

The Cloven Pedal

A Reminiscence of Mr. Sherlock Holmes

by
John H. Watson M.D.

It was in the late 80s that the noted amateur violinist, my friend Mr. Sherlock Holmes, turned his full attention to the pianoforte. Mrs. Hudson, with her customary good humour, had permitted the sill of the widest window in our rooms to be hacked away, to facilitate the delivery by block and tackle of an instrument so very Grand that the combined efforts of Professor Moriarty and Inspector Lestrade, who happened to be visiting, were insufficient to drag the instrument round that awkward corner of the staircase where I so often stumbled in the darkness as I crept in from an evening at the Club. The instrument once in place, Holmes spent many hours at it, and Mrs. Hudson was put to the trouble of inserting an advertisement for a new ground-floor lodger who should be slightly hard of hearing.

As I strolled home along Baker Street one fine May morning in 1890, I heard the clatter and bang of some virtuosic piano morceau spilling out of the open windows of our lodgings. A small crowd had gathered to listen, and I noticed that several were brandishing clenched fists as a mark of their appreciation. As I entered the room, Holmes sprang up from the keyboard, his eyes gleaming, his hair disordered. His long fingers (with the spatulate ends that so easily explain his deductive triumph in the Case of the Solitary Cyclist, still five years in the future) shook with emotion as he pointed to the last page of his well-worn copy of Mendelssohn's Rondo capriccioso.

‘Come, Watson! The game’s a foot!’

Puzzling over the apparent typographical error, the significance of which I could not grasp at the time, it was a moment before I followed him.

‘Shall I bring my service revolver?’ I called down the stairs.

‘My dear Watson,’ he shouted from the street below – ‘cab! – cab! – there has been no need for such precautions at Broadwood’s factory since the Equal Temperament Riots of 1848. Do hurry along, there’s a good fellow. Horseferry Road, cabbie.’

As the hansom bowled down Park Lane, Holmes’s brow was furrowed in concentration. The fingers of both hands tapped on his knees, and I noticed that his right foot twitched restlessly from side to side, such was the overflow of his nervous energy. And ever as we rattled along, he sang under his breath: ‘tiddle-um-pum, tiddle-um-pum, tiddle-um-pum, tiddle-um-PAH.’

‘It must be the answer,’ he muttered. ‘Could Mendelssohn have made a mistake? No! Could there be a misprint in Novello’s Edition? Or Boosey’s, or Breitkopf and Haertel’s? No, a thousand times no! I have eliminated the impossible. Let Broadwood’s famously omniscient Porter enlighten us as to the improbable.’

‘Holmes,’ I cried triumphantly. ‘This interest in Mendelssohn – these syllables, pum and PAH. You have made a discovery about the syntax of the Songs without Words, have you not?’

He looked at me with scorn.

‘I shall leave such simplicities to the less comprehensive thinkers of the future, Watson. The briefest survey of the more common examples of the Indo-European languages, even unsupplemented by that investigation of the Finno-Ugric tongues which I published under the name of Sigerson, would surely clarify Mendelssohn’s habit of peppering his scores with sforzato marks. We are after bigger game. And, if these enormous packing cases on the carts spewing out of the gateway there do not deceive me, we have reached its lair.’

‘Why, yes, Mr. Holmes,’ said the honest porter, quickly at his ease after Holmes’s breezy opening remarks about the trade in ivory and the price of brass, ‘we did used to saw ’em in half, the loud pedals, as I call ’em. Made of wood, they were, so it were a simple matter enough. And the left-hand half used to raise the dampers from middle B down – that’d be just by the lock, sir, if you don’t happen – ’ Holmes made an impatient gesture ‘ – begging your

pardon, sir, I should have noticed your finger-ends – ’ Holmes frowned ‘ – and the right-hand half raised the dampers from middle C upwards, while if you put your foot – ’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Holmes, curtly. ‘But did Mr. Mendelssohn purchase such a piano?’

‘Well, not Mr. Mendelssohn, sir, but his aunt in Berlin, she had one.’

