Carl Tausig's pianism and compositions*

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Abstract
This article proposes an analysis of some innovations and recurrent characteristics of Tausig's piano style (pianism) and compositions. Among those recurrent patterns are the chromatic glissando (who made his first appearance in the history of the piano and caused even Liszt some trouble); his predilections for double notes, which he extended to the point to use them in single passages in Chopin's compositions and transcriptions; his large use of interlocking octaves together with single notes who gives the performer more brilliance, clearness and allows literally a flow of overtones; also Tausig's use of the whole-tone scale in the midst of the 19th century, when he was barely 17 years old, is noteworthy.
Keywords
19th century piano – piano technique – piano transcriptions – virtuoso pianist and composer.

Resumo
Este artigo propõe uma análise de algumas inovações e características recorrentes tanto no estilo pianístico (pianismo) de Tausig quanto em suas composições. Entre tais padrões recorrentes estão o glissando cromático (em sua primeira aparição na história do piano, razão de alguns constrangimentos até mesmo a Liszt); a predileção por notas duplas, que foi estendida tanto substituindo passagens em notas simples em composições de Chopin como em suas transcrições; e o vasto uso de oitavas intercaladas com notas simples, o que proporciona ao intérprete mais brilho, precisão e clareza, assim como permite um grande ressonância de sons harmônicos. Além disso, destaca-se o uso da escala de tons inteiros em meados do século XIX, quando tinha apenas 17 anos de idade.
Palavras-chave
Piano no século XIX – técnica pianística – transcrições para piano – compositor e pianista virtuoso.

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Despite his unusually short life, Carl Tausig (1841-1871) left to posterity a substantial bulk of original pieces, transcriptions and pedagogical exercises that together represent an important source of information for the scholar interested in the development of the piano technique in the nineteenth century.

Around 1860, by then 19 years old, Tausig made his first serious attempt as a composer. The result was a ballade, called *Das Geisterschiff* (The Ghost Ship), written under the influence of the homonymous poem by Strachwitz.[1] The poem in question is a description of an encounter in a stormy sea between two boats, one with a human crew fighting to survive and a ghost ship of Vikings on another. The ghost ship is pointing directly to the North Pole; a place that represents purity and peace. Much about Tausig is revealed in his choosing such a powerful and strong poetry.

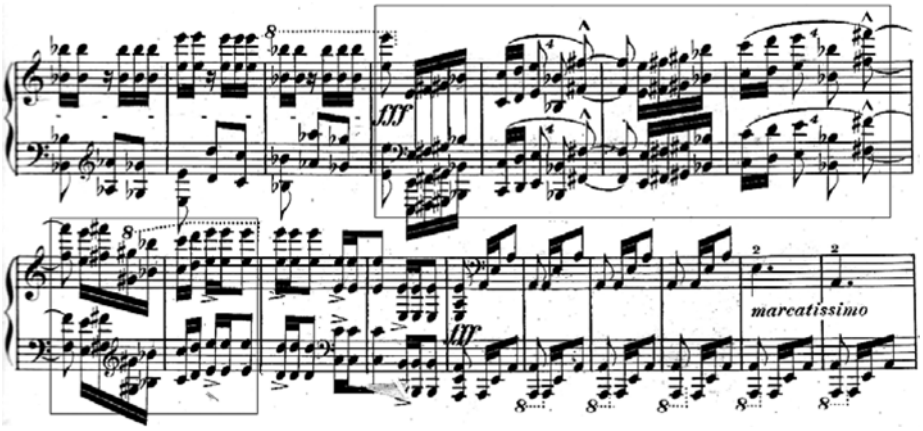
This particular piece evidences young Tausig's turbulent character, his inner *Sturm und Drang* and chaotic emotions. Later, dissatisfied with all his juvenile achievements, Tausig in one of his last outbursts bought back all the copies he could lay his hands on and burned them (Fay, 1922, p. 279). During subsequent decades of donations, some libraries around the world, including the Library of Congress, received copies of the score from private collections, thus making it possible today to evaluate Tausig's *opera prima* on its own merits.

Example 1. Front cover of Tausig's *Ghost Ship*. Library of Congress, U.S.

[1] Moritz Graf von Strachwitz (1822-1847) was a German poet. His works have also been set into music by Robert Schumann, Carl Loewe and Johannes Brahms.

