The Freiburger Barock-orchester is collaborating with conductor Pablo Heras-Casado on a project titled *Die neue Romantik* ("The New Romanticism").

Photo by Britt Schilling

Even Wagner's *Ring* cycle is being explored from a historically informed perspective

By **THOMAS MAY**

Rethinking Romanticism:

Early Music's Latest Adventures in Time Travel

Revolutions have a way of coming full circle. As the HIP movement began spreading more than half a century ago, its bracing challenge to conventional interpretations echoed the rebellious spirit of the 1960s.

The tools and methods honed by the historically informed performance approach have become considerably more sophisticated since those heady years when the movement still operated on the fringes. Recent projects by period performance practitioners are using them to reconsider the legacy of another musical revolution: namely, the shift in sensibility carried out by such early Romantic composers as Mendelssohn and Schumann—and even the aesthetic transformation embodied in Wagner's *Ring* cycle. HIP has already succeeded in revising overall expectations of how early music through the Classical era can sound. Can it achieve the same with Romanticism—the original source for many of the practices rejected by HIP as widespread distortions of what came before?

Period performance enthusiasts initially appeared on the scene as liberators from the distortions of Romantic excess that had taken root, above all in 18th-century repertoire. Listeners accustomed to having their Bach and Handel served with lush, lambent vibrato encountered the Baroque masters in a startlingly fresh light. Even the supposed stability of the standard canon of Western art music came into question as followers of HIP expanded its timeline further into the past and revived long-forgotten composers.

Hostile reactions and even denunciations along the way only underscored the phenomenal success secured by the HIP approach. Increasingly, this became accepted by the mainstream—and by the marketplace.

The movement inevitably pressed forward in time as well, reconsidering the music of the 19th century and even that of the 20th. The umbrella term "early music," with which HIP is usually associated, has thus become chronologically flexible. It no longer connotes just a portion of the repertoire but, as Nicholas Kenyon describes it, "a performance aesthetic, an approach to music in the context of its time…"

Making Romanticism New Again

In its original manifestation, HIP entailed a built-in anti-Romantic bias. This applied both to its critique of performance styles that ultimately had derived from a Romantic reception of Baroque and Classical composers and to its rejection of an overbearing interpretive subjectivity. Richard Taruskin famously debunked the quest for "authenticity" and historical verisimilitude as a "palliating smokescreen," painting HIP instead as closely allied with the Modernist project. Its "apostles of impersonalism" have always been, for Taruskin, coyly disguised Modernists intent on "recasting tradition in contemporary terms and according to contemporary taste."

So, what happens when HIP confronts composers from the Romantic era itself? For Pablo Heras-Casado, the process is essential to how he understands his role as a conductor. "I'm just making music in the most honest and deepest way I know, connecting it with my knowledge, my experience, and the information that the score gives me—and with what I know of the tradition."

A native of Granada who juggles a prominent U.S. presence along with his many international engagements, the 42-year-old Heras-Casado has been at home in HIP culture since his early days. It is evident in his passion for making the music of the early Romantics sound as if it were being introduced to the world for the first time. Referring to the works of Mendelssohn and Schumann, Heras-Casado asserts that "every single new piece was a huge statement, and it should sound *new*—this is my aim, to try to bring back the sense of risk and challenge."

In fact, his ongoing project with the Freiburger Barockorchester, which is being documented by the harmonia mundi label, is titled *Die neue Romantik* ("The New Romanticism"). The novelty, he explains, pertains both to the desire to recapture something of that original sense of what was different and to the challenge HIP poses to conventional readings today. "The 20th-century tradition of performing this repertoire as dark and heavy places it in the same box as the sound of an orchestra playing late Bruckner, Rachmaninoff, or Mahler. But this is a completely different aesthetic and moment. The inner lines and articulation, the vivacity and the nerve of the music have been lost. You need a different approach, a lighter and smaller orchestra and one that knows how to pronounce the specific vocabulary of these composers."

As has been the case throughout the growth and dissemination of HIP, an especially potent chemistry between a conductor and a particular ensemble often catalyzes some of the movement's most significant achievements. After a "blind date" with the Freiburger Barockorchester more than a decade ago, Heras-Casado and the group began working together regularly on recordings and tours—so far, along with their series of Schumann and Mendelssohn releases, they have recorded music of Schubert and Beethoven as well.

