Composing with an Accent: New Old Music for New Old Organs

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THE INTRUSION OF LIVING COMPOSERS into the world of early music performance practice is a phenomenon with which I should, by now, be comfortable, considering it accounts for a large portion of my output as a composer.[1] But I still, while lying awake at night, feel some unease at the idea of contemporary composers violating this particular hallowed ground.

After all, my late-night brain sees early music performance as a realm of music making dominated principally by three categories of people: dead, genius composers; sometimes-living, sometimes long-dead instrument builders; and thoroughly alive performers. This unholy trinity, in which the animate casually mingle with the deceased, seems sacred, serving the timeless goal of reproducing the great works of art as authentically as possible. In this world, composers are best imagined as marble busts: eternally dignified, voiceless, and unlikely to tinker with details of performance. The unencumbered performers, then, are left to answer the important interpretive questions in ever-changing realizations of old masterpieces.

Of course, we know this not to be the case. Richard Taruskin and Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, among many others, have reassured us that while historically-informed performance practice does indeed look backwards, it also serves as a form of modern expression, reflecting our contemporary musical tastes, interests and concerns with remarkable pliability. And indeed, I think many composers have found performers of early music to be most energetically committed to the creation of new works for their old instruments. Taking these considerations into mind, the living composer's relevance seems more secure—and this is usually the point at which I finally fall asleep, reassured that there might be space for a warm-blooded composer in this unholy Trinity after all.

But, now comfortable with the idea of new music for old instruments, a more difficult question arises. Should the composer write differently for old instruments than he does for modern ones? After all, the twentieth century saw composers incorporating (sometimes literally) the whole kitchen sink, from Messiaen's embrace of the *ondes martenot*, to Lou Harrison's interest in Balinese and other non-Western instruments, to Harry Partch's fascinating homemade instruments, to Cage's co-opting of both silence and its polar opposite, talk radio. With an entire world of options, why should a composer treat, say, a Dom Bédos organ any differently than a steam whistle?

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[1] Three movements of Wadsworth's *The Muses*, scored for baroque violin, viola da gamba, and harpsichord, are included as Tracks 5, 6, and 7 of the CD accompanying this volume.

This question boils down to a more essential one: should the entire complex of historical weight attached to an old instrument influence the composer in any way? The answer, of course, is that it doesn't have to; a composer can write music for a Baroque organ that is no different from the music she might otherwise compose. She could approach a Silbermann organ the same way she approaches an English horn—first come questions about the physical and sonic properties of the instrument (range, timbre, and tuning system, among others), then comes music tailored by the composer to that instrument. The music that results from this can certainly be said to be "new" music for old instruments. But to actually write what I'm clumsily calling "new old" music, a composer has to consider not only the mere physical and acoustic realities (that is to say the "present reality") of old instruments, but also the broad history associated with them (or the "past realities" of the instruments).

One instance of this embrace of a "past reality" that immediately comes to mind is Kevin Ernste's *Anacrusis*, which was written for the inauguration of the new Schnitger reconstruction in Cornell University's Anabel Taylor Hall. For Ernste, the instrument's history as a handmade object entered viscerally into the piece, which embraced the sounds of construction and folded them into the musical fabric. So, here, the instrument's physical history influenced the direction of the composition. Ernste also engaged with the instrument's geographical and musical history by quoting a melody from Bach's Passacaglia in C minor. It's this area of an instrument's past—its musical history—that has most influenced my compositional process when working with old (or "new old") instruments. But my focus tends to be less on the composers associated with the instruments, and more with their modern-day performing interpreters.

When I wrote *Recitative and Aria (for the dedication of an organ)* for the opening concerts of Cornell's Schnitger reconstruction, the compositional history of the instrument was clear, and it certainly influenced the harmonic style of the work.[2] But as I was looking back to Handel and Bach (haunted, perhaps, by images of marble busts), I realized that almost all of what I, a child of the 1980s, have grown up hearing from those two composers has been mediated by a performance practice that may be very different from that of the composers' time.

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[2] For a recording of *Recitative and Aria*, performed by David Yearsley and Kristen Dubenion Smith, see Track 13 of the CD accompanying *Keyboard Perspectives* 4 (2011).

