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Bridging Pastness and Presentness in the Teaching of Music History to Performers

One of the paradoxes of performing so-called canonical music of earlier historical periods is the apparent contradiction between pastness and presentness: a Beethoven symphony, for example, belongs to a bygone culture, yet also constitutes a significant element of today's living culture. In this presentation I shall argue that the teaching of both history and performance has tended to focus disproportionately on one or the other aspect, thereby enforcing a notion of the irrelevance of the two areas to one another, and that an important way for history classes to become fresher and more vital to performance majors is through an effort to intertwine pastness and presentness.

Music's mysterious power to transcend conventional boundaries of time was noted by Carl Dahlhaus, who remarked in his *Foundations of Music History* that "the aesthetic presence of individual works will necessarily intervene in any account of the past." In fact, the notion of such an intervention represents an important argument in the general philosophy of history, as Dahlhaus himself recognized when he cited Johann Gustav Droysen's *Historik* as follows: "That which was does not attract our interest simply because it was, but rather because, in a certain sense, it still is, in that it still exercises an influence." Nevertheless, Dahlhaus clearly believed that the arts as a whole and music in particular possessed a special ability to evoke a sense of the present out of

materials of the past, because of their aesthetic dimension. As a result, he made a fundamental distinction between music history and political history: the former “differs from its political counterpart in that the essential relics that it investigates from the past – the musical works – are primarily aesthetic objects and as such also represent an element of the present; only secondarily do they cast light on the events and circumstances of the past.”

Though these remarks by Dahlhaus form part of a discourse on the principles of scholarly investigation in the discipline of music history, they nevertheless illuminate both a crucial aspect of the experience of performing music and the challenge of making the study of history relevant to this experience. For performers of sonatas by Beethoven, Lieder by Schubert, or symphonies by Mahler, for example, the music is of a vividly and intensely present nature. There is relatively little sense of engaging with antique objects, belonging to cultures of several centuries ago. Furthermore, musicians share the immersion in presentness and the disconnection from pastness with their audiences, if they succeed in captivating these audiences. As a result of this powerful experience of the “now,” music’s history can seem pale and lifeless by comparison, almost a denial of the power of transcending time and thus a snub to the notion, admittedly clichéd, that great music is “for all time.” While musicology’s increasingly critical orientation in recent decades has, rightly in my view, cast a large dose of healthy skepticism upon this cliché, it still remains important to consider the degree to which such a belief might be deeply meaningful to performers. I would like to suggest that they in fact ask a legitimate question when they wonder, “why should pastness matter to me?” and that the teaching of music history threatens to alienate them if it doesn’t confront this question

forthrightly. The legitimacy of the question arises from the nature of the performing experience, and so it would be unhelpful to dismiss as anti-intellectual those who doubt the necessity of historical study.

Thus I return to Dahlhaus' insight that the present inevitably intervenes in our relationship with the past. One certainly may disagree with the particular outcome of his line of argumentation, namely, that the fundamental aim of music history is to study outstanding works, for such a notion suggests not only an intervention but also a hegemony of the present, thereby replacing one unbalanced viewpoint with another. Nevertheless, his discussion persuasively identified the complexity of the interaction between "now" and "then" as a vital concern in musical practice and scholarship. This interaction serves as my point of departure for the following thoughts on fostering a closer integration of history and performance.

The dialogue of past and present is of course the central issue of the branch of hermeneutics concerned with historical interpretation. Here I shall focus on the practical pedagogical applications of the hermeneutical bridging of cultures of different times and places. Specifically, I would like to argue that the teaching of music history should actively encourage students to articulate links, whether of similarity or of contrast, between the materials of history and their own personal backgrounds. A fundamental aspect of this approach is the avoidance of any sense that music can narrowly be conceived either as "ours," that is, of the present, or as "theirs," that is, of the past. In other words, the two categories should not exist in a rigid opposition. It is important for music history teachers to promote a dialogue of "ours" and "theirs," and to take care not to reject, even implicitly, the one in favor of the other, if they wish to achieve the goal of

reaching out that defines the title of this panel. The assumption that one can restore the past in a state of purity, free of any purported “taint” of the present, constitutes the fallacy of authenticity that scholarly critical discourse has already discredited, but that may still make its way into the classroom in the form of an attempted objective presentation of music’s past. In place such a non-dialogic approach, one that regards the particular backgrounds, preoccupations, and even biases of students as a valuable pedagogical resource can better promote a meaningful interaction of history and performance. At the least, it would avoid the problem of exemplifying the very non-interaction for which we might be inclined to criticize performers.

