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XXIST C. CHALLENGES TO THE HISTORY OF XVIIIITH C. MUSICAL AESTHETICS
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What, exactly, is aesthetics? A branch of philosophy, obviously. But depending on which philosopher you ask, the term might mean any number of different things, so that delimiting its scope often seems to pose a philosophical problem in itself. On many, but by no means all, understandings, aesthetics is either coterminous with the philosophy of art or at least overlaps it considerably. Paul Oscar Kristeller famously maintained that the ‘fine arts’ (*beaux arts*) were invented, as a conceptual category, in Enlightenment France (see ‘The Modern System of the Arts’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951), 496–527, and 13 (1952), 17–46). Any retroactive application of the category – projecting it back, say, onto Greek sculpture or vase painting – is in Kristeller’s view deeply anachronistic. Supposing that ‘aesthetics’ means ‘philosophy of (fine) art’, that view would seem to establish the eighteenth century as the discourse’s *terminus a quo*. Even more narrowly, one might say that ‘aesthetics’ is the discipline that the twenty-one-year-old Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten inaugurated in his 1735 master’s thesis *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* and then later solidified in his *Aesthetica*, the first volume of which appeared in 1750 and the second in 1758 (Frankfurt: Kleyb). In this sense, ‘aesthetics’ would be a kind of junior appendage to logic, conceived in psychologizing, rather than purely formal, terms: whereas logic, according to this now superannuated conception, putatively studies the laws by which human reason proceeds, aesthetics should present the laws of sensation and perception, in accordance with its Greek root *aisthêsis* (from *aisthanomai*, ‘to perceive’). This view probably only makes sense if one assumes some broadly Leibnizian stance, according to which perceptions are somehow fuzzy, opaque, obscure (or otherwise insufficiently clear and distinct) ideas, so that there is a continuum, rather than a gap, between perception and cognition. Baumgarten’s is, in any case, the view that provides the background to Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Berlin: Lagarde und Friedrich, 1790), a book that is usually thought to be a contribution to aesthetics, though it is only partly concerned with art. From Baumgarten and Kant, one could draw a line through Schiller and Hegel to Adorno (more or less as Terry Eagleton does in his helpful overview *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), and as any number of other standard works also do). According to this view, aesthetics is even more narrowly circumscribed: not just a post-1700 phenomenon, but one peculiarly confined to the German-speaking world, where it perhaps (from a cynical perspective) functioned mostly as a kind of ersatz politics. Carl Dahlhaus’s *Musikästhetik* (Cologne: Gerig, 1967), for instance, broadly takes this view (though mostly minus my cynical gloss).

At the other chronological extreme, Enrico Fubini’s *Estetica della musica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018) starts its chronology from the Greeks. This capacious view is also more common in the anglophone world, where analytic philosophers have often conceived of their discipline as addressing perennial problems, sometimes including problems about art. Or again, another twentieth-century analytic tradition takes ‘aesthetics’ to be a kind of ‘philosophy of criticism’, concerned with how aesthetic appraisals of particular works are (or should be) arrived at (see Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, second edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981)). Here again, ‘aesthetics’ would seem to have a long pre-history, at least with respect to works of



literature – namely as ‘poetics’. That discipline, despite some desultory comments in Plato’s *Republic* and elsewhere, surely gets started with Aristotle’s *Poetics*, though it probably also has some relationship to the earlier Sophistic concern with teaching rhetoric. Horace’s *Ars poetica* clearly belongs to this tradition, as, no doubt, does Longinus’ treatise *On the Sublime* (*Peri hypsous*). And in all probability, eighteenth-century French writers such as Du Bos and Batteux thought they were contributing to ‘poetics’ as well (certainly, neither writer uses the term *esthétique*, which seems not to have been available in eighteenth-century French).

At this point, some might be inclined to throw up their hands and proceed operationally: ‘music aesthetics’ is whatever is filed in the ML3800s – the Library of Congress’s catch-all category for books on music that it doesn’t know where else to put. But there are surely some generalizations that can be made. For instance, whatever exactly ‘aesthetics’ is, the texts constituting its canon tend to be exclusively by European writers, most of them men, whose social class (whether originally or aspirationally) tends largely towards the aristocracy or the upper reaches of the bourgeoisie, and they are generally written in a fairly highbrow register about fairly highbrow topics. There are exceptions, of course: one can find readers and monographs on ‘classical Indian aesthetics’ (Sheldon Pollack, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), ‘the Chinese aesthetic tradition’ (Li Zehou, Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010) and ‘black aesthetics’ (Paul C. Taylor, Oxford: Blackwell, 2016). Significantly, though, their authors and compilers tend to hold office hours outside the philosophy department, so that such studies start looking like the exceptions that prove the rule. (For another instance of the rule see Paul Guyer’s recent and, on its own terms, very fine *History of Modern Aesthetics* (three volumes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014)). Depending on one’s perspective, writers who confine their attention to the scholarly, cultural and linguistic traditions in which they have been trained might simply be evincing sober scholarly self-restraint or supplying yet one more instance – as if the instances needed to be multiplied – of an unreflective and flagrantly Eurocentric exceptionalism (an exceptionalism that becomes all the stranger when unquestioningly adopted by scholars working in centres outside Europe).

