

Would Bach be Hip with HIPPP?

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WRITER'S COMMENT: The choice of topic for this paper came out of a very, very broad list of possible topics in Professor Jeffrey Thomas's History of Johann Sebastian Bach class. Initially, I was drawn to the performance practice difficulties faced by performers of Bach (that is, the challenge in choosing certain details of how to play a piece). This was far too vague a topic, however. My investigative research then led me to a disturbing trend: big-name orchestras had a history of being shamed out of performing Bach's music by performance practice critics. It was then that I knew I'd found my topic. In this essay, I examine the tradition of Historically Informed Performance Practice, and I compare that set of views to the way that Bach approached his own music and the music of his contemporaries.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Johann Sebastian Bach is almost certainly the most well known composer of any previous era. His music appeals to a vast audience and seems especially appreciated by those who work in the sciences, perhaps due to its reliance on complex systems of harmonic theory, form, and process. The undergraduate seminar, "Topics in Music History: Johann Sebastian Bach," addresses the challenge of studying an enormous body of work by the composer, about whom probably more exhaustive research has been published than for any other composer. One particular area of both musicological and practical research that has emerged powerfully over the last half century is that of Historically Informed Performance Practice ("HIPPP") which enlightens us about the instruments and stylistic performance aesthetics of the era in which a musical work was composed, thereby

providing a mechanism for us, as the audience, to actually hear the sounds as they were heard and imagined by their composers. Jordan Henderson's essay, a self-chosen topic guided by a list of suggestions, addresses the phenomenon of HIPP, its supporters and detractors, and its viability as a new standard for modern performance. As his professor, I was particularly pleased to read that his approach to the subject matter presented an engaging tone directed as much to those experienced with the thesis as to those who might be reading about HIPP for the first time.

– Jeffrey Thomas, Department of Music

What did Bach's music sound like to Bach? It may seem a rhetorical question, but a world of sonic difference exists between contemporary listeners and the great master himself. Given two hundred and fifty years of musical innovation, many aural discrepancies lie between the musical worlds of the modern day and the Baroque eras. This separation of listening experience is exactly what Historically Informed Performance Practice (HIPP) strives to correct.

The goals of this movement center on the performance of classical works as their composers imagined them, and as they would have heard them; this requires that performers use period-accurate instruments, ensembles, and interpretations of written music. But as with any movement in the arts, there eventually arose critics who disagreed with HIPP. Scholars like Richard Taruskin claim that truly authentic renderings of these works are an impossibility. Moreover, these scholars argue that creating technically precise renderings (for example, taking great pains to use historically accurate instruments and techniques) might actually work against creating an aesthetically authentic performance. Finally, they are concerned that the emphasis on these practices can put certain musical works out of reach for ensembles that do not follow them. Despite this, HIPP remains our most tangible way to experience the works of older composers most closely to the way they imagined them. We must be mindful, however, that this desire for an authentic listening experience does not preclude the performance of these works in other styles.

Historically Informed Performance Practice began with the work of Arnold Dolmetsch in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The French-

born instrument maker and educator worked in England, where in 1893 he reconstructed his first lute. He went on to produce harpsichords, clavichords, and recorders (all instruments that had fallen out of common use many years prior). His book, *The Interpretation of the Music of the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries*, was published in 1915 (Lynch). By the 1920s, others had taken up the early music revival in other European countries as well, but it was not until the end of the Second World War that HIPP would blossom.

As the idea of reviving earlier compositions began to pick up speed throughout the latter half of the 20th century, a new concept emerged: the primacy of the composer's intent in the performance of a piece of music. It stemmed from several sources at the time period, but most notably the concept of compositions as consummate musical "works" (Sherman). If a composition is a complete and finished work, then nothing should be added or taken away from it. Rather, it should be reproduced exactly as the composer had originally conceived it. If, then, the goal is accurate reproduction, all possible factors relating to sonic output must be taken into account. Perhaps most notable in these considerations are the differences between modern and period instruments.

The desire to use period-accurate instruments began with Dolmetsch and his reconstructions. Older instruments have different sonic qualities than modern ones, and this makes them desirable for HIPP. In addition, changes in the design of these instruments have altered things like the natural way of playing particular articulations or passages. Newer instruments are also generally easier to play than older ones. The improvement of instruments caused composers to write more difficult passages to tax these instruments to their limits. This created a cycle — instrument makers producing better instruments, and composers writing more difficult music to stretch the new capabilities of the instruments. This moved them functionally farther and farther from their historical counterparts (*American Bach Soloists*). As such, playing early music with modern instruments does not provide the player a historically accurate performing experience. This affects the ultimate musical result. Since members of the HIPP movement support replicating the entire musical experience, the use of period instruments is essential. By combining a desire to properly replicate early music with reconstructed period-accurate instruments, the HIPP movement has changed the way we experience it.

