Performing Baroque Music on Modern Instruments: Challenges and Possibilities

Kypros Markou, Violin with Glenn Burdette, Harpsichord

Monday, October 30, 2017 5:30PM Schaver Music Recital Hall, Old Main

Thurston Dart in his book “The Interpretation of Music” points out that Music is one of the arts “which need re-creation on every occasion that they are experienced; thus each performance of a play or a dance or a piece of music is a unique phenomenon....” Over the last hundred-plus years musicians and scholars have become more mindful of the necessity to incorporate knowledge about the sounds, performance traditions, styles, and aesthetics that were part of Baroque Music.

During the 19th and 20th century musicians performed music from the Baroque era using instruments that were different from the ones used during the life of the composers. During the second half of the 20th century and even earlier musicians and scholars began to promote the idea of performing baroque music on baroque instruments. They researched the performance traditions, aesthetic and styles of performance adhered to during the Baroque era. In recent years there has been a tremendous growth both in numbers and quality of ensembles that specialize in performing baroque music on baroque instruments. Still, the reality is that there are thousands of musicians, from High School ensembles to fully professional orchestras who continue to perform music by Handel, Bach, Vivaldi, Telemann, Lully and many others on modern instruments because they do not have baroque instruments.

Being pragmatic about the situation one must still explore possibilities to emulate the sound and to reflect the aesthetic of Baroque music even when performing on modern instruments. It may not be ideal for presenting “historically accurate” performances, but it can lead to performances that are much closer to the spirit of the music than the often romanticized performances that have been common for many years. In our efforts we can be guided both by the writings of Francesco Geminiani, Leopold Mozart, Johann Quantz and other authors from the 17th and 18th century but also from scholars of our time such as Thurston Dart, Christopher Hogwood, Stanley Ritchie and many others. We can also listen to today’s outstanding baroque performers who use original instruments. This will enable us to present performances that reflect the aesthetic of baroque and come closer to the original performance ideals. In the end we hope that the listener will enjoy the essence, nature and true character of the music.

Kypros Markou is the Director of Orchestral Studies and the Conductor of the Wayne State University Orchestra. Additionally he has served as Music Director of the Dearborn Symphony in Michigan since 1997.

Glenn Burdette is an adjunct faculty member in music history and harpsichord performance at Wayne State University.

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