

"Trills in the Bach Cello Suites" by Jerome Carrington

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Book review: Carrington, Jerome. *Trills in the Bach Cello Suites. A Handbook for Performers.* Foreword by Lynn Harrell. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-8061-4001-8.

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Reading this large-print, double-spaced text on *Trills in the Bach Cello Suites* left me perplexed for a variety of reasons. First, back when I was still a “modern” cellist, the question of how precisely I was supposed to perform every trill in Bach’s solos never really occurred to me, because technical issues and problems of phrasing and expression seemed much more urgent. Second, if or when issues of ornamentation in general arose—controversial in the specific case of the cello suites—my approach was fairly intuitive, along the line of “what works best melodically and/or harmonically within a given aesthetic/stylistic context?” And finally, within this ocean of possibilities for ornamentation options, I would not have isolated the trill and its derivatives as a question in itself, but I might have tried to explain for myself why an ornament was suggested in a specific place, to understand its function, and to think of the most effective way to play it in a particular acoustic environment. However, despite its title, the book in fact deals with *all* ornaments and *agréments* in Bach’s cello suites: trills, mordents, *appoggiature*, *tremblements liés*, *coulés*, *Nachschläge*, turns, and so on.

Since my interest in historical performance practices has led me to abandon steel strings in an endeavor to reconstruct the many different types of cellos, bows, improvisation, and performance practices on the instrument(s) in specific repertoires from the mid sixteenth century to roughly the Second World War, an entire study on how to play ornaments in Bach’s cello suites seems to me like baking an elaborate cake starting with the icing. Given that Carrington’s book is inspired by and heavily based on Frederick Neumann’s *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music: With Special Emphasis on J. S. Bach* (Princeton, 1978), one could ask why cellists could not get their ideas about ornamentation from that excellent source. Was there a real need for a book just on ornaments in the six suites? The question is even more pressing when I recall how little beginning students of historically-informed performance practices understand the one concept essential for understanding phrasing, articulation, and punctuation in pre-Romantic¹ musical discourse: rhetoric. What is the utility and relevance for “historically-accurate” execution of just one isolated ornamental detail in the music, when a predominantly

¹ What Bruce Haynes would have called “rhetorical music” in *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer’s History of Music for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 8.

melodic approach still prevails, rather than one based in the oratorical and dance characteristics of Bach's text?

Another surprising feature of the book is its complete lack of any consideration of aesthetic principles of late Baroque art in general with regard to choices in the performance of ornaments. Every case is carefully discussed in terms of melody, harmony, and even voice-leading—which is certainly a language most musicians speak and understand—but any reflection about such typically Baroque stylistic qualities as concealment of structure through ornament, illusion, *trompe l'oeil* (or *trompe l'oreille*), *inganno*, etc., is completely absent from his considerations about ornaments. Never does he ask what the stylistic/aesthetic function is of any of the ornaments, or what the composer (or copyist) might have had in mind in suggesting an ornament, and how this meaning can be made audible in performance. Astonishingly, Carrington appears to have consulted no one specializing in issues of historical performance practice about such questions of Baroque aesthetics: neither Pablo Casals (the subject of chapter 2), Lynn Harrell (author of the preface), nor any of the cellists and scholars cited in the acknowledgments have distinguished themselves as having much interest in performance practices of the Baroque era.

In his study of sources on ornamentation, Carrington also runs the danger of being anachronistic and/or of venturing into inapposite contexts. For instance, he correctly states that “C. P. E. Bach's *Versuch*, has been shown by both Dannreuther and Neumann to include a number of significant departures from J.S. Bach's ornamentation style” (27), and further, “Finally, given the detail in the foregoing, it is abundantly clear that C. P. E. Bach's *Versuch* is only a *preliminary source* for an understanding of his father's ornamentation style” (33; emphasis mine. However, the sentence following the first quotation states that: “The following is a compilation of some of the rules, or concepts of style, that have been applied in the interpretation of the Bach Cello Suites, including several from C. P. E. Bach's *Versuch*.” This keyboard treatise is indeed a conscious departure from J.S. Bach's older performance styles; it aims, just like Quantz' or Leopold Mozart's (barely mentioned) essays, to show the innovations and changes of the new *galant* and *Empfindsam* styles. So why would Carrington consider the *Versuch* an appropriate source for his “rules, or concepts of style,” at all? Indeed, rather oddly, most sources deal with keyboard (in this case the “explication” of several signs in the Little Clavierbook for W. F. Bach) or woodwind instruments (Quantz). Even though Mozart's treatise offers many older-style ways to deal with various ornaments, all these primary sources were compiled in the 1750s in Berlin or in Bavaria/Austria, whereas Bach's Cello Suites date from a generation earlier in Thuringia/Saxony. If historical performance practice has taught us anything at all, it is that we must not blithely conflate different times and places in this way.

