

"After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance" by Kenneth Hamilton

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Kenneth Hamilton's *After the Golden Age* offers a breezy, bracing read in the best traditions of the former British Empire (the Scotsman author will hopefully forgive the reviewer—also a Scotsman by heritage—for lumping British and Scottish education together). Those not born into a tradition that relentlessly exhorts young writers to express complex ideas in a clear style driven by verbs and subtly seasoned by adjectives and adverbs cannot fully appreciate the payoff for those so trained. Oh yes, add the dry, understated wit that the British own outright and you have a package that is well nigh irresistible.

We should not be surprised, then, to run across flattering reviews such as that by Bernard Holland in the *New York Times*.¹ Reading the review of “Mr. Hamilton’s delightful book, which you should read,” however, I had a hard time convincing myself that I had read the same book. For Holland the focus of Hamilton’s study is “a detailed reflection on concert behavior.” Culling as many of these references as he can find and then stringing them together, Holland’s take-away is that “musical events were usually variety shows in the manner of vaudeville.”

Though considerably more sophisticated and nuanced, this is essentially the tone adopted by Alex Ross in a longer piece in *The New Yorker*.² Given the much narrower parameters within which present-day concertgoers move, there is understandably an almost endless fascination with concert formats, programming, and etiquette during the comparatively Wild West period from ca. 1800 to ca. 1930.

Titillating tales of unruly “audience involvement” have circulated for decades, and it is clear that both Mr. Holland and Mr. Ross yearn for at least a modified return. Although author Hamilton takes as much pleasure as the next pianist in accounts of Liszt’s pre-concert mingling with his audience, he sets for himself a more ambitious agenda, one that includes an assessment and critique of “Romantic” and “modern” performing styles, proposing to make sense not only of a purported “Golden Age” but by reflection our own.

¹ January 8, 2008, entitled “Concertgoers, Please Clap, Talk or Shout at Any Time.”

² Alex Ross, “Why So Serious,” *The New Yorker* (September 8, 2008), 3 pp. Online.

Alas, this is where an initially well-illuminated path begins to blur. Like many engaging narratives, *After the Golden Age* seeks to enlist our attention by staking out a novel (even original) point of view from which to argue. The most telling—and more than a little disconcerting—aspect of Hamilton’s argument is that it pointedly undermines the book’s very title. Chapter 1—whose arguments are reinforced liberally throughout the book—is devoted entirely to debunking the notion that there ever was a “Golden Age” (aka “Great Tradition”) of pianism.

But wait a minute! Perhaps by “After the Golden Age” the author meant to convey “After [I have debunked the clichéd notion of] the Golden Age,” or “After the Golden Age [has been thoroughly discredited].” Of the two-dozen people I canvassed in an attempt to get at the title’s sense, to a person they all opted for the common sense reading (i.e. “after” means “after”).

Hamilton proposes as a span for “any alleged pianistic Great Tradition”³ —a kind of un-Golden Age, if you will—as the century from 1837 (the so-called duel between Liszt and Thalberg) to 1941 (the death of Paderewski). He sets up this un-Age as a straw man, a period when pianistic gods roamed the earth propagating mythical performance standards, any record of which is perpetually on the verge of extinction. His prime mouthpiece is pianist/author Abram Chasins in an outdated book almost fifty years old.⁴ But in so doing he overlooks the most obvious reason why the construct of a “Golden Age” remains so compelling. Only in his last chapter does Hamilton finally acknowledge that “the piano itself was more important than [i.e. in his un-Golden Age]. It took a central position in both domestic and public musical life that it has irrevocably lost in our day.”⁵

These truistic remarks leave dangling the fundamental question as to *why*. The simple truth is that the piano followed the same basic curve of invention, innovation, peak penetration, and decline that has attended virtually every major technological breakthrough in the West since at least the sixteenth century. From the late eighteenth century on the piano gradually squeezed out the harpsichord, organ, clavichord, and guitar as the solo keyboard/plucked instrument of choice. The new century prized individuality, and a single instrument that could reproduce all the notes (and many of the colors and dynamics) of the emerging orchestra provided the perfect vehicle for Romantic expression. A complementary way of understanding the vogue of the piano is as the instrument of the Victorians, a powerful antidote to sexual repression on the one hand, and the talismanic emblem of industrial imperialism on the other. Between 1820 and 1910 the level of piano manufacture rose at a rate perhaps rivaled only by the cell phone today.

³ Hamilton, *After the Golden Age*, 19.

⁴ Abram Chasins, *Speaking of Pianists* (New York: Knopf, 1961-62).

⁵ Hamilton, *After the Golden Age*, 256.

By the eve of the First World War the per capita penetration in Europe (and eventually in America, especially urban centers like New York and Boston) reached a level higher than at any time before or since. Moreover, in the 1880s and '90s there was a bewildering variety of makes, with a focus on high quality grands that offered a dazzling variety of sounds. After 1914 the level of manufacture in Europe declined, most precipitously in Germany and the United States, at a Steinway-led level of increasing uniformity, and including a higher proportion of spinets, uprights, and parlor pianos.⁶

During the time when a piano in the drawing room was the goal of virtually every Victorian household, the piano enjoyed a prestige on a scale with the personal computer or iPod today (those with heavily decorated cases could be compared more aptly to high-end imported cars). Beginning with the celebrated Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 and extending into the second decade of the twentieth century, the piano was the centerpiece of every industrial *Austellungskatalog* (exhibition catalogue). And why not? The modern piano was the most advanced piece of technology in the West. It incorporated a rich variety of woods (from soft pine to hard maple) and metals (from the cast iron plate to the steel strings—the same strings used to build the Brooklyn Bridge) that supported up to 30,000 pounds of tension. It joined materials using every combination of glues and bolts. And it could claim at least two advantages over its nearest competitor, the steam locomotive: it was considerably more portable, and you could play it to attract visitors.

