Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 16, No. 2 Spring, 2012

Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

TEXTURE AND PLAYING STYLE IN CLASSIC KEYBOARD MUSIC

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One of the more famous anecdotes in music history, at least for keyboard players, concerns what Beethoven had to tell Carl Czerny about Mozart's piano playing. Beethoven commented that when Mozart was growing up, the piano was in its infancy; that Mozart had become accustomed to playing the more commonly used harpsichord, and consequently had become used to a manner of playing in no way suited to the piano.[1] In 1852, writing to Otto Jahn, Czerny rephrased what he attributed to Beethoven, to the effect that Mozart "had a delicate [*feines]* but choppy [*zerhacktes*] way of playing [Spiel], no legato." Beethoven said that his own concept was to play the piano like an organ (i.e., with an organ-like legato).[2]

Beethoven's comments have been, and continue to be, quoted in so many books and articles that I admit to feeling hesitant in adding my voice to the chorus. However, I would like to hazard a conjecture about the significance of what Beethoven and Czerny were actually discussing. Over the generations, from the nineteenth century to the present, the remarks have generally been accepted as if they relate exclusively to Mozart's technique of keyboard execution. They have sometimes been used to reinforce the unrealistic concept of a jolting turnaround in fundamental keyboard sound c. 1800. Thus, C.P.E. Bach's famous mid-century comments on holding notes for half their written value are simplistically contrasted with Clementi's advice in his 1801 tutor advising legato as the basic piano touch;[3] Mozart's playing technique is thus placed in the category of pre-pubescent piano playing; and 18th century keyboard style, whether Mozart's or that of his predecessors, becomes distanced as something that would be utterly eccentric to modern ears.[4]

One might reasonably expect that a full range of articulation was always among players' resources in the eighteenth century.[5] I would suggest, myself, that the important feature in assessing the Beethoven/Czerny/Mozart comment is actually the question of what styles of articulation were most suited to what kinds of musical purposes: that one might look for a "generation gap" apropos of larger concepts than keyboard touch alone.

Playing Style

It should be noted that when an artist's "playing style" was discussed prior to at least 1830, the phrase most often referred to the player's own compositions and style of improvisation: the artist's typical and personal keyboard textures and inventiveness, not his or her technical approach. What we, today, term "playing style"—the manner of managing various articulations and dynamic effects on the instrument —was the least of it. The concept of the "interpreter performer" (of music composed by others) of course was a product more or less of Liszt's generation.

Whatever Beethoven thought, Mozart in his own time was revered as an expressive and astounding pianist; and his own phrase regarding legato phrases "flowing like oil" is well known, to say nothing of the many slurs in his keyboard scores. What had changed? Musical style altogether, and keyboard style in particular, had changed. The textures and voicing of piano music altered significantly as the style moved conclusively away from its harpsichord-based heritage and tended, by c.1800, to produce a greater overall continuity of sound. (Such continuity, then and now, is often referred to as "legato," although in the finer sense, the word refers to the interconnection of notes as when grouped under a single bowstroke on a stringed instrument. Pianists and clavichordists can imitate the effect by matching the attack of one note of the group to the dynamic reached by the preceding note at the end of its duration. Harpsichordists utilize various degrees of overlapping, and subtleties of timing, to suggest the same thing.)

Pianos, as well as compositional styles, had changed by the time of Beethoven's maturity but piano writing changed much sooner: Mozart was conservative, here as elsewhere. Beethoven

was, doubtless, entirely correct in likening Mozart's playing to harpsichord playing; the same was true of other aspects of later 18th-century, vs. early 19th-century, aesthetics. But the harpsichord, although dynamically inflexible in the sense of touch-sensitive dynamics, is no more naturally "choppy" than a piano. What Beethoven called the "choppiness" of Mozart's playing might perhaps more accurately be called "articulatory variety" with regard to playing technique; and "textural variety" with regard to compositional style. But given the overall tone of the comments as related, the subject appears to have been abruptly couched in careless and dismissive terms.