Originally, *The Ghost Ship* was an orchestral piece. It was surprisingly well received, even the fearsome Hanslick, who later criticized Tausig so severely, was positive. Following a nineteenth century tradition, Tausig made an arrangement for piano solo, which is the only testimony left of this piece. Tausig's transcription shows some interesting compositional devices such as the presence of whole tone scale, (in the midst of the nineteenth century!) a chromatic glissando, which made hear its first appearance in the history of the piano, and finally some strong influences of Richard Wagner.

In a letter to Ingeborg Stark in 1860, Liszt explained his views on the whole tone scale present in Tausig's piece: "It is nothing but a very simple development of the scale, terrifying for all the long and protruding ears […] Tausig makes a very fine use in his *Geisterschiff*" (La Mara, 1893, p. 362-363).



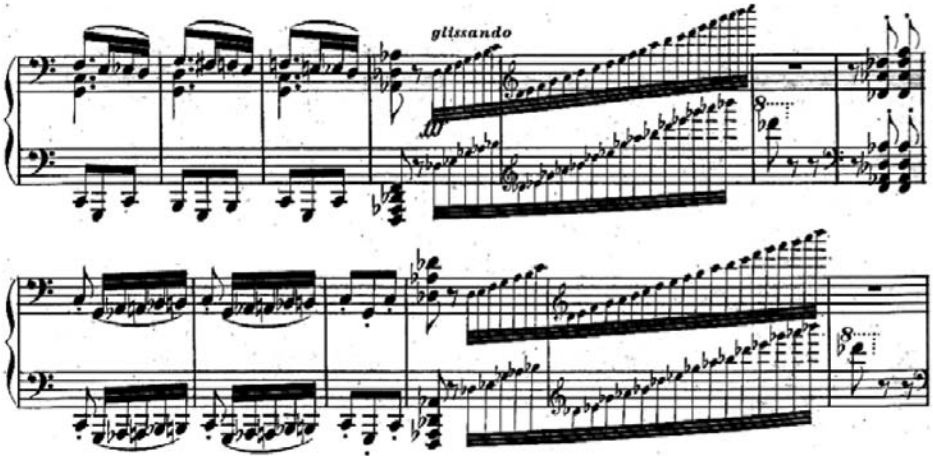
Example 2. Whole-tone scale. Tausig, *Ghost Ship*, mm. 84-100.

However the following chromatic glissando in the next page was not destined to be so easily grasped by Liszt. Weissheimer,[2] present in one of the famous matinees in the Altenburg, remembered when Tausig submitted his new opus for the first time:

> There was a passage so incredible that caused even Liszt a little trouble. It was an ascending chromatic glissando ending shrilly on a top black note! After a few vain attempts, Liszt finally said to Tausig: *'Junge*

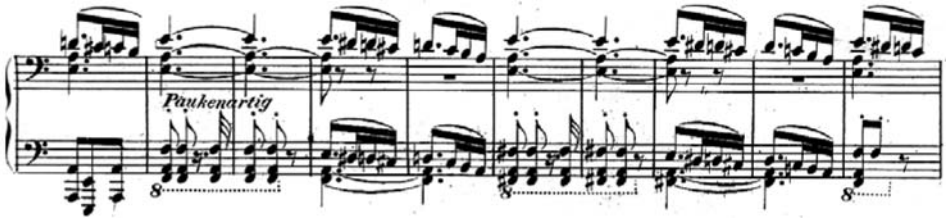
[2] Wendelin Weissheimer (1838-1910), German conductor and composer, student of Liszt.

> *wie machts du das?'* (Young man how do you do this?) Tausig sat down, performed a glissando note on the white keys with the middle finger of his right hand, while at the same time making the fingers of his left hand, fly so cleverly over the black keys that a chromatic scale could be clearly be heard streaking like lightning up the whole length of the keyboard, ending on a high with a shrill 'bip.' Now Liszt addressed himself the problem again to the problem again, and after some half a dozen practice-runs he too achieved the desired 'bip' without any accident. (Watson, 1989, p. 178)



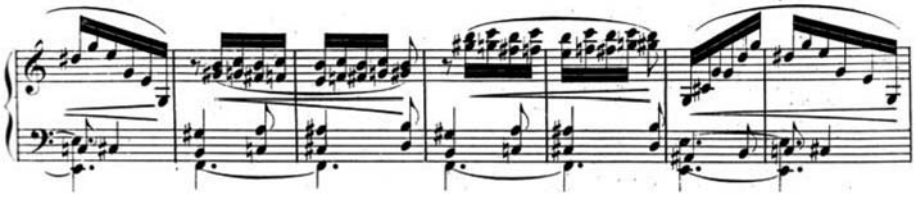
Example 3. Tausig, *Ghost Ship*, mm.155-165.

