

# Rethinking the Art of Baroque Music Performance



Field, left, and Vial stress the range of expression required to play early music.

It's time to expand our interpretation of what constitutes 'early' music

By Elizabeth Field

**MANY MUSICIANS KNOW THAT 18TH-CENTURY** repertoire was composed long before there was the ability to preserve music beyond a performance. But it's easy to forget what that really means. Simply put, in the 18th century, if you wanted to hear a piece of music, someone had to play it for you. They could not have conceived of "disembodied music," hearing music apart from the performer/performance.

As such, musicians were expected to imbue each piece with a highly distinctive personality. This explains why the best composers/performers were employed by the courts: the nobility could buy the best that was out there. As a result, you found amazing musicians—including Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart—spending their talents trying to entertain their bosses. If, at the moment of hearing a new piece, the employer wasn't delighted and moved, even the best composers risked losing their jobs. The purpose of the music then was to move, delight, enthrall, horrify, sadden, elate—all at the moment it was being played.

The performance was an "event" that functioned to elicit human passions in its audience.

When cellist Stephanie Vial, co-director of the Vivaldi Project and the Modern Early Music Institute (MEMI), and I dug deeper into our research at Cornell University, we discovered both from studying the treatises of 18th-century performance practices and playing the period instruments that there was an incredible range of expressions that were new to us and that were expected of Baroque performers. It became apparent that this palette of expression, replete with extreme ranges of emotion, had been smoothed out over the last two centuries of performance traditions. This trend especially manifested itself with the advent of recording in which the value is on perfect execution to create a product (an album or CD).

In the process of cutting and editing a recording, the inherent pleasantness of these compositions often overrode the original spirit of the music.

Vial and I also came to the conclusion that these extraordinary, eye-opening, and wonderfully freeing expressive tools need not belong exclusively to the players of period instruments, but to all performers. This is why we began MEMI in 2009: to give professional players the opportunity to study Baroque and classical performance practices using their own modern instruments

## PLAY MORE THAN JUST THE RIGHT NOTES

One of the first things the participants at the Modern Early Music Institute (MEMI) are told is that one of the problems in interpreting this repertoire isn't that we can't read the notation, it's that we *can* read it. In other words, the fundamentals on the page (pitches, rhythm, expressive markings, and so on) look very familiar and easy to read. And, since this music is inherently diatonic, if you play the right notes at the right time

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with a good sound, some dynamics and good phrasing, it can be very successful.

Some music survives this type of reading better than others, including the music of Haydn, Mozart, Johann Sebastian Bach, Antonio Vivaldi, and George Frederick Handel. Their music translates not just well, but beautifully to many styles of performing traditions. However, the music of Henry Purcell, Heinrich Biber, and Arcangelo Corelli, as well as more obscure composers like Johann Heinrich Schmelzer, Antonio Caldara, or even the Bach sons (C.P.E., J.C., and W.F.) makes less sense to the modern ear, and is either ignored or suffers interpretations missing in vitality.

## BRINGING THE MUSIC INTO THE LIVE ARENA

Our goal at the Vivaldi Project and at MEMI is to bring this music out of the background and into the live arena where it belongs. This isn't just an invitation to randomly emote, but to most effectively present the content of the music—for instance, to speak the language or poetry best suited to the music. It is this extensive palette of expression, and the techniques involved with creating it that we explore in MEMI.

For example, we encourage participants to find the resonance in their modern instruments (which are really “modernized” Baroque instruments) and not simply eliminate vibrato, sustained tone, and legato. We strive to honor the way our instruments want to be played. Expressive playing can never be achieved through means of subtraction, so at MEMI, participants focus on the myriad ways of bringing this music to life without simply stripping it bare of modern sensibilities.

At a Vivaldi Project concert, the players invite the audience to be part of our “event.” This means explaining to the audience at the beginning of the concert that their presence on that day will help define how each piece will sound because so much of this repertoire demands an immediate and spontaneous reception. For example, if there is a humorous passage, the laughter becomes part of the performance and sets the stage for whatever comes next. Thus, every performance should be different, in the way a live play is always slightly different each time it is staged.

You can extend that analogy to say that a recording of a piece of music is like taking

## The Language of Baroque Music

An important concept to consider when learning to perform Baroque music is the idea that 18th-century musical sentences are constructed in much the same way as the sentences of 18th-century written language. In other words, long. Today we speak and write in relatively short sentences, avoiding too many commas, and rarely using a colon or semicolon (let alone two or three). Not so in the 18th century.

There was an art to the way one paused at the intermediary points while speaking, stringing along the listener through a narrative. The way that beautiful, long sentences are achieved in music is, in fact, the same: by pausing at points of expectation and anticipation. This often means making small rests at a point of dissonance, before resolutions that begin the next phrase.

This can seem counterintuitive.

From late-19th-century music, a string player learns to create long lines by always leading over the bar lines, through dominant chords to their tonics. But in 18th-century music, such resolutions prematurely end sentences and the important connection between ideas becomes lost. When effec-

tively strung together, 18th-century musical sentences can, in fact, be longer than 19th-century sentences.

