László Stachó

"Gradus ad Parnassum".

The Purgatory of Instrumental Technique<sup>1</sup>

"I play scales every day" Although he was one of the most refined and virtuoso Hungarian pianists and one of the most influential piano teachers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Béla Bartók recalled in a 1927 interview that when he applied to the Budapest Music Academy in 1899 he had been a "veritable savage" in terms of piano playing. However, in 1903, Pongrác Kacsóh, a 30-year-old composer and editor, reported in the first article written about Bartók that Bartók's teacher at the Music Academy, the former Liszt pupil István Thomán, had told him personally that "when he first heard Bartók, he was almost amazed that in spite of all his teachers and the irregular nature of his studies up to then, 'he wasn't spoilt at all!'" Kacsóh went on to comment on Thomán's statement: "Anyone familiar with the rigorous grounding of the Music Academy will understand that this statement carries great weight."

Bartók may have been exaggerating a little in the 1927 interview; perhaps the "savagery" of his pianism had already improved during his studies with László Erkel (son of Ferenc Erkel, the most important Hungarian opera composer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), and after Erkel died, with Anton Hyrtl, another local teacher in Pozsony where Bartók was living at the time (today Bratislava, the Slovakian capital). Indeed, Bartók himself said to Kacsóh in 1903 that "when [he] came under Erkel's instruction, the repeated interruptions to [his] studies and the continuous change of teacher had resulted in [his] playing in a disorderly, ragged manner pieces that were mostly too difficult, unsuited to his age or technique." But from 1892 onwards, Erkel had

"got him studying hard, and in order to reign in his wandering imagination and better concentrate his attention, he stopped him composing. [...] under his instruction he made good progress. He studied 'Gradus' [by Muzio Clementi] and the 'Well-Tempered Clavier' carefully and with much enthusiasm (he had covered most of Cramer with Kersch), and played the main etudes by Chopin and Liszt well. He was still not studying composition, neither with a teacher nor a book, but he was

- An extended, Hungarian version of this text may be found at www.parlando.hu/2016/2016-4/Bartok-Stacho-Parnassum.pdf(accessed 17 January 2019). As the original citations in Hungarian may be found there, I have refrained from printing them again here. Throughout this article, all translations of quotations are mine unless otherwise stated.
- Beszélgetések Bartókkal. Interjúk, nyilatkozatok 1911–1945 [Conversations with Bartók. Statements, Interviews 1911–1945], ed. by András Wilheim, Budapest 2000, pp. 81–83, here p. 81.
- Floresztán [Pongrác Kacsóh]: Bartók Béla, in: Zenevilág 4 (1903), pp. 211–214, here p. 213.

composing continuously, and meanwhile had started studying scores, without any sound knowledge of transposing instruments."  $^4$ 

Pongrác Kacsóh's description suggests something that might at first seem surprising, namely that developing one's technique by means of etudes played an important part in Erkel Junior's teaching, and that by this means he was able to tame the young "savage". The "Erkel table", in which the adolescent Bartók meticulously noted the entire material of his first sixteen piano lessons,<sup>5</sup> indicates that in terms of page numbers, the learning of etudes took up over one-third of his piano studies. His notes show that his first eight lessons consisted of six Clementi studies, in addition to two Mozart sonatas and part of Bach's English suite No. 3, while over the second eight lessons, alongside Beethoven's F major Sonata Op. 10/2 (which was also in his repertoire as an adult), the remainder of the Bach suite, the Prelude of Bach's English Suite No. 4 and two Mendelssohn pieces, he also learned another six Clementi studies.

Yet technical exercises must have been a considerable part of Bartók's piano studies even before this. In the report published by Kacsóh, the 22-year-old Bartók mentions that when he studied with Ferenc Kersch (and his wife) in Nagyvárad, he had "acquitted himself" in most of Cramer's studies, which were enormously popular in the nineteenth century. On 23 January 1892 he wrote a short, simply composed letter from Nagyvárad to his mother (who was then teaching and living in another town), saying: "I play scales every day." In another letter we read that each day "I play 2 or 1 and ½ hours, and with pleasure", and he wonders why his teacher has not given him studies recently. About 18 months to two years later, while the family was living briefly in the Saxon town of Beszterce in Transylvania (then in Hungary, now in Romania, Bistriţa), the young Bartók

- 4 Floresztán: Bartók Béla, p. 212. Ferenc Kersch was an organist and choirmaster, with whom Bartók studied while he lived in Nagyvárad now in Romania, Oradea for one year from autumn 1891 onwards.
- 5 This is the title Bartók gave to his diary-like register. Later, he crosses out the word "Erkel" and substituted it with "Zongora", that is, "piano". Thematisches Verzeichnis der Jugendwerke Béla Bartóks 1890–1904, ed. by Denis Dille, Budapest 1974, p. 217.
- 6 It is well-known that two volumes of Cramer's studies were found in Anton Schindler's library, containing Beethoven's alleged remarks communicated by Schindler; see Johann Baptist Cramer: 21 Etüden für Klavier. Nach dem Handexemplar Beethovens, aus dem Besitz Anton Schindlers, ed. by Hans Kann, Vienna 1974; cf. William S. Newman: Yet Another Major Beethoven Forgery by Schindler?, in: The Journal of Musicology 3 (1984), pp. 397–422. Indeed, Schindler mentions in his Beethoven biography that Beethoven considered Cramer's etudes not only as the main basis for solid playing ("als die Hauptbasis zum gediegenen Spiel") but also as an appropriate preparatory step before studying his own works ("als die geeignete Vorschule zu seinen eigenen Werken"); see Anton Schindler's Beethoven-Biographie [31860], ed. by Alfred Christlieb Kalischer, Berlin/Leipzig 1909, pp. 529 f.
- 7 Bartók Béla élete levelei tükrében. Összegyûjtött digitális kiadás [Béla Bartók's Life in Letters. An Integrated Digital Edition], ed. by László Vikárius and István Pávai, Budapest 2007 [CD-ROM], letter No. 14.

