Konrad Wolff writes about pianist Artur Schnabel’s technique and means of regulating sound in Chapters 11 and 12 of his book, “Schnabel’s Interpretation of Piano Music.” It was surprisingly difficult to obtain information on the author, but Schnabel is quoted to have remarked of Wolff, “…he is a remarkable pianist, an excellent theorist, a learned historian, an outstanding teacher, a brilliant thinker and writer.” Schnabel obviously supported Wolff’s work, perhaps in part because Wolff had taken such an avid interest in Schnabel. Interestingly, both Schnabel and Wolff moved to the United States around the outbreak of World War II. Schnabel’s background seems much less scattered with academic diplomas and degrees than Wolff’s, but he is clearly a more renowned pianist. An important note is that Schnabel was most interested in the works of Beethoven, Schubert, Mozart, and Brahms. Most of the examples in these chapters are excerpts from pieces by these very composers.

The first chapter, “The Means of Regulating Sound,” first discusses Schnabel’s interpretation of piano tone color. Wolff remarks that piano tone remains the same throughout the range of the instrument and thus has a quality of “neutrality” about it. More interestingly, he notes that tone coloring is usually accomplished by indirect means. This point somewhat relates to previous class discussion on how some musicians attempt to imitate vocal expression, which is considered by some to be “ideally” or most expressive, under the constraints of their instrument. For example, expressive vocal-like vibrato can be achieved on violin by certain types of finger and bow movements. With such limited controls on the piano, however, similar types of expression may only be achieved indirectly, e.g. a performer may attempt to replicate vocal legato between very large pitch intervals by using the sustain pedal (whose “direct” purpose may not necessarily be to emulate legato).

It was somewhat disheartening to read Schnabel’s opinion on whether piano should imitate the color of other instruments. Schnabel felt that this sometimes must be done but should be avoided in general. Even with transcriptions, in Schnabel’s opinion, it is a “mistake” to do so. Firstly, the example given in which it is “obvious” that the composer intended the piano to imitate the bassoon (Example 187) is a poor one at best. Simply because the piano and bassoon share the accompanied line, with only one instrument playing at once, this does not necessarily mean the piano should emulate bassoon tone. In fact, that the bassoon should emulate the piano sound seems to be an equally justifiable argument. Secondly, to regard a technique and/or an artistic decision (such as whether piano should emulate the sound of other instruments) as a mistake seems a bit musically narrow-minded. The next section, in which Wolff lists rules concerning ratios of loudness between synchronous notes, additionally displays Schnabel’s strict interpretation of how the piano should be played. I did, however, find myself agreeing with comments regarding cause and effect type relationships on the piano, e.g. if pianissimo four-part chords are not carefully played, the component pitches/melody may be hard to distinguish.
I also agreed with Schnabel’s philosophy on technique. Schnabel considered technique a means to a musical end. Contrary to conservatory teachings, he believed there is no such thing as an “illegal” trick. On these topics Schnabel seems to be most open-minded and accepting of different interpretations. Interestingly, he considered the physical activity of performance as a gesture similar to rhetoric, likely due in part to his wife, the contralto Therese Behr. In addition, Schnabel felt that practicing should be experimentation rather than drill. He was opposed to slow practicing of fast passages and to practicing each hand alone. He instead suggested inventing patterns that pose technical problems.

Artur Schnabel clearly has a unique and in many ways strict interpretation of piano performance. Wolff clarifies each of these fairly well, with many examples that he had likely discussed with Schnabel himself. The chapters are clear and concise, and they present many interesting opinions from a renowned performer very familiar with and passionate about his instrument.