

REVIEWS



BOOKS

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VANESSA AGNEW

ENLIGHTENMENT ORPHEUS: THE POWER OF MUSIC IN OTHER WORLDS

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Vanessa Agnew's *Enlightenment Orpheus: The Power of Music in Other Worlds* is a cultural history of musical travels in the late eighteenth century, which argues for the formative influence of travel and travellers' writings on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European musical thought. Agnew, who is a specialist in German studies, focuses on two well-known journeys that both began in 1772: Charles Burney's travels through the German lands and Captain James Cook's second Pacific voyage (1772–1775). Burney reported his observations about musical life in his two-volume travelogue *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Provinces* (London: T. Becket & Co., 1773), and Cook's voyage generated a number of descriptions and transcriptions of Polynesian music by naturalists and musically literate mariners, including Burney's own son James.

A second component of the book is the author's historical and systematic treatment of 'Orphic' discourse on music in the late eighteenth century. Agnew argues convincingly for the historical relevance of the Orpheus myth as a means by which eighteenth-century writers engaged with Neoplatonic ideas of music's utility. Indeed, a major point of the book is the continued relevance of such conceptions of music well into the nineteenth century, when, according to the dominant historiography of the period, ethical and utilitarian conceptions gave way to new ideas of music's ontological and aesthetic autonomy. Whether or not specialists will accept this historiographical revision remains to be seen, but Agnew's basic argument – that utilitarian and ethical discourse lived on in, among other things, colonial music discourse (see, for example, page 80) – is an important and challenging insight that deserves to be seriously considered.

Agnew also draws on the Orpheus myth ahistorically, in several ways: as a heuristic device (a 'hermeneutic paradigm', page 9) for understanding music's capacity to act in the world; as an 'ethical paradigm' (9) for engaging with others musically; and, finally, as a formal principle for organizing the book. In conceptual terms, Agnew asks a lot of the Orpheus myth, and does much of her theoretical work through it. Personally, however, I found that this was a less compelling aspect of her argument, because the relationship between her historical and ahistorical uses of the myth seems undertheorized, and so the nature of what she is claiming when she uses the myth analytically is not always clear (see, for example, pages 9–10 and 174–175).

Leaving aside this problem, the structure of the Orpheus myth yields an elegant form that lends coherence to the book's wide-ranging subject matter. After a brief Introduction, the main section of the book is divided into three chapters – 'Argonaut Orpheus', 'Music's Empire' and 'Anti-Orpheus' – and a short Conclusion. Chapter 1, 'Argonaut Orpheus', develops the figure of Orpheus as traveller; here Agnew takes a fresh look at Burney's travelogues and the controversies they generated, reading these writings as part of a vital transnational musical discourse on the power and value of music. In the second chapter, 'Music's Empire', she explores how knowledge and the materials of Maori, Tahitian and Tongan music, acquired in the course of



colonial travels in the Pacific, both challenged and enabled Enlightenment musical thought. Finally, in 'Anti-Orpheus' Agnew addresses late-century British parodying of the seemingly outlandish claims about music that sometimes appeared in travellers' writings, identifying an important counter-tradition to the affirmative utilitarian and ethical discourse that, she argues, lived on in this domain.

Enlightenment Orpheus joins recent work on music in the Burney family's writings by young scholars including Noelle Chao and David R. M. Irving; the latter's 2005 article in this journal also looked at the relationship between Cook's Pacific voyages and Burney's musical travelogues. Agnew's study is at the same time part of a spate of new scholarship on music and European colonialism in the early modern period. Gary Tomlinson's essay compilation *Singing in the New World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) is a well-known example, in addition to recent books by Geoffrey Baker (*Imposing Harmony: Music and Society in Colonial Cuzco* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008)) and myself (*Native American Song at the Frontiers of Early Modern Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)), and articles or chapters by many others. Finally, Agnew's emphasis on the transnational matrix for European cultural development in the eighteenth century – specifically English and German – places her among a small but growing group of music scholars who are exploring how cultural contact across polities shaped Europe's musical past, moving away from the traditional national framework of musicology. This is a promising analytical shift that questions the narratives of cultural coherence put forward by nearly all modern nation-states, pressing music scholars to address the effects of transnational movements of peoples and cultures. Agnew's study is a thoughtful essay on why transnationalism is relevant, even essential, to the musical history of pre-Revolutionary Europe – before nation-states in the modern sense really existed – and it provides an example of how such a history might be written.

