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Book Review: "Performing Beethoven." By Robin Stowell

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Book Review

Robin Stowell, ed. *Performing Beethoven*. Cambridge Studies in Performance Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 246p.

In seeking the pathway to a proper "Beethoven style" and arriving at necessary solutions for the performance of his music, the conscientious musician should be attentive to authentic material, such as the composer's letters, the diaries of contemporaries, and the various descriptions of manners of performance in Beethoven's own time. Of special importance are the commentaries of Beethoven himself or of his pupils and friends (such as Ries and Czerny). Also of interest are the relevant statements found in period "schools" (textbooks, as we would call them), and in the criticisms and reports in journals and newspapers. The ten essays of this collection push forward our efforts to understand what Beethoven really meant and what he would have wished to hear from a performer of his works.

Colin Lawson in "Beethoven and the Development of Wind Instruments" begins with the remark that "Beethoven's career coincided with a particularly dynamic period in the history of musical instruments." Lawson discusses the current revival of wind instruments from Beethoven's time, then focuses on Beethoven's scores, emphasizing the importance of each of the wind instruments within the orchestra, the inhibiting effects of range limits and the inability of instruments (the clarinet in particular) to play in certain keys. Beethoven, of course, demanded a much wider variety of keys than hitherto, as well as a radical increase in volume. Not one of the wind instruments used in orchestras during Beethoven's time sounded as they do today, or even as they did in Wagner's time.¹ They are now certainly of a more brilliant sound and can be played with greater ease and increased volume, which is desirable for modern large halls. Beethoven demanded a great deal from his wind performers, and some contemporary players declared his parts to be simply unplayable, e.g. of the *Cantata on the Death of Emperor Joseph II* (WoO 87). Lawson refers to Schindler, who stated that he

¹ In our own century Austrians born before World War II have also witnessed a considerable change of sound in the woodwind section as well as in the horns of Viennese origin..

witnessed Beethoven frequently discussing instrumental capabilities with players. Lawson is correct in pointing to the beauty of sound of various historical instruments, for instance the old Viennese hand-horn (which is certainly much more difficult to play than the modern French horn). Schönfeld's description of this instrument is well worth quoting:²

... as far as the actual number of notes is concerned, this instrument [the horn] is a poor one, but rich with regard to the effects it arouses due to its roundness or abundance of sound. A composer who knows how to compose well for the horn can arouse remarkable sensations with it including love's complaints, repose, melancholy, horror, and awe ... The virtuoso has much to overcome in the way of embouchure and pitch, but also has at his command a wonderful array of melting, floating, and dying-away effects."

This quotation testifies not only to the sound possibilities the old hand-horn provides but also to the apparently remarkable ability of players in Beethoven's time. Giovanni Punto, the first to perform Beethoven's horn sonata, must have been such a virtuoso player. This ability to master the old hand-horn has fortunately been revived in recent times. Lawson discusses the increasing modern awareness of Beethoven's original orchestral sonority. And what seemed impossible two or three decades ago, namely to have whole orchestras play on original instruments (or replicas), is now no longer an unfulfilled wish.

David Pickett deals with the alterations of Beethoven's instrumentation in his symphonies and other orchestra works³ that have been found necessary or desirable by many famous conductors since Richard Wagner. Wagner's own suggestions along these lines, however, are surprisingly restrained in comparison with those of some later conductors, including Bülow, Mahler, Weingartner (whose recommendations are still valued by some conductors), Strauss, Mengelberg, Toscanini (who, contrary to his oft repeated demand, "come scritto," altered more than did other conductors), Walter,

² Schönfeld, *Jahrbuch der Tonkunst* (1796), 193.

³ Pickett studied about 40 recordings of the Beethoven symphonies in conjunction with older and more recent editions, including their prefaces and commentaries.

Klemperer, Furtwängler (the faithfulness to Beethoven's text of the last two is pointed out by Pickett), and finally Markevitch. This essay should be compulsory reading for every young conductor. Pickett concludes with the remark that the most faithful rendering of Beethoven's orchestral works is not necessarily achieved through literal execution. Rather, restrained adjustments might be appropriate to secure a balance in accordance with the specific circumstances of a performance. Due to the fact that our halls are larger, our modern string instruments louder,⁴ and the wind instruments different in their possibilities of volume, adjustments seem unavoidable, especially if one is not drawing upon period instruments.

