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Consequentialism about Historical Authenticity

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What Historical Authenticity is About: Three Big Stories

The historical authenticity movement arrived on a wave of polemical prose, and was met by a similarly energetic polemical response. The controversy has persisted to the present day.¹ In this polemic, an extreme position favoring the pursuit of historical authenticity (adapted from a wide range of pronouncements by defenders of historical authenticity) might go something like this:

First Big Story About Historical Authenticity

Once upon a time, the Great Composers of the Past composed the wonderful compositions that we long to hear today. Unfortunately, the performing traditions that developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced performances that distorted earlier originals by the use of anachronistic performing forces, styles of playing and singing, and of instruments quite different from those for which the composers wrote. In addition, various liberties were taken with the scores themselves. Rather than hearing the compositions of, say, Bach, what we got were more like mutilated and distorted transcriptions. Eventually, courageous performers and musicologists began the process of learning to perform the works of Bach and others in historically authentic ways, utilizing good and complete scores, and the performance means and practices for which the works were composed. At last, advertised performances of Bach's compositions were, at least sometimes, performances of these compositions themselves rather than hybrid compositions by Bach-cum-Wagner.

¹ Reasonably up-to-date bibliography may be found in Peter Kivy, *Authenticities* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995) and Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

On the other hand, an extreme position on the other side (implicit in a good deal of polemical writing and clearly developed in the work of Peter Kivy²) sees in the pursuit of historical authenticity a significant threat to central values of classical³ music-making as we know it:

Second Big Story About Historical Authenticity

Once upon a time, classical music was understood as a domain of collaborative endeavor among composers and performers. Performers were valued as genuine substantial artistic contributors to performances, which presented performers' versions of compositions in much the way arrangements present arrangers' versions. But now a movement among performers and musicologists strives in the name of *historical authenticity* to replace this "old contract" between composers and performers with a new one, which effaces the artistic role of performers altogether. The ideal is to identify the one correct performance of each composition, supplementing the instructions written in scores with others, identified through historical research, which will entirely remove the discretion of performers with respect to any musical variable and reduce performers to the role of copying the features of the one correct performance each time the composition is played.

If this story represents an extreme of opposition to the historical authenticity movement, a third (most influentially propounded by Richard Taruskin⁴) might be called an extreme of dismissal:

Third Big Story About Historical Authenticity

Once upon a time, late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century, musical performers shared a sensibility that was shaped decisively by the music of Wagner. Like all performers, their musical sensibility was reflected in their performance of both recent and older compositions. This goes as well for performers since the middle of the twentieth century, except that for these more recent performers the crucial sensibility-shaping composer is Stravinsky rather than Wagner. Thus the course of the twentieth-century performance saw a gradual shift from a

² See esp. Kivy, *Authenticities*, particularly chapters 5 and 9.

³ Here and elsewhere in this article, I use "classical" in the "record-bin" sense to distinguish the domain of music-making in general from such alternative domains as jazz and hip-hop.

⁴ Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). See also Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

taste for weighty, blended sonority and slow tempi with frequent fluctuation to a preference for lean, transparent, astringent sonority and quick uninflected tempi. As always, performers defend their preferences as yielding the performances that are truest to the intentions of the composers, and the “back-to-Bach (or Mozart, or Beethoven)” rhetoric gets a serendipitous boost from the fact that the preference for light acerbic sonority can often be served by the use of pre-Wagnerian instruments and performance practices and forces. To help hide the fact that what’s being served are current performers’ preferences, such performances are said to be historically authentic. But rhetoric aside, at issue are ways of performing that reflect present-day general-purpose musical sensibility.

Each of these stories bases the evaluation of the movement on something like a matter of principle. In the first two, the principle is taken to, respectively, favor or oppose the pursuit of historical authenticity. In the third, the principle is taken to suggest that the category of historical authenticity is altogether irrelevant to performance choices.

