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The Contemporaneity of Eighteenth-Century Musical Taste

WILLIAM WEBER

BETWEEN 1700 and 1870 there occurred an epochal change in the balance between the past and the present in Western musical life. By tradition, most works performed had been written by living composers, and often in fact by the performers themselves. Repertoires had gone through cycles of casting out the old and bringing in the new, a process so regular that it was unusual for a work to continue to be performed long after the composer's death. Indeed, an Italian opera rarely survived more than a decade after its première. Musical culture had no pantheon of great composers; rather than honor the past, it spurned it.

But in the early eighteenth century major exceptions to this rule began to appear. In France the *tragédies lyriques* of Jean-Baptiste Lully and his successors were performed regularly up through the 1770s. In England music of the sixteenth century was revived in the Academy of Ancient Music, and many of the works of George Frideric Handel remained in performance after his death in 1759. In Vienna as well, his music was played in conjunction with a broader historical repertory at the private concerts of the Baron Gottfried van Swieten. Most significant of all, after the turn of the nineteenth century the symphonic and chamber works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven became the focus of a new set of concerts devoted primarily to the new pantheon of great composers. Essayists began calling this music "Classical," conservatories made it into a curriculum, and critics defined it as the highest musical authority. By the 1870s most public concerts offered works primarily by these deceased masters, and the basis of modern Classical-music taste was born.

This essay was written originally for the Columbia University Seminar on Eighteenth-Century Studies and was also given at the Phi Beta Kappa Chapter at my university, the Ethnomusicology Seminar at Queen's University, Belfast, and the Social History Seminar at King's College, Cambridge University. For discussion of the manuscript, I am particularly indebted to Howard M. Brown, Orest Ranum, Douglas Johnson, and Jack Censer.

This “great transformation of taste” has been treated only obliquely in historical writing, for only the cult for Beethoven and the revival of the music of J. S. Bach are well known. In most music histories one looks in vain for a discussion of other than the most basic aspects on this subject, in works such as Paul Henry Lang’s *Music in Western Civilization*, Alfred Einstein’s *Music in the Romantic Era*, or Henry Raynor’s *Music and Society since 1815*.¹ The main field where a significant amount of research has appeared is in the revival of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century music, on which pioneering work has been done on England during the eighteenth century, and in Germany early in the nineteenth century.² The most important volume is *Die Ausbreitung des Historismus über die Musik*, the collection of articles under the editorship of Walter Wiora. But even though the trend played an influential role in music history, it remained outside the mainstream of the Classical repertory performed at public concerts and remained largely the interest of scholars.

Before it is possible to arrive at any broad conclusions about the establishment—the triumph—of the Classical-music tradition in the nineteenth century, we must ask the basic question why contemporary taste had always dominated musical life. Only by understanding the nature of the previous tradition can we begin to discuss the change in musical epochs. The question has rarely arisen in music

¹ An important discussion of the problem has been made by Jacques Chailley in *40,000 Years of Music: Man in Search of Music*, trans. Rollo Myers (London, 1964); Arthur Loesser devoted an insightful passage to it in *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History* (New York, 1954), pp. 419-30; also see my “Mass Culture and the Reshaping of Musical Taste, 1770-1870,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, VIII (1977), 5-22. This essay is part of my study entitled *The Rise of Musical Classicism in Eighteenth-Century England*.

² For the Wiora volume, see *Forschungsunternehmen “Neunzehnten Jahrhundert,” Studien zur Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, XIV (Regensburg, 1969). Studies on eighteenth-century England include H. Diack Johnstone, “The Genesis of Boyce’s Cathedral Music,” *Music & Letters*, LVI (1975), 26-40; Thomas Day, “A Renaissance Revival in Eighteenth-Century England,” *The Musical Quarterly* (hereafter *MQ*), LVII (1971), 575-92; Percy Lovell, “‘Ancient’ Music in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Music & Letters*, LX (1979), 401-15. On France see Chailley, “La Musique du moyen âge vue par les XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles,” *Mélanges P. M. Masson* (Paris, 1955); and Willi Kahl, “Zur musikalischen Renaissancebewegung in Frankreich während der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts,” *Festschrift Joseph Schmidt-Görg*, ed. Dagmar Weise (Bonn, 1957), pp. 156-74. Important work on the persistence of repertories is found in Herbert Schneider, *Rezeption der Opern Lullys im Frankreich des Ancien Régime* (Tutzing, 1982); and Christoph-Hellmut Mahling, “Zur Beethoven-Rezeption in Berlin in den Jahren 1830 bis 1850,” *Bericht über den Internationalen Beethoven-Kongress 20. bis 23. März 1977 in Berlin*, ed. Harry Goldschmidt et al. (Leipzig, 1978), pp. 351-60.

history because there were so few exceptions to the rule and, more importantly, because the matter was rarely discussed in musical aesthetics. As one of the most fundamental practices in musical life, the contemporaneity of taste was not an idea or belief, but a given, the kind of unspoken value which French social historians call *mentalités*. This is not one of the subjects that society talks about; it is just taken for granted.³

It is indicative that a few commentators did do so just as the tradition began to weaken in the 1770s. John Hawkins succinctly said in his 1770 account of the history of the Academy of Ancient Music:

Nothing in music is estimable that is not new. No music tolerable, which has been heard before. In answer to which it may be said, that this kind of reasoning is never applied to other intellectual gratifications; for no man was ever yet so weak as to object to the works of Virgil or Raphael, that the one wrote in seventeen hundred, or that the other painted two hundred and fifty years ago.⁴

Music, he as much as said, had no classical tradition. We will have to follow the logic of his bold question as far as possible, avoiding the historian's usual inclination to see common tendencies among the arts. Why was music special? Why did it not look to the past?

