

10 *New Notes for Old Instruments*

Late one evening, towards the end of the 1960s, the BBC Third Programme broadcast a mysterious little feature entitled – if memory serves – *The Shagbutt, the Minikin and the Flemish Clackett*. These turned out to comprise a consort of exceedingly obsolete instruments from the fifteenth century. According to the announcer, the minikin had a keyboard action so slow that the performer – on this occasion, the redoubtable Tatiana Splod of the Schola Cantorum Neasdeniensis – was obliged to start playing fully 30 seconds ahead of the required sound, while the Flemish clackett was a monstrous Hieronymus Bosch kind of wind instrument that had to be played from *inside* – with constant danger to the performer of implosion. The Schola then embarked, in demonstration, upon a rondeau by Huckbald the One-Legged of Gröbhausen. But before the thing had honked and twangled its way through more than a few bars, there came a pop and a series of muffled cries. The Flemish clackett had imploded.

Though this naughty spoof was re-broadcast more than once in subsequent years, nobody ever seems to have admitted responsibility. Yet it encapsulated an attitude to the period instrument movement that was still surprisingly widespread at the time. Despite the earnest revivalism in the first decades of the twentieth century of Arnold Dolmetsch with his viols and spinets, Wanda Landowska with her harpsichords and Paul Hindemith with his early music studio at Yale; despite the arrival in the 1950s and 1960s of a new generation of scholar-showmen such as Noah Greenberg and his New York Pro Musica, Nikolaus Harnoncourt and his Vienna Concentus Musicus and David Munrow and his Early Music Consort of London, many listeners, not to say composers, continued to regard the cult of old instruments as an antiquarian fad or even a joke.

Behind this lay an evolutionary notion of musical history that dated back at least as far as the Enlightenment: an assumption that new musical developments inevitably went hand in glove with improvements in instrumental technology. So, following the great nineteenth-century drive to enhance the reliability and brilliance of all the standard instruments, the twentieth century could proceed to push their new possibilities to the limit and beyond, on the reasonable assumption that, by the time they were exhausted, a new world of electronic developments would be opening up for exploration. Earlier versions of the standard instruments, not to mention older instruments that had disappeared altogether, were self-evident failures in the evolutionary rat-race. Their latter-day revival could only be of ‘museal’ interest – to invoke Pierre Boulez’s most witheringly dismissive adjective.

Which is not to say that composers were oblivious of their charms. Way back in the nineteenth century, Meyerbeer had deployed the antique tone

of the viola d'amore in his grand opera *Les Huguenots* (1836); and, between the wars, Janáček developed a passion for the instrument – or at least for its name – while Hindemith actually mastered it, composing a plaintive little neo-Baroque chamber concerto for his own performance in 1927. Meanwhile, seeking a sweetly naïve timbre to characterize his infant son in his *Symphonia domestica* (1902–03), Richard Strauss hit upon the oboe d'amore. Nor was interest confined to single instruments: in 1971, Elisabeth Lutyens tried combining players from the Early Music Consort and the London Sinfonietta in her elegy *The Tears of Night* and the following year, Peter Maxwell Davies inserted whole sequences of what he called 'muzak behind the arras' for Munrow's period players into his first opera *Taverner*. Yet perhaps the most prophetic experiment of the post-war period was the extraordinary *Music for Renaissance Instruments* composed in 1966 by the Argentinian surrealist, Mauricio Kagel: a study in cultural 'alienation', the strange sounds of which were drawn from the old instruments by entirely unconventional, avant-garde playing techniques.

And on top of these still relatively isolated instances, there was the whole history of the revival of the harpsichord. Yet this tended to confound the 'museal' charge from the start. For the clangorous, steel-framed instruments that Wanda Landowska ordered for her use from Pleyel – the instruments for which Manuel de Falla wrote his Concerto of 1926 and Poulenc his *Concert champêtre* in 1928 – were far removed from Baroque models, almost amounting to new instruments and inaugurating a distinctively twentieth-century tradition of powerful concert harpsichords. Accordingly, when Elliott Carter embarked upon his vastly intricate *Double Concerto* for harpsichord, piano and two chamber orchestras (1961), he carefully adjusted his textures to the instrument his harpsichordist, Ralph Kirkpatrick, was using – a heavy model with all manner of stops and pedals by the New York maker, Challis. But such instruments, in turn, have tended to disappear in more recent decades with the reversion to lighter-toned 'authentic' harpsichords. As a result, putting on this most advanced piece already raises 'authenticity' problems of its own, which may be mitigated but not entirely solved by electronically amplifying a Baroque instrument – a peculiarly post-modern predicament.