As with most technologies, the reasons behind a decline often appear more complex than those for the rise. The war that erupted in 1914 had been building since the 1880s as virtually every European country armed itself to the teeth. Within a few short years war had seriously slowed manufacture, from which the industry never fully recovered (the Second World War was also no help). Aided by the growth of jazz—in part a street level response to the insanity of the Great War—the prestige of the piano hung on through the late 1940s, but little by little another related phenomenon—the rapid rise in the popularity of the blues—led by the mid-1950s to rock 'n' roll (many young Americans associated the piano with Fats Domino or Little Richard rather than Vladimir Horowitz) and its spin-offs. The folk banjo of Pete Seeger, with its easygoing portability, seemed more in tune with post-war American sensibilities than massive, fixed-pitch pianos. The Vietnam War had the unplanned result of making Westerners more global in their outlook, and post-Vietnam curricula argued for world musics as well as the familiar Western pantheon. As blues and rock bands increasingly worked joints that had no working pianos, they were gradually supplanted by guitars (acoustic at first, then electric) or electronic keyboards as both home and gigging instruments of choice. Beginning with the prototypes of the 1930s and followed by Fender, Vox, and Les Paul, the electric guitar in particular projected the rebellious, sexually-charged edge of post-1950s America as had the Lisztian piano in nineteenth-century Europe. Its virtues coupled the pitch-bending qualities of the banjo and acoustic guitar with novel electronic sounds that included stadium-sized amplitude and the ability to distort the standards of beautiful tone that Western art music had spent centuries constructing.

⁶The most reliable source for quantities of pianos manufactured during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the table in the article *fortepiano*, Section 9. 1860-1915 of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 2000), compiled by two of the leading historians of the piano, Cyril Ehrlich and Edwin M. Good.

Though seemingly different in nature, the curves for other Victorian-era technologies track that for the piano. The literally hundreds of automobile brands competing shortly after the turn of the century shrunk to a fraction by the 1940s. Trains introduced at the end of the eighteenth century rapidly connected practically every city and village in Europe, with concomitant increases in speed. Because of the shorter distances, trains remain an important component of European transportation, though the spread after the First World War of the automobile and air travel curtailed further expansion. In America, the phenomenal popularity of trains symbolized by the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 lasted into the 1930s. But the fate of American trains was sealed by the large distances between cities. As soon as air travel and automobiles became cost effective, America's magnificent rail fleet declined to a shadow of its former glory. Bicycles and transatlantic ships followed a similar curve. Note that none of these technologies disappear entirely; millions of people still ride bicycles—just as millions still play the piano. They are nonetheless post-peak.

It makes all the sense in the world, then, to view the period from roughly 1830-1930 as The Golden Age of the *Piano*.⁷ As technological history it is irrefutable. Of course, Hamilton might argue that a Golden Age of the Piano differs from a Golden Age of *Pianists*. But it is no accident that the flood of pianos was accompanied by a flood of pianists, and as practitioners on the talismanic object of their day, it follows absolutely that they enjoyed more prestige and were more in demand than the greatest pianists of our own day. Just compare the density of solo piano recitals and the number of artists playing them at the turn of the twentieth century to the relative trickle of such concerts and handful of touring pianists serving a much larger population a century later.⁸ This says nothing about relative levels of accomplishment; pianists, even the greatest, have no control over when they are born.⁹

Indeed, more than a hint of resentment seems to accompany Hamilton's dismantling: "We can scarcely deny that the players of the past had remarkable talents, remarkable gifts, and unique personalities, but we should doubt that they had ethereally approachable talents and unequalled gifts. It is merely a counsel of despair that claims we needs must live in a silver or even a bronze age after the fabled age of gold."¹⁰

Hamilton's overtly stated rationale for deconstructing a Golden Age revolves around two propositions: 1) performance in this period was not stylistically monolithic, nor was it dominated by a few titans such as Anton Rubinstein or Liszt; 2) the performance traditions are not "continuous," that is, in many cases we have lost contact with how these artists played. Neither of these propositions is today

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I ignore the upsurge of interest in Western classical music throughout Asia, which is anomalous and driven by its own unique set of circumstances.

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It does not matter whether you focus on select venues like Carnegie Hall, or the Community Concert series that served just about every American community outside of New York City.

⁹

Imagine that Mozart and Liszt were born just twenty years earlier; the piano repertory would be greatly impoverished.

¹⁰

Hamilton, *After the Golden Age*, 15-16.

as controversial as their author contends, but even if they were, both fit smoothly within the historical profile of the piano. During the piano's long period of gestation and development we would expect to hear a large variety of piano types (exactly what happened). And precisely because of the focus on individuality of interpretation, we would not expect the predilections of any particular artist to have come down to us in a dominating form (also what happened). Whether "Golden Age" or "Great Tradition" are ideal terms, it is incontestable that the piano and its practitioners enjoyed roughly a century in the sun, arguably amassing the most magnificent repertoire ever for a solo instrument. It is equally incontestable that the piano will never again enjoy such dominance.

