Introduction

This study investigates Beethoven's formative years as a keyboardist and his active career as a keyboard performer, the most important part of which stretches from his youth to the first years of the nineteenth century. Two elements are generally seen as responsible for the end of this career, namely the loss of his hearing and his changing ambitions as a composer. A convenient limit is the turn of the year 1808: Beethoven's last important public appearance as a pianist was on December 22, 1808,[1] and on February 7, 1809, Johann Friedrich Reichardt heard and praised the result of years of hard work by the Streicher piano-building firm: a "perfect" piano that possessed greater sonority and diversity than the earlier Viennese pianos.[2]

If we address Beethoven's keyboard playing and the practice of performing his piano works, one important question is in what way the keyboard tutors of the late eighteenth century fit into the picture. Opinions on this matter vary considerably. The relationship between an eighteenth-century tutor and eighteenth-century performance practice would in any case require careful study. The information we have about Beethoven's relationship to both is even less clear and often contradictory. Apparently even Beethoven's personal opinions about the theorists of his time varied according to the circumstances.[3]

This book is about change: it addresses the changing performance conventions during Beethoven's lifetime, his changing compositional style, his changing keyboard playing, and changes in piano building. I will thus describe Beethoven's pianism as a development, the early stages of which are just as relevant and worth considering as the more famous later developments.

One item that changed just as quickly and radically as Beethoven's composing style for the piano was the piano itself. When considering

[1] For some contemporary descriptions of this event, see, for example, Howard C. Robbins Landon, ed., *Ludwig van Beethoven. Leben und Werk in Zeugnissen der Zeit*, Zürich: Universal, 1970, 140–2.

[2] Johann Friedrich Reichardt, *Briefe, die Musik betreffend*, ed. Grita Herre and Walther Siegmund-Schultze, Leipzig: Philipp Reclam jun., 1976, 287.

[3] See, for instance, the anecdote about Beethoven's dislike of voice-leading rules and Marpurg, Kirnberger, and Fuchs in Franz Gerhard Wegeler and Ferdinand Ries, *Biographische Notizen über Beethoven*, Coblenz: Bädeker, 1838, 87.

Beethoven's pianism, one must inevitably make an assessment of the changing instrument. One typical flaw in earlier literature about Beethoven's pianos is the tendency to oversimplify the picture, taking for granted that he always preferred the newest pianos available to him, while the documents sometimes suggest otherwise.

William Newman's article "Beethoven's pianos versus his piano ideals," which appeared in 1970, was a reaction to this tendency. Newman stated that the three "Beethoven pianos" (Érard 1803, Broadwood 1817, and Graf 1825), "partly for the very reason, that they are Beethoven's only extant pianos and partly because they figure specifically more than any other instruments identified with him in the early sources, have been emphasized far beyond their actual musical value to Beethoven."[4] At the same time, however, Newman supported the common view that Beethoven combined a lifelong interest in the developments in piano building with a fundamental dissatisfaction with his instruments.

Ideas from Newman's earlier articles and from his book *Beethoven on Beethoven. Playing His Piano Music His Way*, published in 1988, have found their way into many subsequent studies by other writers.

In the meantime, research about early pianos has flourished and much new organological information has become accessible. While Newman's statement that "new documentary evidence is hard to discover in the oft-combed sources for Beethoven" remains valid,[5] a whole new set of tools has emerged with which to tackle the interpretation of the relevant documents yet again. Instrument makers have, through restoring many antiques and building new pianos after old models, collected an immense body of information about building styles, techniques, and materials. A vehement but informed debate is carried out at the border between organological expertise and opinions and arguments on the aesthetics of sound. In many cases, today's organological knowledge helps us to interpret the available source information about Beethoven's relationship to keyboard instruments and keyboard playing more precisely than only a few decades ago.

