The Viennese fortepiano of the late 18th century

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Unlike Wanda Landowska’s pioneering of little-known music on the neglected harpsichord, the revival of the fortepiano seems likely to establish itself in a revitalizing of the traditional keyboard repertoire of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and even Schumann. Malcolm Bilson, as a professor of music at Cornell University and also as the keyboard member of the Amadé Trio, is a well-known exponent of this repertoire and an enthusiastic advocate of the fortepiano’s independence. Here he introduces certain aspects of the Viennese classics he has performed which reveal the fortepiano as a typical and eloquent voice of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a period which saw the emergence of new and distinct schools of keyboard instruments such as the ‘Viennese’ itself and the ‘English’.

I have been playing the fortepiano (five-octave pre-1800 Viennese type) for about a decade. I do not now, and did not at the beginning, play it because of disenchantment with the sound of the modern piano—on the contrary; I love the sound of the big romantic piano and was indeed somewhat distressed when first encountering a fortepiano that its sound was so light and thin. In 1969, when Philip Belt proposed bringing one of his fortepiano replicas (of the Louis Dulcken instrument from the 1790s at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.) through Ithaca, New York, where I live, I promised to keep it for a week and play a concert on it. When it appeared, I was at first rather disappointed. I had always loved all kinds of pianos, and had hoped that an ‘old’ piano would be mellower and warmer and richer than a modern one. What I found instead was an extremely bright and clear instrument, hard to control with its light action, and anything but mellow. But I had agreed to use the instrument for a concert, so I practiced on it eight hours a day. As the week progressed two things happened: I began to appreciate the extremely beautiful sound of the instrument, less rich and ‘juicy’ than that of its modern counterpart, but so much more varied in character and timbre; and I also discovered that Mozart’s music (the programme was to be all-Mozart) was eminently realizable on this instrument. The small articulation slurs to be found everywhere in his music came out so naturally on the fortepiano, which strove, as did Mozart’s music itself, not for richness of sound, but for lightness, clarity and elegance. By the time the week was up, I was hooked. I realized that I was hearing Mozart’s music as I had never heard it before, and ordered an instrument from Philip Belt for myself.

The five-octave fortepiano is often referred to as the ‘Mozart piano’ and is, of course, ideally suited to his music. But it is quite curious that the later the music, the more crucial is the choice of instrument. I rather think that for Beethoven it is more crucial than for
Mozart, and even more so for Schumann because as pianos developed, and as pianistic style developed, they became ever more interrelated. At the beginning, to be sure, there were the light, articulate Viennese instruments and the heavier, more resonant English ones; these were quite different from one another in character and design, and quite different music was written for them. But by 1830 this difference had become a strong issue, and there were staunch supporters for each type of instrument. The Viennese pianos of 1830 (by Graf and Streicher) could not compete in volume with the English-type pianos (those of Broadwood and Clementi, then Pleyel and Érard), but were preferred by their proponents for their light action and clear and intimate sound.

But for this article I shall focus on the five-octave Viennese fortepiano as it existed during the last quarter of the 18th century. I would like to give a few examples of music from the common repertoire, from Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven, which I think cannot be played adequately on a modern piano, and then say what I think constitutes a good fortepiano and what we should expect from such an instrument.

Mozart’s Sonata in C major, K.330 (300h), was one of the pieces I played in that first concert ten years ago; this was perhaps the first instance where I realized what the fortepiano could do. I had tried to play those first three notes at the beginning of the slow movement (ex. 1) lightly detached on a modern piano, but was never able to do so without its sounding choppy. I had eventually given up and just pedalled them through—as does virtually everyone. The articulation Mozart asks for before the ‘g’ in bar 2 is so important to the expressivity of that appoggiatura, yet also sounds choppy when played as written on a modern piano. On a fortepiano this comes out naturally and easily. The reason for this was not obvious to me at the time. It is due essentially to the fact that the articulations required by Mozart only make sense within what one would call a ‘light’ framework; the heavier the voice, the more a continuous legato (or rather a continuous heavy tone production) becomes necessary. One need only think of the difference between a ‘Despina soprano’ and an ‘Isolde soprano’ to realize this fact. The modern piano, designed in the time of Liszt and Anton Rubinstein, depends on a large tone production, and indeed the greatest pianists are just those who can produce such a sound from the instrument. I am not stating categorically that the proper articulation of this passage cannot be accomplished on a modern piano, but simply that I have yet to hear anyone do it. Perhaps the resurgence of the earlier pianos will encourage ‘regular’ pianists to change some of their outlooks regarding this music, much as hearing harpsichords has caused them to do with Bach’s music.

