

# Mozart on the Piano

The content of this essay started out as various tangential discussions in the comparative survey of the Mozart concerti. When I realized that much of it would also apply to the Mozart sonatas survey I decided to put all the ideas together as a sort of giant footnote on proper performance practice of Mozart on the modern piano. In conducting the survey I came to the conclusion that most pianists are missing the mark when it comes to Mozart, because I believe that, with exception of the earliest works, much more dramatic characterization and operatic influence is needed. What we need to do is throw out the dirty bath water of “Mozart for Babies” from our collective consciousness.

Even though Paul Badura-Skoda’s landmark book, *Interpreting Mozart at the Keyboard*, has been around for over five decades now, proper performance practice of Mozart among mainstream concert pianists remains in a state of abysmal ignorance. I’m not even talking about trills or appoggiaturas which the average concert listener can’t discern one way or the other. I’m talking about characterization and an understanding of textural balance which even the most novice listener apprehends. It’s obvious that pianists don’t have time for lengthy books; they need to be shown by example, or made to understand with very clear and easily digested talking points.

The specific topics discussed in this essay will include touch and tone, dynamic range, articular emphasis, phraseology and episodic demarcation. The choice of piano, its harmonic character, and how it should be voiced will also constitute an important part of the overall discussion.

It’s hard to know where to begin in this discussion, the cart or the horse, because we need to address both sound and performance awareness. But let’s examine and understand first the nature of the instrument upon which the Classical era composers (Mozart, Haydn, early Beethoven) composed.

## Choice of Instrument

The first question we need to address is to what degree we want to try and imitate on modern instruments the type of tonal characteristics of fortepianos from Mozart's time. We know for a fact that every composer that followed Mozart welcomed each new improvement in the character and responsiveness of the piano as it evolved to its present form. We can't even imagine a scenario where Tchaikovsky or Debussy might have turned their noses up at a new Steinway or Bechstein and revealed that they secretly longed for Beethoven's Broadwood or Chopin's Pleyel. After the introduction of the Steinway D in 1888, and the catch-up development of Bechstein, Blüthner and Bösendorfer over the following decade, the type of piano sound we now know has remained very much the same. Innovations in building techniques continue, of course, and makers such as Fazioli and Yamaha are at the forefront of these developments, but the degree of differences between the makes are far more subtle than the wholesale change in character exhibited between wooden-framed fortepianos and pianos built with cast iron plates.

There is no doubt at all in my mind that Mozart would have been overjoyed with the melodic sustain of modern pianos. But in terms of textural balance, I'm also sure that he would have made some adjustments in the disposition of melody and harmonic foundation if he were composing on a modern piano. All the choices of registrational setting and dynamic contrast were based on the type of instrument he had on hand, not some imagined ideal that wouldn't appear for another hundred years.

The effectiveness of the fortepiano as an instrument for Mozart's solo piano music such as the sonatas and variations is not in question, for the range of color and dynamics suits that music very well. Over the years I've enjoyed Mozart's Sonatas performed on the fortepiano by Gustav Leonhardt, Paul Badura-Skoda, Andreas Staier, and most recently, Kristian Bezuidenhout. Not simply as a matter of curiosity; I actually like them better than 90% of performances that I hear on modern pianos. I'm listening to Bezuidenhout right now and am amazed again at how much color and characterization is possible in the music, and how much of it falls by the wayside when played by pianists on the modern Steinway. Most of the dramatic-narrative characterization of the music derives from considerations of

historically-informed performance which could easily be applied to modern pianos if pianists first understood the nature of the fortepiano.

Badura-Skoda says “The nineteenth-century developments that variously affected the loudness of instruments altered the natural factors on which the classical instrumental ensemble founded its acoustic balance.” This is especially critical to consider in concerto work, which in Mozart’s time were much less dominated by the massive string sections we now have. More important than simple loudness levels, the nature of instrumental tone color also changed. “Overtone relationships have been changed by alterations in the tone of both violin and piano.” He goes on to point out that while the violin became progressively louder through use of more down-bearing pressure from the higher bridge and the change from gut strings to steel strings, the piano has become mellower and lost much of its harmonic richness.

In terms of chamber music the fortepiano reaches its outer limit of suitability, and for concerto work, even with small 24-piece orchestras, the fortepiano is really too diminutive to be musically effective. I discuss this more thoroughly in the Mozart Concerti Survey. It would seem that a properly voiced and regulated modern piano, played with stylistic awareness would be the ideal solution, and one which Mozart would approve.

But when I talk of modern instruments being an ideal solution, I don’t mean a big Steinway D or Imperial Bösendorfer. No manner of voicing or action regulation on these massive instruments will solve all the inherent problems of textural balance for Baroque or Early Classical music. Before we delve into choice of modern instruments let’s look at the capabilities and characteristics of the fortepiano and see what its strengths and weaknesses are.

Fortepianos, *sui generis*, are smaller and much less massive than even a small modern grand piano. Unlike the modern piano with its cast-iron plate, fortepianos are made entirely of wood and have a much lighter wooden frame. Weighing in at about 140 pounds, two strong men could simply pick up Mozart’s fortepiano and move it about with relative ease. Compare that to a modern Bösendorfer which weighs over 1200 pounds. Because of the lighter construction of the fortepiano, sound vibrations are active throughout the entire body of the instrument giving a

faint, lingering after-resonance. Among modern piano makers only Bösendorfers are made with spruce inner rims and frames that resonate. All other makers use thick, multiple layers of non-resonant hardwoods such as beech. But don't assume that Bösendorfer would be your best choice for Mozart; we still have many other characteristics to consider!

