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

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A Comparative Study of the Etude Genre in Chopin and Debussy: Technical Application and Pedagogical Approach

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A Comparative Study of the Etude Genre in Chopin and Debussy:
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Abstract

Claude Debussy alluded to specific influences of past French composers in comments on his late music, and in letters concerning his etudes of 1915 and in the forward to their publication he singled out both François Couperin and Frederic Chopin. In a 1918 essay, Debussy’s longtime friend, Robert Godet, emphasized the influence of Chopin’s etudes on those of Debussy. However, Godet did not provide analysis or explanation, and his comparison merely couples the same technical difficulties, for example, thirds, sixths, chromatic writing, and octaves, between the two composers, which are called “equivalents.” Later scholars, in comparing the two sets, have dealt mainly with issues of form, harmony, melody, voice leading, and pedaling, thus stressing contrasts more than similarities. I will show that by examining certain pianistic gestures (including figures, textures, rhythmic writing, formal elements, and affects), Godet’s pairings exhibit much more in common than previously thought. Indeed, Debussy’s etudes often grapple with a similar idea, motive, focus of difficulty, or structural quality as Chopin. In addition, both sets of etudes offer specific technical challenges that extend to the entire piano output of each composer. This makes the sets of etudes not only valuable for the performer of these composers’ music, but also valuable from a pedagogical point of view. In this document, I will present the equivalent pairs of etudes, discuss the applications of each etude’s technical issue in the composers’ other repertoire, and consider the pedagogical value of both sets of etudes.
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Introduction

The etudes of Frederic Chopin stand as the pinnacle of the piano etude of the 19th century, the etudes of Claude Debussy stand as the pinnacle of the genre in the 20th century. Similarities can be found between the two composers not only in their etudes, but also in the larger context of their entire pianistic and musical output.

By highlighting excerpts from the entire pianistic output of both composers, one finds that the technical difficulties in each of the composer’s etudes can be found throughout their entire pianistic output. In this respect, the difficulties encountered in their etudes are not simply meant to be overcome, but applied. The application of these technical difficulties is not only of value for the performer, but also from a pedagogical point of view. Thus, these etudes may be used to solve various technical or even musical problems that students may have.

While these pieces are usually thought of as *Etudes de Concert*, i.e., intended for public performance, it is important to remember that these studies can be of enormous benefit to the student or performer, even if they are not performed. Therefore, this document will offer performers, teachers, and students alike an alternative way to link and apply these seminal collections of etudes.
Chapter 1: The Etudes of Chopin and Debussy

Chopin is the greatest of all. For with the piano alone he discovered everything. Claude Debussy¹

In the vast history of piano literature, the etude has shown remarkable endurance and importance for both composers and pianists. From the performing or pedagogical point of view, the etude has played a vital role in the diet of past and current pianists.

The most pioneering figure in the development of the etude is Frederic Chopin. Even Schumann named Chopin as one of five composers “who are clearly the most important” writers of etudes, the others being J.S. Bach, Muzio Clementi, Johann Baptist Cramer, and Ignaz Moscheles in a write-up from 6 February 1836 in the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik.²

Chopin transformed the etude from a mechanical exercise meant only to develop finger dexterity to the etude du concert, in which technical problems are still addressed but are given much more musical substance and appeal. Edgar Stillman Kelley writes, “Play, for example, the studies by Czerny, Cramer, and Clementi, for cultivating facility in executing double-thirds, double-sixths and octaves; then place them beside Chopin’s Etudes Op. 10, No. 10 and Op. 25, Nos. 6, 8, and 10. The works of the former are often pleasing, always profitable, but those of Chopin possess the magic quality of making us forget that we are dealing with drudgery.”³

Chopin’s musical idiom is one that focused primarily on smaller forms, such as nocturnes, mazurkas, and etudes, although there are certainly notable exceptions, provided by his piano sonatas and two piano concertos. Victor Lederer said, “For Chopin, short forms are not miniatures, but highly compressed genres in which one or two ideas can be set forth in their individual character - whether lyrical, stormy, exotic, or grotesque - and then explored in ways that are often highly unconventional but absolutely complete…nowhere is his mastery of short forms clearer than in the etudes and the preludes.”\(^4\) As Lederer emphasizes, although Chopin’s template was on a smaller scale, his musical writing and formal structures were full of color and freedom. The etudes of Chopin also deal with mechanical difficulties on a heroic scale, each requiring utmost virtuosic skill. Before Chopin, plenty of composers, such as Carl Czerny and Johann Baptist Cramer, composed hundreds of etude studies in early nineteenth century; some of these are still used in the technical teaching of younger students today. However, Lederer points out that Chopin’s etudes are the greatest instructional compositions after those of J.S. Bach, since they combine technical difficulty with artistry at the highest level.\(^5\)

Simon Finlow maintains that “Chopin distinguishes himself by conquering virtuosity on its home ground, and in doing so lifted himself clear of the surrounding lowland of mediocrity.”\(^6\)

Chopin’s influence extended to nearly all subsequent composers for the piano, including the Russians Alexander Scriabin and Sergei Rachmaninoff, who each composed dozens of etudes and preludes. Lederer pointed out that “Chopin’s truest heir

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\(^5\) Ibid., 26.

\(^6\) Finlow, 51.
has to be Claude Debussy, whose own magnificent musical vision – expressed in twenty-four preludes, twelve etudes, and other piano works – pick up where Chopin left off, boldly shaping the music of the twentieth century.”  

Debussy composed his twelve piano etudes in 1915 during his late period, while he was suffering from cancer. Chopin composed his etudes during his earlier period, before his full maturity had been realized. Particularly with the Op. 10 of 1833, the etudes, while radically advancing and revolutionizing the art of piano playing, were not products of the composer in his most mature period. This lies in direct contrast to the timeline of Debussy’s etudes. They are among the composer’s last compositions, and display a fully mature composer whose most enduring and inspired works were behind him. It is likely that, had Debussy lived longer, there would be another set of twelve new etudes to model the twenty-four etudes of Chopin, as Debussy had already done with his two books of Preludes. According to Paul Roberts, just as Chopin’s etudes, near the beginning of the nineteenth century, became the touchstone for the great piano tradition to follow, so would Debussy fulfill the same function for the twentieth century. 

Roberts discusses an interesting letter Debussy sent to Stravinsky at this time. Debussy wrote to Stravinsky in October of 1915, mentioning the Etudes and the two sonatas (for piano and cello and piano and violin), and betrayed his awareness that the style of character pieces and direct imagery was in the past. But with his reinvigorated creative confidence, Debussy, in his letter to Stravinsky was able to be generous and open with his rival: “My dear Stravinsky, you are a great artist! I’ve actually written nothing

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7 Lederer, 36.
but (pure) music. I’ve invested a lot of passion and faith in the future of the etudes.” 9

After that, Debussy dedicated the final movement of *En blanc et noir* to Stravinsky. At the same time, Debussy wrote another letter to his publisher, Maurice Durand, about his etudes. Debussy said, “I hope you’ll like them, both for the music they contain and for what they denote.” 10 From his letters, Debussy was full of confidence about the future of his etudes even though his illness troubled him very much. These etudes are the last works for piano solo, allowing him the true sublimation and escape from intense physical and mental illness. In these late years, Debussy struggled with his illness and became further removed from the social and professional world. His cancer caused his premature death at fifty-six.