wrote a text in faltering German, with gothic lettering (to practise the language), noting that the only reason he did not practise more than two-and-a-half or three hours a day was because his mother would not allow it. He played scales in octaves and thirds every day, and asked Marie Voit, a distant relative of his mother's and a piano teacher in Pozsony, for advice on how much time each day he should spend playing scales.<sup>8</sup>

László Erkel played a key role in the development of Bartók the pianist prior to his time at the Budapest Music Academy, and his pedagogical repertoire was far from unusual at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His father Ferenc Erkel had trained the pianists of the Music Academy under Liszt's guidance, and unlike the technique-centred repertoire demanded by his rival and colleague Henrik Gobbi, he put greater emphasis on works for performance. But the influence of this approach, of which he and his brother and teaching assistant Gyula Erkel were proponents, lessened after Liszt died. Technical studies were of course present in abundance in Erkel's teaching, but compared to the examination recitals of Henrik Gobbi's pupils, Ferenc Erkel's students played significantly fewer studies. In Gobbi's teaching these had special importance: his teaching material at the Music Academy consisted of almost nothing but studies and the Well-Tempered Clavier (which incidentally decades later was considered material for study, rather than a work for performance: the Bach preludes and fugues figured in the Academy syllabus among the etudes!). To Ferenc Erkel taught at the Music Academy until

- This undated letter has been published by Dille in Thematisches Verzeichnis der Jugendwerke, p. 41: "Mit der Kreutzer Sonate sind wir schon fertig. sie [sic] ist sehr schön besonders gefallen uns die Variazionen, mir von den besonders die 2te Variazión. Jetzt lernen wir die 7te Beethoven Sonate [most probably Op. 30 No. 2], welche sehr schwer ist für mich, aber sie gefällt uns auch. Kann ich die 10te Beethoven Sonate lernen, Op. 14. No 2. G dur? Wie viel Scalen soll ich jeden Tag spielen? Bis jetzt habe ich alle Tag die ganzen Scalen gespielt, einmal in Terzen, oder in octaven [...] Ich habe jetzt die Donau [his early piano piece, The Course of the Danube (A Duna folyása)] für Violin (übersetzt) geschrieben, denn ich habe nicht viel zu thun, ich spiele alle Tag 2 1/2 oder 3 Stunden, mehr erlaubt mir die mama nichteinmal."
- **9** The programmes of the concert examinations were published in the yearbooks of the Hungarian Royal Academy of Music.
- See the 1899, 1905, and 1909 Rules and Regulations of the Royal Academy: Az Orsz. M. Kir. Zene-akadémia szervezeti és szolgálati szabályzata, Budapest [1899], p. 28; [1905], p. 44; [1909], pp. 47 f.; and the unified piano curriculum published in a piano method textbook by Kálmán Chován, Bartók's senior colleague at the Academy; Kálmán Chován: A zongorajáték módszertana (methodika) mint nevelési eszköz [The Methodology of Piano Playing as a Pedagogical Tool], Budapest <sup>2</sup>1905. In fact, this stance may have been the source of Bartók's apparent attitude towards the Wohltemperiertes Klavier as being a pedagogical work in his own classes a generation later. Júlia Székely, who most probably studied with him longer than anyone else, recalled that in Bartók's piano classes at the Music Academy in the 1920s students used to bring him either an etude with a sonata or a Bach prelude and fugue with a "work for performance"; see Júlia Székely: Bartók tanár úr [Professor Bartók], Budapest <sup>2</sup>1978, pp. 58 f.

1888, and Henrik Gobbi until the following year. They were succeeded by István Thomán (a pupil of Erkel and Liszt who taught Dohnányi and Bartók), Árpád Szendy (a pupil of Gobbi and Liszt), and Kálmán Chován (who was invited back to Budapest from Vienna).<sup>11</sup>

A Hungarian capital – with a "Germanic" spirit When Bartók started at the Music Academy, the piano curriculum of all the relevant study programmes – the preparatory course, the academy course, and the piano as compulsory subject for non-pianists – was divided into three categories: technical exercises, studies (etudes), and works for performance. In the descriptions found in the 1899 Music Academy regulations, equal space is given to these three categories (with a note that full information on the work for performance is given in the regular syllabus in Kálmán Chován's textbook). This in itself illustrates the particular emphasis that was given to technical training.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in the next set of regulations, published in 1905, we find the further stipulation that in the first three years of the academy piano course at least 30 of the studies indicated in the syllabus are compulsory, and in the fourth year at least 20, in addition to three sonatas and one or two other works for performance. Incidentally, this syllabus, compiled by Chován and Szendy, included under "studies" not only the Well-Tempered Clavier (in Carl Tausig's edition) but also Bach's Inventions, Suites and Partitas and Chopin's Preludes, alongside etudes by Joseph Kessler and Theodor Kullak. Bartók, whom Thomán admitted straight into the second year at the Academy, would have been confronted with the following material, according to the Music Academy regulations:

"Year II. Repetition and extension of [previously assigned] finger and hand exercises; e.g. playing all the major and minor scales with C-major fingering; double sixths and thirds in contrary motion and broken figuration; octave scales in parallel thirds and sixths etc.

Studies: Clementi-Tausig 'Gradus ad Parnassum' in its entirety. Czerny 'Kunst der Fingerfertigkeit', Books III and IV. 10 Prelud[es] and Fugues from Bach-Tausig 'Wohltemp. Klav'. Three or four of the Kullak octave studies, and possibly one each of Chován Op. 18, or [Károly] Aggházy 'Caprices'. Pieces

- Géza Moravcsik: History of the Hungarian Royal Academy of Music 1875–1907 [Az Országos M. Kir. Zeneakadémia története 1875–1907], Budapest 1907, pp. 29 f. Kálmán Chován (1852–1928) was born in the southern Hungarian town Szarvas, just like Szendy, then spent his last two high school years in Pozsony (the city where Dohnányi and Bartók went to high school, too). Instead of studying with Liszt he went to Vienna where he lived for almost two decades and taught after his conservatoire studies at the Horak Musikschule. Then he was offered a position at the Hungarian Royal Academy of Music in 1889; and from 1891 onwards he served as the leader of the piano-teacher training course; cf. N. N. [Árpád Szendy?]: Chován Kálmán, in: Yearbook of the Hungarian Royal Academy of Music from the 1915/1916 Academic Year [Az Országos M. Kir. Zeneakadémia évkönyve az 1915/1916-iki tanévröl], ed. by Géza Moravcsik, Budapest 1916, pp. 3–13.
- 12 Chován: The Methodology of Piano Playing, 1st ed. (1892).

