

THE VIRTUOSO PIANO TRANSCRIPTION

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History of the transcription phenomenon

The Romantic Virtuoso Piano Transcription that became so popular in the second half of the 19th century through Liszt and others, has its roots in several hundreds of years of musical history.

From the Middle Ages to Bach

The art of transcription is a very old and time-honoured craft stemming from the Middle Ages. Vocal compositions were used as the basis for organ and lute 'tabulaturas'. In the Baroque period this practice continued and became even more widespread. Contrary to popular belief it is not that Romantic Franz Liszt, but his great predecessor Johann Sebastian Bach who is the greatest transcriber in all of musical history. Over half of his works is based on already existing music, either by himself or by other composers.

His motives for using existing materials were varied:

In some cases Bach wanted to learn a new style or branch of composition that he was not yet familiar with. He transcribed for instance a whole bunch of concertos by Italian composers like Vivaldi, Marcello and others before starting to compose himself in the Italian style (Italian Concerto).

Another reason could be that he wanted to pay a compliment to another composer by using his music.

The composer in question would definitely feel honoured by this gesture and, more often than not, return the compliment.

He also did it simply out of a practical necessity: because of time limitations he would use another composition, either by himself or by somebody else, as basis for a new one. And last but not least there is the category of the many works based on religious materials for use in church.

Because of his undisputed genius everything Bach touched became of a very high quality. His music is universal, embracing many styles and uniting in it a great variety of developments. Yet most of the time he would refuse to claim ownership of his music and not sign with his name. Instead he would write 'Soli Deo Gloria' on a musical score.

Looking at Bach's keyboard music we see that his scores carry no information on tempi, dynamics and phrasing. A knowledgeable performer was supposed to make these choices and add embellishments and arpeggios, all in 'good taste'.

18th & 19th century

Starting with Bach's sons, Carl Philip Emanuel especially, and culminating in Beethoven in late 18th century, composers started to write in a more personal style. To achieve this, notation became much more fastidious and since a composer would express his own feelings in his music he would claim more often ownership of his compositions. By the time Liszt appeared on the scene there were many composers like Mendelssohn and Chopin who absolutely disapproved of the great liberties that some performers would take with their music and consequently disapproved of the transcription phenomenon in general. When asked once his opinion about the composer Liszt, Chopin, who admired him tremendously as a pianist, compared him to a bookbinder: 'He is an excellent binder who puts other people's work between his own covers... He is a clever craftsman without a vestige of talent.'

20th century

Finally in the early years of the 20th century as a result of this development the copyright laws came to protect a composer's original text. In the fifties and sixties modern scholarship started to come up with new editions of music based on the earliest and most reliable sources available. From then on every responsible musician was supposed to play from these so-called Urtext editions. And as the result of the advent of the music recording industry with its LPs, CDs and MP3s, a total standardization has been taking place. The composer's written text is sacred and the performer has to suppress his own personality and has become afraid to take any liberties at all. Thus the letter is obeyed and (quite often) the spirit lost.

Music needs personal interpretation

As a performer, I study my part from an Urtext if possible. I like to consult a manuscript or an early edition. I read about the composer's life and hope to find letters or other written material. Some composers have even made recordings! But when I start to play, it is my breathing that will give life to Chopin's or Liszt's music, my heartbeat that gives rhythm, my brains that govern its architecture. I make the choices, decide what is important and what less so. And tomorrow will be different, because the piano that I will be playing on will be different, as is the hall, the audience and my own biorhythm. You should sound different, though you still try to serve the composer as best as you can and your mind is checking manuscripts and Urtexts!

During my recitals I sometimes feel like a guide in a wonderful museum, pointing out the many beautiful things to the visitors. Here I tell a story, there I highlight some technical aspects and later on there may

be a biographical aspect that is important. But I have to make my choices; there's no way I could tell it all! When playing music, one makes choices all the time. That's what we call interpretation.

From interpretation to transcription

The next step after interpretation is in my opinion the transcription. Interpretation and transcription are very closely related. Only the emphasis is reversed; in interpretation you try to find out what Beethoven or Schubert could have meant in writing this piece. In making a transcription of the same piece, it is about your own reaction to the piece: your feelings towards it, your phantasy that's stimulated by it and, very important, the wish to make it available for your instrument. The famous pianist-composer Godowsky called a transcription a musical essay on a musical subject. The transcription doesn't take anything away from the original; it doesn't want to improve it. It is a comment on the original and this original stays intact and available to us. As a matter of fact a lot of the transcriptions that Liszt made had exactly this purpose: to make great compositions available to the general public in the format of a piano transcription when orchestral performances of say Beethoven Symphonies or Wagner Opera's were scant.

Golden Age of the Romantic Piano Transcription

In earlier days great composers were performers and great performers composed.

