‘AUTHENTICITY’ IN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

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It used to be said that we study history for the lessons we can learn for the present: ‘plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose’. But now that the music of the past occupies the centre-stage—with contemporary work getting the walk-on parts—perhaps we should reverse this, and ask how far the past can be illuminated by what happens today.

This thought crossed my mind when reading a series of articles in Early Music (Vol. 12 no. 1, February 1984) which set out to investigate the philosophy behind ‘authentic’ performance. A striking feature—given that Early Music is the house journal for this sort of scholarship—was the candour with which all the writers exposed what they saw as weaknesses in current thinking. In general terms three questions emerged: is authenticity attainable? is it desirable? and (most fundamentally) does authenticity exist? The only disappointment was that the essays made only passing reference to the performance of modern music. For not only are there close parallels between the work of performers in contemporary and (in the widest sense) early music. More importantly, if authenticity has any meaning, modern music is the one area in which this can convincingly be demonstrated. Perhaps it is normally taken for granted that, with the living composer on hand to clarify intentions, authenticity as an issue simply does not apply; yet the more one works with composers, listening to their advice (and changes of mind!), the more elusive a satisfactory definition becomes—causing one, in the end, to doubt whether authenticity as a goal has any useful validity.

All the articles in Early Music noted in varying ways the (perhaps fatal) flaw in the ‘authenticity’ position. This is that the attempt to understand the past in terms of the past is—paradoxically—an absolutely contemporary phenomenon. It is not hard to see how this is so. Nowadays, the art of the past is not merely to be used (on our terms); it must be conserved. Historically this is a recent attitude, which we owe to that aspect of Romanticism which elevated the past into an ideal. The falseness of that position brought, initially, some disastrous results (the lamentable Victorian ‘restoration’ of medieval churches, for instance), yet in the long run it led (through such reformers as Ruskin and Morris, and—in music—Dolmetsch) to today’s attitude of responsible trusteeship.

But, as we have found, conservation presents a ticklish dilemma—whether to restore to mint condition (to the form the creator envisaged) or to preserve in a form more acceptable to modern taste. Not surprisingly it has proved impossible to be consistent. Rococo churches are re-gilded to pristine splendour, but I doubt if anyone has suggested re-colouring the sculpture of
the West Front of Chartres. In the performing arts we can afford to be less cautious. But the same inconsistency prevails. In opera, for some reason, the fidelity to the musical text is so frequently not accorded to the libretto that no one now bats an eyelid when Wagner’s Nibelheim is transposed to a factory floor, or Verdi’s Mantua into the Chicago of Capone.

The prevailing orthodoxy in mainstream classical music is similarly confused. On the one hand, the excellent player is admired for selfless integrity (I well remember as a student receiving instruction in the duties of a performer: always ‘serve the music’, always defer to the composer). But although the study of interpretation is supposedly composer-centred, the constant repetition of a core of repertoire means that it is differences in performance which provide the principal interest (in other words there is a commercial incentive to be different for the sake of it). Moreover, although the text is sacrosanct, the leading players cling to the anachronism of modern instruments.

The authenticity movement however spurns such compromise, and aims at a whole-hearted ‘mint condition’ restoration, supplementing the text with research into performance practice, and using period instruments or replicas. This scrupulous regard for detail is one instance of the way historical and contemporary performance intertwine. In 20th-century music a new kind of sensibility has called for a certain ‘objectivity’ in performance with a premium on exactness and clarity (remember Stravinsky imploring his singers not to be ‘expressive’); but the reverse of this coin has been a loss of confidence in what music means, and thereby in the nature of the underlying impulse. In the resulting vacuum, the former unequivocal role of performances—the vigorous presentation of ideas and perceptions—has tended to give way to a secondary ideal, that of flawless surface detail. (Among many other pressures pointing performers in this direction have been the merciless clarity of recording technology and the prevalence of pre-recorded music in our audience’s musical diet.)

Another important factor has been the complexity of modern scores. Partly this has been a matter of compositional procedures (the structural role of tone colour, for example), but more significant has been the necessity for composers to dot every ‘i’ and cross every ‘t’ as the gulf widened between their intentions and the instincts of performers. An unfortunate feature of authentic performance has been that these contemporary standards in music notation have been applied uncritically to earlier music, often with ludicrous results. We have all suffered from literal-minded performances of baroque music which stick slavishly to two dynamics, ‘piano’ and ‘forte’. And I recently attended a master-class at which a respected singer had no hesitation in asserting that because Schubert dropped the staccato signs in the third bar of a repeating accompaniment figure, the piano part should thereafter be legato.

