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"Beethoven on Beethoven: Playing His Piano His Way." By William S. Newman

Barry Cooper

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William S. Newman: *Beethoven on Beethoven: Playing His Piano Music His Way*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1988. 336p.

The whimsical title *Beethoven on Beethoven* is a misnomer, evidently designed for its memorability rather than its relationship to the contents of the book. But there is little enough else to complain about here, and a great deal that is worthy of warm commendation. Indeed, as soon as one penetrates as far as the subtitle, *Playing His Piano Music His Way*, one recognizes that this is clearly going to be a book on a subject of enormous importance to pianists and "early music" specialists alike. Newman rises to the challenge of a demanding subject with a study that is learned and admirably lucid, wide-ranging yet detailed, succinct yet comprehensive.

The extensive bibliography (including some three dozen titles by Newman himself, some dating back nearly half a century) betokens both the lengthy period of gestation and the broad range of approaches adopted, with all types of evidence being brought to bear on the central question of how to perform Beethoven's piano music as he intended. The title *Beethoven on Beethoven* suggests a study merely of Beethoven's own comments and notational indications; instead we also have Czerny, Ries, Schindler, and others on Beethoven, as well as C. P. E. Bach, Türk, Koch, and others on various aspects of performance in general. From this wide range of sources, plus a certain amount of common sense, intuition, and even leaps of faith, Newman builds up a picture of how all the principal aspects of performing Beethoven's piano music should be approached. He treats questions in a thoughtful and cautious manner: for example, he wisely shows a healthy skepticism towards evidence derived from the unreliable Schindler (although he occasionally still accords it undue weight).

The most important performance aspects each receive a chapter: the instruments of the period, rate and flexibility of tempo, articulation, and ornamentation. Other narrower topics discussed include pedalling, fingering, and touch, while broader ones include the nature and reliability of the manuscripts and early editions, the dynamic direction within phrases (and subphrases), and structural matters such as the relationship between different sections or movements of a work. It is

most welcome to see such an excellent balance between, on the one hand, the purism of an authentic (or scientific) approach, and on the other, more indefinable matters (such as expressive quality, and positioning of climaxes) that one might associate with a "conservatory" approach, where musical instinct tends to take precedence over firm documentary evidence.

The book is not without its problematical passages, however, such as in the definition of "piano music." The works which qualify for discussion are defined as "nearly every Beethoven work that is scored for piano as a solo instrument or as an equal or predominating participant in an ensemble. Only a few very early and slight works are omitted" (p. 24-25). It is therefore disconcerting to find (in the appendix) that in the list of works studied there are omitted a rather large number that should qualify according to the author's definition. They include the 16 sets of variations for piano with flute *ad. lib.* (opp. 105 and 107); the entire corpus of about 70 lieder and over 150 folksong settings (here the piano can hardly be described as subordinate except perhaps in a few lieder); various short piano works that are not "very early and slight," such as the bagatelle (WoO 56), the marches (op. 45), and other dance pieces; and almost all of Beethoven's own piano arrangements. While it cannot be denied that Newman finds plenty to say about the works he has examined, and it may seem ungrateful to expect an already wide-ranging survey to be extended still further, there is nevertheless useful additional information to be gleaned from these pieces. For example, a comparison between piano arrangements and their models could yield new insights into Beethoven's piano figuration, and the folksong arrangements provide additional evidence about such matters as pedalling, and especially ornaments. At the very least, there ought to have been some recognition that these pieces exist.

As a general rule Newman appears to be better at assembling all the relevant evidence than at producing convincing interpretations of that evidence. Whereas the range of information presented is highly impressive, including some from unexpected or hitherto unnoticed sources, there are several contentious conclusions that need to be challenged. Three examples will suffice. On the subject of pianos, Newman claims that Beethoven preferred those of Stein and Streicher to any others, and that "all [his] favorable remarks" on pianos concerned "only instruments made in Vienna" (p. 55). Yet on the next page it is reported that he claimed his Broadwood to be "a beautiful piano" with "a

lovely tone," and that he at one stage refused to allow it to be tuned for fear of its being spoiled. In fact, no firm evidence is ever presented that Beethoven preferred Stein or Streicher to Broadwood.

