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### CHOPIN'S EARLY PIANO STYLE: COMPASS, NOTATION AND TEXTURE

Fundamental to any act of composition is an understanding of the limitations of the instrument and for pianists of Chopin's generation the precise limits of the treble and bass of the piano's keyboard were not necessarily easily defined. As we shall see, choices needed to be made on the basis of the instruments that were available and the markets for which the music was intended.

Another aspect of any composer's style is his notation and in the early works of Chopin it is possible to trace a number of developments that relate not only to matters of performance, but also to his developing compositional style. Chopin's growing attention to details of part writing and its notation is especially intriguing, particularly as it relates to accompanying figures.

A secure chronology of the sources needs to underpin a study such as this, but as any Chopin scholar knows, there remains a considerable amount of uncertainty about the dating of many of Chopin's earliest works. For some works, publication dates are established, and in the case of others, the autographs may be dated with reasonable accuracy from comments in letters and other circumstantial evidence. For many works, however, all that survives are manuscript copies, and/or posthumously published scores. In an attempt to determine stylistic trends we therefore need to tread carefully; but despite the many possible pitfalls, it is still possible to trace a number of developments from Chopin's Polish works to those published during his early years in Paris.

#### *Compass*

The extension of the piano keyboard's range, or compass, is one of the features of the instrument's development in the closing years of the eighteenth century and first decades of the nineteenth. A brief account of these developments is necessary here as background to a discussion of Chopin's use of the keyboard.<sup>1</sup> Insofar as there was a standard design of pianos at the end of the eighteenth century, the usual compass was five octaves, FF-f<sup>3</sup>. Makers sometimes added one or two notes to this range, but the first substantial increase occurred around 1789 when the London maker Broadwood added an extra fifth in the treble to extend the compass to just over five and a half octaves, FF-c<sup>4</sup>. By 1792 Broadwood had extended the compass further still, to six octaves, by adding extra bass notes which took the lower end of the compass down to CC. Around the same time a different six-octave compass, FF-f<sup>4</sup>, was adopted by some continental makers as well as a few individuals in London. The discrepancy between the two six-octave compasses was resolved with the introduction of six-and-a-half-octave pianos whose range was CC-f<sup>4</sup>. This happened at least by 1808 on the continent and by 1811 in London. Makers continued to extend the piano's compass

<sup>1</sup> The issues are outlined in more detail in David Rowland, ed., *The Cambridge companion to the piano* (Cambridge, 1998), pp.32-3 and David Rowland, 'Chopin and the extension of the piano's compass', *Ostinato rigore* 15 (2000), pp.187-196.

further still, and 7 octaves were available in Vienna by 1816 and elsewhere over the following decade or so.

Summary table of piano compasses: ‘standard’ compasses in bold

Date	Place	Compass
<b>End of C18th</b>	<b>All European countries</b>	<b>5 octaves, FF-f<sup>3</sup></b>
<b>1789</b>	<b>London (Broadwood) (Europe shortly afterwards)</b>	<b>5½ octaves, FF-c<sup>4</sup></b>
1792	London (Broadwood)	6 octaves, CC-c <sup>4</sup>
<b>1790s</b>	<b>Continental Europe (and some London makers)</b>	<b>6 octaves, FF-f<sup>4</sup></b>
<b>By 1808</b>	<b>Continental Europe</b>	<b>6½ octaves, CC-f<sup>4</sup></b>
<b>By 1811</b>	<b>London</b>	<b>6½ octaves, CC-f<sup>4</sup></b>
By 1816	Continental Europe	7 octaves

Of course, the newest designs were only gradually introduced into circulation and it was routine for makers to sell a variety of models at any particular time. Clementi & Co’s catalogue of 1823, for example, advertised pianos of five-and-a-half, six, and six-and-a-half octaves, with the smallest square pianos costing less than one-third of the price of six-and-a-half-octave grand<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, newspaper and other advertisements show that there was a buoyant second-hand market throughout the period, so that the variety represented by new models was increased by a large volume of older instruments that were still in circulation.

