Interrelations between Musicology and Musical Performance

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In discussing this subject from the standpoint of the performer, I find it necessary to use the narrower definition of musicology given in the *Harvard Dictionary of Music:* "work . . . that involves the discovery of unknown or the clarification of obscure matters."[1] The performer, particularly the conductor, who has many obligations in preparing a performance (some of them of a rather trivial nature), rarely finds the time to do in-depth research on problems directly connected with musical execution—problems that may indeed have a very noticeable influence on the final outcome of the performance. Obviously, in such cases the help of an expert with enough erudition to make sensible decisions may be more than welcome.

The above statement, unless properly qualified, could of course lead to a great many misconceptions. It would be difficult to respect a conductor if he were to use a musicologist as a musical thinking machine, a supplier of the whole truth in every instance, a truth which would then merely need to be translated into sound in order to produce a performance. No matter how reliable the work of the musicologist may be, in a certain sense the performer must be his own musicologist. He must make decisions, perhaps on the basis of musicological revelations fed to him by others, which will reflect his own musical taste and intelligence. There is no whole and unshakable truth upon which he may rely. Even though musicology may be called a science, it is a science that serves an art and is therefore not necessarily an exact science.

Generally speaking, I am inclined to believe that a performer should call on the help of the musicologist mostly for music written before 1800. After that date the notation becomes so exact and the available sources so plentiful that the intelligent performer ought to be able to make his important decisions without the help of outsiders.

Before the year 1800, however, one finds many problems that need the kind of loving analysis for which the average performer lacks the proper background: various types of ornamentation, the realization of a figured bass, the execution of vocal and instrumental appoggiaturas, or the assignment of various orchestral units and the use of the organ in the accompaniment of chorales in J. S. Bach's Passions, to name just a few particularly striking examples.

Before he arrives at any decisions, however, it is important for the performer, particularly the conductor, to develop a basic philosophy of performance. The question that he must ask himself most often in this connection is the meaning of the word authenticity. How "authentic" must the performer be in order to do justice to his function? To this question the past hundred years of performance practice have certainly supplied solutions of the most extreme kind in both directions, with a full spectrum of variations

in between. One need only think, on the one hand, of a well-known "edition" of Handel's *Messiah* that uses horns and trombones, or of an arrangement for large symphony orchestra of Bach's Chaconne in D minor for violin solo, and, on the other, of some recently recorded performances of the *St. Matthew Passion* in which the elemental outburst of thunder and lightning has been toned down to a peaceable *mezzo forte* in order not to violate the "style." Who is right? How far does the performer's conscience allow him to go?

In order to answer these questions, we should first understand what the term "authenticity" really means and what bearing it has on the validity of a performance. Not long ago a recording of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* appeared in which the conductor apparently had made it his aim to have the vocal lines performed exactly in the manner in which they might have been heard during Mozart's lifetime. This involved the addition of any number of fioriture completely unfamiliar to our present-day ears but quite possibly "authentic." Not having heard the recording myself, I have relied on the comments of several reviewers, who were surprisingly unanimous in their condemnation of the practices used. They lauded the conductor's erudition but did not think much of his performance, which leads me to the conclusion that it was perhaps Mozart's authentic *Don Giovanni*, but not our *Don Giovanni*.

Does this sound like blasphemy? I think not. It merely leads us back to the widely accepted opinion that there is, and must be, a legitimate difference between the function of an art museum and that of a musical performing organization. The paintings in a museum remain forever the same, no matter what their age may be. They may be restored when natural wear requires it, but this must be done with the greatest care, so that nothing in the character of the original will be changed. If a viewer finds a painting dated, his reaction is normally to give it but scant attention and to move on to the next work, which may be more to his liking. Thus he is allowed to make his own selections, to decide for himself which works arouse his emotions and which do not. We find it completely normal that some paintings touch us more than others.

With a musical performance, the work-audience relationship is of a very different nature. The listener in a symphonic concert may or may not enjoy the rendition of a symphony, but for the time being he is a captive. He cannot turn to the next selection or switch channels. Therefore, it is in the best interests of the performer or conductor not to lose rapport with his audience during any selection, or even any part thereof. He cannot say that "this is the way the composer wrote it, so don't blame me if you don't like it." No, he must be keenly aware that it is his duty, by the choice of his program and by the type and quality of his rendition, to keep the listener satisfied. Let us face it: no matter how letter-perfect a musical performer may be, he never merely presents for inspection the work of another; rather, he gives his all to the interpretation in order to win approval from the audience.

For that reason it is most essential, particularly in older works, that the performer create a bridge between the work and the audience. Musical

tastes change, and the art of performance lies in taking these changes into account without doing violence to the intrinsic nature of the work. If his performance leaves the audience cold, then it will do him little good to claim that it was absolutely authentic by the best available standards of scholarship. He must translate without losing the flavor of the original.

But what is really meant by "translating" the composer's intentions? Not one specific thing, of course; "translation" may express itself in a hundred different ways, from the most physical to the most spiritual adjustment of the original. One hopes, however, in this time of conscientious performance standards, that such changes remain subtle.

