

Book Reviews

Erica Buurman, *The Viennese Ballroom in the Age of Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). xiv + 193 pp. £75.00.

Currently, musicological scholarship on social dance music is firmly built on topic theory. Erica Buurman therefore makes an audacious move by situating this repertoire in the Viennese ballroom in the decades around 1800. The venue was the site of changes in public entertainment from the emergence of the first public dance halls in the 1770s to the era of the Lanner–Strauss waltz around 1830. It has been a rarity in English-language scholarship to devote serious attention and extensive discussion to Viennese ballroom dance music from between 1800 and 1830; as an area of study it has been overshadowed by contemporary operatic and symphonic works and their aesthetic principles. Against the backdrop of the changing world of Viennese social life from the Habsburg to the Austrian Empire, *The Viennese Ballroom in the Age of Beethoven* attempts to rediscover social dance music and its contexts, including its reciprocal relationships with the theatre and the concert hall.

Buurman's goal in this book is to provide nuanced explanations and interpretations for the balls she refers to, bringing life to the social event and attendees and making palpable 'the dynamics of a crowded ballroom' (p. xii). With her vivid descriptions and detailed analyses of contemporary dance practice, based on eyewitness accounts which at times incongruously depict Viennese social life, Buurman chooses not to assimilate her findings into a reasoned narrative, but instead offers a kaleidoscope of imagery. Paralleling recent efforts to redirect the scholarship of topic theory itself to the historical realities of musical topics within and beyond their original contexts, Buurman's insightful and imaginative take on the 'actuality' of Viennese social dance and dance music opens the door to rethink the repertoire as an area of critical inquiry that warrants multidimensional lenses of scrutiny and informed historical evaluations.

The title phrases, 'Viennese Ballroom' and 'the Age of Beethoven', not only serve as the spatial and temporal realms in which social dance and dance music took place, but also provide together conceptual boundaries in which such binaries as 'light' and 'serious' music, social conservatism and popular appeal, Europeanism and regionalism, and reality and fantasy (especially in the Bakhtinian concept of carnival, p. 65) can collide and intersect. Throughout the seven chapters Buurman's arguments centre on challenging those conventional oppositions and the separate handling of them, while questioning the commonly held assumptions on social dance and dance music of the Viennese ballroom. Particular attention is drawn to the standard repertoire of the imperial public balls, which included German dances (in part, early waltzes) and minuets, various forms of contredanse, and the polonaise (performed on occasion). Interrogating the popular, complete image of the waltz as *the* dance of Vienna's ball culture, she retraces its messy history before 1800, recovering a subject that has lost its place in music history due to its equivocal origin and the profusion of terms that applied to waltz-type dances.

Chapter 1 delineates a vibrant nightly social life centering around the Viennese public ballrooms, the scale of which seems quite comparable to those of contemporary Paris and London. Buurman paints an ideal picture of the 'public' ball at a time when decrees from the reign of Joseph II and his successors gradually increased opportunities to mix classes and tastes at the dance hall. As she reminds readers throughout, however, the public ball had a strong aristocratic orientation under imperial governmental regulations well into the nineteenth century, and the attendees as well as the organizers made constant class distinctions by various means besides the dance types themselves. At the masked balls in the imperial ballrooms, for example, Buurman describes the upper-class attendees' 'choosing not to dance' as an act of class distinction from the 'dancing' crowd (p. 11). A similar rule may also apply to the elites who chose not to go to such balls, favouring private ones for their secluded and less crowded environments. More revealing is that 'dancing actually played a relatively minor role during a typical carnival ball' in the imperial ballrooms (p. 25), pointing to other roles for music and different modes of listening possibly involved at the ball. Though the divide between music for dancing and music for listening was 'not always clear-cut' (p. 8), Buurman recognizes the following types of music in Viennese ballrooms (categorized also in Chapter 4, p. 142): music for dancing; background music to such social activities as chatting, walking and eating; and music for listening on its own terms.

The next three chapters trace the complex histories of the standard repertoire of imperial ballrooms – German dances and minuets – and the occasional one including various forms of contredanse (*anglaise*, *française* and *allemande*) and the contredanse family (the cotillon, the quadrille, the *ecossaise* and the *Tempête*). Notable is that she approaches music and dance as 'separate traditions' (p. 33), given that music, both as a sounding body and as an occasion for sociability, could travel and adapt to a new environment, at times without the vessel of the physical dance form (as emphasized again in the Epilogue). The stylistic and metrical boundaries of early dance music were rather flexible and fluid: one type of dance music could accompany several types of dances. Buurman's understanding of music and dance as independent entities helps sort out numerous terms and styles that had appeared as German dances in primary sources, overlapping with a wide range of dances from the early waltz, through the *Ländler* and *Langaus*, to the *Strassburger*. According to Buurman's clarification, eighteenth-century waltz music did not have the high-degree correlation of later, Lanner–Strauss waltzes: it rather lacked distinctive stylistic aspects and fell short of becoming 'the product of the Viennese ballroom' (p. 53).

