

Articulation – A Good Place to Be From

When I was working on my doctorate, I was given an allowance for some lessons with whomever. I had developed some physical problems in my playing and had backed off of practicing, awaiting a time (in my tunnel-visioned way) that I might be able to address the issues without lots of distraction and fragmentation. I was working on two dualistic research topics, one being the interplay of clarity and obscurity in unmeasured prelude practice and the other being the interplay of dance accent and vocal inflection in treatment of downbeats in harpsichord playing. The latter was driving me around the bend – it was one of those topics that had a fiery importance to me because of how the conflict played out in my own playing experience, but upon being written about or studied, it became dry, arcane, and pointless. So I decided to use my allowance to return to working with Ed Parmentier.

There's a great deal I could tell you about Ed, about what it was like to go to his house after so many years, about the slow realization that he and I were friends, had an immense history, and a bond rooted in my learning so much from him but not wanting to be anything like him, so I had taken it all and run, and run, and run. What I will say here is that he didn't have a proprietary bone in his body, that he was too busy being pleased and proud that I was serious, seeking, eccentric, and dissatisfied with the reductive approaches being played out among harpsichordists around us. And that I was sitting there with him, wanting to talk as much as to play.

For the work on harpsichord accent (working title: A Song or a Dance? Unquestioned Placement of Downbeats in Harpsichord Practice), I had brought a series of examples that showed potential disagreement as to when and whether to employ the standard practice of 'placing' downbeats (using lift of the upbeat, delay, 'spread' or arpeggiation, and lengthening) in order to create metric clarity, that joyful, physical swing I advocate for so ardently on other fronts. The ambiguity came from the fact that so many songs, even those in simple dance meters that cry out for an easy gravitational treatment of accent, are heavy with phrases that end weakly on the downbeat – the final whispered syllable making a placed, agogic accent completely anathema. Do we play legato into such 'strong' beats? What are our techniques in such astoundingly common situations? How do

we reconcile this melodic, linear characteristic with changes of harmony on the downbeats, and frequent leaps to the downbeat in the bass line? How do we teach our students to create passivity and weakness in the resolution of such phrases while simultaneously teaching them about rich and resonant pulse as reinforced by accentual techniques?

Under the shelter of dialogue with Ed was the only place I could carry on this remarkably specialized and microscopic line of inquiry while feeling still that we were dealing with something pressing, the heart of the matter, an issue that needed attention if all was going to be well in the world. He understood that I was bringing before him something that was truly troubling to me as a performer and as a teacher, because people are so prone to wanting rules, widely applicable principles, and to settle onto one 'side' or another of a contradiction rather than being willing to live within, even celebrate, the ambiguities. The problem I was grappling here made it necessary to deal with each gesture on a case by case basis, and who wants to have to think, or listen, that hard? Well, Ed does.

It was in the course of the far-ranging discussion of all this that I started to talk to him about what he had taught me about articulation and how, over the decades, I had drawn out what I had learned into an extremely refined articulative vocabulary, where no type of lift, or space, or placement was without nuance or was free-standing without the subtle reinforcement of arpeggiation, overholding, or flexed timing around it. This might sound like torture, imprisonment of the mind, but it had actually evolved out of a need to free myself from the pedantic, to never allow the term 'articulation,' or its idea, to rigidly represent just one thing but rather to make it as fluid and varied in its meaning as 'love.' Ed surprised me by saying that he no longer talked to his students about articulation, that it had become just too much of a trap for misunderstanding, a concept that was too likely to lead students to mannered and unnatural practices, and to cause them not to use their musical instincts the way they would on any other instrument. I argued with him, saying as graciously as possible that it was a cop-out, an abdication of responsibility. He had essentially been steered away from addressing the topic altogether by the very type of frustration with contradiction and subtlety that I was bringing before him. I said that you had to talk about articulation, lay out as much of its complexity and dimension as you can, always demanding a flexible mindset and a highly attuned ear, and then send them out into the world to fend for themselves. He looked at me and said 'So articulation is like Kansas: it's a good place to have grown up, but you don't want to have to live there.' Exactly, Ed, exactly.

In the end, I deserted the issue as a research topic: my time with Ed was unusual in its liveliness and depth, but I was ultimately setting myself up for, well, a lot of mind-numbing discussion with colleagues where I was a crusader for something

that really couldn't be talked about that widely. It just has to be done, and shown, and challenged in situ. And it's either felt or not felt – not everyone's going to be troubled by such conflicts, not everyone's going to get that roiling sense of urgency to address the problem when the second syllable of 'cara' is accompanied by a space before it, a delay going into it, a thickly spread chord on it, and a slowness to leave it. We can't all have the same job.