Some Observations on Performance Practice

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Medieval theorists can sometimes surprise us with an unusually modern pronouncement. Franco of Cologne, for example, writes: "When we see so many musicians deficient in knowledge, and wrong in so many of their ideas, especially as regards details of the science, we think they should be assisted, lest by chance, as a result of their deficiency and error, music could be exposed to harm."[1]

He was not, of course, referring to performance practice, but his words fit the situation perfectly, for if one hundredth part of the violence done to early music by badly instructed performers were redirected towards the more familiar repertory of the last century-and-a-half, the music world would abandon its cold wars and be up in arms in a flash. Even the greatest of the pre-Classical masterpieces creates no more than a mild impression upon the minds of modern listeners, those same minds that know the 19th-century classics in depth and detail; and the farther back we go in history, the less familiar the music. It will be years before the musical equivalent of *l'homme moyen sensuel* claims the same degree of familiarity with Monteverdi's nine books of madrigals as he does with Beethoven's nine symphonies. Violence done to the unfamiliar makes little or no impression, just as the murder of an unknown man in the Antipodes shocks us less than the robbery of someone we know personally in the metropolis. Music too can be murdered, and it can be massacred, mutilated, mangled beyond belief. The easiest prey for the hoodlums is that remarkable portion of music history ranging over the six centuries that separate Perotin from Pergolesi.

Performance malpractice, an expression derived in a rather negative way from the German term *Aufführungspraxis*, is to some extent permissible when indulged in by well-intentioned amateurs functioning within their own limits and their own institutions. It is not permissible, nor in the remotest degree forgivable, however, when tolerated or fostered by radio and television corporations, record companies,[2] and concert-giving bodies whose duty to the musical public includes provision of entertainment or instruction of the finest possible quality, born of the best possible brains. If there is to be rhyme or reason in musical performances, it is essential that they should reflect, as nearly as possible, the intentions of the composer. What these intentions were, and the correct way to interpret them, are as much the province of the professional musicologist as microphone placement and tape-editing are the concern of the professional sound engineer.

When proper advice and interpretation are ignored, chaos results. The root of the evil lies, without a doubt, in the tendency of companies to drape programs around artists; and even though the program may be revealing in an altogether diaphanous manner, it will eventually do the artist no credit. Reversing the procedure calls for that rarest of talents—the ability to build

artistically plausible programs and then to cast them in such a way as to enhance their plausibility by fine performance. This may involve the choice of talent from some other stable than the one normally frequented by the company concerned, but (contracts notwithstanding) the public will care not a bit. Audiences are interested—quite rightly—in a stylish, musicianly, and historically correct version that will give them both aesthetic pleasure and a true insight into the composer's mind and message. It is therefore not enough, when performing early music, to state that we do not know how it originally sounded or how it was performed.

Mistakes and mutilations of the type under discussion do not always result from a lack of specialized knowledge. Sometimes they can be traced to a lack of general knowledge, or even of common sense. Not so long ago, a record company which rightly prided itself on its many and notable observances of *Aufführungspraxis* fell suddenly from grace, as the proud occasionally do. The event was the release of a luxurious package of penitential psalms by one of the great composers of the 16th century, and the vocal originals had been "realized" by the addition of numerous instruments, all of them accurate replicas of known prototypes. The sounds conveyed to the listener were richly-colored and kaleidoscopic, sensuous and enchanting. One thing had been forgotten, however, in this beatific blaze of historical accuracy: the fact that penitential psalms are sung during Lent, when the use of instruments is either forbidden or severely restricted.

