

OF PIANOS AND FORTEPIANOS

by
Malcolm Bilson

In March, 1976, in the *New Yorker* magazine, we find a rather astonishing review by critic Andrew Porter of the young Rada Lupu in Carnegie Hall: "...Mr. Lupu is playing like an angel these days. But like an angel with *Flügel** a size too big. Haydn's F-minor Andante with Variations began things; then Beethoven's Opus 110; then Schubert's A Major Sonata, D. 959. All these pieces contain passages that are intended to be played full out - passages of clumped left-hand chords with a treble line running high above, or, inversely, of hard-struck treble chords above a heavy running bass - but cannot decently be played full out on a big modern Steinway : the texture implies the timbre of an early-nineteenth-century piano. In fact, for this particular program, of Viennese music from 1793 to 1828, Mr. Lupu was using the wrong instrument. It is early days, perhaps, to insist that Beethoven's sonatas should be played on the kind of piano for which they were composed; we are not yet so nice about classical music as about Baroque and continue to accept the former rendered on Romantic instruments. But the time will come, I believe, when audiences - and pianists- having once discovered the tone colors and clarity and alertness of wooden-framed pianos with thin strings and buckskin-covered hammers, will want to hear more of them, and new makers of such instruments will spring up, as new harpsichord builders have done."

*In German a grand piano is called a *Flügel*, which means wing-shaped.

This point of view would likely be as shocking and controversial today as it was almost forty years ago. But let's take Porter seriously for a moment and consider what Mr. Lupu might have done at the time had he taken heed. Where could he have found such an instrument? At that point the only restored early 19th century Viennese pianos (for that is what Porter recommends) were in museums or private collections. And most of these were restored superficially at best, which often meant tuning them a half- or a whole-step lower, not replacing hammer coverings or 150 year-old strings, etc. The first working replicas began to be built in the 1980s, and were for the most part 'interesting', (you could do what is described above by Porter quite well on them) but uneven and unreliable at best and certainly not very beautiful. Ten minutes on one of these could prove instructive or even inspiring, but one would be relieved to get back to a well-tuned well-regulated modern instrument.

Yet Andrew Porter proved keenly prescient. In the ensuing 37 years excellent builders have sprung up on virtually every continent, and restoration of historic instruments has reached a level hardly even dreamed of in 1976. A young pianist wishing to play Chopin on a Pleyel or Schubert or Schumann on a Graf or Liszt on an Erard has a vast choice of first-class, genuinely beautiful instruments from which to choose.

Goethe said that whoever knows no foreign language will not really understand his own, and the same can be said about pianos.

Anyone who knows the Steinway model exclusively will not understand the basics of what a piano is. One who knows Broadwoods, Erards and Streichers in addition to Steinways will understand that the sound and touch of each is individual, and that the character of each will have a (sometimes profound) effect on performance, in the same way that each singer's voice influences her musicality.

I do many master classes all over the world, and one of the first questions I invariably ask a piano class is "How many of you know who built the first instrument we now call the modern piano, when and where? Did Beethoven ever see one? Did Chopin, did Debussy?" I am generally greeted by an awkward silence, which I find discouraging. Are the answers to this and related questions not *essential* for understanding of what we as pianists are doing? If Beethoven had a different piano from ours, might a **sf** have had a different meaning to him? And if Chopin had a different piano from ours, might those often seemingly odd yet so meticulous pedal markings mean something different as well? Isn't my first responsibility to *understand* the works I play as deeply as possible, and that includes both the notation and its particular relation to the sound world for which the work was created?

The basic recipe of all pianos is identical: a hammer is flung up at a string, setting it vibrating until it either dies out or is cut off by a damper. Through this basic concept an astonishing variety of sounds and gestures can be achieved, according to varying basic aesthetics: Thicker or thinner strings on thicker or thinner soundboards. Large hammers, small hammers, leather-covered, felt covered. Wooden frame, metal frame, crossed stringing, straight stringing. Double escapement action, single-escapement action, etc. This short article cannot describe pianos in any detail, but merely wants to point out the enormous variety in the instrument we call the piano.

In the 1990s I and six young colleagues played the 32 Beethoven Piano Sonatas in New York and a few other venues. We used three pianos: a five-octave 1795 Walter type for the sonatas up to and including Opus 31, a six-octave 1815 Nannette Streicher type for Opus 53-90, and a 6 1/2 octave 1825 Graf type for Opus 101-111. It proved a revelation to see how Beethoven changed his style of piano writing, often drastically, as the instrument changed and became larger. The crispness of the fugato beginning of Opus 10/2



Beethoven - Sonata in F Major, Opus 10/2/iii

loses much of its incisiveness if played on the Graf Beethoven had in his last years.



Beethoven - Sonata in E Major, Opus 109/iii

Yet playing this passage from Beethoven's last period on an early Walter would rob it of its 'romantic haze', so essential to its meaning. Indeed, it is hard to imagine Beethoven writing something of this type had he still had only a Walter. We know that both Mozart and Verdi changed arias to adapt to the voice of a new singer; it's simply what good composers do.

