

Blog

Piano Practice From Czerny to Chopin

by Hermione Lal | January 15th, 2022

Glenn Gould is my favourite pianist. There, I said it. The reason I like him is because he is unconventional; unconventional in his approach to the stuffy world of classical music, unconventional in his interpretations, and unconventional in his mannerisms.



Glenn Gould



Czerny: The School of Velocity

Piano practice just wasn't very high on his list, and supposedly he practiced less than most during his concert years. After his retirement, he spent even less time at the piano. It is said, I think I know him better, "he was practicing, when at all, as little as half an hour a day, usually about one hour, never more than two."

Carl Czerny: Die Kunst der Fingerfertigkeit, Op. 740 (Fred Oldenburg, piano)



Czerny: The Art of Finger Dexterity

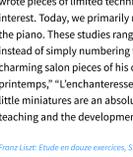
The name Carl Czerny (1791-1857) seems to automatically evoke great fear and loathing in aspiring pianists, but his technical exercises remain an essential part of nearly every pianist's training. The idea that Czerny was a mere pedagogue churning out a seemingly endless stream of unimpaired works actually originates with Robert Schumann.



Carl Czerny

We all know how difficult it is to build up muscle dexterity and muscle memory, and how easy it is to fall off the cliff. The great violinist Jascha Heifetz once said, "If I don't practice one day, I know it; two days, the critics know it; three days, the public knows it."

Johann Friedrich Burgmüller: 12 Etudes, Op. 105 (Takashi Sato, piano)



Czerny: The Art of Finger Dexterity

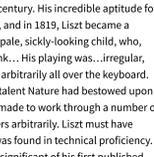
It's one thing to train the muscles of your hand, but quite another to keep your mind and ears interested in the process. As such, composers and pianists far and wide have tried to make the process of piano practice more interesting. Take for example Friedrich Burgmüller (1806-1874), a German composer and pianist.



Friedrich Burgmüller

Stephen Heller: 25 Etudes faciles, Op. 45 (Jon Vermeulen, piano)

Born in Hungary, Stephen Heller (1813-1888) was also looking to study with Carl Czerny in Vienna. However, Czerny was not only very famous, he was also very expensive.



Stephen Heller

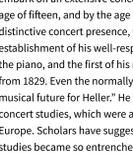
Muzio Clementi: Gradus ad Parnassum, Op. 44, Vol. 2 (Alessandro Marangoni, piano)

Muzio Clementi (1752-1832) published his three-volume Gradus ad Parnassum in 1817, 1819, and 1826. It represents, according to scholars "the culmination of his career, showcasing a veritable treasury of compositional and pianistic technique compiled from all periods of his work."



Clementi: Gradus ad Parnassum, Op. 44

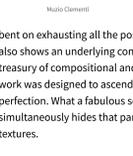
Johann Baptist Cramer: Studio per il pianoforte, Book 1, Op. 30 (Excerpt) (Giorgio Farina, piano)



Muzio Clementi

Let's stay in London for a bit, and look at the piano practice of Johann Baptist Cramer (1771-1858). If you have ever taken formal piano lessons, there is a good chance that you will have played some of Cramer's celebrated set of 84 studies for the piano.

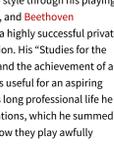
Published in two sets of 42 each in 1804 and 1810 as Studio per il pianoforte, it is still considered a cornerstone of pianistic technique today. With this collection, Cramer contributed directly to the "formulation of an idiomatic piano style through his playing and his compositions."



Johann Baptist Cramer

Benjamin Godard: Etudes mélodiques, Op. 149 (Léon Martin, piano)

The French composer Benjamin Godard (1849-1895) might not be a household name today, but he was frequently compared to the young Mozart in his time. Godard entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten as a violinist child prodigy, and he turned to composing shortly after.



Benjamin Godard

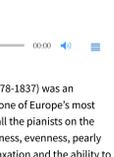
Johann Nepomuk Hummel: 24 Etudes, Op. 125 (Mary Louise Boehm, piano)

Like many of his colleagues, Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778-1837) was an enthusiastic writer of etudes. Without doubt, Hummel was one of Europe's most famous pianists, and he was even hailed as the greatest of all the pianists on the continent.



Johann Nepomuk Hummel

If you have ever taken serious piano lessons, you must surely remember countless hours of practicing scales and exercises to train and refine specific aspects of piano technique. To conclude this little survey on piano practice, I want to pay homage to Frédéric Chopin for turning mundane and boring finger exercises into a veritable art form.



Frédéric Chopin

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Frédéric Chopin: Trois Nouvelles études, Op. posth. (Roustem Salikoulov, piano)

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COMMENTS

Gary December 10, 2022 at 8:32 am The problem I had with etudes and "finger" exercises in my early days was that nowhere did I get to learn HOW to practice and how to use my hands, fingers (and elbows, shoulders, torso, etc.) to good effect.

It seems that too much finger dexterity is detrimental and can cause long-term injuries and the need to stop playing for months or years at a time. If you can play a difficult piece with the same "weakness" and "stiffness" as a 10 year old then you're probably on track to playing it skillfully and effortlessly.

And piano playing is quite easy if you learn how to play in an effortless manner in alignment with your physiology. For example, the 4th and 5th fingers are controlled by the same muscles, so cannot really be played independently.

No doubt, the great pianists in their day stumbled on these natural ways of playing by accident and took it for granted when playing the etudes of the day and composing their own works.

So what I tend to do nowadays is to focus on the fingering and whole-hand structure of various problem passages - and if it's easier to use "incorrect" fingering and simply shift the whole hand across then I play it that way.

Reply

E. Ali January 28, 2022 at 7:43 pm What about Alkan? And Godowsky?

Reply

Zelda Marshall January 24, 2022 at 1:37 pm Thank you for all the composers of etudes that you highlighted.

To answer your question about my favourite Chopin etude, it's a 4-way tie between (1) Op. 10 # 2 in a minor (so brief, but so effective)

And 2 this list of etude composers, I would like to make 2 additions: (1) Charles-Valentin Alkan. (recommending, 1813-1888. Once you get to Opus 27, the etude becomes a massive epic production.

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