

The Man Behind The Virtuoso Pianist

Charles-Louis Hanon's Life and Works

By Andrew Adams and Bradley Martin

Andrew Adams

is assistant professor of piano at Western Carolina University. He completed a doctorate degree in piano performance at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He has published numerous articles in *The Journal of Singing*.



Bradley Martin,

pianist and conductor, is the director of the musical theater program at Western Carolina University. He earned a doctorate degree in piano performance at the University of Colorado at Boulder.



Though Charles-Louis Hanon has been known around the world for more than a century—most notably from his last name emblazoned on the front of the Schirmer edition of his exercises—his life and other works have largely been ignored in the scholarly literature. As we approach the bicentenary of his birth, the time has come not only to examine Hanon's place in piano pedagogy, but also to explore the life of this quiet, devout man.

Charles-Louis Hanon was born in northern France in the village of Renescure on July 2, 1819. Trained as an organist by a local teacher, it is not known if he received more advanced musical education. At age 27, he moved a short distance east from Renescure to Boulogne-sur-Mer where he lived with his brother François who was also a musician.

Music was never the exclusive focus of Hanon's life: he was also a devout Roman Catholic, a Third Order Franciscan and a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Given his spirituality, Boulogne-sur-Mer may have been an ideal choice for a home: in addition to its fine churches, the city also contained numerous religious schools and charitable organizations. It is known from an 1869 article that Hanon was involved with a monastic order called "Les Frères Ignorantins," also known as "Brothers of the Christian Schools." Founded in the 17th-century by Saint John Baptist de la Salle, the schools run by the order

provide free instruction to poor children. One such school was established in Boulogne-sur-Mer in approximately 1815 by Léon de Chanlaire and Father Benoit Agathon Haffreingue, free music instruction was offered there by 1830.(1) It may have been for the school and its pupils that Hanon later wrote his *Système nouveau*.

Located in the Pas-de-Calais district of Northern France on the English Channel, Boulogne-sur-Mer is among the busiest and most beautiful seaports in France. A popular vacation spot due to its sea bathing, Roman ruins, luxury hotels and a famous casino, it was visited by many notable musicians throughout the 19th-century: Richard Wagner, Camille Saint-Saëns, Nicolo Paganini and Giacomo Meyerbeer are known to have vacationed there. In addition, Adam Liszt, father of Franz Liszt, died there in 1827 while he and his 16-year-old son were traveling, and was buried at the Cimetière de l'Est just outside the city.

Boulogne-sur-Mer was the birthplace of several famous men and women, including Auguste Mariette, one of the foremost Egyptologists of the 19th-century and founder of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo; Guillaume Duchenne, pioneering photographer and neurophysiologist of the human face; Frédéric Sauvage, marine engineer and early developer of boat propellers; Pierre Claude François Daunou, statesman and historian; Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, famed literary critic; and Benoît-Constant Coquelin, noted actor who appeared on Broadway with Sarah Bernhardt and his brother Ernest Coquelin.

Also born in Boulogne-sur-Mer, organist and composer Alexandre Guilmant may have played an unwitting part in Hanon's life. Charles Timbrell writes that Hanon was "forced to resign" his position as organist at the Église Saint-Joseph in 1853 "due to unjustified absence."(2) In addition, Andrew Thomson states that 16-year-old Guilmant was appointed organist at Église Saint-Joseph in 1853, the very same year in which Hanon "resigned" from the same church.(3) Is it possible that Hanon was released in order to make a position available for the local prodigy? Despite this incident, later accounts indicate that Hanon was still a respected organist in Boulogne-sur-Mer nearly 15 years after this incident.

Philippe Rougier further links Guilmant and Hanon by writing, "Except for playing the organ occasionally, [Hanon] took little part in local music life, which was dominated by Guilmant."(4) This statement, however, must be qualified. Alexandre Guilmant was nearly 20 years Hanon's junior and by 1860 had left Boulogne-sur-Mer to study and travel abroad, never again permanently living in the city. While contemporary accounts of musical events there sometimes mention Guilmant, the names of other performers appear far more often.

Of the hundreds of references in contemporary journals to the thriving musical scene in Boulogne-sur-Mer printed by the late 19th-century, none includes a reference to Hanon—either as composer or performer. This, despite the fact that by 1879, he had been honored by the Pope, recognized at two World Exhibitions and was the author of a small but impressive body of publications. Why Hanon was ignored in this fashion is a mystery. Perhaps he was content to concentrate on his own musical and religious life and not become involved with events in the city. Perhaps being neither a virtuoso performer nor a composer trained at the Paris Conservatory he was shunned by local musicians. Perhaps after the negative critical reception of his organ method he no longer cared about public opinion. Only future research will shed light on this intriguing question.

Hanon's first major publication was also among the most successful during his lifetime: *Système nouveau*, a method for accompanying plainchant on the organ, was originally printed in 1859 and was in continual publication for more than 30 years. In 1867, the volume was not only recognized by Pope Pius IX who named him an honorary member of the Accademia de Santa Cecilia, but was also given an Honorable Mention at the 1867 World Exhibition in Paris.

