

## **Mozart and the Keyboard Culture of His Time\***

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Let us imagine for the moment that in 2203 a performer/musicologist were invited to deliver the keynote address at a conference treating a leading figure in the keyboard culture of the period from the 1960s to the 1990s. Whose name would be an appropriate counterpart to that of Mozart in the late eighteenth century?

I suspect that the prime candidates would be pianists, not composers—from Serkin, Richter, Michelangeli, Brendel and Argerich to Pollini, Lupo, Perahia, Schiff, Uchida, etc. With some necessary prodding, though not to this audience, the names of Bilson and his illustrious disciples, Lubin, Lubimov, van Immerseel, Staier, etc. would emerge, as well as separate categories for harpsichordists and organists.

If this is indeed the case, perhaps such a conference might not be organized after all. What has happened in the intervening two centuries? It is not that composers have ceased to write for the piano. There would certainly be strong candidates for the honor in the first half of the twentieth century—Debussy, Ravel, Rachmaninoff, Bartók, and Prokofiev leap to mind—but from the second half of that century the sense of a keyboard culture seems no longer to be defined by composers, or rather composer-pianists, as it once was. Indeed, the gulf that emerged in the twentieth century between composers and performers cannot be separated from that separating composers and the general public, and is symptomatic of larger, disturbing cultural issues.

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\* This essay is lightly adapted from the keynote address delivered at an eponymous conference at Cornell University on 28 March 2003.

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The late eighteenth century was perhaps a more fortunate time, when such chasms had yet to emerge—a time when the aesthetic and performance activities of an incandescent creator could shape the culture so decisively as to transcend regional and even national borders. That Mozart's keyboard music did this, not only through its immediate impact at his own hands, but also through its influence on Beethoven, Hummel, and Mendelssohn (among others), is beyond doubt. As specifics are beyond the scope of a short article, I propose to offer an overview of Mozart's activities as performer and composer.

### **Mozart's Artistic Persona**

Mozart was one of the few composer-performers who thoroughly mastered both the violin and the piano. That he later renounced public performance on the violin, preferring the viola during his Vienna years, probably bespeaks the complex relationship with his father. It ought to be acknowledged, however, that from the outset of his *Wunderkind* years he was paraded before the public as a keyboard player, and his career as keyboard virtuoso reflects a consistent trajectory.

An evaluation of Mozart's influence on the keyboard culture of his time will necessarily reflect a good deal of retrospection, criticism, and interpretation. The only proper starting point, however, ought to be the perspective of his contemporaries. One of the most-cited eyewitness reports is that of Franz Xaver Niemetschek:

In answer to a universal request, [Mozart] gave a piano recital at a large concert in the Opera House. The theatre had never been so full as on this occasion; never had

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there been such unanimous enthusiasm as that awakened by his heavenly playing. We did not, in fact, know what to admire most, whether the extraordinary compositions or his extraordinary playing; together they made such an overwhelming impression on us that we felt we had been bewitched. When Mozart had finished the concert he continued improvising alone on the piano for half-an-hour. We were beside ourselves with joy and gave vent to our overwrought feelings in enthusiastic applause. In reality his improvisations exceeded anything that can be imagined in the way of piano-playing, as the highest degree of the composer's art was combined with perfection of playing.<sup>1</sup>

This account makes clear what others corroborate—that it was Mozart's abilities as improviser that earned him legendary status, outshining even his reputation as the finest pianist of his time. His compositions took third place. I propose that we first ponder what we can know about his improvisations and performances, for it is much easier to glean his views of the keyboard from an examination of his compositions.

### **The Improviser**

Mozart's father trained him in the performance and compositional principles of the Baroque era. His public concerts regularly included improvisations—fantasies, sets of variations, and cadenzas and lead-ins in concertos. Our notions of these stem primarily from improvisatory composed

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<sup>1</sup> . Franz Xaver Niemetschek (1766-1849), *Life of Mozart (Leben des K. K. Kapellmeisters Wolfgang Gottlieb Mozart, 1798)*, translated by Helen Mautner with an introduction by A. Hyatt King (London: L. Hyman, 1956), 36.

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music—the cadenzas he composed for his sister and pupils, as well as his fantasies. Most of these works are metrical, except for flourishes before a fermata to underscore the drama of an arrival—either before a new section in a fantasy, or before the final trill in a cadenza.

