

Performing the Score

An Appreciation by Sylvia Berry
DVD, 160 min
Cornell University, 2011

Performing the Score is the follow-up to pianist Malcolm Bilson's wonderful lecture-DVD *Knowing the Score* released by Cornell University in 2005 (reviewed in *EMAg*, Fall 2006, page 31). Here, Bilson collaborates with violinist Elizabeth Field, a musician who

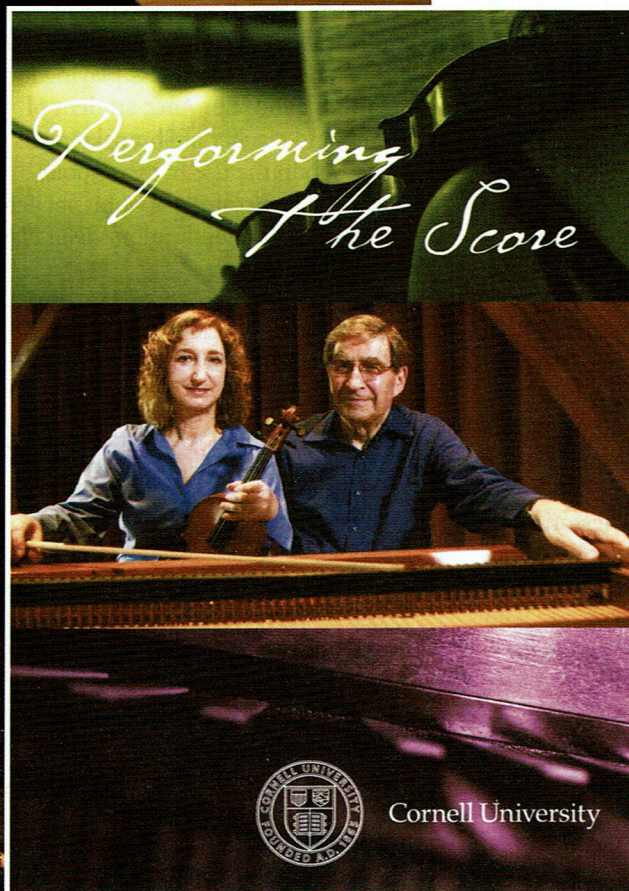
performs on both period and modern instruments. In *Knowing the Score*, Bilson did a terrific job of pointing out the elements that many musicians do not fully comprehend while reading their *urtext* editions, citing numerous 18th-century treatises and showing how a knowledge of period performance practice yields a better understanding of the notation of the period found in *urtext* scores. He also argued passionately for the fortepiano as a better vehicle with which to render the many performance indications found in music written before the 20th century. He

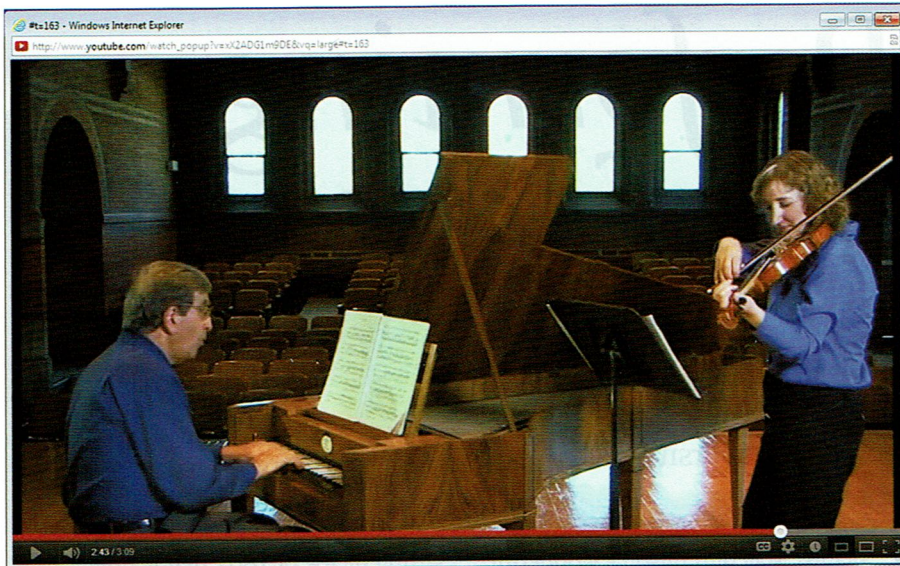
explains that the "modern" piano became ubiquitous only through the complete homogenization of pianos that took place during the 20th century. (He calls the modern piano the "Steinway-

model" because it is Steinway's cross-strung recipe of 1862 that is now reproduced by every other manufacturer.) Interestingly, Bilson also offered incredibly illuminating examples of two 20th-century composers—Bartok and Prokofiev—playing their own music, which revealed that their notation and their *performance* of their own music were reminiscent of the notation and performance styles described by the 18th-century treatises he introduced at the outset. Since this new video is a follow-up to *Knowing the Score*, it seems that one really should watch the earlier DVD in order to be fully up to speed (a two-disc combination is available).

