Authenticity in performance

Eighteenth-century case studies

Peter le Huray

AUTHENTICITY IN PERFORMANCE

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CASE STUDIES

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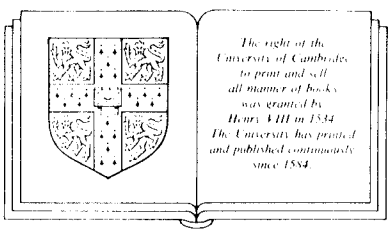

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From *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing* by Leopold Mozart

Preface

Interest in rediscovering earlier styles of performance is no recent development. Arnold Dolmetsch's *The Interpretation of the Music of the XVII and XVIII Centuries* (London, 1915; revised 1944) contains the fruit of half a century's experience of 'early' music, in the fields of performance, instrument-making and musical scholarship. Only recently however has an interest in 'authenticity' reached out to a wide musical public. Many of the best-selling records of Bach, Handel, Haydn and Mozart are now those in which 'period' instruments and 'period' techniques are used. Much that is now published about baroque and classical music is to do with performance. Performance research has never been more intense at all levels than it now is, and the fields of enquiry are steadily widening.

There is however a danger that new 'authentic' dogmas of style and interpretation will come to replace the anachronistic dogmas of a late Romantic tradition, the shortcomings of which are now increasingly realised by informed professionals and an informed musical public. This little book does not aim nor could it ever hope to offer a set of 'right' answers. Performance, after all, is a recreative act in which the imagination of the performer plays a vital role. The objectives of this book, rather, are to define some of the more important *questions* that the performer and listener should ask, to suggest fruitful lines of enquiry, and in doing so to supply, as far as is humanly possible, references to the most informed and up-to-date information that is currently available.

It would have been possible to arrange the following pages in quite a different way, taking – one by one – the major issues: 'source' problems; instrumental sonorities; performance techniques; notational conventions such as 'inequality', overdotting, tempi, dynamics and ornamentation; and especially such interpretative issues as articulation and phrasing. Though an arrangement of this kind might have the superficial attraction of simplicity and orderliness, it would carry with it the temptation to overgeneralise, to ignore the fact that performance conventions were subject to constant

change, that they undoubtedly differed from place to place, and even from composer to composer. Instead of following a subject-by-subject format, therefore, the book is organised into discussions of selected compositions, each representing a major genre of its time. In all but one case a facsimile of either the first edition or autograph is readily available, and all are accessible in good modern editions. The aim has been not only to define the performance conventions that apply to each work, but also to relate each discussion as closely as possible to the actual processes of making music: to go through the stages, in other words, that any thinking musician might choose to follow when preparing a work for performance. It is hoped, nonetheless, that the subject index (p. 201) may serve as a useful guide to the specific issues that are addressed during the course of the book.

The danger of the present format is that it may encourage a compartmentalised approach to interpretation. Although the second chapter, for instance, is concerned with a work for keyboard, there is much in it that is of general relevance to all instrumental music of the period. Similarly, there is much in the subsequent chapter on string playing that will help the keyboard player to grasp principles of baroque articulation. There should be no artificial boundaries between instruments or genres in any genuine discussion of performance practice.

Performance practice (to use that ugly but convenient term) is a continuing subject of enquiry. Almost every month new ideas on 'authentic' performance are being published and new 'authentic' performances recorded. If this brief study serves to open out fresh approaches, if too it succeeds in demonstrating, not only to the performer but to the listener and to the student, the relevance of such 'peripheral' disciplines as analysis and text criticism, then it will have served its purpose.

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Contents

Music examples

But is perhaps the present interest in 'authenticity' simply a reflection of a lack of professional self-confidence? Why all this concern to discover how the music may have sounded at the time of its composition? Is not music a performing art, in which the recreator has just as much right to an opinion as the creator? No one is suggesting, surely, that the time will ever come when Beethoven's piano sonatas will be played *only* on early nineteenth-century Viennese instruments, or that pianists will be banned from playing the '48', on the grounds that Bach wrote the preludes and fugues for clavichord, harpsichord and chamber organ – his 'well-tempered' keyboards! And what if the composer did give precise instructions as to speed, dynamics, articulation and instrumentation? Surely the performer must be the ultimate judge? The early nineteenth-century pianist and historian, Lenz, tells of a visit to young Liszt in Paris in the early 1830s.[2] Lenz was hoping for some lessons, and had taken along a Weber piano sonata to play. Liszt, obviously very bored at the thought of yet another pupil, beckoned him to a piano. As Lenz proceeded, however, Liszt sat up and was soon at the keyboard, sight-reading the music for himself. He ran the A flat major Sonata through, trying passages now fast, now slow, now loud, now soft, regardless of the composer's instructions, asking Lenz which he preferred. Here then surely is ample precedent for a freely creative approach to interpretation?

