

MOZART, ON THE PIANO OR ON THE FORTEPIANO? PLEA FOR A COMPROMISE*

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Of all the instruments Mozart composed for, the piano holds by far the most important place. This statement is justified not only by the quantity and quality of the works, but also by the role this instrument played in his life. It is through the piano that he earned his living, as concert pianist, genius improviser and teacher. Today, his piano works enjoy a privileged place in the musical seasons of the world's most important concert halls. During the recent years, however, the issues related to the interpretation of his piano creation have aroused vivid controversies among pianists and musicologists. Essentially, these controversies can be narrowed down to the following question: can the modern piano of the *Steinway* era render the idioms of Mozart's language in all their complexity and diversity? The question is perfectly legitimate given the differences between the instruments of Mozart's time and those played by today's pianist. As early as in 1892, a century after Mozart's death, Anton Rubinstein realized this fact and said: „I believe that the instruments of each epoch had timbres and effects that can no longer be rendered by today's pianos, and that each composition can exert its complete influence only if performed on the instrument it was written for, therefore its performance on today's piano can only sound to its disadvantage.”¹⁰ These differences have grown even greater since the time of this assertion. It is also well known that one of the characteristics of Mozart's works was adjusting the writing style to the

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¹⁰ „Ich denke, daß die Instrumente aller Zeiten Klangfarben und Effecte hatten, die wir auf dem heutigen Clavier nicht wiedergeben können – Daß die Compositionen je nach den vorhandenen Instrumenten gedacht wurden und nur auf diesen ihre vollgültige Wirkung ausüben konnten, also auf dem heutigen Clavier gespielt eher unvorteilhaft erklingen.“ cf. Malcolm Bilson: *The Myth of the Authentic Pianoforte, Der Mythos vom originalen Pianoforte, Der Pianist Malcolm Bilson über ein altes und immer junges Thema*, PianoNews I/2004.

abilities of the performers and instruments he was composing for. The question arises, therefore, as to the extent to which the modern instrument distracts or distorts the expressive message intended by the composer and the extent to and means by which such potential distortion might be avoided.

The first aspect that we consider here is the difference in timbre between the two instruments – the late 18th century fortepiano and the modern piano. Although we cannot put an equal sign between the instruments of a certain period, since each has their own distinct features in terms of timbre and dynamic potential, they do nevertheless have some common features that we are trying to analyze, by way of comparison. The sound of the modern piano is longer, its low register is much more sonorous and the effect of the *forte* pedal is much stronger. It should be noted that the 18th century pianos used levers pressed upward by the player's knee, with a similar effect as that of today's *forte* pedal, though much more reduced. The size of the modern pianos, their metal frames, the cross stringing system and the material the hammer is made from, can definitely produce a much ampler, denser, even darker sound. There are also differences in tuning, modern pianos being tuned between 442 and 445 Hz, as compared to 430, which was the most frequent tuning in Mozart's time.

Let us try to analyze the consequences of these differences on the ways in which the Mozartian piano language can be rendered. An expanded duration of the sound favors cantability and is an advantage in lyrical passages, whose model is the aria-like vocal singing, requiring a preponderant use of the *legato*. The same duration, however, turns into a disadvantage when trying to render the declamation, so typical of the Mozartian instrumental style, which is imbued with the dramatic spirit of his favorite genre, the opera. The declamatory virtues of his writing grant a much more important role to articulation, as compared to what the interpretative style of the late 19th and early 20th century pianists had accustomed us with. The presumed inability of the modern piano to render the richness of the Mozartian articulation, or its expressive meaning, is the main argument used by the promoters of the historical, or historically informed performance, when they resort to period instruments, which, in their opinion, are the only ones capable of preserving the meaning of Mozart's music unaltered.

Another level of performance that is affected by the above mentioned differences is dynamics. It is hard to resist the temptation of the ample sonorities that the modern piano is able to provide, especially in parts intended to imitate the sonority of the orchestra, or in those displaying a high dramatism from pieces or sections written in minor keys, all the more so as the principle of expressive contrast is emblematic of Mozart's entire musical work. According

to the promoters of period instruments, the modern piano exacerbates the dynamic contrasts and thus affects the unity and integrity of the work.

