

**A NEW INTERPRETATION
OF CHOPIN'S PIANO MUSIC
THROUGH PERFORMANCE
OF THE SECOND PIANO
SONATA ON PLEYEL AND
ERARD FORTEPIANOS AND
ON A MODERN PIANO**

1. Introduction

In this research, I explored different approaches to performing Chopin's Second Piano Sonata in B flat minor on two historical instruments:¹ an original Pleyel grand fortepiano known to have been played by Chopin (No. 13819, Paris, 1848, Cobbe Collection Catalogue No. 33²) and an original Erard grand fortepiano (No. 16994, Paris, 1845, Cobbe Collection Catalogue No. 32³) located at the Cobbe Collection in Hatchlands.⁴ I examined how my experience of these instruments generated new knowledge which then informed my approach to performing the piece on a modern piano. Performance of this Sonata on the Pleyel and Erard fortepianos can be creatively reproduced to a great extent on a modern instrument, suggesting, in turn, that modern piano pedagogy might benefit from insights gained from this project.

This article is not intended to encourage pianists to imitate or copy performance on historical instruments when performing on modern pianos. It is not about 'going back', but about 're-discovering' period instruments in a new context and developing the ideas and perception gained from them to transform approaches to interpretation on modern instruments. In this research, the historical instruments are used not just for a modern pianist to get a feel for pianos from the period in which Chopin lived; they are examined in detail, so that they can become tools for 'teaching' us.

2. Portamento in Chopin's music

2.1. Introduction

Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger suggests that singing formed the basis of Chopin's music and performance techniques, and 'the more piano playing drew its inspiration from vocal models, the more convincing it became' in Chopin's art.⁵ Also, Moritz Karasowski (1823–1892), who was a cellist, music writer and one of the leading Polish music critics in the nineteenth century, states that 'He [Chopin] loved to find in piano playing what we understand by *portamento* in singing'.⁶

Through comparative analysis of the mechanical features of the historical instruments, their influence on the pianist's touch, and

1 This article is based on the author's PhD thesis 'Creating a new interpretation of Chopin's piano music using a comparison of modern and historical instruments through the performance of the second piano sonata', City, University of London / Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, 2020.

2 Alec Cobbe and Christopher Nobbs, *Three Hundred Years of Composers' Instruments: The Cobbe Collection* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2014), 48–51.

3 *Ibid.*, 60–62.

4 I am grateful for receiving access to the Pleyel and the Erard fortepianos to Mr Alec Cobbe and for support from the Cobbe Collection and National Trust staff.

5 Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by his Pupils*, tr. Naomi Shohet with Krycia Osostowicz and Roy Howat, ed. Roy Howat (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 14–15.

6 Moritz Karasowski, *Friedrich Chopin. Sein Leben, seine Werke und Briefe* [Fryderyk Chopin: his life, letters and works], 2 vols (Dresden: Ries, 1877), 94, cited in Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher*, 45.

further consequences for the management of dimensions, I found and learnt a *portamento* singing tone on the fortepiano. To explain this, I first need to introduce the differences between the Pleyel and Erard fortepianos, and between historical and modern pianos. One might argue that it is not possible to hear *portamento* between two different notes on the piano, given the percussive mechanism of the instrument, but understanding the nature of the fortepiano can reveal the cause of this effect.

2.2. Mechanism

The firms of Erard and Pleyel, two of the leading nineteenth-century Parisian manufacturers, had a variety of models, each with different actions. Although the two companies were producing pianos at the same time, they had different origins, and the tonal character of their instruments varied significantly. The father of Sébastien Erard, who invented the double escapement action in 1821, was a furniture craftsman,⁷ while the Pleyel family – both the father, Ignaz Pleyel, who was a composer and the founder of the Pleyel company, and the son, Camille Pleyel, a pianist and publisher who continued the ownership of the firm – had a musical background. Thanks to Erard's invention of the double escapement in 1821, their pianos gained a reputation as the most radical of their time. However, that did not mean simply that the mechanics of Pleyel pianos were technically behind the Erards. Many pianists also liked and preferred the simpler and classical actions of the Pleyel company.⁸

The Pleyel fortepiano more closely resembles English fortepianos,⁹ such as those manufactured by Broadwood in the eighteenth century.¹⁰ The Erard, meanwhile, has a more complicated mechanism, and the structure is much closer to that of the modern piano commonly used today. The differences between Pleyel and Erard instruments are very clear, as can be seen in the following pictures of the mechanism (Figures 1 and 2).¹¹ Also, it is notable that the mechanism of the Erard is very similar to that of a modern piano, as shown on Figures 2 and 3.¹² Through these instruments by Pleyel and Erard, we can trace one of the lines of development from the nineteenth century to the present day and see how the transition was made.

2.3. Erard's hammer motion

In a letter to his uncle Sébastien Erard, of 1824, Pierre Erard compares his family's piano with English pianos, which are known to have similar actions to Pleyel pianos (as mentioned earlier): 'Since I saw that Liszt wished to see pianos made by an English maker, I took them to see Broadwood in order to prove that I had no bias [...]. The sound of English pianos is beautiful, but heavy and thick,

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Ann Griffiths and Richard Macnutt, 'Erard', www.doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.42471, accessed 1 June 2020.

8
Christopher Nobbs, 'Chopin's Piano Actions: A Comparison of the Actions of Broadwood, Pleyel and Erard', in Alec Cobbe (ed.), *Chopin's Swansong: The Paris and London Pianos of his Last Performances* (London: The Chopin Society, 2010), 39–40.

9
Christopher Clarke 'Les Particularités de Pleyel' [The particularities of Pleyel], in Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger (ed.), *Interpréter Chopin* [Interpreting Chopin] (Paris: Musée de la Musique, 2005), 36.

10
Chopin described Broadwood fortepianos as 'real [London] Pleyel' (Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher*, 26).

11
Nobbs, 'Chopin's Piano Actions', 42 (Figure 56. Scale drawings by Christopher Nobbs of the three piano actions. Sections of the actions at Middle C), courtesy of Christopher Nobbs and the Cobbe Collection Trust.

12
Frank Baxter, 'Piano World: Grand Piano Action', www.pianoworld.com/piano-info/grand-piano-action/, accessed 1 July 2020.

keyboard to my will, to control the action of keys and hammers as I wish it',¹⁵ and this impression may derive from how the Erard's hammer reacts to the player's touch, as demonstrated in Example 1.

