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“Attractively Packaged but Unripe Fruit”; the UK’s Commercialization of Musical History in the 1980s

Colin Lawson

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The decade from 1980 proved to be truly significant in the development of historical performance, as recreations of post-Baroque repertory gradually became the norm. At its close, three complete cycles of Beethoven Symphonies had been recorded on “period” instruments, implicitly demonstrating the complexity of the spectrum between practical expediency and historical accuracy. By 1991, Clive Brown was issuing a timely warning that the pedigree of many of the instruments on these recordings was of doubtful authenticity. The commercially-motivated rush to push period-instrument performance ever more rapidly into the nineteenth century did not offer much hope for the consolidation of historical playing styles. Despite some revelations, he felt that there was infinitely more to historically sensitive performance than merely employing the right equipment, and the public was in danger of being offered “attractively packaged but unripe fruit.”¹ Brown noted an uneasy synthesis between modern baroque style applied to Beethoven alongside modern styles applied to old instruments.

At the start of the 1980s, the new medium of the compact disc was emerging to give period performance further impetus, while encouraging forays into new repertory after 1750. The impact of widespread performances of Mozart and Beethoven’s music on period instruments was indeed a hallmark of the pioneering spirit then prevalent. It is salutary to recall that a mere dozen years earlier, the second edition of Willi Apel’s *Harvard Dictionary of Music* had defined performance practice as “the study of how early music, from the Middle Ages to Bach, was performed... In the period after Bach the problems of performance practice largely disappear, owing to the more specific directions for clearly indicating their intentions.”² But during the 1970s, Christopher Hogwood and his Academy of Ancient Music had already begun to test that proposition with pioneering discs of Arne and Stamitz for Decca’s early music label L’Oiseau Lyre.

During the years 1978-83, Hogwood was occupied with his seminal project to record all Mozart’s symphonies on original instruments. These recordings had been heralded in a

¹ Clive Brown, “Historical Performance, Metronome Marks and Tempo in Beethoven Symphonies,” *Early Music* 19 (1991): 248.

² Willi Apel, ed., *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), article “performance practice,” 658-9.

stimulating article by Zaslaw for the Royal Musical Association Proceedings of 1976-7.³ He dismissed the notion of an unbroken tradition of performance practice as a myth, surveying instruments and playing techniques, interpretative problems, orchestral placement, concert rooms, standards, and personnel. He noted that “for every performance of beauty and insight, two are heard which set back the cause of historically authentic performance.” The celebrated Mannheim orchestra was to be an inspiration as remembered in Burney’s characterization as “...an army of generals, equally fit to plan a battle as to fight it.”⁴ And Schubart had written of it in 1784, “Its *forte* is like thunder, its crescendo like a great waterfall, its diminuendo the splashing of a crystalline river disappearing into the distance, its *piano* a breath of spring.”⁵ Zaslaw made no attempt to disguise his opinion that the Academy of Ancient Music was clearly superior to its older German rival Collegium Aureum in terms of eighteenth-century performance techniques. He conceded that the pedigree of the Germans’ instruments was impressive, but asserted that their results were hardly different from powerful, suave modern recordings. He identifies possible causes as the use of modern instrumental techniques, an over-resonant acoustic or a recording engineer with a “symphonic” sound in mind.

After Zaslaw’s promise of historical riches, it was something of a shock in 1984 to read Eric van Tassel’s review of the complete Hogwood Mozart set in *Early Music*. He praised the Academy of Ancient Music’s orchestral tone colors, intonation, and the vivid recording, before continuing:

“...the...minimalist approach, which even in the last symphonies consists simply in getting all the details right, need not prevent our penetrating the surface of the music if we are willing to make some imaginative effort... A performance not merely ‘under-interpreted’ but un-interpreted offers potentially an experience of unequalled authenticity, using the word in a sense as much existential as musicological. If the notes are all you hear... you have to become a participant; you are invited to complete a realization of the music which only begins in the playing.”⁶

This led to a variety of animated discourse before Zaslaw himself returned to the question of interpretation in his 1989 book on the Mozart symphonies, treading a middle course. There could never be “no interpretation,”⁷ but recreated Mozart must speak for itself more than it would under a post-romantic conductor; the results are bound to be more neutral and less personal, more objective and less subjective.

³ Neal Zaslaw, “Toward the Revival of the Classical Orchestra,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 103/1 (1976): 158.

