

Finding Her Voice: Current Trends in Early Vocal Music Performance¹

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The search for authenticity has long held sway over early music practices, dictating the direction of both scholarship and performance. Throughout the development of the early music movement, an emphasis on historical accuracy and production of an *Urtext* has increased dramatically, until the search for authenticity has taken on the air of a religious quest. However, critics and performers have recently begun to question authenticity's hold over text and performance. Once lauded *authentic* performances are now sometimes criticized for excluding creativity, accessibility and communication. Even Richard Taruskin, the acknowledged leader of performance practice criticism, comments that "a movement that might, in the name of history, have shown the way back to a truly creative performance practice has only furthered the stifling of creativity in the name of normative controls" (in Butt 1996, 325). The cult of authenticity is now beginning to be perceived as a "symptom of 20th century modernism" (Taruskin, in Butt 1996, p.325), and postmodern thinking, which has for some time influenced the academic sphere of musicology, is finally beginning to break through the stronghold of early music performance.

One area in which the firm grip of authenticity has noticeably weakened is vocal performance by women. The penchant for historically informed performance has commonly dictated what and how women should sing in the realm of early music. Yet in recent years a reaction to this approach has countered the desire for historical accuracy and a constructed ideal female sound with a need to communicate meaning and emotion and to create performances which are alive and relevant to a modern audience. This radical shift towards a new performance aesthetic is emerging in tandem with feminist musicology's attempt to break down composer/mind-centred conceptions of music in favour of performer/body-epistemologies, as well as bring gender into perspective. With the aid of feminist theory, musicologists have been asking new kinds of questions, moving issues like race, gender, sexuality and the body to the centre of musicological inquiry, and these same issues and questions have begun to be enacted in early music performance.

At first, the entrance of more women performers into yet another traditionally male-dominated sphere, while it sparked some interest in female vocal practice, did not disturb the already well established cult of authenticity. Little opposition is produced when women sing music written specifically for female voices such as the chants of Hildegard von Bingen, or madrigals composed for Ferrara's *concerte della donna*. However, when women move into arguably more *male* spheres,² as for instance when they sing the *superius* and *altus* lines of a

Machaut mass or Gabrieli motet — lines conceivably written for boy's and men's voices — controversy is eased only when they sound like the male singers they are replacing. As the search for authenticity gained dominance, vocal techniques which mimicked the pure, vibrato-less quality of boy sopranos or unique sonority of counter-tenors became desirable for women. A transparent, crystalline timbre and clean, light sound, purged of any nineteenth-century romantic gestures, is now universally associated with early a capella music. Initially advocated by English ensembles such as the Tallis Scholars, this early music ideal draws upon English choral traditions which rely heavily on young male voices. The longstanding entrenchment of England's college and cathedral tradition carries with it a sense of historical authenticity that is transferred to emerging early music groups which adopt their pure, homogeneous vocal timbre; thus the boy treble sound has become an indicator of authenticity and an ideal for female performance of early music.

Mapping female voices onto those of pre-pubescent boys, however, certainly raises some interesting issues regarding gender construction and perception. The equation of women's voices with those of boys simultaneously identifies them with that which is male while relegating them to that which is not yet man. While female voices are mirrored on those which come from biologically male bodies, the female singer remains a gender that is other than male; for boys — children — and women both traditionally exist outside of the dominant gender which is both male and adult. In her exploration of Elizabethan and Jacobean notions of gender and physiological development, Linda Austern notes that earlier societies understood there to be "specific similarities between boys' and women's underdeveloped masculinity, for the true distinction in this patriarchal society was not between the sexes, but between fathers and children" (Austern 1994, pp. 85-86). The early music trend of modelling the female voice upon that of a male child allows this Elizabethan identification of women with children to re-enter modern thinking, and reinforces male hegemony within performance practice.

