

Forms of Performance

From J.S. Bach to M. Alunno (1972-)

Edited by

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Series in Music



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Introduction

by Alberto Nones

Associazione Europea di Musica e Comunicazione (AEMC), Italy

This volume is the result of the 2nd AEMC Conference on Music, Communication and Performance, organized by the Associazione Europea di Musica e Comunicazione (AEMC) and held in Montecassiano on June 29-30, 2019. The conference comprised papers and performances, a selection of those appearing in this book and in the attached audio CD. The sub-focus of the conference was on Johann Sebastian Bach, and a number of contributions centered on this subject. The topic of music performance, though, was approached from a much broader variety of angles and the present volume gives a fair representation of the breadth and richness of the authors' and performers' perspectives. It is divided into two parts, the first focusing on J. S. Bach research, and the second on other studies. The division is straightforward but not without consequence. Today, Bach represents one of the most revered and studied figures in the history of classical music, despite a time during which he was almost forgotten. And the second part of the book deals with composers who are active today, like Marco Alunno, or with composers from the recent past who are less known and performed, such as Pietro Cimara and Leo Ornstein. The attempt of this book and CD is to encourage fresh approaches to the study of a monument like Bach, while also encouraging original research of modern composition and performance. This book's form is thus based on the belief that the history of music is comprised of many figures, some undeservedly forgotten, and that our understanding of and approach to music is at once both shaped by the past and directed by constantly changing sounds and attitudes of the present.

To begin the section on Bach studies, Michael Maul's paper exemplifies the approach of a Bach scholar who is also a genuine admirer of an unsurpassable master's art. Specifically, Maul argues that Bach's 200 existing sacred cantatas are a playground in which one can discover and enjoy the very heart of J. S. Bach's art—despite many of them not featuring in the shortlist of the most canonical masterworks. Maul contends that, although these works were composed under constant time pressure as occasional works for given Sundays, churches, and congregations, they can nowadays be considered a

timeless repertoire soaring across geographical and religious borders. The paper focuses on several cantatas, comprising pieces from Bach's early Mühlhausen and Weimar periods to his mature Leipzig work, in order to demonstrate the range of innovations in terms of text-music relationships, instrumentation, and the intermingling of musical genres and styles. Chiara Bertoglio's paper analyses the Italian transcriptions for piano two hands of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin. The transcendental technical and musical demands of these works, besides the demands they pose on the listeners, often discouraged their public performance. The paper examines the approaches to these works through the lense of the creation, by Italian musicians, of numerous virtuoso piano transcriptions of single movements from the Sonatas and Partitas. They range from Busoni's famous Chaconne, to less known but fascinating transcriptions by Riccardo Pick-Mangiagalli and Sergio Fiorentino. Through this study, Bertoglio also throws light on the historical changes in the style of writing and performing Bach in the past century, contributing to the broader issue of Bach reception in Italy. Maria Borghesi's paper is dedicated to the reception of Johann Sebastian Bach's Sonatas and Partitas as a milestone body of works for both pedagogy and virtuosic performance. Borghesi inquires into the Italian reception of Sonatas and Partitas in the late twentieth century, focusing on two specific sets of oppositions: firstly, how the structure of the Sonatas and Partitas allowed performers and music organizers to conceive of them as either coherent collections, or as a series of distinct pieces which were suitable for showing the performers' technical and musical skills; and secondly, how these works could be, and have been, considered as either the latest violin masterworks of the Baroque era, or as the first witness of modern instrumental technique. Borghesi's aim is to show how diverse premises entailed different reception-phenomena in the complex web constituted by performers, concert life, and the Italian discographic market. Quite diverse is the context discussed in Francisco Castillo's paper, which takes us to the use of Bach in music education in Latin America. The issue of Bach's reception here becomes as fascinating as it is problematic. Music education in Latin America, argues Castillo, faces several challenges, the hardest one being the problem of overcoming a Eurocentric history in which biographies of canonical composers, and the use of their music, have played a critical role. The paper identifies the different uses of J. S. Bach in music education in Latin America, from its consolidation as a representative of the Baroque era to a model of technical complexity, from the view of the founder of both tonal theory and tempered tuning to a symbol of personal improvement and as a father of Western music, or indeed of Music as such. Identifying the ideologies and metaphors that openly or indirectly operate in such an influential story, Castillo is able to underline how Bach's shadow has influenced how people

