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Gadamer and the Hermeneutics of Early Music Performance

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Abstract

The success of the early music movement raises questions about performing historical works: Should musicians perform on period instruments and try to reconstruct the original style? If a historically “authentic” performance is impossible or undesirable, what should be the goal of the early music movement? I turn to Gadamer to answer these questions by constructing the outlines of a hermeneutics of early music performance. In the first half of the paper, I examine Gadamer’s critique of historical reconstruction and argue that this critique sheds light on mistaken tendencies and misunderstandings within the early music movement, but it does not discredit the movement as such. In the second half of the paper, I attempt to show how Gadamer’s dialogical account of historical consciousness provides a framework for understanding what historically informed performance is seeking to accomplish, as well as its advantage over a Nietzschean approach.

Keywords

early music – Gadamer – historically informed performance – hermeneutics – philosophy of music – Nietzsche

1 Introduction

Classical music today is oriented toward the past. It is true, of course, that living composers continue to produce new and significant works. But the overwhelming majority of the music heard in concert halls and on recordings

comes from composers long dead. Indeed, we are so accustomed to this situation that it hardly seems remarkable. What could be more natural than playing and listening to Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven? And yet the seeming familiarity of these masters hides a fundamental problem: the great historical divide that separates us from the composers. In the twenty-first century, our musical technology, culture, and assumptions are very different from those of musicians and audiences centuries ago. This is most apparent in the change in standard musical instruments. For example, keyboard music in the Baroque was originally played on the harpsichord, clavichord, or organ—instruments that sound radically different from the modern grand piano. Should musicians play historical music using period instruments and performance practice, trying as much as possible to recreate the sound of the past? Or is it acceptable—perhaps even preferable—to play older works on modern instruments using a modern style, thus creating a more contemporary sound for our twenty-first-century ears?

This problem was already recognized by that keen observer of the “uses and disadvantages of history,” Friedrich Nietzsche. In an aphorism with the title “Older Art and the Soul of the Present,”¹ Nietzsche notes the discontent that “later masters” experience when encountering older works of art (he seems to have in mind musical works primarily). The modern artists—the musicians of late Romanticism—are used to having “means of expression” that can better give voice to the nuance and power of emotional states, and they intend to “help out” the old composers by using their own more developed expressive powers. Surely the old masters would have availed themselves of these means if they had them, wouldn’t they? Nietzsche is skeptical. Those old composers had different souls, ones that valued measure and symmetry while avoiding passion, and their means of musical expression perfectly suited their psychology.² But this doesn’t mean that modern musicians should leave the original character of older works intact. We have to “give them our soul” so that they speak to us and continue living. By contrast, “the truly ‘historical’ performance,” rather than speaking to us, “would talk to ghosts in a ghostly fashion.”³

Speaking of ghosts, Nietzsche asks us to imagine the dead Beethoven returning and hearing one of his works performed in the most modern style. Beethoven isn’t sure what to think about what has been done to his music.

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* II, Aphorism 126, *Kritische Studienausgabe* (KSA), ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1980), vol. 2, 431–2.

2 Nietzsche’s account of the psychology of older composers is certainly questionable, especially with respect to their attitude toward passion.

3 “Der wirklich ‘historische’ Vortrag würde gespenstisch zu Gespenstern reden” (ibid).

At last, he speaks: “This is neither I nor not-I but some third thing. It seems to me to be something right, even if it isn’t *the right* [version].” Before departing, he cites a line from Schiller: “Und der Lebende hat Recht.” (And the living are right.)⁴ The dead Beethoven thus concedes to living musicians the right to do as they wish with his music.

Whether a resurrected Beethoven would be so accommodating is debatable. In any case, Nietzsche clearly does not think that music from the past should be played in the original style. If the music is to speak to us in the present, it must be updated. Something like Nietzsche’s approach dominated the interpretation of historical music in the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth. In the most extreme form of this approach, musicians around the turn of the century would play Bach and Handel in lush orchestrations with soaring melody lines and huge dynamic contrasts, approaching Baroque works in much the same way they would approach the music of Wagner or Richard Strauss. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, this “adaptive” approach to historical works was rejected by a growing number of musicians in the so-called “early music movement.”⁵ Building on the work of such pioneers as Arnold Dolmetsch and Wanda Landowska, musicians in the movement have sought to perform past works in ways that are faithful to their original style and sound. Most obviously, this involves playing on “period instruments” or new instruments created using historical models. But it also involves researching historical performance practices in the available sources—things like tempo, articulation, phrasing, and ornamentation—and implementing this research in performance.⁶

The early music movement has had astonishing success, both artistically and commercially. Originally on the fringe of the musical establishment, the movement is now mainstream, and its most prominent leaders—including Nikolaus Harnoncourt, John Eliot Gardiner, and Trevor Pinnock—are household names in the classical music world. Significantly, the movement has led to the rediscovery and appreciation of lesser-known Baroque composers, whose

4 From the poem “An die Freunde” (“To Friends”). Although grammatically *der Lebende* is singular, the meaning is plural in both contexts.

5 For an overview of the history of the movement, see Harry Haskell, “Early Music,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 2001), vol. 7, 831–4.

