



FOUR

...OF PEDALS

I would like to paint the way birds sing.

— CLAUDE MONET

The rare, elusive accounts that illustrate the use of pedals in Chopin's time may leave the inquisitive modern pianist with a sense of dissatisfaction. Their content often praises the artful effects of pedaling or denigrates its excesses and abuses, but it does not allow for a full understanding of how the foot pedals were actually used. One of them, however, intrigued me in its perplexing proclamations—an anecdotal account in Anton Schindler's *Biographie von Ludwig van Beethoven*, written in 1842. Albert Sowiński's translation of Schindler's narrative, published more than two decades later, is quoted in Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's extraordinary volume *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by His Pupils*:

So Czerny abused this [damper] pedal from the beginning, employing it too often in *fortes*, while it is more advantageous in *piano* passages, particularly when it is tempered by the soft pedal, which, quietening the sound, allows one to prolong it by raising the dampers at the beginning of each bar. This was Chopin's own procedure in his poetic compositions [Mazurkas].¹

Were I able to travel in time, I wondered, would I find the pedaling of performers from that era inadequate? Although Sowiński's version is an interpretation rather than an accurate rendition of the original, was it possible that the concept of pedaling in the early 1840s was so unremarkable, and that Chopin employed





the pedal so ordinarily? If applied literally, in some cases the approach described by Schindler would cause discordant pitches and harmonies to blur together. For decades, piano teachers have instructed their pupils to avoid this lack of transparency, and not only in Chopin's music. Yet, as I investigated this matter, particularly in the more predictable patterned pedal markings found in Chopin's waltzes and mazurkas, I came to the realization that Schindler's observation was not off the mark, and that what he identified as a typical trait of Chopin's pedaling indeed resides as a specific body of instruction within the composer's manuscripts.



In Chopin's time the use of the right pedal (which today we refer to as the "damper" or "sustain" pedal) was spare, and was still firmly rooted in older formulas and archetypes. The general consensus determined that its use be very discreet, limited to supporting—not replacing—legato playing, and occasionally enhancing the coloristic properties of certain passages. This approach remained unvaried for many decades and was espoused by most pedagogues and performers of the time. In the 1830s, a few pianists began to introduce more generous pedaling—a phenomenon that was frequently met with disfavor by the older generation. The German pianist and pedagogue Friedrich Wieck (1785–1873) lashed out at what he considered a deplorable vogue:

I just returned exhausted and annihilated from a concert, where I have been hearing the piano pounded. [. . .] Time brings into use a great deal that is far from beautiful: does, then, this raging piano revolutionist think it beautiful to bring the pedal into use at every bar? Unhappy delusion.²

Nearly eighty years later, Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921) lamented that the latest generation of pianists was using an indiscriminate amount of pedal³—a practice that, it seems, would have appalled most musicians of the previous century. Yet there seems to be a contradiction between these accounts and Chopin's notation: from the mid-1830s, his manuscripts show that he had begun to introduce the use of the sustain pedal with such profusion that the passages within a piece that benefited from it significantly outnumbered the ones that did not. Chopin's pianism unquestionably prescribed greater amounts of pedal than that of earlier and contemporaneous composers, and the effect produced by certain indications was recognized as unusual—to such a degree





that, even decades later, a performer of the caliber of Anton Rubinstein (1829–1894) openly rejected their eccentricity. Not yet twenty years old when Chopin died, Rubinstein may have recognized the composer's effort as an extraordinary enterprise, but may have also perceived that some of his atypical indications were experimental, and that more advanced instruments no longer allowed their intentions to be revealed.

