

Godowsky's Studies on the Chopin Etudes

by Carlo Grante

To justify himself in the controversy which exists regarding the aesthetic and ethical rights of one composer to use another composer's works, themes, or ideas, in order to freely build upon them new musical creations, such as arrangements, transcriptions, paraphrases, variations, etc., the author desires to say that it entirely depends upon the intentions, nature, and quality of the work of the so-called transgressor. As the Chopin Etudes are, as compositions in study form, universally acknowledged to be the highest attainment in the realm of beautiful pianoforte music combined with indispensable mechanical and technical usefulness, the author thought it wisest to build upon their solid and invulnerable foundation, for the purpose of furthering the art of pianoforte playing. Being adverse to any alterations in the original texts of masterworks when played in their original form, the author would strongly condemn any artist for tampering ever so little with such works as those of Chopin. The original Chopin Etudes remain as intact now as they were before any arrangements of them were ever published; in fact, the author claims that, after assiduously studying the present versions, many hidden beauties in the original Etudes will reveal themselves even to the less observant student.

Leopold Godowsky: From the introduction to Studies on Chopin Etudes (Berlin: Schlesinger / Robert Lienau, 1914).

This is how Leopold Godowsky would justify his extraordinary reworking of the famous Etudes of Chopin. Famous, in some ways "too famous", Chopin's Etudes are widely venerated as sublime archetypes of piano writing, and (justifications aside) Godowsky's drastic elaborations are often dismissed as tampering of the worst sort. But it is precisely the archetypal nature of Chopin's Etudes — intangibly but inescapably available to the mind and fingers of every pianist and piano composer — that allows Godowsky to create a heavy monument to their greatness without at the same time crushing them under its weight.

The piano literature is rife with both art music and teaching pieces (often called Etudes or Studies). Many keyboard works, beginning with Bach's legendary Klavierübung, exhibit an equal measure of pedagogical and compositional boldness, and among the most ambitious and remarkable of all such synthetic works are Godowsky's Studies and the Etudes of Chopin upon which they are based.

Godowsky writes for the piano — but for a special piano, as his great student, Heinrich Neuhaus, makes clear: "Godowsky's performances were never passionate, but instead were always very accurate, very finished, very straightforward in phrasing, and technically flawless to a degree which always astonished the audience. When Godowsky's contemporary Ferruccio Busoni played the piano, one could hear an entire orchestra: the brass, the trills of the violins, the soft chords of the harp. When Godowsky himself played, the piano sounded exactly like a piano. But it was a special piano — the perfect one!"

The perfect piano. Godowsky's piano music, even though highly complex and rich in polyphonic texture, never suggests sounds other than those of the piano. It never evokes an orchestra, or specific instruments. Instead, Godowsky seems to be looking to discover and express the innermost nature of the piano itself. Godowsky's "perfect piano" demands

attention to countless details: a utopian perfectionism which seeks to project every single note as Klangfarben — rather than subsume notes within some larger sound-mass (as often happens in works that embody the archetypes of Lisztian pianism).

Underpinning the poetry of Godowsky's piano writing is a solid matrix of Bach-like polyphony. The inner coherence of the music, and its relative freedom from filler material, derives from Godowsky's single-minded treatment of thematic figurations and remarkable attentiveness to the interplay of imitative devices. Each of Godowsky's works propels itself by means of a continuous cycle of tiny births and deaths and rebirths, subtle thematic references, and indefatigable decorative activity. The externals of Godowsky's music are rooted in the Nineteenth Century: a fact which insulated Godowsky from the stylistic and syntactic fashions of his time (and blinded some of his trend-setting contemporaries to the deeper merits of his work).

Godowsky's music is substantially more difficult to perform than standard virtuoso fare because it avoids traditional pianistic patterns and devices, and aims instead for the utmost in polyphonic saturation. "My works are composed in an intensely personal idiom, with involved inner voices, complicated contrapuntal and polyrhythmic devices, and sonorities of a new kind. The pianistic hoi polloi keep away from them." [Leopold Godowsky: Letter to Paul Howard, 2 May 1933.]

Godowsky's scores are packed with expression marks, which means that his intent is never in doubt. No pianist should ignore Godowsky's desire that his counterpoint be clearly articulated — not compromised by (for example) the sort of pedaling that favors more fluid execution. (The expression marks sometimes suggest Godowsky the performer, and are interestingly representative of the style of his age. At other times the expression marks seem bound to the structural prerogatives of the music itself, and therefore bring to mind Godowsky the composer.)

