Historical Recorder Methods and "Authentic" Performance

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The "lecture" I gave at the First North American Recorder Teachers Conference in 1993, taking its cue from the title of Gordon Schloming's lecture, was more of a "Zen experience," with lots of probing questions — some people thought too many — designed to get the "audience" to think about the history of the recorder and modern performance of early recorder music. It took as its starting point Anthony Rowland-Jones's article on recorder slurring that had just appeared in *American Recorder*. That article performs the valuable service of collecting together what is found about slurring in Renaissance and early Baroque recorder and other methods. Unfortu-nately, by his injudicious use of wording here and there, and especially in his conclusions, Rowland-Jones showed that he was confusing, and confused about, two basic questions.

Rowland-Jones makes such bold statements as "Before 1600, slurring was regarded as a fault attributed to slovenliness or poor technique" or "real slurs were not otherwise part of the performance practice vocabulary of the Renaissance period." Yet the answer to our first basic question — What can we found out about how early recorder music was performed in its day? — is "not much." Methods were written for amateurs and children, to whom professionals would never have given away their trade secrets. With the possible exception of Ganassi's *Opera intitulata Fontegara* (1535), no extant early instructions could have provided adequate instruction for professionals. This is hardly surprising, because those musicians have always been taught orally. In the Renaissance and Baroque periods they served as apprentices, receiving their training from masters with little or no written assistance. We will never know how even the authors of methods really played, and we certainly have no information about the thousands of other musicians from those periods who never wrote a method. In my opinion, what Rowland-Jones really means is "The few writers (for amateurs and children) whose work has come down to us regarded slurring as a fault, etc." or "in the sources (intended for amateurs and children) that have come down to us real slurs are never mentioned/advocated."

Rowland-Jones also tells us: "never use real slurs in playing Renaissance music," "In these *affetti* sections, the soloist must exploit all the capabilities of his [sic] instrument, including slurring," "In music up to 1600, recorder players should not slur," or "Extended passages of ornamentation should, as in the Renaissance, be played with each note separately articulated." Yet the answer to our second basic question — How should we play early recorder music today? — is "Any way we please." There is no moral compunction to use historical evidence in interpreting early music, although many people in the early music movement seem to believe there is. Even if we make use of all the historical evidence we can find, we still know relatively little about how early music was performed in the past, so we could not reconstruct it if we tried. I compared the situation to dinosaur DNA, about which I had just been reading in *Newsweek* in the wake of *Jurassic Park*: from the estimated 1% of information that has come down to us, it would be impossible to reconstruct a dinosaur.

Many performers caught up in the quest for "authenticity" in the performance of early recorder music have clutched at recorder methods as a means of discovering how such music "should" be performed. Yet the concept of authenticity is fraught with difficulties, and recorder methods give us only inadequate snapshots of "the way it used to be" at a few times in a few places.

After my lecture, several members of the audience approached me and asked me to explore the question of "authenticity" further with them. I referred them to an article I wrote for the Australian recorder magazine on this subject. As that magazine has had limited circulation in the United States, I present an updated version of the material below.

"Authentic performance on original instruments." This advertising slogan, emblazoned across hundreds of LPs and CDs in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, has had cash registers ringing loudly all over the world. Chamber orchestras such as Frans Brüggen's Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, Christopher Hogwood's Academy of Ancient Music, Roger Norrington's London Classical Players, and Trevor Pinnock's English Concert have made large inroads into what used to be the province of symphony

orchestras. We have had Baroque orchestras, Classical orchestras, and now even Romantic orchestras, moving on from Bach and Handel into Mozart, Beethoven, Berlioz, and even Brahms and Verdi. Eventually the original-instrument orchestras will surely catch up to the present day. At a time when concert audiences as well as sales of recordings of classical music are declining, and the average age of the audiences is said to be increasing, recordings by members of the authenticity (or "historically informed") movement are selling like hotcakes. The same conductors mentioned above are even being asked to conduct orchestras of modern instruments, their sponsors hoping no doubt that, along with some of the authentic style, some of the authentic success will rub off.

The premise behind the authenticity movement is disarmingly simple: that "early" music (however one limits it) should be performed on original instruments (or faithful copies of them) in accordance with the performance practices of the composer's day, or in other words "authentically." With a few notable exceptions, the idea of performing music of earlier times, rather than only contemporary music, goes back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. The idea of playing such music on original instruments and with original performance practices came later — with Arnold Dolmetsch and others at the end of the nineteenth century — and it has taken the better part of the twentieth century to become widely accepted. For most of this century, in fact, a good deal of early music was performed in what was taken to be a modern style, on modern instruments, in the belief that these instruments had evolved to become far superior to their historical counterparts. If there was any debate about authenticity at all, it was between the minority who believed in original instruments and performance practices, and the majority who did not.

