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"The Keyboard Sonatas of Joseph Haydn: Instruments and Performance Practice, Genres, and Styles." By László Somfai

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Book Review


László Somfai, *The Keyboard Sonatas of Joseph Haydn: Instruments and Performance Practice, Genres and Styles*. Trans. the author in collaboration with Charlotte Greenspan. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995. xx, 389pp. ISBN 0-226-76814-7.

"I believe that an unorthodox guide can be beneficial, even one in which settled rules are disputed, working hypotheses are presented, new terminology is introduced, and the dividing line between pure scholarship and practicality is frequently obscured" (p. xii). With this ringing credo, László Somfai launches his English-language version of a book published originally in Budapest, in Hungarian.¹ The present volume consists of three parts: "Instruments, Performance Practice, and Style" (Chapters 1-8), "Genres and Types" (Chapters 9-10), and "Structures and Styles" (Chapters 11-24). Valuable information of various kinds completes the book: a catalog of the sonatas, a select bibliography, an index, an ornament locator, and a thematic locator.

Dedicated to the late Christa Landon and envisioned primarily as a practical guide, Somfai's study was meant at the same time "to be a messenger of recent scholarly views, a polemical treatise regarding some questions of performance practice and ornamentation, an advocate for historical performance, and a criticism of stiff analytic methods" (p. xi). Although a few reservations will be expressed below, let it be said at the outset that the author has succeeded admirably on all counts, offering performers, music historians, and analysts (frequently one and the same person) precious information that contributes materially to filling a conspicuous gap in our knowledge of Haydn and the Classic Period.

Matters of organization and approach are explained further in the Preface. Somfai sensibly has chosen to precede his investigation of style with aspects of performance. Believing that close analyses of individual movements or works are inappropriate for a handbook of this sort, he proposes to focus on "types, genre trends, opus styles, routine procedures, and corrected versions of a pattern" (p. xiii). Recognizing that clavichord, harpsichord, and fortepiano coexist

¹ László Somfai, *Joseph Haydn zongoraszonátái* (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1979).

during Haydn's decades of keyboard composition (roughly 1755-1796), the author begins Part I with a survey of those instruments. He then moves in a logical progression through seven performance topics: the kind of instrument for which Haydn composed, the choice of instruments for present-day performers, an introduction to reading the conventions of the notation, notation and part writing, touch and articulation, Haydn's notation of dynamics and accents, and thoughts on tempo. Chapter 4 forms the centerpiece, a sixty-nine-page ornamentation treatise based principally but by no means exclusively on C.P.E. Bach's magisterial *Versuch* and including a welcome investigation of the puzzling "Haydn ornament" (), a master symbol that is sometimes a four-note turn and sometimes a three-note mordent.

The two chapters of Part II accomplish the transition from performance concerns to matters of structure and style. Addressed in Chapter 9 ("Early Divertimento and Partita Sonatas") are three issues: authentic and doubtful works, composite forms and styles, and variety of minuet types. Somfai divides into two categories the twelve early sonatas he accepts as genuine: a *Kenner* type (extended, technically demanding) and a *Liebhaber* type (shorter, easier divertimento-like sonatas). Chapter 10 ("The Mature Solo Piano Sonatas: a Survey with Historical Hypotheses") begins with Haydn's new vision of the genre, exemplified by the E^b-Major Sonata, no. 29 (H. XVI:45, 1766). Rejecting the A^b-Major Sonata, no. 35 (H. XVI:43)—Christa Landon and Georg Feder do not question its authenticity—Somfai investigates the thirty-six sonatas and their chronology. He then considers the style periods and sets of sonatas, the formation and revision of sonata subgenres and types, meter and tempo in multi-movement works, forms of movements and their combination, and Haydn's choice of keys. In all, the author identifies twelve basic forms (for example, sonata, rondo, sonata-rondo, and theme and variations) and eight additional combination forms (minuet sonata form, rondo variation, and the like).