While emphasizing the novelty of the early Romantics, Heras-Casado reiterates their continuity with the past. He frequently refers to "discourse" and "vocabulary" as the elements from tradition that composers like Mendelssohn and Schumann used to bring forth their new musical ideas. "There was a tradition that the players knew in terms of phrasing and articulation from the late Baroque and early Classical eras." Rather than mark a sudden break with the past, the aesthetic shift of early Romanticism becomes all the more striking when framed within the context of this underlying continuity. "Many of the gestures and the musical language itself did not change drastically, though what they do with this is of course very different."

Photo by Felix Broede

Violinist Isabelle Faust teamed with Pablo Heras-Casado and the Freiburger Barockorchester for a recording of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto.

Unexpected Surprises from Mendelssohn

An especially revealing example can be found in the account of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto that

Heras-Casado and the Freiburgers released in 2017. The soloist, Isabelle Faust, says the collaboration forced her "to really go back to zero" and rethink everything she knew about the piece. "What was especially exciting was that this was the first time the Freiburgers were learning and playing this concerto. That's a situation you can never find anymore today with other orchestras! There is a very specific tradition we hear on the famous recordings. But I wanted to record it with a HIP approach as a complement to the many fantastic recordings that already exist."

Hard as it may be to imagine reconsidering the Mendelssohn evergreen as a tabula rasa, Faust did just that by carefully studying three contemporary sources to learn about original fingerings and other comments from three violinists who played the score under Mendelssohn himself: Ferdinand David, Hubert Léonard, and Joseph Joachim (particularly his *Violinschule*). "It's difficult to change what you've been doing for so many years and to re-embody it. I changed all my fingerings completely and tried to adopt a certain way of using the bow for *detaché* and interpreting the slurs. From those three sources, we also found a lot of portamento that is completely different from what violinists today use. It was a shock to me."

And to audiences and critics as well. Faust had earlier recorded the Schumann Violin Concerto with the Freiburgers as part of the *Neue Romantik* series, but reactions to their Mendelssohn were notably polarized—reminiscent even of the earlier days and of detractors of the HIP take on Mozart and Beethoven. "It's interesting that the public now expects the orchestra to play Baroque and Classical music in a certain way, but when it comes to the Romantic era, they still find it provocative and can be puzzled by HIP interpretation," Faust says. "It remains a bit foreign to the public in Europe at least, so there's still some opening up of minds to be done." Indeed, she points out that even for herself it took time to supplant old habits with this rediscovered playing style—"and to find it beautiful. But now I always want to play it like that!"

What about bringing her new understanding of such works to conventional orchestras? "That is a big dilemma for me, also when I'm doing Mozart concerti for example with a modern symphonic orchestra. I have to always try to defend what I've learned and stay myself and at the same time be a unit with the orchestra and try to make them and the conductor curious about a new approach. Each time brings a completely different result: Sometimes it's difficult, sometimes a very enriching experience."

On this issue, Heras-Casado says that "HIP is not so much about the instruments as about the attitude of the players and their flexibility. Some great conventional orchestras can play the earlier repertoire in a more exciting way with modern instruments if they have the right mindset because they understand the language and vocabulary." For example, when he undertook a Schumann symphony cycle with the Munich Philharmonic, the first thing the conductor did was to slim the double bass section from eight down to four. "This at once changed the whole picture and landscape. The orchestra reacted immediately to a lighter and more transparent sound. Immediately after that, colors start to come out. They begin to articulate the small tensions that every phrase has and to translate the score into a new aesthetic with subtler agogics and more spark." He adds: "We cannot just rely on past interpretations. If we do that, we are dead as artists. The art itself would die."


Photo by Julien Benhamou

Paris-based conductor Laurence Equilbey

Retracing the Paths Toward Romanticism

Another prominent conductor showing how HIP can freshly illuminate the early Romantics—and the paths that led to them—is the Paris-based Laurence Equilbey. She first came to the attention of the music world with her chamber choir Accentus and in 2012 founded the period instrument ensemble Insula "precisely so that our work in Baroque and Classical music could serve the pre-Romantic era."

Equilbey, 58, leads programs that pair Beethoven with the French Romantic composer Louise Farrenc

as well as with Berlioz and Étienne Méhul, the so-called "French Beethoven." She explains that among her major projects over the next decade is to focus on this transitional period and early Romantic repertoire in the century from 1750 to 1850. "Beyond that I find is not so urgent because the later orchestra is not so far from what we have with modern instruments."

