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The Early Music Problem

So much has already been written on the subjects of historical authenticity and its epistemological impossibility, Early Music and its rebranding as Historically Informed Performance, the elusive Werktreue, and consequent theoretical and philosophical implications that it is well beyond the scope and beside the point of this thesis to enter a fray whose edges are already looking quite frayed.[1] What follows here is a picture of how I relate my artistic practice on the viola da gamba to the idea of Early Music, as a point of departure for the more reflective writing that is to follow.

Reading John Butt's description of the early debate about Early Music in the 20th century, it seems like much of it can be distilled into what amounts to a turf war over the music of J.S. Bach. I refer to the famous Adorno quote:

> *Mechanically squeaking continuo-instruments and wretched school choirs contribute not to sacred sobriety but to malicious failure; and the thought that the shrill and rasping Baroque organs are capable of capturing the long waves of the lapidary, large fugues is pure superstition. Bach's music is separated from the general level of his age by an astronomical distance. Its eloquence returns only when it is liberated from the sphere of resentment and obscuritanism, the triumph of the subjectless over subjectivism. They say Bach, mean Telemann and are secretly in agreement with the regression of musical consciousness which even without them remains a constant threat under the pressures of the culture industry.*[2]

The passions of theorists and performers alike were inflamed by this suggestion that the great modern interpreters of Bach could have their worth and integrity called into question by the threat of historical instruments. For several decades the debate about

authenticity raged, with the ever-present implication that there was such a thing as (in)correctness in performance doing nobody any favours. All the while, the weaponisation of historical instruments as agents of authenticity precluded—for many—their appreciation as interesting or beautiful instruments in their own right.[3] And even today, in 2020, the European Early Music Network held its international summit with a seminar titled "Bach on Piano: Do You Have a Permit?".[4] Certainly this is at least a little tongue-in-cheek by this point, but it still makes me feel a bit like I'm going through Checkpoint Charlie and, as one gleans from the conference proceedings, the question itself still causes strife.

As a viol player, I look at most of this debate from the sidelines. Bach wrote almost nothing for my instrument; the vast majority of our historical solo repertoire was written by player-composers whose principal output was viol music. There is no "modern" instrument laying any direct claim to the viol repertoire with whom we need to battle for ownership. If anything, the viol's role in this culture war is like superglue or microwave ovens, one of those technologies developed by the military that ends up being used to improve the domestic lives of civilians (in the viol's case, generating a huge and vibrant community of amateur players over the course of the 20th century). With almost the entire viol repertoire lying outside of the classical canon, we do not find ourselves fighting with anyone else about how it should be performed.

It is perhaps this less combative vantage-point that makes it easier for me to say there is no longer a meaningful difference between standard-practice classical music and Early Music.[5] This distinction is still seen almost exclusively by those holding on to it from within, something which happens perhaps most strongly at the conservatoire level. To the rest of Western culture, we all fall under the heading of classical music, playing *old* music written by other people on old instruments. The notion that the 137 year-old Steinway D is a "modern" mainstream instrument but the Érard of a few decades before is "early" feels utterly arbitrary. With only a very small stretch, one can make the argument that playing Rachmaninov on a Steinway is an Early Music practice, and that a modern mainstream practice would be playing

it on a Yamaha Clavinova electric piano. A Beatles cover band is absolutely a Historical Performance ensemble in essence. I also recently shared a concert in 2018 with an excellent ensemble called Composers Inside Electronics, performing works of John Cage and David Tudor with 1970's electronics setups to accompany dancers from Stephen Petronio's company performing works by Merce Cunningham (in historical costume, no less). The only difference between them and a wind band specialising in 15th-century Flemish *alta capella* repertoire is the date of composition. Interpretation and creation are part of a continuum, and the essential act of interpreting a pre-existing work in a contextually, critically, or historically aware manner is not limited to any particular time period.

We will return to the issues of instrumentality and the mainstream shortly, but first let's look at the disintegrating differences between mainstream and Early Music ideologies. It is not news that for quite some time, Early Music has been moving further and further from a critical, research-based artistic practice towards a more aurally transmitted, received performance culture. As John Butt wrote nearly twenty years ago, "HIP has now been round long enough for a certain number of its interpretative features to be part of a constantly evolving tradition, in which most players learn as much (in fact, definitely more) from their peers than from their own scholarship.".[6] Learning from a nascent aural tradition is not inherently a bad thing, and is certainly an important part in developing the sound of an ensemble, but when we try to emulate our early successes rather than build upon them, when we expect no more of our students than that they play as well as we do, then we are holding things back. In his 2014 history of Early Music in Britain, Nick Wilson writes:

> *Early Music performances no longer always surprise, their radical and revolutionary credentials being asserted in program notes rather than on the concert platform. It is as if HIP has become just what classical music "does" with old music. More worryingly, musicologist and cultural historian David Irving points to "the institutionalization of a new orthodoxy of 'historical performance practice,'" adding that this is "passed down—often uncritically, as 'received wisdom'—from teacher to student." As Bernard Thomas puts it,*

> *“there is a problem in Britain in that there is too much consensus about what they think early music is. There shouldn’t be a consensus; we don’t know enough for there to be a consensus.”*[7]