In order to illustrate the points I have just made, I would like to offer a series of comments from student papers written for a course on Mozart which I taught at National Taiwan University in the spring of this year. I should first clarify that this was not a course intended specifically for performers, but rather one open to all undergraduates at my institution. Nevertheless, the group of enrolled students did eventually include pianists, orchestral musicians, and conductors, and I hope that the material presented here will be useful for history classes designed strictly for performance majors. Above all, the teaching of a course on a European composer at an Asian university especially highlights the hermeneutical challenge of bridging different perspectives, because of the pronounced disparity not only of historical period but also of place and culture.

The first of the comments concerns the controversial matter of Leopold Mozart’s possible exploitation of his son’s talents in order to acquire prestige and wealth. It is a response to a reading of the early chapters of Maynard Solomon’s biography, but in contrast to Solomon’s Freudian perspective, which interprets Leopold’s motives in a

highly negative light, the student's Asian background leads her to offer a different outlook on the matter:

Would it be possible for us to see Leopold as simply a realistic person who understood how much money matters? Perhaps in this way, we can believe that Leopold wanted his children to be well educated in music whether or not they could bring money as prodigies ... Although Maynard Solomon argues that Mozart learned most of his skill through his own will and methods, in the eyes of a traditional Chinese Taoist, Leopold may be seen as an important and successful educator because he neither restrained nor compelled his son's learning, instead, he just let Mozart progress naturally, kept a close eye on him, and provided help when it was needed.

In these remarks, the student draws upon her own culturally conditioned understanding of a parent's role in fostering a gifted child's development to suggest, but not insist upon, a viewpoint which is personally meaningful to her.

The second of the set of comments compares Mozart's entrepreneurial activities during his early Viennese years to the creative and unconventional methods by which indie musicians of today promote their careers. By means of this comparison, the student is able to make more sense of the unfamiliar world of musical commerce in late eighteenth-century Vienna.

Mozart turned away from operas and tried to make more money by composing piano concertos which were popular amongst the Viennese and in which he was able to take the necessary production steps using his own resources. I do not know how new this was in Mozart's day. I would say that it is rather interesting, especially in light of the situation we now see in the music industry these days, where some musicians are trying to find alternative ways to distribute their music to their listeners.

The third comment presents the most concrete possibility of directly affecting a performance of actual music, specifically, that of Zerlina and Fiordiligi in *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte* respectively. Although it may seem to reflect only an individual's response to music of an earlier time, rather than a dialogue of two cultures, in fact the issue of gender equity has become an urgent concern only relatively recently within a traditional Asian society such as Taiwan's. Thus, the sympathy towards Zerlina and Fiordiligi expressed by this student has a wider cultural resonance, and the kind of performance that would be shaped by her viewpoint would certainly constitute a broad social message.

I believe it is true that Mozart mourned and regretted the fact that he didn't at least reconcile with his father when he still had the chance. That might explain why a lot of the characters in Mozart's operas seem to be dealing with the theme of forgiveness. The behavior of both Zerlina and Fiordiligi would be frowned upon if it was simply described in one sentence, like 'the girls abandoned their fiancés.' But when we watch the operas more carefully and with some heart, we might understand the situations they were in and try to imagine that it was not a simple frame of mind for them. The conditions and surroundings are sometimes complicated and human feelings are subtle and sophisticated as well. The changes and decisions they went through can't therefore be judged simply. The same was true of Mozart.

The fourth and final comment is one that I include as a wonderful example of the critical self-awareness that can be cultivated by a sensitivity towards multiple cultural perspectives and their potentially fruitful interactions. Here, the student demonstrates a fine capacity for transcending a simplistic notion of history as objective retelling of the past and for appreciating the power and significance of mythmaking within human culture.

At first, I tend to be the kind of person who just wants to know the truth, and to restore past events with all the correct information, because this seems 'right'! But now, I realize that as important as it is to try to find out the truth, it is also meaningful to look at all the stories, myths, various interpretations, etc., and to try to understand why they exist and what is the notion or emotion contained behind them. By doing so, I believe we can accomplish something greater than correcting historical data; I think that through this we can actually understand the nature of human beings better and even reflect upon ourselves. It is amazing to see how human emotions work in our mind to form certain notions, and how these notions in turn determine what rituals and customs we will have.

I now offer a few concluding thoughts. Since the study of history is not the passive reception of the past but the active re-creation of this past in a way that conveys meaning for the present, the teaching of music history to performers should encourage them to recognize the degree to which they engage in such re-creation every time they play music of earlier times, and to appreciate the potential for enriching their activities that lies in a deepened involvement with history. Whether the issue under consideration is the sound of early instruments, the older meanings of tempo indications such as *andante*, the conditions of musical patronage by Church and State, or the status of the genders during the Enlightenment, the historical study of music can foster in performers a consciousness of their own distinctiveness within the present, in which they are simultaneously linked to and separated from the past. This dialectic of "ours" and "theirs" may in turn lead them to a better understanding of their passion for perpetuating the past in the present, as well as to a greater respect for the meeting of diverse cultures that is inevitably a crucial facet of the performance of music of bygone times.