This devotion to authenticity hasn't stopped some scholars from questioning the validity of this approach; perhaps most vocal of the movement's critics is musicologist Richard Taruskin. He's not alone in his critiques, as others have echoed a number of his arguments. Scholars like Charles Rosen and John Butt have raised some important questions: How important is recreating the literal sounds of a piece of early music (Rosen)? Is that the truest reflection of the composer's intent (Butt)? And is true authenticity even possible (Sherman)? In many cases, our "period-accurate" instruments are only our best attempts at recreating ancient designs. And because we have no recordings from the period to compare them to, we will never truly know if our recreation attempts were successful (*American Bach Soloists*).

Another roadblock to authenticity lies in the experience and mindset of the listener. The audiences of Bach had never heard anything like the richer harmonies of later composers like Brahms, Hindemith, and Stravinsky— not to mention non-musical sounds like airplanes or car horns (Fogel). Thus, even Bach's most musically adventurous moments pass through the contemporary ear without so much as a second thought. So, even if the technical reproduction of an early music work was totally accurate, we as listeners could not experience that music the way the audience did when it was first performed. In addition, modern audiences often attend concerts of older music (especially sacred music) for very different reasons than people attended the original performances; the experiences and mindset of a concertgoer in the 21st century United States versus a congregant at a worship service in 18th century Germany are two very different things (Sherman).

Scholars who agree with Taruskin have another important question: Is it even desirable to recreate early music in a historically authentic way? One argument in this line of thinking is whether period-accurate performances are any more meaningful than modern ones. Another, raised by Charles Rosen, suggests that attempting to recreate the literal *sounds* that were heard would not be the truest reflection of the composer's intention. Instead, Rosen suggests that the conception of music as a combination of precisely reproduced sounds is actually a modern idea. Finally, Taruskin suggests that the performer's duty is to the modern audience, not a long-dead composer (Sherman). Some contemporary early music critics, however, do not share this view.

Negative critical reception of “inauthentic” early music performances have been a major factor in coaxing some of the world’s best conductors and ensembles away from the music of Bach, Handel, and Mozart, among others (Fogel). Monica Huggett, Baroque violinist, has said that “...the big orchestras stopped playing Bach because in the end ... people didn’t really want to hear it any more.” (“Does Bach Need ‘Rescuing’...”). Some of these orchestras have recently pushed back against this negativity by hosting music festivals celebrating the music of these composers. This included a 2013 Bach festival by the New York Philharmonic, with the stated goal being to reclaim the music of earlier composers for the modern orchestra (“Does Bach Need ‘Rescuing’...”). With this in mind, it’s easy to agree with HIPP detractors: fear of critical backlash should not prevent performances of the music Bach (or Mozart, or Handel). But this indicates an excessive adherence to history and tradition, for no adequate benefit.

The concerns of those who oppose HIPP are valuable of course, but they should not discourage historical performances. Instead, we should use HIPP for the tool that it is. It gives us a unique perspective on (and understanding of) early music. HIPP allows the 21st century listener to experience this music more closely to the way the composer did. By combining this with an understanding of the sociohistorical context of a work (for example, the general religious beliefs of a particular region at a particular time), we are afforded a window into another period of musical history. But, this should not exclude us from pursuing other, more modern interpretations of these works. New interpretations of classics can only add value to them.

For example, Leopold Stokowski’s orchestration of Bach’s “Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor” (featured in the 1940 film *Fantasia*) added timbral depth to the work that Bach couldn’t possibly have achieved in his time—he hadn’t the advantage of the Romantic era’s expansion of the orchestra and development of its instruments. In a similar way, The Swingle Singers, with their fusion of jazz elements and famous Bach works have enhanced contemporary appreciation and understanding of these classics. Of particular note is the group’s rendition of the composer’s “Great” Fugue in G Minor. Finally, Wendy Carlos’s album *Switched on Bach* (including renditions of famous compositions like “Prelude and Fugue no. 7” and “Brandenburg Concerto no. 3”) brought baroque

music and the synthesizer together in a harmonious blend of the great master's music with the latest in musical instrument technology.

It would be very challenging indeed for proponents of HIPP to argue that Baroque composers would have fought against such reinterpretations. Bach, in particular, freely used the works of other composers. His Concerto in A Minor for 4 Harpsichords, BWV 1064, for example, is essentially a direct transcription of the Concerto for 4 Violins by Antonio Vivaldi. He also made use of then-new forms and styles (such as Italian-style arias and recitatives in his cantatas), while at the same time utilizing out-of-fashion instruments (like those from the viol family). The combination of the old with the new was welcomed by Bach and his contemporaries, and so it should not frighten the modern performer to combine the "old" Bach with the "new" instrument, harmony, or orchestration. Far from detracting from a composition, using this synthesis of ideas can only result in the increased relevancy of these masterworks.

The truth is, we may never know how Bach's music sounded to him. But many performers, historians, and musicologists are working diligently to find out. Historically Informed Performance Practice has brought us closer to that reality. We may never achieve an absolutely authentic rendering of historical works, but that should not stop us trying. However, neither should we obstruct the reworking of this music using modern technology or techniques. We can only add relevancy and artistic value by keeping these works up to date with current technology and performance practice. Bach would undoubtedly have done the same.

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