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A Correctly-Attributed Fake

Bruce Haynes

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A few years ago, a harpsichord ascribed to Nicholas Lefébure and dated 1755 appeared on the scene. Although it was enthusiastically received, there was a problem with this instrument. It seems its attribution was incorrect; in fact, by some two and a half centuries. Shortly afterwards, its real maker, Martin Skowroneck, published an amusing and sensational article in which he described how he had created an instrument that was so stylistically convincing that harpsichord restorers didn't hesitate to call it an original.^[1]

Skowroneck was concerned to make sure that everyone knew the truth, as the exploit was not intended as a fraud. But I daresay he was pleased to have succeeded in making a harpsichord that was so stylistically convincing that professional restorers did not doubt its authenticity. This, it seems, had in fact been the point of the exercise, which was inspired over a bottle of good French wine and a wager with Gustav Leonhardt. To my mind, Skowroneck's harpsichord is the model of an ideal period copy of a musical instrument. In what follows, I'll try to explain what I mean.^[2]

These days, there are many ideas about what makes an ideal copy. I would like to propose here two general principles that makers might realise in a number of different ways, according to their tastes and personal convictions. The first is that copies are made in the same way as originals of the same time and place; using, in other words, the same tools, techniques, materials, and working conditions. The second principle is the one I just described: that the copy has all the attributes of a successful fake, which means it is so stylistically convincing that it fools experts into thinking it's an original.

I am aware that these conditions are challenging and can be regarded as extreme, in the sense that few if any makers regularly satisfy them. Nor do I mean them theoretically. Copies are a way of life in the period performance world, and playing music in the style it was first heard could not happen without them. Instrument makers are important, and they must be *à la hauteur*

¹ Martin Skowroneck, "'The Harpsichord of Nicholas Lefebvre 1755': The Story of a Forgery without Intent to Defraud," *Galpin Society Journal* Vol. 55 (Apr., 2002): 4-14.

² This article was written for Claire and Olivier Cottet and appeared in its original form as "Un faux aussi vrai que son modèle," liner notes for a commemorative CD on the Instrument Museum at La Couture-Boussey (France), 2008.

of the best players, the best researchers, and the most discerning ears. It's my belief that every branch of the period music movement has its version of the body of knowledge and basic code of procedure known as "Common Practice" or "Performance Practice." As its name suggests, Common Practice involves the reconstruction of the practical stylistic conventions of historical performance, and in the same way, instrument-making has its documents of traditional working methods and technical fundamentals.

To a period performer, Common Practice is not elective, optional, or discretionary; it's a *sine qua non*, understood as part of his basic equipment: part of the very definition of his work. Some parts are dreary collections of data: trill charts, for instance, and repertoire lists, and biographies. Necessary whether one is inspired or not, like practicing and making reeds. A musician could no more consider himself ready to perform if he was missing a string on his violin, or (pardon me) the *do* on his clarinet, than if he performed in ignorance of the common musical practices of the time. Nor, I believe, can a master craftsman neglect his Common Practice.

Some of these techniques are lost forever, though (found once) they may be rediscovered. Others have yet to be revived and retried, or have yet to show their true worth to modern-day makers.

Some forty years ago, when I was making instruments myself, I used to dream (and sometimes still do) of turning instruments on a copy of a lathe shown in Plumier's magnificent *L'art de tourner* published in 1701.³ Of course that would have entailed working near a large window giving natural light, and finishing keys at a workbench also lit by the sun streaming through a window. Some days, when it was cloudy, I would have been unable to do fine work, as electric light (let alone so-called "power tools") would not have been an option in Baroque times. That, of course, was my idea: to copy not only the instrument for making music, but the one for making the instruments for making music. It seemed a logical extension.

We can imagine Christoph Denner in Nürnberg in the 1680s and 90s, and the intriguing (and very plausible) possibility that he too copied woodwinds very much as we do now. Our models are from the past; his were from a distant country. It was the new designs coming out of La Couture and Paris that interested him, and when in 1694 the court at Ansbach, near Nürnberg, engaged an orchestra that included French wind players, he had a chance to see up close the new recorders and hautboys. Denner and his colleague Johann Schell were apparently the first makers in Germany to start selling copies of the new French instruments. What aspects would they have copied? Well, they probably started with dimensions, as we do now; the bores and outside turning, the divisions into joints, and the sound production were all new and different.

³ Charles Plumier, *L'art de tourner, ou de faire en perfection toutes sortes d'ouvrages...* (Lyon: J. Certe, 1701).

The idea behind the exact copies or replicas of original instruments at original pitches that began to be made in the 1960s was that since we were trying to learn the basic principles of both the music and the instruments, the sensible thing was to follow every original indication as literally as possible. How could we understand original performing styles if we began with instruments that were already adaptations and compromises? Such thoughts may have gone through Denner's mind as well; in relation to the new music from Versailles that was then taking Europe by storm.

