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'The most original Beethoven yet recorded': fantasies, realities and the microphone

It's become widely accepted among students of performance practice that historical evidence needs to be interpreted in the spirit of its own time. Let's take a few examples from the lifetime of Mozart and Beethoven. Agricola in his treatise from 1757 recommended for singers a healthy diet of pheasant, lark and trout. The old teachers specifically prohibited herring, but the castrato Farinelli always ate one uncooked anchovy before going on stage. We may well want to be selective in using this evidence, as also the sober bureaucratic report prepared for the sponsors of the orchestra at Lyon in 1785; the leader had neither intelligence nor an accurate style of performance and there were unauthorised absences among his colleagues for reasons we should now regard as paltry. In 1811, when health was still a relatively fragile affair, Joseph Fröhlich recommended for wind players a moderate lifestyle and the avoidance of anything that could damage the chest, such as running, horseback riding and the excessive consumption of hot drinks. One should not practise after a meal, so the afternoon was best avoided; furthermore, one should not drink immediately after practising if the lungs are still warm, since this has been the cause of many early deaths. In the case of dry lips – very bad for the embouchure – the mouth should be rinsed with an alcoholic beverage to give one new strength.

The fundamental characteristics of this evidence from 1757, 1785 and 1811 respectively can be seen to apply equally to the years around 1980, itself an exciting time for historical reconstruction. The CD was emerging as a new medium to give period performance further impetus, while encouraging forays into repertory after 1750. The impact of widespread Mozart and Beethoven on period instruments was indeed a hallmark of the 1980s. During the years 1978-83, when Christopher Hogwood completed the project to record all Mozart's symphonies on original instruments, there was considerable discussion of the notion of 'authenticity'. For example, Larry Dreyfus argued that the 'authentic' musician acted willingly in the service of the composer, denying any form of glorifying self-expression, but attained this by following the text-book rules for 'scientific method' with a strictly empirical programme to verify historical practices. He was suspicious that these, when all said and done, were magically transformed into the composer's 'intentions'. Nicholas Kenyon's 1984 symposium on 'The Limits of Authenticity' took the role of expression as a central agenda for discussion. Richard Taruskin's contribution viewed the need to satisfy a composer's intentions as a failure of nerve, if not an infantile dependency, a topic that both he and the philosopher Peter Kivy were later to develop.

Although Arnold Dolmetsch had recorded the 'Moonlight' Sonata during the 1930s in the last decade of his life, period recordings of orchestral music written post-1750 were still quite rare. There were exceptions, of course. For example, the German group Collegium Aureum was set up in

1962 especially to record for Harmonia Mundi and within a decade had brought out a pioneering disc of Mozart wind concertos. But in relation to classical repertory, mainstream opinion continued to affirm Robbins Landon's opinion in 1955 that '…no-one will want to perform Haydn's music with natural trumpets and ancient woodwind instruments when our modern counterparts are superior in every way'. Of course, scholars of historical practice are just as entitled to change their opinions as performers and composers, which is precisely what Landon later did. Another much-cited definition of performance practice from 1969 occurs in the second edition of Willi Apel's *Harvard Dictionary of Music*: 'the study of how early music, from the Middle Ages to Bach, was performed… In the period after Bach the problems of performance practice largely disappear, owing to the more specific directions for clearly indicating their intentions'. But during the 1970s Hogwood and his Academy of Ancient Music had begun to test that proposition with pioneering discs of Arne and Stamitz for Decca's early music label L'Oiseau Lyre.

Hogwood's project to record the complete Mozart symphonies on period instruments was heralded in a stimulating article by Zaslaw for the RMA Proceedings of 1976-7. He dismissed the notion of an unbroken tradition of performance practice as a myth, surveying instruments and playing techniques, interpretative problems, orchestral placement, concert rooms, standards and personnel. He noted that 'for every performance of beauty and insight, two are heard which set back the cause of historically authentic performance'. The celebrated Mannheim orchestra was to be an inspiration as remembered in Burney's characterisation as '…an army of generals, equally fit to plan a battle as to fight it'. And Schubart had written of it in 1784, 'Its *forte* is like thunder, its crescendo like a great waterfall, its diminuendo the splashing of a crystalline river disappearing into the distance, its *piano* a breath of spring'. Zaslaw made no attempt to disguise his opinion that the Academy of Ancient Music was clearly superior to Collegium Aureum in terms of eighteenth-century performance techniques. He conceded that the pedigree of the Germans' instruments was impressive, but the results (he said) were hardly different from powerful, suave modern recordings. He identifies possible causes as the use of modern instrumental techniques, an over-resonant acoustic or a recording engineer with a 'symphonic' sound in mind.

