

"Interpreting Mozart: The Performance Practice of his Piano Pieces and Other Compositions" by Eva Badura-Skoda and Paul Badura-Skoda

By: [Andrew Willis](#)

Willis, A. (2009). *Interpreting Mozart: The Performance of His Piano Pieces and Other Compositions*, 2nd ed., by Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda. *Performance Practice Review*, 14(1). doi: 10.5642/perfpr.200914.01.12

Made available courtesy of Claremont Graduate University:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5642/perfpr.200914.01.12>

*****© The Author. Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from the author & Claremont Graduate University. *****

Abstract:

This article is a review and critique of Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda's 2009 book "Interpreting Mozart: The Performance Practice of his Piano Pieces and Other Compositions".

Keywords: Book review | Music | Mozart | Piano

*****Note: Full text of article below**

"Interpreting Mozart: The Performance Practice of his Piano Pieces and Other Compositions" by Eva Badura-Skoda and Paul Badura-Skoda

Andrew Willis

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Music Practice Commons](#)

Willis, Andrew (2009) ""Interpreting Mozart: The Performance Practice of his Piano Pieces and Other Compositions" by Eva Badura-Skoda and Paul Badura-Skoda," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 14: No. 1, Article 12. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.200914.01.12
Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol14/iss1/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Claremont at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performance Practice Review by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Badura-Skoda, Eva, Paul Badura-Skoda. *Interpreting Mozart: The Performance of His Piano Pieces and Other Compositions*, 2nd ed. New York and London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2008. ISBN 978-0-415-97750-0.

Andrew Willis

Copyright © 2009 Claremont Graduate University

Ars longa, vita brevis. Every passionately engaged musician senses the truth of this maxim more acutely with the passing years, and this consciousness was surely part of Paul and Eva Badura-Skoda's motivation to share the discoveries of a lifetime of intensive thinking, listening, and research on the keyboard music of Mozart by expanding and updating their seminal *Mozart-Interpretation* (1957), which appeared in English translation in 1962 as *Interpreting Mozart on the Keyboard*.¹ Hereby the internationally-renowned authors, he a concert pianist and she a musicologist, aim to address just about every conceivable question the subject can generate, producing a book at once broad in scope and densely detailed. Most of the first edition is retained with a few slight adjustments, and herein lies the book's greatest weakness, in passages where the mindset of the 1950s survives the passage of time without rigorous questioning. The book's greatest strength resides in its abundance of new material: additional examples, expanded discussions, and topics not covered in the first edition. Taken together the old and new generate a comprehensive account that will be of value to the performance practice scholar who approaches the work with a mature awareness of the limitations of any one view, regardless of how much authority it may claim. Since the study focuses entirely upon Mozart's keyboard music, its subtitled reference to "other compositions" must be understood in the sense in which interpretive principles discussed in the context of the keyboard works can be applied to the general style of this composer and of his era. An accompanying CD containing examples performed by Paul Badura-Skoda adds an illustrative dimension that could not have been imagined at the time of first writing.

In their new preface, the Badura-Skodas cite various factors that motivated them to update the book. Among the most important are the discovery of lost or missing autographs, the completion of the *Neue Mozart Ausgabe*, an abundance of new publications by Mozart scholars, the desire to respond to certain "questionable new concepts and trends in Mozart research (xi)," the possibility of incorporating recorded examples, the widespread availability of excellent reproductions of keyboard instruments from Mozart's era, and the disappearance from general

¹ Eva Badura-Skoda and Paul Badura-Skoda, *Interpreting Mozart on the Keyboard*, trans. Leo Black (London: Barrie & Radcliffe, 1962).

circulation of various inferior and/or corrupt editions of Mozart's works. In the early twenty-first century, they felt, it was both possible and productive to revitalize their classic publication.

As in the original, individual chapters are devoted to major interpretive issues, in a reshuffled sequence that seems intended to tackle concrete elements before introducing those where personal choice plays a role. Among the more concrete topics belong sonority and instruments, dynamics, tempo and rhythm, and articulation. Somewhat more personal are the discussions of ornaments and improvised embellishments, cadenzas, and *Eingänge*, while "Expression and Gusto" deals with matters that are far from quantifiable. Room is provided for chapters on textual issues, special circumstances arising in performance with orchestra, and advice on keyboard technique. The book concludes with a chapter offering detailed performance suggestions for three concertos and two sonatas.