For *Performing the Score*, Bilson set out to address more fully the issues that come into play when actually preparing a score for performance. He decided to do this through an examination of chamber music rather than solo music, stating in his introduction with Field that: "It is clearly as partner to voices, and especially to string instruments, that the particular attributes of any piano increase greatly in importance."

Before Bilson and Field embark on their chamber music exploration, each sets out separately to present their respective instruments and performance practice issues. Bilson's section recaps much of the information he detailed in the first DVD, but his treatment of this information is more thorough in *Knowing the Score*. In both productions, it becomes clear that Bilson is hoping to reach modern players who have not yet considered the fortepiano. For those who have already been in the field for some





Clips from Malcolm Bilson's DVD production *Performing the Score* can be viewed at <http://malcolmbilson.com/pts/video.php>. Above, Bilson and Elizabeth Field demonstrate markings in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Sonata in B-flat, K. 378*.

time, it covers a lot of familiar ground. Bilson goes back and forth between his exquisite Schanz copy by Thomas and Barbara Wolf and a top-of-the-line Steinway and shows how many things found in the scores of Mozart and Beethoven are unrealizable on the Steinway. In a departure from the last DVD, where he played recordings of unnamed pianists playing this repertoire without any of the performance practice elements he describes, Bilson presents a recording of *himself* playing Mozart (K. 330/ii) on a Steinway some decades earlier to show similar results.

Field's presentation starts from scratch, so to speak, and she presents very detailed excerpts and analyses of Baroque violin treatises and music. She also explains the shift from 18th-century violins and bows to the ones we know now, displaying her 1703 Testori violin, which is still in "modern set-up," and her Baroque violin, which is a modern replica of an Amati built by Karl Dennis in 2007. When the age-old issue of vibrato arises, she points out that for the virtuoso Francesco Geminiani (1687-1762), author of *Art of Playing the Violin* (1751), vibrato is but one item in a lengthy list of "embellishments." However, she goes to great lengths to impress upon the viewer that it's not enough to simply play without vibrato if you want to understand Baroque violin playing. "One cannot play expressively through a process of subtraction.... This is where serious study and deep commitment come into play, for unless these 'new'

old parameters are absorbed into the blood, as it were, to produce deeper insights, we will remain on the fringe at best." To this end, she speaks at length about the importance of bowing, stating: "The 18th century understood the bow to be the true source of the violin's voice."

Before earning a D.M.A. in Performance Practice from Cornell University, Field studied with Oscar Shumsky (1917-2000). Shumsky was a titan of the kind of string playing that those in the early music field usually refer to as "modern," its most defining characteristic being a constant use of vibrato. It's interesting to note that Shumsky studied with Leopold Auer (1845-1930), who was a student of the famous Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), a violinist historically important because of his ties to Brahms. Joachim is often cited by early music practitioners of all stripes for his minimal and highly selective use of vibrato. Indeed, Bilson himself mentions Joachim and his vibrato-less playing in the introduction. But Auer, student of Joachim and teacher of Shumsky, also frowned upon the use of continuous vibrato and complained about it vociferously in his 1921 publication *Violin Playing as I Teach It*.

Those who are convinced that an eternal *vibrato* is the secret of soulful playing, of piquancy in performance—are pitifully mistaken. Their musical taste (or what does service for them in the place of it) does not tell them that they can reduce a programme of the most dissimilar pieces to the same dead level of monotony by peppering them all with the tabasco of a continuous *vibrato*. No, the *vibrato* is an effect, an embellishment... The excessive *vibrato* is a habit for which I have no tolerance, and I always fight against it when I observe it in my pupils—though often, I must admit, without success."

Besides Shumsky, Auer's other famous students who favored constant vibrato included Jascha Heifetz and Efrem Zimbalist. In light of all this, it is fascinating to observe how quickly constant vibrato seems to have taken hold and also to observe Field moving back toward the vibrato-less playing of her grand-teacher and great-grand-teacher, as it were. (For those interested in delving further into these questions, Clive

Brown's *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice: 1750-1900* [Oxford University Press, 1999] is essential reading.)

