

The Maxime Principle

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On the “Maxime” Principle

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In a communication we recently received from Professor Maxime in Paris, she encouraged all instrumentalists to begin thinking of the Italian *piano* and *forte* symbols to mean relative degrees of emotional intensity and not the standard practice of indicating only “soft” and “loud” sound.

This recommendation, that the *piano* and *forte* symbols should reflect “emotional intensity,” is perhaps a bit startling for those of us who have been taught that the purpose of these symbols was to reflect only the degrees of loudness or softness of the actual volume of sound itself. For those who believe that the sole purpose of music is the communication of feeling and emotions, Professor Maxime’s principle is a welcome reminder that in earlier times the *piano* and *forte* symbols were also associated with feeling and were often the responsibility of the performer, not the composer. But the symbols are introduced to us today as being of an objective character with no discussion of how these symbols are related to feeling. While Professor Maxime speaks of “emotional intensity,” we relegate these symbols to the status of being only “dynamic markings.”

Since *piano* and *forte* are Italian words, perhaps we should begin asking what these words mean in the lives of ordinary Italian citizens. Beginning with *piano*, my *Cassell’s Italian–English Dictionary* gives several, unnumbered, one-word definitions, beginning, as we might expect, with “softly.” The second one-word definition, “gently,” is a surprise for this is of a distinctly subjective character and, as the reader will see below, one actually used by some earlier musicians. Also, this is closer to the meaning found in conversation of Italians today. If one were to say, in an attempt to quiet down a group of people, “piano, piano,” the speaker would be understood to mean something more like “calm down,” and not “softer, softer.”

The third one-word definition is even more of a surprise, “slowly”! Have you ever had a teacher point to the lowercase “p” in a composition and tell you it means *slow*?¹ Of course when one reflects on the thousands of Classical Period symphonies, concerti and chamber works one knows, one recalls that the second movement, which is invariably slow, begins with a lowercase “p” at the beginning. It would never occur to most of us that the “p” at this point means *slow*, as opposed to its traditional meaning of *soft*. But then again, no one of us has ever said to a class, “We are now going to hear the soft movement of Mozart’s Symphony Nr. 40.”

Similarly, my dictionary gives for *forte* a number of one-word definitions, many of them rather subjective: strong, vigorous, powerful, sturdy, robust, hale, healthy, considerable, large, heavy and (!) high. Only the twelfth of these one-word definition reads, “loud (of sound).”

While there is a greater diversity of meaning here than most readers might expect for *piano* and *forte*, some early treatises on music are even more extreme. For example, Georg Muffat, in the Foreword to his collection of concerti, *Auserlesene Instrumental-Music* (1701) observes,

¹This reminds us of a comment which Charles Burney made in a posthumous article on “Adagio” in Rees’ *Cyclopaedia*, London, 1819, that if one does not embellish slow notes they “soon excite languor and disgust in the listener.”

At the direction *piano* or *p* all are ordinarily to play at once so softly and tenderly that one barely hears them, and at the direction *forte* or *f* with so full a tone, from the first note so marked, that the listeners are left, as it were, astounded at such vehemence.

But even here, the choice of the words “tenderly” and “vehemence” suggest that Muffat was thinking of more than a mere description of volume. A similar great range of sound is found in Chaucer’s famous *Canterbury Tales*, where we are told that even a trumpet was only half as loud as the two-part songs of the Pardoner and the Sumner, while the parish clerk, Absalom, sometimes sang in a small and gentle voice. Again, in the second-century poem, *Daphnis and Chloe*, we read of even a panpipe player who could go from a “loud and powerful tone” to a “sweeter tone.”²

In reading early treatises on performance one can find many implications that earlier instrumentalists were as concerned with the musical interpretation of dynamic markings as they were about volume of sound. Monteverdi, in 1638, almost avoids the question of volume entirely,

I consider the principal passions or emotions of the soul to be three, namely, anger, serenity and humility. The best philosophers affirm this; the very nature of our voice, with its high, low and middle ranges, shows it; and the art of music clearly manifests it in these three terms: agitated, soft and moderate.

Giustiniani, in discussing the singing of the ladies of Mantua and Ferrara in the early Baroque, mentions they not only produced loud or soft, but “heavy or light ... now slow, breaking off with sometimes a gentle sigh.”³

An Italian treatise of the Baroque observes, “the other letters P, F, E, T, understood for Piano, Forte, Echo and Trill are known to everyone.”⁴ But in French string music of this time the “P” stood for *poussé*, pushed or up-stroke of the bow, whereas the “T”, *tiré*, meant pulled or down-stroke. This suggests that *piano* implied crescendo and *forte* implied diminuendo. This is found again in a vocal treatise of 1686,

Yet with both piano and forte it is to be noted that one does not go so suddenly from piano to forte, but one should gradually strengthen the voice and again let it decrease so that at the beginning piano is heard, forte at the middle and once again piano as one comes to the close.⁵

Finally, there are many passages during the Baroque which make it clear that it is the responsibility of the performer to decide upon adding *forte* and *piano* for musical ends.

