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RESEÑAS/ REVIEWS

Luca Chiantore. Beethoven al piano. Barcelona: Nortedur 3, 2010. 416 pp. ISBN: 978-84-937357-6-0

Reseña de Franco Fabbri (University of Turin)

Carnal musicology (in Beethoven's arms, hands and fingers)

Ethnomusicologists, music anthropologists, popular music scholars, jazz scholars focus on many diverse music cultures (including, sometimes, European art music, or 'classical music'), but seem to have something in common: they concentrate on music as a form of perceived 'organized sound', be it the result of live performance (listened to in the presence of the performer/s) or of the 'reproduction' of recordings. Most 'conventional' musicologists, however, consider performance and recording as very specialised fields of study, which do not warrant much academic prestige, and which are usually and generously (?) left to music critics and journalists.¹ What those musicologists do study is music in its written form, as a score: which, by the way, is

¹ I apologize for all those inverted commas, that I use to point out differences between common linguistic usage and opinions I share (and vice-versa). 'Classical music' is an obvious but widely used misnomer; 'organized sound' is an expression accepted by followers of Edgard Varèse (1998) and/or John Blacking (1973), but not by musicologists who adhere to the formalist aesthetic established in the second half of the Nineteenth century (Philip Tagg uses the adjective 'conventional' to refer to that hegemonic stream in Western musicology; Tagg 2003: 8, note 13); finally, 'reproduction' is also (for me, and others) a misnomer, as it describes the act of 'playing' (more inverted commas...) a recording as if it was a sonic portrait of a real live music event, which since at least the 1950s isn't generally the case: ours is not the age of the mechanical *reproduction* of music, but of the electro-mechanical or electronic *production* of sound.

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hardly considered music not only by other scholars, but even by some of the best performers of the classical canon (like Daniel Barenboim, to name one). All of this constitutes a well-known subject, widely discussed especially amongst ethnomusicologists, music anthropologists and popular music scholars, that is, the vast majority of the readers of this review. The reason why it is worth mentioning here, is that the book reviewed here is about Beethoven, probably the prototype of The Composer in commonsense and in musicological narrations; that the author is a musicologist; and that he approaches the titanic subject (what else!?) on the basis of a strong conviction that what makes a score significant is mainly its function to generate bodily action and sound. Luca Chiantore (it shouldn't be necessary to mention this) is also a distinguished pianist and piano teacher, and the title of his book is *Beethoven al piano* ("Beethoven at the Piano"). The subtitle goes into more detail: *Improvisación, composición e investigación sonora en sus ejercicios técnicos* ("Improvisation, composition and sonic investigation in his technical exercises"), which in a way appears to limit the scope of the study to a circumscribed (and comparatively small) subset of Beethoven's production, but also promises to address aspects of his work as a musician that most 'conventional' musicology even fails to recognize. In Chiantore's quite readable and compelling writing (his book is certainly a rare example of a musicological page turner) the tension between these two poles is clear: on one hand the author appears to know that he has something very solid in his hands, a revolutionary approach that will change our comprehension of Beethoven's work, on the other hand he restrains from any explicit claim, limiting himself to observe the scarcity of musicological studies on the subject, and correctly enumerating and praising the few exceptions. This sounds adequate to well-behaved academic modesty if we think of the second part of the subtitle (Beethoven's technical exercises), but becomes very exciting if we think of the first part (improvisation, composition and sonic investigation). Many people (not only musicologists, but concert goers or 'classical music' fans: the list could include almost all categories in Adorno's listener typology) know that Beethoven used to improvise on the keyboard (and was very well known at his time as an improviser and performer, even more than as a composer, at first), that he created new sonorities both for the piano and for the orchestra, and for other ensembles as well, and – of course – that he was a composer. In a normal world, all these people would wonder why improvisation and sonic investigation have been covered by so few scholars, and why scholars who concentrated on Beethoven's work as a composer focussed almost exclusively on aspects of musical form, harmony, voice leading, and didn't care of the technical, bodily aspects of his writing, of his continuing struggle with the sonic and mechanical

limits of his favoured instrument (and of the symphony orchestra), that is, of the processes that made those tiny ink dots on pieces of paper musically significant. Especially if the evidence for all of this has always been under everyone's eyes and ears. But this is not a normal world, of course.

Again, I am not going to preach to the already converted, as a number of musicologists (most of them of British origin) pointed out and criticized in the past decades the processes by which conventional, 'formalist' musicology (rationalising and giving ideological support to the practices of bourgeois music life in Europe, North America, and 'advanced industrialised societies' in general) reified music into scores, situating musical value (if any) on paper rather than in audible performance. Names like John Blacking, Christopher Small, Nicholas Cook, Philip Tagg, Richard Middleton, John Shepherd are familiar as critics of the conventional view, just as the names of musicologists (most of them of German origin) that helped create the score-centred ideology and used their academic prestige to defend it, like Carl Dahlhaus and his colleagues ('there's more music in a score than in any of its performances', as a well known statement tries to suggest).

