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**Keynote Address: Echoes and Reflections**

Professor Terence Dennis, Head of Classical Performance Studies,  
Department of Music, University of Otago,  
Dunedin

**Reviewed by Sarah Watson**



*Terence Dennis*

**A century of interpretative resources leads us to evaluate our teaching and performing choices and challenge stereotypes – the spectrum of interpretation is wider and more informed than ever before but echoes of the past are increasingly precious and relevant for reviving performance in the future.**

Professor Terence Dennis suggested we look at how we perform classical music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What can we do that is of interest in 2011? We need to reflect on what students are listening to; the music they hear on YouTube may not necessarily be a good example of a performance. They need to be aware of a wider spectrum of performances and we need to teach them to make informed choices. We have to understand the blueprint of a musical work in order to recreate it.

In considering the way in which one piece of music may be reflected by another, Dennis took the example of Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady*, the stage musical hit of 1956. Lerner was writing for Rex Harrison, an actor rather than a singer. (In an aside we learned that Lerner had said that if he wrote the solo voice part 'going up' he knew Rex Harrison would not be able to sing it so "everything I did was written on natural speech patterns".) André Previn, who later scored the music for the film version, was better known as a jazz pianist at that time, and when he heard the musical in 1956 he wrote eight pieces for jazz piano based on the original score.



*André Previn ca1988 Wikimedia Commons*

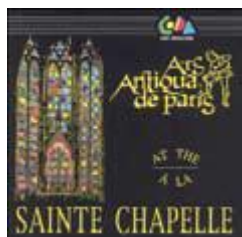
Dennis played a recording of Previn's version of "I Could Have Danced All Night" from the show – the tune was recognisable but also disconcertingly different since it was very much in the jazz idiom with much use of chromaticism and unusual modulations. Dennis was showing us how this was actually current music written for a different idiom, thus it was a 'reflection' of the original music.



*André Previn's "My Fair Lady" CD Cover*

He then compared this reflection with another recreated from the music of a troubadour: *Reis Glorios* by Guirault de Bornheilh. This was written as secular music 800 years ago and we only have an outline to guide us so that the

interpretation itself is pure supposition. Recorded in the 12th-century church of Sainte Chapelle in Paris, the choral music evokes beauty, serenity and mystery through its use of sustained notes under a soaring melody. We have no idea of the original instrumentation and augmentation, only a blueprint of the basic melody and harmony. Thus, although this hypnotic piece of music is actually a thoughtful recreation of the original, it is actually as much a 20th-century piece as Previn's.



*Ars Antiqua de Paris* CD includes "Reis Glorios" by Girault de Borheilh

Dennis then recalled echoes of the past. A cache of Edison phonographic recordings was discovered about ten years ago. A phonograph had been given to Czar Alexander III by Julius Bloch in 1889 but its recordings were believed to have been lost during the Russian revolution. These recordings, made between 1891 and 1894, are the earliest echoes that we have of what was really going on in the musical world of the 19th century. Among them are recordings of Anton Arensky playing the second movement of his D minor Piano Trio. Dennis pointed out the 19th-century ease of rubato and shaping of phrasing, and we can hear that Arensky is a marvellous technician. The 12-year old Jascha Heifetz, thought to be the most extraordinary violinist the world had ever known, shows his brilliant technique playing a piece by David Popper, and the 16-year-old American violinist Eddy Brown plays some Fritz Kreisler, all recorded in 1894. We now have an aural imprint of music of that time rather than just an understanding gained from reading about those composers and performers.

Tchaikovsky is recorded in conversation with Rubinstein and we overhear him giving instructions to singers rehearsing an opera. It is remarkable to listen to such an authentic slice of history.

Between 1901 and 1904, Colonel Mapleson, the librarian of the Metropolitan Opera, New York, recorded live performances from the fly tower (until the machine fell on to the stage one night at which point he was asked to remove it), and during that time he recorded

the coloratura soprano Nellie Melba live on stage. She made studio recordings from 1904, but this live recording not only reveals her extraordinary technique and brilliance of tone as her voice soars above the orchestra but also the wild applause of the crowd. It is an extraordinarily evocative recording and raises interesting questions about the differences in style and technique among singers today.

Performances today are often influenced by the choices that the performer him/herself makes, but Dennis showed us that in the Mozart aria 'Ah se morir mi chiama', K.293e from *Lucio Silla*, K.135, we actually have Mozart's own ornamentation which he dictated to his sister. This opera was written in 1772 for the Opera House in Milan and premiered in 1773 when Mozart was 16 years old. This is the only aria that shows us exactly what Mozart wanted from the ornaments because they are written out exactly as he dictated them. His other operas act as blueprints but it is a challenge for us to know what he wanted. This score is different; it is a living thing and a precious example of what Mozart was asking for from his performers. Dennis suggested that perhaps our present-day interpretations are not actually what Mozart would have intended in many ways. He also referred to Malcolm Bilson's *Knowing the Score*, a DVD in which the scores of Mozart sonatas are closely examined with regard to articulation, beat, phrasing etc., and these elements are put together in a formula which, the idea would be, would then carry over into the other sonatas. He demonstrated on early pianos and instruments of the period. Dennis said that it is presented in a lively but not necessarily persuasive way!



