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# Historical instruments and the embodiment of music

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John Butt

In this paper I hope to contribute to our understanding of the use of historical instruments and performance practices and to suggest how that endeavour might be valuable in the wider context of our musical culture. Much of my contribution is a further development of ideas presented in my book *Playing with History*.<sup>1</sup>

The criticisms of the trend for performing with historical instruments are probably familiar by now but it is nonetheless worth repeating some of them here so that we can present a robust justification for the use of those instruments.

One error that was made quite early on in the historical performance movement was to assume that a player who adopted a historical instrument would automatically begin to play in a historically correct way, that somehow the right form of interpretation would directly emerge from interaction with the instrument itself. If we listen to recordings from the various stages of the movement however, it is clear that each stage has brought with it particular presuppositions about style and interpretation. One only has to think of the ubiquitous 'swells' in string playing of the 1960s and 1970s, which now, to most involved in historical performance, sound overly mannered. An added complication was that players inevitably took some time to accustom themselves to 'new' old instruments – and this seems to have been nowhere more evident than in the field of brass instruments. Indeed, idiosyncrasies of tone or articulation that seemed necessary in early encounters with historical instruments or historical playing techniques often become only one of the range of choices which more years of experience presented. A typical example of this might be the practice of working with 'paired' fingers at the keyboard. Only initially does this tend to force one to play a series of notes in more or less separate pairs. Thus, in general, while it is indisputable that old instruments do indeed cause one to play in new and different ways, it is by no means certain that these ways are the only ones or those which are historically most correct.

1 John Butt, *Playing with history*, Cambridge 2002.



If we actually did hit on the sound and style that corresponded acoustically to those achieved by the original players, would this fidelity strike us with an immediate clarity or in some special way that non-historical sounds and styles will not provoke? Surely not. And is there any certainty that we would hear such identical sounds in the same way in which the original performers and listeners would have heard them? Furthermore, if the assumed consistency of the human condition means that there is some continuity in the way humans hear things from one era to the next, our own personal experiences in listening to any particular recording from one time to another, whether the intervening period is of several years or just a matter of months, immediately shows us the opposite: we learn to hear different things and in different ways over time. In short, only a naïve, mystical conception of music would suggest that an acoustical phenomenon will have precisely the same effect on our 'vital spirits' – to use Descartes' conception of how our passions are constituted – as it would have two or three centuries ago. However directly J. S. Bach's music might still speak to us today, we still have to admit that our awareness of self, of political constitution and of religious beliefs are quite different from those of his age. Even the apparent consistency and continuity of Christian beliefs look different if we remember that alchemy, witches and the divine right of kings were still tied up with the religious beliefs current when Bach was born.

Another common criticism of the historical instrument movement is based in the truism that a particular choice a composer made is not eternally binding. In the first place, composers can change their minds and opinions about performance like anyone else. Furthermore, developments in the construction of instruments and in styles of playing may alter a composer's conception of how a particular piece should be performed after it was first written. This leads to the familiar argument that were a composer to have known of the modern equivalents of certain instruments, he would surely have preferred these to the 'primitive' versions of his own time, thus justifying the use of modern instruments. Many composers from the seventeenth century onwards were surely as interested as contemporary scientists and philosophers in the concept of 'progress'. Might we not be doing them a disservice by putting them into what may seem to be the musical equivalent of a special 'reserve' for primitive peoples?

There is obviously not enough space here to counter all these arguments in one go. But more importantly, I think that we have to admit that most of them contain at least grains of truth. Be that as it may, I would suggest that the justification for studying and using historical instruments does not lie in the refutation of such arguments but in looking at the issues from completely different angles. Only then would the relevance of the oppositional views become clear. There are, it seems to me, three essential arguments which are relevant to the justification of what is called historical performance practice. The first two of these I will only briefly mention here, leaving more space for the third.



First, by re-training ourselves in historical methods and forgotten instruments we give ourselves a form of historical grounding in an age in which the 'modern' has effaced so many traces of our traditions and historical origins. Historical performance is one of several ways we use to engender a cultural depth through a renewal of our awareness of history, a way of giving ourselves security in the wake of the rapid change and flux which suffuses our modern world. Of course, this re-engagement with history would never take us back, nostalgically, to an 'ideal' past, rather it makes us rethink our present condition through a physical encounter with a human artefact that the 'modern' has rendered foreign.

The second argument which justifies historical performance practice, partially related to the first, is that it helps us understand that each age and environment had a different way of doing things. As a consequence, we can make of this historical plurality a virtue in the way we, as contemporary persons, perform and listen to music of other cultures. The acceptance of historical ('vertical') plurality is thus perhaps of a piece with the very necessary acceptance of the cultural ('horizontal') plurality demonstrated by the contemporary world. Our survival today depends on the acceptance of the many differences there are between peoples and cultures. A refusal to acknowledge this plurality can be one of the most dangerous attitudes that can be held in the world today. Musical performance practice which pays no respect to historical plurality obviously presents no great danger in itself, even if such a historical deafness on our part would mean that we might miss the depth and perhaps the joy that an awareness of some aspects of music history could give us. What is pertinent here is simply that by informing ourselves of the variety that must have existed in performance practice in the past and by using the information we thus gather to aid our own performance of historical music we are already embracing the principle of cultural plurality. Although we may have believed the contrary in the recent past, each style of music has a different genre of expressive content and suggests a different performance style; these differences cannot be reduced to a single, universal musical language and corresponding performance practice. The recent history of historical performance practice has gone a long way in demonstrating this to be the case.

