ON THE OTHER HAND...

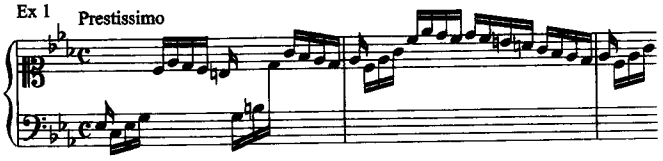
The American pianist ***Joseph Smith*** debates the virtues of even-handedness

A colleague recently asked me if I condoned 'cheating' by redistributing material between the hands, or if I was a 'purist' who maintained that distribution must be precisely 'as the composer wrote it' (for convenience, let's call these two positions 'divisionist' and 'anti-divisionist'). Is this really purely a question of ethics? Is divisionism no more than a naughty indulgence?

Before we can even examine these two positions, we encounter a problem. The phrase 'as the composer wrote it' presupposes that the original notation determines the distribution of material between the hands (for convenience, let's call distribution 'handing'). An actual examination of the piano literature, however, indicates that this is less often true than one might imagine.

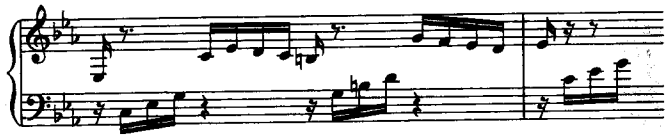
Most often, material in the top stave is executed by the right hand, material in the lower by the left. But no experienced player considers this a rule, only a generalisation. Take the opening of the *Adagio cantabile* from Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata, in which the principal accompaniment is played by the right hand in the bass clef, only the melody being in the treble clef. Certainly, when the composer chooses to do so, he can employ various tools to mark handing unequivocally, such as the indications MD or MS (or their equivalents in another language), fingering, brackets, or extra staves designated specifically for right or left hand. But much of the time, notation remains equivocal in regard to handing.

Ex 1 Prestissimo



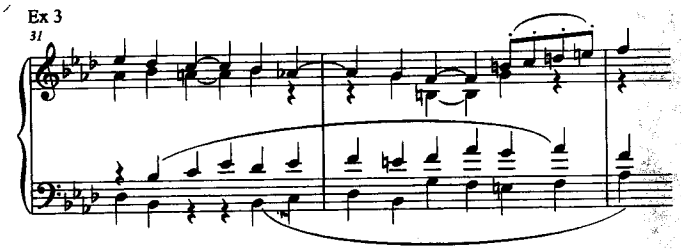
Let us examine a piece rich in interesting implied divisions. In C P E Bach's famous C minor *Solfeggio*, it will be immediately evident to experienced pianists how the material should be divided between the hands (ex 1). It will be so evident, in fact, that they are unlikely to be aware of the chain of deductions that make this distribution seem inevitable. The piece begins with (and largely consists of) an unbroken succession of single notes – not one chord appears in the first 12 bars. Dividing these bars according to stave would be physically possible but highly awkward. In whichever stave the material appears, the notation ignores a traditional notational practice: the convention that notes appearing lower on the stave are given upward stems, beams and flags, while notes appearing higher are given downward stems, beams and flags. We must assume that this irregularity means something. It might suggest the articulation of a melody. Or it could indicate that this passage is not to be conceived of as a single line, but rather as a dialogue, with groups of notes, delineated by upwards or downwards stemming and beaming, answering one another. In actually playing the piece, however, we are also guided by the expectation that a piece composed by a pianist will conform to some degree to the topography of the keyboard and the anatomy of the hand. Thus, we observe that the notated groupings correspond to convenient hand positions, and easily arrive at the conclusion that the stemming, beaming and flagging indicate the handing. Ultimately, we must also consider whether this handing is intended to produce a corresponding phrasing, or whether the switching of hands should be imperceptible – whether handing and expression are intertwined. Note that this passage is not cited as an example of ambiguous handing. On the contrary. Not only do I believe that C P E intends a specific division of hands, but that this division is essential to the piece's meaning. In fact, this way of indicating division appears frequently throughout his piano works. The point is that even in an unambiguous passage like this, the composer's notation does not *dictate* the handing – it only provides information that allows us to infer it. (Why did he not divide the material between the staves according to handing? The result would have required annoying fractional rests, and would look rhythmically arbitrary and confusing (ex 2). C P E's notation may not be fully explicit, but once understood, it is simple and clear.)