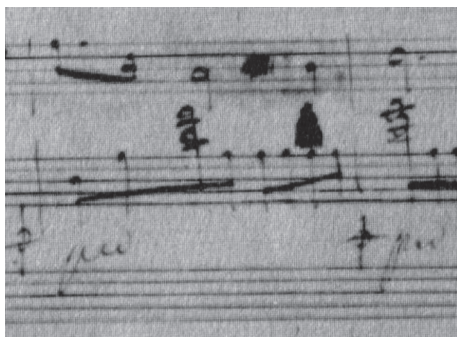


Soon after settling in Paris, Chopin manifested a predilection for Pleyel pianos. With their transparent tone and clear bass register, they offered a richer production of overtones than the instruments of other makers. Their sensitive action appealed to the young composer because it evoked the responsiveness of the Viennese instruments, which he had admired in earlier years. Technology witnessed a remarkable evolution in Chopin's era, and pianos varied significantly in quality and character—even those that were built by the same manufacturer. While experiencing the unique characteristics of historical instruments from the 1820s through the 1840s, I realized how my understanding of original pedal markings was limited by what I heard on modern pianos: not only was a composer influenced by the resonance afforded by the instruments of his time, which determined lengths that might seem undesirable today; I also realized that composers may have not always had the most recently built pianos at their disposal. I was fascinated by the notion that the sound heard by Schubert in his three last sonatas could have plausibly been the same one that inspired Chopin while writing his piano concerti. An even more extreme conjecture arose: Chopin's Scherzo in B Minor, Op. 20, whose impetuous outer sections must have perplexed many at the time of its publication, may have been composed on an instrument that was built at the time in which Beethoven wrote his three last sonatas.



Accuracy seems not to have been one of Chopin's greatest concerns when it came to notating pedal. His manuscripts attest to it: the markings they display vary greatly, depending on their purpose, the available space, the size of his handwriting and the figurations he employed. Chopin used the term *ped* when the pedal was to be depressed; to indicate its release, he wrote a symbol that resembles a cross superimposed on a circle (⊕).⁴ To notate subsequent pedal applications, he closely followed the release sign with another *ped*:





EXAMPLE 4.1. F. Chopin: Prelude in D-flat Major, Op. 28, No. 15, mm.24–25 (Catelin Stichvorlage, 1839).

The frequent irregularity displayed by Chopin's release signs has been the object of speculation for decades. For instance, in an article published by the *Journal of Musicological Research*, Sandra Rosenblum suggests that the reason Chopin often left substantial visual separations between release symbols and the next *ped* is that on pianos built between the 1830s and 1840s, the release of the sustain pedal could not immediately eliminate the veiled resonance caused by its application⁵—a reverberation that, in a more limited fashion, was present even without the use of the pedal. Inasmuch as the pianos of that time did produce a slight blurriness after the release of the sustain pedal, as I gathered while experimenting with an 1840 Pleyel, the reverberation would not have overlapped significantly with the next pedal change. More important, I was reminded about the considerable differences among instruments during that period and began to infer that, were Rosenblum correct in her assumption, the specification of each release would have had to vary depending on how each individual piano reacted.

It is Carl Czerny's *Pianoforte School*, Op. 500, published in 1839, that refutes the supposition that the instruments of the time might have required brief interruptions between pedal applications to avoid the overlap of vibrations:

The release and depression of the pedal shall be realized with extreme rapidity, so as not to leave any void or interstice between the chords; and must take place exactly with the first note of each chord [. . .] as if the pedal were held down without interruption.⁶





Czerny described what we identify today as *syncopated pedal*—a practice that still very much resides at the core of the modern technique of pedaling. This procedure was adopted by all the leading piano schools of the time. As I looked at cases of syncopated pedaling in Chopin's manuscripts, nonetheless, a question remained: why was it so important to mark releases along with a sequence of pedal changes? Would it not have been simpler to notate only when the pedal had to be depressed? Yet Chopin meticulously marked almost every single release—and when he did not, it may have been an oversight that caused the omission, or an instance in which specifying a release could be superfluous, as at the close of a piece.