6 Although the core repertoire of the movement is Baroque music, the movement also includes performers that take a similar, “historically informed” approach to music from the Classical and Romantic periods. As Haskell notes, the term “early music” now refers to any music for which one must reconstruct a historically appropriate style. Haskell, “Early Music,” 831.

music comes alive when performed with historical sensitivity (the opposite of what one might expect from reading Nietzsche).

Despite its success, the movement has long been plagued by controversy. Much of the controversy has surrounded the term “authenticity,” which musicians and record labels have sometimes ascribed to performances using period instruments and historical practices. In the 1980s and ‘90s, critics of the movement, especially Richard Taruskin, were largely successful in discrediting the term, arguing that it is neither possible nor desirable to achieve a historically authentic performance, and that the term has inappropriate moralistic overtones.⁷ In place of “authenticity,” musicians in the movement have widely adopted the phrase “historically informed performance” (HIP) to describe what they are doing. (The standard term in German is *historische Aufführungspraxis*.) Underlying the dispute over language are fundamental questions about the goal and justification of the movement. If a historically authentic performance is impossible, what exactly is the goal—and why is that desirable? Does a historically informed performance really have an advantage over a more Nietzschean approach, especially if both inevitably fall short of the original sound? And despite the success of the movement, isn’t it based on a misguided antiquarianism—an attempt to talk to ghosts?

In this essay, I propose to turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer to answer these questions by constructing the outlines of a hermeneutics of early music performance. In fact, Gadamer’s philosophy is tailor-made for the problem: one of his central concerns is the interpretation of works distant from us in time, and his aesthetics underscores the performative character of art. Although Gadamer himself does not develop a full account of performing historical music, he does offer scattered remarks on the subject throughout his works. Some of these remarks appear quite critical of the early music movement, and one might think that Gadamer would reject its approach in favor of Nietzsche. I will argue that such an interpretation of Gadamer would be mistaken. To be sure, he does reject a certain understanding of what period performers are doing, and he is quite critical of the kind of historical performance that minimizes the creative role of the performer. But his hermeneutics also reveals how historically informed performance can be an expression of what he calls the “wakefulness of historically effected consciousness,”⁸ and thus part of an ongoing process of

7 See especially Richard Taruskin, “The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past,” in *Authenticity and Early Music: A Symposium*, ed. Nicholas Kenyon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 137–207.

8 GW 1, 312. Works by Gadamer are cited by the volume and page number in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* (= GW) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985–1995).

historical understanding. Indeed, Gadamer has an answer to those critics who point out the limitations of the movement in an attempt to discredit it: those limitations are inherent in the process of historical understanding as such.

The literature on the question of “historical authenticity” is extensive. The debate reached its height among English-speaking performers and musicologists in the 1980s and 90s,⁹ while much of the discussion among their German-speaking counterparts happened somewhat earlier.¹⁰ Although a handful of analytic philosophers have treated the problem,¹¹ relatively little has been written from the perspective of continental philosophy.¹² This is unfortunate, since continental thought—especially Gadamer’s hermeneutics—is particularly well suited to address the relationship between history and musical performance, as I hope to show. In fact, virtually every major theme in *Truth and Method* is somehow connected to the issue. Since a comprehensive account is impossible in the space of this essay, I will concentrate in the first part on examining Gadamer’s critique of historical reconstruction, relating it to early music performance. In the second part, I will attempt to show how Gadamer’s dialogical account of historical consciousness provides a framework for understanding what historically informed performance is seeking to accomplish, as well as its advantage over a Nietzschean approach.

2 Gadamer’s Critique of Historical Reconstruction

Before considering Gadamer’s critique of reconstruction, it is helpful to situate the problem of performing past music in the larger context of the history of hermeneutics. What is remarkable is how closely the origins of modern

9 For an overview and critical discussion of some of the main positions in the debate, see John Butt, *Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3–50.

10 Dorottya Fabian gives an overview of the German-speaking debate and shows how it anticipated many of the positions in later English-speaking discussions. “The Meaning of Authenticity and the Early Music Movement: A Historical Review,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 32, no. 2 (2001): 153–167.

11 For example, see Peter Kivy, *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 206–253.

12 See Adorno’s widely cited essay, “Bach Defended Against His Devotees,” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Webber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 133–146. See also Bruce Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 96–124.

hermeneutics parallel the origins of the early music movement. According to Gadamer, modern hermeneutics had two sources: the theology of the Protestant Reformers, who wished to return to the true meaning of the Bible; and classical philology, which sought to uncover the true meaning of classical Greek and Latin texts. Gadamer sums up their common motivation: “Both involve a rediscovery: a rediscovery of something that was not absolutely unknown, but whose meaning had become alien and inaccessible.”¹³ The very same thing could be said of the origin of the early music movement. The music of Baroque composers was not unknown—especially Bach’s works, after Mendelssohn’s famous 1829 revival of the *St. Matthew Passion*. But proponents of the movement believed that the music was distorted by modern instruments and performance practice, and they sought to rediscover it through restoration. Thus the problem of early music is directly analogous to the problem that gave birth to hermeneutics in the first place.

