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The Piano Technique of Frederic Chopin and Franz Liszt:

A Comparative Analysis and Application of their Philosophy of Technique

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by

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This paper is dedicated to my family, for their tireless unwavering support of my goals and fulfillment of my degree. I also am thankful for my committee professors, Robert Koenig, Paul Berkowitz, and Ben Levy, for sharing their knowledge and expertise, enabling me to complete this process. Thank you, all.

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## ABSTRACT

The Piano Technique of Frederic Chopin and Franz Liszt:

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by

Asher Fields Severini

The purpose of this study is to examine how Frederic Chopin and Franz Liszt revitalized piano technique. Because Chopin and Liszt were both composers and pianists whose music bears many similarities, they are often compared by musicians, pianists, and listeners. It seemed natural to write a dissertation that focused on comparing their physical approach to playing the piano. The goals of this paper are to discover similarities and divergences between these pianists' methods and to see if foundational principles of their technique can be found in modern methodologies. This paper shows how their technique can be applied to playing their music and conquering technical problems. Lastly, one question I set out to answer was: "Were there particular techniques that work best for playing one specific composers' music as opposed to the other?"

My methods of research were: (1) reliable sources, (2) further discoveries through the application of their techniques to my playing, and (3) personal knowledge gained from lessons with piano teachers throughout the years.

I discovered that Chopin and Liszt held similar beliefs about technique. They came up with ways of utilizing certain principles of piano technique, such as arm weight and economy of motion. They both emphasized looseness and playing with a supple wrist, along with arm-weight and efficiency, which have remained of paramount importance to modern-day pianists.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In the Baroque Era, the main stringed keyboard instruments were the harpsichord and clavichord.<sup>1</sup> The technique used to play these instruments was a digital technique marked by little body movement and stiff wrists. This technique of using purely the fingers has been called the finger school of technique and originated in the 17th century.<sup>2</sup> During the transition from the harpsichord to the piano as the main keyboard instrument of the time, old habits from the harpsichord technique were maintained. Due to the similarities between the instruments, pianists overlooked some of their major differences, mistakenly applying the harpsichord finger technique to the piano.<sup>3</sup>

During the period following the piano's invention, pianists continued to play with a fixed upper arm and only the fingers. Focus on finger strength became widespread.<sup>4</sup>

High lifting and striking of the keys were integral to Muzio Clementi's pedagogy. We can see that Clementi was very much an advocate of the finger school due to his adherence to the ideals of finger isolation stemming from immobility of the hand.<sup>5</sup> Clementi says:

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<sup>1</sup> Elliott Jones, "The Piano," *Music 101* (Lumen Learning course), section 2 (history of the piano), Accessed August 19, 2021, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-musicapp-medieval-modern/chapter/the-piano/>

<sup>2</sup> Mo Xu, "The High Finger Piano Technique in China: Past, Present, and Future" (DMA diss., University of Iowa, Spring 2018), 2, 10.

<sup>3</sup> George Kochevitsky, *The Art of Piano Playing: A Scientific Approach* (Princeton, NJ: Summy-Birchard Music, 1967), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Kochevitsky, *The Art*, 2–3.

<sup>5</sup> Kochevitsky, *The Art*, 3.

The hand and arm should be held in a horizontal direction; neither depressing nor raising the wrist; the seat should therefore be adjusted accordingly. The fingers and thumb should be placed over the keys, always ready to strike, bending the fingers in, more or less in proportion to their length. All unnecessary motion should be avoided. Let the pupil now begin to practice, slowly at first the following passage; observing to keep down the first key till the next has been struck, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Liszt drew on the finger school of technique to a degree, expanding this practice by making it his own, whereas Chopin shunned it.

Ludwig van Beethoven was crucial to the development of piano technique. Reginald Gerig in his book *Famous Pianists and Their Technique* describes his contribution this way: “Beethoven was working for fullness of tone and was concerned that the power of the arm should back up the fingers.”<sup>7</sup>

Beethoven’s student Carl Czerny further put emphasis on free shoulders with the arms hanging from the fulcrum. This particular idea is a fundamental principle of piano playing because freedom of the arms is only gained by hanging freely from the shoulders.<sup>8</sup> This freedom enables the pianist to be very sensitive to the arms’ weight and to be able to make any necessary

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<sup>6</sup> Xu, “High Finger,” 16.

<sup>7</sup> Reginald R. Gerig, *Famous Pianists and Their Technique* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 91.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Czerny, *Letters to Young Ladies on the Art of Playing the Piano Forte* (New York: Firth, Pond, and Co., 1851), 9.

adjustments. While these were steps in the right direction, Czerny believed that the wrist should be immobile and stiff in line with the finger school.<sup>9</sup>

Czerny's finest student, Franz Liszt, eclipsed his former teacher by incorporating new techniques which would change the way pianists play to this day. Nevertheless, elements of the finger school of technique weave throughout music history [OBJ] Chopin was among the most important pianists to begin shifting from the finger school approach to a more modern holistic<sup>10</sup> approach to playing.<sup>11</sup> The following chapters will explore how this technique influenced these two pianists and how they dealt with the daunting task of finding a solution to the extreme difficulty of playing the piano with virtuosity.

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<sup>9</sup> Czerny, *Letters*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Kochevitsky, *The Art*, 6.

## **Chapter 2: The Technique of Franz Liszt**

When Franz Liszt performed, he never failed to find a way to effortlessly express the music with his body, truly transcending the piano in ways that seemed to defy the very laws of nature itself.

Liszt was born an only child to Adam and Anna Liszt in Raiding, Hungary, on October 22, 1811.<sup>12</sup> At the age of six, Liszt started taking piano lessons with his father Adam, who, while not a professional musician, was an outstanding amateur cellist and pianist.<sup>13</sup>

When Franz was nine, the opportunity arose for Liszt to study under Carl Czerny in Vienna, and Adam moved the family in 1820 so that Liszt could learn from the great master.<sup>14</sup> Czerny recorded their first meeting, which provides an eye-opening window into Liszt's fundamental nature as a pianist. Czerny writes:

...a man with a small boy of about eight years approached me with a request to let the youngster play something on the fortepiano. He was a pale, sickly-looking child who, while playing, swayed about on the stool as if drunk, so that I often thought he would fall to the floor. His playing was also quite irregular, untidy, confused, and he had so little idea of fingering that he threw his fingers arbitrarily all over the keyboard. But that notwithstanding, I was astonished at the talent which Nature had bestowed on him. He

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<sup>12</sup> "Franz Liszt: 10 (small) things you (may) not know about the composer," France Musique, February 5, 2019, accessed August 6, 2021, <https://www.francemusique.fr/en/franz-liszt-10-little-things-you-might-not-know-about-composer-20447>

<sup>13</sup> France Musique, "Franz Liszt: 10 (small) things."

<sup>14</sup> France Musique, "Franz Liszt: 10 (small) things."

played something which I gave him to sight-read, to be sure, like a pure 'natural,' but for that very reason, one saw that Nature herself had formed a pianist.<sup>15</sup>

This account described Liszt as playing in an uncontrolled manner, which is interesting because Liszt also played with wild movements as an adult. The journalist Saint-Rieul Dupouy September 1844 wrote in *Courrier de la Gironde* saying:

Liszt is a great poet. His soul leads his hands, and indeed he plays more with his heart, his intelligence, his whole being than with his fingers. At times he leans backwards and seems to be reading in the air, music that is dreamed, or to be translating something that is sung up there in the region of harmonies. Then he leans his head over the keyboard as if to bring it to life; he grasps it bodily, struggles with it, tames it, embraces it, magnetizes it with his powerful hands. Then it is no longer a piano that you hear; it is an orchestra of a thousand voices.<sup>16</sup>

Czerny's training provided Liszt with the discipline to gain confidence and skill from which he could return to what was a more natural way of playing for his personality.

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<sup>15</sup> Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt, Volume 1: The Virtuoso Years: 1811–1847* (1st American ed.), (New York: Knopf, 2013), 67.

<sup>16</sup> Wan-Hsuan Wu, "Beethoven Through Liszt: Myth, Performance, Edition" (M.M. treatise, The University of Texas at Austin, 2007), 26.

## Czerny's Method and Liszt's Training

Czerny's teaching was defined by a constant demand for perfection in all aspects of music-making. Liszt's discipline during his studies with Czerny proved to be the bedrock for his future transcendental breakthrough.<sup>17</sup>

While Liszt grew tremendously from his studies with Czerny, he would disprove certain notions about piano playing as his stunning virtuosity emerged. One of these rules which Czerny laid out was his admonishment of wrist action. Czerny states that “the forepart of the arm (from the elbow to the fingers) should form a perfectly straight horizontal line; for the hand must neither rise upwards like a ball, nor be bent so as to slope downwards.”<sup>18</sup>

The problem with the Czerny method and the finger school is that without the arm to support the fingers by way of a supple wrist, the fingers will never be strong enough or fast enough without support from the arms. In this way a genuinely efficient playing mechanism based on a sophisticated coordination of the body can be achieved.

