

Early music – and why we need it

Patrice Connelly

Once upon a time, I asked my piano teacher who and what came before Bach. As a teenager, I'd figured out that the pieces by Bach that I was learning couldn't have been born from thin air. She was really puzzled. I don't know if anyone had ever asked her that before. There was no discussion and my question hung in the air like the proverbial elephant in the room.

Actually, I'd unwittingly had an experience of early music before this when the school orchestra played the *Capriol Suite* by Peter Warlock. I loved those pieces but had no idea where they'd come from.

I started my BMus at the University of Sydney; there was this wonderful library with a giant music collection. I discovered music new to me written by composers I'd not heard of dating from over five hundred years ago – a gold mine for a 17-year-old explorer. And the mystery of the *Capriol Suite* was solved in first-year music history when I heard the music of Claude Gervaise and his contemporaries – a satisfying realisation.

It was the 1970s. The early music movement was just beginning to burgeon in England and Europe after tentative steps of the 1960s. It had taken a while; Arnold Dolmetsch rediscovered many early instruments over fifty years before, and the Dolmetsch family were some of the first performers in the 20th century on harpsichord, recorder and viola da gamba.

At Sydney University, Winsome Evans had formed the Renaissance Players. In addition to students being encouraged to try out early instruments bought by the Music Department, early music was actually taught in music history, a chronological course beginning with very early music and progressing over three years to the present. This is an excellent way of working as it gives music students a feel for where things have come from and a context in which they can interpret the sounds they hear. I feel this way should be mandatory for all music students.

Music styles influenced by the past

Everything I've studied in music history has told me that music is written as a reaction to some stimulus. Music always mirrors its time as well as its composers and the instruments they wrote for. You can see it clearly in music of the last three centuries. Speaking in very general terms, the Classical period was a reaction to the Baroque and Rococo – a clearing of the Baroque bizarreness with its heavy ornamentation which climaxed in the excesses of

the Rococo. If you can't see it in the music, look at the architecture which has close parallels. The Classical era brought in cleaner lines, but musically and architecturally, a more 'enlightened' or 'scientific' approach before the Romantic period with its themes of nationalism, pastoralism and patriotism.

What I'm saying is that you can't fully understand the music of one period, without understanding where it came from and what it was reacting against. It's the pendulum swing, which Jung called 'enantiodromia'. Broadly, music has swung from head to heart and back again over time, probably for as long as music has existed.

This fact certainly wasn't lost on Johannes Brahms, as he embraced a remarkably broad study of music for his era, influenced by the violinist and composer Joseph Joachim who suggested that Brahms study Baroque counterpoint and early music. Brahms went much further back to the 15th century, to the works of Heinrich Isaac and his contemporaries. By the 1860s, Brahms was programming works by Giovanni Gabrieli, Heinrich Schutz and others from the 16th and 17th centuries alongside works by Mozart, Beethoven and Mendelssohn. If you are studying a work by Brahms, would it not be useful to know more about early music to understand Brahms' compositional processes?

Most musicians today are trained in music written sometime after 1700. Bach, Handel and Domenico Scarlatti were 15 in 1700, Vivaldi and Telemann were just starting their first jobs. If you know little to no music emanating from before 1700, it's the same as starting a 300-page novel at page 268, without the faintest idea of what was written in the preceding pages, or starting to watch a movie 50 minutes in: you just don't have the context.

Knowing music history, both as a discipline as well as an underpinning to playing music of any era, is invaluable. Music theory has its roots back in the Middle Ages and Renaissance periods. Notation was first devised as a mnemonic device at least as far back as the 10th century. Plato talks about the modes, so it's possible that there are many lost manuscripts or even an aural tradition on music theory which came long before the Middle Ages.

Flexible key signatures and barlines

Everything changes over time, and the last 50 years is no exception. When I was at university, the early music movement was excitingly new. We were told to read the old treatises and copy everything that was said. This concept of 'authenticity' was rife at the time, and looking back on it, fairly inflexible. But flexibility is fundamental to understanding and participating in early music, as well as something which is incredibly important in music education. We've now moved on from slavish copying to understanding more about style and taste of the

period, its context in history and how we might relate to that.

Flexibility of thought on this level can be more challenging for musicians today, used to standardised clefs, key and time signatures, diatonic and chromatic scales, regular barring and rules. Just as spelling wasn't standardised in centuries past, nor was music. Everything evolved over time, and composers worked out ways of doing things. Barlines, for example, were convenient markers, and in some 17th century manuscripts they didn't represent a set number of beats in the bar, but rather a space into which the scribe would stuff notes till they ran out of room.

Until the diatonic scale became established around the 17th and 18th centuries, music was either modal, or a combination of diatonic and modal writing. Modes are also found in music education systems such as Orff and Kodaly, as well as in the music of Bartok and others who were influenced by folk music. But modal music isn't just the province of the classroom, with some highly sophisticated contrapuntal works which are part of the early string repertoire. They may be written for viols, but there's nothing to stop modern string players from exploring this music.

The transition from modal to diatonic music helped standardise key signatures. It's not uncommon, for example, in music of 17th century England to find D minor with no flat, G minor with one flat and so on. Often, the missing flat would be put in as an accidental, but not always, turning parts of a piece from D minor into Dorian mode.