The higher tuning of the modern pianos also brings about changes in expression. According to the theory of the affects, still dominant in the aesthetics of the late 18th century, each key is the reflection of a certain expression and therefore is recommended for the rendering of a certain emotional state. By changing the tuning, the keys alter their expressive qualities so that works written in a certain key will no longer express the affects envisaged originally by the composer.

In essence, Anton Rubinstein's opinion, just like that of the representatives of the historical trend, contains an irrefutable truth. Equally obvious, however, is the fact that nowadays, the conditions in which musical life takes place and concerts are held no longer enable the use of period instruments, other than to a rather small extent. If an orchestra playing old instruments or copies thereof can be heard in a 1000-seat concert hall, without music perception accuracy being affected, things stand quite differently in the case of a fortepiano. A pianoforte can well reveal its qualities and expressive force in a small, 200-300 seat concert hall, or in a recording studio, but would not be easily heard in a larger hall, so that many of the performance details that fortepiano players are rightfully so particular about would fade and thus become imperceptible. Therefore, since we do not wish to give up playing and listening to Mozart's piano music, we hereby suggest a few methods by which the message conveyed by Mozart's music could be rendered on contemporary instruments.

To visualize the solutions, one must first understand the role each parameter plays in the shaping of expression.

Mozart pays special attention to timbre, especially in the case of wind and string instruments and of the human voice. In his letters about pianos, he makes reference only to matters relating to mechanics, to the ability to play legato or evenly, *forte* or *piano*. In a letter dated June 12, 1778, he wrote: „It (the human voice) is imitated not only by the wind instruments, but also by the string instruments or by the piano”.¹¹ We have noticed that in his piano music, Mozart often uses writing elements that are specific to certain vocal, orchestral or theatrical genres. We can therefore infer that the piano timbre, as a means of expression, was not among his main concerns. He appealed rather to the mimetic virtues of the instrument. We therefore believe that the contemporary pianist does not need to try to imitate

¹¹ W. A. Mozart: *Scrisori*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1968, p. 75.

the timbre of the period instruments; he can be much more faithful to the spirit of Mozart by not restricting his coloristic fantasy and by using it, in exchange, to achieve the sonorities that Mozart suggests in his writing – those of the different instruments of the orchestra, or of the different vocal timbres.

Regarding dynamics, there are two performance components to be specially considered by contemporary pianists, as a consequence of the changes in the sonority of the modern piano. The former regards the relationship between registers. In the fortepiano's low register, the sound is full, but much shorter, and does not cover the soprano voices, so that there is no need for a very differentiated play in terms of the weight of the two arms. In contemporary pianos, the left hand must permanently play with less weight, with a shorter articulation, almost always in *nonlegato* touch.

The latter aspect requiring special consideration is the use of the *forte* pedal. It is desirable to pursue the effect of the fortepiano pedal by pressing on it only at certain moments, requiring a more special emphasis – dissonances or important notes in the melodic structure – in which case it has a similar effect as that of the string instruments' *vibrato*. However, if used in the spirit of Romantic music, in a Chopin- or Liszt-like pianistic style (a still quite frequent phenomenon), it will infringe upon the clearness of articulation, which is an essential element in Mozart's discourse.

Articulation and its importance in deciphering the meanings of Mozart's music is the fortepiano players' main argument against the use of the modern piano to render the 18th century music. According to their opinion, the modern piano is not able to properly articulate the requirements of the epoch, inherently leading to the distortion of the message and meanings of this music. The main argument in support of this assertion is the fundamental difference in the evolution of the sound in the two instruments. The sound of a Mozartian piano decreases in intensity right after the hammer hits the strings, whereas the sound of a modern piano first increases slightly and only afterwards decreases. Therefore, certain fine shifts of nuances, those rapid *decrescendos* pertaining to the micro dynamics of motifs and to musical diction, are quite difficult to achieve. A relevant example in this respect are the melodic structures containing those "legato" two-note sigh motifs in which there is always a stress on the former sound and a shortening and decrease in intensity of the latter. In the modern piano, the latter sound of the legato phrase, if played too slow, or too short, is likely to no longer be heard, due to the still too strong intensity of the former. However, given the dimensions of today's concert halls, this effect is substantially diminished by the amplitude of the space in which the sound propagates.

