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Blurred Lines:
Ravasio on “Historically Informed Performance”

JULIAN DODD

1. Matteo Ravasio has recently claimed that what he calls “historically informed performance practice” has been misrepresented by “analytic philosophy of music from the 1980s onward” (Ravasio 2019, 194). More specifically, he thinks that a number of well-known contemporary analytic philosophers of music, including me,¹ collectively misrepresent this practice as “compliance focused, impersonal, and work centered” (2019, 193). My main aim in this brief article is to show why the particular charge leveled at me misses its target. In addition, we’ll also see that, in the course of getting me wrong in the way he does, Ravasio blurs – or, perhaps, completely misses – distinctions that must be made in order to keep in focus the deep, exciting issue in the philosophy of Western classical music that I address in the paper of mine he discusses (Dodd 2015). This is a shame because it means that none of this excitement comes through in his article.

2. What does “historically informed performance practice” refer to? Ravasio takes it to pick out an “approach to performance” (2019: 194). Specifically, he endorses Mary Hunter’s gloss on this term, according to which a performance is historically informed to the extent that it adopts the performance practices from the relevant historical period (Ravasio 2019, 193). On this view, a performance of a work is historically informed insofar as it exemplifies a style of music making that

¹ Other philosophers of music named are Stephen Davies, Aaron Edidin, Peter Kivy, Roger Scruton, and James O. Young.

would have been seen as appropriate for the work's performance during the period in which the work was composed (Hunter 2014: 606).

Since this way of spelling out the notion of historically informed performance practice makes reference to the performance of *a work*, the third element on Ravasio's charge sheet – his accusation that contemporary analytic philosophers of music err in treating historically informed performance practice as “work-centered” – at once heaves into view. The literal content to this criticism is as follows. In presenting historical informedness as an historicist ‘take’ on faithfulness to the work's score, contemporary analytical philosophers of music thereby fail to acknowledge that this approach to performance is also applied within the tradition to what he terms “nonwork performances” (2019, 202): largely improvised performances based on sets of general guidelines agreed upon by musicians competent in the relevant musical tradition, but in which no authored, notated work is performed.²

I have three responses to this indictment. First, and somewhat ironically, if analytic philosophers of music are guilty of this offence, then so too is Hunter, the source of Ravasio's own account of historically informed performance. As she herself puts it, quoted by Ravasio, “historically informed” picks out “practices and attitudes that directly or indirectly rely on documentary sources from the time of *the work* to inform interpretative decisions about the acoustic, conceptual, and (in the case of opera) visual environment in which *a work* was originally created” (Hunter 2014, 606; quoted at Ravasio 2019, 193; my emphases). This should give us pause for thought over the nature of the supposed “oversight” or “inaccuracy” being attributed to analytic philosophers of music (Ravasio 2019: 194).

Ravasio might reply by accusing me of a cheap shot: no doubt, he would point out that he does not commit himself to the letter of what he calls Hunter's

² As Ravasio observes (2019: 202), such sets of guidelines comprise the *passamezzo antico*, the *romanesca*, and the *bergamasca*.

“definition” of historically informed performance, just its spirit, which he then extends to cover both performances of works and nonwork performances. But the fact that a distinguished musicologist – someone, no doubt, all too aware of the tradition of nonwork performances in the early-baroque and pre-baroque periods – explains historical informedness in this way is revealing. And what it shows is just this, surely: not that Hunter has herself unaccountably forgotten about the early tradition of nonwork performance, but that she regards historical informedness as most effectively explicated by first defining it for work performances, and then extending this definition simply and harmlessly to nonwork performances. Her key idea is that performances are historically informed to the extent that the interpretative decisions that determine their character are the product of historical research into the appropriate period’s performance style; that she does not herself go on to define historical informedness in a way that explicitly includes nonwork performances is simply because doing so is so straightforward. Nothing of any interest hangs on it.

