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## Frederick Neumann's Final Book—an Appraisal

Albert Cohen

Frederick Neumann has devoted some thirty years of research, study, and publication to the heady issues of historical performance.<sup>1</sup> From the onset, he has forcibly (and often, caustically) denounced much of the “received wisdom” of earlier scholars, challenging principles based on misconceptions that do not conform to historical fact. His works display a prodigious knowledge of both theoretical and musical sources bearing on these issues, and they have been valuable in forcing us to rethink fundamental questions in the field.

Neumann's prior publications have concentrated primarily on the topics of rhythm and ornamentation. In *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*,<sup>2</sup> he summarizes and updates his discoveries in these topics, and adds important new areas of inquiry. Eight years in the writing, this large book is divided into six Parts in what the author calls the “tactical issues of interpretation.” Part I, *Tempo* (eight chapters), traces the concept from the tactus and proportions of mensural notation, through flexible tempo in styles of the early seventeenth century, to the emergence of the modern metrical system, the latter including tempo words (expression marks), the final *ritardando*, and the role of the dance. Part II, *Rhythm* (four chapters), covers subject matter largely dealt with in earlier writings: rhythmic alterations, French overture style, *notes inégales*, and rhythmic conflicts. Part III, *Dynamics*, discusses “terraced” and graded dynamics,

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<sup>1</sup> These include two major books, *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music* (Princeton, 1978) and *Ornamentation and Improvisation in Mozart* (Princeton, 1986), as well as numerous independent articles, many of which are reprinted in *Essays in Performance Practice* (Ann Arbor, 1982) and *New Essays on Performance Practice* (Ann Arbor, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Neumann, *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Prepared with the assistance of Jane Stevens. New York: Schirmer Books, 1993. xiii, 605p. ISBN 0-02-873300-2.

words and symbols, and unmarked dynamics. Part IV, *Articulation* (four chapters), deals with vocal and instrumental articulation, legato and detachment on different instruments, and the meanings of dots and strokes. Part V, *Phrasing* (two chapters), reviews theories of phrasing and its practice. Part VI, *Ornamentation* (13 chapters), largely repeats the classifications and discussions from the author's earlier writings on ornamentation and improvisation. Most chapters follow the same basic design: the topic is introduced, information derived from theoretical sources is provided, musical examples drawn from the literature are quoted and interpreted, occasional performance suggestions are offered, and (sometimes) a useful summary follows.

The work is organized into an orderly, progressive (though admittedly bulky) handbook "addressed primarily to performers and students of performance." It may be ingenuous, however, to state that the book "does not call for previous knowledge" on the part of the reader (p. xii), for while it certainly promises to be an important reference tool, it seems designed primarily for the student of the fine points of performance practices, rather than for the beginner. A carefully-prepared, comprehensive Index leads searchers readily to sources cited in the text; a compilation of these sources forms the book's Bibliography. (Both Bibliography and Index were prepared by Barbara Anderson.)

The author's fundamental argument throughout this book, as in fact, in his previous writings, is that today's performer, in seeking historical correctness, would do well to abandon the hope of finding a "common practice" of rules that governs performance for any early period; "there has never been a totally homogenized practice in any aspect of performance, not even within a single country, let alone all over Europe" (p. 194). "A historically informed<sup>3</sup> performance is by necessity a mixture of factual knowledge and educated guesses" (p. xii). He goes on to say that "the purpose of this book is the attempt to give an account of what can be established with a good degree of probability about the way composers of the era under scrutiny intended<sup>4</sup> their music to be interpreted and, where facts are elusive, what educated guesses may be reasonably made" (p. 8). Neumann describes the present-

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<sup>3</sup> Neumann understands "historically informed" to mean "roughly, an interpreter's attempt to reconstruct a performance that would have met with the composer's approval" (p. xi).

