

Great Intentions; Great Performances?

What does it really mean to say that a certain musician gave “a great performance?” Are there standards by which we can actually measure performance quality, other than to say: “that concert left me cold; I want my money back,” or “the concert was fantastic, even life-enriching – but I still want my money back,” something more objective than an audience consensus or the receipts from record sales? The field of aesthetics attempts to address questions like these; some dictionaries even define aesthetics as a “science.” Is terming the contemplation of beauty a science justifiable? On what objective criteria might any such “science” be based, other than statistics measuring a number of beholders’ eyes or ears?

Actually, these are very old questions, addressed by Plato amongst other philosophers, and more recently by literary critics. Sometimes scholars and writers create their own consensus, which can exert powerful influences on how some artists perform or even create music. Any aesthetic criterion by which arts may be measured fluctuates, and will evanesce unless there is a sufficient weight of tradition to anchor it; often that weight is literary opinion, accrued even over centuries.

One example of a well-entrenched principle by which the quality of a performer is measured is his or her degree of commitment to a composer’s original intentions (at least so far as determinable). That means reading the score exactly as its creator left it – which is why Urtext printed music has become so important – and striving to make any counterintuitive ideas appearing there make musical sense. The Procrustean bed of authorial intention, it may be argued, can thus stretch the performer, making him or her grow artistically. There is much to be said for the results of this principle, even if it often is an unpleasant a process for the performer to arrive at them; Procrustes did not run a comfortable hotel.

The idea of an author’s intentions acting as a guide to interpretation came under fire in the sixties from scholars like Wimsatt and Beardsley. They argued it’s impossible, for example, to experience exactly what Bach intended, because we don’t live under the same conditions or make the same assumptions he did. They posited, in effect, that players should never attempt to give historicist performances of Bach (even if it were possible to do so completely accurately, which itself is not a provable proposition) because audiences can’t be expected to hear the music through Baroque ears, anyway. This is an important point, especially for players who don’t seek to give a historically accurate picture of the music. They are the ones often heard to say: “If Bach had had modern plumbing he would have used it!” But even for these – and they constitute the mainstream – the ideal of fidelity to a composer’s original intent has never entirely ceased guiding responsible performances.

But rhetoric can exceed a commitment to deeds, and not just in Washington. It can be said of the modern Historically Informed Performance movement (HIP) that a commitment to using period instruments often – and I very carefully acknowledge there are exceptions – outweighs detailed examination of all other historically verifiable

elements that might impinge on what the player actually does with those instruments. However beautiful its results may sometimes be, this category of performance reflects less the willingness to live up to the mandate of real historical performance than the urge to connect with modern audiences and sell novel-sounding records. Making no judgment of the musical value of such performances, which are often of a very high caliber, I still take strong exception to any implication they represent current historical understanding.

So what does “fidelity to a composer’s intentions” mean? How close can – or should – we come to what Bach intended, when it means wrestling with gut strings and Baroque bows, working with a thin, soft palette of sounds that won’t carry in a large auditorium, and perhaps even abandoning some of the beauties that attracted us to Bach in the first place? If the sound the audience wants is more or less the sound Jascha Heifetz produced, why shouldn’t we give it to them?

Is music there to provide visceral satisfaction, financial success, and a little fame, or a quest for historical truth, spiritual growth, and to find new beauties in – or between – old notes? The answer lies in the heart of each performer, and determines his or her level of comfort – or discomfort – in a given musical situation.

However one approaches them, “great performances” are possible through many means, and can take infinite forms. I am always astonished by the fact that music routinely bridges even gaping chasms that separate individual musicians, so that they can always work together. And this, too, makes our calling endlessly fascinating.