Early Music – Earlier and Later

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I was asked to talk about my own career in early music and my own thoughts about the movement, 'past present and future', and I felt that I should also reflect on NEMA at this somewhat critical point in its existence. The two subjects do, in fact, interact, as we shall see while meandering along. It will be somewhat meandering because, like many people I have been in and out of early music, mediæval one day and the Strand Corner House the next (I played in the gypsy band there a couple of times – one of the great advantages of being a drummer is that you play everything and anything).

But I started in early music way back round 1950. Difficult to remember what came first. Was it the ancestor of my own instrument (I was a horn player as second study to conducting), feeling that what Mozart and Beethoven were writing for wasn't this thing I was playing, or was it when conducting Vivaldi and Bach with all those slurs and hairpins? The conservatories in those days had no classes in editing or anything like that; none of the staff ever mentioned *Urtext* or such; you played what was on the paper. They did invite Fritz Rothschild to come and talk about *The Lost Tradition in Music*, and it remained a standing joke for weeks thereafter.

I found a handhorn in a music shop in Wisbech when I was touring during the 1951 Festival of Britain. That, thanks to Eric Halfpenny, led to an introduction to Morley-Pegge, and I shall never forget sitting in his bedroom in his flat in Hall Road while he played a written C major scale, from middle C up, with not the slightest difference of tone or volume between the open and stopped notes. Eric also talked me into joining the Galpin Society, where I eventually followed him as Honorary Secretary from the mid-60s.

Conducting wasn't far behind. It was a string orchestra because that was cheaper, and we divided the programmes between ancient and modern (there's not much for strings in between!), starting with Vivaldi, Handel, or whatever else of that sort of period, and often finishing with a first performance as one way of attracting the critics and reviews. People wanted to know why the hell I was wasting money putting a harpsichord, which nobody ever heard, on the platform, and paying a continuo player.

Of course we learned as we went along. I remember saying to Walter Emery after a concert that included a Vivaldi concerto with a particularly beautiful sequence of chords and nothing else for a slow movement that it had sounded like an accompaniment. 'Yes', he said. 'What to?' I asked. 'You write it,' he replied. People in those days hadn't acquired the idea of improvising such things on the spot; they didn't even know which way up to play a trill, and I had long arguments with Norman Del Mar, my conducting teacher, about the trills in the slow movement of Brandenburg 6. I remember, too, writing out a slow movement for Brandenburg 4, following Tovey's advice, but with a short movement from a violin sonata that ends with the right chords.

We played then on modern instruments, because there wasn't any alternative, though about the time I stopped putting on my own concerts, because I started to breed children and ran out of money, Bob Dart and Sid Humphreys began to use Dolmetsch bows on modern fiddles as a tolerable compromise, something Robert Donington recommended as a first step. At least we were cleaning up the parts. No Tippex in those days but one could get white ink and write over all the Breitkopf & Härtel and Ricordi slurs, bowings, and hairpins, or one could scrape them out with a sharp knife – took hours and hours, and of course one could only do it if one bought the parts. It wasn't something that Goodwin & Tabb liked on hire parts.

But this was earlyish, rather than early. We did try, we altered note values, we graced cadences, we used continuo as I said (Julian Bream once played lute continuo for the concertino while Jane Clark, who taught me so much in those days, played harpsichord continuo for the ripieno on the Fenton House single-manual Shudi – one could hire that for a concert in those days), and we did our best.

I became convinced, and I'm still sure of this, that when a German or English composer took the trouble to title a movement in French, he expected it to be played in French. A minuet might be played straight, a minuetto ornamented in Italian style, but a menuet, and many other French pieces, should be played in French style.

