

Singing Early Music: a conversation.

John Potter and Richard Wistreich

When John Potter and Richard Wistreich founded their ensemble Red Byrd in 1989 they announced that they ‘believe[d] that the point of singing music of the past is to illuminate the present’.¹ This was an attempt to distil something of the conversations and ideas they had been exchanging for a number of years, while each worked in various different early and contemporary music ensembles. For this special edition of *Early Music* they publish a recent conversation (conducted this time largely by e mail) about singing, the early music movement, and higher education.

Richard: When *Early Music* hit the newsstands for the first time in 1973, you were freelancing in London with some of the seminal early music groups, including David Munrow’s Early Music Consort, putting into practice his occasionally weird ideas about historical singing. You also joined Ward Swingle’s new Swingle II, which set extraordinary new standards for precision, polish and breadth of repertoire. Meanwhile, I was joining King’s College Choir and beginning my apprenticeship in another parallel world of bizarre vocal authority. How lucky I was to arrive in London four years later when the experimental years of the first early music revival had not quite come to an end (I was fortunate to join Michael Morrow’s *Musica Reservata* for its final year) and the commercial power of the record industry had not yet quite established its stranglehold on so much professional activity in the UK in the performance of music from before 1750 in ways that soon afterwards began to dominate the lives of most rank and file musicians.

So, you and I are, for better or worse, ‘veterans’ of something that still doggedly hangs on to the name of ‘the early music movement’. Certainly, the sense of ‘early music’ as some sort of collective and progressive endeavour (I will avoid adding other adverbial riders such as ‘revolutionary’ or even ‘ideologically-driven’ to this descriptor), was to a major extent what drew me to wanting to be part of its milieu in those years, just as strong a motivation perhaps as the intrinsic allure of the music itself. I can remember many moments when the feeling of ‘running on the front of the wind’ while talking about ideas, rehearsing and performing was so liberating by comparison with the drudgery of other kinds of musical experiences I had had in other genres, including, I have to say, quite a few in the world of new music. Your career as a singer has always included contemporary ensemble music – from Swingle II and Electric Phoenix in the 70s and 80s to the Gavin Bryars Ensemble and other solo projects now. When I look at your recent (post-Hilliard Ensemble) activities involving early music – including the Dowland Project, *Being Dufay* and *Voices and Vihuelas*, not to mention some of our own attempts at various kinds of flight with Red Byrd over the past 25 years – I get the impression that, whatever you may feel now about the idea of an ‘early music movement’ (and perhaps we’ll come to that later), you are still motivated by a similar sense of adventure and creativity, and that ‘early music’ is actually ‘new music’. Am I right?

John: I’ve never thought of it in quite those terms, but you’re quite right – the sense of adventure is a crucial part of it. We’ve both had music and singing in our bones from childhood, and I suppose (a little arrogantly, perhaps) we took it all very much for granted. Then suddenly it was the 70s and 80s and we got heavily involved in both early music and

the vocal *avant-garde*. They seemed to be two sides of the same coin, and it was the almost visceral excitement of engaging with the (to us) musical unknown that was common to both. Yes, you're right – 'early music' was also the new music; very similar to the progressive rock movement that was happening at the same time. And all three musics – prog rock, early music and the *avant-garde* were in a sense revolutionary – all those involved had a real stake in the process and unlike our rather disciplined musical childhoods no one told us what to do – we had to invent not only the result but the complete process. I suspect we were never either true 'early musicians' nor proper avant-gardists – it was the bits that were common to both that did it for us then. But there's one significant aspect of early music which made it for me the true 'new' music: the *avant-garde*, however challenging and experimental, was (just like the music we'd been brought up on) the composer's (or the conductor's) music. In early music the composers were all dead, so they couldn't own the music like a living composer. There were no rules or conventions, and trying to figure out what a 'score' meant could be an intoxicating collaborative experience. You realised that unlike 'normal' music you couldn't just perfect an 'interpretation' because you had no idea of what you were aiming at. That was the real revolutionary moment for me: the idea that there could be an infinite number of possible performances, some good, some less good, but each one different from the one before and valid in its own right. It was then only a short step to realising that the roles of composer and performer were much more blurred before the twentieth century. You can tell Stravinsky or Schoenberg are great composers just by looking at their scores; Monteverdi's music doesn't work that way – it needs performers to bring it to life. And the further back you go, the more equal becomes the creative relationship between composer and performer.

