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"New Essays on Performance Practice." By Frederick Neumann

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Frederick Neumann: *New Essays on Performance Practice*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989. x, 257p.

More than twenty-five years ago Frederick Neumann established an overnight reputation as an authority on performance problems of the baroque era, with special attention to the music of J. S. Bach. He has since widened his scope to include the classic era as well, focusing on the music of Haydn and Mozart. Neumann's controversial and provocative publications, including two books on ornamentation, as well as numerous articles on baroque and classic rhythmic conventions, have attracted a faithful band of disciples; however, there are still many reputable scholars and performers who are "non-believers," and Neumann has spent many years trying to convince this "establishment" of the truth as he sees it. To use his own words [*New Essays*, 166]:

That a majority of players worldwide disagree with me does not prove that they are right and I am wrong. They disagree because they have been thoroughly indoctrinated with the dogma that every ornament has to take the beat. Their numbers do not protect them from being "benighted." They have company in that huge majority that follows the principles of the French overture style and the one that insists on starting every trill from Corelli and Lully to Mozart and Beethoven with the auxiliary on the beat. It so happens that *historical facts are not determined by majority vote*, no matter how large the majority may be.

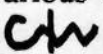
Frederick Neumann, as is the case with all other authorities on the performance of baroque and classic music, bases his writings on historic documents: the treatises of contemporary theorists, autograph scores, and reliable original as well as trustworthy modern scholarly editions. These documents are, of course, all open to many different interpretations. Neumann champions his own interpretations of the "historical facts", bolsters these interpretations with insights he obtains from melody, harmony, voice-leading, text underlay, and vertical alignment, and then assures his readers that these interpretations have "musical logic" and make "musical good sense." He has repeatedly cautioned his readers not to accept the historic documents at face value or unquestioningly, but rather to keep open, unprejudiced minds. In the

world of performance practice, Neumann will be among the first to admit that there may not be a single "correct" solution to any problem; however, in his enthusiasm for his own solutions, he is (and long has been) unwilling to admit that anyone else comes as close to the truth as he.

The present book of eighteen essays (all of them written since 1982) consists primarily of articles reprinted from such journals as *The American Recorder*, *Early Music*, *Performance Practice Review*, and *The Musical Quarterly*; in addition, there are some that have been written especially for *New Essays* (hereafter, *NE*). The essays are, in the main, concerned with restoring and reinforcing Neumann's own position as *the expert* in performance practice matters, and they are arranged in five categories: 1) *Introduction* (a survey of the early music movement and "authenticity" school); 2) *problems of rhythm*; 3) *problems of ornamentation*; 4) *varia*; and 5) *book reviews*. While the whole book has matters of genuine interest to performers, there is room here to touch on three matters only: 1) Neumann's critical stance (including reviews and responses to other scholars); 2) the early music movement's preoccupation with historic instruments; and 3) the *Aria of the Goldberg Variations* as seen in the light of the galant style.

As regards criticism, Neumann responds to people who have written anything at all on performance practice matters. Some of his efforts seem to me to be wasted, particularly his refutation of Hans Klotz's primer on ornamentation in Bach's keyboard and organ music, *Die Ornamentik der Klavier- und Orgelwerke von Johann Sebastian Bach* (Kassel: Barenreiter Verlag, 1984). Klotz allegedly traces his musical lineage directly back to Bach, but I have no particular confidence in him as an editor of Bach's organ music for the *Neue Bach Ausgabe*. For example, in the Leipzig Chorale BWV 651, Klotz does not like the harmony of bar 88, so he substitutes for Bach's autograph whole-note F in the pedal cantus firmus the insipid half-notes F and G from another source. He reasons:

This reading must be Bach's final intention. The change of note in bar 88 avoids the premature stopping-place on the whole-note F, and the progression of the alto becomes much more harmonious.