In considering the performance of trills, Carrington seems primarily to take issue with what he calls “The Rule,” i.e., the indeed erroneous modern understanding of a performance practice in which all trills would need to start with the upper neighbor and on the beat. It is certainly high time we relinquished such oversimplifications that persist even among some performers who specialize in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century repertoires. As Carrington

notes: “A few writers have taken the extreme position that ‘the rule’ applies universally. Others recognize the possibility of exceptions, by stating that it ‘generally’ applies. Such hedging implies that there are exceptions; but, unfortunately, not enough has been written on what those exceptions are” (28). I quite agree; where I disagree is when the author continues: “This study identifies a surprisingly large number of exceptions to ‘the rule’ in the cello suites—enough, in fact, to suggest that it is far from accurate to state even that ‘the rule’ ‘generally’ applies.” Regrettably, Carrington fails to describe his methodology for identifying such exceptions, but continues to use C. P. E. Bach’s *Versuch*, the Neumann book, and the largely outdated 1893 *Musical Ornamentation* by Edward Dannreuther. In short, in his review of sources in chapter 3 (“J. S. Bach. Performance Practice”), the author mainly aims at questioning a “rule” that no period source ever described as such (except when taken out of context!), but that has been widely accepted as a “rule” in late twentieth-century practice, through the use of either the pedagogical keyboard explications or the treatises that postdate the suites by at least a generation. In discussing Carrington’s chapters on the specific compositions below I will provide alternative suggestions to many of his recommendations about performing the trills.

This study really addresses the question that so many cello students have, based on a dim sense that they can no longer ignore some of the discoveries of the now fifty-year-old early-music movement: how to do it right, particularly the trills. We know it is no longer appropriate to play them all starting from the main note (or from the upper neighbor), so what is the “truth” about them? What is the one universal answer to that question; what is “the rule” that needs to be applied? There certainly is an urge in many young players to find the one single, perfect solution to each and every problem. As teachers we do accept that a technical problem might have to be solved in different ways for different students, who may have very different instruments, and in different musical contexts. Nevertheless, we oddly want one single solution for a performance practice question that should be as open-ended as the technical ones. Is it because we do not feel comfortable venturing into such unknown territory? Unfortunately, I am not so sure there is a single truth or one perfect way to do it right when it comes to trills and ornaments: even the most airtight historical concept about a performance approach will have to be variable and flexible, based on specific performance circumstances, instrumental possibilities, and players’ abilities. Variations in architectural and acoustic environments are or should be an important factor in making decisions about bowings, fingerings, and ornamentation, even about the way a simple trill is to be performed. We are no longer used to leaving such a large window of opportunity to in-performance decisions and improvisations. Obviously, making the “wrong” fingering choice in a virtuoso late nineteenth-century concerto can have disastrous consequences for what follows, but such occurrences are quite rare in seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century repertoires in which the display of such flexibility is much more fundamental for an effective *elocutio* of the musical discourse.

For Bach's solo cello suites, it is deplorable that cellists still have no systematic guidebook² to performance practice of the kind that violinist Jaap Schröder has provided for violinists who are interested in delving a little further beneath the surface in Bach's sonatas and partitas for solo violin.³ In that sense, I would rather have welcomed a detailed essay on the ornaments in Bach's cello suites as a chapter (or as an appendix) in a more comprehensive study on performance practice issues in these compositions. As it stands, Carrington's work may give cellists the dangerous impression that they are actually addressing such issues in their performances by just following the author's advice on playing one type of the various possible ornaments in Bach's suites.

