

Introduction

The diversity of musical style in the twentieth century has led composers away from traditional genres, but a few established genres still prove to be fertile ground for new music, including sonatas, variations, and etudes. The etude has played a vital role in the piano repertoire – two roles, actually: pedagogy and performance - since the time of Muzio Clementi, and is still going strong as a major genre of the piano repertoire. A brief glance through the piano recital programs in major music centers, lists of required pieces for competitions, and publishers' catalogues show that the etude genre continues to occupy a central place in the piano repertoire today, and newly composed etudes continue to enter the repertoire.¹ The rather complicated history of the etude genre traces changes in its accepted definition and characteristics throughout its development. In the twentieth century this genre has become as much a study in composition as in piano technique, and one finds that etudes often are a useful introduction to the musical style of a particular composer. One of the most recent additions to this genre is the collection of six etudes by the Korean-born composer Unsuk Chin, winner of the prestigious Grawemeyer Award in 2004. At a glance, Chin's etudes exhibit challenging virtuosity and complexity in rhythm and structure comparable to the piano etudes of her teacher, György Ligeti. On closer examination, however, her etudes are a comprehensive survey of her own identity as a composer, both in her unique musical voice and in her approach to the piano as an instrument. In fact, the writing of the etudes bears comparison to her other compositions for piano as a solo instrument, the Piano Concerto and the Double Concerto for Piano and Percussion.

I propose an overall study of the six published etudes of Unsuk Chin, focusing on how she achieves her own compositional voice within a long-established genre, and how her etudes contain aspects of her technique and personality in a highly compressed form, as if

¹ For an independent study I took in 2004, I compiled a catalogue of pieces written after 1960 that are performed by pianists renowned for contemporary repertoire; the etude was a prominent genre in my research.

they were snapshots of her style. An overview of the genre and its history will establish the context for an introduction to her musical style, followed by an analysis of the etudes themselves with relevant comparison to the Piano Concerto and the Double Concerto.