

EDITORIAL



Sometimes I worry about the eighteenth century. Not because the amount of music scholarship in this area seems to be waning. To be sure, we've seen lots of activity recently: in 2001 the Society for Eighteenth-Century Music was founded; this journal is ending its eighth year; the range of books, volumes of collected essays, articles and new editions of music published in the past ten years is astonishing. The Mozart year in 2006 and the Haydn year in 2009 gave occasion to many conferences across the globe. Furthermore, a quick scan of the reports from the selection committee in the AMS newsletter reveals that in 2004 ten of the fifty-two abstracts submitted on eighteenth-century topics were accepted; in 2009, thirteen of the fifty-nine submitted were accepted. The numbers are steady.

And yet I get nervous. For example, I couldn't help noticing while glancing at the same selection committee reports that in 2004 a total of 120 abstracts were submitted on twentieth- and twenty-first-century topics; in 2009 that number jumped to 310 (seventy-one of which were accepted). I'm not nervous because increasing numbers of musicologists are focusing on other periods in the history of music. Indeed, it seems natural that, as we move away from the twentieth century – as it becomes truly the past – scholars will become increasingly eager to examine it. Rather, the more general changes to our field concern me, shifts that are redefining the nature of musicology. Eighteenth-century scholars may be soldiering on, but the field is changing in radical ways around us that sometimes threaten to make the eighteenth century seem irrelevant.

For much of musicology's history it has been clear where the aesthetic centre of the discipline lay: in musical works. The great works of great composers possessed a transcendent quality that invited – indeed demanded – formal analysis and hermeneutic exegesis; their study required no justification. Over the last twenty or so years, however, this core has been shaken. It has been shaken from without by the rise of sociological and anthropological methodologies and by the rise of popular music and film studies, which shift the focus away from the canon. It has also been disturbed from within, by the historicizing of the very notion of great works and the great composers who produced them. Two texts that exemplify this trend within musicology are Lydia Goehr's 1992 *Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, which interrogated the origins of the musical canon, and Scott Burnham's 1995 *Beethoven Hero*, the book after which, in Nicholas Mathew's words, Beethoven studies became 'Beethoven' studies (Nicholas Mathew, 'The Tangled Woof', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 134/1 (2009), 133). Crucially, such studies broke the symbiotic bond between the aesthetic – that is, the myriad ways in which art affects us and shapes our lives – and musical works; they raised questions about what it means to study musical works today. Does it mean the study of the ideologies that made music into 'works'? Or of the cultures that made musical works possible? This fissure between the work and the aesthetic also raises questions about the fate of the aesthetic itself: should we strive to explain the effects of art in places other than 'the work', or should we look more suspiciously on the aesthetic – even eliminate it altogether – and seek to unmask its social and political foundations?

Talk of beauty is still possible, of course: it has thrived under the guise of the ineffable, where it is most readily glimpsed in performance studies and in the new drastic and carnal musicologies. In this way, rather than mining scores for secret (or not so secret) meanings, musicologists can embrace musical beauty as something fleeting, momentary, ephemeral. Another response to the sundering of the aesthetic from the work has been to turn unapologetically to the material world. This development has been rich indeed and has instigated new kinds of dialogue between music and other disciplines. Its landscape is quite refreshing, especially within musicology: at a conference in Rome in December 2009 (*Performing Voices: Between Embodiment and Mediation*, organized by the American Academy in Rome and the Max Planck Institute), the scholarly focus was not on the power of the voice to channel noumenal realms (a now rather banal trope linking romantic sensibilities to postmodern ones), but instead on the castrato as machine and nineteenth-



century laryngoscopes. During Martha Feldman's paper the audience recoiled in palpable discomfort at video footage of the larynx in the act of singing – in shock that the instrument that produced such ethereal sounds was so pink and wrinkly. Increasingly, musical technologies are what hold our fascination, are the objects that demand analysis, explanation and contextualization.

This disciplinary turn seems to signal not only the abandonment of traditional aesthetic concerns, but also a reversal of the musical values that have dominated since the nineteenth century. Traditionally it has been common to divide art from science, the artistic from the mechanical and the transcendent from the crudely material. This division is not limited to musical enquiry, of course: in Martin Heidegger's essay 'On the Question Concerning Technology' the arts are represented, in a moment of surprising nostalgia, as an antidote to the perils of modern technology. No wonder that, within musical discourse, those composers who flaunted their music's materiality – emphasizing its sensuous appearance or the technologies on which it depends – have been regarded as suspect. Wagner's well-known remark that Meyerbeer's music offered 'effects without causes' is an example of this. The one thing that any average undergraduate music major knows about Meyerbeer's operatic spectacles is that they were packed with undead dancing nuns, electric dawns, ice-skating scenes and other 'shallow' stage effects. His materiality is inescapable. But more recent scholarship – Mary Ann Smart's and Cormac Newark's work, for example – has been able to confront Meyerbeer's materials on his terms. The wider technological turn means that we no longer have to apologize for or explain away Meyerbeer's materiality (and it draws attention – as revealed by Gundula Kreuzer's work – to the often hidden technological substructures that enabled Wagner's aesthetics of transcendence). One might say, therefore, that research of this kind replaces the aesthetic objects of traditional musicology with technological ones.

