



CONFERENCES

doi:10.1017/S1478570613000572

IMAGINING SOUND IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

CORNELL UNIVERSITY, 5–6 APRIL 2013

Sound is all the rage nowadays. Historians proclaim the ‘sonic turn’, literary scholars celebrate listening, and even musicologists, now overcoming a disciplinary orientation towards soundless pieces of paper, are becoming less hard of hearing. One might say that our own field (particularly the study of music ‘around 1800’) has been leading the way with a steady stream of important ‘looks’ at listening practices. So the title of the interdisciplinary conference hosted by the music department at Cornell University on 5–6 April 2013, ‘Imagining Sound in the Early Nineteenth Century’, seemed at first to reflect larger developments in the humanities that have come together under the umbrella of ‘sound studies’. And Cornell’s music department – long a hub for work on eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century music – seemed like an entirely logical place to explore such developments. But the two-day conference, a comfortable, well-catered and friendly affair, did not turn out to be an encounter with the wider world of sonic studies. Instead most of the sixteen speakers kept eyes (and ears) firmly on great works of the canon.

The atmosphere was so friendly that the conference’s first session (‘Timbre and Gesture’) actually started a few minutes early, with a keynote address by Scott Burnham (Princeton University). Burnham’s ‘Beethoven, Schubert and the Movement of Phenomena’ began with a moving tribute to the late Charles Rosen, who, one suspects, would have viewed sound studies with some suspicion. But for Burnham, whose affable delivery could not conceal a serious message, the concerns Rosen championed so firmly (issues such as syntax, structure and gesture) were also always already sonic, even if what Burnham called ‘scopic’ language might sometimes conceal this. Using Schubert’s String Quartet in G major D887 as an example, Burnham explored the destabilizing, ‘frighteningly real’ qualities of sound in comparison with its traces as found in the score, asking ‘when does the visual fail?’. This tension between the seen/material and the heard/ephemeral was to become a leitmotiv of the conference. Thomas Schmidt (University of Manchester) followed Burnham with a more conventional yet enlightening look at the role of timbre in Schubert’s Octet D803 (‘Sounding Rhetoric – On Instrumental Timbre in Schubert’s Octet’), drawing our ears to subtle differences of instrumentation in repetitions of similar melodic and harmonic material. Like Burnham, Schmidt asked us to reflect on differences between material script and disembodied sound. In the final paper of the first panel (‘Imagining and Performing Sound in Nineteenth-Century Piano Music’) Hamish Robb (Princeton University) imagined how ‘impossible’ sounds such as portamento can only exist in the imagination of listeners to pianos of any era. Pianos, as Robb pointed out, leave much of the work of embodiment to the mind of the listener. All three opening papers were adventurous and thought-provoking. But their talk of mysterious disembodiment, and the accompanying danger of failure of real material performance, reminded me at least of some master tropes of (mostly German) musical idealism, the mode of thinking in which human performance (and analysis and history) so often fails to get to grips with the real meaning of great musical artworks.

The next panel, ‘“Fled is that Music”: Real and Ideal Sounds’, took these tropes as its subject. In the first paper (‘Beyond *Ritter Gluck*: The Music and Character of Christoph Gluck in German and French Literature of the Biedermeier Period’) Eric Schneeman (University of Southern California) traced the notion of performance as ‘failure’ through early nineteenth-century Gluck reception, showing how listeners unsatisfied with what they were hearing dreamt of a lost ‘real’ Gluck. Anne Lovering Rounds (City University of New York) continued in this direction, offering a sophisticated reading of Keats’s iconic nightingale as performer (‘Longing for an Encore: Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”’). Rounds argued that the poet used the bird as a chance to resist, in fine romantic style, music’s degradation into mere sonic event. Thomas Grey (Stanford University) picked up on Rounds’s avian theme in his keynote lecture ‘On Wings of Song:



Representing Music as Agency in Nineteenth-Century Culture'. His entertaining talk used mostly visual evidence to engage with metaphors of sonic agency, exploring, for instance, how music embodied by feathery creatures is always rising above its sounds – *aufgehoben*, the Idealist might say – to an imaginary beyond.

The second day of the conference began with an intervention by Roger Moseley (Cornell University). In 'Imagining the Unheard in Beethoven' (the first of a panel entitled 'Pathologized Perception') Moseley, one of the most original thinkers working today in the field of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century music, took the audience beyond the comforts of the previous day's hermeneutic approach. His talk invited us to imagine Fontanelle of 'Sonate, que me veux-tu' fame in transhistorical dialogue with Mozart, Beethoven, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Riemann and Schenker about the limits of hearing. Moseley gets the prize for the most original image of the conference for his vision of Beethoven as homunculus at the controls of a 'discourse network' (Friedrich Kittler) between old and new visions of how music works in sound. (This network also happens to be the sonata Op. 31 No. 3.) Ellen Lockhart (Princeton University) followed with an impressive summation of Enlightened and early romantic thinking on the senses ('Incomplete Animacy and Blind Listening in Napoleonic Italy'). Her discussion of tactile listening and image-to-sound maps – that is, what happens when the reversals of sense such as blind listening and visual smell so popular with Enlightenment writers like Condillac and Diderot are applied to music – raised unexpected interpretive possibilities beyond those offered by the standard language of German musical idealism. This bracing session ended with a striking literal return to the body in a paper ('Tubercular Singing') by David Kasunic (Occidental College) that explored the widely circulated image of the newly invented stethoscope as aural gateway to the 'music' of the tubercular lung.

