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Performing 19th-century chamber music: the yawning chasm between contemporary practice and historical evidence

The character of the period instrument performances on the recordings reviewed here (one is on modern instruments) can be considered from two entirely different points of view. They may, on the one hand, be viewed from the perspective of our contemporary aesthetics of performance: this takes as its yardstick the achievements of the finest present-day musicians, whose training and experience conditions them to respond in particular ways to the notation of Classical- and Romantic-era music. This is not quite so simple as it once was; the last 20 years or so have seen a particularly complex interaction between conventional 'modern' performing practices and the style created (rather than re-created) for the performance of old music by practitioners of period performance. Period performers play in a slightly modified version of conventional modern style that reduces the impact of vibrato, favours 'clean' playing, a generally steady tempo, strict rhythms, and in many respects prioritizes close observance of the *Urtext* score. The musical sensibilities of players of modern instruments have been progressively affected by this shift in taste, and groups formed since the 1980s by younger musicians, such as the Hagen Quartet, have incorporated many of the characteristics of so-called period performance into their style. The second way in which these recordings may be evaluated, which demands a completely different approach, is in terms of their success in capturing the style and sound of the 19th century. For a journal like *Early Music* it is appropriate to focus primarily on the ways in which the performances reflect, or fail to reflect, current knowledge of historical practices.

Before discussing particular recordings it is necessary to consider the state of period performance of Classical- and Romantic-era chamber music today. Although, during the last two decades, scholarly studies have focused increasingly on the performing practices of the 19th century, only a very limited amount of the information presented in scholarly books and articles has had a direct and significant impact on the world of professional performance. A few period instrument groups are seriously committed to understanding more about the ways in which their current manner of performing differs from that of the past, and some individual professional musicians have shown real intellectual curiosity and a willingness to experiment in private. Very few carry much of this experimentation forward into their public performances and recordings. I know of only one recent commercial recording, for instance, that has grappled seriously with the issue of string *portamento* in Romantic music, and this is the Orfeo Duo's recording of Schumann's Violin Sonatas on SGAE. I know of scarcely any that have come to grips with the question of using piano arpeggiation in the performance of late 18th- and 19th-century music where it is not notated in the score.

The reasons why professional musicians have failed to apply our very extensive and ever-increasing knowledge of Classical- and Romantic-era performing practices to their manner of playing are manifold. Some of these may be briefly enumerated:

- the education system in conservatoires prioritizes the established views and practices of successful recording artists, which were largely formed through the performance of earlier repertory in the established modern style of Baroque performance;
- professional musicians have little interest in going beyond a conventional manner of playing that has been accepted as normative by the listening public;
- professional musicians lack the time, or inclination, to read and absorb relevant scholarly research;
- performers are aware of the literature but, after experiencing difficulty in evaluating the findings of research about performance style that are conveyed primarily in words, prefer to stick to tried and tested ways of playing;
- performers take the view that where uncertainty exists it is better not to diverge too much from an established manner of playing;
- performers consciously decide to play in a style that feels comfortable to them and reflects current musical sensibilities, despite recognizing that this is in many respects very significantly different from the style of music-making with which earlier musicians would have been familiar;

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- established performers are disinclined to embark on a path that may necessitate radical changes of technique and style;
- performers expect or fear that audiences (and record producers) will react negatively to sounds and styles that are at odds with those to which listeners are accustomed.

One or more of these factors will undoubtedly have influenced all the string and keyboard players involved in these recordings: none of them can be said to achieve a convincingly appropriate style for the repertory they perform, and although they are skilful and musicianly performers within their own terms, most do not venture any distance beyond the narrow confines of an accepted modern style of so-called 'period performance'. It is disturbing to read in some of the accompanying booklets that the performers are considered to possess 'historically appropriate playing styles' and that the musicians in the ensemble 'have all acquired a good reputation in the field of historical performance practice'. Some booklets are more judicious, referring only to performance on period instruments and making no claims for historically informed styles. But with all these CDs, except the Trio Parnassus's engaging recording **Prince Franz Louis Ferdinand of Prussia: Piano trios vol.3** (MDG 303 1549–2, *rec* 2008, 72′) which is on modern instruments, there is undoubtedly an implication that those performers who specialize in playing on period instruments are presenting the public with a product that offers them performances that are closer to a style that the composers would have recognized.

