

What's the Use of Music History?

One part of my employment at *Lucerne University of Arts* is teaching history of music on BA and MA level. There I detected that many music students regard history of music as a waste of time that keeps them away from practicing and rehearsals.

At first glance, one can understand that point of view, after all their passion and the aim of their education is *making* music. Moreover, the justification that a music teacher has to know music history in order that he can teach it to his students is not very convincing. It cannot be the intention to educate students in music history so that they can educate later their students in music history so that they can educate later their students in music history...

Nevertheless, I'm firmly convinced that the knowledge of music history can influence the making of music; that it can improve the performance – but only if we rethink about the way we are dealing with this subject.

First, we have to abandon the claim that history of music is a continuous evolution. The history of development is a construction of the 19th century. In the beginning of musicology as an academic subject in the end of the 19th century, the scholars tried to conceive music history as a straight-line progress, which is in fact an unsustainable construct. As more information we got during the 20th century as more we saw that music didn't develop in one single line from one grandmaster to the other and from centers to periphery but in an inconsistent, asynchronous and complex way that was different from place to place. There is no time now to discuss the problem of the logical circle of this concept of music history – which means in short that we estimate for example Johan Sebastian Bach as one of the best baroque composer because we developed the criteria for good baroque music on Bach's work. But you can see, what I want to point out: we have to disband from the aim of knowing the complete history of music – not only because of what I said before but mainly for the simple reason of the exploding amount of data. Today nobody can seriously assert knowing more than fragments of the whole history of music. Maybe you are adept in Renaissance-music or in modern jazz or in German romanticism but you cannot be adept in all genres and times.

However, this fact shouldn't unsettle us. We have to learn – like in other fields – to deal with the fact, that there is no canon anymore. Who can say what is the canon of great works that one should know? Even if we restrict to one part of an epoch – there is so much music that is worth to know that you could easily fill a book or a twenty-volume CD box.

However, this mustn't prevent us from music history. We are nowadays in the convenient situation having random access to an inconceivable abundance of music from all times, places and cultures – and we should take advantage from that. The best way to do so is regarding music not like historians but as ethnomusicologists. What does that mean, dealing with history as an ethnomusicologist? Well, an ethnomusicologist has no problem with the fact, that he doesn't know all the different cultures of the world. He picks out those he is interested in and tries to approach and gain comprehension. And this is in my opinion the most beneficial way to deal not only with foreign cultures but also with the past. We have to learn to handle different times like different places. In fact, the past is nothing but a foreign culture. Things happened different there, people spoke different, had other conventions, customs and morals, they were differently minded and had a totally different perception of music. So we have to try to understand the way they were living and thinking in order to understand their music. In this respect a culture from a pacific Island doesn't differ much from a 16th century society in Europe. Of course we cannot do fieldwork in the past, but we have enough material we can consult to gain insight. Music is a universe. Some planets are far away in a temporal sense and some are distant. Most of them are worth to explore. Music history is nothing else than a voyage through this universe. You can try to visit as many places you can – like Japanese tourists on their «Europe in ten days»-tour or you can select some places and spend some time there.

There are several examples in the history of music where composers, conductors and even interpreters gained insights from a comprehensive examination of different cultures or times that were fundamental for their work.

The first example I want to mention is the Austrian musician and conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Harnoncourt started as a Cellist of the Vienna Philharmonic. A year later he founded the Concentus Musicus Wien ensemble to provide a forum for his increasingly intensive work with period instruments and Renaissance and baroque musical performance tradition. This was the key to an entire universe of forgotten works and musical experiences buried under the sands of time.

Let us hear two short examples from the Gloria of Johann Sebastian Bach's Mass in B minor. This was a historical recording with Herbert von Karajan, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and the «Vienna Friends of Music» from 1953. Although there performed great musicians and a outstanding conductor the recording sounds a bit unwieldy, almost clumsy too much like a

19th century symphony. But it was the best interpretation of Bach's mass in b minor one could imagine at that time.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt felt unease with that kind of interpretation and so he began to studying not only the scores of that time but all the circumstances that were relevant for the music in this age. He rediscovered the original instruments of the time and collected information about the performance practice and the terms Bach had to accept in his employment. Thereby he gained new insights and perspectives on the interpretation of old music because he realized that everything was totally different then: from the pitch to the instrumentation and the instruments. So he discovered that the performance practice of the 19th and 20th century was not appropriate to that kind of music and he tried to interpret in a more adequate way.

We listen now to the same section from a recording with Nikolaus Harnoncourt with the «Concentus Musicus Vienna» with original instruments.