I also have no particular confidence in Klotz as an authority on ornamentation in Bach. He proposes solutions for ornament signs that were apparently made up by various copyists and editors. One of the most bizarre of these signs is , which Klotz calls "turn plus mordent," attributing its invention to Bach himself. Neumann does not record any such ornament in his book, nor does he mention such a curiosity in his review; rather, he focuses on Klotz's insistence on on-beat starts for Bach's ornaments [NE, 138]:

...all in all, the book is severely flawed to the point where it is not only misleading, but indeed harmful in its dogmatic rigidity. There are the faulty premises that served as fundamental theses. . . ; there is egregiously inadequate research that kept from the author and his public a vast amount of evidence that contradicts both theses and conclusions. . .

Likewise, Neumann's review of Anthony Newman's *Bach and the Baroque* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1985) seems a wasted effort. Newman's book represents *one* performer's approach to the problems in Bach's music. It does not pretend to be an exhaustive musicological treatise, and the disclaimer comes already on page one: "Leaps to conclusions about other aspects of style insufficiently documented in sources are made on the author's own experience as a performer." Neumann concludes his review with these words [NE, 241]: "those parts that deal with interpretation are severely flawed by incomplete research and careless documentation. It cannot be recommended as a guide to historical performance." One of Neumann's objections to both Klotz and Newman is that neither author seems to be aware of Neumann's writings, or if they are aware of them that they do not find it worthwhile to mention them.

Neumann's responses to Faye Ferguson [NE, 139-153] and Robert Levin [NE, 155-167] were prompted by their unfavorable reviews of his *Ornamentation and Improvisation in Mozart*. Both Ferguson and Levin disagreed with some of Neumann's interpretations of the "historical facts," and he here takes them to task for disagreeing with him. Many other writers come under fire in the book: David Fuller, László Somfai, Michael Collins, Robert Marshall, Robert Donington, Thurston Dart, and Arnold Dolmetsch (who has been dead for fifty years).

Neumann devotes the first two essays to the early music movement. In his second essay, a discussion of "Controversial Aspects of the Authenticity School," Neumann includes many of his favorite catch-words: "musical logic," "musical common sense," "dogma," and so forth. He thinks that the original instrument contingent has gone too far, often putting the music in second place, and to counter this he brings up, among other things, several concepts that have not been fashionable in recent years. On Bach's interest in color (registration, instrumentation, etc.), Neumann states [NE, 27 — see also pp. 170, 236]:

the essence of his music lies in its line, not in its color. . . . Clearly, color combinations of the organ must have ranked near the bottom of Bach's music priorities. . . . In view of the supremacy of line and indifference to color, the spirit of Bach's music stands to be enhanced, not denatured, by the modern piano's potential of giving his phrases plasticity in three-dimensional space.

A similar point of view can be seen in the mid-nineteenth century preface to Volume 1 of the old *Bach Gesellschaft* edition, p. 15: "for our age, the old woodwinds can be replaced by others — the special sound qualities of instruments is much less important in Bach's works than it is in more modern music."

Concerning the harpsichord [NE, 29], Neumann revives the old myth that: ". . . the density of *agréments* in Couperin is closely linked to the quickly decaying, inflexible sound of the harpsichord, while their quantity is redundant on the modern piano." What about the density of *agréments* in the (organ) *masses*, the *concerts*, the *brunettes*, or the *pièces de violes*? Remarks similar to Neumann's can be seen in the *avant-propos* to Saint-Saëns's edition of Rameau's *Pièces de clavecin* (Paris: Durand, 1895):

. . . Now, the very nature of the harpsichord — its lack of resonance, its sour and dry sonority, the meagerness of its expressive resources — quite early on forced artists to seek a means of correcting these faults . . .

— and that is why they thought up ornaments.

On the fortepiano [NE, 27-28] Neumann suggests that the modern piano might often be a better choice, especially for the piano concertos. He finds that the fortepiano is "never fully satisfying" for Mozart's music.