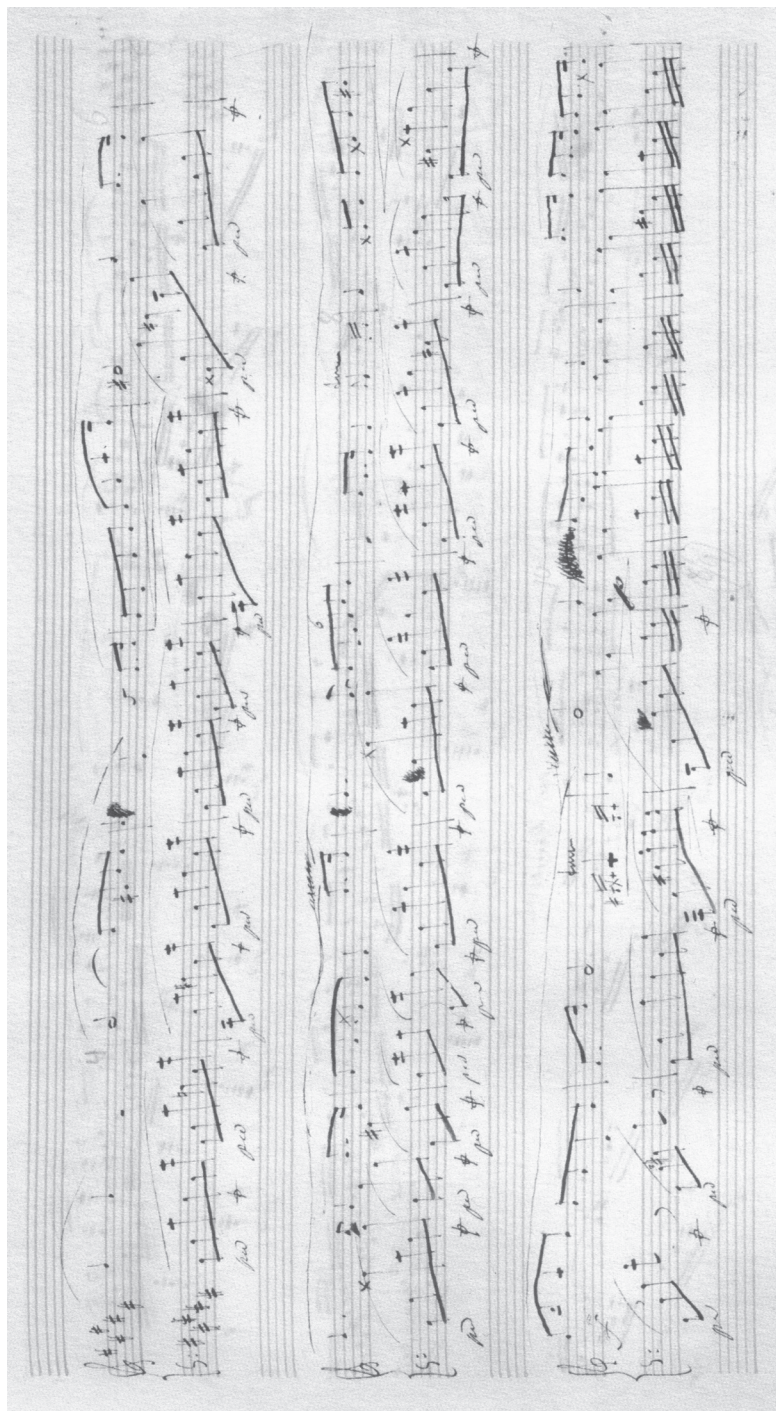


An important element in understanding the role of these releases has emerged from my analysis of Chopin's manuscripts. I began to notice that the symbols *ped* and $\oplus$ seem to have been marked only after all the notes of a system found their place on paper. Reasonably conclusive proof that Chopin notated the symbols as a group, rather than intermittently, is his having written them in a straight line, with the exception of instances in which other writing in the lower staff impelled them into a different position. A passage from the first movement of the Sonata in B Minor, Op. 58 shows both these circumstances (see example 4.2a).

Next, a calligraphic analysis of Chopin's continuous employment of the sustaining pedal led me to a surprising insight: when observing the space that Chopin left between a release symbol and the ensuing pedal application, I noticed that this interval was preserved throughout a line. Regardless of the duration of each pedal indication, in other words, Chopin notated the pedal depressions where they should be observed for an entire system at a time, whereas the placement of the release signs was less consequential, as their positioning was intended only to afford enough space to clearly articulate the two different markings. What emerged as a decisive finding from my analysis is that Chopin's primary concern was to offer visual clarity for the marking *ped*, and that the addition of $\oplus$ merely followed a conventional notational method of the time.

