

"The Art of Re-enchantment: Making Early Music in the Modern Age," by Nick Wilson

Geoffrey Burgess
Eastman School of Music

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Music Performance Commons](#), and the [Music Practice Commons](#)

Burgess, Geoffrey (2015) ""The Art of Re-enchantment: Making Early Music in the Modern Age," by Nick Wilson," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 20: No. 1, Article 6. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.201520.01.06

Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol20/iss1/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Claremont at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performance Practice Review by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Book review: Wilson, Nick. *The Art of Re-enchantment: Making Early Music in the Modern Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0199939930.

Geoffrey Burgess

As its protagonists retire or pass on, there is increasing urgency to document the emergence of Early Music (hereafter EM) in the second half of the twentieth century. Nick Wilson has taken up this task in a stimulating study of the movement in England. While he alludes to the pioneers—Dolmetsch, Donington, Leppard, et al—his main focus is on the rise of EM as a commercially viable proposition from the 1960s.

Histories of the EM movement have been written before. In *Early Music Revival* (1988), Harry Haskell traced the movement back to the nineteenth century, and Joel Cohen's *Reprise: The Extraordinary Revival of Early Music* (1985) chronicled progress mid-stream, looking optimistically towards a promising future. *The Art of Re-enchantment* takes a different track. Delving deeper than an oral history or chronicle, it theorizes a sociology of EM. The author, an EM singer who teaches in the Department of Culture, Media, and Creative Studies at King's College, London, takes a philosophical and analytic outlook. Drawing on first-hand knowledge, interviews, press releases, and reviews, Wilson addresses the diversity of practices—research, editing, instrument building, performance practice, ideologies, marketing, entrepreneurship, recording, and so forth—that grew up under the aegis of EM, which it situates in the context of late Modernity. The outgrowth of Wilson's dissertation, the book examines what people have said *about* EM, and, despite repeatedly arguing that “doing art” relates to actual practices, Wilson shies away from discussions of specific performance issues or interpretations such as found in Bernard Sherman's *Inside Early Music* (1997) or Haynes' *The End of Early Music* (2004).

What Wilson does not shy away from is interrogating EM's doctrinaire principles. Over the course of the book, he traverses the minefield of paradoxes and contradictions associated with the term Authenticity, which for Wilson is the most important of EM's discursive practices (or “rhetorics”). But it is not purist historical veracity that is his primary concern. On the contrary, Wilson is quick to point out the limitations of historical authenticity. What he draws attention to are the broader implications of authenticity as a



concept, its centuries-old place in Western philosophy, and the often highly contentious claims associated with authenticity not only in EM but in vernacular genres. And this is where the idea of re-enchantment comes in. Wilson argues that authenticity provided an antidote for the growing disenchantment with Modernity, the stranglehold of Capitalism, and what many perceived as the dehumanization of life and art in the Postwar era. Authenticity, then, was a way to find self-validation in musical heritage.

But can EM single-handedly bring about such sweeping cultural renewal? Did Historically Informed Practice (HIP) really rock the foundations of the classical music establishment (as Nicholas Kenyon claimed)? For many World War II survivors—families like the von Trapps and the von Huenes who were forced to relocate to America—EM fulfilled an important role of cultural validation and self-affirmation. In England, where composers like Vaughan Williams, Britten, and Tippett did much to invigorate British musical heritage, EM took a back seat to this cultural work. The “rediscovery” of Handel and Mendelssohn on period instruments may have reclaimed part of a lost British performance tradition, but what can be made of the revival of non-British music by Bach, Corelli, Vivaldi, and Rameau—all just as central to the British EM agenda?

It is a point well taken that attacks on authenticity jargon from Richard Taruskin and others may have redefined sales tactics, but ultimately had little impact on the EM practice. Was the substitution of “Historically Informed Performance” more than politically correct window dressing? As much as John Eliot Gardiner has protested that any performance is authentic in itself, so the HIP label is just as vacuous. HIP neither defines the nature of the historical information nor how the performer works with it. Wilson holds to the term Authenticity and tests its applicability to diverse contexts. In chapter four, he distinguishes two authenticities relating essentially to two mind-sets associated with two distinct repertoire areas: Authenticity¹ covers Medieval and Renaissance music; Authenticity² relates to later music. Wilson describes the former as familiarizing the unfamiliar, while the latter involves de-familiarizing the familiar.

Wilson’s goals are ambitious, and, even if confined to EM in Britain, his undertaking is vast in scope. Each of the book’s four parts is dedicated to a different perspective: “Making Early Music” surveys the history of the movement; “Making Early Music Work” discusses professional aspects; “Making Early Music Pay” analyzes economics; and “Making Early Music in the Modern Age” brings the study to the present day. The account of the ad hoc, “on the fly” nature of EM in the 1960s and 1970s may come as a shock to those who imagine HIP has always implied careful planning and contemplated intentions, but one of Wilson’s most important achievements is his ability to integrate aesthetic questions with the pragmatics of EM as a business and means of

livelihood. He is able to see the forest through the trees in order to provide valuable insights of the larger picture.

