

A Performance Guide to Liszt's 12 Transcendental Etudes, S. 139

By

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in the School of Music and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts.

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Date Defended: August 30, 2018

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Abstract

Many of Franz Liszt's piano works are popular and played frequently in concerts and competitions. Liszt's 12 transcendental Etudes are among his most famous and representative piano creations, which greatly challenge pianists' skills, physical strength and comprehensive understanding of the music. This document consists of three chapters: the first chapter describes the background of this cycle together with the background of Liszt and relevant composers, such as his teacher Carl Czerny and his admirer Sergei Lyapunov. The second chapter is the core of this document, in which each of the twelve etudes has been analyzed regarding compositionally and pedagogically, indicating what techniques Liszt used and how to solve technical difficulties. The third chapter contains two parts: a comparison of a couple of different recordings, so that readers will know the characteristics of each pianist I mentioned in the research and what they need to learn from their recordings, and at last, a brief summary at the end of this chapter is made, which restates the technical difficulties of the cycle and suggests a reasonable arrangement on practicing. Hopefully, my research can help people learn useful methods to practice such a demanding work and suggest pianists think more about the poetry and artistry beyond the work itself, as well as create a more thoughtful performance.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I must express my heartfelt thanks to my advisor Dr. Steven Spooner, a piano professor who serves at the University of Kansas - School of Music. During these years of my studies at KU, he unreservedly gave me his marvelous thoughts on piano playing, as well as unique ideas about the performing experience of concerts and competitions, that will benefit all my entire life. I also would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Michael Kirkendoll, Dr. Ketty Wong, Prof. Steve Leisring and Dr. James Moreno, who provided me much help and key advice in the final steps of my degree. Lastly, I appreciate all the support that my family and friends gave me during my DMA studies.

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Chapter I

Background of Franz Liszt

Franz Liszt (1811–1886), a Hungarian composer, pianist, conductor and piano teacher, was one of the most outstanding musician representatives of the Romantic period. Born in Raiding, Hungary, he started studying piano at the age of seven and moved to Paris at the age of sixteen. Later, Liszt began his performance career in Europe by traveling all over France, England, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Russia and other countries. Although Liszt lived in France and Germany for a long period, Hungarian elements are prevalent throughout his works.¹ His Hungarian Rhapsodies are remarkable representatives.²

Programmatic music is one of the characteristics of Liszt's creations, which delivers a general and direct understanding of musical ideas to audiences. He advocated that music should be combined with other artistic genres, so his music works were often inspired by figures like Goethe, Hugo, Schiller and many others.³ Liszt's remarkable contributions include the creation of the symphonic poem genre—a single-movement work that describes extra-musical content such as poem, painting, novel, landscape or story; and development of thematic transformation—a compositional technique based on a core theme where new themes are created by changing rhythm, speed, texture, and other methods.⁴

¹ Arthur Hervey, *Franz Liszt and His Music* (London: John Lane Company, 1911), 1-21, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.32106001370177;view=1up;seq=9>.

² Erika Quinn, *Franz Liszt: A Story of Central European Subjectivity* (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2014), 2, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ku/detail.acton?docID=1786649>.

³ Michael Saffle, ed., *Liszt and His World: Proceedings of the International Liszt Conference Held at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 20-33 May 1993* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1998), 248.

⁴ Steven Vande Moortele, "Beyond Sonata Deformation: Liszt's Symphonic Poem 'Tasso' and the Concept of Two-Dimensional Sonata Form," *Current Musicology* (Fall 2008): 41-42, <https://search-proquest-com.www2.lib.edu/docview/1037807?accountid=14556>.

Liszt was considered the greatest pianist in his generation. He changed the orientation of piano during performance, showing the side of his face during performance instead of his back, making it easier to convey his emotion to the audience. Other pianists soon adopted this tradition. Liszt was the first pianist to hold a piano solo recital, pushing the piano performance as an art form to an unprecedented height.⁵

As a prolific composer, Liszt contributed numerous works to the canon of piano repertoire. Most of them are very dazzling with extremely fast tempos, loud dynamics, and brilliant techniques that often intoxicated and amazed audiences. His overtly virtuosic style greatly influenced the European piano tradition of the time. Late in his career, Liszt turned his attention to simpler and more profound compositions.

Liszt's piano works can be divided into two categories, original and arrangements. His original works include *etudes*, *vales*, *mephistos*, *polonaises*, and Hungarian rhapsodies, while his arrangements include songs, paraphrases, and operatic transcriptions. During Liszt's lifetime, he composed four etude cycles: the *3 Etudes de concert* (1848), the *6 Grandes Etudes de Paganini* (1851), the *12 Transcendental Etudes* (1852) and the *2 concert etudes* (1863).⁶ These etudes were no longer limited to finger exercises; they became not only extraordinary skill training pieces but also incorporated lively melodies with poetic titles. Due to the popularity of the 12 Transcendental Etudes, S.139 and their tremendous contribution to piano pedagogy, I will focus on analyzing this masterwork to show common techniques prevalent throughout and offer practice methods a performer can utilize to effectively express and execute such demanding works.

⁵ Craig Martin Morrow, "Franz Liszt's Life and Music: A Dramatic-Monodrama Piano Recital," (PhD diss., New York University, 1993), 90, <https://search-proquest-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/304066982?pq-origsite=primo>.

⁶ Zhiwei Zheng, "Pedagogical Thoughts on Liszt's Six Concert Etudes," (DMA diss., West Virginia University, 2015), 14, <https://search-proquest-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/1681516312/?pq-origsite=primo>.

