

Investigating critical practice

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This article offers a preliminary overview of a large-scale study of 845 reviews of commercial recordings of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas published in *The Gramophone* between 1923 and 2010. Data regarding publication date, repertoire reviewed, pianist(s) reviewed, music critic, label, release status, and length of the text were extracted and analysed. The results highlight that, despite the high number of critics (n=59), labels (n=136), and pianists (n=216) involved, a large proportion of reviews were written by relatively few critics (n=7) of recordings released by few labels (n=8) and of performances given by few pianists (n=17). The analyses showed that labels and pianists who produced more recordings received longer reviews. Two of the seven most prolific critics seem to have been given more freedom to write idiosyncratically, with particularly long and short reviews. In a second phase, a pilot text content analysis was carried out on a subset of 63 reviews. Results reflect an increasing focus on interpretative issues over the course of the century, with later reviews providing more text on interpretation. This is in line with the growing quantity of reviews of reissues (from the 1950s) and releases of old recordings (from the 1980s) found in the full dataset.

Keywords: criticism; recording; record industry; Beethoven; piano sonatas

Music criticism is a common practice in which the description and evaluation of a composition and/or performance play constitutive parts (Carroll 2009). Yet, this practice has been neglected in performance evaluation research, such that there is currently no structured enquiry on offer of the phenomena or outcomes involved. A systematic investigation into music criticism can

offer new perspectives on this well-established tradition, providing insight into the phenomenological and psychological processes that underpin it and the role that expertise plays therein. As a first step to this investigation, this article offers a preliminary overview of a large sample of music reviews regarding Beethoven's piano sonatas published between 1923 and 2010.

METHOD

Materials

The online archive of *The Gramophone* (www.gramophone.net) was chosen as the reference source. From this archive, all reviews were extracted that concerned commercial recordings of one or more of Ludwig van Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas.

Procedure

Reviews were collected in two successive phases, first using the *search* tool of the Gramophone website and successively browsing every issue page-by-page as they appear in the scanned online version. That was essential in order to assure as complete a collection of material as possible. The reviews were ordered chronologically and divided per decade. For each review, a database was compiled of the following data: issue (date, page); sonata(s) reviewed; pianist(s) reviewed; label; critic; release status (i.e. new release, re-issue, and first publication of an old recording); repertoire reviewed (i.e. only Beethoven sonata(s) or Beethoven sonata(s) plus other works); length of the review text (in words).

Table 1. The 17 most often reviewed pianists. Names in italics are among the performers most often used for comparisons.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
<i>Arrau, Claudio</i>	53	<i>Barenboim, Daniel</i>	18
<i>Brendel, Alfred</i>	52	<i>Giesecking, Walter</i>	18
<i>Kempff, Wilhelm</i>	49	<i>Gulda, Friedrich</i>	16
<i>Backhaus, Wilhelm</i>	38	Lill, John	16
<i>Ashkenazy, Vladimir</i>	27	Michelangeli, Arturo Benedetti	14
<i>Richter, Sviatoslav</i>	26	<i>Kovacevich, Stephen</i>	14
<i>Schnabel, Artur</i>	26	<i>Pollini, Maurizio</i>	13
<i>Solomon, Cutner</i>	25	Serkin, Rudolf	13
<i>Gilels, Emil</i>	20		

Descriptive and exploratory data analyses were carried out on the whole dataset. Subsequently, a subset of 63 of the total 845 reviews was chosen for a pilot quantitative text analysis. This included seven reviews per decade randomly chosen among reviews that (1) concerned solely Beethoven piano sonata(s) and (2) had a text length of between 130 and 800 words, to assure having enough text with which to work and to exclude long, article-like reviews that offered a different journalistic product. Reviews were analysed by the first author, and different content sections were marked in the text according to the following three categories: *interpretation/performance*, *composition*, and *recording*. This process was repeated independently by the second and third authors (all three had professional training in piano performance), and results were compared and agreed upon.