*Malcolm Bilson*

He then emphasised that in the music of the Romantic period we hear a form of rhetoric handed down through the generations from

composers to performers, but this has had the inherent danger of intervention by the performers themselves, especially when passing on the interpretation to the next generation. However, in a recording of Chopin's Prelude in A flat, Op.24 No. 17 played by Alfred Cortot, (who had studied with Chopin's pupil Émile Descombes) we hear a slower tempo and more portamento than we might expect to hear nowadays. It is a pre-World War I interpretation with Romantic rhetoric in the phrasing, an intensification of smaller units, and rapid chord changes intensifying harmony. "The harmonic language is the perfect pedant for the emotion." There is no interventionist bad behaviour, but good intervention to shape the phrasing.

It was interesting to learn of the influence on Brahms of a tour he undertook with a gypsy violinist and to take that into consideration when we listen to his phrasing and accentuation. Dennis played two versions of Brahms' 'Von Ewiger Liebe' [Eternal Love], the first recorded in 1974 by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, baritone, accompanied by Wolfgang Sawallisch, and the second in 1919, by Sigrid Onegin, contralto, with Bruno Seider-Winkler at the piano. Historically closer to Brahms's day than the Fischer-Dieskau performance, since Brahms was still alive when she started her career, Onegin's style was based on the colouration of each word. Fischer-Dieskau is more intent on moving the emotions through colouring verses as a whole.

But who is to say which style is 'right'? It is difficult to explain to our students today how harmonies and rhythmic control work without listening to a range of interpretations. We know that the 20<sup>th</sup> century has monumentalised tempi. Even in the 19th century Mendelssohn noted that he heard Classical symphonies much faster than Mozart intended. Wagner speeded up arias. Czerny revised Beethoven's metronome markings three times.

But with regards to the Romantic repertoire, people were performing in the 1930s who had actually played for Brahms and his contemporaries, for example, Rubinstein, and would perhaps have remained closer to the original interpretation. A 1943 recording of Richard Strauss' 'Zueignung' and 'Heimliche Aufforderung' with Anton Dermota, tenor, and the composer himself at the piano (at the age of 78), demonstrates how he allowed the singer to bring out the phrasing – he is flexible

about allowing them full rubato; each performance demonstrates informed changes.



*Alfred Cortot Wikimedia Commons*

Dennis summed up his Address by reminding us that our ears are not those of these composers' times and we need to show our pupils what sorts of elements they are listening to; how to filter the music through our own ears and hear the validity of each performance. Cortot's performance shows up the harmonic beauties of the piece as the harmonies change so intensively; there are shifts in colour all the time. Balance has to be seen also in interpretation, melodic writing, and the harmonic underpinning. We should encourage pupils to sing through their pieces and explain the history that surrounds each work. Mozart conceived his piano works as vocal writing. He presumed performers would know and understand the ornamentation of the time.

We need to guide students as to what to listen to, and find music that will hold their interest and deepen their musical appreciation. In this way we help them to build up a basis of focus and critical analysis. Recent recordings may give students a variety of different interpretations, but time spent listening to the early recordings and in becoming as familiar as possible with the original intentions of the composers, brings a great value to their own performances. The echoes and reflections of

the musical past should remain with us in our own interpretative choices today.

**Sarah Watson** is originally from England but has lived in Auckland for the past 11 years. She teaches piano and theory at the King's School, Remuera, where she also helps with the School Orchestra and String Group. She is on the Committee of the Auckland Branch of IRMT.

### Listening List

- Loewe arr. Previn: "I could have danced all night" (*My Fair Lady*) – Andre Previn, piano (Living Era AJA5656)
- Guirault de Bornheilh: *Reis Glorios - Ars Antiqua de Paris* (Jannequin 1002)
- Tchaikovsky, Rubinstein and others in conversation (1891)\*
- Arensky plays 2nd movement of his D minor Piano Trio, 1894; Heifetz at 12 years; Eddy Brown (16) *The Dawn of Recording* (Marston 5301-2)
- Meyerbeer: "A ce mot seul" from *Les Huguenots*. Nellie Melba (live), Metropolitan Opera House 3/11/1901, (Symposium 1284)
- Mozart: 'Ah se morir mi chiama', K.293e from *Lucio Silla*, K.135. Iris Vermillion, mezzo-soprano (Philips 422-770)
- Malcolm Bilson: *Knowing the Score*, Cornell University DVD 2005
- Chopin: *Prelude in A flat, Op.24 No 17*, Alfred Cortot (EMI CDH 761050 2)
- Brahms: 'Von Ewiger Liebe' Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, baritone, Wolfgang Sawallisch (1974)(EMI 7 64820 24); Sigrid Onegin, contralto, Bruno Seider-Winkler (1919) (NI7898)
- Richard Strauss: 'Zueignung'; 'Heimliche Aufforderung' – Anton Dermota, tenor, Richard Strauss, piano (1943) (Preiser 93261)

\* There are many film clips of famous composers on YouTube. For example, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Rachmaninov and Debussy.