

Introducing the online Early Music Directory of Australia

Rosalind Halton

You can visit the Directory at <http://www.mca.org.au/EarlyMusic/EARLYDirectory.asp>

Should people working in early music be regarded as some sort of special category, apart from any type of professional musician?

The question was posed in a recent discussion with ABC Classic FM producers, and it's a fair question that deserves some answers, especially if any statement about the health and future of historical performance in Australia is to be formulated. Put simply, does early music have to be a special case?

And why a special online Directory for Early Music hosted by the Music Council of Australia?

It is felt by some that Early Music as a concept lacks clear definition; even that it may have had its day, like a minority political party that has served its function, and outlived its purpose. How else to account for the fact that historical performance does not appear to have established a firm position in our tertiary institutions¹? Yet more and more CDs by 'historically informed' performers are coming on to the market; Sydney subscription concerts by the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra² which I have attended this year have been enthusiastically received by consistently good sized audiences.

It is undeniable that the image of 'Early Music' has changed since it was first adopted as a term for musicians aiming to recreate sounds and musical practices of the past: for example, the term 'authenticity' has all but dropped out of the marketing vocabulary. But one simple thing is clear to me in my role as moderator of the Early Music Directory for the MCA.: the profiles of those sending in their forms for inclusion in the Directory provide in themselves a definition of Early Music as practised in Australia and by Australian musicians.

In announcing the plan for a Directory in 2003, I stated that: "It is the aim that [it] should provide contacts and information for musicians nationwide, and indicate the breadth of Australian creative activity in music from medieval to historically informed classical/romantic periods".

It was a deliberate decision to invite entries not only from musicians working in Australia, but also from those currently based overseas. If the Directory and the Early Music website can serve a role, it seems to me that among the most important of these is to create a database of information on musicians who wish to retain their identity - and their potential to work - as Australian artists in Australia. It is very pleasing to note that already there has been a high rate of response to the Directory from Australian musicians working overseas.

It is often claimed that, to be working at a high level in early music, Australian musicians must study and preferably make a career overseas: but need this be an irreversible drain from the pool of historically informed musicians in Australia? With present-day communications and comparative ease of travel (in money terms at least), I can't see why Australian musicians should not aim to work in both northern and southern hemispheres. There should be immense potential for stimulating interactions, if only we can devise channels of communication to make visits home productive for overseas-based musicians. An essential part of this should be the aim to plan schedules in plenty of time and on an interstate basis. This process of making a career both in Europe/N.America, and Australia has certainly started for some, and could become the rule rather than the exception.

For those of us who have chosen to live and work in Australia, it would also clearly be of great benefit to have some more formalised infrastructure for planning events and exchanges to teach and perform. It is often pointed out that we so far lack an organisation along the lines of the Early Music Network, U.K. which provides a database of ensembles, and also aims to connect performers with promoters. For present purposes, it seems that a broadly inclusive national database should be the starting point: it could lead to a more formalised network of those prepared to act as contacts for interstate concert and workshop planning.

Promoters - are there any? Please contact us by visiting <http://www.mca.org.au/early.htm>

Every time an individual acts on behalf of a colleague or former teacher wishing to visit Australia, s/he discovers the absence of such a network of appropriate contacts which could help to co-ordinate concerts and workshops, often by very distinguished performers. Many times, such visits go by in a limited area, only to be lamented subsequently by those who would have loved to be informed and take part.

For this type of reason it is vital, in my opinion, that Early Music practitioners should be aware of each other's work on a national, not just a state basis. This also means being aware of promising students developing within the tertiary sector, making sure that there are destinations for their work in Australia and not just overseas. Here, too, we need to think beyond the scope of the individual institution, so that we provide stimulating contacts and opportunities for the next generation of performers, wherever they are based.

¹ This complex subject deserves to be researched and documented in a future study.

² An ensemble using the 'period instruments' approach, and with a membership drawn from all around Australia.

The Early Music Directory will help to show what types of training and careers are being currently undertaken by Australians. Hopefully it will act both as an encouragement to young musicians wishing to embark on intensive study, and as an answer to those inclined to be dismissive about professional opportunities for Australians in historically informed performance.

I hope the Directory will help prospective students to find teachers, facilitate contacts at every level, and enable musicians to advertise their work in a space- and cost-effective manner, through their entries and the inclusion of website addresses.

Profiles of Early Music

Is there a typical profile of an Australian musician in the Early Music Directory? At time of writing, we can hardly claim to have a large enough sample on which to draw, as it is in the first week online. But even looking at this small group, we can't help being aware of a highly qualified and diverse group of musicians employed in a very wide range of activities. Most have several degrees, including the group of Australian musicians who have completed Performance diplomas and degrees at Early Music centres such as the Royal Conservatorium, The Hague; many have research degrees in music from Masters to Doctorates, and there is also a wide range of subjects within the degrees, e.g. Museum Studies and Fine Arts as well as Languages.

The database was set up so that individuals could define the various fields into which their work falls. So there are examples in the category of performer/composer, performer/researcher, instrument maker/researcher, administrator/performer, and so on. One could say that a life of on-going research and study is one of the factors that defines the occupation of being engaged in early music performance. Some are involved in research into instruments and materials for instrument construction; others in editing repertoires that are thus far unpublished or recorded; still others in specific aspects of performance practice research, such as dance and gesture, music of the renaissance, interdisciplinary research involving theatre, visual arts, etc.

