

Milsom Past and Present

Having hit the age of 40 in 2014, I decided to have my own version of a mid-life crisis. It seemed like the right and proper thing to do. The circumstances were conducive as well – an enforced period of self-reflection due to ill health, followed by six months of research leave, provided time and space for a reappraisal of my own artistic directions.

Phase 1: Discovering the Past

My upbringing as a violinist is perhaps best described as a traditional chamber-music education – temperamentally disinclined towards virtuosity for its own sake. As a postgraduate student in the 1990s I indulged my burgeoning interest in historical performance. This was not an 'Early Music' interest though, where HIP is an inevitable part of activity, but rather a fascination with the philosophical questions posed by exposure to and study of performance trends of the past. At this time the writings of Richard Taruskin, Peter Kivy et al were still fairly recent news for the majority – this was an interesting time to develop one's education.

Then followed a path that seemed to set me on a particular research and performance trajectory – interest in late nineteenth-century performing practices and early recordings. This resulted in my PhD and first major publication – *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth Century Violin Performance 1850-1900* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2003). Although this is currently out of print, it remains the work by which I am best known. After some years of academic struggle as a busy violin teacher, I won an [AHRC](#) Research Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts. This gave me three years of unfettered research time, which was spent researching and recording – in experimentally reconstructive ways – a number of late nineteenth-century chamber works. The project is documented on my website: <http://davidmilsom.com/projects.html>

Phase 2: Total Immersion in a Past Tradition

I recall very well a discussion with Eric Clarke (now Heather Professor at Oxford), who had been one of my mentors at Sheffield University. At an RMA event at Royal Holloway in 2007, Eric had seen me present and perform in a conscious attempt to evoke the style and practice of Joseph Joachim. Eric was taken aback by what he thought was a willing suspension of my artistic individualism; seeking to become a faithful posthumous protégé of Joseph Joachim. At the time all I knew was that it was necessary, for the duration of the [AHRC Fellowship project](#), to immerse myself fully not only in the research materials of this study, but also its philosophical underpinnings. As an artist I have to believe in the thing that I am doing, and that includes scholarship. To a degree it was a role-playing exercise,

but one that fascinated me (and still does) because late nineteenth-century string playing – still – is a real challenge to the tastes and sensibilities of the present age. The growing pains of the Historical Performance movement, and its uneasy relationship with early recordings and what they tell us, are apt proof.

Phase 3: Life after Joachim

The mid-life crisis, then, perhaps was little more than a postmodern 'coming of age' – an acquiescence to the ideals of 'new musicology' and its creative challenge to some old notions:

- music as text
- performance as fulfilment of composer 'intentions'
- positivist research in general

For a pragmatic yet stubborn performer, used to ploughing his own furrow, this was always going to happen. The worlds of esoteric scholarship and practical 'making it work' imperatives are often, perhaps inevitably, on a collision course.

The result then, might be seen as a process of distancing myself from my former identity as a positivist performing practice scholar and performer. That's not quite true, in that I remain fascinated by the research area that piqued my initial postgraduate scholarly interest. It is undeniable, though (and a number of other scholar performers whom I know seem to be saying the same thing), that I have become increasingly interested in playing over saying (contrary to the impression probably given by my habitually loquacious writings!).

Where now?

Encouragement from colleagues and a crucial stroke of good fortune in becoming acquainted with James Bacon have brought me into a 'purple patch' of music-making. We have several recording projects on the go simultaneously, simply because of a shared enthusiasm for the material and process. Somehow this seems right and natural – it is a true reflection of how many musicians are! I have not given up on the printed word though. As I write this, George Kennaway and I are incubating a text on Performance Philosophies in Classical and Romantic Performing Practice. Since the wide scale abandoning of positivist notions of 'authenticity' in performance – now some quarter of a century ago – there has been a lot of argument over some sensitive topics. This volume will aim to encourage debate and foster productive discussion; to bring forth some mature philosophical positioning that might help to crystallise various thoughts in a helpful way.