



**NEW WORK, OLD INSTRUMENTS: *AT HIS MAJESTY'S PLEASURE* – A COLLABORATION BETWEEN MARTYN HARRY AND 'HIS MAJESTY'S SAGBUTTS AND CORNETTS'**

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# THE PAPER

## Questions

- What happens when an ensemble attuned to the music and performance practices of the C16th and C17th takes on a contemporary commission ?
- In the light of this ensemble's radical collaborative move, what can we say about risk-taking in music?

## Structure

- We will first present the findings of an ethnographic study of rehearsals, recording sessions and performance of 'At His Majesty's Pleasure' (London and Oxford, April and May 2012); we show a series of vignettes from the rehearsal period, and subsequent to the group's performance in Oxford a month later.
- In the second part of the paper, we examine more broadly what it means to take risks in music.

# *AT HIS MAJESTY'S PLEASURE* REHEARSALS, RECORDING AND PERFORMANCE

- 9-13 April 2012, South London
  - Rehearsals and recording
    - Core HMSC personnel PLUS
      - Two organists
      - Two cornetts and one sagbutt
- 5 May 2012, Holywell Room, Oxford
  - Première conducted by Martyn Harry
  - Programme of early music with AHMP closing the performance



# VIGNETTE 1: LEADERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY

10 April 4.35pm



We were losing the sense of unanimous attack at the start of a phrase, because we were relying too heavily on a visual cue; the presence of the conductor meant that we were just sort of delegating that kind of collective responsibility to someone else, the result of which was actually we weren't playing terribly well together at that point.

[Jamie Savan interview 11<sup>th</sup> April 2012]

## Leadership and responsibility

- Savan: I think what's going wrong.....we are not playing that quite right, is that we are delegating all the leadership to Martyn and that isn't the way that we normally play, normally we play unanimously because we breathe together and someone will take the lead not by doing anything particular but by sort of having the responsibility of [breathes] 'and now we play' and we are not doing that now because we are letting Martyn do all the leading and actually we need to be a bit more proactive and that should fix and I am sure it will fix it for 90...

# VIGNETTE 2: TUNING AND TEMPERAMENT

11 April 12.45pm



- Savan: Martin, may I make just a comment about temperament, I don't know whether you necessarily agree with this but as far as I am concerned, equal temperament is a necessary compromise for a keyboard instrument so that they can play all the notes written. I think we shouldn't think amongst ourselves that we are playing in equal temperament, I think that would be a mistake. I think we should play the way these instruments work best, which is just try and play as pure intervals where we possibly can and there may be places where we are playing in unison maybe with the organ or something where we also have to make that sort of compromise, otherwise I don't think we should be too hung up on trying to play, particularly on cornett, to play notes lower than they want to be on the instrument just because that's where they are in equal temperament or higher or either, we shouldn't always be adjusting we should play the instruments the way they want to be played unless there is some real reason of tuning, that we really have to compromise.

Harry: is it easier for you to be unanimous if you are playing more with the instrument?

- Savan: I am just thinking particularly about this opening phrase, for example, where the F is naturally high in the temperament, also naturally high on the instrument, sorry it's higher temperament than we are used to playing in but high on the instrument, and then the C# is that little bit lower and I don't think we should make a huge compromise just because the keyboard instrument [unclear] unless it sounds jarring and not quite natural
- Huw: can I just say, I think the most successful bits of intonation that we had yesterday was when you did that, as well, when you actually reverted to type and I think we found that to be more successful...

# VIGNETTE 3: PERFORMANCE AND AUDIENCE RESPONSES

- “You chose to indulge yourselves at our expense, playing modern music which you had commissioned - nothing wrong with that IF you had put that in the advertised programme so that we had a choice. ... This was not a change forced upon you, but a self indulgent exercise at our cost.”
- “You completely ruined what would have been an excellent concert. I was really looking forward to hearing you and was brought over by a friend as a special treat. ... It is NOT acceptable to change genre when a concert is advertised as an early music concert. What you did tonight was a total disgrace. Did you not even think that if people come to see you, they would be early music fans? If I wanted to go to hear contemporary music I would CHOOSE to buy tickets for such an event. You allowed me to buy tickets for an early music concert and then cheated me. It is not fun to watch a self-satisfied man on an ego trip indulging himself at my expense. If you are bored with early music and want a new toy, please do this in your own time.”

# VIGNETTE 4: PRESS RESPONSE

- “Hats off to HMSC and Martyn Harry for this brave venture. ... The opening movements prompt the question: how abstract is a composition from the instruments it was conceived for? How much of their typical range, tone, idiom and canon infect the creation of the piece? The initial idiom is that of modern writing for modern wind ensemble, and so the aural lens curiously resolves those instruments in the music, since the characteristics of the historic instruments are crowded out, or perhaps suggested out....
- It is wonderful that new music, let alone music of this level of excitement and inventiveness, is being composed for historic instruments. I am sure it will stimulate more to follow, and should be a cultural force which helps maintain the playing of these instruments.” (Steven Cassidy, in *Early Music Review* Dec 2012)

- In each of the above fragments, the central issue was the accommodation between their accepted performance practice and new ways of working within this group, and the reception of these.
- In the second half of the paper, we use these to look at the broader notion of risk in music.

