

Is Mozart's piano music dead?

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In an age where the relevance of much from the past is questioned, it seems justifiable to appraise the place of Mozart's piano music. One of my university lecturers once remarked that Mozart's music was "boring and predictable", and that performance students were wasting their time playing works from the past which, in his opinion, had little relevance to contemporary society. In addressing such a challenge, it is not my intention here to provide an historical examination of societal factors which influenced the composition of Mozart's piano works, rather I shall begin by considering the keyboard instruments themselves for which Mozart wrote, and then examine some salient points in his music. The sounds of Mozart's music, when presented with understanding of his ways of doing things, are justification in themselves of the importance of his music.

The prototype of the piano, Bartolomeo Cristofori's "Gravicembalo col piano e forte" ("harpsichord with soft and loud"), was developed in the first decade of the eighteenth-century, with Cristofori later improving the mechanism in 1726 to include the essentials of a modern action: the double lever, escapement, check and even an "una corda". In those days there was a lack of standardisation in piano making, not only between different makers, but often between various instruments of the same maker. There were certain traits however, which were common to nearly all the early pianos. They were all wooden-framed, with a "harp"-shaped casing like that of the harpsichord, and the strings were straight-strung. The wooden frame permitted less tension on the case and strings than is now possible with the modern, iron-framed, piano, and since pitch generally in Mozart's time was lower, the pitch of these early instruments was about a semitone lower than A440 Hz. None of these instruments were capable of the enormous tone and sustaining power of the modern piano. The keyboard instruments of Mozart's time are now often referred to as "fortepiano", whereas the term "pianoforte" is used to describe the modern instrument. In Mozart's time, two distinctive schools of piano-making had developed, the English and the Viennese. The Viennese "Prellmechanik" action was not very different from the clavichord action, and in fact the Viennese instruments had some tendency to sound like a louder version of the clavichord. The standard compass of instruments available to Mozart was that of the eighteenth-century harpsichord, five octaves, from F' to f'''. The keys were shorter and narrower than nowadays, the long ones being made of spruce with ebony facings (the long keys thus being black), whilst the shorter ones, the "sharps", were made from dyed pearwood topped with bone or ivory: hence the colour scheme of the keyboard was the reverse of that of the modern piano. The casing was like that of a harpsichord, with tapered legs. There were usually two strings per note, sometimes three, and strings were usually made from bass wire, thinner than that used in modern instruments. The dampers were quite efficient, a wedge-shape having been developed around 1770. The Viennese "Prellmechanik" was known as the "single action", and had hammers pivoted on the ends of the keys, each of which was separately hinged. With the development of an escapement, credited mostly to Johann Andreas Stein (1728-92), the "Prellmechanik" was considered to have reached its zenith. The hammers were very light, covered in buff leather or buckskin. The escapement permitted easy repetition of notes and quick response generally: the touch was very light and

shallow. The characteristic tone was thin, but singing and sweet. A damper-rising, and hence sustaining-, mechanism was operated by two knee-levers, sometimes referred to as “Genouillères”. Sometimes these knee-levers operated damping/sustaining systems either for the treble alone, or for the treble and bass coupled together. One of Mozart’s own pianos, which we shall hear in a moment, even allowed this so-called “split damping” in the bass alone. It seems that few Viennese pianos of Mozart’s time had “Una corda” devices, and any that did would have had hand stops to operate them. However, they often had “lute” muting devices, known as a “Jeu céleste” or “Sourdine”, whereby a strip of material came between the hammers and the strings in order to mute the sound, rather like the effect produced by a practice pedal in modern uprights. There were sometimes special stops, such as the “turkish stop” and percussion. In a letter to his father, written in Augsburg and dated October 17th-18th 1777, Mozart outlined his liking for Stein’s pianos:

“ The last [sonata], in D, goes excellently on Stein’s pianoforte. He has, too, improved on the contrivance for exerting pressure by the knee. I can put it in action with the lightest touch, and when one slackens the knee-pressure a little there is no trace of an echo.”¹

Let us listen now to an excerpt from Andras Schiff’s recording of Mozart’s Andante in F for Mechanical Organ, KV 616, performed on the unsigned and undated piano which Mozart possessed in the last years of his life, and which is now housed in the museum at Mozart’s birth-house in Salzburg. This should give an indication of the kinds of piano sounds available to Mozart in his day. The timbral quality of this instrument changes more readily through its pitch range than the relatively homogenous sound of the modern piano: the bass of Mozart’s piano can sound like a bassoon, whereas the treble can sound like other woodwind instruments. One can hear the effect of the “Jeu celeste”.²

Example 1: Mozart - Andante in F for Mechanical Organ, KV 616, bars 1-4
(Examples follow references at end of document)

Whilst I do not wish to suggest that we should perform Mozart’s works only on original instruments, or that we should try to make the modern piano sound like an exact copy of a Mozartian instrument, it is nonetheless helpful for us to be aware of the clarity of texture, the delicacy and refinement of sound, as well as the fact that the bass register particularly is much less powerful than that of our modern pianos. If we can be aware of these issues when we perform works of Mozart, then hopefully we can approach the essence of what he was trying to communicate.

