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Book Review: Skowroneck, Tilman. *Beethoven the Pianist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-521-11959-7.

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According to the violinist Karl Holz, Beethoven's intended biographer and a reliable witness, Beethoven considered his last sonatas the best that he had written for piano and added, "It is and remains an inadequate instrument."¹ The high demands of Beethoven's music for the instrument he masterly played are already evident in works like his three sonatas op. 2, or the Concerto in C major eventually published as Op. 15. The evolution of Beethoven's writing for piano is a rich and fascinating topic that extends far beyond his periods of active performance before audiences. It is evidently on account of his retreat from the concert platform in 1809 that Beethoven wrote out cadenzas to his earlier concertos, and incorporated the cadenzas to his Concerto in E-flat Major, op. 73, directly into the score. The master improviser thereby enriched his pianistic style, and the sonatas of ensuing years, like Op. 101 and the "Hammerklavier" Op. 106, display numerous path-breaking features that have always challenged players. Beethoven himself described Op. 106 as a "sonata that will give pianists something to do, and that it will be played 50 years hence" – a fairly accurate prediction, since, apart from Liszt, Clara Schumann, and Hans von Bülow, few pianists tackled the challenges of this great sonata before the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The new book *Beethoven the Pianist* by Tilman Skowroneck in the Cambridge Series on "Musical Performance and Reception" sets out according to its jacket description to provide "a revised picture of Beethoven" that challenges "the widely held belief that Beethoven was a rough pianist." The target of this revised viewpoint seems unclear, since Beethoven's pianism was not often regarded as merely "rough"; firsthand reports of his playing, such as Carl Czerny's, tend to stress not only its "brilliant and astonishing" aspects but also "a certain magic in his expression, aside from the beauty and originality of his ideas and his genial way of presenting them," a capacity in performance "to make such an impression on every listener that frequently there was not a single dry eye."²

¹ Thayer, Alexander Wheelock, *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, ed. Elliot Forbes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 974.

² O. G. Sonneck, ed. *Beethoven: Impressions by His Contemporaries* (New York: Schirmer, 1926), 31.

The limits and emphases of this study are not so well balanced. Skowroneck uses December 1808 as a chronological endpoint on account of Beethoven's gradual withdrawal from public performances after his *Akademie* concert of that year, but the continuing development of Beethoven as pianist-composer is felt not only in the concerto cadenzas but in major piano works of later years including the "Hammerklavier" and the "Diabelli" Variations, pieces that receive some passing mention by Skowroneck. On the other hand, Skowroneck's very detailed discussion of Beethoven's early training at Bonn does not offer much new material concerning his experience with the variety of keyboard instruments characteristic of the period. Occasionally Skowroneck opposes accepted viewpoints, such as in his defense of Johann van Beethoven's unsuccessful attempt to suppress his son's early proclivity toward improvisation. On this point, Skowroneck's critique of Maynard Solomon, who wrote of improvisation as "a hallmark of the eighteenth-century virtuoso and composer," is less than convincing (p. 22). Improvisation generally receives too little attention from Skowroneck. Conspicuous in this regard is the lack of any mention of the writings or recordings of Robert D. Levin, who has offered stimulating performances of Beethoven's concertos and Choral Fantasy with improvised cadenzas using the fortepiano.

The strongest parts of the book are devoted to discussion of the kinds of instruments Beethoven used, and absorb material from Skowroneck's chapter "Keyboard Instruments of the Young Beethoven" in *Beethoven and His World*, a volume that appeared a decade ago.³ Some of Skowroneck's critical judgments have become more nuanced. He wrote in 2000 that Beethoven's preference for an instrument that gave him "freedom to create his own tone," in the composer's words, "invites us to interpret 'his own tone' as simply 'more tone,' which is verifiable because absolute volume turned out to become an almost *exclusive* concern of Beethoven later on." (p. 175). This opinion is surely too blunt, and the statements in *Beethoven the Pianist* that decline to interpret Beethoven's criticism as simply "an early step in his quest for an essentially louder, more orchestral piano" are more balanced (p. 82). Surely Beethoven sought instruments that gave him a sufficient range of sound possibilities, so that orchestral effects could be mimicked at the keyboard, and forceful, dramatic passages could coexist with cantabile playing. In view of the detailed focus on instruments, particularly Beethoven's Erard grand piano from 1803, some illustrations of these pianos would have been welcome, but no such plates accompany the volume.⁴ The Erard piano has been the subject of a separate article by Skowroneck,⁵ and he provides in his book an interesting and informative discussion of the English and French piano

³ *Beethoven and His World*, ed. Scott Burnham and Michael P. Steinberg (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 151-92.

⁴ While Skowroneck cites Theodor von Frimmel's pioneering study "Beethoven als Clavierspieler" from 1888, he does not mention Frimmel's extension of this work as "Der Klavierspieler Beethoven" in his *Beethoven Studien II* (Munich and Leipzig: Georg Müller, 1906), 203-71, which is accompanied by several photographic illustrations of Beethoven's pianos, including his Erard grand from 1803.