When played softly or up to a mezzo-forte level, the basic tone of a fortepiano retains the recognizable hammer-on-strings sound we know, though it is much closer to the sound of a small or medium-sized grand than a big concert grand. When played more loudly the tone of a fortepiano becomes more pinched and there is greater disparity between the attack envelope and the sustaining following-through. That would seem to argue for harder hammers and increased transient attack in the manner of voicing on modern instruments. But such a simple remedy has vastly different effects on the resultant harmonic sheen (overtones) of modern pianos depending on the scale-design and soundboard excitation patterns of different brands. A one-size-fits-all solution is just not possible. It is first important to understand the type of sound that is desired and then adjust the various possible remedies as needed.

Unlike the massive modern concert grands which have a powerful bass register that can create a tactile sense of physicality, that is, feeling bass vibrations in the body, fortepianos have little or no actual fundamental bass tone. What we hear is a complex mixture of overtones which is a sort of cross between a growly bassoon and the rasping bow of a cello. The take away from this comparison is that the left hand (bass clef) register of the fortepiano has a higher degree of complex harmonics than a typical modern piano, and also has a gruff sense of power that balances with the upper register at all dynamic ranges. This is important to remember because pianists playing on a modern Steinway run into two problems: either they play the Steinway unapologetically as a modern instrument and let the bass register boom forth and distort textural balance (Horowitz), or they conscientiously self-regulate their left hand to play softly and this in turn robs the music of its much needed foundation and psychological drama (Uchida, Zacharias). The better solution is to always voice left hand octaves to the upper note so we get more upper harmonics and less deep bass energy, and this is what Brendel and Schiff generally do.

Furthermore, aside from the power and physicality issue, which would seem to indicate that smaller grands, rather than full-size concert grands, would retain a more approximate conversion of balance, there is the matter of scale design. Virtually all keyboard designs in Mozart's time, whether fortepiano, harpsichord or pipe organ, followed a basic Pythagorean progression of ratios in terms of string size and tension (or pipe length and air pressure) from one note to the next across the entire range of the keyboard. This ratio is nominally about 1.5. Augmented scale designs using ratio up to about 1.7 were first developed by Jonas Chickering and later perfected by Theodore Steinway, with the idea of boosting the ratios in the mid-bass region in order to provide a richer harmonic foundation and move upward in the keyboard range the threshold of physicality. This sense of fulsome richness and perception of tactile physicality reaching up to within an octave of middle C are sound and acoustic concepts that are inherently missing from purely linear designs.

With very careful and expert voicing and regulation (including level of hammer throw) a modern Steinway D may work well for Mozart, and I have praised such instruments in the survey of the Mozart Concerti (Howard Shelley plays on a good one for his cycle). But most of the time, the big Steinways and Bösendorfers are not given such specialized treatment, because in the real world, the same instrument may have to be used the next night for a Rachmaninoff concerto. Recording studios and concert halls can't afford to have multiple instruments adjusted for Bach, Mozart, Chopin, Debussy, and Prokofiev.

A growing trend right now is for single concert instruments to have two custom-fitted actions that offer different voicing, touchweight and let-off points. This allows the pianist to play a first half of Bach and Mozart with one action that provides quick transient speech, textural clarity and appropriate harmonic character, then during the break a technician slides in the other action which may have softer and rounder hammers and adjustments of hammer throw for a second half of lyrical Chopin and thundering Liszt.

This is all good and well, and a hopeful development which puts the needs of the music above the vagaries of settling for the best overall compromise. But let's explore more thoroughly exactly what would be required to render Mozart most effectively on a modern instrument.

Balance of registers is key in Baroque and Classical music, for the same reason that smaller orchestras (whether modern or historical instruments) sound more convincing than full-scale orchestras. If you are a listener who prefers the sound of Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic in the Bach Brandenburg Concertos, then this essay is not for you (unless you want to bring your blood pressure level to a boiling point). Conversely, I wouldn't care to hear an undersized chamber orchestra trying to play a Brahms or Bruckner symphony. Scale and balance appropriate to the time of the composer are critical if we are concerned with textural balance.

First, the scale and balance of registers on a fortepiano dictate a fairly linear scale design. If listeners perceive any divergence from a balance of registers (usually manifest as a recessed upper treble) this is due to vagaries in soundboard construction depending on the maker of the fortepiano. But, the scale design itself follows a linear Pythagorean progression. This is fairly easy to see in historic straight-strung scale designs, but harder to ascertain in modern cross-strung designs without measurements with a gauge caliber and calculating string length and tension ratios.

Steinway is at the opposite spectrum of linear scale design, being the most augmented of any make, and therefore requiring the most care in voicing and preparation if the artist prefers to play a Steinway (and there are reasons why they would want to, which we shall explore in a moment). Among piano makers, Bösendorfer, Bechstein, Schimmel, Yamaha and Stuart are the most linear. Every other maker falls somewhere between the two extremes of Steinway (augmented) and Bösendorfer (linear).

