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Performance Practice: a Manifestation of Our Time?

In a recent Berkeley symposium¹ the proponents of performance practice were called "ancients," while others who reject many of their claims were called "moderns." From the modernist standpoint the ancients, those who have sought to achieve historical verisimilitude, have been laboring under a delusion, in their attempts to reconstruct a past practice that exists for the most part only in their own minds. As the Berkeley brochure expressed it, "characteristic early music performances are . . . less 'historical' than reflective of some 20th-century mind-set." Actually, then, the symposium and its ostensible topic served as a kind of climax to a growing chorus of dissent heard over the past decade from scholars who have claimed that performance practice (or early music) is not actually historical at all, but a mere symptom of modern times. Three recent essays by Leech-Wilkinson, Taruskin, and Morgan develop this idea at some length, and I extract here some key points made by the authors:

1. "The Early Music Debate: Ancients, Moderns, Postmoderns," June 16, 1990, one of the events in *The Berkeley Festival and Exhibition: Music in History*.

I am convinced that historical performance today is not really historical; that a thin veneer of historicism clothes a performance style that is completely of our time.²

The remarkable uniformity of approach which dominates early music performance is nothing more than a reflection of current taste, the same taste that infuses present day performances of Schoenberg, Dallapiccola, and Boulez . . .³

The early music movement in general, as well as the authenticity movement in particular, is . . . an entirely 'authentic' manifestation of our age.⁴

What evidence has persuaded the authors to arrive at these conclusions? Particularly that early music performances, well known for their zealous attention to historical detail and exactitude and their attendant downplaying of expressive factors, have often lapsed into a calculating and geometrical manner of execution, one that bears a close resemblance to the anti-emotional, depersonalized stance evinced by a number of 20th-century composers — Stravinsky, Boulez, Babbitt, et al — and by literary critics such as Pound, Eliot, and Ortega. Detractors of early music have pointed particularly to its normative (i.e. anti-personal) traits, or to its lean and ascetic renditions that have relegated historical works to a kind of 20th-century musical museum, conveying a sterile impression that has little to do with this music as it was originally performed. As Morgan puts it:

As soon as we place these works in a museum, we wrench them out of their own frame and utterly transform their original meaning.⁵

A prominent theme among the so-called "moderns" has been the reinstatement of emotionalism, of a vitalist tradition characteristic of the concert stage (especially that of the 1930s and 40s), whereby a performer can feel freer to follow his or her personal whims. As Nicholas McGegan (a participant in the Berkeley panel) expressed it, "no two performances are alike, since one feels differently each time." And not

2. Richard Taruskin, "The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past," *Authenticity and Early Music: a Symposium*, edited by Nicholas Kenyon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 152.

3. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, "The Limits of Authenticity: a Discussion," *Early Music* 12 (1984), 14.

4. Robert P. Morgan, "Tradition, Anxiety, and the Current Musical Scene," *Authenticity and Early Music*, 72.

5. Morgan, "Tradition," 71.

only do performances vary in one individual, but even moreso between one player and another. This is a vacillating realm, in which interpretations and tastes can shift according to the times; and it is a return to a kind of romanticism that extols individuality and personal expression over hard-and-fast rules. The main requisite in the eyes of these writers is that a performance be vital. Historicism, as embodied in early music renditions, is seen as having a deadening effect by imposing what is regulative, artificial, or normative (aspects that vie against the independence of the artist). Laurence Dreyfus (also on the panel) uttered the *locus classicus*, "do we have to go back 60 years to get to a passionate interpretation?"

Actually, the "moderns" might be characterized as representing a current chic in historical writing, wherein the past is regarded anti-historically, or as part of a broad present. From this vantage point present performance is not really different from what past performance always has been, that is an experience centered in the feelings and attitudes of an individual artist. In accordance with this, no real distinction can be made between modern and historical performance. Historical performance is simply one aspect of a present, a limited aspect to be sure, but nonetheless one that is reflective of the 20th century.

How contrary to all this is the view that would be taken by the "ancients" (a view, incidentally, that hardly found a spokesperson at the Berkeley symposium). A fitting advocate may be found in the person of Robert Donington, who (in what was perhaps his final published essay) spelled out the historical position in quotes such as these:

... the music consists in the composer's intentions, and ... these have existed and continue to exist as an objective entity ... recoverable to the degree we can historically fathom [them] out.⁶

My own definition of authenticity is both simple and categorical. Authenticity is congruity between music and performance. 'Do it now as it was originally done' is no bad start for getting round to that.⁷

Actually Donington intended to establish a kind of compromise, to set up a clear distinction between those "who aspire to authenticity in performing early music, and those others who argue, on the contrary,

6. Robert Donington, "The Present Position of Authenticity," *Performance Practice Review* 2 (1989), 119.

7. Donington, "Authenticity," 117.

that authenticity is either unattainable or undesirable or both."⁸ For the "others" (moderns) as he indicates, a responsiveness and spontaneity would need to be brought into play. But for the historicists, on the other hand, a performance should ideally cast aside individualism while seeking to approximate a composer's basic wishes. If the moderns are conceptualists (the past as our conception of it), the historicists are realists (a discoverable reality that can indeed be found in the past). What the moderns do not choose to acknowledge (at least in the current discussions) is that an intrinsic quality *is* discoverable in musical works, and that performance practice *is* a part of this. While the composer in his own time may have taken for granted much about the performance of a work, it was nevertheless still a quite indispensable part of his conception, of the ideal sound and shape (tone colors, rhythms, pace, articulations, etc.) that he envisaged. Performance practice, then, is an important adjunct; and it is also a means whereby a musical work can be enhanced or clarified.

In this respect the historical performer pursues a unique path, quite different from that of the typical modern virtuoso; this path does not at all exclude expressivity, only it is of a different kind, not individualistic, but arising out of a process of rediscovery, of enthusiasm for and involvement with the unique practice of a past time. This practice is what the historical performer takes delight in sharing with his auditors, and which engenders its own kind of expressivity.

8. Donington, "Authenticity," 117.