Even were we to grant Hamilton's contradictory reading of "Golden Age," the book's subtitle—"Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance"—only creates more confusion. Based on the "after" in the lead clause, we would expect "modern performance" to be a primary focus, since it presumably came "After the Golden Age." At the very least, the two might be represented in roughly equal measure. This is, alas, not the case. The book scarcely addresses "after" at all; except for portions of the last chapter and a handful of exceptions in earlier chapters the book is devoted overwhelmingly to the performance styles of pianists born between 1809 and 1877.

You get a better picture of what the book is about by scrutinizing its contents chapter by chapter. Chapter 2, "Creating the Solo Recital," traces the evolution of the piano recital from the Liszt of the 1830s, beginning with a backwards glance at Paderewski through the lens of the 1937 film, *Moonlight Sonata*. The second half of the chapter addresses the roles of improvisation and patterns of programming, with their growing tendency to dilute ambitious multi-movement works with lighter fare. Chapter 3, enigmatically titled "With Due Respect," takes up the transition to playing from memory, customs of audience applause, and attitudes toward wrong notes. Chapter 4, "A Suitable Prelude," describes the centuries old practice of preluding (improvising) before or between pieces on a program.

Chapter 5, "A Singing Tone," is devoted in large measure to what Hamilton describes as "asynchronization," "dislocation," or "displacement" (what others have called "breaking")—the playing of the right-hand melody slightly after its counterpart in the left hand accompaniment. The related practice of arpeggiation (the breaking of chords not so notated) as well as reflections on pedaling occupy smaller sections. For the record, only Steinways need apply; Hamilton's dismissive and patronizing attitude toward period instruments is not only out of synch with such mainstream artists as Emmanuel Ax but compromises much of what he has to say about interpretation.

The sixth and longest chapter, "The Letter of the Score," looks at how nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pianists interpreted the published scores known to them. It focuses on how technological developments in the piano sparked reworkings of numerous scores, including the flat out recompositions of Busoni and others. But it has virtually nothing to say about *how* these artists (and those from the generation in which the music was actually composed) actually *read* the music they used. Hamilton seems to buy directly into the general fiction of *Urtext* editions, which purport to produce

“laudably ‘clean’ texts.”¹¹ The *Urtext* movement is less a decisive move away from the Romantic world view as it is an attempt to embrace the most sacred and prestigious notions of science—especially that “the world is only what we can observe,” which translates into “the score is all we can play.” Its rationale rests on the absurd claim that a complex skein of sources leads to only one antiseptic *Urtext*, mercifully free of any editorial interpretation. If this notion were at all tenable, then why do the competing Universal Wiener Urtextausgaben and the Henle Urtext of virtually every category of works by Chopin—from etudes to scherzi—differ in important respects? Especially with a composer like Chopin, the German longing for *die Fassung letzter Hand* was not a primary goal of the most fastidious first- or even second-generation Romantic composer.

In an era when the same work could be published nearly simultaneously in Paris, Berlin, London, and even Vienna, there is little evidence that composers were frantically attempting to use these publications to fix forever a frozen view of a composition. Nor is there any evidence that the performers on editions created by other turn-of-the-century performers did any less justice to the music than current performers who read so-called *Urtext* editions as literal, sacrosanct, not-to-be-deviated-from, quasi-mathematical grids. Sure, it is doubtless more liberating for performers to start with an edition that has real connections to the sources for the work being performed (and Hamilton’s discussion on pp. 199-200 of the fate of Mendelssohn’s *Song without Words* is instructive), but even more important that they understand how to read—and interpret—tempo markings, time signatures, slurs and phrase markings, pedalings, and many other performance directions rather than assuming that their “modern” meaning is either useful or clear.

Chapter 7, “Lisztiana,” assesses the overall impact of the composer/pianist Liszt—who has at all events already played the leading man throughout the first six chapters—on pianism. While Chapter 8, “Postlude: Post-Liszt,” implies a more contemporary focus, except for a brief distraction about Vladimir Horowitz and a single quote from Sviatoslav Richter, the vast majority of this final chapter again deals with composer/pianists born between 1809 and 1877, with Liszt as the now predictable centerpiece.

What, then, about the “Modern Performance” touted in the volume’s subtitle? Would it be unreasonable to expect occasional excursions about at least a few of three generations of genuinely post-Liszt modern pianists (chosen as representative rather than comprehensive):¹²

- 1) Rudolf Serkin (1903-91), Clifford Curzon (1907-82), *Emil Gilels (1916-85), Dinu Lipatti (1917-1950), Benedetto Michelangeli (1920-1995), Alicia de Larrocha (b. 1923), Aldo Ciccolini (b. 1925), *Charles Rosen (b. 1927), Byron Janis (b. 1928), and why not Art Tatum (1909-56), whom Horowitz held in awe;

¹¹ Ibid., 197.

¹² There are many ways to organize and categorize pianists—period of major activity, teachers, geographical range, perceived influence, recording legacy, students, length of career, independent rankings, etc. I have elected to list these pianists by their date of birth because it remains the single largest influence on how they turn out.