Even among the same make, individual models may differ in degree of linear or augmented scale design. For example, within the current Steinway line-up, the model B is the most augmented, followed by the D, which is actually slightly more linear but with a super-sized soundboard that conveys such a level of bass energy that balance becomes problematic for playing Baroque and Classical music. The models A and C, being more linear, are better choices overall, but the C is more damped than the A (taking us in the wrong direction), and they both have more mid-bass richness than the Bechsteins, Bösendorfers or Schimmels of the same size. Does this mean that a Schimmel might be better than a Steinway for Mozart? Not likely. This is where we get into the other considerations.

Besides the matter of linear scale design, we also need to consider harmonic complexity, especially in the mid-bass register. Most modern piano makers that follow a linear scale design also strive for purity of tone (or a higher percentage of fundamental to overtones). This is going in the opposite direction of what is desired to approximate the conditions of a fortepiano. Then there is the matter of tonal modulation, that is, the degree to which tonal color varies from the softest pianissimo to the loudest fortissimo. Some makers such as Fazioli and Estonia strive to provide a high level of consistency across the entire dynamic spectrum (with very little perceived change in harmonic profile), and while this has its benefits for certain kinds of music, it takes us in the opposite direction of how a fortepiano behaves.

In an ideal world, where one could have the perfect piano for every type of music, the starting point with Mozart would be a medium-sized grand somewhere in the range of 200-225 cm (6'6" to 7'4"); smaller than that and you get wrapped bass strings that are too harmonically congested, and larger than this you run the risk of excessive fundamental bass energy. There are exceptions, of course. The now discontinued Bechstein EN-280 concert grand was quite effective for Mozart in having a more-or-less linear scale design, increased mid-bass harmonics and internal resonance, and a threshold of physicality that was low enough to not effect the bass notes that were limited by the range of the keyboard in Mozart's time.

In my opinion, the piano that most closely aligns with the all the desired characteristics we would want for Mozart is the Bösendorfer 225 (7'4"). On this instrument you have a suitable linear scale design, more overtones in the mid-bass than in the upper range, some degree of tonal modulation, a good dynamic threshold to balance the registers, no bass boom yet suitably growly when needed, and there is a relatively high level of internal resonance. I'm also excited about exploring the newly designed Yamaha CX-6 (6'11") which on my first cursory examination seemed to have more mid-bass complexity than the older C-series Yamahas, and had a melodic range that is more sustained at lower dynamic levels and more transient at louder levels—just like a fortepiano. Short of finding an older Bechstein EN-280, this is where I would start my search if I were undertaking

a project of recording the Mozart Sonatas, or if I were recommending pianos that might be suitable for a concerto performance with a chamber orchestra.

I'll get into very detailed assessments of every major piano brand in my forthcoming book, but there is one more aspect of instrumental choice we need to discuss before moving on to performance awareness. I started out the discussion by asking how closely we want to mimic Mozart's own instrument versus how far we might want to go to assume what Mozart's own ideals might have been, and of course, to weigh all of these considerations against the reality that modern ears prefer the singing quality of modern instruments.

In that regard, there is a very real reason why I believe Mozart would have loved the modern Steinway, and not just the smaller ones with the more suitable bass balance, but the big model D. How's this? Mozart may have composed within the proscribed limitations of his fortepianos, but at heart the mature Mozart was most fond of the human voice. For this reason he would have prized in a piano a long sustaining melodic range, and he would have especially loved how on a fine Hamburg D, the melodic line floats up out of the box and hovers distinctly above the foundation tones, just as a singer projects into the opera house.

Most well-made modern pianos have a good level of melodic sustain, but this ability to float up and out of the box is something unique to only the best full-sized concert grands, and especially the Hamburg Steinway D. Smaller grands, even in the eight-foot range, just do not have the radius of soundboard swing to propel (or project) the middle range outward for increased dimensionality in the musical presentation. One may readily notice this effect while playing the piano or in listening in near proximity, but it is a phenomenon very rarely captured by the microphones and requiring really exceptional playback equipment to reproduce. Therefore, as desirable as this ability to project a melody may be, given its elusive nature and relative value in the overall context, I still maintain that:

**The basis for effective realization of Mozart should be for:**

- Harmonic character
- Internal resonance
- Balance of registers.



## A Basis for Comparison

I often play historical-practice recordings of Mozart or Beethoven symphonies, and nearly always so for Baroque music. With modern instruments you get the kind of silken smooth sound and deep sonority that works well for Romantic-era music; with historical instruments you get a more raw sound that can actually convey more visceral energy and *frisson*. This topic has been well-discussed for over two decades. I just want to disclose that I enjoy both historical and modern instruments (including the fortepiano and modern piano) for the different colors and textures they bring to the music, as long as there is some understanding of proper performance practice.

The long, luscious lines and luxuriant sonorities that characterize the Romantic-era sound—the symphonies of Brahms, Bruckner and Mahler—were unknown in the Classical era. First off, ensemble size was much smaller and less string-dominated, though listening venues (often not even real concert halls but palaces, churches or even beer and coffee houses) were smaller and the relative impact of sound upon the listener was fairly immediate and visceral. Stringed instruments were played with less vibrato than we hear now, and as we've already discussed, the fortepiano had nowhere near the level of sustain and sonority of the modern piano.

All of this dictates a more incisive manner of articulation and phrasing. Nearly everyone recognizes now that the long-lined approach of conductors who grew up with the traditions of the post-romantic era is not the most authentic characterization for this music. So as much as I enjoy Klemperer and Furtwängler for late Beethoven, Brahms and Bruckner, I don't find their approach makes the most compelling argument for Mozart.