All modern pianos, whether upright or grand, American, German or Japanese, are modelled on the Steinway recipe of the 1870s: string tension supported by a large cast-iron frame, with the tenor strings crossing over the bass strings; the grain of the soundboard running from treble front to bass rear, Erard repetition action, large felt-covered hammers. There are no exceptions to these basic parameters in any of the important pianos of the world. Let's look at these particular attributes briefly for a moment:

Crossed stringing: Neither Mozart, Beethoven nor Chopin ever played a piano that was not straight-strung (all strings parallel). There are to this day various theories of why Steinway crossed the strings back in the 1860s; it was a controversial thing to do at the time (and in my opinion remains so), and many important artists, Louis Moreau

Gottschalk among them, refused to play on them. (Gottschalk favored the straight-strung Chickering.) The cross-strung recipe gives a powerful but rather murky bass, and transforms, for example, many of Beethoven's thick basses into something vastly different from what he heard.



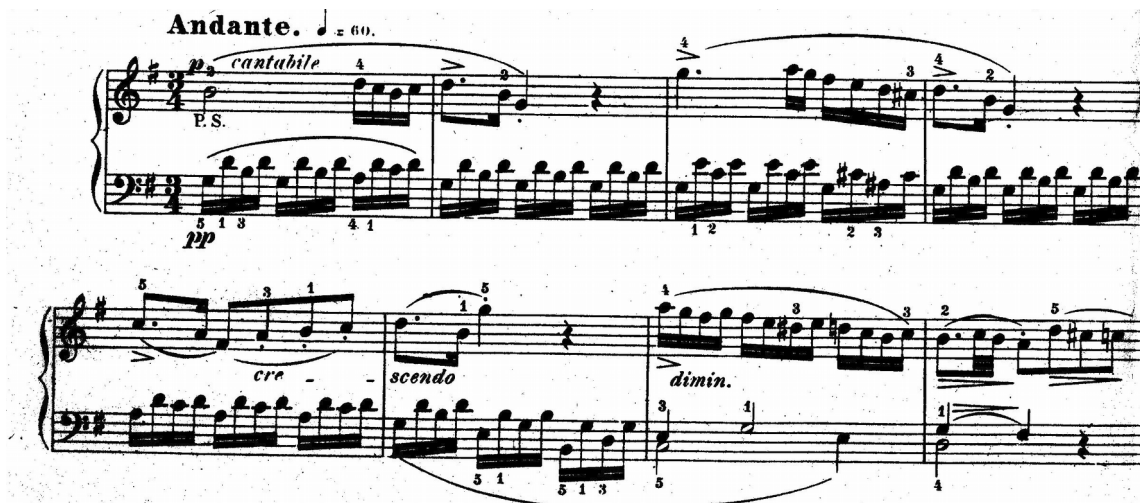
Sonata in f minor, Opus 57 (Appassionata)
1st movement

Although we have become used to the rather clumpy sound afforded by the cross-strung Steinway-type, characteristic bass passages such as these are clear and distinct on any piano Beethoven would have known.

Heavy stringing and large felt hammers: This produces a rich, slowly developing tone ideally suited for long, legato singing lines, but rendering small inflections almost impossible without producing a hiccupping sound.



Mozart - Sonata in C, K. 545/ii
Modern Urtext Edition
Version A



Mozart - Sonata in C, K. 545/ii
Sigmund Lebert's Instruktive Ausgabe, ca. 1868
Version B

I claim that one will find *no* recording of this work on a modern piano that doesn't follow Version B. But before trying to execute Mozart's clear articulatory inflections, modern-day pianists will first have to begin to appreciate the *affettuoso* beauty of his language, so different from the smooth, unarticulated language valued by Sigmund Lebert. From Lebert's time to the present the Steinway-type has been the standard, and every teacher I had as young man stressed this smooth, long-line approach. (I discuss this passage in my DVD *Knowing the Score*, see www.malcolmbilson.com, Featured Videos)



Schubert, "Wanderer" Fantasy, D. 760
1st movement, beginning

Ask anyone to sing the beginning of this work, and you will invariably hear exactly what is on the page: DUM, duh duh, DUM duh duh, DUM, etc. I have never heard anything on a modern piano save DUM, DUM DUM DUM, DUM DUM DUM, etc. Playing beats 2 and 4 weaker on a modern piano sounds rather like High Tide, Low Tide in

some sort of time warp, and I don't believe any musical person would do that!



Schubert - "Wanderer" Fantasy, D. 760
3rd movt, beginning

The situation is similar in the Presto Scherzo, where the second and third beats of bars 3 and 4 should be weaker still; here the down-beat stress > is replaced by the more emphatic **sf**. Due to the slow developing tone of the Steinway model and the efficiency of the damper, the tone of the heavy beats will not recede fast enough to allow the light beats to be played weaker.

