

RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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TITLE

Historically informed performance practice and 17th century Venetian operas – How might the operas of Francesco Cavalli be performed today?

STATE OF THE ART

Historically informed performance practice as we know it today, although it has its roots dating to the end of 19th century, started taking shape in the 1950s as a way of performing music in a certain manner. The music in question was written before roughly 1800. The interest of musicologists towards (at the time) a new way of performing „old“ music has started during the 1980s with big debates over the term *authenticity*. Even though some scholars (e. g. Richard Taruskin) predicted the downfall of performing music in that manner, that has not happened. On the contrary, it seems unimaginable nowadays to see an opera written by Monteverdi or Cavalli performed without using so-called period instruments.

Research on historically informed performance practice has been done by a number of scholars, such as Bernard D. Sherman (Sherman 1997) or John Butt (Butt 2002). However, there has not been so much research done into specific ways of performing 17th century opera in the present time that also brings a comparative analysis of the ways of performing it into focus.

Performance studies in recent years have developed into a discipline within musicology interested in dealing with many different aspects of what performance can bring to a musical work. The most notable contributions to such subjects are those by John Rink and Nicholas Cook. However, dealing with 17th century opera and the ways of performing it nowadays has not received as much interest from the scientific community.

PROJECT RATIONALE

Contemporary historically informed performance practice claims (in theory) its base in written sources, such as treatises and essays, written by composers, performers or contemporaries. These give us an insight into how a certain composition was performed at a certain time, or so many early music pioneers have claimed from the beginning of the 20th century. Since they had no other choice, their insight into performance practice came from those sources. But today, generations of musicians are not only learning from written sources but also from their teachers. Hence, they are acquiring their expertise from another expert as well as from an ancient source.

This has resulted in a much different approach in performing (especially) baroque and classical music during the last fifty years even within the same approach (a

historically informed one). How and why did the performances of 17th century operas change since Harnoncourt's performances of Monteverdi's operas in the 1970s? Have the approach and interest of the audience for Cavalli's operas changed since René Jacobs' recording of *Xerxes*, created in 1985? How closely were pioneers to written sources they were claiming to use? In what way has their approach to the written sources changed? Are the new generations of early music performers working with the written scores at all or are they simply following learned patterns of their mentors?

Those are just some of the questions that have arisen during my research on the subject, both as a musicologist and a harpsichord player with a keen interest in historically informed performance of baroque opera. Answering them would not only bring insight into current tendencies but also contribute to performance studies as a specific scientific approach to performance. This would allow me to continue with a research topic I already started while doing my master studies.

For my Master's thesis I have written a comparative analysis of four historically informed recordings of Mozart's *La finta giardiniera*. Continuing with that focus, in a recent paper presented at the 18th International Biennial Conference on Baroque Music, I have chosen a similar approach in analyzing recordings of Handel's *Agrippina* and *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*. Experiences with analyzing works by two canonical composers in such a manner have resulted in conclusions that prove how the approach changed between different performers (or, in the case of some of them, has not changed at all).

This research would be conducted on works primarily written by Francesco Cavalli, since he is nowadays the most performed opera composer of Venetian 17th century operas.¹ The inspiration comes from watching rehearsals and performances of Cavalli's *Il Giasone* in the Grand Théâtre de Genève, conducted by Leonardo García Alarcón.² Both musically and scenically that production was very interesting because it did not only use Cavalli's score but also included newly-composed instrumental *ritornelli* by the conductor to serve different purposes in the *mise-en-scène*. As Ellen Rosand has shown in her study of opera in 17th century *La Serenissima*, opera was created thanks to many different factors and conventions. How well known are these factors and conventions to performers nowadays? Are they trying to recreate musically the performance as it was exactly in Cavalli's time, or are they simply modernizing the score to suit a contemporary, 21st century, audience? In other words, how are performers doing HIP today? Through Cavalli's works I would like to research in what way, given all the evidence and practice available today, are the performers bringing a 17th century opera to a 21st century audience.

The operas selected for this particular research would be *Il Giasone* (recording from the Grand Théâtre de Genève, conducted by Leonardo García Alarcón) and *Ercole*

¹ There are also occasional performances of works by Pietro Antonio Cesti, however, those are connected with the festival *Innsbrucker Festwochen der Alten Musik* in the Austrian town of Innsbruck where he worked as a composer. Also, there is an approaching performance of Antonio Saccati's *La finta pazza* in Opéra de Dijon. Performances of other Venetian 17th century composers seem rather sporadic when compared to Cavalli.