Newman also has some difficulty with Beethoven's slurs and phrase marks. He quotes Schenker, who said that in the music of Beethoven's period all such marks simply indicated legato; this assertion is to most intents and purposes correct (there are exceptions, but sense can be made of these on an individual basis). Such marks were necessary to prevent performers adopting the more detached style of playing previously practised. (The new continuous-legato style probably originated in Italy with such composers as Alberti before spreading to Vienna in Beethoven's day, but the lack of Italian treatises makes this hypothesis difficult to prove.) Where several slurs occur in succession, a continuous legato between them is to be presumed, except in the case of two-note or occasionally three-note slurs; in other words, the performer should not release the tone at the end of one slur but continue into the next. Once this is accepted, highly irregular slur patterns such as those in the slow movement of the *Pathétique* Sonata, which Newman discusses in detail without offering satisfactory explanation, cease to be puzzling; in fact it seems that the notated length of such slurs depended largely on the *melodic* contour of the line rather than its rhythmic structure. And if a two-bar phrase is given a single slur on one occasion but two separate slurs on repetition, as in Newman's Example 5/2, there is no problem since both mean the same thing. Instead of reaching this conclusion, Newman provides "seven tentative explanations for Beethoven's slurring," which are somewhat inconclusive and in some cases far from convincing.

In his discussion of trills and turns, Newman also presents evidence that will surely lead many to reach the opposite conclusion to his own. In one place (p. 191) he claims it is "safe to assume" that four consecutive trills all begin on their main note, since the four notes had previously been played without ornamentation and define an ascending scale motif; but such an assumption seems highly dubious — especially since the following note, the fifth in the phrase, is decorated on the second occasion by an upper appoggiatura, which might imply that each of the four trills should be similarly decorated. Some of the suggestions about trill suffixes, four-note trills, and turns are also very doubtful, and the turns in particular could have benefited from a longer discussion.

Each of the above issues, however, is likely to remain contentious; and whatever doubts one may have about the conclusions reached here, it would be extremely difficult to disprove them. Other problems in the book are also partially excusable. It is slight muddle, rather than error, which mars the discussion of Beethoven's alteration of the time signature in the Gloria of his Mass in C (p. 94), while it is mere imprecision that leads Newman to state that a metronome speed of 138 is very roughly twice one of 92 (p. 273). It is also inaccurate to suggest that the manuscripts of the First and Second Piano Concertos date from 1795 (pp. 66 and 233); they date from 1800 and 1798 respectively, with the piano part of the latter dating from 1801. But the 1795 date does have some basis, since earlier, lost manuscripts for both concertos were made in or around that year.

These minor problems are easily outweighed by many positive features, some already indicated. The controversial problem of Beethoven's staccato signs — in particular whether any difference is intended between dots and wedge-shaped strokes — is brilliantly dealt with in what is surely much the best discussion of the subject yet. Newman presents evidence that Beethoven recognized the difference in theory, but shows that in practice he was not always sufficiently careful to distinguish the two. Newman even shows examples where a series of dots gradually turns into wedges (denoting a short, sharp staccato) as the music increases in volume. He therefore proposes that editors in future use a mixture of dots and wedges as Beethoven did, plus a third sign in places where it is unclear which was intended (I would prefer this third sign to be two dots — one above the other — rather than the square that Newman proposes; but the idea certainly seems an excellent suggestion).

Newman's discussion of the harmonic blur that results from a literal reading of some of Beethoven's pedal marks (as in the "Moonlight" Sonata) is also particularly well argued. He points out that similar blurred effects were used or advocated by C. P. E. Bach, Clementi, and others of the period; and since Beethoven's markings are fairly explicit, he surely wanted an effect of this kind, which works well on pianos of the period. But whatever piano is being used, Newman is right to warn that caution in the application of the effect is essential; and of course the later the piano, the more wary the pianist is likely to have to be.

One of the most unexpected chapters is the one devoted to a detailed discussion of phrase structure in Beethoven's music. Here Newman introduces the useful term "incise" to denote a subphrase rhythmic unit, usually of two bars, and relates it to contemporary theoretical writings in an effort to obtain information about rhythmic grouping and dynamic direction. The discussion is very detailed, with the theorists' comments and Beethoven's phrase structures minutely analysed. Perhaps it is a little too lengthy for a book of this sort, and it tends to become rather theoretical, without sufficient guidance as to how to perform such incises once they have been recognized. But Newman's conclusion that, for understanding past music, our first approach should be through the influential theorists who were writing at the time of that music and not ours, should be emphatically applauded, and heeded by performers and musical analysts alike.

The book contains a very plentiful supply of music examples, which is absolutely essential in a topic of this kind, and taken as a whole it is a most notable contribution to the subject. Indeed, anyone contemplating giving serious performances of Beethoven's piano music will need to become familiar with it at an early opportunity.

Barry Cooper