From here, Bilson and Field have an "open rehearsal" of the first movement of Mozart's Sonata in B-flat, K. 378.

Issues that arise include interpretation of the notation, *tempo rubato* (the art of not playing the accompaniment and melody together), pedaling, and balance. Inter-

estingly, it is not until this rehearsal that Bilson explains the presence of the "pedal"—actually a knee-lever that raises the dampers—on 18th-century Viennese pianos. Seemingly in order to save time, he

skirts what could have been a far more detailed and informative discussion of what "pedaling" meant to composers of this period and why he makes some of the pedaling choices he does. (Again, one would do well to watch *Knowing the Score* for more information.)

Field states that balance is no longer a problem when playing this music with the "old" pianos, and that it's much more satisfying when the accompanimental figures aren't hidden the way they are by modern pianists who try their best not to cover the violin. They make the important observation that composers from this period treated string instruments and keyboard instruments as members of the same family, whereas 20th-century composers such as Debussy and Bartok treat the instruments as completely different species. It is true that most string players experience a revelation of sorts when playing 18th-century chamber music with fortepianos: problems of balance practically vanish, and at times one is hard pressed to know which instrument is playing which voice when the two are moving together in thirds or sixths.

Observations on balance recur when Bilson speaks with pianist Chi-Chen Wu, a graduate of the Collaborative Piano program at New England Conservatory who now plays fortepiano as well. She speaks of the "revolutionary" moment she had playing the fortepiano

when she was told she needed to play *more*. She says this made her feel "liberated," especially after having spent so much time learning how to "keep out of the way" while playing the modern piano in chamber music of Mozart and Beethoven. Indeed, one of the most startling parts of this DVD is the performance she gives of the Schumann sonata for piano and violin in A minor, Op. 105,

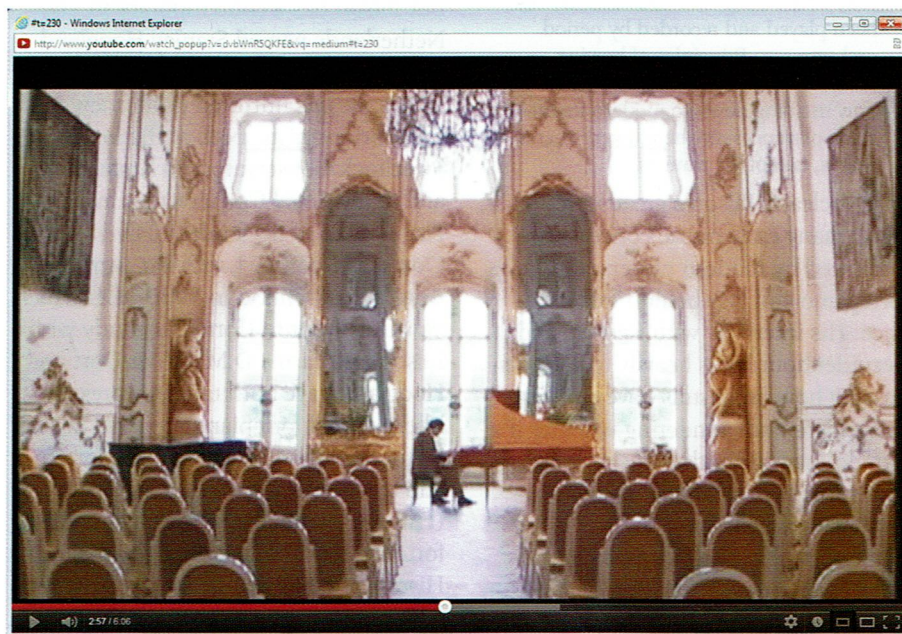
with violinist Nicholas DiEugenio on an 1824 Conrad Graf replica by Rodney Regier. The music comes to life in a new way, rich with small rhetorical gestures and moments of silence that you don't hear

in performances with modern piano, where the music often becomes a soupy morass.

Wu and DiEugenio play the exposition through once before the scene shifts and we hear DiEugenio play the exposition again with a modern pianist named Nathan Hess. Hess is playing a Steinway Model D, the largest and grandest grand piano that Steinway makes. He and DiEugenio play beautifully, but the music becomes a continual wall of sound that saturates the senses. The truth of the matter is that the music of Schumann and Brahms is full of short rhetorical slurs like those found in

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Clips from *Knowing the Score* are at <http://malcolmbilson.com/kts/video.php>. Below, Bilson plays Haydn's *Fantasia in C* at the Esterhaza Castle in Fertod, Hungary.