It is clear that the vast majority of the instrumentalists represented on these discs have very little understanding of the (easily available) corpus of primary and secondary sources that can tell us so much about how 19th-century music was actually performed. More troubling is the extent to which the recordings suggest that these gifted and polished musicians have failed even to inform their understanding of the composer's notational practice by basic research, and that they are content wilfully to ignore the composer's explicit instructions. One yearns to read in the booklet that period instruments are employed solely because of their tonal characteristics and their ability to achieve a better balance between piano and strings than modern ones (though this is less of a problem in the recording studio than the concert hall); or that the players are not interested in performing the music in ways of which the composer might have approved; or that they simply prefer the completely unhistorical style of performance to which they are accustomed and think it is what their audience wants to hear. At least that would deflect the charge of disingenuousness, which must inevitably hang over something that purports to be what it is not. Perhaps, however, that would not help them to sell their discs, and they prefer to continue to allow the public to infer that in buying such period instrument recordings they are hearing the music performed in a manner that embodies the 'composer's intentions', to employ a catchphrase that is now so frequently and naively used in relation to performances and *Urtext* editions.

Having stated that the string players and pianists on these recordings all, more or less, fail to achieve even an approximation of the main features of 19th-century performing style that we *know* to have been employed by the musicians for whom this repertory was composed, it is incumbent on me to identify the major areas of discrepancy.

Starting on the most fundamental level, the first thing that strikes the informed listener is the thoroughly modern approach that is taken to rhythm, phrasing, rubato and tempo in most of the recordings. They exhibit a degree of strictness in the realization of note values and an approach to tempo that is wholly uncharacteristic of what we know about relevant 19th-century practices. Sometimes, elements of genuine historical practice are mixed with entirely modern ones, as in the Atlantis Trio's performances of **Mendelssohn: Chamber music** (Musica Omnia MO 0205, *rec* 2001/2, 61′). These reveal a few convincing examples of agogic accentuation (lingering on an important note and shortening another so that the basic pulse remains constant) and contain some, though not nearly enough, flexibility in the execution of pairs of notes with a 3:1 ratio (which should very often be over-dotted). There is also much easing off of tempo at phrase endings, combined with frequent short articulations (often within slurs) of a kind that find no support in 19th-century string treatises and that we very rarely hear on the earliest recordings by string players. There is also an almost total absence of the slight hurrying that is described by Carl Czerny and other 19th-century writers as being characteristic in crescendo phrases and which can indeed be heard in recordings by Joseph Joachim (b.1831), Carl Reinecke (b.1824) and other performers with their roots in the first half of the 19th century.

Much more adventurous are Maria Cleary and Davide Monti, who in **Spohr . . .allora chiudi gli occhi** (Stradivarius STR 33848, *rec* 2008, 74′) attempt genuine tempo rubato in their performances of Spohr's music for harp, with and without violin. The harp playing is flexible throughout and much more closely approximates the spirit of 19th-century style than any of the keyboard performances on these discs. This is especially true since the

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tradition of harp playing has preserved the arpeggiation practices that were consciously abandoned in piano playing during the early 20th century. Cleary and Monti undoubtedly took the trouble to consult Spohr's *Violinschule* as well as his autobiography. However, the violinist's failure to achieve the essentially legato character of Spohr's writing and the distinctive style of bowing described in the *Violinschule* leads him to break up phrases inappropriately, often in the middle of slurs, with articulations that create breaks in the sound. These are in direct conflict with the legato style of phrasing described by Spohr, which is so convincingly demonstrated in Marie Soldat's 1926 recording of the Adagio from Spohr's Ninth Violin Concerto, a piece she had undoubtedly studied with her early teacher August Pott, a pupil of Spohr in the 1820s. The lingering and hurrying in Monti's and Cleary's recordings is sometimes very convincing. Even though, on this occasion, the violinist has partially misinterpreted Spohr's instructions, the duo are certainly to be thanked for making a genuine attempt to experiment on the basis of the available evidence.

