University of Cincinnati

Date: 4/8/2011

I, Myron D. Brown, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in Piano.

It is entitled:
The 19th Century Tarantella for Piano: A Pedagogical Guide to Performance and Leveling

Student's name: Myron D. Brown

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Jane Conda, PhD

Committee member: Elizabeth Pridonoff, MM

Committee member: Eugene Pridonoff, MM
The 19th Century Tarantella for Piano: A Pedagogical Guide to Performance and Leveling

A document submitted to the

Graduate School
of the University of Cincinnati
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

in the Keyboard Studies Division
of the College-Conservatory of Music

April 2011

by

Myron D. Brown

B.M., Birmingham-Southern College
M.M., University of Houston

Committee Chair: Michelle Conda, PhD
ABSTRACT

This document's primary function is to explore a rarely encountered musical genre, the tarantella. The tarantella is a dance form whose origins have been long shrouded in mystery. Perhaps as a result, there has been very little written about the subject—both in terms of the dance itself and the actual music. Many of the major music encyclopedias and piano literature textbooks only make brief mention of the genre. Some of the greatest composers have written tarantellas for solo piano, but these pieces are not considered to be among their most important works. With only a few exceptions, these works are not performed or recorded very frequently. Tarantellas have great artistic and pedagogical value, and can hold their own alongside works of the standard performance repertoire. Along with general background information about the tarantella, this document will discuss notable tarantellas for solo piano from the 19th century, annotate them for technical challenges and pedagogical solutions, and level them according to difficulty.
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACKGROUND</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tarantella and Tarantism</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Legend</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tarantula</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Origin</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHARACTERISTICS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dance</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Music</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEVELING OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCE CHART FOR LEVELING</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANNOTATIONS AND LEVELING</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burgmüller, Tarentelle, Op. 100, No. 20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilmant, Tarentelle, Op. 48, No. 6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heller, Tarentella, Op. 46, No. 7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heller, Tarentelle in A minor, Op. 85, No. 1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiel, Tarentelle, Op. 38, No. 4</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heller, Tarentelle in A-flat major, Op. 85, No. 2</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mendelssohn, Presto in C major, Op. 102, No. 3</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pieczonka, Tarantella in A Minor ............................................................... 31
Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 .......................................................... 36
Heller, Tarantelle in G major, Op. 137, No. 2 ............................................ 40
Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 137, No. 1 .......................................... 43
Oswald, Tarantella, Op. 14, No. 3 ............................................................. 47
Rubinstein, Tarantella, Op. 14 ................................................................. 51
Beethoven, Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 31, No. 3 (IV) ......................... 55
Heller, Tarantelle in E-flat minor, Op. 61 ............................................... 59
Kiel, Tarantelle, Op. 27 .......................................................................... 62
Rossini, Impromptu Tarantellisé ................................................................ 66
Chopin, Tarantelle in A-flat Major, Op. 43 ............................................ 71
Debussy, Danse (Tarantelle styrienne) ................................................... 77
Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 53 ...................................................... 81
Weber, Sonata in E Minor, Op. 70 (IV) ................................................... 85
Rossini, Tarantelle pur Sang (avec traversée la Procession) ................. 88
Schubert, Sonata in C Minor, D. 958 (IV) ............................................. 93
Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (Neapolitan Tarantella) .................................... 98

CONCLUSION .......................................................................................... 104

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY .......................................... 105

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................................... 108
## LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Typical Tarantella Melody ................................................................</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Weber, Sonata in E minor, Op. 70 (IV) (mm. 1-16, original notation)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Weber, Sonata in E minor, Op. 70 (IV) (mm. 1-16, rewritten in 6/8 time)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Burgmüller, Tarentelle, Op. 100, No. 20 (mm. 1-12)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Burgmüller, Tarentelle, Op. 100, No. 20 (mm. 9-16)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Burgmüller, Tarentelle, Op. 100, No. 20 (mm. 1-5)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Burgmüller, Tarentelle, Op. 100, No. 20 (mm. 37-43)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Guilmant, Tarantelle, Op. 48 (mm. 1-9)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Guilmant, Tarantelle, Op. 48 (mm. 1-9)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Heller, Tarantella, Op. 46, No. 7 (mm. 1-12)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Heller, Tarantella, Op. 46, No. 7 (mm. 13-30)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Heller, Tarantelle in A minor, Op. 85, No. 1 (mm. 1-12)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Heller, Tarantelle in A minor, Op. 85, No. 1 (mm. 7-18)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Kiel, Tarantelle, Op. 38, No. 4 (mm. 17-22)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Heller, Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 85, No. 2 (mm. 7-28)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Heller, Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 85, No. 2 (mm. 87-98)</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Mendelssohn, Presto in C major, Op. 102, No. 3 (mm. 1-12)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
21. Mendelssohn, Presto in C major, Op. 102, No. 3 (mm. 7-18) ............................................. 31
22. Pieczonka, Tarantella in A minor (mm. 10-15) ................................................................. 32
23. Pieczonka, Tarantella in A minor (mm. 24-33) ................................................................. 33
24. Pieczonka, Tarantella in A minor (mm. 17-21) ................................................................. 34
25. Pieczonka, Tarantella in A minor (mm. 24-38) ................................................................. 35
26. Pieczonka, Tarantella in A minor (mm. 64-73) ................................................................. 36
27. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 44-49) ............................................................ 37
28. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 93-98) ............................................................ 37
29. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 366-81) .......................................................... 38
30. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 1-12) ............................................................. 39
31. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 485-92) .......................................................... 40
32. Heller, Tarantelle in G major, Op. 137, No. 2 (mm. 13-24) .............................................. 41
33. Heller, Tarantelle in G major, Op. 137, No. 2 (mm. 75-87) .............................................. 42
34. Heller, Tarantelle in G major, Op. 137, No. 2 (mm. 29-39) .............................................. 43
35. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 137, No. 1 (mm. 107-12) ............................................. 44
36. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 137, No. 1 (mm. 119-31) ............................................. 44
37. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 137, No. 1 (mm. 1-5) .................................................. 45
38. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 137, No. 1 (mm. 62-68) .............................................. 45
40. Oswald, Tarantella, Op. 14, No. 3 (mm. 7-12) .............................................................. 48
41. Oswald, Tarantella, Op. 14, No. 3 (mm. 28-31) .............................................................. 48
42. Oswald, Tarantella, Op. 14, No. 3 (mm. 28-31) .............................................................. 49
43. Oswald, Tarantella, Op. 14, No. 3 (mm. 36-39) .............................................................. 49
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>Oswald, Tarantella, Op. 14, No. 3 (mm. 1-12) ................................................................. 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>Oswald, Tarantella, Op. 14, No. 3 (mm. 63-72) ................................................................. 51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>Rubinstein, Tarantella in G minor, Op. 14 (mm. 228-39) ......................................................... 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>Rubinstein, Tarantella in G minor, Op. 14 (mm. 289-96) ......................................................... 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>Rubinstein, Tarantella in G minor, Op. 14 (mm. 282-88) ......................................................... 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>Beethoven, Sonata in E-flat major, Op. 31, No. 3 (IV) (mm. 1-23) ............................................. 56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>Beethoven, Sonata in E-flat major, Op. 31, No. 3 (IV) (mm. 21-23) .......................................... 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td>Beethoven, Sonata in E-flat major, Op. 31, No. 3 (IV) (mm. 217-28) ....................................... 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.</td>
<td>Heller, Tarantelle in E-flat minor, Op. 61 (mm. 1-11) .............................................................. 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54.</td>
<td>Heller, Tarantelle in E-flat minor, Op. 61 (mm. 565-74) .......................................................... 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55.</td>
<td>Heller, Tarantelle in E-flat minor, Op. 61 (mm. 273-84) .......................................................... 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56.</td>
<td>Kiel, Tarantelle, Op. 27 (mm. 7-12) ....................................................................................... 63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57.</td>
<td>Kiel, Tarantelle, Op. 27 (mm. 194-99) .................................................................................... 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58.</td>
<td>Kiel, Tarantelle, Op. 27 (mm. 7-18) ....................................................................................... 65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59.</td>
<td>Kiel, Tarantelle, Op. 27 (mm. 31-40) ....................................................................................... 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60.</td>
<td>Rossini, <em>Impromptu Tarantellisé</em> (mm. 1-4) ............................................................................ 67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61.</td>
<td>Rossini, <em>Impromptu Tarantellisé</em> (mm. 42-47) ........................................................................ 68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62.</td>
<td>Rossini, <em>Impromptu Tarantellisé</em> (mm. 26-30) ........................................................................ 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63.</td>
<td>Rossini, <em>Impromptu Tarantellisé</em> (mm. 143-48) ..................................................................... 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64.</td>
<td>Rossini, <em>Impromptu Tarantellisé</em> (mm. 163-68) ..................................................................... 71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65.</td>
<td>Chopin, Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 43 (mm. 1-11) ............................................................ 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66.</td>
<td>Chopin, Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 43 (mm. 180-191) ....................................................... 74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67.</td>
<td>Chopin, Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 43 (mm. 204-07) ........................................... 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68.</td>
<td>Chopin, Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 43 (mm. 226-38) ............................................. 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69.</td>
<td>Debussy, <em>Danse</em>, (mm. 1-11) ......................................................................................... 78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70.</td>
<td>Debussy, <em>Danse</em>, (mm. 61-72) ......................................................................................... 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71.</td>
<td>Debussy, <em>Danse</em>, (mm. 247-58) ......................................................................................... 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72.</td>
<td>Debussy, <em>Danse</em>, (mm. 265-70) ......................................................................................... 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73.</td>
<td>Debussy, <em>Danse</em>, (mm. 313-18) ......................................................................................... 81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74.</td>
<td>Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 53 (mm. 1-11) ............................................................... 82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75.</td>
<td>Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 53 (mm. 471-74) ............................................................ 83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76.</td>
<td>Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 53 (mm. 167-76) ............................................................ 84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77.</td>
<td>Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 53 (mm. 192-202) ........................................................... 85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78.</td>
<td>Weber, Sonata in E minor, Op. 70 (IV) (mm. 1-13) .............................................................. 86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79.</td>
<td>Weber, Sonata in E minor, Op. 70 (IV) (mm. 115-21) ............................................................ 87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80.</td>
<td>Weber, Sonata in E minor, Op. 70 (IV) (mm. 300-327) ........................................................... 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81.</td>
<td>Rossini, <em>Tarantelle pur Sang</em> (mm. 33-45) ........................................................................... 89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82.</td>
<td>Rossini, <em>Tarantelle pur Sang</em> (mm. 211-17) ...................................................................... 90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83.</td>
<td>Rossini, <em>Tarantelle pur Sang</em> (mm. 136-61) ...................................................................... 91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84.</td>
<td>Rossini, <em>Tarantelle pur Sang</em> (mm. 563-73) ...................................................................... 92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85.</td>
<td>Rossini, <em>Tarantelle pur Sang</em> (mm. 154-57; 203-06) ........................................................... 93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86.</td>
<td>Schubert, Sonata in C minor, D. 958 (IV) (mm. 1-6) ........................................................... 94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87.</td>
<td>Schubert, Sonata in C minor, D. 958 (IV) (mm. 177-84) ...................................................... 94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88.</td>
<td>Schubert, Sonata in C minor, D. 958 (IV) (mm. 1-20) ........................................................... 95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89.</td>
<td>Schubert, Sonata in C minor, D. 958 (IV) (mm. 177-84) ...................................................... 96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
90. Schubert, Sonata in C minor, D. 958 (IV) (mm. 108-23) ........................................... 97
91. Schubert, Sonata in C minor, D. 958 (IV) (mm. 145-60) ........................................... 97
92. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 16-27) ........................................................................ 98
93. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 93-104) ...................................................................... 99
94. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 13-15) ....................................................................... 100
95. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 66-86) ....................................................................... 101
96. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 130-36) ..................................................................... 102
97. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 73-79) ....................................................................... 103
98. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 111-16) ..................................................................... 103
99. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 288-94) ..................................................................... 103
INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, music and dance have shared a very close-knit union. The earliest musical dance forms served as accompaniment to actual dancing. Over time, the music broke free from its bonds to the dance, developing into independent works; but it still retained its same basic character and stylistic features. Some prime examples of such dances are the minuet, the waltz, the mazurka, and the polonaise. These four dance styles are used quite regularly in compositions and there has been a substantial amount of research devoted to each. A less common dance form is the tarantella, which is often overlooked and only mentioned briefly in music or dance encyclopedias. This document explores the uncertainty surrounding the origin of the tarantella and its evolution into one of the most individual dance forms. There are two primary goals for this document: to explain the unique musical characteristics of the tarantella to readers who may have had little or no exposure to it and to provide a “performer’s guide” to select 19th century tarantellas for solo piano.