In general, it is not sufficient to lay the blame at the editor's feet, for modern musical knowledge may be able to suggest a remedy for a partially unsatisfactory edition. There was the case of a set of Lamentations, broadcast by a large choir which included sopranos. The originally dark-hued score had been transposed a third or fourth upwards, so that the resulting timbre was bright and massive. This was contrary not only to the intention of the composer but also to common observance, as is shown by the words of Pietro Cerone in his *El melopeo y maestro*: "The usual custom is to compose [Lamentations] in the untransposed second, fourth, and sixth tones, these tones being naturally sad and doleful; they are always sung by very low and dark voices (only male singers taking part) with only one voice to a part."[3]

The use of a single voice to each part, a *sine qua non* of all madrigal performances that aspire to expressive authenticity, may be safely applied to most polyphonic music written between the 11th and 14th centuries. Yet it is not uncommon to hear choral interpretations of the *Magnus Liber*, presumably because the instigators imagine that the greatness of Perotin's book of liturgical polyphony is of a purely physical kind, and that twenty or thirty singers could read from it, as from one of the huge choirbooks of the Renaissance.

The actual size of a typical volume containing music by Perotin, Leonin, and their contemporaries rarely surpasses 9×6 inches, and it is clearly intended for two or three soloists at the most. Further proof of the employment of soloists may be found in records of early churches and cathedrals

throughout Europe. Isidore of Seville also lends weight to the argument in his definition of the perfect voice as "sweet, high, and loud: loud, to fill the ear; high, to be adequate to the sublime; sweet, to soothe the minds of the hearers. If any of these qualities be absent, the voice is not perfect."[4]

This definition, although some 1300 years old, would serve well for a present-day operatic tenor; and it is perfectly obvious that such a musician singing florid descant under the lantern of a great cathedral or abbey would sound infinitely more like Perotin and Leonin than a nondescript chorus, with or without "authentick instrumentys." Rudolf von Ficker's arrangements of medieval masterpieces, heard at the Beethoven Festival in Vienna in 1927, were a necessary step along the path leading to plausible performance; yet they were not themselves plausible, since all the choral portions of the music had been assigned to soloists and all the solo portions to a chorus. A classical analogy to such a situation would be to perform the Beethoven Violin Concerto with an orchestra having only one man to each part, and with thirty violins playing the solo part in unison. Beethoven's music would never be so maltreated; but with medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque music, matters are on a different footing. The do-it-yourself musicology kit reigns supreme.

Extraordinary accidents can happen even to Bach and Handel and Vivaldi. There was a recent recording of Bach's *Musical Offering,* "arranged" by a well-known conductor who took for the basis of his text the century-old Bach-Gesellschaft edition, in which some of the canons are wrongly resolved. Instead of asking a Bach scholar about the state of research (which has in fact put matters right), our conductor plunged blissfully into a quagmire of error from which he found it impossible to extricate himself. But this puts only one recording out of court. The fantastic case of the *concerti grossi* is quite another matter, for here some ninety-five per cent of all recordings of this genre can be given immediate life sentences. Contemporary reports of concerts, allied to the evidence of the music itself, prove conclusively that every decent performance of a concerto in the time of Vivaldi, Handel, and Telemann enjoyed the extra support and contrast of a second harpsichord or an organ. Usually the organ supported the tutti, while the soloists had their own continuo. But there were many variations to this pattern, such as two harpsichords, lute and harpsichord, organ and lute, and so on. This very important division of resources, which modern stereo techniques could bring out with glowing success, has so far made no noticeable impression on those capable of turning the dross of humdrum recording into the pure gold of authentic and genuinely musical monuments in sound.

There is an old military adage to the effect that a good commander never reinforces a failure. Unhappily, this has failed so far to persuade the musical commanders to use a little common sense when faced with defeat at the hands of the critics. There was the sad example of a set of records produced to illustrate a book of musical examples, all intended for use in classrooms. Moral misleading of the young is a punishable offense; would that musical

misleading were similarly punishable! Thousands upon thousands of students must have heard those performances, most of which are in one way or another unsatisfactory, and the consequent damage done to budding aesthetic and historical sensibilities must have been incalculable. Yet when a further volume was produced by the same firm, the contract for recorded illustrations was handed to the same group as before, with entirely predictable results.