Were it not for Mozart's sister Maria Anna (Nannerl), we are unlikely to have known that Mozart also improvised non-metrical preludes. Nannerl was a fine pianist, but she lacked the ability to improvise. On several occasions from 1776 to 1778 Mozart composed for her modulating preludes and other pseudo-improvisations, which she evidently memorized and performed as if she were spontaneously inventing them. It is most fortunate that most of these pieces survive. Atypical of Mozart's normal style, scarcely known and rarely performed, they give us unusual insight into the world of improvisation in the late 1770s.<sup>2</sup>

These preludes are easily reducible to a bass line with figures to represent the chords, which happens to be precisely the means by which Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach teaches improvisation in the final chapter of his celebrated *Essay on the True Manner of Playing Keyboard Instruments*.<sup>3</sup> Bach presents a variety of harmonic formulae and some figuration to give his reader a basic vocabulary, and concludes with a figured bass and a non-measured prelude based upon it. The relationship between it and Mozart's examples is unmistakable.

Once he settled in Vienna, Mozart's pseudo-improvisations were limited to fantasies and cadenzas. He apparently taught the art of embellishment, as demonstrated by an elaborate

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2 . Cf. *Neue Mozart-Ausgabe* (henceforth *NMA*) IX/27/2:

a. Modulating Prelude from F major to C major, KV deest + K.6Anh. C 15.11; 4-5; 148-51. The two sections have been reprinted as a single unit in *NMA IX/27 (Klavierstücke Band 1 und 2)*, critical report (*Kritischer Bericht*, henceforth *KB*), ed. Wolfgang Rehm, 211-18; and in the recently published Bärenreiter edition of the *Einzelstücke für Klavier* (BA 5745)(Kassel, 2001).

b. Four Preludes, K. 284a (formerly collectively known as the Capriccio in C major, K. 395/300g).

A third prelude, discussed extensively in the family correspondence (18 July – 10 September 1778), has yet to surface. Cf. Robert D. Levin, "Mozart's non-metrical keyboard preludes," *The Keyboard in Baroque Europe*, ed. Christopher Hogwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 198-216.

3 . Translated by William J. Mitchell as *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949).

ornamentation by Barbara Ployer to the middle movement of the Piano Concerto in A major, K. 488;<sup>4</sup> but we have no record of his recourse to non-metrical improvisation or composition after 1778.

To judge from Ployer's embellishment of the middle movement to K. 488, her teacher's improvised decorations were considerably more elaborate than the most fanciful attempted by any performer today. As for Mozart's written-out cadenzas and lead-ins, whereas some of them are quite dependent on a selection of themes from the movement proper, at least one—again K. 488—does not use a single one of the memorable themes available.<sup>5</sup> Careful examination of their content reveals that, as a rule, virtually every measure is taken directly from a specific spot, and citations that are adjacent in the cadenza may be as many as hundreds of measures apart in the movement. The relationship between these apparently rigorous pseudo-improvisations and those conjured up by the master in live concerts is likely to remain speculative.

The same may be said about Mozart's composed fantasies and those he is likely to have improvised. The rhetoric of the D-minor fantasy, K. 397, or the Fantasy (Prelude) in C major, K. 394, in which primarily metrical discourse is at times punctuated with non-metrical passages, may be a better approximation of what his listeners are likely to have heard than the Fantasy in C minor, K. 475, whose volatile emotions are channeled into a more controlled compositional

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4 . Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, *Mus. ms.* 15486/5. The document is reproduced, without attribution, in the *KB* to the *NMA* edition of K. 488 (V/15/7) prepared by Hermann Beck, appearing in a diplomatic version with an additional staff that rationalizes the rhythms (pp. g/10-14), as well as in facsimile (pp. g/106-109). Subsequent to its publication, Wolfgang Plath was able to identify the handwriting as that of Barbara Ployer. Cf. *NMA X/30/2 (Barbara Ployers und Franz Jakob Freystädtlers Theorie- und Kompositionsstudien bei Mozart)*, prepared by Hellmut Federhofer and Alfred Mann, p. X.

5 . The idea that opens the cadenza is in fact derived not from a similar-sounding passage in the concerto, but from the later of the two first-movement cadenzas to the other A-major concerto, K. 414/385p, which demonstrably lay on Mozart's desk during the composition of K. 488. Cf. Robert D. Levin, "K. 488: Mozart's Third Concerto for Barbara Ployer?" in *Mozartiana. The Festschrift for the Seventieth Birthday of Professor Ebisawa Bin* (2001): 555-70; Japanese translation, 45-57: **《ピアノ協奏曲第23番》** .

K.488はモーツァルトがバルバラ・プロイヤーに献呈した3番目の協奏曲か?——ロバート・D・レヴィン  
若松茂生・訳

environment.

On the other hand, many of his keyboard variations, with their stylized figurative embellishment and obligatory *minore* (for major-key themes; *maggiore* for those in minor) and adagio variations, are quite possibly protocols of actual improvisations.

