Interpretation or Simply Mistakes

Morbus Pianist

In keeping with the naming of diseases after their discoverers, I could call the following text, which deals with pianists' mistakes, morbus Fleischmann, but I'd rather stick with the title morbus Pianist.

This is about pianists' mistakes that hardly any other instrumentalist or singer makes. This is partly due to the piano tone, which can no longer be influenced once it's struck, but also to piano technique, when important notes are often not sustained according to their value because it's more comfortable to bounce off them and fall smoothly into the following note. Although one could hold the notes in question with the pedal, this doesn't often happen either, and this brings us to our topic, which I want to explain in detail.

Mozart was often annoyed when his works were played too fast. That has hardly changed to this day. Now that I am almost a century old, I have been able to observe how pianists increasingly missed the composers' intentions and apparently lost their natural access to music. This is exacerbated by YouTube. Especially in classical music, the emotional expressiveness of motifs and phrases, represented by different dynamics, articulation and agogic, is far too often reduced to rhythm by playing staccato that is too fast and short. Different note lengths are ignored. The length (the time) of the note is sustained but not the duration of the tone. It is precisely the heavy beats of the bar that are played staccatissimo, even though they convey the melodic and harmonic meaning. The brevity prevents the harmony from being understood, and so only the rhythm remains.

There are three errors we hear:

1. Failure disregarding heavy and light beats and the lengths and shortenings

2. Tempo in Classical Variations and by Bach.

3. Hidden voices.

In his book "Attempt at a Thorough Violin Method," Leopold Mozart explained the heavy and light beats in music. Beethoven's comments on the Cramer Etudes for his nephew also reveal how important correct accentuation and attention to “lengths and shortenings” of notes for the interpretation were to him. Beethoven writes that when playing cantilenas, he should listen to trained singers, add appropriate words to a passage and sing them, or even listen to such passages performed by an educated violinist or wind player (he evidently didn't think much of pianists).

Bach also spoke of the cantabile style of piano playing, that is, of singing the music. Singing almost always has a text that requires a certain tempo.

The most influential music encyclopedia that summarized the body of knowledge of the Baroque and early Classical periods was Heinrich Christoph Koch's encyclopedia, published in 1802. There, he writes about the heavy part of the bar:

"...strictly speaking, it consists partly in the durability of tone increased by a sustained voice, partly in a certain emphatic lingering, whereby it seems as if one were lingering on such an accentuated tone for a moment longer than its specific duration requires..."

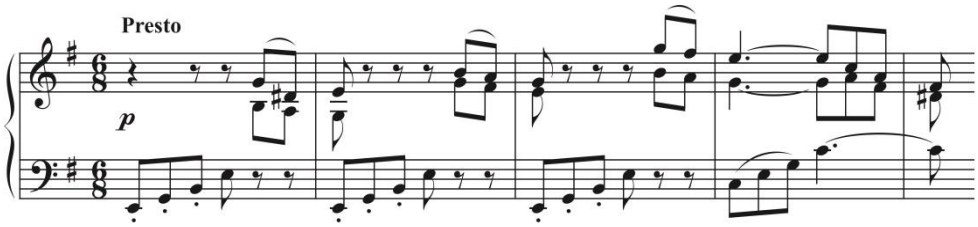
And here is another word from Schindler, Beethoven's biographer:

"Without prior study of prosody, without precise knowledge of iambic, trochaic, dactylic, and spondaic meters, as the poetic forms that underlie all instrumental music, nothing can be achieved by the student, for the art of correct accentuation and the distinction between „lengths and shortenings“ notes in tone groups rests on this knowledge. The correct declamation of word poetry serves as an analogy here."

So, in a 4/4 time signature, the first note is a heavy part of the measure, the third note is an easy part, and the 2nd and 4th notes are even easier to play. In a 6/8 time signature, the first note is again heavy, the fourth note is easier, and the rest is to be played even lighter

Here's just one example of how this can be understood in the sense of Leopold Mozart and Beethoven. It corresponds to the musical logic:

Joseph Haydn Sonata in E minor, Hob. XVI/34



In the left hand, the first three notes appear to be exactly the same. In fact, however, the first note is the heaviest part of the bar and should therefore be played slightly louder and held longer than the next two notes, which are lighter parts of the bar and should therefore be played softer and shorter. In the right hand, the upbeat is played softer and shorter (2nd note), while the first note of the next bar, as the heavy part, should be played louder and held longer. Notating these fine nuances too precisely would be far too complicated and difficult to read. Musicians of that time were well aware of this and took it for granted. Today's pianists often just stick to the written music and not only play it uniformly, but also play the third notes of the right hand staccato.

The staccato dot can have various meanings:

It can shorten the note by varying its length, depending on the character of the phrase, so it's certainly not only staccatissimo.

Or it can indicate a dynamic style of playing. It's not to be played short, but loud. This can be recognized, for example, by the fact that the pedal is often required at the same time, which sustains the note.

The dot can also simply indicate an arm movement. Josef Dichler called this “technical notation” in his book "The Path to Artistic Piano Playing." For example, the bass note is written staccato because the arm jumps up to the higher notes, even though the bass note must be held, which is sometimes indicated by pedal signs.

Classical variation require a constant tempo because the theme is always audible and therefore cannot suddenly be played at a different tempo. Only if the variation is composed more freely does the composer specify a different tempo.

