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PLAYING WITH HISTORY

Why do we feel the need to perform music in an historically informed style, and is this need related to wider cultural concerns? In the most ambitious study of the topic to date, John Butt sums up recent debates on the nature of the early music movement and historically informed performance, calling upon a seemingly inexhaustible fund of ideas gleaned from historical musicology, analytic philosophy, literary theory, historiography and theories of modernism and postmodernism. He develops the critical views of both supporters and detractors of the movement, while claiming ultimately that it has more intellectual and artistic potential than its detractors may have assumed. He also asks whether the phenomenon of historically informed performance reflects changes in the culture of western music and how it, in turn, may have influenced that culture, particularly in regard to such issues as the status of the composer, the work, intentionality and notation.

JOHN BUTT is the Gardiner Professor of Music at the University of Glasgow, having previously been a lecturer in music at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of King's College, and University Organist and Associate Professor of Music at the University of California, at Berkeley. He is the author of *Bach Interpretation* (1990), *Bach: Mass in B Minor* (1991), *Music Education and the Art of Performance in the German Baroque* (1994), and editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (1997), all published by Cambridge University Press. He is also a highly acclaimed harpsichordist and organist and has recorded ten CDs for Harmonia Mundi, France.

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Preface

> We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life.
>
> Nietzsche[1]

> History has one great strength over the things a Waldzell tutor feels to be worthy of his interest: it deals with reality. Abstractions are fine, but I think people also have to breathe air and eat bread.
>
> Hermann Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game*[2]

Perhaps every work of scholarship and criticism contains a trace of autobiography, and this could hardly be truer of the present case. Much of my career has been taken up with both performance and scholarship and thus inevitably with the constant mediation between them. Moreover, much of the performance and much of the scholarship has related directly to the issue of 'historically informed performance' (henceforth HIP) and the debates about this concept have become particularly vigorous during the very course of my career.

When I began a dissertation on performance practice issues in Bach during the early 1980s at the University of Cambridge, the order of things seemed quite clear in the context of that faculty. Composition stood at the top of the hierarchy and performance (which had barely a place in the curriculum) at the bottom; scholarship in performance stood marginally above performance itself so long as it involved rigorous, scientific and historical methods. I could claw my way a rung or two higher by working on a Great Composer and by tying in some of the results with musical analysis (the most respected discipline below composition proper). What seemed obvious to me was that historical performance was fundamentally anathema to the modernist regime; it was something to be seen – more often than not – as a rather bemusing throwback to nineteenth-century antiquarianism. If HIP did share anything with modernism it was in its counter-cultural credentials, its distance from a supposedly conservative mainstream. Particularly fascinating was the fact that a huge

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industry connected to the revival of early music and HIP was blossoming just down the road in London. Yet this represented the activities of surprisingly small groups of people who seemed to have enjoyed virtually no consistent or institutional training in history or historical performance. The movement was dominated by a handful of scholar–performers directing versatile vocalists and instrumentalists who learned the historical styles and techniques more or less 'on the job'.

Moving to California in 1989, many of my impressions and assumptions were completely overturned. Here many universities and conservatories did, in fact, teach historical performance on a far more institutionalised basis than in Britain, yet the professional success of the movement was considerably slimmer; indeed many of the best American artists had moved abroad. Instrument building could be of an extraordinarily high standard and there was much public enthusiasm for early music and HIP, particularly as a counter-cultural movement. Most inspiring of all was the critical work of new colleagues such as Joseph Kerman and Richard Taruskin, both of whom had been connected with the movement in one way or another and both of whom looked critically at common assumptions regarding both historical performance and historical research *per se*. They called into even greater question the concept of the academic composer at the head of the musical food chain. Most striking – and jarring, given my own experiences – was Taruskin's association of HIP with modernism. Had I not just moved from an environment in which modernism had seemed the very antithesis of HIP, in which members of the early music movement often placed themselves in direct opposition to the culture of progress and the relentless advance of 'technique'? Another issue was Taruskin's belief that research into performance practice is categorically distinct from performance and that good scholarship does not necessarily result in good performance. Yet I felt that my development as a performer had definitely benefited from my research as a graduate student (and beyond); indeed it would be impossible for me to perform the way I do now without the benefit of that experience. But, taking his view on board, it was clear that the relationship was not direct – with each new discovery neatly paralleling a new way of performing – but that the very action of historical thinking, 'playing with history' as it were, informed my entire attitude towards performance.

This experience of crossing cultures, crossing disciplines of performance and scholarship and, increasingly, experiencing the critical turn in musicology itself, has led directly to the questions formulated in this book. Given the diversity of impressions and opinions, what actually

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is Historically Informed Performance? Or rather, what conceptions of western music does it seem to confirm, alter or develop? How, in turn, might it reflect changes in our cultural conceptions of music? Why has it happened on such a scale during the last few decades and how does it fit into contemporary culture? Here there is no room for a comprehensive history of the movement or advice on how to 'do' historical performance – there is plenty of that elsewhere – rather I write from a position of bafflement in the face of the cross-currents I have experienced, and by examining my own motives and preferences. It clearly follows from the ongoing debate about HIP, as the first chapter shows, and could hardly have been written without the precedents set by previous writers. I endeavour to adopt and develop the critical stances of such writings although, perhaps inevitably, my ultimate goal is to provide a defence for the movement; it has been debunked enough already. Much of what I write is done in the – perhaps erroneous – belief that HIP is an essential part of contemporary culture and that, however great its shortcomings, it contributes to the continued survival and flourishing of western music.

