

EDITORIAL



Some weeks ago I was chatting with a colleague, comparing notes about how we came to be academics. In the course of this very casual conversation – more than half of it the gossip and good-natured complaining that are the grist of workplace talk – she said something that brought me up short, and which I am still sorting out. Speaking of her ambitions as a singer, and of the decision to become a musicologist, she remarked, a little sadly, ‘It was the fork in the road, you know. . .’.

I find it quite striking that it was the choice between performing and scholarly work – and not, for instance, the choice to have children – that my colleague should have characterized as a fork in the road: a grave choice, a dire choice, one that does not permit any kind of both/and solution, a choice which complicates retreat or may even render it impossible. It is not the peculiar world-view of that one colleague, of course. Her remark struck me because of how succinctly it sums up something that is generally perceived to be the case. Either one is a performer or one is a scholar; one must choose; that’s just the way it is (the resigned little tag, ‘you know. . .’).

I do not bring up my colleague’s innocent remark in order to berate her for it, nor to imply that she should have or even could have chosen otherwise. On the contrary. Although I have more or less managed to ‘keep my hand in’ with both performance and scholarship in my own career, I think that the fork in the road to which she refers is quite real. There are obvious and very good reasons for this, the primary among them being that it is a huge drain on one’s time and energy to keep two careers going at a high level. One or the other of them, at one time or another, is going to suffer in quality; most likely both of them will suffer in the long run. Though there is a very small handful of people in our field who really do do it all, full on and consistently over the years – performing in concerts, recording with commercial labels, publishing in refereed journals and with scholarly presses, holding down teaching positions, supervising dissertations and training concert artists – they are (and I say this with all of the affection and admiration that they assuredly deserve) freaks; the likes of most of us cannot measure ourselves usefully by their example.

However, I do think the ubiquitousness of the fork-in-the-road solution in our profession deserves some thought, especially because performance *as a topic* in musicological scholarship is becoming so much more prominent. I doubt very much that anyone in academic musicology nowadays would dispute the importance of including the performers’ point of view in any serious attempt to come to terms with a given piece of music. Indeed, many musicologists are moving away from a work-centred approach to musicology altogether, into something more oriented towards the practices through which, or in accordance with which, works are constituted (something, dare I say it, rather more like ethnomusicology). This kind of emphasis is grounded in the consideration of performance.

The eighteenth century has a special importance in any interrogation of this issue. In terms of the history of musical performance in Western Europe, the eighteenth century, and particularly the second half of it, was a watershed: it was during those scant fifty years that the concept of The Work really crystallized and became a common way of thinking about music, while the prior equation or conflation of work with performer was seriously undone. Now, one can trace this matter a great deal further back into Western culture: there is good reason to lay much of the responsibility for it on Plato’s doorstep, for instance. But by the end of the eighteenth century, the long-latent fault line between text and act had become a chasm. The tendency of that great eighteenth-century invention, the market economy, to convert services, relations and ideas alike into goods – capital – tends to favour the concrete and discrete over the contingent; a capitalist society allows (encourages) its members to become blind and deaf to the constant, delicate, unstable negotiations of power that characterize the relationship between performers and performed.

Whatever the root cause to which one chooses to ascribe this shift, in the more particular view, it is clear that it was going on in a great many ways in a great many places in the late eighteenth century. It is visible as both cause and effect in such period trends as the ascendancy of music printing, which made text such a convenient and accessible stand-in for the artist; in the huge growth of cities, which required attendant



professionalization and specialization from competing urban musicians; and in the ascendancy and (by century's end) hegemony of that style that went by so many names, as befits its chameleonic and plebeian nature – galant, Neapolitan, comic, buffa, 'modern', 'free', *estilo suelto*.

Our very profession owes its establishment to the period in question. To name only the most obvious examples: within the academy, Johann Nikolaus Forkel's 1787 honorary doctorate in music history at the Universität Göttingen, the first of its kind; while at the same time outside of the academy, John Hawkins and Charles Burney vied actively for the honour of being England's premier chronicler of the history of music. In all these cases, 'history' was implicitly construed as the kind of story one tells through and about documents. The practices which documents document were not disallowed; but they were clearly of secondary interest, if any. To adapt an infamous military euphemism, performers came to constitute collateral information.

This ontological and methodological shift was profound enough that now, two hundred and some years later, scholars of the humanities are still in the relatively early stages of questioning and deconstructing it; and for once, I think, musicology is not lagging a decade or two behind its sister disciplines, but in the intellectual advance party, along with dance and theatre studies. Some of the most profound and provocative musicological work being done these days treats performance in ways that essentially redefine our discipline.

