

European Piano Schools: Russian, German and French classical piano interpretation and technique

ABSTRACT

The goal of this research is to characterize representative performances by famous pianists in order to determine main influential trends in performance, derived specifically from traditional piano practices referred to as National Piano Schools.

Previous research (Lourenço, 2005, 2007) has shown strong musical correlation of particular characteristics, namely the aesthetic, the technical, the historic and the repertoire. The concept of piano interpretation school is a useful concept for analyzing the universe of piano performance. Piano pedagogy literature of each European National Piano School has been analyzed together with an empirical audio analysis of recordings through a check-list survey. Overall the main National Piano Schools consist of three essential branches: the Russian school; the German school; the French school.

The identification of National Piano Schools provides a powerful framework of study and an awareness of Europe's elusive music heritage and its main influences.

Furthermore, as pianists use their whole body to enhance their communication of the music's spiritual, emotional and dramatic essence, this study also aims to contribute into research on performance practice.

Keywords: European Piano Schools, Typology Russian, German, French Piano Schools

1 | Introduction

Almost every pianist is satisfied with his musicality, but not with his technique.

Margulis, 2006

In the beginning of the twentieth century performers and audiences were used to versatile piano practices originated from distinct nationalities and

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generations. Several studies have shown that it is possible to identify major trends in piano performance. These are generally referred to as National Piano Schools, due to its strong correlation to particular characteristics, which seem to share common features within communities of practitioners. Facets such as aesthetics, technique, historical tradition and chosen repertoire have been studied by several researchers (Neuhaus, 1981; Kullak, 1994; Leimer & Giesecking, 1998; Timbrell, 1999; Lourenço, 2005). Overall the main National Piano Schools consist of three essential branches: the Russian school, the French school and the German school (Kaiser, 1989; Rattalino, 2001). It is acknowledged that these National Piano Schools are present in most of the piano performance practices in the twentieth century and therefore its identification provides a powerful framework to study, understand and raise awareness of the Europe's intangible music heritage.

The coexistence of different tendencies in the tradition of interpretation and technique of classical piano is clear. It is common the designation of "Russian School", "German School", "Russian Technique", in terms of defining a certain tradition approach. These descriptions concern preference for general and specific repertoire, characteristic sonority, tempo, use of pedal, different piano constructors, pedagogical methods, technical-interpretation approaches (use of *rubato*, polyphonic clearness, etc.). The concept of piano interpretation school needs to be questioned and discussed, in an effort of analytical systematization and also as a result of the subjectiveness, possible within the bounds of the work of art. Being common the designation of "Russian School", "German School", "Russian Technique", in terms of definition of a certain approach tradition of the general and specific repertoire, characteristic sonority, beloved repertoire, tempo, use of pedal, different piano constructors, pedagogical methods, technical-interpretation approaches (use of *rubato*,

polyphonic clearness, etc.), the concept of piano interpretation school needs to be questioned and discussed, in an effort of analytical systematization but also as a result of the subjective element, possible within the bounds of the work of art. Still concerning the piano interpretation school, the privileged relationship master-student (oral tradition of the individual lesson), through the transmitting of certain performing approaches and repertoire selections and through technical resources can support the definition of a certain piano interpretation school. There will be a final proposition about this concept, mainly making it more flexible.

The performing art of music is directly connected to the notation limitation on the score, and also to the work itself. About musical interpretation on the piano, and as Adolph Kullak proposes, *Denken und Forschen – das Werk in allen seinen Atomen studieren – alle Schönheitselemente auf bewußtes wissenschaftliches Erkennen zurückführen – dies ist die Aufgabe* (Reflection and Research – get to analyse the musical work in every atom (its smallest elements) – to look for each one of the beauty elements in an organised way – this is the main task) (Kullak, 1876). In that sense we may state that the musical text doesn't always clarify what is essential – it is this that a performer shall take out from the score and respective notation.

2 | Method

The components of expressive performance intend to work as analysis criteria of the various audio examples of piano interpretations by many pianists representing the various piano schools. The selection of the main representative tendencies, their comparison and consequent definition of “piano school” will be based on: repertoire, dynamics, agogic patterning, tempo, phrasing and articulation, accents, pedal, textures.

The methodology in order to obtain a Typology of National Interpretation Piano Schools applies a check-list survey according to different musical interpretation components.