Taking Mozart's favorite instrument, the piano, as a point of departure, the first chapter is devoted to "Mozart's World of Sound." After the briefest of general introductions to the keyboard instruments of the classical era, the authors survey the instruments available to the Mozart family, building a strong case for Wolfgang's early and ongoing exposure to a keyboard instrument with a hammer action. A controversial side issue is touched upon, the authors contending that Mozart (and indeed both Sebastian and Emanuel Bach) considered equal temperament the best. Perhaps Professor Eva Badura-Skoda will proffer further support for this position in her temptingly referenced forthcoming book, *The History of the Fortepiano from Scarlatti to Chopin*, a publication aficionados of the early piano eagerly anticipate. A discussion of instrumental considerations bearing on range and the use of the damper-lifting mechanism rounds out the chapter. It is not made clear to what extent the Badura-Skodas consider this information fundamental to the discovery, testing, and incorporation of performance practices. This ambiguity hints that they consider the performer's and scholar's choice of historical versus modern instrument to be a question, if not negligible, then tangential to the performance-practice issues at hand.

With an instrumental context established, a survey of individual performance-practice elements begins with a chapter focusing on dynamics, new in this edition, and covering all Mozart's marks of dynamic expression. Many insightful ideas are proposed, including the wide range of intensities that Mozart's *forte* can cover, the element of tenderness evoked by *dolce*, and the observation that "*forte* is not only an acoustical but also a psychological effect (61)." The following Chapter 3, on "Problems of Tempo and Rhythm," compiles a fund of basic practical information. An occasional point is couched in a slightly dismissive tone, as if the authors have tired of reiterating points that others should have accepted by now. Thus, "we should remember that for Mozart *calando* obviously meant only 'get softer' and not 'get slower (86)," a conclusion that appears to be based primarily on the absence of *a tempo* markings following *calando*. This point, while worth debating, discounts the possibility that other phenomena might clearly imply a return to tempo without requiring an explicit marking. Such an appeal to the "obvious" puts the alert reader on notice that many of the authors' assumptions do not invite questioning.

The chapters on articulation and ornamentation also assemble much that is essential knowledge for every informed player. Readers might find the Badura-Skodas' differentiation between legato slurs and articulation slurs a bit elusive, but to their credit they acknowledge that "Mozart's notation of slurs is often ambiguous, inconsistent, and at times even misleading (107)." Part of the fascination in studying Mozart lies in weighing the many decisions his music requires of the performer, an activity often invigorated by comparing ideas drawn from one's own reservoir of knowledge and experience with those of others. Many readers who might retain reservations about this or that conclusion of the authors will find it stimulating to engage with their point of view. They may find themselves imagining an evening's conversation with the authors, brimming with animated exchanges, witty ripostes, and deep enthusiasms, much in the spirit of Mozart's music itself.

With the subject of freely improvised embellishment, taken up in Chapter 6, the authors enter a region in which many classically-trained performers feel uncertain of their rights and responsibilities, and sometimes, regrettably, uncertain of their ability to function at all. In the first edition, this subject was presented with a spirit of discovery and encouragement, perhaps because the need to overcome reticence was at that time so pronounced. (The great pianist Rudolf Serkin once admitted, so the story goes, that even though he knew the notation of certain passages in the concertos was incomplete, he simply couldn't bring himself to insult Mozart by adding notes of his own.) Today, though, following a path blazed in the United States by such performers as Malcolm Bilson and Robert Levin, and in Europe by Paul Badura-Skoda himself, the majority of both period-instrument performers and mainstream concert artists regularly supply their own embellishments and cadenzas when performing Mozart. A great deal of this creative activity is grounded in a thorough knowledge of Mozart's style, but inevitably the more adventuresome will push further in the direction of liberty, perhaps transgressing the limits of taste and style that the Badura-Skodas would deem appropriate. They observe, "We sometimes hear today . . . additions [that] are often too numerous, are thus out of style, and are frequently superfluous and seldom tasteful (249)." In response, they take great pains in the revised chapter to emphasize caution and discretion, discussing at a detailed level the parameters that they believe compel, permit, or exclude free embellishment. Only in cases of obviously incomplete notation is embellishment mandatory. All other instances where ornamentation may be admitted are "a matter of taste," and to develop taste, Mozart's own embellishments offer the ideal model. A warning is given, reasonably enough, against the notion that every return of a musical idea should be varied, but no clear principle is offered to guide the decision to vary or not; one gathers the authors would be more comfortable with literal repetition most of the time, especially in sonata-form and *da capo* movements. They would also exclude any alteration of Mozart's notated ornamentations, particularly when the composer oversaw the publication of the work. For instructional purposes, they recommend assigning students "less important works by minor composers (231)," suggesting that a weak piece might conceivably be improved by a student's efforts to decorate it. But one must ask: does the defense of Mozart, whose greatness has surmounted the vagaries of its first two and a half centuries of existence, truly require the creation of a safety zone around his music?

