

ECMTA Notes

From the Chairman of the European Chamber Music Teachers' Association

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A conversation with Simon Rowland Jones

The ECMTA column is usually devoted to the projects of our members and the activities of the association. But we would like to make an exception for this issue, because we have had the opportunity to meet with a musician whose work will certainly have a lasting impact on the teaching and playing of chamber music. Founding member of the Chilingirian Quartet, the violist Simon Rowland-Jones divides his time between performing, teaching, and composing. But over the past ten years he has also made impressive contributions to chamber music with an immense revision of the Haydn String Quartets for the new Peters Urtext edition. In spite of the tremendous historical, artistic, and pedagogical importance of this project, this is his first interview devoted to the process and experience of revisiting these masterpieces.

Q. At the time you began this new edition of Haydn quartets, you were principally a performer and composer. How did you get involved in this project as an editor?

As a performer I'm probably best known as a founding member of the Chilingirian String Quartet, and it was only when I left the quartet that I began to think about what I might want to do as a solo violist. One of the things I was keen to do was to make a study of the Bach cello suites. And, I thought, there isn't a complete viola recording of the suites, so why not make one? I didn't set out to become an editor, but in the process of preparing these recordings I looked at all the editions available, and found that they had very little to do with what Bach originally wrote. I found this subject extremely interesting, and in the end I made something that amounted to my own edition. When I approached Peter Owens of Peters Edition he was eager to publish it, so I set about preparing a version that could be published, and of course *that* was very different from the one I had prepared for the recording. What I needed to present in the edition was what I believed Bach actually wrote in the lost autograph and not my personal version.

After the edition was published I met again with Peter Owens, and just before leaving I asked, "When are you going to do something about your old quartet editions of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven?" And he said, "Which one would you like to do first?" I didn't hesitate: I wanted to work on Haydn as I felt they were the most misrepresented, and I loved those quartets more than anything. I went straight to the Royal College of Music library, which has the Opus 64, no. 1 autograph manuscript, took it out and sat there for an hour in a state of wonder. It was just thrilling, the thought that I was going to be spending so much time with these works.

Q. How did you proceed?

Well, there is a pretty standard method. You must be completely sure of your sources, and these vary opus by opus. Various early publishers published the quartets, sometimes there is an autograph and sometimes there isn't. You look for your primary source, preferably the autograph, and then select your secondary sources. I'm the kind of person who likes to plunge into a project and get going with the music, and I hate being held back by still more research I know I should do before I start. But luckily I had some help with that, which sped things up. Then it's a question of comparing every aspect of the scores and parts bar by bar, which takes an extraordinary amount of time and poses more and more problems as you go on.

For example, in the Opus 20, no. 1 there is a 3-note motif in the first movement that comes 30 odd times. I was looking at 6 different early editions: each one dealt differently with this 3-note motif. But worst of all was the original Haydn manuscript, which was totally inconsistent throughout the movement! I tried to find some reason why he would have phrased it this way here and yet that way

there, and suddenly several days work seemed to be just for three notes! I thought, if all the quartets are like this perhaps I should just give up now. And, what should I put in the edition if I'm not certain about the authenticity myself? Often the secondary sources didn't really help to clarify.

Q. Was there no way to establish the priority of one edition over another?

That is a big problem. There are certain editions Haydn is supposed to have authorized. But there's virtually no correspondence with publishers dealing with possible corrections or changes. So it seems that he didn't proofread. He may have given editions a cursory glance but how could he possibly have had time to proofread thoroughly when you look at the quantity of music he wrote? The idea that he was going to sit in a room and carefully examine six different editions of the same music seems very unlikely!

Q. Your preface has an unusual amount of information on editions and performance, and the commentary includes a multitude of alternatives taken from historical and modern editions. How did you come to work with the musicologist David Ledbetter, and how did you establish the introductory texts and commentary?

We were colleagues together in Manchester. David has an encyclopedic knowledge of music from that period, and a brain that has instant access to it. The idea for the prefaces to the Haydn volumes came from the Bach edition, because it was with the Bach cello suites that we established the model that included not only historical context but information on performance practice, and also details of the editing process, how editorial decisions were arrived at and which alternatives users might want to consider.

I said right away to Peters that there should also be such a preface for the Haydn, and that I would be happy to work on it with David and they agreed. What happened in the end was that David and I would have long sessions, sometimes lasting a week or more, when we'd work intensively on one opus, going through my initial editing work in tremendous detail. The many questions and points of interest that arose would form the basis for the preface for that particular opus. David could miraculously distill this mass of ideas and information brilliantly into a well-ordered preface, something I would have found very difficult to do.

Q. But your focus was on what the performer should know?

That is the main issue when you're editing music. For the composer too, right from when it is being written! What do you put on the page to clearly indicate to the performer how to play your music? The performer needs to look at it and react the right way so that he expresses the music in the way the composer thought of it. That's all that we're trying to do as editors. But what's difficult is that we as 21st century musicians do not have the same musical background as 18th century musicians would have had. But really, if you've done a little research and you have good musical instincts, then you should know what to do with Haydn's music, even in passages where there are no performance markings at all.

