

Jouez le Fortepiano!: An Interview with Malcolm Bilson

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Abstract:

In an interview, fortepianist Malcolm Bilson discusses performing on early pianos, recording Mozart's concertos on period instruments in the 1970s, his experiences studying abroad, his recent video project "Knowing the Score: How to Read Urtext Editions, and How Can This Lead to More Expressive, Even Passionate Playing?," musical traditions, and other subjects.

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Article:

With his new teaching video successfully released in DVD, the celebrated fortepianist discusses his career and training with Andrew Willis

WILLIS You are best known as a performer on early pianos. How did you first get interested in playing them?

BILSON When I came to Cornell University in 1968 from the University of Illinois -- where I had been teaching for seven years -- I had a lovely old Mason & Hamlin, and the tuner in Illinois had recommended Leonard West in East Rochester, New York. The company there at that time made Mason & Hamlin, Weber, Knabe, and a few others, and West was their chief technician. When I went up to see him about my own piano, he showed me what he called a 'Mozart piano' that he had bought at an auction for \$100 and that he had been hoping to restore. It was, in point of fact, a large Viennese grand from around 1870, straight-strung and heavily reinforced with iron bars. It was completely unplayable, but down in the tenor register there were one or two notes that sounded very enticing. I gave him the \$100 he had paid for it and brought it home to Ithaca.

I had a friend, Kenneth Drake, who knew about old pianos, and he referred me to a man named Philip Belt to see about restoring it. I wrote Belt and sent some pictures, and Belt wrote back that

yes, he could do that, but it wasn't at all a piano from Mozart's time. And as a matter of fact, he had just built such a piano, after Louis Dulcken, c.1785, and he wanted to take it around to show at colleges and music schools. So I said fine, bring it, and I'll play a concert on it. He brought it and left it for a week, and I played an all-Mozart concert (the word fortepiano didn't exist yet -- Belt called it a "Mozart piano") with K. 330 and the B minor Adagio and the Kleine Gigue, [as well as] the G minor piano quartet with some modern string players at 440. I have to admit now that I really couldn't handle the thing at all. I must be the least gifted person for the job; my hands are too big, and I don't have the necessary technique such an instrument required. In trying to operate this light, precise mechanism, I really felt like an elephant in a china closet. But I kept at it all week and practiced hard and after several days began to notice that I was actually playing what was on the page. What I had been doing before was simply playing legato and pedaling through. I saw the slurs, but, of course, I didn't want to create hiccups, which can happen so easily on the modern piano. Suddenly I found that I really didn't need much pedal and that the articulative pauses actually made the music more expressive.

At the concert at the end of that first week, which was absolutely filled to overflowing, there was great enthusiasm. Nobody had ever seen such a thing. I thought to myself that this was an opportunity to do something useful with my talents. This was in 1969, and I decided to buy one of these pianos and to seriously pursue playing it. For several years I took the instrument around and played it in colleges and small venues. It was, of course, viewed as a curiosity back then, and some people thought I was a bit crazy. I knew I was doing something fringe-y, but I also thought it was important and worth doing because there were aspects of this music that nobody could hear any more.

AW What caused your involvement with fortepiano to become less "fringe-y," as you say.

MB An important event occurred in the late 1970s; there was a change of direction at Nonesuch Records. None-such had been a bit like Naxos is today: they were cheaper than the "Big Three," and they recorded lots of contemporary and Medieval and Renaissance music that you simply couldn't get anywhere else -- it was an extremely important label. I know that my name had been proposed more than once to Teresa Sterne, who was the heart and soul of Nonesuch, but she either didn't like the fortepiano, or she didn't like my playing; I never found out which. In any case, Warner took Nonesuch away from Teresa Sterne in New York (creating quite a scandal, actually), moved it out to Los Angeles, and put it under a man named Keith Holzman, who almost immediately called me up and said, "My advisors say I should make records with you." I think that was the big turning point, not just for my career, but for the "fortepiano thing" altogether, because those records got a lot of recognition. They were heard by Nicholas Kenyon, who at that time reviewed for *The New Yorker*. When John Eliot Gardiner came to New York, Kenyon played him some of my records, and Gardiner then invited me to play with the CBC Radio Orchestra in Vancouver. This was a modern instrument group that he had more or less gotten not to vibrate very much, and we hit it off right away. The following year he invited me to Aix-en-Provence to play with his original instrument orchestra, the English Baroque Soloists.

