A Performer's Perspective

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Musicology and the Performer

I believe that the performer is the re-creator of the music on the page, while the musicologist is the dissector of this written music. I do not think that the analytical approach to music is basically a musical one, since it tends to be exceedingly dry. For these reasons I feel that the performer cannot work strictly within musicological guidelines and still be a good performer.

Neither a totally intellectual nor a totally emotional handling of music is sufficiently comprehensive. However, a balance between the two is difficult to achieve because most performers are essentially either intellectual or emotional.

The musicologist's approach to performance is usually quite different from that of the performer. Once a musicologist becomes firmly convinced that his interpretation is the only one, he tends to perform a given composition the same way every time. The performer, not having to work within only a musicological framework, will usually achieve far more spontaneity and variety from one performance to the next.

Does the musicologist have the right to insist that only he knows the composer's true intentions? Having premiered two violin concertos[1] and having studied the scores and parts in great depth with the composers, my personal experience has shown that composers themselves are often the first to be willing to change what they have written. The composer may also leave nuances to the performer's discretion. This is just as true today as it was in centuries past.

And practical experience shows that some elements on the printed page cannot be interpreted too literally. Terms such as *adagio*, *allegro*, and *presto* are generally taken to indicate tempos. But, at best, they can be relied upon only to indicate an approximate speed or a particular mood or style. How fast, for example, is *Presto*? There are countless variables, such as the performer's technical ability, his musical taste, his understanding of the composer's intentions, and the ability of the accompanying artists, if any. Weather conditions can also be a determinant. Neither are metronome markings wholly reliable, since even metronomes of similar manufacture often fail to synchronize.

There is an astonishing lack of direct communication between musicologists and performers. Perhaps closing this gap would be very enlightening and mutually beneficial. Musicologists often tend to consider themselves superior to "mere" performers, and, of course, this attitude tends to further alienate the performers. Too many musicologists are of the self-trained variety and have an unbearable snob quotient. Unfortunately, they give the genuine musicologist a very bad name among most performing artists.

The "Purist"

The self-appointed "purist," who embraces the belief that the only music worth hearing, performing, and studying is from the Baroque and contemporary periods, cannot truly be recognized as a complete musician. The would-be "purist" usually cannot relate to the Romantic period because of his own emotional peculiarities.

The performer or musicologist who claims to be a one-composer "specialist" is usually uninteresting and uninspiring and often even unable to present a well-rounded picture of his subject. Having shut himself off from other musical experiences, his musical credibility must be highly suspect.

Contemporary Performance in the U.S.A.

Until the early 1960's performance practices and demands were very simply understood in the United States: the finest performances by the great artists of the day set the standards. Since that time there appears to have been a rather hysterical and neurotic grasping for identification with "The Star" of the moment. In such blind idolatry the music and its interpretation are forced into second place, and most other performers are pushed into the background and overlooked, only to have their musical ideas and contributions remain unheard. On the current concert stage, "star status" seems to be far more important than ability. Hopefully, this situation is only a passing fashion.

The Concert Experience

The concert experience is very difficult to describe adequately, since it involves myriad personal, emotional, and intellectual forces. There are three human elements: composer, performer, and audience. Essentially, a concert is an experience in musical, emotional, and personal communication.

The composer, through his music, communicates with the performer. The performer and his instrument communicate this music to the audience. Throughout the concert there is a constant emotional give-and-take between the audience and the performer.

The Music Critic

The chief function of the music critic, as I see it, is to report everything that occurs during a concert. He should use language easily understood by both the musician and the music lover and should always be aware of his responsibility to the music. He must write with candor and set aside all personal prejudices and predetermined attitudes. A critic must not review a concert if he knows the program is not to his liking, or if he is prejudiced in any way toward the performer. Critical remarks should always be preceded by "in my opinion." When the critic stoops to the use of snide or sarcastic remarks,

he ceases to be a critic. During the last twenty years, there have been far too many cases of excellent conductors being forced to leave their orchestras because of brow-beating by unintelligent, unmusical, and obviously prejudiced critics.

