Interpretative Approaches to the Works

BWV 1001: G Minor Sonata

- **modern instrumentation**
- **a-historical focus**

This work has great personal significance for me, having been the first of the unaccompanied Bach works I learnt with my teachers Peter Cropper and Roger Bigley. These formative influences of thirty years ago colour my aural consciousness, but with the Prelude so too do the many utterly different early recordings by violinists of remote late nineteenth-century traditions – such as Joseph Joachim and Arnold Rosé, who recorded it in 1903 and 1928 respectively (see Milsom, *Theory and Practice…*).

My performances here are assimilative of the sum total of my own rather unusual stylistic heritage: initial training as an orthodox modern player by figures very much of the British establishment (Peter Cropper, Roger Bigley, Martin Milner, Roger Coull), before pursuit of an in-depth and deliberately isolated series of experiments as a posthumous disciple of various iconic nineteenth-century pedagogues (Joseph Joachim in particular).

VIDEO TASTERS

BWV 1001 – Prelude

BWV 1001 – Fugue

BWV 1002: B Minor Partita

- **nineteenth-century instrumentation & posture**
- **emulation of performance style of Joseph Joachim**

Traditionally, the performance of historical music is divided into two main categories – 'modern' (or 'mainstream') performance, and 'historical' practice. The latter usually assumes that the goal is to evoke performing practices of the time of a work's original conception. Increasingly, though, awareness not only of an expanded vision of the past but also of the diaspora of twentieth-century styles – all of which are often crudely termed 'modern' – means that other historical conceptions are understood and admitted to the spectrum. As part of the CHASE project at Leeds the late Duncan

Druce began some work looking at nineteenth-century performance of earlier eighteenth-century music (see Articles on Historical Background). In my Historical Performance classes at the University of Huddersfield, I play students an excerpt from Thomas Beecham's 1959 performance of Handel's Messiah using Eugene Goossens' orchestration. What once would have been seen as an almost laughable act of historical ignorance is now – rightfully – seen as an historical document in itself. Beecham's essay explaining it has a still-valid and irrefutable logic, even if this sits oddly with present-day qualitative privileging of more Handel-aware performing practices. Broadly, Beecham's argument is that performing practices must adapt in order that the work has its intended effect on listeners – a matter encapsulated in Peter Kivy's distinction between 'sonic' and 'sensible' authenticity (see Peter Kivy, *Authenticities – Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance*, Cornell University Press, Cornell, 1995).

Our interest here is in the performing practices of the first major violinist to perform the Bach solo violin works without spurious accompaniment (as Ferdinand David is alleged to have done): Joseph Joachim. Joachim's aesthetic – peculiarly austere even by the standards of his own times, perhaps – nonetheless parsed Bach's music in accordance with the aesthetic and technical ideals of his own times. (On closer inspection, defining Joachim's performance as old or new is a complex paradox, into which I will not enter here). My nineteenth-century violin set-up is of thick, unwound gut upper strings and a silver-wound gut G string on a modernised violin, and post-Tourte bow. My performance on such a set-up is very different from later twentieth-century modern practices, and likely to be quite distinct from early eighteenth-century practices as well.

In this Sonata, performed from Joachim's own edition of the works released posthumously in 1908, I seek to evoke the style and practice as modelled in his 1903 recording of the Bourée. Joachim's own practice created a sonorous, almost organ-like performance of chordal figurations, which heard on his recording to be snatched quite quickly. Joachim is not averse to portamenti, and we hear this too in his two recorded fragments of Bach; in this context he uses the device sparingly, as he does the vibrato. There is a depth of sound and rhythmic freedom that sounds markedly different from both current 'mainstream', and current 'historically informed' renditions, by and large. It is inappropriate to suggest that performers of Joachim's time were not aware of historical distinctions, and Joachim's two Bach performances are notably more restrained in their use of nineteenth-century expressive devices than the Brahms-Joachim Hungarian Dances, or his performance of his own Romance in C (all of which are discussed in my 2003 book *Theory and Practice…*). So, this recording of mine seeks to emulate, up to a point, Joachim's style and practice. It draws upon my long experience of studying late-nineteenth-century performance, Joachim's performance style, and my work from 2006-9 at Leeds with Clive Brown to put such ideals into experimental practice (see project archive at http://davidmilsom.com/AHRC.html)