Following an introductory chapter ("Originality and Personal Language: the Options of Analytic Methods"), in which Somfai reaffirms his intention to pursue a chronology- and genre-oriented analysis, Part III unfolds in two sections: a large one devoted to the first-movement sonata form; a shorter one devoted to other forms. The chapters of Section 1 move from general matters of classification and terminology (Somfai adopts Jan LaRue's symbols, with some modifications) to the specific structural units of exposition, deve-

lopment, and recapitulation;² each chapter of Section 2 covers one or more forms: sonata form and scherzo form in the finale, sonata forms in slow tempos, minuets, rondos and fast variation forms, slow variations and double variations, and fantasia and capriccio.

Examining the book's content more closely, the reader notices immediately that Somfai builds upon a solid foundation of 18th-century writings, among them some, like Johann Ferdinand Ritter von Schönfeld's *Jahrbuch der Tonkunst von Wien and Prag* (1796), that are less well known than the standards by C.P.E. Bach, Leopold Mozart, Quantz, and Türk. He treats his theoretical and musical sources sensitively, reporting what is there and noting what is absent. For instance, "Haydn's notation does not supply us with any information on the speed with which the trills are supposed to be executed" (p. 56). Similarly missing are primary sources that confirm the necessity of ornamenting the repeats in Haydn's keyboard works (p. 100). The posing of leading questions—Chapter 2's title is framed as a question—serves to engage the reader and direct his/her attention to the shape of a chapter. Throughout, the author provides numerous services, such as dispelling legends and offering value judgments concerning the reliability of information. Critiques of sources and scholars are handled in a polemical but respectful manner, whether it be Somfai's reservations about the applicability to Haydn of Frederick Neumann's ornamentation theories, or disagreements with H.C. Robbins Landon about work attributions, A. Peter Brown about source issues, and Elaine Sisman about formal classifications. Countless insights enrich our understanding. Somfai believes, for example, "that Haydn thought in terms of a hierarchy of forms, ranging from less sophisticated, easier forms through more intellectually and technically demanding ones, and this conception helped him in molding sonatas for a given purpose or audience" (p. 200). Similarly, sage advice is abundant, such as the endorsement of overdotting as a powerful tool in Haydn performance and the concomitant caution against *notes inégales*. So too is the wisdom accumulated from long experience: "The primary goal of the performer must be the individualization of the motives through emphasis on the differences of their details and shades—the cohesion and strict construction of the movement has already been taken care of by the composer" (p. 345).

² Jan LaRue, *Guidelines for Style Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1970). The revised second edition (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 1992) is not cited.

On another level, Somfai introduces new terminology to help organize complex areas of inquiry. See especially his seven main types of mature Haydn sonata: "concert-style," "chamber sonata," "court-style," "dilettante-style," "dilettante sonatas in concertante style," "ladies' sonata," and "concert" ("grand") sonata. To cite but one instance of a thought-provoking hypotheses, see the author's informed speculation concerning the entries of sonata incipits in Haydn's *Entwurfkatalog* (pp. 160-62). Particularly praiseworthy are the many fruitful ways in which Somfai views the music. On the broadest level, the sonatas are never allowed to exist in a vacuum; when appropriate, Mozart's piano sonatas or Haydn's piano trios serve as control groups. More specifically, several approaches merit mention: the invocation of "rhythmic codes" ("the dominant rhythmic patterns of the movement," (p. 158) to facilitate the exploration of variant and contrasting styles; the identification of four main types of sonata form employed in the first movements of the keyboard sonatas; the series of chapters on the first movement, each embracing a wealth of detail (in Chapter 15, for example, a sixfold classification of opening theme types); an ongoing sensitivity to register as a compositional and expressive resource; an investigation within the exposition of proportions of strict thematic sections versus fantasia-like insertions (the implications for performance are clear: the thematic block should be played in a rhythmically disciplined way, the fantasia-like section more freely); and the identification of four types of development section. Many of these investigative approaches reinforce the author's belief "that a clear understanding of the background and motivation of the composition of a new group of works can improve the interpretation of individual pieces" (p. 212).

