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"Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Music for Solo Keyboard." Trevor Stephenson, Fortepiano

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Record Review

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Music for Solo Keyboard. Minuet in D Major (K. 355); Rondo in D Major (K. 485); Sonata in B-flat Major (K. 570); Sonata in A Minor (K. 310); Adagio in C Major (K. 356). Trevor Stephenson, fortepiano. Light and Shadow Productions (Madison, Wisconsin).

Stephenson plays a modern replica of a late 18th-century Stein fortepiano, built by Thomas Ciul (and customized by Stephenson and Norman Sheppard). The instrument is actually a hybrid, with a Stein case from about 1780 and a later Streicher (Stein's daughter) action, and is distinguished primarily by its adjustable metal *Kapsels* which hold the escapement.¹ The instrument seems to be badly regulated and voiced, as is evidenced by certain notes that repeatedly stick out and by the uneven striking and damping of the action.² Leather-covered dampers that are slow to seat on the widely vibrating bass and tenor strings cause distracting buzzing noises. Such buzzing is, to be sure, not uncommon on fortepianos; however other Stein copies are not so problematic.³ This is apparent in the Sonata in A Minor (K. 310), where Stephenson commences with a crisply articulated main theme, but where the triadic accompaniment soon builds up to an accumulation of noise that overwhelms the treble voice. This imbalance re-emerges in the development section, where a 16th-note accompanimental pattern momentarily interrupts the train of thought and confuses the listener.

¹ Mr. Ciul informed Bruce Teter (conversation of Sept. 1996) that the instrument is a Zuckerman "Stein" kit, which Ciul modified by removing the back-check rail—a surprising change since this rail prevents the hammer from rebounding and restriking the string, a major fault of early fortepianos that lacked such a rail; he justified this by claiming greater tactile sensitivity.

² I owe special thanks to the early keyboard builder and restorer Curtis Berak, early keyboard restorer and museum scientist Robert Portillo, and Bruce Teter for discussions on technical aspects and tonal qualities of fortepianos and this recording.

³ The copy after a Stein of 1788 by C. Kelecom, for instance, is particularly satisfying, as heard on *J. van Immerseel, Pianoforte, W.A. Mozart* (Beert, Belgium: Accent 58018D, 1980).

Registral imbalance, resulting particularly in a weak treble is another problem.⁴ The weak treble is partially compensated by the clear incisive attack that the leather hammers on Stephenson's instrument achieve (they produce an effective clavichord-like "tic"). But even though the treble decays quickly on fortepianos, such a decay can be "filled in" with the acoustic resonance of the case and the room, as may be heard on other recordings.⁵ On Stephenson's instrument the treble is very dry with no acoustic resonance (this is perhaps exacerbated by the dry recording technique). The esthetic merit of this instantaneous damping can easily be prejudiced by our present-day expectations of maximized resonance on modern pianos.

Another factor that can contribute to the weak treble is the relative number of strings per note. Stephenson notes that his instrument, like its late-18th-century model, is double-strung throughout both the bass and the treble; this maintains treble clarity at the expense of its volume. The correction of treble volume deficiency by triple stringing the treble was generally adopted by c.1800. In contrast to Stephenson's defense of double stringing, most surviving Steins are triple-strung in the treble, although some examples, presumably including the model for Stephenson's instrument, are double-strung throughout.⁶ The evolution of the fortepiano before 1800 toward increased volume by triple-stringing, even perhaps at the expense of what Stephenson calls thicker, more opaque tone color, raises the question of the relative merits of technological "advances," as Stein's instruments were considered to be the best,⁷ and many later changes to be deleterious. Stephenson's instrument illustrates one builder's attempt at idealization. However, there is serious debate as to what is ideal and whether it is valid to idealize by hybridization or modernization. In the midst of these polemics stand the builders and their dilemma: to what extent should an original instrument's design be modified with the application of anachronistic or hybrid technique (with our 20th-century knowledge of the effects of such

⁴ One that is characteristic of early pianos in general, however; see Edwin M. Ripin, "Pianoforte," *New Grove Dictionary*, XIV/686.