It was through the Galpin Society that I really got enmeshed, and because the Galpin members played their instruments, that I came to realise that it was the sound of the music that came first. After all, music is sound (that's about the only definition of music on which everyone can agree) and if you're trying to perform it the first

thing to do is to try to get the sound right. If the sound's right, the music **may** be right – if the sound's wrong, the music **can't** be right. There's plenty of modern music nowadays where the sound's all that matters – I remember one concert for brass and percussion where as we came off the platform one trumpeter said to the other 'that was a B ♭ part wasn't it? and his mate said 'Was it? I was playing in C.' but the composer was happy as the sound was right and neither he nor the conductor had even noticed, either then or at rehearsal, that one part was a tone out all the way. Still, that wasn't early music. One advantage of first performances was that you could get away with murder – nobody knew the difference.

It was at a Galpin meeting that Michael Morrow said 'Can I give you a leaflet for this concert by our new mediæval ensemble?' I asked him 'Who's your percussion player?' and I played that concert in Fenton House on a pair of jazz tom-toms for nakers, a side drum for tabor, a modern tambourine and so forth. It didn't seem right. There was John Sothcott on recorder, Michael on lute, Daphne Webb on viol, I can't remember what John Beckett played other than harpsichord, and me on the modern drums.

So I decided to investigate. I looked at mediæval manuscripts and carvings [**Advertisement:** Have you all seen Gwen's and my recent book, *Minstrels and Angels*?], and then made things that looked like what the angels played. Of course no mediæval drums survive so one could only hope that they might sound something like the originals, but drummers get pretty experienced at making odd bits of kit (Jimmy Blades made me a tubular bell for my first pantomime – you can't play Cinderella without a bell), and one gets to know how an instrument's likely to work and what it's going to sound like when you see it. I was part of Musica Reservata from then on. We had pretty staid ideas in modern terms, but they worked.

We believed, and I still believe, that dance music, as most of the surviving instrumental music is, should be played as dance music, and we believed that dancers weren't so different in the Middle Ages from what they were at the end of the 1950s. What was needed was strict tempo, as Victor Silvester proved, and solid rhythms. It was a belief for which there is no evidence save for experience as a musician who's played for dancers (not enough of our modern early music players have ever sat in a dance band) but it is a belief confirmed to the hilt by Thoinot Arbeau in 1588. Can

one project his statements back two or three hundred years to the Middle Ages? Up to each of us to decide, but I know what I believe. After all, you can still hear his unvarying, repetitive, rock-steady beat in any Viennese waltz and in any Latin American dance band. If you could hear dance band drummers playing his rhythms in 1888 and 1988, why not in 1488, 1388, and 1288? Dancers still need to know which is the first beat of the bar, hence Strauss's unvarying um–cha–cha, um–cha–cha and Arbeau's dun–ta–ta–ta–ta dun–ta–ta–ta–ta – it's just two different ways of doing the same job. Trouble is that it doesn't sound flashy and with-it, and that's what sells today.

When Musica Reservata hit the major concert halls, it made quite a stir. Up to then mediæval music had been a bit quiet; most performers had started in madrigals and went on that way with a dash of country tea-rooms. Our very direct approach was a bit different. I suppose not many remember us now – our last concerts were over twenty years ago – but our drive and hard rhythms, often hard tone, were then very new. Michael Morrow had very firm ideas and he took what little evidence there is very seriously. We know what many of the instruments sounded like, so that's the sound we made, both instrumentally and vocally. We can normally see not more than one or two players in the pictures and carvings (leaving aside the psalm illustrations), so we kept away from the musical toyshop and the mediæval big band. We might use different instruments in two different pieces, but we never swapped instruments around from verse to verse like confetti, as some bands do today.

What I've told you so far, about sums up my career as an early music performer. Of course Reservata wasn't the only early music group I played with, I was playing early timpani, too, and I wasn't only involved in early music – I've played in orchestras of all sorts. I can even tell my grandchildren that I was the first person to play under a conductor in the Festival Hall. Each of the schools of music played a concert as part of the series of acoustic tests. The Guildhall did the first one. In those days every concert began with the Queen (the King then), and who rolls her up? The side drummer – Me. Later l was Beecham's number one spare, the first they called in for an extra. He was a bit different from the rest.