The historical and theoretical context on which the schools are set will be discussed. Once analysed, it is possible to get to conclusions and objectives; applying the same check-list, and despite the difficulties, to look for the individuality of each piano interpretation schools. Available recordings by 19 mainstream piano works by 29 pianists who started their piano careers prior to 1950 were analysed. Following are the chosen 19 mainstream piano works:

D. Scarlatti (1685-1757), Sonata K 322 A Major; J. S. Bach (1685-1750), Prelude and Fugue C Major BWV 846; Haydn Franz Joseph (1732-1809), E-Flat Major Sonata, Hob. XVI/49; Mozart W. A. (1756-1791)

Fantasie c-minor KV 475; Beethoven L. v. (1770-1827) Sonata n. 23 f minor op.57 “Appassionata”; Schubert F. (1797-1828), Impromptu op. 90 n°3 G flat Major; Chopin F. (1810-1849), Nocturne in F sharp Major op. 15 n. 2; Chopin F. (1810-1849), Ballade in g minor op. 23 n. 1; Schumann R. (1810-1856), C-Dur Fantasie op.17; Liszt F. (1811-1886), Sonata in h minor; Brahms J. (1833-1897) Variations on a theme by Paganini op. 35; Moussorgsky M. (1839-1881) Pictures of an Exhibition; Albéniz I. (1860-1909), Evocación (Iberia); Debussy C. (1862-1918), La Cathédrale engloutie; Scriabin A. (1872-1915), Poème in F sharp Major op.32 n. 1; Rachmaninoff S. (1873-1943), Étude-Tableaux op. 39 n. 6; Ravel M. (1875-1937), Gaspard de la nuit; Prokofieff S. (1891-1953) Visions fugitives op.22 .

The chosen pianists were Arrau (1903-1991), Backhaus (1884-1969), Busoni (1866-1824), Casadesus (1899-1972), Ciccolini, Aldo (1925), Cortot (1877-1962), Jeanne-Marie Darré (1905-1999), Feinberg (1890-1962), Fischer (1886-1960), Samson François (1924-1970), Giesecking (1895-1956), Gilels (1916-1985), Clara Haskil (1895-1960), Ingrid Haebler (1929) Josef Hofmann (1876-1957), Horowitz (1904-1989), Kempff (1895-1991), Alicia de Larrocha (1923-2009), Vitaly Margulis (1926), Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli (1920-1995), Paderewsky (1860-1941), Perlemuter (1904-2002), Egon Petri (1881-1962), Rachmaninov (1924-1970), Richter (1915-1998), Artur Rubinstein (1889-1982), Schnabel (1882-1951), Alexander Scriabin (1892-1915), Vladimir Sofronitzky (1901-1961). As discussed in the Literature Review, several piano studies have shown that it is possible to characterize the major trends in musical performance, making it possible to identify three major National Piano Schools: the German, the French and the Russian Schools.

Practitioners of each one of these Piano Schools seem to share common features related to stylistic parameters, such as tempo, dynamics (loudness), articulation, phrasing, among many others. In fact, a musical performance is more than a literal reproduction of a musical score. If played exactly as notated in the musical score, a piece of music would sound mechanical and expressionless becoming both unmusical and physically impossible for a musician to perform. What makes a piece of music come alive (and what makes some performers and playing styles unique) is the art of music interpretation. In fact the unlimited resources for vocal and instrumental art lie in artistic deviation from the pure, the exact, the perfect, the rigid, the even, and the precise (quoted in H.G. Seashore, 1937).

Therefore, the notated music score is but a small part of the actual music performing process. Not every intended gradation can be captured in a limited formalism such as common music notation, and

the composers are well aware of this. The performing artist is a determinative part of the system, and expressive music performance plays a central role in the European musical culture. Musicological research has gradually started to focus on (empirical) aspects of expressive performance, since in the past the vast majority of music research dealt with formal theories.

