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PART I

*Historically informed performance  
in music criticism*

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## I

*Joining the historical performance debate*HINDEMITH AND ADORNO, AND SOME PRELIMINARY  
ANTINOMIES OF HIP

Some of the parameters of the debate over historical performance were set many years before the movement became a truly public phenomenon in the late 1960s. For instance, the commemoration of the year of Bach's death in 1950 occasioned diverse opinions on the way his music should be performed: the prominent composer and performer, Paul Hindemith, advocated the wholesale restoration of the instruments and performing practices of Bach's own age:

We can be sure that Bach was thoroughly content with the means of expression at hand in voices and instruments, and if we want to perform his music according to his intentions we ought to restore the conditions of performance of that time.<sup>1</sup>

Here we have the fundamental assumption that a composer fits effortlessly and contentedly into the culture of his own age, that what he got coincided with what he wanted, and that a restoration of contemporary performing conventions will thus coincide with the composer's intentions. Given that Hindemith himself was one of the major composers of the age, the suggestion that we might wish to follow the composer's intentions must have carried some considerable force in 1950. Both Hindemith's historicist attitude and his productions of early music were of tremendous influence on Nikolaus Harnoncourt who, perhaps more than anyone over the next twenty years, made the case for HIP.<sup>2</sup> He was recording with early instruments by the early 1960s and his countless essays from this pioneering period did much to popularise the virtues of associating earlier music with its original performance practice. More importantly, he was perhaps the first to stress that music and its performance before the nineteenth century involved a different

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aesthetic attitude, one stressing the speech-like and rhetorical aspects of music. Each musical style and period before 1800 had a different ethos that brought with it different conceptions of performance, and it is thus wrong to think of changes in performance and instrument construction in terms of a necessary ‘progress’.<sup>3</sup> Both in his rejection of the status quo and his early alliance with Hindemith, Harnoncourt’s case is symptomatic of the association of HIP with a particular strand of modernism. Indeed Harnoncourt was one of the first to suggest that his historical reconstructions represented a ‘modern’ adventure and not simply a direct return to the past.<sup>4</sup> Behind much of his work as a performer and writer lies the sense that we have been in a prolonged state of cultural decline, one that HIP – by re-introducing us to conceptions of music more varied than our bland present – may rectify. In this pessimistic diagnosis of the present Harnoncourt comes remarkably close to Theodor W. Adorno, although his remedy is radically different.

Adorno in 1951 poured scorn on historical reconstruction: only the ‘progressive’ modern performance resources (indeed the modern arrangements by Schoenberg and Webern) could reveal the full import of Bach’s music which stood head and shoulders above the pitiful concerns of its own age. Speaking at a time when the early music movement was still in its infancy, but when western Germany was undergoing an enormous process of rebuilding and restoration, he suggests that:

the neo-religious Bach is impoverished, reduced and stripped of the specific musical content which was the basis of his prestige. He suffers the very fate which his fervent protectors are least willing to admit: he is changed into a neutralized cultural monument, in which aesthetic success mingles obscurely with a truth that has lost its intrinsic substance. They have made him into a composer for organ festivals in well-preserved Baroque towns, into ideology.<sup>5</sup>

Adorno’s specific comments about the levelling proclivities of ‘historical’ performance and the inadequacy of the older forms of performance sound very much like the types of criticism that became familiar over the next decades from musicologists such as Paul Henry Lang and musicians such as Pinchas Zukerman.<sup>6</sup>

Mechanically squeaking *continuo*-instruments and wretched school choirs contribute not to sacred sobriety but to malicious failure; and the thought that the shrill and rasping Baroque organs are capable of capturing the long waves of the lapidary, large fugues is pure superstition. Bach’s music is separated from the general level of his age by an astronomical distance. Its eloquence returns only

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when it is liberated from the sphere of resentment and obscurantism, the triumph of the subjectless over subjectivism. They say Bach, mean Telemann and are secretly in agreement with the regression of musical consciousness which even without them remains a constant threat under the pressures of the culture industry. (Adorno, 'Bach Defended', p. 145)

Whatever we might think of Adorno's views today, he does raise some important questions that proponents of HIP frequently miss. He sees the fledgling movement to restore older instruments and performance practices as part of a wider cultural malaise in the wake of the depersonalising forces of industrialism and late capitalism. Instead of setting up a form of resistance to contemporary society, as was done by the increasing isolation, introspection and complexity of the Second Viennese School (Adorno's ever-pessimistic hope for the future of musical culture) the culture of restoration resorts to a facile objectivity that does not even notice the subjective challenge posed by great modern art. As mass culture becomes ever more superficial it substitutes the fetish for historical detail for a profundity of which it is not even any longer aware. Adorno is clearly representative of a form of musical modernism that sees the avant-garde as absolutely crucial in somehow revealing the truth of our desperate condition. Pessimistic though his tone may be, he evidently still believes in a form of progress, that music culture and composition must move forward, however bleak the prospects ahead. Perhaps this is more a sense of irreversibility than of progress as such.<sup>7</sup> But, whether this is progress or irreversibility there is clearly a fundamental antipathy between the modernism, as represented by the Second Viennese School and Adorno, and any culture of restoration, such as HIP. Hindemith and Adorno not only represent the two poles of opinion about HIP, they also show how the movement, in its post-war form, sits both within and without the culture of modernism.