There is also a good deal of tiresome trendiness, of course; most frustrating of all is when a genuinely new and important insight is immured behind a nearly unscaleable wall of critical-theory jargon. I suppose everyone must have their own least favourite locution; mine is the increasingly common use of 'the body' as a way to anoint references to corporeal matters with an aroma of important-sounding generality. (The trouble is that bodies are irreducibly and humbly specific to their owners, and resist generalization for some very good reasons.) However, I prefer to regard the unreadability factor as evidence of growing pains, and to trust that the merely common sense of recuperating the study of performance will eventually percolate down into a merely commonsensical prose style. There are a number of fine models for such a style already out there, among which I would single out Christopher Small's wonderful little book *Musicking* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998) as a model of the radical power of plain speaking.

It is the idea of common sense that returns me now to my initial topic of career paths, this time with a question. If we agree that it is important to study musical performance as well as documents, then doesn't it stand to reason that more musicologists will choose to be performers as well? Shouldn't the fork in the road be disappearing in favour of the broader highway that encompasses both paths? Such questions beg many others (or as my students would say, more colourfully and more memorably, they circle around to bite us in the butt). All of a sudden we are confronted with questions about the scholar's obligation to empiricism; about the proper degree of intersection between personal experience and investigative work; about whether there 'should' be such an intersection, and if not, why not? That is, if we are interested in studying actions as well as texts, on what basis (if any) may we justify personal unfamiliarity with the actions we describe?

I will now conveniently exempt myself from attempting any sort of comprehensive answers to such questions, by claiming that this essay is too short to deal with them as they deserve. While this is true, a more honest truth is that I do not have answers for them yet, if indeed I ever will. I do best, I think, to retreat into the anecdotal at this point, and speak briefly of my own career path – more, perhaps, as cautionary tale than as any kind of exemplum.

My book *Boccherini's Body* is based pretty explicitly on a kind of militant empiricism. It was my belief while writing it that, indeed, a musicologist who wishes to study performance would do well to have direct experience of the kind of performance they are studying. Thus I used my own experience as a baroque cellist as the fodder for almost everything I wrote about. In terms of repertory, the book deals with the sonatas for cello and basso (works I had come to know in the practice room, and later in performance and recording), and with three early sets of string quartets which I was engaged in performing and recording during the period of writing the dissertation on which the book is based. (The book has an accompanying CD; furthermore, my recordings of several sonatas may be found (and downloaded for free) at my Boccherini website, which contains various source materials that could not be included in the book: <<http://epub.library.ucla.edu/leguin/boccherini>>. As for the quartet recordings, made by the Artaria Quartet (of



which I was the cellist), they were subsequently mothballed because of a dispute with the recording company. After ten years, one of them is finally about to be released: this will be the previously unrecorded Op. 9, six quartets composed in 1770. It will appear on the Festival de Aranjuez label and will be distributed by Harmonia Mundi.) It then, perforce, became my project to connect my empiricism as well as I possibly could to historical example: whence the excursions, some of them extensive, into period dance, acting theory and medicine, and the philosophical treatment of things like kinaesthesia and nocturnal pollution. While I don't think I ever announce my militancy in so many words anywhere in the book, people's informal reactions to it since publication suggest that the message is loud and clear. Performer-scholars, many of them still graduate students, and amateur performers (some of them academics in fields other than musicology) have been wonderfully enthusiastic. Professional performers are politely unimpressed: the implicit attitude there is, this is *news*? And non-performing musicologists – those who may at one time have been quite serious as performers, but who have passed the fatal fork in the road – have been regretful, like my colleague above; or, worse, bashful, as if they had done something wrong, or failed to do something right.

I am extremely uncomfortable with the idea that the beliefs I explored in that book could come to represent any kind of orthodoxy on the topic of performance studies, and I hope they never do so. Far be it from me to suggest that there cannot be a way to study an action without also doing it! At the same time, I continue to believe that the separation of text and act is a kind of cultural wound, the live edge of a fissure trying to heal; in this regard I do think it is important to pose what may be – perhaps *should* be – uncomfortable questions about it.

The fact is that I came to write *Boccherini's Body* out of that place of discomfort – or, to be honest, out of sheer epistemological terror. As a graduate student, dazzled by the erudition of my musicological forebears and unnerved by the ferocity of their debates, I felt, in choosing a dissertation topic, that I had no choice but to retreat into what I *knew* to be true, however small it might be, and however basic. That was my own body, and its sensations and reactions through many years' experience as a cellist, a sort of epistemological 'bottom line', something which can and should be extensively examined, prodded, interrogated – but which I refused and still refuse to deconstruct or to explode into theoretical generalities. Everything else about the book followed, more or less fortuitously, from that essentially craven and self-protective move. I was simply lucky that the follow-through proved to be as intellectually and historically rich as it did.

What I wish to emphasize in closing is that initial terror, which is not incidental and should not be underestimated. For me, the book has not expunged it in the least. It may be no accident that my current project is of a quite different nature, an archival study based, copiously and gratefully, on documents.

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