⁴ Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Provinces* (New York: Broude Brothers, [1773] 1969), 95-7.

⁵ Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart, *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (Vienna: J.V. Degen, 1806), 130.

⁶ Eric Van Tassel, “Untitled Review,” *Early Music* 12/1 (1984): 129.

⁷ Neal Zaslaw, *Mozart’s Symphonies: Context, Performance Practice, Reception* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 509.

As Hogwood's Mozart project was inspiring more orchestral players to take up old instruments, Howard Mayer Brown observed in his now notorious article "Performing Practice" for *The New Grove* (1980) that it would be revealing to hear Beethoven symphonies on period instruments, "...but the practical difficulties of assembling and equipping such an orchestra would be almost insuperable."⁸ But as early as 1982, The Hanover Band was already venturing an LP of the First Symphony and First Piano Concerto for the Nimbus label (Nimbus NI2150). The Band claimed to present Beethoven's orchestral music "in a form he would recognise," with original sound, lower pitch, late eighteenth-century feeling for tempo, an intimate, chamber music approach, the open-textured articulation of that time and the dramatic address to rhythmic accent. Only now was it possible to assemble specialist performers with the technical facility and stylistic knowledge enabled them to play the instruments on their own terms. The sleeve-notes were confident, the reviews broadly welcoming. *Early Music News* supplied the line "The most original Beethoven yet recorded,"⁹ while in *Early Music* Eric van Tassel wrote of the promise of much new light and some indication of what would be possible in the future.¹⁰ Mary Verney's 1798 Broadwood piano excited a great deal of critical attention. It was claimed in the liner notes that, despite being English rather than Viennese, it had the kind of weight and sustaining power that Beethoven was seeking and sounded much as it would have in Beethoven's lifetime. However, Eric van Tassel retorted that the piano would have sounded like this in Beethoven's time "...only if it had been built in 1612 and restored in the 1790s, for it bears all the hallmarks of old, dead timber and leather."¹¹ Early pianos have remained somewhat controversial and it is surely relevant here that Beethoven spent his life striving for better instruments.

The Hanover Band, Hogwood and Norrington could all argue that their pioneering Beethoven cycles made a selection of optimal conditions. This is an important consideration, given that social, political and orchestral conditions in Beethoven's Vienna were not especially favorable. But occasionally some exaggerated if not misleading claims were made in the name of "authenticity." The Hanover Band under Roy Goodman recorded the "Pastoral" Symphony in 1987 (Nimbus NI5099). Some of the old pioneering spirit was already evaporating in favor of technical stability; a not altogether negative feature in view of the Nimbus philosophy of long takes, which could seem closer to an inhibition rather than replicating a concert-hall environment. The sessions were energetically conducted with a baton by Roy Goodman and it was therefore a shock to find in the booklet notes that the Band was directed either from the violin or from the keyboard, "as is in keeping with the period

⁸ Howard Mayer Brown, article "Performing Practice" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1980), 14: 389.

⁹ *Early Music News*, July 1982, cited in John Griffiths, *Nimbus: Technology Serving the Arts* (London: Nimbus, 1995), 178.

¹⁰ Eric van Tassel, "Review," *Early Music*, 12/4, The Early Piano I (Nov. 1984): 565.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 563.

and according to the repertoire.” The disc reached no.13 on the US Classical Billboard charts.

Other record labels exhibited a similar lack of producers’ involvement with explicitly historical issues in Classical repertoire. As for musical direction, Trevor Pinnock manifestly prioritized sound and intonation, whereas Roger Norrington preferred to use sound as a means to the language of gesture, shape, and form. These conductors’ musical personalities were well served and supported by producers and engineers of fine artistic judgment. But overall, no one ever queried even the basic national playing styles that might have made, say, Beethoven, Cherubini, and Rossini sound distinctive. Pinnock, for example, showed absolutely no interest in such matters, apparently dreading only that offensive sounds would be emitted, especially from the winds. Yet in celebration of twenty years of The English Concert in 1993, he wrote: “Some of the publicists’ myths about “authenticity” have been exploded, but for us the simple fact remains the same: we like to use the tools designed for the job in hand. Instruments good enough for Bach should surely be good enough for us.”¹² While leading the London Classical Players, Norrington wrote in one of his booklet notes that the earliest gramophone recordings are of limited help in seeking a historical viewpoint. It was somehow reassuring that a mere dozen years later he could write in relation to his latest crusade against pervasive orchestral vibrato that most of today’s musicians had no notion of what can be so simply revealed in a good gramophone collection. Norrington’s project to record Brahms’s First Symphony was very much of its time—the early 1990s. There was a single performance in a Gloucestershire school, one more on London’s South Bank and then an immediate retreat to EMI’s Abbey Road Studio 1. Though such instant results were in a sense remarkable, there was little opportunity for reflection.

