Presenting the Past

Thanks for the article “A New Baroque Revival” (Summer 2007, page 36). It simply reaffirmed what I’ve been saying for the last 30 years. Just because a period in music or art has passed, doesn’t mean that its artistic potential has necessarily been exhausted.

Case in point: there are composers out there who still write piano rags and what I term “coherent” jazz. You don’t have to create art, music, literature, films, etc., based on some concept of the “theatre of the absurd” merely because this is the 21st century. You can employ the techniques and styles of the past and still remain original in your concepts.

After reading this article and listening to the examples, I’ve been encouraged to go back to my composing and hopefully have some of my “new” old works performed by someone, somewhere. As was stated in the article, monetary fortune is not the ultimate goal, although it would not be refused, but simple recognition and acceptance would be nice.

Norbert Fronczak
Warren, MI

Writing a sonnet does not a Shakespeare make, particularly if you are rhyming in Old English!

Many of my students are attracted to Baroque composition. The world of Bach offers us symmetry, context, beauty, peace, inspiration, and genius. Following the rules that the 18th-century world presented gives composers a compositional glimpse into the interpretations of years past. We will never be Bach; nor should we aspire to be Bach. Emulate, yes; copy, no.

In 1803 Beethoven articulated a vision for composers – that each composition would evolve from the one previous to it by offering new material.

It is perfectly appropriate to utilize forms of yore, and yet if we turn off our awareness to contemporary harmony, we run the risk of limiting our connection to living audiences. It is a tremendous challenge to compose original work that honors our Baroque past while creating a bridge to our palpable living world of listeners young and old.

Really, it is all about communicating – music is a language and language is context. Form is a mechanism to contextualize beauty. Adhering to ancient harmonic rules and regulations, purposefully excluding contemporary musical experience, will not lead our movement into a living future where there is room for youth, experimentation, and growth.

Adhering only to old rules rather than advancing Baroque understanding is much like treading water. It may be a nice pond, but the swimmer is not going anywhere.

Sheli Nan
Berkeley, CA

Hummel’s Influence

Hummel’s influence on the Romantics first became apparent to me when I learned that Schubert’s “Trout” Quintet was based on a Hummel piece with the same instrumentation. But until I read Mark Kroll’s “Hummel and the Romantics” (Summer 2007, page 20), I wouldn’t have imagined that his influence reached much farther than that. Usually, Hummel is regarded as a mediocre contemporary of Beethoven’s who wrote only a few pieces that could stand the test of time. This article demonstrates that he was an extremely popular composer whose piano works helped redefine keyboard composition for a new generation! If Schumann knew that Hummel was not a popular composer in this day and age, he would be appalled.

Meyer Brown
New Bedford, MA

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