

## articles

### *Some Reflections on Performance Practice, Musicology, and Aesthetics*

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As an aesthetic phenomenon music may be classified in any of several ways. One can describe it, for example, as a “sonorous” art and thereby focus upon its acoustic properties; the description “aural” underlines its sensory aspect; “temporal” suggests a conceptual dimension, and so forth. On yet another level, music ranks among the “performing” arts; this modifier transfers the emphasis from theory to operations. But irrespective of the mode of discourse, the essential fact is that music is inconceivable without the executant element, symbolized by Plato’s *rhapsode*, who must “interpret the mind of the poet to his hearers.”<sup>1</sup>

The Platonic image translates into explicitly musical terms with the notion of an “intermediary . . . whose capacity to relive the originator’s [composer’s] experience, and . . . whose technical competence in relaying it” are central to the “partnership between the originator and the percipient.”<sup>2</sup> Or, stated otherwise, the reality of music as process rather than object becomes its distinguishing mark; it is unlike

painting, architecture, sculpture, literature, or philosophy, for the fundamental reason that a piece of music is not made to be gazed upon, read through, or contemplated, but to be sounded—which involves activity, and of a very strenuous and exacting sort—in the present.<sup>3</sup>

In view of this exceptional feature of music, the comparatively recent arrival of performance practice—*Aufführungspraxis*—as a specific research area in musicology is indeed surprising. Apart from the seminal contributions made during the first decades of this century by Arnold Dolmetsch, Hans Albrecht, Robert Haas, and Arnold Schering,<sup>4</sup> as well as a few important early monographs on ornamentation, systematic attention to the problems of interpretation and the emergence of a corps of specialists on the subject have become musicological realities only within the last twenty-odd years.<sup>5</sup> Yet in this short span scholarly investigations in the field have yielded a store of knowledge and educated conjecture whose value is demonstrable in practical as well as intellectual terms. Programs of older music are no longer a rarity, and the resultant sophistication of taste generates ever-higher standards of authenticity. Today, for instance, audience sensibility would hardly tolerate a concert performance or commercial recording of Monteverdi madrigals with piano accompaniment, such as Nadia Boulanger’s 78 rpm of 1937—although it was a pioneering achievement at that time.<sup>6</sup>

Within the decade just ended, most major American universities have instituted graduate seminars in performance-practice problems of various periods. In 1968 William S. Newman conducted one at the University of North Carolina. An outstanding accomplishment of this seminar was the compilation of a comprehensive bibliography of writings on performance practices, reproduced in its entirety by *Current Musicology*, which devoted a complete issue to its publication.<sup>7</sup> The activities of professional organizations also testify to the urgency of this aspect of music research. Both the International Musicological Society and its American affiliate have held important colloquia on special problems in performing older music. The College Music Society, at its annual meeting in December 1968, sponsored a Round Table entitled "Rehearsal Techniques and Historical Performance Practice," with four noted scholar-conductors presenting the main papers.<sup>8</sup>

The City University of New York, in 1969–70, organized a lecture/seminar/demonstration series centered on performance-practice problems; the format paralleled CUNY's inaugural-year project, *Perspectives and Lacunae in Musicological Research*.<sup>9</sup> Under the direction of Robert Donington the new series, *Problems in Performance Practice from the Middle Ages to the Present Day*, like the earlier one, presented in turn a number of visiting scholars, each a specialist in one or another area of the field. A synoptic view emerged, consequently, not only of the broad range of current explorations into the history of performance practice, but also of the wide spectrum of theoretical and empirical approaches reflected by the participating lecturers.

The twin goals of this musicological problem-area are the recovery of knowledge for its own sake (a central aim of all the humanities) and the actual reconstruction of a former sound-world. Since the latter objective must be attained without benefit of aural evidence, it is obviously possible to arrive at substantially different interpretations of the pertinent data. What must be considered and assessed are relevant contemporary writings about music; the old instruments used, as well as then-current methods of voice production; the physical conditions of performance; the societal framework, ranging from the general sociocultural setting to the specific musical occasion; and, finally, the notated music itself.

