

How I Felt on 14 March 1972

Susan Thiemann Sommer

Musicology and performance—just how much of a connection is there between the two? “Not much” was the immediate and overwhelming answer in my informal poll of musicians I know well enough to ask for an honest reply. Perhaps it would be kinder, however, to say “not enough,” because surely musicologists and performers do have something to say to one another. The problem is a breakdown of communication somewhere along the line.

One justification for the existence of musicology (and, concomitantly, of musicologists) is, of course, its position in the history of ideas. Like the study of English literature or medieval art, the analytical and historical study of music reveals something precious of our cultural heritage, something which, one hopes, enhances the beauty and meaning of the work of art itself. But music, unlike art or literature, depends on an intermediary creator, the performer. Without him there is no music at all for practical purposes. The audience needs the performer; and in order for the audience to hear the music as the composer intended, the performer needs the musicologist.

From the performer’s point of view the final decisions as to the interpretation of a piece of music are his and rightly so. We, the audience, can only hope that he will be as well informed as possible about the basic stylistic necessities and the options available to him in terms of contemporary practices of ornamentation and instrumentation, textual variants and their authenticity, and all the paraphernalia of the musicologist’s art.

One of my main jobs as librarian in a major research collection located in the heart of the performing world is to bring these people together. All I can say is that it is *very* difficult, especially since the musicologists are usually looking down on the performers, who are, in turn, looking in a different direction. From another point of view, as a record reviewer I get a more encouraging impression. There have been audible results from the cooperation of sympathetic musicologists and knowledgeable performers in the field of early music in particular. Sometimes musicologist and performer is one and the same person; Thurston Dart was a perfect example. It is even more noteworthy when artists from a different sphere, Victoria de los Angeles or Cathy Berberian, for instance, can apply their skills to Spanish villancicos or Monteverdi operas. And more musicologically oriented groups have raised their performance levels high enough to sound authentically improvisational, as witness the Early Music Quartet’s dazzling rendition of the troubadour repertoire.

The influence of musicology on the garden variety musician is not nearly so clear. Of course there have been changes; we are much less likely to hear massive orchestras pounding out Mozart serenades, for example, but the gap is still there. Why? Part of the answer lies, I think, in the difference between the performer’s upbringing and the musicologist’s attitude.

Most musicians spend the early part of their careers concentrating on technique, being able to play or sing any passage in any piece no matter what the speed, range, or other difficulties. Their next concern is repertoire—simply learning enough pieces to meet the concert or ensemble demands of a professional career. At this point they do not have time to sift and weigh conflicting theories of performance practice; they just want to know how to do it—now, right here, in this measure. Of course, a well-brought-up novice will want the best edition. He calls it the *Urtext*, and he believes, naïvely and rather winningly, that it is in fact a perfect authentic score containing the answers to all his questions—questions musicologists and their ilk are all too willing to bring up and throw at him. “How do you ornament the repeats?” “Where did you get that cadenza?” “Do you follow the autograph or the first edition?” “*Urtext!* What do you mean? There is no such thing.” “All very good for them; they haven’t had to spend hours and hours every day on scales and arpeggios,” mutters the young musician resentfully, and the seeds of mistrust are sown.

It is only the mature musician, or the extraordinarily intellectually gifted one, who has time to explore unusual repertoire, refine his ornamentation, and follow up the textual history of the score. Unfortunately, by the time he is ready to enjoy the benefits of scholarship fully he is often so suspicious and afraid of the whole thing that he avoids it altogether—and then feels guilty and consequently more hostile. An endless chain is forged.

This is really true. I see it behind the eyes of my friends who are performers, in the hesitant step and apologetic air of a famous opera singer approaching the librarian’s desk, in the expression of a member of one of the world’s great symphony orchestras who is “just inquiring for a friend.” I see it and it upsets me, because I know that we musicologists are largely to blame. And we librarians, too. I realize that libraries are scary places. If I had my way, all librarians would have to do research in a strange library once every six months just to reacquaint themselves with the new reader’s confusion and terror. But a library is only one of many grounds on which musicologist and performer may meet.

It is the task of the musicologist to communicate on the right levels to the audience he wants to reach. The classroom is an obvious example. Will a semester spent in transcribing Aquitanian neumes or its equivalent really help a conservatory student, especially if this is the only exposure to musicology he is likely to get? The point hardly needs belaboring. I can think of a few more suggestions, however, which might help the young musicologist who really wants to reach his contemporaries in the performing world. First, turn out good performing editions if you are equipped to do so. Performers work from scores, not books. Second, write for the musician in his own journals, trade magazines, and publications aimed at music educators. Why scorn popularization? But be forewarned that it is not easy to do well. Third, get to know some professional musicians personally. They will discover you are not a fabulous monster, and you, in turn, will probably learn a

great deal of practical information from them. Finally, praise and appreciate the performing musician. A large and tender ego is the hallmark of the soloist in particular, and you may have to move carefully here, but the results of this treatment are astonishing. For a well praised musician can be like a well polished Aladdin's lamp in responding enthusiastically to your suggestions, making beautiful music, and bringing your ideas alive in sound to a whole new audience. And isn't that what it's all about?