

# Piano Transcriptions: Earl Wild's Virtuoso Etudes on Gershwin's Songs

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American pianist and composer Earl Wild (1915-2010) has been described as “one of the last in a long line of great virtuoso pianists/composers,” “one of the 20th century's greatest pianists, and “the finest transcriber of our time.” He transcribed seven George Gershwin’s popular songs: “I Got Rhythm,” “Fascinating Rhythm,” “The Man I Love,” “Embraceable You,” “Oh, Lady, Be Good!,” “Liza,” and “Somebody Loves Me” as piano solo transcriptions entitled *Seven Virtuoso Etudes*. Because of my interest in the art of transcription, it has become my goal to discover more unique piano repertoire of transcription and reveal the nuances of the work in my practice and performance. While pursuing degrees in piano at the School of Music of The Ohio State University, I was extremely fortunate to study piano with Mr. Wild who was an Artist-In-Residence. In a faculty recital he performed three of his virtuoso etudes, “Liza,” “Somebody Loves Me,” and “I Got Rhythm.” These beautiful and clever etudes immediately drew my attention. Later I studied some of these etudes with him and performed in recitals over the years.

The focus of this study is on the selected four of Earl Wild’s *Seven Virtuoso Etudes*-transcriptions based upon the following Gershwin’s songs:

1. “Embraceable You”
2. “The Man I Love”
3. “Fascinating Rhythm”
4. “I Got Rhythm”

A brief overall transcriptional background, characteristics, a detailed examination of piano technique specifically on these four etudes, as well as a pre-recorded live performance can be heard at this YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqxJALvcaf8>

## Background and Characteristics of the Transcriptions

Besides concertizing, Wild was also interested in composing and transcribing. Since performing as soloist in Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue with the conductor Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra in 1942, Wild has been a leading exponent of George Gershwin's music. While performing the Rhapsody in Blue and the Concerto in F with Whiteman's orchestra in the late 1940s and the 1950s, because Wild wanted some solo music to perform as encores, he began to arrange Gershwin's songs for piano solo and completed seven etudes in 1975. It was originally titled ‘Seven Etudes Based On George Gershwin's Popular Songs,’ but later named as *Seven Virtuoso Etudes*. They are published by Michael Rolland Davis Productions. The

relationship between Wild's *Seven Virtuoso Etudes* and Gershwin's popular songs is similar to that of Liszt's Paganini Etudes to the original violin pieces.

Wild has combined his passion for improvisation, Gershwin, and nineteenth-century romanticism and impressionism. These transcriptions are amazing not only for their cleverness, but especially for their technical challenges. The transcriptions are also amusing. Certainly, Wild's transcriptions amuse because of his successful combination of idioms. One has the popular melodies of Gershwin combining with exciting jazz rhythms, and also some romantic and impressionistic traditions of virtuosic writing with brilliant passagework, counterpoint, and symphonic textures. Wild decorates the chosen melodies with various figurations and uses the original thematic material for further development without changing the spirit of the original composition.

The sentimental “Embraceable You” has an impressionistic beauty that is particularly shown using arpeggiated figuration. “I Got Rhythm” is a vigorous and an exciting piece which is reminiscent of Ravel's style of playing. “Oh, Lady, Be Good!” and “Somebody Loves Me” slow down the original tempo to match a rich blue melancholy and both etudes include many blues notes and scales. “Liza” includes a breath-taking technical virtuosity with fast runs throughout the piece. “Fascinating Rhythm” is a rhythmic and driving perpetual motion piece with only one and a half minutes long. “The Man I Love” was originally written for the left hand alone in 1954. Wild later arranged it for both hands in 1975 and placed it along with other six etudes as *Seven Virtuoso Etudes*. The version for the left hand alone is not considered one of the Seven Virtuoso Etudes. Both versions are published by Michael Rolland Davis Productions and only the version for both hands is discussed in this document. “The Man I Love” for both hands contains beautiful notes surrounding the melody and complex chordal and rapid single-note technique.

