



# Storytelling in Classical Music

article by Michael Smolens ©2023

A while back I had the rare opportunity to hear my favorite artists perform live at a lovely Berkeley venue — Baroque flute player from Belgium, Barthold Kuijken, accompanied by Korean harpsichordist JungHae Kim. I first heard Barthold 50 years ago when he and his two brothers (Sigiswald & Wieland) along with harpsichordist Robert Kohnen performed at my school, UC Santa Cruz. This was in the mid-70s when the revolution in historically informed early music performance using period instruments was really taking off. I used to play a replica of a Baroque flute back then and loved how that highly rhythmic approach, with minimal vibrato, mirrored my ideal sound in jazz. And so, I became a huge fan of this flutist.

The Kuijken & Kim duo exclusively played music by the major Baroque composers — Handel, Telemann, and J.S. Bach (I got quite a chuckle reading that one of the Telemann pieces previously unknown to me was titled “The Methodical Sonata”!). Anyway, I was very familiar with both of the Bach Flute Sonatas, one of them unaccompanied. It was the Sonata in B minor that piqued my interest . . . I noticed that I became, well, a bit uncomfortable with their performance of the opening movement. I wondered if the recording I grew up with by another artist (Franz Brüggen, teacher of Barthold) had spoiled my ability to stay open to what I was hearing on that sunny afternoon.

The opening movement of this sonata is the longest single movement within a chamber piece that Bach ever wrote, and feels more like a concerto than a duet. Now, Mr. Kuijken had absolutely no problem getting through it. But it felt rushed. Why? I think there’s more to judging tempos in Baroque music than just the harmonic rhythm (how fast the harmony changes) or the character of the dance movement (whether stated or not), as important as both of those elements are to a convincing interpretation.

I feel that there’s a strong storytelling component to music, even when there are no vocals present. One of the touchstones that I find helpful in creating a vivid interpretation is to sense the age of the storyteller, like a narrator in a play or novel. We could be very literal about this and compare a recording of an artist performing classical piece X in their 20s vs. their 50s. Granted, there can be quite a difference in performances because the artist has had many more experiences in their life that can influence their interpretation of a specific work. Yet I feel that an artist at any stage in life can begin to imagine the age and even temperament of such a musical storyteller. And by extensions, late works by composers are often best presented by more mature performers.

So, given the intense chromaticism and syncopation of the opening of Bach’s Sonata in B minor, I feel that its story would be best told by someone of advanced age who has experienced many joys, but likely more uncertainties and sorrows. After all, I don’t think I would have heard this piece the same way even five years ago . . .