It is for this very same reason that I'm often utterly flabbergasted by the continued long-lined approach of pianists that is completely foreign to a natural singing line, not to mention the lack of incisive articulation that we know to be proper to the era. I talked about this at length in my essay on **Listener Psychology: How We Perceive Music** with a discussion of phrasing in Mozart's famous Sonata in A, K. 331. Nearly every modern day concert pianist plays the opening eight-bar phrase in one continuous *legatissimo* line. I'm nearly gasping for air by the end of it.

Completely unnatural not only for any human singer or woodwind player, but even for the natural bowing of string instruments. The music needs to breathe! Beyond that, there is the issue of articular emphasis and registral balance, but we'll get to that in a bit.

I'm pointing my finger at pianists who play the modern piano and continue to carry on performance traditions that have been discredited for over four decades now. I'm talking about some of the biggest names and artists regarded for their Mozart: Uchida, Pires, Perahia, and Zacharias. Coming closer to the ideal we are talking about are Brendel, Schiff and Badura-Skoda, yet each still harbors some remnants of romantic-era traditions.

To get as close as possible one needs to listen to authentic instrument practitioners who are much more compelling in their phraseology and vividness of characterization: Bezuidenhout, Staier, Leonhardt. It is not the fortepiano itself which magically makes this music come alive, it is first and foremost the understanding of the artists that play them. This vividness of characterization could easily be carried over to a properly-voiced modern piano, but nobody is doing it. I'm practically biting at the bit to do it myself but I don't think homespun YouTube postings from my living room would be edifying to anyone. So, I wait for the day when I might have access to a suitable instrument in a suitable acoustic.

For Baroque and Classical music one wants an incisive and well-defined sound with clear textures and plenty of articular emphasis and micro-dynamic inflection. Conductors such as Böhm, Szell, and Toscanini, though very different in temperaments, each give us an aspect of Classical performance that seemed more authentic than the romantic-based approach of Klemperer or Furtwängler. More recently, the work of Harmoncourt, Gardiner and Norrington have brought us even closer to the real sound world of Mozart. Solti was probably the best synthesis of styles, combining the full splendor and power of the modern orchestra, but with a temperament and musical vision that intuitively understood that Mozart's music came to life with propelling drive, incisive articulation and vigorous dynamics. This understanding which he brought to the symphonies and concertos (with DeLarrocha) and the famous overtures, stemmed from his deep immersion into the operatic world of Mozart. And that is our next talking point....

## The Operatic Connection

As Mozart matured he became increasingly fascinated—even obsessed—with opera. The sense of theatrical spectacle was a strong component of this fascination. By all historical accounts, this operatic and theatrical persona is the real Mozart, made somewhat silly in the film *Amadeus*, but true nonetheless. Not just in the operas, but also in the later symphonies and even in the Requiem, we hear sense of theatrical drama and soaring pathos. This is where we get the idea of what Mozart is really all about, with all the passions that he had within. In opera, even the most pianissimo passages of dialogue or aria can impart a real sense of bristling electricity throughout the opera house. This is not the simple, and docile Mozart for baby as he slumbers in the cradle. It seems fundamentally inconceivable to me that Mozart would reserve his sense of wit, biting sarcasm, trembling drama and human pathos solely for his operas, and reserve the chamber music and fortepiano creations for the Sunday brunch crowd as they sip their tea with pinky extended.

By and large, this operatic element is sorely missing in most of the versions I heard of Mozart's piano sonatas and concerti. It seems many pianists have put on a recording of a Mozart opera at home at easy background listening levels and think they've got the full measure of the music. It is common for pianists giving interviews (Uchida, Zacharias) to throw out the idea that a proper understanding of Mozart stems from listening to his operas. Yet, their playing is entirely un-operatic, and devoid of any real dramatic frisson. When you see the drama on stage, and hear the vitality in the singer's renderings which can give you goose bumps, you realize this is some pretty potent material!

What is needed, first and foremost, is for pianists to sit their butts down in any opera house and hear a production of a Mozart opera. Doesn't matter which one, lightweight like *Così*, dramatic like *Don Giovanni*, or fantastical like *Zauberflöte*. Doesn't matter which conductor or cast of singers, or whether they hear a rendering with modern or authentic instruments. The point is to hear the level of energy and bristling frisson of the singers! And this is what Mozart wanted. Remember the story of him cajoling the singers in a rehearsal to give more drama and intensity, and finally he snuck up on the soprano and goosed her quite rudely, saying that that was the kind of shriek he wanted in the music!

When I listen to Mozart at home, more often than not I'll put on one of the operas in preference to the many insipid and mild-mannered piano recordings. I have a very egalitarian appreciation for the operas, whether with modern instruments (Böhm), or with historical instruments (Harnoncourt or Norrington). By either standard, it is clear that the vast majority of Mozart piano recordings need to have way, way more energy and vitality of articulation. This may seem a contradiction when I've criticized a few recordings for being too roughhewn. But vigor and energy don't have to translate into textural imbalances any more than we tolerate a diva for chewing the scenery. In any case, I'd still opt for roughhewn over lullaby Mozart. When I hear Mozart rendered all dainty and effete, with the natural arch of phrases reigned-in, with the deep emotional currents of the bass foundation underplayed, and with hushed intimacy favored over bold exclamation, I don't even recognize this as the same composer as the operatic Mozart! We wouldn't tolerate such a disparity in performance tradition between Beethoven's *Fidelio* opera and his *Appassionata*, but in Mozart there is this tradition for playing the keyboard works with utmost restraint, delicate bass, and with all the exclamation points neutered. The late concerti, especially, should have an operatic, theatrical sense about how the themes are characterized.

