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Music Project Paper 1

Classic and Modern Stylistic Approach

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When music is performed or recorded by anyone other than the original composer, and this could even extend to the original creator as well, questions of authenticity and fidelity often surface. How is it possible to justify one musician’s interpretation of a piece over that of another? Of course there are objective aspects attributed to written music, tempo and pacing, rhythmic inflexion, dynamics, pitch modulation, etc. but if music is meant to be provoking, emotionally invocative or at least provide entertainment to the listener, and the conductor isn’t attempting to play along as authentically as possible, do these concerns even matter? Music still contains the same use-value to the listener in a subjective sense (we are forgetting about music in the physical form, considering it purely as an auditory phenomenon) and so any critique of its general particular value should be debased.

Differing from the form of music in live performance, recorded music offers an intriguing twist to critical attempts at gauging authenticity that is to the music’s *fidelity*. This is essentially a means of determining a recording’s, in contextual consideration of its quality in relation to the available technology to produce it, integral likeness with that of the original composer. Of course many composers whose times have long past, were unable to bear witness to the awe-invoking power of recorded music, so comparisons can only related back to as far as history will allow. Yet it is becoming increasingly apparent that our modern sense of classical music has devolved into an illiterate appreciation for anticipated movements and rhythmic pacing’s, as many modern conductors conform their music to popular standards. As more and more recordings circulate bearing inauthentic auras of the popular archetypal standard, our very mode of consciousness, of active engagement with the music, is shifting before our very eyes. Our very conception of history is being manipulated as the real becomes replaced by the typical, and the authentic by idealized conceptions. Though authenticity doesn’t matter in terms of music’s effectual relationship with an individual, it is absolutely important for historical and academic sake that we don’t lose sight of the music that deterministically led to the musical creations and forms we have now. I hope I’m not alone in seeing how dominant the media’s control over our mode of consciousness is generating an abominable, horrid anomaly.

When a conductor considers a piece of music to perform there are a variety of factors that he or she must contemplate in interpretation: tempo flexibility and relationships, rhythmic variance, how to even consider basic tempo (many older scores didn’t even have bpm markings, only ambiguous phrasing instructing how to perform the music). To look more in depth at the relationships between the old and the new, this paper will examine the work of Frédéric Chopin, particularly Nocturne in E op. 62 No. 2. Although this essay will solely focus on individual performs reinterpretation of manuscripts, most of the same thought is applicable to symphonic and orchestral pieces, and other works written for more than one player. It is merely a matter of the conductor’s interpretative analysis, arrangement, and chosen instrumentation, (we must remember that most musicians don’t play with instruments like those around a century ago) that factor.

My choice in these songs was mostly arbitrary besides the fact that I enjoy Chopin’s music, and chose to focus on his repertoire solely for that fact. To start I picked out three performances of Nocturne E No. 2, the oldest, recorded on cylinder by Pavel Augustovich Pabst in 1895, a recording from 1958 by Benno Moiseiwitsch, and one from 1959 by Jan Eiker. Essentially, I viewed Pabst’s performance as the most accurate depiction of romantic style, purely based on its historical context, and found Moiseiwitsch’s rendition to be much more akin to classical technique than Eiker’s performance. Pabst’s rendering is definitely the fastest, thought just by a slight margin, and is full of much more uncensored, natural sounds and wrong notes than the more modern recordings. The introductory segments from Moiseiwitsch’s recital are representatively akin to the airiness and grace with which Pabst’s performance is loaded. Just compare the delicacy with which he plays the second phrase and the following accented flurry that Moiseiwitsch uses from 0:30-0:40, in comparison with Pabst 0:27-0:34, and Eiker from 0:28-0:36. Though Eiker does intone his phrase with a same sort of flurry articulation, I feel the actual inflection of both Pabst and Moiseiwitsch’s performances to be much more intimate and in touch with the music. (Note the trouble here between articulating authenticity between personal tastes) Eiker’s performance overall, embodies much more of the generic popularly approved formic devices than the other pieces; for instance, from 0:37-0:45 Eiker’s gesticulation is more heavily backed by both his manual pressure on the keys and his dynamic enunciation of the phrase, while Moiseiwitsch’s phrase, from 0:42-0:52 is much slower than Eiker’s and colored by beautifully descending lines that give the music more a narrative shape, than the rhythmically loaded, downbeat accented phrasing from Eiker. (Pabst, again much faster, finishes this section approximately from 0:35-0:41) I’m not sure entirely, but as Moiseiwitsch’s recording actually comes from a live performance, and Eiker’s may not, these readings may simply be attributed to the contextual background to whence these recordings took place.