Keyboard music of the romantic period draws on a wide vocabulary of rhetorical figures, which are usually derived from accompaniments to thematic material. These figures aim to characterize or establish moods and subjects. Schubert, in particular, has bequeathed an enormous vocabulary of rhetorical figures. For example, the spinning motive, used to superb effect in "Gretchen am Spinnrade," quickly became a much-used gesture in the piano literature of the period. Godowsky's response to Schubert's vocabulary is typical. He never allows rhetorical figures to remain intact, in his transcriptions of twelve of Schubert's Songs. As an example, the water motive in "Die Forelle" and "Liebesbotschaft" is dissected and manipulated to the point where it loses much of its original character. Godowsky looks at Schubert's rhetorical figures from all possible angles and magnifies their innermost details (without dressing them up in modernist garb).

So too with the Studies on Chopin Etudes. This work is Godowsky's clearest message to the piano world of the future — a personal vision of pianism oriented towards the relentless exploitation of the polyphonic, polyrhythmic, and polydynamic resources of the instrument.

Godowsky resorts to more than one approach to transcribing Chopin's Etudes, and categorizes his Studies the following way:

1. Strict transcriptions in which the text of the original is as closely followed as an adaption for the left hand allows: Studies 1, 3, 7, 14, 36, 39, 43.
2. Free transcriptions in which the text is:
 - freely treated: Studies 2, 5, 6, 12a, 13, 15a, 16a, 17, 18a, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25/A, 25/B, 25a, 30, 33, 35, 40, 41, 42, 44, 45a;
 - inverted: Studies 11, 12, 16, 27;
 - combined with another Etude: Studies, 47, 48;
 - imitated through the medium of another Etude: Study 15.
1. Cantus Firmus transcriptions in which the right-hand part of the original Etude is strictly transferred to the left hand while the right hand is treated in a free and contrapuntal way: Studies 4, 8, 9, 10, 15, 25, 26, 38
2. Transcriptions in the form of free variations on the text of the original Etude: Studies 19, 29, 31, 45, 46.
3. Metamorphoses in which the Etude's character, rhythm, harmony, and melodic outline are altered while its architectural design remains intact: Studies 32, 34. (The following Studies might also be categorized as metamorphic transcriptions: 2, 11, 12, 17, 18, 18a, 19, 27, 46).

Studies 1 and 2 on Op. 10 No.1

One always wonders if Chopin's Op. 10 No.1 has a "theme." Performers tend to bring out the bass line — but this is little more than a ground, not a theme. There is, however, a rudimentary melodic line (or "melos") implicit in the voicing of the Etude's arpeggiated chords. This is the very thing which Godowsky chooses to emphasize in Study 1, with cavernous two-handed chords in the lower register that drive arpeggios across the entire keyboard. Study 2 balances the homophony of Study 1 with polyphonic textures for the left hand alone. The result is a refined and Chopinesque chromaticism, which avoids superfluous patterns and passagework.

Studies 3 and 4 on Op. 10 No.2

Chopin's original version of Op. 10 No.2 features held notes and four-note scalar passages for the same hand. His revised version demands far less finger-independence. It frees up the held chords — the staccato creating a kind of pizzicato effect. In his Study 3 for left hand, Godowsky looks back to Chopin's original idea, in part to provide sturdier harmonic material and a better-defined melodic contour for the chords. Study 4 reworks the chromatic scalar material of Op. 10 No.2 into 4:3 polyrhythms. The Study's subtitle ("Ignis fatuus") underscores a connection with Liszt's "Feux Follets" — a work which projects its chromaticism in a similar albeit more homophonic way.

Study 5 on Op. 10 No.3

This Study justifies Godowsky's view that the left hand is in every way equal and in some ways superior to the right hand:

In its application to piano playing the left hand has many advantages over the right hand and it would suffice to enumerate but a few of these to convince the student that it is a fallacy to deem the left hand less adaptable to training than the right hand. The left hand is favored by nature in having the stronger part of the hand for the upper voice of all double notes and chords, and also by generally having the

strongest fingers for the stronger parts of a melody In addition to what is stated above, the left hand, commanding as it does the lower half of the keyboard, has the incontestable advantage of enabling the player to produce with less effort and more plasticity a fuller and mellower tone, superior in quantity and quality to that of the right hand.

