

Knowing Music: Reflections, Practices and Perspectives

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Joëlle Morton (University of Toronto)

Abstract: The growth of the ‘historically informed performance’ movement has profoundly influenced the development of music-making during the past decades. The notion that we can – and indeed should – perform music in the manner its composers intended has led to a search for original methods and styles of performance. At first this was the passion and pursuit of a small number of individuals, who derived great inspiration and pleasure from the ‘exploration’ of new timbres, new techniques and new repertoire and who attempted to define (and consequently, to defend) what is ‘authentic’ or ‘historically correct.’ In recent years, the explosion of interest in period performance and use of period instruments has largely supplanted those on modern instruments in some areas of the classical repertoire. ‘Modern players’ often perceive this as a threat, since the movement effectively implies they perform in a ‘non-informed’ way, and it castigates them for the ‘romantic’ techniques and mindsets they have studied for years to achieve. Not only is a huge portion of previously standard repertoire now deemed to be off-limits to modern players, but an entire approach to music-making has also changed, with greater emphasis and respect for intellectualization, in lieu of emotional interpreting. And yet the irony is that much early music was actually written to allow great liberties to performers, and with the goal of portraying and celebrating emotions. For period instrument specialists, too, the clarification and codification of older traditions is proving to be a limiting factor in the areas of individual exploration, creativity and debate.

Knowing Music: Reflections, Practices and Perspectives

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished musicians and colleagues, it is a great pleasure and honour to be here today, in this beautiful city of Curitiba. I hope you will please forgive my speaking in English, but my knowledge of Portuguese is very limited – I offer heartfelt thanks for the assistance of my excellent translator, Mauricio Dottori. When Professor Sonia Ray invited me to come to be part of this event, I was both flattered and excited. I have attended many conventions in North America and Europe, however, this is my first time as a scholar in Brazil. I very much look forward to the week ahead, and in particular to attending *your* presentations, to learning about your research and teaching, and to meeting and speaking with many of you in person.

The scope of this convention is very impressive, with presentations on all kinds of musical subjects. It thrills me to be part of events like this, because it makes me see how *vast* the subject of music is, and how *little* my own area of it. The exposure to new ideas and insights is perhaps the element that I most enjoy about being part of academia. Collegial discussion may of course inform me about something that directly impacts my own line of work. But I relish even more the exposure to subjects seemingly unrelated to my specialty. Many of my happiest, most meaningful and life-changing discoveries came from unexpected encounters. It was that kind of serendipity that introduced me, and consequently *converted* me to early music and historically informed performance.

Historical performance is something that I came to relatively late in my studies, when I was a graduate student. In fact, it really wasn't until I was working on a master's degree that I even became aware that such a subject exists. But I am not unusual in this regard. In North America, there are almost no undergraduate programmes for period performance. People who get into early music tend to do so at the graduate level, or in some cases after they have started to perform professionally on a modern instrument. When early music *is* available at university or conservatory, it is most often in the form of a Collegium Musicum, where musicians play instruments and learn music that is treated as *secondary* to their main, and more *serious* course of study. At the university level, early music is perhaps taken most seriously by historical

musicologists, at least, by those involved with researching composers and repertoires that date prior to the 20th century. Outside of musicology, early music and its approach are things that musicians in other fields tend to know little about, in spite of the fact that the subject has been studied and represented by musicians onstage and in recordings for more than 100 years! But I think this is a shame, because *informed performance* is something that bears relevance to every other musical subject: whether it's composition, music theory and analysis, music education, technology, ethnomusicology, music therapy, or semiotics. I thought I would speak with you today about *what* this subject really is, and some of the interesting dilemmas that it poses to performers and scholars. No matter whether you already have a familiarity with this subject, I believe you will find a number of period performance issues are relevant to your own areas of specialty.

