

What Questions Should a Performer Ask a Musicologist?

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Performers and musicologists traditionally have had trouble communicating with each other. Many performers feel that the musicologist is a dry, dull scholar interested primarily in exploring the esoteric minutiae of earlier music¹ and in using reason along with endless facts for the purpose of always being “right” in any argument or discussion. And many musicologists feel that the performer is an empty-headed activist who spends most of his time in an endless series of rehearsals and concerts, who knows a few facts but has them all out of context, and who sometimes listens politely and respectfully to the musicologists’ ideas but later ignores them and relies on a mysterious, subjective inspiration when it comes to preparing and performing a piece of music from another era.

Unfortunately, these prejudices all too often have a basis in fact. Many performers and musicologists do embody the qualities just mentioned, and, what is worse, they enjoy being that way. Some performers even believe that musicologists have nothing at all to offer the world of music, and some musicologists believe that performers could well be dispensed with, since music is best enjoyed intellectually.

Overcoming this communications gap is a prerequisite to the establishment of a worthwhile working relationship between musicologists and performers. Success will come when both sides discover the good representatives as well as the bad ones in the two fields of endeavor. These “good” representatives possess an open and inquisitive mind, musical intelligence or musicianship, the experience and training of the best specialists in their field, and an intuitive grasp of the problems of both performance and research.

Even when the good performer seeks information from the good musicologist, the questions he asks are often far too limited in scope. He may say, for example, “What ornamentation should I add to this score?” or “How fast should this piece go?” Those who pose these queries, however sincere they may be, want the response to be a specific “correct answer” (as if one existed!), but the resulting performance is likely to be about as imaginative as a painting in which one fills the numbered sections with certain prescribed colors. What is needed is a deeper level of understanding of the piece, from which the sensitive musician will be able to answer this type of question himself. The considerable recent advances in musicology should be utilized more widely in the performance of music of other ages. Performers must learn to ask the kinds of questions which will bring them the information they want and need, facts and ideas which will help them to re-create the original intensity, power, and grace which many compositions from former years are reported to have had. How can inquiries be phrased so as to elicit the most relevant information?

Suitable questions concerning a piece of music fall into four categories:

1) **NOTATION:** One must obtain a score with the correct notational symbols and understand their meaning as to pitch, time values, and other matters expressed overtly.

Question: "What notational symbols represent the composer's intentions in a manner which I can understand?"

2) **ANALYSIS:** Understanding of the composition, especially its structure and style, is essential.

Questions: "How is this piece constructed as a whole, and what is the relation of each section, phrase, and note to this whole?"

"What styles has the composer borrowed or elaborated upon? How has he done this?"

"What is unique about this piece?"

3) **PROJECTION OF ANALYSIS:** The structure and styles should be projected as analyzed; thus performance techniques, usually referred to as "performance practices," must be studied.

Question: "What techniques or performance practices were in use or might have been intended by the composer at the time the composition was written?"

Question for the performer to ask himself: "Which of these techniques will illuminate most convincingly the structure and style of this piece? How?"

4) **CULTURAL CONTEXT:** The piece must be placed in its proper historical framework.

Questions: "What was the cultural context in which and for which the piece was written?"

"Does the composer write as part of a tradition or as a departure from it?"

It will be beneficial to discuss these four categories in more detail, and then to qualify their use with comments, warnings, and suggestions as to whom it would be most helpful to ask.

NOTATION: A performer may face three types of problems in notation: those of transcribing or deciphering unfamiliar notation, those of evaluating an edition which someone else has made, and those of locating and interpreting relevant secondary sources. If he chooses to work from the composer's manuscript (holograph) or a printed edition approved by the composer, he must learn to understand the notational system and to know what the symbols mean in terms of sound. If a modern edition is used, he must be able to evaluate it, know its strengths and weaknesses, decide if the editor knew what the composer intended to write. In either case he may want to have access to certain secondary sources for added information, especially in the absence of an extant holograph. Useful secondary sources are usually the work of the composer, his close associates, or his pupils. They may be verbal writings explaining that particular piece of music or others similar to it, or earlier or later copies of the score, perhaps embellished or abbreviated for various reasons.

