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Problems in Appropriating Seventeenth Century Repertoire into Present-Day Theory Class: Henry Purcell as a Case Study

ABSTRACT

Background

Music written before Bach or by Bach's contemporaries is usually absent from syllabi of theory and analysis classes in conservatories and in universities. Analysis of syllabi from music schools worldwide shows that, despite many differences and many local characteristics, music colleges all around the world share a tendency to limit students' engagement with early music to music history class, and to ignore that repertoire when it comes to the context of theoretical classes.

Some of the topics usually covered in syllabi nowadays rely, by definition, on the study of later repertoire (sonata form, classical concerto form). By contrast, other topics do allow the use of earlier repertoire: themes and variations by English virginalists are not less sophisticated than those by Mozart or Beethoven. Rondeaux by French harpsichordists combine rondeau with stylized dances and sometimes create rondeau-within-rondeau structures in ways that are no less inspired than those observed in classical rondo-sonata movements. The average Frescobaldi fugue is as rich in contrapuntal devices as the average Bach fugue.

It may seem that the absence of early music from syllabi testifies for the incompatibility of early repertoire with the analytical methods studied in schools nowadays. This might lead us to the sad conclusion that, assuming that schools decide on analytical methods according to the repertoire they focus on rather than vice versa, teachers simply do not have the motivation to introduce their students to early music.

Reasons for this lack of motivation abound: some teachers simply do not think highly of the artistic achievement of early music, perhaps because they judge it according to anachronistic criteria. Some teachers simply believe that common-practice repertoire is challenging enough not to require shifting the traditional emphasis away from it. In some cases, when students are introduced to early repertoire through recordings, traditional ideology regarding musical performance might lead to poor choices of edition and performance. This puts early music in an inferior starting point in the competition with carefully selected performances of later repertoire. All these reasons have the potential to perpetuate themselves, but it is unfair to attack anyone for not liking any specific repertoire.

Only one recurring trait in common-practice textbooks really deserves questioning, if not immediate correction. I call the trait by the name 'The Kuhnau Syndrome', after the way Bach's predecessor Johann Kuhnau (1660–1722) is treated in one of the most popular harmony books available nowadays — Aldwell and Schachter's *Harmony and Voice Leading*.

Although they are consistent with their self-imposed boundaries from the preface of the book — dealing with music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — the authors do summon earlier masters in some cases, and analyze excerpts from earlier works. In most of these cases, the examples are brought to demonstrate excessive use of a certain harmonic device. The example from Kuhnau's *Biblische Historien* (1700), is presented for its use of a mere two chords, all tonic and dominant. Some lip-service is being paid (Kuhnau uses 'a curious and unusual procedure' for programmatic reasons) but the tacit implication here is disturbing: baroque and renaissance works are shown to demonstrate embryonic stages of ideas which were to be developed and refined by later masters. The students are not given any reason to take Kuhnau's sonatas off the shelf and search for goods in other movements or in other works by the composer. For some of them, Kuhnau will forever remain that curious composer who wrote an entire binary movement with two chords.

There seems to be a sweeping consensus among music historians regarding Kuhnau's famous English contemporary, Henry Purcell (1659–1695) and his superb command over the craft of composition. Authors refer to him as 'the Restoration genius' who 'made of the superficialities of his age a profound work of art' (Bukofzer 1947, 203) and 'as close to an all-round musical genius [...] as England has ever produced' (Taruskin 2010, 127). His mastery as contrapuntist, as a ground-bass composer, and as a profound dramatic thinker is often mentioned in music history books. However, the consensus regarding Purcell's technical ability seems to stand in stark contrast to the composer's absence from most twentieth-century theory and analysis textbooks. Even when excerpts from his works are given as examples, it is often for their occasional harmonic surprises (still rubbing shoulders with earlier modal practice) rather than for the compositional achievement they exhibit.

Aims and repertoire studied

My paper overviews examples and analyses from textbooks, where excerpts from Purcell's music are used to demonstrate various musical phenomena. These case studies help to assess, and better understand some peculiarities in theorists' treatment of seventeenth-century works.

Methods

I present a quantitative survey of references to Purcell in contemporary textbooks, and then go on to present a close reading of some analyses, a critical evaluation of the texts used for these analyses, and evaluation of their aims.

Implications

I will suggest that the tendency to ignore Purcell and other seventeenth-century composers stems in part from the way that musicological scholarly communities are composed. Early music scholars tend to practice musical analysis only within the boundaries of carefully-delineated fields, often focused around a specific composer. Thus, adaptations from analytical methods used on the works of one composer by scholars of other composers are relatively slow, and a real impetus for the consolidation of an ‘early music theory’ sub-discipline does not exist.

As a consequence, there is not a significant quantity of preliminary reference literature that relates early composers to relevant musical phenomena. An anthology for analysis with a focus on early music may seriously advance the inclusion of early composers in syllabi.

In addition, the use of proper authoritative editions of early music is bound to clash with the rudiments acquired by undergraduates in their first years (for example, non-standard key signatures and the irrelevance of the Circle of Fifths to earlier temperament systems).

Indeed, some of the most original compositional devices in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were founded on hexachordal theory, and since this is no longer a part of common theoretical knowledge, it is impossible for theory students to appreciate some types of seventeenth-century motivic manipulations.

I will also suggest that Purcell’s abilities as contrapuntist and his original ways of structuring large-scale forms is sadly ignored in classrooms today. As is the case with many seventeenth-century composers, Purcell’s works are often summoned just because they combine a canonic stature on the one hand, and seventeenth-century idioms that are peculiar to ears used to common-practice repertoire on the other.

Keywords

Early music, early tonality, musical pedagogy.

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