

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Philibuster

New music for the fortepiano

The editor of H&F commented in the first issue of the magazine upon the apparent absence of pieces written for the fortepiano by contemporary composers. He was not quite correct in his assumption, however. In 1992 the German pianist and fortepianist Marc Reichow suggested to the English composer Richard Sims that he considered the fortepiano an instrument worthy of a piece. In April 1993, Philibuster for solo fortepiano was finished. The piece was first performed in May 1993 in The Hague by its dedicatee. It has since been performed in Heidelberg and Amsterdam. In this article, pianist and composer discuss the problems of writing and playing new music written for fortepiano.

It remains something of a mystery why there is so little new music written for the fortepiano. Whereas the harpsichord player is inundated with new pieces written for his instrument, the repertoire of the fortepianist consists almost entirely of period pieces. Is there an intrinsic property of the harpsichord that guarantees its place at the table of contemporary music? The fortepianist would never entertain such an idea. Rather it seems that the fortepiano has been passed over in favour of its illustrious cousin. Composers are more familiar with the harpsichord. They feel, rightly or wrongly, that they know the instrument, that they are familiar with the subtleties of tone colour in its various registrations and tessiture. Access to the instrument has ensured that they have some idea about mechanics and technique. A frequently performed and large repertoire has enabled them to formulate a notion, however misguided, of a 'generalized harpsichord': a sort of universal instrument possessing essential core acoustic properties, in which the quintessence of all that is 'harpsichord' is distilled. Composers often work in this way, drawing upon general experience rather than particular characteristics of an individual instrument. Is it any wonder then that a significant proportion of the pieces written this century exploit only general coloristic features of the harpsichord?

In this age of mass production of instruments it is easy to lose sight of what is an essential characteristic of instrument building at a time when information travelled far more slowly than today: the huge variation in different building techniques, materials and aesthetics. Moreover, these factors varied over time to produce a richly diverse collection of instruments from different makers, different geographical locations and different epochs. While the exploitation of this diversity is stock in trade for the harpsichord player, the average composer is happy to stick to his idea of the generalized harpsichord. Only a

handful of composers explore a powerful aspect of the harpsichord: its amenability to different tuning systems. Richard Sims is at present working on a harpsichord piece that does just this.

The fortepiano, however, does not allow such sweeping generalization. Although harpsichord building evolved through the centuries there is no idea that the modern harpsichord is somehow an evolutionary endpoint of a chain of more or less successful mutations. With the fortepiano the perception is, wrongly, that the instrument is an early predecessor of the modern grand piano and hence only an intermediate phase. The inference is therefore that the modern instrument is to all intents and purposes an improvement. These are the mistaken assumptions that underlie the meaningless cliché often cited in concert reviews: 'the piece was effective but it is not clear why it had to be played on the fortepiano and not a modern instrument'. Would the reviewer have said the same about the harpsichord in the de Falla or McCabe concerti or its use in the Ligeti Chamber Concerto?

Gustav Leonhardt acknowledges the problem in the sleeve notes to his early recordings of Mozart sonatas on the fortepiano (1972):

I do believe that today's harpsichord player, going one step further and playing Mozart on the fortepiano, will encounter fewer problems than a modern pianist attempting to do the same. For the latter, taking a hundred steps backwards to 'real' Mozart, the composer's innovations would not seem 'modern' at all. . . .

Through the ingenuity of the music the harpsichordist forgets that the actual sound of the fortepiano is not at all comparable to that of the (literally) perfect harpsichord. The indirect escapement will never caress the string as affectionately as does the harpsichord's sensitive mechanism.

One cannot have everything. Ideals change. Something good at one level has to be sacrificed in order to achieve something good on another. Mozart's ideal was exemplified by the Viennese piano of his time otherwise he would have written differently or not for the piano at all. [Trans. JMR]

There are further consequences of Leonhardt's approach which he himself does not draw—possibly because they favour the modern pianist. The modern pianist can, if his taste and education do not tie him too closely to the aesthetics of nineteenth-century pianism, experience the fortepiano as a perfect instrument in its own right, not merely a missing link between the less modern harpsichord and the less primitive modern piano. Moreover, he can bring his own aesthetic ideals, experimental instrumental approach and contemporary performance practice to bear on the problems of fortepiano playing.