The next section I want to examine takes place at the start of the next major phrase group, in Pabst’s performance from 1:32-1:39, Moiseiwitsch 1:22-1:34, and Eiker 1:14 -1:23. Pabst’s phrase is very punctual, the second half cramming a plethora of notes into a very small space, and almost sounding tinny with the tempo at which he cruises through it. (Discounting the tininess inherent in the form of recording) Eiker’s reproduction is much more round and clearer sounding in articulation, being less punchy, and the ornamented fills he maneuvers with the tremolo are succinct, not as concise as Pabst’s, but they keep the pace of the section moving forward. Moiseiwitsch’s delivery on the other hand takes the longest to complete, is much more freely rubato and tempered to his own conception of the phrase as he fills it out. You can almost feel his present engrossment as he improvisatorially elaborates the phrase; the extra time he sustains the tremolo and the more dynamic intercession he uses to transition to the next phrase also adds to the swell and release of emotion (resolving at 1:36; 3 ½ seconds into the clip) and creates a stronger engagement with the listener as the music seamlessly transitions, and makes it hard to discern where one phrasing ends and the next begins.

With Pabst’s reproduction, at 3:01, he superfluously plays a descending phrase by half-step, and one is able to attain a sense of his command over the music, performing the rhythm and meter with his own improvised emotional flair. The subsequent measures he streams through, despondently casting aside a few stray tones and pitches, moving with expressive dynamism as he tersely tears through some phrases, while presenting others with more expansive and voluminous bodies. In contrast to the other two performers, I feel Pabst’s use of space here adds a more stylistic connotation to the musical scene. In Eiker’s performance, he maintains a more steady and cruising speed, (reaching the next dynamic shift in 15 seconds, in contrast to Moiseiwitsch taking 26) compared to akin to that of traditional Baroque era briskness, but concurrently this demonstrates his own inability to allow the music to take on a free, graceful elegance (as is intended by such a medium based on the passing of time); I feel Pabst does a much finer job at articulating this. As characteristic to Moiseiwitsch’s performance, he progresses through this phrase with a particular focus on expressing tone between the contrasting voices, (notice how punctuated and refined the bass sounds) allowing the listener to hear the interwoven polyphony clearly. The descending lines that continue through this section 3:29-3:35 also have a sense of present uncertainty, as if his own spiritual and emotional energy was being transferred and encapsulated through the music.

Unfortunately the Pabst recording doesn’t include the entire piece so the remaining discussion will solely focus on the other performances. In Moiseiwitsch’s recording at 4:17, there is a slurred rise up to a G, followed by a melancholic descending melody. In terms of comparison, he really allows the harmonics and overtone series to ring through every pitch in the decent, and while Eiker does manage to be genuine in his adherence to dynamic markings, he is too snappish in his approach and he doesn’t allow the music to fully take on its intended gesture. (3:54-4:01) From 4:29-4:33 in Moiseiwitsch’s recording, he reaches out into the upper register of the piano, playing the notes slightly behind the beat thus introducing a really atmospheric feeling to the arpeggio, while Eiker’s performance of the notes seems to stress the downbeat and rigidity of the meter, which feels too proud, resolute and dulcet in comparison to the rest of the piece. Eiker keeps a steady complacent rhythm that never falters throughout, making the music seem more contented and situated than I think it is meant to be. On the other hand, Moiseiwitsch’s style seems to epitomize the very ephemerality of the Nocturne itself, as he audibly maintains himself as creator and player behind the music, listen to how he drops out almost entirely in between 4:35-4:40, giving his track a much more human air than Eiker’s (which would supposedly seem more mechanized and popularized in contrast).