Yet the real issue of the last 20-odd years is not merely post-modern but, by implication, post-historical. Despite the supreme vision and skill of the greatest pioneering period performers, from Hindemith to Harnoncourt, from Landowska to Thurston Dart, it used to be widely suspected that the early music movement harboured many a performer who was simply not good enough to make it on modern standard instruments. Whatever truth there might once have been in this, however, the intense cultivation of period performance in recent decades seems to have transformed the situation. London now teems with performers who not only play their Renaissance viols, Baroque oboes

and classical horns technically as well as modern instruments, but as if to the manner born: raising the positively philosophical question as to how far these can any longer be regarded as specifically 'early' instruments at all.

Take George Benjamin's striking song *On Silence*, for mezzo-soprano and five viols, of 1990. His initial approach to the viol consort Fretwork seems to have arisen out of an enthusiasm for the Purcell viol fantasias. But he soon realized that the medium effectively constituted 'a new family of string instruments ... capable of an array of hitherto unexplored techniques and sonorities ... amongst these ... the almost complete absence of vibrato, the novel bowing technique, the potential for numerous natural harmonics, super-fast tremolo and resonant pizzicati'. The result was a setting of Yeats's 'Long-Legged Fly' of exquisite sensitivity and strangeness. Since then, Benjamin has skilfully transcribed his viol textures into an alternative version for 'ordinary' strings, though this cannot quite recapture the fine-spun aura of viol tone.¹

Meanwhile, an increasing number of other composers have been rising to the opportunities of early music ensembles – from the 1991 Glyndebourne Serenades for period wind ensemble commissioned from Jonathan Dove and Nigel Osborne in celebration of the Mozart Bicentenary, to John Woolrich's deployment of the full Mozartian line-up of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment in *The Theatre Represents a Garden – Night* (1991), by way of whole arrays of viol pieces commissioned by Fretwork in celebration of the 1995 Purcell Tercentenary, and more recently by Concordia to complement the pavan sequence of Dowland's *Lachrymae*. Not only have established British figures such as Alexander Goehr and rising young talents such as Tansy Davies tried their hands, but so too have composers as diverse as Gavin Bryers, Peter Sculthorpe, Paul Ruders, Tan Dun, even Elvis Costello ...

Not all of them have gone beyond revampings of the sort of thing they usually do anyway. But the more thoughtful have realized, with George Benjamin, that the unfamiliar constraints and possibilities of period instruments can offer as stimulating a challenge to compositional habits as the latest developments in computerized sound. Composers facing the Baroque harpsichord for the first time suddenly find that the sustained lines and fluctuating dynamics they have so heavily relied upon to characterize phrasing and maintain continuity are simply not available; can compensations, or equivalents be found by exploiting the instrument's exceptional precision of articulation or its propensity for fuller, denser textures to convey the illusion of louder volume? Or maybe such composers find their usual mode of dissonant harmony is reduced to percussive note-clusters by the harpsichord's complex overtones; can they find vertical combinations and progressions that turn those resonances to positive account?

Again, composers used to thinking primarily in terms of harmony, gesture or texture may feel compelled to renew their command of counterpoint if

they are to make the most of the special clarity with which the viol consort reveals the interweaving of independent lines. Others, confronted by the pinched sounds of those notes in the ranges of pre-valve horns in the period classical orchestra that can only be produced by hand-stopping, may seek to gear harmony and phrasing to exploit such tones as expressive nuances – as a period performance of Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony reveals that he did in the trio of its scherzo. Maybe the timbral and textural discoveries some of these composers make in working with period instruments will, in turn, feed back into their music for modern forces – a potentially endless dialectic just at the point when history was supposed to be sweeping away such acoustic-instrumental concerns in a flux of electronic possibilities. Admittedly, the singular propensities of the Flemish clackett have yet to be explored. No doubt, it is merely a matter of time ...

NOTES

Source: 'Old Before Their Time', *The Independent*, 3 March 1995; rev. 2008.

- 1 Both versions are recorded on Nimbus NI 5505.