

# Reviving the Past: Unravelling the Magnetic Pull of Historically Informed Performance in the 20th Century

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How can we define Early Music?

To understand the impetus of the 20th-century early music revival and the significance of Historically Informed Performance, ‘early’ demands definition. If one utilises a literal lens, the definition of ‘early’ surely gets later as time progresses, as exemplified by the description of the 1776 ‘Consort of Ancient’s repertory of music that was more than just 20 years old – clearly illustrating the slowing of the rate that music has developed over time.<sup>1</sup> However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world of early musicians, early music is generally regarded to be a collective term for the music from the Medieval to the Baroque, encompassing the period from the late 8<sup>th</sup> century to 1750. This essay will examine the historically informed performance (HIP) of Renaissance and Baroque music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Historical Revivals

History is sporadically punctuated with historical revivals of art and music: a cultures that seem distant to our own. One may observe instances in artistic and musical history when a certain culture has reflected upon previous civilisations with a certain intrigue. In architecture and literature, artistes have been inspired by the past, as manifested in movements like neo-classicism. Music has observed similar historical revivals. Although the 20<sup>th</sup> century revival of early music is the most well-known and well-documented, it was by no means the only such revival. As early as 1585, in Vicenza, a production of the Ancient Greek play *Oedipus Rex* was performed in a theatre whose architecture mimicked that of Ancient Greece, accompanied by the music of the contemporary composer Andrea Gabrielli: an amalgamation of the contemporary and the ancient.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Mozart stated in a letter to his father in 1782:

“I go every Sunday at twelve o’clock to the Baron van Sweiten, where nothing is played but Handel and Bach.”<sup>3</sup>

Baron van Sweiten was one of Mozart’s patrons and employed his services to transcribe many of J.S., C.P.E and W.F. Bach’s keyboard fugues for string quartets, as well as larger works like Handel’s *Messiah* for a contemporary scoring.<sup>4</sup> It can be observed that Mozart appeared a little frustrated by van Sweiten’s rather regressive approach to music in the above quote, perhaps due to the fact that Bach was alive for the much of Van Sweiten’s adolescence, hence influencing his music taste for the rest of his life. However, the most

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<sup>1</sup> (Kelly, 2011)

<sup>2</sup> (Kelly, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> (Tomita, 2000)

<sup>4</sup> (Kelly, 2011)

critical revival of early music occurred after Felix Mendelssohn's 1829 performance of J.S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion, a work oft-played today, but that held little appeal in 19th-century European repertory outside Leipzig, highlighting the frequent neglect of certain musics that do not comply with contemporary trends throughout history.

Mendelssohn's 1829 performance of the Passion seemed to echo Mozart's efforts in that it used a remarkably different orchestration to that which Bach would have heard: Mendelssohn famously conducted from a piano, not a harpsichord and his impressively large two choirs surmounted to 158 people.<sup>5</sup> However, such large-scale performances were not a novelty, as one can observe in the performance of the Messiah mass in Handel's own memorial service. Further, it can be observed that Mendelssohn condensed the Passion significantly as he believed that his audience would have too short an attention span for the whole three-hour work, choosing to remove ten arias and six chorales.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it must be appreciated that the work of Mendelssohn was critical in the revival of Bach's larger choral works in a manner that cannot be observed again in music history. As Fanny Mendelssohn stated:

“[The choir sang] with a fire, a striking power and also with a touching delicacy and softness the like of which I have never heard”.<sup>7</sup>

### The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Early Music Revival

As we have demonstrated, revivals of earlier cultures have occurred throughout history, but for a huge variety of reasons. For example, a sense of inquisitiveness about the exotic and novel, or an academic and historic investigation into the past, or to reflect the politics of the time. It certainly seems that Mendelssohn's revival of Bach coincided with a surge of nationalism in continental Europe, in a manner that perhaps led to an increase in Germany's interest in its cultural heritage: why did Mendelssohn choose to revive Bach rather than Palestrina whose counterpoint can be argued to be just as study-worthy as Bach's? Such rises in nationalism can also be observed to coincide with the rise of conservatoire culture as educators sought out repertoire suitable (related to their country) for study, a concept that would eventually lead to the problematic 'Western Classical Music Canon'.