Often, however, multiple new plausible interpretations present themselves. Performance practice research has long tended to favor proof and conclusions, and the arguments are often only seen as an instrument to achieve that goal. Beethoven research is no exception in this respect. A case in point is William Newman's and Robert Winter's dispute about Beethoven's trills.[6] Both Newman and Winter strive for a positive confirmation of their hypotheses through argument, but they disagree because

[4] William S. Newman, "Beethoven's pianos versus his piano ideals," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 23/3 (1970): 484.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] For references and a discussion see Chapter 8.

the source situation is complex and because they attribute a different relevance to secondary knowledge.

Part of the problem in this example may be that a modern effort to bring misty historical information into focus does not always do justice to the historical situation; perhaps it only seems misty because we are lacking some of the information, but perhaps a documented vagueness is the consequence of historical tolerance instead (in the case of the trills, this would be a late eighteenth-century tolerance about various ways to play a trill). In that case, final answers simply fail to describe the historical reality.

For research based on the evidence from Beethoven's music itself, the greatest risk is that we let ourselves be guided by the Beethoven picture of our time. This should be avoided: even if, in acknowledging that the unique cultural relevance of Beethoven reception history is the force that makes Beethoven important today, we end up rejecting Beethoven's own performance practice or the practice of his day, we can nevertheless only gain understanding – even an understanding of the significance of this rejection – if we first acknowledge and accept the historical information.

Whereas a powerfully supported conclusion might have the potential to trigger a specialists' debate, an emphasis on argument greatly enhances the practical usefulness of a performance practice study, especially when a large body of conflicting material is to be considered. Often it is preferable *not* to choose among various competing answers to a question, thus introducing yet another set of constructed Beethovenian truths. I am convinced that using careful discussion as a tool to convey historical likelihood must be preferred to ever so skillfully constructed conclusions. This is the approach I have chosen for this book.

An important stimulus for the artistic aspect of this work was the concert and recording project of the complete Beethoven sonatas on period pianos by fortepianist Malcolm Bilson and six of his former students. The CD set was issued in 1997,[7] and radio broadcasts of a concert series in Utrecht in the Netherlands were distributed around the same time. In the CD set, the use of a total of nine old and new fortepianos (representing Beethoven's possible piano preferences and most of the relevant periods) illustrates the progress of Beethoven's piano style in a most striking manner. The project is founded on the assertion that Beethoven's pianos were part of his reality and hence worth considering. Pianist, recording engineer, and listener are made to share an essential experience: that of the practical and artistic effects of the confrontation of the composer with his pianos. At last, one gets an idea of whether Carl Czerny's 1842 statement that Beethoven's "playing as well as his compositions were ahead of his time, [and] the extremely weak and imperfect fortepianos of that time (until about 1810) often could not yet

[7] Claves CD 50–9707/10. The performers are Malcolm Bilson, Tom Beghin, David Breitman, Ursula Dütschler, Zvi Meniker, Bart van Oort, and Andrew Willis.

support his gigantic performance" describes Czerny's actual experience, or is an aesthetic judgment made in hindsight.[8] What is especially successful, in my opinion, is the fact that seven pianists with very different approaches are involved. As a result, the often difficult problems of Beethoven interpretation on the early piano are solved in a variety of ways. With Czerny's words in mind, one might think that the production of expressivity through force is the only true challenge in a confrontation between this repertoire and these instruments. Instead, the recording shows, in a most positive manner, that the realization of awkward technical maneuvers in notated non-accented dynamics, regularity in extended *pp* passages, and polyphonic and melodic clarity, challenge the pianist just as much as the more or less judicious command over the dynamic top of the instrument.

In one area the similarities in these recordings are, however, more striking than the differences: in contrast to the varied approaches to the sonatas from *c.* 1800 onward, the earlier sonatas are presented in a markedly uniform manner. A comparison with the available information about Beethoven's early instruments reveals that the performances of the earlier repertoire are compromised, indeed modernized. For the six sonatas up to the mid-1790s (WoO 47 and Op. 2), a whole range of historically plausible instruments has yet to find its way into the recordings. One wonders whether the pianists on this recording felt that the young Beethoven had access to instruments that are just too archaic to be presentable.