I thought I might perhaps begin by telling you a bit about myself. Although neither of my parents is a musician, I was raised in a music loving family. Classical music was heard on the radio in our house from the moment I got up each morning until I went to bed every night. So Western classical music is a language I knew and loved, from a very early age. By North American educational standards, I was very fortunate. My elementary public school had a choir, which I was part of. We also had weekly sessions of Orff – playing on percussion instruments and marimbas. By Grade 3, we had recorder lessons in class once a week. In Grade 4, we were offered the opportunity of taking up an orchestral instrument. The Toronto public school system at that time owned and maintained thousands of instruments, and there was a sophisticated schedule in place that arranged for 'itinerant' teachers on each instrument to come to school once a week to give lessons. I started on viola, but at age 11 switched to double bass. From that time on, there was never a doubt in my mind that I wanted to make music my career. My parents are middle class people who had little money to spare for extra-curricular activities – if it hadn't been for these public school programmes, I would never have become a musician.

I was very serious about my studies, and fortunate to be offered some wonderful opportunities. After completing a Bachelor's degree in double bass at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, I returned to Toronto and became a member of the Toronto Symphony for two years. A prestigious grant from the Canadian government enabled me to pursue advanced solo

studies in Vienna and Prague. After that, I returned to North America, settling as a free-lancer in the Los Angeles area where my husband was doing a Ph.D. While there, I was offered a full scholarship at the University of Southern California to do a Masters degree on double bass. I had completed just one semester when the movie “*Tous le matins du monde*” was released. Perhaps some of you know this film? It stars Gérard Depardieu and his son, Guillaume and the story centers on the lives of Mr. de Ste. Colombe and Marin Marais, two 17th century French performers and composers for the viola da gamba. The movie was a blockbuster hit, and its soundtrack, expertly recorded by Jordi Savall, can be credited for launching an explosion of new interest in the performance on the viola da gamba. I am just one of many, who having seen the film, decided I ‘had’ to learn more about the gamba. Luckily for me, the University of Southern California owned several of them, and in fact, had a very good early music programme, run by James Tyler, the former director of the London Early Music Group. I signed up for class thinking it would be a minor diversion from my double bass studies. My primary goal was to learn how Bach’s sonatas for viola da gamba sounded on the original instrument, since I very happily played them, and intended to continue playing them, on double bass.

You must understand, up until then, I was a very traditional modern musician, trained with the Philadelphia Orchestra sound in mind. I don’t believe I had ever consciously heard a ‘baroque orchestra’ play before that time. Even with my extensive education and professional experience, I had no idea that historically informed performance existed! All my musical training until then had been in the romantic tradition, where I was asked to copy the tried-and-true fingerings and bowings and phrasings of my experienced and accomplished teachers. These *master teachers* also prescribed the elements of style. My role as a musician was to ‘copy’ what I had been taught.

My first day in the early music ensemble was a revelation. I was given a tenor member of the viola da gamba family (roughly viola sized), and a page with the alto part to John Dowland’s *Lachrymae Antiquae*, in facsimile. That gamba was much smaller than a double bass, but its tuning was quite similar and it was held on the lap in vertical position and played with an underhand bow. The similarities to double bass meant that I found it relatively simple to find the pitches and make a reasonable sound. There was no conductor for our rehearsal, of course, since

this was a small ensemble of five gambas of different sizes, each playing its own part. The music was glorious – rich and sonorous, with lovely and unexpected harmonies. I was hooked! There was only one small problem. Even though I was pretty confident I was putting my fingers on the right notes, and bowing to make a good sound, I could not for the life of me *hear* the notes as they came out. It was a truly disturbing phenomenon...in my mind's ear, I knew what the pitches *should* sound like, but I could not physically *hear* them as I played them. In retrospect it all makes sense—I was listening in the wrong octave! As a double bass player, I had always played bass lines, with my part sounding in the sub-bass register. But confronted with an alto line, my ears were not accustomed to the inner line of harmony that sounded at least an octave higher than my brain was used to listening. That was an ear-opening moment for me – if I couldn't hear the notes as I saw them on the page, then how much more music was I not hearing when I didn't know to look, I mean, listen, for it?! After many years of advanced study and practice, it was sobering to realize how 'shallowly' I was listening to, and experiencing, music.