Debussy’s etudes were dedicated to the memory of Chopin. According to Robert Schmitz, Debussy was still hesitating as to the dedication to Chopin or to François Couperin, both of whom he held in high esteem and toward whom he felt respectful gratitude. 11 At last he decided on Chopin, though this series owes its point of musicality to both composers. Debussy had a great respect for the two masters, and he wrote to Durand, indicating those two composers as “both such marvelous seers.” Perhaps, his fourth etude, *Pour les agreements* (for embellishments), might be secretly dedicated to Couperin.

Certainly, Debussy based each etude on a concrete musical idea. In order to search for pure music, he launched into a remarkable series of sound structures, based on harmonic experimentation and the accumulation of previous pianistic virtuosic technique.

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
According to Frank Dawes, in Debussy’s etudes, there are at least two things in common with the studies of earlier composers: Profound research into the possibilities of keyboard technique to the limits of their respective composer’s knowledge, and the fact that these explorations were carried out in such a way as to produce highly individual musical poetry.12

In this late period, Debussy returned to the older form of sonata. Compared to his two books of preludes, which display a freer structure and flexible compositional template, this period included his two sonatas for different instruments, and En blanc et noir, written in strict sonata form. Debussy also claimed that this late period’s piano works had only to do with “the sonority of the piano,” and he intentionally used traditional sonata form at this time. Jane Fulcher pointed out that use of sonata form was Debussy’s intention:

Debussy practiced his unorthodox classicism, continuing to define himself against his contemporaries and particularly the rivals d’Indy and Saint-Saëns. Clearly at issue here is his treatment of sonata form, which he had previously derived, considering it as synonymous with the rigid German mold that d’Indy taught at the Schola Cantorum. But Debussy now audaciously reclaims the genre as endemically French, referring back to its origins, as we noted in his prose, as simply an instrumental piece. In adopting this definition, Debussy was again defining his approach in opposition to the norm, or contestably demonstrating what a sonata doesn’t necessarily have to be…this form which carried Germanic connotations, could be filled with and redefined by French content.13

Traditionally, sonata form was viewed as a product of the Germanic musical tradition. It is not surprising that numerous French composers, including Debussy, intentionally avoided using sonata form in their compositions. However, Debussy finally used this traditional sonata form at his late period in order to reach what he called “pure” music.

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Debussy’s reference to the sonata form is very significant, even in relation to the etudes. While the Etudes were not written in sonata form, their structure follows the tradition of etudes passed down from Chopin and Clementi, that of an ABA ternary form. Debussy therefore conformed his musical imagination with its distinctively colorful ideas to the pre-existing formal template. Perhaps he needed a pre-existing, standard form best suited to the pure music of his etudes. Thus, in terms of structural qualities, Debussy’s etudes are surprisingly rigid and lacking in innovation. However, the case must be made that in doing so, Debussy was situating himself as direct descendant from his predecessors in the genre.

Within this simple structure, however, Debussy depicts his own colorful stories in every single etude. He shows his musical and technical style in a variety of ways throughout the etude genre. According to Robert Schmitz, for the etudes:

Their scope is musically most varied from fierce to tender, very fast to slow, soft, to strident, modal through diatonic and bitonal to near atonal, and a matching array of technical problems of performance; to the more frequently treated double-thirds, double-sixths, octaves, which he completely revaluates, Debussy has added studies in the problems of such fascinating equations as ornaments, opposed sonorities, double-fourths, and repeated notes, and embodies the expansion of the instrumental capacities of the piano and research into the differentiated timbres and tone colors it is capable of, simultaneously or singly.14

The published ordering of the etudes has all the hallmarks of a carefully constructed design. The original manuscript shows that the etudes were planned in a completely different order and without their final division into two volumes. The ordering of Book I, seems very logical: a study for five fingers, progressing to one for eight fingers, passing through thirds, fourths, sixths, and octaves. It is more difficult to

14 Schmitz, 192.
trace the progression of Book II in this fashion. His letter to Durand shows that Debussy wrote his etudes down on paper as quickly as possible regardless of ordering:

The six current etudes are almost all “up tempo”: Don’t worry. There’ll be calmer ones! I started with these because they’re the most difficult to write and to get some variety into… The others have to do with finding special sonorities, among them “Pour les quartes,” in which you’ll find unheard-of things.  

Debussy realized that the etude in fourths was unique, as fourths were rarely treated in traditional theory or practice. However, many of his compositions show a heavy use of parallel fourths and fifths. This letter shows that several of the etudes were concerned with “special sonorities” along with the study of fourths, thirds, sixths and octaves.

Debussy added studies for fascinating ornaments, opposed sonorities, repeated notes, and also chromatics. Perhaps, in his opinion, he explored “unheard-of things” throughout all of etudes. These experiments embodied the expansion of the instrumental capacity of the piano and research into the different timbres and tone colors. In this aspect, it can be shown as idiomatic piano writing in various ways. In his etudes, the most challenging and distinctive thing is the absence of fingerings, which Debussy intentionally omitted.

To impose a fingering cannot logically meet the different conformations of hands. Our old Masters - mean “our” admirable clavecinistes - never indicated fingerings, relying, probably, on the ingenuosity of their contemporaries. To doubt that of the modern virtuosi would be ill-mannered. To conclude: the absence of fingerings is an excellent exercise, suppresses the spirit of contradiction which induces us to choose to ignore the fingerings of the composer, and proves those eternal words: “One is never better served than by oneself.” Let us seek our fingerings!  

According to Debussy himself, these twelve etudes impart musical as well as technical challenges. Perhaps the absence of fingerings alludes to the French clavecin tradition and one of his admired idols, François Couperin, instead of Chopin.

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15 Robert, 303.
16 Schmitz, 193.
Along with the late sonatas, one for cello and piano (1915), one for violin and piano (1917), and a sonata for flute, viola, and harp (1915), the etudes show a departure for Debussy from the programmatic/characteristic pieces of his earlier career towards more abstract expression. They also demonstrate a desire on Debussy’s part to connect to what in his mind was a specifically French past. In a letter of 19 August 1915 to his friend and publisher, Durand, he asked, “Will they be dedicated to F. Chopin or F. Couperin? I have as much respectful gratitude for one as for the other of these two masters, such admirable ‘diviners.’”17 Chopin received the dedication, but Couperin presumably would have been included in “our admirable clavecinists” to whom Debussy pays homage in the foreword to the first edition.18 About this episode, Marianne Wheeldon makes the following argument:

That Debussy should have looked to Chopin and Couperin as dedicatees for the etudes is not surprising, since the invocation of one or the other would help to consolidate both an indigenous French tradition of pianism and, at the same time, would cement Debussy’s position within this heritage. However, the level of emphasis Debussy accords each composer in the opening pages of the etudes correlates with their varying degrees of influence in his music.19

Indeed, placing himself within a French tradition was a major concern for Debussy in his later years. According to Jane Fulcher, during the War, Debussy sought a different path than his French compatriots, especially the “conservative advocacy of tradition” found in either Camille Saint-Saëns’s perpetuation of German qualities or the glorification of the distant past with Vincent d’Indy’s Schola Cantorum.20 He claimed himself a musicien

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17 Quoted in Marianne Wheeldon, Debussy’s Late Style (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 55.
18 Wheeldon, 55.
19 Ibid.
français. His only article of 1915, the year he wrote the etudes, published in

*L’intransigeant*, exhorted French musicians to revitalize their national music.21 By
approaching the genre of the etude with specific connections to Chopin and previous
French clavonicists, Debussy sought to do just what he advocated.