We believe that by skilfully employing the full resources of the modern piano and considering the effect that its sound can have according to the dimensions of the room it is placed in, a good pianist can render the richness of the Mozartian articulation and its expressive content even on this instrument.

Musical example: *Sonata in C Major*, KV 279, Theme 1,

1 – performed by Robert Levin – fortepiano – copy after an instrument made by Johann Andreas Stein, tuned to - 430 Hz.

2 – performed by Daniel Barenboim – *Steinway* concert grand piano

There remains the problem of tuning, which changes the color and affective properties of each tonality. Today, for example, a piece conceived in E minor is actually heard in D sharp minor, if related to the time when it was written. It is a totally different expression. But aren't the mutations occurred in the human psyche during the more than 200 years that have elapsed since the creation of these pieces, directly proportional with the changes occurred in the tuning of instruments? Aren't these changes in tuning a consequence of these mutations?

If so, it means that our perception is comparable to that of Mozart's contemporary listeners.

There is no doubt that all these are mere suppositions and speculations; for, no matter how tempted we were to play the time tunnel game, we cannot make categorical statements about things that are impossible to quantify and belong to the mysterious, transcendental side of music and of the human psyche. One thing is, however, certain – today, in modern tuning, we perceive the D minor as carrying the same tragic weight as that indicated in the 18th century treatises.

Today we are trying to revive a language that used to be convincing 200 years ago, and which would touch the heart of the contemporary man. We have at our disposal several sources of information on this language, on its symbols and on how it was meant to be uttered. The 18th century treatises, especially those by Leopold Mozart and C. Ph. Em. Bach, together with the period instruments, are of the essence in this respect. Almost all the great pianists nowadays agree that the use of period instruments is a source of knowledge, which can enrich and nuance our perception of this music. Daniel Barenboim believes that „the work of the best musicians in this field has brought us into a vast realm of meditation, especially in what regards the necessity to articulate the music of the 18th century with utmost clarity. [...] The valuable musicians who used to deal with original instruments did not primarily focus on

their use, but experimented and researched through them the possibilities of discovering the expressive force that these instruments had in the 18th century.”¹²

As the issue we have raised here is surely much more complex, our intention has been to merely touch on a few aspects illustrating the idea of a compromise. The knowledge of the expressive potential of the instruments for which a certain music was created is, in our opinion, equally important as the knowledge of its harmonic form or language. And the ideal would be to be familiar with this instrument by way of first-hand experience, and not merely by way of descriptions and recordings. By being aware of its qualities and limits, one can more easily understand the music that was dedicated to it. This will ease our efforts to translate the idioms of that music onto the modern instrument, in an attempt to communicate a more than 200 years old message to the contemporary listener.

¹² „...ich glaube, dass die Arbeit der besten Musiker auf diesem Gebiet uns allen viel Stoff zum Nachdenken gegeben hat, insbesondere was das Bedürfnis betrifft, die Musik des 18. Jahrhunderts so klar wie möglich zu artikulieren. [...] Gute Musiker die sich mit Originalinstrumenten beschäftigt haben, haben sich nicht ausschließlich auf dem Gebrauch solcher instrumente konzentriert, sondern haben mit ihnen experimentiert und versucht, Verwendbarkeit des Ausdrucks zu erforschen, den diese Instrumente im 18. Jahrhundert erzeugten.“ Daniel Barenboim: *Die Musik-mein Leben*, List Taschenbuch, München 2002, pag. 297