It seems that Early Music is not living up to the philosophical ideal Lydia Goehr saw for it in 2009:

> *It keeps our eyes open to the possibility of producing music in new ways under the regulation of new ideals. It keeps our eyes open to the inherently critical and revisable nature of our regulative concepts. Most importantly, it helps us overcome that deep-rooted desire to hold the most dangerous of beliefs, that we have at any time got our practices absolutely right.*[8]

I could imagine the vast majority of my current and former Early Music colleagues nodding their heads in agreement to Goehr’s words, yet I could name a hefty number of them who would also occasionally claim that they *have* in fact got their practices right, and who—worse still—*teach* as if they had. This is of course a difficult and emotional terrain. Surviving as a musician is a punishing career; we want to be proud of our achievements and not everyone can be at the vanguard all the time. Wilson, citing the evils of capitalism, cuts modern performers a bit of slack, acknowledging that “they have also had to perform the ‘magical’ act of turning art into commercial activity, jobs, employment, and personal wealth”[9], which gives rise to what he calls TINA (There Is No Alternative) formations, or a compromise of principles in which the artist feels they have no alternative but to compromise.

A certain amount of compromise is unavoidable, but a narrative I have observed in modern Early Music culture (and this is my personal impression, so we are dipping into the autoethnographic segment a bit ahead of schedule here) is the use and *abuse* of the concepts of either historical accuracy or the inevitability of compromised principles as tools in rehearsal and planning arguments that one uses to get

one's—subjective—way. It's become a dichotomy with which we are all too familiar, and whose goalposts we are willing to shift at will to suit our desires. Don't like the bowing the leader suggests? Easy! They're either being too historically pedantic or not historically appropriate enough; use whichever criticism favours the bowing you'd rather do.

Now that we practitioners have mostly accepted the epistemological impossibility of the historically authentic performance of a musical work, Early Music has lost a bit of a hold on its identity. Most musicians understand that rigid adherence to historical practices is no longer en vogue, but I'm not certain we always understand precisely why. And the cynic in me wonders whether many of us have too readily given up on historical research in our artistic practices, yet continue to invoke the concept in our marketing because it's our most saleable asset. All recent writing about the Early Music movement cites the role of the CD industry boom in bolstering the Early Music performance scene by selling the concept of authenticity; it's what brought us into being as we are now, so it makes sense being afraid to let go of this validating stamp.

John Butt rightly questions whether, in light of the impending end of Western modernity, "it may be that any debates about HIP are equivalent to ordering new paint for those deckchairs on the Titanic."[10], but suggests that we should carry on anyway because it is an interesting line of cultural inquiry. Nick Wilson offers a slightly more optimistic solution for marrying historical authenticity and personal authenticity with his metaphor of re-enchantment, but the cynic in me reads the words "…inspire tomorrow's early music-makers to be even bolder in their vision, yet more charismatic in their communication to others, and just as playful in their 'rule-breaking' as their illustrious predecessors have been" as precisely the kind of fluff we should be encouraging tomorrow's early music-makers to delete from their artist bios.[11]

I see the greatest danger for Early Music now as being the unquestioning acceptance of sonic aesthetics and interpretations aurally inherited from the previous generation of performers. My generation is the first to have had the luxury of being able to do

undergraduate degrees in Early Music, and there are a large number of giants with sturdy shoulders for us to stand on. However, the formulas these giants developed for making music *work* are not scientific truths but their own subjective narratives. We do a great disservice to their legacy if we repeat their experiments and only achieve similar results. As Wilson states:

> *While HP pioneers in the latter part of the twentieth century necessarily backed up their performance with fresh scholarship—reading treatises and undertaking extensive archival research—today's generation have a massive library of HP recordings and modern texts to follow. To the extent that HP is now the default for pretty much any classical music of Romantic or earlier eras, one might be forgiven for thinking, 'job done'. But this is precisely the sort of modernist triumphalist 'endism' that the HP movement was spurred into action to respond to in the first place. So, over and above the many historical performance questions that we have yet to ask (let alone answer), we need to consider whether we as educators and performers are being sufficiently reflexive about HP? What are the challenging questions being asked in HP's name today?*[12]

Several years ago, while I was still in Fretwork, we played in the British Library at a study day devoted to the fantasias of Henry Purcell. The crowd was a mixture of amateur viol players and eminent musicologists. At one point we were asked whether we thought the top lines of these pieces "worked" on treble viols, because Purcell specifies no instrumentation for these works and by the time he was writing them, the treble viol was on its way out. I responded (as the treble viol player) that it was impossible for us to answer this question based on our own technical understanding of the instrument, because we as a culture still haven't quite figured out how to *play* the treble viol (As Bernard Thomas said above, "we don't know enough for there to be a concencus."). I pointed to the fact that the playing position adopted by most of the instrument's modern exponents (myself included) was completely ahistorical, and that, as there have really only been a handful of players who have seriously

devoted themselves to the instrument, further exploration was needed by future generations before we could make any kind of judgement call about the boundaries of an instrument's capability. My answer was met with quite a few scoffs and accusations of disrespect for my musical forbears. Yet I stood and stand by it. There remains *so* much to learn, so many pieces we haven't yet figured out how to make *work*, so many instruments we haven't really mastered, and old music will never really come alive if we stop trying to reach further with it than where we are now.

