An open conclusion

As I said in the introduction to this thesis, the principal outcomes of this research project are those which remain embodied in my viol playing, but in the interest of drawing this document—though not my research—to a close, I will now attempt to draw together a few of the lessons I have learnt along the way, and also to fantasise a bit. In the final stages of writing-up this document, I looked back for the first time at my application materials from 2014 and 2015 for the V&A residency and for this PhD, and I was struck firstly by how present my fundamental questions already were back then, and secondly by how much more creative, suggestive, and inspired the tone of writing an application is in comparison with the job of structuring, supporting, and defending which I have hopefully at least *sort of* done in this thesis. It saddened me a little to feel that, in my efforts to legitimise my practice-as-research in an academically acceptable form, I had lost some of the spark of creatively suggesting unsupported or indefensible ideas, those inspired points of departure which are perhaps one of the most important outcomes from practical research. So with this in mind, the following paragraphs are an attempt to revisit the lessons learnt from my three performance experiments and their emergent epiphanies and expressive variables, but also to freestyle and leave some things open. Rather than being just a slightly messy conclusion, I hope this can serve as a collection of points of departure for a productive continuation.

I had set out on this research journey to examine a multiplicity of relationships between listener, performer, space, and repertoire, and while it was indeed these interrelationships that provided the structure for my three performance experiments at the V&A, the issues which emerged from these experiments—particularly when examined through the autoethnographic lens—drew me consistently back into myself. I don't see this as a bad thing, and the work on myself and my playing that

I've done would never have happened, were it not for the agencies of the listeners and spaces provoking my self-analysis through the structures of the three experiments.

In *Inside Voices*, I learnt that editing myself is not a necessary precondition of forming connections with others. I also learnt the benefits of showing a listener my emotional relationship to repertoire without worrying what they will think of it or of me. The listener's response is not something for which I can be responsible, but they are more likely to generate their own response, exercising their own agency within the act of listening, if I also exercise mine. Fearing that listeners won't like a piece that I love is a wastefully self-destructive way of thinking, which—if anything—will ultimately make listeners less likely to connect with the piece. Moving forward, this is especially important for my performance of more obscure or delicate repertoire, particularly when I myself am still trying to figure a piece out.

In *One Piece*, I saw that letting go of the idealised Sarabande meant I had microscopic control over every moment in whatever flawed reality of Sarabande I existed in at the time. The most important lesson from this analysis is that I do not have to *hide* from time or try to subvert time in order to survive, but that I actually can express my emotional identity whilst being present in time. It is not against the laws of physics. I will, however, still probably turn up five minutes late for rehearsal.

Comparing the *One Piece* Sarabande with the Allemande in *Inside Voices*, it feels like with the latter, my temporal alterations were a bit like a commentary on the piece while it was happening, like kids joking at the back of the class, but with the St Colombe Sarabande, by the end of day 2 in the Globe I felt like I was absolutely *in* it myself. In the Allemande I was a narrator, but in the Sarabande I was the actor deep in his role. The big challenge of *One Piece* for me was that the audience had so much freedom, and sometimes even a lot of indifference toward me, that in this context I felt like editing myself to please them was 1) pointless and 2) impossible. This repetition removed the need *and* the opportunity for me to edit myself; it left me to my own devices until I got so bored of faking it that I had to admit I was absolutely

actually *there*. In addition to bending time, agency can also be achieved by letting go of idealised expectations.

When writing up the *Live Studio Audience* experiment, I nearly identified its expressive variable as “mattering”, but it felt too clumsy. Yet for me one of the most important questions to come from that experiment was “What do I have to do to make myself feel like a take—or by extension a performance—really *matters*?”. The ephemerality of performance helps to encourage this sense of agency: “you’ve got one shot, don’t blow it” kind of thing. But when I want to record, which is an unavoidable and—certainly in early 2021—increasingly necessary part of being a professional musician, what structures can I create, either environmentally or in my own thinking, that encourage a sense of expressive agency in my recorded performances?

As a tiny appendix to the *Live Studio Audience* experiment, in November 2020 I was recording a video of a lyra viol Fantasia by Daniel Farrant at home.[1] Although I have multiple cameras and the technical wherewithal to edit together video seamlessly (and in other videos from that series have done so), I had decided to record this piece in a single take with a static camera. This was thus a commitment to making no edits in the roughly 3-minute long piece.