The particular compass for which composers of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wrote depended on a number of factors. For music that was not written for publication purposes we can assume that composers wrote for the instruments with which they were personally familiar – their own pianos, or instruments belonging to a circle of friends and acquaintances. For published music, composers wrote for instruments in general circulation. These may have been the instruments in use relatively locally, if the music was published by a small publisher, or the instruments in circulation around Europe, in the case of works, for example, that were published simultaneously by major publishing houses in several countries. In addition, composers would have been conscious of the kind of market for which they were writing. Composers writing for the amateur end of the market, including pianists in households where the purchase of a new piano was a rare event, would be unlikely to use the full resources of the newest models. However, composers who wrote for fellow professionals and for amateurs who kept abreast of the latest developments would have been inclined to write for the latest designs. During Chopin’s lifetime, therefore, there was a variety of reasons for choosing the compass within which any particular work would be written.

For which pianos did Chopin write, and how did these instruments dictate his use of the piano’s compass? Benjamin Vogel has shown that Chopin was familiar with a range of Polish, England and Viennese pianos during his Warsaw years.<sup>3</sup> However,

<sup>2</sup> A five-and-a-half-octave square cost 32 guineas while a six-and-a-half octave grand cost 105 guineas. These are the prices for plain models; decorated pianos cost considerably more.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Vogel, ‘The young Chopin’s domestic pianos’, *Chopin in performance: history, theory, practice* (Warsaw, 2005), pp.57-75.

although it is possible to identify some of the makers, the details of the instruments that Chopin knew are largely unknown. Similarly, it is difficult to form a detailed picture of the pianos generally available in Warsaw during the period of his childhood and youth. The city boasted some prominent visiting pianists, so that in all likelihood there were some up-to-date models there; but it also evident that there were plenty of older instruments in circulation. One of the pianos in the Chopin household was described as ‘old’, and the composer’s correspondence does not give the impression that he was surrounded in his youth by the best and most modern instruments that Europe had to offer.

Chopin’s early works match the picture described in the preceding paragraph. None of the polonaises composed before 1824 requires a compass greater than that of a five-and-a-half octave piano. Two of the works that are likely to date from 1824, the g-sharp minor Polonaise and the Introduction and Variations on a German Air require a six-octave compass, but the early version of the A-flat major Mazurka (Op.7, No.4, also dated 1824) requires no more than a five-octave compass. These earliest works of Chopin therefore require only a very modest keyboard compass compared with the biggest pianos of his day.

The picture is similar for those works written and published in Chopin’s later Polish years, the rondos, Op.1 and Op.5, published in Warsaw in 1825 and 1828 respectively. Despite the fact that both works were written in the brilliant style for general circulation among pianists in Poland, both require only the compass of a six-octave piano, FF-f<sup>4</sup>, confirming the impression that bigger pianos were possibly few and far between in Poland at the time.

From this point on, some of Chopin’s works were written for six-and-a-half octave pianos – the compass that may be regarded as the usual ‘professional’ one across Europe. This compass is used most notably in the Op.2 Variations, sent to Haslinger by the summer of 1829. From the autograph it appears that Chopin’s view on piano compass changed during the time that he was writing the Variations (probably between 1827 and 1829). For most of the work Chopin avoids the extra half-octave in the bass that would necessitate performance on a six-and-a-half-octave piano: up to the end of variation 5 the music lies comfortably within six octaves, FF-f<sup>4</sup>. The same is true for most of the Alla Polacca, except that in bar 60 of that section, when the bass part appears to ‘need’ to go down to EE, Chopin avoids the octave in the bass that would have extended the work outside of the six-octave range. **[Example 1]** (Examples of this sort appear in works by other composers and it is always unclear whether the composers actually intended the additional note to be played.) Finally, however, in bar 96 of the section, just 17 bars before the end of the piece, an EE is included in the autograph. For whatever reason, just before the end of the work Chopin appears to have decided that it would be acceptable to include notes from the six-and-a-half-octave compass, whereas for most of the piece he carefully avoided the extra bass notes that would have extended it beyond six octaves.

Thereafter, in most of the works published during Chopin’s lifetime, a six-and-a-half octave compass is needed. Doubtless this reflects the fact that the wider compass was readily available on pianos in Vienna and Paris, and perhaps also that the fuller compass was becoming increasingly usual in Poland towards the end of the 1820s.

