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The Well-Coordinated Pianist

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The Well-Coordinated Pianist

By

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Accepted in Partial Completion
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Master's Thesis

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Avery Alexander

May 18, 2023

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A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Music

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to provide a survey of technical and postural methods that can be helpful in piano playing. Methodologies discussed include Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, György Sándor's *On Piano Playing: Motion, Sound, and Expression*, and Seymour Bernstein's *With Your Own Two Hands*. The first chapter of this paper is a discussion of these methods and how they can be helpful to pianists and piano teachers. The second introduces musical examples, including historical and musical information: Mozart's Sonata No. 12 in F major, K. 332; Ravel's *Sonatine*; and Schumann's *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16. From a pedagogical standpoint, technical issues that I've encountered in my own study of these pieces will be explored, along with the implementation of some of the methods discussed.

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Introduction

Pianists struggle with many difficulties relating to technique, the way they use their bodies to play their instruments. Pianists of all levels often run into problems involving unnecessary muscular tension, which can result in issues with tone production, accuracy, and even possible injury. It is important to identify and rectify these issues early on in piano study, and create a relaxed, easeful technique with good posture. Pedagogues and scientists have studied these issues in piano playing and devised numerous methods for alleviating tension. Unfortunately, many pianists do not encounter these approaches until they are well along in their studies. The issue is that by this stage, most pianists have already developed playing habits that are difficult to alter.

There have been countless writings about piano technique over the years; what follows is a survey of a few methods which can be beneficial to both teachers and students of the piano. Specific musical examples will be discussed, as well as the techniques applied from a pedagogical standpoint. The technical methodologies discussed include the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais – Awareness Through Movement, György Sándor's book *On Piano Playing: Motion, Sound, and Expression*, and Seymour Bernstein's book *With Your Own Two Hands*. As well as providing historical and musical background, I will apply some of these methods to three solo piano pieces commonly performed within the repertoire, using my own experience learning these works as a model. I am presenting what has worked well for me in learning these pieces, in the hopes that it may help others or at least bring awareness to the importance of technique. My aim is to provide a survey of technical problems and their solutions; this is by no means an exhaustive list.

Chapter 1

This chapter is a survey of the four methods that will be used in this study. The first two are more general, anatomical ways of being and using the body. Good posture is an important foundation that can be used for more than just piano playing, and both performers and teachers alike can benefit from knowledge of these methods.

The Alexander Technique was developed by F. Matthias Alexander, an Australian actor who suffered from chronic laryngitis whenever he performed.[1] He was aware that he was holding tension in his neck and body and was able to overcome these issues by observing himself in a mirror. In Wilfred Barlow's book, *The Alexander Principle*, he explains how this method has been scientifically tested and proven to be effective.[2] Barlow describes the Alexander Technique as a method of body use which is most efficient, always coming back to a balanced resting state.[3] There is an emphasis on developing awareness of harmful tension in the body by using mindfulness to understand how our bodies rest and respond to certain stimuli. One of the most important aspects of the Alexander Technique, Barlow says, is the primary control, involving the head in relation to the neck.[4] The head should be held slightly forward, and neck elongated but not stretched. He also devotes an entire section to the slump or hump, which as you can imagine is the space between the shoulders at the base of the neck. According to Alexander, the neck should be lengthened, and shoulders held back with the spine aligned instead of slumped forward.[5] Posture is often unconsciously, socially ingrained in us to the point at which we are

[1]"Who was F. Matthias Alexander?" The Complete Guide to the Alexander Technique, accessed April 24, 2023, https://alexandertechnique.com/fma/.
[2]Wilfred Barlow, *The Alexander Technique* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 3-5.
[3]Barlow, *The Alexander Technique*, 56-69.
[4]Barlow, 16-19.
[5]Barlow, 19-27.

completely unaware of harmful alignment. Barlow also discusses mental health in relation to body use.[6] Anxiety is a major contributor to muscle tension, and it is often totally subconscious. Often when we are engaged in an activity that involves an intense level of focus and coordination, muscular tension can arise, and we are oblivious of it because we are so immersed in the activity.

There is only so much that can be said to explain the Alexander Technique; to really understand it, I believe one must experience it for themselves with an Alexander teacher. In an Alexander lesson, the teacher will guide the student's body to show them this natural way of being. The first lesson typically starts with focusing on the sitting position and how to sit well with the spine properly aligned. The teacher will say something like "ask the head to lead and rest of the body will follow," simultaneously guiding the students' body into place. It's all about reprogramming and reconditioning the mind and body to learn a new way of being, returning to this balanced resting state. After participating in an Alexander lesson, I felt a new sense of spaciousness in my body when I sat at the piano which gave me much more freedom and ease of movement. I also discovered that I had been sitting too close to the keyboard. This limited the range of motion that was possible, and ultimately affected my sound. The Alexander Technique can provide information about the body that is not only beneficial in piano playing, but also in everyday life.

The next method I will discuss is Feldenkrais – Awareness Through Movement. Moshé Feldenkrais was an Israeli engineer, born in Russia, who developed his method after suffering a chronic knee injury.[7] He was influenced by Judo and was one of the first non-Asians to earn a

[6]Barlow, 125-131.
[7]"Moshe Feldenkrais 1904-1984," Feldenkrais Method, accessed April 24, 2023, https://feldenkrais.com/about-moshe-feldenkrais/.

black belt in the discipline.[8] As is evident in the title: Awareness Through Movement – this method uses movement to develop awareness of the body. The Feldenkrais method is similar to the Alexander Technique in that it uses movements to become aware of harmful habits in body posture and use. What's different is the focus on breathing and one's own individual experience. It's a type of biofeedback which uses repetitive, slow movements while paying close attention to how the different parts of the body respond.[9] After a lesson, the student is asked to walk around and notice how their body feels different. There are often noticeable changes, and the lesson often puts one into a meditative state. I was lucky enough to participate in a workshop with pianists in a Feldenkrais lesson.[10] A few of us were asked to play piano after the lesson was over. We all found it difficult to "turn our brains on" after being in a meditative state for an extended period, but it gave us all valuable information about our body's posture and reactions.

Next, we discuss two technical and psychological works which deal specifically with piano playing. The first is György Sándor's book, *On Piano Playing: Motion, Sound, and Expression*. György Sándor was a Hungarian pianist and writer, and studied with Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály at the Liszt Royal Conservatory in Budapest.[11] Sándor's *On Piano Playing* was published in 1981 and is a valuable, concise resource for piano technique. One of the key points in the book is that technique is simply a coordination of motions.[12] Sándor writes that

[8]Ibid.
[9]Moshé Feldenkrais, *Awareness Through Movement: Health Exercises for Personal Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 58-65.
[10]Katie O'Rourke, Feldenkrais – Awareness Through Movement Workshop at Western Washington University, April 18, 2023.
[11]"Obituary: György Sándor, Keyboard tiger who championed Bartok's piano works," *The Guardian*, published January 25, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2006/jan/26/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries.
[12]György Sándor, *On Piano Playing: Motion, Sound, and Expression* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1981), ix.

conscious practicing saves time.[13] If one can practice consciously, there is no need to spend countless hours a day practicing.