As I hope to show in the following chapters, Adorno was surprisingly accurate in diagnosing a move away from a culture of progress and ever-renewing modernity towards one based more on restoration and recycling. Much that was profound or challenging may well have been lost in the process. But, given what I perceive to be crucial shifts in cultural consciousness, it is impossible for us to know what we have lost. Indeed to resort to Adorno's particular brand of modernism would itself be a sterile form of resurrectionism, since we have passed the historical moment from which he was talking and cannot authentically restore his ideals. The various forms of historical restoration, of which HIP is an obvious component, are, I believe, an 'authentic' expression of our

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contemporary cultural condition bringing new experiences and insights into our world. Most importantly, this lies largely in the realisation that the culture of inexorable technological progress is itself an historically conditioned phenomenon, that conserving what we already have or might already have lost is now at least as essential as forging new paths into the future unknown.

Adorno's later writing reveals what perhaps lay behind his strident antipathy in 1951. In his typographical sketch opening his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, those associated with HIP (at least as it stood in 1962) are christened 'resentment listeners'.<sup>8</sup> This category comes at the very bottom of the ranking of those constituting the culture of classical music, just above the 'jazz listener'. What is immediately striking is how Adorno relates the early music culture to totalitarian politics: the resentment listener normally sympathises with orders and collectives, together with the political consequences (p. 10); all expression and individuality is to be expunged, 'the gypsies are to croak now as they did before, in concentration camps' (p. 11). This culture yearns for the pre-individual state (witnessed by its penchant for Baroque music, which Adorno considers – apart from Bach – as a form of levelling mediocrity)<sup>9</sup> while it cannot escape its own post-individual state. Its process is 'formally comparable to the fascist manipulation that invested the compulsory collective of the atomized with the insignia of a precapitalist, nature-grown "people's community"' (p. 12).

Indeed, during the 1930s in Germany both the ecological movements and the popular youth movements in early music had been strongly infiltrated by the Nazis (see p. 210 below), so it is easy to understand Adorno's personal position. Yet Hindemith too had been a refugee from the same regime and he – together with several others in the same circumstances – did much to cultivate the early music culture of American campuses. Here there was no inkling of the political associations that had arisen in Germany and, more often than not, the American culture of HIP acquired liberal connotations. This would seem to suggest that a culture dedicated to restoring practices from a past age does not, by definition at least, seek to restore the political circumstances of that age. The notion of a 'lost innocence' can serve a number of political ideologies – sometimes fanatically – but we should refrain from prejudging all forms of restoration as inescapably reactionary.

So far then, we have the modernist–antimodernist identity of HIP, together with the reactionary–liberal dichotomy, both of which suggest that the culture of HIP is not so simply explained as it might first appear.

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These two issues form major threads throughout the present book and receive a more thorough examination in the last two chapters.

THE HIP CULTURE OF THE 1980S – THE DIAGNOSES  
OF LAURENCE DREYFUS AND ROBERT MORGAN

Laurence Dreyfus, building on some of the implications of Adorno's view, gives the most perceptive critique of HIP from the vantage point of the early 1980s, thus a full decade after it had become a major component of public musical culture. He also introduces several themes that become central to the debate as it accelerated over the next fifteen years. From the outset, he poses a question that is crucial to the present book (one that has perhaps received less attention than it ought in the meantime) namely, why the historically 'correct' performance of music should become such a particular issue in the late twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, we learn that it is wrong to view it purely as a 'thing' since it is definable only as a social practice, the tacit assumptions and activities of a range of people.<sup>11</sup> And, as is taken up in the last chapter of this book, it is not just a matter of looking at the people producing the instruments, texts and performances but also at the consumers and audiences without whom the HIP movement could never have been a commercial concern in the first place.

The commonplace assumption that HIP resulted from 'progress' in musicology is simply inadequate, particularly since there has been an increasing rift between HIP and post-war musicology (Dreyfus, 'Early Music', p. 311). As Joseph Kerman observed around the same time, musicology has many things to do other than provide material for performers: history and criticism are the disciplines he mentions specifically in 1985,<sup>12</sup> but, by the end of the century, this list would have expanded almost beyond recognition to cover the whole gamut of cultural and critical studies. A recent and seemingly comprehensive study of the entire field of musicology (1999) contains no chapter on HIP as such and remarks that it is 'Modernist, and – as an intellectual concept, perhaps – exhausted . . . it proved impossible to find an author who could feel that there was something useful that could be said beyond a summary of conclusions of arguments current in the 1980s.'<sup>13</sup> Performance is more important as an element of musicology than ever, but now more as a feature of the ontology and receptive traditions of works, institutions or performing communities, or as a counterpart of analysis. Nevertheless, Kerman's assumption that most outsiders would normally associate

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musicology with the music they hear at concerts and particularly with the unearthing of older repertoires, probably still holds true.