But now Ravasio has a problem. For if this is what we should say about Hunter, then why should we not say the same thing about the contemporary analytic philosophers of music that are his target? Sure, such philosophers, like Hunter, introduce historically informed work performance as a matter of complying with the work’s score in a historically informed style; but since, *so obviously*, nonwork performances are not guided by a score, it is open to these philosophers to flatly observe, as Hunter presumably would, that historically informed such performances are just those that see performers improvise upon the guidelines concerned in the style characteristic of the era in which the relevant practice became established.³

Ultimately, then, I think that the mere fact that contemporary analytic philosophers of music, when writing about historically informed performance,

³ So, for example, a performance of the *romanesca* is historically informed to the extent to which it recreates the typical style with which this formula was improvised upon in the early baroque period.

have tended to focus on performances of works does not entail that their view of this practice is “work centered” in Ravasio’s sense. That they tend not to discuss examples of historically informed nonwork performances entails neither that they are ignorant of the existence of this tradition of performance, nor that they operate with a conception of historical informedness that cannot be easily extended to it. It just reflects the fact that extending such a conception to nonwork performances is philosophically negligible, as I think I’ve just demonstrated.

3. The idea that I, in particular, regard all historically informed performance as work involving is an odd one because the article Ravasio cites is not about historically informed performance at all. (The phrase is conspicuous by its absence from it.) The scope of my interest is explicitly limited to the performance of works,⁴ my particular concern being what I claim to be a highly significant, yet under-described, phenomenon in such work performance. Specifically, I present this particular performance practice as having the following features. First, there is not just one norm of faithfulness – score compliance – governing this practice, but two: performers can be true to a work, not merely by obeying its score, but by performing it in a manner that evinces understanding of it (2015, §§2, 3). Second, the respective demands of score compliance and this latter form of authenticity, can come into conflict (2015, §4). And third, when such normative conflict arises, performers can be justified in trading some notational accuracy for the sake of making their performance more interpretively authentic (2015, §§4,5). Unsurprisingly, given the point of my paper, I don’t take a stand on whether all historically informed performances are performances of works. On this matter, Ravasio is right: they aren’t. But then again, I didn’t assume otherwise.

⁴ Witness my first two sentences. “Take a work of Western, ‘classical’ music, *W*. What makes a performance of *W* a good performance of *W*? In asking this question we set ourselves the task of ascertaining which features are genuine performance values within our practice of performing such works of music. My claim in this paper is that an important such performance value is a variety of authenticity that has tended to be overlooked by philosophers of music” (Dodd 2015, 485). My topic is plainly that of work performance. That I say nothing about nonwork performances does nothing to suggest that I deny the existence of such a performance tradition.

Having said this, the charge that Ravasio specifically levels at me is not so much that of overlooking the practice of nonwork performances in early music, but that of committing myself to a misconceived “compliance-focused” conception of what it is for a performance of a work to be historically informed (2019, 194-195).⁵ What does this charge amount to?

This. I allegedly caricature historically informed performance of works of music as “valu[ing] score-compliance authenticity above all else” (Ravasio 2019, 195). And so, according to Ravasio’s version of me, a historically informed performer of a work, by contrast with someone working within “mainstream performance practice” (Ravasio 2019, 195), could never, hand on heart, decide to trade off score compliance for interpretive authenticity in the manner of which I approve. But this, Ravasio points out, traduces historically informed performance: as he convincingly explains, talking through some decisive examples (2019, 198-199), self-styled historically informed performers often depart from scored instructions in order, as they see it, to make better sense of the works they perform.

This picture, however, misconstrues what I’m doing since, as I have just explained, I’m not in the business of giving an account of what it is for a performance of a work to be historically informed. True enough, as Ravasio points out (2019, 195), I do briefly characterize what I call (in inverted commas) “the historical authenticity movement” as coupling “a strong commitment to score compliance authenticity [in the performance of a work] ... with the claim that a faithful rendering of [its] score requires performers to follow the notational conventions and performance practices assumed by the work’s composer” (Dodd 2015, 486). But notice that I use the term “historical authenticity movement”, and not “historically informed performance movement”. This marks a distinction that Ravasio fails to pick up on, and this failure is significant.

