



Performance Practice in Baroque Music

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Abstract

Baroque music (c. 1600–1750) represents one of the most influential periods in Western music history, characterized by profound developments in form, harmony, and performance practices. However, the performance of this repertoire in contemporary times has been fraught with significant challenges and controversies. This article provides a comprehensive review of performance practices in Baroque music, examining six main themes: the Early Music movement and the evolution of performance approaches; national differences in performance styles (Italian, French, and German); the role of rhetoric in Baroque performance; ornamentation and improvisation as cornerstones of authentic performance; the influence of acoustic spaces and period instruments on performance; and the changing reputation of Baroque composers in musicological historiography. Drawing on over twenty authoritative sources from the 1970s to 2020, this study demonstrates that Baroque performance practice has evolved from a positivist, purist approach toward a constructivist, polyphonic approach grounded in dialogue between past and present. The research highlights how contemporary performers navigate the tension between historical authenticity and modern interpretative freedom. The role of performance as a research instrument and the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding Baroque music are also examined, offering new perspectives on the relationship between musicology and performance practice.

Keywords:Baroque music, performance practice, historically informed performance, musical rhetoric, ornamentation

1. Introduction

Baroque music, which flourished approximately between 1600 and 1750, represents a period of Western music history marked by remarkable developments in form, harmony, and particularly performance practices. The term "Baroque" itself derives from the Portuguese word barroco, meaning "irregular pearl," and was initially used to describe architecture and visual arts characterized by complexity, abundant ornamentation, and dynamism. Baroque music similarly reflects these characteristics, distinguished by rich harmonies, intricate counterpoint, and intense emotional expression .



However, what sets Baroque music apart from later periods is not merely its structural features but its distinctive approach to performance. During the Baroque era, the boundary between composer and performer was considerably more fluid than in the Romantic period. Notation often provided only a skeletal framework of melodic lines and a bass line with figured harmonic abbreviations (basso continuo), expecting the performer, drawing on stylistic knowledge and artistic taste, to complete the work with ornamentation, improvisation, and rhythmic flexibility. As Tyma observes, "The Baroque ideal did not consist of a faithful adherence to a carefully notated text. Composers depended upon the individuality of the performer to fill out the implications of a sketchily notated text".

This unique characteristic has made the performance of Baroque music one of the most challenging areas of classical music in contemporary times. The fundamental question is: how can a work from three centuries ago be performed in a manner that is both historically authentic and meaningful to today's audience? Answering this question requires careful examination of the historical evolution of performance approaches, national differences in performance styles, and the role of concepts such as rhetoric, ornamentation, and improvisation.

2. The Early Music Movement and the Evolution of Performance Approaches

1- Origins and Theoretical Foundations

From approximately the mid-twentieth century, a movement known as "Early Music" emerged, aiming to reconstruct authentic performance practices of pre-Romantic periods, particularly the Baroque. Haskell defines this movement as:

"A term once applied to music of the Baroque and earlier periods, but now commonly used to denote any music for which a historically appropriate style of performance must be reconstructed on the basis of surviving scores, treatises, instruments and other contemporary evidence" [1, 2].

In its early stages, this movement bore a strong resemblance to a quasi-religious fundamentalist movement in search of a purist ideal, with musicologists seeking to recover the "real" sound of Baroque music. This approach often involved the use of reconstructed period instruments, gut strings, lower tuning (approximately 415 Hz rather than the modern 440 Hz), and a dry, unemotional approach to performance [1].

However, Schulenberg, in his review of Walls's edited essay collection, critiques the problems inherent in this purist approach. He argues that such collections present an incomplete and somewhat outdated picture of Baroque performance practices, neglecting many key topics such as aesthetics, philosophy of music, expression and rhetoric, religion and liturgy, music economics, and even dance. Schulenberg emphasizes that "the avoidance of self-examination, a refusal to theorize Baroque performance practice" represents one of the deepest problems in this field [13, 4].

2- From Authenticism to Historically Informed Performance (HIP)



Over time, the Early Music movement evolved from a rigid "authenticity"-based approach toward a more flexible approach known as "Historically Informed Performance" (HIP). Cherevko and colleagues explain that Gustav Leonhardt, one of the pioneers of this movement, believed that only objects could be authentic, not performances of works, because returning to the past is impossible. Thus, the term "authenticism" was replaced by "historically informed performance," which is closer to the contemporary context of early music performance and incorporates elements of an innovative approach to music of the past [4, 3].

