

***Musica Practica*: Towards a redefinition of Early Music in the Conservatoire**

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Musica practica was the formal, Latin term that referred to music as a practical art, as opposed to the speculative character traditionally associated with the idea of *musica* as one of the liberal arts. The gradual shaping of the practical discipline of music extends through most of the Middle Ages:

- It first acquires coherence during the 11th century, with elements still familiar today: the multi-line staff, the usage of seven letters (A-G), the introduction of mnemonic syllables for solmization, etc.
- By ca. 1250 the development of polyphony forces *musica* to break down into *plana* and *mensurabilis*, the latter including both the technique of measuring musical time and the polyphonic doctrines of *organum* / *discantus*.
- The systematization of counterpoint in the 14th century effectively separates the two main aspects of *musica mensurabilis*.
- The label *musica practica* appears consistently in printed treatises from the late 15th century, under humanist influence and/or to give a higher status to the practical skill of music, by now clearly divided into three components: *musica plana*, *contrapunctus*, *musica figuralis*.

Today, “Musica Practica” is also the name of a subject within the Early Music department of the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague, created a few years ago within the reshaping of the theory curriculum. It currently defines its goal as “the development of core musical skills, as understood in the Early Modern Era (roughly 1500-1800), consisting mainly of ear-training, sight-singing and improvisation using historically inspired methodology reconstructed from sources of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries”. This “Musica Practica” places emphasis on old skills, such as solmization, direct use of early notational systems, practice of improvised counterpoint, etc., up to and including the fundamental tools used in the Neapolitan conservatoires: *solfeggi* and *partimenti*.

While researching on *musica practica*, it is also possible to find some unexpected instances of the term. French literary theorist Roland Barthes (1915-1980) wrote a short essay with the title "Musica Practica" in 1970. He partly redefines the term to refer to the music one plays, as opposed to the music one listens to, and he describes such music as active, muscular, manual, even sensual. He goes as far as to say that this kind of music has disappeared: according to him, in modern times we have been left with a passive, receptive music in which the only agent, the virtuoso, does not instil in the audience the desire of making music anymore but effectively relieves the listener of all activity. Following up on Barthes, British documentary film-maker and music critic Michael Chanan dedicates a full monograph (“Musica Practica”, 1994) to the social aspect of music-making, attempting to trace it through the history of Western music within the constant dialectics between the written score and music itself. Both Barthes and Chanan are, evidently, reusing a historical term for their own purposes: they appear to be pointing to the sociological implications of the idea of *musica practica*.

The fundamental changes in society ca. 1800 completely reshaped the “system of the arts”, to take the expression from Larry Shiner (“The Invention of Art”, 2001): his main point is that the 18th century saw the progressive crystallization of a group of disciplines, the fine arts, which are practiced primarily for their aesthetic value and separated from the crafts and their functional utility. Upon the Fall of the Ancien Régime, artists lose their traditional patrons (church, aristocracy) and must survive in a new artistic market, oriented towards the now dominant bourgeois class and subjected to the laws of supply and demand. Martha Woodmansee (“The Author, Art and the Market”, 1994) describes aesthetics itself, as a philosophy of art, as an adaptation to the new mode of production: it provides an ideological framework to justify and give value to “higher” artistic expressions.

The central object of the fine arts is no longer the process of skilled work, but the product, the work of art itself, as an autonomous, individual and self-sufficient artifact. Separated from function, it is “art for the sake of art” (*ars gratia artis*), but it also becomes a commodity: in the old system, artists were on the payroll of their patrons, now, the patrons can only buy a piece of their art. As for music, Lydia Goehr (“The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works”, 1992) has argued that, although the idea of a written-down composition being a finished thing can be traced to ca. 1500 (the *resfacta* of Tinctoris, the *opus perfectum et absolutum* of Listenius), dealing with music primarily in terms of musical works only becomes the norm ca. 1800. Paintings, sculptures or symphonies: works of art become segregated pieces, disconnected from functional utility. But they do not live in a vacuum: they will find their place in institutions created specifically for them, like museums, galleries, concert halls, conservatoires, etc.

The model for all modern conservatoires, the Conservatoire of Paris (founded in 1795), inherited not just the name but also a great deal of craft-like methodologies from the old Italian *conservatori*. Nevertheless, it was altogether a different institution, run by the state and built on the idea of music as a fine art, closely connected to concert culture (the “imaginary museum”), where musical training deals primarily with the performance of existing repertoire (the canon). Under the dominant ideology of aesthetics, where art almost plays the role of a secular religion, a musical work is created by a genius, acquiring the status of a sacred text, which is then interpreted and brought to life by a priestly class (performers) in the secularized versions of ceremonies and temples (concerts, concert halls). A music education compliant of that ideology (centered on the excellent performance of repertoire) is ultimately alienating both for performers and audiences. This is still the norm today for Classical Music, but also for Early Music. Early Music, if understood as early repertoire, and even if understood as an attitude on how to deal with that early repertoire, is still centered on the repertoire, on the work of art. At least in that aspect, it represents no fundamental change as for the dominant ideas of music or art.

