

## Early Music, Notation and Performance: an interview with Clive Brown

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INTERVIEW

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**Abstract:** In this interview granted to Marcus Held, Clive Brown discourses about his career dedicated to the historical investigations related to the 18th and 19th centuries music, with emphasis on past performance practices. Brown, who witnessed the consolidation of the *Early Music* in England, recalls the processes of (re)discovery not only of the past repertoire, but also of the musical thought. With particular interest in musical notation and its intellectual processes, the researcher points that the approach to the score has definitely changed throughout the centuries and, from that, many challenges are posed for the activity of contemporary musical editing.

**Keywords:** Clive Brown; Early Music; Musical Notation; Critical Editing; Performance Practice.

### MÚSICA ANTIGA, NOTAÇÃO E PERFORMANCE: ENTREVISTA COM CLIVE BROWN

**Resumo:** Nesta entrevista concedida a Marcus Held, Clive Brown discorre sobre sua carreira dedicada às investigações históricas relacionadas à música dos séculos XVIII e XIX, com ênfase nas práticas interpretativas do passado. Brown, que testemunhou a consolidação do campo da *Música Antiga* na Inglaterra, relembra os processos de (re)descoberta não apenas do repertório, mas também do pensamento musical progressivo. Com particular interesse na notação musical e seus processos de intelecção, o pesquisador aponta que a abordagem da partitura mudou definitivamente ao longo dos séculos e, com isso, estão postos diversos desafios para a atividade da edição musical contemporânea.

**Palavras-chave:** Clive Brown; Música Antiga; Notação Musical; Edição Crítica; Práticas Interpretativas.



# Early Music, Notation and Performance: an interview with Clive Brown

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## 1. Introduction

Clive Brown is a violinist and researcher specialized on historical perspectives on the Classical and Romantic eras music repertoire and performance practices. Brown obtained his PhD in 1980 at the University of Oxford, where he was a lecturer from then until 1991. Then, was Professor of Applied Musicology at the University of Leeds, where he is now *Emeritus*. He currently teaches at the Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst, in Vienna. A practice-led researcher, Brown has published many articles in the field of early music performance, notation and critical editing. He has also worked on many performing-practice editions. For Bärenreiter, he edited Johannes Brahms' Violin Concerto and his complete sonatas for one instrument and piano, Felix Mendelssohn's violin concerto and Ludwig van Beethoven's violin sonatas. For Breitkopf und Härtel, Brown edited the latter's Violin Concerto, Choral Fantasia and his 1st, 2nd and 5th symphonies. Early Music has constituted a great part of Clive Brown's career. In this interview granted to Marcus Held, Brown gently talks about his thoughts and ideas on the field, both from the perspective of the instrumentalist and the musicologist.



Fig. 1. Clive Brown<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://www.mdw.ac.at/ijh/?PagelId=4174>, access: April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

**Marcus Held:** Since the generations of Arnold Dolmetsch and Wanda Landowska, we have seen many stages and approaches to the field known as *Early Music*. How would you define *Early Music* today?

**Clive Brown:** Oh, goodness! Well, *Early Music* now comes to mean pretty well everything, into the early 20th century, from Mahler, Elgar, Strauss – back as far as we can go. We haven't gone further into the 20th century yet, but perhaps that is still to come.

Researching the later periods poses very interesting questions, because we have recordings of some of these people, including some of the great musicians born well before 1850. And the remarkable thing is that almost nobody really wants to play the music like it comes out of the recordings! The recordings tell us an awful lot about what the past was like, and how very different it was from the presents. We really do not know what 18th century music sounded like. We never can know what it sounded like. We can only guess, and we probably wouldn't get very close to how it really sounded.

So this, poses for me, a lot of very important questions about what we are trying to do here. I don't like the idea that we are trying to recreate the past, because the past is gone. It is irretrievably lost. What I *do* like is the idea that we can discover different ways of looking at musical performance, different meanings behind the notation. For me, that is one of the key central points: the meaning of notation. We read notation as we were taught to read it when we were children. We have grown up in an environment where people play the music in a particular way, and that is deep inside our heads.