Richard: This resonates with another a second 'rush of excitement', when it began to dawn on me that the overwhelmingly score-based 'historical musicology' I encountered as a performer – which, for better or worse was (and remains in some quarters) the self-appointed parent and guardian of early music performance – might well be both challenged as the dominant epistemology and then redirected in the light of the knowledge that I (and many others) had acquired in the process of our own experience of actually having prepared and performed so much of it. I felt that a lot of the music-making I found myself involved with was still stuck in what you so rightly signal as characterized as a poverty-stricken paradigm of 'the performer as interpreter of musical scores', rather than as co-creator or re-creator. In the late 80s, after more than ten years on the road with various ensembles, and while continuing to work pretty well full-time as a jobbing freelance, I rather nervously took myself back to university to try to make good at least some of my ignorance of the history of Renaissance music and music theatre. My motivation for this academic return was, perhaps, a realisation that notwithstanding my good fortune to have started in the early music trade under the guidance of some notable challengers of orthodoxy, whose innate heterodoxy appealed to me as I sought to shake off the shackles of the negative aspects of an Oxbridge collegiate training (and here I would single out Andrew Parrott as one of the most significant for me at the time), I still could not quite see the point of performing music either just in order to reveal and demonstrate 'historical correctness', however hedged around by disclaimers and provisionality such claims might be, or simply to make a new case for the existing canon and its expansion to embrace lots more works. Not that I mean to suggest that there was not much heartfelt, meticulously researched, and sometimes inspiring and ear-opening music-making on the way, only that its inherent claims to supra-audible authority seemed so often unfounded in genuine experimental process.

John: I remember a time (after a Red Byrd gig in the Birmingham Early Music Festival) when we were both prodded into coming out as musicologists. We were ambushed! We once

drew up a list of academic terms that we'd never use in our own writing (I think it included 'epistemology...'). I also engaged with critical theory while doing my PhD, and although I enjoyed it as an intellectual challenge (and still do) it didn't seem to have anything much to do with real musical life. I'd performed well enough before I came across all those words ending in 'ology'. I also think of myself as a historian, and I also find abstract historical musicology too often divorced from the likely historical reality. The early music movement has never had much connection with the shambolic, messy, and just plain confusing nature of historical reality (which is where the real excitement is for me). The 'composer's intention' charade was an intellectually lazy concept that enabled musicians, record companies and audiences to bypass history altogether. There have of course been examples of more productive collaborations between musicologists and performers, particularly where the materials themselves are so open in the first place that there is no alternative to an experimental and highly creative approach: Red Byrd's Parisian organum project with Mark Everist (whose story is told from Mark's side elsewhere in this issue) springs to mind. It didn't help, either, that institutions had discovered the non-concept of 'excellence' at about the same time (so much easier to be excellent in determining what Bach or Monteverdi might have wanted rather than speculate on what they actually got). It's a shame that early music was hijacked by musicology, making so much of it the preserve of an elite (who, as you imply, were too often barking up the wrong organological tree). It's no coincidence that there's very little sign of Lean Methodology in early music: Lean Musicology, Lean Pedagogy? Slim it all down and make sure it all has performative value.

