



INTERVIEW WITH JOCELYN SWIGGER CHOPIN'S ÉTUDES ON AN ORIGINAL ÉRARD

Jocelyn Swigger, Associate Professor of Music and Coordinator of Keyboard Studies at Sunderman Conservatory, Gettysburg College speaks with Westfield about preparing and recording Chopin's Études Op. 10, Op. 25 and three Nouvelles Études on an original Érard piano.

Jocelyn, you have just released a new recording of Chopin's Études, played on an 1841 Érard grand piano. It is exciting that over the last fifteen years or so, ever more old French pianos are surfacing that are receiving ever better treatment by the restorers, helping us to understand more and more about the sound-world that inspired the Romantic pianists. What is special about this particular instrument?

Well, I'm tickled by the idea that Chopin or his students could have played on this very piano (though I have to confess there's no record that they did)—this particular piano, with this action and these strings. As I'm sure you know, Érard was one of Chopin's two favorite pianos, and 1841 is during his lifetime; I've had the opportunity to play on some Pleyels, and some other Erards, but I fell in love with this piano from the first chord I played on it. You're exactly right to point to the restorers: Anne Acker (the piano's owner and technician) is a wizard, and brought this instrument back to beautiful condition. Its rich, warm, metallic sound is addictive—when I visited to practice on it, I would wake up in the morning feeling like I couldn't wait to hear that sound. It's so, so different from the modern Steinway; I describe it as being as different as the sound of a clarinet and an oboe. I miss it.

Playing all of Chopin's études on any piano is a major undertaking (which is a bit of an understatement). To play them on an early piano takes things to yet another level: action control is different from the modern piano; dynamic shifts manifest themselves as shifts in tone color rather than gradations of loud and soft, while the



Jocelyn Swigger

greater overall clarity of the tone presents its own set of difficulties. How did you address these challenges?

A lot of it was about letting go: of my preconceived notions, of my own perfectionism, even of some of my identity as a player. The hardest thing for me to let go of was soft dynamics; usually I like to find the quietest sound a piano can make, and I probably have some ego about that, but this piano's quietest sounds were what I call "a nice healthy mezzo-forte." I couldn't play as softly as I wanted to. You say it beautifully: the dynamic shifts are about tone color. The action was tricky, too; though Anne is a genius, the original action can only be so even after almost

two hundred years. It was hard to find the exact bump in the escapement on some of the keys, and anything above the bump felt very loose. Keeping my hands close to the keys helped, but I still had to let go of some evenness. The clarity of tone meant that I couldn't count on a quiet wash of color to smooth out lumps in the fast accompanimental runs. I tried to point my attention towards phrasing the big lines of the melody, even though that's often not where the technical difficulty lies. Fortunately, that voicing was much easier on this instrument. I think of the études on this instrument as being like a painting with vivid colors and visible brushstrokes.

Are there any specific things, musical or technical, that turned out in a different way when playing these pieces on the Érard, as compared to the modern concert grand?

Chopin often has surprisingly few pedal markings—almost none on the first two pages of the 'cello' étude, for example—and I thought using less pedal really worked on this instrument, while adding it in then made for some really nice color changes. Also, since the tone decays so quickly on the Érard, melody lines can only be so slow before the decay kills the legato. Chopin's tempo markings

for the slower etudes are actually pretty speedy—a lickety-split MM=100 for Op. 10/3, for example! There’s a long aural tradition, including some really gorgeous recordings, of people playing the slower etudes on modern pianos with luxuriously slow tempos and lots of pedal, but I felt like the slower pieces wanted faster tempos on the Erard.

One thing that sets your recording apart from others is the use of an unequal temperament. What is the story behind this choice? How does music that employs enharmonic shifts, diminished seventh chords and chromaticism benefit from an unequal temperament?

The Westfield Center is actually at the heart of this story! In 2010, at the very beginning of starting this project, I went to the Westfield Center’s Chopin bicentennial conference at Yale. One of the things that really stood out to me at that conference was the chance to hear Chopin on unequal temperament. A few years later, I had the chance to play on some of David Breitman’s instruments tuned to unequal temperaments, and loved how they brought Chopin’s harmonies into relief. David encouraged me to look up the scholar who had presented on Chopin’s tuning at the Yale conference. I found Jonathan Bellman, and he very generously shared his recipe for a Chopin temperament with me. About a year after that, I met Anne Acker, who owns the Erard on this recording (and who tuned to Jonathan’s recipe). She and I looked familiar to each other, and figured out that we recognized each other from the bicentennial conference.

As far as how the tuning affects the music, it makes everything more intense: dissonances hurt more, resolutions offer more relief, and minor keys are unhappier than major ones. It also gives different keys distinct personalities: some keys, like A flat major, are happy and bright, while others, like G major, are unstable and unpleasant (Chopin rarely writes in G major in the etudes). C major is still and monolithic, while B major is shimmering and full of possibility. To return to the painting analogy, the brush strokes are not just visible but in relief, popping off the canvas.