Notationally, some of these interior points of musical punctuation are explicitly written into the music as rests, but many are not. The kind of nuances the performer must observe are so complex and varied that they are simply impossible to notate, and would only be visually confusing if they were—this is an important part of the history of punctuation, that there must always be a balance between that which is written and that which must remain unwritten.

In addition, many rests that are written have articulative and rhythmic functions and do not relate to punctuation at all. The performer's important job is to learn to recognize the punctuation embedded in the notation and to then explore the wonderful and varied ways in which it can be executed.

—Stephanie Vial

*Stephanie Vial is the author of The Art of Musical Phrasing in the 18th Century: Punctuating the Classical Period (University of Rochester Press, 2008).*

a script and adapting it for a film with many takes and edits. It's easy to understand how different the interpretation of a script must be each time it is committed to film. Essentially, audio recordings adapt a live “script” intended for a live event to become a permanent product.

Because MEMI prioritizes the “language” of the music vs. the actual medium it goes through, the program is specifically designed for the seasoned modern player, who has years of background and sophisticated intuition. This is not a how-to course about learning to play early instruments. Instead, it strives to open up possibilities and liberate musicians to find their own expressive voices. We've seen players grow as they discover the joy and incredible humanity of this repertoire.

### ADDRESSING THE VIBRATO ISSUE

It might seem simple enough to eliminate vibrato in order to approximate the sound of period instruments. It's true that vibrato takes on a very different role with period

instruments (Geminiani famously describes it in his 14th ornament from his tutorial *The Art of Playing on the Violin*), but imitating this single facet is a little like noticing icing on a cake and thinking that the icing is the sole distinguishing characteristic of the cake.

A better analogy that I often use (I love food analogies) is the mistaken notion that eliminating soy sauce from Chinese cooking might make a dish more French because you have been told there is no soy sauce in French cuisine. Clearly, you get no closer to French cooking by doing this—you simply ruin a perfectly good Chinese dish!

The point is that the superficial impression that the main difference between modern and early instruments is simply vibrato vs. non-vibrato can result in some misguided and sadly tepid interpretations on modern instruments. This is what I mean when I say you can never play expressively through means of subtraction.

Who wants to hear a group of fabulous players simply withhold their best modes of expression? That is just plain silly!



There is much more involved regarding the treatment of vibrato and it turns out that the study is tremendously rewarding. Musicians mostly discover that, instead of eliminating things they love, by re-examining their use of vibrato, they exponentially increase their possibilities for personal expression.

### A PERSONAL WAKE-UP CALL

My own journey probably started as a child growing up outside of Boston. My mother and I always listened to Baroque music played on WCRB (99.5 FM), Boston's all-classical radio station, as background to our late-afternoon activities. When we wanted to go hear a "real" concert, we went to the Boston Symphony Orchestra, where the earliest music I heard was by Haydn.

Still, I was intrigued by this earlier repertoire, which ironically seemed to be assigned only to children and "drive time" programming on classical radio. If Baroque music was performed live, it was the throwaway piece to start a program, like an appetizer.

Later in life, after I had spent several years as a freelance violinist in New York, I was introduced to Mozart on a fortepiano. My

friend and colleague, David Breitman, the director of the historical performance program at Oberlin College and Conservatory, was studying with Malcolm Bilson at Cornell University, and when I visited he and I read through some Mozart sonatas. Breitman pointed out two ideas about articulations that I had never heard before. First, he mentioned the rule of the slur, which in its simplest form states that the first note of a slur is the strongest while the rest of the notes taper. And he opened my eyes to the ambiguity of notated dots. In Mozart's script it is extremely difficult to distinguish between wedges and dots—some editions simply make them all dots, while others make them all wedges. Other editions take liberties by making their own decisions. The main thing to understand, he explained, is that every case and even every composer is different in this regard. The only thing we know for certain about a dot is that it is not a slur. And, most likely, it is *not* a staccato note either.

I definitely had a Wiley-Coyote-anvil-on-the-head-aha moment. I began to see that there was a *lot* more to this "children's repertoire" than I had been led to believe.

Once the flood of information started coming in, I never looked back.

Stephanie tells me she got to a point in her playing at which she felt she needed to understand more about why she was being asked to make certain musical decisions, especially in music lacking a lot of notational direction (an unaccompanied Bach cello suite, for instance). She found the study of early music to be a wonderful opportunity to combine scholarship with performance. Understanding how 18th-century composers and players thought and felt about their music (and its notation) allowed her to begin to make informed choices, and at the same time offered an incredible expressive freedom.

It's not about "authenticity" or "right" or "wrong," it's about realizing and taking advantage of the many options and possibilities offered by Baroque music.

*Elizabeth Field is the director of the Vivaldi Project, a period-instrument ensemble based in Washington, DC. The Modern Early Music Institute takes place between June 27 and July 1. For details, visit [thevivaldiproject.org](http://thevivaldiproject.org).*



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