Other commentators in Debussy’s own time also noticed and highlighted the
connection to a French past in the etudes. Robert Godet, in his essay “Chopin-Debussy”
(1918),22 champions Debussy as an equal to Chopin and discusses certain similarities in
their overall approach in writing for the piano before moving to the etudes. Yet rather
than providing a detailed analysis of either Chopin’s or Debussy’s etudes, Godet abruptly
concludes his essay with an “adventurous assertion” (“conjecture aventurée”) that
nonchalance pairs certain etudes of Chopin with their “equivalents” in Debussy:

### Table 1: Godet’s equivalents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debussy</th>
<th>Chopin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pour les <em>Cinq Doigts</em> (à M. Czerny)</td>
<td>Op. 10, no 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour les <em>Tierces</em></td>
<td>Op. 25, no 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour les <em>Quartes</em></td>
<td>pas d’équivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour les <em>Sixtes</em></td>
<td>Op. 25, no 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour les <em>Octaves</em></td>
<td>Op. 25, No 9 et No 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour les <em>Huit Doigts</em></td>
<td>pas d’équivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour les <em>Degrés chromatiques</em></td>
<td>Op. 10, No 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour les <em>agréments</em></td>
<td>pas d’équivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour les <em>Notes répétées</em></td>
<td>pas d’équivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour les <em>Sonorités opposées</em></td>
<td>pas d’équivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour les <em>Arpèges composés</em></td>
<td>Op. 25, No 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour les <em>Accords</em></td>
<td>Op. 10, No 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Wheeldon has pointed out, however, Godet’s pairings do not offer any explanation of the similarities between the etudes other than their same basic technical issue.²³ For instance, he couples Chopin’s Op. 25, No. 6 with Debussy’s Pour les tierces, Op. 25, No. 8 with Pour les sixtes, and so on. Etudes dealing with technical problems such as fourths and agréments in Debussy’s set are viewed as having no parallels in the etudes of Chopin.²⁴

Much scholarship has dealt with Debussy and his music. For the current study, especially important are studies that examine the composer’s desire for a specifically French music. Déirdre Donnellon explores Debussy’s claim as being a musicien français, whose music is heir to a French tradition, including composers like Rameau and Couperin, among others, and his relation to non-French traditions, namely Wagner.²⁵ Jane Fulcher places the composer’s wartime pieces (including the etudes) within a context of nationalism fostered by the composer.²⁶ Debussy’s own critical writing, including Monsieur Croche the Dilettante Hater, also helps to provide a picture of his opinions on his late style in the context of his Parisian contemporaries such as Vincent d’Indy and Saint-Saëns.²⁷ In all of these sources, connections to past French composers are important in defining Debussy’s late style. In addition, the music of Chopin stands as an enormous influence. A study that explores this topic from the opposite end of the

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²³ Wheeldon, 58.
²⁴ Ibid., 59.
²⁵ Donnellon, “Debussy as Musician and Critic,” 54.
²⁶ Fulcher, “Speaking the Truth to Power,” 209.
spectrum can be found in Roy Howat’s essay, in which he identifies Chopin’s influences on the *fin-de-siècle* composers; not only Debussy but also Ravel and Fauré.\(^{28}\)

The pairing and comparison of Chopin and Debussy’s contributions in the etude genre is based on a comparative study of each pair of etudes with regards to similarities in gesture, pianistic approach, and texture. As has been mentioned, one of Wheeldon’s complaints in regards to Godet is that his “equivalents” are based solely on technical difficulty and do not demonstrate other potential similarities. And while she sees evidence of Chopin’s “persona” in Debussy’s etudes, she seems to be content with a lack of explanation of specific similarities between the “equivalents” (in Godet’s term). She highlights contrast when she points out, as a central difference between Chopin’s writing and Debussy’s, that Chopin treats technical difficulty in a traditional “perpetuum mobile” manner, in which the technique is introduced and worked out in a continuous manner throughout the etude, while Debussy is content to alternate the technical focus with sections that are less technically focused.\(^{29}\) By focusing attention on certain similarities of gesture between etudes in each pair, it becomes clear that in some of his etudes, Debussy seems to draw specific comparisons to Chopin, where in others he seems to emphasize the contrasts. In other words, he often employs a similar gesture in a completely different manner.


\(^{29}\) Ibid., 60.
Chapter 2: The Equivalent Pairs

With a musical mind of such genius and individuality as Debussy, the influence of past composers - specifically that of Chopin - on his own writing is not as immediately recognizable as it might be with a lesser composer; rather, the influence is also subordinate to Debussy’s own creative instincts, taste, and musical language. Thus, the similarities in compositional technique and use of the instrument are of a more subtle nature. It is only upon a more detailed analysis of certain pairs of etudes that the similarities become apparent. The seven equivalent pairs of etudes proposed by M. Godet will be outlined and analyzed with regards to gestural similarity in the remainder of this chapter.

i. Octaves – Chopin Op. 25 No. 10 and Debussy Pour les octaves

In general, the etudes of Chopin address a single primary technical issue, around which the entire composition is formed. The etude in B minor, Op. 25 No. 10, often called the “Octave etude,” is a clear example. The piece begins and ends in octaves, and, in the case of the right hand, has nothing but octaves. Even in the beautiful Lento section, the right hand melody is played in octaves, demanding a supreme command of finger and wrist legato. Thus, while the music is beautiful and offers the audience and performer alike a chance to recover from the turbulent main section, this section is no less difficult, albeit for different reasons.
Example 1: Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 10, mm. 29-37

Debussy’s equivalent etude, *Pour les Octaves*, does not follow the linear, neatly organized progression as Chopin’s; rather, this etude is highly sectional, with stark musical and technical shifts from section to section. The music dances around and travels through different keys by means of abrupt chromatic shifts.

Example 2: Debussy *Pour les Octaves*, mm. 20-24
In many ways, Debussy’s octave etude resembles the stylized Baroque dance, the *Sarabande*, written in a more moving 3/8 with emphasis on the second beats.

In this etude, Debussy’s tempo markings are written in French (*Joyeux et emporte, librement rhythm*, etc.) instead of the typical Italian. (Jumping ahead, it is important to note that in his etude in thirds, Debussy switches to Italian indications).

Perhaps Debussy is trying to more fluently present his French style not only through the dance character in this etude but even with the language of his indications. Debussy also experiments with overtones through octave doubling in the experimental middle section.

Here, the melody is in the inner voice and is played by the thumb, creating a beautiful color through acoustic means.

Example 3: Debussy Etude *Pour les Octaves*, mm. 56-63

Further exploring color through pianistic means, Debussy uses the French markings *garder la sourdine, la pedale forte sur chaque temps*, which means use the soft pedal (*una corda*) throughout and change the damper pedal on every beat.
Another similarity between the two etudes appears in the climaxes of each piece. Chopin uses an ascending scale in octaves, the downbeats of which outline a diminished seventh chord:

Example 4. Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 10, mm. 111-113

Debussy uses a combination of a whole-tone and chromatic ascending scale in his climax, also with Chopin-esque accents.