for performance from the works of classical and modern masters according to the abilities of the student. $^{773}$ 

This description may give the impression that the approach favoured by Gobbi, giving such prominence to technical training, had endured and triumphed. Szendy, a co-author of the syllabus, may have represented this approach not only in theory; he may have embodied it in his Music Academy classes more credibly in its details than could have done Bartók's teacher, Thomán.<sup>14</sup> However, it would be misleading to attribute the triumph of technical training, in a uniform "regular syllabus" adopted by other Hungarian institutions, merely to the influence of Gobbi.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the spread of music-making among the bourgeoisie created a need for efficient pedagogical methods to enable as many amateurs as possible to learn an instrument. The democratisation of a specialist field necessarily entails methods that offer the promise of easy, mechanical reproduction. These methods spread very effectively in their given media, almost like viruses, and during their spread they often become self-serving. To use a term from evolutionary theory: they become "runaway traits". In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the influential German composer, music theorist and critic Adolf Bernhard Marx remarked:

"Lastly, look at our domestic music! It is scarcely necessary to ask: who is musical? but, rather, who is not? In the so-called higher or more refined circles of society, music has long been looked upon as an indispensable branch of education. In every family it is cultivated, if possible, by all the members, without particular regard to talent or inclination; in many of them it constitutes the whole liberal education (at least of the young ladies), and the entire stock of social entertainment; in addition, perhaps, to a couple of modern languages and a most confined and carefully restricted literature. [...] And this beginning amongst the 'higher' and more favourably circumstanced ranks of society is followed up intrepidly and without much forethought by those below, even down to the small shop-keeper and tradesman. Carried away by the force of example, by ignorance and false pride, they grudge not the time that is stolen from pressing labour, and the money that is squeezed out of the hard-earned

- 13 The 1899 Rules and Regulations, p. 28.
- 14 György Kálmán writes in 1928: "Árpád Szendy's masters were Czerny (through his etudes), Liszt, Bülow, Köhler, and Henrik Gobbi. [... However,] Liszt must have had relatively less influence in this respect [that is, regarding technique] and all influence must have been only 'suggestive' as his students from the 1880s didn't have much occasion to listen to his playing. Henrik Gobbi's playing and teaching had definitely much more influence on his [Szendy's] technique." György Kálmán: Szendy Árpád tanítói működése [Árpád Szendy as pedagogue], in: Zenei Szemle [The Musical Review] 12 (1928), pp. 32–35, here p. 33.
- 15 In the course of evolution, "runaway traits" become more embedded and exaggerated with each passing generation due to selection factors, surpassing the traits' optimum extent (in our example, the runaway trait is the mechanical/technical training on music instruments, while the selection factor is wide-spread music-making in society). For the origin of the concept see Ronald A. Fisher: The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection, Oxford 1930.

pittance, so that at least the daughters may get a piano, teachers and music, and thereby – as they hope – acquire a position in society. And all that has thus everywhere been learnt and practised flows in over-abundance into the domestic circle, attempts to make a display at evening parties, and in the semi-publicity of musical societies, and draws new food (like the orchideæ, which have their roots in air) from all those concerts and operatic performances, without which the youngest girl is now no longer able to breathe, and no innkeeper can continue to exist. It is a moving in a circle without beginning or end; every one learns music because music is heard everywhere, and music is heard everywhere because every one has learnt it – and but too often nothing else."<sup>16</sup>

This rapid spread is naturally only one of the reasons (1) for methodical training becoming an end in itself, (2) for the pursuit of instrumental technique in its own right, and (3) for the institutionalisation of instrumental virtuosity.<sup>17</sup> As instruments developed, performing techniques changed too, and this repeatedly focused attention on matters of technical training and method.

The endeavour to achieve technical assurance and easily measurable instrumental perfection, which is less demanding intellectually and emotionally, moved to occupy the centre of music teaching and learning for both the music pupil less endowed with talent (or perhaps rather motivation) – who for some reason finds it more difficult to give meaning to music, and for whom it is more difficult to express what music means to him

- "Dazu nun die Hausmusik. Kaum darf man noch fragen: wer ist musikalisch? sondern: wer ist es nicht? In den sogenannten höhern oder gebildeten Kreisen galt Musik längst als unerlässlicher Theil der Bildung; jede Familie fordert ihn, wo möglich für alle Angehören, ohne sonderliche Rücksicht auf Talent und Lust; in gar vielen beschränkt sich, wenigstens für die weibliche Jugend, die ganze freiere Bildung, sogar die gesellige Unterhaltung nur auf Musik, neben der etwa noch ein Paar neue Sprachen und eine höchst ängstlich und prüde gesichtete und beschränkte Lektüre Raum findet. [...] Was im Kreise der günstiger gestellten 'Gesellschaft' so begonnen, dem eifert, schon vom Beispiel von Unkunde von falschem Ehrgeiz bezwungen, unerschrocken und unberechnend die Menge nach; bis in die Kreise des Kleinhandels und Gewerbes hinein wird der endlos drängenden Arbeitsnoth Zeit, dem knappen Erwerbe Geld abgelistet und abgerungen, um wenigstens für die Töchter Klavier Noten Lehrer Musikbildung zu erbeuten, vor allem in der Hoffnung damit zu den 'Gebildeten' zu zählen. Was allerwärts erübt und erlernt ist, ergiesst sich in Ueberfülle über den häuslichen Kreis, will sich in der Gesellschaft, in der Halböffentlichkeit der Singvereine geltend machen, nährt sich (wie Orchideen, die ihre Wurzeln in der Luft haben) an all' den Konzerten und Opern, ohne die jetzt das kleinste Mädchen nicht zu athmen, kein Gastwirt zu bestehn vermeint. Es ist ein Kreislauf ohne Anfang und Ende: man lernt Musik weil überall Musik gemacht wird, und man macht überall Musik weil man es überall gelernt hat – und oft nichts weiter." Adolf Bernhard Marx: Die Musik des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts und ihre Pflege. Methode der Musik, Leipzig 1855, p. 131 f., English transl.: id.: The Music of the Nineteenth Century, and its Culture. Method of Musical Instruction, transl. by August Heinrich Wehrhan, London 1855, p. 73 (emphasis in the original text). This formulation of the famous 19<sup>th</sup>century German musicologist is a perfect illustration of the abovementioned concept from human ethology, the "runaway trait".
- An insightful description of piano virtuosos shining in Paris in the 1830s is given in Alan Walker: Franz Liszt. The Virtuoso Years, 1811–1847, Revised ed., Ithaca, NY 1987, pp. 161–167.

