

## Studying the étude

The piano étude was made popular through the compositions of Cramer, Czerny, Clementi et al, but the form underwent a transformation with the arrival of Chopin, Alkan and Liszt.

By the 21st century, the étude had become an established artform, exemplified by the works of György Ligeti, Nikolai Kapustin and Unsuk Chin. *Jeremy Nicholas* surveys the humble piano study in conversation with Clare Hammond, who has recently recorded a collection of neglected études

THE ABSENT-MINDED MAESTRO was racing up New York's Seventh Avenue to a rehearsal when a stranger stopped him. 'Pardon me,' he said. 'Can you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?' 'Yes,' answered the maestro, breathlessly. 'Practise!'

It's an old joke that will raise a rueful smile among the many of us who didn't practise enough – and prompt a wry nodding of the head from those who did. Maybe one of the stumbling blocks that barred the way to Carnegie Hall for some of us was that we were not determined (or interested) enough to master the relentless, repetitive studies by Cramer (or Cramer-Bülow); not sufficiently inspired by Hanon, Czerny and Clementi to acquire the rock-solid technical foundation they could provide.

COLLECTIONS OF SPECIFICALLY designated didactic keyboard pieces before the 1800s were few. There was no established genre, as such. That changed in the early 19th century, when technical advances ran hand in hand with the development of the piano as an instrument and its growing popularity domestically and professionally. A landmark

moment came in September 1804, when JB Cramer brought out a book of 42 études, the first of their kind ever produced. Different from earlier volumes labelled 'lessons' or 'exercises', these studies were based on a particular pattern of notes that was then reiterated in various forms. The aim, of course, was to develop the pianist's dexterity, co-ordination and stamina.

Often concerned with matters of touch and legato playing, Cramer's études were fed by Beethoven to his nephew Carl and by Friedrich Wieck to his daughter Clara (who later passed them on to her own pupils). Seized with jealousy over Cramer's success, the very next year Daniel Steibelt produced *Study for the Pianoforte*, containing 50 exercises (a near copy of Cramer's style), to which Cramer responded in 1810 with a further book of 42 studies. Joseph Wölfl retaliated with *Practical School for the Pianoforte*, consisting of 50 exercises, and this was followed six years later by Clementi's monumental *Gradus ad Parnassum* ('Steps to Mount Parnassus', the dwelling of the Muses), containing 100 pieces. Three years after Clementi's death, the elderly Cramer came up with a further 16 études to match Clementi's total. Such

fecundity pales into insignificance beside Czerny's staggering total of 1,129 exercises spread over 20 opus numbers, covering every aspect of keyboard technique, including his most famous publication *Die Schule der Fingerfertigkeit* ('The School of Velocity'). Books of piano studies were big sellers. Many of the best retain their usefulness and are widely used today.

In the meantime, coinciding with the arrival of a new breed of virtuoso pianist-composer, a new type of étude emerged in which technical exercises were subsumed into music of pure poetry. Some of Czerny's studies, it is true, manage to do this; so, too, do some of Hummel's (his Op 125, 24 études in a cycle of major/minor fifths) and Moscheles's (24 Etudes Op 74, 12 Etudes Op 95 and others). But it is Chopin's studies that were the first to consistently present beguiling musical content alongside technical challenges. Since their publication in 1833 and 1837, Op 10 and Op 25 have been rightly regarded as sui generis. Underlining Chopin's genius, many of his études have clear precedents: for instance, Cramer's D major and D minor studies and Moscheles's Op 70 No 11 use similar figurations to Chopin's Op

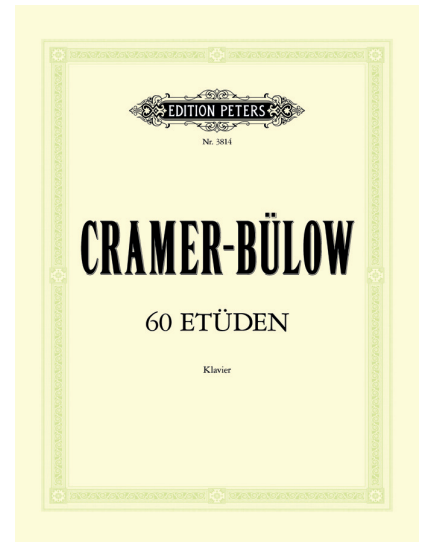
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10 No 1. Liszt developed the genre further with his *Études d'exécution transcendante*, published (after several revisions) in 1851, 12 studies that were of far greater technical difficulty, demanding huge reserves of stamina when played in public. Originally, Liszt issued them as pure music; later, he added programmatic titles to some. Significantly, he dedicated the entire collection to his teacher Czerny 'in token of gratitude, respect and friendship'.