AW And the Mozart concerto recordings followed from those concerts?

MB In 1976, my Cornell colleague Neal Zaslaw, in London on sabbatical, gave a talk to the Royal Musical Association on the orchestra in the 18th century. Christopher Hogwood and Decca Records happened to be present and got the idea of recording all the Mozart symphonies on period instruments. That was, of course, a very risky proposition, and many thought they would lose their shirts. Yet those records, to everyone's astonishment, sold like hot cakes. By the third or fourth year of the project, it became clear that this was the wave of the future -- why record Beethoven with a modern orchestra unless you have a megastar conductor?

The next logical recording project, it seemed to everyone, was the Mozart concertos. People knew who I was, but I wasn't the only one playing on these instruments at the time, and I thought it might be nice to have several pianists involved. But my manager, Lynn Glaser, was determined and quite fearless. On a trip to Europe, she set up meetings with Decca and Philips and Deutsche Grammophon. I was having dinner one night at home when she called from London pronouncing, "I caught one of the companies: DG!" I said, "Don't be silly." I just couldn't believe it. That's how that project got started. I was very, very lucky.

But I've been very lucky on a number of counts. It wasn't just that the early instrument movement was growing, but the LP disc was on its way out, and the CD was a new and exciting medium. When it appeared, the whole industry just exploded, the classical divisions right along with the pop. And of course to meet up with John Eliot Gardiner and start on that great adventure together was simply a dream. Those recordings he and I made between 1983 and 1989 are still available, and I am very proud of them. Yet I am also very sad when I think of my friend Robert Levin recording [the Mozart concertos] in the 90s with Christopher Hogwood. They got halfway through the project only to have the contract cancelled: the CD bubble had burst by that time, and we entered the era of the "Three Tenors and Little Else" in the classical field. You cannot get Levin's and Hogwood's version anymore, and it's a crime because they're wonderful recordings, adventurous and, to me, very inspiring. Theirs are the ones I was so happy to see next to ours on any display....

AW Sometimes it's just a matter of circumstances. Your recordings were influential far and wide, opening doors for people like me who were absolutely new to this. How did you have your formation as a pianist?

MB Well, I grew up in LA in a very lively family. My father was in the movie business -- actually a lot of the family is still in the television and movie business. We had a piano, a Kranich and Bach it was (some would call it a "piano-shaped-object"). I started playing by ear, and they finally realized that I should have some lessons. This was during the war, and my parents were working in a sort of nightclub, the Hollywood Canteen, where glamorous movie stars would come and dance with the servicemen and put on shows. They met a woman there who said she knew how to play the piano, and they got her to come and give me lessons. We

started with John Thompson's *Teaching Little Fingers to Play*, and within 10 minutes I had put the first few pieces together (the first was for the right hand and the second for the left hand) and started transposing the piece all around the keyboard. Poor thing -- she was a nice lady, and I don't think she really knew what to do with me. She had had a few lessons but wasn't really a pianist. (She appeared backstage at a concert I gave a few years ago, well into her 80s -- at least she remembered me....)

I never practiced because there was nothing for me to practice; I would just learn all the pieces in a few minutes. So they stopped the lessons because it seemed like a waste of money. It's rather important to know that there's no one in my family who is interested in serious music. I seem to be all alone in that. Nobody in my family ever went to concerts or listened to serious music. But when I was nine, I started to work with a woman named Norma Brown, who was a serious musician and a very fine pianist. I stayed with her until I was 17, when I left Los Angeles to go to college. She also took me to many concerts; I vividly remember hearing Clifford Curzon play the Brahms B-flat concerto and Solomon playing *Carnaval*.