It was against these background assumptions, to judge from Maria Semi’s opening remarks, that the recent conference XXIst C. Challenges to the History of XVIIIth C. Musical Aesthetics, held in Turin, was primarily directed. Semi made the point, deftly and with a light touch, by drawing on Hogarth’s engraving of *The Enraged Musician* (I thank her both for providing a written transcript of her remarks and granting permission to quote from them):

This image . . . may be used to tell us something about the task of the cultural historian interested in the sounds of the eighteenth century. I think we can comfortably venture to assert that musicological studies dealing with eighteenth-century aesthetics have mainly focused on one of the figures here represented: precisely the ‘enraged musician’. This figure (significantly a male one) not only represents the so-called ‘art-music’ tradition, but also all that this tradition is supposed to be opposed to and all that this tradition wants manifestly to stop its ears against. In a solid house made of bricks, protected by a fence, our musician keeps his window open, still needing some air to breathe (I’m not saying ‘fresh air’, as London in the eighteenth century was notoriously not a healthy place to live). The open window exposes the violinist to the sounds coming from the world outside. Stuck to the wall of the musician’s house, we find a hint of another important element of London’s ‘official’ musical life: ballad-operas, a more socially inclusive form of opera than the Italian one. Ballad-operas feature here as a form of music in-between. They don’t belong to the interior of the house inhabited by our musician, but still they stick to its wall and find themselves behind the fence. The other figures of this picture are not protected by fences or walls. The two towering women figures of this picture both represent central aspects of the British eighteenth-century soundscape: street mongers and ballad hawkers, singing their cries and their stories . . . There is also an itinerant musician seeking recognition from his upper-class colleague. The shawm-player presses his instrument against the fence, almost trying to cross the barrier between the two worlds physically, and it indeed seems to be upon him that the enraged musician is revolving his furious gaze. Apart from these sounds, many others populate the picture. Sounds produced



by workers, by ringing bells (the flag over the tower of the church signaling a day of rejoicing), but also by the many represented animals (a parrot, a dog and two cats).

I think by now it should be pretty clear why I wanted to use this picture to plead my case. And let me end in a provocative way, especially when facing an audience of consummate musicologists, as you are. Let the violinist feature in the title-page of our works, if need be, but let us also be attentive to the world of sounds represented in the rest of the picture, which is to say approximately 90% of the total. Interestingly, Hogarth did not put the character who gives the title to his engraving at the center of the picture. Why should we?

To what extent did the conference that followed live up to this challenge? The programme featured keynote addresses by Philip Bohlman (University of Chicago; “The Voice of the People, a Song, a Notable Phrase, A Rhyme, Managed to Survive”: The Birth of Musical Aesthetics and the End of Global History), Suzanne Aspden (University of Oxford; “All in the Mind”: Eighteenth-Century Opera and the Idea of Psychological Depth), Thomas McAuley (University of Cambridge; ‘Hearing the Enlightenment: Musical Affects and Mechanical Philosophy in England and Scotland, 1663–1749’) and Martha Feldman (University of Chicago; ‘Castrato/Trans*’: Thoughts from the 21st Century). Vanessa Agnew (Universität Duisburg-Essen), unfortunately, had to cancel. In addition to these invited talks, there were eleven free papers. Of these, most, it must be said, hewed fairly closely to the traditional canon of European writings on ‘aesthetics’ – including my own contribution (Nathan J. Martin, University of Michigan) on the satirical pen-portrait of Rameau in chapter 13 of Rousseau’s *Essai sur l’origine des langues* (Geneva, 1781). Katherine Walker (Hobart and William Smith Colleges) discussed the complex *goût/gusto/Geschmack/taste* in those four languages, Giorgia Malagò (Università di Padua) considered Tartini’s correspondence and Mårten Hultén (Stockholms universitet) treated the emerging discourse concerning ‘national style’ in the eighteenth-century German-speaking world. Benedikt Leßmann (Universität Wien) drew attention to contemporaneous German translations of Batteux’s *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe*, which raises the question why these translations were deemed necessary at all – couldn’t any eighteenth-century Germanophone intellectual interested in reading Batteux simply have read the text in French? A number of papers considered eighteenth-century opera from various angles (Anna Parkitna, SUNY Stony Brook, and Carlo Lanfossi, University of Pennsylvania, in addition to the keynote addresses of Aspden and Feldman). Slightly further off the beaten track, Ann Holtzmüller (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg) proposed ‘immersion’ as an aesthetic category, Elena Pons Capdevila (Royal Holloway, University of London) considered late eighteenth-century discussions of ‘arrangement’ and Jessica Gabriel Peritz (University of Chicago) used discussions of Luigia Todì’s ‘vocal defects’ to probe eighteenth-century anxieties about female subjectivity.

