



BEAUTIFUL PIANO TONE – A MATTHAY LEGACY?

Julian Hellaby

Julian Hellaby PhD, MMus, BMus, LRAM, ARAM studied piano with the distinguished pianist Denis Matthews and later at London's Royal Academy of Music. He has performed as a solo pianist, concerto soloist, accompanist and chamber musician in continental Europe, the Middle East, South Africa and throughout the UK, including recitals at the Wigmore Hall and Purcell Room. More recently, in two-piano work with pianist Peter Noke, he has performed across the UK and in Hong Kong and China.

Julian is an examiner for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), a moderator and public presenter, as well as a former mentor for the ABRSM's Certificate of Teaching course. He has taught academic music at Coventry University and London College of Music, and also has extensive experience of adjudicating and piano teaching, including in masterclass settings. He has released several CDs for the ASC and MSV labels, and his book *Reading Musical Interpretation* was published by Ashgate in 2009. His second book, *The Mid-Twentieth-Century Concert Pianist: An English Experience*, was published by Routledge in 2018. He has also written a number of journal articles on piano-related subjects and has contributed to ABRSM's *Piano Teaching Notes*.

Abstract: Beautiful Piano Tone – a Matthay Legacy?

Piano pedagogue Tobias Matthay (1858–1945) was a major influence on English pianism in the first half of the twentieth century. His work emphasised tonal production and the means to achieve a varied and beautiful sound. His influence on English piano playing was, for a time, very considerable.

Matthay's most famous pupil, Myra Hess, was often critically commended for her tone production. This article examines whether beautiful tone was still a characteristic of Matthay's pedagogical descendants during the 1950s and 1960s. It presents results from a series of focus groups comprising expert listeners who were played a selection of recordings, all featuring music of an expressive or lyrical nature which might therefore encourage pianists to engage a 'beautiful' touch. For comparative purposes, half of these recordings were made by Matthay-influenced English pianists, the other half by non-English pianists, and project participants were asked to rate the tonal beauty of the performance on a scale of 0 to 5.

Beautiful Piano Tone – a Matthay Legacy?

Matthay and beautiful piano tone

English piano pedagogue Tobias Matthay (1858–1945) was much concerned with tone production, his magnum opus, *The Act of Touch in All Its Diversity* (1903), being something of a manifesto for this aspect of pianism. The book's repetitiveness, pedantry and prolixity may now seem dated, but the ideas contained in it and in his other treatises that appeared between 1903 and 1913 were hugely influential on English piano playing. Fundamental to his writings was an approach to tone production which emphasized relaxation and the optimal use of the playing mechanisms, thereby enabling tone control to be achieved in a seemingly effortless way. Although the term 'tonal beauty' is rarely used in *The Act of Touch*, it is implicit throughout and occasionally specifically evoked: 'our object being to produce beauty and accuracy of tone, we must be careful to reach the key, *practically without percussion or concussion* [*sic*]; 'beauty of tone depends on our inducing this key-speed as gradually as possible'.¹ The object of this essay is thus to assess perceptions of how successful Matthay was in beneficially influencing the tone production of his descendants and whether his legacy in this regard was a recognisable feature of their playing. Most of the text will be devoted to this but, to place the legacy in a wider context, tonal beauty as heard in early twenty-first-century English pianism will also be considered.

Very few English pianists of the generations following Matthay's publications were untouched by his influence be it direct, as in the cases of Clifford Curzon (1907–1982) and Moura Lympany (1916–2005), or indirect, as in the cases of Denis Matthews (1919–1988) and Valerie Tryon (b.1934). *Primus inter pares* amongst Matthay's immediate pupils was his 'prophetess',² Myra Hess (1890–1965), who commenced her studies with Matthay in 1903 and remained close to him until his death. Significantly, in view of her master's preoccupation with tone production, it was Hess's tonal qualities that often drew laudatory comments from the press. On 26 June, 1954, a *Times* critic described a performance of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, given in London's Royal Festival Hall, as 'dedicated to beautiful tone', and a *Daily Telegraph* review, written on 26 November 1957, for a recital, again given in the Festival Hall, carried as its heading: 'Gentle singing tone'. Moura Lympany, a pupil of the elderly Matthay from 1937–1945, recalled his emphasis on tonal beauty: 'What I really learned from him was how to produce a singing tone, the emphasis being always on beauty of tone and the importance for a performer to strive to produce sounds which are rich, warm and more and more beautiful'.³ In this regard, her reception by the press, like Hess's, drew praise from the critics: 'beautifully limpid tone' noted a *Times* review on 27 September 1954, and Alec Robertson in *Gramophone* observed that, in her recording of Schumann's *Symphonic Studies*, her 'cello tone in the third *étude* ... against a delicate woodwind *staccato* treble is lovely'.⁴

One of Matthay's pupils who went on to have a highly successful teaching career based at London's Royal Academy of Music was Harold Craxton (1885–1971) and it seems that he too was keen to develop a beautiful tone in his students' playing. Former pupil Philip Jenkins comments: 'I'd like to think that that would be a hallmark of his pupils ... he didn't tolerate an ugly sound', adding 'he'd sing a lot in a rather querulous voice ... the examples were so amazingly meaningful and it was all to do with getting a beautiful sound'.⁵ Again, a beautiful tonal quality was heard in the playing of two of Craxton's most distinguished pupils, Denis Matthews and Peter Katin (1930–2015). Of the former, a *Times* critic noted his 'pearly cantabile touch' (08/12/1958) whilst an earlier review in the same newspaper found Peter Katin's touch to be 'the chief of [his] many virtues' (30/01/1956). According to Valerie Tryon, her teacher at the Royal Academy, Eric Grant, a grand-pupil of Matthay, likewise sought tonal

excellence from his pupils. Subsequently, her tone quality was praised by W. A. Chislett who, writing in *Gramophone*, commended her ‘beautiful singing legato’.⁶

So what exactly were these critics hearing and what criteria might they have been using to assess tonal beauty? Each one would have heard the pianist’s sound through his or her own processing mechanisms and would therefore have come to an unavoidably subjective conclusion but, given the amount of overlap there was amongst reviewers with regard to the tonal quality of Matthay’s descendants, there must have been at least some commonality of aesthetic judgment taking place. In order to investigate whether such commonality of aesthetic judgment in mid-twentieth-century England has survived into the early twenty-first century (2016) and whether the perception of tonal beauty within the Matthay lineage has remained with the passage of time, I set up a bespoke exercise, called the ‘tonal beauty project’. Before presenting this, a few words concerning the concept of tonal beauty as it relates to piano playing are in order.

