

The Fakery of Early Music

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I was going to call this *The Perils of Inauthenticity*, but then I remembered that *Authenticity* is now regarded as a dirty word in Early Music, and therefore *Inauthenticity* must be an even dirtier word. Nowadays we realise that there is no way that we can be authentic; we are people of the twenty-first century, we have a modern mind-set, we have modern ears, modern social customs, modern lives. We can never hear music in earlier ways, and even though we may pretend to try to play it in earlier ways, we must admit that the ways in which we do so are only imaginary imitations. In other words, we are faking it.

Another article on this site discusses our fakery of reconstructing the instruments; in this article I want to discuss our fakery in playing it. This is the more blatant of the two, for in many ways we are, quite deliberately, departing from the ways in which the music was performed in its own time, and we know it.

There are a few factors in this respect that are beyond our control. We do not have some of the objects that make the sounds. Strings, for example; we are still experimenting with materials and manufacture, though we do seem to be getting closer. Reeds for reed instruments are simply not available in the quality of earlier times, partly due to climatic and environmental changes, and partly due to the modern economics of the trade, including over-hasty seasoning. And almost all our musicians were initially taught to play modern instruments with modern techniques and therefore have had to forget much of what they were taught and try to relearn how to play and sing.

Singing is one of the most contentious issues. Vibrato or not? All singers today are taught a constant vibrato, either a temporal one – Janet Baker for example who bleats like a sheep on one pitch, or a pitched one – Maria Callas for example who wobbled up and down like a jelly. All the evidence that we have suggests that neither of these techniques existed in earlier times, even into

the memories of the phonograph. Less than a century ago, singers were still being taught that vibrato was an ornament and that, when it was used, it was to be variable in intensity according to context, but today it is constant and unvarying, even with many of our early music performers.

Then there is the music. Should they sing the notes as they were printed or should they ornament the da capos and many other repetitive passages? And if so by how much should they do it? Many operatic arias were written to allow the singer to show off their virtuosity with ornamental passage-work, many even have a 6/4 chord in the accompaniment to suggest the intervention of a cadenza (Handel's 'Largo' is a case in point). We do quite often hear a little ornamentation these days, but we are told that audiences would not like to hear today as much as we know was common practice then. How do these people know? The audiences have never had the chance to find out whether they would like it or not.

This question of ornamentation arises for instrumentalists also. Once upon a time, in the early 1950s when I was still a beginner, I conducted a Vivaldi non-solo string concerto. The slow movement was a stately progression of chords, rather lovely, but in performance, far too late to do anything about it, I realised that this was an accompaniment, an accompaniment to something that wasn't there. We weren't trained to do anything about such things in those days; they didn't teach jazz then in our strait-laced schools of music. A very obvious case in point is Brandenburg 3. The style in those mid-twentieth century days was to play, very solemnly, those two chords, and then to dash into the Finale, omitting a whole short, improvised slow movement.

We have evidence of how Mozart ornamented his solo parts – Hummel, I think it was, who wrote a lot of it down. Some of Telemann's and Corelli's Sonatas were actually published in print and are available today, with the solo line printed both as written and with the same line printed again as it was played – we never hear anything like that today, but why on earth not? Couperin and many others wrote down how the *agréments* should be played in their music. The evidence of how music was and should be played is there, staring us in the face.

And then there is what one might call the small ornamentation, the shakes and graces that any musician of the time would automatically insert. We do hear many of them today but still nothing like as many as there would, and should have been. And *stile francese*? When, where, and how much, and whatever do we do about ‘The Trumpet Shall Sound’? Handel wrote the dots in but stopped bothering after a time – do we go on dotting or not? Not that the dots necessarily mean a literal three-to-one or even four-to-one rhythm – swing it gently was good advice I received in my younger days for much of it, though some should obviously be tighter. I believed then and still believe now that when a composer gave the title of a movement in French, he expected it to be played in French. Why else did he write Menuet rather than Menuetto or Minuet? Because that was how he expected it to be played. Even more so he expected it when he gave it such a descriptive name as Badinerie or Réjouissance.

And what about repeats? We do often hear the exposition repeated but less often the development; perhaps performers feel that when the composer came to finish a movement they ought to let it finish rather than repeating it. And what about Minuet/Scherzo and Trios? As soon as we get into the school orchestra we are taught not to make the repeats in the Minuet/Scherzo da capo. And yet there is ample evidence that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries they did make the repeats in the da capo. Will our players ever do that for us? I can think of a few places where our modern players will say ‘Please God, no’ in some tricky patches which might be difficult to bring off successfully every time, and how about the cases with multiple trios – da capo repeated, da capo repeated, da capo repeated (Brandenburg 1 for example), but then just think of the opportunities for improvisation and ornamentation, doing it differently each time. It could be fascinating.

But let us turn to playing techniques.

Here we have some obvious fakeries, the most obvious of which is the fingerhole trumpet, something that pretends to be Baroque but never existed until today. Yes, there were some post-horns that had a single hole, but they were not trumpets, and there is one experimental harmonic trumpet in the Royal Collection that Eric Halfpenny described in *Galpin Society Journal* XIII. We do now

have some trumpeters who can bend the notes of the true Baroque and Classical trumpet into tune but we are seldom allowed to hear them just in case there is one duff note in a performance, so accustomed are we today at the perfection that we hear on recordings. Performers have told me that the director would not allow them to play a real trumpet, and some performers of course have not developed the proper techniques, or the proper mouthpieces that would allow them to bend the notes, and therefore rely on these fake trumpets as a prop for their lack of skill.

What about fiddles gripped under the chin? Yes some tutors show that grip, but others don't. Supporting the fiddle under the chin frees the left hand to shift position, whereas holding the fiddle on the shoulder or chest means that the weight of the fiddle has to be supported by the left hand and that makes shifting position a very different operation. Even on old recordings we can hear a portamento that must have existed far more frequently as a constant in earlier times, whereas today players are brought up to the idea of the clean shift.

Quantz recommended using the corps de rechange on the flute for different movements, a longer one for brisk and usually louder movements and a shorter one for leisurely and quieter movements to compensate for blowing harder and therefore sharper in pitch and softer and therefore lower in pitch. But our directors today don't like longer pauses between movements to allow for the change, and they often resent the fact that the horns have to take time to change crooks, and sometimes trumpets too, and timpani have to retune.

And what about tempo? Did they really play as fast as we so often hear today? Was the minuet more like a scherzo or was it nearer to dance speed? I remember the old days when Harry Newstone and the Haydn Orchestra played them nearer dance speed and how effective they sounded that way. And not just the minuets, so much music is played much faster than it used to be.

And when they play fast, what should the double basses do? We often hear the most awful scramble today, but in earlier times the bass players did the sensible thing and simplified the parts. Look at the way that Beethoven separated the basses from the cellos – he was one of the first to do that. He avoided a lot

of the scramble and I'd be willing to bet that Haydn's and Mozart's players did so, too.

I know that playing techniques have improved enormously in modern times so that players today can race through the music, but I believe we should put our minds back into earlier times as we do with our instruments. As I've said above, we may not be able to hear the music with earlier ears but we can, and we should, play it in earlier ways, and then perhaps our audiences could hear it as something like it was in the earlier days.

Our modern performances are full of all such fakery and as a result they are pale shadows of original performances. We have ample evidence of how music was played then, so why don't we do it?

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