‘Eureka!’ ejaculated Holmes. ‘There is the explanation, Watson. You’ll recall that the head-motif of the Rondo capriccioso – tiddle-um-pum – ends its fourth iteration, in the left hand, on a low E in every case except the last, where that fourth iteration ends, uniquely, upon a B. Why, Watson: why is the note changed just this once, at this, its seventh and last appearance? Consider. It is the second occasion on which the head-motif is set out above a dominant pedal – I’m now using the word ‘pedal’ in the harmonic sense of a sustained bass note, of course, Watson, do you follow me? – a dominant, Watson, in the key of E! What note is that?’

‘Why, Holmes,’ I stammered, and my fingers tapped together in my discomposure. Oddly enough, the porter, who had been listening with the liveliest interest, began tapping his fingers together too. Holmes looked from one to the other of us, and a slow smile spread across his face.

‘I quite agree with you,’ he said to the porter. ‘Princess Ida is the best of them all.’

The porter’s mouth fell open.

‘How ...? how ...?’. His voice trailed away. His amazement was complete.

‘In your attempt to answer my question, both you and Dr. Watson here have unconsciously resorted to what must be a habit of your youth. Finding musical notes by touching various parts of the hand and fingers is an old choirboy’s trick. It was conceived in the distant Middle Ages by Guido of Arezzo, I believe. Now, the only choirmaster in England who knew that much of mediaeval music, at the time that your voices were unbroken, was Mr. Helmore, at the Chapel Royal. Ergo, both you and Watson must have been choirboys under him.’

‘He lives just down the road now, sir,’ said the porter, nodding. ‘Not very well, the poor old gentleman.’

‘I’m sorry to hear it,’ said Holmes, courteously. ‘The man responsible for Good King Wenceslas will always command my respect.’

‘But, go on, sir. How could you possibly know my opinion of Princess Ida?’

‘The most famous of Mr. Helmore’s pupils is Sir Arthur Sullivan – a contemporary of yours, I fancy?’

The porter nodded his head once more.

‘What would be more natural than for you to keep up to date with your old chum’s successes? Dr. Watson never misses a Savoy Opera – I have often wondered why. You’ve kept your musical accomplishments very dark, Watson!’ – I shuffled my feet bashfully – ‘The choir must have been very proud of its Old Boy in your day.’

‘Yes indeed, Holmes,’ I responded heartily. ‘The Mendelssohn Scholarship. The Tempest music. Mr. Dickens’s remarks.’

The porter took off his cap and scratched his head.

‘Well, that’s clear enough,’ he said, ‘but, Princess Ida?’

Holmes turned to me, smiling.

‘I think I can rely on you to sketch in the rest of my deductions, Watson,’ he said.

‘I think so! A glance at the porter’s chair shows that as we approached, he was reading The Idylls of the King. Indeed, re-reading it, to judge from the condition of the spine. Mr. Gilbert’s parody of The Princess must either enrage or delight a man who loves his Tennyson.’

I turned to the porter, and grasped his hand.

‘You, sir, are a man of cheerful disposition, as I perceive from the crinkles in the skin around your eye-sockets. And so you were delighted by the parody, and must consider it the best of our fellow chorister’s comic operas.’

The porter shook my hand warmly.

‘That’s wonderful, Dr. Watson,’ he said.

I took a deep breath. My moment had come.

‘Elementary,’ I said.

‘Enough of these trifles,’ said Holmes briskly, laying down his music on the porter’s desk. The porter and I peered over his shoulders.

‘Bear in mind that the dominant of E is B – the very note where the sustaining pedal divides. Now, here is the first four-fold iteration of the motif.’

‘The last note in the left hand is an E.’

‘I know that, Holmes,’ I snapped, nettled.



‘A thousand pardons, Watson. As it lies well below the range of the treble voice, I fancied you might not recognize it in the treble clef. An E, then, and an E it remains for its next five appearances. Here it is, over the first of those octave low Bs in the left hand, just where it says *a Tempo*.’



‘Still a low E in the fourth iteration, you notice.’

The porter leant forward in excitement, jabbing his fingers at the bars of music that followed the low E.

‘Look here, sir! E, D sharp, E, D sharp. You couldn’t pedal them together, it’d clash something terrible.’

