

Debate 'Authentic' Baroque performance



Just what exactly is authentic about 'authentic performance practice' anyway, asks tenor and early music expert (nearly) Christopher Gillett. Aren't Baroque musicians just making it up as they go along, like the rest of us?



Recently I was studying some French Baroque music. As I worked on it, it occurred to me that everything I know about Baroque style has been dictated by rather condescending 'specialists' (usually conductors), or by hearing other singers do the same repertoire and imitating their style.

I've just taken their word that this is the way it is done, respected their authority and left it at that. And while I've never exactly been a darling of the authentic movement, I've done my share of Baroque music with expert players and

conductors.

I'm of a generation that sang [Handel \(/uk/learn/composers/george-frideric-handel\)](#) and [Bach \(/uk/learn/composers/johann-sebastian-bach\)](#) just before authenticity became fashionable. In fact, 'authenticity' was often sneered at: the 'sandals and oatmeal brigade'. Early attempts at playing on 'original instruments' were often terrible. That's all changed of course – the players are now top-notch – but when it comes to singing style, I'm left with a nagging doubt.

I heard a new CD of *Messiah* the other day and it was very good: phrased with originality and very cleanly sung. It reminded me somehow of a very chic Michelin-starred restaurant in a beautifully restored old building. While I could enjoy it, I didn't believe for a moment that this was how Handel had heard it. It was as if Heston Blumenthal had reinvented a steak-and-kidney pudding by doing something fancy with liquid nitrogen.

You only have to hear singers from the 1950s to wonder how they would fare in today's business

The current taste is for very bright, cleanly-projected voices. That's terrific, but you only have to listen to a recording from the middle of the 20th century to hear how fashions have changed. Gone are the hooty contraltos and the quivery sopranos. Gone are the tenors and basses with rather strange vowels and lots of rolled Rs. Heck, you only have to hear singers from the 1950s to wonder how they would fare in today's business. Would [Peter Pears \(/uk/learn/artists/peter-pears\)](/uk/learn/artists/peter-pears) get booked these days for a St Matthew Passion? [Kathleen Ferrier \(/uk/learn/artists/kathleen-ferrier\)](/uk/learn/artists/kathleen-ferrier)? Wouldn't their voices be dismissed as 'old-fashioned'?

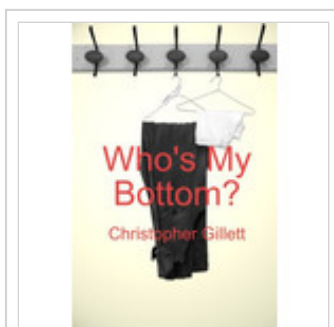
Recently I saw a countertenor's performance described by a critic as 'sung with Baroque perfection'. That's all very well, but how could the critic possibly know? Did he mean that his singing sounded entirely in keeping with what we like to hear from singers in that repertoire?

So, as I carry on practising my Baroque trills, I'm fully aware that I'm not really attempting to recreate something from the 17th century; I'm trying to conform to what everybody today thinks is the best way to sing old music in the early part of the 21st century. All I'm really doing is keeping up with the vocal Zeitgeist.

When you think about it, it's a very odd way to make music.

Read more of [Christopher Gillett on Sinfini Music \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs\)](/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs). The tenor's own blog is christophergillett.co.uk (<http://christophergillett.co.uk/>).

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