The video in Example 1 demonstrates the motion of the Erard's hammer. The first strike is fast and strong, producing a *forte* sound.¹⁶ The second strike is slow and gentle, with the intention of producing a soft *p* sound, but the hammer does not get enough power to rise to hit the string, and cannot produce a sound. Since the second strike does not produce a sound, a third strike is made to create a *p* sound. This strike is much softer than the first, but does not change the speed of attack. The video shows that the change of dynamics controlled by the fingers from the first strike to the third makes little difference to the speed of the hammer's movement. The hammer bounces after each strike, moving quickly and powerfully.

2.4. Pleyel's hammer motion

The Pleyel has a much simpler action compared to the Erard, but enables more direct contact between the performer and the instrument. According to Christopher Nobbs, 'the action's particular virtue was an intimacy of sensation – subliminal perhaps, yet significant – where the player is aware of the sequence of engagement, acceleration, and release in each descent of a key'.¹⁷

On the Pleyel, the hammer is able to react to the speed of the touch on the keyboard: it moves slowly if the key is pressed slowly, and swiftly if the key is struck quickly (Example 2).¹⁸ Chopin commented: 'I prefer a Pleyel if I feel alert, ready to make my fingers work without fatigue' as 'my fingers feel in more immediate contact with the hammers, which then translate precisely and faithfully the feeling I want to produce and the effect I want to obtain'.¹⁹ The sensitive and precise action of Pleyel's hammers, demonstrated in Example 2, suggests how the instrument enabled Chopin to 'translate precisely and faithfully the feeling' he wanted.

In Example 2, the first strike is made quickly, at the same speed as the first and third strikes on the Erard video, giving a moderate *mf* sound. The second strike demonstrates how the Pleyel reacts to a gentle and slow touch. As the key is pressed slowly, the hammer also comes up slowly and synchronises the movement with the touch on the key. While the Erard fortepiano could not hit the string when a key was struck slowly, the Pleyel fortepiano was able to hit the string even with a slow touch.

2.5. How the differences affect performance

These differences can cause variations in performance, especially in slow and quiet sections. Listening to the performance of the second subject of the Sonata's first movement on the Erard fortepiano (Example 3),²⁰ one can hear bumps caused by each note. This is

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Antoine Marmontel, *Histoire du piano et de ses origines* [History of the piano and its origins] (Paris: Heugel, 1885), 256.

16
In this video, the double escapement can also be observed. Each time a note is held, the hammer gently shifts up before returning to its original position. This allows the note to be played again.

17
Nobbs, 'Chopin's Piano Actions', 39.

18
Example 2 is available at youtu.be/O3uKev5klrc.

19
Marmontel, *Histoire du piano et de ses origines*, 256.

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Example 3 is available at youtu.be/vBQJUeR6asQ.

due to the swift motion of the hammer hitting the strings, which occurs even when gently playing a quiet *p* sound, as illustrated in the slow-motion video of Example 1. Subtle differences between the touches controlled by the performer cannot be precisely reflected in the hammer motions on the Erard compared to the Pleyel. On the other hand, it is possible on the Pleyel to create a mellow *p* sound if the player controls soft touches to create smooth *legato* lines (Example 4).²¹

Although the Erard mechanism does not react to slow touches as much as the Pleyel mechanism, this swift motion of the hammer on the Erard has the effect of producing a more sonorous sound than on the Pleyel. It is apparent that the double escapement action, where the hammer hits the strings very swiftly and moves back quickly to the halfway point, also enables the production of bigger sounds.

Examples 5 and 6 show the hammer's motion on a modern Steinway D piano:²² the first video when the note is played *mf*, the second video when it is played *pp*. In the first video, the hammer is raised swiftly with momentum, as in the Erard video. When the key is hit very softly, in the second video (Example 6), the speed of the hammer's motion is adjusted according to the touch on the key, yet the momentum to the hammer can be seen from its bounce after hitting the string. The modern piano hammer has a similar motion to that found on the Erard fortepiano, but the speed and release of the motion are more controlled and react to various touches on the keys without losing the momentum of the striking hammer.

2.6. Sound decay

When playing the melodic line of the first subject of the Second Sonata (see Figure 4) on the Pleyel fortepiano, I was able to imagine a '*portamento*' effect between intervals, especially in the sixth interval, akin to the rhythmic distortion often found in performances of Romantic repertoire by string players or singers. This effect, demonstrated in Example 7, was an unexpected discovery while I was playing on the Pleyel fortepiano to examine the features of the tone and explore effective ways of performing on the instrument.²³ Although I could also hear this '*portamento*' between paired notes on the Erard fortepiano, the Pleyel gave a clearer and more obvious effect. It was a surprise to me that I had experienced an illusion of *portamento*, which was what Chopin was teaching and seeking in his piano playing.²⁴ The Pleyel fortepiano taught me to recognise this *portamento* as being a natural feature in the musical continuity.

The sound produced by fortepianos has a much shorter decay compared to that on modern pianos, and it occurs immediately after a key is pressed. On one hand, this means that it is more difficult to play *legato*, especially when the notes have longer values,

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Example 4 is available at youtu.be/BFYRfISphc.

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Example 5 is available at youtu.be/clnCyb-RKF8.
Example 6 is available at youtu.be/vcHZJaxtGV0.

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Example 7 is available at youtu.be/kYJPZwwTRkO.

24
Karasowski, *Friedrich Chopin*, 94.

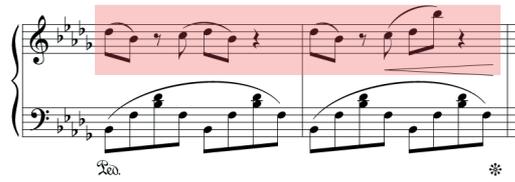


Figure 4. Fryderyk Chopin, Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, first subject motif, bars 10–11.

as there is virtually no resonance left by the time the next note is played. At the same time, however, this short sound decay enables the fortepianos to create the ‘*portamento*’ effect. When executing a *portamento*, a singer or string player will decrease the volume of the tone during the slide.²⁵ This decreased volume of sound is important for *portamento*. When a piano is played, to achieve an effect that relates to the *portamento* approach, it is vital for the performer to listen closely to the decrease in sound, as this enables a *portamento* sound to be imagined. On fortepianos, especially on the Pleyel, the shape of the decay makes this easier, since the sound starts to fade immediately after a note is played.