One might object to the analogy with classical philology and Reformation theology: in the case of these disciplines, hermeneutics has to do with interpreting the meaning of texts, but the debate about early music has to do with performance. Gadamer, however, does not view this difference as decisive. The performance of a Mozart piano sonata or any musical work is also an interpretation, since it involves achieving some understanding of the composition and thereby bringing it into appearance.¹⁴ Indeed, not just performing but listening to music also involves understanding and interpretation—as does the experience of all art. For this reason, Gadamer declares that “aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics.”¹⁵

How then is art from the distant past to be interpreted? Gadamer treats this question most extensively in a section of *Truth and Method* entitled “Reconstruction and Integration as Hermeneutic Tasks.” In this title Gadamer identifies two “extreme possibilities”¹⁶ for interpreting historical art: the approach of Schleiermacher (reconstruction) and that of Hegel (integration). Gadamer sides more with Hegel’s approach, and he is severely critical of Schleiermacher’s concept of historical reconstruction, elements of which bear a striking resemblance to the early music movement. However, I will argue that Gadamer’s critique is only aimed at certain aspects of Schleiermacher’s approach, and that he does not intend to dismiss historical reconstruction per se.

13 GW 1, 178. *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed., revised trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 176.

14 “Zwischen Phänomenologie und Dialektik,” GW 2, 17. Cf. GW 1, 403. *Truth and Method*, 400.

15 GW 1, 170. *Truth and Method*, 157. The whole sentence is in italics in the original.

16 *Ibid.*, 171/158. Translation modified.

In Gadamer's telling, Schleiermacher rightly recognizes that historical works of art are torn out of their original world when we encounter them today, and that this world gave them their original meaning. We might think of the statue of a Greek god, which used to stand in a temple; or one of Josquin's masses, which were integrated into liturgical celebrations. Where Schleiermacher errs is in thinking that the restoration of this original context will allow us to understand the meaning of the art. Gadamer summarizes Schleiermacher's position as follows: "Hence all the various means of historical reconstruction—re-establishing the 'world' to which it belongs, re-establishing the original situation which the creative artist 'had in mind,' performing in the original style, and so on—can claim to reveal the true meaning of a work of art and guard against misunderstanding and anachronistic interpretation."¹⁷ This certainly sounds like what the early music movement is doing—especially the reference to "performing in the original style." However, we should note that Schleiermacher is not just advocating historical reconstruction; he is advocating it as the way to understand "the true meaning of a work of art." Thus, one can reject Schleiermacher's view that the true meaning is obtained in this way without rejecting the value of historical reconstruction.

And this is what Gadamer in fact does: "Reconstructing the conditions in which a work passed down to us from the past was originally constituted is certainly an essential aid to understanding it. But we may ask whether what we obtain is really the *meaning* of the work of art that we are looking for."¹⁸ Here Gadamer not only allows for the reconstruction of the work's original conditions; he calls it "an essential aid" (*eine wesentliche Hilfsoperation*) for understanding.¹⁹ We will see in the next section in what way it is essential and how this boosts the case for the early music movement. In any event, Gadamer insists that reconstruction is not sufficient for understanding the meaning of past art. Why not? We can distinguish three reasons in Gadamer's account. For our purposes, it is important to examine them closely, because each provides a challenge to a possible misunderstanding of what historically informed performance accomplishes—or should try to accomplish.

17 Ibid., 171–2/159.

18 Ibid., translation modified.

19 Cf. "Disclosing what is foreign does *not just* mean historical reconstruction of the 'world' in which a work of art had its original meaning and function; it *also* means the hearing [*das Vernehmen*] of that which is said to us." "Ästhetik und Hermeneutik," GW 8, 5. Emphasis added.

2.1 *The Restored Meaning of Art will not be the Original Meaning*

Gadamer notes that the “historicity of our being” makes it futile to try to find the meaning of art in the restoration of its original conditions. In thinking about the artwork’s place in history, we shouldn’t forget that we ourselves are in history. Thus, even a completely successful restoration of the original conditions will not mean for us what it meant for the people at the time. That world no longer exists. Gadamer quotes Hegel’s line that *for us* historical art is “beautiful fruit broken off from the tree.”²⁰ The tree, of course, is the past life that is not our life. Gadamer gives the example of returning a painting hanging in a museum to its original place in a church. For us, the painting is still a tourist destination, not what it was originally.²¹ But here again, one can concede Gadamer’s point and still find value in the restoration of the painting to the church: seeing it in its original context can reveal things about the painting—e.g., how the lighting of the space affects it—that are lost when it hangs in a museum.

Critics of the early music movement have made an objection similar to Gadamer’s. It is misguided to claim that one is recreating the original sound, they argue, because the music does not sound to us like it would have sounded to people at the time.²² As Dadelsen notes, “We cannot transport ourselves back to a state of acoustical innocence.”²³ Centuries of music lie between us and works of the Baroque, Classical, and early-Romantic periods. Whether we recognize it or not, our musical taste and expectations are shaped by that intervening past. For example, many of the dissonances in Beethoven’s symphonies, which shocked his contemporaries, do not seem so shocking to us, having heard Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*.

