

Henri Herz, *Méthode complète de piano* (1839)

In 1839, when Henri Herz published his *Méthode*, he and his brother Jacques had just opened (in the autumn of 1838) an “École spéciale de piano” within his newly built piano factory. He released the book simultaneously in English (published in London by D’Almaine) and in Paris (published by Meissonnier), after having commercialised the Dactylion, an instrument designed to strengthen the fingers, and the accompanying collection *1000 Exercices* (1835).

The book contains 140 pages, almost double the figure for Kalkbrenner’s *Méthode pour apprendre le piano à l’aide du guide-mains* (1831); an advertised volume for advanced students never came to fruition, but in 1854 Herz published an abridged version with the title *Petite Méthode élémentaire composée pour les jeunes élèves*. Following the custom, the *Méthode* comes in two parts, one theoretical (pp. 1-23) and one practical.

After a section expounding in the traditional manner the “Elements of Music”, the theoretical part contains a large section, “On the Piano” (pp. 10-23), that begins from the idea, common at the time, that the piano’s main function is to reduce opera: “Encompassing all on its own the whole range of the musical scale, of all the instruments it is the most fit to condense the orchestra, and consequently to evoke memories and reproduce effects of dramatic works.” The book is therefore completely oriented towards a search for expressive means, “Expression” being indeed the title of its very first Étude.

Among these means, touch occupies a central place: “There are as many nuances in touch as in musical feeling”, Herz declares (pg. 13). He distinguishes five of them, corresponding to as many notational signs (including two of his invention): neutral, picked out with the fingers alone, staccato through lifting of the hand, total legato, and legato with slight accent and weight for singing melodies.

Herz also draws on a particularly rich palette of expressive markings, especially for tempo change (in keeping with the rubato of singers), presented “more or less in ascending order” as follows: *Morendo*, *Smorzando*, *Perdendosi* (these three also affect the intensity, he says), *Calando*, *rallentando*, *ritenuto*, *Meno mosso*.

With this same expressive goal in mind, Herz endorses a slight rhythmic discrepancy between the right and left hands, a practice whose neglect he laments: it was by such means, he writes (pg. 20), that Dussek “shed a hazy and melancholic tint on certain phrases by letting the right hand sing in a vague and nonchalant manner, while the left executed rhythms in strict time”.

Virtuosity, all the rage at the time, is not forgotten, as the practical part attests: there one finds exercises for finger independence, “notes repeated by finger change”, scales, scales in octaves, exercises for ornamentation (so as to imitate Italian opera singers), hand-crossing, leaps – everything needed to play the brilliant concertos of the time. These are followed by short pieces of progressive difficulty (“Twelve Favourite Airs”, “Six Recreations”, for the most part variations on opera arias) and 18 “special etudes” for speed, each one addressing a particular difficulty, leading up to the last and highest of them all: expression.

Finally, Herz offers general advice on selecting pieces and precautions to follow to make oneself heard in public: the pianist must take into account his personality, the public (“the principle being to only play for an audience, whatever that audience might be, what it can understand and what will please it”), and the space (“in a narrow hall, an overly brilliant piano, a too vigorous attack will detract from the effect and fatigue the ear”). He warns those who aspire to improvise in public, citing the case of Hummel, “incontestably the premier improviser of the age”, who nevertheless “had his off days” (pg. 23).

The reissuing of the *Méthode* in 1841, with a preface by Georges Kastner, attests to its success; when Herz succeeded Louis Adam at the Conservatoire in 1842, it was adopted by that institution. Since Herz taught there for thirty-three years (César Franck too recommended it to his students), it offers much insight into the training of several generations of pianists.

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