

OVERTURE MUSIC SERIES

# STYLE IN PIANO PLAYING



PETER COOPER

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# *Style in Piano Playing*

Peter Cooper

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To Dorothy L'Estrange Malone,  
in gratitude and affection

## PREFACE

On my travels as a concert pianist I am often asked what I consider the most important element in piano-playing. My first reaction is, 'the music itself'. In such a many-sided activity, it is well-nigh impossible to select one particular attribute as taking precedence over all others, for it is the combined excellence of many factors which gives pleasure in piano-playing.

If I were forced to give a considered answer however, I would say 'style', with its sub-divisions: the composer's style, the style of his country, the style of the times in which he lived, of the piece itself, of the instrument for which it was written. Then there is the performer's personal style of playing, and how successfully it is adjusted to these others.

In this book I have tried to relate style to the grand piano as it is at present constituted. What I have said about the contemporary pianoforte and its ancestors is based on my experience as a pianist, harpsichordist and piano teacher for forty years. What is not supported by historical fact can only be supplemented by my own judgment.

I leave it to the reader to reject or accept these observations as he wishes.



## *Part I*



## CHAPTER 1

### *EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN PIANO*

If Bartolomeo Cristofori, to whom the invention of the pianoforte in 1709 in Florence is usually credited, were able to see today's concert grand piano, he might well be amazed, but the inventors of the first car or aeroplane might be similarly astounded at a racing car or a supersonic aircraft. Whereas the car-driver or the pilot is solely concerned with the present scene, a pianist, operating his high-powered 1970s model, plays works written for the piano over a period of 200 years. He not only thinks and plays in terms of the current instrument, but of the many different kinds of pianos for which composers have written since the pianoforte's first appearance.

Moreover, the pianist does not hesitate to appropriate music written for the more fragile clavichord and harpsichord, the pianoforte's forerunners as keyboard stringed instruments. Nor does he shrink from playing elaborate piano transcriptions from sources other than the keyboard—vocal, orchestral or operatic. In fact, the modern concert grand piano is a kind of musical boa-constrictor, an iron-framed monster which will support a tension of 200 pounds to a string, an overall stress of 20 tons, and a weight of 1,120 pounds. This 'triumph of ironmongery', as Bernard Shaw called it, is usually 8 feet 10 inches long and has a compass of 7½ octaves.

Cristofori's pristine pianoforte was much more delicate. Of the two models extant, the earlier one of 1720, now in the

Metropolitan Museum, New York, is 7 feet 9 inches in length, and has a compass of  $4\frac{1}{2}$  octaves. Its wooden frame makes the tension of the strings very weak, and it has no stops or pedals of any kind.

Created in the age of the harpsichord it had a good deal in common with it—a slender shape, because its compass was much the same, and a small sound owing to its weak string tension. It was the method of its sound production which made it so markedly different. No inflection of tone by pressure of the finger had been possible on the harpsichord. To remedy this defect the new instrument was called *gravicembalo col piano e forte* (literally harpsichord with soft and loud). Stretched strings which had been set in motion by the plucking of tiny quills, were now struck by small wooden hammers covered with leather, the resulting volume depending on the speed of the key's depression.

Another Cristofori piano, which dates from 1726 and is in the Musikinstrumenten Museum of the Karl Marx University, Leipzig, has a stop operated by hand for *una corda*, a quietening device so that only one of the two strings to a note sounded. In the course of the century other stops were to be introduced, but none had more effect on keyboard writing and playing than the 'forte' or sustaining stop. Without it the pianoforte would have remained a dry-toned instrument. Its mechanism, which raised the dampers from the strings, was operated first by a hand stop, later by knee levers, and finally by a foot pedal.

Mozart in a letter to his father, dated October 17, 1777, from Augsburg, where he had visited the piano-maker Johann Andreas Stein, writes:

'The pedals, pressed by the knees, are also better made by Stein than by anyone else; you scarcely require to touch them to make them act, and as soon as the pressure is removed not the slightest vibration is perceptible.' Knee levers are to be found on the pianoforte made for him by Anton Walter in Vienna (Mozart Museum, Salzburg). These raise the dampers to the right and left of the player in two sections, enabling the treble or bass to be sustained independently.

In the Raymond Russell Collection of Early Keyboard



Pianoforte by Bartolomeo Cristofori 1720. The dimensions are: Length, 7 feet 7 inches; width, 3 feet 3 inches; depth, 9½ inches. There are two strings to each note (the vibrating length of the longest is 6 feet 2 inches; the shortest 4 inches). Its compass is four octaves and a fourth—C to F, and it does not have a pedal.





The Mozart Piano, built by Anton Walter, at the International Stiftung Mozarteum SALZBURG.



Beethoven's piano, made by Konrad Graf in Vienna.  
Courtesy Beethoven House, Bonn.

Instruments (St. Cecilia's Hall, Edinburgh) there is a piano by the Dutchman Americus Backers (London 1772) with pedals which operate unusually through the shafts of the two front stand legs. The left or soft pedal moves the keyboard to the right for 'una corda'; the right or 'forte' pedal raises the dampers off the strings. In 1783 in London John Broadwood patented his device of a sustaining pedal placed on a lyre with the soft pedal, immediately in front of the player.