At the other end of this scale are the **Mendelssohn: Piano trios** (Avie AV 2187, *rec* 2009, 60′) from the Benvenue Fortepiano Trio, who, like Monti and the Atlantis Trio, frequently employ inappropriate articulation in the middle of legato phrases. In Mendelssohn's Piano Trio op.66, for example, violinist Monica Huggett often interrupts the legato slurs in the melodic passage beginning at bar 22 of the first movement; the slurred dotted crotchet–quaver figures are often broken up so that they become almost crotchet–quaver rest–quaver and the intended cantabile character is completely destroyed. Elsewhere in this movement Mendelssohn has clearly indicated articulation in similar figures, where he envisaged it, by supplying the quaver rest. There can be no doubt that when he wrote bowing slurs, or notes that were neither marked staccato nor separated by rests, he intended a seamless legato; in such cases articulation and the shaping of the phrase was expected to be achieved by accentuation and dynamic shading. This shortening of Mendelssohn's longer notes to interpolate an articulation by means of a rest is characteristic of the string playing in this recording. One must suspect that the tendency of period instrument performers to articulate in this manner, in direct contravention to the composer's notation, derives from their manner of performing earlier Baroque- and Classical-era repertory, where such practices represent an orthodoxy of modern 'period' style. Whether or not they are correct even in that repertory is questionable. This type of inapt articulation often results from string players failing to employ appropriate historically informed bowing techniques, but very few performers on period instruments have grasped this nettle as yet.

The Benvenue Trio also use extreme tempo fluctuation in direct contravention of the composer's known practice and forcibly expressed wishes. As George Grove related, Mendelssohn never varied the basic tempo of a movement once established, although he did not always take pieces at the same pace on different occasions. Hans von Bülow recalled that Mendelssohn never interpolated a ritardando or suffered it in anyone else, and both Charlotte Moscheles and William S. Rockstro reported Mendelssohn's sharp comment 'Es steht nicht da!' when students introduced unwritten rallentandos. He asserted that 'if it were intended it would be written in—they think it expression but it is sheer affectation.' The Benvenue Trio's adoption of a much slower tempo in the middle of the first movement of the op.66 Trio, for instance, would surely have enraged the composer. It may also be noted that both the Atlantis and Benvenue adopt significantly slower tempos than Mendelssohn's metronome marks in all the movements of both trios, and very markedly slower ones in some of them. As Clara Schumann recalled, Mendelssohn 'would sometimes take the tempi very quick, but never to the prejudice of the music'. It is therefore disappointing that neither trio seriously attempts to achieve these specified tempos. (Mendelssohn's tempos for the D minor Trio op.49 are dotted minim = 80, crotchet = 72, dotted crotchet = 120 and minim = 100: the Benvenue Trio take approximately 63, 63, 92 and 72, while the Atlantis Trio take 72, 63–6, 76–80 and 84. For the C minor Trio op.66 Mendelssohn gave minim = 92, dotted crotchet = 54, minim = 88 and dotted crotchet = 112: the Benvenue Trio take approximately 72, 46–8, 66 and 88.)

The recordings of the Zivian-Tomkins duo (**Beethoven: Cello sonatas**, Bridge 9305, *rec* 2008, 78′) and Manze-Egarr duo (**Schubert: Violin sonatas**, Harmonia Mundi HMU 907445, *rec* 2007, 79′), and of the Schuppanzigh Quartet (**Ferdinand Ries: String quartets vol.2**, CPO 777 227–2, *rec* 2005, 60′) and Pleyel Quartet (**Pleyel: String quartets**, CPO 777 315–2, *rec* 2007, 58′) reveal an equally unhistorical approach to these aspects of rhythm, phrasing and rubato. It is quite extraordinary how rarely any of these performers allow themselves to deviate perceptibly from the notated rhythms. They execute equal notes with great equality and dotted ones in strict 3:1 ratios, despite all the evidence that this would have been highly uncharacteristic of 19th-century performers. A typical example is Andrew Manze and Richard Egarr's interpretation of Schubert's Violin Sonata in A major D574, where the

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repeated dotted-crotchet–quaver figures with which the movement opens are delivered with great precision. A fascinating contrast to this treatment can be heard in Joachim's very flexible rendition of the same repeated rhythmic figure at the beginning of Brahms's first Hungarian Dance, recorded in 1903. It is interesting to note that Joachim's revered teacher, Joseph Boehm, was directly associated with Schubert, having given the premiere performance of his E♭ major Piano Trio D929 in 1828.