It is altogether fitting that the primary source-document appear last on this list; not until the 19th century, after all, did the musical autograph become the more or less immutable record of the composer's intention and the inviolable mandate for the performer. The impulse of the performing musician to improvise—either entire pieces or extemporized embellishments to existing compositions—has conditioned the development of Western music from its earliest known manifestations. The generating principle of polyphony, in a very real sense, was the use of plainsong as a foil for improvised or quasi-improvised accompanying voices. Music from the turn of the 14th century to the first decades of the 19th has been described as "the process of making the composer's defences sure against the incursions of the extemporizer,"<sup>10</sup> and

although the figure of speech is colorful and felicitous, it can also mislead. The plain fact is that a good part of the music during this period was intended *by the composer* to be modified in performance—the melody ornamented (including lengthy interpolations), the accompaniment elaborated, the rhythms altered.

This conception of the written composition as a partial sketch, a plan offering alternatives for realization, had evolved into a theoretical canon by the first decade of the 17th century. During the succeeding 150 years the composer's work was treated somewhat casually: instruments could be deleted, added, or changed; a composition might be simplified or shortened, embellished or lengthened; plagiarism and piracy abounded.<sup>11</sup> But if these permissive attitudes are entirely at variance with the aesthetic values and legal codes of our own time (an age of composer power, aleatory ventures notwithstanding!), the benefits of the earlier tradition surely outweighed the abuses. The idea of the performer as *de facto* partner-in-creation with the composer released a source of artistic invention that expanded and enriched the total musical experience. For today's electronic composer the musical intention and its actualization are one—"He has been his own copyist, proofreader, publisher, conductor, and orchestra";<sup>12</sup> formerly, the composer expected and listeners encouraged creative collaboration from the performer.

Yet this interpretive freedom, as practiced in the past, was not limitless; the range of possibilities fell within a restricted set of conventions, an accumulated tradition generally understood and observed and hence not always fully described or explicated in the scholarly treatises, composers' prefaces, and similar documents of the time. Inquiry today into the musical aesthetics and performance practices of earlier epochs offers a comparable range of options—broad, but not infinite—for the researcher. One is dealing here with a sonorous phenomenon forever irretrievable in its primal, complete (i.e., *heard*) form. There is no true analogue, in music history, of the exhilarating discoveries—sought-after or serendipitous—which have periodically rewarded historians of the visual and literary arts.<sup>13</sup>

This being the case, the musicologist must ultimately rely upon some combination of (a) factual data, (b) presumptive evidence, and (c) his own musical judgment. That the last two factors invite diversity of opinion is self-evident. There can be more than one hypothesis regarding, say, the acoustical conditions in a certain church or opera house during the 1600's; and everyone knows about not disputing taste. But what of the first point, the recovery of written sources? Here, too, interpretation and decision-making are obligatory. We have seen that the musical manuscripts themselves offer only limited and tentative clues, and literary texts *about* music—critical, didactic, philosophical, journalistic—need to be assessed for their reliability, universality, and influence, *inter alia*. Of an old treatise or teaching manual, for example, one must ask: Is the writer an authority? Do his rules and admonitions represent the performance practices of more than a specific time and circumscribed region? Is the work prescriptive or descriptive?

Perhaps more so than in other areas of musicology, therefore, a crucial determinant of the individual scholar's style of investigation and interpretive bent in *Aufführungspraxis* research is his framing philosophy of history. In light of the endless musicological polemics in this field one is impelled to pursue the point further—in quest of an explanatory principle, a unitary measure for the spread of opinion. On analysis, the dissonant views do in fact fall into an ordered series of positions along a continuum: a simple rigidity-flexibility scale.<sup>14</sup> The operative factor here is tolerance of ambiguity; this means, in relation to musicology, that location on the scale is a function of the historian's approach to some very basic questions: Are the scientific ideals of precision and certitude feasible objectives in recreating early-music performance? Does there exist to be discovered an authoritative set of procedures governing the practices of each era in the past? How heavily can one rely upon nonmusical documentary sources or commit oneself to obligatory interpretations? And, finally, the eternal dilemma confronting every humanist scholar: What is the degree of investment in one's own findings and conclusions?

The answers to these queries constitute the matrix of attitudes defining for each researcher the goals and limits of this branch of musicology. And although firm beliefs are an inevitable (and commendable) result of thoughtful and musically-sensitive scholarship, the most convincing expositions are those advanced not as Final Solutions but as strongly suggestive hypotheses.