‘But what if one raised only the dampers below middle C?’ probed Holmes. The porter scratched his head again.

‘No,’ he said slowly. ‘That wouldn’t work either. The low E would be sustained, and it would clash with the D sharps. So you’d have to stop pedalling once you’ve played the low E.’

‘Quite right,’ said Holmes with approval. He flipped the page triumphantly.

‘Now here is the second occurrence of the low octave B –’:



‘Now look there, after the *a Tempo*, second note from the end in the left hand. The note B, in place of that low E. What do you deduce from that, Mr. Porter?’

The man’s eyes gleamed.

‘I think I’m getting the hang of this,’ he said. ‘By changing that note, Mr. Mendelssohn has made it possible for you to keep your foot on the left-hand half of the pedal through the whole four-bar passage. The altered note, the B, is sustained, which reinforces the bass note. The low E doesn’t clash, because you haven’t played it. And the Es and D sharps don’t clash because they’re above middle C, and you haven’t raised those dampers!’

‘And can either of you think of a reason for the alteration that does not involve the mechanism of the divided pedal?’ asked Holmes keenly. ‘Caprice? Error?’ We exchanged glances, and shook our heads.

‘Once one has eliminated the impossible,’ I began.

‘And it’s rather a nice point of composition,’ interrupted the porter, ‘that a passage that would otherwise sound practically identical to the earlier one can gain reinforcement from a longer pedal the second time.’

‘That’s true,’ I admitted. ‘But, Holmes, is it really important?’

‘Important! My dear fellow, this is why Mendelssohn’s Sonata Opus 6 is in the key of E! Those repeated staccato Bs in the left hand, under the complex three-part legato texture in the right: that mysterious contradiction between the words *sempre staccato* and the extensive pedal markings in the Minuet. And turning to lesser masters, I can call to mind several passages in the works of Glorious John – you’ll recall Baptist Cramer? – and our own late Sir Sterndale Bennett, which can only be explained by the existence of such a device. Think of the ramifications.’

He pressed a coin into the porter’s hand.

‘Thank you, my man. You have made a contribution to musical history this day. You really must write this up, Watson.’

‘I fear my readers would find little to interest them, Holmes.’

‘Not even if you were to hint that we may have discovered the reason that Mozart’s great A minor Piano Sonata is not in G minor? G minor, Mozart’s favourite key for sadness, Watson? There’s almost no Mozart in A minor. What, other than some technological quirk of the instrument, could cause him to abandon the habit of a lifetime?’

He turned on his heel.

‘Come, Watson. Borwick plays Brahms at St. James’s Hall this afternoon, and if we hurry we may arrive in time for the new quartet. At Windsor –’ He bit off the words as soon as he had said them, and I remembered his strange diffidence about naming his more exalted clients. He was quickly back in the hansom.

‘And what about Beethoven’s E major Sonata, Watson?’ he shouted excitedly, leaning out of the window.

‘I don’t think they’d be interested in that, either, Holmes,’ I answered; but, mindful only of the musical treat in store, he had already seized the whip from the hands of the astonished driver, and had set the horse into sudden motion. He was gone.