However, there is no reason that this should discredit historically informed performance, so long as performers and listeners acknowledge their own historicity. And many thoughtful advocates of the early music movement do just that. For example, in his classic study *The Interpretation of Early Music*, Robert Donington writes: “It is naïve to think that we can shed the intervening centuries like a garment, and interpret Monteverdi and Cavalli as though these centuries had never been.”²⁴ On the other hand, it is possible to exaggerate how

20 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §753.

21 GW 1, 172. *Truth and Method*, 159–60.

22 For example, see James O. Young, “The Concept of Authentic Performance,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 28, no. 3 (1988): 232–5.

23 Georg von Dadelsen, “Alte Musik in neuer Zeit,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 140, no. 2 (1979): 120.

24 Robert Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music*, New Version (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1974), 49.

different things sound to modern listeners. When we listen at length to music in a past style, our ears gradually adjust, and we can hear Baroque dissonance *as* dissonance, even if it does not sound dissonant in more modern contexts.²⁵

2.2 *The Meaning of Art goes beyond the Original Intentions of the Creator*

The second reason reconstruction isn't sufficient to discover the meaning of art has to do with the primary form reconstruction takes in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. According to Schleiermacher, one truly understands a work only by transporting oneself into the mind of the creator and reconstructing the original creative thought process.²⁶ Thus the *mens auctoris*, the "mind of the author," is all-important for understanding a work. In fact, something like Schleiermacher's view is a very common understanding of how one interprets texts and works of art: one looks to the intentions of the author or artist. However, Gadamer insists that the meaning of a work always goes beyond its creator's intentions.²⁷ In one sense, this is simply acknowledging the common observation that artists are not always the best interpreters of their works. But beyond that, Gadamer means that those who come later in history see the work from a different historical perspective, and its meaning for them goes beyond what the artist had in mind in creating the work. For us, the meaning of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* is not exhausted by Beethoven's intentions: we hear it in light of its tremendous influence on Brahms and Wagner, and connect it with the historic occasions when it has been performed. In the essay "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," Gadamer notes that it is the work of art—not the artist—that speaks to us, and the work is inexhaustible in its meaning.²⁸

Certainly Gadamer's critique here seems to be a challenge to many musicians in the early music movement, since they commonly place great emphasis on researching and implementing the composer's original intentions. Harnoncourt expresses this quite definitively: "The composer's intention has become for us the highest authority."²⁹ This focus on intentions is related to the idea of *Werktreue*, or "faithfulness to the work," which guides—at least to some extent—performers beyond the early music movement as well. Although there are different ways of understanding *Werktreue*, it is often understood as

25 Davies makes a similar point. *Musical Works and Performances*, 234–5. Cf. Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, 115–18.

26 GW 1, 189ff. *Truth and Method*, 186ff.

27 *Ibid.*, 301/296.

28 "Ästhetik und Hermeneutik," GW 8, 7.

29 Nikolaus Harnoncourt, *Baroque Music Today: Music as Speech*, trans. Mary O'Neill (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1988), 15.

faithfulness to the composer's intentions as expressed (primarily) in the score. In the most uncontroversial case, if a performer disregards the tempo and many of the notes written in the original text, the resulting performance is not a faithful rendition of the work—at best, it is an arrangement. Does Gadamer think that musicians are free to disregard any of the composer's intentions, even about the notes?

The answer is no, if we follow Gadamer's discussion of the "bindingness" (*Verbindlichkeit*) of the work: "We do not allow the interpretation of a piece of music or a drama the freedom to take the fixed 'text' as a basis for arbitrary effects, and yet we would regard the canonization of a particular interpretation—e.g., in a recorded performance conducted by the composer, or the detailed notes on performance which come from the canonized first performance—as a failure to appreciate the real task of interpretation."³⁰ Here we can see that Gadamer does affirm a form of *Werktreue*: the text may not be arbitrarily changed.³¹ But a particular interpretation of a musical work is not binding, even when it comes from the composer. This suggests that performers are bound by those intentions of the composer that constitute the work itself, but they are not bound by intentions that are interpretive and have to do with a particular performance. Admittedly, this distinction is often difficult to draw.³² For example: when is notated ornamentation—trills, mordents, appoggiaturas—an essential part of the work, and when is it merely interpretive?³³

In any case, Gadamer clearly thinks it is a mistake to canonize the composer's original performance of a piece, as some early music performers tend to do. In this critique, Gadamer has an ally in Nikolaus Harnoncourt, one of the leaders of the movement. Harnoncourt warns against simply replicating the size of the orchestra that originally performed a work—for example, only using three violins if the composer only had three violins. Instead, "the size of the orchestra must be determined by the acoustics of the hall, the musical form, and the sound of the instruments."³⁴ He notes that Mozart performed

30 GW 1, 124–5. *Truth and Method*, 118. Translation modified. Gadamer goes on to use the phrase "the true bindingness of the work" (GW 1, 125).

31 Cf. his later reference to the performing artist's "Bindung an den Text." GW 1, 403. *Truth and Method*, 401.

32 Davies distinguishes between the composer's work-determinative intentions and recommendations that are not work-determinative. For Davies, social practice and the conventions of a genre decide whether intentions are work-determinative or not. See *Musical Works and Performances*, 211–14.

