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## *An Expanded View of Authenticity” in Early Music*

*By Paul French*

*Editor’s note: Paul’s fine article on authenticity was divided into three parts. Check earlier editions of NW-Notes for parts one and two.*

### **III. The Authenticity of the Performer:** *The inescapable you.*

No matter how we may fight it, interpretation is forced upon us. Modern composers often go to incredible lengths to notate exactly what they want. Yet Stravinsky was simply admitting the obvious when he wrote in *The Poetics of Music* :

*But no matter how scrupulously a piece of music may be notated, no matter how carefully it may be insured against every possible ambiguity through the indications of tempo, shading, phrasing, accentuation, and so on, it always contains hidden elements that defy definition because verbal dialectic is powerless to define musical dialectic in its totality. The realization of these elements is thus a matter of experience and intuition, in a word, of the talent of the person who is called upon to present the music.<sup>1</sup> (underlining mine)*

Even for Stravinsky, “intuition” and “talent” were central to the creative process. But the modern conductor, reacting against the abuses of romanticism, is often uncomfortable with these non-cognitive areas, turning instead to authenticity of text and context for validation. Leaving us, as Taruskin has said, with: “a sort of pre-Renaissance abjectness of spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, “abjectness of spirit” is also a personality trait, but is it really the one we want? Ironically, even those “purely objective” conductors who seem to be attempting to smother all traces of their own personality, are, of course, engaging in an act of strong personality. Hogwood is present in his music-making no less so than is Mahler.

And not only is our own personality present, but also the personality of

our day. We are all, inescapably, products of our age, and just as the Romantics played with an abundance of feeling and individualism, the modern performer tends to be rule-governed and careful. The early music movement's call for contextual musical performance has resulted in many good things, but the congruence between authentic performance practice and modern legalism represents the dark side of the movement.

Perhaps the most outspoken critic of this "dark side" is Richard Taruskin, whose contribution to the Journal of Early Music's 1984 Symposium on Authenticity was titled: "The Authenticity movement can become a positivistic purgatory, literalistic and dehumanizing."

Sadly, literalism and legalism are on the ascendancy in many western cultures. Philip Howard's brilliant indictment of modern legalism, *The Death of Common Sense*, offers countless examples of situations in which complicated rules, designed to protect process, actually end up working against the larger goals the rules were supposed to serve.

I sometimes wonder if the musical community is not headed down that same path. When the "self" is removed from self-expression, when our interpretations become simply the observance of performance practice "shalt-nots," our performances must soon degenerate into mere imitation. And imitation is, at one level, the very opposite of authenticity.

The early music movement began by challenging assumptions, but it is beginning to show signs of institutionalization. We need to continue to ask questions, and to seek new solutions. Joseph Kerman, in *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology*, sums up everything I have been trying to say in one sentence: "Authenticity should not be valued in itself, only in the service of the ever-better interpretation of music."<sup>2</sup> An "ever-better interpretation" implies life and growth. It implies participation and investment. Perhaps it would be better to talk of recreation rather than reconstruction of music. And this recreation, this "ever-better interpretation," will be achieved by carefully balancing not just two, but four authenticities:

- 1) The Authenticity of Text,
- 2) The Authenticity of Historical Context
- 3) The Authenticity of the Performer and
- 4) The Authenticity of the Audience.

*We should care.*

How much harm did Milton Babbitt do the classical performing arts community with his “who cares if you listen”<sup>1</sup> dismissal of the modern audience. No wonder many mistrust classical music and, for the most part, ignore it. Although it is well known that only an unbelievably small percentage of the general public attends classical concerts, how often do we, as conductors, give the audience the attention they deserve?

