

Sawn in Half:  
Mendelssohn and the Divided Pedal

David Owen Norris *on stage*

Practice-led Research – more even than most Research – is a combative discipline. Its procedures are those of politics and the law courts. The initial arbiter is my ear: an experienced, subtle and well-trained ear, but often unsupported by any document whatsoever. Its opinions must be deployed in the same way as circumstantial evidence, and the resulting argument put to the jury – or electorate – of public opinion.

This little Square Piano, built in London in 1781 by a German refugee – or economic migrant, perhaps – has no pedals. Its dampers are raised by lever, so you can only ‘change the pedal’, as it were, when you happen to have a hand free. That problem is alleviated by the provision of TWO levers

PICTURE

one to raise the treble dampers MUSIC and one to raise the bass dampers. MUSIC The other lever you see is a buff stop to soften the tone.

But the mechanism was not sophisticated enough for people to take the instrument seriously. Its sound seemed too jumbled. The single pre-2001 recording of such a piano explicitly ignored the damper-levers. By a strange chance, the piano music of Johann Christian Bach, who may well have been the first person to play a piano in public, was similarly misprized. Its textures were too spare. But it was this sort of piano that Bach played – he had a commercial arrangement with its inventor, Johannes Zumpe – and I found that if I played HIS music on HIS instrument, both sounded good. Bach ingeniously adjusted his textures, paying especial attention to the division-point between B and middle C.

1'30

MUSIC JCBach C minor Finale

In the course of my AHRC Fellowship here at Southampton I also found that it was for these little instruments that the very first Piano Concertos were written. I recorded this CD (*hold it up*), which is now in its third pressing, having sold from Japan and Korea to Brazil and Chile, the long way round; and I played the repertoire in concerts, many of which were broadcast on the BBC, NPR and elsewhere. Many millions of people have heard the Square Piano doing its stuff. Only one has complained, a scholar of the early piano whose previously published ideas did not conform with what I was suggesting. The nature of Practice-led Research means that I can never convince him. Never mind. The pack I gave you lists the countries in which I have played the repertoire, and presents some of the reviews.

*to Broadwood*

PICTURE

The London makers of Grand Pianos carried on the tradition of raising the bass and treble dampers independently. This Broadwood Grand of 1817 has the right-hand pedal simply sawn in two.

PICTURE

I press down the left side, and the bass dampers rise.

MUSIC

The right side lifts the treble dampers.

MUSIC

And of course you can do both at once.

*to stage*

A mechanism of immense resource and subtlety which was inexplicably abandoned some time in the 1830s, I suspect, though there's work for a couple of doctorates to be done in the Broadwood Archive in Woking, for almost nothing has been written about the history of this mechanism. A lovely detail is the inked stripe down the middle of the unsawn left-hand pedal, so that its appearance matches the other.

PICTURE

A pianist has too much practice to do to spend much time in Woking, but I have managed to discover that just such a piano as this belonged to – Mendelssohn’s aunt.

If you happen to come from an ordinary background in the rural Midlands, the scholarly literature on Mendelssohn is amusingly circular. The first stage of Mendelssohn reception was of wild acclaim – when he premiered his Second Piano Concerto in Birmingham Town Hall it took him three minutes to reach the piano because the whole orchestra wanted to shake his hand. The second stage had two prongs – one was growing German anti-Semitism, and the other was an over-intellectualized inability to appreciate art that seemed to eschew problems, or at least to solve them. The third stage, at present under way, is naturally a stage of rehabilitation. Luckily, in Northamptonshire we’re still in the grip of the first stage, and I can’t recall a time that I didn’t think that Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto was infinitely superior to Beethoven’s, or his Hebrides Overture preferable to anything Richard Strauss had to offer: an opinion shared, incidentally, by the Master of the Queen’s Musick, Peter Maxwell Davies.

Let us consider the possibility that Mendelssohn played his aunt’s piano at those famous Berlin *soirées*. 5’

*to Broadwood*

The first movement of the Sonata in E op. 6 has a passage where detached repeated Bs in the bass

MUSIC

underlie smooth three-part writing in the right hand. On the modern piano, pedal is absolutely ruled out by the *staccato* bass. Now, it is possible to play the right hand smoothly without any pedal

MUSIC

but how much better it sounds with just the treble dampers raised.

MUSIC

Notice that those bass notes are Bs because it's a Sonata in E. And B is exactly on the dividing line between treble and bass. If it were a Sonata in F, the music could not be played.

