

Macaroni and Cheese

When I go grocery shopping I am always amazed at the amount of “convenience” food on the shelves of the supermarket. None perplexes me more than boxed macaroni and cheese. To my taste, it looks awful and tastes worse, and the irony is that it does not take much longer to prepare this dish from scratch. It does take a bit more effort.

What, you ask, is she going on about? Have I suddenly landed at Epicurious.com instead of the Indy Flute Club newsletter? You are in the right place, and we are going to discuss performance practice, keeping the aforementioned analogy in mind.

The first question to ask ourselves is “Why should we care how they played 250 years ago?” The answer is one of musical intention, and in this, I believe, there are two main schools of thought. In black and white, they are:

1. We must, as performers, honor the composer’s intentions, as we are conduits of the composers’ ideas, filtered through our musical selves and presented to an audience. Without us, the composer is mute.
2. The contrary idea, is that the main purpose of performance is to present the performer’s ideas and emotions in the forefront and use the score as a vehicle for this personal expression. My individual expression is more important than the composer’s intent.

If we look much past the beginning of the nineteenth century, we note that there is no individual—that concept had not yet been invented. Rather, we would know our place in society, ordained, we would believe, by God, and answer to our superiors and to our deity. But the 18th Century was also the time that this was in flux. Franz Joseph Haydn and Carl Philip Emanuel Bach spent much of their professional lives wearing livery. In other words, they used the servant’s entrance; were required to ask permission of royal patrons to marry; and like J.S. Bach, butt heads with their patrons. But like Old Bach, some would risk even prison to remain steadfast to their artistic principles.

So if we are simply being asked to reproduce exactly what is on the page, where is the problem? That is like following the directions on the mac and cheese box.

To make scratch mac and cheese, we have to know how to make a white sauce, and it is helpful if we know something about the differing results that proportions of flour, butter, and milk will result in. Sometimes we can discover a helpful shortcut (heating the milk before adding it to the roux) All of this we can learn from a cookbook.

Not to go off on a culinary tangent here, but the modern cookbook was invented for home cooks (amateurs) in the mid-19th century. Prior to this standard listing of ingredients and techniques, all you often had was a list of ingredients. You were supposed to have the knowledge, learned in a long apprenticeship, of how to put this together. To bring us back to flute playing, the 18th-Century saw many cookbooks, or treatises, on the market, mostly published for the consumption of amateur musicians.

What you will find when you delve into these books is an indication of what was important and what, by exclusion, was not. The question I am most often asked about by modern players is ornamentation. Important, but it is not primary. That would be in the realm of rhythm, and the concept that there is only one strong beat in a measure (the first) and that a work is driven forward by the harmony, not the melody. Melody is subservient to harmony.

When you begin to learn a piece of baroque music, learn it from the score, and make sure that you have the figured bass in front of you. Spend a little time in the Quantz book and find out what was considered a loud/strong harmony and what was considered to be soft or weak. I won't give you the "answers" because I know you will really learn it if you look it up yourselves.

The ornaments? That comes last, like deciding to put marjoram, or dill, or Tabasco in your mac and cheese. Firstly, stick to the basics of sauce making.

If you don't own it, do purchase the Quantz "On Playing the Flute". It is available at Amazon.com. Here is the url:
www.amazon.com/Playing-Flute-Johann-Joachim-Quantz/dp/1555534732/ref=pd_bxgy_b_text_b/102-2749636-3738500