The founding of the self-governing Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE) in 1986 has been described as one of the absolutely decisive moments in British musical life. It brought about a revolution in performance style that left few modern symphony orchestras untouched. Sir Nicholas Kenyon has compared its significance with that of the London Symphony Orchestra, whose foundation in 1904 marked another occasion when players took control of their own destiny. He has observed that although the first director-led groups helped create public taste, it was the players who had taken the risks in terms of mastering old techniques and instruments. OAE proceeded to attract a variety of conductors who had never before worked with period orchestras, notably Sir Simon Rattle. It gradually found its way into repertoire that included Borodin, Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Fauré, and even Stravinsky. OAE personnel have always represented a wide spectrum of historical approaches. For example, violinist Elizabeth Wallfisch has expressed the hope that younger players will go back to the historical evidence: “It’s so important to keep looking at the primary sources, and not just what happened 20 years ago, or listen to recordings for their learning, rather than playing the works unheard, and then discovering for themselves what treasures are contained within.”¹³ Yet OAE has developed a market position that is in some

¹² Trevor Pinnock, “20 Years of the English Concert,” *Early Music News* 174 (May 1993): 1.

¹³ Helen Wallace, *Spirit of the Orchestra* (London: Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, 2006), 67.

respects reflects an international orchestral profile rather than a specialist historical position. Comments by clarinetist Antony Pay help to explain how this came about: "...I am sensitive to the notion that it is more important you find a good instrument you can play expressively rather than a 'correct' instrument simply for its time and date... In fact, the enterprise of playing on old instruments must always be secondary to the enterprise of bringing the music alive in the way it 'wants to be.'"¹⁴

During the 1980s critics were beginning to articulate some of the major philosophical concerns surrounding the concept of historical performance. Is the use of period instruments in recreating the music of the past really a significant factor compared with musical understanding, cultural and social context, acoustical considerations and concert-giving situations? Can a composer expect to have any influence over how his music might be performed? What moral obligation is there to fulfill his original intentions? Are we more likely to understand a composer's piece of music if we restrict ourselves to the means he had available or does such a restriction inhibit our full expression of the piece? Laurence Dreyfus argued that the "authentic" musician acted willingly in the service of the composer, denying any form of glorifying self-expression, but attained this by following the textbook rules for "scientific method" with a strictly empirical program to verify historical practices. He was suspicious that these, when all said and done, were magically transformed into the composer's "intentions."¹⁵ Other writers have addressed the vexed question of an earlier composer's intentions, or even their expectations—an altogether controversial matter. When they express their intentions, composers may do so disingenuously or they may be honestly mistaken, owing to the passage of time or a not necessarily consciously experienced change of taste. Nicholas Kenyon's symposium on "The Limits of Authenticity" took the role of expression as a central agenda for discussion. Richard Taruskin's contribution viewed the need to satisfy a composer's intentions as a failure of nerve, if not an infantile dependency, a topic that both he and the philosopher Peter Kivy were later to develop.¹⁶

Taruskin's claim that historical performance was in a sense the most modern sound around was borne out by what were sometimes loosely, if not falsely described as "original instruments." In the event, improved copies of instruments have a long and distinguished pedigree. As long ago as 1932 Arnold Dolmetsch's pupil Robert Donington remarked of his teacher's reconstructions: "the old harpsichord has certain limitations [and produces] a jangle, slight in the treble but audible in the bass.... The new instruments, which remedy these historical oversights, have proved both purer and more sustained than any previous harpsichord."¹⁷ And some sixty years later Robert Barclay made a rare foray into this same

¹⁴ Ibid., 42, 61.

¹⁵ Laurence Dreyfus, "Early Music Defended Against its Devotees: A Theory of Historical Performance in the Twentieth Century," *Musical Quarterly* 49 (1983): 300.