Concerning 'meaning', it is notable that Buurman identifies it closely with function and sociability, as she posits that social dance's meaning varied according to the performing context and other circumstantial factors. In an eighteenth-century French context, for example, in which the term *German* in general meant 'foreign', 'unsophisticated', and 'uncultured', German dances received a low estimation (pp. 42–3). At the turn of the nineteenth century, however, the changing political and social parameters of the time led to such local variants with distinctive names as the *Ländler* and *Langaus*, signalling the cultural independence of the Austrian Empire and its awareness of nation and national identity yet to come, along with the character of the 'folk'. Likewise, once the minuet was transmitted from the Bourbon court to the Viennese public ball, its meaning transformed from the aristocracy itself to desired 'aristocratic behaviour', especially for some lower-class ballroom dancers (p. 57), and further to 'a historical dance type' favoured by aristocratic organizations that began to identify themselves with a conservative

taste as opposed to the surging Lanner–Strauss waltz and its popular appeal at the ball (p. 72). Moreover, apart from what it represents as a musical expression in music history, the contredanse in practice took place less often in public than in private ballrooms. When performed in public, it was by a small group of elite dancers (often members of the nobility) and as a ‘presentational’ dance that involved a pre-rehearsed, balletic choreography in a ceremonial atmosphere of the court ball. The centre of attention was drawn to the dancing of the entitled, whereas the rest of the crowd became spectators with much less social interaction. Countering the conventional notion of the contredanse as an anti-hierarchical, communal dance, Buurman argues that its performance practice rather enforced social hierarchy, drawing a line between participants and spectators (p. 77). Between these realities and the connotations of the social dances in association with the social hierarchy of their original, eighteenth-century context, Buurman asserts that the social dances’ functions or meanings at that time were not always what they affectively represent today (the minuet with aristocratic nobility, the German dance with peasant simplicity, and the contredanse with playfulness of communal participation bridging the two).

In the remaining chapters, Buurman’s attention moves toward the repertoires of dance arrangements and compositions and their relationship with contemporary large-scale works from theatres and concert halls. Taking the premise of ‘dance arrangements as a genre in their own right’ (p. 95), Buurman examines in Chapter 5 the close connections between Viennese opera and ballroom repertoires during the period from the premiere of Vicente Martín y Soler’s opera *Una cosa rara* (1786) to the heyday of Rossini’s operas in the 1820s. Measuring the success of opera by the number of dance arrangements available, Buurman re-evaluates *Una cosa rara* as a work worthy of more study in opera history. Its contemporary reception surpassed that of Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), and as a source of material it began to inspire Viennese composer-arrangers to use operas to explore their ideas. Buurman singles out Martín y Soler’s inclusion of the seguidilla, a Spanish folk dance which has been misleadingly characterized as a waltz by contemporary onlookers and modern historians alike. Part of the opera’s originality lies in the supple melodies in the rhythm of six-eight meter, which would have been translated easily to such contemporary popular ballroom dances in triple meter (p. 103) as minuets and German dances.

Buurman offers a challenge to the conventional prioritization of major-genre composers over arrangement composers. By perceiving the latter as primary composers in remaking the works of the former,¹ she discovers, and rediscovers, contemporaries whose main interest lay in writing, performing and selling dance music arrangements, such as Stanislaus Ossowski (c.1766–1802), Anton Diabelli (1781–1858) and Joseph Wilde (1778–1831); in later chapters she includes Friedrich Starke (1774–1835), Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778–1837), Joseph Eybler (1765–1846) and Joseph Weigl (1766–1846). As Buurman shows, these composers were not only competent musicians but also versatile figures in Vienna’s public dance hall and publishing industries; without their musical calibre and entrepreneurship their works and the canonical composers’ careers would have

¹ Similarly, Emily Green identifies the composers of arrangements as ‘primary composers’ and the composers of the borrowed works as ‘source composers’. See Chapter 4 of Emily H. Green, *Dedicating Music, 1785–1850* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2019).

been very different. Although Buurman's discussion focuses on the works' stylistic affinities and innovations, and not as much on the composers' networking in performance and music publishing, her section on Diabelli's skills as a composer and as an experienced dance music arranger may help restore scholarly interest in him and his musicianship for their own merits. (After all, Diabelli's calling for a number of Austrian composers each to write a variation on his own waltz theme was not as absurd a project as it has often been viewed by biographers. In effect, Beethoven took his idea seriously, perhaps too seriously, producing not one but thirty-three variations that came into existence as his Op. 120!²)

Chapter 6 discusses the reciprocal relationships between ballroom dance music and instrumental music from the concert hall, looking at battle music dances and the demand for attentive listening more common in concert-hall settings than in ballrooms. Orchestral battle waltzes and later their signature codas had narrative elements with battle noises that appeared in sequence. Buurman connects the rise of the battle-inspired waltz with Viennese citizens' familiarity with real battles, and she views the repertoire as a means of evoking patriotic feelings at the time of successive wars. In conjunction with her argument that follows in the final chapter, 'The Congress Dances', she stresses that the ballroom was 'an ideal setting for enacting communal celebration' and dancing an act of participation for the public at the commemoration of historical events (p. 122).

