

Mozart vs Clementi – Re-Imagining a Legendary Piano Duel

Prof. Dr. Aurelia VIȘOVAN
Hochschule für Musik, Nürnberg

Abstract

The encounter between Mozart and Clementi in 1781 sparked interest among musicians and music lovers which has continued for centuries. In this article I consider the effect of my recreation of this supposed duel, a solo fortepiano recital conceived as an imaginary contest between the two composers. The programme alternates between their works, and verbal explanations in between pieces add colour. The chosen repertoire was based on information from available sources, supplemented in a way that ensures a lively experience for today's audiences. In addition to the purpose of entertainment, we used this type of programming to highlight the ways in which the two great composers influenced each other during and after their meeting, and how this meeting shaped their future paths.

The article examines the idea of music competition and its history, the effect it has had and continues to have on audiences, and the reaction contemporary listeners have to such programming ideas. I have tried to present the essential differences between musicianship then and now, and to make some considerations about what should be changed in music education today.

Keywords: Mozart, Clementi, Duel, Recital, Improvisation

As far back as our awareness extends, we know that humans have been fascinated by the idea of competition. Besides the more serious forms of it, where the aim might be to meet needs for survival and well-being, or perpetuate the species, humankind has always excelled at inventing various forms of competing for pure

entertainment purposes. Games, sports and arts are just a few examples of activities which could serve as a basis for a race between individuals, with purposes varying from consolidating the winners' social status within a community or providing entertainment for the observers, to surpassing one's physical and mental limits and achieving things previously thought impossible. In a way, without the idea of competition, humanity would probably never have come as far as it did.

Music-making has always been among the art forms best suited for such competition: not only does it have a physical component but, unlike the visual arts, it can be instantaneous and spontaneous, elements that open up interesting possibilities for an audience in search of entertainment. The idea that music competitions are a new phenomenon in the artistic world is therefore certainly erroneous. Although there are certainly angles from which their usefulness and justification in their current form can be queried, the reality is that they have always existed, and the Western Classical composers were no strangers to this phenomenon.

Among several accounts of well-known musicians taking part in musical contests of one form or another, we find mentions of an interesting event which purportedly happened in Vienna on Christmas Eve, 1781. It involved two of the leading musicians of that era: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Muzio Clementi. Many different stories describing this encounter were perpetuated throughout the 19th century¹, and the resulting inconsistencies are significant, making it difficult to know with certainty how the meeting between the two musicians actually took place. Since 1900, however, a certain legend

¹ Sascha Wegner, "Angaben variieren [...], wie es in solchen Dingen zu gehen pflegt": Der 'Wettstreit' zwischen Mozart und Clementi im Angesicht 'alternativer Fakten' ("Data vary [...] as is the custom in such matters": The 'Competition' between Mozart and Clementi in the Face of 'Alternative Facts'), *Musik in Bayern*, Vol. 84 (2019): 123-155.

has grown up around this event, presenting it to the public as a piano duel – a contest between the two musicians in front of a large audience, including the emperor himself.

Whether or not this version of events corresponds with reality, it is very plausible; we know that such instrumental duels have been a common practice throughout music history. And even if it were to be simply a legend, the mere idea of a ‘piano race’ between two such incredible musicians seems to have been exciting enough for generations of music lovers to perpetuate this version of the story. As previously mentioned, humans enjoy competition – which is why I thought of recreating this supposed piano duel in the form of a concert program for my audience.

Since sources of information regarding the works being played in that encounter back in 1781 are scant, and since much of the event itself must have been based on spontaneous improvisations by the two composers, it was impossible for me to accurately build up a concert program recreating that Christmas evening in Vienna’s Hofburg Palace – even if I had decided to improvise myself, I could never claim to do it at a level or style that would come close to the two masters. Nevertheless, I used the information I could find and alternated works by the two composers in a way which seemed meaningful and entertaining, while also including verbal explanations for the audience intended to help them better imagine the presumed moment in history.