⁵ Tilman Skowroneck, "Beethoven's Erard piano: Its Influence on His Compositions and on Viennese Fortepiano Building," *Early Music* 30 (2002): 522-38.

building traditions in relation to the big new sonata that Beethoven wrote mainly in 1803: the “Waldstein” Sonata, Op. 53.

The material that has been added to the preexisting core of the book drawn from these articles is often problematic. Skowroneck quotes Alfred Brendel to the effect that “Beethoven’s piano work pointed far into the future of piano building” and that “decades had to pass after his death before there were pianos—and pianists—equal to the demands of his ‘Hammerklavier’ Sonata Op. 106” (p. 166). For Skowroneck, Brendel’s assertion is “disproved” by the fact that Carl Czerny and others, such as Czerny’s pupil the ten-year-old Franz Liszt, played Op. 106 in the years following its initial publication (pp. 166-67). We cannot know exactly how well they played the sonata, but it seems reasonable in this case to assume that this piece really did give pianists “something to do,” and that a distinction must be made between merely playing through a piece and mastering its challenges to interpretation. After all, Op. 106 reportedly “gave Czerny much trouble”; and more than a half-century later, Liszt was still playing the “Hammerklavier” Sonata, and surely differently than he did as a young boy in 1821.

Skowroneck finds no “reconciliation of the idea of Beethoven the visionary pianist with the comparatively prosaic straightforwardness of a performance practice study” (p. 167). The extensive literature relating to how specific techniques contribute to Beethoven’s “visionary” effects plays no role here. One remedy to the “prosaic straightforwardness” of Skowroneck’s study would have been more engagement with existing writings relevant to performance of Beethoven’s piano works. Yet strangely, such engagement is absent, as if only a narrow range of sources and writings were deemed relevant to a “performance practice study.”

Let us entertain the notion that a “performance practice study” should build on the existing literature and not avoid the analysis and aesthetics of music. Skowroneck’s discussion of the “interpretation of slurs in performance” of the famous main theme of the *Adagio cantabile* of the “Sonate Pathétique” Op. 13 is confined to generalities of limited aesthetic import, such as the idea that an “Adagio cantabile with clear melodic lines” justifies a “heavy touch” (p. 202). What a difference if we compare his lackluster comments with the analysis of slurs and phrasing in the same passage in Robert Hatten’s *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes*, published in 2004.⁶ Hatten shows how “these unexpected articulations individualize the melodic line, giving it a more self-willed agency that can shape its own way against the gravitational fields of meter and tonality” (p. 146), and he makes his comments audible and insightful in relation to the music by interweaving observations about meter, texture, harmony, and gestural features, while also supplying a meaningful analogy to the third movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Hatten does not hesitate to confront the expressive character of the music, which is not only more satisfying aesthetically but historically appropriate, since “Charakter” was an important

⁶ Robert Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2004), 145-47.

category in discourse about music in the period.⁷ If “performance practice” is regarded as something to be heard and experienced, then Hatten’s work is a more useful contribution to this endeavor than the book at hand.

Other parts of *Beethoven the Pianist* raise some concerns about accuracy. In discussing the Diabelli Variations, Skowronek writes that “in the sixteenth variation all the sixteenth notes are suddenly slurred although the character given is ‘piacevole’ anyway”; in the very next sentence, he writes about “both halves of the eighteenth variation, a Vivace.” (p. 204). Both references are incorrect. The variation marked “piacevole” is the twenty-sixth; the variation marked “Vivace” in this context is the twenty-seventh. One of these errors could have occurred through oversight or misguided editing, but not both. It is difficult not to conclude that the author (and editors) of this volume on *Beethoven the Pianist* were not familiar enough with Beethoven’s most comprehensive work for the piano. The book contains too many errors: on the very next page (p. 205), for instance, Skowronek writes about Beethoven’s “preludes Op. 93 from 1789.” The two preludes in question are Op. 39, pieces stemming from the 1780s and revised in 1789, although published only in 1803 as Op. 39.

In evaluating Beethoven’s response to Carl Czerny’s “pearly” effect in playing passages of broken thirds with few fingers (such as using just the thumb and third finger to glide upward by step), Skowronek takes issue with George Barth in his book *The Pianist as Orator*, finding no “annoyance” on Beethoven’s part with Czerny’s “pearly” technique (p. 205). However, Beethoven favored a differentiated rhetorical style and disliked a merely mechanical brilliance in piano playing, and a bit of annoyance is indeed conveyed in the tone of his letter, which concerns Czerny’s teaching of Beethoven’s nephew Karl in 1816.⁸ Relevant in this context is the 1814 testimony of Johann Wenzel Tomaschek, who reported Beethoven’s sharp complaints about “the pianists of to-day, who only run up and down the keyboard with passages they have learned by heart—putch, putch, putch! What does that mean? Nothing! The real piano virtuosos, when they played, gave us something interconnected, a whole. When it was written out it could at once be accepted as a well-composed work. That was piano playing, the rest is nothing!”⁹ Beethoven was critical of piano playing according to mechanical digital patterns if a controlling rhetorical or dramatic sequence was absent, and the latter was not a prominent aspect of Czerny’s approach.

