

## *Musicology vs. Performance*

### *Yehudi Menuhin*

In reanimating the silent scores of countless ancient libraries, the musicologist has restored the elaboration of a figured bass and the ornamentation of a melodic line from the realm of theoretical exercises to that of performing techniques: musicologist and performer have joined on common ground. The old-fashioned image of the dry-as-dust, scholarly musicologist—as opposed to the romantic, long-haired virtuoso performer—is no longer valid. In fact, the shoe has been on the other foot for some time.

An increasing interest in the various uses and manners of improvisation has contributed to this metamorphosis. Our growing awareness of that spontaneous, improvisatory element in African and, more recently, in Indian music, coupled with our very longing to be released from the bondage of a detailed blueprint—the score—have, in fact, *enhanced* our sense of style, that cultivated and rigorously-formed sense of appropriateness in any given composition, without which improvisation is meaningless.

To be sure, we still have within and close to our own Western civilizations living strains of an improvised folklore, particularly in the countries of Eastern Europe, Asia Minor, North Africa, and the Middle East, while such relics also remain among the Indian peoples of North America. Nor should we forget the last true nomads among us, the Gypsies, who keep alive the image of man unfettered by what is rigid and rooted, who are attached to the sky rather than the earth, and who carry their nostalgic voice across the centuries. No less a composer and performer than Bartók became a musicologist *par excellence* through his penetrating studies of the folklore of his own and neighboring countries.

Today the most romantic, inspired musicians I know are the great harpsichord players—musicologists *and* performers—like Raymond Leppard, George Malcolm, and Rafael Puyana. The pure, clean sound of the plucked string allied to the keyboard lends itself to a cultivation of line and counterpoint rather than of sound *per se*. Nor should we ever forget our debt to the French school of organ playing; with the death of Marcel Dupré we have lost one of the greatest modern exponents of the art of improvisation at the keyboard, a tradition which includes the legendary improvisations of Bach, Beethoven, Franck, and countless other composers.

But common to all improvisation is the stylistic framework which only our sense of fitness can monitor or guide. Here the musicologist is a mentor, one all the more inspiring since he himself has come to know the fire of discovery and re-creation. The extraordinary quality of music is the fact that it comes alive only as it is sounded. Were the fossil to start wriggling in the paleontologist's hand, or the potter's wheel to start turning of its own accord, the sensation would be similar to the hearing of 12th-century music. An instance that comes to mind is the unforgettable revelation by the late Noah Green-

berg, who, with the New York Pro Musica, brought us *The Play of Daniel*, a 12th-century musical drama, performed in Wells Cathedral for the Bath Festival.<sup>1</sup>

How many sounds lie dormant in ancient instruments of stone, metal, wood, reed, skin, bone, and gut; and how evocative they would be of their makers' ways of life, their fears, pleasures, and ceremonies! Today musicology joins with anthropology, archeology, and the allied arts of sculpture, painting, dance, and poetry to give us a clearer picture of man and his world through the ages.

What of music as a contemporary sociological phenomenon? There is, in fact, no limit to musicology's potential contribution to our knowledge and culture: we have only begun to scratch the surface.

Curiously enough, with the accelerated pace of change, the musicologist might find work nearer at hand. I venture to say that, in the United States, a composer as recent as Beethoven is already so very much dated and lost to contemporary taste that—unlike the case of Monteverdi, where the notes and embellishments alone need restoring—Beethoven's spirit itself will soon require the efforts of the historical, atmospherically-steeped musicologist to revive its already archaic message. Beethoven's music, with its profundity, its extraordinary Olympian, Promethean message, so meaningful for man's social and scientific liberation, seems to be losing its significance, as that very spirit of liberation is turning sour. Only Beethoven's elemental greatness and power could possibly survive so massive an assault. Perhaps the musicologists should organize a sit-in on the steps of Carnegie Hall (this time with scythe, skull, and bones), or walk in front of Lincoln Center and carry banners reading "Ban Beethoven," "Silence to Beethoven," and "Let's put Beethoven on ice for 200 years—then we'll make him better than ever before!"

Bach was restored to us in this way by the romantic Mendelssohn, who revived the *St. Matthew Passion* after it had been ignored for decades; and today, right up to the Swingle Singers, Bach is the most contemporary of all composers. His music has the qualities of structure, precision, improvisation, romance, philosophy, and faith, and an abstract universal greatness and eternal validity as pure music which make it adaptable to any instrument, any arrangement, any period. Casals insists that the Bach who composed the Prelude to the Sonata in G Minor for Solo Violin was, if not a Hungarian gypsy cymbalom player, at least his blood brother!

The fields of musicologist and performer are complementary, of course. Nonetheless, as they grow in scope, a measure of specialization is inevitable as well.

Personally, I look upon such eminent and sympathetic musicologists as Denis Stevens as invaluable advisers, whose counsel I accept and apply experimentally. Yet I cannot actually incorporate such advice into my interpretation until the specific suggestions have become organically integrated into my own aesthetic analysis and instinct. This process is not at all one of adding superficial trimmings; rather, it is one of trial, rejection,

adaptation, rejection, acceptance—if, indeed, it is ever altogether and invariably accepted. And this is the way the best musicologists would have it. For dogma can never replace the improbable and unpredictable dictates of true inspiration that have always motivated all great stylists, composers or performers.

*NOTE*

<sup>1</sup> The Pro Musica's first performance of this work in its entirety was given at The Cloisters in New York in 1958. The production was brought to England in 1960.