

THOUGHTS ON USING HISTORICAL MODELS IN PIANO PLAYING

Even if the performer could really claim absolute fidelity to the letter or to the spirit of the composer's text (very seldom the case), it is still not a given that this fidelity must be his ultimate goal. It certainly is not what makes a performer convincing to listen to: there are after all plenty of examples where performers deliberately or unknowingly stray far from what we think the composer's intentions are but nevertheless make compelling music, and plenty of examples of the opposite too. And – quite simply – knowing what is expected is not the same as doing it.

Anyway, the latter-day pianist, just by playing on the instrument he does, immediately relinquishes claims of fidelity to a significant extent in a large portion of the standard repertoire.

But even those who claim historical correctness when it comes to instruments and researched practices have been shown to build their philosophy on unsteady ground. Instruments may have been very varied or thought of as far from ideal even at the time; composers may have treated instruments pragmatically, or not, or only in part; and treatises may not reflect the professional secrets of the top performers. The original sound worlds which the old works inhabit transferred to our modern setting may not achieve the desired effects; indeed, a kind of nostalgia for lost worlds that accompany hearing those sounds are an added layer of feeling anyway. Likewise, adopting old concert practices now may at worst feel like a theme-park experience rather than a genuine revival.

Also: we cannot forget intervening periods, and the music we know from those periods which inevitably reflect on previous eras; and when we hear an older work it may seem (quite impossibly of course) to refer to subsequent musics – indeed this kind of anachronism is a wonderful way in which our experience of music may be said to be transcendent.

So when the pianist appeals to the authority of correctness or fidelity or authenticity it is at least in part a lie, or an irrelevance. In most cases what he is actually doing is appealing to the strictures of a given

tradition – its disciplines of how to treat the instrument, of how to interpret historical information and of how to 'read' texts. (And most often it is with the tradition(s) in which he *himself* has been taught that he plays this game of Chinese whispers.) All of this may genuinely and rightly be in the service of fine expressive results. But there are problem areas: 1. The strictures themselves too often become the yardstick against which performances are judged rather than the expressive ends. 2. There are normally quite a number of traditions to which to appeal, with sometimes directly contradictory dictates. 3. When a tradition has become defined as such the dangers of staleness, of fossilisation, are imminent.

This is not to dismiss the great traditions or schools (only uncritical adherence to them). After all, traditions become defined as such based on the credibility given to their practices by great exponents. They show how whole complexes of expressive means can work together convincingly. And in an ideal world the disciplines that they impose instrumentally, and to an extent intellectually (even when some of their premises are not necessarily intellectually inscrutable), become a refinery for unchecked or crude expressive impulses; and the very nature of that tension carries powerful emotional potential. (But that is in an ideal world truly. Some of the more recent schools of training or some of the more recent off-shoots of the old schools seem to have 'forgotten' the discriminating sensitivities of yester-year. The dangers of fossilisation in action: schools founded on apparently sound proven principles of mechanics and musicality end up as generic production lines.)

Nothing prevents the performer from acquiring techniques and aesthetic and expressive models from a variety of traditions. Think of the exciting explorations of textures, buoyancy of rhythms and possibilities for stylisation that 'period instruments' have given us; of the miracles of characterisation, timing and phrasing, the ambiguities of sensibility of the pre-second-world-war players; and of some of the startling new sounds that can emerge when, in modernist fashion, the traditional relationship between means and ends is over-thrown, or when we hear the music through our more recent 'digital' interpretations of the world*.

Choosing what to use and how to use it, and rejecting other possibilities are inevitably critical acts, and the options are legion. But when 'using' traditions or when emulating admired master performers there are pitfalls. Some of these: 1. Learning expressive means/tools without the understanding that they spring from a larger context or culture or personality which needs to be understood or sensed but which cannot necessarily be acquired or enacted in full. 2. Cosmetic copying or pastiche of expressive and 'stylistic' markers onto an otherwise 'normalised', 'consistent' manner of playing – i.e. without integrating or subsuming them into a coherent whole of the performer's making. 3. Simple hybrids, like 'historically-informed performance on modern instruments', i.e. hybrids that tick boxes (usually good for marketing but really only a small step up from point 2). 4. Eclectic mumbo-jumbo. 5. Reference for the sake of reference – i.e. without throwing new light on the old, and without an independent life from the old.

The biggest challenges therefore with drawing richly on various traditions and various given individual practices without subscribing to the belief-systems and total attitude to the instrument that any one of them propounds, are expressive and aesthetic coherence. One might say that the former ultimately rests on the personality of the performer (there is after all no substitute for the 'x factor') and that, as far as the latter goes, there are models through history, starting with the ancient classical ones, for using materials complex in references and practices. But as far as the pianist-performer of the often-hackneyed 'standard' repertoire is concerned (a repertoire that is fast receding into the past, and of which a deeper understanding seems ever more esoteric) there is as yet no clear map for negotiating these histories past and present, and perhaps it must remain so – just as it has always been in other fields.

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2011

* An aside: It is interesting to think about the differences in the way we listen to pre-modern recordings and ones that are captured in the digital shining garb of our information age. The old recordings, serendipitously, can be said to *lack* some information – information which we are good at 'filling in'

intuitively (behind the veil of crackles and hiss we feel we hear the 'real thing') – in the best instances dictating a listening from the 'middle perspective' as it were, from which one can view details as well as a bigger picture. We are perhaps much less skilled at intuitively 'blocking out' the excessive information of unrealistically complicated or present sonics. Such recordings may well offer new experiences of listening if there is a happy synergy with the performer's intentions. Other performers may legitimately prefer less high-tech engineering.