Toscanini was very fond of telling journalists that he was only the composer's faithful servant, and that he never did anything but see to it that every note was sung or played the way the composer wrote it. This was an excellent publicity line, particularly at the fade-out of an overly romantic age in which the "interpreter of genius" had the right to impose his own personality upon everything. But it does not take a great deal of musicological knowledge to point out how vulnerable Toscanini's statement is. There are many reasons for which slight changes in the written text of a score may be necessary in order to warrant a proper execution. Mozart is perhaps the only one among the older composers who can always be taken at face value. The reason is that he was eminently practical and never wrote anything that could not be properly performed by the means available during his own time.

But how different is Beethoven! Felix Weingartner devoted an entire book to the hundreds of changes that must be made in the original text of Beethoven's nine symphonies in order for them to sound satisfactory to a modern ear. These changes were not particularly musicological. A mere knowledge of the techniques of wind instruments during Beethoven's time shows us that certain notes could not be produced on the instruments available to him, and that whenever these notes seem to be demanded by the musical sequence, it is only logical to have them played, since modern instruments can produce them without difficulty. Not to use these notes—because Beethoven did not write them—would hardly be in the best interests of the performance, for it is obvious that Beethoven did not always tailor his invention to the possibilities of the existing instruments, the way Mozart did. In fact, I remember a very striking example from my student days: a Viennese orchestra performed Beethoven's Fifth under the direction of a very prominent conductor who at that time had apparently gone through a spell of having to be literal at all costs. In the recapitulation of the first movement, when the second theme appears in C major, it was not played by the horns (as Weingartner recommends and as is now done in every performance) but by the bassoons—which is what Beethoven wrote. The reaction of the audience was not merely astonishment at the rather strange sound, but a series of unrestrained chuckles; to hear the bassoons play this heroic theme could only be termed funny.

So much for relentless authenticity, which eliminates the use of ordinary

common sense. To any open-minded musician it must be quite obvious that Beethoven would have liked to use the horns for this particular passage, but since his horns for this movement were in E♭ and could not produce all the necessary notes, and since there was not enough time for a change of pitch, he had to resort to the bassoons. It is easy to see that this was done in order to cope with a dire emergency and not out of artistic conviction. In such a case it seems that the task of the present-day conductor is not to safeguard the literal execution of all details but to project the contents of the score in the most direct and technically unencumbered fashion possible. This may sometimes call for slight reorchestrations, as in the above example; more often it will necessitate changes in the dynamics or even in the phrasing. For we are referring not only to passages which Beethoven could not commit to paper because of the limitations of the instruments available to him: we are thinking also of other passages where he was so completely possessed by the musical meaning that he did not pay strict attention to the details necessary to make this meaning clear. Here again the conductor must be untrue to the letter in order to be true to the spirit.

As mentioned before, the real problems, the ones that often induce the conductor or performer to seek the advice of the musicologist, occur mostly in works written before 1800. This is so mainly for two reasons. First, during the 17th and 18th centuries musical orthography was far less literal than after the *Eroica*. It dealt much more frequently with ambiguous symbols that must be interpreted by the performer for proper execution. (The figured bass is only one example.) The second and even more important reason is that certain performance practices of earlier periods, which must have been part and parcel of every musical education in those days, have since quietly disappeared and can be unearthed only through ardent musicological labor.

We can discover some of these lost performance practices in surprisingly familiar music, where familiarity with the music itself often overshadows the fact that in playing it we are not following our standard rules. A good example is the slow introduction of the overture to *Don Giovanni*, which is marked *Alla breve*. If we were to follow our own rules and insist that this introduction be performed at a speed indicated by two beats to the measure, the result would be absolute disaster. This is where musicology comes to our aid. Musicologists tell us that in Mozart's day time-beating was not nearly so important an activity as it is now, that therefore the indication *Alla breve* in a Mozart score has nothing to do with giving two beats to the bar or with the speed that this would dictate, that *Alla breve* is thus merely an expressive indication suggesting the pulsation of the passage. Of course this is not a unique case: exactly the same thing occurs in the opening measures of *Così fan tutte* and *Die Zauberflöte*.

Musicians of today have a tendency to overlook such apparent discrepancies and simply follow "tradition." I have often tried to test this point by asking my students why the opening of *Don Giovanni* should not be conducted in two. The answer usually was: "Why, everybody knows this piece. You

could not possibly conduct it in two; it would be much too fast." I submit that for a thinking musician this answer is insufficient. How do we know that it should be played at a slower tempo, except for the fact that we remember it from past performances? But what would happen if this were not the thrice familiar opening of *Don Giovanni* but rather the second movement of a divertimento by Dittersdorf? Would we still know what to do? Or would we have to consult someone else's recording and hope that it might supply the right answer? One might think that the basic theory of tempo determination in music before Beethoven ought to be a matter of common knowledge among musicians. And yet, I have found relatively few musicians who were able to furnish an intelligent explanation, or who were even aware that a difference existed in tempo determination before and after 1800.

