The Larger View

by

Abram Loft

In twenty-five years of membership in the Fine Arts Quartet, I played a great many works many times over. The pieces I enjoyed most were, in many cases, also those the audiences most enjoyed hearing, and for much the same reasons. The composition that "clicked" started with an interesting idea (note that I say "idea," not "theme"), explored that idea in ways both logical and surprising, and somehow made the several movements of the piece fit the implications of the opening measures.

Simplistic, perhaps; but think of the performer or ensemble looking down the long stream of notes to be played before reaching that last double-bar. The first sounds are produced, and immediately a calculation process begins: how do the first tones affect those that follow immediately after? How are the next, and the next, to be played so that they vindicate, rather than nullify, the musical thoughts that have come before? On a larger scale, phrases must be built, larger statements and sections constructed, entire movements fleshed out and linked into the overall structure. In an ensemble, moreover, all of this takes place not under the control of one mind and sensibility, but as an interweaving, a constant negotiation process between the members of the group. This is a rather risky pastime, since the players are entirely

dependent on each other, but one that is exhilarating and satisfying when it works.

It works best when the composer has made every note (just enough notes, as Mozart is supposed to have explained to the Emperor) do its job, and when the player sees the sequence of musical events the way the composer saw them originally. This is, on the face of it, an absurd statement, because every performer "knows" the composer's intent in an individual way. That makes life interesting--or devastating --for the composer; it is also the stuff of concert life, accounting for the constantly changing perspective in which a given work is heard in successive performances.

I wish I could say, in the pages of a journal dedicated to the reasoned inspection of music, that the performer builds his perception of a composition through careful preliminary study of the work, so that he knows what he is up to when he begins to practice the piece. Truth to tell, this is usually not so. Especially in the case of an ensemble (at least judging from my own experience), there is a tendency to jump in, start rehearsing, and see what happens. Perhaps that is just as well, for if each of the members of a string quartet, for example, knew in advance how the music should go, the rehearsal arguments would start immediately, rather than build up in the course of successsive practice sessions. Even so, if the work is from the standard repertoire, there will be a barnacled shell of prior impressions, inherited from teachers, from accepted "tradition," from performances heard, and so on. All this

received information about the music may be relevant; on the other hand, often it has not been carefully sifted through by the player, and must be recognized as expendable in the performer's own search for his understanding of the work.

By rehearsing the piece, the players learn not only how to manage technical details, but also how to hear the individual parts in relation to one another. The eighth-notes of inner parts in a Haydn or Mozart quartet have an obbligato function that is interesting and readily apparent when heard in context; it is hard to work up similar enthusiasm when playing the lone part in solitary practice. Moreover, in good ensemble writing, the individual player learns a great deal about detail, line, inflection, coloration, and dynamic shading by responding to what he hears around him in the group. It is the handing back and forth of successive detail that shapes the thought; think, for example of the exquisitely tortuous conversations of the third movement of Beethoven's Op. 130. To play one's own part here, divorced from the other three, is like inspecting isolated fragments of a mosaic.

In the course of rehearsal, performers build a familiarity with the patterns of the work; the hair-raising passage-work of the finale of the Bartok Fifth is unplayable if the interlocking patterns are not second nature to the ensemble. Also, there is a growing sense of the relationship between various events, sometimes widely separated ones, in the composition. This affects the group's perception of overall and

episodic tempi, for example, as well as of such factors as tone color and articulation.

Soon enough, the global concept of the piece, what it is that drives it, comes into discussion. It is at this point that some of the most Talmudic discourse takes place in the rehearsal room. Arguing his own, personal view of the meaning of the work can all too easily become a defense of the individual player's psyche against the attacking psyches of his fellows. Each player's view, after all, is the "right" one.

Actually, even (or especially) with the best of works, it can take time to arrive at a convincing realization of its purpose, particularly since the composer feels no compulsion to offer verbal clues to his thinking. Let me give a few illustrations, starting with some of my own experiences.