According to Sándor, there are five fundamental motion patterns that can solve all pianistic problems, and the musical notation indicates which should be used.[14] The first of these motion patterns discussed is the free fall. **Free fall** is essentially using gravity and our own muscular system to our advantage.[15] This method originates from weight technique, made popular by Rudolf Maria Breithaupt in the early twentieth century.[16] The second motion pattern discussed is **five-finger patterns, scales, and arpeggios**. Each finger is considered an extension of forearm muscle and should be placed in proper alignment when each respective finger plays.[17] This means that it can be helpful to visualize a straight line from the forearm, through the wrist and hand, to the finger that is playing. Awkward angles of the wrist and hand should be avoided. As a five-finger pattern, scale, or arpeggio is played, there should be an adjustment of the arm for each finger.[18] The third motion pattern discussed is the concept of **rotation**. Medical terms used to describe rotation are *pronation* and *supination*.[19] *Pronation* is when the wrist and forearm rotate towards the body and *supination* refers to the wrist and forearm moving away from the body. There should also be proper alignment of forearm and upper arm. Sándor writes that the forearm should be aligned between the two fingers that play.[20] The fourth motion pattern discussed is **staccato**. Sándor says that whether it's single notes, double notes, chords, or

[13]Sándor, *On Piano Playing: Motion, Sound, and Expression*, ix-x.
[14]Sándor, 35.
[15]Sándor, 37.
[16]Reginald G. Gerig, *Famous Pianists and Their Technique* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 329-332.
[17]Sándor, 52.
[18]Sándor, 52-53.
[19]Sándor, 79.
[20]Sándor, 81.

octaves, the technique will be similar.[21] The entire arm should always be actively engaged. He describes it as a "throw" of the finger by activating the hand, forearm, and upper arm.[22] The final motion pattern discussed is **thrust**. In this movement the muscles participate in a downward motion. Sándor says that there is a split-second fixation of muscles.[23] Maximum power is used from the surface of the keys. Pianist and pedagogue Seymour Bernstein also advocates for staying close to the keys.[24] In an interview, Bernstein demonstrated why one should always start from the keys, even when trying to play loudly. This means that we should not raise our fingers high off the keys to strike with a loud sound. This can be achieved with the fingers staying on the surface of the keys.

While on the topic of motion patterns, I wanted to mention some additional discoveries I've made while studying technique. Before studying technique, I felt that I was constantly using a downward, pressing motion. As an educator and performer studying these technical and pedagogical methods, I've found that the entire approach of using pressure or pushing can create a great deal of muscular tension. There should be some minimal pressure, but it needs to be released as frequently as possible. As Sándor said, it should only be a split-second fixation of the muscles, which needs to be released immediately.[25] Shifting to an upward motion, as if pulling the sound out of the keys, has completely freed my technique and improved my sound. Another discovery I made was that I'd adopted the habit of high fingers. When playing fast passages such as in Bach, in an effort to be highly articulate, I'd raise my fingers high off the keys for each

[21]Sándor, 93.
[22]Sándor, 94.
[23]Sándor, 108.
[24]"Seymour Bernstein on Beethoven: Technique & Interpretation (Interview at the piano)," tonebase Piano, YouTube, published November 13, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59x8eeB1bYk&t=1289s.
[25]Sándor, 108.

note. This is unnecessary movement which can contribute to extra muscular tension and cause injury. As Bernstein and Sándor said, it's easier if we keep our fingers close to the keys.[26,27]

Next, I will discuss Seymour Bernstein's book *With Your Own Two Hands*. This book is a great resource for philosophy on piano playing and music learning in general. He also has a great book called *20 Lessons in Keyboard Choreography* which deals with many technical situations as well. What Bernstein stresses is that there should always be a natural fascination and love for music.[28] If a person doesn't enjoy making music, they shouldn't be doing it. Much of the book is a discussion of the psychological aspects that go along with piano playing and performance. What he calls the **auto pilot** refers to reflex memory, which is how our brains store the motion patterns used in playing a piece that has been memorized.[29] I'm again reminded of an interview with Bernstein in which memorization was discussed. In the interview, he said that memory slips constitute eighty percent of all nervousness in performance.[30] He went on to argue that we shouldn't force ourselves to not use music in performance, and that some of the best performances happen even when the score is used.[31] Bernstein talks at length about the importance of the emotional content of music. In his book, he stresses playing with feeling rather than mechanically, and that composers will convey musical feeling through notation.[32] He also mentions the importance of listening: listening to ourselves, to other performers, etc. Bernstein believes that it is important to develop our aural skills.[33] He has all his students take a piece that

[26]Sándor, 108.
[27]YouTube, "Seymour Bernstein on Beethoven: Technique & Interpretation (Interview at the piano)."
[28]Seymour Bernstein, *With Your Own Two Hands: Self-Discovery Through Music* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1981), 3-10.
[29]Bernstein, *With Your Own Two Hands: Self-Discovery Through Music*, 47-49.
[30]"Classical Encounter with Seymour Bernstein, Part 3 (Philosophy on Memorizing Music)," PYPA Channel, YouTube, published February 25, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPsdMvCPFpl&t=209s.
[31]"Classical Encounter with Seymour Bernstein, Part 3 (Philosophy on Memorizing Music)," YouTube.
[32]Bernstein, 62-65.
[33]Bernstein, 123-126.

they know well by memory and play the melody with just the index finger of the left hand.[34] This allows them to use only their ear, and the reflex memory is stopped. There is also an entire chapter on nervousness and stage fright. Much can be said about this topic, and Bernstein tells us how to be adequately prepared, stressing the importance of "try-outs," or having a practice performance in front of a real audience.[35]

[34]Classical Encounter with Seymour Bernstein, Part 3 (Philosophy on Memorizing Music)," YouTube.
[35]Bernstein, 268-271.

Chapter 2

This chapter includes a discussion of musical examples and demonstration of how the technical methods mentioned in Chapter 1 can be implemented.

