

# Perilous Listening

## Early Music, Historically Informed Listening, and the Sacrosphere of Spaces<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This essay deals with a musical performance at the 20th Haapsalu Early Music Festival in 2013, when the viol ensemble Phantasm played a concert entitled “Perilous Polyphony” consisting of works by William Byrd, Elway Bevin, and other composers of Elizabethan Britain. After a cursory overview of Haapsalu’s characteristics, the programme and the programme notes of the concert in question are discussed with regard to potential perils in the music as they can be observed in some contrapuntal details of the compositions. While the Early Music Festival is centred on concerts that feature period instruments and historically informed performance practice, it is questionable whether the audience, even if historically informed itself, is able to perceive the music’s perils as the audience in Elizabethan Britain did. But since the very performance situation is entirely different, the heading “Perilous Polyphony” turns out to rather be an atmospheric label.

In as much as musicology reflects the challenges of cultural studies, it seems quite clear that the subject of musicology is to be understood as a complex network of different cultural practices rather than as an entity in itself. Christopher Small therefore coined the term “musicking” to make clear that “music is not a thing at all but an activity” (Small 1998: 2). Activities, however, may be understood not only as more or less unbiased actions, but also as practices that are both based on and establish certain meanings. Small defines it thus:

To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing (Small 1998: 9).

This definition, as incomplete as it is, makes clear that “to music” is related to a complex network of interdependent communication practices. But since it is difficult to think of communication without thinking of meaning, I suggest to refer to musicking as a set of cultural practices that involve communication of meaning.

It is as courageous as it is risky to give a general definition of musicking that is suitable

to any musical performance, particularly since the term “musical performance” refers to music as a given matter, notwithstanding the fact that “to music” is just being defined. But beyond sophistries of this kind one has to admit that musicking also incorporates activities that are subject to potentially discursive processes, and thus to being made meaningful. The attempt to investigate these processes in general would be as presumptuous as it would be futile, but it seems promising to attempt to do this in a specific case study. The attempt that will be made here, however, is in the nature of a trial, and makes not claim to be representative at all. But it does appear to offer fruitful insights into how musical practices are made discursive and by whom. The subject of this essay is a musical performance that took place at the XX Haapsalu Vanamuusikafestival (20th Haapsalu Early Music Festival) on 4 July 2013, when the viol ensemble Phantasm played a concert entitled “Perilous Polyphony” in the Haapsalu Dome church.

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The small town of Haapsalu, located on the western coast of Estonia, was famous from the early 19th century for its spa facilities. It was popular with

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1 This paper is based on research that I conducted at the XX Haapsalu Vanamuusikafestival (20th Haapsalu Early Music Festival), 3–7 July 2013, especially on interviews held with Toomas Siitan and Laurence Dreyfus. I gratefully acknowledge that they shared their thoughts with me.