

## The Historical Context and Interpretation of Creations Dedicated to the Piano duo for Four Hands

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**Abstract:** *Throughout history, a variety of factors have influenced the development of the four-hand piano duet as a genre. From the advent of keyboard instruments in the fourteenth century, to its transformation into a major genre in the works of nineteenth-century composers, to its current resurgence as a performance genre, its progression encompasses many musicians and their works. This overview of the historical context of the piano duet for two performers on a single keyboard will highlight the literature, social trends, and performer opinions that represent its development as a genre and its relationship to the piano duet for two performers on separate keyboards.*

**Keywords:** *piano four-hand; virginal; harpsichord; keyboards; interpretation;*

### Introduction

Since the genre of works for keyboard instruments is not only represented by the piano duet for four hands and the piano duet for two pianos, it is necessary to thoroughly study the works for keyboard instruments; the change and development of instruments, the social influence and the cultural background of composers should also be studied. In the following section, I have listed the stylistic characteristics and compositional intentions of various arrangements for piano duet in each period.

According to the Grove Dictionary of Music, piano duo refers to two performers playing the same keyboard or two separate keyboards. For the purpose of this research, here is the definition for the terms that will be used: four-hand piano duo refers to two pianists using the same keyboard or the same piano. By sharing the same instrument, it serves as a means of performance between the two pianists. The four-hand piano duet has a long history that documents a wide variety of artistic creations for this type of ensemble. The earliest pieces for piano duet, such as *A Verse for Two to Play* by Nicholas Carlton (1570 - 1630) and *A Fancy for Two to Play* by Thomas Tomkins (1572–1656), were originally written for harpsichord<sup>2</sup>.

### 1. Renaissance Era

During the 16th century, the popularity of sacred and secular music, such as missals, motets, madrigals, and chansons, made vocal music prominent. Therefore, instrumental performance was strongly associated with vocal music during this period, which was heard

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<sup>2</sup> Cameron McGraw. 2001. *Repertoire for piano duo. Music originally written for one piano, four hands*. Ed. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. p. 5.

primarily as a prelude or interlude in church liturgical ceremonies, except for a few chapels, such as the Sistine Chapel in Rome, where choirs were unaccompanied. Although instrumental music seemed to be of secondary importance during the Renaissance, keyboard music in tablature was already in existence. The virginal and the spineta are both precursors of Renaissance keyboard instruments, which, due to their construction and plucking mechanism, had a limited range and lower sonority. Historically, the keyboard instrument became more independent and widely used when English composers established the school of the "English virgins" in the late 16th century, at which time keyboard tablatures show the embellished style of music. The most famous collection of harpsichord manuscripts from this period was the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, which contains nearly three hundred folk songs and dance tunes in variation form. Although the structure of the keyboard instrument in the Renaissance was not the best construction for multiple performers to play together, several ensemble compositions for keyboard have been recorded. In 1976, Schirmer Publishers released a collection of five pieces for four hands from England, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, and Spain by anonymous Renaissance composers.



*Fig. 1: Musical fragment from Thomas Tomkins "Fancy for two to play" – original manuscript*

These pieces were written for two virgins in a dance music style. Since Renaissance dance music was often improvised and written without attribution to a specific composer, it is very likely that these pieces were written for the social activity of dancing.

## **2. Baroque Era**

Instrumental music began to develop during the Baroque period, and composers began to explore the possibilities of the keyboard. John Bull (1562-1628) is believed to have composed the earliest documented ensemble piece for the virginal, titled "A battle, and No battle," for two musicians to perform three hands simultaneously on a virginal. In the meantime, two other composers, Nikolas Carleton (1570-1630) and Thomas Tomkins (1572-1656), together composed "A Verse for Two to Play on One Virginal or Organ" and "A Fantasy for Two to Play," which represent the earliest manuscripts of four-handed keyboard music to date. In addition, Giles Farnaby's (1563-1640) composition For Two Virginals extends to two keyboards for two players and represents the earliest conception of duo music for two separate keyboards. Later, French composers such as Gaspar Le Roux (1660-1707) and François Couperin (1668-1733) created works with three harpsichord portatives, the lower one marked in Roman numbers for improvisation. Overall, most Baroque compositions for harpsichord ensembles tend to be considered experimental works, easily ignored by the limitations of the instruments of time.



