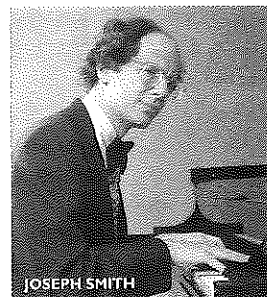


What Is An “Étude” Anyway?

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J. B. Cramer

Muzio Clementi

Carl Czerny

What is an “étude”? Only when you actually try to define it do you realize just how slippery the term is. Okay, it is a piece for study. But what piece of music doesn’t demand study? It is a piece that develops a specific area of technique. What about a Liszt “concert étude,” or a Rachmaninoff “étude-tableau,” which can encompass an array of diverse techniques? A piece called an étude? In the 1730’s, Scarlatti published a collection of his sonatas, including some of the most familiar, under the title *Essercizi per gravicembalo* (Exercises for harpsichord), and Bach published some of his most imposing keyboard works under the collective title *Clavier-Übung* (Keyboard practice). If works like the Partitas and the “Italian” Concerto are to be considered “études,” then the word is so broad as to be useless.

Let’s add the adjective “didactic” to describe the kind of étude intended for practice rather than performance, such as those composed by the three C’s of études: J. B. Cramer’s 84, Clementi’s *Gradus ad Parnassum*, and Czerny’s innumerable “Art of [something or other]” opuses. Cramer’s work was the first of these. He didn’t use the French word “étude,” but his collective title for the 84 was an Italian equivalent, *Studio per il pianoforte*. Many pianists suppose that a didactic étude must necessarily be boring, empty, and schematic. Those who have never looked into Cramer, however, will be surprised by their intellectual and aesthetic interest. For example, the widely spaced left-hand arpeggios of No. 77 constitute its obvious technical challenge—its etudicity. But its warm cantabile melody makes practicing it a pleasure rather than a duty. The report that Beethoven praised Cramer’s études comes, alas, from that most unreliable of sources, Anton Schindler. But it seems plausible.

Clementi’s title, *Gradus ad Parnassum* (Steps to Parnassus) is taken from Fux’s counterpoint treatise. The *Gradus* is a huge, ambitious work intended to cover every aspect of piano playing. The hundred pieces, many of them arranged in suites, include sonata movements, canons, and even a few character pieces, as well as what we would call “études.” Clementi entitled his No. 16, “To Equalize the Power of the Fingers.” (Clementi was a longtime Londoner, and except for the exotic title, all the verbiage in *Gradus* is in English.) This is unequivocally just an exercise—we

would not want to be subjected to it in a concert (although even here, Clementi succeeds in providing some harmonic and contrapuntal interest). No. 39, the gigantic *scena patetica*, an opera scene for the piano, on the other hand, is unequivocally a concert piece. But many of the *Gradus* pieces—in fact, most—lie somewhere in between. They are practice pieces in that each explores a single facet of technique, but they also have aesthetic value as music. Etudes, perhaps, but not merely études.

I recently compiled and edited a volume for International Music Company, *Mano Sinistra*. It seemed to me that while the étude literature tends to favor the right hand, most pianists need more help with the left hand. I of course restudied each étude in depth. (The responsibility of recommending fingerings made me feel vulnerable indeed. I could hear a chorus of piano teachers exclaiming, “What idiot came up with this fingering?” It is a remark I myself have made often enough about other editors.) Practicing these études, I often found myself surprised at the musical pleasure I was enjoying. With Clementi’s No. 79, I found myself thinking “an étude for two legato voices in the left hand, or a melancholy little poem?” Perhaps a good title would have been “studio patetico.”

Now a word about the third C of didactic études. Czerny is the best known, and unquestionably the most prolific composer ever of didactic études. (He worked on multiple desks, so he could write one manuscript while the ink was drying on another.) His mountain of work includes volumes of shorter and easier études. Furthermore, even the more difficult ones are extremely schematic, and therefore easy to read. These qualities give his work definite practical utility. But from a standpoint of intellectual interest, his études, while bubbling and euphonious, simply do not begin to compare with those of Cramer and Clementi. I believe that it is the ubiquity of Czerny’s works that has created the fallacy that études are necessarily musically boring.

I treasure a story a pianist once told me. Students at her conservatory were required to present an étude for their juries. She chose Clementi’s No. 24 in F sharp minor (the configuration requires the thumb to play on the black notes, making it hard to execute evenly and rapidly; this étude appears to me to have inspired Chopin’s prelude in the same key.) After she played, a jury member objected indignantly that the piece *couldn’t* be an étude—it was too beautiful!

