

Historical Imaginaries: Composing the Past

Historical theorists argue that pure objectivity is impossible; that historians actually invent the past. Art theorists conversely argue that pure originality is impossible; that artists can never escape the historical. For musicians, this means that every historical performance will bear some trace of the present and every new composition will bear some trace of the past. But where does that leave us? It seems to rob historically-informed performers of their historical qualification and composers of their artistic qualification. It places both historians and artists in some kind of grey area between fact and fiction.

Some consolation can be found in Paul Ricoeur's observation that we can only actually experience the present, while both the past and future exist exclusively in the imagination. This means that historians and artists are both engaged in fundamentally creative acts, and that historians will never be able to accurately reconstruct the past but may still be able to conjure knowledge about it. It also means that historians have no more reason to research historical realities than historical imaginaries; what Ann Laura Stoler calls "failed projects, delusional imaginings, equivocal explanations". Suddenly creativity and imagination become crucial to historical work.

This raises a question for historically-oriented musicians. Can a marriage of compositional invention to historical research provide new possibilities for knowledge production about historical music, especially that for which there is little to no extant notational evidence? Or, more simply put, can contemporary composition produce historical knowledge?

Using an example from my own practice – a concert-biography of the 17th-century English musician Thomas Mace – I will demonstrate how composition might be employed to bolster the imaginative capacity of historical work, thus enhancing its ability to create sounding knowledge about music that was described but never realised in either notation or performance.



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I am a composer, conductor, and concert producer; Artistic Director of the Early+New Music ensemble Stile Nu, Artistic Director of the Past Futures Festival at the Oosterkerk Amsterdam, Production Coordinator for the Chicago-based International Music Foundation, and PhD candidate on the docARTES trajectory at Leiden University and the Orpheus Institute.

As composition, curation, and historiography, my work explores the concept of music as rhetorical oration through the lenses of impossible originality, unattainable authenticity and the creativity of performance. I have worked with ensembles including Stile Nu, the Nieuw Ensemble, wild Up, Ensemble Linea and Ugly Pug, and have participated in festivals including the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra's National Composers Intensive, Make Music Chicago and the Tampering Festival.

I live in Poplar, East London.