Mozart - Sonata No. 12 in F Major, K. 332

The first piece I will be discussing is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's (1756-1791) Sonata No. 12 in F Major, K. 332. This sonata is believed to be written in Vienna or Salzburg in the summer of 1783, and was first published in 1784, along with the K. 330 and K. 331 sonatas.[36]

One of the important aspects of performing Mozart's works is historical performance practice, or historically informed performance. Since it has been centuries since Mozart was alive, it is hard to know exactly how his music was performed. What we can do is have a general picture of how the music sounded at the time, and the instrument it was originally written for. Mozart did not play on a modern piano; he played on a fortepiano, which came after the harpsichord and before the modern piano. There are several differences between the two instruments, which can inform how Mozart's music was played. The sound of a fortepiano is much lighter and softer than the modern piano.[37] The sound also decays much faster than the modern piano. When a note is struck on a fortepiano, the sound immediately starts to decay. On a modern piano when a note is struck, the sound swells and then starts to decay.[38] It's important to recognize this in the performance of Mozart's pieces. Also, the weight of the action on a

[36]"Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Piano Sonata F major K. 332 (300k)," G. Henle Verlag, Accessed April 22, 2023, https://www.henle.de/en/detail/?Title=Piano+Sonata+F+major+K.+332+(300k)_178.
[37]"What is a Fortepiano?" Daniel Adam Maltz, YouTube, published December 30, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15R9KSLZvz0.
[38]Maltz, "What is a Fortepiano?"

fortepiano is much lighter than the modern piano – more like a harpsichord.[39] The keys are also narrower on a fortepiano so large intervals such as octaves fit within a smaller distance, making it easier to play for those with small hands.

I had the opportunity to work on this sonata with Vienna based fortepianist Daniel Adam Maltz and received an abundance of valuable insight on historically informed performance practice.[40] The best piece of advice I got from him was that there is an unspoken way of playing Classical piano music in the modern day which is very mechanical in that everything is perfectly, rhythmically in time.[41] This can make for almost robotic-sounding music. What he told me is that Mozart's music – and other music of the Classical era – is speechlike and should be played as if imitating speech.[42] This means that there will be natural pauses and slight tempo changes. Since Mozart's music is so continuous, with one idea presented after another, it is important that we communicate the differences between sections and ideas.[43]

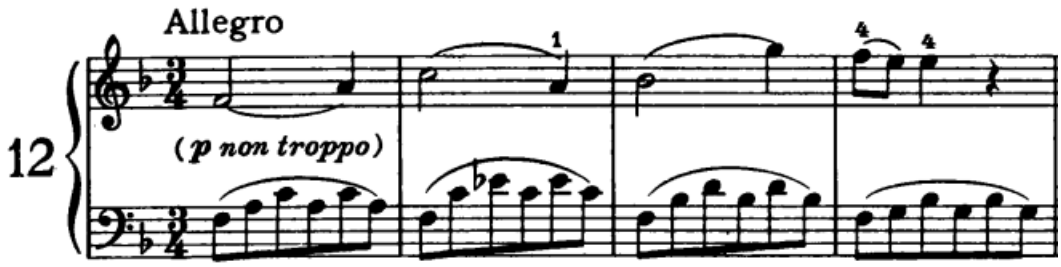
I. *Allegro*

The first movement of the sonata is a triple-meter piece in Classical sonata form. There are many contrasting sections and dynamics, with the characteristic Mozartean charm. The movement tells a story, with stormy sections followed by light, whimsical melodies. Beginning in F Major, the movement wanders into other keys before returning to the home key at the end.

[39]Maltz, "What is a Fortepiano?"
[40]Daniel Adam Maltz, Zoom lesson on Mozart's Sonata K. 332, April 25, 2023.
[41]Maltz, Zoom lesson on Mozart's Sonata K. 332.
[42]Maltz, Zoom lesson on Mozart's Sonata K. 332.
[43]Maltz, Zoom lesson on Mozart's Sonata K. 332.

In the opening four measures of this movement, shown in Example 1, each measure has its own separate slur markings.[44]

EXAMPLE 1: Mozart - Sonata in F Major, K. 332, I, mm. 1-4



The question is whether to play each measure separated or connected. Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda write that the best way to solve this problem is to imagine this line as if it's an operatic aria.[45] Because it should sound like a continuously sung line, we should not have too much of a gap between the slurs. Some editions (Schirmer) add a slur marking over the entire 4 measures.[46] This is the idea we should strive for but should not be taken literally – staying true to what Mozart originally wrote is most important.[47] There should be a small break in between each slur, but the line should be heard as one continuous phrase.

II. *Adagio*

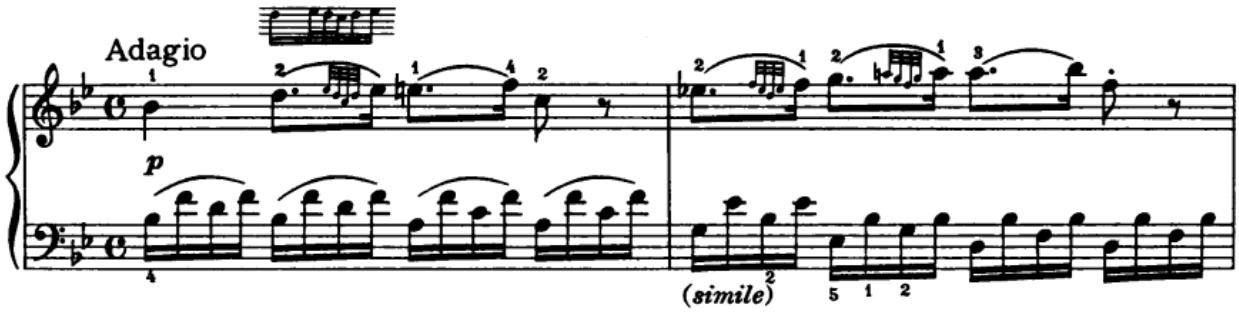
The second movement of the sonata is the slow movement of the work, featuring an Alberti bass accompaniment in the left hand and melodic material almost entirely within the right hand. The melody is reminiscent of something from an operatic aria, as many of Mozart's slow movements are. The melodic material is improvisatory at times, and the second half of the piece

[44]Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Sonaten für Klavier zu zwei Händen* (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1938), 183.
[45]Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda, *Interpreting Mozart: The Performance of His Piano Pieces and Other Compositions* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 118-119.
[46]Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *19 Sonatas for the Piano* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1893),
[47]Badura-Skoda, *Interpreting Mozart: The Performance of His Piano Pieces and Other Compositions*, 118-119.

is a varied reprise of the two opening sections with added embellishments, just as was custom for an opera singer.

In the Alberti bass passages, it is helpful to use what many pianists refer to as "finger pedal," a technique in which one holds the first note of the figure longer than indicated. In this case, the B-flat in the first two beats of measure 1 would be held for the length of a quarter note, rather than the sixteenth note that is written (see Example 2).[48] This provides a richer, more supported sound without using the damper pedal. Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda write that this creates an instrumental effect, as if the held bass note is a cello in a chamber group.[49]

EXAMPLE 2: Mozart - Sonata in F Major, K. 332, II, mm. 1-2



As mentioned in Chapter 1, even though the note is held, we should not be actively pressing the key. The muscles fixate momentarily when the key is first played, and then should be held passively for the remaining duration of the note. The muscular tension should release immediately after the note is played.