### Piano Technique of the Transcriptions

Earl Wild has a strong classical piano background. His superb keyboard technique not only comes from his study with famous pianists but also from practicing many virtuosic piano compositions. He not only combined Gershwin's popular melodies and rhythms with his own improvisation technique, but also with traditional romantic and impressionistic technical approaches in the transcriptions of Seven Virtuoso Etudes. These etudes are highly virtuosic in their technical demands and are valuable as technical exercises. That is why he titled them “virtuoso etudes.” In this section, seven aspects of piano technique that Wild employed in the four selected etude-transcriptions of “Fascinating Rhythm,” “The Man I Love,” “I Got Rhythm,” and “Embraceable You,” will be analyzed.

#### 1. Chordal Patterns

For Wild's transcriptions of *Seven Virtuoso Etudes*, this chordal technique is also significant. Most of the time the chordal pattern takes place when a climax or a full sonority of the melody occurs in the music. There are three kinds of chordal patterns in Wild's transcriptions, including block and scalar chordal patterns.

- Block chordal patterns

This is the most common chordal pattern among the two: block and scalar. Wild used the block chordal technique for both hands in his “The Man I Love.” and used double notes or octaves between chords. Wild used this technique only for the final A section of the piece for the climax of the main theme. These block chordal patterns are difficult to execute (see Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Block chordal patterns, Gershwin/Wild: “The Man I Love,” mm. 30-33.

- Scalar chordal patterns

There are two scalar chordal patterns that are included in Wild's transcriptions. The first pattern occurs in “Fascinating Rhythm” which contains a series of successive scalar chords to decorate the sustained E-flat major chord. These chords can be executed with both hands: the top two notes for the right hand and the bottom note for the left hand (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Successive scalar chord pattern, Gershwin/Wild: “Fascinating Rhythm,” mm. 21-22.

The second pattern appears in the coda of Wild's transcription “I Got Rhythm.” It contains scalar chords in the right-hand alternating with single notes in the left hand, are required to be executed *Prestissimo*. These fast scalar chords display Wild's technical virtuosity (see Fig. 3).

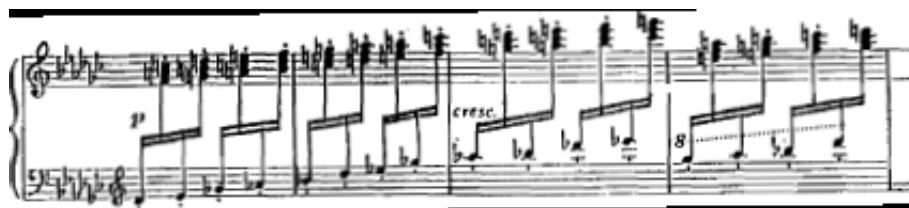


Figure 3: Alternating scalar chord pattern, Gershwin/Wild: “I Got Rhythm,” mm. 131-134.

## 2. Rapid Single-Note Passages

In Wild's transcriptions, rapid single-note passages are usually composed of irregular scales (combinations of both melodic and chromatic scales) or arpeggiated passages. It is one of the most important techniques that Wild uses. One of the rapid single-note passages that Wild favors using involves alternation of two hands. Three examples are the following (see Fig. 4, 5, and 6):



Figure 4: Rapid single-note scale passage with alternating hands, Gershwin/Wild: “Fascinating Rhythm” mm. 49.

As has been mentioned previously, Wild applies rapid single-note figurations to enhance his harmonic texture. An example is in the “The Man I Love.” His excellent improvisational ability and finger technique are especially shown using these rapid single-note figurations (see Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Rapid single-note figurations, Gershwin/Wild: “The Man I Love,” mm. 19-22.

Additionally, Wild uses a rapid scale passage in thirds in the transcription “The Man I Love,” which is also executed by both hands (see Fig. 6).



Figure 6: Rapid single-note scale passage in thirds, Gershwin/Wild: “The Man I Love,” mm. 27.

