

EDITORIAL



John Dryden famously bowdlerized Shakespeare, whose plays violated his reason-governed tastes. That the author of such verse as ‘Happy, happy, happy pair! / None but the brave, / None but the brave, / None but the brave deserves the fair’ (*Alexander’s Feast*) should have found the rather stronger temperament and the complex plot ambiguities of his predecessor indigestible should come as no surprise. Because our educational processes have long since held up Shakespeare as the pinnacle of English-language literature, we tend to find Dryden’s fastidious attitude somewhat quaint – if, indeed, we remember it at all.

The narratives of musicology, however, developed according to a different set of reference points. From its beginnings in nineteenth-century Germany, the discipline has favoured the emergence in the eighteenth century of such composers as Bach, Mozart and Beethoven and, with them, the commonly shared grammar and formal processes of harmonic tonality. Never mind that Bach continued throughout his career to engage with modal strategies when he found them useful for his purposes, or that Beethoven late in life began to resort again to Lydian and other dormant procedures; our story of tonal triumphalism has informed our historical, theoretical and critical methods.

This story has most obviously blocked us from taking seriously *as music* anything composed before around 1700. I would argue, however, that the period that suffers most from this concept of a standard *modus operandi* is the eighteenth century itself. I say this not only because we can find many vestiges of earlier practices in music written during this time, but also because this narrative gives us so very little to work with when we approach unequivocally tonal repertoires.

I’m biased, of course. I have spent much of my career making syntactical sense of sixteenth-century madrigals and early seventeenth-century extravaganzas. But I also give a ten-week course for music majors on music in eighteenth-century culture. When I teach them about music from the 1600s, I feel as if I am constantly pulling rabbits (Grandi, Sweelinck, Strozzi, Froberger, D’Anglebert, Biber, Stradella, Charpentier, Jacquet de la Guerre, Buxtehude) out of my hat; not even budding professionals know this amazing stuff, and they can scarcely believe their ears – even though they do occasionally complain about what they perceive as a relatively arbitrary sense of harmony. Then the next term arrives with its long-awaited tonality. Once students discover that they can label all the chords with Roman numerals, they tend to lose interest, and it’s an uphill battle from there until we reach Mozart.

The very elevation of eighteenth-century procedures to the status of universals has made these same procedures default positions, absorbed as a kind of checklist by undergraduates in their first year of music-theory training. Is it tonal? Yep. Is it in binary or da capo form? Yep. This music is logical and consistent: hurray, and so what? With the exception of the works of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, all of whom are perceived – rightly or wrongly – to push the conventional envelope and thus to call for a brand of analysis that rewards transgression, the eighteenth-century repertory seems to students to lack substance. Note that I am including in this latter category Handel (an astonishing composer of melodies, which current music theory undervalues) and Haydn (the forger of many of the genres students have learned to regard as always already available); both these composers are very dear to me, and yet they are very hard sells so long as we are saddled with criteria that favour deviation. The one relatively unfamiliar rabbit I can pull out of my hat during that school term is C. P. E. Bach, whose music never fails to amaze.

As James Webster and Thomas Christensen have argued previously in this journal (respectively ‘The Eighteenth Century as a Music-Historical Period?’, *Eighteenth-Century Music* 1/1 (2004), 47–60, and ‘Editorial’, *Eighteenth-Century Music* 2/1 (2005), 3–5), part of the problem can be traced to conventions of periodization within our discipline, which has long partitioned this hundred-year time block into ‘Baroque’ and ‘Classical’ segments. Most historians in other fields consider modes of early eighteenth-century cultural expression as reactions against the purported excesses of the seventeenth, against precisely the deformities Dryden and Dr Johnson disdained as ‘baroque’; but many music-history textbooks still position Vivaldi, Bach and Handel as the very core of the ‘Baroque’ era and spend a great deal of time trying to explain how



these eighteenth-century figures belong categorically with Monteverdi. Worse yet, our ‘Classical’ period seems to have only three widely acknowledged occupants – Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven – all of whom represented a single city. If ever there was a recipe for historiographical disaster, this surely is it.

During the 1980s and 1990s younger musicologists increasingly gravitated to topics such as nineteenth-century opera, a guilty pleasure that suddenly became available as a legitimate area of study, and the prestige that had once drawn scholars to the music of the Enlightenment dwindled. Strategies that work on the principle of raised and gratified expectations, thereby demonstrating the power of abstract reason, came to seem merely predictable and boring. How can a stately minuet hope to compete with raving madwomen, soul-destroying gypsies or marauding valkyries?

Of course, the business of writing dissertations about, and producing editions of, little-known eighteenth-century musicians continued apace. Yet the writing addressing these artists tended to operate on a different plane from that which focused on the cluster of great composers; much of it seemed apologetic, something like the ‘special pleading’ that used to attend the discovery of a hitherto unknown female composer. These projects strove dutifully to fill in gaps in the historical record, but they failed to attract much attention. After the authors had completed the checklist of defaults, they frequently tried to make the case that x – the topic of a lovingly researched doctoral thesis – was undeservedly neglected, that indeed x might even qualify as great! By and large, no one cared, not even within the discipline itself.

For we had no intellectual frameworks that could cast questions in terms other than those of aesthetic exceptionality. Everyone else’s fugues sounded amateurish next to Bach’s, and Mozart’s collaborations with da Ponte held up impossible standards for the rest of eighteenth-century music drama; Beethoven’s ‘Eroica’ served as the measure against which all other symphonies could only be judged inadequate. Until quite recently, even Handel’s stage works (to say nothing of those by Scarlatti, Vivaldi, Rameau and many others we knew to have had considerable influence in their own day) were deemed too stiff and artificial to justify mounted productions or professional recordings.