One of the most substantial documents relating to Hanon is a curious article by critic Oscar Comettant published in his chronicle of the musical activities at the 1867 Exhibition.⁽⁵⁾ Hanon wrote the *Système nouveau* partially using a notation system of numbers instead of musical notes that was popular at the time, especially in France, for teaching sight singing. Comettant was violently opposed to this system. Believing that it was more mathematical than musical, he wrote, "This system is of all of them [the] most intolerable, the most dangerous, the most inadmissible. It is a misleading mask for the ears by the eyes, a lie, a disorder, a chaos..."⁽⁶⁾

To further denigrate this system by attacking the *Système nouveau*, Comettant invents a fictional dialogue between Hanon and a church official in which Hanon roams across France searching for the weakest pupils through whom he can prove the merits of his method. Comettant exploits the pun on Hanon's last name and the French word *anon*, meaning—in its polite translation—"little donkey." The student presented to Hanon looks and acts the part:

Mr. Hanon, who is himself an organist at Boulogne-sur-Mer, and an organist of talent, told me recently of his manner of proceeding on one of these journeys.

When arriving in a city, he learns about the religious establishments found there and presents himself, his method under his arm, with the noble assurance of a dedicated author.

"Sir," says Mr. Hanon to the Head of the congregation, "would you have, by chance, a student in your community endowed with limited intelligence?"

"But yes, Sir," replies the Head of the house, smiling.

"It's just," replies Mr. Hanon, "that I'm a little confused about the term 'limited intelligence.' Is he really stupid, or just that they call him stupid, your student?"

"Entirely stupid, sir. And I, myself, have several witnesses to this case."

"Ah! So much the better," adds Mr. Hanon with a satisfied air. "I was told that your establishment was one of the most substantial in the whole district and that I would not have much trouble finding what I wanted."

...The Head of the community... searches among his dunces for the most stupid and delivers him body and soul to Mr. Hanon.

The dunce presents himself. He has long ears and scratches them slowly to put on a bold front.

"Well! my friend," says the author of the *Universal Organist*, "it was said to me that you have a thick disposition...that you lack memory...that you have not been able to learn writing...in short that you are no scholar... In eight days or less you can accompany plainchant, though you don't know even the first sign, and accompany on the organ, although you perhaps don't even know what an organ is. Do you love music, my friend?"

The pupil laughs jerkily and moves to scratch his right ear and then the left.

"Very good," adds Mr. Hanon, "your response is enough for me. In eight days you will give your first performance as organ accompanist in front of the Head of the community and all of your comrades will witness your triumphs."

Despite the invective of this narrative, Comettant ultimately writes favorably, if reservedly, of the method:

Though a work like this seems made more to encourage and support ignorance than to serve the true interests of art, I must agree, however, after an attentive examination of the author's process, my fears in this respect were in great part dissipated. Indeed, one finds nothing in the book by the organist from Boulogne-Sur-Mer which deviates from the principles that form the basic study of harmony. One can thus consider [it] as a clever means of disseminating music, a way to open the true science of harmony.

In the 1860s, Hanon published approximately 30 piano pieces. Original copies of two pieces from the mid-1860s are in the authors' private collection: both *Les Montagnes de la Savoie* and *L'Exilée, méditation pour piano* comfortably fall under the category of "salon music." All of his known solo pieces have programmatic titles and despite technical elements that include grandiose chordal, octave and scale passages, the musical content is for the most part weak.

The Virtuoso Pianist was first published in 1874. Despite its iconic place in piano study, one fact becomes clear upon examining it in relation to other pedagogical works of the early to middle 19th-century: Hanon's work contains nothing that is in any way new or innovative. The method is, in fact, remarkably similar to a number of French and German piano methods of the period that display an identical progression from simple exercises to a variety of basic technical elements. Notable among these, Aloys Schmitt's *Études pour le piano*, published in the decade before Hanon's birth, contains five-finger exercises that clearly influenced Hanon. For example, Schmitt's exercise 170, the first exercise in his collection, is identical to Hanon's own first exercise published approximately 60 years later.

As five-finger studies are formulas rather than compositions *per se*, it is impossible to verify that Hanon copied some of his exercises from previously existing collections—a practice not unheard of in the decades before modern copyright laws—or if he unconsciously mimicked other composers. However, the similarities of his method to those published before his own suggest, at the very least, familiarity with the pedagogical literature available at the time.

The Virtuoso Pianist was only one volume in Hanon's four-part piano method. *Elementary Method for the Piano*, written after the first printing of *The Virtuoso Pianist*, was designed to teach basic elements of notation, rhythm and technique. The second part of the method was a collection of 50 pieces first published in 1872, entitled *Extracts of the Masterpieces of the Grand Masters for Piano, Organ or Harmonium*. An assortment of works (mostly transcriptions) by Mozart, Beethoven, Dussek and other composers, the literature is for the most part unfamiliar to modern audiences.

