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A Note from the Editors

ONE OF THE MANY amazing side-effects of 20th-century sound technology is the ability to be able to compare performances, frozen in time, and so to juxtapose at the push of a button different interpretations of the same piece. This highlights the Platonic nature of music: an ideal, which is but imperfectly reflected on earth. What are the Brandenburg Concertos? What is immutable in that work of art, and what is merely transient? The question becomes even more complex when, as in the case of Bach's concertos, the listener has probably collected different recordings from different periods of his or her life, and so finds it difficult to separate the personal memories and feelings which any loved recording can evoke, from the purely musical decisions reached by the performers.

Take, for instance, the first movement of Brandenburg no.5. The recording I grew up with for the first fifteen or so years of my life was from the 1960s — Benjamin Tuke conducting The London Handel Players. Some of the 'new thinking' about baroque music is evident in the chamber-orchestra approach to the music, and the performance was obviously exciting enough for the piece to become an early favourite with me. Listening to it now it is clear that the greatest defect in the recording is not the relatively slow tempo, or the mischievous changes of registration on the harpsichord, but the fact that the cadenza does not fit, rather it explodes into the piece of music. The integrity of the piece is thus destroyed: no wonder Marxist interpretations of the concerto were popular at this time.

Later, still at school, I heard the Concentus Musicus Wien recording on 'original instruments'. This recording was a personal revolution in the way I not only heard the concertos, but Bach and baroque music generally. Curiously enough it wasn't the instruments themselves that were a revelation, nor the tempo (in fact the performance takes a slightly longer time than The London Handel Players recording), but the way the music breathed. I had been indoctrinated with the old adage that Bach wrote for voices as if they were instruments, but the truth now appeared to be the opposite: Bach wrote for instruments as if they were singers. The cadenza now had its natural place, proportioned and disciplined as we would expect from Leonhardt, but also, more importantly, its lungs inhaled and exhaled air as the body of the music sang, danced, lived.

Subsequent recordings failed to make as deep an impression. Although there were marked gains in instrumental technique, which combined with a faster tempo (Pinnock, for example, knocking some five minutes off Harnoncourt's time) created a new virtuoso approach to the Concerto, I remained deeply uneasy: something, I felt, and I could not put my finger on it at the time, was missing.

Philip Pickett's controversial 1994 New London Consort recording seems to me to provide this missing ingredient. It combines the technical advances of the last twenty years with a genuine understanding (and in performance terms that is probably the same as saying the questioning) of the music which is found in Harnoncourt's recording. The cadenza here is very different: Roblou performs it as if he had there and then thought of each good idea, and this is absolutely right, for the heart of Pickett's interpretation is rhetoric, the art of persuasion.

Gary Tomlinson has shown us how rhetoric is at the heart of Monteverdi's transformation of the Italian madrigal, and if there is anything that holds the collection of composers we call the Baroque together, it is surely their employment of musical rhetoric — even if at different times it spoke with different accents. It is, therefore, with great pleasure that we are able to print, unabridged, Pickett's essay on his interpretation of the Brandenburgs.

Musicianship like Pickett's, which questions and thinks, is the most essential factor in the survival of our musical civilisation. This is the theme of the present issue of *Harpsichord and Fortepiano*. This musical intelligence comes in many forms: whether, for example, in the search for a truly contemporary voice for the harpsichord (Jane Chapman) or as a pioneer in finding new ways of performing old music (Isolde Ahlgrimm). However it is manifested, it challenges us and makes us doubt. And, as hard as it may be to bear, that doubt must even extend to those recordings that we have canonised in our own collections. We may certainly never realise the ideal, but that is no reason to abandon a critical approach. Our sincere thanks, then, to all the contributors who have made this issue possible.