Considering that Chopin was an admirer of bel canto singing and stressed to his pupils how listening to songs could improve their performance skills on the piano,²⁶ it is reasonable to speculate how Chopin came to be particularly fond of the action of the Pleyel, which helps the performer to think and play with a singing approach, like a *portamento* effect. Wilhelm von Lenz (1809–1883), who was a pupil of Chopin and formerly of Liszt, states that ‘one should follow the style of Pasta, of the great Italian school of singing.’²⁷ Lenz repeated that observation with regard to the cantilena passages in the third movement of this Second Sonata.²⁸ Emilie Gretsches (1821–1877), who had lessons with Chopin, recalls that ‘His playing is entirely based on the vocal style of Rubini, Malibran and Grisi, etc.’²⁹ Similarly, Jean [Jan] Kleczyński (1837–95), a Polish pianist, composer, teacher, musical author and pupil of Chopin’s pupils,³⁰ also states that ‘Chopin’s advice was, that this theory [of musical declamation] should be grounded upon the rules which guide vocalists, and that it should be perfected by hearing good singers.’³¹

If players do not investigate this singing approach on the Pleyel, the instrument will not reveal its features, but when pianists communicate with the instrument and control their touch sufficiently, with consideration, they will be able to incorporate these vocal affects. Working on the Pleyel naturally led me to consider the singing tone.

Comparing sound decay on the instruments used in this research can help us to appreciate the significant differences between the fortepianos and the modern piano, and how these affect the

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An example of singing can be found in Daniel Shigo, ‘No 5 The Portamento’, *youtu.be/VzUABTPOpvA*, and an example of string instruments in professor V, ‘Violin Lesson #56: The Portamento/Slide’ (00:00:34-00:00:36), *youtu.be/OYTQIIX-Drwl?t=34s*.

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Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher*, 44.

27

Wilhelm Lenz, ‘Übersichtliche Beurteilung der Pianoforte-Kompositionen von Chopin’ [A clear assessment of Chopin’s piano compositions], in *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung*, cited in Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher*, 44.

28

Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher*, 111.

29

Maria von Grewingk, *Eine Tochter Alt-Rigas, Schülerin Chopins* [A young lady in Old Riga, a pupil of Chopin] (Riga: Löffler, 1928), 9–10.

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Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher*, 102.

31

Jean Kleczyński, *How to Play Chopin: The Works of Frederic Chopin, their Proper Interpretation*, tr. Alfred Whittingham (London: Reeves, 1913 [1879]), 55.



Figure 5. Fryderyk Chopin, Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, movt III, opening. Sound decay on a modern piano.



Figure 6. Fryderyk Chopin, Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, movt III, opening. Sound decay on an 1848 Pleyel fortepiano.

Figure 7. Fryderyk Chopin, Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, movt III, bars 13–30 (Breitkopf & Härtel edn, ed. Johannes Brahms, p. 13).

approach taken by the performer. The general differences in sound decay between the modern piano and the Pleyel fortepiano are compared in the following diagrams (Figures 5 and 6). These show the sound decay of each instrument taken from a performance of the same excerpt; the opening of the third movement from the Second Piano Sonata (Figure 7). One can clearly see that the sound of the Pleyel has a shorter decay, so it creates fluctuation and triangular shapes, while the modern piano resonates longer, so the sound decay has a more continuous line and gentler slopes. The right hand plays chords on every crotchet beat in this section, which allows the differences in the sound decay to be clearly observed.

Also, the diagram by Gabriel Weinreich shows the typical sound decay on modern pianos.³² After the first phase of the decay, the rate of which is high, the sound in the second phase decays more gradually and slowly, lasting for longer than on a fortepiano, giving an extended note with a more continuous sound. That is why the sound decay from the performance of the third movement (Figure 5) has less fluctuation. While the modern piano sustains the sound for longer and has a more gradual decay, the fortepiano has a much shorter and steeper decay (Figure 6). This short sound decay on the fortepiano can help pianists to hear the 'quiet moment' which enables the production of a *portamento* effect.

The longer decay of the sound on a modern piano helps pianists to hear longer tones and to maintain the sound for longer, even in soft dynamics. There are benefits to these tones, such as maintaining a sufficient volume of sound and enabling the creation of *legato*, even with notes in longer values. In contrast, it is more difficult to create the *portamento* effect. Because of its longer decay, the sound sustains for longer in a louder volume, so the instrument does not, by its nature, assist the player in hearing the *portamento* effect.

I have observed that the way I listen to the melodic line has changed since I discovered the *portamento* effect in this passage. In my performance in Example 8, recorded on a modern piano before commencing this research, the melody of the first subject in the first movement is played clearly; it is rhythmically stricter, and gives a more angular line, rather than a singing smooth tone.³³ The interpretation that I used to apply to the melody in this passage was not in a singing style, as I thought that the motif, which is used throughout the piece, needed to be heard clearly, with a rather *marcato* approach. Also, my interpretation was that the melody should be rhythmically precise, rather than leaving freedom for a singing quality, because the agitated fast tempo would not provide a rhythmical freedom or enough time and space to 'sing' the melodic line. Judging by the existing discography, approaches to agogic manipulation concerning this particular motif have varied a great deal. A rhythmically strict reading of this motif is relatively common among pianists, and similar interpretations are offered by such pianists as Vladimir Ashkenazy (1992) and Howard Shelley (2003).³⁴

32 See 'Figure 1. Typical decay of a piano tone by the sound pressure level versus time (Eb3 = 311 Hz)', from Gabriel Weinreich, 'The Coupled Motion of Piano Strings', in Anders Askenfelt (ed.), *Five Lectures on the Acoustics of the Piano*, www.speech.kth.se/music/5_lectures/weinreic/motion.html, accessed 1 March 2018.

33 Example 8 is available at youtu.be/iTPeTK1_Y3c.

34 Vladimir Ashkenazy, *Favourite Chopin [Disc 2]* (Decca, 1992); Howard Shelley, *Chopin: Piano Sonatas No. 2/Preludes* (Regis, 2003).

