

Musicology and Other Friendly Musical Disciplines

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It seems something of a truism to say that there are relationships between musicology, composition, and performance, that they complement each other, that they can be mutually helpful, and that they can all contribute to the enjoyment and understanding of music. We must first have compositions; otherwise performers would have nothing to play or sing, and musicologists nothing to say. Composers can at times be totally independent of the other two groups if their music is electronic, for example, or if it serves visual ends, such as intarsia on furniture, or ornaments on clothes—Renaissance dresses or 20th-century ties. Pleasing the eye, however, is only an occasional purpose of music, and so we need performers if we are to hear it. Whether or not we also need musicologists is not for me to say, but I think they are here to stay. Scholars want them, certainly, and so do concert-goers and other listeners who expect a musicological (or pseudomusicological) explanation of what they are about to hear. Musicologists have helped bring to light forgotten compositions of the past and, sometimes, of the present. Their research in performance practice is hopefully of value to performers. Conversely, some composers' pronouncements—and they are becoming more and more frequent—can help musicologists understand their creative processes. What performers have to say about what is or is not playable can guide the musicologist in making a better edition or in understanding how an old instrument was probably held or played. In other words, the various disciplines are closely allied. It is those people who practice them who sometimes present problems. But more about that later.

There are musicologists who also compose or perform, such as Halsey Stevens and Denis Stevens; but although it is essential that musicologists know something about composition and performance, and advisable that composers and performers have some training in musicology, it does not follow that everyone must be an expert at everything, the exceptional individuals notwithstanding. Each discipline requires long hours of work, and there is rarely enough time to do everything well. Then, too, each requires a special type of mind—creative, artistic, or scholarly. It does not matter whether or not they are equivalent, but it must be recognized that they are not the same.

Both musicologists and performers disagree among themselves about the extent to which performers should try to re-create an authentic performance (assuming that such a thing were possible). I believe that most musicologists and many musicologically-oriented performers strive for as historically valid a performance as can be achieved. But I have also heard less scholarly performers say that, since musicologists disagree with each other on problems of interpretation, the artist need not worry about such matters. They therefore feel free to play as they like. In fact, they do not always mean the same

thing as musicologists when they speak of interpretation. Musicologists think of *musica ficta*, *notes inégales*, and the like, whereas these performers are concerned with how much pedal one should use when playing Bach on a grand piano. "If Bach were alive today," they insist, "he would be grateful for our modern instruments." To this kind of remark there is little one can reply, because one must assume that they obtained their information through direct communication with the departed composer.

Colleges and universities which give degrees in musicology encourage performance more and more as an auxiliary discipline, without necessarily considering vocal or instrumental lessons as part of the credit hours for the degree. Some expect a candidate to have achieved a minimum level of proficiency in performance before entrance, or before graduation. Certain institutions provide a *collegium musicum*, in which musicology students may play or sing; they also sponsor visits by performers of early music, who give concerts and then discuss the music with musicology classes.

The Josquin Festival (New York, 1971)¹ was an example on an international scale of extended dialogue between scholars and performers. In fact, more and more of the papers presented at musicological meetings include musical illustrations, live or recorded. Similarly, lecture-recitals such as those organized by the Toscanini Archives of the New York Public Library's Music Division stress both archival and performance aspects of music. The interest in early music is no longer limited to musicologists and other antiquarians. Whenever a competent group gives a free concert of early music, one is sure to find the place filled with people of all ages and varied garb; and not all of them look like musicologists.

The trend in scholarly editions is changing. Musicologists take a bolder stand than in the past. They suggest more *musica ficta*, realize figured basses, write out ornaments; and for lute music they keep both the scholar and the performer in mind by giving the tablature as well as the transcription. It is no longer fashionable (though by no means unheard of) to rely on the performer's taste and let him decide what to do when the musicologist is unwilling or unable to make up his mind. As a result, we now have less of a dichotomy between scholarly and practical editions.

The historical musicologist who teaches touches upon composition and performance. He discusses compositions and places them within their larger historical, social, or other applicable context. Through research he can discover a piece of music and identify it; through paleography he can make it readable, explainable, and performable. He considers *musica ficta*, text underlay, and other problems of performance. He may criticize editions and performances of music. Students want to perform—no matter how poorly—works which they have studied musicologically.

Pure theorists explain and analyze compositions in great detail. Many seem happy to concentrate on the particular piece under their nose; they use a less comparative method than musicologists and care less about non-musical factors which others might consider pertinent. They often tell us in

no uncertain terms what it is that we are hearing. If we think we are hearing something else occasionally, the fault, I am sure, is ours. Musicologists use theory too, of course, but in a broader sense, I believe, and as one of several means to a better understanding of music.

It would be difficult to operate without librarians. I am referring not to the dedicated souls who try to attract illiterates to the library but to musicologist-librarians such as François Lesure and Nanie Bridgman, who help scholars and performers locate source materials or decipher difficult scripts. Since they see other musicologists every day, they know about work in progress before it is listed in bibliographies and can tell others concerned with the same subject, so as to avoid unnecessary duplication. I am indebted to librarians for much useful information.