On paper Mozart's operas look no different than the textures and orchestration found in the symphonies and concerti, so when I talk about the later concerti needing more dramatic intensity, more of the same kind of characterization that we hear in his opera performances, I'm talking about performance traditions and listener expectation, not the written notes. I certainly do not mean that pianists should try to replicate the sheer aural intensity of the human voice, or pound on the piano like one might for Bartok. I remember accompanying a vocalist in concert, where I was playing as loudly as I could on a Mason & Hamlin A (a six-footer) with the lid all the way up, and I could barely even hear what I was playing over the body-vibrating intensity of the vocalist. Maybe a rematch is in order with me on the big Fazioli 10-footer! ☺

It is possible to have elegance and a cultivated tone, but through a greater range of micro-dynamic inflection convey more *frisson* and excitement. In his televised Master Classes, Andras Schiff has demonstrated quite effectively that banging and harsh tone production are not needed in Mozart or even in Beethoven, but that

articulation, and voice-leading of harmonic elements can convey more than enough dramatic tension. This is what I'm talking about. The pianist can't just set their fingers on the piano and expect the music to play itself; they must energize the music and make it come alive for the listener.

## Stylistic Performance Awareness

Many readers may have been nodding along in agreement with much of what I've written so far, but it is obvious that, without specific examples, people make a lot of assumptions and often fill in the blanks erroneously with what they think is meant.

I'll present my arguments in relative order of importance. First off, dynamic vigor. Proper performance of Mozart on the modern piano needs to be somewhat louder and more projected than is now common, and more importantly, sudden contrasts in dynamics need to be more vigorous. Not quite as robust as Beethoven, but more than we hear now. Yes, the modern piano is louder and more sonorous than the fortepiano, but as we've already discussed, the fortepiano sounds more emphatic and energetic, and you can't replicate that degree of dramatic characterization by holding back.

Badura-Skoda addresses this very issue when he says "A forte in Mozart, though in fact having a smaller degree of loudness, will usually require more psychological intensity than a forte in Wagner." I've therefore put together a simple list which indicates on a scale of 1-10 the proper dynamic range (from softest to loudest sound) appropriate for different composers:

<u>Dynamic Range</u>	<u>Composer</u>
10	Bartok, Messiaen
9	Liszt
8	Beethoven (Chopin)
7	Mozart, Schubert
6	Haydn
5	Bach, Scarlatti

The above list is more a thought piece than absolute dictum because everything is, of course, relative to the situation at hand. For example, if I were to play a full “10” (by measure of my absolute strength) on most pianos the sound would be unpleasantly distorted even for percussive modern styles and would certainly invite broken strings. Only on the Fazioli have I been able to play to my absolute level of strength with no apparent distress from the piano, but playing with that amount of physical energy is very tiring. So my idea of a “10” for Bartok is really a “9” according to my own physical capabilities. Likewise, each instrument must be gauged for what is appropriate. I’ve also placed the dynamic limits for Liszt higher than Chopin because of what we understand of the temperaments of the composers. Similarly, I find that Mozart’s fascination with the operatic-theatrical world makes his music inherently more dramatic than Haydn’s more subtle and circumspect characterizations. I’d also hedge my bets slightly and say to reserve the “7” for the concerti, and that a good “6” would probably be sufficient for the solo works.

But even a “6” is more than we get from most pianists. Many of the more reticent players such as Curzon or Uchida hover in a persistent *mezzo-piano*, and occasionally rise up to a 4 or 5. Everybody needs to bump it up notch. I’d rather players err on the side of over-exuberance with a vigorous 8 than the wimpy, lullaby-time dynamic levels we now have. Some may take a defensive posture and claim that I’m overly-opinionated, but I honestly don’t believe this to be a matter of subjective preference. Listen to the symphonies, the operas, even the string quartets, and you will hear much more vigor than we get from most pianists. Often, this sense of vigor has nothing to do with decibel levels, for even a hushed *pianissimo* may convey psychological intensity.

I’ve said it before in the comparative surveys that we wouldn’t tolerate such a disparity in performance traditions between different musical genres with Beethoven or Liszt, so why do we accept this pabulum for Mozart’s keyboard works? When we listen to Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, or *Eroica*, or *Appassionata*, the dynamic template and range of articular emphasis is the same across all genres. In Mozart we have spine-tingling operas, soaring symphonies, and.... dainty little ditties for sonatas? Remember, they don’t sound so tepid and innocuous when

actually played on a fortepiano! (Check out the Suggested Listening section at the end of the essay).

When we listen to Harnoncourt conduct (whether with authentic or modern instruments), or when we hear Bezuidenhout on the fortepiano, some of the dynamic contrasts can be startling. And even when they are not startling they are certainly more emphatic and contrasted than what we hear from most pianists. Part of the problem is the overly-needled round Renner hammers found on most modern concert instruments which give us a pervasive soft Buick-ride when Mozart really wants the thrill of a Ferrari. The very shape and density of the hammers make dynamic contrast more difficult without resorting to outright bludgeoning.