or her – and the mediocre music teacher. These were also the characteristics par excellence of the virtuosi. Following a psychological necessity, the music teacher and pupil of moderate talent have always been drawn to methods promising easily measurable "results", towards a routine that evokes security, and towards technique-based methodologies in which the teacher "instils" learning in the student.

Thus the circle closes: we might concur with the assertion of the Hungarian music psychologist and pedagogical historian Zoltán Laczó that "training had become mechanical, leeched of all musical expression: it had become the object of both teaching and learning. The era suggested a focus on [finger] movement, such had music pedagogy become, certainly in the hands of minor practitioners." It is worth noting that in actual pedagogical practice this is what happened even when statements made by those involved might otherwise lead us to conclude the opposite. In his foreword to the most popular Hungarian piano method of the first decade of the 20th century, Kálmán Chován wrote that: "I have linked theory and practice so closely together that the child learns not just the instrument, but also music, for the instrument is merely a tool for expressing music", and "I should regard it as the finest reward for my work if from now on we teach even to beginners not just the instrument – but music too"; but from start to finish, his syllabus in fact centred on a systematic technical training of mediocre musical quality (at best). <sup>19</sup>

Chován's goal with the Music Academy curriculum was to "make [it] Hungarian, to rework it in Hungarian fashion", and this was for the most part completed by the time the Academy had moved into its new building on what is now Liszt Square. <sup>20</sup> This goal, however, was only realised in part. According to the yearbooks and regulations of the Music Academy, Chován revised (or, rather, simply supplemented) the uniform piano syllabus in 1905, 1908, and 1913. The new syllabus took students from the beginnings to the "highest artistry", and was complemented with new Hungarian compositions, including most of the latest piano works of the young Bartók. Both in terms of repertoire and approach it reflected a spirit that Kodály traced back to German music teaching, and even decades later was to condemn:

"We are cultivating digital dexterity, but the intellect is dragging its feet after the flighty fingers. Yet the intellect should be leading the way.

- 20 Zoltán Laczó: Kovács Sándor a zongorapedagógus [Sándor Kovács, the piano pedagogue], in: Kovács Sándor válogatott zenei írásai [Sándor Kovács's selected Musical Writings], ed. by Péter Balassa, Budapest 1976, pp. 451–471, here p. 455.
- 19 Kálmán Chován: Elméleti és gyakorlati zongora-iskola mint zenei nevelési eszköz kezdők számára [Theoretical and Practical Piano Method as a Music Educational Tool for Beginners] Op. 21, Budapest <sup>1</sup>1905.
- From the foreword, dated September 1907, to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the piano method, p. 2.

With us, the psychological process is this: music on the page, the creation of the note, post-fact listening, and perhaps correction. But the correct path should be the reverse: written music, imagining the sound, and execution. When this happens, there is little to correct.

The ancient opposition of Latin and German music teaching is reflected in these two opposing methods."<sup>21</sup>

# A few years later, Kodály provided a more nuanced view:

"[I]n this piece [Über das Dirigieren] [Wagner] discusses at length the difference between the French (he includes Italian here) and German music-making. He says that the German is a mixture of mathematics, philosophy and gymnastics, from which nothing can come that would affect the sensitive listener. An exaggeration it may be, but we have first-hand experience of the truth of it, because for one hundred years music teaching was conducted in the spirit of second- and third-rate German Musiklehrers, and this is the influence it diffused. [...] German musicians cannot even read in the sense that a French or Italian musician can. A striking example of this is Koessler [Hans Koessler, who taught Kodály and Bartók at the Music Academy, and was himself a pupil of Rheinberger] who while he was marking assignments, clenched a pencil between his fingers and pressed the chords on the desk, because in spite of being an excellent musician he was unable to hear the chords internally without feeling the position of the chords. This is another example of what German music teaching was like."<sup>22</sup>

It would appear that despite their intentions, the teachers that compiled the turn-of-thecentury Music Academy syllabus, placing technical training at its core, were unable to break away from what Kodály had called the "German" route. Due to the influence of tradition, their hands were tied.

"Gradus ad Parnassum": The purgatory of instrumental technique The unbiased observer may well see a dichotomy between Chován's declaration of a "music-centred" attitude and his own pedagogical practice as the leading piano master at the Music Academy, where on a daily basis he applied a piano method prioritising technical training. This contradiction is merely an illusion, however, and is resolved as soon as we examine the views held by Chován, Szendy and Bartók on the function of independent technical training. Extant documents would appear to show that they shared these views, even though they were merely hinted at in chance remarks (albeit quite telling ones).

"Alongside a relaxed position of the hand, the deep depression of the keys, even playing throughout, a smooth tucking under of the thumbs, and the strict adherence to fingering, are the requirements which are indispensable not just for scale studies, but for the successful surmounting of all other difficulties of finger technique",

remarks Chován in a note in an edition of Czerny. He continues:

- Zoltán Kodály: Visszatekintés [Retrospection], ed. by Ferenc Bónis, Budapest 2007, Vol. 1, p. 192 (from Kodály's speech at the opening ceremony of the academic year 1946/47 of the Music Academy).
- 22 Ibid., p. 253 (from Kodály's reflections on the reform plan of Hungarian music education, 1952).