The adoption of a static, homogeneous sound, which mirrors a boy treble's voice and effectively ignores the gender of the soprano or alto singer, also obscures the female body in performance and reinforces the nineteenth-century concept of music as a transcendent creation, detached from human physicality.

As Suzanne Cusick asserts, musicology is "a discipline that identifies nearly totally with the composer as *mind*, and which identifies music as *mind*" (Cusick 1994, p. 16). Early music's preoccupation with an historically informed performance which resides in the composer's supposed original intentions has compounded the association of music and mind. Too often music is viewed as a direct transmission from the mind of the composer to the mind of the listener — in Cusick's words, a *mind-mind* game (Cusick 1994, p. 16) — the less intervention by the performer the more authentic the performance is perceived to be. Such attitudes toward the study and practice of music continually obscure the body, to the point where any noticeable physicality in performance is immediately criticized and exaggerated.³ So often in the production of music the body is deemed not only irrelevant but also potentially subversive — both to music's transcendent power and patriarchal hierarchies. Early epistemologies of music were heavily influenced by the Cartesian view of knowledge that associates the body with woman and the mind with man, thus, a denial of the body is in essence an exclusion of the feminine⁴.

As feminist musicology continues to examine structures of male hegemony within traditional epistemologies of music, female performers have begun to offer alternatives to the search for an authentic performance practice. Whenever it penetrates a new field, one of the first actions of feminism is to situate women and their social, intellectual or artistic contributions within the conventional canon of recognized male achievements. In music, as Susan McClary remarks, "much of the new work has focussed on rediscovering the women who participated in the Western art tradition" (1993, pp. 400-401). Keeping pace with scholarship, a new surge of ensembles and soloists flooding the early music scene have expressed a growing interest in performing female compositions and songs about women's life. Jean Seiler and Anne Bagnall Yardley noted in 1994 that "women's music [was] appearing with increasing frequency as a theme for early music concerts" (Seiler and Yardley 1994, 95).⁵ Publishing companies are also picking up interest in women's music, and scores as well as recordings of the works of early female composers (including Barbara Strozzi, Francesca Caccini and Elizabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre) are all now readily available.

Yet more than enlarging the repertoire of early music ensembles, feminist theory has impacted the very nature of early music performance. Many recent performances and recordings of early music possess qualities indicative of a perspective which openly challenges the dominant cult of authenticity and subverts the conventional role of women within the early music movement. Through a performance style which may incorporate free interpretation, an emphasis on emotion and communication, manipulation of vocal timbres rather than maintenance of purity and uniformity, and repertoire that either emphasizes or crosses traditional gender boundaries, female vocalists and ensembles have taken early vocal music and made it a medium for not only aural beauty, but also a feminine perspective, both personal and political.

The first and perhaps most obvious locus of this new perspective is found in the changing sound of female singers. While many still adhere to the straight, homogeneous tone of boy trebles, others have begun instead to search for ultimate control over and expressive variety within their own female voices. Hesperion XX's soprano Montserrat Figueras or the Consort of Music's Evelyn Tubb, for instance, have decidedly not bought into the sweet boy-soprano sound⁶. Figueras regularly exploits the rich femininity and flexibility of her voice and draws upon her Spanish heritage to achieve an extraordinary vitality and range of expression; while Evelyn Tubb's unique approach rests upon dramatic and compelling interpretations of the diverse voices represented in early vocal repertoire, for which she manipulates vocal timbre, diction and style in response to the varying demands of text and melody. Expression and honesty is the key for yet another singer, Gothic Voices' Margaret Philpot. Although she maintains a fairly straight tone, adding vibrato only to colour certain phrases, it would be difficult to mistake her warm and open contralto voice for the clear incisive sound of a countertenor⁷.

