

MICHAŁ BRULIŃSKI review

<https://doi.org/10.56693/cr.167>

Classical & Romantic Performance Practice
1750-1900
Clive Brown
2nd edition

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025
Hardcover: pp. 1080
ISBN: 9780197581612
Price approx. \$164 (£130)

Last year, a quarter of a century passed since the first edition of Clive Brown's *Classical & Romantic Performance Practice 1750-1900*, which altered the thinking of performers, listeners and scholars about Classical and Romantic music. Brown sketched a map of issues relating to historically informed performance of Classical and Romantic music, which for two and a half decades has been supplemented by further scholars. From our present-day perspective, we can appreciate the particular value of the author's observations and intuitions – pioneering in their day – and the fact that he always compared 'archaeological' discoveries in musical treatises with performance experience. Thanks to the intense work carried out by Brown and the legions of his musical and scholarly colleagues, the

publication grew to more than 650 pages in 1999 and almost 1100 pages in 2025. The second edition of his book, quite daunting to review, is essentially the *opus vitae* of this professor emeritus of Leeds University, who – according to his own calculations – included here his conclusions and reflections from at least 36 years of research.

Brown's main aim was not to create a complete 'handbook for the performance of early music', but to illustrate the multi-stranded process behind the changes that occurred in the notation of Classical and Romantic instrumental and vocal music. In the most general terms, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the 'norms' were usually established 'between the lines', within various currents of performance conventions, and not in precisely constructed scores. As scores became increasingly detailed, awareness of tradition among performers and listeners dwindled, resulting in distortions to the music of the past. In the course of this process, the communicational relationship between composers, performers and listeners altered. According to Brown, the 'problem with early music' was not resolved by the urtext editions that proliferated around the turn of the twenty-first century, which to a large extent perpetuate misunderstandings.

In a university seminar, I once heard from the eminent historian Prof. Marcin Kula that the real art in scholarship lies not in discovering unequivocal answers, but above all in posing questions. I have the impression that Brown's monumental book is very close to that perspective. The author, shunning dogmatism, consistently demonstrates that every historically informed interpretation is a series of aesthetic polemics and compromises: with tradition, with the current state of knowledge, with the instruments, with the audience, with one's 'artistic I'. Each musical case is a separate tale; so there is no 'universal key' to the historically 'correct' or 'authentic' performance of and listening

to music. Yet there are more or less suitable keys to reading old scores; and he gives more than 1000 pages of hints as to how to discover them. However, this renowned violinist and scholar does not wish to turn performers into scholars slaving away in libraries. What he wants is to help to inform the awareness of artists performing the music of the past, artists capable of bearing the weight of tradition and making mature aesthetic choices in dialogue with contemporary audiences. The problem is that the size and weight of this publication may put off some instrumentalists, one sad testimony to which is the small number of syllabuses in performance studies dealing with Classical and Romantic music that include *Classical & Romantic Performance Practice* on their reading list. An even greater challenge in reading Brown's book may be faced by musicologists and theorists without any performance experience. No doubt aware of these challenges, the author (or helpful editors) have simplified the language in many places compared to the first edition. Those efforts should be appreciated.

As befits a scholar, I should begin with questions linked to chronology and to the body of sources analysed by Brown. This is incredibly large, and comprises various treatises and handbooks (so-called 'schools') for playing, works (scores and the earliest recordings – operatic, symphonic, instrumental and vocal music), iconographic material, instruments, and also conventional historical sources (press, letters, diaries, documents of everyday life). The author and his collaborators and doctoral students have painstakingly analysed a vast amount of source material, in an admirable manner. The body of sources is considerably expanded compared to the first edition, which was possible thanks to the 'explosion' of digitisation over the last two decades. Brown conducted source research in Munich, Paris, Oxford, London, Florence, Regensburg, Vienna,

Darmstadt, Washington, Bergamo, New York, Dresden and Berlin. This all looks most exemplary... except for that question of chronology. It is understandable that there would be no sense in delimiting strict temporal caesurae in the case of the adopted methodological principles and perspectives. However, in the first edition, Brown attempted to get a grip on the chronology, as evidenced, for example, by the timeframe indicated in the title (1750–1900). Unfortunately, in the second edition, he abandoned those attempts. In my opinion, he could have placed on the sketched time axis several events that would have helped the reader to find essential reference points not only in the analysed material. Brown's bold excursions into the territory of music by Brahms, Liszt and even Wagner do not alter the main chronological profile of his interests: the second half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Someone might ask provocatively: given that Horowitz was deemed to be the last 'Romantic' virtuoso, then why, in the second edition, was Brown not tempted to offer a separate chapter devoted to the Romantic performance tradition in the twentieth century? Despite the author's slightly casual approach to the question of chronology, I wish to emphasise his considerable 'social' sensitivity: he brilliantly profiles numerous social aspects of musical life, giving the reader to understand that musical material is never born in a vacuum; it does not exist in isolation from the world that surrounds it.

