

<b>Zeitschrift:</b>	Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis : eine Veröffentlichung der Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, Lehr- und Forschungsinstitut für Alte Musik an der Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel
<b>Herausgeber:</b>	Schola Cantorum Basiliensis
<b>Band:</b>	26 (2002)
<b>Artikel:</b>	Past perfect & future fictions
<b>Autor:</b>	Potter, John
<b>DOI:</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869005">https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869005</a>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 15.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## PAST PERFECT & FUTURE FICTIONS

by JOHN POTTER

One of the hoped-for outcomes of a conference such as this is that we'll go away at the end of the week with a heightened awareness of the significance of what we do, and why we do it. My own particular interest is perhaps as a user of musicology, rather than as a musicologist, and it's questions of how we performers use musicology (and why) that I'd like to ruminate on here. If we are going to think about the future direction of early music singing, then we are in effect considering the future of our musical past. So, to look at some possibilities for what the future might hold, I'm going to begin with a little of the history of our early music present. If we know how we got here, we might be able to make more informed decisions about where we go next. We may have only limited control over such things, but it's important to keep the fundamental questions in mind and not to run our musical lives on a kind of autopilot. We need to know what we can reasonably retrieve from the past and how we can interpret it. On a more basic level we need to understand why we feel the need to do it.

I'd like to start by looking at the early music „revival“: what it actually was, what it has achieved, how and why. The „why“ is important: we don't do it for the reason that mountaineers are said to climb mountains: because they are there. Many of us here will remember the palpable excitement of the 1970s, when (in England) great musician-entrepreneurs such as David Munrow, Michael Morrow, Andrew Parrott and others offered us, both as performers and audiences, musical experiences that we'd never had before. Here was a new music that meant something to us, which had a direct appeal to our senses and didn't need a PhD in mathematics to understand. The vocal music was colourful; it was on a human scale with none of the excess that we associated with, for example, opera singing. It seemed within our grasp as individuals, not remote and institutional.

Of course, no musical revolution happens because of a single recognisable cause: there is always a much wider social and cultural context. Part of the reason that we were so intoxicated by early music was that, perhaps un-knowingly, we were in flight from elements of the then current musical aesthetic that we didn't like. I suggested in my book *Vocal Authority* that it's possible to view singing in terms of a process which evolves from radically new styles or techniques through a period of consolidation to a longer stage which I called „decadence“; this third stage (which may be the longest of the three) is eventually broken by an injection of new ideas, which in effect start the process all over again.<sup>1</sup> Listening to recordings of vocal music from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through to my own earliest usable memories of singing (in the

<sup>1</sup> John Potter, *Vocal authority*, Cambridge 1998. See especially pp. 193 ff.

60s), the conclusion I reached was that there had been very little development in mainstream singing during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century so perhaps we might consider this a period of decadence, with early music an example of the new breaking the mould. Those of us who began our musical lives in English choir schools were very sure that the „proper“ singing to which we were sometimes exposed was not something that we could aspire to. Compared with our own experience as boy trebles, adult singing was often so wobbly that the pitches could often only be guessed at, words could be completely incomprehensible, and in concerts the players were often so loud you couldn't hear the singers properly anyway. Although many of us grew up wanting to be singers, it was inconceivable that we would become one of „them“.

As it happened, the market for a lot of this singing shifted significantly, as we grew up during the 60s and 70s. English Music Clubs, for example, which had promoted song recitals and oratorio concerts, largely disappeared. This in itself is an indicator that all was not well with the singing profession: Music Clubs died because their members died. Lieder recitals and the like appealed to older audiences; there was nothing there to attract younger listeners. This decline was paralleled by a gradual expansion of opera singing in the British conservatories. Although they would offer alternative study (the Guildhall had an „Arie Antiche“ class when I was there) opera increasingly became the flagship course, to the extent that all of the British conservatories eventually became the opera singing factories that they are today, turning often very young singers into opera singers with huge voices (most of whom, sadly, are likely to be unemployable without a considerable increase in the death rate within the opera business).

There was one other factor that helped to get the impending revolution going: the record industry. One of the engines of capitalism is built-in redundancy: in marketing terms this means you achieve economic success by persuading people to buy what they've already got. Classical music offers lots of potential for this: the more or less fixed canon (with its associated ideas of „interpretation“) meant that record companies could sell multiple versions of the same work. Two things began to dawn on record company executives in the early seventies: one was that there might be a limit to the number of recordings of the same piece that people were prepared to buy. Related to this was the question of what they would buy instead. One answer was opera, of which there was an apparently infinite number of unrecorded examples. EMI, for example, embarked on a huge programme of opera recording with astronomical budgets. Profits would only accrue in the very long term, which left a gap in short-term strategy. This, it was thought, might be filled with what was to become early music.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The Hilliard Ensemble's EMI contract in the 1980s was initially for 3 albums per year, and was intended to cover as much early vocal repertoire as possible. At the same time as these records were being produced, EMI was also investing in opera (sometimes with the same producers working on both).

