

Review of Beethoven's French Piano: A Tale of Ambition and Frustration by Tom Beghin

Dorian Bandy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/beethovenjournal>



Part of the [Musicology Commons](#)

Tom Beghin, *Beethoven's French Piano: A Tale of Ambition and Frustration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 384 pp. ISBN 9780226818351.

Critics examining the philosophical underpinnings of historical performance have long been exercised by the tension between, on the one hand, the primacy of specificity to the performer's craft—performers studying a given piece must attend to *that* slur in *that* phrase—and, on the other hand, the generalities in which historical evidence is often parsed. It is as a result of this tension that attempts at historical reconstruction are sometimes dismissed as relying on an oversimplified conception of practices that prevailed at a given time and place. Even Beethoven, whose relationship with pianos and professional colleagues is singularly well documented, proves an elusive subject of study when the matter at hand is the ephemeral art of musical performance. His own proclivities at the keyboard, as they relate both to his concert career and to his use of the instrument as a compositional tool, are difficult to establish without falling back on contemporary sources, even those originating far beyond his circle.

Tom Beghin's new study pursues a dizzying range of intellectual agendas, and although it is not his explicit goal to disarm the tensions inherent in the aims and methods of historical performance, he nonetheless manages to do exactly that. Beghin focuses not on Beethoven's relationship with the piano as such, nor even on the instruments built by the Erard firm during the composer's lifetime, but on a single piano in all its particularity. He describes in exacting detail the process of constructing a modern-day replica of the Erard piano Beethoven acquired in 1803, and he chronicles the many challenges Beethoven faced while learning to play and understand the instrument. In doing so he demonstrates the benefits that accrue when we invert the music historian's usual method, examining a composer's style and output through the mediating lens of a single object.

The first part of the book establishes the background to both Beethoven's and Beghin's acquisitions. We learn of many contextual matters—the documentation surrounding Beethoven's purchase; the pianistic techniques of various contemporaries; details of keyboard organology, mechanics, and aesthetics; and aspects of Beethoven's creative methods and aspirations. In the second major portion of the book, Beghin

discusses music from three “phases” of the composer’s relationship with the Erard. The “Waldstein” Sonata in C Major, Op. 53 (which Beghin redubs the “Adam” after the French virtuoso whose pianism may have influenced the composition) stands for the “breaking in” phase during which Beethoven optimistically probed the potentiality of the new instrument); the Sonata in F Major, Op. 54, represents the “stability” phase; and the “Appassionata” Sonata in F Minor, Op. 57, represents the “revision” phase, during which Beethoven, increasingly dissatisfied, engaged the help of piano-building colleagues to alter the Erard. Throughout, Beghin reflects on his own developing relationship with the replica and offers a closing account that discusses both his recording of these sonatas on the replica and the aftermath of Beethoven’s relationship with the original. Laced throughout are brief “vignettes” by four of Beghin’s collaborators at the Orpheus Instituut: Robin Blanton, Chris Maene, Michael Pecak, and Tilman Skowronek. (Other Orpheus collaborators are referred to repeatedly but did not contribute prose to the book.) Extensive supplementary materials provided on a companion website (<https://www.orpheusinstituut.be/en/beethovenerard>) include videos of Beghin’s performances as well as various demonstrations such as an extreme slow-motion video comparing the Erard action with that of contemporaneous Viennese instruments often used by modern-day fortepianists.

The book’s greatest strength is the fascinating glimpse it allows into the workings of Beghin’s mind. We accompany him on a journey of documentary sleuthing around Europe, through archives and museums, and ultimately into the practice room and recording studio. The many digressions and speculations, and of course the density of dogged, meticulous research, all make the book a comprehensive record of this insightful scholar-performer’s working process—an exhilarating masterclass for the rest of us, whether or not we seek to emulate Beghin’s dual career. The book exudes remarkable depth of thought, demonstrating at every turn the author’s ability to draw interpretive riches from minute details.