AW *Was this a result of your asking for lessons at that point?*

MB Well, you know, I simply played the piano all the time. I composed things; I tried to play by ear what I heard on records or on the radio. Of course, since I composed, my father thought it a natural that I would become a movie composer. Everybody in the family was in movies then, so that seemed a foregone conclusion. I also got theory and composition lessons from several very fine teachers, so I acquired a good solid background.

In the summer of '53 I was at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, preparing to go to Juilliard that fall. I had auditioned for Irwin Freundlich, who had agreed to take me. I was happy to go to Juilliard but not particularly happy to go to New York City; I have never been a big city person and feared I wouldn't like it there. (In retrospect, spect, I was probably wrong, by the way.) But then I met a young man who was studying at Bard College, a small liberal arts college 100 miles up the Hudson from New York City. We became very, very good friends, and Bard really seemed like the perfect place for me, so that's where I went.

There was a pianist-composer there named Paul Nordoff, who was an extraordinary musician. He was a very good composer, although his music isn't heard much anymore, which is really too bad for much of it is truly deep and moving. I think he was one of the biggest talents that had ever been through Juilliard by the 1930s. He studied with Olga Samaroff, who took him to Europe and introduced him to all kinds of important musicians. In 1932, on a jury exam, he played the Prokofieff third concerto with Samaroff at the second piano. The work was new at that time, and the faculty was appalled, declaring that such a cacophonous piece would never be tolerated at Juilliard!

Nordoff was, among other things, an anthroposophist -- [a follower of] the spiritual philosophy of Rudolf Steiner -- and was also sort of a recluse. He might have been in the mainstream with

people like Copland and Barber and Creston, but he wasn't. Among my favorites of his compositions were his settings of poems by e. e. cummings. Cummings was notorious in not liking his poems to be "meddled with," but these he apparently liked. Once we went down to Greenwich Village, and I played on cummings's old upright piano while Nordoff sang some of these songs. It was a wonderful experience for me, as you can imagine. Cummings told me, "these poems don't belong to me any more; they're his now." Nordoff was an unbelievably intense musician, and he really brought me to the inside of music, if I could put it that way. He understood flexibility, and he played absolutely wonderfully and could sight read anything upside down.

After graduating from Bard, I got a Fulbright and went to Vienna, where I studied with a woman named Grete Hinterhofer. It was she who taught me how to practice and how to think clearly. I had another year abroad with Reine Gianoli in Paris, who was also quite terrific. She had made many recordings for Westminster -- she recorded all of Schumann, I think, and all the Mozart variations. Then I went to the University of Illinois, where I stayed for seven years. I went in as a graduate student but then got put on the faculty and became a full-time faculty member. In 1967 I took a year off to finish up the DMA degree I had been working on (why not, after all?), and then in '68 I was invited here to Cornell, where I have remained ever since.

AW You must have had some memorable experiences studying abroad.

MB When I was studying in Paris, the army draft still existed, which meant that if you could show that you were in a degree program you could get a deferral. So I enrolled at l'Ecole Normale, where Gianoli was teaching and where there were two degree programs one could get. One was the Licence de Concert (only the French suppose you should get a license to play concerts!). I wasn't interested in such a degree, and besides, it would have meant learning some terribly difficult piece the last month before the exam (the year before it had been the *Don Juan Fantasy*, and I must admit that I have always been a sort of Liszt-less pianist). But there was also a Licence Libre d'Enseignement, basically a teacher's certificate, for which you could play whatever you wanted, and I decided to do that just to stay enrolled.

At the end of the year there was an exam, in the main concert hall, conducted by Cortot and other members of a jury, and that was just a God-awful thing. Some hapless young student would tiptoe out on the stage and sit down and Cortot would say (he had a fantastic resonant voice, you know) "JOU -- EZ LE BACH!" And the poor kid would just set off playing like mad until the buzzer went off--

AW They had a buzzer?