Leopold Godowsky: Special remarks on the studies for left hand alone
[from the introduction to the Studies on Chopin Etudes]

Study 6 on Op. 10 No.4

In this left-hand transcription, Godowsky aims to maintain the Etude's toccata-like character but at the same time extrapolates several subsidiary melodic lines (which are added to the inner structure of the inherent polyphony). His methods are apparent in the very first measures: in the subtle treatment of the descending 16th-note incipit. Achieving textural completeness with a single hand demands highly complex writing — designed to expose and clarify each and every melodic and contrapuntal aspect of the piece. As with his left-hand transcription of the "Revolutionary" Etude, Godowsky adds new voices to the motoric passages. This gives the Study added weight (and contrasts it with Op. 10 No.4, which is traditionally performed as a brisk, light, forward-moving, two-part Toccata).

Studies 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 12a on Op. 10 No.5

In this group (complemented by Study 43) Godowsky elaborates and interprets Chopin's "Black Key" Etude in several different ways. One striking feature is the regrouping into triplets of the Etude's two-note inner structure. This creates diverse opportunities for rhythmic reorganization and the exploitation of latent polyphony, as for example in Study 10. Godowsky is also preoccupied with the technical and instrumental implications of transferring the right hand's material to the left hand, as in Study 7. He inverts the Etude's material and assigns it to the left hand in Study 11 and to the right hand in Study 12. The "Black Key" Etude is metamorphosed into a Tarantella in Study 9 and into a "White Key" Etude in Study S. Surprisingly, the version for left hand (Study 12a) is the least interesting of the lot.

Study 13 on Op. 10 No.6

This masterpiece achieves several compositional and poetic goals. It elaborates the semitonal inflection of the Etude's original accompaniment (developing from this a massive web of sonorities). The resulting polyphony (springing from the texture of the accompaniment) is scarcely conceivable for a single hand. Godowsky adds new melodic lines that are ideal companions to Chopin's primary thematic material. Some listeners will recognize Blumenfeld's Etude for Left Hand as the Study's pianistic (if not stylistic) ancestor.

Studies 14, 15 and 15a on Op. 10 No.7

This series of elaborations serves up a diversified range of mechanical exercises in left-hand repeated notes, recalling a principal feature of Chopin's Op. 10 No.7. Each Godowsky Study has its own style and character. No. 14 is a Toccata — a very faithful transcription which works 2-1 finger-repetitions. No. 15 is a Nocturne — a free variation which emphasizes 4-5 repetitions. No. 15a is a left-hand Study built around 3-2 repetitions. The Nocturne is remarkable for the degree to which it transmogrifies Chopin's original Etude into something virtually unrecognizable. (The connection between a theme and a variation need not be obvious, but it is rare for a purported arrangement to fail to resemble the work it arranges.) Study 15 and similar Studies are always juxtaposed with Studies which pay careful tribute to a particular Etude by sounding as close to it as possible. Even

Godowsky's most radical metamorphoses pay close attention to aspects of their models. For example, the left-hand part of Study 15 imitates the right-hand part of Op. 10 No. 7. Still to come are Studies which push transmogrification to alarming extremes.

Studies 16 and 16a on Op. 10 No.8

In these Studies, Godowsky systematically transfers musical materials from one hand to the other, creating technical hurdles of the utmost difficulty. Study 16 features intertwined passagework for both hands; and Study 16a somehow manages to assign all the Etude's material to the left hand. (Upward- and downward-arpeggiated figurations over a horn-like melody are reminiscent of horn melodies in Chopin's Concertos.) The original passagework is articulated and accented in a way that forces the performer to abandon superficial fluency in favor of accurate metric and harmonic subdivisions. This fact, combined with the presence of subsidiary figurations and reiterated thematic material, creates textures of maximum richness, especially in the case of Study 16.

Studies 17, 18 and 18a on Op. 10 No.9

Godowsky transforms Chopin's Etude in surprising ways, even though he limits himself to just three Studies. Only Study 18a, for the left hand, retains the outward character of Chopin's text—but even this is "translated" in dramatic ways. For example, the wide broken intervals in the original left-hand accompaniment are now skips. The other two Studies are really variations. Study 17, for two hands, shares 18a's preoccupation with the left-hand part of the original. Its use of repeated notes to mimic the anxious effect of Op. 10 No. 9's broken intervals must be heard to be believed. Study 18 imports and structurally adapts the right-hand figurations of Chopin's Op. 25 No.2 with staggering results.

Studies 19 and 20 on Op. 10 No. 10

Study 19 is a sheer miracle. Its form is variational but is suggested by the structure of the Etude — which moves its primary material through several keys, almost repeating itself. Godowsky elaborates on this aspect of the original text, magnifying each quasi-repetition into a full-fledged variation. Study 20 is a free arrangement for left hand of the same Etude.