III. *Allegro Assai*

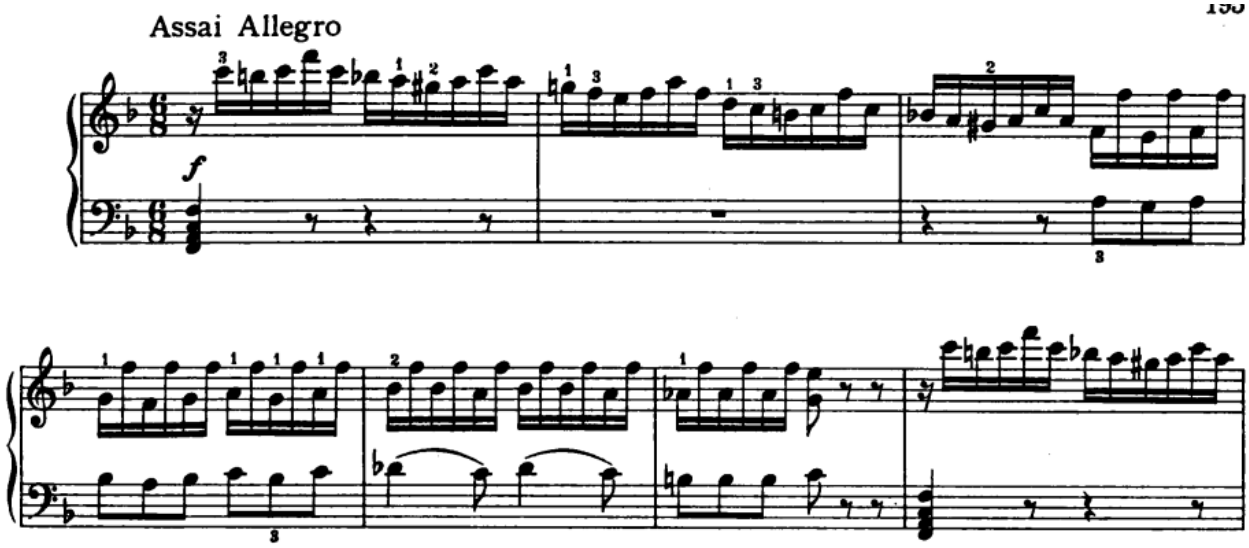
The third movement is the most technically difficult movement of the sonata. It is in 6/8 time, the longest movement of the sonata, and filled with fast, running sixteenth notes. According

[48]Mozart, *Sonaten für Klavier zu zwei Händen* (Peters), 190.
[49]Badura-Skoda, *Interpreting Mozart: The Performance of His Piano Pieces and Other Compositions*, 305-306.

to Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda, this movement has higher technical demands than any of the Beethoven sonatas. I'll discuss a few of these.

The first technical concept that is needed at the beginning of the third movement is the "wrist breath." In long running sixteenth note passages, it is important to group the sixteenths rather than approaching them as a continuous line. The wrist should move freely within these groupings. There is a sort of breath or slight relaxation of the wrist at the beginning of each grouping of sixteenths, shown in Example 3.[50]

EXAMPLE 3: Mozart - Sonata in F Major, K. 332, III, mm. 1-6



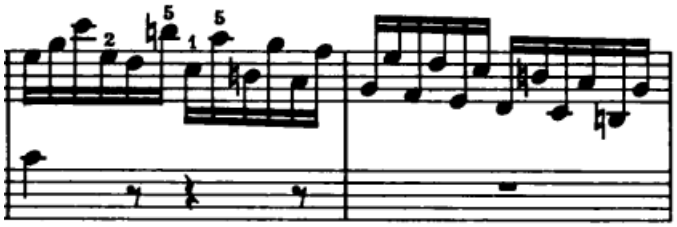
It is important that we always have a free, supple wrist that is not locked. A pitfall that many students fall into is locking their wrist when playing fast passages such as this one. Even when playing fast passages, there should be small moments during which muscular tension is released so that we have the endurance to play this difficult movement. If the wrist stays locked without releasing tension, the muscles will fixate and tire very quickly.

[50]Mozart, *Sonaten für Klavier zu zwei Händen* (Peters), 196.

The second important technical concept for this movement is wrist rotation. As discussed in Sándor's book, rotation is helpful in many situations when two notes are alternating back and forth. In mm. 3-6 (Example 3), rotation is essential for the right hand to stay free and stable. In this case, we have the upper note – F – as an anchor point.

Later in the movement, there are descending, broken sixths which are often very difficult to keep together, shown in Example 4.[51]

EXAMPLE 4: Mozart - Sonata in F Major, K. 332, III, mm. 68-69



This passage does not have an anchor point like the one mentioned in mm. 3-6 (Example 3). There are several effective ways to practice this passage: 1) blocked sixths, 2) thumb line only – playing only the lower notes of the sixths, 3) pinky line only – playing only the upper notes, 4) grouping and adding on – only playing one sixth, adding another, and then another, etc. When playing this passage, it's also important to keep the wrist and arm free. I've found that imagining my arm as weightless and light helps to keep this passage under control. So often in piano playing we want to control our playing mechanism as much as possible and the muscles will tense up trying to accomplish this. It seems counterintuitive to relax as many muscles as possible, but once we learn how little effort is truly needed, we can take our musical skills and sound to a whole new level. Another difficulty is that all these fast notes need to be played

[51]Mozart, *Sonaten für Klavier zu zwei Händen* (Peters), 197.

lightly to achieve the speed necessary. I like to imagine that the keys are not being played all the way to the bottom of the keybed.

