Harpsichord & fortepiano

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REVISITING KEYBOARD TECHNIQUE

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It is common in the HIP (historically informed performance) world to think that "we know better now". The sins of the past are forgiven, we are all experts now, and there is no more work to be done. We have short bow-strokes with the "rule of the down bow", "light and air" between phrases, and ultra-light tempi. There is no need to look to the past anymore. We are scientific people .

However, if we take a step back we may realise that maybe some of this is also part of a trend –part of an aesthetic about early music that we can find the "one true path". If we are not careful we may fall into the trap of our forebears. They thought the piano was the result of evolution, and they "were wrong" (irony intended); we may falter by seeing our trends as being the result of a "stylistic evolution", which makes us no better.

It may be worth re-examining some of the scholarship that has gone before on early keyboards, mainly harpsichord, fortepiano, and to a great extent, clavichord. Research has shown that tempi have become faster. Modern orchestras have raised A 440 to higher levels. We all know there are limits: instruments can only go so high before A becomes Bb. We will examine the writing of Reginald Gerig and William Leslie Sumner to see what they include and therefore value in understanding keyboard technique.

Gerig in 1974 notes that the harpsichord has a more shallow key dip – that "tone is reached quickly in the key's descent, a third to a half of the way down".[1] He notes correctly that more force will not yield greater volume and that mostly players use hand with some arm weight. To achieve this, the hand must be "suspended" over the keyboard in a "weightless manner". A very useful insight, that some may not have grasped, is that the harpsichord is actually better capable of sustaining that many give it credit. He notes that more attention to articulation is necessary; the player cannot be vague. Legato is completely controlled by the fingers, and by varying the duration of individual notes, one can give the "sense" of accent or of intensity. The fingers must be close to the keys. By contrast, the clavichord is more intimate and touch sensitive. Pianists today can discipline their touch through practising on the harpsichord and clavichord.[2]

Gerig provides an interesting insight into the differences between the English virginalists and the Italians which is worth reading by harpsichordists, namely that Italian harpsichords were intended for accompanying dancing so are more rugged in construction in order to produce more sound; the English virginal is more gentle. He also points that paired fingering stemming from Diruta was used with Italian playing; however, the English virginalists thought the thumb and third finger were better fingers. In fact, he attributes to the English the advantage gained by "the superiority of English fingering"[3]. In dealing with Couperin, he again emphasises the importance of fingering, especially repeating the same finger to make correct phrasing "inevitable".[4] He points out that the thumb was not used as a pivot in scales by the French and then notes the trend that J.S. Bach started to use the thumb according to his famous son, C.P.E. Bach. He also traces the gentle increase in arm weight beginning with Scarlatti, who uses the arm actively as well as "quiet hand and finger position". Then Gerig notes that C.P.E. Bach's posture positioned the forearm slightly above the keyboard, which may imply some beginning arm weight as well.

Gerig suggests that Mozart, in keeping with Viennese tradition, relied mainly on fingers and hands, not arms, for power. Clementi is seen as making the transition to modern pianists technique, with legato passagework features in his *Gradus ad Parnassum* and strengthened fourth and fifth fingers, enough for trills. By the time Beethoven is covered, there is virtuosity, thirds, sixths, and the power of the arm to support the fingers.[5] In addition, there is increased use of pedal, a sustained tone and distinctive accents. Liszt, when described is like Czerny in having his "hands in the air"- a sign of the virtuoso, public performer we recognise on concert stages everywhere (sometimes on early music stages). Gerig has highlighted for us the important of understanding early technique and separating it from later technique. He also sees a trend in the actual composition either creating or enabling the technique.

William Leslie Sumner, writing in 1966, has much to offer. He notes that even with the accepted equal temperament of the time, there are still imperfections which give rise to variations in key colour.[6] This is interesting because it helps to explain why teachers have persisted in mentioning key colour in modern piano pedagogy despite many being ignorant of Renaissance thought on the matter. He examines Forkel's description of the playing of J.S. Bach, noting that the key dip of the clavichord was shallower and lighter in the time of J.S. Bach. This is significant in that he notes both the importance of keeping modern piano technique distinct from keyboard techniques from the past, and that he specifically mentions clavichord.

When we move on to fortepiano playing, Sumner notes that Mozart would not have approved of Beethoven's playing.[7] Indeed, the reverse is also true. Beethoven was known for legato, which contrasted with Mozart's "choppy" style. Czerny as a pupil would note that the use of the thumb as a pivot was important to Beethoven's technique.[8] Beethoven was known to keep good time, only rarely speeding the tempo; he might slow the tempo slightly in a crescendo for a good effect. He also rarely added ornaments beyond those written into the score; this may caution us from adding too many to our performances of Beethoven.[9] During his lifetime, Beethoven was compared with Hummel. Hummel's playing was valued for being clean, elegant and distinct, but those who preferred Beethoven prized his imagination; presumably this regarded his interpretation and performance as well as his composition. The two domains of performance and composition were not separate as they are today; luckily Beethoven left a compositional record that ensures his status today.[10]