Fig. 2: Musical fragment from Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Duo for harpsichord no 7, measures 1-6

### 3. Classical Era

Discussions about the determination of the first published or first printed work for keyboard four hands remain controversial. However, Charles Burney's (1726-1841) Four Sonatas or Duets for Two Performers on a Pianoforte or Harpsichord, published in 1777, was the first to document the value and techniques of four-handed performance. As a result, Charles Burney's notes elevated the importance of four-handed duo music in the instrumental repertoire. Later, keyboard ensemble works gradually evolved into a higher art form when J. C. Bach published his two harpsichord duet sonatas for four-handed harpsichord in 1778, influencing composers such as W. A. Mozart and M. Clementi.

Comparing W. A. Mozart with contemporary composers of the Classical period, we find that W. A. Mozart had the most compositions for piano duets for four hands, mostly in his early composing phase. For instance, his compositions KV19d, KV381, KV358 are all piano duets for four hands. In addition, the London performance of J.C. Bach by W.A. Mozart and his sister Maria Anna Nannerl in 1765 is considered the first public concert performance of a four-handed harpsichord duet.



Fig. 3: Musical fragment from W. A. Mozart – Sonata K. 521 in C Major, 3rd part, measures 1-4

Around the same time, keyboard instruments were reaching five to six octaves, allowing two performers to play simultaneously on the same instrument. As a result, classical composers such as Muzio Clementi (1752-1832), Jan Ladislav Dussek (1760-1812), and John Baptist Cramer

(1771-1858) wrote piano duets for four hands. The demand for keyboard instruments by classical composers affected the manufacture of pianos. In 1794, the Broadwood Company produced a six-and-a-half-octave piano, also known as a duet range keyboard. By 1850, the keyboard had expanded to eighty-eight keys found in the modern piano. According to the scholar Alexander Weinmann (1901-1987), the total quantity of music composed for four-handed piano duos between 1760 and 1860 was equal to that of works for solo piano. As a result, the importance of the piano duo for four hands was much greater in the classical period.

#### **4. The development and growing popularity of the four-hand piano duo in Classicism**

The beginning of the history of the four-hand duo for keyboard as a genre is attributed to Johann Christian Bach, whose sonatas for four hands were originally published in 1778 and 1780, although they probably existed several years earlier. In addition to his direct contribution to the genre, J. C. Bach, who was based in London, also guided the young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart when he lived in that city. We can imagine them playing these pieces together, the first occasion in a long tradition of master composers sharing their music and friendship by performing music for piano duo. Even so, two performers playing on a single keyboard would have been considered a novelty for the society of the time. Novelty seems to have been one of the reasons why W. A. Mozart and his sister Nannerl gave the first recital for four-hand harpsichord in London in July 1765. Researchers believe that W. A. Mozart's Sonata in C Major, K. 19d was probably written for this occasion. Their father, Leopold, announced: The two children will play on the same harpsichord and will place a handkerchief over it, without seeing the keys. Leopold also wrote in a letter: In London, little Wolfgang wrote his first piece for four hands. No one has ever written a sonata for four hands before. Although history now shows us that many compositions for four-hand piano duets predate W. A. Mozart's Sonata in C Major, it is interesting to note that even in some of its earliest manifestations, the four-hand piano duet served several functions: recreational chamber music, a vast repertoire for performance, and a source of inspiration for composition. It is believed that W. A. Mozart continued to write his second and third sonatas for four-hand piano duets, in D major, K. 381, and B-flat major, K. 358, during his adolescence, to play them with Nannerl. His last two sonatas for piano duet, in F major, K. 497, and C major, K. 521, are known as representative works of his mature compositional style and were the last of the six sonatas he completed for piano duet.