Moreover, if we compare the extensive indications for articulation in the three earliest sonatas (WoO 47) with the recordings of these pieces, we find that their realization has been adapted to Beethoven's later style. The three pianists who perform these sonatas have chosen to approach the passage-work of the outer movements using much more legato than the score suggests. Hence the recordings of these early pieces leave the impression that Beethoven's early notation needs not only interpretation but reworking in order to sound characteristic.

The very fact that the instruments chosen for these early pieces, and the legato touch, are so well suited to some of Beethoven's later works should alert us to the extent of his early development, and to the importance of the young Beethoven's learning and maturing, for our understanding of the performance practice of his works. So, while I was inspired by this project, it also raised questions about the significance of a more detailed approach to Beethoven's early instruments and the performance of his early works.

I should mention some of the key problems regarding the material encountered during my work. The immensity of literature on Beethoven means that it is impossible to consult all of the accessible material. This in itself is no reason for despair. Many areas of information are heavily

[8] Carl Czerny, "Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben, 1842," in *Über den richtigen Vortrag der sämtlichen Beethoven'schen Klavierwerke*, ed. Paul Badura-Skoda, Vienna: Universal, 1963, 22.

cross-referenced in the literature and the amount of material that specifically bears on performance practices on early pianos is somewhat less intimidating.

Primary sources have become much more accessible in recent years. Complete critical editions of the letters and the conversation books are available; some important sketchbooks have been published; many autographs and early editions of Beethoven's music have been reprinted in facsimile. Some institutions, such as the Beethoven-Haus in Bonn, have published an enormous amount of source material on the internet.

Most of the anecdotal literature is easily accessible through several well-known compilations, starting with Gerhard Wegeler's and Ferdinand Ries' *Biographische Notizen über Beethoven* from 1838 and culminating in the various editions of Thayer's Beethoven biography, Theodor Frimmel's compilations of material and discussions, and several similar works from the early twentieth century.

In the non-German literature a perennial problem is the translation of primary sources. Beethoven's letters, for example, generate many difficulties of interpretation even in the original language. It is scarcely surprising that, at times, the accepted authorized translations are inadequate as soon as a close reading of the content of a source is required. Sometimes the translations are simply incorrect. This is the reason I have reworked all the translations appearing in this book, with very few exceptions.

Even in the original language, wherever a remark from an original exchange survives on its own, one often needs additional background knowledge for a proper interpretation. In the conversation books, in which everything but Beethoven's words is preserved (with a few exceptions), the difficulty is often not so much the absence of Beethoven's words, but rather our lack of insight into the psychology of the situation. In some cases it is impossible to know whether a writer is making a statement casually, in anticipation of Beethoven's consent, to test his opinion, or even to provoke an argument. The three latter possibilities represent a contemporary's effort to trigger Beethoven's reaction through a remark. Since Beethoven's reaction is lost, such a remark assumes a life of its own beyond the historical moment. Some of the conversation book entries can thus be seen as the embryonic beginnings of Beethoven history writing.

For us who have to rely on the surviving part of this material, the acknowledgment of the historical simultaneity of statement and reaction does not solve the problem of interpretation. Some of the conversation book entries remain, for us, cut off from the Beethovenian reality. An instructive example is a sentence from Carl Czerny's long conversation with Beethoven in August 1823. At one point, Czerny writes, "Of course at that time the instruments were very imperfect."[9] The context (a conversation about the

[9] Dagmar Beck, Karl-Heinz Köhler, and Grita Herre, eds., *Ludwig van Beethovens Konversationshefte*, Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1968–2001, vol. IV, 62.

pianist and composer Moscheles) suggests that Czerny is in fact talking about pianos. This sentence is an almost literal anticipation of Czerny's opinion in 1842 that the earlier pianos were "extremely weak and imperfect."[10] But the context in both quotations is of necessity Czerny's, not Beethoven's. Granted, at any given moment in Czerny's life pianos existed that could justify a definition of earlier pianos as "weak," and there existed (and still exist) examples of pianos of various periods that were and are "imperfect" in some way. Also, the possibility that Beethoven agreed with Czerny certainly needs to be considered. But the option that Czerny perhaps expressed something uncontroversial does not solve the fundamental problem: the quotation from 1823 is, in its value as a source, no different from the 1842 one. That Czerny talks *with* Beethoven in one case and *about* him in the other has no influence on the fact that it is only Czerny who reveals his personal agenda in both these sentences. *Beethoven*'s agenda simply does not appear. So even if the conversation books, as a whole, belong to the primary sources in the narrowest sense, many entries function as a part of the abundant material that is of an anecdotal character.

Apart from the specific and complex case of some conversation book entries, the anecdotal material typically contains contemporary writers' reports about Beethoven's music making, Beethoven's character or appearance, or writers' specific experiences of Beethoven. Many eye-witnesses' reports were written down at a much later date, which presents well-known difficulties in assessing their accuracy and measuring the influence of the reigning zeitgeist. An example is the early romantic belief in aesthetic progress which sometimes influenced contemporary opinions about artistic development, performing style, the composition of piano music, or piano building. The related aspect of personal progress, as has been often observed, frequently caused Beethoven himself to re-formulate and, if necessary, even re-invent his own past – even some of the original material may consequently mirror something that was never really there. There are certainly good reasons for suspecting hidden agendas behind some value judgments in the sources of the time, and hidden value judgments behind some of the surviving factual information.

The possibility of suspicion and hidden agendas opens up a further area of source-critical insecurity. The danger is clear: if it becomes a routine to question the accuracy of the utterances of the past, the documents risk losing their function as documents of a positive character – our whole discussion becomes inherently speculative. The assumption that every historical opinion about Beethoven's playing, music, or style has a hidden meaning would most certainly doom the discussion to non-conclusiveness.

[10] A similar remark, but by *Joseph* Czerny, appears even earlier in a conversation book of April 1820: Beck, Köhler, and Herre, eds., *Ludwig van Beethovens Konversationshefte*, vol. II, 37. Joseph Czerny says during a conversation about the Menuetto in the Sonata Op. 2/1 (apparently bars 59–62), "At that time the *Claviere* were worse as well."

The case of Anton Schindler demonstrates, on the other hand, that matters of Beethoven performance practice and biography and a strong personal agenda occasionally *did* coincide. Schindler was most industrious in binding his view of Beethovenian musical expression into a self-glorifying narrative of his closeness to Beethoven, and he falsified and suppressed source information in the process.

Unlike Schindler, Carl Czerny's various texts on Beethoven performance sometimes suffer from a struggle to assume a scholarly attitude and from an effort to combine Beethoven performance with the demands of Czerny's own mid-nineteenth-century musical taste. Additionally, his chronological memory was not always perfect (neither in fact was Schindler's, whose Beethoven biography is full of inaccuracies). However, these flaws are difficulties of systematic writing more than an indication of a personal agenda.

Modern common sense is a doubtful tool for solving the various problems of source evaluation and interpretation. In matters of Beethoven performance practice alone, the evocation of common sense (on both sides) lies behind some of the fiercest controversies. A more useful concept than common sense is contextual verisimilitude. This term encourages a scholarly technique that is based on the idea that a source can reveal a hidden content when it is discussed with such questions in mind that primarily appear relevant in historical contexts and that only secondarily represent the context of a scholar's work.

Working with contextual verisimilitude is a thorny enterprise. We are facing the classic problem that we cannot fully avoid basing our judgment on our own context and common sense. A scholar's goal-oriented mindset could also hamper the creative and playful attitude that could lead to posing perhaps unexpected, but historically relevant questions. The greatest danger, perhaps, is that the interpretation of a source suffers fundamentally from the accidental omission of an important context.

In view of such general and specific complications connected to Beethoven source readings, the traditionally accepted story of Beethoven's dissatisfaction with some or all of his pianos, in whichever argumental framework it may appear, is simply not nuanced enough to match any of the possible emerging realities. Every single Beethoven source that bears on piano playing, piano sound, and piano building involves contexts more complex than the common sense of either fortepiano haters or fortepiano lovers from our time can provide. If the story of Beethoven's relationship to the piano needs to be retold, the story of his relationship to piano playing certainly does. This is the objective of this book.