At 4:42, Eiker reaches the coda of the Nocturne- on a syncopated high E, 7 bars from the end of the piece. While I very much like his descending gesture, the calm and collectedness of its recapitulation, (his accent following the extended F# G# A# chord is also remarkable) I think the dynamics with which he brings out the bass notes, plus the steady pressing pulse of his rhythm markedly makes his closing phrases seem to be more modern and carefully orchestrated to match the seeming pounding uniformity of uninterrupted meter in popular music. Though there is some correlation to be drawn between his hasty speed and Pabst’s own Romantic rapidity, Moiseiwitsch’s final phrases are more demonstrative of the inherent conditionally human properties of music. (Its temporal and phenomenological aspects) In contrast, he blends his polyphony, masking the voices in one another’s timbres, (4:59-5:07) and again, less metrically arrays his melodies, making theme seem more liberated, and ‘Romantique.’ When he extends the F# G# A# chord for its *whole* duration (granted at a lesser tempo) he accentuates the presence of sound decay and space in the music, again in parallel with our own transient lives as mortal beings. (And sculptors of such medium)

Eiker moves thoroughly, almost systematically, through the final phrases of music, capitulating the final scale rather rhythmically and plays out the final phrase with, what I feel, is almost too much of a dramatic loss of emotion, compared to the dynamic expressive energy of earlier on. Moisewitsch rises leisurely through the scale hits the G and mutes it with the pedal (hear the pause 5:34) then, just like Eiker plays the first of the next two B’s for a slightly shorter duration (M: 5:36-38/ E: 5:15-5:18), and similarly briefly arpeggiate the introductory hits on both of the last major chords (BM and EM) I also found it striking that Moiseiwitsch hits the final EM just a sixteenth note too soon, his intentionality I’m sure derived either from his own passion in the performance, or his abnormal gesture against the strict interpretations that many tend to offer when interpreting such pieces from the past.

It seems that when considering a recording or piece of acoustic music, our own individual means of assessing the use-value of a piece, in its direct relation to us is determined purely by our own engagement and absorption of the piece. Less and less are people actually concerned as much the authenticity of a recording, as they are with its fidelity, chiefly in terms of sound quality. Today dispute ranges on the value of classic vinyl listening vs. that of the Mp3 and solitary listening, whether there is an inherent basis for a discrepancy between the two forms, and some audio analysis has proven that Mp3s and Cds do in fact cut back partially on the quality of sound recordings, making it seem like a slightly better form of medium (Note also its physical form). In our modern age, as all our ears are conditioned in a similar fashion to the “hot” forms of over produced, and mass mediatized music, music that is constantly manipulated and remixed, we hear the scratchiness of recordings like Pabst, and the raw sound generated by the gramophone as abnormalities, thus they are immediately disregarded as being mechanically flawed in some way and thus their value dispossessed. Authenticity and Fidelity only matter to the individual as much so as they choose; music has always been a human experiment- playing with the fragmentation and maneuvering of space and time. It is purely human in essence in that respect. For the sake of scholarly tradition, and genuinely concerned musicians in general, I’m sure the question of value of authenticity will remain a center topic for discussion for sometime. Looking at Pabst, Moiseiwitsch, and Eiker, though they all seem to have varying technically and rhythmically representative aspects in accordance the Baroque style of Chopin’s own time, true perfect authenticity is proved impossible, and the value in an individual performer interpretations and their relationship with the individual’s own personal identity is seen as the most prevailing element. In comparison to a more recent recording, and to highlight some of the over dramatized phrasing and strict steady rhythms of modern performances, examine Evgeny Kissin’s own performance (1:25-1:35 and 5:50-5:58 are notable spots of comparison), which popularly stresses heavy dynamics, cadential phrasing and slow tempos. In this overbearing, mass managed and reproduced media era, authenticity is void and style is purely a individual’s concern; thus, it is critical that scholars and musicians alike maintain an awareness of both the value of an individual’s own perception of their work, while simultaneously noting the over homogenized media image of classical music today.