

## THE PIANOS OF BEETHOVEN

Interpreting Beethoven's Sonatas on an instrument dating from the composer's time poses at the outset the difficult problem of the sonority wished for by Beethoven and also of his relationship with the instrument-makers of the period : indeed the greatest evolution in the history of piano construction took place during Beethoven's life.

As composer, improviser and interpreter of his own music, Beethoven studied intensely the problems of mechanics, sonority, range and power. Besides, he was in constant contact with Nanette Streicher who, with her husband, had transported to Vienna the workshop of her father, the famous Stein of Augsburg by whom Mozart had been so impressed in 1777. Beethoven may never have bought a piano himself as instrument-makers were very interested in gathering his observations. The Streichers built instruments according to the wishes of their patrons and Beethoven must have thought more interesting, at least during his youth, to confront himself with their diversity rather settle on one. However it may have been, the three pianos that have been preserved as having belonged to Beethoven were presented to him. Beethoven was never satisfied with the first, sent him off by the Paris instrument-maker Sébastien Erard in 1803. The second one, built by Thomas Broadwood in London in 1817, was to reach Vienna in the middle of the next year. The last one came finally from Conrad Graf's workshop and was delivered to the composer as a permanent loan in 1825.

In Beethoven's time, piano-making drew on two opposed principles of mechanism: the Viennese action and the English one, the latter of which was also to be adopted by the French. In the Viennese action, the key is directly connected to the hammer and it produces a sensitive, light, clear tone and a rather soft volume. The English action on the contrary, ancestor to our modern repetition action, is heavier and stiffer, making for a fuller, rounder, more powerful tone, better able to employ the acoustics of large concert-halls. The Viennese action was preferred by German-speaking countries for a longtime, for the Anglo-French one was reproached for its lack of sensitivity. If the latter did finally supplant the former in the history of piano-making, it was thanks to the adoption of the double escapement by Sébastien Erard in 1822, an invention which Beethoven never came to know.

Long considered as a decisive progress in pianoforte making, the double escapement has nowadays been questioned by some commentators for in fact it only solved the action problem of the Anglo-French mechanism, a very heavy one which impeded the quick repetition of a note.

But Beethoven seems to have remained faithful to the Viennese action all his life, as evidenced in some passages of Opus 106. Because it offered a six-octave range - instead of the five on the pianos which Beethoven had long been using - the Broadwood piano's role (Beethoven received a model in 1818) has been overestimated. Actually he had then already composed his Sonata Opus 101, whose demands outstripped the capabilities of the Broadwood. Therefore, it is the piano constructed by Conrad Graf which no doubt comes closest to the composer's ideal in terms of keyboard at the end of his life.

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