Bach's music is just as emotional an experience as that of any other composer. Although the harpsichord, which does not allow for dynamic differentiation, was not an ideal instrument, it was nevertheless indispensable for the reproduction of the entire composition. Bach had made suggestions for improvements to piano makers and had certainly composed preludes in the Well-Tempered Clavier for the fortepiano (Eva Badura-Skoda), which was already widespread at the time, which cannot be adequately reproduced on a harpsichord. It demands dynamic and expressive playing with use of agogic. Thus, even pieces that consist only of 16th notes and appear to be played evenly and without distinction like an étude find their expression in the cadences and harmonic modulations, which must also be dynamically and agogically differentiated. Ultimately, everything originates in singing and, with it, the natural speed of speech.

We have statements from this period about tempo from Johann Joachim Quantz:

In his "Attempt at an Instruction on Playing the Flute Transversely" he writes:

Take as a basis the pulse rate as it runs after lunch until evening, namely as it beats in a cheerful and jovial, yet somewhat hot-tempered and volatile person, or, if one may say so, in a person of choleric-sanguine temperament.

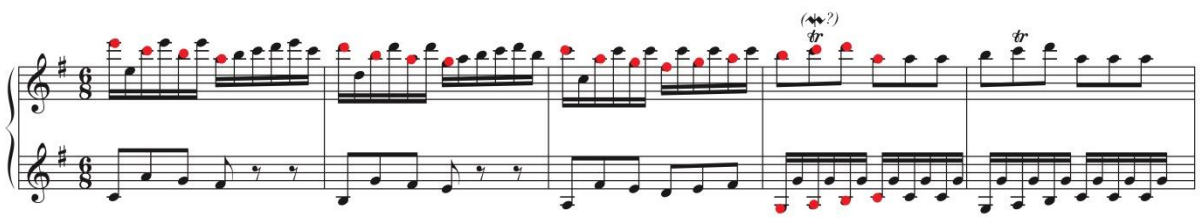
Quantz goes even further: "If this isn't sufficient, I want to determine something more precise. Take the pulse that beats approximately eighty times in a minute as a guideline." And then: that's the right one.

The sound of a fortepiano or pianoforte of that time was not cut-off as abruptly by the light dampers as it is on a modern Steinway or other grand piano. Such a cut-off also doesn't correspond to the natural attack and fade-away of a vocal note. Here, the correct use of the pedal can naturally enhance the tone. Furthermore, there are passages, such as the fugue in the E minor Toccata, where we can achieve the tonal impression of a two-manual harpsichord simply by holding the pedal. For chords, the pedal helps to somewhat match the overtone-rich sound of a harpsichord on modern grand pianos.

Recitatives are a type of sprechgesang (speech-song) and are therefore rendered in the tone of expressive speech. Due to misunderstanding, pianists sometimes play them with strict metronomes.

Writing with a goose quill is a tricky business. Therefore, composers usually do not write out hidden parts. Examples in Bach include the opening theme of the Prelude and the Minuet I in the first Partita.

Joseph Haydn Sonata in E minor, Hob. XVI/34, from bar 19

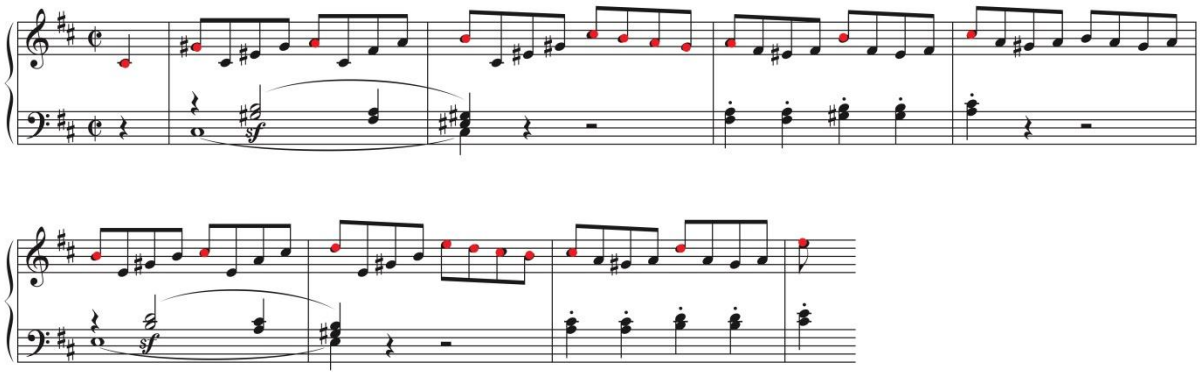


The left hand is the second voice. The simultaneously sounding notes of the right hand must be sustained as eighth notes and form the main voice. In the fourth measure, the corresponding notes of the left hand must be sustained as eighth notes.

As already mentioned, the eighth notes of the first voice are not written for simplicity's sake. In the left hand and in the hidden part of the right hand, we must again play heavy and light beats differently. This results in a swaying rhythm, which also requires a corresponding tempo that is not too fast. What is usually heard is a tempo that is too fast and the right hand as mere viruose fluency.

Another of many examples:

L.v. Beethoven Sonata in D major op. 10/3 from bar 30



It's quite amusing when pianists fail to recognize the first voice and play the accompanying voices louder, supposedly the main part, while the actual theme is neglected. From the Baroque period to the Viennese Classical period, there are repeated examples of hidden voices.

I would like to end with the words of Leopold Mozart:

"and play in such a way that one imitates the art of singing with the instrument as much as possible. And this is the most beautiful thing in music."

Walter Fleischmann