After Zaslaw's promise of historical riches, it was something of a shock in 1984 to read Eric van Tassel's review of the complete Hogwood Mozart set. He praised orchestral tone colours, intonation and the vivid recording, before continuing: '…the… minimalist approach, which even in the last symphonies consists simply in getting all the details right, need not prevent our penetrating the surface of the music if we are willing to make some imaginative effort…. A performance not merely 'under-interpreted' but uninterpreted offers potentially an experience of unequalled authenticity, using the word in a sense as much existential as musicological. If the notes are all you hear… you have to become a participant: you are invited to complete a realization of the music begins in the playing'. Was this fair?

[example 2]

What happened next? Malcolm Bilson entered the fray by remarking that *any* decision on tempo or dynamics constitutes interpretation. Addressing the question of lack of rehearsal in the eighteenth-century, Bilson drew an analogy attention to top jazz musicians, who often play sophisticated idioms at their first meeting. As another example, Viennese musicians have a common understanding of waltz idioms. Zaslaw returned to the question of interpretation in his 1989 book on the Mozart symphonies, treading a middle course. There could never be no interpretation, but recreated Mozart must speak for itself more than it would under a post-romantic conductor; the results are bound to be more neutral and less personal, more objective and less subjective. This is perilously close to the situation in 1950s Cambridge, where 'early musicians' were thanked for the 'voluntary restraint in the display of their artistic capabilities' when recreating an atmosphere of appropriate equanimity and tranquillity - admittedly in a much earlier repertory than Mozart. And after all, in a broader context the French organist Marcel Dupré had argued a generation earlier that a performer's own personality must be absolutely subdued in favour of the composer. This viewpoint was of course famously articulated by Stravinsky and caused an irate Schoenberg to exclaim in 1948; 'why do you play the piano when you could show the same skill on a typewriter?'

As Hogwood's Mozart project was inspiring more orchestral players to enter the historical arena, Howard Mayer Brown noted in *The New Grove* that it would be revealing to hear Beethoven symphonies on period instruments, '…but the practical difficulties of assembling and equipping such an orchestra would be almost insuperable'. By the end of the 1980s there would be three complete cycles. Meanwhile in 1982 The Hanover Band ventured an LP of the First Symphony and First Piano Concerto for Nimbus. The Band claimed to present Beethoven's orchestral music 'in a form he would recognise', with original sound, lower pitch, late-18th-century feeling for tempo, an intimate, chamber music approach, the open-textured articulation of that time and the dramatic address to rhythmic accent. Only now was it possible to assemble specialist performers with the technical facility and stylistic knowledge enabled them to play the instruments on their own terms. The sleeve-notes were confident, the reviews broadly welcoming. *Early Music News* supplied the line 'The most original Beethoven yet recorded', while in *Early Music* Eric van Tassel wrote of the promise of much new light and some indication of what will be possible in the future.

Mary Verney's 1798 Broadwood piano excited a great deal of critical attention. It was claimed in the liner notes that, despite being English rather than Viennese, it had the kind of weight and sustaining power that Beethoven was seeking and sounded much as it would have in Beethoven's lifetime. However, Eric van Tassel retorted that the piano would have sounded like this in Beethoven's time '…only if it had been built in 1612 and restored in the 1790s, for it bears all the hallmarks of old, dead timber and leather'.

[example 1]

Early pianos have remained controversial and it's true that Beethoven spent his life striving for better instruments. More broadly, the orchestral conditions in Beethoven's Vienna were subject to scrutiny by Clive Brown in 1988, in which he painted a picture of variable standards in an environment that was socially, politically and musically challenging. The Hanover Band, Hogwood and Norrington could all argue that their 1980s Beethoven cycles made a selection of optimal conditions. Yet in 1991 Brown declared that the pedigree of many of the instruments was of doubtful authenticity. The commercially-motivated rush to push period-instrument performance ever more rapidly into the 19th century did not offer much hope for the consolidation of historical playing styles. Despite some revelations, he felt that there was 'infinitely more to historically sensitive performance than merely employing the right equipment, and the public is in danger of being offered attractively packaged but unripe fruit'. Brown noted an uneasy synthesis between modern baroque style applied to Beethoven alongside modern styles applied to old instruments.

This was undoubtedly true of that pilot disc by The Hanover Band that led to the Nimbus label commissioning a complete Beethoven cycle. Nimbus itself was a major player in the project, proudly declaring its policy of encouraging artists who were willing and able to approach recording in the same spirit as live performances … without recourse to the edit'. To Nimbus, detailed editing was 'destructive, indefensible and fraudulent' …. Nimbus will use the edit to save a performance, not to create one'. Like many Nimbus artists, the Hanover Band queried the editing policy, to be told roundly in 1983 that there were places where the Band never did get it right and that modest corrections already made it sound 'of a total quality which is actually beyond the competence of the Band to reproduce in a live concert…. Editing only improves the notes, the more important quality of communication is absolute and cannot be improved by cutting it up'.

