

Frédéric Chopin, Sketches for a Piano Method [Esquisses pour une méthode de piano]

Renowned across Europe as an artist and pedagogue, Chopin intended to write a piano method, of which only his preliminary sketches of the beginning survive. Evidence of the project comes in the form of an allusion made by George Sand, sometime around 1840: “yet he promises to write us a method, in which he’ll discuss not only practical skills, but also theoretical principles. Will he keep his word?” (*Impressions et souvenirs*, Paris, 1896, p. 88). It is also worth noting that it was in November 1840 that Fétis and Moscheles published their *Méthode des méthodes de piano*, to which Chopin had contributed his three new études. And a letter of his own, dated 18 October 1841, mentions a figure of remuneration for the edition of a hypothetical Method, containing a similar number of plates to that of his twelve Études. At that stage, therefore, it was not meant to be a large-scale work.

The sketches that have been preserved are noted on highly varied types of paper, from Italian-style ruled manuscript leaves to modest letter-writing paper. The phases of writing appear equally discontinuous, varying according to context; these fragments were penned at diverse moments, most likely between 1838 and 1845, and appear to correspond to the initial chapters. Chopin may have remained interested in them in his final years of suffering. Following his death, the main “corpus” (12 pages) was offered to Princess Marcelina Czartoryska, a favorite student, who in turn gave it to a piano student of hers, Natalia Janotha, who herself published snippets of it (in English translation) in Jean Kleczynski, *Chopin’s Greater Works: How they should be understood* (London, 1896). Alfred Cortot managed to acquire the manuscript in 1936, and published a transcription (of questionable status) in his *Aspects de Chopin* (Paris, 1949). From then on, the manuscript has been preserved at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York (Robert Owen Lehman). A copy made by Chopin’s elder sister, Ludwika, testifies to the importance with which this project was viewed; it is now kept at the Chopin Museum in Warsaw; four or five spare pages have also been added to it.

According to an intimate friend of Chopin, the collection ought to have been given after Chopin’s death to Charles Valentin Alkan or to Henri Reber; it was instead given to Thomas Tellefsen, a Norwegian student who, notwithstanding his ambitions to assume the mantle of his former teacher, failed in his own attempts to get it published.

It is touching to see Chopin conforming to the contemporary convention of placing an explanation of the most elementary music theory concepts at the beginning of a piano method. He begins by explicitly defining the principle of the grand staff, note shapes and values, different types of time signatures, major and minor modes, and the 24 keys according to the circle of fifths. While explaining the scale, Chopin

proposes no fewer than a dozen definitions of music, including, “The indefinite (indeterminate) language [*parole*] of men is sound,” and, “We use sounds to make music just as we use words to make a language.” Next comes his radical classification of the three categories of technical study: 1. Adjacent intervals one key apart: diatonic and chromatic scales, and trills; 2. Intervals of a tone and a half or greater: diminished-seventh arpeggios, then arpeggios of major and minor triads in various inversions, etc.; and 3. Double notes (thirds, sixths, octaves), and chords of three or more sounds. Another chapter concerns the body’s posture in relation to the instrument, and the ideal position of the hand on the keyboard, with the fingers resting on the keys E-F#-G#-A#-B—three black keys for the longer fingers and two white keys for the outer thumb and fifth finger. Consequently, the first scale to be learned is that of B Major, which preserves that hand position, only to arrive last to C Major, which, despite its easiness from the point of view of solfège is in fact the most difficult on the piano, due to the discrepancy between the morphology of the hand and the structure of the keyboard. Such considerations on the anatomy of the fingers and on preserving their individual characteristics (“as many sounds as there are fingers”) form the basis of Chopin’s reflections on the art of fingering. In the margins of one of the sketch pages, one can read another key affirmation: “the wrist, breathing in the voice”.

The sketches present themselves in uncertain order. The transcendent pedagogue’s thinking shines through at each turn. In his axiomatic words: “As art is infinite within the limits of its means, so its teaching should be governed by the same limits in order to give it boundless potential.”

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Further reading

Frédéric Chopin, *Esquisses pour une méthode de piano*, éd. J.-J. Eigeldinger, Paris, Flammarion, 2010 (2^e éd.)

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