3 | Materials and Procedure

For this research, three recordings of the 1st movement of Beethoven's Sonata op. 57, Appassionata (specifically bars 1-50, which included Exposition-first and second themes) by Vladimir Sofronitzky, Edwin Fischer and Robert Casadesus were used. Example 1. Beethoven, Sonata op. 57. Appassionata, first movement: first theme (bars 1-9)

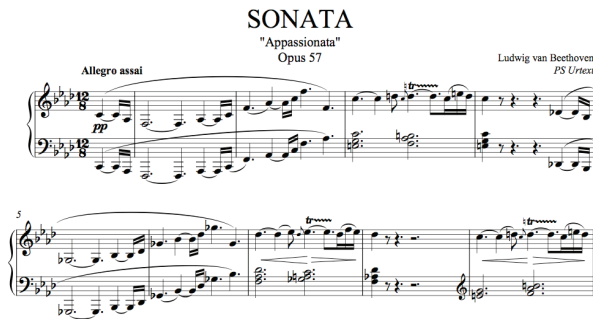


Figure 1. Beethoven, Sonata op. 57. Appassionata, first movement: first theme (bars 1-9)

The following recordings are to be used as short demonstration of the methodology applied to the extensive check-list survey: Sofronitzky (1901-1961); V. Sofronitzky vol. 7, Arlechino, 1939), E. Fischer (1886-1960); Edwin Fischer Plays Beethoven Piano Sonatas, Pathétique, Appassionata, Emperor, Pearl, GEMM CD 9218, 1996, recorded in London, 1935, and Robert Casadesus (1899-1972); Beethoven Piano Sonatas, Sony Classical, SBK 46345, 1990. A summary of the results is presented in Table 1.

	Dynamics	Tempo	Textures
Vladimir Sofronitzky (Russian School)	Unbalanced dynamics	Slower tempo, vocal character, agogic patterning, sudden allargandi, tempo/beat changes	Polyphonic sonority with weight making structure clearer, show individual lines of polyphonic texture

	Dynamics	Tempo	Textures
Edwin Fischer (German school)	Balanced dynamics	Stable tempo/beat	Clarity individual lines of polyphonic texture
Robert Casadesus (French school)	Balanced dynamics	Faster tempo, instrumental character, less vocal	Less voice leading or polyphonic sonority: importance of clear jeu perlé and souple piano playing

Table 1. Beethoven, Sonata op. 57. Appassionata, first movement

Comparing the check-list survey concerning dynamics, tempo, voice leading, use of pedal, textures (as verified in Table 1), we come to certain conclusions concerning the interpretation of this part of the Beethoven piano sonata. Those conclusions can be extended to more general ideas concerning the different “piano interpretation schools”.

The most important difference among the three pianists of this sample is the result of V. Sofronitzky (Russian school) who prefers a slower tempo, with sudden allargandi (gradually slower tempo), often changing tempo and making structure clearer. This is very clear when we compare the interpretation of the 2nd theme of the 1st Movement (b. 35 to 39) :Example 2. Beethoven, Sonata op. 57. Appassionata, first movement: second theme (bars 34-40)



Figure 2 Beethoven, Sonata op. 57. Appassionata, first movement: second theme (bars 34-40)first movement: first theme (bars 1-9)

We must then conclude that the transmission of the sonata form is made including tempo changes. Pianists of the Russian school frequently prefer to stand for the imaginative and improvising character of their performances, even in the classical style repertoire.

As shown above in Table.1 analysis involved observation and comparison of three short examples, by three pianists of three piano schools in particular addressing expressive elements like dynamics (crescendo/diminuendo), tempo (use of rubato- changes of beat-, clarity of individual lines of the polyphonic texture, agogic patterning, etc), voice leading, phrasing and articulation, use of pedal.

Synthesizing, "While the German musicians focus their interest of musical performing on the side of music architecture, being that their generic structures point out to a static component in the core of performance (let us think for instance of Busoni's "architectonic" drawings to elucidate works' architecture), pianists of Russian tradition have more interest on the progress of character of music, or by the sequence of internal events." says Großmann (Rathert et al. 1998).

The French school is not very far from some perspectives of the German school, as Marguerite Long (1874-1966), who was a great apologist of the "unconditional respect for the text" (Timbrell, 1999), had as main concern, pianism precision, what includes a total commitment to technical improvement. The *jeu perlé*, predilection for the "subtle" pedal, as Yvonne Léfébure states, preference for a lighter and "insensitive" repertoire, are other recognizing characteristics, as belonging to the French piano school. As Daniel Wayenberg states, her main concern was the pianism precision, in her book "Le Piano", everything is referred and grounded (Long, 1956). The same thing can be observed in other testimonies, as for example from E. Robert Schmitz "French love for rigour differs from the German, as it is less massively concrete, and more logical, clearer, and easier to understand. I may even state that these are the qualities that characterize the "French school" of piano, singing, composition, art, of everything that has its roots in the French heart and mentality." (Timbrell, 1999).