AS Marc Reichow remembers from his own experience as a modern pianist beginning the study of the fortepiano several years ago, the Viennese instrument does lend itself easily to this approach—in contrast, paradoxically, to its post-1800 companions—and proves itself to be equal, if not superior, to the modern piano for a number of aspects of twentieth-century keyboard style. Lightness of touch, for example, which is physically determined by weight of key allows considerable velocity and economy of movement and enables the player to achieve greater raw speed without losing articulation. Indeed, in a Mephistophelian sense, thought and the accompanying movement are virtually simultaneous. Moreover, the instrument is capable of subtle dynamic differentiation throughout the range from the loudest *forte* to almost nothing. There is no dynamic threshold—at the quiet end—as in the modern instrument. This coupled with the rapid decay of sustained notes leads to increased clarity of line.

As Leonhardt suggests, these gains are paid for by losses elsewhere. For sheer loudness of tone and availability of pitches in extreme registers the modern piano cannot be equalled. It could be argued, though, that these aspects cannot be considered indispensable in contemporary composition, that the good composer can fashion his music to the instrument like a glove to a hand and exploit its strengths. What better models can

the contemporary fortepiano composer have than Mozart and C P E Bach?

Writing for the fortepiano

With these considerations in mind, Sims set out upon the task of writing for a late eighteenth-century five-octave fortepiano with Viennese action (range F–f'') with knee lever pedal mechanism—for example, Stein or Walter. He had become attracted to the possibilities of this instrument during a number of fortepiano familiarization sessions with Marc Reichow in late 1992.

The ambiguous relationship between music of the medieval, Renaissance and Baroque periods and that of the present day had long been a preoccupation. In his piece *Vir Perfecte* (1986) for clarinet, cello, piano and percussion he had taken a fragment of Leonin's *Magnus Liber Organi de Gradali et Antiphonario* of 1160: this was transformed through the use of group theoretical techniques¹ into a dialectic between a creationist and a Darwinist view of Man. In the present piece historical reference goes one step further with the use of an early instrument as a commentator—a Virgil-to-Dante relationship?—upon a number of meta-musical ideas.

In order to learn about fortepiano writing the composer studied a number of composers from the mid-eighteenth century and, in particular, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. His music, in a general sense, is the starting point for this piece. The name *Philibuster* makes a reference to this undoubtedly genius. His predilection for two-part counterpoint was studied in some depth. The nature of this particular fortepiano is such that every single note has a very rich structure: notes in the middle to low registers ring with high harmonics; prime-numbered partials give the notes a somewhat astringent quality. This quality can be utilised by the composer in a number of different ways. Firstly, there is no real need to write any great contrapuntal density since the harmonic *richesse* of each note ensures that two-part writing is already harmonically adventurous:

Example 1: Two-part counterpoint in *Philibuster*

Secondly, close-spaced chords have a stridently physical quality brought about by interference of

close inharmonic partials. This gives the possibility of sudden impact, especially in *forte*:



Example 2: An example of closed-spaced chordal writing

Thirdly, the different structural quality of notes in different registers allows the composer to layer

material of different tessiture and yet still remain audible:



Example 3: Multi-layered writing for the fortepiano

The dynamic range of the fortepiano is also heavily utilised in the piece by further heightening the contrast between different layers but also by giving extra impetus to chordal attacks. Hence the piece is very much a reconciliation of extremes.

ONE of the intriguing linguistic observations about music is that the function, and hence meaning, of musical structures is often established retrospectively. A theme can only be identified as such after the listener has experienced its subsequent development. The significance of each term in the dialectical exchange 'first subject-second subject' in sonata form is determined by the other and the whole form is instrumental in making explicit this relation. The composer therefore has the possibility of altering the meaning of a particular musical structure retrospectively. What the listener first hears as an important structural unit can become at a later stage marginal or subservient to subsequent ideas. Thus sonata-form bridge

passages, supposedly less important to the general scheme of things, become in the hands of Brahms independent musical objects themselves amenable to development and they are subsequently elevated in importance to the level of major structural blocks. *Philibuster* is an essay in retrospective meaning.