In the thirteenth essay, "Bach: Progressive or Conservative and the Authorship of the Goldberg Aria" [NE, 195-208], Neumann takes exception to Robert Marshall's "Bach the Progressive" (MQ, 1976), and finds Bach "not guilty" of any *galant* leanings. Neumann's prime piece of evidence in pronouncing his verdict is the Aria of the Goldberg Variations. Neumann thinks that it is an "inferior composition" [NE, 206], and argues that it cannot be by Bach. He cites Arthur Mendel's pronouncement: "it is a piece of French fluff" [NE, 208], and rates the Aria as "only a cut or two above Diabelli's Waltz of Beethoven's variations" [NE, 204]. In sum [NE, 203f]:

I have for a long time, and at first purely instinctively, suspected the attribution. The un-Bachian flavor, the flimsiness of its substance, and the shallowness of its melodic content aroused my suspicion. Then there is the sudden stylistic break of the last six measures, where the *galant* fractionalized melody suddenly turns into a Baroque-type *Fortspinnung* figuration (musically the best part of the piece). Such breaks do not occur in Bach's dances or related pieces.

Neumann focuses on the ornamentation of the Aria [NE, 204]:

Apart from the excess of embellishments, strewn over the music as in a shower of confetti, many of the ornaments are highly suspect. There are, above all, several collisions of different ornaments in the left and right hands in a manner used by French Keyboard composers but not by Bach.

After citing four examples of different ornament-signs occurring simultaneously in left and right hands, as well as a "clumsy and redundant" *port-de-voix* on the identical pitch on two successive beats, Neumann rests his case [NE, 205]: "The use of these ornaments alone is sufficient to reject Bach's authorship".

One would like to believe that this statement is the truth. After all, Neumann has studied all the Bach sources, and has written a standard reference work which focuses on Bach's ornamentation. A ten-minute check of the *NBA* series V, however, yielded the following instances of keyboard pieces in which two different ornaments occur simultaneously.

Ouverture, BWV 831, bars 159, 160. (The same ornaments are present in the c minor version, BWV 831a.)

Partita in E Minor, BWV 830, Sarabande, bar 22.

Goldberg Variations, BWV 988, variations 16, bars 3, 6.

Invention in E Minor, BWV 778 (1720 version), bar 6.

English Suites. BWV 806, Courante II, bars 1, 2, 9. Sarabande, bars 13, 31; BWV 810, Courante, bar 19.

French Suites. BWV 812, Courante, bar 15; BWV 813, Gigue, bars 2, 12, 29, 34, 38; BWV 817, Sarabande, bar 18.

Even if we reject the "colliding" ornament signs present in Gerber's copies of the French Suites (which the *NBA* does not do), we are still left with at least a dozen authentic instances of the "collision" of two simultaneous ornaments in Bach's keyboard works, and almost half of these come from copies engraved in Bach's lifetime. Who among musicians is willing to reject any of the pieces listed above? In his zeal to "unburden Bach of the responsibility of this inferior composition" [*NE*, 206], Neumann has introduced as evidence that "the use of these ornaments alone is sufficient to reject Bach's authorship"; however, his evidence, to use his own words, "would be thrown out of court in any civilized society" [*NE*, 72]. The last word has not been spoken on the authorship of the Goldberg Aria.

New Essays, in my opinion, is not up to Frederick Neumann's usual standards. The essays, which are addressed to many different kinds of performers, are as a consequence rather uneven in their quality. One has come to expect from Neumann only high-level discussions which are scrupulously documented. The thread of frustration at the enormous amount of attention that is now-a-days focused on "original instruments"

and "authenticity" runs through many of the essays. The book, in many ways, strikes me as being the musicological equivalent of the "Back to the Future" movies: if only we could persuade Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd to return to 1915 England, "Marty" and "Doc" could prevent Arnold Dolmetsch from publishing his book, and the good old performance traditions would still be in force.

Erich Schwandt