

Historical Thinking and Individual Creativity: Teaching Primary Sources on Performance

REBECCA CYPRESS, MASON GROSS SCHOOL OF THE ARTS,
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

“Achieving mature historical thought depends precisely on our ability to navigate the uneven landscape of history, to traverse the rugged terrain that lies between the poles of familiarity and distance from the past.”¹ Thus educational psychologist Sam Wineburg lays out the difficulties of instilling in his students the habits of what he calls “historical thinking”—an approach to the study of history that examines primary sources critically, asks questions of them rather than seeking simple answers, and synthesizes them to construct arguments and narratives about peoples and events of the past. Wineburg’s work has prompted extensive discussion about the pedagogy of general history; among the responses to his work is that of Fritz Fischer, who describes historical thinking as “a way of questioning, examining, drawing conclusions, and thinking about the past.”² For Bruce Lesh, history students must be taught to interrogate primary sources, asking questions such as, “What does the source say? What information does it provide? What was going on when the source was produced? What do you know about the historical context for the source that helps to explain the information it provides? Who created the source and why? For whom was the source created?”³ Wineburg has suggested that historical thinking is an “unnatural act”—something that needs to be taught and deliberately cultivated. Yet the rewards are obviously great: in Fischer’s estimation, the habits of historical thinking are a “Rosetta Stone” for

1. My thanks to Timothy Cochran, Louis Kaiser Epstein, Sara Haefeli, and Steven Meyer for their helpful suggestions concerning this essay, and to the students in my performance practice courses at the Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University for their willingness to test some of these ideas. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 5. Pedagogical activities designed to cultivate historical thinking are at the web site historicalthinkingmatters.org, co-directed by Roy Rosenzweig and Sam Wineburg (accessed April 2, 2018).

2. Fritz Fischer, “The Historian as Translator: Historical Thinking, the Rosetta Stone of History Education,” *Historically Thinking* 12, no. 3 (June, 2011): 16.

3. Bruce Lesh, “Making Historical Thinking a Natural Act,” *Historically Thinking* 12, no. 3 (June, 2011): 18.

history education, allowing for the “translation” of the past into the present. In learning to ask questions of their sources, students gain a nuanced understanding—one that accounts for a variety of perspectives and accommodates the complexities of reality—rather than settling for a mere caricature of history.

As educators in *music* history, we are responsible for instilling in students the same habits of historical thinking advocated by Wineburg, Fischer, Lesh, and many others in our sibling discipline. In teaching these habits, we encourage our students to eschew easy answers in favor of sustained and nuanced engagement with music-historical documents. Yet, in the study of music history, there are both additional challenges and additional motivations to understand primary sources in all of their complexity. For students in one of the many conservatory or conservatory-style programs in North America or abroad who hope to make performance their career, the goal is not simply to understand the past, but, to greater or lesser extents, to breathe new life into sources from the past, reanimating them in ways that will be compelling for listeners in the present moment. For music students who do not plan on a career in performance, these goals are also important and achievable: anyone engaged in what Christopher Small has called “musicking”—the teaching, producing, songwriting, listening, concert-going, and other activities that contribute to a musical environment—benefits from learning to observe, interpret, and animate primary sources in ways that are historically grounded yet also creative and individual.⁴

The role of performance in the general music history classroom—especially in music history surveys—has been addressed in the field of music history pedagogy before, with some wonderfully engaging results.⁵ As these studies demonstrate, the incorporation of performance into the teaching of music history can lead to historical thinking, in that it forces students to engage more critically, personally, and immediately with the range of problems, questions, and opportunities posed by primary sources. Courses in the field of performance practice offer an opportunity to explore such questions fruitfully; in them, historical thinking can be brought to bear in distinctive ways on the practical necessities and requirements of the professional field.

4. Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

5. See especially Daniel Barolsky, Sara Gross Ceballos, Rebecca Plack, and Steven M. Whiting, “Roundtable: Performance as a Master Narrative in Music History,” this *Journal* 3, no. 1 (2012): 77–102; Douglass Seaton, “Teaching Music History: Principles, Problems, and Proposals,” in *Vitalizing Music History Teaching*, ed. James R. Briscoe (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2010), 59–71 (especially 70–71); James A. Grymes and John Allemeier, “Making Students Make Music: Integrating Composition and Improvisation into the Early Music Classroom,” this *Journal* 4, no. 2 (2014): 231–54; Amanda Lalonde, “Student Performance in the Undergraduate Music History Sequence: Current Practices and Suggested Models,” this *Journal* 7, no. 2 (2017): 81–93.

Students seeking professional training in performance often view music history courses in utilitarian terms. What practical information does the field of music history convey? What answers does it offer that will further a performer's professional objectives? In my experience advising and teaching students in such a setting, music history courses that do not contribute in obvious ways to the professional mission of conservatory-style programs often seem to these students like arbitrary obstacles. One purpose of performance practice courses is, therefore, to show students how to blend the study of music history with their work in applied performance. In this respect, it may be true that the knowledge gleaned from primary documents on performance practice fosters skills that will contribute in obvious ways to their professional opportunities. In this applied context, it is understandable that students might look to primary sources simply for answers to concrete technical questions. And yet, as I will show, the use of primary sources that might at first appear to offer simple answers can instead serve as an entry point to historical discovery. Primary sources are often messy, contradictory, and frustratingly vague—and in these respects they encourage the student to assume an approach rooted in “historical thinking.” The experiences in performance practice courses might thus provide insights that can be applied to the teaching of music history in broader contexts.

In my experience teaching courses on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century performance practice to advanced undergraduates and graduate students in performance programs, the question that students have asked most commonly at the start of the semester is when they will be learning to interpret the ornamentation signs used by Johann Sebastian Bach and his contemporaries. There are pressing questions that (students often imagine) should have clear answers: Do trills start on the main note, or on the upper neighbor? How many oscillations should each trill contain? What are the rules governing each ornament symbol? There are two problems with these sorts of questions: First, they are symptomatic of a lack of historical thinking, as they indicate that students expect music history classes to provide simple answers rather than spark new questions. By extension, students often view the field of performance practice as one involving rules that limit options for performers: they imagine that a trill *must* contain a certain number of notes, that it *must* start on either the main note or the upper neighbor, that there is *one* correct manner of execution for each of the ornament signs. Upending these assumptions through contextualization and the cultivation of creative questioning ultimately leads students to assume greater responsibility for their choices as performers and allows them to develop distinctive performerly voices.

In order to demonstrate how historical thinking can foster creative artistic responses to primary sources, my discussion needs to touch upon both

historical evidence concerning musical practice and pedagogy and strategies for the contemporary classroom. The ornament table included by J. S. Bach in his *Clavierbüchlein vor Wilhelm Friedemann Bach* (**Figure 1**) provides a point of entry. On its surface, the ornament table seems like a Rosetta Stone unto itself—a key to interpreting the apparently mysterious notation of a venerable eighteenth-century composer. (Distribution of printed copies of this ornament table for classroom discussion often prompts students to pull out their phones to take pictures of it, despite its being readily available online—as if private possession of such an image will lead to its accurate application.) However, encouraging students to ask the sorts of questions that lead to historical thinking helps to contextualize, explain, and demystify it. Far from being a simple Rosetta Stone, these ornament tables reveal themselves to be full of problems, as they depict a manner of performance that is out-of-sync with contemporaneous descriptions of flexible, affected interpretation.

