

"The Notation Is Not the Music: Reflections on Early Music Practice and Performance" by Barthold Kuijken

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Book Review: Kuijken, Barthold. *The Notation Is Not the Music: Reflections on Early Music Practice and Performance*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-253-01060-5.

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As Kuijken makes clear from the outset, this book is neither a musicological study nor a how-to-play “Early Music” guide with detailed references to all the historical sources. Enough examples of both kinds already exist, he suggests. What he does not reveal is that its basis is his 2007 doctoral thesis of substantially the same title, submitted at the Free University of Brussels. (Indeed, his was the first doctorate in music to be awarded in Belgium.) Kuijken has always considered his brand of subjective and creative research to be “artistic research,” long before that now ubiquitous expression was coined. On the spectrum of practical expediency and historical accuracy it is clear that the author’s aspirations lie firmly at the latter end of the spectrum. In a climate where marketing and convenient practicalities have increasingly tended to overwhelm historical evidence, Kuijken’s book is timely and worthwhile. It is a personal manifesto that exudes integrity, which nevertheless pays scant lip service to the academic rigour traditionally associated with doctoral work.

The author’s underlying philosophy largely reflects the pioneering spirit of the 1970s, when Kuijken began his career in the ensemble Collegium Aureum. He draws a distinction between “traditionally notated composition [that] can be studied quite accurately from the score” and earlier compositions, where “some notational parameters seem to be absent, whereas others have a less compelling or altogether different meaning that is dependent upon the time or place of composition. Their ‘correct’ performance cannot be documented through personal acquaintance with the composer or his contemporaneous performers, nor by studying original sound recordings” (p. 1). Striving for historical authenticity, while at the same time taking one’s full responsibility as a performer, amounts to far more than simply obeying easy-to-learn fixed sets of rules. Informed performance can be captivating; all we can aspire to do is to fall reasonably well within the limits of probability and good taste. Unsurprisingly, Kuijken points to the inherent danger that some Early Music “star” performers bring great artistry, charisma, pedagogical authority, and commercial success to performances that are unthinkingly imitated by others. Such a new performance tradition, based on the personal choice of some historical facts plus a strong dose of individual genius, takes us one step away from the historical documenta-



tion itself. “The more we study the old sources, the more it becomes obvious that there is not a unique historical truth, valid for all times, places, styles, genres and composers” (p. 4). Students should not accept their teachers’ interpretations of historical material, because even with the best intentions, the information will be “truncated, manipulated, chosen, neglected or combined, and anyway subjected to . . . biases, (in)capacities, experiences, blind spots, temperament and taste” (p. 4).

It is not difficult to empathize with Kuijken’s personal manifesto. During his career, the realities of musical life have indeed brought about some decidedly unhistorical elements that are especially endemic on the British and American period scene and have been subject to comment time and again. For example, in sanctioning modernized copies of original instruments, the trumpeter Crispian Steele-Perkins in 1988 excused the situation by citing the necessity “to earn a living in an environment where time is money and where there are monstrous egos to be satiated.” Andrew Pinnock remarked some three years later that “we all fall from grace at the studio door.” In the early 1990s Clive Brown warned that the pedigree of some of the instruments used in recently recorded Beethoven cycles would not have been recognizable to the composer and that the general public was in danger of being sold “attractively packaged but unripe fruit.” Clarinetist Antony Pay made the shameless observation in 2000 that “. . . the enterprise of playing old instruments must always be secondary to the enterprise of bringing the music alive in the way it ‘wants to be.’ Old instruments are just a part of the unpacking of that ‘wants to be.’”

It is evident from Kuijken’s book that he would have little patience with such attitudes. His central discourse relating to “The notation, its perception and rendering” is framed by two short chapters relating to the limits of the printed page. “The notation gives us the raw but lifeless material from which we have to reinvent the actual music, applying the reading and performing conventions of different times and places. . . . I am convinced that questions are more important and more interesting than answers. . . . No Early Music performer would be such a fool as to claim that he plays exactly like Bach or whomever . . .” (113). Kuijken reminds us that a desire to write down music as precisely as possible culminated in the twentieth century, giving as examples Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Boulez. He further notes that only in the 1820s did string quartets begin to appear in score, which implies a different kind of trust in one’s colleagues’ intuition in relation to dissonance, counterpoint, rhythmic shape, ornaments, dynamics, phrasing, or articulation. And of course, as we know from early recordings by (for instance) Patti, Rachmaninov, or Mengelberg, good musical taste, while identified as a *sine qua non* of artistry in many eighteenth-century treatises, varied enormously according to time and place.

Kuijken’s remarks on pitch, temperament, tempo, rhythm, phrasing, and articulation vary in their scope and ambition, though they all bear the hallmark of an intelligent, reflective practitioner. They are far from exhaustive but will surely act as an effective spur to further thought. In passing, I imagine that some Anglo-American readers will

want to take issue with the author's claim to have initiated the now ubiquitous classical pitch of $a^{\flat}=430$ for La Petite Bande's recording of Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* in 1982; there are several other contenders, notably Christopher Hogwood in the UK. As one might expect, Kuijken is especially perceptive in relation to ornamentation, even though his treatment of improvisation is disappointingly peremptory. He proceeds from musical detail to give examples of audience attitudes throughout history, together with a brief survey of different kinds of performers, as the author perceives them. He concludes that "Only historical authenticity and personal authenticity together can give the listener both the message of the composer and its unique and honest reading by the performer, in ever-changing proportions. I do not see why the audience should get any less than that from us" (p. 112).

Is Kuijken's tiny compendium of thoughts and ideas a treasure trove of inspiration or an undisciplined ramble? In truth, it has elements of both. In perusing this book, one is reminded of Daniel Türk's celebrated words from 1789 that "some musical effects cannot be described; they must be *heard*." As we know from concert reviews, words are indeed woefully inadequate to articulate those tiny differences in emphasis and timing that distinguish a great performance from a merely good one. Ten pages from the end of the book, the reader is reminded that earlier in his career Kuijken was invited by the record label Accent to record all the major works for flute written before ca. 1840, which led him to focus on them and research them in theory and practice, at his own pace. In this context, surely a multi-media project would have illuminated Kuijken's delicate balance of mind and spirit rather more effectively than what is contrived by this modest tome.