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INTERPRETING AND PERFORMING THE EMBODIED
MUSICAL GESTURES AND EXPRESSION IN
SELECTED IMPROMPTUS FOR SOLO
PIANO BY FRANZ SCHUBERT
AND FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN



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CHEN RUIYANG

UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

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THESIS PRESENTED TO QUALIFY FOR DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF MUSIC AND PERFORMING ARTS
UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

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9/9/2025

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the performative interpretation through musical gestures in the selected impromptus for solo piano by Franz Schubert and Frédéric Chopin. Although Hatten (2004) has developed a comprehensive framework for the analysis of musical gestures, the focus is mainly on the musical works from the eighteenth century until the early nineteenth century, in particular by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Franz Schubert. Therefore, this dissertation aims to extend Hatten's theory beyond the early nineteenth century in examining the different musical gestures in the selected impromptus by Schubert and Chopin. By associating with gestural analysis and performance considerations, it provides a guideline for pianists to develop their own interpretation. Despite the selected impromptus by both composers being lyrical in nature, the outcomes suggest that Schubert's and Chopin's impromptus generally exhibit Hatten's concepts of stylistic and strategic gestures. However, Schubert's impromptus mainly incorporate dialogical and rhetorical gestures, while Chopin's impromptus primarily convey thematic and spontaneous gestures that evoke a sense of improvisation.





PENTAFSIRAN DAN PERSEMBAHAN GERAKAN SERTA EKSPRESI MUZIKAL DALAM KARYA IMPROMPTU YANG TERPILIH UNTUK PIANO SOLO OLEH FRANZ SCHUBERT DAN FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

ABSTRAK

Disertasi ini menfokuskan kepada interpretasi performatif melalui gerak isyarat muzik dalam impromptus terpilih untuk piano solo oleh Franz Schubert dan Frédéric Chopin. Walaupun Robert Hatten (2004) telah mengembangkan satu kerangka konsep yang komprehensif untuk analisis gerak isyarat muzik, tumpuan utamanya adalah pada karya-karya muzik dari abad kelapan belas hingga awal abad kesembilan belas, khususnya oleh penggubah lagu seperti Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, dan Franz Schubert. Oleh itu, disertasi ini bertujuan untuk memperluaskan teori Hatten melangkaui awal abad kesembilan belas dalam mengkaji gerak isyarat muzik yang berbeza dalam karya impromptus yang terpilih oleh Schubert dan Chopin. Dengan mengaitkan analisis gerak isyarat muzik dan cadangan persembahan, kajian ini menyediakan panduan bagi pemain piano untuk mengembangkan interpretasi mereka sendiri. Walaupun impromptus terpilih oleh kedua-dua komposer bersifat lirik secara semulajadi, dapatan kajian menunjukkan impromptus Schubert dan Chopin secara umumnya mempamerkan konsep gerak isyarat stilistik dan strategik Hattens. Walau bagaimanapun, impromptus Schubert lebih banyak menggabungkan gerak isyarat dialogik dan retorik, manakala impromptus Chopin lebih menjurus kepada menyampaikan gerak isyarat tematik dan spontan yang membangkitkan daya improvisasi.



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS / SYMBOLS

Note on the Musical Examples and Identification of Pitch

This dissertation contains musical examples throughout, which have been taken from Günter Henle Verlag (Urtext Edition of Schubert and Chopin Impromptus). The editorial policy in the examples has been to minimise interference with the original score.

Throughout this dissertation, note pitches are described using the system below:

CC	FF	C	B
Capital Letter			

c b c' b' c² c³ f³

LIST OF APPENDICES

- A Artistic Practice Video
- B Poster: Musical Showcase of Lecturers
- C UCSI University 3rd Piano Pedagogy Conference
- D UPSI The 2nd IPAGCon
- E UPSI 6th International Conference
- F Schubert's Impromptus G. H. Henle Verlag Urtext Edition
- G Chopin's Impromptus G. H. Henle Verlag Urtext Edition



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



Music performance is a multifaceted endeavour that intricately weaves together the acts of interpretation and analysis (Beard & Gloag, 2016). Musical interpretation transcends mere comprehension of a composer's intentions; it demands embodiment through gestures based on a performer's intention. These gestures, whether manifested physically through a performer's movements or metaphorically through musical phrasing, provide an essential toolkit for shaping interpretation. They allow performers to imbue their renditions with heightened clarity and emotional nuance (Hatten, 2004).