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In terms of its contents, the bulk of Carrington's book offers a systematic and detailed discussion of ornaments in each of the six suites, including a short chapter (n° 9) on the lute suite in G Minor BWV 995 (chapters 5-11), followed by a conclusion, a postscript on "The Experience Factor," and an appendix on the "Differences between Cello Suite n° 5 and the Lute Suite," a useful "Glossary" and a 20-item bibliography. The analysis of each of the movements within the suites is preceded (after a preface, acknowledgments, and an introduction) by a first chapter on "Designs and Definitions" of the ornaments at hand; Chapter 2 on Casals; Chapter 3 on "Performance Practice in J. S. Bach"; and Chapter 4 on "Compound Trills."

The first chapter addresses "Designs and Definitions" of the ornaments under scrutiny, giving clear and useful definitions of the various *appoggiature* (long, short, grace-note before the beat and with the emphasis on the main note) and trills (ordinary, compound, turn trill, *Triller von unten*, Italian double trill, *tremblement lié*, half or short trill, the chevron [as a symbol], suffix, mordent, and turn). The next chapter, "Pablo Casals," is a three-page reflection on Casals' approach to ornamentation, which could have been fascinating had the author compared it to approaches by other cellists (modern and Baroque), who have reflected on such problems. I was surprised not to see any mention of Bylsma's often provocative study of the first three cello suites in *Bach, The Fencing Master*.

Chapter 4, "The Compound Trills," offers a more in-depth treatment of the various trills defined in the second chapter, using excellent examples from the suites. Although I agree with many of the author's performance "solutions," I take issue with several of his propositions, of which I will pick one specific example. As the author acknowledges, the *Allemande* of the sixth suite is a piece in which all ornaments are written out in great detail, except of course for a few implied or marked trills. The trill n° 8 in bar 11 (discussed on p. 52), for example, is described as

² Anner Bylsma, *Bach, The Fencing Master: Reading Aloud from the First Three Cello Suites* (Amsterdam and Basel: [Self-published], 1998) may be one rare exception.

³ Jaap Schröder, *Bach's Solo Violin Works: A Performer's Guide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

a grace-note trill within a figure that combines a mordent trill and a double Italian trill (all written out in thirty-second- and sixty-fourth-note values!), meaning that the dotted thirty-second note with its implied trill would have to be performed with an anticipated grace note and the trill starting “on the beat” and on the main note. In fact however, the entire figure of ten fast notes should actually be seen as a gradually accelerated series of ornamental pitches where the exact place on-or-off the beat is largely irrelevant. Within the tempo and character of the piece, the whole ten-note ornament (including the trill) should be considered as a single gesture that has a single function: to provide a transition from the B in bar 11 to the A in bar 12. Nothing could be more inappropriate than to try to turn the notational rhythmic approximation of this musical idea as it appears on the page into a digital-age, metronomic, and sterile mathematical aberration!

In the subsequent chapters (5-11) in which Carrington takes a close look at the trills in each movement of every suite, I came to realize that even though I use a completely different type of reasoning—based in rhetorical and aesthetic reflections rather than on “rules” and “trill tests” taken from Neumann—I tend to agree with most (not all) of the author’s solutions that suggest (supported or plain) appoggiatura trills, but I disagree with many of his grace-note and main-note (supported or not) trills. In some cases, I would even see his solutions that suggest appoggiatura trills as main-note trills and vice versa. As mentioned before, my reasoning is rooted in general early eighteenth-century aesthetic and rhetorical principles; that is, upon a reflection that attempts to understand the specific function of the ornament within the musical discourse and upon the question of how it is most effectively made audible, also considering comparable situations in the visual arts where equivalent ornaments (in terms of function) could be used to enhance the effect at hand or optimize a way to convince the listener.