Study 21 on Op. 10 No. 11

This is another free transcription for left hand — and not the most appealing one. Godowsky projects many simultaneous strands of music, some newly invented, which spell out ideas that are only hinted at in the text of the Etude.

Study 22 on Op. 10 No. 12

The famous thematic features of the well-known "Revolutionary" Etude are left unaffected, and are supplemented with polyphonic activity not present in the original. The result is a work that is a mix of transcription, left-hand arrangement, and elaboration. The accompanying passagework is infused with strands of melodic material (hidden or implicit in the original), thereby adding even more pathos to the already turbulent Etude.

Studies 23, 24 and 25 on Op. 25 No. 1

Chopin's famous "Aeolian Harp" Etude is treated in three ways. Study 23 is a very successful transcription for left hand — which not only manages to retain the basic features of the original, but even adds a subsidiary descant. Study 24 also uses new thematic material. Its subtitle — "like a piece for four hands" — might well serve as a motto for the poetic and compositional impetus behind all of Godowsky's piano writing. Even more surprising is the chromatic inventiveness of Study 25, where a new counter-melody

of exquisite Chopinesque character is sustained by the numerous voices that sprout from the structure of the complex accompaniment.

Studies 26, 27, 28/A, 28/B and 28a on Op. 25 No.2

The structural features of Chopin's Etude are X-rayed from several angles, in Godowsky's five re-workings. First among these features is the metrical offset between the hands (12/8 over 6/4). This gives rise to the meter-driven ingenuity of Study 27 ("Tempo di Valse") and the polyrhythmic complexity of Study 26. Study 28 appears in no less than two versions of itself. Version B, the more effective, presents a right hand in octaves — thus elevating the original right hand to a sine qua non of virtuosity (but of a specialized kind, the octaves being legato). The octaves are accompanied by held notes in the same hand (an idea anticipated by Chopin's Op. 25 No. 10) and by polyphonic activity in 4/4 in the left hand. Version A of Study 28 demands that the right hand, by itself, supply the primary material of Op. 25 No.2 together with 4/4 counterpoint. Study 28a (not to be confused with Study 28/A) is little more than an awkward exercise in polyrhythms for the left hand.

Studies 29 and 30 on Op. 25 No.3

Godowsky offers two versions of Op. 25 No.3. The figurations of Chopin's Etude are elfin and spirited (with a cleverly concealed exercise-element) and require wrist independence over an appoggiatura. This suggests an incipient polyphonic design. Godowsky reifies Chopin's embryonic inner melody in Study 29, and allows it to give birth to new thematic ideas. Amazingly, the reified inner melody is also a feature of Study 30 for left hand alone. Several interesting options offer the performer the option of de-emphasizing the inner melody.

Studies 31 and 32 on Op. 25 No.4

Op. 25 No.4 is the blueprint for two very different works. Study 31 is a cruel finger-twister for the left hand. It requires the performer to hold inner notes in the most awkward ways imaginable — and in this it resembles Study 96 from Clementi's *Gradus ad Parnassum*, which also demands unusual finger-changes on specific notes in the absence of pedal. After this nightmare of an exercise, Godowsky serves up an astonishing and authentically Chopinesque Polonaise. Study 32 resembles Op. 25 No.4 in its mood, but has a very different look and feel. Its middle section is a calm and lyrical variation on the entire Etude — in effect an arrangement within an arrangement. Everything is rendered with breathtaking stylistic coherence and total command of Chopin's compositional idiom.

Studies 33, 34 and 35 on Op. 25 No.5

Op. 25 No.5 inspires Study 34: a work in another form inextricably linked to Chopin — in this case the Mazurka. (One cannot fail to notice how Godowsky's monumental set of Studies is motivated more by devotion to Chopin than by a desire to write ingenious technical exercises.) A number of the Etude's subtle structural details (e.g. an up-beat hemiola) are put on center-stage — and in this case the middle section is a contemplative re-working of the middle section of Chopin's work. Study 33 is very different in character. Godowsky has magnified every aspect of the piece and created a massive, accomplished, and pianistically challenging masterwork. Busoni, who dubbed Op. 25 No.5 "Mazeppa on a toy horse," might well have greeted Godowsky's elaboration with awe. Study 35, for left hand, is ambitious and successful but less rewarding.

