

JOURNALISTIC CRITIQUE; PIANO PERFORMANCE AS CRITIQUE

Journalistic critique of performance (at least in the music world) consists more often than not of a quick (if not instant) response directly expressed in a condensed format. But there are other kinds of critical activity which work slowly, with many caveats and sub-clauses. The journalistic critic passes public judgement (reviews are almost always remembered as simply being 'good' or 'bad', perhaps 'so-so') and thus implies his own superior insight as a *fait accompli*. But there are other modes of critical inquiry where the tone is searching, investigative and provisional, and where gaining deeper understanding is the primary goal, not summary value-assessment.

Unless the reviewer is himself a great writer (this may be true in rare cases) few would argue that the perusal of a journalistic critique constitutes an artistic experience in itself. In that sense (with a nod to George Steiner) reviewing is almost always a 'secondary' activity: it reflects off the creative attempts of others and cannot stand alone. The scope of reviews in magazines or papers or radio round-ups seldom allow for the reviewer to really build an intellectually and emotionally compelling broader background case for his views. The brevity goes hand-in-hand with the consumerist/utilitarian nature of the endeavour, which is confined to brief impressions and often presented outright as 'buyer's guides' – but nowhere is the writer obliged to deliver proof of his own musical or intellectual values or talents or to demonstrate his own fineness of sensibility, other than by the merest implication. Instead the relative validity of his preferences rests on his reputation. But what are the factors that play a role in the building of a reputation? How often is this reputation really put to the test?

By sharp contrast it is in the nature of the performer's business to *enact* his own critical ideals in a concrete way in his playing. Piano playing is disquietingly often judged by writers with little specific expert understanding of the technicalities of mastering the instrument or the professional issues which haunt practitioners – the piano repertoire is so

vast and so much of it so close to the heart of the western canon that it is easily assumed the domain of the 'arts critic'. (This is not to discount the possibility wonderful writing on performance by thinkers or fine writers from other disciplines, merely to question glib assessments from outside the specifics of the art of piano playing in the context of journalistic reviewing.) When, by contrast, the pianist himself approaches a vaunted repertoire he extends his critical involvement (whether consciously or intuitively, or both) over a wide terrain, *through his craft, through the making of something*; i.e. he is constantly making decisions that are put into practice. He must engage with, form his own views on, the original historical contexts of the scores, the subsequent reception(s) of the works and composers, different (sometimes competing) performance practices/traditions/conventions, stereotypes of pedagogy, the latter-day popular platitudes which inform the popular opinion of composers (or a specific work) and their position in aesthetics, or the arts, or even the wider social world. Indeed the performer is grappling with (to him) the even larger issue of his own *raison d'être*: is he an executant, an interpreter, a creator, or something of all three? What shall his specific professional relationship to his eminent pianistic colleagues, dead and alive, be? Shall he strive to emulate *their* values or reject them? Which specific expressive means may he seek to assimilate, which to ignore?... *It is inevitable that in his playing, an expert pianist, deliberately or not, poses responses to all these issues* and that they in turn provide one kind of lens through which to look into a performer's work. Before reaching conclusions about a performer's specific reading of a score one may well spend some time thus trying to understand what values 'make him tick' as an autonomous musician.

The great majority of journalistic writing about performance rests on easy unstated assumptions of consensus in all areas: the player's role as an 'interpreter', stereotyped expectations of listeners when hearing the music of specific composers, issues of historical veracity, the accepted use of the instrument in particular repertoires, the meaning of problematic but frequently-banded-about words like 'structure' and 'style' and 'meaning', the ranges covered by expressions such as 'too much' or 'a little'. On closer examination such consensus can seldom be

shown to really exist or to be built on reasonable grounds – which is why one so often reads directly contradictory descriptions and assessments of the same recording or performance by different reviewers. Of course, if one is familiar with the kinds of opinions that a specific reviewer holds and the kinds of playing he favours, one may very well know 'where he is coming from' even when he uses inexact language or makes unsubstantiated statements, but that sort of writing does not seek to *raise the bar* for refining the critical apparatus, cannot have genuinely edifying ambitions; it merely confirms existing allegiances aesthetic and personal. Fruitful discussions on internet forums or comments sections on platforms like youtube where amateurs may write are at times subsumed by a trading of personal insults once differences of opinion have been expressed, and yet these exchanges, seen in perspective, at other times appear more knowledgeable and thought-provoking than reviews in trade rags, not least because the format allows for dialogue and mutual challenge. They also have the advantage of potentially broadening vistas of opinion, since they are not confined to a small clique of reviewers who repeatedly review the same artists, as is the case in the 'main-stream' press.

