

(Courtesy of an Anonymous Student. Used with permission.)

### **Nocturne Op.9 No.1 in B-flat Minor**

“‘natural phrasing’ and ‘from the heart’ are prized attributes of song, singing that way requires rehearsal, preparation, and getting in touch with whatever it is inside singers and getting in touch with whatever it is inside singers that, by a neural kink or the grace of God, enables them to turn themselves into vessels of musical sound.”

-Louis Menand

On an Alumni Weekend at Milton Academy, I was practicing on a grand piano in the orchestra room. After about two hours of warm-up and practicing, the sun went down and the room became dark. Suddenly, an alumna walked in to confess that she was listening to me for the past thirty minutes. She said how much she liked Chopin’s Nocturnes and my playing. She asked me whether I was planning on studying music in college.

To her disappointment, I said, “No, I just play to enjoy the moment.”

After thanking me, she left to join her classmates for dinner. I was dissatisfied with my playing that day. I apparently had been playing a piece delightful to her ears, but I could not get into the mode of playing naturally for some reason. To me, my playing sounded clumsy and rigid. You cannot guarantee that you will play the way you like every time you sit at a piano. There are days when your fingers are stiff and days

you may not be able to express your interpretations so well. When your finger hits a wrong note or when your fingers cannot play as smoothly as you want, such subtle mistakes can ruin the voice or impression that you are trying to create.

Chopin's Nocturnes are some of my favorite of all piano music I know. In my opinion, Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2 is the most challenging and rewarding piece to learn. My piano technique, however, is not sufficient to play Rachmaninoc and I can only enjoy the piece when I can play it. Listening to a famous pianist play Rachmaninov is a different kind of pleasure than playing it yourself. The fulfillment, pride, and power you possess while you play the piece "naturally" and "from the heart" are very satisfying and rewarding. If you keep on making mistakes or if you are not able to play as well as you hope, there is no joy in playing. However, I can play Chopin. There is more room for the musician to improvise and interpret his way in Chopin's Nocturnes. The delayed or sudden cadences, ambiguous harmonies, and clashing melodies are played differently by each pianist. Different pianists invoke a different voice, feeling, meaning, or whatever other musicians call it, into the piece of music they play. I have fun experimenting with Chopin's Nocturne Op.9 No.1 in B-flat Minor once I practice enough so that I can play with my imagination and the music.

Legato – The bright moonlight smoothly descends to Earth like snowflakes quietly accumulating on the ground. The image magnifies in my mind and I now see the journey of a snowflake.

Accelerando and Ritenuto – A sudden gust of wind disturbs the peace. The snowflake gets thrown up into the air and dances as the cold wind directs. Then, the magical force suddenly vanishes, the snowflake summersaults to the ground gracefully and the short dramatic interlude disappears like the melting snowflakes on my warm hand.

Crescendo – the music of the night becomes even more real to me. I can listen to the stars shining, trees swaying in the wind, and a street lamp fighting the darkness alone. All of these images become even more vivid and feel real to me. I see what I hear.

Practicing the same piece over and over again can be boring and frustrating. Getting the perfect note – the right timing, feel, softness, and texture – is the largest task. Trying to eliminate a habitual mistake can be an agony. Many times, I stop practicing for a week and sometimes as long as two months after stressing out and getting angry because of one note that I habitually hit too early. A mistake can ruin the moment and the images disappear. What drives me to practice more is that I want to be in that moment longer when I see the music or images in my head. The moonlight becomes so visual that I almost see a bright silk waving in the air or sometimes I just simply visualize

a perfectly quiet winter night. Although I do not know whether all musicians feel the same, there is no greater achievement for me as a musician to have the feeling of being one with the music. I wonder if they visualize the same peaceful night as I do when they play Chopin's Nocturnes and whether they feel the same kind of satisfaction once they have "mastered" their piece.

When I am in that state of mind, my fingers move naturally and the music flows. This is when I play what I see in my mind. The various markings editors put on the sheet music become meaningless and my own interpretation of the music directs my fingers how to play. When I see a gloomy winter night, the Nocturne in B-flat minor may sound even more saddening than what a B-flat Minor sounds like. A Nocturne for a clear summer night may sound totally different from a gloomy winter night. Each time, I play the same Nocturne differently and I see different images. I wonder what Chopin was thinking about when he composed his Nocturnes. Did he think about the winds I hear? What color was his moon? Did he hear his music in his head like I do? Whenever I struggle to find what feels like the right interpretation of Chopin's Nocturnes, I wonder what Chopin's interpretation might have been. Listening to famous pianists such as Arthur Rubinstein or Vladimir Ashkenazi and their interpretation can give me hints to what I think is the right or perfect way to play the piece. I could try playing certain parts

of the Nocturne like Ashkenazi but the answer – what I like to hear and what feels right – will only come from me.

In the music I play, I look for the “voice” as Menand puts it and “spend hours getting the timing right – so that what [I play] sounds completely unrehearsed.” When this happens, I may be so absorbed that I do not know what I am doing. Like Paul Taylor said his dance “just comes out,” my improvisations when “I am one with the music also just flow out of me. There is no right or wrong answer how to play Chopin’s Nocturnes, Ashkenazi and Rubinstein play it differently and I just happen to like Ashkenazi’s pause between the cadences more than Rubinstein’s. Some people must find Rubinstein’s pause more effective than Ashkenazi’s. Although there may be critics, no one will not allow you to play the way you interpret the piece. Music is personal and I think that I will be happy playing piano as long as I enjoy the time playing and creating music. Although it would be great if others find my playing entertaining, it is not as important as being able to enjoy playing the piece. I think what Hawthorne calls the “enjoyment of the reality” an artist possess “when [he rises] high enough to achieve the beautiful” keeps me practicing the piano.