

## Returning romantic excess to the baroque

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'Corelli would have been appalled if he'd heard people playing his sonatas with his ornaments,' Richard Egarr says. 'He would have just thought, "Make your own bloody ornaments up, lazy git!"' Picture: Dan Himbrechts. Source: The Australian

**MUSICAL performance is just as subject to fashion as clothing and hairstyles, which is why strong opinions on it are as dating as chignons and twin-sets for women and flares and moustaches on men. In the past 40 years, as baroque music has been rediscovered, indeed has become big business, those opinions have fluctuated wildly as hemlines used to.**

"I can't stand purists," says Richard Egarr. "I just don't think it's necessary; it's just not healthy to be that sure about everything."

Egarr, who is director of the Academy of Ancient Music in London, is about to embark on a national tour with the Australian Chamber Orchestra. On the menu is a tempting array of baroque and early classical fare: Corelli, Castello, Biber, Scarlatti, Mozart and Handel. He will conduct and play the harpsichord and fortepiano.

Egarr has been in the business since he was 13 and a schoolboy at York Minster school choir, singing nine services a week with no music repeated in the course of a year.

He went on to study music at Cambridge University, where he befriended baroque violinist Andrew Manze and with him formed a quartet. After they graduated they studied for a year in Amsterdam with the renowned Gustav Leonhardt, who died this year.

The purists he refers to are the metronome-driven musicians who have cleared out the romantic excess from early music, leaving it pristine, almost scientific, in its precision. Gone are the rubato and the vibrato, voices as well as instruments are flat and pure, and, depending on your age and the CDs you love or were brought up with, you might think this is the real deal. Wrong, says Egarr, who has, ahem, his own quite firmly held opinions.

The further back you go past high modernism, he says, when puritanical bourgeois coolness was at its apogee thanks to interpreters such as Stravinsky and Schoenberg, the more emotional people were. The British royals' "don't complain, don't explain" policy may be the model of modern dispassion. Before that people wept, shrieked, thundered and laughed out loud. And their music, and music-making, reflected it.

Indeed, it is difficult to equate the coolness of recent baroque music practice with the almost hysterical emotions and those mad flights of angels we see in baroque painting.

Egarr pounces on that thought and refers to Charles Le Brun, the 17th-century French painter and theorist who formalised the portrayal of emotion in art with a treatise on the topic, richly illustrated with exhaustive drawings of people expressing the whole gamut of human emotions.

"To us, they look like caricatures and it's interesting that when they were republished in the 19th century, they were basically air-brushed to make them less offensive," Egarr says.

Most interesting for him is how that transition works in music, in the move from emotional expression to iron discipline.

"This idea that we come from a clean place in the baroque, we get excessive in the 19th century and then we get clean again -- I think it's absolutely backwards," he says. "We've become the cleanest, and the further you go back the dirtier it becomes."

This isn't just a matter of interpretation in the moment of performance. It is an essential misunderstanding of the very texts purists are so slavishly following, despite all written and recorded evidence to the contrary.

He uses the example of Mozart, whose Piano Concerto No 12 he will be playing on the tour.

"When Mozart says 'your left hand plays in time and your right hand should do rubato', it doesn't mean what we mean by playing in time," he explains.

"Today, if you say play in time, you're expected to play to a click track, but that's not what they meant by playing in time before the 20th century.

"It meant there is a sort of regular pulse, but the pulse will change. Your pulse is not metronomic. Depending on whether you're excited or you're at rest, your pulse is constantly changing, but there is a sort of regular beat to it that is not chaotic."

The big change came, he says, when we started thinking of music vertically -- lining up notes down the page of a score with precision engineering -- instead of horizontally. He refers to a famous recording of Alfred Cortot and Jacques Thibaud playing Debussy, made in the 1920s, in which they clearly don't keep time with each other.

You'd think this kind of thing would sound almost discordant now. "Yes, it does to our ear, if you can't hear it this way," he says, making a horizontal sweep with his hand, "because we've been brought up on the idea that things should be together."

If that sounds challenging, there's more. When Egarr took over the Academy of Ancient Music, an esteemed period instrument ensemble, it had been in existence for almost 30 years under its founder Christopher Hogwood. Hogwood had painstakingly stripped its playing of all romantic-era excess and ponderousness. "I'm not bringing the heaviness back but I'm bringing back the romantic excess," Egarr says, with mark-my-words emphasis.

The other thing he is bringing back is subjectivity and spontaneity. "The idea of subjectivity in performance was a slightly dirty thing, but it's absolutely essential for this music that there is a subjective view of it," he says.

"Bach or Handel or Corelli would not have expected another performer to play his music how they played it. Once they'd written a piece, there was a huge amount of subjectivity involved in performance. Your own ornamentation, your own take on how the music is performed would have been a given.

"Corelli would have been appalled if he'd heard people playing his sonatas with his ornaments. I'm sure he would have just thought, 'What the hell are you doing? Make your own bloody ornaments up, lazy git!' That was part of your skill as a performer, to add your own dimension to the music, and that's true right through the 19th century up to the 20th century." When he plays the Mozart concert with the ACO, he will improvise a little -- "I'll just noodle about," as he puts it -- before the start and maybe between two of the movements. It all depends how he feels at the time.

Indeed, he points out pianists used to go with their own inner flow right into the early 20th century. They would improvise a little between movements or link pieces without waiting for applause.

Which brings us to another stick subject for purists: applause. Sticklers for silence between movements simply don't know their music history, according to Egarr. People used to clap between movements, indeed whenever they felt like it.

Egarr thinks audiences should be free to do that now, something that would feel more natural if the improvisatory aspect of performance returned and was appreciated. He recalls a spontaneous applause that broke

out after he inserted a cadenza into Bach's fifth Brandenburg concerto. It was in Leipzig, the spiritual home of the German music tradition, of all places.

"That felt really good, the way people applaud after a jazz solo," he recalls. "It was exactly the same feeling." Mind you, the burghers of Leipzig, who have some ownership of music given their city's place in German music history, were not unanimous in this wild act. The loud behaviour made the newspapers. But it is not all about the audience.

"It depends on the performers, too," Egarr remarks. "If you have performers who are po-faced and don't look as if they're having a good time, you're not encouraged to applaud. But if they're giving off that free energy, then people should feel free to react as they see fit. Even if it's to throw things."

Richard Egarr's tour with the Australian Chamber Orchestra starts in Canberra on Saturday and runs until October 18.