Since the contemporaneity of musical taste had no intellectual rationale, we should look into the underlying social purposes normally assumed for music to see how new works remained dominant. I suggest three main purposes: celebration, study, and amusement. By examining these *mentalités*, these deep-rooted musical values, we can understand how musical taste had to be centered upon the present. Though the musical life of the eighteenth century is our principal concern, we will examine it as part of the long tradition of contemporaneity and must therefore refer occasionally to events in previous centuries.

³ Most prominent among the historians following this line of research are Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, as found in *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York, 1978); and Fernand Braudel, in *Structures of Everyday Life* (New York, 1982). On the distance of musical aesthetics from musical practice (indeed, music itself), see Elaine Sisman's interesting comments in her review of *Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Peter le Huray and James Day (Cambridge, 1981), in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* (hereafter *JAMS*), XXXV (1982), 565-77.

⁴ *An Account of the Institution and Progress of the Academy of Ancient Music* (London, 1770), p. 13. See as well *Journal de musique par une société des amateurs*, I/6 (1773), 10.

One of the most fundamental assumptions about music was the notion that a piece would celebrate an event. Rarely was music performed ostensibly for itself alone; it was used to glorify the Lord, to honor personal feasts, or to mark the passings of the seasons. Musical celebration was highly specific in its designation, since the character of a genre might grow in part from the nature of the occasion, and the occasion would become imbued with the flavor of the music. Thus the primacy of contemporary taste: an old work was usually not deemed worthy of a great event, and the rhythm of these happenings governed much of the rhythm of musical composition.

Historians call this practice “occasional music.”⁵ Works in most genres—for example opera, church music, or instrumental music—were written expressly to be performed upon a celebrative occasion. Such events were varied, from personal events in a patron’s family—usually births and namedays—to state events—coronations, military victories, and visits of dignitaries. Such customs went far beyond the royal courts. Much the same practices were followed, if on a less extravagant scale, when bourgeois or peasant families celebrated their feasts; when religious or professional societies held functions or honored their past; or when towns celebrated the seasons or personal events among local notables.

Musical performance was often simply one of many rituals and entertainments held to honor a particular event. Music historians who studied the contexts in which operas were performed have found that the production of a new work was often the focal point of a one- or two-week-long extravaganza of entertainment. In Rome during the seventeenth century, for example, new operas generally were performed at the wedding of a member of a noble household, or a gala event to celebrate a variety of recent weddings, joined by drama, jousting, horse dancing, banquets, balls, and a protocol of gift giving.⁶ At the Hapsburg court during the middle of the eighteenth century, new operas were always produced on the feast

⁵ Paul Henry Lang discusses this in *Music in Western Civilization* (New York, 1941), pp. 296-303, 394-95, 407-8.

⁶ Margaret Murata, “Il carnevale a Roma sotto Clemente IX Rospigliosi,” *Rivista italiana di musicologica*, XII (1977), 83-99. For a later example, see Kathleen and Sven Hansell, review of Hasse’s *Ruggiero*, ed. K. Hortschansky, *JAMS*, XXIX (1976), 308-19.

days of the Emperor.⁷ When J. J. Fux wrote a new *opera seria*, he did so in honor of his monarch's continuing health and benevolence.

Celebration also was the basis of the activities of the public theaters. Throughout Europe their seasonal repertory was derived from the celebration of pagan and religious feasts; generally new productions took place at carnival time when the upper classes left their estates to do business and amuse themselves in the city.⁸ Celebration made its way into the opera itself through the custom of the *licenza*, a prologue written for the specific occasion of a new production of an opera. Thus an opera would serve many celebrative purposes in its short lifetime.

The highly personal nature of patronage lay at the basis of musical contemporaneity. As Gerald Abraham has pointed out, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries few musicians were "employed" in the sense that they held permanent positions for musical purposes alone, with contracts, obligations, and salaries.⁹ People did not have jobs, they had relationships, ties with unfixed remuneration, and in musical life the indefiniteness of these relationships played an important part in the production of new music. Initiation of a work could come from either patron or musician; in many cases the musician offered his work as a gift to the patron and was rewarded by a gratuity, more often a valuable object than money. Celebration generated new works within the subtle social play between musician and patron.

Performing institutions as well usually rested upon such ties. The *accademia* which sponsored opera and concerts in most Italian cities was farthest removed from the highly formalized opera houses and concert societies of the nineteenth century. The Accademia de' Dissonanti of Modena, for example, called for cantatas written to celebrate events in the life of its founder, the Duke Francesco d'Este. By this means the local nobleman and educated bourgeois must have ingratiated themselves into his favor though in some instances the librettos commented upon his private life. Giovanni Martini, the most prominent musician in the Duke's court, wrote most of the cantatas

⁷ Ludwig von Köchel, *Johann Josef Fux, Hofcompositor und Hofkapellmeister der Kaiser Leopold I., Joseph I. und Karl VI. von 1698 bis 1740* (Vienna, 1872; reprint, Hildesheim and New York, 1974).