When we look at a piece of music on paper, we have certain expectations about what the notation is telling us; this is hard-wired in our brains through years of training and experience. A lot of the research I do is about trying to understand how the training and experience of people in the past determined what the notation meant for them. So, when Beethoven was writing his music, what did he think he was conveying by the notes he put on the page? He certainly wasn't trying to tell people the same things that we would try to tell today by putting the same notes on the page. A great deal is said today about the importance of "the composer's intentions", but that is generally taken to mean staying as close to the literal meaning of the notation as possible. Well, in my view, a composer like Beethoven had very clear intentions for the way he wrote down his music, but his only intention for the performance was that it should be beautiful. And he, as well as all his most gifted contemporaries, knew that there were many ways to do this, which required something quite different from what the notation seems literally to mean.

If we can discover some of the things that lay behind the notes, then we can begin to use historical techniques and practices to make our own performances more interesting, more creative. We can do this without being unfaithful to the composer's intentions, because these practices were expected from a cultivated musician. Conventions for good, professional performance are constantly evolving, but they often result in a style of performance that would have been considered utterly inappropriate in the past. Of course, musical composition and performance always have to develop, to become different from what went before. We can't live with a *status quo*, everything always being the same. It is not interesting! But changes of style, changes of attitude are not necessarily the same as progress. Sometimes we throw out the baby with the bath water!

**Marcus Held:** I have listened several times to Joachim's recordings, Leopold Auer's, Saint-Säens', Barbirolli conducting Tchaikovsky etc. It is fascinating how we do not try to imitate them!

**Clive Brown:** Yes! It is really fascinating! And it is very difficult to get musicians to do that. We don't feel secure when we are taken out of our comfort zone. For example – since we are both violinists – it is often taught that most bowstrokes are initiated with movement from the shoulder, right? I regularly hear this from modern violinists when they are teaching: "You must make the movement straight from the shoulder". You first find people writing about this in the late 19th century and the early 20th century. Violinists before that were teaching absolutely the opposite: "You never move the shoulder, unless you absolutely have to". The upper-arm is completely passive. It doesn't do anything except follow. Everything comes from the elbow and from the wrist. Now, if you try to adopt that technique, you realise that there are certain kinds of modern bow strokes you simply can't do. For me, exploring what you can achieve with this standard 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century technique has been a really fascinating journey!

**Marcus Held:** Is *Early Music* still a movement?

**Clive Brown:** Oh...Well, it depends on what you mean, really. The *Early Music* movement started in the 1960's, at least to my perception. Of course, I lived through that. When I started to play the violin in the 1950s, the *Early Music* movement that we know didn't exist. I don't think I became aware of any such thing until the 1970s. Like I said before, change is needed to keep things alive. The early music movement owed a great deal of its success to its novelty. Passionate young musicians were trying to do something exciting, something new. In fact, the revival of old instruments goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it seems never to have been more than. It didn't really rouse much interest. Arnold Dolmetsch's efforts were seen as quaint rather than of serious interest. Then in the 1960s, when so many social conventions were being challenged, the young period instrument performers became really successful, because they made baroque music sound totally different from the way it had been played, in the previous generation – more lively, more exotic.

But it became a commercial product in the end. Recording is very commercial. You have to produce a product that people want to hear. I used an analogy when I wrote a review of Beethoven symphony recordings back in the 80's, made by The Hanover Band, the Academy of Ancient Music, and the London Classical Players. It reminded me of going to the supermarket where you see fruit beautifully packaged, and it looks wonderful! Then you take it home and try to eat it, only to find that it's not ripe– I felt already that "there is infinitely more to historically sensitive performance than merely employing the right equipment, and that the public is in danger of being offered attractively packaged, but unripe fruit" – [*Early Music* 19 (1991), 248]. It seemed to me that was really what was happening with this *Early Music* movement. They were doing all these unfamiliar, exciting things, but actually it wasn't based on very much knowledge. The style was a slightly modified version of modern performance, and really had little connection with how people in the 18th and 17th centuries might actually have understood the relationship between notation and performance. But it worked! People wanted it, and it became a commercial product.