Many years ago, before I had anything more than a casual, listener's view of Beethoven's Op. 95, I was annoyed by the apparently extraneous Allegro tacked on at the end of the finale. It seemed to be a bit of glib virtuosity, a disturbing and gratuitous throwaway, unworthy of the brooding intensity of all that had preceded. It was only in the course of time and of the performer's close contact with the work that I came to realize that the violent changes of mood and temper, the deliberate and probing indecisions that mark most of the piece, right up to the end of the Allegro agitato, seemingly ready to die away there in the exhaustion of uncertainty, finally enforce a radical solution: the rather hysterical brightness and verve of the postlude. It is a resolution

that settles nothing and everything, an impatient recognition of the fact that the vacillation of moods that has been spelled out since the beginning of the piece has no answer other than this frenetic busyness that fires us out of the work. This is quite unlike the triumphant, cadential trumpetings that mark the close of other Beethoven pieces.

Again at a callow stage of my musical experience, I felt annoyance at Mendelssohn's constant rushing about within the frame of a sonata allegro in the first movement of his Quartet in D, Op. 44, No. 1. Why didn't he settle down to the serious working-out of material in the structural frame he had adopted from his predecessors? It was only from the experience of playing the piece, of sensing the excitement of the intense tremolos, the racing lines, the constant forward thrust of even the quiet interludes that I recognized that the feverish motion is the essential stuff of this very properly named, Molto Allegro vivace. A close analogy in another art seemed to me to be Turner's "Rain, Steam and Speed," actually not far removed in time from the date of Mendelssohn's quartet, where the diagonal slash of motion cutting across the canvas seems to outweigh concern for literal detail of representation, yet conveys a feeling that makes literalness irrelevant. In the Mendelssohn work, the impulse of the opening movement can be thought also to cut across the canvas of the entire work, driving the unfolding lines of the Menuetto and the swirling eighth-notes of its trio, accounting for the constant sixteenth-note pulse of the third

movement, and clearly finding its culmination in the unbridled sweep of the last Presto.

The player's-eye view can be distorted, blurring the message that the composer has painstakingly built into the music. One of the most challenging quartets in the repertoire is the C major, K. 465, of Mozart. I recently had occasion to listen to a number of recordings of this piece by various ensembles, including my own, and was struck by the fact that most of the groups seemed to miss the point of this quartet. The slow introduction, with its false relations, not only has earned it the nickname of the "Dissonant" quartet, but even, in the nineteenth century, evoked a number of misguided attempts to "correct" the part-writing. But this composer who could (two years later) write the sophisticated gaucheries of the *Musical Joke* knows exactly what he is up to in this most serious of quartets. The quiet, successive entry of voices, moving toward meeting-points that are disturbed by the foreign tones of the first violin part (measures 4 and 6)--from this arises an eerie unrest that suffuses the rest of the introduction. Clearly these opening lines of the quartet demand a very atmospheric, moody treatment.

I was distressed to note, then, in too many recordings a business-as-usual approach to the introduction: too etched an articulation of the cello's eighth-notes in the first measures; excited vibrato instead of a cool sound; overdriven crescendos and *fortes*; and undiscriminating, hard attacks of the *sf* and *sfp* notes in the last seven

measures. If the handling of the introduction calls for sensitive treatment, the relation between this Adagio and the ensuing Allegro is no less problematic. Both the melodic detail of the first violin part and the pulsating eighths of the inner voices in the opening statement of the Allegro clearly reflect corresponding elements in the Adagio. This relationship should affect the players' approach to the Allegro, certainly so in its first measures.

Why, then, do some performances give the impression that the Allegro is a sudden and complete release from the sense of the Adagio? So athletic is the playing of the Allegro at the hands of more than one ensemble that it conjures up a vision of the Marx Brothers pedaling a four-seater bike. The very choice of tempo is in question. Must the Allegro be relentlessly brisk? Not only should it be of moderate speed, but it should yield to the requirements of the reflective parts of the movement, such as the opening, the first measures of the bridge passage, the codetta of the exposition, much of the development, and the closing lines.