The presentation of early music in terms of sound brings with it innumerable problems, but most of these can now be solved by expert minds. Some problems are purely musical—the kinds of voices and instruments needed; the best interpretation of rhythm, meter, and pitch. But there are also aesthetic questions to consider, and of these by far the most important is this one: are we justified in presenting medieval music in the form of concerts, often in secular surroundings, so that the unfortunate listener hears strings of "motets," each lasting only a minute or so? Surely there is a grave danger in suggesting that all early forms were short, isolated, and unrelated, and that composers of the Middle Ages had failed to master the broad sweep of later tonal architects. Are we to suggest that medieval builders, who raised monuments in stone that still survive in something like their pristine glory, were so incredibly far ahead of their musical contemporaries?

It has for many years been fashionable to admit that music lagged behind the other arts, but the evidence for this assumption, when carefully examined, does not really hold water. The plain fact is that the function of early music, especially sacred music, has long been misunderstood, and, although certain individual items have been held in high esteem, they have always looked rather sad and lonely, like jewels deprived of their rightful artistic settings. There seems to be a lack of association and continuity; and we know enough of medieval art of other kinds to attribute that lack of continuity to modern practice. Once it is realized, however, that the framework of plainsong is the liturgy of the Mass and Office, it becomes possible to restore these apparently isolated fragments of music into an integrated whole.

For many years it was thought that the earliest polyphonic setting of the *Ordinarium Missae* was by Guillaume de Machaut. Recently a handful of possible earlier candidates has been put forward, but without doing very much to solve this extensive problem of integration and continuity. It is only when we accept the fact that composers of the 12th and 13th centuries did not want to write and did not need to write the kind of "five-movement" Mass known to Josquin, Lassus, Byrd, and their contemporaries, that we break down the first barrier between ourselves and that music. Medieval composers preferred to write the sections of the Mass and Office in such a way that they could be combined according to the dictates of the liturgy, and some of them even composed subsections so that the possible number of combinations (within, of course, liturgical limits) was almost inexhaustible.

For the proper presentation of early music, many skills must join together: those of the paleographer, the authority on early notation; those of the expert

on local usages and on the singers and players who by their talents transform signs into sounds; and last but not least those of the musician. His concern must not be to perform the music as fast as possible, nor to make it sound slick and chromium-plated, or glamorized by the addition of fancy instruments. He must be the man who (to quote Boethius) "has on reflection taken to himself the science of singing, not by servitude of work, but by the rule of contemplation."[5]

NOTES

[1] *Ars cantus mensurabilis,* Prologue. All translations are by the author.

[2] A recent example of total falsification of a musical form may be seen and heard in Volume III of a *History of Spanish Music in Sound,* recorded by Hispavox in Spain and released in the U.S.A. by Musical Heritage Society. The music on side one of this disc (OR 433) is drawn from *La Música a Catalunya fins al segle XIII* by Higinio Anglés, and begins with three sequences. They are beautifully sung, in the style of Solesmes, but their impact is greatly reduced by the total omission of all repeats, i.e., the second of each pair of verses. Since this pairing of verses ranks as a primary formal characteristic of the medieval sequence, it follows that performance of only the first of each pair destroys not only the musical form but also the sense of the poetry. A glance at the translations provided for *Cantantibus hodie, Alleluia, persona nostra iocunda,* and *Potestati magni* will prove the folly of such strange tactics. Imagine any poem deprived of alternate lines! The current, sometimes lamentable obsession with "olde instrumentys of musicke" creates further difficulties in the next item, *Hosanna, sospitati dedit,* where the complete text is indeed printed and translated, but the performance allocates only the odd-numbered verses to the choir, the instruments playing the even-numbered verses. Perhaps this is no worse than any *alternatim* organ hymn or Mass of later times, when verses were not sung, but rather said *in submissa voce* while the organ supplied an elaboration of the chant. It would nevertheless have been preferable to hear two complete sequences than four incomplete ones.

[3] Book XII, Chapter 16.

[4] *Etymologiarum,* Book III, Chapter 20.

[5] *De institutione musica,* Book I, Chapter 33.