The 12 Transcendental Etudes

The *Etudes d'exécution transcendante* or 12 Transcendental Etudes, S. 139 consist of twelve separate etudes that can be individually performed. They each highlight different playing techniques but contain the most Lisztian compositional characteristics. The collection was written in 1826 and Liszt wrote the second version in 1837, which is much more technically difficult than the original. Published in 1852, Liszt modified and slightly reduced some of the impossible technical difficulties to make the etudes suitable for pianists with smaller hands. He also added programmatic titles to nine of the etudes—*Paysage, Mazeppa, Feux-Follets, Vision, Eroica, Wilde Jagd, Ricordanze, Harmonies du Soir* and *Chasse-Neige*.⁷ In the twenty-first century, pianists usually use the third version in concerts and competitions because this version is more suitable for playing on modern piano for most pianists. Although Liszt did not title the second and tenth etude initially, the Italian pianist and composer Ferruccio Busoni named the second 'Fusees' (*Rocket*) and tenth 'Appassionata'. German publisher G. Henle Verlag referred to the second and tenth studies by their tempo markings (*molto vivace* and *agitato molto* respectively). The tenth etude is also referred to by its key signature (f minor). In this study, Busoni's identifications are employed. Liszt originally planned to compose 24 etudes in all major and minor keys, but he only finished half of them. Beginning with C major, each subsequent etude moves through the circle of fifths, containing parallel minor keys with the final one is in B minor: C–a–F–d–B^b–g–E^b–c–A^b–f–D^b–b. When it comes to the 12 Transcendental Etudes, there are two important composers who have to be mentioned because they both have connections with this composition; they are Carl Czerny and Sergei Lyapunov.

⁷ Christopher Gibbs and Dana Gooley, eds., *Franz Liszt and His World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 13k; James Conway, "Musical Sources for the Liszt *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*: A Study in the Evolution of Liszt's Compositional and Keyboard Techniques," (DMA diss., University of Arizona, 1969), 1-7, <https://search-proquest-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/302363271/?pq-origsite=primo>.

Carl Czerny

Liszt's teacher Carl Czerny (1791–1857) was an Austrian composer and pianist who was one of the first to use 'etude' as the title of a piece. Some of the most well-known works by Czerny are his piano studies, including the *School of Velocity*, *24 Studies for the Left Hand*, *The Art of Finger Dexterity*, *Exercises for Small Hands*, and *Practical Finger Exercises and Studies of Mechanism*. Czerny wrote nearly one thousand works with various genres, such as piano works, symphonies, organs, songs, chamber music and religious music. With the exception of his piano works, Czerny's works are seldom heard today. The prolific composer also taught numerous students including Theodor Dohler, Stephen Heller, Theodor Kullak, Theodor Leschetizky, and Sigismond Thalberg, as well as Franz Liszt.⁸ As a young boy, Liszt impressed Czerny with his advanced ability and Czerny taught Liszt free of charge. Czerny focused on technical perfection, rhythmic accuracy and faultless memorization of performance. Liszt studied the works of Clementi, Hummel, Bach, and Beethoven, as well as new works that improved Liszt's sight-reading skills.⁹ Liszt often incorporated piano literature by Czerny into his recitals and public performances. Liszt maintained a very close relationship with Czerny throughout his life and often wrote to Czerny as "My very dear Master."¹⁰ In 1852, Liszt wrote a letter and mentioned that the 12 Transcendental Etudes S. 139 will be dedicated to his teacher Carl Czerny:

My Dear, Honored Master and Friend,

Permit me to recommend particularly to you Professor Jahn [...] Mr. Jahn's object in going to Vienna is to collect documents for a biography of Beethoven, [...].

⁸ Chia-Jung Chou, "Carl Czerny: An Underappreciated Piano Composer and His *Variations Brillantes*, Opus 14," (MM thesis, Tunghai University, 2012), 4; Miriam Conti Vanoni, "Technique and Expression in Carl Czerny's Teaching: A Critical Study of Czerny's Piano-Forte School, Opus 500, Demonstrating the Direct Relation Between Mechanical Teaching and Expression in Performance," (DMA diss., Boston University, 2017), 8, <https://search-proquest-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/1878242660?accountid=14556>.

⁹ Helbig, *Franz Liszt*, 38.

¹⁰ Franz Liszt to Carl Czerny, Vienna, December 2, 1828, in *Letters of Franz Liszt*, trans. Constance Bache (London: H. Grevel & Co., 1894), 1.

May I beg you—in honor of the great man whom you have had the merit of comprehending and admiring, long before the common herd joined in chorus around his name—to open the treasures of your reminiscences and knowledge to Mr. Jahn, and accept beforehand my sincere thanks for the good service you will render to Art in this matter. It is with unchangeable attachment that I remain, dear master, you're very grateful and devoted

F. Liszt

P.S.—When will the "Gradus ad Parnassum" come out? — You will receive the copy of my Studies, which are dedicated to you, through Mr. Lowy in a few days.¹¹

Sergei Lyapunov

Russian composer and pianist Sergei Lyapunov (1859–1924) was profoundly affected by Liszt. Lyapunov's compositions were heavily influenced by Liszt and are just as demanding.¹² Lyapunov's main teacher at the Moscow Conservatory was Liszt's student Karl Kindworth.¹³ Since Liszt and the Russian composer Balakirev were Lyapunov's two idols, the aesthetic elements of Western art music and the traditional Russian music were the two main sources of inspiration that deeply rooted into Lyapunov's compositions. Lyapunov's most significant piano work is his *Douze etudes d'execution transcendental*, a suite written between 1897 and 1905. Mirroring Liszt's work, it also consisted of 12 pieces and completes the other half of the 24 related major and minor keys that Liszt left unfinished (from F-sharp to E minor). Lyapunov dedicated this suite to honor Franz Liszt as the last piece was titled *Elegie en memoire de Franz Liszt*. Like Liszt's etudes, Lyapunov's work was not only simple technical exercises for fingers

¹¹ Liszt to Carl Czerny, Weimar, October 30, 1852, in *Letters of Franz Liszt*.

¹² 4.

¹³ Natalia Bolshakova, "Georgy L'vovich Catoire: His Life and Music for Piano, with Special Emphasis on *Poem*, Second Sonata for Violin and Piano, Op. 20," (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2008), 9, <https://search-proquest-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/304537634?accountid=14556>.

but also presentable as concert pieces.¹⁴

¹⁴ Andrew G. C. O. Banks, “Musical Influences Which Shaped the *Twelve transcendental studies* Op. 11 by Sergei Lyapunov (1859–1924),” (DMA diss., West Virginia University, 2004), 1-3, <https://search-proquest-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/305113409?accountid=14556>.

