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Authenticity

At its most successful, Early Music does not return to the past at all but reconstructs the musical object in the here and now, enabling a new and hitherto silenced subject to speak.

—LAURENCE DREYFUS, 1983*

The performance of a piece of music can never be authentic, since music does not lend itself to being immutably fixed. More important than the antithesis "authentic-inauthentic" . . . is the point of artistic quality.

—GUSTAV LEONHARDT, 1978**

THIS latter citation may have caused some surprise when it first appeared inside a record album devoted to "early instrument" performances of some well-known works. The pieces in question were Bach's Brandenburg concerti; the author of the remarks (and the director of the performances) is a man reputed to hold twice-

* "Early Music Defended against Its Devotees: A Theory of Historical Performance in the Twentieth Century," *The Musical Quarterly* (Summer 1983).

** Notes to Pro Arte record album no. L-P PAL-2022 (English translation by Robert Jordan).

daily phone conversations with Bach himself. To many musicians and music lovers these words are no more than simple good sense; but coming from someone who has spent so much time and energy researching and rethinking the performance techniques of early music (and who has such large monthly phone bills) they deserve very careful attention.

There is a radical contradiction between the claims made by many specialist performers of old music and the realities of the early music movement. As in politics, religion, and marriage, there is an important gap separating official ideology from daily practice—and it could hardly be otherwise. For the goal of "authentic" reinterpretation of music from the distant past is forever unattainable, if one defines authenticity as an exact replica of the composer's intentions or even, more modestly, as an exact reproduction of older performing techniques. But that's how the early music movement, or at any rate its purist vanguard, defines its goals.

> *A musician humbled by authenticity . . . acts willingly at the service of the composer, thereby committing himself to "truth," or, at the very least, accuracy. But there's the rub. For if we peer behind the uplifting language, we find that one attains authenticity by following the textbook rules for "scientific method." Early Music, in other words, does not preach some empathetic leap into the past in an act of imaginative* Verstehen. *What it has in mind is a strictly empirical program to verify historical practices, which, when all is said and done, are magically transformed into the composer's intentions.**

"What are you aiming for when you recreate a troubadour song from the twelfth century?" My question to the world's most eminent practitioner of Medieval music had an immediate reply: "I want to reproduce the first performance of the work as precisely as possible."

My first reaction was, suppose troubadour X had a stomachache that first night, and his performance was a flop? Maybe the second performance went much better. . . . Why this mystique of the premiere?

My reactions on succeeding days and years to that proclaimed goal

* Dreyfus, "Early Music Defended against Its Devotees."

drew me farther and farther away from that imaginary troubadour and his hypothetical digestive problems. Not that I didn't want to find out who he was or how he sang his song—it just appeared increasingly evident that reconstructing the past through the methods of factual inquiry alone was hopelessly insufficient. You might through some miracle discover exactly what dialect of Provençal was spoken in his native village; you might through an act of divine intervention discover the song manuscript with a date of first performance and copious notes about how the piece was done (don't rush to the archives just yet, young scholars; no such document has ever turned up). But you can't reproduce in your "authentic" performance his religious beliefs, his sexual preferences, his money problems, and the unfortunate effects of that too-large dinner he had unwisely ingested. You can't replicate another man's life!

During the early-to-mid-1950s there was an "authentic" revival of New Orleans jazz in this country: some of the old players were coaxed out of retirement and asked to record and to perform in public again. More than that: some young players decided to recreate the great recorded performances of the 1920s. Using the old 78s of King Oliver, of Louis Armstrong, of Jelly Roll Morton, and others (and the living example of some still-active founding fathers), the New Orleans revivalists performed and recorded interpretations that tried to be as faithful as possible in every detail to the originals.

The results? Almost uniformly disastrous. The early music practitioners of the New Orleans style had impeccable documentation to work with: far better than the scores and archival documents that are all we have from earlier centuries were the sound recordings available to the young jazzmen: recordings that replicated as no paper scratches ever can the colors and inflections of real performances.

Yet it couldn't be done. There was no way for these white, college-educated musicians to reproduce the cultural experience undergone two generations earlier by black musicians from the New Orleans ghetto. The recreations were flat, lumbering, full of good intentions, but ludicrously inept.