A model for this nonauthoritarian, open-ended outlook was provided ten years ago at a symposium on 17th- and 18th-century performance practice held during the Eighth Congress of the International Musicological Society, meeting in New York City in 1961.<sup>15</sup> In the discussion following the two main papers, several of the panelists, though agreeing that much philological and organological research remained to be done, argued against unyielding, exaggerated positions taken in the name of authenticity. Arthur Mendel suggested that "the battle for historical accuracy is overwon"; Ralph Kirkpatrick spoke of being "musicians first and following performance-practices second; and we should approach music with the humility of the artist"; Jens Peter Larsen confessed, "I do not like the phrase 'exact reconstruction,' which is not possible for us today. The best we can achieve and what is desirable is a closer approach to old traditions"; and Robert Donington, citing instances of conflicting evidence, insisted that "the law is less important than the spirit in performance."

As coordinator of the CUNY 1969–70 lecture series, Professor Donington took many opportunities to enlarge on this point; he urged the fusion of "sheer intuition" and musicality with the specialized knowledge acquired from research. But the elementary truth of this proposition had its most forceful demonstration in the breach rather than in the observance, as the series progressed. Sol Babitz, defending his individualistic interpretation of *notes inégales*, unwittingly caricatured his own argument by the rigidity of his

adherence to contemporary treatises, as well as the eccentricities of his musical illustrations.

Several of the CUNY lecturers, on the other hand, indicated the futility of viewing early treatises as exclusive repositories of orthodoxy. Frederick Neumann and Albert Fuller, among others, cited numerous faulty procedures and erroneous theories arising from latter-day misuse of such documents. But the essential flaw in the end-of-scale position exemplified by Babitz has deeper implications. This mode of thinking shares the philosophical and logical errors of *all* fundamentalist belief; it attempts to reify a dynamic process by erecting a monolith of “baroque characteristics” (Whitehead’s Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness) and then resorts to circular reasoning to validate the authenticity of those stylistic traits previously defined.

And there is still another, more pragmatic case to be made against dogmatism in performance-practice scholarship—the ever-present risk of being proved wrong by subsequent research. Until very recently, for example, the 17th-century sound ideal was imagined as the

thin, clear, somewhat piercing tone . . . inherent in most of the instruments of the period—the viols, recorders, cornetti, high trumpets, harpsichord, etc.<sup>16</sup>

Yet new investigations suggest quite another hypothesis. Evidently 17th-century musicians in Italy successfully counterbalanced this strident tendency of their melody instruments, so often exacerbated by uncongenial acoustical conditions in churches and ducal chambers, with large forces of foundation instruments and echo-absorbing draperies; this practice bears witness to the period’s serious “preoccupation with bass sonority.”<sup>17</sup>

The 19th century is an epoch whose performance tradition is still imperfectly understood, partially because of our own era’s lack of empathy with the Romantic aesthetic. Scholarly zeal for historical authenticity—*wie es eigentlich gewesen*—in respect to older music is limitless, but there is no equivalent impulse to recreate a bona fide Romantic performance style. The response of the CUNY audience when Harold Schonberg presented rare transcriptions of 19th-century pianists (Paderewski, de Pachmann) playing Chopin is indicative. These genuine—*not* reconstructed!—performances from an earlier cultural epoch simply provoked amusement; they qualified as high camp. Now suppose a Renaissance scholar could miraculously produce a 1592 recording of the Duke of Gonzaga’s choir doing a five-part Monteverdi madrigal. If such a fantasy could materialize, the listeners’ reactions would range from absolute reverence to ordinary, uncritical acceptance of the Mantuan singers’ vocal and interpretive style as a neutral historical datum.

Perhaps another fifty years must elapse before the Romantic era can be regarded with appropriate aesthetic detachment, though the beginnings of a swing in this direction are already demonstrable. Many 19th-century musical

conventions are out of favor today, among them the cult of virtuosity which mesmerized audiences and propelled artists toward extravagant display at the expense of the music. But this phenomenon was not peculiar to the 19th century, nor did it arise spontaneously; it grew out of a long tradition already firmly established by the early 1600's. Moreover, it remained for one of the most adulated virtuosos of the Romantic epoch, Franz Liszt, to make the turn to modern standards of interpretation, as documented in an *autocritique* remarkable for its candor despite its self-congratulatory tone:

. . . in yielding to mindless applause, I nearly put myself on the wrong path, from which, happily, I disengaged myself in time.<sup>18</sup>

In any event, understanding past performance practices is not synonymous with reconstructing artifacts, any more than knowledge of former fashions in concert-programming (excerpts, interpolations, potpourris, etc.) requires worshipful imitation of those customs today.

