

Riley, Matthew. 2004. *Musical Listening in the German Enlightenment: Attention, Wonder and Astonishment*. Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing.

### Reviewed by Matthew Head

Matthew Riley's impressive contribution to the history of music theory and psychology explores an Enlightenment ideal of listener "attentiveness." This ideal was discussed, or more often simply referenced, by German theorists of the last three decades of the eighteenth century. Attentiveness (*Aufmerksamkeit*) concerned neither reverent communion with music nor rapt attention and silent contemplation; it was neither a description of social conduct nor a presentiment of Romantic and modernist listening. Rather, it described a psychological state in which the attention, as a faculty of the mind, was voluntarily exercised. Attentiveness was rarely a goal in itself; most often, it was a means to listeners' engagement with the ruling sentiment of the piece as it unfolded through time and was subject to changes in intensity, or gave way temporarily to subsidiary sentiments. Riley traces such visions of listening to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (chapter 2), whose concepts of melodic unity and natural simplicity provided compositional-stylistic cues for audience attentiveness. At the same time, Riley notes in passing that such ideas of unity and their relationship to the listeners' undivided attention were already present in Germany in the 1730s in the writings of Johann Mattheson.

Riley sets himself the painstaking task of elucidating what the authors of his primary sources sought to communicate in their jargon-filled and often abstract texts. Riley's readings stay close to the terms employed by contemporary authors, giving his book the character of a foundational study rather than one that explores less immediately apparent aspects of music-theoretical discourse. Given that the sources are complex and contradictory, and that the terminology and conceptual background often unclear to modern readers, this is an appropriate and difficult task which Riley executes extremely well.

Attentiveness is about the mental effort that underwrites a sustained engagement with music, and its appeal to a writer such as Johann Nicolaus Forkel seems to me to be that it allows the theorist to turn music from something one listens to (or produces) into something one comprehends. Attentiveness had strings attached: it was not valued by theorists purely as a state of engagement. In the texts Riley considers, listeners do not emerge freely from attentiveness with their own personal sense of music's significance.

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Instead, attentiveness “enabled” listeners to “benefit” from music’s civilizing purification of the passions and directed them to a particular set of experiences. I wonder if the disciplinary roles of attentiveness (in a Foucauldian sense) could be further developed.

Chapter 1 summons the philosophical context for music critics’ references to attention and describes with admirable clarity contemporary conceptions of the mind. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750–58) is reviewed as a foundation for subsequent aesthetic topics—although arguably this material is dealt with adequately elsewhere in the literature.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2 traces an ideal of attentiveness in Rosseau’s stylistic and aesthetic preferences for melodic unity and for sympathetic identification with the implied narrator of a musical discourse. Chapter 3 re-evaluates Johann Georg Sulzer as a writer on music. Riley argues convincingly that far from belittling instrumental music, Sulzer accorded it a special status as belonging to that art (music) most able to catalyze social progress by animating the passive minds of the uncivilized. The connection of this important discussion to the previous chapter, and to attentiveness, is a little difficult to grasp, but the point appears to be that through music the savage mind can acquire a capacity for attention. Chapter 4 similarly revises received wisdom about the Enlightenment’s dismissive attitude to instrumental music. Forkel, Riley reveals, considered instrumental music meaningful for expert and knowledgeable listeners, but deemed it unsuitable to *Liebhaber* because they focused solely on its “external” features. Such views are then related to Forkel’s programming of concerts at the University of Göttingen.

The fifth and final chapter turns to compositional theory of the 1770s and 1780s and re-reads the now-familiar discussions of musical rhetoric in terms of “techniques for arousing or sustaining the attention on a particular emotion, or for putting the listener into a state of wonder” (Riley 2004:5). For Descartes, wonder was “a sudden surprise of the soul which makes it tend to consider attentively those objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary” (28). In an anticlimactic finish, Riley re-examines some of the warhorse examples from the C. P. E. Bach secondary literature, including the cantata *Heilig*, nudging them gently from compositional theory into music examples “about” listening. The compositional and aesthetic ideas of original genius, fantasy, and the picturesque are referenced here, but we are invited to reconsider these categories in the context of attentiveness, astonishment and wonder. Thus, for example, the much-discussed juxtaposition of B-Major and C-Major chords in *Heilig* (an illustration of the disjunction between a choir of angels and a chorus of people), is read as a means through which Bach could arouse (in his words) “attention and sentiment” (161).