Richard: Not content with more than forty years of seemingly indefatigable performing and encouragement of other musicians, including many years of service in a series of international super-groups that has involved, besides all the live performance, incalculable hours waiting around in airports, probably thousands of hours in recording studios and freezing churches, as well as plenty in libraries, you have also been (and continue to be) a prolific researcher and writer about singing in the past and the present, not least in your latest book *A History of Singing*, written jointly with Neil Sorrell.² One thing that has characterized your developing analyses of the concept of singing as both a technical and a social phenomenon ever since *Vocal Authority*³ through to recent contributions to various Cambridge *Histories* and *Companions*, has been a deep-seated sense that as there can never be 'historical singing' based on evidence that predates recording, this therefore renders the institutionalization of the teaching of early music either pointless or worse – damaging to creativity. Most recently, in *A History of Singing*, you have written 'the history of classical singing for the last hundred years or so has been one of stasis – small, frozen repertoires perpetuated by conservative teaching regimes focusing on the abstract pursuit of excellence rather than creativity'.⁴ I have, like you, spent many recent years working in academic institutions, including a lengthy spell with the title of 'Professor of Singing (Early Music)' in a German conservatoire and I can think of many reasons for agreeing with you (and a few for disagreeing).⁵ But to put the question perhaps rather bluntly: do you think that singing that is informed by historical knowledge is firstly valid; second, can it be taught; and third, could institutions be changed in any way to make such an endeavour possible?

John: There's no question about the validity of historical knowledge: everything is informed by its past to some extent. For early musicians the question (for those inclined to ask it) was what should be recovered from the past and what left in dignified obscurity. So the connection between early music as a concept and history as reality has always been ambivalent (to say the least). It all begins to unravel when we try to grapple with nineteenth-

century music, as early music's own ideology and beliefs come up against the reality of the first recordings.

Richard: Indeed – in 2002 you and I took part in the annual three-day symposium on historical performance practice at the Schola Cantorum in Basel. These events have been bringing performers and musicologists together to debate different topics for the past 35 years; their proceedings are subsequently published in the *Basler Jahrbuch für Historische Musikpraxis*. Quite significantly, I think, this was the first time that the series had turned its attention to the question of singing since the inaugural event in 1977 (which focused solely on medieval song and legacy of the Studio der Frühen Musik). I sensed that the subject has been assiduously avoided at the Schola, as it has been everywhere else where 'historical performance' is taught in conservatoires, in favour of the far safer ground of questions of organology, musical sources, historical documents, even hand gestures – indeed anything rather than deal with the elephant that has been hanging around in the early music movement's room, probably ever since Mendelssohn brought in soloists from the opera house to sing in his revival of the St Matthew Passion in 1829.

John: In my presentation at Basel, I played some recordings of Adelina Patti, whose extravagant *portamento* caused the assembled company much amusement. "Do you teach nineteenth-century performance style and technique", I asked? "Of course we do". "Does it sound like that?" "Of course it doesn't" came the reply. There was a collision between the expectations generated by thirty years of early music, and the apparent awfulness of actual history. And a nagging feeling that we might have got something wrong somewhere. The truth is we invented the early music vocal sound based on what we wanted it to be like, and on the voices of a small number of singers with particular talents. The small-scale, refined, straight, disciplined early music singing that we were used to came out of nowhere (or perhaps the head of David Munrow!): it wasn't the product of research (and you won't find any evidence for it in the literature). Even when singers began to look at pedagogical sources and so on, they (we) chose to ignore those bits that didn't fit the model we had in our heads. An entire pedagogy was developed by people who claimed to know how seventeenth or eighteenth century singing was supposed to go, but whose knowledge was based mostly on their own experience of the late twentieth century early music movement, rather than an understanding of the sources. The huge success of early music recordings then made it impossible to go back and start again. There's nothing wrong with the results, incidentally, it's just that it's misleading to use a term like 'historically informed'.

