

Time-Travel For Pianists:

How Today's Players Can Learn From Yesterday's Instruments

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About Instruments

DIFFERENT KINDS OF MUSICIANS HAVE different relationships with their instruments. Singers are at one extreme: they have a life-long commitment to the one they are born with. And organists are at the opposite extreme: whenever they play, they must come to terms with the unique qualities of the instrument they find. Organ actions — whether mechanical, pneumatic, or electrical — differ tremendously; every instrument offers a distinctive collection of sounds, and each is tailored to the space it's in. The choices made by the builder give every organ its own relationship to the repertoire: it will inevitably be more suited to some styles than others — and, if it's a good instrument, it will have something to teach the player about those styles.

The pianist's situation is in some respects similar to the organist's. With rare exceptions, we don't carry our instruments around, so we, too, are at the mercy of whatever instrument we find. However, a strange thing happened in the piano world over the past hundred or so years: piano-making converged on a single design, so that all modern pianos are extremely similar.¹ Of course they vary in quality, depending on how they were built and how they have been maintained; but, in principle (to exaggerate only slightly), all are made to be as much like the great Steinways of the 1930's as possible. Performing style for all repertoires has evolved to take advantage of the particular strengths (and weaknesses) of these instruments, and those of us who have made a specialty of performing on pre-Steinway pianos know very well how much adaptation was involved:² we have experienced this process in reverse, by rediscovering how

¹ Of course there are differences between a Fazioli and a Bösendorfer, or even between a New York Steinway and a Hamburg Steinway, but these fade into insignificance when compared with the differences between a Walter of 1795 and a Pleyel of 1840 — or even between that Walter and a contemporary Broadwood, or the Pleyel and a Graf from that same year.

² It's difficult to know what to call these pianos: *fortepiano* is the accepted term for instruments like Mozart's Walter, but what about Chopin's Pleyel? I will refer to "historical" and "modern" pianos.

the pieces relate to the instruments for which they were composed. Thanks to several decades of concerts, lectures, and recordings devoted to promoting the fortepiano, most serious musicians and music lovers have some inkling of this as well. Yet, historical pianos remain, for the most part, a curiosity, and very few talented young students aspire to play them.

Thanks to the generosity of Oberlin College, I have been able to devote the academic year 2009-10 to exploring a different approach to this problem. Instead of trying to convince pianists that the only way to perform classical piano music properly is to abandon the modern instrument, I want them to use historical instruments as research tools to help them learn to play the (modern) piano better. (Of course, if they decide to continue playing the old instruments, they won't get any complaints from me!) And thanks to the cooperation of the Faculty of Music at l'Université de Montréal, I was able to try out my ideas on a group of advanced students in a graduate seminar.

The course, entitled "Les instruments d'époque comme outils de travail pour le pianiste d'aujourd'hui" or "Period Instruments as tools for today's pianists," was divided into four separate workshops. Each workshop lasted ten days, devoted, in turn, to an 1848 Pleyel (original restored by Marcel Lapointe); an 1819 Graf (copy by Paul McNulty); a circa 1800 Walter (copy by Philip Belt); and a 1762 Hass clavichord (copy by Ugo Casiglia). Sixteen Master's and Doctoral students participated, all with the enthusiastic support of their teachers.³ In fact, the course was under the overall supervision of the head of the piano department, Jean Saulnier, who taught the segment of the course devoted to Chopin. A note about the order of the workshops: the Pleyel was only available to us in September, so we had to begin there. This external factor inspired me to offer the segments in reverse chronological order, which, in hindsight, was absolutely the best plan.

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I used the notion of time-travel to set the tone of the course, explaining it like this: "If I offered to take you by time-machine to Mozart's studio in Vienna in 1785, you'd come along, wouldn't you? You could have a lesson with him, and I'm sure you'd bring plenty of questions. But if I told you that Mozart was going

³ All sixteen students earned my gratitude for their unflagging enthusiasm and commitment: Vincent Béland-Bernard, Michel-Alexandre Broekaert, Patrick Cashin, Eunice Chen, Carol-Anne Fraser, Jean-Simon Gaudreau, Julio Gonzalo, Junghwa Hong, Alison Kilgannon, Jonathan Kilgannon, Ryan Kolodziej, Simon Larivière, Jean-François Latour, Sofia Mycyk, Elizabeth Schumann, and Marie-Hélène Trempe.

to be away — we could still visit the studio, play his piano (it's the Walter that, according to his father, was 'constantly being hauled about for concerts'), look over his manuscripts, and experience his surroundings — wouldn't you still take the trip?"