In this recording session, there were very many discarded takes of the first 25 seconds, but it took only two or three full takes before I found the “one”. While recording, when I was still close to the beginning of the piece, I felt like I could stop for any reason, for any little flaw, and it wouldn’t “waste” too much of a take because I hadn’t yet got very far. So I was very critical about the opening line, not that it was the hardest or most important thing in the piece, but just because I reasonably *could* reject and restart within the first line without feeling like I was wasting my energy. However, once I had satisfactorily passed a certain point in the second line, everything started to *matter* more. The “good” take became more valuable to me the longer it went on, and from this came a sensation not of anxiety, but of expressive freedom. In this little home session I’d found it so hard to play the opening beautifully, because I was struggling to find that frisson of agency, but as soon as I passed that point around 30 seconds in, I found an excitement and focus from

needing to deliver, and then I felt like my time-bending was more effectively expressive. It was flirting with an edge.

The most surprising thing for me in joining all this up is perhaps the least surprising to the outside observer: that much of my approach to music-making revolves around time, specifically playing against it. And it is manipulating time that makes me feel like I have agency. In my life generally speaking, feeling a sense of agency has always been difficult. I have always had mildly depressive tendencies and I usually struggle to get past the "dread" stage of existentialism, but when I bring myself in check with my little atheist *memento mori* moments, I instantly, if briefly, feel like have the capacity to act and influence my own existence.

Understanding more of my struggle to feel agency in *performance* has given me a new and deeper understanding of a specific recurring experience from my professional concert life. Years ago there was a chamber group I used to frequently guest with, and it was made up entirely of strong and sensitive chamber players under the artistic direction of an extremely intelligent and imaginative musician. However, several times in every dress rehearsal, we would come to a point where something wasn't working, but the director couldn't quite make up his mind about how to solve the problem. We'd try a few things, make suggestions, get frustrated, and ultimately leave the issue unresolved or maybe semi-resolved. These dress rehearsals were often rather stressful. But when we walked out on stage, all of these unresolved moments in the programme actually worked like a kind of expressive variable: we all knew that *something* had to happen in those moments, but we weren't sure exactly which way it was going to go. Luckily everyone in that group had excellent antennae and the result was that this ensemble gave some of the most fun, exciting, and spontaneous performances I've ever been part of, in Early Music. I don't mean to suggest that the artistic director did this intentionally, or consciously, but I now understand that this somewhat unusual rehearsal habit was a way of giving us all a greater sense of agency on stage.

Looking back to the relationship between material culture and Early Music, this all-important sense of agency is encouraged by focusing not on the musical work, but on the musical practice. Classical music doesn't need to rebrand as performance art, but as I see it, the artwork in question is not the historical musical work (even if attaining a better understanding of these works is part of our process); the artwork itself is the act of *playing* historical texts on the viola da gamba *for people*. This has been relatively clear when I've been presenting performance installations in a museum, but even when we take this concept back into mainstream classical concert life, it is still possible and productive to understand the artwork itself as the interaction between listener and performer, the intersectional performance of multiple listenings.

The main focus of this project has been on performance, and not on the curation of musical objects in museums, but it feels relevant to highlight at this point how a material culture approach to old instruments in museums' collections can help to bring their stories to life and build a more fluent bridge with the world of performance. So often, an unplayable instrument is almost apologetically relegated to a glass case, where at best its decoration can be admired, but it is often the least playable historical instruments that tell the most interesting stories. Many instruments bear visible scars that describe their various alterations and changing uses throughout their lifetime, but we so often ignore these "imperfections" in the interests of presenting a more historically accurate or pure version of the instrument. The detailed description of the extraordinary Sainprae Baryton in the V&A collection, for example, mentions that two of the original six tuning pegs were removed and the holes were filled in, but there is no mention of *why* this might have been done or for whom. There is no mention that at some point probably in the 19th century, someone felt this curious beautiful old thing needed to be made more like a cello in order to be musically useful, which unlocks a series of interesting questions about *who* was engaging with these antiques, what music they were playing on them, why they thought at that time like 4 strings was the only way forward, the complex balance between preservation and alteration that occurs whenever we use old things, and so

on. We don't have to *only* play Haydn Baryton trios in front of old barytons in cases. We could also try stringing a modern copy of a baryton as a cello and playing a Brahms Sonata on it and talking about some of the quirkier chamber music activities of the 19th-century salon.