Closer investigation of early Romantic attitudes to interpretation, however, reveals a very different spirit at work amongst many musicians. The impulsive and self-willed Berlioz, for example, felt passionately that music should not be tampered with. In his *A Travers Chants* (Paris, 1862) he strongly condemned the practice of reorchestrating established masterpieces, tracing this back to Mozart, whose wind parts to *Messiah* are still commonly used. 'Even the greatest symphonist the world has ever seen has not escaped this indescribable kind of outrage [he wrote] . . . and they have already begun to correct the instrumentation of the C MINOR SYMPHONY!'

The reorchestration of music is, of course, a gross example of a deliberate disregard for the composer's intentions. Disregard, however, manifests itself more commonly at deeper levels of interpretation, and it is a disregard (significantly enough) that several leading twentieth-century composers have intensely resented. In his 1939 Norton lectures at Harvard, for instance, Stravinsky went so far as to suggest that performance is an ethical matter – a question so to speak of musical 'morality':

> The sin against the spirit of a work [he wrote] always begins with a sin against its letter and leads to . . . endless follies . . . Thus it follows that a *crescendo* . . . is always accompanied by a speeding up of movement, while a slowing down never fails to accompany a *diminuendo*. The superfluous is refined upon; a *piano, piano pianissimo* is delicately sought after; great pride is taken in perfecting useless nuances – a concern that usually goes hand in hand with inaccurate rhythm.[3]

Many echoes of Stravinsky's ideas on performance are to be found in Hindemith's Harvard lectures, which he delivered there six years later. He particularly deplored the exaggerated role accorded to the performer. As he put it:

> This high evaluation of the intermediate transformer station between the generator of a composition and the consumer . . . is dangerous – It seduces the listener to slide down 'irresistibly' until the lowest point of perception is reached, when nothing else counts but the performer's virtuosity, the pleasant-sounding emptiness, the uninhibited superficiality.[4]

Arnold Schoenberg tended to take a more sophisticated and at the same time more optimistic view of the performer of his day than did either Hindemith or Stravinsky. Like Vaughan Williams, he was particularly conscious of the inadequacies of the printed page. And yet he, too, was in no doubt that the composer's wishes, as far as they could be determined, should be respected:

> It must be admitted [he wrote] that in the period around 1900 many artists overdid themselves in exhibiting the power of the emotion they were capable of feeling; artists who believed themselves to be more important than the work – or at least than the composer.[5]

Olivier Messiaen also is keenly aware of the limitations of conventional score notation, but he too, argues that good performance demands the closest attention to what the composer has written.[6] To be sure, composers have from time to time built into their music techniques that give the performer some freedom in the choice of speeds, rhythms and dynamics. In some modern compositions the performer is even invited to choose where to begin and end the piece, and which pitches and rhythms to play. Normally, however, the composer expects the performer to begin at the beginning and end at the end, and to follow all the instructions in the score in chronological order.

If, then, composers tend to mean what they write, it is our duty as performers to try to find out as much as possible about that meaning. It is as much a question of ethics as aesthetics. This is not for a moment to suggest, however, that musical 'meaning' has a fixed and absolute value – that there can be only *one* way of playing a particular piece. For as Vaughan Williams aptly put it:

> a musical score is merely an indication of potential music . . . a most clumsy and ill-devised indication. How clumsy it is may be seen from the importance of the 'individual renderings' of any piece of music. If a composer could indicate what he wanted with any precision there would be no room for this; as it is, two singers or players may follow faithfully the composer's intentions as given in the written notes, and yet produce widely differing results.[7]

He might well have gone on at that point to say that this is one of the particular joys that music shares with the other performing arts: that a

musical object can be viewed from many different angles and yet remain essentially the same piece.

