

# **Creators vs. Performers**

**by Forrest Kinney**

## **An Outline of Topics with Representative Quotations**

**History: The Stories We Live By**

**The Untold Story of a Great Shift in Western Music**

**The Big Picture: What is the Purpose of Art?**

### **THE KEYBOARD MUSICIAN BEFORE 1800**

**Bach Was Not a “Composer”**

**Musician as Speaker (The Great Stream of Improvisation)**

“In Matheson’s account, the entire audition [Hamburg Cathedral, 1725] is comprised of improvisation, some from a given subject or thoroughbass, and some without any given material. Undoubtedly, improvisation was the foremost skill required of organists in the 18th century. “ — Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra, *Bach and the Art of Improvisation*

“Beethoven’s improvisation, which created a very great sensation during the first few years after his arrival in Vienna, was of various kinds, whether he extemporized upon an original or a given theme. . . Sometimes two or three insignificant notes would serve as the material from which to improvise an entire composition.” —Carl Czerny

**Competitions, Duels, and Cutting Contests**

"Until then I had never heard anyone play with such spirit and grace. I was particularly overwhelmed by an adagio and by several of his extempore variations for which the Emperor had chosen the theme, and which we were to devise alternately."—Clementi about Mozart

**Harmony and Figured Bass (Foundation of Arranging and Improvising)**

"Bach's pupils had to begin their studies by learning pure four-part thorough bass." —CPE Bach

**Many Pieces Were Models of Musical Speech (The Goal was Not Faithful Reproduction)**

From the introduction to the *Inventions*: “Straightforward Instruction, in which amateurs of the keyboard... are shown a clear way ..not only getting good *inventiones*, but developing the same satisfactorily, and above all arriving at a *cantabile* manner in playing, all the while acquiring a strong foretaste of composition.” — J.S. Bach

**Pieces Inspired Spontaneous Speech**

“The famous man [J.S. Bach] who has the greatest praise in our town in music, and the greatest admiration of connoisseurs, does not get into condition to delight others with the mingling of his

tones until he has played something from the printed or written page, and has thus set his powers of imagination in motion.” —M.T. Pitschel, 1741

"At four Wolfgang could master assigned pieces within an hour, playing them faultlessly, with utmost neatness, and in exact time. Using as model what he had learned, he would then improvise on the keyboard." — Mozart's sister, Nannerl

### **Pieces were Mutable Sounds, Not Fixed Scores**

"A large part of the music of the whole Baroque era was sketched rather than fully realized, and the performer had something of the responsibility of a child with a coloring book, to turn those sketches into rounded art-works." —David Fuller, Baroque scholar

### **Concerts (Variety, Arrangements, and Improvisation)**

"According to Mary Sue Morrow's study of Viennese concerts in the 18th and early 19th centuries, there is no evidence of any solo piano sonata being publicly performed in Vienna between the years 1760 and 1810—"Non-improvisational solo material occurred only rarely." — Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age*

## **THE KEYBOARD MUSICIAN AFTER 1800**

### **The 19th Century: Printed Music Became Widely Available**

Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier* was published for the first time in Germany in 1800, a full fifty years after Bach's death.

### **The Rise of the Composer and Interpreter, and the Issue of Originality**

#### **Stunned Humility**

"...there is nothing that surpasses the joy of creation, if only because through it one wins hours of self-forgetfulness, when one lives in a world of sound." —Clara Schumann

"I once believed that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose — there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one?"—Clara Schumann (She stopped composing at age 36.)

#### **The Nature of Print**

"Print is comfortable only with finality." —Walter Ong, S.J.

#### **The Agony of Notating**

"Writing for print often calls for painstaking revisions by the author of an order of magnitude virtually known in a manuscript culture." —Walter Ong, S.J.