We play Loud or Soft, according to our fancy, or the mood of the music.⁶

Humour a Lesson [composition] by Playing some Sentences Loud and others again Soft, according as they best please your own fancy.⁷

Quantz in his famous flute treatise reminds the reader that in most cases there are no dynamic markings in the original and that it is important that the performer “work out a good scheme of louds and softs.”⁸ But he then continues with a very interesting observation,

²Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*, II, 35.

³Vicenzo Giustiniani, *Discorso sopra la Musica* [c. 1628], trans. Carol MacClintock (American Institute of Musicology, 1962), 67ff.

⁴Domenico Mazzocchi, *Partitura de' madrigali a cinque voice*, Rome, 1638, preface.

⁵W. M. Mylius, *Rudimenta Musices*, Gotha, 1686, 49.

⁶Christopher Simpson, *Division-Violist*, London, 1659, 10.

⁷Thomas Mace, *Musick's Monument*, London, 1676, 130.

⁸Joachim Quantz, *Essay*, Berlin, 1752, XII, 23.

But within these fairly level planes of volume, a constant play of light and shade can keep the dynamic texture alive with interest.

During the nineteenth century performers began to take even more responsibility for issues related to dynamics. We recommend to the reader a very interesting treatise by Jeanne Roudet, *F. Chopin, Clara Schumann and the Singing Piano School*. She points to places where Chopin wrote *Rubato stretto* to indicate an acceleration caused by emotion and observes that in Bellini and Donizetti “accents must sometimes be taken to mean vibrato and surely not as an accent.”

Clearly there is a performance practice regarding the role of *piano* and *forte* which for some reason instrumentalists of our time have lost. At the same time on reflection we realize this is not true at all with singers. Singers, whose music comes from within the body, naturally employ a vast range of dynamics to express their feelings and generally feel the responsibility to ignore the symbols on paper in the greater necessity of the accurate communication their feelings. Indeed, I was amused recently when I had the opportunity to study the autograph score of the opera *Euryante* by von Weber to notice that while he carefully marked dynamic symbols throughout the orchestra, he wrote none at all in the vocal parts. I could feel him thinking, “Why should I waste all this ink writing such symbols in the score when the singers are going to ignore them anyway!”

Before the general adoption of music being written down on paper, instrumentalists must have been for ages untold like singers, creating their own range of dynamics to express themselves and very probably never giving a thought to the substitute goals of “loud” and “soft.”

This presents us with an interesting and important question: How did we instrumentalists lose sight of something so fundamental? Perhaps an important influence was the early organ, which arrived earlier than other instrumentalists in both the performance before audiences in churches, palaces and city halls, but also in the use of written notation. As Joachim Quantz recalled in 1752, at the end of the Baroque, it was still common practice for organists to perform “terrace dynamics,” long stretches at a single level before changing to a long stretch at another level.⁹ Certainly with the association of *forte* with *loud* sound, the point is very striking when, if one is listening to a Baroque performance, the organist hits a lever suddenly opening a dozen small doors above his head causing an immediate blast of loud sound.

We instrumentalists have also been greatly disadvantaged by many modern music education theories which have eliminated the role of the communication of feelings in the classroom to replace it with “conceptual music education theory,” which means primarily teaching only descriptions of the grammar of music and not the performance of music.

In addition to this there has been the futile and anti-musical concept of holding “contests” in music. This has resulted, in the United States, in an ethic by which an ensemble is graded not on the basis of musicality, but on the basis of performing exactly and precisely what appears on paper. *Forte* must be loud, *piano* must be on the border of inaudibility or a demerit is given. No one seems to care if there were any musical purpose to these symbols. Here I must mention an occasion when I was engaged to be the President of the Jury for an international piano contest in Italy. The other ten judges were all famous piano teachers; I was to represent the “general listener.” After a moving and musical performance of a Beethoven Sonata by a pianist from Finland (who, upon a vote of 10 to 1, was thrown out and sent packing) I turned to one of the judges whom I knew, a performing artist from Argentina, and asked him how the entire jury, excepting myself, rejected so musical a performance. “Oh,” he answered in a most matter of fact voice, “piano contests have nothing to do with music!”

⁹Ibid.

Finally, we should like to give an example of the application of the Maxime Principle. Following is the final four bars of the first movement of an original Baroque band composition by Johann Müller.

Figure 1: Concerto da camera XII, Johann Müller, ed. David Whitwell

If you were trained as a conductor as I was, you would look at this music, with its change from *piano* to *forte* on every beat, contemplating the rehearsal time involved to achieve this, not to mention the conducting acrobatics, and you would think to yourself, “No, I will not perform this composition.”

But if one were to view this music through the (Baroque) eyes of the Maxime Principle one would see no *pianos* nor *fortes* at all! Rather one would see repeated chord tones which lean forward slightly with more emotional intensity and then return back with less emotional intensity—a gentle forward back, forward back, etc., with perhaps a ritard. on the final two beats. The result would be a lovely and elegant coda to this movement.