RESULTS

The collected material summed up to 845 reviews (ca. 400,000 words) published between April 1923 and September 2010. The publication rate for the first three decades (until 1950) was 2.6 reviews per year. After 1950 and until 2010, the rate increased to 12.9 reviews per year. First releases of new recordings accounted for 67.3% of reviews, and re-issues and first releases of old recordings covered 29.5%, with “old” understood as recordings produced more than 15 years prior to the publication date of the review. A residual 2.7% of reviews concerned recordings of groups of sonatas, some of which had been previously reviewed. Re-issues started to appear in the 1950s and increased toward the 1980s, when the ratio between new recordings and re-issues reaches almost 1:1. After 1990, this tendency recedes but was compensated by the new phenomenon of old, unpublished recordings made suddenly commercially available. In the collected corpus of critical texts, 216 different pianists were reviewed, but 50% of reviews concerned only 17 pianists, with 117 performers reviewed only once. Comparisons between pianists by reviewers were common, found in 41.2% of all reviews and 53.1% of the reviews of only Beethoven sonatas. Beginning in October 1953, comparisons were also stated officially in the titles of the reviews. Out of the 216 pianists, 81 were used throughout the century for comparisons. Of the 16 performers most often used for comparison, 14 correspond with those included among the 17 most reviewed pianists (see Table 1).

There were 136 labels that produced recordings reviewed in *The Gramophone*. Out of the 136 labels, eight (i.e. Philips, DGG, HMV, Decca, Columbia, RCA, EMI, CBS) cover 61.51% of the total. Starting in the 1950s, the predominance of those labels constantly decreases. The percentage of produced re-

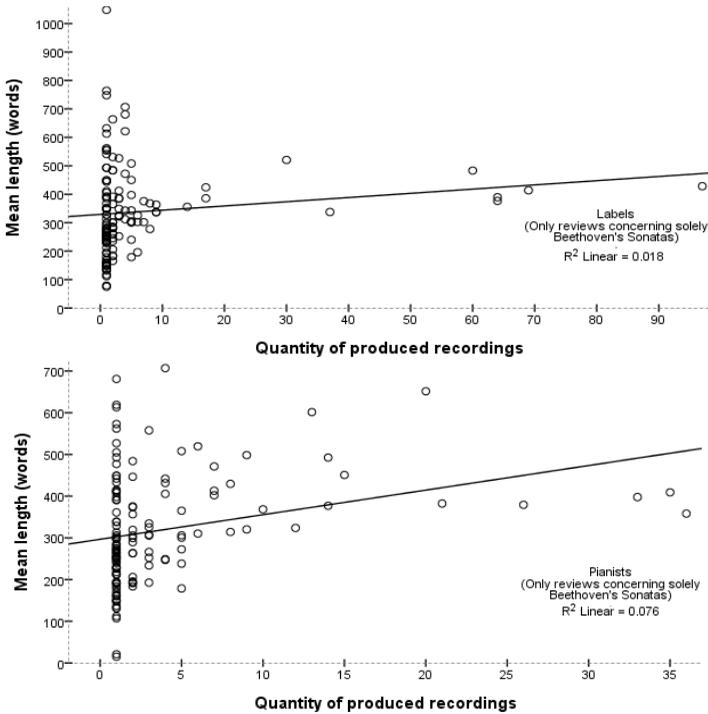


Figure 1. Distribution of mean length of reviews against quantity of produced recordings reviewed for labels (top panel) and pianists (bottom panel).

cordings was 84.2% in the 1950s; 20.9% in 2000s. This tendency is strongly accentuated in the last two decades.

The length of review was extremely varied, ranging from 10 to 2426 words (mean=409.86, SD=277.70); however, the distribution presents a strong positive kurtosis (kurtosis=11.89, SE=0.17) and a comparatively small interquartile range (IQR=251). For reviews concerning solely Beethoven's sonatas, relationships were explored between length and decade, critic, label, and pianist, respectively. Kendall's Tau (two-tailed) revealed a moderate positive correlation between quantity of produced recordings and length of reviews for labels ($\tau=0.234$, $p<0.001$) and pianists ($\tau=0.277$, $p<0.001$).