Example 5: Debussy Etude Pour les Octaves, mm. 31-32

**ii. Sixths: Chopin’s Op. 25 No. 8 and Debussy’s Pour les sixtes**

These etudes share a very similar technical focus on the legato and even execution of double sixths, while the musical structure of each is markedly different. It is also
noteworthy that both etudes share the key signature of D-flat Major, suggesting that both composers inherently understood that this key gives the maximum comfort and naturalness for the execution of sixths. Chopin’s etude, Op. 25 No. 8 is marked vivace – lively – and the constant motion of the sixths does not stop until the final four chords. Debussy does not begin the etude proper immediately, but starts with a Lento introduction. The opening gesture is directly related to Chopin’s opening figure but in inversion.

Example 6: Debussy Etude Pour les Sixtes, mm. 1-3

![Example 6: Debussy Etude Pour les Sixtes, mm. 1-3](image)

Example 7: Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 8, mm. 1-2

![Example 7: Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 8, mm. 1-2](image)

Another similarity lies in rhythmic figures: In both pieces, a two note “sigh motive” in the left hand disturbs the established pulse.
As in the preceding octave pairing, a chromatic ascending scale occurs at the apex of emotional and harmonic tension, usually at a structurally important cadence.
In the last bars of Debussy’s etude, a chromatic resolution over a cadential pedal point is used to bring the piece to a tranquil, colorful close.

Example 11: Debussy Etude *Pour les Sixtes* mm. 55-59

***Chromatics: Chopin’s Op. 10 No. 2 and Debussy’s *Pour les degrés chromatiques***

As in Chopin’s etude in sixths, his chromatic etude demands perpetual motion in the right hand – thus, a more accurate name would be the “right-hand chromatic etude.”

Example 12: Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 2, mm. 1-2

The perpetual motion allows both etudes to retain the same affect (urgency or excitement) from beginning to end, not allowing any huge shift in mood as in the *Lento* section of the octave etude. Meanwhile, Debussy keeps both hands occupied with different types of inner chromatic passagework, including:
Parallel motion

Example 13: Debussy Etude *Pour les degrés chromatiques*, mm. 17-18

Contrary motion

Example 14: Debussy Etude *Pour les degrés chromatiques*, mm. 39-41

Combination of contrary and double chromatic scales

Example 15: Debussy Etude *Pour les degrés chromatiques*, mm. 59-61
Towards the closing section, Chopin implies a descending left hand motive that begins in measure 45 and runs to the end.

Example 16: Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 2, mm. 44-48

Likewise, Debussy suggests a substantive melody in the left hand while the right hand is preoccupied with ceaseless chromatic scales up and down.

Example 17: Debussy Etude *Pour les degrés chromatiques*, mm. 45-50
**iv. Thirds: Chopin’s Op. 25 No. 6 and Debussy’s Pour les tierces**

This pairing is the most linear and forward moving – from beginning to end – and shows the most similarity to each other among the etude pairings. While Debussy’s etudes more closely resemble the style and technical figures of his Chopin model, Debussy's indications are written in Italian rather than French. Perhaps this suggests his effort to more closely adhere to a pre-existing form and model – that of Chopin – rather than to write a colorful, unique, “new” sort of piece. A phrase of 4 groupings of 16 notes keeps the piece in constant motion. Chopin's etude in thirds has a melody line in the left hand while Debussy's melody line is inside the double-thirds passagework of the right hand. A four-note ostinato rhythm under the double thirds of the right hand is a gesture found frequently in the Chopin model.

Example 18: Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 6, mm.3-4

Debussy imitates the same gesture with a shimmering melody line carried by the top note of the right hand.
Again, chromaticism is a huge factor in developing the perpetual motion of double thirds for Chopin. To build a particularly high amount of tension, Chopin writes chromatic thirds in both hands, combining textural and harmonic tension.

Outdoing his model, Debussy writes a distinctive melody line over his chromatic thirds.
Chopin juxtaposes a chromatic - i.e. black and white key - figure with a diatonic figure played on the white keys, shifting from G-sharp minor to a G seven chord without any warning. This device results in a breathtakingly effective change in color and harmony.

Debussy achieves this same effect through different but related means. He presents a flowing gesture of thirds in G-flat Major and abruptly juxtaposes this with the same material, transposed to C Major. Harmonically speaking, this is as un-related as a modulation can be.
At the climax of Chopin’s etude, a constant and restless eighth-note figure in the left hand suddenly comes to a halt, and a vigorous right hand descending scale of thirds increases the tension and drama.

Example 24: Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 6, mm. 45-50
Conversely, at the climax of Debussy’s etude, he uses a chromatically descending gesture, with both hands in double thirds.

Example 25: Debussy Etude *Pour les Tierces*, mm. 40-44

Also of note is that in the Coda, Debussy quotes his own work, the famous “Claire de Lune” from his *Suite Bergamasque* of 1905.

Example 26: Claire de Lune, mm. 15-17

The slow, sustained, and tranquil style of the “Claire de Lune” motive is transformed in the etude into *con fuoco* chords that bustle with energy. The change in context and character is such that it might not be recognized without seeing the visual similarity in the
score. However, one might also ask why Debussy would have inserted such a passage that has such a different texture from the rest of the etude in thirds.

Example 27: Debussy Etude *Pour les Tierces*, mm. 66-68

![Example 27: Debussy Etude *Pour les Tierces*, mm. 66-68](image)

**v. Chopin’s Op. 10 No. 4 and Debussy’s *Pour les cinq doigts***

Chopin’s famous etude Op.10 No. 4 and Debussy’s first etude, *Pour les cinq doigts*, bear similarities in texture and technical approach, albeit with vastly different character. Both etudes focus and develop five-finger dexterity of both hands. Debussy’s etude opens with a mocking parody of the exercises for finger dexterity of Carl Czerny, and becomes frequently interrupted by rapid, harmonically unrelated ornamented *sforzandi*. Chopin’s etude opens with a fiery, perpetual motion figure that alternates between hands, famous for its unrelenting demands of dexterity and evenness. The etude goes far beyond five-finger patterns, in that Chopin often requires that the outer fingers of the hand continue to play rapid passagework while the inner part of the hand is anchored to chords.
Example 28: Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 4, mm. 25-26

![Example 28: Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 4, mm. 25-26](image)

Debussy employs a similar technical figuration in his etude.

Example 29: Debussy Etude *Pour les cinq doigts*, mm. 44-47

![Example 29: Debussy Etude *Pour les cinq doigts*, mm. 44-47](image)

Both composers employ rapid figuration in contrary motion, with an implied inner voice in the thumb of the left hand.
Example 30: Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 4, mm. 33-37

Debussy uses a similar figuration, though with a four-against-three rhythm.

Example 31: Debussy Etude *Pour les cinq doigts*, m. 72

Another defining feature of these etudes is the use of declamatory chords in the right hand over five-finger passagework in the left hand.
Example 32: Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 4, mm. 33-34

![Example 32: Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 4, mm. 33-34](image)

Debussy uses this same construction, though in much quicker rhythm in the chords.