The forty-year time-and-culture gap was too much for the New Orleans revivalists to overcome. And the two-to-seven-century gap

we face in dealing with the music of the distant past is a hundred, a thousand times more profound and insurmountable. You cannot reproduce the living music of even a few years ago, so quickly have our values and attitudes been changing. And you cannot, merely by an act of the will, hope to duplicate the aesthetic norms of any distant period. There is only one civilization we can ever hope to express completely and authentically — our own.

Still, we try, like some cheerful Sisyphus, to attain the unattainable. Over and over, we renew our attempts to recall the past, to extract its meaning and its hidden beauty. We need the strength of the past because taken all by itself our own experience is too limited, too insufficient. The present, endured in isolation from what went before, is a shallow place to be.

How precious, therefore, is the musical past as revealed to us by the early music movement. But the movement itself is, as we have seen, a very modern phenomenon. It is heavily influenced by some curious (though widely disseminated) attitudes that were born with and are proper to the machine age. Like the behavioral psychologists of the twenties, like the artificial intelligence researchers of the seventies, some early music crusaders have fallen for the ideology of scientism. Just as man is supposed to be the sum of his discrete, observable behaviors; just as thought is purported to be a series of on-and-off electrical pulses; so is historical music seen as various sets of notated pitches and codifiable performance practices. In this uniquely modern view of things, what count the most, so we are told, are data!

> *The objectivity of these methods [of style analysis] invites the use of the computer, whose logic insures rigorous adherence to the criteria that have been laid down, and which can handle complex data in large quantities. For the latter reason the computer lends itself well to the systematic examination of an entire stylistic field, as in the Princeton project on the style of Josquin's music.**

One is tempted to cry "Poor Josquin des Prez!" on reading such steely prose. But it is not the long-dead Flemish master who will

* From the article "Musicology," *The New Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, 1980).

suffer from the implied metaphysics of the Princeton project. It is we ourselves who stand to lose. If you assume that any computer, no matter how complex, can apprehend the "entire stylistic field" that is Josquin's music, then you may be setting yourself up to overlook or ignore that which is most vital and profound in that music (or in anyone else's, for that matter).

Of course, the austere rituals of the Princeton computer lab are situated at some distance from the daily routine of the performing musician. The choirmaster rehearsing Josquin's *Missa Pange Lingua* is not likely to share many concerns with that big calculating machine in New Jersey. Still, the values of contemporary musicology (a field of study unknown in fifteenth-century Flanders) may insinuate themselves one way or another into his choir's performance. When those values translate into respect for the musical text and careful attention to our current knowledge of Renaissance musical style and practices, we stand to gain both in understanding and in musical pleasure. When such values manifest themselves as reticence, pallid expression, and a reluctance to make controversial decisions, we stand to come out with the short end of the stick.

A performing musician, if he is to succeed, must still center his work in a place that lies outside the realm of the scientifically knowable, of the computer program and the scholarly monograph. What is known as fact (and what isn't known, as well) must be reimagined by the interpretive artist if the dead work he is charged with resuscitating is to start breathing again. Without a large dose of humility about the limits of our knowledge, and without a goodly measure of affectionate empathy, our efforts to recreate the past will come to naught.

"Obscurantist!" I can hear the cry already, resonating down the corridors of some specialist journal's office space. Please forbear; I am not trying to bring back the bad old days. I make no case for the thumping pianist, the megalomaniac conductor, or the glass-shattering concert soprano. Those people will survive very well without this book to defend them. I mean to make a case *en famille,* among people who already know and love the sounds of old instruments and the expressive power of early performance techniques.

Our devotion to the music of the distant past has led us to serve it

better through knowledge of its proper historical context. To complete that context, to fill in the gaps that mere knowledge cannot complete, we must call forth the same effort of creative imagination that is contained in the musical works themselves. As in politics, religion, and marriage, that means learning to live with a certain number of contradictions, and assuming a certain number of risks. It means accepting a limited degree of success as the best deal possible under the circumstances. It also helps to keep a sense of humor through it all, lest we become relentless Captain Ahabs pursuing some elusive white whale of authenticity, and losing a measure of our humanity in the process.

We performers need the discipline of scholarship. We need the tools of modern research, and we need the results those tools have obtained for us. What we *don't* need is the mind-set of the technocratic priesthood. There are dimensions of any artistic activity that cannot be harnessed to the yoke of scientific cognition. Those dimensions are just as important for Campra as for Chopin; just as necessary for Monteverdi as for Mahler. The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction!