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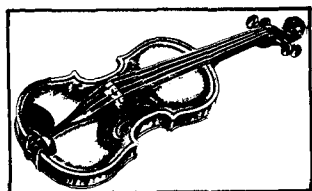
# MUSIC

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*A Reply to Anne-Sophie Mutter*

## Playing on *What Stradivarius?*

*By Michael Graubart*



THERE ARE few unexpected revelations, insights or illuminations in the interview with the young violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter (ENCOUNTER, May). But when an outstanding performer of

today talks about authenticity in relation to the masterpieces of the past, it behoves us to listen—and perhaps to challenge his or her assumptions.

The question is not a simple one, nor the answer a foregone conclusion. Why *should* we make a piece sound as nearly like it did in its composer's time as we can? Ultimately it is a question for the listener. Does he or she listen to music for immediate pleasure or in order to establish a relation with and understanding of the mind and the surrounding world of its creator? If the former, then there is nothing wrong with Bach on the piano or Mozart with modern strings and wind—or, for that matter, electric guitars.

But where does one stop? Conductors regularly “touch up” Beethoven's orchestration—poor man . . . he was deaf, after all. Mahler radically re-orchestrated Schumann; it sounds “better” that way. 19th-century editors changed the harmonies—“crude” by their textbook standards—in Haydn's masses in order to make the tunes more acceptable. No less an editor than Brahms, working on the first collected edition of Schubert, toned down a harsh and structurally crucial dissonance in the *Unfinished Symphony*, establishing the standard version still usually played today. It fits the image of Schubert, the innocuous lyricist, better. But what if we get bored with the 29 bars of reiterated tonic chord at the end of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony? Is it fundamentally so different to cut them? And suppose we find the cheerful D-major coda to the finale of Mozart's D-minor piano concerto frivolous—play it in D-minor? Or do we find the theme of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* too square and predictable? Change a few notes? Even this is not as absurd as it sounds. Vivaldi would have been profoundly disappointed if a soloist had played one of his slow movements as written and not used it as a skeleton for elaborate, improvised decorations, and melodic transformations.

If the listener chooses the other alternative, and tries to re-

enter the aural world of the composer, things are still not easy. We may study the manuscript scores and the contemporary treatises on performance-practice, restore the old instruments, even perform in halls the right size and shape. The one feature of the transaction that we cannot make authentic is the listener's ears. Or rather, the stored-up memories and associations: the seven-note harpsichord crash that begins Bach's *Italian Concerto* must have made his first listeners jump out of their seats; to us, conditioned by pneumatic drills, Concorde, 100-piece orchestras, it is a pleasing tinkle.

Personally, I think the effort to come ever closer to the composer's sound-world is worthwhile. It initiates a cyclic educative process whereby the listener does begin to build up the appropriate set of expectations, and hence responses, instead of the anachronistic ones. But whatever stance we decide to adopt, let us strive to be consistent—and honest.

Thirty years ago—even, perhaps, ten years ago—one had to choose between impeccable “modern” performances of Baroque music and scratchy, unreliable, out-of-tune “authentic” ones. Few performers (certainly not enough of them to form orchestras of quality) could earn a living entirely by playing early music on period instruments. They had to switch between “old” and “new” from day to day, and could not develop real expertise on the old. That is no longer true, and when Miss Mutter talks about Harnoncourt (and, by implication, Pinnock and Hogwood and Norrington and Brüggén and Kuijken, and many other directors of absolutely first-class Baroque ensembles and orchestras) in terms of “searching for just how awful it used to sound”, she is not in fact criticising playing standards, but making a subjective declaration of her own position along the “authentic-modern” axis. She is entitled to prefer Bach on the piano but is perhaps unwise to imply that the harpsichordist plays less well than the pianist.

THE CONDUCTOR, by the way, to whom Nathan Milstein offered his violin when they could not agree about the interpretation of a concerto, would probably have been unwise to risk taking up the challenge. Few conductors, whatever their skills may once have been, remain as well in practice as world-famous soloists. But I did once watch such a gauntlet being thrown down to a conductor—and being picked up with spectacular success.

This was during one of the recording sessions for Verdi's *Otello*, conducted by Sir John Barbirolli. The principal cellist of the Philharmonia Orchestra just could not play the famous solo to the conductor's satisfaction, and finally Barbirolli exclaimed, “If only I had a cello, I'd show you!” Immediately, the cellist handed up his instrument. Barbirolli took it, knelt down on one knee on the rostrum, played the recalcitrant phrase exquisitely and, to applause from the whole orchestra, silently handed the instrument back to its owner—who then played the melody just as Barbirolli wanted it.