"Weird and Nice"

At the end of our first class, the students were invited to try the 1848 Pleyel. We filmed them playing one minute of Chopin on a modern piano, followed by the same music on the Pleyel, and then we asked for their immediate reactions. (The students didn't hear each other.) We met again the very next day, and Jean summarized the range of reactions. He began by observing that they could be arranged into "two families: 'weird' and 'nice.'"⁴ The 'weird' category had comments like: "I can't play loud." "I don't know how to control it." "I lost my bearings." In the 'nice' category: "I like the sound." "I can use more pedal." "It's easier to balance the hands."

After a few hours of practicing, the students overcame all of the purely technical difficulties posed by the Pleyel. And with some guidance from us, they discovered new strategies for making music on this unfamiliar instrument. Significantly, much of what they needed to do was actually notated in the scores: dynamic indications, pedal markings, slurs, and accents that had previously appeared awkward or puzzling now seemed perfectly suited to the instrument in front of them. By the end of their time with the Pleyel, each student reported some variation of "the music will never look the same again." As the course progressed, the instruments became increasingly unfamiliar, but the experience was similar. Each instrument eased the transition to the next, with the touch becoming progressively lighter, the key-dip shallower, the attacks sharper, and the decay of sound quicker. Only the clavichord posed challenges of a different order, as I'll explain later.

Although I was very interested in the students' adaptation to the historical instruments, the goal of the project was to see what they could take back to the modern piano. Before the course began, I imagined putting their discoveries into three categories: elements that could be transferred directly to the modern piano; elements that could be adapted to the modern piano as long as certain adjustments were made; and elements that, although undoubtedly well suited to the instrument of the composer, could not be applied at the modern

⁴ My translation: since our class was conducted in French, he actually said "*bizarre et agréable*."

piano. Some of the students also thought in these terms. A student who had us spellbound with his performance of the first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata* wrote the following:

...some aspects [of what we learned from the Walter] are directly applicable to the modern piano, [for example] Mozart's articulations. Other characteristics of the period instruments serve rather as a source of inspiration for the player. The sound of the Walter in Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, using the moderator and with the dampers lifted throughout, is a perfect example of this situation.⁵

Strictly speaking, he is quite correct. One can perform any pattern of articulation on either piano, but the modern piano simply doesn't have a moderator pedal. However, this particular student spent the Walter workshop working on Beethoven, and his suggestion about Mozart's articulations wasn't based on his own experience. Compare it with this statement, from a student who *did* struggle with the articulations at the opening of this piece:



Example 1 Mozart, Sonata in F major K. 332/i

Many times during presentations, when students attempted to transfer an idea directly back to the modern piano, the results were unsuccessful. The thought process must arise from an auditory image of how a piece sounds on its intended instrument, and from there we can decide what pianistic approach is required to express the musical content in keeping with its original conception.

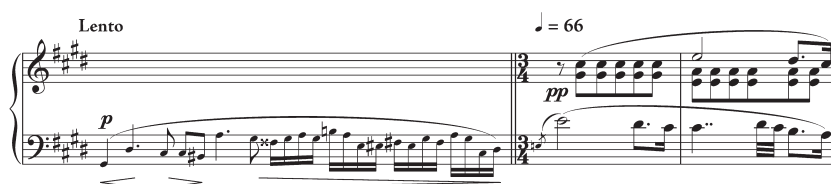
In his class presentation, this student showed us how, in transferring his performance of Mozart's short slurs from the Walter to the modern piano, he chose to alter his tempo, adjust the lengths of notes, and add bits of pedal for shading. In fact, as we saw time and again during the course, it's virtually impossible to switch instruments and then do *exactly the same thing*; some adaptation is inevitable. And anything that could not be applied to a performance on the modern piano — e.g. the moderator pedal on the fortepiano, or *Bebung*

⁵ This quotation and all subsequent quotations come from the term papers submitted at the end of the semester.

on the clavichord — still left its mark on the students’ imagination, leading to what could be considered a form of adaptation. So, as a great believer in categories, I now prefer these to classify the students’ discoveries: insights that made sense of (previously baffling) indications in the scores; insights that related to more general questions, such as confusing information in historical accounts or treatises; and new ideas arising directly from the experience of producing sound on an unfamiliar instrument. The new framework reflected a crucial shift in my understanding: the old instruments did not really teach the students how to *play* differently, so much as how to *think* differently.

