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## Performance Practice and Its Critics - The Debate Goes On

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## Editorial

### Performance Practice and Its Critics—the Debate Goes On

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An intriguing dilemma came up at the opening session of the symposium *Mozart Performance* (held in the Juilliard Theatre of the Lincoln Center 20-24 May 1991). David Hamilton, as part of a general overview of *Mozart on records*, brought to the attention of the participants Rakhmaninov's fascinating 1919 rendition of the A-major Variations. Many of those present (including a number of early-music stalwarts) were quite taken with Rakhmaninov's interpretation, which was obviously sensitive, engaging, and imaginative. At the same time it unabashedly departed from most of the criteria we have come to associate with "informed" Mozart performance. Were performance practice and its principles thereby brought into question? Are renditions such as Rakhmaninov's to be regarded as valid in their own way, as alternatives to—and even at times as superior to—those of performers who seek historical exactitude? Such questions hung over the symposium in general and animated many of its discussions.

Especially notable was a marked difference of opinion (which brought the above conflict into sharp focus) between two of the participants, Neal

Zaslaw, the symposium's director, well-known for his contributions to Mozart performance practice, and Richard Taruskin, who in a number of essays over the past decade has spearheaded the anti-performance-practice movement. Zaslaw, near the beginning of the conference, laid out the by-now standard view (one unquestioningly accepted by performance-practice adherents) that a musical work along with its manner of realization (actually part of the "work") is something that over time (i.e. the 19th and early-20th centuries) has gradually become obscured or even distorted by subsequent performances, by the various performing traditions that have since crept in. Taruskin, in a provocative final paper, on the other hand, took the very opposite position, that the musical work *per se* was not to be regarded as an autonomous (or tangible) entity, but instead existed only as a result of its various interpretations, original and subsequent; only these gave the work its meaning and validity. Indeed, the very traditions Zaslaw had been complaining about were (in Taruskin's estimation) what lent the work its genuineness and even its perpetuity.

Taruskin's view, surprising as it seems, is typical of the swing towards subjectivism in current critical thought, of a movement away from the single work, from the search for objective reality, to pluralism and individuality of interpretation, away from the notion of the "timeless" work (or "timeless" performance) to a consideration of the personal responses of those who at various times have experienced (or will experience) the work. Implicit in the new scepticism and subjectivity are its anti-textuality (did the work exist in a single form? did the composer have only one performance in mind?), its refunctioning (the work is simply adapted to new situations), its conceptualism (works are as we perceive them), and its historicism (history and its manifestations "exist" only in accordance with our view of them).

As a critical stance subjectivism is unassailable and falls into the realm of speculation. Nonetheless, if it is to be enlisted as a means of dismantling performance practice it would seem that some coming to grips with the evidence, some taking into account the many discoveries that have been made in the field over the past 50 to 75 years, is called for. (At the symposium, for instance, Malcolm Bilson showed how the Viennese piano was inherently suited to Mozart's one-measure slur markings at the beginning of K332 and not to the single unbroken phrase played by Schnabel and other modern pianists.) Taruskin's point of view (which sums up much of what has been said by performance-practice critics over the past few years) runs along the following lines:

- (1) performance practice cannot return to an earlier time (efforts to do so are "Wellesian time-travel fantasies");
- (2) on the contrary, it is in actuality but a manifestation of our own time (the mid-20th century to the present);
- (3) and as such its performers (following a kind of "Stravinskian aesthetic,") are lacking the warmth and spontaneity that characterized many concert performances of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Such an argument is compelling, yet it leaves a great deal unanswered.

- (1) In what sense is performance practice unable to return? (to historical circumstances like our own? to the concept of an intrinsic, autonomous work? to the sounds of an original performance?). Although it cannot be proven, it is nevertheless hard to believe that past works do not speak to us much as they did to their own contemporaries (to be sure, "historical" listening needs to be cultivated, and Mozart not heard with the same expectancies as is Wagner).
- (2) Why does performance practice not reflect an earlier time? How has the evidence concerning "authentic performance" (I'll use the expression) been invalidated? Have not original documents, contemporary reports, the sounds of reconstructed instruments, the scores themselves, yielded up a vast array of secrets concerning past eras? And using these as a basis, is it not possible to reconstruct or approximate how performances once were?
- (3) Have early-music performances actually been less "expressive" than those of early-century concert artists (a point often brought up by the anti-performance-practice faction)? Is expressivity necessarily to be associated with interpretive individuality, freedom, or spontaneity? Is it not possible to merge into the practice of a former time, perceive its evocative qualities, and incorporate these into a present-day performance? Cannot one identify with the expressive aims of a past composer and (selflessly) reinvolve these in a modern interpretation?

In listening to Rakhmaninov play the A-major Variations one is struck by the fact that his approach (although more exaggerated) was not all that different from that of many modern-day instrumentalists and vocalists.



As in these later performances Rakhmaninov's rendition was guided primarily by a personal response to the music, without giving thought to performance practice considerations. But for those listeners who have become aware of earlier performance criteria, who because of this are to an extent sensitive as to how Mozart's music once sounded, such performances (whether in 1919 or 1991) will begin to be heard as well-intentioned but actually grotesque, not simply as departures from an original but as caricatures of it.