Henselt, Herz, Bertini, Burgmüller and Stephen Heller also issued several sets of studies of varying musical interest around about this time. Within the space of a few years, the étude had turned from something to practise in private into a vehicle for the public exhibition of superhuman dexterity. Indeed, a whole new étude genre had developed, that of the 'étude de concert' – particularly brilliant studies specifically designed to be heard in concert. The

power and agility needed made the form increasingly inaccessible to the amateur. In addition, because this style of music lay more easily under the fingers by employing many black notes, fearsome key signatures, hitherto unfamiliar, became widely used: G flat, D flat and B flat minor can cause palpitations to the recreational sight-reader.

If Liszt's collection was matched with the appearance of Alkan's *Douze études dans tous les tons majeurs*, Op 35, it was trumped in 1857 by its companion, *Douze études dans tous les tons mineurs*, Op 39. Ronald Smith suggests that here, the very term 'étude' must seem singularly inappropriate, 'that is until one considers these works as studies in the translation of orchestral sonorities into their pianistic counterpart.' Alkan's Etudes Nos 8-10 from the Op 39 set form the Concerto for Solo Piano. No 8 alone, at 1,343 bars, is longer than the entire 'Hammerklavier' Sonata.



Hans Bülow revised Cramer's studies to make them more useful as a course of study in piano lessons (Published by Edition Peters; EP 3814)



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**W**HERE WAS THE ETUDE to go from here? A new CD provides part of the answer, taking us from the end of the 19th century to our own. Clare Hammond has recorded a programme which, most unusually, embraces the études of not one composer (much preferred by record labels) but four. 'One of the reasons for this disc was that I was drawn to the études of Unsuk Chin,' she says. 'They are extremely difficult but I was fascinated by the way she uses the piano and by the imaginative timbres, colours and figurations that she gets out of the instrument.' Hammond wanted to avoid the 'mainstream études' of Chopin and Liszt and was more interested to see how this genre had been interpreted in the modern age. 'I'd already done the Szymanowski Op 33 sets, which complement the Chin musically because they have quite a mercurial feel to them – they are very brief and float across the keyboard in a similar way. Then I looked around for new works and came across the 12 Transcendental Studies by Lyapunov written right at the turn of the 20th century – high Romantic, very passionate works – and the studies by Kapustin written at the other end of the 20th century, which I was completely blown away by. They're great fun in the way they combine jazz and classical.' ►



## THE PIANO ETUDE

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As Hammond readily admits, her survey is hardly complete or exhaustive. 'It's just a snapshot but it does convey an idea of the vastly disparate styles and ways of writing.' She might have chosen, from the late 19th/early 20th century, brilliant studies by Moszkowski, Saint-Saëns, Anton Rubinstein, Blumenfeld or Dohnányi, not to mention Debussy, or Rachmaninov's two sets of *Études-tableaux*. 'I've done a lot of 20th-century and contemporary music in the past few years,' says Hammond. 'The selection I've made provides an interesting synopsis of the étude in that period. I chose them for their musical rather than technical interest. The Lyapunov studies, modelled on Liszt's, don't address particular figurations in the same way that Chopin's do but they have these strong pictorial elements.

The Szymanowski studies have a slightly stronger emphasis on particular figurations and textures, but not in a schematic way. The musical substance of the piece is still a priority, although they are technically very fiddly – deceptively so, in fact. The Chin are clearly études from the way they are written and just the sheer level of difficulty. There are a lot of patterns already under my hands because of other composers, whereas with Chin, because she writes in such an original way, I couldn't map any patterns from other composers, so they took much longer to learn. The closest point of comparison is the studies by Ligeti, with whom Chin studied for three years in Hamburg in the 1980s. The Kapustin are the most étude-like in that each of the five I've recorded is based on a particular interval.

So they are the most explicitly structured, but again, they are so exuberant.'

The character of the étude changed markedly during the 20th century. Hammond thinks that 'it has something to do with the decline of the idea of the romantic virtuoso pianist. Composers had to find a new way of writing études so that they didn't become tarnished with this now unfashionable idea of big bravura playing. The Lyapunov studies [dedicated to the memory of Liszt] were written right at the end of this [Romantic] period whereas the Szymanowski [from 1915] are already a completely different kettle of fish. And later, by the end of the 20th century, composers didn't feel they had to react against the virtuoso pianist any longer.'

But if, so far this century, there has been a decline in interest in writing études, there would seem to be no lack of interest in playing them – one only has to look at YouTube to see the number of hits for (relatively recent) studies by Ligeti, Earl Wild and Marc-André Hamelin, all immensely popular challenges, especially among the young blades. I might have been able to play them myself – had I only devoted more time to Cramer in my formative years. 🎵



Clare Hammond has recorded a collection of études for the BIS label, out now

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