

Escaping the HIP Paradigm

There has been much discussion of late in the scholarly press concerning the nature of performances that subvert the ideal of the 'definitive', and question the various academy-based approaches that seek to create qualitative standards by which performance is judged.

The Historical Performance 'project' – if it can be so termed – can be seen as a major questioning of prevailing, received notions of style in performance. The basic premise of this HP approach – once readily dubbed by many as 'authenticity' – is that a long time has elapsed since the music was composed; instruments have changed; techniques of playing and their artistic ideals have changed. In a traditional critique still couched very much in belief, or confidence, in 'music as text', scores have changed – often with layer upon layer of historically-anachronistic information painted over the composer's original pen-work; sometimes with layers of historical stylistic information *removed* to produce the prized 'urtext'. John Butt's text *Playing with History* (CUP, Cambridge, 2002) provides a good introduction to many of the established justifications of 'historically informed performance' (HIP) as an idea, a set of axioms, and as performing practices. The solution, of course, is apt study: developing the 'scholarly edition' that, through research, seeks (often from fragmentary and indeed at times contradictory sources) to create a reasonably accurate view of what a composer wrote. Instrument manufacture, set-up, performance technique and consequential style are also studied, with the ultimate aim – to articulate another HP cliché – being to perform the music 'as the composer intended' – a still-powerful and quasi-moralistic injunction. Such an approach has moved in the last half century from the presenting of arcane 'early music' on ancient and specialised instruments, to music of the western canon – by which, by and large, we mean music of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This is all well and good, but the extent to which it is but a crass over-simplification is immediately evident, even to the least initiated. Some thirty years have now elapsed since Richard Taruskin's muscular tirade against the notion of 'mis-selling' – especially (as then) when 'historically informed performance' was synonymous with notions of 'authenticity': see Richard Taruskin, *Text & Act* (OUP, Oxford, 1995). Put simply, however much we read the evidence, engage in organological archaeology, and earnestly desire – through scholarly endeavour – to construct a performance identity that aims at fulfilling a composer's intentions – we simply do not know what this sounds like. Our conclusions are, at best, modern abstractions. Indeed, the very notions of 'music as text', and 'truthfulness' in music as fidelity to the musical text, have been seen, rightly, as cultural tropes in themselves. All of this might be construed as a commentary, if you will, upon our own modernist leanings towards performance enlightenment – distancing ourselves from the efficacy of our own performer identity in favour of invented historical ideals. Taruskin's argument is that much suspicion should be aroused when the conclusions drawn about, for example, the performance of Baroque music have much in common with

modernist notions of accuracy, distance, rhythmic precision, and tonal cleanliness. Studies such as Robert Hill's "'Overcoming Romanticism": on the modernization of twentieth-century performance practice' in Bryan Gilliam (ed), *Music and Performance during the Weimar Republic* (CUP, Cambridge, 1994) show us that such performance norms actually say far more about the legacy of a modernist reformist movement of the early twentieth century than they do about a more distant past. Proof, perhaps, can be cited in the presently uneasy attitude of even the most well-versed scholar performers as regards 'romantic' performance – crucially, an aspect of historical playing for which we have (in comparative terms at least) direct evidence. We can hear the performance on the piano roll of Carl Reinecke, born in 1824, and artistically mature before the death of Mendelssohn – or the orchestral practices presided over by Edouard Colonne, born in 1838, and a personal acquaintance of Hector Berlioz – or the pianism of Ilona Eibenschütz, a pupil of Clara Schumann, and protégé of Johannes Brahms. In violin-playing terms, perhaps the most potent revelations of a dimly-elucidated but still-graspable age come with the playing of Joseph Joachim, born 1831, a student of Mendelssohn and Leipzig editor and concertmeister of the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Ferdinand David. Furthermore, as indicated in the many annotated string editions collected by the [CHASE project](#), we have copious evidence of edited material – some of which includes highly revealing performance markings – as well as hand-annotated copies of some of this material which might map directly onto teaching within a conservative German 'school'. And, of course, the nineteenth century gave us a remarkably detailed legacy of pedagogic material, reviews, and discussions of performance style – far greater in detail and scope (and therefore with comparatively less opportunity for mis-interpretation) than is the case for more distant ages. Yet the response, as Clive Brown has argued for a long time – has thus far been highly selective. Not to every historically-interested performer's taste, Brown's scholarly work represents an extreme, 'fundamentalist' view of performance archaeology; some of his more recent writings argue for the resurrection of certain aspects not only of nineteenth-century performance style, but also of physical performing posture and technique – much of which runs entirely contrary to modern ideals and teachings. See <http://chase.leeds.ac.uk/article/physical-parameters-of-19th-and-early-20th-century-violin-playing-clive-brown/>.

