

REVIEWS



BOOKS

Eighteenth-Century Music © The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S1478570620000366

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THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FORTEPIANO GRAND AND ITS PATRONS FROM SCARLATTI TO BEETHOVEN

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017

pp. xiii + 492, ISBN 978 0 253 02263 9

In recent years we have benefited from the publication of a number of texts that have re-examined the early history of the piano, notably those by Stewart Pollens (*Bartolomeo Cristofori and the Invention of the Piano* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)) and Michael Latham (*Towards a New History of the Piano* (Munich: Katzbichler, 2019)). These sit alongside edited volumes of related source materials, including letters associated with Clementi (David Rowland, ed., *The Correspondence of Muzio Clementi* (Bologna: Ut Orpheus, 2010)) and Érard (Robert Adelson, Alain Roudier, Jenny Nex, Laure Barthel and Michel Foussard, eds, *The History of the Erard Piano and Harp in Letters and Documents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)). Here, Badura-Skoda addresses the place of the piano in the eighteenth century from the perspective of a scholar and performer with many years of experience working with early pianos, and as such adds a valuable voice to that of other authors. The main text covers some 468 pages and is complemented by introductory material, an appendix, bibliography and indices. There are musical examples scattered throughout, while a section of twenty-two plates fills pages 215–230. Minor slips in presentation relating to quoted text that is not formatted consistently and odd errors, such as hyphenating ‘Joseph Haydn-Wenzel’ in the contents list instead of using a comma, confuse the reader at first, but such typographical errors are few and far between. More important is the decision, helpful for monoglots, to present most quotations in an English translation as well as in their original language.

We begin our journey focusing on activities on the Italian peninsula, centred understandably in Florence and the work of Bartolomeo Cristofori and his pupil Giovanni Ferrini, before following the piano’s move northwards into German lands. Subsequent chapters change from focusing on location to examining specific named makers (including Johann Andreas Stein, Sébastien Érard, John Broadwood and John Joseph Merlin) and particular composers (including Mozart, members of the Bach family, Haydn and Beethoven) positioned within the social, political and economic climates in which they worked. These sections and the attention given to each individual differ significantly in length and detail: for example, in the chapter dedicated to the piano makers Stein and Érard, the former is discussed over some thirty-three pages while the latter has two. Overall, the result feels like an interesting conversation that moves and morphs as the thoughts of the participants interact, rather than a single narrative with a carefully constructed and predetermined path. The result is not unpleasant but does feel vaguely unsatisfying, like something has been missed or is just out of reach.

At the heart of this volume is the challenge faced by anyone interested in musical instruments: nomenclature. Instrument names can be used generically, specifically, knowledgeably and carelessly. For example, many people today say they have a piano in their home when in truth they have an electronic keyboard. For some of us, a piano has to have strings and a hammer action, neither of which is found in the rectangular boxes in many homes today. This is the same challenge addressed by Badura-Skoda: which of the terms used in the eighteenth century referred to stringed keyboard instruments with hammers? There is no simple, universal or generally agreed answer. There are German, French and Italian names that refer to the shape of the



instrument (*Flügel* for wing) or the presence of a keyboard (*Klavier*, *clavicin*, *clavicembalo*). Even the English term ‘harpsichord’ refers to strings and perhaps hints at the winged harp-shape, but none of these terms tells us what is happening inside the case. However, Badura-Skoda’s thesis that all terms, and particularly ‘harpsichord’, can therefore mean both plucked and hammered stringed keyboard instruments is problematic. Cristofori’s term for his newly invented instrument with hammers was indeed a bit of a mouthful (*arpicembalo che fa il piano e il forte*, or a variant thereon), so was ripe for abbreviating, but simply to cut it back to a name used for something different is not supported by the evidence found in archives and museums across all countries under consideration. For example, Charles Burney did indeed refer to a hammered harpsichord, but I would suggest that he was explaining an unknown instrument to his readers in as few words as possible. This term was rarely seen again, suggesting that it was not in common use and therefore was also not commonly abbreviated to ‘harpsichord’. We will probably never know why the instrument was not given its own, distinctive name, particularly in Italy, where none of the options for abbreviation were particularly helpful. Simply calling it a keyboard would have ignored the significance of its new action; calling it a ‘quiet-loud’, Badura-Skoda argues, was linguistically odd for native Italian speakers. Perhaps it is even stranger that we now call it the piano when in fact it is much louder than its predecessors and is more often played *forte*, or *fortissimo*, yet no one seems to mind. It is also odd that, in a volume specifically questioning nomenclature, the name used in the title of the book – *fortepiano grand* – is not found within the volume and is itself not commonly used.