I've said that no revolution has a single cause, but if there was one element that enabled the kind of intellectual and musical critical mass to kick-start change, it was the meteor-like crossing of the English music scene of David Munrow. The breadth of his musical imagination, his dynamism (and sheer physical energy), gave (the largely ex-Oxbridge) singers a huge confidence, enabling them to create an exciting alternative to what we thought of as vibrating voices which scooped all over the place. We could hear pitches, identify temperaments, we could be creative with the notes, and more than anything we could produce a new music that people wanted to listen to, unlike the avant-garde that many of us were also involved in, with its absurd complexities and unknowable parameters. It was also anti-establishment: it wasn't remotely academic and was about as far away from conservatory training as you could get.

For the foot soldiers of this revolution (such as myself and the dozens of other singers who were later to make successful careers out of this new music) very little of what we did was based on any sort of historical research. We were quite content to take what was on offer and go with it. Those who sang in David Munrow's ensemble will remember the „lift-bang“ (and if you listen to the recordings, especially off-air radio tapes you can still hear it). If I remember correctly it was David's solution to the „pllica problem“, which none of us understood (or cared much about). It was a practical solution, a creative use of the holes in our knowledge (something that early music enables all the time). For a time, the „lift bang“ became what you did when you got to one of those funny squiggles. None of us, as far as I'm aware, ever read anything about medieval or renaissance singing. If we had done, we might have been rather alarmed, and indeed the early music phenomenon might have been rather different... But let's leave that question on one side for the moment.

Eventually, some of us did get around to doing some reading, and began the process of „informing ourselves historically“. It took a while for me at least to realise that musicology meant musicology of the composer, or rather of the composer's text as mediated by a musicologist (who was, in effect, the dead composer's representative here on earth). The written word has an almost theological authority when we come to dealing with historical sources, and such is our respect for written sources that we will often decontextualise them completely, even when we are well aware of the context and milieu to which they pertain. The psychology of this is interesting. Singers will be familiar with the *bel canto* myth (the perfect singing that apparently existed at some unidentifiable point in the past), and to some extent the mythology of a perfect past still pervades much of early music thinking and performance. When we talk of historically informed performance, what we often mean is what the composer is thought to have wanted (which may have been very different from what he actually got). We are informing ourselves of an ideal which may have had no basis in reality. Let me give you an example: many of us here will know Conrad von Zabern's *De modo bene cantandi* of 1474, which was the fruit of Conrad's lifetime of trying to teach recalcitrant

monks to sing properly.<sup>3</sup> My first encounter with this source led me to draw certain conclusions about how chant should be sung. But those conclusions were based on what Conrad wrote, not on what he actually experienced. Had I put those ideas into practice I would have, hopefully, ended up with a chant choir that Conrad would have been really proud of. But would it have been one that he would have recognised? I doubt it, because the reason he had to write the treatise was that people *didn't* do it his way. I would perhaps have been trying to re-invent something that hadn't existed in the first place. The rather salutary lesson I learned from this is that a source might mean exactly the opposite of what it appeared to mean.

One reason I was happy to take Conrad at face value was that what he said seemed to me to represent what early music singing ought to be like: quite like I would perhaps instinctively sing it myself, in fact. The need that we all have to fit the past into our contemporary aesthetic is something that needs to be negotiated, or we risk mythologising our source material. With medieval sources it's essential to determine not simply when and where the source was written, but why, and what was the intended (and likely) readership. Of course it's possible that there were choirs who sang just as Conrad hoped they would, but we have no means of knowing who, if anyone, actually read his work so it's impossible to tell. Printed sources of 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> century treatises are more reliable in this respect, especially when we can estimate print runs, though the numbers don't tell us much about the readership beyond the fact that some people could afford the book. Was Tosi used by significant numbers of aspiring professionals, or was his book aimed at the salon market, like Vaccaj? If we use Vaccaj, how do we account for the fact that he was aiming at what we would call an amateur market? Think of modern singing manuals aimed at singing for fun, and you'll get my drift.<sup>4</sup>

Making generalised and possibly misleading deductions from source material is one thing, but even more worrying is when we discover what the sources tell us about what singers actually did, and which we then choose to ignore because they don't fit with our 21st century idea of what singing should be like. The second book I bought on early music (the first was Thurston Dart) was Robert Donington's classic *Performer's guide to Baroque music*.<sup>5</sup> It was (and still is) full of interesting material. The section I glossed over, because I thought he must have got it completely wrong, was that dealing with early recordings. He had the curious idea that by listening to recordings from the turn of the century one could get an idea of what earlier singing might have been like. These were the very wobbly singers that we hoped to put behind us forever when we invented early music. Not only were they wobbly, they often didn't sing in tune. Worst of all, they couldn't get from one note to another

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Dyer, „Singing with proper refinement“, *Early Music* 6 (1978) 207-227.