Liszt, Busoni and Godowsky were very active composers (and transcribers) and they belonged at the same time to the great performers category. They wrote for their own concert programmes, just as Mozart and Beethoven had done previously.

The fact that the piano transcription became so popular around 1830 had a lot to do with the recent developments of the instrument. The piano had become a complete and powerful instrument that was more varied than any other instrument. Under the hands of a magician like Liszt it could even surpass a whole orchestra! In December 1836 Berlioz had conducted a concert of his own 'Symphonie Fantastique' with full orchestra. Afterwards, Liszt sat down at the piano and repeated the 'Marche au Supplice' with an even greater effect than the whole orchestra had achieved before.

The transcriptions that Liszt made should become generally recognized as a very important body of works. Even a rather severe critic like Johannes Brahms praised the operatic transcriptions highly. After Liszt's death his many students and followers brought the transcription in the 20th century: Busoni, Godowsky, Rachmaninow, Siloti, Kempf and Wild wrote masterpieces.

A poor 20th century

Unfortunately in the course of the 20th century the transcriptions largely disappeared from the concert programmes. Though audiences loved them, critics and snobbish music-lovers decided it was 'not done' anymore. Busoni (who advocated and continued the operatic fantasy) believed that this critical reaction was also occasioned by mal-performances of Liszt by superficial virtuosi who emphasised brilliant passage-work at the expense of melody: thus rendering the music out of aural focus; falsely making the background assume the foreground. Busoni himself emblazoned melody in full-throated Italianate cantabile and played fioriture with gossamer leggierissimo. His employment of a 'chamber style' of pianism in his Carmen Fantasy represented an attempt to make converts to the genre by refining its grandiosities into microscopic finesse. (Stevenson)

Great masters such as Horowitz, Cherkassky, Bolet and Wild passionately continued to defend these works but without effect. It is now an almost dying art, performed by very few. Earl Wild and Jorge Bolet urged me to continue to play the great transcriptions and gave me some of their scores. As some of them are fiendishly difficult it is also a marvellous test of a pianist's abilities. In Earl Wild's words: 'It separates the men from the boys.'

Judging transcriptions?

For more than 25 years I have been involved intensely with these transcriptions. I have played them many times at concerts and over the past years often successfully played my series of three recitals 'Romantic Transcriptions' (dedicated to Liszt, Busoni and Godowsky). Nevertheless there is a widespread prejudice against transcriptions in general. It is still considered to be pinched work, stemming from a lack of ideas, and the result is criticised as second hand and second rate music. How unjust and untrue! Of course there are good and bad transcriptions, just as there are good and bad symphonies or sonatas. But the fact alone that a piece of music is a transcription should never be a reason to disapprove of it. And as history has shown, it is sometimes very difficult to establish whether a piece is a transcription or not. To Busoni this is not relevant at all; as all music exists already in the cosmos, a composer when writing down a composition, is basically making the first transcription. The second transcription is, compared to this first one, a relatively minor insignificant step.

In judging music it is universally accepted that the ear should be our ultimate guide. But, as a matter of fact, the ear alone cannot tell you that you're dealing with a transcription. You need to have prior knowledge. Many years ago I happened to turn my radio on when a wonderful piano piece was being performed. I was glued to my seat and wouldn't move. It was one of the greatest piano pieces I had ever

heard. When the piece was over, the announcer told the listeners they had been listening to the Bach 'Chaconne' in Busoni's transcription. As I didn't know the Bach solo violin Chaconne at the time, there was no way I could have perceived that I had been listening to a transcription. I listened to a great piece that happened to be a transcription! In the years after this 'first time' I've been listening to many other Chaconne-transcriptions. The more of them I have known, the more I can see the beauty of Bach's masterpiece.

Good or bad music

Dealing with transcriptions is for me about 'how' and 'why'. 'How is it done?', 'Is it done with skill, with fantasy, with understanding of the composers intentions?', 'And why is it done?', 'What are the motives behind it?', 'Are there solely artistic motives or are there commercial motives as well?'

Basically it boils down to the question: IS THE RESULT GOOD MUSIC?

Let me assure you that this question very often can be answered with YES! We have a very rich heritage of over 150 years of Romantic Transcriptions.

An important accomplishment today is that we have very good editions available which convey to us the information as accurately as possible that a composer wrote down. Having this Urtext around, it is then a great joy to browse through a Schnabel or Arrau edition of the Beethoven Piano Sonatas. For your Chopin Etudes you now have your Henle Urtext, then you check with the old Paderewski and Mikuli editions and finally you have a lot of fun with Godowsky's 53 transcriptions of the Chopin set!

Book, CDs and recitals

As you may understand by now, musicological information is for me relevant when you can hear with your own ears what it actually means. That's why my book to be published will contain corresponding CDs. I hope to have this project finished and published in 2008. In the meantime I will continue playing many transcriptions during my recitals.