33 The short answer is that in the nineteenth century notated ornamentation became essential to the work, but Baroque ornamentation was much more flexible, for reasons I will mention below.

34 Harnoncourt, *Baroque Music Today*, 91.

the same symphonic works with small forces in Salzburg and much larger ones in Milan where the size of the hall was much larger. The composer's intentions in performing a piece at a particular place and time are not binding for all places and times.

2.3 *The Creative Contribution of the Performer is Essential to the Work*

This final reason why historical reconstruction is insufficient is already implied in the limited role of the composer's intentions. Merely copying the past leaves out the essential task of interpretation in one's own performance. In the same passage where Gadamer discusses the bindingness of the work, he describes the whole performance as "bound and free at the same time."³⁵ In its freedom, the performance is a creative act that gives its own interpretation and does not simply re-create the creative act of the composer. He then adds a comment that seems quite critical of the early music movement: "Thus, historicizing presentations—e.g., music played on old instruments—are not as faithful as they intend. Rather, they are in danger 'of standing at a third remove from the truth' as an imitation of an imitation (Plato)."³⁶ Gadamer does not say why playing on period instruments would be problematic in itself. In context, his criticism seems to be targeted at what period instruments (sometimes) represent: an attempt to recreate an original performance that relinquishes the interpretive and creative task of the performer. In a later essay, he calls this "the death of reproductive art" and "an uncreative activity."³⁷

However, there is no reason that historically informed performance on period instruments needs to relinquish the performer's creativity. In fact, one of the things that historical research has revealed is the *larger* creative role of the performer during the Baroque period. At the time there was no rigid distinction between performer and composer, and performance included elements of improvisation. This is reflected in the scores themselves. In the Baroque, most scores are underdetermined in comparison to later periods: they don't mark all of the phrasing, articulation, and ornamentation. These are left for the performers to fill out in accordance with the style of the piece, varying them

35 GW 1, 125. *Truth and Method*, 118. Translation modified.

36 Ibid., translation modified. The reference is to the critique of artistic *mimesis* in Book 10 of Plato's *Republic* (597e). For an account of *mimesis* in Plato and Gadamer, see John Sallis, "On the Manifold Senses of Mimesis," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Chichester: Wiley, 2016), 289–298.

37 "Die Aktualität des Schönen," GW 8, 134. *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 44. Translation modified.

when repeating sections or when playing the same piece on different occasions.³⁸ Of course, the creative role of the Baroque performer is something that was only rediscovered as a result of reading the historical sources in an attempt to reconstruct the style. Here reconstruction enables rather than prevents the performer's creativity.

To be sure, not all early music performers have lived up to the historical role of the performer. Perhaps in reaction to the emotional effusiveness of Romantic performances, some musicians have adopted a more detached, literal style of performing that minimizes their own contribution beyond the technical execution. This is one of the reasons Adorno criticized the movement in its early days: "Objectivity is not left over after the subject is subtracted. The musical score is never identical with the work; devotion to the text means the constant effort to grasp that which it hides."³⁹ However, this critique of subject-less objectivity by no means applies to all early music performers, and many within the movement have criticized this tendency as fundamentally un-historical. For example, Donington writes that "the school which mistakes under-playing for authentic playing" is "unbaroque."⁴⁰

We can therefore conclude that Gadamer's critique of historical reconstruction sheds light on mistaken tendencies and misunderstandings within the early music movement, but it by no means discredits the movement as such. Indeed, Gadamer's account of the relationship of the performer to the work provides an inspiring vision of what early music performance can be—a combination of creative freedom and "bindingness" that involves a full participation in the work of art. Perhaps there is no better description of this combination than what Mozart writes in a letter to his father. The ideal performer manages "to play the piece in correct time, just the way it is supposed to be, and to play all the notes...with all proper expression and feeling, just as it says on the page, so that one could have the impression that the one who is playing the piece had actually composed it."⁴¹

38 See Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 102–115.

39 Adorno, "Bach Defended against His Devotees," 144.

40 Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music*, 41. See also Haynes, *The End of Early Music*, 61ff.

41 Letter of January 17, 1778. *Mozart's Letters, Mozart's Life: Selected Letters*, ed. and trans. Robert Spaethling (New York: Norton, 2000), 122. Mozart actually says that this describes the art of sight-reading (!), but it certainly applies to other performances as well.

3 The Ongoing Dialogue between Old and New

As we have seen, Gadamer acknowledges that historical reconstruction can be an “essential aid” to understanding past works, but contends that it is not sufficient. In place of Schleiermacher’s reconstructive approach, he favors Hegel’s model of integration. Only much later in *Truth and Method* does Gadamer reveal the precise form this integration takes: it is a “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*).⁴² At first glance, this may seem to decide the question of how to interpret historical music in Nietzsche’s favor. After all, what Nietzsche is advocating is a kind of fusion: a performer takes some music from the past, combines it with the style of the present, and the result is a blend of the two. In a certain sense, such a performance would indeed be a fusion of horizons. However, what is missing is a genuine encounter with the *otherness* of the past—an encounter in which the past speaks to us with its own voice, challenging the assumptions of the present. Such a dialogue with the past is essential for true historical understanding, according to Gadamer. And I will argue that this dialogical account of historical consciousness provides a framework for understanding what historically informed performance is seeking to accomplish, as well as its advantage over a Nietzschean approach.