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<sup>17</sup> David Friddle, “Carl Czerny, Liszt's first teacher,” (slide in online slide deck), accessed August 18, 2021, <https://davidfriddle.com/romantic-musik/czerny/index.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Czerny, *Letters*, 10.

## **New Discoveries**

A trademark of Liszt's playing was the increased use of the wrist. Madam Caroline Boissier, a pianist, and the mother of one of Liszt's students, described in her diary Liszt's discovery of the wrists' importance:

[He had] played the piano for years, and was brilliant in concert, and so believed that he was quite marvelous. Then one day, being unable to express with his fingers all the feelings which weighed upon him, he re-examined himself point by point and found that he could not perform trills nor octaves very well, nor even certain chords. Since then, he studied his scales again, and little by little, completely changed his touch. Formerly, when attempting to express certain tone energetically, his hands stiffened, but now he has banished all stiffness from his playing; from the wrist, he tosses his fingers upon the keys, at times with force and at times with softness, but always complete suppleness.<sup>19</sup>

Notice how the word "tosses" is used here. The combination of the elasticity of the fingers produced from copious amounts of finger exercises in tandem with the use of a supple wrist gave Liszt a more remarkable ability. It is worth noting here that more freedom in the wrist naturally leads to more relaxation in the arm itself and more freedom of motion.

## **Liszt's Inspiration**

After an encounter with the violin virtuoso Paganini in 1832, Liszt described how he began to practice even more intensely than ever before:

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<sup>19</sup> Alan Davison, "Franz Liszt and the Development of 19th-Century Pianism: A Re-Reading of the Evidence," *The Musical Times* 147, no. 1896 (Autumn 2006): 38. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25434402>

For a whole fortnight my mind and my fingers have been working like two lost souls. Homer, the Bible, Plato, Locke, Byron, Hugo, Lamartine, Chateaubriand, Beethoven, Bach, Hummel, Mozart, Weber are all around me. I study them, meditate on them, devour them with fury; besides this, I practise four to five hours of exercises (thirds, sixths, octaves, tremolos, repetition of notes, cadenzas, etc.) Ah! Provided I don't go mad you will find in me an artist! Yes, an artist—such as is required today.<sup>20</sup>

Liszt, by virtue of his practicing, broke the barrier of his technique, and suddenly he found a new way to use his body that went further than the finger school method of the baroque and classical periods.<sup>21</sup> He had learned how to tap into his arm weight while playing through a coordinated relaxation of the muscles of the wrists and arms.<sup>22</sup>

### **Posture and Bench**

When Liszt played it is said that he sat high at the piano stool and far back to allow for more room to move his arms freely. This enabled a lengthening of the arms, drawing the sound out of

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<sup>20</sup> Bryan Wallick, “Piano Practice: Practice Routines and Techniques for Concert Pianists” (DMus (Performing Art) diss., University of Pretoria, 2013), 9–10, [https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/32394/Wallick\\_Piano\\_2013.pdf?sequence=1](https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/32394/Wallick_Piano_2013.pdf?sequence=1).

<sup>21</sup> Yoshinori Hosaka, “Sumiko Mikimoto’s Piano Method: A Modern Physiological Approach To Piano Technique In Historical Context” (DMA diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2009), 17.

<sup>22</sup> Hosaka, “Sumiko Mikimoto’s,” 17.



the piano from the base of the shoulders. Lengthening the arms also activated more of the shoulder blades and back muscles.<sup>23</sup>

It should be noted that Liszt often played with his head tilted back, which could have had the effect of strengthening the neck, bringing greater sensory awareness to the whole body because of its openness.<sup>24</sup> The focus on tilting his head back and sitting higher had the effect of lengthening the spine. Sitting up tall enables one to feel one's sit bones (ischial tuberosity) more effectively, which creates more optimal skeletal alignment.

### **Liszt's Arm Weight Technique**

Liszt's works demand a very sophisticated use of the whole arm and body, which attests to Liszt's technical prowess and holistic approach to conquering the instrument. Concert pianist and music teacher George Kochevitsky puts it this way:

His symphonic treatment of the piano called forth a radical change in the fundamental motor skill of the pianist, requiring the use and coordination of all the muscles of the arm, shoulder, and torso. The desire for a wide dynamic range required freedom and elasticity of movements, various positions, peculiar fingerings. For Liszt, each movement of the

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<sup>23</sup> George Fee, "Performing Liszt's Piano Music" Dersnah-Fee.com, last modified September, 2011, 5, <http://w.dersnah-fee.com/Essays%20and%20Educational%20Material/Liszt%20Thoughts.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Xu, "High Finger," 21.

finger was connected with the whole process of movement of the playing arm; each rhythmical and dynamic change was linked to an inner impulse.<sup>25</sup>

Introducing more supple wrist movements into his playing was crucial in Liszt's advancement towards a complete technical breakthrough. Pianists can discover firsthand through disciplined practice the intricate movements needed to master the passages of Liszt's fiendishly difficult music.

Before Liszt's arm weight technique is delved into further, a clear definition of what is meant by arm weight must be presented. Arm weight technique, in a sense, refers not only to the arms but to the act of playing the piano with the whole body and mind in a state of complete freedom. The following postulates can describe arm weight technique:

1. It is concluded that the arm should hang from the shoulder and that its weight should be transmitted from the shoulder down to the fingertips to the bottom of the key bed.
2. The fingers must be strong enough to support the weight of the arm.
3. Perfect technique is defined by a state of constant perfect balance.
4. Balance is the ability of the fingers to support the weight of the arm at all times.<sup>26</sup>

One must remember the dynamic function of the wrist. A defining characteristic of an advanced technique is the capability of relaxing specific parts of the body while keeping other regions tense. The fundamental purpose of this endeavor is to maintain a feeling of utter relaxation in the arm, which of course is an illusion. The pianist's craft is the art of

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<sup>25</sup> Kochevitsky, *The Art*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Vivien Chen and Zhuping Ling, "Articles: Principles of Piano Technique," VC Studio Web Pages, accessed August 12, 2021, <http://www.people.vcu.edu/~bhammel/chen/principles%20of%20piano%20technique%201.htm>.

accomplishing this in a way that feels effortless. Technique is a process of engaging with gravity to create music through motion.

### **Crucial Motions**

Because of the freedoms granted to the wrist by pianists such as Liszt and, as we will see, Chopin, the arm had to be given additional liberties. The arm needed to be able to swing from side to side and the forearm to rotate in an uninhibited way. Liszt used rotation extensively, both forearm rotation and rotation of the whole arm, as clearly seen by any pianist who plays and masters his music. For example, Liszt's 3rd Grande Etude *La Campanella* cannot be played without a mastery of rotation because the distance of the leaps is so extreme.

These arm movements were an essential part of the Lisztian technique and were dependent on powerful fingers. Without incredible finger strength, no intricate coordination can enable a pianist to master the instrument. The dichotomy between the use of free movement, which feels effortless, and the reality that there must be, at times, tension when developing finger strength is one of the problems that pianists deal with in various ways. It is with Chopin's technique that we find a possible solution to this problem; this will be discussed in the next chapter in detail.

### **Student's Account**

One of Liszt's pupils, Lina Ramman, left detailed accounts describing specific passages from pieces where Liszt used the full extent of the arm. It seems that Liszt especially liked to raise the arm and let it fall onto the keyboard with a high wrist, as well as for various other musical

purposes such as for grand octaves with a raised hand and straightened thumb.<sup>27</sup> Hanging from the shoulder is important because it relieves tension from the hand and gives the arm and hand a firm base from which to freely act.

## Conclusion

Despite the vast amount of evidence showing Liszt's use and appreciation of a relaxed arm and flexible wrist, Liszt likely drew on elements of Czerny's method and the finger school to help acquire, through practice, more technical prowess. While certain pianists, at their discretion, may find the finger method to be a helpful practice method, performing in such a restricted manner is unwise. Once more advanced music began being written for the piano in the Romantic period, tension began to be seen as an enemy, not a friend. Chopin described it this way once to a student: "Have the body supple right to the tips of the toes."<sup>28</sup>

Whatever Liszt's viewpoint was on the extent of finger strengthening and tension's role in piano playing, his biographer Alan Walker was correct in saying that "Liszt is to pianists what Euclid is to geometry."<sup>29</sup> The sheer breadth and scope of Liszt's experimentations in the realm of arm-weight technique and the technique's advanced abilities to create more variety in tone color and increased virtuosity deserve much recognition.

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<sup>27</sup> Victoria A. von Arx, *Piano Lessons with Claudio Arrau: A Guide to His Philosophy and Techniques* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 44–45.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher: As Seen by his Pupils*, trans. Naomi Shohet with Krysia Osotowicz and Roy Howat, edited by Roy Howat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 31.

<sup>29</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, 296.

Notably, Liszt and Chopin were both master pianists and great composers. If they had been pianists only, it is unlikely that their influence would have been as extensive, but because they were also composers, through their music, they have been ambassadors for their excellent technique. While Liszt's music is beloved by many, there is some contention among critics and listeners alike about the quality of many of his works. However, Chopin remains universally admired, and his music continues to affect each passing generation just as profoundly as the last. The next chapter will explore Chopin's contribution to the world of piano playing and will make comparisons with his friend and rival, Franz Liszt.

