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REINTERPRETING MICHAEL MUSGRAVE AND BERNARD D. SHERMAN'S *PERFORMING BRAHMS: EARLY EVIDENCE OF PERFORMANCE STYLE*

Abstract: Part review, part reinterpretation, this article places Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman's brilliant 2003 compendium of essays entitled *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performance Style,* within the context of today's burgeoning field of practice-led research into historical Brahms performance. In spite of ever-expanding interest in historically-informed performance practices, the piano music of Johannes Brahms continues to endure a degree of negligence – perhaps because modern ears have yet to acclimatize to the sounds of the early recorded evidence. While this volume goes a long way towards the editors' stated goal of reinvigoration of Brahmsian performance, some of the contributors' suspicious attitudes towards late 19th/early 20th century performance styles are also laid bare – leaving modern performers more aware than ever of the historical evidence, yet too afraid to tackle it head-on at their instruments. Nearly a decade later, *Performing Brahms* remains both the most authoritative volume of collected writings on the subject, and a potent reminder that today's Brahmsian pianist-researcher must continue to paddle upstream when trying to approach a more historically-informed style of Brahms performance.

Keywords: Brahms, piano, historically-informed performance, performance history, performance criticism, historical performance.

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Апстракт: Делом приказ, делом интерпретација, овај рад смешта изванредну збирку есеја *Извођење Брамса: Рани докази извођачког стила* Мајкла Масгрејва и Бернарда Д. Шермана, у контекст данашњег све ширег поља практичног истраживања историјског извођења Брамса. Упркос растућем интересовању за историјски засноване извођачке праксе, клавирска музика Јоханеса Брамса и даље је у извесној мери занемарена, могуће и зато што савремени слушаоци још увек нису навикнути на звук најранијих снимљених доказа. И док ово издање у великој мери остварује назначени циљ својих аутора – да поново оснажи брамсијанско извођење, у њему су откривени и поједини подозриви ставови уредника по питању извођачког стила касног 19-ог и раног 20-ог века, остављајући тако савремене извођаче свесније него икада историјских чињеница, али истовремено и превише застрашене да се суоче са њима за својим инструментима. Готово деценију касније, *Извођење Брамса* остаје најмеродавнија збирка сабраних радова на ову тему, и значајан подсетник да данашњи пијанисти, извођачи Брамса, морају наставити свој пут ка историјски заснованом стилу извођења Брамсових дела.

Кључне речи: Брамс, клавир, историјски засновано извођење, историја извођаштва, критика извођаштва, историјско извођење

While the historically-informed performance practice movement has begun to guide musicians ever closer to mapping the shores of late Romantic performance styles, the music of Johannes Brahms has endured a degree of negligence. Long beleaguered by positivistic musicological studies, today's Brahmsian performers seek some measure of the same working conditions enjoyed by the composer: a *working* knowledge of the expressive devices at our disposal, an encouragement of performative flexibility, and an acceptance of widely-differing personal styles. As such, artist-researchers have warmly embraced *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performance Style* – Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman's 2003 compendium of essays on many of the most compelling issues surrounding Brahms performance practice. This volume includes an accompanying CD of historical recordings, and remains the single most authoritative source for those interested in the performing practices of the composer's inner circle.

In their forward the editors acknowledge the difficulty of situating Brahms' music historically. At the turn of the century Brahms increasingly found himself alienated by the emergence of competitive and virtuosic pianism on one hand, and the scorn of progressive followers of the Second Viennese School on the other. As a result, much of what we know about his performing style is essentially a 20th century construct – colored by the agendas of those either scoffing at his conservatism or championing his genius. For this reason, many believe that the performance practices of Brahms' circle were essentially similar to those heard in concert halls today. Fortunately, in the prefatory paragraphs of their book, Musgrave and Sherman state that when it comes to Brahms' music, 'we cannot travel in time.

But equally we know that much has changed. The challenge is to know why, and especially *how* historical knowledge might be of value to performance and understanding today.'[1] It would be easy to criticize *Performing Brahms* for its underrepresentation of essays concerning Brahmsian pianism (as the piano was the central focus of the composer's creative activities), but this scarcity accurately reflects the current state of Brahms performance practice scholarship. There is also little need to detail the pesky inaccuracies to be found in the list of extracts for the accompanying CD, as they are sufficiently discussed in Daniel Leech-Wilkinson's review of this same book.[2] What *is* troublesome however, is *Performing Brahms'* unwitting betrayal of some of its contributing authors' somewhat supercilious attitudes towards late 19th century performance style. The persistence of such attitudes may not only be the most potent obstacle facing historically-informed performers of late Romantic repertoires, but it may undermine the editors' stated goal of performative reinvigoration as well – leaving performers aware of the evidence, yet frightened to test it out at their instruments.

In Bernard D. Sherman's essay entitled 'How different was Brahms' playing style from our own?' the author highlights a number of inconsistencies found within the historical letters of Brahms' circle, yet does not mention those that exist between the letters and some of the Brahms pupil recordings included in the accompanying CD! For example, Sherman describes how one of Brahms' piano students reported that Brahms particularly disliked the practice of rolling chords, while another of Brahms' contemporaries said that the composer's own performances were full of this pianistic device. Sherman could have mentioned that the situation is further clouded by the fact that the pupil's performances on the included CD are resplendent with spread chords.