Ex 2

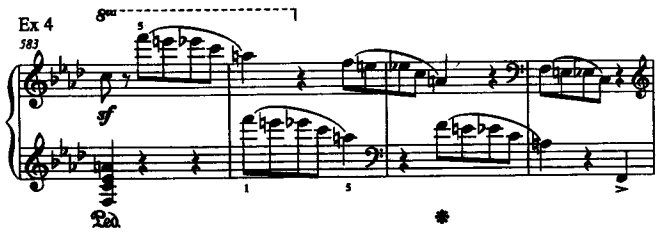


One type of composition – the fugue – epitomises the problem of dictating handing without special symbols. I was reminded, when editing Schumann's Fugue Op 72 no 3, for publication in a magazine, that Schumann's original clearly did not indicate the division between hands: each stave contains many intervals far too large for a single hand (ex 3) – even a single giant hand! Since many of the magazine's readers are home pianists, I felt obliged to offer practical divisions for these passages. I found, however, that my notation of these divisions completely obliterated the fugue's voice-leading. Using my notation alone, one could play the correct notes, but not gauge dynamics so as to clarify the counterpoint. With Schumann's original notation, on the other hand, one could clearly see the movement of voices, but if one assumed that the hands must be divided by stave, passages would be unplayable. A single notation could not serve two masters: execution and musical content; I relegated my suggestions to footnotes.

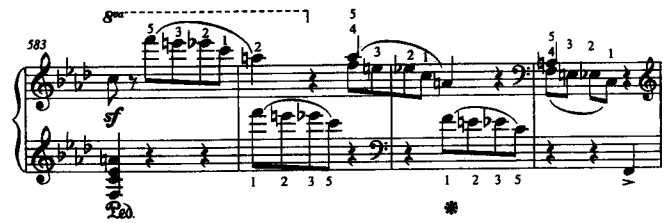
Ex 3



Of course, a fugue is a special type of composition. But even piano music that is not overtly contrapuntal in texture still represents multiple voices on a single instrument. And this is why we should not expect the composer always to represent the division of hands on the page. He cannot, because the visual expositions of voice-leading and of handing are frequently irreconcilable. Therefore, I believe composers take it for granted that, in lieu of special pianistic effects, the player will tailor the handing to his or her needs, which must take into account the characteristics of the their hands. If I am correct, except in cases where the composer has clearly dictated the handing, the player's arrangement should not be called 're-distribution,' but simply 'distribution'.

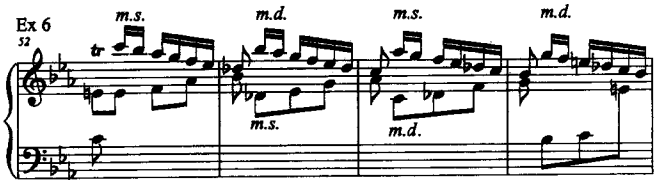


I would like to offer here an example of a distribution which is not required (like those in the Schumann fugue), not implied in the composer's notation, but which would be objectionable only to the most devout anti-divisionist. In this passage from Chopin's Scherzo in B♭ minor, Op 31, division of the voices in the canon seems to accord with division of the hands by stave (ex 4). I prefer, however, to avoid spreading my hands and, in particular, to avoid playing the consecutive third, fourth, and fifth fingers of my spread left hand. My solution can be seen as ex 5. Not only are listeners unable to hear a difference, they are unlikely even to *see* one – the little motif still appears to be tossed from hand to hand. One could say that if I were a better endowed pianist physically, I wouldn't need this distribution. I would agree! But 'cheating'? Who is being cheated, and of what?