⁷ Cf. Christian Gottfried Körner article “Über Charakterdarstellung in der Musik,” *Die Horen* 1 (1795), and the commentary and English translation of Körner’s treatise in Robert Riggs, “‘On the Representation of Character in Music’: Christian Gottfried Körner’s Aesthetics of Instrumental Music,” *Musical Quarterly* 81 (1997): 599-631; and Alfred Brendel, “Musical Character(s) in Beethoven’s Piano Sonatas” in *Alfred Brendel On Music* (Chicago: A Cappella, 2001), 66-67.

⁸ *Beethoven Briefe*, vol. 3, ed. Sieghard Brandenburg (Munich: Henle, 1996), L. 912, pp. 236, 238.

⁹ *Impressions of Contemporaries*, 105.

Since he is an active fortepianist, one might expect Tilman Skowroneck to be revealing on points connected to performance technique, yet this is not always the case. In his chapter on “Common touch and legato,” he writes at some length about “one of [Beethoven’s] characteristic textures: a legato cantilena in octaves for the right hand against an active left hand,” and he cites examples from several Beethoven sonatas (pp. 213-15). Skowroneck finds it “difficult, sometimes impossible, to perform literally legato as notated” in such passages, unless frequent pedaling or a divided pedal (only lifted in the treble) is employed. This leaves out of consideration a means of legato playing in cantabile octave passages that is effective on a period fortepiano or the modern Steinway: the changing of fingers on the upper notes of the melody to create seamless legato although the line in the lower octave is actually slightly interrupted. This means of legato playing without dependence on the sustaining pedal was certainly well known to Beethoven, and has remained an important technique in piano playing.

Topics are sometimes passed over in this study that would have deserved more scrutiny. For instance, the unusual phrasing of the aforementioned twenty-sixth *Diabelli* variation marked “piacevole,” with its pairs of groups of sixteenth notes in 3/8 meter, assumes a key role in the larger sequence of four fast variations, Nos. 25-28. The investigation of such issues requires a perspective that takes many factors into consideration, whereas Skowroneck’s approach tends to remain general or as he puts it, “prosaic”—in other words, external to the aesthetics of the music. In discussing the Sonata in C-sharp minor, Op. 27 no. 2, he writes concerning the cadenza-like passage near the end of the finale that “in the autograph there is a page break, and in the first edition a new line begins before the trill, so the forward surge one might seek in the music cannot in fact be seen on the page.” (p. 255). Why does it matter where the page break is placed? Music exists in sound and time, and is not represented through the accidental circumstances of page and line breaks.

This book does not consistently reflect the latest state of research on its subject. The comments about “new, careful research” in the Introduction (p. 12) refer for instance to a recent article by Jos Van der Zanden that has already been contested,¹⁰ and the very first footnote in chapter 1 on “Beethoven’s early training” (p. 13) misspells the name of Beethoven’s great grandfather, Michael van Beethoven, and fails to cite the second revised edition from 1998 of Maynard Solomon’s Beethoven biography in place of its original 1977 edition. The last two points are admittedly just small details, but the number of errors and omissions undermines confidence in the book’s reliability.

¹⁰ The article in question by Jos Van der Zanden aims to undercut the credibility of Ferdinand Ries about Beethoven, but it is hard to reconcile with evidence relating to the genesis of Beethoven’s Marches for Piano Duet Op. 45, including one of the composer’s letters. Skowroneck cites the German version of Van der Zanden’s article in *Bonner Beethoven-Studien* (not *Reihe V Bonner Beethoven-Studien*, as is erroneously printed in his footnote) but he does not mention the English version of the same study that appeared as “Ferdinand Ries in Vienna: New Perspectives on the Notizen,” *Beethoven Journal* 19 (2004): 51-65, nor the critique of Van der Zanden’s study by Katherine Syer in “A Peculiar Hybrid: The Structure and Chronology of the ‘Eroica’ Sketchbook (Landsberg 6),” *Bonner Beethoven-Studien* 5 (2006): 159-81, esp. 170.

Beethoven the Pianist does not build sufficiently on the existing literature on performance issues in Beethoven's piano music. It is not a clear advance on the work of William S. Newman, whose *Beethoven On Beethoven* is often cited by Skowroneck, whereas many other relevant studies are overlooked. Worthy of attention are *Denken und Spielen: Studien zu einer Theorie der musikalischen Darstellung* by Jürgen Uhde and Renate Wieland (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1988), and Heinrich Schenker, *The Art of Performance*, edited by Heribert Esser and translated by Irene Schreier Scott (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), to name just two in addition to Hatten's aforementioned study. Historically informed approaches to performance practice need to take into account issues of artistic character and aesthetics, and recognize the relevance of contributions from music theory, analysis, and musicology. In its "prosaic straightforwardness," Skowroneck's study is too narrowly limited. It would be encouraging to see an emergence out of this self-imposed ghetto into the wider world of Beethoven performance and interpretation.