

PIANOS IN GERMAN CONSERVATORIES
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On Uniformity of Instrumental Sound

Recently I gave master classes at two of the best German conservatories. Although I was invited to teach on early pianos, most of the pianists in both places played for me on the modern piano. For me this is quite natural: everyone should play on the instrument on which s/he learned the piece, only afterwards do we go into details that might have to do with the difference between the instruments. All the modern pianos I saw at both schools were Steinways and I was told that in fact all their pianos were Steinways. I know that in the United States at both the Juilliard and Oberlin conservatories there are likewise only Steinway pianos.

I asked what seemed to me a logical question: why limit the students to a single type of piano? I received two answers: 1. Steinway is simply the best, or 2. On the stage of most concert halls in the world these days one finds a Steinway, so one should practice and study on those, in order to be best prepared.

Is this attitude really a good and healthy one for the musical development of the next generation of pianists?

In the *Jahrbuch der Tonkunst in Wien und Prag, 1796* (Musik Yearbook for Vienna and Prague, 1796) there is a lengthy article on the Viennese pianos of the time. Many are praised, but the pianos of Anton Walter are singled out as the most brilliant for the great virtuosi. For the more 'sensitive souls,' however, the instruments of Nannette Streicher are recommended. In Paris around 1835 it is clear that for virtuosi like Liszt the Erard was the standard; Chopin on the other hand preferred the lighter and more sensitive instruments of Pleyel. In the first half of the 20th century

one can still see such a clear difference: Horowitz and Rachmaninoff naturally played on Steinways, but we can also hear recordings of Cortot, Schnabel, Gieseking etc., on lighter instruments of Bechstein, Blüthner, Gaveau. On those recordings there are not only sounds but more importantly musical gestures that have virtually disappeared; today's brilliant Steinways simply don't *suggest* them.

Since the end of the 19th century all pianos have been based on the model developed by the Steinway company in the United States in the 1860s and 70s. All have a cast-iron frame with crossed stringing; the grain of the soundboard runs from treble right to tail left; all have an Erard repetition action with large felt hammers. I know of no exceptions to this basic recipe. Naturally there are variants: differences in scaling (one thinks especially of Blüthner's Aliquot System with the fourth sympathetic string in the treble), and differences in the repetition action. Especially Bechstein and Blüthner, in the first Post-Steinway years (if one can call it thus) experimented with different actions, in an effort to make the Erard system more sensitive, more 'German'.¹ Many of these early attempts hit dead ends, but gradually a 'German' action came into being (Bechstein, Bösendorfer, Grotrian, etc.) that was virtually standard well into the 1980s. Yamaha and Kawai also used this action earlier. For the last 20 years, however, all pianos known to me have switched to a Steinway-type action.

When Artur Schnabel first came to the United States he refused to play on Steinways; it was not because of the sound, but rather because of the action. Schnabel claimed it was illogical to have a piano action "where it is very easy to play *ff* and very difficult to play *pp*". To my knowledge this 'German' action is no longer available². This means that a young pianist will *never* feel anything but a Steinway

¹ Even before 1800 the English pianos had always been considered more robust, 'fuller' in sound, but somewhat more difficult to play. The Viennese and German instruments, on the other hand, were more 'sensitive', with a lighter and more responsive action.

² For example, every Bechstein I have encountered in recent years has had a Steinway-type action. I don't know whether or not Bechstein still delivers the older type of action if requested.

mechanism under his/her fingers. Now Steinway's action always aimed at brilliance and power; since nowadays all pianos strive first and foremost for these effects it seems natural that all piano manufacturers have gone over to a Steinway-type action.

But is this really good for the musical development of the next generation?

In the last number of *PianoNews* (German publication, May-June 2004) Volker Banfield (p. 74) has a great deal of useful information in his review of the new Yamaha Concert Grand, Model CF IIS. His first sentence is "The fortissimo is very good." Only then does he begin speaking of the "singing middle dynamic." Banfield: "The older Steinways had a much clearer, ringing tone. Today's Steinways sound much like this Yamaha, since many pianists seem today to prefer a hard-sounding instrument in the erroneous belief that such a sound will carry better in a large hall."³ What might cause such a difference: were the older pianos simply more beautiful, or might something else play a role here?

