

Notes from NEPTA speaker series, January 22, 2018

Speaker: Seymour Bernstein

Topic: "Examining Chopin's Notational Indications"

Also see: <http://seymourbernstein.com/publications/chopin-interpreting-his-notational-symbols/>

Seymour Bernstein covered a great deal of ground over the course of more than two hours. The salient points are mentioned below, but most of the material is also included in his various publications, referred to at his website, <http://seymourbernstein.com>

Mr. Bernstein opened by making two points he would elaborate on through the presentation: 1) Chopin's pedal marking asterisks (*) should not be followed. If followed, the result would be *non legato* playing. 2) The "hairpins" < > in romantic notation do not refer to dynamics but rather to tempo fluctuations. These are conclusions he has reached after ten years of research. He also said his goal was to help make our teaching easier.

Before focusing on those two conclusions, he discussed pedaling in general, and other musical topics. The pedal is the soul of the piano (Anton Rubenstein quote).

Four ways to pedal a chord:

- 1) Depress pedal with the chord; get enormous emphasis (e.g., opening chord of Beethoven's *Pathétique* sonata).
- 2) Depress pedal after the chord; the sound is augmented, with a little swell.
- 3) Depress pedal before the chord; takes away the percussion.
- 4) For **fp**, use flutter pedal to dissipate the sound.

Releasing the pedal often produces a clicking or thumping sound if not controlled. Bernstein wrote a piece for children that calls for deliberately thumping the pedal. This serves as a way to counter the tendency to thump the pedal (reverse psychology).

How to end a piece properly (if pedaling) and especially if soft ending:

- 1) Lift fingers to surface of keys.
- 2) Lift pedal slowly.
- 3) Hands to lap slowly.

Referring to opening of Mozart G major sonata, K. 283:

Alberti bass in early classical music should never be played dryly; instead, use "finger pedaling," holding certain notes (usually the lower ones); keeps the dampers up.

Within a four-measure phrase, typically the third measure gets the climax. In this sonata, the first accented downbeat is in the 5th measure.

Mozart indicated dynamics sparingly. When we get them, it's like a gift from heaven.

Side tip: Never allow a student to play anything without a dynamic. We need to foster an emotional connection to the music. A wrong dynamic is equivalent to a wrong note.

Mozart had knee pedals: R knee pedal for treble, L knee pedal for bass.

The slurs in Mozart are bow markings, as for string players. No silence (no breath) in between. The two-note slur generally only means play *legato*. It does not always mean loud-soft >, though it *may* mean that as well.

Mozart's slurs are rarely more than two measures long. Violin bows were shorter and had different tension than bows now. Players would run out of bow. In an example of a three-bar phrase in a Mozart sonata, Bernstein's solution was to hold the pedal with the bass through the phrase. The high notes do not blur.

Referring to Mozart's Fantasie, K. 397, *Adagio* section, the slur over the dotted notes indicates *portato* articulation (not *portamento!*). He said to detach with the hand and connect with the foot. He urges using pedal on all *portato* phrases.

Aside: There are two categories of musicians: The upbeaters and the downbeaters. We must be both, depending on what the music requires.

Beethoven sometimes indicates *senza sordino* or *con sordino*. *Sordino* means mute (*sordini* -- mutes). *Senza sordino* translates as without the mute(s), i.e., without the dampers, which means WITH the pedal. *Con sordino* means with the dampers, meaning NO pedal. (Somewhat counterintuitive.)

Regarding the first movement of the "Moonlight" sonata, play entire piece **pp** and *senza sordino* -- with pedal down the entire time, no change. Bernstein mentioned hearing a recording of a pianist playing on a fortepiano of Beethoven's time, in this manner. Out of this world.

The problem of the asterisk *:

As he mentioned in his opening remarks, Mr. Bernstein's conclusion, after years of research, is that in Chopin's piano music, the pedal asterisks mean nothing at all. They should be ignored.

Liszt heard his own pupils fracture his music with their observation of the asterisk, so he took out the * completely.