However, thanks to my experience of performing this passage on the Pleyel fortepiano, new interpretive possibilities have suggested themselves. Initially, I thought that this *portamento* was more effective in slower sections, such as the second subject of the first movement, but I found that it also worked effectively in this fast passage in the first subject. Performing on the Pleyel fortepiano, the instrument responded to my touch in a different way, and I realised it was possible to maintain a singing tone, even in this agitated section at a fast tempo (Example 9).³⁵

By analysing the cause of this *portamento* effect, which comes from the shorter decay of each note on the fortepiano, I have identified the cause of the change in my hand's movements. As each note on the Pleyel fortepiano lasts a shorter time than on a modern piano, I was unconsciously trying to hold the key longer to cover the shorter sound decay, switching from a more rounded hand shape (Figure 8) to flatter fingers (Figure 9).



Figure 8. Right-hand position before starting the research.

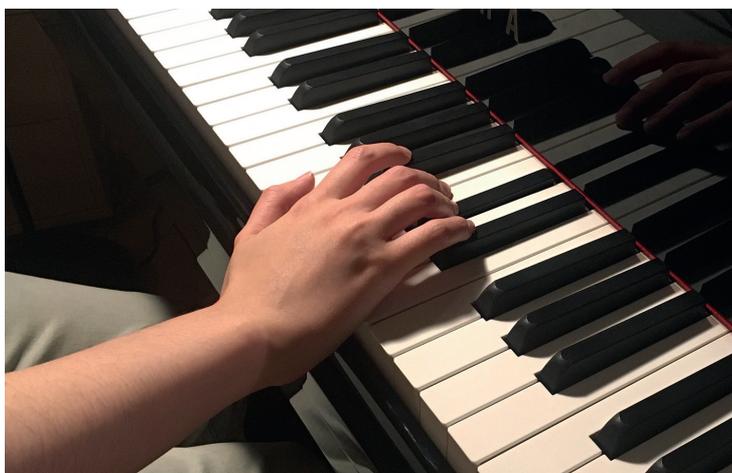


Figure 9. Right-hand position after the research.

³⁵
Example 9 is available at youtu.be/R4QJaXteBVQ.

This flat-finger approach gave two results. The first is that I now hold the quaver notes on down-beats in the right-hand part, such as D₅ flat before B₄ flat and B₅ flat in bars 9 to 11, with the finger slightly longer (highlighted in Figure 10). This is to maintain a stronger *legato* by overlapping the second note with the first. This did not occur when I was playing with a rounded hand (see Figure 8), as I was playing the passage more with the fingertips, for a *marcato* effect, rather than to create a smooth *legato*.

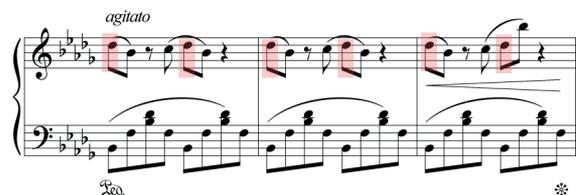


Figure 10. Fryderyk Chopin, Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, movt I, first subject, bars 9–11.

The second outcome is that this stronger *legato* (holding the first quaver notes a little longer) slightly extended the time taken to prepare and reach the ascending interval of a sixth; for example, reaching from D₅ flat played with the second finger to B₅ flat played with the fifth finger (the third bar in Figure 10) takes slightly longer than the interval of a third down from D₅ flat played by the fourth finger to B₄ flat played by the second finger (the first and second bars in Figure 10). Because of this, the *portamento* effect is more obvious for the sixth, as it takes a slightly longer time, and the short decay of the sound on the D₅ flat is more clearly heard. In Example 7, the *portamento* effect can be observed more clearly where the sixth is played.

In general, when I play a passage containing wide intervals, a sixth and greater, I take a little more time between the two notes and play them slightly more slowly than the notes in smaller intervals. This is to imitate the performance of singers, who need to take more time over wide intervals. I was applying this technique regularly on the modern piano even before starting this research, but not for this passage in the first subject of the Sonata, as I had thought that it should be played *marcato*. It was only through my investigation of the passage on the Pleyel fortepiano, in this research, that I reconsidered my approach. The fortepiano told me that it is possible to have a singing tone in this passage, even at the fast tempo, by changing the way one listens to the sound and, consequently, one's touch.

In the past, I played the melody shown in Figure 11 (upper staves of the right-hand part) with a different articulation. Example 10 shows the movement of the fingers used previously.³⁶ My palm and fingers are in a fixed shape and the motion tends to draw a straight,

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Example 10 is available at
youtu.be/Vdl3pfCVCkM.

vertical line. This fast up-and-down motion generates a slight accent on the quaver notes C5 in bars 9 to 11 and D6 flat in bars 13 to 15 (highlighted in Figure 11) in Example 10, as well as in Example 8.

Figure 11. Fryderyk Chopin, Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, movt I, first subject, bars 8–19.

In contrast to the earlier recording in Example 10, Example 11 shows the finger movements after the research, indicating significant differences in the hand motion and the position of the right hand.³⁷ The palm is flatter and more wrist is used. The motion of the hand in Example 11 has greater flexibility and draws a circling motion rather than the straight, vertical line found in Example 10. The sound gives more fluidity and flexibility, and creates a flowing melodic line. The accent on the quaver C5 notes is also removed.

Chopin taught his pupils the use and importance of flexible wrist motion, as found in his statement: ‘The wrist: respiration in the voice’.³⁸ Also, according to the recollections of his pupils, it can be seen that Chopin treated the movement of the wrist as an aid to the performer, imitating a singing approach. Emilie Gretsch described Chopin’s approach: ‘Chopin drew from the instrument the secret of

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Example 11 is available at youtu.be/phOfVmD-xq4.

38
Fryderyk Chopin, *Project de Méthode*, cited in Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher*, 45.

Figure 12. Fryderyk Chopin, Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, movt I, second subject, bars 41–56 (Breitkopf & Härtel edn, ed. Johannes Brahms, p. 3).

how to express breathing. At every point where a singer would take a breath, the accomplished pianist [...] should take care to raise the wrist so as to let it fall again on the singing note with the greatest suppleness imaginable³⁹

I had been playing the opening of the Second Piano Sonata with a fixed wrist, but in response to the instrument, Chopin's statement and the *portamento* effect found on the instrument, I changed to a different wrist movement, which now enables me to understand, as a pianist, what Chopin intended and taught his pupils. This lower wrist position, found in Figure 9 and Example 11, helps the wrist to have a 'breath' by lifting it up. It is difficult to achieve this flexible, lifting motion of the wrist if its original position is already higher, as in the earlier performance in Figure 8 and in Example 10.