- 2) *Alfred Brendel (b. 1931), Van Cliburn (b. 1934), Malcolm Bilson (b. 1935), Vladimir Ashkenazy (b. 1937), *Maurizio Pollini (b. 1942), Daniel Barenboim (b. 1942), Richard Goode (b. 1943), Andre Watts (b. 1946), Murray Perahia (b. 1947), Emanuel Ax (b. 1949), Yefim Bronfman (b. 1958); and
- 3) Cecile Licad (b. 1961), Leif Ove Andsnes (b. 1970), Evgeny Kissin (b. 1971), and Lang Lang (b. 1982).

Although four of these artists receive fleeting mention (indicated by an * above), not a single pianist on this list is discussed in relation to their “modern” playing style. What, then, does Hamilton mean by “modern performance”? As it turns out, “modern performance” is not a style (or series of styles) but an absence—the absence of knowledge by legions of contemporary pianists of the performance styles from Hamilton’s un-Golden Age. Hence we have another one-size-fits-all straw man, a generic stage figure who would be well advised to embrace the historical lessons Hamilton adumbrates in Chapters 2-7.

In the concluding section to Chapter 1, “Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance” (pp. 30-32), the author states that the function of his study is not to search for “a musical equivalent of the quest for the Holy Grail, nor to reminisce wistfully about vanished and never-to-be-regained ‘good old days,’ but as a guide to performance practice for professional musicians, music students, interested amateurs, and—not least—critics of our own era.”¹³ This defines a broad and commendably ambitious demographic.

A “guide,” of course, can range from a source of basic information to a detailed blueprint. I searched in vain for anything other than the most tentative and cautious recommendations. These occur primarily in concluding paragraphs at the ends of chapters (or sections thereof). For example, at the end of a richly detailed and entertaining account of the evolution of the piano recital (Chapter 2), Hamilton proffers these words of “guidance”:

“A knowledge of the historically contingent nature of recital programming should be liberating for the pianist interested in trying out new patterns...rethinking the organization of our solo recitals, including the placing of the mid-concert break, if there is to be one, might allow us more regularly to fit in pieces of awkward length or gargantuan demands, like the Alkan Op. 39 Solo Concerto. And what of the once common practice of playing isolated movements from sonatas or other such works? Would a return to this really be so dreadful[?]....Nothing is set in stone.”¹⁴

¹³ Hamilton, *After the Golden Age*, 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

Though these gently encouraging words are welcome, they offer little direction for any serious student of the piano. Indeed, the one place where the author deals with this topic in any detail occurs in the book's final chapter¹⁵ and relates to a performance at the Istanbul International Festival, where Hamilton was asked to re-create the spirit of Liszt's 1847 concerts. We learn that Hamilton played fewer bravura works, injected some novel repertoire, kept the programs short, spoke to the audience between pieces, and dealt with the reality that no one could directly replicate Liszt's charisma. While presenting no earth shattering insights, this example is nonetheless instructive—and would have proved even more valuable alongside a half dozen other analogous instances.

Chapter 3, in spite of its balanced and insightful presentation on the history of memorization, offers no comment about an appropriate postmodern etiquette, or even rationale, for playing from memory.¹⁶ The otherwise sparkling narration of preluding that is the subject of Chapter 4 draws largely from a dozen printed examples (a third of them from Liszt) in the repertoire, beginning with the tentative arpeggio that opens Beethoven's Tempest Sonata (Op. 31, No. 2) through Percy Grainger's Preliminary Canter, "One More Day, My John." While all of these well chosen instances clearly evoke the spirit of preluding, by virtue of their being integral parts of printed pieces they bear only a tangential relationship to actual examples.

The chapter concludes with this tepid endorsement:

"Modern players, with a few notable exceptions, have been extremely reluctant to reintroduce the spontaneous improvised elements that were a normal feature of the concerts of the past....Yet there is a wealth of material available for those who wish to learn the skills of preluding and improvisation. This is not a lost art—it is simply one that has been deliberately neglected."¹⁷

It would have boosted Hamilton's cause had he spoken of nineteenth-century composers' proclivity for beginning pieces *ex nihilo*, affording us a glimpse into the unfolding act of creation (Beethoven's Ninth being the most dramatic impetus). The result often sounds uncannily like a prelude. Hence the Mazurka in A minor, Op. 17, No. 4 (1832-33) begins on a barely audible dissonant chord that turns out to be the accompaniment to the main theme. The Mazurka in A-flat, Op. 50, No. 2 (1841-42) opens with eight bars of mildly syncopated, questioning sonorities that never surface again in the piece—much as we have come to expect of most preluding. Further examples abound.

There is also a distinction well worth making between preluding before pieces and segueing between them. The former can in truth be accounted for in large measure as alerting a restive crowd that

¹⁵ Ibid., Chapter 8, 261-63.

¹⁶ The late Sviatoslav Richter (1915-97) and the very active Richard Goode (b. 1943) are only two examples of major pianists who frequently play(ed) from music.

¹⁷ Hamilton, *After the Golden Age*, 138.

a performance is about to commence. The sterile or anticipatory (depending on your perspective) silence precedes the emergence of an artist from the wings today neutralizes most of the rationale for preluding. Increasingly from ca. 1900 on, pianists tried out their instruments (often one they selected, especially in the case of Steinway) beforehand, obviating the need for a warm-up. The interpolated seque turns out to be even rarer, both historically and on record.