<sup>4</sup> Pierfrancesco Tosi, *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni*, Bologna 1723; Nicola Vaccaj, *Metodo pratico di canto italiano*, Napoli 1833.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Donington, *A performer's guide to Baroque music*, London 1973.

without a massive glissando and they kept swelling on any note that lasted longer than a beat or two. As for the technology, well it was so primitive that the recordings were almost impossible to listen to: the cylinders and curious recording machines of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century preserved singers long past their sell-by date, performing bizarrely inappropriate arrangements and accompanied on out of tune pianos. Adelina Patti's 1905 recording of Mozart's „Batti batti“<sup>6</sup> reveals grotesque register changes, inaccurate pitching, sliding about all over the place, absurd tempo changes that aren't marked in the score, appoggiaturas put in where not marked and left out where Mozart put them in. It's no wonder we couldn't stomach that sort of thing.

Donington was a Patti fan, and so too was Michael Scott, whose *Record of Singing* is still the most comprehensive account of recorded singing. Scott points to the link between Patti and her coach Maurice Strakosch, who had been Guiditta Pasta's accompanist. Pasta had sung the role of Zerlina in London in 1816 (Mozart, had he lived that long, would have been approaching 60).<sup>7</sup> So we can trace a line backwards to within 25 years of Mozart's death. In early music singing terms, a hit of plus or minus 25 years is something pretty close to the bull's eye. So would this recording be recognised by the composer? Let's look at what Mancini has to say in 1774. He doesn't like unjoined registers („The great art of the singer consists in acquiring the ability to render imperceptible to the ear the passing from one register to another“) but he devotes several pages to the *portamento* and how it can be achieved, and he has a whole chapter on  *messa di voce*.<sup>8</sup> But perhaps Mancini, like Conrad before him, was writing about what he wanted rather than what singers actually did? He had his points to make, certainly, but virtually every singing treatise from Tosi onwards talks about *portamento* in one form or another („Dragging and glyding are beautiful“, says Tosi).<sup>9</sup> The 1912 American edition of Mancini is dedicated by its translator (Pietro Buzzi) to the Italian lyric tenor Alessandro Bonci, who, claims Buzzi, is the only living exponent of the art of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century singing.<sup>10</sup> This is, of course, a bit of mythologising (unless he misprinted his roman numerals), but Buzzi is obviously suggesting that Bonci is the one surviving singer who would appreciate the teachings of Mancini. His 1905 recording of Pergolesi's „Se tu m'ami“ is stylistically very similar to Patti's Mozart: plenty of *portamenti* and random ornaments.<sup>11</sup>

Let's look at it another way: what we think of as a crude recording process was in fact cutting edge technology, and some of the greatest late-19th century stars were still in sufficiently good voice for many thousands of people to buy copies of their recordings without complaint. Patti herself famously exclaimed,

<sup>6</sup> Pearl GEM CD 9312.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Scott, *The record of singing*, London 1977. See especially pp. 22 & 23.

<sup>8</sup> Giovanni Battista Mancini, *Riflessioni pratiche*, Milano 1777.

<sup>9</sup> This from the Galliard translation of 1743.

<sup>10</sup> Pietro Buzzi (transl.), *Practical reflections on the figurative art of singing*, Boston 1912.

<sup>11</sup> Symposium 1113. I am very grateful to Tim Day, Curator of Western Art Music at the National Sound Archive (British Library) for making recordings available to me.

on hearing herself for the first time: „Maintenant je comprends pourquoi je suis Patti. Ah oui, quelle voix, quelle artiste! Enfin je comprends tout.“<sup>12</sup> Not the blasé comments of some one unhappy with their work and the new recording process. And a singer who has a clear link to the age of Mozart. It doesn't remotely resemble most of the Mozart singing that we now hear.