### **Mozart's Keyboard Instruments**

Mozart was acquainted with and wrote for harpsichord, clavichord, organ, clock organ and piano. He was also likely to have known and played the tangent piano (*Tangentenflügel*) – an instrument whose strings are struck by oblong pieces of wood, the shape of which is similar to that of harpsichord jacks but which are positioned at a right angle to that of such jacks. Mozart also wrote for the glass harmonica and glockenspiel (the latter in *Die Zauberflöte*) – non-keyboard instruments that nonetheless employ keyboard textures. In Vienna he owned a clavichord, a piano by Anton Walter, and a piano pedal-board on which he is known to have improvised in public.<sup>6</sup>

With the possible exception of Johann Sebastian Bach, whose overall instrumental insight and particular expertise in organ-building are well known,

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6 . Donnerstag den 10ten März 1785, wird / Hr. Kapellmeister Mozart Die Ehre haben / in dem / k. k. National-Hof-Theater / eine / grosse musikalische Akademie / zu seinem Vortheile / zu geben, wobey er nicht nur ein *neues erst /verfertigtes Forte piano-Konzert / spielen, sondern auch ein besonders grosses / Forte piano Pedal / beym Phantasie- / ren* gebrauchen wird. Die übrigen Stücke / wird der große Anschlagzettel am Tage selbst / zeigen. *Mozart. Die Dokumente seines Lebens. Gesammelt und erläutert von Otto Erich Deutsch (NMA X/34)* (Kassel etc.: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 1961), 211-12.

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together with his role in the design of the viola pomposa,<sup>7</sup> Mozart possessed unsurpassed connoisseurship of all instruments. His music reveals not only a total grasp of the technique of each instrument, but exploits to the full the characteristics of the instruments and voices at hand. This involves not merely the technical and timbral aspects of the instruments, but the specialized abilities of individual instrumentalists and singers.

This uncanny aptitude may be of considerable help in attempting to divine the instrument for which an individual keyboard work may have been conceived. Nomenclature alone is surely not a reliable key. Mozart designates the solo keyboard of his concertos as *Cembalo* (harpsichord) through K. 503 (1787); in K. 537 (1788) it is *Forte-Piano* and by the final concerto, K. 595, he uses the modern nomenclature *Pianoforte*. As noted, he performed his Viennese concertos on a five-octave piano (ca. 1781) by Anton Walter; hence the retention of *cembalo* does not prescribe the harpsichord. The plethora of dynamics in Mozart's solo and chamber works for keyboard likewise imply that he had the piano in mind. Solo works could be played on a clavichord, which Mozart still possessed at his death, but the instrument was not suitable for public concerts or ensemble works, to say nothing of concertos.

Mozart's earliest solo keyboard works—the individual pieces preserved from the *Notenbücher*, the sonatas with violin accompaniment K. 6-9, 10-15<sup>8</sup> and 26-31 and the four *pasticcio* concertos K. 37, 39-41 seem clearly intended for the harpsichord. Many of

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7 . Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach. The Learned Musician*. (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2000), 414.

8 . Also performable as trios with *ad libitum* cello.

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these pieces have an almost paralyzing dependence upon Alberti basses. Young as he was, Mozart could not have overlooked the fact that melodies in eighth-notes and longer values would be overwhelmed acoustically by the constant drone of left-hand sixteenths, even if the melody were to be reinforced with additional stops. Nonetheless, his earliest surviving original concertos, K. 175, K. 238 and K. 246, in which Mozart has weaned himself from the dependence upon the Alberti bass, are effective on the harpsichord. Despite the inscription *Concerto per il Clavicembalo*, K. 175 could conceivably have been intended for organ. Its top note is  $d^3$  and the treatment of the lower bass range—in which low B is demonstrably avoided but A is present, is congruent with the treatment of the organ in the epistle sonatas. Although it would seem far-fetched that the Lodron family would possess three pianos in 1774, the first and second keyboard parts to the triple concerto K. 242 contain changes from  $f$  to  $p$  within passages of continuous thirty-seconds as well as numerous occurrences of  $fp$ ; making performance on harpsichords problematic. Given Mozart's lifelong care to accommodate to the gifts of individual performers and specific instruments, it is questionable whether he would prescribe split-second dynamic changes that might cause anxiety in even a seasoned professional, to say nothing of a Countess and her elder daughter.<sup>9</sup>

There seems little doubt that from the sonatas K. 279-284 onward Mozart's keyboard music was geared to the piano. This, of course, does not mean today's concert grand. From the foregoing it should be clear that Mozart's keyboard music is precisely gauged to the acoustic

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<sup>9</sup> . The two *crescendo* markings in Keyboard I, first movement, could be executed on a harpsichord with Venetian swell shutters or a machine stop, as observed by Richard Maunder in private correspondence, but instantaneous shifts within a running passage, or *thesubito*  $p$  on the resolution of a  $f$  trill (Keyboard II, third movement, solo lead-in) could cause the mechanism to jam.