² The performance will soon be published on a DVD by Alpha Classics (Outhere Music) which will make it easier to research as a fixed, unchangeable performance.

amante (a live performance expected to be performed in Opéra Comique in Paris, conducted by Raphaël Pichon). Although the latter opera represents quite a different operatic output in Cavalli's oeuvre, since it was conceived as an opera written for the wedding of Louis XIV and the Infanta of Spain (i. e. for a Parisian audience), it is not devoid of elements typical for Cavalli's style.

Both performances are part of an operatic season, made for an audience who pay a subscription for all kinds of operas during one season (thus being exposed to a variety of musical styles during a season). It remains an open question if this influences the way they are presented.

A final set of questions dealt within this research would be those linked to problems faced by contemporary performers when dealing with performing Cavalli's works today. Even though a new edition of Cavalli's operas is in the process of being published by Bärenreiter (edited by renowned experts on Cavalli's works), that does not necessarily solve other problems in performance, for example the choice of instruments (especially popular is the use of percussion in 17th century opera performances). Hence, it is interesting to find out what choices are the performers presented with when they choose an edition.

The entire research would lead to giving a definitive answer to my research question – presented in the title – how might the operas of Francesco Cavalli be performed today?

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As a research project which is connected with music, an art form that is developing its results in time, it seems crucial to attend different live performances of operas on stage and in concert. Musical work as a performance (unlike the correlation in traditional musicology, which equates a musical work only with the score) is also connected with research into the rehearsing process as well as working on the score (both the edition and the work-in-progress of finding solutions for certain situations *in situ* during rehearsals).

Research concerning the live performance of Cavalli's *Ercole Amante* in the Opéra Comique would be conducted using various methodologies: analysis of the manuscript and/or the edition used for the performance (if it is not the critical edition published by Bärenreiter), observation of rehearsals (if possible) and performances, interviews with the conductor (and other performers), and a comparison with previously made recordings of that opera (e. g. recording of a 2009 production from Amsterdam, conducted by Ivor Bolton).

Analysis of performance would be conducted using various parameters: analysis of tempo, dynamics, choice of the singers and instruments, correlation between mise-en-scène and the music (e. g. was it necessary to compose new *ritornelli* or perhaps bring pieces from other operas for purposes of the staging), and finally the conductor's approach to prosody in *recitativo* parts. All those parameters would be compared to situations in the manuscript score, contemporary treatises and

theoretical works (Giuseffo Zarlino's *Le istituzioni harmoniche*, 1558 or Agostino Agazzari's *Del sonare sopra il basso*, 1607 etc.) as well as to previous recordings of the same operas (in case of *Il Giasone*, to René Jacobs' recording from 1988, or the recording made in Pinchgut Opera in 2013, conducted by Erin Helyard) to achieve results that would give an explanation of how the approach towards 17th century (Cavalli's) operas has changed (if it has at all) within historically informed performance practice since its beginnings until now.

In my previous research of Händel and Mozart operas I have come to the conclusion that a significant part of HIP recordings is influenced by the personal style of a conductor, for example the approach of Harnoncourt to Mozart's *La finta giardiniera* has not changed at all from 1991 to 2006, even when he performed it with a different orchestra. However, in the case of proposed performances, the analysis would focus on parameters that would show how diverse is the approach to these operas today and is it possible to establish a sense of change in style of performing operas from the HIP revival in the 1980s until today.

WORKING PROGRAM

Total: 36 months

6 months

Producing an introductory survey of historically informed Cavalli productions from 1980s until 2019. which would bring more detailed description of the productions and their context within HIP performances as well as their context within the operatic scene in which they are presented (opera seasons, festivals etc.).

6 months

Research on the manuscripts of *Ercole amante* and *Il Giasone*, i. e. surviving materials from the time of their first performances. The materials would be reviewed *in situ* (archives where they are kept). A comparison of those materials would be made with existing printed editions that are available for use to performers, or with materials chosen for upcoming scheduled performances.

6 months

Analysis of textual sources written prior to the operas that are analysed or the ones written roughly around the same time (e. g. Gioseffo Zarlino's *Le istituzioni harmoniche*, Agostino Agazzari's *Del sonare sopra il basso*, Cristoforo Ivanovich's *Memorie teatrali* from *Minerva al tavolino*). Comparison of information from textual sources to selected performing editions, and interview with performers (conductors and possibly other performers) about their choice of editions and direction in which they plan to take the performance regardin the casting, choice of instruments. In the case of previously recorded versions of the opera, interview would be conducted as well, also reviews and interviews given to media (newspaper, radio etc.) would be taken into account.