But one thing led to another. I've never believed in keeping secrets from other players, so I published what I'd learned and guessed about early percussion, initially

in the Galpin Journal.[i] That started other players, pre-eminently Paul Williamson who came to me to ask why his big tabor didn't sound like mine. He went on to make all sorts of mediæval percussion far better than I did, and I used his instruments rather than my own except for the big tabor, which he never made commercially, and the tambourine because I preferred the sound of my hammer-beaten jingles to those of his cast ones which I thought were too heavy and too bell-like.

A few years later John Thomson asked Jimmy Blades and me to write a couple of books on early percussion; we had already done a joint article for him in the second issue of *Early Music*, and before that I'd written the mediæval chapter for Jimmy for his big book and my own *World of Medieval and Renaissance Musical Instruments*.[ii] Jimmy's and mine were number 2 and number 3 in the OUP Early Music Series – Howard Brown's *Embellishing* was number 1, and they all came out together in 1976, the year after FoMRHI began. FoMRHI had been Eph Segerman's idea, but he talked me into dog's-bodying it for him. It was the following year that Howard chaired that big conference on "The Future of Early Music in Britain", which had been convened by Tony Rooley.

It was that conference which led to the foundation of NEMA. It was another of John Thomson's ideas, wasn't it, *Early Music*, NEMA, the Forums; we owe him a lot. Once NEMA began, it took over Chris Monk's and Carl Willetts's *Register of Early Music*, which became our *Yearbook*. That's, with all due deference to all those present who have written articles in our other publications, certainly NEMA's most important production and it is the one thing that must continue, whatever we may decide is going to happen to NEMA, today. We must hope, too, that if someone else is going to run it, whoever takes it over isn't going to go too commercial on it. It's not something we can do without, and it has always been affordable, free to members (and our subscription has never been one to break the bank) and cheap enough for non-members to buy if they don't have the sense to join us. It's also one of the things that links the Fora.

When I was planning this meander, I thought I'd look back on NEMA's history as well as my own. I thought I remembered the days when it began, all those meetings John called at Ely House, discussions for what it would do, how it would do it and all that, a constitution being argued back and forth, I seem to remember drafted by Bruno

Turner. One idea that never really worked was that of exchange membership with the other organisations. I think this was mainly because none of us got round to swapping information about what we were doing and what was going on, like we should have done. But it did mean, in theory, that NEMA could speak for us all in the corridors of power if it ever got there. All the same, it was one reason that NEMA got off to such a slow start so far as the number of individual members was concerned. We all belonged to something else already, Lute Society, Galpin, FoMRHI, Recorder, Viola da Gamba, and so on, and did we need to belong to NEMA, too? Especially if our other society itself belonged to NEMA.

I thought I remembered all that, but then I thought of looking in the *25-year Index* of *Early Music*[iii] and there was Cliff Bartlett's account of our first AGM in December 1982[iv] with a reference back to our first conference in July of that year, on 'Early Music and the Critic' at which, according to Cliff, not many musicians and even fewer critics turned up.[v] So I looked back earlier in *Early Music*, and found the account of our inaugural meeting, on 31 October 1981, 'as a direct result of the famed 1977 conference on "The Future of Early Music in Britain"'.[vi] So I looked up John Thomson's report of that conference,[vii] which had been organised by Francesca McManus, who was to become our first Treasurer, Administrator, and mainstay once NEMA got going. Looking it through, it's notable how the emphasis in 1977 was already divided between the practical and the educational, two aspects which have always been our prime concerns.

In the report of our inauguration, John said we 'will integrate the needs, interests and activities both of individuals (professional and amateur), and of existing societies, institutions, colleges, music departments, etc. It is an organizational experiment with immediate practical aims. These include: the creation and expansion of educational activities at every level from primary schools to universities and the lobbying of national organizations for their funding; the dissemination of information on the achievements of early music throughout Great Britain; the compilation of a national registry and directory embracing all aspects of early music; the lobbying of the press to encourage greater coverage and greater discrimination in the space allotted to early music; and the representation of early music in Britain internationally, to forge European and overseas links.