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characteristics of the pianos of his day. Earlier models were double-strung (i.e., two strings per note); gradually, triple stringing was introduced in the treble for added power. The precision and crispness of articulation of the harpsichord, whose plucking action is extraordinarily sensitive to the speed of attack, is mirrored in Viennese pianos, in which a small tuning-fork-shaped metal capsule is mounted towards the rear of the key. The hammer shank is held in place by a metal pin resting in dimples on each arm of the forked capsule. The shank runs backward towards the wrest plank; the hammer strikes the string close to the nut. At the rear of the key an escapement aids repetition, and most pianos from the 1780s onward have a back check running just in front of the hammers, which are quite small and covered by leather. The lightness and simplicity of this design, together with the added velocity due to the reverse positioning of the hammers compared with the English-French-American design now standard, result in an action of great speed, sensitivity, precision, and efficiency based on a key dip and resistance weight some 50 percent of that of the present concert grand. The faster hammer velocity preserves the crisp articulation of the harpsichord, whereas the striking point—so close to the end of the sounding string—yields more focus to the sonority and gives Mozart's expressive dissonances greater pungency. The lesser string tension of an entirely wood frame results in a more rapid sound decay. Moreover, the longer and more thinly wound bass strings have a lighter sonority, so that chords in the lower register are far more transparent than on later instruments, where such chords can easily sound muddy even without the pedal. All of these factors contribute to a timbre that is lighter, with greater presence of higher overtones (and lesser of the lower ones), and which is capable of both delicacy and tanginess. Finally, the fact that, like harpsichords, older pianos have parallel stringing (cross stringing was invented in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century) makes it possible to play

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both hands with equal strength without the left hand overpowering the right.<sup>10</sup> Today's normative practice of lightening the left hand and bringing out the right is unnecessary on Mozart's piano and in fact undermines his carefully balanced textures. In all of these respects performers playing on later instruments must make adjustments that will be easier if they have had the experience of playing, however briefly, on a good quality period piano (original or copy). Those of us who have devoted a considerable amount of our lives to the rediscovery of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music on period pianos are utterly persuaded that the imagination of those composers is deployed with acuity to the exploitation of the acoustic opportunities afforded by the instruments of their time. We feel that were their music to sound more effective on later instruments, to that degree their ear and practical understanding might be considered deficient. We would argue, however, that there is no need to worry.

### **Pedaling**

Mozart never explicitly calls for the use of raising the dampers—i.e., the pedal. His Walter piano once had a hand stop to lift the dampers; this has been replaced with knee levers that are typical of Viennese pianos of the time. Michael Latham has argued that the knee levers were installed as part of a *grand ravalement* in 1805 and therefore should not be assumed for the execution of

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<sup>10</sup> . Cross stringing reduces the length of the bass strings, requiring thicker copper windings to preserve the low pitch. This is responsible for the muddier sound of the bass referred to above.

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Mozart's keyboard music.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, most performers of Mozart on period pianos argue from the evidence of the music that he reckoned with the use of damper raising (pedal),<sup>12</sup> as implied by the double-stemmed left-hand passage from the second movement of the Sonata in D, K. 311, mm. 86-90.<sup>13</sup>

**Example 1** Mozart, Piano Sonata in D major, K. 311, second movement, mm. 86-90

The image shows a musical score for measures 86-90 of Mozart's Piano Sonata in D major, K. 311, second movement. The score is written for piano and consists of two staves: a treble clef staff for the right hand and a bass clef staff for the left hand. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The right hand part begins with a melodic line in measure 86, featuring a grace note on the first beat. The left hand part consists of a double-stemmed passage, where each note is written with two stems. The dynamics are marked as 'crescendo' starting in measure 87, 'f' (forte) in measure 89, and 'p' (piano) in measure 90. The score ends with a final chord in measure 90.

Literal performance of this passage without pedal is impossible except for those with *very* large hands.

In any case, the lighter, clearer sound of Mozart's pianos makes a more sparing use of pedal possible than is customary on today's instruments.

### The Pedal-Board

Mozart's ownership of a pedal-board has led inevitably to questions about how and when he used

11 . Michael Latcham, "Mozart and the Pianos of Gabriel Anton Walter," *Early Music* 25, no. 3 (1997): 382-402.

12 . Cf. Eva Badura-Skoda, "The Anton Walter fortepiano: Mozart's beloved concert instrument – A response to Michael Latcham," *Early Music* 28, no. 3 (2000): 469-74; Malcolm Bilson and David A. Sutherland, "Mozart's Walter Fortepiano," *Early Music* 29, no. 2 (2001): 333-34.

