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Editorial

Authenticity or Authenticities?—Performance Practice and the Mainstream

Roland Jackson

Performance practice has held to the idea of a single authenticity. What is historically most accurate? What comes closest to recapturing a composer's original conception of how a work was to be performed? What is the best link between the modern listener and the composer, the best means by which the listener can reexperience what a composer had in mind?

Peter Kivy in his recent book¹ sets aside the idea of a single authenticity, proposing instead that there are several authenticities, in particular the following, each of which may be considered to have a validity of its own:

- (1) "composer authenticity"—the respect for a composer's original conception;
- (2) "sonic authenticity"—the quest to restore the sound materials with which a composer worked;
- (3) "personal authenticity"—the esteem accorded the performer's individual expression, which may at times deviate from what a composer indicated;
- (4) "sensible authenticity"—the meaning attached to a performance by

¹ Peter Kivy, *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

its audience.

In actuality, the four might be reduced to two. Nos. 1 and 2 have come to be intimately associated with performance practice or the early music movement, 3 and 4 with the more standard repertoire, with concert artists and audiences, with what has come to be called "the mainstream." Kivy's book, in fact, owes much of its content to the interplay between the two (performance practice and the mainstream) and to the tensions that have over time arisen between them. Kivy sees the benefits of coexistence; but he is concerned that the balance may now have begun to shift:

The performance of 'classical' music has come increasingly to be influenced, even dominated by what certain people call 'historical authenticity' . . . (x) ²

This is perhaps why he generally adopts the position of the mainstream, and questions the assumptions of performance practice. As such he enters into what has become "the early music debate," subjecting its issues to more careful (philosophical) scrutiny than they have been to now. And his book not only sharpens but brings into better focus the entire discussion.

Personal (Performance) Authenticity

The performer's personal expression (something held in high esteem by mainstream audiences) becomes a central issue for Kivy. Throughout the book he defends the performer's right to individual interpretation, along with its tendency to go beyond a composer's directives—something that stands at antipodes with performance practice's emphasis upon the precedence of the composer.

Performer individuality acquires a certain sanction, Kivy feels, by virtue of the following two definitions for "authentic" found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*,

belonging to himself, own, proper
acting of itself, self originated, automatic, (3)

which in his view can easily be transferred to the musical performer, and to the notion that singers or players be allowed to follow their

² Page numbers in Kivy's volume are placed in parentheses.

personal inclinations. For Kivy, the performer is a kind of artist, an “arranger” of musical compositions, capable of enhancing them in a distinctive manner, thus heightening their appeal and making them more readily accessible to a musical audience.

For Kivy, the renowned cellist Pablo Casals may be viewed as a paragon of the artist “arranger,” a performer who stands out for his distinctly personal manner of playing, although purists have been inclined to call his renditions inauthentic. Kivy cites a few measures of the Sarabande in D Minor (133), minutely recaptured in a *Melograph* transcription, as illustrative of Casals’s subtle and expressive changes in respect to Bach’s original. If, as Kivy says, Bach’s score can be thought of in terms of “suggestions for performance” upon which the performer might legitimately expand, then

Casals performance may be as historically authentic as the most punctilious performance of the musicological purist. (33)

Kivy extends this same idea to other performers as well, and sees no reason why they should not arrive at musical solutions as artistically valid as (or perhaps even moreso than) those of a composer.

Why . . . should we believe the composer’s plan for performance of his work must necessarily be the best one? (161)

Why should it be true of *all* musical works that each of them as it stands *is* such that no performance change from the composer’s intentions can do aught but lower its aesthetic payoff? (170)

Kivy makes a good deal out of the classical cadenza, which in his view offers an instance in which the performer could come to the fore. For at this moment in the concerto the composer relinquished all authority, and allowed, even encouraged the performer to follow his or her own inclinations:

intentional authority would lie in the [female] performer, if she can, doing her own thing, not slavishly imitating the composer’s style. For *that* is not what the composer intended. Indeed, if a twentieth-century performer is to produce her own cadenza to a classical concerto, it should be, if she is to achieve the personal authenticity the composer intended, in her own personal, *twentieth-century style*. (274)