Further revelations in early music came as I was introduced to 'primary source materials' like old manuscripts, or reproductions of original printed editions. In most cases there were no tempo, dynamic or articulation markings. I might also have to read an unfamiliar clef, or to be asked to transpose at sight. In many of the parts we played from, there were no barlines. When there *were* barlines, they did not reliably convey which notes should and should not be emphasized in a metrical sense. Reading from these old documents, I had to decide if what I saw was a funny ornament sign, not just an ink splotch or a dead fly... I was told that I would have to think about all of these things myself and then make decisions about interpretation and realization. In one of my first private lessons on viola da gamba, my teacher asked me to improvise a fantasia. He didn't care if it had a coherent structure, or if it was melodic or tonal in nature. He just wanted me to 'think off the page.' I'll tell you, I was completely caught off guard – it was as if the carpet had been pulled out from under me. Until that time, I had spent my entire life following what I saw on the page, putting my fingers in the right place at the right time, according to the way a teacher or conductor told me it *had* to be played. The new freedom in early music was shocking. The entire process was new, and it felt like I was starting my musical studies all over again. It was both terribly intimidating, and incredibly exciting.

By describing my indoctrination into early music, I was hoping to illustrate a couple of points. First, early music is not merely about the 'equipment.' From the outside listener's perspective, it's of course easy to single out the obvious thing: that period performance requires different instruments, and these obviously sound and respond differently from their modern counterparts. Unusual instruments do offer the appeal of exploring new timbres, and there's the excitement involved with believing one is breaking new ground or perhaps recapturing music the way it sounded in previous times. But there are many modern players who use old instruments. And there are also some players of modern instruments who play them with an historically informed sensibility. Historical performance, then, is really much more about the *approach*, or what you do with that instrument.

The basic goal of the historical performer is to try to come as close as possible to bringing music to life in a manner that the original composer would have recognized, if not endorsed. As a basic source of information about how to approach the music, historical performers use 'primary materials.' These materials come in many forms: composers' original manuscripts, sketches, drafts and publications, instrumental and theoretical treatises, surviving instruments, iconography, literary references (such as letters, diaries, journals, newspapers, catalogues and advertisements) and even early recordings. After accessing these raw materials, historically informed performers criticize, arrange, evaluate and interpret the music taking the external information into account, in an attempt to 're-create' a performance that would be true to the spirit of its time. Of course, this process is fraught with difficulties not-the-least-of-which is that '*intellectual study*' does not necessarily make a musician a good technician or a convincing performer! The hours that go into researching and making informed decisions have to be in addition to the hours a musician spends in the practice room. Additionally, making informed decisions is not always so simple. It can be very difficult to isolate a single way of interpreting a document or piece of music. The concept of 'authenticity' is one that has fostered huge arguments and debates in the performance and musicological communities. But I will come back to this in a few minutes.

Interest and involvement with the music of the past has been in practice for a long time. Many of the manuscripts with the songs of the troubadours, for example, were copied out long after the

