

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 25, No. 2 Spring, 2021

© Peacock Press.

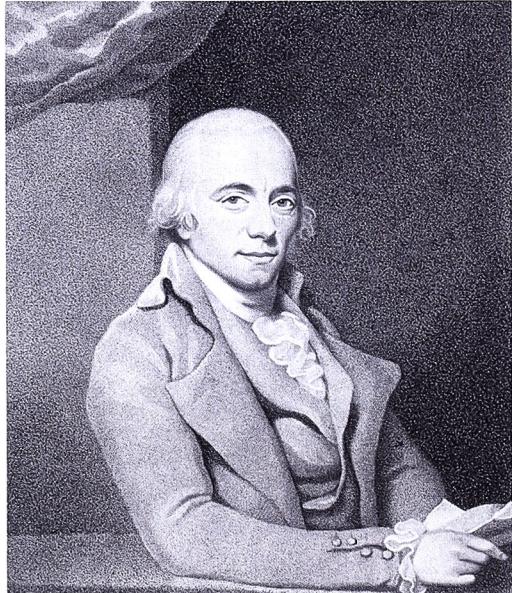
Licensed under [CC BY-NC 4.0](#).

You are free to share and adapt the content for non-commercial purposes, provided you give appropriate credit to Peacock Press and indicate if changes were made. Commercial use, redistribution for profit, or uses beyond this license require prior written permission from Peacock Press.

Musical Instrument Research Catalog  
(MIRCat)

# Muzio Clementi's contribution to the history of music

Marina Rodríguez Brià



Illus 1. Muzio Clementi, engraving by Thomas Hardy (1757–1804)

Muzio Clementi (1752–1832, illus.1) was one of the most multifaceted and influential musicians in the history of the piano. His long life represents a bridge between the Baroque - from whose fountains he drank during his Roman youth - and the Romanticism portrayed by the individuality of its most representative instrument, the piano. Settling in England from the age of 14, his activities encompassed piano performance, conducting, music promotion, composition, didactics, music publishing, and piano manufacturing. He excelled extraordinarily in all his facets, being an active part of the European society and leaving a legacy that has endured to our own day.

### Clementi, a cosmopolitan musician

Clementi was a great traveller, and was constantly moving. Travelling regularly throughout Europe kept him up to date with current events, and his curiosity and unusual intellectual knowledge made it easier for him to move effectively around Europe. He spoke more than ten languages, was well versed in literature and was also a scholar of science. According to the testimony of one of his sons, Vincent:

When, occasionally, very seldom, I was allowed a brief entrance to the room [his studio] I usually found him sitting at his instrument, his fingers at a wonderfully rapid exercise, with a volume: of Greek or Latin, generally a play of Euripides or Sophocles on the desk before him instead of a music book.<sup>1</sup>

Clementi knew most of the major cultural cities of Europe and also visited Russia twice. Nevertheless, his residence was in London and he would die in England as a British citizen: he defined himself as 'a young Italian but an old Englishman'. His very first journey was at the age of fourteen, when he went from his native town Rome to England, accompanying his patron Peter Beckford. Who would have Clementi been if he had stayed in Rome? We do not know, but it was significant that he eventually established himself in London, the modern, cosmopolitan city par excellence, that Voltaire had already praised because it was merit and not lineage that counted there. Musical activity in London was frenetic, and it was a place with opportunities for both musicians and piano manufacturers. It was in the vanguard of industrialization, mercantilism and more democratic ideologies, and it was the leading consumer of art and importer of art and musicians. Clementi personifies the new 'free' man of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, not a servant-musician but an independent musician who lived off his own work. This is probably due to his personality, but also to the adopted place and the time he lived in.

### Clementi, a multi-faceted musician

Clementi dealt in all aspects of the piano, and a large part of music in general as well. Although he ceased his pianistic activity at the age of 39, he never stopped composing or being a musician by teaching, conducting, arranging, compiling manuscripts etc. Half-way through his life, he began as a publisher and piano manufacturer, creating the firm Clementi & Co.