⁵ While I agree with Ravasio that much early music repertoire does not consist of authored works, my focus from now on will be on the practice of work performance, as was the case in my 2015.

Throughout his article Ravasio treats “historically authentic performance” and “historically informed performance” as notational variants,⁶ but they are not. As Hunter points out in the very extract to which Ravasio refers at the beginning of his piece, “historically informed performance” is a term that came into currency in the 1990s and which *replaced* the earlier term, “authentic” (Hunter 2014, 606). One thing that motivated practitioners and musicologists to give up talk of “authenticity” in favor of “historically informed performance” was a certain dissatisfaction with the idea that performing works with historical accuracy was in itself a performance value: a good-making feature of performances. Those who prefer to describe their approach to the performance of works from earlier eras as “historically informed” tend to regard what they are doing as not abiding by a norm of performance, obeying a *pro tanto* aesthetic obligation, or some such, but as engaging in what we might call “transhistorical communication” (Dulak 1993, 36): they adopt a period style, not because they believe that they are under an obligation to do so for the sake of portraying the music accurately, but because they think that such an approach is likely to lead to interesting, insightful, fresh, or otherwise rewarding interpretations of the music concerned.

Indeed, as Michelle Dulak observes, historically informed performance is commonly regarded by those who engage in it as just one valid approach to performance among others, and one whose success can only be judged on a case-by-case basis. On this view,

performance style becomes less of a historical ‘given’ than a large set of sonic resources, from which the musician selects whatever he (or she) feels to be appropriate to the situation at hand. Style becomes less like part of the music’s ‘body’ and more like the clothes one might choose to dress it in. (Mozart might wear restrained vibrato and *appogiature* one evening, an altogether more

⁶ This is most spectacularly evident in his fn. 4, in which he just states that I call the historically informed performance movement “the historical authenticity movement” (2014, 195, 204).

sumptuous ensemble the next, as a player moves back and forth between ‘period’ and ‘modern’ contexts.) (Dulak 1993, 96)

This, in turn, is something reflected in the fact that the “turf wars” between self-styled historically authentic performers and those who take a less historicist approach have largely subsided since the 1990s (Sherman 1997: 6). There has been a good deal of what Alfred Brendel has termed “true cross-fertilization” (Brendel 1990: 224; quoted in Sherman 1997: 6): many performers, such as Cecilia Bartoli, John Elliot Gardner, Stephen Isserlis, and Yo-Yo Ma have worked with both historical and non-historically informed ensembles (Sherman 1997: 6); while others have developed their own style by constructing a bricolage of historically informed and more traditional, one might say almost say “pre-war”, performance practices.⁷ For, historically informed performers, the appeal of their approach to the music lies less in the idea that it is a requirement of representational accuracy, than that it clothes the music in a style – typically characterized in the performance of baroque music by brisk, steady tempi, a clean sound, sparing vibrato, use of the smallest practicable orchestra, and the rest (Leech-Wilkinson 1984, 14) – that is thought likely to shed fresh light on it for a contemporary audience.⁸

⁷ Many examples abound of this latter phenomenon. According to Bernard Sherman, Anner Bylsma, though keen to explore eighteenth century performance practices in the *Quadro Amsterdam*, has nonetheless not shrunk from using a modern bow in his performances of music from this period (Sherman 1997: 6). Jordi Savall, though long embedded in the historical performance movement, led his Hespèrion XX in a recording of Bach’s *Art of Fugue* (*Die Kunst der Fuge*, Hespèrion XX/Jordi Savall, Alia Vox 9818: 2005), which departed from historical practice by using unusually slow tempos and anachronistic orchestration (i.e. wind instruments, including a trombone, alongside viols) (Dulak 1993: 51). Andreas Staier has recorded Mozart piano music, including the *Rondo alla turca*, on a reproduction of a 1786 fortepiano, and yet has treated the *Rondo* with a playfulness, abandon, and carefree attitude towards the score that would not have been regarded as ideal in period performances (Mozart Piano Sonatas K. 330, K. 331, K. 332, Harmonia Mundi 901856: 2005).

