

ON FRENCH STYLE AND CHOPIN IN HELEN DEWITT

SARA ECKERSON

In Helen DeWitt's "The French Style of Mlle Matsumoto,"^[1] there are three pianists: M. Morhange, "The Gorilla;" Mlle Matsumoto, "The Automaton," who is a young woman from Japan; and a 12 year-old Shikoku-native, a student of Matsumoto. The story is told from the perspective of Morhange, as he recounts his studies at the *conservatoire* as a young man (around the time of WWII) to his retirement.


Throughout, DeWitt expresses the differences between these apparent enemies – Morhange and Matsumoto – through the description of rather bestial behavior of the one and the elegance and charm of the other. The story is angled through visions of contempt: first, contempt for their common teacher, Koslowski, and his adoration of Matsumoto and for having dropped Morhange as a student; second, contempt for Matsumoto for having been maintained by Koslowski during the war where this contempt can be recognized within the descriptions of her talent; and third, the last accusation of contempt is turned inward, toward Morhange himself, but this is only revealed later.

The reader can recognize the frustration of one pianist before another in Koslowski's praise of Matsumoto:

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[To play a difficult passage with simplicity and ease, to not play with affectation or showmanship] was to have the nuances, the expressive shading of the human voice or of that instrument which comes closest to the voice, the violin. [...] What was remarkable was Mlle Matsumoto's ability to realize the impossible, to transform a percussive instrument into one which had the fluidity of the voice.

Her retirement has robbed music of a precious ornament but it is impossible to regret it, for it springs from the very thing which made her playing incomparable – I refer to the complete absence of self. (131-132)

The mastery within this description of Matsumoto's playing is this touch upon the keyboard which already suggests a specific temperament, a method of playing in "the French style." This transformation of an instrument of the percussion family into something that can execute a melody or theme as though it were the voice is to achieve a near impossible legato. This can be imagined as the pianist smoothly connecting notes and allowing the tone to fade at the appropriate moments to somehow parallel the natural limits breath – but which is articulated by hammers on a string. This is the aim of many composers for themes in piano compositions, not only French ones, where there might be an instruction for a *singing* tone (that is, *cantabile*).

Nevertheless, the previous passage cited begins, "of all my pupils the one who showed the finest sensibility in the interpretation of Chopin was Mlle Matsumoto. To praise her technique is to say nothing" (131). Thus, within the ambit of Koslowski's students, here there is the best interpreter of Chopin precisely because of how she approaches the instrument. Chopin's nocturnes and ballades often require a light touch, with a characteristic legato, to execute the *fiore* (the ornaments imagined as the delicate turns, colors, and natural growth of a flower) in the music.

Chopin is the central composer to the short story. Mlle Matsumoto's ability to play Chopin is rather like an ideal. However, Morhange's approach to music is a different animal all together. As the reader is told:

the virtues of French style were usually said to be clearness of phrasing, richness of shading, a predominance of the legato element, a strict avoidance of tempo rubato. While it may not be true that Morhange had the vices which were the opposite of these virtues, his attack on the keyboard was something very different. The massive shoulders hulked over the keys; fingers like cigars grabbed at chords like bunches of bananas. (132)

Morhange was, therefore, not incapable of “the French style” of playing; his problem was himself. DeWitt explains that Morhange, when not practicing, would go to the gymnasium to work on the bars and the rings as a gymnast while singing Charles-Valentin Alkan’s *Funeral March for a Dead Parrot* (1859).

In earlier descriptions, Matsumoto’s playing is exemplary of delicacy and grace. Yet, she exhibits that “absence of self.” This quality might be juxtaposed against the more developed sense of self found in Morhange, in all the things Morhange seems to tell the reader that he does. To have thick fingers (a description by the narrator, not by the pianist himself) is not necessarily a definition of the self. To “grab at chords like bunches of bananas” (again, the narrator’s depiction) is another story.