Much of that NEMA has indeed achieved, especially on education, with early music thriving in every university music department and every conservatory, though less successfully, I suspect, at the school level. We have all heard of schools where some heroic soul has gathered instruments and music together, got children enthusiastic about early music, produced some really exciting concerts, and then heard governors, even head teachers, say 'Well, we've done early music; what shall we do next year?' Least successfully at the lobbying for funding, of course, for unless you're Covent Garden you'll never succeed in getting real money in this country (and they only get a tithe of their needs). The compilation of a register, as I've already said, was and remains one of the major achievements. Lobbying the press and the dissemination of our achievements has been successful up to a point, but there are still many who don't take us seriously and who don't really understand the difference that the early music approach makes, even to quite late music. This is partly our own fault; when enough of us get up and say that authenticity is something that can never be achieved, then the reaction is 'why bother to try then?' Our own members have done us a good deal of damage over the years! European and international links have certainly been forged – some of our ensembles perform more abroad than they do here, and many of our individual performers, editors and directors are more respected abroad than here, at least as far as the general public and the media are concerned.

The publications, NEMA's own journals, carried useful articles and information, but they've never really settled down, not even to a coherent and continuing title, partly because too many of us were trying to find time to write for our other journals and newsletters, and for John's own *Early Music* and the Early Music series of books which he persuaded OUP to publish and encouraged us to write, and partly because many of us weren't really clear just which gap NEMA was trying to fill in this way. The books that John inspired through *Early Music* and NEMA perhaps were more important and achieved more, though some were pretty controversial, itself a good thing. John and NEMA, between them, achieved a hell of a lot, one way or the other. I don't need to tell you the details because you were there, but we do need to recognise the devotion that many people put into it, quietly plugging along (though that was never a very appropriate description of Margot Leigh-Milner, in whose memory I have the honour to speak today) and keeping it going, despite lack of recognition.

Let's look back at John's report of that first preliminary conference, back in 1977, in the Waterloo Room at the Royal Festival Hall. [viii] Let's see just how much of that conference has borne fruit, how many of its aims has NEMA achieved, as it was set up to do.

Frankly, it makes pretty depressing reading. Two papers, Cliff Bartlett's and mine, on libraries of music and instruments, have produced no result at all (and mine wasn't just my idea – I was asked to speak on that subject), and I suspect, though it's not my field so I don't know for sure, that Peter Holman's, on editing and the need for being paid for it, hasn't had any better success. Richard Phillips's paper had better luck than some. The York Early Music Week still exists, but although his idea of an Early Music Network did get off the ground, where is it now? Of the papers on performing, the answer is pretty mixed. Yes, we've achieved quite a lot of what Chris Hogwood and Robert Donington spoke for, but to my mind a good deal less on the mediæval and renaissance, certainly a lot less than Howard Brown wanted, but I doubt whether Andrew Parrott, despite far greater musical achievements, is any better off on rehearsal time than he was then.

Could NEMA have done more to change things? Maybe. Certainly we've tried, though one problem is that we often hamstring ourselves. The fact that Peter set out the extent to which he is subsidising early music performances by doing all the preliminary editing unpaid hasn't stopped him from doing it. Nor does the fact that we are all often prepared to rehearse for nowt help in this. One suspects that an official attitude may well be 'If they're mug enough to do it, why should we waste our resources?' And of course we are all mug enough because if we weren't the performances wouldn't happen.

Our trouble is that the people involved in early music are there because they want to be, because they want to perform the stuff. Mugs the lot of us.

Has NEMA done enough, that it might be time to stop? I'm not sure. Certainly the public knows Early Music exists even if it doesn't know the difference between its serious applications and what rides on the bandwagon. The musical profession certainly knows. It's not like it was when I first started conducting those concerts back around 1950.