The causative factor of the revival of early music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be observed to be far more complex than a single factor, as evidenced by the divisions the subject has caused among critics. As Jonathon Shull (2006) asserts, 20<sup>th</sup> century interest in early music seems to be similar to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century orientalising projects by composers such as Debussy and Ravel, and hence can also be observed to reflect the 20<sup>th</sup> century rise of world music and ethnomusicology.<sup>8</sup> Combined with this factor of excitement at novelty, it can be observed that many critics of the Early Music Revival speculate over the sincerity at the root of the movement; perhaps it was more egocentric or financially motivated, whilst some scholars like Kailan R. Rubinoff suggesting that the principles of early music follow an almost Marxist agenda.<sup>9</sup>

Part of the beauty of the revival was the fact that it was not one dimensional, with many performers inspired by differing aspects of early music, leading to various, contrasting, and refreshing performances. Whilst many ensembles were simply 'early music ensembles', one may observe how certain individuals and groups found their niche: Thomas Binkley's

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<sup>5</sup> (Blain, 2022)

<sup>6</sup> (Blain, 2022)

<sup>7</sup> (Blain, 2022)

<sup>8</sup> (Shull, 2006)

<sup>9</sup> (Rubinoff, 2013)

Studio der fruhen Musik specialised in 14th century Italian songs, troubadour or French estampies; Michael Morrow's Musica Reservata became known for their uniquely focused and directed sound in relation to Renaissance music, with efforts focused on pronunciation, improvisation and dance rhythms; David Munrow brought early music to a wider audience through his TV presence; Anthony Rooley's Consort of Musicke became renowned for working with singers who sang with very little to no vibrato, with a language-forwarding style, like Emma Kirkby; and Benjamin Bagby's Sequentia specialised in Medieval monophony.<sup>10</sup>

The revival began in earnest in the 1960s in The Netherlands due to their government's generous funding to the arts sector and general support of novel and avant-garde ideologies.<sup>11</sup> Whilst early music is certainly not avant-garde, it was the openness of The Netherlands as a whole that allowed the revival to be centred so specifically there.

### The Purpose of the Early Music Revival

“And it [the EMR] is organized in a sort of grass-roots, non-hierarchical network of training and playing opportunities that lie largely outside traditional concert and educational structures—or it did so in the 1970s and 1980s, when this aspect of the movement was at its height.”<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of music is a neigh-impossible question to answer, but nonetheless, one can evaluate musicians' motives for playing music and hence estimate by implication what the purpose of their work is. There is certainly a strong point to be made for the purpose of early music ensembles being increased connectivity with the past in a manner that is simply not achievable in a symphonic setting where there exists relatively little connectivity between players, hence leading to a possible lack of connectivity with the music. However, Thomas Forrest Kelly argues that the early music revival itself ‘is self-consciously archaizing, in that it senses a gap rather than a continuity, with the past’, hence suggesting that at some point, early music simply ceased to be played, and hence that in order for it to be played today, it must be revived.<sup>13</sup> In many ways Forrest Kelly's statement is true, as the very nature of any form of art or music evolves at such a rate that often music that isn't wholly compliant with contemporary social fashions is left obsolete: confined to the history books. Hence, it can certainly be argued that the early music revival acknowledges a gap in music history, simply through its very existence.

Furthermore, as previously alluded to, the Early Music Revival (EMR) acted as a method for some musicians to escape the confines of the symphony orchestra. As the musicologist Laurence Dreyfus highlights, the very nature of a symphony orchestra involves a hierarchical system, with the conductor at the top of a somewhat feudal system, with the principal player of each section being next in this pecking order, and lastly the ‘ordinary’ musicians.<sup>14</sup> Often, such ‘ordinary’ musicians felt aggrieved by what they perceived to be the authoritarian nature that conductors' indomitable interpretations had on the remainder of the ensemble: the intellectual subordination of orchestral playing. Prominent ‘cellist and conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt, as well as the conductor and harpsichordist Ton Koopman,

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<sup>10</sup> (Kelly, 2011)

<sup>11</sup> (Rubinoff, 2013)

<sup>12</sup> (Kelly, 2011)

<sup>13</sup> (Kelly, 2011)

<sup>14</sup> (Dreyfus, 1983)

both spoke out against such intellectual subordination: they later became influential in the growing Early Music world.<sup>15 16</sup>

However, there were very many who criticised the infantile days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century early music revival, mostly due to the often-poor quality of playing. Dreyfus draws his judgement in a table, perhaps more of a satirical observation than a critique:<sup>17</sup>

