

"The Fortepiano Writings of Streicher, Dieudonné, and the Schiedmayers: Two Manuals and a Notebook, Translated from the Original German, with Commentary" by Preethi De Silva

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Book review: De Silva, Preethi. *The Fortepiano Writings of Streicher, Dieudonné, and the Schiedmayers: Two Manuals and a Notebook, Translated from the Original German, with Commentary*. Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. 978-0-773-44874-2

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Beethoven's relation to the Streicher piano represents a special instance of a composer's wishes being fulfilled and satisfied by a particular instrument. The story is a fascinating one.

In 1796, Beethoven already expressed admiration for the Streicher piano, writing to the maker that "one can make the pianoforte sing" (which alludes to one of the instrument's most prominent traits). But in a further note to Streicher written in the same year, he indicated that this piano "robs me of the freedom to produce my own tone" (Beethoven was especially known for his fortissimo dynamics). However, in the same note he shrugged this off as being merely his own personal whim, encouraging Streicher to continue making pianos "in the same way."

Nonetheless, the Streichers, Andreas and his wife Nannette, subsequently sought to strengthen the tone of their instruments, being persuaded to do so especially by Beethoven. By 1803 the treble strings were sometimes triple (rather than double) strung. And in 1807, Andreas wrote to Friedrich Rochlitz, editor of the Leipzig *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, concerning his wish to elevate German piano-making to the level of the English and French models (whose stronger tone was favored by traveling concert pianists). This change is borne out in 1810 in a letter of Johann Friedrich Reichardt (in his *Vertraute Briefe*), which informs us that "Streicher has abandoned the soft, yielding, percussive tone of the other Viennese instruments, and at Beethoven's wish and advice has given his instruments greater resonance and elasticity, so that the virtuoso who plays with strength and significance may have his instrument in better command of sustained and expressive tones."

Finally, Beethoven himself writes (7 July 1817), "Although I have not always used [Streicher's pianos], since 1809 I have had a special preference for them. Only Streicher would be able to send me the kind of piano I require."

Pianists, therefore, need to consider that the sound of Beethoven's works on a mature Streicher piano of about 1809 should be an ideal for which they earnestly strive in their performances.

To find out more about Streicher's instrument, pianists might also now turn to Preethi de Silva's *The Fortepiano Writings of Streicher, Dieudonné, and the Schiedmayers*, which contains, as its central item, Streicher's essay concerning his instrument and how to perform on it. Published in 1801, much of what Streicher says is pertinent to the Viennese classicists in general, to Haydn and Mozart as well as to Beethoven, all of whom favored the German-style piano Streicher describes over its English or French counterparts, particularly for its singing quality, its light action, and clarity of melodic nuance. To achieve these attributes, Streicher emphasizes the importance of connectedness, no finger raised before the next one takes its place.

But Streicher also says much that is applicable to fortepiano performance in general between 1770 and 1830, prior to the advent of the modern piano. He speaks, for example, of the fortepiano's subtle dynamics, its capability of achieving "infinitely varied" shadings of forte and piano, carrying on in this regard from the comments made earlier by Daniel Gottlob Türk in his treatise of 1789. Concerning Streicher's remarks on the maintenance of the fortepiano, there is also much that bears on the effectiveness of a performance. He stresses, for instance, the value of a precise tuning (he favors equal temperament), by which the entire instrument will resonate more fully, due to the sympathetic response of the strings not being played at any one time.

De Silva also includes the later, parallel essay of 1824 by Carl Dieudonné and Johann Lorenz Schiedmayer. Although this contains much that duplicates Streicher's earlier writing, showing the authors' esteem for him, this essay is also worth going over for the additional insights it provides.

The volume is also filled out with a considerable amount of background information not directly applicable to performance, including the lives of the builders, for example of Andreas Streicher and his wife Nannette, who aided him in the constructing of his instruments, and of Johann David and Johann Lorenz Schiedmayer, who kept a notebook account of their experiences as fortepiano builders. There are also lists of the museum locations of fortepianos, and a detailed commentary concerning the social setting—why the fortepiano became so important as a domestic instrument in the early nineteenth century, entertaining the bourgeoisie and elevating their spirits during evenings (prior to the time of radio or television).

But for the reader looking for specific information concerning performance, these various other aspects might be bypassed by going directly to the index for particular listings, such as of Streicher's comments on dynamics, slurred notes, staccato, tone production, attack, hand position, etc.

Preethi de Silva is to be commended for her careful and thoroughgoing efforts. As one who has devoted her life to teaching harpsichord and fortepiano and in presenting concerts on

these instruments, she is uniquely qualified to have written this valuable reference concerning early keyboard performance.