music was composed. So were the anthologies of Notre Dame polyphony. The Squarcialupi Codex, prepared in the 15th century some time after the death of Francesco Landini, was intended to celebrate the achievements of the musicians of Florence, evidently as a kind of historical record. By the second half of the 16th century, a number of musicians regularly performed music that was at least 50 years old. Some of the manuscripts for use in the Sistine Chapel in Rome, also, seem to have been a part of the choir's working library for decades. And Spanish manuscripts of the 17th century are the chief sources of knowledge about music at the Spanish Royal Chapel in the 16th century, with motets by Morales, Victoria and Guerrero that continued to be sung in Spain and in the New World into the 18th century, and even beyond. During the late 18th and early 19th century organizations devoted to performing old music came into being, like the Academy of Ancient Music in London. In Germanic countries, the music of Bach and Handel was avidly studied and performed by various circles of connoisseurs. This interest led to the preparation and publication of studies of composer's lives, such as Forkel's biography of Bach in 1802. In France and Belgium, too, there were sporadic concerts of early music in the 19th century, notably those of François-Joseph Fétis, whose *Concerts historiques* were presented in Paris from 1832, and in Brussels from 1839. Most of the 19th century performances of early music were probably *unselfconscious* about authenticity. The question has never really been studied, but no evidence is known if in fact the Sistine Chapel or the Spanish Royal Chapel in the 17th century made any attempt to sing old repertoire in a manner different from what was used for music of their own contemporaries.

It wasn't until the early 1900s that Hugo Riemann, a distinguished theorist and musicologist at the University of Leipzig, decided to call the musicological institute he headed the "Collegium Musicum." He did this apparently to make clear his devotion to music as an art as well as an academic discipline. Riemann's Collegium was not established to present old music in concert, but he and his contemporaries did begin to make available modern editions of music of the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Baroque, especially through a series of monumental volumes published in Germany under the titles the *Denkmäler Deutscher Tonkunst* and the *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Bayern*. Riemann's Collegium and pursuits were soon copied at other German universities, and gave rise to some of the earliest scholarly studies of performance in the past – a sub-discipline of *Aufführungspraxis*.

Where early music in Germany was mostly pursued at the academic and amateur levels, Paris was home to the first great virtuoso, the harpsichordist, Wanda Landowska. Landowska, however, never pretended to perform baroque music exactly the way performers of the 17th or 18th century would have done. She is quoted as saying, “At no time in the course of my work have I ever tried to reproduce exactly what the old masters did. Instead, I study, I scrutinize, I love, and I recreate...I am sure that what I am doing is very far from the historical truth...I search for what seems logical and beautiful to me, that does justice to Bach, but little do I care, if to attain the proper effect, I use means that were not exactly those of Bach.” Landowska believed strongly in her own personal understanding of the music and her commitment to it, and this trumped the quest for what the original composer would have wanted or expected.

Of all the pioneers of early music active before the 1930s, it was Arnold Dolmetsch who was committed to the idea that performers should try to play music in the way its composers intended. Dolmetsch built harpsichords, lutes, viols and recorders, which were exemplary for their time. He wrote a scholarly study of performance in the 17th and 18th centuries that was the first to take completely seriously the injunctions of old treatises. It was the first modern book, therefore, to offer a summary of details of performance like phrasing, bowing, articulation and ornamentation. And Dolmetsch himself, along with members of his family, performed in concert on the original instruments he collected, as well as the modern copies he built. He exerted incredible influence on future generations. Along with Edgar Hunt and Walter Bergmann, he was the guiding spirit behind the recorder movement in England. His students Richard Nicholson and Marco Pallis organized and ran the English Consort of Viols and began publishing activities that have made a substantial portion of the English consort repertoire available in modern editions. Dolmetsch’s students Diana Poulton was similarly responsible for influencing lute playing, making and research, and Robert Donington became the leading English scholar on the subject of performance practice. It’s no exaggeration to say that even today, almost everyone involved in early music has been touched in some way by Dolmetsch, his students or his students’ students. Whatever the level of his own performances, Dolmetsch was amazingly ahead of his time. He expressed a deep devotion to the idea that a vast repertoire of great music was waiting to be rediscovered and brought to life again. He urged performers to read, learn, and take seriously

what the writers of previous eras had to say about details of performance, and to then use that information as the basis for an ‘imaginative re-creation in the performance of the notes on the page.’