The next panel ('Ceremonies of Sound') attended more than the others to sound as an object in the real world. In my paper I spoke about the uses of sound – bell ringing, cannon salutes and also indeed music – to project national sovereignty in the port of Canton, China, around 1800 (Thomas Irvine, University of Southampton; 'Soundscapes of Encounter and Exchange in Early Nineteenth-Century Canton'). In light of the conference's overall fascination with sound's immateriality, I noted that on the edge of the Western soundworld European listeners engaged with the musics of other cultures as material; that is, as noise. Laura Stokes (Indiana University) also explored how sound generated political sovereignty, in this case in Felix Mendelssohn's use of historicist compositional techniques to give sonic form to Prussian fantasies of a glorious medieval past ('Felix Mendelssohn's *Deutsche Liturgie* and the Medievalist Political Imagination').

The conference then moved across the Cornell campus to the resonant Annabel Taylor Chapel for two papers delivered from the keyboard. Roberto Poli (New England Conservatory) gave a deeply felt keynote paper ('Chopin's Bach: A Music for the Future') on Chopin's sonic encounter with the music of J. S. Bach. Poli demonstrated Chopin's power to use subtle variations of notation in order to draw the utmost out of the piano's powers of resonance without overuse of pedals. With this new sonic language, Poli argued, Chopin drew on the past to write music for the future. He was followed by Mike Lee (Cornell University), one of the conference's organizers. Lee's paper ('The Analysis of Transience: Chopin's Autographs as Texts and Contexts'), delivered like Poli's with great authority from Cornell's Graf fortepiano, drew on the tried and tested tools of an older musicology, combining detailed attention to autograph materials and wide-ranging use of such rigorous methods as linear-reductive and pitch-class-set analysis. Lee's enthusiasm and formidable skills as a pianist proved more than enough to overcome the density of his material. His paper testified to the staying power of the imaginary soundscapes of academic high modernism, in which Great Works still sound pretty good.

The final session of the conference ('Sympathetic Resonances') returned to the concerns with sonic (dis)embodiment that had marked the first. Amanda Lalonde (Cornell University), with Lee one of the organizers of the conference, used an aperçu of Hoffmann's about musical instruments as 'living-dead things' to illustrate a range of early nineteenth-century engagements with sound in both literature and music ('The Music of the Living Dead'). The zombie-like implications of her title and her reading of Hoffmann were meant, I think, to illustrate how fraught the relationship could (and can?) be between



sounds and the agents that create them. Carmel Raz (Yale University) followed with an original reading of Berlioz's *Treatise on Orchestration* as an exercise in early nineteenth-century neuroscience ('Hector Berlioz and Some Music-Aesthetic Implications of Neuroscience in the Romantic Era'). The conference proper concluded with a fourth keynote address, 'The Unheard Masterpiece: Noetic Aesthetics and Political Rejuvenation in Balzac's *Gambara*' by the Harvard literary scholar John Hamilton. Like so many of his fellow speakers, Hamilton spoke powerfully of the presence of sound in its negation – in dreams, in the unheard, in the disembodied and immaterial. Hamilton, however, mapped out a different space for this familiar brand of romanticism: Balzac's conservative political critique of the 'non-transcendent' bourgeois king Louis Phillippe.

The conference came to end with a plenary discussion deftly moderated by Annette Richards (Cornell University). The overall sense of the participants was that sound does matter. 'Sound studies', however, as practised by so many music scholars today, did not figure at all. Instead, most participants seemed happy enough to have been able to use the figure of sound (and its negation) as a tool with which to approach a small repertoire of mostly familiar works. As one colleague put it, what we had witnessed in Ithaca over the weekend was 'the death of the death of the canon'. The canon lives, in other words, and it sounds interesting.

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doi:10.1017/S1478570613000584

MUSIQUE DE LA FOI, MUSIQUE DU POUVOIR: MUSIQUES RELIGIEUSES D'APPARAT
DANS LES COURS REGNANTES D'EUROPE AU TEMPS DE LOUIS XIV
CENTRE DE MUSIQUE BAROQUE DE VERSAILLES, 11–13 APRIL 2013

Though sacred music has long been studied as a central element of the devotional and artistic life of European courts, its political aspect often receives less attention than that of secular court music. Moreover, comparative approaches are still relatively rare in studies of religious music, which often remain framed within well-established political and confessional boundaries. At a three-day colloquium at the Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles (CMBV), researchers sought to move toward a broader understanding of sacred music at court. The colloquium brought together musicologists and historians from across Europe and North America to assess the state of research by working through a variety of specific case studies. What were the connections between political agendas and the music heard at court chapels? Moving beyond abstract analyses of 'symbolic representations' of power, what were the daily routines and decisions that guided the production of sacred music by musicians working for royal chapels? What distinctive stylistic or generic features could be understood as politically meaningful in religious court music? By what channels and media was this music disseminated outside of the court? What was its reception? The conference offered a glimpse into these complex questions, requiring the participants to negotiate political, religious and musical issues.

The organizers of the conference, Thierry Favier (Université de Poitiers) and Thomas Leconte (CMBV), both leading specialists in the field of French religious music, have published widely on politics and aesthetics in religious music. The location of the conference, a stone's throw from the Château de Versailles, proved the perfect setting to reflect upon the cohesion between artistic production, religious expression and political action in early-modern Europe. A concert at the royal chapel offered participants a choice opportunity to combine scholarly rumination with a live musical performance *in situ*. Using contemporary descriptions, the organizers recreated the positioning of musicians in the chapel and chose a programme