The heart of Gadamer’s account of historical understanding is found in the sections entitled “The Hermeneutic Significance of Temporal Distance” and “The Principle of *Wirkungsgeschichte*.”⁴³ In these sections Gadamer steers a course between two mistaken conceptions of our relationship to the past. On the one hand, he warns against viewing the past as completely alien, as something that can only be understood if we cut all ties to the present and transport ourselves back in history. The time between us and the past “is not primarily an abyss to be bridged because it separates and keeps us distant.”⁴⁴ Instead, we are already—in some way—connected to the past by virtue of its effect on us through tradition. Moreover, temporal distance gives us new possibilities for understanding history from our present perspective. On the other hand, Gadamer warns against viewing the past as something completely familiar that requires little effort to understand and appropriate. Rejecting both extremes, Gadamer claims that the task of hermeneutics is founded on the polarity or tension “between strangeness and familiarity.” He concludes: “The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.”⁴⁵

42 GW 1, 311. *Truth and Method*, 305.

43 *Ibid.*, 296–312/291–306.

44 *Ibid.*, 302/297. Translation modified.

45 *Ibid.*, 300/295. The whole sentence is in italics in the original.

On these terms, the problem with Schleiermacher's reconstructive approach is that it lacks a full appreciation of the "hermeneutic situation" of the interpreter. In focusing exclusively on reconstructing what is foreign, Schleiermacher loses sight of the fact that, as interpreters, we are ourselves in history, and that this history is effective in our understanding—often in ways that are undetected. It can determine, for example, what historical objects are worth investigating in the first place, and it gives us a (pre-critical) familiarity with these objects. One sees "the other" only from the perspective of one's own history. Gadamer names the effect that history exercises in our understanding *Wirkungsgeschichte*.⁴⁶ Historical understanding requires a "consciousness of being affected by history" (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*).⁴⁷

We can see the implications of *Wirkungsgeschichte* and the tension between strangeness and familiarity in Gadamer's discussion of horizons, which is decisive for the problem of interpreting early music. He defines horizon as "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point."⁴⁸ Thus, as listeners and performers, each of us today has a horizon or perspective that is very different from the horizons of past composers, musicians, and listeners. One might think that the key to understanding early music is to transpose ourselves into the situation of those in the past and see things—or rather, *hear* them—from out of their horizon. Along these lines, the Dutch conductor and harpsichordist Ton Koopman sums up his approach to interpreting Baroque music as "stepping into the shoes of someone from that period."⁴⁹ Gadamer's response is nuanced. On the one hand, he denies that we can transpose ourselves into the past, if this means trading our own horizon for a historical one. In trying to do so, we would be forgetting our own historicity and involvement in *Wirkungsgeschichte*. And yet, he affirms that we can (and should) transpose ourselves into the past, if we bring *ourselves* along, together with our own perspective. In other words, it is not a matter of trading horizons but of enlarging our own horizon so that it includes the past perspective: "To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion."⁵⁰ Neither our present horizon nor the

46 Ibid., 305–306/299–300.

47 As James Risser notes, this is "both a consciousness effected by history and a consciousness of history's effects." *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY, 1997), 79.

48 GW 1, 307. *Truth and Method*, 301.

49 Ton Koopman, "Some Thoughts on Authenticity," *Musick* 8, no. 3 (1987): 2.

50 GW 1, 310. *Truth and Method*, 304.

past horizon exist separately. Instead, the process of historical understanding is a “fusion of horizons.”⁵¹

Robert Donington gives a strikingly similar account of performing Baroque music in his classic study, *The Interpretation of Early Music*, which documents historical sources on performance practice. He even describes the experience of researching and performing early music as a “marriage of antiquity with modernity.” About early music performers, Donington states directly: “We do not shed our individuality, which is indeed of the twentieth century.” While affirming the need for “historical empathy” to understand musical idioms that are different from our own, he acknowledges that such empathy is driven by “our own present musicianly desires.”⁵² These include our desire to perform past music in the first place, and to hear classic works again and again. This orientation toward the past is itself a distinctive part of our horizon today: before the nineteenth century, it was rare to perform older works, and even successful contemporary works usually had a short shelf life.