I believe the most important part of the piano, the one that defines its tonal characteristic the most, is the hammer. This is true for Steinway, Kawai or Mason & Hamlin, but it was equally true for Walter, Broadwood or Streicher. Pianos are the only melodic percussion instruments with fixed, mechanically activated hammers. Xylophones, marimbas or cymbaloms are played with mallets held in the hand, producing a far greater scale of dynamics and attacks. One can also exchange the mallets altogether for softer ones, harder ones, those made of different materials, etc. In pianos, however, mass and hardness of the hammer are constant, as well as the distance from rest point to striking point. Thus every degree of color and shading is dependent on the makeup and elasticity of the hammer material.

In Mozart's time piano hammers were made out of wood with a thin leather covering. In the early 19th century we already find somewhat larger hammers in a form resembling the modern hammer: a wooden core with several

³ Is Banfield using 'Steinway' here in a generic sense, much as the British use the word 'Hoover' to denote all vacuum cleaners? I suppose that Banfield would say the same of older Bösendorfers or Bechsteins.

layers of leather forming a pear shape. Around 1830 felt begins to be used; a hammer made out of a single piece of felt represents far less work than building up many layers of leather – but the felt was still covered with leather at the top. Finally the top layer of leather came off and the hammer was all felt, as today. Both leather and felt can be hard or soft, but also “nobler” or “cruder.” What should one expect from the best hammer?

The first thing that one should require of a piano hammer is that at a *mf* level it should bring the *best and warmest* tone out of the instrument. Banfield calls this sound the “singing middle dynamic.” With a mediocre hammer the tone can be too dull or too sharp, but also simply too coarse, too lacking in true “nobility,” as I like to call it.

But the best hammer must also have two other qualities: at a certain dynamic level it must get hard, even unpleasant. And at the other end of the scale it must get soft, velvety, even “breathless.” Soft as opposite to hard, and soft as opposite to loud are by no means identical, just as hard and loud are not the same. The best hammer must be able to give all the shadings the xylophonist gets from his several mallets – no small task.

But different pianists have different preferences, *as well they should!* At what degree of loudness, for example, should the hammer become hard? Normally between *f* and *ff*. Many players would like a hard hammer at *f*, others (*I for one*) only at *ff*. And should *p* be soft, velvety already, or only *pp*? Or somewhere in-between – the possibilities are endless! Often the same pianist will have different preferences for different repertoires in different halls, for example an evening of Schubert sonatas in a small hall or the Prokofiev Second Concerto with the Berlin Philharmonic.

All the Steinways that I saw in both these conservatories were ideal for the latter, none for the former. Frankly I saw not a single instrument where the “singing middle dynamic” could develop into a rich, full singing tone to bring out the full beauty of the instrument. And on virtually every piano the hardness of the hammer began

somewhere between *mf* and *f*.⁴ On none was there anything one could call a soft or velvety sound, even with the shift pedal depressed.

This problem is of course not exclusive with Steinways. At home in America I have a Bösendorfer from 1958 with worn-out hammers. We ordered two different sets from Bösendorfer in Vienna, but sent both back. Now we have hand-made hammers from Canada on the instrument; these are a bit too soft, however, and had to be lacquered to bring them up. As far as soft-hard and piano-forte are concerned these hammers are acceptable; mechanically the piano is the same but for tonal beauty and flexibility it simply cannot be compared to what it was.

The reader might rejoin “But you live in the past, my friend. Today we *like* such hammers; we want brilliance!” (Tuning is going up, etc.) I can easily accept that; everyone should have the sound that s/he wants; it is not at all my intention to force my ideas on anyone. But that *all* pianos should be so hard? And if *every* piano in an important conservatory is the same brand, and *every* one has hammers that become hard below *f* - *what will the students learn about the varieties of piano tone and feel?*⁵

At one of these conservatories a very talented young woman played me the second movement of the Brahms f-minor sonata, Opus 5. In the heavenly Db Major coda the music swells into a grandiose *fortissimo*, in my opinion full, rich, *voluptuous* - a full symphony orchestra with many violins and horns, but certainly without trumpets or tympani! Instead this particular Steinway gave a hard, percussive sound, to my mind quite the opposite of what the music would require. I can think of several such *ff* passages: the codas of the Ab Ballade of Chopin, or of his Barcarolle or Polonaise-Fantasy, the *Isle Joyeuse* of Debussy⁶.