Figure 1: Johann Sebastian Bach, ornament table in the *Clavierbüchlein vor Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*, begun in 1720. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



The first step in this demystification is to compare Bach's ornament table with others compiled by his contemporaries, examples of which can be distributed to the class at this point.⁶ Bach's was one of dozens of similar tables produced in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The fact that the majority of these were assembled by French composers provides modern-day students with a window onto the cultural influences on the German high baroque, and

6. Some of these are discussed in Mary Cyr, *Performing Baroque Music* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1992), 132–141.

thus helps to provide context within which to understand Bach's performance practices. These ornament tables of Bach's French contemporaries might share certain features in common with his and with each other's, but there are differences among both the symbols and their realizations, and these differences attest to varying conceptions of ornaments in the early eighteenth century.

As students compare these sources with Bach's ornament table they should consider their intended readership. Many French ornament tables appear in printed sources, meaning that they were intended primarily for amateur musicians who might have only limited access to the oral tradition that would have been available to professional keyboardists. Bach's ornament table was not published, but it, too, served a pedagogical purpose. Part of a notebook intended for the use of his eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann (who had just passed his ninth birthday when his father began assembling its contents), the table was a component of Bach's broader educational system.⁷ Thus the pedagogy of performance today may be enriched through consideration of the pedagogy of music in the past.

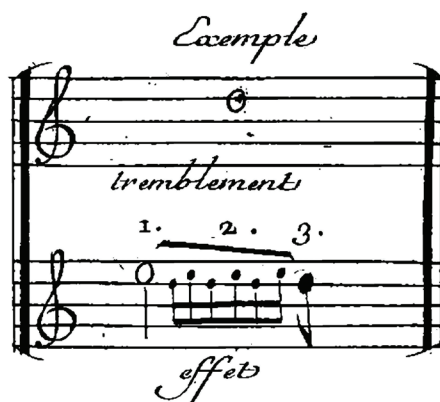
Consideration of work by Bach's contemporaries, his students, and another of his sons, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, helps to complicate the picture of eighteenth-century ornamentation still further. Among the ornament tables by Bach's contemporaries some sources present a picture that is considerably more complicated than the one captured by Bach's table for Wilhelm Friedemann. In this complication, they suggest that Bach's ornament table is itself overly rigid in its notation, and perhaps that, in teaching it to his son, he would have added explanation of the nuances that could not be captured in notation. One source that captures some of this nuance (as well as some frustration at the limits of notation) is the ornament table by François Couperin, which was perhaps the clearest in explaining why facile transcriptions of ornaments were insufficient and why their realization was a matter of subjective taste and perception. Couperin's ornament table, included in his *Premier livre de pièces de clavecin* (*First Book of Harpsichord Pieces*, 1717), allows for a greater or lesser number of oscillations in a trill, mordent, or appoggiatura, according to the duration of the note being ornamented, which is itself a function of tempo. In his treatise *L'art de toucher le clavecin* (*The Art of Playing the Harpsichord*), published in the same year, he explains that "Although the trills are notated equally in the ornament table in my *First Book* [*of Harpsichord Pieces*], they should nevertheless begin more slowly than they end; but this gradation should be imperceptible."⁸

7. On Bach's pedagogical practices at the keyboard, see John Butt, *Music Education and the Art of Performance in the German Baroque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Richard D. P. Jones, "The Keyboard Works: Bach as Teacher and Virtuoso," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, ed. John Butt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 136–153.

8. François Couperin, *L'art de toucher le clavecin* (Paris: l'auteur, 1717), 23. My translation.

He continues, “Trills of any considerable length are comprised of three components, which are not the same in performance as in appearance. 1. The accent, which should be placed on the note above the main note. 2. The oscillations. 3. The stopping point” (see **Figure 2**).⁹ Finally, in discussing another aspect of performance practice that cannot be captured clearly in conventional notation (namely *notes inégales*, the convention of “swinging” consecutive eighth notes¹⁰) Couperin exclaims in frustration, “In my view there are defects in our style of writing music which correspond to the manner of writing our language. That is, we write differently from the way we play.”¹¹ This statement on the flexible performance of *notes inégales* applies to the rhythmic flexibility of ornaments as well.

