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## "Orchestral Performance Practices in the Nineteenth Century: Size, Proportions, and Seating," by Daniel J. Koury.

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## Reviews of Books

Daniel J. Koury: *Orchestral Performance Practices in the Nineteenth Century: Size, Proportions, and Seating*. Studies in Musicology, no. 85. Edited by George J. Buelow. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986. xvii, 409p. ISBN 0-0357-1649-x

The story of the development of the modern orchestra is a fascinating one, and Dr. Koury tells it with fuller and more compelling detail than earlier writers. Statistics and contemporary descriptions abound, and there are some evocative illustrations.

But this book is not intended to be a mere history. The Introduction clearly declares that it is intended as "a contribution towards advancing the cause of authentic orchestral performance practices in nineteenth-century music." It is on that basis that it must be judged.

We are all very much aware that the nineteenth century's turn has come in the movement for historical authenticity, and Koury's study, based on his 1981 Ph.D. dissertation at Boston University, is timely. Early-nineteenth-century pianos are now commonly heard. A number of historical performances of Romantic orchestral works are available, such as Roger Norrington's stunning recording of the *Symphonie fantastique*, but for the most part they have relied until now on exact fulfillment of composers' expressed intentions and the use of contemporary instruments or replicas of them. Koury provides a further layer of evidence of a type that has already been widely drawn on for earlier periods: the general practices of the time, which composers presumably took for granted and thus did not specify in their scores.

Koury devotes more than half of his book to seating (or standing) arrangements, so he presumably thinks that placement is the most important factor in orchestral performance practice. It certainly claimed the attention of many commentators in the nineteenth century, above all Berlioz and Wagner. Their chief concerns were with efficiency — what placement was most likely to help the players to keep time together and

to follow the conductor — and with balance and effect in a particular hall or theater.

No matter how interesting these matters may be historically, placement cannot be anything more than a marginal consideration in the total experience of orchestral music. It does undoubtedly affect the sound, but not in ways that can be controlled independently of the acoustics of the building or the listener's position. There is no way to arrange or rearrange the instruments so as to produce a particular balance or directional effect that will be uniform throughout a concert hall. Nor is there necessarily any advantage in imitating a seating plan used in one hall when one is playing in another, which will have different acoustics (as Josef Krips pointed out: Koury, p. 321). The eye may be presented with a replication of the original experience, but the ear is not. The most that can be said on this subject is that where the hall used for the first performances of a work is still standing, and has its original or similar wall coverings and furnishing, one may hope to recover something of the original audience's specific aural experience by reproducing the original placement of instruments. Some people may think this worth doing.

The emergence of the baton conductor is another major topic addressed by Koury — and, of course, by many earlier writers. It is a fascinating historical development, but like the new seating plans, it was primarily motivated by the need for greater efficiency: more accurate regulation of time and rhythm, and the ability to impose unified expressive nuances. It is true that baton conducting was rarely used in the early 1800s. But only a fanatical historicist would wish to give up its enormous advantages for *the sake of historical authenticity*. *The result would be a performance that was authentic, indeed, but authentically incompetent*. We do actually play Beethoven's symphonies better than his contemporaries did, thanks to the rise of the conductor.

A much more significant factor is the size of orchestral forces. Even here one may exaggerate the difference between the sound of, say, 16 and 20 violins playing in unison; I would challenge anyone to guess the number consistently within a 20% error margin from even the most faithful of recordings. But Koury's thorough investigation of this matter is really useful. It corrects and greatly extends Adam Carse's data in *The Orchestra from Beethoven to Berlioz* (1948). It shows, for example, that despite Carse's view, woodwinds were often played two or more to a part in German as well as French orchestras for several decades after 1800. To find out when they played *ripieno* and when the principals played alone is quite another matter, requiring careful study of performing

parts; these have not been one of Koury's primary sources of information. A good example of this type of study is A. Peter Brown's *Performing Haydn's The Creation* (1986). Relative size of orchestra and chorus is another very useful subject that Koury tackles, with abundant sources of information.

A chapter on "New Sonorities" deals with the changes in instruments and playing techniques and the introduction of new ones. In every department except the strings this was a dynamic part of orchestral history in the nineteenth century. Koury's chapter will help those who wish to revert to the phase of instrumental development that existed at a particular time and place.

To sum up: Koury's book has plenty of historical interest and some useful information for performers. But it fails to make the critical distinction between past orchestral practices that can be revived with advantage and those that cannot. Such discrimination is too often lacking in the early (or not-so-early) music movement of our time.

Nicholas Temperley