As Dreyfus argues, musicologists have taken particular relish in debunking the claims of HIP's often spotty and inadequate scholarship. But he also shows how this criticism often covertly defends the supposed monumental and unified institution of western music against the revolutionary force of HIP. He outlines the fundamental opposition that early music is supposed to make to the 'self-aggrandising individualism prevalent in Mainstream musical praxis' (p. 299), something that was to become far less the case in the later 1980s and 1990s, as HIP threw up more and more of its own self-aggrandising figures. Instead of reaching some sort of spiritual understanding with the composer, HIP in its orthodox mode of the early 1980s dealt mainly with empirical evidence, thus substituting objectivism for subjectivism, relativism for critical appreciation, precisely as Adorno had complained: 'Objectivity is not left over once the subject is subtracted' (Dreyfus, 'Early Music', p. 300). It is thus easy to brand the movement as profoundly puritanical, relishing its very denial of the subjective and emotional.

Yet even from Dreyfus's 1983 standpoint it was evident that the best performers (he names Gustav Leonhardt) used their history in startlingly imaginative ways. What was so beneficial about HIP was the fact that the best performers had to rethink their entire interpretative strategy, thus challenging the assumed 'natural' expressivity of the mainstream. In a deeply prophetic statement, Dreyfus notes that successful HIP does not (indeed, I might add, cannot) return us to the past 'but reconstructs the musical object in the here and now, enabling a new and hitherto silenced subject to speak' (p. 304). This realisation of the *present* significance of HIP had already been acknowledged by some of the more perceptive writers of the 1950s,<sup>14</sup> and also became a central point of Taruskin's critique around the same time as Dreyfus. It relates to one of Taruskin's more surprising claims, that HIP is a symptom of late twentieth-century modernism.

While it is already clear that there is a fundamental antipathy between Adorno's modernism – which requires the constant taunting of a progressive avant-garde – and early music, Dreyfus notes their reciprocal negation of a comfortable present. Just as modernism purposely engages in defamiliarisation, HIP renders strange favourite masterpieces inherited from the past and, in consequence, often experiences exactly the same sort of sharp criticism from the conservative mainstream. Almost unintentionally, HIP performers become branded as dangerous,

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counter-cultural figures. By overthrowing accepted models of musical taste, HIP threatens many of the supposed certainties of civilised society. Indeed critics both of the avant-garde and of HIP analyse the phenomena as though they were pathological disorders.

Yet early music performers are also counter-cultural in another, more conscious, way, which Dreyfus relates to the denial of envy. The practice of HIP (at least as Dreyfus saw it in 1983) builds purposely on the equality of its members, under no conductor, all sharing a number of performing functions, avoiding virtuosity, enjoying a cross-over between the professional and amateur world and thus experiencing a closer relationship with a like-minded audience and producing historically integrated – rather than sensational – programmes. He might well have added that many involved in the movement during the seminal decades of the 1960s and 70s were, in fact, counter-cultural in other ways, seeing in HIP a way of redeeming music from its elitist and hierarchical connotations. In an interesting – and perhaps underplayed – footnote, Dreyfus adds that much of the recent improvement in HIP standards resulted from an influx of conservatory-trained musicians, themselves eager to escape the rat-race of the mainstream.

It is worth outlining some of the interesting contradictions between the ‘purist’, non-hierarchical conception of HIP that Dreyfus so graphically formulates and the original historical practices with which it is assumed to correspond. First, it may well be that many forms of performance before the nineteenth century did not use a conductor in the modern sense. Yet most had a director (often the composer) who clearly had a status and will that dominated the other performers. Secondly, while performers were extremely versatile, they were often far more rigidly ranked than even a modern orchestra would require. Such ranking usually mirrored a broader social ranking and much of the music was written to confirm or exploit the hierarchical nature of society in general. Far from eschewing virtuosity, many forms of music making from the mid-sixteenth century onwards were extremely virtuosic, the technical agility required of singers in Baroque opera far exceeding that which became the norm by the twentieth century. And if velocity was not a feature of the performance practice there was often some element that sharply distinguished it from the amateur ethos outlined by Dreyfus: e.g. improvisation in Baroque and Classical keyboard performance, memorisation of an enormous corpus of liturgical music in the Middle Ages. Thus the stereotypical HIP milieu that Dreyfus describes tends to use an imagined utopian past as a way of criticising and ‘improving’ the present. The modern conventions of



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safe, objectivist scholarship help sift out the diversity and messy realities of history and present the past as a potent social practice with a political relevance in reforming the present condition.

