

“A singing phrase the way I liked it”: Friedrich Kalkbrenner’s response to the Viennese piano sound

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Introduction

Friedrich Kalkbrenner (1785-1849) was an eminent composer and performer active in the early 19th century. As a pianist, he developed a preference for the full-rounded sound of English and French pianos which reflected his sound ideals.

His opinions about pianos and piano playing focus on one particular element: **sound resonance**, or as he expresses it, the singing tone of the piano. Kalkbrenner took special care regarding this sonic aspect since it highly influenced his artistic choices. In 1824, during his stay in Vienna, he reported to have manipulated the damper action of a Conrad Graf piano in order to successfully play a singing phrase as expressive as he wished.

Manipulating the damper action of a Viennese piano

“When I went to Vienna in 1824 I was totally bewildered during the first 14 days of playing a piano put at my disposal by Mr Conrad Graff, one of the best German builders; in spite of all my efforts, I never succeeded in playing a singing phrase the way I liked it, and I was at the point of cancelling my public appearance when the idea occurred to me to put a piece of cork underneath the damper rail at the treble, in such a way that the top two octaves were hardly damped any more; this way I succeeded in avoiding that dryness and separateness that existed between the notes, and in realizing the effects I wanted.”

FRIEDRICH KALKBRENNER, *Méthode pour apprendre le piano-forte à l'aide du Guide-mains op. 108*, Pleyel, Paris, 1831 (my translation).



Step 1. Damper action of a Viennese instrument (Wilhelm Löscher, 1815 ca.).

Viennese pianos of the 1820s generally had a light and sharp sound, together with an efficient damper action, immediately stopping the strings vibration up to the last note in the treble.



Step 2. Recreating Kalkbrenner's modification.

By using a piece of cork (here a tuning wedge) Kalkbrenner lifted the damper action at the treble, consequently leaving the last two octaves almost undamped.



Step 3. Final result.

This additional resonance prolongs the time of sound decay of the middle and higher registers, thus increasing and facilitating the connection between sounds.

Research question

How did Kalkbrenner’s musical expressivity relate to the Viennese piano sound and why was that of such significance?

Discussion

Kalkbrenner did not specify in the previous quote which passage he wanted to perform. However, in 1824 it is reported that he performed in Vienna, playing his own Piano Concerto in D minor op.61 on a Conrad Graf piano.

There are several passages in this concerto containing pedalling indications for melodies but, as he himself described, the singing phrase taken into account didn't allow the regular use of pedal.

The realization of the characteristic pedalling indication in the Example 1, on a Viennese instrument, instigates a further investigation. Although in Kalkbrenner’s original editions we find misprints or missing pedal indications, the notation of pedal releasing is mostly carefully done and reliable.



Example 1. F. Kalkbrenner, op. 61, II. mov. «Adagio di molto», b. 14 (N. Simrock: Bonn and Cologne, 1824).

Notational issues

In his piano method (1831) Kalkbrenner suggests the use of damper pedal in arpeggios and in dolce passages in the treble (i.e. in order to sweeten the sound and improve the harmonics). However, in this bar the composer puts a releasing sign under that typically pedalled spot, probably wishing to clean the previous resonances and to emphasize the ascending melody.

Performance implications

When playing the passage on a similar instrument to the aforementioned Graf-type, it's easy to understand Kalkbrenner's sound impressions. To his ears the general sound in the middle-higher register could have resulted too weak to sustain the rising melody (to be played in crescendo, as prescribed in the method), at the expense of the expressivity of the entire passage. The use of Kalkbrenner's modification of the Viennese damper action, which refers to the English damper mechanism, can turn the situation around and support his need for a singing sound, while preserving the original pedalling indication. In fact, this system allows a normal use of the damper pedal, while assuring that the higher strings remain free to resonate.

Conclusions

1. Some of Kalkbrenner's notated pedals in singing phrases are in contrast with his own instructions and do not meet completely the expressive properties of the Viennese pianos. The reason is that his notational style, along with his sound ideal, related to instruments of English and French construction.
2. Kalkbrenner's response to the Viennese piano sound has been, on one hand, to adapt his performance style to the expressive qualities of the instrument; on the other hand to seek unusual strategies to fulfil his own sound expectations including, as demonstrated above, that of manipulating the mechanical properties of the instrument.
3. Kalkbrenner's manipulation of the Viennese damper action naturally enhances the expressivity of singing phrases and therefore supports the composer's quest for a full and resonant sound in the higher register.

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