

The Right Instrument

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Warning! This article is essentially impractical, and its content is weak because it is limited to my own limited knowledge of music and of instruments.

We can, I hope, agree that music is sound. We would, I hope again, also agree that composers, on the whole, have some idea that when they write dots on paper on a line for a specified instrument, they will know, more or less, what the thing is going to sound like. Also I am ignoring here the written exercises such as an *Art of Fugue* for unspecified instruments, and also those early twentieth-century composers who copied their wives' embroidery patterns on to music manuscript paper just for fun and to see what it would sound like.

I have the belief, and I don't think I am alone in this, that what a composer hears in his mental ear as he writes music for a specified instrument, is the sound of the instruments of his own time, and in earlier times than the present day, those of his own town and even of his own orchestra or band. For instance, Haydn at Esterházy quite evidently knew just what each of his players could do, and he wrote accordingly. On the other hand, those writing deliberately for a different locality had to write more carefully and more safely. An obvious example is Haydn's first set of London Symphonies – it is quite clear that he was then pretty vague about what the clarinets, for instance, could do, and his second set shows a very considerable difference in that respect. It is a rare composer, Wagner is one example, who could imagine a sound and then asked someone to make the instrument that would produce that sound – even then it was mainly a matter of range rather than a new sound altogether. It is beyond the reach of imagination that Bach could mentally hear, and prefer, the sound of a Steinway over that of his clavichord.

So the drift of this article is: Can we form any ideas of how better we can perform the music?

I wrote at the beginning that this article was impractical. It is impractical in that in a mixed programme of solo harpsichord pieces by French, German, and Italian composers, how many harpsichords can you put on the same platform, both for space and for the costs of hire? It is also impractical in that how many oboes, flutes, etc, etc, can you expect players to have, especially when there are two players side by side. It is further complicated by the fact that in some cities, London especially, orchestras were cosmopolitan at least from the sixteenth century onwards, and each player would have brought his own instruments with him from his home town, and that in many other cities even when the players were local, not all those players went to the same instrument maker. Nevertheless, until very recently Vienna did always have its own sound, and so did other cities.

If we can return, for the moment, to the harpsichord recital, is it really doing justice to the music if we put on a concert of Bach, Couperin, and Scarlatti, using a copy of a big, late, French harpsichord? Let us ignore, for another moment, that one or more of the Scarlatti sonatas may have been written for one of the Queen's Cristofori pianos. They were all three more or less contemporaries, but each lived in a different sound world, not only geographically, but also stylistically, and also instrumentally. German harpsichords did not sound like French ones, and nor did they sound like Italian ones, and none of the three could even do the same things to their strings.

Leaving aside the question, which applies to all our instruments, did the copy of 'the big, late, French harpsichord' sound anything like the original, with strings of modern wire, modern quills, turkey or delrin rather than crow, in the jacks, and twentieth-century wood for the soundboard, how much would Couperin have liked the sound of a Hass or tolerated the limited capabilities of the Italian instrument compared with his Blanchet?

Should our harpsichord recitalists stick to a single composer recital and get a copy of an instrument appropriate to his time and place? And would audiences, and managements, tolerate that?

And now what about the woodwind. Many players do spend money on an original instrument, though there's a limit on the number that survive, but

woodwind often come in pairs and how often might both the players each have an original by the same maker? In my experience at the Bate Collection, many modern makers brought their copies of the original back to the Bate to compare it with the original, and never once did the copy sound the same as the original even when played with the same reed (for oboe, bassoon, or clarinet). OK, I know all the arguments of new versus old, etc, bore changes over time, and so on, but this doesn't help us when two players are playing together, one on an original and one on a copy, especially in contrapuntal music with interweaving lines. And then, just to take one detail, if one of a pair of *oboi da caccia* has a spun bell and the other a hammered bell, what then?

A further problem is attitude. A fiddler will mortgage his soul to buy a Stainer or whatever put back into original condition, but woodwind players don't seem to think like this. Woodwinds seem to change quite radically in sound every generation, but how many players will have one for each of those generations, let alone one German, one French, and one English for each generation. And even if they did, what about the pitch that each ensemble chooses to play at?

Trumpeters – I'm speaking of real trumpets, not ones with holes in them – seem to stick to Nuremberg, though even trumpets differ somewhat in sound over time. When I blew Bendinelli's own trumpet the fundamental was in tune, but when I blew a Hass trumpet it wasn't. I'm not enough of a trumpeter to be able to judge more than that, and I didn't have a real trumpeter with me on those visits. And trumpet mouthpieces, wide enough and deep enough to bend the pitch reliably, make a very different sound from the small ones that we usually see. But German, Bohemian/Viennese, and French handhorns each sound quite different (I've got the latter two of the three and the Bate has a German, and once upon a time I was a horn player).

I wrote above of putting fiddles back. Just how much does get put back? Necks and wedges obviously, but bass bars and soundposts? I've never seen anything like an early bridge such as one sees in a good Vanitas painting. How much difference does that make? The Vanitas bridges seem to spread the strings more, and their feet look different from the modern ones – how much does

that affect the transmission of vibrations to the body? How do modern gut strings compare with seventeenth- or eighteenth-century ones? What certainly makes a difference to playing technique is how one supports the weight of the fiddle, under the chin or in the left hand – that radically affects how one changes position up, and especially down, the neck? But that’s irrelevant to this subject. What is relevant is the model, the high-arch Amati and Stainer model or the flat-arch Strad model, and to some extent that’s a matter of date and geography.

How do we, how in practice can we, choose the right instrument to play each piece of music that we come to, and how do we, and how in practice can we, choose our programmes?

Back in the early days of ‘early music’ when I was conducting a string orchestra, I programmed Baroque or Classical music in the first half for my own pleasure, and modern music in the second half to attract the critics. We had no early string instruments in those days, the first half of the 1950s, and not even any decent early bows. Yes we had a harpsichord for continuo (the single-manual Broadwood from Fenton House that one could hire in those days), and even a lute continuo for the *concertino* in a Handel concerto grosso, with the harpsichord for the *ripieno*. Yes, we did our best with ornaments and *inégalité*, but that was about as far as we could go, and even that was quite a lot further than other chamber orchestras of the 1950s.

But that was those days and you can’t get away with that sort of thing today.

So what do we do?