

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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A Note from the Editors

The late early music festival?

Over the last twenty years I have spent nearly every summer happily trailling around the ever-increasing number of early music festivals, mainly in England but occasionally also elsewhere. During the last couple of years, however, I have felt a growing sense of unease: not only were a large number of the concerts I attended leaving me cold, but many were of a standard that can only be described as poor. Initially I looked for an explanation inside myself: I'm getting older, more jaded; I no longer approach the festivals with the musical virginity of youth; basically I'm spoilt, getting too much of a good thing.

Nevertheless, after much thought, I was forced to put these arguments to one side. After all, I do still enjoy the occasional concert or two, with no direct correlation observed between the pleasure gained and age of the performers, their nationality or, indeed, the date of the repertoire played. Given that I attend festivals on a purely voluntary basis — wanting, willing them to be good — I could only think that some other factor or factors were contributing to my new-found anxiety.

Perhaps the answer lies in the transformation over the last twenty years in the profile of the early music audience. In England in the early 1980s there was still discernible link between early music and the folk-music, arts-and-crafts, environmentally-concerned, liberal, besandalised world. Audiences were made up of diverse ages and social groups. Go to an early music festival now and you will observe a mainly elderly audience, all seemingly from a frighteningly similar social background. The greying of the early music movement is to some extent predictable; the same trend is occurring in mainstream classical concerts. Yet I do believe that certain issues need to be addressed.

Firstly, the cost of tickets is now prohibitively expensive for those on limited incomes, typically the young, and those with families. While market forces and lack of sponsorship dictate that low ticket charges are unsustainable, the hope, commonly expressed, that these social groups will become the audience of the future — once they become more financially secure — is, I am afraid, a pious one. Secondly, the formation of Friends' organisations militates against the young in two ways. To start with, large swathes of seating are instantly reserved, so that cheaper seating tends to be limited to the back of the nave, or behind a pillar. As a student I used to turn up early to procure a good seat: all I need now is an understanding credit card: the message is clear — enthusiasm doesn't pay (at least, not enough). The Friends' groups, made up of the wealthy, the culturally-aspiring, and the elderly, all help to put a stamp on the character of the Festival. One can be forgiven for seeing them as a cypher for the current management teams of early music festivals. Finally, early music itself, aided by its assimilation of ever-later repertoire, has entered the mainstream: hence the burgeoning number of festivals, a move that deprives early music of its radical and alternative flavour and therefore, by definition, makes it less likely to appeal to the young.

The result of the geriatrification and gentrification of the early music festival is its capture by the heritage movement. Most of the criticisms applied to the heritage movement can also be applied to early music these days: a tendency to tart up, rather than include the dirt; a moral indignation against the distasteful, vulgar or shocking; a view of the past, and its music, as static, conservative and non-threatening; a tendency to overpraise the trivial. The pretty voices and tinkling instruments are just the bone china that this sector of society takes with its cucumber sandwiches and tea. Here is the focus group for the early music movement, and here are the results: a music designed for background listening, technologically compatible with the CD, yet with added snob value.

Don't misunderstand me: I'm not making a plea for early music to become politically correct. I'm not even saying that the thin, beautiful sounds produced by so many of our groups are wrong *per se* — only that it would be an error to allow them to remain unchallenged, regardless of the provenance, date and style of the music played. Festivals help to homogenize the 'early music sound' by promoting the groups and singers who are associated with it, and by failing to promote those who challenge it. Or perhaps there aren't any that do challenge — perhaps we have all reached a cosy agreement, blessed by the CD industry. Groups now tend to be judged by their discography rather than through their live performances. In national newspapers, reviews of early music recordings far outnumber reviews of concerts. Any deviations to this status quo are more of a marketing ploy than a real attempt to provide an alternative; for example, a much-lauded, highly awarded (discographically speaking) group that was promoted as a challenge to our own English Oxbridge chuch music style, turned out in live performance, to accept all the familiar conventions (the same old *contenance angloise*, but with knobs on!).