Ironically, however, while the authenticity movement has been sweeping everything before it at the box office (and particularly the CD store), a different debate has been going on in musicological circles that has cast serious doubt on the labeling of the whole enterprise and raised questions of the utmost importance about all our performances of early music. It would be impossible to do justice to the breadth and depth of this debate in the space I have at my disposal here, and in any case the arguments continue apace, so I shall content myself with giving readers a taste of the debate and setting out those of its points that have appealed to me the most.

Because it is always good to begin with definitions, I shall summarize an article by a philosopher, James O. Young, which, having been published in a journal of aesthetics rather than one of music, seems to have gone unnoticed by the debaters; yet it represents the best attempt yet to pull the rug out from under the historicist definition of "authenticity." Young acknowledges that we do not know everything about the way music was performed in the past. But supposing we did — supposing there was an omniscient musicologist who knew everything it was possible to know about the music of the past: scores, instruments, performing techniques, tuning, and so on. He hazards a first definition:

(1) "An authentic performance is a performance which reproduces music as it was heard at the time of its composition." This sound innocuous enough. But Young raises moral obstacles to that: we do not want to produce castrato singers today. Some pieces of music were never performed at their time of composition: what do we do about them? Music was sometimes badly played and sung in the past; some early performers were quite frankly inept: we do not really want to imitate them.

So he changes the definition: (2) "An authentic performance is one in which a composition sounds the way its composer intended it to sound." Again this sounds very reasonable. But Young points out there is no way to determine which performances are authentic, as we do not know all of a composer's intentions. What possible evidence of his intentions is there? He may have left some performance instructions; there may have been reports on his concerts — but really those are extremely rare. Moreover, perhaps the composer did not even realize his own intentions in performance. Even if we could do so, it might not be an attractive artistic ideal, as composers may not be the best interpreters of their own works.

He therefore tries a third definition: (3) "An authentic performance makes a piece sound as it would have sounded at the period of its composition, had conditions been ideal." The problem now is that all listeners differ in how they hear a piece of music. There is no such thing as an innocent ear: perception is based on the listener's background, education, and beliefs. In the Middle Ages, for example, certain intervals were considered dissonant that we would consider consonant today. For that reason, there is no such thing as an "authentic" listener in that sense of the term.

Can we remove the listener from the definition? (4)

"An authentic performance is one which causes air to vibrate as it would have vibrated at the time of its composition, under ideal conditions." One objection to that, of course, is that we might have a modern synthesizer which could cause air to vibrate in exactly the same way. (4b) "An authentic performance is one which, by means of authentic instruments, causes air to vibrate as it would have vibrated at the time of its composition, under ideal conditions." But performers' experiences and beliefs influence their interpretations. Since today's musicians do not have the same experiences and beliefs as early musicians, they cannot vibrate air as early musicians would have done. Even if we could vibrate air in exactly the right manner, Young continues, this definition fails as a characterization of authentic performance because it loses sight of the point of any performance: to realize some kind of artistic goal — aesthetic, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual. A style of performance attains its goals by means of the vibrating air; it is artistically attractive, however, not for that reason but because it attains an artistic goal. He concludes that the search for "authentic" performance has been misguided.

Notice that Young's demolition of possible definitions of authentic performance begins by assuming that we could know everything there is to know about performance styles of the past. In practice, of course, there are limits to our knowledge of those performance styles, and the farther back we go, the less knowledge we have. The recent authenticity debate may be said to have started with an article published in 1978 by Michael Morrow, then director of the stimulating medieval and Renaissance group, Musica Reservata. He wrote that "virtually any modern attempt to perform medieval or renaissance music can be at best merely a more or less successful counterfeit. . . . In recent years the emergence of the old-music virtuoso has done much to encourage the manufacture of counterfeit performing styles. One finds performer after performer adopting the same mannerisms — mannerisms based on no known historical practice, but merely in imitation of a hero's personal idiosyncracies."

What about Baroque and Classical music, where we have a great deal more historical evidence? During the 1960s and 70s, both the influential recorder player Frans Brüggen and the Netherlands early string players developed a mannerism variously known as the "Brüggen bulge," the "Dutch banana," and the "Amsterdam swell." They took an idea that had some basis in historical practice — the *messa di voce* performed on long notes — and applied it to practically every note of a piece, in Brüggen's case sometimes at the expense of intonation. Of course Brüggen himself stopped doing it fairly soon, but his students and others who cloned his style picked it up, and some still use it to this day.