Similar problems arise with the performance of a work that may well have been inspired by the Mozart example: Beethoven's Quartet in C, Op. 59, No. 3. Here the slow introduction, as in the Mozart, seems designed to establish a wandering, groping sense, first sinking, then rising to hover on the dominant-seventh chord at the juncture with the Allegro vivace. The texture of the introduction is simpler than in the Mozart case, and ensembles grasp the appropriate

tone more readily, though there is still a tendency to play the episode with an edge that cuts too sharply through the required atmosphere. There is more of a problem with the Allegro vivace itself. Where Mozart masks the still transitional aspect of the opening of his Allegro by coming immediately to his tonic, C major, Beethoven more overtly indicates the bridging nature of his first allegro measures (for first violin, solo) by casting them still in the dominant, threatening to move yet farther afield harmonically in the violin's second flight, while reserving the actual arrival at the tonic for the massed statement by all four voices at measure 43.

As observed in the Mozart performances, so also in the Beethoven there is a tendency to take at face value the assumed release that the Allegro provides from the murkiness of the introduction. Thus we find some first violinists arcing calisthenically and squarely through the solo statements, apparently insensitive to the fact that these flights are a continued manifestation of the uncertainties of the introduction. Beethoven, like his predecessor, lets the ramifications of his opening measures extend to later portions of the work. To name a few examples: the tiptoe stealthiness of the ensemble maneuvers at the opening of the development and the lead-in to the recapitulation (maneuvers reflected, at higher speed, in some passages of the finale); the touchings and circlings of the part-writing in the second movement, which, overall, suggests a slow-motion expansion of the mood of the introduction; the quite clear reflection of the introduction in the

transitional coda that carries us from the Menuetto to the finale; the solo entries of the Allegro molto, which may well hark back to the first violin's solitary state at the beginning of the first Allegro; and the repeated interruptions of motion, sometimes emphasized by a *fermata*, that block out the frame of the finale, as though recalling the moment of suspension between Adagio and Allegro.

Further, we might consider this quartet, the third of the Razumovsky set, to be part of a trilogy. (The concept fits more conveniently here than to the three Galitsin quartets; our ensemble once performed the latter group, complete with Great Fugue, in one concert, which made for an interestingly long and strenuous evening. We did not repeat the experiment.) If the three Razumovsky's are thought to have any temperamental balance between them, then the C major must be played not simply as a kind of monumental *Kehraus*, but with the overall seriousness that befits not only its own musical personality but that of the other two quartets in the opus.

One consideration that comes out of all this, it seems to me, is that it is not enough to study the score (even *Urtext*) of a work and take every indication as literal, unalterable truth. If, as some have done, we refer to Beethoven's own metronome markings and take these as a license to run at madcap pace through the fast movements of Op. 59, No. 3, there comes a point of diminishing returns. There is no profit in riding a fast train if it means that you must ignore details of the passing scenery. With all music before the age of the phonograph, we

cannot know how the composer himself actually heard his music played. We can use circumstantial evidence, including written descriptions by contemporary laymen and professionals, as secondary guides, but our prime information must come from the dictates of the composition itself.

From what I have heard in all too many a recording and performance, whether by soloist, chamber ensemble, or conductor, there is a blight of over-achievement abroad in the the land. We can play faster and more cleanly than ever before; our orchestras are models of synchronization and precision; our instrumentalists take in stride the most difficult technical assigments presented them by composers past and present. But too much playing and recording sounds as though the piece was there to be played and recorded. The machine works; the music is ground out, often with crystalline clarity, yet without any impulse to respond to the temperamental demands of the work at hand. In the case of older repertoire, the mere use of authentic instruments and bows is not a sufficient answer. Neither a gut string nor a valveless horn, not even a well-turned ornament or properly unequal notes will compensate for a mechanical approach to the realization of the music.