At least that group could sing. A worrying trend is that the accusation of poor musicianship, which so often unfairly beset the early music movement in its infancy, now carries some truth. String-playing in particular is often abysmal. Has the movement been a victim of its own success? In order to make a living musicians need to practise a kind of

music-group pluralism, and survive through excellent sight-reading, a skill which compensates for scanty rehearsal schedules. This provides another reason for the standard 'early music sound' as players can swap with ease from one ensemble to the next, each sharing the same technique and performance practice, and further, it also provides another reason for groups to concentrate on recordings, as in the recording studio errors can be easily erased or amended.

The audience reaction at a music festival is always rapturous, whatever the standard of performance; if you've paid a lot of money for your ticket, you like to assume that what's put in front of you is good. In some recent early music festivals decent music-making, for the lack of anything better, has seemed inspirational. A result of this ad hoc approach to music-making is a fidelity to the page that is against the very essence of so much early music. Improvisation does not record well either, though the best groups today are those which make improvisation central to their art.

Underlying all this is a crisis of identity. What exactly is "early music"? There are three strands to the movement: the performance of early repertoire; performance in period style; and performance on period instruments. The hope is that these all come together, but the signs are that they are beginning to drift apart. As regards the exploration of lesser-known repertoire, it seems to have been put on hold as groups look later and later into the well-established Classic Charts territory, rather than, say, into exploring the contemporaries of these 'Great Composers': concerts that were a revelation of past music are themselves rapidly becoming a thing of the past. As for exploration of performance style, it has become, as noted above, standardised: regularly, aided by a lot of sloppy talk about the meaninglessness of authenticity, we hear that performance research should not dictate feelings (and therefore practice). It is now very rare to hear concerts that pay more than lip-service to period style. Thus, increasingly, the early music movement is confined to the third strand: performance on period instruments. Players often have two strings to their bow, a modern instrument and a period one, and employ a few simple rules, such as using less vibrato — but if you can't manage to do that, don't worry! Modern pianists turn to the fortepiano and play it in exactly the same way as the modern piano. The feeling that a baroque cello, for instance, is an instrument with which has a technique worth acquiring for its own sake, is nowadays very rare.

It is of course unfair to put full blame on the festivals for this sad state of affairs, yet they do help to fossilise it, and do little to break the mould. Some solutions? English Festivals might try to promote non-English groups, and Continental Festivals might try to get over their Bach fetish. Young groups which are exciting and adventurous provide a cheap solution; careful consideration should be given to programming, to avoid runthroughs or promos for the latest CD; concerts could be linked with thorough explorations of latest performance research; links with traditional musics and improvisation could be encouraged.

If early music festivals can't look at what they package with a more critical attitude, then perhaps they should come to an end. From the 1960s onwards the early music movement shed its antiquarian role and forced modern audiences to reexamine the music of the past, and by extension that music's agenda. It is one of the most important movements of the second-half of the last century, and can still be a source of profound creativity. Many performers, groups, and even some festival-type events are exempt from the criticisms above — and, while they go on, there is still some hope that we can recapture, before it is too late, the adventurous and challenging meeting with music of the past which seemed so important twenty years ago.

Outing the clavichord

Gary Blaise's article takes our magazine into the field of clavichord studies — not strictly within our remit, but, as we are more-and-more coming to realise, this quiet cousin of ours needs outing. Often the clavichord reminds me of one of those personal ads at the back of the *New York Review of Books*: Professional instrument, retiring, discreet, seeks repertoire. It seems that the repertoire itself has been in the closet, and only in our more tolerant times can the musicologist and performer act as a supportive dating agency. We shall continue to cover the clavichord in future issues with reviews of books and recordings.

Our other three article are all from regulars: Pamela Nash concludes her three-part series on transcribing Bach for the harpsichord; Gwilym Beechy surveys Field's still too little-heard solo piano music, and Claudio di Veroli looks at the rhythmic interpretation of Rameau.

Finally we have our usual review section. Plenty for everyone, and a sincere thanks to all our contributors.

Coming up...

Our next issue is going to be very special. With contributions from Nicholas Mitchell, Joel Katzman and Paula Woods, and interviews with Philip Pickett and Sharona Joshua, we lead a full-scale re-examination of the Renaissance harpsichord. This will be essential reading, so please make sure your subscriptions are up-to-date and try to persuade friends and institutions to support us, an independent voice in the early music world. The issue after this returns to address broader issues of performance practice and the music written for early keyboard instruments: of that, more later!