Approaching a History of 18th-Century Music

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Any attempt at a comprehensive history of music in the 18th century runs up against some deep-grained prejudices. Historiography in this area has been done largely by, for, and about Germans. It was perhaps inevitable that they should divide the century according to their *Grossmeister*, with the first half being the "period" of Bach and Handel, the second that of Haydn and Mozart. The division is impossible as history, if history means a rational attempt to seek the interconnection between events. It ignores the fact that the well-spring for the music of Haydn and Mozart was a specific 18th-century heritage *other* than that represented by Bach and Handel. It ignores what 18th-century critics themselves perceived as the breakthrough to a "modern" style: the new simplicity and naturalness achieved in Italian opera (also in the closely dependent area of concerted church music) early in the century. From the innovations in performance and composition of Vinci, Leo, Pergolesi, and Hasse (often in conjunction with the new poetry—the Arcadian Neo-Classicism represented at its most refined by Metastasio) 18th-century music unfolds logically as an unbroken stylistic chain. Parallel movements and new discoveries there certainly were. The perennial counterpoint of French achievements, which offered another antidote to the stiffness of the older style, provides one case in point. The peculiar instrumental flare of many German-Bohemian musicians that came to flower at Mannheim offers another. But the basic stock remained just that to the end of the century: Italianate and operatic. Bach and Handel had little or nothing to do with the newer melodic and harmonic fashions. Their importance for Mozart and Haydn came late, mainly after 1780 in fact, and in the manner of a revelation.

The death of Bach has a sentimental meaning for all music lovers today. It meant nothing at the time. For all that the Leipzig master participated upon the European musical scene of his day he might as well have died a generation earlier. He did not take the extra step that made Hasse the darling of Dresden and of Europe (*Laus Deo!*). With Handel the case is different. Had he remained in the North we should probably honor him now

no more than we do a hundred other Lutheran worthies. Italy coaxed him beyond his originally turgid and unvocal mannerisms. Had he remained to bask in Southern climes he might have joined the Vinci-Perglolesi thrust into the mainstream of 18th-century music. But he went instead to Augustan England. There, musical backwater though it was, he found himself in a land that led the world with regard to the freedom and dignity of the human spirit. To England, as Professor Lang has shown so eloquently, we owe thanks that Handel became one of the greatest of all masters. At the same time it should be borne in mind that Handel in London stood aside from the main evolution nearly as much as Bach.

The terms which musicology has attached to the pre- and post-1750 "eras" are as misleading as the periodization itself. They derive from art-historical concepts of fifty years ago that are either wrong, imperfectly understood, or hopelessly outdated. One hears on all sides, and with the greatest confidence, pronouncements about what are "Baroque music" and "Classical music." The perpetrators most often have no notion about the issues involved that led initially to the choice of such terms, to what areas of endeavor they were meant to apply, or what geographical and political biases they betrayed. It would be necessary to come to terms with all these issues before an intelligent terminology could be developed. Moreover, it would be necessary, when seeking helpful parallels in other arts, to rely not upon the stratifications of fifty years ago, but upon the latest thinking and upon an international spectrum of it.

If "Baroque" and "Classical" are traps for the unsuspecting, how much more of a mare's nest is "Rococo." The very word rouses our prejudices, for who does not conjure up fluttering ribbons, shells, *amoretti*, and all that is endemically trivial? Put to the question of when, where, and how this style evolved, most would probably respond that it was a direct outgrowth or final phase of Late Baroque style, finding its most congenial home in Germany toward the middle of the century. This is, of course, the German viewpoint. Yet an American scholar, the late Fiske Kimball, explains the origins and spread of the movement quite otherwise: the style, which has to do indeed with surface ornament, did not derive directly from Italian Baroque (understand Bernini) but as a reaction to and continuation of 17th-century French classicism; its first phase, of incomparable light-

ness and sinuousity, went from about 1700 to 1730 (cf. Couperin le grand), and is most properly called *style Régence*: its second phase, the *genre pittoresque* or *style Louis XV*, went from about 1730 to 1760 (cf. Rameau) and was an elaboration of the first in the direction of more eccentricity and distortion. If the new art historians were to go beyond this and give us a detailed picture of how French and Italian art interrelate during the same years, how Tiepolo relates to Watteau, for example, we might gain a useful perspective with which to approach the art of Metastasio and his composers. It cannot but be clear in any case that we have put down the Latin and Mediterranean contributions to 18th-century art and civilization in favor of the Germanic synthesis, with the result that a musical "Rococo" has mostly come to be regarded, if regarded at all, as a somewhat unfortunate interlude between the peaks of "*Deutsche Tiefe*." A historical approach opens up far more intriguing and challenging possibilities. Germany, and particularly southern, Catholic Germany, with Austria, was one of the main battlegrounds for supremacy between French and Italian art.

In his recently published *Musical Form and Musical Performance* Edward T. Cone compares his tour of musical styles to a walk through a museum. "We shall begin in the room marked Late Baroque, go on (skipping a small one in between variously labelled Rococo, Galant, etc.) to the one marked Classical, proceed to the one called Romantic . . . ." He then makes a very illuminating comparison between the rhythmic styles found in instrumental pieces by Bach, on the one hand, and Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, on the other. There is a dimension lacking in his comparison in that it can offer no hint of how the styles of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven came into being. That is one of our tasks as historians. We cannot, it goes without saying, allow ourselves to skip the "little room" in between. And we cannot place our sole emphasis upon instrumental music when the 18th century so clearly held opera uppermost in its scheme of values. This is merely to say in other terms that we must not lose sight of the fine model laid down for us nearly thirty years ago in the relevant chapters of *Music in Western Civilization*.

The problems of treating the earlier parts of the century are complicated by the lack of scholarly editions and studies. Even major figures have yet to be evaluated. As the century grows older these lacunae diminish. The problem becomes one of where and

how to stop. Blume would convince us that there is no dividing Classical from Romantic: they are two complementary tendencies within the same style. It is clear enough how this movement got started. Around 1760 there was a general reaction against the mentality of the previous three decades—call them Rococo, *genre pittoresque*, *Louis XV*, or what we will. It involved all the arts, but not everywhere at once, for the main centers always preceded the more provincial ones. Here opera, with its manifold ties to literature, dance, painting, architecture, acting, and costume serves us well as a guide (see "From Garrick to Gluck: the Reform of Theatre and Opera in the mid-Eighteenth Century" in *PRMA* 1967–1968). One advantage of the Classical-Romantic formulation is that the storm and stress movements of the 'sixties and 'seventies fall into place and we achieve some perspective of their relationship to preceding and succeeding styles. Another advantage is that music is brought in line with more recent scholarship concerning the other arts and civilization in general. There is no paradox in the evocative cultivation of Gothic ruins simultaneously with an archeologically severe Greek Revival, often by the same artist. The sentimental idealization is intense in both cases. One of the more interesting aspects of the later 18th century is its linking up with the feeling for the sublime in the old pre-Rococo "grand manner." The painter David reincarnates Poussin, or so Diderot believed and was proud to point out in the *Salon* of 1781. Music invites some similar parallels.

The date of 1800 is an arbitrary terminus yet a valid one. It took a decade to realize what an immense step had been taken in 1789. The world was not the same place after Bonaparte. Beethoven before the *Eroica* and Cherubini before *Les Deux Journées* belong in spirit to the 18th century. With these two works they went beyond its spiritual confines.