Bernstein asserts that editors/publishers made Chopin and other Romantic composers put in a sign to indicate release of the pedal. They used *. Now, we have brackets below the staff to indicate pedal on/off, but those symbols were not available then. They just had *Ped.*

With Chopin, when you see *Ped.*, inject the pedal. Ignore the *. Do not change pedal until the next *Ped.* sign. (There may be spots without any pedal at all.) Use flutter pedal under elaborate melodic passages and adjust dynamically for non-chord tones.

The long pedal in Chopin works because of the foundation in the bass. Example: D-flat Nocturne, Op. 27, No. 2. Chopin knew that when there is a resonance in the bass, there is no problem of blurring.

Chopin's students wrote that his right foot was always trembling. (Similarly, Czerny wrote that Beethoven's foot was always trembling.) Flutter pedaling disperses dissonances.

Chopin, and other composer-pianists, frequently held down notes that are not notated durationally, e.g., with double stems. That would clutter up the score. Example: Chopin's "Raindrop" Prelude. Left hand holds the A-flat.

(Schubert only indicated *Ped.* four times in all his piano music.)

In Chopin's A-flat Ballade, Op. 47, No. 3, there is a series of upbeat pedals in preparation for a big downbeat. In the G Minor Ballade, Op. 23, No. 1, hold left-hand bass notes (finger pedaling). Chopin loved dissonances, because they resolve eventually.

Regarding Paderewski editions of Chopin, Bernstein exhorted us to heave them in the garbage. They are terrible.

Dots confuse people. We automatically think they must mean *staccato*. Not so, in specific situations. They are choreographic indications. Composers wrote down what the hands and fingers and feet were doing. The dots in the bass do not indicate *staccato*, nor do they indicate lack of pedal, but rather are choreographic indications showing where pianist's hands have to make a leap.

Examples: Schubert's Impromptu, Op. 142, No. 3, in B-flat. Chopin's B-flat minor Scherzo has dots with the bass note, as well as a pedal indication. [Schubert used the dot, but did not denote *Ped.*]

Where it is not always clear, we have to make decisions on how to play.

Chopin Nocturne, Op. 15, No. 3 in B-flat: Dots over bass notes are choreographic indications, not *staccato*. Also marked with *Ped.* signs.

Hairpins < >:

It seems that, beginning with Beethoven, hairpins do not refer to dynamics but rather to tempo fluctuations. An observer at a Brahms rehearsal wrote that < > means to play with extra warmth, not just with tone but also with rhythm. Clara Schumann wrote about Brahms' rubato: He'd linger on notes as if he could not bear to leave them, but would not be so foolish as to metronomically make up for the time. Bernstein: Rob Peter but don't pay Paul. (*Rubare* in Italian means to steal.)

Fanny Mendelssohn wrote that the < > sign stands for *accelerando* and *ritardando*.

Tempo *rubato* connotes flexibility, constantly shifting rhythmic energy and abatement.

The < > does not mean play the note in the middle louder (though one might, depending on the context).

Example: Brahms Intermezzo in A, Op. 118, No. 2. The hairpins indicate *rubato* (though a *crescendo* may be also appropriate in some cases).

In Chopin's Ballade in G Minor, in the third measure, the marking of *dim.* inside a > is not a redundancy. Bernstein says the hairpin means linger and then move. He also referred to the Prelude in E Minor, Op. 28, No. 4, mm. 16-17.

Bernstein concludes that the < > in this period's repertoire means linger and then go ahead. [Ed. The markings could also reasonably be interpreted as the opposite: intensify/move forward and then abate, as Fanny Mendelssohn wrote. Context will help decision-making.]

Another teaching tip, to counteract the tendency of student to suddenly play loud upon seeing *crescendo* and to play soft upon seeing *diminuendo*: Tell student that *crescendo* means **p** and that *diminuendo* means **f** [at the inception of that indication, and relative to prevailing dynamic].

NOTE: After the lecture ended, Bernstein was asked, "When did the hairpins revert to indicating dynamic changes, rather than tempo fluctuations." He said with Debussy.

Notes submitted by Barbara Engel