Example 33: Debussy Etude *Pour les cinq doigts*, mm. 88-89

![Example 33: Debussy Etude *Pour les cinq doigts*, mm. 88-89](image)

Chopin, in building momentum and energy, uses broken octaves in the right hand, a technique very rarely found in his piano writing. Such is the exceptional passion and fire of this etude.

Example 34: Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 4, m. 4

![Example 34: Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 4, m. 4](image)
Debussy employs the same figure though in a more coquettish, pointillistic fashion.

Example 35: Debussy Etude *Pour les cinq doigts*, mm. 56-58

![Example 35: Debussy Etude *Pour les cinq doigts*, mm. 56-58](image)

**vi. Chopin’s Op. 25. No. 1 and Debussy’s *Pour les Arpèges composés***

Chopin’s first Etude of Op. 25, the famous “Aeolian Harp” is remarkable in how many layers and textures of sound it gives to the piano. The distance between bass and treble is such that the overtones create a natural resonance for the instrument, a sort of palette over which the undulating inner voices rest without disturbing the hierarchy of voices. This texture, combined with ample use of the sustaining pedal, was highly influential not only for Debussy, but for all subsequent French composers. In Debussy’s etude *Pour les Arpèges composés*, this technique of harmonically swelling chords is widely apparent. Debussy uses the same technique of typesetting smaller note-heads to indicate gradation of sound, as Chopin does in his “Harp” etude. Debussy’s etude, while written in the style of a character piece or prelude, owes its sonic treatment of the instrument to Chopin. One notable difference is that Debussy uses crossing hands to achieve one long stream of notes, imitating the strum of a harp.
Example 36: Debussy Etude *Pour les Arpèges composés*, mm. 7-8

![Example 36: Debussy Etude](image)

Chopin, however, uses both hands simultaneously in contrary motion to achieve a wave of sound. The melody is combined with the accompaniment figure in such a way that they are one in the same gesture, the melody note being played on each beat at the beginning of the repeating pattern.

Example 37: Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 1, mm. 1-2

![Example 37: Chopin Etude](image)

Likewise, Debussy’s texture includes a melody note on each beat, at the beginning of each accompaniment pattern.
Example 38: Debussy Etude *Pour les Arpèges composés*, mm. 1-4

Both etudes end with a flourishing, harp-like arpeggio that swells from the lower register to the top.

Example 39: Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 1, mm. 43-49.
Example 39: Debussy Etude *Pour les Arpèges composés*

![Example 39: Debussy Etude](image)

**vii. Chopin’s Op. 25 No. 4 and Debussy’s *Pour les accords***

In his table of equivalent études, Godet pairs Debussy’s *Pour les accords* with Chopin’s Op. 10 No. 11.

Example 40: Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 11, mm. 1-3

![Example 40: Chopin Etude](image)
Example 41: Debussy Etude *Pour les Accords*, mm. 1-5

![Debussy Etude](image)

It is difficult to comprehend why these two etudes would be paired together. While Chopin’s does feature arpeggiated chords, the span and texture of the chords makes it a completely different study and musical texture than the strong, rhythmic, blocked chords of his proposed Debussy equivalent. Thus, I argue that Chopin’s etude Op. 25 No. 4 makes a much more suitable equivalent.

Example 42: Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 4, mm. 1-3

![Chopin Etude](image)

These two etudes share the tonality of A minor, unlike Op. 10 No. 11 in E flat Major. This gives them an inherently similar character. Both etudes, as seen in the preceding two examples, are essentially rhythmic in nature, as well as being studies in blocked rather than rolled chords. The sense of strong and weak beats is distorted in both
instances. In Chopin’s case, this is achieved through creating a melodic line out of the off beats, making it seem that they are strong beats.

Example 43: Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 4. mm. 16-19

Debussy achieves this distortion of rhythm through hemiola, creating duple units in a triple meter. (See Example 41, mm. 3-4) As in the Chopin, the melodic line lies in the top voice of the chords, though it is distorted by the underlying rhythmic and harmonic processes.

Both etudes are also quite harmonically colorful and adventurous. Chopin introduces the etude with a rather conventional harmonic scheme but quickly departs into foreign or distantly related keys and abrupt shifts in mode. For example, in the retransition, within nine measures, Chopin explores C minor, F minor, D flat Major - in this context, a Neapolitan color - and E minor before returning to A minor.
Similarly, Debussy employs the technique of chord planing - non-functional parallel chords - to create stark harmonic instability. This device is one of Debussy’s trademark compositional techniques.

Example 45: Debussy Etude *Pour les Accords*, mm. 33-38

Debussy’s etude features an extended, beautiful, slow middle section, producing an ABA form. This draws from the tradition of Chopin in both his etudes Op. 25 nos. 10 and 5, both of which feature beautiful slow sections of contrasting material.
Example 46: Debussy Etude *Pour les Accords*, mm. 80-88
Chapter 3: Pedagogical Approach

The genre of the concert etude is one that is both appealing to audience and performers and of irreplaceable importance to the developing piano student. The technical difficulties found in these etudes are not simply ends in themselves, but are vital to the growth of the student’s overall technical facility. While many of these difficulties might be found in passages of other repertoire, the beauty of studying them in an etude setting is the sole concentration on one technical issue, providing a thorough exploration of a single problem.

By comparing the pairs of etudes of Debussy and Chopin, the obvious conclusion one draws is that many of the etudes of Debussy address the same issues as those of Chopin, but with a higher degree of stylistic complexity and coloristic devices throughout the piece. It might be said that the etudes of Chopin address the issues in a more musically isolated and compact environment, while Debussy’s, though still highly technically concentrated, have more of a flexible balance of purely musical and purely technical material. Thus, in developing a certain set of technical skills in a student, one might begin with the Chopin etude, to address the issue in a more isolated and concentrated fashion, and then give the student its equivalent etude of Debussy as a sort of reinforcement, further developing the skill in a more musically complex context.

For each pair of etudes, the chief technical issues will be highlighted and a pedagogical approach on practicing, teaching, and overcoming them will be given.
In Chopin’s etude, the difficulties include muscular endurance, voicing of octaves, and the achievement of a true legato. This last issue is particularly daunting to those students with a smaller hand, in which case it is better to examine proper pedaling instead of straining oneself with the hands. In addressing issues of muscular strength, it is crucial to understand that the chief mechanism in the playing of octaves is the wrist. The student need not exert wasteful energy in trying to muscle the octaves with the arm and shoulders. This can result in physical strain and wasteful expenditure of energy, as well as an inappropriate sound. To help gain endurance and to develop the wrist before playing the etude itself, the student might make a pattern of the chromatic scale in segments of rapid octaves, gradually increasing the size of the pattern, and always feeling relaxed.

As regards, the student should practice the outer voices alone with the outer fingers of each hand, using both the wrist and finger to achieve the desired legato articulation. One should also practice the thumbs alone, which makes the importance of the wrist explicitly obvious.

In the middle section, the same technical issue is used in a completely different musical context, that of calm serenity and cantabile melody. Thus, voicing, tone, and legato are even more exposed in this slow section, and, with more harmonic activity, pedaling must be done with a much greater attention to detail. A beneficial strategy in achieving a good voicing and beautiful singing tone in the top voice is to quickly release
the thumb of the octave after playing it; when the pedal is down, this creates a more focused sound on the top voice and also helps avoid physical tension.