As previously mentioned, it is difficult for modern pianists to hear a *portamento* between the two intervals on modern pianos, because the volume of the sound usually lasts until the next played note. On fortepianos, the sound – once played – fades immediately or at least has a much shorter duration than on a modern piano. On the

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Grewingk, *Eine Tochter*,
9–10.

fortepiano, as the sound decays more rapidly, pianists need to keep listening to and imagining the sound sustained for longer, after it is produced. As the sound fades away immediately, it is vital to keep imagining how the sound continues to create a smooth *legato* line.

This approach means that listening to the sustaining sound between two notes is crucial, and it leads pianists to listen to their sound more carefully. When I was playing only on modern pianos, the way I listened to the sound was more limited, compared to my approach as a result of this research using fortepianos. As the sound lasts longer on modern pianos, I was listening to the sound between two notes on the same volume level. By way of example, a performance of the second subject (Figure 12) employing this approach can be heard in Example 12.⁴⁰ The volume of the sound, of course, decreases once the key has been struck, but it is difficult to sense this on a modern piano due to the slower sound decay. However, listening to the sound through its decay enables the performer to feel, recognise and be conscious of the shape of the tone, as demonstrated in Example 13.⁴¹

3. Pedalling

As well as listening skills, pedalling also assumes an important role in piano performance. György Sándor takes Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto as an example and says that players must not take the pedal marks simply because they are on the score, but 'must search for the real meaning behind the indication in all pedal markings'.⁴² Joseph Banowetz and Maurice Hinson also suggest the importance of searching for the real meaning of pedal markings.⁴³

Pedalling is an important aspect of Chopin's music and his approach to performance.⁴⁴ When Robert Schumann listened to Chopin's playing of his own Etude in A flat major, Op. 25 No. 1, he praised Chopin's performance and the captivating result obtained through his innovative use of pedal techniques, as 'it was rather an undulation of the A flat major chord, brought out more loudly here and there with the pedal, but, exquisitely entangled in the harmony'.⁴⁵ Antoine Marmontel also commented that 'Chopin used the pedals with marvellous discretion'.⁴⁶ Chopin scrupulously indicated his intended use of pedalling in his notation, and one can gain greater insight into his intentions by using historical instruments.

Just as the hammer action and the instrument's construction are different, so too the damper pedal on the fortepiano and the modern piano work differently. For example, there are plenty of long pedal markings which are rarely adopted by modern pianists because they are unlikely to create the effect on a modern piano that the composer originally wanted. Since the sound decay on a modern piano lasts a relatively long time (as explained earlier), the notes

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Example 12 is available at youtu.be/s2XvAW_Nsf8.

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Example 13 is available at youtu.be/KGcft5UiTa8.

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György Sándor, *On Piano Playing: Motion, Sound and Expression* (New York: Schirmer, 1981), 167.

43

Joseph Banowetz, *The Pianist's Guide to Pedalling* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985), 168; Maurice Hinson, 'Pedalling the Piano Works of Chopin' in *ibid.*, 195.

44

Hinson, 'Pedaling the Piano Works of Chopin', 179.

45

Robert Schumann, *Music and Musician: Essays and Criticisms* (London: Reeves, 1877), 199–200.

46

Marmontel, *Histoire du piano et de ses origines*, 256–257.

sustained by its damper pedal create a much louder and longer sound than on historical instruments. Due to these mechanical differences, following the composer's original pedal markings may sometimes be ineffective on a modern piano. One can also find such pedal markings in Chopin's Second Sonata. At the beginning of the first movement, a long pedal marking over three or four bars can be found in the first subject (Figure 13).

A long pedal is placed through bars 5 to 8, but this is more acceptable on a modern piano, as these four bars retain the same harmony and notes and there is, as yet, no melody. While some pianists change the pedal halfway through, to avoid the sound becoming too loud, Chopin's notated effect can be captured on

Figure 13. Fryderyk Chopin, Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, movt I, first subject, bars 1–36. The long pedal markings are highlighted in red.

20 *p* *f*

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(Figure 13 continued)

a modern piano by keeping the dynamic very quiet. Conversely, the pedal markings in bars 9 to 11, and especially bars 12 to 15, can be too long for modern concert grand pianos in large concert halls. These passages include both the melody with chords of the right hand and the left hand's accompaniment in the lower register. Considering the speed, the number of notes and the register, it can sound muddy and too loud if the damper pedal is sustained for such a long time on a modern piano in a big concert hall. Moving to an Erard or Pleyel fortepiano, the marked pedalling throughout this passage works perfectly, and it does not give the impression of too heavy a sound or of the pedal being too long.

So, what can be done on a modern piano? The composer gave long pedal markings, but they are often ineffective on a modern

The image shows a musical score for Fryderyk Chopin's Sonata in B-flat minor, Op. 35, movement I, first subject, bars 8-30. The score is written for piano and consists of six systems of music. Each system has a treble clef on the top staff and a bass clef on the bottom staff. The key signature is B-flat minor (three flats) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo marking 'agitato' is placed above the first system. The bass notes in the bottom staff are highlighted in red. Pedal markings, indicated by a star symbol and the word 'ped.', are placed below the bass staff. Dynamics include 'f' (forte) and 'p' (piano). The score shows a complex interplay between the two hands, with the bass line providing a rhythmic and harmonic foundation.

Figure 14. Fryderyk Chopin, Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, movt I, first subject, bars 8–30. The bass notes are highlighted in red.

piano. Should we ignore them, because of the differences of the instrument, or follow them, even if they do not create the same effect on a modern piano as on fortepianos? During the research process, I observed how these pedal markings work, and how they affect the performance of the piece. I will now explain what I found in Chopin's pedalling and how these long pedal markings can be interpreted on a modern piano.

When I perform the first subject on a modern piano, I change the pedal once or twice a bar in order not to lose the quaver rest and to keep the sound rather quiet. When I applied the same pedalling on the fortepiano and changed the pedal as frequently as I do on the modern piano, the action worked well and I did not notice anything

Figure 15. Fryderyk Chopin, Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, movt I, first subject, bars 13–20 and 29–36 (repr. from the Polish National Edition, ed. Jan Ekier and Paweł Kamiński, pp. 11–12). The pedal markings are highlighted in red and the dynamics in blue.

amiss. However, when I applied the long pedalling, as marked originally in the score, I found that the original pedalling worked better in terms of the phrasing and that the accompaniment part of the left hand flowed more smoothly. When I went back to the fortepiano and applied the frequent pedalling that I employ on the modern piano, I felt that it prevented me from maintaining the long phrasing that I had found with the long pedalling.