Like many musicologists wrestling with the evidence surrounding Brahms' performing practices, the author points out inconsistencies without offering plausible reasons for their existence. Perhaps, as the historical recordings and performance descriptions seem to suggest, the practice of rolling chords was indeed widespread, but at times used to excess in the personal opinion of the composer – on a given day, for a particular pupil. This flexibility threatens the modernist need for 'style rules' when it comes to lost performance practices. Brahms is supposed to have either preferred rolled chords, or have categorically avoided them – there is no room for both. That Sherman does not consider a flexible approach to the use of rolled chords is made all the more troubling when he goes on to describe

[1] Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman, eds, *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performance Style*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, xviii.

[2] Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, 'Review of *Performing Brahms: Early Evidence of Performing Style*.' Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman, eds., *Early Music*, vol. 33, 2005, 334-336.

the composer's apparently relaxed attitude towards tempo and vibrato, suggesting that 'Brahms, like many composers, was concerned more with a performer's ability to convey musical content than with adherence to specific performance practices.'[3] If one truly supports such a theory, perhaps it would be more fruitful to gather evidence of all of the varying approaches that made up a particular performing context and offer those *en masse* as viable possibilities for historically-minded performers, rather than searching for style rules and pointing out inconsistencies.

Michael Musgrave's chapter 'Early trends in the performance of Brahms' piano music' also betrays the positivistic leanings of its author. For example, Musgrave states that because Brahms began his career as a concert pianist, 'his piano music is written to reflect accurately his intentions, since its notation is based on intimate experience.'[4] Not only is it highly disputable that *any* score can accurately reflect composer intent, but much of the evidence (his carelessness throughout the publication process and the frequency with which he changed expressive indications) seems to indicate that the very notion of conveying intent with notation is one that was quite foreign to Brahms. Furthermore, one need only listen to the accompanying CD to discover the expressive world that seems to reside, un-notated, between the lines of his pupil's performances.

Musgrave discusses the recordings of two of these students – Ilona Eibenschütz and Adelina De Lara – in some detail. Actually, these women were Clara Schumann's pupils as well, and often premiered many of Brahms' later piano works. Descriptions of the day are full of references to Clara's beautiful, delicate and singing *legato* tone. Such descriptions exist of Brahms' playing as well: as another pupil recalled, 'his touch could be warm, deep, full and broad in the *fortes*, and not hard even in the *fortissimos*; and his *pianos*, always of carrying power, could be as round and transparent as a dewdrop. He had a wonderful *legato*.'[5] Because they appeal to our own tastes, descriptions such as these have largely shaped the way we perform Brahms' music today. Musgrave too seems to believe that the qualities described above are those of a Brahms 'school' of playing. He avoids the inclusion of descriptions of Brahms' playing that contradict those described above (a *Clara* school of playing), as well as those that run counter to our modern performance tastes. He praises De Lara's interpretations for their balance, control and unfailing faithfulness to Brahms' score. He lambastes Eibenschütz's performances for being perfunctory in some instances, and played at wildly quick tempi

[3] Musgrave and Sherman, 3.
[4] Ibid., 302.
[5] Ibid., 303.

'with none of the reflective asides that the music seems to invite'[6] in others. Musgrave points out every instance where she does not follow Brahms' score, makes a mistake, is inconsistent, and where she spreads chords that are not marked. The very fact that Brahms approved of Eibenschütz's playing and entrusted her with the premiering of his works seems to appall the author, never mind the possibility that playing as rowdy (read 'sloppy') as this could have been part of a Brahms school of pianism.

Interestingly, in his earlier work entitled *A Brahms Reader*, Musgrave includes descriptions such as Edward Hanslick's observation that Brahms 'treat[ed] the purely technical aspect of playing with a kind of negligence'[7] and Eugenie Schumann's recollection that she 'never gained the impression that Brahms looked upon the piano as a beloved friend, as did [her] mother. He seemed to be in battle with it...when he played passionate parts, it was as though a tempest were tossing clouds.'[8] Eibenschütz's wild-child performances suddenly seem closer to something Brahms would have preferred than De Lara's!

As the reverberations of the early music movement continue to stimulate interest in the historical accuracy of modern approaches to all musics, those interested in late 19th century repertoires are confronted with something their early music counterparts never had to contend with: recordings and a patronizing view of past performing styles. With *Performing Brahms,* Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman have not only initiated the necessary discussions, but have successfully brought the *real* value of such inquiries to the forefront as well – its relevance to performers. However, this volume is a reminder that today's historically-inspired Brahmsian performer continues to paddle upstream. Armed with the valuable information found in volumes such as this – yet immune to their authors' occasional tendency towards positivism and judgment – ultimately it is *performers* who must find the courage to navigate the craggy coast between our historically-informed intellects and our modernist hearts.

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[6] Ibid., 309.

[7] Michael Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, 122.

[8] Ibid., 127.