The complexity of interpretation in music performance is well-documented. O'Dea (2000) emphasizes its intrinsic link to performance, while Beard and Gloag (2016) highlight its capacity to offer numerous advantages within the context of musical





performance. Interpretation involves a deep understanding, analysis, and synthesis of information, all of which contribute to a richer, more nuanced performance.

A key function of interpretation is its positive influence on expressing personal characteristics while respecting the composer's intentions. Godlovitch (1998, p. 81) argues that performers bear the responsibility for interpretation, viewing it as a significant privilege. This perspective, however, is not without contention. Composers such as Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) and Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) emphasized the importance of adhering to the score's integrity and conveying the composer's intended meaning (Walls, 2002). This dissertation posits that while interpreting musical works is essential, it should be done with respect for the original ideas of composers and the inherent qualities of the works themselves.



Meanwhile, Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2013) define the term "interpretation" as follows: (1) "an explanation or opinion of what something means"; and (2) "a particular way of performing a piece of music, a part in a play, etc." On the other hand, Pocket Oxford Thesaurus (2008) suggests several meanings for interpretation: (1) "explanation, elucidation, exposition, exegesis, clarification"; (2) "meaning, understanding, explanation, inference"; (3) "analysis, evaluation"; (4) "rendition, execution, presentation, performance, reading, playing, singing."

The process of analysis contributes to enhanced knowledge and a deeper insight into the music performance, leading to a more comprehensive understanding. As a result, there have been various discourses by musicologists and scholars (Beard &





Gloag, 2016; Whittall, 1991; Cook, 2009; Hood, 2014; Rink, 2015) on the relationship between analysis and performance.

Analysis can provide many advantages. It engages in “the interpretation of abstract, conceptual levels in music” (Beard & Gloag, 2016, p. 14). Interestingly, Whittall (1991) extends the proposed relationship between analysis and interpretation to suggest that analysis involves performing an action. Cook (2009) also point out that analysis is a useful way to acquire knowledge, as music analysis could support a performer in the preparation of an interpretation (Hood, 2014). According to Beard and Gloag (2016, p. 13), the analysis also has positive influence on “musical form, style, and genre.” From the author’s perspective, the scholars’ arguments enrich the essence of analysis and agree with its positive effect.



However, there are still a few scholars who hold different views on analysis. For instance, Rink (2015) disagrees with “performance analysis” due to its ambiguity (p. 127). In other words, from the author’s understanding, “performance analysis” might not perfectly capture the essence of the various elements involved in studying and understanding musical performance. Instead, the expression in music analysis should also be encouraged more precisely in the context of performance. Hatten’s theory could serve as one of the guidelines in performing and analyzing music.

The author chose the impromptus by Schubert and Chopin for the following reasons:





First of all, they allow for a more direct comparison between composers from different eras; Moreover, the genre of impromptus provides greater space for exploring gestural expression, particularly in relation to spontaneous gestures, thematic gestures, and others. The dissertation is motivated by the necessity to explore how musical gestures function as vital interpretative mechanisms, enabling performers to navigate the intricate complexities inherent in these composers' works. By positioning gesture as a central interpretative device, this dissertation seeks to provide performers with a structured approach to elevating expressivity, refining phrasing, and deepening emotional connections during performance. Through this approach, performers can gain a deeper understanding of interpretation, technical aspects, and emotional expression. Crucially, gestures act as powerful interpretative tools that unlock layers of meaning within musical works. By focusing on the role of gestures in interpreting Schubert and Chopin's impromptus, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the performance practice of Romantic piano music, offering a new perspective on how gestures can enhance both analysis and performance.

In terms of the term Embodied Interpretation, it originates from phenomenology and cognitive science. While traditional views regard interpretation as a purely rational or linguistic process, theories of embodied cognition argue that human understanding is deeply rooted in bodily experience. From this perspective, embodied interpretation refers to the process of meaning-making through physical sensation, movement, and perceptual engagement. In the field of music, especially in performance and analysis, embodied interpretation has increasingly been adopted to describe how performers convey musical structure and emotional content through bodily actions—such as gestures, touch, and expressive movement.