Now, what makes Luca Chiantore's book exceptional and, in a way, definitive in the debate, is that on one hand the evidence presented is on paper (Beethoven's technical exercises, as reported in the subtitle), but, on the other hand, proof is given in almost every page that instrumental writing – that is, the way musical ideas are generated or transformed according to the bodily interaction with instruments – is a crucial aspect of composition, improvisation, performance, and that musical sense and meaning are created in the act of generating sound. As I mentioned previously, while it is clear that the author sympathises with a modern, non conventional view of musicology and its tasks, his polemic is always subdued, he doesn't seem to be fighting a scholarly battle, he never quotes the champions of anti-formalist theories, he just wonders (with a smile, I'd say) why scholars never acknowledged what was so easily available. To some respect, Chiantore even seems to accept fragments of conventional musicological ideology: for example, when he adopts the absence of intended aesthetic value as a criterion to distinguish technical exercises from other sketches. Music anthropologists would certainly object: how can intended aesthetic value be detected in a piece of music writing, in the absence of the community to which that aesthetic judgement is related? Is then music value embedded (or not embedded, as in this case) in the score, just as formalists maintain? But I would suggest that here the pianist wins over the musicologist: aesthetic value, or the lack of it, is not on paper, but in the performers' practice, in their music competence, in their knowledge of the repertoire. Performers know

with/by their fingers (and arms, and breath, and the whole body) if they are exercising or communicating (or both), which means that meaning isn't 'absolute' and embedded, but construed in the relation between real or virtual music events.

The author's competence as a pianist is of utmost importance not only for this reason. But, be careful, we are not re-enacting the old debate about musicologists (or music critics) who can play and others who can't (with the added tag of 'failed musicians'). The fact is that Chiantore is a very high level pianist, and a teacher/trainer of high level pianists. Which means he isn't simply able to transform a piano (or orchestral) score into sound, with enough credibility to supplement his sonic imagination, as most musicologists do, but he also knows, from his long experience as a performer, what a certain fingering, a chord disposition, a thumb passage and the like mean in terms of the sound that can be obtained from different instruments, and what will those details mean in the development of the performers' bodies when they grow, with respect to their age and profession, and how are all those technical and bodily details related to style, both on the performer's and the composer's side. Music, to give a name to all of this.

The reason why Beethoven's technical exercises remained long unexplored is that scholars examining the composer's sketchbooks were looking for traces of existing works, for sketches of unfinished ones, at best for cadenzas or fragments of them, according to a positivist, evolutionist idea of musicological research. As technical exercises (like those collected in so-called Fischhoff and Kafka miscellanies) do not offer such relations, they have been overlooked. As I said, musicology waited for an excellent pianist to discover their function and value. As Chiantore reports, a great quantity of those exercises belong to an almost silent and mysterious phase of Beethoven's career, that ends in coincidence with his explosive blooming, so to speak, as a pianist and composer. Of course, one of the most intriguing aspects of Chiantore's investigation is the relation between Beethoven's technical exercises and his skills as an improviser. Reports from contemporaries indicated that his abilities were exceptional, and were usually compared to those of that other composer-improviser the preceded him, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Certainly, and Chiantore's book is abundant of remarks on the subject, Beethoven's fame as an improviser, as well as a performer, was linked to the technical developments of the piano, so he may have had an advantage on his predecessors. But those technical exercises must have played an important role in the struggle Beethoven conducted with the changing mechanical and geometrical features of the instrument, and with his own body. We learn from Chiantore how certain passages, along with their fingerings and other Beethoven's annotations, suggest innovative roles for the hand

(with fingers expanded or closed), for the wrists, for the weight of the arm, aimed at obtaining new sounds. But the sketchbooks offer more food for our curiosity. What were Beethoven's improvisations like? Very few of his compositions are known to be derived from or to bear traces of improvisation: the Fantasia in G minor op. 77 (to which is dedicated a long section in Chiantore's book), the Adagio from the Choral Fantasy op. 80 (that was improvised at the famous 1808 concert, because the author hadn't finished it, as he was busy with the other compositions he presented in the same occasion: the Fifth and Sixth symphonies and the Fourth piano concerto), and some cadenzas. Only recently musicologists and performance scholars investigated those texts deeply: Chiantore's book includes extensive reports from those studies, as well as technical comments by Beethoven's contemporaries (Czerny). To this respect, *Beethoven al piano* includes more material on improvisation in the classical age than any book on improvisation I know of (including excellent Caporaletti 2005). And this is an indication that although Beethoven's technical exercises are the starting point of Chiantore's research, the book actually covers, and very convincingly, many of the composer's 'regular' works, looking for traces and proofs of the relation amongst improvisation, performance and composition.

Before a final tribute to Frederic Rzewski, a pianist and composer that Chiantore cherishes, one chapter is dedicated to one of the best known compositions for the piano in the history of classical music, *Für Elise*, that is deemed by Chiantore to be a fake. When Chiantore discussed his doctoral thesis on the same subject of this book, as soon as he came out of the dissertation room at Barcelona's university, his mobile started to ring; newspapers, television and radio stations all over the world were asking the same question: is *Für Elise* a fake? I will not give Chiantore's answer here: his argument is very solid, it has since then been approved by some of the greatest authorities in Beethoven studies, and it is based of course on Beethoven's sketchbooks. It deserves attention, but is just a minor part of a much larger study that deserves more and more. If you want to know the answer, read the whole book!

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Cita recomendada

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