<b>Early Music</b>	<b>Musical Mainstream</b>
1. The conductor is banished.	1. The conductor is the symbol of authority, stature, and social difference.
2. All members of the ensemble are equal.	2. The orchestra is organised in a hierarchy.
3. Ensemble members play a number of instruments, sometimes sing, and commonly exchange roles.	3. The “division of labour” is strictly defined, with one player per part.
4. Symptomatic grouping: like a consort – like-minded members of a harmonious family.	4. Symptomatic grouping: the concerto-opposing forces struggling for control; later, the one against the many.
5. Virtuosity is not a set goal and is implicitly discouraged.	5. Virtuosity defines the professional.
6. Technical level of professionals is commonly mediocre.	6. Technical standards are high and competitive.
7. The audience (often amateurs) may play the same repertory at home.	7. The audience marvels at the technical demands of the repertory.
8. The audience identifies with the performers.	8. The audience idealises the performers.
9. Programs are packed with homogenous works and are often dull.	9. Programs contain contrasting items and are designed around a climax.
10. Critics report on the instruments, the composers, pieces and that “a good time was had by all.”	10. Critics comment in the performer and his interpretation.

It must be observed that many critiques of the Early Music revival were by no means any way near as satirical and casual as Dreyfus. The Israeli violinist and conductor Pinchas Zukerman was a vehement and relentless critic of the early music stating:<sup>18</sup>

“The first time I heard that shit, I couldn’t believe it. It’s complete rubbish, and the people who play it... Maybe one or two or a half-dozen have wonderful musical minds. But I certainly don’t want to hear them perform.”

Whilst Zukerman’s judgement is certainly crass and non-discriminatory in his critique of the early music revival, he does raise a substantial point that many of the early music ensembles of the 1950s and ‘60s did not prioritise ‘good’ playing over historical sensitivity and the unity that players struggled to feel in larger ensembles. However, over time, the standard of playing in early music ensembles has increased to a highly virtuosic level that is surely now comparable to the level of any top symphony orchestras.

<sup>15</sup> (Mertl, 1999)

<sup>16</sup> (Kozinn, 1987)

<sup>17</sup> (Dreyfus, 1983)

<sup>18</sup> (Everett-Green, 2000)

## What is an Historically Informed Performance (HIP)?

Historically informed performance is the performance of music using the instruments and techniques that a composer originally intended the music to be played with. Therefore, great efforts were taken in the 1960s and 1970s in researching obsolete instruments of the past and reconstructing them, often from museum articles that remain in their original state. However, this method is flawed as one cannot ever know what, for example, a 17<sup>th</sup> century harpsichord would have sounded when it was new; we only know what it sounds like 300 years later: should we guess how it would have sounded when it was new, or should we make new instruments that reflect the sound contemporary instruments make today?

However, HIP is not simply an appreciation of contemporary instruments' sonorities, but is rather, in a perfect world, a complete recreation of historical performance practices and techniques, as well as tunings and temperaments. Often HIP has been mistaken as a performance on historically sensitive instruments, when in reality a true HIP is played with obsolete techniques and appropriate tuning systems. *id est*; A = 392-415Hz in Baroque music rather than the standard 440. Nevertheless, historically sensitive instruments are critical to a true historically informed performance.

It is also worth highlighting the fact that HIP is non-discriminatory in its period of history. Although the term is used mostly in relation to early music, it is possible to have an HIP of a work like Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, which would utilise the now obsolete trumpet in F as well as unusual playing techniques, like the playing of the viola vertically rather than the usual horizontal. Such performances have indeed occurred, most notably at the 2008 Utrecht Music Festival, proving the timeless nature of HIP.<sup>19</sup>

## Historically Informed Performance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Early Music Revival

“The concern for historical awareness, propriety and consequent responsibility, which initially spawned the much maligned authenticity movement in Early Music, has been tempered and mollified and now manifests itself in the guise of what is generally referred to as "historically informed performance" (glibly abbreviated as HIP).”<sup>20</sup>

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Early Music Revival was unique in its emphasis on historically sensitive performance. As mentioned above, Mozart and Mendelssohn both drastically changed the orchestration that composers like Bach originally indicated. Therefore, it must be observed that the inclusion of historically accurate instruments and sensitive performance practices is a good thing for the fullness of time as it allows the past to be remembered and documented in a manner that has often been neglected in large periods of history.