### **Chapter 3: The Technique of Frederic Chopin**

Frederic Chopin is known and loved for the warmth and depth of his astounding compositions, which have touched the imagination of countless individuals through the performance of dedicated pianists, often through feats of coordination that had never before been thought possible.

Just a year older than Franz Liszt, Frederic Chopin was born in the small town of Zelazowa Wola, Poland, in March of the year 1810.<sup>30</sup> The acclaimed Hungarian pianist Andras Schiff has observed that it is somewhat of a miracle that Chopin became the legendary pianist we know and admire today.<sup>31</sup> Schiff said this to highlight the extraordinary fact that Chopin was almost entirely self-taught as a pianist. Chopin's one formal teacher, Wojciech Zwiny, had been a professional violinist but only began teaching piano due to financial need. Zwiny was considered an excellent all-around music teacher and was loved by the entire community.<sup>32</sup> Chopin began piano lessons with Zwiny at the age of 6 and continued with him until he was 12.

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<sup>30</sup> Ted Libbey, "The Life and Music Of Frederic Chopin," *NPR*, March 2, 2010, section 1 "Chopin, Frederic Francois," <https://www.npr.org/2011/07/18/123967818/the-life-and-music-of-frederic-chopin>.

<sup>31</sup> Roger Thompson (BBC executive producer), "Chopin with Andras Schiff (1 of 6)," *Omnibus* (television show), aired 1999, uploaded August 10, 2008, YouTube video, 06:01, <https://youtu.be/P-tpRMb6aEw>.

<sup>32</sup> Alan Walker, *Fryderyk Chopin: A Life and Times* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018), 47, 50.

Far from indoctrinating him into his own method, Zwiny encouraged Chopin to develop his own unique playing style.<sup>33</sup>

Chopin moved to Paris in 1820 and would never again return to Poland. On Feb. 26, 1832, Chopin made his debut at the Salle Pleyel; it was so influential that he became quite in demand as a teacher.<sup>34</sup>

### **Chopin's Technique**

Chopin abhorred the finger equalization school and believed that each finger deserved to be recognized for its unique characteristics and individuality.<sup>35</sup> Chopin states his beliefs in the following:

For a long time, we have been acting against nature by training our fingers to be all equally powerful. As each finger is differently formed, it's better not to attempt to destroy the particular charm of each one's touch but, on the contrary, to develop it. Each finger's power is determined by its shape: the thumb having the most power, being the broadest, shortest and freest; the fifth [finger] as the other extremity of the hand; the third as the middle and the pivot; then the second [a few words illegible], and then the fourth, the weakest one, the Siamese twin of the third, bound to it by a common ligament, and which

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<sup>33</sup> Walker, *Fryderyk Chopin*, 47, 50.

<sup>34</sup> Libbey, "Life," section 3 "Off to Paris."

<sup>35</sup> Walker, *Fryderyk Chopin*, 242.

people insist on trying to separate from the third—which is impossible and fortunately, unnecessary.<sup>36</sup>

Chopin believed in a strength that was marked and developed more as a byproduct of flexibility, developed not by strenuous effort but by the persistent discovery of the body's capability to create worlds of motion in the quest to create beautiful sounds and colors. Not surprisingly, Chopin was not hesitant to break the rules.<sup>37</sup> Here we note a few examples. It was a traditional rule that the thumbs should not be used to play the black keys on the piano, but Chopin began writing music that frequently required the pianist to play in this way.<sup>38</sup> Etudes Op. 25 Nos. 9 and 11 feature this.

Another innovation that Chopin championed was the practice of crossing the fingers over one another when playing.<sup>39</sup> This practice can be found in pieces like Etude Op. 10 No. 2, where the third, fourth, and fifth right-hand fingers need to cross over one another. Although undoubtedly novel for the period in which Chopin lived, this was not so much an innovation, but rather a revival of an older technique from the Baroque period before the thumbs were used in keyboard

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<sup>36</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 27-28

<sup>37</sup> Qiao-Shuang Xian, "Rediscovering Frédéric Chopin's 'Trois Nouvelles Études'" (Doctor of Musical Arts diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2002), 32.  
[https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3431&context=gradschool\\_dissertations](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3431&context=gradschool_dissertations).

<sup>38</sup> Xian, "Rediscovering," 32.

<sup>39</sup> Min Joung Kim, "The Chopin Etudes: A Study Guide For Teaching and Learning Opus 10 And Opus 25" (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2011), 70.  
[https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc115039/m2/1/high\\_res\\_d/Dissertation.pdf](https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc115039/m2/1/high_res_d/Dissertation.pdf).



playing.<sup>40</sup> An apparent innovation of this etude, and one which makes Op.10 No. 2 one of the most difficult of the set is that the right-hand thumb has to be in use since it plays staccato chords with the index finger while the other fingers play the legato chromatic runs. This increased finger individuality marked a heightened development and requirement for the pianist to control their fingers completely.

As though Chopin's rule breaking when it came to fingering was not enough, he also completely rethought the way pianists should approach hand position for that era.

## **Hand Shape**

Chopin's approach to teaching contradicts several common contemporary pedagogical methods. For students to acquire what many deem to be the correct hand shape for piano playing, teachers often will have students hold a small ball to curve their fingers.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, curling the fingers to this extent is not the best practice for many reasons, which Chopin must have been aware of. Apart from many standard patterns and philosophies, there are a few modern methodologies that have the consensus that overly curling the fingers is unhealthy and not conducive to healthy virtuosic playing.

Also, in addition to using a small ball as an essential tool for learning the "correct" hand shape, teachers almost invariably first start new students on the C Major scale, which right away

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<sup>40</sup> Kim, "The Chopin Etudes," 70.

<sup>41</sup> Gwen Orel, "Taubman Festival Highlights Young Players Using her Technique," Montclair Local, June 26, 2019. <https://www.montclairlocal.news/2019/06/26/taubman-festival-highlights-young-players-using-her-technique/>.

encourages a cramped hand position with curled fingers.<sup>42</sup> The following are Chopin's directions for finding the correct position of the hand. He states:

Find the correct position for the hand by placing your fingers on the keys, E, F#, G#, A#, B [B Major]: the long fingers will occupy the high [= black] keys, and the short fingers the low [= white] keys. Place the fingers occupying the high [= black] keys all on one level and do the same for those occupying the white keys to make the leverage relatively equal; this will curve the hand, giving it the necessary suppleness that it could not have with the fingers straight.<sup>43</sup>

When playing the piano, this natural shape of the hand should be referred back to frequently, and any unnecessary tension that may be being held in the fingers from over curling can be relaxed.

### **Exercises and Elbows**

Chopin recommended that scales and arpeggios be practiced daily and believed that they had great benefit.<sup>44</sup> Chopin insisted that when his students were doing these exercises, they should ensure that the hand retains its position, making sure not to turn the hand to help the thumb when it passed under the hand.<sup>45</sup> Chopin preferred that the notes be disconnected if need be to make it

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<sup>42</sup> Stephen Hough, "Writings: Chopin and the Development of Piano Technique," StephenHough.com, accessed September 1, 2021, para. 2, <http://stephenhough.com/writings/selective/chopin.php>.

<sup>43</sup> Frederic Chopin, *The Etudes* (Schott Music, 2015), 25.

<sup>44</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 32.

easier at first for the student to perform this exercise.<sup>46</sup>

Chopin was an effective teacher because he gave his students very detailed instructions on how to practice their exercises correctly. Instead of allowing his student to practice their bad habits while hoping to see improvements, Chopin demonstrated how to do the exercises correctly to guide students to mastery and set them on the road towards success. Chopin taught with the utmost care, thoughtfulness, and precision to the benefit of his students and to modern-day pianists, which can be seen in the following account from one of his students:

Yesterday at Chopin's I tried to play his Nocturnes. I knew, I still felt clearly within myself the way in which he had played them. But partly because of uncertainty with the notes, and partly through a certain inhibition which comes out in our bearing and our performance when we are anxious or unhappy, I found myself unable to express the music as I heard it in my head; I did not have the strength to realize it in sound. It is wonderful then to see how tactfully Chopin puts one at one's ease; how intuitively he identifies, I might say, with the thoughts of the person to whom he is speaking or listening; with what delicate nuances of behavior he adapts his own being to that of another. To encourage me, he tells me among other things, 'It seems to me that you don't dare to express yourself as you feel. Be bolder, let yourself go more. Imagine you're at the Conservatoire, listening to the most beautiful performance in the world. Make yourself want to hear it, and then you'll hear yourself playing it right here. Have full confidence in yourself; make yourself want to sing like Rubini, and you'll succeed in doing so. Forget you're being listened to, and always listen to yourself. I see that timidity

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<sup>46</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 32.

and lack of self-confidence form a kind of armour around you, but through this armour I perceive something else that you don't always dare to express, and so you deprive us all. When you're at the piano, I give you full authority to do whatever you want; follow freely the ideal you've set for yourself and which you must feel within you; be bold and confident in your own powers and strength, and whatever you say will always be good. It would give me so much pleasure to hear you play with complete abandon that I'd find the shameless confidence of the "vulgaires" unbearable by comparison.<sup>47</sup>

The intent of Chopin's exercises was to promote evenness in playing passagework. To accomplish this, he wished that the elbows would hang "freely and always loose by one's side."<sup>48</sup> The freedom and looseness of the elbows were the bedrock of Chopin's technique, on which all the other elements were built and from which he was able to access all the benefits of arm-weight technique. And in performance Chopin practiced what he preached, playing as much as possible with his elbows by his sides.<sup>49</sup>

An incredible amount of tension is generated from the outward movement of the elbows away from the body. Chopin developed a technique that allowed him to use the elbows in as relaxed a way as possible, without having to strain. When one is playing in this way, the body adjusts by leaning to one side or towards or away from the piano when the arm moves further away from the body so that the elbows can still feel relaxed.