The study begins with a review of important stages in the HIP debate as a way of drawing out threads and topics that inform the remainder of the study. The debate is traced from the seminal work of Adorno in 1950 through to important articles by Laurence Dreyfus and Robert Morgan in the 1980s. A large part of the discussion is dedicated to the books by Richard Taruskin and Peter Kivy: Taruskin's study represents a fascinating critique of the movement from within the increasingly rich and polyglot discipline of critical musicology while Kivy's represents the supremely abstract discourse of analytical philosophy. The two could hardly be more different although some of their resulting opinions are strikingly similar. They perhaps represent the two poles of the discourse on HIP, the one rich in its rhetorical flair and diverse cultural perspectives, the other seemingly logical and precise. Such is the success and sheer force of Taruskin's writing (published as a whole in 1995) that many within musicology and music criticism in general have perceived that the debate over HIP is effectively closed, that there is nothing more to say, and, indeed, that the movement as a whole is running out of steam (like modernism itself).[3] I attempt here to show that Taruskin's work – far from closing the debate – is really the work that has most made future debate possible and has entirely reformulated the issues concerned with the discussion of HIP.

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The next three chapters examine how HIP relates to three important parameters in our traditional conception of western music: the work, the composer and the intermediary role of notation. How does HIP relate to the view of musical works as somehow universal and portable from one historical context to another? Does it actually effect a change in our preconceptions of works? I suggest that HIP gained much of its prestige by capitalising on existing attitudes to the integrity of musical works, yet – in its admission of history and the concept of contingency – it has actually served to loosen the concept of the essential musical work. The relation of HIP to the concept of a composer and his intentions has endured particular critical approbation within the early music debate. Chapter 3 puts the question in a new way: instead of inquiring into the composer's intentions in order to discern a correct performance, this study suggests that HIP can actually enable us to form a different concept of the composer and his intentions, namely, how his encounter with the media and practices of performance fed into the very act of composition in the first place. In other words, performance might be a useful parameter in understanding how a piece of music came to be created and notated. Performance could then be seen as much a part of the past, as of the future, of a newly finished piece. As chapter 2 also suggests, the boundary between work and performance thus becomes much looser when the issue of historical performance is raised. The last chapter in this sequence examines the idea of notation as a recipe for performance, one we commonly presume to have developed progressively over the years. Consideration of HIP allows us to reformulate this function of notation by suggesting many other ways in which notation may relate (or not) to performance, the composer and the 'work', however these are to be understood. This study thus consolidates some of the points about work and author formulated in the previous two chapters.

Having discussed what I consider to be the significance of HIP in refining or developing our conceptions of music, the final part of the book attempts to place the movement within the wider cultural context. Chapter 5 examines HIP from the perspective of modernism and postmodernism. Clearly there is hardly the room here to define either of these concepts in any way that can begin to be adequate. I try to isolate those aspects that might relate most closely to musical performance and history, in the belief that HIP has to fit somewhere within the debate on modernity, that there is no such thing as a purely isolated cultural phenomenon and that even the most naive antiquarianism must relate – if only by negation – to larger cultural movements over the last century or so.

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The final chapter takes a closer look at a particular phenomenon related to the modernism/postmodernism debate, namely the culture of 'Heritage' and preservationism that has so characterised the final decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps the coincidence of this with the overwhelming commercial success of HIP is too obvious to have deserved much comment in the recent debates. Or, more likely, Heritage has generally been considered an amateurish and populist form of history and thus not serious enough to be part of the academic discourse on musical performance. But the connection between the two seems unmistakable and the Heritage industry must surely provide much of the context in which it has become fashionable to invest considerable financial resources in performances 'on original instruments' just as one does in 'period' furnishings, houses and drama.

I cannot claim to be able to explain all that happens, or might happen, within the world of HIP. Rather I try to present a more theoretical conception of HIP by standing back from the immediate day-to-day concerns of the movement. In this way I hope at least to show how the movement has more intellectual and artistic potential than its detractors might have assumed. I make liberal use of various philosophical and cultural forms of 'theory', but in a relatively practical, ad hoc, way that, I suppose, betrays both my English empirical disposition and my untutored status in so many of the disciplines I co-opt. But, hopefully, the combination of approaches and the peculiarities of my experience will shed some new light on what Lydia Goehr describes as HIP's potential to help 'us overcome that deep-rooted desire to hold the most dangerous of beliefs, that we have at any time got our practices absolutely right'.[4]

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Abbreviations

BJA	*The British Journal of Aesthetics*
CM	*Current Musicology*
COJ	*Cambridge Opera Journal*
EM	*Early Music*
JAAC	*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*
JAMS	*The Journal of the American Musicological Society*
JM	*The Journal of Musicology*
MQ	*The Musical Quarterly*

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