But over the course of the last ten years, owing in part to the energies that have come together to make *Eighteenth-Century Music* a successful enterprise, a number of approaches other than purely formal analysis and canon formation have greatly revitalized this field. Many of these projects feature musicians who are relatively unknown. Yet they situate these artists in ways that make them matter culturally, that allow us to understand this period of history in more complex ways.

The issues of space and location, for instance, came to full bloom with the publication of Daniel Hertz’s *Music in European Capitals: The Galant Style, 1720–1780* (New York: Norton, 2003) and in recent work by Louise K. Stein on Neapolitan opera under the Spanish viceroys. Elisabeth Le Guin’s *Boccherini’s Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005) and a series of recent articles by Matthew Head have turned the spotlight on performers and their physical engagement with their instruments. The long-defunct genre of opera seria – famously written off as ‘opera without drama’ in a previous era – has come back to life with the anthropological orientation of Martha Feldman in *Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) and with a series of extraordinary performances, often starring male sopranos (some of them naked!), now available on commercial CD and DVD. Annette Richards examined the quirky works of C. P. E. Bach within his larger cultural environment in *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Tom Beghin and Sander Goldberg’s collection *Haydn and the Performance of Rhetoric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) allows both historical and pragmatic questions to make Haydn’s music properly exciting once again; the proof of the pudding is to be found in the astonishing DVD that accompanies the book.

Many other projects in addition to the ones I have just named have also produced major shifts in the ways we now study music of the eighteenth century. For all their idiosyncrasies, what they have in common is a refusal of the old badge of universality. They celebrate instead the particular: the particularities of an actual body in the process of playing an instrument, the particularities of a political situation and so forth. If eighteenth-century music thereby loses its status as the gold-standard of normalcy, it thereby gains access to



an infinite number of perspectives. This is not music that works the way music was preordained to work; it is simply – and wonderfully – the historical trace of how various people and communities in the 1700s chose to deploy sound for their myriad activities, whether spiritual or downright bawdy.

We no longer find it necessary to trash Telemann's often hilarious music (as did Adorno) in order to appreciate Bach, for even the Great Ones have benefited from social contextualization. The individual who peddled the latest music-theory books in Leipzig (see Christoph Wolff) or the one who composed blood-curdling dramatic settings of anti-Semitic passages from the gospels (see Michael Marissen) or the one who appears as the preternaturally well-hung young man sculpted by Bernd Göbel for the 1985 Arnstadt Bach Memorial (just google it!): all these surely are more interesting than the Bach who used to float somewhere above the surface of the earth communing with his Lord about contrapuntal intricacies.

In a similar vein, Maynard Solomon has presented culturally situated biographies of Mozart and Beethoven, and these deeply human revisions have allowed for new insights into their music. Please note that I would not want this music to disappear from the inventory of acknowledged cultural treasures; I am not trying to 'cut down the tall poppies', as they say in Australia. But by virtue of these new approaches, musicologists can also participate now with other historians in tracing the developments of subjectivity, perceptions of the body, nationalism, anti-Semitism and many other ethical dilemmas that emerged in early modern Europe and remain with us today. I see no contradiction between studying a piece as a document of its moment and still allowing it to overwhelm me affectively. I would not spend so much of my time coaching performers in these repertoires if it were otherwise.

In closing, I want to return to Dryden and the issue of eighteenth-century standardization. Our collective identification with tonality and its structures may make it difficult for us to understand this swerve into 'order' as a problem for music. But Max Weber did so almost a century ago in *Die rationalen und soziologischen Grundlagen der Musik* (Munich: Drei Masken, 1921), in which he argued that the history of music in the West can be seen as a trajectory of increasingly coercive strictures applied to sound. This process of diminishing options occurred with respect not only to pitch constructions, as twelve modal types dwindled to a mere two, but also to metres, timbres, formal plans, tunings and temperaments. Horkheimer and Adorno theorized this enterprise as part of a dialectic of Enlightenment, as the dark side of what they – and we – were taught to celebrate uncritically. To the extent that we receive our catechism through a quasi-mathematical account of tonality, building it up Rameau-style from elements of the overtone series through circles of fifths to a proof of its perfect internal consistency, we can perceive neither the dark side of eighteenth-century practices nor the ways they framed previous procedures as obsolete or even ideologically dangerous, which is how Dryden viewed Shakespeare.

J. S. Bach insisted on retaining important dimensions of modal practice all the way through the first half of the eighteenth century. His son Carl Philipp Emanuel struggled to break free of tonal imperatives all the way through the second half. And the French, despite their apparent adherence to tonal grammar, wielded it so as to produce temporalities so radically different from those of the Italians and Germans as to demand alternative analytical approaches. We have managed to corral all these kinds of musicking into a single uncomfortable pen.

An attentive ear to eighteenth-century music itself might well understand diatonic tonality as a historical anomaly, a myth of common practice that masks particularities, a blip on the screen that stands as much in need of cultural analysis as any other moment in the series of stylistic configurations offered over the ages. It may become more difficult to teach first-year harmony if we decide to present tonality as a historically contingent procedure. But we need to do so if we are to make sense of music from before, from after and – finally – from within the eighteenth century.

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