In this light, Hummel's battle coda from his *Neue Walzer*, Op. 91 (1821) is contextualized within the heightened spirit of Austrian identity from the year 1809 onward and seen as a parallel to Beethoven's *Wellingtons Sieg* (the so-called Battle Symphony, 1813). For their textual similarities (from the quotation of the tunes 'Marlborough' and 'Rule Britannia' to a lengthy fugato in D major as the final ending), and the composers' physical and cultural proximities as contemporaries, Buurman interprets the coda's resemblance to *Wellingtons Sieg* as 'an explicit allusion to that [Beethoven's] work and, by extension, to the festivities in Vienna during the Congress of Vienna in 1814–15' (p. 141). The familiar trajectory of uncovering Beethoven's influence seems to take over in this section. Moreover, as Buurman pushes her narrative toward the theme of the final chapter as the climax, the Congress of Vienna – during which Beethoven had the most successful year in profit and popularity (p. 113) – there is less treatment of the two composers and the two works as of equal standing in the music industry.

Additionally, with Buurman's mode of narrative escalating toward the crystallization of communal spirit at the Congress balls in celebrating the victory over the French, her rhetoric tends to treat French culture and its influence as a tradition of the past rather than an ongoing fashion favoured by contemporary Viennese aristocrats.³ Throughout the book, she does mention French courtly dance tradition, theatre productions popular in Vienna (p. 134), and equestrian ballet and

² For more details about Anton Diabelli's diverse career in music and music business, see Paul Nettl, *The Beethoven Encyclopedia* (New York: A Citadel Press Book, 1994); and Alexander Weinmann and John Warrack, 'Diabelli, Anton', in *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusic.com (accessed 15 Aug 2022).

³ Laura Tunbridge remarks, 'The capital of the Habsburg Empire had been Francophile – and its court Francophone – for music of the eighteenth century'. See her *Beethoven: A Life in Nine Pieces* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2020): 71–2. About the ongoing influence of the French in Vienna's culture, and the city's cultural inertia, see also Rhys Jones, 'Beethoven and the Sound of Revolution in Vienna, 1792–1814', *The Historical Journal* 57/4 (2014): 947–71.

horsemanship (p. 160), as well as the idea of the sublime from French grand opera (p. 128). However, the teleological organization of the book leads to downplaying the presence of French influence in Vienna's culture, inasmuch as she articulates the rise of the Austrian national identity. In a similar sense, the title phrase 'the Age of Beethoven', though a convenient and still catchy symbolic marker in European studies, may send an unintended message that subverts recent intentional efforts to deliver hitherto lesser-known musicians, works, and genres from the shadow of traditional canons and their centrality in music scholarship.

The final chapter draws a broader picture of the role of social dance in relation to contemporary politics, particularly referring to the grand balls of the Congress of Vienna, 1814–15. Recent scholarship counters the tendency to dismiss the Congress balls as a distraction for the public from the political agenda, and Buurman argues that the grandeur of the political-social event functioned as a means of forging an idea of unity between monarchy and public by means of 'courtly aristocratic pageantry' and 'civic participation' (p. 148). While projecting an ideal image of the grand ball, Buurman concedes that 'there were clear limits to the cross-class socializing at these occasions ... social dance was the primary means by which the social hierarchy was highlighted and enforced' (p. 152). From the processional polonaise of the allied sovereigns (England, Austria, Russia and Prussia) to the carousel (medieval tournament that involved 24 knights' equestrian ballet) in the riding school, public entertainment during the Congress of Vienna helped enhance the communal experience of victory and unity, yet preserved class distinctions by the arrangement of the polonaise and its order of entries, the raised dancing and seating platforms for select participants, and the perceived tension between the pleasure of the dancers and the spectators' lack thereof.

To some twenty-first-century readers, social dance and dance music may seem to be highly specialized subjects of a bygone era, irrelevant now that the corresponding social hierarchy no longer exists, and the dances are rarely practiced. However, Buurman's particular attention to venue and a visual aesthetic, lending a sense of heightened reality to the substantial role of dance at the Congress balls, makes the subject ever more intriguing and relevant. Today's culture of performing arts sees audience engagement and immersive experience as important concerns even while maintaining the distinction between performers and spectators. The totality of performance so vividly observed by Buurman seamlessly fuses material elements of visual display and ontological, felt qualities of the liveness of performance into a single powerful entity. To the venue seemingly so insulated by its contemporary social hierarchies and the period so well-known as the era of serious music, *The Viennese Ballroom in the Age of Beethoven* brings both motions and commotions of public music spirit, leading us to recognize cultures, ideas and traditions of the past as still meaningful to our own time and place.

Heeseung Lee
University of Northern Colorado
heeseung.lee@unco.edu

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