Chapter II: Analysis of 12 Transcendental etudes, S. 139

Liszt made a great contribution to the genre of etude because he transformed them into concert pieces beyond finger-training exercises. The *Etudes d'exécution transcendante* contains all manners of necessary training skills for fingers and integrates extra-musical elements into the etude, making each sound not only virtuosic, but also melodic, poetic and imaginative.

Moreover, *Etudes d'exécution transcendante* broke the tradition of using etudes only for skill development and brought them to the concert stage. Because of this change, subsequent concert etudes became more challenging and appreciative, mimicking Liszt's pivotal work.

Since Liszt pursued poetry and emphasized literature when creating the cycle, he also incorporates extra-musical aspects in the etudes. He added titles to most, highlighting their programmatic quality and conveying a straightforward and clear background to the performers. These titles provide the most accurate insight into the atmosphere Liszt imagined for performance. In this cycle, Liszt draws upon poetry, landscapes, scenes, folks, heroic dramas, and historical legends.

As a technically demanding work, this chapter will address the main characteristics and challenges of each etude within the *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, and combine piano pedagogy to put forward effective practice methods to help the players overcome technical difficulties and deduce works smoothly. Etudes no.4 "Mazeppa," no.5 "Feux Follets," no.8 "Wilde Jagd," no.10 "Appassionata", no.11 "Harmonies du Soir" and no.12 "Chasse-Neige" are the most famous and are often played in concerts and competitions. Furthermore, no.4 "Mazeppa," no.5 "Feux Follets" and no.8 "Wilde Jagd" are recognized as the most challenging pieces among the twelve etudes.

Etudes d'exécution transcendante, no. 1, "Preludio"

In C major, the opening piece of the *Etudes d'exécution transcendante* "Preludio" is a one-minute short work. Serving as an introduction to the cycle, it has a *Presto* tempo marking. "Preludio" has two sections: the first 11 measures comprise the first, followed by a two-measure transition and second section. In the first section, the melody moves quickly from the lower range into the higher range until several successive chords creating the climax.

Example 1 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante, no. 1, "Preludio,"* mm. 4-8 (right-hand only)

The image displays a musical score for the right-hand part of the first section of "Preludio" (measures 4-8). The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. It features a dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo) at the beginning, followed by *rinforz.* (rinforzando) and *p* (piano). The melody is characterized by rapid, ascending eighth-note runs that culminate in a series of chords. A bracket above the first six measures indicates a first ending, with a second ending marked with a star symbol. The score includes performance instructions such as "poco a poco cre - -", "scen - - - do", "ed accelerando - -", and "sempre più forte - -". Measure numbers 3, 5, 7, and 8 are clearly marked.

Arpeggios form the second section, emulating a fluctuating ocean. The sustain pedal should be applied more frequently in this section to highlight the fluidity of the sea. The use of the pedal in the second section contrasts the dry, suspenseful atmosphere in the opening section

with an absence of pedal markings. Although the right-hand has rapid runs, most of the accents in “Preludio” are in the left-hand (see Example 2) and should be played louder than the virtuosic right-hand passages. The use of the wrist is the key to practice this piece because of the substantial arpeggios using in the whole piece. The performer’s right hand and arm should move to the right at the same time so that make fingers can easily to reach the following notes with a legato sound in quick succession.

Example 2 *Etudes d’exécution transcendante*, no. 1, “Preludio,” mm. 5-6 (left-hand only)



***Etudes d’exécution transcendante*, no.2, “Fusees”**

The second etude is in A minor and is often referred to by key area. In addition to “Fusees,” the etude has also been referred as *Molto vivace* by G. Henle Verlag and *Rockets* by Ferruccio Busoni. The two-minute piece contains several technical difficulties including rapid, alternating hands, hand overlapping, and large leaps. In order to be able to play quickly and accurately, performers must effectively practice to master it. For the alternating notes (see Example 3), pianists should first play two tandem notes simultaneously with both hands, aiming to project a loud dynamic in a slow tempo. Practicing in this way teaches pianists to quickly find the chord position. Gradually speeding up, pianists can finally play the etude in the indicated

tempo. Pianists should also pay close attention to pedal usage because the non-legato etude has a number of staccato notes throughout and performers should use the sustain pedal sparingly.

Example 3 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 2, "Fusees," mm. 6-7



***Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no.3, "Paysage"**

After the two agitated short pieces, the third, slightly easier etude in F major evokes a peaceful mood. "Paysage," translates to landscape, Liszt depicting a pastoral vision of a nature scene.¹⁵ There are some arpeggios in the left-hand, shown in Example 4, which should be played slowly and gently rather than technically or mechanically, catering to the mood.

Example 4 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 3, "Paysage," mm. 1-5



¹⁵ 173.

The main melody occurs in continuous thirds and octaves with a syncopated rhythm where both hands either play simultaneously or alternately. Pianists should think about the musical direction throughout, shaping each smaller phrase within the longer phrase.

Example 5 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 3, "Paysage," mm. 6-11



In order to show a continuous and lyrical sound, pianists should try to lower their wrists as much as possible, pressing the key longer and moving hands horizontally to play more fluently and smoothly. Although the composer was looking at the landscapes out of the window, "Paysage" sounds more like a memory. This etude might be a good choice for an amateur to work on lyrical playing or for an encore in a concert.

***Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no.4, "Mazeppa"**

One of the most demanding etudes in the entire cycle is the fourth piece, "Mazeppa". Liszt's "Mazeppa" was inspired by a collection of poems, *Les Orientales*, written by Victor Hugo in 1828. Cossack Mazeppa angered the husband of a Polish lady who had an affair with a noblewoman. As a result, Mazeppa was tied naked to a wild horse and dragged to Ukraine.¹⁶

¹⁶ John Douglas Fry, "Liszt's *Mazeppa*: The History and Development of a Symphonic Poem," (DMA diss., Ohio State University, 1988), 3-4, <https://search-proquest-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/303710670?accountid=14556>.

Liszt used fast successive thirds to imitate the sound effect of a wild horse galloping, showing the crazy hooves, Mazeppa's suffering, and pain. This etude contains several sections, the first section and introduction leads to the theme by a series of strong arpeggios and rapid scales ((Example 6). Each subsequent section is separated by double octaves. The main melody of each section is presented in octaves, while thirds in the center of the keyboard provide accompaniment, giving a sense of a galloping horse (Example 7).

