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Author

Morgan, Elizabeth

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BODILY Writing

by Elizabeth Morgan

MY BACKGROUND as a performer shapes how I write about music. I came to musicology after receiving my undergraduate and master's degrees in piano performance at The Juilliard School. When I started graduate school in the Department of Musicology at UCLA, I gravitated toward studying issues related to performance, topics such as virtuosity and performance practice. Meanwhile, I noticed that the campus abounded with scholars whose interest in performance had inspired them to experiment in their writing, figures such as Sue-Ellen Case, Elisabeth Le Guin, Susan Leigh Foster, and Susan McClary. Common to their work is the absence of a boundary between their identities as

performers and their identities as scholars; their understanding of the performing body spurs them to perform in their writing. Perhaps Susan Leigh Foster says it best: "I am a body writing. I am a bodily writing."^{*}

I, too, am interested in bringing a physical sensibility into my writing on music, one that reflects the material at hand and which renders my academic prose personal and compelling. One of the best ways I've found to do this is through experimenting with narrative voice. When I write about keyboard music, for instance, I use the first person. I have a

^{*}Susan Leigh Foster, "An Introduction to Moving Bodies," *Choreographing History*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3.

personal connection to piano music, from years of playing and interpreting, and I want to communicate that relationship to my reader. My connection is not only emotional, but physical too. As a pianist, I am always subject to the temperament of this particular mass of flesh and bones, with its weak fourth fingers, thick webbing, and meaty fingertips. My physical experience playing a piece shapes my understanding of that work. For instance, I had a particularly tough time learning Chopin's first etude in college, and so I think of the work as agitated and neurotic, connecting its emotional affect to my own frustration trying to learn it. My perspective comes, in part, from being true to my bodily

presence, and so my writing reflects that; I use the first person, I draw on anecdotes about hours in the practice room and Band-Aids on my thumbs, I describe stretches and physical contortions that relate to my hands. To do this in the third person would seem as strange as writing this essay about the pianist and musicologist Elizabeth Morgan, instead of about ME.

One of the challenges to writing from an overtly personal perspective is historicity. Chopin wrote the C Major etude for his hands, not for mine. He composed the work for a mid-nineteenth-century Pleyel piano, not a twentieth-century Steinway. Maybe the stretches that I find so maddening in that piece were easy for him, with his hands, on his instrument. Sometimes, bodily knowledge and personal experience seem like particularly unstable forms of historical knowledge. Yet they also have the potential to provide windows into fact when nothing else can. I found this to be particularly true as I did research for my dissertation, which examined music making among female amateurs in late eighteenth-

and early nineteenth-century England. As I traveled from archive to archive, reading diaries and letters of Georgian-era women and looking at their collections of sheet music, I couldn't stop lamenting the fact that the voices of so many historical women had been lost. For every diary I read, how many had disappeared? I decided that the best tool for filling in voids in historical knowledge was imagination. In each chapter of my dissertation, I included some original, non-academic prose, written in the style of a late-Georgian or Regency woman. I composed a letter from a young girl to her mother, a short story about a dinner party and the music making that followed, and several diary entries documenting a girl's piano practicing. I also used my imagination as I interpreted the musical works that women of the time performed; I continually explained how different physical and interpretive decisions, such as choice of fingering and tempo, could transform the meaning of a piece of music in performance. My original fiction and musical interpretations served an academic purpose, but they also reflected

the nature of my historical subject. Women of the Georgian and Regency eras avidly read fiction. They loved stories, and I had benefited from stories about them; novels were one of my most important sources of information in uncovering details of their lives. So it was only natural that I should tell stories in my project.

While none of the topics that I am researching presently calls for quite so dramatic a departure from norms of academic writing, I remain tied to the notion of story telling that I explored in my dissertation. Crafting narratives is something that both performers and musicologists do daily. We look at musical works and make sense of them, drawing on what we see, hear, and feel. This is not to say that we don't deal in fact. We do. But imagination and interpretation are crucial components of how we make those facts come to life. By infusing my academic prose with the kinds of creative decisions that I might make as I learn a Chopin etude at the piano, I hope that I serve my subjects truthfully and convey their essence vividly in prose.