⁸ The most careful reconstruction of seasons is in Robert and Norman Weaver, *A Chronology of Music in the Florentine Theater, 1590-1750* (Detroit, 1978), pp. 38, 71-74.

⁹ *Tradition of Western Music* (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 84-88.

and served in diplomatic capacities.¹⁰ Thus celebration and patronage worked together and focused musical taste upon new works.

Since the most powerful patrons were normally royalty, patronage and celebration were necessarily involved in politics. The highest-level musicians in some cases were diplomats; in any event the composer of a king had to be politically adroit to retain his position at court. Monarchs used the music which glorified them as part of their larger political efforts. Iain Fenlon has demonstrated this admirably in his history of musical patronage in sixteenth-century Mantua. He has proved that it is impossible to understand the distinctive musical orientations of Ercole, Guglielmo, and Vincenzo Gonzaga without examining their very different political directions.¹¹ Robert Isherwood has demonstrated how the *tragédies lyriques* of Lully served specific political purposes, even to including textual references to figures or events involved.¹² Most historians do not now think that Louis XIV went as far as used to be thought in establishing new state authority, and for that reason his centralization of French musical life seems all the more impressive.¹³ Political interests thus helped create new works and eliminate the old.

In patronage we see reflected the social system which maintained the rhythm of contemporary taste. However, much less research has been focused upon this practice for the eighteenth than for the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, and what exists is generally not recent.¹⁴ Using present-day research methods, it is difficult to evaluate how much the practice of patronage had changed since the sixteenth century; indeed, it is hard to generalize from individual national examples. While Sven and Kathleen Hansell have described

¹⁰ Owen Jander, "The Cantata in Accademia. Music for the Accademia de' Dissonanti and their Duke, Francesco II d'Este," *Rivista italiana di musicologica*, X (1975), 519-44.

¹¹ *Music and Patronage in Sixteenth-Century Mantua*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1980), I, *passim*.

¹² *Music in Service of the King: France in the Seventeenth Century* (Ithaca, 1975). Insightful discussion of politics and patronage can be found as well in Donald J. Burrows, "Handel and the English Chapel Royal during the Reigns of Queen Anne and King George I," (Ph.D. diss., Open University, 1981).

¹³ For bibliography on the question, see Ragnhild M. Hatton, "Louis XIV: Recent Gains in Historical Knowledge," *Journal of Modern History*, XLV (1973), 277-91.

¹⁴ Especially useful are Christopher Hogwood, *Music at Court* (London, 1980); and Alan Yorke-Long, *Music at Court: Four Eighteenth-Century Studies* (London, 1954). For literary patronage, see Paul J. Korshin, "Types of Eighteenth-Century Literary Patronage," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, VII (1974), 453-73.

vividly an example of the old-style, two-week celebration which occurred in Milan in 1771,¹⁵ royal patronage was clearly waning in France and England by that time. What happened to the style of opera repertoires as opera houses were changed from court to public institutions? Did any kind of celebration remain that existed before? How did it affect the nature of patronage? How did the sense of musical novelty thereby change?

When we turn to the study of music, we encounter the difficult problem of how musical life related to the classical tradition. But the contemporaneity of musical taste reveals a fundamental contradiction which demands that we ask some basic questions about the links between classical study and music.

The most important fact about musical taste was that it had no corpus of ancient works. Theorists had tried to reconstruct the music of the ancients, working with the few fragments available, and speculating about ancient treatises. But that left major questions largely unresolved—even so basic a question as whether the music had more than one line.¹⁶ This absence of an ancient heritage had profound consequences. Music had no ultimate intellectual authority, no models from the past on which to build. Lacking ancient examples, it could not refer to an authority of previous works. It had no Virgil or Petrarch; no line of great composers could be revered from the past as were Dante and Michelangelo.

Music, of course, was not wholly unique in this regard. Before the discoveries of Roman paintings began in the sixteenth century, painting also had a limited set of ancient models. And, as Sir E. H. Gombrich has pointed out, “Buildings easily turn into monuments of the past, but their location in history often becomes hazy and the canon of architecture was slower in developing than that of the visual arts.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, painting derived a crucial framework for its pedagogy from ancient sculpture and had a much closer relationship with poetic aesthetics than did music. By the time of Vasari in the late sixteenth century, there was established an elaborate system for historical attribution and aesthetic criticism of ancient and recent

¹⁵ See Hansell, review of *Ruggiero*, ed. Hortschansky.

¹⁶ John Dawson, “Whether the Concerts of the Antients were Sung in Parts?” *Gentleman’s Magazine*, XL (1770), 449; and [Jean-Jacques Rousseau], “Musique,” *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 17 vols. (Paris, 1750-65), X, 899-902.

¹⁷ “The Art of Collecting Art,” *New York Review of Books*, Dec. 2, 1982, p. 41.

works. As Gombrich suggests, such “retrospective canonization” took place much later in music than in the other arts.¹⁸ Since that occurred at the very time when classical aesthetics was coming under severe attack in the Romantic movement, musical life acquired such a system very much on its own terms. Before then musical culture related to the classical tradition in ways which, even if significant in their influence, had to be indirect and unrelated to the music itself.

