

# Hardy Rittner and Nineteenth-Century Pianos

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SEZI SESKIR

Photo: Stephan Reising.



SINCE THE 1980S, PIANISTS WHO are part of the Historically Informed Performance (HIP) movement have recorded eighteenth-century piano works on replicas of fortepianos from the period. It took longer however until recordings of nineteenth-century piano repertoire performed on period instruments surfaced. Starting in the 1990s, pianists such as Malcolm Bilson and Alexei Lubimov produced influential recordings of Franz Schubert's piano works on period instruments. Bart van Oort's renditions of Frederic Chopin's works, as well as Andreas Staier and Tobias Koch's recordings of Robert Schumann's compositions on period instruments followed closely.<sup>1</sup> Such valuable efforts, however, did not extend to late nineteenth-century piano works, which until recently were overlooked by those interested in performance practice. This state

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of Schumann's piano works performed on period instruments see my earlier article "Robert Schumann recordings on period pianos in the bicentennial year," *Keyboard Perspectives* 3 (2010): 177–88.

of affairs is changing thanks to the recordings of German pianist Hardy Rittner, whose recent CDs of Johannes Brahms's piano works on period instruments broadens the way we might hear these old war horses.

The absence of renditions of Brahms's solo piano works on period instruments is particularly surprising considering the attention that his orchestral work has received from historically informed conductors since the 1990s. John Elliot Gardiner for instance recorded *Ein deutsches Requiem*, op. 45 on period instruments twice, in 1990 and 2008 respectively.<sup>2</sup> Gardiner also released Brahms's four symphonies on period instruments between 2008 and 2010. And yet the interest in Brahms's piano works played on the pianos from his own time remained dormant.<sup>3</sup>

At the relatively young age of thirty-two, the prolific pianist Hardy Rittner has made a much-needed contribution to the late nineteenth-century piano repertoire with his recordings of Brahms's complete piano works. Between 2008 and 2013, he has brought out four CDs of Brahms's solo piano works so far with the fifth volume forthcoming, as well as a recording of his first piano concerto, all on period pianos. Rittner is, to use musicologist Bernard Sherman's term, "a dual citizen": a musician invested in the HIP movement who integrates the cumulative knowledge emanating from it into his performances, while not labeling himself solely as a fortepianist. In taking this approach he joins other musicians, such as the Berlin Philharmonic under Simon Rattle's direction, one of the best known examples of this crossbreeding. Violinist Viktoria Mullova and pianist Emmanuel Ax are other examples of border-crossing musicians who record with period instrument orchestras such as the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, as well as with mainstream orchestras. It seems that the early music movement's merits have reached a point of maturity, where the mainstream of classical musicians more readily embrace and apply the information and experience gained through this once marginal approach.

Rittner and I met on a typical July afternoon in Berlin-Charlottenburg, cloudy and somewhat cool for what one expects of summer. After seeing a modern grand piano standing in his studio, I asked him whether or not he also had historical instruments elsewhere in the apartment. He told me that he did not have any instruments other than the modern grand piano in his living room and when

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard D. Sherman, "Orchestral Brahms and 'Historically Informed Performance': A Progress Report," [http://bsherman.net/Brahms\\_Diapason\\_Sherman\\_English.htm](http://bsherman.net/Brahms_Diapason_Sherman_English.htm) (accessed December 21, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> It deserves to be mentioned here that Brahms's cello and piano sonatas on period instruments were recorded by Anner Bylsma and Lambert Orkis in 1995, predating efforts in recording Brahms's solo piano works by ten years.

I asked him how he prepared for his recordings on historical instruments he explained in a matter of fact manner that he usually only had a couple of days or at most a week to try getting used to the instruments on which he recorded his Brahms and Chopin CDs. The ease with which Rittner can juggle between modern and historical instruments sums up his general relaxed attitude towards labels such as being a fortepianist or a modern pianist. He belongs to a new breed of performers who can change from a Walter to a Graf just as easily as switching from a Yamaha upright in a green room to a Steinway D on the main stage.

## **Rittner's First Encounter with Period Instruments**

Rittner's interest in historical instruments emerged from a serendipitous encounter. One day, while studying in Salzburg with Karl Heinz Kammerling at the Mozarteum, he found himself looking for a practice room. On this particularly busy day at the conservatory none of the practice rooms were available. And so a friend handed Rittner a new key that would take him to a practice room he had not visited before. There were two historical pianos in that room—one of which was a Conrad Graf instrument from circa 1835. After trying these pianos out for a while, Rittner was intrigued by their sound and feel, although he could not yet get a good result out of the instruments. He then started exploring recordings made on these instruments and later on arranged to receive his first lessons on them at the Mozarteum.