<sup>4</sup> The fallacy of the "composer's intention" has been argued, *inter alia*, in Richard Taruskin, "The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past," in Nicholas Kenyon (ed.), *Authenticity and Early Music* (Oxford, 1988), 145.

ation as “descriptive” rather than “prescriptive,” seeking to provide for “today’s interpreter a foundation of historical insights as a basis for making artistic decisions, not to offer a rule book of what the performer must and must not do” (p. 8). “In the end,” he adds, “it is our feeling, supported ideally by stylistic literacy and sensitive musicianship, that will suggest to us an appropriate or, at least, an acceptable... [solution] for a given situation” (p. 290). The reliance by Neumann on musical instinct or intuition, which has been noted by earlier critics of his works,<sup>5</sup> provides a curious paradox against the substance of his carefully-reasoned arguments. But it gives the book its very special quality: it is a document that reflects the strongly-held beliefs of a sensitive scholar and musician, who applies his considerable research, knowledge and powers of persuasion to sustain his personal, intuitive musical impulses.

While basic thoughts and examples found in Neumann’s earlier publications form a central core for this work (notably in Parts II and VI, on rhythm and ornamentation, which comprise the larger portion of the book), special effort has been made to reduce them to their essence. Careful editing has trimmed the prose borrowed from former studies into a tighter, more focused, less confrontational style (in keeping with the purpose of the book), and footnotes have been kept to a minimum (references are typically short and given in the body of the text). Occasional unclear musical examples from former studies have been replaced or excised in this version, and additional information has been inserted—sometimes responding to earlier criticism,<sup>6</sup> but more often adding views on selectively-chosen, recently-published sources by other scholars. Yet, where Neumann has taken previous stands on basic issues of performance practice, these stands remain essentially unchanged here.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the comments of Robert Levin, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 41 (1988), 357-8, and Thomas Binkley, *MLA Notes* 48 (December 1991), 484.

<sup>6</sup> For example, new sections on English ornamental practice in *Performance Practices* appear to be a response to several critics of Neumann’s *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music*, who censure him for failing to take English ornamentation into account—see George J. Buelow, *Musical Times* 120 (1979), 639; David Fuller, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 33 (1980), 398, and Neal Zaslaw, *Early Music* 9 (1981), 63. The absence of the traditional style terms “Baroque” or “Classic” in the very title of the book (though not within its body) may, in fact, reflect Neumann’s reaction to criticism that such terms are now “universally discredited”—see Peter Williams, *Music & Letters* 63 (1982), 96.



In presenting new material, Neumann is most persuasive when arguing details of examples, and least convincing when generalizing about a given subject (as in the introductory section to chapters). Indeed, his generalities tend to be incomplete and dated; they rarely take into account current or recent thinking on the subject matter.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, his discussions of expression and taste (in the introduction), and parts of his sections on tempo (Part I) and dynamics (Part III)—while filled with interesting insights and personal viewpoints—are often distracting rather than helpful; these subjects come alive only when examples are presented and interpreted. The author appears to be more comfortable when dealing with the topics of articulation (Part IV) and phrasing (Part V), which are given fuller and more successful treatment. The sections devoted to articulation in the music of Mozart are particularly fascinating, especially where Neumann develops a systematic and cogent set of criteria for judging the “intention” of different articulation marks, derived from careful analysis of score examples (see in particular, pp. 233-44, where, however, the examples in facsimile are often illegible).

Novel terms are occasionally adopted in this book to describe performance features, and a glossary of these terms would have been helpful. Among them are: “area dynamics” and “spot dynamics” (p. 173), “denominations” (p. 44), the “arbitrary accent” (p. 88), “superlegato” (p. 203), “earwitness” (p. 203), and the “anatomy” and “physiology” of phrasing (p. 259).

Frederick Neumann's *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* is an important new reference tool for students of historical performance. It is a work that is both challenging and engaging—one that will doubtlessly form the basis for continuing discussion, controversy, and experimentation by both performers and scholars in the field.

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<sup>7</sup> On several occasions, Neumann refers to personal correspondence from musicians and scholars whom he respects, rather than to published literature on a given subject; see for example, Arthur Mendel on principles of vocal articulation (p. 195), Alejandro Planchart on mensural notation (pp. 23, 25-6), and Stephen Hefling on the characteristics of old bows (p. 217).