Although Chopin composed regularly for pianos with the largest normal compass for their time, he often chose not to exploit the full range of the keyboard. This is as true of his early works as it is of his later ones. None of the works prior to his Op.1 Rondo use the full extent of the compass that is necessary for their performance. The Introduction and Variations on a German Air, for example, only requires notes from BB in the bass to c<sup>#4</sup> in the treble. (Although the range of this work is actually just over five octaves the required notes would only have been available on a six-octave piano with a compass from FF to f<sup>4</sup>.) Similarly, most of the works written within a six-and-a-half-octave compass require much less than the full range of the keyboard and a number of works from his early Paris years (such as the Mazurkas Opp. 6 and 7, and the Nocturnes Op.9) were written with the six-octave compass still in mind.

### *Notation and texture*

Chopin's notational habits changed considerably during the period of his early works. Precisely when significant changes occurred is not always easy, or even possible, to pinpoint, because of uncertainties in the dating of these works; but it is clear that changes took place, and that in some measure they reflected Chopin's developing thinking about piano textures and their performance.

The earliest of Chopin's works, the polonaises in g minor and B-flat major of 1817 and the A-flat Polonaise of 1821 have virtually no notational markings other than the notes themselves. Dynamics, pedalling, and other performance indications are completely lacking with the possible exception of a few articulation markings in the B-flat major Polonaise and a single tempo direction in the A-flat Polonaise (which I have so far been unable to check from the autograph itself). Perhaps this absence of markings is unsurprising in works that were not prepared for publication, since composers were generally more inclined to provide performance indications when their works entered the public domain. However, some performance information might have been expected in the published score of the g-minor Polonaise (although Chopin was only seven years old at the time, so that it is easy to excuse the lack of detail on account of his youth).

Compared with the early polonaises, the early version of the A-flat Mazurka, Op.7. No.4 (1825?) represents a step forward. Although the Mazurka itself has no performance indications other than a single slur, the trio section includes several slurs, one dynamic marking, an accent and three Italian terms.

Compared with the early works already described, the wealth of all sorts of markings in the G#-minor Polonaise and the Introduction and Variations on a German Air are so extensive that they are only barely plausible at the date assigned to them of 1824. This is particularly the case with the Polonaise, whose notation is more in line with that of Op.2 (see below). However, autographs survive for neither work, and since both were published after the composer's death it is impossible to make use of them in the present discussion.

We are on safer ground with the Rondo Op.1, which was published in Warsaw in 1825. This published source includes a wide range of performance markings including articulation, phrasing, pedalling, a range of dynamic markings, metronome indications, and tempo directions. Yet there are frequent inconsistencies in the use of

the markings, a number of which were corrected in preparation for later editions. Two examples will suffice in order to characterise the level of accuracy and detail in the markings of the Polish edition of 1825. In the octave passage in bars 29 to 31 the Polish edition has articulation wedges over only the quavers of bar 29 **[Example 2]**. In the German edition of 1838 (in which Chopin almost certainly had a hand) these were replaced by staccato dots but, importantly for our discussion, they were continued in bar 30, making greater sense of the articulation of the whole phrase (many details such as this were attended to in the later editions). Secondly, very few pedal markings are used anywhere in first edition of the work, and pedal release signs are completely absent. In fact, they were not included in the later edition either, but their exclusion from the Polish edition is in marked contrast to the precision in his notation that Chopin was to adopt in the following years.

One feature of the Polish edition of Op.1 that was to prove an important element of Chopin's notation in later works is his use of double note stems to indicate melodic lines in the context of faster figuration. The notation of the passage commencing at bar 30 and continuing to bar 58 (and equivalent passages later in the movement) **[Example 3]** clearly shows where the right-hand melody lies. Similarly, the left-hand part from bar 136 has crotchet note-heads on the beat in order to indicate the baseline **[Example 4]**. However, as with other features of the Polish edition, the notation is not very careful, and there are missing note-heads in the middle of the baseline, for example, at bar 138 (2<sup>nd</sup> beat).

The first edition of the Op.1 Rondo contains significantly more notational detail than most of his earlier works, although whether it was his most detailed score at the time must remain a matter for conjecture, because of the dating issues already discussed. Notwithstanding its clumsiness, and the numerous errors, Op.1 represents Chopin's serious engagement with notational issues and provides some examples of practices that were to be worked out much more thoroughly in later works.

