

*Thoughts on Writing a Comprehensive History of  
18th-Century Music*

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To approach the 18th century as a self-contained historical entity is to invite problems at the outset. We all know that there is nothing inherently significant about a time span of one hundred years. Centuries come and go, and can be measured from any arbitrarily selected date in the calendar. Most historians are well aware of this, at least in theory, but few are ready to give up the convenient practice of dividing time into one-hundred-year parcels. They have created an 18th century for us whether we like it or not. The concept itself is an established historical fact. The generations of scholars who have devoted themselves to the music of the period between 1700 and 1799 have produced a substantial body of literature that calls for some kind of synthesis. History is to a large extent the product of its own documentation; it is made by the men who write the history books. At one time it was thought that all a historian had to do was to describe the facts as he saw them. Now we are less confident of that simple, Positivistic approach, recognizing that the historian's data, particularly in the realm of the arts, is highly selective and projected through a series of interpretations and re-interpretations in which the writer's taste and sense of values are necessary ingredients.

The first task of the historian of 18th-century music is one of organization—the problem of clarifying the structure of the age. It does not suffice to explain it merely in terms of a prolonged transition from the Baroque to the Classic. In a century that begins with Buxtehude and ends with Beethoven, the patterns are infinitely complex. As Daniel Hertz has observed (in a paper presented at the Tenth Congress of the International Musicological Society in Ljubljana) features commonly identified with mature Classicism are to be found in the Neapolitan opera as early as 1740. Jens Peter Larsen has called attention to the recurrence of aspects of late Baroque style in the instrumental music of the last decades of the century.<sup>1</sup> There is still considerable confusion as to what is meant by "Classicism" or "the Classic style." Frits Noske, for one, is prepared to abandon the

terms altogether. He favors a periodization in which disintegrating Baroque forms lead directly into emerging Romantic ones.<sup>2</sup> In many respects the terms Baroque, Rococo, pre-Classic, Classic, Style galant, Sturm und Drang, Empfindsamkeit (all borrowed from other disciplines) have outlived their usefulness. Larsen's point seems to be well taken when he advises us to "forget these labels and what they stand for, and limit ourselves to the study of the music."

Yet these "labels," inadequate as they are, bear witness to a key problem for the historian of 18th-century music—the problem of explaining the diversification of styles. The 18th century was an age of style consciousness. It expanded the familiar categories of Church, Chamber, and Theater style into a sophisticated system of descriptive terminology. For the 18th-century opera goer, distinctions were made in terms of some variation on the theme: French vs. Italian opera. But other national influences and local schools contributed to the picture: English ballad and comedy opera, for example, and a variety of instrumental styles fostered in Bologna, Venice, Padua, Berlin, Paris, Mannheim, and Vienna. Sacred music throughout the century displays a spectrum of styles ranging from survivals of the Renaissance *ars antiqua* to a type of "modernism" closely related to the Neapolitan operatic tradition.

One can applaud Larsen's suggestion that the proper study of the music historian is music, and at the same time insist that, as far as the 18th century is concerned, the ideas that lie behind the music are of great importance. Theory, methodology, aesthetics, and historiography are pedestrian terms in our vocabulary, yet they stand for vigorous aspects of 18th-century musical thought. Our own historical viewpoint takes its start from the Enlightenment. The great histories of Burney, Hawkins, and Forkel in the last decades of the century do not mark the beginnings of historical method as applied to music; rather they are the culmination of a line of development that can be traced through the lexicons of Brossard, Walther, Rousseau, and Gerber, gaining momentum in the critical journals edited by such men as Mattheson, Marpurg, Scheibe, and Hiller. Similarly, we owe to the 18th century the establishment of a systematic approach to musical aesthetics. Aesthetic views were anything but remote and abstract in that context. We cannot understand the musical creativity of the time without becoming conversant with the

contemporary concepts of imitation, expression, and the relationships between music and its sister arts, painting and poetry.

Another area of crucial concern for the historian of 18th-century music resides in the continuing pursuit of what lies behind the notation. The understanding of 18th-century performance practices is made all the more difficult because the notational conventions employed are, by and large, identical with our own. The baffling elements are those which the early musicians took for granted. Some valuable work has been done to shed light on these problems in recent years—studies such as George Buelow's *Thorough-bass accompaniment according to John David Heinichen*, for example, or Edward Reilly's exposition of the wealth of information to be found in Quantz's *Versuch*. The approach through the theorists and pedagogues is only one of many that should be brought to bear on the task of restoring 18th-century music to life.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Larsen, J. P. "Some observations on the development and characteristics of the Vienna Classical instrumental music," in *Studia Musicologica Scientiarum Hungaricae* (1967) 9: 115-39.

<sup>2</sup> Noake, F. R. *Beobachtungen over de periodisering der muziekgeschiedenis*. Leiden, 1965.