Several auxiliary components supplement the text. In its generous annotations, placed on the page as footnotes, happily, Somfai pursues fascinating avenues of inquiry. See page 132, note 11, for a meticulous examination of the source situation of the C-Minor Sonata, no. 33 (H.XVI:20). Note 8 on page 337 serves to broach a subject which limitations of space prevent him from developing: the "variety of Haydn's extremely 'dialectical' processes in actual composition," which Somfai believes can be understood from a "thesis—antithesis" aspect. While not eliminating the need for scores, 166 musical examples materially facilitate comprehension of the author's points. Similarly, the ornament locator, the indispensable thematic locator, twenty-two tables, and thirty-six figures ranging from illustrations of instruments to extraordinarily graphic representations of chronologies, publication dates and places, sets of

sonatas, individual designs, and the like provide a visual dimension without precedent in musicological studies of the Classic Period with which I am familiar. The volume could hold its own very nicely in a design competition.

Indisputably strengths of the book, the notes and the graphic apparatus can serve nonetheless as a pivot to some critical considerations. A general policy of partially citing books and articles in the notes results in a minor inconvenience, the need to consult the select bibliography for complete publication information. Lists of examples, tables, and figures have not been provided. Figures 1 through 6 depict historical instruments; the two mechanisms sketched on page 14 are unnumbered. Figure 8 ("Chronology of the mature solo, duo, and trio sonatas by Mozart and Haydn," p. 165) is as eye-catching as it is readily comprehensible. On the other hand, the symbols of Table 8 ("The Succession of Meters in Two- and Three-Movement Sonatas," p. 182) are confusing visually (and one key symbol is explained in the text rather than in the interpretive "Note"), while Table 16 ("Key Preferences," p. 202) and Figure 17 ("The two basic forms of primary themes," p. 240) are initially perplexing due to the intricacy of their design. The twenty-four chapters vary widely in length, from four pages to sixty-nine (with twelve subdivisions). While idiosyncratic in some respects—see, for example, the lengthy parenthetical remark inserted in an already long sentence at the top of page 131—the prose is at least serviceable and often distinguished. Among some arresting verbal images are the "temporary guest" (a passage in the dominant, p. 231) and the "bridge of communication" between work and listener (the opening measures of a composition, p. 237).

A sixteen-year period between versions could be considered short for some topics, but in the thriving field of performance practice it is an eternity. Assuredly, *The Keyboard Sonatas of Joseph Haydn* has been updated. For example, Helm numbers supplement the traditional Wotquenne numbers for C.P.E. Bach, the most recent thinking appears concerning repetition schemes of sonata forms and minuets, and the bibliography includes important work as recent as 1995. Still, in several respects the book is less current than its 1995 publication date might lead one to believe. The author lists major books by Webster (1991), Sisman (1993), and Komlós (1995) that appeared too late to be reflected in his text. He criticizes Neumann's *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music* (1978), yet omits the later *Ornamentation and Improvisation in Mozart* (1986:

listed in the bibliography). Following H.C. Koch, Elaine Sisman has refined her terminology to recognize a distinction between rondo variation (a variation movement with intervening episodes, as in Sonata no. 30 [H.XVI:19]) and variation rondo (a rapid finale rondo with incidental varyings in the refrain, as in the doubtful Sonata no. 35 [H.XVI:43]).³ On page 144, a statement about the virtues needed for a musician interpreting Haydn versus the "internationally acknowledged pianistic ideals of the 1960s and 1970s" hopefully may be less true of the 1980s and 1990s. Parenthetically, it should be noted that Paul Badura-Skoda's study of Haydn's ornamentation exists in English.⁴ In addition, I find it odd that while citing Heinrich Bessler's work on the *contredanse*, Somfai makes no mention of his late colleague Dénes Bartha's numerous contributions to our knowledge of it and its often-accompanying quatrain form.⁵

Some subjects, such as ornamentation, have been covered exhaustively and insightfully. Others have been broached tantalizingly but not pursued. For example, choosing to emphasize rubato in Chapter 8 ("Thoughts on Tempos in Haydn's Style"), Somfai devotes scarcely three pages to issues of tempo proper. Might it not be possible to prepare for Haydn a tempo spectrum similar to that developed for Mozart by Jean-Pierre Marty, who has "translated" into metronome markings an eighteenth-century "code" consisting of Italian tempo-term, meter, and prevailing note value(s).⁶