Learning in Action

The extent to which the students’ comments reflect a common learning experience is striking. Observations about the behavior of the historical instrument tend to be followed by a description of the strategy adopted at that instrument, and finally the lesson that the student was able to draw from the experience and carry to the modern piano. We begin with a student’s reflections on tempo choice:



Example 2 Chopin, Étude op. 25, no. 7

Since the sounds of the Pleyel die away more quickly than those of a modern piano, it is necessary to choose faster tempos for slow movements than those we have become accustomed to on today’s long-sustaining instruments. It was even possible to play this Étude (op. 25 no. 7 in C-sharp minor) at the tempo suggested by Chopin, which had always seemed extremely fast to me. At this speed the phrasing is more sustained, and the music “sings” more naturally. In addition, the shape of the Pleyel’s sounds [*la courbe sonore*] encourages the use of more rubato.⁶ Accelerating slightly during the long notes helps to connect the

⁶ Half of the papers were submitted in French; the translations are mine. The student is referring here to the distinctive way the piano’s sound develops: by comparison with a modern piano, the Pleyel has a quicker attack, then sustains at a noticeably lower dynamic level. This shape seems less

sounds of the melody, and [because of the faster tempo] it becomes advisable to take more time in the more active passages. As a result of the increased speed and rubato, the character becomes more tragic and less contemplative, which adds to the drama of the étude. ... Transferring these elements to the modern piano was basically fruitful. One can easily increase the tempo, but not to the degree possible on the Pleyel, because the character becomes too agitated on account of the greater intensity and duration of the sounds. As for the rubato, one should try to reproduce it on the modern piano, even though the nature of the instrument discourages it somewhat.

The next examples concern pedaling. Although the pedal (or knee lever) performs the same physical action on every piano — namely raising all of the dampers from the strings — the musical results are surprisingly different. Chopin proved an excellent starting point for us, because his instructions for the use of the pedal are extremely precise and complete. Here is a fairly typical example:



Example 3 Chopin, Impromptu, op. 29. M/198 Fryderyk Chopin Museum at the Fryderyk Chopin Institute in Warsaw collection.

Many of the students had never paid attention to these indications before, and attempting to follow them scrupulously at the Pleyel led to many discoveries. One observation was that Chopin often contrasts pedaled and unp pedaled sound for structural purposes. But because the dampers of the modern piano stop the sound more completely than those of the Pleyel, and because the unp pedaled sound of the modern piano is duller (i.e., contains fewer upper partials), some of Chopin's unp pedaled passages — wonderfully effective on the Pleyel — sounded unpleasantly dry on the modern piano. Here's how one student described what she learned:

Having experienced the importance of these contrasts, I now try to imagine the sounds that Chopin's pedal indications would produce on the Pleyel piano and then search for a way to achieve a similar effect with the means available on a modern piano. This usually involves some half-pedaling, partial releases, flutter

bulky, more nimble, hence more susceptible to manipulation.

pedaling, and careful control of placement and pedal cuts [releases] in order to characterize the overall sound.

Chopin's precise directions forced the students to re-examine the largely unconscious and virtually constant use of the pedal that characterizes much current piano playing. This experience proved valuable when we approached earlier music. Here another student describes his relationship to the pedal of the Walter:

Another shock I received from this instrument came from the absence of a pedal on the floor. My feet never stopped looking for some kind of support, even after ten days of practice! Located above the knee, [the knee lever] seemed awkward to use and I rejected it completely. My reading (Sandra Rosenblum, p. 104) confirmed this instinct: it seems that Hummel and Clementi were in agreement that Mozart hardly used the pedal at all. This was very interesting for me since I generally depend heavily on this device, even in baroque and classical works. I tried the beginning of K. 332/i [Example 1, above] making a point of not touching the pedal, and to my surprise, found the transition much easier to accept than I expected. I quickly realized that there were advantages to removing this element. I had to compensate with a clearer, more definite articulation, which enlivened the discourse in a way that seemed to me, finally, more stylistically appropriate.

This student also worked on Beethoven's sonata op. 109, where the question of tempo emerged again:

[At the Graf], I had to increase the tempo of the slow music (*adagio espressivo* sections of the first movement; the theme and variations 1, 2, 4, 6 of the third), since the sounds die away so soon after the initial attack. The faster tempo allowed for a smoother and more singing style of phrasing, as well as greater rhythmic flexibility. Since the dynamic range of the Graf is relatively limited, the performer needs to impart more direction in order for the music to have the necessary expression...