"The other day I heard Chopin improvise at George Sand's house. His inspiration is so immediate and complete that he plays without hesitation as if it had to be thus. But when it

comes to writing it down...he spends days of nervous strain and almost frightening desperation. He alters and retouches the same phrases incessantly, and walk up and down like a madman."  
—Carl Filtsch, pianist and student of Chopin

"I witnessed a curious example of that almost morbid conscientiousness of Mendelssohn's with regard to the possible perfection of his compositions. One evening I came into his room and found him looking so heated, and in such a feverish state of excitement, that I was frightened. "What's the matter with you?" I called out. "There I have been sitting for the last four hours," he said, "trying to alter a few bars in a song and can't do it."—Ferdinand Hiller, composer

### **Improvisation is Inadvertently Cast Aside for the Best of Reasons**

"I have seldom felt so like a fool as when I took my place at the piano, to present to the public the fruits of my inspiration...My former opinion is now fully confirmed, that it is an absurdity..and I am resolved never again to improvise in public." —Mendelssohn

"...wretched and dull, nothing but scale passages." — Mendelssohn on hearing the 14-year old Liszt improvise.

"It is impossible to avoid commonplace passages" in improvisations. — Liszt

### **Music Becomes the Score (and the Score Becomes Like Scripture)**

"You must be able to understand a piece of music on paper." —Schumann

"...if printed, it would have constituted a complete work of art." — Schumann

### **Taking the Score Literally (Figured Bass, Embellishments, and Improvisation Die Out)**

"I never carried my piety to the extent of taking his directions absolutely literally."— Wagner, on his Beethoven revisions

"Play what is written; play it as it is written." —Clara Schumann

"It is inartistic, nay barbaric, to alter anything the masters have ever written, even by a single note." — Mendelssohn, in contrast to his earlier attitude about the St. Matthews Passion.

"I [now] deplore these concessions to bad taste, these sacrilegious violations of the SPIRIT and the LETTER, because in me the most absolute respect for the masterpieces of the great masters has replaced the need for novelty and individuality." — Liszt

### **Changing Aesthetics**

"What made Czerny's ideology of child rearing equally revolutionary...was its mechanical model of discipline—the idea that a child could learn by dint of endless repetition to produce something that was perfectly uniform." — *Piano Roles*

### **The Classical Concert Emerges**

"The idea was indeed new: never before in the history of Western music did we encounter any considerable number of instrumental soloists who could achieve fame by confining their performances to other people's compositions." — Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women, and Pianos*

“Mendelssohn got rid of the variety programs that were customary, and began to organize programs much as they are organized today, starting with an overture, proceeding to a large-scale work, then to a concerto or another large-scale work, and ending with a shorter piece. Nor would he separate the movements of a symphony with a divertissement. Often, in programs of the day, a Beethoven symphony would be stopped after two movements, and a harpist, or cellist, or singer would entertain the audience, after which the symphony would be resumed. Sponsors of concerts clearly felt that no audience could survive the intellectual strain of listening to a Beethoven symphony straight through.”—Harold Schonberg, *Lives of the Great Composers*

“Still yearning for the old orality, the 19th Century developed "elocution" contests, which tried to re-pristiniate printed texts, using careful artistry to memorize the texts verbatim and recite them so that they would sound like extempore oral productions.” —Walter Ong, S.J.

### **The Rise of Conservatories and Their Influence**

“Between 1843 and 1918, records show that 1,644 students from the US and Canada attended Mendelssohn’s school in Leipzig. Musical life in the US was profoundly influenced by the techniques, repertoire, and tastes acquired at this and other German schools.” — *Piano Roles*

### **The Master/Servant Metaphor**

“Interpreters are slaves.” —Maurice Ravel “..conformity...to the composer’s will.”—Stravinsky

"Music should be transmitted and not interpreted, because interpretation reveals the personality of the interpreter rather than that of the author."—Stravinsky

“The progressive annihilation of the performer's share in the creation of a piece of music is an alarming phenomenon and one that has never occurred before in the whole history of music, European and non-European.” —Thurston Dart, *The Interpretation of Music*

## **NOW AND THE FUTURE**

### **The Literate Speaker**

### **The Four Arts of Music (New/Old Ways of Teaching)**

### **Beyond “Master and Servant” to “Co-Creators”**

"And in fact composers themselves are rarely dogmatic. Wilhelm Backhaus used to tell a story of Brahms listening to two very different performances of his B minor Clarinet Quintet, both of which appeared to delight him equally.... Although the two readings were totally unlike, both had conveyed his intentions with equal fidelity.” — Timothy Day, *A Century of Recorded Music*

### **Public vs. Private Music (Music at Home vs. Music at Concerts)**

*A talk given on July 4, 2017 for the MTAC conference.*