The critical approach which takes as its starting point the self-sufficient *performer as a critic* of all the material that he scrutinises, that he chooses or discards, must necessarily hinge on a specific understanding of the expressive tools of playing the instrument and of the physical mechanics for making these means 'work' – i.e. the 'how' of what the performer does; how he gives his thoughts and sentiments concrete shape. He after all makes something with his hands, with his body. An preliminary effort at listing some of the overlapping categories in the toolbox of the pianist might look like this:

'Large scale' pacing

'Large scale' calibration

Hierarchic relationships between 'local' and 'global'

Rhetoric, musical 'argument'

Gesture

Musical prosody

Phrasing

Emphasis
Enunciation, articulation
'Local' rhythmic organisation
'Local' sonority and 'texture'
'Local' rhythmic deformations
'Local' tonal inflections
Vertical alignment and dislocation
Voicing
Use of the pedals
Percussive noises (pedals, key surface, key bed)

Each of these interdependent areas may be teased out not only as to how the player's physical mechanism is harnessed effectively, but as to how means are in turn marshalled to aid characterisation and narration, how they are made to reflect sensuous and emotional and aesthetic experience, ideas. Each item in a list such as the above can indeed become a *focal point* for looking into the ways the player uses or does not use means, or for deliberating on the ways in which manipulations of one aspect have 'knock-on' effects on others; for assessing whether the performer indeed makes use of a *complex* set of means – or, if he does not, whether his restraining of means in certain areas is meaningful in a complex way. And to ask, where there is complexity, whether there is coherence. To ask where diversity lies and how...

It is not a long way from teasing out the specific uses of expressive techniques to gaining insight into the specific critical and larger aesthetic values that the performer holds. With such thoughts for due process, one may very well then feel free to debate those values themselves, talk about the performer's relationship with a composer, or to state one's opinion of the artistic quality of the performer's work *in the context of one's own taste* or one's own expectations of the performance of a specific work; or simply to say how a performance affects one. The goal must always be to return to talking about a listening 'experience' (to forget this would be deadly too, as with some of the writing on performance in academe) – but the investigative engagement with 'nuts-and-bolts' specifics is above all a self-education which enhances and refines that experience.

A full explication of the complexity and interrelation of means in a good piece of piano playing would of course be an impossible task. But the professional pianist is continually engaged in exploring these means and lives in daily awareness of the essentially heuristic nature of his 'decisions' (i.e. these decisions represent always only small hooks of understanding on which much larger, more inchoate physical realities hang) and of the provisional nature of his own judgements and self-critique. Of course it is the *emergent properties* of this kind of complexity that both the performer and the listener are ultimately interested in, but the fascination with how such synergy comes about can never be far behind.

Defining priorities for a critical method in this way may seem long-winded, tortuous even, and currently there does not seem to exist the kind of formal publication that can accommodate a truly careful critique of musical performance outside academe – of a good length, expressed in accessible language and without trivialising difficult questions (compare for instance with such literary publications as the London Review of Books; or maybe it might simply be more interesting were critics to have conversations with performers, acting as interlocutors, rather than self-appointed taste-makers).

For better or for worse, the values of complexity, coherence and diversity have been enshrined in the great scores that are so admired in 'western classical music' and those values must hold true in the critical act too; i.e. it is a 'dumbing-down' of the issue to simply say that good music and good performance 'transcend', and therefore to be satisfied with unexamined intuitions. It is after all nothing new to say that the development of taste is a slow and often painful process, and that the weighing of aesthetic distinctions goes hand in hand with learning to make ever finer distinctions of feeling and thinking too. The true enjoyments are not facile.

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