The intention was to allow Baroque and early Classical ornament patterns to aspire to the status of major structural units. This is achieved by unvarying repetition. At the same time, seemingly structural pitch sequences elaborately constructed at the beginning of the piece are shown to be nothing more than ornamentation of tonal melody. A recurring theme of the piece is the juxtaposition of tonal 'quotations' of C P E Bach—mostly stylistic rather than literal—and pitch sequences derived from group theory: Sims' own particular brand of generalised serialism. Indeed, tonal cadences are preceded or 'delayed' by the intervention of repeated ornament patterns:



Example 4: A cadence delayed (filibustered) by repeated ornament patterns

The title of the work refers to the technique which in oratory is known as 'filibuster': the talking out of time of a piece of legislation. Eventually the tonal cadences, as if tired of waiting for the cadence points, occur at the same time as the ornamentation, thereby forcing the latter to assume ever more clearly a decorative function (example 3, above) with the cadences becoming an extended *cantus firmus*.

Another musical play on meaning is set up

in a number of chords derived from the opening pitch sequences. Although at the outset these appear to be cold products of the group/serial machine (example 5a); later—when given a tonal context—they reveal their true identity as suspensions over altered dominant harmony (example 5b). The tonal material implicit in the early stages of the piece is thus eventually explicitly stated towards the end. But it remains an open question as to who wins the tussle for supremacy.

a.



Atonal products of the serial machine?

b.



At * Ex. 5a (transposed) is revealed as a suspension over the dominant in a (fictitious) C P E Bach 'quotation'

Example 5

Performance of *Philibuster*

One might call the fortepiano the true instrument of suspension. Its ability to mediate between dissonance and consonance is most subtle. As Étienne Darbellay states in his essay 'C P E Bach's Aesthetic as Reflected in his Notation':

Here the rule establishes itself that the dynamics might somehow be entirely deducible from the music itself. . . . It stems from a natural aesthetic conception in which it is dissonance in the broad sense (whatever breaks the harmony, whatever disturbs the equilibrium of the system) that drives the music's unfolding. Without it there would be sheer silence. Indeed, the perturbations are what are brought to the centre of attention (the intensity of volume, the noise); the resolutions of them fade away into silence.²

In a composition based on more contemporary aesthetics than those current in C P E Bach's time, the gravitational tension set up between competing harmonic centres is likely to lack harmonic resolution. There are good aesthetic and historical reasons for this but the consequence from the performance point of view is a dangerous tendency towards monochromaticism. The fortepiano cannot compensate for this, as a modern piano can, through extremes of dynamics, densities or register differences.

Applying these considerations to *Philibuster* the first and most fundamental level at which to study and practise the language of the piece is the metrical distribution of notes and their relative weight within the bars. The composer has carefully adjusted these weightings to control energy flows and hence perception of time within the piece—a function C P E Bach would have delegated to harmonic rhythm. A realization should concentrate

on flexible, rhetorical accentuation of the semiquaver patterns.

A second level of interpretation centres on dynamic contrast: both occurring successively over time and simultaneously. On the fortepiano real dynamic contrast can never be achieved independently of textural context. The same can be said of the harpsichord: a thorough study of the harpsichord repertoire is arguably as useful to a would-be fortepiano composer as to Leonhardt's harpsichordist graduating to the novelties of the fortepiano. The independence of dynamics has been a feature of many twentieth-century compositions for the modern piano—which should not therefore be simply transported to the fortepiano. Olivier Messiaen's study *Mode des valeurs et d'intensités* (1949) is the prototype of all *pointilliste* piano pieces where the parameters of pitch, articulation and dynamics are controlled independently. This piece is the exact antithesis of good fortepiano writing. Dynamic contrast on the fortepiano is more likely to be understood by the listener as a means of expression, of communicating what at C P E Bach's time would have been called the musical *Affekt*. This phenomenon is rooted in the fact that the fortepiano offers less resistance to the physical action of the player than any other keyboard instrument.

Practically speaking, in the passage bb. 75–82 (example 6) the fortepianist has to accentuate contrast in character, style, register and dynamics in order to highlight the structural importance of such juxtapositions of disparate stylistic material in the formal development of the piece:

70

77

mf

p

ped

Example 6: The fortepiano is faced with contrasts in character, style, register and dynamics

Concerning the general dynamic levels of *Philibuster*, it is necessary for the performer to have a clear idea about the overall dynamic relations of the piece as well as the dynamic attributes of the particular instrument he is using. The loudest

sections of the piece—the *non legato* semiquaver patterns at b. 143 (example 7)—are points of departure for a downward calibration of the dynamic levels for the rest of the piece. They become goals in actual performance!