**Marcus Held:** It is paradoxical. I feel that when I teach. There are certain things my students ask me "how to do this? How should I do that?", and sometimes I have to just say something like "I don't really know".

**Clive Brown:** Yes! We can be honest about those things. But when it comes to giving a concert in a public hall or making a recording, you have then to make decisions about "How am I going to do it?" And usually those decisions are not, in the end, based mainly on what we think might be an appropriate way of understanding that notation if it differs too much from the conventional way of playing it. They are based on "well, if I did this, the public might not like it, so I am going to do that. Because I *know* they like it that way".

**Marcus Held:** That's true, I must say...

**Clive Brown:** With my students in Vienna we always experiment with known historical practices: with *portamento*, for instance (already widely used in the second half of the 18th century!), with different kinds of bow strokes, rarely playing the notes exactly as they are written on the page, but bending the rhythms, and subtly nuancing the tempo, and these kinds of things. It is great fun, and many of them become quite enthusiastic about seeing the notation in a different light, but they do it and they say: "Ah, but I can't do that when I go for my lesson", or "If I did it in an audition, I wouldn't get the place".

It takes time. These things will change, but they take time to change. You have to have a lot of courage to make them change. I am too old to do it myself now, but all these wonderful young players, who are fantastic technicians, can start to broaden their idea of what this music might mean. I firmly believe it could make Classical music a much more compelling emotional experience for people who currently avoid it, because they find it too 'stuffy', too rigid.

**Marcus Held:** We deal with a kind of music that happened before musical institutions. How do you feel about teaching this music inside institutions, where we have schedules, programs, deadlines, exams and so on?

**Clive Brown:** In fact, I am officially retired, and moved to Austria in 2017 for family reasons. Now I teach in Vienna because I enjoy working with students and they have given me the opportunity to do it. I teach what they call an "elective" in the Music University (Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst). The elective is called 'Performing Practice in Classical and Romantic Music'. I give some lectures at the beginning and then we have workshops experimenting with chamber music repertoire. It is wonderful, for example, to experiment with these talented young musicians playing Beethoven or Brahms in completely different ways from normal modern practice, as suggested in my recent Bärenreiter editions of the Brahms and Beethoven sonatas.

I don't find it problematic to teach in an institution. I often go as a visiting professor to give masterclasses in other institutions, for example in other countries. It is all new stuff for most of the students, but they often get very excited about it! They often say, "of course, I can't do this for my teacher" [laughs], but they open their minds to other possibilities.

What I am trying to do, all the time, is to help people read notation differently. What has happened in the 20th century is that we have become more and more fixated on playing the notes on the page as they appear to be, so we play them very precisely. We don't really bend rhythms very much. For instance, we might over-dot a little in some repertoires, so not play an exact 3:1 ratio, playing the little note a bit later, but most of the time, we are still very, very strictly tied to the score, and that is not how they did in the past. Around the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, in German music theory, there was a concept of *richtiger Vortrag* – correct performance – and *schöner Vortrag* – beautiful performance. Students had to learn correct performance. That was the first thing you had to do. But, when you had learned how to perform correctly, you then had to learn how to perform beautifully, which meant that you went beyond what was written on the page to do something more than was written in the score. But they all said that you could not be taught to do this, you had to gain it through hearing great performers and emulating them. You had to have the talent for this. One musician in 1804 (A. E. Müller) who writes about this, explained that if you haven't got the necessary talent, you will never get beyond *correct* performance. Then, he writes: "you can

become a useful orchestral player, a useful choral singer, which is worthwhile, but it isn't art" – "*was allerding's zu schätzen aber nicht Kunst ist!*"

My feeling is that what we do today is essentially *richtige Vortrag* almost all the time—we have lost the courage to go beyond the notes, in the way that they expected.