Among the 845 reviews, it was possible to identify 59 different critics (8.88% of reviews were unsigned). Out of the 59 critics, seven cover 51.95% of the reviews written, their average period of activity is 27.14 years. Between

these seven critics, mean values of length of produced reviews were compared through a Kruskal-Wallis test that showed significant differences ($H_6=23.33$, $p<0.005$). However, it was thought that those differences could be influenced by historical tendencies; therefore, the mean lengths for each of those seven critics were compared with those of their colleagues, for the period of time in which each critic was active. Two critics scored reviews significantly longer (R.O.) and shorter (M.M.) than their contemporaries according to Mann-Whitney tests ($U_1=17,689.50$, $Z=2.78$, $p<0.05$ and $U_1=3,999.50$, $Z=704.12$, $p<0.001$). From the text analysis run on the subset of 63 reviews, the categories *interpretation/performance*, *composition*, and *recording* accounted for 76.34% of all text, on average. They were distributed as follow: 54.74% interpretation/performance, 11.60% recording, and 10% composition. The residual text contained diverse information regarding, for instance, the categories labelled *shopping tips* (e.g. “Buy X and you will have all important sonatas in just 3 discs”) and *recording policy* (e.g. “One more Moonlight? When will we have an Op. 79?”). This internal distribution of categories varies along the century. The distribution of the three categories within the reviews text among decades is shown in Figure 2.

The amount of text given to the category *interpretation/performance* increased over time. In particular, a strong growth is seen at the beginning of

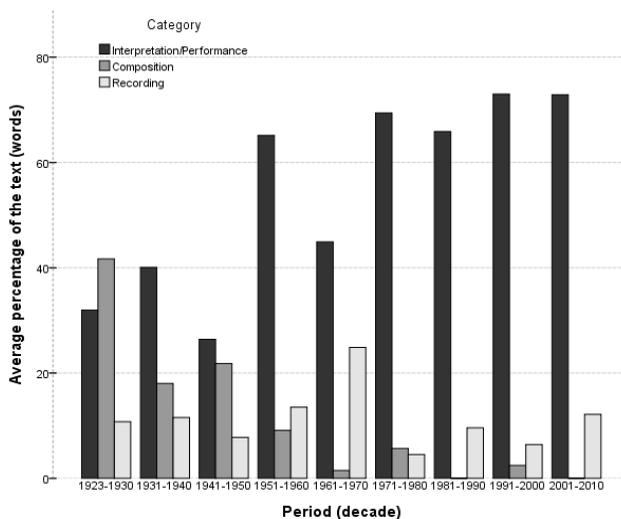


Figure 2. Distribution of text according to the three content categories across decades.

the 1950s. After this date, the increase is marginal. The years 1961-70 do not belong to this picture, showing a low percentage of *interpretation* text. The category *composition* plays a major role at the beginning of the century and decreases toward 1960. After this date, almost no text at all is devoted to it. The *recording* category scores a peak in 1961-70.

DISCUSSION

This study serves as the first step for a larger investigation of the practice of music criticism. The first picture emerging from the data is extremely varied with a high number of critics, pianists, and labels involved. However, the distribution of reviews is polarized around small subgroups of them, and those subgroups also receive longer reviews on average. That suggests a focus on high profile performers and labels, which could make an in depth investigation of a reduced number of authors, players, and producers fruitful. First, however, more contextual information is needed in order to interpret the emerging patterns properly. For labels, it will be important to reframe the analysis taking into account the different merging and splitting movements between record producers and trademarks (see Patmore 2009). Editorial issues and standard procedures behind the selection of recordings to be reviewed should be clarified with regard to the relationships between quantity of produced recordings (by pianist and label) and length of reviews. Differences in the average text length among critics, in particular for R.O. and M.M., should be investigated through a text content analysis aimed at enlightening divergences in linguistic style and use of expressions.

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