

Music 314 Literature Review: Early Music
Performance Practice Discussions From 1990 to
2010

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I Introduction

Of the easily accessible articles on the subject, there are two primary discussions that can be analyzed: first, the debate between whether or not early 15th-century chansons were written with instrumental accompaniment; second, two major definitions of the word *authenticity* as it relates to early music performance. I would imagine that once one digs deeper into the literature there are debates about the specific performance practices of different genres, regions, and instruments. As such, this paper will primarily focus on the definitions of authenticity forwarded by individuals such as Richard Taruskin and John Butt in the 1980s through the 2000s only. This literature review ended up relying heavily on Michael Troy Murphy's dissertation from 2008 on the recordings of J.S. Bach's *Passio Secundum Johannem*.¹

Murphy traces the interest the performance of historical music from Mozart arranging Bach and Handel, to Dannreuther Dolmetsch in the early twentieth century, to the founding in 1933 of the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis in Switzerland, to contemporary scholarship on performing historical music.² Murphy notes that Dorottya Fabian, in "The Meaning of Authenticity and the Early Music Movement," comes to the "conclusion that musicians and scholars in continental Europe came to regard 'authenticity' as a futile utopian attempt fifteen years before English speaking countries."³

2 Issues of Authenticity: Taruskin vs. Butt

In 1982, Taruskin wrote that we "tend to assume that if we can recreate all the external conditions that obtained in the original performance of a piece we will thus recreate the composer's inner experience of the piece and thus allow him to speak for himself."⁴ Taruskin states that authenticity in "performance practice is a chimaera, most of us are nevertheless no more deterred by this realization from seeking it than was Bellerophon himself."⁵ The essence of Taruskin's thought on the subject in 1982 seems to be: "it's find to assemble the shards of a lost performance tradition, but how much better

1. Michael Troy Murphy, "Performance Practice of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Passio Secundum Johannem* — A Study of 25 Years of Recorded History (1982-2007) as Influenced by Events Surrounding the Historically Informed Performance Movement" (Ph.D. Dissertaton, Florida State University, 2008).

2. Ibid., 9–16.

3. Ibid., 23.

4. Richard Taruskin, "On Letting the Music Speak for Itself: Some Reflections on Musicology and Performance," *The Journal of Musicology* 1, no. 3 (July 1982): 341.

5. Ibid.

to reinvent it.”⁶ In speaking of the most authoritative performances he asserts that they “have always been those that have proceeded from a vividly imagined—that is frankly to say imaginary—but coherent performance style. They provide themselves with Tradition ...and bestow authenticity upon themselves.”⁷ These performances are not truly reconstructions of past performances, “they are quintessentially modern performances, modernist performances in fact, the product of an esthetic wholly of our own era, no less time-bound than the performance styles they would supplant.”⁸ At the end of this article, Taruskin quotes an analogy for the musicologist from Nikolai Malko in which the musicologist is like a cook who only talks about the making of eggs instead of actually making them. After this Taruskin states that in reference to those eggs, “we’re eating them now, and even cook up a few on occasion, as when we do a little discreet composing to make a fragmentary piece performance. Now, if we could only sell them...”⁹ This is an extremely interesting statement. It references a form of authenticity that Kivy mentions later in 1995, the ‘sensible authenticity’ in which the audience decides their own form of authenticity.¹⁰

Laurence Dreyfus, in his 1983 article, “Early Music Defended Against its Devotees”, discusses Theodor Adorno’s thoughts on early music performance and the developing aesthetic relationship between the emerging avant garde and early music. Dreyfus’s article also attempts to examine many of the emerging connections within early music. One distinct way that he does this is through what he calls a Brechtian table in which he defines the different roles of Early Music against the Musical Mainstream.¹¹ This table has been printed below.

6. Taruskin, “On Letting the Music Speak for Itself: Some Reflections on Musicology and Performance,” 343.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 344.