Another characteristic mannerism of the authenticity movement has been the studied, almost self-conscious elimination or restriction of vibrato, particularly by string players and singers. No doubt the performers in question had read a few treatises saying that vibrato was used only occasionally, as an ornament (or, more likely, they picked up the notion from other performers). Yet two musicologists, Greta Moens-Haenen and Frederick Neumann, have now collected voluminous evidence demonstrating a wide range of attitudes towards vibrato in various times and places. Mozart, for example, wrote to his father: "The human voice vibrates by itself, but in a way and to a degree that is beautiful: this is the nature of the voice, and one imitates it not only on wind instruments, but also on strings, and even on the clavichord."

Richard Taruskin, the American musicologist who has taken the lead in the authenticity debate, has pointed out another revealing facet of the self-proclaimed "authentic" performances. I noted above that the original instrument orchestras had been making their way steadily towards the twentieth century. Taruskin has been looking at twentieth-century recordings and extrapolating backwards. Taking a cue from him, in a lecture I gave on authenticity at Recorder '90 in Canberra, Australia I played a pair of illustrative examples of the overture of the same Handel concerto grosso played by Wilhelm Furtwängler with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in 1944 and Trevor Pinnock with the English Concert on original instruments in 1982. Even by 1944 Furtwängler was an anachronism — a throwback to a Wagnerian conception of musical performance. His interpretation, with a large orchestra, is on a grand and magnificent scale, and the emotional climate is profound and sublime. The tempo is (basically) slow and majestic, but it speeds up and slows down, and the level of intensity also varies, according to the ebb and flow of the music. Pinnock's performance, in contrast, has a very light tone, a fixed level of intensity, a rather impersonal emotional climate, and a much faster tempo kept steady all the way through the movement.

Taruskin notes that Furtwängler is one of the

survivors of a tradition that started to disappear in recordings in the 1920s and 30s — a disappearance he puts down to the influence of Stravinsky, who was striving to keep emotion out of performance, and Toscanini, who brought some of the ideals of the opera house into the symphonic world. Under those influences — and before anyone had heard the label "authentic" performance — players on modern instruments began to play in a lighter vein, metronomically accurately and steadily, with a rather impersonal emotional level. If you listen to *all* twentieth-century recordings of Handel or Bach (or any early composer), in fact, the original instrument players turn out to have a great deal in common with all of the players of *modern* instruments all the way back into the 1920s, having unconsciously absorbed certain twentieth-century traits of performance that have nothing to do with history. Furtwängler remains as a reminder that musicians used to play differently once upon a time.

Taruskin concludes that "historical performance today is not really historic. . . . A thin veneer of historicism cloaks a performance style that is completely of our time, and is in fact the most modern style around. . . . The historical hardware [i.e., the use of "original" instruments] has won its wide acceptance and above all its commercial viability precisely by virtue of its novelty and not its antiquity." He believes, then, that the so-called authentic performance style is in fact the taste of today. Musicians may think they are going back to early times but they are creating a modern style suitable for modern audiences — and a good thing, too. "Being the true voice of one's own time is far more vital and important than being the assumed voice of history. What is verisimilitude, after all, but correctness, the paltriest of virtues?"

One of the unfortunate results of the "authenticity" movement is the belief of some of its practitioners that their performances are inevitably better than other performances simply by virtue of their use of historical instruments or (some) performance practices. To take the matter of the instruments, Taruskin quotes the example of Nicholas Kenyon (a former editor of both the journal *Early Music* and editor also of a fine book on authenticity) writing in the *New Yorker* that he does not really look forward to a forthcoming performance of Beethoven cello and piano sonatas on modern instruments because "they won't be Beethoven's sounds, they'll be modern sounds." Besides having severe confusion about the ownership of the sounds, Kenyon dismissed the performance in advance! It would not have mattered if these players on modern instruments had been the finest in the world, he was already predisposed toward disliking the performance. In other words, the performance was being evaluated not on its own merits but for its "class connections."

Another unfortunate result of the authenticity movement has been that, although research into early performance practice is a neutral activity, some musicologists do not behave as if it were. Taruskin describes going to a conference in America in the early 1970s devoted to performance of the music of Josquin des Prez. The musicologists gathered there had inconclusive discussions about how certain aspects of Josquin's notation should be interpreted. Then some well-known musicians gave performances of Josquin's music, and every time were told by a musicologist that they could not perform that way because there was evidence against it. Not a single performance received the approval of the musicologists.

Clearly, however, it is ridiculous that we should be told we cannot perform Josquin's music just because musicologists have not yet decided how to interpret it. In any case, we can never have enough evidence to know how it was done in Josquin's day, and as Taruskin sagely remarks, "If you construe your fragmentary evidence the way religious fundamentalists construe scripture . . . what is not permitted is prohibited . . . then you must do nothing — as many do in the name of 'authenticity.'" Performers are not writing research papers on the state of Josquin research: in performing they must propose solutions.