This does not mean, however, that there may not be legitimate limits to divisionism. The absolute divisionist position is encapsulated in the familiar formula, 'I don't care if you play it with your nose, as long as...' (though so far, I have never encountered a passage facilitated by this means). In other words, the arrangement of the notes that enables us to execute a passage comfortably, reliably and accurately is *always* justified. But like anti-divisionism this attitude is based on a very questionable assumption. It presumes that because sound is primary to musical performance, visual appearance is necessarily irrelevant. In fact, however, most of the literature of music was composed to be played live, rather than recorded – the musician's visual presence is unavoidably part of his or her performance. Since this is so, is it not possible that the division between hands must sometimes take the visual into account? To give an extreme example, if we saw a pianist playing Scriabin's left-hand Nocturne with two hands, would we not feel dissatisfied, no matter how beautiful the sound?

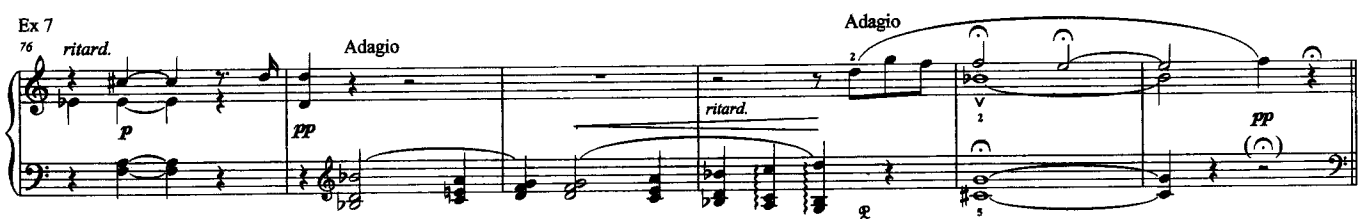
There is something particularly delightful about the intermingling of visual and aural effect in a piece like Liszt's F minor *Transcendental Étude*. One can scarcely call this *étude* to mind without seeing interlocked hands and jiggling wrists. But here, the dizzying alternation of chords between the hands is also practical – it is the only way to execute the *étude's* figuration. It could be argued, therefore, that the visual impression is merely a side-effect. This is emphatically untrue, though, of certain passages in Scarlatti that are stubbornly impractical! Scarlatti is, of course, famous for his hand-crossings, which he chooses to dictate in the most unequivocal manner: by specifying D (MD) or M (MS). In the sonata K22, for example, a passage begins with the left hand crossing the right (ex 6). Immediately, however, the sequence continues with the hands switched – the material previously played by the right is given to the left, and vice versa. Now, of course, the hands must uncross. The next two bars repeat this pattern of crossing and uncrossing. Here, the handing cannot be intended to facilitate the passage – it would certainly be easier to maintain either a crossed or uncrossed position. Precisely, because of its gratuitous difficulty, we can be sure that Scarlatti's division is intentional. It probably combines the visual, the tactile and the conceptual: the crossing and uncrossing is analogous to the idea of two imaginary instruments exchanging material. (The great Scarlatti scholar Ralph Kirkpatrick maintains that on a two-manual harpsichord such brilliant passages would call for the coupling of manuals. We can virtually rule out, then, the possibility that Scarlatti is exploiting differences of *timbre* between two manuals.)



If we believe that the composer can sometimes dictate handing for purely visual or conceptual reasons, it follows that the visual and conceptual must be considered even where the composer has not dictated them. When such issues arise in works of great musical substance, we find disagreement among pianists to be especially bitter.