Some curators of instrumental collections help performers and musicologists with organological and iconographical details. Several, such as Geneviève Thibault, also organize concerts in which their instruments can be heard as well as seen.

Music critics are called upon to review both musical works and musical performances. Journalistic critics have included composers, performers, and some musicologists, such as Alfred Einstein and Paul Henry Lang. There should be little difference between good criticism and good musicological method, but that is not always apparent in the daily papers. In more scholarly media, however, one finds musicologically-oriented criticism. A recent example is Alexander Blachly's review of two recordings of Trecento music in the April 1971 issue of *The Musical Quarterly*; therein he considers anachronistic instrumentation, insufficient *musica ficta*, and lack of references to sources in formulating his judgment. These are not points which would ordinarily cause most newspaper critics to bat an eyelash.

When I consider the many musicological polemics that have taken place, I realize that musicologists do not always act as one big happy family. On the other hand, I have always thought that scholars were essentially harmless to other musicians and nonmusicians. Such is not everyone's opinion, however. To some people the musicologist seems like a cold, dehydrated creature, all mind and no heart. He is essentially a frustrated composer or performer who turned to scholarship out of despair. Owing to his lack of "feeling," he was too incompetent to do anything else. And so, with a vengeance, he tries to take away a performer's spontaneity and warmth by admonishing him against playing a piece "as he feels it." The musicologist does not like music; that is why, as everyone knows, he talks about everything connected with music, except the music itself. He would rather look at a score than listen to one. If he is forced to attend a concert, he makes observations about whether the ornaments were properly performed or not, thereby spoiling other people's listening pleasure. He may be a scholar, but a musician he is not. "Is Mr. X a musician or a musicologist?" a performer asked me. I inquired whether one necessarily precluded the other, though I had been strongly tempted to retort: "Are you a musician or a performer?" In

retrospect I am glad I held my tongue, first of all because I do not completely agree that “*Musicorum et cantorum magna est distancia . . . Nam qui canit quod non sapit, diffinitur bestia*”; and secondly, the lady probably meant no harm at the time and was simply restricting the use of the term “musician” to composers and performers, whereas I had thought it also included persons who knew about music. Her views were more clearly expressed on another occasion, however, during a radio interview, in which she proclaimed with gusto: “I am madly fighting musicology!”

I was once asked by a layman: “Isn’t it dangerous for a potential composer to study musicology? Won’t it stifle his creativity if he finds out about all the things that have already been done?” Another unforgettable remark was: “Musicologists are only trying to show off their erudition by unearthing the works of some obscure composer, whose music could interest no one, and would do better to say something new about established masterpieces.” Since this statement was made by a theorist, I took it in stride. But imagine my reaction when I read in the preface to a thesis by a gifted student of mine, a performer who I thought was converting to musicology: “In academia today, the concept of studying the esoteric is very acceptable as long as one is not actually confronted with any facts of the matter.” I knew that the gentleman was joking, but I threatened him with some sort of excommunication unless he softened his words.

Just as book publishers occasionally try to sugar-coat serious musicological writing by minimizing the author’s scholarly background,² certain critics and impresarios show a similar penchant with regard to performances. I was recently sent an advertisement for a series of concerts of unusual music. Judging from reports of earlier series, these programs are of high quality and require no apology for the musicological spadework that must have been necessary in their preparation. But whoever composed the notice saw fit to quote from critics who seemed to equate musicology with dullness. “Mr. ——— and his singers avoid musicological mustiness. For them, music is a very living art.”³ “Musicologists as a rule are none too animated themselves, but one . . . happens to be a conductor . . . who proves a happy exception,”⁴ said a record reviewer. Why the publicity experts include musicologists on their mailing lists and send them these gems is difficult to understand. Surely musicologists cannot be expected to buy subscriptions in response to such appeals. Publicists must think that musicologists are not only tedious but also stupid and insensitive. Are we to turn the other cheek?

Why not? Temporarily annoying as they might be, a few remarks directed at musicologists by some laymen or by some musicians of another stripe cannot do much damage. In fact, they probably do not reflect a majority view. Today, most people are trying to bring the various branches of music closer together for our mutual benefit. Perfect equality among musical disciplines may be a myth, at least in the minds of some of their representatives, but fraternity is not impossible. Musicologists converse more and more with other friendly musicians. We can, therefore, be proud that, as Gusta·e

Reese put it in his introductory comments at the Josquin Festival, we are becoming ecumenical.

NOTES

¹ See the report in this issue, pp. 47–64.

² See P. H. Lang's review in *The Musical Quarterly* (1963) 49:252–54.

³ Harold Schonberg, *The New York Times*, 11 February 1971.

⁴ John W. Freeman, *Opera News*, 27 February 1971, p. 34.