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<sup>47</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 16.

<sup>48</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 37.

<sup>49</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 27.

Just as playing in this way strengthens the upper body, playing the piano in Chopin's manner also supports the sides and back, enabling more significant support for the arms, hands, and fingers. In conjunction with the elbow technique, one can find in Chopin's music a persistent focus on turning the hands outward to achieve technical brilliance.

### **Hands Turned Outward**

According to Jan Kleczynski, a Chopin enthusiast and fellow Pole, Chopin wished that, "for all rapid passages in general the hands must be slightly turned, the right hand to the right, and the left hand to the left; and the elbows should remain close to the body, except in the highest and lowest octaves."<sup>50</sup>

In this passage, Chopin says that when playing rapid passages, the hands should be turned outwards. This is a general statement, however, and cannot be applied to every passage. If pianists use and incorporate this concept into their practice routine, it will become clear that if the slightly turned position of the hand is maintained, it is impossible to keep it turned and fixed in that way consistently. However, to preserve this rotated position as much as possible, one will need to practice and learn other movements such as moving in and out of the black key area and adjusting the height of the wrist at different times.

If Chopin's hand position with the hands turned outwards is continued during practice sessions, one may begin to note a fluidity emerging and new motions taking place based on rotational, circular shapes from the wrist, along with increased flexibility in the fingers.

## Circular Wrist Motion

Circular wrist motion is a prominent characteristic of Chopin's and Liszt's technique, and a mastery of this element is required to reach a complete artistic expression of their music.

Chopin's etude Op. 10 No. 1 is essentially a study on arpeggios for the right hand covering the whole keyboard. Because of the large stretches in this piece, not only between the thumb and pinky but also between the thumb and forefinger, the players must move their wrists laterally while at the same time incorporating vertical motions of the wrist. The reason for shaping, as this is often referred to, is to make the fingers feel balanced and supported on each note by the arm. If one were to play the etude without wrist motion, it would be challenging and, if possible, would only be moderately successful both technically and musically.

Strictly lateral movements devoid of shape are, in a sense, two-dimensional, and as such, cannot transcend the cold, straight angles of the keys of the piano.

Proof that Chopin played with a keen awareness of the importance of wrist mobility can be found in an observation of Chopin's playing. Karl Mikuli, a student of Chopin's, noted that "he could play legato in the most difficult arpeggios made up of extensive intervals since it was his wrist and not his arm that was in constant motion."<sup>51</sup>

Because flexibility of the wrist played a vital role in both Chopin and Liszt's playing, they both saw it necessary to supplement the work done at the piano to attain this suppleness with stretching exercises both of the wrists and the fingers.

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<sup>51</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 26.

## Stretching and Arm Weight

Chopin asked his students to train their wrists and fingers through stretching but cautioned them to do so carefully and stop if they felt any pain.<sup>52</sup> Liszt also required students to do stretches, but was more aggressive, telling students to stretch for 3 hours a day.<sup>53</sup>

Stiffness is the prime enemy to defeat for a fluid, virtuosic technique with a total capacity to produce sonorous tones. And suppleness, of course, is the antithesis of stiffness. It implies not only a relaxed state of the muscles but also the flexibility of the joints and muscle tissue. Chopin had some exciting insights about the role of the wrist and the importance of relaxation:

The hand should be supple and trained to flex as far as possible, without ever having to resort to the force of the elbow, except in fortissimo passages, and not always even then. Furthermore, the hand should fall softly on the keys just with its weight – as though to play pianissimo. Often seeming to caress the keys, sometimes lying as though dead at the wrist, but always keeping a living, active link from each finger to the hand, concentrating the sensorial power in the extreme tips of the fingers. When the wrist is not passive, the sensorial power runs through the whole hand right through to the fingers, paralyzing them; this robs them of their freedom and tires the player, and the stiff hand prevents him from playing what he would be able to manage perfectly well by being relaxed.<sup>54</sup>

Chopin's belief, as can be inferred from this quote, is that if the wrist lacks suppleness, the arm's weight cannot pass freely through the arm, wrist, and fingers, down into the keys. Liszt was in

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<sup>52</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 27.

<sup>53</sup> Wallick, "Piano Practice," 11.

<sup>54</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 27.

agreement with Chopin on this front. When teaching octaves, Liszt asked his students to play them from the wrist and encouraged them to establish this technique in their bodies through exercises. Liszt described the looseness needed to play octaves as a feeling of the hand being “dead.”<sup>55</sup> Without this, speed and power would be unable to be acquired. This clearly shows Chopin and Liszt's awareness of the wrist's ability to create tension or relaxation when playing.

It is also clear from Chopin's quote that he had disdain for applying extra force from the elbow. The elbow is a prime location for extra tension to accumulate, leading pianists to play with more arm weight than is necessary. We can say for a fact that Chopin and Liszt both knew about the uses of arm weight. A student recorded that once in a lesson, Chopin told her, “... Laissez tomber les mains’ [Let your hands fall].” She said, “Hitherto, I had been accustomed to hear ‘Put down your hands’, or ‘Strike’ such a note.”<sup>56</sup> “This letting fall was not mechanical only: it was to be a new idea, and in a moment I felt the difference.” Liszt was said to at times play successive chords, by falling from the arm onto the keys with a high wrist.<sup>57</sup> These accounts clearly show an awareness and application of arm weight principles.

Even though Chopin and Liszt both used arm weight in their playing, we understand that they did not give the utmost importance to the role of the arms. This may have been because of their

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<sup>55</sup> Davison, “Franz Liszt,” 37.

<sup>56</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 26.

<sup>57</sup> von Arx, *Piano Lessons*, 44.



wariness of the overuse of the arms, which can cause many problems resulting from acute tension.

## **Conclusion**

Before the Romantic period, the arms' capabilities in playing piano had not been fully realized. With Chopin and Liszt, the arms became enlivened and played a vital role in the art of playing the piano. However, the field of piano pedagogy had much farther to develop, both in its knowledge of healthy coordination and in the proper teaching and application of these principles.

Today, the belief that a virtuosic technique cannot be successfully and systematically taught is in decline. One of the achievements of modern piano techniques is that we have learned to a greater degree how to use the arms more precisely. Although Chopin may not have fully conveyed the method of his astounding technique, his music essentially codifies all aspects of a virtuosic piano technique in the many sacred pages of his Etudes and other works.

Many variables over a few centuries, developing in the minds of instrument builders, composers, and pianists, led to a tipping point resulting in a golden age of romantic music in the 19th century. This technical knowledge and musical talent accumulated during this golden age has spilled over into the modern era. The influx of inspired information became the bedrock for new approaches to piano techniques in the 20th century, such as the work of Dorothy Taubman and Barbara Lister-Sink, as well as other current methodologies. Many of the contemporary ideas found in these methods originated in Chopin and Liszt's philosophies.

Today, the traditions of Chopin and Liszt are taught in the great music schools of the world, and the basic principles of their technique are present in the mainstream pedagogical community.

It is thanks to Chopin and Liszt that the notion that playing the piano required one to play with a rigidity of the wrists and arms began to shift. Today, while the roles of finger strengthening and exercises are still disputed among many in the classical music field, there is no longer any dispute over the need for and validity of playing the piano using the whole body. Piano technique now has the limitless potential for bringing to life the exciting music yet to come.

## **Chapter 4: Chopin and Taubman**

This section aims to show how Chopin's technique bears some remarkable similarities to the modern-day Taubman technique. While it is impossible to say if there is a direct connection, pointing out the similarities can make us appreciate how advanced Chopin was when it came to playing with a technique which was not of the finger school.

To begin with, the Taubman technique proposes that the fingers should be naturally curved just as they are when one lets the arms hang by one's side.<sup>58</sup> This naturalness is what Chopin aimed for as well. He started new students on the B major scale, which encourages a natural position of the fingers because they are forced to spread out over the black keys.<sup>59</sup> Why is this important? A neutral curvature of the fingers, neither completely flat nor completely curved is free, uninhibited by the tension created by curling or by the tension of overly straightening.