See also: 'Time Travelling': Towards An Appreciation of Bach in the Style of Joachim (article by David Milsom, June 2016, here)

BWV 1003: A Minor Sonata

- **baroque violin and bow**
- **gut strings**
- **eighteenth-century performing practices**

This performance reflects a positivist HIP approach, and will seek to display my own understanding of early eighteenth-century practices. Whilst I do not consider myself to be a baroque performing specialist, I have am well informed and perform baroque music on period instruments regularly – most recently as a member of Huddersfield University's 'Four's Company' ensemble, learning from the more specific expertise of the late Duncan Druce, and more recently, Amanda Babington. Preparation of this performance will involve re-appraisal of some of the more practical strain of literature on baroque playing.

My status here is also unusual. Many historical performers, by dint of the fact that the HIP discipline began by tackling the most historically-distant repertoire, have approached later-period work via 'expertise' (or at least modern-times experience) of earlier epochs. That is, becoming expert in performance of early music and stretching this technical and artistic information forward into Classical and Romantic repertoire. This has led to criticism by a number of historically-interested players that later-period music is being performed in a stylistically-anachronistic way because of earlier performing practices being used inappropriately. Commentators who have drawn attention to this have included Clive Brown, as in his May 2010 review article for *Early Music* (pp. 476-480).

My approach to Baroque playing, however, takes the reverse route – via the portal of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century HIP expertise. Thus, I offer perceptions filtered not only (as with all of us) via the inevitable historical inconvenience of being a present-day person, but also via the filters of a deep knowledge of late nineteenth-century practices. The results can claim no more historical legitimacy than that of a present-day player whose practices are influenced by historical stimuli. But the results aim to offer an unprejudiced insight into such a style of playing – deliberately eschewing the current established orthodoxy of Early Music performance, which as likely as not involves various concocted mannerisms of performing practice. How much certainty may we reasonably have that eighteenth century performance should be quite so radically unlike that of the nineteenth century, the legacy of which we can hear on early recordings?

Clive Brown's article, 'Performing Classical Repertoire: The Unbridgeable Gulf Between Contemporary Practice and Historical Reality' (*Basler Jahrbuch für Historische Musikpraxis*, XXX, 2006) proposes, through analysis of performers with clear links with the eighteenth century through pedagogy and chronology, that nineteenth-century performers vividly recounted on record – such as Joachim, Marie Soldat (1863-1955) or the pianist Carl Reinecke (1824-1910) – might be said quite credibly to represent earlier practices. Equally, if read with an unprejudiced eye, many pronouncements by eighteenth-century sources could be read in the light of nineteenth-century

practices. Take, for example, Leopold Mozart's *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing* (1756) trans. Edith Knocker (OUP, Oxford, 1948). On p.203: Tremolo (here synonymous with the modern term 'vibrato') is said to arise '...from Nature herself' and it is an '…error if every note were played with the tremolo.' This is a famous passage, often used to prove that vibrato was seldom (or, if many HP groups performing baroque or early classical music are to be believed, virtually never!) used: 'Performers there are who tremble consistently on each note as if they had the palsy.' But does this not allow for the possibility that the device was used fairly frequently? And how does this differ from twenty-first century advice that vibrato should be controlled and thoughtful?

Moreover, in terms of fingering, Mozart advocates 4th fingers rather than the loudness of the open strings; he also encourages staying on the same string within a phrase, commenting on p.101 that 'The human voice glides quite easily from one note to another; and a sensible singer will never make a break unless some special kind of expression, or the division of rests of the phrase demand one'. Does this not sound at least like a written description of nineteenth-century performing practice? Why might it sound radically different from nineteenth-century practice? These points have portamento implications, perhaps.