The process of transmuting the written model of the composer's imagination to its aural counterpart calls to mind Huizinga's insight on the play element in art. The very idea of entering the creative world of another suggests the notion of playing (tinkering?) with the creature of the original fancy; now it is but a step to the suspicion that "style and fashion are more readily consanguineous than orthodox aesthetics are ready to admit."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, this salient feature of music and the dance, their common dependence upon an agent to animate the object-appreciator relationship, constitutes an intriguing problem in the philosophy of art, one that has never been adequately analyzed. The failure of scholarly thought to acknowledge performance as one of the primary categories in aesthetics is finally being challenged on fundamental grounds: namely, that the neglect of this parameter undervalues the decisive role of process and change in certain modes of aesthetic experience.<sup>20</sup> And, for musicology, these theoretical considerations serve to emphasize the urgency of a nondoctrinaire approach to studies in the field, a point aptly summarized in the following *caveat*:

[Do not be misled] into regarding knowledge of the past as a substitute for imagination in the present, rather than as food for it.<sup>21</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Ion*, p. 530 in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Donington, "Expression," in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5th ed. (New York, 1966), II, 984.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Jay Grout, "On Historical Authenticity in the Performance of Old Music," in *Essays in Music in Honor of Archibald Thompson Davison* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p. 346.

<sup>4</sup> Dolmetsch, *The Interpretation of the Music of the 17th and 18th Centuries* (London, 1915); Albrecht, "Die Aufführungspraxis der italienischen Musik des 14. Jahrhunderts" (dissertation, Berlin, 1925); Haas, "Die Aufführungspraxis der Musik" (Vol. 6 of Ernst Bücken's *Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft*, Potsdam, 1931); Schering, *Aufführungspraxis alter Musik* (Leipzig, 1931).

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Dorian's *The History of Music in Performance* (New York, 1942), despite its popular style, was the first important English-language book in this area; a more current reference is Robert Donington's *The Interpretation of Early Music* (London, 1963; 2nd ed. 1965).

<sup>6</sup> This vintage recording has been recently reissued as a long-playing disc (Seraphim 60125).

<sup>7</sup> *Current Musicology* (1969) Number 8; supplement in *Current Musicology* (1970) 10:144–66.

<sup>8</sup> Published in *College Music Symposium* (1969) 9:83–111. The participants were John Reeves White, Denis Stevens, Alfred Mann, and Franklin Zimmerman.

<sup>9</sup> Summarized by the present writer in "Report from New York: Ph.D. Program in Musicology at the City University of New York," *Current Musicology* (1969) 9:27–35.

<sup>10</sup> H. C. Colles, "Extemporization," in *Grove's*, II, 991.

<sup>11</sup> Marc Pincherle, "On the Rights of the Interpreter in the Performance of 17th- and 18th-Century Music," *The Musical Quarterly* (1958) 44:145–66.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Russcol, "Music Since Hiroshima: The Electronic Age Begins," *The American Scholar* (1970) 39:289.

<sup>13</sup> One such fortuitous strike came about during the painstaking art restorations in Florence, after the 1966 flood. A long-time brunette (Donatello's wood sculpture of Mary Magdalene) suddenly became a proper blonde again, when the artist's original gilding was disclosed under layers of mud and centuries-old dirt!

<sup>14</sup> This notion is borrowed from the influential post-World War II study by Adorno *et al.* on personality components of social and political attitudes: Theodore W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. N. Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, 1950).

<sup>15</sup> Full proceedings in *Report of the Eighth Congress of the International Musicological Society* (Kassel, 1961), 2 vols. The quotations in the remainder of this paragraph are from Vol. II, 122–23.

<sup>16</sup> Putnam Aldrich, "The 'Authentic' Performance of Baroque Music," in Davison *Festschrift* (see Note 3), 162.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Schnoebelen, "Performance Practices at San Petronio in the Baroque," *Acta Musicologica* (1969) 41:44.

<sup>18</sup> *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* (Feb. 12, 1837), quoted in R. Wangermée, "Tradition et innovation dans la virtuosité romantique," *Acta Musicologica* (1970) 42:20.

<sup>19</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston, 1950), p. 186.

<sup>20</sup> Hilde Hein, "Performance as an Aesthetic Category," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1970) 27:381–86.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Grout, *op. cit.*, p. 347.