It is worth mentioning that some dissonances present in Tausig's *Ghost Ship* sound much more aggressive and threatening on the piano. One of those is for sure the electrifying effect when the same motive is played half a step higher from F to F#. We can also have an idea how certain parts of his Tausig's orchestration must have sound because he wrote *Paukenartig*, meaning like timpani.

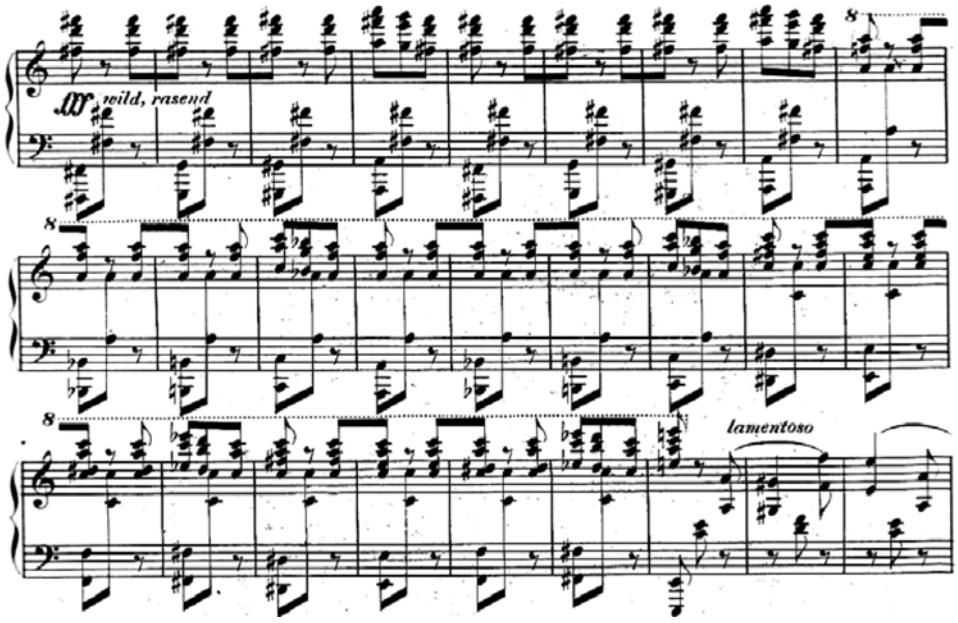


Example 4. Tausig, *Ghost Ship*, mm. 46-55.

In the next examples it can be noticed the double notes played in *prestissimo* by the right hand and the risky jumps played by the left strongly suggest that *The Ghost Ship* was primarily intended for orchestra. Probably it was due to sections like this that Bülow considered this an "unhappy transcription, full of eccentricities" (Bülow, 1896, p. 313).



Example 5. Tausig, *Ghost Ship*, mm. 267-273.



Example 6. Tausig, *Ghost Ship*, mm. 288-314.

Since the beginning of his apprenticeship with Liszt, Tausig was considered an extraordinary talent with many inborn qualities. One of those was for sure his octave technique. Also a large use of interlocking octaves was made by in his unpublished transcription of *A Faust Symphony*. In the year 1866 Tausig demonstrated his skills

and tried to explain to a perplexed Wilhelm von Lenz how the famous middle section in octaves of the Polonaise, Op. 53 – which he used to call "a little specialty of mine" – should be played:

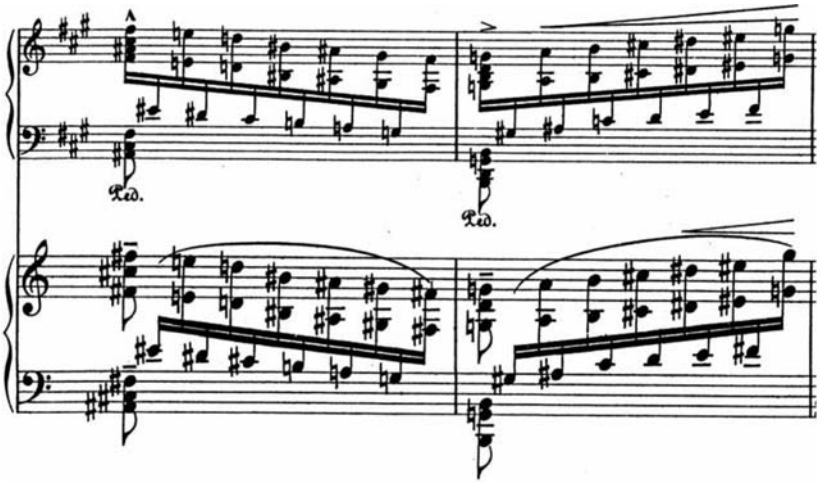
> Look, my hand is small, and I keep it still closer together; my left hand is so formed that it runs by itself over the four degrees, E, D#, C#, B– it's a kind of *lusus naturae* (smiling); I can do it as long as you like – it does not tire me; that was written for me. Strike these four octaves with both hands; you can't play them so loud. I tried it. See! See! Very good, but not as loud as mine, and after a couple of measures you are tired and so are the octaves! I don't think that any one else can play this passage just as I do but how few understand it! It is the tramp of the horses of the Polish Light Cavalry! (Lenz, 1973, p. 83-84)

The obsession with octaves that must have occurred after Tausig's achievements in the middle section of Chopin's famous Polonaise ended up annoying Liszt in his later years. August Göllerich remembered

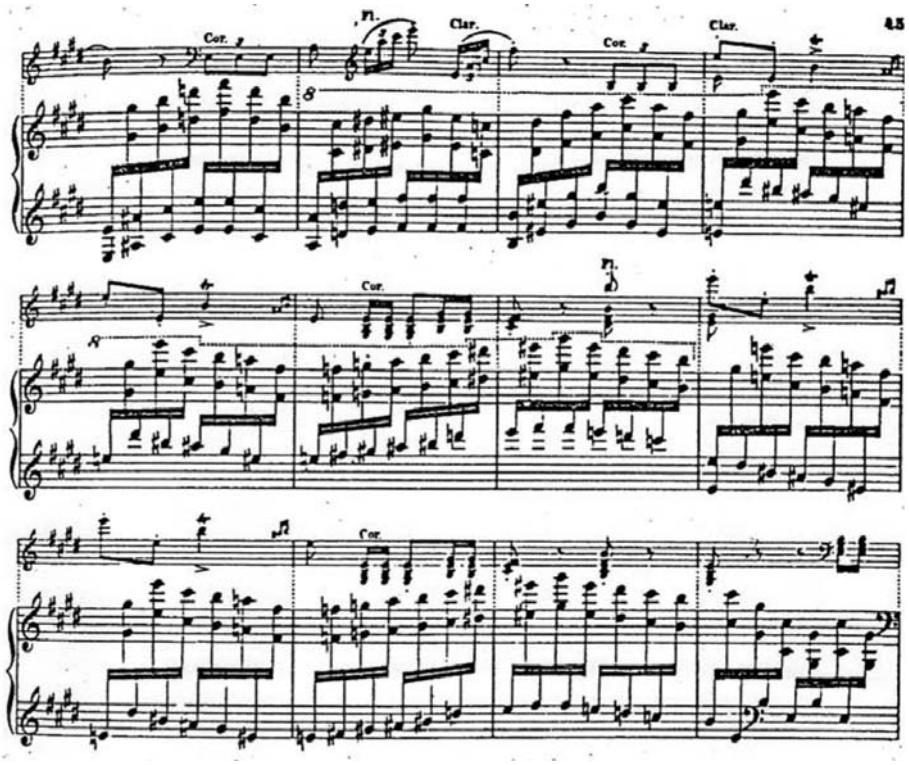
> … "a pianist who was performing Chopin's Polonaise in A-flat with great gusto." When he came to the celebrated octave passage in the left hand, Liszt interrupted him snapping: "I don't want to listen to how fast you can play octaves. What I wish to hear is the canter of the horses of the Polish cavalry before they gather force and destroy the enemy." (Göllerich, 1996, p. 164)

Tausig's interlocking octave technique must also have been quite a remarkable feat. Decades later after Tausig's disappearance, Busoni in his edition of Liszt's *Don Juan Fantasy* (Example 7) recollected a rumor in which "It was told that, on the occasion of the performance of the *Don Juan Fantasy* under the hands of Tausig, the public at this point stood up from their seats" (Liszt, 1917, p. 40).

