

...'More than Authenticity'

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... 'More than Authenticity'

Leo Black

The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra revisits London on 18 February, when Claudio Abbado will be the conductor at a Royal Festival Hall concert.

When the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra visited this country as recently as last October, one of the reviews it received went way over the top. Barry Millington, a man of sense who has done sterling work keeping up-to-date the opera entries for Grove's Dictionary, suffered a rush of musicological righteousness to the head and enquired in *The Times* (3 Nov) whether 'we' any longer need this orchestra's sound for Mozart's music, because 'the period-instrument bands have transformed our perception of the classics'. It was good of him to ask, and the answer so far as I am concerned is 'Yes we do – desperately and increasingly'.

A different perspective was provided by words read the same day in *The Strad*. They came from a prominent American violinist/violist, Michael Tree. As a member of the Guarneri String Quartet, he was understandably less enthused by those transforming 'last couple of decades', in whose performing practices he detected, at worst, 'a giant step backwards in terms of performance standards – not only in regard to vitality of sound and brilliance of technique, but in terms of variety of colour, diversity of vibrato and sensitivity to the expressive powers of intonation ...'.

Those are potent musical resources, and with the possible exception of 'brilliance of technique' they transcend questions of 'authenticity'. I recently spent a profitable hour comparing recordings of early Mozart symphonies by the Vienna Philharmonic (with James Levine), the Berlin Philharmonic (with Karl Böhm) and the Academy of Ancient Music. Under their distinguished conductors from different continents and generations the two great continental orchestras seemed worlds apart, while there was little difference in conception between Vienna and London: tempi were similar, phrasing was thought of in comparable ways, it was just that the Viennese did it so much better and came up trumps in all Tree's categories, notably the selective use of vibrato. This is axiomatic not only for authenticity but for good string-playing, period and I found it far more artistically present in the Vienna recordings.

Out of all the specific musical virtues listed by Tree, a *Times* critic had been able to extract merely 'a fat, luscious sound'. A colleague of Jonathan Meades, Simon Barnes, Andrei Navrozov and Bernard Levin should have better anti-cliché-radar than that. But cliché is very rife in this field, and is used to beg many questions, such as that of the 'vinegary' string tone which some devotees of the period-instrument movement actually seem to value, as if this were merely a matter of taste. I stand to be corrected by the above-mentioned Pandit Meades, but is there an accredited form of cuisine anywhere in which vinegar is more than a rather dangerous culinary addition, to be used in the background and with utmost discretion?

There's a certain British distrust of excellence, which views the Vienna Philharmonic as a bunch of country cousins, behind the times and ignorant of all the latest advances (ie current trends) in performance-practice. In fact its musicians know precisely what they are doing and not doing. Each is an outstanding practitioner of his craft. They show a seriousness of approach and a joy in music not found in all performers for many critics. They also argue like mad among themselves, for while the Philharmonic is determined to keep its own sound, its members never forget that they are there to make music – great music. They work only with conductors who will let them do so, being self-governing when they appear in concert. (In opera performances they are at the behest of the management.) In case this all sounds too much like a publicity handout, it must be added that things like recording contracts do play a part between short-list and final list; but nobody makes the short-list whom they mistrust as a musician. They wish to avoid becoming even just one more world-class symphony orchestra indistinguishable from the others, and I doubt whether God would need to forbid that they try to emulate a 'period-instrument band'. They do, as it happens, stick passionately to their old-fashioned, awkward horns and oboes, and are not short of discerning supporters who insist that they continue to do so: in the course of the orchestra's symposium 'Sound and Composer' last June a positive whirlwind of exhortation to prefer beauty to safety came from no less Authentic a figure than Nikolaus Harnoncourt.

This whole issue of 'authenticity', of 'period-instrument' performance, has got out of hand, though so much money is involved that it isn't going to go away. Michael Tanner sounded off about it in the November 1990 issue of *Classic CD*, with Roger Norrington more than holding the balance over the adjoining three pages. I find it hard to disagree with statements like 'great music demands great performance', and 'there are innumerable choices to be made at every moment ... the most minute variations in stress and timing add up to a very different overall effect'. And yet I felt Michael Tanner got it wrong when he identified the missing element as 'love of the music'. Love is polymorphously perverse; its manifestations can be quite Gothic in their strangeness. And no-one who's heard performances under Gustav Leonhardt or by Reinhard Goebel's *Musica Antiqua* of Cologne should be in any doubt about their superabundant love of the music. It makes not for sentimentality, let alone a 'fat, luscious sound', but for an immensely dramatic conception which uses the most unprecedented (and historically correct) sounds to conjure up what Schumann once described as 'character pieces of the loftiest kind, amounting to true poetry'. John Beckett,

who has spent a lifetime rising to the challenges of the same masterpieces, put it to me once that Goebel's performances had been through fire and water and emerged triumphant. Here we are speaking not of Mozart and his successors but of the Baroque, and above all of J. S. Bach. In the hands of Leonhardt or Goebel his music takes on an almost visual quality.

Move on a couple of generations from Bach, though, and we still await our Leonhardt, our Goebel. Honest brainwork rather than vision is the order of the day. Some of the innumerable and overlapping publics for music seem to like the results very much. A couple of years ago a formidable American scholar Richard Taruskin delivered a provocative if sympathetic analysis of period-instrument recordings of the complete Beethoven symphonies. He finally nominated Roger Norrington as the 'next great Beethoven conductor'. That came upon me like 'the thirteenth stroke of the clock, incredible in itself but also casting doubt on all that went before'. It felt as if a professor who'd researched a new vaccine had been proposed for the Nobel Prize for Literature. To judge by the modesty with which Maestro Norrington made his points in the *Classic CD* article, I imagine the idea would take him aback too, rightly proud though he is of his intelligent and pioneering approach to the great classic texts.

If the performers haven't taken a good hard look at X's score to find out what the composer seems to have intended, you may get something more like Y than X: 15-0 Norrington. But even when they have, you still get

a vast range of different results – 15-all. (Who knew his Beethoven scores better, Furtwängler or Toscanini?) And so the game goes on, with thesis and antithesis and the world's great performers 'lectured as if Beckmesser had never existed'. Is there a synthesis somewhere? The transcendent experience of great music comes from (in no particular order) the sheer standard of the performance and the quality of performers' instincts, the one an even more contentious matter than the other on which to pronounce. I find myself distrusting the apparent modesty of statements like 'Nobody's saying we've got it right'. Imagine that in the mouth of T. or F. Nowadays the infallibilities come not from the principals but from the hangers-on, to the point of insisting that people who do it otherwise have got it wrong. QED, 'we' no longer need the Vienna Philharmonic for Mozart. It's the Brahms-Wagner saga all over again. Tree's *Strad* article continued 'If we can't rely to a certain extent on our musical instincts and suddenly have to preach a doctrine when we play, I don't think the audience will receive the satisfaction it expects to derive from a concert'. The problem is that not all musical instincts are equal: the tragedy, that musical instincts can be suppressed and distorted to the point where they disappear. It's been known to happen to Viennese singers, but the risk of it with the Philharmonic is negligible. Next time, they play Mahler, but also more Mozart (the little 29th symphony, which in even its first four bars offers many an opportunity for 'minute variations in stress and timing'). Hear them while you can.

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