My point here is perhaps a little disingenuous – I am not for a moment suggesting that vibrato in 1756 was necessarily akin to that of 1856 or 1956. Nor am I suggesting that in the mid eighteenth century portamento was used as it was in the era of early recordings – although we should not perhaps forget well-documented cases of its use in the eighteenth century, as discussed in detail by Clive Brown in *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice 1750-1900* (OUP, Oxford, 1999). For example, he quotes and analyses Haydn's string quartet Op. 33/2 2nd movement, in which the composer writes successive second fingers in the violin 1 part which are highly-suggestive of portamento of the most aurally-obvious kind (p.581). In truth, it is rather less likely that such practices map directly onto performing practices of Bach's experience, but one should perhaps cast at least reasonable doubt upon present-day HIP performing 'orthodoxies' concerning this music.

BWV 1004: D Minor Partita

- **modern instrumentation**
- **a-historical focus**

This performance, as with BWV 1001, does not seek a conscious historical focus, but it does draw upon my experiences of reviewing recordings, and, indeed, authoring the Naxos publication *A-Z of Solo String Players* (Naxos Educational, London, 2014). This gave me the opportunity to hear many violinists throughout the twentieth century attempt this Partita, and in particular the Chaconne which for many is seen as one of the touchstones of violinistic prowess, both musically, and technically.

Performing the work thus sets a philosophical challenge: does one attempt to emulate, to synthesise, or to act independently? For most people, the former two categories have very obvious limitations, but how can one actually act independently when there is such a well-known legacy of others? For me, the performance requires a degree of tough-mindedness; to resist kneejerk assimilations of 'conventional' practices (which, by definition, seem 'normal'), and to resist too the opposite attitude – the temptation to do something 'different' for the sake of it. Take for example the passage at bar 14. Most twentieth-century 'mainstream' violinists use what is often given to be Joachim's realisation of this – spreading the chord from the bottom to the top, as is 'normal', then hastily returning to the bottom line to sustain the melodic theme. This has a clear logic to it, but has always sounded ridiculous to me – as if the artist is fighting the ultimately-inevitable disconnection between notation, and meaning. None of the nineteenth-century/early twentieth-century editions currently on the CHASE website indicate that the editors advocated this practice, including Joachim, who put his name to a jointly-edited version with Andreas Moser published by Botte & Bock in Berlin in 1908 and from which I perform the BWV 1002 Partita. I decided to employ a more straightforward style here, allowing the active listening of the auditor (and the complicity of ambience and acoustic) to sustain the unsustainable, and using the carefully-considered scale and scope of reverberation to 'complete the musical thought', as would prevail with the intelligent listener in a live acoustic space. But it takes quite a lot of courage to assert one's own artistic sense, especially if it is at variance with prevailing attitudes and practices!

Ultimately, this is again a personal reading – I claim no more for it than the authenticity of my own performance perspectives. And the *Chaconne* in particular reflects unashamedly my own perspectives of performing this music in a very troubled present-day world. It is, quite intentionally, a performance of its time and place.

VIDEO TASTER

BWV 1004 – Chaconne (excerpt)

BWV 1005: C Major Sonata

- **carbon-fibre violin & bow**
- **a-historical focus**

Here, I do not seek to be deliberately provocative, rather, openly inquisitive. I seek to show, in practice, a number of key things.

Firstly, it is my conviction that intelligent, shapely, and historically-interesting playing need not be tied to organological concerns. Wonderful as today's array of 'period instruments' is, the fact remains that

such resources are often not available to players of more modest circumstances. Are they to be denied the opportunities for historical and stylistic experimentation? Playing Bach on an instrument so conspicuously different from that which he envisaged corroborates this.