Listening to the recording of the performance on the Erard fortepiano with the frequent pedal changes, the bass note of the left hand, where the pedal is changed, sounds more obvious each time I hear it. In the recording in Example 14, the bass notes of B2 flat and C3 sound more distinctly in every minim beat (highlighted in Figure 14).⁴⁷ In contrast, the bass notes in Example 15, where the original pedalling is applied, are more harmonised within the melody and the chords.⁴⁸ Therefore, it is possible to say that the original longer pedalling supports the creation of longer phrases. Maurice Hinson has also stated that Chopin's pedalling indicates an important role in phrasing.⁴⁹

I also noticed the differences where Chopin marked either a long pedal or a short pedal. The long pedal markings in bars 9 to 11 and bars 12 to 15 help the performer to feel a long melodic line and to

47
Example 14 is available at youtu.be/HjBoG2TUWgg.

48
Example 15 is available at youtu.be/h3GoighNnOM.

49
Hinson, 'Pedaling the Piano Works of Chopin', 183.

move forward, while the short pedal markings, starting from bar 16, can suggest that the player should articulate the short slurs of the melody more clearly. Following this long and short pedalling marked in the score on the fortepiano, the articulation and phrasing can be distinguished more clearly, as demonstrated in the performance on the Erard fortepiano in Example 16.⁵⁰

Therefore, in my opinion, Chopin's pedalling is intended not only to sustain the sounds; it also indicates the articulation and phrasing. After comparing the short and long pedal markings on the fortepiano, I realised their effects, as well as the purpose of the pedalling in this music.

One may assume that Chopin marked pedalling simply in accordance with harmonic changes. Indeed, looking at the first subject, the pedal is changed according to the harmony. For example, bars 9 to 11 and bars 12 to 15 keep the same harmony and the pedal is sustained accordingly; and from bars 16 onwards, the harmony changes every minim beat with the pedal also changing every minim beat. However, the difference between bars 13 to 20 and bars 29 to 36 in the first subject (Figure 15) indicates that the pedalling is changed even though the harmony remains the same each time. Why would this be the case?

The first difference occurs in bars 16 and 32 (Figure 15, marked in red). These two bars have the same harmony and the same melody, with a few variations; however, the pedalling is different. The first time, in bar 16, the pedal marking changes every minim beat, while later, in bar 32, Chopin keeps the pedal throughout. The variations of the melody also suggest different articulations in bars 16 and 32. In bar 16, the top melodic line is held in crotchets, and these longer notes create a slight emphasis on every minim note. In bar 32, these crotchets are removed, and the similar texture from the previous bars continues.

Considering my earlier contention that pedalling could indicate phrases in Chopin's writing, it can be seen that each occurrence of this phrase has a different intention. The reasons for these differences can be found by looking at the following bars. In bars 17 to 20, there are frequent changes of dynamics, and these create a big dynamic contrast in each bar, from *f* to *p* (Figure 15, marked in blue). In contrast, in bars 33 to 36, there is only a single *crescendo* towards *ff* in bar 37, without the contrast of *f* and *p* that had occurred in the previous iteration (Figure 15, marked in blue). The dynamics of the first example in bars 17 to 20 would suggest an intention to prevent the melody from flowing straight forward, and it creates an effect in which the music struggles to move forward easily. There is a conflict between the melody that wants to move forward and the frequent dynamic changes that prevent its momentum. The latter part, in bars 33 to 36, would suggest one single smooth line of movement towards the next phrase to reach *ff* in bar 37, and there is no strain to prevent its movement.

⁵⁰
Example 16 is available at
youtu.be/LbOKtJ9iRE0.

Figure 16. Fryderyk Chopin, Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, movt I, development, bars 153–160 (repr. from the Polish National Edition, ed. Jan Ekier and Paweł Kamiński, p. 17). The pedal markings are highlighted.

The pedal markings in bars 16 and 32 (Figure 15, marked in red) already indicate what is going to happen in the dynamics in the next phrase by the frequency of the pedalling. In bar 16, the pedal is changed every minim beat, the same rate as in the following bars, with frequent dynamic changes. In contrast, bar 32 has the pedal kept down for the whole bar, and there is no change of pedal in the bar. This helps to keep the line growing from the previous bars with long pedalling, as well as providing a continuous line towards bar 35, where a single *crescendo* starts towards *ff* in bar 37 (Figure 15, marked in blue). The phrase is not interrupted by frequent dynamic changes or by the pedalling, and it creates a longer connecting line to the *ff*.

When listening to existing recordings, I have observed that these subtle differences in the pedal and phrase markings are sometimes not apparent in performance. For example, in performances by pianists such as Martha Argerich (2015 [1975]),⁵¹ Vladimir Ashkenazy (1992),⁵² Yulianna Avdeeva (2010) and Yundi Li (2011),⁵³ there are no differences in the phrasings between bars 16 and 32, and all the pianists play both bars with one single line (that is, without separating the phrase in bar 16 by a crotchet beat). Some pianists even change the pedalling completely: they play the first phrase of the first subject (bars 9 to 24) with no pedal, or almost without pedal, to create more detached notes, possibly to differentiate from the second phrase of the first subject (bars 25 to 40), where they start using the pedal more generously. Such examples can be found in performances by Sergei Rachmaninov (2009 [1925-1942]),⁵⁴ Mikhail Pletnev (1988) and Howard Shelley (2003).⁵⁵

In contrast, a few pianists, such as Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli (1968),⁵⁶ Maurizio Pollini (1985) and Grigory Sokolov (1992), do

51
Martha Argerich, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Scherzo No. 2, Andante Spianato & Grande Polonaise*: Argerich (Japan: Universal Music, 2015 [1975]).

52
Ashkenazy, *Favourite Chopin* [Disc 2]

53
Chopin Institute, 'Yuliana Avdeeva – Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35 (third stage, 2010)', www.youtube.be/O8JkCUVsxu, accessed 1 August 2017; Yundi Li, *Yundi – Live In Beijing*, (Warner Classics, 2011).

54
Sergei Rachmaninov, *Rachmaninov - Sergei: Piano Solo Recordings, Vol. 1* (Victor Recordings 1925–1942), (Naxos, 2009).

