

Why Couldn't They Play With Their Hands Together?

Noncoordination Between and Within the Hands in 19th Century Piano Interpretation

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Introduction

In common with some other pupils of Leschetizky, Paderewski has been frowned upon for playing the left hand first in simultaneous chords, and in basses accompanying the melody. This is certainly a habit that can easily become a vice, and in its extreme is one to be abhorred. Yet this form of arpeggiation is indispensable. When subtly applied it creates a body of full and supporting tone, and it will also sustain an otherwise empty melodic note in a manner extremely effective and grateful to the ear. Many pianists, in their anxiety to avoid its excessive use, carry to equal extreme the "square stroke," playing unarpeggiated, and exactly together. Certainly nothing can be more unmusical or tiresome to the ear.¹

The romantic pianism of a century ago differed from today's more sober approach in nearly every respect - including attitude towards the text, tempo flexibility, agogic modifications, and even voicing. But no aspect jumps out at a listener more than the noncoordination of the hands: The older pianists don't keep their hands consistently together.

This noncoordination was an almost universal feature of earlier pianism. A study of recordings and piano rolls by 118 pianists born between 1824 and 1880 shows that all but one engaged in the practice to some degree.²

The purpose of noncoordination was to characterize the music, generally by heightening the expression and clarifying the rhythmic structure. There were - the past tense is appropriate, since the practice has all but vanished - surprisingly few techniques. Melodic notes were delayed or, rarely, anticipated; bass notes anticipated the beat; accompaniment chords were broken or arpeggiated. But given both the immense variety of musical contexts in which these devices occurred, and the wide degrees of shading in their use, they open a door to the amazingly rich world of romantic piano interpretation. Noncoordination is behind much of the spontaneity that makes it the best recordings by Friedman, Cortot, or de Pachmann surprising yet satisfying even when heard again and again.

Unfortunately, many modern listeners find this romantic practice not an aid but a barrier to comprehension. Noncoordination is a product of a very different world, one in which buildings were ornately decorated and every inch of a fine room contained something to stimulate the eye. Today's buildings have clean lines, and we keep our things in storage. The situation is no different in performance practice. Even Robert Philip, although speaking in favor of the authenticity of performance practice as encapsulated in early recordings, uses such terms as "clumsy and disorderly," "eccentric," "uncontrolled," "unclear," and "chaotic" to describe these sumptuously rich romantic performances.³

Today, the vacuum born of this lack of understanding is filled with nonsense. Older pianists had faulty technique, or perhaps were unaware their hands weren't together.⁴ More often the practice is written off as a mannerism, deserving of no further comment.

Fortunately, the recorded legacy is vast, though decidedly spotty with regard to pianists born before 1860. It shows distinct consistencies underlying the practice, both in the types of noncoordination, noted above, and the musical contexts in which they occur: more in slow pieces than in fast ones (which alone should put to rest any notion that it's a technical problem); more on strong beats than on weak ones; more on dissonances than on consonances; more with wide melodic skips than with narrow ones. If noncoordination of the hands was a mannerism, it was one in the highest sense of the term, as an integral part of romantic performance style.

Why They Did It

An analytical challenge posed by noncoordination of the hands is that there were five general reasons pianists had for adopting the practice, and a single instance might combine several of them. For instance, Malwine Brée, one of Theodore Leschetizky's assistants, recognized several functions in a seemingly self-contradictory passage:

Neither should bass tone and melody-note always be taken precisely together, but the melody note may be struck an instant after the bass, which gives it more relief and a softer effect.⁵

"More relief" suggests a musical accent; "a softer effect" could refer to either or both of two things: the acoustic phenomenon in which higher notes appear in the overtone sequence of lower ones, or the idea of rhythmic pulse.

1. *Acoustics*

Since the piano's bass notes contain overtones out of which many of the upper notes grow, a pianist can prepare the melodic note by anticipating it in the bass. This softens the melodic attack, giving the note a less percussive, more singing quality. (One instance is at the beginning of Chopin's Nocturne Op. 9 #2, in which the melodic G is a prominent overtone of the bass E-flat on many pianos.)

Because of this inherent distinction between lower notes and higher ones - there are overtones but not undertones - chords are nearly always rolled from bottom to top

(the rare exceptions are always notated for a specific effect). This is also why, in a piece such as Chopin's Etude, Op. 25 #7, romantic pianists played the melodic bass line ahead of the beat even though the melodic right hand, was played behind the beat .

This acoustic effect was heightened as piano design changed over the course of the 19th century; the whole instrument became brighter and louder, but especially the bass.

A second acoustic effect involved lessening the piano's inherent percussiveness. Swiftly rolling a chord, even a quiet chord, would make the attack less obtrusive by spreading it out over several milliseconds.

2. Beat versus Pulse

One effect of any type of noncoordination is to expand the beat, giving it a sense of duration; that is, the romantics favored a pulse-like area over a point-like beat. The sense of beat as pulse was first described by Carl Maria von Weber in 1824: "The beat should not be a tyrannical restriction or the driving of a mill hammer. On the contrary, it should be to music what the pulse-beat is to the life of man."⁶ Weber was especially talking about tempo flexibility, but his words are also appropriate to the nature of the romantic pulse itself, which, like the human pulse, wasn't a dot, but had a beginning, a peak, and an end.