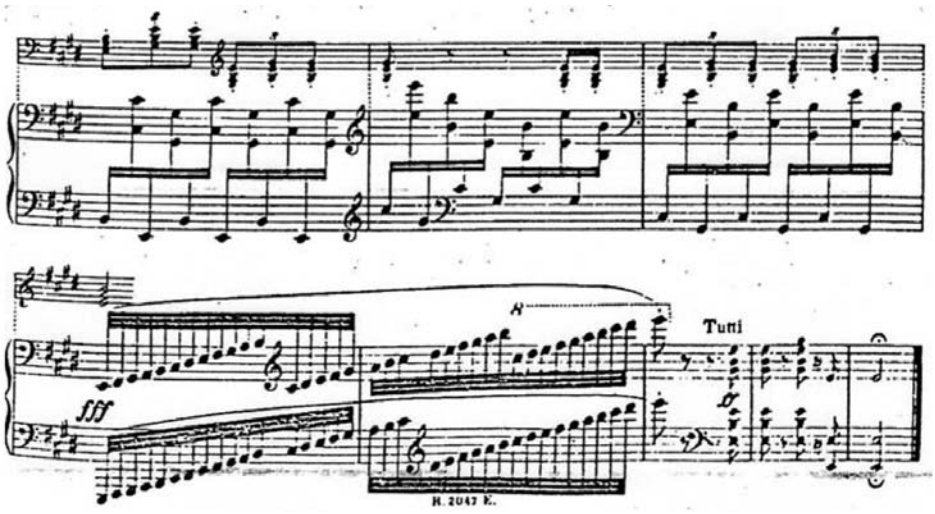
Another example (Example 8) of Tausig's predilection for this technique can be found in his version of the *Piano Concerto,* Op. 11 by Chopin. In the last bars he simply substituted the runs in unison for alternating octaves.



Example 7. Liszt, *Don Juan Fantasy*, mm.321-322.



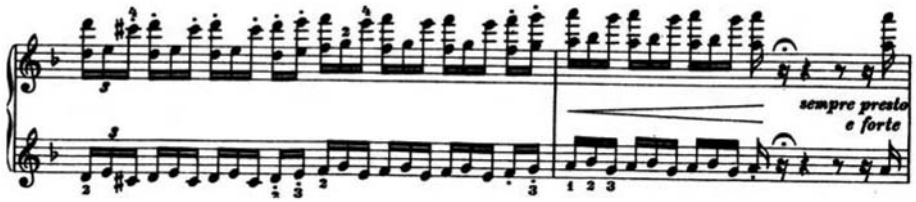
Example 8. Tausig, out of print version of Chopin's *Piano Concerto*, op. 11, p. 21. Published by Ries & Erler, Berlin.



Example 8. Tausig, out of print version of Chopin's *Piano Concerto*, op. 11, p. 21. Published by Ries & Erler, Berlin.

