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VOX HUMANA: Bach by Immersion

James Pressler has a story to tell, and a stirring one at that. With it, what would have been an otherwise not-too-noticeable item received for review assumes real importance. Granted, an op-ed column ought not to replace the reviews elsewhere in this journal, but the process in this project begs for a word or two and, in the end, outflanks the results.

Pressler, a Californian since 1952, says he played recitals for 37 years from 1957 to 1994. A stroke finished his live performing. But since he had acquired technological skills, Pressler tied his physical recovery to his skill in MIDI. Think about it. How many of us with MIDI equipped consoles actually use the technology to positive benefit? Here's one positive tale.

Pressler, you see, had to learn to do everything in life with his left hand unassisted. With time, he discovered that encoding MIDI music would enable him to "play" again on appropriately equipped consoles. He also located sound fonts replicating the organ (pretty well) on computers, and synthesized desktop "performances." Evidence of this technological productivity abounds on his several Web sites (he also develops sites for others). But Pressler's real breakthrough resulted from collaboration with Noel Jones in Knoxville. Jones wanted a MIDI encoding of the whole of Bach's organ music for his Rodgers Organs dedicated Web site. Pressler replied by extending his work into a pedagogical project by making available his Bach MIDI files with left, right hand, and pedal alone, and in various combinations (remember practicing the Trio Sonatas with one hand on a silent manual?). Jones distributed these files through frog music press (www.frogmusic.com, a site about "music, MIDI, support, innovation and talk, mostly for and about Rodgers Organs"). Users have the option of playing Pressler's sequences on a computer, MIDI device, or MIDI equipped organ. Students may practice with these files (by playing the missing voice or voices with them at whatever tempo). So Pressler's "learning project," led to a "performance" in which finished performances of the complete Bach works were assembled, all from an organist limited to the use of one hand.

Pressler and Jones put the resulting music on a CD entitled "Bach by Immersion," (Frog Music Press, 3706 Terrace View Drive, Knoxville TN 37918, or the Web address above). Jones custom designed and voiced a Rodgers for these "MIDI preparations."

Generally, a recording of the Bach *intégrale* on an electronic organ would not reap great attention here. Nor, probably, would a disc full of MIDI files. If it is Bach one wants, one can select from dozens of sterling, conversant, performances on appropriate instruments ranging from indigenous, to authentic replicas, to just plain wonderful, to refreshingly off-center. These qualify as unashamedly good performances, but not more. Artistic integrity also counts. Are MIDI encodings performance? The very desktop computer that produces this commentary holds the software to scan a printed score of Bach, bring that up as notation, and save to MIDI thus enabling, in the end, a "performance" of the piece on a MIDI equipped organ, all without a single human finger depressing a key. Is that honest performance? Have we altered aesthetic truth?

James Pressler's "preparations" seem honest enough. They qualify as inventive, fresh, and musical, not the germ-free metronomic stuff of MIDI sequencing, but more the spontaneous expression of a live player. True, it is still a digital organ we hear on the CD, and one may choose not to accept this solution either ideologically or musically, but Rodgers technology enabled the project and deserves to be there at the end. Still, all this would be unremarkable were it not for the two big overarching factors.

First, James Pressler, after suffering a limiting disability, returned to performance as a “virtual organist.” Art is not the act of a victim, it is the expression of an artist. Whatever it takes to make art, it takes. Secondly, Pressler looked at technology in thoughtful and musical ways. In doing so, he uncovered a valuable teaching tool. The Bach works in MIDI enable those just learning this axial repertoire just as they enable Pressler to “perform” again. It looks as if James Pressler not only returned to the stage, but to teaching.

- Haig Mardirosoian