My own research is bound up with questions of technology: I am interested in instruments and machines, and the roles they play within Enlightenment and early romantic musical cultures. Yet the further I pursue these interests, the more I feel forced to confront the wider implications of this 'material turn' in music studies. After all, there are some dangers here: the scholarly investigation of machines can become merely whimsical, an opportunity to wheel out forgotten contraptions that captivate because of their novelty appeal. The New Musicology threatens to give way to what one might call instead the Weird Musicology: musicologists risk subjecting each other to a parade of quirky historical objects and circumstances that elude serious criticism because they resist any sophisticated dialogical engagement. Of course, the reason for this gravitation towards historical oddities reveals something important about the normative relationships between music, technology and musicology: it is easier for historians to 'see' failed, 'bad' or novel technologies; functional, 'good' technologies can be taken for granted. Historians can attend to the results and effects of technologies without focusing on these technologies themselves.

This is where it gets exciting: it seems to me that we begin to understand the implications of this burgeoning interest in technology and the attendant fate of the aesthetic by turning to the eighteenth century. Studying the eighteenth-century perspective on technology offers ways of breaking down unhelpful dichotomies between art and technology. In the first place, it reminds us that we need to understand 'technology' broadly. In the music world, we tend to associate 'technology' with the twentieth century: theremins, synthesisers and magnetic tape, that is, those things that involve electricity. But oboes and violins are also technologies. Acknowledging this simple fact might make us question the values and ideas that we've come to attach to certain technologies. For example, in the eighteenth century machines had not yet taken on associations with the uncanny and spooky: the brilliant automata built by Jacques de Vaucanson or Pierre and Henri Jacquet-Droz were celebrated as virtuosic mechanical achievements. It was only in the nineteenth century that automaton musicians began to be seen as potentially unsettling and creepy.

More importantly, though, I would argue that thinking about technology in the eighteenth century actually brings us closer to the original sense of the aesthetic. Aesthetics as it was conceived by its earliest theorists was not the study of beauty, and certainly not the study of art or of ideal forms, but – in accordance with the word's etymology – was the study of sensation: for a thinker such as Baumgarten (usually credited with writing the first modern 'aesthetics' in 1750) it was an inquiry into the process by which our sensations



of the outside world were translated into higher orders of cognition. That is to say that the aesthetic was understood as the study of the mediation between inner and outer worlds, between sensation and cognition, and as an enquiry into the senses and those things that served as extensions of the senses. It therefore dealt in equal measure with immediate sensation and abstract reason. This important sense of the aesthetic was increasingly obscured by the transcendent speculations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

And just as Enlightenment aesthetics began as an enquiry into the human senses, so it brought attention to those things that also functioned as mediators. In music this meant attending to instruments. When the philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder called for a 'true aesthetics' of music (rather than Rameau's mathematical and physical explanation of harmony), he insisted that such an enquiry consider musical tone as it was experienced by listeners. A true aesthetics, for Herder, implied the attention to different effects of oboes, violins and horns. Aesthetic experience, for him, was lodged in the experience of timbre and thus the subtle difference between instruments. Indeed, the concept of timbre itself grew out of this new attention to sensation in the eighteenth century: to talk about timbre is to discuss sound not in the abstract, but as real, material experience. From one perspective this is paradoxical: it requires the ability to generalize about something elusively immediate and particular.

Of course, plenty of musicians and theorists had written about musical instruments before the eighteenth century. The landscape of instruments in the Renaissance and after was one of rapid change, evolution and variety. Instruments thrived in diverse contexts, and organologists even debated what qualified as a musical instrument. Examining early modern organologies, we find that writers only rarely attempt any sort of description of the quality of the sound of instruments. More pressing were questions of the instruments' basic physical characteristics: the authors of these treatises strove to classify the instruments they knew to exist – even if they had never heard them – and to explain how these different instruments produced sound and were played. When instruments were invoked within theoretical discourse, the actual sound of a particular instrument was usually irrelevant. The monochord, for example, functioned not so much as a musical instrument but rather as a scientific instrument that demonstrated the abstract mathematical ratios behind pitch. The eighteenth century thus saw the birth of a new discourse that asked how instruments functioned as mediators.

So: to return to music studies today. It might seem as if the scholarly turn to technology marks the end of our focus on the aesthetic, but the study of eighteenth-century music suggests that this is far from the truth. Indeed, the new discourse about instruments in the eighteenth century did not *correspond* with the birth of aesthetics; the birth of timbre and the talk of instruments *was* the birth of the aesthetic. In thinking about how technologies enable musical production – how technologies create new cultures of feeling – and how music itself might function as a kind of technology, perhaps we are witnessing the rebirth and redefinition of the aesthetic in music scholarship. And if this is true, the eighteenth century, far from becoming irrelevant to musicology, is the place where emerging disciplinary concerns about art, aesthetics and technology might be most fruitfully explored.

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