**Marcus Held:** I totally agree. I have watched your lecture about *The deceptive simplicity of musical notation*. It was fascinating when you showed Ferdinand David's part of Beethoven's violin concerto, because we could see that he modified a lot of original bowings, fingerings and even ornamentation. That is to say, people were much more free than we expected in the 19th century.

**Clive Brown:** Yes. The trend, during the 19th century, was to get stricter and stricter. That leads into the 20th century, when the modernists decided that they didn't want the past anymore, so they had to do something completely new. And that was the beginning of a transformation that led us to the style of mainstream performance today, which is completely severed from the historical traditions. Some of those traditions seem to have remained in touch with 18<sup>th</sup>-century practices throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We can find parallels with many documented Classical practices in early recording made by performers such as Carl Reinecke (b. 1824), Joseph Joachim (b. 1831), Adelina Patti (b. 1843) and even some younger players like Marie Soldat (b. 1863) and Karl Klingler (b. 1879).

**Marcus Held:** How did the violin performance help you as a musicologist?

**Clive Brown:** It really was the thing that led me to become interested in performing practice, in the first place. For my Doctoral work, in Oxford, I worked on the reception history of Spohr's music. But, of course, Spohr was a violinist who wrote a treatise, and so I was aware of that and got quite interested in it. But it wasn't until I was playing quartets with my friends from the old 19th century editions, which we used in those days (we are talking about the 60's and the 70's). They had bowings and fingerings by people like Ferdinand David and Joseph Joachim, and I would be playing like a modern violinist does, mostly in the lower half of the bow. Suddenly, I would be playing near the frog, and then I would come to a long note marked up bow! [Laughs] Wrong end of the bow!

That was when, as a violinist, I got really interested in performing practice. I started looking in the old editions, trying to play them with their fingerings and the bowings, and realised that they must have had a totally different kind of technique. That was a great eye-opener for me.

**Marcus Held:** It is like learning music again, isn't it?

**Clive Brown:** Yes! It made things much more exciting. Much more interesting.

**Marcus Held:** And how did musicology help you as a violinist?

**Clive Brown:** Well, I don't know if you could say it helped me, but it has made me change my violin playing over the years. I played professionally when I was in my 20s, but after becoming a full-time academic, I was not a concert-giving violinist, except in a small way, for instance performing chamber music in concert series in universities. So, it didn't really matter to me whether my experiments made me play better or worse though of course I always tried to do my best. But I could do whatever I wanted and changed my technique and experimented. After I started teaching practice-led PhD students who were working on issues in historical performance, we often played together and experimented in applying my research and theirs.

Quite a lot of my experimentation has been very fruitful. I think I play better than I used to play, because of the things that I have learned, even though I am getting old and, as you can imagine, the muscles don't work quite so well as they used to. But I think I have a bigger range of things that I can do on the instrument now. Much more than a violinist normally uses. A big part of it is right arm techniques, a range of bow strokes different from normal modern practice, but also the things one can do with the left hand. For instance, we were all taught to put one finger down and keep the others up because you wanted to do lots of vibrato all the time. But, in the 19th century, they kept all their fingers down unless they had to lift them up. That changes the whole way that the left hand works, the way you shift and so on. Then, you didn't normally try to disguise your shifts, so you used quite different fingering patterns to ensure that you shifted, wherever possible, in places that required an expressive portamento.

It is really hard to put into words. It is the sort of thing that you can only do with your instrument in your hands. It would be nice if we could have our two instruments here now to experiment together, but we are a little bit too far apart!

**Marcus Held:** Personally, sometimes I get overwhelmed with the managing of sort of a two-sided life: as a performer and as a researcher. Any tips on that?

**Clive Brown:** Oh, yes! Good heavens! For most of my time in the university - as a professor - I was busy trying to do all the horrible administration that was required. Managing a department, managing my own teaching and so on.

It is a different world altogether now for me. Since I retired, I can choose what I want to teach and I have much, much more time to do the research I want to do, which is why I am trying to write a revised edition of my 1999 book! I have learned much more during the last quarter century! The burden of university teaching and administration, which has got worse over the years, does not create an ideal environment for research, and the things that were necessary to do the research also don't go very well with playing the violin.

