

1996

José Bowen's Essay: A Few Afterthoughts

Roland Jackson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Music Practice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jackson, Roland (1996) "José Bowen's Essay: A Few Afterthoughts," *Performance Practice Review*. Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 4. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199609.01.04
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol9/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Current Journals at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performance Practice Review by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

José Bowen's Essay: a Few Afterthoughts

Roland Jackson

What is performance analysis and how does it actually differ from performance practice? As is the case with Taruskin (see the first editorial above) Bowen appears to be performer- (rather than composer-) oriented. He mentions "audience response" and "performer psychology"—code expressions for this shift of emphasis. Performance analysis, and its umbrella organization CHARM, is to all appearances not seeking to discover what in a performance would be acceptable to a composer (the primary quest of performance practice), rather it is directed toward exploring in depth what various 20th-century performers (whose efforts are so vividly preserved in recordings) have done. Such an emphasis can be seen to have a compelling interest in its own right (e.g. Karajan's various versions of Beethoven's Fifth). Moreover, many performers of the earlier 20th century have been placed under a shadow as a result of the outlook of performance practice. Performance analysis will apparently assign a new value to these performances regardless of their lack of adherence to what has since been learned about historical practice.

But despite these apparent differences of purpose performance practice can, if only derivatively, benefit substantially by the new endeavors being undertaken by CHARM. Here I would like to men-

tion but some of the possibilities. First, there is the increasing accessibility of recordings through electronic means and library interchange. This will greatly facilitate and broaden the kinds of comparison that performance practice has been encouraging, especially that of performances by composers of their own works (e.g. Rachmaninoff playing Rachmaninoff). It will also permit a wider exploration of performances by persons who had a close association with composers or whose playing came directly under their guidance (e.g. Long or Perlemuter playing Ravel).

Another distinct advantage of having a broader panorama of recordings (as Bowen point out) is that the conventions of a certain geographic location or time period, or the two in combination (such as Paris in the 1920s), will provide us with a more distinct and reliable basis for comparison. It will enable us, for instance, to determine whether a composer's interpretation simply reflected certain general trends (e.g. Schoenberg's ascending-line crescendos), or whether a composer was idiosyncratic, departing from the norms of a time and place.

Were some performers oblivious to the predilections of the composer they performed? Sandor performed Bartók's works very differently from the way Bartók himself performed them (the preference, of course, should be assigned to Bartók). Moreover, the printed score often gives a very incomplete picture of what a composer expected in the performance of a work. Scriabin's recordings of his own keyboard works (taken up in the present issue of *PPR*), shows the extent to which composers sometimes digressed from their own published music.

Professor Bowen seizes upon a fascinating issue, the distinct differences that are now so conspicuous between performances of the early 20th-century and those of the present time. He calls them "two distinct accents." Can we return to the original manner of playing music of the early century, incorporating the irregular rhythms (e.g. the unequal distributions of notes within a measure or even a beat), the frequent rubatos (of the *accelerando* and *ritardando* sort), portamentos between certain tones, and the (merely) occasional introduction of vibratos. For mainstream performance the task may be a daunting one, since audiences have now grown quite unaccustomed to such an unfamiliar manner of performing. For

performance practice, on the other hand, this represents a final frontier, that of restoring the music of the early century to what it originally was. It seems almost inevitable, in fact, that certain venturesome performers will soon be taking up the challenge. Only now—unlike other early music performers (e.g. of the 17th century)—they will have at their disposal specific recordings, for instance those of Grieg, Scriabin, or Elgar, to take as their guides.