I’ve argued elsewhere that the practice of performing classical compositions in the first place is justified only by the musical value of the performances to which it leads. In this article, after summarizing that argument, I’ll defend the extension of this “consequentialist” approach to the various practices that characterize historically authentic performance.⁵ Such an approach is inimical to “big story” evaluations of historical-authenticity-in-principle. But it yields the conclusion that the (defeasible, consequentialist) considerations that recommend performing classical compositions in the first place extend (in defeasible, consequentialist ways) to the pursuit of historical authenticity.

I’ll need to begin with a word about terminology. The contrast among the big stories suggests that in one sense, different authors mean different things by the phrase “historical authenticity.” But in another sense, it’s clear that there’s a common phenomenon that the three stories address. For all its role in the misleading hype of advertising campaigns, “historical authenticity” has come to function as something like a proper name for the constellation of practices in question. These include most prominently the following three elements: fidelity to composers’ directions, the use of period practices not explicitly specified by the composer, and the use of period instruments. However authors define historical authenticity, it’s this set of elements that the discussion comes down to. So I’ll be using the term “historical authenticity” as shorthand for a specification of the practices.

⁵ I take the term “consequentialist” from Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances*, 240ff., but I use it a bit more broadly than he defines it. According to Davies’ definition, the only relevant consequences concern the audience’s enjoyment. I count any consequence that concerns the musical value of the audible performance. Davies’ objections to consequentialism don’t turn on his narrower definition.

Because of the hype, it has become common among both musicians and critics to deplore the term “authenticity” in this context as both misleading and invidious. Oddly, philosophers writing about the movement have tended to argue that the term is quite appropriate even when, as Kivy does, they deplore the practice. I don’t really have an opinion about the matter, but I find the going alternatives, “historical performance” and “historically informed performance,” in different ways unsuitable. The former suggests actual performances of the distant past, and the latter, taken literally, is too broad. I’ll stick with “historical authenticity;” you may if you like read it with distancing scare-quotes.⁶

Why Perform Compositions in the First Place? A Consequentialist Answer

Current practice in the broad domain of “classical” music is profoundly composition-centered. Classical performers play from highly prescriptive scores, which dictate what and how they play in great detail. Writing of “the language we traditionally use to describe ‘performance’ in its specifically musical sense,” Nicholas Cook notes that

According to this language, we do not have “performances” but rather “performances of” pre-existing, Platonic works. The implication is that a performance should function as a transparent medium, “expressing,” “projecting,” or “bringing out” only what is already “in” the work...⁷

In such a context, considerations of historical authenticity enter largely as additional constraints in an already highly constrained field of performance.

If we focus on the status of compositions as works of art, it might seem natural to organize musical practice around their creation and presentation. The visual arts provide a clear model for this, centered on such artworks as paintings and sculptures. But the status of compositions as musical works doesn’t really contribute to the aesthetic case for organizing musical practice around the performance of such works. The basic reason is very simple.⁸ Just as the arts of painting and sculpture enrich the world aesthetically by enriching the domain of things to be seen, music enriches the world aesthetically by enriching the domain of things to be heard. But with respect to the aim of aesthetically enriching the perceivable world, the creation of musical compositions is incomplete in comparison with the creation of pictures or statues. An unperformed composition may of course be a complete composition (and so a complete musical

⁶ The typical contrast-term to “historically authentic” is “traditional,” and I’ll retain this usage as well, again as shorthand for a constellation of practices, and not invoking any deeper sense of “tradition.”

⁷ Nicholas Cook, “Analyzing Performance, Performing Analysis,” in *Rethinking Music*, eds. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 244.

