
Rick's Place

Notes, Thoughts, and Random Musings on the Online Experience

by Rick Hein, AMIS webmaster

Imagine three singers--Tony Bennett, Willie Nelson and Janis Joplin--each singing Itsy-Bitsy Spider. Already you can hear how each would interpret the song, making it his or her own by imprinting it with his or her unique style. The plot doesn't change from singer to singer; we know that persistent little arachnid will get washed out the spout yet eventually triumph over adversity. The style then is determined by the singer's tone of voice, which notes are emphasized, the tempo, the background music. A writer has to do all the same things to establish style--but with words.

Raymond Obstfeld

"Guide to Writing Fiction Today" in *Writing Digest*

Your taste in singers may run more along the lines of Placido Domingo, Joan Sutherland, and Marilyn Horne. Or you may think of the story as set by Mozart, libretto by DaPonte; or by Bernstein, libretto by Sondheim; or Boublil and Schonberg. Each of these these singers, composers, and librettists has a uniquely identifiable voice. But whose voice do we actually hear - the performer, the conductor, or the composer?

In the classical world we find great effort being made to make the performance fit the voice of the composer. Hours of study devoted to the approach to ornamentation, instruments, performance practices, relative pitch, and everything else related to realizing the composer's wishes. We develop the understanding that notation is not an exact art. Convention dictates our choices to a greater or lesser extent and we rely on an informed interpretation by other conductors and performers to guide us in our development. Today we are more and more able to recreate a composer's music on the instruments of the period and in the style that scholars have determined is an accurate to its time. Listening to a performance of Beethoven or Bach on period instruments with appropriately scaled forces gives a new sound to familiar friends.

Jazz and pop musicians are not immune from this scholarly way of thinking. Solos of the masters are transcribed and performed as the individual voice of a performer is gradually developed. One listens to the recordings of performers and notates their slides, growls, and other elements of their voice to make it one's own. Score study of voicings, arranging techniques, and ranges gives a better understanding of the roles instruments play. Annotating scores is not the sole province of the mediaeval or renaissance scholar assembling scores from part books and manuscripts.

Why as performers do we develop our individual voices if they are to be lost in the conversation between the other partners in the discussion? Perhaps it is to take a more full part in the discussion. We all know very well the negotiations that take place when rehearsing a piece of music which will blend a number of performers in a variety of roles. Soloists, section leaders, singers and players of every kind, conductor, chorus master, repetiteur, producers, lighting, sound technicians, porters, drivers, facilities management; all have to have a say in the discussion that produces a performance. Even if it is just you and your choir, we must also include the voices of the parents, the principal(s), a headmaster, and other teachers in the blend of our final performance. We all contribute to the balancing act that results in a performance.

Study of the workings of the brain and its role in perceiving and structuring these vibrations in the air continues. Mastering the techniques of playing, singing, conducting, arranging, composing work our brains and create new connections and patterns of cognition and recognition. We value highly the product of those negotiations; products of our brain waves, cognitive patterns, synapses firing, learned behaviours being replayed. We may never fully understand or appreciate why music, the product of all of that energy, makes that vibrating air so vital to our existence.

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The AMIS website can be found at <http://amis-online.org.uk> or <http://amis-online.org>
