Historically Informed Performance in Portugal: Ideological Ambiguities
Helena Marinho

Affiliation: University of Aveiro
Address:
University of Aveiro – Portugal
Rua 9 de Abril, 201, r/c d.º
4250-357 Porto - Portugal
Tel: +351914937439
Email: helena.marinho@ca.ua.pt

Aim and objectives

This paper intends to study the gap between academic discussions in the wake of Richard Taruskin's fierce challenge to the ideological bases of historically informed performance and recent responses of musicians and critics in Portugal to early music performance and its theoretical framework.

Context

The attitudes of performers and critics towards historically informed performance in Portugal show a remarkable variety of positions regarding the concepts of authenticity and fidelity in musical interpretation.

Methodology

This research departed from written texts produced in 2004, which deal with the issue of authenticity. These texts include press and Internet material that reflect a publicly accessible view of early music performance, and were used as a means to contrast ideological contents implicit in the press (articles, interviews, and concert and CD reviews), the contents of blogs dedicated to music criticism, as well as musicians’ statements.

The press materials were selected from three main sources: the weekly newspaper Expresso (and its magazine Actual), and the daily newspapers Público (and its magazine Cartaz), and Diário de Notícias. This choice of sources was determined by the fact that these publications present, on a regular basis, concert and recording reviews as well as occasional articles on the subject of early music performance.

Musicians’ written statements were particularly difficult to find, due to the scarce number of interviews of Portuguese musicians connected to the early music movement (interviews of “Classical” musicians are in general rare). Interviews did not necessarily focus on the issue of authenticity; presentation texts in musicians’ sites were therefore of special interest.

Blogs dealing with music criticism are a recent phenomenon in Portugal, but their increasing number is a testimony to growing concerns with performance matters not necessarily confined
to the experts’ realm. The type of approach in these blogs is fundamentally diverse: the absence of editorial and space restraints and a deliberate pursuit of polemics has led to texts of profound orthodoxy.

Results

The analysis of this material has shown a continued persistence in musicians’ statements of the ideologies endorsing authenticity in its text-fidelity perspective. This fact is not surprising if we take into account the specificity of the canon established by the early music movement. Early music performers focus, in general, on an alternative corpus, or alternative performing styles of a standard corpus of repertory. The need to justify, in a positivist manner, the different performing approaches has persisted in spite of Taruskin’s attacks on the interpreter’s subservience to musicological standards. Nevertheless, the existence of an alternative corpus may be disputed, if we take into account the early music movement continuous search for unknown repertories; in this case we may speak of canon in the sense of a corpus of interpretative patterns rather than a corpus of masterpieces, acknowledged by the community as representative of a superlative standard.

The critical positions represented by newspaper/magazine/blog articles on live and recorded performances range from a total avoidance of the subject to virulent defences of text-fidelity orthodoxy, along with the belated acknowledgement of the discussions surrounding the concept of authenticity in the 1980s. The most extreme positions are found in blogs; some sites convey extreme positions on authenticity in performance, supported sometimes by the use of musicological data, selected to support the appraisal or condemnation of various interpretative choices, and often adopt an offensive tone. Newspapers and magazines are in general more restrained in tone. Critics often write about early music, particularly about new CD issues, but seldom address matters of authenticity: the absence of discussion about interpretative fidelity can be intriguing, if we take into account the persistence of the issue in texts produced by musicians and bloggers. A single text addressing directly the issue of authenticity was found among the written articles dealing with early music; its proximity to Taruskin’s positions was clear, but unacknowledged. The issue of authenticity is otherwise connected, in most articles, with questions of instrument choice rather than interpretative choices. The issue of ensemble size (orchestral or vocal) is also examined, but in similar terms to equivalent discussions about instrumental choice. The corpus of practices connected to the performance of early music, and its connection to authenticity issues, is by large avoided. This fact is understandable: even though the articles on CD releases often deal with special recording projects not addressed to a large public, music criticism aims at maintaining a concise, intelligible type of discourse, avoiding the specialised analysis of performances, not understandable to general audiences.
Key Contribution

The coexistence of contrasting positions in a country with few early music performers and a limited audience derives, partly, from a belated divulgation of the early music movement in Portugal. The polemics regarding the authenticity concept precede the most recent developments regarding this performance trend, namely the increase in number of musicians and festivals dedicated to early music. Most early music performers in Portugal are second- or third-generation performers, and their approach has been developed in a practical, hands-on manner, even if their discourse suggests otherwise. This is particularly obvious in matters concerning the performance of Portuguese early music, whose performing traditions are scarcely documented and researched.

The diversity of discourses concerning the key issues of authenticity and fidelity reveals that academic and interpretative discussions within the field of early music have been, in general, avoided or minimised in Portugal. Apparently, there seems to be a declared tendency towards positivist approaches, connected to a need to justify, in theoretical terms, the option for alternative performance rules and canons. The shift from authentic to historically informed is thus obscured by the varied range of ideological positions on historically informed performance parallel to, but distinct from, the polemics surrounding Taruskin.

Key words

Authenticity, Portugal, early-music performance, media

Bibliography