⁸ A more detailed account may be found in Aron Edidin, “Performing Compositions,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34 (1997): 323-335, from which this section is adapted.

work according to the conventional use of the term). But the completion of a composition doesn't fully realize the artistic end of the activity of composing. The world-enriching product of painting is the picture and that of the sculpture the statue. But the artistic end-product of composing isn't the composition, but rather its performance. This is explicit in accounts of composition as a matter of providing directions for performance.⁹ It is implicit in accounts of the ontology of musical works that identify them with kinds whose instances, if any, are performances.¹⁰ And it is reflected in the fact that a typical concrete product of compositional activity is the specification of directions for performance, in the form of a score. As Paul Thom puts it, performance is included in the teleology of such works-for-performance.¹¹ The unfinished artistic business remaining when the composition has been completed is clearest in the case of eternally unperformed works. Thom describes these as not actualized; they simply fail to provide the sort of aesthetic enrichment of reality at issue.

The value of compositions, then, is instrumental. If the artistic end-product of composition is to be found in performances, then the works that are composed are of aesthetic value on account of the role they play in the production of valuable performances. The aesthetic case for focusing musical activity on the performance of such works will be a consequentialist one, based on the aesthetic value of the performances that result.

Once it's clear what kind of case is needed, it's not hard to provide one.¹² From the perspective that I've recommended, composing is to be understood as a kind of performance-planning. Performing compositions (as opposed to freely improvising) permits the benefits of large-scale planning and organization of the features of the performance that derive from its observance of the score. A performance of a composed symphony or sonata or concerto will exhibit a degree of musical organization in a temporal scale unavailable to improvised performance.¹³ And this large-scale organization is the source of some of the most significant aesthetic values realized by performances. Even in the case of some of the smallest-scaled of compositions, it is widely held that the carefully planned organization of sound exhibited by their performance can itself be the source of significant musical enrichment. Our practice of classical

⁹ As in Paul Thom, *For an Audience: A Philosophy of the Performing Arts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). Wolterstorff's account of compositions as norm kinds is somewhere in the middle; see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Worlds and Works of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 51-57.

¹⁰ Examples are the accounts of Levinson and Kivy discussed in Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is?" *Journal of Philosophy* 77/1 (1980): 5-28 and Peter Kivy, "Platonism in Music: A Kind of Defense," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 19 (1983): 109-129, reprinted in Peter Kivy, *The Fine Art of Repetition: Essays in the Philosophy of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Thom, *For an Audience*, 75.

¹² Again, for more details see Edidin, "Performing Compositions."

¹³ Cf. Thom, *For an Audience*, 71-72.

performance embodies this judgment: that significant musical values can best be realized by taking full advantage of the benefits of composition over improvisation in the areas of planning and polishing.

The composers whose works we value are terrific performance-planners. Not only do we find value in first hearing their plans realized in performance. We find continuing value in performances that repeat the planned (scored) features of other performances we've already heard (i.e., in repeated performances of the same works). From repeated hearings of (roughly) the same sequence of notes we get things that differ from what we get from hearing ever-novel sequences; we hear more in (approximate) repetitions of performances we have heard than we did in the first performance.

Finally, if a composition dictates an aesthetically rich enough structure in its performances, and if performances can nevertheless vary in the extent to which they make audible the aesthetic merits of this structure, it will make sense to think of the performer's task as one of serving the composition, bringing out as far as possible its aesthetic value. The works we value most are rich enough to merit this sort of approach. The benefit we seek in preferring planning (i.e., composition) to improvisation, and in leaving the planning, most of the time, to Beethoven, Schubert, Mozart, et. al., is this: that our performances will realize musical structures of a richness and beauty only achievable by combining the efforts of great composers with those of performers bent on serving as faithfully as possible the works that they perform. But even in a practice thus centered on compositions, the payoff is not in the works themselves, but in the performances. The reason for centering the practice on the compositions is that doing so yields the best outcome in audible music-making.

Consequentialism and the Pursuit of Historical Authenticity

I'll approach the task of defending consequentialism concerning historical authenticity by considering an attempt to bypass consequentialist consideration in justifying the practices in question. The rhetoric of the "first big story" outlined above suggests that if there's an aesthetic justification for performing compositions at all, such justification will automatically carry over to the practices of historical authenticity. According to this rhetoric, it's only by using "original methods and styles of performance" that we really perform, say, the music of Bach as opposed to Bach-cum-anachronistic-accretions. If there's a reason to perform the *Goldberg Variations* there's reason to perform them in a historically authentic way, because only then will one really have performed the work itself.