Even if this approach might be seen as a necessarily 'niche market' even within HIP, most would agree that many commercially-released records purporting to be 'historically informed' are only 'historical' up to a point (true of all such experiments where evidence is wanting in clarity and comprehensiveness), and are also perhaps intentionally highly selective. The readiness to adopt period instruments and sparing vibrato perhaps reflects the commercial and academic trustworthiness of a modern 'HIP' aesthetic. On the other hand, the still-prevalent reticence towards portamenti and varying forms of tempo and rhythm flexibility perhaps reflects the fact that, for all of the elevated aims espoused by many HIP performer scholars, they are only willing to go so far in reflecting the likeness of the composer and contemporaneous performers. In general terms, HIP isn't as informed as we might think.

By the same token, the old division – or dichotomy – between HIP and 'mainstream' performance doesn't really work either, and on two levels. Firstly, slurring the 'mainstream' with intimations of a

slovenly, complacent appeal to present-day performer self-aggrandisement is not really a fair critique. Secondly, the notion of the musical 'mainstream' as a single entity is as flawed as the perception of HIP as a single, unified, co-ordinated 'project'. Certainly, many branches of present-day 'mainstream' pedagogy appeal to the intentionally awe-inspiring notion of a grand tradition of handed-down pedagogic greatness, wisdom, and authority, whilst HIP tries to create an aura of legitimacy surrounding performance ideals by means of an almost scriptural evocation of historical 'evidence' to justify aesthetic decisions. This-or-that violinist proves their greatness and their Cultural Capital by invoking the Holy Spirits of exalted genealogy – taught by this famous person of this tradition, whilst at the same time inhabiting this-or-that cultural locus. It's a bit like going out for a curry in Britain: how much better, we convince ourselves, the food does taste, when we know the thoroughly 'authentic' origins of it, and the 'qualifications' of the chef! In reality, this 'project' is as riven with contradictions as anything else. The Establishment teaches those who become The Establishment, or, more accurately, those who are already a part of it in the first place. As one of my current PhD students is exploring, one of the core planks of high-level dissemination of ideas – the celebrity masterclass – is, as I see it anyway, a highly flawed pedagogic institution with loaded dice and predictable musical, social, and power-dynamic outcomes. This being so, is it any wonder that one violinist sounds much like any other?

The ultimate irony in all of this is that in seeking to replicate aspects of past performing aesthetics, the performer loses the very trait that links pre-modern performance styles together: that of *personal authenticity*.

And where does the future lie in all of this? Notions of progress have become, of course, as old fashioned as modernism itself. Our painfully relativist society shies away from notions of 'greatness', of the elevation of 'the exceptional' – presumably for fear of offending those who are not 'great'. It tends to hide self-effacingly in notions of an inevitably (ultimately) invented view of the past – whether this is a nebulous notion of family-tree greatness, or a more pointed, earnest and scholarly manifestation of 'performance as research'. In our desire to see the past as a different country, to paraphrase Hartley, we perhaps legislate away the probability – or even just the possibility – that maybe, just maybe, future generations will have equally good, or even 'better' ideas.

The most obvious manifestation of this maybe comes in the sphere of instrument technology. Most orchestral instruments, and even the pianoforte – ever an instrument affected by changes of technological capability – have achieved a form of atrophy whereby future 'development', if it happen at all, is superficial. But what if we can invent a piano that is strong, durable, light, capable, sonorous, yet crystal clear? What if we can use modern technology to make excellent violins affordable, durable, and embodying new performance characteristics that we can exploit? Such a view might be seen to be at odds with a conservative support for the status quo. It is even more at enmity, so one might think, with musicians playing on replica instruments, undertaking research projects to discover long-moribund organological models, bravely putting up with the inconveniences of pre-industrial materials, or spending vast sums of money having the most faithful replicas built. Faith in the probability of an enlightened future might also unseat the powerful dominions of classical

music infrastructure. Maybe modern technology can allow any violinist to afford a decent-sounding instrument. Maybe, too, modern technology can make the recording process more accessible to a wider range of artistic talents – talents not chosen by being in the right place at the right time in the bosom of the artistic establishment, but rather artists praised for genuine originality of ideas. What if...?

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