The work I started with was by Clementi, the only one we know for sure was heard that evening: his Piano Sonata in B-flat major op. 24 no. 2. Opening with Clementi was a decision taken due to Mozart’s account of the evening as written in a letter to his father dated 16 January 1782. He relates parts of the encounter, noting that the emperor asked Clementi to be the first one to play, thereby giving priority to *la Santa Chiesa Cattolica* (the Holy Catholic Church), an allusion to Rome, Clementi’s home city. In the same letter, Mozart also mentions Clementi performing a sonata, and although he does not

mention which one exactly, we know from Clementi’s accounts that it was his newly-composed op. 24 no. 2². The work inspired Mozart for his later Overture to *The Magic Flute*, in which he borrows its first theme and develops it extensively.



Example 1: Clementi – Sonata Op.24 no.2



Example 2: Mozart – Overture to The Magic Flute

We know from Clementi’s letters that Mozart had impressed him greatly by playing an Adagio, and I continued the recital by performing Mozart’s K. 540 in B Minor. While it could certainly have been a different Adagio, considering the date it was written, or even

² Robert Greenberg, “Music History Monday: The Mozart/Clementi Duel”, 2017 <https://robertgreenbergmusic.com/mozart-clementi-duel/>

been an improvisation, the B minor is probably Mozart's known for solo keyboard, and it suited the general idea of the programme well.

In Mozart's aforementioned letter to his father, he praises Clementi's ability to play passages in thirds: "Er hat sehr viel Fertigkeit in der rechten Hand, seine Hauptpassagen sind die Terzen" [Clementi plays well, so far as execution with the right hand goes. His greatest strength is his passages in thirds]³. This led to the inclusion of the Italian's Etude in thirds, op. 44 no.15, from his collection *Gradus ad Parnassum*. This work is highly demanding technically, and reflects Clementi's remarkably developed right-hand technique, one of the skills he became famous for.



Example 3: Clementi – Etude Op.44 No.15

Last but not least, to give the audience an idea of what the improvisation part of the evening might have looked like, I chose to

³ Mozart's letter to his father, 16 January 1782. *The Letters of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, transl. Lady Wallace, Project Gutenberg Ebook <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5307/5307-h/5307-h.htm>

play two pieces that most closely resemble improvisations: Mozart's Fantasy in C Minor K. 396 (completed posthumously by pupil Maximilian Stadler) and the Fantasia e variazioni su "Au clair de la lune" by Clementi. In that era, the term "fantasy" was used to describe a written-out improvisation, while "variations" were considered another opportunity to spontaneously transform and embellish a given (or indeed improvised) theme. Both Clementi and Mozart mention variations as having been part of the evening program.

Although the official programme was coming to an end, adding an encore – my own transcription of Mozart's Overture from *The Magic Flute* – enabled me to balance the number of works from each composer at three apiece, but more importantly it showed the progression of the story. The derogatory observations Mozart made in hindsight about Clementi didn't prevent him going on to "steal" the main theme of the latter's B-flat Sonata and use it in his own music. What he does with the material is quite extraordinary and tends to overshadow Clementi's Sonata (and thus his compositional skills), but one must keep in mind that by the time Mozart got round to developing the theme he was in his last years, when his compositional style was at its most bewildering.

The sources which describe Mozart and Clementi's encounter as a contest mention that the result of the evening was a tie (Predota, 2012). Regardless of the truth, the purpose of the duel would certainly not have been to establish a winner: in doing so, the court would have either upset their cherished Viennese protégé or offended an esteemed guest. The goal of the evening was to provide entertainment, and we can say that this was achieved with certainty.

In spite of it being clearly impossible to recreate that event faithfully, the concert managed to generate an impressive level of enthusiasm among the listeners. Of all the programme ideas I have ever presented to an audience, I dare say this was the one that attracted the most interest.