This is clearly too strong in its insistence that most of the performance history of older compositions doesn't involve performances of those works at all. But Stephen Davies has developed a more subtle argument along the same general lines. Davies argues that the nature of classical compositions entails that once the decision has been made to perform such compositions in the first place, there is a presumption in favor of the use of period practices and

instruments in a context of full fidelity to composers' directions.¹⁴ The argument, laid out in steps, looks like this:

(1) Scores of compositions encode instructions for performance, some of which are “work-determining” in the following sense: a performance is a performance of the work in question if and only if it comes close enough to fully executing these work-determining instructions. (Davies understands authenticity of performance to be a matter of faithfully executing the work-determining instructions for a composition.)

Therefore,

(2) Fully authentic performances of a work, i.e., ones that fully execute all of its work-determining instructions, are ontologically exemplary performances, providing the standard of comparison for putative performances of the composition.

(3) To identify these work-determining instructions, scores must be read in light of period practices and conventions. When this is done, it typically turns out that certain “original methods and styles of performance” and the use of period instruments are required by the work-determining instructions of classical compositions.

Therefore (from 1 and 3),

(4) Fully authentic performance of classical compositions typically requires conformity to the relevant elements of period style and the use of period instruments.

Therefore (from 2 and 4),

(5) Ontologically exemplary performances of classical compositions must typically observe period performance practices and use period instruments.

Therefore,

(6) There is a presumption in favor of observing such practices and using such instruments in performing the works in question. The presumption is defeasible, but it's not just one desideratum among others to be assessed in consequentialist terms.

Davies concludes that

Because it is essentially implicated in a work's performance, authenticity is an ontological requirement, not an interpretive option... If one is committed to playing the given piece then, equally, one must be committed to playing it authentically.¹⁵

¹⁴ Davies, *Musical Works*, Chapters 3 and 5.

Davies' defense of (1)-(5) leaves room for dispute about particular practices and instrumental requirements, but he's convincing in arguing that period practices and instruments will often be required for ontologically exemplary performance of classical compositions. The problem with the argument for authenticity in performance is that (6) does not follow from (5). To see why, consider some of the alternatives to a practice of striving for authenticity in the performance of classical compositions.

Paul Berliner's discussion of jazz performance of head arrangements suggests one such alternative.¹⁶ We could treat classical compositions the way jazz musicians treat head arrangements. (This might or might not actually count as a practice of performing the compositions.) We can call this way of using compositions in performance "jazzing them up." So we could have a practice of jazzing-up classical compositions in addition to or in place of the practice of faithfully performing them. Certainly, one could be committed to jazzing-up a classical composition without being committed to playing it authentically; in fact, the former commitment would preclude the latter.

This jazz-like practice stands in stark contrast to the approaches that characterize current practice in classical performance. But the history of performance of old compositions (i.e., compositions that were old at the time of performance) suggests other, less radical alternatives. Taruskin (1988, 1995), Morgan (1988), and Crutchfield (1988) all suggest that performers early in the twentieth century performed earlier compositions as part of a living tradition that involved adapting the performance to current taste without concern for historical practice. This involved the application of broadly romantic conventions and styles of performance, including preferred instrumentation and performing forces, to works of any period. Call this use of a composition "updating it in performance." Taruskin, Morgan, and Crutchfield all find value in the way that this practice reflects immersion in an all-encompassing musical culture. They suggest that it produces performances of unique conviction, placing older works in a living tradition.¹⁷ Performances which in this way update a composition, typically do count as performances of the composition: they're observant *enough* of the composer's work-determining instructions to meet

¹⁵ Davies, *Musical Works*, 207-8.

