

Chapter five: confessions of a practitioner

This chapter is my attempt to inscribe what I have found lacking in other studies of music. That is, to write of my attitudes to the performance of baroque music in a way that allows creativity, sensuality and imagination pose serious threats to conventional reason. It has struck me again and again in my reading and thinking, that finding words for the glory, the obsession, the emotion-drenched messiness and inconstancy of artistic pursuits, does not sit comfortably within the scope of accepted academia, certainly not within the language of early music. Until what it is to be a scholar is redefined in my field and what it is to be a performer is reassessed, I wish to dissociate myself with these notions. I want to play and here, to write as an artist, paying my respects to early music as it stands, but ultimately departing from its bounds.

In reading the sentences of many eloquent musicologists and in wrestling with the words in this and other sections of my thesis, it has become clear to me that to find a means to convey the qualities of sound requires technical virtuosity. Adrienne Rich, Jeanette Winterson and Milan Kundera pass their days spinning poetry and prose. They have channelled their lives into developing a language fine and flexible enough to define existence; I have tried to do the same with the sounds of my recorders. When they write of how and why artists create, they do so with an urgency that resonates with my own.

I believe that spending years making sound develops distinct sensibilities. I consider it is important to learn to verbalise these. I do this as a key to my own survival – a touchstone of “why” on days it is less clear, a way of unravelling the knots in my head in order to discover their interlocking patterns. I write too because I believe that the pursuit of early music in the early twenty-first century, whilst increasingly lucrative – now an almost financially sustainable skill in some parts of the world – has reached a stalemate. I hope that my writing may encourage new exploration in a field that has survived thus far by doggedly separating itself from the mainstream and ruthlessly quelling differences from within.

Yet I am not a writer. And this, I suspect, would be the cry of most of my colleagues. Our medium is sound, not words. Nevertheless, without an attempt to put words on our ideas, we as performers condemn ourselves to perpetual erasure in writings on music, relinquish the chance to shape the way people hear, respond to and understand music.

Milan Kundera and *The Art of the Novel*

What does Cervantes' great novel mean? Much has been written on the question. Some see in it a rationalist critique of Don Quixote's hazy idealism. Others see it as a celebration of that same idealism. Both interpretations are mistaken because they both seek at the novel's core not an inquiry but a moral position [...]. They can cope with the novel only by translating its language of relativity and ambiguity into their own apodictic and dogmatic discourse [...]. This 'either-or' encapsulates an inability to tolerate the essential relativity of things human [...]. This inability makes the novel's wisdom (the wisdom of uncertainty) hard to accept and understand.¹

Art involves uncertainty, interminable question-asking. The artist carries out inquiries with finely-honed, exacting tools and the sureness of his/her technique allows the creation of a work that is ambiguous and multi-layered. It resists description and definition, reaches out to an infinite number of possible meanings, all relative to the listener/viewer/reader, all questioning and questionable. Art "means" what you want it to mean and therein lies its power.

If the writer considers a historical situation a fresh and revealing possibility of the human world, he will want to describe it as it is. Still, fidelity to historical reality is a secondary matter as regards the value of the novel. The novelist is neither historian nor prophet: he is an explorer of existence.²

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) 7.

² *Ibid.*, 44.

Those who, in the spirit of Broch, declare knowledge to be the novel's sole morality are betrayed by the metallic aura of "knowledge," a word too much compromised by its link with the sciences. So we have to add: whatever aspects of existence the novel discovers, it discovers as the beautiful. [...] Beauty in art: the suddenly kindled light of the never-before-said.³

Historical verisimilitude is only one of the possibilities available to an artist exploring existence. Art invites paradoxes, possibilities rather than realities. The acceptance of a stingily-imagined concept of knowledge as the sole morality of art means a denial of not just beauty, but uncertainty, exploration, potentiality. Fidelity to this "metallic aura" has been allowed to dominate the writings and performances of early music.

Jeanette Winterson's *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*

If truth is that which lasts, then art has proved truer than any other human endeavour. What is certain is that pictures and poetry and music are not only marks in time but mark through time, of their own time and ours, not antique or historical, but living as they ever did, exuberantly, untired.⁴

Our "evidence" for the performance of baroque music comes from multiple sources: theoretical writings, practical "how to play" manuals for amateurs, literary descriptions of players and their performances, iconographic sources, philosophical statements on the moral value of art etc., etc. These invaluable fragments help us to frame our music-making within what we imagine to be historical concerns and priorities. Our pursuit of them acknowledges that a piece written in the seventeenth or eighteenth century is in part at least, a mark *in* time.

But the *performance* of this piece is a mark *through* time, the act of creating music in a concert situation one of living, ebullient celebration. The exchange between a person and artwork is indisputably dependent on *this* time and *this* place. Musical sonorities only exist

³ Ibid., 122-23.

⁴ Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Vintage, 1996), epigraph.

through performance, and the notes on the page are unavoidably “mediated” by the performer. The sound of these notes is dependent on the artistic priorities of the player, the acoustic properties of his/her physical body, the space in which s/he plays, and countless other factors. This sound is in turn received and processed according to the desires, biases and tastes of the listener. There is nothing objective or historical about this act of communication – every stage is subject to interpretation.

I do not think it possible (or moral) to write a book that is made to affect others without being affected oneself. I did not put my life into *Art & Lies*, as people commonly understand the artist at work, but I have put *Art & Lies* into my life. The question “How shall I live?” had to be addressed to myself.⁵

The writer will have to make her words into a true equivalent of her heart.⁶

Any act of creation is a subjective, idiosyncratic one. The subject of a work may not map directly back onto the life of its creator, but the two are related. Perhaps one is a distilled version of the other. In order to move, one must be moved, one must want to be moved, be able to be moved.

Adrienne Rich’s *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*

What does a poet need to know?

- That poetry can occur, not just as a fierce, precarious charge in the imagination, or an almost physical wave of desire, but as something written down, that remains, so regardless of circumstance you can turn back to that fierce charge, that desire.
- [...]
- That this in itself can be a means of saving your life.
- That this itself can be an activity of keenest joy.

⁵ Ibid., 160.

⁶ Ibid., 115.

- That no culture, language, caste can claim superiority; across enormous social, geographic tracts, poetry lifts its head and looks you in the eye.
- [...]
- That to mis-take, to mis-prize, your own life and its landscapes, to imagine that poetry belongs by right to others (of another culture, gender, class, century) and not to you, means falling – if not into silence – into language others found in struggle with their own conditions. Then you become a mouthpiece for the lives of others, you inhabit their rhythms, their vocabularies, you lose track of your own desire in an adopted style.⁷

You must write, and read, as if your life depended on it. That is not generally taught in school. [...]

To read as if your life depended on it would mean to let into your reading your beliefs, the swirl of your dreamlife, the physical sensations of your ordinary carnal life; and, simultaneously, to allow what you're reading to pierce the routines, safe and impermeable, in which ordinary carnal life is tracked, charted, channeled. [...]

To write as if your life depended on it: to write across the chalkboard, putting up there in public words you have dredged, sieved up from your dreams, from behind screen memories, out of silence – words you have dreaded and needed in order to know you exist.⁸

These words moved me to tears. They are among the most enlightening and humanising, most directly relevant sources I have. They describe the searching, questing nature of my days, they define in lofty and stirring terms the aims, objectives and possible outcomes of my pursuit. They confirm my instinct that the raw materials with which an artist begins can be drawn from across the world, and that the process of making them into something

⁷ Adrienne Rich, "To Invent What We Desire," *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (London: Virago, 1993) 214-16.

⁸ Adrienne Rich, "As If Your Life Depended On It," *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (London: Virago, 1993) 32-33.

meaningful is personal, painstaking, savagely disciplined. They and I both seek to elucidate – even obliquely – a larger picture of connecting patterns in our art.

Genevieve Lacey

I play the recorder. In my early-music life – as distinct from my new-music life where the contexts are quite different – I generally play with harpsichord/organ continuo, or with period-instrument orchestras. I realise that playing Vivaldi with musicians using gut-strings at 415 pitch is far from radical: it hardly shifts early twenty-first century concepts of art. I love the sound of these instruments and this repertoire.

I have great respect for many of the things that twentieth-century early-music musicology has taught me. Without it, much of the musical fabric of my days would not exist. So why is it that the early-music world pains me to the extent that I come close to disowning it?

How do I play?

I like to create a warm, endlessly malleable sound. Many of my recorder-playing colleagues believe that the recorder is an essentially inexpressive instrument, limited much like an organ pipe by its ability to be only on or off. I have been told that recorders are not capable of any dynamic or emotional range, and that to strive for either is to deny the fundamental nature of the instrument. My response to this is that if you begin with the premise that your instrument is little and limited, you can quickly prove your theory. If you presume that its potential is boundless, limited only by your own lack of skill or courage, then you have a life's work ahead of you.

I have a very flexible sense of pulse. My heartbeat is not regular, emotional highs and lows influence my sense of time, quicken or deaden my internal rhythms. Many Early Musickers believe that there is historical proof showing that the tempo established at the start of a piece ought to be immutable. They refer to mathematics and perfect proportions. I have been brought up thinking that any musical decisions I make in performance should be based

on historical evidence. Despite refusing to privilege this model in my preparation and performance, I still feel the ghosts of twentieth-century guardians of historical music as a pristine site occasionally looking over my shoulder, sternly asking me to justify my creative practices. So if this is a historical argument, my response is to suggest that if the art of rhetorical persuasion is as important to baroque music as we believe it to be, then the concept of an orator delivering every sentence of his speech at the one speed, in the same tone of voice, and without allowing any silences at the end of significant points is hardly credible. If we move our discussion out of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, then I refer again to the physical and emotional inconstancy of a human body, which I take pleasure in celebrating.

I like to play “by heart.” This demands that I am completely engaged in the moment and that the sound that I make comes directly out of me, unmediated by reference to a fixed, written document. I have been told this practice is historically inappropriate, and serves only to highlight my own presence in the music – a highly undesirable attribute in an environment where the music is meant to speak for itself.

I have a ferocious commitment to technique. I hate to have my imagination curbed by my fingers or tongue. I spend hours away from my instrument dreaming its possibilities. I spend even more hours finding them physically, chiselling away at stubborn habits of the body to forge and refine ideas in sound. My most intense connection with music comes through my sensory experiences of hours of sonic immersion. I believe that experimenting with the physical possibilities of my instrument can teach me a great deal about the music I play. The sensibilities and skills I have developed in conjunction with my recorders are the primary influence on the way I experience, hear, think and write about music.

I am an extremist in all things and my perception of baroque music suggests that the emotional life of a great deal of this music is not so far-removed from my own. I like to play my instrument and my self to their limits. Western Classical musicians are educated to be obsessed with ideals of perfection (standardisation), accuracy (lack of risk-taking), repetition (lack of spontaneity), conformity (little improvisation). I try to remind myself

that technical virtues are not ends in themselves, that clinical perfection – elevated to the status of art and honoured by our recording industry – is just one way of expressing an idea. I try to spend time with people and art celebrating rough edges, gravity, reality, frail and vulnerable, passionate, turbulent humanity. I am so moved by artists prepared to take themselves beyond their techniques in a public place, prepared to acknowledge that some things cannot be said in a cultivated, controlled voice.

For me, life and art are inextricably linked. There is a myth that says that one must suffer to be an artist. I think this is only half the story. It could be just as true to say that in order to create, one must know ecstasy. I believe that any creative person needs to have intimate insight into both these wild places. For me, striving to reach the boundaries of human existence in order to challenge definitions of who we are, and to imagine who we might become, is the essence of art.

What do I play?

I have included a recording as an appendix to my thesis. All the pieces on it are performed with the harpsichordist/organist, Linda Kent, and for the Vivaldi concerto, she and I are joined by members of the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra. All the cuts are unedited – there are no “cleaned-up” versions of the way I play.

I begin with a lament – *Lady Ann Bothwell's Lament*. Geminiani took a selection of Scottish folk songs and added a figured bass to them in the back of his treatise on ornamentation for the violin. The melodies are pure folk – haunting, uncontained by notation. I play them on a Ganassi recorder, historically incorrect, but the closest thing to a pipe that I have. I observe Geminiani's ornaments, but I also add others that I have learnt from listening to pipers and folk singers. There is one in particular that perhaps Geminiani never heard, or perhaps could not write. It sounds like a catch in someone's throat. It is a pitiful sound, and makes the grief of a lament excruciatingly real.

Linda and I took away the bass line for the start of this piece to make our rendition stark and unadorned. To our ears, Geminiani's straightening of the melody and rhythm in order to make it fit within eighteenth-century language sounded contrived, like an attempt to make folk music into stiff baroquisms. We begin with a drone, and gradually transform this into his bass line before moving finally into "real" continuo playing.

Next on the recording is some Bach: the first two movements from his *Sonate BWV 1023*. The *Prelude* is an unfolding of chords, which I cannot play "straight" as it entails such movement to and from magnetic poles. It is notated as an endless stream of semiquavers, but a recorder player needs to breathe. The harmony's logic is broken once or twice by shocking shifts, so my breath elongates into a silence to underline these moments.

We used a harpsichord to trace the anguished longings of the *Adagio ma non tanto*, despite having begun the sonata on the organ. There are no historical sources to verify this practice, but I cannot believe that eighteenth-century players sensitive to colour did not experiment with similar possibilities. This piece is originally written for the violin; fortunately recorder players have a long and distinguished history as pirates. Baroque composers, it seems, were well aware of this phenomenon, and certainly, baroque players performed and published arrangements and transcriptions of countless works not originally written for the instrument.

Instrumentation aside, our interpretation of this second movement is characterised by the kind of expressive rubato I referred to earlier. We use it to inflect certain moments and to make it clear where sentences begin and end.

Marini's *Sonata terza "variata"* follows our Bach. This reading is clearly divergent from the notated score. The sonata is written for violin and continuo. Here, the solo line is performed by both recorder and violin. We presented this work in concert with the violinist Elizabeth Wallfisch. Both she and I knew and loved this piece, so we decided to make a version of it where we both could play. The piece is characterised by sharply delineated sections, which seem to be spoken by different voices, and even within segments, the line is

in constant dialogue with itself. Our division of the one part into two brings out the drama of voices, allows each player to do what fits best on her instrument.

We are driven here by the thought of Marini as a radical, aligned with a turn-of-the-seventeenth-century group whose art shocked. This music is declamatory, dramatic and gives voice to disturbing excess. It spits and sighs with emotions that take time to articulate or cascade out in an unrestrained rush.

Finally, there is a Vivaldi concerto: RV 444. I decided to play this piece on a treble recorder – nobody is entirely sure what a “flautino” is, but the general consensus is that it was probably a sopranino. To my ears, the sound of a sopranino is unbearably shrill, so I chose an instrument that sits amidst the orchestra and is more capable of singing. We used single strings to avoid any balance problems, surrounded by a fantastic array of continuo instruments – two harpsichords, organ, two theorbos, and harp. This way, we have an infinite range of colours to play with and enough body that we avoid sounding like an anaemic early-music band.

Vivaldi does not specify this exact instrumentation, but he uses permutations of it in all sorts of other scores. In the second movement, we decided all the strings apart from the first violin would play pizzicato to give the movement an icy fragility over which the recorder could float. That is not in the score either.

For me, this music is opera – larger-than-life theatre played out in vibrant colours. And amidst the drama there are moments that need special attention. So sometimes we bend the pulse, stretch it, push it in order to bark out a syllable, dwell on a word, make a grander entrance, create a sudden swish of movement. I like that you can hear us playing to the edges of our instruments – you can hear my tongue giving a note an edge, hair touching gut, the pluck of a theorbo, jacks releasing on the harpsichord.

Given that I am so present in these interpretations of baroque music, it is clear that the realisation of my concepts of performance practice send shudders through Early Musickers

committed to more contained modes of playing. My performances involve careful research – my processes are probably similar to those of musicologists piecing together fragments to form a mosaic. It is just that my mosaic is made of different stuff.

I learn baroque performance practice by rumour – putting together conversations caught in cafés, phrases tossed out in masterclasses, lines read in contemporary novels, stories told by friends, ideas from contemporary literary theories, scenes from a film. And I like to play with the force and frailty of my body, the colours and fancies of my dreams, a strong bodily presence, a sound that comes direct from my passions and my flesh.

Postlude

I have often felt lonely reading books of musicology. As someone fiercely impassioned about music, grappling daily with its visceral presence in my life, it can be quite alienating to read scholarly articles and studies. Edifying, but estranging.

I have been reading books for as long as I can remember. The houses I grew up in were littered with them and our lives were filled with words. Words were a means to express ideas, articulate emotions, capture dreams. Words for me are strangely tangible, highly emotionally charged. I can feel their temperature, sense their weight and taste them in my mouth.

Encounters with people's words have been among the most intense epiphanies in my life. Books have allowed an escape into depths of myself that I can not reach alone, and a bridge out of myself into minds and lives beyond mine. I believe fervently that sentences can change the way you understand yourself and the world. I believe music has this same revelatory power.

A writer's use of language betrays much about his/her relationship with his/her subject. The topic of my thesis involves *attitudes* to the performance of baroque music. Writers reveal their attitudes not just in their subject matter – what is deemed worthy of research and discussion and what is not – but in their tone of voice, their choice of words. When a writer constructs impeccably proper, careful sentences to form a lucid argument dependent on masking his/her own presence and insisting on historical music as something that belongs in a carefully-controlled environment, it says reams about how s/he hears and thinks. When someone calls performance an “extreme occasion,” writes out of a palpable anger, uses “I” in his/her prose, has an ear for the sound of words and sits little breathless sentences up against long, meandering ones, s/he also discloses a great deal – perhaps not about formal fact, but about the implications of facts on people's lives.

As I have read through great tracts of literature traversing the domain of early music, I have seldom encountered the voice of a performer. It seems practising musicians do not often write within the arenas that are set up and approved by institutions and academia. Mine is a practice that involves faith as well as reason, and faith, it seems, is hard to write about. There are people within these spheres who write with sympathy for performers, but they do not write asserting a distinctive performer-ness. Certainly they are musicians. They write about music. Sometimes they play it. But their writing is not born out of days and nights with their hands wrapped around their instruments.

bell hooks reminds me that any thinking artist has a responsibility to address the silences in his/her field. The written ideas and experiences of those not customarily represented in literature help to develop alternate bodies of thought, which challenge accepted forms of knowledge and expand value systems. Writings of difference help create communities between people who have been fringe dwellers, who have felt isolated and slightly insane in the peculiarity of their views. hooks maintains that a withdrawal from the written world into “pure” arts practice is politically debilitating. I see her point. This thesis then, voices the thoughts of a contemporary musician who makes her life playing old music and who has a passion for words: words and music both and their ability to shape our lives.