¹⁶ Richard Taruskin, "The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past," in *Authenticity and Early Music*, ed. Nicholas Kenyon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 146.

¹⁷ Cited from Laurence Dreyfus, "Early Music Defended," 305-6.

subject area by drawing attention to the finger-holes often placed on copies of the Baroque trumpet, so that “the so-called out-of-tune harmonics of the natural series ...will not be unpleasant to modern sensitivity.”¹⁸ As a further example, UK period clarinetists have each quickly established an individual position on a spectrum ranging from historical fidelity to practical expediency. Some players have had a genuine love of old instruments, while others have wanted to get as close as possible to the aesthetic of modern instruments—disguised in boxwood. Clarinet replicas, with their tweaked mouthpieces and sometimes over-generous mechanisms have come in for some tart criticism from organologists, who have felt that even the demands of air travel and the microphone can scarcely justify such cutting of historical corners. As already implied, the different national characteristics of clarinets that are a central focus of the major collections are often barely reflected in the studio. Within the author’s collections of clarinets is an instrument on which a great deal of Mozart’s music has been recorded, with Pinnock and others. It is a copy of a Viennese instrument from 1790. Or is it? The ivory has been replaced with plastic and some double holes have been introduced from another contemporary clarinet. Furthermore, the mouthpiece has been given a nudge in the direction of twentieth-century design and it has been manufactured in ebonite, a material first shown at the Great Exhibition in 1851, some sixty years after Mozart’s death. To justify all of this, one might argue that the eighteenth century did not have to grapple with air travel or the microphone. How do such compromises relate to the evidence that Anton Stadler’s clarinet was described as having so soft and lovely a sound that no one with a heart could resist it? And the regularization of historical pitches has been ironic, given that Quantz in 1752 lamented the lack of a uniform standard, which he reckoned was detrimental to his work as a flautist and to music in general.

Perhaps the most significant writings on historical performance in the 1980s emanated from the pen of conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt. He famously deplored the fact that ever since the French revolution music has become a pretty adornment in our lives, whereas from the Middle Ages to the French Revolution music was one of the foundations of our culture and the understanding of music part of a general education. He observes that people today find a car or airplane more valuable than a violin, the circuitry of a computer more important than a symphony. Two hundred years ago music was a living language, which had to be continually re-created and could actually change listeners and musicians. Harnoncourt believes that for many people music as an ornament rather than an essential part of our lives has been reduced to the merely beautiful and thereby to what can be universally appreciated. The simplification of music, confining it to the emotional sphere, dates back to the French Revolution. Wagner was a great admirer of the new approach to performing music, replacing verbal elements with the pictorial. To this day many conservatoires drill performance techniques rather than the understanding of music as a language. Harnoncourt reckons that not only do we not understand the music we perform; we are completely unaware of the need to do so. Musicians strive for beauty and emotion, addressing their performance completely to the feelings of the audience. When music had its own vocabulary and syntax, it had an incredible power over man’s body and soul. Gradually we have come to prioritize music’s aesthetic and emotional aspects; and current debates about the value of commercial classical

¹⁸ Robert Barclay, “A New Species of Instrument: The Vented Trumpet in Context,” *Historic Brass Society Journal* 10 (1998): 1-13.

radio stations revolve around the very question of whether music should be understood or merely absorbed. Indeed, many listeners now want to avoid challenge, preferring programs of the already familiar and merely comparing minor differences in interpretation.¹⁹

Balancing Harnoncourt's invective is the undeniable fact that the 1980s period movement in Britain and elsewhere made a significant contribution in establishing a new and widespread understanding of a huge range of repertoire and a closer engagement with its composers. For all the criticisms that were often justified, that decade's pioneers influenced many of today's performances, whether in the concert hall or the studio, on modern or on period instruments. The application of "rules" in relation to musical character is an issue that has been constantly revisited in the intervening decades since it is an inevitable fact that the craft of making music is better served by the historical evidence than the art. In many respects the British period scene has now been overtaken not only by its old rival Holland, but by a variety of virtuoso groups from Italy, France, Germany and farther a-field. Yet in those exciting days of the 1980s, the UK was a highly powerful force, whose extraordinary musical achievements within historical performance are surely deserving of further academic study in their own right.

¹⁹ Nikolaus Harnoncourt, *Baroque Music Today: Music as Speech* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1988), 11-13.