The third volume of the method was *The Virtuoso Pianist* itself. And for the final part, Hanon collected his original piano pieces and titled the anthology simply *Thirty-one Pieces in 4 Volumes*. Each book was designed to be studied with specific parts of *The Virtuoso Pianist*: volumes one and two of the solo pieces corresponded to the five-finger exercises (numbers 1 through 31), and volumes three and four of the solo pieces with the rest of the technical studies (scales, arpeggios, octaves and so on).

The 12 short studies entitled *The Delights of Young Pianists* (originally published in 1866) comprised the first volume of the *Thirty-one Pieces*. Rougier wrote of them that "the insignificance of their content is matched only by the vacuity of their titles."⁽⁷⁾ Despite this harsh assessment, Hanon's *The Dawn*—the first of *The Delights*, the full score of which was published with Timbrell's article—is virtually indistinguishable from the hundreds of other teaching pieces by his contemporaries. Simple, descriptive titles and naïve musical content are typical of similar pieces in collections by Burgmüller, Gurlitt, Heller and Streabbog.

The second and fourth volumes of the *Thirty-one Pieces* consist of his remaining previously published solo piano works dating from the 1860s and early 1870s. The third volume is devoted to his six transcriptions of arias by Bellini and Rossini originally published in 1871.

In 1878 Hanon's complete works were awarded the silver medal at the Universal Exposition in Paris. By the same year, *The Virtuoso Pianist* had been formally adopted for use at the Paris Conservatoire and Royal Conservatoire of Brussels. In letters reprinted in the front matter of the 1878 edition, three of the most famous professors at the Paris Conservatoire in the late 19th-century endorsed Hanon's exercises: Antonin Marmontel, Félix Le Couppey and Georges Mathias, a student of Chopin.

In 1917 Sergei Rachmaninoff wrote of the fundamental place that Hanon's studies occupied in Russia by at least 1891, the year in which he graduated from the Moscow Conservatory:

It may be interesting to hear something of the general plan followed in the Imperial music schools of Russia. The course is nine years in duration. During the first five years the student gets most of his technical instruction from a book of studies by Hanon, which is used very extensively in the conservatories. In fact this is practically the only book of strictly technical studies employed...

At the end of the fifth year an examination takes place...if the pupil fails to pass the technical examination he is not permitted to go ahead. He knows the exercises in the book of studies by Hanon so well that he knows each study by number, and the examiner may ask him, for instance, to play study 17, or 28, or 32, etc. The student at once sits at the keyboard and plays.⁽⁸⁾

Thus, only a few years after its first printing, *The Virtuoso Pianist* was in use at major conservatoires in Paris and Moscow, as well as in music schools in many other European cities. And in 1900, the famous Schirmer edition was published in New York, making the work available to pianists in the United States. Since then, literally thousands of reprints and transcriptions of the exercises have been published in dozens of languages.

After the third edition of *The Virtuoso Pianist* in 1878, it is not known if Hanon composed or published any new works. After a long and productive life, he died in Boulogne-sur-Mer on March 19, 1900 at age 81. Timbrell quotes from the obituary printed in a church publication entitled *La Voix de Saint-Nicholas*:

M. Charles Hanon was one of those Christians of old stock such as we rarely encounter today. He always gave generously to the poor, and he sustained a multitude of Catholic charities [as well as] expelled monks and impoverished artists. His piety was exemplary. He was seen at mass daily, and he took Holy Communion each morning. It was at church that he caught [the pneumonia] that caused his death a few days later.⁽⁹⁾

Though Hanon's works and their place in the history of piano pedagogy are rich fields for scholarship, he has been unjustly neglected in the scholarly literature to date. More than the composer of exercises and methods, upon closer study Hanon emerges as a pious man whose life and works have touched generations of pianists. Hopefully, this biographical sketch will inspire future scholars to discover more about the intriguing man behind *The Virtuoso Pianist*.

NOTES

- (1) *Le Pas-de-Calais au Dix-Neuvième Siècle* (Repesse-Crepel, 1900), 68.
- (2) Charles Timbrell, "Who Was Hanon?" *Piano and Keyboard* (May/June 1995), 31.
- (3) Andrew Thomson, "Alexandre Guilment," *The New Grove Dictionary*, vol. 10, 539.
- (4) Philippe Rougier, "Hanon," *The New Grove Dictionary*, vol. 10, 822.
- (5) Oscar Comettant, "L'Organiste universel, par Hanon," *La Musique, les Musiciens et les Instruments de Musique chez les Différents Peuples du Monde* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1869), 399–402. (All translations in this article are by the authors.)
- (6) Oscar Comettant, *Les musiciens, les philosophes et les gaietés de la musique en chiffres; réponse à M. Francisque Sarcey* (Paris, E. Dentu, 1870), section VI.
- (7) Rougier, "Hanon," 823.
- (8) James Francis Cooke, *Great Pianists on Piano Playing* (Theodore Presser: Philadelphia, 1917), 210–211.
- (9) Timbrell, "Who Was Hanon?"