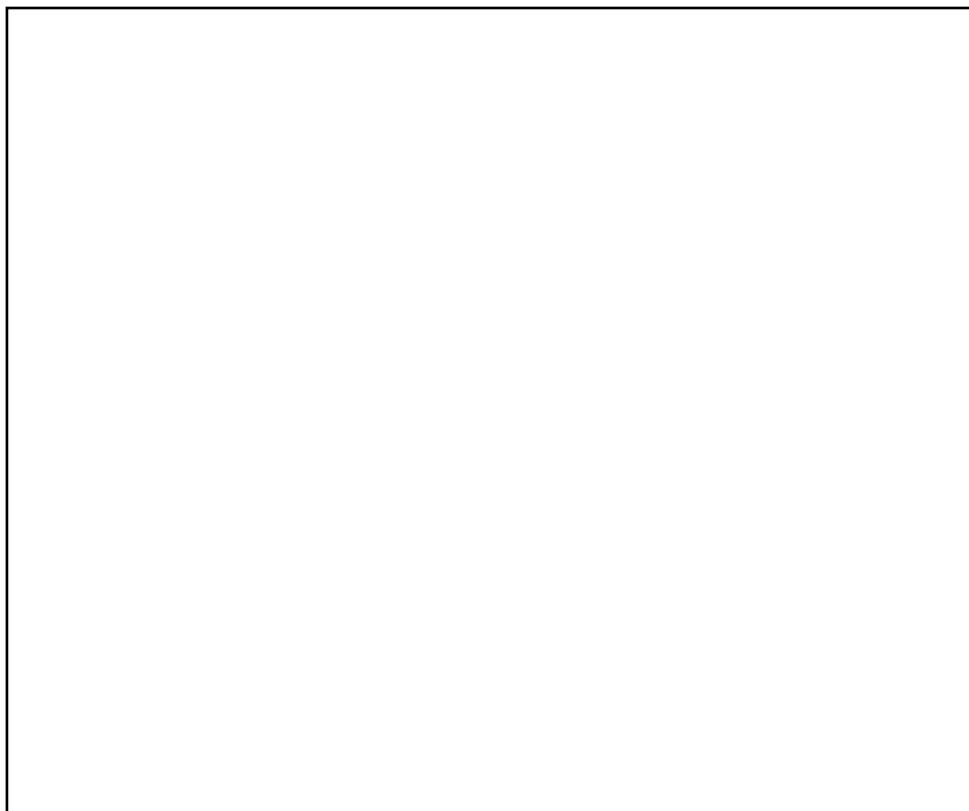
I shook my head. Mozart? Beethoven? Mendelssohn? Not in the Strand Magazine. Better to catch up on old times with the porter.

David Owen Norris adds:

The recent discovery of the remarkable manuscript, transcribed above, in the vaults of Messrs. Coutts & Co, lying at the bottom of a cabin trunk labelled

J.H.W.
P.O.S.H.

is timely. In January I collected from Christopher Barlow's workshop in Frome a piano just like Mendelssohn's aunt's.



Dated 1828, it has a compass of 6 and a half octaves. Mendelssohn's music requires this extended range: you can't play it on the Broadwoods of ten years earlier. The left pedal is the true *una corda* which allows the hammer to strike only one string of the three provided for each note. Hammer-heads became wider as the century progressed, making it impossible to get down to just one string, but the true device is absolutely required for the effect *poco a poco tutte le corde* ('bit by bit, all the strings') which we find in Mendelssohn's Op.6 Sonata and in Beethoven's Sonata Op.101 which was clearly the youthful Mendelssohn's model. And my instrument has the all-important divided sustaining pedal so brilliantly deduced by Holmes. Beethoven's Broadwood, by the way, possessed the divided pedal too, and there are certain features of the notation of the E major Sonata Op.109, which can only be explained by its mechanism, as Holmes was the first to perceive.

There's one more important difference about my 1828 Broadwood. It's pitched at A = 430. That's because I've come across some very interesting arrangements by Cramer and Hummel, published in 1827. Each of these great virtuosos made 'modern' versions of six Mozart Piano Concertos, rendering them much more difficult and showy, using the extended compass, and, with great compositional skill, reducing the orchestra to just violin, flute and cello. I'm putting together performances of these pieces with colleagues at Southampton University. The 1827 flute parts require a flute with 6 or 8 keys – and such flutes are pitched at A = 430.

Holmes's remarks about the syntax of the Songs without Words are a bit of a blow to me, I must admit. I had hoped when I announced my discoveries in 2009 to a meeting of the Royal Philharmonic Society (Mendelssohn's old patron) that I was the first to attempt an explanation of Mendelssohn's unusually frequent use of the *sforzato*, *sf*. But Holmes seems also to have grasped that it must relate to the rhetorical delivery of a phrase, using the devices of delay, pause and hesitation, as opposed to the normal interpretation of 'bang it a bit'. Luckily, he doesn't seem to have pre-empted my theory about the difference between a 'hairpin' and the words *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, which Mendelssohn employs in very puzzling ways. I adopt the performing hypothesis that the 'hairpin' implies some slight acceleration, while the words *cres* and *dim* imply a holding-back.