3. Noncoordination as Accent

When used melodically, a noncoordination was usually an accent. Earlier pianists were especially fond of marking downbeats by delaying the melody slightly. This clarified the rhythmic structure without resorting to a crude dynamic accent. Especially expressive moments, such as melodic leaps or dissonances, were also often delayed.

Even on weak beats, romantic pianists often used a melodic delay as a substitute for - or an intensifier of - a dynamic accent. This gave romantic performances extremely flexible emotional character, with subtle distinctions between different kinds of accents.

4. Noncoordination as Separator in Contrapuntal Music

Brée also wrote that "an arpeggio may also be employed where the polyphony is to be brought out more distinctly; but only at important points, for instance where one part ends and the other begins at the same time."⁷ We hear this distinctly in some earlier performances, such as Carl Reinecke's piano roll of Schumann's "Warum?," where it's by no means confined to "important points." This use had greatly decreased by the beginning of the 20th century - Howard-Jones' Bach was chaste for a pianist of his era, but not remarkably chaste - but it can still be heard now and then in later pianists. Prokofiev, for instance, breaks his hands in order to separate contrapuntal voices in his recording of the slow movement of his Fourth Piano Sonata.

5. Noncoordination as "Orchestral" Sound

Finally, romantic pianists occasionally rolled chords in pursuit of an "orchestral"

sound, a situation in which Philip's adjective "untidy" is not entirely out of place. The intention was to sound like a multiplicity of instruments, and we should keep in mind that standards or orchestral precision were much less stringent then than now. In Mahler's *Welte* roll of the first movement of his 5th Symphony, for instance, Mahler rolls the final octave at the end, to simulate the multiple attacks of a group of pizzicato strings. Arthur Friedheim, in an unpublished edition of Liszt's B-Minor Sonata, suggests that to "attain the intended effect of the string instruments playing pizzicato, it is advisable to play these g's in the 1st, 4th, and 7th measures slightly arpeggiato, without an accent on the upper note."⁸

In louder passages, the effect could be sweeping. As Alfred Cortot noted:

At p. 32 [of the Liszt E-flat Concerto] the octaves of both hands may be executed with one hand slightly ahead of the other. That increases the tone tenfold.⁹

What They Did

1. *Noncoordination as a Form of Tempo Rubato*

In a slow melody written in long notes, it is effective, especially on the first beat of every measure or at the beginning of each phrase, to attack the melody after the bass, but only with an almost imperceptible delay.¹⁰

Tempo rubato - the ancient art of giving rhetorical emphasis to a melodic line through subtle agogic modifications - is too complex a subject to deal with in detail here. (Richard Hudson's "Stolen Time" contains a wealth of information on this topic.) The term itself was undergoing evolution at the end of the 19th century, from its earlier meaning as a local noncoordination of the hands to a change in tempo. Hudson notes that, by the end of the century, few pianists or composers seemed aware that rubato meant anything except a tempo modification. Nevertheless, though pianists no longer associated noncoordination of the hands with rubato, much of what they did had its roots in Classical rubato.

In practice, this meant a melody that lagged behind the beat (or, more rarely, preceded it, usually as a way of deemphasizing an arrival). The grammar was fairly formalized, as the study below of Chopin's Nocturnes, Op. 27 #2 and Op. 9 #2 will show; but it also allowed for wide divergence of opinion, as the study of Op. 15 #2 and Op. 48 #1 will show.

Rubato was not necessarily an accent, though. When the right hand continues to lag behind the left for several bars, it gives the impression of floating lazily along, especially in the absence of dynamic accents. This is the case in both Leschetizky's piano roll of Chopin's Nocturne, Op. 27 #2, and Saint-Saens' two recordings (piano roll and disk) of his "Reverie a Blidah."

This form of noncoordination may be very old, since it disappears early in the history of recording - Leschetizky and Saint-Saens, two of the earliest pianists to record, used it, and virtually nobody after them does. It appears that it was easily abused. In addition to the passage quoted above, Thalberg wrote:

Always avoid in playing that ridiculous and tasteless mannerism in which the melody-notes are struck at an exaggerated interval of time after their accompaniment, so that from beginning to end of the piece the impression of a continuous succession of syncopations is produced.¹¹

2. Rolling Accompaniment Chords

Carl Flesch wrote about the piano playing of Julius Röntgen, a Reinecke student who he met around 1903:

[W]hat I found particularly irritating was his “Leipzig” manner, i.e. his *arpeggio* execution of chords and the delaying of thematic notes in the right hand.¹²

Two pieces of evidence suggest that the practice of arpeggiating accompaniment chords may date back, if not all the way to the Baroque *stile brise*, at least to pre-romantic style.

First, as Flesch notes, it’s especially associated with the ultra-conservative Leipzig school, which kept alive some traits of pre-Lisztian piano playing. All the recorded students of the immortal Leipziger Clara Schumann used it liberally, and recordings of the Leipzig-trained Wilhelm Backhaus show the tradition alive even into the late 1960s.

Second, the recorded evidence suggests the practice was on the continual decline through the latter half of the 19th century: Four of the five recorded pianists born before 1840 appear to have arpeggiated accompaniments more-or-less-regularly, those born between 1840 and 1850 less often, and so on. The decline wasn’t uniform; the practice of arpeggiating accompaniment chords survived longer with eastern European and Russian pianists than with western European pianists.

