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COMMUNICATION: CONFERENCE REPORT

Symposium on Beethoven's Pianos

The Center for Beethoven Research, Boston University, 8 November 2021

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Boston University's Center for Beethoven Research, which opened in 2014, is the repository of the Beethoven library and research papers of Lewis Lockwood, Professor of Music Emeritus of Harvard University (also Distinguished Senior Scholar at Boston University and co-director of the Center). The Center sponsors lectures, concerts and symposia; this event was announced as 'a symposium on Beethoven's pianos, their mechanisms, their sound, and playing techniques, as they relate to performing his piano sonatas'. In his opening remarks Jeremy Yudkin (Boston University and co-director of the Center) credited Malcolm Bilson for demonstrating that period pianos deserved to be played and heard, and then reminded us that, although Broadwood and Érard are mentioned frequently in discussions of Beethoven, there were more than a dozen other instruments – mostly Viennese – that played an important part in his creative life. In a greeting delivered remotely from his home, Lewis Lockwood characterized all of these instruments as 'extensions of the composer's body and mind', reinforcing their centrality to any understanding of his work.

The first presentation, 'Beethoven's Inner Clavichord', was given by Richard Kramer (City University of New York Graduate Center). His point of departure was the famous recitative passage in Op. 110 where Beethoven notates pairs of repeated notes with slurs and a finger change – an effect that is often referred to as *Bebung*, although *Bebung* is a clavichord-specific technique that has no practical effect at the piano. Kramer proposed that at this late stage of his life, Beethoven was turning inwards and reflecting on his early musical influences, including that of his teacher Neefe, an ardent advocate of the clavichord, and C. P. E. Bach, whose compositions for that instrument do indeed specify *Bebung* at moments of heightened expressivity.

The clavichord continued to play a surprisingly large role over the course of the day. Peter Sykes (Boston University and The Juilliard School) suggested that given how ubiquitous it was at the time, the clavichord should be considered a suitable medium for any eighteenth-century repertory, and that for those players willing take it on, it tends to become either 'a watershed or a Waterloo'. After quoting Charles Burney's account of C. P. E. Bach's ability to produce 'a cry of sorrow and complaint' from the clavichord (*The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands and United Provinces*, two volumes (London: T. Becket, J. Robson and G. Robinson, 1773), volume 2, 269), he rose to the challenge and produced his own cries of despair in a gripping performance of the second movement (Largo e mesto) from Beethoven's Sonata Op. 10 No. 3.

Next, Bobby Giglio (Assistant Curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts) spoke about the diverse keyboard mechanisms of the pianos that Beethoven knew. Drawing on research involving high-speed video, he discussed the pros and cons of each design. Using recordings made at the museum, Sylvia Berry (independent scholar and performer, Boston) demonstrated two contrasting (but equally lavishly decorated) pianos from the Museum of Fine Art's collection: an 1815 Fritz and a 1796 Broadwood. Both instruments have recently been restored, and the videos only made us want to experience the instruments in the flesh.

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In my own contribution (David Breitman, Oberlin College and Conservatory) I made the case for using an unequal temperament in Beethoven's piano music. Both Daniel Gottlob Türk (in his *Klavierschule, oder Anweisung zum Klavierspielen für Lehrer und Lernende* (Leipzig: Schwickert and Halle: Hemmerde und Schwetschke, 1789)) and Carl Czerny (in his *Vollständige theoretisch-praktische Pianoforte-Schule*, Op. 500, three volumes (Vienna: Diabelli, 1839)) explicitly advocate equal temperament, so we cannot exclude it as a historically appropriate choice. But the method they (and many others, including C. P. E. Bach) describe – tuning a sequence of 'slightly imperfect' fifths and fourths, and then checking the thirds and sixths – seems more likely to produce a somewhat unequal temperament, favouring the 'good keys' (those most frequently used, with the fewest accidentals). I value the variety that results from an unequal temperament, and find Bradley Lehman's 'Bach Temperament' (described in his articles 'Bach's Extraordinary Temperament: Our Rosetta Stone – 1', *Early Music* 33/1 (2005), 3–23, and 'Bach's Extraordinary Temperament: Our Rosetta Stone – 2', *Early Music* 33/2 (2005), 211–231) well suited to the classical repertory. In this tuning the E major triad is the least pure, but not much worse than equal temperament, and the sharp keys generally beat faster than the flat keys. Beethoven's key choices seem consistent with such a temperament: the varying stability of the chords reinforces contrasts already present in the music. Confining myself to examples in E and C, I began with the slow movement of Op. 2 No. 3, comparing the tentative, questioning opening theme in E major with its *fortissimo* return at bar 53 in a triumphal C major. Then I discussed the final movements of Op. 109 and Op. 111: with this temperament the E major theme of Op. 109 is always restless, while the C major Arietta of Op. 111 is as grounded as could be.