"Primarily, this is what students should concentrate on, and only after having achieved a certain skill in this should they try to colour the notes, by trying to strengthen or weaken them in volume, and to gradually accelerate the tempo."<sup>23</sup>

Thomán, an heir to the Liszt school, expresses the same principle in relation to daily technical training in volume 2 of his A zongorázás technikája [The Technique of Piano-Playing]: "Particularly at the beginning, scales should be practised hands separately, slowly, and forcefully. Dynamic shading is added only at a more advanced level, when they can be played with sure certainty and faultless evenness." But the most detailed account of the practising ethos of the era was given by Szendy, the other of Liszt's pupils to have had a considerable influence on pedagogy, when he wrote an explanatory introduction for the collection entitled 2 minden napra való gyakorlat az ujjak egyenlő erősítésére Clementi Gradus-ából [2 Daily Exercises from Clementi's Gradus to Strengthen the Fingers Evenly]. In this he showed how technical training and musical expression are to be separated in pedagogy, and suggests they may be built one on the other somewhat mechanically:

"The nascent 'technician' – the main aim being for the moment the acquisition of technique as a means – should employ both exercises. Initially, of course he should practise them slowly, if possible, and take the utmost care that the semiquavers of the right or left hand follow one another at regular time intervals; the dynamic nuances of both the details and the etude as a whole should, initially, be disregarded. This can be left for later, when the evenness of attack is no longer vulnerable to the smaller or greater working of the muscles concomitant with dynamic shaping. Also to be left for later is the practice of staccato, which is absolutely necessary. In addition to paying attention to the rhythmic evenness mentioned above, we should pay equal attention to dynamic evenness. They go hand in hand. The notes, made with correct finger motions, should be evenly loud – mezzoforte or mezzopiano notes." <sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, in forewords to several instructive editions, Szendy sets out, in various turns of phrase, the idea that although "it is self-evident that technique is merely a means to achieve a higher purpose", for the sake of the latter "the technical difficulties must be overcome in the minutest detail". <sup>26</sup> In his foreword to the Chopin etudes he writes at greater length about the relationship between technical training and the expression of musical content:

- 23 Kálmán Chován: Előtanulmányok Czerny "Kézügyesség iskolája" hoz [Preparatory Studies to Czerny's "The School of Velocity"], Budapest [n. d.], p. 3 (my emphasis, L. S.).
- 24 István Thomán: A zongorázás technikája [The Technique of Piano Playing], Vol. 2: Hangsoriskola [School of Scales], Budapest [n. d.], p. 4.
- 2 minden napra való gyakorlat az ujjak egyenlő erősitésére Clementi Gradus-ából [2 Daily Exercises from Clementi's Gradus to Strengthen the Fingers Evenly], ed. by Árpád Szendy, Budapest 1914, p. 1 (emphases original).
- 26 From Szendy's foreword to his edition of Bach's two-part inventions, Budapest (n. d.).

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"They [Chopin's Etudes] are written with great poetic inspiration, they sprang from a deeply sensitive soul, and were created by a soaring imagination. [...] if we do not master them with utter sovereignty, technically and musically, in a manner that is arrived at only after many long years of work, then we have only a distorted image of them.

We shall then only tackle these studies if our technique (the speed, grace, and strength of our fingers, hands, wrists, and even arms) has developed to the extent that the difficulties can be overcome playfully, with mechanical precision, facility and – let us note – close to tempo, effortlessly." $^{27}$ 

The idea put forward by Szendy that technique (or indeed "mechanical precision") is merely a means to achieve a higher aim would in theory have been self-evident to all teachers of the time. Shortly afterwards, however, a controversy would arise about the largely nineteenth-century notion that teaching instrumental technique can be separated from teaching musical expression. A decade later, this would be opposed by one of the most famous of Szendy's pupils (the best-known throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of international fame and whose instructional material has been widely used even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century) who seemingly owed neither her skill nor her fame to her teacher: Margit Varró.<sup>28</sup> In a contemporary review of a book still in use in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an amateur musician (a notable Hungarian writer, poet, and playwright) offers an insight both into Varró's principles and into the practice of music teaching at the time:

"And what simple fundamentals [...]. For indeed these are familiar principles of child psychology, but each and every one is of fundamental importance, and as to why nobody has yet applied them in music teaching (apart from Sándor Kovács, I am told), and why it is a struggle to get them recognised today: I have not the faintest idea. [...] the main principle of her book is that the purpose of music is to bring delight, first and foremost to the one who works with music, that what should be taught is music, and not just instrumental technique, as so many are wont to do. [...] We must constantly see to it that [the beginner at the piano] finds pleasure in music and, from the very first, we must accordingly draw attention to the music itself, we must get the learner to love it, and we must not allow technical requirements to obscure the essence of the matter. [...] And if I now think back to how I was taught music, how I was left for years with no answer to my most important questions, how my interest in

- 27 From Szendy's foreword to his edition of Chopin's Etudes, Op. 10, Vol. 1, Budapest 1911, p. 2.
- In Varró's writings we almost never find explicit references to Szendy; the most detailed characterisation of her Academy teacher without naming him explicitly can be found in an illuminating pedagogical paper written by Varró in 1942 (decades after her studies with him), with a shrewdly ironic upbeat: "I owe much to my last teacher. Mr D., an excellent pianist and musician but an embittered man, frustrated in his aspirations to become known as a brilliant virtuoso. Pupil of Liszt and the holder of one of the most prominent teaching positions in Hungary, he was an experienced, inspiring master. But alas, his artist-pupils paid dearly for everything by which they profited: whatever the master bestowed upon them in knowledge, he took ample toll for it on their self-confidence. His favourites were those who emulated, or rather imitated him; a student who tried to find his own way has a hard time of it ..." Margit Varró: Visszatekintve a nehézségekre [Problems in Retrospect], in: Két világrész tanára Varró Margit [A Teacher in Two Worlds], ed. by Mariann Ábrahám, Budapest 1991, p. 393.

music was left untended, how I was tortured with soulless exercises – then I am grateful to Mrs Varró for her work". $^{29}$ 