55
Mikhail Pletnev, *Chopin: Piano Sonata #2, 4 Nocturnes, Scherzo #2, Barcarolle* (Virgin Classics, 1988), Shelley, *Chopin: Piano Sonatas No. 2/Preludes*.

56
Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, *Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli* [Disc 2] (Aura, 1968).

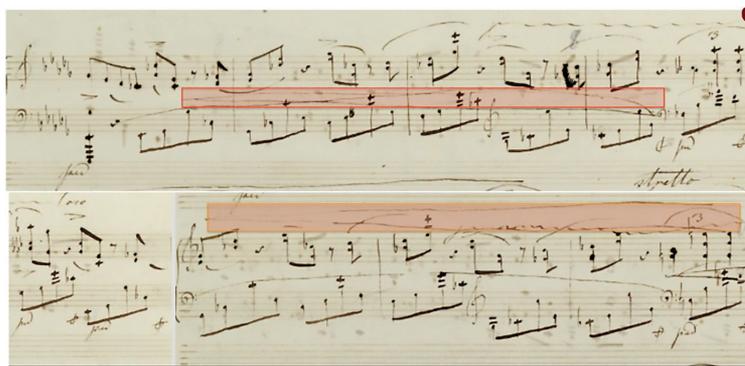


Figure 17. Fryderyk Chopin, Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35, movt I, development, bars 153–160, from the manuscript copy by Adolf Gutmann (National Digital Library POLONA). The dynamics markings are highlighted in red.

observe the differences between the phrase marks, as suggested by the dynamics and pedalling.⁵⁷ For example, Grigory Sokolov's 1992 performance clearly suggests the differences between the first (bars 9 to 24) and second phrases (bars 25 to 40) of the first subject. The melody (in crotchets) of the first phrase is articulated in bar 16 as a distinct line followed by a big contrast of *f* and *p* in bars 17 to 20. The second phrase, in bar 32, is played more smoothly, with a flowing, rhythmic movement.⁵⁸

As demonstrated by this example, Chopin's pedalling works not simply in a harmonic way, but in many other, perhaps more subtle, ways. Maurice Hinson also says that it is common in Chopin to find inflexible rules of pedal for identical passages, and that the same manner cannot be followed for these passages.⁵⁹ The development section of the first movement shows another clear example of Chopin using the pedal for articulation. In bars 153 to 156, the pedal is kept down, as the music maintains the same harmony. However, in bars 157 to 160, where the passage is the same as in the previous four bars, Chopin writes pedal markings only at the first and the last minim beats of the phrase, as shown in Figure 16.

These different pedal markings create different articulations in the first phrase of bars 153 to 156 and the second phrase of bars 157 to 160 in the same passages. By following the pedalling instructions, the first phrase creates a long line by sustaining a harmonic build-up for four bars, especially because the lower register of the left hand gets louder, according to the longer pedalling. On the other hand, the second phrase demonstrates more detailed articulation, clearer rhythms and a lighter and livelier character, due to the absence of the pedal.

By looking further at the dynamic marks in the score, the first phrase of bars 153 to 156 has a hairpin *cresc.* in the middle of the two staves, which can suggest a *cresc.* to be expressed by both hands, as the whole sound is maintained by the pedal. Moving to the next

57

Maurizio Pollini, *Chopin: Piano Sonatas Nos. 2 & 3* (Deutsche Grammophon, 1985), Grigory Sokolov, *Chopin: Piano Sonata #2, Etudes, Op. 25*, (Naïve, 1992).

58

Again, unlike the majority of pianists, Grigory Sokolov uses a longer pedal for the second phrase, as well, by following the original pedal marking.

59

Hinson, 'Pedaling the Piano Works of Chopin', 193.

phrase, in bars 157 to 160, a hairpin *cresc.* is placed above the right hand's passage, which may indicate that this *cresc.* is different to the one in the previous phrase. As the *cresc.* is intentionally placed in a different position, one can understand that it is particularly for the right hand to build up, while the left is kept rather quiet, so as not to disturb the right, with a lighter pedalling. The position of the *cresc.* can also be found in the manuscript copy by Adolf Gutmann (Figure 17).⁶⁰

Considering this dynamic marking, along with the pedal mark, a case can be made that Chopin's pedalling is connected to the articulation, as well as the dynamics, phrasing and various other aspects. By understanding the features of Chopin's pedalling, one can appreciate and create the effect of the original pedal (as revealed on the fortepiano), even if the original pedalling is not always applied.

The examples discussed thus far demonstrate that it is important to look at Chopin's pedal markings when performing on a modern piano. Even if they initially seem at odds with the phrase marks or *legato* indications, there always appears to be some justification, and his markings allow the performer to comprehend the piece in more detail. Examining Chopin's pedalling is not simply for the purposes of using the pedal, but also as an important means for analysing and understanding his indications beyond the written notes.

To conclude, I would recommend that performers try to use Chopin's own pedalling, in order to seek what he intended. Some markings do not work well or are not compatible with a modern piano, but at least the performer can speculate on the fundamental reasons for the pedalling indications. It is important to explore the meaning of the indications before disregarding them simply because they do not suit the modern piano.

Period instruments are among the best tools for understanding the meaning of markings and the composer's intentions, seeking a solution on the modern piano. As experienced through my research, period instruments sometimes suggest an important key that would not be found by working only with modern instruments, and these create opportunities to further improve performance. Since some edited versions alter Chopin's pedalling indications, as they are sometimes independent of the harmony and cause blurring as a result (although Chopin usually created these instances deliberately),⁶¹ it is important to refer to various editions and, where possible, to the composer's original manuscript, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the markings.

4. Conclusion

This article has examined the mechanical differences between Pleyel and Erard instruments, and how the characteristics of the two fortepianos are affected by their different mechanical features.

60

The National Digital Library POLONA, 'Chopin, Fryderyk (1810–1849) Sonate : pour le Piano forte : Op. 35', www.polona.pl/item/sonate-pour-le-piano-forte-op-35,MTEyNDkxMQ/9/#info:metadata, accessed 1 July 2020.

61

For example, editions edited by pianists such as Xaver Scharwenka (1833), Hermann Scholtz (1879), Claude Debussy (1915), Alfred Cortot (1930) and Ignacy Paderewski (1950) altered Chopin's pedal markings in the first movement of the Second Piano Sonata in bars 32 and 158–159.

