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User Report on the OCVÉ Prototype Site

The Online Chopin Variorum prototype site is highly promising. The site is very useable and loaded with excellent images of both manuscript and printed sources, well supported by explanatory information. I found myself almost immediately becoming absorbed in studying the content of the site, which is sure testimony to its transparency and functionality.

If the site did nothing more than bring together clear and precise digital images of the sources of Chopin's works it would be very helpful. Until now there would be no way to study these sources, many of which are located in widely separate physical locations, side by side. I found the quality of the images to be fully acceptable. The printed sources certainly come through very well. The manuscript sources may be more variable, but even the autograph sketch [A¹] of op. 28. no. 4 is well-served, although the original document itself is less legible.

Access to the images is very direct and well-presented, starting with the list of the available sources. The ease with which the different sources can be viewed is excellent. The option that displays an individual bar from all the sources is highly useful. I found myself treating this page as a home base, from which to migrate back and forth among the sources as I tracked down variants of specific textual details. The ability to move the image tiles around was helpful, as is the option of dragging one image on top of another to overlay them for comparison.

As a test case, I chose mm. 16-17 of Op. 28 No. 4. These bars are not only the musical high point of this prelude, but contain musically important, slightly unusual dynamic notations. The OCVÉ makes it easy to ascertain that these markings vary somewhat in the disparate sources. The site also makes it possible for the user to gain an overview of the various ways in which the *stretto* indication has been placed and to explore the variant notations of the all-important < > hairpins. This is a crucial moment in the interpretation of this prelude and it is significant to be able to study how the precise location of these markings varies among the sources. The fine points of pedal markings can likewise be checked.

The site makes this sort of source study not only possible, but entirely accessible to any curious soul. It is easy to imagine an enterprising, thoughtful pianist studying the genealogy of these bars as s/he develops an interpretation of this prelude. The advantages of the access to Chopin sources provided by the OCVÉ will be especially great with a composer like Chopin whose music is played widely by amateurs. It is to be hoped that the OCVÉ will become part of the music-making of amateurs, students, and professionals across the globe. The OCVÉ will also be able to support a wide variety of research projects for students of music history and textual criticism. Part of the beauty of the site is that its possibilities are so open. Scholarly ingenuity will find a great home here.

The annotations to Op. 28 No. 4 complement the images effectively. The blue stars point out to the user the location of the major points of difference in the sources. The annotations help clarify fine points, especially in the manuscript sources, which may be hardly legible even in these high-quality digital images (for example the notation about the deleted F# in the right hand of m. 17 of Op. 28 No. 4 in the autograph sketch [A¹]). Any danger that a blue star marker could cover a key spot on the image is obviated by the option of turning off the annotations.

In sum, the OCVÉ prototype foretells a very successful site. For me, a scholar with average computer savvy, the site provided no problem in using it. The content is easily accessible. The opportunity to compare various sources is outstanding, and the site offers excellent tools for doing so.

I did note a few minor problems:

- The first day I tested the site (11 November 2004) the pop-up annotations were not working consistently. Fairly often clicking on a blue star produced an error message (e.g. 'the requested resource (/ocve/annotation165) is not available'). Presumably this was a temporary problem. It did not happen to me on 12 November 2004.
- On one of the computers on which I viewed the OCVE, the window that displays thumbnail images of all of the sources of one bar seems to be skewed too far to right of the browser window such that the edge of the page was cut off by the right side of the monitor screen.
- On several of the images faint green or blue lines are evident where the bar needed to be demarcated irregularly to include an expression marking, as in m. 11 of Op. 28 No. 20.
- The method of verbal identification of specific notes and chords within a given bar used in the annotations to Op. 28 No. 4 is precise and adequate for this work. The meaning of the annotation to m. 17 of the autograph score [A²] that in comparison to autograph sketch [A¹] 'LH chords 2–4: a–c¹–f-sharp¹–a¹, not f-sharp–a¹–c¹–f-sharp' is clear in this context. But it may be that in more rhythmically dense and texturally complex works, a more precise alternative method of indicating specific notes and chords would be preferable.
- Slightly fuller, more informative descriptions of the sources would be welcome. Users may well want to know a bit more about the provenance and physical description of the sources, paper types, and the like.
- It was easy to copy images of the sources to my computer as JPEG files. Is there a need to 'lock' the image to prevent widespread copying of them? Does this raise rights issues?
- One other question that may arise is the comprehensiveness of the sources included in the OCVE. When and if there are significant sources which are absent from the OCVE, this should be signaled to users.