Example 7: Climactic passages

THE benefits, listed earlier, of playing the fortepiano—velocity, lightness of mechanism and touch, etc.—have to be paid for with the loss of a number of technical devices considered indispensable in 19th- and 20th-century piano playing. The most obvious and challenging example in *Philibuster* is the abundance of many large and fast motoric movements of the forearm, arm and shoulders required for the execution of rapid jumps (e.g., bb. 131–6, example 8). As these passages give the player little time to prepare position changes they tend to develop a certain automatic dynamic quality disturbing

the clarity of execution. Large movements cannot be compensated for on the fortepiano by the integration of attack and positioning movements since these are destined for an extremely sensitive, light key, unreachable quickly and silently as required in the score. At the same time, key-resistance, which is virtually absent, cannot be incorporated into the solution of these technical problems: whereas on a modern piano the key-weight and depth are used to give impetus to the movement of the arm, on the fortepiano such 'rebounding' is not possible—only a small finger-action is required to sound the note.

Example 8: Physically demanding forearm leaps

In the most demanding passage, at b. 226 (see *example 6*), the quasi-*legato* chordal passages are to be played *piano* whereas the interrupting—filibustering—semitriplets passages must be played *forte* and *non legato*. When it works, after much practice, the player is rewarded by a unique sort of polyphonic dialectic between the soft cantus firmus sounding through a busy and declamatory foreground. This is one of the things that the fortepiano alone can do.

The passage in *Philibuster* coming closest to a (fictitious) C P E Bach quotation—having been prepared throughout the piece—carries the somewhat ambiguous German performance instruction *Mit dem gehörigen Affecte* (see *example 5b*). This is the point at which ornamentation that had hitherto been structurally incorporated into the texture is handed over to the stylistic sensibilities and taste of the performer. *Philibuster* does not deny that the fortepiano is an historic instrument with attendant tradition.

Undoubtedly there is huge potential here for other composers. Current projects involving a five-octave Viennese piano include a recently completed new piece Repetition 5 by English composer Geoffrey King, written for fortepianist Walewein Witten and a piece by American Joanne Metcalf premiered by Marc Reichow in 1995.

Notes

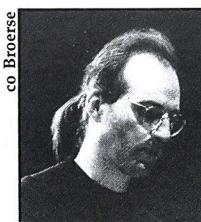
¹ Group theory: a technique developed by Stockhausen in *Kontra-Punkte* (1952) in which a group is 'a collection of notes (it may be a chord, a melodic line, a rapid burst or a more complex event) to which the composer in some way gives an identity' (Paul Griffiths: *Modern Music the avant garde since 1945*, London & Melbourne 1981).

² In *C P E Bach Studies*, ed. Stephen L Clark, Oxford 1988.

Marc Reichow b. Germany 1966, studied piano in Cologne with Eckart Sellheim and Pi-Hsien Chen and in The Hague with Geoffrey Douglas Madge. As a modern pianist he has performed and recorded widely, concentrating mainly on 20th-century repertoire with, amongst others, Ensemble Modern, Ensemble Recherché and projects with John Cage (1988) and Pierre Boulez (1990). He has participated in masterclasses with György Sebök, György Kurtág, Earl Wild and Zoltán Kocsis. Marc began fortepiano studies in 1992 as a student of Stanley Hoogland in The Hague. He founded Trio Eroica in 1994, with which he rediscovered the clarinet trio by Adalbert Gyroweitz (recorded 1995).



J Marc Reichow



Richard Sims

Richard Sims b. England 1961. After studying Pure Mathematics at Oxford and Warwick Universities and a period of research at Liverpool University he studied composition with James Wishart. His music has been performed in England, Holland, Germany, Belgium

and Italy. As a conductor he has worked with the group Opus, a number of English and Dutch orchestras and both professional and amateur ensembles. He is conductor of the Amsterdam-based ensemble HEX who regularly appear in the IJsbreker. He conducted his Responses at the opening of the new Dutch House of Commons in April 1992 before Queen Beatrix, the Dutch Government and their guests. Since 1990 he has lived in Holland and studies composition with Louis Andriessen and Gilius van Bergeijk at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague.

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