In order to dispel complacency in this area, let me say that very few modern editions of music prior to the 20th century are as faithful to the composer as they might be, and many are deficient in important aspects. Heinrich Franz Biber's *Sonata XI* (the "Resurrection" sonata, c. 1675), a favorite with violinists who play Baroque music, is usually performed from the version in the 1905 Austrian *Denkmäler*,² but this edition contains serious errors and meaningless dissonances resulting from the editor's misunderstanding of Biber's use of scordatura tuning. The German musicologist Max Schneider pointed out these errors in 1907 in an article entitled "Zu Bibers Violinsonaten,"³ and a corrected version appears in the appendix of the 1959 reprint of the *Denkmäler*. Nevertheless, a recent performance of this composition in a major recital at a leading eastern United States school of music used the 1905 edition, leaving all the rude mistakes intact. The same sonata is also included in the widely used *Historical Anthology of Music*,⁴ but this version still contains errors similar to those of the 1905 *Denkmäler*.

Not only are some modern editions of older music incorrect, but many major composers are available only in editions for which the editor has not consulted or included information from relevant secondary sources. Interesting alternate versions of many of J. S. Bach's keyboard works are extant in the hand of Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber (1702–75), one of Bach's pupils, but these versions are not available in even the best modern editions of Bach's music.⁵ Practically all medieval and Renaissance composers suffer from inaccurate or unclear modern editions. Furthermore, some controversy exists among musicologists as to the best way to transcribe time values in music before 1650, and transcribers need both experience and musical imagination in order to arrive at a convincing solution or compromise. The admonition *caveat emptor* might well be placed on every modern edition of earlier music.

ANALYSIS: While many approaches to analysis are in use today, most are concerned with a study of the structure and styles of a piece of music. The structural features may include its text (if any), its function in a liturgy, the dance it was meant to accompany or from which it was stylized, a succession of harmonies, the mode or other arrangement of tones upon which it is based, or the succession of somewhat separate sections (as in a theme and variations, or the different strains of a dance piece). In some cases, such as a fugue or canzona, one might look for a type of procedure (i.e., the exposing of a subject in various contexts) rather than a structure in the sense of framework. Perhaps the term "structural principles" describes this aspect of analysis better. In the question of style, one may seek to determine the identifying characteristics of a particular piece as seen in the light of other works similar to it. This includes sources from which this style has been derived, as one attempts to retrace the learning processes of the composer in the compositions which may have influenced him. Some of the traditional sources of styles are found in court, theater, church, popular, and folk music, and in particular ways of treating melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, and the other elements of music.

In general, structure may be thought of as the overall conception of the piece with its various sections, phrases, and gestures, while style is a characteristic manner of doing something—a particular reminder of a certain practice.

Both structure and style must be identified in precise detail in order to make a good analysis. It is not enough, for example, to say that a piece is “in the Viennese style.” The performer needs to know exactly what elements (such as melodic patterns, harmonic sequences, or subtle pauses in timing) constitute this style, and where and how and why the composer has utilized these elements. Stylistic analysis requires not only a practical working knowledge of the styles themselves but also wide experience with many pieces of music similar or related to the one being analyzed. Only then can the unique qualities of the piece be identified and appreciated. As for structural features, it is not enough to say, for example, that a piece is based on bourrée dance patterns. Unless one knows not only the general qualities of the bourrée but also the specific rhythmic patterns with the characteristic steps, and the lengths and shapes of the bourrée dance phrases, one cannot obtain real structural insight into the overall rhythmic framework of the piece. Furthermore, pieces have not one but many structural features, and some of them are more important than others.