The third argument justifying historical performance practice, the one I hope to develop here, has to do with the relationship between how we interpret and use particular pieces of music and our understanding of the role we attribute to the composer who wrote those pieces. I maintain that the consideration of a composer's conscious intentions regarding performance – however historically significant and interesting these obviously may be – is not as enriching as the consideration of the composer's unconscious intentions, those relating directly to his encounter with the instruments and players available at the time he was writing. From this point of view it is hardly relevant whether Bach would



have preferred his keyboard works performed on the modern piano if he had possessed one; what is crucial is how and if the older instruments (and their players) caused him to write the way he did and if they did, whether this can be traced in the surviving music.

Much of my thought here has been influenced by the work of two contributions to the philosophy of visual art, Michael Baxandall's *Patterns of Intention* and Richard Wollheim's *Painting as an Art*. For Baxandall, 'inferential criticism' relates not to:

an actual, particular psychological state or even a historical set of mental events inside the heads of [the artists] ... One assumes purposefulness – or 'intention-ness' – in the historical actor but even more in the historical objects themselves. Intentionality in this sense is taken to be characteristic of both. Intention is the forward-leaning look of things.<sup>2</sup>

This view of intention is evidently a construct of the contemporary critic or interpreter, something to be strictly distinguished from the more traditional and static view of intention which:

would deny the encounter with the medium and reduce the work to a sort of conceptual or ideal art imperfectly realized. There is not just *an* intention but a numberless sequence of developing moments of intention. [...] The account of intention is not a narrative of what went on in the painter's mind but an analytical construct about his ends and means, as we infer them from the relation of the object to identifiable circumstances. It stands in an ostensive relation to the picture itself.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, in the field of music, we should imagine pieces emerging as the result of a numberless sequence of decisions based on the composer's interaction with his environment, including the instruments and the players. This helps us to temper the view of musical works as static, timeless objects of composition and allows us to see them as something belonging to the process of performance. According to Baxandall:

... in a picture ... it is not quite a matter of the painter first working out a finished design and then picking up the brushes in an executive role and just carrying it out. The phases interpenetrate, and one would surely wish at least to accommodate this sense of process.<sup>4</sup>

Baxandall's insistence that the critical viewer has an active role in interpreting the picture is arguably even more important when transformed into a general maxim for musical performance, that is, that the critical listener has an active

2 Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of intention: on the historical explanation of pictures*, New Haven 1985, 63.

3 *Ibid.*, 109.

4 *Ibid.*, 39.



role in the interpretation of a piece of music. Performance is, after all, a necessary act required to complete the musical work of art, an intermediate act for which there is no equivalent in the visual arts except in the performance art of today. The completion of a painting requires an active viewer, the completion of a musical score requires both a performance and an active listener.

The active role of the viewer (and by analogy, the active role of the listener) is further developed by Wollheim.<sup>5</sup> For him, the viewer's perspective emerges as a crucial element both for the original artist and for subsequent interpreters. Wollheim assumes a universal human capacity of 'seeing-in' which is prior to that of pictorial representation. In other words, we all have the tendency to discern representations within seemingly abstract patterns in nature before attempting such representations ourselves. It is this capacity of 'seeing-in' that the artist mobilises as he paints. His intention to represent rests on the same psychological abilities as the viewer has in 'seeing-in'. Wollheim goes on to discern how the spectator's ability can be improved through the cultivation of particular kinds of knowledge of the surrounding context that allow him or her to find something new within the picture. Both the knowable facts and the angles from which we can view those facts are potentially countless. This would imply, by analogy, that the knowledge we can gain from our study of historical musical performance is never complete, not even once all the facts seem to be in. This leads to the more positive conclusion that our constantly changing viewpoints and perspectives with regard to the study of historical instruments are not only productive today but will continue to be so in the future.

In examining the relationship between music and the inferential approach to intentionality there is a great deal of sense in the notion that the composer functions not only as a creator of music but also as a performer and listener during the course of composition, reacting to what he plays and hears and altering and developing the composition accordingly. The practices of composition, performance and listening belong essentially to the same process; anyone participating in any one of these activities tacitly participates in all three. Furthermore, Wollheim's view that information external to the work of art can allow us to appreciate something we would not otherwise have noticed suggests that the search for historical facts of every kind is fully justified. Rather than merely setting a standard of correctness, historical details – however irrelevant they may at first appear – can direct us towards a musical experience of which we might not otherwise have conceived.

