



COMMUNICATION: CONFERENCE REPORT

Authentisch? Zum Umgang mit Emotionen in der Alten Musik

Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, 23–25 November 2023

Bettina Varwig

Faculty of Music, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
bv239@cam.ac.uk

‘Could the dead hear the requiems that were being sung for them?’ This was just one of the many intriguing questions raised at this symposium, which brought together historical musicology with perspectives from music psychology, ethnomusicology and the history of emotions to ponder the enduring issue of how to understand musical emotions from the past and translate them into performance today. For music historians, the question of what the emotional effects or meanings of particular musical sounds might have been for their producers and consumers remains both paramount and elusive. And while there was widespread agreement among the symposium’s participants that an accurate reproduction of past sounds or feelings neither can nor should be the aim of current performance approaches, any musician setting out to play these early repertoires today necessarily has to grapple with the challenge of how to make sense of the notes on the page – how to ‘express’ whatever expressive potential might be found in those dots and dashes that composers left for us to decipher.

A couple of the papers served as broader introductions to the symposium theme, to help provide a terminological and methodological frame of reference for the surrounding presentations. Marie Louise Herzfeld-Schild (Universität Wien) offered a lucid exposition of recent history-of-emotions research, its key terms and paradigms as well as the current state of play in the discipline. She emphasized in particular the usefulness of the idea of music as an ‘emotional practice’ in the sense outlined by Monique Scheer (‘Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion’, *History and Theory* 51/2 (2012), 193–220). This was followed by a contribution from social psychologist Disa Sauter (Universiteit van Amsterdam), who outlined some key present-day psychological theories of the emotions and their applicability to music in particular. She then shared the results of some of her own projects on musical emotions. These highlighted the cross-cultural dimensions of how one recognizes emotions, but also acknowledged some of the limitations of a method that assumes the translatability of certain emotive words, categories and gestures between different historical and cultural contexts. As Sauter said, there are so many different ways to feel ‘happy’ in music!

A roundtable on ‘Modality and Ethos/Emotions’ – with Alexander Lingas (City University of London), Peter McMurray (University of Cambridge), Eleonora Rocconi (Università di Pavia), Ken Zuckerman (Musik-Akademie Basel) and Disa Sauter as respondent – picked up on this theme of cross-cultural musical (dis)connections. Although the focus of the presentations (on the modes in ancient Greek music theory, Byzantine chant, early Arabic/Ottoman theory and in the Indian raga system) was predominantly on older sources, the central question regarding the affective associations of particular sounds or scales is of course highly relevant to many eighteenth-century contexts as well. Some of the subsequent contributions engaged more directly with

eighteenth-century source materials: the paper by Christoph Haffter (Hochschule für Musik Basel) outlined Johann Mattheson's understanding of the affections in relation to earlier theories by René Descartes and Athanasius Kircher. Comparing their approaches in some detail, Haffter offered a persuasive critique of the notion of a unified 'mimetic' conception of affect before 1800. Elizabeth Dobbin (Haute École de Musique de Genève) then pondered the usefulness of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French singing treatises for today's vocal practice. Her proposal for a new pedagogy for early-music singing stressed the central role of the performer's imagination in bringing together the various technical aspects of register, timbre, dynamics, tempo and gestural shape.

Given the strong practical orientation of the host institution, it is not surprising that links to historical performance practice were emphasized throughout the event. This occurred partly in the form of accompanying concerts – ranging from a lunchtime recorder ensemble to a theatrical performance event by Ensemble Theatro dei Cervelli entitled 'The Language of Pain' – as well as a hands-on workshop with students from the Schola on the final afternoon. In addition, there were many instances of live performance integrated into the paper presentations themselves. This was the case in the contribution of David Mesquita (Schola Cantorum Basiliensis; Hochschule für Musik Basel), which discussed compositional practices and attitudes to the affections in eighteenth-century Spanish sacred music, illustrated with numerous musical excerpts performed by students; and in a joint presentation by Johannes Menke (Schola Cantorum Basiliensis) and Angelika Moths (Universität Zürich) on 'Affektarien' by Johann David Heinichen. Heinichen's figured-bass treatises contain a wealth of musical examples showing how to create different affective characters when setting operatic arias. With the help of a student singer and continuo ensemble, Menke and Moths made those examples audible, to great effect. My own paper (Bettina Varwig, University of Cambridge), on 'Plenisentient Musicking', also included such moments of live embodied enactment. The key argument – that early modern musicking was a multisensory practice that went beyond the auditory domain to encompass experiences of hymns tasting sweet and musical sound touching the heart – gained immeasurably from the musical examples performed in situ.

In all these ways, the Schola Cantorum, as a place of musical exchange, offered constant reminders and invitations to facilitate and engage in close dialogue between theory and practice, and between scholars and performers. What emerged clearly from the symposium overall was the insight that only through that dialogue can we work towards compelling new ways to bring to life today the affective power of these early repertoires.

Bettina Varwig is Professor of Music History at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Emmanuel College. Her publications include *Histories of Heinrich Schütz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), *Music in the Flesh: An Early Modern Musical Physiology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023) and the edited volume *Rethinking Bach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).