Example 6 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 4, "Mazeppa," mm. 1-6

The musical score for Liszt's *Etude No. 4, "Mazeppa"* (measures 1-6) is presented in a grand staff. The tempo is marked **Allegro**. The score begins with a series of arpeggios in both hands, marked **ff**. A section of rapid scales follows, marked **p** and **con ped.***. This is followed by a **Cadenza ad libitum** section, which features a series of rapid scales in both hands, marked **cresc.**. The piece concludes with a final section of rapid scales, marked **rinforz.** and **m.s.**

Example 7 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 4, "Mazeppa," mm. 7-8

The image shows a musical score for Liszt's "Mazeppa" etude, measures 7-8. The score is written for piano and consists of three staves: a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a separate bass clef staff. The tempo is marked "Allegro" with a metronome marking of quarter note = 112-116. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The first staff contains the melody, starting with a dynamic marking of "sempre fortissimo e con strepito". The second and third staves contain the accompaniment, featuring rapid sixteenth-note passages. The second staff has fingering numbers (2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 2) and dynamic markings (m.s., m.d., m.s.). The third staff has fingering numbers (2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 2) and dynamic markings (m.s., m.d., m.s.). The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Because the sound of this piece is very rich and complex, it often deceives listeners into hearing four hands. "Mazeppa" is virtuosic, dramatic, and the most technically difficult with its rapid large leaps. The performer needs to have good endurance because it lasts for approximately seven minutes. To practice the large leaps this etude, a pianist should play only the octave melodies, then quickly move to the middle position for the thirds without playing. The pianist should then play only the middle position thirds and quickly move to the position of the octaves, again without playing. Practicing the motion of the passage allows performers to carefully practice hand placement. Pianists should also practice the etude by breaking the phrasing into smaller sections and practice each at different tempi, particularly practicing the fast passages at a slower speed as well as an extremely fast speed. It is worth noting that in the first two sections, Liszt marked the second finger and fourth finger to play a rapid succession of thirds (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). While this marking may seem to impede the speed, the player should not change it because the purpose of the indicated fingering imitates the sound of a horseshoe. Despite its difficulty, Liszt's employed this fingering to avoid a legato sound, instead,

emulating a horse's gallop. When pianists practice this passage, they should pay close attention to relaxing their wrists; keeping a low wrist enables easier and clearer execution.

After massive alternating octaves, *Lo stesso tempo* (means the same tempo) ushers in a lyrical section. It is more peaceful, graceful, and different from the other majestic sections of this piece. Melodies occur in the left-hand in the first time and are echoed by the right-hand afterwards. Performers should bring out the melodies each occurrence, playing the thirds and chromatic notes lighter as accompaniment (see Example 8 and Example 9).

Example 8 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 4, "Mazeppa," mm. 62-65

The musical score for Example 8 shows measures 62-65. The right-hand part features a series of chords with a melodic line that is marked *p* (piano) and includes the instruction *il canto marcato e vibrato assai*. The left-hand part provides a harmonic accompaniment with a *con ped.* (con pedale) marking. The key signature has one flat (B-flat major), and the time signature is 3/4.

Example 9 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 4, "Mazeppa," mm. 80-82

The musical score for Example 9 shows measures 80-82. The right-hand part features a series of chords with a melodic line that is marked *p* (piano). The left-hand part provides a harmonic accompaniment with a *p* (piano) marking. The key signature has one flat (B-flat major), and the time signature is 3/4.

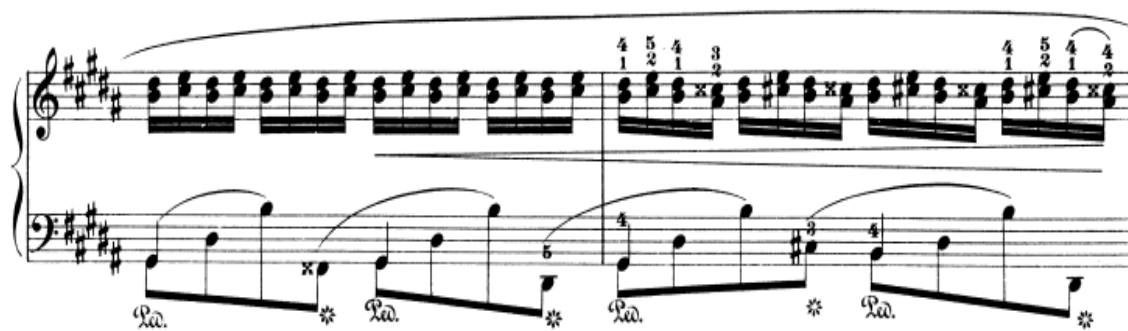
***Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no.5, "Feux Follets"**

The fifth etude, called "Feux Follets," is in B-flat major. "Feux Follets" is generally understood as "will-o'-the-wisp" or "ignis fatuus," referring to the mysterious lights in folklore

that lead travelers to enter the marshes.¹⁷ The fires depicted in “Feux Follets” were caused by the flames of the marsh plants, described as lights coming from fairies or spirits in traditional folklore.¹⁸ The etude paints a scene with flashing lights that lure curious travelers into the swamp. Liszt used chromatic scales and rapid successive double notes to create an ironic and mysterious atmosphere in the night, with a large number of staccato notes and leaps to illustrate the flashing and dizzying light.

Even though the duration of this piece is only four minutes, “Feux Follets” is the most difficult piece of the whole set with its technique, speed, dynamic control, and mysterious musical sense. Compared to Chopin’s rapid double-note etude (see Example 10), “Feux Follets” is much more complex because the double notes in the right-hand are not limited to thirds, there are also seconds, fourths, fifths, sixths, and even octaves (see Example 11).

Example 10 Chopin, *Étude*, op. 25, no. 6, mm. 3-4



¹⁷ Ethel H. Rudkin, “Will O’ Wisp,” *Folklore* 49, no. 1 (1938): 46-48, <http://www.jstor.org/www2.lib.ku.edu/stable/1257689>.

¹⁸ Rudkin, “Will O’ Wisp,” 46-48.

