

HISTORICALLY INFORMED PERFORMANCE: ON TAKING REFUGE IN THE PAST AND THE MYTH OF AUTHENTICITY

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Abstract: *Historically informed performance has a stable, enthusiastic audience and has offered impulses to redefine and reconsider theories on musical performance in general. If we have already gotten accustomed to the sound of an ensemble of baroque instruments, as well as with an interpretative manner that tries to reproduce the practices of the time when the respective music was written, we are continuing to reflect on (at least) two fundamental problems: seeking refuge in the past and the claim to authenticity.*

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Since the 1970s, ensembles, conductors and soloists have built a reputation on their efforts to render the music of the past as faithfully as possible, with the help of thorough archive research and the study of iconography, documents, treatises and period instruments, as well as bravely assumed imagination exercises. The starting point was the reconstitution of Renaissance and especially baroque music in this spirit, but later investigations expanded as close to the present as Johannes Brahms. The first attempts were to configure a “sound” typical to instruments used at the respective time and, moreover, a performance style different from the usual. If we take baroque repertoire as an example, there are amazing differences across generations, from David Oistrakh and Sviatoslav Richter, for instance (when Bach’s music was generally performed in a rigorous,

objective, even “cold”, totally uncompromising manner) to Jordi Savall, Nikolaus Harnoncourt and today’s young interpreters.

But the differences are sometimes disconcerting even within the movement itself. If one were to try to define the situation of historical performance nowadays, the only possible comment would be that the field has become more professional and has been opening up to more freedom of expression and of imagination. After all, everything depends on each and every interpreter’s talent, intelligence and taste. The mere fact that a musician conforms to historical performance ideas neither ensures the quality of his/her artistic act, nor does it enhance his/her power of persuasion.

The trend that has renewed the interest in *Early Music* has manifested itself since the first decades of last century, first and foremost through musicological curiosity towards Renaissance and Baroque repertoires⁶⁹. An original musician, Arnold Dolmetsch, had intuitions that were unique at his time, as he started to reconstitute period instruments (lutes, violas, Blockflöte, harpsichords a) as early as the end of the nineteenth century and published the volume *The Interpretation of the Music of the 17th and 18th Centuries* in 1915⁷⁰. Such initiatives remained isolated, but they added themselves to the growing amount of investigation on Bach’s creation and style or on the work of Renaissance composers. In 1926, for instance, *Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa: Musician and Murderer*⁷¹, the book that brought back to light Carlo Gesualdo da Venosa’s bizarre figure, was published, and the style characteristic to Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, the classic contemporary of Gesualdo the mannerist,

⁶⁹ It goes without saying that this interest is nothing new, if we only think of the important parts played by Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann in rediscovering Bach at the time of high Romanticism.

⁷⁰ Arnold Dolmetsch, *The Interpretation of the Music of the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Novello and Company, London, 1915.

⁷¹ Cecil Gray and Peter Warlock (pseudonym for Philip Heseltine), *Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa: Musician and Murderer*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd, 1926.

became the model for the academic study of Renaissance counterpoint. At least this is the proposal made by Knud Jeppesen in his famous stylistic analysis, *The Style of Palestrina and the Dissonance*, published in English in 1927⁷². Alongside new and renewed research on first-hand names, in the decades that followed various composers were brought back to public attention, whose importance lay especially in shedding light on the time and place where they made music, or, to put it differently – they were *minor masters* or *Kleinmeister*. Old music sheets were minutely edited, restored, reconsidered, re-analysed. The repertoires of seasons and festivals were permanently enriched, and the notion of *Early Music* expanded from the first manuscripts discovered in the Middle Ages to early works signed by Haydn and Mozart.