This was a revelation to me, and connected me to the sensation that Chopin had on these two different instruments, as demonstrated by the previously introduced quotes. Chopin told his pupils that they should not rely on the beautiful ready-made tone that was already provided by the instrument, but should work hard to create something even better.⁶² Emilie Gretsch recalled that ‘Things that came out perfectly on my solid and robust Erard became abrupt and ugly on Chopin’s [Pleyel] piano’.⁶³ This ‘ready-made tone’ could be likened to a ready meal – a convenient option that is time-efficient and sates one’s hunger. On the contrary, not relying on the ready-made tone is like cooking by oneself from scratch. It is harder and takes more time and effort, but through this process a better quality and greater variety of outcome can be achieved. Working on the Pleyel fortepiano provided me with an opportunity to not rely on the ‘ready-made tone’ but to work by myself with the instrument to find out what works effectively with different touches. During the course of this practical research on these instruments, I gained the same sensation that Chopin felt on these two different fortepianos. Investigating the relationship between Chopin and his instruments in this way helped me to find a way to establish the relationship between performer and instrument.

Thanks to the development of the piano since the mid-nineteenth century, modern pianos are now well-equipped to accommodate various approaches and to enable pianists to achieve what was impossible on fortepianos in past centuries. However, there are fewer opportunities for pianists to consider whether what they do is effective, as modern pianos are more capable of concealing less effective touches compared to fortepianos. The results of different touches are more obvious on period instruments, as they react more directly, honestly and sensitively, because of the simpler mechanism: this straightforward reaction from the fortepiano shows us more clearly what works and what does not work on the instrument. Chopin also alerted his pupils that they should not rely too much on instruments with a beautiful ready-made tone. Gretsch recalls Chopin’s comments: ‘You can thump it and bash it, it makes no difference: the sound is always beautiful and the ear doesn’t ask for anything more since it hears a full, resonant tone’.⁶⁴ Through this research, I have realised that different approaches fundamentally originate from how the performer listens to the sound production. Experimenting with the Pleyel and Erard fortepianos has expanded my view of how to listen to the sound, and this has led to consequences for the management of specific dimensions and how that contributes to my approach on a modern piano. Pianists tend to focus on analysing differences of touch, tone or performing style when comparing performances, but these are judged by appearances. I believe, as a result of this research, that the fundamental differences stem from how one *listens* to the sound.

62
Grewingk, *Eine Tochter*,
15.

63
Ibid., 15.

64
Ibid., 15.

I believe that this research bridges the gap between historical and modern instrument players, as well as between theoretical and practical research into Chopin's music. For example, many recollections from Chopin's pupils and existing scholarship suggest that Chopin sought a singing quality in music performance, and Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger says that 'for Chopin, singing constituted the alpha and omega of music'.⁶⁵ However, it is not enough to know what the composer wanted; also important is how pianists can apply his wishes in practice. This research, through the detailed examinations on the Pleyel and the Erard fortepianos and a comparison of historical and modern instruments from the perspective of being a concert pianist myself, has revealed how pianists can achieve a singing quality in performance on percussive keyboard instruments. These important discoveries could not be found through scholarly knowledge alone, but needed the process of practical research. This suggests the importance of using a methodology that combines theoretical and collected scholarship with practical experience and experiments on both historical and modern instruments from the perspective of a performing artist-researcher.

65
Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher*, 14.

ABSTRACT

I explored different approaches to performing Chopin's Second Piano Sonata using my experience of playing on two period instruments: an original Pleyel 1848 grand fortepiano (known to have been played by Chopin) and an original Erard 1845 grand fortepiano. I considered how my experience of these instruments generated new knowledge which then informed my approach to performing the piece on a modern piano. This article is not intended to encourage pianists to imitate or copy my performance on historical instruments, but to re-discover period instruments in a new context and develop the ideas and perception gained from them to transform approaches to interpretation on modern pianos.

I first examined the differences between the Pleyel and Erard instruments, and how the characteristics of the two fortepianos are affected by their different mechanical features. I explain why these differences occur and how they affect performers, and this is connected to the famous statement by Chopin comparing Pleyel and Erard fortepianos.

Examining the Pleyel and Erard fortepianos and comparing historical and modern instruments from the perspective of being a concert pianist myself, this research revealed how pianists can bring out a singing quality in performance on percussive keyboard instruments. Experimenting with the Pleyel and Erard fortepianos has expanded my view of how to listen to the sound, with consequences for the management of specific dimensions and for my approach to modern pianos.

KEYWORDS

Chopin, piano, sonata, fortepiano, Pleyel, Erard, period instruments, performance, approach, mechanism, singing, *portamento*, pedal, phrasing, articulation, listening, touch, sound, practical

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Born in Tokyo, Japan, pianist Jun Ishimura made her soloist debut at the age of eight and went on to perform with Kraków State Philharmonic Orchestra at the age of 15. Since then, she has been appearing in numerous concerts with orchestra and solo recitals worldwide, including a performance of Mozart's Piano Concerto in C minor conducted by Sir Roger Norrington in London. As a chamber musician, she has collaborated with internationally renowned musicians including Wolfram Christ and Michel Arrignon.

She has won numerous prizes in prestigious international competitions, including the 54th Maria Canals Barcelona International Competition in Spain and the 2nd Takamatsu International Piano Competition in Japan, being the youngest finalist in both competitions. During her studies in the UK, she was the sole recipient of a prestigious long-term fellowship of the Japanese Government's Overseas Study Programme, awarded by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, a special body of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

Jun has a great passion for research and has been conducting practical research as a performing artist-researcher using both historical and modern pianos, drawing on her extensive performance experience as a concert pianist and fortepianist. She recently completed her doctoral research into Chopin's music at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance under the supervision of John Irving and Aleksander Szram, with generous support from the Rohm Music Foundation, and was awarded a PhD in Creative Practice (Music) from City, University of London.

She has studied with distinguished pianists including Elena Ashkenazy, Yuko Yamaoka and Kevin Kenner. In the UK she studied piano with Dina Parakhina and fortepiano with David Ward, and she received a Bachelor of Music (First Class Honours), Master of Performance (Distinction) and Artist Diploma in Performance at the Royal College of Music, with full scholarships including generous support from the ABRSM and the Sir Roger and Lady Carr Soirée d'Or Scholarship.