

# "Classical and Romantic Music, the Library of Essays on Music Performance Practice" edited by David Milsom and Mary Cyr

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**Milsom, David, ed. *Classical and Romantic Music, the Library of Essays on Music Performance Practice*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011. 978-0-754-62859-0.**

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This volume concludes a series of four that comprises the *Library of Essays on Music Performance Practice*. According to the Series Editor, Mary Cyr, the books feature “a coherent selection of essays about how music was performed before the modern era of recorded sound.” Given that musical performance takes place within the elusive medium of sound, there is of course a sense in which much of its history before the invention of what has recently been dubbed “the non-human storage of music” has entirely disappeared. Nowadays, the study of historical performance practice continues to prove fertile territory; its frustrations and delights bring to mind a memorable phrase of Mozart’s contemporary Daniel Türk, who observed in 1789 that “some musical subtleties cannot be described; they must be *heard*.” The art of performance itself has been subject to greater scrutiny than ever before, and theorists must now be in a minority who with Heinrich Schenker would consider “the mechanical realization of a work of art ...superfluous,” not least because “a composition does not require a performance in order to exist.” Yet, in the words of Jonathan Dunsby, “Time and again...earlier epochs characterize performance as something valid only for the present, or for veiled, mediated recollection; and though performance may have been reflected, represented, and even to some extent ‘recorded’ in literary or visual art, music in performance was not essentially open to scientific or even philosophical inspection.”

This Ashgate volume sits oddly within a publisher’s list that has consistently shown a commitment to the quality, breadth, and diversity of current musical scholarship. Cyr claims that each of her editors “offers an authoritative overview of the issues and controversies that have dominated performance practice research within a particular historical period.” She also claims that each of them “is a recognized authority in the field of performance practice and...has made significant contributions to research, teaching, and performing early music within the period in question.” Milsom has a reputation as a scholar rather than player, and the material he has chosen for this anthology is largely articulated from an academic rather than a performance-orientated perspective. In addition, his bibliography contrives to omit the work of prominent performer scholars such as Malcolm Bilson or Robert Levin. This bias is something of a limitation in an arena where the big picture has often been projected by innovative performers rather than scholars. It is scarcely a surprise that the work of Milsom’s mentor Clive Brown is well represented throughout the volume. For example, his 1988 article for the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* on bowing styles, vibrato, and portamento doubtless warrants this further opportunity for wider circulation. Yet with “impact” currently firmly on the worldwide research agenda, another equally important aspect of the debate is Sir Roger Norrington’s iconic “The Sound Orchestras Make,” which

Milson has chosen to ignore.<sup>1</sup> For better or for ill, Norrington's campaign against vibrato reached the international press and stimulated further debate in the ambience of the BBC Proms. Norrington may be more of a populist figure than Brown, but he has been able to launch a radical case through his extraordinary music-making, which is in a sense "beyond text." Another prominent absentee from the list of contributors is violinist Robin Stowell, whose article on the role of the concertmaster is a definitive contribution to the field.<sup>2</sup> Its continued relevance is all the more potent in light of the subsequent marketing of baton-waving conductors in Classical repertory on period instruments, an example of practical expediency subsuming historical accuracy. This seminal topic of orchestral leadership is represented only by an article from the same year by José Bowen, who confines himself to the later period of Mendelssohn, Berlioz, and Wagner. The volume as a whole has a palpable string bias, with orchestral wind and brass instruments entirely overlooked, despite the momentous technical developments to which they were subject during the period under discussion. And although no volume of this kind can ever claim to be exhaustive, some aspects of the period under discussion are surely indispensable for an inspirational mix, whether the French Revolution, the development of art-song (Schubert, Schumann, Brahms), or the age of virtuosity (Paganini, Chopin, Liszt).

It is of course a relatively simple matter for a reviewer to express a preference for those articles and authors that have not made the final cut. But one is entitled to ponder the very purpose of this book. Certainly, its presentation lacks visual appeal, not least because the various fonts and font sizes of each article are reproduced from different journals without modification. Even the original page numbers have been retained. Milson's declared aim has been to choose essays that span a period of vigorous scholarship and highlight the main areas of discussion. He organizes his twenty-two chapters within five parts: Style and purpose: appraising eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetics; Studies in historical sources; Instruments, ensembles, and conducting; Tempo and rhythm; Aspects of notation. Across these areas, he identifies the following as particular approaches and preoccupations: Objective description of discrete topics; Description of topics highlighting and/or commenting upon the shortcomings of historically-informed performance; Reference to, and/or significant focus upon recordings. Arguing that our erstwhile myopic distrust of Romanticism must now be abandoned and singing the praises of interdisciplinary research, Milson suggests that his book will provide a number of raw materials for such future developments and will be instrumental in stimulating future debate. But surely there is some danger for the unwary reader in presenting an anthology of secondary sources spanning more than three decades, even when read in conjunction with Milson's pocket guide to the development of scholarly approaches during the period 1973-2010. The earliest article, Edward Kravitt's influential study of tempo and tempo rubato is criticized for its attempt to create a unified view of late Romanticism and is reckoned to be old-fashioned in "breaking up the untilled soil of enquiry, leaving it ripe for further and (inevitably) more detailed research."<sup>3</sup> In the same vein, some of Brown's work from the early 1990s presented here

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Norrington, "The Sound Orchestras Make," *Early Music* 32/1 (2004): 2-5.

<sup>2</sup> Robin Stowell, "Good Execution and Other Necessary Skills – the Role of the Concertmaster in the Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century," *Early Music* 16 (1988): 21-33.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Kravitt, "Tempo as an Expressive Element in the Late Romantic Lied," *Musical Quarterly* 59/4 (October, 1973): 497-518.

was later revised and incorporated in his *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice 1750-1900*.<sup>4</sup> In other words, a potentially inexperienced reader is required to make sense of a disparate array of authors and topics, while negotiating and tracking developments in scholarship since the 1970s. Not everyone will feel able to accept Milsom's implication that such developments have necessarily been entirely progressive and beneficial. The most recent article in the collection dates from the year before the volume was published; Daniel Leech-Wilkinson's "Listening and responding to the evidence of early twentieth-century performance" reflects the avalanche of interest in this area since Robert Philip's pioneering work and badly needs more context than is offered in the introductory material.<sup>5</sup>

In this digital age, with easy access to the Internet as well as personal electronic devices, to what extent can an editor and publisher justify producing a costly 500-page hardback volume of this kind? Articles in *Early Music* (represented here by such authors as Brown, Dreyfus, Fontijn, and Edge) are readily available in digital format, and the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* (Leech-Wilkinson, Freitas, Martin, Brown) is hardly inaccessible. *Performance Practice Review*, *The Wagner Journal*, *Musical Quarterly*, *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music*, and even the *Basler Jahrbuch für Historische Musikpraxis*, the *Journal of Musicological Research*, and the *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* will hardly present a challenge to a determined, well-mentored student. This strange and motley collection of articles ranging across the broadest and narrowest of issues will be unlikely to reach (or at any rate resonate with) the performing community at large. It would be difficult to substantiate Milsom's claim that the volume brings together "twenty-two of the most diverse and stimulating journal articles on classical and romantic performing practice." Unfortunately, he fails to make the case for the coherence or value of this book; even if one accepts the controversial proposition that Classical and Romantic performance practices are usefully considered together as a piece, this book would make an eccentric and idiosyncratic introduction to the subject and indeed has little real identity of its own.

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<sup>4</sup> Clive Brown, *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice 1750-1900* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, "Listening and Responding to the Evidence of Early Twentieth-century Performance," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 135, Supplement 1 (January, 2010): 45-62.