On another practical note, classical concerts, and especially Early Music concerts, can do a lot to alienate listeners by putting too much emphasis on repertoire in advertising and presentation. Sure, if you're doing the St John Passion that's one thing; orchestras are a different matter. But if you are presenting a solo or chamber music programme of music by composers most audience members are not likely to be familiar with, it feels counterproductive to *foreground* these composers and works when our ultimate goal is for performers, listeners, and instruments to be in the same room *musicking together*. The long-dead composer is the least tangible element in the equation, and just as material culture studies would encourage a museum curator to focus first on a particularly beautiful vase's form and glaze rather than the conceptual objectives of Art Nouveau as a movement (but using the vase as a way *in* to the conceptual discussion), classical promoters can focus more on the people and instruments on stage without negating the genius of the composer. It can even be a way *in* to understanding that composer's genius even better.[2]

We already see this performer-focused formulation in almost all other genres of music. How many people have been shocked to discover that it was Dolly Parton and not Whitney Houston who wrote "I Will Always Love You"? At an Irish traditional music concert, only the performers are advertised and it is the players who are centred in the musical act, but before almost every piece they'll tell the audience who wrote the tunes and who they learnt them from, along whose cousin knew that piper in the first place and whose funeral they'd all just been to that day, etc, etc. And people who follow techno DJs have a very specific sense of what types of beats and ambiances each DJ will create in their performance, and they go to hear a DJ specifically for that experience. Yet, a DJ is essentially just pushing play on someone else's recording, albeit in a very sensitive and performative way with consideration for the listeners, repertoire, and space in which they perform (Perhaps the techno DJ

is the ultimate master of our little vector diagram?). Even in the commercially successful sectors of the classical world, most of the people who go to hear Jonas Kaufmann are not aware of what pieces he's going to sing.

This all may sound like symptoms of stardom, but it doesn't have to be. In my own more humble recent experience, I have found more and more concert promoters who are happy to advertise recitals with simply an artist biography and press kit. Some of the more conservative ones might still ask for the names of two or three composers, but it is becoming increasingly rare that I am asked to fix a solo recital programme in advance, and I try to avoid doing it whenever possible. Indeed, I try to avoid having a programme in the performance at all. I would rather give the audience a piece of paper with a biography and a description of my instrument, then tell them about the pieces as I play them, and publish a setlist online after the event, with links to recordings and further information about the works, composers, and instruments involved.

As I've said from the beginning, this has been a very self-centred research project, and it would be even more self-centred of me now to suggest that the story of my personal artistic journey had any kind of universal application. I do hope, however, that we can move toward dissolving the boundary between Early Music and so-called mainstream classical, or at least allowing that distinction to be less categorical and more loosely descriptive of how people spend their time. I believe that the model of the expressive variable can be a useful way of understanding interpretation as a creative act, by providing a *critical* space for performers' subjectivities, regardless of what kind of instrument or repertoire they're playing.

I also hope that as we continue to refine our relationships to the concept of historical authenticity, our actual technical instrumental and vocal practices can evolve. I do think it's a little bit sad nowadays to continue to present a consciously compromised historical instrumental practice under the banner of Historically Informed

Performance. I hope primarily that we can let go of the emotional need for the validating stamp of HIP, and focus on the beauty and expressivity of our performances as reason enough to give them. But I also hope that within our broader community of people who play early music (maybe it'll help if we stop capitalising it…), we can come to see the pursuit of organological historical accuracy as a valuable source of creative inspiration, rather than a backwards-looking fundamentalism.

In the broader field of musical performance, I hope we can more frequently move beyond familiar formulaic structures for our sharing of musical practices. I am thrilled to see the modern multisensory museum accepting and examining the role of sound in museum spaces, and I hope this can lead to even more live musical performance that goes beyond simply putting on concerts in museum spaces. And although the general necessity of digital musical performance in early 2021 doesn't always feel particularly inspiring, I hope that the stopping and resetting of live music can lead us to a richer multiplicity of performance practices in the very near future.

References

↑1	This was originally intended as part of a later abandoned "pandemic appendix" to this document, in which I self-recorded a series of lyra viol pieces at home using different audio and video techniques, in order to look at issues of liveness and intimacy in self-produced recording. Ultimately I felt its relevance to the rest of the project was too tangential, but this Farrant Fantasia offers a useful anecdote for building on the NHMR recording sessions.
↑2	Note to self: this probably has something to do with what I don't like about the way we play and present Bach.