

## Loudsoft or Softloud? - By Richard Lester

Why call it a 'piano' if it's the loudest instrument on stage? Wouldn't it have been more apt to call it the 'forte'? The pianoforte - or confusingly fortepiano - is, of course, not just loud, but was so called because it was the first keyboard instrument that could respond to the touch of the key and produce a genuine dynamic range. This was a very exciting development and composers quickly adopted the instrument as a means to express an increasingly dynamic style of music.

However, since the refined days of early keyboard instruments, the world has become a much louder place and we can now routinely burst our eardrums with electronically produced noise. People actually choose to stand in front of banks of speakers the size of buses and be pulverised by bass vibrations strong enough to knock over an elephant. The piano has had to try to keep up with this inexorable global crescendo and the modern Steinway *flügel* (it now has wings) is a great beast that can compete with the loudest orchestras and be heard at the back of the world's greatest concert halls.

But have we lost something in this process? The modern piano has come a long way since its first wiry, tinkling ancestors amazed eighteenth century ears, and is a marvellous thing. Every note pure in tone, equal right across its huge compass, perfectly homogenised and smooth. It has a tremendous sustaining power, almost like an organ, and an enormous dynamic range. The problem is the piano in its current form has only existed for just over a century and much of the music written for it was written well before that. Adaptations to string instruments made in the latter part of the nineteenth century have increased their tone too but the difference is negligible compared to the power surge of the piano, particularly in the bass register. This creates real problems of balance, not least in chamber music. Naturally, wonderful pianists can control and balance textures to suit the music but somehow one feels they are struggling against their instrument to achieve this rather than using the natural strength, timbre and clarity of an instrument that the composer had at his disposal. The argument is often given that composers, especially Beethoven, were frustrated with these earlier instruments and would have much preferred the sound of the modern piano. It's clear to me though that they would have written very differently had they known that sound and would have compensated for the difference in strength.

Since the upsurge in period instrument performance we are now all becoming much more familiar and fond of the clarity and delicacy of an early classical period fortepiano. Fantastic new reproduction instruments are being built and the quality is improving consistently. We are less used, however, to hearing performances of later nineteenth and early twentieth century repertoire on instruments that were around at the time. Many of these instruments were destroyed in the two world wars and the monopolistic ascent of the Steinway company put paid to what little remained.

There are still a few wonderful old late nineteenth century pianos around and I am increasingly seeking opportunities to perform with them. The great French company of Erard was a favourite of many pianists - Ravel and Paderewski both preferred them. Debussy, however, favoured Bechstein. In England, Broadwood was making wonderful instruments - I was lucky enough recently to perform a Brahms piano quartet with a beautifully restored Broadwood. The result was a revelation: Brahms' sometimes rather thick textures that can cause balance difficulties were simply no problem with this piano. Brahms owned an 1868 Streicher which had a rather light metal frame and leather hammers and would have had a similar sound.

I'm not a pianist and should be sympathetic to the plight of those who have to cope with a great variety in quality and condition of the instruments they are presented with (I would hate not to know which cello I will have to play tomorrow). Understandably, touring pianists will always want to know roughly what the next instrument will sound like and how it will react. The downside of this is that the piano world has become standardised. Whereas a century ago there were tens of piano producers in every major European capital, each producing their own unique style and sound, now there is really only one major company that the world agrees on: Steinway. A good Steinway is a beautiful machine, the Porsche of pianos. But sometimes it's nice to drive around in other cars too, especially beautifully restored old classics.