There are standard texts for leveling piano repertoire based on difficulty.¹ These reference works mention the tarantella, but by no means contain an exhaustive list. This document will utilize Jane Magrath’s The Pianist’s Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature as the basis for the leveling of pieces. There is no available reference book that levels the tarantella.

BACKGROUND

The Tarantella and Tarantism

The tarantella is a folkdance of southern Italy, common since the 15th century. People believed that a spider’s bite—more specifically, that of the tarantula—was the cause of a disease called tarantism. Some of the symptoms of this condition could include fever, melancholy, or madness. Some who suffered from tarantism were known to fall unconscious and make obscene gestures. The most obvious symptom of tarantism, however, was an uncontrollable urge to dance. After a person had fallen victim to a tarantula’s bite, doctors believed that music and dancing had to begin immediately, in order to have a therapeutic effect. Furthermore, if the musicians made blunders in the performance, or if the performance did not last long enough, the condition of the victim could worsen.

Many believed that dancing was the only cure for tarantism. In fact, some victims were known to have danced nonstop for hours or even days, until they collapsed.

The Legend

There exist two opposing explanations about the origin of the tarantella dance. One idea suggests that the frenzied dancing of the tarantella occurs as a result of a tarantula’s

---

3 Don Gregorio Paniagua Rodriguez, Liner Notes, Tarentule-Tarantelle, Atrium Musicae, perf. Translated by Derek Yeld (Harmonia Mundi, HM 379, 33 rpm, 1976).
5 Rodriguez.
bite. According to this theory, a victim eventually drops dead. Another view proposes that the dancing is used as the cure for a tarantula's bite. Through dancing, victims “sweat” the tarantula’s venom out of their system. Multiple sources agree that this latter account is the more popular of the two, and still believed by many people in the 21st century.

The Tarantula

Aside from the bite of a tarantula, researchers have tried to link tarantism to several other factors, including demonic possession, epilepsy, or poisoning by a fungus. A 1997 study, The Dancing Plague, by Donaldson, Cavanagh, and Rankin shows that the actual cause of tarantism is still unknown. Many other studies consider tarantism to be simply a form of hysteria. Karen Lüdtke's book, Dances with Spiders, quotes: “...most cases of tarantism never featured an actual spider bite. No real spider was involved.”

Even if people actually were bitten by tarantulas, the results probably would not be as bad as legend would have us believe. Generally, when the word tarantula is mentioned, the hairy, American tarantula is what comes to mind. The tarantula associated with the tarantella is from a different family of spiders, the wolf spider. Its bite was actually not very toxic to humans, and no more painful than a bee sting. The venom of this spider was designed to kill insects and small mammals. Also, it is highly unlikely that people would have encountered a tarantula often because these spiders are nocturnal creatures, mostly

---

active at night. Even then, they generally stay near the openings of their burrows, waiting for prey to come near.

The Origin

The terms *tarantella*, *tarantism*, and *tarantula* and all have the same root. They are derived from the name Taranto, which is a seaport city located just inside Italy's “heel.”\(^\text{10}\) Since the tarantella eventually spread to northern Italy and other parts of Europe, its name has taken on several alternate spellings: *tarantella, tarantela, tarantelle, tarentella, tarentelle, tarandla.*

CHARACTERISTICS

The Dance

The tarantella was danced by either two ladies, or a lady and a man—dancing the tarantella alone was considered unlucky.11 As a couple danced, they often played instruments such as castanets or tambourines. One or more couples performed this dance. Others would surround the dancers, watching and singing along.12 The steps and movements of the tarantella seem to mimic gestures of attack and defense. Dance steps include the pirouette, the long hop, the high hop, and the glissé.13 The choreography was often improvised.14

The Music

Not just any music could function as a stimulus for a bite victim—only the tarantella or similar composition was able to elicit a response.15 From the 17th through the 20th centuries, major epidemics of tarantism led entire towns to break into wild dancing. The popularity of tarantellas during this period resulted in a very lucrative time for musicians and composers alike.16 In its earliest form, the tarantella was performed on a vihuela,

---

13 Bianca M. Galanti, Dances of Italy (New York: Chanticleer Press, 1950), 30-36.
14 Ibid, 11-12.
violin, guitar, or similar instrument. Most tarantellas for piano were conceived specifically as concert works, and composed during the 19th century.17

The unique musical characteristics of tarantellas make them easily recognizable. One of its most distinguishing features is its rhythm. When compared to typical rhythms of other dance forms, the tarantella stands out because of the “hopping” or “skipping” rhythm created by rests. Adding to this effect are melodies, which are generally built from repeated notes or alternation of a note with its upper or lower neighbor. Melodic lines also include scales, arpeggios, and leaps. These features bring to mind images of running and jumping, often associated with dancing.

The next feature is the tempo. The tarantella is a very lively dance which is usually given a tempo marking of vivace, presto, or prestissimo. Even with an already rapid pace, tarantellas often have an increase in speed near the end, either through a written in accelerando or artistic interpretation on the part of the performer. Tarantellas are usually composed in minor keys. Other characteristics include a regular phrase structure and nearly perpetual motion. In terms of form, tarantellas are generally comprised of several distinct, contrasting sections, which can recur several times; most tarantellas can be classified as some type of rondo. Figure 1 shows an example of a typical tarantella melody.

---

17 Sanz, "Medical Theories of Tarantism in Eighteenth-Century Spain," 285-86.
Figure 1. Typical Tarantella Melody

![Typical Tarantella Melody](image)

Tarantellas are usually written in 6/8 time, with some exceptions. In Carl Maria von Weber’s last piano sonata, he titles the last movement “Finale: La Tarantella.” Although it is notated with a time signature of 2/4, Weber uses triplets and dotted rhythms to create the feeling of 6/8 time. This effect is illustrated in the following two musical examples. First is the opening sixteen measures of the movement, as originally notated in 2/4 time (Figure 2). The next example shows how these same sixteen measures would look if they were rewritten in the traditional in 6/8 time of a tarantella (Figure 3); there is no change of character.

---

18 Schwanst, "Tarantella."
Figure 2. Weber, Sonata in E minor, Op. 70 (IV) (mm. 1-16, original notation)

Figure 3. Weber, Sonata in E minor, Op. 70 (IV) (mm. 1-16, rewritten in 6/8 time)
There are tarantellas written for various ensembles. Richard Strauss’s tone poem *Aus Italien* uses Italian themes, including a tarantella. Felix Mendelssohn’s *Italian Symphony* uses a tarantella theme in the development section of its finale. Rossini’s *La Danza*, for voice and piano, is one of the most famous tarantellas, and the source of inspiration for several that followed. Gottschalk wrote a *Grand Tarantella for Piano and Orchestra*, Op. 67. In 1964, George Balanchine used Gottschalk’s composition to create a ballet entitled *Tarantella*. Many composers wrote tarantellas for solo piano, including well-known composers such as Burgmüller, Liszt, Heller, Glinka, Rossini, Debussy, and Prokofiev.
LEVELING OF LITERATURE

Of all the resources available for determining the difficulty level of a specific piano piece, Jane Magrath’s *The Pianist’s Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature* is the choice most pedagogues use. Magrath assigns each piece a level from one to ten. Level one could be called “late elementary,” and level ten is “early-advanced.” The book includes a reference chart that lists representative pieces for each level.

The levels of the tarantellas discussed in this document will be determined using this same scale. In order to accommodate “advanced” and “late-advanced” literature, Magrath’s grading scale has been extended, using well-known sonatas of Beethoven as representative pieces for levels eleven through fifteen.

---

## Reference Chart for Leveling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Representative Piece(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>Bartók, Mikrokosmos, Vol. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>Türk, Pieces for Beginners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>Latour Sonatinas; Kabalevsky, Pieces for Young People, Op. 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook; Gurlitt, Album for the Young, Op. 140; Tchaikovsky, Album for the Young, Op. 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td>Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook; Sonatinas by Attwood, Lynes; Menotti, Poemetti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 7</td>
<td>Kuhlau and Diabelli Sonatinas; Bach easier Two-Part Inventions; Bach, Little Preludes; Dello Joio, Lyric Pieces for the Young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Moderately difficult Bach, Two-Part Inventions; Beethoven easier variation sets; Field Nocturnes; Schumann, Album Leaves, Op. 124; Schubert Waltzes; Turina, Miniatures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>Easier Bach Three-Part Inventions; easiest Haydn Sonata movements; easiest Mendelssohn Songs without Words; easiest Chopin Mazurkas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 10</td>
<td>Bach Three-Part Inventions; easiest Chopin Nocturnes; Beethoven, Sonatas, Op. 49, 79; Mozart, Sonata, K. 283; Muczynski, Preludes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 11</td>
<td>Beethoven, Sonata, Op 2, No. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 12</td>
<td>Beethoven, Sonata, Op. 53 “Waldstein”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 13</td>
<td>Beethoven, Sonata, Op. 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 14</td>
<td>Beethoven, Sonata, Op. 57 “Appassionata”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 15</td>
<td>Beethoven, Sonata, Op. 106 “Hammerklavier”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

20 Magrath, The Pianist’s Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature, xi. (Levels 1-10 are Magrath’s; Levels 11-15 were added to accommodate more advanced works in this study).
Friedrich Burgmüller—Tarentelle, Op. 100, No. 20

Friedrich Burgmüller is best known for composing several collections of etudes for piano. This literature is commonly used in the instruction of beginning and intermediate students. In Opus 100, *25 Leichte Etüden*, Burgmüller gives each etude a descriptive title. Number twenty, in D minor, is entitled “Tarentelle.” This set of etudes is also referred to as *25 Easy and Progressive Studies*, Op. 100.