### Clementi as pianist and composer

The title 'Father of the Pianoforte' is found on his grave in Westminster, but *The Quarterly Musical Magazine* had already placed him among the first rank of musicians, together with Beethoven, in the sense that they wrote scientifically and with the finest style. They named him 'The Father of Modern Piano Music'.



Ex.1 Clementi, Sonata Op.34/1, Finale (1793)

In general, Clementi is considered a pioneer in developing a specific language for the piano, playing with all the sound and technical possibilities that had already differentiated it from the harpsichord. Also, he developed a substantial number of works devoted to the systematic study of the new instrument, instructing the first-ever professional pianists. For instance, in his method *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Pianoforte* he says that *legato* shall be considered normal when nothing is indicated on the score:

When de composer leaves the LEGATO, and STACCATO to the performer's taste; the best rule is, to adhere chiefly to the LEGATO; reserving the STACCATO to give SPIRIT occasionally to certain passages, and to set off the HIGHER BEAUTIES of the LEGATO.

And he explains how to play legato:

[it] must be played in a SMOOTH and CLOSE manner; which is done by keeping down the first key, 'till the next is struck; by which means, the strings VIBRATE SWEETLY into one another.

From his sonatas of the 1790s, he often wrote *legato* or *sempre legato* on the scores. Clementi also initiated the virtuosic piano style, paving the way for the Romantic pianists. He used double notes, octaves, thirds and sixths in very fast passages, and added leaps and tessitura changes with all kinds of contrast (See Ex. 1).

Clementi's harmony, chromaticisms, accents in unexpected places and rhythmical richness are something new, as is his contrast of extreme high and low notes. There are examples that sound like Beethoven when that composer was still a child. In some sonatas, he shows a search for sound, introspection and expressivity that already outlines an essentially Romantic character; an

example is the Sonata in G minor, Op.7/3 (1782). As well as his piano method, he composed the well-known Sonatinas, preludes and exercises, and the *Gradus ad Parnassum*. Clementi wrote 75 sonatas for piano solo, as well as duets and trios 'with accompaniment', duets for four hands and for two pianos, as well as toccatas, capriccios, variations and arrangements and so on.

According to Beethoven's biographer Anton Schindler, Beethoven's regard for Clementi was significant:

Almost all of Clementi's sonatas were at hand. He had the greatest admiration for these sonatas, considering them the most beautiful, the most pianistic of works, both for their lovely, pleasing, original melodies and for their consistent, easily followed form of each movement. Beethoven had but little liking for Mozart's piano music, and the musical education of his beloved nephew was confined for many years to the playing of Clementi's sonatas.<sup>2</sup>

In 1819 Clementi wrote to Erard and said, 'I heard from Berger that Beethoven has praised my didactic work. The praise of a great man is always immensely gratifying'.<sup>3</sup>

Although it is not known whether this was a completely new contribution, the way Clementi played may also have been influential. Many testimonies highlight his improvisations, and also his precise and expressive touch. A testimony from Berna gives us further details, where he said that Clementi played each note in a different way, with great passion and with a continuous crescendo and diminuendo, and with a non-written *lentando* and *rubando* that was impossible to express in notation. This aspect connects with the explanation that Clementi gives in his method about the terms *con espressione* or *con anima*: 'with expression; that is, with passionate feeling; where every note has its peculiar force and energy and where even the severity of time may be relaxed for extraordinary effects'.