A similar investigation of old recordings was carried out by Robert Philip in his essay "Traditional Habits of Performance in Early-Twentieth Century Recordings of Beethoven." Philip poses an intriguing question:

We are now used to Beethoven played with gut strings, fortepianos, hard drum-sticks, old flutes, oboes and bassoons, narrow-bore trumpets, and the consequences for balance and sonority. We have grown accustomed to new ideas on tempo in Beethoven, based on reexamination of his metronome markings. We have, it seems, attained an immense amount of knowledge about Beethoven performance. But have we also lost something?

Philip may be correct: we have probably (and not seldom) lost something. As he points out, the time span between the generation of Beethoven interpreters born before the turn of the 20th century (such as Thibaud, Cortot, Busch, Szigeti) and Beethoven himself is shorter than that between this generation and ourselves. In some respects, therefore, their stylistic insights may have been closer to Beethoven's than to our own. Philip discusses the differences in performing Beethoven, with regard to flexible tempo, rhythmic interpretation of dotted figures, tempo rubato, portamento, and

⁴ During World War II the string sections of Viennese orchestras were still using Pirastro gut strings, and this was a reason why they sounded softer and produced an altogether different sonority than did orchestras in America for instance.

vibrato,⁵ before and after the two World Wars (before 1914, after 1945). Such generalizations may be misleading, but the great artists chosen for comparison by Philip deserve to be analyzed and their artistic insights re-evaluated. Many performers of our time, who strive for "authenticity," misunderstand this concept as much as they once did in sticking literally to an "Urtext." Some musicians certainly have found it easier to follow a text "to the letter" instead of seeking to discover the real intentions of a composer. A case in point is the doctrine of a rigid strictness of tempo, which has become fashionable in recent years. In this regard Philip (p. 202) approvingly quotes Taruskin's protest against Roger Norrington's recording of the Ninth Symphony:

[For Beethoven] metronome markings were good "only for the first measures, as feeling has its own tempo." No one, to my knowledge, ever maintained a position to the contrary before the twentieth century, when . . . composers began demanding an objective, depersonalized performance style . . .

Robin Stowell devotes his essay to Beethoven's Violin Concerto, and a large portion of Clive Brown's discussion of Ferdinand David's editions of Beethoven also deals with textual and interpretive problems in this concerto. According to Czerny, Beethoven composed the concerto in some haste. Much abashment has been caused by the numerous alterations in the solo violin part found in the autograph score. Alan Tyson called the autograph "a confusing document . . . something short of the composer's intentions." The first edition appeared in 1808 in Vienna (Bureau des Arts et d'Industrie), and in the last 150 years a large number of other editions followed, showing a wide range of differences, especially with regard to bowing instructions. The facsimile edition of the autograph, edited by Grasberger with a preface by Wolfgang Schneiderhan, now allows every modern violinist to study Beethoven's initial intentions. But this does not solve all the problems. Stowell guides performers to the most reliable and illuminating practical editions. There is a lack of agreement over dynamics and accents, bowing and articulation. ~~Most of the editions issued shortly before and after 1900 contain~~ added interpretive signs, often with little respect for Beethoven's

⁵ Concerning vibrato, I recall the shock in my student days, when I first heard a French bassoonist playing with vibrato in a solo passage. Such vibrato was never heard in our Viennese Philharmonic Orchestra during the 1940s or 1950s.

own markings. According to Stowell the most reliable scholarly score is that of Alan Tyson,⁶ aside from which he also praises the edition of Max Rostal as being faithful to Beethoven's text, as well as being accompanied by informative notes and practical suggestions for the performer.

"Beethoven's Sonatas for Piano and Cello: Aspects of Technique and Performance" is the title of David Watkin's article, a thorough study of the changes in the instrument and in its sonority (including the acceptance of the Tourte bow and a new fingerboard design during the first half of the 19th century). As Watkin points out, the various *Violoncello Schulen* of Beethoven's time and of the next generation (Dupont, Dotzauer, and Romberg) deserve the renewed attention of cellists.

