

ADDING NOTES

A Call for Interpretive Freedom

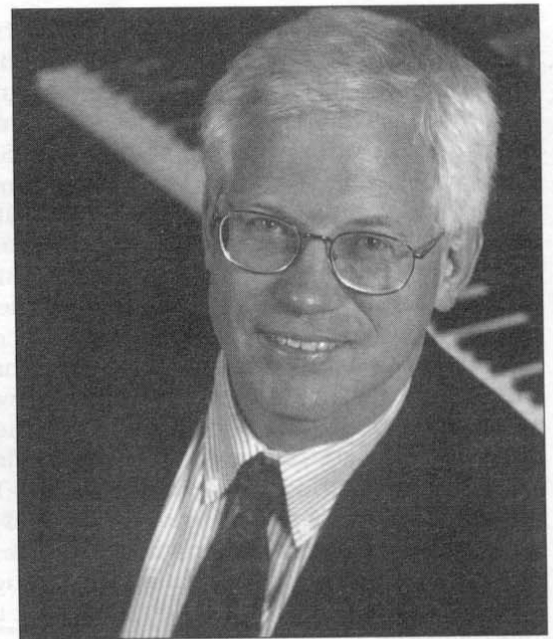
Part I

BY JOHN SALMON

Several battle cries for interpretive freedom have converged in my mind recently. Pianist John Perry, speaking to an audience at a recent Music Teachers National Association convention in Los Angeles, exhorted pianists to view the Urtext as only the beginning of the interpretive process; without creativity, Perry argued, no score, however “definitive,” will ever come to life in performance. Robert Weirich, speaking to the same group in Los Angeles, urged us to consider “the spirit of improvisation” that caused such works as Beethoven’s “Rage Over the Lost Penny” and Mozart’s Adagio in B Minor, K. 540, to come to life, even accepting (if not demonstrating at that moment) the esthetic legitimacy of spontaneous note-changing. William Westney, in the August/September 1999 issue of *American Music Teacher*, warned against the perils of perfectionism, stressing beauty as the true goal of practice and performance. Robert Levin, at a 92nd Street Y gathering, defended ornamentation in Schubert.

I am excited by these proclamations, all of which point to the primacy of the performer and the thin line between “creation” and “recreation.” In an age that places emphasis on musicologically refined editions of masterworks, each purporting to take us a step closer to the composer’s “true” intentions, I revel in the freedom hinted at by the aforementioned distinguished colleagues. Of course, these and most pedagogues would never dispute the necessity of obtaining reliable versions of the printed score as the starting point of a compelling performance. “Necessary but not sufficient” is the phrase best applied to the musical text’s role in the performer’s life.

I agree wholeheartedly with the notion of comparing the best—by which I mean the most exhaustively researched, most amply explained—editions of masterworks. I would never play a Mozart piano concerto anymore without first having consulted the Neue Mozart Ausgabe, as well as an Eulenburg pocket score and maybe even a Peters edition for two pianos. But, having done this, am I assured of giving an enchanting perfor-



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mance, full of sparkle, life, wit, drama, and color? It is daunting for me to consider that Lili Kraus, Edwin Fischer, and, in fact, most of the pianists who have ever performed, gave wonderful performances of Mozart without the benefit of modern scholarship.

Of course Lili Kraus and Edwin Fischer were not ignorant of style either. Both knew of Türk’s *Klavierschule* (1789), Leopold Mozart’s *Violinschule* (1756), and C.P.E. Bach’s *Versuch...* (1753-1762). Both knew the musical traditions of the eighteenth-century Viennese classicists. But, above all, both were pianists who knew how to breathe life into a score, with not a whiff of academic rigidity. I remember performances of Lili Kraus, whom I heard many times in my native Fort Worth, that were, like Madame Kraus herself, dramatic, rhetorical, hyperbolic... freshly invented. She didn’t use terms like “authenticity” or “performance practice,” nor was she particularly preoccupied with one Urtext over another. Rather, each piece was a little opera, with full-blooded characters, emotive conflicts, and special effects. I can still hear her playing through a Mozart concerto at a master class, narrating her imagined story, Hungarian accent intact, all r’s rolled lavishly. “Hee-rre he is so sad ... all is gloom. But, wait ... a rray of sunshine promises new life!”