Historical performance practice is a controversial matter and we don't have time to discuss it here. But I'm sure that you could hear the vivid lightness and colorful richness in this recording. And that's the crucial point in my opinion. It's not so important if you use an original instrument or not but it is crucial that you take the decision actively with full knowledge of the consequences. There are fantastic recordings of baroque music with modern instruments nowadays because the musicians benefit from the insights of the use of historical instruments. The important thing is that one understands a piece of music as completely as possible. And therefore the ethnomusicological approach to the past – which includes the comprehensive examination of a culture and not only biographic details and worklists – can be fruitful and inspiring.

Another example for a worthwhile voyage through the universe of music is the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky. He was one of the first composers that regarded the past as a foreign culture and not as an untouchable bygone thing; the keyword here is neo-classicism. Stravinsky took the old baroque forms and filled them with new contents. Therefore he didn't need a wide knowledge of the whole history of music but a deep comprehension of some parts of it – and the insight that music history is not an academic end in itself but a stimulus for his own creativity. Interestingly Stravinsky did not only take inspiration from the past, he was also influenced by folk music and – by popular music. He didn't divide between influences from the past times or from foreign cultures like popular music. He was simply a voyager in the universe of music.

A good example is one of his works from 1918, which is based on and named after the then popular music style: Ragtime. First we hear a ragtime recording from 1916 of Scott Joplin's «Magnetic Rag» and then Stravinsky's composition in that style.

Stravinsky's work is not anymore a simple piece of popular dance music but it results from his approach to other musical cultures. Here we can see that in fact it doesn't matter if one gets his inspirations from bygone or from other musical worlds. Important is, that one can widen his horizon by serious studies of far away times or cultures.

The last example I present is one of the greatest contemporary American composers, Steve Reich. In Reich's work the reiteration of musical phrases with subtle, gradual, variation over long periods of time – without musical development in a Western sense – plays an important role. The power of Reich's music is based on the constant repetition of small units beyond the point of boredom where it evolves a suggestive, hypnotic almost trance-like effect. Reich didn't develop that kind of music from nothing by virtue of his ingeniousness. He found the idea for this composition technique by studying West African music. West African music is based on the permanent reiteration of different patterns that proceed in a complex polyrhythmic texture. Steve Reich experienced the hypnotic power of that kind of music and took it as a basis for his own musical language. He never just copied African music, but his experiences with that strange way of making music had an important influence on his artistic development. To show you this connection between West African and minimal music I'll give you two examples: first is a sample from a Yoruba Drumming Ceremony from Benin, West Africa. You can hear several drums, rattles and bells reiterating patterns with small variations. Now we hear the beginning of Steve Reich's early work «Piano Phase» for two pianos or marimbas from 1967. The pianos reiterate a simple tonal phrase during the whole piece. By and by the two pianos begin to shift slightly, like two tape recorders that are not exactly synchronized. For those who don't know Steve Reich or minimal music: you will find the piece interesting for the first ten seconds, then you'll find it boring, then it will get on your nerves and then – maybe – you'll get into it and feel the fascinating, trance-like power of this kind of music. Regrettably we don't have time to hear it entirely. The whole composition is more than 15 minutes, but I hope that the example is long enough to show you the effect. Whether you like minimal music or not: the comprehensive examination of a foreign culture can give you new ideas and perspectives. If we understand music history in the way I tried to describe, not as an academic imposition but as a means of understanding, then it is worth the trouble.

To come back to music education: at *Lucerne University of Arts*, we arrived at the conclusion that a deep knowledge of some parts is better than a superficial overview. So we changed the curriculum. All the BA music students have to attend now a two-hour per week lecture on history of music during the first two semesters. In a very short overview, we give them a minimal knowledge of conventional history of music from the middle ages to the present day including Jazz, Rock, Folk music and the most important non-European music cultures. It shall be understood that this overview is very compact and picks only a few examples along general lines. In the following two years to their BA degree, the students have to choose four seminars on their own free choice from Middle Ages, Renaissance, Baroque, Classic and Romantic Music, Music of the 20th century, Contemporary art music, Old-Time, modern or contemporary Jazz, Rock or Pop, Folk music and African or Asian music. The only restriction is, that they have to choose at least two different subjects within these four seminars. That means that the students can make their own choice and can focus on those subjects they are interested in. Of course it is a loss – if the students don't have a wide overview over the history of music anymore. But on the other hand we win a lot.

The students are highly motivated because they can concentrate on a subject they are interested in. Formerly music history was an unpopular requirement. Now many of the students spend their time voluntarily with music history because they discover lots of challenging things. Of course some of them will never know in which century Telemann or Scarlatti lived. But we have harpists that study the Celtic harp tradition, classical percussionists that explore techno and hip hop loops, but also violinists that specialize in early 18th century. All of them benefit from that concept.

I'm convinced that traveling through the universe of music can change your musicality, if you can choose your own path.