Ravel - *Sonatine*

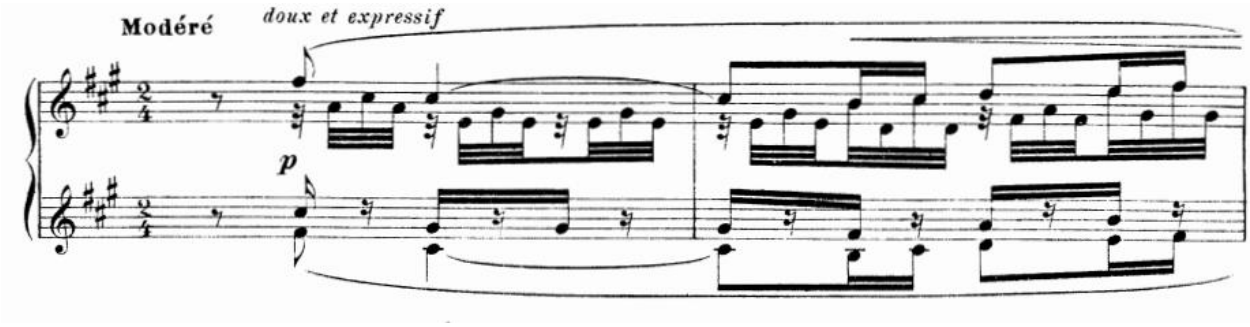
The next piece I will be discussing is Maurice Ravel's (1875-1937) *Sonatine*. Ravel was one of the most well-known impressionist composers, along with his contemporary Debussy. Ravel was known for using impressionist harmonic language while also staying true to classical forms and structures, making him one of the pioneers of neoclassicism. This is evident in the *Sonatine*, as he uses conventional sonata form, but the harmonic language is different from a sonata of the Classical era. Extended harmonies such as ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths are used as well as seconds which create a jazz-like sound. The *Sonatine* was written for a competition printed in a French magazine called *La Revue Critique Hebdomadaire* – the Paris Weekly Critical Review.[52] The posting read: "Musical Competition. Compose the first movement of a piano-forte sonate in F sharp minor, not to exceed 75 bars in length." For reasons unknown, the competition was cancelled.[53] The first movement was evidently composed between March and May of 1903.[54] It is unknown when exactly the other two movements were written. The full sonatina was published by Durand in 1905.[55]

[52]Maurice Ravel, *Sonatine* (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 2011), v-vi.
[53]Ravel, *Sonatine* (Henle), v-vi.
[54]Ravel, *Sonatine* (Henle), v-vi.
[55]Ravel, *Sonatine* (Henle), v-vi.

I. *Modéré*

The first movement of the work is perhaps the most well-known. The opening theme (shown in Example 5) is based on a falling fourth motive that is heard throughout all the movements.[56] This theme features tremolo-like inner harmonies which require the delicate, light touch so important in French music. There are several tempo changes when a new motive begins. This opening movement is in sonata form, with an exciting development section that grows in intensity to an *Animé* section.

EXAMPLE 5: Ravel - *Sonatine*, I, mm. 1-2



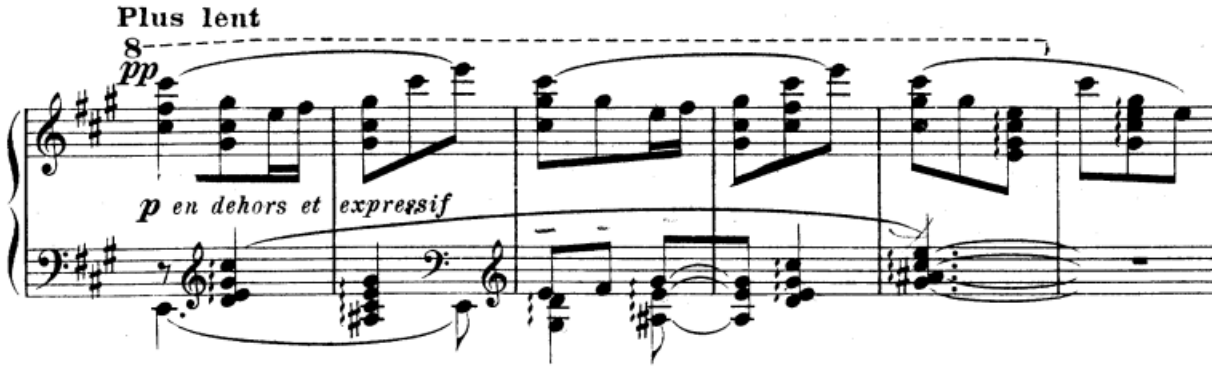
II. *Mouvement de Menuet*

This movement is a minuet in triple meter. The opening theme is reminiscent of a stately dance at an elegant ball. Even though there are tempo changes, the steady, triple-meter pulse should continue throughout so that the dance is heard clearly. Ravel said this movement should be played in the tempo of Beethoven's Op. 31, No. 3.[57]

[56]Maurice Ravel, *Sonatine pour piano* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1905), 2.
[57]Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Ravel*, trans. Olive Senior-Ellis (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1973), 84.

In the *plus lent* section after the climax (shown in Example 6), the left hand plays an echo of the opening theme from the first movement.[58] The left hand should be more present than the right hand here, specifically bringing out the thumb line. This is an example of rhythmic augmentation, as the notes are much slower both in tempo and notation compared to the original theme of the first movement.

EXAMPLE 6: Ravel - *Sonatine*, II, mm. 39-44



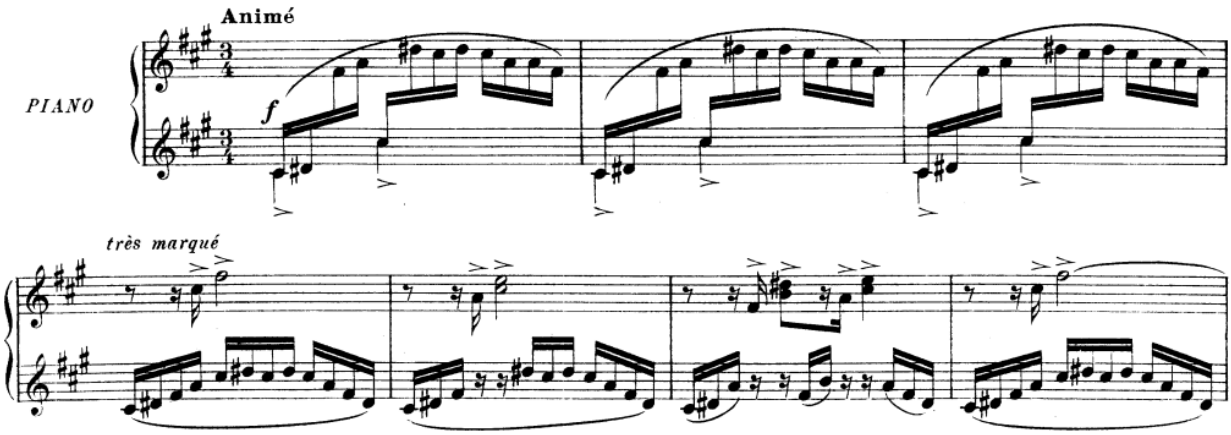
III. *Animé*

The third movement is much faster and more technically difficult than the first two and has often been compared to a toccata. The title *Animé* literally translates to "animated." A rising fourth melody is introduced – a sort of reversal of the opening motif of the first movement. There is consistent movement in this piece; it is very exciting and seems to never rest. There are moments in which the tempo slows and drops to a softer dynamic, but the forward motion continues throughout. According to Henle, Ravel never performed the third movement himself because it was technically too challenging for him.[59]

[58]Ravel, *Sonatine pour piano* (Durand & Fils), 7.
[59]Ravel, *Sonatine* (Henle), v-vi.

