

Pathfinder in Performance Practice: Howard Mayer Brown, 1930-1993

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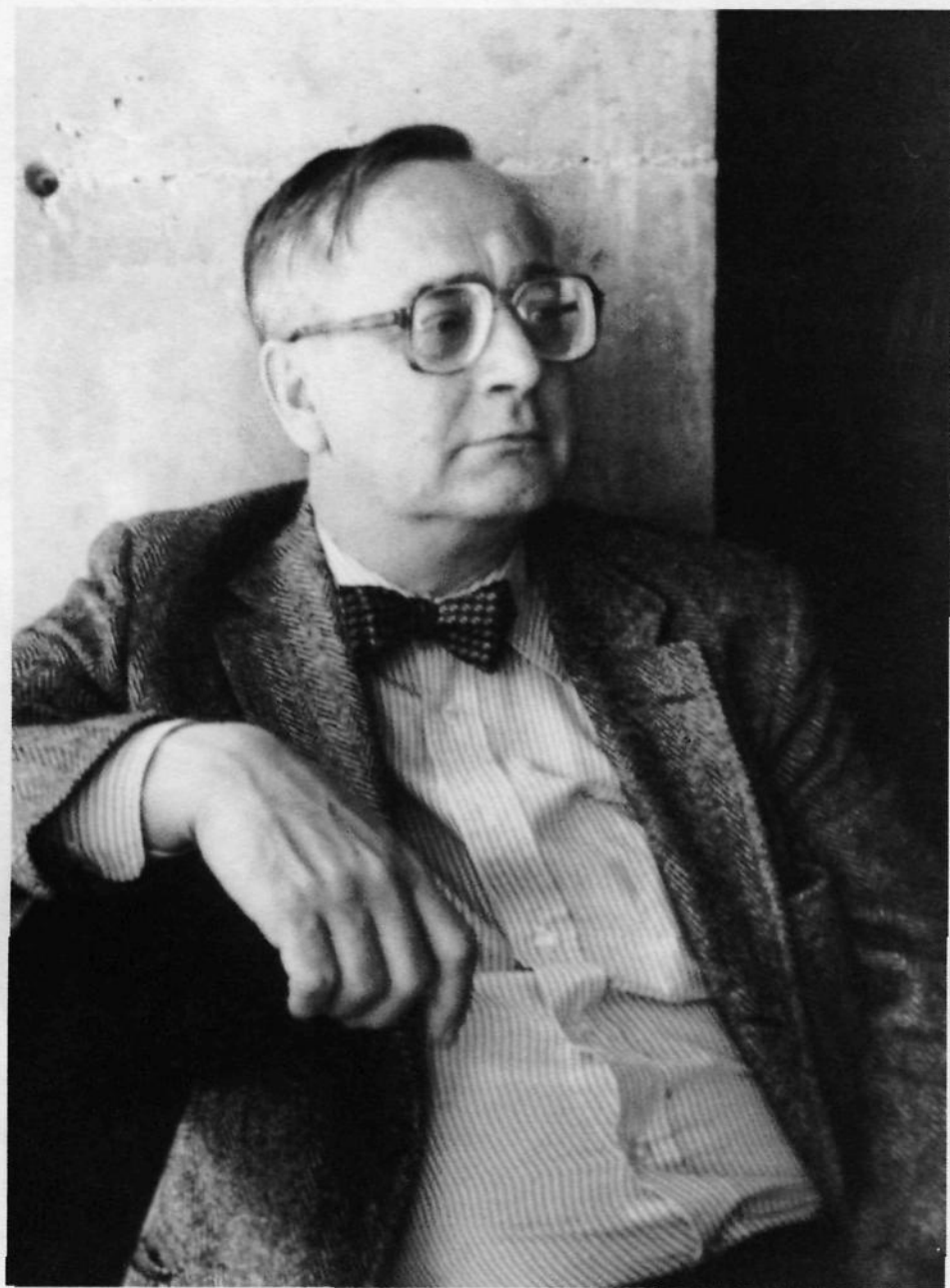
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Howard Mayer Brown in 1984

In Memoriam: Howard Mayer Brown

Pathfinder in Performance Practice: Howard Mayer Brown, 1930-1993

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Howard Mayer Brown was a scholar of wide-ranging interests. But performance practice comprised a central thread that ran through much of his activity. He was especially drawn to early instruments and how they were played. And (despite the time demands of his scholarly pursuits) he was himself much engaged in the actual performing of music, both as conductor and as player of several wind instruments. Due to this first-hand involvement, he had the capacity to look at scholarly issues from the performer's point of view. He took a special delight in descriptions of early playing techniques, in original scores and tablatures, and in visual representations or literary accounts of performances. From these sources he enquired deeply into early musical practices and into what music must have sounded like, particularly in the Renaissance and Middle Ages. In this quest he was ever pointing us in new directions—and there can be little doubt that he was in the forefront of those who shaped the field of performance practice during the 1970s and 1980s.