Understanding the concept of tonal beauty

Over the years, there have been many studies concerning piano tone (Askenfelt, 1991; Richardson, 1998; Bresin, Galembo and Goebel, 2004; Bernays and Traube, 2013; Haas, 2017) but most of these are based on the instrument’s acoustical properties and are primarily scientific. Perhaps a little depressingly for pianists, the studies generally conclude that the only means of sound control at a player’s disposal are hammer speed and use of the pedals. If the concept of tone quality is raised at all, there is an attempt to quantify the more measurable areas involved - such as hammer speed, speed of key attack and finger noise; the aesthetic property of beauty is not addressed other than perhaps briefly and in passing. Michel Bernays and Caroline Traube propose a compromise between the scientific and the empirical: ‘this quantified understanding of piano timbre production and control ought to be envisioned as a complement to the empiric body of knowledge that pianists have come to develop’.⁷ Richard Parncutt and Malcolm Troup offer a more humanly-oriented appraisal of piano tone:

Tone quality in piano performance is determined not only by the physics of individual key strokes but also involves a complex and largely intuitive interaction among bodily movements, technical finesse, and musical interpretation. For example, it is possible that the exact timing of a *rubato* melodic phrase affects the global perception of timbre.⁸

However, a scientific approach is not appropriate to a consideration of tonal beauty which is essentially an empirically-based aesthetic construct, not an objective fact. It is a construct that acquires validity through exposure to a body of repertoire and familiarity with performance tradition(s), and is deeply meaningful to a community of cognoscenti, including piano teachers, pianists and dedicated auditors (such as those musicians who regularly listen to recordings of piano music and attend piano recitals). As a construct, beautiful tone is not an absolute but is highly contingent, essentially an aesthetic synthesis that is greater than the sum of its parts. However, before proposing what those parts might be, a few parameters need to be established.

At a fundamental level, it is very unlikely that tonal beauty, as understood by the expert community, will be achieved if the piano is not of top quality, is not in tune or is in a neglected condition.⁹ Likewise it is hard to achieve in an unfavourable acoustic, one that is either very dry or very reverberant. Where recorded performance is concerned, tonal beauty will in some measure depend on the use of sensitive microphones, optimal microphone placement, minimal loss of quality in the reproduction process and high-calibre play-back equipment. All of these last points are conditioned by what is ‘state of the art’ at a particular point in time. For example, even the best electronic recordings produced on shellac in the 1940s and played back on a top-of-the-range 78 rpm gramophone cannot compete in clarity, dynamic range or tonal focus with

a sensitively ‘cleaned-up’ digitised recording, played back on a high-quality CD player through well-adjusted, responsive speakers.

References to the term ‘tonal beauty’ are customarily made when discussing performances of romantic music (in its broadest sense). Examples of this would include Baroque sarabandes or arias, slow movements and lyrical sections of Classical works, most of the more ‘poetic’ music from the Romantic period (for example nocturnes, melodic sections within ballades or programmatic collections) and ‘soft-focused’ twentieth- and twenty-first-century music (such as the more songful Debussy preludes and Poulenc nocturnes, and the miniatures of Howard Skempton). Tonal beauty is very unlikely to be invoked when assessing performances of a virtuoso show-piece such as Liszt’s *Grand galop chromatique* or an aggressive piece such as Bartók’s *Allegro barbaro*. As may be surmised from this, beautiful tone is most typically associated with ‘cantabile’ music, music that is often thought to evoke the analogous sound of the human singing voice. There are other associations too which are best expressed negatively. Generally beautiful tone does not reference extremes of pitch, dynamic, tempo or texture: it is rarely if ever used in connection with the uppermost and lowermost octaves of the piano keyboard but mostly in relation to the range from approximately two octaves below middle C to two octaves above; it is rarely thought to apply to dynamic levels above *fortissimo* or below *pianissimo* where qualities such as ‘thunderous’ or ‘magnificent’, ‘magical’ or ‘whispered’ are more likely ascriptions; it is not primarily associated with very fast or very slow music, performances of which tend to attract epithets such as ‘brilliant’ or ‘mercurial’, ‘lugubrious’ or ‘sonorous’; nor is it usually connected to very dry, detached playing or copiously pedalled impressionistic hazes – although the latter might be described as beautiful if an aesthetic framework of reference is established other than that of ‘cantabile’ or ‘espressivo’ as commonly (romantically) used. Concepts of tonal beauty may thus be thought to occupy an expressive middle-ground. Jerrold Levinson’s definition of beautiful music is ‘music that seduces, charms and gently conquers us – rather than, say, exciting, confronting or challenging us’.¹⁰ It would be an easy extension of this notion to suggest that beautiful piano tone seduces, charms and gently conquers the listener, but does not generally excite, confront or challenge. However, we can aim to be a little more analytical than this.

