

Historical accuracy and the early-music movement

Revivals of music from earlier periods has always been common. When there was very little knowledge of what it was like, it was just made up. Most medieval and Renaissance stringed instruments at times claimed to be revivals of the ancient Greek lyre or kithara. From medieval times onwards, earlier music could be found and later performers often performed it, but as far as we know, always in an up-to-date arrangement or style. Our current early-music movement is little different.

The ideal of accurately reproducing the sound of the earlier music was not widely held until the second half of the 20th century, with emphasis on 16th and early 17th century music involving instruments. The idea of realising the intentions of the composers dates from a lot earlier. The conditions that produced this was the publishing of editions of much music of the period by musicologists, and the careful measurement and photography of original instruments in museums by instrument makers, who usually shared this information with others.

Components of the early music movement started much earlier. Organists had been playing music of all periods for ages. The sound their instruments made mostly reflected 19th century taste. Early keyboard music was also played on the piano. A few played it on harpsichords, which often were 'improved' versions by piano makers. All-vocal groups have always existed, and early sacred music and secular music like madrigals was sung. The viol consort was revived with new sizes based on surviving bass viols of cello size assumed to be consort basses (they weren't). Recorders were produced in quantity and their low cost led them to be used in schools as a beginning wind instrument.

At the time, all instruments were tuned to a'=440 Hz, and everyone expected early instruments to be tuned to that pitch as well. Lute playing was minimal since gut top strings broke too quickly, but with the availability of nylon strings after the War, it grew rapidly. Interest in early music amongst amateurs blossomed. A range of wind instruments with plastic reeds was developed for this market. A few early musicians practised up to what is considered to be modern professional standards, i.e. to be able to play very fast cleanly in time and in tune. They were accepted as such, with the help of promotion by the musicologists/critics and became the teachers of subsequent professionals.

Before early music was dominated by professionals, makers fell into several camps. Some, inspired by artistic creativity, decided that they had absorbed the spirit of the original instruments, and indulged in their individualistic versions. Others, also concerned with being labelled as copyists rather than artists, scrupulously copied known historical models when the sound is concerned, but added obvious individual touches otherwise. And there were those who tried to be as historically accurate as possible in all aspects, and FoMRHI supported them. For the players, manuals of early performance practices were published. They provided surveys of historical information, and suggested generally that performers should use their own judgement on how to interpret it. They found interpretation difficult and mostly copied respected performers and responded to the reactions of their audiences.

The early professionals toured and made records, and with the acclaim of the media, fuelled the growth of the movement. An integral part of the publicity emphasised that what the audience was hearing was as close as possible to what was heard when the music was composed, reflecting the composer's intention. The movement did not yet include the playing of instruments that look like those used in modern orchestras. Then the opera community decided to revive 17th century operas, and others to revive the baroque orchestra in the same spirit, so early-music violins and their larger relatives were required. To demonstrate their early-music identity, these instruments were fitted with gut strings and tuned to a pitch standard a semitone lower than modern. That lower pitch made

the violin's top string last longer and was justified by a false interpretation of Praetorius's pitch. Copies of superior late-17th century French orchestral wind instruments were comfortable at that pitch.

With early music going from strength to strength, many performers were only too aware of the compromises being made with modern practices, such as using an all-purpose early-music style, rather than varying it in time or place according to the evidence. They realised that audiences were much more responsive to the attractiveness of the music than to any historical claims, so they decided to modify the authenticity claim to 'historically informed', apparently with no objections. Modern orchestras can easily imitate the style of baroque orchestras (which is not very different), and the differences in sound are becoming increasingly blurred.

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I first got into historical research when asked to use my experience in materials science to find out why the available gut (for harps) don't work on lutes. My first finding was that, according to the information given by Praetorius (string length from scaled drawings and pitch frequency from drawings of pitch pipes), lutes of normal size were tuned over a tone below modern. The second was that the low strings would work if they were stretchier. After suggesting that rope construction of the gut could do that, we started to produce them. The lute community was not interested in such a low pitch standard, and it persisted in its assumption that early gut was stronger than modern gut. It was disappointed with our roped gut thick strings because the sound was not as bright as the basses they were used to, made of wire wound on nylon floss. Nevertheless, many players rubbed bee's wax on their wound strings to get an intermediate level of brightness. I was told that they found that my research was interesting, but it was not to be taken seriously.

Nylon stringing was much cheaper than gut and lasts much longer, and the treble sound was almost as good. Being much more practical, I always accepted that it has been an excellent substitute for gut. What I have objected to is the claim that it is more historically accurate because of its strength, a claim without any clear evidential support. Amongst my subsequent studies, I showed that the evidence pointed to original consort viols being 15–20% larger than modern viols, and that tempos before the late baroque were much slower than in most modern interpretations. I was just doing historical research and certainly did not expect early musicians to change what they were doing. What I did hope was that the more adventurous of them might explore such historically indicated avenues to find what could be useful nowadays. Unfortunately, my results were considered by some leaders as necessarily dubious in quality and somehow destructive to early music. With the objective changed from historically accurate to historically informed, one might expect an improvement in my reputation, but it seems that being reminded of probable differences between early practices and those of the early music movement is still uncomfortable.