Sumner notes the tradition of piano lineage. The "Clementi-Beethoven-Czerny-Liszt tradition" dominated the nineteenth century. Clementi and the English piano created a trend and Field was a great example of a good match with the English piano, with playing that was described by Glinka as "sweet, strong and precise".[11]Another interesting point is that Beethoven's compositions often strove for an ideal that might not have been achievable (which actually drove change in fortepiano construction) while Chopin, not much later, composed "for the human hand".[12] Beethoven was much more concerned with the difference between *una corda, due corde* and *tre corde* and gave precise instructions for use of the damper pedal. Most of us are familiar with the idea that Beethoven's deafness created some problems with his use of pianos in later years, especially when he had an Érard. However, it is also important to note that Beethoven had struggled previously with the Viennese grand. With his incisive tone and heavy approach to the physicality of playing, he found that the Viennese instruments lacked the range, power and durability he desired. He would later favour his Graf, which had four strings for many of its pitches.[13]

Schubert, on the other hand, was very happy with the Viennese piano, and he used its intimacy well. His piano solos and lieder textures were not designed for virtuosity. His contribution to piano technique was partly compositional, as his works used the piano to imitate orchestral textures – with piccolo/flute tones in the treble and chords in the low range creating accompaniments. Schumann did not add much to the use the piano's resources but added meaningfully to its literature. Mendelssohn was similar in approach, exploiting arpeggios and other figuration, yet tending more toward the virtuosic. He made use of thumbs of both hands and often employed double octaves for effect.[14]

As Sumner moves to describe Chopin and his technique, he includes already a criticism of modern players' interpretations. Many use too 'plummy' a tone and make excessive use of tempo rubato. Sources close to Chopin recall that his left hand was very strict even if his right played freely. Also, his piano dynamics were exploited very well so that his fortes did not need to be very loud. According to Diehl, a contemporary, he played with his elbows close to his sides, using only fingers to control touch, not arm weight. Here we see a retrenchment in the supposed goal-oriented history we have received; Chopin used arm weight used *less*, not more than Beethoven. He changed fingers much as organists do, and used the easiest fingerings –not always the conventional ones— to achieve his aims.[15] In fact, he was known to pass the third finger over the fourth or fifth finger.[16] Whether players of today should take this as an exception for an exceptional player is up for debate, just in the same way that 18th-century complaints of excessively wide vibrato by a singer do not create a licence for excessive vibrato today.

Chopin was fond of using black keys and advocated the E Major Scale degrees 1-5 as the normal five-finger position, preferring this to "all white keys". He felt the black keys allowed more "purchase points" for controlling hand position.[17] An interest fact is that Hipkins, the Broadwood employee who tuned pianos for Chopin's appearances in England, noted in 1848 that Chopin's favourite instrument to play for his own pleasure was a Broadwood cottage grand and that Chopin practiced Bach's "48" his entire life. He would play Bach as written for technique, but played his own compositions differently every time.[18] We know that Chopin preferred Pleyel pianos for their "neutral tone", which allowed him to control the sonority. If he were in a bad mood, he would prefer the Érard for its ready sound.

Sumner cites Liszt as the final chain in this tradition. His particular physique, with his long fingers and thumbs made him more agile; it is known he held his arms and shoulders higher than previous generations, and used the whole arm and shoulder for playing. Clearly he was exceptional and his music was often too difficult for the high-level amateur, even after he had simplified it. Here virtuosity came to the fore. However it was not sheer athleticism; his nimble fingers were used to draw new tone colours from the piano and he advocated a free rotation of the arm in achieving this.[19]

Brahms, who co-existed with Chopin and Liszt, did not write for piano *per se*. Being a double bass player, he was probably more interested compositionally in sonorities he could create. His music does not lie under the hand like Chopin's and his technique is therefore less reliable as a guide to players today. Finally, Debussy brought tone colour in a new way to the pianist's palate. His interest in playing and composing exploited chords, and this fit with the overstrung instruments common to his day. Here we see in Sumner's account of the past not an evolution but a change in trend, wrought sometimes by the composer, sometimes by the player, and sometimes by the availability of instruments. We see the uniqueness of particular composers' technique and the struggles they had with the instruments at hand, as well as the effects it had on their composition, which has ultimate bearing on their legacy today. How we uphold that legacy today remains to be seen —and heard.

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1 Reginald R. Gerig, Famous pianists and their Technique. (Robert B Luce: Bridgeport, CT,1974), 9.
2 Gerig, 10.
3 Gerg, 13.
4 Gerig, 17.
5 Gerig, 91.
6 William Leslie Sumner, The Pianoforte.(Macdonald:London,1966), 102.
7 Sumner, 145.
8 Sumner, 152.
9 Sumner, 154-5.
10 Sumner, 153.
11 Sumner, 155-6.
12 Sumner, 145.
13 Sumner, 150.
14 Sumner, 157.
15 Sumner, 165.
16 Sumner, 168-9.
17 Sumner, 166.
18 Sumner, 163.
19 Sumner, 170-1.