Overall dynamic range and contrast in dynamics is easy enough to comprehend, but what do I mean by articular vigor? Extreme dynamic contrasts which may work on a finely-voiced Hamburg Steinway may seem crude and overbearing on pianos with less “tonal cushion.” In such a case, it is vital to shape the line with micro-dynamic inflection, and to make the most of contrasts between legato and staccato. These slight inflections, never over-the-top, energize the music through more active emphasis of musical gesture. Badura-Skoda talks about how Mozart’s contrasting dynamics are like the contrast of light and shadow in a painting, and as such, these contrasts shouldn’t be blurred into a hazy grey. But he and I do seem to be somewhat at odds on micro versus macro inflection of the long line. Now, keep in mind, his book was written well before the authentic instruments craze took hold, so he may very well have changed some of his ideas, and in fact his 1990’s recordings of Mozart concerti on a modern piano seem to me quite buoyant and full of micro-dynamic inflection. But in the book he seems to postulate that a certain steadiness of dynamics—without added crescendo, *dimenuendi*, or metric accents—is what Mozart valued most. I don’t think we can justify a whole different manner of musical sensibility between Mozart’s keyboard works and what we hear from string quartets or opera performances which virtually explode with bowing digs, or syllabic plosives and abdominal stresses.

Brendel, Schiff, and Badura-Skoda all inflect the lines with this kind of micro-dynamic nuance. Evgeni Kissin is a pianist who really gives us tremendous micro-dynamic energy, but I was unable to recommend any of his concerto performances

due to problems with the orchestral collaborations. Perahia is for the most part too macro-dynamic, though in his two-piano collaborations with Radu Lupu he seemed to be more energized.

Let's look at how dynamic contrast (light and shadows) and articular vigor come together in one of my favorite sonatas, the C Major, K. 309. Some of the sonatas are more clearly keyboard-conceived, such as the famous Sonata Facile, K. 545, but to me the K. 309 is very orchestral in conception and in its disposition of contrasting colors and textures.

The difference between the forte octaves and the melodic piano rejoinder needn't be overly contrasted because in this case we also have a readily apparent contrast of texture and sonority. Likewise, the contrast between forte and piano in measures 15-19 needn't be exaggerated because we also have octaves versus single tones at work which make the orchestration apparent. However, the sforzandi in measure 13 and 14 are worth further consideration. Here it is possible to let loose one of Mozart's soprano-goosing sforzandos to good effect if the piano has the tonal modulation to support (90% of pianos don't). This works best if the pianist plays the resolving note as a tenuto. However, I believe a more convincing effect is achieved with a lighter touch by applying a micro agogic before the sforzando and by abruptly releasing the phrased note instead of holding it tenuto. To me, the first way is passably Mozartean in a big symphonic way, but the second way is much more operatic and full of character. Following in this same vein, I'd apply micro agogics before the *fp* chords in measures 23 and 25 and shape the ascending line not just with the indicated crescendo but also by a slight emphasis of the penultimate note before the resolution. This gives a bit of piquant spice and lift to the line. As for the crescendo, the dynamic curve may be quite vigorous if the tone doesn't become too harsh, or one may allow the articular emphasis to convey the impression of increased excitement.

Measure by measure we find instances where vehement dynamics might work (depending on the piano) but where articular emphasis in most cases is less bullying. Save the really vigorous dynamics for the final cadence. In any case, we don't get any of this from most pianists. Obviously there are numerous solutions, but do something beyond the pretentious "acculturated" prettiness that is so prevalent.



## Tone and Texture in Playing Mozart

There is no question at all that Mozart was a musical sensualist who delighted in creating colorful combinations of instruments in his orchestration and thought carefully about (or knew instinctually) which instruments were best for certain kinds of characterization. Therefore, it seems entirely inappropriate to take a black and white Ansel Adams type of approach when playing Mozart on the piano.

Tone color and tonal texture are separate matters, but usually found together by a pianist with a well-developed ear for sound. Tone color at the piano is achieved by use of varying shades of pedaling, or by subtle gradations of dynamic contour to create a sound that is more than just black and white, structure, harmony and rhythm. The pianist may 'voice' his finger weight like a choral conductor who wishes to emphasize one vocal line over another. Pianists with good tone color will often have three distinct dynamic levels—bass, middle and melodic—so that the music doesn't just have a flat 'piano sound.'

Tonal texture is achieved by using the various propagating tendencies of each register to full effect, and by using different articulation for different lines. For example: the bass line may be fulsome enough to engage the full activation of the soundboard, yet not have much dynamic contour, while the middle textures are played with a lighter *detaché*, and the melody has a much greater expressive arch which on a good concert grand will float up and out of the 'box'. This gives the listener an impression of various layers of instrumental character, or a sense of textural dimension. I often talk of one-dimensional playing with pianists who lack this ability to differentiate the latent textures of music.