MB Oh yes, a buzzer. Then "JOU -- EZ LE BEET -- HOVEN!" thundered from the balcony, and the frantic playing would start all over again for a while. I had seen it all in action and was quite horrified by it.

Now, I had eaten something bad the evening before and had been up sick all night and hadn't slept and really couldn't care less about the whole thing; I was merely doing it to stay out of the army and have my nice year in Paris with Reine Gianoli -- it had been a wonderful year, and that's where I met my wife Elizabeth! But the day before my exam, Reine Gianoli had called me up and told me that apparently I also was required to have a concerto. I had played the Mozart K. 595 the year before in Vienna, so I practiced the first movement and got another student to play the second part.

When I went out on the stage for my exam, I had, among other things, the first series of Images. Cortot said, "JOU -- EZ LE DE -- BUS -- SY!" So I said, "Maître." (It's the only time in my life I ever said "maître" to anybody. I don't even know how it came out of my mouth, but that's what you were supposed to say to a distinguished artist.) "Maître, which movement would you like?" A shudder went through the jury, for nobody had ever spoken from the stage to Cortot before. He asked which one I would like, and I said, "'Hommage à Rameau,'" and he said, "Good, that's the one I'd like to hear too." So I played that, and then we got to the concerto, and after he had let us play the entire first movement (no buzzer), he said, "JOU -- EZ LE DEUX -- I -- EME MOUVE -- MENT." I looked at my accompanist and said, "Can you do this?" and she nodded, so we played that, and then Cortot said, "JOU -- EZ LE TROIS -- I -- EME MOUVE -- MENT." And I said, "Maître, I'm sorry, we only found out about this yesterday." Later, I was called into his office, and everybody was trembling because he had the reputation of being pretty much of an ogre -- but it turned out he wanted me to stay there and study with him. I had to explain that I had a boat ticket to return to America in three days. He died a few months after that, so it wouldn't have worked out, but he wrote me a very nice letter -- *une attestation*, as they call it in French -- that still hangs in my office at Cornell.

AW Cortot was one of those pianists whose playing was completely infused with imagination and color.

MB Yes, it still is a kind of ideal for many, including me. I think that with all that imagination, he sometimes veers off in funny directions, but when he hits the target, it's sheer magic.

AW You've recently released a video project that explores many of the concepts you've developed during your years of working with early pianos.

MB Yes, the full title is *Knowing the Score: Do We Know How to Read Urtext Editions, and How Can This Lead to More Expressive, Even Passionate Playing?*

AW But no artist since the Second World War who wants to be taken seriously in the classical repertoire would think of learning notes from anything but an urtext.

MB Yes, but do they know how to read them? In the video lecture we look at a few scores very carefully, and I endeavor to read them as I think Mozart and Beethoven would have expected their public to read them at the time. I do believe that composers write for a public who can

presumably understand their notation. Then we listen to some recordings, often by quite well-known pianists.

Now, I don't think it's a good idea for one pianist (in this case, me) to point out another pianist by name and claim that that person is reading the score incorrectly. On the other hand, it won't do to simply assert the fact that nobody plays certain things that are in the score, because invariably some listener will claim that they have a recording that does. So, for the examples, I assembled all the recordings from our library, a dozen or so of each, and I listed the names of the players on the screen. I then asked an assistant to select, at random, any three of the recordings to play. I don't even know which they are myself, for I had asked someone else put them onto a tape. Of course, some of these performances are more inspired than others, some faster or slower than others, but I think it's imperative to show that, in spite of artistic differences, absolutely no one plays what Mozart and Beethoven have so carefully indicated. Naturally, I think this has something to do with instruments, but it's more than that; it also has to do with traditions that have developed over a long, long time.

AW What about traditions and the passing down of culture from generation to generation? You, for example, have told me that you studied with two people who studied with Schnabel. Now we know that Schnabel studied with Leschetizky, Leschetizky studied with Czerny, and Czerny with Beethoven. Don't you believe that genuine traditions have been handed down through such a distinguished lineage?