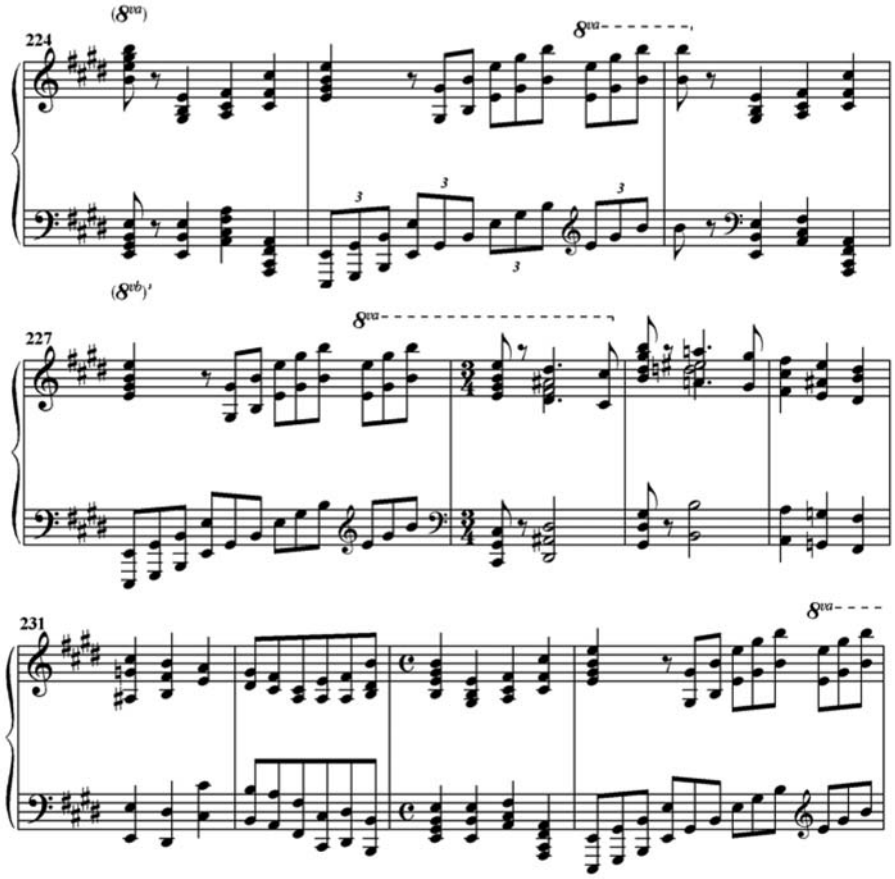
These sorts of *ossias* may appear sacrilegious for many of today's pianists, saturated as they are by the so-called *urtext* scores; original instrument performances and the endless preaching that started shortly after World War II–about how the nineteenth century's composers would or would not have played their music. But in safeguard of Tausig, Liszt, Anton Rubinstein and uncountable other great nineteenth century performers, it must be pointed that such licenses were not only permitted, but encouraged. It was legitimate for an interpreter to seek everything technically, dynamically or even philosophically which could bring more eloquence and imagination into the recreation of a score.

Also interesting to note is Tausig's solution for some specific sections in his transcriptions that – at first sight – would require double octaves. Tausig's octaves are not doubled in both hands; he utilizes a pioneer technique that was going to be largely used by Busoni decades later in many of his transcriptions, that is to alternate octaves with single notes.



Example 9. Bach-Busoni, *Toccata and Fugue* in D minor, mm. 9-10.

In playing one hand in octaves and the other in single notes, Tausig was totally conscious that the harmonics and overtones produced by the sequence would start to vibrate immediately, thus eliminating the necessity of playing octaves with both hands. This simple proceeding allows more control, the hand with single notes moves like an arpeggio and the performer has to control the accuracy of the octaves only one hand at a time. He made a large use of this aspect of his pianism many of his transcriptions, like in his two hands version of A Faust Symphony:

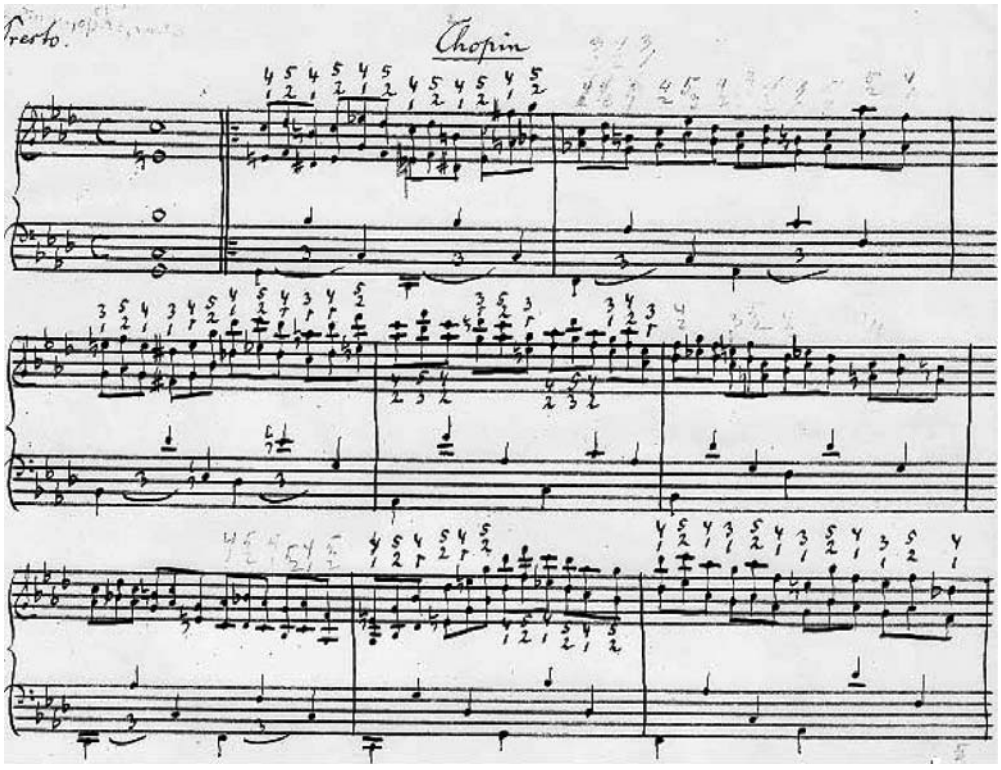


Example 10. Liszt-Tausig, *Faust Symphony*, 1 mvt. mm. 224-234.

In reflecting on the legitimacy of some of Tausig's transcriptional solutions in the light of the twentieth century, one name comes immediately at mind: Vladimir Horowitz. Differently from his contemporaries and transcribers of orchestral music such as Leopold Godowsky or György Cziffra, Horowitz's arrangements are from the

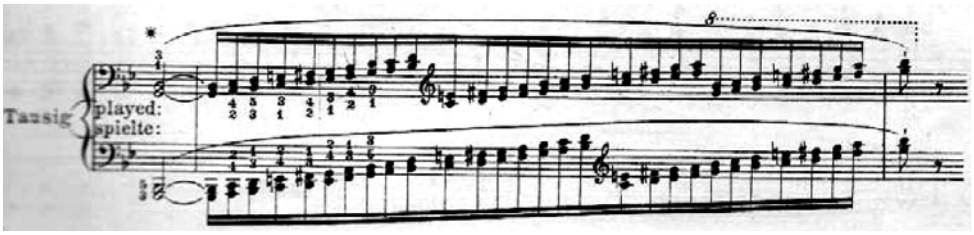
technical and polyphonic point of view less complicated to perform. But paradoxically as it may seem, they are by far more effective. Horowitz knew exactly how to extract the maximum from the piano with the minimum effort. In a casual conversation about technique with Leonid Hambro in 1951, the latter remembered how Horowitz asked him "You know how hard it is to play the piano? Why should you make it harder? Better to make it easier." Specifically regarding octave playing Horowitz demonstrated how "he could play only a single note, or rearrange a difficult right-hand episode so that the left carried some of the weight." Hambro concluded reverently: "He understood density, he understood registration, he understood overtones. He put them all to use and was always after simplifications" (Schonberg, 1992, p. 172).

Another predilection of Tausig was for double notes, which together with the octaves are the litmus paper of transcendental pianism. One of his attempts was his pioneer effort to transcribe the *Etude* in F minor, Op. 25 by Chopin in double thirds and sixths.



Example 11. Tausig unpublished manuscript. Library of Congress.

Tausig also liked to conclude the last run of the *Ballade*, Op. 23 by Chopin in parallel double thirds.

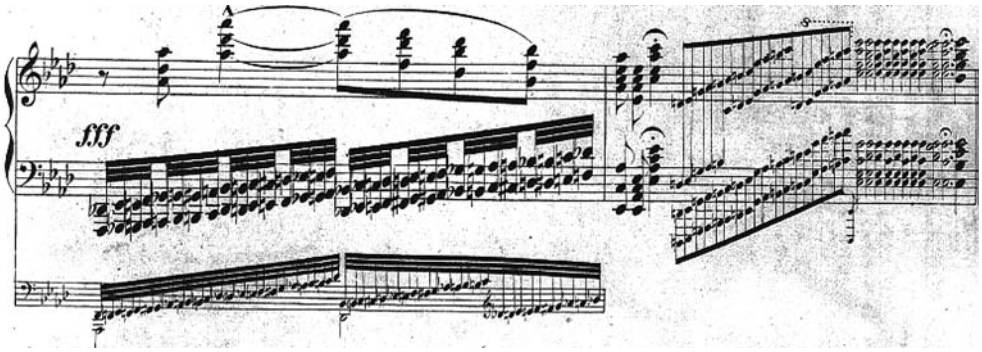


Example 12. Chopin, *Ballade* in G minor, edited by Raphael Joseffy, mm. 249.

