

"Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing" by Neal Peres Da Costa

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Book Review: Peres Da Costa, Neal. *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-19-538691-2.

William Kinderman

The double meaning of the title “Off the Record” of this intriguing new study of Romantic piano playing by Peres Da Costa refers to early recordings as well as to performance techniques not specified in published musical scores. The importance of the topic is considerable. That adequate performance entails more than the literal rendering of an Urtext score should be evident. How much freedom should we expect in musical interpretation, and what specific techniques are involved?

An excess of literalism is surely characteristic of much musical education and performance today. One problem with musical texts is encapsulated in the old joke in German about the so-called Urtext (original text): “Wie viel ur ist es?” (“To what extent is it original?”), a question which plays on the identically sounding familiar turn-of-phrase “Wie viel Uhr ist es?” (“What time is it?”). The doctrine of prioritizing an “original text” became wedded to the pious notion of faithfulness to the work (*Werktreue*), promoting an impression that performers should strive to bring to sound exactly what they see in the pages of their Urtext score. Is this really sufficient? The sterile quality of too many performances stems in part from this short-sighted perspective.

Since music exists in sound and time, it is not adequately represented by the visual image of the printed score alone. A pianist is more than a musical typist following the directions in a text. This situation has of course always been understood by accomplished players. It is richly documented that composer/performers like Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin did not simply render texts. They were capable of communicating musical ideas and gestures while drawing on a wide range of rhetorical devices and expressive nuances, resources they also used in their improvisations. During the century following Beethoven’s death in 1827, various performance practices continued to flourish that went well beyond the notated musical texts. Before the age of recording, successful performers tended to incorporate some of their recommendations into editions. By the second half of the twentieth century, however, a more objectivist approach emerged and has threatened to become dominant.



Da Costa's book aims to help address this problem by examining the early-recorded legacy of pianists from a century ago, while occasionally exploring the performance practices of violinists and singers as well. He gives attention to performers including Pachmann and Paderewski, Brahms and Joachim, Leschetizsky and Hofmann, Reinecke and Rosenthal, Grieg and Saint-Saëns. Weighing their recordings against their recommendations in treatises and other sources, Da Costa probes the divergences between practice and theory. Carl Reinecke receives particular attention, and his picture is placed on the cover of the volume. The book is supported by an array of audio clips available through a website. In exploring issues such as metrical rubato and rhythmic alteration, Da Costa sensibly brings into play the recommendations of the influential nineteenth-century singing teacher Manuel García. Welcome too is Da Costa's attempt to extrapolate backwards from the evidence of early recordings. How did Chopin, Paganini, Schumann, or Liszt actually play? While admitting that any precise answer remains elusive, Da Costa makes a spirited argument for an enhanced freedom in interpretation today, for revising "current notions of good taste" in order to promote "fresh, insightful, and inspired interpretations of music of the old masters" (p. 310).

A number of questions arise. Peres de Costa gives particular attention to matters of rhythm and tempo, including playing one hand after the other, unnotated arpeggiation, rubato, and tempo modification. In his chapter on "Playing One Hand after the Other," da Costa discusses the "tyranny of synchronous playing" (p. 41), and he often conveys the impression that techniques of dislocation between the hands that were commonplace a century ago have since become unknown and even forbidden. He is surely right that such practices were not just characteristic of the early twentieth century but stemmed from early times. At the same time, he acknowledges Sigismund Thalberg's recommendation that such delays between the hands should be not obvious but "almost imperceptible" (p. 72).

Subtle use of asynchronous playing is not unknown among distinguished pianists in recent times. For instance, Alfred Brendel sometimes utilizes such devices selectively, in ways that are significant even if "almost imperceptible." In the opening allegro of Beethoven's "Lebewohl" ("Farewell") Sonata, op. 81a, where the "Farewell" motive appears in the faster main tempo, and its initial melody note sounds on high D in the *espressivo* passage at m. 50, Brendel uses a slightly asynchronous delivery to lend rhetorical emphasis to the pitch. In the second movement, the "Abwesenheit" ("Absence"), the harmony in m. 5 is underscored by subtle use of this device.¹

The beginning of Beethoven's so-called "Tempest" Sonata in D minor, op. 31, no. 2, offers a particularly meaningful treatment of arpeggiation. Beethoven employs here a progression leading from a freely unfolding broken chord in a suspended, fantasy-like texture, to a rhythmically-defined motive based on that same sonority. Thus the initial

1. This recording appeared as Philips 446 093-2, as part of Brendel's comprehensive recording of the Beethoven sonatas.

arpeggiation of the first-inversion dominant chord, rising out of the depths of the bass, is shaped into the ensuing triadic ascending figure A-C#-E-A, expressed through the rhythmic pattern long-short-short-long. Beethoven subsequently exploits yet another such motivic reinterpretation in m. 21, when the opening motive, which was initially played in a slow largo tempo, is hammered out on the tonic D minor in the swift allegro tempo.