Chopin’s Études may have started out as exercise material, but they are today known as brilliant concert pieces. How much artistic freedom, embellishment, or even improvisation does this music permit?

Probably a lot of people would say not very much! But I chose to ornament and embellish these pieces. You read so much about improvisation being important for Chopin and his contemporaries, I felt like I had to learn

to improvise in order to understand Chopin’s style. I did study and practice improvising—I still do—and now I can’t imagine playing these pieces without making a few changes here and there. Some of my embellishments I have planned out, and play the same way every time, and some I change on different days. I think the thing that’s so incredible about Chopin’s etudes is that they are music above all, so I tried to make choices in the direction of artistic expression. I’m really curious to find out what listeners think of my choices, and I’d love for players to hear my small changes (some of them really are tiny) and feel like they have the inspiration or permission to make changes of their own.

According to the CD booklet, you spent seven years working on this repertoire. Can you tell us something about the trajectory of such a project? What to you do on day one, when you first open the book? Where are you after three years? Are there things you would do differently, looking back?

Actually, day one was probably going to the Westfield Chopin bicentennial conference in 2010, so it’s a thrill that you’re interviewing me now. I was a new mother—my son was one month old—and I was still in a sleep-deprived delirium, but I knew that I wanted to start working on these pieces, and it was inspiring to hear the presentations and try the different pianos people had brought, and think about starting this project. When I did start practicing a few months later, I started playing the first page of Op. 10 no. 1 painfully slowly. I was still playing it slowly a year later! I would pick two or three etudes every week to be on the “front burner” and put two or three on the “back burner.” I tried to pair etudes that had different techniques, so I would work on a right hand piece at the same time as a left hand one, or an open hand one with a closed hand one. I thought a lot about the etudes away from the piano, making theory maps and playlists of different recordings for each one. I made my theory maps early in the process of learning the pieces, so that learning the techniques was within a frame of thinking about how I wanted the music to go.

I gave myself some accountability measures: I’m useless without a deadline, so I booked some concerts before I had the pieces all learned, and I gave myself mini-deadlines. I was performing Op. 10 as a set, with some other pieces, about a year before I was playing all of Op. 25, for example. Probably my most useful accountability measure was hosting a podcast, Play It Again Swig, where I would give myself a piano lesson for the week and make

promises about what I would learn the following week. That completely failed to go viral and win me fame and fortune, but did give me small goals to work towards and make me listen to recordings of myself playing. It also taught me a lot about vulnerability. I used some practice techniques I got from a workshop with Burton Kaplan—I make all my students read his book *Practicing for Artistic Success*—especially planning and timing my practice to the minute. For the past three years or so I've been performing the etudes as a set everywhere that would have me, and also visiting any Erard or Pleyel I could find on Google. I was astonished by how generous and hospitable piano owners were—complete strangers welcomed me into their homes and studios and let me play their pianos. It was incredible. I thought I was ready to record in the summer of 2016, but we couldn't get the scheduling to work out, and I'm grateful for the extra year to polish.

Coachings were important for me. I had some lessons with Rebecca Penneys, my graduate school mentor, who also has recorded all the etudes. David Breitman was incredibly helpful about thinking about the early instruments and looking at the score. Jackie Herbein helped me apply the Alexander Technique (a method of teaching alignment and body awareness) to my piano playing. Chopin's etudes will always make me feel like a student, and it was really important to have such helpful teachers along the journey to recording them. Looking back, I would have been more careful with my body from the very beginning. Many of the etudes hurt until I unlocked them, and I didn't always give up and ask for help as soon as I should have.

What comes after such a recording—what will your next project be? Will you explore other early pianos? Other repertoire?

I don't know what my next big project will be; just the question sends me spinning. I have some chamber music concerts planned for 2018, including a show of art songs by women composers and a Mozart quartet on the Walter copy by Thomas and Barbara Wolf that we have at Gettysburg College. I'm starting to get interested in Chaminade, and it might be really fun to play that repertoire on a historical piano, but I haven't actually practiced any of it yet, so we'll see. I hope I'll get to play on more of Anne Acker's pianos; maybe I'll decide on some of my rep according to what she's restoring (I think she's planning on bringing a Pleyel back to life in the next couple of years, which would make me want to play Chopin preludes and waltzes and mazurkas and scherzos on it). I'm definitely interested in other collaborations too—chamber music and art song but also multimedia possibilities. In a completely different direction, I have about thirty minutes of original ukulele songs, and I'd like to write a few more and make them into an album. We'll see. For now I'm improvising a bit, and there are lots of novels to read...

Thank you, Jocelyn, for this interview!

Jocelyn Swigger's TED talk titled "How I memorize piano music" is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJouIL6uaoc>. Her personal website is <http://jocelynswigger.com>.



See the June 2017 issue of *Westfield* for information about the 1st International Chopin Competition on Period Instruments, to be held September 2018 at the Warsaw Philharmonic, or visit www.iccpi.eu.