Some features that set this work apart as a tarantella are the minor key and the fast tempo indication. Repeated notes and scalar passages in the eight-measure introduction are also indicative of a typical tarantella. The following section combines “running” passages with “skipping” passages, which are the result of rests in the melody (Figure 4).

---

This tarantella is in ternary form, which is enclosed by a simple introduction and coda. In the opening measures, the left and right hands play, in unison, an up-and-down figure, which moves back and forth between the tonic and dominant pitches. This leads quickly to a half cadence followed by a grand pause. The main theme is built mostly on scale fragments, which change direction often (Figure 5). Both the melody and the rhythm conjure up images of people running and skipping. In the first eight measures of this section, the tonality modulates from D minor to the relative major, and then these eight measures are repeated. The repetitive shifting between major and minor seems to mirror a shift in the mood, from mysterious to cheerful.
Figure 5. Burgmüller, Tarentelle, Op. 100, No. 20 (mm. 9-16)

The middle section of the work is in the parallel major key, D major. For the majority of this section, the typical tarantella rhythm is abandoned. Instead, each hand punctuates the downbeat, creating a steady, march-like pattern. Unlike the typical tarantella, the composer marks “diminuendo e poco ritardando” near the closing, followed by two measures marked “a tempo.” Although the ending feels conclusive, it lacks the vigor of other tarantellas.

Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

As simple as the opening (Figure 6) may seem, it can be difficult for two hands to play steadily and evenly in unison. Although the pattern can be played by simply placing both hands in a D-minor five-finger position, many editions of this work suggest using only fingers one, two, and three in each hand. A pianist has more precise control over those fingers, which are much stronger than four and five. In addition to the introduction, this
fingering strategy can be applied to the right hand of the piece, whenever there is a group of three eighth notes—all ascending or descending—under a slur. Also, by using these fingers consistently, the composer’s phrasing marks become natural and intuitive, giving the piece a more lively character.

Figure 6. Burgmüller, Tarentelle, Op. 100, No. 20 (mm. 1-5)

The central section of this tarantella has a series of repeated notes, which are written as grace notes (Figure 7). If not played quickly enough, these ornaments won’t sound like grace notes, but they will come across as simply the last eighth of the previous beat. A performer can achieve the best effect by playing each key with a quick, outward-sweeping motion, using alternating fingers.

Figure 7. Burgmüller, Tarentelle, Op. 100, No. 20 (mm. 37-43)
Alexandre Guilmant—Tarantelle, Op. 48

Alexandre Guilmant was known mostly as a virtuoso organist and as a co-founder of the Schola Cantorum in Paris in 1894. Although the majority of his compositions were for organ, he did write a few works for piano. It is believed that Guilmant likely composed his Six Short Pieces, Op. 48 as instructive works for his daughter. The Tarantelle from this set was included in volume two of the 1918 publication Modern Music and Musicians.

According to the title page, this collection was said to contain “The One Hundred Greatest Compositions for the Piano.”

The prominent tarantella features of this work are the vivace tempo, repeated notes, and periodic phrase structure. Also, the melody is in nearly perpetual motion; many phrases run into another without rests between (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Guilmant, Tarantelle, Op. 48 (mm. 1-9)

---

This tarantella has a typical ternary form, except that the opening theme begins abruptly, without an introduction. The C-minor melody has a wavelike contour, constantly changing direction as it outlines fragments of a harmonic minor scale. The left hand part begins in a simple manner, but soon intensifies through counterpoint against the right hand. The piece modulates to the relative major in the middle section. Here, the treble and bass parts alternate back and forth between melody and accompaniment roles. The coda at the end is based on the second half of the opening theme.

**Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions**

This tarantella contains octave jumps that must be made quickly—in the space of an eighth note. This first occurs at m. 4 (Figure 9), and then several more times throughout the piece. After the leap, the melody continues upward in a stepwise motion.

**Figure 9. Guilmant, Tarantelle, Op. 48 (mm. 1-9)**
Because of this figuration, the most logical fingering for a pianist would be to play the middle C with the thumb, and the C above with the index finger. Even for those with larger hands, this can be a tricky maneuver on the keyboard. A good way to practice would be to play the phrase leading down to the middle C and then jump to the C an octave above, but then stop, without completing the next phrase. This fragment can be repeated slowly, as many times as necessary for mastery. Immediately after playing the middle C, it is helpful to rotate the hand slightly, pointing the fingers towards the C above. Alternately, the middle C can be played with the left hand, giving the right hand more time to move to its next position. If this option is taken, the pianist must be careful that the left hand plays at an appropriate dynamic level, so that the phrase is not interrupted. The middle C should not be accented in any way, but should still maintain the same tone quality and sound like it was played with the right hand.

**Stephen Heller—Tarantella, Op. 46, No. 7  
Level 7**

Similar to many composers of the 19th century, Stephen Heller wrote several sets of etudes for piano. Unlike the concert etudes of Chopin and Liszt, Heller’s works are used primarily as teaching resources, and performed with less frequency. *Études mélodiques et progressives*, Op. 46 contains a total of thirty etudes; the seventh is entitled “Tarantella.”

This form of this piece is typical of a tarantella: a ternary structure with an introduction and coda. The piece is in a minor key, and has a fast tempo indication: *vivace*. The melody is built from periodic phrases and features both scalar passages and repeated
notes (Figure 10). These repeated notes are articulated by either rests, or the typical “long-short” rhythms common in tarantellas.

**Figure 10. Heller, Tarantella, Op. 46, No. 7 (mm. 1-12)**

In comparison to the other tarantellas in this study, this one presents a few unusual features in the form. The introduction of this work seems somewhat lengthy. At sixteen measures, it is the same length as the first theme. The coda, on the other hand, is quite brief. The resulting form of the piece is: Introduction A B A’ Coda.

Another feature that sets this apart from other tarantellas is that the ternary structure of the main body of the work doesn’t have much variety in themes or moods. The middle section, like the first, is in E minor. It borrows fragments from the main theme, while interjecting with tonic or dominant octaves in between. What this section lacks in variety, it makes up for with exciting dynamics that shift from forte to piano and back every two measures.
**Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions**

Heller’s Tarantella, Op. 46, No. 7 is simple in form and not very demanding technically. Although keeping a steady tempo is important, this piece can easily become dull and “metronomical” if a performer doesn’t give careful attention to the phrase structure. In order to give this piece more forward motion, it is useful to feel a hypermeter, in which each measure becomes one beat of a larger-scale duple meter. The concept of strong and weak beats can then be applied to entire measures—resulting in strong measures (odd-numbered measures) and weak measures (even-numbered measures) (Figure 11).

**Figure 11. Heller, Tarantella, Op. 46, No. 7 (mm. 13-30)**
Interpreting this music in larger segments will make important points of arrival more apparent. For example, the first half of the A section should be played as three statements—two measures, two measures, and four measures—each with increasing tension. Simply following the dynamic and articulation marks indicated by the composer can help achieve a brilliant shaping of each phrase.

The amount of repetition in this tarantella makes it easy to learn, but also introduces a greater risk for a monotonous performance. The first two pairs of measures in the A section (mm. 17-18 and mm. 19-20) are exactly the same (See earlier Figure 11). Even though they are both marked piano, one of these phrases can be made slightly louder or softer than the other, and still be within the overall piano range. On a larger level, the A section as a whole is comprised of two identical eight-measure segments, which can be varied to some extent, so that the music doesn’t seem static. The excitement of the B section lies mainly in the dynamic contrast between the sets of octaves and their melodic interruptions. This excitement can be intensified by making a gradual crescendo, which peaks on the last attack in each set of octaves.

**Stephen Heller—Tarantelle in A minor, Op. 85, No. 1**

This work, together with Op. 85, No. 2, was composed for the great virtuoso pianist, Clara Schumann. After a short introduction, the mysterious opening theme in A minor features ascending and descending scales in the treble with staccato accompaniment in the bass. This is followed by a transitional passage which oscillates between the tonic key and its relative major. Next, is the more lyrical melody in the key of A major. After a short
passage which is reminiscent of the introductory material, same three sections are then repeated, slightly varied, and rounded off by a brief coda.

The most noticeable tarantella characteristics of this work are the presto tempo, 6/8 time signature, minor tonality, and rapid, melodic runs in the right hand (Figure 12). Short, contrasting sections marked off by double bars make the form easy to follow.

Figure 12. Heller, Tarantelle in A minor, Op. 85, No. 1 (mm. 1-12)

Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

In the opening theme, each group of ascending or descending eight notes should be played with fingers one, two, and three, for the sake of simplicity and consistency (Figure 13). This will allow for more control and stronger accents, when necessary. The left hand
accompaniment consists mostly of tenths. Preferably, this piece should be studied by a pianist who can reach this interval without any strain. Given the tempo of this tarantella, and the quasi staccato performance instruction, a blocked interval would be more appropriate. Unless it can be done imperceptibly, rolling these tenths should be avoided, as it would destroy the character (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Heller, Tarantelle in A minor, Op. 85, No. 1 (mm. 7-18)

Friedrich Kiel—Tarantelle, Op. 38, No. 4 Level 7

German composer Friedrich Kiel wrote music in virtually every major genre, except the symphony and the opera. He is best remembered for his chamber music, which has often been considered equally as great as the music of Brahms.
A rather short piece, the Tarantella, Op. 38, No. 4 lacks both an introduction and a coda. Two contrasting sections are presented, after which the first section is repeated verbatim through the use of the Da Capo al Fine instruction. In the key of G minor, the opening theme has a spicy character. It features frequent alternation between legato and staccato articulation. Many accents and grace notes also give it a zesty character. There are sudden shifts between piano and forte, as well as sforzando markings on the last beat of some measures. The middle section begins in E-flat major and modulates back to G minor near the end. The melody features “running” eighth notes in a stepwise pattern, with many changes of direction. The left-hand accompaniment is much less active than at the beginning of the piece; it consists of chords in which some voices are sustained, while others move in a steady, chorale-like fashion.

The tarantella traits that stand out in this work are the minor tonality coupled with a vivace tempo. Also notable are the frequent leaps in the opening measures (Figure 14) and the rapid, “running” passages in the section that follows (Figure 15).

**Figure 14. Keil, Tarantelle, Op. 38, No. 4 (mm. 1-5)**
Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

The brevity of this piece, along with its simple form and regular phrase structure makes it very easy for a performer to comprehend. The lack of any extreme technical demands makes it accessible to younger or intermediate-level pianists.