However, the dissolving of the boundary between mainstream classical and Early Music is not solely a result of Early Music giving up on its dreams. Classical music has changed too, and there is a meeting in the middle of sorts. Wilson goes so far as to suggest that "HIP principles are now pretty much all-pervasive across the classical music profession.".[13] Especially with my millennial classical colleagues, a new generation of musicians is being encouraged, if not required, to think beyond their id. John Butt writes in 2016:

> *There has also been a sense in which many musicians, whether trained in conservatoires or universities, have begun to develop a broader sense of the cultural environment in which they live and work. This comes partly from the general trend towards interdisciplinary study in academia, one which is certainly very productive in what seemed to be – until very recently – an increasingly pluralistic world.*[14]

As more classical musicians develop varied freelance careers outside the once stable and secure orchestral career path, we all start to find a more flexible understanding of musicking as process rather than a thing, also for music after 1800. Performers now generally feel freer to adapt and arrange. I recently saw a concert in one of Berlin's elite chamber music venues, the Piano Salon Christophori, where the Linos Piano Trio played arrangements of symphonic works with great success. In summer

of 2018, I found myself on a residency in Aldeburgh with the new music ensemble Chroma playing an arrangement of the third movement of the Ravel Piano Trio for modern cello, clarinet, and very historically set-up early 18th-century French viola da gamba. And ensembles like stargaze don't even bat half an eyelid at the idea of rearranging all the Beethoven symphonies for whatever mix of instruments they like. Across the spectrum of classical music (although admittedly coming especially from the New and Early Music camps) there is a move toward more freedom of individual expression, and less fearful reverence of musical works.

This slow broadening of mindset about classical performance is altering our relationship with instrumentality as well. In the early days of the Early Music debate, the mainstream saw complete virtuosity on a single standardised instrument as the locus of pure artistic subjectivity; the fluency of a performer with that single tool gave them total control to express themselves absolutely.[15] So the threat of early instruments was not simply the ugly twang of the harpsichord or the out of tune rasps of the baroque violin; it was the implication that there might exist a musical landscape over which one's virtuosity did not have all-powerful authority. Nowadays we understand virtuosity differently, and a new generation of conservatoire-trained musicians are starting to see flexibility as less of a threat to artistic integrity.

Insisting upon the universal appropriateness of one's instrument might seem like it gives the player freedom: "I don't need to use a baroque violin because I can play on my modern violin in a baroque style" is a cute idea, but this is actually a narrative of limitation rather than one of flexibility. It makes the musician's worth too dependent on their technical fluency with a single object. The capability of a modern violin is shaped and limited by the physical properties of that object; a musician does not *need* to confine themselves to these same physical limitations, or struggle under the attempt to bend an instrument to their will against its own. They may of course *choose* these limitations, and that choice is an issue we will explore shortly.

Guitarists typically exemplify instrumental flexibility beautifully. Even among conservatory-trained classical guitarists, it is not at all uncommon for musicians to

have multiple instruments for different repertoires: nylon-strung classical guitars, metal strung acoustics, multiple types of electric. Especially on electric guitar, the pursuit of a very particular sound through combinations of pedals, pickups, and amplifiers is a large part of the interpretative process. Rather than playing one instrument with one ideal sound, guitarists fluently switch instruments in pursuit of a diversity of colours and textures to use in different musical situations.

We are now also starting to see this opening of minds in the piano world. Whereas once the notion that Early Music could lay claim to Romantic repertoire was seen as preposterous, it is now becoming more acceptable for mainstream classical pianists to play Romantic works on something other than a Steinway, without being branded Early Music practitioners. Perhaps the Érard's status as an early "other" is being redefined after all, and hopefully many more instruments are to follow. As we all start to come together, Taruskin comes to mind again:

> *The whole trouble with Early Music as a "movement" …is the way it has uncritically accepted the post-Romantic work-concept and imposed it anachronistically on pre-Romantic repertories. What is troubling, of course, is not the anachronism but the uncritical acceptance—and the imposition. A movement that might, in the name of history, have shown the way back to a truly creative performance practice has only furthered the stifling of creativity in the name of normative controls. Here Early Music actively colludes with the so-called "mainstream" it externally impugns.*[16]

On this point I am inclined to agree with Richard Taruskin, but if I can be a bit more optimistic, I would suggest that as the Authenticity Wars are now mostly behind us, the new broad field of classical music is embracing a much more flexible concept of music-making, and that this post-Romantic work concept is becoming less relevant to many repertoires, not just those before 1800. Could it in fact be that Early Music *has* finally started to show us "the way back to a truly creative performance practice",

one which benefits everyone in the new broad spectrum of classical music? I have one possible suggestion for what that might look like.

The Expressive Variable

I want now to put forward a simple concept applicable to a broad practice of creative musical interpretation, one which has been a central thread in my thinking for the past decade or so. This tool is descriptive rather than prescriptive; it's not a rule with limitations or implications, but a way of orienting one's intention, much like movable-do solfège is a way of clarifying the context and interrelation of pitches but has no implication for what pitch one must sing or how exactly one sings it.

I've been calling it the *expressive variable*. The premise is that a performer-interpreter consciously decides which specific aspects of their performance they intend to expressively manipulate (the variables), and which aspects they accept as the fixed framework which makes those variables effective (the parameters).