Two excerpts from the Stichvorlage of the first movement from the Sonata in B Minor, Op. 58 illustrate my thesis in regard to Chopin's placement of pedal markings and releases. Midway through measure 161, the symbol $\oplus$ is positioned beneath the last eighth-note of the left-hand accompaniment to





EXAMPLE 4.2a. F. Chopin: Sonata in B Minor, Op. 58, I. Allegro maestoso, mm. 154–168 (Breitkopf & Hänel Stichvorlage, 1844).



permit a reasonable amount of space for the placement of the ensuing *ped*; at the end of the same measure the release symbol is marked after the last eighth-note, because the position of the subsequent depression allows ample space before the bar line:



EXAMPLE 4.2b. F. Chopin: Sonata in B Minor, Op. 58, I. Allegro maestoso, m. 161 (Breitkopf & Härtel Stichvorlage, 1844).

The release near the middle of measure 159 occurs before a left-hand group comes entirely to a close, and the reason is by now evident:

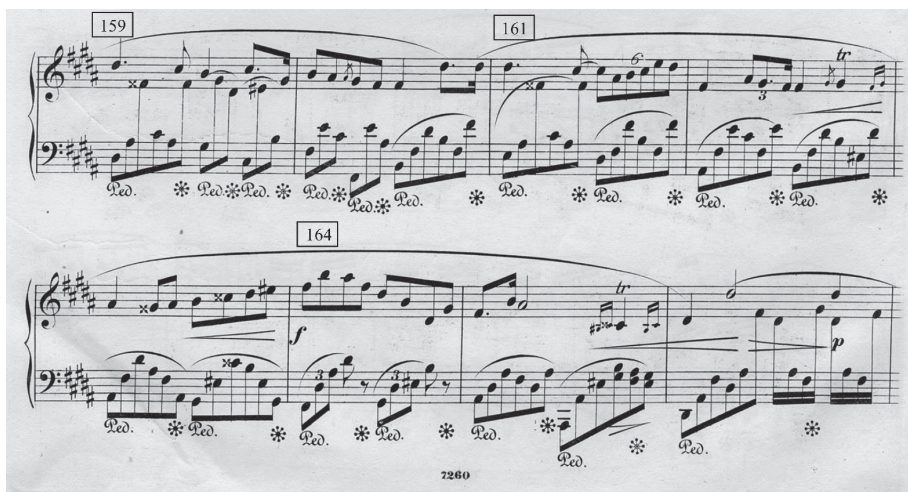


EXAMPLE 4.2c. F. Chopin: Sonata in B Minor, Op. 58, I. Allegro maestoso, m. 159 (Breitkopf & Härtel Stichvorlage, 1844).

When nineteenth- and twentieth-century editors faced decisions about the typographical assignment of the release symbols, they resolved to create an alignment with the notes or chords that were close enough to justify an imposition of verticality. The notation that emerged from this approach often goes against what would have been Chopin's original intentions.



The main obstacle that confronts a performer in regard to the execution of Chopin's release signs is that a decision concerning each instance is usually based on what is shown in print. The way we read pedal indications is a consequence of how editors have understood the original sources for us. In my young years, I believed that the printed version of a work, especially if carried out by an authoritative firm, would feature a faithful reproduction of the composer's markings; as my analysis unfolded, I understood that the interpretation of Chopin's release signs was often premised solely on a calligraphic scrutiny of each symbol as an individual case and not on contextual meaning. I realized that this was not a problem caused exclusively by modern versions, but that it also held true in the case of the early editions. Consider, for example, how the editors at Breitkopf & Härtel, who were following the *Stichvorlage* just discussed, printed measures 159–66 from the first movement of the Sonata in B Minor, Op. 58, in 1845:



EXAMPLE 4.3. F. Chopin: Sonata in B Minor, Op. 58, I. Allegro maestoso, mm. 159–166 (Breitkopf & Härtel edition, 1845).