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Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and Schubert. Furthermore, Schumann and Brahms played straight-strung Viennese pianos that were in principle larger versions of the pianos those earlier composers played, so it is really no wonder that this music sounds so natural when played on a Graf.

The next chapter is Bilson's interview with Sir Nicholas Kenyon (whose many accomplishments include founding the journal *Early Music*) and world-renowned fortepianist Kristian Bezuidenhout entitled "Early Instrument Performances in the Context of Today's Concert and Recording World." This segment refers back in many ways to the opening of Bilson's solo presentation, where he tells the following story:

In 1976, I gave a concert in Boston on a five-octave fortepiano very similar to the one I'm sitting at here. The review by Michael Steinberg for the *Boston Globe* predicted that by the year 2000, most piano recitals of Mozart and Beethoven would be given on such instruments. This prediction, as you *may* have noticed, does not seem to have come to pass. Yet Steinberg was remarkably prescient: A change did occur, albeit elsewhere, in the world of the orchestras. Starting with the landmark recordings of all the Mozart symphonies in the 1970s, virtually all the important repertoire of the 18th- and 19th-century has been played and recorded by period orchestras.... Principles of bowing, articulation, tempo, vibrato, etc., are now trickling down to modern instrument players everywhere. Everywhere, that is, except for pianists.

It is clearly Bilson's great sorrow that, while many early music concepts are embraced by modern players, the fortepiano still lags behind in acceptance. His interview with Kenyon and Bezuidenhout leans heavily toward discussing how orchestras have embraced these ideas and wondering whether it's a traditionalist mindset at the conservatories that keeps pianists away from historical pianos.

Bezuidenhout in fact came to the fortepiano through studying with Bilson at the Eastman School of Music.

ezuidenhout uses the same word as Wu—liberated—when eloquently describing his early feelings and sensations at the five-octave Viennese fortepiano. Kenyon speaks of his revelatory moment hearing Bilson play such an instrument, because the music for once "absolutely fit the scale of the instrument it was being played on." Bezuidenhout, after revealing that Bilson told him he needed to get more serious about the fortepiano, posits that maybe what is needed is for more students to commit to it in the same way, practicing on it the way most Steinway students do.

At this point, however, there are a number of pianists in the world for whom early pianos *are* their primary instruments. There are of course Bilson's

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—Malcolm Bilson**

many students, who can be found on the faculties of many prestigious schools. But Bilson has a contemporary in the Netherlands named Stanley Hoogland who has been in the field since the early 1970s; he has nurtured quite a few full time fortepianists, both at the former Sweelinck Conservatory in Amsterdam and at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. Two of his students, Bart van Oort and Geoffrey Lancaster, won the Bruges competition in 1986, after which Van Oort went to Cornell to study with Bilson and earn a D.M.A. Van Oort and Hoogland have both taught scores of international fortepiano students in The Netherlands, and there are also fortepiano teachers active throughout Europe. (Full disclosure: the author first studied fortepiano in the Oberlin Conservatory's Historical Performance Department with a former Bilson student, David Breitman,

then went on to study fortepiano in Holland with Van Oort and Hoogland.) From this writer's perspective, part of the problem is that many people in the early music community itself have not embraced the fortepiano in the way they embraced the harpsichord. Therefore, even some conservatories and colleges that have early music programs or faculty members in the field do not have quality instruments with which to interest modern piano students or faculty members.

It seems that Bilson would like to see every major conservatory add a fortepiano to its collection in order to give students the chance to learn about the instrument, and surely this could have some effect. Most conservatories these days do have a harpsichord somewhere on the premises. When interviewed by Nicholas Mathew for the most recent issue of *Keyboard Perspectives* (Vol. IV, 2011, Westfield Center), Bilson was asked whether all pianists should be required to spend a part of their education playing earlier pianos. He responded, "Goethe said that you don't understand your own language until you learn another one.... After I had been with my first Belt piano [see a feature on fortepiano builder Philip Belt in *EMAg*, Winter 2011, page 24] for a week, even if I had never played another one ever again, my whole world would have been changed by that experience. I think every pianist should have the opportunity to *practice* on an early piano... The piano you practice on is much more important than the piano you give a concert on, because that's where you begin, where you form your ideas about the music." Kenyon makes a similar statement in the interview, saying that students should be able to try the old instruments. Some will decide to specialize in them, some will say it's not for them, and still others will see elements that they might be able to transfer to their modern playing. He says that even if everything is not "transferable" to a modern counterpart (*i.e.*, viola da gamba to cello), the experience would still contribute significantly to one's music making.

