

Schnabel's Interpretation of Piano Music
Ch. 10 - Interpretation of Character and Structure



by R. Wolff

Presented by Arpi Mardirossian
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About the Subject

- **Arthur Schnabel (1882 - 1951)**
 - classical pianist, who also composed and taught
 - Born in Poland, studied piano from the age of 7 in Vienna under Theodor Leschetizky
 - Began his professional career in Berlin in 1900
 - Moved to the United States in 1939 and taught at the University of Michigan
 - Focused on the music of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert



About the Author

- **Konrad Wolff**
 - Active lecturer and teacher until his death in 1989
 - Schnabel's thoughts about Wolff:
 - "He is a remarkable pianist, an excellent theorist, a learned historian, an outstanding teacher, a brilliant thinker and writer."



Chapter Layout

- Introduction to Schnabel's approach to the interpretation of character and structure
- Connections
 - Melodic
 - Harmonic
 - Rhythmic-metric
- Separations (especially through phrasing)
- Clarification of individual features in each work



Introduction to Schnabel's Approach

- Never listened to his own recordings
- Studied each composition as an independent entity
 - Discovered new details and connections
 - "Departure from tradition concerns the scholar and not the artist."
- Considered a piece section by section
- In general, disregarded motivic developments as such in his search for the inner truth and drama.

Introduction to Schnabel's Approach

- Untechnical and simple analysis
 - "searching for a new key"
 - "the rhythmic motion doubled"
 - "the texture becomes thicker"
- Assumed the composer could have written otherwise but didn't - improvised other versions
- Believed that sadness or happiness belonged to the listener and not the piece


Introduction to Schnabel's Approach

- Theme and variations examples:
 - Unadorned theme is used simultaneously with one of the variations
 - notes in left-hand part are those of the theme
 - notes in right-hand part play figurations
 - Schnabel warned against bringing the left hand out: "we want to hear the variation now."

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Connections

- **Melodic**
 - Concerned with the structural lines of ascent and descent which are common in the inner voices
 - Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata 
 - Value of bass structure is in the connection it creates between bar 4 and bar 5.
 - Avoid a diminuendo in the left hand and play directly from bar 4 to bar 5

Connections

- **Melodic (continued)**
 - Polyphony hidden within a single part
 - Mozart's Concerto in C - 3rd movement 
 - Both top and inner notes move melodically
 - Important to emphasize the alternation where one part holds on to a pitch while the other descends
 - Schnabel admitted it was difficult to play this clearly and naturally

Connections


- **Melodic (continued)**
 - Bass line notes that fall on off-beats should be accented so the bass line will be clear
 - When several parts of music (bass and treble) collaborate to create a melody line (chromatic or diatonic), should re-enforce audibility by deliberately confronting any notes that succeed one another in the extreme registers

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Connections

- **Harmonic**
 - Harmonic connections between movements can be an important element in the unifying process
 - Sequences used to secure the long line of the music
 - Schumann's Piano Concerto Finale



- Same melodic figurations to be played 4 times - 2 groups
- Should play 2nd and 4th more softly

- To find important harmonic progressions, play chords

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Connections

- **Rhythmic-metric**
 - Rhythm may be main motive, pulse, or both
 - Rhythmic events important when the melody pitch is unvarying
 - Schnabel insisted on their correct articulation: equally long, fully detached, and with minimal metrical accent
 - Accented 2nd beat in the bass of a piece in 3/4 time - unifying rhythmic device

Connections

- **Rhythmic-metric (continued)**
 - Both devices (previous slide) combined
 - Schuber's Sonata in D - Scherzo



- Right-hand: even-note rhythm
- Left-hand: accented second-beat rhythm
- Schnabel made the combination clear by not allowing any of the right-hand accents to be shared by the left hand

Connections

- **Rhythmic-metric (continued)**
 - In dances, *rhythm* is the most obvious necessity in performance
 - In sarabandes - 3rd bar of each four bar phrase should be presented with all 3 beats being part of the rhythm (in other bars, only the first 2 beats are part of the rhythm)
 - In waltzes - 3rd beat is always lighter than the first 2
 - In walking rhythms (Schumann) Schnabel played at same absolute speed in spite of a slowing down marked by the composer

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Separations (Phrasing)

- **Phrasing**
 - Separation, but there is more to it
 - Phrases may overlap
 - Phrase boundaries may be ambiguous
 - Schnabel's thoughts:
 - "[Phrasing] is not supposed to be more than the interpreter's private amusement and can be observed by the listener only as a means of making figurations sound pleasant rather than mechanical."

Separations (Phrasing)

- **Phrasing (continued)**
 - Schnabel suggested multiple phrasings in some cases
 - Beethoven's 4th Piano Concerto
 - Schnabel just acknowledged the absence of a separation in some cases
 - Beethoven's Sonata in B flat

Separations (Phrasing)

- *Phrasing (continued)*
 - *Phrasing can be difficult with irregular phrase lengths*
 - Schubert's Sonata in G Finale
- *To create a phrase, add accents (and maybe a pause), especially on off-beat notes*



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- *Connections*
 - *Atletic*
 - *Harmonic*
 - *Rhythmic-metric*
- *Separations (especially through phrasing)*
- *Clarification of individual features in each work*

Clarification of Individual Features in Each Work

- *Each composition and each section within the composition have an 'identity' or uniqueness*
 - *Schnabel liked to point to any details that changed during a piece*
 - *He was sensitive to differentiations of long and short notes within a phrase*
 - *He believed that all differences should be observed in performance and that none should be artificially created*
 - *Principal error is to lose the proportions of a composition by over-concentrating on one aspect*