

Jan Smeterlin

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I had the privilege of having been, during a period of from about 1955 (when I was 16) to maybe 1962, a pupil of Jan Smeterlin and during those years attended many of his recitals, both in London and on the Continent, especially in the Netherlands, including his annual Christmas day afternoon recital in the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, followed by a boxing day recital (with a different programme) in the Diligentia in The Hague. I had thus an almost unique opportunity (by the mid '50s, at least, he had few, if any, other pupils) to become intimately acquainted with his playing and teaching.

My introduction to Smeterlin was entirely fortuitous. I did not seek him out; but it was an extraordinarily happy chance that brought me into contact with him, as I was already a passionate lover of Chopin (almost my earliest memories are of lying on the nursery floor with a wind-up gramophone listening to Cortot playing Chopin Waltzes on HMV red label 78s); and Smeterlin was, of course, very much associated with the music of Chopin. There was, even, the potential for some tension in relation to this association. Smeterlin was often asked if he resented it (bearing in mind that his repertoire stretched way beyond Chopin, as the present CD so interestingly demonstrates). He used to reply that, no, he did not mind this, and was, indeed proud of his close association with the greatest Polish composer. On the other hand, he was very strict in his rejection of the concept, so prevalent in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, of the "Chopin Pianist". "There is no such thing as a good 'Chopin player'; there are only good players of Chopin." This may seem obvious these days, as the "Chopin Pianist" concept has happily died out. But it was not obvious back in the 1950s; and one of the first, and most important, lessons I learned from him when I came to work on music of Chopin was that Smeterlin approached the study of Chopin in exactly the same way as the study of any other composer—which pre-eminently meant that everything was to be found in the score which, for Chopin, merited exactly the same degree of respect and detailed study as would be the case if one were working on a Sonata of Mozart or Beethoven.

In a way, this highlights what used to seem a kind of enigma. When it came to working on a piece, Smeterlin's approach was absolutely straight forward, above all, honest to the music. He looked for what was there—on the page, as it were—never seeking to impose anything which smacked of an "own personality" or external story or image. But—here the enigma—there was an undoubted, and unique, magic about his performances, which it was hard to describe or explain in terms, simply, of notes written on a page. His concerts seemed to have an atmosphere which was entirely his own, notwithstanding that, though often flamboyant and dramatic in his verbal expression, he was, when it came to playing, actually personally very retiring.

I often encountered his bent for sometimes dramatic hyperbole during lessons ("For God's sake, boy", shouted from the other side of the room, "if you can't play loud enough sitting down, stand up"—Etude in C minor from Chopin Opus 10). My introduction to this came when I first played to him. My "programme" included the Mozart Sonata in F K332, and somewhere in the first movement I played a note in the left hand an octave below where Smeterlin maintained (quite rightly, I think) it should be played. Diffidently, I said that I played it where indicated in the music I was working from. Smeterlin demanded to know what edition I used; and when I named the edition in question (a large prestigious music publisher the name of which I will refrain from mentioning here) he set out on a positive diatribe about what an abomination this edition it was. Most people, then, might have limited themselves to making the suggestion—even, perhaps, issuing an edict—that I should acquire a better edition: not enough for Smeterlin, who, in colourful language, enjoined me, when I got

home, to take the offending volume to the bottom of the garden and light a bonfire and burn it to ashes.

I have never been able to put my finger on just where the magic came from; but my conclusion is that it was from a perhaps unique combination of abilities which his playing displayed. All of these, also, permeated his teaching, which was inspirational, though often almost depressingly challenging. I will refer to these abilities under 3 headings, though not in any particular order of importance. They are: Song; Dance; and Narrative.

Song

Smeterlin was, when playing the piano, quite simply, a great singer; and he demanded replication of that ability from his pupils. This involved two elements, namely, an exceptionally rich legato touch (see also under Texture, below), and a singer's approach to phrasing (not just any singer, though, see below).

To his extraordinary legato, I was introduced when I first played Mozart's K332 to him (above) with its simple, but so meltingly beautiful, Adagio. It was an experience I have never forgotten. I was entirely in love, as only a romantic teenager could be, with the piece; and Smeterlin, of whom I was, at that stage, terrifyingly in awe, totally endeared himself to me by echoing my feelings by interjecting, quietly, an encouraging whisper, from behind me, as I paused after the first movement, the simple words (and challenge), " ... and now the beautiful ... ". And at the end, I thought it had come off well; but after I had finished the third movement, Smeterlin reverted to "the beautiful" and sat down at the piano himself (he was always a generously demonstrative teacher) and brought home to me vividly the inadequacy of my ability to make the piano "sing". He simply produced a richness of lyrical sound that I had no idea could be drawn out of a piano. Happily, I was young and adaptable and, when called upon to do so, found myself, somewhat to my astonishment, and Smeterlin's pleasure, able to copy nearly exactly how he had played it. I was, of course, greatly aided by the quite exceptionally rich toned Steinway concert grand—one of two in the room—which opened my ears to possibilities way beyond those of the rather poor instruments I was accustomed to.

