



Theme & Variations

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Monthly column about the world of such music that people usually call *classical*. Subjects of abundant subjectivity and, at times, little free of controversy. Those that all musicians talk and discuss about, but never come to firm conclusions. Those that allow the enthusiastic public to satisfy its curiosity and, by the way, to build communicational bridges and viaducts between the stage and the audience. And so that no one dares to take the themes less seriously, the variations will be commented and discussed exclusively with some of the best musicians on the planet.

Authenticity

A brief search through some of the main dictionaries allows us to glimpse at first a certain plurality of definitions in relation to the term *authenticity*: the Cambridge Dictionary, for example, identifies it as «the quality of being real or true», while Merriam-Webster offers several propositions ranging from «worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact» to «according to an original so as to reproduce essential features». But how can we apply these definitions to music and very concretely to the interpretation of ancient music, be it from the Renaissance, Baroque, Classical or even Romantic periods?

The search for authenticity is, at least to some extent, certainly connected with subjectivity, and the motivation and decision about that search depends on personal interest, as well as on the curiosity and openness of spirit (or lack of it) of the interpreter himself. It is also true that the quantity and quality of information known and compiled in the present, is very different from the information available half a century ago

FEATUREDGUEST

Ton Koopman



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Dutch conductor, organist, harpsichordist and musicologist Ton Koopman is a top reference in the field of ancient music. He recorded the complete work of Buxtehude and the essential works of Bach, among which, all the cantatas. Internationally multi-award winner, he is founder and director of the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra & Choir for more than four decades and is a regular guest of the leading modern orchestras in the world.

– which, in my opinion, justifies such curiosity and refutes the possible indifference in relation to what we normally define as historical performance practice. Personally, I prefer *urtext* versions, I carefully review prefaces and literature on the works and the historical contexts in which they were created, I compare interpretations and theories of defenders and deniers, and above all I try to understand this or that articulation in a Baroque manuscript or a more or less contradictory dynamic in a Beethoven symphony. Sometimes I do not succeed.

To help me on such a delicate subject, I count on the collaboration of one the greatest experts on Bach, and on much more. Ton Koopman is an essential reference in the field of ancient music and, in addition to being an excellent performer, he is a respected and versatile musicologist. About authenticity, Koopman starts by saying that «there are many truths and none of them are engraved in marble», warning that «whoever plays Bach in a supposedly authentic style, does not mean that he plays as Bach did». About fellow musicians like Leonhardt, Rifkin, Jacobs, Suzuki, Herreweghe or Harnoncourt, he says that all have or had very different views and approaches to authenticity, and that, above all, «we try to play ancient music in a convincing way».

The investigation and research aspect is almost implicit in the life of a specialist in ancient music, certainly more than in the life of an ordinary modern interpreter. Koopman confesses that he has always been interested in research and that it is important to get information from as many sources as possible: «there is not just one book that says how we should play or sing, there are many books and many articles». He warns of the fact that there are very good musicians «supporting theories in incomplete and dubious sources», but he also recognizes that, on certain subjects, «if I can know 35-40%, I am already very happy». There are questions that accompany him since adolescence and for which, now aged 76, he still has not found an answer.

Regarding the historical performance practice in general, Koopman states that, in substance, «it tries to understand how people made music, for example, in the 17th or 18th century», but that Bach «was not the same his whole life» and his music «is very different from Rameau's». There is, therefore, much to discover and, above all, a lot of room to experiment, although this shall not be an excuse for those who decide to diminish and reject the concept of historical performance practice. About those who claim that, for all intents and purposes, we do not know precisely how to play in the Baroque or Classical period, Koopman says «they are lazy» and «certainly ignore how much we actually know».

However, it is important to differentiate between interpreters who specialize in ancient music – who use, for example, instruments or replicas adjusted to the period in question or who do a solid and continuous training in the field of ancient music – and "modern" interpreters who simply seek authenticity in their rather sporadic interpretive approaches to Vivaldi, Purcell or Lully. Koopman's regular work with great modern orchestras in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Amsterdam, New York or Chicago is a very interesting example, not least because conducting modern orchestras exclusively – in addition to his Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra & Choir – is a firm and assumed decision. To my question about the biggest challenges of

this type of work and to what extent is it possible to get closer to the desired authenticity, Koopman says, the most important thing is that musicians are «willing to explore and achieve something new and different», confessing that he can obtain better results when they demonstrate «a lot of experience as chamber musicians». Returning to an orchestra that he has worked with in the past and knows his methods and priorities can be a huge advantage, but it also gives him immense pleasure to work «from the beginning» and, for example, to work on a more reliable sound quality, despite the use of modern strings. On the famous topic *vibrato*, Koopman categorically admits: «I never ask for *senza vibrato* because it does not make sense, I ask for less *vibrato*». May many "experts" have the opportunity to read this text!

Among other episodes, anecdotes or more serious and controversial themes such as overdotting in French overture, if it is more authentic to use choir or unique voices in Bach's cantatas or how many strings Haydn and Beethoven used in their symphonies, I dare to ask what characteristics does Ton Koopman associate to a good interpretation of Bach. The answer is immediate: «the rhythm»! The phrasing comes right after it «because music should take us somewhere and it is important to contextualize the small details in a larger dimension», as well as an appropriate but differentiated articulation. Regarding his known preference for flexibility in terms of *tempi* and dynamics, even during a movement, Koopman says, it is not about trying to be original or different from others, but that the music «must be, in some way, spontaneous».

I therefore dare to affirm that authenticity, although it does not represent an absolute and complete truth, is an issue too important to be ignored. Especially in the present, in which the information is more than enough to at least know how musicians did not play in the time of Bach, Mozart or Beethoven... In the end, it is up to the interpreter to decide the path to follow and the authenticity ends up being part of a broadly complex and multiform process in which the musician, more than imitating, should know the music, understand it and recreate it himself.