Hamilton might also have emboldened more pianists to experiment with this dormant tradition had he devoted more than five percent of his chapter to actual examples created either by him or that were extant on recordings. While many historical performances on the piano still await transfer from 78's¹⁸, even those who limit their online their searches to Amazon.com can at most any time come up with three dozen current CD's of piano recordings made before 1940 and numbering over five hundred individual pieces or movements. While only a tiny percentage includes examples of preluding, each illuminates a real-world aspect of this practice.

Among numerous choices with which to start, two of my favorites are those provided for Beethoven's improbably popular Eccossaises in E-flat major, WoO 83, the first by Eugen d'Albert between 1910-12¹⁹ and the second by Wilhelm Kempf toward the end of his long performing career.²⁰ Unlike those for the more extravagant Romantic works adduced by Hamilton, both of these brief parallel preludes are thematic in nature (most related to the first category of Carl Czerny). Both cover the range from bottom to top in a dramatic fashion that sets up the low-key beginning of Beethoven's original.

Both preludes convey a sense of being "composed," although Kempf may have varied his version over a career that included composition and spanned more than half a century. Indeed, in both cases the preluding is just one dimension of extensive overall modifications (doublings, ornamentation, dynamics, etc.). Every early pianist who recorded this diminutive work freely re-ordered and rearranged the half dozen (A-F) 16-bar ecossaises (d'Albert even helps himself to the Ecossaise, WoO 86, in the same key), each of which links directly to the contagious 16-bar refrain:

Eugen d'Albert (1910-12): Prelude-A-Refrain/B-Refrain/C-Refrain/D-Refrain/WoO 86 [32 bars]-Refrain/E-Refrain/B-Refrain/C-Refrain/D-Refrain/WoO86 [32bars]-Refrain/E-Refrain/F-Refrain/Codetta

¹⁸ These are best found in the collections of public libraries, such as the New York Public Library.

¹⁹ Arbiter 147, track 10. WoO 83 may well be an arrangements from a set of orchestral dances by Beethoven.

²⁰ DGG ,CBE 06, disc 5, track 32. No firm date can be ascribed to the Kempf recording, which the current DGG recording lists with a release date of 1993, two years after the pianist's death. The stereo sound could date from anytime after the mid-1960s.

Feruccio Busoni (1922, played at breakneck speed):²¹ A-Refrain/A-Refrain/B-Refrain/D-Refrain/C-Refrain/F-Refrain/[8va] A-Refrain/Codetta

Wilhelm Kempf(1960s?): Prelude-A-Refrain/B-Refrain/C/C-Refrain/C-Refrain/D-Refrain/E-Refrain/F/F-Refrain

To be sure, none of these pianists would have dared rearrange one of Beethoven's piano sonatas. Yet Kempf's stolid but lively version, probably recorded in the second half of the 1960s, illustrates the longevity of the tradition.

Hamilton refers to Joseph Hofmann's preludings as "doodlings," but this scarcely does justice to the variety of styles tailored to fit an equal variety of circumstances. The prefatory material for his 1937 live performance of Chopin's *Andante spianato and Grande Polonaise*, Op. 22²² is especially striking for its insinuating, Debussian chromaticism that contrasts sharply with the diatonicism of the opening. In his 1945 Carnegie Hall concert, Hofmann plays the *Andante spianato* again,²³ but preceded by an entirely different introduction, one whose deep, enigmatic (and non-functional!) octaves create an air of mysterious anticipation.

On the other hand, Hofmann's preluding to the Ballade in G minor, Op. 23 is much more of a mood setter, well in the spirit of Chopin's equally enigmatic opening though not entirely congruent stylistically. In contrast to both of these examples, the preluding for the "Butterfly" Etude, Op. 25, No. 9 consists of a brusquely efficient upward sweeping black key glissando (moving the audience to stunned silence), followed by two simple tonic chords. It sounds not only off the cuff but gives the etude proper a delightfully jocose affect.

None of these variegated examples fits neatly into the often formulaic categories or examples of Hummel, Czerny, Kalkbrenner, Czerny, or Corri, much less the more elaborate examples from Liszt's *Transcendental Studies* or Alkan's *Fifth Book of Chants*. For example, both the preluding to the 1937 *Andante spianato* and that to the G-minor Ballade employ parallel harmonies you would never find in a work by Chopin. Indeed, it is Hofmann's idiosyncratic stylistic discontinuities in all his examples that raise his preludings above the level of "doodlings." Examples like these are probably more instructive for the student/performer today than any of the myriad instances in historical treatises or other publications.

Chapter 7 ("Lisztiana") concludes with:

²¹ Arbitrator 134, track 4.

²² Cedar AB 78946, track 5.

²³ Cedar AB 78945, track 14.

“...what of Liszt’s attitude to the arpeggiation and asynchronization that formed the core of the discussion in chapter 5? Here we have little direct evidence other than Liszt’s occasional attempts to notate such things in his own scores, but it seems highly likely that something that formed such a striking feature of his students’ playing should have been absent from his own. We have also noticed previously how reluctant Liszt was to spend too much time marking details of arpeggiation and pedaling, and the same is likely too for subtle dislocations, which would anyway differ with each performance....The message here...seems to be communication, imagination, and variety.”²⁴

There is nothing to argue with here. What is missing, as in so many other places, is what concrete suggestions Hamilton might make for the overwhelming majority of pieces or passages in the repertory for which no historical personage has left a recording.

With all the generic references to “modern players,” the one whose absence is felt most keenly under the circumstances is Hamilton himself. Frustrated in my attempt to uncover strong points of view in the book, I decided to procure a few of Hamilton’s own recordings to hear what kinds of performance decisions he makes. Alas, I came up empty handed. If there are such documents, they have been concealed very effectively.