Scientific theory bearing upon music provided one link with the classical tradition. Here music did have a history—the line of musical thinkers stretching from Pythagoras to Boethius, and to moderns such as Glareanus and Mersenne. But this tradition was restricted to scientific and philosophical matters—mostly theories of acoustics and ideas about the metaphysics of tones. Such study did, of course, bear an indirect relationship to practical problems of tuning and temperament, with which all performers had to contend. But to say that “music” was part of the quadrivium, a point recited in almost every textbook, is quite misleading. Most of what we now consider as “music”—history, composition, performance—had no part in that study. A scholar would have thought it most improper to inquire about an actual piece of music in his lecture or treatises. That was for musical craftsmen to do; a scholar was concerned with higher things.

That did not mean, however, that music had that different a role in the universities from the other arts. Neither painting nor poetry was studied there; scholars’ concern lay in the intellectual skills of logic, rhetoric, philosophy, and science. No one normally looked to the universities for leadership in the practical arts. The tradition of scientific study of music amounted to a kind of general education about great theories and ideas of music, and that gave music intellectual prestige rather as the study of rhetoric did the field of literature. But the study of theories did not comprise a classical tradition. What was special about music was its lack of a corpus of ancient works, and the presence of “music” originally in the quadrivium could not alter that fact.

Musical aesthetics provided another link of music with the classical tradition. The scientific study of music lost ground during the seventeenth century as thinkers began losing interest in the Pythagorean tradition and saw musical problems as a field best

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

studied in reference to the trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic.¹⁹ Learned discussion of music passed increasingly into belles-lettres, where Greek philosophy on the social purposes of music was joined with remnants of scientific tradition, considered on a historical rather than a theoretical basis. Almost all works of any pretension on aesthetics considered the place of music within the classical tradition, sometimes using it as a jumping-off point for a critique of modern musical styles. Since amateur music making was becoming increasingly common among the upper classes, people found relevance to their own lives in Greek ideas on the social virtues of music, and the subject became a mainstay within the growing literature for the genteel reading public.

But we should not mistake aesthetic commentary for an emulative tradition. The core of the classical heritage lay in the textual analysis of ancient works, in the scrutiny of present practice with great works from antiquity; without that, classical allusion verged upon learned name dropping. Lacking a textual corpus from the past, music had only a secondhand classical tradition. Discussion of Plato's ideas of the modes was all very well and good, but that could not offer to the composer what *The Republic* did to the philosopher or the Parthenon to the architect. Musical life, therefore, had to fashion its own canons of contemporary taste.

Some commentators tried to draw parallels between their time and antiquity, trumping up dubious philosophical notions to show how music fit the ancient mold. Even the usually clear-sighted aesthetician Jean-Baptiste Dubos went so far as to claim that "the ancients had the same idea as we on the perfection of music and on the usage one can make of it."²⁰ As late as 1770 a writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* made the extraordinary claim that Greek music was polyphonic in a manner like the learned composition of his time.²¹ But others were more honest, among them a French writer who said carefully that "it is certain that there may be an analogy between our opera and ancient tragedy, but across the shadows which obscure the ancient theater one can scarcely find any

¹⁹ Marie Naudin, *Evolution parallèle de la poésie et de la musique en France* (Paris, 1968), pp. 126-48.

²⁰ *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, 3 vols., 7th ed. (Paris, 1770), III, 46.

²¹ Dawson, "The Concerts of the Antients."

but feeble conjectures on the subject.”²² In the *Encyclopédie*, Louis Cahusac summed up what that meant for the aesthetic status of music. He advised that music had not advanced as far as the other arts, since it was bound to its time by performance. It did not take part in traditions by which “painting, poetry, sculpture, in all their different transmigrations from the Greeks through the Romans, from the Romans into the rest of Italy and finally in all of Europe, have had the same kinds of evolution.”²³

Any historical consideration of music had to be done in the terms of other fields. In 1715 appeared *l’Histoire de la musique et de ses effets* by Jacques Bonnet—one of the first works on music with “history” in its title.²⁴ Almost half the book concerns scientific theories and ideas about music under the ancient Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans. It traces a history of music in court life, from Charlemagne to Louis XIV, examining social customs and poetic trends—the troubadours, for example—in their political and literary contexts. Though a chronicle of music theories opens the book, nowhere does it examine either composers or styles before the seventeenth century, and even the concluding section on the recent period is mostly a panegyric to the Sun King and his age. It is a coherent social and political history, insightful in its own way; but it is not a history of music—of the music itself—in the modern manner.

But did neo-classical theories influence musical composition? The problem is not easy to measure, for opinion is increasingly divided on this score. It cannot be questioned that the primacy of vocal music brought literary trends to bear upon composition in certain ways, affecting musical rhythm and phrase and the relations between text and music; here the classical tradition helped shape some vocal works directly. But less clear is the extent to which intellectual ideals—rather than just literary practices—determined the specifics of musical composition. The Florentine Camerata comes immediately to mind. As Nino Pirrotta has argued, Jacopo Peri and Claudio Monteverdi did not apply aesthetic theories, but rather

²² [Joseph de La Porte, ed.] *Observations sur la littérature moderne*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1749-50), I, 224.

²³ “Exécution,” VI, 234-35.