And indeed, genuinely eye-opening insights emerge along the way. One exemplary early section includes an extended discussion of the “una corda” pedal (Chapter 4), which undergirds Beghin’s analysis of the slow

movement of the Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Major, Op. 58. Beghin embellishes the movement's already-familiar programmatic depiction of Orpheus, offering a penetrating reading in which Beethoven himself becomes the mythical lyre-player, opening up magical soundscapes through the harp-like timbral adjustments made possible by the Erard's pedals. Another rich section, perhaps the high point of the study, is the discussion of the Sonata Op. 53 (Chapter 9). Beghin identifies a series of overlaps between this work and the methods of contemporary pianists—Louis Adam in particular, but also Daniel Steibelt and others. These reveal much about Beethoven's immersion in contemporary performance culture, a point easily lost amid the prevailing focus on his activities as a composer. Beghin's discussion of Op. 53 charts the genesis of the sonata, following it along the slow path to publication and even explaining its three-movement (rather than four-movement) structure. He does an excellent job of keeping the musical discussions grounded in tactile details of pianism, at times using the instrument to clarify long-disputed analytic mysteries, for instance the enigmatic single note (rather than full chord) that opens the piece. Equally revealing is his treatment of Beethoven's draft material for Op. 53, which occasions a number of Erard-inspired counterfactual speculations that, in turn, help us hear the finished sonata in a new way: no small feat when writing about such familiar repertoire. Because the piano, like the sonata, underwent "revisions" at Beethoven's request, Beghin's linked discussions of compositional and organological developments (concentrated in Chapter 11) evince a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between instrument, composer, and repertoire. Here, Beghin is at his very best, giving us something that only he could produce, drawing as he does on such a unique array of intellectual and musical interests.

Even more, there is something irresistibly *fun* about Beghin's outlook: his curiosity and creativity are infectious. Taking in the immense scope of the study, one might easily feel overwhelmed by the scholarly tenacity on display—yet this is offset by a refreshing sense of playfulness. A historically-informed contest described in Chapter 10 is a highlight in this regard. Beghin reconstructs a list of pieces used for degree exams in early nineteenth-century Paris and stages a competition, inviting an international roster of pianists to adopt the personae of various historical figures. (Beghin

plays Louis Adam.) The experiment is both humorous and revealing. Although Beghin gestures towards scientific rigor, even maintaining a set of “control” pieces against which to gauge his historical guesswork, what shines through is the variety of investigative approaches he is willing to adopt. Meanwhile, many of the playful, imaginative statements Beghin tosses off in the text are left undeveloped, awaiting elaboration by others. One idea ripe for investigation is the notion that the Erard functions as a quasi-orchestral instrument, a possibility Beghin does not fully explore. This could, for instance, amplify a parallel claim of topic theory, which often locates echoes of wind instruments, and even the occasional string instrument or voice, in solo keyboard music. To take up this avenue of investigation might cast light on Beethoven’s symphonic orchestrations and perhaps even his working-habits in writing sacred vocal music, a genre Beghin repeatedly invokes.

Although it is sometimes tempting to distinguish a book’s prose style from its conceptual content, Beghin’s writing itself deserves mention. On a granular level, his sentences are beautifully written, by turns elegant and witty. This makes the text easy to navigate—and it also allows him to convey a remarkable density of information. He is fond of digressions, and frequently mentions ideas which, though perhaps not strictly relevant, amplify the book’s scope and resonances. A favorite example comes on p. 195, when the position of Beghin’s feet on the Erard’s pedals invites comparison with the elegant *contrapposto* of a French high-society dandy. Beghin quips that, fortunately, he just *happened* to bring dancing shoes to the recording studio. The humor makes palatable the type of aside that might be frustrating if set in weightier prose. As a result of his light touch, he is able to gesture toward points he does not explicitly pursue, in this case resonances with the socioeconomic identities of nineteenth-century pianists. Other literary turns, meanwhile, occur on the level of large-scale structure. Most movingly, Beghin gives the study momentum and shape by conceiving of “parallel tales” in which Beethoven’s relationship with his Erard prefigures a similar three-phase path traced by Beghin with the replica.