The sociologist Richard Sennet has explored the ideas of craft and craftsmanship, and their problematic role in today's society ("The Craftsman", 2008). The modern world demands quick results, but a craft is rather slow; it is process driven as opposed to production driven, problem-finding as opposed to problem-solving. Together with the ever-present devaluation of manual labor and the effects of industrialization and mass production, Sennet specifically points to the separation of art and craft as a critical turning point in history. The artist seems to express a unique, extraordinary individuality, and channels an otherworldly inspiration to give shape the work of art. But the craftsman is part of a guild, internalizing a discipline through many years of work, to the point of shaping his very identity. The tacit knowledge of a community is transmitted from master to apprentice in one of the most natural social hierarchies experienced by people. Even more, craftsmanship is a fundamental factor of humanization of labor.

The Early Music movement was once a countercultural, even subversive affair. It challenged the dominant ideology within the world of Classical Music. But hegemony maintains dominance through assimilation of those who resist it, and the assimilation of Early Music into concert life, recording industry and the conservatoire is almost a paradigmatic example. Nevertheless, Early Music can still offer a further challenge, indeed, it has been already offering that challenge for a while.

In the last couple of decades it has become clear that some skills that were originally revived as "performance practice" are acquiring a significance that surpasses initial motivation. Improvisatory skills such as basso continuo, counterpoint, diminution, etc., but also solmization or performing directly from original notation (especially for music in choirbook and partbook format) are actually changing the way Early Music practitioners understand music. Even going back to one of the fundamental premises, that of original instruments, a similar feeling arises: they might have been brought back for aesthetic reasons (ie. how their characteristics match the repertoire), but it is the actual process of learning to make music with them is what causes a tremendous effect on the musicianship of those who take the step and learn to play on them.

Because of some coincidences, the year 2007 could be seen as a turning point. Bruce Haynes, in "The End of Early Music" (2007) argued that the main issue was not historical accuracy, following up on the whole authenticity debate. Instead of a return to the past, the goal ("the end") of Early Music is to enrich the present with a revival of early performing ideals, styles, and techniques. Probably eloquence is the most important one: a rhetoric-inspired way of performing through which expressivity is liberated from the objective/subjective dichotomy, and that, in my opinion, was already at the core of the writings of Nikolaus Harnoncourt, more than historical authenticity.

But 2007 is also the year of publication of Gjerdingen's "Music in the Galant Style", the year of a *Basler Jahrbuch* exploring improvisatory practices from the Middle Ages till the 18th century, and the year of a *Journal of Music Theory* issue integrally dedicated to *partimento*. All of these hint to an extension of the idea of Early Music beyond written repertoire. We must also recall here that Haynes already advocated not only for an eloquent "period style" of performance but also for "period improvisation" and even "period composition".

My proposal is to fully embrace this expansion of the field of Early Music beyond repertoire, to actually reshape the curricula of our departments. This means taking the old idea of *musica practica* (music as a craft, and not as a fine art) as the guiding principle of Early Music education.

Gjerdingen, in his last book (2020), writes very highly of the level of musical fluency and understanding attained through the old methods (“far beyond what music students typically achieve today”). He argues for reviving these methods for the sake of music education, even if they are linked to a social context and function that does not exist anymore. The traditions of music as a craft, learned and practised within a guild of artisans, were transformed in the 19th century into a fine art, practised to a high technical standard but somewhat segregated and abstracted. In the 20th century conservatoires have been gradually replaced with (or normalized into) universities, first in America, and now in Europe after the Bologna Process. In Gjerdingen’s words, what once was “an identity and a long-term project in cognitive and motor conditioning” is now merely a “subject” or a “course” – one could add, even worse: a “seminar” or a “master-class”.

Reshaping music education from the craft perspective is no small task. It’s true that much work has already been done: a field of “historically informed music pedagogy” is open, and most of the mentioned techniques are now being practiced in our schools and departments. But actually shifting the focus from the performance of repertoire to the skills constituting a historically inspired musicianship will potentially generate conflict with the current structures. Many elements, dependent on the still dominant aesthetic ideology (music as a fine art), will have to be reconsidered, modified or simply discarded and replaced.

Musica practica offers a different way of understanding music: here, Early Music is “the early idea of music as a craft”. By training craftsmen instead of artists, the accent is put on the work of the individual as part of a living tradition integrated in society, abandoning the myth of the genius, of the segregated individual beyond society. Moreover, *musica practica* is a hands-on criticism of the modern system of the arts: those practical skills (and the embodied knowledge that they represent) are a much more robust challenge against the dominant aesthetic ideology than hundreds of pages of philological discussion or sociological deconstruction.

The core heritage of Western music lays not in the surviving repertoire, but in the musical skills that made that repertoire possible. With *musica practica* we can contribute towards the redefinition of a role for the conservatoire in society at large. If the traditional idea of music as a craft is ultimately impracticable in the modern conservatoire, an independent institution will have to make it possible.