

EDITORIAL



In the world of historically informed performance (HIP) the word ‘authenticity’ is, if not exactly dead, certainly taboo (‘I know that we shouldn’t use the A-word’), fenced in with qualifiers (‘Of course we can’t be fully authentic’) or softened to clarify that of course HIP performances are aiming for something less than a full realization of the composer’s intentions (‘This may be the way Mozart could have heard it’, or ‘This represents some of the practices of the time’). But at least for the most successful practitioners of HIP (epigones may be a different matter), authenticity discourse was always a significant but simplified version of one part of a more complex and even contradictory set of justifications for using old instruments and techniques. Indeed, HIP practitioners regularly invoke chapter and verse from the treatises or other primary sources in the same breath as claiming not to be interested in authenticity per se or not to be engaged in any kind of ‘reconstruction’. This discursive rupture may be more striking with music of the later seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where the performance-practice sources are more numerous and the scores are more ‘complete’ by modern standards than those of much earlier music, whose performance has always been more frankly imaginative and conjectural.

It is unreasonable to expect the verbal justifications for any artistic process to be verbally consistent or logically watertight, but in this case the apparent dissonance between meticulous research and the denial of reconstructive intent is discursively (and probably psychologically) resolvable in a variety of ways. For example, historical research into the sound of music – especially but not only before the age of recordings – is always radically incomplete, and filling in the gaps always involves decisions and behaviours that involve the performer’s own imagination. Historical ‘plausibility’ can then become the implicit goal, rather than full accuracy. The word ‘plausible’ itself is not part of HIP discourse, as far as I know: it’s certainly not a particularly compelling sales pitch (‘The most plausible performance of the *St Matthew Passion* available!’). But it is, I believe, a working principle for those who have jettisoned ‘authenticity’ as a goal primarily because it is unachievable. (‘Let’s just get as close as we can to how it would have been, understanding that we’ll never know how close we actually are.’)

Another way to make sense of the gap between claims of careful research and denials of authenticity is to think of HIP as analogous to historical fiction. This makes more affirmative discursive space for the acknowledgment and justification of creativity and agency on the performers’ parts. As in fiction, the creative imagination is the main point, not the stuff that perforce has to fill the gaps in the historical record. More crucially, however, the idea of HIP as fiction also addresses Richard Taruskin’s essential point that using historical authenticity as a primary justification for interpretative choices is not only mendacious because authenticity is a chimera, but also, more importantly, as undesirable a primary goal for performance as it is for fiction (*Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 77).

There are obvious differences between the two genres: fiction is creation more or less *ex nihilo* while classical performance is (usually) interpretative; fiction is representational while instrumental music is generally not, and even vocal music is less bound by the rules of verisimilitude than is much fiction. None the less, there are enough points of contact that it is worth thinking about the extent of the analogy and ultimately its value for the way we conceive of HIP. Indeed, in many ways it seems so obvious an analogy that it’s barely worth discussing. However, one of my interlocutors at a TCHIP (Transforming Nineteenth-Century Historically Informed Performance) workshop in Oxford in the summer of 2017 noted that she had been thinking about historical fiction as a sort of model for HIP, but that the kind of discourse produced by that analogy was still not quite permissible even in the thoughtful and privileged HIP communities in which she moves; and another of my interlocutors at the same workshop described performing as ‘telling stories’,



but then added that many performers 'don't like' to think of it in this way. 'Authenticity' as a goal may be taboo, but the discourse of truth and accuracy does seem still to be very much with us.

Hesitation about embracing the fiction-like aspects of HIP may stem in part from a sense that 'historical fiction' consists primarily of bodice-ripping tales in which essentially modern characters cavort in picturesque settings purporting to be historical: in other words, predictable stories in inaccurate settings appealing to lowest-common-denominator readers. One might argue that some HIP performances could happily generate more visceral excitement, if not exactly of the bodice-ripping sort, but the discomfort of associating a musical subculture thought of as elite, even within the already elite world of classical music, with a pulp-fiction genre is understandable. That queasiness can, however, be easily countered with the argument that historical fiction comes in many flavours and levels including serious literature, so it is not necessarily a demeaning association. More interestingly, though, I suspect the unwillingness to admit fiction as a model or analogue for HIP has to do with the truth claims of classical music in general and HIP in particular. Although academic culture has long set aside the universalist claims of classical music, the notion that canonic masterpieces transcend their circumstances to tell truths about 'the human condition' is still quite firmly entrenched. In a 2004 interview with Brian Robins, the pioneering Baroque violinist Sigiswald Kuijken notes:

The most important thing for me is to make the deepest contact I can with Bach's art, to try to penetrate that richer world that was his. That certainly is something that appeals to all of us. (*Early Music World* <http://brianmartinrobins.powweb.com/id19.html>.)

Kuijken notes that this position is borderline 'romantic', and probably unfashionable in his HIP community (which may not reflect the attitudes of many other HIP performers), but what I find interesting here is first that Kuijken frames Bach's 'richer world' as something that existed historically rather than as a quality he has attributed to the facts he has assembled; and second that his famous evidence-based advocacy for 'chin-off' violin and viola playing, as well as for the viola da spalla as the instrument for which Bach's cello suites were written, gives his more imaginative efforts to come close to the essence of Bach's art an aura of 'truthiness' (the estimable Stephen Colbert's word for the quality of *feeling* true). One can see why a frank acceptance of fiction as a model for HIP (or, in fact, much classical performance) might sit uncomfortably in an environment where performers feel the need to justify an effort to make emotional sense of music with appeals to something framed as a kind of truth. None the less, I think the fiction model of HIP rests on enough similarities and is sufficiently advantageous to performers that it is worth exploring in a little more detail.

The most obvious similarity between HIP and historical fiction is that both deal with the impossible-to-disentangle relation between verifiable facts and the poetic licence necessary to present a convincing artistic product to an audience; and both have the urgent, even overriding, need to appeal to a more or less broad audience. The advantage of using fiction seriously and overtly as analogy or model for HIP would be discursively to foreground and empower the imaginative element in interpretation, and to figure historical accuracy as the background against which the artistic animating forces play a leading role. This formulation is in fact quite normal in HIP discourse, even if 'fiction' is not the explicit model for what performers do. Once we admit that fiction or fantasy is our first concern, though, why bother with history at all? Why not just go all-out for the novelty and palette-broadening qualities of old instruments and practices? Novelist Hilary Mantel, author of the Tudor blockbusters *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012) notes that (of course) her chief concern is the inner lives of her characters, and she feels honour-bound to make those narratively and aesthetically compelling. But she also says of her early writing practice:

I didn't like making things up, which put me at a disadvantage. In the end I scrambled through to an interim position that satisfied me. I would make up a man's inner torments, but not, for instance, the colour of his drawing room wallpaper. (Reith Lecture 1: medium.com/@bbcradiofour/hilary-mantel-bbc-reith-lectures-2017-aeff8935ab33)



The reason that you don't make up the colour of your hero's wallpaper is partly pride mixed with a sense of integrity: the craft of the literary-fiction kind of historical novelist (in other words, no ripped bodices) demands that kind of rigour; she notes in a later lecture that 'engagement with the evidence is what raises your game' (Reith Lecture 2: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2017/reith_2017_hilary_mantel_lecture2.pdf). In addition, in the fifth lecture in the series she notes that as a serious historical novelist she wants to stake a claim to shaping a truth of equal importance to that of 'non-fiction' historians (<https://medium.com/@bbcradiofour/adaptation-3d6boce51c69>):

we owe it to [our audiences] to stretch our technique to offer the truth, in its multiple and layered forms – not to mislead because it is, on the face of it, the easier option – we should not avoid the complexities and contradictions of history, any more than politicians should abandon debate and govern by slogans. We must try by all the means we command to do justice to the past in its nuance, intricacy, familiarity and strangeness. Historical fiction acts to make the past a shared imaginative resource.

Both Mantel's reasons for rigorous research resonate with HIP ideologies. Discipline, rigour, practice and fidelity are an obvious part of both mainstream and HIP classical music, and the notion of raising your game by using historical evidence is completely consonant with those cultural norms. I have already mentioned the importance of truth claims to classical music generally and HIP in particular. To the extent that listeners believe the instruments and non-mainstream practices used in a historically informed performance are the result of truth-seeking study, they expand and enrich the 'multiple and layered' truth about that piece, and can stimulate and amplify listeners' historical imaginations. In other words, the model of HIP-as-(literary) fiction both foregrounds creativity and justifies careful research.

Another, perhaps less obvious, similarity between the two genres is that both understand themselves to be more self-conscious than just-plain Fiction or just-plain Performance. In his survey study *The Historical Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2009), for example, Jerome de Groot writes: 'An historical novel is always a slightly more inflected form than most other types of fiction, the reader of such a work slightly more self-aware of the artificiality of the writing and the strangeness of engaging with imaginary work which strives to explain something that is other than one's contemporary knowledge and experience: the past' (4). Comparably, a number of my Oxford interviewees noted that whereas in many mainstream gigs the expectation was that one just 'played what was on the page', in HIP practice the score was treated much more self-consciously as a historical artefact, and as a stimulant to historically plausible invention rather than a rigid list of instructions. My interlocutors tended to think of this reflectiveness as advantageous, partly because the increased mental work involved led to more inventiveness and often richer musical relationships with colleagues. In short, then, to think of historical fiction as a model for HIP is to find estimable company for an attitude of productive critical distance on one's interpretative choices.

Finally, historical fiction and HIP share a concern with the complicated interplay between the distance conferred by detailed descriptions of the past and the sense of familiarity needed to make a story connect with an audience. This has been an issue for historical fiction since its generally-agreed-upon origins with the works of Sir Walter Scott, starting with *Waverly*, published in 1814. *Waverly* is set in the mid-eighteenth century, only about sixty years before the date of publication, and is based in part on Scott's own conversations with people who had lived through the events in the novel. Scott notes in the preface: 'From this my choice of an era the understanding critic may farther presage that the object of my tale is more a description of men than manners. A tale of manners, to be interesting, must either refer to antiquity so great as to have become venerable, or it must bear a vivid reflection of those scenes which are passing daily before our eyes, and are interesting from their novelty' (*Waverly, or 'Tis Sixty Years Hence*, with introductory essay and notes by Andrew Lamb (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1893), chapter 1: 'Introductory'). I take this latter passage to mean that novelty is charming only when it appears as a new example of a familiar category.



Scott's distinction between 'men' and 'manners' represents the former as instantly recognizable and identifiable-with; a depiction of the 'manners' of a period, in contrast, involves a sense of difference or distance. (*Waverly's* lack of historical distance makes 'manners' a less appealing focus than it would be if it were set centuries rather than decades before the present.) However, Scott suggests that sense of distance, where present, has to be piquant without being alienating; it must include or arouse recognizable elements, whether a well-honed sense of veneration or some easy comparison with the readers' own experiences. This resonates quite directly with some HIP decisions. In his mid-1990s interview with Bernard D. Sherman for the collection *Inside Early Music: Conversations with Performers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 257–274), for example, French Baroque specialist William Christie describes in some detail the necessity of grounding musical inflections in the French language as it was understood in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the same time, he notes that actually using historical pronunciation is a step too far for French listeners: using Scott's framework, Christie might say that deploying old pronunciation would induce neither a sense of veneration nor a charming twist on a familiar formula. Thus he sticks to modern pronunciation to keep his 'men' (that is, the aesthetic-emotional focus of the music) recognizable to modern souls, and their 'manners' (that is, the distinguishable trappings of performance) comfortable enough to modern listeners that they do not alienate those listeners from the human experience being communicated.

Another HIP-related version of this dialectic between familiarity and distance is the shock when a familiar work is presented in radically new historicized performative clothing. Nikolaus Harnoncourt's 1971 recording of the *St Matthew Passion* certainly produced such a shock in both performers and audiences – Harnoncourt himself noted 'it was as if we had never heard the work before' (*The Musical Dialogue: Thoughts on Monteverdi, Bach and Mozart*, trans. Mary O'Neill (Portland, OR: Amadeus, 1997, 75) and for me, hearing it for the first time was one of the cataclysms of my late adolescence. My response (and it was not one universally shared) was that my sense of historical distance – the boys' vibratoless voices, the viscerally entraining perfusion of dance rhythms and the sweet transparency of the sound, all so different from the thick, overwhelming, granitic, constantly vibrated sound I was used to – served to construct a 'Bach' I could relate to: an embodied man embedded in a community, working with fully human resources. In that case the performance 'manners' literally made the man, and my sense of what I took to be historical distance served to create a new familiarity. It was as though Hilary Mantel's historically accurate wallpaper (let's imagine it as endlessly intricate) helped to make sense of her protagonist's convoluted thought processes. Wallpaper is not manners; it can afford to be unpalatable or unrecognizable in a way that manners cannot if you're trying to attach them to sympathetic characters. But even to think about whether historical performance practices are more like wallpaper or manners is to lend a sophistication to the discourse of musical historicity that may be helpful in explaining performance choices to yourself or others.

Historical fiction as an analogue to, or model for, HIP, then, should not be a matter of embarrassment. As Mantel suggests, it is not a construct that simply validates doing whatever you happen to want with any given moment of the music. In addition to being an analogy that might empower and justify creativity, it is also a construct that encourages productive critical distance on our uses of history in performance. Finally, to use historical fiction even as a highly imperfect analogy encourages us to consider the relationship between the alienation that rigorous adherence to past practices might produce and the need for audience-pleasing familiarity. I am not in any way saying that HIP performers do not already consider these things in a variety of ways, nor that many do not embrace their own creativity and agency. They certainly do not need musicological 'permission' to do so. But I hope I have suggested that historical fiction as a model might provide a fruitful discourse to frame certain performance choices, particularly when they go beyond obvious historical plausibility. (The increasingly common moniker 'historically inspired performance' seems to suggest that this more frankly imaginative use of history is already well embedded in some subcultures of the HIP world.) I would also like to have suggested that, as a musicologist, one's role might happily move beyond the dispensations of 'facts' to something both more speculative and more collaborative. If in its day 'authenticity' was used or received as a musicological yardstick by which performers could be judged to have



succeeded or failed – implicitly setting up a hierarchy between musicology and performance that was to no-one's credit – perhaps 'fiction' as a model offers more possibilities for non-hierarchical but none the less productive discussions between the different branches of our shared discipline.

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