Over the sixteen chapters, Brown addresses many issues related to the 'weight' of notes (metre, rhythm and the rhetorical determinants of accentuation), dynamics, articulation, phrasing, musical expression (incl. 'light' and 'heavy' performance), tempo and its modifications (incl. various kinds of *tempo rubato*), different variants of ornamentation, improvisation, *portamento* technique ('sliding effects'), *vibrato* (as well as *tremolo*

and all kinds of ‘trembling effects’), and also bowing. In chapter I (‘Metric, Structural and Expressive Accents’), he presents the complex network of interdependencies among metrical, structural and expressive determinants in the weight of musical elements, before then, in chapter II (‘Accentuation in Practice’), confronting a theoretical sketch with musical practice, superimposing the described principles onto an ‘articulation map’, in which a primary role is played by the slur and by harmonic and rhythmic relations. Paraphrasing the first Polish encyclopaedia, by Benedykt Chmielowski, one might say that everyone sees what *forte* or an accent is like, and it is with this delusive assertion that Brown takes issue in one of the longest chapters in the book, chapter III (‘The Notation of Accents and Dynamics’), showing the reader, how much content can be found ‘between the notes’.

In chapter IV (‘Articulation and Phrasing’), the author describes the tension between the two leading strategies in articulation and phrasing – the structural and the expressive – noting the growing tendency in the nineteenth century for precise notation. He also diagnoses the familiar bane of ‘historically uninformed’ musicians: from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the wealth of variety in articulation from past epochs was systematically lost in the practice of ubiquitous *legato*, which – as the author rightly observes in the next chapter (‘Articulation and Expression’) – was by no means a fundamental style of ‘musical expression’ during the first decades of that century. Brown displays genuine methodological and literary flair in chapter VI (‘The Notation of Articulation and Phrasing’): here, he combines in a most intricate way reflection from reading treatises with performance experience – his own, as well as that of his colleagues and predecessors. If I were to identify a Weberian ‘ideal type’ of publication that

blends musical and musicological discourse, I would instantly choose this section.

In the introduction to chapter VII (‘Articulation and String Bowing’), the author announces that given the vastness of the subject, he will only address detailed issues linked to instruments when he deems it essential to the structure of his exposition.¹ There is no denying that bowing on string instruments is a crucial question in the performative context not only per se, but also as a reference point for many other aspects of instrumental practices. One may gain the impression that Brown – himself a gifted violinist – somewhat prioritises string instruments in his book in relation to others (e.g. keyboard chordophones), while violin articulation serves him as a sort of exemplar. I think that in the context of the role played by the piano in the aesthetic universe of the Romantic era, it would be worth devoting more space to that instrument. A suitable place for this might be the closing sections of the book and the context of the adaptation of *vibrato* technique to keyboard instruments (*bebung* on the clavichord and techniques imitating vibration on the piano). Regardless of the modest wishes of readers, credit is certainly due to Brown: in the second edition, he expanded the source base relating to both instruments, taking account of previously absent works for violin (incl. by Charles Dancla,² Carl Flesch,³ Jacques Mazas⁴ and several by Pierre Baillot) and piano (incl. Johann

1 ‘While a broad range of major issues is examined, some significant matters, such as details of playing technique on individual instruments, methods of conducting, the physical conditions of music-making, and so on, are considered only where there are special insights to offer. The technical specifications of instruments, and the changes that took place in these during the period, though important for re-imagining the textures and tone colours with which 18th- and 19th-century composers were familiar, are referred to solely where they are directly relevant to questions of performing style’ (p. 2).

2 *Méthode élémentaire et progressive pour violon*, Op. 52 (Paris, 1855).

3 *Die Kunst des Violinspiels* (Berlin, 1923).

4 *Méthode de violon*, Op. 34 (Paris, 1832).

Baptist Cramer,⁵ Johann Gottlieb Junghans,⁶ Francesco Serafino Tomicich⁷ and William Sheppard⁸). It is worth mentioning that, besides many flute contexts, the second edition is also enriched with references to harp⁹ and bassoon¹⁰.

