

KYLE GANN

Beethoven: Now in Color

Enid Katahn/Edward Foote
Beethoven in the Temperaments
Gasparo

If every museum in the world displayed Rembrandt's paintings covered by wax paper, outraged art lovers and historians would raise an uproar. And yet, in effect, we do something similar with music of the classical keyboard repertoire. Nearly every grand piano in the world is tuned to a tuning called equal temperament, in which the 12 steps of the octave are equally spaced. No composer who lived before 1850 ever wrote for this tuning; sensitive musicians of the 19th century, as it slowly crept into use, decried it as ugly and colorless. And yet it triumphed in the name of



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science and uniformity of the keys. Today we play the music of Bach, Haydn, and Beethoven in a bland tuning that obliterates the differences between tonalities that they intended to capitalize on when they composed.

Finally that tide is turning. The first recording has just appeared to restore Beethoven's music to the tuning he wrote it in: *Beethoven in the Temperaments* (Gasparo), on which pianist Enid Katahn plays four sonatas—the *Pathétique*, the *Moonlight*, the *Waldstein*, and Op. 14 No. 1—in late-18th-century well temperament. The piano tuner who initiated the project is intrepid Edward Foote of Vanderbilt University, who provides notes on tuning for a hefty 34-page booklet. He in turn took his cues from that indefatigable historical-tuning pioneer Owen Jorgensen, whose four-inch-thick opus *Tuning* (Michigan State University Press) is the massive bible of equal temperament's enemies. Jorgensen's book—a distilled compendium of keyboard-tuning manuals from the 14th century to the present—is witty, philosophical, and more passionate than you'd expect for the subject matter. Their reputation notwithstanding, piano tuners are a wild crowd.

To get the technicalities out of the way, the principle of well temperament is that, for tonal music, it is more important for major thirds (C to E) to be in tune than perfect fifths (C to G). The reason, simply put, is that major thirds, being smaller intervals, create faster beats, while fuzzy fifths can pass undetected if the third is sufficiently sweet. (A well tuned major third, whose strings vibrate at a 5-to-4 ratio, is a sev-

enth of a half-step flatter than the one we're used to.) But you can't tune all the thirds to optimal sizes without distorting the fifths and octaves. Therefore 18th-century tuners tuned the sweetest, flattest, most consonant thirds in the keys related to C (like F and G). The black-note keys, meanwhile, have wide and slightly harsh thirds, but their fifths are crystal pure.

So what does this mean in terms of Beethoven? The key of C, even C minor as in the *Pathétique's* outer movements, is pure and consonant, sort of vanilla, while C-sharp—prominent in the *Moonlight*—is more exotic. However, the *Moonlight* emphasizes open fifths

which are pure in a black-note key, and thus achieves a stately calm in this tuning. A-flat major, on the other hand, is a kind of active key with a subliminal layer of overtones buzzing above its major triads, and so the *Pathétique's* second movement comes out a little more high-energy than you'd expect. Katahn is an agile pianist, with a clean, classical touch; no interpretive idiosyncrasies distract you from experiencing the tuning.

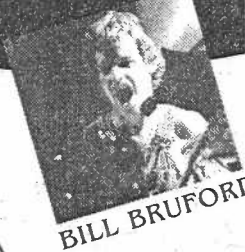
Now that you're set to run out and buy *Beethoven in the Temperaments*, let me warn you: the difference from equal-tempered normalcy is not going to jump out at you. After spending your whole life

trained not to notice clashes among upper overtones on the piano, you're going to have to develop sensitivity. At first the piano may sound slightly out of tune, but if you listen with open ears you'll eventually enjoy the new nuances. If you're familiar with the sonatas, concentrate on the areas where you know there are colorful key changes. Listen to how pleasantly flatter than usual the E is in the C-major chord that opens the *Waldstein*, and hear how the color shifts when Beethoven suddenly drops to the distant key of B-flat major in the fifth measure. Listen to how sharp and pingy, by comparison, the G-sharp is in the E-major second theme.

Though the changes are subtle, the music takes on a more colorful, more vivid personality. This trend is surely inevitable. Even the most traditional pianists become incensed when I inform them that we're not hearing Beethoven's music in the tuning he intended. There is no reason in the world for us to cling to equal temperament. It offers no advantages, just a dreary, beat-producing sameness in every key. The only music it theoretically supports is purely atonal music; I keep my piano in well temperament, and I find no diminished effect in 12-tone pieces like Webern's Op. 27 Variations. The textbooks assure us that equal temperament has been used since Bach, but that's an error that originated with the 1893 *Grove's Dictionary of Music* and is taking forever to expunge. Foote's and Katahn's *Beethoven in the Temperaments* is a first chance to hear classical repertoire in the original full color. May innumerable others follow.

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