13 . More generally, see David Rowland, *A History of Pianoforte Pedalling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

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it.<sup>14</sup> Evidence for Mozart's use of the pedal-board in his composed music is not particularly persuasive. It is worth noting that the announcement of a subscription concert in which the pedal-board would be used<sup>15</sup> refers to it only for an improvisation and not for a new concerto to be heard on the same occasion. In the autograph of the D-minor concerto K. 466, the nine beats of the first movement that are often invoked in support of the pedal-board's use display a series of notational layers indigenous to Mozart's compositional process. It is more likely that what is found in those measures is a series of alternatives, not a total texture. It is relevant here to ponder several analogous cases of works Mozart composed for special instruments:

1. The Concerto for Flute and Harp, K. 299/297c. Its flutist, Count de Guines, had a tail-piece enabling him to play two extra notes at the bottom of the instrument, *d-flat*<sub>1</sub> and *c*<sub>1</sub>, that were not available to normal players of the time. At least one of the extra notes appears in each of the three movements of the concerto.

2. The Clarinet Quintet in A, K. 581, the Clarinet Concerto in A, K. 622, and several fragments were written for Anton Stadler, who devised an extension to his instrument that extended its range four semi-tones lower. It is commonly agreed that these extra notes are used pervasively throughout these works.

If Mozart intended to use his pedal-board for the execution of his concertos, his documented abilities on the organ would have made a completely independent pedal part possible and likely. This would have added considerably to the virtuosity of the concertos and would have garnered attention and appreciation. Surely he would not have employed the pedal-

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14 . Session V of the Cornell Conference, "Three Pedal Claviers: Lessons & Implications," chaired by David Breitman and featuring a concert by David Yearsley and John Khouri, was quite thought-provoking, though it left at least as many questions as it provided answers.

15 . Cf. n. 6.

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board for a mere five notes in K. 466.

Then, too, there are enough passages in the concertos with bass lines in octaves to question notions that the purpose of the pedal-board would have been limited to reinforcing the bass. Were that the case, such octave notation would have been superfluous. This is not to say that Mozart notated everything he intended to play in the concertos. We know well that he contented himself with outlining the outer notes of right-hand arpeggios and other passagework at times, and similarly wrote sketchy versions of melodies that could be elaborated anew in each performance. Given present knowledge, though, it would seem to require a leap of faith to posit the use of the pedal-board in an *ad libitum* manner that rests upon nothing more solid than the presence of K. 466's debatable five notes.

### **Tuning**

Equal temperament, which divides the octave into twelve equal semi-tones, has constituted the normative tuning system for well over one hundred and fifty years. Musicians playing on standard instruments use equal temperament as a basic frame of reference, with significant deviations. Keyboard instruments are tuned in equal temperament, but the octaves are stretched in the interest of brilliance in the upper register, compounding the compromise inherent in the system. String (and, to a lesser extent, wind and brass) players rely on late nineteenth-century notions of sharpening leading tones and chromatically raised pitches and flattening subdominants and chromatically lowered pitches. (The result causes leading tones to be doubly out of tune, as the tempered leading tone is already sharp to the natural major third.)

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In Mozart's time keyboard instruments were tuned in a number of compromise temperaments, in which some tonalities were more pure, others less so, giving the chords of each key a different and characteristic sonority deriving from their relative acoustic purity or dissonance. Such temperaments, which are susceptible of considerable alteration and invention, are often named after the musicians who devised them, e.g., Werckmeister, Kirnberger, and Vallotti. The result was a unique flavor for each key, which enabled those without perfect pitch to have a sense of the distance of a foreign key from the principal one. False reprises thus sounded as peculiar to the listener as they looked on the page.

### **Continuo**

Keyboard soloists in Mozart's time accompanied the orchestra during the orchestral ritornellos. In every one of his works involving keyboard and orchestra Mozart directs the soloist to double the string bass line (not the violoncello line when this diverges from the double basses, or the bassoon when the basses are silent) in orchestral passages, thus delineating a continuo role for the soloist. The earlier concertos provide figuration of the bass during such orchestral sections; these figures were often (but not always) supplied subsequently by his father. Although later concerto autographs omit the figures, the convention is preserved by the indication *Col Basso* or its abbreviation *ColB*.

The validity and relevance of this practice to present-day performance has been attacked for well over a century on several grounds:

- It is said to undermine the essential nature of a concerto, viz., the contest between

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soloist and orchestra;

- The bass-line and figures are now deemed to have been mere cues for the soloist to follow the progress of the work during purely orchestral sections, thus corresponding to the short score simplification of the orchestral music that appears in the solo keyboard parts of nineteenth-century concertos;
- The main purpose of continuo playing was to keep the orchestra together—a function that was later taken over by the conductor and thus lacks relevance in present-day performances.

These factors would surely be no less important, however, in passages for winds or for strings when the string basses are silent—places where Mozart does not prescribe continuo. There is, then, no compelling documentary evidence against a continuo role for the soloist.

Where Mozart prescribes continuo, he invokes the full range of accompanimental possibilities: harmonic and/or linear textures, *tasto solo* (the bass line only) and octave doubling of the bass. During many solo passages Mozart accompanies an active right hand by doubling the bass with single notes in the left hand. There is no evidence, however, that he expected the soloist to add continuo-like chords in such passages; indeed, the existence of many notated passages containing left-hand chords may be the strongest argument against supplying them where they are missing.