David Rowland writes on the use of the pedal in Beethoven.⁷ It seems surprising, however, that he fails to mention the most problematical pedal markings, for instance those in the *Waldstein Sonata*. It would seem that he did not take into account the fortepiano instruments of Beethoven's time. There is no mention of the very short sound duration on these pianos. The problems that Beethoven's pedal markings, if followed "to the letter," would cause in modern performances of the First Piano Concerto in C Major op. 15 or in the Sonatas Op. 31/2, Op. 53, and Op. 110 are generally known among pianists. These signs made much more sense in Beethoven's time and they indeed can be literally followed on old fortepianos without great adjustments, which is not the case when using the damper-lifting pedal of a modern concert grand. There the pedal must be executed with great discretion, which means that quick changes (*Zitterpedal*) are unavoidable, otherwise the result is an impossibly blurred sound. A pianist has to have special pedal control in order to avoid this ugly blurring. Rowland may have

⁶ For this Eulenburg score Tyson used four sources: 1) the autograph, in which the orchestral parts are more or less in their final form (although the solo violin part is not); 2) a copyist's score with corrections in Beethoven's hand (now the property of the British Museum), which according to Tyson served as a "Stichvorlage" for the first Viennese print—here the solo violin part appears in the form best known today; 3) the first Viennese edition of the parts (Erstdruck); and 4) the London edition of the parts (published in 1810 by Clementi & Co.).

⁷ Rowland's book, *A History of Piano Pedalling*, appeared in 1993 (Cambridge University Press).

omitted discussion of these problems since Martin Hughes takes them up in his excellent contribution "Beethoven's Piano Music: Contemporary Performance Issues." Hughes points out the characteristic merits and shortcomings of pianos since Beethoven's time (further on his essay below).

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Tibor Szasz's essay, "Beethoven's Basso Continuo: Notation and Performance" is concerned with basso continuo in the piano concertos of Beethoven and the background of this usage in Mozart. His guidelines on how to play a good continuo realization in Mozart's Piano Concerto K246 can be recommended without any reservations and ought to be fully implemented by every responsible intelligent pianist. Szasz has devoted years to the problems of basso continuo. He quotes mainly his own earlier publications on this subject.⁸ He has unearthed hitherto unknown sources, and adds some valuable information regarding Beethoven.

Alas, the majority of pianists still fail to play any basso continuo at all, in Mozart's concertos as well as in Beethoven's. Why this reluctance by pianists to follow the composers' directions? There are several answers, the most obvious being "tradition." Today's pianists have been trained mostly by teachers whose own teachers grew up in the 19th-century tradition, which not only ignored but even showed a contempt for historically correct performances. Another reason is that the sound of the modern piano, being much poorer in overtones than that of period instruments, does not melt well with

⁸ There have been other studies, however. The present reviewer has written on basso continuo in Mozart and Beethoven (prior to Szasz), arriving at nearly identical solutions. And already in the 1930s Friedrich Blume drew attention to the "basso continuo" in Mozart's piano concertos: see the prefaces to several Mozart piano concertos in the Eulenburg pocket scores (Leipzig, Berlin, London). See also Paul Badura-Skoda, "Über das Generalbaß in Mozarts Klavierkonzerten," *Mozart Jahrbuch* (1957) 96-107, his prefaces to the Eulenburg editions of Mozart's Piano Concertos K246 and K466 (1968 and 1979 respectively); his review of the Piano Concertos nos. 1, 2, and 3 in the *Neue Beethoven-Ausgabe* (Henle Verlag); and his articles "Eine langerwartete Neuausgabe der Beethoven Klavierkonzerte nmr. 1-3," *Das Orchester*, Heft 4 (1988), 353-56, and "Zur Rolle der Continuo-Notierungen in Beethovens Klavierkonzerten," *Das Orchester*, Heft 2 (1989), 207-208.

A Graf piano in Beethoven's possession in 1823
(this piano, originally a gift to Beethoven from the maker, is now
a part of the Collection Badura-Skoda)⁹



⁹ See Eva Badura-Skoda, "Ein vierter erhaltener Hammerflügel aus dem Besitz Beethovens," in *Beiträge zu Buch, Bibliothek und Schrift*, published by the Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, vol. 45/2 (Vienna, 1996), 249-65.

the orchestra.¹⁰ What may be regarded as an advantage for the solo passages becomes a handicap during the tutti sections. Unless played with discretion these tutti sections can create the impression of a prolonged solo part (as if the soloist had failed to understand the nature of the piano's dialogue with the orchestra).