Kenyon's assessment is that audiences love the early music movement, and that it is most likely the very conser-

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vatism of the conservatory system that keeps some students away from it. On the other hand, it could be said that there is now an old guard of sorts in the early music field; one can now go to any number of conservatories and university music departments and study with students of Bilson, Gustav Leonhardt, the Kuijken brothers, Anner Bylsma, and so on. As a result, one can now invest themselves in learning “how to play early music” from them in the same way that “modern” students learned their craft, absorbing presented knowledge without engaging in any of the groundbreaking research that all of these performers did. In addition, an incredible wealth of recordings exists that students and professional musicians can reference without having to think for themselves. While discussing the early music assimilation by many mainstream orchestras, Kenyon wonders whether we’ll “come out the other end with another mainstream style.” Some would say this has already happened. About ten years ago the late Gustav Leonhardt gave a talk at the Royal Conservatory of the Hague in which he declared that early music, as he knew it, was now dead because of a certain feeling of standardization.

For Bilson, who looks around and sees “Steinway-model” pianists interpreting music of the late-18th and early-19th centuries in a historically uninformed and rhetorically uninflected way, there is clearly no feeling of having “won” the argument. But, if anything, this entire DVD is a testament to the vast impact he’s had on countless musicians, concert goers, instrument builders, restorers, and thinkers on music throughout the world. His tireless dedication to this music and these instruments brought him in touch with scores of people, and one cannot imagine the field of early music without his work as a performer, teacher, scholar, and yes, even a provocateur at times.

In the final segment of the video, “Six Pre-Steinway Pianos in Sound Examples,” Bilson gives viewers a tantalizing

sample of the wide range of early pianos and their sound world. He is always railing against standardization (of instruments *and* performing styles), and it is true that the world of pianos is poorer for having become homogenized. Of course there is still some variety; no two Steinways are alike, and Yamahas are different from Steinways. But nevertheless, the current level of variety is nowhere near that found in pianos built between the beginning of the 18th century, when

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the piano was invented, to the beginning of the 20th century. Bilson presents recordings of three gorgeous antiques (seven-octave Pleyel from 1847 played by Ronald Brautigam; six-octave LaGrassa, a Viennese-type piano from 1816 played by Bart van Oort; six-and- $\frac{1}{2}$ -octave Hafner, c. 1830, played by Bilson), two wonderful replicas (five-octave 1790 Walter by McNulty, played by Bilson; five-and- $\frac{1}{2}$ -octave Longman & Clementi, c. 1799 by Maene, played by Liv Glaser) and, in an interesting twist, a “modern” piano played by the great Alfred Cortot in 1937. Bilson postulates that the piano is probably a Bechstein or a Gaveau from the period and writes, “Although a modern piano, to my knowledge no instrument is being

built today by any company that strives for this kind of basic sound.” Bilson had a famous brush with Cortot (see Andrew Willis’s interview in *EMAg*, Fall 2006, page 28) that resulted in the esteemed master writing an “attestation”—a recommendation letter of sorts—for Bilson, which he framed and which hung in his office in Cornell throughout his 38-year tenure. Bilson describes Cortot’s sound and imagination as “magical,” and so is his own, especially when playing the music of Schubert.

Performing the Score is a worthy sequel to *Knowing the Score*, and it will certainly provide all viewers, whether in the “modern” field or the early music field, with much-needed food for thought. If Bilson were to find himself in the mood to make another one of these, perhaps he could continue in the vein of the last section and take us on a few Diane Bish-style tours of some of his favorite instruments, which would be incredibly informative and thoroughly entertaining! The collection of pianos restored by Edwin Beunk and Johan Wennink in Holland—two of which are featured in the last chapter—could quite possibly expand to a DVD of its own, but there are countless fascinating instruments throughout Europe and here in the U.S. Indeed, presenting an even greater number of instruments and even more repertoire might further enhance Bilson’s argument. ♣

Based in the Boston area, Sylvia Berry is an active performer-scholar specializing in Viennese keyboard music of the late-18th and early-19th centuries.



PHOTO: FELVEGI