¹⁶ Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Richard Taruskin, "The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past," in Nicholas Kenyon, ed., *Authenticity and Early Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 137-207, revised and reprinted as Chapter 4 in Taruskin, *Text and Act*, 90-154, Robert P. Morgan, "Tradition, Anxiety, and the Current Music Scene," in Kenyon, *Authenticity*, 57-82, Will Crutchfield, "Fashion, Conviction, and Performance Style in an Age of Revivals," in Kenyon, *Authenticity*, 19-26. Both Morgan and Crutchfield suggest that these advantages are no longer available, due to the fragmentation of musical culture today. Taruskin, on the other hand, at least sometimes suggests that Stravinskian modernism defines an encompassing musical culture that's reflected in Norrington's performances of Beethoven as an earlier culture was reflected in Furtwängler's.

Davies' criterion. Updating a composition in performance is a way of performing it. But commitment to updating a composition in performance need involve no commitment to pursuing historical authenticity. In the case of older compositions, the commitments will often be incompatible.

Clearly enough, such examples may be multiplied at will. Many such practices would require a considerable degree of fidelity to (certain classes of) compositional instructions; the performances within such practices would be performances of the compositions in question. Some of these practices will resemble the "traditional" approaches to old music that are the polemical targets of proponents of historical authenticity. (Updating-in-performance is one of these.) Clearly one may be committed to playing a work in the context of such a practice without being committed to playing it authentically.

At issue is the justification of one way or another of using compositions in performance. And any musical justification¹⁸ must rest in the musical results of each way of using compositions. I have argued that the creative contribution of composition is in the domain of the planning of performances. The musical value of compositions rests in their contribution to the musical value of performances. It's a mistake to think that the status of compositions as works is something that will bear aesthetic weight. There's no independent end-value to the compositions themselves that enjoins one or another way of using them in performance.

There is, as Davies suggests, a special ontological relation between compositions and their fully faithful performances. But no justification follows from this for the practice of using compositions by performing them with a commitment to faithfulness as opposed to jazzing them up, updating them, or basing performances on them in some other way. In this way, compositions are like recipes. There's a special ontological relation between a recipe and a cooked dish that results from faithfully executing its instructions. But the only epicurean¹⁹ reason to use a recipe in the first place is the quality of the consequent meal, and the same goes for following a recipe faithfully rather than freely.

Note that this reply depends on consequentialism with respect to the practice of performing compositions in the first place. If we had an independent reason to value compositions apart from their contribution to musical value realized in their performances, this might close the gap between steps (5) and (6) in the anti-consequentialist argument. Davies seems headed in this direction when he writes,

[A consequentialist objection] would have bite if we were attracted to performance of composers' works merely because these tend to be the ones that result in pleasant playings. I reject this account of our interest in music making, however. We care for the

¹⁸ As opposed to, say, moral or social justifications.

¹⁹ In the sense of "pertaining to the enjoyment of good food," the analogue in this context for "musical."

works of composers and for performances at least in part for the works they reveal. We are not concerned with performances merely as pleasant playings that may only be incidentally related to the works they purport to be of. That is why we regard authenticity as important whether or not it always contributes to the maximization of the pleasure we take in hearing music played.

There is an intimate connection between the concern with music and with composers' pieces, for the music in question is just musical works regarded as of their composers.²⁰

Davies is right in identifying a concern with works as an important component of our approach to classical music. Where he errs is in thinking that this concern yields a consequence-independent reason to favor the most complete degree of work-realization in preference to degrees that might promise better musical results.

I argued above that there is a consequentialist case, but only a consequentialist case, for placing compositions at the focal point of a domain of musical practice. Any performance which counts as being of a composition, must be authentic (in Davies' sense) to a considerable degree: it must be sufficiently observant of the work-determining instructions. So the case for performing compositions in the first place is automatically a case for at least this degree of authenticity in performance. The justification will extend to any degree of composition-centeredness that serves the musical value of performances. But it will extend no further. The case for (or against) deepening the focus on compositions by commitment to further degrees of fidelity (including those that distinguish the historical authenticity movement) must once again be based on the musical value of the performances, which would be informed by such commitment. (Whether this value is merely a matter of "pleasantness" is of course another issue entirely.)