As early as 1790, Johann Peter Milchmeyer advocates legato as the basis for piano playing, "for the sake of the instrument," since he considers that hard attacks do not sound effective on it. He says that the piano should be tenderly caressed.[6] Anyone familiar with certain styles of German and Austrian fortepianos from before 1790 will understand what he is driving at, particularly when the instrument, as in some early examples, lacks a backcheck, and strident playing can cause hammer rebound. Tastes vary, of course, but if such a view could be propounded in 1790, apropos of instrumental limitations and an evolving aesthetic specific to the newer instrument, what, then, was the situation with Mozart's playing that excited Beethoven's implied criticism on grounds quite opposite to Milchmeyer's advocacy of legato and Mozart's own comment on passages that should "flow like oil" and his frequent slurring? If Mozart's playing was seen in the early nineteenth century as "harpsichord-like" in its "un-legato choppiness" on an instrument already deemed by some around 1790 as requiring careful, tender, legato handling, perhaps these contradictions stem from some conflict other than an opposition as crudely absolute as "legato vs. non-legato touch."[7]

Legato made up a large part of the keyboardist's palette of effects throughout the eighteenth century and before. But the harpsichord, without touch-sensitive dynamics, relies on many sorts of variety composed into the textures and realised by the performer with diverse agogic and articulatory variation. With the writing of the new school represented by the likes of Clementi, Dussek, and Beethoven, a more *uniform* smoothness of overall texture and sound (often generically called "legato") became typical, and above all, the fullness or thinness of keyboard textures was no longer directly associated with dynamic effect.

Dynamic emphasis was now independent of textural voicing, and the piano was emancipated from the harpsichord's influence. The textural language of this school of writing has remained, largely, the pianistic "common practice" ever since and it is, indeed, a notable change from before, but one hardly so cut-and-dried as to be properly summed up as moving from "always detached" to "always connected." What is interesting for today's player is the nature of the early piano style's heritage from the harpsichord.

Harpsichord Textures

Foremost among the influences on baroque-era harpsichord texture is continuo playing. Accompanying from a figured bass was often the primary duty of keyboard players, from professional musicians to aristocratic amateurs. As any harpsichordist learns early on, soloists are quickly irritated by lack of flexibility in the accompaniment's textures, and hence the harpsichord's volume of sound. Variation in the number of parts and in their voicing and rhythmic density (whether slow or fast note values) are essentially all one has to work with. The picture is best summed up by C.P.E. Bach's remark —one of his first points regarding accompaniment —that the accompanist renders one, two, three, four, or more parts, depending upon immediate circumstances. These textural/dynamic responses were ingrained in any keyboard player of the eighteenth century and are paralleled in the solo literature, up to and including piano style almost throughout the century.

Effective harpsichordists learn to shape their rhythmic impulses, indeed, to phrase generally, in accordance with the accents produced by thicker vs. thinner voicing (N.B. for example, the accentual opening chord of Bach's "Italian Concerto") and with the often subtler variations of actual and implied dynamics provided by textural ebb and flow. These small changes in dynamic effect are more important in shaping a phrase than large-scale changes of keyboard or registration. In fact, "change" at all is important in how the harpsichordist expresses shape. Any change in line or texture can be significant or "dynamic" in the wider sense.

On a piano or clavichord, of course, one can linger at points in the phrase which would make no sense whatever on the flat dynamic plane of the harpsichord. The latter instrument depends on the arcs of energy it produces in coordination with textural fluctuations, to sound convincing. Miscalculate the textural effect and the rhythmic-cum-dynamic arc can

sound strained. I believe that thinking in these terms is important for stylish rendition of 18th-century music, not only for the modern pianist playing harpsichord literature, but for any keyboardist playing early piano literature. In both cases, acquaintance with the harpsichord's intrinsic qualities and the musical/performance conventions that matched them (e.g., rhythmic inequality and alterations generally) provides clues to the intended musical shape and energy.

For instance, it is typical of certain 19th- and 20th-century approaches to 18th-century music (and by no means limited to keyboard playing) to smooth out the diversity of line into an undifferentiated long-term phrase. These tendencies can even include reversal of obvious accent patterns.[8] But musical writers of the period such as Mattheson, Türk, and many others spoke at (sometimes turgid) length of the component units of a phrase and their energizing aspects, from beats and sub-phrases to the phrase, period, paragraph, and so forth.

Thinking in terms of cellular construction, relating and contrasting small impulses to the overall propulsion of the phrase is absolutely characteristic of the era and is one reason for the absence of dynamic marks in so very many 18th-century keyboard scores. With a correlation between dynamics, texture, and phrase energy, dynamic marks are often superfluous; and familiarity with standard idioms such as rhythmic dance formulae clarifies things further. Thus, the idea that a given keyboard work must be intended for the harpsichord because it lacks dynamic indications of forte and piano, misses the point of the intrinsic dynamics.