Such examples alert us to the special ways in which Beethoven treats arpeggiated sonorities in his works but also suggest why this practice should be carefully considered and not too indiscriminately employed. Da Costa refers to Carl Czerny's recommendation of arpeggiating the opening chord of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto in G major (p. 43), a practice that has occasionally been adopted by pianists today, including Melvin Tan, Lars Vogt, and Robert Levin. Particularly arresting is Levin's idea of associating this initial arpeggiated chord with the remarkable second movement of the concerto, whose stark contrasts and unfolding narrative seem to absorb the symbolism of Orpheus and the Furies. Concerning the slow movement, Levin observes in the notes to his excellent recording that "In keeping with the personification of Orpheus and his lyre,² I have introduced a substantial amount of arpeggiation into the chordal accompaniment."²

Levin's extension of the rhetorical practice of arpeggiation to the Andante con moto of the concerto makes a provocative point that is highly effective on his chosen fortepiano, whereby the intensification from *una corda* to *tre corde* is more distinctive and impressive than on a modern Steinway. On the other hand, a decision to arpeggiate the initial chord on a modern instrument has a drawback, since this surprising *dolce* beginning in the solo piano is poised against the exquisite re-harmonization of the highest pitch in the B-major chord in the orchestra in the following phrase—a sonority that is necessarily synchronized. This sensitive harmonic shift from G major to B major is not enhanced by arpeggiation of the opening chord, and Beethoven after all did not specify a broken chord.

In his zeal to offer suggestions of alternative performance practice, Da Costa is sometimes led astray. In discussing the transition from the second movement to the finale of Beethoven's F minor Sonata, op. 57, Da Costa speculates that Beethoven wrote the word *arpeggio* on the *fortissimo* diminished-seventh chord in m. 97 because "he intended the pregnant fortissimo chords—at least in the left hand—to be arpeggiated (perhaps unusually) up and down several times to create a dramatic and/or sustained effect" (p. 115). However, such a rendering of the passage would weaken rather than strengthen the artistic impact. The immediately preceding *pianissimo* diminished-seventh sonority actually contains as its highest pitch the D-flat that might have formed part of the final tonic cadence of the Andante con moto in D-flat major. Beethoven first undermines or subverts this cadence by leaving the expected melodic pitch D-flat intact while

2. Robert Levin, liner notes for *Beethoven Piano Concertos Nos. 3 & 4*, Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique, John Eliot Gardiner (conductor), Robert Levin (fortepiano), Archiv/Deutsche Grammophon 457 608-2, 1998, compact disc, 4.

substituting the dissonant diminished-seventh under it. A powerful turning-point comes as this *pianissimo* chord is then reinterpreted as a fortissimo diminished-seventh sonority an octave higher. An arpeggiation of chords at this juncture “up and down several times” would be quite superfluous, since Beethoven richly develops the pivotal diminished-seventh in the ensuing extended transition passage, with the music falling into the depths of the bass until it hits the lowest available F at m. 20 of the ensuing Allegro ma non troppo. This is the true beginning of the finale, which so powerfully reasserts the tragic character of the opening movement of the sonata.

Da Costa reproduces the rendering of this passage from the edition by Carl Reinecke (p. 116), showing how Reinecke marks the fortissimo diminished-seventh chord with arpeggiation signs in both hands, with the additional verbal direction “arpeggio” set between the staves. Unfortunately, Da Costa misinforms his readers in recommending this faulty text. Beethoven’s own autograph score (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Ms 20) is instructive here. The notational sign and verbal direction “arpeggio” are explicitly confined to the lower stave for the left hand only, with no arpeggiation indicated for the right hand, which according to the autograph needs to be delivered in a synchronized way, as a simultaneity.³ The Henle Urtext edition edited by B.A. Wallner reproduces the passage according to the autograph, but Reinecke’s edition is arbitrary and untrustworthy here. Beethoven surely would *not* have approved of such added arpeggiated chords but would presumably have responded with anger to such intervention. His student Ferdinand Ries reported that when a publisher added measures to the musical text of the first movement of his Sonata in G major, op. 31, no. 1, Beethoven responded with fury, exclaiming “Wo steht das, zum Teufel?” (“Where is that, damn it!”).

Even the most eminent pianists of earlier times made some questionable interpretative decisions and committed outright errors. For instance, Hans von Bülow (often cited as an authority by Da Costa) added notes to the last variation of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in E major, op. 109, citing the insertion of these pitches as reflecting Franz Liszt’s version.⁴ There can be no doubt about Beethoven’s aesthetic intention in deliberately leaving out these implied pitches F# and D# at the transition to the *da capo* return of the original sarabande-like theme. The effect is thereby created of a rapport between sound and silence, as the final variation fades into the return of the *cantabile* theme. Beethoven’s autograph score lends no support to von Bülow’s version, but the editions of Heinrich Schenker and Donald Francis Tovey corrected the mistake.

3. The first printed edition issued by the Bureau des Arts et d’industrie in 1807 does include an arpeggiation sign before the chord in the right hand, but this is likely an error, and in the print, Beethoven’s direction “arpeggio” is placed to apply to the left hand, just as in the autograph score. The autograph score was evidently used as the engraver’s copy. See Martha Frohlich, *Beethoven’s ‘Appassionata’ Sonata* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 130.

4. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Beethoven Sonatas for the Piano*, ed. Hans von Bülow, vol. 2 (New York: Schirmer, 1894), 636.

As these examples show, the reader of *Off the Record* must remain cautious and critical. Not everything about the world of Romantic piano playing was admirable, nor has all rhetorical freedom disappeared from the recent concert environment. Some other important areas of performance practice, such as the handling of dissonance and voicing, are given little attention here. It is certainly true that notation often does “not do justice to the subtleties of the inflection,” or expressive meaning, of outstanding works of musical art (p. 200). Da Costa’s book will help stimulate reflection on important issues related to performance, but much remains to be done.