In this version, the asterisks are quite systematically placed under the last pitch of each left-hand group of three or six notes (with the exception of measures 164 and 166). The editors at Breitkopf & Härtel may have chosen this alignment in response to the erratic and perplexing placements in the *Stichvorlage*; yet I wondered why the asterisks were not placed closer to the ensuing *ped* whenever the space permitted it—a solution that would have eliminated any alternative interpretation of the syncopated pedal they propose.



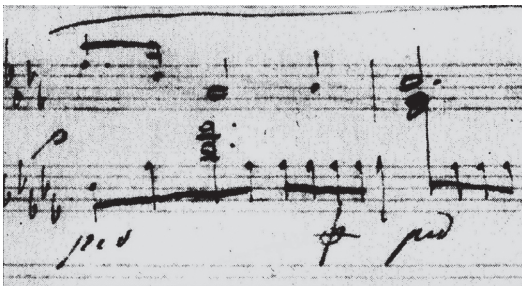
A rather thorny issue concerning inconsistent pedal releases was addressed by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, who tried to rationalize the presence of such irregularity in analogous passages in the Stichvorlage of the Prelude in D-flat Major, Op. 28, No. 15. Eigeldinger presumed that these divergences represented a stroke of creativity on Chopin's part:

The autograph of the Prelude Op. 28/15 indicates the pedal for the whole of bar 1 and its repetitions in bars 5, 20, 24 and 80, but not for the return of the same motif after the second section, bar 76, where the pedal is to be raised on the fourth beat. It is evident there that Chopin intends two different treatments. On an 1840 Pleyel the sound clears more rapidly and the melodic move to Bb colours it without however affecting its clarity, whereas on a modern piano it blurs the harmony. Renewing the pedal just before the fourth beat would effectively negate Chopin's intention of reserving this effect for bar 76; so we are left with the possibility of a half-pedal, more practicable on modern pianos than on old ones.⁷

Here are the two pedal markings in question:



EXAMPLE 4.4a. F. Chopin: Prelude in D-flat Major, op. 28, No. 15, mm. 1–2 (Catelin Stichvorlage, 1839).

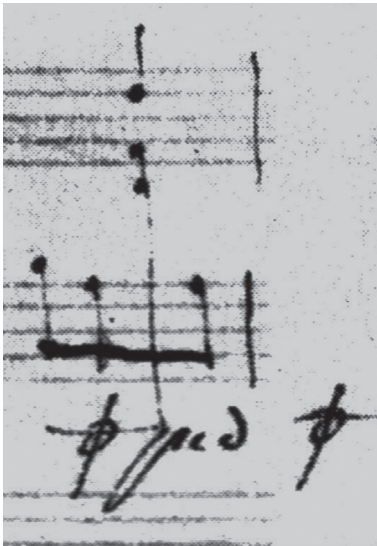


EXAMPLE 4.4b. F. Chopin: Prelude in D-flat Major, op. 28, No. 15, mm. 76–77 (Catelin Stichvorlage, 1839).





Chopin's compositional process and the profuse corrections found throughout this Stichvorlage led me to speculate at first that the placement of the release sign under the fourth beat of measure 76 may have been a mistake that was incurred while the composer hastily transcribed the forty complex manuscript pages of the Preludes, Op. 28—a monumental effort that must have taken many hours of work. However, while analyzing the original manuscript of the prelude in question, I noticed a repetition of the kind of pattern identified in example 4.2a: the distance between the release in measure 76 and the *ped* in measure 77 is consistent with the distance between the other releases and *ped* symbols in the same line. The regularity of this spacing would attest to its reference to syncopated pedaling, and would counter the notion that “the same motif,” in Eigeldinger’s words, would have been subject to a different treatment. Further, if this pedal marking were not extended through the recurring thematic material to the following downbeat, it would be the only such instance in the entire prelude.⁸ Had Chopin desired a new pedal application for the fourth beat of measure 76, I thought, he would have probably marked it—as he did a few beats later, still in measure 77:



EXAMPLE 4.5. F. Chopin: Prelude in D-flat Major, Op. 28, No. 15, m. 77 (Catelin Stichvorlage, 1839).