### **Mozart's Style**

Viennese Classicism is often considered a high-water mark of music history. In contemplating

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long-term historical developments we can see the coalescing of a number of tendencies. The power of tonal harmony, used alongside other options for over two hundred years prior to the High Baroque, became the central vernacular at the turn of the eighteenth century, promulgated in Italy and eagerly taken up elsewhere. The direct discourse of rhythmically distinctive and often catchy motives, another contemporary Italian trademark, allowed for greater definition of character. These developments were easily applied to the prevailing polyphonic discourse, which favored continuity over local inflection and culminated in major cadences only in mid- to long-term. The sole exceptions were dances and marches, whose shorter length favored a sense of local reference. Major/minor tonality provides a strong paradigm to a sophisticated listener, but a lay audience needs more frequent orientation. The normative four-measure phrases with balanced antecedents and consequents of Classical period music, the origins of which are to be found in the dance, provide just that. Virtually every few seconds in a Classical allegro the audience is asked a question or presented with a resolution, or, less frequently, with a surprise. The resultant sense of expectation allows a listener direct and constant interaction with the course of the piece. The adroit composer fulfills that expectation most of the time, in precisely the way a shark with three walnut shells and a pea lets the corner bystander win until the stakes are raised.

The development of sonata form is a concomitant element in this aesthetic. The dichotomy of half and perfect cadence of the 4+-4-measure period is extended to a primary and secondary group, and the dramatic element of seduction or escape can animate the exposition, even as the disorder of the development section mimics the turbulence of real life. The equivalence of the arrival at the recapitulation with the moment of self-revelation in Aristotelian drama was manifest to contemporary composers, performers, and listeners alike.



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As auspicious as these developments were, they brought problems. No musical style, not even the pomp of the French Baroque, is so replete with clichés. The grace of the appoggiaturas, the regularity of the four-bar phrases, the dependence on devices such as the already-maligned Alberti bass, the numbing predictability of the cadential formulae—all of these produced a music full of curtsies and gallantry that was for the most part either vapid or downright stultifying. That we look upon the era differently is because a handful of astounding masters were able to take this dross and turn it into a language of miraculous intensity. Make no mistake about it, though, it was much more difficult to succeed in making the Classical style expressive than we acknowledge, for Haydn and Mozart have spoiled us utterly, abetted by Beethoven and Schubert.

Within such limitations Mozart's achievement is all the more remarkable. Like Telemann, he was a sophisticate with a cosmopolitan palate. His musical language resulted from an ability to absorb the crucial attributes of the best music he heard and create a synthesis that he could slant to national styles, writing French, Italian or German music at will. Unlike Telemann, however, he was not content to write suavely and glibly. We need have no illusions about this; despite his apparently effortless facility, he worked assiduously, evidently driven by a justified belief in his own superiority. His music, like Haydn's, would have been the greatest of its era had it been one-half or even perhaps one-tenth as eloquent as it is.

Looking back at his *œuvre* we may single out several attributes that are of determining importance to Mozart's language.

1. He has a superlative sense of the narrative and the dramatic. In the operas we marvel at his ability to delineate character; that ability is exploited in the instrumental works as well. The

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melody, rhythm, texture, and harmony of Mozart's music develop a character and purpose to every phrase that serves multilevel dramatic ends, from local to long-term. To that end, he develops a hierarchical network of motives and sections that is demonstrably more complex than that of any other composer in the Western canon. The hierarchy does not require the listener to be aware of its intricacies, but lies behind the sense of direction and the awareness of events past and anticipated. That sense of direction guides us seemingly ineffably to the predetermined end. That Mozart actively and deliberately controls his architecture is confirmed by the fact that he is the only opera composer in history who illustrated the consequence of the Aristotelian precept of the unity of time, place, and action by ending his operas in the same key in which they began.

Mozart's fascination with figures, the counting of measures in certain of his autographs and the sketch-leaf containing the bar counts of the successive numbers in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* leave no doubt about his use of and awareness of complex procedures. The more of this we understand, of course, the more we sense of his miraculous genius.

2. A subtle source of the potency of Mozart's language resides in his conservatism in choice of keys. No multimovement instrumental work of his uses a key signature of more than four sharps or three flats. He preferred the social tension of audacious modulations within normative origins to the blandishments of the exotic. Haydn's choice of far-flung tonalities for the slow movements of many of his later compositions, emulated by Beethoven, held no appeal for Mozart. A modulation to F# major in the first movement of the C-minor piano concerto K. 491 interested him much more.