However, a fusion of horizons isn’t alone enough for historical understanding, according to Gadamer. In fact, one can hardly *avoid* some form of fusion, since our present horizons are constantly shaped by the past—whether we are aware of this or not. Gadamer notes that a fusion of horizons is particularly noticeable in instances where there is a naïve relationship to tradition, and people assume that the way things are is the way they have always been. (Proponents of the early music movement would characterize elements of the mainstream performance tradition—at least, before widespread recognition of the movement’s insights—in similar terms.) In the unbroken line of tradition there is a fusion of horizons, “for there old and new are always growing into living presence together, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other.”⁵³ This last phrase identifies what is missing in a naïve relationship to the past: the past and the present are not distinguished, and one has no sense of the strangeness of history—it all seems familiar. By contrast, in historical understanding the historical horizon is foregrounded (*sich abhebt*) or distinguished from the present horizon. It recognizes the otherness of the past, and this otherness calls attentions to features of the present that one had previously taken for granted. But the process of historical understanding doesn’t end there. For it to reach completion, the historical horizon that had

51 Ibid., 311/305.

52 Robert Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music*, 49–50.

53 GW 1, 311. *Truth and Method*, 305. Translation modified. Cf. Gadamer’s earlier reference to “self-evident, unquestioned unanimity” in the case of the “unbroken stream of tradition.” GW 1, 300. *Truth and Method*, 295.

been foregrounded needs to be incorporated back into the present horizon,⁵⁴ resulting in a fusion of the horizons. Gadamer designates the controlled enactment (*Vollzug*) of this fusion “the wakefulness [*Wachheit*] of historically effected consciousness.”⁵⁵ It is awake, because—with eyes open—it recognizes the otherness of the past, its own position in history, and how the two belong together.

We can therefore distinguish three moments in the process of historical understanding, which together form a kind of dialectic: (1) a naïve familiarity with the past, (2) the foregrounding and distinction of the past horizon from the present, and (3) the controlled fusion of the two horizons. In terms of this process, performers in the early music movement have a “dialectical” advantage over those without an appreciation for the otherness of past music: by researching historical performance practice and playing on period instruments, they are able to foreground the historical horizon. Whether they successfully (and with self-awareness) fuse this horizon with their own must be decided on a case-by-case basis. In any event, the possibility for the “wakefulness of historically effected consciousness” is there.

One of the benefits of encountering the otherness of the past is that it allows us to become aware of our own prejudices and pre-judgments, when these aren’t shared by a historical work. Gadamer even frames this in terms of a dialogue: the past addresses us, questioning us about our assumptions.⁵⁶ (Later in *Truth and Method* he defines the hermeneutic task as “coming into conversation with the text.”⁵⁷) Along these lines, the early music movement, by highlighting the otherness of the past, draws attention to contemporary prejudices and assumptions about how music is performed. Chief among these assumptions is that music should be played by default in a smooth legato, seamlessly connecting the notes without any space between them. Haynes notes that this is a legacy of Romanticism that carried over into “mainstream style.” For those unaware of the alternatives, it is “as undetectable as our own accents.”⁵⁸ However, in Baroque performance practice, a smooth legato is not the default; often the notes are lightly detached (the so-called “Baroque legato”), but performers use a wide palette of possible articulations, ranging from over-legato

54 Gadamer uses the word *Aufhebung* here, clearly drawing on Hegel. GW 1, 312. *Truth and Method*, 306.

55 Ibid. Jean Grondin notes that Gadamer added the word *Wachheit* to the last edition of *Truth and Method* in 1986. (This word is not translated in the English edition.) *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, trans. Kathryn Plant (London: Routledge, 2003), 95.

56 GW 1, 304. *Truth and Method*, 298.

57 Ibid., 374/362.

58 Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music*, 53.

to staccato. As a result, pieces come alive that are quite boring when played in straight legato.

At this point one might object to the notion that the early music movement has any advantage in interpreting historical works. Appreciating the otherness of past music (“foregrounding its historical horizon”) is one thing; actually adopting the historical practices when playing the music is another. Couldn’t one be fully aware of the differences between past and present performance practices, and reject the past in favor of the present? Indeed, this is Nietzsche’s approach, as we saw above. Although it is unclear how much Nietzsche knew about historical performance practices, he certainly recognizes the stylistic otherness of older music. The updating he recommends—giving the works “our soul”—is not historically naïve, but done with at least a general awareness of its anachronism. Indeed, the current watchword of the early music movement, “historically informed performance,” when taken most literally, seems to leave open the possibility that a performance be historically informed but reject (at least some) historical practices.

In terms of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, the question of how—and whether—to implement historical understanding is part of the problem of application (*Anwendung*), which is integral to the process of interpretation: “Understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter’s present situation.”⁵⁹ As we have seen, this does not mean adopting wholesale the historical perspective, but integrating it with one’s own. Even in the case where encountering the otherness of the past reveals one’s own prejudices and unconscious assumptions, these assumptions are not automatically discarded; they are merely placed on the examination table, as it were.⁶⁰ From the general standpoint of application, therefore, a performer could understand a historical work and not implement historical practices when performing.

