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Contemporary and historical performance practice in late eighteenth-century violin repertoire

observations on articulation, bow strokes, and interpretation

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, historically-aware performances of late eighteenth-century repertoire (and that of Mozart and Beethoven in particular) have prompted demands for a finer stylistic awareness on the part of the performer. Articulation in late eighteenth-century repertoire is of particular importance in this regard. In violin performance, bow strokes constitute the primary technique with which to render articulatory effects. In this study, I consider not only the link between the theoretical discussions of historically-informed performance (HIP) practitioners and the conventions of mainstream performance practice on the violin, but I investigate how best to merge musicological discussions of HIP with the practice of frequently performed repertoire on modern instruments today.

Violin bow models play an important role in any discussion of articulation and bow strokes, and the use of old-style instruments represents the main divergence between HIP and mainstream performance. In this regard, observations on execution with the bow models used during the Classical era are important, and the differences between the so-called transitional bows and modern bows in performance will be informed by my own practice with a copy of a 1785 bow.

Notation, which conveys the interpretative instructions of the composer, is one of the major areas of critical research of contemporary studies of the performance practices of the Classical era. Slurs, staccato markings, and passages without any articulation markings will be discussed from an interpretative perspective. Editorial issues of music scores and contemporary violin performances of the Classical repertoire will be touched upon, in conjunction with the consideration of performers’ interpretative choices and understandings of late eighteenth-century notation.
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