Badura-Skoda questions generally held assumptions about which types of instrument were available in particular places or in specific contexts. One example relates to the occasion when Handel and Domenico Scarlatti played for Cardinal Ottoboni in Rome in about 1709, as described by John Mainwaring in his *Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel* of 1760 (London: R. and J. Dodsley). On this occasion, Scarlatti reportedly played with ‘elegance and delicacy of expression’ (91). Badura-Skoda takes this to mean that the instrument in use was hammered and not plucked, so was one of Cristofori’s newly invented pianos. Although this is possible, as Ottoboni had been given such an instrument, Badura-Skoda falls prey to her own earlier assertion that harpsichordists and organists would have taken some time to adjust their technique to the new action: would Scarlatti really have been able to play in this way with an instrument so new to him? On the other hand, is it not possible to play with elegance on a harpsichord? Of course, there is at present no way of knowing precisely what the instrument was, so, sadly, we are left to speculate. The discussion of Haydn’s keyboard music and the instruments available to him, as well as that concerning Scarlatti’s sonatas and their suitability for each type of instrument, is informative, although concerning the latter, John Koster has explored the range of keyboard instruments available in Spain in more depth elsewhere (for example, ‘A Harpsichord by Diego Fernández’, *The Galpin Society Journal* 64 (2011), 5–48).

Much of the information in the volume is useful and relates to the adoption and increasing popularity of hammer-action keyboard instruments, including the detailed discussion of Cristofori’s work, and the position of instrument makers in socio-political structures such as the guild systems. However, it is difficult to substantiate many of Badura-Skoda’s assertions as there are few footnotes containing references to primary source material. There are also some inaccuracies: for example, Clementi never ‘owned [his] company more or less alone’ (451). Indeed, he relied very heavily on his partners, notably expert piano makers Frederick and William Collard, to make and develop the instruments he was promoting on his travels (see Michael Kassler, ed., *The Music Trade in Georgian London* (London: Ashgate, 2011)).

Despite its idiosyncrasies, it is to be hoped that this volume will inspire other musician-scholars to question the names of the instruments found on published music or in archives, since it is often not clear whether a composer, editor, publisher, printer or anyone else determined which instrument to use, and whether this represents a carefully made decision or a simple piece of marketing. It is healthy to be raising issues of nomenclature, but perhaps the whole volume would be more successful if it were framed as an exploration of the possibilities and their implications, given that there is so much open to interpretation, rather than a firm assertion of the opposite perspective to that most widely accepted. Badura-Skoda’s writing does encourage us to explore whether composers had specific types of keyboard action in mind for their compositions.



Undoubtedly some compositions work better with a plucked action while others better suit the hammered, but a great deal of the expressivity we as audiences enjoy hearing coaxed from any type of action is due to the skill of the player. In any case, a good understanding of the instruments available to every composer and some awareness of the socio-political climate that helped to shape their lives, and the lives of the instrument makers addressing their musical needs, is always fruitful.

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doi:10.1017/S1478570620000512

GLENDA GOODMAN

CULTIVATED BY HAND: AMATEUR MUSICIANS IN THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC

New York: Oxford University Press, 2020

pp. xxv + 243, ISBN 9 780 190 88492 5

The genteel amateur musician is a figure familiar to historians of early American music, most notably from the musical activities of founders like Thomas Jefferson or Francis Hopkinson. Glenda Goodman's study *Cultivated by Hand: Amateur Musicians in the Early American Republic* extends and deepens our understanding of the social world musical amateurs inhabited in the generations after the Revolution, which, she rightly notes, are often overlooked by music historians. Although prominent Northeastern families like the Adamses (of Massachusetts) and the Browns (of Rhode Island) appear in her study, its focus is on more ordinary individuals, especially the genteel, mostly white young women and men who created the manuscript music books that lie at the heart of her account.

The roughly 250 music books surveyed allow the author to present a compelling, nuanced portrait of a social world. Examining the books' physical features as well as their content, Goodman regards them as a kind of 'material proxy' for their creators (9): status items that socially elite individuals enlisted in their efforts at self-fashioning in the early years of the Republic. That micro-histories like these are germane to the broader emergence of a post-Revolutionary national society is a contention of the book; but such grand narratives are not where it dwells. Rather, Goodman's study shines most brightly in its attention to material details – a decorative flourish here, a messy hand there – that suggest something of an embodied musicality, as well as a self and a social station that the manuscripts' makers displayed with their creations.

This is not to suggest that the author neglects larger themes. On the contrary, one of her more striking findings is the persistence of an aesthetic conservatism among this social group (for instance 'the continued influence of eighteenth-century sensibility and the continued embrace of the sentimental' (4)), in contrast to contemporary developments in Europe and Great Britain. While it is unsurprising that members of a settler society would look to the home region as a cultural source, doing so in the aftermath of a war of independence is not intuitive. Goodman makes a convincing case that the very conventionalism of the repertoires that her amateurs collected was part of their appeal to after-generations of the Revolution, as they sought to cultivate an urbane sensibility they associated with metropolitan Europe.

This is a fascinating analysis that I would love to see the author take further, perhaps in a version of the 'multinodal comparative analysis' (5) that she advocates as a future approach. Even here – in a book that is clearly occupied with many other important things – it would have been interesting to see a discussion of these music books as products of a post-Revolutionary *settler* society, as well as an early Republican one. Both headings are appropriate, but the first highlights a different investment (in colonial expansion versus nation-building per se) and identification that may also be perceptible in these books, as Bonnie Gordon