### Clementi, an influential teacher

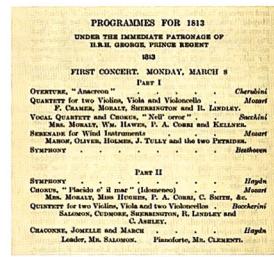
As a musician who taught throughout Europe for many years, Clementi trained a network of students that would have a strong impact on the future Romantics, not only in pianistic matters but also in compositional ones, as all of them were not only performers but also composers. For example, in London he had two brilliant students, John Field and Johann Baptist Cramer, who would in turn instruct many other musicians. The influence of Clementi was also passed through his student Ludwig Berger to his own pupil Mendelssohn. In Russia, Clementi's footprint would be significant as well. In his first trip to Russia, Clementi was accompanied by Field,<sup>4</sup> and in the second he was accompanied by Berger and Klengel. He provided work for all of them and they stayed there for years, teaching numerous piano students. Other students of Clementi, such as Zeuner, also taught hundreds of students in Russia. Glinka (who had a Clementi & Co. grand piano) took lessons from Field and from two students of Field, Charles Mayer and Alexandre Dubuque. In turn, the latter would become the teacher of Balakirev and Zverev, and Zverev was the great teacher of Scriabin and Rachmaninov. Perhaps it is fair to talk of a 'Clementian' pianistic school in Russia; in fact, there are many recordings of Clementi sonatas performed by Russian pianists: Emil Gilels, Lazar Berman, Horowitz and so on.

### Clementi as a symphonic composer and conductor

Clementi began his professional career in London as a conductor at the King's Theatre, and he conducted all his life. From 1813 until 1828, Clementi conducted twenty-five concerts at the London Philharmonic Society, and he also undertook concerts at the Gewandhaus of Leipzig. The majority of his orchestral music is lost, and all that remains is six symphonies, two overtures, a minuet and a piano concerto.

### Clementi as a music promoter

Clementi was present at the very beginning of the Royal Academy of Music, founded in 1822, and importantly he was one of the founding members of the Philharmonic Society, a highly important entity due to the excellence of the instrumental music it produced (illus.2). Its purpose was to 'promote the perfect interpretation of complete pieces of the most highly regarded, and best, instrumental music'. There Clementi, for instance, conducted the English premiere of Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony, and the Society was also the one who commissioned the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony, as well as helping Beethoven financially.



Illus.2 The first concert of the Philharmonic Society (1813), with Clementi at the pianoforte

### Clementi as a publisher

Like his predecessors Longman and Broderip, Clementi & Co. were also printers and music publishers. Clementi's closest relationships with publishers during his first years in business were with Pleyel, Härtel and Artaria, but he also had contact with Erard, Nageli and Ricordi. Clementi had an editorial and publishing relationship with Beethoven, and he said to Härtel: 'Beethoven and I have become good friends in the end'.<sup>5</sup> His relationship with Beethoven, both on personal terms and as his publisher, is remarkable. He held full and exclusive publishing rights in England for many of Beethoven's works (they had met and signed a deal on 20 April 1807), including the 'Razumovsky' string quartets, the 4th Symphony, the Coriolan Overture, the 4th Piano Concerto, the Violin Concerto and the same work arranged for piano and orchestra.

Clementi said to his business partner Collard:

In short, I agreed with him to take in M.S. three Quartetts, A Symphony, an overture, a concerto for the violin which is beautiful, and which, at my request, he will adapt for the pianoforte [...] The Symphony and the Overture are wonderfully fine... I have likewise engaged him to compose 2 sonatas and a Fantasia for the P[iano]Forte.<sup>6</sup>

In London, between 1809 and 1811, Clementi & Co. would publish the first editions of more than ten of Beethoven's most important works, before other publishers on the continent were able to do so. In 1823, at the time Beethoven was finishing his Symphony No.9, Clementi published some of his major works for piano, such as the sonatas Op.110 and 111 and the Bagatelles Op.119.

One of Clementi's most important works as a publisher was the *Practical Harmony*, which is a large collection of examples that Clementi compiled during his travels. Some of the works by Bach it contains were first editions; for instance, the first volume contains the French suite No.5, published for the first time. In 1823, his catalogue comprised 6,000 pieces in 59 categories, for the use and enjoyment of both professional and amateur musicians.