Yet the book’s strengths are also weaknesses. Beghin’s eye for detail is superb, as is his range of expertise, yet these qualities occasionally burden

the text. Especially for readers who do not share the breadth of his interests—which is to say, for most of us—large swathes of the book are fatiguing. Are the financial practices of the Erard firm in the early nineteenth century truly of consequence in this study? Perhaps; but given the near-simultaneous publication of Robert Adelson's *Erard: A Passion for the Piano* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), and the mutual association both authors mention in their books' acknowledgments, one wonders whether some historical discussions in the present text could not have been streamlined. The methodological buzzwords placed early in the text, too, are superfluous. Beghin introduces his study by invoking, in sequence, the Latour-school sociological phenomenon of "de-scription" (p. 4); "life-history" (p. 13); "dependences," playing upon and extending the more familiar "affordances" (p. 15); entanglement theory (pp. 15 and 18–22); and "fittingness" (pp. 22–25). Although the literature associated with such ideas may have spurred Beghin's thinking, the book he ultimately produced does not integrate these concepts, but simply goes on to probe, as any thorough study must, the intersections of repertoire, instrument, composer, and culture. The extraneous invocation of these terms and their associated histories needlessly lengthens the study and distracts from the book's actual contents.

Equally perplexing are the extended scientific—though here I mean to say *scientific*—passages. Beghin draws repeatedly on quantitative techniques in vogue at European research institutes, but it is unclear what these contribute to his arguments. In one case, he uses a slow-motion camera to mark the speed-difference between hammer-strikes while playing tremolo on Walter and Erard pianos, laying out the results in a series of neatly quantified graphs (Chapter 7). To be sure, the relevance of tremolo, and the question of which piano produces the more "continuous" tremolo sound, is central to his study. But the cash-value of this question is to be found in the human ear's perception of the pianos' sounds. It was human ears which, in the early nineteenth century, guided piano builders, players, and composers; and it is human ears that today guide Beghin's research as well as adjudicate its success. It is also worth recalling that the machine Beghin employs is not measuring the piano itself, but its player. Similar objections apply to the spectrographic analyses printed in Chapter

9, which attempt to apply tools of empirical measurement despite the fact that the relevant questions are not empirical but theoretical. Beghin goes to great lengths to show that the melodic notes in the last movement of Op. 53 are implied in acoustic analyses of the Erard's sonorities in the first movement. He wants to demonstrate that Beethoven is responding sensitively to the piano's timbral affordances—which, needless to say, seems uncontroversially true. But considering that the melody in question is composed almost entirely of notes in the C major chord, the resonances Beghin detects are unsurprising. He is correct that the finale positively revels in the sonority of C major, and I am persuaded by his proposal that this is, in a sense, what the music is “about.” But quantitative methods do not further the case.

A final point of concern is Beghin's tendency to overstate the importance of the piano in Beethoven's creative process. Despite having already praised Beghin's analysis of Op. 53, I admit that I occasionally grew skeptical—for instance of the extraordinary claim that we should see the Erard “not as merely capable of having ‘an impact’ [on Beethoven's compositional decisions], but as the very space in which creation [happened]” (p. 183). I am sympathetic to the motivating ethos here, and I, too, have argued that Beethoven's relationship with performance was of material importance in his compositional mind. But Beghin goes too far. The piano's affordances are fascinating points of departure—yet, having been available to other contemporaries as well, these must be insufficient to explain what Beethoven himself was doing when he brought his compositional mind to bear on the Erard. Even taking the piano into consideration and seeking the instrument's impact on Op. 53, we sooner or later hit bedrock and must grapple, as ever, with the particular aesthetic criteria Beethoven used *as a composer* while he worked with the Erard. Beghin's analytic and musical insights speak for themselves, but his attempt to play up the importance of the piano is not, in the end, fully convincing.

DORIAN BANDY