²⁴ O. Wesseley, Introduction to reprint of 1725 Amsterdam edition (Graz, 1966), pp. xv-xxxvii.

acted as practicing musicians, shaping their music as they saw fit.²⁵

A similar problem concerns the influence of the rhetorical tradition upon music. Ursula and Warren Kirkendale have argued that principles of rhetoric, most often derived from Aristotelian or Ciceronian texts, shaped the early seventeenth-century *ricercar* and Johann Sebastian Bach's *Musical Offering*.²⁶ Through this means we can see one way in which musicians perceived the compositional process in certain genres. But the use of rhetorical terms ought not be viewed as an esoteric intellectual discipline, since they amounted more to a set of practices than aesthetic theories. Howard M. Brown traces their origins instead to the tradition of *imitatio* in musical practice which predated humanistic interest in rhetoric.²⁷ By treating rhetoric as one of various means to musical emulation, he shows the independence of music's pedagogical tradition from literary life.

Be all this as it may, classical preoccupations did not keep music in existence. Neither the study of ancient aesthetics nor its influence upon music generated a historical consciousness parallel to the classical tradition. Venetian opera composers of the 1630s hardly glanced back at Monteverdi's *Orfeo*; nor did aesthetic theory keep its memory alive. Classical influence upon musical composition was sporadic and did not build up a tradition of old music remembered through ancient aesthetic ideals.

The distance between music and classical tradition had important social consequences. For one thing, musical amateurs could not claim as high an intellectual authority as did men of letters or connoisseurs of painting.²⁸ If a few Englishmen collected old music manuscripts, they exercised no discipline comparable to the historical attribution of paintings. The musical connoisseur was more an

²⁵ "Temperaments and Tendencies in the Florentine Camerata," *MQ*, XL (1954), 169-89; and "Tragédie et comédie dans la Camerata fiorentina," *Musique et poésie au XVI^e siècle, Paris 30 juin-4 juillet 1953* (Paris, 1954), pp. 287-97.

²⁶ Warren Kirkendale, "Ciceronians versus Aristotelians on the Ricercar as Exordium, from Bembo to Bach," *JAMS*, XXXII (1979), 1-44; Ursula Kirkendale, "The Source for Bach's *Musical Offering*," *JAMS*, XXXIII (1980), 88-141; Gregory G. Butler, "Fugue and Rhetoric," *Journal of Music Theory*, XXI (1977), 49-110.

²⁷ "Emulation, Competition and Homage: Imitation and Theories of Imitation in the Renaissance," *JAMS*, XXXV (1982), 35-42. For a skillful treatment of the rhetorical tradition in social and political context, see Orest Ranum, *Artisans of Glory: Writers and Historical Thought in Seventeenth-Century France* (Chapel Hill, 1980).

²⁸ On connoisseurs in painting, see Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters: A Study in the Relations between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* (New York, 1963).

impresario than an expert; such a person was indeed ridiculed for any signs of intellectual pretension.²⁹ For another thing, music did not have its own learned institutions commanding intellectual authority, academies in which the musically educated could gather. Almost all academies with music in their names were simply opera halls or concert societies. Papers on scientific or philosophical aspects were given at scientific or literary academies, but music entered these halls only at the behest of the other disciplines, and interest accordingly did not lie in the music itself. In Italy the generalized membership and interests of academies worked more in music's favor, encouraging discussion at least of musical aesthetics on a broad plane. But that was less common in France and Britain, where such organizations were highly specialized at an early date.³⁰ Neither the Académie Française nor the Académie des Inscriptions et des Belles-Lettres had musical members, either amateur or professional, even though learned musicians (Abbé Vogler, for example) were sometimes asked to perform there.³¹ The prestige of these bodies was so great that Rameau's highest ambition was not the popularity of his operas (which was enormous) but the recognition of his scientific and philosophical theories at the Académie des Sciences (which was lukewarm).³²

That music had its own technical language made its role in European culture all the more special. Musical pedagogy and composition were based on an oral tradition. Conducted in a technical vocabulary and passed on by the masters in the trade, these disciplines were not focused upon written discussion during the eighteenth century. While a few handbooks for compositions did appear, they generally did not venture beyond rules of harmony or voice-leading to the analysis of specific pieces of music, let alone old ones. We just do not know what musicians thought analytically about the music they heard or read. Books of musical rules

²⁹ See my "Learned and General Musical Taste in Eighteenth-Century France," *Past & Present*, No. 89 (1980), 58-85.

³⁰ Jander, "The Cantata in Accademia"; Ellen Rosand, "Barbara Strozzi, *virtuosissima cantatrice*: The Composer's Voice," *JAMS*, XXXI (1978), 244-47; Frances Yates, "Seventeenth-Century Academies after 1635," *French Academies of the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1947), pp. 290-316.

³¹ *l'Almanach royale*, LXXIII (1780), 472-97.

³² Cuthbert Girdlestone, *Jean-Philippe Rameau* (London, 1957), pp. 548-49. See also Charles B. Paul, "Music and Ideology: Rameau, Rousseau, and 1789," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXXII (1971), 395-410.

usually represented the most conservative side of musical taste; the intellectually most vital side of that field remained a spoken tradition among the musically educated.

