

On the Training of Musicologists and Performers in Great Britain

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The training of professional musicians in Great Britain has been bedeviled by the traditional, though unnatural, division between the various conservatory establishments—the four Royal Schools of Music, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and so on—and the small (by American standards) music departments which now exist in virtually every British university. Until very recently the assumption was that if practical training was desired, then a conservatory course would be chosen; if academic training were preferred, the student would select a university course. Stated in this way, the unreality and absurdity of the division is immediately apparent, but when I was a student, some twenty years ago, it was generally accepted as an inevitable and even desirable distinction. My contemporaries at the conservatories shared little common ground in their approach to music with their colleagues at universities, and even today, having taught extensively in both types of institutions, I find that there too often remains a markedly differing outlook between the “practical” conservatory teachers and the “theoretical” university staff.

That the conservatories were dimly aware that adequate performers could not be produced through a training based almost exclusively on instrumental playing was shown by the various “Graduate” courses which they instituted in the period following the last war. However, when one talks to students who have taken these courses, it becomes clear that the fundamental academic disciplines which are basic to a university course are virtually ignored: the approach is essentially geared to musical rather than intellectual training, and history, harmony, etc., tend to be regarded as frills rather than as basics. Some twelve years ago at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music, I instituted an intensive three-year course in the outlines of music history from plain-song to contemporary music. It was uphill work at the time to convince either colleagues or students that a general knowledge of music history was desirable, if not essential, for a practical musician. Even today, British conservatories tend to pay lip service to anything other than playing an instrument.

Before dismissing such attitudes as ignorant or unbalanced, one must realize that music is ill-taught—if taught at all!—in the large majority of British schools, and that there is a dire shortage of first-class private instrumental teachers. Thus most students are accepted for professional training more on promise and latent talent than on any impressive accomplishment. Given the normal grant-aid period of three years, the traditionally-minded conservatory teacher argues as follows: “This student needs six to eight

hours of daily practice on his main instrument if he is to reach a high professional standard; furthermore, his secondary instrument needs three to four hours daily if he is to reach a respectable standard. That leaves very little time for anything else." There is a genuine feeling of desperation here. How can our students catch up in three years with their contemporaries in other countries, many of whom will have had a first-class training since primary school?

The universities face a similar dilemma, arising from the failure of most British schools to take music seriously. Again, student selection must be based primarily on promise instead of achievement; despite regulations about A-level passes, these examinations, as presently constituted, are no guarantee of any real standards as far as music is concerned. The student has almost certainly been so badly taught in harmony and counterpoint that he will have to be taken back almost to the beginning and thoroughly trained in the appropriate logical and aural processes; his history is likely to be the result of regurgitating the words in a general textbook rather than based on any scholarly study or detailed knowledge of the music involved. Being so deficient in these subjects, he is unlikely to be even a tolerable analyst. Above all, the university teacher will have to inculcate the close logic, the painstaking attention to detail, the stringent self-criticism and opening-up of individual thought which constitute a scholarly approach. Small wonder that here, in the thick of essays, seminars, compositional work, it is hard to fit in instrumental instruction as well.

There have been two marked musical stages in the British universities in this century, and a third may well be emerging. Initially the music departments were dominated by teachers whose main background was organ and cathedral music, whose main teaching concerned harmony, counterpoint, and history from c. 1550 to c. 1900. The dramatic spread of the influence of musicology in this country following the last war was quite abruptly reflected in a large majority of professional and teaching appointments being given to scholars. The "cathedral tradition" quickly waned, together with the rapid decline of church-going as a mark of social respectability, and musicology became virtually the fundamental constituent of university music courses. In the past few years there has been further change, and as British universities have gradually incorporated performance as a part of their courses, many more practical musicians have been appointed to their staffs. Few universities now lack a specialist composer or an attached instrumental ensemble, whereas even ten years ago few possessed either. Of the last four professorial appointments in Britain, two have gone to musicologists, one to a professional pianist, and one to a professional composer.

What caused the British universities almost uniformly, and within the course of a few years, to modify their traditions of pure scholarship to incorporate the essentially practical and professional study of performance? It seems to me that a number of factors were simultaneously involved, the first of which concerns the basic nature of the subject itself.

Music is sound; the study of music, the study of a sound world. Purposefully organized musical sound may legitimately be considered a form of abstract language.¹ However one defines music, the study of music must constitute the study of particular sound worlds and abstract languages. It is with sound that we begin, because this is what music is. The purpose of musical study is to try to probe with our conscious minds what is essentially a communication from subconscious to subconscious (from the heart to the heart, as Beethoven put it).