Since I cannot review each single example here, I will provide one striking situation that occurs quite often in the Suites. In many cases Carrington supports his choice of a main-note trill by showing the appropriate harmony change on the note where the trill appears.⁴ By playing that main note (supported or not) before starting the trill, the player thus emphasizes the dominant (as it often happens to be) so everyone can hear the motion from, for example, the tonic harmony to the dominant. The reasoning is certainly clear, but although the harmony is mostly implied in such monodic pieces, anyone with some knowledge of harmony would have no trouble understanding that in this specific spot the composer indeed took his listener from a tonic to a dominant harmony. However, in the stylistic languages of early eighteenth-century painting, architecture, or literature and rhetoric, stating the obvious is never considered to be tasteful, witty, creative, or even appropriate. Much in the language of late-Baroque ornamentation is

⁴ For example in Suite n°1: Allemande: trill #2, bar 11, p. 64 (in the book); trill #3, bar 12, p. 65; trills #5 & 6, bars 19-20, p. 66; Courante: trills #1 & 2, bars 10 & 16, p. 68; Sarabande: trill #1, bar 2, p. 70; trill #2, bar 4, p. 71: all these trills should not be main-note trills, but appoggiatura trills. In my opinion the same applies to Suite n° 2: Allemande: trill #1, bar 6, p. 85; trills #4 & 5, bars 13 & 19, p. 86-87; Sarabande: trill #1, bar 1, p.87-89; trill #9, bar 23, p. 94; Menuet 1: trill #1, bar 17, p. 96 (the tension continues!). However, I fully agree with Carrington’s suggestion to begin both section A and B of Menuet 2 with a main-note trill given their *ex abrupto* position. Other similar examples can be found throughout Suites n° 3-6 as well.

anchored precisely in concealing the structure—or delaying the listener’s or viewer’s feeling of gratification or confirmation in order to intensify the pleasure of the unknown—but always maintaining the characteristic Baroque tension between two opposite qualities (the structure vs. the ornament). In other words, the ornament is not detached from or juxtaposed with the structure; instead it is superimposed upon it and evolves in a relationship of tension with it. In literature, as in the other arts, excessive clarity and denotative language is considered flat and vulgar; the complexity of a metaphor or allegory is what really tickles the mind of early eighteenth-century courtiers, the same audience as that of the cello suites. How then can that tension be better expressed in music than through a passing dissonance that is slightly emphasized, and where its solution (the consonance) is so obvious that it can almost be omitted or just barely touched? Emphasizing the dominant upon which a trill is written or implied is thus utterly ineffective in this sense, and the choice of the note with which the trill should begin will have to be the most dissonant of all these pitches in order to delay and thus partly conceal the obvious statement, which in a courtly eighteenth-century environment would add elegance and wit, and be experienced as playful and tasteful. Let us not forget that Bach still chose to write his cello solos, despite their highly sophisticated compositional qualities, in the form of (stylized) dances—the most courtly of all genres.

In general, I would apply the same reasoning to most of Carrington’s grace-note trills,⁵ and even to a few of his appoggiatura trills.⁶ In other cases, I can agree with either his or a different solution, where I believe that more than one single possibility can be used towards an effective rendering of the gesture.⁷ Carrington’s discussion and explanation of the “unusual” key signature of Menuet II in the first suite (78-83) is certainly useful, clear, and informative for musicians unfamiliar with older notation standards.

In the opening of chapter 7 (Suite n° 3), the author addresses the problem of the partly written-out double trill in bars 85-86 of the Prelude, quoting and agreeing with Neumann that: “[Bach] tried with the limited notational means at his disposal to convey the idea of a slow start and gradual acceleration by writing out the start of the trill in relatively longer note values followed by the trill symbol” (101). In other words, it is clear that we are dealing with a single gesture, bridging the harmony change to reach the tonic. It is surprising that Carrington then writes: “It follows that, in accordance with this design, the trill proper should also begin with the

⁵ In the Minuet I of the first suite: trill #1, bar 4, p. 77 and in the Gigue, trill #1, bar 4, p. 84 the grace-note trill should be replaced by an appoggiatura trill. Also in Suite n°2: Sarabande: trill #8, bar 16, p. 93; Menuet 1, trill #3, bar 23, p. 97; Menuet 2: trill #3, bar 21, p.98; Gigue: trill #1, bar 8, p. 99.