On the other hand, the critic's job does entail great difficulties. He is expected to be able to review opera, ballet, solo, chamber, and symphonic music. Generally, a critic cannot know the technical and musical demands of every instrument and cannot be expected to be familiar with the entire musical repertoire. This problem is especially significant today because of the current importance of reviews, which the public assumes to be written by those completely qualified to judge.

Recordings

Recordings have been the greatest single influence in making music generally available in the United States, and their educational benefits have been immeasurable.

With the advent of the long-playing record, recording companies began to saturate the market by offering far too many interpretations of the same basic repertoire. Consequently, by 1961 these same companies were in dire financial straits and initiated price-cutting on a grand scale in an attempt to sell their huge inventory.

As an economy measure, they then issued few new releases and left the listener with very little choice. This created another unfortunate situation. The listener, having become accustomed to one particular version, was frequently unable to appreciate other interpretations.

Let us hope that when television comes of age, concerts will become an integral part of the programing. This would certainly revitalize the recording industry, create further interest in music, and lead to better concert attendance. Few people today are musically knowledgeable, and the level of teaching has unfortunately become very low. In my opinion television is the most logical medium for making the opportunity to appreciate and understand music available to everyone. Of course, all schools, from kindergarten to college, should give required courses in the appreciation and understanding of music, taught by qualified people. Colleges and universities should offer both applied and theoretical courses in music.

Government

The need for the arts is apparently not understood by the United States government, which prefers to remain blind to the importance of the arts as cultural, historical, sociological, educational, and emotional phenomena. This attitude, coupled with proposed tax revisions which may sharply curtail all contributions to the arts by eliminating presently-allowed tax exemptions, may bring about the demise of our cultural life. Before that time comes, the government must be made to realize that it will have to become a

willing and generous partner in both the preservation and presentation of the arts. At present, the United States is the only major country which does not support its arts. Ideally, the government should be responsible for the preservation and maintenance of all present artistic organizations and institutions and should also realize the need to introduce the arts into areas where they are not presently found.[2]

The government must set up an Arts Administration regulated either by businessmen with an empathy for the arts, or by people in the arts who are also trained in business. This kind of commitment would allow the arts to flourish.

NOTES

[1] Richard Mauhaupt, *Violin Concerto*, April 1954, New York City; Paul Creston, *Violin Concerto No. 2*, November 1960, Los Angeles.

[2] Similar views were upheld at the 84th Annual Convention of the American Economic Association (New Orleans, 28 December 1971). Economists John Kenneth Galbraith (Harvard), Tibor Scitovsky (Stanford), and Hyman Faine (UCLA) all decried the lack of support for the arts in the United States. Professor Faine stated that only government and foundation support could save the arts from extinction as a result of rising deficits. Professor Scitovsky proposed education as the most effective means both of reordering government priorities and of changing public taste, while Professor Galbraith said he hoped "to live to see the day when financing the arts is as important as financing the coal industry."

* The initial inspiration for "The Spheres of Music: Harmony and Discord" came from Michael Rabin. One of the most illustrious violinists of our time, Michael had for years sought to establish just such a pattern of intercommunication within the musical community. His sudden death on 19 January 1972, just as *Current Musicology*'s project was nearing completion, was a multidimensional tragedy: Michael was not only a superb musician and a fine human being, but also a very close personal friend. He was, in a sense, the father of this project. With his deep commitment to and love for music, he helped me to become aware of the wide gaps which, in many instances, still separate the various fields of music. Michael's concern for the future of the arts and, especially, of music in the United States was evident not only in the plans which he had begun to formulate for a special National Council but also in other specific, immediate, and personal ways. His deep interest in music education and in the survival of the art of violin playing led him to teach privately, as well as at such colleges as Bowdoin, the University of Arizona, the University of Houston, and Yale. Even after a demanding recital or a concert at the end of a long and exhausting tour, he never refused to see people, to discuss music and life with them, and to give help, advice, encouragement, and even financial aid to those in need. It is tragic that Michael did not live to see his article in print. The entire staff of *Current Musicology* feels a deep sense of loss at his passing. **L.R.**