As he continued to familiarize himself with recordings on period instruments, Rittner realized that there were no recordings of Johannes Brahms made on historical instruments and he could find only a very few of Frédéric Chopin's works. He emphasizes that the reason he decided to record the piano works of these two composers—as well as Schoenberg's—was not a marketing effort to fill an available niche. Rather, Rittner engaged in a musical exploration of these works that historical instruments brought into a new light. His experience with fortepianos revealed to him certain essential aspects of the music that until then were not apparent to him. For example, many of the original markings of the composer such as the accent and articulation markings and the odd looking pedal signs in Chopin's etudes suddenly were not cryptic indications to be ignored, as they were, Rittner observed, by many of the existing recordings made on modern pianos. He realized that accent markings could pave the way for a more flexible playing style, allowing for more rubato, while the pedal markings, or the lack thereof, can create contrasting colors and character differences.

## Berlin

The next step in Rittner's educational journey took him to Berlin, where he studied with Klaus Hellwig at the University of the Arts. When I ask Rittner why he did not choose a teacher with whom he could work on period instruments, he argues that he wanted to work with a pianist whom he admired as an all-round musician rather than specializing to be a fortepianist. Moreover, even though Hellwig himself did not play period instruments, he did not see Rittner's interest in them as a hindrance to his modern piano playing as some teachers do. In Berlin, Rittner also studied music theory under Hartmut Fladt. His passion for this second field of study appeared repeatedly in our conversation, as he offered insightful remarks on the music of the composers he has recently recorded. Rittner is one of those performers whose fluency in music history and theory extends from Chopin, Brahms, and Schoenberg, to popular music. For instance, he points out the innovative use of harmony in Michael Jackson's later output. Perhaps this is another indication of the open-mindedness of today's young musicians and their readiness in welcoming a variety of musical styles and genres at once.

Currently Rittner resides in Berlin and enjoys a lively career that takes him to almost all the European countries, the United States, South Korea, and Taiwan. His Brahms CD released on MDG, the first recording worldwide of the composer's early piano works on period instruments (J. B. Streicher, 1851 and Ignaz Bösendorfer, 1849–50), received enthusiastic reviews and numerous awards—as has his release featuring Schoenberg's complete piano oeuvre.<sup>4</sup> In October 2009 Rittner was presented with the prestigious Echo Klassik Prize in the “Young Artist of the Year” category. In 2010 his recording of Schoenberg's piano works received another Echo award in the “Solo Recording of the Year (20th–21st Century): Piano” category and put him unquestionably on the map of young, upcoming European pianists.

Such recognition not only reflects the quality of his performances but also speaks to the breadth of his knowledge and taste in terms of the instruments from Chopin, Brahms, and Schoenberg's lifetimes. Rittner released his CD of Chopin's complete etudes in 2011, for which he unexpectedly chose a Viennese instrument by Conrad Graf from 1835 over a Pleyel, a known favorite instrument of Chopin's. Rittner explains that one of the reasons for his instrument choice

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<sup>4</sup> For examples of reviews see, *klassik.com* (<http://magazin.klassik.com/reviews/reviews.cfm?TASK=REVIEW&RECID=22658&REID=13764>), *FonoForum* (<http://www.fonoforum.de/index.php?id=9016>), and *hr2 Kultur CD in Germany*, *Supersonic Award in Luxembourg*, and *Fanfare in the United States*.

was due to the brilliance and sound volume with which the dynamic breadth of this instrument supplied him. The two moderator pedals of this piano, which made it further possible for him to bring across the most tender and poetic of timbres, were yet other reasons why he picked this piano over its Parisian rival. He emphasizes in our interview that he would not want to record works that have been exhaustively recorded by other performers; he wants to add something new.

And adding he does: his flawless technique, sensitive musicality, and perfect command of the capabilities of the instrument at hand set a new standard for historical instrument recordings. His flexibility in changing from one instrument to the other within the same concert, as he tells me of his recent performances, makes him an inspiring example for the next generation of pianists. Rittner believes the optimal piano education would take place in an institution where three or four different instruments from different eras stand next to each other, where the student could compare and experience the differences first hand, while receiving instruction from an expert teacher.

## Schoenberg

Rittner's interest is not limited to nineteenth-century works. He describes himself as an emotional player who needs a "valve" to release his emotions on stage with the appropriate works. He finds this outlet in later music too. He believes that Schoenberg's music is often considered cold and distant, whereas he sees strong connections between this music and the rich vocabulary of earlier Viennese gestures. As in his Chopin, Rittner surprised the listener with an unorthodox choice of instrument on which to record Schoenberg's complete piano works: he chose a Streicher piano from 1856 to play works that were written between 1894 and 1931. He states that the instrument's extreme variety of colors and sound density convinced him to prefer it to an instrument from Schoenberg's period. It allowed, adds Rittner, for a full-blown forte while making it still possible for the eerie "wie ein Hauch" (like a breeze) at the end of *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke*, op. 19, no. 6 to be realized convincingly. He is interested in recording more contemporary music in the near future and in completing the Brahms complete piano works project he already started. It is a hard task considering Rittner's young age and the maturity required for playing Brahms's entire oeuvre. He explains that he often talks to the audience about the works he is about to play and adds that a work like Brahms's Piano Sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor, op. 2 benefits from such an introduction, giving anchor points to the audience as they enter the unusual harmonic world of the work. Rittner also talks about the

pianos he plays and explains his choices to the audience. He remarks that using late nineteenth-century instruments requires more explanation than using a five-octave instrument from the eighteenth century; the difference between a modern piano and a turn-of-the-century Erard or a Schweighofer may not be obvious to all.