Van Ness, citing Taruskin, describes this evolution as follows: "I am convinced that 'historical' performance today is not really historical; that a thin veneer of historicism clothes a performance style that is completely of our own time, and is in fact the most modern style around" [1, 3].

Ravasio identifies three main characteristics of historically informed performance: "1-compliance-focused, as opposed to interpretation-focused; 2-impersonal and objective, as opposed to personal and creative; and 3- work-centered, as opposed to practice-centered" [12]. However, Dodd, distinguishing between "compliance authenticity" and "interpretive authenticity," argues that performers can achieve authenticity either by strict adherence to the score (compliance) or by deeper understanding of the work and conveying its content (interpretation) [4].

3. National Differences in Performance Styles: Italy, France, and Germany

One of the most important characteristics of Baroque music is the diversity of its national styles. Filip argues that "the contrastive mentalities of the two nations represent the generating sources of their music: Italians are extroverted and passionate, used to expressing their joy and pain directly and spontaneously, whereas the French filter their feelings intellectually" [5].

This fundamental difference led to two contrasting performance styles:

The Italian Style is characterized by drama, spontaneity, a fantastic richness of musical forms, and colorful expression that even includes bizarre elements. In this style, figurative ornamentation played an essential role, and Italians preferred spontaneous improvisation, embellishing melodies with melodic notes and rhythmic-melodic cells [5].

The French Style emerged as a reaction to the volcanic Italian music and is characterized by intellectualism, aristocracy, clear musical forms, and precise rules for interpretation. The French used ornamentation of musical sounds as the basic unit of melody and wrote most ornaments into the notation [5].

Quantz summarizes this difference as follows: "Italian music is less balanced; French music is yet much too restrained and, probably, because of that, in French music even what is new seems old." Nevertheless, he emphasizes that beginners should "combine the decent and clear conduct of the French interpretation with the Italian chiaroscuro" [5].



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The longstanding political, cultural, and spiritual rivalry between these two nations also influenced musical styles. The French considered Italian music tasteless and vulgar, while the Italians regarded French music as inexpressive and useless, "destined for the ears, and not for the heart" [5]. Ragueneau provides a vivid description of the difference in violin performance:

"[The French] play the violin with much more delicacy and care, in comparison to the Italians who agonise every time... I have not seen anyone so seized with passion while playing the violin, like the famous Arcangelo Corelli, whose eyes reddened countless times, whose face maimed, and whose eyes moved as if in agony" [19].

Germany, influenced by both styles, gradually synthesized them, giving rise to great composers such as Telemann, Handel, and Bach [5, p. 29]. Vaubel, in an economic-historical analysis, demonstrates that political fragmentation in Germany and Italy (with approximately 300 small states in Germany and numerous city-states in Italy) was a key factor in the flourishing of Baroque music, as competition among courts and churches to attract composers encouraged creativity and innovation [17]. His data show that the average duration of employment for Baroque composers in Italy and Germany (11.1 and 9.1 years, respectively) was significantly shorter than in France (18.6 years) and Britain (19.7 years), indicating greater competition in fragmented countries [17].

4. The Role of Rhetoric in Baroque Music Performance

One of the most fundamental concepts in Baroque performance practice is "rhetoric." Golomb, citing Haynes, suggests that the term "Rhetorical music" is an appropriate alternative to "Early music," as it "expresses the essence of the musical spirit prior to the Romantic Revolution" [3,1].

1- Rhetoric as Semantics (Figurenlehre)

From the late nineteenth century, musicologists such as Hermann Kretzschmar, Arnold Schering, and Arnold Schmitz developed a theory called Figurenlehre (Doctrine of Musical Figures) based on Baroque treatises. They believed that rhetorical figures in Baroque music, like words in a dictionary, carried specific symbolic meanings and regulated Baroque music [3,2].

However, Golomb, citing critiques of this theory, including Joshua Rifkin's criticism, explains that "most of the figures cited in Baroque treatises designate musical techniques like fugue, repetition, chromaticism, or imitation; with few exceptions, they were not intended to communicate extra-musical meanings" [3, 4].