In this dissertation, embodied interpretation is applied as an analytical lens for exploring selected impromptus by Franz Schubert and Frédéric Chopin. The focus is on how pianists communicate musical intentions and expressive gestures through bodily engagement, including hand movements, articulation, rhythmical shaping, dynamic nuance, and touch. Rather than viewing interpretation as a strictly intellectual exercise, this research highlights the performer's physical and emotional involvement as central to the construction of musical meaning. Through this embodied perspective, the dissertation seeks to reveal how gesture and expression function as strategic tools in shaping interpretive decisions and conveying stylistic identity.

1.2 Performance Problems



While Hatten's theory of musical gestures has been applied primarily to Classical repertoire (Hatten, 2004), there is a lack of research examining its relevance to Romantic music, particularly in Schubert and Chopin's works. Romantic compositions are characterized by greater expressive freedom (e.g., rubato, dynamic contrasts), making gestures even more critical when interpreting structural and emotional complexities. In terms of insight into interpretative challenges found in Romantic piano works, pianists often struggle with balancing the structural integrity of the music and its expressive demands. Thus, analysing Hatten's gestures in Schubert and Chopin's impromptus will offer performers practical insights into identifying and interpreting phrasing, dynamics, and emotional nuances. There is a need to bridge Hatten's theoretical framework with its practical application in Romantic piano repertoire. This dissertation will provide detailed analyses of how stylistic (culturally embedded) and





strategic (context-dependent) gestures operate within the selected impromptu. By identifying specific gestural elements in Schubert and Chopin's impromptu, this dissertation will expand the scope of Hatten's theoretical application to include the Romantic repertoire, offering valuable contributions to gesture studies and performance analysis.

The complexity of Romantic piano works often demands nuanced interpretative strategies. The Romantic model of interpretation allows performers significant influence over the music, enabling them to infuse personal expression into their performances (Ponce, 1998). Developing practical tools based on Hatten's theory on musical gestures will help pianists articulate emotional expression, manage rubato, and enhance dynamic control, ultimately leading to more informed and expressive interpretations. Although Hatten's theoretical framework provides important insights into musical gestures (Thompson & Mendoza, 2014), it is predominantly analytical and lacks a structured methodology for practical application in live performances. There is a need to develop a practical approach that allows performers to use gestures as interpretative tools during their performance preparation and execution. Current research on musical gestures often emphasizes theoretical analysis rather than the performer's perspective. As such, developing practical tools based on Hatten's theory of musical gestures addresses the need for practice-based research that prioritizes the performer's creative process and decision-making. Developing Hatten's theory into a performative framework will contribute to the broader field of performance studies by providing a clear and structured way for performers to integrate gestures into their interpretation, bridging the gap between analysis, creative process, and artistic performance.





This dissertation arises from a gap in applying Hatten's gesture theory to Romantic repertoire and its lack of practical insight for addressing interpretative challenges in Schubert and Chopin's music. The need stems from a lack of performer-focused, practical methodologies that allow for the application of Hatten's gestures as interpretative tools in performance and pedagogy, bridging the gap between theory, analysis, and practice.

The process of musical interpretation inherently requires the use of gestures as interpretative tools, forming an indispensable link between the written score and the audible performance. This relationship is multifaceted and deeply ingrained in the act of music-making: Hatten (2004) defines musical gestures as "significant energetic shaping through time" (p. 95), highlighting their role in conveying expressive content.

These gestures allow performers to breathe life into the static notation, transforming it into a dynamic, emotive experience for the listener.

Gritten and King (2006) assert that "gesture is central to music as a performative art" (p. xx). This centrality underscores the inseparable nature of gesture and musical interpretation, suggesting that one cannot fully interpret music without engaging with its gestural aspects. Rink (2002) emphasizes that "performers' physical gestures play a crucial role in shaping the music's character and meaning" (p. 51). This perspective highlights how the physical actions of performers directly contribute to the interpretation and communication of musical ideas. Godøy and Leman (2010) propose that "musical gestures serve as a vital communicative link between performer and audience" (p. 3), emphasizing the role of gestures in conveying interpretative choices to listeners. By integrating these perspectives, we can conclude that musical





interpretation is inextricably linked to the use of gestures as interpretative tools. Gestures provide performers the means to navigate the complex landscape of musical expression, bridging the gap between notation and realization, and facilitating a deeper, more nuanced communication of musical ideas to the audience.

While Hatten's theory on musical gesture is unique and insightful, he mainly concentrated on Viennese Classical works, with a particular emphasis on composers such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), and Franz Schubert (1797-1828). Additionally, recent investigations on Hatten's theory show that scholars are only concerned about the music analysis itself but not how it is related to the performance of a piece (Scott, 2009; O'Malley, 2013; Velázquez, n.d.). These Baroque, Classical, and Modern period works were only relatively investigated.