Rittner believes that the richness and variety of color in the late nineteenth-century instruments have not yet received the due interest they deserve. In fact the proximity of Brahms's death to the twentieth-century and Schoenberg's famous article hailing him a "progressive" could be among the reasons why Brahms so easily became a household name of the next century.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the curiosity of twentieth-century pianists about his choice of instruments and their possible effects on his compositions has not been awakened until now. Rittner explains the reasons why he chose to record on these specific instruments in his liner notes for his fourth volume of Brahms CDs: "I have again striven in the present recording to find instruments which are not only historically appropriate but which also sensually support the character of each piece. The Ignaz Bösendorfer piano was built in 1846 and has a compass of seven octaves... Franz Liszt favored this model because of its robustness and stability and used it in concerts at the Musikverein in Vienna." He continues his comments by explaining the technical particularities of one of the Streicher pianos he uses in this CD from 1868, such as its Viennese action, its seven-octave span and the fact that this model was the one that Streicher placed at Brahms's disposal and which the composer used at home in Vienna for the rest of his life. On this CD, Rittner recorded the *Zwei Rhapsodien*, op. 79 and the *Klavierstücke*, op. 76 on the 1868 Streicher piano.<sup>6</sup> It is a remarkable instrument with its lush, dark sound in the bass register that is balanced by the ethereal character of its treble, a subtle combination that is hard to come by in the pianos of the twentieth-century.

When describing the J. B. Streicher & Sohn piano from the 1870s that he used for recording opp. 116–19, Rittner underlines that the reason for choosing that particular piano was its soft and poetic tone, which suited the character of these meditative pieces. He prefers a Streicher from two years earlier for the recording of op. 76. Despite the mere two years between them these instruments sound different from each other, he states, adding that in the nineteenth century each individual keyboard instrument had its own particular timbral characteristics.

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<sup>5</sup> Schoenberg first delivered this essay in 1933, and it was published in a substantially revised version in Dika Newlin, ed., *Style and Idea* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950).

<sup>6</sup> Excerpts from this recording are given as Tracks 15–19 on the CD accompanying this volume.

In Hartmut Fladt's liner notes to Rittner's fourth CD, we read that in a letter to Brahms from 1892, the famous Bach researcher Philipp Spitta wrote the following about the intermezzos: "They are suited to slow ingestion in peace and solitude, to reverie and anticipation, and I believe I have understood you correctly when I say that is what you intend with 'intermezzos.'"<sup>7</sup>

In Rittner's renditions Brahms's thick yet fast moving textures become more transparent than when played on a twentieth-century modern piano. For instance his op. 79 rhapsodies reveal a highly charged dynamism bursting with bubbling energy. Rittner's immaculate technique, which reflects the agility and accuracy valued in later twentieth-century performance, also serves him well on his exploration of these older instruments. On the other hand, he may be called too reserved in the temporal liberties he allows himself in op. 76, in comparison to the rubato manner of the late nineteenth-century performers. Instead his choice of tempi is rather brisk and shy of indulgences such as tempo rubato or asynchronization of the hands. His skilled command of the rich and colorful sound vocabulary of the instruments he has at hand, however, is highly sophisticated. Perhaps Rittner, like Gardiner, will also revisit his interpretations of Brahms in some years time, while for now letting the new sound ideal, which he presented with these five CDs, sink into our consciousness.

By the end of our long interview I felt uplifted by the fact that there are such interesting and inspiring musicians out there as Rittner, who is not merely a good player but also a musician who puts a lot of thought into his musical intentions and choices. If the aforementioned cross breeding between HIP and mainstream results in a whole new generation of performers à la Rittner, we surely have a more colorful concert life to look forward to in the near future.

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<sup>7</sup> "Sie sind recht zum langsamen Aufsaugen in der Stille und Einsamkeit, nicht nur zum Nach-, sondern auch zum Vordenken und ich glaube Sie recht zu verstehen, wenn ich meine, daß Sie derartiges mit dem 'Intermezzo' haben aussagen wollen." Carl Krebs, ed., *Johannes Brahms in Briefwechsel mit Philipp Spitta* (Tutzing: Schneider, 1974): 95–96.