In the field of teaching, it is true to say that all early music performers are engaged in teaching, with the exception of those primarily involved in administration.

Compared with performers of modern instruments, we may note a considerable involvement in teaching at primary and pre-tertiary level. Few early music practitioners in Australia are employed in the tertiary sector, despite the enormous amount of experience and research that underlies their work. This is not to denigrate the work with younger age groups: on the contrary, it is likely to produce a new generation with awareness of a wider range of repertoires than the generation that organises the syllabuses of tertiary institutions. But it seems a needless waste of so much experience and potential for innovative teaching programs at tertiary level.

As instrumentalists, these are people who have retrained, probably at tertiary or postgraduate level, for the risky and unpredictable game of playing historical instruments. The singers are people who, by choice, form ensembles to perform music from Machaut to - well, to the 21st century, if you look at a group like The Song Company. To develop this facility for vocal chamber music, they need an approach that is technically and aesthetically at odds with the technique required to sing Wagner, but takes in a potentially huge solo and ensemble repertoire.

The dilemma of coming back home

Let's return to the question: Should people working in early music be regarded as a special case? My answers to this question come from two points of view.

1) What is it like to be a musician working in early music performance in Australia, compared with elsewhere in the world?

2) Are there particular issues for 'early music' performers and performances that are distinct from 'conventional' forms of classical music-making - i.e. in a symphony orchestra or chamber ensemble using so-called modern instruments?

The first question is one pondered on a regular basis by Australian musicians who have moved to Europe or North America for specialised early music study. Whether it is London, The Hague, Basle, Milan, or Indiana: all of these centres offer an environment in which historical performance can be studied with a like-minded (and enthused) peer group, with possibilities for ensemble work coached or directed by some brilliant teachers - many of them household names in historical performance - leading to satisfying professional opportunities on a regular basis. Why bother to return to Australia?

Even if the Australian performer has met with a sympathetic reception on her/his way through undergraduate study, the wealth of opportunities to perform constantly fresh repertoire with an international peer group in Europe/N. America, often in beautiful historic venues with rich acoustics, is likely to make such an agreeable contrast with the comparatively small range of activities in Australia, that the prospect of returning home is not obviously inviting.

Yet Australian performers, even at the peak of busy successful careers overseas, generally wish to keep some professional contact with Australia, and many aim to return home to live and work. Most wish to contribute to music-making in their own country, and to feel that they still belong.

For those planning to return permanently, what is the waiting scenario? In teaching, opportunities are limited by the budget cutbacks that have affected every Australian tertiary institution. Compared with the U.K., where many universities have a substantial faculty of early music specialists, Australian conservatoria and universities have few positions specifically designated for historical performance. In performance, the low population base of Australia again limits opportunities to initiate new projects without incurring heavy debts. Venue hire and publicity costs are in inverse proportion to performance fees in Australia. Recordings often have to be self-funded and self-promoted. There are

many days when the performer who has returned home has to remind him/herself of the non-musical reasons for choosing to be based in Australia: the weather, space, family ...

Yes, all this is equally the case for the trombonist specialising in contemporary repertoire, for the young opera singer trying to decide whether to stay another year overseas or return home and try to start a career. So what are the factors that are specific to early music performance, and are they difficult to maintain here at the level that seems regularly within reach in Europe?

Infrastructure and career development

- The most obvious ingredient lacking from the early music practitioner's life in Australia is the existence of established ensembles, akin to the symphony orchestra, which can provide the musician with a steady supply of work and income. The Australian Brandenburg Orchestra is currently the only such ensemble for Australian early music instrumentalists, but with a comparatively limited membership and work confined to specific seasons, even a full-time member of this ensemble requires a good deal of free-lance work to make up a living.
- Performers in historical performance typically begin to study, and acquire their chosen instrument(s) at a later stage than the symphony orchestra player. The development and recognition of solo/principal player 'material' thus occurs at a later age, with important ramifications for scholarship/award possibilities.
- For free-lance early music ensembles applying for Australia Council funding (etc.), the requirement of Australian content is a recurrent problem, given that the performers themselves, and their creativity, don't seem to count as 'Australian content'. Lack of funding will result in inability to pay a manager/promoter, with flow-on effects including difficulties in building a national touring and recording profile.
- Performers in Australia have less opportunity to explore a wide range of historical instruments; though this country boasts some outstanding harpsichord makers, for example, their work is not always made available for performances or maintained by institutions responsible for their upkeep. The small continuo harpsichord - the lifeblood of a baroque ensemble - is a type of instrument only rarely seen in Australia, and even more rarely presented in playable condition.

Whether these problems become more soluble or more insurmountable remains to be seen, and the answer will largely determine whether historical performance in this country can fulfil the potential of all the immensely talented individuals produced by and/or working in Australia. Let's hope that the Directory can serve a useful function by documenting the range and quality of these talents, and the recognition that the rest of the world is prepared to give them. If new contacts and opportunities come from it, it may prove itself to be not just a fascinating read but a useful tool of communication.

My warmest thanks to Peter Rasmussen for his work in setting up the Early Music site and in particular the Early Music Directory; my thanks also to Claudio Pompili for his initial work in the design of the submission form. The Directory is divided into two sections, i.e. for individual entries and ensembles. Current projects, CD releases, and impending visits/residencies, etc. may be notified in the 'What's New' section of the Early Music website.

Rosalind Halton is a harpsicordist, researcher, editor, Senior Lecturer in Performance and Musicology at the University of Newcastle. She performs with Ensemble Chacona.

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