Music of earlier eras was often composed without barlines and used (to us) unfamiliar time and key signatures, as well as strange clefs. The history of printing influenced this dramatically. In using movable type, it was important to stay as much on the stave as possible, as leger lines often did not print well. In order to do this, the clef would be changed rather more often than we think of now. It wasn't until engraving became more common that this became less necessary, and eventually the ottava sign was invented, allowing even more flexibility within modern clefs.

Repertoire summary

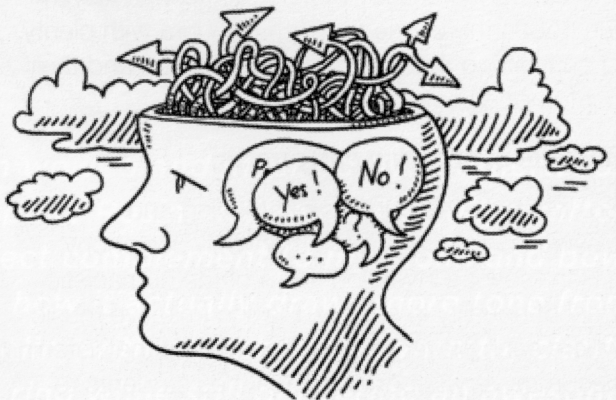
Here's a short summary for those who aren't aware of the amazing diversity of music for strings written in earlier centuries.

In the Renaissance, we have secular and sacred music. Secular music includes the massive consort repertoire from the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries for three to six (sometimes more) strings, such as fantasias, dances, ricercari and canzon. The consort repertoire expanded into 'broken consorts', comprising recorders, cittern, viols or violins, and

Choosing your next Instrument

The effort invested in 'getting it right' should be commensurate with the importance of the decision.

Daniel Kahneman



Some Suggestions:

- Come up with an algorithm for choosing the best one (get help with this if needed).
- Make a list, look widely, and make a recording of trials noting who is playing, what strings are on it/quality of set up and the acoustics of the space. Try to compare like with like or make compensation for these.
- Don't be too influenced by a salesperson that plays it for you, remember the sound you hear comes mostly from the player not the instrument.
- Get advice from another player(s). Someone you like but who doesn't care about your feelings.
- Try to imagine re-evaluating your decision 1 or more years into the future. You are now a better player. Make note of what you got right about your decision and what you didn't, and the reasons for these.

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other instruments. There's also a vast collection of repertoire in tablature for which you do need a fretted instrument such as a viol or lute. A smaller offshoot of this repertoire is the lute song, where you would have voice, bass viol and lute (or voice, cello and guitar).

Strings would also play in early music theatre works known as masques, mixing the early violin family with the viols and possibly other instruments. The sacred consort works include verse anthems, such as those by Orlando Gibbons, where a choir is accompanied by a consort of viols.

In the Baroque era, strings played sonatas with continuo, and multi-instrumental sonatas grew into concerti grossi by the 18th century. In Italy in the 1580s there was the birth of opera with plenty of early string music by Peri, Monteverdi and their contemporaries.

Benefits of studying early music

So, what are the benefits of studying and playing early music? Let's start with polyphony, a Renaissance invention, born of the humanistic ideal of equality in society. Playing imitative music where each player has one line means that listening becomes very important; it teaches students to work with each other in a different way from playing homophonically. Each student has their own 'voice' to contribute in a democratic way. The player with the first iteration of a subject chooses how it is played, and the others need to follow that. This can lead to discussion, trials of different ideas and (one hopes) consensus on the outcome.

Early music has a massive, and for modern musicians, a largely forgotten repertoire of beautifully crafted works. Consort music by Orlando Gibbons, William Byrd, John Jenkins, William Lawes and many others can be played and enjoyed on modern strings, though its true beauty will be amplified when played on the viols it was intended for. For English music, this was a truly golden era of polyphonic repertoire, culminating in the extraordinary fantasias

by Henry Purcell, composed in 1680. (What is amazing is that, within a year or so, he was composing trio sonatas in the Italian tradition!) A knowledge of the fantasias from 1680 will subtly help to inform performance of his later music.

I see many possibilities for early music in music education. In church schools with choirs, the verse anthem with a consort of viols or with modern strings provides new opportunities in music making. There were also pieces called 'Cries' in the 17th century English repertoire. For five or six voices, doubled by instruments, these lend great opportunities for dramatic performance, including costuming and props and are a lot of fun for performers and audience.

Then there are the musical challenges which are valuable for senior students. Combining recorders with strings in small groups means that intonation between the two instruments has to be negotiated. Using theory knowledge, such as chords and intervals when interpreting figured bass in continuo lines, is a highly valuable performance skill. There are complex syncopations in a lot of the consort repertoire which will challenge counting; once conquered, the student gains an invaluable skill.

I'd love to share all the wonderful music I've played and enjoyed with a much wider audience. To do this, I want to remove the 'ageist' divide so that what we now call 'early music' simply becomes mainstream. It's happening in Europe and in places in the US. We have early music departments in universities and conservatoria in Australia (mostly in Sydney and Melbourne). Others are starting to see the light.

Follow me, folks! I'm off to the 17th century for a shedload of fun!

Patrice Connelly is the owner of Saraband Music, publisher and retailer of music and strings. She has an MMus (Hons) from the University of Sydney and has taught viola da gamba since the 1980s. She recently chaired the Early Music Forum at the 2018 AUSTA Conference, and this article has arisen from her talk.

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