In consultation with eight other colleagues, a list of elements contributing to tonal beauty was compiled, and there was a strong measure of agreement that tonal beauty is recognised when some or all of the following are operative:

- The hammer hits the string within appropriate speed boundaries – too fast and a hard, percussive sound is produced; too slow and a very thin sound or none at all is produced;
- The sound comes in varying degrees of fullness and avoids special effects (such as playing inside the piano);
- The tone complements the musical style;
- Melody notes demonstrate a relationship to each other – for example, graded dynamics and/or rubato give shape to a musical phrase;
- The tone flows evenly and is free from inappropriate bumps;
- The tonal flow includes a musically-just variety of inflections within and between phrases;
- Textures are clear;
- Balancing of keyboard registers is well judged;
- Melodic voices are sufficiently projected;
- Pedalling supports harmonic progressions and warms the sound as dictated by the style but is not so generous that blurring or harmonic density occurs.

The tonal beauty project

However much one attempts to analyse what makes up beautiful tone, individual reactions to this aspect of a performance remain subjective and thus to arrive at an objectively ‘true’ conclusion as to the beauty of one performance over another is inadmissible. With this in mind, I convened six panels of experts, all of whom were experienced pianists, musicians, teachers and auditors, to listen to a series of recorded performances, half by English pianists from within the Matthay tradition and half by non-English pianists, thus enabling the tonal qualities of each category to be directly compared. Of the listening groups involved, there was one each from three UK conservatoires, where the panels included undergraduate and postgraduate piano students and members of the piano teaching staff. The remaining three panels comprised professional musicians, pianists, piano teachers and students, making an overall total of fifty-five listeners. In order to counter-balance English reactions, which might be more ‘tuned-in’ and responsive to an English, post-Matthay, tonal aesthetic, a number of other nationalities were represented in the groups, including American, Australian, Chinese, Israeli, Japanese, Polish, Russian, South African and Ukrainian. To add to the balance, reactions were also gathered from musicians who are not primarily pianists. Furthermore, participants were drawn from a wide age-range (c. 20 to 74).

After discussions concerning the meaning of tonal beauty (as described above), panel members were asked to rate this aspect of each of the recorded performances by awarding a mark chosen from a scale of 0–5, where 5 meant most beautiful and 0 meant least beautiful. To minimise the potentially distorting effect of a listener’s possible bias in favour of one pianist over another, listening was done ‘blind’ and the names of the pianists were not disclosed until after the exercise was complete. Panellists were played between two and four minutes’ worth of music to enable their hearing to adjust to the differing recording qualities and innate tonal characteristics of the recorded instruments, the aim being that listeners could hear a performer’s piano tone on its own terms rather than in direct comparison to the previous recording. It was important for the project’s validity that, for example, piano tone heard through background hiss was not deemed inferior to piano tone heard without background hiss purely on the grounds of technological deficiency. Participants were asked to filter out background noise aurally and to focus solely on the piano tone – in other words, to listen to the pianist at the piano via the recording.

Panellists were thus prepared for what are commonly thought to be the stages of achieving aesthetic appreciation:

- Aesthetic attitude – ‘specific readiness for, or inclination toward, experience of a certain sort’;¹¹
- Aesthetic attention – ‘aimed ... at having as full and adequate an experience of the object as possible’;¹²
- Aesthetic satisfaction – ‘satisfaction deriving from aesthetic attention to music’;¹³
- Aesthetic experience – an experience that ‘involves aesthetic attention to, and aesthetic satisfaction from, the music. Saying that ... makes it automatic that aesthetic experience is *positive* experience’.¹⁴

Because the tonal beauty project involved formal assessment of aesthetic experiences which had not been autonomously sought, the last two points above need to be revised. In the case of a listener feeling antipathy towards, or just apathy for, the piano sound that s/he is hearing, bullet point three can be rephrased as: ‘Aesthetic response – satisfaction, neutrality or dissatisfaction deriving from aesthetic attention to piano tone’; and bullet point four can be amended to: ‘Aesthetic experience – an experience that involves aesthetic attention to, and

aesthetic satisfaction/neutrality/dissatisfaction, from the piano tone. Aesthetic experience can be positive, neutral or negative’.

Artists and recordings

To return to the central theme of this paper, whether or not tonal beauty can be recognised in the playing of Matthay-influenced English pianists, I selected five subjects who were all at their most active during the middle years of the twentieth century and all of whom were distinguished Matthay descendants: Moura Lympany (1916–2005), Denis Matthews (1919–1988), Peter Katin (1930–2015), Valerie Tryon (b. 1934) and Malcolm Binns (b. 1936). Although all of these pianists were broadly contemporary, they represent the teaching influence of Matthay at one, two and three stages of removal, and their relationship by lineage can be seen in Table 1.

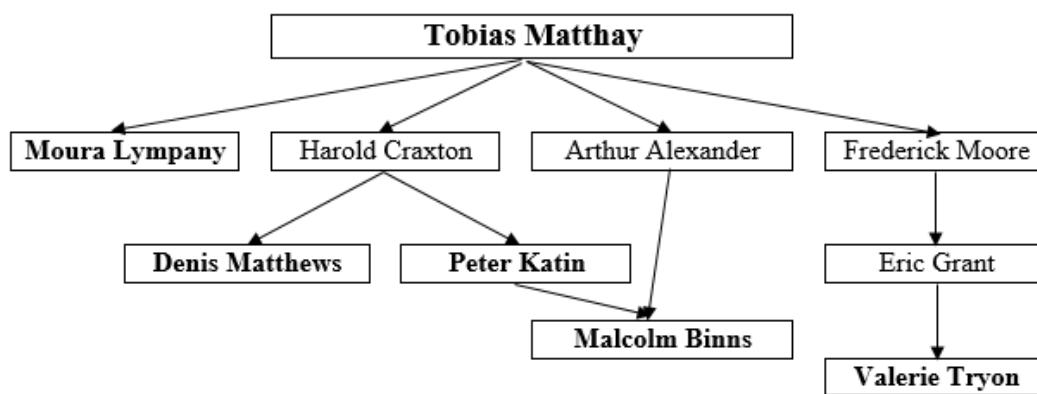


Table 1. Matthay lineage of Malcolm Binns, Peter Katin, Moura Lympany, Denis Matthews and Valerie Tryon

These five pianists thus span various layers of pedagogical transfer and potential dilution, and therefore make interesting subjects wherewith to ascertain whether a Matthay-influenced tone was robust enough to withstand a possible ‘lost in translation’ effect.