Q. So you wanted to make an edition that would allow performers to make intelligent choices?

Exactly that. To present to the user as much information as possible, whether in the musical text itself, the preface or in the critical commentary, with its very specific alternatives. This is particularly important when there is no extant Haydn autograph: you need comprehensive information on the different sources to be instantly available. This kind of commentary is usually published separately, so that most performers don't even have access to it. In the end, as editor you just have to take the attitude that whatever you put in the edition is not final. I'm not saying "This is how it should be." And once you accept that, you can say "This is what I think is correct, but it could be this, or it could be that".

But this question fascinates me: will the mentality of players ever change? Will they stop believing that what they're looking at is a finished, correct product, and that they should simply play what they see in front of them? That is a kind of mental laziness.

And then there are inconsistencies, like the figure in Opus 20, no. 1, that appears differently within the same movement and that *could* have been intentionally so. Why? Because the figure comes also in the development section, it's in a different key, maybe it needs a smoother or more articulated version. Players don't like that, they expect consistency.

Another good example is in the last movement of the second Opus 20, in C major. In the fugue, the chromatic descending first subject sometimes has three notes slurred, and sometimes only two notes slurred and one separate (with an articulation mark, so it's very clear that Haydn did intend it to be like that). But that Haydn intended it to be the articulated version the whole way through seems unlikely, because that's not how he wrote it at the beginning. Later, he puts these two different versions together! And that's what so interesting, that the cello would be playing one way and the viola the other. And then a few bars later, the violins do the same thing. So I thought, because it's happened twice like that within a few bars, that he must have intended it. But it's certainly not like that in any other edition, and people think it's a bit crazy when they see it. They think I've made a mistake or just not noticed "the inconsistency", but it's definitely intentional.

I easily spent more than 50% of my time worrying about articulation and bowing inconsistencies, how to reconcile them, or even *whether* to reconcile them, trying to distinguish if a difference was intentional or accidental.

Q. How did you find time to do all of this?

I almost can't remember now how it worked, I was just working on it all the time. But I didn't give up anything else. Soon after I started on the Haydn the Chilingirian Quartet asked me to come back for a few months while they looked for a new violist, and I stayed for three years! It was amusing, because when I went back to the quartet there was a lot of resistance if I would ever say, "I know that's how we used to play it in the good old days, and that's what I remember, but I don't really believe that that's what we should be doing now."

Q. Doesn't the old Peters edition also represent a historical tradition of interpretation? Would you say that Haydn shouldn't be played that way?

No, I wouldn't. With such great music there is room for a wide variety of interpretations. But there are quite serious mistakes of notes and of bars taken out. There's an example in Opus 33, no. 4, the trio of the Scherzo, which has a nine-bar phrase, which is not that unusual for Haydn. But the offending bar was taken out by an early editor, and that's how it stayed ever since. If you play from the old Peters edition, that's what you'll be playing. Another good example is in Opus 50, no. 5, with the Minuet in F major. In the old Peters edition, at the beginning of the Trio section, the key signature changes from one to four flats so it appeared to begin in f minor. In my edition we go back to what Haydn actually wrote, which was to leave the key signature unchanged, only adding the further flats where he wanted them. So the first two bars of the Trio are exactly the same as the beginning of the Minuet, in F major, and then there is a dramatic D-flat implying f minor in a very surprising way. The remainder of the Trio is in A flat major. This surprise effect was ruined by whoever put a new key-signature there for convenience. The surprise was undoubtedly intentional as, unusually, Haydn did not repeat that particular section! So it's an honour to have the chance to put things like that right.

Q. Did you follow a particular method of research and editing?

I played quite a lot of Haydn in my early career as a quartet player, I felt that I knew how Haydn quartets should be played and what Haydn intended. I think I definitely had prejudices. And a big part of the editing process was getting rid of those. It was a shock every time, whenever it came to a

quartet that I knew well and had played many times. I'd be amazed by how much I thought I knew that was not authentic, and in the end I often had to put something quite different into the edition.

And, don't forget, I had David; I was discussing everything with him, a highly experienced writer, academic and musician. One thing we did, which I think was quite a new idea, was to use small numbers, something like footnote numbers, in the score. These correspond with different sections of the critical commentary. So if you see a number 3, you'll know that the editor is saying "Have a look at the commentary to understand more about this slur and the possible alternatives." Also because we wanted players to make use of this commentary it a) had to be available in the back of the score and b) was something we needed to constantly draw players' attention to.

Q. Now that the project is almost finished, what next?

Well, I thought that there would be nothing next! I just want to compose now. I'm writing my fourth quartet at the moment. But I was asked if I would make an edition of the Bach violin Sonatas and Partitas for viola. Over Christmas I just started looking at them, and to my joy I realized how easy it would be compared to the cello suites and to the Haydn quartets, because of Bach's wonderful, brilliantly clear autograph. And so I said that if Peters were happy for me to make an edition from the autograph, just the autograph and a little very light editing, then I'd love to do it. It seems I may be addicted!

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The next meeting of the ECMTA will take place May 4-6, 2012 at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre in Tallinn. See the complete program on the website.

If you have questions please write to evan.rothstein@ecmta.eu