The search for an 'authentic' interpretation, therefore, is not the search for a single hard and fast answer, but for a range of possibilities from which to make performing decisions. The age of the music will determine what kinds of search the performer has to make. Whatever its age, the composition will need to be analysed closely to see what its overall structure is, what its musical themes or motives are, and how these are developed, phrase by phrase, to create a vital and coherent whole. The analytical process will, of course, involve insights of differing kinds, according to the type of music being investigated, and its time and place of origin. The impact of Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto, after all, is far removed from that of Beethoven's 'Emperor' Concerto, and that of Beethoven's early F minor Piano Sonata from Debussy's *La Fille aux cheveux de lin.*

Analysis apart, there are other avenues that the perceptive performer will wish to explore. In more recent times, composers themselves have been increasingly particular about the ways in which they would like their music to be played. Debussy, for instance, spoke of the aural ideal of a hammerless piano; Chopin wrote of his intense dislike of tub-thumping German pianism. The further back in time we go, however, the more sketchy is the evidence of this kind, the less informative is the musical notation itself, and the less familiar are the instruments and the techniques of playing them. Every avenue of enquiry must nonetheless be explored in the search for the fullest possible picture of the original, a picture that will more clearly define the range of choices that are open to the performer. The violinist who is learning one of Bach's unaccompanied sonatas or partitas, for instance, will doubtless be using a modern edition rather than a facsimile of the original. This will need to be checked against the readily accessible facsimile of Bach's autograph to ensure that every detail of the original has been clearly reproduced, and that every editorial adjustment and clarification is clearly visible as such. As much as possible should be discovered, too, about the type of violin that a player of Bach's day might have used – about its stringing and its 'soul' (the bow), and about the techniques of applying the bow to the strings. Not every question will find a ready answer, but until every potential source of information has been checked the player will be in no position to assess the strengths and weaknesses of modern techniques and interpretative approaches.

Authenticity is no dogma. There has never been, nor can there ever be, *one* way of interpreting a composition. Neither is it practicable or even desirable to insist exclusively on 'period' instruments and 'period' techniques. Humility must be a vital ingredient of the modern performer's equipment: the humility to read, to analyse and to listen, and the humility to modify accepted assumptions where necessary in order to transform the 'timetable' into a truly *musical* journey.

2

Bach's C major Prelude BWV 870 and 870a

ON CHOOSING A GOOD EDITION

The very first thing to be done in preparing a performance is to ensure that the edition being used is up to date. No one would dream of using an out-of-date timetable to plan a journey; but how many musicians take the trouble to find out whether their 'timetable' – the edition from which they are working – is the current one? In what ways, though, can a musical score be 'out of date'? Surely, all the printer has to do is to reproduce exactly what the composer wrote? In an ideal world this would indeed be the case. Sadly, however, things are never quite as simple or straightforward as they may seem. Take the piano music of Chopin, for instance. Most of it was published during the composer's lifetime, and with the composer's approval. On the face of it, this would seem to be a perfect situation, for direct links can be established between the composer and the first printed editions of his music. There are, however, hidden and formidable snags. Chopin published much of his music in three different countries simultaneously – Germany, France and England – using three different publishers. To do this, he had three sets of copies made, and each publisher was sent a set from which were then produced the printed editions. Unfortunately, Chopin did not always check carefully the manuscript copies that he sent to the publishers, still less the printed editions that were made from them. As a result there are many differences of detail between the French, German and English editions, many of which are not simply obvious mistakes. One solution might be to ignore the printed editions and concentrate on the autographs. Many of these have been lost, however. To make matters more difficult, Chopin tended to go back to his earlier compositions from time to time to revise them. Some of the differences that are to be found in surviving copies of a piece, therefore, could be genuine 'second thoughts' rather than oversights and mistakes.

If difficulties of this size arise from such an apparently straightforward

case, how much more formidable then are the problems that Beethoven's untidy scores create. And even these problems pale into insignificance beside those that arise in connection with much earlier music. The older the music, the poorer the sources tend to be. Before 1600, in particular, autographs and good quality publications are rare. Much early notation is inexact, and the older it is the less performance 'information' it will contain: phrasings, expression marks and speed indications, for example, are practically non-existent in pre-eighteenth-century music.