Example 11 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 5, "Feux Follets," mm. 25-26



The left-hand is accompanied by difficult techniques such as the big leaps of broken intervals and rapid chromatic scales. Some passages are asymmetrical between the hands (see Example 12), creating physically awkward movements to accurately play the rhythm (for example, page 53 to 55). Pianists should work with a metronome to execute precise rhythms while playing heavily on both the downbeat and upbeat while practicing.

Example 12 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 5, "Feux Folles," mm. 53-55



Speed and clarity are the biggest challenges of playing double notes, so performers should think about effective ways to solve this demanding technique. First, the pianist should mark all fingerings on all double notes before practicing. The performer should play only the top voice and change it to play only the bottom notes in the melody at different speeds (from an extremely slow tempo to a moderate tempo to a fast tempo to an extremely fast tempo) multiple times at each speed level. Moreover, pianists can use different rhythms to practice both the top and bottom voices simultaneously. For example, putting a dotted rhythm between each two-note group, making the first note long and second note short. Similarly, the pianist can place the dotted rhythm after the first note when four notes are in a group that makes the first note longer but other three notes are in equally short rhythm. After elongating the first note, pianists can also add a dotted rhythm between second and third note in the four-note group, playing the first and second notes quickly and leaving on third note longer, and then playing third and fourth notes very fast.

Etudes d'exécution transcendante, no.6, "Vision"

The sixth etude is G minor, and is called "Vision." The title offers freedom for imagination. It is not a hard piece and the performance timing is about six minutes. The main technical features in this etude include arpeggios, arpeggiated double notes, hands moving in opposite directions, cantabile, leaps, and tremolos. This etude is better suited for a pianist with bigger hands because of its wide intervals, but performers with smaller hands can also perform it as a practice for extending their hands. Throughout the etude, the performer may freely use the wrists to move the hands horizontally and stretch fingers that help fingers easily reach next note one by one with a singing tone. The climax with double octaves is followed by quick up and

down arpeggios in the right-hand until the *Ossia* creates a magnificent and exciting sound. This dark and profound piece is not fast but requires the pianist to play flowing phrases with deep emotions. Even though the tempo of “Vision” is marked as *Lento* (see Example 13), the performance should not be too slow because the pianist has to consider a flowing performance with long musical lines. Finally, pianists should bring out all accent notes in the low register against a serious of background arpeggio.

Example 13 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 6, “Vision,” mm. 1-2

***Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no.7, “Eroica”**

The etude, “Eroica” (Heroic) is in E-flat major. It is a dramatic piece with two main contrasts: rapid run notes and octaves. After an introductory flourish, the “Hero” theme appears for the first time as the indication of *Tempo di Marcia*. This main theme reoccurs multiple times and is restated at the end. Octaves in the melody should be played in time, especially the dotted octaves, emulating a march or portraying a confident hero. One method is the usage of fingering that pianist plays octaves with two hands: the main theme comes out in the first time from measures 19 to 28, right-hand plays the top notes of octave and left-hand plays the bottom notes

of octave, then both hands hold octaves simultaneously on half notes as the fingering shows below, meanwhile, to play the outlying chordal accompaniment lightly and shortly.

Example 14 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 7, "Eroica," mm. 19-22

The image shows a musical score for two staves, likely piano and right hand. The tempo is marked "Tempo di marcia" with a quarter note equal to 108 (♩ = 108). The key signature has two flats. The score is numbered 20 at the beginning. The right hand part starts with a half note chord, followed by a half note chord, and then a half note chord. The left hand part starts with a half note chord, followed by a half note chord, and then a half note chord. The score includes performance instructions: "p un poco marcato" and "il canto". Fingering numbers are provided for both hands: 23, 1, 2, 4, 2, 5, 1 for the right hand and 43, 2, 1, 5, 1, 5 for the left hand. There are also some markings like "5", "4", "1", "2", "1", "5", "1", "5" above and below the notes.

The double octaves lead to the climax of the piece, and perhaps the most challenging part of the piece (see Example 15). The performer must keep both hands very close to the keyboard and laterally move them. To improve the accuracy of octaves, the performer should practice only one voice at one time, for example, the top melody with only the fifth finger and the bottom melody solely with the thumb. Practicing in this manner allows the pianists to easily and quickly find the right position for each octave. In addition, the performer should strive to avoid sounding like chopping, carefully shaping each phrase as a pattern instead of pressing each note heavily.

Example 15 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 7, "Eroica," mm. 87-93

Etudes d'exécution transcendante, no.8, "Wilde Jagd"

"Wilde Jagd" is one of the toughest etudes in the cycle and the title translates to "Wild Hunt" in English. In E minor, it depicts a hunting scene, usually led by gods or legendary heroes occurring in ancient folk mythology. The difficulty of the five-minute "Wilde Jagd" lies in the technical aspects prevalent throughout the whole piece, even in the lyrical passages where technique is hidden in the singing melodies. "Wilde Jagd" contains rapid jump chords, quickly alternate notes, fast chromatic passages, swift arpeggios, tremolos, continuous dotted notes, and

expansive jump octaves. Pianists should practice each technique individually and effectively for mastery. For rapidly alternating notes, pianists should first play the pitches simultaneously as staccato and accented notes. The performer should then add an accent on left-hand only and play the pitches alternately. Reversing the process, performers should then play the accents with the right-hand and alternate the pitches as written. In continuous dotted-note passages (see Example 16), pianists usually make mistakes when they feel nervous on the stage in performance and often play the rhythm equally rather than precisely dotted. It is easy to rush the last two notes in the passage, so the two notes are unclear in performance. Practicing at a slow tempo allows pianists to intentionally allocate extra time after the first note and avoid rushing the last two notes. Slow practice also allows pianists to quickly move to the position of the last two notes before playing the pitches in an effort to improve accuracy on continuous, fast dotted notes.

Example 16 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 8, "Wilde Jagd," mm. 67-70



The wide octave leaps spanning three octaves on the second last page are known as the most challenge passage of the piece (see Example 17). The right-hand moves very quickly, traveling a large distance against left-hand's dotted rhythms. Pianists should practice playing each octave in position without making a sound. Then, with sound, they should practice only two octaves at a time. For example, pianists should play the first and second octaves extremely fast,

then play the second and third octaves in succession, followed by the third and fourth octaves, etc.