As to *what* 20th-century style (say for Mozart), Kivy does not specify, although he finds Schoenberg to be too far afield. On the other hand, Rochberg's cadenzas to the Oboe Concerto, K. 314 are offered as a potential model, for even though they are not *in* Mozart's style, they are at least "evocative" of it. (132)

Such speculations, of course, run contrary to what performance practice has urged, namely that the cadenza be as nearly as possible in the composer's own style. This, of course, still leaves a good deal to the performer's own inclinations, such as which themes to draw upon, or which figurations or embellishments, etc. (here one thinks of Robert Levin's stylistically sound, but nonetheless highly imaginative and spontaneous Mozart cadenzas).

Kivy points to still another instance in which the performer transcends compositorial authority: those instances when composers for some reason have acquiesced to a performer's interpretation despite its departures from the composer's own realization. Anecdotes concerning this have often been cited, the encounter between Debussy and the pianist Copeland perhaps being typical. Apparently, the composer expressed some surprise at Copeland's rendering of the final two bars of *Reflets dans l'eau*, but then encouraged the pianist to continue playing it as he (Copeland) felt it. In light of examples of this kind Kivy declares

Why, indeed, should we even think that any of the composer's performance intentions are infallible, if we accept that at least one of them, his intention sometimes to acquiesce in the performer's way over his own, is *always* to be counted mistaken? (166)

Historical performance would reply that the composer's conception very likely had some degree of latitude (a certain margin of tempo possibility, for instance). Did Copeland's deviation lie within such a latitude? Debussy's assent would seem to affirm that it did. Although the nature of Copeland's changes remains unknown.

Sonic Authenticity

Sonic authenticity (the endeavor to recapture the musical sounds of past eras) is looked upon by Kivy with some reservation. For the mainstream listener the sounds of early instruments have often been deemed as less than satisfying, and by no means as rewarding as those of the more modern instruments to which they have become

familiar. Kivy illustrates this by describing a circumstance in which an early-music enthusiast performs Opus 110 on a reconstructed Graf piano (of ca. 1825) for a listener who has hitherto experienced this sonata only on a modern Bechstein or Steinway. Accustomed to a smooth legato, the listener is somewhat dismayed by the pianist's "choppy articulations" in the fugue and the excessive pounding of (unresponsive) higher keys, and in the end comes away dissatisfied. The question posed is one often heard: would the time required for such a listener to come to appreciate the sound of Beethoven's original instrument result in a commensurable "aesthetic payoff"? (180)

From a somewhat different vantage point, Kivy asks whether the original instruments inevitably fulfilled the purposes a composer had in mind. Taking *Brandenburg Concerto no. 2* as an instance, Kivy points out that Bach's original trumpet, recorder, oboe, and violin are sometimes dynamically incompatible, especially when the recorder is playing in its lower register (43). Modern instruments, including a "Bach" trumpet and metal flute, would (according to Kivy) achieve a better equilibrium, even if at the expense of Bach's more variegated tone colors. Kivy suggests, however, that such a "trade-off" might prove acceptable, since (as he rather cautiously ventures) Bach would have "wanted [his *concertino* instruments to remain] in perfect dynamic balance."

The early music devotee looks upon original instruments from a different perspective, i.e. that they constituted something essential to the musical work, comparable in a sense to the materials with which visual artists work. Indeed, the sounds of original instruments are considered as likely to have resided in the composer's mind at the time of a work's creation, and therefore as having had a bearing on the nature of the work. Aron Edidin nicely sets forth this idea in the following:

It is at least possible that Bach or Mozart or Beethoven or Chopin made various decisions in composing with the intention of exploiting features of the instruments they knew, which are not features of later versions of the same instruments (later violins, bassoons, pianos, etc.).³

Thus, for Bach, the original scoring, the instrumental colors he chose

³ Aron Edidin, "Look What They've Done to My Song," in French, Vehling, and Wettstein, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 16, p. 407. Cited by Kivy (176).

for *Brandenburg Concerto no. 2*, can be taken as indigenous to the work, part of its very conception. For the historian, preserving these colors clearly outweighs the modern (and presumably not Bach's) desire for maintaining balance between the instruments.

