



Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance

By Richard Taruskin

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Over the last dozen years, the writings of Richard Taruskin have transformed the debate about "early music" and "authenticity." *Text and Act* collects for the first time the most important of Taruskin's essays and reviews from this period, many of which now classics in the field. Taking a wide-ranging cultural view of the phenomenon, he shows that the movement, far from reviving ancient traditions, in fact represents the only truly modern style of performance being offered today. He goes on to contend that the movement is therefore far more valuable and even authentic than the historical verisimilitude for which it ostensibly strives could ever be. These essays cast fresh light on many aspects of contemporary music-making and music-thinking, mixing lighthearted debunking with impassioned argumentation. Taruskin ranges from theoretical speculation to practical criticism, and covers a repertory spanning from Bach to Stravinsky. Including a newly written introduction, *Text and Act* collects the very best of one of our most incisive musical thinkers.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Music lovers who have watched the "authenticity" (period instrument) wars of the 1980s and 1990s could be excused for forgetting that Richard Taruskin is a musicologist and professor by trade, not a professional critic. For it is as an essayist and critic (if not a professional gadfly) that he has made a real impact on American musical culture. Indeed, in early-music circles, and even in the marketing of period-instrument performances by record labels, the word *authentic* has been abandoned almost entirely--and this is due largely to Taruskin's impassioned arguments (and his ability to get them published in places like *The New York Times*).

Text & Act is a collection of Taruskin's most important (or, at least, most inflammatory) essays and articles on the subject of authenticity in the performance of 18th- and 19th-century music. These are the pieces that got Taruskin a reputation for being a flame-thrower; many fans of what is now called HIP (historically informed performance) have gotten the idea that Taruskin is the enemy of everything HIP stands for. They should have a look at this book: they'll see that he actually applauds many of the HIP movement's achievements. (In fact, Taruskin was himself a Baroque cellist and a founding member of the New York period-instrument orchestra Concert Royal.) What he skewers mercilessly are the pretensions and a few of the assumptions on which HIP was originally based and that it used to market itself.

Readers will also see why Taruskin has deeply infuriated so many people. He regularly makes inflammatory (if not downright insulting) statements at the outset of an essay and then backpedals in the middle. He quotes a statement by another writer or musician, draws implications from that statement that are far more extensive than the speaker apparently intended, and then demolishes those implications and often mocks the unwitting speaker. Especially in his introduction (which I recommend you skip until you've read the rest of the book), he continues to fight battles that he has already won, even as he seems to brag of his triumphs.

Nevertheless, Taruskin's main points are persuasive. They may even seem obvious, but all too many musicians seem to have forgotten them. "Authenticity" in the sense of a faithful re-creation of the composer's intentions and preferred conditions of performance is simply not an achievable goal. We can't know the composer's real intentions (he or she is almost certainly dead), and re-creating original performance conditions is unfeasible (we can't spend the equivalent of the unlimited budget Louis XIV had for his operas, and there are no more French nobles trained in Baroque dance to do the ballets), if not impossible (there are no more 14-year-old boy sopranos to sing Taverner's masses or Bach's soprano solos). There's no point in having as a goal a performance that would please the composer--again, the composer is (as a rule) dead. What's important is a performance that pleases us, the people performing and listening to the music now. So for anyone who wants to understand the early-music revival of the late 20th century and the debates surrounding it, this book is indispensable. Just don't be surprised if you want to smack the author every so often. --*Matthew Westphal*

Review

"This is not a book, it's an education, and a joyous one. Richard Taruskin's stylistic flair and incisive wit make it an endless pleasure to pick his fertile brain."--James R. Oestreich, Classical Music Editor, *The New York Times*

"This deliciously readable collection by America's most brilliant musicologist is a model of how to think independently, even before that becomes fashionable, and of how to articulate values, even after that becomes unfashionable. When other books on music are forgotten, Taruskin's essays, like those of Berlioz and Tovey, will be savored and relished as the best musical writing of their time."--Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Professor of Music, Brown University*

"Little escapes his sharp eye, and his incisive commentary spans developments from the Middle Ages to the present era. The author is sometimes whimsical, often bitingly critical, occasionally self-indulgent, and always provocative. Highly recommended."--*Library Journal*

"Should be consulted by everyone interested in the performance of old music."--*Choice*

"Taruskin's prose is remarkably readable, and the content is very thought-provoking. He readdresses old concerns (tempo, authenticity) in a most refreshing way."--Dr. Gary Miller, *Southeast Missouri State University*

From the Back Cover

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Users Review

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