⁴ A colleague at one of the these schools read through this article and thought I was too mild in my assessment: according to him most of these Steinways got hard even below *mf*..

⁵ I don't believe, by the way, that it is merely a question of voicing here. Of course one could voice these pianos differently, the fact remains, however, that in general hammers are much harder and of far less “noble” quality than they were earlier, and that there is too little variety.

Unfortunately these kinds of pianos teach such a talented young woman that all *ff*-passages must be equally hard.

For me this situation is simply disastrous for the present and future generations of pianists. Today, in virtually every area of life there is far more variety than 50 years ago, but in the performance of classical music we see just the opposite. When I sat in the jury of the Leeds Competition four years ago I was astonished at the level of piano playing in the world today. But when we heard Opus 109 of Beethoven five times, the Liszt Sonata five times or the Haydn C-Major Sonata, Hob.50 five times, all the performances of the particular work seemed virtually interchangeable. Of course some were more inspired, some more beautiful, etc., but the basic *concept* of these pieces seemed virtually identical. Naturally there can be many reasons for this phenomenon but surely one of them is the fact that all these pianists play and learn on such similar instruments.⁷

Listen to recordings from before the Second World War: singers, orchestras, pianists, to see that we have become far poorer and that with every decade we become poorer still.⁸ If we listen to the recordings of Rachmaninov, Edwin Fischer, Schnabel or Moritz Rosenthal the playing styles and sounds are so different, one could almost speak of different activities altogether! We hear not just various playing styles, but a variety of instruments as well: Steinway, Bechstein, Ibach, Mason & Hamlin. A richness that no longer exists, *not even in music conservatories* where students might learn a greater variety of sound and touch.

The instruments on which we learn our art are far more important than those on which we perform.

⁶ Debussy apparently preferred the Bechsteins of that period, with their large and soft 'balloon' hammers. It is said that when Debussy played one never heard a hammer strike a string - the music just seemed to float out of the instrument. What would Debussy say to these hard-hammered Steinways?

⁷On the stage stood a single concert grand: a Steinway. To my ears it was a rather hard piano, especially in the top two octaves, but this didn't seem to bother the other jurors. Some of the contestants drew beautiful sounds from it, however.

⁸ I am not trying to say here that I believe all pianists play alike today. I do assert, however, that instruments play a bigger role in the development of interpretive styles than is generally recognized.

I play on many kinds of pianos, also on “pre-Steinway” pianos, as I call them. I took this up because I saw that many facets of the music of Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, etc. could be rediscovered, aspects that had been hidden for more than a century. But not just for that reason; even before I knew that there were earlier types I always loved pianos – beautiful ones, different ones. It was always a mystery to me how anyone could want to play on only one piano and no others. Franz Liszt owned some 30 pianos in his lifetime and endorsed about 60. Today’s situation would be simply incomprehensible for Liszt. And can anyone imagine a passionate car driver who only drives Mercedes and no other?

Uniformity is certainly desirable in many areas. I hope that in a few years the entire world will drive either on the right or the left. In today’s world, where we fly across oceans and continents and drive rental cars, it should become uniform everywhere.⁹ But uniformity in art? How is the world thus enriched?

It is *we pianists* who are guilty; it is we who have allowed this uniformity to come about. What can we (if we want) do about it?

First – every pianist should know everything about his instrument. Most piano factories and piano technicians are happy to confer with an intelligent well-informed pianist. We should understand what produces the sound of our piano, and how it can be modified; we should understand actions, pedals, everything. What are really the highest virtues of Steinway, Fazioli, Kawai, etc. and how can each of these instruments be brought to its full potential and beauty?

Is it possible, for example, to go to the Bösendorfer factory and demand hammers as they were in 1958? Can one go to Bechstein and still get the old ‘German’ action? And are there young pianists who would be happy to play on these pianos, once they feel them under their fingers? Pianos, that are neither better nor poorer, but simply

⁹ A few years ago when I was in New Zealand, where they drive on the left, a European driver became confused and went over to the right – three people lost their lives.

different, with different strengths, perhaps more appropriate for *l'Isle Joyeuse*? I would like to hope so.

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