This flair for the dramatic made her performances come alive. At her best, Lili transformed an Urtext into a life-changing proclamation, utterly shattering in its immediacy and vibrancy. This is surely what John Perry meant in his challenge to transcend the Urtext. I find it highly ironic that Malcolm Bilson, whose performances also pulsate with wit and color, should have ever been accused of being academic, just because he sought to revitalize the “Mozartian message” through an examination of Mozart’s notation and his conclusion that period fortepianos are perfectly suited to express Mozart’s musical language. Academic is the last thing I think of when I hear Mr. Bilson’s magnificent recordings of Mozart piano concertos.

Nowadays, as both teacher and performer, I remember

these important role models even as I take spontaneity a step further: I have no trouble adding notes to masterpieces! It is inconceivable to me that, as one example, Scarlatti would have performed the numerous repeated passages in his sonatas the same each time. In addition to changes in dynamics and articulation, I see nothing wrong with making a virtuosic passage of Scarlatti even more brilliant, especially on the last repetition.

EXAMPLE 1: Scarlatti G Major Sonata,
L. 335, K. 55, measures 121-22.

original



possible variant



Scarlatti must have been a fabulous player, improvising wildly in El Escorial with the same abandon and imagination as stride master James P. Johnson cutting loose at Harlem “rent parties” of the 1920s. I make this analogy not lightly, for it seems to me that most great keyboardists throughout the ages have also been masterful improvisers.

Speaking of... we know that J. S. Bach published a triplet version of the first invention. Can you imagine that he never played it any other way? Is it so wrong to think that, in a third performance (assuming Bach ever played his own compositions more than twice!), Bach might have played something like this:

EXAMPLE 2: J. S. Bach C Major Invention, measure 1

original



possible variant



While I'm on the topic of Bach, why are we fixated on only the published versions of ornamentation, as if adding a trill here or taking out a mordent there were sacrilege? It is nothing of the sort! Far more perverse, in my opinion, is to practice one—and only one—way of ornamenting.

I heard an excellent Baroque ensemble a few months ago rehearsing a trio sonata of Handel. They practiced

the same spot three times, in which the group paused on a cadential *six-four chord* and the oboist, poised to solo, played the same descending chromatic scale each time (and no doubt the same way in the performance that night, which I unfortunately could not hear) beautifully, soulfully, with perfect breath control through the final trill. But what struck me as odd in this otherwise marvelous performance was that he played the same way each time. Surely an eighteenth-century counterpart would have improvised as the mood struck him. (Or will you who know players of the oboe d'amore proffer that the damn thing is so hard to play one is lucky to get a sound out of it at all, let alone improvise?)

Improvising “Eingänge” and “Durchgänge” (transitional figures) in Mozart seems less controversial nowadays, though I still don't know why I hear so little of it. Occasions abound in the sonatas and concertos for added flourishes, so I am baffled by all the monochromatic repetitions of rondo refrains I hear in juries and on record. Surely Mozart, in the Rondo in D, K. 485, could have played one version of the theme as suggested below:

EXAMPLE 3: Mozart Rondo in D Major,
K. 485, measures 95-96

original



possible variant



I believe the same freedom can be extended to most of Haydn's works, incidentally, a topic Gretchen Wheelock addressed at the 1998 Focus on Piano Literature symposium at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

“But what about Beethoven?” you collectively heave. “Remember that slap on the wrist Beethoven gave to Czerny when the young student dared to add notes of his own?” This one incident (relayed to us via a letter Beethoven wrote to Czerny on February 12, 1816: “You must forgive a composer who would rather have heard his work performed exactly as written, however beautifully you played it in other respects...”) has surely been blown out of proportion by succeeding generations of piano teachers wishing to impart discipline and a high regard for textual fidelity to their students. I believe Beethoven was reacting to Czerny's heavy-handed, unimaginative emendations more than to the very idea of notational tampering. After all, Beethoven first made his reputation in Vienna as an improviser. I am inclined—no,