It appears that Bartók too accepted and was a proponent of technical foundations in piano teaching, to judge from a noteworthy remark he once made. When his sister Elza wanted to learn the piano in autumn 1902, Bartók, then a student at the Budapest Music Academy, sent the following message to his mother, who was living with his sister in Pozsony:

"'Oh Elza! Elza! why do you want to start tinkling the ivories!' Tell her [viz., Bartók's mother should tell Elza] that anyone who passed over such a wonderful opportunity as she [Elza] did last year, when I wanted to teach her as a favour, does not deserve to be taught. And then it would only be worth learning the piano if she were to dedicate at least an entire hour to serious practice every day [...] and started her studies with thorough practise of finger exercises. That is what I say, as a pianist, composer, and private music teacher!"<sup>30</sup>

Could the finger exercises to which the brother refers possibly have been pieces from Clementi's Gradus, which László Erkel used to rebuild Bartók's technique, and which were again part of the syllabus of Bartók's first year at the Music Academy, when he started his studies with Thomán?<sup>31</sup> In the absence of further data in the Bartók literature, this question cannot be answered with certainty. In his later teaching at the "Parnassus" of the Music Academy, there was typically no mention of technical training, and Bartók expected his pupils to solve all technical problems themselves. This attitude resembles Liszt's approach in his later years, and was transferred through one of his favourite pupils, Thomán, to Bartók. In any case, it is worth noting that Storm Bull, an American pupil of Bartók's over three decades later, remarked that as far as he knew the only collection of studies that Bartók used in the first half of the 1930s was the very selection from Gradus that Szendy had edited.<sup>32</sup> In a piece published in 1941, only a few years after his studies

- 29 Milán Füst: [book review of] Varró Margit: Zongoratanítás és zenei nevelés [Margit Varró: Piano Teaching and Education through Music], in: Nyugat 16 (1923), pp. 295 f. Varró's ground-breaking book in instrumental pedagogy was published in 1921 by Rózsavölgyi.
- 30 Béla Bartók's Life in Letters, letter No. 71.
- 31 Thematisches Verzeichnis der Jugendwerke, pp. 217 f. and 241.
- Szendy edited the following two selections from the Gradus: (1) Clementi-Szendy: 20 gewählte Studien aus Clementi's "Gradus ad Parnassum", Budapest 1908, <sup>2</sup>1914 (corrected and augmented edition published as 23 gewählte Studien aus Clementi's "Gradus ad Parnassum"); (2) the above mentioned 2 Daily Exercises from Clementi's Gradus from 1914. For another private pupil from 1930, however, Bartók mentioned that he himself used Joseffy's exercises but suggested to the student to make up individual finger exercises for her own technical problems; see Irma K. Molnár: Zongorázni tanultam töle [I learned to play the piano from him], in: Bartók-könyv 1970–1971 (Bartók Book 1970–1971), ed. by Ferenc László, Bucharest 1971, p. 112. Rafael Joseffy's finger exercises from 1902 (Schule des höheren Klavierspiels. Uebungen, New York/Leipzig) provide rather standard finger training in the spirit of Liszt's, Brahms', Thomán's or Cortot's finger exercises.

with Bartók, Bull makes reference to the "complete" technical foundation he received: "Bela Bartok is a firm believer in a technical equipment so complete that physical difficulties cannot in any way hinder a facile expression of musical thought. The mind must be free to devote all its energies to the task of giving life to music."<sup>33</sup>

... back to Beethoven? In order to locate the source of this nineteenth-century attitude typical of Bartók's generation, promoting the primacy of a sound technical foundation, we must sift through the advice of the preceding generations, primarily that of István Thomán. Bartók gave his mother no account of his piano lessons with Thomán; but from the letters of Ernő Dohnányi, who enrolled at the Music Academy five years earlier, we learn that Thomán immediately set this young man from Pozsony to re-learning and consolidating his technical foundations. "I have had 2 lessons from Thomán", wrote the 17-year-old Dohnányi to his father on 21 September 1894. "He starts the teaching right from the beginning. For 1 or 2 weeks I'll practise nothing but finger exercises, to get a softer 'anschlag' [attack]."<sup>34</sup> But Dohnányi was a brilliant pianist, and progressed through the technical "purification phase" in a few weeks. In a letter dated 17 October he reports that "it seems I've made great progress with Thomán, because he's let me jump from the simplest exercises, a little Bach, the Haydn F minor variations, and the Mozart C minor fantasy, straight to the most difficult Beethoven concerto (G major, Op. 58)."<sup>35</sup>

We have very few actual sources on the piano pedagogy of Thomán's youth, but there are far more on the youthful attitude of his most famous, and probably most influential, teacher, Franz Liszt. When her daughter took a piano lesson from Liszt in Paris in 1832, Caroline Boissier noted down what Liszt said:

"Then he [Liszt] insisted on the importance of bending the fingers and making them more flexible in every direction, doing various exercises for at least three hours a day, various scales, in octaves, thirds, all forms of arpeggios, trills, chords, indeed everything imaginable. When one has fingers perfectly supple and strong, one has mastered the greatest difficulties of the piano. He did not approve of the painstaking execution of pieces; he wants one to get the spirit of them".