9. Ibid., 349.

10. Peter Kivy, *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

11. Laurence Dreyfus, “Early Music Defended against Its Devotees: A Theory of Historical Performance in the Twentieth Century,” *The Musical Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 317–318.

Early Music

1. The conductor is banished.
2. All members of the ensemble are equal.
3. Ensemble members play a number of instruments, sometimes sing, and commonly exchange roles.
4. Symptomatic grouping: the consort—like-minded members of a harmonious family.
5. Virtuosity is not a set goal and is implicitly discouraged.
6. Technical level of professionals is commonly mediocre.
7. The audience (often amateurs) may play the same repertory at home.
8. The audience identifies with the performers.
9. Programs are packed with homogeneous works and are often dull.
10. Critics report on the instruments, the composers, pieces and that “a good time was had by all.”

Musical Mainstream

1. The conductor is the symbol of authority, stature, and social difference.
2. The orchestra is organized in a hierarchy.
3. The “division of labor” is strictly defined, with one player per part.
4. Symptomatic grouping: the concerto—opposing forces struggling for control; later, the one against the many.
5. Virtuosity defines the professional.
6. Technical standards are high and competitive.
7. The audience marvels at the technical demands of the repertory.
8. The audience idealizes the performers.
9. Programs contain contrasting items and are designed around a climax.
10. Critics comment on the performer and his interpretation.

In Taruskin's next article on the subject of authenticity, he notes that performers see musical performance as texts. He notes that “many, if not most, of use who concern ourselves with ‘authentic’ interpretation of music approach musical performance with the attitudes of textual critics, and fail to make the fundamental distinction between

music as tones-in-motion and music as notes-on-page.”¹² This discussion of performer as textual critic is placed in opposition to the performer as moral philosopher. I must add this excellent quote which has bearing on finger-style guitar:

So where does one begin? Surely with the music, with one's love for it, with endless study of it, and with the determination to challenge one's every assumption about it, especially the assumptions we do not know we are making because, to quote Whitehead, 'no other way of putting things has ever occurred' to us ... One Musician whom I particularly admire, a lutenist, once told me that when he began to experiment with improvisation practices to accompany medieval song, he deliberately mistuned[sic] his instrument so that his fingers would not be able to run along familiar paths.¹³

It is curious to think of the early music performer as sharing characteristics with the 21st-century finger-style guitarist. In a segment which Kivy might deem a discussion on 'sonic authenticity,' Taruskin notes that using old instruments forces the performer into a space of unfamiliarity which forces her "into a more direct confrontation with the music."¹⁴

Check out Taruskin 1995 page 166.¹⁵

Kivy "proposes there are four" authenticities.¹⁶ As discussed in Murphy, there is the 'composer authenticity,' the 'sonic authenticity,' the 'personal authenticity,' and the 'sensible authenticity.'¹⁷ The first deals with composer intent, the second, sonic, is concerned with "reconstructing the physical materials" surrounding a given composition's inception, the third, personal, deals with the performer sense of authenticity, the fourth, sensible, deals with how the audience interacts with authenticity.

12. Richard Taruskin, "The Authenticity Movement Can Become a Positivistic Purgatory, Literalistic and Dehumanizing," *Early Music* 12, no. 1 (February 1984): 4.

13. Ibid., 10.

14. Ibid., 11.

15. Richard Taruskin, *Text and act: essays on music and performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 166.

16. Kivy, *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance*.

17. Murphy, "Performance Practice of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Passio Secundum Johannem* — A Study of 25 Years of Recorded History (1982-2007) as Influenced by Events Surrounding the Historically Informed Performance Movement," 26.

3 Conclusions

Like most of the work that I have done this semester, I find myself biting off more than I can chew, as it were. This project demanded more time of me than I was able to give. It is a worthwhile subject. In a different world, I would have worked more with recent dissertations on the performance of early music. I also would have been interested in focusing on thoughts on early music performance surrounding plucked-string instruments, such as lutes and historical guitars. It appears that these discussions have been written about in journals such as *Performance Practice Review* and *Early Music*.

References

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