The two Mazurkas published in 1826, in G and B-flat major, are works of very modest proportions. Nevertheless, in the G major there is evidence of a growing attention to detail in notational matters. In 40 bars of musical text there are almost as many pedalling indications as there are in the whole of Op.1 and details of articulation and dynamics are more consistently worked out than in the earlier work.

Similarly, the Op.5 Rondo, published in 1828, was much more carefully notated. Pedalling is much more frequent and pedal release signs are included. Dynamics and Italian terms are more frequent. Of particular interest in this work is the appearance of so many chord-spreading indications. The practice of spreading chords appears to have been widespread from the early days of the piano's history, when it was carried over from harpsichord technique, to at least the middle of the nineteenth century. Both Kalkbrenner and Czerny, for example, devote space to a consideration of the practice in their piano tutors.<sup>4</sup> Composers varied very considerably in the extent to which they notate spread chords, just as they did other aspects of performance, but in the case of Chopin's Op.5 chord spreading seems to be notated very fully. Not only is spreading notated in places where the notes cannot be played together by an average-sized hand

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Kalkbrenner, *Méthode pour apprendre le pianoforte* (Paris 1830; English translation, London, 1862), translation p.12; Carl Czerny, *Vollständige theoretisch-practische Pianoforteschule*, Op.500 (3 vols, Vienna, 1838-9; English translation, London, 1838-9), translation vol.3, pp.55-6.

(see, for example, bars 17-19 [**Example 5**]), but there are plenty of examples where the full chord could easily be played without the spread (see, for example, bars 22-24 [**Example 6**]). In contrast, there are no indications such as these in works published prior to Op.5, including the Op.1 Rondo of 1825 and the mazurkas of 1826.

Another notational practice that occupied Chopin in the Rondo Op.5 to a greater extent than previously was his use of double note-stems in order to indicate part writing where more than one part is played by either the left or right hand, as well as the notation of sustained bass notes beneath chords played with the same hand. Numerous examples exist, the first being the left-hand part of bar 22, where the continuation of the A that constitutes the bassline on the third beat is indicated by a crotchet note stem in addition to the dotted quaver rhythm that is notated on the same note [**Example 7**]. In passages such as bars 38 and following, where the notes of each bar can just about be held down by the left hand without the assistance of the pedal, the prolongation of the bass note is indicated rhythmically, with a dotted minim on the first beat of each bar [**Example 8**]. Where the accompaniment lies outside of the span of the left hand, however, pedalling is indicated, as in bars 27 and 28 [**Example 9**]. Elsewhere, the two notations are used simultaneously, for example in bars 93ff where the prolongation of the notes on the first beat of the bar in the left-hand part is indicated by both a dotted minim and a pedal marking [**Example 10**]. In all cases, the meaning to the performer is clear, but the notation of these sorts of textures lacks consistency in Op.5 (in this respect, Chopin was no different from most other pianists of his time).

The notation of Chopin's Op.2 Variations contains a level of detail that is unparalleled in Chopin's early works, and unusual in the piano music of the period more generally. As Jim Samson has noted, the amount of performing information contained in the autograph of Op.2 Variations is remarkable.<sup>5</sup> There are copious Italian terms and dynamics throughout the work. A range of articulation and accent markings for individual notes is used, including the following: ., ', ^, and >. Pedalling, including release signs, is notated throughout and there are spread chord indications. The sheer volume, as well as the detail of the markings, and their consistency, makes this an important work for our purposes.

The reason why the autograph of Op.2 was so carefully notated may have to do with the circumstances of its creation; it was among the first of Chopin's works to be sent to a publisher outside of Poland. The manuscript from which the edition of Op.2 was made was prepared between the end of 1827 and 1829. In a letter of 1827 to his friend Jan Matuszyński Chopin wrote 'I should like to make a fair copy of the piano part of the variations, and I can't do it without your copy'.<sup>6</sup> It was sent to the Viennese publisher Haslinger in 1829, along with copies of the Sonata Op.4 and the Introduction and Variations on a German Air.

Some features are worthy of special note. One of these is Chopin's notation of contrasting simultaneous dynamics. As in the music of some other composers, specific and sometimes contrasting dynamics are given to each hand simultaneously. This is most apparent in Variation 3 of Op.2 [**Example 11**], but it does occur

<sup>5</sup> Jim Samson, *The music of Chopin* (London, 1985), p.47.

