

Chopin Variorum Edition: User Report

These comments are based on a short period of experimentation with the materials presently available on the developing website of the Online Chopin Variorum Edition. They also reflect some of the discussion that took place at a meeting held in the Centre for Computing in the Humanities of King's College London on 26 October 2004.

The first point to make is that, as far as I am aware, this is pioneering research that advances several light years beyond comparable attempts to present such materials online. The approach of the team has been to invest initial time and effort in methodology, deliberately restricting the repertory under investigation to two short preludes. It seems obvious that as the methodology becomes increasingly secure, the pace of the work will increase dramatically. This approach seems to me exactly the right one, and I am immensely impressed by what has been achieved so far.

Edition or Resource?

Having spent long hours producing an edition of the Chopin Ballades, I am well aware of how tedious, time-consuming and impractical it is for musicians to assemble the multiple sources in one place and to attempt comparative analyses of these sources (several desks joined together is a familiar syndrome here). To be able to set the versions alongside one another at the press of a computer key is in itself a wonderful facility, though this is not unique to the Chopin Variorum Edition. What is unique is the capacity to break these sources down, so that variants can be compared at the level of the bar. It would be difficult to overstate just how useful it is to be able to see on a single screen multiple variants of a single bar in this way. It is reasonable to ask: useful to whom? To editors, naturally, and also to scholars at several levels. I can imagine this as an invaluable teaching resource, for example. But also to those performers (they may be in the minority, but their number is not negligible, and they include many piano teachers) who are actively interested in the status of the editions they use.

This of course brings me to the question in the header. Probably the term 'edition' is a misnomer in this context. The process is more like providing self-assembly building materials than constructing a building. Indeed, my first thought was to agree with those at the meeting who argued that the real value of this project is as a resource and that performers would probably mark up existing copies to create their own performing edition. My second thought is that provided the process is made technically undemanding, many performers might well use this resource to make their own edition. Some advice on how to cut and paste to a chosen base version might well be a feature of the finished product. So for me the answer is: Edition and Resource, accepting a loose interpretation of 'edition'.

Practical Points

Here I confine myself to reinforcing a few points that emerged from the discussion and were brought home strongly when I subsequently used the resource. Others, with a better eye for detail, will have more to offer here. The first point concerns the frustration of not being able to see a manuscript on a full screen. When flicking back and forth between versions, it is really very irritating to have to scroll across the page as presently. I do take the point about uniformity of size, but I wonder if the technical team is able to provide a reduction mechanism that could be applied to any image currently on the screen.

A second point concerns the advantages of being able to see individual bar variants alongside rather than in place of the whole. At one point it was suggested that a split screen with a scrolling mechanism for presenting individual variants might be a possible option (perhaps in addition to, rather than in place of, what is now available). I foresee difficulties of screen space here, especially if the source pool is expanded beyond Chopin's lifetime, but simply point out that the advantages of seeing part and whole simultaneously would be considerable.

My third and final point concerns cross-bar features such as slurs and hairpins, especially the former. Of course the team are well aware of the limitations of the present scheme in this respect, but it would be worth giving further thought to ways in which comparisons of this kind might be made readily available onscreen. I have in mind, for example, the multiple slurrings in different sources for the opening section of Op. 38.

Next Stage?

Counter-intuitive though it may seem, my recommendation would be to remain with the two preludes for the next stage of this research. The great advantage of the present scheme is the comprehensiveness of its coverage for manuscript and early printed sources. Such comprehensiveness would necessarily be sacrificed if the team decides to move to posthumously published editions of the same music. However, the gains of doing so would be immense, and the range of scholarly questions raised by this further stage of research would expand rapidly. My sense is that an extensive treatment of a small repertory should be the goal of this project. This means that clear criteria will need to be established for the selection of later printed sources (not actually all that difficult, now I come to think of it, but it does mean another period at the drawing-board, before the implementation can begin). It has been suggested that this later stage might also include sound files, and this does indeed seem an exciting possibility. If this is to be considered, the proportion of included to available material would reduce yet further, and actually rather dramatically. In other words, there would need to be much thought given to what is included and why.

I imagine a situation in which Stage 2 of the project results in the availability online of a very broad range of sources (possibly including recordings) for just two preludes. Ideally the methodology would then be in place, and the job of Stage 3 would be to expand the repertory. It's too soon to consider how that should be done, but there will be major questions to ask at that point. This stage should be less problematic than it seems. First, the technological methods will be in place, and second, there already exists a considerable pool of knowledge about the sources available to the team, so that much of the preliminary musicological work will already have been done.

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