

Mid-Twentieth-Century English Pianism – Classicism, *Werktreue* and Empiricism

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Piano aficionado and former critic of the *New York Times*, Harold Schonberg, characterised what he considered to be the “English school of the first half of this century” [that is the twentieth] as an

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urbane one, seldom passionate and seldom even dramatic, but never closed in. That is why it is more closely allied to the classical school than to the others. Old J. B. Cramer put his mark on the English school late in the eighteenth century and Mendelssohn the classicist was the dominating force in the nineteenth. Their ghosts haunt British music and British pianists to this day.¹

By a classical style, Schonberg was referring to a style of playing which emphasised purity, accuracy, clarity, directness and a subordination of the personality of the player to the demands of the work.

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This is what we might now call *Werktreue* performance – a style of playing described by Lydia Goehr thus: “Performances and performers were respectively subservient to works and their composers”.² Schonberg’s subjects in his discussion of ‘the English school’ are Myra Hess, Solomon Cutner and Clifford Curzon. However, I was keen to ascertain whether Schonberg’s observations could also be found to apply to the next generation of English pianists. The pianists that were the focus of the current study are thus:

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Malcolm Binns (b.1936), Peter Katin (b.1930), Moura Lympany (1916 – 2005),

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Denis Matthews (1919–1988), Valerie Tryon (b.1934) and David Wilde (b.1935).

To ascertain whether any interpretative convergence suggested by the term ‘school of’ can be detected between members of this focal group, and whether this does indeed demonstrate ‘classical’ interpretative tendencies, I analysed a representative sample of their solo recordings. To place the analytical outcomes into a wider frame of reference, I introduced a control group of non-English pianists and offset recordings by members of this group with recordings by the featured English pianists. Thus non-English pianist X was compared with English pianist Y in a recording of the same piece. This throws into sharper relief any tendencies observed in the English recordings that might otherwise seem unremarkable without this comparative element, thereby adding strength to any conclusions that were drawn. To make such comparative assessment as telling as possible, I chose recordings by non-English artists that were issued as closely as possible in time to those released by the English pianists. The aim here was to minimise differences in recording technology that inevitably impact on the listening experience. Also, the non-English pianists selected were, in most cases, broadly contemporary with their English counterparts.

Analyses of the recordings addressed all the usual audible aspects of performance: accuracy, articulation, duration, dynamics, phrasing, rhythm, tempo and texture. As a template for the performances, naturally enough, the score was used as arbiter to determine how conformist or how deviant a performance was. However, as I do not wish to confuse *Werktreue* with *Texttreue* performance, the score as an informant for performance was assessed alongside other important areas such as structural embeddedness, style and performance tradition. Performance tradition is an aspect that has acquired much force with the passage of time and may be work-specific – as with the Schumann piano concerto in which the soloist’s opening flourish is habitually taken at a faster speed than the ensuing lyrical subject – or it may be more general, as in common perceptions of era-related performance practice. For example it is customary for greater amounts of *rubato* to be used in a performance of music from the Romantic era, say in a Chopin nocturne, than in one from the Classical.

Returning to Schonberg’s characterisation of the English school of pianism as ‘classical’, I summarised the outcomes of each performance analysis as leaning towards the classic or the non-classic (I prefer the term ‘classic’ to ‘classical’ so as to avoid any suggestion of a musical era or ancient-world architecture.)

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Classic readings do broadly what is expected and are neither uncompromisingly *Texttreue* nor wilfully interventionist, occupying an interpretative middle ground in which, as is normal in *Werktreue*-inspired performances, the personality of the performer is secondary to the perceived requirements of the musical work (rather than just its score).

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Non-classic readings can move towards the opposite poles of an interpretative hinterland. On the one hand there is the interpretation that is literal in its adherence to the score’s instructions placing textual fidelity above other considerations such as historical context, musical structure and/or related stylistic conventions. On the other hand, non-classic readings are likely to adapt the score’s performance instructions and modify conventional perceptions of the music’s structural-expressive implications or are highly personalised, the performer’s “signature”³ being wilfully present throughout. I should also add that my use of the classic/non-classic terminology is purely descriptive and non-judgemental. There will no doubt be many listeners who have been equally thrilled by performances that tend either way.

Nineteen detailed analyses were carried out using recordings of music by Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Liszt and Rachmaninoff. Time does not permit me to discuss these fully so I will highlight three of the most telling outcomes, those concerning tempo, dynamics and pedalling.