Incidentally, the second release in example 4.5 may support my observation in regard to the role of the release symbols: despite the extremely limited space at the end of the system, Chopin still maintained a generous distance between *ped* and . It was the odd presence of this release symbol beyond the bar line that made





me realize one important aspect: I understood that the approximate placement of the asterisks in modern editions incurred flaws that hindered my understanding of Chopin's language, but the idea of relying on the composer's original markings seemed an insurmountable task that would necessitate my gaining access to manuscripts that were disseminated in libraries and private collections around the world. Thankfully, some of Chopin's *Stichvorlagen* were available in print or online, which facilitated the process of clarification.



The consultation of Chopin's *Stichvorlagen* helped me resolve a problematic issue in regard to the pedaling that is frequently indicated in mainstream editions of such pieces as mazurkas and waltzes. Their patterned accompanying figures—in most cases three quarter-notes per measure—were the source of a conundrum: the limited amount of space between beats often caused release signs to be placed with some approximation at the end of each measure, close to the next downbeat but not close enough to specify syncopated pedaling with precision. Their ambiguous position led editors to follow an alignment that favored the third quarter-note of each measure, rather than the ensuing downbeat.

This kind of notation has similarly affected our perception of pedaling in structurally more ambitious compositions, such as the ballades. A pedal marking in the first half of measure 116 of the Ballade in A-flat Major, Op. 47, for example, provides a plausible parallel to the Prelude in D-flat Major: as the 1841 *Stichvorlage* used by Breitkopf & Härtel confirms, the nearness of notes and symbols, combined with the composer's habit of consistent spacing between $\oplus$ and *ped*, destined the release sign to be placed slightly to the right of the left-hand eighth-note chord E-flat–A-flat–E-flat:



 **EXAMPLE 4.6.** F. Chopin: Ballade in A-flat Major, Op. 47, mm. 116–117 (Breitkopf & Härtel *Stichvorlage*, 1841).

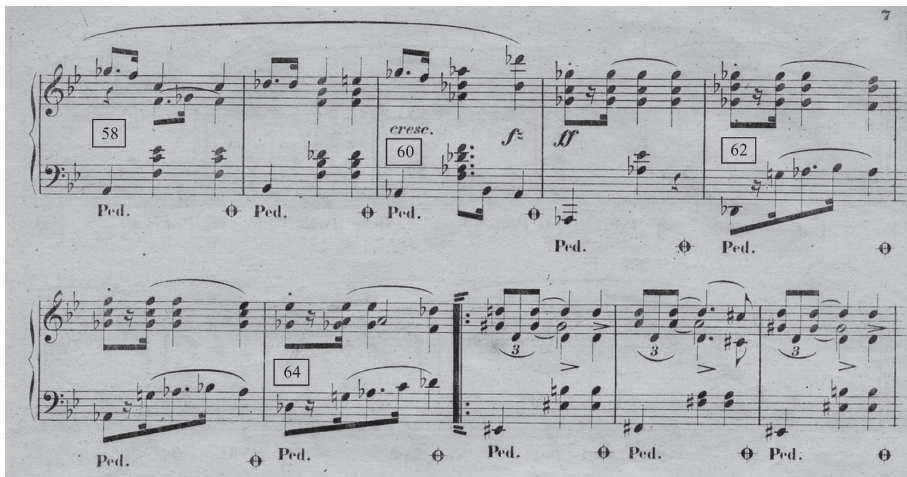




This release may visually suggest that an interruption before the following *ped* should apply. Alternatively, the absence of a pedal marking for the same chord leads many to believe that it should be individually pedaled. Foreseeably, most widely used editions report the release as belonging to this very chord, rather than marking it as an uninterrupted application to the next depression.

How did pianists in Chopin's time respond to these shortened pedal applications that appeared in the early editions of the composer's works? Would have they treated them as syncopated pedaling? Would have they left unpedaled the notes or chords notated between the release and the ensuing *ped*? Or would have they subjectively inserted an extra pedal? Ten modern recordings of the Ballade in A-flat Major, Op. 47 used as a test showed that most of the pianists chose the third approach for the pedaling of measure 116, which we just viewed in example 4.6. Had Chopin known what a headache his release markings would prove to be, and had he been acquainted with other ways to indicate syncopated pedaling—such as the more modern brackets under the system (____)—he might have been delighted to employ these alternatives.