The Art of Re-enchantment makes for a heady and challenging read, and it will find its readership among scholars, cultural historians, and aestheticians. Analysis and theorizing are foregrounded. The author revisits vexing questions, such as the definition of a musical “work,” and the roles of creative and re-creative artists. As well as critiquing musicologists like Richard Taruskin and Lydia Goehr, he engages with a wide range of social analysts from Max Weber and Jean-Paul Sartre to Sara Sarasvathy. What is perhaps surprising in a cultural history is that the author provides little of the “flavor” of EM—what it was like to attend an EM event, who attended, how did people dress, and what outside signs mirrored the movement’s alternative claims. Performers may find those details about artists and ensembles that are included of interest, but, as the author admits, “it would be preposterous to suggest that those involved in early music have thought explicitly in the theoretical terms used here” (50). Readability would have been better served by a larger print size, and the synoptic charts designed to clarify the author’s soundly reasoned but often labyrinthine arguments are not always large enough to be legible.

I occasionally got the impression that Wilson treats the British scene as representative of EM practices around the world. While it is true that British scholarship has dominated performance practice, and recordings of British EM ensembles have been widely influential, the British scene has for numerous reasons remained distinct (some might say insular). Firstly, Britain did not initiate the late-twentieth-century EM movement. Wilson admits that Dutch and Austrians made an indelible mark on British EM in Britain, but it would have been instructive to examine the nature of their impact in greater detail. Most of those who formed the remarkable concentration of early musicians in London in the 1980s had studied with Nikolaus Harnoncourt in Salzburg, at the Schola Cantorum in Basel, or in The Hague. Only in the late 1980s did British institutions offer training in EM. Secondly, under the dominant presence of the recording companies, British early musicians were praised for their efficiency but were also known for the blandness of their interpretations. The Musician’s Union protected local British artists but discouraged free exchange with outside collaborators. Thirdly, the British scene was characterized by a plethora of ensembles serviced by a relatively small pool of players. In order to survive, most musicians took employment with multiple ensembles. This produced a relatively consistent philosophy and marketing strategy, but instead of groups producing their own distinctive interpretations, they came to depend on a default style that was easily transferrable from group to group and closely aligned to mainstream practices. There is also more to be said about trans-Atlantic influences, which were arguably stronger than those between Britain and Continental Europe. The Boston harpsichord

school exercised a major influence, and America's devotion to foreign conductors has guaranteed that Brits have had a major impact on EM in the USA. A significant difference between EM in the UK and USA is that American economic opportunism never spawned a significant output of EM recordings. Connections between EM and the avant-garde also deserve further investigation as both shared the goal of establishing an alternative to mainstream music culture.

Wilson asks searching questions about the nature of entrepreneurship and marketing and how they impacted EM's identity as it took shape alongside the mainstream. Americans might look enviously at the state funding available to European musicians, but Wilson shows that public financing for EM in England was minimal in the early days. Abundant funding came from recording companies. The BBC also made a significant contribution by providing regular radio engagements, educational outreach, as well as concert opportunities at the Proms. Only once EM had proven itself did the British Arts Council chip in with subsidies.

One brand of disenchantment that Wilson does not touch on is the discontent that has surfaced in recent years among practitioners. While acknowledging the enormous strides made in technical standards, many of the older generation of early musicians view the present level of institutionalization and professionalization as a sell-out to the pallid anonymity and rule-bound play-by-numbers that they set out to resist. Voiced fervently by Bruce Haynes in *The End of Early Music*, one only need read Tom Kelly's editorial in the Spring 2015 issue of *Early Music America* and statements from veteran performers in Europe to see that this is not a marginalized opinion. How successful early musicians have been to escape the straitjacket of modernism remains moot. How many early instrument orchestras, for instance, have been able to shed the master-servant dynamic of conductor-musician?

In his concluding remarks, Wilson reiterates the continued relevance of authenticity to the path of EM. "Rather than understanding authenticity in terms of an idealized and dogmatic goal that dictates how those involved strategically managed doing art, we should see authenticity as a human capacity...to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable on an ongoing basis" (211). He calls for a balance between Old and New, Head and Heart, Text and Act, Research and Instinct. But where does this leave EM? If all we need to do is be mindful of the relationship between historical work and our interpretation, then how does Herbert von Karajan's Bach differ from Andrew Parrott's? More pressing is how these ideals can be implemented in practice, particularly after the global economic slowdown and the reconfiguration of the recording industry have pulled the rug of support out from under EM. *The Art of Re-enchantment* is to be applauded for its scope and

the avenues that it opens for further contemplation and exploration. It remains to be seen how what can be learned from EM's history will influence its future course.