Yet during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries musical life did have its own kind of learning, imbued with a limited historical consciousness—the *stile antico*. By tradition, sacred polyphony had acted as a kind of academic study, as a field in which the most highly trained musicians wrote for each other in strict and conservative styles. This practice took on a stronger historical dimension when at the turn of the seventeenth century the polyphonic style was outmoded by the new monodic style. Based chiefly upon the vocal music of Giovanni Palestrina, the *stile antico* was codified for teaching composition and for writing in specialized academic or sacred genres.³³ Here alone did music—the music itself—possess both a learned and a historical tradition. Musical taste acquired a sense of the past which acted as a reference point for the present, a style whose purity and discipline defined secular changes in new works and styles. Its accomplishment was the hallmark of the learned musician; to write a Credo in the antique style marked a composer off from the common run of musicians.

We must not, however, exaggerate the extent of its historical consciousness. If it implied a musical past, that was not regarded as a classical age like Greek or Roman antiquity. It was not a repertory of great works, but a set of compositional rules. Not only did the rules differ from the music of Palestrina, but composers also adapted them to modern styles in a wide variety of ways. Most important of all, use of the old style carried with it neither the study of old works nor their revival for performance. Though we still have a very incomplete picture of where and how often music of the sixteenth century was performed, we do know that so learned a musical body as the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna performed only works recently composed in the academic idiom.³⁴

³³ Christoph Wolff, *Der Stile Antico in der Musik J. S. Bachs. Studien zu Bachs Spätwerk* (Wiesbaden, 1968), pp. 4-33; Karl Gustav Fellerer, *Das Palestrinastil und seine Bedeutung in der vokalen Kirchenmusik des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Augsburg, 1929); Thomas Day, "Echoes of Palestrina's *Missa ad fugam* in the 18th Century," *JAMS*, XXIV (1971), 462-69; Warren Kirkendale, *Fugue and Fugato in Rococo and Classical Chamber Music*, trans. Kirkendale and Margaret Bent (Durham, N.C., 1979); Susan Wollenberg, "The Unknown Gradus," *Music & Letters*, LI (1970), 423-34.

³⁴ Fellerer, pp. 241-70.

Still, the music written vaguely in reference to this style did seem antique to ears of the time that were so accustomed to Baroque monody. Many settings of the Mass were done in the old manner during the seventeenth and even the eighteenth centuries. Then as religious music became increasingly secular, indeed operatic, application of the *stile antico* was shifted to works written as exhibitions of technical skill among learned musicians. Pieces like these were not written to be performed, but to be studied, possibly at the keyboard, by people who knew the techniques. This historical consciousness was the strongest in Italy, where the old style was seen the most clearly in opposition to modern styles. In Bologna, the Accademia Filarmonica admitted members upon their demonstrating the ability to write in this manner; the society thereby came the closest to a true musical academy.³⁵ In Germany, however, the old style was usually blended closely with modern styles. As Christoph Wolff has shown, J. S. Bach drew upon it in a number of works but exhibited little interest in writing in a distinct historical style.³⁶

As the eighteenth century progressed, the *stile antico* became more and more isolated from musical common practice. If fugal writing derived from that tradition appeared in oratorios and opera overtures, it was many times removed from the musical “high” tradition, serving to give the modern style a patina of learning and a touch of the antique. Simple canons were written for amateurs to sing, but fugal technique beyond the most elementary was regarded as accessible—indeed, attractive—only to highly trained musicians. As an English gentleman said sadly about learned polyphony in 1757, “It requires a very special genius to make any considerable progress in all the branches of that most elevated and exalted science.”³⁷

If we put before us the different modes of musical learning—classical aesthetics, scientific theory, and the *stile antico*—we can see that they had relatively little to do with each other. Musical aesthetics was bound to literature, harmonic theory to science, and the antique style to musical pedagogy. They had, for the most part, quite different practitioners. Connoisseurs discussed the nature of good taste, the most technically learned among them speculated

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Wolff, p. 4 and *passim*.

³⁷ *Gentlemen's Magazine*, XXVII (1757), 544.

upon the ancient modes, and learned musicians wrote elegant crab canons. But only exceptionally did either amateurs or professionals have close acquaintance with all three fields. On the one hand, while some connoisseurs did compose, few of them were highly skilled in the learned style, capable of going beyond the most elementary pedagogical exercises. On the other hand, many musicians had only marginal verbal literacy, and the best educated among them generally had only a smattering of classical knowledge.

The open-ended social structure of the musical profession was partly responsible for this disunity. Musicians had never developed guilds as restrictive or as monopolistic as those in the crafts, since musical skills could be taught so readily, and people in any trade could easily perform for some kind of remuneration.³⁸ It was not so much that musicians had a lower social standing than those in other arts or crafts, as it was that the profession was less closed because of the nature of the trade and therefore admitted many persons from the less educated social orders. Codification of the *stile antico* was used to counteract this. It was intended to create a learned musical elite and thereby grant a special status to some of the most skilled musicians. But that never became an academic distinction nearly as powerful as admission to the academies in science or literature. The limited education of most musicians thus limited the unity of musical learning, since they could have so little to do with the amateurs for whom (or with whom) they performed.

We must conclude that the disunity of musical learning helped keep taste contemporary. Musical life simply could not acquire the intellectual framework on which to mount a classical tradition. For works from the past to be accepted as classical models in any field demanded that a whole array of disciplines—theoretical, historical, critical, popularizing—work together to maintain the authority of the models. That was very much the case in the art world of the eighteenth century; technical and classical discourse related closely, and painters and connoisseurs engaged in a continuing dialogue over historical attribution.³⁹ But music had no

³⁸ Walter Salmen, *Der Fahrende Musiker im europäischen Mittelalter* (Kassel, 1960); W. Salmen, ed., *Der Sozialstatus des Berufsmusikers vom 17. bis 19. Jahrhundert* (Kassel, 1971).