Referring to Marguerite Long, her disciple Gabriel Tacchino states as follows: "Her technique was the opposite of the Russian school. Little weight, little sound. But she gave us precious indications on the French composers' works." (Timbrell, 1999). If we report to the already mentioned "style sévère", characteristic that may be followed by various pianists of the French tradition, from Alkan's professor (1813-1888), Zimmermann (1785-1853), to Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) himself, there is a clear preference for works by Hummel, particularly baroque composers,

predominate in the concerts and recitals' programs of these pianists (Timbrell, 1999). This way, predilection and specialization of this kind indicates a tendency at dynamics level, of the clearness, ingenious simplicity and precision, may be in prejudice of dynamic extremes in both contrasting directions of dynamics, that is, in direction to the fortissimo or to the pianissimo. Predilection and specialization of this kind indicates a tendency of clearness, ingenious simplicity and precision contrasting with dynamics contrasts (during piano performance often played fortissimo dynamics and often played pianissimo dynamics).

Since dynamics scope of harpsichord is very limited the harpsichord performing tradition has also a predominant role in French music tradition, previously influencing the dynamics performing options by keyboard music baroque composers.

The option is almost radically opposed when we listen to E. Fischer, W. Kempff, or even W. Backhaus. Fischer follows inexorably the same movement all along 1st movement of *Appassionata*, and wisely respects the rhythmic units. And he even grounds his principle, since as he himself states in his writings on Beethoven, *Wie du die drei ersten Achtel spielst, so mußst du im Tempo weiterspielen. Das Gesetz ist da schon gegeben, und die Würfel sind gefallen.* (Fischer, 1956) which means, as you play the three first quavers, so you must play the rest of the work. The rule has already been settled and the dice are thrown.

As regards to 1st theme of *Appassionata* the request of absolute rhythmic meticulousness makes it so much more radical, since these three quavers that E. Fischer evokes, are effectively express in a q quarternote+ligature of augmentation to a $e+e$ (semiquaver+semiquaver), defining the main metric beat proportion, 12/8. E. Fischer's predilection for rhythmic rigour and aversion to tempo and pulse changes, as said before, is reiterated in his writings on Beethoven, as this delay on movement of 2nd theme [of 1st movement], that is only a metamorphosis of 1st theme, doesn't seem correct: on the contrary, it is here the place of the *Urwort* of Goethe, of the laws we must respect and follow, in an equilibrated way (Fischer, 1956).

Another pianist of German piano school, Wilhelm Kempff, performing this same sonata shows many resonant and polyphonic gradations, but always with some contention, without great exaggerations. As example, should be listened very attentively 3rd movement of this sonata in his version. The transmission of sonata form is made with clarity, without appealing to great asymmetries of tempo or dynamics. Still in German tradition, the transmission of form in this performance by Claudio Arrau is remarkable.

It is a fact that 2nd theme of 1st movement begins in a slow and dolce way, the same occurring, in the recapitulation, where the 2nd theme is still exposed in a slower tempo. It seems that Arrau searches for the symmetry between regularity and respect for Edwin Fischer's score, agogic and dynamics liberty of Gilels and Richter.

The number of 13 available recordings of Beethoven Sonata Appassionata op. 57 by pianists who started their artistic career until 1950, and relevant analysis of this research, contributed to the flexibility

L. V BEETHOVEN(1770 - 1827) Sonata N° 23 f minor op.57 Appassionata (1st Movement) Tempo Outline

	Total time	Tempo
1.Schnabel	8'56"	♩=108
2.Backhaus	9'54"	♩=116
3.Fischer	8'40"	♩=126
4.Rubinstein	9'22"	♩=100
5.Feinberg	8'11"	♩=126
6.Kempff	9'52"	♩=108
7.Gieseking	8'13"	♩=126
8.Casadesus	9'04"	♩=112
9.Sofronitzky	9'46"	♩=120; (Più allegro=144)
10.Arrau	11'10"	♩=92
11.Horowitz	9'57"	♩=108
12.Richter	11'39"	♩=84
13.Gilels	11'03"	♩=96

Table 2. Beethoven, Sonata op. 57. Appassionata, first movement

in choices and consequent conclusions, because none of these important pianists failed to perform Beethoven and provide testimony of Beethoven's music through recording.