The book concludes by throwing up another last-second straw man:

“We surely have a lot to gain from adopting a more liberal attitude to our performance traditions—from taking seriously what players fashioned from the repertoire as well as what its composers envisaged—just as we have from loosening concert etiquette with entertainment as well as education in mind. Traditions, great or merely different, teach us not just about the potentialities in the music, but about the limitations of our own taste. Let us not treat them like embarrassingly garrulous elderly relatives, to be shunted off to the old-folks’ home of anachronistic attitudes by the forward march of musicology.”²⁵

Musicology? The infrequent mentions of reputed musicologists—Peter Stadlen, Richard Taruskin, Jim Samson, myself, Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, Lydia Goehr (all on pp. 25-27)—are overwhelmingly positive. In the entire book, only two scholars come in for censure—the distinguished American writer Michael Steinberg (p. 260, for criticizing Vladimir Horowitz’s interpretive freedoms) and the late, legendary Renaissance scholar Howard Mayer Brown (for claiming, according to Hamilton, that “there is no lost tradition” [for music after 1750], p. 24). Characterizing Brown’s 1980 *Grove* article on “Performing Practice” as “notorious,” Hamilton claims that it was “for twenty subsequent years the first, and sometimes the only, port of call for English-speaking music students in search of a quick infusion of historical wisdom...”

This account is both disingenuous and inaccurate. Hamilton does not complete the offending phrase, which I reproduce in its entirety below:

²⁴ Hamilton, *After the Golden Age*, 252-53.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

“...there is no ‘lost tradition’ separating the modern performer from the music of Haydn, Mozart and their successors comparable with that which separates him from Machaut, or even from Monteverdi.”

Read as a whole, this is an entirely reasonable assertion. What Brown meant, of course, was that performances of the music of Machaut or Monteverdi demands knowledge of arcane notation, obsolete families of instruments, lost styles of vocal production, rare practices of embellishment, and a wholesale absence of performance directions, along with the most basic notions of sound that performances of Mozart and beyond rarely have to address.

Moreover, Brown never viewed the post-1750 portion of his 1980 article as ideal. The three-volume *Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* that appeared only four years after the original *Grove* afforded him the opportunity to make a change. He and editor Stanley Sadie requested that I rewrite from scratch the post-1750 segment, and agreed to a tripling of its length (I requested even more). Anyone in the period between 1984 and 2000 who wished to get an up-to-date snapshot of performing practice had an easy task.

There is ample reason to believe that Hamilton knew my article. In my first paragraph, I scuttle the notion of a “continuous tradition” using the teacher lineage of my friend Charles Rosen to illustrate: “if, for example, Czerny studied with Beethoven, and Liszt studied with Czerny, and Moritz Rosenthal studied with Liszt, and Charles Rosen studied with Rosenthal, then there is an unbroken performing tradition from Beethoven’s time to the present day. But on closer examination neither the assumption of an unbroken performance history nor the corollary of an unbroken performance tradition stand up.”²⁶ In his own bid to “correct” Brown, Hamilton writes: “After all, if Beethoven taught Czerny, Czerny taught Liszt, Liszt taught Rosenthal, Rosenthal taught Charles Rosen, and Rosen is giving a master class at your university, then how distant can we really be from a valid and unbroken apostolic succession?”²⁷

Hamilton would scarcely be the first scholar to forget where he ran across a particular idea.²⁸ But throughout his book there is a cast of not-quite-scapegoats. He cannot be serious about musicologists (who are often, as is Hamilton, performer/scholars) because they not only pioneered many of these rediscoveries but are clearly among his most ardent sympathizers and supporters. He offers little more than anecdotal evidence concerning the openness to innovation of modern concert audiences.

²⁶ Robert Winter, “Performing Practice after 1750” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, Vol. 3, p. 53. When writing the Schubert article for the *New Grove* became too all-consuming for me to attend to a revision of my 1984 piece, I was delighted when my colleague D. Kern Holoman stepped in and surveyed the rapidly evolving field with distinction.

²⁷ Hamilton, *After the Golden Age*, 24. His posing of the question is meant to be rhetorical.

²⁸ Indeed, in his preface to *The Classical Style*, Charles Rosen pens one of the more sweeping self-absolutions on the subject: “In most instances I could no longer distinguish, even if I wanted to, which ideas are my own and which I have read, or learned from my teachers, or simply heard in discussion.”

Clarifications aside, to invoke—in the very last word of the book!—as the bad boy a discipline that has played an almost entirely supportive, pro-Hamilton role in the preceding 280 pages is little short of bizarre.

What, then, is *After the Golden Age*? If you strip away what it is not, much still remains. A more appropriate title might be: *From Liszt to Paderewski: A Cultural History of Romantic Pianism*. I suggest a cultural history because, for example, the first chapter to deal specifically with the playing of actual pieces is Chapter 5; Chapters 4-6 are arguably the only ones to deal in detail with direct performance issues. Not surprisingly, *After the Golden Age* reflects the centrality of Liszt in Hamilton's previous work;²⁹ there is, for example, comparatively little on Chopin. Yet I would venture to say that no single-authored, book-length study on the history of piano playing draws from so many strands of historical thought, both written and recorded. It is therefore all the more regrettable that the exquisite parts add up to more than the whole.

