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Artistic practices of historical sound: memory, imagination, and mimesis in contemporary composition and historical performance

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Summary

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The fields of historical performance and contemporary composition may not seem on first impression to share much. Insofar as the former is dedicated to reproducing the oldest music and the latter to inventing the newest, they can easily be understood as fundamental opposites. In context of this precise disciplinary opposition, however, this dissertation locates an opportunity for the advancement of both fields through an interdisciplinary practice and theorisation across them. Much cross-pollination has certainly occurred between the two fields already, but it has largely been confined to performance spheres. Theorisations across the two remain rare. Key to the productivity of this dissertation is the identification of a complementary pair of analyses coming out of the two fields in the 1980s: critiques of the authenticity of historical performance on the one hand, with Richard Taruskin providing the classic example, and critiques of the possibility of artistic originality on the other, especially by Rosalind Krauss.

Viewed independently, each of these critiques can seem to present a vexing impasse. If historical performers cannot reproduce the past, what are they doing and why does it matter? Likewise, if contemporary composers cannot make anything new, the same questions apply. What can one do but acknowledge one's shortcomings and carry on? As these debates of the 1980s wound down, this is exactly what happened. Each discipline resigned itself to its shortcomings and carried on as if the critiques had never been made. But a reevaluation is worthwhile, as something much more interesting happens when they are viewed across each other. The ontological problems they describe begin to look eerily similar, and a wide array of practices within both disciplines come to look like fundamental syntheses of mimesis and invention, memory and imagination. What previously obscured or devalued types of music might be freshly empowered by renewed attention to this synthesis?

Through comparative study of historical theory, critical theory, art theory, Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment philosophy, and the recent histories of historical performance and contemporary composition, alongside artistic experiments in a potent gray space between the two, this dissertation seeks to understand artistry and historicity in relation to broad ontological and epistemological problems of making and remaking in music. Special potency is found in archival manuscripts of long 18th-century Britain containing anonymous, fragmentary, or damaged notation. Through both compositional and

interpretive experiments with these historical extracts of music notation, as well as theoretical reflection upon them, novel ways are found for aurally presenting the rich and complex intertemporality of musical practice and its surrounding cultures and histories.