In Debussy’s etude, the octave writing is not of a perpetual motion nature as in Chopin’s, but of a dance-like character using octaves with sporadic rhythms. In the etude, different types of octave passagework, such as leaping, interlocking, rapid impulse rhythms, arpeggiation over a wide register, and pentatonic scales in octaves, are juxtaposed. The resulting issue is not of endurance, but of immediate change of figuration. Thus, this etude offers more variety in types of octave writing, making it crucial to have a basic foundation in octaves before attempting to play the etude. The etude is really a study in the application of octaves rather than octaves themselves.

Because of this diversity of octave figuration, the methods of practice are much more varied than in the Chopin etude. One basic principle of practicing thumbs alone stands true in this etude, however, particularly with regards to accuracy in wide octave leaps. Since this etude is of a highly sectionalized nature, a method of practicing the frequent changes of figuration is to practice each section in isolation, so that one can start at the beginning of any new figuration, rather than “falling into it” without being mentally prepared.

**ii. Chopin’s Op. 25 No. 8 and Debussy’s Pour les Sixtes**

In a similar way to the octave etude, Chopin’s Op. 25 No. 8, the etude in sixths, is daunting to those with small hands, and can only be solved with a supple and active wrist. It is likely that pianists with different sized hands will approach the etude from a different
technical perspective. Those with small hands will not be readily able to maneuver the fingers around the sixths, and will approach it in a similar manner as the octaves, with a wrist impulse on each sixth. In a way, the sixths might be thought of as octaves with reduced intervals, thus requiring similar method of execution. Those with a larger hand might view the sixths in a similar manner as thirds, but with an expanded interval. Thus, it is likely that those with smaller hands will instinctively use more wrist in the approach, while those with larger hands will instinctively use more finger; consequently, one should practice what one is not as comfortable doing. For small hands, more time practicing finger legato will be required; for those with larger hands, more time will be spent on the wrist. Additionally, similar principles as are used in the octave etude, namely quickly releasing the thumb to reduce tension and practicing the outer fingers separately to achieve a legato outer voice. Because of the density of notes resulting from simultaneous sixths in both hands, voicing is even more of a challenge, and a beneficial strategy is to voice the outer fingers of each hand, resulting in a prominent bass and soprano, while the inner voices provide harmonic color of a subdued nature.

The Debussy etude *Pour les Sixtes*, also written in D-flat Major, is of a completely different technical nature than its equivalent. Marked *Lento* and *mezza voce*, the piece requires ample amount of rubato and a sensual, colorful, and luxurious approach to tone and pacing. For faster passages in sixths (faster than an eighth note), Debussy indicates a *portato* articulation (notated by dots under a slur marking), which suggests that one should not strain oneself to execute legato sixths as one does in the Chopin, but should let them ring in the air after being played with the help of the
sustaining pedal. As with the octave etude, this etude is not solely focused on sixths, but on the application of sixths, particularly with respect to nuances in color and articulation.

**iii. Chopin’s Op. 10 No. 2 and Debussy’s Pour les Degres Chromatiques**

Chopin’s etude Op. 10 No. 2 in A Minor is one of the most innovative and fundamental of the etudes, forcing the outer fingers to play legato and frequently crossing the third finger over the fourth, and the fourth over the fifth. As in the octave etude, the etude requires muscular endurance to play from beginning to end, as the outer fingers have no resting point. It is of the utmost importance that the pianist paces his or her expenditure of energy, saving the most energy for only the biggest moments. It is also vital that the inner two notes of the right hand are played as lightly and as sharply as possible, keeping the weight of the arm focused on the ascending chromatic line of the right hand. As in the etudes for octaves and sixths, it is beneficial to practice the outer finger’s line independently, and to be able to perform the entire etude with only the top line. In developing the strength and agility of the outer fingers alone, one may also use wrist rotation rather than the fingers as the source of the motion, as the performance demands a balance of the use of wrist and fingers. This etude also requires coordination between the different figures between left and right hands. The jumps in the left hand require that it be practiced with as much independent concentration as the right. When both hands play together, it is crucial that the left hand be independent enough to provide harmonic and rhythmic support, but not hinder the right hand thematic material.
The chief difficulty in Debussy’s etude *Pour les degrés chromatiques* is that of coordination, rapidly crossing hands rather than crossing fingers as in Chopin’s. In most of the chromatic writing, Debussy uses four-note patterns, using one of the following fingerings: 4-3-2-1 or 5-4-3-2. These patterns either oscillate up and down or alternate with the left hand to create a longer stream of notes. In these sections of alternating hands, one should practice landing on the first note of each four-note group, omitting the other three notes of the grouping. Unlike most of Debussy’s other etudes, this etude imitates the perpetual motion of Chopin’s. The pentatonic thematic material is almost exclusively in the left hand, with the chromatic material serving as *accompagnement*, in direct opposition to Chopin’s. Debussy frequently uses rapid chromatic scales within a crescendo or decrescendo. These passages are not thematic or melodic, but represent a surging impulse of sound. In these passages, one should keep the fingers in close contact with the keys, and imagine rolling over the keys with the fingers rather than playing individual notes. It is also important to note that despite the virtuosity and excitement of the writing, the majority of the piece does not go above a *piano* dynamic, with one climax that only reaches a *forte*. Thus, these passages must not be practiced too loudly, but with a nimble, delicate touch. In reaching this end, it is desirable to practice without pedal, and to play on the surface of the key in the chromatic passagework, while the theme is played with more weight and projected tone. The pedal should only be used after one can achieve the delicacy of touch without it.
iv. Chopin’s Etude Op. 25 No. 6 and Debussy’s Pour les Tierces

Chopin’s Etude Op. 25 No. 6 has gained considerable notoriety among pianists for its relentless demands of continuous thirds, which are written in a perpetual motion style. This etude, perhaps more than any other, is a long-term project in developing the muscles (particularly the fourth and fifth fingers) and suppleness required for the thirds of the right hand. In the ascending chromatic lines, it is helpful to practice the outer voice and fingers alone, so that they guide the hand. One should practice in groups of notes, particularly in the trill-like passages, gradually increasing the size of the groups. Because of the intricacy of the thirds, no two pianists will use the exact same fingering, and it is crucial that one explores and chooses fingerings that lie best for their own hand. Because of the difficulty and technical focus of the right hand thirds, the importance of the left hand is often neglected. In truth the real thematic material and beautiful melodic line is in the left hand, and one should imagine the sustaining quality idiomatic to cello writing. The pedaling should be based on the articulation of the ostinato pattern in left hand, not its harmonic implications.

In Debussy’s etude Pour les Tierces, the thirds serve a more coloristic function, creating an atmosphere of fluidity and buoyancy, rather than insistent evenness as in Chopin’s. The harmonies of the thirds should float in the air, and should not seem too tangible. Unlike the etude of Chopin, Debussy frequently uses thirds in both hands in a quasi-contrapuntal fashion. Because of this, special care should be given to achieve delicate shading of pedal and good voicing. Another difficulty lies in the simultaneous use of contrasting articulations, for example, with the right hand playing legato thirds
while the left hand plays *portato* upper notes interwoven with an accompanimental figuration. In a similar fashion, the outer fingers of the right hand are often called to play thematic material over inner thirds played with the inside of the hand, resulting in an enormously difficult combination of two different articulations in the same hand. To overcome this, the wrist must be extremely supple and must flutter over the inner thirds. A practice strategy for this might involve omitting the thirds in between melodic notes, landing on the chords of each eighth beat.