The twenty-year-old virtuoso urged the girl to do at least three hours a day of varied technical exercises.<sup>36</sup>

- Bartók Remembered, ed. by Malcolm Gillies, London 1990, pp. 147. Bull privately studied with Bartók between 1932 and 1935; see ibid., p. 147.
- 34 From the young Dohnányi's letter dated 21 September 1894; see Dohnányi Ernő családi levelei [Ernő Dohnányi's Family Letters], ed. by Éva Kelemen, Budapest 2011, p. 50.
- **35** Ibid., 54.
- 36 "Ensuite il a appuyé fortement sur l'urgence de plier et d'assouplir les doigts dans tous les sens en faisant au moins trois heures par jour des exercices multiples, gammes diverses, en octaves, en tierces, des arpèges sous toutes leurs formes, des trilles, des accords, enfin tout ce que l'on peut faire. Quand

The direct model for this attitude was in all certainty his own teacher. When Liszt began his studies with Czerny in Vienna, the latter recalled him being a musical savage,

"and, by showing him scale exercises, etc., [I] also instructed him [Liszt's father] how to continue the little boy's training in the interim. About a year later Liszt [Franz's father] and his son came to Vienna and moved to the same street where we lived; since I had little time during the day, I devoted almost every evening to the young boy. Never before had I had so eager, talented, or industrious a student. Since I knew from numerous experiences that geniuses whose mental gifts are ahead of their physical strength tend to slight solid technique, it seemed necessary above all to use the first months to regulate and strengthen his mechanical dexterity in such a way that he could not possibly slide into any bad habits in later years. Within a short time he played the scales in all keys with a masterful fluency made possible by a natural digital equipment especially well suited for piano-playing. Through intensive study of Clementi's sonatas (which will always remain the best school for the pianist, if one knows how to study them in his spirit) I instilled in him for the first time a firm feeling for rhythm and taught him beautiful touch and tone, correct fingering, and proper musical phrasing, even though these compositions at first struck the lively and always extremely alert boy as rather dry.

Because of this method it was unnecessary for me to pay much attention to technical rules when a few months later we took up the works of Hummel, Ries, Moscheles, and then Beethoven and Sebastian Bach; instead I was able to acquaint him immediately with the spirit and character of the various composers."<sup>37</sup>

on a les doigts parfaitement souples et forts, on a dompté les plus grandes difficultés du piano. Il [Liszt] n'approuve pas qu'on finisse minutieusement les morceaux, il veut qu'on en prenne l'esprit [...]." Madame Auguste Boissier [Caroline Boissier]: Liszt pédagogue. Leçons de piano données par Liszt à Mademoiselle Valérie Boissier à Paris en 1832. Notes de Madame Auguste Boissier, Paris 1927, pp. 46 f. Liszt's quoted remark is not unique in this recollection about his playing; further clarifications by Mme Boissier confirm Liszt's determination regarding finger exercises and the many hours of daily technical training.

"[...] gab ihm zugleich die Anweisung, auf welche Art er einstweilen den Kleinen selber weiter fortbilden solle, indem ich ihm die Skalenübungen usw. zeigte. Ungefähr ein Jahr später kam Liszt mit seinem Sohne nach Wien, bezog in derselben Gasse, wo wir wohnten, eine Wohnung, und ich widmete dem Kleinen, da ich bei Tag wenig Zeit hatte, fast täglich jeden Abend. Nie hatte ich einen so eifrigen, genievollen und fleißigen Schüler gehabt. Da ich aus mancher Erfahrung wußte, daß gerade solche Genies, wo die Geistesgaben der physischen Kraft vorauseilen, das gründlich Technische zu versäumen pflegen, so schien es mir vor allem andern nötig, die ersten Monate dazu anzuwenden, seine mechanische Fertigkeit dergestalt zu regeln und zu befestigen, daß sie in späteren Jahren auf keinen Abweg mehr geraten könnte. In kurzer Zeit spielte er die Skalen in allen Tonarten mit aller der meisterhaften Geläufigkeit, welche seine, zum Klavierspiel höchst günstig organisierten Finger möglich machten, und durch das ernste Studium der Clementischen Sonaten, welche stets für den Klavieristen die beste Schule bleiben werden, wenn man sie in seinem Sinne zu studieren weiß, gewöhnte ich ihm die bisher ganz mangelnde Taktfestigkeit, den schönen Anschlag und Ton, den richtigsten Fingersatz und richtige musikalische Deklamation an, obwohl diese Kompositionen dem lebhaften und stets höchst munteren Knaben anfangs ziemlich trocken vorkamen. Diese Methode bewirkte, daß ich, als wir einige Monate später die Werke des Hummel, Ries, Moscheles, sodann Beethoven und Seb. Bach vornahmen, nicht mehr nötig hatte, auf die mechanischen Regeln zu viel zu achten, sondern ihn gleich den Geist und Charakter dieser verschiedenen Autoren auffassen lassen

This excerpt about Czerny's teaching from his autobiographical Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben well demonstrates his pedagogical attitude, regardless of the veracity of the recollections themselves. By contrast, one oft-cited letter from Beethoven to Czerny offers us a primary written source (and not someone else's remark or a recollection) that enables us to deduce the attitude of the previous generation. Beethoven arranged for Czerny to teach his nephew Karl the piano, and the instructions he gave to Czerny reflect the didactic approach outlined above in the process of learning a piece of music:

"treat him with love, but also seriously, then [...] with respect to his playing I ask you, once he has attained the correct fingering and can also play in time and once he reads the notes without too many mistakes, to draw his attention to matters of interpretation only then, and once he has developed that far not to stop him on account of slight mistakes and to point these out to him only at the end of a piece. Although I have given few lessons, I have always followed this method, it soon creates musicians which, in the end, is one of the foremost purposes of art, and it tires both master and pupil less". 38

Czerny's own memories of his first lessons with Beethoven, at the age of nine (ten according to Czerny), tally with the words quoted above. Czerny recalled that in the first lessons Beethoven made him play nothing but scales, and instructed him in the "correct" position of the hand and in the use of the fingers.<sup>39</sup>

It would thus appear that in the main current of history of performance, the notion of the purifying phase of mechanical technical practice, transmitted from generation to generation and embodying the steps to Parnassus for both training pianists and learning individual pieces of music, can be documented from Beethoven to Bartók's generation. To put it pointedly, this attitude was the product of a pedagogy based on discipline and external motivation, which in relation to piano teaching began to come under serious scrutiny in the 20th century in the country of Bartók and Dohnányi, the trustees of the

konnte." Carl Czerny: Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben, ed. by Walter Kolneder, Baden-Baden 1968, p. 27 f.; id.: Recollections from my life [1842], transl. by Ernest Sanders, in: The Musical Quarterly 42 (1956), pp. 302–317, here p. 315.