⁵ E.g., that of van Immerseel.

⁶ Maribel Meisel and Philip R. Belt, "Pianoforte," *The New Grove Dictionary*, XIV/688.

⁷ Mozart himself considered them to be superior instruments. See Richard Maunder, "Mozart's Keyboard Instruments," *Early Music* 20 (1992), 214.

modifications) to produce an instrument that is more easily playable, more easily mass-producible (for instance with an amateur-buildable kit), or more easily listenable for (necessarily) 20th-century ears.

The recording methods and temperament cause several problems. The liner notes inform us that Stephenson recorded each performance in unbroken takes (which could account for occasional wrong notes), a dubious procedure considering the possibility of a pristine recording using modern editing technology while still maintaining the coherent spontaneity of “musical flow” as Stephenson calls it. Furthermore, an apparently very close proximity of the microphone to the instrument overemphasized an intimate listening environment with no room ambiance and produced an unsatisfying sound quality, let alone a great deal of undesirable mechanical noise. The effects of temperament were strikingly exemplified in the opening work, the Sonata in D Major (K. 355), which begins with modulations that are gratingly colored by Stephenson’s tuning. And despite the extensive notes on late 18th-century keyboard temperaments, the most crucial point is omitted: the exact temperament being used.

Articulation, or grouping, separating and delineating motives, plays a vital role in determining the rhetorical force of Mozart’s music. Stephenson employs a variety of articulations, sometimes presenting alternatives to the treatises, at other times overriding detailed elements in the music. In the Sonata in A Minor (K. 310), for instance, Stephenson leans in varying degrees on the quarter-note appoggiaturas each time they occur (mm. 6, 7, and later), showing a variety of interpretive nuances. However, he applies an unvarying execution to the 16th note appoggiaturas (mm. 2 and 4) and to the written-out 8th note appoggiatura (m. 10). The longer appoggiatura could have been played more slowly, as the score indicates (see Example 1).⁸

Practice was undoubtedly mixed regarding the execution of such short and long appoggiaturas. As Türk notes, “Many . . . have the

⁸ Examples in this review are taken from *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s Werke, Kritisch durchgesehene Gesamtausgabe: Sonaten und Phantasien für das Piano-forte*, Serie 20, no. 8 (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1878; Ann Arbor: J.W. Edwards, 1956). The *Neue Mozart Ausgabe* (NMA) notates the appoggiatura passages in exactly the same way, although it differs in the slurring of units, e.g. m. 8 is subdivided into two-note slurred groups, whereas in *Mozart’s Werke* there is a single slur over the entire bar.

Example 1. Mozart, *Sonata in A Minor* (mm. 1-15)

Allegro maestoso.

f

p

f

f

calando

p

legato

bad habit of notating all appoggiaturas alike without regard for the following longer or shorter note.⁹ Stephenson's decisions, viewed in this light, seem justified, since performers were not often given consistent notation regarding appoggiatura duration. He also shapes the appoggiatura figures in two slurred 8ths in contrasting ways (e.g. in m. 14 he emphasizes the first appoggiatura note, whereas in m. 15 he plays it more quickly, cutting the value of the following note).

Stephenson breaks up longer slurred units, an intuitively effective technique that calls attention to the underlying harmony. An example occurs in the Menuett in D Major (K. 355), where Stephenson does not slur the last two quarter notes of the four-note unit (e.g. mm. 5, 7, and following), but he maintains the "sigh" (or *sospiro*) effect by slurring the first quarter note appoggiatura (see Example 2).¹⁰

Stephenson's performance, while effective at the single phrase level, sometimes lacks clarity in groups of slurred units. Türk discussed how after the last slurred note, which was most often rhythmically weak, there was generally a separation to clarify the grouping and sometimes to let the music breathe.¹¹ Stephenson, however, contradicts this principle, as may be seen in the Rondo in D Major (K. 485), where he continues slurring over the barline in the bass part (mm. 17 and 19), thereby disturbing the transparent phrasing of the other voices. Here a subtle lift before the downbeat tonic bass notes, as indicated in the score, would declaim more incisively the short appoggiatura slurs in the treble (see Example 3).¹²

⁹ Daniel Gottlob Türk, *School of Clavier Playing*, trans. Raymond H. Haggh (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 202.

¹⁰ As in *Mozart's Werke*. Here the text is based on Mozart's Autograph A version; see Jacob Lateiner's discussion in "An Interpreter's Approach to Mozart," *Early Music* 20 (1992), 245-53. The *NMA* provides no slur over the middle-voice quarter-notes in m. 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 344-7.

¹² As in *Mozart's Werke*. There is no difference in the *NMA*.

Example 2. Mozart, Menuett in D Major, mm. 1-7

The musical score for Example 2 is for a Minuet in D Major by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, measures 1 through 7. It is written for solo keyboard in 3/4 time. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The first system (measures 1-3) is marked 'dolce'. The second system (measures 4-7) includes dynamic markings: 'f' (forte) in measure 4, 'p' (piano) in measure 5, 'f' in measure 6, and 'p' in measure 7. The melody is in the right hand, and the bass line is in the left hand.

Example 3. Rondo in D Major, mm. 16-20.

The musical score for Example 3 is for a Rondo in D Major, measures 16 through 20. It is written for solo keyboard in 3/4 time. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The first system (measures 16-18) and the second system (measures 19-20) show a rhythmic pattern in the right hand and a supporting bass line in the left hand. The melody is in the right hand, and the bass line is in the left hand.

Stephenson's repertoire of touches was especially effective in his treatment of the "Scotch snaps," as in the Rondo in D Major (K. 485), with its varied reprises of the theme. Those "snaps" occurring in the dotted opening motif come back both in the repeats as well as when the theme returns in the contrasting minor mode. Türk comments, "Figures in which the first note is short and the second dotted are slurred without exception and played for the most part in a caressing manner."¹³ C.P.E. Bach qualifies this by stating, "The first note should not be done away with too quickly if the tempo is moderate or slow,"¹⁴ which implies a livelier rendition of the dotted notes in pieces of a faster tempo, such as in the Rondo in D Major (K. 485). Here in m. 1 Stephenson plays the snap figure in a crisp manner, following it with a more caressing rendition in m. 9. For the repeat he articulates the snap solely in the caressing style, but in doing so, omits the small-unit slurrings that delineate and characterize the snap (see Example 4).¹⁵

In m. 60, during the (ominous) minor passage he reverts to the brisker rendition, where the snap figure appears in parallel octaves.¹⁶ He releases these octaves *staccatissimo*, causing (to my ears) a jarring effect. This latter rendition contradicts Türk, "If the character of a composition [and presumably any section within] is serious, tender, etc., then the detached notes must not be as short as they would be in pieces of a lively, humorous, and the like, nature."¹⁷

¹³ Türk, *School of Clavier Playing*, 351.

¹⁴ Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, trans. William J. Mitchell (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1979), 142.

¹⁵ As in *Mozart's Werke*. The *NMA* notates a small ornamental 16th note for the "Scotch snap," and gives the snap the note values of *Mozart's Werke* in parentheses above m. 1.

¹⁶ The *NMA* changes the notation of the snap at this point to that in *Mozart's Werke*.

¹⁷ Türk, *School of Clavier Playing*, 343.

Example 4. Mozart, Rondo in D Major, mm. 1–9, 60–63.