Barbirolli had, of course, been a cellist, though he could not have played for decades before this incident. But the anecdote illustrates an important point. Barbirolli had been in close contact with another cellist-conductor: Toscanini. And Toscanini had worked with Verdi himself.

Performing traditions handed on through unbroken chains of great musicians have, it is true, to be handled with critical caution: great performers' idiosyncracies may at times be stronger than their long-term memories. But they are of the utmost importance, none the less, especially where there are neither original gramophone recordings nor (as there are in one or two cases for Haydn and Mozart) contemporary barrel-organs or mechanical clocks. Even when recordings exist, their value is limited by the philosophical problem of exemplification, whereas performing traditions will often be based on an amalgamation of many remembered performances, rehearsals, and even discussions.

WHICH BRINGS ME to Miss Mutter's Stradivarius and all the past music and players' idiosyncracies that she feels it has absorbed. I do not wish to dispute that she can tell when someone else has been playing on it. But what it has primarily absorbed over the years is a succession of rebuilds that makes it not much more like it was in 1710 than a modern Steinway concert-grand is like the fortepiano on which Mozart played.

Today's surviving early violins (if they have not lain undisturbed in museums or been restored to their original state) have had their necks and finger-boards lengthened to make it easier to play in high positions. Their bridges are more arched. They are strung with steel strings or, on the lower ones, strings wound along their whole length with fine wire, instead of plain cat-gut. To bring these heavier and longer strings up to pitch (and a higher pitch at that), they are put under vastly greater tension—which not only yields a more powerful tone, but makes the strings react differently to various bow-strokes and makes the bow bounce differently. And, most radically, to support this greater tension, the internal structure of the violin has had to be greatly strengthened—which changes and damps down the vibrations of its body. The bow, too, is different. By Mozart's day it had begun to change; but in 1710 bows were lighter, and curved in reverse (making them really look like a huntsman's bow) and the horse-hair was under less tension, again altering not just the tone but the kinds of bowing and articulation that were possible and effective.

Why, then, is Miss Mutter so keen on *Ur*-texts? It is, of course, a praiseworthy endeavour at least to be aware of the starting-point from which alterations are made, whether by an editor or by a modern performer. But does she not imply that she *plays* something close to what the composer intended, even though she does so on a thoroughly modernised violin, with a modernised orchestra, making an "improved" modern sound that she infinitely prefers to the original? Why her purism about bowings, when bowings that are effective with a modern violin and bow *do not work* on an early one, and the composer was conditioned in what he notated by what *worked* on the instrument of his own day?

One might also wish to ask Miss Mutter whether she can more readily than the various scholars and editors, define what an *Ur*-text actually *is* when, as in the case of many works

of Beethoven's, she is faced with an autograph, a printer's proof of the first edition, not only corrected but liberally recomposed in Beethoven's own hand, and a copy of the first edition itself, containing some but not all of these changes, and also many other alterations which might, or might not, have been yet more afterthoughts of the composer's. . . .

**B**UT LET US revert to instruments and bowings. "Beethoven certainly didn't compose for the fortepiano: he imagined the sound of the modern grand piano." Really? How does Miss Mutter know? How did *Beethoven* know? Or is it a total coincidence that Messrs Steinway created what Beethoven had silently imagined? Is Miss Mutter not arrogating to herself rather more of the interpreter's insight into the mind of the composer than can easily be tolerated?

There is at least one Beethoven masterpiece that disproves the general applicability of her assertion. The Triple Concerto is devastatingly undervalued, and not just because (like far more of Beethoven's output than the Romantic view of him will readily countenance) it is predominantly cheerful. Played on a modern concert-grand, its keyboard part (written for a talented amateur, the Archduke Rudolf of Austria) sounds thin and puny—not only in relation to the more virtuosic solo string parts (written for professionals) but in relation to our expectations of "modern" piano writing. Played on period instruments, the whole concerto comes together with all its parts on the same conceptual scale, and rises to its proper stature as a result.

Of course, innovative composers make extreme demands on instruments, which lead instrument-makers to introduce modifications—which, in turn, stimulate composers to develop their writing further. But this is a gradual process, which does not involve "imagining the future". When, in the 1930s, Edgar Varese finally became dissatisfied with conventional instruments, he predicted that new ones would eventually be made. He even predicted that they would be electronic. But he did not compose for them. He stopped composing altogether for years, and only began again when some of the new possibilities provided by tape recorders and oscillators (and the like) were made available to him and stimulated his imagination anew.