Even though W. A. Mozart's family gave public recitals during their stay in London, Wolfgang's piano duets for four hands remained unpublished. Dr. Charles Burney, a well-known music teacher and historian based in London at the end of the 18th century, wrote the first duets for harpsichord or pianoforte for four hands published in 1777: *Sonatas or Duets for Two Performers on One Piano Forte or Harpsichord*. C. Burney's compositions are not particularly noteworthy, but their preface provides insight into the growing predilection of composers for using four-hand keyboard literature as a pedagogical form of this kind. "When two pianists play the same instrument, they inconvenience each other; however, through compositions of this kind, they become mutually useful and necessary companions in their musical exercises. Apart from the amusement that such experiments may afford, they may be made to serve two very useful purposes of development, as they will require particular attention to rhythm and to that chiaroscuro which

is produced by different degrees of piano and forte. As for the Piano and Forte indications, each performer should try to discover when the main melody is being played or when they should simply accompany it, either to make it more evident or simply to enrich its harmony.

The publication of C. Burney's duo compositions coincided with cultural circumstances that led to the simultaneous rise of piano duo composition in England and continental Europe, and shows the growth of the piano duo as a source of family and social entertainment. Howard Ferguson (1908–1999) describes three factors that influenced this trend: “the growth of music publishing, the size and popularity of the instrument, and the class of wealthy professionals who could afford music lessons”<sup>3</sup>.

The pedagogical use of the four-hand piano duo by C. Burney became more popular with other composers. "Pieces composed for pedagogical purposes by composers of the time include J. Haydn's *Il maestro e lo scolare* (The Master and the Pupil) Hob. XVIIa, and *Thirty Pieces for 4 Hands*, dedicated to aspirants, by Daniel Gottlob Turk (1750–1813), *Players of the Klavier*."<sup>4</sup> Both have clearly designated parts for the teacher and the student, with the teacher modeling the melodic lines and rhythms for the student to reproduce in a simplified form.

## 5. Romantic Era

In the 19th century, piano music became a common form of entertainment in everyday life for several reasons: first, the rise of the middle class and the sustained growth of the piano factory increased the impressive amount of work for piano duets for four hands. The invention of the repetition mechanism known as the double escapement, the iron frame, and the sustain pedal led composers to seek more variation and pianistic techniques. In order to enhance the expressiveness and virtuosity of the piano, composers wrote piano ensemble music with more advanced piano techniques. In addition, the popularity of salon music culture and salon concert events made piano ensemble performance a social occasion for intimate and entertaining interaction among friends and relatives. The composers of four-hand piano duos include, chronologically, Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826), Franz Schubert (1797-1828), Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847), Robert Schumann (1810-1856), Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), Antonín Leopold Dvořák (1841-1904), Edward Grieg (1843-1907), and Max Reger (1873-1916).



Fig. 4: Musical fragment from Franz Schubert – Sonata in C Major, D. 812, measures 79-82.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Ferguson. 1947. *Mozart's Duets for One Pianoforte*. London: Ed. Royal Musical Association, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 5-6.

The coordination of ensemble performance expanded from the four-handed piano duo to the two-piano duo, which used two grand pianos and had a much more sonorous effect, better suited for performing in concert on a larger stage. Some of the well-known original music for two pianos in the concert program include "Rondo in C Major for Two Pianos" by Frederic Chopin (1810-1849), "Caprice Arabe", Op. 96 and "Scherzo", Op. 87 by Charles-Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921), "Suite for Two Pianos", No. 1, No. 2 by Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) and "Scaramouche" by Darius Milhaud (1892-1974). In addition to the original repertoire for two pianos, some of the pieces for piano duet for four hands from the 19th century have been transcribed from the symphonic works to solo piano or even vice versa. Transcriptions for piano began in the late 19th century and became even more popular in the Romantic period. Many orchestral or instrumental works have been transcribed for piano to reach a new audience. For example, part of Edvard Grieg's First Symphony (1863-1864) was transcribed by the composer in 1875 into a piano reduction under the new title 'Two Symphonic Pieces', Op. 14. In addition, Johannes Brahms had both four-handed and solo piano versions of his composition 'Sixteen Waltzes', Op. 39, which were published in 1865 and 1866 respectively. Romantic composers not only transcribed their own music but also created transcriptions of existing works by their predecessors.

