By Word of Mouth: Historical Performance Comes of Age

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Abstract
Since Clive Brown’s 1991 accusation that many twentieth-century manifestations of historical performance lacked an appropriate degree of musical sensitivity, the historical performance movement has truly come of age. In the arena of Western Art music, historical performance is now an essential component of musical training and education. Successful performers must be able to seamlessly function across the widest possible range of musical styles, accommodating an equally wide gamut of tastes, both individually and collectively.

In 1982, nine years earlier, Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* explored differences between oral and literate cultures. Of particular interest to me, a musician working across both practice and theory primarily in the arena of historical performance, is Ong’s identification and definition of some characteristics of orally-based thought and expression.

In the 21st century, particularly at an institution such as London’s Royal College of Music, fluency across both practice and theory is the norm. Applying Ong’s work to the teaching and learning, rehearsing and performing of Western Art music, and through this, reflecting on the nature of orality and literacy, can give us a far greater understanding of the dynamics of practice and theory. In considering Ong alongside the work of performer/scholars, musicologists, and other writers, this paper suggests that the current success of the historical performance movement lies in its ability to embrace both oral and literate modes.

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