Performers must start over if they make any mistake, otherwise, this kind of practice method is inefficient at improving accuracy. Pianists should play with a metronome at each tempo since it can help foster a stable tempo for performance.

Example 17 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 8, "Wilde Jagd," mm. 186-193

The image shows a musical score for Example 17, *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 8, "Wilde Jagd," mm. 186-193. The score is in 6/8 time and consists of two systems. The first system (mm. 186-189) is marked "leggermente" and "p e sempre più animato". The second system (mm. 190-193) is marked "cresc. molto" and includes an "Ossia" section. The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and dynamic markings such as "p" and "cresc. molto".

Etudes d'exécution transcendante, no.9, "Ricordanza"

The ninth study is a lyrical and sentimental piece whose title means memorial. In A-flat major, the etude offers a gentle contrast to the previous "Wilde Jagd." It is one of the longest pieces in the cycle, lasting approximately ten minutes. The main melody is repeated several times throughout with a relaxed tempo. The beautiful melody embodies a nostalgic atmosphere.

Although the piece is not very exciting, it not easy to play. The melody begins in the left-hand and is developed with multiple variations, each containing different technical aspects including fast fingers move, double notes jump, octaves, arpeggios, and cadenza passages. The variations are constantly changing and become thicker and more complex over the course of the “Ricordanza” and eventually drives to a climax after a fancy cadenza following variation seven. The use of pedals is particularly important, and from measure fifteen to sixteen, performers should follow what Liszt notations for a pedal application (see Example 18). Pianists should hold down the pedal for the whole measure rather than changing it twice in a measure to prevent breaking the phrase into many small fragments.

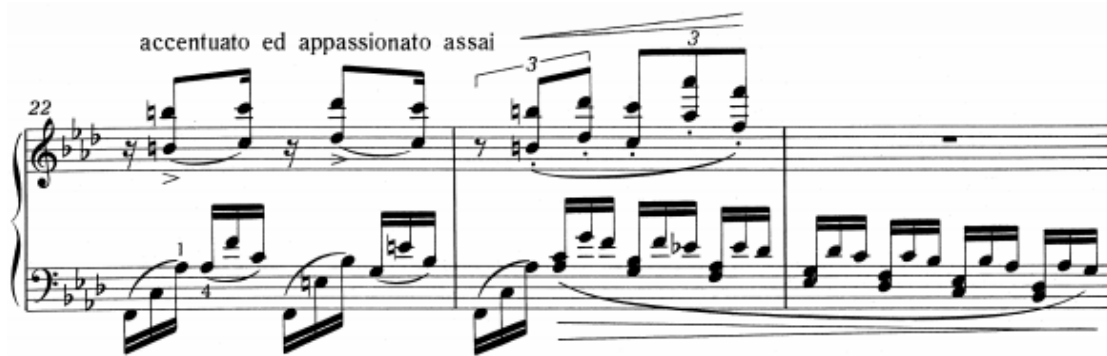
Example 18 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 9, “Ricordanza,” mm. 14-16

Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no.10, *Appassionata/F Minor

This etude often appears on concert programs and competitions because of its combination of beautiful melodies and brilliant virtuosity. In sonata form with a coda, the performing time is approximately five minutes. In general, the left-hand is more difficult although it is just accompaniment because it often contains wide and fast arpeggios. Performers should work more on the left-hand while practicing. The right-hand plays the main melody in

octaves (see Example 19), which pianists must strive to play with a legato sound and long phrases rather than mechanical, fragmented phrases.

Example 19 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 10, "F Minor," mm. 22-24



Proper execution of the left-hand is critical to a successful performance. If a pianist lays their hands flat on the keyboard so that they easily reach each note, they are able to make efficient use of their wrist to freely move their hands laterally. To facilitate the legato arpeggios, performers should divide notes into six-note and twelve-note groupings to practice at different tempos, practice phrase by phrase, as well as section by section. The melody in the right-hand assumes the role of a leader throughout the piece and requires the pianist to express a certain eloquence in performance. This can be achieved by highlighting the melodies with more prominence than the accompaniment. Performers should play legato under slurs in addition to finding the direction and large-scale shape for each phrase. There are several passages similar to the very beginning of this piece that are difficult to play cleanly, smoothly, and musically (see Example 20). Practicing each hand separately here may not help, but grouping every three notes to play simultaneously and holding the third note for a while before going on to next three notes

is more effective. Pianists should also add dynamics to the passage, shaping the phrase with a slight crescendo and decrescendo.

Example 20 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 10, "F Minor," mm. 1-2



Grouping is effective for the coda as well (see Example 21). Pianists should practice grouping at a fast speed, beginning with three notes and working up to six notes, one measure at a time. This can be achieved by highlighting the melodies with more prominence than the accompaniment and finally an entire phrase, emphasizing or counting each chord of left-hand other than thinking both hands in order to make a strong sense of rhythmic in its acceleration process while showing off this exciting part.

Example 21 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 10, mm. 161-169

The image displays a musical score for Example 21, *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 10, measures 161-169. The score is presented in three systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The first system (measures 161-163) features a complex rhythmic pattern in the right hand, primarily consisting of eighth and sixteenth notes. The bass line consists of chords. A dashed line with an '8' indicates an octave extension. The second system (measures 164-166) continues the right-hand pattern, with a 'stacc.' marking under the bass line. The third system (measures 167-169) shows the right hand with a more active melodic line and the bass line with chords. Another dashed line with an '8' indicates an octave extension.

***Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no.11, “Harmonies du soir”**

The penultimate etude is “Harmonies du soir” or Evening Harmonies, in D-flat major. It is one of the longest pieces in this cycle and lasts approximate nine to ten minutes. As the title of this work indicates, a large number of harmonies and broken chords make up this composition and become the main core of the melody. The etude demands skilled technique with chords in succession, arpeggios, octaves jump, octaves chromatic, chords jump, chords chromatic, interlaced hands, and repeated massive octaves and chords. This etude is very different from other etudes because it has the features of a symphonic poem, generating the sound of orchestra through only the piano. It is a completely artistic composition with its creative elements, musical

structure, and tremendous sound effects. At the beginning of this piece, there is a short introduction of nine bars. The theme is then introduced with successive chords in the left hand, while the right-hand accompanies with notes in the bass clef (see Example 22). The pianist's hands need to cross at the beginning of this section until the music reaches a point where the melody sounds like a harp played by both hands. Although the notes are written as numerous whole chords in the harp section, pianists must not ignore Liszt's words: *arpeggiato con molto sentimento* (see Example 23).