While some, but by no means all, of the above-mentioned aspects of musical gesture must remain open to differing interpretations, there are other specific 19th-century practices that were unquestionably part of every string or keyboard player's performing style. These are scarcely apparent in, or are even absent altogether from, these recordings. There can be no doubt, for instance, that keyboard arpeggiation was not so much an occasional ornament as a pervasive characteristic of every early and mid-19th-century pianist's approach. We know from a vast range of sources, both written and aural, that this practice was integral to the expressive vocabulary of 19th-century piano playing and we can be absolutely certain that pianist-composers from Mozart to Brahms employed it very frequently in places where it was not notated, just as 18th-century harpsichordists had done. The early fortepiano was not seen as a fundamentally different instrument from the harpsichord and the techniques of the one would simply have been transferred to the other. Individual pianists undoubtedly had their own approach to this particular expressive resource and will have employed a flexible range of differently executed arpeggiations, from broad and slow to very short and tight, depending on the musical context. Even at the end of the 19th century, when there was a growing reaction against the use of arpeggiation (probably as a result of the changing tonal qualities of the developing piano), a composer like Edward McDowell felt it necessary to instruct the pianist in the score of his character piece 'Starlight' (1895) not to 'roll' the chords on notes which he marked with a specific sign. The inclusion of some arpeggio marks in 19th-century compositions has led modern performers, with their unhistorical, purist conviction that the notation means precisely what it says, to assume that arpeggiation was only intended to be executed where specified. This is clearly not what was envisaged, as a number of scholars have demonstrated in recent years with reference to treatises and early recordings. In fact, arpeggio indications may well denote a particularly pronounced spreading of the chord rather than the standard, tighter spread that was simply a feature of normal execution. Related to arpeggiation and also to tempo rubato is the matter of dislocation between the hands (frequently the delay of a melodic note in relation to the bass), which, sensitively employed, was an equally important element in 19th-century piano playing. Both these practices are conspicuous by their absence in these recordings. Only occasionally, where a chord has too great a span for ease of simultaneous execution (as at bar 12 in the Allegro vivace of Mendelssohn's Piano Sextet on Musica Omnia) does pianist Penelope Crawford provide an unmarked arpeggiation. Elsewhere, chords are almost entirely played firmly together in a manner that would have astonished and probably dismayed the composers.

Just as keyboard players employed varying degrees of arpeggiation to give character and expression to the music, string players were meant to introduce vibrato and portamento as expressive gestures. The idea that a modern continuous vibrato is not appropriate for 19th-century performance has percolated through to the world of commercial performance in the past couple of decades. Few now seriously believe Robert Donington's contention that some degree of more or less continuous vibrato was always considered an aspect of beautiful playing on string instruments. In most of these recordings, however, the approach is merely to reduce the amplitude of the vibrato and confine its frequency to longer notes (Tanya Tomkins, Andrew Manze, Atlantis Trio, Benvenue Trio, Schuppanzigh Quartet). The performance of the cello melody that opens Mendelssohn's D minor Piano Trio in both recordings conveniently illustrates this tendency to colour more 'romantic' melodies with a vibrato on every longer note (although Tomkins on Bridge is more restrained than Enid Sutherland on Musica Omnia). The result is that the shorter notes are 'dryer' than the longer ones, but we are scarcely aware of vibrato as a special effect. Yet mid-19th-century treatises and the evidence of fingerings in, for instance, editions by Mendelssohn's friend Ferdinand David clearly demonstrate that at that stage the vibrato was still very much an occasional ornament, quite deliberately introduced as an effect. Oddly, in Mendelssohn's Piano Sextet the Atlantis Trio's violinist Jaap Schröder ignores some of the composer's specifically marked harmonics (which indicate a pure, unvibrated note). An example is one of the subsidiary themes of the first movement, where the harmonics come in the middle of a lyrical melody that Ferdinand David or his colleagues would almost certainly have played with a still left hand throughout. The Pleyel Quartet on CPO aims, more convincingly, for a basically unvibrated sound with occasional vibrato, but this is not combined with the other characteristics that would surely have distinguished a late 18th-century performance from that of the present day.