For example, let's say a violinist wants to draw attention to a single note in a phrase. They have decided for whatever reason that they want to play the phrase perfectly in time (the set parameter) so they emphasise the note by playing it louder or softer; dynamics are the variable. Of course they could also decide they need to play the whole phrase fortissimo (the parameter), so they put a tenuto on the note in question to bring it out; articulation is the variable. How we *work* the variable doesn't matter, loud or soft, long or short, whatever. If our playing were an automobile, this would be about identifying what the steering wheel *is*, not which direction we're driving.

Obviously expressive variables co-exist in many layers and on multiple planes: micro, macro, meta, and everything in between. As a different example, in autumn 2018 I played two concerts with the violinist Daniel Pioro in two very different locations: first in a church in Oxfordshire for a chamber music society, and second in an informal house concert in a recording studio in Iceland. In both concerts he played the Biber *Passacaglia*; in Oxford it was a mesmeric flow of long lines atop a steady tactus building slowly and meditatively, but in Reykjavik it was lots of playful pushing and pulling the tempo, cheeky articulations that bordered on the grotesque. I was struck by how fundamentally differently he approached the piece in Reykjavik but I felt it somehow worked and it went down well with the crowd. We spoke about it afterwards and he said he would never normally take those tempo and articulation liberties, that they were not how he felt the piece should go, but that in that moment it seemed the best way of getting the piece across to the people in the room. I then proceeded to talk his ear off about my notion of expressive variables, seeing the cosy studio performance setting as the parameters which led him to use time and articulation as expressive variables in that moment, even if this was at odds with his understanding of the piece.

It really hit home with him. We found ourselves in agreement that the steering wheel, the controls, the buttons we push in a piece of music are not always the same, and are dependent on many parameters both within ourselves and our environment, but that consciously identifying these controls, the expressive variables, was a central part of our way-in to interpretation.

Having orientated my own work around this concept for quite some time, especially as a way of organising my relationship to historical information, I was absolutely thrilled when I recently read John Butt's 2016 essay "Playing with History Again" and saw the following elucidated so clearly:

> *My approach has often been to try and find ways in which any limitations that historical evidence might imply actually become opportunities for expression or new forms of experience. Therefore, rather than taking*

historical performance as the act of stripping away the expressive accretions of reception, my approach is generally to extract the maximum potential expression and experience from the parameters that historical knowledge has reset. Any narrowing of possibilities should surely bring with it an intensification of other parameters – one example where this sort of thing often happens successfully in practice is where orchestral string players in baroque and early classical style lessen the use of continuous vibrato in music. But rather than being merely the removal of one parameter of expression, leaving everything else exactly as it was (which might have been the assumption of the 'less is more' school), most of the better players now work on a greater degree of expression and shaping through other parameters, such as the use of the bow, or through alternative ornamental devices.[17]

Seeing one of the leading thinkers in my field articulate a similar approach using almost identical vocabulary was immensely validating, and made me feel like my idea was perhaps something with broader potential appeal, and that this simple framing device could perhaps be the way-in to the creative performance practice Taruskin was hoping for. I would stress of course that this way of thinking is not limited to parameters defined by historical information, but that the conscious identification of these variables and parameters can deepen any performance practice.

Earlier I mentioned the 2020 REMA-EEMN conference segment called "Bach on Piano: Do You Have a Permit?". As part of this panel, multi-keyboardist Antony Romaniuk prepared an introductory video that is so good it merits watching in full so I will just leave it right here:

SATURDAY 21 - Anthony Romaniuk INTRO to BACH ON PIANO

Ex 1: Anthony Romaniuk

By way of introduction, he quotes Glenn Gould:

> *I really think, frankly, that the piano does offer a great many resources which are entirely appropriate vis-à-vis the music of Bach, and that it also offers some that are entirely inappropriate, so it really becomes a question of…using those things or adopting those things which really work within the parameters that the music itself observes.*[18]

Romaniuk then focuses on three specific areas in his video: resonance, ornamentation, and timing/dynamic axis, comparing how these musical elements play out on both the piano and the harpsichord, and he illustrates by example how choosing one instrument or the other (as a set parameter) necessarily influences the effectiveness of each musical element as an expressive variable.

At 4:28 he draws a parallel between playing expressively with dynamics on the piano and playing expressively with timing on the harpsichord and illustrates it with a short musical example.

> *I can see that this is a matter of taste, but were I to use the same timing on the piano as the harpsichord, I fear that rather than an equivalence of expression, the result is somehow weaker. Similarly, in order to achieve a kind of driving effect on the harpsichord, if I were to play with the equivalent amount of rhythmical strictness which I would use on the piano, the result is utterly cold and machine-like.*

So, as with Daniel Pioro choosing to manipulate different expressive variables in two different parameters of performance context, Anthony Romaniuk chooses to use a different expressive variable for two different instrumental contexts. Understanding the choice of instrument as a setting of interpretative parameters is a topic we will return to in the next section, but what excites me about both of these performance models—and this expressive variable framework in general—is that we start to move away from this idea of there being a single ideal realisation of a musical text, or that an individual artist makes *one* subjective yet idealised interpretation of a work. Instead, the expressive variable gives us a model for intent and understanding in creative interpretation that incorporates far more of Small's active agents in musicking, Dreyfus's models for play metaphors, or Naumur's mind-forces.

