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Keyboard culture

Pianos came of age in Beethoven's formative years. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, they rivalled and eventually superseded harpsichords and clavichords as the favoured domestic and concert keyboard instrument. As the wealth of mercantile families in England and central Europe grew, so did the market for the new instruments. To meet the demands of this unprecedented mass cultural phenomenon, a vast body of music exploiting the instrument's unique properties was written (largely for domestic consumption), and the publication of sheet music proliferated. The crest of this wave was ridden by virtuoso pianist-composers who built their careers on three core skills: their technical brilliance as performers, their outstanding abilities at extempore improvisation, and their fluency as composers. Mozart and Clementi (born in 1752) blazed the trail in the early 1780s, and in the next twenty years a number of virtuosi came to prominence. In addition to Beethoven, the outstanding figures at the turn of the century were (in order of birth) Jan Ladislav Dussek (1760), Daniel Steibelt (1765), Johann Baptist Cramer (1771), Joseph Wölfl (1773), and Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778). Without the financial security of long-term court appointments, most of these men had to support themselves by diversifying their musical activities.[1] It was advantageous for them to live in one of the few large cities whose wealth and cultural life could provide them with lucrative opportunities for teaching and performing: chiefly London, Vienna, and – in its brief periods of political stability – Paris. But there were periods in their lives when they had to lead an itinerant existence, undertaking concert tours throughout Europe. They composed large amounts of piano music, not only as dazzling vehicles for their own virtuosity, but (more profitably) for the amateur market. And many of them became involved in the support industries of their

profession: instrument making and music publishing.[2] These virtuosi were thus strategically placed to affect the future developments of the piano and its repertoire. By developing new playing techniques they could expand its musical potential; their involvement with manufacturing firms gave them an influence in the instrument's technical development; and they had the opportunity to shape a new idiomatic style of keyboard music.

It might be trivial, given his historical pre-eminence, to say that Beethoven stands out from his contemporaries. But it is worth stressing that in many ways his career as a pianist-composer was not typical. For most of the 1790s his financial security was guaranteed by a small but powerful group of Viennese aristocratic sponsors, and this protected him from the mass-market forces that weighed heavily upon his leading rivals. After tours to Berlin, Prague and Pressburg in 1796 he was relieved of the need to make extensive foreign journeys, and he was the only major keyboard player of his time never to set foot in Paris or London. Unlike pianists working in London, Beethoven rarely played in large public spaces.[3] His performances were largely confined to Vienna's most elite aristocratic salons where, since the death of Mozart in 1791, the select audiences had become increasingly receptive to high musical seriousness.[4] Among his principal patrons, Baron Gottfried van Swieten and Prince Karl Lichnowsky had a taste for 'learned' serious music that was at odds with more widespread popular tastes. They encouraged Beethoven to pursue his already marked bent towards novel, difficult, and densely-argued music. Uniquely, the circles within which Beethoven worked were socially *and* artistically exclusive. He had no significant contact with the larger musical public and, free from the need to be a popular composer, he could afford largely to eschew middlebrow mass-market values in his performances and compositions.

Technique and technology

Throughout the eighteenth century instrumentalists regarded performance as a rhetorical act. The ideal of affective eloquence was repeatedly stressed in treatises: a fundamental principle was to play as though one were 'speaking in tones', and public performance was likened to

oratory. Beethoven seems to have subscribed to this oratorical approach, but he put it into practice in novel ways.[5] Contemporary commentators unanimously recognised fundamental differences between his playing style and those of his leading Viennese rivals.[6] Since the early 1780s, when Mozart had been the dominant virtuoso in Vienna, a highly articulated non-legato style had been considered exemplary. It was characterised by faultless technical ease, a light touch, the smooth production of an even and brilliant 'perlé' tone in rapid passagework, the subtle inflection of melodic lines imitating the ideal of vocal delivery, and the controlled poise with which the player addressed the keyboard. Above all, a good balance should be struck between taste (*Geschmack*) and feeling (*Empfindung*). During the 1790s this style was perpetuated in Vienna by older figures such as Joseph Gelinek (1758–1825) and by rivals from Beethoven's own generation like Hummel and Wölfl, both of whom had personal contacts with Mozart. In contrast, Beethoven is reported to have performed with a more pronounced finger legato, and to have used the undampened resonance of his instruments with less discrimination than his rivals. He played more forcefully than exponents of the older style, but his passagework was sometimes comparatively untidy and he lacked the poise and grace that were the hallmarks of performances by Wölfl and Hummel. His tonal range was wider, but it was perceived to be used with more brutality: consequently accents and sudden changes in dymanics appeared more exaggerated.[7]