If Mozart had "imagined" Miss Mutter's Strad and bow in their modern state, and her modern taste, and had composed for them, later editors would not have felt the need to "modernise" his bowings and dynamics. In that case it would not have been necessary for Miss Mutter to go back to the *Ur*-texts. Miss Mutter is as entitled to her position—along the axis stretching from "authentic sounds and styles; insight into an earlier mind and world" to "modern sounds and styles; immediate pleasure, direct relationship to our modern world"—as, I take it, I am to mine. But I do not think she should separate authenticity of *text* from authenticity of instruments and playing styles.

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# ARCHITECTURE

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## Brown Bread & Glass Fibre

*Looking for a New Tradition—By DAVID ANSTIS*



WITHIN MY EDITION of J. M. Richards's classic *Introduction to Modern Architecture* (1940) lies the claim that the battle for Modern Architecture had been won. As things turned out, it hadn't. It was more one particular generation's way of looking at and designing architecture that was the victory: aesthetically topical, clearly rational, socially caring, unafraid of new technologies, thorough—and not a little dictatorial. This was the era and the Golden Age of the Masters: Wright, Corb, Mies, and Gropius, who in varying ways filled the architectural vocabulary with new forms and attitudes about architecture. Study materials, said Wright. Study light, said Corb. Study detail, said Mies. Study *properly*, said Gropius . . . merge with the team into a common cause.

Today there is no common cause. Inner city concerns, vital though these must be, are one facet of a much larger social problem that started (in Britain) with the Enclosure Acts and Industrialism: the undermining of the economic foundations which keep a community live, self-respecting, and self-sufficiently prosperous. Architecture can certainly help towards ameliorating the resultant physical conditions, but even that task does not define what architecture is about or what it might be; as some sort of total activity answering a great range of requirements and conditions.

In recent years the buzz-word for architecture has been nicely tolerant: *pluralism*. The diverse. A choice among equals. Had the Victorians used this word, then we would today no doubt be referring to the War of Pluralism, instead of to the War of Styles in which poor Gilbert Scott got embroiled when his neo-Gothic Foreign Office design was compulsorily re-façaded to neo-Classic on the orders of Lord Palmerston. Surely we can detect the same old story today with the National Gallery affair? Re-styling, façadism, over-concern with the superficial, over-reliance on thousands of words of verbal justification, rather than the proof or otherwise of experiencing a real building.

So, apart from offering a range of choices, has pluralism

any principle which sustains architecture as an art? I suspect not. For pluralism can also be recognised as the escape-hatch for a lack of commitment and an inability to sort out priorities, whether of utility, performance, or appearance.

One can take any of the visual arts and see that from time to time it can be pursued in such a way that its various examples are regarded as belonging to a characteristic group or "school". (Who cannot recognise an Impressionist painting?) Each individual work is nevertheless unique and, if very good of its kind, may well come to be called a masterpiece. Even within the much maligned art of architecture there are masterpieces; with the post-War ARCON pre-fab, for instance, we would be justified not only in describing it as a minor masterpiece but also, by reason of its mass-production as identical replicas of itself, as a "multiple" work of art. Like a Hockney print—quite a lot of them about, but still a very respectable class of art indeed.

Covering the nation with cloned versions of homely, decorated brick and tile is not quite the same, however. Just like those arrogantly massive geometric grids of public housing schemes, concrete dregs of latter-day cult-Modernism, the new buildings seen here, seen there, and then everywhere, also tend to pall. Although the flavour may be sweeter, the final sensation is also one of boredom, with the attractions virtually confined to the outside surfaces. Not, in this case, multiple masterpieces. Not art through and through. Not risqué, wild, humbling, or daring. Neither making up a thorough-going style (as Gothic was in *all* its aspects) nor presenting us with some unique insight into the mind of an individual designer. It is Brown Bread Building—produced because, like a sepia photograph, it evokes a taste of yesterday's security, and because it contains certain ingredients, like small windows and twee porches, which, like fibre in the brown loaf, are supposed to be good for us.

No doubt, in a general way, such things are indeed salutary. After all, the outsides of other people's buildings are, for most of us most of the time, all that we are likely to share in, and the introduction of a variety of elements, textures, patterns, and colours does illustrate a move towards a healthy desire to please the eye, away from the over-determinist grey elevational solutions of conformist '60s modernism. But one is reminded of a company which offers each and every mail-order buyer—no matter how many there might be—a choice from a small list of "real oil paintings". A hundred thousand