

On The Validity of Historical Performance

Note: I wrote this brief essay to include on the reverse side of the program for my final recital at Manhattan School of Music, in which I played a program of only 1920s-style jazz.

Every action by a musician reflects his or her philosophy. Deliberately or not, a performer proclaims his most fundamental views on the nature of his art form with every repertoire selection, and every interpretational decision that follows. A composer may be more conscious of the implications of his work, given his necessarily introspective disposition. His most basic aesthetic choices and the very process by which he composes make plain his philosophy for anyone to see. An improviser is a hybrid of these two types of musicians and must therefore be all the more deliberate in every aspect of his work.

This has forced me to consider what reason there is for anyone to play music in 2011 with careful restrictions of style and repertoire based on performance practices from 80 years ago. I started playing hot jazz because I love the sound of it. And for a while, I thought that should be enough justification for it.

A musician can only be sincere when they hear and therefore justify every note they play; an improviser reacts to his musical surroundings: therefore the “stylistic restrictions” inherent in playing improvised music within any given framework are not external restrictions at all, but rather the informed improviser’s sincere reactions to his surroundings. “Informed” because a thorough knowledge of the contrasting aesthetics available in one’s chosen form makes possible the potential for artistry: if artistry is characterized by deliberate choices, all of the options must be known for the choices to mean anything. This still does not validate the contemporary performance of improvised historical music.

A traditionalist will suffice it to say that he likes traditional music while rejecting – implicitly or explicitly – what came after. I am not a traditionalist. Conversely, some musical progressives are too concerned with what will come next, or how Music will continue to evolve. They may be versed or not in older genres, but ultimately neglect them for the sake of devoting themselves to discovering only what comes next. This is foolish, because with very few exceptions, the great innovators in any field did not set out to become innovators. They saw or heard the world slightly differently, and therefore produced distorted impressions of their surroundings, in the process creating a unique model for subsequent generations.

I reject the view of history that makes this concern even relevant. History is a series of coincidences and accidents that only in retrospect may have the appearance of inevitability. Though any given innovation resulted from a pre-existing model, that model could just have easily triggered a different progression of events. This is often the case, in fact, but all but a few paths are forgotten or neglected by circumstance.

When history is no longer seen as a clean linear progression, but a beautifully haphazard tangle of cycles and seeming dead ends, it becomes no less relevant to create music from the models of the 1920s or any other historical era as those of the present day.

With all of that out of the way, I’m mainly doing this because it’s fun. It’s fun to play this kind of music, and equally if not more fun to listen to it. It’s fun to play for dancers – certainly more so than for drinkers, talkers, or worst of all, audiences comprised entirely of other jazz students out to hear something “killing.” And in a perverse way, it’s fun to tell people that mine is among the many MSM jazz recitals with nothing in 4/4... because everything is in “2.”