At the eventual parting of the ways a decade later, the conductor Roy Goodman took the opportunity to bemoan his own lack of artistic control over what was presented on Nimbus discs, including the sound. And this element was controversial, given the use of a single 'soundfield' microphone. Nimbus believed that it could achieve a natural balance from its so-called 'Ambisonic sound system', which – with careful positioning – could arguably take greater account of room acoustics. But overall, didn't the ample acoustic run counter to the detailed phrasing the Band was attempting to produce?

Personal experiences in the studio have been less documented than the philosophical debate surrounding period performance. I arrived on the period scene in the early 1980s with clarinets that in some respects reflected the twentieth century almost as much as the eighteenth. I was always eager to assimilate historical evidence into articulation and phrasing, but also to prioritise sound quality, even if the means were not always strictly historical. I argued to myself that CPE Bach's remarks about moving an audience were especially important. And after all, Anton Stadler's clarinet was described as having so soft and lovely a sound that no-one with a heart could resist it. Yet no record producer and only one conductor ever took any interest in my clarinets, so long as most of the

right notes were emerging in roughly the right order. Yes, most of my mouthpieces are of ebonite – a material shown at the Great Exhibition, well after Mozart's death – yet this is stable material even on long aeroplane journeys, and everyone wants instruments that work well. I joined The Hanover Band Beethoven cycle in time for the Pastoral in 1987, from which some of the old pioneering spirit was already evaporating in favour of technical stability; but those clarinet solos felt challenging, and the Nimbus philosophy seemed an inhibition rather than replicating the concert-hall. After a series of sessions energetically conducted with a baton by Roy Goodman, I was surprised to find in the booklet notes that the Band was directed either from the violin or from the keyboard, 'as is in keeping with the period and according to the repertoire'. But the disc reached no. 13 on the US Classical Billboard charts.

Recording the Mozart Concerto for Nimbus some two years later, I was relieved to find no exaggerated claims as to authenticity in the booklet, especially since the piece was again conducted by Roy. But, asking the producer about an untidy solo entry in the slow movement, I was frustrated afterwards to be met with sympathy for my inadequacies rather than any kind of solution. And although that disc sounds quite effective, a Nimbus session in which I took part with a modern orchestra – of Peter and the Wolf – made me deeply suspicious of the so-called natural balance, since the animals all seemed banished to the edge of the paddock.

My experiences with DG Archiv and EMI revealed a similar lack of producers' involvement with explicitly historical issues. Trevor Pinnock seemed to prioritise sound and intonation, whereas Roger Norrington used sound as a means to the language of gesture, shape and form. These conductors' musical personalities were well served and supported by producers and engineers of fine artistic judgement. But overall, no-one ever queried even the basic national playing styles that might make, say, Beethoven, Cherubini and Rossini distinctive. While leading the London Classical Players, Norrington wrote in one of his booklet notes that the earliest gramophone recordings are of limited help in seeking a historical viewpoint. It was somehow reassuring that a mere dozen years later he could write in relation to his latest crusade against pervading orchestral vibrato that most of today's musicians 'have no notion of what can be so simply revealed in a good gramophone collection'.

As long ago as 1789 Mozart's contemporary Türk remarked that some musical effects cannot be described; they must be *heard*. I witnessed one of the most impressive attempts to bridge this kind of historical chasm in taking part in recordings of Mozart piano concertos with a stylish Hogwood and brilliant fortepianist Robert Levin. His improvisations throughout each take in the sessions were an integral part of the project. He later wrote that the producer, Chris Sayers, was left to select from a variety of interpretations and improvisations, pending developments in technology that would enable every version to be programmable. As Levin has said, there is something about recording that is antithetical to the freedom of improvisation.

[example 3]

Of course, Mozart and Beethoven didn't have air travel or the microphone, nor for that matter conductors in their concerto performances. We've got the benefits of hindsight and we can be selective in how we use the music and the evidence. By the mid-90s the Academy of Ancient Music was much more suave and polished, if still articulate. Taruskin was right about historical performance being the most modern sound around but Nick Kenyon was right in observing how tradition has been re-shaped by historical performance. As he says, there is no worthwhile, thoughtful, intellectually stimulating and musically adventurous performance going on today that has not been touched by the period instrument movement.

We've touched upon a number of questions here, including the value of long takes, the conditions and aims of recording old instruments, the role of personality and the responsibilities of authenticity. There have been some promises and disappointments. But for our students a generation after 1980 there's now a huge variety of accepted ways to perform Mozart and Beethoven, whether on period or modern instruments, and arguably the recording industry can take a great deal of credit for that state of affairs.

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