

Performance on Early Pianos (1760-1840)

Joanna Leach



The Music Room at Shute House

Front left: Clementi 1832 Front right: Stodart 1823

Back left: Steinway Model 'A' 1910 Back right: Longman & Broderip 1786

1. Performance Hints

Single action fortepianos made towards the end of 18th Century usually were of five octaves, whilst those with double action made at the end of the 18thC or the early 19thC, are usually found with five-and-a-half or six octaves. The key-board compass to some extent will determine what music is suitable to be played on the instrument. When I inherited a Clementi square piano, it was purely out of curiosity - for its historical interest - that I decided to have it restored. Having only experienced badly or unrestored square pianos, it had never occurred to me to imagine that I would ever prefer playing the works of classical and early romantic composers on early pianos.

Part of the excitement of exploring a period piano, is to realise the sounds that the composer had in his inner ear. For instance Dussek would not have expected his Duos for harp and piano to be played on two tonally dissimilar instruments, such as the modern piano and harp. Played on the appropriate period instruments, the music blends and comes to life in an

unexpected manner for us today, but in a way that Dussek obviously intended.

Performers may well find that the piano itself seems to dictate many subtleties of interpretation which would not be self-evident on a modern instrument. For example, the varying character of the 'voice-parts' within the compass of the piano, invites the player to utilise these distinctive tonal qualities to bring to life the conversational, almost operatic aspect, developed by composers such as Haydn.



Joanna playing an 1810 Astor - Arundel 2006

The light shallow touch makes repetition and rapid ornaments feel particularly delightful under the fingers and much easier to play on a really well restored instrument. It was only when the piano evolved with thicker strings and heavier hammers that it became necessary to make the mechanism more complicated to avoid the hammers rebounding. Contrary to popular belief, rapid intricate passages are perfectly possible, and indeed sometimes much easier to play than on the modern piano. The pianists touch must be adapted to the light and shallow action in order to achieve the most beautiful sound from the instrument. Even in forte passages use of heavy arm-weight results in ugly tone. One is able to use more energy in the forte passages to generate excitement, which on a modern instrument would sound somewhat overblown. Bear in mind that 'forte' dynamic markings in compositions of the period, are entirely appropriate when applied using period pianos, whilst the same markings played on a modern piano will often appear 'Wagnerian'.

The soft silvery singing tone of the treble is more effective when not played with a 'bedding-the-keys' super legato touch. Newly restored instruments must be played-in to achieve their natural beautiful tone.

3. Why 'Authentic'? What's wrong with replicas?

Not only did each make of piano have its own acoustic characteristics of the marque, but each individual instrument had its unique sound! When making a modern replica there is almost certainly the temptation to 'improve' on the original, by using techniques which only developed later. Authentic instruments invariably have very different qualities in each part or 'voice' within the compass of the piano. It is a curious feature of many reproduction pianos, that the sound quality has been evened out, producing a uniformity of tone across



*Joanna Leach playing the 1823 Stodart
at the Wagon & Horses Recital*

the compass which sounds bland by comparison with an original.

In Badura-Skoda's famous book 'Interpreting Mozart on the Keyboard' written in 1957, he writes "Really good historical instruments are rarely available. Imitations may be more mechanically reliable, but it is very rare for them to sound as distinctive and satisfying as do originals." Since this was written more emphasis has been placed on authentic restoration and the work of skilled restorers has led to increased interest in performances on carefully prepared original instruments.

Quite apart from the considerations of sound, there is also something to value in the piano as a beautiful piece of antique furniture - often nowhere near as expensive as one might think! Happily days of amateurish restorations are largely in the past - for example, where a very fine Broadwood grand of the same period as Beethoven's was ruined when modern strings had been fitted, causing the whole instrument to warp beyond repair!