Sometimes distinctly non-conventional vocal techniques are incorporated into performance, displaying an exploration of the potential of the female voice as well as an attempt to bring early music into a popular sphere of interest. Mara Kiek, for instance, draws fully on her training in Balkan folk techniques to interpret Medieval *trobairitz* songs and *chansons de femme*⁸. Similarly, Anne Azéma, although a specialist in conventional early music singing styles, calls upon an

instinct born out of her Occitan childhood when performing Old Provençal or French lyrics.⁹ The Baroque ensemble Bimbetta, on the other hand, searches for new sounds not in folk music, but in pop, jazz and rock. Of their unconventional presentation, Bimbetta comments that the inclusion of "snatches of pop, jazz and blues as introductions to Baroque sonatas and arias . . . are meant to [make their music] . . . more relevant and accessible to a modern audience" (in Reiss 1996, p. 40). Such cross-cultural performance styles are representative of a postmodern trend which offers not one exclusive mode of thinking but many equally valid perspectives. As Scott Reiss suggests, "there is not a way to play any historic music, but many ways. We can be informed by our written sources, but not completely informed. We can also be informed by all the music we have ever heard. And we can be informed by our creativity" (Reiss 1996, p. 41). For female practitioners of early music, the incorporation of popular and unconventional vocal styles is just one way in which they can reclaim the female voice and form their own consciousness of vocal technique and interpretation.

Even a singer like Emma Kirkby, whose "characteristic crystalline timbre and discreet ornamentation" (Dobbins 1980, p. 188) has come to epitomize the early music sound, is moving away from a pure, precise, but ultimately restrained *authentic* sonority, towards performance in which the singer does not merely transmit the composer's intentions but adopts an active, personal role in the interpretation and presentation of the work. There has been a definite shift in Kirkby's aesthetics of vocal sound since her earliest recordings — even beyond the natural maturing and technical development of her voice. A well-controlled use of vibrato now adds warmth and richness to her previously transparent, straight tone. In live performance her presentation is lively, visually engaging and possesses a definite sense of physical presence, and freedom of movement.¹⁰ This re-appropriation and centring of the voice within the female body is indicative of feminist criticism's influence on performance practice and points to a new concept of authenticity.

Expressivity remains, for these and other singers, more important than, and in some cases precludes, uniformity of vocal sound; the individual performer becomes the impetus for expression as well as the location for authenticity. In 1984 Richard Taruskin asked, "can the text not be an opportunity — for the exercise of imagination, the communication of delight, even the sharing of emotion? . . . Can there be no reconciliation between the two authenticities, that is, the authenticity of the object performed and the authenticity of the subject performing?" (Taruskin 1984, p. 6). The emerging feminist perspective answers Taruskin's question not by throwing out the historically informed performance, but by situating authenticity within the female voice which, in the act of performance, is at once an extension of the performing subject and the object performed. Paul Zumthor declares that whenever language is sung or spoken, authority resides in the action of the human voice¹¹. Female performers of early music have taken hold of this authority in a desire to secure authenticity within the voice and also bring the female body into focus. By allowing distinctly feminine vocal qualities to dominate and re-articulate *authentic* early music performance, singers are re-aligning the soprano or alto voice with the female body.

In performance the performer is no longer ignored but invoked as the locus of authority through a new physicality and presence. No longer content to utilise a static staging or strict concert format, early music practitioners are trying out new

performance strategies which exploit the presence of the performing body and allow for a greater level of communication between performer and audience. This new early music aesthetic leads in many cases to an exploration of musical agency through dance, narrative, dramatic, autobiographic or intertextual devices. Groups like Anonymous 4 are breaking convention by deliberately utilising dramatic narrative throughout their concert programs¹², whereas the Baroque ensemble Bimbeta mixes humour, drama, modern and provocative costuming, staging and lighting which evoke a nightclub atmosphere with their use of period instruments and repertoire. For too long performers of early music have tended, as Taruskin comments, "to regard their performances as texts rather than acts" (1984, p. 6), and their own role as faithful re-producer of the intentions of the composer and the conditions of the first performance. Viewing performance as a performer-audience relationship rather than a composer-audience one, allows the musician to perceive music as a phenomenon existing in flux between the performer and the listener, rather than fixed solidly in the composer's manuscript. A personal, expressive communication of this music therefore becomes the primary aim of the performer.