Such naivety becomes understandable when we remember that performers today are under pressure, as never before, to be accurate. And in both the contemporary and early fields there is even a school of thought which advocates accuracy as an end in itself. In early music the stand against interpretation (of a personal sort) is a logical conclusion of the crusade against self-indulgence (using music as a vehicle), and a natural consequence of the objective research behind performances. But equally it has to be said that the expressive side of authentic performance has always been its Achilles heel: historical treatises are inevitably more illuminating on detail than on musical impulse; and performers (at least those over 30) have a nagging sense of guilt lest their musical instincts (acquired in childhood) betray ‘romantic’ origins.

An example of this way of thinking occurs by coincidence in the same issue of Early Music. Writing (pp. 125-129) about recordings of the Mozart Symphonies by the Academy of Ancient Music, Eric van Tassel notes the ‘virtual absence of any “interpretation” as modern conductors and their audience understand it’. And he concludes by ingenuously supplying the theory to fit the practice:

A performance not merely 'underinterpreted' 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—if the players essay to elucidate but not to interpret—you have to become a participant; you are invited to complete a realization of the music which only begins in the playing.

This remarkable theory, so persuasively argued, would well repay amplification outside the confines of a record review. Once again I was struck by how contemporary it is—compare the 'anonymity' sought by Boulez,2 or the calculated obliteration of interpretative leeway by sheer technical difficulty in the scores of (among others) Brian Ferneyhough. I found the idea so intriguing that it occurred to me to put it to the test, choosing for the purpose music where one would most expect it to be valid: the intensely detailed scores of the 1950's in which the quantity and precision of detail would seem to rule out interpretation.

The introductory section of Messiaen's La Chouette Hulotte (1956) is perfect for the purpose (Ex. 1). The notation is exceptionally detailed—each pitch having its own unique combination of dynamic and duration; and, if that were not enough, Messiaen adds in a footnote: 'Observer très exactement les nuances et les durées'. With all licence of rhythm or dynamic expressly prohibited one would say that this was an ideal passage for an 'uninterpreted' performance.

But consider the D# at the end of Ex. 1. What is 'ppp'? The question is by no means frivolous. When I first played the passage through I was struck by the fact that my D# was inaudible, its attack covered by the A (fff) in the right hand, its decay obliterated by the F# in the bass. Trying the note alone, it was perfectly audible; but repeated in context, with the same weight of touch, could only be detected at best by a microphone poised inches from the strings—not by me, and certainly not by a listener at the other end of the hall. Raising the dynamic level of the D# by degrees, I was confronted by two practical possibilities: one was to lessen the distinction between ppp and mf in such a way that the D# was distinctly audible right through until the moment of release; the other was to treat the D# as a 'resonance', not an entity in itself but a means of 'colouring' the F# through a faint vibration.

These conclusions held good when practising on a large grand piano in an empty reverberant hall. In a small room with a dry acoustic and an upright piano, identical weights of touch might produce quite different effects. Even leaving these circumstantial variables aside, the point remains that I have a decision to make, an interpretative decision, involving musical taste, judgement of what can be communicated (playing to an audience for example differs from playing to a microphone) and—most imponderable of all—what I think the composer meant. Mere blind unthinking obedience to the text is simply not enough.

If I am doubtful whether the detachment advocated by Eric van Tassel is ever feasible even in the smallest details, that is not to deny the value of restraint in performance. This is particularly true when handling 'ambiguous' moments in music, when over-emphatic performance may actually lessen the music's impact by obliterating the double-meaning. The first few bars from the slow movement of Beethoven's Quartet op. 127 provide an instance. After the

2 Pierre Boulez, 'Sonate, que me veux-tu?' in Perspectives of New Music Vol. 1 No. 2 (Spring 1963), p. 44.
obscurity of the opening the third bar comes as a moment of radiant illumination: in one sense—the obvious one—bar 3 is a new departure. The rhythm attains stability, the harmony moves to the tonic; yet these factors are balanced by others which suggest a continuity—the scalar line of the First Violin’s upbeat which continues into the theme, and the Eb left trailing behind in the cello part. Most quartets play this progression with a strong crescendo followed by a hushed subito piano, a theatrical gesture which emphasizes the first ‘meaning’ very much at the expense of the second. Better, to my mind, would be a rendering which somehow suggests both: balancing, through the degree of crescendo and the dynamic of bar 3, the element of surprise with that of continuity. If this is what van Tassel is driving at, then I am entirely in agreement.