Prolonging pedal applications that are typically shortened in modern editions may occasionally result in the blurring of harmonies or melodic lines. Consider the following episode from the Mazurka in D Major, Op. 33, No. 2 as it appears in the Breitkopf & Härtel edition of 1838:



 **EXAMPLE 4.7.** F. Chopin: Mazurka in D Major, Op. 33, No. 2, mm. 58–67 (Breitkopf & Härtel edition, 1838).

In measure 58, the presence of two G-flats in the right hand blurs the dominant seventh chord of F major; in measure 60, a G-flat in the first beat of the right





hand blurs the harmony of D-flat major; and the pitches included in the left-hand motif in measures 62–64 are extraneous to the prevailing harmonies sustained by the extended pedals. In the version published by Schlesinger in 1838, based on a copy made by Julian Fontana, these pedal markings were shortened and placed beneath the third beat of each measure. I thought this could have been a miscalculation on Fontana's part while he was reproducing Chopin's manuscript, but I also could not dismiss the possibility that it was the editor who reproduced his copy erroneously. The French *Stichvorlage* of this mazurka resides in a private collection in Japan, and it seemed a hopeless prospect to verify whether the shorter markings appear in it. The *Stichvorlage* that Chopin sent to Breitkopf & Härtel, however, is now in the possession of the Biblioteka Narodowa in Warsaw and accessible to the public. Viewing it confirmed that the engraver at the German firm had followed Chopin's notation faithfully, indicating pedal applications to the end of the measure, with one exception: in the composer's hand, the release in measure 64 extends to the following downbeat, blurring the harmonies of the dominant seventh chord of A-flat major and its tonic D-flat major in the third beat—a solution that any modern pianist would find outrageous. Proposing Schlesinger's shorter indications in some modern editions seems to have been a choice directed to eliminate some of the blurriness that is found so undesirable on modern pianos. Still, these shorter applications in many cases would include some of the overlap of unrelated pitches, and the complete absence of pedal for the third beat of each measure would result in continuous brief interruptions. My experience had taught me that both quandaries would have presented themselves even on the less sophisticated instruments of the 1830s. Further, had Chopin wanted a pedal for the third beat of each measure, I thought, he would probably have specified such an important element in his manuscripts, since he did so in many other instances throughout his works.

It was while researching the location of Julian Fontana's copy of the Mazurka in D Major, locked up in a safe somewhere in Tokyo, that I came to an unforeseen conclusion: if long pedals had been intentionally placed for each measure and in many cases encompassed different harmonies, perhaps their purposes were distant from the necessity of prolonging a single harmony throughout a passage or facilitating the resonance of notes whose intervallic distance would not be reachable by a regular-size hand. Instead, these indications may disclose a specific aesthetic of sound to which we have not been exposed—an experimental stage in Chopin's evolution that broke ground for the new coloristic possibilities he explored in later years in the evocative arpeggios of the opening page of the *Polonaise-Fantaisie* or in the watercolor-like textures achieved in the second tonal area of the *Barcarolle*. Put another way, as the effects of these long pedal applications on pianos from the 1830s would have not been too dissimilar to the





effects produced on today's instruments, Chopin may have deliberately conceived them as generating blurriness—an outcome that would have been considered unusual during that time, as it is today.

The comparison I had established between original instruments and the modern grand piano, I came to understand, had encouraged the creation of contradictions and double standards in my own playing. Still in the early stages of my explorations, I struggled to accept what on a contemporary instrument seemed an excessive reverberation caused by some of Chopin's original markings, but I also aspired to follow the composer's instructions in ways that represented their outcomes as I imagined them on the pianos he played. This wavering position led me to alter the text by using half pedals, fluttered applications, and interruptions of longer markings so as to reduce the blurriness that the original instruments, I thought at the time, would have not generated. Moreover, I found that certain pedals in Chopin were preimpressionistic, but was willing to apply these instances only when the harmony was agreeable. Should I have become more attuned to these generous pedal applications as particular timbric effects, which seem to be what Chopin had intended for some of his indications? A pianist of the caliber of Anton Rubinstein had come to the conclusion that what appears to be lack of textual logic should be disregarded or modified in favor of each pianist's approximation of the composer's intentions, and that pedaling is bound to vary depending on the instrument, the performance space, and—last but not least—the interpreter's inspiration. I, too, believed that I was altering Chopin's original pedal indications in ways that were allowing me to reproduce the composer's intentions more closely, but in fact my strategy of fluttering, half pedaling and breaking long pedals may have been removing me far from them. As time passed, a greater familiarity with Chopin's manuscripts and early editions made me realize that the presence of unusually long pedal indications was circumscribed to a specific period in Chopin's life—from the mid- to the late 1830s—and that the blurriness that I often tried to modify may have been an intended characteristic of a language in evolution.