In addition to the da capo al fine instruction at the end, some passages in this piece have their own enclosed repeats. Thus, the amount of repetition in this piece can lead to monotony. Throughout most of the composition, Kiel was very specific in regards to dynamics and articulation; however, there are numerous ways that a performer can interpret the piece in order to achieve more variety. Beginning the final eight measures (Figure 16) pianissimo before the crescendo makes it more dramatic. Adding an accelerando in the last few measures follows the performance practice of many tarantellas. Since the piece lacks a coda, these recommendations make for a much more powerful and convincing ending.
Stephen Heller—Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 85, No. 2

Followed by a witty introduction, the first theme of this tarantella is built from simple, stepwise patterns. The left and right hands alternate between melody and accompaniment roles. Occasional accents and sforzandos drive the rhythm forward. The next major section is the key of C minor. This is followed by a reprise of the introductory material, the opening theme, and a pleasant coda. The coda has just enough excitement to make it fun, without being too virtuosic.

The prominent tarantella features of this work are the “skipping” phrases that make up the melody, through rests and repeated notes (Figure 17). The presto tempo and periodic phrasing add to the energy and zest of the piece. Also typical is the instruction poco a poco stringendo at the beginning of the coda.
**Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions**

One of the most challenging sections of this piece is mm. 87-100. The left hand has a series of diminished seven chords, which ascend chromatically (Figure 18). This passage is marked *stringendo*, so following this instruction accurately can be a prohibitive factor, especially depending on the initial tempo taken at the beginning. Since the thumb is so much shorter than the other fingers, it helps for a pianist to move the hand inward, closer to the black keys for all the chords that have a black key as the top note. This allows the thumb to reach this key more easily. These particular chords are indicated by arrows in
Figure 18. This is perhaps the most challenging passage in this entire tarantella; a performer should not begin this piece any faster than they can accurately play the left hand chords in this passage.

Figure 18. Heller, Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 85, No. 2 (mm. 87-98)

At the very end of the coda, the right hand must make a series of progressively large leaps. What makes this even more difficult is that the melody is doubled at the octave (Figure 19). The *ritardando* in measure 200 can help to make these jumps a bit more feasible. The performer should make sure to keep the hands close to the keys and strive to move the wrist laterally, rather than vertically. Also, indicated pedal markings will help maintain the legato tough within each slur.
Felix Mendelssohn—Presto in C major, Op. 102, No. 3

*Lieder ohne Worte* (Songs without Words) is a collection of short, expressive pieces composed by Felix Mendelssohn. The entire collection is divided into eight volumes, each consisting of six pieces. These forty-eight lieder were written and published over a span of sixteen years, and remain among Mendelssohn’s most popular piano works.

The Presto in C major is the third piece from the eighth volume of *Lieder ohne Worte*. The structure of the work is a rondo, with the form: A B A B A Coda. It is extremely brief, with a typical performance lasting just over one minute.
This composition is considered a tarantella because of the 6/8 time signature and the *presto* tempo. The phrases are balanced and periodic. The rhythm is in nearly perpetual motion throughout. In most measures, the melody has a note on every single beat, but in others there are rests on beats two and five. These two features, side by side, seem to shift the character of the tarantella from one that suggests running to one which evokes hopping or skipping. The melody has an abundance of repeated notes, while the accompaniment often features repeated chords (Figure 20).

**Figure 20. Mendelssohn, Presto in C major, Op. 102, No. 3 (mm. 1-12)**

![Sheet music for Mendelssohn's Presto in C major, Op. 102, No. 3, mm. 1-12.](image)

**Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions**

Many pianists play all the eighth notes in this piece *staccato*, except those explicitly connected with slurs. For many, the most challenging aspect of playing this tarantella will be maintaining a soft, *staccato* touch at a *presto* tempo. At such speeds, the most effective way to play the melody quietly and detached is to create the *staccato* with the wrist. The
right wrist should bounce in short spring-like motions for each note, while remaining relatively close to the keys. When the left hand has groups of repeated chords, they can be played with one wrist motion—the first chord of each group of two or three is played as the wrist drops downward. The last chord of each group is played as the wrist rebounds upward. Suggested wrist motion is indicated by arrows in Figure 21. Creating the staccato from the wrist, rather than the fingers, will also help produce an even tone and help to prevent certain notes from sticking out or sounding too loud.

Figure 21. Mendelssohn, Presto in C major, Op. 102, No. 3 (mm. 7-18)

Although Albert Pieczonka has fifty-two known compositions, his music is practically forgotten, with the exception of the Tarantella in A minor, written in 1879. In 1902, this work brought Pieczonka great fame after being published as the featured
composition in the music magazine *The Etude*. This tarantella became an instant favorite because of its simple form and accessibility to average players. It quickly became popular throughout the world, especially in America. Even in the 21st century, this piece continues to be included in classical music anthologies by Alfred Music Publishing, FJH Music Company, and others.

Pieczonka’s constant use of repeated notes in the melody (Figure 22) is the trait that is most typical of a tarantella. Another distinguishing feature is the series of octave leaps that occurs later in the piece (Figure 23).

**Figure 22. Pieczonka, Tarantella in A minor (mm. 10-15)**

---

The form of this tarantella is very straightforward. A dizzying melody in A minor is interrupted by a more songlike section A major. The outer sections are defined by a “skipping” melody, full of repeated notes, scales, and broken octaves. Several unexpected silences add to the drama of this section. In contrast, the middle section abandons the tarantella rhythm, and focuses more on a lyrical duet between the high and low registers. In addition to these sections, the piece is enclosed by a brief, mysterious introduction and a *prestissimo* coda, which features a rapid scale, descending over four octaves.

**Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions**

Repeated notes are a general characteristic of any tarantella. Pieczonka’s Tarantella in A minor has a two-measure passage in which the note ‘E’ is repeated eight times in succession. This passage recurs three more times throughout the piece. There are several
fingering suggestions for this passage (Figure 24). The most simple is to alternate between two fingers. A second option is to use more fingers in alternation. A third option is to always play the repeated notes using the same finger. The wrist should remain light and flexible in all choices.

**Figure 24. Pieczonka, Tarantella in A minor (mm. 17-21)**

The ability of the piano to respond to the key stroke, which varies from instrument to instrument, impacts the performance. With this in mind, it is important for the performer not to begin any faster than the repeated notes can accurately be played. With these two factors in mind, the performer needs to consider more than one fingering option for these passages.

One of the most exciting moments of the piece is mm. 26-51 (Figure 25). This passage introduces a descending figuration in the right hand, which essentially alternates groups of adjacent keys with broken octaves. The first appearance is marked *brillante*, and its recurrence in m. 138 is given the performance instruction *con fuoco*. On one hand, the *presto* tempo makes this passage sounds a lot more difficult than it actually is. At the same time, it does require the pianist to have a certain degree of technical facility in order to
execute it with ease and flair. The alternation of adjacent keys with broken octaves requires a pianist’s hand to change between an open and a closed position (Figure 25). One way a performer can quickly become familiar with the changing hand shapes necessary for this passage is to practice it slowly, playing each of the broken octaves as a blocked interval. Once the pianist is comfortable expanding and contracting the hand every half-measure, then the passage can be played as written, with broken octaves, with the tempo increasing as comfort of the passage increases.

Figure 25. Pieczonka, Tarantella in A minor (mm. 24-38)

After the A minor section ends, the texture increases from two to three voices, and the dynamic level drops from fortissimo to pianissimo—all within the space of one measure (Figure 26). This extreme change in character can be trouble. Although this section is technically easier, it is a struggle to achieve the correct balance in the dense texture. The
most important lines are the outside voices; the eighth notes in the middle voice should be played quietly. An ideal way to master this is to simply play each broken harmony in the right hand as a blocked chord, always emphasizing the top note. Another option is to play through this section, leaving out the middle voice altogether, until the counterpoint between the outer voices is better understood. Regardless of which alternative is taken, a performer can use this “simplified” version to practice shaping each phrase before playing the section as written.

Figure 26. Pieczonka, Tarantella in A minor (mm. 64-73)

Stephen Heller—Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87

Heller’s dedication for this tarantella was to Madame Wilhelmine Szarvady. An ominous introduction winds its way through forty-five measures before the key of E minor is firmly established and the first thematic material appears. The melody winds its way up and down an E minor scale, while the accompaniment punctuates steady, blocked chords.
This is quite a lengthy tarantella, 632 measures, with 8 different contrasting sections. The opening theme (Figure 27) recurs several more times throughout the work, with slight variations.

Typical “running” rhythms associated with the tarantella are seen in the opening theme. The melody is mostly stepwise, while occasional leaps outline notes of the tonic triad (Figure 27). The third section uses a lot more rests, creating more of a “skipping” rhythm (Figure 28).

**Figure 27. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 44-49)**

![Figure 27. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 44-49)](image)

**Figure 28. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 93-98)**

![Figure 28. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 93-98)](image)
Throughout this piece, the time signature of 2/4 is used, together with triplets, to mimic the feel of a 6/8 tarantella. During the extended passage in mm. 364-492, the time signature switches from 2/4 to 3/8. Here every two measures of 3/8 sounds like the equivalent of one measure of 6/8 in a usual tarantella (Figure 29). Since the eighth note is the pulse here, rather than the quarter note as before, this section has a slower tempo, for more contrast.

**Figure 29. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 366-81)**

![Musical notation](image)

**Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions**

In the introduction to this tarantella, the left hand has several sustained chords that require the hands to cross. The faster notes of the right hand actually fall in between the two notes of the left hand, causing the hands to be positioned very closely. Depending on
what is easier, some pianists might opt to play the left hand above and the right hand below. Others might find the opposite to be more comfortable. In either case, one hand should play on tall, extended fingers while the other hand and wrist is kept low. An alternate fingering for the right hand is shown in Figure 30.

**Figure 30. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 1-12)**

Measure 485 marks the beginning of a transitional passage leading up to the final recurrence of the opening melody. The primary feature of this passage is the sequence of broken diminished seventh chords in the right hand. The first note of each group of sixteenth notes is double-stemmed, and held throughout the entire measure. This same sustained pitch is also present in the highest voice of the left hand in each measure. A
suggested fingering has been given in Figure 31, beginning each group of sixteenth notes with the fifth finger.

**Figure 31. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 485-92)**

![Musical notation for Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 87 (mm. 485-92)](image)

**Stephen Heller—Tarantelle in G major, Op. 137, No. 2 Level 10**

The overall structure of this tarantella is ternary, with a short introduction and a two-part coda. The first theme of the piece features a very light texture, syncopated rhythms, and a mix of *staccato* and *legato* articulations.