⁶ In the case of trill #3, bar 26, p. 69 in the Courante and trill #4, bar 10, p. 76 of the Sarabande, I would play supported main-note trills to emphasize the dissonance. Also in Suite n°2: Allemande: trill #2, bar 8, p. 86;

⁷ For example in the Sarabande of Suite IV, trill 1, bar 12, p. 116, the trill appears on the final long note of the A section. I would probably opt for a supported appoggiatura trill to delay the tonic, but since it is not the final note of the entire dance, I could conceive of a long main-note start as Carrington proposes.

main note—that is, no upper auxiliary note should be added in the middle of the trill at point (b; i.e., the trill)” (101). He confirms this idea by saying that: “The most practical solution might be to leave Bach’s note design intact, with a slightly supported main note at (b) as the sole indication of the harmony change. This can be done by using two bows for the trill, beginning at bar 85, with a bow change at point (b). An accent at the potentially disruptive point (a; i.e., second sixteenth-note of beat 2 in bar 85) would thus be avoided, and there would be a mild support for the main note (b) in recognition of the harmony change” (102). This indeed fits Carrington’s—in my opinion stylistically inappropriate—desire to add emphasis to (obvious) harmonic changes. However, the strong contradiction between the clear concept of the unique accelerating trill gesture and its negation through an emphasis of the clear harmonic progression makes his suggestion odd, and even more odd since in his consideration of the double trill Carrington states that: “Despite this omission, it seems logical to assume that Bach intended a continuation of the trill in both voices” (103). Even a “mild support” on the main note on the dominant seventh chord would be excessively disruptive and would destroy the idea of the continuing and accelerating double trill towards the final C Major scale at the end of the prelude. If the cellist really needs to change bowing there (which is not even absolutely necessary), it should happen as discreetly as possible: the situation is certainly not to be compared to a final gesture in the solo cadenza in a Haydn cello concerto.

Another misconception in my view is Carrington’s discussion of the gigue of Suite III in which he constructs his reasoning about trill performance on a restructuring of Bach’s 3/8 pattern into a regular 6/8. “The 3/8-meter Giges make sense musically, more or less, when restructured in 6/8-time; but in most there are a few phrases that seem natural in various combinations of 3/8, 6/8, and 9/8” (108). I believe (independently from how the trills should be executed) that if Bach chooses to write a gigue in 3/8 rather than in 6/8, he does so in order to specifically avoid a regular symmetrical 6/8 accent pattern, and to have the freedom to group one, two, or sometimes even three bars in phrases or motifs with varying length. Here again we can invoke the beginning of the *galant* style in Bach’s courtly environment and the taste for irregular, asymmetrical *Rococo* painting to understand this musical equivalent.

Chapter 9 is dedicated to the lute suite in G Minor, a source that definitely needs consideration within the topic. The chapter is, unfortunately, confusing in terms of its purpose and construction, and sometimes contradictory in its arguments. Early in the chapter the author announces that his goal is to find out whether the lute suite preceded or postdates the fifth cello suite (121), but then the argument seems to veer towards the question whether or not the ornaments are to be played legato (122-124). After several statements in which it becomes clear to the reader that it is impossible to know which version came first, Carrington comes back to claim that the lute suite probably preceded the cello version (128). I will not comment here either on the author’s opinion that the C-G-d-g tuning was a rarity at the time, or on his speculation that the lute suite may have been written earlier, but with a version for the cello “in the back of his mind” (130). Simply, it is disappointing that on the basis of his study of the lute suite, Carrington offers no real conclusions to benefit the performing cellist, and that to his own question of: “Why should it be so important to discover which of the suites came first?” Carrington’s conclusion is:

“it is of historical interest to shed as much light as possible on the genesis of both suites” (131). Agreed, but how does this inform the player on specific performance issues, especially as far as ornaments are concerned? These should be a function (within a given style and musical language) of the particular idiomatic technical issues of these two fundamentally different instruments, as the author himself acknowledges on p. 129. Important and true however, is the author’s comment—based on explicit differences in rhythm in some written-out turns and *Nachschläge* after a dotted note (either sixteenth or thirty-second notes) that seem to be similar in purpose—that not all these ornaments are to be performed in the same way.