Following phenomenological theory, the wider horizon that can help us reconstruct a composer's world of thinking and experience is formed by factors of which that composer was largely unconscious. His 'horizon of expectations'

5 Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, London 1987.



might relate to how he expected his music to be played and perceived, but might also, in turn, have caused him to write in a particular way. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposed, our interrelations with our environment ingrain 'carnal formulae' in our bodies and each new experience forms a sediment in our 'intentional arc', thus influencing our future actions. It is this 'intentional arc' that 'endows experience with its degree of vitality and fruitfulness'.<sup>6</sup> Consideration of intention, even at the lowest 'passive' levels, makes us aware of the artist's actual individual embodiment of experience and helps us experience this afresh in the surviving works. Our perception and comprehension of these intentions brings with them an element of reciprocity, as if the composer comes to inhabit our body and we his.<sup>7</sup>

The late seventeenth-century English musician Roger North provides a remarkably subtle notion of the need for compositional 'intentiveness' when he describes the art of the *Voluntary*, in which the roles of composer and performer are joined into one: the principal purpose of the *Voluntary* is to conjure up many moods. Even if the composer/organist is not entirely successful in this, the presence of his intention to do so or his thinking to do so 'will signifie more than if nothing at all was intended or thought on.' In other words, the title *Voluntary* should not only alert us to the intention of the piece of music as it is notated, but also to the human and dynamic aspects implied in that intention or, following Baxandall, to its 'forward-leaning' quality. We can broaden this view of the *Voluntary* to include any piece of music, regardless of its age or style, thereby relinquishing the positivist, objectivist view of intention and embracing a perspective which takes into account the subjective nature of musical performance.

In all then, I believe it is important to appreciate the latent intentionality in music as an art to be performed, something that can be distinguished from the more local concept of the composer's express wishes. Just as our interest in art *per se* rests on our understanding that it is intentionally created as art (otherwise it would have the same status as an object in nature), our interest in pieces of music should be directed towards the human subjectivity involved in their creation, particularly in the intentionality towards (and occasioned by) performance. This approach, thus couched in a broader context, will influence our idea of the so-called 'higher' spiritual intentions of a composer, the 'message' that he supposedly communicates through the fallible media at his disposal. These intentions inevitably interact with all the parameters which go towards the actual embodiment of any composition.

6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), translation: Colin Smith, London 2002, 182.

7 *Ibid.*, 215.



If we take a strictly formalist view of music, that is, as an art independent and adequate in its own mode of existence, the inferential approach is obviously irrelevant. But it surely becomes crucial if we wish to understand music as the product of human action, of a process of making decisions which have to be taken within a constrained range of choices or, as Fredric Jameson remarked:

... restoring the clumsiness of some initial thought process means returning to the act of thinking as praxis and stripping away the reifications that sediment around that act when it has become an object.<sup>8</sup>

Studying both the historical context and the methods of performance widens the field from which aesthetic choices and evaluations can be made. Moreover, historical knowledge can neither be fixed and nor is it finite, it will change and develop as our own priorities change.

Our reception of any particular piece, composer or repertory will develop as we learn more about the relevant creative context. This development will in turn inform our evaluation of what is significant within that context. Merleau-Ponty's theory of art suggests that the work of art is an expression of the relationship between the artist and a wider shared world and thus has important implications for other lives. Artefacts such as musical instruments, moulded by human action, contain the sediment of human action; we feel the presence of others in such cultural objects:

we need to know how an object can become the eloquent relic of an existence; how, conversely, an intention, a thought or a project can detach themselves from the personal subject and become visible outside him [...] in the environment which he builds for himself.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the ultimate value of studying all aspects of historical musical performance do not rest in telling us how a piece should or should not sound, but rather in how performance, as the medium of sounding music, conditions our idea of the way music relates both to the world in which it first sounded and to the world in which it sounds again. In other words, we are led to a broader conception of the way in which we use music from the past. The tendency in the classical tradition has been to see musical compositions as abstract and self-sufficient works of art, accorded something of the durability of Plato's forms and thus standing outside immediate human concern and the vicissitudes of history. The conception of music this implies might still be valid in providing a sort of quasi-religious model of some level of abstract perfection which could help

8 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham NC 1991, 220.

9 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, *op. cit.*, 406.



counteract the mess of our imperfect existence. At the same time we often tend to think of the great composers as timeless geniuses standing above the cares of daily human existence. In this rarified atmosphere however, we negate the specifically human elements of music, both in the composers and performers in their own times and in ourselves as performers and listeners in our times. There is surely much more to be gained by bringing music back to earth and understanding it as the product of human processes of embodiment analogous to those in which we are involved but borne of an interaction with a completely different historical and cultural environment. Ultimately, the value of studying not only old instruments but also the countless technical – even tedious – facts related to performance practice itself and to the wider context in which music was created lies in the regeneration of music from the past through our interaction with an inferred creative experience. This process clearly deepens our own experience of being alive and our sense of belonging to a world of interacting human beings, right here in the present.