Based on this, it is important to focus more on Hatten's framework in order to expand expressive characteristics and gestures in the musical works from the Romantic period (Hatten, 2010), particularly in the nineteenth century. It might fill in the gap of the applying Hatten's theory, especially in extending stylistic and strategic gestures.

In addition to observing scholars utilizing Hatten's theory, the author will also focus on other scholars who have already explored the impromptus itself. For example, Fisk (2001) illustrated a series of musical ideas, such as thematic motives and harmonic analysis, in the chapter on impromptus. More specifically, he mentions "melodic gestures and textural configurations" (p. 120). Furthermore, Montgomery (2003) has conducted a deep investigation on performance practice in terms of a range of pieces, which includes impromptus. It should also be noted that Bodley and Horton (2016)





have offered historical information, textual references, theoretical methodologies, and analytical viewpoints regarding Schubert's compositions.

On the other hand, Chopin's impromptus have been discussed by a number of scholars. For instance, John Rink (1989) extensively explored Chopin's structural style and improvisation in his dissertation. Likewise, Jim Samson (2018) provided a more detailed description of aspects related to genre-based on impromptus. Additionally, Huneker (2008) focused on "characters" among Chopin's four impromptus. However, from the author's point, there is still a lack of in-depth investigation into gestural description, even though various scholars have made some significant achievements. It seems that more attention could be paid towards specific techniques in order to present a stylistic performance at the end.



Despite the extensive research that has been conducted by scholars on Schubert and Chopin's impromptus, it seems that the focus has mainly been on the historical context and musical analysis. Therefore, the author's main focus will address these performance-related issues, including examining the challenges of interpretation and providing performance guidelines for stylistic and strategic gestures. This dissertation is anticipated to enrich the performance of these pieces and contribute to further studies on impromptus by Schubert and Chopin.

The expansion on Hatten's theory of musical gestures is crucial because, his applications were mostly confined to select works and styles within Schubert and Beethoven. By revisiting Hatten's theoretical framework through the lens of Impromptus, this dissertation seeks to test, adapt, and further develop the theory in a





performative context. In particular, the inclusion of both Schubert and Chopin allows for a comparative exploration of gestural interpretation across two composers who approached the impromptu form from distinct aesthetic and structural perspectives.

The works of Schubert are chosen again not to replicate Hatten's findings, but to offer a new performance-informed reading of his Impromptus that emphasizes dialogical and rhetorical gestures often underexplored in analytical literature. While Hatten's work provides a strong foundation, this study aims to integrate analytical insights with embodied performance experience, which opens new interpretative pathways beyond the scope of theoretical gesture analysis. Moreover, the impromptu genre offers a fertile ground for investigating gestural expressivity due to its hybrid character—somewhere between composed structure and improvisatory feel. This genre allows for a wide range of spontaneous, thematic, and expressive gestures, making it ideal for bridging theoretical gesture analysis with performance interpretation.

1.3 Performance Objectives

The research objectives of this dissertation are as follows:

1. To identify and analyze Hatten's stylistic and strategic gestures in Schubert and Chopin's selected impromptus, exploring how these gestures contribute to the structural, emotional, and expressive dimensions of the music
2. To develop Hatten's theoretical framework of musical gestures as interpretative tools in Schubert and Chopin's selected impromptus





3. To perform the selected impromptus of Schubert and Chopin in the form of a recital and reflect the findings through performance demonstrations.

Based on Hatten's theory of musical gesture, this dissertation seeks to examine how to achieve technical requirements, profound emotional content, and intricate structural nuances, shape specific artistic demands for the performer. Specifically, it could examine Hatten's theory on musical gesture and its relationship to music performance whereby the dissertation engages with an original model via Hatten's music theory. The dissertation explores how Hatten's musical gesture is reflected in the Romantic context, analysing a series of typical gestures including timbre, articulation, dynamics, tempo, pacing, and phrase structure. These gestures will be demonstrated within the selected impromptus.



In this dissertation, the author seeks to analyse and further understand Hatten's theory on musical gesture in the selected impromptu by Schubert and Chopin. A deeper understanding of the gestural elements in piano works is crucial for analytical processes, that can lead to further explorations of individualized gestures between Schubert and Chopin within the context of Romantic music. In fact, this dissertation effectively captures the essence of Schubert's and Chopin's impromptus.

