A Letter from Geneva

Voleur!

By Penny Pay
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“Voleur!” this was the tongue-in-cheek comment of Swiss oboist Roland Perrenoud as he arrived to congratulate friend and colleague Roger Birnstingl on his performance of a bassoon concerto. Roland’s reaction seems odd until one learns that the concerto which he’d just head played on the bassoon was the Oboe Concerto K314 by Mozart. The “voleur” was not Roger of course, but Mordechai Rechtman who has transcribed and adapted the concerto from the original key of D major into the bassoon-friendly key of F major.

The first public airing of this transcription took place at the Geneva Conservatoire on 8th November 1997. It formed the centrepiece of a concert of wind music which was directed by Rechtman himself.

He arrived in Geneva from New York, where he had been combining family visits with conducting performances of Bach Cantatas, and Mozart’s violin and viola Sinfonia Concertante. Once installed in Geneva, he gave two days of masterclasses which were attended mainly by present and past students of Roger Birnstingl, who has been professor of bassoon at the Conservatoire for some twenty years.

Geneva Conservatoire can hardly be compared to the giants such as Juilliard, but for such a small catchment area the classes were well supported. Rechtman has an ability to immediately get to the nub of each student’s “problem”. His thought-provoking and often direct approach was clearly appreciated both by active participants of the class, as well as those who preferred simply to listen.

The remainder of his week was spent in rehearsing the Conservatoire orchestra, who were to accompany the bassoon concerto, and the Wind Ensemble which played the Strauss Serenade for Winds Opus 7, plus Rechtman’s own richly scored arrangements of organ works by J.S. Bach. These last pieces exploit to the full the huge range of colours that each instrument has to offer. Add to that the sheer power of Bach’s music and for both the audience and players a performance becomes almost a sensual experience.

It is difficult to know how well such transcriptions are received. I feel certain that many people disapprove of those who dare to tamper with the “great works” and herein lies the problem.

Rechtman recognizes the profundity of Bach and Mozart’s music, and it is this that he chooses to make available to a wider spectrum of musicians. Why did he transcribe the K314 Concerto for the bassoon? I doubt that he did this arrangement merely to satisfy a bassoonist’s whim to have more repertoire. I would suggest that it was his love of the bassoon combined with his admiration for Mozart’s genius that inspired the notion.

If oboists feel that Rechtman has stolen their
concerto, then they might remember that flautists have an equal claim to the piece, as it was Mozart himself who adapted it for the flute, thus creating that tug-of-war situation that prevails to this day. Yet somehow it seems better if the composer is the "voleur" rather than someone else! Hang on a minute though ... I have it on good authority that Bach transcribed sixteen of Vivaldi's violin concertos for clavier solo. Did Bach make these transcriptions because he felt that there was shortfall in clavier music? Whatever his motives for doing the work, I suspect that few people object to it, because it was done with skill and sensitivity.

The person who undertakes the task of transcribing a piece of music, particularly that of great composers such as Bach or Mozart, has to assume certain responsibilities. Merely transposing the notes is not sufficient. He needs to understand the instrument for which the piece was originally written and at the same time understand the arrangement. Also, he needs to understand the work as a whole, and in the case of a concerto, preserve the balance between orchestra and soloist. My impression, as I listened to the K314 was not that I was hearing an arrangement for bassoon but that I was hearing a Mozart concerto that sounded familiar in some way. In other words, it seems that Rechtman has got it right. Here is a man who really loves Mozart!

Another man who really loves Mozart is Roger Birnstingl who after all was the first person to breathe life into Rechtman’s adaptation. This concerto was perfectly suited to Roger’s natural feeling for melody and nuance. He managed to convey the sheer joy of Mozart’s music both in the concerto and in the encore piece, which was yet another one of Rechtman’s “finds”: a fragment adapted and completed, catalogued by Koechel as 580a for cor anglais with some rudimentary harmonization.

To those wishing to pose the question, “can transcriptions really work and are they valid as pieces of music?” I would say two things. Firstly, to quote Groves, “an arrangement is justified as it is creative and serves in some way to interpret and illumine the original”. Secondly, in the hands of a skilled musician such as Roger Birnstingl it was Mozart’s music that won the day, and after all, isn’t it the music that counts?