In the Minuetto of the Sonata in E we find the apparently contradictory instructions '*sempre staccato*' and '*col pedale*'. A little thought suggests the following solution, raising only the bass dampers.

MUSIC

Later in the movement, Mendelssohn plays with fire, putting some of the harmonically active material down in the bass. But the potentially discordant note is – MIDDLE C, whose dampers are NOT raised, and which consequently does NOT blur the texture.

MUSIC

The song *Nachtlied* has a tolling B flat in the left hand. An undivided pedal can sustain them, even while allowing for the changing chords in the right hand – I'm putting my foot on the whole pedal here

MUSIC

But as the bass dampers fall each time, they kill the sympathetic resonance of the surrounding strings. If I leave the bass dampers up all the time, and damp only the treble strings, the tolling bell develops an almost nightmarish omnipresence, which wonderfully complements the words.

MUSIC

A procedure, you observe, which requires both feet to operate one pedal!

10'

*to stage*

Even apart from the pedal mechanism, early instruments can shed new light on music of their period. The first time I accompanied the great Viennese violinist, Ernst Kovacic, in Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata, long long ago, I had prepared the finale in the written rhythm.

SINGS

But Kovacic allowed the springy horsehair and pernambuco wood of his bow to make a suggestion to him; he played it like this.

SINGS

Beethoven could not have written it any other way – double-dotting would have sent a different message altogether – and simply had to hope that the violinist would find how to make the music work best. My modern piano had made no subliminal suggestions to me. But if I'd been using this one – [almost identical, incidentally, to the piano that Broadwoods presented to Beethoven in 1817 – it's the second closest match in existence] – it would have had things to tell me. When I end this presentation with Mendelssohn's *Rondo capriccioso* I shall use a fingering that I found only when I played on this instrument with its light, shallow key action; sliding the second finger from black note to white note, which spices up the rhythm just like Kovacic's bow did for Beethoven.

When I did come to play the Kreutzer on this instrument, with Monica Huggett, it taught us both an important thing about the mark *sf*, or sforzato, which is normally thought to mean 'bang it a bit harder'. On this delicate instrument, once you've reached *fortissimo*, banging it a bit harder will merely break it. We had to seek an alternative meaning for *sf*, and we found that a rhetorical delay worked perfectly.

The Mendelssohn Bicentenary in 2009 offers an opportunity for a new look at a composer at present neglected by the lemming-like vagaries of musical fashion. Mendelssohn and the Divided-Pedal Piano can illuminate each other, just as JC Bach and the Square Piano did. The noticeably different sound will allow people to listen beyond their expectations.

The Divided-pedal will put out-of-date all the current Mendelssohn piano recordings – someone will have to do it all again! – and new editions will need to be made. An enormous field of scholarly endeavour, that will require a large supply of divided-pedal instruments.

#### PICTURE

To overcome some of the problems of this delicate instrument – breakages and tuning, for instance – I have had a modern fortepiano made, with divided pedal, by Peter Newham.

#### PICTURE

He has made a modern case for it with geometrical marquetry, using cherrywood and a fallen yew that was 700 years old when they built Gloucester Cathedral next to it. It always creates a great stir amongst an audience.

#### PICTURE

I expect Peter Newham will find a growing number of orders for his Mendelssohn piano. Meanwhile, Christopher Barlow, who prepared the Broadwood for us this morning, is working on a method of adapting any modern piano to a divided-pedal. Many of my colleagues will be interested in this. We may even persuade a main-stream manufacturer to re-introduce the mechanism.

*to Broadwood*

I'll end with Mendelssohn at the age of fifteen. The *Rondo capriccioso* is a compendium of the devices I've been talking about, as you'll hear. And it contains a precious morsel of documentary evidence. A passage is exactly repeated, but for one note. The first time, we hear this

MUSIC

but the second time, this note

E

is changed to the

B above.

MUSIC

Is this just a slip? No, for the first time, the bass progresses in the expected way, to E. The second time, it progresses down to a less obvious G. We can help the listener to hear that nicely judged point by prolonging the bass notes by raising the bass dampers. If we did that with what Mendelssohn wrote first, we have an E stuck in the harmony when it turns to D sharps.

MUSIC

But Mendelssohn's change of E to B makes the divided-peddalling possible, raising a strong probability that that's why he changed it.

MUSIC

Performance: duration 7 minutes.