This leads us to the peculiar discovery that sometimes the "knowledge" of a so-called tradition can easily stifle investigation into musicological matters. If an otherwise well-trained musician were not familiar with the "traditional" tempo of the introduction to *Don Giovanni*, he might initially be tempted to perform it at an incorrect tempo. But probably sooner or later he would sense something wrong with his interpretation, and then he would perhaps start asking a few questions that might ultimately lead him to the proper explanation for the phenomenon. On the other hand, a musician familiar with the "tradition" would not be likely to ask any questions; he would simply accept something as right because it was practiced by those who "ought to know." Such an attitude would lead away from all risk, away from inquisitiveness, and away from the acquisition of knowledge.

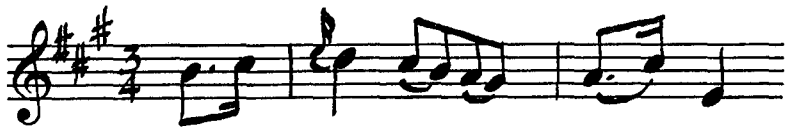
When I was still a novice in my profession, I once asked a much older and more experienced Italian colleague why a certain retard, not written in the score, was always observed in a duet from *La Traviata*. His *non sequitur* answer was "Si fa così," which, in other words, meant "Do it, and don't ask silly questions." Yet, an intelligent and inquisitive musician does want to ask questions, silly or otherwise. He wants a reason for doing something, and this reason frequently can be found only with the help of musicology. He must be eager to know what the original performance practices were, not in order to accept them all without reservation, but in order to make an intelligent choice among them and to adjust them to the sense of style of his own epoch.

Take, for instance, the question of vocal appoggiaturas in Mozart's operas, or in other vocal works of the same period. As a student I was taught that appoggiaturas are admissible only in a secco recitative, never in an accompagnato or—Heaven forbid—in an aria or concerted piece; and even where they were admissible, so I was taught, they could be used only in the descending, never in the ascending, line. Listening to a few representative recordings of recent vintage will soon convince the hearer that the attitude toward this problem has changed greatly. Now, not only are appoggiaturas used in accompagnato recitatives and concerted pieces, but they are also occasionally taken in ascending lines. Let an erudite musicologist decide which is right. I would suspect that the practice of Mozart's time probably

went much further than that of the most uninhibited present-day performance. This does not mean to say that we are not going far enough; an exact imitation of the "authentic" practice might easily appear today as a stilted mannerism. Fashions may change to some extent, as they have in this case, but rarely does any fashion revert completely to its original practice.

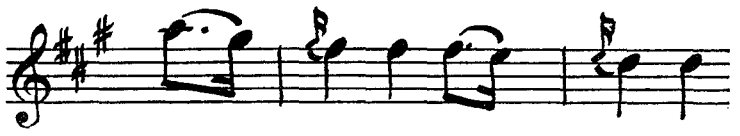
As another illustration, take the question of the instrumental appoggiatura. When is it short and when is it long? What is the meaning of the little line drawn through its stem? Should it always be performed according to its written value? Although these questions have been the subjects of many books, not all the ambiguities have been removed. One example has haunted me for many years: the opening measures of the last movement of Mozart's Violin Concerto in A major, K. 219 (Ex. 1).

EXAMPLE 1



Here the appoggiatura on *e* is written as a sixteenth and in all probability should be performed as such. Yet in nine out of ten performances you will hear it played as an eighth. Admittedly, the eighth-note sounds very elegant and graceful, but is it correct? This question must be asked, particularly in view of the fact that in a phrase a few measures later the identical sixteenth appoggiatura is almost invariably performed as a sixteenth (Ex. 2).

EXAMPLE 2



Thus, we have a case in which two phrases in absolutely identical notation and only a few measures apart are, in the majority of performances, executed differently. Why? Here we could certainly use a definitive answer from musicologists. Perhaps this answer has already been supplied, and only my ignorance in such matters keeps me from knowing it. But if this be the case, then the majority of performers must be subject to the same ignorance, which, for their sake, I prefer not to assume.[2]

It is strange that in our time problems of this nature still exist. Perhaps musicology could come to the rescue and supply the words of wisdom which we so badly need. In a sense, it would be reassuring for a teacher to be able to say to his student: "This is the way it must be played, and any other execution is wrong." But on second thought, perhaps we ought not to wish for this

state of affairs. One of the charms of music lies in the fact that there are still unresolved situations, and that the solutions are to be supplied by the good sense and taste of the artist rather than by any kind of exact knowledge. Perhaps one ought to deal with some of these problems in the spirit of Artur Schnabel, who supposedly said, when asked about a certain question of ornamentation: "It really does not matter how you play it—the important thing is to have the courage of your convictions!"

NOTES

[1] Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969, p. 558.

[2] I distinctly remember Adolf Busch's execution of this passage. This violinist, who certainly could not be accused of a superficial approach to musical problems, played the *e* appoggiatura as a sixteenth-note. In this interpretation, he certainly had the principle of consistency on his side.