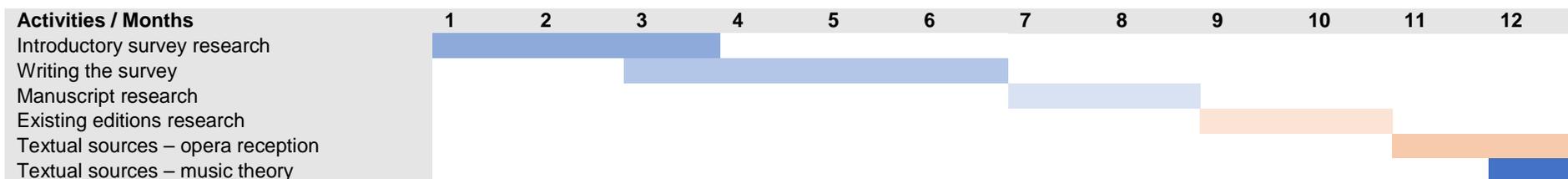
6 months

Keeping track of rehearsals and attending performance of Francesco Cavalli's *Ercole amante*. Afterwards, analyzing the collected data both from interviews and working scores, and comparing them to previous results of analysis of textual sources, interviews, and the original manuscript scores.

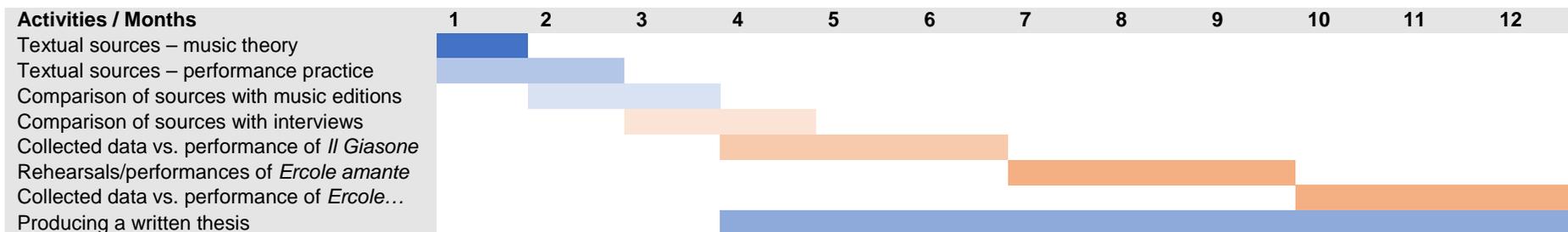
12 months

Processing collected materials and producing a written dissertation.

Year 1



Year 2



Year 3



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ABSTRACT

Historically informed performance (HIP) has been around for enough time to become a part of the *mainstream* when it comes to performing 17th century operas. And those operas, especially written by Francesco Cavalli, have become more and more staged not only in festivals, but in big opera houses as well. Although significant amount of research has been done in the philological aspect of Cavalli's works (even the critical edition publication is on the way), there are not many papers dealing with *how* those works are performed today. Contemporary HIP claims (in theory) its base in written sources, which give us an insight into how certain composition might have been performed at a certain time, or so many early music pioneers have claimed from the beginning of the 20th century. But is that really the case with performances of Cavalli's operas today? Through analysis of two different performances of his operas (*Il Giasone* performed in Geneva in 2016 and *Ercole Amante* in Paris in 2019) would be conducted using various parameters, some of them being analysis of tempo, dynamics, choice of the singers and instruments, conductor's approach to prosody in *recitativo* parts etc. Those aspects would be compared not only to the critical edition of the score, and different contemporary sources (e.g. treatises on playing *basso continuo*), but also with what is written in manuscript scores of mentioned operas. Since many conductors approach Cavalli's operas in different ways—some of them perform exactly what is written, while others deviate from the score composing, for example, their own *ritornelli*, the research of this thesis would concentrate on finding out if there are certain trends that prevail today. Also, are those trends connected with what a 21st century audience might expect or with a quest to be as close as possible to the original score and assumptions based on the written sources by the pioneers of the HIP movement. The entire research aims to give a definitive answer to the research question—presented in the title—how might the operas of Francesco Cavalli be performed today?