

Detaching from Expertise

One of the odd benefits of having a really bad memory for terminology, dates, systems, and historical relationships is that I automatically stop expecting myself to be an expert. This doesn't mean I don't whip myself about these gaping holes, especially when faced with doctoral oral exams or the question/answer sessions following a paper presentation. But I have come to know that I can't really fake it in this regard.

So where does this put me in the realm of historical performance practice? Strangely, I know my stuff, and yet the stuff so rarely has clear documentation as to its origins. So often, I'm able to say with certainty that something should or can be a particular way: when is it ok to double the solo line? When can one play dissonance and no resolution? When is triple time with whole notes as the beat (3/1 meter) meant to be felt in one per bar? When can the thumb be used on a sharp or flat? When can all the notes in a group of six be played as an overhauled unit? When are dotted notes meant to end with a rest, 'silencing the dot' as I claim that CPE Bach said, but where did he say it? Somehow I know these things, yet I often don't know why. And there's all that information about the instruments themselves – the makers, the nationalities, the type of jacks, strings, quills – I know what I like, what feels good, what's well made, what's special, but I can't retain much of the factual surroundings.

We've learned a huge amount from our predecessors, Leonhardt and others, who did so much investigation. And we get a lot out of the gatherings of historical keyboardists and builders that occur each year, where we talk and compare and play many instruments. And gossip. We also need, as teachers, to be able to eloquently establish a clear foundation for students to absorb and understand principles of rhetoric, inflection, articulation, dynamics, basic technique. We can't be ignoramuses, bounding around like happy dogs who happen to have a penchant for baroque music on period instruments. But in the end, when playing, if your mind is crowded with what is verified by documents, what is known to be correct, then you're probably not listening from inside. And you're likely not moving or singing. So much of what we've learned is incredibly detailed – execution of agréments, small groupings, appropriate suspensions, how to create dynamic contrast – so your mind could be busy absolutely all the time, to the exclusion of instinctive motion, of sweep, of performance that's honest and penetrable.

Some of us are burdened more than others with concern over what people think. Congratulations to those who don't struggle with this. It's a type of hard work to stop thinking about others' perceptions, especially when you're playing for those who might find fault with your choices, question the historical 'validity,' or condemn the personal 'caprice,' of your interpretation. The place to listen to those voices is in roundtable discussion, or shared masterclasses, or at a lecture, or over dinner. Not while playing. Your own voice should be too strong, singing and breathing, speaking words and phrases that lend themselves to the shapes you're creating. Your own ears should be listening for clarity of intention (did it sound how you had thought it would?), for the heart of the instrument's sound, for detail that doesn't interrupt a simpler direction but rather combines into an exquisite 'mouvement.' And it should be carried by too powerful a physicality to be derailed by minor trespasses. Should should should. Easy to say, yes? Talk is cheap.

These are our obligations without measure: to learn all we can and do everything we can to apply what we learn whole-heartedly; to always DO before we speak, so we truly know what it is we're talking about, what makes up the foundation upon which we intend to construct something masterful using the building blocks of historical style; to find the natural truth behind notions that seem stylized or didactic, to try to get to the bottom of what was truly intended by the description of a particular quirky practice (articulation is a special trap when it comes to doggedly replicating what's described in a treatise rather than really listening for its meaning, for how it fits into the overall picture of elegant transmission); to remain open in body, mind, spirit so that the music's fullest expression, its nature, is always the first thing to be heard, by you, and yes, by others.