For all their success and recognition, both Landowska and Dolmetsch remained somewhat isolated figures within the musical life of their times. They were individuals dedicated to ideals that were shared by relatively few others. Since then, however, early music has gradually come to be accepted as a normal part of concert life. Some groups have seen incredible success, touring widely and recording prolifically. Groups such as Christopher Hogwood’s Academy of Ancient Music, Anthony Rooley’s Consort of Musicke, Trevor Pinnock’s English Concert, as well as continental ensembles led by Gustav Leonhardt, Nicholas Harnoncourt, Frans Bruggen and Sigiswald Kuijken come to mind. Early music is now firmly acknowledged as part of the official musical establishment.

In recent years, performers’ and ensembles’ repertoires are increasingly more and more specialized and the quest for authenticity has now invaded the mainstream concert repertoire. In addition to Baroque masters such as Bach, Handel, Vivaldi and Monteverdi, audiences are ever more frequently offered historically informed performances of music by Mozart and Beethoven, even pushing into late 19th century music, such as Brahms and Berlioz. Increasingly, modern symphony orchestras are ceasing to perform works of the Baroque era, or at least dramatically scaling back the size of the ensemble used to perform them, if they continue to do so. Some modern ensembles have even forged an identity by performing old works on modern instruments, but with an *informed* sensibility. A case in point, the Handel and Haydn Society in Boston is staffed primarily by modern musicians, but violinists play on gut stings and use baroque bows, and the conductor has some knowledge of period style and approach.

To some extent, it can be argued that specialization is necessary. As scholars and musicians pay ever-greater attention to the minutiae of history and performance practices, specific repertoires become more and more refined. At this point in time, there is now *so much* information readily available, that few questions are left for a performer to explore or discover on his/her own. This is a bit of a Catch-22. Early on in my viola da gamba studies, I worked with a wonderful teacher,

Mary Springfels, perhaps the most well-known gamba soloist in the United States. She said to me: “You are so lucky! In my day we had to go out and hunt down old manuscripts to discover how to play the music of Christopher Simpson, but now, all the questions have been answered. All you have to do is take a lesson, and someone will show you how to do it.” Oh no, what an incredible shame, I thought to myself! The spirit that pervaded early music in its infancy has evolved, into what could almost be characterized as a new romantic approach. The very essence of what attracted me, and all those other pioneers, to early music in the first place, seems to be disappearing as things are codified and catalogued and micro-analyzed.

The all-embracing concern for authenticity is the inevitable result of more than a century of study. In the early music world, discussion has often been heated about the nature and purpose and validity of different performance styles. This has led, in turn, to an equally natural rebellion on the part of some musicians against such an approach, or as they might say, against a “mindless obsession” with authenticity. Their feelings can be attributed in part to a legitimate concern that questions of authenticity have taken precedence over a concern about bringing music to life in a way that is convincing and communicative to a broad audience. There is also a concern that by implication, musicians who are not duly obsessed with historical matters are performing in a manner that is *inauthentic* and therefore *inferior* and/or *invalid*.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, there were numerous articles and even entire volumes published devoted to the subject of authenticity in early music. In 1984, Nicholas Kenyon, then editor of Oxford University Press’s journal *Early Music*, found himself at the centre of a heated debate. He consequently organized an entire symposium about the subject, with scholars representing many different opinions. In preparation for the symposium, Kenyon asked 6 general questions that he put forth as areas for discussion. I find the questions fascinating and hugely relevant not just for a study of early music, but for the study of music and performance in general. So I’d like to share these questions with you, here:

1. Is period instrument use really significant, compared to other factors such as musical understanding, cultural and social context, acoustical considerations and concert-giving situations?

2. Can a composer expect to have an influence over how his music is performed after he has written it?

3. What moral obligations does a performer have to fulfill the composer's original intentions? Perhaps more importantly, what obligations does a performer have to make him/herself aware of the composer's original intentions?

4. Are we more likely to understand a piece by restricting ourselves to the means a composer had available when he/she composed it? Would such a restriction inhibit a performer's full expression of the piece?