2- Rhetoric as Speech

The more dominant and practical approach is "rhetoric as speech." In this view, music follows the patterns of speech and should be articulated accordingly. John Butt points out that when Baroque treatises exhort instrumentalists to imitate singers, they do not mean long, sustained legato lines, but rather clarity of words and sensitivity to metrical accents [3,5].



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This approach emphasizes the "small figures in the surface" as the focal point of expression and signification, marginalizing "larger music processes, such as the extended crescendo or the prolonged dissonance" [3, 5]. However, rhetorical performers, rather than the inflexible "sewing machine" style prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s (with rigid tempos and dynamics), emphasize variety and flexibility. Each figure should be shaped independently, and the listener should be made aware of its relationship to other figures [3, 5].

Harnoncourt argues that "music prior to 1800 speaks, while subsequent music paints. The former must be understood, since anything that is spoken presupposes understanding; the latter affects us by means of moods which need not be understood, because they should be felt" [10]. In contrast, Rifkin considers this view exaggerated and maintains that "none of this has anything to do with some different style of performance" [16].

Despite these disagreements, Golomb concludes that the rhetorical approach has had "a humanising effect on contemporary performances of Baroque music. It increased listeners' attention to the contribution of individual voices, allowing individual musicians greater freedom and more breathing space" [3, 11].

5. Ornamentation and Improvisation: Cornerstones of Authentic Performance

1- Principles of Ornamentation

Donington outlines five basic principles of ornamentation in Baroque music [8,3,4]:

1. The Principle of Necessity: Embellishments are obligatory, not a luxury.
2. The Principle of Economy: One must choose the correct ornament in its proper context; too much embellishment obscures the melody.
3. The Principle of Uniformity: In imitative passages, ornaments should be consistent.
4. The Principle of Variety: To avoid monotony, ornaments should be varied in da capo sections.
5. The Principle of Suitability: The choice of ornaments must be guided by taste, context, and appropriateness.

Tyma describes in detail various types of ornaments, including: the appoggiatura (leaning note), which is divided into short and long types and serves either harmonic or melodic functions; the trill, which is obligatory at cadences and must begin on the upper note; the mordent, which uses the lower auxiliary note and serves a rhythmic function; and the turn, which circles the main note with upper and lower auxiliary notes [8,6,14].

2- National Differences in Ornamentation

Filip, citing Quantz, explains the fundamental difference between the two ornamental styles as follows [5]:



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"The French ornamentation of the Adagio can be learned under good guidance, without having to study harmonies. In comparison, the Italian ornamentation requires knowledge of harmony... French composers used to display most of their ornaments; thus, the interpreter did not have anything else to do than to interpret them correctly. Italians preferred not to display the ornamentations at all; they were left to the interpreters' ingenuity."

3- Improvisation and Its Challenges in Contemporary Practice

Rubinoﬀ highlights the fundamental paradox of the Early Music movement: "On the one hand, historical performers aim to obey the composer's intentions by paying careful attention to the written instructions of the musical score yet they also seek to recreate the performative conventions—and freedoms—of an earlier era" [14, p. 2]. Taruskin sharply criticizes this movement, arguing that "the modern reconstructionist movement has produced many scrupulous realizers of musical notation but has yet to produce a single genuine master of improvisation" [14,1].

Rubinoﬀ identifies three main factors limiting improvisation in contemporary Baroque performance [14,7,10]:

1. Performance Practice Literature: Works by Dolmetsch, Donington, and Neumann focus on the minutiae of written ornaments and pay insufficient attention to free improvisation. Neumann even advises performers to stay within an "ornamentation belt" and err on the side of modesty [14,7].
2. The Recording Industry: Recordings, rather than encouraging improvisation, have led to homogenization and stylization. Performers often use other performers' written ornaments (such as Roger's edition of Corelli sonatas) rather than improvising personally [14,9,10].
3. Conservatory Education: Early music programs in conservatories treat improvisation as a peripheral topic, and examination systems focus on performing written works rather than improvising [14, 12,13].

Despite these obstacles, Rubinoﬀ points to signs of improvisation revival, including performances by Christina Pluhar (L'Arpeggiata), Andrew Manze, and Matthias Maute, who performed a Vivaldi concerto from memory with a completely new Adagio movement and an extended cadenza [14,13,14].