Our trouble then was that we were compromising, as I said earlier, doing our best

with modern instruments. We were compromising in Musica Reservata, too, a decade later, playing at modern pitch so that we could get other players in when necessary, and then using pea-shooter trombones with two or three inches cut off the bell to make them into sackbuts, pseudo-renaissance recorders from Bärenreiter – I remember when we went in there to choose them while on tour in Kassel – they were about the first to come on to the market and the best then available. Daphne's wonderful tenor rebec was a Sumatran *gambus* that Dietrich Kessler had put a fingerboard on and a wooden belly to replace the original skin one. Don Smithers, who played like an angel some of the time, used a cornett with a trumpet mouthpiece (that was before the NEMA Conference at which he insisted on the importance of using the proper acorn-cup one), and David Munrow, while he still played with us, lipped his shawm reed so that it sounded like a dyspeptic cor anglais. Jim Tyler used an english guittar as a cittern, and as I've told you, my percussion was invented from whole cloth.

Now what worries me about the possibility of NEMA stopping is that forty years later we are still compromising. Yes, things have changed, and we're all using early instruments, you can learn any early instrument at any of the Colleges, and all our young players know all about it. But do they? Most of our early music ensembles are pretty generic. Early is early, but don't ask how early, not if you don't want some pretty brusque answers. And if I were you, I wouldn't ask if the trumpeters were using real natural trumpets rather than those things with holes like a colander. You can look round the platform at a concert of any of our early music bands and, as one would expect, you'll see many familiar faces. Fair enough, the best players are the best players and get the best jobs – London's freelance world has always been like that. What worries me is that you often see the same instruments in their hands whether the concert is Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven. What also worries me, too, is the idea, gaining ground at present, that our symphony orchestras can play the earlier parts of their repertoire in 'an early music fashion'. Sure, it can help any performance to take all the slurs and hairpins out of a Breitkopf sets of parts, but it still doesn't **sound** the same and the instruments still don't **balance** the same.

I'm sure many of you are tired of hearing me saying that music is sound and if the sound, the noise it makes, is wrong, the music won't be right either. All the same, I'm

going to go on saying it, because it is one thing that we **can** get right. There's much that we can't replicate, but some things we can, and maybe this is something that we've not emphasised enough over the years – my fault maybe; perhaps I should have shouted more and bored you more with that idea. And if NEMA were to go, that's one less venue to shout it. I said earlier something about 'the early music approach, even in quite late music'. Well, I joined the Musicians' Union over fifty years ago (I'm still a member, with a gold card to celebrate it), and every single instrument in the British orchestra has changed its sound since then. So have many aspects of playing technique. Any music written before 1950 could benefit from a **real** early music approach. And by that I don't just mean Simon Rattle or Charles Mackerras telling a normal symphony orchestra how to play it (though that's a good start). I mean using the right instruments, not just a baritone for the serpent instead of a bass tuba (thought that, too, is a good start), but pea-shooter trombones, narrow-bore French trumpets, wooden flutes, maybe french bassoons and horns though the germans came into several orchestras before the war, gut A strings and covered gut D and G instead of these terrible steel strings, maybe even gut E (Kreisler never put up with the whine of a steel E, and I can't be the only one here who remembers hearing him play, and I'm certainly not the only one who can remember the Thomastik strings arriving in the mid-50s), skin timpani heads, and so on. OK, there's one band doing this, but how many gigs do they get?

At least that band is using the right instruments – they perform music *as it was played in the old Queen's Hall* . How many other bands can put their hands on their heart and say they are using the right instruments? How many bands play a concert of 1780-90 music with not one instrument made, or reproduction styled, later than 1789 and not one earlier than around 1770? How many play on a hodge-podge of German, French, and English instruments? How many of the fiddle players still take the weight with their chins instead of with their thumbs, as players did, which makes position-shift a whole new ball-game? How many of the brass players are using their ordinary modern mouthpiece or an adaption of it, which alters the sound and prevents them from bending the pitch? How many clarinets have a flat scrape on the reed, and the reed on the upper lip?