MB The answer is "maybe," at best. Look, there are recordings by Adelina de Lara, who studied with Clara Schumann as a girl and made recordings when she was 80. What can this really show us about Clara Schumann's playing or teaching? When I was 18 or 19, I played the music of my teacher, Paul Nordoff, and he told me that he liked the way I played it very much. I also heard him play quite a bit, so I would say that if anybody is interested in playing Paul Nordoff's music, I'm likely the best person to come and see. But it's soo-o many years later; I'm a very different person after the intervening 50 years. And then, suppose I teach you a "Nordoff tradition," and 40 years later you teach somebody else, etc. That's how these "traditions" get transmitted.

Of course I do claim that changing instruments play a role, but not only instruments -- just look at the difference in the way pianists, violinists, and even singers interpreted music before the Second World War; we have recorded documentation!

AW Are you suggesting that a combination of reliable sources, historically relevant instruments, and historically informed, self-reliant thinking can lead to the liberation of the performer?

MB I couldn't have said it better. I suppose what I believe most strongly is that to express music with confidence and passion, the first step should always be to see clearly what the composer communicated through his or her writing, and that most certainly requires all of the above.

Pianist Andrew Willis performs in the United States and abroad on pianos of every period. His recordings include the "Hammerklavier" and other Beethoven sonatas for Claves, as part of the first Beethoven sonata cycle on period instruments.

Knowing the Score

Malcolm Bilson

Cornell University DVD

90 minutes plus special features

Reviewed by Sylvia Berry

During the 30-plus years he has spent as an indefatigable performer, scholar, teacher, and proponent of the early piano, Malcolm Bilson has ruffled a few feathers. This DVD might well ruffle some more, for the basic question behind the aptly named *Knowing the Score* is, "Do we know how to read urtext editions?" and the answer, according to Bilson, is a resounding "No."

A lot of ground is covered in this engaging lecture, which was filmed before a live audience at Cornell University. Bilson begins by saying that the key word is interpretation; it is not enough to use an *urtext* edition if you don't know how to interpret it. He makes clear at the outset that his assertions are based on principles found in treatises of the period, reading passages from two of the most important of the 18th century, by C.P.E. Bach and Johann Joachim Quantz. This is followed by what he calls a "*Reader's Digest* course on how to read music," in which he provides examples of very basic notation and illustrates how the treatises tell us to play them in a way that is different from the way they are usually played.

Bilson makes two important observations here: the sources tell us to never play "evenly," and Western musical notation is in fact not precise but suggestive. There are many things that are seemingly absent from the score that are inherently there but are only recognizable once one knows how to interpret the notation.

This is just the beginning of a stunning array of revelations that are illustrated by examining numerous musical examples and by listening to recordings of famous artists who, more often than not, don't read the score properly. Bilson's infectious joy and humor infuse these proceedings with many enjoyable moments.

Bilson turns this around by presenting recordings of Sergei Prokofiev and Bela Bartok playing their own works. He says we shouldn't ask, "How do they play these?" but rather, "How did they notate what we hear?" This is fascinating and fleshes out the idea that notation isn't precise. The composers play more freely than anyone would today, but Bilson asserts that if we understand how to read the music, "It's all there."

One-third of the video is over before Bilson begins showing us that most of what is asked for in late 18th- and early 19th-century Viennese music is not realizable on modern pianos. It's obvious that he wants the thrust of this lecture to be less about instruments and more about reading music properly. With this video, Bilson hopes to bring this message to mainstream musicians at conservatories that don't broach these subjects. Early music people might feel that he's preaching to the converted, but anyone interested in these topics will find this presentation riveting and inspiring; in fact, it is a must-see for anyone in the field.

Fortepianist Sylvia Berry is a founder of Boston Hausmusik and wrote the liner notes for Bart van Oort's 14-CD Brilliant Classics box set, The Complete Keyboard Works of Mozart.