### Clementi as instrument manufacturer

Clementi enjoyed great prestige as a piano maker, thanks to the fine quality of his instruments. His knowledge of actually playing the instrument himself enabled him to come up with numerous technical improvements. He was also very active in promoting the piano commercially. In 1802, the London correspondent of the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* wrote that Clementi & Co. 'produce without question the finest but also to be sure the most expensive instruments in the world, whose quality has been enhanced by Clementi's mechanical ability and artistic experience'.<sup>7</sup>

In 1796 Clementi associated with Longman and in 1800 they became Clementi & Co. They were mainly piano manufacturers (see illus.3 for an example of a grand), although they sold many other musical instruments as well, in particular woodwinds. In a letter to his brother, Clementi wrote: 'I am always busy from morning until evening. In fact I have just begun a new job in the field of music commerce, making all sorts of instruments, and acting as publisher for all sorts of printed music at Longman, Hyde, Collard & Co'.<sup>8</sup> Three years later, Clementi & Co wrote to the publisher Pleyel & Co saying: 'We are therefore at this time finishing under the direction of M. Clementi a variety of grand and small pianos, calculated to answer the purpose of all ranks of people'.<sup>9</sup>



Illus.3 Grand Piano by Clementi & Co., London (c.1815)

Clementi devoted himself to the company for 32 years until he retired, two years before his death. His partners and friends, the Collard brothers, continued the business. As his contribution to the manufacture, Clementi provided quality: he was fully involved in technological innovation and in the improvement of sound, even contributing with his own inventions. He was a great exporter of pianos

around the world, and during his lifetime the company built 25,000 pianos.

In summary, at a time when the piano was the star instrument, Clementi did everything for it; he devoted his entire long life to it. His aim was to excel in all his facets, and he helped raise the level of music and musical performance, with the goal of a cultured man: to enlighten.

*Marina Rodríguez Brià was born in Barcelona and studied at the conservatories of Barcelona and Perpignan and at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. As a pianist she has performed and recorded internationally, lectured and published on music, and made 13 CDs, including two of Clementi. She is also the curator of the exhibition 'Clementi, the Father of the Pianoforte. Confluences with Beethoven' (Music Museum of Barcelona, 2020). [www.marinarodriguezbria.com](http://www.marinarodriguezbria.com)*

### Endnotes

- 1 David Rowland (ed), *The Correspondence of Muzio Clementi* (Bologna, 2010), p.369. Letter from Vincent Clementi (a son of Clementi) to Cecil Clementi Smith (a grandson of Clementi), (Ontario, Canada, 20 August 1895).
- 2 Anton Schindler, ed Donald W. MacArdle, *Beethoven as I Knew Him* (New York, 1966).
- 3 Rowland (2010), p.390. Letter from Clementi to Erard (London, 30 April 1819).
- 4 John Field and his legato and cantabile style were very significant. Franz Liszt wrote, 'A favorite pupil of Clementi, he learned from this great master the secrets of the finest execution known at that period, and employed it in a style of poetry wherein he will ever be an incomparable model of grace unconscious of itself, of melancholy artlessness, of refinement and natural ease alike' (from Liszt's essay on John Field's Nocturnes, first published in 1859 as a preface to an edition of six of the Nocturnes (Leipzig, 1859)). Translated by Theodore Baker and quoted in *Field, Eighteen Nocturnes for the Piano* (New York & London, 1902).
- 5 Rowland (2010), p.179. Letter from Clementi to G. C. Härtel (Vienna, 22 April 1807).
- 6 Rowland (2010), pp.182-183. Letter from Clementi to Collard (Vienna, 22 April 1807).
- 7 *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (Leipzig, 1802), p.197; translated from the German: 'liefert, ohne allen Widerspruch, die trefft ichsten Instrumente in der Welt, die von Clementi's mechanischem Kopf und Kunsterfahrung veredelt, aber freyligh auch die kostbarsten sind.' Quoted by Leif Sahlqvist at [www.squarepianotech.com](http://www.squarepianotech.com).
- 8 Rowland (2010), pp.27-30. Letter from Clementi to his brother Gaetano (London, 21 December 1798).
- 9 Rowland (2010), p.77. Letter from Clementi & Co to Pleyel & Co. (London, 20 October 1801).