The expressive variable is not about limiting the areas in which our subjective expression is allowed (as in the old Werktreue debate), but about focussing consciously on the particular tools we use expressively and understanding why we choose them. It's about an increase in self-awareness *in parallel and in conjunction* with an understanding of a piece's context, historically or otherwise. In the following chapters, as we explore the different vectors of interaction between listener, performer, repertoire, and space in my performance work at the V&A, these set experimental parameters will illuminate a series of expressive variables that will help us to understand the richness of dynamics at play in performance. Essentially, the aim of each of the following experiments was to set certain parameters of performance and then see what expressive variables I turn to in order to make music work in each context. Of course there were many emergent forms of expression over the course of this research, but I have chosen to organise them under the umbrella categories of risk, time, presence, and agency.

But staying with the Early Music problem a little bit longer, I now want to look closer at the viola da gamba as the set parameter central to my own artistic practice, at the instrument as historical object, and its implication for performance in the multisensory museum.

Instrumentality – A New Fundamentalism?

The answer for me, personally, to the Early Music problem and the question of authenticity is to look toward the viola da gamba itself. Music is not an object, but a historical physical object remains—at least in my worldview—a physical object, about which we *can* know a plethora of quantifiable things. I'm not talking about the question of the historical appropriateness of an instrument's use in the context of a specific musical work. I mean we can look at an instrument and say, "This viol was built in 1676 and is original in all its parts except for two tuning pegs and the strings." or "This instrument is a copy of a 400 year-old viol, which appears to possess many of the same physical properties, although this neck is shorter than it would likely have been on a historical viol. This deviation from the historical model is related to a time in the early history of 20th-century viol-making where players and makers wanted viols to feel not too different from cellos, etc. etc.".

Obviously a copy will never be an original, but when we are talking about any historical physical object, the amount of things that can be known is far greater than when we are talking about a historical practice.

What is puzzling, then, is that in most of the theoretical writing about Early Music and authenticity, whenever instrumentality is discussed, it is only ever in the context of "What are the appropriate continuo instruments for this piece?" and almost never "Does your harpsichord have crow quills or delryn plectra?". The first question is of course relevant when it comes to understanding the nature of a historical work (and/or practice), but it ignores the question of whether whatever version of these "appropriate" instruments one has to hand are actually themselves historically accurate reproductions. Rarely in professional life is someone chastised for bringing

a nylon-strung theorbo to a recording session, regardless of how much of a plasticky sheen it brings to the continuo sound.[19]

Nick Wilson actually suggests that historical authenticity in instrument reconstruction is *at the root* of "the troublesome question of authenticity" in EM performance practice, yet his chapter on organology seems to suggest that early instrument construction has been pretty much figured out since the 1990's, or at least that it's no longer a theoretically relevant question[20]. And even my hero John Butt in 2016 describes such issues as string tension on violins or valves on brass instruments as the domain of a "new fundamentalism" fuelled by internet zealots, although he does admit that "fundamentalist rhetoric d[oes] not necessarily lead to dull, literalistic performances".[21]

I can understand how fussing about strings can seem like it's getting in the way of an artistic practice, when one centres their artistic practice on the realisation of a musical text. But I propose, at least for myself, to centre my artistic practice first and foremost on the process of *playing the viola da gamba*. It is, after all, in the most immediate sense, the main thing I'm *doing*. The beautiful thing about this recentring, as far as Early Music is concerned, is that we are actually able, definitively and quantifiably, to speak about the historical authenticity of an instrument itself as an object.

With this subtle shift from "playing old viola da gamba music" to "playing the viola da gamba" as business model, we see the stacks of scores on our shelves or in our Dropbox folders more like scrapbooks and photo albums reminding us of things we have experienced, or perhaps as cookbooks full of recipes we love or have been meaning to try out. The old repertoire remains a huge part of what has shaped and continues to shape my musical identity and my relationship to the instrument. The repertoire is the food I grew up eating, the recipes, the traditions. But the viol is the beautifully seasoned wok that has been passed down from my great grandmother. It is the tool that I learnt to master and maintain, and which I now use every day, whether I'm preparing old family recipes or making something entirely new.

So I want to restart myself on a journey of historical discovery centred on the authenticity of the instrument. To phrase this in my own terms, the historical parameters within which I wish to find my expressive variables are the use of an instrument that is as historically accurate a reproduction of an original model as possible. Of course this in itself isn't groundbreaking. It's not that there isn't precedent or appreciation for the idea that the instrument itself can be an inspiring tool in Early Music research. Wilson writes "So it is precisely through physical, natural, and embodied engagement with these old instruments that performers have been able to gain a much deeper and felt understanding of early music.".[22] And more broadly, this kind of instrument-focused work is an important part of what Bruce Haynes calls the "serendipity effect", or

> *the joyful phenomenon of making happy and agreeable discoveries unintentionally… The Serendipity effect is directly tied to the pursuit of Authenticity. It addresses the question—not an unreasonable one—whether it really matters if we perform details as they were done in their own period. My experience has been pretty consistent: the reason for incomprehensible practices does not often become evident until we actually do it that way ourselves, sometimes for a long time. Stated as a principle of musicking, we could say that if you attempt to be historically consistent, persistence will eventually show a logic that was not immediately obvious.*[23]

Haynes is not speaking specifically about working with authenticity in organology, but the principle of learning from the historical object through acceptance and repetition as a route to serendipitous discovery is one that deeply resonates. To push this theorising a step further, I am absolutely certain that Laurence Dreyfus was not advocating for an instrumental "new fundamentalism" when he wrote, "At its most successful, Early Music does not return to the past at all but reconstructs the musical object in the here and now, enabling a new and hitherto silenced subject to speak."[24], but I will gladly bend those words and run with the sentiment behind them to support my position.