While Dreyfus attempts to explain how HIP happened by relating it to a form of discontent with – even protest against – an assumed norm, he does not fully address the issue of why it should have happened precisely when it did, why it became such a tremendous commercial success in the 1970s and 80s. Robert P. Morgan considers this wider cultural issue in his contribution to a valuable collection of essays, edited by Nicholas Kenyon in 1988.<sup>15</sup> He links the sudden widespread concern for historical accuracy with the contemporary situation in musical culture as a whole, characterised as it is ‘by an extraordinary degree of insecurity, uncertainty, and self-doubt – in a word, by anxiety’ (Morgan, ‘Tradition’, p. 57). He outlines a fundamental change in our conception of musical culture, from one based on unbroken linear tradition, which is not consciously aware of the great difference between that which has survived from the past and the present, to one in which the past has become an enormous ‘field of instantaneous possibilities’. One has complete access to a wide range of historical data, thus obscuring ‘the very distinction between past and present’ (pp. 59–60). Morgan goes on to observe a similar diversity in compositional style and the increasing multi-culturalism in the music scene. But this is possible ‘precisely because, and only because, we have no well-defined sense of the musical present’ (p. 66). On the assumption that the availability of all cultures is basically no culture at all, Morgan suggests that our greed for diverse cultures grows so far that we are even keen to assimilate the older versions of our own culture. The quest for historical ‘authenticity’ thus reflects the very absence of a culture we can still call our own. Adorno would surely have concurred with this, and also – for different reasons – Nikolaus Harnoncourt, who suggests that the historical approach to performance ‘is a symptom of the loss of a truly living contemporary music’.<sup>16</sup> HIP is thus to him a sort of last-ditch rescue attempt of western musical culture. As Hermann Hesse put it in the words of Joseph Knecht’s friend Plinio, in *The Glass Bead Game*, ‘our resigned sterility proves the worthlessness of our whole culture and our intellectual attitudes. We analyse the laws and techniques of all the styles and periods of music . . . but produce no new music ourselves.’<sup>17</sup>

Morgan suggests that while tradition flourished we were quite happy to adapt and arrange earlier music for our own purposes, but now everything must be restored since ‘we have no clear idea of what “up to date” means’ (p. 68). Just as many contemporary composers borrow multiple

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languages from others, the historicist performer recovers old musical languages as if they were fossils, and the resulting performance automatically lacks ‘the immediate, unreflected, and “natural” delivery of a native speaker’ (p. 70). A similar nostalgic spirit informs house restoration and furniture, and some even seek to restore the songs and shows of the 1930s to their ‘original’ performance style (pp. 75–8). In sum, music history, like history in general is over, and with no purposes of our own we can no longer interpret the past, only passively reconstruct it within the culture of the museum. This ‘cultural identity crisis’ Morgan sees as having roots as far back as the seventeenth century, part of a long process of the divided self and the increasing loss of individual identity (pp. 78–81).

Morgan’s pessimistic diagnosis has much in common with Roger Scruton’s, as I discuss below, and also shares with Taruskin a concern for the loss of tradition that HIP seemingly implies. The ‘end of history’ hypothesis is convincing and his suggestion that HIP belongs within a larger culture of nostalgia that restores other artefacts becomes the subject of chapter 6 below. But where I differ is in rejecting the sense of pessimism he seems to present. Indeed, his very tone suggests a nostalgia for a past order that is precisely of a piece with the culture of restoration itself. While the HIP scholar/performer typically wishes to return performance to a lost Eden, Morgan, in turn, laments the loss of an age in which stylistic difference was unnoticed owing to the strength of one’s own tradition. Both these facets of the past are, of course, equally unrecoverable.

While Morgan is quite correct to suggest that the access to such a wide range of historical data effaces the distinction between past and present, this was surely also the case with ‘tradition’ as he describes it. Within tradition one used whatever was deemed canonical from the past entirely for presentist purposes and consigned everything else to oblivion. Both modes – restoration and tradition – thus evidence different ways of ‘misusing’ the past. Perhaps it would be truer to say that restoration movements such as HIP themselves represent the culmination of a long tradition, one stretching back to the Renaissance. It was that era which first became conscious of the past ‘as a foreign country’, one that was admired as a corrective to the present condition.<sup>18</sup> By the end of the twentieth century the collection of ‘differences’ had become so great that it was no longer possible to be certain of *any* similarity between past and present; we had better preserve everything it is still possible to know or collect, ‘just in case’. Moreover, as Daniel Leech-Wilkinson argues, it was only in the twentieth century that there were enough people with