

# The Final Frontier



How late can we go and still be early?

By **Sylvia Berry**

**E**ARLY ON IN MY historical performance life, when I was still basking in the period of post-conversion euphoria that many of us experience when we “switch” from modern to early instruments, I started to sense that something wasn’t quite right. I was immensely enthusiastic about the fortepiano and the daily discoveries it yielded about the music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert, but I had the feeling that some of my colleagues and teachers who specialized in earlier repertoire felt half-hearted about the instrument. It was a subtle prejudice, but it was there. Weren’t we all in this together?

Eventually I found myself asking a harpsichord-playing colleague why the fortepiano sometimes seemed to be regarded as the ugly stepchild of the early music movement. He replied that some performers and audience members saw it merely as a vehicle for being “in the movement,” yet playing mainstream repertoire that one could hear any day on the radio. With the harpsichord, we had encountered not only a different sound world but a host of fantastic composers whose music had languished in obscurity. He explained that one of the most exciting things about the harpsichord renaissance had been discovering composers such as Louis and François Couperin, Rameau, Frescobaldi, Froberger, *et al*, whose music had brilliantly come to light again once their instrument enjoyed a resurgence.

I saw his point and could easily agree with it, since I had only ever played one work by Rameau as a modern pianist before my “conversion experience” and had indeed never heard of the others on that list until I entered Early Music Land. Yet it saddened me, since my excitement revolved around my feeling that the works of my beloved “Viennese masters” truly felt reborn for me at the

fortepiano. Unfortunately, I did not have the wherewithal to respond that early music practitioners seemed all too happy to have wrested Bach and Handel from the clutches of mainstream or modern players, but I wish I had, for in returning to this conversation with the same colleague many years later in preparation for this piece, he had to concede that point to me! It is hard to understand why Bach on the harpsichord is more worthwhile than Mozart on the fortepiano. Yes, the harpsichord is truly a different species from the modern piano, while a fortepiano is still a *piano*. But those of us who primarily play early pianos know that the dictum “A rose is a rose” doesn’t work here.

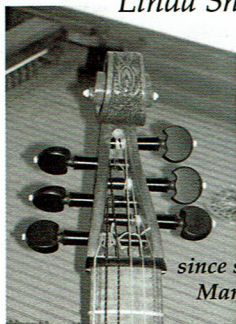
As time goes on, however, I come to see that this is part of a larger question, namely: How “late” can we go and still be “early”? Is early music “early” simply when we’ve got the right instruments? Most practitioners would rightly say “no,” and add that you need the right instruments *and* a working knowledge of how music from the period might have been performed. But what of audiences? What do they expect when someone promotes an “early music” concert to them? Do they expect to see a menagerie of instruments they’ve never seen, or to be whisked away to a time as far away as possible from their modern lives?

It seems to me that these are questions we must ask ourselves again in North America, since it appears that our “early music” borders start somewhere before Palestrina and end roughly at Mozart, or middle-period Beethoven if you’re lucky (see the interview with Harry Christophers in the Summer 2009 *EMAg*). As a student in Holland, I routinely heard music from 1820 and beyond being performed on period

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instruments. There are a number of antique Viennese pianos scattered throughout Holland, and my exposure to these instruments led me to discoveries about Schubert and middle- and late-period Beethoven that I would have never learned by only reading treatises from the period. I even played Chopin and Schumann on these instruments with the same results! However, upon moving back to the U.S., it came as a shock to realize that practitioners and concert-goers alike had a vague aversion to anything past 1800. I once suggested to a director of an early music festival here that it might be fun to present a Schubert program, and after being visibly taken aback, this person replied, "Schubert... that's a bit late!"

How could we still be skeptical of hearing Schubert on period instruments after the work of such artists as Malcolm Bilson, whose sonata cycle and disc of works for four-hands with

Robert Levin (tragically out of print) were simply revelatory? Or Frans Brüggen, whose readings of the symphonies are both exciting and gorgeous? Or Monica Huggett's ensemble Hausmusik London, which issued a stunning recording of the Mendelssohn string octet? Or Anner Bylsma's ensemble L'archibudelli, who turned in absolutely sumptuous (and yes, vibrato-free) readings of the Brahms string sextets?

If someone had asked me how far I thought the early music movement could logically go, I *might* have half-jokingly said that the final frontier was *The Rite of Spring*. Amazingly, this frontier has now been reached: unsurprisingly, this took place in Holland. At the 2008 Utrecht Early Music Festival, the Kölner Akademie, directed by Michael Alexander Willens, presented a program of two works: the Suite from *Les Indes galantes* by Rameau and Stravinsky's aforementioned riot-inducing ballet score. I am

still on the fence myself about delving into early 20th-century repertoire, but I feel utterly crestfallen about having colleagues in the early music field who think that Schubert is "too late," especially after a proven track record of wonderfully illuminating performances and recordings on period instruments. In fact, in our early music scene today, even Mozart is not performed as much as his Baroque counterparts.

The above-mentioned harpsichordist friend finally said to me that another big issue here is very simply the lack of resources, and this makes more sense to me. Indeed, I no longer have easy access to Viennese fortepianos from post-1800, or I myself would be trying to play more "late" repertoire. When it comes to orchestras, for instance, I realize that it's a formidable expense to hire

a full complement of period wind-players. However, I still have a nagging suspicion that a number of us believe that music beyond the Baroque era is too "late" to count as "early." Interestingly, when Bilson and six of his former students presented the complete

Beethoven piano sonatas on period instruments, they did not perform it at the Berkeley or Boston Early Music Festivals but at Merkin Concert Hall in New York City and at the Utrecht Early Music Festival.

While I wish I could have heard last year's performance of *The Rite of Spring* in Utrecht, that is not what I'm suggesting we do here in North America at this time. I would love it if we could push the frontiers a little further; it would be wonderful to get to 1850, but I would be thankful just to get to 1830 for now!

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Currently based in the Boston area, Sylvia Berry is an active performer-scholar specializing in Viennese music of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. At the Haydn Society of North America's 2009 conference, she presented a lecture-recital entitled "Haydn at the Keyboard: Four Sonatas from Four Decades" for which she played both harpsichord and fortepiano.

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