Let's say there is a passage in a Mozart concerto with rapid scales and brilliant figurations in the right hand, and some chordal harmonic foundation in the left hand. Many times the left hand is just a variation of what the orchestra is doing, but sometimes there is activity with just the piano, or with chords that have voice leading beyond what the orchestra is playing. A pianist like Brendel finds these nuggets, but a pianist such as Zacharais, who is completely right-hand dominant, misses this extra bit of dimension. Even if nothing vital is lost—and irrespective of how lovingly the right hand passagework is shaped—to constantly emphasize only the upper half of the keyboard makes the music sound more delicate and effete

than it should. Uchida has better balance of the hands than Zacharias, but she hardly ever gives any contour to the right-hand passagework (do you know of any opera singer who would flatten the line like that?). Why settle for one or the other when there are pianists such as Schiff, Anda, or Brendel who give us both? Barenboim is the most fulsome in the left hand, but also not as finely nuanced as Schiff or Brendel. But Barenboim has enough innate musicality to compensate, especially with regard to his masterly sense for natural, breathing phrases. Perahia has a beautifully cultivated tone which appeals to many listeners (though I find it more appropriate for Chopin than for Mozart), but the overall conception is completely macro-dynamic. Schiff is stronger in texture than Brendel, and Brendel is stronger in color than Schiff, but both are fairly complete in their overall conception, another reason why they are among the leading Mozarteans of our time.

## Episodic Demarcation

Perhaps one of the most controversial points I wish to make concerns episodic demarcation. This concept, so vital to the narrative character of Baroque and Classical music, functions grammatically like the paragraph by inserting breaks or hesitations in the flow of the music in order to delineate changes between the major thematic actorants. These needn't be grand rhetorical pauses, but sufficient that the listener recognizes the end of one idea and the start of another. When I say controversial, I mean to the vast majority of performing pianists and to the institutional teachers who supposedly provide a proper education. But among the historical specialists such as Harnoncourt, Leonhardt, and Bezuidenhout, there is nothing controversial about this concept at all. It is a natural outcome of understanding that music of this period was much influenced by the manner of speech and theatrical presentation. Harnoncourt wrote a whole book on the subject, *Musik als Klangrede* (Music as Speech), and further elaborates on the narrative nature of music in his essay on Schubert's Unfinished Symphony.

There are virtually no pianists who play on the modern piano who observe this important narrative function. Not even Brendel and Schiff who are otherwise quite well-versed in proper performance practice. Many pianists who perform Bach, Scarlatti, Mozart, or Haydn seem to set a tempo mark at the beginning like running in place on a treadmill and cling to that for dear life. This steady and

unrelenting metric progression almost guarantees that listeners will lapse into a passive mode simply as a function of how our neuro-synaps process rhythm (see my essay **Listener Psychology: How We Perceive Music** for more on that). This idea of the long continuous line as a means of perceiving the overarching architectural structure of the music is best left for silent perusal of the score because it has nothing to do with proper performance practice of the time.

Everybody talks of proper trills and appoggiaturas, and maybe they talk nervously about adding a little ornamentation in Mozart, but in terms of the actual listening experience I believe these are relatively minor details that hardly even get noticed. But characterization, the amount of emphasis of gesture and articulation—and of narrative flow—these are the defining aspects of performance that have the most impact on the listener. Let's take a closer look at a specific musical example to try and understand how episodic demarcation affects the overall narrative.

I've just randomly selected the Sonata in F, K. 332, simply because that's the last one I've listened to and it's still percolating around in my head. The first theme runs its course from the beginning until the downbeat of measure 12. Then there is a quarter-note rest, and then the onset of the secondary theme. Pianists sail right along from the first theme to the second with no change in gears at all. Performers savvy to the narrative flow and the change of thematic actorants (like a change from one actor to another in a play) will allow more than a mere quarter rest to properly and sufficiently delineate this change. Likewise at measure 22, pianists blithely cruise along in strict time when in fact, the new and dramatic forte in octaves is like a new paragraph in the story, with an entirely new type of action and narrative intensity. Listen to how Bezuidenhout sets off this change with nearly double the length of the quarter rest, and a really startling contrast of dynamic emphasis. These demarcations are absolutely essential to convey to the listener changes in who the characters are. These breaks in tempo, far from being disruptive, actually encourage the listener to follow along in an active manner in response to the ongoing narrative.

Less critical, but certainly desirable, are the micro hesitations that can occur within the phrase period of a single actorant. Since this is a sonata-allegro movement and not an expressive andante, we are not talking about any kind of rubato at all; that would be entirely inappropriate. Neither are we talking about

the occasional use of agogic stress to emphasize some major point of cadence. What we are talking about are micro-hesitations which are the equivalent of a quick catch-breath of a singer or actor. Such instances abound in Baroque and Classical music, and some artists are more sensitive to this than others (Barenboim and Arrau, for example, both talk about the use of ‘commas’ in phraseology), but it is probably easiest to just listen to any of the fortepiano performances you have access to for the most explicit demonstration of this performance practice.

For those following the discussion here with score in hand, let’s look at measure 76. The downbeat of the measure has the cadential resolution of the preceding thematic idea started in measure 71. Then there are a series of ascending eighth notes which take us to a reiteration of the thematic idea of measure 71, only now an octave higher. In such an instance a small, barely perceptible catch breath is appropriate here, like an actor who shrugs their shoulders or nods their head a certain way in order to convey that they’ve had an afterthought concerning what was just spoken. Not a change in actorants, not a change in thematic subject, just an amendment or clarification in the narrative. In such a case it is not a major travesty if the pianists sails right through without any demarcation, but it is an added aid to the narrative discourse if the performer differentiates such self-reflecting moments.

