Period players are preparing to mark Beethoven’s birthday in 2020

HAPPY 250TH (almost),

LUDWIG

By LAURENCE VITTES

For anyone interested in historically informed performance ramping up to Beethoven 2020, one of the best places to start researching the current state of Beethoven on period instruments is the André Mertens Galleries for Musical Instruments at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. With Beethoven’s 250th birthday happening the same year the museum turns 150, the gallery is a fantasyland of instruments the composer wrote for and knew intimately, and Bradley Strauchen-Scherer, the collection’s associate curator, is an enthusiastic fan.
from Beethoven symphonies continue to hold a prominent place at orchestra auditions. For Bruggemeyer, these challenges come to a head in the Ninth Symphony: “I’d go so far as to say that some of it is completely nuts! The fast section on the last page is virtually unplayable. But, of course, we have the opening recitative of the last movement, which is a unique and special moment in double-bass writing—a chance for our instruments to sing.”

To know what physical resources Beethoven was working with in his seminal string quartets, they must be heard performed on period instruments. Aisslinn Nosky, concertmaster of the Handel and Haydn Society and first violin of the Eybler Quartet, describes what it’s like playing a violin prepared in an early 19th-century manner.

“To an audience member, the biggest differences between my historical setup and a modern setup might be the fact that I use a model of an earlier bow and that I don’t use a chin rest when performing the Beethoven quartets,” says Nosky. “My bow by Stephen Marvin is based on an early Tourte model, slightly shorter and quite a bit lighter than a modern bow. It helps me achieve the great variety of articulation that I believe Beethoven calls for in his writing.”

Concerning her chin rest, Nosky has “a different, very enjoyable relationship to the violin” when she doesn’t use one. “Without a chin rest, the violin can more easily move around on my shoulder and that makes shifting back and forth between high and low positions, which is a feature of Beethoven’s string writing, something that I have to make very specific technical plans for if I’m going to achieve accurate intonation.”

Beethoven’s fortepiano

The fortepiano was, of course, the instrument Beethoven loved most. “They are not as loud as modern instruments,” Paul Badura-Skoda said in an interview a few years ago, “and at first hearing they don’t have a round, Romantic tone. At first, they can also sound wiry due to too many overtones. But then I started to realize they were halfway between a harpsichord and a modern piano in the shape of a beautiful guitar, and with many extraordinary possibilities.”

Thomas Crawford, founder, artistic director, and conductor of the American Classical Orchestra, is in total agreement. “A unique convergence of factors,” he says, “indicates that the time is right for fortepiano mainstreaming.” So, he and ACO will bring the fortepiano and Beethoven together in an ambitious three-year initiative kicking off in 2019. The goal: “To elevate the fortepiano to the forefront of the HIP community in America.”

In addition to programming, master classes, workshops and other outreach activities, Crawford and ACO will host an international competition each year, with the winners performing with the orchestra at Lincoln Center.

Appropriately enough, the second year will focus entirely on Beethoven. “It will be for his 250th birthday,” Crawford says, “our 35th. the Metropolitan Museum’s 150th, and the 300th birthday of Bartolomeo Cristofori’s first fortepiano.”

Many leading fortepianists will participate as performers, judges, teachers, and scholars, including Malcolm Bilson, Robert Levin, Bart van Oort, Kristian Bezuidenhout, and Alexei Lubimov. The Met will participate with an exhibit of Cristofori’s three surviving instruments.

Pushing the limits

Like many of his colleagues equally proficient on period and modern instruments, Max Mandel, co-principal viola of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, focuses on another essential component—“the struggle.”

“I can’t quite get Beethoven’s ‘fist-shaking’ image out of my mind, I guess,” he says.
The large cases at the gallery entrance constitute an education unto themselves. One particularly magnificent display comprises wind-instrument design and development from the first decades of the 19th century, with the brass resplendent in their tubing and, in the newer ones, their valves. In addition to the extraordinary beauty of design and materials, these displays are particularly interesting because of Beethoven's core interest in pushing the limits of technology.

Inside the gallery, a case with antique ivory flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons—all miracles of workmanship and technology—show the heartbreaking cracks and other signs of deterioration and aging.

As Strauchen-Scherer says, "There are so many things to see here that relate to Beethoven's life and music."

And to the hearing of his music. For Michael Alexander Willens, music director of Die Köln Akademie, whose new recording of Beethoven's five piano concertos with fortepianist Ronald Brautigam will be released in the fall of 2019, "conducting Beethoven on period instruments has proven to be a true ear opener when compared to the normal symphonic experience."

**Beethoven's orchestra: the basics**

"The sound of an orchestra at a lower pitch of 430 Hz," Willens explains, "and the strings playing without vibrato immediately removes shrillness from the sound. The use of gut strings with lighter bows makes for articulations and colors that are not possible with steel strings and heavier bows.

"Woodwind instruments are another key component of Beethoven's sound world. They had fewer keys which were made of lighter wood and they blended effortlessly better as a wind band. Natural horns are forced to play certain notes stopped with the right hand—there were no valves yet—so they create sounds and effects that one never hears in performances with modern instruments. And the lighter clarity demonstrated by the natural trumpets in combination with the powerful sound of calf-headed timpani being struck by wooden beaters is extremely dramatic."

Beethoven's relationship to his instruments also was special when it came to the double bass, even if not so revolutionary. In fact, Cecelia Bruggemeyer, principal bass of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, says Beethoven "was one of the last composers to treat the bass as if it were a cello. For him, the cello and bass together made one instrumental bass line voice.

