

L8Nite Performance

The Labyrinth

Using new music experience to recreate historical music

The reason I call myself a "new music musician" is only partly due to my career being based on commissioning new works by composers and performing those works. I believe that being a new music musician entails an attitude surrounding the works performed that could theoretically make whatever I choose to perform new music. As a student performing historical works of music, I often felt like I was role-playing: instead of trying to act on what I noticed when I saw a score, I usually just tried to sound like something or someone else, either a recording or another musician or a teacher. The impetus for any interpretation I made came from outside of myself, not from within. Using these classical techniques was of course very important for learning to play the violin, but it was often seen as an end in itself instead of as a means to an interpretive end. And perhaps this is what the point of learning the classical repertoire was for me: to give me the technical tools to be able to start working on new music. In new music I feel that I am allowed to interpret a score in a different way, one that is more relevant for me as a musician.

This attitude is of course quite common in other art forms, where too faithful an attempt to recreate something that previously existed is often seen as derivative. This is why I am leading a three year artistic research project financed by the Swedish Research Council called "Back to the future," in which I and three other researchers (the pianist Rei Nakamura and the composer/performers Ida Lundén and Mattias Petersson) are engaged in finding serious alternatives to historical music interpretation based both on our experience as new music practitioners and on our research into other art forms and their attitudes. We are using theories and techniques derived from e.g. performance, conceptual art, translation theory and postmodern sculpture and applying them to historical music to create recordings and concert programs that will provide models for the similar treatment of historical works in the future. Here I present a project where I simply use my experience with new music to reinterpret a work for solo violin, Locatelli's Caprice No. 23, subtitled "The Harmonic Labyrinth".

After having looked through various editions of the piece, which were used as bow exercises during the 19th and 20th centuries, I found the manuscript version, which has almost no markings aside from the chords. In fact, the score resembled works of new music much more than it did any of the editions I had studied. I finally landed on a simple idea that would not have been possible without drawing on my experience with new music. From the urtext I isolated this information: 1) there are 143 measures in the piece. 2) 143 is 11 x 13. 3) One could therefore create a randomizing algorithm where the musician plays each measure 1-13 times and varies that pattern 11 times through the work, resulting in a 25 minute piece at 120 bpm, or a version where each measure is played 1-11 times and varied 13 times in order to create a 20 minute work. 4) The algorithm could show its results in real time to both musician and audience, so the musician does not know how many times each measure is to be played until the performance. This takes focus away from harmonic sequences and bow techniques and shifts it towards other musical parameters and physical endurance, making it a piece that can be performed as a piece of new music without changing any of the notes. To envision this I used ideas gleaned from performing and studying music by e.g. Terry Riley, John Cage, Hugh Shrapnel and Peter Ablinger. The final recording of the work will be in the form of an app in which all possible permutations are stored and each replaying becomes a new version of the piece, of any chosen length.

The questions raised here are rather simple:

Is there a limit to the kind of information in a score a musician can act on?

L8Nite Performance

Is one allowed to use modern knowledge as a tool when interpreting historical works?
Is this the same work that Locatelli wrote?
Is the previous question important?



George Kentros
Kungliga Musikhögskolan, Stockholm, Sweden
george.kentros@kmh.se

The experimental violinist George Kentros studied at Yale University and the Mannes School of Music in the US as well as at the Royal University College of Music in Stockholm. He has performed as a chamber musician, soloist, and actor across Europe as well as in the Americas, Japan, and Oceania, primarily with the new music ensemble “the peärils before swine experience” and the electronic duo “there are no more four seasons”. He has specialized in the newest art music and has to date commissioned more than 200 works from composers from 21 countries, receiving many prizes in contemporary interpretation. He also founded and curated the avantgarde art club SEKT, which was a pioneer in the realm of genre crossing alternative art presentation, and has been on the boards of various arts societies such as Sound of Stockholm and the ISCM. He is currently an artistic researcher at KMH.