³⁹ Haskell, *Patrons and Painters*; François Villard, "l'Identité du tableau: ambitions et limites de l'attribution," *Revue de l'art*, XLII (1978), 4-14; Krzysztof Pomian, "Marchands, connoisseurs, curieux, à Paris au XVIII^e siècle," *ibid.*, XLIII (1979), 23-36.

integrated body of knowledge and training, and its strongest historical consciousness—the learned style—had few links with classical study. It therefore depended on literature for the conduct of its intellectual life.

Amusement, the third purpose of music we shall consider, was the most basic of them all. Compared with the other arts, music penetrated the most widely and deeply into people's daily lives. It loomed large in the rites and pleasures of the court, the tavern, the fair, and the home; people danced, drank, and courted to it. The rise of public opera and concerts in the seventeenth century simply put such pursuits on a grander scale. Musical events helped people meet and talk as well as listen; indeed, the opera was a meeting ground for genteel prostitution and opera life was imbued with sexual overtones. Moreover, musical life carried over into the home, most important of all into the salons where people consorted with each other to a musical backdrop. Whereas paintings were passive objects, and theatrical activity was uncommon in homes, music obtruded upon everyone in powerful ways both in public and in private. All of which had even stronger implications because people heard much the same music in many of these places. They might dance to pieces in the same style they heard at the opera or were performed in their salons, and even hear some of them performed by players in the street. Musical amusement thus did not have the disunity found in musical learning.

The contemporaneity of musical taste grew in part from the moral backlash that was unleashed. It was usually futile to cry for the eradication of indecent music or musical customs, but over the long term such suspicion shaped the art's social roles in profound ways.⁴⁰ Music was regarded as the most vulgar of the arts—in both the moral and the temporal meanings of the word. Its proximity to misconduct distanced it from the loftier, less worldly artistic pursuits, and that bound its taste to the present. Hawkins suggested as much when he deplored the low intellectual status of music in his preface to the *General History of the Science and Practice of Music*:

Another end of this work is the setting of music upon somewhat like a footing of equality with the...sister arts; to reprobate the vulgar notion that its ultimate

⁴⁰ Jacques Chailley has pithy comments on the ancient senses of music as "meditation" and "ecstasy" in *40,000 Years of Music*, pp. 53-83.

end is merely to excite mirth; and above all, to demonstrate that its principles are founded in certain general and universal laws.⁴¹

There it is in a nutshell: because music could only “excite mirth,” it could not be studied for its “general and universal laws,” and therefore it could have no history. Hawkins’ book began to change all that.

The sense of music as amusement had an extremely broad range morally and aesthetically. This was not true only of music, of course. The mentality which blurred distinctions between art and amusement was general to eighteenth-century culture; such a social purpose was often deemed commensurate with the most cultivated of the arts. As Charles Dufresny put it in 1699, in *Amusements sérieux et comiques*, “All is amusement in life; virtue alone merits being called an occupation.”⁴² There was an honesty in this value which brought the present always to bear upon taste; diversion is by nature present-minded.

Religious music was often termed amusement. Cavendish Weedon, speaking at a concert of sacred music given for Parliament in 1701, urged that his listeners be “charmed into devotion by delight,” since “composers of music on divine subjects are capable of being the most sublime and entertaining, as appeared by our late performance.”⁴³ We must take seriously his use of the word “entertaining” here, not just dismiss it for its archaic quality. The eclecticism by which the idea of amusement was viewed, so different from its specialization in modern values, focused attention upon the present. By the same token French journalists would call Racine’s *Phèdre* and a completely unclassical Italian *vaudeville* both *spectacles*—a neutral term applied independent of the aesthetic differences between them.

The word “amusement” nevertheless meant something special in musical life because its taste was not ruled by a classical tradition. Since musical amusement had no ancient reference points, it did not answer to any high intellectual authority, any academy, but rather to the general public. The world of Italian opera shows this most pertinently, since it was commercial from its origin in the 1630s and rose to its central position in European musical life because

⁴¹ Ed. C. Cudworth, 2 vols. (New York, 1963), xvix.

⁴² (Paris, 1699), p. 6.

⁴³ *Oration, Anthems & Poems* . . . (London, 1702), pp. 3-4. For discussion of the concerts, see “Concert,” *New Grove Dictionary* (London, 1980), IV, 617.

it was so responsive to shifts in taste. In 1731 an Englishman characterized this unlearned tradition in a book called *The Taste of the Town, or a Guide to all Public Diversions*:

The Italians, in attempting to restore the grandeur of the ancient Greek and Roman theaters, instead of the magnificence of the old tragedy, with a suitable chorus, they revived that part which they imagined would prove most generally entertaining; and being then infected with gothic whims, licenses, and trifling ornaments in everything polite; in a place of musical chorus, which was the embellishment of the old stage; they trumped up an entertainment to consist wholly of music, dancing, and machinery.⁴⁴

Here we see the secondhand quality of classical influence on music, and the focus upon theater was the “most generally entertaining.” Yet the writer saw a variety of virtues in it: “I flatter myself,” he said, “that by this time every thinking Briton is convinced that an Italian opera is an innocent and perfect entertainment and may be rendered as improving as agreeable.”⁴⁵ Amusement was thus thought as well to be morally improving—and not in the manipulative sense of the Victorian age.

