

Shortly before 1700 Bartolomeo Cristofori, a supremely skilled instrument maker in the service of Count Lorenzo de Medici of Florence, invented a keyboard instrument that distinguished itself from other harpsichords by employing a hammer action to evoke soft and loud dynamics through the touch.

For several years, I've had the fascinating opportunity to own and play a fine replica instrument built by David Sutherland in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 2005 that incorporates Cristofori's action design. Just as playing Haydn and Mozart on a Walter of the 1780s or Chopin on a Pleyel of the 1840s informs our perception of the gestures and sonorities inherent in music composed for those instruments, playing keyboard music of the early eighteenth century on this Florentine piano reveals qualities that do not readily emerge when other instruments are employed. Yet early pianos of this type have still to receive widespread attention or appreciation and have often been dismissed as an interesting but ultimately stillborn experiment.

In the very first sentence of his excellent 1998 book, *The Pianoforte in the Classical Era*, Michael Cole throws down the gauntlet: "It would hardly be overstating the case to say that before the advent of the early classical era, even as late as 1765, the pianoforte had barely any influence on musical composition or performance." Despite this unpromising caveat, he then delivers a thoroughgoing and insightful chapter on the invention, mechanism, reception, and dissemination of the earliest fortepianos, ultimately coming round to the position that "the pianoforte as invented by Cristofori excited a great deal of interest, and...his wonderfully sophisticated invention exerted an influence on harpsichord makers throughout Europe." Apparently it was players who stood in the way since, "with a few exceptions, keyboard players remained unconvinced and unconverted."

That most players were not fans of the piano before 1765 can hardly be disputed, for the obvious reason that the great majority of them never experienced the chance to play on an instrument with a hammer action. Such instruments were rare, expensive, and familiar only to a small group of privileged aristocrats who could afford to own one and to a handful of supremely successful musicians who circulated in their milieu. Among these were Farinelli, Scarlatti, Handel, Bach, and an assortment of significant but less celebrated musicians including the Italian sonata composers represented on the first half of this program. An even more potent factor that militated against the ready embrace of the piano by players was their almost universal unfamiliarity with the touch required to make it sound well, a factor that received comment in the earliest published description of the instrument. This much-quoted article, published in 1711 by Scipione Maffei in an Italian journal of intellectual inquiry, is thought by some to transmit a text supplied to the writer by Cristofori himself, which would accord with its laudatory tone. But this would not lessen the validity of the information presented, which would therefore perfectly describe the inventor's goals.

Here follow a few excerpts from the Maffei report (italics added):

"[Cristofori] has already made three [cembali with piano and forte]...and *they have all succeeded perfectly*," asserting that the instrument provided effective dynamic variation;

"It has appeared to [some] that the voice of the instrument...is too soft and dull; ...but the ear quickly adapts itself to it, and becomes so charmed that one never tires of it, *and the common gravecembali no longer please*," praising the loveliness of its sound;

"It requires a person who...has made a particular study of it, *so as to regulate the strength of the varied pressure which should be given to the keys*," recognizing that the customary touch of a harpsichordist would fail to elicit the best results from the new instrument.

Indeed, the evenness of finger strength sought by an excellent harpsichord player stands fundamentally opposed to the intent of the pianoforte, which is to permit constant variation in the dynamic intensity of the notes. The monotony that results when an even touch is applied to the pianoforte simply exacerbates the fact that its tone, as Maffei/Cristofori admits, is softer and duller than that of the quilled harpsichord. The process of learning to exploit the piano's capacity for contrast and inflection through constant modification of the touch requires extended trial, error, and application, an exercise that not every player would welcome. As late as 1753, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach observed in his treatise that "the...pianoforte...has many fine qualities, although its touch must be carefully worked out, a task which is not without difficulties."

Composers and players who did embrace the hammered *cembalo*, however, found in it a medium well suited to the up-to-date textures and sonorities of the galant style. Alberti's eponymous accompanimental figure, used extensively in the first movement of his G-major sonata, provides the perfect support for a singing melody by activating the harmonic background. The more Scarlattian second movement features a provocative harmonic sequence that raises the key by a whole tone six times in succession in order to return to the home tonality.

One of the earliest Italian composers to incorporate suggestively pianistic figuration into his keyboard sonatas was Benedetto Marcello. In the *Largo* from his sonata in C minor, the use of dynamic inflection can impart direction and momentum to otherwise static sequences and a repetitive traversal of the *passus duriusculus*. Often the keyboard imitates violin figuration, with its inherent dynamic flexibility.

The bustling first movement Padre Martini's G-minor sonata would work well on any keyboard instrument, but the sensitive expression of its *Adagio* second movement entices the player to engage the true *una corda* tone, a special resource of Cristofori's design that is accessed by sliding the keyboard to the left.

Platti carried the Italian keyboard style northward to Würzburg, investing his sonatas with many pianistic traits. In his richly varied G-minor sonata one again notices the aptitude of the pianoforte for songful melodies and elegant violinistic figures.