Some people think we know enough now about original instruments to make our own models—models that do what we want to do. My own opinion is that what we don't know about those instruments and their music, or about what we can do with them, is still vastly more than what we do know. It seems hasty to me to be thinking already of improving and adjusting the old models. Wouldn't that be like music editors fixing the "faults" in old music, instead of restoring early manuscripts? If we "correct" them, we may inadvertently eliminate differences between the present and the past in the same way nineteenth-century editors used to bowdlerize out the cross-relations in Purcell scores. "Don't fix it," as they say, "if it ain't broke." We don't even know if it is "broke" or not.

On the other hand, we do have to play concerts. So on one side is the responsibility of a maker to provide an instrument designed and built to play as "well" as possible, according to our own inherited musical standards and ideals. On the other is the desire to explore and understand the distinctive qualities that originally attracted our attention: the "foreign" musical ecosystem of the past.

That dilemma is too big to discuss here. I have no doubt that Denner shared the mind-set of every woodwind player and builder today: that making and playing a woodwind instrument consists of shrewdly distributing imperfection over several incompatible demands.

A replica may begin with the dimensions of an original, but it moves on from there. Just as Common Practice is scarcely the whole of a musician's art, the instrument maker works well beyond the mere technical prerequisites. Historical working conditions, whatever that may mean to him, are no more than a preliminary step. There are re-reamings, undercuttings, voicings, even movings of tone-holes. So in instrument-making terms, a finished instrument copy is defined not so much by its physical traits as by the intentions of its maker. It is—like performance style—essentially a question of attitude.

Besides, the idea of a "copy" has to be somewhat tempered by reality. First of all, as every maker knows, each instrument is unique; no two are ever quite the same. Even factory instruments made in series differ from each other. Even mass-produced plastic recorders are each

slightly different in sound and response. So there is no such thing as a copy that reproduces another instrument absolutely.

Second, the old instruments were made primarily of wood, and relatively soft wood at that: normally the bodies of string instruments were made of fir, the woodwinds of boxwood. In *Hail, bright Cecilia*, Henry Purcell set this delightful text by Nicholas Brady with a dialogue between a pair of recorders and a string section:

Hark, each tree its silence breaks,
The box and fir to talk begin. . .

With instruments made of wood, the natural grain and density of the wood already give each instrument its own special character. Wood can also be treated in ways that affect its playing attributes, like being artificially dried, aged, or stored—even left in running water. Fathers would prepare timber for their sons, or would teach them when they were young how to prepare their own, for use when they grew up.

To achieve a convincing copy of style, in either instrument-making or -playing, a useful strategy is *extrapolation*: generalising from the particular, applying a rule or theory to unknown situations on the basis of its relevance to known situations (I “doo-ded” it, says the intelligent child, extrapolating from the verb “do” and the past ending “ed.”) In music, if a trill is seen to work in one situation, generalizations can be made that allow one to deduce where else trills will be appropriate—or better yet, desirable. Thus, to play trills authentically requires that one understand what purposes they served. The ability to apply a style generally, to “get” it, and start using it elsewhere, is not something that can be done by rote. Linguists call this *linguistic competence*: the ability to extrapolate new but correct expressions in a foreign language.

By this reasoning, a newly-made period instrument could be considered a kind of extrapolation: a deduction based on the mind of the maker. Early instruments have always had a special status. Record jackets in the 70s began to attach golden stickers proclaiming the use of “original instruments” or “historical instruments.”) Actually, these stickers were not just for documentation. They were, as they say, “commercial;” they sold—or were thought to help sell—the recordings in the same way that “organic” sells tomatoes. They reflected a new curiosity in those days about original instruments. Intermissions at concerts invariably involved the audience onstage looking at the harpsichord (often from underneath), as if the instruments were transmitting the message of the past.

They never were, of course. With their different proportions and the uncanny sounds they produced—even without our wishing for them—they transmitted the occasionally unexpected and sometimes delightful. There is no question that they encouraged new ways of playing, new ideas. But, now that a generation has gone by, it is clear that while period instruments can serve to encourage experiment, they have little direct effect on a player’s stylistic approach to the music. The new sounds they produce are not inherently stylish; they need firm control. The fact

is, instruments do not play music; people do. What we have discovered is that authenticity is not a product of the instrument being played, but of the musician's sense of style. Style originates, of course, in the player's head (and/or heart). This is where real musical "restoration" takes place. For the maker, it seems, as much as the player.

Extrapolation is also the technique of artists who make forgeries. They don't copy a painting that already exists, but rather invent one in the style of the original artist.