One of the principal differences between Liszt’s piano and Mozart’s is that by the time of Liszt the bass of the piano had become a rich, solid fundamental, for use as a powerful underpinning over which all kinds of virtuosic pianistic and orchestral effects could be built. But the Viennese fortepiano had a bass still similar to that of the harpsichord—rich but not overpowering in its fundamental, and eminently usable for melodic purposes. A passage such as ex. 2 is almost ludicrous on a modern piano, especially since it is asked for piano. There is simply no way to perform a movement such as this satisfactorily on a modern piano, and most musicians and the public have a completely false notion of Beethoven’s perverseness in setting music of this type in such a register. It has become very hard for me to judge a performance of such a movement with modern instruments because it is so far from what Beethoven could have conceived that the greatest artistry of a Serkin or a Menuhin can do little to overcome these difficulties, marvellous and full of insight though their performances may be from other points of view. This particular sonata has many such melodic statements in the extreme lower register of the piano.

It is often pointed out, and quite correctly, that the English piano as early as the 1770s was already striving for a larger, fuller tone, and that this was achieved through the heavier English action and more robust construction. But in addition, the two types of pianos—the English and the Viennese—had very different kinds of damping mechanisms. The English
pianos had gentle dampers, ‘leather-dusters’, as they were sometimes called, while the Viennese pianos had lightning-quick leather dampers. I would go so far as to say that the damping is almost the chief characteristic of the Viennese piano. It is significant that the keyboard music of Vienna of this period demonstrates more small slurring than is found in the music of any other period, and at the same time the instrument demonstrates the most efficient damping. No other keyboard instrument can induce silence so well; indeed, no other keyboard instrument even strives to do so. The English obviously did not want such efficient damping (it doesn’t help the long, singing line) while the Viennese put no pedals on their pianos until they went to the six-octave instrument. If one compares the keyboard sonatas of Mozart and Haydn with those of Dussek and Clementi, one sees a great difference in the kinds of slurs used and the kinds of articulation (or lack of articulation) requested of the player, and this goes along very well with what was being asked of the two types of instruments by their makers.

The short eighth-notes in the left hand of ex. 3 are of course stopped on a modern piano with its felt dampers, but on a fortepiano with leather dampers they have an incomparable crispness, and the whole piece comes to life as it simply never can do on a modern piano. Whereas on a modern piano the notes are shortened, on a Viennese fortepiano they are stopped dead in their tracks! One could easily cite many other such examples. In this regard it must be said that a restored instrument or a replica fitted with felt dampers is missing what must be considered one of the most important ingredients of the fortepiano.

In sleeve notes of a fortepiano recording by an eminent harpsichordist one may read that playing the fortepiano comes easily to the harpsichordist and only with difficulty to the modern pianist. I do not believe that to be accurate. Those who could handle the instrument well in the 18th century were those who played the clavichord, as was pointed out by C. P. E. Bach and Türk and others. Modern pianists have trouble because of the light touch and sonority, and harpsichordists have difficulty because they must get used to doing things tonally they have previously done agogically. In various fortepiano courses I have taught there has always been a fair admixture of harpsichordists and pianists, and no clear pattern has emerged showing one group to be definitely more disposed than the other. There are occasional individuals who adjust with amazing rapidity, and they are the envy of us all.

Curiously enough, the harpsichord and the modern piano share one thing in common that is contrary to the aesthetic of the fortepiano: continued resonance. A fine harpsichord is built for resonance; the action of
the small cloth dampers is slight compared to the fortepiano’s separate leather damping, and the afterlengths of the strings (between the bridge and the hitch pins) are left undamped on the harpsichord to help the resonance of the instrument. (A noted harpsichordist once suggested to a friend of mine who has a very fine replica fortepiano that she should take out the tape behind the bridge, to help the resonance.)

I am in no way averse to stating that the modern piano has many advantages over the early fortepiano, but it is curious that virtually none of them help the music of the late 18th century; indeed, it is precisely those effects the mid-19th-century builders were striving for in their instruments that create problems in the proper playing of late-18th-century music. Recently I had a curious experience; I played the Mozart E flat Piano Quartet (K.493) on a modern piano. There was to be a student concert here in our music department, on regular modern instruments and at the last minute the student pianist was unable to play, so they asked me if I would help out. In the past ten years I had not played Mozart on a modern piano, and was intrigued to see how it would seem to me. In many ways the E flat Quartet is not ill-suited to the modern piano; in contrast to the Beethoven piano-violin sonata cited earlier, most of the passage-work takes place in the upper registers of the instrument. Yet, I was amazed how limited this music sounded on the modern piano, with its far greater tonal resources. First of all, one cannot play very softly and intimately, because the modern piano needs to have a certain resonance before it begins to speak (cf. the remarks on ex. 1). But then one cannot play very loudly either (and the best Mozart players on a modern piano do not) because then it is far too bombastic. The inevitable result on a modern piano with a good sound is utter sweetness all the time. There is no need to explain, in these pages, that all the string players used continuous vibrato on every note (even the accompanying ones) as is their wont, so that a passage such as ex. 4 was totally devoid of all its expressivity.