However, there is an element of historical performance practice that Gadamer regards as binding on the musician: style.⁶¹ When discussing music and the other performing arts, Gadamer is unequivocal about style’s importance: “The rendition must be in the correct style [*stilgerecht*]. One must know what the style of the time demands, as well as the personal style of the master.” Of course, historical knowledge of style is not sufficient for interpretation; he rehearses his critique of attempts to authentically reproduce an original per-

59 GW 1, 313. *Truth and Method*, 306–7.

60 Cf. GW 1, 304. *Truth and Method*, 298–9.

61 His most developed discussion of the concept of style is found in the first of six “digressions” (*Exkurse*) published at the end of the original 1960 edition of *Truth and Method*. GW 2, 375–8.

formance. “And yet even the most vital renewal of a work encounters certain limitations from the side of historical style, and it is not permitted to go against these limitations.”⁶² Why does Gadamer place so much importance on style? In short, he regards it as an essential component of the work: “Indeed, the style is one of the ‘foundations’ of art, one of the conditions that make up the thing itself.”⁶³

By emphasizing that “one must know what the style of the time demands,” Gadamer endorses one of the principal goals of the early music movement: the recovery of the original style. This would include historical practices with respect to tempo, articulation, phrasing, and ornamentation. That said, Gadamer is elsewhere more flexible, acknowledging a need to fuse horizons even in matters of style: “The demand for a rendition in the correct style is limited by the style-will [*Stilwillen*] of the present.”⁶⁴ Thus, one might argue that certain aspects of a historical style—for example, the demand for a richly ornamented melody—are too foreign to contemporary taste and should be reigned in. However, one should not forget that our tastes are always in the process of being formed and that we can acquire a taste for a past style in much the same way that we can acquire a taste for music from another culture.⁶⁵

What about period instruments—one of the signatures of the early music movement? Certainly, hearing the sound of the harpsichord or the Baroque flute helps us to foreground the historical horizon and to appreciate the otherness of early music, but is it necessary to perform historical music on these instruments? Here Gadamer’s notion of a fusion of horizons would certainly allow for performance on modern instruments, especially if the musicians bring to their interpretation an appreciation for the historically appropriate style and the ways in which their instruments are both similar and different from those of the period. And many performers on contemporary instruments have done just that—for example, the pianist and legendary Bach interpreter, Rosalyn Tureck. Nevertheless, the fact remains that it is often easier to perform in a historically appropriate style on period instruments. Harnoncourt gives the example of the Baroque violin bow, which can more naturally produce the articulations so essential to Baroque style.⁶⁶

62 GW 2, 377. Cf. “We distinguish very precisely between appropriate and ‘unallowed’ or ‘stylistically incorrect’ [*stilwidrigen*] reproductive interpretations of musical or dramatic works.” “Klassische und philosophische Hermeneutik,” GW 2, 104.

63 “Der Stil gehört in der Tat zu den ‘Grundfesten’ der Kunst, zu den Bedingungen, die in der Sache liegen” (GW 2, 377).

64 GW 1, 315. *Truth and Method*, 309. Translation modified.

65 Cf. Haynes, *The End of Early Music*, 221–222.

66 Harnoncourt, *Baroque Music Today*, 94–5.

We can now summarize the results of the application of Gadamer's hermeneutics to early music performance. First, Gadamer provides a framework for understanding what performers in the movement are doing. They are not giving "historically authentic performances," if this means replicating the performances of the past. Such a replication would lack artistic merit, and musicians inevitably incorporate elements of the present into their interpretations. Instead, their performances are part of the process of historical understanding, which is an ongoing dialogue with the past. By researching historical practices, they recognize the otherness of the past horizon, and fuse this horizon with their own when performing. Moreover, since this is an ongoing process, one can never claim—as some performers have—that a rendition achieves the goal of historical understanding. In itself, the performance may be historically informed and artistically compelling, but there is always more research to be done, more ways that engaging with the past can call into question our present assumptions. The dialogue with the past goes on.

Second, Gadamer's hermeneutics provides a middle position on the heated debate about how historical works should be performed. On the one hand, he clearly favors a historically informed approach in the broad sense. In order to understand a historical work, it is necessary to foreground its horizon through historical reconstruction so that its otherness is properly recognized. In particular, Gadamer emphasizes the need to acquire knowledge of the work's historical style, and to perform in a style that is historically correct. On the other hand, a fusion of horizons is also required, and this leaves open different possibilities for applying historical knowledge in performance. Certainly, musicians playing on period instruments can accomplish this fusion—but so can musicians playing on modern instruments with historical awareness.

Finally, what can we say about Nietzsche's approach? Since Gadamer regards style as fundamental to a work of art, he would no doubt be wary of Nietzsche's willingness to update the style of older works. But from Gadamer's perspective Nietzsche's approach is problematic for a more fundamental reason. As we have seen, he regards the interpretation of historical works as a form of dialogue: they speak to us, and we respond. This requires a genuine encounter with the otherness of the works. Otherwise they would not be able to challenge our assumptions by speaking in their own voice, which is both strange and familiar. In freely updating past works, as Nietzsche recommends, they no longer challenge our present musical sensibilities. The strangeness is sacrificed to familiarity. By contrast, the early music movement—at its best—is able to preserve the tension between the two.

And yet, Nietzsche does have a point when he declares that a merely historical performance would only talk to ghosts. Gadamer agrees that performance

shouldn't be an antiquarian exercise: it must speak to us today. But it should also speak to us with the voice of the past—not simply our own voice. In other words, a genuine conversation is not talking to ourselves. And since the composers speak to us through their works, we can say that an ideal performance is a dialogue between musician and composer, a dialogue in which both have their say. In this sense, performing early music really should be talking to ghosts.