

Interview with David Warn about Mozart Sonatas - Pianostreet.com

The Italian pianist Roberto Prosseda has previously recorded Mendelssohn's complete piano works. Now he is embarking on a new, slightly less encyclopedic but equally ambitious project, that of recording Mozart's complete sonatas. The first instalment, a double CD with Sonatas 1-6, was released earlier this year. At the [Cremona Mondomusica Piano Experience](#), where Prosseda was engaged as artistic advisor, Piano Street's David Wörn had the chance of talking to him about the risks and rewards of playing and recording Mozart's piano music.

What similarities do you see between [Mendelssohn](#) and [Mozart](#)?

Well, there are many things in common. Both Mozart and Mendelssohn were great pianists, with a very transparent piano language. You absolutely cannot cheat with their music. You cannot use too much pedal; you need to always play with great clarity, and with what I would like to call integrity. If you don't keep the integrity of phrasing, of expression, this music doesn't work. Both Mendelssohn and Mozart were child prodigies, and their piano oeuvres are very large, even though they both died before 40. We have a lot of pieces composed when they were very young – this is especially true of Mendelssohn.

And what would you say are the main differences?

A lot of things are different, of course, but let me tell you what was the main difference for me: When I recorded Mendelssohn's complete piano works, I was the first one to do this. There are other, almost complete, recordings – by Martin Jones for example – but they don't include the whole of Mendelssohn's production. Because only a few years ago, many pieces were not discovered yet. Some of them are still unpublished.

So, I felt a responsibility to give a vision which was quite clear and objective. Of course, I'm always trying to be natural and personal in my playing, but when I recorded Mendelssohn I knew that, for many of the pieces, mine was the only recording. That's why my sole aim was to show Mendelssohn's intentions as faithfully and exactly as possible.

In Mozart, the situation is very different. We have plenty of recordings of [Mozart's piano sonatas](#). Everything has already been discovered and recorded many times over. My personal favorite is Lili Kraus, but there are so many good recordings, from Giesecking to András Schiff, and the recent recording on fortepiano by Kristian Bezuidenhout... just to mention some of the complete recordings.

Does that mean that your goal was different when recording Mozart?

Yes, it had to be! I needed to emphasize my own vision of this music, to do something a little bit unusual. I also thought: is this really important? Does anybody need another recording of all Mozart's sonatas? Probably not! At least not if I couldn't find a unique, entirely valid but also very personal approach.

I enjoy playing the fortepiano and always try to go deeper into the understanding of Mozart's articulation signs. I also thought that it would be worth it to try to emphasize the lyricism and the dramatic strength of this music, especially of the first six sonatas. These are usually considered very ornamental – decorations rather than serious, powerful works of art.

Do you think that we misunderstand Mozart when we view him as the model of refined elegance?

I think that you can have decorative music which is also very strong and profound. The two things do not exclude each other. In Mozart there are always several different layers of reading – the surface level is often something very elegant and refined. But if you go deeper, you will find in this elegance a lot of ambiguity and double meanings. There is even a lot of sarcasm. So, I'm trying to approach the Sonatas from this other, hidden side, which I think has been ignored in many other interpretations.

To achieve this, I have thought a lot about the sound of the piano. I was looking for a sound which was not so, let's say, standard. In the end, I chose a Fazioli F 278. It's a new instrument, but it has been tuned in a different way, with unequal temperament. Which of course isn't anything particularly new, because this used to be the normal way of tuning a keyboard.

Could you please explain the concept of unequal temperament?

In Mozart's time, there were many different ways of tuning with unequal temperament. But the main concept was that each key should sound with its own flavor. For this reason, I think that it's very important to feel the 'harmonic geography' of these sonatas. So that when you move from C major to, let's say, E-flat major, you really change perspective. With unequal temperament tuning, this is much easier. It makes you feel the harmonic changes much deeper and with more intensity. Studying historically informed performances has helped me to find my own way, and provided me with some of the best arguments for recording yet another set of Mozart sonatas. I'm playing a modern piano, but I am also trying to reproduce some effects and expressions coming from period performance practice, in a way that hasn't been done before.

In your recordings, you add quite a lot of ornamentation.

Yes, I never play a repeat in exactly the same way, because I don't think it makes any sense. You can't just copy and paste, especially when you are recording. I cannot imagine that Mozart would play the same thing twice. Even if he didn't write down all the suggested ornaments, of course we must do them. At the fermatas, I improvise small cadenzas. I think that is what Mozart would have done.

Of course, when you do these things you need to take some risks. Today, we have the idea that we should give a perfect, exact image of Mozart's own playing. This is of course impossible – and if you just play the notes, with no ornamentation or improvised cadenzas, this is very far from Mozart's playing, for sure! I prefer to take my own risks, rather than being too much on the safe side.

How do you practice the skill of improvising an ornament or cadenza?

Since I always liked to improvise, this is not something that I find uncomfortable or difficult. Of course, it still deserves a lot of attention – you want to add things that are worthy and stylistically appropriate. I would say that my main method is to try to immerse my creativity in Mozart's thinking.

There are a few pieces and movements that are very important to study in this respect, for example the A minor Rondo K 511, or the second movement of the Sonata K 332, or the adagio variation of K 284. Those are important because they exist in 2 versions: one is the manuscript version, which is without ornamentation, and then there is the first edition version – which Mozart must have approved – where the ornamentation is written out. This is a great opportunity to study exactly how ornamentation was used at the time. I try to apply the same concepts to other movements.

You also need to understand exactly which parts you can play with, and which parts must remain the same – otherwise you will lose the sense of structure. You can only improvise cadenzas in very particular places: before the recapitulation, for example, or in some fermata points which are clearly empty if you don't do anything. But again, if you do too much, it will ruin the rest.

Before recording the sonatas, I also studied many other recordings – not to copy or to steal ideas, but rather to check if my own ideas are completely original. I know that many pianists are very cautious about listening to others, but I think it's a good way to be more aware of what I'm doing. I found it very interesting to see how others, pianists and fortepianists, are dealing with all these problems.

For most pianists, tuning to unequal temperament would be impractical, and very few will have the chance to play a handpicked, extremely touch-responsive Fazioli... What is the most important thing to focus on to make Mozart's piano music interesting and alive in more 'ordinary' circumstances?

I would say that the most important thing in general is having a clear idea before playing. Even the unequal temperament, or the response of the piano, is a consequence of your own idea. Today, many musicians don't think enough about that. First they play and then, according to what comes out, they adjust their playing. And it will always be an adjustment.

I think the best thing is focusing on a very clear idea of the piece – an idea of the music's drama. You need to find out about the different characters, the same way a film director or screenplay writer would do. When I interpret a piece of music, I feel as if I'm a screenplay writer, a film director, many actors, and a director of photography as well! Because at the piano, you can also

work with depth of field: you can choose what is in focus, and what is in the background. All of this you must manage with only two hands, on one piano. It's a challenging task, but I think it's essential that we try all these different perspectives – that we form an exact, focused idea of the music's drama, in order to achieve a clear 'staging' of the pieces. In short, that we think before we play.