**v. Chopin’s Op. 10 No. 4 and Debussy’s Pour les cinq doigts**

Chopin’s fiery etude Op. 10 No. 4 may be called the most technically comprehensive of all his etudes, demanding equal dexterity between left and right hands, the ability to handle multiple lines in one hand, the ability to extend the hand over an octave rapidly, and to keep the strength and power throughout without become physically exhausted. As in the chromatic etudes of both composers, pacing is an important factor in not using too much energy. There are select moments that are to be played *f* or *ff*, but the majority of the piece is written in a piano dynamic. Observing this helps avoid physical exhaustion and also ensures the excitement of reaching the climaxes when they arrive. Many of the aforementioned methods of practice and execution can be applied here. For example, it is advisable to practice in small groups, and to gradually increase the size of the grouping, exaggerating strong beats, and playing inner notes lightly. The use of wrist rotation in this etude is critical, and one should exaggerate the rotation in practice, particularly in sections of contrary motion. Another difficulty lies in the frequent shifts
between parallel, contrary, and contrapuntal figurations. To gain security in moving from section to section, it is helpful find “checkpoints” where the hands align on a strong beat or on the same note. As in the chromatic etude of Debussy, keeping the fingers close to the keys in scalar passages helps avoid unnecessary muscular exertion.

Unlike the equivalent Chopin etude, Debussy’s etude *Pour les cinq doigts* is among the least difficult of his etudes, and its theatrical, satirical nature (here leveled against Carl Czerny) is polar opposite to the drama of Chopin’s Op. 10 No. 4. In a similar way to the Op. 10 No. 1 etude in C Major of Chopin, this almost serves as a prelude to the set of etudes as a whole. The pianist must be sensitive to the immediate changes in mood and whimsical musical interruptions. Again in opposition to Chopin’s etude, there is no real climax or steady build-up of tension; rather, the passages seem almost stagnant, and are frequently interrupted by sudden and odd exclamations. As a result, the pianist must be more prepared for these difficult exclamations, since they come without warning or chance for preparation. The one build up of tension occurs when the left and right alternate white note and black note scales (this bitonality represents a possible influence of Igor Stravinsky), requiring a great deal of coordination between the hands. Again, the first note of each group should be emphasized and practiced as a landing point.
vi. Chopin’s Etude Op. 25 and Debussy’s Pour les arpèges composés

The difficulty in Chopin’s so called “Aeolian Harp” etude is primarily one of voicing, bringing out the top melody notes and bass note and rolling over the smaller notes rather than playing them. Thus, each beat should be played with one motion, with the weight given to the first note, and using a curvilinear motion, clockwise in the left hand and counter-clockwise in the right hand. The elbows should extend laterally, and reach their apex at the first note of each grouping. One must understand the harmonic rhythm and structure in order to phrase convincingly; one way to practice this is to play the first note of each group and play the inner notes as one blocked chord. This will also facilitate the inner passagework, as they should be treated as an undulating chord played with a quiet hand rather than individual notes. Because of the density of notes, one should use a shallow and fluttering pedal, changing primarily based on harmonic shifts, avoiding too muddy of a texture.

In Debussy’s Pour les arpèges composés, the arpeggiations do not have a melodic stress as in the “Aeolian Harp,” but rather serve as one harmonic motion. When a melody does emerge, the difficulty is in projecting the melody note through the accompaniment, since they are interwoven, requiring careful articulation and voicing. One should practice the dotted rhythm of the melody separately from the arpeggiated chord, again using blocked chords in place of the arpeggiations. In passages written in smaller notes, one might be tempted to treat the rhythm in a free, cadenza-like manner; however, one ought to keep a fairly regular meter, emulating the strum of a harp using alternating hands. The smaller notes should be played lightly and off the key, letting the sonority swell over the
pedal. In changing from smaller note-heads to standard note-heads, one ought to distinguish the articulations in such way that suggest two different instruments. Every passage in this etude should be executed with a light attack, with a sensitivity to touch, color, and articulation.

vii. Chopin’s Op. 25 No. 4 and Debussy’s Pour les Accords

Chopin’s etude in A minor, Op. 25 No. 4 is an atypical work of Chopin in its jagged contour and highly rhythmic style. As with the octave etude, the wrist is the chief mechanism, and in order to achieve a crisp staccato attack, the fingers should be kept firm and close to the keys. Because each chord is played on an upbeat, the chord should be played from the key rather than from above, in a similar manner as the inner notes of the Op. 10 No. 2 etude, also in A minor. One should not use too much force and weight from the entire arm, but focus the energy of the forearm and wrist. When more melodic material arises in the top voice, one should simply relax the top finger to achieve a more singing tone while keeping the underlying rhythmic nature. Unless marked, one should avoid use of the pedal, as the secco quality is a central part of the character. One might practice omitting the downbeat bass note and play the chords as if they were downbeats to practice coordination and to gain a clear conception of the harmonic structure.

Debussy’s etude Pour les accords is one of the most difficult of the etudes, and is similar to its equivalent etude of Chopin in its rhythmic structure. The difficulty lies in the rapid jumps in contrary motion of chords and octaves in both hands and the rhythmic complexity. With such thick chords and wide leaps, one must physically memorize the
distance of leaps on the keyboard, as there is not time to hesitate and find each chord before playing it. This is a tedious process that must be undertaken slowly and carefully. One can practice silently, by “ghost practice”, that is, finding each chord but not depressing the keys. Conversely, one should also practice forming the chord in the hand while in the air, so that one can focus on accuracy in dropping the arm. Another helpful practicing strategy is to rearrange the rhythm so that each leap, from one chord to the next is practiced and mastered. It is also beneficial to practice rhythmic pattern away from the piano, perhaps on the piano lid, to internalize the rhythm without wasting energy on the chords themselves in the early stages. Debussy specifically distinguishes the different levels of accentuation and stress, and this must be carefully observed. Unlike most cases, practicing hands alone will actually cause more confusion than benefit, as one needs to feel centered to execute the leaps in contrary motion. The sensation must be of both arms spreading out symmetrically from the back as one unit.

It has become common practice among pedagogical resources to arrange pieces in order of difficulty. However, when a student has reached an advanced enough level to play any of these etudes, the situation is no longer about what is more difficult, but what a student’s strengths and weaknesses are. Often, students seem to be born with octaves, or thirds, for example, and these etudes will not be as difficult for them as with others. Thus, there is no leveling system for these etudes; rather, they must be given with the teacher’s discretion, based on the familiarity and understanding of each student’s technical needs, strengths, and weaknesses.
Chapter 4: Application

Based on the study of these etudes with regards to musical gesture and technical approach, it is possible and beneficial to find instances in the other works of each composer of the same technical issue addressed in the etudes. Chopin himself stated that every technical problem of his compositions could be found in his etudes. Furthermore, the more one encounters and studies these technical difficulties in an etude setting, the more natural and enjoyable the experience will be when one encounters them in a larger musical context; one can focus on more of the musical content in a broader context of the piece without having to labor over the technical difficulties.