## 3. Arpeggios

Arpeggios are one of the most important techniques in Wild's transcriptions of *Seven Virtuoso Etudes*. They are often used to decorate a chord or a single note and usually display his dazzling finger technique. The broken chord arpeggiated pattern is his favorite kind of arpeggio. He employs this figuration frequently in his transcriptions. Some of the best examples are in “Fascinating Rhythm,” and “Embraceable You.” The quartal broken chord arpeggiated patterns in “Fascinating Rhythm” are particularly difficult (see Fig. 7); the broken chord arpeggiated

patterns in “Embraceable You” are sentimental (see Fig. 8). “Embraceable You” can be considered an etude especially for his use of arpeggio because it is filled with arpeggiated patterns throughout the entire piece.



Figure 7: Quartal broken chord arpeggiated patterns, Gershwin/Wild: “Fascinating Rhythm,” mm. 58-60.

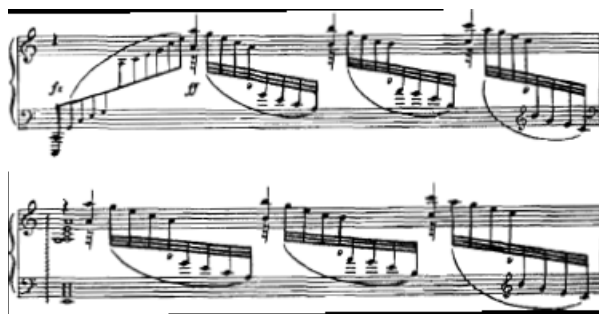


Figure 8: Broken chord arpeggiated patterns, Gershwin/Wild: “Embraceable You,” mm. 41-42.

Wild wrote impressive cadential arpeggiated figurations in the transcription of “The Man I Love.” These arpeggiated passages in the left hand decorate E-flat octaves and trills in the right hand (see Fig. 9).

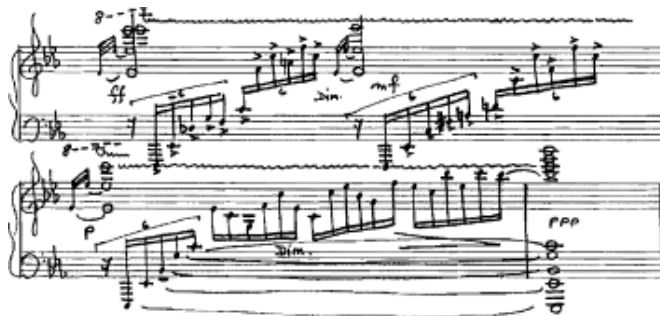


Figure 9: Cadential arpeggiated figurations, Gershwin/Wild: “The Man I Love,” mm. 34-36.

#### 4. Repeated Note Patterns

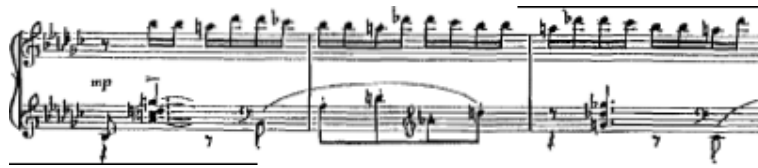
Occasionally, repeated note patterns are applied by Wild. He employs repeated double-note patterns in “Fascinating Rhythm” where they serve as a technical decoration for the right hand (see Fig. 10).



Figure 10: Repeated double-note patterns, Gershwin/Wild: “Fascinating Rhythm,” mm. 45-48.

Furthermore, Wild also applied repeated single-note patterns. They are usually written as consecutive decorative patterns. Examples are the following (see Fig. 11 and 12):

Measure 102-104.



Measure 112-114.



Figure 11 and 12: Repeated single-note patterns, Gershwin/Wild: “I Got Rhythm,” mm. 102-104 and 112-114.

### 5. Large Skips

Wild not only uses jumping in left hand broken chord skips, stretching in large intervals and chords, or rolled chords, but also uses hand shifting skips. Wild employs a left-hand broken chord ragtime bass in his transcription of “Fascinating Rhythm” (see Fig. 13).



Figure 13: Left hand broken chord skips, Gershwin/Wild: “Fascinating Rhythm,” mm.11-14.