Can these things be done satisfactorily on the modern piano? I have two answers:

1. Why not use the best instrument available? If we need to execute the hairpin curves in the Swiss Alps, why take a big Mercedes limousine when Jeeps are now readily accessible?
2. The modern piano would probably be far more capable of executing these things *were they to become part of our aesthetic vocabulary*. The way we *hear* music must always be the basis of how we play. Many of the most important modern-instrument orchestras of the world have learned much from the Early Music Bands; we pianists would do well to follow their example. We must start with the *Ur-instrument* just as we must start with a good *Ur-text* edition, and from this beginning each will develop his or her individual artistry.

But what about making a career? Many of our most talented pianists go to big international competitions, hoping that an important prize will help launch them on a career, and on occasion it does. But isn't there an oversupply of fine pianists on every continent; how many more are needed? The burgeoning of first-class historic instruments, on the other hand, has created a *genuine need* for the best talents, of which there are as yet only a handful on the international stage. Kristian Bezuidenhout is making a stellar career as a fortepianist, with all the early instrument orchestras vying for an engagement with him. The Dutch pianist Ronald Brautigam and the Russian Alexey Ljubimov play every kind of piano: Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven on a Walter replica, Brahms Bb Concerto on an early

Steinway, Debussy on a straight-strung Bechstein, etc. The young German pianist Hardy Rittner has been making widely praised recordings of Brahms on late Streicher pianos. These are but a few; the field is wide open.

In my own case I was lucky enough, in 1970, to acquire a first-class 'Mozart Piano' as it was called then*, by the brilliant fortepiano builder Philip Belt. In the ensuing years a great deal of my own work was perforce pioneering; commissioning pianos to be built or restored, learning to work with them to make them optimal to compete with the high quality of today's Steinways or Bösendorfers, etc., and of course cultivating the new musical language that had been obscured for more than 100 years, so different from the traditions my teachers had handed down to me. But now everything is available to any young artist, all it takes is serious study and devotion. Can one still find something new to say about that 'warhorse' the *Tchaikowsky Bb minor Concerto* (clearly inspired at the time by the then brand new Steinway), in contrast to what might be revealed in a fresh performance on a Graf or Streicher of that other great 'warhorse' the *Appassionata* of Beethoven? Is there a young Rada Lupu today to pick up the gauntlet thrown down by Andrew Porter almost 40 years ago?

I am currently preparing a program on an 1835 Graf-type piano. On the first half I will play the Beethoven Ab Sonata, Opus 26. This is a piece I originally learned and play often on a 1795 Walter-type - is it really 'legitimate' to play it on this later piano, clearly not what Beethoven knew at the time of its conception? I find it quite exhilarating! The later piano brings out different reactions in me to the music, and contributes much when I go back and play it on the Walter. I love diversity, I deplore uniformity, and I am certainly not a purist! It is clear that the greatest pianists of the last 100 years, whose Beethoven interpretations have been inspired by the particular qualities of the Steinway-type piano, have contributed a great deal to our perception of these works. Nowhere will you read me or any of my best colleagues advocating abandoning the modern piano for *any* repertoire. But there are now over 100 complete Beethoven Sonata recordings on Steinway types; how many more do we need? And just think what revelations remain to be brought to the light of day by the next Alfred Brendel or Richard Goode *studying and playing* these works on pianos that Beethoven had in his ears and in his fingers!

I cannot end this short article without a word about the modern piano. As we see ever greater variety in the early pianos, from Cristofori copies to restored late Streichers (Brahms' last instrument), the modern piano continues to diminish in diversity. Before the 2nd world war a Steinway, Bechstein, Blüthner and Bösendorfer represented genuine alternatives, not merely in sound quality and timbre, but in the action as well. When Artur Schnabel made his first

trip to America in the 1930s he refused to play the Steinway due to the action, claiming that he found it strange to have a piano where it is very easy to play loud and very difficult to play soft (this remains true to this day). Yet since the 1980s all pianos known to me (certainly Bechstein and Bösendorfer, Yamaha and Kawai) have converted to Steinway-type actions, so that young pianists *never get anything but one type* under their fingers. And the ultimate insult is the now ever more prevalent *all-Steinway school*, assuring that what little variety is left in the modern piano world is excluded.

For those who love pianos as much as I do, it is important to realize that it is *we pianists* who are at fault. *We* have to go the builders of Erards, Streichers and Walter, encouraging them, helping them, learning with them. But we must do the the same for Bechsteins, Blüthners and Bösendorfers - can these factories produce, once again, those gorgeous pianos of the past that were a clear alternative to the Steinway? *Has anyone asked them to?*

(at www.malcolmbilson.com you can hear sound examples of six beautiful pianos from 1795-1935 under Featured Videos)

*It was in the 1950s that the term fortepiano was coined, to distinguish the 18th century Viennese instrument from the modern piano. I believe it is time to do away with this artificial term - is Liszt's Erard a fortepiano? In my concert programs I now list the instrument as, for example: Piano by Thomas and Barbara Wolf, 1998, after Nannette Streicher, Vienna, 1814.