This practice seems to have been so widespread that, for instance, in the case of Schumann’s music, notation can be regarded as prescriptive, not proscriptive. That is, when a composer marks for a chord to be rolled, the performer must do so, but when a composer marks nothing, it’s up to the performer’s discretion whether to roll a chord.

The arpeggiating of accompaniments points up the difficulty of analyzing romantic noncoordination. The practice itself is simple, but any number of reasons may underlie its use in a particular instance. It’s one of the simplest ways of expanding the beat and heightening the sense of pulse. In quiet music, it effectively softens the attack of a chord, producing a harplike effect; it’s especially common in slow music.

In contrast, arpeggiation could also be used to achieve a grand, orchestral effect. Reinecke, in his piano roll of the slow movement from Mozart’s 26th Piano Concerto, arpeggiates the accompaniment broadly in the outer sections to striking effect (though few today would regard it as musically appropriate for this passage); in the more intimate middle section, he more often plays chords together, or at least in a much tighter arpeggiation.

An arpeggiation can also intensify the harmony, by supplying an accent underneath the melody. For instance, Saint-Saens, in his piano roll of Chopin’s Nocturne Op. 15 #2, arpeggiates the accompaniment tritone on the third eighth notes of bars 1, 3, and 5, but plays the resolutions in bars 2 and 4 non-arpeggiando.

Finally, rolled chords can have a rhythmic function, increasing or lessening the forward momentum, as in Rachmaninoff's performance of Chopin's Nocturne, Op. 9 #2, analyzed below.

3. *Breaking of the Hands*

In classical rubato, the accompaniment maintained the pulse (though, in romantic practice, this pulse may have been subject to almost constant modification). This meant that the bass note, by definition, occurred on the beat.

"Breaking the hands," the quasi-rubato that so many romantic pianists decried – and indulged in – slightly changed this procedure. In breaking the hands, the bass, instead of keeping time, anticipated the beat. Thus, to a casual listener it appears virtually identical to rubato – except that rubato places the right hand behind the left, while breaking the hands places the left hand ahead of the right. Few modern listeners will even notice the difference between the two, but at one time musicians were so attuned to these subtleties that a musician such as Saint-Saens could write dismissively of the latter while practicing the former.

We're fortunate Saint-Saens so articulately explained the difference between the two practices: "Those lacking [the ability to perform true rubato] give both themselves and others the illusion of it by playing the melody in time and dislocating the accompaniment so that it falls beside the beat."¹³ That is, he says, breaking the hands is much easier to accomplish, but disfigures the accompaniment.

However, it's past time to question the notion that breaking the hands is automatically a sign of bad taste. A practice adopted by musicians of the stature of Rachmaninoff, Rosenthal, and Friedman requires us to take it seriously.

As Saint-Saens suggests, breaking the hands is a vulgarization of rubato. But that's not all it is. First, breaking the hands is a sound acoustic practice that helps a pianist achieve a singing melodic quality. Second, as Romantic music became more overtly harmonic and less contrapuntal, the argument that breaking the hands does violence to the integrity of the bass loses weight. Third, as an accent, or as a way of imparting a sense of pulse, it's nearly as effective as true rubato.

Finally, the practice is so widespread among pianists born after 1860 that we can only assume that composers expected it to occur. In many cases we don't even have to assume: Recordings made by composers born between 1860 and 1890 demonstrate they nearly all adopted the practice. These include Albeñiz, Bartók, Busoni, Chaminade, Debussy, Falla, Granados, Medtner, Rachmaninoff, Roussel, Scriabin, and Richard Strauss. Their interpretations of their own work must be regarded as, if not ideal, at least valid.

The traditional break places the left hand before the beat; however, it can occur within the right hand as well, as in Josef Hofmann's recordings of the first movement of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata. In both his 1916 acoustic disk and a broadcast recording from 1944, Hofmann plays the hands together on the first beat of bar 16, and intensifies the repeat at bar 18 by breaking the right hand, anticipating the beat with the thumb. (There are no bass notes on these beats.) He also does this when the passage repeats (bars 52 and 54). This use of the break as an intensifying accent is especially striking because Hofmann almost never broke his hands.

The Historical Context

A crucial question in the study of noncoordination is to what extent it reflects the practice of the 1830s and 1840s - that is, the time during which so much of the romantic piano literature was composed. There is no conclusive answer, partly because there were once many national and even regional piano styles; a pianist trained in Leipzig was probably more likely to roll accompaniment chords than one trained in Paris.

This stylistic diversity, which has been decreasing for over a century, makes it absolutely essential that the scholar of 19th Century performance practice be committed to honesty above ideology. Otherwise, there will be a powerful temptation to choose what one agrees with from the documents and ignore what one doesn't. It doesn't help that the documents themselves are contradictory: Chopin either played in strict time, or was temperamentally incapable of playing in time. The parallels with the story "Rashomon," in which each character tells the same story, but perceived it very differently, are difficult to ignore.

However, as alluded to above, we can, by comparing early pianists of different eras, push our informed supposition about performance practice back several decades. What traits are most common in the pianists born in the 1820s and '30s? Are they increasing or decreasing among pianists born in the 1840s and 50s? The 1860s and 70s? This provides, though not proof, at least strong reason to suspect that those traits that declined during this era had been more common among earlier pianists, while the traits that become more common had once been relatively rare.