6. The Influence of Acoustic Spaces and Period Instruments on Performance

One of the lesser-explored aspects of Baroque performance practice is the influence of performance space on musicians' performance. Eley and colleagues conducted an experimental study in which ten musicians specializing in Baroque music (viola da gamba, transverse flute, and theorbo) performed in two completely different halls: the Baroque "Salon des Nobles" at the Château de Versailles (volume 567 m³, reverberation time approximately 1.5 seconds) and the modern amphitheater at the Cité de la Musique in Paris (volume 1430 m³, reverberation time approximately 1 second) [7].

Questionnaire results revealed that musicians rated Versailles significantly higher in terms of reverberance, resonance, and envelopment, considering it much more suitable for Baroque music



performance [7,5]. One participant wrote: "This space is made for playing the viol... the acoustics are absolutely perfect." In contrast, the modern hall was described as "dry," "flat," and "unflattering," forcing musicians to play notes longer or adjust their tone to compensate for the lack of acoustic support [7].

Objective analysis of performances using logistic regression classification revealed that performances in the two halls were significantly different, with prediction accuracy exceeding 90% in some cases [7]. For example, one flutist noticeably increased the loudness of their sound in the modern hall to compensate for the lack of reverberation [7, 8]. This research demonstrates that room acoustics affect not only listener perception but also the performer's performance decisions, and therefore should be considered an integral part of Baroque performance practice.

7. The Changing Reputation of Baroque Composers in Musicological Historiography

Ceulemans analyzed seven major music dictionaries from 1790 to 2000 to trace the evolution of Baroque composers' reputations. The results show significant consensus among musicologists over two centuries. Spearman rank correlation coefficients between different rankings are all positive and statistically significant [2].

However, interesting changes are also observed:

- Bach (J.S. Bach) is the only composer consistently ranked among the top ten.
- Vivaldi, now one of the most popular Baroque composers, appears in the top ten only twice (in MGG and New Grove) [2].
- Charpentier was severely neglected until 1970 but is now considered as important as Rameau and Lully [2].
- Composers such as Tartini and Pergolesi, very popular in the nineteenth century, declined in the twentieth century [2].

The dynamic panel econometric model shows that "the importance devoted to a composer in a dictionary is for 20% a reminiscence of the previous dictionary" [2]. This finding both confirms that musicologists rely on their predecessors' work and shows that changes in reputation occur gradually rather than suddenly. Furthermore, statistical analysis demonstrates that "all dictionaries are biased and give more importance to their composers with whom they share their citizenship" This bias is even present in recent encyclopedic works such as Grove, despite being written by an international team of musicologists [2].

8. Conclusion

Baroque music, with its unique characteristics, represents one of the richest and most challenging periods of music history for contemporary performers. This article has demonstrated that Baroque performance practices have undergone significant transformations over the past two centuries: from a positivist, purist approach in the early Early Music movement to a constructivist, polyphonic approach grounded in dialogue between past and present in Historically Informed Performance.



Three essential pillars of Baroque performance are: 1-Rhetoric, which through two approaches—"rhetoric as semantics" and "rhetoric as speech"—provides a theoretical framework for musical expression; 2-Ornamentation and Improvisation, which, although well documented in Baroque treatises, face obstacles in contemporary practice such as restrictive scholarly literature, the recording industry, and conservatory education; and 3- Acoustic Space, which recent empirical research has shown profoundly influences musicians' performance decisions and must be considered an integral part of performance practice.

Furthermore, national differences in performance styles (Italian, French, and German) and political competition resulting from state fragmentation in Italy and Germany were key factors in the flourishing of Baroque music. The evolution of Baroque composers' reputations in musicological historiography shows that while significant consensus exists regarding the Baroque canon, tastes and national biases have always played a role in evaluating composers.

Ultimately, as Van Ness emphasizes, "A musical performance is, in fact, an adventure spanning time and space. We resurrect music through a notation from a period long ago historically, from a place different from the one we are in now. We combine hypothesis and fact drawn from period sources and seek to combine these with the inescapable fact of us as living beings in our own total cultural context". This interdisciplinary approach, in which the performer is simultaneously researcher, interpreter, and creator, will guide the future of Baroque performance practices toward more dynamic engagement with both past and present.

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