The Russian school believes, once more, in the assertion of work's structure, in slower movements, emphasizing a greater polyphonic clarity. All this is shown by the performances of Richter, Gilels, Feinberg and Sofronitzky, in the sampling made. The music structure becomes much clear, when playing, overlapping melody. Many are the examples pointed out, as for instance, the case of 2nd movement's theme, where the polyphonic line is very perceptible. Example 3. Beethoven, Sonata op. 57. Appassionata, second movement (bars 1-8)



Figure 3 Beethoven, Sonata op. 57. Appassionata, second movement (bars 1-8)

4 | Discussion

Another group, "OTHER SCHOOLS", includes Arturo

Benedetti Michelangeli, who having a musical education course centred in Italy, and even for the diverse choice of his repertoire, is little definable as regards to performing tradition, which is inevitable to observe, was relatively indifferent to him (namely in the sudden changes of movement and time, difficult to justify out of the context, but also the nuances of a lowest subtlety). Alicia de Larrocha is also included in this group, much for her course and different sonorities, but above all for her predilections of repertoire, predominantly of Spanish composers. Cases become sometimes hybrid or mixed, as a result of circulation, determined by various factors, already referred. There are conclusions regarding crossings in "Mixed German school", "Mixed French school", or still "Other schools" (Lourenço, 2005). This way, affinities and aesthetic influences belong sometimes to different schools, creating unexpected and unique transverse processes, disturbing statistics and numerical data.

5 | Conclusion

The main conclusion of this work is that piano schools exist, but artistic personalities are placed above. It is possible to ground the existence of national piano schools based in national tendencies of leading performing tradition, gathering pianists at the end of the nineteenth century, beginning of twentieth century. Important is, in fact, the adequate analytical exercise. Always within a certain performing tradition, piano schools are important as effective model or analytical instrument, as it is not possible to apply this generic category to each one of the pianist as a genius. Schools are generic categories that have not always real existence in the characterization of each artist.

In fact, there are great groups. They are made in a generic way, containing a very big group of very diverse artistic personalities. On the other hand, categories are not to be mistaken with nationalities. When we attend a piano recital it is the individual artistic personality that stands out and not a certain piano school. There is still the reality circumstance of the individual career of each international artist, with frequent contact with distinct cultural influences.

This international circulation of artists with contrasting performing personalities, always present, also during the first half of the twentieth century, took us to another important observation, regarding the categorization and generic groups that have been referred. As an example we may quote the Russian school pianists, in their most charismatic representatives, for instance, as regards to repertoire. While all of them dedicate themselves to the classic, romantic repertoire and to works of Russian composers, we think immediately of the name of Sviatoslav Richter,

as a pianist of universal and eclectic taste, who plays all the repertoire, including many twentieth century and contemporary works.

Another important conclusion of this research, is that baroque and classical repertoire reveals itself, generally, more defining of the performing interpretative direction of each pianist. In the universe of the comparative analysis of sampling made in this research, it is the case of recordings of works by D. Scarlatti, J. S. Bach, W. A. Mozart, L. v. Beethoven and F. Schubert.

In the analysed work of Scarlatti, it is Horowitz (Russian school) who chooses a slower tempo, inspiring a more personalized conception of the work, and less conventional and standard in stylistic terms. Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli prefers to follow a more conservative performing style of baroque music, with a faster tempo, less agogic patterning daring and less pedal. Also voice leading is simpler and reminding the harpsichord and dance rhythms. C. Haskil stands in a compromise result, as although movement is relatively quick, the agogic patterning supports, the pedal and clarity individual lines of polyphonic texture are more released and give the performance more creativity and imagination elements.

Prelude and Fugue in C major by J. S. Bach, Book 1 has been also analysed in the check-list survey. S. Richter's main concern (and also of V. Margulis) is performance in the sense of form transmission. He gives great emphasis to structure, reaching the culminating harmonic points with allargandi or significant agogic patterning. Edwin Fischer, of German school, takes different options, giving more importance to melody and less to structure and form. Thus his preference for a faster tempo, as a slower tempo gives more clarity to polyphonic lines and structure. Likewise, Fugue is performed in a slower tempo by Richter (vocal character, voice and singing) and by Fischer in a faster tempo (musical instrument keyboard character, harpsichord).

