

Creative Collaboration

The Bach Violin Project embodies collaborative practice between recording engineer and violinist, further to the conventional artist-producer relationship. The nature of this creative collaboration is interesting: not necessarily unique, but, probably, unusual at least. It has implications for the 'ownership' of the project, how discourse happens, and – through an organic unfolding of ideas – how creative energy can emanate. This has been part of the excitement of the project for me, quite apart from the 'milestone' element of bringing these iconic, canonic works of violin literature to the performance platform.

Challenging My Own 'Norms'

Most of my discussions of music, music performance, and the circumstances in which musical performance is conducted sit within a relatively specific, normal, set of social and industry parameters. I discuss classical music with classical musicians. I am, in many ways, woefully ignorant when it comes to music generically tagged with the epithet 'popular'. I was brought up in a moderately musical, middle-class, petit-bourgeois family. So-called 'high culture' was the only diet, and if you ask me what the 'sound track' was of my adolescent years, I'd refer not to bands of the time, but to violin music taped with dubious legality from Radio 3! This means that my discourses on music inhabit a closed world. This world, too, is elitist, and esoterically terminological. My interest in HIP, from undergraduate days, might be seen as a further extension of this – underpinning my world view of music not only by appeal to academy-constructed norms of my own times, but also in the belief that scholarly activity can deepen this process – further study, further specificity and research-driven ways of circumscribing 'the artwork'. Musicians in such a context often talk a highly-technical and exclusive language. If they are historical performance scholars as well, musical decisions are often made by the quoting of chapter and verse of historical evidence, rather similar perhaps to the discussions of traditional theologians!

But what happens when classical musicians encounter terminology and discourse more akin to pop music? Is this just different language, or is there something else going on? It seems to me that there is something here more immediately linked the fundamental expressivity of music. I still know very little about the repertory of pop music, but meeting James and discussing aspects of musical performance and thought with him has brought a whole new realm of artistic freedom and vocabulary to the fore. My own neuroses as a performer often hinge upon not only my own prowess as a player (and Bach's music is difficult – for me, at least!), but also upon doing things 'right' – that is, tapping into a culturally-specific set of responses to the legacy of being brought up in a positivist, text-based understanding of classical music. James has encouraged me to think more of the 'effects' of the music –

its emotional import, and its communicative intensity. All musicians think about such things, but I have been challenged by a collaborative partner who sees music in a broader way than I do; one who is visibly excited when my performance is 'rock and roll'. This, in the best way, forces me to reappraise the fundamental purpose of my musical communications, and is tremendously exciting!

I might also add, far beyond discussions of instruments and performing practices, that this seems to connect with past understandings of music far more perhaps than many conspicuously-learned modern intentions. Much has been made of 'modernism' – not only in early twentieth-century composition, but also in terms of performance aesthetics. Much, too, has been made of what Bruce Haynes (*The End of Early Music*, OUP, Oxford, 2007) describes as the 'icing up' of repertory by the mid nineteenth century. This is a matter told vividly by Dorottya Fabian in her study of Joachim, Sarasate and Ysaÿe against the backdrop of George Bernard Shaw's music criticism of the 1890s; she also makes the observation that earlier nineteenth-century reviews focus on the (new) music, whilst later nineteenth-century reviews focus more on the playing of already-canonized compositions (see 'The Recordings of Joachim, Ysaÿe and Sarasate. In Light of Their Reception by Nineteenth-Century British Critics', in *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol 37, 2006, pp. 189-210). As many have observed, the Historical Performance project – maybe unwittingly – further taps into an attempt to turn 'music as experience' into 'music as text'. Thus the consequences for our understanding – fundamentally – of what compositions are actually for remain deep-seated and profound. These consequences, too, seem to go deep into our cultural psyche – beyond the attempts of 'new musicologies' especially as regards performance – to distance themselves from this 'Werktreue' attitude.

In his volume *On Playing the Flute* (Berlin, 1752; trans. E. Reilly, London, Faber, 1966), Johann Joachim Quantz gives a fundamentally-prosaic definition of the musician: 'Whoever has a healthy body, with well-disposed and healthy limbs, and yet is not stupid or of unsound mind can, with much industry, learn what is called the mechanics of music.' (p.14). The fundamental, emotive purpose of musicianship, however, is never far below the surface; hence '...those who wish to maintain their superiority over the machine, and wish to touch people, must play each piece with its proper fire.' (p. 131). Leopold Mozart (*A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*, 1756, trans. Edith Knocker, OUP, Oxford, 1948) invokes similar unwitting testimony to a fundamentally emotive understanding of the purpose of the musical act to 'stir the soul'. In a famous passage, the ideal is proposed of the performer 'moving' the audience, which, rather than being an amorphous and conceptual construct, is a tangible, relatable entity:

'To ingratiate yourself with your listeners, it is most advantageous to know their humours. A choleric person may be satisfied with majestic and serious pieces; one inclined to melancholy with thoughtful, chromatic pieces, and those set in minor keys; and a gay, wide-awake person with gay and jocular pieces. A musician must pay as much attention to this matter as he can; if he does not, he will never fully achieve his goal with listeners such as these.' (p. 201)

Of course, as Nikolaus Harnoncourt has suggested, 'baroque' music (as opposed to texts that may well be a source of useful information for Bach performing practice but are, nonetheless, significantly later) inhabited a time when such music was then, as now, 'high art' – requiring an intellectual as well as emotional understanding. (Though perhaps Harnoncourt's equation of 'non-esoteric' music with the French Revolution may be a rhetorical step too far!) See Harnoncourt: *Baroque Music Today – Music as Speech* (Amadeus Press, Oregon, 1982, especially chapter 1). Nonetheless, seeking a contemporary expression of the subjective impulses created by Bach's music – as well as earnest debates as to how to do it 'properly' (I call to mind the many years rift between a British city's cathedral and university music department over the issue of Bach organ phrasing) – is surely necessary to appreciate the full implications of these extraordinary compositions.

In this sense, our collaboration – challenging me to parse performance in different terms, and gaining, as I already have, the praise of a number of musicians outside of the classical music academy – gives energy to the project in a way that is highly stimulating.

Research-driven Performance / Performance-based Research?

Is this research-driven performance? I'm not sure I know what performance is that does not embody research. What I can say is that the project provides a number of contrasting musical, musicological, historical, and cultural 'filters' on this set of works, and that it seeks to pursue as much artistic integrity as it can in the environment of philosophical open-mindedness. Our collaboration opens up new possibilities for me as a performing artist, as I am frequently surprised by what can be achieved on record that cannot be done in the concert hall, and as James and I respond to each other's creative impulses.

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