Trust (Cf Gritten) and its complement: Risk

# RISK IN MUSIC

- Reputational risk
    - Safe and unfamiliar territory
  - Risk as a performance strategy
    - Deliberate unpreparedness / unfinishedness / incomplete information
  - Aesthetic risk
    - Pushing at boundaries
    - Defying conventions
-

# RISK AND PLEASURE

- The pleasures of uncertainty, and the attractions of (safe?) danger
  - Fairgrounds, and other risky scenes...
  - Multiphonics and indeterminacy (Chris Redgate)
  - 'Not knowing the score' (Peter Sheppard Skærved)
  - Deliberate 'under-preparation' (Peter Cropper; Derek Bailey)
- Risk and exposure: being public (no risky pleasure in the practice room)
- 'Flow' (Csikszentmihalyi): balance of demand and capacity (risk and daring?)

# RISK AND TRUST

EC: Did you feel collectively or individually that it was riskier or safer today?

CR: Riskier, I would say. In a sense it's always going to be if it's got the audience in front of you.

NH: I definitely think riskier.

CR: We didn't walk into the kind of safety zones of "We all know we can do this". There were those fast passages: that's the kind of thing you can often pile in; but we just left you to it at one stage.

NH: Yes it was great.

MW: Likewise we left you [RR] hanging.

RR: I sort of knew that was going to happen, and it was really comfortable.

...

NH: The nice thing about people dropping away is it's always a sign of trust.

CR: It is, yes.

NH: You don't drop out if you think someone's going to bottle it [rest agree] so when people drop away that's always nice.

...

RR: There was a nice moment when you really started to dig in with the ricochets, and it was like the wheels were falling off the thing in a really good way. It's like this can't be effortless music: it has to be difficult. It has to be thrown into chaos, and those moments were really good, when we really got the sense that you two were working on quite a delicate dialogue and we were really not. A kind of barbed wire situation!

...

CR: [F]or me we're back to Neil's trust again, because there were times when I was sitting there thinking "OK this is about to go in a new direction. I don't know what that's going to be but I'm quite happy just to sit here and see what happens." And that is because I know these guys...

EC: The out-of-tuneness that [Martyn's] built into the piece has musical and theatrical purposes: the sound of childishness, or a kind of incompetence. And I was struck that when you [Adam Woolf] and Abi [Abigail Newman] had a section like this that you rehearsed on your own, in unison – at the end of it you kind of took a mock bow as if to say “We can sound like complete rubbish as well!” Is there a discomfort about deliberately making yourself seem incompetent?

AW: Yes, I know exactly what you mean, and I think it's something which has to be taken very seriously. The humour has to be taken seriously because there is a lot of humour in that and in the music, and he [MH] wants that effect. Of course it requires a certain degree of confidence as well. We're pretty comfortable with the way we play normally, and so we don't mind messing around a bit, and things like that – actually making it sound bad on purpose.

EC: Because musicians are understandably very protective in a sense of their own excellence and their own skill, so deliberately to expose themselves as being 'incompetent' is ...

AW: It's tricky and I can see especially with these instruments and with the cornetto which is not familiar to a wide audience – or a lot of people have heard it played badly, and the trombone as well of course. And of course the trombone also has associations with being the clown of the orchestra – glissandi and everything – or if someone wants to write a drunk scene in a play it's the trombone that gets it.

# RISK AND COURAGE

[Abbate on *Meistersinger* at the Metropolitan Opera]:

“At the first performance...Ben Heppner lost his voice spectacularly. This became evident when he cracked on the high Gs and As while singing the first strophe in the first verse in the preliminary version of the Prize Song, and at that point I made a quick calculation that he had five more strophes in two full verses in the preliminary version, and nine strophes in three verses in the final version in the last scene, in short lots more high Gs and As not even counting the Act 3 quintet. This was when my eyes closed in despair. But I told myself to open my eyes and pay attention because what we were witnessing was extraordinary raw courage and sangfroid. Heppner would go on singing knowing what lay ahead...I was transfixed not by Wagner’s opera but by Heppner’s heroism, and what was important was not the apperception of concealed meaning through hermeneutic alchemy...but the singular demonstration of moral courage, which, indeed, produces knowledge of something fundamentally different and of a fundamentally different kind. Perhaps one could call it drastic knowledge.”

Carolyn Abbate (2004) Music: Drastic or Gnostic? *Critical Inquiry*, 30/3, 505-536, p535.

# CONCLUSIONS

- Davis, Dylan, and 'Judas' moments
- Collaboration and risk
  - Not being in control – sharing responsibility
  - Being open to other people/traditions
- Creativity and risk
  - Omelettes and eggs: the unavailability of 'stepping out'
- Embodiment, presence, the moment: risk and excitement
  - Not getting too drastic