⁸ The idea that the satisfaction listeners take from historical performances lies not in their accuracy, but in their performing the music in new, exciting ways is well made by John Andrew Fisher and Jason Potter (1997: 179).

Once historically informed performance is in this way distinguished from historically authentic performance, it becomes apparent that Ravasio has drastically mislocated me in conceptual space. *Pace* Ravasio (2019, 197), I do not regard historically informed performance in work performance as “a hardline compliance view with a historicist twist.” As I make clear in my article (2015, 486), this characterization is, in fact, Davies’s gloss on historical authenticity in such performance;⁹ I reply to him by arguing that score compliance can sometimes be justifiably traded for interpretive authenticity. *Pace* Ravasio (2019, 195), I do not believe that “[h]istorically informed performance [in the performance of works] values score-compliance above all else”; I agree with him that historically informed performers – those who adopt a period performing style – may well decide to trade off some textual accuracy for the sake of increasing their performance’s interpretive authenticity (Ravasio 2019, 199). Finally, I do not, as Ravasio suggests (2019, 195), contrast historically informed performance with “mainstream” performance. As my little potted history of historical approaches to performance practice illustrates, I believe that historically informed performance has itself become enfolded into the mainstream. Of course, I did not say this in the paper of mine that Ravasio criticizes – I’m only saying it now – but this was no oversight on my part, since the paper in question was not about historically informed performance in the first place.

The fact is this: insofar as I committed myself to any claims about historical performance practice, they concerned *historically authentic*, not *historically informed*, such practice. Ravasio, thinking he is criticizing me, in fact changes the subject.

4. But actually, things are a little worse than this, and this is the point at which another distinction materializes. In perhaps an unguarded moment,

⁹ This is because Davies commits himself to two claims: that score compliance is “not negotiable in the way that other performance values may be” (2001, 241); and that, in any particular case, determining what the demands of such compliance are requires us to interpret the work’s score according to the notational conventions and performance practices in place when the work in question was composed (S. Davies 1987,43; 2001, 211-214, 222-224).

Ravasio says that I conceive of the “concept of interpretive authenticity as a criticism of historical authenticity” (2019: 195). Now, we’ve seen already that he mistakenly identifies historically authentic performance with historically informed performance; but even if we read this remark literally, as applying to the former rather than the latter, it is, at best, misleading. I explicitly claim that score compliance in work performance is a performance value: a good-making feature of performances of works (2015, 497). So if we agree with the standard view in the literature, and then give such compliance the historicist twist I talked about in the penultimate paragraph of §3, then we thereby arrive at the conclusion that historical authenticity within this practice – score compliance with the historicist twist – is a performance value, too.

What I objected to then, and still object to, is not historical authenticity *per se*, but the hardline attitude towards it exemplified by Davies. Davies cannot seriously envisage a situation in which a performer is justified in deliberately disobeying a scored instruction that falls within her compass. According to him, a performer who takes such a course has an “intention at odds with the goal of work performance” and thereby “misses the point of the enterprise” (2001, 248). I disagree, so long as such a departure is for the sake of increasing the performance’s interpretive authenticity. This does not, as Ravasio thinks (2019, 197), make me “skeptical” about score compliance or, if this notion is historicized, historical authenticity; it is still a performance value. I just deny that it can never be traded for other such values.

To put it another way, it is not historical authenticity with respect to work performance that embodies a view that is “hard-line” in this sense, but a philosopher’s thesis about its normative strength in relation to other performance values governing this practice. The hard-liner is Davies, not historical authenticity itself.

5. The same strategy of distinguishing between a performance value and a controversial estimation of its normative profile also yields a reply to the charge Ravasio levels at Peter Kivy, namely that he misconstrues historically informed performance as “impersonal” (2019, 196). Ravasio presents Kivy as holding a “skeptical view of historically informed performance” (2019, 200), a skepticism supposedly based in the belief that “historically informed performance lacks personal authenticity” (2019, 200).

