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Rediscovering Clementi's *Gradus ad Parnassum*

A New Perspective from the Early English Piano

By John Khouri

Two important events occurred in my career as a recording artist in 2011: I started my own record label, "San Francisco Fortepiano Society" and I recorded Clementi's complete *Gradus ad Parnassum,* the first recording on early pianos.

A compilation of fugues, canons, sonata movements, and character and fantasy pieces collected over many years, Muzio Clementi's magnum opus (nearly six hours in playing time) appeared in three books, Volumes 1-3, 1817, 1819 and 1826, a great instructional compendium for pianists. Warmly welcomed on its appearance, it is still in print today, yet not more than 50 years later it had already begun drifting into obscurity. True, many of the more athletic exercises were reprinted and used for training purposes, but the totality of Clementi's huge legacy was distorted and ultimately forgotten.

Using a title apparently borrowed from J.J. Fux (1660-1741), *Parnassus* refers to the home of poetry, literature and learning, sacred to the god Apollo. The title "Step" or "Steps to the Summit" implies a climb upwards, starting easily but gradually becoming more arduous until the summit is reached and translated into pianistic terms. In theory, the first book of 27 Exercises would be easier than those in Book Two which in turn would be easier than those in Book Three. Nothing could be further from the truth, as anyone trying to play the first four exercises will soon discover.

In the relatively harmless key of F Major, these exercises require a very well developed finger and chordal technique, while Exercise 3 requires a large stretch in both hands and considerable stamina. In fact, Clementi's collection bristles with technical booby traps from the start and can only be attempted when the player already has a comprehensive technical foundation. If we already need an excellent technique from the beginning, what exactly are we climbing *toward*?

The answer may be two-fold. If we must already have fine technique to start, the object is to lift that technique from excellent to transcendental, never an easy proposition. And the title may also refer to Clementi himself; it is his climb to the summit, in this case a complete mastery of many compositional forms for the piano and the perfect fusion of the strict and free styles or the elegant and severe. If that is what Clementi means, he certainly arrives unscathed at the summit, a true master of piano technique and also of piano composition.

I experience the *Gradus* as a huge fresco: a riot of rhythm, colour and emotion. It appears to many to be dry, dull, mechanical and boring, faithfully mirroring the image of Clementi described so eloquently by Mozart (who was burned by the incandescence of Clementi's technique), and it often

sounds that way, judging from the many performances that I have heard on the modern piano. Modern pianists today cruise blithely over the surface of the *Gradus,* thinking only of their mastery of the technical problems but never bothering to peer beneath the surface. Their instruments do not help. Due to its thick muffled bass and tenor registers and hard glassy treble, the modern concert grand so exciting in Prokofiev and Rachmaninov is utterly incapable of adding the requisite resonance and colour that this music so desperately needs.

When we play these 100 Exercises on pianos that Clementi would have recognized, there is an immediate transformation, the music coming alive in all its beauty, colour and immediacy. We then begin to experience the huge range of expression in these pieces, from great happiness, energy and hope, to the deepest gloom, anger, fear, disillusionment and tragedy. And there is yet another dimension, as Clementi takes his leave of his world and seems to float away into the atmosphere (Exercise 94) while experiencing a radiant vision of the future (Exercise 100).

Choosing an Instrument

Shortly after I decided to record the complete *Gradus ad Parnassum*, I had to choose a piano or pianos that would fit the varying demands of the music. Although Clementi is very advanced in many aspects of composition, he remained extremely conservative with regard to the expanded keyboard compasses available to him after 1810 and through to 1823; incredibly, all 100 Exercises do not go beyond a 5 1/2 octave range. This compass of FF-c4 was the standard range for English pianos from c1791-1800, when new 6 octave pianos (CC-c4) were introduced by John Broadwood.