Peter Kivy, in his recent book *Authenticities* , offers a hypothetical example of 20th century John and 17th century Johann each listening to the grand, opening chorus of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*:

*Johann listens to the opening chorus and hears a monumental, overwhelming musical sound. John hears a rather subdued, almost chamber music-like musical fabric. Johann hears a brand-new contemporary work, with various daring harmonies and innovations that he finds difficult (he wistfully longs for good old familiar Kuhnau). John, on the other hand, hears a somewhat “archaic” but nevertheless comfortable work. But at one place Johann and John do both hear a rather daring, startling harmonic progression. However, John also hears that gesture as rather romantic, somewhat Schubertian, as a matter of fact; and, of course, Johann hears no such thing...<sup>2</sup>*

John’s musical experience will always be different than Johann’s because John cannot help but listen historically. Now I think we can all agree that this opening chorus of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, written with the maximum performing forces available to him, was intended to sound grand and impressive. However, in modern times, the size of performing ensembles has increased dramatically, as has the general noise level. Add to this, the increased size of the modern performing hall, and an early music performance employing Bach’s thirty-four performers (including soloists, chorus, and orchestra) cannot possibly sound grand and impressive to twentieth century ears. What then, would be Bach’s intentions today? A reconstruction of what his music sounded like to his contemporaries, or a performance that creates his intended musical effect?

I believe that Bach would opt for musical effect, but consider for a moment the logical ramifications of accepting the reconstructionist view. If our goal is

authentic reconstruction, we shouldn't do things like bow the string parts, use modern fingerings that are better in tune, or rehearse very much. And why stop at recreating just the musical sounds? The reconstructionist attitude leads inevitably to attempted recreations of the entire performance experience, the visuals as well as the aural. If the St. Matthew Passion was performed in a church, is it authentic to perform it in the concert hall? And wouldn't the audience's experience be different if the performers played by candlelight? in wigs, with frock coats and buckled shoes? Does this make any sense? Nobody is demanding performances of Shakespeare with only men and boys. Why is reconstruction so important to the musical world?

But perhaps the most important question is not: how can we more accurately recreate the composer's intentions, but, as Howard Mayer Brown puts it: "should we play music in the way the composer intended?"<sup>3</sup> Why is it worth reconstructing historical conditions, when old music is heard by modern listeners? If it's true that what anyone really wants or intends can only be understood relative to the available choices, and if intentions are contextual, shouldn't we really be asking ourselves what would be the composer's performing intentions today? Do we really believe that Bach would compose in exactly the same way for a modern audience? Yes, we have an historical responsibility to understand the composer's context, but we also have a responsibility to our own historical context. Some thirty years ago Donald Grout went to the very core of the issue when he wrote:

*Could a composer by some miracle be brought to life in the twentieth century to be quizzed about methods of performance practice in his own times, his first reaction would certainly be one of astonishment at our interest in such matters. Have we no living tradition of music, that we must be seeking to revive a dead one?*

The question may be an embarrassing one. Musical archaism may be a symptom of disintegrating civilization. <sup>4</sup>

So where does this leave us? Where do we begin? We must begin, as Richard Tauskin writes:

*...with the music, with one's love for it, with endless study of it, and with the determination to challenge one's every assumption about it, especially*

*the assumptions we do not know we are making because, to quote Whitehead, 'no other way of putting things has ever occurred to us.'*<sup>1</sup>

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In looking at these four authenticities side by side, we see that the proportions of objective and subjective elements are evenly split, one half objective, to one half subjective. If I have seemed to unduly stress the intuitive half, it is only in the light of the present bias against the subjective in music. A healthy combination of all four should be our goal. To return one final time to Taruskin:

*Let us accept from the scholar in us only that which genuinely excites the performer in us, if for no other reason than because both the attractive and the unattractive findings are equally likely to be wrong. Above all, let us not be afraid, as Rose Rosengard Subotnik recently put it with respect to criticism, to "acknowledge our own presence" in our work and to accept it, if for no other reason than because it is in the final analysis inescapable....<sup>3</sup>*

The question is no longer "How did the music sound to Brahms?" or even "What did the music mean to Brahms?" Preoccupation with these questions can only lead to an obsession with trivialities (strings, pitch...) The important questions are "what does this music mean to us?" and, even more important, "What can it mean to us?"<sup>4</sup>

(20 Ibid., pp. 65-66).

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