The primacy of the general public in the shaping of musical taste reinforced the contemporaneity of taste. Since the public did not defer to a higher academic authority, it was not segmented into various levels of learning or sophistication. Values toward music as amusement did not emphasize divisions between the more and the less learned listeners; training was appreciated but not demanded. If anything, the connoisseur had to be careful not to flaunt his knowledge, for neither he nor the artist would dare speak spitefully about the general public, as Berlioz and Wagner were later to do.⁴⁶ Mozart expressed this well when, in telling his father about a new set of piano concertos, said that they would strike

a happy medium between what is too easy and too difficult . . . Here and there are things which connoisseurs can appreciate, but I have seen to it that those less knowledgeable can also be pleased without knowing why.⁴⁷

This comment seems naïve to us since it attributes so weak an authority to higher musical learning. Beneath his assumption lay the present orientation of taste in his time.

⁴⁴ (London, 1731), p. 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ See further on this problem in my “Learned and General Musical Taste.”

⁴⁷ Dec. 28, 1782, *Letters of Mozart and his Family*, ed. and trans., Emily Anderson, 3 vols. (London, 1938), III, 1242.

The social hierarchy of the old regime also helped shape these attitudes. Amusement constituted a set of basic privileges for the upper classes. While all social orders were thought to have rights to traditional pleasures, members of the aristocracy and the upper middle class regarded the conduct of their amusements much as they did that of their fiefs or their sinecures: such pursuits manifested their social status and defined their way of life. While hunting privileges had by tradition been the hallmark of the wealthy classes, with the growing commercialization of land use and the greater centrality of city life, urban amusements—particularly those in public halls—slowly replaced hunting as the most visible privilege of upper-class amusement. What this meant, above all, was that no one could tell these people what they ought to do or listen to. The *beau monde* was beholden to none in its amusements; ultimately, no authority could challenge its tastes.

All of this applied much more strongly in music than in the other arts. In poetry, drama, and the *beaux-arts*, learned authority was specified and institutionalized; educated men and their academies held lines of authority which shaped public taste, interpreting the classics and enshrining the great. But because music had so weak and dispersed a learned tradition, because it had no academy, public taste—general taste—had no such limits. This did not simply mean that lesser professionals such as musicians or journalists could not tell people what to listen to; it meant also that connoisseurs among these rarefied social milieux themselves could not presume upon their learning and dictate tastes. Music was too essential to the daily lives of the upper classes for that to happen. From the assumption that all privileged persons were their own musical judges came an anthropomorphic idea of the public as a unitary, self-governing body.

To celebrate, study, and amuse: these are the purposes ascribed for music which underlay the present-mindedness of musical taste in the eighteenth century. We can see a reason for contemporaneity in each one. First, patronage, being bound to the celebration of personal events, kept new works in the forefront of musical life. Musical ceremony made a ritual out of the new. Not only did this maintain a steady flow of new music, but also its competitive tendency yielded a keen sense of what was new and old. Second, the lack of a unified intellectual life around music prevented the development of a classical tradition. If the absence of a corpus of great works from antiquity was the simplest cause for this, the gulf

between practice and theory and the isolation of the *stile antico*, music's main historical tradition, made musical culture intellectually dependent upon other fields. Finally, the powerful role of music as amusement put authority over taste into the hands of the general public, not connoisseurs or an academy. That and the suspicion of music on ethical grounds limited music's ability to develop a classical tradition.

I have attempted to offer a set of speculations about this vast problem, the outline of an argument designed more to define the problem than to yield a definitive answer. I have not tried to discuss the role of publishing and printing, a subject much too complicated for so brief an essay. My main points are suggestions. The first is that neither the tradition of contemporaneity nor the rise of old repertoires can be explained by a single factor, since each was so vast in scale, so fundamental in its implications. Our discussion of celebration, musical learning, and musical amusement included the gamut of political, intellectual, and social aspects of European society. That the tradition of contemporaneity had such diverse bases as these indicates why it lasted as long as it did.

My second suggestion is that we must study these problems first and foremost within the context of musical, not literary life. Since literary aesthetics dominated the discussion of musical taste for so long, it is easy to view the rise of the Classical-music tradition in those terms alone. As I have argued elsewhere, essential to the new order of musical taste was the establishment of dialogue on music in its own terms, a tendency found quite significantly in England during the late eighteenth century.⁴⁸ To understand why musical life had had no classical heritage, we must first look at what was special in its traditions; only then can we proceed to explain why reverence for the Masters evolved in the modern era.

⁴⁸ "Intellectual Bases of the Handelian Tradition, 1759-1800," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, CVIII (1981-82), 100-14, and "La musique ancienne in the Waning of the Ancien Régime," *Journal of Modern History*, LVI (1984), 58-88. See also two perceptive studies: Bellamy Hosler, *Changing Aesthetic Views of Instrumental Music in 18th-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor, 1981); and Georgia Cowart, *Origins of Modern Musical Criticism: French and Italian Music, 1600-1750* (Ann Arbor, 1981).