Although most of the observations I should make regarding Carrington’s conception of performing ornaments in suites 5 and 6 have already been made in considering the first suites, I should address just a couple of issues relative to chapters 10 and 11. Although the first issue does not pertain directly to ornaments, it raises a fundamentally important performance practice question: that of tempo. In this sense, the author’s statement that: “The *alla breve* time signatures in the Prelude and Allemande are good examples of the unreliability of the time signature as an indication of Bach’s intentions regarding tempo. Actually a *moderato* tempo is quite appropriate for both movements” (133) is surprising. Allemandes appear in both common time and in *tempo da cappella*, and the tempo is always the typical allemande speed with its own specific affect,⁸ whereas the slashed C in the slow dotted-rhythm overture section of the prelude in suite 5 offers the perfect proportion for the following fugato in 3/8: one beat per half measure in the first section becomes the same beat for a whole measure in the fugato. That way the slow duple-meter is not too slow, nor does the triple-meter fugato end up being played too fast, as most cellists do: that proportion should in fact be quite rigorously respected. If we conceive the slow section in four, the proportion is destroyed. Carrington’s objection then about the “unreliability of the time signature as an indication of Bach’s intentions regarding tempo” is disconcerting: these time/tempo signatures are actually clear and unambiguous.

A final issue relates to chapter 11 (Suite N° 6 in D major), and more particularly about the structure of the gavottes (171). In my understanding, the Gavotte 2 is written in the normal binary dance form that reiterates the A-section of the typical *gavotte en rondeau*, as the author rightly mentions (i.e., A, A-B-A-C-A[-A]). The question whether the A section should be repeated after the *dal segno* can be discussed. However, I do not believe that the second part (given the *dal segno*) needs to be repeated as the author claims it does, since no repeat sign appears at the end. On the other hand—and this is a general observation on performing the cello suites that the book leaves unaddressed—I am convinced that in all six suites the repeat of both sections in the *da capo* of the first *menuet*, *bourrée*, or *gavotte* should be observed, something which virtually no cellists do because they are following the late eighteenth-century minuet practice (not applicable here) of the *da capo senza ritornelli*. The total structure of these dances for suites 1-5 should be: I (aabb)-II(ccdd)-I(aabb), whereas the exception, Suite 6, with its first

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See Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991; 2nd edition, 2001); and Katherine Westine and Phebe Craig, *Dance at a Glance: Being a Quick Musical Guide* (Oakland, CA: Katastrophe, 2003 & 2004).

and second *gavotte en rondeau* should be played as I(aabb)-II(ccdc[c])-I(aabb). Carrington's concerns about the "confusing" repeat signs (with 4 dots instead of the modern 2) are a red herring, since that sort of sign is actually normal in seventeenth-century notation.

The author's final conclusions (173-6) are disappointing: they oscillate between the statement that many of his solutions are controversial and could be done in another way, and his hope that in using his suggestions cellists might move "in the direction of more historically informed interpretation (175)." While his statement that "The player should have the freedom to make revisions for spontaneity and variety, and to be imaginative in applying ornamental logic, provided that the resultant interpretations reasonably conform to the Bach style" (175) is absolutely appropriate, one does first need to figure out what that Bach style is!

* * *

In short, unfortunately Carrington's study is not a book to which I would send students and performers with questions about ornaments in Bach's cello suites. I have alluded before to the dangers that pseudo-scholarly essays on performance practice represent for performers who are not well versed in historical performance practice; this book addresses an extremely limited part of the big picture. Without that big picture, strictures about ornaments are little more than sand in the eyes of cellists who want to pour a small amount of Baroque sauce on their performance of the suites. On the other hand, today's trained period performers would not benefit from the book either, for the reasons I have explained. Perhaps, instead of analyzing the historical background of performance practices to confirm or revisit and even change existing opinions and intuitions, scholars and musicians could proceed more systematically and learn to extrapolate an ornamental language from within the style and rhetoric of the musical discourse at hand. As far as the cello suites go, one should play precisely with what Bach has not written: the pieces are true notational and compositional exercises in minimalism! Bach's thoughts may have been: "how little can I write down, or how economical can I be in suggesting as many as possible contrapuntal lines, harmonic changes, and melodic and rhythmic variety without becoming entirely hermetic and unclear?" I believe that with this approach in mind, a performer should not feel the need to spell out every harmony and every motivic feature to the audience as if it were entirely musically illiterate, but leave much room for ambivalence, for the audience's imagination, for their own game of the mind. As a listener I do not much appreciate being told how I should understand the music, and yet so many performers think they have to interpret everything for their audience, as if they were building them prefab homes or cooking them pre-packaged microwave dinners.