I'm getting to like Patti, Sembrich, Melba, Charles Santley, and those other megastars who survived into the age of the gramophone. But it hasn't been easy and I've still got some way to go. The fact is, we still don't really like portamento or even messa di voce. The more you know the worse it gets: We can't ignore the fact that tenors now prefer to sing top notes in chest voice rather than resort to falsetto, as Rubini and his predecessors would have done. And we're not prepared to spend five years singing the same exercise in order to make us into the perfect baroque singer (as Porpora is said to have done with Caffarelli). There *are* things we do like: cleanliness of line, smallness of scale, accurate intonation, countertenors. There's not much evidence for any of these – at least on the scale we would like to believe. Our modern aesthetic simply doesn't, and can't, match up with that of the past. I have sometimes asked myself how many great counter-tenors there were before Alfred Deller? How many times have you heard „He was despised“ sung by an actress?“ How many people here have heard anyone try to recreate Mrs Cibber's original performance of *Messiah*? We spend a great deal of musical time trying to establish and interpret Handel's original autograph, but then completely ignore the kind of performer he had in mind to sing it. Isn't music about what it sounds like? Well, yes, and we don't like the thought of an actress being let loose on *Messiah* when we could have a modern turbo-charged counter-tenor. Handel did have a couple of male altos, but they were vicars choral from local churches. Mrs Cibber was brought from London at some expense. He also wrote *Dalila* in *Sampson* for her, and the alto parts in *Semele* for Esther Young (Thomas Arne's sister). Clearly the voice of choice for him was female in this instance. Handel did have a male alto for some of the subsequent performances – but what species of male alto was this? Was he the Kowalski (or indeed the René Jacobs) of his day? I doubt it. I'm sure in a hundred years time our successors will still be assessing the careers of Mrs Cibber and messrs Kowalski and Jacobs, but I'd be very surprised if anyone knows or cares much about obscure English cathedral layclerks. We have a tendency to what linguists call hyper-correction: the attempt to put right something that wasn't wrong in the first place. In the case of the male alto we may be trying to re-invent something that didn't actually exist in the form that we would like it to have done.

This tendency to sanitise the past, to blur the boundary between fact and fantasy, has its parallels in many aspects of contemporary culture. At its worst, it is a symptom of what in England we call „heritage culture“, the preservation and maintenance of a pristine representation of the past. In architecture this takes the form of the preservation of houses or even whole towns according

<sup>12</sup> Scott, p. 23.

to strict rules which perpetuate a mythical moment of historical cleanliness which, if it did exist can only have lasted for a matter of hours. The parallels with music are obvious: England's Classic FM radio station plays the best of the past, in all its polished and static glory (while at the same time effectively reminding listeners that the best way to hear music is sitting on your sofa at home, rather than going out to a live concert). In literature and film many writers find the blurring of the line between truth and fiction a very creative stimulus. Magical realism, documentaries, travel writing, often blend the two completely seamlessly. This is what we often do in early music, extrapolating from what we perceive as facts, until they become something much closer to fiction.

So what's wrong with that? Three suggestions: firstly, I don't think we should mislead our listeners (or ourselves, and certainly not our students), secondly, in fictionalising we may be missing out on actual truths which may be valuable. But perhaps most important of all is what all this says about our lack of confidence in our own present. If we are to avoid becoming a branch of the heritage industry, we must use the past in a positive and creative way, and own up to what we're doing. We can't resort to the merely quaint, the meaningless gesture, the mock-Tudor.

My convenient three-stage theory was, of course, an over-simplification. The radicalism of the 70s reacted against the decadent tradition that seemed to precede it – but within that tradition were many surviving elements of actual early practice – we were rejecting many of the very practices we were seeking to re-discover because they didn't conform to our 20<sup>th</sup> century notions of history. What we were throwing out were large slices of our own present. And in this, we have been so successful that our carefully-crafted definition of early music has become institutionalised. Re-examining our past, and envisioning our future is sometimes not easy in this more comfortable context. None of the leaders of the English early music avant-garde was attached to a college or university: they were radically opposed to much of what they perceived as the establishment. They didn't need the abstract notions of excellence or mission statements that institutions breed. They didn't invent criteria to fulfil certain agreed standards, they simply made things up as they went along.

Careers and reputations depend on maintaining the status quo, so how can we circumvent the crushing effects of our own success? Perhaps we should look to the margins, to the periphery, for the performers who are going to change the world next time. If we're interested in *performing* the music, then we have to try to identify what performers did, not what composers notionally might have wanted. We have a fine musicology of the composer (the most-highly valued original written source). Perhaps we need musicology of the performer (although as a singer I would be wary of this because it would have to include conductors who – in my experience – almost invariably see the composer's point of view). We need a musicology of the singer and of the singing. We have to accept that singers today have to deal with a huge variety of music from many periods and need a good basic general technique, but they have to apply

this judiciously: there is a tendency to teach way beyond the demands of the music so that everything comes out sounding the same. We need to take risks, to push at the boundaries of taste; if we don't like portamenti let's say so, let's do Mozart with clean lines and no scooping, but let's not call it early music. The past is a resource and we don't need to fictionalise it. If we can come to terms with the present, we won't need to fictionalise the future either.