



WHAT IS

HISTORICALLY INFORMED PERFORMANCE?

The study of performance practice, or historically informed performance (HIP), began, at some level, with the fundamental question, “What did this piece sound like in the composer’s day?”

Period-instrument ensembles like H+H specialize in reproducing, with as much accuracy as possible, how a performance in the 17th and 18th centuries may have sounded, using instruments and performing techniques specific to that time period.

From its beginnings in the mid-20th century, the HIP movement was widespread, yet concentrated in major musical centers. Nikolaus Harnoncourt spearheaded the movement in Vienna with the founding of the period-instrument ensemble *Concentus Musicus Wien* in 1953. In England, musicologist and harpsichordist Thurston Dart inspired a new generation of HIP performers, including David Munrow and Christopher Hogwood, who became the founders of the *Early Music Consort of London*. Hogwood then revived the *Academy of Ancient Music*, a group dedicated to performing and recording on period instruments. Under Hogwood’s direction the “new” *Academy of Ancient Music* performed and recorded on period instruments and, beginning in 1986, he transformed the *Handel and Haydn Society* orchestra into a period-instrument ensemble.

INSTRUMENTS

While many aspects of performance are researched and examined in connection with HIP or period-instrument performances, instrument construction is probably the most far-reaching in terms of what the audience hears and sees in any one performance. Some of the most obvious visual differences are found in the brass and woodwind instruments. Early flutes, for example, were constructed of wood rather than metal, producing a rounder tone. Modern brass and woodwinds are built with a series of valves (brass) and keys (woodwinds), which extend the number of notes that the instrument can play accurately.

This series of extensions, however, was not available before the 19th century; using instruments without these extensions changes the sound.

String instruments, such as the violin, were also quite different in the 17th and 18th centuries compared with modern instruments. The fingerboard was slightly shorter, affecting the playing of the instrument. Violins and violas had no chin rests. Even the bows were shaped and held differently.

TUNING

Instrument construction, including the materials from which an instrument is made, affects how the instrument is played as well as the sound produced. Period-instrument strings are made of gut rather than steel, producing a mellower, even sweeter, sound quality. Gut strings are also one reason why period instruments are tuned at a lower pitch than modern ones. If a composition were played by both a period-instrument and modern ensemble, one of the first audible differences between the two would be the pitch. Orchestras today tend to tune to A=440 (or a little higher) while period-instrument ensembles tune about A=420 (or a little lower).

ARTICULATION

Similarly, articulation, or how a note is played, on a modern instrument is not the same on a period instrument. The result for the listener can perhaps be described as a lighter and faster or more dance-like sound. Another aspect of articulation is the use of vibrato, which Guy Fishman, principal cellist of the H+H Period Instrument Orchestra, explains:



A BAROQUE TRUMPET IS MUCH LONGER THAN A MODERN ONE AND DOES NOT HAVE VALVES, LIMITING THE NUMBER OF PITCHES A PERFORMER CAN PLAY WITH ACCURACY.



BAROQUE WOODWIND INSTRUMENTS WERE BUILT FROM WOOD INSTEAD OF METAL. VIEWED FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, TWO BAROQUE OBOES AND A BASSOON.



TOP: A BAROQUE VIOLIN (LEFT) AND MODERN VIOLIN (RIGHT) ARE OF THE SAME GENERAL SIZE AND SHAPE.

MIDDLE: ONE DISTINCT DIFFERENCE IS THE ADDITIONAL OF A CHIN REST, AN EARLY 19TH CENTURY INVENTION, TO THE MODERN VIOLIN (TOP). ALSO, THE FINGERBOARD OF THE MODERN VIOLIN IS LONGER.

BOTTOM: ON CLOSER EXAMINATION, THE NECK OF THE MODERN VIOLIN (TOP) IS POSITIONED AT A SHARPER ANGLE IN RELATION TO THE BODY OF THE INSTRUMENT, PLACING MORE TENSION ON THE STRINGS.

Vibrato refers to an expressive device whereby the deliberate alteration of pitch [a note] above and below its center differentiates it from what would otherwise be described as a "straight" or "pure" tone. ... The musicians of the Handel and Haydn Society utilize this device as an ornament, in accordance with the general performance practice norm starting in the 1400s and lasting into the 1920s; that is, the application of vibrato to straight tone in order to heighten the affect of specific points in the music, in a manner that is judicious, brief, and infrequent.

SIZE OF THE ENSEMBLE

With Historically Informed Performance, one of the most fundamental questions concerns how many people played in an orchestra or sang in a chorus. To answer this question, payment records, diaries, composer’s scores, notes, program, etc., are culled. We know, for example, that about 50 musicians performed for the premiere of Handel’s *Messiah* in 1742. In the 1980s, when the Handel and Haydn Society decided to follow that performance practice, as opposed to using some 200-plus performers as was its tradition, it was presenting a known work in a new way.

Many of the compositions that the HIP movement revisited had never left the concert hall. Often hearing these “old” works in a “new” light is a revelation for performer and audience alike. Musical lines and the interactions between instruments become fresh experiences for the seasoned listener while the lively nature of period-instrument performance can captivate someone new to the HIP movement.

While period-instrument ensembles seek to create performances that are influenced by knowledge of the time in which the work was composed, it is done with the understanding that no live musical performance can be duplicated. Historical performance practice does not claim superiority over modern-instrument performances; it offers an alternative way of engaging with music of the past, in other words, making the old new again.

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MARCH 24, 1815: The Handel and Haydn Society is founded “to promote the love of good music and a better performance of it.”



DECEMBER 25, 1815: First public performance at King’s Chapel in Boston.