Richter still gives the opportunity to the listener of following the clarity of individual lines of the polyphonic texture of Fugue, without giving special prevalence to the theme's many entries. He manages to outline the dialogue between the voices in an organic and attractive way. It may be then remarked the "organ" like performance tendency by Richter, "piano" like performance by Fischer and the intended "clavichord voice" performance by Margulis. Different keyboard musical instruments (organ, piano, clavichord), different sonority and expression. Here were expressed some differences between the Russian school and the German school, regarding the preference for the structure and for the asset in the polyphonic speech. In Fantasy in C minor KV

475, other characteristics are shown, such as the use of pedal by Sofronitzky, contrasting with the option of Gieseking, who almost doesn't use the right pedal adept of contention in the use of right pedal. He uses, by contrast, una corda pedal many times. According to pianist Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli "Being a pianist and a musician, is not a profession. It is a philosophy, a life conception that cannot be based on good intentions, or natural talent. First of all, it is necessary to have an unimaginable spirit of sacrifice" All these great pianists and whose audio register have been previously analysed surely go with this approach of performing art and pianism (www.arturobenedettimichelangeli.net).

7 | Future Work

It would be interesting to study the performance style of famous artists who clearly represent each one of the identified European Piano Schools (Lourenço, 2005), and make it available in CD audio (or video footage) formats. However, this will depend on the availability of computational methods for precise music information extraction from audio signals which is still an open research problem (Tzanetakis, 2004; Lagrange et al. 2008). To the present date there has been little research on the subject of performance observation and assessment, as well as on qualitative evaluation of the elements of musical performance. There is an agreement that performances comprise both technical and aesthetic appeal, yet there are no knowledge of the source from which this information is being drawn from when assessments are made. Upon the completion of this data acquisition stage, the objective is to continue with further research to detect patterns and regularities in the recorded data, that regards sound and gesture and their perception by human observers, which may be representative of the particular identified European Piano Schools (Lourenço, 2005).

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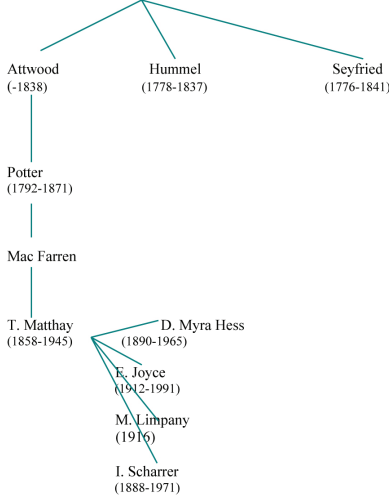
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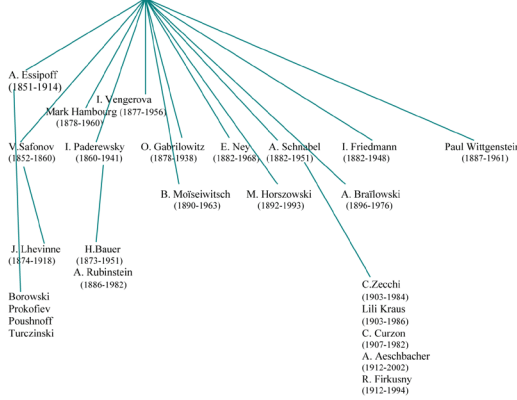
APPENDIX

German Piano School Genealogy, Russian Piano School Genealogy and French Piano School Genealogy(after Alain Pâris, Dictionnaire des Interprètes et de l'interprétation musicale au XXe siècle, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1982 (2nd ed. 1985))