Not so long ago, I had the opportunity to audit a masterclass given by a leading pianist of our time. One of the featured pieces at the much anticipated event was the first movement of Chopin's Sonata in B Minor, Op. 58. The comments that the visiting artist offered focused mainly on the adherence to the pedal markings as they appeared in the edition that the student was using, and which he was not closely observing. For example, here is how that edition notated the episode in measures 61–64:





 **EXAMPLE 4.8.** F. Chopin: Sonata in B Minor, Op. 58, I. Allegro maestoso, mm. 61–65.

“It works perfectly the way Chopin himself marked it, and there is no reason not to follow his original intentions!” was the teacher’s peremptory claim. Yet, when I later consulted the Stichvorlage that Chopin prepared for Breitkopf & Härtel, I noticed that the release symbols do not consistently align with the rests in the left hand:

EXAMPLE 4.9. F. Chopin: Sonata in B Minor, Op. 58, I. Allegro maestoso, mm. 61–63
(Breitkopf & Härtel Stichvorlage, 1844).

The release symbols appear with some approximation under the eighth-note rests featured in the left hand, but the even distance between  and the ensuing *ped* maintained throughout the system support the idea that Chopin intended syncopated pedaling. The gaps between each  and the following *ped* are more substantial than in other instances throughout the same Stichvorlage





(compare the spacing between release symbols and pedal markings in example 4.2 and in this passage from the Breitkopf & Härtel edition), and the inference that the editors seem to have drawn from the generous spacing in these measures was that the composer intended an aural separation with each release. At the same time, some of the silences that would occur coincide with the sixteenth-note rests in the right hand (measures 63 in example 4.9, beats two and four), both creating and justifying the presence of an interruption not just in the left hand but in both hands. The product of this pedaling has been perpetuated as an interpretive tradition, and several authoritative editions have ingrained the belief that this convention is exactly what Chopin intended. Were intuition and, especially, listening to play a larger role in the way we read the printed page, we might object to the continuous interruption of the rich overtones in the texture of this passage, and to the prevention of the left-hand writing from revealing the numerous compound lines that are woven into the thick harmonic fabric. I concluded that the markings we have been considering would make more sense as continuous syncopated pedal, and I realized that their release signs would not be so problematic if pianists were to accept them as indicating nothing more than an uncomplicated prerequisite: before the pedal is depressed again, the right foot has to be lifted. The illustrious pianist trusted that what is generally considered an authoritative edition would never fail to report the original notation correctly, and declared his belief that those rests assuredly represent short suspensions of the pedal. This interpretive choice is evident in his recording of the Sonata in B Minor—a recording that had become very popular years earlier and that, as I remember, had affected the perception of the work in the minds of several young pianists I knew.



The puzzling presence of long pedals over rests is a rather common occurrence in Chopin's writing. Generally, the temporal value of these brief separations is a sixteenth-note. Instances can be highly irregular within a piece, and they do not necessarily set precedents for analogous passages in different keys. I often wondered whether I should have either disregarded the rests entirely or modified the pedal to reproduce those silences faithfully, and in many cases the latter option prevailed.

Eigeldinger's volume may offer insight here as well, in its conveyance of a brief but informative memoir by Chopin's student Anna de Lichocherstoff:

The *Luft-Pause* . . . gives the hand the elegance of a wing . . . The suppleness of the wrist, independent of the forearm, was the virtuoso's prime consideration.⁹