The following segment of the symposium began with excerpts from a documentary by Tom Beghin (Orpheus Institute and McGill University) about Beethoven's Érard and its relevance to Beethoven's sonatas Opp. 53 and 57. Joining us virtually from Belgium, Beghin suggested that Op. 53 was a direct, positive response to Beethoven's experiments with the new instrument, but that as he worked on Op. 57, his increasing frustrations led him to try to 'Viennicize' it (that is, lighten the touch, and reduce the key-dip), ultimately rendering it useless. In response to a question from Yudkin, Beghin tantalized us with his next project, involving a transcription of the Diabelli Variations for two pianos – one English and one Viennese – in dialogue.

The next presenter was Kenneth Drake (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), who has been playing Beethoven on an antique Broadwood for a long time: he used one for his New York debut recital in 1965! It was inspiring to hear his undiminished passion for what old instruments can teach us, and to experience a direct connection with the history of the early-instrument revival: Drake bought his first Broadwood in the 1950s from none other than the renowned American harpsichord-maker John Challis (1907–1974).

The evening session began with another clavichord performance: Yi-heng Yang (The Juilliard School) played Joseph Haydn's Sonata in C major H48 with lots of delightful ornamentation and plenty of verve. Ann Schaefer (University of Alaska Fairbanks) then drew our attention to the relationship between the unusual 'blurred' pedalling in some of Beethoven's piano pieces, and passages from his symphonies that also feature dissonant mixtures of harmonies. She sees them both as expressions of transcendence and suggested that their presence in the piano works served to disseminate 'experimental practices' that allowed for heightened expressivity. Sylvia Berry returned to the stage to talk about Beethoven's relationship with the five-octave piano, highlighting the pedal effects in the Bagatelle Op. 33 No. 7 and in the 'Tempest Sonata', Op. 31 No. 2, as well as details of articulation in the first movement of the Cello Sonata in G minor, Op. 5 No. 2, which she then performed with Rebecca Shaw.

Robert Levin (Harvard University) ended the day with a survey of the place of improvisation in Beethoven performance: the ornamentation of repeats, the embellishment of fermatas and – of course – the improvisation of cadenzas, for which he is renowned. He gave witty examples of each type, insisting that adding embellishment was not something one did because one was

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'supposed to', but rather because one *wanted* to. He pointed out that Beethoven's music was aimed at a variety of audiences, and that an amateur might play just what was written, while a professional could aspire to 'co-create' the piece with the composer, re-composing the surface while telling the same story. He then asked the audience which concerto he should use for an improvised cadenza and responded with two radically different versions for the Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58, bringing the symposium to a rousing conclusion.

David Breitman has taught at the Oberlin Conservatory since 1991. His Beethoven discography includes all of the violin sonatas with Elizabeth Wallfisch and the cello works with Jaap ter Linden, as well as five of the solo sonatas as part of the collaborative set organized by Malcolm Bilson in 1997. He has also recorded the complete Mozart violin sonatas with Jean-François Rivest and four albums of songs with the late Sanford Sylvan, whom he partnered in recital for over thirty years. In *Piano-Playing Revisited: What Modern Players Can Learn from Period Instruments*, published by the University of Rochester Press in 2021, Breitman summarizes a lifetime of experience as a performer and teacher.

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