3. Mozart's music displays a restlessness of invention that threatens to resemble Attention Deficiency Disorder. We have only to examine the constantly changing orchestral

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accompaniment patterns in the piano concertos—sometimes as many as three within a single phrase. With every such change comes a nuance of character. Acutely aware of the myriad manifestations of human behavior, he succeeded in mirroring them in an impulsive musical language. To my mind, the embalming of that language by blanketing its rhetoric in perpetual loveliness and refinement—a hallmark of many performers of the last century—verges on the criminal.

4. Critical to all of this is Mozart's sense of rhythm, which displays a fluidity so natural, so flexible, that it is unlikely ever to be surpassed. Messiaen, for one, marveled at it. The effect of Mozart's continuous inflection is heightened by comparing the second movement of Haydn's Sonata in E-flat major, Hob. XV:49 with Mozart's Piano Sonata in D major, K. 576: both use a similar theme.

**Example 2a** Haydn: Piano Sonata in E-flat major, Hob. XVI:49, second movement, beginning

The image shows the beginning of the second movement of Haydn's Piano Sonata in E-flat major, Hob. XVI:49. The tempo is marked "Adagio e cantabile". The music is in 3/4 time and E-flat major. The score consists of two systems of piano and bass staves. The first system shows the first five measures, with dynamics *fz* and *fz* in the right hand. The second system shows measures 6 through 9, with dynamics *fz*, *fz*, and *p* in the right hand. The left hand provides a simple harmonic accompaniment.

**Example 2b** Mozart: Piano Sonata in D major, K. 576, second movement, beginning

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The point here is not to find fault with Haydn's marvelous movement, for that would condemn him for failing to adopt a strategy he did not wish to employ. The pauses in his music are as essential to its amalgamation of tenderness and wit as Mozart's *filo* to his combination of equal tenderness with a melancholy nostalgia.

### Mozart's Keyboard Writing

Mozart's earliest Salzburg keyboard pieces show *galant* contours over Baroque bass lines. They are by no means addicted to the Alberti bass, as are the sonatas from K. 6 onward. Having succumbed to that device with a vengeance, he must have realized soon enough that flexibility of expression could not be achieved with a device as mechanical—and *loud*.

What is quite peculiar is how little keyboard music Mozart composed after the grand tour in the mid-1760s. It remains unexplained why the young man, who was composing arias and

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whole operas, would choose in 1768 to arrange sonata movements by other composers rather than writing his own concertos, or why his first surviving original concerto dates from as late as 1773, and his first surviving solo sonatas from as late as 1775.

What we see in those sonatas is considerable flair in defining a variety of characters and colors, a flexibility of keyboard textures that delineate a range from quiet introspection to the symphonic bustle of K. 284's opening movement. In the six works, Mozart's determined use of the dynamic resources of the piano creates a voice of considerable and expressive sophistication. The concertos of this period are less progressive in this respect; it is not until the watershed of the Concerto in E-flat, K. 271 that this changes.

The choice of C minor for K. 271's middle movement—mirrored in the 1779 *sinfonia concertante* for violin and viola, K. 364/320d, also in the key of E-flat—has precedents in such works as the F-major sonata K. 280, whose middle movement is in F minor. The depth and breadth of feeling in K. 271/ii, however, are arresting, and it is perhaps anything but coincidental that the harmonic and melodic content of the dominant pedal within the recapitulation is quoted in the dominant pedal that ends the development of the first movement of the C-minor concerto, K. 491.<sup>16</sup> This will not be the last time Mozart engages in remakes.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the fact that a majority of Mozart's solo keyboard pieces were written with commerce in view, certain sonatas, variations, and individual pieces clearly reflected serious artistic commitment. The most remarkable of these is the A-minor sonata, K. 310, written in Paris in 1778 and, unlike virtually the totality of his music, surely precipitated by external circumstances—in this

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16 . Cf. K. 271, second movement, mm. 96-100; K. 491, first movement, mm. 354-62.

17 . For example, the finale of the String Quintet in C major, K. 515, is unmistakably based on that of the Dissonant Quartet, K. 465, in the same key; and the insertion of an A-flat-major minuet in the finale of K.271 is revived in that of the Piano Concerto, K. 482, likewise in E-flat. These are not isolated cases.

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case the death of his mother. For its sheer violence, rage, and despair, K. 310 knows no equal in his solo works. The juxtaposition in the first-movement development of ff and pp is likewise unprecedented, and is devastatingly coordinated with the scale degrees of the circle of fifths to produce a sense of terror that anticipates the tales of Poe. Similarly, the distended, jagged left-hand leaps of the finale show the artist spinning out of control in a manner that Mozart will not ever again reveal.