Referring to a Beethoven cycle with Insula, Equilbey says that "a return to the sources of the work, the context, and knowledge of the style" has helped bring us to a closer understanding of "the truth in these symphonies, even though the interpretations from the past have been quite profound."

Hermeneutical issues, she adds, must also be considered in the context of practical contingencies such as the size and layout of the orchestra. The assumption that HIP automatically means reduced forces is not always accurate. Equilbey points out that because most of the concert halls from the early 19th century are smaller in comparison with modern venues, "if you want to get back to the impact of the original performance on listeners in a modern hall, you would have to triple the size of the [period] orchestra." She therefore teamed Insula up with other players, including from the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, to form a 90-strong HIP ensemble for a Beethoven project at La Seine Musicale, making it possible to emulate "the power as well as the color and flexibility" of the music.

The paradoxical effect of period instruments is that they bring into sharp relief what Equilbey describes as a sense of "color and energy, so that very often in concert I feel that Beethoven is really modern." Another paradox that intrigues her lies at the heart of HIP's complex relationship with Romanticism. If HIP effaced the Romantic misreading of the Baroque, it also in a sense must revive that misreading in order to understand the aesthetic that guided composers like Mendelssohn. Regarding the issue of continuity with the past, Equilbey singles out Mendelssohn and his special relationship with J.S. Bach: "Both lived in Leipzig, and Mendelssohn had a great knowledge of Baroque and Classical style and its rules of composition. But it is this Romantic Bach who paradoxically masked the real Bach of Leipzig for years. Mendelssohn advanced this language with a virtuoso orchestra, which was something really new. Schumann, on other hand, pushed in unheard-of directions and was freer in form, with a rhapsodic spirit. The Mendelssohn line and the Schumann line are really two different lines for me."

Photo by Marco Borgrevve

Shunske Sato, Concerto Köln's concertmaster and artistic director of the Netherlands Bach Society

Forging the *Ring* Anew

What does "faithfulness to the work" (*Werktreue*) mean nowadays for HIP? The issue acquires a dimension of irony when applied to the Romantic era—nowhere more so than with Richard Wagner. During its more strife-ridden adolescent phase, HIP's claims to "authenticity" centered around an anti-Romantic (and at heart Modernist) concept that was shown to be illusory at best because, as Taruskin put it, such claims "squeezed out" that concept's own rich history until it came to mean only the "text" by itself. Wagner represented the epitome of an earlier, far more comprehensive understanding of *Werktreue* (much as Mendelssohn stood for an alternative approach to such fidelity—a strand that also worked its way through the 19th century and beyond).

The most ambitious application of HIP thinking to Romantic aesthetics currently underway is a collaboration between Kent Nagano and Concerto Köln to interpret the *Ring* cycle from a historically informed perspective. Reflecting the vast scope of the project is the amount of time that has been set aside for preparatory research and rehearsal—a five-year period that began in 2017—before they will undertake a complete recording the cycle. A crucial aspect of the organization of the project, which is being funded by North Rhine-Westphalia's Kunststiftung, is that it integrates new scholarly advances by experts at Cologne University and Academy of Music.

They are partnering intensively with the musicians and singers in a series of workshop performances that, according to Kai Hinrich Müller, who leads the team of five musicologists, aim "to bridge the gap between scholarship and praxis, between what Taruskin calls 'text and act.'"

As with Heras-Casado, the initial impetus for an early-music ensemble to venture into what is unusual—in this case, downright improbable—territory for its musicians came from close bonds with a conductor. Nagano recalls that the prospect of taking on the *Ring* started "spontaneously" when he was asked by members "to bring us something that represents the other part of your repertoire."

Photo courtesy of Concerto Köln

Musicologist Kai Hinrich Müller

Speaking near the end of a three-month lockdown he had spent in Paris, the conductor explained that in their collaborations together, Concerto Köln—which appointed him honorary conductor last October—had been "slowly stepping out of the Baroque to Mozart and then Beethoven and Mendelssohn. The musicians thought it would be fascinating for their own edification and for deepening their relationship with their own central repertoire to go on an exploration toward the future, making their way forward in time until they arrived at the period of Wagner."