Many 20th-century history books suggest that the mechanical accretions that developed in English and French harpsichords such as the nag's head swell, the Venetian swell, the machine stop, pedals, genouillères, etc. were "in competition" with the piano. It would appear more likely that the new devices arose, as did the piano itself, as possible solutions in response to a general demand for a keyboard instrument with touch-sensitive dynamic response: a feature which became increasingly necessary with thinner, more uniform textures.

The clavichord, although admirably flexible, and used as a solo instrument in salons and even court performances, as well as intimate circumstances, was not powerful enough for use in certain large venues and in most ensemble work. The piano won out, perhaps because it did not depend upon external "attachments." Above all, the awkward dynamic gradations made through swell devices and registration shifts on the harpsichord could affect only the musical fabric as a whole. The infinite shading of the clavichord or piano could not be achieved.

Nonetheless, until the piano became powerful enough for all public situations, whether solo or ensemble work, all keyboard players must have been familiar with the harpsichord's limitations and capabilities. Even Clementi, a major proponent of what became the piano's long-lasting idiom, does not appear to have fully changed over to the piano from the harpsichord until the early 1780s. The older instrument inevitably left its mark in some of the newer writing styles.[9]

Galant Style

Perhaps to harpsichordists' dismay, keyboard textures of the galant style became (as any textbook will say) less varied than previously: counterpoint waned; textures generally were much thinner and tended toward lightly accompanied melody. Often the accompaniment took the form of (predominantly) reiterated thirds and sixths. (The textural ebb and flow on which the harpsichord often depends impelled the movement toward a dynamically touch-sensitive keyboard loud enough for varied usage.) Two examples of this basic type of texture will nicely demonstrate the requirements of the harpsichord vs. the piano. (See Figure 1a and 1b.) The second movement of C.P.E. Bach's famous Harpsichord Concerto in D Minor (W.23) features solos configured exactly as just described, with the left hand pulsing thirds and sixths in quaver (eighth-note) values while the melody unfolds in (predominantly) semiquavers (sixteenths).

Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major, K. 453, uses the same formula in some of the solos of its second movement. The differences between the two are striking, however, in regard to their intended instruments. The Bach piece, almost unquestionably intended for the harpsichord, and in any case well suited thereto, puts the moving values in the melody, thus affording the player some control over dynamic effects, since the melody can be flexed in various ways. Mozart, on the other hand, features pulsing quaver (eighth-note) values in the accompaniment, and the solo line includes crotchets (quarters) and dotted crotchets (dotted quarters), as well as quavers (eighths).

This harpsichord-derived texture would, however, be embarrassing for a harpsichordist, because with the moving values in the accompaniment, the placidity of the melody is overwhelmed by the relentless, faster iterations of the left hand. And the embarrassment

increases when the accompaniment grows to four note chords, which although marked "piano" could hardly be made to sound unobtrusive on a harpsichord. Thus, a lovely example of early piano texture grows from a harpsichord related texture, and yet is utterly unsuited to the harpsichord. Similarly, Haydn's late piano sonatas, with their heavily textured chords that often function as quiet accompaniment, show many features derived from harpsichord style, and yet would not be effective on the older instrument.

Mozart did not, generally, move much further away from harpsichord-derived writing. The newer style grew up with such a figure as Muzio Clementi, who had so great an influence on Beethoven. Mozart's writing, even when clearly for the piano, often shows its origin in the harpsichord's need for textural variety. To contrast two styles of piano writing, the "conservative" vs. the "progressive", consider the opening of the *Andante cantabile* of Mozart's Sonata in C Major, K. 330 (b. 1-20) in contrast to the theme of the *Andante con moto* of Beethoven's Sonata in F Minor, op. 7, the "Appassionata," b. 1-16. K. 330 was composed in 1778. (See Figures 2a-2b.)

The texture of the Mozart example ranges from single notes to thin and full chords; bass octave doublings; and a highly plastic melody. The dynamic indications coordinate almost entirely with the texture's varying density (piano on thin textures, forte on full), and although the passage is almost certainly conceived primarily for the piano and requires it for fullest effect, it is so harpsichord-like in its textural basis that it works quite effectively on that instrument.