Contemporary music affords plenty of examples where a certain restraint may actually enhance the excitement of the music. Ex. 3 is from Messiaen’s Cantéyodjaya, a work of exuberant rhythmic vitality much of which arises from the use of maverick ‘added’ values. Here the note in question is the D in the first bar. Only at the start of the next bar do we realise that we have been tricked: that we have not heard . However if one clarifies matters by accenting the D, not only does this spoil the joke (which is the rhythmic ambiguity), it robs the beginning of the next bar of its élan.

Where Eric van Tassel’s ideas do seem valid is in the preparation (not performance) of contemporary music. In my experience the sort of ‘neutral’ attitude he advocates can be useful, even indispensable, in the early stages of learning. This is particularly true of a newly-composed piece where it is most desirable not to jump too rapidly to conclusions; one needs to re-examine carefully one’s habitual instincts in order to avoid obliterating the newness of the piece by projecting onto it one’s familiar musical responses. The worst feature of the over-hasty learning of contemporary scores (which economic necessity often regrettably demands) is not smudging of detail, but that insufficient rehearsal encourages facile interpretation. The conscious attempt to learn a work ‘from the inside’ is of course yet another parallel with the radical aims of the authentic performer.

The example from La Chouette Hulotte is particularly impressive because it shows that even in the most detailed type of modern score the intelligence and initiative of the player are called for. But the experience of modern music suggests a much more fundamental challenge to the purist position adopted by some proponents of the authenticity aesthetic. In particular it calls
into question a central tenet, namely the rigid master-servant hierarchy of composer and performer.

My experience of working with a large number and variety of composers has been that they exhibit a bewildering range of attitudes to the score which they have supplied to the performer. Some seem almost superstitious about avoiding assisting with the preparation of performances, answering queries with 'Do whatever you think best'. This attitude is not one of carelessness, but is akin to that of painters who have an instinctive feeling for when a canvas is finished and no more paint should be applied. The composer's work is complete, and in a sense already in the past. Further revisions—even in the form of advice to players—will be made from the outside, and therefore risk being false to the original creative impulse. Furthermore the composer may no longer be as committed as the performer (compare David Hockney: 'I don't want to sit back and look at the finished ones, I'm only interested in what I'm working on').³ In the performing arts, the completion of the score (or script) is only a stage in the development of the work; it must now take its chance, acquiring insights and additional meanings through the work of others. This point concurs with one made in a subsequent issue of Early Music by Hans Keller⁴—that the original contemporary performances of a work are the least desirable model. As with the incomprehension of a Schuppanzigh, so with the inevitably crude and makeshift performances of the music of our time. Except that I would go further than Keller: it is not merely that the Beethovens are ahead of their time (and therefore of contemporary performers); it is that performers of talent—either contemporary or later—may see further into a work than its creator. Diehard proponents of authenticity may protest that this smacks of bad old Victorian notions of 'progress'. But I believe that in the current vogue for purifying a work of later accretions, there is a danger that valuable—as well as corrupt—traditions are discarded.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the composers who not only supervise every aspect of one's performance of their music, but are constantly revising and altering the score right up to the day of the concert. For them the score seems to represent only a general statement, with is details dependent on the character and strengths of the performer—and even such factors as the nature of the instrument or the acoustic of the hall, etc. One has the feeling that the final details of the score (tempo, pedalling, dynamics, etc.) come into being through trial-and-error. They arise from a particular combination of circumstances, which for other players may be incomprehensible or inappropriate. An instance I recently encountered is Dallapiccola's Due Studi for violin and piano; in the second study every note is encrusted with accents and sforzandi, giving an effect which both the violinist and I felt horribly unmusical. Were these marks, I wondered, added by Dallapiccola in a mood of exasperation in response to a particular under-powered performance? (How are we to determine what was a composer's attitude to his scores? My experience suggest that we need to know what a composer was like as a person, a view which departs from the prevailing orthodoxy that a composer's 'life' is of little relevance to his work.) These experiences have convinced me that the notion of a single 'authenticity' or truth towards which one should strive is a chimera; that even in the composer's mind a work is rarely, if ever, fixed. They suggest that the score itself is provisional, a staging post on a creative journey, not the species of holy writ which it has come to be regarded.