Beethoven's individual style was potentially a strong asset in the development of his reputation as a piano virtuoso, since it was evidently well suited to the rhetorical ferocity and expressive intensity of his improvisations. Yet while many commentators were struck by the affective power of his playing, they did not necessarily value other aspects of its originality. During his first decade in Vienna it was in fact more likely to be cited to his detriment than to his advantage.[8] Such negative critiques were brilliantly distilled in Andreas Streicher's vignettes of two (anonymous) pianists in his *Kurze Bemerkungen über das Spielen, Stimmen und Erhalten der Fortepiano* ('Brief Remarks on the Playing, Tuning and Maintainance of the Fortepiano').[9] Streicher gives a detailed account of the older style of playing, whose representative is described as 'a true musician' who has 'learned to subordinate his feelings to the limits of the instrument' so that he is able to 'make us feel what he

himself feels'.[10] His second portrait – which, by comparison, reads like a caricature – is of a pianist 'unworthy of imitation':

> A player, of whom it is said 'He plays extraordinarily, like you have never heard before', sits down (or rather throws himself) at the fortepiano. Already the first chords will have been played with such violence ['*Starke*'] that you wonder whether the player is deaf . . . Through the movement of his body, arms and hands, he seemingly wants to make us understand how difficult is the work he has undertaken. He carries on in a fiery manner and treats his instrument like a man who, bent on revenge, has his arch-enemy in his hands and, with cruel relish, wants to torture him slowly to death . . . He pounds so much that suddenly the maltreated strings go out of tune, several fly towards bystanders who hurriedly move back in order to protect their eyes . . . Puff! What was that? He raised the dampers . . . Now he wants to imitate the glass harmonica, but he makes only harsh sounds. Consonances and dissonances flow into one another and we hear only a disgusting mixture of tones.
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> Short notes are shoved with the arm and hand at the same time, making a racket. If the notes should be slurred together, they are blurred, because he never lifts his fingers at the right time. His playing resembles a script which has been smeared before the ink has dried . . . Is this description exaggerated? Certainly not! A hundred instances could be cited in which 'keyboard stranglers' have broken strings in the most beautiful, gentle adagio.[11]

By 1801 such murderous views of Beethoven's playing were becoming more rare, as critics began to perceive his style as an aesthetically legitimate alternative to his rivals' Mozartian non-legato. No doubt this transformation was connected with the growing critical appreciation of his music at this time: when a high value was placed on his works, the performing style that fostered them came to be acceptable, even desirable. These changes in perception were also partly driven by the projection of Beethoven's reputation by his aristocratic sponsors, since the more prestige he acquired, the less cachet there was in denigrating his manner of performance.

Aesthetic debates generated by this bifurcation in playing styles also affected the directions in which the instruments themselves evolved at the beginning of the nineteenth century.[12] Of course, there was a dynamic and complex relationship between developing keyboard technologies, changing performing techniques, and the demands made by

new music. But it can be claimed that Beethoven's ideals, together with the style of his music and playing, had a decisive effect on piano construction in Vienna between 1800 and 1810. In the classical period there were basically two different types of piano mechanism.[13] On the one hand, instruments made in south Germany and Vienna were suited to Mozartian non-legato styles: they had a shallow touch, a light action, and very effective dampers; their sound was delicate, but its qualities varied greatly between registral extremes. English instruments, on the other hand, were better suited to a more sonorous legato style: with a heavier action, they were louder, more resonant, and had greater timbral homogeneity than their Viennese counterparts. At the time Beethoven wrote his Op. 27 and Op. 31 sonatas the latest English pianos were known in Vienna only by repute, and his first-hand knowledge was confined to local instruments. He had been impressed by Johann Andreas Stein's fortepianos in 1787, and in Vienna he kept in close touch with the firm 'Nannette Streicher, geburt Stein', which was run by Stein's daughter and son-in-law. For short periods he seems also to have played pianos by Mozart's preferred maker Anton Walter (*c.* 1801) and by Johann Jakesch (*c.* 1802).[14] But such instruments did not flatter Beethoven's manner of performing, nor did he allow them to fetter his compositional imagination, and there was a significant gap between the capabilities of the instruments available to him and his ideal conception of what a piano ought to be. His dissatisfaction applied particularly to the limitations of the prevalent five-octave range (*FF–f*^{3}), the absence of *una corda* mechanisms, and above all the dynamic power and timbral qualities of Viennese instruments.[15] In 1796 he expressed his reservations trenchantly in two well-known letters to Andreas Streicher. Writing from Pressburg, he thanked Streicher for the receipt of a piano, but he joked that it was 'far too good' for him because it 'robs me of the freedom to produce my own tone'.[16] Later in the year he elaborated on the topic:

> There is no doubt that so far as the manner of playing is concerned, the piano is still the least studied and developed of all instruments; often one thinks that one is merely listening to a harp. And I am delighted, my dear fellow, that you are one of the few who realize and perceive that, provided one can feel the music, one can make the piano sing. I hope that the time will come when the harp and the fortepiano will be treated as two entirely different instruments.[17]

What he wanted, then, was more resonant instruments that could cope with his dynamic extremes (especially his strong *forte*) and facilitate his legato-style expressivity. If the comments in Streicher's *Bemerkungen* are anything to go by, he was at that stage hardly sympathetic to Beethoven's aesthetics. But as the composer's reputation and influence grew in the first decade of the nineteenth century, Streicher came under increasing pressure to produce instruments that took account of Beethoven's ideals. Alongside 'classic' Viennese models, his firm started to produce triple-strung pianos with heavier actions, a bigger tone, and an *una corda* mechanism. In DeNora's words, 'Pro-Beethoven values had been partially worked into the very hardware and into the means of musical production itself.'[18]

Music for connoisseurs

Traditional distinctions between keyboard music for connoisseurs and amateurs became more pronounced during the 1790s. Pieces written for amateur performers were technically undemanding, with unadventurous diatonic harmonies, light textures, easily-grasped forms, and simple melodic styles. Certain genres were associated almost exclusively with this market: dances, song arrangements, simple decorative variations or pot-pourri fantasias on popular songs or arias, and descriptive pieces that often played on significant events in current affairs, such as Dussek's *The Sufferings of the Queen of France* (1793). Meanwhile, the music that professionals wrote for themselves to play made increasingly flamboyant technical and musical demands. Two subcategories can be distinguished here. Virtuoso pieces like Dussek's programmatic sonata *The Naval Battle and Total Defeat of the Grand Dutch Fleet by Admiral Duncan on the 11th of October 1797* and Steibelt's *La journée d'Ulm* were targeted at the tastes of non-connoisseur audiences, though they were well beyond the capabilities of all but the best amateur pianists. But a tiny minority of pieces demanding professional executors was designed to appeal to connoisseurs: these included highbrow genres such as preludes and fugues, and free fantasies in the tradition of the north German *Empfindsamer Stil* (the style playing on the audience's sensibilities).

The only genre that bridged all sectors of this culture was the sonata.[19] In terms of quantity, the market was dominated by sonatas

written for the domestic use of amateurs: pieces that shared the modest dimensions and facile characteristics of other mass-market genres. Most were written by historically insignificant figures, though even the greatest virtuosi also wrote for players with modest abilities. Mozart described his C major Sonata K.545 (1788) as 'for beginners', Clementi's six sonatinas Op. 36 (1797) proved popular with amateurs, and Beethoven's two sonatas Op. 49 (dating from the mid-1790s) were also composed in this tradition. As far as quality is concerned, however, the repertoire was dominated by a small minority of sonatas that virtuoso pianist-composers wrote for professional players and connoisseurs. It goes without saying that Beethoven's sonatas stand at the pinnacle of this category, but the gulf between the amateur and connoisseur sonatas of his greatest contemporaries is just as wide as the gap between Beethoven's Op. 49 and, for example, the 'Pathétique'.

A number of historians have explored similarities between Beethoven's keyboard music and sonatas by Clementi, Dussek, Cramer and George Frederick Pinto (1785–1806), composers of the so-called 'London Pianoforte School'.[20] Anyone who has heard 'professional' sonatas by these composers cannot fail to have noticed turns of phrase, textures, colourful harmonic progressions and formal strategies that are reminiscent of Beethoven. He undoubtedly knew some of the music emanating from London and, when specific comparisons can be drawn between a Beethoven sonata and a 'London' sonata, chronology usually gives precedence to the latter. But artistic influence is a problematic and elusive concept; even if historians could establish that conditions at the time made an exchange of ideas possible, two fundamental problems would remain. First, the concept of the 'musical idea' embraces such a wide range of possibilities – from the shortest motive to the most intangible generalities about form, rhetoric and style – that it might not be easy to categorise the raw materials of the exchange. Second, even if Beethoven had taken on board ideas from the London composers, it might be difficult to identify with any confidence the trace they leave in his music; indeed, the more he assimilated an idea, the harder it would be to identify the source of the influence at all. With this in mind, it is perhaps preferable to speak of stylistic *affinities* between Beethoven and these contemporaries, affinities which can be claimed most plausibly on the largest scale:

1 Sonatas increasingly acquired symphonic characteristics. They were in the 'Grand' style, with imposing ideas, rich textures, brilliant figuration, and broad structures. Individual movements grew in size, and sonatas sometimes contained four movements rather than the classical norm of three.
2 Greater demands were made on the technique of the performer and the technical capabilities of the instrument.
3 There was a tendency for composers to establish a stylistic distance between their sonatas and classical models. This could take many forms, such as the deformation of normative sonata-form processes, the ironic treatment of classical clichés, the exploration of mediant tonal relationships and of keys related chromatically to the tonic, the avoidance of regular periodic phrase structures, the inclusion of popular elements like song themes in slow movements and variation finales, or an increased emphasis on virtuosity for its own sake.

Despite these common features, the greater density, cogency, energy, and above all, the more imaginative daring of Beethoven's music is inevitably striking. Just as his playing attracted opprobrium in the 1790s, so his sonatas were variously described as being 'overladen with difficulties', 'strange', 'obstinate', and 'unnatural'.[21] Beethoven's pursuit of these anti-popular characteristics in his music can, of course, be attributed to the unique nature of his musical talents and his highly individual artistic personality; but it can also be traced back to the supportive environment of the elite salons in Vienna.

An important new phenomenon emerged in the musical culture of both London and Vienna at the end of the eighteenth century. In the face of a mainstream preoccupation with the new and contemporary, musical connoisseurs became interested in performing old (mostly Baroque) music and perpetuating its values. The preservation of non-contemporary repertoires may be viewed as the first step towards the creation of a musical canon in the nineteenth century, but it took very different forms in the two cities concerned.[22] 'Ancient' music was kept as a separate category from modern music in London. So while English connoisseurs revered Handel's music, they would not have expected contemporary composers such as Clementi and Dussek to aspire to its sublime 'greatness'. In contrast, Viennese connoisseurs like Gottfried van Swieten

seem not to have made such a categorical distinction between the best examples of old and new music. By constructing a tradition of 'great' music that stretched from J. S. Bach and Handel, through C. P. E. Bach, Mozart and Haydn (still at the height of his powers), to embrace Beethoven, van Swieten and his colleagues were creating an appreciative context in which Beethoven could explore musical difficulty to an unprecedented degree.[23]

These elitist tastes illuminate the background to the commission and publication of Beethoven's Op. 31 sonatas by the Zurich music publisher Hans Georg Nägeli. Two of Nägeli's boldest projects reflect the complementary aspects of old and new music which were so significant in the emergence of a Viennese canon. In 1802 he began to issue 'classic' keyboard music from the first half of the eighteenth century, including works by J. S. Bach and Handel, in a series entitled *Musikalische Kunstwerke im strengen Schreibart* ('Musical works in the strict style').[24] And in the following year he started another series with the aim of creating a complementary classic repertoire of contemporary piano music. The *Répertoire des Clavecinistes* was initially envisaged on a vast scale, though eventually only seventeen volumes appeared. Nägeli intended to reprint excellent examples of recent music, and to commission the leading virtuoso-composers. His notion of excellence can be reconstructed from notices that appeared in the musical press in 1803. First he outlined the project's broad aims. Crediting Clementi with the founding of the modern piano style, Nägeli said that he wanted to collect the most excellent examples by the best composers (additionally naming Cramer, Dussek, Steibelt, and Beethoven), so that the competition would spur them on to greater things. The ambitious nature of the enterprise was revealed in a remarkable passage spelling out his aesthetic criteria:

> I am interested mainly in piano solos in the grand style, large in size, and with many departures from the usual form of the sonata. These products should be distinguished by their wealth of detail and full sonorities. Artistic piano figuration must be interwoven with contrapuntal phrases.[25]

Clearly the *Répertoire* was aimed at connoisseurs rather than amateurs, but Nägeli was aware that an emphasis on virtuosity might discourage both parties: amateurs would balk at the technical demands and connoisseurs would disapprove of 'empty' technical virtuosity without serious

content. Perhaps it was this inherent commercial danger that prompted Nägeli to highlight the combination of brilliant and serious elements he required:

> It might be displeasing to talk of virtuosity as a principal requirement here. But one should consider that from Clementi onwards all outstanding composers of keyboard music are also excellent virtuosi, and this is undoubtedly the reason for the appeal and liveliness of their products, since it channels their physical and spiritual power in precisely this direction. Therefore such complete artists are rightly held up as models. It goes without saying, then, that compositional thoroughness must not be neglected . . . Those who have no contrapuntal skill and are not piano virtuosi will hardly be able to achieve much here.[26]

With their focus on a mixture of the grand style, formal originality, contrapuntal skill and brilliant figuration, Nägeli's criteria might well have been tailored around Beethoven's keyboard music.