<sup>6</sup> *Chopin's letters*, collected by Henry Opieński, translated by E.L. Voynich (New York, 1931), p.36.

elsewhere as well. An extreme example occurs in the Alla Polacca at bar 61 **[Example 12]**. Here, a dynamic indication is placed against a middle voice played by the right hand while another dynamic marking relates to the top part, played by the same hand. At the same time, a separate marking indicates a left-hand crescendo while overall the whole bar forms part of a crescendo that lasts for 4 bars. As far as I am aware, this level of dynamic detail is unprecedented in Chopin's music.

The dynamic detail is only one way in which Chopin delineates the part-writing in this example. In addition, Chopin writes different note values for notes struck at the same time as part of a chord, and he includes a double note-stem on the F# in the right hand.

The careful notation of note lengths, including the use of double note-stems, is a feature of accompanying figurations in Op.2. From bar 16 of the introduction most of the left hand notes have double stems that are designed to maintain a full left-hand texture **[Example 13]**. As with the Rondo Op.5, there is a degree of inconsistency, and this sort of notation continues, even when the pedal is indicated. However, a more refined use of this style occurs later in the work, for example at bar 31 of the Alla Polacca **[Example 14]**. In order to understand the notation fully at this point we need to consider more precisely what piano music notation represents.

The notation of piano music, as with many other forms of notation, is capable of representing one of two things. Either it represents *what the performer does*, or it represents *what is heard*. The two are not the same. The Op.5 Rondo contains unsophisticated examples of both. Bars 27-28 **[Example 9]** are a notated version of what the pianist does. On the first beat of the bar the pianist plays a bass octave and depresses the pedal. On the second and third beats of the bar the pianist plays chords. What is heard is different from the notation here, since the bass octave will continue to sound through the second and third beats because of the use of the pedal. Bars 38-40 of the same work are different **[Example 8]**. Here, the composer notates what is heard, leaving it to the performer to decide how to achieve what the notation expresses. For most performers, the realisation of long note at the beginning of each bar will only be possible with the use of the sustaining pedal, although pianists with large hands might realise the notated texture without it.

The notation of the left-hand part of bar 31 of the Alla Polacca from Op.2 **[Example 14]** appears to be a rigorous application of a style of notation that communicates what the performer should do, and not the sound that results. At first sight, if the performer makes the assumption that the notation is a representation of how the music sounds, the notation appears illogical. According to this way of thinking, the use of a wedge symbol (∧) beneath the quaver G-flat of the left-hand part suggests that the note should sound for less than a quaver. But the purpose of the sustaining pedal, also indicated at this point, is to prevent the note from being damped, apparently contradicting the articulation marking. If, however, the notation is understood to represent what the pianist actually does, and not what is heard, the performer will release the low G-flat quickly, at the same time as depressing the pedal, in order to allow the time needed to shift hand positions so that the minim G-flat an octave higher can be played with the fifth finger, thereby allowing it to be sustained once the pedal has been released, and while the other notes of the second and third beats are played. What appears to be an

illogical notation is, according to this understanding, a close representation of what is required of the performer.

The notation of this single bar demonstrates how far Chopin's notational practice had developed by this time; but it should not be taken to imply that the notation of Op.2 as a whole is rigorously logical, nor that Chopin had consciously and fully worked out his system of notation. Notational anomalies exist, as we have seen, and the lack of logical consistency in Chopin's music following Op.2 suggests that the development of some aspects of his notation up to this point were more the result of intuition than the result of rigorous thought processes. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Op.2 represents an early milestone in the development of Chopin's notational style. Furthermore, Chopin's careful notation in Op.2 show that he was by this time writing in a style that featured rich part writing, both implied and real, as well as carefully-textured accompaniment figures.