For the project, recordings by the above pianists were heard alongside a selection of recordings by non-English artists so that the tonal qualities of pianists from within the Matthay tradition could be assessed and compared with those of pianists from other traditions. Three playlists were chosen (by me) so that all recordings used were analogue and came, where possible, from the 1950s and 1960s. The earliest recording used dated from 1946 (so just prior to the LP era), the latest from 1970. Where CD transfers or Mp3 downloads were available, I used these, where they were not, I made a digital transfer from the LP and edited it myself to clean up the sound as far as the technological means allowed. Further to keep the playing field as level as possible, I used studio recordings because these are usually of better sound quality than transfers of live broadcasts or private recordings of live recitals. One exception to this was a live recording of Vladimir Horowitz which was nonetheless of studio quality sound. I chose sixteen recordings, of which eight were made by my five English subjects and eight by pianists from other nationalities and backgrounds. The latter did not represent any single school of playing and there was no attempt to compare the Matthay tone with that of any other specific tradition.

I made every effort not to load my choices in favour of one group or the other; thus both Matthay and non-Matthay performances were by artists playing repertoire for which they were renowned (for example, Arthur Rubinstein in Chopin, Alicia de Larrocha in Granados). The

repertoire was selected for its innately song-like character so as to highlight specifically those tonal qualities customarily associated with beauty, and all pianists were heard in solo music, the piano tone being thus unmoderated by any other instrumental timbre. To avoid a recognisable pattern, such as alternating English with non-English pianists, the ordering of the tracks was irregular, and participants were informed of this.

Tables 2, 3 and 4 show the recordings that were used in the project. Playlist 1 was heard by the first three groups, Playlist 2 by groups four and five, and Playlist 3, a ‘mix-and-match’ selection omitting the lower-scoring performances from the first two, was heard by group six. Use of a wide range of recordings and a wide range of non-English pianists added extra scope and strength to the project’s findings, and pitting the higher-scoring performances from the groups of English and non-English pianists against each other was useful in determining whether a lead (if any) evident in Playlists 1 and 2, was maintained when this extra competitive edge was added.

Once the exercises were complete, results were collated in a number of ways to find out:

1. Which group (Matthay or non-Matthay) gained the higher overall mark;
2. Which pianist/s gained the highest individual mark;
3. Whether the marking from English-trained markers for Matthay pianists, possibly intuiting an English ‘sound’, was more or less generous than from non-English. (Data for this was available from five of the groups);
4. Whether recordings with significant background noise had attracted lower marks than those without.

Order	Title of composition	Composer	Pianist	Date of recording
1	Prelude in E-flat minor, Forty-eight Preludes and Fugues, Book 1	J. S. Bach	Denis Matthews	1949
2	Sonata in C minor Op.13, ii) Adagio sostenuto	L. van Beethoven	Wilhelm Kempff	1956
3	‘Rigoletto’ Paraphrase	F. Liszt	Peter Katin	1954
4	Ballade	C. Debussy	Malcolm Binns	1962
5	Sonata in F K332, i) Allegro	W. A. Mozart	Lili Kraus	1954
6	‘Moments musicaux’, ii) Andantino	F. Schubert	Edwin Fischer	1950
7	Nocturne in B major Op.62/1	F. Chopin	Moura Lympany	c. 1961
8	Romance in F-sharp Op.28/2	R. Schumann	Valerie Tryon	c. 1970
9	Ballade No.1 in G minor Op.23	F. Chopin	Arthur Rubinstein	1959
10	Poème in F-sharp Op.32/1	A. Scriabin	Heinrich Neuhaus	1953
11	Sonata in B-flat K333, i) Allegro	W. A. Mozart	Denis Matthews	1959
12	Prelude in E major, Forty-eight Preludes and Fugues, Book 1	J. S. Bach	Rosalyn Tureck	1953
13	‘La fille aux cheveux de lin’	C. Debussy	Walter Gieseking	1953
14	Nocturne in D-flat Op.27/2	F. Chopin	Peter Katin	1956
15	‘Quejas, o La Maja y el ruiseñor’	E. Granados	Alicia de Larrocha	1965
16	Prelude in G Op.32/5	S. Rachmaninoff	Moura Lympany	1951

Table 2. First playlist used for the tonal beauty project (mid-twentieth-century pianists)

Order	Title of composition	Composer	Pianist	Date of recording
1	Sonata No.1 in F-sharp minor Op.11, ii) Aria	R. Schumann	Malcolm Binns	1964
2	Sonata in F HobXVI/23, ii) Adagio	J. Haydn	Vladimir Horowitz	1966
3	Sonata in C minor Op.13, ii) Adagio sostenuto	L. v. Beethoven	Annie Fischer	1958
4	Sonata in B minor Kp27	D. Scarlatti	Emil Gilels	1955
5	Sonata in E Op.109 iii) Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo	L. v. Beethoven	Denis Matthews	1946
6	Tango Op.165/2	I. Albeniz arr. L. Godowsky	Moura Lympany	1952
7	'Jeunes filles aux jardin'	F. Mompou	Guiomar Novaes	1946
8	Liebestraum, Nocturne No.3	F. Liszt	Valerie Tryon	c. 1970
9	Nocturne in F-sharp, Op.15/2	F. Chopin	Peter Katin	1955
10	Intermezzo in A major Op.118/2	J. Brahms	Wilhelm Backhaus	1956
11	'On Wings of Song'	F. Mendelssohn arr. F. Liszt	Julius Katchen	1953
12	Sonata in B-flat K333, iii) Allegretto grazioso	W. A. Mozart	Denis Matthews	1959
13	Etude in E-flat minor Op.10/6	F. Chopin	Claudio Arrau	1956
14	'Bruyères'	C. Debussy	Albert Ferber	1953
15	Prelude in D Op.23/4	S. Rachmaninoff	Peter Katin	1970
16	'Quejas, o La Maja y el ruiseñor'	E. Granados	Moura Lympany	1952

