

Mid-Twentieth-Century English Pianism - Classicism, Werktreue and Empiricism

Former music critic of *The New York Times*, Harold Schonberg, described the early twentieth-century style of English piano playing, represented by Myra Hess, Clifford Curzon and Solomon Cutner, as “seldom passionate and seldom even dramatic ... more closely allied to the classical school” (1987 [1963]: 455). A ‘classical’ approach to musical performance tends to be associated with restraint, respect for the composer’s perceived wishes and an avoidance of self-serving individualism. Thus a *Werktreue* attitude is suggested, one wherein the personality of the performer is subordinate to the apparent dictates of the musical work.

This paper seeks to explore Schonberg’s statements in more depth, taking its investigative case studies from a slightly later generation of English pianists: Malcolm Binns (b. 1936), Peter Katin (1930-2015), Moura Lympany (1916-2005), Denis Matthews (1919-1988), Valerie Tryon (b. 1934) and David Wilde (b.1935). This is partly to test Schonberg’s assertions and partly to discover whether they can also be found to apply to English pianism in the middle years of the twentieth century. If the latter is shown to be the case over this more extended time period, it becomes possible to posit an English performance style that was embedded in the national psyche.

In order to carry out the investigation, selected recordings of standard score-based repertoire by the six above-named English pianists were analysed to discover whether ‘classical’ or *Werktreue* performance traits could be heard in the playing. Control recordings by various non-English pianists were analysed alongside those by the English pianists so as to throw the outcomes into sharper relief. The analyses were not carried out with any intention of verifying or disproving Schonberg’s opinion, but were conducted dispassionately and methodically. Analytical strategies included close listening and simple computer-based techniques to determine aspects of tempo, timing, articulation, pedalling and dynamics.

A musical performance style that eschews overt personalisation can be linked to the cultural phenomenon of empiricism. The paper thus concludes by presenting the outcomes of the performance analyses, comparing these with Schonberg’s assertions and evaluating them within the context of empiricism as detected in the English character by anthropologist Kate Fox and in literature by cultural historian, Anthony Easthope.



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