Structure is a defining feature of Mozart’s music, and can be examined on several levels. Let us take the case of the Sonata in F major, KV 332, probably composed in Paris in the summer of 1778. Firstly there is the overall classical symmetry of the “arch” design of the three movements: fast, slow and fast. Then we see that the first movement is cast in a Sonata form. Quite typically for Mozart, the second movement Adagio is also in Sonata form, although without a development section, and even the third movement here is in Sonata form too. If we consider the phrasing of the first subject from the first movement, we see that there are several four-bar antecedent and consequent phrases, although there is nothing specific in Mozart’s notation to indicate this phrasing. Similarly, the

second subject of the same movement betrays this preference for four-bar phrasing. One could even argue that some of these four-bar phrases could be split into smaller two-bar sub-phrases. The clear harmonic structure, the lyricism, the symmetry of phrasing and the driving rhythms combine to provide a tightly-knit and satisfying structure.

Example 2: Mozart - Sonata in F KV 332, first movement, bars 1-12

Example 3: Mozart – Sonata in F KV 332, first movement, bars 41-44

The same Sonata movement raises an important stylistic point with regard to the articulation. Here, we need to keep two points in mind. Firstly, Mozart was also a string player and composer, and the conventions of notation for articulation in baroque and classic keyboard works need to be viewed within the context of articulation for wind and string players. Secondly, in the far less information-specific age of Mozart's time, we need to remember that he did not specifically notate everything that he would have expected good interpreters of his music to have achieved in performance. Quite probably the slurred notation in the right hand of the first subject, within the bar, would be related to the written conventions of string bowing, i.e. writing the slur to the bar line, but often not beyond. The two-note slurs here seem to reinforce that the minim on the beat is stronger than the weaker crotchet on the third beat, and the slur ending seems mostly to indicate that this is the weaker note, the point where a string player's bow would be leaving the string or changing direction. Under these conventions, one is not compelled to separate at the bar line, and in fact to do so in this case would produce a disjointed sense of phrase. Here I would suggest a slur for the first three bars, with a subtle half-separation at the beginning of the fourth bar. Within the fast tempo required, it is obvious that many of the running semiquavers in the bridge passage at bars 23-40 would need to be played legato, although Mozart has not marked them as such. In summary, Mozart's given articulation needs to be seen as the starting point rather than the finishing point: it indicates legato for the notes under the slurs, it indicates relative strength and weakness of dynamic nuance, but it does not specifically mean that every slur ending is a separation, nor does it mean that notes without any markings must be unconditionally executed as non-legato, although this is often the case.

Example 4: Mozart – Sonata in F KV 332, first movement, bars 22-25

The Adagio movement of this same Sonata is typical of the expressive lyricism found in many slow movements by Mozart, and is akin to the melodic invention found in his coloratura soprano writing (we should not forget that Mozart's wife, Constanze Weber, was a fine soprano). In this Adagio, care needs to be taken to produce a flexible sense of line which is vocal in style, never abrupt in execution. Much of the phrasing here should be legato, with separations being judged subtly. The melodic invention presents a fine example of the kind of melodic ornamentation which Mozart expected good performers to execute, but which he did not always indicate. The notation of the first print is important, because it presents a more elaborate version than the autograph: thus indicating a difference between one written version and a possible reality of what Mozart may have actually expected. In this particular slow movement it seems appropriate to begin the trills on the upper note as one would do in faster, outer, movements by Mozart, thereby stressing the melodic dissonance. However in the slow

movements particularly this is not always the case, and there are justifiable instances where one could begin trills on the principal note. Some of the trills in this movement could justifiably be executed as four-note upper-note turns, if the execution of too many notes were to produce an inelegant sense of line (for example, bar 11). For similar technical and musical reasons, the right hand trill marked at bar 8 in the third movement of the Sonata in B flat major KV 570 might best be played as a grace note. The long trill which begins the Concerto for two pianos in E flat major KV 365 could arguably begin on the principal note instead of on the upper neighbouring note, since the effect of the trill here is rhythmic and harmonic, rather than melodic. To begin this particular trill on the upper note would be to provide a factor of distraction for the listener. In summary, the particular harmonic, rhythmic and melodic context need to be considered in regard to how one commences a trill in Mozart, and technical considerations in relation to the speed required, can play a role also. There are many ambiguous cases where, within the limitations of the style, more than one execution of the trill start is possible, and after studying the available evidence in such cases, one needs to consider which possibilities sound like the hand of a master composer, and which do not.