Chopin was said to play with his elbows at his sides.<sup>60</sup> This is also a core tenant of the Taubman approach. An excess of tension is created by holding the arms needlessly out away from the body.<sup>61</sup> It seems that both Chopin and Taubman share an awareness that the arm has to be engaged and active to an extent. The only main piece to the Taubman technique which may not relate to Chopin is the emphasis on rotation. It is clear that Chopin played with rotation but it seems that this word was not used frequently during that time. All that is known is that Chopin

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<sup>58</sup> Yoriko Fieleke, Taubman Technique Lesson (Zoom lesson), July 15, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Hough, "Writings," accessed August 26, 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 27.

<sup>61</sup> Yoriko Fieleke, Taubman Technique Lesson (Zoom lesson), June 10, 2021.

wanted the whole body to be supple and relaxed.<sup>62</sup> When this truly is the case, rotation happens naturally.

Lastly, Chopin wanted a supple wrist, one which could move with the music as was needed.<sup>63</sup> He left no detailed information on this subject, whereas the Taubman technique is a very methodical, disciplined approach. But simply put, freedom of the wrist is a concept shared by Taubman and Chopin. All of this shows how much of an independent thinker Chopin was. In so many ways Chopin left his mark on piano playing, and centuries later we continue to benefit from his groundbreaking contributions.

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<sup>62</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 26.

<sup>63</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 26–27.

## **Chapter 5: Analysis**

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how one can apply the principles of Chopin and Liszt's philosophy of technique to mastering their etudes. The chapter shows how techniques from both approaches can be used in various passages, sometimes achieving different musical results. The etudes discussed are Liszt's Etudes Nos. 3 and 5 (*Paysage* and *Feux Follets*) from the Transcendental Etudes and Chopin's Op. 10 Nos. 1, 4, and 8. These techniques of Chopin and Liszt have become engrained in modern piano playing and can be applied to their music and to all music composed for the piano.

These techniques illustrate the fundamental principles of the coordination of movement, sometimes expressed in different forms by the composers. As we will see, some methods of Chopin or Liszt are distinctive and are best applied to works written by the respective composer.

### **Analysis and Comparison of *Paysage* (Landscape) and Op. 10 No. 1**

In *Paysage*, the pianist must produce excellent voicing of all the harmonies comprising thirds, chords, and octaves. These must be balanced so that a beautiful, shimmering atmosphere is expressed. This is accomplished by controlling the gradations of arm weight directed through each finger into the keys.

Feeling the connection of the fingers to the shoulders is an essential component of this endeavor because it opens up the possibility of channeling weight down through the arm to the fingers into the keys. This, in turn, gives the fingers a more excellent sense of balance, strength, individualization, and a feeling of connectivity and relaxation rather than isolation or tension. It is said that Liszt would often sit far back at the piano and pull the sound outwards towards him

with his arms while leaning back.<sup>64</sup> This motion activates the shoulders; in addition, by sitting far away from the keyboard, the arms hang down from the shoulders more freely. These techniques can be used in *Paysage* to produce a beautiful tone and pure legato.

Leaning backward can facilitate this process for a few reasons. Leaning backward removes some of the automatic tension and heaviness which comes with leaning forward or sitting up straight. Therefore, it is easier to control more precisely how much weight is being released into the keys. This is perfect for *Paysage*, as creating a panorama of exact colors is essential for evoking a natural scene. Chopin may have also played in this way: in the image in Fig. 1 of Chopin at the piano, he is leaning back, almost resting against the back of the chair.



Figure 1. Chopin Playing the Piano in Prince Radziwill's Salon, 1887 Giclee Print by Henryk Siemiradzki<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Fee, "Performing," 5.

<sup>65</sup> Source: <https://www.playbill.com/article/celebrating-the-musical-genius-of-chopin-on-his-birthday>.

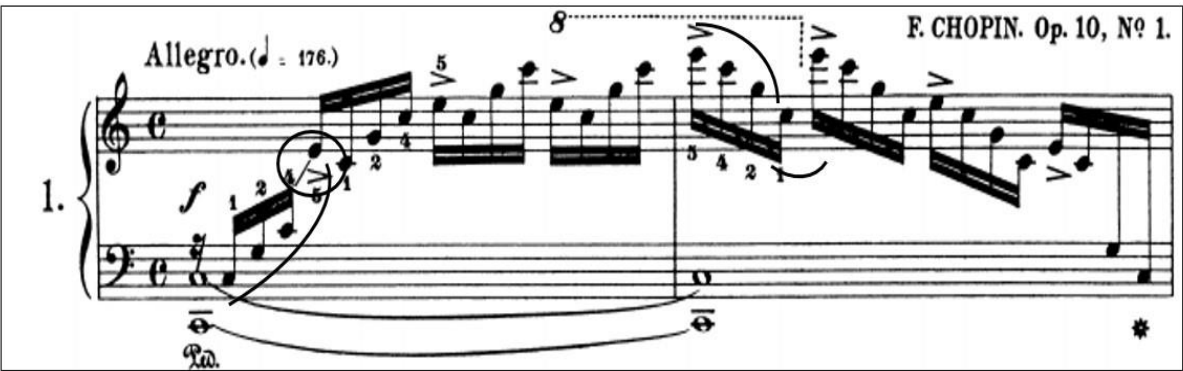
In Chopin Op. 10 No. 1, letting the arms hang freely from the shoulder enables a feeling of more profound connection to the whole hand, arm, and body when playing this piece. For Chopin, the relaxation of the elbow can be thought of as the gateway to acquiring the ability to let the arms hang loosely from the shoulder. Precise movements of the torso are required to achieve this result so that the elbows never strain by moving too far away from the body. This way of playing suits Chopin's music, whereas Liszt's technique, based more on strength, often requires a more varied approach.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the prominent and current Taubman Piano Technique includes ideas that relate to Chopin's method. There is a critical component to the Taubman Technique called shaping, essentially a circular motion of the wrist or, according to Taubman, "an elliptical forearm movement."<sup>66</sup> Dorothy Taubman, the technique's creator, did not want the action to be initiated from the wrist, but instead from the back of the forearm.<sup>67</sup> When done correctly, wrist motions should feel effortless since the impulse is not being made from the wrist. Chopin probably saw circular wrist motion as being initiated from the wrists alone. Nonetheless, he most assuredly wanted students' wrists to be completely relaxed as he adamantly taught students the value of keeping their whole body loose and supple. This indicates that Chopin may have had an unconscious awareness of shaping, which would later become one of Taubman's principles.

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<sup>66</sup> Therese Milanovic, "An Introduction to Shaping," Therese Milanovic (blog), para. 1, accessed August 24, 2021, <https://www.theresemilanovic.com/blog/phd-extract-an-introduction-to-shaping/>.

<sup>67</sup> Milanovic, "An Introduction," para. 1.



In the first bar the slurs under the notes represent undershapes while the circled notes represent overshapes

The pattern continues the same way through the end of the bar

In the second bar the slur over the notes represents an overshape

The pattern continues for the rest of the bar

Figure 2. Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 1 circular wrist motion<sup>68</sup>

According to the Taubman Technique, shaping consists of under-shapes and over-shapes. Under-shapes are the lower half of a wrist circle.<sup>69</sup> Place your right hand and fingers on the keyboard and move your wrist laterally to the right, lowering your wrist slightly and returning to

<sup>68</sup> Frédéric Chopin, *Etude Op. 10 No. 1*, Schirmer’s Library of Musical Classics, *Frédéric Chopin Complete Works for the Piano* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1916, Copyright renewed 1943), p. 3, measures 1–2. <https://ks.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/5/59/IMSLP60294-PMLP01969-Chopin Etudes Schirmer Mikuli Op 10 filter.pdf>.

<sup>69</sup> Milanovic, “An Introduction,” para. 2.



the normal position. This is an under-shape; an over-shape is precisely the opposite motion. A critical note is that the circles can either move from left to right or from right to left. An under-shape linked with an over-shape creates a sweeping circular motion of the wrist. This can be seen in Fig. 2. The most common mistake a pianist can make in playing this work is not engaging the wrist and playing with the fingers alone. While possible, this tactic will never yield the ultimate musical or technical freedom.

The enormous stretches between the thumb and index finger show the need for these fingers to individuate even more from the others. The distance makes it challenging to feel stable, and therefore extra strength is needed in these fingers to stabilize the rest of the hand and complete the circular motions.

### **Sideways Orientation for Chopin Etude**

Chopin's student Karl Mikuli reported that Chopin believed that "...evenness in scales (and in arpeggios) depended not merely on equal strengthening of all fingers by means of five-finger exercises, and on entire freedom of the thumb when passing under and over, but above all on a constant sideways movement of the hands (with the elbow hanging freely and always loose)."<sup>70</sup>

Until recently, I had not played with a "constant sideways movement of the hands." As I have practiced engraining this sideways motion into my playing, I have discovered that despite appearing at first impossible to keep the correct hand orientation with the proper circular wrist motions, I soon began to integrate the sideways movement of the hand successfully.