In contrast, the dynamic variation of Beethoven's *Andante con moto* is made entirely through touch dynamics. The texture is essentially constant, in four and then five parts and with limited rhythmic variation. The dynamics, which include piano, sforzando, crescendi and diminuendi, nuance an essentially constant surface. Whereas the Mozart example shows varied texture and articulation (including much legato) which can produce nuances on the harpsichord's flat dynamic plane, Beethoven provides a plane of neutral texture and (probably connected) articulation whose dynamic contours depend on actual, touch-sensitive dynamics.

Beethoven's remark about Mozart's style seems to be true at least concerning its harpsichord derivation, and about a large-scale change in the style of piano music. Players of early and modern pianos are well advised to acquaint themselves with the harpsichord and its literature in exploring the nuances of Mozart's piano writing.

This article is a revised and condensed version of a paper given by me at the University of Alberta, in 1992; and at the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, in 1993.

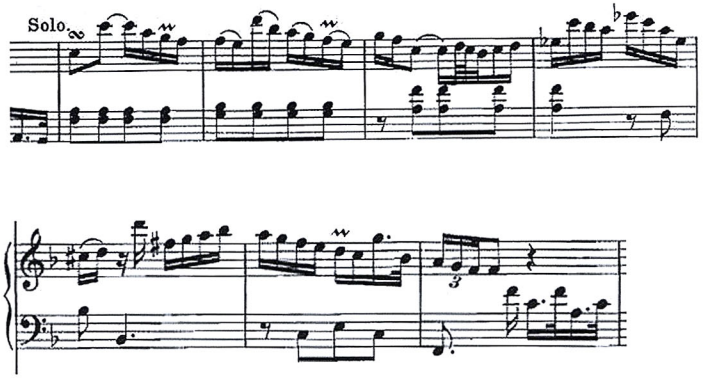

Figure 1a. The second movement of C.P.E. Bach's famous Harpsichord Concerto in D Minor (Wotquenne 23)

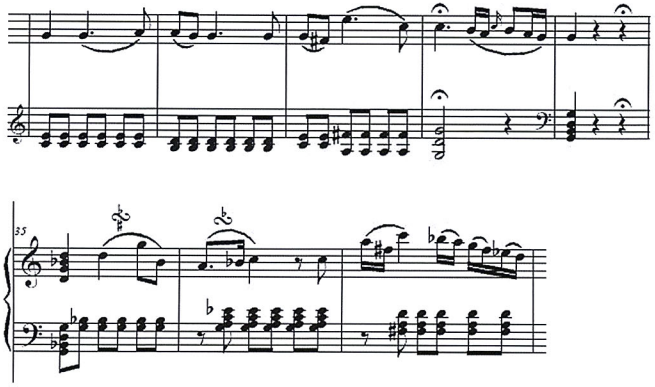

Figure 1b. Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major, K. 453

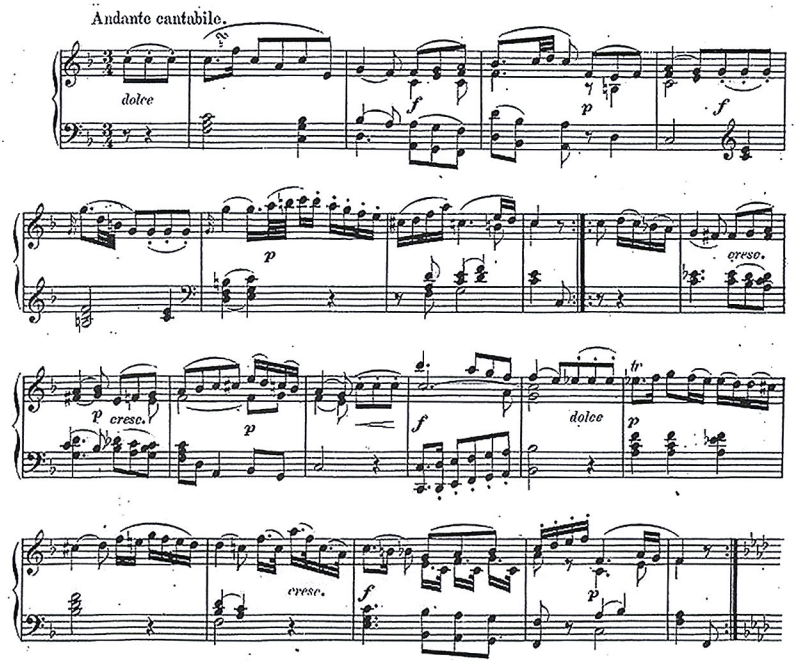

Figure 2a. Mozart's Sonata in C Major, K. 330 (mm. 1-20)