A chapter on cadenzas and lead-ins continues the theme of improvised elements, furnishing a perceptive and reliable guide for the exploration of this important topic. There follows a chapter on the highly-subjective matters of “Expression and Gusto,” regarding which it suffices to invoke the Roman proverb, *de gustibus non disputandum est*. Of particular interest here is the observation that “one has, it seems, to emphasize emotional effects for modern listeners, who are thicker skinned, and to draw the important psychological outlines with broad strokes (310),” which appears to endorse a projection of expressive content intensified beyond the norms of an eighteenth-century performance. One wonders how the authors can feel at all sure of their ground here. If many present-day listeners perceive an enhanced vigor and meaning in historically-informed performances of Mozart on period instruments, could that not be the result of coming closer to its vital spirit as first perceived during his era? It is critically important for the performer to distinguish between the ability of such performances to uncover inherent aspects of the music and the danger of relying upon a generic, externally applied emotionality.

Chapter 9, “In Search of the Best Text,” brings editorial issues to the forefront. Although performers may find this tedious if unaccustomed to grappling with the text at the scholarly level required of editors, they will be able to benefit from the many useful textual corrections that are brought to their attention. The authors set forth three essential questions that should guide the conscientious editor. The first two, regarding source criticism and text criticism, are clearly essential, but the odd wording of the third, regarding elucidation of the text, raises an important question of agency. In asking “How ought the composer to have notated his music in order to be generally understood today (320)?” some sort of dereliction seems to be imputed, probably unintentionally, to the composer. It might be more fruitful to ask, “How can we correctly interpret the composer’s notation as he set it forth?”

The discussion shifts in Chapter 10 to issues arising in performance of the piano concertos, offering practical, insightful recommendations for continuo realization and the reduction of accompanying forces during solos. The presentation of “technical questions” in Chapter 11, almost entirely retained from the first edition, will strike many as oddly-placed in a book aiming to serve proficient pianists. Addressing fairly elementary considerations of touch, fingering, and pedaling, and predicated on the use of the modern piano, it covers matters that are widely viewed as the prerogative of the player.

The concluding chapter offers a richly-detailed guide to selected masterworks as Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda have come to conceive of them. The discussions of the Concertos in D minor K. 466, A major K. 488, and C minor K. 491 that appeared in the first edition are joined by new treatments of the piano sonatas in A minor K. 310 and A major K. 311. Shifting the focus from discrete topics to particular works viewed cumulatively, the authors demonstrate how to weave multifarious threads of knowledge into unified interpretations, providing a fitting capstone to their comprehensive investigation of Mozart’s keyboard works.