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<sup>70</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 31.

Why is it beneficial for the right hand to adhere to a sideways movement across the keyboard? The answer to this complex question lies in one further question: which finger is the balance point of the hand and, thus, the central issue? Chopin's answer to this question would unequivocally be the index finger. He says, "the pivot is the index finger which divides the hand in half when it spreads open."<sup>71</sup> The well-known pianist and pedagogue Earl Wild taught that the index finger was the center of the hand, in alignment with Chopin's philosophy.<sup>72</sup> If the index finger is the pivot, then the index finger is the balance point of the hand. But when playing the piano, things become complicated because one begins to feel forced to give up this sideways orientation that strengthens the index finger automatically. This strengthening is crucial for the development of one's technique. A stronger index finger frees up the thumb and fourth finger, giving them a more comprehensive range of motion. This is very important for Op. 10 No. 1 because of the vast stretches required for the arpeggios. It may seem not very sensible to put so much emphasis on strengthening the index finger. However, Chopin discovered that it was indeed the most important finger to be dealt with as it is the pivot of the entire hand. So many of his etudes deal with strengthening this finger specifically. The wide intervals between the thumb and index finger in Op. 10 No. 1 support both fingers by intensely activating their muscles, forcing them to be more in sync.

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<sup>71</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 26.

<sup>72</sup> David Korevaar, "Chopin's Pedagogy: A Practical Approach," presentation delivered at the MTNA National Convention, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2010, accessed April 25, 2021, para. 16, [https://spot.colorado.edu/~korevaar/Chopin\\_talk.htm](https://spot.colorado.edu/~korevaar/Chopin_talk.htm).

Circular wrist motion is also required in *Paysage* to produce a rich tone from the piano and to aid in creating a smooth legato. In Fig. 3, see how the under-shapes and over-shapes create complete wrist circles, the first being the largest, and the second the smallest.



**The light blue curvilinear line represents an under shape of the wrist**  
**The dark blue curvilinear line represents an over shape of the wrist**

Figure 3. Liszt's *Paysage* circular motion<sup>73</sup>

In the second half of *Paysage*, we have a section that begins with the new articulation of *portato* followed by short bursts of legato. This change comes at a pivotal point where it is marked in the music to increase the tempo. One can use changes in touch, namely rounded fingers and flat fingers, to create these varied color effects. The different textures, the *portato* chords, and legato thirds, exemplify Liszt's playing style because of the ability required to move into contrasting hand shapes.<sup>74</sup> The chords are naturally easily played with rounded fingers, just

<sup>73</sup> Franz Liszt, *Etude No. 3 in F Major "Paysage," Douze Etudes d'execution Transcendante pour piano*, Leipzig: Breitkopf and Hartel 2002), p. 11, measures 1–3, [https://imslp.eu/files/imglnks/euimg/6/61/IMSLP182212-PMLP02567-Liszt\\_NLA\\_Serie\\_I\\_Band\\_01\\_01\\_Etudes\\_S.139\\_scan.pdf](https://imslp.eu/files/imglnks/euimg/6/61/IMSLP182212-PMLP02567-Liszt_NLA_Serie_I_Band_01_01_Etudes_S.139_scan.pdf).

<sup>74</sup> Davison, "Franz Liszt," 37.



Legato is a common thread that runs through both etudes. In Chopin's etude, while it is possible to make some interpretive choices by varying the touch, the entire right-hand part should be practiced legato. To perform this etude with a pure finger legato at the tempo Chopin indicates is a truly remarkable feat for a pianist to achieve.

Achieving finger legato in *Paysage* is a much more attainable goal. Using the tools described in this section – wrist motions, hand orientation, and connecting to the shoulder – it is possible to play these studies so that the audience feels they are in the presence of the beautiful sights and sounds of nature.

### **Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 8**

Chopin once commanded a student to let their hands drop onto the keys, utilizing gravity.<sup>76</sup> This illustrates Chopin's awareness of the advantages of using arm-weight and relaxation, both available when bringing gravity into one's awareness and harnessing its potential for unrestricted movement.

Much of the right hand of Chopin's Etude Op. 10 No. 8 uses arpeggios which span the entire keyboard. These arpeggios are a challenge for the pianist because of the need for the fourth finger to cross over the thumb and for the thumb to cross under the hand. Chopin had students do an exercise where as they played scales he did not allow them to help the thumb cross under the hand by turning the hand.<sup>77</sup> The same principle also applies to situations where the fingers need to cross over the thumb and can be successfully applied to practicing these arpeggios.

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<sup>76</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 26.

<sup>77</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 32.

Additionally, the elbows should not move exaggeratedly when crossing the pointer over the thumb or vice versa.

**Elbow remains as straight as possible  
between crossover**



**Avoid helping the 4th finger cross over the thumb  
by raising elbow**

Figure 5. Stable elbow<sup>78</sup>

The repetitive nature of the musical patterns in the piece, as well as the stationary left-hand part, lends itself to students greatly benefitting from practicing without looking at their hands.

Figures 6 and 7 show examples of these patterns. Practicing looking straight ahead enabled the author to envision his movements more accurately when engaging in mental practice. While no

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<sup>78</sup> Frédéric Chopin, *Etude Op. 10 No. 8 in F Major*, Schirmer's Library of Musical Classics, *Frédéric Chopin Complete Works for the Piano* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1916, Copyright renewed 1943), p. 35, measures 27–28, [https://ks.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/5/59/IMSLP60294-PMLP01969-Chopin\\_Etudes\\_Schirmer\\_Mikuli\\_Op\\_10\\_filter.pdf](https://ks.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/5/59/IMSLP60294-PMLP01969-Chopin_Etudes_Schirmer_Mikuli_Op_10_filter.pdf).

research could be found on the perceived correlation between looking straight ahead and more accurate visualization, there is truth in this. From personal experience, I have found that looking away from one's hands gives the body better equilibrium to visualize all the body's movements concerning the instrument.

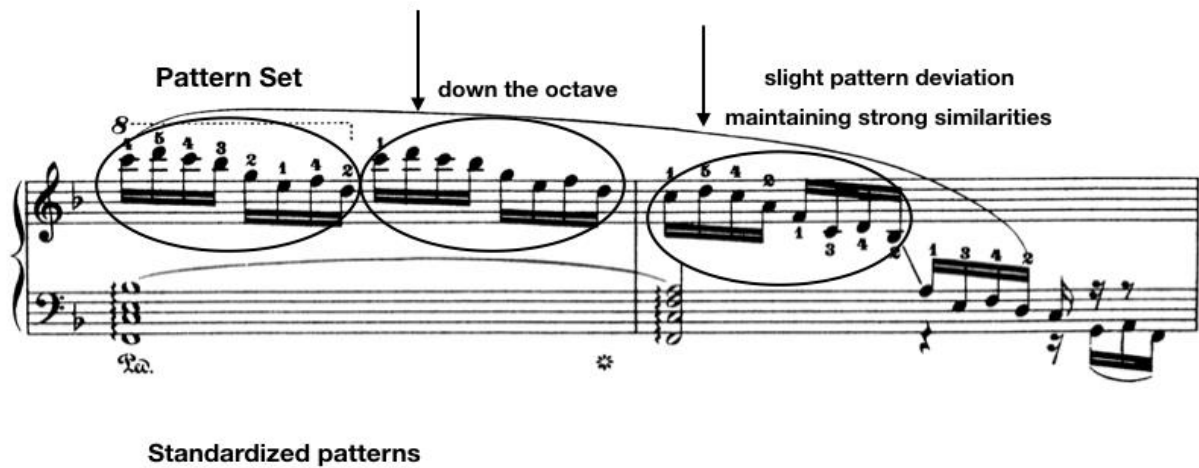


Figure 6. Patterns<sup>79</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Chopin, *Etude Op. 10 No. 8 in F Major*, p. 34, measures 3–5.

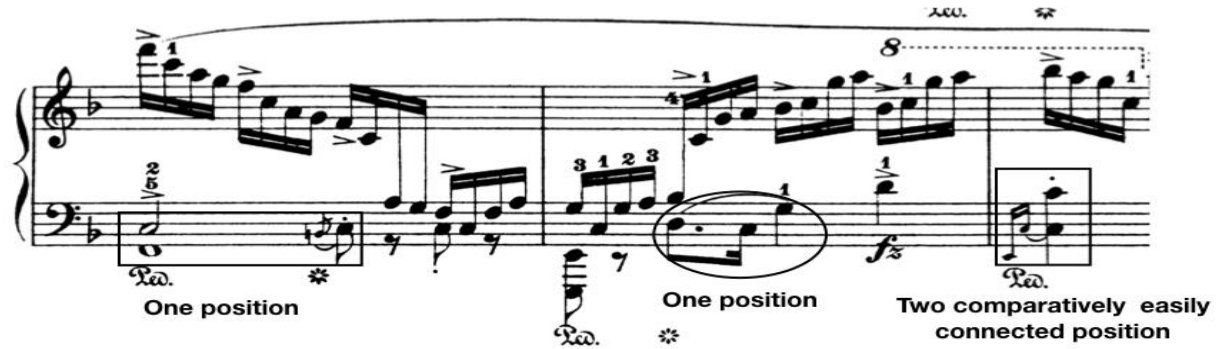


Figure 7. Left-hand positions

Chopin was known to play the piano entirely in the dark, not only in practice sessions but in performances as well.<sup>80</sup> This is a practice that other pianists throughout the years have taken up because it can help create a very accurate image and spatial awareness of the keyboard. From this method, we can see how Chopin developed a keen tactile understanding without looking at his hands.

