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Ensemble Skills: Stylistic Integrity

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We do not play Mozart the way we play Brahms, and we do not play Brahms as we do Bartok. The range of tempi, dynamics, colors and expression generally increases with each musical era. But without resorting to strict historical performance practice, how do we make the correct interpretive distinctions? Several related questions arise.

- Why not turn to strict historical performance practice? After all, wouldn't that bring us closest to the composer's original intent? In fact there are performers who do just that, applying all the information they can glean from the historical record, and vigilantly excluding all influence from later periods. They are in the minority, as the rest of us do not wish to make the adjustments to our instruments, bows, strings, pitch, and technique that would be required. Many argue that even with all those regressions, we the players are not those of old, nor are our audiences, which makes those adjustments seem quaint, like a visit to a colonial-period theme park. As examples: the lower-tension strings and transitional bows of Mozart's day mean that the off-the-string articulations we use so often would not have been available. But how can we know they might not have been welcomed? Reading the letters describing all the broken strings on Beethoven's fortepiano [the result of his efforts to make more sound] it is easy to imagine the exhilaration he would have experienced had he been presented with a modern Steinway. Yet in neither of these suppositions can we be certain.

- Should we run to the other end of the interpretive spectrum? Part of the definition of a masterwork is that it can be played more than one way and still retain its musical value. So the question is; what boundaries? 90% of today's performances of Mozart's chamber works with clarinet are heard on modern clarinets, and basset-clarinets are scarce. Weber's Quartet Op. 28 sounds amazing on a quartet of saxophones, and who is to say a synthesizer might not come closer to the composer's sound-image? Stokowski's orchestrations of Bach made many musicians squirm, but more people were listening to Bach's music because of them. Emerson, Lake and Palmer brought a version of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition to rock audiences with great success, while Jimi Hendrix's Purple Haze entered many quartets' repertoires



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after the Kronos Quartet recorded it. So, if all it means is blurring or erasing the lines between existing musical genres, why not?

- And what of tradition? Schuppanzigh's quartet was the mostly closely associated with Beethoven, who attended many of their rehearsals, offering criticism, tempi, suggestions and sometimes wrath. The group left no recordings, of course, nor did they make an edition of the works they learned and played. But there is still a thread: for a time [after ejecting Schuppanzigh] Beethoven preferred Joseph Boehm as first violinist, and Boehm's pupils included Joseph Joachim, whose personality and commitment to the letter of the score dominated string quartet playing in Europe and England for decades. He disdained the cult of the virtuosi who allowed personality to overwhelm or ignore what composers wrote, so the purity and seriousness of his approach should, in theory, take us nearer to Beethoven. Aside from some acoustic recordings made so late in his career as to be unrepresentative, Joachim's legacy is to be found in his students, his editions, and contemporaneous descriptions of his playing. Letters and reviews generally agree that his sound, while not large, was noble, and his intonation exceptional. He made judicious use of expressive portamenti and almost none of vibrato, and was strict in indoctrinating his students along similar lines. Yet the giants of the next generation, Ysaye and Kreisler, used almost continuous vibrato. and while they spoke of Joachim's music-making with the utmost respect, they privately described his sound as cold and somewhat pale. Joachim's assistant Andreas Moser prepared editions of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven quartets which reproduced his bowings, fingerings and articulations. While less useful for the 18th-century works, the Beethoven quartets come as close as we have to a picture of how Beethoven's works were played in his day.

- How long ago was the music made? Players in Mozart's day, freed from the empty calories of the Style Galant must have enjoyed the greater expressivity and complexity of what was then modern music. It seems unlikely that they would have been concerned with the habits of the Late Baroque in making their interpretive choices - more likely that they simply played the way they played. Within a few decades, Beethoven called for much greater expression and technique, stretching those players, nearly all of whom would have lived and played in Mozart's day as well. Whether consciously or not, they would have played the new music differently. And after another half-century, Bartok's music expanded matters similarly, though now the performers' knowledge of what had come before was much greater. Yet in no case were great composers seeking novelty for its own sake, only requiring it in order to tell their stories, so to speak,



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while the players, aware of the changes in the language of music, retold the stories to the audiences of their time.

Viewed in one way, music begins and ends as an internal experience: first within the composer as inspiration; next, onto the page, in a terse and inexact coded communication to the performers; after that, as recreated according to their understanding and instincts, transformed by the players into sound for the listeners; and finally [and ideally], within each hearer as a reproduction of the composer's original experience. But today we are not attempting that reproduction in Beethoven's audiences - our aim is our live listeners, and just as they are not the public of Vienna in the 1800s, so our methods and our sensibilities must evolve to reflect the passage of the intervening years.

The search for meaningful distinctions in playing the music of one era or another is a large part of an ensemble's identity, and no less vital for being an esoteric pursuit. Like most of the players' progress, it evolves over time and constantly exposes both their understanding of music-making and their tastes. One perennially popular quartet made everything sound like Brahms [to my ear] but I know [because they told me] that they were working hard to make stylistic differences audible. Welcome to a life-long challenge.

QUESTIONS

Please create your own.