Starting with **tempo**, the most striking example of a middle-ground (or classic) tempo was discovered in Moura Lyman’s and Peter Katin’s recordings of Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in G major Op. 32/5. Here the non-English control performance was by the Italian pianist Sergio Fiorentino. All three recordings were made between 1951 and 1970 and were the first three recordings of the complete preludes to be issued on LP.

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Lympany and Katin average out at crotchet = c. 63 and 65 respectively, whereas Fiorentino at c.77 is much brisker.

If other recordings are examined a very wide tempo range becomes apparent, one of the slowest being crotchet = c.52 (Ashkenazy) and the fastest c. 79 (Moiseiwitsch and Constance Keene). Interestingly Rachmaninoff's own recording goes at c. 62, placing the two English subjects very close to the composer's own interpretation – and R was not a pianist known for romantic excess. So from the tempo perspective, an interpretative middle-ground is taken by both Katin and Lympany. A quick sample from Lympany's and Fiorentino's recordings will illustrate.

Music example 1: Lympany and Fiorentino.

So there is no attempt at undue personalisation, and a classic approach is evident.

In the realm of **dynamics**, one typical example will have to stand for the others. In 1969, Valerie Tryon made the first recoding of the Rach Etudes Tab Op. 39, shortly to be followed by Ashkenazy in 1973.

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One passage (bars 15–22) in the Etude in B minor (no. 4) shows Tryon reflecting the score markings and Ashkenazy largely disregarding them.

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This can be seen graphically in the sound wave forms for both artists.

Music example 2: Tryon and Ashkenazy

In this regard, Tryon can be heard (and seen) to be the more score observant, but this observance is also innate to the music as sound, and so is more *Werktreue* than *Texttreue*, thus also more classic in the sense that I am using the word.

Now to **pedalling**.

Denis Matthews made his recording of the *Waldstein* Sonata Op. 53 by Beethoven in 1953, Wilhelm Kempff's in 1951 (the first of his two LP recordings).

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In the first movement of the *Waldstein* sonata Beethoven does not mark any pedalling so any assessment of an interpretative approach cannot take score direction into account. A good example of this occurs during Bars 14–22 where there are no scored pedal markings. Both pianists nonetheless engage pedal, Matthews methodically so, clearing the resonance only to reflect the harmonic changes or to ensure articulative clarity. Kempff's use is more sporadic as can be seen and heard.

Music example 3 – Kempff's pedalling + Matthews

Thus Matthews adopts a classic approach in that he draws the pedalling out of the musical information provided by the score. Kempff's is more whimsical.

Naturally, it is not possible to draw many firm conclusions about a school of English pianism, especially as the analysis was small-scale and selective. Nevertheless one fundamental area of commonality in the English pianists' approach presented itself with reasonable consistency across a variety of genres and styles. Evident from all the analyses – and the examples just offered are only a representative selection of the outcomes – was what I have broadly characterised as a 'classic' manner of interpretation. That is, there was a straightforward, balanced approach to performance informants such as score directions, structural considerations, expressive devices and performance traditions. The lack of any wilful eccentricities or strongly projected personality traits suggests that the composer's apparent wishes, embedded in a score, performance tradition or musical structure, were placed above the artistic will of the performer – an attitude which suggests a *Werktreue* (rather than a *Texttreue*) approach to interpretation.

Returning to Schonberg, whose opinion was cited at the beginning of this paper, it would seem that his characterisation of the English school as “seldom passionate ... seldom dramatic” and “more closely allied to the classical school than to the others” has some support from my analytical findings. The English pianists when compared with their non-English colleagues in most cases emerged as the more convention-bound in their interpretative approach (so seldom passionate) and freer from exaggerated gesture (so seldom dramatic). Thus, despite exceptions, it can be proposed that as a school, English pianists of the middle years of the last century broadly demonstrated a classic attitude to interpretation – as did the previous generation, if Schonberg is correct (which now seems likely).