**Marcus Held:** When editing such central masterpieces of Music History, like Beethoven symphonies, what is your principal aim?

**Clive Brown:** My aim is to go beyond the text. The tradition of making an *Urtext* is to create a reliable text which is either based on an autograph, or an early edition and with all the evidence for which notes are the correct notes, and which markings are the correct markings intended by the composer. And that is great, because we all need to have that kind of information. But it generally stops there, and my feeling, when I was first asked to edit things (which was by Breitkopf & Härtel, in the 1990's), was that I wanted to go a little bit beyond that and try to explain what I thought the notes were actually meant to tell the performer. I could do that in a small way in the early editions I made, writing some things in the preface. With Beethoven's Violin Concerto, I went a bit further, including an *Urtext* solo part and also a part with my own fingering and bowing, based on historical editions. I played the first performance from this edition with my university students orchestra.

I started making editions for Bärenreiter with the Brahms' Violin Concerto. Basically, I was still doing that same thing, but I also wanted to make an edition with historic fingerings and bowings for this concerto too. So, there are two violin parts: the first edition (the *Urtext*) and one with all of Joachim's extra markings from his 1905 *Violinschule*.

That gave me the idea that, when I had another opportunity, I would make my own version of the violin part, with bowing and fingering based on historical practice (if there wasn't some historical model I could use) and also to include bar-by-bar performing practice commentaries, drawing on all the evidence I could find. That's what I have done recently in a number of editions: Brahms' complete duo sonatas (2015), which I made with two of my former PhD students (pianist Neal Peres Da Costa and cellist Kate Bennett Wadsworth). Most recently I edited Beethoven's violin sonatas (in 2020), for Bärenreiter. The editions get bigger and bigger! The publishers got a little bit alarmed when I told them we would need to have at least a hundred pages for the performing practice commentaries [Laughs], on which Neal and I collaborated again. The solution was to issue the commentary online – which you can get cost free from the Bärenreiter website.

I think it is worthwhile to do that: to try to assemble the things we know about this repertoire - about how people played it, what the notation meant to them - and to make that available to people, to experiment with.

**Marcus Held:** Sometimes, it is actually a discomfort to put that musical knowledge into words. It is so much easier to grab your violin and play the way you think about it.

**Clive Brown:** Yes, absolutely! Maybe, the next stage is to have some audio or video examples. I have been talking about that with some of my colleagues, my former PhD students that I still work with... Maybe that is the next stage!

**Marcus Held:** How does musical notation help or annoy you in the process of editing?

**Clive Brown:** It doesn't annoy me; it doesn't exactly help me: it fascinates me! As you said before – you are right – there is a limit to what you can explain about music in words. But there is quite a lot you can say about the historical background, which might be helpful to people. You can give them ideas. You can't tell them what it really means, but you can tell them what it doesn't mean. Actually, I think that is probably the most important thing. You have to tell them what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean what it literally says, and that is a big step for most people.

**Marcus Held:** How *Urtext* can an *Urtext* edition really be?

**Clive Brown:** I think, from a scholarly point of view, it can be pretty *Urtext*. It depends on what your sources are. If you are editing, for instance, Mozart's last three symphonies, all we have is the autograph. You have to put that on paper as best as you can. Mozart is a good example, because there has been controversy about whether or not he meant two different kinds of *staccato* marks: dots and strokes. You look at these autographs, and you have, visually, a wide range of *staccato* marks: from great big strokes to tiny little strokes, or dots.

In fact, when you try to place them in two categories, you encounter big problems, because then you have a choice. Is this one small enough to be a dot? Is it big enough to be a stroke? From that point of view, when you have a printed *Urtext*, you can't possibly show all of those tiny differences. Therefore, you are always, when you have to choose one of two *staccato* marks, in danger of being unfaithful to your source. But it wouldn't really be very helpful, to the user, to have a print which shows exactly how big each one of the *staccato* marks was. It would also be impractical to do it. For people who are curious to know such things, the increasing availability of digital archives is a wonderful resource.