Example 22 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 11, "Harmonies du soir," mm. 10-11

Musical score for Example 22, measures 10-11. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of two systems. The first system (measures 10-11) shows the right hand playing a melody in the treble clef and the left hand playing chords in the bass clef. The second system (measures 12-13) continues the piece with similar hand positions.

Example 23 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 11, "Harmonies du soir," mm. 24-25

Musical score for Example 23, measures 22-25. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of two systems. The first system (measures 22-25) shows the right hand playing chords in the treble clef and the left hand playing a melody in the bass clef. The second system (measures 26-29) continues the piece with similar hand positions. Performance instructions include "un poco animato", "più cresc.", "sf", and "arpeggiato con molto sentimento".

Developing and growing, the etude finally arrives at the climax and the most difficult passage, consisting of several pages with repeated chords and jumping octaves in rapid succession. The climax also showcases continuous power and passionate expression, so performers must pose physical strength.

Example 24 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 11, "Harmonies du soir," mm. 98-103

The image shows a musical score for Liszt's *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 11, "Harmonies du soir," measures 98-103. The score is written for piano and consists of two systems of staves. The first system (measures 98-100) features a treble clef with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and a common time signature. The music is characterized by dense, repeated chords in both hands, with a dynamic marking of *fff* (fortissimo) and a tempo marking of *simile*. The second system (measures 101-103) continues the dense chordal texture, with a dynamic marking of *mf* (mezzo-forte) and a tempo marking of *rit.* (ritardando). The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

On the last page, the music grows quiet gradually, like an evening walk at dusk. Eventually, the melody disappears and morphs into slow arpeggios supported by chords. Liszt wrote a significant number of chords and harmonies to increase the density of the etude as well as a complexity of technique. Until here, we have to say that a flexible wrist will facilitate broken chords because the wrist needs to follow through after the fingers to make legate playing. The quick successive chords are most effectively played by memorizing the whole position of the chord rather than simply memorizing each note. This technique allows pianists to quickly and accurately locate and remember the position of the chord. For example, as the chord succession

begins in the right-hand in measure 80, the pianist's hand plays the first chord on a black key, seeing the top note of G-sharp. The pianist then moves their hand down a major third to a white key of the top note E. The pianist's hand then returns to the G-sharp and moves up a minor third to a white key so top note arrives at B, and so forth. From measure 91 on, the rapid, chromatic broken octaves in the left-hand mirror another one of Liszt's renowned grand works, the *Ballade*, no. 2 in b minor, S.171/2 (1853). Pianists should also avoid playing with a mechanical sound, instead, using wrist rotation to create a thick and intense atmosphere.

Example 25 *Ballade*, no. 2, mm. 113-114

The image shows a musical score for measures 113 and 114 of Liszt's *Ballade*, no. 2. The score is written for piano and consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The key signature is two sharps (D major). Measure 113 features a right-hand part with a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, and a left-hand part with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Measure 114 shows a right-hand part with a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, and a left-hand part with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. There are dynamic markings such as *ff* and *f* throughout the passage. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and fingering numbers (e.g., 5, 8).

Example 26 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 11, "Harmonies du soir," mm. 92-93

The image shows a musical score for measures 92 and 93 of Liszt's *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 11, "Harmonies du soir." The score is written for piano and consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The key signature is two sharps (D major). Measure 92 features a right-hand part with a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, and a left-hand part with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Measure 93 shows a right-hand part with a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, and a left-hand part with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. There are dynamic markings such as *ff* and *f* throughout the passage. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and fingering numbers (e.g., 6, 8).

Etudes d'exécution transcendante, no.12, "Chasse-neige"

"Chasse-neige" (Snowstorm), in b-flat minor, is the last etude in the cycle and is generally performed in five minutes. "Chasse-neige" epitomizes the cold wind and violent snow in a blizzard. Since the melody of the piece is in a minor key, it feels cold. Liszt wrote frequent tremolos to represent the unrelenting snowstorm. The chromatic scales emulate cold wind, creating a more desolate and even scared feeling. Since tremolos are prominent throughout the piece (see Example 27), the rotation skill is very suitable for this kind of technique. The performer should roll their hands to facilitate fast playing and achieve an even sound. Using an exaggerated motion while playing tremolos, fosters an easier execution of fast and dense notes, as well as generates a wind sound effect. In addition, this piece requires the pianist to masterfully control their key touch, carefully deciding on the amount of weight required to press each key for tremolos and chromatic passages. Different amounts of weight will produce varying dynamics, articulations, and atmosphere. For example, a gentle touch produces a sense of mystery and half of that weight generates a more stable sound. Completely pressing keys down creates a blazing or even a violent mood, so a successful pianist has a wide palette of diverse tone colors to greatly inspire the listener's imagination. In measure 53, the best way to play the wide span is to move the arms horizontally, saving time and energy to quickly and accurately playing each note (see Example 28).

Example 27 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 12, "Chasse-neige," mm. 1-2

Andante con moto [♩ = 100]

The musical score for Example 27, "Chasse-neige," measures 1-2, is presented in a grand staff. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 8/8. The tempo is marked "Andante con moto" with a metronome marking of 100. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody of quarter notes, while the left hand (bass clef) plays a dense tremolo of eighth notes. The piece begins with a piano (p) dynamic. The score includes first and second endings for both hands, indicated by "1^o" and "2^o" markings.

Example 28 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 12, "Chasse-neige," m. 53



In addition to these technical aspects of the etude, for musical performance, the pianist must consider how they represent the music's direction in each phrase. For "Chasse-neige," the accompaniment usually appears in the middle portion of the keyboard, while the main melodies occur in both the high and low registers of the keyboard. The performer should not only bring out the main melodies, but also connect and shape each main note into a long phrase, imaging slurs added over top of each note. There is an interesting phenomenon regarding the last chord of the piece. Some pianists play it loudly, as a majestic ending and other pianists prefer ending it gently. In the last several measures of the ending passage, the sound gradually fades away with a *decrescendo* until the sound dies out. Instead, Liszt marked a *crescendo* with a *sf* on the last chord that suggests a sound, like a winter's ring bell that feels cold and sorrowful. After a careful consideration of Liszt's markings, performers must express their own ideas, and execute the quality of the sound they believe ends the etude and whole cycle.