The mindful pacing is key to the process. Mirroring this in his own carefully articulated, thoughtful way of speaking, Nagano emphasizes that allotting sufficient time to absorb new discoveries has been essential. "It's important for the Concerto Köln musicians to confront these scores like the musicians of the time did, for whom the appearance of Wagner's compositions was radical—to be in touch with their novelty." This is also accomplished through performances of works by composers like Berlioz, Liszt, Schumann, even Paganini—all new repertoire for the ensemble. "In this way, we're creating a context out of which Wagner's genius exploded." Last May, they performed Bruckner's Third Symphony, for example, "as an avenue toward harmonic understanding of Wagner's language."

"All of a sudden, you have to adapt to a very different way of playing," says Shunske Sato, Concerto Köln's concertmaster and artistic director of the Netherlands Bach Society, about what it's like from inside the ensemble to shift to this repertoire and the *Ring*. Normally, the slender size of the ensemble "keeps it chamber music-like, with communication lines that are very direct, so the orchestra is an organism. For the *Ring*, we suddenly need to adapt to playing in an orchestra that's three times larger than what we are used to"—the rest of the players coming from a mixture of other period ensembles as well as orchestral musicians who already have experience playing Wagner and students from the Music Academy.

The variety of wind instruments in particular, which changed so rapidly during the 19th century, was "staggering," adds Sato. But perhaps the most interesting hurdle is that elements that have been lost in modern classical training need to be recovered for a HIP approach—even though it was HIP itself that encouraged shedding many of these "Romantic" tendencies, as Sato points out: "Everything is implicated: portamento, certain bow strokes, legato, breaking free of steadiness of tempo. Now we are trying to feed these things back into what we do. It can be confusing for HIP people."

There are precedents for filtering Wagner through the HIP lens, including endeavors by Roger Norrington, Marc Minkowski, Bruno Weil, Simon Rattle (*Das Rheingold* with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment), and a 2013 concert performance of *Parsifal* by Thomas Hengelbrock and the Balthasar Neumann Chorus and Ensemble. The last mentioned, incidentally, took place at Madrid's Teatro Real, where Heras-Casado—principal guest conductor—is currently in the middle of his first *Ring* cycle, directed by Robert Carsen.

But Concerto Köln's *Ring* project will be the first to integrate systematic research into sources with actual performances. The results of the research are being carefully documented and published in a series of three or four books. Some of the material is already available to the public on MUSICONN, an open-access repository online.

Significantly, the "sources" in question go well beyond the "text" in the narrow sense. Nagano explains that they embrace critical questions of performance and sound culture, the Romantic revolution in the literary and visual arts as well as music, and changes in the social makeup of the public—all with a background awareness of the rapidly unfolding Industrial Revolution and its implications. "For example, it even found its way into the evolution of instruments and technical advances in metallurgy."

Photo by Michael Rathmann

Kent Nagano rehearsing Concerto Köln

In other words, this is not a "literalist" approach to the *Ring* scores, says Müller, who frequently cites Taruskin as an inspiration for the project's goal of understanding artists "as historical humans in their environment." Following the research and workshop stage, Concerto Köln and its partners will give semi-staged performances of the *Ring* at the Kölner Philharmonie, with the singers using the mime and gesticulation that Wagner believed were essential to theatrical presentation.

Müller notes that the main differences in the *sound* of this *Ring* will involve two areas. First is the unaccustomed textures and timbres of the period instruments tuned to a lower standard pitch, which will result in a more "covered" and transparent, chamber-like sound. "This is not just about historical instruments," he says. "We are also trying to reconstruct the playing culture, with its use of portamento and other stylistic traits, using as our model the Munich Hofkappelle, one of the most famous ensembles at the time."

The second area, which especially differentiates this *Ring* project, involves a sustained focus on how people sang, and in particular on how German was sung, in the 19th century. The soprano-actress Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, Wagner's "great idol," according to Müller—she created his Adriano, Senta, and Venus—fascinated the composer through her articulation and practice of declamation. "Throughout his career, Wagner emphasized the importance of beautiful, well-trained voices, with understanding and clear enunciation of the text."

Ultimately, Müller and Nagano anticipate a revelatory *Ring* that results not from an attempt at "time travel" or historical reenactment but from a renewed "vitalist" understanding of Wagner's work—again to borrow a term from Taruskin, which he uses to conjure the emotional connectedness and scope associated with Romanticism and, in his view, rejected by HIP (at least in its earlier manifestations). "Research means to look again," says Nagano. "It's never fixed for all time. New conclusions can replace current ones and surprise us."

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