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predestined!—to scandalize some colleagues the next time one of my students performs the *Appassionata Sonata* and changes some of the figuration in the repetitions of the middle movement. At the very least, noticeable changes of mood, dynamics, and/or articulation must attend every repeat! Why else should we repeat? Don't talk to me about "organic form development," a term German musicologists invented mainly to prove Beethoven's superiority over Schubert (Beethoven had it, Schubert didn't, so the argument goes). I find no merit in repeating, with exactly the same expression, just so the form can "develop organically." And while I'm on the topic of Schubert, go, Robert Levin!! Surely Schubert's music can be ornamented, filled out, dressed up, as the occasion warrants, according to the talent and whim—yes, whim!!—of the interpreter.

It goes without saying that it is possible to ornament music badly, that one can all too easily deny Mozart's twin dicta of *Geschmack* and *Empfindung*. It is obvious when we hear someone play with *taste* and *feeling*. Nat "King" Cole (1917-1965) comes quickly to mind. Daniel Steibelt (1765-1823), and far too many among the living, on the other hand, are examples of what Mozart hated. Lacking taste and feeling, a performer could never animate a score to Mozart's satisfaction, no matter how dazzling his technique or showmanship. Clearly, mere drama and liveliness will not make us great interpreters (though my invitation to my wife, Mari Pino, to play tambourine during my concerts, as Mrs. Steibelt did, still holds).

In this essay, I will not list chronologically every great composer, demonstrating where I'd change or add notes (since I could probably come up with a list longer than the Bible). But I would like to include remarks on two composers whose works we never hear ornamented: Chopin and Ravel. I remember learning Chopin's B Major Nocturne, Op. 9 No. 3 long ago. Believing in the sanctity of absolute textual faithfulness, I tried hard to remember the subtle differences among the piece's five statements of the main theme. I ended up photocopying those statements and taping them alongside each other on one page, so I could more clearly see the divergences and come up with mnemonic means of memorizing them. ("This one is straight and direct. This one slithers down chromatically in quintuplets." And so on.) I do not remember if my final performances of that work corre-

sponded note for note with the printed score, or, even more sadly, if my playing conveyed the improvisatory delight Chopin must have had when he first penned those variants. But I do know now that, were I to play that piece today, I would come up with some of my own possible variants, worry more about playing beautifully and with imagination, and worry less about a perfect recitation of the published text.

Herbie Hancock's recorded version of the slow movement of Ravel's G Major Concerto (on the CD *Gershwin's World*) also comes close to hitting the nail on the head in his improvised fiorituras. It helps that Hancock's voicings from the world of post-bop coincide with Ravel's harmonic language. (I hope somebody will write an essay someday exploring the relations between twentieth-century French composers and post-1945 jazz musicians in America.) I don't know if Ravel would have approved of Herbie's flights of fancy, but, frankly, I don't care. While unorthodox, this performance is alive, authentic, immediate, and unique—all the things that make a musical interpretation worthwhile.

I am certainly not suggesting that we need to tamper with the notes of every work we encounter. The spirit of improvisation, necessary in every great performance, can take many forms. But I believe it is time to loosen the strictures of perfectionism (a euphemism for literalism, after all) that have gradually eviscerated the interpreter's art in this age of "note-perfect" recordings and competitions, and to reemphasize the beautiful, the imaginative. ■

Part II of this article will focus on creating variants in the repeat sections of Bach's Partita in B Flat.

This article is adapted from one that first appeared on the internet magazine Piano Pedagogy Forum, Vol. 3 No. 1, Jan. 2000 (www.music.sc.edu/departments/piano/ppf/). Pianist John Salmon, on the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro since 1989, plays both classical music and jazz and regularly inflicts the kind of heresy found in this article on his students. He often "adds" notes in his piano concerto performances (almost as creatively, he says, as he "drops" them). As a particular advocate of the concert music of Dave Brubeck, he has recorded the compact disc John Salmon Plays Brubeck Piano Compositions (Phoenix PHCD 130).