No book dealing with performance issues can remain totally objective, and indeed the Badura-Skodas acknowledge at the outset that “some purely personal views are bound to be expressed. (ix)” There is no need to enumerate every small matter about which one might legitimately reach a different conclusion from that of the authors. Nevertheless, caution must be advised regarding aspects of the methodology used in this book, particularly in those discussions retained in their 1950s form. One type of problem arises when, in attempting to explain the eighteenth-century execution of Mozart’s notation, the authors become entangled in the disparity between classical and modern conventions. Aiming to clarify certain subtleties of timing or shading, they resort to a “translation” of a given passage into notation based on such twenty-first-century assumptions as subdividing rhythmic groups with a strictly regular equality and holding unmarked notes for their full value. It may have been necessary to employ this tactic in the 1950s, when knowledge of eighteenth-century notational conventions belonged to a much smaller segment of the musical population than nowadays, but it seems vexingly at cross-purposes with the goal of reading Mozart’s notation as he would have read it. In reproducing these examples verbatim, the Badura-Skodas seem not to have noticed that they tend to reinforce the very reading habits from which historically-informed performers have struggled to free themselves. A few examples suffice to illustrate the kind of anomaly that arises: to encourage emphasis on a crucial melodic tone, a passage of three beats in common time is renotated as 7/16 plus 5/16 (Sonata in C minor, K. 457/ii/12-13, p. 89); to convey the flexibility of a rubato, a passage of regular thirty-second-notes is gathered into groups of 3, 4, 5, and 4 (Concerto in G major, K. 453/ii/51, p. 93); and to convey the particular weight and phrase direction of a series of repeated eighth-notes separated by eighth-rests in a measure of common time, the values are recast as a sixteenth and three single-triplet eighths separated by the necessary rests (Trio in C major, K. 548/i/5). Such notations have no meaningful place among the musical ratios employed by Mozart, and their use distances us from his musical language more than it helps us to comprehend it.

The Badura-Skodas also do not consistently take into account the vast difference between the resources of the period piano and those of the modern piano. Considering Paul Badura-Skoda’s authoritative mastery of every kind of piano, it is puzzling that the authors have not insisted upon a more differentiated approach to certain phenomena affected by the instrument at hand. To mention just one contrast, any performer who has played eighteenth-century music on both kinds of instrument—and Paul Badura-Skoda is widely known as the dean of this practice—is keenly aware of the quick decay of the historical tone compared with the virtually unlimited ability of the modern piano to sustain tone. Yet much of the interpretive advice given seems clearly predicated upon the attributes of the modern piano. In one instance (again retained from the book’s first edition), the opening solo of the Concerto in C minor, K. 491 is presented in a chart that combines modernized notation of the right hand part with a graphic representing sound intensity by means of a continuous rising and falling line. Six levels of dynamics (*più f*, *f*, *mf*, *mp*, *p*, *pp*) are applied to the melody, along with various hairpin indications in two levels simultaneously (representing local and phrase-length gestures that sometimes move in different directions, a rather Chopinesque conceit), various accent marks, and the assignment of strong and weak rhythmic accents to alternating measures. (The latter situation is more ambiguous than

the graph reveals, since the piano's entrance on a high note unites a strong gesture with a weak hypermetric point, following on the heels of a cadential resolution that can only be parsed as strong. But this is secondary to the underlying assumptions about sound, to which we return.) Coming rather jarringly from authors so well-informed on matters of performance practice and instruments, the orthography of this example seems to posit that expression is primarily a matter of dynamics, that is, the application of fluctuating intensity to a constant sound presence. Is this not perilously close to the well-worn practice of old-fashioned performance editions and conservatory "interpretation" of the "my teacher told me" variety, which approaches music of whatever period from the single perspective of sustained "singing" tone? If pleasantly seduced by the malleable and long-lasting voice of the modern piano, one may indisputably create exquisitely artistic and moving performances based on cultivated sensitivity to sound quality and respectful affection for the music. But it is also possible to create such performances (regardless of the instrument used) on the basis of an informed reading of Mozart's text.

To take one brief example: across the bar line of measure 110 in the first movement of K. 491, where the melody leaps to its highest note (and the highest on Mozart's piano) from an unmarked upbeat eighth-note, the Badura-Skoda text marks the upbeat with a staccato and a parenthetical accent, and the high note with an actual accent in a dynamic of *mf*. Would an informed player be likely to arrive at this shaping without the inserted diacritical assistance? I contend that she absolutely would, given an awareness of the following conditions: (1) this gesture culminates a series of four, the other three all utilizing slurred grace-notes to approach the high note, marking the unslurred eighth-note upbeat as a conspicuous change that imparts greater energy; (2) this two-bar sub-phrase is in direct relationship with the parallel sub-phrase immediately preceding, which it doubly intensifies by extending the range a third higher and by dividing the quarter-note rhythmic motion into eighths; and (3) an unmarked upbeat eighth will normally be played short and light, just perhaps a little less so in this instance in light of (1) and (2). A reading of this kind generates the appropriate dynamic levels by situating notes in a matrix of structural, harmonic, rhythmic, and intervallic relationships, as the contemporary treatises are at pains to instruct us how to do. Once this is grasped, it becomes unnecessary to try to control the dynamic intensity of each instant within an unbroken continuum of sound—and unbroken the line on the pictured graph is, persisting even through rests.