I would play this, on the fortepiano, leaning fully into the rich chords in the bass, and swelling towards the sf; it is a passionate outburst in the keyboard part. In this particular passage I would use the knee-lever heavily as well (such pedalling sounds absolutely absurd on a modern piano, and I restrained myself admirably!) And just imagine the heavenly answer from the strings, non-vibrato pp, especially at bar 33. But all this was lacking in our performance, and essentially because of the instruments used.3

I have often heard it stated by scholars and others interested in performance on early instruments that they would rather hear a great artist on the wrong instrument than a mediocre player on the right one. I am no longer willing to accept that statement. Perhaps it is wrong to put the instrument before the artist, but I have begun to feel that it must be done. First of all, for a mediocre performance it does not matter what kind

Ex. 3 Haydn: Sonata in G Major Hob. 40, 2nd movement, bars 1-8

Presto

Fortepiano by Johann Schantz (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) believed to have belonged to Haydn, who wrote to Frau von Genzinger on 27 June 1790: ‘It’s only a pity that Your Grace doesn’t own a Schantz fortepiano, on which everything is better expressed… Your beautiful hands and their facility of execution deserve this and much more.”

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of instrument is used. This is not merely a platitude; the choice of instrument only becomes meaningful when the artist has something very specific to express. My ex. 4 is critical only for those musicians who strive for the kind of expression we have outlined. Musicians who do not are in no way better served by authentic instruments than standard modern ones.

A few days after having played the E flat Quartet with the students I heard a performance of the G minor Quartet (K.478) by one of the most famous American pianists with one of the most famous American string quartets. They are all superb musicians, with wonderful flair and a high sense of expressivity. They even used a good modern edition, I happened to notice. To my ears the performance was extremely limited, however, and I believe could not but be so with a nine-foot Steinway concert grand, modernized string instruments with Tourte bows, and a 2,300-seat concert hall to fill with sound. There is simply no way that the greatest, most sensitive artist can ever come close to a true Mozartean sense with such a set-up.

There is the question of whether to try to obtain restored originals or have copies made. This is a difficult question, and seems to arouse strong feelings in many. Actually, I think there are very beautiful and very bad instruments to be had in both categories; the question therefore is not so much old v. new as it is good v. bad. It is true that Johann Andreas Stein is not alive today, and that the most careful craftsman and copyst is not a Johann Andreas Stein. It is equally true, in my opinion, that an ‘original’ Stein instrument is probably not original either, because someone will have had to restore it, and someone has therefore set his own personal imprint on it, no matter how hard he may try not to. And if someone claims he has an instrument that has never been restored, what can that sound like? The average concert grand in use today is restrung or has new hammers every ten or twenty years; what would a piano sound like that had 150-year-old strings and hammers?

In conclusion, I would like to say that I do find the sound of the fortepiano (a good one, of course) to be exquisite. If at first I found the tone to be thin, I now find the tone of a modern piano to be distinctly thick by comparison. Almost inevitably, when I give a fortepiano concert, someone will approach me afterwards and say ‘I never want to hear a Steinway again’. On the other hand, last spring a friend of mine heard the remark, ‘I’m sorry, but I still prefer the “old” piano’ (“old” meaning of course the modern piano, not this new-fangled instrument). This is inevitable, I suppose. I would like to hope that it is not the sound of the instrument that pushes the movement forward, however, but rather the searching for an ever-better interpretation of the music, ever closer to what the composer intended. Then all instruments will find their proper place in concert halls and on recordings.

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1 Knee-levers for raising the dampers were to be found on most, but not all Viennese pianos by about 1780, but it is my belief that they were not put there for the same reasons the English put pedals on their pianos, that is, to increase general resonance. As a matter of fact, it would seem as though the Viennese builders almost set out to avoid (see following paragraphs).  
3 Mozart’s masterly use of the instrumental timbres he knew is nowhere better demonstrated than in this passage. Note how the piano starts with the full chords in the left hand at bars 27 and 29, and then proceeds to the s’(bars 28 and 30) at a closer spacing. This is answered by the strings pp progressing through their largest spacing and most telling harmony (bar 33) to their s’ at bar 34 (dare I suggest, with vibrato?)