In the context of *legato* playing on the piano, one cannot overlook Chopin, yet he appears suspiciously rarely in Brown's book.¹¹ Chopin, of course, unlike Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach or Daniel Gottlob Türk, did not write a complete methodological treatise, but several other Poles did.¹² The difficulty with the language is understandable, though this might have been overcome through collaboration with any of the 'historically informed' Polish publishers, of which there are several in the European vanguard. In his acknowledgements, Brown names only the brilliant violinist Paulina Sokołowska, who died a few years ago, but he fails to mention over the course of his exposition her research into the work of Feliks Janiewicz. One may gain the impression that he treated the territory of Polish music as a cultural periphery. And again,

in the context of the author's agenda, it is hardly surprising that he devoted most attention to Vienna and to German and British culture and less to the Francophone landscape. It is impossible to describe everything, and Brown relinquishes all holistic aspirations, yet the consistent lack of references to the musical culture of Eastern and part of Central Europe in the second edition of his book is surprising and regrettable.

In chapter VIII ('Tempo'), Brown gets to grips with an incredibly complicated subject, at the same time describing music's first modern quantification test, in the shape of Johann Nepomuk Mälzel's metronome. He indicates that the choice of a good tempo in historically informed interpretation must take into account such aspects as the correlation of the time, the space, the instrument, the linguistic subjectivity of the nomenclature, the performance tradition, the compositional style, the character of the work and many psychological and aesthetic factors linked to the nature of the musical work; hence it is an ultrasubjective topic. In chapter IX ('Alla breve'), a postscript to the preceding chapter, Brown adds an interesting table that presents a correlation of particular tempi with their approximate metronome values in the work of selected composers. He follows Nicolaus Harnoncourt's lead in noting that the disturbance of the continuity to the functioning of musical stylistic conventions (e.g. in the choice of tempi) coincided with many drastic changes in European culture during revolutionary times. Devoted to the detailed nomenclature linked to tempi is the relatively short chapter X ('Terms of Tempo and Expression'). Here Brown emphasises one important aspect – by no means as obvious as it might seem: tempo names (*Grave*, *Adagio*, *Largo*, *Lento*, *Larghetto*, *Andante*, *Andantino*, *Moderato*, *Allegro*, *Maestoso*, *Vivace*, *Spiritoso*, and also *Amoroso*, *Sostenuto* and *Cantabile*) serve not

5 *Instructions for the Piano Forte* (London, c.1812).

6 *Theoretisch-praktische Pianoforte-Schule* (Vienna, 1820).

7 *Il fanciullo triestino al piano-forte o sia Metodo elementare pel piano-forte compilato sulle opere dei migliori autori* (Trieste, 1850).

8 *A New Pianoforte Preceptor* (London, 1824).

9 John Erhardt Weippert, *The Pedal Harp Rotula, and New Instructions for That Instrument* (London, c.1800).

10 Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Willent-Bordogni, *Méthode complète pour le basson* (Paris, 1844); also Áurea Domínguez Moreno, *Bassoon Playing in Perspective. Character and Performance Practice from 1800 to 1850* (Helsinki, 2013).

11 For example, relating the 'accent hairpin' analysed by the author to the Chopin context (Jan Ekier's National Edition, the commentaries of which devote plenty of space to different variants of articulation) could have been quite striking – see pp. 147–150. The fundamental Chopin strand in the context of tempo modification (*tempo rubato* – pp. 577 ff.) is included, though without wider references.

12 See Michał Bruliński, 'Wybrane polskie podręczniki do gry na fortepianie z I poł. XIX wieku a perspektywa społecznej historii muzyki' [Selected Polish piano-playing handbooks from the first half of the nineteenth century and the perspective of the social history of music], *Muzyka*, 2020/4.

just attempts to define the immeasurable value of tempo in time, but above all descriptions of the mood of a given piece of music and the style in which a work should be performed.¹³ From the next chapter (XI – ‘Tempo Modifications’), we learn that the ‘didactic pressure’ on the metronomically regular performance of Baroque and Classical works is a misunderstanding, since fluctuations of tempo were a crucial element of artistic performance conventions at the time.¹⁴

Similarly flexible material in the Classical and Romantic traditions were all kinds of ornaments, often improvised. It is to such embellishments that Brown devotes the extensive block of five chapters which bring the book to a close (XII – ‘Notated Ornaments’, XIII – ‘Improvised Ornamentation and Embellishment’, XIV – ‘Asynchrony, Arpeggiation, and Flexible Rhythm’, XV – ‘Sliding Effects’, XVI – ‘Trembling Effects’). These have been considerably expanded compared to the first edition from 1999. The author demonstrates that ‘musicological archaeology’ abstracted from auditory experience is useless with regard to ornamentation,¹⁵ while the demise of the ornamental tradition, despite bourgeois ignorance of

the subject, proceeded far more slowly than we normally think.¹⁶ Composers’ clarification of their notation – particularly of ornaments – was designed to eliminate the misunderstandings that arose among participants in the musical discourse who were increasingly less aware of tradition: the greater the move during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries towards rendering the notation of works from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries more precise, the further we departed from the freer ideals of Classical and Romantic performance conventions.