"There are a few moments of independent double bass lines in his symphonies, but not many, and a lot of the fast passages are identical," she says, adding with a grimace, "There's no sense of any quarter being given to the distance we have to travel to shift around the instrument." She points out that it's a sign of the complexity and challenge of his writing that excerpts
"Beethoven was constantly pushing the limits of the instruments at his disposal: 'How high can you play on that fiddle? How loud can we make this piano? Do I have to break some strings? Don't make me throw my soup at my cook!'

"So when I'm playing the finale of his 7th or 8th symphony on a classical setup with gut strings and a transitional bow, I really have to work hard for my fortissimos. It's not easy. You have to dig in there and pull the sound, you can't just press down and get more volume the way you can on steel. Sometimes it hurts to hold down gut strings with your left hand in a way steel never does."

But to Mandel, that's the point. "Beethoven should never feel easy on period or modern instruments. I don't want to take any shortcuts that would put perfection within reach. I believe the audience should hear us pushing the limits of what our instruments can do, so they can feel the risk and the danger that left audiences of the early 1800s in a state of shock."

Mandel adds, as a point of pride: "I also hope you can catch the OAE playing Beethoven sometime soon where you'll get to see and hear the violas giving it everything we have."

Effect on the mainstream

Die Kölnner Akademie's Willens believes the "revolution has started" and that over the next decade "all of the knowledge we have acquired using these instruments and applying HIP will become mainstream itself!"

"Most modern orchestras these days," Willens says, "at least here in Europe, have purchased natural trumpets and baroque timpani and are using them in their performances of late 18th and early 19th-century music. Conductors are asking the strings, and to a lesser extent the woodwinds, to play without vibrato, with varied success. Some orchestras have even purchased bows for their string section."

A quick canvassing of America's top orchestras reveals a less consistent pattern. Few orchestras own both natural trumpets and calf-skin timpani, although many use them on occasion, and many players are keen period-instrument practitioners themselves.

Markus Rhoten, principal timpanist of the New York Philharmonic, uses baroque timpani for compositions of the late 18th and early 19th century. "Beethoven's Fifth has been the cutoff point so far. Any compositions following have orchestrations that are simply too large for the sound capacity of my baroque drums."

The Philharmonic's principal trumpet, Christopher Martin, owns a natural trumpet. "It's an Egger four-hole. I've used it for solo and chamber music performances. We've discussed the idea of using them in the Philharmonic, but the idea hasn't yet come to fruition."

Martin finds the sound, blend, and balance of the natural instruments "ideal for Baroque and Classical repertoire, so perhaps it will happen someday soon. At the same time, we face a busy schedule of 130-140 concerts per season with quick turnaround times, so it's a challenge."

It's also reality. As Nosky says, "I still play a violin with a modern setup whenever it seems appropriate for the music. I enjoy relating to my instrument in different ways with different setups for different music."

Elisa Citterio, the new music director of Tafelmusik, reports that "many musicians are now easily able to switch from modern to baroque instruments" and has been one of them herself for 20 years. "The point is what kind of education the musicians receive. Good training can only be beneficial when a modern musician who also specializes in early music comes back to the modern orchestra enriched with more flexibility, nuances, and information."

Citterio could not say whether modern-instrument orchestras in Europe require knowledge of Baroque style but says she is finding "more and more musicians who have a sensitivity about early music. "Modern orchestras will probably be inspired more and more
by the HIP, and the border between them for early and classical repertoire will grow thinner."

**Reality**

With the boost provided by the birthday celebrations, HIP Beethoven will face opportunities and challenges on its hands in 2020.

The other Cologne period band, Concerto Köln, for example, is planning various endeavors including the *Missa solemnis* led by Kent Nagano, an educational Beethoven program for children, and a CD project featuring the Violin Concerto and Triple Concerto.

However, Jochen Schäfmeier, the ensemble's managing director, says there will be no complete new recording of the symphonies.

"The reason for this partially lies in the structure of an orchestra that does not perform its own concert series but rather offers projects to concert promoters," says Schäfmeier. "Furthermore, as there is an excess supply of Beethoven symphonies in 2020, convincing concert promoters to take them on is nearly impossible."

**Epilogue**

This past September, Albert Kim and his piano students at the University of Central Missouri went on a field trip to the National Music Museum in Vermillion, SD, a few weeks before it was to close until 2021 for major expansion. Half a continent away from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, they played on a Beethoven/Haydn era fortepiano, a clavichord, an 1849 Erard, an 1855 Broadwood, and a replica of an 18th-century harpsichord. Kim also had the opportunity to play the opening of Beethoven's *Waldstein* Sonata on an un-refurbished Anton Martin Thym grand piano ca. 1815.

"Fifteen seconds was all I had," Kim says, "and I was afraid I'd hurt the instrument; its keys were so very shallow. It felt like nothing compared to a modern grand. So I played lightly, but I'll never forget it. What was it like? It thundered. And then, quicksilver, it fell into a shimmering hush."

Hana Oshima, one of Kim's students, notes that the fortepiano produced the sound she was "yearning to hear and struggling to find on a modern piano...even in the few chords I played. It was as if the instrument itself brought the piece to life. It made me realize that the increased effort we pianists in the 21st century need to exert to play on modern pianos can easily then lead to obscuring the intent of the music itself. The sensitivity of the keyboards in the museum stripped me of that weight and let me hear the sound world and music more clearly than ever before."

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