The earliest early musicians (like us) were self-taught, and both you and I were among those who once called for early music singing to be taught in music colleges on a par with the opera singing which increasingly came to dominate conservatory thinking in the late twentieth century. With hindsight, I think this was a mistake, as the industrial approach to opera singing is now applied to early music. For singers, conservatoires essentially remain opera factories, but many now have another production line which claims to produce early music singers as well. They can produce very competent performers who all nevertheless sound rather similar (and in such quantity that many of them won't find work). Music educational institutions are programmed to deliver teaching. This is something of a paradox for those of our generation who weren't taught, and it highlights the fundamental difference between teaching and learning. You can teach the basics of singing (it doesn't take long) but after that, historical singing is a matter of research. Research is learning – you can't teach it. Universities don't help either as they seem to think that teaching and research are umbilically linked to each other: they aren't. If institutions are going to do more than just reflect political and financial

realities there has to be a basic shift from teaching to learning. They need to become places where learning is enabled by individual research, not disciplined by teaching schedules. There is a role for teachers, but as consultants perhaps rather than gurus.

I jumped off the academic tree in terminal frustration, but you've gone from being a German Professor of Singing to a British university lecturer to a fully-fledged academic Professor in a conservatoire, and I can't help thinking you're going to say it's all very well for me to rant on, but you actually have to deal with these issues at the sharp end...

Richard: In fact, I agree with most of your points. Institutions which educate musicians are in urgent need of radical reform at just the time when this is less likely to happen than at any time in the past 40 years, because in the coming period of devastating attack and retrenchment in higher education, conservatoires and universities (in the UK at least) will probably feel the need to batten down the hatches and wait for the storm to pass. Nevertheless, the conservatoire where I teach (the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester) has been persuaded by the idea that the best way to open the eyes and ears of young musicians to the thrill of playing music from before about 1750, with which even today most of them have never had more than the most cursory contact other than the odd bit of Bach (mainly because too many have spent their young adulthoods alone in small practice rooms perfecting their ability to reproduce the canon), is not to create more specialist courses in early music and certainly not to try to persuade them to choose historical instruments over modern. Rather, with the limited resources at its disposal, it will do its best to let the students work with as many interesting professional 'early' musicians as possible and support them to make their own experiments and find solutions, just as they do with contemporary music of all kinds. Thus, I certainly do not think there should be some specific, professionally definable specialism called 'early music singer'; nor would I any longer attempt to try to invent a course that would educate a young student to become one (having tried for twelve years in another conservatoire). But equally, the concepts of 'opera singer' or 'musical theatre singer' are to my mind, other anachronisms that need to be prised out of the curriculum of conservatoires and stage schools as soon as possible.

It may be that in the decade between 2002 – when you wrote 'When we talk of historically informed performance, we are informing ourselves of an ideal which may have had no basis in reality'⁶ – and 2012, the idea that there can be no 'historical performance' is no longer just a debating point among philosophers of the post-modern but has truly permeated at least parts of the professional world of performance. But this could, ironically, mean that the new idea of a 'valueless' approach to the performance of early music may have made it easier for musical directors to impose their often dubiously-founded orthodoxies on new generations of young singers, who feel they must toe the line to get into paying work and hold on to it. What worries me is that all that self-empowerment that we gained by informing ourselves – at a time when, as you rightly say, we had no alternative – will pass young singers in conservatoires by, as they battle to find their own voices in what is in many ways a more deeply conservative classical music scene than it was in the early seventies.

John: It's good to hear the positive case for a broader approach to pedagogy, and let's hope it's replicated elsewhere and does indeed generate a sense of self-empowerment. In a sense, the bolshie early music teenager has become the genteel grown-up success story. But let's hope it grows old a bit more disgracefully.

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1 <http://www.john-potter.co.uk/red-byrd.php> [

² J. Potter and N. Sorrell, *A History of Singing* (Cambridge, 2012).

³ J. Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* (Cambridge, 1998).

⁴ Potter and Sorrell, *A History of Singing*, p. 294.

⁵ See R. Wistreich, 'Teaching and Practising Historically Informed Singing: Who Cares?', *Basler Jahrbuch für Historische Musikpraxis*, xxvi (2002), pp. 17–30

⁶ J. Potter, 'Past Perfect & Future Fictions', *Basler Jahrbuch für Historische Musikpraxis*, xxvi (2002), pp. 9–16, at p. 9.