Agnew's analysis also engages with postcolonial studies, and because this is still relatively rare in scholarship on European music before 1900, I want to pose some critical questions in response, in the spirit of encouraging such work. As we might expect, Agnew draws on postcolonial theory in discussing Cook's Pacific voyages and their associated musical writings, and this works well for her analysis. Less expected, however, is her argument that a postcolonial framework is also helpful for understanding Burney's voyages to the German lands. Here is how she explains this move:

Eighteenth-century Anglo-German entanglements cannot, of course, be construed in the self-same terms [as European–Polynesian encounters]. Still, my experiment involves transposing these postcolonial concepts to Europe to examine the ways in which discrete instances of cultural appropriation and transfer were implicated in larger-scale processes. (22)

Further on she notes that these 'larger-scale processes' include 'the making and the reputation of nations and empires' (23). As Agnew points out in a short endnote (note 33 on page 179), there have been other efforts to apply postcolonialism to internal conquest within Europe. When these address politico-economic relations that genuinely resemble colonization (as in Ummayad-controlled Iberia, for example), this approach has merit. However, Agnew's 'transposition' of postcolonialism to the eighteenth-century Anglo-German relationship has two problems. First, Hanoverian-ruled Britain did not seek to conquer the German lands, nor did a power disparity exist like that between Britain and the Polynesian societies that Cook explored. For this reason, Agnew's reference to the German subjects of Burney's travel writings as 'subalterns' (21–22) is inappropriate. Second, the analytical parallel between Burney's and Cook's voyages is inexact because of their different relations to the imperial state. Cook's second voyage was state-sponsored for the purpose of discovering and, if possible, possessing Pacific territories (especially the supposed *Terra Australis*), whereas Burney undertook his voyages privately and for personal gain. This does not mean that Burney or his writings about music were untouched by imperial ideologies or institutions of music; but such an argument would need to tell us precisely what those empirical and/or ideological connections were.

Nevertheless, the questions raised by Agnew's study are profound and difficult ones, and she has given this reader much to think about. She rightly points to the English habit of viewing Germanic culture as exotic, even though eighteenth-century exoticism was, in the main, fundamentally rooted in imperialism. So how



do we account for musical representation of the exotic in the context of political or economic relations that do not appear to be manifestly imperial, nor even to involve colonial domination? This common situation is particularly acute in the case of the German territories, where significant contributions to the development of scholarly approaches to non-European musics were made in the nineteenth century, yet which had practically no state-sponsored colonial enterprise until the 1880s. Agnew addresses this problem directly, writing:

The fact that the German states did not have formal commercial or territorial stakes in the exploration of the Pacific and were not directly affected by the encounter did not diminish Germans' concern over the nexus of music and power. If anything, German music scholars took such questions all the more seriously as they attempted to carve out their own spheres of cultural influence. (103–104)

Can 'cultural influence' be seen as a substitute for German empire? This seems plausible, yet the question remains of how to parse this particular relationship between the domains of politics and culture.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of *Enlightenment Orpheus* is as a prehistory of the German states' rise to musical dominance by the nineteenth century (14–15, 172), and this in itself makes it necessary reading for scholars of eighteenth-century music. Agnew's study does more than chart a new history of the music aesthetics and cultural ideals that preceded the apotheosis of Germanic music, which is well-trodden terrain. She gives a strikingly original account that emphasizes the transnational and even imperial matrix of this rise and, by implication, that of the period's most cherished ideals of music, which represents a high achievement indeed.

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KAROL BERGER

BACH'S CYCLE, MOZART'S ARROW: AN ESSAY ON THE ORIGINS OF MUSICAL MODERNITY

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pp. xi + 420, ISBN 978 0 520 25091 8

Karol Berger's book addresses one of the most interesting if not entirely novel topics in recent historiography: the fundamental change in the artistic understanding of temporality since the second half of the eighteenth century. This study examines a phase in history during which an awareness of being on the threshold of a new epoch and a forward-thinking intellectual outlook became prominent. These were based on the faster exchange of knowledge and the rapid increase of experience made possible through the mediums of printed music and music journals, leading in our case to the emergence of music historiography. The various phenomena termed 'pressure of experience' by the sociologist Wolf Lepenies, referred to as a 'horizon of expectation' by the historian Reinhart Koselleck and described as 'acceleration factors' by the philosopher Hans Blumenberg thirty years ago (in relation to the period around 1800) are no longer subjects of controversy in the field of musicology. Yet Berger's book on the transition from a cyclical to a goal-directed notion of time is nevertheless a highly fruitful reading experience, because of its thought-provoking contents, and it is necessary to explain why this is so.

Any readers who expect Berger's book to introduce them to its complex subject matter through a reflection on methods and conceptual critique will be disappointed. The question of why (and with what far-reaching consequences) music theorists set about dividing art into binary oppositions of old and new,