Allegro.

p legato

legato

The musical score is presented in four systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is D major (two sharps). The time signature is common time (C). The first system (measures 1-4) is marked 'Allegro.' and 'p legato'. The second system (measures 5-8) continues the 'p legato' marking. The third system (measures 9 and 60-61) is marked 'legato'. The fourth system (measures 62-63) is marked 'f' and 'legato'. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

In the *Adagio in C für Glasharmonika* (K. 356) Stephenson continually uses the sustaining lever, which blurs the inflections and harmonic syntax. Andreas Streicher suggested imitating the sustained, ethereal sound of the glass harmonica, "through the raising of the dampers."¹⁸ However, Johann Milchmeyer added a cautionary note, "if one changes the chord, then the notes of the [chord] preceding [either] gradually die away if the expression allows it, or are damped . . . for without this care the resonance . . . would produce a horribly bad sound."¹⁹ I have compared Stephenson's rendition to that of two glass harmonica performers: Dennis James on a Benjamin Franklin-style glass harmonica and Bruno Hoffmann on original-styled musical glasses.²⁰ In these recordings the interpreters phrase very accurately, neglecting none of the slurs, negotiate staccato passages and tapered notes with ease, exhibiting the essential sense of "lilt." By contrast, Stephenson's continual use of the damper lever breaks rank with theorists' suggestions by continually blurring the harmony. He could instead have occasionally substituted finger legato, as was advocated.²¹

Stephenson showed spontaneity and variety in his execution of trills. Although the treatises differ regarding the new method of execution of the trill starting on the main note,²² Stephenson starts most trills on the upper note. Sometimes this runs contrary to the musical con-

¹⁸ Andreas Streicher, *Brief Remarks on the Playing, Tuning and Care of Fortepianos* (Vienna: Albert, 1801), 5.

¹⁹ Johann Peter Milchmeyer, *Die wahre Art das Pianoforte zu Spielen* (Dresden: Meinhold, 1797), 62.

²⁰ The Benjamin Franklin instrument played by Dennis James utilizes rotating German crystal bowls and is installed in an ornamental wooden case constructed by the fortepiano builder Paul Poletti, *Dennis James: Glass Music* (Berkeley: Glass Music, GM-1001 CD, 1994); Bruno Hoffmann: *The Music of the Glass Harmonica* (Hackensack: The Moss Music Group, Vox Unique label, division of Essex Entertainment, VU 9008, 1987).

²¹ Finger legato instead of the damper pedal was advocated in articulating a legato line or to connect differing harmonies; Adam, 218-19, and Milchmeyer, 59, 65-66.

²² Louis Adam, *Méthode de piano du Conservatoire* (Paris: Magasin de Musique du Conservatoire Royal, 1804), 54. Adam recommended the main-note start (usually consonant) for most trills. Pierre Viguerie, *L'art de toucher le piano-forte* (Paris, Chez l'Auteur, 1797). In Viguerie, all trills start on the note above.

text, as for example when he inserts the note *a* in m. 74 of K. 310 as a prefix to the trill, this forming a dissonance against the high *b*.

In this recording Stephenson successfully introduces his own ideas by sensing the discourse apparent in Mozart's works and by bringing out the currents of *Empfindsamkeit*, *Sturm und Drang*, dynamic contrasts, and principles that characterize Mozart's highly rhetorical yet mercurial style. Fortunately, Stephenson does not collapse his performance into estrangement from the rhetorical purpose of the music; rather he balances the tensions between *Ausführung* and *Ausdruck* (Türk's distinction)²³ through his own informed but highly colored readings, making this recording both rewarding and challenging for the listener.²⁴

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²³ Türk, *School of Clavier Playing*, 337-38. See the discussion of these terms in Malcolm Bilson, "Execution and Expression in the Sonata in E-flat, K282," *Early Music* 20 (1992), 237-43.

²⁴ I would like to acknowledge the helpful discussions and critical readings of this review by Curtis Berak, Bruce K. Burchmore, Susan McClary, Robert Portillo, Harris S. Saunders, Jr., and Bruce Teter.