

The “Fortepiano”

Fortepiano or Pianoforte?

In the history of confusing names, the fortepiano ranks close to the top. What is it? How does it differ from a pianoforte? And what about the piano? I have had many amusing opportunities trying to explain this to my audiences—often successfully confusing them further—because strictly speaking a fortepiano is, in fact, the same as a pianoforte, which is the full name for the piano! It all started around 1700 in Florence when Bartolomeo Cristofori developed a new instrument which was called a “gravicembalo col piano, e forte” (“harpsichord with soft and loud”). This got truncated to just pianoforte, which has been used interchangeably with fortepiano. But in today’s common English usage, we use the word fortepiano to refer to earlier models of the modern piano as we know it, generally pre-1820 instruments with wooden frames and leathered hammers (in contrast to the modern iron frames and felted hammers).

However, the confusion intensifies as one delves into the fortepiano world because of the huge historical variety. The difference between instruments from different decades and cities is often greater than their difference to the modern piano, notwithstanding the even wider variety of other piano-like keyboard instruments developed in the 18th Century (Daniel Gottlob Türk lists close to thirty such exotic instruments in the introduction to his 1789 treatise, *Klavierschule*). But at this point I shall make a sweeping generalisation that the world can be divided into those who are fascinated by this, and those who are not. The former can read on!

A tale of two cities: London and Vienna

After Cristofori’s invention in the early 1700’s it took the next sixty years before the musical tastes caught on and the fortepiano became widely used. Two separate schools of fortepiano making evolved in London and Vienna, with two completely different ways to activate the hammers to strike the strings. These two mechanisms became known as the “English action” and the “Viennese action”. They developed alongside each other until the mid-nineteenth century, when the Viennese action gave way to the more robust English action that eventually became the modern piano.

The easiest way to spot whether a fortepiano is of the Viennese or English type is to see which way the hammers point. The English hammerheads point away from the keyboard as in the modern piano, while the Viennese hammers point toward the keyboard. These two actions offer different experiences for the player, each with their own advantages and disadvantages. The English action has hammers independent from the keys, which means they can be leveraged to produce a fuller sound; the Viennese hammers are attached to the key levers, with the result that the fingers are always in connection with the hammers right through to the crucial striking moment, offering more precise and responsive touch.

But for getting started, it is best to focus on one type: my choice would be the Viennese fortepiano from around 1780-1790. This is the instrument that the great Viennese composers—Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven—played and wrote for. Coming from a modern piano perspective, this fortepiano also offers the greatest aesthetic contrast. For my taste, the Viennese design reached its peak in this period, when music and design aligned to favour sensitivity, nimbleness, and clarity. The fortepianist's first task, therefore, is to find an aesthetic that brings out the instrument's unique qualities.

Shifting aesthetics

Because of the relative rarity of fortepianos, most of us approach it having first played either the harpsichord or the modern piano. While equally challenging for both camps, harpsichordists get to experience a similar path of musical thought to composers like Haydn or Mozart, who also first played the harpsichord. It is for the modern pianists that the leap of aesthetic adjustment will be greater.

A modern pianist first encountering a Viennese fortepiano will probably have a plethora of mixed feelings (depending on which instrument they encounter), as I myself once had. I was moved by the elegance of its shape and natural wood, a material which feels more suited to Classical aesthetics than the shiny black piano with lots of metal. But on first playing a fortepiano, the extremely light touch was uncomfortable to control, and I secretly shared a feeling often voiced by sceptics, that it somewhat lacked the depth and richness of a modern piano. But as I got to know the instrument better, I discovered that its "depth and richness" lie elsewhere. To compare the fortepiano to the piano would be like comparing green tea to hot chocolate, or a watercolour painting with a bronze sculpture, you run the risk of missing the point. But yet, as I myself have experienced, it is almost impossible not to compare them as a player coming from a certain perspective. In this light, here are a few suggestions of 'aesthetic shifts' that may serve as a starting point for discovering the fortepiano, both as a player and listener.

The first aesthetic shift would be the concept of blend and balance, the relationship between melody and accompaniment. The modern piano aims for uniformity throughout its range, and the notes blend well into a homogenous and resonant sound. Modern pianists have to work to distinguish the melodic line from this sound blend. The fortepiano has a rather opposite quality; Each region of the keyboard has its own colour and personality, so different voices are naturally distinct and clear from each other. The richness of the music comes not from the overall sonic blend, but the drama of interaction between contrasting colours and registers.

The next aesthetic shift is how to hear the melodic line itself. The fortepiano sound does not sustain as long as the modern piano, but it is much better at subtle shades of quiet to very quiet. So melodies work less well as long sweeping lines, but blossom when articulated as a series of words that form a coherent sentence. One of the greatest joys of playing the fortepiano is the variety of possible ways to articulate and connect small phrases: how the last decibel of sound tapers into silence, and how the energy of the silence inspires the consonant of the next phrase.

Then comes the concept of 'pedalling'. The most helpful thing to keep in mind when using the sustaining knee-lever is that the mechanism to disengage the dampers (allowing the notes to continue ringing after releasing the keys) was originally operated by a hand stop, and could not be changed without a pause in the music. This original 'pedal' was more like an organ stop for a particular effect and colour, which C. P. E. Bach recommended for improvisatory passages. Using the 'pedal' to create legato is a modern concept, and when used on the fortepiano, flattens the instrument's rich range of articulations. Local resonance and legato on the fortepiano is better created with the harpsichord technique of overholding notes and finger legato. The pedal is most successful when used to create colour and resonance for a whole section or harmony.

And lastly, the perception of scale and volume; The fortepiano is a much softer instrument than the modern piano. The key depth is only about a quarter as deep, and the action multiple times more sensitive to minute changes in weight and velocity. So while the top end of the dynamic can sound limited to our modern ears, the possibilities of gradation in the middle to quiet dynamics are endless. Practically, this takes the most getting used to for modern pianists. The arm weight necessary to operate the piano's heavy action is almost redundant on the fortepiano. The fingers alone are enough to play the maximum volume—in order to achieve the fine-grained details of musical expression, players must cultivate relaxed hands and fingers that are sensitive to every thought and intention.

Beyond the sensitivity and delicacy I focused on above, however, the most satisfying dimension playing the fortepiano is the sense of closeness to the compositions intended for the instrument. It's like reading Shakespeare in English (of course you read Shakespeare in English, don't you?). On the fortepiano, Beethoven's defiance of instrumental limitations is felt ever so vividly (you can never almost break the modern piano...), Mozart's throbbing and stormy left hand opening to his A minor piano sonata can articulate itself fully without fear of covering up the melody, and Haydn's journey towards the edges of the keyboard's universe at the end of his great F minor Variations becomes thrilling as you play the highest and the lowest notes possible.

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