Given that the public's interest in witnessing musical contests of this kind seems to be as strong today as it was, one wonders why such instrumental duels between very famous performers ceased to exist. Would it not be exciting to witness a duel between, say, Martha Argerich and Daniel Barenboim? Not as much as we might imagine, perhaps, and not for reasons connected to musical and technical skills. Consider this: how would a duel between them, or any other two famous pianists of today's classical scene, be staged? In order to be able to compare them, they would need to perform the same works. Their only options to surprise the audience would therefore be to play at an unexpected dynamic or speed, or with a special perfection perhaps, but there is little else.

The true reason why such duels (and, one could argue, nearly every piano competition which is taking place these days) make no sense is our generation's lost ability to compose and improvise. As the great Robert D. Levin once said:

[...] the sense of a keyboard culture seems no longer to be defined by composers, or rather composer-pianists, as it once was. Indeed, the gulf that emerged in the twentieth century between composers and performers cannot be separated from that separating composers and the general public, and is symptomatic of larger, disturbing cultural issues.⁴

Without these skills, a musician is deprived of their most personal tools to express themselves through music. And sadly, with just a few notable exceptions, most of us have never been educated or trained in these fields. Our performances are more alike than they have ever been because of the limitations imposed by the written notation of the works we perform. The audience always knows in advance what

⁴ Robert Levin, "Mozart and the Keyboard Culture of his Time", 2003 https://publikationen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/opus4/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/10640/file/MIN_AD_LevinMOZART.pdf

they will experience during the concert, and the element of surprise has almost disappeared.

Until the music education system changes and allows aspiring artists to unleash their own voice by learning improvisation and composition, we can't expect such a duel to spark much interest among today's listeners. Even if a desire for the unexpected remains, in this era video recordings of basically any classical work ever composed are readily available; if the concert hall does nothing but provide further interpretations of well-known repertoire, the temptation will be too great for audiences to comfortably sit at home and watch videos instead of physically attending, and paying for, live events.

As performers, we can always try to surprise an audience by interpreting the works in a novel way, but I would argue that if we insist on being guided by attempts to recreate (what we believe to be) the composers' intentions, our path is inherently limited. Besides, today's audiences are largely not musically astute enough to realise subtle nuances of interpretation. Our only tools to ensure a true element of surprise are actually independent from the instrumental performance itself: clever programming, combining different forms of art into one show, communicating verbally to the audience, and utilising innovative concert venues. These strategies are currently being used by concert organisers and artists alike, and they certainly are proving to be helpful in keeping the classical music industry afloat. But maybe – just maybe – there would exist another even more effective path: that of reintroducing spontaneity and originality in the form of improvisation and composition into every musician's toolbox and bringing back the element of musical surprise into every concert hall. To quote Levin again, "What we know about late eighteenth-century performance practice and Mozart's personality suggests that

capricious spontaneity was at the core of his performances, with the element of risk at the forefront.”⁵

It would take decades for mainstream music education institutions to fully support the development of improvisational skills and spontaneity, but this might just be a salvation for an otherwise dramatically declining musical culture.

References

The Correspondence of Muzio Clementi, Bologna:

Ut Orpheus Edizioni, 2010

The Letters of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, transl. Lady Wallace, Project Gutenberg Ebook <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5307/5307-h/5307-h.htm>

Greenberg, Robert. “Music History Monday: The Mozart/Clementi Duel” 2017. <https://robertgreenbergmusic.com/mozart-clementi-duel/>

Levin, Robert D. “Mozart and the Keyboard Culture of his Time”, 2003 https://publikationen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/opus4/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/10640/file/MIN_AD_LevinMOZART.pdf

Predota, Georg. “Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart versus Muzio Clementi”, 2012 <https://interlude.hk/wolfgang-amadeus-mozart-versus-muzio-clementi/>

Wegner, Sascha. “Angaben variieren [...], wie es in solchen Dingen zu gehen pflegt”: Der 'Wettstreit' zwischen Mozart und Clementi im Angesicht ‚alternativer Fakten‘ (“Data vary [...] as is the custom in such matters”: The 'Competition' between Mozart and Clementi in the Face of 'Alternative Facts'), *Musik in Bayern*, 84, (2019): 123-155.

⁵ Levin (2003), op. cit.