Secondly, the performance seeks to make a point about the timelessness of Bach's music – the unerring logic of his compositions, as abstract and formalist constructions, as well as Shibboleths of human experience. Invoking terms such as 'genius' might be highly unfashionable and, ultimately of course, qualitatively insecure, but the fact remains that, at least by the estimation of modern perspectives, some composers survive stylistic and organological manipulation better than others. Beethoven's string quartets thus can make perfectly good sense performed using nineteenth-century practices (as displayed by the Rosé Quartet recordings of 1927-8, for example), and using twentieth-century practices with no evident historical intent, such as one of my personal favourite sets – the 1981 recordings by the Lindsay Quartet on ASV. The same might not be said of the music of Louis Spohr. The comparison is fair in that they came at a similar time, and because in the early nineteenth century Spohr's music was generally more popular than Beethoven's. It is less fair when one considers that Beethoven was a rather limited string player whilst Spohr was a virtuoso, writing music based around his own theories and practices of style, taste, composition, and virtuosity. So it is perhaps unsurprising that Spohr was more dogmatic about how his music 'should' be played. Nonetheless, divorced from its contemporary surroundings Spohr's music sounds comparatively weak and directionless. The force of Beethoven's ideas overrides such procedural matters. And so, too, with Bach! In this sense I am asserting – in a rather unfashionable way perhaps, but as the result of much inner reflection and the appeal to common sense – that Bach is one of a minority of demonstrably 'great' composers. It is simple logic and observation of more recent manifestations that suggests that, in a given place at a given time, only a small minority of music (or anything else) is exceptional – sufficiently so to be fully remembered – and much is, at best, workmanlike, worthy, but unexceptional. The same holds true for contemporary pop music – cover bands perform (sometimes in very different contexts) music of 'the greats' – whereas obscurities remain so (except, perhaps, as the focus of aficionados, and/or researchers looking earnestly for an unusual project).

I am thus of the view that Bach's music works well in different contexts. I could opine piously about Bach keyboard music on the modern pianoforte as a 'transcription', but this doesn't in any case stop me enjoying the Goldberg Variations on a concert grand, as well as on a harpsichord. We do not have to choose.

Here I get onto my third point and a more contentious issue, maybe: something touched on by Bruce Haynes in his 2007 text, *The End of Early Music* (OUP, Oxford, 2007). Modern instruments are not modern instruments. I'm not sure I'd go as far as he did and describe them as 'romantic' instruments (there is a world of difference between the voicing of even an overstrung metal-framed concert grand of c.1870, and today's pianos; or between a gut-strung violin of Bach's time, and today's ultra-modern synthetic-strung set-up). But I am going to point out that the whole idea of 'modern instruments' is a ludicrous over-simplification. Even in my time of learning, changes have been big. I was brought up in the belief that Pirastro Olive strings (aluminium-wound gut) were the *sine qua non* of the good

violinist, whereas today most players, myself included, use super-reliable, super-bright, entirely synthetic strings that have a much faster response. Yet we do not refer to violin organology of the 1980s as 'period performance', and – as Leech-Wilkinson has suggested in his article 'Listening and Responding to the Evidence of Early Twentieth-Century Performance' in *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 15 (2010), pp. 45-62 – change usually happens by means of a large number of individually-infinitesimally-small steps. And quite a few such steps have been made in the years since I first picked up a violin in 1978.

So, in a carbon-fibre violin I do have something that might be described as 'modern'. But is it an advance? What is the point? Do such instruments confer advantages over their more conventional counterparts? Are there particular playing characteristics that an intelligent player would seek to exploit? Is it, in fact, best to see these as different, rather than better, or worse?

BWV 1006: E Major Partita

- **to be decided**

The final work's thrust is as yet undetermined. The purpose here is not some kind of pre-ordained set of differences or gimmickry, but rather a means to display the fact that, as a creative performer, I naturally hold a number of viewpoints – and some of them apparently contradictory – at the same time. We shall see what emerges as the project progresses!

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