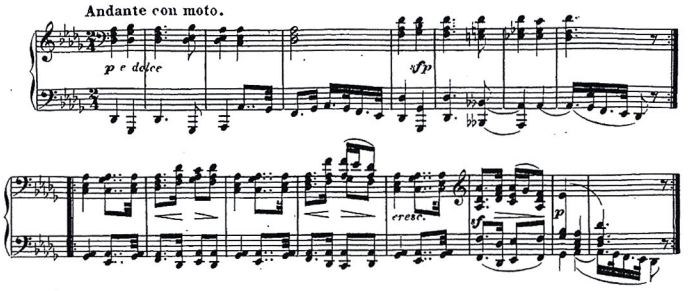

Figure 2b. Theme of the Andante con moto of Beethoven's Sonata in F Minor, op. 57, the "Appassionata," b. 1-16

Endnotes

1 Carl Czerny, *Über den richtigen Vortrag des sämtlichen Beethoven'schen Klavierwerke* (Vienna: Diabelli, 1846),11.

2 Cf. Alexander Thayer, *Life of Beethoven*, ed. and transl. Elliott Forbes, 88. Both remarks are quoted in Sandra Rosenblum, *Performance Practices in Classic Piano Music,* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988), 24 and 411.

3 Muzio Clementi, *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Piano Forte*, 1801)

4 Indeed, I have seen an article in which legato is stated, on the basis of Czerny's quotes, to have been non-existent before Beethoven. Similarly, I have heard the invention of legato attributed to Couperin, in his treatise on harpsichord playing of 1716/17.

5 Among modern commentators, Tilman Skowroneck, with well-informed common sense, has recently pointed out that a full range of articulation was always found in the eighteenth century, but that the authors of the various treatises struck at the nail from various angles. Cf. Tilman Skowroneck, *Beethoven the Pianist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 176 ff. Mr. Skowroneck, by the way, points out the limitations of C.P.E. Bach's famous comment on sustaining half the note values; and as I have pointed out in *Playing Bach on the Keyboard* (Amadeus Press, 2003), there were many contexts, such as broken chordal textures, in which legato was taken for granted. Another vitally important exception to any kind of detached "ordinary movement" applies to works in what Türk calls "heavy style," under which sobriquet falls much of the repertory played in modern times from the period.

6 J.P. Milchmeyer, *Die wahre Art das Pianoforte zu spielen*, 1790.

7 If the harpsichord's sound fundamentally requires a detached technique, then recommendations of its legato effects from many writers of the harpsichord's heyday, including Francois Couperin, would seem to be fundamentally flawed. And in fact, Milchmeyer's preference for a legato approach to the piano had their predecessor in, for example, London-based Nicolo Pasquali, who in his posthumous harpsichord treatise of 1758 (*The Art of Fingering the Harpsichord*), advocates legato as the fundamental touch for the instrument. Indeed, Couperin himself commented on the need for a perfect legato in his treatise of 1716/17. So much for generalities, whether by Beethoven, Czerny, or others about inherent "choppiness" on the harpsichord. Whatever the "basic touch" might have been for various schools of thought, Beethoven's point about Mozart may not be limited to that aspect.

8 When I spoke in public once on this subject and mentioned trochaic patterns in some examples from Bach's music, an elderly pianist trained in 19th-century German traditions raised a hand. "Bach is iambic," he declared, with a simple directness.

9 Another assumption often found in history books, and one which seems at last to have diminished, is that keyboard compositions were almost inevitably intended for one or another specific instrument. Certain works, indeed, were published with the harpsichord or the clavichord specified as the sole effective medium (e.g., Bach's "Goldberg" Variations for the harpsichord, and Neefe's Sonatas for the clavichord.) But it seems likely that one normally played on whatever was available in a given venue. Thus, Mozart is known to have played on a clavichord in one location, on a piano in another. One would suit one's improvisation, or interpretation of a specific work, to the best qualities of the instrument at hand. C.P.E. Bach's famous advice about cultivating both the harpsichord and the clavichord, and playing works interchangeably on them, would relate, among other things, to the practical situation of finding one's self in a salon and faced with either; or, later, with either of the older instruments or a piano of square or grand, English or Teutonic design.