The chords in tenth intervals in the example above may require a slight roll on each chord. Although Mr. Wild has big hands, he often plays a large chord with a quick roll. Rachmaninoff used the same roll technique on large chords.

Moreover, Wild uses hand-shifting skips in the perpetual motion of “Fascinating Rhythm.” The first example in measure 30 includes not only right-hand shifting skips but also skips in the opposite direction in the left-hand broken chord accompaniment (see Fig. 14). The second example contains consecutive skips in the left-hand shifting (see Fig. 15). These large

skips are executed at an extremely fast speed and are technically challenging especially for pianists who have smaller hands.



Figure 14: Skips in right-hand shifting, Gershwin/Wild: “Fascinating Rhythm,” mm.30.



Figure 15: Skips in left-hand shifting, Gershwin/Wild: “Fascinating Rhythm,” mm. 74-77.

## 6. Countermelody

An added countermelody is employed by Wild only in “The Man I Love.” This technique is used in the second A section. While the left hand plays the melody filled with broken chord arpeggiated accompanying figurations, an extra countermelody line is added in the higher register for the right hand (see Fig. 16). Because Wild did not want to repeat the main theme and accompaniment patterns twice in the same way, he made it more interesting the second time by adding a countermelody line. This technique is frequently seen in Richard Strauss's music. (from Wild, interview. 20 April 2000.) This complex treatment of playing the main melody with accompanying figurations in the left hand and the countermelody in the right hand is good for practicing balance and voicing between two hands.



Figure 16: Adding countermelody (on the first treble clef), Gershwin/Wild: “The Man I Love,” mm. 11-13.

## 7. Pedaling

The use of sustaining pedal is particularly important and personal in Wild's *Seven Virtuoso Etudes* because the romantic and impressionistic style of playing is required in the pieces. Most of the transcriptions contain pedal markings that are indicated with signs *Ped... \**. The use of sustaining pedal is needed not only in those places that contain markings, but frequently also in places that contain no markings. Frequent changes of sustaining pedal on chordal changes are the most common pedaling used in these transcriptions. In some passages Wild suggests holding the pedal for more than one measure or even several measures mainly for the sonority and effect (see Fig. 17 and 18).

Measure 47-48.



Measure 55-57.

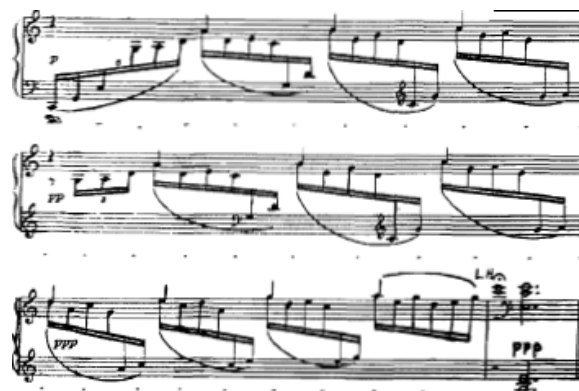


Figure 17 and 18: The use of sustaining pedal, Gershwin/Wild: “Embraceable You,” mm.47-48 and 55-58.

Analysis suggests that Wild is highly acclaimed for his superb piano technique and no doubt is an extremely talented improviser with great abilities of improvising on melodies of Gershwin’s melodies. These transcriptions were not just the improvisations on Gershwin's popular melody but a combination of traditional nineteenth-century romantic and impressionistic passagework, counterpoint, and even symphonic textures. From the title of the transcriptions, *Seven Virtuoso Etudes*, we can infer that Wild composed them for the purpose of practicing technique and performing on concert programs. These *Virtuoso Etudes* are fine exercises for studying technique.

I hope you enjoy my live performance of these four Gershwin/Wild’s *Virtuoso Etudes*: “Embraceable You,” “The Man I Love,” “Fascinating Rhythm,” and “I Got Rhythm” at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqxJALvcaf8> (see next page)



If you have any questions, comments or feedback, please email me at: [DrHsu@yunlingsu.com](mailto:DrHsu@yunlingsu.com)  
Thank you!