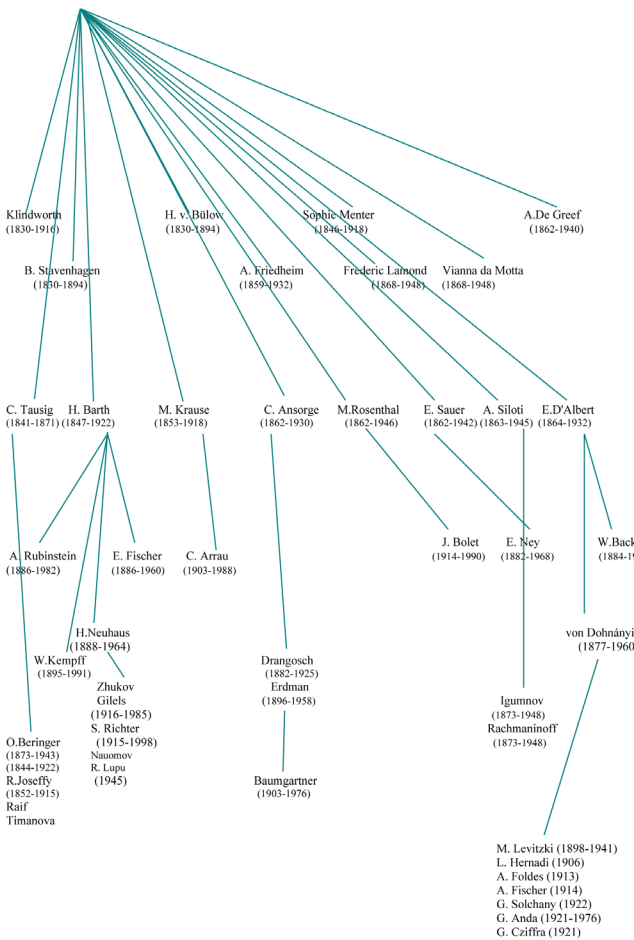
W. A. Mozart (1756-1791)



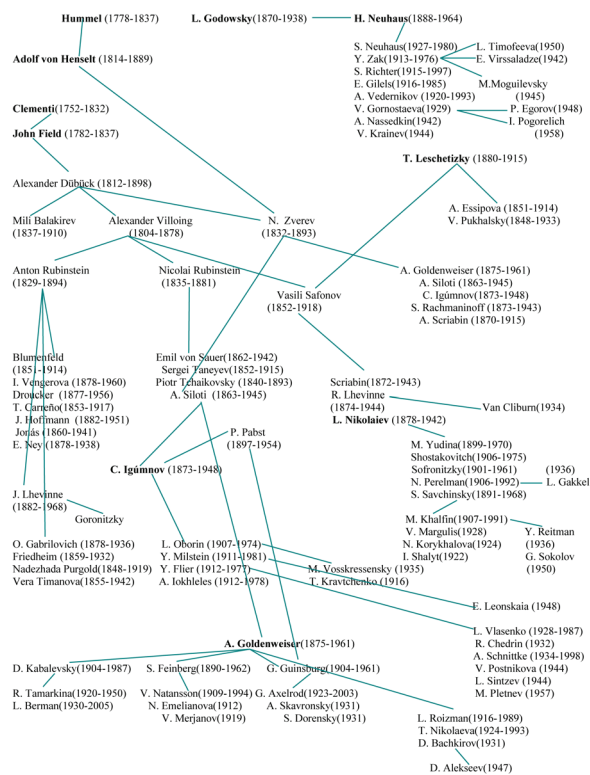
Th. Leschetzky (1830-1915)



F. Liszt (1811-1886)

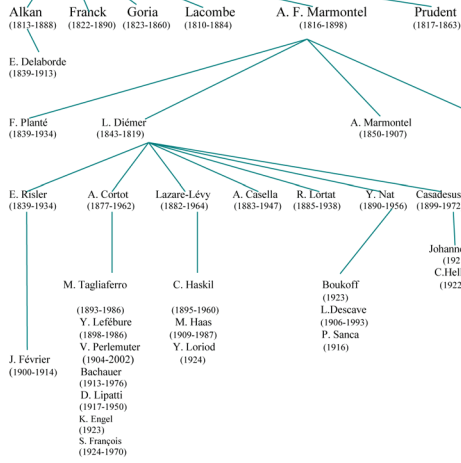


Russian Piano School Genealogy



François Adrien Boieldieu
(1775-1834)

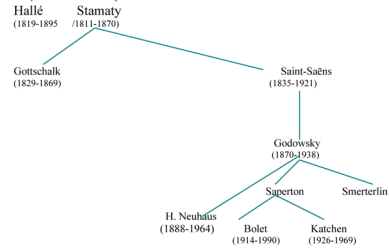
Pierre Zimmermann (1785-1853)



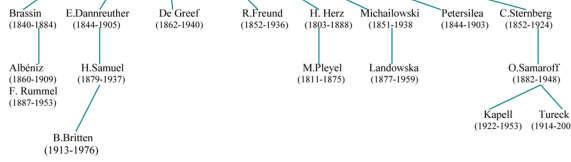
French Piano School Genealogy

L. Adam
(1758-1848)

Kalkbrenner(1785-1849)



Moscheles (1794-1870)



F. Chopin(1810-1849)