Sensible Authenticity

"Sensible authenticity" (one thinks of the French *sensible*) is Kivy's way of getting at what may have occurred in the minds of audiences, a sensitivity or responsiveness lying beneath mere surface impressions. From this standpoint, sonic authenticity has seemed to Kivy to be too much concerned about the mere duplicating of the sounds of earlier music, while at the same time failing to take into account how past audiences might have reacted to these sounds. As an example, he considers the response of Bach's congregation, conjecturing that the opening chorus of *St. Matthew Passion*

must have had an impressive, almost overwhelming effect. . .
much like the effect Berlioz's Requiem still has on us. (53)

Whereas for a modern audience this same chorus (in an authentically reduced performance),

. . . far from sounding like massed forces, is going to have a rather modest, almost chamber music-like sound. So if we want sensible authenticity in this regard one cannot achieve it by performing this chorus in Bach-like size: doing so will merely give us sonic authenticity. (53)

As a further example Kivy draws upon the opening of Beethoven's First Symphony, which to its original audience (as history testifies) was surprising and audacious. Not only does it begin "in the wrong key but doesn't even start on the tonic chord of that key." (54) For us, however, "Beethoven's daring stroke"—since we have in the meantime been exposed to Wagner, Mahler, and Schoenberg—has become "completely familiar and syntactically unsurprising."

This is an opinion often expressed: that we today are incapable of reexperiencing what past audiences did (the initial effect of Bach's chorus or of Beethoven's opening). And, as Kivy proposes, the opposite could be true as well, that early audiences often failed to recognize musical attributes anticipatory of later musical developments, "historically embedded properties," as Kivy characterizes

them. Either way, the perception is that the past and present are unrelated in their responses.

The problem here is two-fold. First, one cannot really characterize the reception of audiences, which are made up of various kinds of listeners, some more perceptive than others. Second, history shows that there is something enduring about the work of a past composer, something about it that speaks to us in the way that it did to its contemporaries. Why is Beethoven's opening still an impressive experience? Why are we still drawn into the ambiguity and strangeness of its harmonies? Because like any past work it projects a feeling content all its own, compared to which mental considerations such as that it begins in the "wrong key" seem a mere distraction (what Kant would describe as an irrelevant "interest").⁴ Similarly, to adequately experience Bach's chorus is not to think of its "chamber music-like performance," but to enter into its depiction of the text and its implications, which Bach dramatically underscores by juxtaposing his choirs in powerful concertato effects. To the historically sensitive listener, these works remain as compelling (and startling) as they were to their original audiences.

Performance practice is the handmaiden of this kind of (historical) reception, enabling us to come more fully into contact with the nature of past works. By returning to their original sonorities and manner of execution, we are able to perceive their musical qualities more distinctly.

Composer Authenticity

Composer authenticity—composer priority—is at the very center of performance practice, whose basic aim is to find out from contemporary evidence and source materials as much as possible about how a composer considered that his work might best be performed.

Whence comes this concern? Kivy traces it back to the "composer worship" of the Romantic period (278). And it seems entirely plausible that the 19th-century's reverence for the composer was inevitably followed by the 20th-century's idea of fidelity to a composer's performance wishes. Is performance practice, then, simply a "histo-

⁴ Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), held that the experience of art is essentially pure and disinterested (i.e. free of outside "interests" or distractions).

rical" phenomenon? José Bowen,⁵ and subsequently Richard Taruskin⁶ have pursued this idea, and Taruskin in particular has emphasized the theory of the "great divide" (ca. 1800), after which music came to be conceived of as an aesthetic object (composer oriented), and prior to which it was regarded primarily as an activity (performer oriented). Kivy, too, alludes to this change of emphasis, but he recognizes that earlier, along with music's apparent social purposes (liturgical, courtly, domestic), there existed as well an awareness of its aesthetic qualities.