How shall we assess the nature of his contributions? The bibliography following—limited solely to writings on performance practice—provides a clear indication of his specialties and preferences. And further, when we look into the writings themselves, they give evidence of a precise and well-defined methodology. Certain approaches or points of departure lay behind

his work and may be taken as characteristic. These include his steadfast reliance on original documents (he was especially drawn to performance tutors, for example), his readiness to extend theoretical knowledge back into earlier time periods, his zealous (and persistent) wish to uncover more evidence than that currently available, and his exceptional attentiveness to detail (this latter particularly in regard to iconographical evidence).

His indispensable study on 16th-century ornaments (8) rested on two basic questions: What did the performance tutors tell us about ornamenting? And what was the evidence from the music, especially as in the intabulations, with their richly ornamented versions of models? Because of his in-depth knowledge of these two areas, he was able to draw a fascinating picture of how ornamental usage changed and developed throughout the century. Early on, the decorations were more modest, when there was greater adherence to theoretical prescriptions. But as the century wore on, the players and singers became more individualistic, departing from the basic prescriptions, and tending more and more toward the virtuosic and even spectacular. Along similar lines was his shorter study of 18th-century cadenzas (a time-period outside his usual purview), where he compared Faustina Bordoni's and Farinelli's written-out cadenzas (19). Here Faustina's are shown to have been more faithful to the theoretical writings, her cadenzas being of more modest length overall and generally adhering to a single affect; Farinelli's, on the other hand, tended to veer away from theory, as may be seen in their excessive lengths and in their incorporation of multiple affects, the principal aim apparently being mere vocal display.

A favored procedure was that of taking theoretical writings and extending their tenets backwards to a previous era. Thus, Agazzari's (1607) dichotomy between fundamental and ornamental instruments afforded a basis for his suggested scorings of 16th-century *intermedii*, where he felt that a similar principle was operating (3). And Ganassi's (1535) recommendations seemed a valid basis for ornamenting 15th-century secular works (5). Although closer in time, it was similarly innovative on his part to extend Agazzari's "improvising orchestra" to Peri's *Euridice* as a means of enlivening the stark recitatives through decorative instrumental lines (15).

Moreso than many performance scholars Brown sought to find evidence in the musical sources themselves. In the 15th-century *chanson* certain repeated phrases that were altered (or that were varied in a concordance) afforded in his eyes clues to contemporary improvisatory practice (7). And in respect to the question of *ficta*, he also looked at differing versions, regarding them as "improvisatory" variants, and questioning whether the application of accidentals was really all that definitive, reflecting as it did

the individuality of the performers, and this in divergent locales as well (2, 17). The same could be said for text underlay, which in his view seemed far too loosely and variously applied to yield any universal principles (6). Brown was also deeply involved in the study of clefs and transpositions, these serving as an aidful guide as to how instruments were originally joined together in ensembles (20, 21).

Iconography became for Brown a cardinal means of elucidating performance issues. The procedure was in itself by no means new, but he brought a greater depth and systematization to this kind of research than had been customary earlier. His inspection could be copious, as in the searching out of 350 trecento art works containing fiddles (24), or highly detailed, as in his enquiry into the numbers and sizes of strings on harps, psalteries, or fiddles (16, 24), or discerning, as when he perceived that the puffed cheeks of trecento shawm players lent credibility to other, more musically technical aspects of the paintings (9). A work of art showing both lute and gittern served as a stimulus for one of his more imaginative essays (18), wherein he speculated that a famous 15th-century gittern virtuoso may have played to the accompaniment of slower (tenor) notes on the lute, and that such a combination could have been applicable to certain of the Faenza duos. And his broad familiarity with Italian, French, and Spanish medieval iconography (as well as literature) led to the insight that each of these domains may have favored a unique *instrumentarium* during the Middle Ages (28).

Two qualities are memorable about Brown's approach to scholarship. The first was his unflinching sense of what was important, of where we were, and of what needed to be done. He was quick to point out how little we really know about this or that topic and about avenues that might profitably still be explored. In regard to performance practice he felt that we had scarcely scratched the surface, especially in our understanding of early instruments. Moreover the field itself was a large one, embracing the entire range of Western music from the early Middle Ages right up to the present, as he himself laid it out in his remarkable entries for *Grove* (11, 12) and in the two volumes he edited (with Stanley Sadie)—*Performance Practice: Music before [Music after] 1600* (25, 26). Nonetheless, in these larger works Brown unflinchingly kept the critical issues in focus.

Brown's second quality—perhaps even more telling—was his ability to bring together areas of study in ways they had not been before. He sought out clues in many places: in liturgical books and in ethnic ritual, as well as in literature and the visual arts. For performance practice, too, he sought to combine performing *per se* with what the theorists (and the philosophers) had called "taste." An out-of-the-ordinary section in the initial *Grove* article

(11) was entitled "Execution and Expression," and here he writes that despite the increasing preciseness of (19th-century) performance indications, "the executant was still relied on to 'express' the music." Elsewhere he pointed out that the ultimate goal of authentic performance was that of making early music "come alive" (22).

Many of Howard Mayer Brown's ideas and projects were left unfulfilled. Yet we are grateful for the abundance of writings he did leave us, as these afford an invaluable guide for further endeavors in the field. But above all, his presence will be deeply missed.

*Chantres experts de toutes nations
Changez vos voix cleres et haultaines
En cris tranchantz et lamentations . . .*

(Josquin's lament for Ockeghem)

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