All these matters call for the attention of an expert editor: someone who knows the music of the period intimately, and who is familiar with its sources. His task will be to sift out the good sources from the bad, and to decide which version is to form the basis of his edition. Some of the decisions that he will have to make will be easy. A wrong note is usually obvious enough, as is a wrong time value. Accidentals, though, are not always clearly right or wrong, whilst variants of other kinds can be teasingly difficult to pin down.

No matter how carefully and skilfully the editor may have completed his task, his edition will be of little use to the performer unless he clearly explains to the reader what he has done to the original score, and why he has done it. To begin with, the edition should contain a brief description of the sources that have been used. If the editor has had to change or add to the original notation in any way, he should then explain the need for the changes and alterations and describe how the reader may see what has been done. If an accidental has had to be altered, for instance, it should look different from an original one – it could be shown in small type, for instance, or placed above rather than at the side of the note. Unless the edition clearly shows what the editor has done to the original, it should be either consigned to the waste-paper basket or carefully checked against an up-to-date edition (such as the Associated Board edition of Mozart's piano sonatas, edited by Stanley Sadie and Denis Matthews). Most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editors carried out their work in an extraordinarily highhanded manner, as we shall shortly see, correcting 'errors' without a word of warning, and liberally covering the pages with slurs, dots and 'expression' marks of their own. In doing so, they often transformed the intended spirit of the original composition beyond recognition. Unfortunately, far too many misleading editions are still in print. More will be said later on in the book about editorial problems – especially in the chapter on Haydn's 'Drum Roll' Symphony (p. 149). These preliminary remarks, however, may serve as a general introduction to a vital yet much neglected aspect of performance.

How can a good edition of Bach's *Das wohltemperirte Clavier* (commonly translated as 'The Well-Tempered Clavier') be identified? To begin with, the performer has a right to know something about the original sources

which the editor has used. Neither the first nor the second book of the '48' was published during Bach's lifetime, but by great good fortune Bach's own manuscripts have survived, together with copies made by a close circle of pupils and friends. The first problem that the editor must decide is whether to use only Bach's own copies (the primary sources, that is to say), or to look at secondary sources as well, particularly those that were copied out by Bach's pupils. It could be, for instance, that a copy in the hand of a Bach pupil contains second thoughts scribbled down by the composer during the course of a lesson. Bach's early editors tended to take the simple way out, selecting what seemed to be the most reliable source and publishing it with whatever emendations they felt were necessary. The 'New and Correct Edition' by S. Wesley and C. F. Horne (London *c.* 1830) is typical of its kind. The editors seem to have used the largely autograph copy of Book 1, though they say nothing about this in their lengthy preface (were they too inexperienced, perhaps, to know that they were working from the autograph?). They reproduced the original exactly as they found it, barring a minor slip here and there, and apart from the addition of half a dozen signs to indicate different types of fugal entry. Friedrich Chrysander's Wolfenbüttel edition of 1856 presents an equally clean text. It does, however, diverge in places from the autograph. The editor tells us nothing about the sources he used, nor indeed would he have known much (if anything) about the secondary copies, for it is only recently that scholars have managed to identify some of the handwritings of Bach's pupils and friends. All one can say of Chrysander's edition is that it does not follow Bach's autograph, and that no good reasons are given for the differences that arise. Moving on to Czerny's celebrated edition (Vienna 1838), we enter an altogether different world (see Example 3 below). 'Our chief aim [wrote Czerny] has been to make this *New Edition of John Sebastian Bach's 48 Preludes and 48 Fugues* as correct and perfect as possible; for this purpose we have compared together every previous edition, as well as several ancient manuscripts.' The mere act of comparison is valueless, however, unless the worth of what is being compared is known, a matter that Czerny delicately sidestepped. Little confidence can be placed in his judgement, for he makes no mention at all of the existence of an autograph! Czerny's brazen assurances of 'correctness' and 'perfectness', moreover, are totally contradicted by the appearance of the printed page: most of the actual notes are accurate enough, to be sure, but Czerny has added a whole battery of dynamic signs, from *pp* to *ff*, and the music is peppered with phrasings and staccato marks. From the preface, it is clear that Czerny had heard 'many of the Fugues played by the great *Beethoven*', and that his edition reflects that experience, rather than the 'correctness' and 'perfection' of Bach's originals. It will, therefore, be of greater interest to students of Beethoven than of Bach. Nevertheless, it was still being reprinted by the eminent firm of Peters more than a hundred years after it was first published, and it has perhaps been the