Certainly, there once existed a necessity for the piano soloist to play with the "bass" part during the tutti, a need, however, that has been greatly diminished when using modern instruments. Here follow some arguments that have been raised both for and against the use of a piano basso continuo:

pro

- 1) reinforcement of the bass line—recent research, particularly by Zaslaw,¹¹ proved that Mozart and Beethoven had very small orchestras (sometimes Mozart had to perform with only two cellos!);
- 2) if the pianist directs the orchestra, taking over the functions of a conductor by playing at the keyboard;
- 3) filling in incomplete or missing harmonies (the main function of the continuo player in the late baroque era)¹²—now and then Mozart wrote empty fifths in the tutti (e.g. in the first movement of the Concerto K414 in A Major, mm. 32 and 152);
- 4) enriching the sound of the full orchestra.¹³

¹⁰ See Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda, *Interpreting Mozart on the Keyboard* (London, New York, 1962), 197-208.

¹¹ Neal Zaslaw, *Mozart's Symphonies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 5, 205, 458-59.

¹² C.P.E. Bach devotes the lengthy second part of his essay, *Versuch über die wahre Art, das Clavier zu spielen* (Berlin, 1753, 1762) to this problem.

¹³ It is a pity that in Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto most soloists (misled by modern editions) stop playing five seconds before the conclusion. This is unnatural as well as "un-historical" (i.e. historically incorrect). The soloist should join in the final chords, just as they did at the end of the first movement.

con

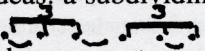
- 1) reinforcement of the bass line is no longer necessary with today's large orchestras;
- 2) two hundred years of developing conducting technique cannot easily be dismissed, making keyboard conducting redundant;
- 3) in Mozart's works the harmonies are mostly supplied by the second violins and violas, often supported by the wind section, and in the later concertos by Mozart and in all of Beethoven's concertos the orchestral harmony is so complete that no filling-in by the piano is needed—the modern soloist is faced with the question: “why should I double certain parts in the orchestra (an oboe, a horn, a viola part, etc.) which would in fact sound much better without the piano?”

In his article “Beethoven's Revisions to His Fourth Piano Concerto” Barry Cooper deciphered and transcribed in an admirable way the complete sketchlike entries which Beethoven wrote into the manuscript score of the first and then also the third movement of his G-Major Piano Concerto, presumably in preparation for his own public performance of it in December of 1808.¹⁴ With very few exceptions Cooper comes very close in his readings to what Beethoven must have intended when writing down these elaborations.

Now that these examples of relevant variants are available, the question arises anew whether Beethoven indeed played all or only some of them, and also whether he would have wanted these elaborations to be incorporated by other pianists in future performances of his concerto. Cooper emphatically says yes to the complete embellished version, which he considers to be a definite improvement over the standard version, considering it to be “more virtuosic, sophisticated, sparkling, and original.” (p.34)

With due respect to Cooper's enthusiasm, a more sober assessment of the new versions might show that “not everything that sparkles is gold.” Undoubtedly, a few of these new entries are improvements, for example nos. 28, 29, 31, and of course nos. 12 and 26, which are derived from the main body of the manuscript score. Others, how-

¹⁴ The score is now in the possession of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, Sign. A 82 B.

ever, can hardly be called improvements. They are either unplayable (e.g. no. 2, bar 173; no. 8, unless slowed; no. 23) or simply trivial (e.g. no. 13; and particularly no. 15, which is so primitive that one can hardly believe Beethoven wrote it). Also, it is rather strange to observe that during this revision Beethoven seems to have become obsessed with two “new” ideas: a subdividing of triplets into slurred groups of two notes each (), e.g. first movement, mm. 196, 198, 356-57, third movement, mm. 134-35, 455-58, etc.—see exs. no. 5, 19, 23, 28, and the adding of as many trills as possible to a score that already contains an unusual number of trills and double trills (see exs. 3, 8, 16, 18, 19,¹⁵). A particularly questionable case is the end of ex. 3, m. 173. Outwardly the transcription comes close to the nearly illegible dots Beethoven jotted all over the stave. Did Beethoven actually intend an embellishment here? At the end of this bar the right hand comes into a collision with the left hand (*f*#-1 below the *a*-1 of the left) after which there follows a totally unmotivated leap upwards by an 11th. Worse still, instead of *embellishing* the original melody *a-g-f#-e*, it surely *emuglishes* it by a meaningless scale. If we assume that from *g* (the 20th note) up to *f*# (the fifth note before the end) another *octava*-sign had been intended, this passage takes on a new meaning and becomes playable as well! The reader should try this out.