Initially, the use of historically sensitive instruments had a mixed reception from critics like Richard Taruskin as he believed that many ensembles were ‘fetishizing some forms of historical information like metronome markings or vibrato-less sound [*and the instruments themselves*], whilst completely ignoring others like improvisation practices or tempo flexibility.’<sup>21</sup> Such theories were not uncommon, and it does not take too much imagination to see the use of period-inspired instruments (perhaps cynically) as a way to increase the novelty value and perhaps expand the audience. However, the simple fact that

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<sup>19</sup> (Kelly, 2011)

<sup>20</sup> (Shull, 2006)

<sup>21</sup> (Taruskin, 1990)

historically informed orchestration still exists today perhaps disproves this argument as HIP has become thoroughly normalised in all the Early Music Ensembles of today.

Whilst many performers felt undermined and insulted by the harsh critique of figures like Taruskin, it can certainly be observed that such criticism led to a greater atmosphere of self-reflection in the early music revival, that perhaps made performers more conscious of the decisions they made surrounding historical music practices leading to a more informed and convincing performance.

However, HIP was in the revival's ancestry when one researches the very earliest proponents of the 20<sup>th</sup> century revival. Arnold Dolmetsch was a key figure in the commencing of the revival in the 1920s through his establishment of the Haslemere Music Festival where his Dolmetsch Consort performed.<sup>22</sup> As he was an instrument maker, Dolmetsch's focus was naturally on the instrument that early music was being performed upon, hence he began to focus his work upon the manufacturing of instruments like lutes, viols, recorders, clavichords, and harpsichords. Whilst the early music revival had certainly not started in earnest in the 1920s, it can be observed that many of the Dutch efforts in the '50s and '60s continued the ideas of HIP that Dolmetsch pioneered in the '20s.

It can generally be observed that the reason HIP remained such an important part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century early music revival, despite its many criticisms by figures like Taruskin and Zukerman, was because of the involvement of what Thomas Forrest Kelly calls 'scholar-performers'.<sup>23</sup> Performers like Dolmetsch, Robert Donington, Thruston Dart as well as the distinguished composer Paul Hindemith sustained the intellectual aspect of HIP and allowed the academic and practical sides of early music to amalgamate for an ultimately historically sensitive and practically superior performance.

Whilst the more specialised music ensembles mentioned previously, were clearly instrumental in their development of HIP, there are, according to Thomas Forrest Kelly, several recordings that changed the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Early Music Revival: these are Nikolaus Harnoncourt's recording of Monteverdi's *l'Orfeo*, Gustav Leonhardt's recordings of the Bach Brandenburg Concertos, and Christopher Hogwood's recording of Handel's *Messiah*.<sup>24</sup>

Harnoncourt's *Concentus Musicus Wien* ensemble was critical in re-establishing creative continuo playing, emphasising renaissance instruments' sonorities, and appropriate singing, which can be observed quite specifically on their 1968 *l'Orfeo* recording which can be seen to have boosted significantly the popularity of Monteverdi for many years to come as well as setting the standard for historically sensitive techniques and performances.<sup>25</sup>

Gustav Leonhardt's Consort's 1976 recording of all 6 of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos was critical for much of the development of many historically informed techniques, with the importance of tuning and historically sensitive techniques being highlighted, along with metrical sensitivity, and the development of small crescendos on notes for shaping: techniques that are often taken for granted today.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, Christopher Hogwood's 1984 recording of the incredibly popular Handel's *Messiah* was highly important as it was the first time that a conductor had dared to apply HIP to a work that was and is exceptionally well-known to not only musicians but the world outside of musicology. Hogwood and his Academy of Ancient Music certainly paved the way for such projects to be taken up by other ensembles in the future.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> (Kelly, 2011)

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<sup>27</sup> (Kelly, 2011)

Such recordings were critical in highlighting the benefits of HIP to the Early Music world, as well as being relatively early examples of virtuosic playing of Early Music, another standard of today, pioneered in such recordings.

## Conclusions

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Early Music Revival's apparent obsession with Historically Informed Performance was an inevitability when one examines previous historical revivals and their neglect of historically informed practices: it would seem simply a matter of time before musicians wondered how music would have sounded to the ears of its composers. The modern revival has had HIP in its bloodline from its earliest proprietors like Arnold Dolmetsch and hence, the socio-political widening of musical taste allowed early music to develop and grow in popularity with the work of performing scholars like Robert Donington and Paul Hindemith, and their investigative work in researching historical performance practices.

Therefore, historically informed performance can be observed in today's early music ensembles as standard, but only thanks to the work of the pioneers of such techniques and their ability to listen, and yet remain defiant in the face of criticism, creating one of the most popular and thoroughly revived sub-genres of classical music that exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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