One source of Davies' error in this regard is his disinclination to see composition-centered practices that don't pursue historical authenticity as genuine alternative practices, as opposed to incomplete realizations of the practice of pursuing full authenticity. The only alternative practice he discusses as such is "to treat composers' works merely as jumping-off points for performers' fantasias"²¹ (something like the "jazzing-up" practice I describe above). He notes correctly that this use of classical compositions would constitute a profound change. But the same doesn't go for such practices as the "updating in performance" typical of the fairly recent past, or the more "traditional" (as opposed to historically authentic) current practices. Indeed, it couldn't possibly go for any approach to compositions within the contemporary mainstream.

It's helpful in this regard to recall Kivy's suggestion (summarized in the "Second Big Story" above) that the pursuit of historical authenticity threatens a valuable going practice (the "old

²⁰ Davies, *Musical Works*, 249-50.

²¹ Davies, *Musical Works*, 251.

contract”) that reflects a deep sense of the appropriate roles of composer and performer.²² Kivy is right that we value the artistic role of classical performers, and Davies is right that our interest in classical music is nevertheless strongly focused on works. What’s really at issue for performers is how to parlay a strong focus on the works we value into the most rewarding music-making.

Sketch of a Consequentialist Case for Historical Authenticity

Davies’ principled argument for the pursuit of historical authenticity just doesn’t work. An argument that works will have to defend the pursuit in terms of the musical value of the resulting performances. This will often enough take the form of the detailed elaboration of musical benefits of observing particular directions, or of using particular historical practices or period instruments in particular works. But a more general form of consequentialist argument is also available.²³

The argument is a straightforward extension of the consequentialist case for a practice of performing compositions in the first place. (To this extent, at least, Davies is right: our reasons for performing compositions yield reasons for pursuing historical authenticity in their performance.) We have reason to perform a composer’s work to the extent that we hold her in esteem as a performance-planner. But such esteem gives us reason to expect musical benefits from the faithful execution of the planner’s plans. To value a composition just *is* to endorse the musical judgment of the composer as embodied in the decisions that together constituted the composing of the work. That is, to judge that a composition is good is to judge that in composing it the composer chose well, at least on the whole. To hold a composer in great esteem is to hold that her musical judgment, as exercised in the specification of plans for performance, is exceptionally fine. And that’s a *prima facie* reason to expect particularly good results from the faithful execution of those plans. Esteem for a composer provides *prima facie* reason to think that her directions concerning performance are apt to be good ones. Other things being equal, the greater our esteem for the composer, the weightier the reason for confidence in the details of her plans.²⁴

²² For critical discussion of Kivy’s worries, see Aron Edidin, “Look What They’ve Done To My Song: ‘Historical Authenticity’ and the Aesthetics of Musical Performance,” in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Vol. 16: Philosophy and the Arts*, eds. Peter A. French, T. E. Uehling, and H. K. Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 394-420 and Edidin, “Playing Bach His Way: Historical Authenticity, Personal Authenticity, and the Performance of Classical Music,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 32 (1998): 79-91.

²³ A much fuller version of this argument is developed in Edidin, “Look What They’ve Done.”

²⁴ Kivy, who objects to this reasoning, has dubbed the underlying principle CKB (for “Composer Knows Best”). Kivy’s objections are developed in Kivy, *Authenticities*. I reply to these objections in Edidin, “Playing Bach His Way.”

This reasoning applies most directly to the aspect of historical authenticity, which consists of fidelity to explicit directions in the score. More elaborate arguments suggest a somewhat more qualified conclusion that confidence in a composer's musical judgment provides *prima facie* reason to favor the use of practices and instruments of the composer's time and place.²⁵

The general form of the conclusion is this: the pursuit of historical authenticity in performance can reasonably be expected to bring frequent musical benefits, because it allows us to take the greatest advantage of the musical judgment of composers whose artistry we recognize in choosing to perform their compositions in the first place. The consequentialist case for a practice of performing compositions generalizes in this way to the pursuit of historical authenticity in performance.