Table 3. Second playlist used for the tonal beauty project (mid-twentieth-century pianists)

Order	Title of composition	Composer	Pianist	Date of recording
1	Sonata in F HobXVI/23 ii) Adagio	J. Haydn	Vladimir Horowitz	1966
2	Sonata in C minor Op.13 ii) Adagio sostenuto	L. v. Beethoven	Wilhelm Kempff	1956
3	'Rigoletto' paraphrase	F. Liszt	Peter Katin	1954
4	Ballade	Debussy	Malcolm Binns	1962
5	Sonata in F K332, i) Allegro	W. A. Mozart	Lili Kraus	1954
6	'Moments musicaux', ii) Andantino	F. Schubert	Edwin Fischer	1950
7	Tango Op.165/2	I. Albeniz arr. L. Godowsky	Moura Lympany	1952
8	'Quejas, o La Maja y el ruiseñor'	E. Granados	Alicia de Larrocha	1965
9	Sonata in B-flat K333, i) Allegro	W. A. Mozart	Denis Matthews	1959
10	Romance in F-sharp Op.28/2	R. Schumann	Valerie Tryon	c. 1970
11	Poème in F-sharp Op.32/1	A. Scriabin	Heinrich Neuhaus	1953
12	Prelude in E major, Forty-eight Preludes and Fugues, Book 1	J. S. Bach	Rosalyn Tureck	1953
13	Sonata in B-flat K333, iii) Allegretto grazioso	W. A. Mozart	Denis Matthews	1959
14	Nocturne in D-flat Op.27/2	F. Chopin	Peter Katin	1956
15	'Jeunes filles aux jardin'	F. Mompou	Guiomar Novaes	1946
16	'Quejas, o La Maja y el ruiseñor'	E. Granados	Moura Lympany	1952

Table 4. Third playlist used for the tonal beauty project – a combination of higher scoring recordings drawn from playlists one and two (mid-twentieth-century recordings)

Outcomes and conclusions

When all the data had been collated, the results were as follows:

1. From all six focus groups, the Matthay pianists emerged with a higher mark than the non-Matthay pianists. The overall marks when totals from each focus group were added together were 1,632 for the Matthay pianists and 1,414 for the non-Matthay (out of a possible maximum of 2,160), giving the Matthay group a lead of 7.96%. The average marks for each group were Matthay: 3.78 and non-Matthay: 3.17.
2. The highest individual score went to Denis Matthews for his recording of the first movement of Mozart's Sonata in B-flat K333, which gained an average mark of 4.11; next came Peter Katin for his recording of the *Rigoletto* Paraphrase, which gained an average mark of 4.08; and in third place was Malcolm Binns for his recording of Debussy's Ballade, the average mark being 4.05. The highest scoring non-Matthay pianist was Heinrich Neuhaus, whose average mark was 4.03 (or, more precisely, 4.027) for his recording of Scriabin's *Poème* Op.32/1.
3. The average mark for Matthay pianists from English-trained markers was slightly higher than that from non-English-trained markers: 3.77 as opposed to 3.71, but both these averages were significantly higher than those for the non-Matthay pianists: 3.14 from English-trained markers, 3.24 from non-English-trained markers. Of the 54 markers,¹⁵ 30 were English-trained and 24 were not.
4. There was no tendency for recordings with background noise to attract lower marks than those without. For example, Malcolm Binns' recording of the Debussy Ballade, a 'budget' LP recording (by Saga) digitised by me and retaining a significant amount of surface noise plus a few small scratches, gained an average mark of 4.05 (as shown above), and Denis Matthews' 1946 recording of Beethoven's Sonata in E (3rd movement extract), a shellac-to-CD transfer with a narrow dynamic range and consistent background hiss, gained an average mark of 3.65. By contrast Alicia de Larrocha's good quality CD transfer of her LP recording of Granados' 'Quejas ó La Maja y El Ruiseñor' achieved an average of 3.35 and (surprisingly, perhaps) Claudio Arrau's cleaned-up CD transfer of his LP recording of Chopin's Study in E-flat minor Op.10/6 attracted an average of just 2.71.

Outcome number 2 is interesting because it suggests that Harold Craxton's insistence on a beautiful sound was indeed reflected in his pupils' performances, given its recognition in Denis Matthews' and Peter Katin's recordings by a wide variety of listeners, many of whom have no connection to either Craxton or Matthay. Outcome number 3 indicates a very slight bias on the part of the English-trained markers in favour of the post-Matthay English sound. However, the inflation is only 1.6%, and, given that both sets of markers had the Matthay pianists on significantly higher averages than their non-Matthay colleagues, the overall result does not appear to have been distorted in any significant way. The last outcome can be dealt with swiftly, in that no positive or negative relationship to the quality of the recorded sound was apparent.

Outcome Number 1 is of the most relevance to this study because it indicates that tonal beauty was heard as a characteristic of post-Matthay English pianism during the years under discussion. It would, of course, be unwise to insist that the project's outcome, based as it is on sampling and opinion, actually *proves* anything, especially as there were significant internal inconsistencies in participants' marking patterns. It certainly does not prove that the piano tone of Matthay-trained pianists was superior to that of pianists from other traditions, especially as the representatives of the Matthay school were not specifically pitted against those of any other national school. Had they been compared exclusively with, say, French- or Russian-trained pianists, the outcomes could well have been very different. Nevertheless, it is now possible to

propose that beautiful piano tone, as understood by a relevant community of experts, can still be recognised, albeit in varying degrees, in the playing of mid-twentieth-century English pianists of the Matthey tradition.