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This was also sometimes discovered by critics. For example Stephen Plaistow in *Gramophone* described David Wilde's recording of Liszt to be “tasteful, fluent and emotionally restrained”⁴ Perhaps most tellingly, *The Times* reviewer greatly admired Peter Katin's “clean playing and classical restraint”⁵ a view further corroborated by Gerald Larner, writing in *The Guardian*, who applauded Katin's “clear interpretation of classical restraint and stylishness”.⁶ This does not belittle the skill or individuality of the artists in question since none is by any means a carbon copy of any other, but it does suggest an unarticulated cultural alliance between the pianists, one that seems to ensure a degree of moderation and sobriety – “urbane” to quote Schonberg again.

At this point it should also be stressed that my conclusions relate purely to English pianism and do not imply anything about other schools of mid-twentieth-century playing, many of which probably shared common characteristics with the attitude described earlier. In any case there was, in the first few decades of the twentieth century, a general move away from what Nicholas Cook has called “the clutter and subjectivity of rhetorical performance” towards, he goes on, “the values of aesthetic, expressive, and even ethical disciplining of performance”.⁷

So if there is evidence that a mid-twentieth English school of piano playing did indeed exist and that a distinguishing feature was a broadly classic approach to musical interpretation, the

question now arises as to where this might have come from. Was it purely nurture? Or did nature enter the equation too?

Nurture, via the pedagogy of such figures as Tobias Matthay and Harold Craxton seems to have played a part in the interpretative attitudes of the pianists under discussion and, given the extent of Matthay's influence, probably affected the interpretative attitudes of many of their contemporaries too. Time does not permit a discussion of pedagogical influences – a paper in itself – but I would like to conclude by considering nurture's corollary, nature.

It is perhaps a truism to write of 'English reserve' but it is nonetheless a persistent one. Stereotypical it may be and stereotypes are usually generalisations that disregard the many exceptions but, as anthropologist Kate Fox has pointed out:

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Stereotypes about the English character ... do not, after all, just come out of thin air but must have germinated and grown from *something*. Most national-character stereotypes are widely accepted, even enthusiastically 'endorsed' among ordinary citizens of the nations in question, which does not make them 'true' but at the very least tells us something about a culture's self-image, and therefore about its beliefs and values.⁸

In a concluding passage to her study of English behaviour, Fox describes moderation as a "deep-seated, unconscious reflex" manifested by "avoidance of extremes, excess and intensity".⁹ This depiction of the English personality-type finds support in a recent (2011) survey by the market research firm Mintel and may also be set within the wider context of empiricism which has been thought to inform many aspects of English culture.¹⁰

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In 1856, Ralph Waldo Emerson characterised the English as "impious in their scepticism of theory"¹¹ hating "nonsense, sentimentalism, and highflown expression",¹² and more recently, the cultural historian Anthony Easthope has traced the influence of empiricism back to the philosophical writings of Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. For example, he cites Bacon's notion that anything which could not be grasped by "enlightened reason" was "'vain', 'frivolous', 'false'",¹³ Easthope also finds empiricism pervading the work of John Milton and of John Dryden whose *Religio Laici* defends "the centre ... against extremes" and appeals to "clarity over obscurity".¹⁴ The author similarly discerns empirical attitudes in late twentieth-century literary journalism and historical writing.

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Overall Easthope characterises English discourse as favouring "transparency over rhetoric, objective statement over subjective excess".¹⁵

It seems reasonable then to propose that a national personality profile and culture are likely to inform a national musical performance style. In the case of the English, if both character and culture tend to favour transparency and objectivity as opposed to rhetoric and excess, then musical performance is liable to display similar tendencies.¹⁶ So, clear, objectively verifiable interpretative parameters set by the score or stylistic norms of expression were

generally adopted, and subjective excess, as in a perceived over-use of *rubato* or excessive tempo manipulation, was generally avoided. These traits in combination can thus be thought to yield the classic or *Werktreue* interpretative approach described earlier.

Thank you.

¹ Schonberg, 1987 [1963]: 454–455

² Goehr, 2007 [1992]: 231

³ Godlovitch, 1998: 140

⁴ Plaistow, 1961: 159

⁵ *The Times*, 19/07/1965

⁶ *Ibid*, 04/04/19670

⁷ Cook, 2013: 217

⁸ Fox, 2014 [2004]: 29–30

⁹ *Ibid*: 551

¹⁰ Easthope, 1999, Kumar, 2003

¹¹ Emerson, 1856: 21

¹² *Ibid*: 29

¹³ Easthope, 1999: 65

¹⁴ *Ibid*: 113

¹⁵ Easthope, 1999: 154