

The Composer as Musicologist

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The idea that musicology has any validity, relevance, or applicability for the composer is most frequently questioned by the latter when he or she is in graduate school and is forced to take one or more courses in musicology to fulfill requirements of the departmental establishment. Such was my own experience, and at the time it seemed that the line of least resistance pointed to taking the course without asking philosophical questions—not an atypical response. But the questions remain, even if the courses disappear from the curriculum, or if a student cajoles the department into waiving requirements. How is it possible to anticipate how such courses may later be useful?

It was not long after this forced exposure that its first effects appeared. I was commissioned to compose a work for an early music group that wanted to have a contemporary piece to contrast with their staple repertoire. This, as well as many more recent compositions, required a thorough knowledge of the early instruments and also of performance practice. Why the latter? The answer is most easily given with respect to the harpsichord. The instrument reached its zenith in the Baroque, and the music written for it at that time has a colorful and evocative sound that is not revealed by the printed score. The music, of course, must be “brought to life” by the performer, who must supply not only articulation, phrasing, and ornamentation (of which scant indications appear), but also an appropriate registration (for which there are no indications at all). At this point the composer-quasi-musicologist has vague memories about this sort of thing; it was once mentioned in the musicology course that there were certain areas of common practice concerning these matters, and so one could go and look them up somewhere if one wished. But would that be the wish of the composer who is emphatically writing 20th-, not 18th-century music? Perhaps not, until he confers with the harpsichordist who will play his new piece. This performer usually proves to be only too eager to discuss such matters, especially the use of registration. The composer feels a distinct warmth in the player’s presence—gratitude for having shown enough interest in his instrument to compose for it. One is also treated on this occasion to a capsule lecture-recital that effectively demonstrates the instrument’s traditional range of possibilities and explains the rationale underlying its utilization. The explanation ends with the solemn warning that not everyone views these matters in quite the same way. One must not be misled by those who would have us think that the primary function of registration is to determine color, not to obtain octave doublings. (Or was it the other way around?) It is too strong a temptation not to consult another performer, who turns out to champion rather different ideas with equally enthusiastic partisan fervor. Alas, there is really no alternative to

looking it up in a large, outwardly-hostile library. There, of course, one finds several excellent studies which deal with just this sort of problem. But even this may not really prove satisfactory; sometimes the only answer is to try one's hand at playing the pieces oneself, experimenting with different methods of transforming the scores into music.

All that has been proven thus far is that the results of musicology, the labor of dedicated professionals, may have some use; it has not been demonstrated that the composer can profit from the study of musicology as a discipline. We left the composer struggling with the harpsichord, perhaps disillusioned with his brief musicological investigation. However, looking something up in a library, even in scholarly tomes, is not musicology; it is merely an extension of reference techniques learned in elementary school. It is only when the composer begins to reflect on the aptness of the various kinds of ornamentation, articulation, phrasing, and registration with which he is experimenting, that musicology really comes into play by providing a proper stylistic sense of reference as to what might have seemed appropriate to players and listeners of another era. The composer might well agree that the study of musicology should aid this kind of understanding, but how will it help him in his task of creating new music for the harpsichord? There are at least two possible ways.

The first is through a knowledgeable and sophisticated use of notation. The notation for conventional instruments is so routine that we often forget the link between notational conventions and playing techniques. The practicality of the *sova* symbol in extreme registers for some instruments (especially keyboard) and its impracticality for others (especially strings) is the most familiar instance.

A second possibility is to adapt patterns indigenous to certain instruments to contemporary styles. For example, many virtuosic works for violin utilize patterns of a rapid succession of notes that lie well under the hand in one position and are then repeated sequentially by merely shifting the hand to a higher or lower position. This technique can be modernized; there are many nontriadic patterns of notes which can be fitted into this technique as readily as the triadic ones previously employed.

These and other possibilities contribute to the construction of an idiomatic composition, one that will sound like a work for the harpsichord, not something which is merely played on that instrument.

It might be thought that such considerations of blending the very old and the very new would apply only to early instruments, but this is not the case. For several centuries composers have demonstrated an awareness of the past through clearly observable practices. One need cite only two well-known examples: Bach, *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II*, E Major Fugue, and Mozart, *Requiem*. Both works show an awareness of the harmonic and contrapuntal practices of the preceding period, and the *Requiem* extends this to include treatment of texture. But how should one consider the modal chorale settings of Bach, the Mozart *Suite*, K. 399, the polychoral compositions of Brahms, or,

for that matter, the Neo-Classic school of this century? In these works there is, in each instance, a complete fusion of two styles, that of the composer's own era, and a previous one of his choosing.

It can be argued that the discipline of musicology did not exist in the time of Bach and Mozart, and that it was in its infancy in the time of Brahms, but this point is negated by the well-known fact that all three composers made as complete and systematic a study of the music of the past as their circumstances permitted. In recent years there has been a flood of new knowledge of the music of the past—not musicological knowledge, which has, admittedly, reached deluge proportions, but the fact that the average student has at his immediate disposal the vast bulk of music itself, which the master composer until the recent past could not have. We speak of music printing starting in the early 16th century, but how many of these early editions were in the hands of composers? And Mozart, for example, had no contact with the works of Bach until 1782, when he made a trip to the Thomaskirche in Leipzig and studied the motets of Bach by laying out the manuscript parts on a large table and “synthesizing” the score mentally. It no longer requires a lifetime of dedication to secure a comprehensive general knowledge of past styles and techniques. The most immediate and profound consequence has been to equip almost every composer with that general knowledge which, in the past, was the possession of only those composers who actively pursued it.

Were it not for this phenomenon, the Neo-Classic school could not have come into existence. Its inspirational models came not only from the Classic period but equally or even more so from the Baroque. Renaissance influence can also be found frequently, and the extent of medieval influence, while smaller, is by no means insignificant. This amalgamation of styles and techniques has also included the influences of musical traditions outside the familiar European and has consequently ensured the usefulness of ethnomusicology. (Indeed, this whole tale might be retold via the medium of my experiences composing for Chinese and Japanese instruments, but that would be another article.)

Despite this interest in the past, a large group of composers wish to reject it, a wish that seems to have been realized, if one judges by the unfamiliar sounds that dominate their works. But rejecting something is possible only after knowing it, however imperfectly, and thus one might say that historically, it was not possible for such an attitude to occur until and unless a certain level of awareness had been reached. Even the Romantic composers who made freedom of expression almost a fetish did not reject the Classics; they revered them. If they made a conscious effort to avoid too close a resemblance, it was only from the fear of not being able to compete successfully on the Classicists' own grounds. Perhaps all this could be said in a different way: it is necessary to know what one is rejecting.

In retrospect, the composer can only conclude that his exposure to musicology was, after all, the best thing for him and that rules and regulations had, for once, actually worked in his favor. However, if only once or twice

during the musicology course someone had tried to explain the usefulness of such study instead of taking that fact for granted, years of doubt, suspicion, and even resentment might have been avoided. Few composers recognize what musicology has to offer them, but this sad situation seems as much the responsibility of the musicologists as of the composers themselves.