Centring my practice on playing a historically accurate instrument does not of course guarantee that my performance of old repertoire will be any better, or indeed any more historically authentic. But it is an opportunity for me to learn artistically from the materiality of the object itself, as well as from primary historical sources on playing technique, and this material learning becomes the framework that allows my own subjectivity to speak more directly and expressively. First and foremost, I focus on my body physically making sounds come out of the viola da gamba. The interpretation of musical texts is still an important and complex undertaking involving significant research of its own, but for me it is philosophically secondary.

Materiality, Music, and Museums

There is a strong parallel between my focus on the historical instrument and the emerging importance of material culture in museum studies. In Sandra Dudley's first chapter of the 2010 collection *Museum Materialities*, she begins her problematisation of museum studies with the following sentence:

> *There is a current, indeed dominant, view within museum studies and practice that the museum is about information and that the object is just a part—and indeed not always an essential part—of that informational culture.*[25]

If we were to replace the word "museum" with "music", "information" with "repertoire", and "object" with "instrument", we would find ourselves with a fairly representative statement about the state of affairs in classical music, too. Dudley continues:

> *And while information is vital, might the conventional emphasis on it rather than on object, occasionally actually inhibit the varied possibilities of engagement across a socially extensive range of visitors, including those who lack prior knowledge of the objects they are looking at?*[26]

The "prior knowledge" problem should sound alarm bells for anyone familiar with classical music. The opinion that one needs any kind of prior knowledge to understand classical music is a widespread problem in the industry. Potential audiences are often dissuaded by a fear of not "understanding" the music, and our attempts as performers and programmers to combat this fear by bombarding audiences with contextual information can sometimes end up unintentionally reinforcing the misconception that it is necessary.

If I may allow myself a slightly tangential anecdote from my professional history, I am reminded of a day in 2015 when my musical polymath friend Chris Vatalaro called me up and asked if I was free to play a short opening set for a band he was drumming with that night, to which I said yes, and I planned to play what was at that time my normal set of a few baroque pieces, an unaccompanied contemporary piece, and one or two new things with a backing track of "electronics". Up until that point, whenever I had ventured outside the walls of the classical music world, it had always been safely within the context of some kind of "strange" or "experimental" event, where my esoteric old instrument had a certain curious cachet, bolstered by the fact I was also playing some serious new music by a known composer. This gig, however, turned out to be in a sticky-floored rock 'n' roll club in Hackney with a raspy sound system, opening for a band that sounded distressingly like Coldplay. Once I realised this, I was kind of terrified at the prospect of going out in front of an already rather rowdy crowd of off-brand emo fans and playing a galant Vivace by Karl Friedrich Abel. But it was too late to change and I didn't really have a lot of other repertoire in those days anyway, so I just decided to get up on stage and do it as if it were a normal thing to do. Amplification of course helped me to be heard over the bar noise, but the crowd mostly stayed remarkably quiet and attentive, and even seemed to enjoy

themselves throughout the set. They were there, after all, to listen to music. In retrospect, it was almost certainly much less strange for them than it was for me.

This show was my first really significant experience performing old viol music without any explanatory framework about the instrument or the repertoire as part of the performance, and it was so striking to me at the time that the music could *work* without any explanation, for an audience with no obvious connection to or prior knowledge of the instrument or repertoire. Particularly when one is presented as—or presents oneself as—playing an especially historical instrument, this issue of prior knowledge becomes thorny quite quickly.

It is dangerously easy to *historicise* oneself, by invoking the idea of history (and its recreation) as being both the instrument's and the performer's raisons d'être. Presenting oneself as a specialist agent of history can risk instantly alienating an audience, because it says in effect, "I have studied and I know things that you don't know, so listen now while I tell you.". On the other hand, simply telling an audience that one is playing a 400 year-old instrument can also serve as a fruitful point of departure for their own imaginative listening practice. This has proven particularly effective over the years with certain "timeless" sounding pieces like Marais's *Les Voix Humaines*, where people often come up to ask me afterward whether it was new or old. In this case, their desire for historical information about the music is inspired first by their direct aesthetic engagement with it.