Example 5: Mozart - Sonata in F KV 332, second movement, bars 1-12

Example 6: Mozart - Sonata in B flat KV 570, third movement, bars 7-8

Example 7: Mozart - Concerto in E flat for two pianos KV 365, first movement, bars 54-55

Mozart used the notation of a quaver with a single cross-stroke as a way of writing a semiquaver and the notation of a quaver with a double cross-stroke as a way of writing a demisemiquaver.

Example 8: Notation of quavers with single and double cross-strokes

In general, such notes should be played on the beat, with the main or principal note following on after the appoggiatura, although sometimes in quicker tempi particularly this can be difficult to execute without creating an inelegant sense of line. In such cases, it seems advisable to execute such appoggiature as crushed notes on the beat instead. Sometimes Mozart wrote quavers with the cross stroke when he wanted to indicate a particular kind of execution, for example in the first bar of the Sonata in D major, KV 284, where I believe he probably wanted the first two semiquavers to be joined, with separations after the second, third and fourth in the group.

Example 9: Mozart - Sonata in D KV 284, bars 1-2

Although Mozart and his father Leopold sometimes used the same notation for double-dotting as we do today, as in the first bar of Wolfgang's Sonata in C major for four hands KV 521, it seems plausible that the interpretation of single dotted rhythms could in certain instances have had more than one possible execution.

Example 10: Single dotted rhythm

Example 11: Mozart – Sonata in C for piano duet, KV 521, bars 1-5

In order to come to a conclusion, one needs to examine the particular rhythmic context, as is often undertaken in the works of Bach and Schubert. For example in Variation 4 of Mozart's Andante and Variations for four hands KV 501, it seems better to interpret the dotted rhythm in bar 2 of the primo part as double-dotted, so that there is not the "clunky" effect of two different dotted rhythms between the hands.

Example 12: Mozart – Theme and Variations in G major for piano duet, KV 501, Variation 4, bars 1-2

Other instances occur in the finale of the Concerto for two pianos in E flat major, KV 365, where, although the three-against-four of triplets against semiquavers sometimes occurs and is clearly intended, in other places it can be technically easier and just as musically satisfying to assimilate the dotted rhythms to the prevailing triplet subdivisions, thereby producing a rhythmically "softer", more lilting, effect.

Example 13: Mozart – Concerto for two pianos in E flat major, KV 365, third movement, bars 255-258

Hence there seem to be three possibilities for executing single dotted rhythms in Mozart's works: i) as written, in the literal or modern sense, ii) as a 2:1 lilting triplet rhythm, and iii) as double-dotted.

Example 14: Dotted rhythms

Mozart's chromaticism was comparatively daring for his own day, and often there are psychological implications for the harmonic progressions and for the choice of key. The Fantasy in D minor, KV 397, often wrongly regarded as being of little depth, is in fact a study in psychological disturbance. The harmonic progressions of the introductory section serve to let us know that something ominous is about to occur, and the omen is delivered in the following recitative-like section, with its dissonances and declamatory gestures. The sudden change to the sunnier mood of the section in the major mode represents an emotional dichotomy, the bitter-sweetness of life.

Mozart never indicated any pedalling of any kind, although it seems obvious that judicious short touches of pedal are needed for warmth of sound, so long as stylistic parameters of clarity of texture, rests, articulation, harmony and melodic detail are not transgressed. For example, careful touches of pedal in the theme of the Sonata in A major KV 331 can serve not only to provide warmth of sound, but also to highlight subtle rhythmic stress inherent within the structure.

Example 15: Mozart - Sonata in A major KV 331, first movement, bars 1-4

Mozart's dynamic markings can be quite specific, as in bars 60-65 of the first movement of the Sonata in F KV 332. At other times they are quite sparing or skeletal, even non-existent in places. Part of the reason for this is that Mozart knew that many people would still be playing his works on the harpsichords (i.e. the piano was not yet in "universal" usage), and again partly because musicians of the time simply expected good performers to know what to do. Factors such as

pitch, harmonic tensions and resolutions, rhetoric gesture of antecedent and consequent elements, repetition of motives and rhythmic intensification or slackening of rhythmic activity give us the kinds of clues we need to understand the inherent structure of Mozart's music, and thus to employ dynamic nuances or shadings beyond those indicated in the score.