think of music in Latin America. Castillo contends that the emphasis on Bach, and on myths surrounding Bach, has made other important elements of the musical phenomenon invisible in certain circles. Among these other elements are the musical practices, routes of circulation, orality, and dance.

Interestingly enough, musical practice, circulation, orality—in one word, musicking (Small 1998)—were not alien at all to how J. S. Bach may have conceived of and experienced music during his own time, that is, as a real human being, in everyday contexts (Wolff 2001), and separate from the mythographic picture through which many have tried to make sense of his music and figure over the centuries. It is a healthy counterpoint, therefore, to contrast a set of Bach studies with a dive into lesser-known composers of our recent past, as well as into the work of a contemporary composer. To start with, Andrés Ruiz focuses on futurism, an artistic movement that may not be of primary concern for musicians and musicologists but which has played a major role in the development of new art in the twentieth century in several countries, including the United States. Leo Ornstein, for one, was deeply influenced by futurism, especially in some of his early piano music, Ruiz argues. Ornstein's pianism is evidently full of remnants of compositional inheritances, just as it is full of new exploratory challenges and unusual sounds, most notably derived by a combination of mechanism and noise in piano writing. Ruiz's paper, like his performance in the CD, aims to prove that one can identify a link between conservatism and futurism in Ornstein's early piano music, which is a key link, arguably, in any new artistic creation. Alberto Nones's paper, too, has to do in some way with the theme of preserving elements of tradition and adding new elements in the process of artistic creation. Nones examines and compares two art song versions, dating from the early 1930s, of an 1819 famous idyll by Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi, *L'Infinito*. One is by semi-unknown composer Pietro Cimara, and the other by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco. Through musical analysis, followed by a performance of the two pieces that can be heard in the CD attached, the comparison aims to show how a different reading of the same poem, on the part of the composers, can result in important and rich musical differences. Nones suggests that Pietro Cimara's musical reading anticipates an interpretation of the poem (and of the poet) which has come to the fore recently, whereas the other reading, by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, conforms to more traditional visions of Leopardi as the exponent of a pessimist view of man and the world. The hypothesis that music can indeed express pessimism, or optimism, or any other human sentiment and vision, lies at the center of Nones's paper, which also attempts to single out some of those music elements that may vehicle such effects on the listener. Alunno's and Gómez Bravo's paper, endowed with the typical hands-on approach of the composer and of the interpreter, testifies how, in the literature for solo instrument,

etudes typically present different kinds of technical and expressive challenges. Such works often focus on single problematic aspects of performance on a specific instrument. The piano etudes by Marco Alunno have such an analytical purpose as well, although, in some cases, they recall writing techniques and melodic-rhythmical modules usually associated with composers and styles of both the past, with a reference to J. S. Bach *in primis*, and present times. In particular, three etudes (“Expressive Fingering”, “Parallel Thirds” and “Broken Octaves”) are briefly described and analyzed from both a compositional and an interpretive approach, and these can be heard in the CD attached.

Indeed, recordings of performances given over the two days of the conference have been included either to clarify arguments made in the papers, or to more generally testify to the music explored. The technical quality of the recordings has been deemed sufficient for this purpose although it is not of professional standard, especially as regards Ciferri’s and Luisi’s performances, which were compromised by a buzzing sound (which gives, nevertheless, a certain vintage feeling that may be heard as evoking the distance that separates us from the music being played). Thanks go to Mayor Dr. Leonardo Catena and the municipality of Montecassiano, with special mention of Ilaria Palmieri whose efforts are invaluable, for assistance in organizing the conference.

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