Only one form of noncoordination is on the rise during the decades before 1870: the anticipatory break with the left hand. The melodic delay and the arpeggiated accompaniment are generally on the decline - though, of course, they were used far more commonly by pianists born in the 1870s than by later pianists. No pianist alive today bears a close stylistic resemblance to any pianist born before 1870, which suggests that we've drawn the wrong conclusions from our study of the documents.

Prehistory: The 1830s and '40s. Rubato was probably fairly common during this period, though its difficulty restricted it to the most artistic performers. Its most common use was metric, marking downbeats. Breaking the hands was also probably common, but looked down upon by experts. Unquestionably, arpeggiation of accompaniment chords was extremely common, especially in slow music or in lyrical passages. Overall tempos may have been fairly strict, with little of the later practice of highlighting each new section with its own tempo. However, many pianists used relatively massive local agogic modifications.

Overall, the pianism of this period probably took far more liberties than many musicians are comfortable with today. At least two musicians wrote that the interpretive qualities of Paderewski, today widely regarded as a poster-child for romantic excess, reminded them of Moscheles, a major pre-romantic figure who was born in 1794.¹⁴ Both writers, however, single out the similarity in the two pianists' conceptions of Bach - whose music Paderewski didn't record.

Early history: The 1850s and '60s. It's probable that this was the era with the greatest interpretive license. Breaking the hands becomes epidemic, fueled both by the popularity of rubato effects and by the piano's increasing brilliance. This is the period to

which Saint-Saens was referring when he wrote of performances “with one hand after the other in accordance with the strict principles of bad playing.”¹⁵

It was probably a time of excess even with regard to true rubato. The Thalberg quote above about “continual syncopation” was published in 1853.

With the influence of Chopin and especially Liszt, tempos become more flexible – too flexible for Czerny, who wrote, around 1846:

How often have we had to hear in recent time, for example, in the performance of a Hummel Concerto, already in the first movement (which is still only in one tempo), the first line played *allegro*, the middle melody *andante*, the passage following that *presto*, and then again individual places stretched out endlessly, and so on,--while Hummel himself played his compositions in such a constant tempo that one could almost always have let the metronome beat to it.¹⁶

The earliest pianists to make records and piano rolls reach their maturity during this period. Of the two earliest, Leschetizky was progressive and Reinecke conservative, but each played with his hands apart an extraordinary amount of the time.

The picture isn't so clear with slightly later pianists. Brahms, born in 1833, left one recording. It's hard to make much out from it, but his hands don't seem to be together much. Saint-Saens, born in 1835, wrote scathingly of the contemporary vulgarization of rubato, but used it - in its older sense - lavishly in slow music. Francois Planté (born 1839) recorded mostly fast pieces, which traditionally require little rubato, but in a pair of Mendelssohn Songs Without Words he uses both rubato and rolled accompaniment chords with taste and discretion. (Planté's hands may be together most of the time in faster pieces, but his conception of tempo flexibility is light years from today's.) Louis Diémer (b. 1843) sounds almost modern in his moderately fast “Valse de Concert,” but in Chopin's Nocturne Op. 27 #2 his rubato and chord-rolling are as prominent as Leschetizky's.

Of all recorded pianists born before about 1860, Edvard Grieg (b. 1843) is the most modern. He rarely breaks his hands except when notated, and he rolls accompaniment chords less often than any other pianist of the era. (When he does, as during two bars marked “cantabile” near the end of his final Lyric Piece, the effect is lovely.) This isn't to suggest that composers were generally more chaste interpreters than virtuosos. In a piano roll, Gabriel Fauré (b. 1845) rolls chords nearly every time he gets the chance, and his right hand almost continually lags behind the left at downbeats.

Approached from the past instead of the future, the extravagantly imaginative Vladimir de Pachmann (b. 1848) is no longer an eccentric. Compared to later pianists, he can sound like a bizarre extremist; in reality, the difference between Pachmann and other pianists of his era was only one of degree, and hardly of that. As an interpreter, he's closer to older figures, such as Leschetizky, than younger figures, and today his interpretations stand out, not because he was an oddball, but because he was by far the most extensively recorded pianist before Paderewski.

One trait shared by the early pianists who recorded both slow and fast music is a pronounced difference in performance style between these two types. They don't have a modern sense of style with regard to historical periods - for instance, Saint-Saens uses nearly as much rubato and agogic modification in his piano roll of the slow

movement from Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 31 #1 as he does in Chopin's Nocturne, Op. 15 #2 - but they're acutely aware of the difference between brilliant and expressive. Those pianists who blur this distinction - Leschetizky and de Pachmann - do so in the direction of expression, using rubato even in fast music.

Later Direction. By the 1880s, things may have been settling down. Around 1885, Adolph Christiani wrote:

[T]he old *ad libitum* style of interpretation (in rhythmic respect), which only too often resembled the unsteady gait of a drunken man, is giving way to positiveness and precision, as far as rhythm is concerned. And that pernicious *rubato* nuisance, that slippery downward course in time-keeping, which Chopin's disciples and unripe admirers are greatly responsible for, is happily becoming rarer and scarcer.¹⁷

The general trend was towards homogenization. No pianists born in the 1870s used noncoordination as much as Pachmann or Paderewski had before them; but at the same time, few are as restrained as some of the pianists born in the 1860s, such as Friedheim or da Motta. Pianists born in the 1880s are more alike than pianists born in the 1870s, and, with notable exceptions such as Friedman and Koczalski, less romantic in approach. Some pianists born in the 1890s abandon noncoordination altogether.