PART I

Beethoven, his playing, and his instruments

Introduction

The question of how Beethoven, the prophetic composer, was rooted in the musical practices and conventions of the eighteenth century began to interest some authors in the late nineteenth century. In 1881, Franz Kullak investigated the relationship between Beethoven and eighteenth-century keyboard tutors in order to establish guidelines for the performance of Beethoven's trills.[1] In 1888, Theodor Frimmel produced a 62-page essay on Beethoven as a pianist, in which information about Beethoven's musical education and descriptions of his playing alternate with quotations from C. P. E. Bach's *Versuch* on the one hand, and information about Beethoven's various possible keyboard instruments on the other.[2] Frimmel and, later, Ludwig Schiedermair[3] were versed enough in eighteenth-century keyboard treatises to include instruments other than Thayer's ubiquitous "Pianoforte" in their analyses. In his later *Beethoven-Handbuch*, Frimmel gave a detailed overview of the knowledge in his time of Beethoven's various pianos.[4]

After a strong tradition of subjective romantic Beethoven writing, this was a new tendency,[5] in spite of a comparative lack of practical experience on the part of the authors with the performing conventions described in the tutors and with historical instruments.

It was, indeed, not until the 1980s that an increasing number of authors entered the stage who explicitly based their keyboard performance practice studies on their professional experience with historical keyboard instruments.[6] At a time when first-rate institutions have offered complete

[1] Franz Kullak, "Über den Triller," in *Beethovens Klavierkonzerte*, Leipzig: Steingräber, 1881, xii–xxviii.
[2] Theodor Frimmel, "Beethoven als Clavierspieler," in *Neue Beethoveniana*, Vienna: Carl Gerold's Sohn, 1888, 1–62.
[3] Ludwig Schiedermair, *Der junge Beethoven*, Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1925.
[4] Theodor Frimmel, *Beethoven-Handbuch*, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1926. Reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 2003.
[5] A typical example of such a romantic approach is Adolf Bernhard Marx, *Anleitung zum Vortrag Beethovenscher Klavierwerke*, ed. Eugen Schmitz, Regensburg: Bosse, 1912.
[6] Examples are: Sandra P. Rosenblum, *Performance Practices in Classic Piano Music*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988; Bart van Oort, "The English Classical piano style and its influence on Haydn and Beethoven," DMA thesis, Cornell University, 1993; David Rowland, "Beethoven's pianoforte pedalling," in Robin Stowell, ed., *Performing Beethoven*, Cambridge University Press, 1994; Katalin Komlós, *Fortepianos and their Music*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

programs in performance practices for decades, and when the performance of historical music on instruments of historical types has built many successful lifelong careers, it is not arrogant to claim that our experience helps us to understand some of the practical aspects of Beethoven's early musicianship in ways that were inaccessible to earlier scholars – even though the distance from Beethoven has more than doubled since Kullak's or Frimmel's time.

Like their predecessors, modern Beethoven scholars usually rely squarely on the traditional biographical information. Much of this information, especially regarding Beethoven's early years, comes from a small number of compilations of reminiscences that all take a rather associative approach. These sources may not always be correct; the chronology of events is sometimes jumbled, disturbed by the insertion of unrelated blocks of information each with its intact micro-chronology. The quality of information shifts wildly and the evaluation of these sources is often extremely difficult. Consequently, even a well-established part of Beethoven's timeline can be challenged if the sources are subjected to new, careful research.[7]

Most problematic of all, very often a witness would incorporate her or his own evaluation of events into the narrative, thus introducing an interpretation where it is difficult for the modern observer to detect. Having worked with this material for a number of years, and having closely re-read the chronology of events, I hope to bring new insights into this material in the following chapters.

[7] See, for example, Jos van der Zanden, "Ferdinand Ries in Wien. Neue Perspektiven zu den *Notizen*," in Ernst Herttrich, ed., *Reihe V Bonner Beethoven-Studien*, Bonn: Verlag Beethoven-Haus, 2005, 191–212.