As has been mentioned earlier, an important distinction between the etudes of Chopin and those of Debussy is that Chopin’s were composed earlier in his compositional lifetime, while Debussy’s were written near the end of his. Thus, Chopin’s more mature compositions were written after both books of etudes, and seem to more consciously and literally call up certain technical feats that were devised in his etudes. The etudes of Debussy seem to focus on musical or coloristic ideas as a first priority, with technical topics following these as a result.

While there are numerous examples in each composer’s output of these technical difficulties, prominent examples will be given and explained below.
i. The use of octaves in Chopin and Debussy

The dramatic opening of the third Scherzo of Chopin gives a violent statement of its theme in parallel octaves. As in the more strenuous sections of the etude Op. 25 No. 10, a light attack primarily with the wrist is required. Additionally, the phrase should be played in one large motion with the arm, letting the wrist alone play the octaves.

Example 1: Chopin Scherzo #3, Op. 39, mm. 17-37

Near the climactic ending Debussy’s L’isle Joyeuse, a highly rhythmic character is developed, and the excitement of declamatory octave statements ushers in the coda. These octaves require tremendous strength and sharpness in attack. As in the etude Pour les octaves, the octave passagework is used as a musical tool in a crucial moment, rather than using octaves throughout the piece.
Example 2: Debussy’s L’isle Joyeuse, mm. 199-212
ii. The use of sixths in Chopin and Debussy

In Chopin’s beautiful nocturne Op. 37 No.2, double-note passagework is consistently used in the primary thematic section, and must be executed with delicacy, charm, and lyricism, as a duet. The right hand must float above the barcarolle-like ostinato of the left hand, with a tasteful balance of strictness and freedom.

Example 3: Nocturne in G Major, Op. 37 No. 2, mm. 11-20

The Sarabande of Debussy’s *Pour le Piano* suite contains the most coloristic writing in the suite, evoking an atmosphere of antiquity with its modal writing and parallel chord streaming. The use of parallelism is one of the most distinguishing features of Debussy’s early period, and is readily exemplified in this Sarabande, with parallel
sixths - colored by inner voices that outline a first inversion seventh chord - moving in parallel motion.

Example 4: Debussy’s *Pour le Piano*, L. 95, Sarabande, mm. 33-41
iii. The use of chromatic passagework in Chopin and Debussy

In the G-sharp minor Prelude from the Op. 28 Preludes, Chopin applies the same technique used in his Op. 10 No. 2 etude in A minor, but rhythmically contracted. Instead of four note groups, he uses two note groups. It is notable that he indicates a long phrase rather than two-note slurs. Due to this rhythmic contraction, the wrist is of even more vital importance.

Example 5: Chopin’s Prelude in G-sharp minor, Op. 28 No. 12, mm. 1-6

Debussy’s *Six Epigraphes antiques* are among Debussy’s later compositions, dating from 1914, and were originally written for piano four-hands. Debussy later published a version re-scored for solo piano. In the last piece, *Pour remercier la pluie au matin*, the opening material demands delicate and even chromatic passagework in the right hand over the left hand thematic material that is very similar to what is found in the etude *Pour les degrés chromatiques*. 
Example 6: Debussy’s *Pour remercier la pluie au matin* from *Six Epigraphes antiques*, mm. 1-6

**iv. The use of thirds in Chopin and Debussy**

The coda of Chopin’s fourth ballade is notorious for its brutal difficulties, including rapid chromatic double thirds written inside outer melodic notes. They should be played with a down-up motion with the arm, not focusing too much on individual thirds. As in the etude, it is important to find the fingering that works best individually.
Debussy’s prelude *Pour les tierces alternées* can be thought of not only as an application of the technical issue of thirds found in his etude *Pour les tierces*, but also as an extension, dealing with the issue of alternating thirds rather than double thirds in the same hand. Thus, coordination between left and right hand is essential, particularly in passages of rapid hand crossing over a wide register in a very rapid tempo. The alternating thirds should be played in an even and motoric fashion.

Example 7: Chopin Ballade No. 4 in F minor, Op. 52, mm. 215- 218
Example 8: Debussy Prelude *Pour les tierces alternées*, Book II, mm. 108-124

v. *The use of five-finger passagework in Chopin and Debussy*

Chopin’s B flat minor prelude from the Op. 28 Preludes is notorious for its relentless finger-work that eclipses in difficulty most of the etudes. The difficulty lies not only in the passagework itself, but also in the demands of muscular endurance. Thus, practice should be approached in a similar manner as in the etude Op. 10 No. 4, i.e., starting with small groups and gradually increasing the size, and pacing muscular expenditure.
Example 9: Chopin Prelude in B flat minor, Op. 28 No. 16. mm. 30-35

In Debussy’s *Brouillards* from the second book of Preludes, the finger patterns in the right hand are combined with chords in the left hand, creating one musical unit. Again, this makes coordination between the hands of vital importance. As in the etude *Pour les cinq doigts*, there are frequent hand crossings that require coordination and accuracy in leaping in an unprepared context. Because of the frequent use of the whole tone scale, pedaling should be given extra care, and can be used to enhance the musical gestures.
vi. Use of rapid arpeggios in Chopin and Debussy

The F-sharp minor prelude of Op. 28 is another prelude that is infamous for its etude-like difficulty. As in the harp etude Op. 25 No. 1, the inner notes should not so much be played as rolled over, and each beat should receive one motion. The chief difficulty is that instead of the melody being in the top voice with the outer fingers, it must be played here solely with the thumb. Thus, the motion is simply an inversion of what is used in the Op. 25 No. 1 etude. The thumb must be flexible and should be released immediately after it is played to release tension in the hand.
Debussy’s *Feux d’artifice* is among his most famous compositions for piano, and is filled with brilliant pianistic effects such as black and white key *glissandi*, right and left hand crossing, rapid interlocking repeated notes, and menacing tremolos in the lower bass register. Debussy uses harp-like figures of the same kind as are found in his *etude Pour les arpeges composés*. 
vii. Use of blocked chords in Chopin and Debussy

In the first movement of Chopin’s B-flat minor sonata, Chopin utilizes a restless, surging rhythmic figure that gives the music a breathless and agitated quality. The stress on upbeats creates a unique sense of urgency. This rhythmic device, a rarity in Chopin’s writing, is also found in his etude Op. 25 No. 4. As in the etude, the hands should be kept close to the keys, using the wrist to provide the rhythmic impulses of the chords.
Debussy’s *Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest* is among the most physically demanding of the preludes, and could well be considered an etude because of its uncompromising difficulties. Though there is not the difficulty of wide jumps with chords as in the etude *Pour les accords*, the brisk and forward moving tempo make these chords very difficult to execute, especially because they have no consistent pattern and are given no preparation due to registral difference. The chords also carry the melodic line, so careful attention to voicing and pacing must be given.
As has been seen throughout the preceding musical examples, analyses, and comparisons, the music of Debussy and Chopin has very much in common, both musically and pianistically, particularly in the etudes. The technical traits and difficulties encountered in these etudes can and should be applied to other repertoire. It is my hope that through this document, teachers and performers alike will gain both familiarity and insight into the etudes and piano output of both of these great composers.
Bibliography