This opening motif that begins with the rising fourth (shown in Example 7) requires a technique of using the wrist with two separate downward motions for each accented note.[60] Ravel indicates "*très marqué*" which translates to "very marked," or marcato. The arm assists with one fluid movement while the wrist executes the individual movements for each note. This goes back to the idea of using the whole arm to help the rest of the playing apparatus, which both Seymour Bernstein and György Sándor discuss in their works.

EXAMPLE 7: Ravel - *Sonatine*, III, mm. 1-7



[60]Ravel, *Sonatine pour piano* (Durand & Fils), 8.

Robert Schumann - *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16

The final piece that I will discuss is Robert Schumann's (1810-1856) *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16. *Kreisleriana* is an eight-movement set of character pieces composed in 1838.[61] Schumann dedicated the work to Frederic Chopin, though Chopin never really acknowledged its significance.[62] The work was composed within the same few weeks as his *Novelletten* (Op. 21) and *Kinderszenen* (Op. 15).[63] These are all deeply poetic pieces written at a time when the love between him and Clara Wieck (eventually Clara Schumann) was just beginning to blossom. Much of Schumann's inspiration for his compositions came from his love for Clara. He was also obsessed with musical codes and ciphers, which often contained Clara's name. Robert wrote to Clara about the piece: "There's a very wild love in some movements, and your life and mine and many of your glances."[64] The title *Kreisleriana* also refers to a popular literary work of the time: E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Kreisleriana*, part of a collection of writings titled *Fantasiestücke*, is a tale of the eccentric Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler, who is obsessed with Bach and is attracted to his employer's niece.[65] He also feels like an outcast among the musical society within which he operates.[66] Robert Schumann probably sympathized with this character because he loved the music of Bach and fell in love with – and eventually married – his teacher's daughter. He wrote that the "eight Kreisler pieces" are a portrait of the "eccentric, wild, witty" Kapellmeister.[67] This description accurately depicts the contrast between the movements. *Kreisleriana* was not as well-

[61]Robert Schumann, Kreisleriana (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1975), 1.
[62]Judith Chernaik, *Schumann: The Faces and the Masks* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), 95.
[63]Chernaik, *Schumann: The Faces and the Masks*, 91.
[64]Chernaik, 93.
[65]Chernaik, 93-94.
[66]Chernaik, 93-94.
[67]Chernaik, 94.

received as his other popular pieces of the time such as *Carnaval* (Op. 9) or *Kinderszenen* (Op. 15).[68]

Another important concept to discuss when talking about Schumann's works are the personas of Florestan and Eusebius. These are Schumann's alter-egos, facets of his personality whom he considered to be real people or characters about whom he wrote in his music journal, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. These personas are heard in his music as different styles: Florestan is described as the more playful, arrogant, outgoing personality, while Eusebius is introspective, meditative, and introverted. Both characters are heard in many of Schumann's compositions. The movements in *Kreisleriana* are not overtly linked with Florestan or Eusebius, but the characters can be associated with certain movements and sections of movements.

A final feature of Schumann's music is the poetic and characteristic quality. Robert Schumann is well known for his character pieces, including *Carnaval* (Op. 9), his most well-known set of character pieces, and *Papillons* (Op. 2), the first set Schumann wrote in 1829. In the *Kreisleriana* set, there is thematic unity throughout the movements, all of which are set in closely related keys: D minor, B flat Major, G minor and C minor.[69]

I. *Äußerst bewegt*

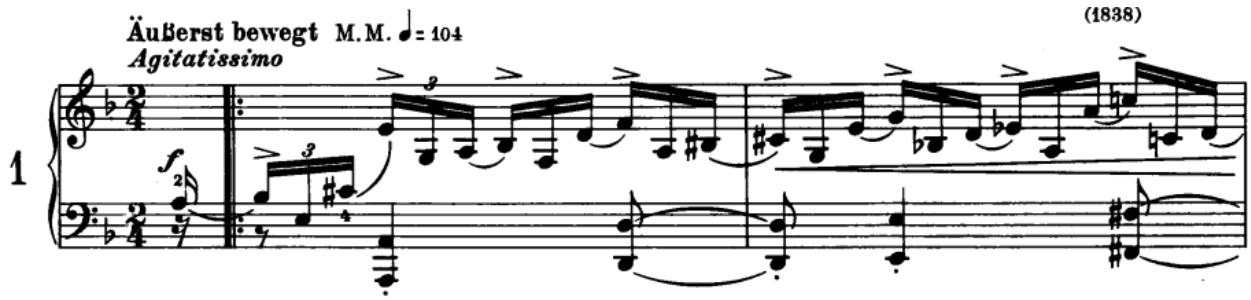
The opening movement, marked "*Äußerst bewegt*" translates to "extremely moving." *Agitatissimo* is marked, meaning that it should be played in an agitated manner. This movement is full of constant, roiling notes with an out-of-control feeling. The consistency of the movement

[68]Chernaik, 134.
[69]Robert Schumann, *Kreisleriana* (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1975), 42.

could be compared to a toccata. It depicts a sort of madness. The middle section is oddly calm, homophonic, but with the same amount of activity as the rest of the piece.

The technical difficulties of this movement are primarily in keeping a relaxed wrist and forearm while executing these extremely fast notes (see Example 8).[70] It's easy to tense up when playing extremely fast passages. This is our body's way of trying to control as much as possible, but the effect is the exact opposite – when our muscles tense up, we have less mobility and dexterity, and often the quality of sound suffers. It's helpful to have the wrist moving with a certain grouping of notes. Finding what works best is the first step. I've found that if the wrist makes small circular motions it tends to stay free and relaxed. This goes back to the technical ideas discussed in Sándor and Bernstein's books of having freedom of movement by using the whole arm with a relaxed, free wrist.