The middle section, in E-flat major is in stark contrast to the beginning. It dispenses with the tarantella traits, and takes on a more lyrical, sustained quality. The texture is akin to that of a Chopin nocturne—a single line melody in the right hand is accompanied by
broken arpeggios in the left hand. The melodic line features hemiola in some places and is occasionally ornamented with grace notes. Before returning to the primary theme, the tarantella has a transition which consists of long scale passages, first in the left hand, then in the right hand, and finally in both hands at once.

Although distinctive rhythms of the tarantella are found throughout this work, they are not as apparent in the first theme as they are in later sections. The arpeggio figures found early in the piece contain ties across the barline. This takes away the emphasis of the downbeat and creates syncopation (Figure 32). There are, however, frequent leaps involved. In measure 77, at the section marked *molto animato*, the character of the tarantella dance is more obvious, complete with repeated notes, rests, and a melody which moves mostly in a stepwise manner (Figure 33). The *sforzando* accents in both of these segments add to the expected rhythmic anxiety expected in a tarantella.

**Figure 32. Heller, Tarantelle in G major, Op. 137, No. 2 (mm. 13-24)**

![Image of musical notation](image-url)
Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

Occurring twice in this tarantella, the passage in mm. 29-44 (Figure 34) has several problematic issues. The left hand and right hand both have two independent voices. The upper voice moves more rapidly, and is syncopated through the use of ties. The lower voice moves more slowly, and sometimes consists of two pitches. In order to achieve a smooth, connected melodic line, many finger substitutions must be made in both hands, simultaneously. Light use of the pedal can also help create a legato line in this passage.
Stephen Heller—Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 137, No. 1  

On a large scale, this tarantella is in ternary form. There are three large sections and a coda. The outer sections of the ternary structure each contain three distinct thematic areas, all in the key of E minor. The central section and the coda are both preceded by transitional passages, in which a prominent feature is the many pairs of thirty-second notes.

The first musical material presented is a series of “question and answer” phrases, which begin with declamatory chords. Later sections of the piece match more closely with the molto vivace performance instruction given by the composer. The central section, in C major, best displays the traits of a typical tarantella. It includes both “skipping” rhythms (Figure 35) and “running” passages (Figure 36). The sequence established in the treble is a
simple embellishment of a scale; this pattern along with the crescendo indications creates lots of excitement and vitality in this passage.

**Figure 35. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 137, No. 1 (mm. 107-12)**

![Figure 35](image)

**Figure 36. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 137, No. 1 (mm. 119-31)**

![Figure 36](image)
Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

Strangely, this tarantella is marked from the beginning with the time signatures 6/8 and 2/4 side by side (Figure 37). While the majority of the piece is written in 6/8 time, there are 2/4 measures scattered throughout, creating rhythmic variety. Whenever these meter shifts occur, the dotted half note pulse from the 6/8 measures should be made equal to the quarter note pulse in the 2/4 measures (Figure 38). Because the overall pulse is sometimes divided into three, and sometimes two equal parts, it is very important in this piece for the performer to “feel” the larger beats.

Figure 37. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 137, No. 1 (mm. 1-5)

![Allegro molto vivace](Image)

Figure 38. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 137, No. 1 (mm. 62-68)

![Measures in 6/8 time and 2/4 time](Image)
The coda of this tarantella is challenging in several ways. First, it alternates contrary motion with parallel motion between the treble and bass. Next, it alternates octave leaps in each hand with stepwise movement. Finally, it involves double thirds in both hands simultaneously (Figure 39). To play this passage, a pianist’s hands must assume several different positions very quickly and make rather large leaps between measures. This can be more easily done by cutting the last note of each measure short. If these eighth notes are played as sixteenth notes followed by sixteenth rests, it gives the hands more time to assume the next position. These short gaps in the sound actually fall right in line with Heller’s phrasing, which has a separate slur for each measure.

Figure 39. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 137, No. 1 (mm. 309-21)
Although his music is relatively little known, Henrique Oswald has been referred to as “the most accomplished Brazilian composer before Heitor Villa-Lobos.”\textsuperscript{27} He was born and died in Rio de Janeiro, but he spent thirty years of his life in Florence, Italy. Oswald composed many piano and chamber works, and towards the end of his life he wrote mainly sacred and organ pieces. The influence of Debussy and Fauré can be heard throughout his compositions.\textsuperscript{28}

The Tarantella in B minor is the third piece from \textit{Six Pieces}, Op. 14. The opening melody alternates measures of constant eighth notes with measures of staccato quarter notes and eight notes (Figure 40). This combines the “running” and “skipping” rhythms common in tarantellas. Many tarantellas use melodies with constant repeated notes. Some, however, use melodies in which notes alternate with a note a step above (Figure 41). This has a similar effect.

Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

Technically, this tarantella is only moderately difficult. The right-hand figuration in mm. 28-31 (Figure 42) is one that occurs several times throughout the piece. The treble register is expanded to two voices—the lower voice in dotted quarter notes, and the upper voice, a steady stream of eighth notes. Because the thumbs are required to play the bottom voice, this leaves the weaker fingers, four and five, to play the majority of the fast passagework. Fingering suggestions have been given for the passage in mm. 28-31 (Figure
42) and the similar passage in mm. 36-39 (Figure 43). These recommendations utilize the third finger whenever possible.

Figure 42. Oswald, Tarantella, Op. 14, No. 3 (mm. 28-31)

![Image of musical notation]

Figure 43. Oswald, Tarantella, Op. 14, No. 3 (mm. 36-39)

![Image of musical notation]

One of the most striking features about this piece is its use of syncopation. The music begins with an anacrusis and each phrase begins on the second half of the measure. Although this half of the measure is considered the “weak beat,” it is frequently emphasized
either through a *sforzando* accent (Figure 44). At other times, the “weak beat” is emphasized through prominent harmonic element, such as the lowest note of a broken chord. Together, these characteristics seem to obscure the pulse.

**Figure 44. Oswald, Tarantella, Op. 14, No. 3 (mm. 1-12)**

The accent patterns would seem to be more logical if the barlines were all shifted by half a measure—turning the “strong beats” into “weak beats,” and vice versa. Since the composer did not bar the music in this manner, it is unlikely that he intended it to sound that way. Thus, in performing this piece, the pianist must be careful to make the accents come across as syncopations, rather than the “normal” strong pulses. To help ensure this, a
slight emphasis can be given to the downbeat of each measure, even if not explicitly stated.

This implied emphasis is illustrated with arrows in Figure 45.

**Figure 45. Oswald, Tarantella, Op. 14, No. 3 (mm. 63-72)**

![Musical notation]

**Nikolai Rubinstein—Tarantella in G minor, Op. 14**  

Throughout his career, Nikolai Rubinstein was celebrated more for his performing than he was for his composition. Although he did not write much music for piano, the Tarantella in G minor is perhaps one of his most well-known works.

Several common features of the tarantella genre are found in this work, including the minor key and fast tempo. Many passages feature perpetual motion in both the melody and accompaniment lines (Figure 46). Other passages display the usual “skipping” rhythm in conjunction with repeated notes or octaves (Figure 47).
The long, ominous introduction winds its way through several different tonal centers, accompanied by several moments of silence. When the main theme begins, it consists of short phrases, which begin in the middle of the measure on the weak beat. Broken chords in the bass accompany the melody. In some sections of the work, the texture
thickens, as one or both hands plays chords or octaves. The middle section, in G major, is a lot less interesting musically than the opening section. Most phrases are simply stepwise embellishments of the tonic and dominant harmonies. The most fascinating moment happens in m. 171, when there is a sudden shift to A-flat major. Measure 187 marks the beginning of a passage that is a paraphrase of the introduction. At m. 215, the turmoil of the piece is interrupted by a hushed, improvisatory passage. Following this is the return of the opening theme and a vibrant coda in G major.

**Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions**

In the middle of the work is a contrasting slow section, marked *Lento, capriccioso* (Figure 48). It consists of four lament-like phrases, followed by a Lisztian cadenza. Like a waterfall, this energetic passage flourishes downward and then it rises back upwards with an unexpected Neapolitan harmony (Figure 48). The descending portion of this the passage is broken into somewhat awkward groupings of five beats. This pattern is repeated several times exactly, as it makes its downward plunge over a span of five octaves. In order to play this effortlessly, it is important to decide on a consistent fingering for each hand. After practicing this passage several times over one octave, it should then be practiced over two octaves, so that the hands can master the transition from one set down to the next. Finally, the repetitions of the pattern can gradually increase to cover three, four, and then the full five octaves.
Rubinstein offers an alternate version for the passage in mm. 282-88 (Figure 49). This ossia adds a middle voice to the texture, through a series of eighth notes on the off beats. Although it adds more color to the passage, it adds a great amount of difficulty. Should a performer opt to play this more difficult version, the left hand must now perform one- and sometimes two-octave leaps in the space of just one beat. In addition to shifting registers rapidly, the left hand must also quickly conform to a new shape, as it alternates between playing harmonic thirds, and either dominant seventh chords or octaves.
Ludwig van Beethoven—Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 31, No. 3 (IV)  

Beethoven’s Opus 31 sonata is unusual in that it does not contain a slow movement. The fourth and final movement is the fastest of all, having the tempo indication “presto con fuoco,” or “very fast, with fire.” Although pianist and lecturer Denis Matthews refers to this movement as a “‘hunting’ finale,” others interpret it as a tarantella.\(^{29}\)

In the first theme of this piece, several features typical of a tarantella are immediately recognizable. The presto con fuoco tempo seems even more energetic because of the constant eighth notes in the left hand. Beginning in measure 11, the right hand contains numerous pairs of repeated notes. The melody also uses characteristic tarantella rhythms, in which two-note slurs highlight the strong beats of each measure (Figure 50).

Figure 50. Beethoven, Sonata in E-flat major, Op. 31, No. 3 (IV) (mm. 1-23)

Presto con fuoco.

Typical of a third movement, this tarantella is in sonata allegro form. The movement opens with the first theme in E-flat major, and modulates to the dominant key, as expected, for the second theme. The development section begins in G-flat major. Then there is an enharmonic shift to F-sharp major, which is followed by a passage B minor and a series of brief episodes in other keys.

As typical of a sonata allegro movement, the recapitulation recalls the opening theme in the tonic key. Although one would expect the second theme to also return in the tonic key, Beethoven instead presents it in G-flat major. As the recapitulation seems to
draw to a close in this key, it suddenly modulates to the relative minor, E-flat minor, and then leads to a sixteen-measure transition built on a B-flat seven chord.

This dominant harmony is resolved by a short coda, which is built from fragments of the opening theme. In this final iteration, the hands reverse roles—the left hand plays the melody, while the right hand takes over the broken-chord accompaniment. In the coda, the perpetual motion of this movement is interrupted by two fermatas, after which the tempo resumes, for an exciting ending.

Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

From the onset, and for the majority of the piece, the left hand has a perpetual pattern of eighth notes, either as broken chords or in scalar passages. In the main theme, the tarantella rhythm is encompassed in the right hand, while the left hand crosses over the right, creating multiple layers of rhythm (Figure 51). The right hand should maintain a low wrist, so the left hand has plenty of room as it leaps back and forth over the right.
There are some passages in which the right hand has syncopated figures that avoid the downbeat (Figure 52). The quarter and eighth rests in the right hand add rhythmic variety to the music, but can cause coordination problems between the hands. In practicing and performing this passage, there is often a tendency to accent the last note in each right-hand group—which occurs on beat six. This can leave both the performer and the listener confused as to where the beat is. To avoid making these unintentional accents, a pianist should gradually lift the wrist through each group of notes. In doing so, less weight is directed through the hands and fingers on the last few notes, resulting in a lighter touch.
Also, a slight emphasis of the downbeat, which occurs in the left hand, can help to keep the pulse unmistakable.

**Figure 52. Beethoven, Sonata in E-flat major, Op. 31, No. 3 (IV) (mm. 217-28)**

![Musical notation]

**Stephen Heller—Tarantelle in E-flat minor, Op. 61**

Heller dedicated the Tarantelle, Op. 61 to his friend Joseph Fiscoff. The piece begins in E-flat minor, but closes in E-flat major. This tarantella is written in 2/4, using triplets to mimic the feel of a compound meter. For the coda, the time signature changes to an explicit 6/8.

In this tarantella, scalar passages, some with repeated notes, are a prominent feature. Although the melodic lines employ typical tarantella rhythms, occasional ties across the barlines allow for syncopation and variety. The *vivace* tempo is also a very
common of a typical tarantella (Figure 53). Heller writes some passages with repeated chords, rests, melodic leaps, and the resulting “skipping” rhythm (Figure 54).

Figure 53. Heller, Tarantelle in E-flat minor, Op. 61 (mm. 1-11)
Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

In mm. 273-81, the pianist is presented with a brilliant passage of arpeggios. Both hands weave up and down in parallel through a G-flat major chord, separated by an octave. (Figure 55). Since this triad consists of all black keys, the fingers can easily slip off and play wrong notes. Adding to the difficulty is the fast tempo and occasional sforzando accents. Accuracy can be achieved by playing with flattened fingers.
Friedrich Kiel—Tarantelle, Op. 27

Kiel’s Tarantelle, Op. 27 has much in common with Chopin’s Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 43. Both have a *presto* tempo, are in the key of A-flat major, have joyful moods, and are in rondo form. The introduction of this work begins very softly and but grows to a *fortissimo* within eight measures. The music abruptly quiets, as the opening theme begins. Rather than a simple ternary structure, there are numerous contrasting sections recurring throughout the piece. These sections are relatively short, most being composed of eight-measure units. Perhaps for variety, some sections are six or eighteen measures long. Similar to the technique used in Chopin’s tarantella, adjacent sections are generally at opposite extremes of the dynamic range.
Even the coda of this tarantella has similarities with Chopin’s work. In his coda, Chopin writes “sempre più animato e crescendo” (Figure 68). It begins very softly, building steadily to a thunderous ending, with strong accents along the way. Creating a similar effect, Kiel’s coda is marked prestissimo with the additional instruction stringendo al fine (Figure 57). There are also occasional reminders of crescendo or più crescendo. A very striking feature of this coda is the measures where the time signature shifts from 6/8 to 2/4. This change, along with the constant eight-note pulse creates a hemiola. The unexpected meter changes, along with sforzando accents on weak beats, create a great amount of rhythmic drive and vitality, as well as a spectacular ending.

The upper notes of the broken octaves in the first theme (Figure 56) have the same rhythmic effect as repeated notes separated by rests in many other tarantellas. The general “skipping” rhythm is most noticeable in the coda (Figure 57), which also exhibits another common trait of tarantellas, an increase in speed near the end of the work.

Figure 56. Keil, Tarantelle, Op. 27 (mm. 7-12)
Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

The broken octaves in the right hand are one of the most distinguishing features of the opening theme (Figure 58). The challenge lies in the ability to play them softly at a fast tempo while maintaining a legato touch. While a little pedal is helpful, too much could negate the staccato articulation of the chords in the left hand. A more ideal solution would be to alternate use of finger five and four on the upper Cs and Bs, respectively.
The passage in mm. 32-40 (Figure 59) is one of the most difficult in the piece. The right hand consists of two voices, a lyrical upper melody joined by a descending countermelody. For most pianists to achieve an ideal balance and legato touch, the right hand will likely require some unusual fingering. The large left hand leaps can be easily missed. Lastly, the dynamics must be mastered, which include crescendos, diminuendos, and sforzandos on the last beat of some measures.
Gioachino Rossini—Impromptu Tarantellisé

During the 19th century, Gioachino Rossini was considered by many to be the most famous composer alive, overshadowing even the reputation of Beethoven. Mostly remembered for his thirty-nine operas, Rossini also composed choral, vocal, and instrumental music. He gathered a collection pieces for voice and solo piano written between 1857 and 1868 and compiled them into thirteen volumes, known as Péchés de vieillesse. This collection remained unpublished until the 1950s. The Impromptu Tarantellisé is found within Album pour piano, violon, violoncello, harmonium et cor, the

---

ninth volume of the collection. As the title implies, this work is somewhat improvisatory in nature, but still has a very clear structure.

Although the *andantino mosso* tempo indication is unusual, the syncopated rhythm in the introduction (Figure 60) is very distinctive of the tarantella genre. The *animato* section displays another common feature of tarantella melodies, the alternation of notes with adjacent notes a step above or below (Figure 61).

**Figure 60. Rossini, *Impromptu Tarantellisé* (mm. 1-4)**
Overall, this tarantella mimics the formal structure and tonal plan of a sonata allegro movement, but it lacks a development section. After a long introduction, the primary theme is introduced in the key of F major, followed by a transition. The secondary and closing themes are then introduced, in the dominant key, C major.

Instead of a development section, the introductory material returns, in a more complex variation. The main theme is then recalled, incorporating triplet rhythms into its original configuration. The transition, secondary, and closing themes all recur as originally heard, but they remain in the key of F major. This piece is completed by an extended coda, which is characterized by a buildup of rhythmic and dynamic intensity.
While “running” and “skipping” rhythms can be heard in the introduction and just about every theme and transitional passage, they are oddly absent from the first theme. The opening melody has a very sweet, lyrical style (Figure 62). The texture is similar to what would be found in one of Felix Mendelssohn’s Songs without Words.

**Figure 62. Rossini, Impromptu Tarantellisé (mm. 26-30)**

![Sheet music](image)

**Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions**

“Skipping” rhythms in the right hand and a broken-chord accompaniment in the left hand mark the second theme of this tarantella (Figure 63). Each time this theme occurs, the right hand is first presented in single notes, and then the same melody is repeated, in octaves. These octaves must be played just as smoothly and seamlessly as the unison line that came before. One possible suggestion for maintaining a legato line, especially in the highest voice, is to use the thumb together with the fifth, fourth, and third fingers, in alternation (Figure 63). Pianists with larger hands have an advantage if they can comfortably make these stretches.
The coda ushers in several challenges of its own. As in most tarantellas, there is a gradual increase in speed—this particular coda is marked *stringendo a poco a poco* (Figure 64). The coda is rhythmically saturated, as constant sixteenth-note triplets create perpetual motion for an extended amount of time. Lastly, it contains many sequential passages, arpeggios, and other figurations that were not prevalent in the main body of the work. At the very beginning of the coda, the left and right hands play in strict contrary motion. Within each group of notes, the intervals created between the hands become smaller with each successive beat. The hands start off far apart, and then draw together, as close as a second. Within each slur, the wrists should rotate towards each other, as indicated by arrows in Figure 64. Not only will rotation of the wrists assist in maintaining coordination and control of the hands, but it will also help to prevent tension and fatigue.
Frédéric Chopin—Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 43

Chopin’s Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 43 was published in 1841. Although he had visited Italy for a short time in 1839, it is unlikely that the journey influenced this composition. According to Chopin’s letters, the primary source of inspiration was his admiration of Rossini’s La Danza, which was written just six years before. In a letter to his friend Fontana, dated 1841, Chopin writes:

“I send you the Tarantella. Please to copy it, but first go to Schlesinger, or better still to Troupenas, and see the collection of Rossini’s songs published by him. In it there is a Tarantella in F. I do not know whether it is
written in 6/8 or 12/8 time. As to my composition, it does not matter which way it is written, but I should prefer it to be like Rossini’s.”

*La Danza* was one of many songs which Rossini composed for weekly *soirées* at his home. It is a virtuoso piece, written for a tenor. The text of the song speaks of dancing, leaping, turning, and spinning. Like many instrumental tarantellas, it has several sections, with contrasting moods and ideas. Chopin’s composition features this same variety of material. Throughout the work Chopin engages listeners through a constant fluctuation of dynamics, especially the *subito pianos* and *fortes*.

From the very beginning of this composition, the typical pairs of repeated notes are obvious in the melody. Quarter notes and eighth notes are paired into two-note slurs; in these pairs, each eighth note has the effect of a pick-up to one of the strong beats. Also as in most tarantellas, Chopin gives this work a fast tempo marking and a rapid, continuously moving accompaniment pattern (Figure 65).

---

The form of this piece can best be understood as a rondo. In addition to the introduction and coda, there are eight distinct sections, three that reappear later in the piece. In summary, the overall structure of the work is as follows: Introduction (mm. 1-3), A (mm. 4-19), B (mm. 20-51), C (mm. 52-67), D (mm. 68-83), E (mm. 84-115), F (mm. 116-131), E (mm. 132-147), G (mm. 148-163), H (mm. 164-179), A’ (mm. 180-195), B’ (mm. 196-227), Coda (mm. 228-270). Every section is constructed from periodic phrases of even length, resulting in sections that are sixteen measures long. The only exceptions to this are section B and the first statement of section E; in these instances, the material of the first sixteen measures is essentially repeated, creating a thirty-two-measure section.
In the book *Chopin: A Graded Practical Guide*, Eleanor Bailie labels this work “very advanced,” and warns those who would study the piece of the technical and interpretive challenges that will be encountered.34

**Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions**

One challenge of this tarantella is when multiple voices which occur in the right hand part. In the second appearance of the opening theme (Figure 66), the right hand is slightly varied from the way it was heard at the beginning. There are two voices—one that is sustained with notes tied across barlines, and another that consists of octave leaps, both above and below the inner voice.

**Figure 66. Chopin, Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 43 (mm. 180-191)**

In order to play the inner voice smoothly, and without restriking the tied notes, quick finger substitutions are necessary. At the same time, the two-note slurs of the outer

---

voice must be observed in order to preserve the distinct rhythmic character of the tarantella. The rapid tempo of the piece makes this extremely difficult.