Present-day notions of performance practice are sufficiently broad and inclusive enough to encompass most of the issues raised by Hamilton. If one is a pianist, however, the most engaging yet vexing issue raised by Romantic pianism seems to be addressed by the author almost in passing. If you confront pianists trained in a contemporary modernist style with recorded performances³⁰ by any of a flock of composers/pianists born before 1867 (e.g. Edvard Grieg, b. 1843; Vladimir de Pachmann, b. 1848; Teresa Carreño, b. 1853; Arthur Friedheim, b. 1859; Gustav Mahler, b. 1860; Ignace Jan Paderewski, b. 1860; Conrad Ansoerge, b. 1862; Arthur de Greef, b. 1862; Moritz Rosenthal, b. 1862; Emil von Sauer, b. 1862; Bernhard Stevenhagen, b. 1862; Eugen d'Albert, b. 1864; Richard Strauss, b. 1864; Josef Weiss, b. 1864; and Ferruccio Busoni, b. 1866), their near unanimous bafflement will have little to do with precluding, asynchronization, arpeggiation, or pedaling but rather with that magical yet inscrutable phenomenon we formally call tempo flexibility but which is often referred to in the trenches as "push-and-pull." Counting references to "rubato," Hamilton refers to tempo flexibility only about a dozen times in his entire book. The most sustained discussion (three pages) talks about tempo flexibility against a backdrop of fidelity to the score. About his main example—Moritz Rosenthal's performance of the second theme in the first movement of Chopin's Sonata in B minor, Op. 58³¹—Hamilton opines:

²⁹ In addition to *Liszt: Sonata in B Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) and serving as editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), Hamilton has published four other articles devoted entirely or in large part to the keyboard music of Liszt.

³⁰ For my purposes here I make no distinction between actual recorded performances and those produced by the Duo-Art or Welte-Mignon mechanisms.

³¹ Biddulph LHW 939, track 20.

“Here the second-subject tune is delivered in a flexible manner that does not always coincide with Chopin’s notation. By modern standards, Rosenthal’s rendition is simply a misreading; by the standards of his generation, and probably of Chopin’s time too, it was an allowable rhetorical license. We may regard the effect as free and inspired, or irritating and mannered. Chopin may have loved it or hated it, but he is unlikely to have been surprised by it.”³²

These are lovely turns of phrase, but they shed no light on what Rosenthal actually does, or why. What does “not always coincide with Chopin’s notation” mean? Measuring a performance by such a narrow yardstick would have made little sense to several generations of Romantics, all of whom understood that notation was inevitably incomplete, suggestive, and flexible rather than some blueprint to be followed slavishly. Beyond this, Hamilton seems to assume that the “meanings” of each and every performance direction are best achieved only courtesy of “modern standards.”

To be sure, Rosenthal’s performance of the Chopin passage in question (Example 1 below)³³ actually raises layers of intriguing issues, by no means restricted to a “flexible” tempo. Just before the “*sostenuto*” second group begins, he makes a dramatic *ritard* on the fourth beat of the bar (m. 40). Further, he dots not just the eighth-note on beat 4 of m. 43 (as Chopin indicates) but the fourth beats of mm. 41 and 45—and even the triplet on the second beat of m. 50 and the quintuplet in the second half of m. 51 (and later the third beat of m. 60). As arrayed against the sextuplet accompaniment, none of the short notes is exactly the same length. He omits the f-sharp on the third beat of m. 45. In the < > hairpin that extends across mm. 53-54, Rosenthal *ritards* to highlight his diminuendo on the high c-sharp (a standard operatic ploy) on the second half of beat one in m. 54. In the second half of m. 56, when the accompaniment rhythm moves from triplet eighths to sixteenths, Rosenthal speeds up—as does virtually every pianist who has recorded the work. He injects a dramatic *ritard* in the second half of m. 62. Within the accompanimental sextuplets, the pattern on many beats is to speed up slightly and then—even taking the large leaps into account—recapture the extra time on the last note.

Example 1. Chopin, Sonata no. 3 in B minor, Op. 58/1, mm. 40-62.

³² Hamilton, *After the Golden Age*, 187.

³³ It is not clear just how many bars Hamilton means to encompass with his remark, but the second group arguably extends at least from m. 41 to m. 64.

Example 1 (continued).

Musical score for Example 1 (continued), measures 42-54. The score is written for piano and features a complex rhythmic and melodic structure. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into five systems, each with a measure number (42, 45, 48, 51, 54) at the beginning. The notation includes treble and bass staves, with various musical symbols such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. The bass line is characterized by frequent triplets and slurs, while the treble line features more complex melodic patterns. The score concludes with a *tr* (trill) and a *f* (forte) dynamic marking.

42

45

48

51

54

tr

f

8va

tr

f

Example 1 (continued).

None of this comes across in listening as disjointed or fragmented as my description might suggest. Nor does any of it sound capricious or arbitrary or due to Rosenthal's advanced years. What makes Rosenthal's dotted rhythms appear less like mistakes is his flexible treatment, recalling the eighteenth-century dictum that dotted-rhythms consist of a long note followed by a short one, with the exact ratio determined by the expressive circumstance. Some of the more languorous approximate triplets, while more climactic ones approach 6:1.