The expectations in question, though reasonable *prima facie*, will be defeasible. Nothing guarantees that any such benefits will actually be realized in any given historically authentic performance of any given composition. But there can be a reasonable general preference for the pursuit of historical authenticity that is independent of Davies-style matters of grand principle without descending to the level of case-by-case consideration of the musical benefits of this or that particular instrument or practice or marking in the score.²⁶ To be sure, if the pursuit of historical authenticity produces a better performance, it will do so in particular, specifiable ways. For a critic, praising a performance for its historical authenticity without citing the particular virtues produced by such authenticity is not enough.²⁷ But in the cases of the composers we respect the most, we'll have reason to expect good results from relying on their judgment even before we know just what advantages will eventuate.

Where This Leaves Us: the Three Big Stories Revisited

I've focused here on the kind of case that can be made for the pursuit of historical authenticity in performance. My main argument is directed against views in the broad neighborhood of the First Big Story, most notably Stephen Davies' sophisticated development of the principled defense of authenticity. But the general consequentialist defense that I've sketched here and developed more fully elsewhere indicates the error of the Third Big Story (Taruskin's dismissive story) as well. Considerations of historical authenticity can be more than just a smokescreen for the Stravinskification of performance.

²⁵ These arguments, and some of their limitations, are spelled out in Edidin, "Look What They've Done."

²⁶ This is consistent with the possibility of a reasonable contrary preference for pursuing musical benefits in ways that conflict with the pursuit of historical authenticity. This possibility is discussed in Edidin, "Look What They've Done."

²⁷ Examples of both sorts of praise abound in the literature of performance and recording reviews. Of course, a critic's claim that a certain virtue of a performance was the result of historical authenticity may itself be disputable.

The approach to issues of authenticity that I've recommended is likewise inimical to the Second Big Story, which sees the pursuit of historical authenticity as hostile to the exercise of artistry in performance. Kivy writes that

If the establishing of historically authentic performance were carried to its ultimate (and presumably desired) conclusion, performance would collapse into text, and what we used to call "performance" would now have the logical status of prints (if you like) rather than true performances.²⁸

But one could say exactly the same thing about the practice of performing compositions. To perform compositions is to transfer a considerable measure of artistic agency from performers to performance-planners (composers). The pursuit of historical authenticity is a further incremental step in taking advantage of the musical judgment of composers in the preparation of performances. Compared to the step involved in moving from improvisation to the elaborate compositions of Western classical music, it's a small one. There's no more reason for this small second step than for the large first step to be judged by what would happen if it "were carried to its ultimate conclusion." Meanwhile, if the practices characteristic of the historical authenticity movement represent a New Contract between composers and performers, it's not the one Kivy describes. Performances that seek historical authenticity vary among themselves as do traditional performances, and in ways that clearly reflect performers' musical judgment and style rather than (or in addition to) differences of opinion about historical facts.²⁹ The work of such highly individual performers as Landowska, Newman, Kipnis, Staier, Levin, Harnoncourt, Rampe, Baird, Figueras, Manze, Biondi, Podger, Wispelwey, Bezuidenhout, and Savall would have no place in a movement whose "logic" is as Kivy suggests. But then, neither would the work of Leonhardt, Bylsma, Bilson, Pinnock, Brüggem, and other performing artists whose performances are less flamboyant than those of the first-listed group; the range of personal style isn't limited to varieties of musical extroversion.

In all three cases, the key to seeing what's wrong with the Big Story about historical authenticity is to not take for granted the larger practice of performing compositions in the first place. Seriously addressing the question of why it's a good thing to make music by performing compositions can give us a clearer sense of why it can be a good thing to pursue historical authenticity in their performance.

²⁸ Kivy, *Authenticities*, 270-1.

²⁹ A similar point is made by John Butt in his *Playing with History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).