When Currier wrote of the "square stroke" that "nothing can be more unmusical or tiresome to the ear," he couldn't have guessed that he was describing the future of pianism. It's significant that the criticisms of Paderewski's habitual hands-apart playing come later, not earlier in his career; Paderewski's rubato was a throwback that sounded increasingly odd as the 20th century progressed.

By the 1930s, the attitude of pedagogue Karl Leimer was typical: "A faulty and uneven rendering of chords is an error very often committed, even by well known concert pianists. How often in our concert halls we hear pianists neglecting to sound their two hands exactly together."¹⁸

Conclusion

Today, it's almost a truism that it's becoming harder and harder to tell different pianists apart. A major reason for this is the universal practice of playing with the hands together. Contemporary pianists simply don't have as many interpretive decisions to make as earlier pianists had - or rather, they've all made the same decision, which is to play with the hands together. One reason Rachmaninoff could shape a melodic line so exquisitely is that his accompaniment provided support in ways that today's pianists find out of the question.

And yet we know that the earliest recorded pianists - starting with Reinecke, who was born in 1824 and was Schumann's friend - used various forms of noncoordination. There's no evidence to suggest that it was new to them; the only question is exactly how - and how much - earlier pianists such as Chopin and Liszt made use of noncoordination.

As with so many things, the elusive element is taste. Breaking the hands and rolling chords aren't in poor taste when they're done, but only when they're done badly.

Thalberg didn't object to melody notes being played after the bass; he objected to "melody-notes ... struck *at an exaggerated interval of time* after their accompaniment."

Though we'll look in vain for hard and fast rules of taste, we have a rich legacy of recordings by great romantic performers - not just pianists, but string players and singers as well - to guide us. Our pianistic past isn't lost. It's merely forgotten.

Appendix: Three Case Studies

1. *Arpeggiated Chords in Rachmaninoff's Performance of Chopin's Nocturne, Op. 9 #2*

Rachmaninoff was one of the last pianists to make a habit of arpeggiating accompaniment chords, and they're one of this 1927 performance's most striking features. We don't know if they have any textual source: We don't know what edition Rachmaninoff used, and though there are no rolled chords in the original editions, there may be some in the phrased editions common later in the 19th century. At any rate, Rachmaninoff had no aversion to interpolating this device where it wasn't specifically called for. For instance, we find unnotated arpeggiations in his recordings of his Prelude in G-flat, Op. 23 #10, and "Lilacs." There, as here, their rhythmic function is small scale, affecting a beat, a bar, or, at most, a phrase.

Rachmaninoff's rolled inner voices are of two types:

1. Fully rolled, starting on the beat. This is the weaker form.
2. Broken, in which the first note is played before the beat, and the remainder of the chord is either played all at once, on the beat, or rolled very quickly starting on the beat. The first note generally receives a dynamic accent as well. This is clearly analogous to the larger-scale anticipation of the left hand.

The rolls occur in three different rhythmic contexts: on the second eighth of the beat only; on the third eighth only; or on the last two eighths (in this nocturne, there are no chords on the first eighth note, which Chopin reserves for the bass). Rolls on the second eighth are generally of the first type. Their function is usually one of slowing forward motion before the phrase peak - expanding the beat without intensifying it - and thus they generally occur in bars in which Rachmaninoff plays a ritard, such as the first beats of bars 4, 16, 23, and 24.

Rolled chords on the third eighth note are, with few exceptions, of the second type. They serve to strengthen the next beat and to propel the music forward with a strong sense of 2-3-1. They almost invariably support a corresponding eighth-note in the melody: They occur, for instance, at the ends of bars 1, 2, and 4, but not at the end of bar 3, which contains no upbeat, or of bar 5, which contains an elaborate upbeat of five 16th-notes, one of which is trilled. In the latter case, the additional rhythmic activity resulting from a break in the left hand would obscure the rhythm, not intensify it.

When rolling the last two eighths - the strongest possible upbeat - Rachmaninoff uses both types of rolls, depending on how strongly accented he wants the following downbeat to be. For instance, in bar 7, the first type is used on the second beat in order to stress the phrase peak on the third beat - a relatively mild accent - whereas in the last beat of bar 8 the stronger second form is used to highlight the beginning of the new

period.

Rachmaninoff's rolled chords, far from being a mannerism, nearly always serve a specific musical purpose. His use of them is responsible for much of this performance's remarkable combination of forward momentum and elasticity.

2. *Grammar of Romantic Piano Playing I: Chopin's Nocturnes, Op. 27 #2 and Op. 9 #2*

Though romantic practice was far from systematic, there are a number of strong tendencies that could result in broad similarities between different pianists' interpretations. Take the interaction of two general practices:

1. Grace notes are played before the beat; and
2. In large melodic intervals, the second note is delayed, especially when it falls on the downbeat.

Chopin's nocturnes, Op. 9 #2, bar 27, 4th beat, and Op. 27 #2, bar 8, 1st beat, each contain a grace note preceding a large leap upwards (a tenth in Op. 9 #2, an octave in Op. 27 #2). The "rules" above predict that romantic pianists would have played the grace note first, then the bass note, and then the high melodic note.