Returning now to the world of museums, we see a distinct parallel here with the way material culture seeks to move away from presenting museum objects *only* as elements of an informational/historical framework, but presents objects in a way that allows *the things themselves to speak*. Dudley highlights two of its key messages:

> *The first, ontological point is that through our sensory experience of them objects have some potential for value and significance in their own right,*

whether or not we are privy to any information concerning their purpose or past. The second, more practical point is that creative, materialist thinking about embodied and emotional engagements with objects can provide more powerful alternatives or additions to textual interpretation in enabling visitors to understand and empathize with the stories objects may represent.[27]

It is precisely this creative materialist thinking and embodied emotional engagement that is at the core of my relationship with the historically accurate viola da gamba. One obvious example of this would be concerning the difference between plain-gut and wound-gut bass strings. The latter were developed first around 1660, so if I accept that in playing early 17th-century English music I will use plain-gut strings, I am going to corporeally engage with a completely different material from that which is standard among modern viol players. Thick plain gut responds entirely differently to wound gut: it speaks more slowly, has more core to the sound but less ambient resonance, and requires a different weight and speed of bow (and of course the early 17th-century English bow *itself* was probably made from ash or yew rather than the now common snakewood). This is just scratching the surface of the material differences between the two types of string, but all of these have distinct implications for the expressive variables available to me as a performer. There are certain sounds or gestures that I can perform on plain-gut strings that wouldn't be possible on wound gut, and vice versa. The historically accurate object thus becomes the inspiration for my playing, rather than a limitation.

In the museum, the focus on material culture presents objects not as examples to support an existing historical narrative, but as starting points for discovery of other stories that might have slipped through the hegemonic historiography. Flora Dennis writes:

Material culture studies seek to understand the meanings that objects possess and once possessed, for those who made them, owned them, gave, stole or

> *borrowed them, used them, broke them, or threw them away. This meaning can be attributed in different ways and understood on different levels, but it usually requires a consideration of the relationships between material objects and people. Here, material culture is not viewed as a passive expression of human interests; it is understood actively to shape beliefs, knowledge and behavior: to possess agency."*[28]

Agency will be a recurring theme throughout this project, the agency of the listener and of the performer, and indeed of the instrument itself. This sense of agency is precisely the thing that is too often lacking in classical music, where the people actually in the room together musicking do not feel a empowered and engaged in this act because they are all struggling under the conceptual weight of a long-dead composer's imagined authority. But starting the historical narrative with the instrument as object, rather than the score of a dead genius, allows the people in the room to sense their agency, to more actively engage, to collectively create the musical artwork out of thin air, as Narmour described it.

Gabriele Rossi Rognoni points out that in modern Britain, musical instruments have entered the households and hands of most people, which "provides a direct connection with an incredibly vast and diverse museum audience who can relate with these objects through personal, tactile, and aural memories, and through these be enticed into the exploration of potentially any context in history and space of which human beings have been a part.".[29] In this sense, the viola da gamba as object is not just the starting point for my own historical journey, but it can also serve as a touchstone for the listener to begin theirs.

The 7-string viol I play throughout this project is exceptionally attractive, with lots of inlaid purfling all over the ribs and belly, and a carved head. Visually as well as sonically, the instrument itself is a particularly effective way-in for the listener. It is also, as previously stated, a modern copy of a 17th-century English instrument which survives severely modified by an 18th-century French hand. That information in

itself unlocks an interesting story about the early demise of the viol in England shortly after the Civil War, but its continued popularity in France well into the reign of Louis XV.

Similar stories are to be unlocked by other musical instruments. In the Metropolitan Museum in New York there is a bass viol labelled as being made by Richard Meares, but through a detailed study of its materials, proportions, and construction, Benjamin Hebbert was able to prove that it was in fact a half-finished instrument by Edward Lewis, which Richard Meares bought from Lewis's widow upon his death in 1717 and finished himself. This tells us not only something interesting about the instrument itself, but about life and business in the community of instrument makers working in St Paul's Churchyard at the beginning of the 18th century.[30]

In summary, this materials-orientated approach to both my personal relationship with the instrument *and* the way I share my musical practice with listeners provides both a richer historical foundation *and* a broader range of inspiring points of departure for everyone involved.

A Short Rant About Frets

What follows will certainly be an unnecessary tangent for some readers, but having expounded at length about the importance to me of a historically set-up viola da gamba, it feels necessary to mention at least a few examples of what this actually means. Now, in 2021, there are still a sizeable number of historical aspects of instrumental setup or playing technique that are mostly ignored by performers and luthiers alike. I place the blame primarily with the former, because when it comes to

finer and more changeable surface details of setup, most luthiers are happy to prioritise the desires of their customers, reserving their own assertions of responsibility for the construction of the instrument's body.

I could go on about viol setup for many pages, but for present purposes I would like to focus just on the thickness of frets. Viol frets are simply old strings tied on to the neck of the instrument, and we players often change them ourselves when they wear out. The only historical piece of written information about the thickness of frets (as far as I am aware) comes from none other than John Dowland, who writes in his introduction to Robert Dowland's *Variety of Lute Lessons* (1610) that the first two frets should be as thick as fourth strings, the next two should be third strings, and so on.[31] He says this rule is true for viols as well as lutes. There it stands, printed in black and white by one of the greatest practitioners of his age, and now readily available on IMSLP for all to read, yet it is something I have actually never seen on anyone else's viol. If we go a step further to consider the lower pitch of consort instruments and the likelihood that strings were thicker historically anyway,[32] it follows that historical frets were *significantly* thicker than we use today, in Dowland's circle at least.