Figure 2: François Couperin, explanation of the trill, *L'art de toucher le clavecin* (1717), 24.



Couperin thus conveyed a sense of flexibility and subjectivity in the execution of his ornaments, allowing for variation in the number of decorative notes played and, perhaps more importantly, in the rhythmic-expressive qualities involved. This level of flexibility is hardly captured in Bach’s ornament table, yet its presence in the Bach family tradition is apparent from the enormous section on ornamentation in Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach’s *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* (*Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard*

9. Couperin, *L'art de toucher le clavecin*, 24.

10. On rhythmic flexibility in the French baroque, see Susan McClary, “Temporality and Ideology: Qualities of Motion in Seventeenth-Century French Music,” in *Structures of Feeling in Seventeenth-Century Cultural Expression*, ed. Susan McClary (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013) and Rebecca Cypess, “‘It Would Be Without Error’: Automated Technology and the Pursuit of Correct Performance in the French Enlightenment,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 142 (spring, 2017): 1–29. General principles of baroque performance practice are discussed in Cyr, *Performing Baroque Music*; an excellent overview of ornamentation in the eighteenth century and beyond is in Sandra P. Rosenblum, *Performance Practices in Classic Piano Music: Their Principles and Applications* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 216–292.

11. Rosenblum, *Performance Practices*, 39–40.

Instruments, 1753–67). The complexity and depth of Philipp Emanuel’s discussion demonstrates the impossibility of any facile answers to the question of how to ornament.

In considering these sources in the classroom, some understanding of the principles of eighteenth-century European performance practice are helpful. C. P. E. Bach’s famous statements that “good performance” is “the ability...to make the ear conscious of the true content and affect of a composition” and that “a musician cannot move others unless he, too, is moved” apply readily to ornamentation along with all other aspects of performance.¹² Throughout his discussion of ornaments are descriptions of the affect—the emotional content—of each. Ornaments, he explains, “are indispensable. Consider their many uses: they make music pleasing and awaken our close attention. Expression is heightened by them; let a piece be sad, joyful, or otherwise, and they will lend a fitting assistance.”¹³ He provides for long and short trills, mordents, turns, appoggiaturas, combining them in creative ways and demonstrating such combinations for his readers. Reading C. P. E. Bach’s discussion, one gains the sense that ornamentation was endlessly flexible. The treatise seems conceived not to *limit* the reader’s options, but to *expand* them by accommodating each player’s instinct. By reading and discussing these excerpts and drawing out this sense of flexibility and individuality in performance, students can approach the more specific topic of ornamentation with a new sense of the possibilities that it offers. In accommodating multiple viewpoints, the primary sources prompt the use of “historical thinking.” The sources themselves avoid easy answers, instead promoting self-reflection and questioning on the part of the reader.

In order to gain access to and practice with this expanded toolbox, students in the performance-practice classroom can be assigned a variety of analytic and creative assignments. A class discussion might revolve around a movement for which J. S. Bach left written-out ornaments that vary his own simple original. One example of such a work is the Sarabande from the English Suite in G Minor, which contains a fully-notated, binary Sarabande with repeat signs, followed by a set of “agrémens de la même sarabande” (ornaments for the same Sarabande). These elaborate ornaments—indeed, students might find them *surprisingly* elaborate—attest to Bach’s own ornamental practice. Discussion of this movement might be followed by consideration of a simpler slow movement like the Sarabande from Bach’s French Suite in G Major, BWV 816, which contains written-out ornaments in the French style but also demands that players supply their own variations, elaborations, or an alternate set of ornaments for each repeated section. Students can learn to read and interpret Bach’s notated

12. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, trans. William J. Mitchell (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), 148 and 152.

13. Bach, *Essay on the True Art*, 79.

embellishments, considering how the notation captures numerous possibilities for each embellished note. The movement can then be reduced to a simpler melodic/harmonic form, and students can be asked to write new ornaments on that plain version of the movement.