After spending a long time reworking the piece following the workshop, I came to a number of conclusions. [For performance at the modern piano], I slightly increased the tempo of the slow music, especially the *adagio espressivo* sections of the first movement. In addition, I decided on a more improvisatory character for these sections, which added a much more expressive dimension. For the theme of the third movement, after experimenting with different tempi, I decided that a slow tempo with a rich sonority was the most appropriate at the modern piano: the sounds are so sustained that a quicker tempo inevitably sounds too passionate and

doesn't breathe. Additionally, I believe that it's dangerous to play with the rhythm too much in the theme, because this makes it too dramatic and agitated...

The Graf was an excellent tool for defining my musical concept at the modern piano. Dealing with elements that were necessary at the fortepiano forced me to experiment with ideas that wouldn't have occurred to me otherwise. It forced me to question myself and to search. While keeping or adapting some ideas and rejecting others, I remained conscious of other possibilities. This was especially valuable for me, since I was still in the process of learning the piece during the workshop. Finally, the Graf gave me a good sense of the materials and constraints facing Beethoven as he composed his last sonatas.

A student working on a Schubert sonata addressed another critical topic, articulation. For many musicians, Schubert's careful placement of multiple slurs is unintelligible, since this passage is normally performed with a smooth legato.



Example 4 Schubert, A major sonata, D. 664

[T]he smaller sound and the rapid decay of each note [on the Graf] led me to my most significant discovery on this instrument. With a less-sustaining sound available, it became necessary to build the phrases through a much more detailed interaction of smaller shapes, articulated phrase members, and defined rhythmic groupings. Through treatises on articulation and accentuation written by Classical theorists, I realized that this level of detail I now found necessary is actually required in the score! ... [T]he barring and slurring of the accompaniment indicates a repeated pattern of two short groups followed by a longer one which complements the activity in the right hand by carrying the line forward over the long melody note in measure two. The slurring of the melody emphasizes important notes and underlines the metric structure by stressing the beginning of each measure with the beginning of a slur. When I respect this carefully constructed counterpoint of articulation through shaping and subtle lifts or pronunciation of groupings, it becomes clear why "Classical theorists stressed the importance of recognizing, shaping, and separating each phrase member" (Rosenblum p. 163-4). Herein lies the life and essence of the music; these are not details to be added later on to the surface of the piece.

Returning to the modern piano, I find that this level of detail remains equally important. I had previously neglected it in favour of a long sustained line, an approach that now seems superficial and general and robs the music of its richness. However, due to the modern piano's comparatively massive sound, I need to thin the texture by using less pedal (shallower pedaling with more frequent changes) and to listen for the definition of each note in order to allow each group to speak and carry its part in the line.

The Clavichord

The clavichord presented new and greater challenges. Although the pianos demanded some technical adaptation, every student was able to begin working on interpretation virtually immediately. Not so with the clavichord. The results were all over the map: a few students were able to produce musical results the very first time; some still couldn't play a simple two-part texture consistently at the end of the ten days. For most of them, then, this workshop was largely focused on the physical aspects of producing sound at the keyboard. Here is one student's description of the experience:

Through the direct, light action, I learned to find a balance between suppleness and firmness, relaxation and presence in every gesture. ... I realized how important this is on the modern piano as well, yet how often I allow myself to be inattentive and to distort my gestures, distracted by other aspects of playing. The clavichord would not permit this. I needed to be able to sit supported and centered independently from the instrument so that when I touched it to play, my gestures could be proportionate and unified, anchored in a balanced centre rather than using the resistance of the action to counter my own physical imbalance. A touch too heavy or too light, too short or too forceful would result in a note pushed sharp or in no sound at all. I learned to remain present with each gesture, with each note as it unfolds. The clavichord tolerated no alternative; I had to remain present and trust that my interior listening would guide each gesture into the next in its own time.

Another student related his experience at the clavichord to the technical method taught at l'Université de Montréal, which breaks the playing gesture down into three phases: the preparation, the attack, and the "follow-through."

[I]f one fails to maintain a certain pressure [on the key] after the attack, the tangent bounces off the string, cutting off the sound, whose resonance depends on the tangent remaining in contact with the string for the full duration of the note... The clavichord is unequivocal: a good “follow-through” produces a clear, vibrant sound; if the “follow-through” is deficient, the sound dies immediately. It’s much easier to discern than on a modern piano, where even a thoughtless “follow-through” still produces a normal sound from the instrument. The clavichord helped me practice this gesture, and that’s why I wish I had access to one more regularly. The slower, well-supported “follow-through” demanded by the clavichord, when transferred to the modern piano, helps tremendously in the development of a rich, connected, projecting sound.