Before we can start, we must master the language. This is not merely a question of learning musical notation as theory, any more than learning a spoken language is a question just of learning vocabulary and grammar. In terms of spoken language we must not only be able to converse as fluently as the natives: we must become steeped in the same literature, the same historical traditions; we must be able to catch the most subtle inflection and understand its precise significance in any given context.

To this end we learn to write essays in the language (in music via harmony, counterpoint, composition, orchestration), we steep ourselves in its literature, history, philosophy, and general culture, we go to live with the people and imbibe their ethos—the sounds, smells, sights, thoughts, even the restrictions: everything which shapes their daily lives and their modes of speech. Omitting any of this means an incomplete grasp of the language as it actually exists.

Music is infinitely more subtle and evasive than spoken languages. Moreover, it really lives only when it is actually heard. The mind cannot conjure up the complex sounds of music so precisely as it can conjure up the sequence of words. In either case the subtle significance is often lost unless spoken or played aloud. I may think of an abstract idea: “I love early mornings in summer.” Take a dozen people agreeing with that sentiment, and each, through the force of his own personality, would give the phrase different inflections and shades of meaning.

Given the equivalent of that statement in music, our job is not to inflect it ourselves but to try to discover what inflection the composer intended. To do so involves a knowledge of the composer, his musical language, the historical and personal traditions of that language, and much more.

Such lines of thought always proceed toward sound as the end product. Without that end, all the rest is essentially futile and nonproductive. There is no such thing as the abstract study of music, and if there were, it could not possibly interest and involve anyone with music in his blood. We chose to study music because in our youth we were intoxicated with sound.

How impossible, therefore, to provide adequate courses of study which do not involve performance; they are blighted by unreality from the start. How equally futile to provide courses which “teach” performance only. A worthwhile performance is not taught, even if basic technique may be: a worthwhile performance grows from a profound knowledge of all aspects of the music involved.

I doubt that many British academicians just a few years ago reasoned quite

like this, but whatever their motives, or perhaps dissatisfaction with the prevailing "abstract" state of affairs, the notion began to spread for one reason or another that performance might, after all, be a respectable branch of music study. (As historians, they must have had a subconscious awareness that, historically speaking, the odds were weighted against performers being regarded as desirable members of society.)

The main impetus, however, came—I suspect—from the students themselves. The demands that relevance in curriculum be seen as well as claimed may have been dramatically highlighted by the student uprisings of three or four years ago, but they were in the air well before that. Indeed they were taking shape at much the same time that many British academicians were feeling a little unsure of music as a purely academic discipline. (I can quote no written authority but recall many conversations on the subject with other music lecturers.) The change was apparent in interviews when each year an increasing number of applicants asked about the role of performance in our curriculum. It was also revealed when one suggested to applicants of a high performing ability that they might be more suited to a conservatory, only to be told with increasing frequency that the conservatory approach was too narrow to interest them. Added to this, the British system of peripatetic instrumental teachers in schools and the establishment of county youth orchestras got into its stride only in the early 1960's; by the end of that decade we were seeing the first practical products of this emphasis on instrumental performance.

So now we have performance as a part of most British university music courses; instrumental instruction is available in most music departments, and we have to consider how it is accommodated, and what standards we should expect. In brief, it is usually one of a series of specialized options for final exams, and the nonspecialist can only be constantly encouraged to impose the same high standards of self-criticism on his playing as on the rest of his university work. Lacking the necessary hours for practice, even the specialist cannot often rival the technical accomplishments of the conservatory student. But his detailed grasp of compositional procedures and musicology should compensate in terms of interpretive understanding. At Hull University he is also expected to study thoroughly performance practices and the history and repertoire of his instrument.

Thus far I have mainly considered the performer and the assets he gains from academic studies. Similarly, the musicologist learns from practice. Unless he himself performs, he exists in a vacuum, in an unreal cloud-cuckoo-land. Moreover, unless he has personally come to grips with the language which he employs, by actually bringing it to life, he fails to understand what it is really about; his tomes enshrine the dead, the theoretically correct, but will not represent the same language as that actually spoken by the performer. Just as the performer who has not come to grips with music through writing it himself, through analytical methods and historical awareness, will have an incomplete understanding of what he is playing, so the musicologist who has

not handled the basic materials through composing, performing, and conducting, will not fully understand the sound world he writes about or edits.

In short, I regard both the “pure” musicologist and the “pure” performer as not only undesirable but also unreal in terms of the world of music which I know and love. The only musician who wins my respect is both musicologist and performer and has a lively practical understanding of the many other fields of music as well. Naturally he will have his own specialization, but if this is achieved only at the expense of other accomplishments, he is as potentially dangerous as any other mind which claims authority in a subject which it knows only in part.

NOTE

¹ I mean here that clear messages are passed from composer to listener even though neither can precisely define the communication in the crude terms of verbal language.