Example 16: Mozart – Sonata in F KV 332, first movement, bars 60-65

The opening section of the Fantasy in C minor KV 475 provides an interesting case to consider.

Example 17: Mozart - Fantasy in C minor KV 475, bars 1-4

It should be clear from what I have written that I do not think that the piano music of Mozart is either “dead”, outmoded or irrelevant. The study of his piano music within an historically-informed framework encourages the development of several critical faculties in the aspiring musician: the detail involved in score reading and the understanding of notation, the understanding of formal structure, and the understanding of stylistic attributes such as articulation, ornamentation and pedalling. Surely these areas of detailed awareness are of value, irrespective of whether one is composing an aleatoric work or interpreting a piano work of Mozart or Messiaen. In order to interpret and, if necessary, to re-invent ourselves artistically, we need to know the traditions from whence we stem, even if we choose to rebel against them. The greatest moments in human endeavour occur when the intellect and the senses coalesce into a wondrous unity, and this is certainly the case in the music of Mozart. To those more concerned with the “now” of things, what I write might seem to be a defence of a “museum culture”, but I ask: What is the worth of any society which has no museum? Through the study of music from an historical perspective we extend ourselves into other worlds beyond our own, into the thoughts and feelings of other peoples, into other times and other languages. In the face of the challenges our world has at present, surely this is valuable.

About the Author

Darryl Coote is a partner of the Melbourne-based Team of Pianists. He pursues an active career as a solo pianist, chamber musician, concerto soloist, teacher, examiner and adjudicator. He has been associate artist to musicians such as Anne Gilby (oboe), David Thomas (clarinet), Judith Hickel (violin), Charles Castleman (violin), Miwako Abe (violin) and Sally-Anne Russell (mezzo-soprano); and has performed piano duets with Max Cooke and two-piano works with Robert Chamberlain. Darryl has recorded and broadcast extensively. An experienced teacher, examiner and adjudicator, he frequently lectures on pedagogical matters. He is a co-founder and a past adjudicator of the Australian National Piano Award Shepparton.

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References

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2. Schiff, Andras (performer). Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791): Piano Works, Andras Schiff, Mozart's Fortepiano. Decca CD ISM 91/3: London, 1991.

Example 1: Mozart - Andante in F for Mechanical Organ, KV 616, bars 1-4

Musical score for Example 1: Mozart - Andante in F for Mechanical Organ, KV 616, bars 1-4. The score is in 2/4 time, F major, and marked Andante. It features a treble and bass staff with various ornaments and fingerings.

Example 2: Mozart - Sonata in F KV 332, first movement, bars 1-12

Musical score for Example 2: Mozart - Sonata in F KV 332, first movement, bars 1-12. The score is in 3/4 time, F major, and marked Allegro. It features a treble and bass staff with various ornaments and fingerings.

Example 3: Mozart – Sonata in F KV 332, first movement, bars 41-43

Musical score for Example 3: Mozart – Sonata in F KV 332, first movement, bars 41-43. The score is in 3/4 time, F major, and marked *p*. It features a treble and bass staff with various ornaments and fingerings.

Example 4: Mozart – Sonata in F KV 332, first movement, bars 22-25

Musical score for Example 4: Mozart – Sonata in F KV 332, first movement, bars 22-25. The score is in 3/4 time, F major, and marked *f*. It features a treble and bass staff with various ornaments and fingerings.

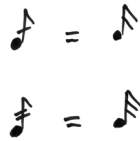
Example 5: Mozart - Sonata in F KV 332, second movement, bars 1-12

Adagio

Example 6: Mozart - Sonata in B flat KV 570, third movement, bars 7-8

Example 7: Mozart - Concerto in E flat for two pianos KV 365, first movement, bar 54-55

Example 8: Notation of quaver with a single cross-stroke as a way of writing a semiquaver and notation of quaver with a double-cross stroke as a way of writing a demisemiquaver



Example 9: Mozart - Sonata in D KV 284, bars 1-2



Example 10: Single dotted rhythm



Example 11: Mozart – Sonata in C for piano duet, KV 521, bars 1-5 primo part



Example 12: Mozart – Theme and Variations in G major for piano duet, KV 501, Variation 4 bars 1-2, primo part



Example 13: Mozart – Concerto for two pianos in E flat major, KV 365, third movement, bars 255-258



Example 14: Dotted rhythms

MOZART WROTE BOTH:



FOR HIM,  COULD MEAN:

1.  (modern interpretation)

2. 

3. 

Example 15: Mozart - Sonata in A major KV 331, first movement, bars 1-4



Example 16: Mozart – Sonata in F KV 332, first movement, bars 60-65



Example 17: Mozart - Fantasy in C minor KV 475, bars 1-4