In February 1922 Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) made a transcription of W. A. Mozart's organ piece 'Fantasia in F minor', KV 608 for piano duet for two pianos. Ernest Guiraud (1837-1892), a French composer, transcribed C. Saint-Saëns' Danse Macabre, Op. 40 and George Bizet's Carmen for piano duet for two pianos. As the experience of attending a symphonic concert or opera performance was considered normal for the affluent middle class, piano transcriptions allowed audiences with limited financial resources to appreciate more types of music. In general, the wide variety of piano duet transcriptions for four hands and two pianos in the nineteenth century suggests the accessibility of the piano as a primary instrument that served as a compositional resource and a way for the public to learn music.

## **6. Contemporary Era**

Throughout the twentieth century and into the present, many compositions for piano ensemble have been written to present new compositional techniques and particular timbres. In many cases, contemporary composers have not only adopted the musical legacy of Romanticism but have further enhanced the revolutionary musical effects of works with avant-garde aesthetic values. Their use of ambiguous sounds, polyrhythms, bitonality, rhythmic changes, tempo, and new notation schemes make the overall experience of collaboration more demanding. In comparison to the classical presentation of a four-hand piano duo and a two-piano piano duo, the context of ensemble music for more than one pianist in performance emphasizes partnership and communication skills to a much greater extent. At the same time, the concept of piano ensemble performance expands to include teamwork involving the participation of multiple pianists in a single musical creation.



Fig. 5: Musical arrangement from *Habanera in Modern Style*, by G. Bizet, measures 1-5

Contemporary composer Walden Hughes (1955-2019) wrote the twelve-hand arrangement for two pianos of the "Radetzky March" by Johann Strauss (1825-1899), intended to be performed by a total of six pianists, three at each piano. Vladislav Uspensky (1937-2004), a Russian composer, wrote a piece for six-hands piano ensemble, performed by two pianists playing together on the first piano and another pianist on the second piano. Today, the importance of piano ensemble performance has also increased, as several major international music competitions have recently begun to include a piano duo category. The ARD International Piano Duo Competition in Munich, Germany, and the Maria Canals International Music Competition in Barcelona, Spain, are well-known competitions that offer opportunities for pianists performing four-handed piano duo music.

## 7. The debut of four-hand piano duo as a genre

The history of keyboard duos begins long before the invention of the modern piano (around 1700). Willi Apel (1893-1988) presents the history of keyboard music up to 1700 with evidence of four-handed organ playing that can be dated back to the 6th century, with evidence of increasing importance in the 18th and 19th centuries. Willi Apel argues that "the presence of two players at an organ may have led to the beginning of the organum, an early form of polyphony"<sup>5</sup>. Historical references to keyboard literature for more than two hands are often ambiguous as to the exact instrument, which means that the history of the four-hand piano duet corresponds to the development of the two-manual keyboard duet. According to the book *Music for Two or More Players at Clavichord, Harpsichord, Organ: An Annotated Bibliography*, Sally Jo Sloane uses church registers to document the presence of multiple organs and organists in some cathedrals. J Sloane then describes the juxtaposition of several organs "playing in the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Italian concertante style, literature that may have been original or intended for an instrumental ensemble"<sup>6</sup>. The first keyboard duet is attributed to the English virgin tradition of the late 16th and early 17th centuries and owes much of its historical development to the development of keyboard instruments. The first uncontested keyboard duets are Thomas Tomkins' (1572 - 1656)

<sup>5</sup> Willi Apel. 1972. *The History of Keyboard Music to 1700*. Indiana: Ed. Bloomington, pp. 20-21.