5. What is the relationship between the performer's work and the scholar's work? How can the scholar reconcile the need for an open verdict with the performer's need to make a practical decision? For the performer, what happens at the moment when the conclusions of musicological enquiry have to be turned into action?

6. How does a conventionally trained performer reform his/her imagination in light of all this recent research?

I hope you agree, these are truly interesting questions. On one level, I think the *pure* or *intended* answers are pretty obvious. In real life, however, there are always at least two sides to a story. For example, in response to question two, "Can a composer expect to have an influence over how his music is performed after he has written it?" the implicit answer is, "But *of course*, a composer *can, should* and *does* expect to have an influence over how his music is performed!" On the other hand, if the composer is all-important, where does that leave the *performer*? Why would a performer wish to invest time, energy and expertise in a piece, if there was no room for him/herself to have a say in how it was delivered? Art by definition is something that is personal. And if you take away the element of personal expression from a performer, all that remains is *sport*.

There is a saying: “You cannot step into the same river twice.” I find this a wonderful metaphor for music, as well as life in general. Even if we could *definitely* know how Bach performed his own Prelude in d minor (BWV 539) in 1720, the year he composed it, why would we believe he played it exactly the same way 20 years later? Surely Bach the 35 year-old would interpret his music differently from Bach the 55-year old. As a point of fact, Bach originally scored this particular prelude not for organ, but for solo violin. It was a later *inspiration* that motivated him to transcribe it for organ. (Incidentally, he also re-scored a second movement of the original violin setting – for lute!) Bach’s preferences aside, someone in Curitiba in 2009 might desire to hear this music, and be able to enjoy it on an iPod—a device that Bach surely would never have imagined or predicted! If we are to be pure about authenticity, perhaps we should never consider listening to Bach’s music outside of the manner and context for which it was written... I hope you know that I’m not serious! Nor am I passing judgement—I only wanted to point out that all of these ‘incarnations’ of Bach’s music are *valid* and discussions of which is better/worse, correct/incorrect are really a matter of personal opinion.

Drama and dance are two other art forms similar to music, in that they require the participation of two creators: one, the author who pens the structure of the work and the second, the performer who realizes it, or brings it to life. We may prefer one actor’s rendition of Shakespeare more than another, but we don’t usually compare them by claiming one is *representing* and the other *misrepresenting* Shakespeare’s intentions. Nor do we judge dance in this way. *Why* then, are we so judgmental about *Bach’s intentions* in music? Drama, dance and music are all *living* art forms, and therefore have quite a bit of flexibility. On the one hand, you have the composer whose inspiration gives birth to a form. On the other, you have the performer who presents it to a broad public. For the relationship to work, there must be the elements of *mutual trust and respect*, on both sides. If those elements exist, then the realization of a piece of music can take many different shapes. Like any *meaningful* relationship, it’s a question of achieving balance between the two creators. You will not have *meaningful music* without both.

Over the whole study of history hangs Leopold von Ranke’s assertion from the 1830s that the purpose of historical investigation is to determine “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” (the way it really was). Ironically, we can never really make contact with the past or pin down something that was

alive, and therefore changeable, in its own day. In the historical performance community, the implication often seems to be that an approach that respects the composer's intentions and attempts to re-create the sound world that he had in mind will result in a *good* performance. Well, that seems overly simplistic to me. We are incredibly lucky, in this information age, to have so much documentation and so many resources readily at our disposal. But let us not forget how much pleasure and inspiration can be achieved from exploring music as if it is completely new to us, and forging new paths as we encounter them or perceive the need for them. And let us also not forget that as human beings, first and foremost, music is only the *vehicle* through which we express ourselves, to communicate with each other and the external public. No matter our particular area of specialty, type of instrument or approach, what each of us has to *say* through music is purely personal, and if we had *other means* of communicating it, we would have no *need* for being musicians. This is what makes music a creative art, and not just a physical sport.

Thank you so much for your kind attention; I hope I have provided a little bit of food for thought. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.