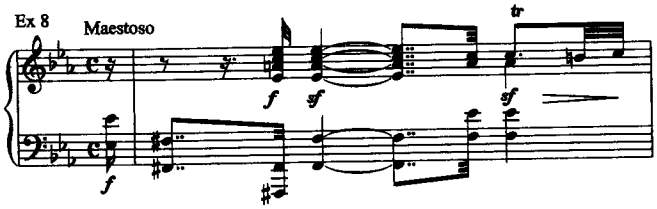
I was shocked to see a pianist I respect divide the following passage from Schumann's *Fantasy* Op 17 between the hands (ex 7). Since I am not an absolute anti-divisionist, I had to ask myself why I was so opposed to this choice. Beginning at bar 61, I find the rhythmic staggering of voices to be an essential aspect of the passage. There is drama both in the dropping out of the soprano voice in bar 77, and in its resumption in bar 79, where it interrupts the lower voices. I perceive a visual analogy in the dropping out of the right hand, followed by a left-hand solo, and the resumption of the right hand. If I am correct, the increasing tension of the widening intervals is also expressed through the increasing stretches of the left hand. Similarly, in No 7 of the *Davidsbündlertänze*, the music is so clearly in the form of a dialogue that I feel it preferable to play the opening as a left-hand solo, and let the right enter with the appearance of the new voice at the end of the fourth bar. The fact that Schumann was, in general, so peculiarly sensitive to the extra-musical implications of music strengthens my suspicion that dialogue between the hands is intended (Schumann did consider the practice of composing an entire piece for left-hand solo a silly stunt, but this does not prove that he didn't find musical meaning in handing.)

It is in Beethoven that we find the greatest battleground for divisionist and anti-divisionist pianists. First, let us examine the



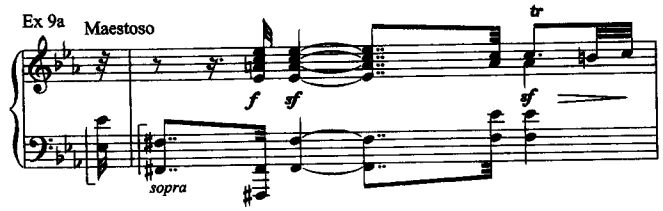
opening of Op 111: an octave plunging down a diminished seventh. The anti-divisionist would argue that the dramatic leap embodies the idea of struggle, and therefore the octaves must be executed by the left hand alone, rather than divided between the hands. Please note the circularity of this argument! The leap, executed by one hand, creates tension because it requires effort and risk. To create effort and risk, it must be executed by one hand. But in discussing music, we can never completely escape this kind of circular reasoning. Interpreting a passage depends utterly on identifying its character, yet its character is always a matter of inference and intuition, and will never be susceptible to proof. The subjective must be granted a role even in a supposedly 'objective' conversation. In the case of the opening of Op 111, however, I think we can agree that the large interval, *forte* dynamic, and strong, double-dotted rhythm combine to create tension (ex 8).

Ex 8 Maestoso

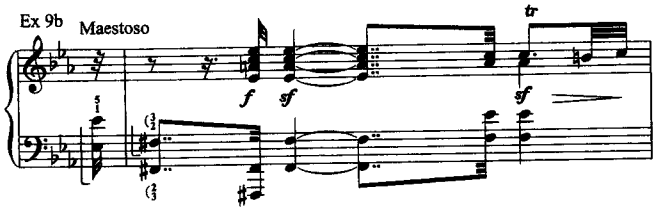


Divisionists will maintain that they can divide the passage between the hands, and still avoid an inappropriately glib, easy execution – he can consciously replicate the *marcato* quality of attack of one hand playing loud octaves. Here are several possible divisions (ex 9):