I should say "invent one in the style they perceive his style to have been." This distinction is important, because our perception of style is forever changing. Forgeries show this clearly, which is why so few of them survive for long. What one generation will accept—and spend considerable money for—will leave the next cold. They are looking at, and for, different aspects of the work. Friedländer once said that the life of a forgery does not outlast thirty years, in other words its own generation. As Kurz put it, "Every forgery will—unconsciously—show symptoms of the style of the epoch which produced it. Contemporaries may not discern it but, seen from a distance, the signs of the true Period of origin gradually become apparent."^[4] As they get farther away from the period in which they were made, fakes begin to betray the attributes of the wrong period. Werness observes, "Characteristics that mark an era may be those that are most universally appreciated at that time. They seem also to be the qualities that become 'dated' most quickly. The generation for which these qualities are in fashion tends to be blind to them, but to the next generation they may become painfully evident."^[5]

Copies of various kinds in period style would presumably share this property of "shelf-life" with forgeries. I am thinking performance styles, instrument copies, editions, and compositions, even replicas made as authentically as possible. Consider recordings of period playing from the 1930s and 1940s—those of Landowska, for instance. They certainly sound dated. Instruments made in the same period that were called "copies" seem insensitive and too heavily built, and editions of music are (not always, but usually) difficult to use because of the intrusive additions and directives of well-meaning musicologist-editors. We cannot help it; our view of history is limited by our vantage-point and our imaginations.

A good case can be made for the idea that all the music of a given period—regardless of its genre—is connected by a deep underpinning of similar style. Church music from the 1930s, for instance, has a certain resemblance to popular songs of the same decade: they share, happily

⁴ Otto Kurz, *Fakes, A Handbook for Collectors and Students* (London: Faber, 1948), 317.

⁵ Hope B. Werness et al., *The Forger's Art: Forger and the Philosophy of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 50-1.

or not, a similar conception of performing style; the container is similar even if the contents are different.

In his well-known book *On Art and Connoisseurship*, M. J. Friedländer observed that “a forgery done by a contemporary is not infrequently successful . . . because the forger has understood, and misunderstood, the old master in the same way as ourselves.”^[6] Since style depends on current perceptions, any kind of style-copying is subject to change with the passing of time. As Friedländer says, “We laugh at the mistakes of our fathers, as our descendents will laugh at us.”

Han van Meegeren’s paintings are an example. In the 1930s and 40s, van Meegeren produced a number of paintings in the style of Vermeer. Viewed today, it is hard to understand how anyone could have thought they were by Vermeer; they look nothing like our idea of his work. But around 1940 they pushed the right buttons, and all the experts of his time were taken in. As one expert commented, “Some of van Meegeren’s beautiful figures curiously resemble Greta Garbo . . . that charm has faded with time.”^[7]

Is there any difference in principle between how van Meegeren applied Vermeer’s techniques (color, light, and materials) to new and original subjects and compositions, and a musician like Gustav Leonhardt playing a concert of Couperin’s music, imitating Couperin’s playing style or the playing style of the era of Louis XIV, on an instrument imitating the action and framing of the style of harpsichord Couperin might have used? Both are imitations of style, based on extrapolation. (Imagine a concert of a well-known period group billed as “fake performances!”) What about instrument copies?

It is ironic that Martin Skowronek, the builder of the fake Lefébure and one of the modern masters of harpsichord-making, resists the concept of copying. “In no other field,” writes Skowronek, “whether in the Arts, mechanics, economics or any other subject, is the term copy thought of as highly as in instrument making.”^[8] He prefers to call his own instruments “historical.” For the “Lefébure,” he used earlier techniques of making than he normally does (like special hinge designs, the exclusive use of hand instead of power tools, and paintings of flowers that are now extinct on the soundboard).

⁶ Max J. Friedländer, *On Art and Connoisseurship* (London: B. Cassirer, 1942), 261–2.

⁷ Werness et al., *The Forger’s Art*, 50–1.

⁸ Martin Skowronek, *Cembalobau: Erfahrungen und Erkenntnisse aus der Werkstattpraxis/Harpsichord Construction: A Craftsman’s Workshop Experience and Insight* (Scherhauser, Augsburg: Edition Bochinsky, 2003), 267.

Skowroneck subtitled his article on the “Lefébure” “Forgery Without Intent to Defraud,”^[9] and indeed as soon as his instrument was generally accepted as antique, he announced his ruse. His work might better be described by other words than “forgery;” he was copying style, after all, not \$20 bills.

Old or new, it is a magnificent-sounding instrument, and incidentally one of the few harpsichords that Leonhardt still keeps in his house.

So all these ideas bring us back to the two attributes I proposed at the beginning of this article, and which I recommend for your consideration: that an ideal instrument copy is made in the way the originals were, using the tools, techniques, materials, and working conditions of that time and place. And as well, that it is so stylistically convincing (at this moment) that experts think it’s an original. A successful authentic copy might thus be called “a correctly attributed ‘fake.’”

⁹ Skowroneck, “The Harpsichord,” 4.