

"Beethoven's Piano Sonatas: a Handbook for Performers," by Stewart Gordon

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David Rowland

The literature on Beethoven's piano sonatas is vast, so is there a role for yet another book on the subject? Perhaps, but it depends on its intended audience. An initial glance at this book's contents suggested that it is not aimed at those who already know some of the Beethoven literature, or who are looking to study the music at university level or beyond. The "select bibliography" is indeed highly select and the footnoting very limited, so that anyone wishing to engage in any detail with the scholarly literature on the performance history of the works, or on their analysis, will be limited in the extent to which they can pursue the ideas that are put forward. The book instead appears to be aimed at the school, college, or amateur market comprising pianists who want to do more than simply play the notes, but whose background in the study of sources, performance history, and analysis is very limited, and who are unlikely to want to pursue their studies very far.

The author's preface sets out his vision for the book. Rather than attempting to write about his own ideas of playing Beethoven's sonatas he "conceived a volume that would be valuable to performers, but one that simply collected information and made observations about the sonatas" (vii). The first section, he writes, addresses the broader issues of the sources, contemporary instruments, performance practices, and the composer's style. The second section "considers each sonata, providing selected historical information, distinguishing features, and a descriptive analysis" (vii).

Generally speaking, the author is true to his word. The book contains information rather than opinion, and as such it could serve as a useful companion to someone who is unaware of the performance issues raised by the sonatas or who only has a rudimentary idea of formal structures and normal procedures in sonatas of the period. The reader is generally left to draw his or her own conclusions about how to play the music, but this approach begs a question: how will a student of the sonatas make decisions about their performance? What criteria will they use? An example illustrates this issue.

The book devotes a page and a half to the main issues regarding tempo, in particular metronome markings (Beethoven's and others') and tempo fluctuation. A single paragraph is devoted to the former in which the author makes the point that



Beethoven left metronome markings for just one sonata (Op.106). He also mentions Czerny's markings along with others by Moscheles, von Bülow, Casella, Schnabel, and Taylor. There is, however, no hint as to how a student might evaluate these different markings, except for the comment that Beethoven's own indications suggest tempi that are "unaccountably fast" (which is in itself a contentious statement).

As for tempo fluctuation, there is a little more information, although the sources mentioned all date from after the composer's death, such as Chopin (relevant only to his own music), Schindler, Schnabel, and Toscanini. Important keyboard tutors such as Hummel's and Czerny's strangely do not feature in the discussion, and neither is there any mention here (or anywhere else) of standard resources, such as Sandra Rosenblum's *Performance Practices in Classic Piano Music*,¹ which provide a wealth of contemporary comment on subjects such as this. The author has admittedly limited space in which to discuss the issues, but the choice of evidence seems very restricted, and there could have been more guidance to the reader on the criteria they might use in deciding whose approach to follow.

The kinds of difficulties seen in the discussion of tempo fluctuation are less evident in other sections of the book. In the same chapter on performance practices, the treatment of ornaments is more detailed and more soundly based. About thirteen pages are devoted to various aspects of ornamentation, and evidence is cited from C.P.E. Bach's *Versuch* (which Beethoven recommended to Czerny) as well as the latter's own account of how Beethoven played and taught his own piano music. In the section on the use of the damper pedal, there is a useful, if brief, discussion that includes some of Czerny's advice as well as a consideration of the different approaches that might be needed when the music is played on modern, rather than historical, instruments. The discussion of articulation similarly contains some pertinent, historically-based observations.

The chapter on performance practices is preceded by two others on important contextual issues; the first briefly describes the sources used by modern editors, while the second focuses on the pianos with which Beethoven was familiar. The source chapter briefly raises a number of important issues such as the relative importance ascribed to autographs and early editions in formulating a modern performing text, and the varied approaches to their task taken by later nineteenth and early twentieth-century editors. This section will be useful to a student who has not previously considered these matters. Because of ease of access, a link to the Beethoven Haus's collection of digitized early editions (http://www.beethoven-haus-bonn.de/sixcms/detail.php?template=startseite_digitales_archiv_en) would have perhaps been useful, but this is a small point, and the author does at least refer readers to printed reproductions of early editions, although many readers will find it difficult to locate copies.

The second chapter introduces the different pianos used by and known to Beethoven during his lifetime. It begins by stressing the differences between the in-

1. Sandra Rosenblum, *Performance Practices in Classic Piano Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

struments of Beethoven's time and those in use today, making the point that "the dates of the thirty-two sonatas range from 1796 to 1822" (11), before listing some of the major design changes that occurred in the 1820s and 1830s. The changes that were introduced in these two decades brought in some of the essential features that distinguish modern pianos from their earlier counterparts: double escapement actions, iron frames, cross-stringing, and felt hammers. The author then lists the main differences between the "English" and "Viennese" pianos of Beethoven's days. There follows a ten-page account of the instruments used and known by Beethoven with evidence mostly drawn from the composer's correspondence. It is strange, however, that there is no reference here to William Newman's convincing argument that throughout his life Beethoven preferred Viennese pianos, especially when Newman's literature on Beethoven performance is occasionally referenced elsewhere in the book and cited in the bibliography.

Following the chapter on performance practice (discussed above), chapter four is entitled "Beethoven's Expressive Legacy." This is largely an account of Beethoven's piano textures and his musical style more generally, including a discussion of formal issues in the sonatas. Some reference to works such as Charles Rosen's *Sonata Forms*² or other literature that introduces the way in which contemporary musical structures "work" would have been useful here, and, in general, the approach seemed somewhat out-of-date, although perhaps useful to someone without any notion of formal procedures in the period. Chapter five refers to additional textural issues in individual sonatas, sometimes linking certain patterns found in more than one work.

The chapters discussed above make up just over one-third of this book. The rest of the volume is devoted to discussions of individual sonatas. The beginning of each of these sections provides summaries of some very useful background information. First, there is a "biographical snapshot" containing information about where each work "sits" within the composer's life. So, for example, the Op.2 discussion briefly introduces readers to his teachers in Vienna—Haydn and Albrechtsberger—as well as the details of his early performing career in the city and his first tour. There follows some detail of when the work was published and the sources that exist, as well as information about the dedicatee. All of this is presented efficiently and succinctly.

After the introductory material, there are "observations" on each work, ranging from the identification of formal elements, to observations about the sources and to performance matters. How useful to a reader some of these comments will be is difficult to assess. Some of the observations are highly descriptive in nature, a little like the sort of commentary offered by Tovey and others, which helps the reader to chart a way through the work by identifying formal moments ("exposition," "development," and "recapitulation," etc.) or particular stylistic features. To those unaccustomed to navigating their way through sonatas this could be invaluable, but the detail takes up a lot of space in the volume, which might have been devoted to more thorough investigations of other matters. Further comments, for ex-

2. Charles Rosen, *Sonata Forms* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988).

ample about differences between sources, will help students decide about what, or how, they play. All of the information is very clearly presented.

In summary, this book has several merits, and for those eager to explore the history and content of Beethoven's piano sonatas and their performance for the first time it will provide an introduction to some of the main contextual issues. But there are missed opportunities here as well, especially the book's limitations in helping the student follow up on the rich literature of these works that already exists.