I am of course well aware of the pitfalls surrounding overly literal interpretation of historical sources, yet in this case I have never heard anyone even attempt to mount an argument against the practice of using thick frets. I've been following Dowland's advice myself for years now and am very happy to report that it makes playing the viol much easier in several regards. To start with, chordal play stresses the left hand far less. Thick frets also create a much purer tone with less effort than thin frets, but most excitingly, thick frets allow the player a much greater flexibility of intonation. I don't mean the awkward bending of a note we often see viol players do in ensemble; I mean there is a wider pitch range available with thick frets, without having to resort to any unusual or even conscious finger manipulation. It essentially renders the viol able to play in almost any standard temperaments without having to adjust frets much at all. In short, there are nothing but advantages to using historically accurate thick frets, but it has bewilderingly not yet become part of common practice. Perhaps

many viol players have simply fallen into the habit of unquestioningly accepting instruments as they find them.

I realise I am definitely starting to sound like one of the “new fundamentalist” zealots Butt describes above, and I could happily continue ranting about the huge difference between clip-in frogs and the totally anachronistic (for viols) screw-frogs, or about equal tension stringing and how the practices described in Oliver Webber’s groundbreaking article from 1999 are just now starting to be adopted by a small group of players, or about the fact that Christopher Simpson gives explicit diagrams for the curvature of the bridge which are ignored by makers and players alike (but let me tell you, when you follow his recommendations it is life changing), but I have to reign myself in. I’m stepping down from the soapbox and we will return now to the V&A and the main focus of this work, the performance experiments.

References

↑1	The theoretical debate at the end of the 20th century is eloquently parsed by John Butt’s *Playing with History*, to which I refer principally, along with Taruskin and Goehr, and more recent writing by Haynes, Wilson, and a recent essay by Butt, among others.
↑2	Adorno, T.W. (1967) ‘Bach Defended Against his Devotees’, in *Prisms*. p. 145.
↑3	The importance of the instrument as historical object will receive greater attention below.
↑4	Various (2021), *Our Future Past: Early Music in Context*. https://aec-music.eu/userfiles/File/customfiles/rema-report_20201218113757.pdf

↑5	For what it's worth, I have decided to keep calling it Early Music, mainly because it is colloquially still the most widely used term, and the least philosophically dangerous. It feels like the other options were thought up by people who—rightly so—wanted to play Mozart on gut strings but needed the banner of authenticity to justify it. Historically Informed Performance implies that performers not ascribing to this label are somehow historically uninformed, which borders on the impossible. Plain old Historical Performance as the Guildhall calls it sidesteps this problem but implies a level of re-creationism that reflects neither the current reality of our industry nor my personal desires.
↑6	Butt, J. (2002) *Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance*. p. 34.
↑7	Wilson, N. (2013) *The Art of Re-enchantment: Making Early Music in the Modern Age*. p. 127. Here he is citing Irving, D.R.M. (2013) 'Historicizing performance practice: early music through time and space', *Early Music*, 41(1), pp. 83–85., who is in turn at that moment summarising Taruskin. Also citing a personal interview with Bernard Thomas, 9 November, 2012.
↑8	Goehr, L. (1994) *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*. p. 284.
↑9	Wilson (2013), p. 150.
↑10	Butt, J. (2016) 'Playing with History Again'. Available at: https://www.dunedin-consort.org.uk/blog/playing-with-history-again/ (Accessed: 27 January 2021).
↑11	Wilson (2013), p. 228.
↑12	Wilson, N. (2018) 'What's the Problem? Cultural Capability and Learning from Historical Performance', *Historical Performance*, 1, p. 207.

↑13	Wilson (2013), p. 137.
↑14, ↑17, ↑21	Butt (2016).
↑15	Kivy, P. (1998) *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance*. Cited in Butt (2002), p. 34.
↑16	Taruskin, R. (1995) *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance*. p. 13.
↑18	Glenn Gould interviewed by Bruno Monsaingeon
↑19	One notable exception would be London's Gabrieli Consort & Players. I was delighted the first time I performed with them to see a line in my contract about precisely what types of strings they expected me to have on my instrument!
↑20	Wilson (2013), p. 103.
↑22	Wilson (2013), p. 108.
↑23	Haynes, B. (2007) *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century*. p. 28.
↑24	Dreyfus, L. (1983) 'Early Music Defended against Its Devotees: A Theory of Historical Performance in the Twentieth Century', *The Musical Quarterly*, 69(3), pp. 297–322.
↑25	Dudley, S. (2013) *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*. p. 31.
↑26	Dudley (2013), p. 32.
↑27	Dudley (2013), p. 34.

↑28	Dennis, F. (2018) ‘Organology and material culture’, *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society*, 44, pp. 18–25.
↑29	Rognoni, G.R. (2019) ‘Preserving Functionality: Keeping Artifacts “Alive” In Museums’, *Curator: the Museum Journal*.
↑30	Hebbert, B. (2003) ‘The Richard Meares Viol in the Metropolitan Museum of Art Re-evaluated’, *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America*, 40, pp. 36–48.
↑31	Dowland, J. (1610) ‘Other Necessary Observations belonging to the Lute’, in *Varietie of Lute Lessons*.
↑32	Webber, O. (1999) ‘Real Gut Strings: Some New Experiments in Historical Stringing’, *The Consort*.