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While some acknowledgement of historical vibrato practice is apparent in these recordings, there is virtually no recognition of the role of portamento in 19th-century string playing. It is clear from treatises and accounts of performances that portamento began to be seen from the late 18th century onwards as an increasingly important aspect of beautiful singing and playing, and not only on string but also on wind instruments. Spohr was quite specific in his *Violinschule* that this was one of the features that transformed a 'correct' style into a 'beautiful' one. The proper use of portamento was closely connected with the role of legato as a central aspect of fine performance, and the faulty articulation in almost all these recordings is inextricably linked with the performers' efforts to avoid the technique. Only Monti makes a consequential attempt to introduce some degree of portamento, but he is evidently unwilling to employ the effect with anything like the intensity or frequency with which Spohr himself would have executed it. The wholesale condemnation of portamento as a tasteless abuse during the first half of the 20th century has left its legacy in the visceral reluctance of modern players to use it as their 19th-century forebears would have done. Where we do detect hints of portamento in these recordings, ironically, it is often incorrectly executed. There is, for example, a very restrained 'French' example (which all Mendelssohn's violinist colleagues would have condemned and eschewed) from Schröder in the slow movement of Mendelssohn's D minor Trio, but most of the time he pays a very modern attention to 'clean' fingering. (See the description of the different types of portamento and their use in C. Brown, *Classical and Romantic performing practice* (Oxford, 1999), ch.15.) Schröder, like all the other string players except Monti, studiously avoids any audible slides. An interesting case of where important historical evidence has been ignored is Manze's Schubert. We know beyond a shadow of doubt that the violinists associated with Schubert (and surely Schubert himself) used portamento in their playing as an essential expressive resource. The edition of Schubert's sonatas by Ferdinand David, for instance, indicates an extensive use of portamento fingering to retain the A-string tone of the lyrical opening violin melody of the A major Sonata and to give it a vocal character; even in Carl Herrmann's much later Peters edition these, along with many other portamento fingerings, are retained. In Manze's performance, however, there is no hint of portamento here or elsewhere.

On a more positive note, much of the repertory on these CDs is highly interesting. It was a revelation to hear the skilfully written **Boely: Chamber music** (Laborie LC05, *rec* 2008, 74′), so different as it is from other music being produced in Paris at that time. Christoph Coin leads the Ensemble Baroque de Limoges. Pleyel's Prussian Quartets allow one to see why many of his contemporaries considered him to be more than a merely competent composer. Prince Louis Ferdinand's abilities and imaginative flair also mark him out as a highly gifted composer. Perhaps the most remarkable unfamiliar pieces on these CDs, however, are Ferdinand Ries's string quartets from the Schuppanzigh Quartet. For a long time Ries, Beethoven's only real composition student, has suffered from his master's often-quoted comment 'he imitates me too much'. Having played Ries's String Quartet op.150 no.3 a couple of years ago I was already aware of his little-known capabilities in this field, but the Schuppanzigh Quartet has done the musical world a considerable service by making these fine and highly individual works more widely available.

It is nevertheless disappointing that the majority of the performers on these discs have shown so little commitment to understanding and bringing to life the aural intentions that lie behind the notation in all these works, which would have been clear to the composers and performers of the time, but have been obscured for us by later developments and changes of taste. This is not the place for a more detailed survey of where and how performing practices such as those discussed earlier would have been employed and for what reasons they would have been regarded as integral to a fine performance. Suffice it to say that anyone who wishes to experience the bulk of this repertory in something like the style in which its composers must have conceived it will have to look elsewhere. Despite the interest and efforts of a few bold spirits in the world of commercial performance we have, as yet, made little progress with evolving a more faithful historically informed approach to performing this music in the spirit of its creators. It is to be hoped that the rising generation of talented young musicians will commit themselves to forging a new way of playing it, which engages seriously with our ever-expanding knowledge of the performing practices of the 19th century.

Websites

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