Bimbeta's controversial modern, theatrical approach points out the contemporary relevance and overtly feminist agenda of the music they perform — music about women, power and desire.

The postmodern concept of authenticity is the authenticity of "personal [artistic] conviction" and challenging, "individual responses to individual pieces" of music which result in intense and exciting performances (Taruskin 1984, p. 10). The convictions of feminist musicologists to introduce new perspectives which bring gender, sexuality and the body into focus, have clearly impacted the world of early music and contributed to this new performance aesthetic. At the start of the early music movement, gender consciousness meant self-consciousness concealed in an attempt to fit into the male vocal tradition, or only performing music that would (proveably) have been performed by a woman four or five centuries ago. Today, to invoke gender is to affirm and empower the female voice through a subjective performance which locates authority in the female body and authenticity in the sharing of meaning, emotion and aural beauty between the performer and audience. The invocation of gender in early music performance is adding a vibrant, re-invigorating facet to this continually evolving movement.

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Endnotes

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²Arguably rather than certainly for according to some perspectives young boy sopranos and countertenors, men affecting a castrato's sound, are not considered fully male (see Austern 1994, 85).

³Consider, for instance, a description by Joel Cohen and Herb Snitzer of a performance where "the instrumentalists seem to be playing for God . . . while the vocal soloists stretch and strain their public selves like contestants at the Miss America pageant" (Cohen and Snitzer 1985, 75). The instrumentalists here are lauded for a divinely cerebral performance while the intrusion of the notably female vocalists' bodies cause Cohen and Snitzer much anxiety.

⁴See for instance, Cusick 1994, 16.

⁵Ensembles such as The Early Music Players of New Jersey, HelioTropé from California and the Toronto Consort have programmed and recorded concerts of early music by and about women. Other groups are dedicated at their inception almost exclusively to women's music: the Boston ensemble La Donna Musicale, for instance, performs music by women composers of the Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical periods, while the German-based Medieval ensemble Sequentia has undertaken to record the complete repertoire of Hildegard of Bingen.

⁶Montserrat Figueras can be heard on the CD Hesperion XX, Jordi Savall, director, *Cansos de Trobairitz: Songs of the women troubadours c1200*, London: Virgin Classics, 1996. Veritas Edition 7243/5/61310/2/6; or compare Evelyn Tubbs, soprano and Michael Fields, lute, *The Dark is My Delight*, Dorset: Columns Musica Oscura, 1993, compact disc recording 070980.

⁷Listen, for example, to Philpot's rendition of *Ave Generosa* on Gothic Voices, Christopher Page, director, *A Feather on the Breath of God: Sequences and Hymns by Abbess Hildegard of Bingen*, London: Hyperion Records, 1981. Compact disc recording CDA66039.

⁸Mara Kieck joins Medieval ensemble Sinfonye, directed by Stevie Wishart on their recording, *Bella Domna*. London: Hyperion, A66283.

⁹For an example see Camerata Mediterranea, Joel Cohen, dir., *Lo Gai Saber*, Erato Disques: 1991, compact disc 2292-45647-2; or Anne Azema, *The Unicorn: Chants Médiévaux Français*, Erato Disques: 1994, compact disc 4509-94830-2.

¹⁰This was particularly apparent in a 1995 concert of Restoration lute songs with Anthony Rooley, in Edmonton, Canada and a Consort of Musicke performance of 1994 in Dartington, England.

¹¹ "Lorsque le poète ou son interprète chante ou rècite (que le texte soit improvisé ou mémorisé), sa voix seule confère à celui-ci son autorité" (Zumthor 1987, 19)

¹²Although, they accept and advocate the recognized "ideal" vibrato-less timbre and are admired for maintaining a pure and uniform vocal sonority.
