

A Chopin-Inspired Fugue

BY JOSEPH SMITH

In 1840, the pianist-composer Moscheles and the musicologist Fétis published their *Method of Methods*. The title may sound immodest, but it intends to indicate only that the volume collated information from the best previous instructional piano books. As a special feature, the *Method* contained up-to-date examples of virtuoso styles—eighteen newly commissioned études from twelve leading pianists of the day, including Liszt, Mendelssohn, Henselt, Heller, Thalberg, and Chopin. The three by Chopin are not simply the most interesting in this diverse sampling of styles—they are among the most subtle, tender, and atmospheric of his compositions altogether.

None of Chopin's *Trois nouvelles études* (as they have subsequently become known—strange that pieces published in 1840 should continue to be called “new!”—features any external show of dexterity; in fact, the audience is unlikely even to identify the technical problems addressed. In the F minor etude, a plaintive, wide-ranging melody in triplets levitates over a rustling accompaniment of even eighth-notes. For the player, the challenge consists in subordinating the left-hand eighth notes while maintaining the integrity of the two rhythms. The better it is played, the less prominent is the mixed rhythm.

In 1853, Schumann published a cycle of Four Fugues as his Op. 72. The third of these, in F minor, has a very unusual subject. While most fugue subjects immediately define a tonality, this one refuses to do so until its eighth note. This subject is, I am certain, based on the theme of the Chopin etude in the same key: Schumann has preserved the theme's contour, meter, and key, although he condenses it and expands two intervals in order to adapt it as a fugue subject. Is the Schumann subject close enough to the Chopin theme to support my claim? You must decide for yourself:

Chopin



Schumann



I cannot prove conclusively that Schumann encountered the *Method of Methods* (he did not review it), but



Robert Schumann

he certainly would have had access to it. Moscheles had been one of the earliest established musicians to recognize and encourage Schumann's talent, and Schumann was friendly with several of the contributing composers. (Since the études were given as representative examples of modern pianism from “celebrated virtuosos,” Schumann, who had injured his hand as a student and never performed, would not himself have been a candidate to contribute.)

When Schumann began to celebrate Chopin, each was at the beginning of his respective career. In 1831, he debuted as music critic with a mad, ecstatic review of Chopin's Op. 2 variations that famously shouts, “Hats off, gentlemen—a genius!” Reading the review, we may feel that it surpasses Chopin's variations in boldness and poetry! Schumann proved prescient in recognizing Chopin's originality even from a comparatively immature and conventional work. Schumann's later reviews show a rich appreciation of Chopin's boldest and most original works—only the “Funeral March” Sonata seems to have puzzled him.

Among the movements of his piano suite *Carnaval*, Schumann includes a tiny sketch titled “Chopin,” which captures not just simply Chopin's mannerisms, but also his distinctive combination of feverish passion and pianistic delicacy. Schumann later dedicated one of his most important and characteristic piano works, *Kreisleriana*, to him. This third fugue, therefore, is the last in a series of tributes. (Alas, it was Schumann's sad fate to appreciate the genius of his great contemporaries while receiving little understanding and appreciation in return. Chopin hated Schumann's music.)

The seeds of this fugue may have actually been planted years before Chopin composed his *Nouvelles études*. In 1837, Schumann wrote, “...the best fugues will always be those... where the artistic roots are covered as are

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Letters *continued*

tenths? I suppose it impressed the ladies. And here was *Hungarian Rhapsodie No. 6*, which I played in my teacher's recital at the age of 15. And Chopin's *Black Key Etude*, which I played as an encore. And snuggled up close to the *Rhapsodie* was good old Czerny's Octave Studies, the purpose of which was to make No. 6's octaves seem easy. Which, come to think of it, at the time they were.

But I couldn't find your Mystery Piece, so I dug out Rena Kyriakou's complete Mendelssohn piano music on VOX (LP), hoping the *Lieder ohne Worte* would be numbered, which they weren't. Your piece was ninth on Kryiakou's program, but that didn't mean it was No. 9. So to *Grove*, only to find these *Songs* are identified by key signature and date of composition and sometimes by Opus, but not always. I don't think they are numbered, at least not originally.

