

EDITORIAL



Recently, I committed one of academia's cardinal sins. I junked my books and took a charter flight to Luxor, hoping to catch an echo of the musical past. My object was the eighteenth-century explorer James Bruce, who drew ancient Egyptian music to the attention of Charles Burney and hence to readers of volume one of the *General History of Music*. Since historical re-enactment is one of my intellectual preoccupations, I'm used to this kind of guilty pleasure: before following Bruce to upper Egypt, I pursued Captain Cook, Georg Forster and Burney's sailor son James to the South Seas, where I ventured aboard a replica tall ship and reflected on the use of music in eighteenth-century cross-cultural encounters. Thanks to jaunts like these, visiting the 'showplaces of history' – to use an Enlightenment phrase – has come to seem productive for historical understanding. By voyaging on a square-rigger, exploring a fetid tomb and affectively engaging with the past, we learn both about earlier ways of performing and listening, and about how historical knowledge makes itself.

Although eighteenth-century music historiography was in some measure born of travellers' observations about exotic music, the relationship between travel and historiography has always been a tricky one. As I have shown in *Enlightenment Orpheus: The Power of Music in Other Worlds* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Charles Burney travelled to the Continent with the specific purpose of visiting archives and listening to the 'present state' of music; he interviewed travellers to Egypt, China, Polynesia and a number of European countries, and incorporated their findings into his magnum opus. This enthusiasm for travel and travel writing was motivated not just by necessity – a paucity of source material in England and the corresponding need to conduct research abroad – but was underscored by the belief that traversing physical space meant, as it had done since Herodotus's day, travelling back in time. The origins of polyphony could, to take an example from Burney, be possibly rooted out in French and Italian archives, but could also be investigated in places like Tonga and New Zealand, where Europeans were surprised and perplexed by the discovery of part-singing. Reading travelogues and following in the footsteps of earlier travellers were thus commonplace. With the possible exception of Burney's rival John Hawkins, who, in the Preface to his *General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (London: Printed for T. Payne & Son, 1776[, ix]), objected to interrogating 'a Hottentot, a wild American, or even a more refined Chinese' about their musical proclivities, most contemporary historians relied on travellers for their universal histories. In the work of Johann Nikolaus Forkel, Johann Gottfried Herder and others, it is the travel account that forms a basis for conjectural understandings of the past.

This has come to be called bad historiography and worse ethnomusicology. It is bad historiography in so far as conflating different temporalities easily blinds one to the specificity of earlier forms of social and cultural practice. It also tends to confuse the nature of historical evidence when the authority of eye- and ear-witness testimony substitutes for more rigorous forms of corroboration. It is bad ethnomusicology (if we can call it that at all) because non-European music tends to be denied an independent existence and is instead situated within a historical teleology that culminates in serious Western music. Post Edward Said, we have come to expect that historical ethnomusicology – like other species of historiography – will give its subject its due rather than subordinate it in aesthetic and moral terms to the study of something else. Music history, too, we hold to higher standards of scholarly rigour.

Bruce may not, in fact, have deserved his punning nickname 'the Abyssinian lyre' and the disapprobation heaped on him by his contemporaries (A. A. Moorefield, who conducted his own Kings' Valley tour in the 1970s, wrote a useful article on this called 'James Bruce: Ethnomusicologist or Abyssinian Lyre?' (*Journal of the American Musicological Society* 28/3 (1975), 493–514)). Bruce and Burney can, however, be found guilty of the charges set out above. Burney readily conflates ancient Egyptian music with its eighteenth-century



counterpart and makes non-European music plug gaps in the historical record. In Burney's illustration of the Theban harp, supposedly a faithful copy of the painted reliefs in the tomb of Rameses III made by someone who had actually been there, the harp acquires distinctly neoclassical curlicues; and the reed instrument reported by Bruce seems to have been a type of shawm imported from elsewhere.

And yet, reading Burney generously, we detect in him something of the re-enactor. Burney's daughter Fanny says that on several occasions he sequestered himself with Bruce in order to find out what he could about Egyptian music. The music historian speculated about the nature of the Egyptian tuning system and compared it with the archaic Greek one, and did so in an effort to imagine vividly the music produced by the pharaonic harpists themselves. He didn't go so far as to construct a large harp along the lines of Bruce's description, but he probably performed this thought experiment in order to test his hypotheses about the scope of the New Kingdom instrument, its distribution and its organological ancestors. Thus, while we don't have much truck with some of Burney's wilder conjecturing, I don't think we can fault his intention – a powerful desire to know what the past sounded like and to uncover aural traces in the present, traces that might explain the mechanisms of musical continuity and change.

If I had hoped to find striking resonances between Bruce's exploration of the tomb of Rameses III and my own visit to Kings' Valley, or between Bruce and the object of his investigation – three-thousand-year-old harps and lutes – I was to be disappointed. A canned muezzin and the braying of donkeys dominated – at inconvenient hours – the soundscape of the rural village where I stayed. Only an old man hawking instruments – a melodic fragment performed on a two-stringed *rabāba* a hundred times a day for the arriving tour buses – connected my experience to Bruce's and reminded me of the way that music has always mediated the traveller's engagement with this particular place. What was to be learned here was perhaps less about the specifics of eighteenth-century and earlier Egyptian music-making and more about the way music can and did function within its social context. Like Tia DeNora, I was prompted to ask how daily life constituted a sonic backdrop for organized music-making and how music-making intruded into daily life; and, with Ian Woodfield, Philip Bohlman and Richard Leppert, to ask how encounters across barriers of culture, class, gender, ethnicity, religion and time could be negotiated via music.

Re-enactment and its effort to restage the past allows us to question what we want to make of music history – a point made in Kate Bowan's contribution on R. G. Collingwood and the early music revival in *Historical Re-enactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn*, edited by Iain McCalman and Paul Pickering (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming). Re-enactment causes us to think about the history of music not, as Carl Dahlhaus would have it, as an isolated aesthetic activity centred on the afterlife of the musical work. Rather, we can think of music history as a species of cultural history, a contextualized social activity that encompasses the professional and the lay and synthesizes discrete areas of musical inquiry. Thinking about music history in these terms allows us, in other words, to conceive of the musical past in all its fullness. Re-enactment restores to music historiography the conjectural dimension that enabled eighteenth-century music historians to exercise free play of the imagination and to enthuse and persuade about music. Most importantly, it places before us what Walter Benjamin, in 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', referred to as *ein Echo von nun verstummen [Stimmen]* ('an echo of now silenced [voices]') that continues to resound in the air long after their first sounding (*Gesammelte Schriften*, with Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, volume 1/2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 693). What we are after, then, is an attentive listening to the past and present and a listening that attempts to restore agency to those lost voices.

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