

Sovereign Feminine

Music and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Germany



MATTHEW HEAD



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*For my mother, Carol Ann Head (née Scott),
and her feeling for beauty*

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What better can temper manly rudeness, or strengthen and support the weakness of man, what so soon can assuage the rapid blaze of wrath, what more charm masculine power, what so quickly dissipate peevishness and ill-temper, what so well can while away the insipid tedious hours of life, as the near and affectionate look of a noble, beautiful woman? What is so strong as her soft delicate hand? What so persuasive as her tears restrained? Who but beholding her must cease to sin?

J. C. LAVATER, *PHYSIOGNOMY* (1775-1777)

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Today, references to gender issues in accounts of music's cultural meaning and context are unremarkable, even characteristic of nuanced historical interpretation. As a university student between 1985 and 1995 I could hardly have predicted this state of affairs. When I began reading about music and gender in the early 1990s, as a British graduate student at Yale, gender was at the center of a large, at times acrimonious, controversy over the boundaries and ambitions of musical scholarship. In a relatively conservative institution such as Yale's department of music it was risky to show too active an interest in the latest enthusiasms. Like many other students at that time, I had been trained to discuss music through the vocabulary of music theory, as a sounding structure, and in terms of the history of compositional style. These approaches were common to both my undergraduate studies at Oxford and the doctoral program at Yale, so much so that, methodologically, I felt at home for most of my time in New Haven, despite my visa status as a "nonresident alien." Intellectual tensions arose less from national differences than from the then widespread practice among students of shuttling back and forth between two basic approaches, structural analysis and the discussion of "historical" style. At this distance, though, my sense of having been torn between these two subdisciplines seems comical: both approaches, after all, constitute music as unworldly and self-referential in essence. It was their fundamental agreement that sustained the long-standing rivalry between them.

Starting in the mid-1980s, the time of Joseph Kerman's critique of music analysis and his attendant call for historical criticism, through the disciplinary upheaval of the 1990s (that period of the "new musicology"), it seemed as though the historical approach had triumphed over the abstractions of theory. But this

was true only insofar as what passed for music history was itself being rethought. The history of music, as I had learned it, was paradoxically ahistorical. Music was said to be deployed in, even tailored to, social contexts, and to be shaped by changing aesthetic ambitions; but its very nature and essential meaning were largely thought of as self-referential—as, in the parlance of the day, “purely musical.” This ontological assumption served from the outset to set musical material outside of history. The development of musical form and style, we were assured, just happened to take place in scenes from the past, like a favorite actor’s appearing in a series of costume dramas.

Changes in musical scholarship that took place in the 1990s were many and various, but nearly all of them involved finding alternative approaches to writing music history. A good example was feminist criticism and gender studies, hot topics in my North American context in the 1990s and in some ways transformative influences on the discipline. The transformation was not, however, the result of anything as straightforward as breaking musical codes. Musicologists did not simply discover that music *in fact* contained signs for masculinity and femininity. Rather, there was a shift in academic understanding of what and where the music was: a shift, in other words, in views about the ontology of music. This might be summarized as a movement from text to context, were it not that such vocabulary maintains precisely the boundaries that had partly dissolved. In the North American context particularly, scholars as different in their approaches as Leo Treitler, Gary Tomlinson, and Lawrence Kramer argued that the distinction between music and its worldly contexts, including the context of our understanding, is illusory; for music written before the rise of ideas of aesthetic autonomy in the nineteenth century, it is an anachronistic imposition.

When I returned to England in 1995 I carried these debates in my luggage. They made it through customs, but it was unclear to me whether they would survive in their new habitat. In the United Kingdom there appeared to be an attitude at once less defensive and less excited about the prospects of gender studies in musicology. The battle lines of the North American debate, the quasi-emancipatory struggle over ancient and modern scholarship, appeared not to resonate here as loudly, not to engage academic passions in similar ways. A new colleague put her finger on a characteristic of British musicology in observing that gender issues had a future here but as components of “something else,” not as issues in their own right. The implied contrast between how “they” and “we” approached gender was perhaps illusory, but the point highlighted some perceived differences of musicological tone and rhetoric that required negotiation.

Mediating national differences was only part of the challenge, however. The pioneering and inspirational literature on music, gender, and sexuality that reached a critical mass around 1990 had left my favored period, the late eighteenth century, largely untouched. What place was there in a study of gender and the

Enlightenment, I wondered, for the compelling dramas told in millennial musicology about the dangerousness of woman, her imperiled agency, her containment, and her triumph? In late eighteenth-century contexts, was the figure of woman always a figure of Otherness; was she necessarily mad, bad, and dangerous to know? If not, then what remained historically relevant in the scholarly literature to inspire me?

I did not face these challenges alone: my project unfolded as part of a broader disciplinary process of historicizing feminist criticism, a process that is still ongoing. Susan McClary's groundbreaking *Feminine Endings* (1991), a text I found particularly inspiring, included issues of historical difference in music and in the sex-gender system, alongside a critical apparatus that linked musical analysis, narrative theory, and semiotics. McClary's sensitivity to music as an analog of human action, identity, character, feeling, and desire, and her willingness to prioritize those issues in her scholarship represent enduring contributions to the discipline. In subsequent volumes Ruth Solie and Mary Ann Smart responded to McClary's challenge by setting gender within still broader fields of difference and more specific moments of reception. Consideration of contingencies of staging, performance, and revision revealed that studies of gender and sexuality could help to recover the strangeness of the past. In recent studies of early modern Italy by Wendy Heller and Bonnie Gordon, historical difference in the sex-gender system defamiliarizes musical culture, even to the point that singing is invested with alterity as a release of vital spirit. Both authors discovered that the "woman question" had a long history: that thinking about the nature of woman and her roles in music was not the invention of late twentieth-century musicology. On the contrary, female vocality, affiliated with the body, morality, and sexuality, was a preoccupation of the early modern period with far-reaching implications for the development of musical genres and styles. Inevitably, though, all this talk of women in musicology has caused frustration, not least among those who were doing the talking. Some even abandoned ship. Without subjecting men and masculinity to historical analysis, Thomas Laqueur argued in a special issue of *Cambridge Opera Journal* (2007), the feminist project is incomplete, the male still set in transcendent remove from the contingencies of history. Coincidentally, my study too turns to male investments in, and identifications with, the female sign, as evidenced in the context of Beethoven's authorial identification with Joan of Arc and Johann Friedrich Reichardt's feelings for musical women.

My chosen period, the late eighteenth century, brought additional challenges. Music making, including something approaching a mania for composing, was then so widespread among amateurs of both sexes that a historically oriented study of the period needed to come to terms with this phenomenon. This period also saw the emergence of writing about music as a widespread and professionalized activity, taking the diverse forms of musical theory, pedagogy, criticism,