The second movement of the sonata reveals another aspect of Mozart's musical personality—his astonishing long-term memory. In 1768 he arranged Johann Schobert's Sonata Op. XVII No. 2 as the second movement of his second *pasticcio* concerto in B-flat, K. 39. The ingredients of the movement consist of an ascending triad in the left hand and a triplet *ostinato* in the right. This combination veers amusingly close to the popular music of the 1950s after the double bar, but contains a characteristic circle-of-fifth sequence in D minor that is clearly reprised in K. 310/ii, composed ten years after K. 39. Furthermore, this combination of ascending F-major triad and triplets is taken up by Mozart a third time, in 1785, when he added a transcendent melody to the texture, which all the Muzak-al dissemination in the world cannot subvert. I refer, of course, to the second movement of the **C-major piano concerto K. 467**.

By the early Vienna years Mozart's keyboard style had attained an urbanity and flexibility that knew few equals. He had solved the accompaniment problem by creating dynamic interaction between the two hands. For example, a sudden pause in the left hand sends the right hand into a flurry of feigned embarrassment, as occurs twice at the beginning of the first movement of the Sonata in B-flat, K. 333.

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**Example 3** Mozart, Piano Sonata in B-flat major, K. 333, first movement, beginning

Entstand in Linz, Ende 1783

**Allegro**

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo marking is 'Allegro'. The first system begins with a treble clef staff containing a melodic line of eighth and sixteenth notes, and a bass clef staff with a simple accompaniment of quarter notes. The second system continues the melodic line with some chromaticism and includes a fermata over a measure. The third system features a more complex texture with sixteenth-note passages in the right hand and a steady accompaniment in the left hand.

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The finale of the same sonata is the equivalent of Bach's Italian Concerto, BWV 971, replicating a concerto rondo, complete with cadenza.

From 1784 to 1786 it is the piano concerto that dominates Mozart's keyboard thinking. Except for the ambitious demands of K. 450 and K. 451, which Mozart himself described as making the performer sweat, he never sought to equal the more athletic style of a Kozeluch. His writing is certainly difficult, but much more due to expressive richness and weight than technical strain. It is precisely that richness that elicits the sensuality of his discourse with a harmonic vocabulary so subtle and variegated that Beethoven's response was not to imitate it, but to pare it down to the absolute basics. In jazz parlance, Mozart's changes had few advocates, and only a vestigial presence can be discerned in certain passages of his already-cited acolytes, Hummel and Mendelssohn.

A fascinating aspect of Mozart's keyboard style is the degree to which his initial ideas prompt him to simplify later, not for the sake of improvement but more likely because he was undoubtedly too pressed for time to practice for the impending concert. Devilish passages in K. 450 (including a triplet scale and trill in double thirds), K. 451, and K. 467 were replaced with elegant simplifications that are not necessarily improvements. We should be aware of these, for we, at least, can find the practice time that eluded him.



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Mozart's late keyboard style emerges not in the concertos, but in the A-major violin sonata K. 526 and the sonatas K. 533 and K. 576. The influence of J. S. Bach had been immediate in 1782, but it is from 1787 onward that polyphony becomes organic to Mozart's language, providing it with both strength and deepened personality. The pure two-part texture of his late keyboard writing is the ultimate victory over the child's clichéd labors, and closes the circle by bringing Mozart back to the musical time immediately preceding his birth. Drafts of unfinished piano sonatas show that he intended to move further in that direction.

### **Performance**

Although each age executes music from an earlier period according to its own ideas, the nineteenth-century view of Mozart as the embodiment of grace and elegance, coupled with the post-Chopin predilection for singing legato playing, remains the present-day norm, and not just for pianists. It is pianists above all, however, who tend to minimize or ignore completely Mozart's staccato articulations and detailed slurring, holding notes into rests and, in general, providing as continuous a smooth surface as possible. (The advent of Urtext editions has not prevented performers from continuing to impose a late nineteenth-century aesthetic on Mozart's music.) Furthermore, the decline of improvisation as a central element in concert life and the ultimate separation of musicians into performers and composers, already bemoaned, have fostered performances, as well as editions, based on literal readings of the composer's text. This encourages a pietistic approach to a music whose actual substance is theatrical, not decorative. We have seen that Mozart was above all a dramatist: his performances were crowned by his improvisations and were dependent on the spontaneous realization of a musical surface he often

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left somewhat bare. This allowed him the necessary freedom to slant the characterization of a given performance in a particular direction.

What we know about late eighteenth-century performance practice and Mozart's personality suggests that capricious spontaneity was at the core of his performances, with the element of risk at the forefront. We must remember the newness of music during his day, when few pieces were ever heard more than once. The concept of repertoire did not exist. Perhaps, then, Mozart's most significant contribution to the keyboard culture of his time arose from his unrivaled ability to harness his immense musical intellect, his overwhelming facility at the piano, his prodigious memory, and above all his sublime understanding of human nature, freed from the need to judge his fellow human beings, to the goal of communicating a world of teeming emotions. Everything about that process was directed to the fervor of the moment; and that moment shows every sign of being eternal.