Still other subjects invite alternative analysis. For instance, Haydn's sophisticated handling of form guarantees that differences of opinion will arise concerning specific pieces. For Somfai, by way of illustration, none of Haydn's piano trios opens with a movement in rondo form (p. 199, no. 65). I submit that Trios 25/I (a double variation for Somfai) and 31/I (a ternary variation) just as legitimately could be

³ Elaine Sisman, *Haydn and the Classical Variation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Although the volume is listed in the bibliography, Somfai, p. 326 and elsewhere, relies upon earlier Sisman publications.

⁴ Paul Badura-Skoda, "On Ornamentation in Haydn," *Piano Quarterly* no. 135 (Fall 1986), 38-48.

⁵ See, for example, Dénes Bartha, "Thematic Profile and Character in the Quartet-Finales of Joseph Haydn," *Studia musicologica* 11 (1969), 35-62.

⁶ Jean-Pierre Marty, *The Tempo Indications of Mozart* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).

considered rondos.⁷ Finally, at least two seemingly pertinent subjects have been omitted.⁸ First, even though his line of argument in Chapter 15 ("The Primary Theme") appears to be leading in that direction, Somfai avoids altogether a consideration of "Topics" (subjects for musical discourse), a subject vitally linked with informed historical performance. For Haydn's keyboard music, Leonard Ratner has shown the way with a nuanced analysis of the play of rhetoric, topic, and texture in the E^b-Major Sonata, no. 62 (H.XVI:52).⁹ Does Somfai omit the subject because of a view articulated elsewhere in the book: "Haydn's sonata form in general does not have a dramatic sequence of events, a narrative, comparable to the plot of a stage work" (p. 291)? Second, although employing the word on occasion, the author nowhere addresses the issue of musical humor in Haydn's sonatas, a dimension recognized in the composer's lifetime and recently the focus of Gretchen Wheelock's landmark study.¹⁰

These criticisms notwithstanding, *The Keyboard Sonatas of Joseph Haydn* is a major contribution to our understanding of Haydn's unique art and its performance. Because of a long life, an enormous output, and the early-19th-century view of a smiling "Papa Haydn," the true father of the Classic style has been slow to achieve the status accorded Mozart and Beethoven. It remained for A. Peter Brown to shed scholarly light in English on Haydn's unjustly neglected

⁷ I have prepared the rondo entry for a forthcoming Oxford Composer Companion devoted to Haydn.

⁸ On page 127, Somfai calls attention to a decision he has made about another subject. Examining Haydn's notation of dynamics and accents, he elects to explore the intended meaning of the signs, leaving to teachers and performers the task of applying them.

⁹ Leonard Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980), pp. 412-21; see pp. 9-30 for general coverage of the subject. In a related vein, Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 67, presents a metrical spectrum, or hierarchy, that corresponds to an affective one.

¹⁰ Gretchen A. Wheelock, *Haydn's Ingenious Jestings with Art: Contexts of Musical Wit and Humor* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992).

keyboard music.¹¹ Somfai's English-language study offers the perfect complement, focusing an attention on Haydn performance comparable to that generated for Mozart by the Badura-Skodas and Neumann and for Beethoven by William S. Newman.¹² Drawing upon the vast manuscript holdings in the National Széchény Library in Budapest and upon his own extensive experience in Haydn research, László Somfai, Head of the Bartók Archives in Budapest and Professor of Musicology at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music, has written a fitting tribute to the late Christa Landon and her path-breaking *Wiener Urtext* edition of Haydn's complete piano sonatas.

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¹¹ A. Peter Brown, *Joseph Haydn's Keyboard Music: Sources and Style* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

¹² Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda, *Interpreting Mozart on the Keyboard*, trans. Leo Black (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1962); Frederick Neumann, *Ornamentation and Improvisation in Mozart* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). William S. Newman, *Beethoven on Beethoven: Playing His Piano Music His Way* (New York: Norton, 1988).