The brutality of this talent, as Morhange is the most successful of the two enemies, is all the more evident in his displays of gymnastics. While singing *Funeral March for a Dead Parrot*, Morhange is able to grab onto the sui generis charm of that work – the irony that weaves expressive depth into its tonal fabric. DeWitt writes that Morhange throws himself back and forth on the bars “the figure hurtled back Eh de quoi? & back again, on a cascade of notes of inexpressible pathos: Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!” (133). All the words of the work are written out in the story itself, the three sections of the work almost indicative of a change of exercise.

The music discussed at more length in the story, however, is Chopin’s Fourth Ballade in F Minor, Op. 52. The lack of refinement before Chopin in these exercises in Alkan paints a picture for the reader of a performer who is talented; this

pianist has tremendous strength but lacks the restraint for an interpretation to be more than mere ornament and yet not cross that line into self-aggrandizing choices. From what the reader knows of Morhange and his talent, a blindfolded listener would still recognize him: *Oh, that's the Gorilla at the piano; what power in those hands. You can't mistake that articulation for anyone else!*

At the end of the story, Morhange moves to Japan for his own retirement. It seems he is fed up with Western art, and in Japan he can find solace in the art that piqued so much of his interest:

the haiku – it is the art of subtraction, an art with horror of the extraneous, but it's not so much that it has a horror of the extraneous as it avoids histrionics, Western art gives the impression by contrast of being saturated with sincerity –

It was pointed out that his greatest triumphs had been with Rachmaninov, Tchaikovsky (138).

The avoidance of a theatricality, of an exaggerated emphasis on emotion, draws Morhange more to his destiny in Japan. It would seem, then, that pathos (for Morhange) is possible in music without histrionics. It may not be the “inexpressible pathos” of Alkan, but an ineffable one that, in a sense, is difficult to name: it is the ironic pathos of the individual.

Morhange changes his tune, so to speak, about his enemy when he hears a recording that Mlle Matsumoto made of Chopin's Fourth Ballade.

I was astonished by a performance which seemed to anticipate so much of the last twenty years, & in justice to myself I listened to the recording I myself had made at that time. I was filled with contempt. If Delacroix could have played piano, this theatrical display is precisely what he would have produced (138).

The hyperbole in this rhetorical conditional statement is humorous for how on the nose it is, but the Gorilla is not one for subtlety in anything. However, from the reader's perspective, this is not to say that Delacroix is not artful; it is perhaps to say that Delacroix's works are not *musical* – that

is, they do not incorporate the equivalent style appropriate to Chopin, not even for the virtuosity required in the coda of the Fourth Ballade. More fitting of French style, without having to turn to Japanese art, is to recognize maybe the drama of Chardin – for example, in the face of the ray and the tail of the cat – than in the noise of Delacroix.

The contempt that arises here seems to come from Morhange seeing himself in a Delacroix. However, it is more than just seeing his reflection in that theatrical display – the drama and theatre of a snarling tiger or in the person of Louis de Bourbon immediately before he is assassinated. It is that Morhange sees his talent and the limit of that talent in the frightened eyes of Delacroix's central figures.

It is the contempt towards everyone else (including Delacroix, it would seem) that is now turned toward himself. Morhange recognizes the gorilla-ways in his hands: they are more of a paw painted by Delacroix than simply tools to (aggressively) pick fruit at the keyboard. The lightness of the ornaments in Couperin's *Pièces de clavecin* point toward not what is found in the mirror, but toward what is truly elegant: simplicity, decoration, fittingness and to be pleasing in a way that does not bear the name of the *claveciniste* like an awful white sticker stuck in the fabric of a blazer.

There is one thing to note, though. Disgusted as he might be with himself, Morhange is still the one who sings the *Death March for a Parrot* at the gym, and whose “sincerity” in playing Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky gave him a career. It seems art, style, and talent are not chosen but choose. To cultivate histrionics, as part of the self, looks more like a problem of taste than of talent.

[1] DeWitt, Helen. 2018. “The French Style of Mlle Matsumoto.” In *Some Trick*, 131-140. New York: New Directions.

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