Which seems to be what pianists born before 1870 did. These include, in Op. 27 #2, Leschetizky, born 1830 (Welte roll); Pachmann, born 1848 (acoustic disk, electric disk); von Sauer, born 1862 (Welte roll); and Rosenthal, born 1862 (electric disk); in Op. 9 #2, we have Pachmann (acoustic disk) and Rosenthal (two electric disks) again, plus Paderewski, born 1860 (electric disk) and Stockmarr, born 1869 (electric disk). It's also the practice of Koczalski, whose birthdate (1885) puts him in a later generation but who allegedly received the authentic Chopin style from his teacher Mikuli, a student of Chopin's. (Rosenthal also studied with Mikuli.) The one exception among earlier pianists is von Sauer (1862). In a 1940 radio broadcast, he plays the bass note and the grace note together - but both before the beat, not on it.

But with pianists born nearer the end of the century, the picture is much less clear. The earliest pianist to muddy the water is Godowsky (b. 1870), a surprisingly modern pianist despite his music's legendary excess. His electric disk of Op. 27 #2 follows the practice outlined above. In his earlier acoustic recording of Op. 9 #2, though, he plays the high G and the bass together on the beat; in his later electric recording, he follows expected romantic practice, but just barely. Rachmaninoff (b. 1873) omits the grace note altogether, but ties the preceding note (also an E-flat, like the omitted grace note) over the bar line, still delaying the high G. This gives an extremely subtle effect of a grace note without actually playing it.

Josef Hofmann (b. 1876) plays the high G together with the bass in his early acoustic recording of Op. 9 #2. In a live recording made 25 years later, he still does this, but now omits the grace note, for an even more unsentimental effect. In four recordings of Op. 27 #2, Hofmann plays the grace notes ahead of the beat and the melody on the beat. This would become the model for younger pianists, such as Rubinstein (b. 1887).

But Hofmann's straightforward style would take years to work itself into the mainstream. Cortot (b. 1877) and Samaroff (b. 1882) in Op. 9 #2, and La Forge (b.

1879) and Petri (b. 1882) in Op. 27 #2 conform to the earlier practice. Petri's use of this device in a live recording from around 1940, is especially striking because he nearly always played with his hands together, and this is the first noncoordination in the performance. In Op. 9 #2, Hambourg (b. 1879), like Rachmaninoff, omits the grace note and delays the high G, though to a much lesser degree.

The unanimity of approach among earlier pianists suggests a widespread practice - and since it probably took some time for the practice to become so widespread, it probably predates recorded pianism and may well represent the procedure of Chopin and Liszt.

3. *Grammar of Romantic Piano Playing II: Chopin's Nocturne, Op. 15 #2 and Op. 48 #1*

The above case was clear, at least for pianists born before 1870. Not so in the case of Chopin's Nocturnes, Op. 15 #2 and Op. 48 #1. In Op. 15 #2, one of the most widely-recorded pieces in the early catalogues, bars 12 and 52 each begin with a dissonant grace note (G#) that leaps downward a fifth to resolve (C#, over an F# bass). An almost identical situation occurs at the beginning of bar 19 of Op. 48 #1 - a leap from G to C, over an A-flat bass.¹⁹ Here, two general romantic practices conflict:

1. Grace notes are played before the beat; and
2. Melodic dissonances are emphasized by delaying them.

A dissonant grace note straddles these two practices - it should fall either before the beat or after it - and the pianists' approaches are correspondingly wide. For Raoul Pugno (b. 1852), the fact that the G# is a grace note takes precedence over the fact that it's dissonant, so he follows the practice of the earlier pianists noted above in Op. 27 #2: The G# precedes the bass note, and the C# follows it. However, the practice diverges sharply among the other early pianists:

Saint-Saens (b. 1835) plays the grace note on the beat (i.e., simultaneously with the left hand) in bar 12 of Op. 15 #2; in bar 52, he intensifies this gesture, playing both the grace note and its resolution after the beat.

Michalowski (b. 1851) in Op. 15#2 plays the grace notes ahead of the beat and the melodic resolutions on the beat — sort of. In bar 12, the C# is played simultaneously with the left hand, but the effect is softened by a rapidly arpeggiated chord Michalowski adds beneath it. (These are not the only notes Michalowski adds in this performance.) In bar 52, The C# is again simultaneous with the bass note — but Michalowski immediately repeats it, as if the first C# were an additional grace note. In both instances the dynamic stress is on the C#.

Carreño (b. 1853) in Op. 48 #1 plays the grace note on the beat.

Paderewski (b. 1860) recorded Op. 15 #2 four times. In his first recording (1911), he omits the grace note in both instances,²⁰ delays the C# very slightly only in bar 12 (similar to Rachmaninoff's practice in Op. 9 #2, above), and in bar 52 plays the C# on the beat. In his second recording (1917), he omits the grace note and delays the C# in both instances. In his third recording (c. 1928), bar 12 is again like the 1911 recording,

but in bar 52 he plays the grace note ahead of the beat and the resolution on the beat. In his fourth recording (1937), he omits the grace note in bar 12 and plays the C# on the beat in both instances.