One can only concur with Brown that a synthesis of even part of the studies devoted to the performance practice of Classical and Romantic music would considerably exceed the framework of his book.¹⁷ That said, in the context of his declared intention to update the literature, one is surprised at the lack in the appended bibliography, expanded by a dozen pages or so, of at least several major publications in the area being considered, such as Charles Rosen’s *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* and Kenneth Hamilton’s *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*. One indisputable advantage of the bibliography is the precision with regard to dating: the author gives the date and place of the first publication of analysed sources and also of their subsequent editions. Unfortunately, the editors of this voluminous tome refrained from correcting a flaw in the first edition and providing even the most rudimentary ordering of this list, besides the alphabetical order. As a consequence, it is difficult to distinguish sources from studies, and also to gain some idea of which items are treatises and which

13 ‘A particular problem with these terms was that they served a dual purpose; for composers, especially in the earlier part of the period, tended to use them as much to prescribe the appropriate mood or style as to designate the tempo’ (p. 507).

14 ‘Certain aesthetic borderlines were not crossed, holding back some notes or passages, and hurrying others was not merely permissible, but was an indispensable adjunct of sensitive and effective performance’ (p. 599).

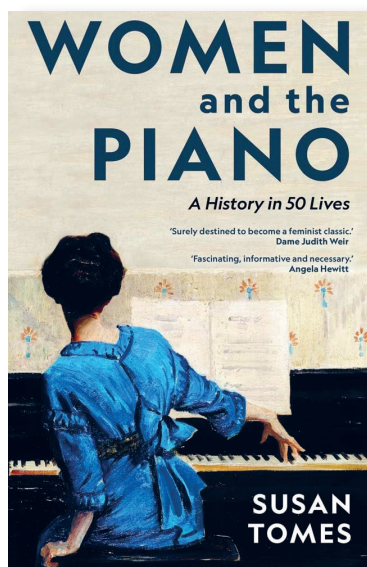
15 ‘In the matter of ornament notation, the musical archaeologist is working in extensively excavated ground. The finds are abundant, but their identification and ordering are by no means straightforward; much of the information derived from them is confusing, contradictory, and often controversial. Considerable scholarly attention has been focused on ornament signs in the music of the early part of the period, and on theorists’ accounts of the realization of ornaments; but these durable survivals, like the artefacts from an excavation, represent only a relatively small proportion of what once existed. The ephemeral nature of the aural experience has left us with mere traces of evidence that are not easy to interpret’ (p. 626).

16 ‘During the 18th and early 19th centuries, the ornamentation and embellishment of all kinds of music by performers was endemic and, in many respects, fundamental to the aesthetic experience of composer, performer, and listener alike’ (p. 713).

17 ‘An adequate synthesis of the considerable body of recent secondary literature alone would fill more space than the present volume’ (p. 1).

are musical works. Given the extensive resonance of this publication, such an ordering would be extremely helpful.

The second edition of Brown's study is excellent in many respects, and considerably expanded and updated compared to the original in terms of substance, language and design. I have not the slightest doubt that the new edition of this book in its revised form will contribute not so much to enhancing its canonic status (of which Brown surely has no need, given his achievements to date), as to the further development of the flourishing movement of historically informed performance. We hope that, thanks to this distinguished scholar's successors, that movement will flourish just as well in the domain of Romantic interpretation. We eagerly await a Polish translation.



ANETA MARKUSZEWSKA review

<https://doi.org/10.56693/cr.168>

Women and the Piano. A History in 50 Lives
Susan Tomes

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2024
Paperback / Hardcover / eBook: pp. 304
ISBN: 9780300281101 / 9780300266573
e-ISBN 978-0-300-27776-0
Price approx. \$20 / \$35

Although interest in the musical activities of women in past epochs continues to grow, after reading Susan Tomes's book, we are left with the embarrassing reflection that we had to wait so long for a work devoted entirely to women pianists. For the last three centuries, they have remained in the shadow of men, although the piano was a crucial element in their life experience, regardless of whether they thought of it in a professional or an amateur context.

Tomes's work begins with three short opening chapters. In the first ('Introduction'), the author refers to her recollections as a piano pupil who knew the names and achievements of great pianists like Cortot, Schnabel, Horowitz