All these are early signs of a growing interest in pre-1750 repertoires and in past performance styles. After 1950, the *Early Music* trend won over an increasing number of followers, specialised ensembles were created for performing on period instruments, as well as festivals, publications etc. Not only performers, musicologists, professors and researchers interested in dance, theatre, iconography, cultural history, luthiers (and other instrument builders) got engaged in this movement, but also editors, music critics with influential columns in periodicals, concert managers and agents, recording companies and sound engineers and, finally, a growing audience in the European west and the U.S.A.⁷³ Between 1970-1980 the music education institutions in these areas introduce Early Music and historically informed performance classes in their curricula, thus marking the fact that the trend had acquired academic status and had become settled within musical life. At the same time, it is no

⁷² Latest edition: Dover Books of Music, 2005.

⁷³ See Laurence Dreyfus, “Early Music Defended against Its Devotees: A Theory of Historical Performance in the Twentieth Century”, in *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (Summer, 1983), p. 298.

coincidence that the first critical studies are published which reflects on the substantive issues of historical performance.

The place of historically informed performance in musical life has gone beyond a mere *niche zone*. It has a stable, enthusiastic audience and has offered impulses to redefine and reconsider theories on musical performance in general. If we have already got accustomed to the sonorities characteristic to an ensemble of baroque instruments, for instance, as well as with an interpretative manner that tries to reproduce the practices of the time when the respective music was written, we are continuing to reflect on (at least) two fundamental problems: refuge in the past and the authenticity claim.

Views on performance have been gradually changing in the last 50 years: if, in the case of performing a Romantic or modern score, what tends to be evaluated first and foremost is the performer (his/her virtuosity and vision in a concerto by Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninov), when it comes to baroque music the stress falls on faithfulness to the composer, so Bach (to take an example) comes to the foreground and his performer will be content to come second. A similar situation – even though strictly related to contemporary artistic phenomena – can be noticed in the film industry. After all, along the 20th century the actors were in the limelight, the projector now moves onto the director's personality more and more insistently. But cinema is a much younger art, with a more dynamic way to connect to the audience, and any performer-actor or composer-director similarities must be adjusted very carefully.

Among the apparently dizzying unfolding of tendencies in 20th century music, one may count the (re)discovery of spaces different from the mainstream⁷⁴. Around 1970, two such “marginal” directions coexisted, with no apparent connection between them: the

⁷⁴ Mainstream: the western classical-romantic tradition, massively present in the repertoires of concert and recording institutions (the same Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Tchaikovsky).

musical avant-garde in composition and the *Early Music* trend in performance. And yet, one's audience failure nourishes the other's success. The profound conflictual crisis which exists between the avant-garde experimental composer and the average listener determines the latter to accept the rediscovery of an old age with enough enthusiasm; what attracts him/her to the past is the stability of music that have stood the test of time, as well as an illusion of serenity. Moreover, some *Early Music* adepts do not content themselves with reviving the past, but try to make it "better", to idealise it.

Post-war musical life gradually brings in a radicalization of sonorous experiments (with noise being included among the new communication tools) and of languages (intellectualist, mathematical, abstract or intentionally simplistic, but challenging through diverse parameters). The discrepancy between the contemporary composer and the audience accelerates, with the latter preferring to take refuge in various comfort zones. At the time of Bach, Mozart or Liszt, music was an essential part of everyday life. It always had to be new and nobody ever thought of using the old music of past generations. What was important was the opening night, which always stimulated the production of new musical creations. After the two World Wars of the 20th century, music had to be "beautiful", to match everyday comfort, to not bother the ear, to entertain; the listener no longer finds these features in the contemporary music production, but in the past. One should not forget that the music industry adapts rapidly to the preferences of the majority.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt wisely draws attention to the fact that we are not facing a crisis in music, but it is the music that reflects a crisis of our times⁷⁵. This backwards run means selecting from the

⁷⁵ Nikolaus Harnoncourt, *Le discours musical. Pour une nouvelle conception de la musique*. Traduit de l'allemand (*Musik als Klangrede*. Residenz, Salzburg 1982) par Dennis Collins, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, p. 10.

history of last millennium's music those parts that please the ear and musical life becomes a sort of museum reconstitution.

