

18th-Century Music and the Problems of its History

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It is arguable that the first important step in the direction of a comprehensive history of the music of the 18th century was taken the year after Paul Henry Lang's birth, when in 1902 Hugo Riemann published a volume of Mannheim symphonics in the second (Bavarian) series of *Denkmäler deutscher Tonkunst*. Up to then the 18th century had seemed to consist musically of "the age of Bach and Handel" and "the age of Haydn and Mozart," with little but Gluck and C. P. E. Bach in between; that, at any rate, was the impression given not only by late 19th-century histories like Naumann's but also by the original *Oxford History of Music* (1901-05). Even the heroes who exclusively filled the stage were seen neither whole nor correctly in detail, neither in perspective nor in relation to each other and the period as a whole. Bach was just being wrongly re-drawn as a pre-Romantic; Handel's operas were regarded as dead; Gluck was the reformer of opera (and his non-reformed operas of all periods were conveniently forgotten); C. P. E. Bach was mainly interesting as a forerunner of Haydn and Beethoven; Haydn himself was known almost exclusively by his last symphonics and quartets and the two great oratorios; and Mozart, like Haydn, was a "forerunner" of Beethoven who composed music that was divinely innocent and beautiful but lacked emotional depth. It was Riemann's discovery of the Mannheimers, followed some years later by Guido Adler's discovery of the Viennese symphonists, which first obliged thinking musicians to recognize that the Baroque wave exhausted itself by mid-century, that a new wave—of Rococo or sentimentality, two aspects of the same style—was all the while forming itself to mount and break in turn. And this recognition led in turn to the perception that Gluck's dramatic reforms, the elements of *Sturm und Drang* that came to light in C. P. E. Bach and Haydn the more one studied them, and the element of the *dämonisch* in Mozart to which Hermann Abert first drew attention in 1919, were the symptoms of yet another wave that was to pile up in Beethoven and then curl over and break in the flurry of romanticism. Unfortunately, so far as the concert and opera repertoires are concerned, we are still hardly out of the pre-Riemann conception of the 18th century.

Delimitation by centuries is an arbitrary way of measuring off history, but all ways of delimiting historical periods are arbitrary; the frontiers, even the seemingly natural ones, like 1600, always cut across something vital. But the 18th century with its two great "ages"—or, as we now see it, its three great stylistic waves—Baroque/Rococo/pre-Romantic—looks temptingly neat. Too neat. These are still only the convenient abstractions of the historian's mind, and before we can hope to write a really valid account of the century's music as it really was, we need to get further behind these abstractions, find a great many more facts and ask a great many questions about them. The facts are mostly purely musical ones, the questions are also partly musical but also generally cultural, social, even economic or political.

The number of important 18th-century composers whose work we still know only in part is enormous. All but a few of the operas of even such a key figure as Alessandro Scarlatti are *terra incognita* to all but a few scholars. Vivaldi's vast corpus of instrumental music has been well studied and a large proportion of it is now readily available in modern editions, but his nearly fifty operas remain virtually unknown even to specialists. And Alessandro Scarlatti and Vivaldi are not secondary figures. The position with minor but not negligible composers is naturally just as bad; it could hardly be worse. And attention is still much too firmly focused on Italy, the German-speaking lands, and France. They are central, of course, but even if we knew all we need to know about their music our picture of the 18th century would still be very incomplete. British and American scholars do not forget England—though the British sometimes forget America—and the scholars of every peripheral country can be relied on to remember their own cultural heritage; but no one takes a grand synoptic view for the very sound reason that no one yet is in a position to take it. It is only a few years since Barry Brook moved the French symphony into our line of vision, but a truly synoptic view of the symphony in the 18th century would have to take into account also the really peripheral, almost domestic symphonies written in Poland during the second half of the century and only now unearthed in any quantity and published and studied. It is the peripheral countries—Scandinavian, Slav, Iberian—that should fill in the background.

And like the celebrated incident of the dog that didn't bark in the night, the weakness or absence of some particular form of

musical culture in a particular environment may guide us to the true reasons for its flourishing in another. These reasons are often non-musical, sometimes even non-cultural. However autonomous as an art music may appear to be, it is seldom possible to appreciate accurately and sympathetically the music of any country or period in detachment from its social and general cultural background. We must beware of detecting superficial, and sometimes absurd, pseudo-parallels with other arts, and instead trace the noumenal origins of the phenomena. I myself once described the young Mozart's church music as "the precise musical equivalent of such Rococo churches as Balthasar Neumann's *Vierzehnheiligen*"; I think this is so—but the question the musical historian must ask is "why?" What was the essence of the religious nature that found expression in such music and such churches? Of course all 18th-century church music, like that of other centuries, must be explained in terms of religion itself—in the Protestant field alone, in terms of German pietism, Anglican latitudinarianism, and Anglo-American non-conformist "enthusiasm."

To observe and collect facts about compositions, and test evidence for this or that manner of performance, is basic but it is not enough. Far too much contemporary musicology is devoted to this kind of labor for its own sake. It is indispensable groundwork and, as I have already observed, much remains to be done. But it is only groundwork, the raw material of history, not true history itself. Why the decline of non-operatic solo song in Italy during the century, the gradual death of the solo concerto? We must first establish by research that solo song really did die out, that our assumption rests on something more than our ignorance of the sources in which 18th-century Italian solo song is preserved; but before we can go on to write the true history of 18th-century Italian music, we must make at least a determined attempt to explain why solo song died.

Perhaps if we could make up our minds as to what are the grand problems of musical history in the 18th century, we could profitably reorientate and provisionally delimit the directions and scope of our basic research.