

*Approaches to Musical Historiography of the
18th Century*

Leonard G. Ratner

History can be told in many ways. Each writer will highlight those facets of the past which are sympathetic to his own view; this coloring may be personal or it may reflect the spirit of the times.

Over the past one hundred and fifty years we can distinguish such coloring in the musical historiography of the 18th century. Some of the phases have been:

1. A kind of *hero worship*, in the early 19th century, reflecting the Napoleonic mood. Attention was centered upon the great figures of the 18th century, and upon Beethoven.
2. A *dialectic* or *evolutionary* view, in the later 19th century and early 20th, reflecting the ideas of Darwin and Hegel. The evolution of the classic style and of sonata form was traced in order to explain the heroic achievements of the later Haydn and Mozart, and of Beethoven.
3. *Nationalism*, paralleling the political nationalism of the 19th century. Claims were made for Mannheim, Berlin, Vienna, Italy, and Bohemia as playing decisive roles in the evolution of the classic style.
4. An approach which might be designated as *psychological* or *generative*, in which the coloring of 20th-century psychology can be sensed. Basic organizing and motivating forces in 18th-century music (and in music of other periods) are sought for, to explain how the subconscious or subliminal expresses itself outwardly. The writings of Kurth, Reti, Westphal, and Schenker would be subsumed here.
5. A *factual* or *objective* treatment, aiming at completeness and accuracy of all types of data. Present-day technology has given this approach much emphasis; air travel, photographic and sound reproduction methods, along with subsidies for scholarship have made the recovery of data much more feasible than heretofore. The result has been comprehensive catalogues, reliable modern editions, and depth studies of genres and persons.
6. A *phenomenological* approach, centering upon the work of art itself. Traditionally, this has consisted of *analysis* of the

structure of a composition; recently, the idea of *performance practice* has been incorporated, to consider not only how a piece was put together, but also, how it might have sounded to 18th-century listeners.

7. 18th-century music as representing a facet of the *history of ideas*. This approach searches for the philosophical, social, economic, aesthetic, scientific, religious, and other motives in 18th-century life in order to throw some light upon the characteristic qualities of the music itself.

Each of the approaches listed above has its own validity; each is a point of perspective that organizes the historical terrain. Yet each has its own problems and its limitations. For example, the "great man" view can easily misrepresent the relative importance of lesser figures in their time and milieu; while the dialectic approach as well as that of nationalism can run the danger of misreading trends, influences, and the connections between causes and effects. Some special problems relating to the recovery of data are:

1. The immense quantity of data, representing an output of hundreds of thousands of individual compositions, by thousands of composers; and, in spite of the large amount of data available, the gaps that presently exist, often due to the irretrievability of many works.
2. Reading the data correctly. This includes proper *transcription* of the music, frequently complicated by irresponsibility in copying, inconsistencies in notation and editing; *authentication* of a composer or composition, complicated by the exuberant piracy of many 18th-century musicians and publishers; *interpreting* a properly-notated work with respect to valid sonority, tasteful ornamentation and nuances of performance; *correcting* the errors and emendations made in later editions.
3. The immense task of putting music newly-recovered into score; typically, ensemble music, both vocal and instrumental, was prepared or published only in parts or short score.

Each of the approaches discussed first in this paper must necessarily incorporate elements of various other attitudes as a substructure. A history of 18th-century music that co-ordinated intensive treatment of all of these facets in proper balance would be a gigantic undertaking, not only because of the

immense amount of data involved, but also because many uncertainties exist regarding the arrangement of historical perspectives. Very likely, for these reasons, no up-to-date comprehensive history of 18th-century music or of the Classical period exists.

Still, the difficulty of marshalling material and co-ordinating points of view can be overcome if a context can be established that will be flexible enough to adjust to new material or to shifting emphases. One way to attack the problem of historical perspective is to deal with the work of art in its own time, a co-ordination of the phenomenological and history of ideas approaches. Studying the work of art, we would try to trace its life history from the general premises of composition upon which it was based, through the special formulations that give it its special distinction, to the actual realization of the work in a reasonably valid performance. Also, we would try to place the work in its social context, to learn how it embodied ideas of musical expression and how its genre evolved to serve the purposes of its times. To do this, we can determine what general assumptions, what basic criteria, were accepted in 18th-century musical composition. Each work can then be seen as a special variation or combination of the common elements of 18th-century musical rhetoric and expression, not as an item in a category but as a variant of a type. In this approach, musical theory and criticism by 18th-century writers can play important roles. They can reduce speculation to a minimum, providing clues to the scholar as to lines of investigation; they can correct misconceptions that have grown up over the years; and they can indicate generic tendencies proper to the music of the 18th century.

The final object of this view of history would be to create anew the work of art in a performance that had as much of the color of the 18th century as we could recover. History would then be brought up-to-date, giving us a heightened sense of what the musical experience might have been in the 18th century.

When the editors of *Current Musicology* asked me to prepare a brief statement "assessing problems inherent in attempting a comprehensive history of the music of the 18th century," I accepted the assignment with some degree of confidence, but I find that confidence rapidly draining away with the recognition of the extent of the problems that remain to be solved before a

truly comprehensive history of this period can be written. The crux of the matter lies in that term "comprehensive." It calls for a synthesis that, in my view, would be premature at this time. The writing of history is a social phenomenon conditioned by the state of knowledge and society's readiness to absorb it. Comprehensive histories tend to be of two kinds: (1) they can be imaginative introductions to a new field, or (2) masterful summaries of existing information. The present state of our knowledge of 18th-century music does not encourage either of these approaches. It is doubtful that any "introduction" to the music of the 18th century, written at this time, could have much scholarly authority. It would tend to fall into easy, if not misleading, generalizations. At the same time, it is too soon to expect an achievement at the level of a book such as Reese's *Music in the Renaissance*. There are too many gaps in our knowledge, too many primary investigations to be conducted before the over-all patterns become clear. It has been observed that the more remote a period is in time the easier it is for the historian to command it. The observation is a half truth at best, but it suggests one reason why the coverage of our studies in 18th-century music is still far from comprehensive, and by the same token why it will take us an even longer time to bring the 19th century under historical control.