If at Mozart's time music was based almost exclusively on the living creation of the present, nowadays it seems that the last "living" creative period, as understood by concert institutions, is the late-romantic one (Bruckner, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Mahler). However, there is also the entertainment repertoire, with all its continuously blossoming branches, from pop-rock to animation music or the music of electronic games, of movies etc. Thus, our present also has a living music, which will very likely please a majority audience. In its turn, "classical" music maintains a certain audience zone and tries to diversify its "offer" through educational projects, through repertoires refreshed by combinations of the old with the new and fusion between genres. In such a context (which I outline only briefly here) appears *Early Music*, with its offer of an attractive refuge in the past, in a mixture of museum reconstitution and a new performers' enthusiasm to enter "faithfully" the "original" intentions of former times' composers.

In what ways is the past investigated and, as it seems, recreated? The most spectacular element remains the reconstructions of old instruments, such as, for instance, the industry of harpsichord making. Few authentic period instruments have survived the passage of time, and their sound has doubtless been altered after two or three centuries of existence. Not any old instrument is capable of producing artistic excellence, even if, in itself, it represents more than just a useful object, it is rather an artistic museum object. How close to the original can an ensemble of baroque instruments sound today? The sound difference is shocking to the present-day audience, if they are to compare *Matthäus-Passion* by Bach conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler and Leopold Stokowski, in recordings made around the middle of last century, to recent versions made after 2000, conducted by Ton Koopman, Harnoncourt or Philippe Herreweghe (the latter with over two million *youtube* viewings). In the first case,

monumental orchestras and a romantic spirit animate Furtwängler, Stokowski and that time's vocal soloists. In the second case, ensembles of baroque instruments are powered by the main idea of authenticity and faithfulness to the composer's intentions, through re-creating the baroque spirit, that is, by placing today's performer within a long-gone frame of mind.

Not only are instruments chosen in conformity with baroque models as much as possible, but also have music sheet editions gone through successive transformations, triggered by detailed research on original manuscripts. Romantic musicians inserted their own indications in their forerunners' scores (the freedom and fantasy of adaptations at that time being commendable and enjoyed by the audience). On the other hand, the modern spirit encourages objectivity, respecting the Urtext. The scores are amply commented, but only in forewords, without the editor indicating anything in the musical text itself other than what is discovered in manuscripts, after a detailed work of research.

The editor's work is not easier. Public and personal archives are thoroughly researched, and Renaissance and baroque treatises are carefully studied. All such publications certainly are greatly profitable to modern musical life and influence performance style towards a more neutral, "cleaner", de-romanticised vision, purified from the performer's expressive licences. Gradually, however, towards the end of the 20th century, the performer's voice changes again. Musicologists are starting to warn their colleagues that those treatises are not infallible, and that they do not contain absolute truths. Today's performers are returning to an imagined style, to well-documented fantasy.

All this search and rediscovery of the past was long placed under the banner of authenticity: "Thou shalt perform the music in accordance with the composer's intentions, for this is (H)is will."⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Dreyfus, p. 298.

The first half of Lawrence Dreyfus's 1983 article title, *Early Music Defended against Its Devotees: A Theory of Historical Performance in the Twentieth Century*, announces a sharp critical discussion on the authenticity claim raised by historically informed performance at that time. As a matter of fact, this paraphrases an article signed by the "mandarin of modernism" (as Dreyfus calls him), Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, entitled *Bach gegen seine Liebhaber verteidigt*⁷⁷. As early as 1951, Adorno warned against the presupposed objectivity of those who attempted to rebuild old instruments and the practices to handle them, but who neglect emotional expression and the significance of the music, which is to be found in the intrinsic structure of the score. It is true, *Early Music* was at its very beginnings, with inevitable exaggerations, and its adepts were promoting a total replacement of the piano by the harpsichord, big orchestral ensembles with chamber ensembles, the avoidance of all emotion and emphasis in interpretation.