Riley chooses not to explore less regulated aspects of listening or exam-

ine whether composers and performers really adhered to the formal pronouncements of Sulzer and Forkel. The title, which begins *Musical Listening in the German Enlightenment*, implies a broader study of listening habits than is offered. The boundaries of the study are drawn not just by the focus on attentiveness itself, but the fact that all the primary sources are printed, male-authored texts, more or less canonic and official, that have a disciplinary component—that is, with varying degrees of explicitness and authoritarianism, they instructed *Bürgerthum* on how they *should* engage with music and established hierarchal values for engagement with different aspects of music. The opposite of attentiveness was not simply distraction, but—at least according to Forkel, the principal musical theorist of attentiveness—a focus on external rather than internal aspects of music. Internal aspects included the ruling sentiment of the piece and its moral/ethical purpose; external aspects included the tone quality of instruments and voices, and (remarkably) rhythm. Attentiveness was a marker and a means of achieving advancement through the continuum of savagery to politeness.

Future research might consider the gap between musical culture “on the ground” and the theoretical sources considered here. Caryl Clark’s study of listening to Viennese *opera buffa* (2004) is an excellent point of reference, alongside the foundational studies of William Weber (1997) and Peter Gay (2005:11–35). Forkel’s rhetorical effort to consign the tone quality of voices and instruments to “external” elements of music is difficult to reconcile with the evaluative terminology of contemporary critics and musicians. This is not to question Riley’s account of Forkel—which is excellent—but only the extent to which Forkel is a reliable guide to the world beyond himself.

A broader account of listening would be a useful addition to this volume. Perhaps reflecting the origin of this book in a PhD dissertation, Riley is at pains to focus his topic and render it discrete. Even within the realms of attentiveness in music theory, Riley’s focus is highly selective. Riley is aware that attentiveness was not usually an end in itself, but rather a means of sustaining the listener’s engagement with the “content” of a piece of music over time. Given that this “content” was often the sentiment, emotion, passion, or character of the music, a study that focuses almost exclusively on attention (rather than on emotion) can sometimes feel a little cold. It is unfortunate that something approaching a taboo still surrounds discussions of musical expression even when the primary sources indicate in overwhelming consensus that “moving” and so refining the heart were the primary goals of the fine arts. There is still a need for a study that establishes a terminology and a way of engaging with this aspect of eighteenth century music.

Riley stays clear of “new musicology,” so this is not a book to consult on

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issues of power, identity, or subjectivity in listening, though these issues could be pursued with reference to Riley's work. The light coverage of even such culturally-oriented topics as nationalism is surprising, though, given that nationalism is raised in some of the secondary sources Riley considers. For example, Riley cites Mary Sue Morrow's bland account of eighteenth-century musical reviews (1997); unlike Morrow, however, Riley doesn't explore how national character informed people's written responses to music in the later eighteenth century. Another culturally-oriented topic overlooked by Riley (and Morrow as well) is gender.<sup>2</sup> Outside of musicology, the Enlightenment is often said to have invented sexual difference in terms of binary opposition. Given that such opposition involved appeals to the different weightings of reason, imagination, and sensibility in men and women, one wonders if differences in musical "attentiveness" were (rhetorically) gendered in this period. As existing literature indicates, the *Kenner/Liebhaber* distinction (that Riley discusses as a gender-neutral matter) did in fact concern gender difference as well as differences of educational level (Head 1999).<sup>3</sup>

No criticism is implied by my ending here with a paradox inherent but not fully articulated in Riley's study. This paradox surrounds the term "listening" which is an absent presence in the primary sources discussed. *Musical Listening in the German Enlightenment* is a book about listening that leaves one with the sense that there was barely a discourse on listening in the late eighteenth century. Almost all the musical writers discussed by Riley pass over listening itself to discuss instead the results of listening, encapsulated in such Enlightenment ideals as understanding, moral/ethical effect, and judgment of value. In this sense, Riley's study is always *almost* about listening, but constantly shifts back into the realm of musical aesthetics more generally. This is less a fault with Riley than a diagnosis of Enlightenment discourse on music which was disciplinary in intent and weighed down with scholarly protocol. The philosophical pedigree and psychological kudos of attentiveness as a concept lent gravitas to music, and scholarly legitimacy to words about that art, but possibly at the price of rendering listening as an activity out of reach.

### Notes

1. See Hosler (1981).
2. For reasons that are not clear, Morrow suppressed the significance of the many references to gender difference in the primary sources she collected. This ideological blindness to gender issues also characterizes Riley's study (as it does the history of Enlightenment theory and aesthetics in general).
3. See *Handwörterbuch der musikalischen Terminologie*, 1972, s.v. "Kenner-Liebhaber-

Dilettant” (by Erich Reimer).

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