The second element of making the piano "sing" was, of course, his ability to phrase like a singer. Here, Smeterlin's message as a teacher was, essentially, that the main element in acquiring this ability was to listen to, and absorb, the phrasing of great singers. It was not something that could altogether be taught (see below under Dance, Mazurkas). And for Smeterlin, in this respect, it was not just any singing, but very specifically, the singing of Italian opera by, again very specifically, Italian singers. At our first meeting, I was given a peremptory command to immerse myself in Italian opera: and, most particularly, sung by Italians, who he said were the only nationality who understood how to phrase. It may be apposite, as an aside, to remember that the musical scene in Warsaw during Chopin's childhood and adolescence was dominated by Italian opera; and that as a youth, even before starting his studies there, Chopin was a constant frequenter of the Conservatoire, where he hung out with the opera students and formed a monumental crush on a young soprano. In mid 1950s, opera was still often sung in English in London, and largely by English singers—not good enough for Smeterlin, who enjoined me, rather, to attend practically nightly the season of Italian opera by Italians currently running, mounted by the impresario S.A. Gorkinsky, at (as I recall) the old Stoll theatre.

Dance

Equally important, in relation to teaching and playing, to Smeterlin's singing was his dancing, with respect to which, of course, I am referring to his very characteristic rhythmic vitality. Obviously, this was most in evidence in actual dance, or dance derived, music, particularly in the waltzes and mazurkas of Chopin. His Chopin programmes usually included at least one waltz and always a group of mazurkas, and as he played these one had absolutely the sense that he was dancing on the keys. But the concept of rhythm, in the sense of a slight, often infinitesimal, distortion of the pattern of the beats within a regular pulse, extended beyond waltzes, mazurkas and polonaises. I recollect his insistence on a distinct rhythmic bite in other works, for instance the outer sections of the Scherzo from the B flat minor Sonata, and in the march like sections of the Fantasie in F minor of Chopin.

In dance related music, there was, however a big divide in his teaching on how to achieve rhythm as between mazurkas (whether of Chopin or of Szymanowski) and other dances. The characteristic rhythm of the waltz, for instance, could be learned. There were rules which could be taught; and, indeed, I was taught (having come to Smeterlin with little understanding of it), though not actually by Smeterlin himself but by a colleague to whom he sent people to work on physical technique. This was an English pianist, Vernon Warner, who had attended the so-called Vienna Master School at the same time (before the First World War) as Smeterlin, though having been a pupil of Emile von Saur (himself a pupil—allegedly the favourite pupil—of Liszt) as opposed to Smeterlin's teacher, Leopold Godowski. Warner had acquired an excellent understanding of waltz rhythm, in particular, which seemed to be characteristic of all Vienna trained pianists of that time; and Smeterlin simply assumed that I understood this. What he did teach himself, however, was the way in which this rhythm had to be present in, and maintained throughout, every waltz. Its strength might vary from quite strong (though never, in Chopin's waltzes, as strong as it would properly be in a pure Viennese waltz) to almost a mere hint. But in some form it must always, he insisted, be there.

This had two important implications in relation to the waltzes of Chopin. In the first place, it imposed limits on the possible speed at which they could properly be played. There is a speed above which, and a speed below which, it is impossible to impose the characteristic lilt of the waltz within each bar, so Smeterlin taught speeds for the slower waltzes that were often a little faster, and for faster waltzes a speed that was generally a little slower than the speeds generally adopted.

The second implication was the need for a certain uniformity of speed within each waltz. There had, he said, to be a certain continuity of the dance throughout each waltz; you started waltzing at the beginning and went on waltzing, bar by bar, to the end. You never stopped dancing, nor changed the speed to the extent of interrupting that continuity. A very good example of the implications of this is the Waltz in A flat Op 42 of Chopin which I worked on with Smeterlin. He would not allow the near *doppio movimento* in the ritornello sections of this work that is very often adopted. You could vary speed a little, but you must never interrupt the dance. It may become a little more lively, or a little calmer, more intimate, and so slower; but it must always be a continuation of the same dance; not a switch to a different one.