Around 1980, historically informed performance reaches a climactic point of influence and success in musical life, at the same time becoming a field of controversy. Most of it is connected to authenticity or, better said, authenticities⁷⁸. Musicological literature shows a consistent preoccupation with this subject and, moreover, the first systematic philosophical debate on historical authenticity appears in the musical performance practice in the nineties. Generally focusing on music philosophy topics, Peter Kivy looks at theories of musical interpretation, practically breaking new paths into a territory that had been less explored by philosophers. He builds his argumentation on a well-organised skeleton, starting thoroughly from a lexicographic step. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, he finds five significances of authenticity, of which four are applicable

⁷⁷ Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, „Bach gegen seine Liebhaber verteidigt“, in *Merkur* 5 (40), 1951, Klett-Cotta Verlag, Stuttgart, pp. 535-546.

⁷⁸ Vezi Peter Kivy, *Authenticities. Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1995.

in musical performance: *with authority* (whose authority cannot be doubted; since we are talking about the composer's authority, the performer faithfully adheres to his intentions, trying his best to produce sonorities similar to the ones of the time the work comes from); *original* (as opposed to copied; if in painting a clear distinction is made between the original and the reproduction or the copy, in music we do not have an authentic object and many copies, but only the sensation that an authentic object is produced); *genuine* (coming from an undebatable origin; the composer is in the foreground once again and so is the faithfulness of the performer towards the composer); *of its own* (belonging to itself; we mean the uniqueness of a performance that, in its originality, does not necessarily imply faithfulness and authenticity); *automatic*, functioning on its own (about clocks)⁷⁹. However, Kivy's discourse will focus primarily on the first three understandings of the concept of authenticity, discussing each of them from the point of view of the composer, performer and receiver.

Supporting his argument on the basis of works by modern American authors, passages from Kant, Leibniz and Hume, but mostly (to the delight of the music-aware reader) on an excellent knowledge of the musical repertoire approached (in terms of composition and performance), Kivy develops personal argument with respect to the "authenticities" of historical performance, and more: he inevitably goes over that border towards the general problematic of musical performance (it may not be useless here to note that in English the concept of *performance* is categorically different from the concept of *interpretation*, whereas in Romanian this distinction is not made).

The authenticity obtained through respecting the composer's intentions can be questioned from several angles: we lack a rational method to have access to the composer's intentions, so we can never

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

be sure that we are authentic from this perspective; the intentions may be the composer's or may be attributed to the composer by ourselves; do we mean intentions or wishes, suggestions?

Here are a few of the dilemmas that Kivy's text permanently, systematically brings up, trying to answer in a nuanced way and continuing to raise other questions. The tendency to ignore the spirit of the score, while strictly respecting its letter, the appeal to old instruments exaggerates the idea of "faithfulness" to the respective music. Actually, this is what, with his characteristic polemical spirit, Richard Taruskin (one of the few musicologists quoted by Kivy) notices⁸⁰.

As regards the use of period instruments, Kivy refers to the authenticity of sonority, distinguishing between the historical one of the physical sound ("sonic authenticity") and the one coming from the conscious way in which we are listening to that repertoire ("sensible authenticity")⁸¹. The examples are convincing in demonstrating that we do not listen to music a historically, and music has properties mediated by history or which are destroyed by history: the sonority of the ensemble that Bach originally had in mind for *Matthäus-Passion* sounds intimate and chamber-like nowadays, but for the 18th century listener (who was not used to the breadth of a romantic orchestra in a modern concert hall) it had a massive effect. As regards the unusual beginning of Symphony No. 1 by Beethoven, with its dissonant dominant harmony, today's listener must be familiarised with historical circumstances, or else that dissonance will not have the expected impact. Nowadays, when we listen, we are products of music history. Concert programs give us some historical orientation, and the climax of historical listening is represented

⁸⁰ Richard Taruskin, "The Authenticity Movement Can Become a Positivistic Purgatory, Literalistic and Dehumanizing", *Early Music*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Feb., 1984), pp. 3-12; „Tradition and Authority", *Early Music*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Performing Mozart's Music III (May, 1992), pp. 311-325; "Is There a Baby in the Bathwater? (Part II)", *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 63. Jahrg., H. 4. (2006), pp. 309-327.