It is a very complex issue. You have to do the best you can to provide not only a clear, scholarly text, but also the kind of contextualisation that makes its potential meanings as clear as possible to the users. On that basis they can make informed artistic decisions.

**Marcus Held:** It is complex, indeed. It came to my mind now the process of transcribing this interview. I won't be able to stress the syllables of your words, your stops, breaths, exclamations. Maybe it is part of the sound's ephemerality problem.

**Clive Brown:** Yes! That is a good parallel with music making.

**Marcus Held:** Is it possible to identify oral tradition within the traditional Romantic symphonic repertoire?

**Clive Brown:** Well, we were talking about early recordings earlier. We have some absolutely fascinating information from early recordings, which is incredibly revealing and rather shocking and, sometimes, very disturbing.

I take Carl Reinecke, for example. He was born in 1824, and in his 80's he made many piano roll recordings. He was one of the great German pianists, a really important musical figure – a significant composer and writer, as well. He wrote books about Mozart playing and about Mozart concertos. In neither of those books does he ever mention arpeggiating chords when it isn't written. Never. Nowhere. If he'd died without making recordings, we might have imagined he always played his hands absolutely together! The recordings are really shocking, because he almost never plays his hands exactly together. He spreads nearly everything, one way or another. Sometimes very much, sometimes merely a bit. Just occasionally he plays both of them together.

Without those recordings, we would have no knowledge of this aspect of his playing. The fact that he, the oldest great performer on record, played with more spreading of chords than younger pianists in early recordings is striking. In other words, it was so natural in the mid-19th century that he did not think it was worth writing about. Of course, some musicians *did* write about chord spreading, usually to criticise excess. But no-one criticised Reinecke for this, as far as I have been able to discover, and he was famous for his 'classical' performance style, which suggests that his way of doing it wasn't something you needed to debate, because everybody knew that is how you should play.

Recordings have that kind of information, which we couldn't possibly get without them. Joachim, for instance, was not concerned about playing exactly together with his pianist. If you do one of these wonderful computer tests on Joachim's recordings, you can tell that it would have been a nightmare for the modern recording engineer. He is usually either a little ahead or a little behind... You don't notice when you listen to it, because it is all so natural. But it is not what we would do today. We are absolutely required to play everything with great vertical togetherness. Recording engineers get terribly upset if you don't.

**Marcus Held:** And you would not be called to the next gig!

**Clive Brown:** [Laughs] Yes! Nowadays, I am really heartened by the interest of so many talented young musicians in all of these things. I think it is time for us to have a change, and from the work I do with young musicians, I'm convinced that they are very open to experiment and to enlarging the range of expressive gestures, which historical knowledge offers us. I think that a lot of younger musicians would like to challenge the *status quo*, but they are still rather frightened of doing it because their careers are still in the hands of

musicians who have very different ideas about what is acceptable, and also because they don't know how the public might respond to the performance of familiar repertoire in a strikingly different way. They have to please their audiences, and the critics to be successful.

But, actually, the example we started with, the *Early Music* movement of the 1960's and 1970's, can be an inspiration: there was a lot of scepticism, especially from music critics at first, and, to be fair, a lot of the early players weren't terribly reliable technically. They weren't always fully in command of their instruments, but something finally caught on, and the technical expertise increased. Maybe it became rather too rigid and stylised, because of the need for a certain kind of technical expertise. But, still, the enthusiasm of the early music performers was infectious, and people increasingly wanted to hear familiar repertoire in a different way and also to hear unfamiliar repertoire from the same period. I suspect something similar is happening now, with a much wider repertoire from Haydn and Mozart to Brahms and Mahler, including the works of many fine composers whose music we almost never hear in live concerts. The revival of known historical practices can let us hear the classical and romantic repertoire with fresh ears, and perhaps recapture some of the impact it made on its original listeners.

I really look forward, if I live long enough, to seeing this come to fruition!

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