Tonal beauty and the twenty-first century

So, if tonal beauty was a characteristic of the post-Matthey English pianists in the middle years of the last century, the question arises as to whether this can still be heard in early twenty-first-century English pianism. To ascertain whether this might be the case, I extended the project described above to include recordings made much more recently. I selected two playlists of eight recorded samples, each of which were heard by five of the focus groups (comprising 46 markers). Half of the samples were played by distinguished, currently busy, English pianists, the other half by non-English artists, and all dated from after 2000. As with the vintage pianists, the final focus group heard a playlist featuring the higher-scoring performances from the previous two lists. In order to by-pass undue technological manipulation of the piano sound via such means as equalization or reverb addition, I avoided using CD recordings and used only live concert or studio performances as heard on YouTube. These had nonetheless been well recorded in a good acoustic and the piano sound was unaffected by distortion. Otherwise, criteria for choice and assessment methods were as before.

Tables 5, 6 and 7 show what pieces were included in the three playlists, whether the pianist was English or non-English, and in what order the pieces were heard.

Order	Title of composition	Composer	Pianist (English or non-English)
1	Romance in F-sharp Op.28/2	R. Schumann	Non-English
2	Hungarian Melody in B minor D817	F. Schubert	English
3	Impromptu in G-flat D899/3	F. Schubert	Non-English
4	Nocturne in F-sharp Op.15/2	F. Chopin	English
5	'Jeunes filles au jardin'	F. Mompou	English
6	Sonata in G D894, i) Molto moderato e cantabile	F. Schubert	English
7	Prelude in B minor Op.32/10	S. Rachmaninoff	Non-English
8	Mélodie	C. W. Gluck arr. G. Sgambati	Non-English

Table 5. First playlist used for the tonal beauty project (post-2000 recordings)

Order	Title of composition	Composer	Pianist (English or non-English)
1	Prelude in B-flat minor, Forty-Eight Preludes and Fugues, Book 2	J. S. Bach	Non-English
2	Arabesque Op.18	R. Schumann	English
3	Sechs kleine klavierstücke Op19 i) Leicht, zart ii) Langsam	A. Schönberg	English
4	Impromptu in G-flat D899/3	F. Schubert	Non-English
5	Nocturne in C-sharp minor Op.19/4	P. Tchaikovsky	Non-English
6	Sonata in C Op.2/3 ii) Adagio	L. v. Beethoven	Non-English
7	Prelude in G Op.32/5	S. Rachmaninoff	English
8	Piano Sonata, iii) Adagio mesto	S. Barber	English

Table 6. Second playlist used for the tonal beauty project (post-2000 recordings)

Order	Title of composition	Composer	Pianist (English or non-English)
1	'Jeunes filles au jardin'	F. Mompou	English
2	Sechs kleine klavierstücke Op19 i) Leicht, zart ii) Langsam	A. Schönberg	English
3	Impromptu in G-flat D899/3	F. Schubert	Non-English
4	Nocturne in F-sharp Op.15/2	F. Chopin	English
5	Nocturne in C-sharp minor Op.19/4	P. Tchaikovsky	Non-English
6	Sonata in C Op.2/3 ii) Adagio	L. v. Beethoven	Non-English
7	Prelude in G Op.32/5	S. Rachmaninoff	English
8	Mélodie	C. W. Gluck arr. G. Sgambati	Non-English

Table 7. Third playlist used for the tonal beauty project – a combination of higher scoring recordings drawn from playlists one and two (post-2000 recordings)

Analysis of the numerical outcomes was carried out as described earlier and this time the results were:

1. The English group of pianists emerged with a slightly lower mark overall than the group of non-English. The overall marks when group totals were added together was 659 for the English pianists and 681 for the others (out of a possible maximum of 920) giving the non-English group a lead of 2.22%. The average marks for each group were English: 3.58 and non-English: 3.74.
2. The highest individual score went to a Southern European pianist whose performance gained an average mark of 4.1; next came a Far Eastern pianist who attracted an average mark of 4.06; and in third place was a Central European player in a performance which gained an average mark of 4. The highest scoring English pianists were jointly on an average of 3.87.
3. The average mark for non-English pianists from English-trained markers was lower than that from non-English-trained markers: 3.56 as opposed to 3.84. However, the non-English-trained markers also awarded a slightly higher mark to the English pianists than their English-trained colleagues: 3.58 to 3.56, suggesting that in this instance, the English markers were typically the less generous of the two groups. Of the 46 markers, 24 were English-trained and 22 were not.

The fourth area of enquiry with regard to the vintage performances, that is whether recording quality may be thought to have affected the marking, was not relevant in this case as the recording quality was, in all cases, of a similar standard.

As with the results of the tonal beauty project regarding the group of vintage pianists, it is hard to draw any firm conclusions from such a relatively limited sampling exercise. However, there was considerable consistency across the five focus groups, with only one showing a slight preference for the English pianists' piano tone, all the rest preferring the non-English sound. Interestingly the English-trained markers overall showed no preference for either group of pianists, so it was the non-English-trained markers who gave the non-English pianists their slight lead. Nevertheless, given that the English-trained markers awarded significantly higher marks to the vintage English pianists than to the vintage non-English, both groups of markers demonstrated a downward trend in their ranking of English piano tone. There is therefore some evidence that a subtle change in tone production amongst English pianists has occurred. So why might this be the case?