When the second theme reappears, just before the coda, Chopin varies it from the way it was originally presented (Figure 67). The right hand contains two separate voices—the higher voice, a pedal point on an E-flat, and the lower voice, a descending, sequential pattern of eighth notes. Because of this figuration, the fingers of the right hand must gradually spread farther and farther apart in mm. 204-207. As the lower voice descends, it becomes nearly impossible to keep it legato. Most pianists will logically play the top E-flat with the fifth finger—and because of the large stretch, most of the lower notes can only be reached with the thumb. In the excerpt below, taken from the G. Henle Verlag edition of this piece, Hans-Martin Theopold suggests using the thumb, first two, and then three times in succession.35 This is an extremely tricky maneuver, both because of the swift tempo, and the inherent difficulty of playing black keys with the thumb. For pianists with average-sized hands, there seems to be no other solution.

Figure 67. Chopin, Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 43 (mm. 204-07)

---

There are many large chords in this piece, which can present quite a problem for performers with smaller hands. In one instance, there are four-note blocked chords that span the range of a 10th. In the coda, the left hand must play a series of broken chords built from progressively larger intervals (Figure 68). The largest of these spans the range of a 12th—from F-flat up to C-flat—requiring the left hand to expand quickly.

Figure 68. Chopin, Tarantelle in A-flat major, Op. 43 (mm. 226-38)

Regardless of the size of the hand, these chords can be played easily if the pianist maintains a loose, free wrist. Using the wrist as a pivot, the left hand should constantly rotate from left to right—aiming for the bottom and top notes of each broken chord with the fifth finger and the thumb, respectively.

Like many other of Chopin’s compositions, the coda of this piece is very technically demanding. Both hands pound out the rhythm incessantly, with only two places for a quick “breath”—and that only an eighth rest. The constant motion requires a great amount of
physical endurance. For this reason, it is best if the performer drops to pianissimo at the beginning of the coda and gradually builds to the triple forte at the end. If the crescendo is begun too early, the performer will run the risk of not having enough stamina to make it to the end. Chopin gives the performance instruction “sempre più animato e crescendo” for the coda; in keeping with the tradition of the tarantella, many performers may interpret the animato as an accelerando. They must be careful not to take the tempo faster than they can accurately play the sequence of diminished seventh chords on the last page, which requires a pianist’s hands to assume some rather awkward positions.

Claude Debussy—Danse (Tarantelle styrienne) Level 13

Claude Debussy composed Danse in 1890, with the subtitle Tarantelle styrienne. In this tarantella, the composer uses many clever methods to the usual rhythmic patterns associated with the genre. Although it is written in 6/8 time, many measures actually have the emphasis of a 3/4 time and are divided into three pulses, rather than two. In listening to a performance of this work, most listeners would not recognize it as a tarantella at all.

In rondo form, Danse consists of several sections, each with contrasting keys and themes. The opening section (Figure 69) incorporates so much syncopation that it sounds more like a triple-meter dance, with an occasional hint of 6/8 time. This theme, which is returns two more times in the piece, is characterized by the use of hemiola, and accompaniment chords on the offbeats. Within this opening theme, the left and right hands reverse melody and accompaniment roles several times.
The contrasting episodes sound much more like a typical tarantella. These sections, unlike the opening, employ much more use of repeated notes (Figure 70). Later sections in this piece also better resemble a typical tarantella in terms of rhythm. The accompaniment in mm. 239-70 consists of uninterrupted eighth notes. Also, there are clearly two pulses per measure and syncopation becomes the exception, rather than the norm (Figure 71).
Figure 70. Debussy, *Danse*, (mm. 61-72)

Figure 71. Debussy, *Danse*, (mm. 247-58)
Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

Amid an already busy accompaniment, the left hand must play sandwiched between the right hand octaves in mm. 265-66. This is most effectively played with the left hand using fingers four and two, and positioned below the right hand (Figure 72).

Figure 72. Debussy, Danse, (mm. 265-70)

When the right hand takes over the melody in the opening theme, the left hand has a string of large chords on every eighth note beat. The challenging feat here is to keep this thick accompaniment at a steady tempo, yet softer than the melody. This can be accomplished by playing with a light, flexible wrist and dropping the wrist slightly into each group of three chords. Suggested wrist motion is indicated by arrows in Figure 73.
Stephen Heller—Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 53

Heller wrote the Tarantelle, Op. 53 for his friend, Lindsay Sloper. In the opening theme (Figure 74), the typical character of a tarantella is easy to see. The right hand has several sets of repeated notes, as well as typical eighth rests on beats two and five. The left hand provides harmonic and rhythmic support through broken arpeggios. This theme returns several times throughout the work, each time slightly varied and slightly more difficult to play.
In a rondo form, this piece is composed of many smaller sections, which are separated in the score by double bars or repeat signs. Each section has a contrasting mood and key. By the time the coda arrives, the music has shifted to an E major tonality, and ends with a majestic flair. This piece involves some very virtuosic writing. Quick arpeggios in the left hand often span more than an octave, while flighty passages in the right hand often continue for several systems without pause. In the last half of the work is an entire section in which Heller sets the right hand against the left in a two-against-three rhythmic pattern. There is even an unusual transitional passage, in which the left hand is written in 6/8 time, while the right hand is notated in 2/4 (Figure 75).
Figure 75. Heller, Tarantelle in E minor, Op. 53 (mm. 471-74)

Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

This tarantella contains many large chords in the left hand, often appearing one right after the other. The chords in mm. 169-175 require the largest stretches in the piece (Figure 76). One chord in particular, on the downbeat of m. 174, has a span of a 12th—from D up to A. This interval is a considerable stretch in itself, and the other two notes in the middle only make the task more difficult. Since these chords are indicated to be arpeggiated, a sweeping motion of the wrist will help get the fingers into place quickly. Heller does not indicate any pedal markings on largest of the two chords in this passage. Certainly, even pianists with large hands would need to use pedal here, in order to help sustain the tied notes.
One of the many exciting climaxes in this tarantella is preceded by a measured trill, at mm. 194-200 (Figure 77). What makes this trill difficult to play is that every other note is doubled at the octave. Since the left hand is not able to assist in playing this figure, a performer must choose a right-hand fingerling that works well. Some suggestions are to trill the upper notes with fingers three and four, or fingers four and five, and play the bottom notes with the thumb. A more ideal suggestion, assuming a pianist’s hands are big enough to make the stretch, is to trill the upper notes with fingers three and five. This will eliminate the need to use the fourth finger, which is the most difficult to control.
Carl Maria von Weber—Sonata in E Minor, Op. 70 (IV)  

Carl Maria von Weber made great contributions to the history of music, especially his influence in the development of the German Romantic Opera. Aside from operas, most of his music included the orchestra as a major component, including symphonies, vocal works, and concertos. His music for solo piano includes sonatas, concertos, character pieces, and programmatic works.

Weber’s Sonata in E minor, Op. 70, the last of his four piano sonatas, has a tarantella as its final movement. The last movement is explicitly titled “Finale: La Tarantella.” It is notated with a time signature of 2/4, using triplets and dotted rhythms to recreate typical tarantella rhythms (See earlier Figure 2). To the ear, it sounds no different than if it had been written in 6/8 time (See earlier Figure 3). Additionally, this sonata can be classified as
a tarantella because of characteristic features, such neighbor note figures and “skipping” rhythms (Figure 78). It is also in a minor key, with a prestissimo tempo.

**Figure 78. Weber, Sonata in E minor, Op. 70 (IV) (mm. 1-13)**

This movement has characteristics of both a sonata and a rondo. Like a sonata, it presents two contrasting themes in different keys, which both appear later in the tonic key. Like a rondo, the first theme recurs many times throughout the piece in many different ways: at different dynamic levels, in different registers, doubled at the octave, or in the major rather than the minor mode.

**Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions**

Because of the many complicated figurations, those without a well-developed technique should not attempt performance of this tarantella. The prestissimo tempo of this piece allows for countless flighty passages, with very few moments for the performer’s
hands and arms to take a brief rest. A substantial amount of endurance is a needed in order to master this work.

Measures 116-23 contain an awkward figuration for the left hand. The thumb and index finger oscillate between a C and B, which, at this tempo, results in a measured trill (Figure 79). At the same time, the fifth finger must play long, sustained Cs, an octave below. This is a very big stretch, and nearly impossible for pianists with small hands. Excess use of the pedal should be avoided; only a little is needed, in order to help make the right hand slurs smooth. While practicing, emphasize the strong beats of the measure, as indicated by the arrows in Figure 79. Next make only one accent per measure, and then only accent the first beat of every other measure. Finally, the passage can be played as written, without any accents.

Figure 79. Weber, Sonata in E minor, Op. 70 (IV) (mm. 115-21)

In the right hand, double thirds occur regularly throughout the piece, most frequently in mm. 305-23. In these measures, they are presented both ascending and descending, and with both staccato and legato articulations. Several different fingering options should be considered, to fit each situation. Some possible fingering choices are
given in Figure 80. In general, using adjacent fingers for each pair of thirds will result in a loss of control—especially given the extreme dynamic and tempo.

Figure 80. Weber, Sonata in E minor, Op. 70 (IV) (mm. 300-327)

Gioachino Rossini—Tarantelle pur Sang (avec traversée la Procession) Level 14

Tarantelle pur Sang is a composition contained in Album de château, the eighth volume in Rossini’s Péchés de vieillesse. The full title, Tarantelle pur Sang (avec traversée la Procession), essentially means “Full-Blooded Tarantula (crossing with the procession).”
Although most tarantellas are in minor keys, Rossini’s *Tarantelle pur Sang* still exhibits many characteristics of the genre. After the introduction, the first theme exhibits perpetual motion in both the melody and accompaniment (Figure 81). Later themes display the typical “skipping” rhythm through the use of repeated chords (Figure 82).

**Figure 81. Rossini, *Tarantelle pur Sang* (mm. 33-45)**
As the name suggests, the furious rhythms of the tarantella are juxtaposed with a tranquil procession. The tarantella is actually interrupted by the procession twice—once on the way to its destination and again on its return. This is indicated in the score by *Traversée la Procession* (Figure 83) and *Retour de la Procession*, respectively. In both instances, the procession begins and ends with a series of accented downbeats on a single note, middle C. The term *clochette* in the score (Figure 83) suggests that these accents should mimic the ringing of a bell. The processional theme has the hymn-like texture of a chorale and a solemn mood. Based on these qualities, one can assume that the procession was en route to a funeral or burial, although this is not explicitly stated.
Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

With a length of just over 600 measures, the *Tarantelle pur Sang* has plenty of demanding passages that require dexterity and endurance. One of the most difficult passages involves measures of descending double thirds alternating with measures of descending double sixths in the right hand (Figure 84). This leads directly into an ascending scale, in parallel octaves, in both hands. This entire passage must be played with a gradual crescendo. In these eight measures, there are no rests in the treble clef, which means the right hand only has a fraction of a second to conform to the shapes necessary to
play thirds, then sixths, then octaves. A pianist might instinctively think to play these
double thirds and double sixths using alternating fingers, but using the same fingering for
each group will make it easier to maintain the staccato touch. Also, keeping the wrist light
as it moves laterally will allow for greater speed without tension in the hands or forearms.

