

Authenticity and Evgeni Mravinsky's Style

Evgeni Mravinsky was one of the great introverts among musicians. He plays from the inside out, while the great Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg plays from the outside in. The same is true of the two great German pianists Wilhelm Kempff and Wilhelm Backhaus, Kempff being the introvert, playing from the inside out, and Backhaus the extravert, playing from the outside in.

To appreciate Mravinsky's way of conducting one must pay rapt attention and get inside the performance, joining in with the conductor. The extraverts come right at the listener, but for Mravinsky, one must come to him. Listen to his recording of the Tchaikovsky 5th Symphony (the 1978/6/13 live performance in Vienna is my favorite). More than any other recording of this score, Mravinsky emphasizes the *cross currents*. The cellos, say, will make their appearance in the score, but Mravinsky will point them up: they surge into the music and become the most dominant part; then they subside. This emphasizing of cross currents repeats itself throughout the work. Yet although it seems at every point that the forward drive of the music is ignored, when one is done listening, somehow the drama and forward momentum were there all along.

Compare this to the live performance of the same work on 1939/11/26 conducted by the extraverted Willem Mengelberg, with the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam. This is a sensational performance, played from the outside in, that comes right at the listener, and one is bowled over, especially by the brass instruments. Now, when one is done listening, one realizes that Mengelberg managed to take care of all the details.

Speaking again of that other great inside out performer, Wilhelm Kempff, his playing has been described to me as cold and unemotional, but those who have joined in with this gentle poet find his emotions to be quite powerful. And so it is with Mravinsky: his performances have also been described as cold, and this may be the most frequent negative criticism of him by reviewers. Fans of Mravinsky will need no convincing; so encourage your friends to keep on listening! The Tchaikovsky 5th is a very good recommendation, but the Shostakovich 5th (again the Vienna performance is the best) is the most committed performance by far ever recorded. This one does come right at the listener, so much so that, by the time one finishes listening to the first movement for the first time, one knows one could get no such depth of understanding from any other performance. (Ah, if a performance by Mengelberg or, say, Hermann Scherchen should turn up! But this is very unlikely.)

Now keep listening to the Mravinsky Tchaikovsky 5th and ponder whether the composer really wanted these cross currents to be highlighted by the conductor. They were in the score, of course, but they were just part of the overall flow of the music, not something to be singled out and emphasized. Or so it might seem. The charge could be made that Mravinsky countered the wishes of Tchaikovsky by playing his music in a way he did not intend. We are hearing Mravinsky's Tchaikovsky and not Tchaikovsky's Tchaikovsky. Mravinsky is, therefore, not "authentic".

This is true: we are indeed hearing Mravinsky's Tchaikovsky, but this is *in fact the very essence of authenticity*. The reason is simply that music as performance art and the performances truest to the nature of music as performance are precisely those that strike a *balance* between composer and performer. Just to play the notes, however competently, gives the listener *only* the composer. This is without any risk whatsoever, and the performer can be sure the audience will clap politely at the finish. Such a performer risks no hostile reviews claiming that he has violated the wishes of the composer, though the reviewer may complain of dullness.

That such dullards (comparatively speaking, at any rate) bother to make music at all can only be explained by the fact that people just enjoy making music. This suffices to get conductor and orchestra through their concerts. As a *listener*, however, one is spoiled and can go home and put on some really exciting records and not have to listen to those who just enjoy making music themselves, though it often seems that these musicians come less and less to like music making and just go through the motions. Give us, instead, a group of amateurs whose infectious butchering of Bach or Mozart (so hard for them) carries us listeners away! This is fine: much worse is too little performer and too much composer.

On the other hand, there can be too much performer and too little composer. Glenn Gould's recordings of Mozart's sonatas come foremost to mind. Gould very much detested this music, and he has often been accused of deliberately making them as bad as possible. In my own view, the sonatas are not the towering masterpieces the piano concerti are, and so when I hear the sonatas, I very much want a tremendous amount of *performer* to really enliven the music. (I like Gould better than Mozart anyhow.) This Gould manages extraordinarily, but if one wants more standard performances of this music, try those with a great deal of performer still, such as Reine Gianoli's long-vanished recordings for Westminster or any of those of Backhaus or Artur Schnabel. Kempff's single disc of Mozart piano music is, I used to think, one of his weakest discs, but a recent hearing – when I was in just the right mood – made me reevaluate it upward.

Many of Mravinsky's performances may also strike one on the first or second hearing as being weak. Perhaps one failed to join in quietly with this great introvert, or perhaps some of his discs are in fact simply weak. This is not to say that the performances are in any sense bad or incompetent; it is just that the balance between composer and conductor was struck too far in the direction of the composer. What is certain is, that if the relistening and reevaluating goes on, one will be greatly enriched. By contrast, one does not so much *reevaluate* the great Mengelberg: one just listens and enjoys more and more.

What might turn up with Mravinsky? I hunger most for a Berlioz *Symphonic Fantastique* (which may get released) and a Mahler 3rd. Mravinsky, if he was nothing else, was a master of orchestral color, and these two works demand that mastery. And to hear him manage to point up the cross currents in these two scores would be revelation indeed. It is the sometime revelation of what can be more than the composer himself knew that constitutes true authenticity in what is, we must never forget, fundamentally a performing art.

Endnote

Mengelberg made two studio recordings of the Tchaikovsky 5th, but the live performance of 1939 is by far the best. Unfortunately, the live performance, first issued by the Bruno Walter Society on LP in the United States and later on the King label in Japan on compact disc, is so poor in sound (evidently derived from an amateur home taping off the radio) that one could only sense, not hear, its true magnificence. Happily, I was able to obtain the original master tape used for a rebroadcast over French National Radio and lent it to Fred Maroth of the Music and Arts Program of America (the second

successor to the Bruno Walter Society). He used this tape in a four-disc set (CD 780, "The Mengelberg Legacy") issued in late 1993, which contains other magnificent live performances, including my favorites ever of the Beethoven Third and the Brahms Third Symphonies. I also call attention to a stupendous live Mahler Third, conducted by Hermann Scherchen, with the Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra in 1960 (along with a live first movement of the Mahler Tenth) on a two-compact disc French set, Tahra TAH 101. This is Scherchen at his most characteristic.