A changing pedagogical and performance landscape

Tobias Matthay is a figure who is now studied by historians and musicologists but is almost never invoked in current pedagogy, even though some of his ideas, such as arm-weight and forearm rotation, have become embedded in English piano teaching. However, with the waning of Matthay's influence on pedagogy, there has been a concomitant rise in international input. An examination of piano staff lists for the Royal Academy of Music (RAM), Royal College of Music (RCM) and Royal Manchester College of Music, now the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM), in the late 1940s shows an overwhelmingly British presence, Australian Max Pirani, Russian Iso Elinson and German Hedwig Stein, being rare exceptions. This insularity is more-or-less matched by the pedagogical experience of the five Matthay descendants mentioned above, most of whom had no teachers outside the UK. Admittedly Moura Lympany's earliest teacher (apart from her mother) was a Belgian nun but her other principal teachers, Ambrose Coviello,¹⁶ Mathilde Verne and Tobias Matthay, were all UK-based.¹⁷ Malcolm Binns, Peter Katin¹⁸ and Denis Matthews went only to English teachers firmly within the Matthay tradition as did Valerie Tryon, although she did later study with Jacques Février

whose concept of tonal beauty, according to Tryon, was the same as that of her teacher at the RAM, Eric Grant.

By contrast, in recent years, piano staff and visiting professors at the RAM, RCM and RNCM have presented a rather more ethnically diverse profile, with a fairly significant Russian presence. Both Vanessa Latache, Head of Keyboard at the RCM, and Graham Scott, Head of the School of Keyboard Studies at the RNCM, feel that national traditions have become more mixed,¹⁹ and Christopher Elton, former Head of Piano at the RAM, likewise believes that ‘there isn’t the same sense of schools in piano playing that there was fifty years ago ... they’re much more blurred at the edges’.²⁰ Current Head of piano at the RAM, Joanna MacGregor, thinks that the Academy’s system – and the English one generally – whereby students are assigned to a particular piano teacher but are encouraged to avail themselves of opportunities of playing to visiting professors, including those from overseas, or of playing to each other’s teachers strengthens the students’ international and cultural outlook.²¹ If one examines the pedagogical background of several currently active English pianists, the figure of Matthay is not entirely absent but it is very distant and is eclipsed by a range of more recent influences. For example, Ashley Wass’s teacher at Chetham’s School of Music was David Hartigan, a pupil of Polish émigré Derek Wyndham, and also of Neuhaus pupil Ryszard Bakst and, later, Austrian pianist Walter Klien. Wass also studied with Maria Curcio, a Schnabel pupil, his only distant Matthay connection being his studies at the RAM with Hamish Milne and Christopher Elton, respectively a grand-pupil and great grand-pupil of Matthay. Paul Lewis has a very tenuous link through his teacher at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Joan Havill, a pupil of Cyril Smith, himself a student of Herbert Fryer, the latter’s principal teachers being Matthay and Busoni. On the other hand, Stephen Hough relates that one of his teachers ‘[Gordon] Green was a student of Frank Merrick and Egon Petri’ and that another ‘Derrick Wyndham [was] a student of Moriz Rosenthal and Artur Schnabel’, thus showing no link to Matthay at all.²²

A less clear-cut distinction between national schools of playing has seemingly been brought about by a process of cross-fertilisation through the wider dissemination and journeying of contrasting pedagogical approaches. If a brief comparison is made between some of Matthay’s ideas and those of Josef Lhévinne, an important twentieth-century representative of the Russian school – which, as noted above, has in recent years had a significant influence in UK pedagogy – differing notions emerge. For example, a late-nineteenth-century Moscow-trained physical engagement with the keyboard, as described by Lhévinne, diverges from that advocated by Matthay (although there are also overlaps). Lhévinne believed that finger movement should come from the metacarpal joint, the one that connects the finger to the hand, and that wrist flexibility means that wrists may drop ‘below the level of the keyboard’ when descending and that ‘raising or dropping the wrist’ would subsequently occur ‘according to the design of the melody’.²³ By contrast, Matthay assigned positions of the first two finger joints according to whether a ‘clinging’ or ‘thrusting’ touch is required, and explained how a wrist that ‘*is placed [sic]* in a “dropped” or low position, is no more necessarily in an unrestrained condition, than if it were placed high or midway between either extreme ... the wrist is not truly free unless it is so not only vertically, but also horizontally and rotarily’.²⁴ If Matthay’s prescriptions, such as the ones just cited, contributed to the development of a recognisably English sound, then this sound has subsequently been modified by other methods of tone production (such as the Russian one just described) and has consequently become absorbed into a pianistic mainstream, perhaps losing something of its individuality in the process. Thus the increasing growth of international influences during the latter years of the twentieth century and beyond presents itself as a potentially important factor in the apparent adjustment of the English tonal aesthetic perceived by the focus groups.

In response to a questionnaire, fifteen eminent UK-based piano teachers indicated that they give at least some priority, in many cases a very high priority, to good tone production, which indicates that there has been as much pedagogical interest in the subject during more recent years as there was in Matthay's time. However, since the means to achieve tonal beauty no longer originate from a single source, and pedagogical influences have become more heterogeneous, a loss of particularity is more-or-less inevitable. Which is not to say that a more synthetic means of producing piano tone, drawing on many methods (not just Russian and English) has had a detrimental effect – after all, the English pianists' average mark in the post-2000 group came out only 2.8% below their vintage counterparts' and, given the relatively limited scope of both exercises, the difference is not very remarkable. As with all dialectical processes, there is both gain and loss, and the tonal coalescence that may now be heard in early twenty-first-century piano playing, whilst tending to global conformity, overall shows no waning of artistic aspiration or decentralising of tonal beauty where the latter is desirable.