Arthur de Greef (b. 1862) plays both the grace note and the resolution after the bass note in both instances in Op. 15 #2; in contrast to Pugno, for de Greef the fact that the G# is dissonant takes precedence over the fact that it's a grace note.

Eugene d'Albert (b. 1864), like Saint-Saens, uses an "evolving" interpretation in Op. 15#2, but starts one notch ahead. In bar 12, he plays the grace note ahead of the beat and the melody on it; in bar 52 he plays the grace note on the beat and the C# behind it.

Joseph Pizzarello (b. probably before 1870), like Pugno, treats the grace note as a grace note in his 1898 Bettini cylinder of Op. 15#2. However, he also anticipates the left hand, marking the pulse with a dynamic stress on the melodic C#. Bar 12 has the bass and the G# together; bar 52 has the bass slightly ahead. (Bar 52 is preceded by a luftpause, a lovely effect that's probably more characteristic of Liszt's style than of Chopin's.)

Ferruccio Busoni (b. 1866) omits the grace note in bar 52 of Op. 15 #2 but plays the C# on the beat in both instances in his piano roll.

Busoni's later acoustic disk (1922) features the interpretation that became the model for later pianists. (This isn't to imply other pianists copied Busoni; the style was simply in the air.) He plays the grace note ahead of the beat and the resolution on the beat. Such temperamentally diverse artists as Godowsky (b. 1870), Friedberg (b. 1872), Risler (b. 1873), Hofmann (b. 1876), Cortot (b. 1877), and Rubinstein (b. 1887) all play these passages in this way, in both Op. 15 #2 or Op. 48 #1.

This would remain the model until the middle of this century when doubt again arose concerning the placement of the grace notes. Chopin's own notation in a student's copy of Op. 48 #1 suggests the grace note should be played on the beat, or at least, not before it²¹—a practice very similar, if not identical, to that of Saint-Saens and Carreño, the earliest pianists to record the work, and close to that of the Liszt students de Greef and d'Albert.

Endnotes

¹ T.P. Currier, *International Library of Music Pianist's Guide*, c. 1900, 1948 ed., p. 24.

² The recorded keyboard players born by 1880 who broke their hands and whose recordings were consulted for this study include, in rough chronological order: Reinecke (rolls only) (b. 1824), Leschetizky (rolls only) (1830), Brahms (1833), Saint-Saens (1835), Planté (1839), Diemer (1843), Grieg (1843), Fauré (rolls only) (1845), Pachmann (1848), Henschel (1850), Scharwenka (1850), Essipova (1851), d'Indy (1851), Michalowski (1851), Pugno (1852), Grünfeld (1852), Carreño (rolls only) (1853), Barili (1854), Humperdinck (rolls only) (1854), Nikisch (1855), Janotha (1856), Kienzl (1857), Elgar (1857), Chaminade (1857), Kennedy-Fraser (1857), Leoncavallo (1858), Matthay (1858), Arnold Dolmetsch (1859), Friedheim (1859), Albeñiz (1860), Mahler (1860), Paderewski (1860), Luckstone (1861), Melba (1861), Davies (1861), Ansorge (1862), Damrosch (1862), Debussy (1862), Sauer (1862), Greef (1862), Alexander

Lambert (1862), Stavenhagen (1862), Rosenthal (1862), Bloomfield-Zeisler (1863), Pierre (1863), Siloti (1863), Reisenauer (1863), Philipp (1863), Josef Weiss (1864), d'Albert (1864), Gretchaninov (1864), Richard Strauss (1864), Georg Liebling (1865), Orefice (1865), Busoni (1866), Pauer (but see note 4) (1866), Granados (1867), Henriques (1867), Lamond (1868), Merikanto (1868), Ekman (1869), da Motta (1868), Sapellnikov (1868), Epstein (1869), Järnefelt (1869), Pfitzner (1869), Roussel (1869), Mayer-Mahr (1869), Stockmarr (1869), Stojowski (1869), Godowsky (1870), Goll (c. 1870), Rabcewicz (1870), Schmitt (1870), Hallock Greenwalt (1871), Hutcheson (1871), Woodhouse (1871), Malats (1872), Scriabin (rolls only) (1872), de Lara (1872), Eibenschutz (1872), Friedberg (1872), Reger (rolls only) (1873), Schafer (1873), Risler (1873), Rachmaninoff (1873), Bauer (1873), Igumnov (1873), Ronald (1873), Falla (1873), Ives (1874), Marguerite Long (1874), Joseph Lhevinne (1874), Goldenweiser (1875), Kreisler (1875), Pembaur (1875), Tovey (1875), Viñes (1875), Ravel (rolls only) (1875), Walter (1876), Hofmann (1876), Ganz (1877), Howard-Jones (1877), Landowska (1877), Dohnanyi (1877), Cortot (1877), Gabrilowitsch (1878), Freund (1879), Benoist (1879 or 1880), Samuel (1879), Hambourg (1879), Eisenberger (1879), La Forge (1879), Scott (1879), Medtner (1880), Rosina Lhevinne (1880), and Buhlig (1880).

The possible exception is Cuban composer Joaquim Nin (1879). Nin's recorded legacy is both small and narrow (and only a little of it has been reissued on CD), so he may have occasionally broken his hands.