Example 29 *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, no. 12, "Chasse-neige," mm. 78-79

The image shows a musical score for two staves, likely piano and bassoon or a similar instrument. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into two measures, 78 and 79. Measure 78 features a complex rhythmic pattern with sixteenth notes and slurs, including fingering numbers 5 and 6. Measure 79 continues the pattern with a dynamic marking of *sf* (sforzando) and a final measure with a fermata. The notation includes various articulations and slurs.

Chapter III

Comparison of Recordings

The *Etudes d'exécution transcendante* are not only a challenge to the performer's skills and strength, but also a test of the listener's perseverance, especially when listening to the entire hour-long cycle. Contemporary pianists often play the whole cycle of etudes as a solo repertoire in recital. In this section, I will offer my personal perspectives of available recordings of *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*. The examination of the four representative pianists offers helpful insight for study and performance of this work.

Lazar Berman is one of the outstanding contemporary Russia school representatives, and his recordings offer the greatest value for learning and appreciation. He made two complete recordings of Liszt's Transcendental Etudes, one in 1959 and the other in 1963. Since the recording quality of 1959 album is not satisfactory, this study will focus on his 1963 recording. Like in Berman's other repertoire, his playing is thick with a big sound and stark contrasts. His impeccable technique is especially suited for Liszt's demanding work even though he rushed the tempo sometimes in "Eroica" and "Wilde Jagd", in which he obviously does not have much patience. "Mazeppa" and "Feux Follets" are very persuasive with Berman's technique and exquisite interpretation. He appropriately contrasts loud and fast passages with very gentle moments, particularly in "Paysage" and "Ricordanza". Berman's overall performance of the cycle is extremely virtuosic and colorful, and he conveys his emotions and the poetic nature of pieces without a technical burden. Berman's recording of the 12 Transcendental Etudes is one hour and three minutes in duration.

Claudio Arrau is a Chilean pianist and a student of Liszt's student, Martin Krause. He is considered one of the legendary pianists of the twentieth century. Arrau's performance is not

very fast but he is extremely artistic with his poetic interpretation and meditation on music, vividly reflected in “Harmonies du Soir.” His recording is reminiscent of the second *Ballade* by Liszt. In comparison to Berman's recording of “Harmonies du Soir,” I prefer Arrau's interpretation. Arrau’s touch on keyboard is deep, and he plays with a full sound while highlighting the underlying structure of the etude in performance. He played the fast etudes “Mazeppa” and “Feux Follets” slightly slower and more carefully, but his melodies are clear with a specific sense of musical direction. Arrau’s recording of this whole set is probably not the best of his recordings, compared to his other incredible Liszt performances. The recording time of the cycle is one hour and five minutes.

Daniil Trifonov is a young pianist from Russia who has won several major international competitions all over the world. His live-performance recording of the cycle displays a high level of technical polishing and musical expression. For such a difficult and large work, this balance and integrity of live performance are really priceless. Often, young pianists prefer to play dazzlingly and passionately, and he is no exception. Trifonov’s performances of the fast etudes “Mazeppa,” “Feux Follets,” and “Wilde Jagd” are extremely fast but very accurate. His touch on the keyboard is lighter than both Berman and Arrau, but he has flexible fingers and a keen ear to decide what sound quality he wants. Trifonov’s delicate and interesting thoughts are thoroughly expressed in “Feux Follets” and “Wilde Jagd,” where his right-hand is sometimes lighter and the left-hand melodies are outstanding and shining. He uses the extremely rare pedal while playing fast run notes to convey the sense of dancing spirits.

Boris Berezovsky performed the set of the 12 Transcendental Etudes in concert, and there are two different playing versions of him on YouTube, one in Moscow during 2009 and the other from Lisbon in 2011. Berezovsky's two performances of this set are the fastest ones in this study

so the entire cycles lasted only 53 minutes and 55 minutes respectively. Berezovsky's skills are unquestionable. He sits in front of the piano with almost no body motion and facial expression, and audiences only see his big hands flying easily and flexibly over the keyboard. Berezovsky's performance of each etude has unique musical ideas, clear sound, and good rhythmic control that draw the audience in throughout the lengthy work. The piano is like a toy in his hand and he can easily handle it as a taller pianist with big hands and with impeccable technique.

There are numerous wonderful recordings of the cycle by the excellent pianists. Besides the appreciation value of recordings, performers and listeners alike also should ponder what can be learned from pianists' performances in terms of studying and teaching. Recordings can introduce performers and audiences to the piece quickly and establish an appropriate concept of performance.

Conclusion

Today, more and more pianists practice and play Liszt's Transcendental Etudes in concerts or competitions, proving that we have the courage to challenge this demanding work in scholarship and performance. Due to the combination of technical difficulty, physical strength, and musicality of each etude in the cycle, performers should diligently practice with a clear purpose. Furthermore, if performers only pursue perfect technique and neglect the artistic value of the work, the performance will sound mechanical and tiresome. Each etude contains a lot of different technical points and performers should first solve all technical difficulties and practice each piece individually rather than immediately hoping to perform all twelve pieces within a short time. The number of etudes performed is not nearly as important as the quality of the performance.

As a suggestion for repertoire selection, I believe in excerpting from the entire set; selecting a couple of etudes rather than the all twelve etudes as a smaller set, consisting of contrasting characteristics, to play in concerts and competitions. For example, no.4 “Mazeppa,” no.9 “Ricordanza,” and no. 10 “F minor” work as a twenty-minute set or no.7 “Eroica,” no.12 “Chasse-Neige,” no.11 “Harmonies du Soir” and no.8 “Wilde Jagd” to create a virtuosic thirty-minutes set that works as half a recital. I think music’s charm lies in its unpredictability, so there is no right and wrong; instead, there are an infinite expanse of imaginations and expectations when you are really enjoying the music.

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