Smeterlin's approach to "teaching" the mazurka was completely different. Indeed (hence the inverted commas) it was, in essence, that mazurka playing could not be learned because, unlike, for instance, the waltz, there were no rules that could be taught. Ability to play mazurkas in an authentic way could only, he said, be acquired through absorption. But of what? He was, he said, quite often asked whether, to play Chopin generally and mazurkas in particular, one had to be Polish; to which, he told me, he generally responded that it was not at all a question of *being* Polish (there were, he said, many Polish pianists who played Chopin very badly), but of having been *in* Poland at a time when he (also, he said, the composer Szymanowski) had been able to hear Polish folk music played (and, one must add, sung) in the market towns and villages of the Polish countryside, where authentic tradition of folk music was still alive.

Obviously, I could not do exactly that; but Smeternin recommended a course that was similar to his injunction to listen to Italian opera singers, namely, to listen as much as possible to pianists of his, and an earlier generation on records, who had the same opportunities as him, as well as to go to any performances available of companies presenting traditional Polish dance.

At the time I began to study with Smeternin, though of course I had heard some performances of Chopin mazurkas, I was not well acquainted with them. It was listening to Smeternin himself playing them that almost instantaneously generated a passion for them that has never left me. However, I immediately discovered the complete impossibility of objectively imitating his playing. Obviously, I could not replicate Smeternin's own experience; but I did set out to follow his advice to attempt to absorb the authentic way of playing them, at first by listening to his performances, and also to the recordings of other pianists of his generation, and earlier, who could be presumed themselves to have heard authentic performances of Polish folk music. Later in life, I was able to go further in following his instruction. I spent long hours in the British Sound Archive listening to, and I hoped duly "absorbing", authentic Polish folk music from archival material which was available there (something which, bearing in mind that this had been mostly recorded in the open air in the very early days of recording, and from performers often in their 80s, required steely determination). Due to the great variety of dance rhythms and types of music involved, and the extent to which this was transformed by Chopin's own musical invention (something of which Smeternin had warned me), the connection between this archival material and actual Chopin mazurkas was not at all obvious. I can only vouch for the fact that, as Smeternin had said would happen, I seemed to absorb something, and found that I had acquired an ability to play mazurkas from the inside, as it were, where before I had been limited to adoring them from the outside: vindication of Smeternin's advice.

Narrative

The third of these elements of Smeternin's playing and teaching, and the one that was, perhaps the most dominant, was what he referred to as "telling a story". At the very first encounter I had with him, and always thereafter, he hammered home the message that a performance was absolutely valueless unless it told a story. But it is essential to understand what he meant by this, and in particular that he did not mean anything that came from outside the music being played itself. It was not your own story, nor any "programme", nor any visual image (no raindrops, no leaves blowing about a grave yard); it was the composer's musical story, as told in the notes written in the score.

I can illustrate this, and, importantly, what it meant in practical terms, by his teaching of Chopin's Etude in C minor from Opus 10 (the so-called "Revolutionary"). Today, performances of this work regularly seem to concentrate on the steely prestidigitation of modern finger technique; for Smeternin, on the other hand, it was what he referred to as the "tragi-dramatic" declamation in the right hand that the piece was all about. But it was absolutely characteristic, however, of the highly practical nature of his teaching that it did not at all involve an emotional or philosophic exploration of what he meant by tragedy or drama; he assumed you had that (purely musical) understanding without his assistance. What he taught was how to get this over in performance. Here, of course, the first essential was to understand that the left hand, which is where the brilliant technical stuff is to be found—what may be seen as what the piece is a "study" about—has to be absolutely subservient to the narrative material in the right hand. But Smeternin went on to say that that did not by any means imply that the left hand could be neglected. On the contrary, just because one's conscious attention needed to be focused on the right hand, the left hand needed extra practice, so that it might, as it were, look after itself. And, furthermore, there was more for him in this subservient left hand than just playing the notes (it went without saying that in that respect nothing less than perfection was acceptable); the left hand, for him, had its own character and dynamic, which supported the right hand, and which had to be firmly built into its performance. In this respect, he identified the crescendo to the top of each repetition of the

arpeggios which accompany the statements of the initial theme in the right hand, as key to producing the dramatic surges that should underpin the drama of the right hand declamation.

This concentration on the search for “what the music was really about” was perhaps the major element of Smeternin’s teaching; and pages could be written giving examples of how it manifested itself in different works. I would refer here only to one area as an example, namely, the codas of many of Chopin’s larger works, particularly the Ballades and Scherzos. It is common for these to be seen as, principally, an opportunity for a display of pianistic pyrotechnics: often leading to adoption of very fast tempi. Smeternin, however, always saw them as containing a story, often a very dramatic one, but the telling of which generally called for concentration on elements other than the most obviously technically brilliant, and for somewhat slower tempi than were generally adopted.