Clementi did not take advantage of extra bass notes now available or the 6 1/2 range (CC-f4) available after 1822 but used instead the old 5 1/2 octave range to the end. He was not used to the new ranges and probably didn't want to affect sales by offering music which went beyond the keyboards of some prospective buyers. It is nevertheless a great pity that he didn't take advantage of one of the best features of the early English piano, its outstanding bass register; he was quite unlike Beethoven, who wasted no time in exploring both the highest and lowest notes available.

Though it was theoretically possible to use earlier 5 1/2 octave pianos for the series, I finally decided not to do so, as a lot of the Exercises needed a bigger sound to match the heavier piano writing (for example Exercise 44). Yet, extreme delicacy is also called for with plenty of one- and two-string effects only possible on the triple strung pianos made before 1835.

I therefore chose my 1813 Broadwood grand for those reasons in the majority of the pieces and also my 1832 Broadwood in a few others. The 1813 grand had undergone extensive restoration after I purchased it in 1984, and had a very unusual compass of FF-f4. This was retained at the time but two years later, the added strain of the higher scaling caused the belly rail to crack and after my restorer, the late Bjarne Dahl, installed a new one, the piano was returned to its original compass of CC-c4. There was an immediate improvement in tuning stability and this was a great help during the four arduous days of recording the *Gradus*.

John Khouri at his Broadwood Piano

Advantages of Using the Early English Grand

Using early pianos made it possible to explore fully the myriad colour possibilities suggested by the endlessly inventive piano writing and to bring out the full range of strong emotion in so many of the pieces. The many etude-like exercises which always sound dry and colourless on the modern grand take on a new perspective on the English grand due to its light cloth damping. There is always lots of resonance in these pianos and this helps in pieces with thin textures of running semiquaver (16th) notes for example.

Additionally, we can finally take advantage of the shift pedal to obey Clementi's frequent instruction *"mezzo"*. This direction is generally printed at the start of a piece and means that we should use the shift pedal to activate one or two strings (see Dussek's *Instructions on the Art of Playing the Piano Forte or Harpsichord* 1796, 45). *"Mezzo"* first appears in Exercise 15, a lovely delicate English Pastorale, a study in touch, and many of the Canons also have this direction (see for example Exercises 26, 32 & 33). It is used as a startling colour effect in the great F# Minor Study (Exercise 24) where in bar 22 there is a sudden drop in intensity and sound level.

The early piano also has an immediate advantage over modern grands in the lightness of the action which is sorely needed in the many exhausting exercises designed to strengthen fingers and improve one's stamina. Yet even Clementi's most seemingly

mundane studies for exercising one's fingers always have harmonic, poetic or dramatic interest and he, Cramer, Steibelt, and Kalkbrenner were the first to create piano studies which are also viable pieces of music that can be performed in public. Chopin is always given credit for this achievement, but in fact, he simply followed their example.

Conclusions

Clementi's piano music has fascinated me since my teenage years, and in 1980, after changing from modern to early pianos, I began to seriously study his Sonatas. In 1983 I played his G Minor Sonata Op. 50, No. 3 in my San Francisco debut, using my newly restored 1813 Broadwood. I was later invited to give a concert on the c1806 Clementi grand piano at the de Bellis Collection at San Francisco State University. I enjoyed playing this piano so much that I arranged to make the first professional recording using it and was able to work with the piano at home for several weeks before recording Clementi's Op. 40 Sonatas (released by Music and Arts, 1999). While the piano was at my home, I was able to work on the action, cleaning and lubricating it and making other repairs, and becoming intimately acquainted with the distinctive Clementi action.

In 1992 I started to explore seriously the *Gradus ad Parnassum* and in 2003 played concerts featuring six of the 13 Suites which occur throughout it, always hoping that one day I would be able to play all 100 Exercises. I had avoided some of the more intractable exercises but I finally had to conquer them for the recording. Hours were spent over pieces which last under one minute in length, but in October of 2011 I was ready, and the entire work was recorded in four consecutive sessions consisting of over 17 hours of actual playing.