<sup>6</sup> Sally Sloane. 1991. *Music for Two or More Players at Clavichord, Harpsichord, Organ: An Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Ed. Greenwood Press, pp. 9-10.

A Fancy for Two to Play (1647) and his friend Nicholas Carlton's (1570 - 1630) A Verse for Two to Play on One Virginal or Organ (1625).



Fig. 6: Musical fragment from "Verse for Two to Play on One Virginal or Organe"  
Nicholas Carleton, measures 1-3

17th-century virginal keyboards were only one and a half meters in length, so it would have been difficult for more than one performer to play on a single keyboard, given the popular dress styles of the time. "The dimensional limitations of the virginal may explain why the compositions of T. Tomkins and N. Carlton are the first to be specifically designated as being for keyboard duet whereas their contemporaries wrote pieces for instruments of even more flexible dimensions"<sup>7</sup>. Several pieces written for three portatives appeared in the early 17th century, without specifying the instrument. Given two portatives for the keyboard, the third could be played either on the same keyboard, on a different keyboard, or on an instrument without a keyboard. William Byrd (1543-1623) and John Bull, the earliest English composers, and the French harpsichordists Gaspard Le Roux (1660-1707) and Francois Couperin (1668-1733) wrote in this way with three portatives. J. Bull's A Battle and No Battle (Phrygian Music) "can be performed as a keyboard duet, as the three portatives never interfere with each other. The score of W. Byrd's Ut Re Mi Fa Sol La, for Two to Play by W. Byrd makes it impossible to play on one keyboard, which no doubt indicates that it was intended to be played on one keyboard and another melodic instrument"<sup>8</sup>.

French composers wrote more extensively in this three-portative format. Gaspard Le Roux has offered a trio of versions of his solo literature consisting of two written portatives and a figured bass, with the indication that they may be played on two harpsichords. Each performer combines a single portative with his own realization of the bass. F. Couperin included five similar pieces in his work *Pieces de harpsichord*, although he specifically calls them "pièce croisée"<sup>9</sup> because the voices are continually interleaved. The second volume of F. Couperin's *Pieces de harpsichord* contains one of the first compositions written especially and entirely for two performers, *Allemande a deux Harpsichords* (1716/1717). This piece was printed with one set of portatives on top of the other, in the form we refer to as the modern form of the score.

Apart from this limited number of works, there was no further development for organ or virginal piano, and the piano duet flourished as a separate and distinct genre from the keyboard duet. Harpsichord became the most popular keyboard instrument and was commonly found in the

<sup>7</sup> Howard Ferguson. 1947. *Mozart's Duets for One Pianoforte*. London: Ed. Royal Musical Association, p. 10

<sup>8</sup> Howard Ferguson. 1995. *Keyboard Duets from the 16th to the 20th Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Pièce croisée refers to a piece of music for the harpsichord or other keyboard instrument that involves crossing both hands, with the right hand sometimes playing lower than the left hand on the keyboard - an unusual technique in the early 18th century.

homes of the rising middle class. Playing two harpsichords at the same time, however, was impractical because they had to be tuned exactly alike. Also, the range of the harpsichord was about 5 octaves, and two performers seated at one keyboard were physically discomforting.

## 8. Conclusions

One of the most curious and fascinating episodes in the history of music is certainly the rise and fall of the art of the piano duet for four hands. This atypical form of chamber music, in which two performers play at the same keyboard, hardly existed before the introduction of the piano in the second half of the 18th century. Then, beginning with a small number of piano duo compositions by W. A. Mozart and his contemporaries, it became a stream in the time of F. Schubert and soon a flood that flooded the entire musical life of the 19th century. Shortly after the end of the nineteenth century, the force of this flood subsided considerably, leaving behind innumerable sonatas, salon pieces and arrangements, among which, in addition to the most important musical creations, were hidden other works of great beauty that have long remained shrouded in the oblivion that has enveloped a large part of the repertoire dedicated to the piano duo for four hands.

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