The notational and textural features of Op.2 discussed above were important elements of Chopin's style that he carried forward into his Paris years, though without the consistency that might be expected. The Op.9 Nocturnes provide good examples of works where the notation is much less rigorous, and where the accompaniment textures are unsophisticated, when compared with aspects of Op.2. In Op.9 No.1, for example, two pedal markings (with their corresponding release signs) are placed under the first complete bar, but no further markings occur until bar 19, and then again until bar 51. There is consistent pedalling in the last 6 bars of the work, but for a piece that relies so heavily on the pedal for its effect a performer would be justified in expecting more precision in the notation. Similarly, in terms of texture, a simple left-hand pattern is established in the first bar that is continued with only small variation until the end of the work. Very little internal part-writing of any sort is implied in either the right-hand or left-hand part at any point in the work. The work's uncomplicated melody-plus-accompaniment texture resembles the early e minor Nocturne, and passages from other works such as the C minor Sonata and the g minor Trio, which in turn use textures found in the relatively unsophisticated nocturnes and similar works of other composers of the first quarter of the century. Despite its evident qualities, similar points can be made of Op.9 No.2, although there are at least some more pedalling indications.

Op.9 No.3 is completely devoid of pedalling until the last 4 bars, but its accompanying textures are a little more interesting. The left-hand part essentially comprises two elements, represented by the accompaniment figures in bars 1 and 6 [Examples 15 and 16]. The accompaniment figure of bar 1 has double note-stems on each second note of every three-note group of quavers, implying a sustained middle part. The notation appears to be incomplete, however, since the literal length of the first quaver of each group of three seems too short in the context. Neither pedal markings, nor double note-stems are used to suggest any prolongation of these notes, yet the harmonic sense of the work suggests that they should be lengthened. Perhaps the slur over the first two groups of three notes suggests something equivalent (and this sort of notation is sometimes used in earlier music to imply prolongation), but the precise meaning of the notation is unclear.

In contrast to the Op.9 Nocturnes, the Op.15 Nocturnes are more complete in their notation, and the accompanying parts contain much more variety and subtlety. The

processes identified in the Op.2 Variations find a fuller expression here. The opening eight bars of the F major Nocturne, Op.15 No.1 provide a good example [Example 17]. For the first six bars the notation is at one and the same time an indication of what the performer's left hand does, and what is heard. The four separate lines of the accompaniment are clearly delineated by the use of a variety of note values and double note-stems. The pattern is broken, however, at bar 7, where the pedal becomes essential to the texture, and where the notation becomes a representation only of what the performer's hands do, not what is heard. Later works tend to follow the same pattern – where it is impossible to notate at the same time both what is actually heard and what the hands do, Chopin tends to choose the latter. However, there are often inconsistencies, as we shall see, and in bars 7 and 8 themselves it is not clear how far the logic of the notation may be pressed. The notation of the last beat of bar 7 is clear insofar as the pedal is used to sustain the lower parts of the left-hand texture while the thumb rests on the top a of the texture and another finger plays the two ds. It might be argued here that the double note-stem on the a of this chord is redundant, because the note will continue sounding anyway; but perhaps it was Chopin's intention that the hand should be kept as close to the keyboard as possible, rather than hovering above it, hence the crotchet stem on the a suggests that the note should not be released until the end of the bar. Similarly, the first two crotchets of the next bar have double note-stems that might be taken to imply that Chopin wanted the pianist's hand to rest on the g# and e at the top of the texture, rather than releasing the notes earlier. These are the most logical interpretations of Chopin's notation, but anomalies elsewhere in the work suggest that other interpretations may still be possible. The first note of bar 19, and other equivalent places later in the work, is consistently notated as a dotted minim [Example 18]. This cannot be a literal notation of what the performer's hand does, because the stretch required for the rest of the bar prohibits it. Yet at the same time, the prolongation of the note by this means is unnecessary, because Chopin has indicated the use of the pedal at this point. Although it is clear to the performer what should happen here, the notation has a different logic to bars 7 and 8, and we must therefore still question just how precisely thought-out was the presentation of the left-hand part.

Despite the notational uncertainties it is clear enough that the left-hand part of Op.15 No.1 is far richer and more subtle than most equivalent textures in earlier works. Space does not permit a full investigation of all of the other accompanying textures from Op.15, but a short passage from the second Nocturne of the set reveals a surprisingly rich variety of textures within the space of just a few bars [Example 19].

Chopin's piano textures and their notation in Op.15 are vastly different from those in his earliest works. In order to compose in this way one senses that the composer had listened very carefully to the qualities of the instrument, and had attempted to notate as helpfully, and in as detailed a way, as possible what the pianist's hand must do in order to realise the rich variety of his piano textures.