What I have tried to indicate in sketch is that a composition by a master can reveal to the perceptive performer a great deal about its particular purpose and integration. So also, it can deny that revelation to those who concern themselves so much with mastering the small technical details of the work that they miss its larger sweep and

implication. Both aspects, of course, are essential to an acceptable realization of the piece.

The ability to balance both aspects is partly inborn, like the musical gift in general. To a large extent, however, it must be learned--and taught. Performers in general, and string players and pianists in particular, begin their study at an early age, when they are thought too young to be able to deal with the intellectual and psychological concepts that govern musical line and structure and the subtleties of interpretation. While it is true that such perceptions come more readily to one of some years, they can in some measure be transmitted already to the younger student by a teacher who is used to thinking of such matters on his own.

Unfortunately, too much instrumental teaching of young people, whether private or institutional, concentrates almost exclusively on control of the apparatus. It is impressive to see large numbers of youngsters fiddling away, in surprising synchronization and intonation, in a Vivaldi concerto movement. The technical efficiency and discipline is clear-cut, but how many of the products of such an approach go on to personal musical understanding, or the ability to communicate that understanding through their playing to their listeners? How many, for that matter, become music consumers, concert-goers, or serious listeners in their mature years?

Some sense of musical process and structure can be absorbed to an initial degree through exposure to a broad spectrum of music.

Most students have a painfully limited view of the musical literature. Many complete their years of professional training, indeed, having experienced only a small portion of the repertoire for their own instrument. Especially today, when there is such a broad array of music from all periods and styles available in recorded form, those teaching young people should encourage and facilitate their tasting of the widest possible range of compositions.

Aside from the more immediate benefits of such exposure, the student would be in a better position to deal with the historical view of music when he reaches the classroom in his collegiate years at a professional school of music. As matters stand now, the older student tends to memorize the words that reflect the musical awareness of the music history teacher or the textbook writer, divorced from the sensations that produce those thoughts in the first place. Concentrated doses of listening-list material will be necessary in any case, but even these are more meaningful if carried out against the background of broad, earlier listening experience.

Ideally, the well-equipped performer looks to the music historian for several things. First, a clear idea of what music and musicians have meant to society, and vice versa. Second, a view of the kinds of music that have been produced as a result of the interaction. Third, as accurate an idea as possible of performance practices in all periods. Fourth, a grasp of the important musical figures in the various periods of history, why their work is important, and what their major,

representative compositions are. Fifth, a sense of the available repertoire, of reliable editions of that music, and of important historical sets. Sixth (and probably an automatic result of the above), the ability of the student to find answers to his questions about music history as he moves into his professional years.

There is undoubtedly more emphasis on the the study of theory than of music history in the early training of an instrumentalist. Its value is manifest, since it reveals to the student at least the following: how music is constructed, what kinds of musical structures have been produced in our history, how the given structure coheres, and how causes and consequences within that structure take effect. The presentation of this material must obviously be matched to the learning skills of the student's age group. At all levels, however, the performer must be kept aware of the close relation between the overall musical structure and its smallest component units.

In my own experience as teacher of violin and of chamber music, I have often found that students do not sufficiently retain the historical and theoretical insights they receive in the classroom when they cross the hall to the practice room or the teaching studio. Theorist, historian, and applied teacher must collaborate patiently to make the student realize how important to interpretation is a grasp of the ways of music in a given context of time and style, and of the ways of a specific work in its own environment.

Even as a student on the collegiate level in a professional school of music, the performer has already demonstrated a significant degree of musical intelligence, else he would not be there. The historian and theorist, speaking with expertise and clarity, are vital to the illumination of that intelligence. Conversely, the well-informed, thoughtful performer will, through his interpretation, cast sidelights on the musical literature that cannot but be helpful to the perceptions of the scholar. This is an age of specialization. Very few can now hope to be effective as performer, composer, theorist and scholar all in one. Representatives of the several musical disciplines, however, have much to give to each other.