In short, a fascinating set of papers. But also one that I can imagine must have struck the conference’s organizers as responding only partly to their call. Indeed, of all the papers, only Philip Bohlman’s really expanded its purview beyond ‘Western’ sources, and subaltern voices from Europe and America mostly appeared in the form of discussions of sex, gender and transgender in the papers read by Feldman and Peritz. On the whole, then, we were a long way from the more encompassing aesthetics envisaged in Semi’s remarks:

What I’d like to argue here is that I think we should also (please note that I’m saying ‘also’, not ‘only’) try to devote some of our researches to things we could variously name as ‘Grub-street aesthetics’, ‘diffused aesthetics’, and, in general, to aesthetic views that in the end lost their battle for social recognition, that were fought against or condemned.

In sum, as a group and as a field, I think we could have done – and should now endeavour to do – better. Of course, there are practical limitations. My own graduate training at McGill prepared me to deal with some kinds of music and not others: I learned how to transcribe *ars nova* notation, but not *gongche*; how to improvise thoroughbass, but not an *alapa*; how to graph a Beethoven sonata, not analyse *Kind of Blue*; I read Aristoxenos, not al-Farabi. And I laboriously learned the foreign languages that seemed most likely to help me in these endeavours: German, Greek, some Italian, some Latin (I had school French, having grown up in Canada, but my French had



to get a lot better too). Learning these things represented an enormous investment of time, money and energy. And there aren't many of them that I wish I didn't know (though I wouldn't mind unlearning some of the prejudices and assumptions that I imbibed together with this knowledge). Still, I'd also like to know what the *Kitab al-Musiqā al-Kabir* says, or the various musical writings of Zhu Zaiyu. I wish I understood 'So What' as well as I do the 'Tempest' Sonata. But sitting down, for instance, to start learning classical Chinese now, in middle age and amidst all my other personal and professional commitments, is a rather daunting prospect.

So where to start? I may not be able to read Li Guangdi (yet). But I can read Joseph-Marie Amiot. And I can look at how passages from Li Guangdi showed up, through Amiot's mediation, in Rameau's *Code de musique pratique* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1760). Another of my interests, namely in Rousseau's musical writings, also offers enormous opportunities for expanding the cultural and geographical range of my scholarship. Rousseau was deeply interested in vernacular music, for instance: he had a great deal to say about French popular song (see the entry 'Chanson' in the *Dictionnaire de musique* (Paris: la veuve Duchesne, 1768)) and about the singing of Venetian gondoliers (see Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's excellent article in the *Annales Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 40 (1992), 213–263). Claude Dauphin has identified a creole version of *Le Devin du village* performed in Haiti. Rousseau printed examples of Chinese, Persian and Amerindian melodies in his *Dictionnaire de musique*. And he had interesting, intelligent and (for the time) rather novel things to say – if one is willing to read past Rousseau's own prejudices, and those of his era – in the *Essai sur l'origine des langues* and elsewhere, about the range and diversity of the world's musics. For example:

Tous les peuples qui ont des instrumens à cordes sont forcés de les accorder par des consonances, mais ceux qui n'en ont pas ont dans leurs chants des inflexions que nous nommons fausses parce qu'elles n'entrent pas dans notre système et que nous ne pouvons les noter. C'est ce qu'on a remarqué sur les chants des sauvages de l'Amérique, et c'est ce qu'on aurait dû remarquer aussi sur divers intervalles de la musique des Grecs, si l'on eut étudié cette musique avec moins de prévention pour la nôtre. (*Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, five volumes, volume 5 (Paris: Pléiade, 1995), 423)

All those peoples who have string instruments are forced to tune them according to the consonances. But those who don't [have string instruments] have in their songs inflections that we call 'out of tune' because they don't enter into our [musical] system and because we cannot write them down. This has been noted in the songs of the *sauvages* of America, and it ought to have been noted also concerning the various musical intervals of the Greeks, if we had studied their music with less predilection for our own. (My translation.)

In sum, by broadening our purview beyond the narrow range of musics and discourses in which most of us, as theorists and/or historical musicologists, were trained, we might just hope to begin catching up with the perspective of our eighteenth-century sources. As Herder observed:

To this point in history, it has been customary for writers to focus on a single, small part of the world whose creations, models, masterpieces, and criteria for taste we have extrapolated and applied to all forms of literature, poetry, and humanism, thereby *excluding all others*. (Quoted in Philip V. Bohlman, *Song Loves the Masses: Herder on Music and Nationalism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 38; my italics.)

To echo Maria Semi's query: must we continue to do so?

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