But once the issue is properly reconfigured as concerning the historical authenticity that is explicitly Kivy’s concern, a reply on his behalf goes like this. Historical authenticity is a performance value: as Kivy himself says, “[i]ts credentials are in good order” (1995, 283).¹⁰ The problem lies with a certain species of performer, theorist, or critic: the person who, self-identifying as a fully paid up member of “the historically authentic crew” (Kivy 2002, 245), thinks that considerations, notably those pertaining to the performer’s personal authenticity, that a piece be played this way are “always overridden by the assertion that it was intended to be played that way” (2002, 245).

Somewhat controversially, Kivy thinks that historical authenticity and personal authenticity are performance values that are, so to speak, competing for the same space. As he sees things, if a performer becomes fixated on performing period music with maximal historical authenticity, her performance will inevitably fail to be “true to her own values and tastes and aesthetic intuitions” (1995, 123).¹¹ This, however, does mean that he is in any way skeptical about historical authenticity in itself; he just thinks that performers should ensure that they do not pursue it with such vigor that they crowd out the possibility of their performances being personally authentic. Consequently, according to Kivy, one of the arts of performance is being able to balance the competing demands of historical authenticity and personal authenticity, so that one’s performance

¹⁰ I disagree with him on this (forthcoming, ch. 3), but this does not affect the exegetical point on I’m making here on his behalf.

¹¹ I also disagree with Kivy on this (forthcoming, ch. 3), but, again, this disagreement is a side issue.

maintains *both* (1995, 280): the performer should aim to achieve an equilibrium between these competing authenticities, one that withstands what he calls “the test of listening” (1995, 285). Performances that succeed in this are, he thinks, the acme of our performance practice; this is because they are performances in which “strands of historical authenticity ... are woven together with strands of personal authenticity to make a seamless and beautiful fabric” (1995, 285).

Having laid out Kivy’s position and quoted heavily from him in doing so, two things strike me as obvious. First, wasn’t he a wonderful writer! He is greatly missed. Second, contrary to what Ravasio says about him, he does not claim that historically authentic performances “lack personal authenticity”. While he takes personal authenticity and historical authenticity to be distinct performance values, and thus holds that historical authenticity is not itself a source of personal authenticity, he certainly thinks that these two authenticities can, and should, co-exist in performance. So Ravasio is wrong to attribute to Kivy the view that historically authentic performances are impersonal.

6. Where does this leave us? First, it turns out that, between us, Kivy and I avoid all three elements of what Ravasio calls “the received view” of historically informed performance practice. I agree with Ravasio that the received view is historically uninformed, but I have shown that Kivy and I collectively do not fall into the trap of endorsing it.

Perhaps more significantly, though, reinstating the distinctions Ravasio blurs can clear our path towards addressing the issues in this area that I believe to be the most exciting. In particular, once we have taken my focus on the practice of work performance in the right spirit, once we have distinguished historically authentic such performance from historically informed performance, and once we have distinguished something’s being a performance value from the normative strength it has in relation to other such performance values, we can focus on the question animating the paper of mine that Ravasio refers to (Dodd 2015) – a

question he seems to have by-passed entirely. The question is this: what kind of reason, if any, justifies a performer of a work of music in deliberately disobeying a scored instruction she could easily have followed? Its import is at once practical and conceptual, taking us to the heart of a practice of which, it turns out, we might not yet have a perspicuous representation.¹²

Davies puts his finger on something deep when he suggests that a commitment to textual accuracy is “fundamental to the enterprise of work performance” (2001, 247). But could there be another performance value of equal or greater fundamentality? In the article of mine Ravasio discusses, my suggestion is that interpretive authenticity is just such a value and, hence, that trading off score compliance against this other authenticity is sanctioned within our practice of work performance. Four years on, I am more certain than ever that this is true, but how this truth is best formulated and what explains it are likely to add up to a convoluted, albeit gripping, story.¹³

¹² The notion of a perspicuous representation is, of course, Wittgenstein’s (1953, I. §122).

¹³ Dodd forthcoming is some kind of attempt to tell this story convincingly.

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