Chopin cautioned his students to listen to themselves playing, saying, “Forget you’re being listened to, and always listen to yourself.”<sup>81</sup> Developing one’s listening skills and musical imagination is of utmost importance as a musician.

Chopin was very cautious about pianistic acrobatics, which focused on exercises as an agenda separate from music.<sup>82</sup> In the following passage, Chopin discusses this very sentiment:

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<sup>80</sup> Austin Hennen Vigil, “Top 10 Interesting Facts about Frédéric Chopin,” Take Note: Sheet Music Plus (blog), March 1, 2018, 1, <https://blog.sheetmusicplus.com/2018/03/01/top-10-interesting-facts-about-frederic-chopin/>.

<sup>81</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 16.

<sup>82</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 23.



People have tried out all kinds of methods of learning to play the piano, processes that are tedious and useless and have nothing to do with the study of this instrument. It's like learning, for example, to walk on one's hands to go for a stroll. Eventually, one can no longer walk properly on one's feet and not very well on one's hands either. It doesn't teach us how to play the music itself — and the type of difficulty we are practicing is not the difficulty encountered in good music, the music of the great masters. It's an abstract difficulty, a new genre of acrobatics.<sup>83</sup>

When one's mind and ear give clear commands, and the imagination dictates the function of a technique, playing the piano is easier and more enjoyable, and gratifying for the listener. The ear must be engaged when playing a piece like this Etude, with so many different layers of sound and articulations happening simultaneously. Without artistic vision, the mastery of technical challenges can be more challenging than it ought to be. By increasing one's sensitivity to musical demands, one can learn to solve problems more efficiently.

The etude closes with a coda, the left hand giving an altered playful rendition of the opening theme while the right hand, in a jazz-like fashion, scurries up and down the keyboard in a trapeze act. While it is said that Chopin did not enjoy performing, one would not know it by the last phrases of this etude, which end the piece in a classic show-stopping fashion. We arrive suddenly at an imperfect authentic cadence on the tonic in the treble register. Immediately the texture thins, the parts double, and dramatically the pianist's hands rush down the keyboard only to catapult back up to the top register of the piano, resolving on an F. Rather than end with fanfare, the piece concludes with suave rolled chords, confirming the tonic of F Major.

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<sup>83</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 23.

### **Liszt's *Feux Follets* and Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 4**

Liszt's students described his hands as he played as being neither flat nor rounded but very flexible, so flexible in fact as to have no discernible shape at all.<sup>84</sup> This ability to go in and out of different hand shapes and forms very quickly is necessary for playing *Feux Follets*. It requires a special kind of agility to move in and out of the black key area speedily and to shift either from a flat to a rounded hand shape immediately or vice versa.

Barber Lister-Sink is a renowned pedagogue who has helped many to play the piano in a healthy way, avoiding injury.<sup>85</sup> A fundamental component of her approach to technique is the "basic stroke," which is a gentle lifting of the forearm and wrist followed by a release and quick falling back down into the keys, releasing all tension.<sup>86</sup> This technique should be used to play the double notes in this etude in order to facilitate the ease of clean execution. The basic stroke should always be executed from a low wrist position and to a high wrist position and then a drop back down, beginning this pattern once again. This applies to all the double notes in *Feux Follets*. Trying to articulate the notes with fingers alone will not lead to positive results. For the double note passage in Fig. 8, the wrist begins in a low position on the first double note and then rises on the second. The motion should then be eventually minimized.

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<sup>84</sup> Davison, "Franz Liszt," 37.

<sup>85</sup> Osada, "The Lister-Sink Method," 28.

<sup>86</sup> Osada, "The Lister-Sink Method," 52.

**wrist snap back  
after group of 4**      **wrist aids in bringing  
out top voice**      **lower voice  
becomes melody**

Figure 8. Liszt *Feux Follets*, wrist snapping back minimized<sup>87</sup>

Liszt had students do exercises which included dropping onto each note from the wrist.<sup>88</sup> This shows that Barbara Lister- Sink’s technique may be grounded in Liszt’s technique. Fig. 8 explores an example of how Liszt may have relied on the wrist in playing two-note passages. After every slurred group of four notes, snapping the hand back from the wrist enables one to balance the top voice in the passage more successfully. This is because the overworked fourth and fifth fingers feel remarkably inhibited. This motion releases the tension of the fingers but needs to be significantly minimized to be valuable at tempo. The lower voice in the second bar of Fig. 8 can be brought out in this way more easily, showing that through suppleness of the wrist, arm weight truly is an aide in both mastering technical and musical problems.

<sup>87</sup> Franz Liszt, *Etude No. 5 in B-flat Major "Feux Follets," Douze Etudes d'execution Transcendante pour piano*, Leipzig: Breitkopf and Hartel, 1911, p. 31, measures 27–28.

<sup>88</sup> Davison, “Franz Liszt,” 37.

I decided to practice the double-notes in this piece by applying Liszt's wrist techniques and I slowly began to see improvement. To test Liszt's methods more broadly, I used his exercise of dropping onto each note from the wrist to every double note in the piece and was greatly benefited. I realized that this was because I was training my wrist and fingers to relax quickly after tensing. To clarify, when dropping my hand from the wrist onto the keys, my fingers, of course, would tighten, but then, while lifting my hand immediately off the keys, my fingers would automatically relax. I want to emphasize here that not only was my hand lifting my fingers off the keys, but there was also a feeling of rebound from the keys because my hand was loose and dropping freely from my wrist.

By giving my wrists, hands, and fingers the experience of relaxing through this technique, I noticed that I could use gravity to tap into my arm weight effectively when I played as written, just as I had when I was doing the exercise. The wrist strokes had further sensitized me to gravity's potential to relax and create free movement. I should note that the fingers must always feel strong when playing yet, never stiff. Liszt's exercise helped teach my fingers to let go of stiffness by relaxation.

We can see similarities in some of the figurations in *Feux Follets* to Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 4. Figures 9 and 10 are an example of this. Even though the notes bear no similarities, the effect of these passages is similar. The notes are swift weaving across the staff and through the bar-lines, creating a swirling effect. This quality is produced by how the notes are configured, which requires the wrist to raise and lower quickly. The similarities between the passages are the fingerings and the consecutive rising and falling lines. Fig. 9 shows these two aspects clearly in

*Feux Follets* and Fig. 10 does the same for Chopin Op 10. No. 4. Each group of boxed notes can be played by raising the wrist and then quickly relaxing it at the completion.



Notes in the orange circles are two note wrist groupings  
 Notes in red boxes 4 note wrist groupings  
 Begin each group with a low wrist  
 -then raise until the end of the group and then relax quickly to begin again

Figure 9. *Feux Follets* swirls of grouped notes<sup>89</sup>



Notes in boxes indicate 4 note wrist groupings  
 Begin each group with a low wrist  
 -then raise until the end of the group and then relax quickly to begin again  
 Notice the same fingering in the boxed groups between the Liszt and Chopin examples: 1,2,3,4

Figure 10. Chopin Etude. Op. 10 No. 4 comparison<sup>90</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Liszt, *Etude No. 5 in B-flat Major "Feux Follets,"* p. 29, measures 1–2.

<sup>90</sup> Frédéric Chopin, *Etude Op. 10 No. 4*, Schirmer's Library of Musical Classics, *Frédéric Chopin Complete Works for the Piano* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1916, Copyright renewed 1943), p. 16, measure 1.

*Feux Follets* does not overtly showcase circular wrist motion. However, there is one section in the work where this motion can be used effectively. In Fig. 11, one can see a motive in the box that is similar in construction to what we find in an example from Op. 10 No. 4 seen in Fig. 12. In Fig. 11, this motive is the beginning of an under-shape that links with an over-shape, as seen in the example. In this instance, the figuration is used in a playful way, creating an animated character. You can see that not only are there leaps in the left hand, but the hands also have to cross over each other. The body must be relaxed, yet controlled and still, while the hands perform this feat.

**motive x**

**Hands overlap**

**body must remain still for both measures, including LH leaps**

**notes in the red box are motive x which is an under-shape**  
**notes in the circle are an over shape**  
**notes in the blue box are an under-shape**  
**notes in the triangle indicate the first set of leaps**

Figure 11. Hand Crossing in Liszt's *Feux Follets* <sup>91</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Liszt, *Etude No. 5 in B-flat Major "Feux Follets,"* p. 36, measures 86–87.

