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AEC Session on The Future of Early Music Departments - Early Music Summit 2020

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The ideas of “Early Music” and “Historically Informed Performance” have been around since more or less hundred years now, and I think it is interesting to see how these concepts have changed during that period. For instance, I don’t think many would agree today that the goal of historically informed performance is to replicate the first execution of a piece, as it was proposed by Robert Donington. So, what makes early music be early music today?

The tradition that comes from the formal teaching context in conservatories puts works (compositions) and authors (composers) in the center of attention. Therefore, it seems only natural that a definition of early music would be associated to periods and repertoires. If around 1970 the concept of “early music” was a niche reserved for the performance of compositions written, let’s say, before Bach, in the following decades that line has been moved to later repertoires.

Bruce Haynes proposed an interesting divisor line between rhetorical and romantic revolutionary repertoires, but today we can find historically informed approaches to late 19th century or early 20th century composers, such as Wagner or Debussy.

A rather pacific definition of historically informed performance could be playing in original instruments, or copies, using historically documented techniques and performative practices. The expression “in period instruments” was actually mandatory in every HIP recording of the recording labels dedicated to this niche. I think most of the training provided by early music departments in music schools would be aligned with this definition, but I’m not so sure if upon a closer look we would see this simple idea to be developed coherently. I can give an example from my instrument, where there is a performative tradition, that can be traced to the 80’s (1980, not 1580 or 1680) to play 17th century instrumental repertory in something called a “ganassi recorder” which is a modern design vaguely based on instruments and descriptions from the early 16th century.

I think many more examples could be given in other instrumental fields. And I think this happens because “early music” has become in the last decades of the 20th century a label of sonority promoted by the explosion of discography and early music festivals. We witnessed then the birth of iconic ensembles, such as Les Arts Florissants, Hesperion XX, Musica Antica Koln, Giardino Armomico (I could of course name many others). And because these ensembles had such a strong sound identity, they become models to young

generations of musicians that pursued their studies in early music departments, lured more by the aesthetics of the discography rather than the music itself.

Personally, I think historically informed performance is defined by the ethics of the performer. And by that I mean that the attention given by the performer to the process is far more important than the final outcome itself. Today, we can listen to modern orchestras cloning, very successfully, the sonority of baroque orchestras because they want to be “historically correct”. No criticism implied, but for me that is not an interesting exercise. Music from the past is a gateway for the culture and thought of the past. Understanding those cultures and thought processes teaches us many things about who we are today, where we come from and what has been lost in the way.

In my perspective, the way to achieve this is via immersion, and there are 2 essential tools for that: philology and hermeneutics. Historical sources, and I don't mean only treatises or literary documents, are by far the best guide to savour a culture from the past. But I don't think it is enough to read and understand the concepts in them: we have also to integrate them in our sensorial experience, to allow ourselves to be fluent in them in a let's say Dionysian manner, and not only Apollonian. If we do so, the musical outcome will become the by-product and not goal of the musical performative experience.

One of the exciting novelties of the current century is the attention given to how music was taught in the past. Some very interesting studies, both from the musicological and performative fields, have been made, and they start to modulate our perception of the music from certain periods and styles. Slowly, the center of the attention is shifting from the “work” to the “language”. Maybe we are witnessing the transformation from the Historically Informed Performance to the Historically Formed Performer?