A similar project can be undertaken with the opening Aria of the *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988; the notated ornaments there are more complex, but students should still come to understand that they are capable of interpreting them, varying them, and deviating from the way other performers have rendered them. Homework assignments using other Sarabandes or slow movements of sonatas might follow, encouraging students to continue to develop their own approach to French-style ornamentation. Use of notated ornaments in the Italian style or notated ornaments that seek to combine the French and the Italian styles—for example, George Frideric Handel’s ornaments for three arias from his opera *Ottone*, or Georg Philipp Telemann’s *Sonate metodiche*—can help to enhance students’ facility with a variety of repertoires, empowering them to make performance decisions that are both historically grounded and entirely new and creative.¹⁴ Presentation of these examples by the teacher to a classroom of students—and of ornamentation projects prepared by students and shared with their colleagues and teacher in response—will likewise encourage an exchange of students’ perspectives and modes of expression.

Bach’s ornament table was itself a pedagogical tool, intended for his young son. Years later, C. P. E. Bach’s treatise was likewise intended as a tool for teaching the budding amateurs of eighteenth-century Germany, and in many respects it codified the method of instruction that his father had used. The pedagogical nature of these texts can be pressed into service today as well. Yet it was this very pedagogical approach that led Johann Adolf Scheibe, in 1737, to complain that Bach placed too many demands on singers and instrumentalists: “Every ornament, every little grace, and *everything that one thinks of as belonging to the method of playing*, he expresses completely in notes.”¹⁵ According to Scheibe, decisions about ornamentation should be left to the performer’s discretion. In defense of Bach, Abraham Birnbaum argued that the Capellmeister was merely instructing performers who lacked the training and judgment to ornament on their own: “If all such [performers] were sufficiently instructed in that which is truly beautiful in the manner; if they always knew how to employ it where it might serve as a true ornament and particular emphasis of the main melody;

14. See George Frideric Handel, *Three Ornamented Arias from Ottone, 1723*, ed. Winton Dean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) and Georg Philipp Telemann, *Sonate metodiche à violino solo ò flauto traverso* (1728; facsimile ed., Florence: Studio per Edizioni Scelte, 1993).

15. [Johann Adolph Scheibe], “Letter from an Able *Musikant* Abroad,” translated in *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, ed. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, rev. and enlarged by Christoph Wolff (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 338. Emphasis added.

in that case it would be superfluous for the composer to write down in notes once more what they already knew.”¹⁶ As this discussion has shown, Birnbaum might also have added that the *realization* of these ornaments—no matter how specific they appear and how plentiful they are—is no straightforward task. Understanding of eighteenth-century styles requires an embrace of the flexibility and individual taste that is mandated by the primary sources.

Birnbaum’s statement suggests that broad and methodical teaching and learning were central to the art of ornamentation in the eighteenth century, and so must they be today. Exercises with primary sources that are concerned with performance upend the common assumption that there is a single “correct” manner of playing early music. The music history classroom presents an opportunity to engage students’ creative minds, instilling in them an appreciation for a musical language that might otherwise seem foreign and empowering them in the joyful process of discovery. Critical encounters with primary sources on performance of *any* type of music will demonstrate the impossibility of easy, straightforward, or clear answers. The handful of sources mentioned here underscores flexibility and subjectivity, rather than adherence to rigid rules. Far from limiting students’ options for performance, these sources can help to build a toolbox of creative, expressive gestures not otherwise available. The same may be said for the practicing of more florid types of ornamentation, variation techniques, and improvisatory practices in general. Development of habits of “historical thinking” in these classroom settings can lead to the cultivation of distinct, individual approaches to music-making for the present day.

16. Johann Abraham Birnbaum, “Impartial Comments on a Questionable Passage in the Sixth Number of *Der Critische Musicus*,” trans. in *The New Bach Reader*, 346–347.