The *ritard* in the second half of m. 62 intersects the most chromatic passage of the initial theme, with its touching circle-of-fifths return from F-sharp to D major—exactly the kind of place where opera singers and conductors took the same kinds of license. Speeding up at the introduction of faster note values (m. 56) had also been described since the eighteenth century. The slurred sextuplets that make up the accompaniment (sometimes extended by Chopin to groups of twelve) are probably less about slurring than an expressive series of gradual diminuendos. The hairpins in mm. 53-54 are necessary to break this pattern (although many pianists, among them Rosenthal, choose to land ever so gently on the high c-sharp).

Elsewhere Rosenthal's departure from a literal reading of the score is even more dramatic. He plays mm. 2, 4, and 6 as groups of pointed staccatos instead of the notated slurs. He pedals right through the staccatos in m. 8. He makes numerous dramatic *ritards* that are not notated. And much more. But aside from the fact that much of what he does is sanctioned by what performers from the eighteenth century on understood as well within the bounds of appropriate individual expression³⁴, his reading is quite consciously of a restrained, elegant, and even elegiac character—more in harmony with Chopin's "*maestoso*" than the more furious, virtuosic, and literal readings of many later pianists. It is less a question of whether Chopin would have approved or disapproved—this would anyway have been viewed as of little importance at the time—but of how Rosenthal's generation still saw performance as a highly individual undertaking with a whole range of expressive possibilities.

The late nineteenth century, of course, had no monopoly on tempo flexibility. It plays an important role in Western music from chant to the present day. But it is most determinative in music from Schubert to Mahler—encompassing Paganini, Donizetti, Bellini, Weber, Meyerbeer, Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin, Verdi, Wagner, Liszt, Bruckner, Brahms, Bruch, Gounod, Bizet, Grieg, Smetana, Saint-Saens, John Philip Sousa, Wagner, Verdi, Johann and Richard Strauss, Dvorak, Smetana, Lalo, Lehar, Massenet, Leoncavallo, Tchaikovsky, Elgar, Musorgsky, Granados, most of Puccini, much of Rachmaninoff, and many others. It forms the centerpiece of Romantic expression, and as soloists in control of their sovereign orchestra, pianists were in a particularly good position to influence the argument, even if they were by and large intending to emulate the expressive range of opera. In any serious study of Romantic pianism it would have to play a central role.

In spite of many illuminating references throughout the book to the evidence presented by recorded performances, Hamilton largely ignores their one overriding advantage. This is the simple matter of comparative listenings—a means of comparison made possible for the first time in human history by the marriage between recordings and digital technologies, and surely the most direct means by which we can understand both the range and boundaries of Romantic interpretation. (Hamilton's most ambitious foray in this direction is a brief comparison of three performances of the opening of Chopin's Nocturne in D-flat Major, Op. 27, no. 2 by Vladimir de Pachmann, Moritz Rosenthal, and Josef Hofmann.³⁵)

Among dozens of enticing opportunities, I will cite only one. Near the top of the list of most often recorded pieces of the early recording era is Chopin's Waltz in C-sharp minor, Op. 64, no. 2. A common misconception is that Chopin marked his scores with great precision. This waltz, organized as A-B-C-B-A-B, contains an absolute minimum of tempo directions:

³⁴The best source bringing together the most extensive array of primary sources as they relate to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century keyboard performance remains Sandra Rosenblum's *Performance Practice in Classic Piano Music* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991). A wider stylistic range and interpretations either different from, or with a different emphasis, can be found in Clive Brown, *Classical & Romantic Performing Practice 1750-1900* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999).

³⁵Hamilton, *After the Golden Age*, 148-9.

A: *Tempo giusto*
 B: *Più mosso*
 C: *Più lento*
 B: *Più mosso*
 A: Tempo I
 B: *Più mosso*

The C-section contains the single tempo-modifying instruction (*poco ritenuto* at 5 bars before the end). While awash in hairpins (which may at all events have more agogic than dynamic ramifications) and pedal markings, both tempo and tempo flexibility are left largely to the performer.

On this relatively blank slate no fewer than ten performances are currently available in re-issues from artists born between 1848 and 1896 who recorded between 1927 and 1929:

Vladimir de Pachmann (1848-1933)	rec. 1907
Ignace Jan Paderewski (1860-1941)	rec. 1917
Moritz Rosenthal (1862-1946)	rec. 1930
Eugen d'Albert (1864-1932)	rec. 1918-22
Leopold Godowsky (1870-1938)	rec. 1913-16
Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)	rec. 1927
Josef Hofmann (1876-1957)	rec. 1916
Alfred Cortot (1877-1962)	rec. 1925
Alfred Cortot (1877-1962)	rec. 1929
Alexander Brailowsky (1896-1976)	rec. 1928

A full interpretation of this lineup belongs in a separate study. For now suffice it to say that the range of readings is breathtaking, and very little of it comes across as purely self-indulgent. Against this backdrop, *After the Golden Age*—in spite of its command of the richest store of primary sources in any study of its kind—feels like an endless series of exquisite appetizers that never leads to an entrée. If you are a prisoner of the bogus *Urtext* movement you will go from frown to frown while listening to Chopin's overly familiar, but also unfamiliar waltz. But if, as a pianist or singer or instrumentalist or conductor or simply a lover of this extraordinary repertoire, you listen in succession to these and many other recordings with equally undeniable ties to the period in which they were created, you will understand that the issue is not asynchronization or pedaling or preluding or playing with or without music or even what edition you use, but putting together whole performances in which rhythmic push-and-pull provides the living pulse. That study remains to be written.