Since this idea is so important, let’s look at another example in the Sonata in C, K. 309. In the development section (measure 59) which suddenly changes to a ghostly minor key, Mozart has sufficiently delineated the ascending thematic echoes with rests and individual dynamic markings. But the onset of the new thematic response at measure 63, which conveys uncertain trepidation, needs a bit more demarcation than the single quarter rest allows. In this particular case, one may choose to elongate the period of rest, or one may start in relative time but place an agogic hesitation on the first note of the right-hand melody. But either way, the listener is alerted to two separate components of narrative at work: a non-personal statement of condition (fate) versus a fearful human reaction. Pianists who sail right through all of this fail to grasp the underlying psychology of what is happening. It’s more than just notes; action and reaction abound in the classical narrative tradition.

## An Authentic Vernacular

Taken individually, each of the authentic performance practices we've discussed will impart subtle changes in how the listener responds to the music. Taken together, there is a significant change in the overall experience. Just consider how modern producers 'update' Wagner by putting the characters in business suits. These producers are loathe to copy what has been done before and are driven to create their own stamp of individuality no matter how absurd the end result. Or consider the summer festivals of Shakespeare where a character may appear in jeans and a t-shirt and speak in casual suburban dialect. The intent is to somehow connect with new audiences, to eliminate barriers that intimidate the uninitiated.

Many applaud such efforts. But that's mostly because they've become bored with the originals. And therein lies the disconnect. They've become bored because they have never learned to listen beyond the most basic external elements of the musical message. None of these alternative methods of attracting new audiences have ever gained much traction or converted many new listeners in the long run. Did listening to the cool synthesized sounds of Tomita at the outdoor summer festival ever really convert any of the non-initiated to explore Debussy in its original form? More important is the need to demonstrate to youngsters how to perceive emotion and narrative characterization in the classics (art, music, theater). Properly understood, the value of Mozart, or Michelangeli or Monet should continue to have communicative value a thousand years hence, precisely for the reason that they tie in with a time and place and how humanity responded under those conditions. Every time you 'update' (or dumb-down!) a great work of art, you diminish its authentic expression and artistic value. Whether changes are made by artistic preference or concession to circumstance, a little is lost in translation each time.

I enjoy watching period-piece films and TV shows of all types in order to gain a perspective into the circumstances under which our forebears dealt with the human condition. The motivations of greed, lust, altruism, and search for meaning, to name just a few, have remained largely the same over the millennia. Basic emotional response has also remained about the same. Death is still mourned, and birth is still celebrated. But the conditions surrounding the

experience of life have changed and continue to change such that each successive generation has a different perspective and different set of relative values in how they respond to the unchanging core experiences of life.

In an interview I conducted with pianist Grigory Sokolov, the artist was adamant that any talk of style or external details of performance (the kind of authentic vernacular we're talking about here) were irrelevant to the deeper meaning of the music. I've pondered that for two decades and have to say that I disagree. If all we are after are the most irreducible emotional triggers of the human experience, then Beethoven and Prokofiev, Mozart and Messiaen may all be considered as the same experience just dressed up in different clothes. Mozart's Requiem and Messiaen's *Vingt Regards* both express the soaring ecstasy, awe and wonderment of contemplating a Divine presence. But here is a case of more than merely changing costume, from ordered formalism and tonality to fragmentary and prismatic structure and dissonant sonority. Beyond that, each composer had a completely different understanding of theology and cosmology which should guide the perceptive performer to very different means of expression.

If we lump Beethoven and Prokofiev together, we may then forget the circumstances under which Prokofiev's Wartime Sonatas were written, or the frustration and isolation with which Beethoven suffered with his deafness, and content ourselves to tap into a common experience shared by both about the determination of the human spirit to persevere. But by stripping away so many layers to get to that common core, much nuance and perspective is lost.

They say Eskimos have ten different words for snow depending on the type of snow and conditions of the weather. In each case, we can reduce the points of differentiation and simply agree that snow is white and cold. Or, if Mozart and Schoenberg both stubbed their toes, we may find that their reactions were pretty much the same (involving some choice cursing in German). But musical art is more than just putting a voice to the most basic responses of the human condition. It is also about the day-to-day conditions of life, what we value, what entertains us, what we find offensive. This is what is missing when you strip away all sense of authentic vernacular.

# Executive Summary

For those of you who have skipped to the end (how long is this damn thing, anyway?) here are the basic points to consider:

- An authentic vernacular puts works of art into a context that helps define the motivating inspiration and expressive response to the human condition.
- Small matters of performance details, when taken together, can completely change the listener's overall experience.
- Instrumental tone and balance of registers impact not only clarity of texture but also the psychological intensity of the music.
- Proper phraseology with natural breathing points are more convincing than unbroken Romantic-era long lines.
- Use of episodic demarcation (rather than steady metric progression) assists the listener in understanding the changes of actorants in the narrative.
- Modern instruments may offer an aesthetically pleasing (if somewhat revisionist) template for presentation of Mozart to modern listeners as long as the pianist is sensitive to all of the issues discussed above.

## Suggested Listening

Here are three performances that demonstrate the proper sound and style for Mozart. Compare them with any modern instrument performance you have and ponder the degree of difference in balance, narrative flow and dramatic impact.

- **Concerto No. 20 in D-minor, K. 466.** Brautigam/Willens/Kölner Akademie. BIS
- **Concerto No. 25 in C, K.503.** Buchbinder/Harnoncourt/Musicus Concentus. Sony
- **Sonata in B-flat, K. 333.** Bezuidenhout. Harmonia Mundi

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