In the late eighteenth century, harpsichord, clavichord, and pianoforte (or fortepiano as it was sometimes called in Germany and France) co-existed quite happily. Harpsichord and pianoforte often had interchangeable characteristics, and the early eighteenth century pianoforte could be regarded as a harpsichord with a new kind of action, i.e. hammers. The sustaining pedal was the first of a series of inventions which was to establish it as a separate instrument, a process which continued in the nineteenth century, the period of its great development, and eventually isolated it completely from its older cousin.

Like the harpsichord the early pianoforte acquired a number of stops to give it additional tone-colour, devices which could muffle the sound, imitate lute or harp, even the harpsichord itself. Towards the end of the century these mechanisms were transferred to foot-pedals, with a number of new piquant effects introduced from Turkish music: bassoon, drums or triangle. Mozart's Rondo alla Turea, the concluding movement from his Sonata in A major (K 331) must have been far more gaudily vulgar on a piano 'with Turkish effects' than the polite, refined piece it usually is to-day.

A piano made by Erard in Paris in 1803, which was in the possession of Beethoven, had four pedals—lute, sustaining, mute and una corda (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). Also in the same museum is one by Conrad Graf (Vienna c. 1820) which had five—bassoon, two mutes (one half strength, the other full) una corda and tre corde (sustaining). Yet another by him in the possession of Brahms, and before that of Robert and Clara Schumann, had four pedals.

In the course of the nineteenth century the 'fancy'

pedals disappeared and only the soft and sustaining pedals survived. (A third or middle pedal is found on Steinway concert grand pianofortes today—a Steinway invention from America in 1874. By means of a rail which pushes up certain notes already struck, higher than the dampers, these notes may be held without participation by the hands, independently of the sustaining pedal).

Cristofori's piano had an escapement for the hammer and the pianoforte later became more efficient in its action through the invention of double-escapement by Sebastien Erard Paris (1821) which made for an easy and quick repetition of the key. Rosamond Harding in her *History of the Pianoforte* (Oxford University Press, 1933) says: 'Without this action the art of pianoforte playing could not have attained the state of perfection to which it has now risen; in fact we may say that modern pianoforte technique was built upon it.'

Ignaz Moscheles noted in his diary after the new invention: 'This quicker action of the hammer seems to me so important that I prophesy a new era in the manufacture of pianofortes.'

Meanwhile with additions to its compass in both treble and bass the pianoforte's sonority was increasing. By the middle of the nineteenth century its keyboard span had reached 7 octaves. To support the additional notes iron entered into its frame from 1800, and in 1851, according to A.J. Hipkins (*History of the Pianoforte*, Novello) Broadwood's iron grand model was the first pianoforte to be made in England with a complete metal frame. He had been preceded by Jonas Chickering in Boston, who in 1843 patented a frame for grand pianos in one solid casting. As with most inventions the iron frame was not specifically the work of one individual, but the result of experiments on upright, square and grand pianos by several people for half a century. Without the iron frame the piano would never have attained the power of which it is capable now.

At about this time felt began to be used instead of leather in the hammer heads, which further thickened the tone; and overstringing (Steinway in America, 1855) increased

power still more through a greater length of string.

By 1880, thanks to inventions in Europe and America, the pianoforte had been transformed from Cristofori's pioneer model into a new instrument, bearing little relationship to the harpsichord, which was now relegated to the status of an interesting historical piece. Until the outbreak of the first World War in 1914, a wonderful period of piano construction now occurred, which has never been surpassed. Surviving pianos of all sizes, both grands and uprights, are proof of the high level of craftsmanship of these years. Pianos not only had a rich sound, they also possessed a mellow tonal beauty.

A Bechstein full-sized grand, made in 1898, and taken out to New Zealand by Paderewski for a concert tour in 1903 (now privately owned by Mr. J. Hanna of Tokoroa) testifies to the craftsmanship of its time. In 1968, seventy years after its construction, its original soundboard and action were of such excellence that it took one back nostalgically to a great era of piano-making and piano-playing, when beautiful tone, ease and evenness of touch were held in high regard. Its strings have been renewed and felts replaced by the original makers in Berlin, but it retains an integral richness and a ring in its tone which would be hard to find today. Not only were these vintage years for the piano in Germany, but French pianos also had a similar outstanding quality.

Between the two World Wars, traditions were maintained by the great piano houses of Steinway, Bechstein, Blüthner and Bösendorfer, although the previous 'golden age' seemed to have lost a little of its brightness.

Startling changes were apparent after the second World War. Now the piano, in all its models, from the largest to the smallest, seemed to be 'utility', lacking the charm of its pre-War predecessors. Perhaps it was inevitable after the devastation of a war of much greater dimensions and widespread aerial bombing. The division between East and West Europe, one of the legacies of the war, cut off the supply of those pianos whose manufacturing premises lay behind the Iron Curtain.

The new post-war concert grand seemed to aim at