EXAMPLE 8: Schumann - *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16, I, mm. 1-2



II. *Sehr innig und nicht zu rasch*

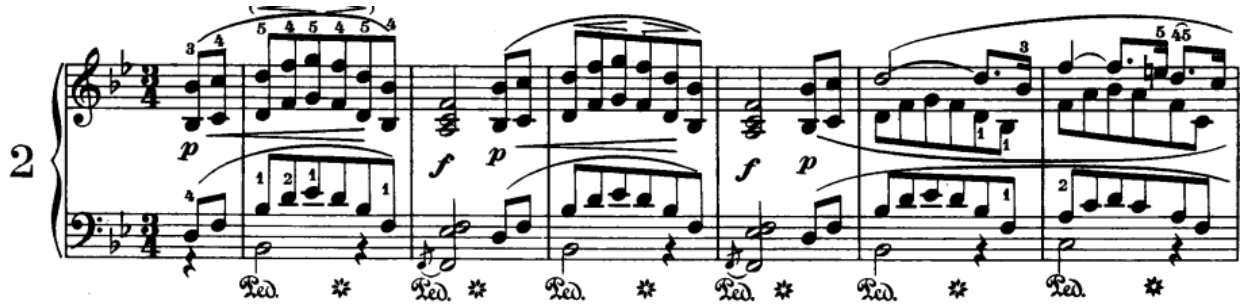
The second movement was the first movement that Schumann wrote of the set.[71] *Sehr innig und nicht zu rasch* translates to "very intimately and not too quickly." The movement features a broad, lyrical, romantic melody with several moving lines in some sections. These sections are separated by two intermezzi: the first an animated fugue, the second fantasy-like

[70]Schumann, *Kreisleriana* (Breitkopf & Härtel), 2.
[71]Chernaik, *Schumann: The Faces and the Masks*, 95.

with stormy free imitation in the outer voices. At the end, before the last iteration of the broad lyrical theme there is a *Langsamer* section that has double counterpoint and rich harmonic language. This shows the deep poeticism of Schumann's music, which was not always understood or appreciated during his lifetime.

This movement requires a free, relaxed wrist for legato octaves. There are many large jumps in the left hand that need to be executed very quickly as grace notes, necessitating motion with enough speed to arrive at the second note without tensing up on arrival. It also requires opening and closing the hand. Many of the intervals – octaves and larger – will stretch the hand, and it is important that the hand returns to a relaxed, natural position as soon as possible. This relates to the concept in the Alexander Technique of returning to a balanced resting state. Example 9 shows the broad lyrical theme at the opening of the movement.[72]

EXAMPLE 9: Schumann - *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16, II, mm. 1-6



III. *Sehr aufgeregt*

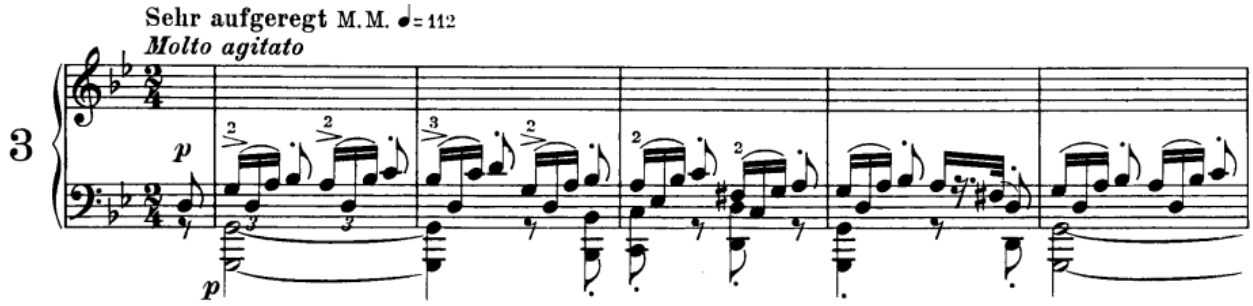
The third movement is in ABA form. *Sehr aufgeregt* translates to "very excited." The two outer sections are agitated like the first movement, and the middle section is highly romantic with a beautiful singing line. With the rising and falling lines interwoven into the romantic

[72]Schumann, *Kreisleriana* (Breitkopf & Härtel), 6.

melody, this is a moment of Robert Schumann's music in which one can tangibly feel the emotions that went into this music and his love for Clara.

The quickly-moving triplet sixteenth note figure that is repeated throughout the agitated sections of this movement (shown in Example 10) requires a free wrist and hand and fast fingers.[73]

EXAMPLE 10: Schumann - *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16, III, mm. 1-5



It took me some time to technically discover how this works. Each individual note of the figure should be heard clearly. I started by practicing the figure slowly, with all the notes staccato, being highly articulate with the fingers. This triplet figure also requires the wrist to move freely within each repetition. I found that slight upward motion at the end of each group of notes ensures that the wrist, arm, and hand stay free and light. This goes along with Sándor's technical approach for **five-finger patterns, scales, and arpeggios**, adjusting the alignment of the wrist and forearm for each finger.[74]

IV. *Sehr langsam*

The fourth movement is a moment of rest and introspection. It is marked *Sehr langsam* – "very slow." The first section is recitative-like, with a quietly expressive ornamented line. The

[73]Schumann, *Kreisleriana* (Breitkopf & Härtel), 13.
[74]Sándor, 52.

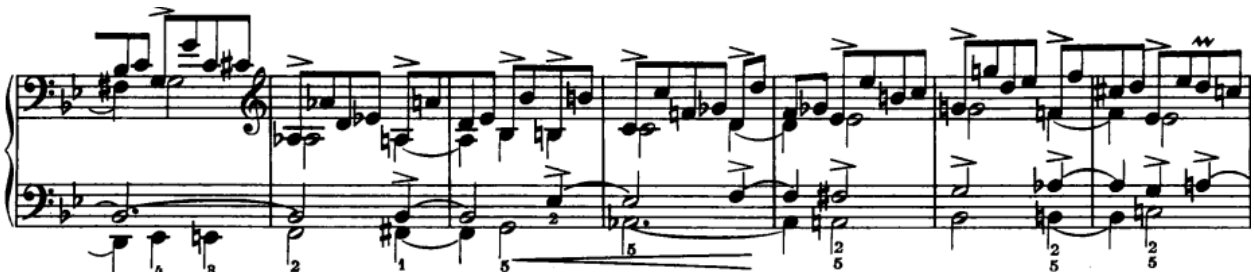
second features a calm melody and flowing accompaniment before returning to the opening motive.

V. *Sehr lebhaft*

The fifth movement is marked *Sehr lebhaft* – "very lively." It is a scherzo with a skipping, dotted rhythm permeating as the unifying motif. There's something sneaky and mischievous about it. The fantasy-like middle section builds to a climax before returning to the original theme and ending as if a creature just scampered off into the darkness.

In the middle section, I had difficulties with tension in the chromatic passage (shown in Example 11).[75] I was trying to hold the double-stemmed thumb line in the right hand, and it was resulting in painful tension and less mobility for the other notes.

EXAMPLE 11: Schumann - *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16, V, mm. 89-95



In a masterclass with Spencer Myer, he told me that I don't need to hold those melody notes – the pedal will do that for me.[76] This a concept applicable in many situations where we can "cheat" with the pedal, and don't have to physically hold the note for its full duration.

[75]Schumann, *Kreisleriana* (Breitkopf & Härtel), 22.
[76]Spencer Myer, Masterclass at Western Washington University, January 28, 2023.