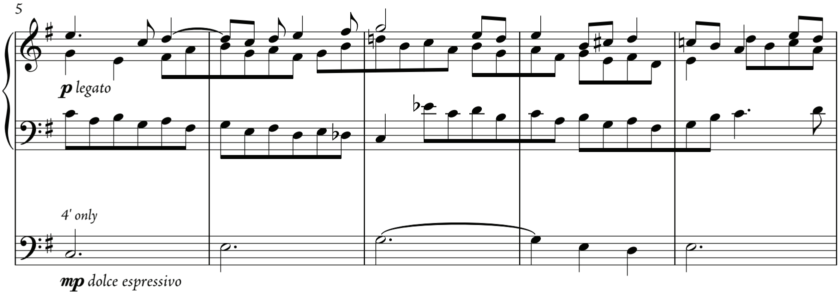
Don't get me wrong; I vastly prefer John Eliot Gardiner and Harry Bicket to Herbert von Karajan when it comes to Baroque music. But it's false to say that what I love about many modern performances of Bach and Handel comes directly from the minds of those two composers. Many of my favorite features—emphasized dissonances, crystalline tone, and breathlessly brisk tempos—are all matters of performance practice, not of composition. And so when I write new music for old instruments, I tend to think less about specific compositions of the past, focusing instead on the entire expressive and gestural complex that has arisen with the historically-informed performance movement.

This brings me to a brief non sequitur. Since 2007, all Apple computers, iPads, and iPhones have included a feature called "Core Animation." Essentially, this provides a library of visual animations built into the core operating system. What it means for developers programming Mac applications is that, instead of spending time writing every little twitch and flicker in their program's visual interface, they can instead simply call up any of Apple's built-in animations. While of course they're free to make their application more individuated by writing everything from scratch, they can also, by calling up the built-in visual effects, quickly and easily make applications that look entirely, richly at home on an Apple device.

So how does this relate to early music? Well, I like to think of historically informed performance practice as a kind of musical Core Animation present in the minds of early music performers. That is not to say that they, like any Apple device, are mindless automatons awaiting my command (as much as any composer might like to think so). On the contrary, the built-in language of expressive and gestural animations that makes up modern historical performance practice is one devised entirely by performers for performers. But I, as a composer, have realized that if I make certain compositional choices I can, like a Mac program developer, activate certain built-in expressive impulses of performers without necessarily quoting or referencing older music explicitly.

And this is what I mean when I refer in the title of this paper to "composing with an accent." The activation of these gestural devices can, ideally, take place regardless of the surface musical style of a given moment in music. And so whether a composition is more modern in tone or more overtly historicized, this gestural accent can provide expressive guidance to the performer (and, perhaps, a sense of familiarity to the listener) without prescribing any particular compositional language.

One of my most recent compositions for organ, *Prelude on "Resignation,"* illustrates this point well. It was commissioned by Jonathan Ryan for his debut album, *A Cathedral's Voice*, recorded on Phil Parkey's new organ at the Cathedral of St. John Berchmans in Shreveport, Louisiana.[1] Jonathan asked for a modern spin on the Chorale Prelude, and we settled on the hymn tune "Resignation," more commonly known by its first line: "My shepherd will supply my need." Structurally, the piece operates just as any prelude by Bach or Brahms, with active, newly-composed music above the tune, which crawls along in the pedal. And though the musical surface is composed in a modern idiom, it is infused with signals to the performer that suggest Baroque interpretive decisions: emphasized dissonances, deemphasized consonances, cross motifs, imitative counterpoint, and hemiola (Example 1).



***Example 1** Zachary Wadsworth,* Prelude on "Resignation," *mm 5–9*

This music is intensely tied to performance practice. And, since all but the very least distinguished organs carry such a strong history of performance style, I'm not surprised to find non-Baroque performance styles in my writing as well. For example, when I wrote a long, single-movement Sonata for Tim Pyper to premiere on the E. M. Skinner organ at Saint Paul's Church in Rochester, New York, various performance practice "tricks" from orchestral repertoire and transcriptions snuck in, including overlap legato and sforzando effects.

When Annette Richards and David Yearsley asked me to write for Cornell University's Schnitger replica, I was faced with a new compositional question: that of composing "new old" music for a "new old" organ. On the one hand, the organ is so close to the original that it carries much of the original's historical weight. But, on the other hand, the very act of recreating an old organ is fraught with postmodern questions: When we are no longer able to preserve an instrument that has been destroyed, what, exactly, are we recreating when we build a replica, and why? That is to say, if the "Mona Lisa" were burned, and we repainted it perfectly, what would be the status of that new work, and how would we view it differently? Is Cornell's Schnitger, perhaps, its own act of performance practice? While I don't have easy answers to these questions, I must admit that they leaked into my composition for the organ's inauguration. The music, like the instrument, both was and could never be entirely Baroque, and the text self-consciously deified both instrument and performer.

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[1] For this recording, reproduced from *A Cathedral's Voice* with the permission of Raven Recordings, see Track 4 of the CD accompanying this volume.

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Ultimately, I compose flexibly as a modern person, influenced heavily by modern historical performance practice. And I'm one of a large number of contemporary composers exploring the broad expressive possibilities of instruments and performers that were all too recently deprived of new music. In a time when an audience's musical interests are far broader than any given composer's list of influences, it seems perfectly right that composers can engage actively with any variety of older or contemporary musics. And though mine is only one of many different ways forward, ours is an age when we no longer need, and indeed no longer seek, a single way.