Bibliography

- Askenfelt, Anders, 'Measuring the motion of the piano hammer during string contact' in *Dept. for Speech, Music and Hearing: Quarterly Progress and Status Report*. 32/4/1991, pp. 19–34
- Bernays, Michel and Caroline Traube, 'Expressive Production of Piano Timbre: Touch and Playing Techniques for Timbre Control in Piano Performance', *10th Sound and Music Computing Conference*, Stockholm, August 2013
- Brendel, Alfred, *Musical Thoughts and Afterthoughts*, (London: Robson Books, 1976)
- Bresin, Roberto with Alexander Galembo and Werner Goebel, 'Once again: The perception of piano touch and tone. Can touch audibly change piano sound independently of intensity?' *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Musical Acoustics*, March 31st to April 3rd 2004, (ISMA2004), Nara, Japan
- Chislett, W. A., 'These You Have Loved/Tryon'. *Gramophone* (July 1971), p. 243
- Grindea, Carola, *Great Pianists and Pedagogues in Conversation with Carola Grindea*, (London: Kahn and Averil, 2007)
- Haas, Miha, 'Tone Colours on the Piano: Acoustic Predisposition or Contextual Illusion' in *EPTA Piano Journal* 112/2017: 18–22
- Kettle, Martin, 'Why are Today's Concert Pianists so Boring?', *The Guardian*, 05/09/2002
- Leech-Wilkinson, Daniel, *The Changing Sound of Music: Approaches to Studying Recorded Musical Performance* www.charm.kcl.ac.uk/studies/chapters/chap1.html (London: CHARM, 2009)
- Levinson, Jerrold, *Musical Concerns*, (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)
- Lhévinne, Josef, *Basic Principles in Pianoforte Playing*, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1972 [1924])
- Lympany, Moura and Margot Strickland, *Moura*, (London & Chester Springs PA: Peter Owen, 1991)
- Matthay, Tobias, *The Act of Touch in All Its Diversity*, (London, New York, Bombay & Calcutta: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914 [1903])
- McKenna, Marian, (1976) *Myra Hess*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976)
- Parncutt, Richard and Malcolm Troup, 'Piano' in R. Parncutt and G. McPherson, eds, *The Science and Psychology of Music Performance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)
- Richardson, Bernard, 'The Acoustics of the Piano' in D. Rowland, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Piano*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)
- Robertson, Alec, 'Schumann/Symphonic Studies/Lympany'. *Gramophone* (January 1951), pp. 175–176
- Schonberg, Harold, *The Great Pianists*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987 [1963])
- Siek, Stephen, *England's Piano Sage*, (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2012)

Newspaper reviews cited (in chronological order)

- The Times, 26/06/1954
 The Times, 27/09/1954
 The Times, 30/01/1956
 The Daily Telegraph, 26/11/1957
 The Times, 08/12/1958

-
- ¹ Tobias Matthay, *The Act of Touch in all its Diversity*, (London, New York, Bombay & Calcutta: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914 [1903]), pp. 125-6 & 316
- ² Moura Lympny and Margaret Strickland, *Moura*, (London Chester Springs PA: Peter Owen, 1991), p.51
- ³ Carola Grindea, *Great Pianists and Pedagogues in Conversation with Carola Grindea*, (London: Kahn and Averil, 2007), p. 211
- ⁴ Alec Robertson, 'Schumann/Symphonic Studies /Lympny', *Gramophone*, January 1951, pp. 175–176
- ⁵ From a personal interview, 08/09/2015
- ⁶ W. A. Chislett, 'These You Have Loved/Tryon', *Gramophone*, July 1971, p. 243
- ⁷ Michel Bernays and Caroline Traube, 'Expressive Production of Piano Timbre: Touch and Playing Techniques for Timbre Control in Piano Performance', *10th Sound and Music Computing Conference*, Stockholm, August 2013, pp. 245-6
- ⁸ Richard Parncutt and Malcolm Troup, 'Piano' in Parncutt and McPherson, eds, *The Science and Psychology of Music Performance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 290
- ⁹ In this connection, Alfred Brendel writes:
[t]o 'carry the day' on a badly regulated, unequally registered, faultily voiced, dull or noisy instrument implies as often as not that one has violated the music for which one is responsible, that control and refinement have been pushed aside ... and a dubious sort of mystique has taken over, far removed from the effect the piece should legitimately produce.
[Alfred Brendel, *Musical Thoughts and Afterthoughts*, (London: Robson Books, 1976), p. 129]
- ¹⁰ Jerrold Levinson, *Musical Concerns*, (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 59
- ¹¹ Levinson, op.cit., p. 20
- ¹² Levinson, p.21
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ As stated above, there were 55 markers altogether, but one of the completed score sheets was unusable.
- ¹⁶ Despite his Italian-sounding name, Coviello was an English native and 'an ardent admirer' of Matthay. [Stephen Siek, *England's Piano Sage*, (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2012), p.259]
- ¹⁷ During her career, Lympny studied with a number of teachers. Between her time with Coviello and Verne, she studied with Paul Weingarten in Vienna for about nine months and, after Matthay's death, she took lessons from Eduard Steuermann and Ilona Kabos. If the word count allotted to her various teachers in her autobiography is any guide, it seems that the ones who made the most impression on her were Verne, Kabos and, in particular, Matthay. Her lessons with Kabos occurred much later in life when she was recovering from a loss of confidence.
- ¹⁸ Peter Katin did play to Claudio Arrau, but cannot be considered to have been a pupil as the term is normally understood.
- ¹⁹ Personal interviews with Vanessa Latache, 15/08/2016, and Graham Scott, 26/08/2016
- ²⁰ Personal interview with Christophe Elton, 23/09/2016
- ²¹ Personal interview with Joanna MacGregor, 13/10/2016
- ²² Personal communication with Stephen Hough, 19/11/2016
- ²³ Josef Lhévinne, *Basic Principles in Pianoforte Playing*. (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1972 [1924]), pp. 21 and 22
- ²⁴ Matthay, op. cit., p. 328