Study 36 on Op. 25 No.6 and 38 on Op. 25 No.8

Study 36, based on Op. 25 No.6, is the earliest of the Chopin Etude transcriptions and an outgrowth of Godowsky's experiments with new fingerings for passages in thirds. It is a strict transcription, but one which inverts much of the music — shifting hurdles to the left

hand originally assigned to the right. Whenever something like this takes place (another instance is Study 7), Godowsky takes steps to maintain the original harmonic shape of chords and their inversions. He does this by adding functional bass notes, or chords, to the right hand — which restore the original harmonic voicing. The resulting subsidiary melodies sound as if they had always been present — somehow concealed within the original Etude. Godowsky refers to this procedure as his "Cantus Firmus" form of transcription, and it is also the basis for Study 38: an elaboration of the Etude in sixths. (Godowsky classifies Study 36 as a strict transcription but it would be equally appropriate to put it in the "Cantus Firmus" category)

Study 37 on Op. 25 No.7 [not composed]

The greatest of Chopin's Etudes — often called the "Cello" Etude — is left un-transcribed by Godowsky. This explains the absence of Study 37. One could imagine a version of the Etude for left hand (similar to the Studies on Op. 10 Nos. 3 and 7) but perhaps the very idea of a transcription of this work struck Godowsky as blasphemous.

Studies 39 and 40 on Op. 25 No.9

Chopin's "Butterfly" Etude has been straightforwardly adapted to further tax the left hand. Study 39 is for both hands and Study 40 is for left hand. Godowsky allows for considerable interplay between the upper and lower voices of the melodic line, in the former Study Exchanging material from hand to hand adds more weight to the overall structure, thereby subtly changing the light, elfin character of the original Etude.

Study 41 on Op. 25 No. 10

Study 41 transcribes Chopin's octave Etude for left hand — most successfully. What makes it especially interesting is the mental challenge posed by its mechanical aspects. In the original Etude there is an emphasis on legato octaves — which forces the performer to forego the more or less unpremeditated execution characteristic of non-legato octaves. (In this, the Etude anticipates a pianistic preoccupation of Brahms.) Godowsky's challenges can only be overcome by comparably circumspect playing. The performer must maintain complete polyphonic independence — and a weighty but rich and expressive legato — by means of the utmost muscular flexibility. The central, calmer section of the work exploits similar playing.

Study 42 on Op. 25 No. 11

The "Winter Wind" Etude receives just one treatment, for both hands. It transfers the passagework to the left hand, where it becomes very strenuous; and it effectively highlights the structural contours of the turbulent chromatic cascades of notes that frame the marching, brass-like theme.

Study 43 on Op. 25 No. 12

This very strict transcription for left hand is not one of the most creative of the Studies, but it is nevertheless effective to hear and rewarding to play. Godowsky manages, incredibly, to retain all the harmonic and melodic elements of the Etude, with very little distortion of the particulars of the text. Heroic pianistic gestures, of considerable technical difficulty, enrich the drama of Chopin's music.

Study 44 on Trois nouvelles études No 1

Study 44 is based on the first of three Etudes written for the Methode of Moscheles and Fetis. It is one of the most Chopinesque of Godowsky's transcriptions for left hand. The chromaticism and the masterly use of inner polyphony (surpassed only by Study 13)

sounds as one imagines Chopin would have sounded, had he lived longer and written for left hand.

Studies 45 and 45a on Trois nouvelles études No 2

Study 45 uses the Etude's implicit polyphony to elaborate a polymetric, as well as polyphonic, structure. The intended result — light, transparent, but saturated with sound — requires complex pedaling. (Godowsky suggests appropriate pedaling methods in his introductory remarks.) Study 45a is a version of the same Etude for left hand — quite faithful to the original.

Study 46 on Trois nouvelles études No 3

Study 46, based on the last of the Moscheles Etudes, is subtitled Menuetto. It proliferates intricate polyrhythms, and interchanges a great deal of melodic material between the hands. Marvelous and especially moving is the quotation from a Chopin Impromptu near the end.

Study 47 on Op. 10 No.5 and Op. 25 No.9

Study 48 on Op. 10 No. 11 and Op. 25 No.3,

The last Studies demonstrate Godowsky's ability to combine harmonically adapted material from different works. Study 47 (the notorious "Badinage") combines Op. 10 No.5 and Op. 25 No.9; Study 48 combines Op. 10 No. 11 and Op. 25 No.3. (Equally astonishing combinations of material can be found in Godowsky's Chopin Waltz transcriptions, though in that case the combined material is extracted from different parts of particular works.) It would be easy, but mistaken, to suppose that Godowsky's compositional attitude is mainly playful and salon-inspired, in these works. The sheer compositional command exhibited in the last of the Studies is truly impressive, as Neuhaus remarked. It is unfortunate that the perceived insouciance of Studies 47 and 48 has to some degree denied them the status they deserve.