PROJECTION OF THE ANALYSIS: Having used the musicologist’s help both in obtaining a suitable score from which to work and in making a good analysis of the piece, the performer should next ask the question “What techniques will illuminate most convincingly the structure and styles as analyzed?” Unfortunately, few musicologists are equipped to answer this, either by training or intuition, since few perform seriously in public and have experience dealing with the performance problems of particular pieces. The performer should keep the question in mind while asking the musicologist to explain instead what techniques were in use at the time the composition was written or which the composer might have intended to be used. The answer to this comprises all the information usually thought of as “performance practices”: for example, basso continuo realization, improvisation, *musica ficta*, ornamentation, dynamics, registration, articulation and phrasing (including the related studies of fingering, bowing, tonguing, and breathing), tempo and its fluctuations, rhythm and its alterations, tuning, and the construction of ancient instruments.

Once the performer has access to a full range of possibilities in these techniques for a certain style and age, he should, with much practice, be able to figure out specific answers himself. In fact, it is imperative that he learn how to do so, since choices should be personal and must make sense for the piece as a whole. He must choose a proper balance of techniques, and this is often an intuitive matter, depending more on musical imagination than on research or logic. He may ask himself “How do I project the Viennese style in this piece?” The answer may be in his choice of articulations (tonguings, bowings, or fingerings), combined with a tempo consistent with the speed of

harmonic change. Or he may say: "How can I show the listener how this piece makes sense as a whole?" Answers can be found in the use of suitable dynamics, registration, or instrumentation, in contrasting articulations and tempos, and perhaps in rhythmic alteration or tempo fluctuation at crucial places in the structure. The important point to make here, and perhaps the most important single statement of this essay, is that the choice of techniques and their proper use are completely dependent upon the analysis of the structure and styles of the piece. One does not simply "plug in" the notes of an ornament; one must think of it in terms of its function in a certain place in a particular composition. Everything depends upon context—both the notes one adds and the timing one gives to those notes. François Couperin uses exactly the same signs for ornamentation in the two keyboard pieces *La Voluptueuse* and *L'Angélique*, but the contrasting moods of the two pieces dictate quite different execution of the ornaments in each case. Of course there are limits in the personal application of performance practices to a piece of earlier music, and these occur when an interpretation results which was probably not within the range of possibilities envisioned by the composer. It is perfectly valid to do this, and musicians throughout history have successfully updated or improved early music to suit a contemporary audience, but the performer should be aware of the changes he has made and possibly add his own name to that of the composer in listing the piece on a program.

Recent advances in the construction of Renaissance and Baroque instruments have made available playable replicas of extant old instruments. Performers are beginning to experiment fruitfully with the possibilities of using, for example, Baroque oboes and flutes in the music of Bach and Telemann. Another encouraging activity is the revival of old systems of tuning, often resulting in striking sonorities not previously imagined. Although these trends naturally improve the quality of Renaissance and Baroque music by providing insights not possible in any other way, one should realize that the use of a certain instrument or tuning system will not in itself result in a good performance. The larger questions of the analysis and projection of the piece's unique qualities must also be confronted and resolved.

CULTURAL CONTEXT: The fourth category for inquiry needs little comment. Although many performers are able to do this type of research for themselves, they may save time by asking for suggestions for the best books, articles, and other source materials to be consulted. The goal is to become filled with a sense of the underlying attitudes and unquestioned assumptions which the people associated with the piece might have had. This includes composer, audience, critic, and performer. One seeks not only the external description of a cultural situation, its buildings, institutions, customs, personalities, and other art forms but also the feelings and reactions of the people to their culture and to each other.

COMMENTS: These four categories are interdependent, and problems in one area may often be solved at a later time by knowledge gained from resolutions

in a different area. One may change his conception of structure after various experiments with ornamentation, tuning, or fingering. An open mind is necessary in probing the mysteries of music of past ages, and not all the answers can be found at one time, or by one visit to a musicologist.

Performers should also realize that much of the research in music is far from definitive. Many questions have not yet been answered; some questions are in the process of being studied, and some have not even been asked at all. It is often wiser to omit certain pieces from the repertoire than to invent an interpretation based on insufficient information. An alert musicologist will know whether or not enough information is available.