Of course, there's a wide difference in degree. Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's one record is notable for her nearly ubiquitous arpeggiando approach, which may have been old-fashioned even for a pianist born in 1857. Others — especially among the later figures listed above — rarely broke their hands. But it's significant that even the most modern figures among these pianists, such as Hofmann and Viñes, broke their hands occasionally, both to clarify structure and to heighten expression.

There are a few pianists known to have made records but whose performances were not available for this study. The most important are Sgambati (1841), Lucien Lambert (1858), Dawson (1868), Panthés (1871), and Goodson (1872). There are also quite a few pianists from this period who made piano rolls but no records, including such tantalizing earlier figures as Sophie Menter. These performances are not currently available.

³ Robert Philip, "Early Recordings and Musical Style," Cambridge University Press, 1992.

⁴ This assertion is occasionally accompanied by a quote from English pianist Max Pauer, who wrote after hearing his first recordings that "the unrelenting machine showed that in some places I had failed to play both hands exactly together, and had been guilty of other errors no less heinous because they were trifling." Charles Cooke, "Great Pianists on Piano Playing," Theodore Presser, 1913, pp. 201-202. One must read this statement in context of the dozens of pianists who heard their own recordings and *didn't* alter their styles.

⁵ Malwine Brée, "The Groundwork of the Leschetizky Method," Haskell House

Publishers, 1969 (reprint of 1902 ed.), p. 73.

⁶ Carl Maria von Weber, article on the metronomic markings to the opera “Euranthe,” quoted in “Composers on Music,” Pantheon Books, Inc., 1956, pp. 100-101.

⁷ Brée, p. 72.

⁸ Quoted in Gordon Rumson, “Arthur Friedheim’s Edition of the Liszt b minor Sonata,” unpublished ms., pp. 55-56. There is no way of knowing whether this was Liszt’s practice, however. D’Albert, in his piano roll of the work, attacks the low G’s squarely.

⁹ Alfred Cortot, “Studies in Musical Interpretation,” Da Capo Press, 1989 (reprint of G. G. Harrap, 1937), p. 214.

¹⁰ Sigismond Thalberg, “L’Art du chant appliqué au Piano,” 1853, quoted in Richard Hudson, “Stolen Time,” Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 196.

¹¹ Thalberg. Hudson quotes this as a criticism of breaking the hands, but there’s no hint that Thalberg is referring to a bass note preceding the beat; he seems to be criticizing the degree of delay, not the practice itself.

¹² Carl Flesch, “The Memoirs of Carl Flesch,” The Macmillan Company, 1958, p. 215.

¹³ Camille Saint-Saens, “Quelques mots sur l’exécution des oeuvres de Chopin,” 1910, quoted in Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, “Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by His Pupils,” Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 49.

¹⁴ William Mason, “Memories of a Musical Life,” The Century Company, 1901, p. 59; W. F. Pecher, “The Emotional Legacy of the Classical School: Reminiscences of the Teaching of Moscheles,” International Library of Music Pianist’s Guide, 1948 ed., p. 28.

¹⁵ Camille Saint-Saens, “Outspoken Essays on Music,” Greenwood Press, 1970 (reprint of Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922), p. 83.

¹⁶ Carl Czerny, of “Der Kunst des Vortrags,” 1846, quoted in Sandra Rosenblum, “Performance Practices in Classic Piano Music,” Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 383. Czerny is objecting to the degree of this practice, not its use *per se*. In “The Art of Playing the Ancient and Modern Piano Forte Works,” he wrote that “there is a certain way of playing melodious passages *with greater tranquility, and yet not perceptibly slower*, so that all appears to flow on in one and the same time, and the difference would only be discovered by a reference to the beats of the metronome. An *evident* change of time must only be allowed where the author has expressly indicated it by *piu lento*, *ritardando*, or so forth.” (Emphasis in original.) Quoted from Czerny, “On the Proper Performance of All Beethoven’s Works for the Piano,” Universal Edition, 1970, p. 93.

¹⁷ Adolph Christiani, "The Principles of Expression in Pianoforte Playing," Theodore Presser, 1885, p. 53.

¹⁸ Walter Giesecking & Carl Leimer, "Piano Technique," Dover Publications 1972 (reprint of Theodore Presser 1932, 1938), p. 56. Nevertheless, Giesecking, Leimer's greatest student, discreetly delays his right hand now and then.

¹⁹ A number of performances that were unavailable for this study could further clarify or muddy things. These include a disk by Roger-Miclos of Op. 15#2, disks by Koczalski of both nocturnes, rolls by Pachmann and Scharwenka of Op. 15 #2, and rolls by Grünfeld, Friedheim, and Bloomfield-Zeisler of Op. 48 #1.

An important sub-study regarding this grace note-resolution issue still needs to be done: Is the dynamic stress on the grace note or on its resolution? This affects the mood (in Op. 15 #2, accenting the G# sounds more poetic, while accenting the C# sounds more forthright) and even the rhythmic structure – in Op. 15 #2, Pizzarello establishes the beat as being on the melodic resolution only through a dynamic accent.

²⁰ This is a more minor alteration of the score than it may at first seem at first. The G# grace note is a repetition of the preceding note, so what Paderewski and others do is not so much omit a note as omit an attack. This is also the case in the missing grace notes in Hofmann's and Rachmaninoff's performances of Op. 9 #2, discussed above.

²¹ Eigeldinger, p. 114-115, n. 82.