The passage in Fig. 12 showcases how rotation can and must be used to accomplish the task of playing the leaps with virtuosity. The difficulty, as seen in the left-hand part, is the leaps that require rotation to be played accurately. The defining factor in a pianist achieving success is having an awareness of the location of the elbow when leaping from note to note. The elbow of the left arm should be closer to one's side than may be obvious. This is because it is easier to move from note to note if the elbow is held more at the mid-point between the notes, enabling greater accuracy. Emphasis must be placed on not letting the elbow move its position irregularly during the jumps, as this will cause inaccuracy.

**The same applies for RH groupings**



**Under shape for each grouping of 4  
However, a complete circular wrist motion occurs  
- a small over shape connects each grouping**

Figure 12. Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 4 leaps<sup>92</sup>

In Op. 10 No. 4, Chopin uses musical markings as a guide to help the pianist find the right physical tool to both accomplish the most accurate technical result and the most captivating

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<sup>92</sup> Chopin, *Etude Op. 10 No. 4*, p. 21, measure 77.



musical result. Fig. 13 is an example of Chopin's use of accents to point out the importance of the top voice in the right hand. From the accents, we know that the top voice, played exclusively by the fifth finger, should be emphasized due to its primary importance. For the fifth finger to be optimally voiced, one should use the finger's pad for more strength and richness of tone.

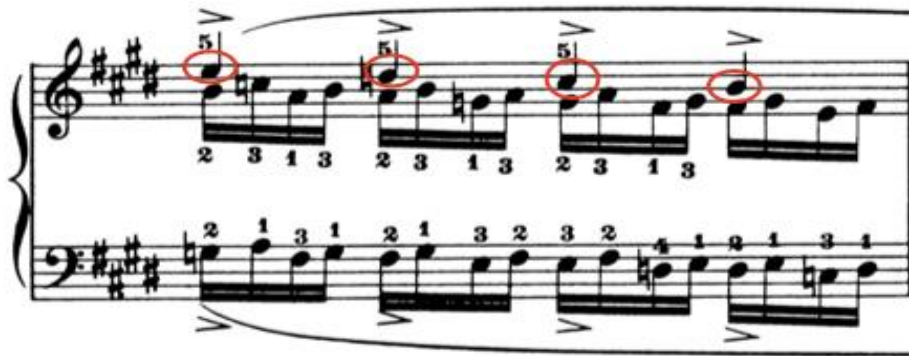


Figure 13. Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 4 voicing<sup>93</sup>

Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 2 in A minor causes hand to strengthen by forcing each side to achieve distinct musical tasks. The crossing of the weak fingers over each other, which is the central aspect of this study, actually serves to force the left side of the hand to strengthen. An important note is the marked outward orientation of the right hand needed to facilitate the crossing over of each finger.

Chopin's Etude Op. 25 No. 11 (Winter Wind) exemplifies how important hand position is for mastery. Chopin demonstrated the sideways orientation of the hand he desired by playing a glissando up and down the keyboard.<sup>94</sup> We can surmise from this that when going up the

<sup>93</sup> Chopin, *Etude Op. 10 No. 4*, p. 18, measure 31.

<sup>94</sup> Eigeldinger, *Chopin*, 31.

keyboard, the hand would be turned out and when going down the keyboard, it would be turned in. This is precisely what we see in this Etude. Throughout the work, we know the frequency and speed of the changes required between inward and outward hand orientation fluctuate considerably. Sometimes within one beat, there can be a clear need to shift the hand from one side to the other. It is the precision and exactitude required that makes this Etude noteworthy in this regard.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, there have been several piano methodologies that arose, all based in part on foundational principles of holistic movement that are rooted in the work of these great composers/pianists. The main principles common to each are flexibility, freedom of the arm, use of arm weight, and economy of motion. Breakthroughs that are yet to come will all, to a degree, be a result of Chopin's and Liszt's achievements brought about by their experimentation and vision.

Through challenging, diligent work, one can change a small technique to a grand one, enabling the pianist to worry less about technique because all the many mechanical components have been synthesized. It is now about the sound one wishes to hear and how to achieve that sound. And all the music played and all the techniques learned by the pianist suddenly unite, and it becomes natural and easy to play a note 20 times and to know precisely how to get different colors out of that single note. That is what Chopin and Liszt did. That is the lesson they taught — to control sound and let your ear take you on the journey where you wish to go.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

The wonderful thing about studying the technique of two geniuses is that it begins to change one's perspective on both technique and music. One begins to see and appreciate how they intersect and how techniques can be used to create satisfying music that captivates and inspires.

The purpose of this study was to discover similarities and divergences between these pianists' methods and to find commonalities that are foundational principles of coordination. Applying each composer's approach to their pieces sheds light on which technical tools worked best for each pianist's music. The study also set out to confirm that Chopin and Liszt's techniques could be applied to other composers' music in order to achieve great results.

Chopin and Liszt both transformed piano technique. However, much of how they played remains a mystery, and perhaps that is what they would have wanted. Chopin and Liszt influenced pedagogy in multiple ways, both positive and negative. They both were artists, and so their teaching focused primarily on teaching the art of crafting a musical interpretation, with less emphasis on teaching a set curriculum of technique. Over the years, a belief has emerged that, overall, technique is best left a mystery for the individual to discover through shedding tears and blood from hard labor. But in the modern era, some methods now exist which focus almost exclusively on teaching a whole-body technique in defiance of the finger school. When two approaches meet — the transmission of detailed artistry and the transmission of technical knowledge — genuinely remarkable things are accomplished in the education of young musicians. In this way, Chopin and Liszt have aided the advancement of the field while also causing some unnecessary problems.

Chopin and Liszt held similar views on technique, as can be deduced from all accounts. Liszt had his feet in both the world of the finger school and the world of the arm-weight school, while Chopin's views veered more towards a technique that banished all tension. These two approaches to playing the piano have continued ever since then. There have been many successes from both schools of thought, and it is a testament to Chopin's and Liszt's work that we have a variety of methods to choose from in the modern era.

The application of these pianist's techniques to mastering their works was a wonderful experience. I discovered that some methods were best suited to their originator's music and others were more versatile. However, I concluded that if the basic principles of technique were adhered to, variations of approaches could still bring successful results.

This study can be used as a springboard to search for and explore new sources for data. Researching the iconography of Liszt and Chopin at the piano would be very useful to better understand how these pianists approached playing the instrument. This would include noting bench height and every aspect of how they sat at the piano in these images. For example, from a perusal of photos, Chopin's and Liszt's wrists often appear to be hanging suspended in the air. There are many avenues of exploration one could take with just this simple detail. One avenue of research could be to examine that gesture and its particular role in the pianist's technical toolbox leading up to modern times. Liszt's wrists are more highly arched than in many images of Chopin, as seen in Fig. 14. This deserves further research. Could this mean that Liszt valued flexibility even more than Chopin? Why in Fig. 15 does Chopin have both arms raised above the keyboard in an awkward position? These questions and their answers may suggest further ways

to apply their technique to their music and may even help to clarify how these composers' techniques relate to the specific performance practice of their own music.



Fig. 14. Liszt at the piano, wrists arched<sup>95</sup> Fig. 15. Fryderyk Chopin at the piano, raised arms<sup>96</sup>

The time given for research was limited, and so the scope of my research on Liszt, in particular, was less substantial than on Chopin due to limited source material. Liszt is more complicated than Chopin to research because Liszt's use of arm weight is disputed, and there are contradictory accounts that all seem to have authenticity. However, genuinely confirming the

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<sup>95</sup> Jean Gabriel Scheffer (artist), *Liszt at the piano*, Geneva, 1836. Source: Alan Davison, "Studies In The Iconography Of Franz Liszt" (PhD diss., The University of Melbourne, 2001), 227.

<sup>96</sup> January Suchodolski (artist), *Fryderyk Chopin at the piano*, ca 1844, Collection of the Czartoryski Princes Foundation in Cracow. Source: [https://www.chopin.pl/zycie\\_ilustracje\\_part6.en.html](https://www.chopin.pl/zycie_ilustracje_part6.en.html).

authenticity of sources would be required to create a very compelling argument that takes into account disparate views. While I stand by my statements, examining a fuller variety of sources that are antagonistic to the view of Liszt as a proponent of the arm-weight technique could give a complete picture of Liszt's philosophy and personal beliefs about the method itself.

There are several implications of this study. Musicians are not always adequately taught technique by many instructors, even at the most prestigious conservatories. Therefore, to have two of the most legendary pianists and composers teach us through their legacy is incredibly valuable. Many students are not aware that such information about how Chopin and Liszt played exists, hence the importance of this research. On another level, one can learn how to play these composers' music more beautifully by studying their technique. This paper offers a window into how they thought about and imagined their music.

This study also helps musicians see that playing an instrument successfully requires the understanding of what each technical tool at our disposal can be used for and how to use that tool to interpret the composer's music, taking it off the page and presenting it to an audience. I hope that musicians apply the information found in these pages in any way that seems inspired and natural. Learn from these legends. Take what speaks to you and continue your quest for achieving the highest levels of your craft.

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