Our difficulties arise partly from the fact that we are accustomed to think of music not in terms of transitory sounds and experiences but as printed scores which are inevitably fixed in appearance. (The problem is compounded by the permanence of modern recording.) This is an illusion. For one thing, in the most interesting music—that with the richest possibilities—there can be no one 'perfect' way of playing the piece. That is what Schnabel meant by music which 'is better than it can be performed'. For another, interpretations change because they have to;

³ Living in Vogue, p. 146.
no artist can stand still and remain fresh and vital. Hear the way in which, over the years, Bob Dylan has played around with his early songs, twisting and distorting often to the point of creating a new idea, a new meaning—not always, significantly, to the approval of his fans, who cling to what they know just as tenaciously as classical music audiences. It may be objected that such re-creation is legitimate for Dylan, since he is performing his own material. Whatever he does—since it is ‘his’—cannot be un-authentic. Actually this attitude is very much peculiar to classical music, with its long tradition of musical notation and the consequent division of labour between composer and performer.

I first realized the artificiality of this attitude a few years ago when I published an article on the music of Xenakis.\(^5\) I wrote at some length about the piano piece Evryali, whose formidable difficulties go at times beyond the bounds of literal feasibility. I suggested that the pianist needed to cope with such passages by devising unorthodox strategies, even on occasion making modest alterations, changing specific notes to achieve the closest possible approximation to Xenakis’s apparent intended effect. This suggestion provoked a minor flurry of correspondence. One pianist—Stephen Pruslin—took the orthodox view, berating me in no uncertain terms for daring to tamper with the text. Another—Yuji Takahashi (noted, incidentally, for his astounding performances of Xenakis)—took an entirely contrary position. He first reproved me for puzzling conscientiously over the details of the score, and then went on to propose a radical view of the performer as ‘an adventurer who explores sonic nebulae following the star map provided by the composer. A composition is a model which is used again and again to open the door of perception. It will be modified, if necessary, and discarded when it is no longer valid’.\(^6\)

For Takahashi, the only thing that matters is the act of making music. How much this has to do with the text employed is academic. I am not for a moment suggesting that accuracy doesn’t matter, or that it isn’t important to get things right; only that correctness should be a means to an end, not a tyrannical end in itself. There is something exhilaratingly direct about the way in which Takahashi slices through the Gordian knot of our hang-ups about performance. Above all we can learn from him that the text should be a source of stimulus, not of inhibition. How that stimulus works depends on the personality of the performer. Some work best and most creatively within rigid constraints. For them minute investigation of the text and the surrounding historical evidence will be a positive assistance. Others may use the text as a point of departure for something free, and ultimately perhaps only loosely connected with the original. Vive la différence! But unfortunately contemporary dogma points all performers—regardless of talent or temperament—in the former direction.

The separation of the roles of performer and composer is a symptom of an over-regimentation so pervasive that it passes largely unnoticed. (How many well-known classical soloists, for example, play a note of contemporary music?!) The ‘hands off’ attitude of the specialized musician has its roots, I suspect, in a deep-seated loss of confidence, so that we rely increasingly on ‘rules’ and ‘evidence’ as a means of evading personal responsibility for artistic judgements. It is this quality of confidence which is so striking to modern ears in ‘pre-authentic’ playing, as in the Bach performances of Casals or Hamilton Harty, for example: a bedrock of conviction on which their particular ‘authenticity’ resides. Such artists were fortunate in not having to face a public which has acquired a liking for the shiny—if flavourless—apples it has been fed by the music industry. Perhaps Eric van Tassel is right: perhaps there are discerning listeners who can supply the vital spark to their ‘un-interpreted’ Mozart; but the majority, I would guess, will be only too content with the innocuous surface.

Such is the regrettable conclusion which surely lies at the end of contemporary thinking. Seen in this light, the zeal for authenticity is part of a specifically contemporary malaise which values


\(^6\) TEMPO 115, p. 54. Italics mine.
detail above essence. Worse, by foisting dubious contemporary values on the past, its proponents threaten to diminish, not enlarge, our musical horizons.

Perhaps I go too far. Yet the prevailing ideology of performance practice is so well entrenched that it does no harm to give the edifice a gentle shake from time to time by way of testing its foundations. It would be wrong to deny the achievements which contemporary attitudes have brought about; but wrong, too, to ignore the disquieting signs of decadence within.

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Symphony No. 3 (1944-46)
Orchestral Variations (1957)
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