I could go on like this a long time.

That's one reason that Philip Bate gave his collection to Oxford, that Geoffrey Rendall gave his (in effect) to Edinburgh, that Edgar Hunt let his follow Philip's to Oxford. Those collections were, in part, the origin of my paper at that London conference, though there've never been the followers and emulators that we need. Those instruments could be played, they could be borrowed, they could be used. Many of our most eminent early music professionals first began when Tony Baines thrust an instrument into their hands and said 'Try that'. I followed him of course. I built up the very large library of plans and measured drawings, in which Arnold Myers has followed me, so that makers could have the information they needed to make the wind instruments to join the strings and keyboards of the Ashmolean, Royal College, and V&A. I used to encourage the makers to bring their copies to the Bate and compare them with the originals. When the copy was really close, but still sounded different from the original, I got them to swap the joints, our head in their body, their head in our body, and so on. We all learned, like that. But if I'd not allowed them to play the instrument in the first place, they'd have had no idea of what sound they were trying to reproduce.

Any fool can make a cosmetic copy, something that looks like the original, but what's the use of that, except for a film of the life of Marin Marais or whomever? (I would never, at least never after the first time, and thank God that was mine, not the Bate's, lend an instrument to be used as a stage or film prop.) What counts is the sound of the copy, and unless makers can hear the sound of the original, and get some idea of what it's like to play, they'll never make a true copy.

The same applies to the players. However accurate a modern copy may be, it doesn't have the feel, OK the magic, of the original. That's how Tony and I inspired so many players – I can still remember the wide-eyed glow on some students' faces. I doubt if any of them today are playing on originals, rather than on modern copies, for unlike string instruments, wind don't last for ever. But how many string players have ever played an original? and I don't mean one that was butchered in the nineteenth century and then more or less hypothetically 'restored' to its 'original condition'.

Can we encourage more collections to make this sort of thing possible? Maybe there are still some things that NEMA could do. Maybe, even now, nearly twenty-five years later, it could encourage performers to give or bequeath their libraries of

material to institutions whence it could be borrowed, as Cliff suggested. Maybe it could encourage some more collectors to follow Philip's, Rendall's, and Edgar's examples. Maybe it could even encourage at least some museums to break the current mould and let at least some of their instruments be played, borrowed, and used.

Maybe it could do other things, too. Maybe it could publish polemic fact sheets on instruments and their techniques for different periods, just one piece of paper per instrument or period, and distribute them around the music schools. Maybe it could publish similar fact sheets on some of the other subjects covered in 1977 and distribute them round appropriate places in government, or the Lottery Commission, (and we owe the Lottery to a musician, Denis Vaughan, and it wasn't his fault that governments have reneged on every single promise they made when they let it begin, that it would generate additional money for the Arts, not replace government money), or to the relevant quangos (God knows we spend enough taxpayer and lottery money on those), and the media. Maybe we should set up a website and place them there.

There is still quite a lot we could do, and in many ways NEMA is centrally placed to do it.

A paper (The Margot Leigh-Milner Memorial Lecture) given at a NEMA Conference in 2001

i
GSJ XXIII, 1970, 104-14.

ii James Blades, *Percussion Instruments and their History* , Faber, 1970. Mine was published very belatedly by David & Charles, Newton Abbot, 1976.

iii David Roberts, *Early Music: 25-Year Index*, OUP, Oxford, 1998.

iv *EM* xi:2, April 1983, 293.

v *EM* xi:1, January 1983, 149.

vi *EM* x:1, January 1982, 5.

vii OUP, 1978.

viii J. M. Thomson, ed, *The Future of Early Music in Britain*, OUP, London, 1978.