Whatever other intentions of social use composers prior to the aesthetic revolution and the great divide [c. 1800] may have had for their works, surely one of their intentions has always been to have aspects of these works—structure, sensuous surface, expression—admired, contemplated for their own musical sake as "fine," "beautiful," "sumptuous," "impressive" qualities. Whether the word was in place or not, the concept of aesthetic appreciation certainly was, at least in some recognizable form. (240)

Aesthetic appreciation goes hand in hand with the idea of composer authenticity, which is as real for Kivy as is the idea of composer intention. Drawing upon the following definitions of "authentic" (again in the *OED*) Kivy sees, especially in the first of them, a direct connection with performance practice's idea of "adhering faithfully to the composer's performance intentions." (4)

of authority, authoritarian
original, firsthand, prototypical
really proceeding from its reputed source or author (3)

The third, however, seems even more apropos, for this is precisely what performance practice has been saying: that a given performance should "proceed from its reputed source," i.e. the composer.

⁵ José Bowen, "Mendelssohn, Berlioz, and Wagner as Conductors: the Origins of the Ideal of 'Fidelity to the Composer'," *Performance Practice Review* 6 (1993), 77-88.

⁶ Richard Taruskin, "The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past," in *Authenticity and Early Music: a Symposium*, ed. Nicholas Kenyon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 137-207, and *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 10f.

Later in the book, however, Kivy gives this third definition a quite different interpretation. Concerning an imagined performance of *St. John Passion* on Good Friday 1990, he asserts that

we have to know if *that* very performance, *that* very 'text' is "really proceeding from its source or author." And to know that, of course, is to know whether it conforms to Bach's performing wishes and intentions for a performance in 1990, not to those for one in 1724. (42)

Here again, we encounter the demarcation between past and present (between opposing "sensible authenticities"). Such a demarcation is sometimes voiced by the mainstream in statements such as that if this of that composer were now alive, would they not be in favor of our modern means of performance (large orchestras, Steinway pianos, etc.). This question, to be sure, can never be answered. Nor does it correspond with reality. For what we possess is only what the composer has left us. And for the historian, this is ultimately the most satisfying, rediscovering *what* was and *how* it was: Bach as in 1724, not Bach as in 1990.

Coexistence or Synthesis?

Near the conclusion of his volume, Kivy returns to what is perhaps his most perplexing enigma, namely that personal expression is becoming increasingly threatened by the encroachments of historical practice:

The question of personal authenticity in performance versus historically authentic performance, when they are incompatible, is the question of whether or not, in any given instance, you want a parameter to remain a variable one of performance or become an inalterable one of text and, in general, whether you want the art music of the Western historical tradition to remain a *performing* art or to cease to be one. (271)

And, later, more succinctly:

that the driving force behind the historical performance movement is the desire to collapse performance into text. (276)

What Kivy is foreseeing is the possible demise of the (mainstream)

performer, and with it the extinction of an important aspect of musical life as we now know it.

But is it true, that performance practice is averse to performer individuality? This is to look at historical performance very narrowly and very rigidly. As mentioned above, the composer's conception very likely had some degree of variability (e.g. a tempo in one hall may not prove suitable in another). At the same time, the composer presumably had a rather fixed idea as to what was desirable in a performance. It is well known, for example, that composers gave preference to certain performers over others and even composed works with them in mind. Such performers must have manifested unusual gifts of expressivity, while still remaining faithful to the composer's score. Of what did this expressivity consist? Two aspects in particular might be suggested, by which performers were, in fact, able to assert their individuality, each of them being so subtle as to preclude the composer's capacity (or wish) to notate them.

dynamic shadings—slight gradations of volume between the successive tones

rhythmic flexibility—slight deviations in respect to the notated lengths of the tones

These qualities are, and perhaps have always been, something uniquely individual, a way in which singers or players were able to convey their own feelings. Other aspects as well have tended to elude specific notation. In the 19th century, for instance, composers usually did not feel it necessary to indicate the exact placement of portamentos, vibratos, or (tempo) rubatos, leaving such matters to a performer's discretion.

What, then, of the future? What might be looked for in musical performance? Two things in particular. (1) that the historical performer become more aware of and draw more freely upon the kinds of expressive devices described above, since they have historical sanction; and (2) that the mainstream performer become more attentive to whatever can be found out about historical performance, which (in light of expressive features such as the above) need not detract from individuality of expression. The hope is that the two kinds of performer (historical and mainstream) will thereby be able to draw closer together and eventually perhaps even merge into one practice.