This seemingly preposterous stunt seems to have made its way into the following generations of piano virtuosos. Reminiscing about lessons with Moriz Rosenthal, Charles Rosen recalled Rosenthal's account of an occasion while performing Liszt's Don Juan Fantasy with Brahms sitting in the audience, Rosenthal decided to get the composer's attention by suddenly playing the chromatic thirds simultaneously with both hands, instead of the original right hand alone. (Mitchell and Evans, 2006, p. x)When consulted about the possible origins of this idea whether it could have been suggested to Rosenthal through Tausig's best student, Raphael Joseffy, Charles Rosen pointed out an important difference between Tausig's and Rosenthal's virtuosic displays:

> The double thirds of the last run in the Chopin *Ballade no.1* must be diatonic, and the one Rosenthal played in the Reminiscences of Don Juan was chromatic and descending as well as ascending, and are far more difficult. I can play the Chopin quite easily even without practicing, although I am sure not as fast or as evenly as Tausig, but a quarter of an hour of practice would improve it a lot, if I thought was worth the trouble. (Rosen, Charles. Letter to Giulio Draghi, 9 December 2006)

Rosen's last statement, "if I thought was worth the trouble" belongs definitely to our contemporary perspective. But in the nineteenth century, when virtuosity was understood as culture, and the piano technique was constantly expanding its horizons, pianists would do whatever they could to challenge and surprise audiences. But even Rosenthal's feat retreats in front of Tausig's ultimate challenge: ascending sixths in the left hand. Anyway it was indeed very considerate of Tausig to offer performers the option of a simple chromatic scale.



Example 13. Tausig, *Reminiscences de Halka*, op. 2, mm. 167.

One last interesting feature in Tausig's talents was his much touted skill in transposing and sight reading. In recalling Tausig's pianism, Joseffy remembered that

> Tausig used to play the big Fugues in any key for our class, telling us to do so. Rosenthal maybe could practice a Bach fugue in 12 Keys for 12 weeks and then be able to play in them all, but with Tausig it was natural. Tausig never had to practice. He played all of Wagner from memory, every note, and that is something which Rosenthal cannot do (great pianist that he is).[3]

Tausig's legacy in terms of piano technique development is still waiting for a proper reevaluation. His outstanding *Daily Exercises* in three volumes cover almost any aspect of technique. The worldwide used "Daily Exercises" by Oscar Beringer (a former Tausig student) are less than a pale substitute for Tausig's more challenging and all-embracing proposal. Tausig was one of the first pedagogues to advocate the transposition of the same section in different keys in order to make it more difficult, and once mastered, much easier when back to the original key. In our time in which lack of personality and shallowness in interpretation allied with endless specialization seem to be all around us, Carl Tausig's legacy as editor, composer and pedagogue can still teach us an invaluable lesson.

[3] David G. Phillips, *The Notebook of Edwin Hughes 1905-1906* (The American Music Teacher).

Dec. 9, 2006

Dear Mr. Draghi,

The double thirds of the last run in the Chopin Ballade no. 1 must be diatonic, and the one Rosenthal played in the Reminiscences de Do n Juan ~~were~~ was chromatic and descending as well as ascending, and are far more difficult

. I can play the Chopin quite easily even without practicing, although I am sure not as fast or as evenly as Tausig, but a quarter of an hour of practice would improve it a lot if I thought it as worth the trouble.

The only thing that I know about Rosenthal and Joseffy is what Rosenthal wrote, that Joseffy had an old-fashioned articulated touch instead of the singing legato of Mikuli, that he faked the left hand in the last pages of the Chopin B minor Sonata, and that he never told his students about the importance of the bass line in the second theme of the Mozart a Major Concerto K. 488. Of course Rosenthal was very young when he studied with Joseffy.

Sincerely

Figure 14. Charles Rosen. Letter to Giulio Draghi, 9 December 2006.

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