The most eminent of Italian sonata composers, Domenico Scarlatti, developed his immensely varied repertoire of keyboard styles while surrounded by both quilled and hammered *cembali*. The sonatas presented here offer a concentrated spectrum of expressive and brilliant elements.

Interest in the Italian fortepiano penetrated northward into Saxony during the 1720s, accelerated by the arrival of Hasse and the Italian opera in Dresden in 1730. The organ builder Gottfried Silbermann, a friend and associate of Johann Sebastian Bach, was inspired to build a hammered keyboard instrument, winning Bach's qualified approval for his first design. As David Sutherland has proven, Silbermann's

subsequent revision of the action was copied directly from the work of Cristofori's heir and successor Giovanni Ferrini; this improved action earned Bach's unqualified endorsement. The intellectual, stylistic, and aesthetic power of Bach's mature solo keyboard music has proven formative for countless generations of pianists. There can be little doubt that Bach, an avid connoisseur of everything worthwhile in music, would have welcomed this eminently expressive instrument as a medium for his musical thought as soon as it arrived on the scene.

Bach reveals his most earnest and elevated manner in the *Partita in E minor*, the crown of his Opus 1, published in 1731. Through various allusions this work attests his faith in dedicated service and religious devotion as the pathway to profound joy.

Toccata

Bach sets out to awaken devotional thoughts, using a genre closely associated with that quintessential liturgical instrument, the organ. At its heart lies a broad three-voiced fugue whose subject references lamentation (three successive sigh figures) and the cross (three successive interlaced intervallic designs). Opening and closing improvisations frame this weighty material with chordal harmony, forceful dotted rhythms, and arched figures whose rare septuplet grouping suggests transcendence of worldly limitations. At the close this arched figure mounts through all twelve chromatic steps to achieve universal resolution.

Allemanda

The brilliant surface of this movement introduces a chain of descending thirds, a figure that is to play a part in several other movements of this partita. In both halves, an angular dotted rhythm links a series of cross figures.

Corrente

At 116 measures, this movement easily claims pride of place among Bach's correntes. Despite constant opposition from syncopations, rests, and suspensions, the resolute bass motion never flags. In each part, an area of prolonged dominant harmony frees the solo line to delight in tactile brilliance.

Sarabande

A sense of profound melancholy infuses this sarabande, which has left behind any semblance of dancing. The traditional rhythmic relationship intrinsic to a sarabande (a heavy downbeat paired with a prolonged and heavy second beat) remains intact but is shifted to an earlier position by one beat, aligning the more expressive harmonies with the stronger beats. This movement shares a close affinity with the initial Toccata's harmonies, dotted rhythms, and full chordal sonorities.

Air

As with the *Aria* of the fourth *partita*, vocal style has little relevance to this purely instrumental piece. It belongs here despite its placement in the score following the *Corrente*, which is merely a space-saving device to avoid inconvenient page turning in the *Sarabande*. The salient characteristics of the *Air* are a propulsive drive and a predilection for leaps that glances in the direction of Scarlatti. Constantly running eighth notes divert attention from the gavotte-like rhythm.

Tempo di Gavotta

Bach stops short of claiming that this piece actually *is* a gavotte. The requisite double upbeat is manifest, but so is a gigue-like triplet motion. The Bachian laboratory has begun to generate hybrids that resist simple classification.

Gigue

Unsurprisingly, Bach reserves a heightened significance for the concluding movement of the *Six Partitas*. For those who notice that the symbol of the cross is triply embedded in the fugue subject, there can be no mistaking the underlying message. There is, in addition, a notational conundrum to ponder. The invariable defining feature of gigue rhythm is the triplet: whether in 12/8, 6/8, 9/16, or 4/4 with eighth-note triplet subdivision (all of which have appeared in the preceding Partitas), the pulse of a gigue is invariably divisible by three. On this occasion, however, the scope of Bach's conception requires the largest canvas capable of accommodating four beats per measure. Were Bach to employ a triplet notation using eighth notes as the measuring unit, he would need to accommodate four sets of sextuple eighth notes per measure, producing an unwieldy time signature of 24/8. Instead, he resorts to *duple* notation comprising four half notes in the bar, producing the appearance of a sort of doubled cut time, and designating this unusual framework with the time signature of a circle crossed with a vertical line. Taken at face value, a fugue proceeding in duple meter generates no triplets, thus failing to meet the definition of gigue rhythm. Many have played this gigue "as written" in solid duple time, and as a matter of curiosity I experimented with this approach and found the unshakable internal cohesion of Bach's music effective under such conditions. However, as others have discovered, it is not particularly difficult to "tripletize" this gigue. I offer the listener a choice: you will hear the gigue played "straight" the first time through each half, and "gigued" on the repeats. I like to imagine that such a comparison depicts Bach's ultimate message: through the serious pursuit of virtue, the spirit is freed to rejoice.

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