"[...] begegnen sie ihm so viel als möglich mit Liebe jedoch ernst, [...] in Rücksicht seines Spielens bey ihnen bitte ich sie ihn, wenn er einmal den gehörigen Fingersatz nimmt, alsdenn im Takte richtig wie auch die Noten ziemlich ohne Fehler spielt, alsdenn erst ihn in Rücksicht des Vortrages anzuhalten, u. wenn man einmal so weit ist, ihn wegen kleinen Fehlern nicht aufhören zu laßen, u. selbe ihm erst beym Ende des Stücks zu bemerken; obschon ich wenig Unterricht gegeben, habe ich doch immer diese Methode befolgt, sie bildet bald Musiker, welches doch am Ende schon einer der ersten Zwecke der Kunst ist, u. ermüdet Meister u. schüler weniger". Beethoven to Carl Czerny [February/March 1816, No. 912], in: Beethoven: Briefwechsel. Gesamtausgabe, ed. by Sieghard Brandenburg, München 1996, pp. 236–238, here p. 236. The English translation is based on the following website (Ingrid Schwaegermann, 2003): www.raptusassociation.org/czerny\_e2.html (accessed 17 January 2019).

Czerny: Recollections from my life, p. 307.

Beethoven–Czerny–Liszt pedagogical legacy.<sup>40</sup> We should not, however, assume that it was only in teacher–pupil relationships in the main current of music history that this "purification by fire" approach to technical training was passed on. The most important figure in Hungarian-language nineteenth-century instrumental pedagogy, István Bartalus (whose music tutorials Bartók's mother, his first piano teacher, may have come across while studying at the teacher training college in Pozsony) "transcribed" his then highly popular pedagogical work Gyermek Lant [The Child's Lyre] "from Hungarian folksongs for learners of the piano".<sup>41</sup> Though we might view the basic concept of this Hungarian tutorial as a precursor to Bartók's For Children, Bartalus's pieces are quite certainly among those compositions of which Bartók said, much later, at the peak of his career as a composer, that they had "no real musical value".<sup>42</sup> In his foreword to his two-volume series, Bartalus clearly expounds the role of mechanical training in instrumental technique during musical studies:

"though the main task of music is to ennoble the soul: [...] the teacher should not forget that for the beginner this is not the main thing; for soul can only be poured into tamed material. So the teacher must judge the moment when this book can be used with benefit alongside mechanical exercises. In training, the raw material can be trained first through mechanical exercises, and as we overcome their difficulties, the intellect will grow to a similar degree."

In another two-volume collection of "folksong" arrangements, Bartalus carries this approach into the title: Little artist / A Collection of familiar Hungarian songs for piano / for learners who have made progress in the mechanics [of playing]. For the "little artist" rescued from the purgatory of "mechanical learning", the childhood Parnassus was represented by "folksongs" with first lines such as "Come to my lap, my sweetheart" and "When I was a

- In Hungarian music pedagogy, see especially Margit Varró's Zongoratanítás és zenei nevelés [Piano Teaching and Education through Music], Budapest 1989 (1921), especially pp. 174–179, as well as writings by Varró's contemporary Sándor Kovács who is perhaps still the most cited early 20th-century Hungarian author in music education to date see particularly his essay entitled: Hogyan kellene a gyermekeket a zenébe bevezetni? [How we Should Introduce Children to Music?], in: Kovács Sándor válogatott zenei írásai [Sándor Kovács's Selected Musical Writings], ed. by Péter Balassa, Budapest 1976, pp. 375–398.
- 41 István Bartalus: Gyermek Lant [The Child's Lyre], Budapest 1861.
- 42 "Already at the very beginning of my career as a composer I had the idea of writing some easy works for piano students. This idea originated in my experience as a piano teacher; I had always the feeling that the available material, especially for beginners, has no real musical value, with the exception of very few works for instance, Bach's easiest pieces and Schumann's Jugendalbum. I thought these works to be insufficient, and so, more than thirty years ago, I myself tried to write some easy piano pieces." Excerpt from Bartók's text draft for a lecture-recital in 1940 in the United States, published as "Contemporary Music in Piano Teaching", in: Béla Bartók Essays, ed. by Benjamin Suchoff, London 1976, p. 426–430, here p. 426.
- 43 Bartalus: Gyermek Lant, p. 2.

bachelor". The situation was little improved in his piano methods, where Bartalus takes a stance against starting with scales at the very beginning of learning to play an instrument – but in reality in the first lessons he merely gives preference to other forms of technical training.

"Many – perhaps even today – begin piano lessons with the enthusiastic teaching of scales, and they think that anyone who can play scales can play the piano. This is the worst of bad methods. [...] It deters mediocre and lesser talents from studying music for ever. – The teaching of scales is best advised when the learner has reached a level where he can play precisely, through having carried out technical and rhythmic exercises",

wrote Bartalus in 1862. As a summary of his pedagogical guidelines, he states: "It is to be desired that the learner should spend half of every lesson partly with finger exercises, and partly (if these have already been introduced) playing scales."<sup>44</sup>

The training in instrumental technique outlined above by Bartalus, and its foundational role in the daily practice of nineteenth-century Hungarian music pedagogy, seems of course somewhat extreme compared to the ideas espoused by Bartók. Indeed: in the Bartók/Reschofsky piano method, half a century after Bartalus, the works for performance (small character pieces composed by Bartók) are dovetailed into the technical training; in this respect the pedagogical work by Sándor Reschofsky and Bartók represents a more modern approach even than Chován's piano method published a few years earlier: despite Bartók's views, outlined above, on the role of technical training at the outset of learning an instrument, this piano method lays the foundation for a new generation and a new approach to instrumental pedagogy.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> István Bartalus: Módszer a zongora helyes játszására [Method for the Correct Playing of the Piano], Pest 1862, p. 18.

<sup>45</sup> Béla Bartók/Sándor Reschofsky: Zongoraiskola [Piano School] [BB 66, Sz 52], Budapest 1913.

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RUND UM BEETHOVEN
Interpretationsforschung heute •
Herausgegeben von Thomas
Gartmann und Daniel Allenbach

# Musikforschung der Hochschule der Künste Bern

Herausgegeben von Martin Skamletz und Thomas Gartmann

Band 14

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