**Figure 84. Rossini, *Tarantelle pur Sang* (mm. 563-73)**

![Musical notation](image)

Each time it occurs, the transitional passage leading to the “Procession” section is
accompanied by a decrease in volume. After the *fortissimo* accents on middle C, the score
indicates *p*, *pp*, and *ppp* in succession. It may seem natural for a performer to couple this
gradual change of dynamics with a gradual change in tempo; however, Rossini indicates
that an exact tempo change should take place (Figure 85). Through a metric modulation, in
which the dotted quarter note pulse becomes a dotted half note, tempo is cut precisely in
half. Once the procession has passed, this process is reversed (the dotted half note pulse

92
becomes a dotted quarter note), and the original tempo resumes. Musically, these strict tempo changes are much more effective and exciting than employing _ritardando_ or _accelerando._

**Figure 85. Rossini, *Tarantelle pur Sang* (mm. 154-57; 203-06)**

Franz Schubert—Sonata in C Minor, D. 958 (IV)  

Schubert’s Sonata in C minor was completed in September 1828, just a few weeks before his death. The final movement is the longest of the four, having over 700 measures.

This lively work in C minor has the distinctive sound of a tarantella right from the beginning. The pairs of repeated notes in the melody (Figure 86) are prominent throughout the majority of the piece. This repeated figures and “skipping” rhythms are also present in chords, and not just single notes (Figure 87).

---

The structure of this movement can be viewed as a seven-part rondo, but the first expected return of the main theme is omitted, resulting in the form: A B C A B A. One would expect the A theme to return before the presenting the C theme. Schubert may have purposely left out this rather long theme because another repetition would seem unbearable.\(^{37}\) The mysterious opening theme (Figure 88) has a very light texture: a breathy, winding melody over a simple, broken-chord accompaniment. The periodic phrasing and dynamic buildup leads to a somewhat predictable point of arrival.

\(^{37}\) Dahlhaus, 74.
after every eight measures, namely, a half cadence and a perfect authentic cadence (Figure 88).

**Figure 88. Schubert, Sonata in C minor, D. 958 (IV) (mm. 1-20)**

The C theme represents the most lyrical section in the movement. It is essentially a transformation of the opening theme. The rhythm is less jagged, and the melodic contour is essentially the same, with the addition of one note.\(^{38}\) This movement is very chromatic in nature. Although the main theme is in C minor, there are extended passages in C-sharp minor and B major. There are several passages in which the music modulates frequently by thirds. In the B theme, for instance, there is a sequence which begins in A minor, goes through C minor, finally ends up in E-flat minor.

\(^{38}\) Dahlhaus, 71.
Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

Several difficulties are presented in within the B theme alone. First, the “skipping” rhythm of the tarantella is sounded incessantly in this section, but it presents itself in chords, rather than just single notes. Although repeated chords are more difficult to play than repeated single notes, the momentum must be maintained, because these chords are what help to drive the music forward. The ideal touch can be found by using a “down-up” wrist motion in coordination with the “long-short” rhythm of the chords. The arrows in Figure 89 indicate the suggested wrist motion.

Figure 89. Schubert, Sonata in C minor, D. 958 (IV) (mm. 177-84)

Lastly, in this section, the left and right hands engage in a sort of dance of their own, as they constantly leap over one another. The right hand, which contains the melody, crosses over the left hand, and plays notes in the bass clef (Figure 90). Shortly afterwards, the hands switch melody and accompaniment roles and the left hand begins crossing over the right, playing notes in the treble clef (Figure 91). Each time a hand crosses over the other, it should play on tall, extended fingers, while the other hand should maintain a low wrist.
This will give the hands ample room to move over and under one another without a collision.

Figure 90. Schubert, Sonata in C minor, D. 958 (IV) (mm. 108-23)

Figure 91. Schubert, Sonata in C minor, D. 958 (IV) (mm. 145-60)
Rossini’s *La Danza*, for tenor and piano was a widely known composition. It was one of the most famous tarantellas ever written, and a source of inspiration for later composers. In 1837, Franz Liszt completed piano transcriptions of Rossini’s *Les soirées musicales*, the larger set of works from which *La Danza* is taken. In its original form, *La Danza* is a strophic song that includes two verses, a refrain, and a recurring ritornello in the piano part. Liszt’s transcription maintains this same basic structure, adding to it an introduction, cadenza, and a short coda at the end.

Liszt gave *La Danza* the subtitle “Tarantella napolitana,” and the work has many features that distinguish it as a tarantella. The beginning of the work is divided into three sections, which have very fast tempo markings of *presto brillante*, *il più presto possibile*, and *presto*, respectively. Some sections feature perpetual motion in both hands (Figure 92), while others are marked by repeated notes in the highest voice (Figure 93).

**Figure 92. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 16-27)**
Franz Liszt has long been considered the greatest virtuoso pianist that ever lived. He frequently performed his own music in concerts; thus, he composed in a way that would show off his flawless technique. Many of his ingenious technical devices can be heard within this piece. In comparing Liszt’s piano transcription to Rossini’s original song, the texture of the music changes as the piece progresses through different sections. During the ritornellos, the writing is very pianistic; during the verses, the piano actually sounds as if a melody is being sung and accompanied; and during the refrains, the piano takes on the character of a full orchestra.
Technical/Interpretive Challenges and Suggestions

Like most of Liszt’s compositions, study of La Danza is impractical for all but the most advanced pianists. Although there are some relatively simple passages, it is full of technical tricks and traps, some of which will be examined here.

Less than a minute into the piece, the rhythm is briefly interrupted for a brilliant cadenza (Figure 94). The passage is basically built on the alternation of two harmonies, which appear in various inversions. The una corda pedal can be used to assist in the difficult task of playing both quickly and softly. The damper pedal can be slightly depressed to aid in the crescendo, but it must be released to account for the staccatissimo chords and the rests at the end. Throughout this passage, the highest and lowest notes should be stressed in order to emphasize the counterpoint and voice exchange between those lines.

Figure 94. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 13-15)
Because this is a transcription, a performer should be familiar with the original composition in order to develop a proper interpretation. Rossini’s song begins with an extended ritornello in the piano, long before the voice begins to sing. This moment is parallel to measure 70 in Liszt’s transcription (Figure 95). At this point, there should be a distinct change in tone and the melodic line must be played in a lyrical manner. Although the melody is doubled by various intervals below, the top line should always be prominent.

**Figure 95. Liszt, *La Danza*, S. 424 (mm. 66-86)**

During the short refrain in A major (Figure 96), the left hand has a series of very wide leaps that must be executed quickly. From the sixth beat of one measure, to the
downbeat of the next, a performer must make a leap of a 12th, likely using the fifth finger for both the upper and lower notes. The left-hand leaps can be conquered by first practicing them in blocked notes—the lower two notes together, then the four upper notes together—as indicated by brackets in the following example. Once the hands and arms are familiar with the distance they must leap, the notes can be broken up and played as written. It is very crucial that the muscles automate the leaps because the right hand is extremely busy with large leaps of its own. It would also be wise to practice the left hand in the dark, or with closed eyes, so that in performance, the passage will not suffer if the pianist’s visual focus fluctuates back and forth between the hands.

Figure 96. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 130-36)

There are several other technical challenges in La Danza. Some of the most problematic passages involve: parallel tenths in the left hand (Figure 97), parallel thirds and fourths in the right hand (Figure 98), and a rapid chromatic passage with sustained voices (Figure 99).
Figure 97. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 73-79)

Figure 98. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 111-16)

Figure 99. Liszt, La Danza, S. 424 (mm. 288-94)
CONCLUSION

Tarantellas are found throughout the 19th century piano literature, both as independent pieces and as parts of larger works, but as a genre they have been largely ignored. The pedagogical significance of these pieces, as well as an understanding of their unique characteristics, will lead to a greater appreciation of this valuable repertoire.

The tarantella is still a viable style of composition, found in recent publications39 as well as scattered throughout uncommon literature. The rhythmic vivaciousness and tuneful melodies are favorites for piano students and performers alike. Since the form is apparent and repetitive, tarantellas are easy listening for most audiences. This genre should not be neglected.

---

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The scope of this study is limited to tarantellas for solo piano, composed during the 19th century. It is further restricted to pieces with a difficulty level between one and fifteen. Outside of these constraints, there are other notable tarantellas that can be evaluated. Further study is needed in the following areas. Several examples and some brief information are given as a starting point.

Tarantellas for Two Pianos

Rachmaninoff’s Suite No. 2 for Two Pianos, Op. 17 has a tarantella as its finale.

Tarantellas for Piano and Orchestra

The last movement of the Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor by Camille Saint-Saëns is a tarantella. Gottschalk’s Grand Tarantella for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 67 is also worth considering.

Tarantellas Composed After the 19th Century

Sergei Prokofiev included a tarantella as the fourth piece of the suite Musique d’Enfants, Op. 65.

Virtuoso Tarantellas
Besides his transcription of Rossini’s *La Danza*, Franz Liszt also composed the frequently performed *Tarantella* from *Venice e Napoli*. This composition, however, lies well beyond the difficulty level the other works in this study. Similarly, Moritz Moszkowski’s Tarantelle, Op. 27, No. 2 is a virtuoso work with technical requirements far above the other works examined here.

Leopold Godowsky composed a set of 54 Studies after Frédéric Chopin’s Études. He wrote seven different versions of Chopin’s famous “Black Key” Étude, Op. 10, No. 5. The third of these seven versions was given the subtitle “Tarantella” and it was arranged with all the expected rhythmic and melodic traits associated with the genre. Stylistically, it was transposed from Chopin’s original key of G-flat major into the key of A minor. Also, the melody is in the left hand, while Chopin’s original composition placed it in the right hand. The technical demands of this tarantella are again far beyond the scope of this study.

**Tarantellas by Less-Prominent Composers**

There are several works which may be of interest to some, but were excluded from this study because they were written by unfamiliar composers, or composers whose works do not represent the “core” of the standard performance literature for piano. These include:

Cécile Chaminade—Concert Etude No. 6 in D major, Op. 35 (Tarentelle)

Hubert de Blanck—Tarantelle

Génari Karganoff—Tarantelle, Op. 4; Tarantelle, Op. 17

Giuseppe Martucci—Tarantella, Op. 6

Salomon Mazurette—Squirrel Dance (Tarantelle Caractéristique), Op. 135

Anton Rubinstein—Tarantelle, Op. 6

Gustav Satter—Tarantella

István Szelényi—Tarantella

Maurice Strakosch—Tarantella Siciliana

Carl Tausig—Introduction and Tarantella, Op. 2

Although most of these pieces in the above list exist in publications which are difficult to obtain or out-of-print, the scores may be available at public or university libraries. Also, much of this music has been digitally preserved and is available to download from online resources such as The Sheet Music Archive.40 The Petrucci Music Library also has an extensive collection of free public domain music scores.41
BIBLIOGRAPHY