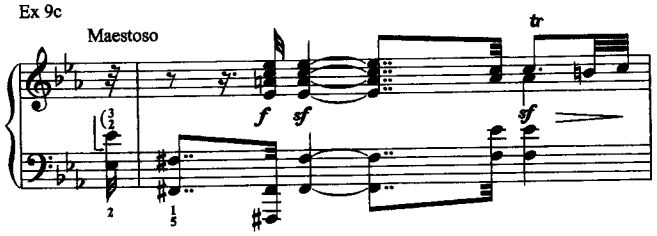
Ex 9a Maestoso



Ex 9b Maestoso

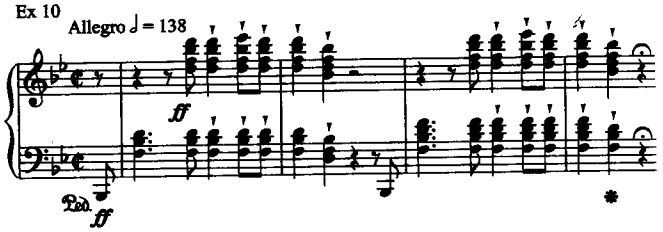


Ex 9c Maestoso



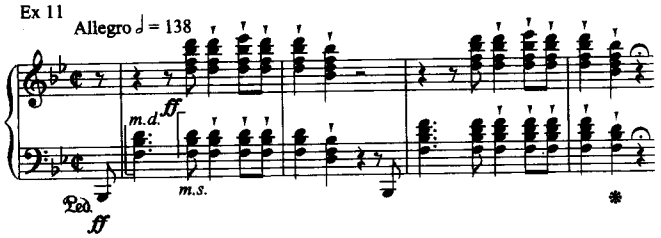
After all, the piano key does not 'know' which hand plays it – it only knows *how* it has been played – how fast it has been depressed, and whether there has been audible percussion of finger on key, or key on its key bed, or both. But if we regard the visible effort of playing the precipitating octave leap with the left hand as a metaphor for the struggle embodied in the music, the division between the hands will still seem a compromise, even if the sound is the same. The player must decide whether it is a compromise worth making. Perhaps something is lost, but something is also lost if the pianist misses the notes, or if the fear of missing the notes distracts from the intellectual and emotional challenges of the work.

Ex 10 Allegro ♩ = 138

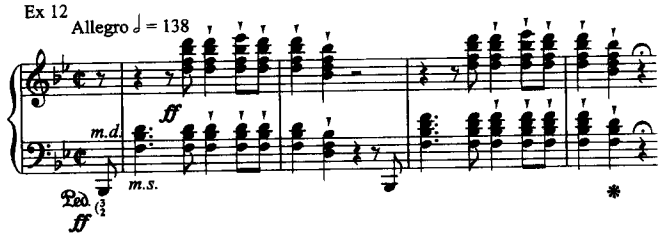


If regarded only in terms of keyboard writing, the opening of Op 106 (the *Hammerklavier* Sonata) may seem similar to the opening of Op 111 (ex 10). But what if we examine it not as *piano* music, but rather as music to played on the piano? In fact, this sonata is unprecedented in its orchestral texture and symphonic scope. One could imagine many different ways of mentally 'orchestrating' the opening. It seems near impossible, however, that anyone would choose to have the instrument playing the initial low B♭ jump up to the middle range to play the lowest note of the following chords. In Op 111, the leap between the first two notes is clearly a melodic interval – the two notes belong to the same voice, doubled at the octave. In Op 106, however, the leap is between different 'sections' of a keyboard orchestra. Beethoven's pedalling ensures that the low B♭ continues through the chords in the middle – it does not move up to them. Therefore, the left hand moving between these sections is not even a good visual analogy for the content of the passage. On the other hand, it does seem visually preferable to assign the wildly energetic treble chords to a fresh hand, since they make a dramatic entrance, rather than continuing the chords in the middle range. Accordingly, the distribution in ex 11 seems less satisfactory than that in ex 12.

Ex 11 Allegro ♩ = 138



Ex 12 Allegro ♩ = 138



Readers may disagree with me in many instances – perhaps all instances! I do hope, however, that they will acknowledge that the issue of handing, once it is examined seriously, proves unexpectedly complicated. The desire to escape complication by adopting (or professing to adopt) an absolute anti-divisionist or divisionist line may be tempting – one single big decision appearing to replace an endless series of little ones. But neither position is defensible as an absolute. As with so many musical issues, what may at first appear a narrowly technical issue is inseparable from musical interpretation. It is the pianist's responsibility to consider handing decisions critically on a case-by-case basis. Thus, my answer to the colleague who asked if I was distributionist or anti-distributionist was 'both and neither.'