Admittedly, the Badura-Skodas' choices reconcile the design of the overall phrase with its component smaller, local gestures in an artistic manner. But a performer capable of reading music with sophisticated insight will recognize that Mozart has already designed into his text everything needed to arrive at quite a similar result (it need not be identical, to the degree that the player's individuality and spontaneity come into play). The composer, as can readily be confirmed, notated no dynamics at all in this passage, and apart from indicating the requisite slurs and *portati*, he trusted the realization of his conception entirely to the player's knowledge and skill.

The Badura-Skodas' venture into extended technology, while laudable, is limited to sound recordings, bypassing the other media that can now be included to supplement the book

format.² Some obstacles are thrown up to the effective access of these examples. First, the tracks are not identified in a form that is readable by an mp3 player and can thus only be located by track number. In addition, the handling of references is rather careless, reducing the utility of the supplemental recordings. Among the mix-ups are a referral to a recorded example that does not contain the passage in question (32), a referral misplaced on the page (108), and the omission of referrals to tracks 77 and 79, the relevance of which can, however, be traced from the context. The authors have not imagined that a reader/listener might wish to work from the recording back to the text citation, so there is no concordance to show on what page each track is cited, and the task of identification is further complicated by the irregular order in which some tracks are cited in the text (the first track cited is the last on the disc, and similar cases abound). A concordance would make a useful addendum to future printings, as would an mp3-player-readable identification of the track contents.

Even so, most of the recorded examples do help to clarify the matters they illustrate. Hearing some examples illustrated on the fortepiano and others on the modern piano, the attentive listener can observe how strongly the choice of instrument influences the interpretive result, even though this critical topic is nowhere discussed directly, nor is it explained why 25 of the 80 recorded examples employ historical pianos and the remaining 55 modern pianos. Announcing certain demonstrations under the blunt rubrics “correct” and “incorrect,” as Paul Badura-Skoda does, invokes a school of performance teaching of the “this is the way it goes” variety; in today’s postmodern scholarly environment, a more diplomatic approach inviting the listener to compare, understand, and reach her own conclusions would likely be more persuasive. But it is important to remember that this artist and his opinions have earned serious respect, considering that few people have thought so deeply, so long, and with such care about Mozartean matters.

The book is handsomely-produced in hard cover with no dust jacket, featuring on the cover a portrait of Mozart by Joseph Grassi from the Glinka Museum in Moscow. Three interesting appendices make their appearance in this edition, dealing respectively with a contemporary measurement of tempo in Pamina’s aria “Ach, ich fühl’s” from *Die Zauberflöte*, recommended editions (“the best presently available”) of Mozart’s keyboard works, and a model continuo realization for the first movement of the Concerto in E-flat major, K. 449. Footnoted references are dealt with conveniently on the page where they occur. An updated and greatly-expanded bibliography, a new subject index, and an index of works-cited all increase the utility of the new edition.

The appearance of *Mozart-Interpretation* in 1957 opened new vistas to thousands of performers and devotees of Mozart around the world. Much of what has entered the shared consciousness of the world’s musicians regarding Mozartean ornamentation, articulation,

²For an outstanding and highly ambitious example, see Tom Beghin and Sander M. Goldberg, eds., *Haydn and the Performance of Rhetoric* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007) of which the accompanying DVD-ROM provides synchronized scores, texts, and performance excerpts, with embedded supplementary notes, images and video clips, all clearly indexed.

improvised elements, and touch can be traced to the influence of this pioneering work as it extended its reach around the globe through translations into many languages. Now, in a beautifully-produced and greatly-enhanced new edition, the authors continue “to bring to light problems of Mozart interpretation and to help solve them” (ix). Taking into account new evidence, new controversies, and new conditions, Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda have renewed the vitality of an essential reference for every student of Mozart’s keyboard music, illuminating the evolution not merely of Mozart playing, but of scholarship itself.