Anyway, my music is somewhat in order now—let me rephrase that, the stacks are a little neater—and Aretha Franklin, autographed covers and all, is no longer in the same stack with Beethoven, although I don't think he'd mind, not if those rumors are correct. But I still haven't found the damn piece. In fact, I

can't compare with I play with what you printed, since in all the shuffling and stacking, I managed to misplace the current issue of *Piano Today*. I've searched the house and have concluded that it must have slipped into one of those stacks. And I'm not going through that again, at least not this year.

I mentioned, above, age-related deterioration. Well, to arthritis you can add memory. Not long term—I can now remember, word for word, conversations I had 60 years ago; not that I really want to, but they sort of pop up unbidden (move over, Marcel). But short term is another matter. Put down a pen to answer the phone, and it's gone.

Actually, I never got the chance to read the current issue; leafing through it, I saw the Mystery Piece, and things just go out of hand. If you have an extra copy in the office and could send it to me, I should appreciate it. I know my copy is here, but its exact location is, shall we say, a mystery.

Jim Baird
Woodstock, GA

A new copy of the issue will be on its way, as soon as we can recover from being doubled over with laughter.

Rare Finds *continued*

those of a flower, permitting us to perceive the blossom only. I know—the case is real—of a by no means contemptible connoisseur of music who mistook a Bach fugue for a Chopin etude—to the honor of both.”

I can't help wondering if the connoisseur in question didn't mistake the *prelude* part of a Bach prelude and fugue for Chopin, which would seem more likely. Clearly, however, Schumann chose to believe the anecdote because it illustrated a cherished principle of his—that musical erudition should serve a poetic aim. And I, in turn, choose to imagine that, when he began composing piano fugues, this cherished anecdote recurred to him and inspired him to compose, as an imagined collaboration between Bach and Chopin, this pensive, romantic fugue on a Chopin subject. ■

I have suggested hand division in the main text by upwards and downwards brackets, and by the indication ms (left hand). In cases where the crossing of voices did not allow this, I have given the suggestion as a footnote.

See Schumann's Fugue beginning on page 11.

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18

dolce

This system contains measures 18 through 21. The music is in a key with three flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor) and a 3/4 time signature. The right hand features a melodic line with slurs and ties, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. The word "dolce" is written above the first measure of this system.

22

This system contains measures 22 through 25. The musical texture continues with the right hand playing a series of chords and moving lines, and the left hand providing a steady accompaniment. The dynamics remain consistent with the previous system.

26

This system contains measures 26 through 30. The right hand has a more active melodic line with slurs and ties, while the left hand continues with a rhythmic accompaniment. The key signature and time signature remain the same.

31

This system contains measures 31 through 34. The music features a complex interplay between the right and left hands, with the right hand often playing chords and the left hand providing a moving bass line. The dynamics are consistent.

35

pp

This system contains measures 35 through 38. The music concludes with a final system. The word "pp" (pianissimo) is written below the first measure of this system. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and ties, and the left hand provides a final accompaniment.

39

Red. * p

This system contains measures 39, 40, and 41. The music is in a key with three flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor) and a 3/4 time signature. Measure 39 features a complex melodic line in the right hand with many accidentals and a bass line with rests. Measure 40 continues the melodic development. Measure 41 shows a change in dynamics to *p* and a more rhythmic bass line. A *Red.* marking is present at the start, and an asterisk is placed between measures 40 and 41.

42

ms Red.

This system contains measures 42, 43, 44, and 45. Measure 42 has a melodic line in the right hand with a *ms* marking. Measure 43 continues with similar melodic patterns. Measure 44 features a bass line with a *Red.* marking. Measure 45 concludes the system with a melodic phrase in the right hand. An asterisk is located between measures 44 and 45.

46

p

This system contains measures 46, 47, 48, and 49. Measure 46 begins with a *p* dynamic marking. Measure 47 has a melodic line in the right hand with a slur. Measure 48 features a bass line with a slur and a *>* accent. Measure 49 concludes with a melodic phrase in the right hand.

50

dim.

This system contains measures 50, 51, 52, and 53. Measure 50 has a *dim.* marking. Measure 51 continues with a melodic line in the right hand. Measure 52 features a bass line with a slur. Measure 53 concludes with a melodic phrase in the right hand.

54

8:

This system contains measures 54, 55, 56, and 57. Measure 54 has a *8:* marking. Measure 55 continues with a melodic line in the right hand. Measure 56 features a bass line with a slur. Measure 57 concludes with a melodic phrase in the right hand.