The first triplet (instead of a duplet) in m. 198 (ex. 5) makes a bad effect, because it occurs against the motivic matrix of the section. Neither the figure 3 nor the following tie is in Beethoven's handwriting. In ex. 6 (m. 202) Cooper inserts a “*sf*” (*sforzato*) which, however, is not found in any source. Knowing Beethoven's enormous self criticism in sifting through his sketches (and his gradual refining of an occasionally crude initial idea), we may assume that he would not have played this new version the way it stands in the score. Besides, most of the elaborations are not fully written out, i.e. they have to be completed. Had he really wished that the new version should replace the standard one, he undoubtedly would have seen to it that it would have been copied in a legible way, or he would have made a written or spoken remark to this effect. Recordings of this version fail to convince, either. In nearly all places the “new”

¹⁵ In no. 19 the transposition of the melody an octave higher, acceptable on a modern piano, sounds thin and tinny even on the best period pianos. Also one misses the very beautiful embellishment of the original version (m. 349 onward). Would Beethoven have sacrificed this fine embellishment simply to introduce another trill?

version sounds awkward and does not create the impression of being an improvement.

In "Beethoven's Piano Music: Contemporary Performance Issues" Martin Hughes proves to have a firm grasp of the problems confronting today's interpreter, whether he performs Beethoven on modern or on period pianos. Every pianist who is seriously interested in rendering the spirit of a Beethoven piano work ought to read it. It is worth quoting what Hughes has to say about the widespread habit of adopting extremely slow tempi for the central movements of the sonatas (p. 229):

... it is in the slow movements that the sustaining power of the new instruments has allowed pianists to adopt slow tempos far beyond the possibilities of the lung or the bow, to usurp line, eschew narrative in favor of melodrama, while the simple dignity of the music is overlaid with an exaggeration of phrase and tone that, far from revealing the music, actually obscures its meaning with the indulgences of the performer. Additionally, the cult of the interminable slow movement stemmed from a belief in the sixties that slow meant profound, a phenomenon fostered as much by the improvement in the gramophone record and the concert hall acoustic as by any artistic view.

It is also worth noticing in this context that Claudio Arrau in his widely used "Urtext" edition of the Beethoven sonatas,¹⁶ smuggled in a comma in the tempo indication of the *Arietta* of Op. 111: "Adagio molto[,] semplice e cantabile," whereas the correct reading should be "Adagio[,] molto semplice e cantabile," i.e. a very simple and singing adagio," which is similar to the inscription of the last movement of Op. 109. Moreover, a careful examination of the autograph of Op. 111 reveals that the words "molto semplice e cantabile" were apparently added by Beethoven at a later time.

Also convincing is what Hughes has to say about Beethoven's phrasing, dynamics, and use of staccato. It deserves to be followed by contemporary performers. Concerning the modern tendency to overpedal Beethoven's piano works, another example might be considered here: in the first movement of the Fourth Piano Concerto the arpeggiated chords in the middle of the development section

¹⁶ Ed. Peters (New York, Frankfurt).

(mm. 223-226) are marked with pedal throughout. Why then do nearly all pianists already use full pedal 17 measures earlier? By doing so they infringe upon the thematic dialogue between the winds and strings. On the other hand, the final chords in this movement (as well as in the opening movements of Beethoven's Third and Fifth Piano Concertos) should clearly be played with the pedal held down. Why is this indication nearly always ignored?

In only one respect do I disagree with the author. In his penultimate paragraph, he compares the groups of tied notes in Op. 110 with the *Bebung* of the clavichord, and refers the reader to Arthur Schnabel's edition of the Beethoven sonatas. In my article "A Tie Is a Tie Is a Tie . . ." ¹⁷ I attempt to prove that these ties have nothing to do with the *Bebung* (where the same note undergoes a vibrato without being struck again). Here I quote evidence that the second note in pairs of tied notes (e.g. in Op. 69, Op. 106, Op. 110) ought to be tied in the traditional way; that means silently.

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¹⁷ *Early Music* 16 (1988), 84-88.