As part of the dissertation's methodology, the author aims to perform selected impromptus by Schubert and Chopin while applying Hatten's theory of musical gesture. By performing these selected impromptus, the individual expressions of Schubert and Chopin will be intuitively demonstrated and different stylistic elements will be compared in two recitals. Through practice and performing, this dissertation aim to gain





a deeper understanding towards dynamic relationship between composition and artistic interpretation in the context of musical gesture. The purpose of this dissertation is to clearly define musical gestures as the central focus of the interpretative process. It mainly provides a performance guideline for pianists in interpreting Schubert and Chopin's impromptus by comparing their various musical gestures.

1.4 Performance Questions

The dissertation is structured around three interrelated components, which are expressed in the form of performance questions. Accordingly, several performance questions will be provided regarding relevant performance objectives. In fact, the performance questions are designed to make musical gestures central to the interpretative process, asking how they guide phrasing, dynamics, and expressiveness.

- (i) How can musical gestures be central to the interpretative process?
- (ii) How can Hatten's musical gestures be applied to practical performances?
- (iii) How can use Hatten's musical gestures help overcome interpretative challenges specific to the Schubert and Chopin's impromptus?



1.5 Programmes for Recital 1 and Recital 2

Table 1.1

Title of Works for Recital 1

Composer	Title of Work	Duration
Schubert	Impromptu No. 1 in F minor Op. 142	12:25
	Impromptu No. 3 in B flat major Op. 142	12:50
Chopin	Impromptu No. 1 in A flat major Op. 29	4:18
	Impromptu No. 2 in F sharp major Op. 36	6:06
	Impromptu No. 3 in G flat major Op. 51	5:50
	Impromptu No. 4 in C sharp minor Op. 66	5:50
Total Duration		47:19

Table 1.2

Title of Works for Recital 2

Composer	Title of Work	Duration
Schubert	Impromptu Op. 142 No. 1 in F minor	12:25
	Impromptu Op. 142 No. 2 in A flat major	8:20
	Impromptu Op. 142 No. 3 in B flat major	12:50
	Impromptu Op. 142 No. 4 in F minor	8:31
Chopin	Impromptu Op. 29 No. 1 in A flat major	4:18
	Impromptu Op. 36 No. 2 in F sharp major	6:06
	Impromptu Op. 51 No. 3 in G flat major	5:50
	Impromptu Op. 66 No. 4 in C sharp minor	5:50
Total Duration		64:10

These works are selected to present various styles and gestures in the works of Schubert and Chopin, and they are relatively beneficial and insightful for making comparisons and arriving at conclusions within the same genre (impromptus). Thus,



while referring to Hatten's music theory, the design of the programme aims to reconstruct meaningful characteristics in the Romantic context.

1.6 Significance of Performance

As mentioned earlier, both interpretation and analysis are of importance with regards to performance. Thus, the author will attempt to clarify its significance from those these perspectives:

- Through performance, the dissertation compares how the composers, Schubert and Chopin, perceived the musical gestures in the same musical genre (impromptus). By doing so, the author may gain a better understanding of interpretative approaches that contributes to personal interpretation.
- Through performance, techniques related to performing impromptus can be demonstrated and gradually reinforced. For instance, trills and chords can be compared. More specifically, the trills in Chopin's impromptus are relatively more flexible, while those in Schubert's are more cautious. Additionally, the chords in Schubert's impromptus might be more harmonic and dramatic, while comparing them to the chords in Chopin's impromptus, which should be played more subtly and cantabile.
- Through performance, artistic aspects related to musical gestures would be demonstrated further, especially in stylistic and strategic perspectives. Consequently, a performer might have a better understanding towards performance considerations.





In essence, the primary goal of the performance is to use musical gestures to help the audience understand the distinct styles of Schubert and Chopin within the same genre, namely impromptus. This entails a performer's need to be cautious and focused on improving piano techniques and artistic expression within the context of the performance. The author is devoted to making musical gestures central to the interpretative process, asking how they guide phrasing, dynamics, and expressiveness.

Although Schubert's music has been addressed in Hatten's studies, his focus was largely on sonata and song forms. This dissertation instead focuses on Schubert's Impromptus, which present unique challenges in terms of structural openness, spontaneity, and poetic ambiguity. These characteristics offer fertile ground for studying how embodied gestures contribute to interpretive decisions.