If a performer has had training in musicology, he may want to try answering the questions without help. However, he should keep in mind that the answers can be quite subtle, and that finding them often requires highly specialized skills and experience. On the other hand, many performers will object to doing any research at all, with or without a musicologist's help, since they are too busy with rehearsals and concerts to spend time on such study. They depend completely on what they were told by their teachers, no matter how long ago. In my opinion, these musicians should not perform compositions intended for other ages but should limit their repertoire to 20th-century music and some 19th-century compositions for which the performing traditions are still alive. The cultural state of our nation would be greatly enhanced if more performers were to seek new, relevant music instead of continuing to deliver renditions of Palestrina, Handel, Mozart, and Schubert which are either overly dramatic or note-perfect and dull.

In choosing a musicologist with whom to work, the performer should naturally gravitate toward one who does significant research in the area of the piece under study. In addition, he should appreciate the fact that widely differing attitudes toward music exist among the world's musicologists, and that these unspoken opinions have a great deal of influence on the kind of information a particular scholar possesses or can find. Four of the common attitudes or mind-sets are: (1) "The musicologist's main goal, and the only one which can be completely objective, is a descriptive and statistical study of the quantifiable aspects of music in all its forms." (2) "The important thing to be studied in music is style. Every piece embodies styles from other composers, ages, and locations." (3) "Music is a performed art, and, as such, can never be completely written down on a page. Music is only meaningful as sound actually heard and must be studied with this in mind." (4) "Music is primarily a humanistic study and is important mainly as an expression of man's needs and strivings, that is, of his spiritual life."

Most musicologists will refuse to pigeonhole themselves, but most do favor one of these attitudes above the others. The performer should try to aim certain kinds of questions at scholars who have an attitude conducive to a helpful answer. It is unrealistic to expect a dedicated humanist/aesthete to give detailed advice on 14th-century notation, or a statistician-musicologist to provide information on improvisation in Handel's Italian arias. Beware of

a musicologist who gives short authoritarian answers or is engaged in violent controversy with a colleague on certain facts and their interpretation. Seemingly definitive brief answers are often too simple to include a realistic range of possibility, and violent arguments usually indicate that a moderate position, somewhere between the views of the two antagonists, is the most useful and sensible one.

Let performers take the initiative in learning about earlier music from musicologists. Let them ask questions which will lead not only to better performances but also toward new kinds of research in music. To seek the answers to the larger questions in the performance of older music is to follow a long and arduous path, but it is necessary if one is to re-create the richness of the music of past ages.

NOTES

¹ Throughout this paper terms such as “earlier music” and “music from another era” refer to compositions whose performance traditions are not known through direct experience. “Earlier music” includes not only Western art music through the mid-19th century, but any piece whose “flavor” and peculiarities are not a part of one’s understanding.

² *Sechzehn Violinsonaten mit ausgeführter Klavierbegleitung*. (DToe, Jg. 12, T. 2, Bd. 25 [Vienna: Artaria, 1906]). Introduction and *Revisionsbericht* by Erwin Luntz.

³ *Zeitschrift der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* (1907) 8:471–74.

⁴ Edited by Archibald T. Davison and Willi Apel (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), Vol. II, No. 238.

⁵ Samples of ornaments found in two of the Gerber manuscripts are given in J. S. Bach’s *Werke*, ed. Bach-Gesellschaft (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1851–99), Vol. XXXVI, p. xxxviii. Copies of Bach’s music by Gerber are listed in Wolfgang Schmieder’s *Thematisch-Systematisches Verzeichnis der musikalischen Werke von Johann Sebastian Bach* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1950). For further information on Gerber as Bach’s pupil see *The Bach Reader*, revised edition by Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966), pp. 263–65. I am indebted to Professor Erich Schwandt of the University of Rochester for pointing out the potential value of the Gerber manuscripts.