VI. *Sehr langsam*

Movement six is another return to rest, keeping the theme of alternating between a fast and a slow movement. It is marked as slow but is not quite as slow as the fourth. The main theme is reminiscent of the well-known Christmas tune "Silent Night." Schumann's ability to write such heartfelt, singing lines is evident in this Eusebian movement.

The technical difficulties of this movement have to do with sound and spaciousness. A warm, rich sound is needed for this movement to blossom. A slower key descent paired with a free, relaxed wrist and playing with the whole arm is what does the trick for me. Taking extra time at certain moments to let the sound linger before moving on creates an anticipation for what comes next, which is essential in playing slow music.

VII. *Sehr rasch*

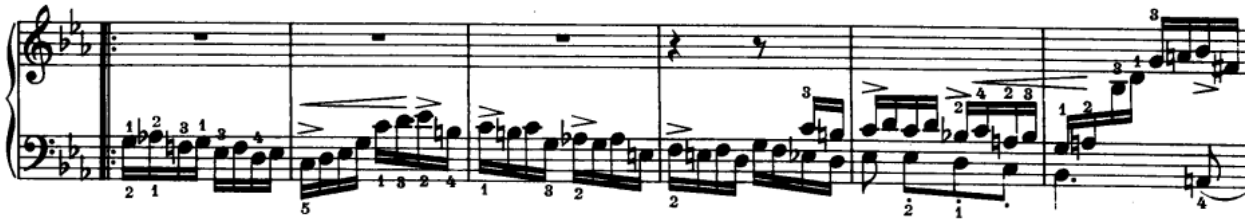
The seventh movement brings back the madness of the opening, with fast, driving agitation followed by an energetic fugue. This is an example of Schumann's love for the music of Bach. *Sehr rasch* translates to "very quickly." A suddenly slow, lyrical section at the end shows the polarity and range of emotion of which Schumann was capable: one moment of absolute madness is followed by an immediate change to calm. It is a difficult moment to execute. In general, the emotional extremes of this set of pieces are a challenge for the performer and require a substantial emotional investment. Bernstein discusses emotional investment in his work, as well as concentration, which is one of the challenges of performing this piece. The performer must be able to switch from insanity to calm within a split-second.

Technically, this movement is one of the most difficult of the set. The biggest problem here is similar to the first movement: many fast notes happening at once and the wrist and arm

needing to stay free. The key is freedom of movement. Keeping the wrist locked in place will only make things more difficult. Freedom comes from continuous movement. Having the wrist consistently making some movement, even if it is small, will help to mitigate any tension.

Again, the concept of grouping long strings of fast notes comes into play with the fugue section (shown in Example 12).[77]

EXAMPLE 12: Schumann - *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16, VII, mm. 41-46



I was holding a great deal of tension when I was first learning this section, and grouping notes with a wrist breath allowed me to play more relaxed and with a better sound. This will also allow for the speed essential to this movement. Additionally, in learning this movement, I was using very high fingers to play this passage. As mentioned in Chapter 1, playing with high fingers can cause tension and possibly injury. It also is less efficient than staying close to the keys.

VIII. *Schnell und spielend*

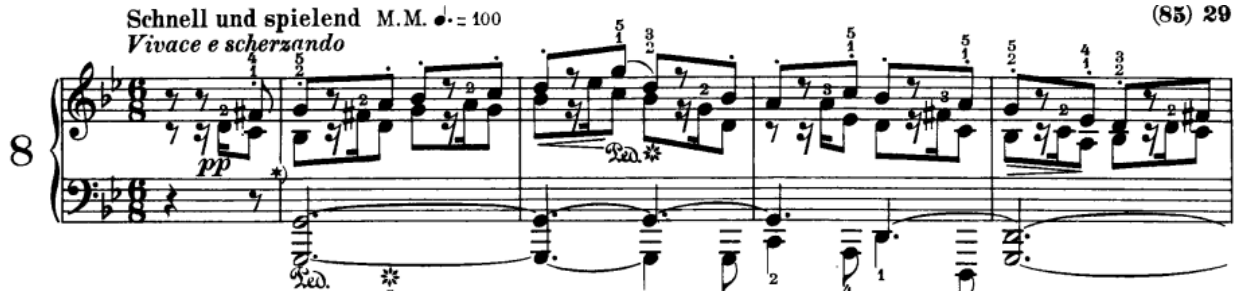
The final movement of the set is interesting because it's not a grand finale by any means. It is similar to the fifth movement in that there is a consistent, syncopated rhythm throughout. This obsessive feature of Schumann's music also tells us a lot about his personality. *Schnell und spielend* translates to "fast and playful." The movement is divided by two contrasting sections, similar to the intermezzi in no. 2. The first has conflicting rhythms, the left hand is playing in 2/4 while the right hand is in 6/8; the second features expressive power with more continuous

[77]Schumann, *Kreisleriana* (Breitkopf & Härtel), 27.

rhythmic repetition in the form of dotted rhythms. There is a playful quality to this movement, which could be associated with the Florestan persona.

Technically, the eighth movement is tricky to learn because of the skipping, syncopated line of double notes (see Example 13).[78] For me, when I used a slight upward movement for each group of notes, I was able to relieve the tension and became much more relaxed. This relates to Sándor's approach for **staccato**: activating the whole arm for each group of notes; as well as his concept of **thrust** – there should only be tension for the split-second when the notes are played. It is impossible to play this movement fast enough with too much tension. Tension needs to be released as much as possible, in between each group of notes.

EXAMPLE 13: Schumann - *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16, VIII, mm. 1-4



[78]Schumann, *Kreisleriana* (Breitkopf & Härtel), 29.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the technical and postural methodologies I have surveyed can be applied to many situations in piano playing. As demonstrated, the Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais – Awareness Through Movement are more general body awareness methods, which improve one's posture at the piano. This foundation is crucial in piano playing; it can affect our sound and mobility. Cultivating awareness around the sensations in the body is also important; knowing what feels good and what does not. The more specific examples from Sándor's and Bernstein's books can be applied to a countless number of musical situations. In my experience, I never had a piano teacher that focused on technique until recent years. Once I began studying technique, it was as if the possibilities of what I could do on the piano became endless. Before I studied technique, playing piano often felt like a struggle; I was physically battling with my uncoordinated technique. I often wonder what would have happened if I'd discovered this ease of playing earlier in my career. If these ideas and methods can be implemented early on in piano study, there will be more success and ease in a student's playing. Overall, a well-coordinated, aware body can learn to do anything, including learning to play piano. Both performer and teacher should have access to various methods that will help them and their students to develop a holistic awareness of the body that can lead them to making beautiful music without tension or strain.

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Appendix

Additional Resources

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