If the attacks on performers are not by musicologists, they are by critics and reviewers of recordings, as a glance at any review journal will reveal. Taruskin calls them "the musicological vice squad" or the "mordent police," lamenting that "fear of prosecution" by them has made some original instrument performers play it safe. Yet by no means all critics are biased in favor of "authentic" performances. Donald R. Vroon, the editor of *American Record Guide*, has inveighed against them on many occasions. "Most of the critics I know (and not just our writers) do not like the sound of period instruments and, like me, find the stylistic hangups of the movement irritating at best and wrongheaded and unmusical at worst."

Some performers in the "authenticity" movement have popularized the metaphor that they are "restoring" early music, stripping away the accretions

of the modern performance tradition, in the same way that old paintings are being restored by the removal of the dirt and varnish of the centuries to reveal them exactly as they were when they were created. This sounds plausible at first sight, and is of course an extremely appealing notion. Once again, Taruskin lays it to rest. A piece of music is not an object like a painting and cannot be "found" anywhere. Some early music advocates seem to think that the piece is somehow located in its first (or an early) performance, so that if we imitate that performance we will somehow achieve authenticity. Yet why should any performance have any special validity? Could the piece, instead, be located in the score? No: the score is a kind of plan for the work, and any performance an instance of it. The piece itself, if it is anywhere, is in the mind. We can have no access to the piece unless a performer interprets it; the music cannot "speak for itself."

We saw above that the "authentic" performers in fact use a mixture of historical and modern performance practices. One aspect of historical performance we have generally not chosen to imitate is its performer-centeredness. Nowadays we tend to think of early music as a repertoire. If you are a recorder player, you have your repertoire of Handel and Telemann sonatas, the Sammartini concerto, and so on — composers and works you come back to over and over again. Yet in earlier times, as the ubiquitous Taruskin has pointed out, "Works were not considered constituents of a repertory or canon; they were the commodities necessary for the carrying on of the musical 'daily business,' in which the central figure was not the creator but the performer, whether domestic amateur consuming new works at home or charismatic professional plying his trade in salons and theaters at a transcendent level of execution. In either case, the performer was not there to serve the work; the work was there to serve the performer."

The spirit of the eighteenth century, in particular, was much closer to the popular or jazz world of today than it is to the classical world. In pop or jazz, a piece may vary so much in different performances and realizations as to be almost unrecognizable. The performers interpret the piece according to their taste, instinct, and inspiration, experimenting and "playing" in the other sense of the word. In jazz, especially, creativity and spontaneity are valued above all else. During my lecture at Recorder '90 I played a provocatively extreme example from jazz: Thelonious Monk's "Ba-lue Bolivar Ba-lues-are" in wildly differing versions by the composer and the group Was (Not Was). In the latter, Monk's blues is transformed into what the sleeve notes call "a loopy but moving dirge with traces of both New Orleans and outer space."

Where does all this leave us, and especially, what value is there in playing on original instruments and studying historical performance practices? Once again Taruskin, in his latest thoughts on the matter, hits the nail on the head. Modern performances cannot help but be authentically of our own times, whether they are on original or modern instruments and no matter how many or few elements of historical performance practice they have absorbed. If we, as authentically modern performers, want to use original instruments, then we should. If we, as authentically modern performers, want to study historical performance practice, then we should. These two activities are, at the very least, educational, and they may inspire us into giving vital performances that modern audiences can relate to. Both are disciplines that can open up to creativity. And here is the crux of the matter: having learned our lessons from history we are free to do what we like with them. Rather than being hidebound by a correct, "authentic" way of doing things, imagining (or pretending) that we can and should be restoring the music of the past, let us, in a spirit of adventure, explore early music to the fullest extent of our imaginations, and in recreating it, make it our own.

Examples of such (re)creativity are not hard to find in the recorder world today. Think, for example, of the Loeki Stardust Recorder Quartet arrangement of a Vivaldi flautino concerto with its quirky touches of which even the composer's fertile imagination had never dreamed. At Recorder '90 Conrad Steinmann and Walter van Hauwe gave solo recitals in which medieval and Baroque pieces intermingled with modern ones in such a fashion that I was sometimes not sure which was which. I ended my lecture with another provocative example from jazz, announcing it one of my favorite authentic performances of early music. Jimmy Garrison's bass leads into McCoy Tyner's piano overlaid eventually by a brass group; after almost a minute John Coltrane enters on soprano saxophone and surprises everyone by announcing the theme of . . . "Greensleeves." Let us take our hats off to Conrad, Walter, Jimmy, McCoy, and John, and let us never forget that, unlike the composers of yesteryear, we are alive and kicking.

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