⁸¹ Kivy, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

(paradoxically or not) precisely by historically informed performance, whereas a contemporary of Bach or Handel listened to music while being strictly anchored in the present, with no interest for the past and tradition and with no “musicological” support.

Peter Kivy then explores authenticity in stage performances. Nowadays we have got used to listening to operas or liturgical creations in concert, pushing aside the visual aspect in the respective work. Even in absolute music, the visual side is important. How close are we to authenticity if we perform an 18th century music with or without a wig, in a hall with candles or with electrical light, in a cathedral or on the concert stage? How are we to reconstitute the social function, the event for which a certain music was written (coronations, open air parties, religious feasts)?

Finally, one last dictionary meaning of the authentic term Peter Kivy refers to is that of a performer’s personal, original *style*. Critics often talk about the “expression”, the “sincerity” of a performance, eccentric visions such as Vladimir Horowitz’s or Glenn Gould’s are appreciated. If someone vandalizes a classical work of art by painting on top of it, he/she is subject to punishment, but “when Horowitz ‘defaced’ Mozart by playing him like Chopin and on a modern Steinway, he ended up on a pedestal”⁸². Such a personal touch (called “the other authenticity”) presupposes the respective performer’s unique perspective, one that will not obey the rules of generally recognised historical authenticity. Such performers may encourage arrangement, they may take liberties in relation to the score, they may propose versions that take certain liberties.

I have selected only a few of the ideas launched and debated by Kivy around authenticities, especially in the first part of the volume, entitled *How to Be Authentic*. In the second part, *Why to Be Authentic*, the performer’s voice seems to come to the fore more. Does it have the moral obligation to respect the composer’s

⁸² *Ibidem*, p. 192.

indications? Why should we believe that the way in which a composer intended his work to be performed is the best one? How are we to know the composer's intentions (wishes, hypotheses, suggestions) exactly with respect to the way in which his/her music is performed? Couldn't we rather focus on the performer's way to bring to the surface or to intensify emotions in a musical passage? Is it the performer's task to stress the positive aspects of music and to minimise the negative ones? All those who make music know that the answers to such questions generate multiple variants, as "there is no *one* perfect or optimal performance but a wide variety of different performances, both attractive and unattractive for various reasons. The world of performance [...] is a pluralistic one"⁸³.

As we read such reflections on the *Historically informed performance* – a less controversial expression, therefore, also one that is more widely spread than the phrase used by Kivy in his volume, "historically authentic performance" – and listen to performers, conductors, specialised ensembles situated under this umbrella, it is obvious that, once again, history has a word to say. One gradually notices a metamorphosis of *Early Music* adepts from rather dogmatic positions regarding authenticity, expressed especially at the beginnings, when the movement was looking for its own legitimacy, to much more nuanced and flexible attitudes. If faithfulness to an old score meant for some performers (and commentators in the audience) that they were well informed and rendered a music objectively, knowledgeably and with an exaggerated respect for the *Urtext*, others underline the need for a creativity of one's own and for a personal, bold vision, going hand in hand with a good knowledge of the score and of its historical context. Nowadays, the concert life landscape is varied and of many opinions. Someone may be equally delighted to listen to the famous air *Erbarne Dich* from *Matthäus-Passion* in at least two very

⁸³ *Ibidem*, p. 159.

different versions: the mezzo-soprano Julia Hamari in 1971 (with Münchener Bach-Orchester and the conductor Karl Richter), and the countertenor Damien Guillon in 2010 (accompanied by the choir and orchestra Collegium Vocale Ghent and by the conductor Philippe Herreweghe).

Of course, only in the second case can we talk about a historically informed performance, with an ensemble of baroque instruments and a countertenor voice modulated in the spirit of baroque rhetoric. But aren't both versions authentic, each in its own style? If authenticity in performance finally translates as the emotion triggered in the listener, then we can certainly find it beyond the borders of performance trends and fashions, beyond the (un)faithfulness to and the (non)observance of the composer's intentions.

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