I introduced them to Griepenkerl’s account of Bach’s keyboard teaching, in which short musical figures (generally two to four notes) form the building blocks of keyboard technique.⁷ Each figure was to be played with a distinct arm gesture, and these same figures were the basis of exercises in improvisation and composition. Of course, viewing the music as a series of discrete gestures rather than of individual notes, and using these groupings to organize the motions of the arm has a direct impact on interpretation. Some of the students found this approach arcane or distracting; others really took it to heart. One student found it useful in their interpretation of J. S. Bach’s Prelude in F-sharp minor:



Example 5 J. S. Bach, Prelude in F-sharp minor, BWV 883i, from WTC 2

The idea of rearticulating at the beginning of each motive, i.e., integrating spaces — smaller or larger depending on the context — seemed very relevant to me, since it forced me to analyze the musical discourse. [The spaces] enlivened my playing, making it sometimes more dance-like, sometimes more dramatic. This was totally appropriate in my prelude [Example 5], since an analysis of

⁷ Reprinted in Joel Speerstra, *J. S. Bach and the Pedal Clavichord* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2004). My own understanding of this subject derives largely from Chapter 6 (“*Musica Poetica* and Figural Notation”) of this book and from personal communication with the author.

its constituent elements (expressive leaps, recurrent syncopation, rhythmic complexity) revealed more agitation and pathos, rather than the sentimentality generally encountered in modern performances of the work.

Another student, who worked on Bach's entire Fourth Partita during the workshop, went even further:

The catalogue of Baroque figures with their Latin names combined with Griepenkerl's description of how technically to execute groups of notes helped me group several notes into one arm stroke. This [...] simplified my technique by reducing the number of gestures, thus allowing me to play in positions rather than a long string of individual notes. Furthermore, I began to phrase the series of groupings rather than the line of continuous notes and achieved very effective results. The wide dynamic range and singing tone of the modern piano allows one to phrase simply through long legato lines of varying dynamic level. By transferring the idea of phrasing articulated groups of notes, however, one can achieve much more variety and I believe a more stylistically convincing result. [...My] experiences with the other movements of the Partita continued to lead me to the same conclusions: note groupings and articulation between figures is imperative not only from a technical standpoint but also from the perspective of musical expression.

Translation

In attempting to explain my work to non-musicians, I find myself turning to another metaphor: translation. Foreign literature is translated so that an English-speaking reader can gain access to a wider range of material; older pieces have been adapted for the modern piano to enlarge our repertoire. In both cases, the process can be more or less successful; everything depends on the skill and art with which it is done. But in both cases there is nothing quite like first-hand experience with the original.

The foreign-language metaphor leads me to my concluding point. All of us who have studied another language know what an enriching experience this is. Not only can we understand texts and conversations in a new language, but we also know ourselves better, and express ourselves more clearly, even in our mother tongue. And so I shouldn't really have been that surprised to read the following, in a report by Daniel Walden, my research assistant at Oberlin:

I have discovered that the tools I acquired during the project have helped me not only in my performance of compositions from the Common Practice Era on the piano, but also of works in compositional styles far removed from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. [...] Stockhausen [for example] requires such unusual performance techniques that the pianist must approach the piano almost as if it were a new type of keyboard instrument. I was surprised to find that the techniques I developed in working on Bach at the clavichord as well as Mozart and Beethoven at the fortepiano assisted me directly in both the practice and performance of the unusual and extended techniques that Stockhausen requires.

I found that the historical instruments were useful not only in helping to develop [interpretations of] music from the eighteenth or nineteenth century that seemed more idiomatic, but also led to the discovery of basic principles that were applicable more generally to keyboard performance, even to music far removed from the soundscape of the fortepiano and clavichord. Simply by helping to break a “piano-centric” understanding of the roles of the ear and the hand in performance on the Steinway, I was able to establish the foundation for developing a variety of new techniques that will [draw] new sounds and timbres from the instrument, and which will be useful in the performance of music of all genres and time periods.

What could be more rewarding than to discover that a student found your teaching even more useful than you thought!

One final analogy with translation. Every generation returns to the classics and produces translations for its own time, just as musicians continue to perform the classics in ways that reflect the style of their time. And just as a modern translation cannot be based on earlier translations alone, but requires looking at the original text with fresh eyes, today’s musicians should not simply react to the interpretations of their predecessors, but rather engage directly with the original materials as fully as possible. And, for that adventure, the instruments of the past are indispensable.