

Davies, J.Q. 2014. *Romantic Anatomies of Performance*. Berkeley: University Of California Press.

**Reviewed by J. Mackenzie Pierce**

What might a broken clavicle, a urinating Frédéric Chopin, the execution of parricides, and Sigismund Thalberg’s “third hand” all have in common? According to James Davies, these practices, accidents, and medical woes share nothing less than a concern for defining musical bodies. *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* offers a richly detailed history of hands, voices, and the music they made circa 1830. Travelling between London and Paris with the same alacrity as early nineteenth-century musicians, Davies marshals an impressive array of primary sources, including testimony by performers, composers, listeners, critics, and scientific researchers. By thickly describing the conflicts among participants in musical culture, Davies argues that music was itself as a site on which theories and practices of embodiment took shape.

Davies’s scholarship contributes to several musicological sub-fields, most notably to the study of music and embodiment. Carolyn Abbate (2004) and Elisabeth Le Guin (2006) have trenchantly re-asserted the centrality of the body for musical experience. Moreover, they have shown how attention to performance’s materialities may generate musical knowledge of a type traditionally outside the purview of musicology. Davies is taking the next step in the study of music and body, as he brings a concern for embodiment to bear on nineteenth-century music in a new level of detail. Such a study is especially germane, as the musical practices cemented in the commercial centers of nineteenth-century Europe were arguably central to the formation of ideologies of modern art music more generally.

Moreover, Davies advances a subtle understanding of embodiment. Ever keen to stress the historical nature of embodied experience, Davies’s key claim is that music was a central way of educating and forming nineteenth-century bodies. Rather than noting the ways in which music is always already a product of bodily regimes, Davies assigns music an active role in making the very bodies through which it was played and heard. Music was, in other words, “an instrument for the induction, even acquisition of hands and voices” (2). This formulation should have a broad, interdisciplinary appeal, as Davies convincingly argues that musical performance is important to the history of medicine and science. *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* will also make for intriguing reading by practicing musi-

cians and educators, who will find concepts important to contemporary musical training, such as voice, expressivity, or technique cast in new, and often startling, light.

The book consists of two sets of three chapters with each group providing three case studies of hands or the voice. A major strength of the book is Davies's ability to connect medical history, performers, pedagogy, and even scores into conceptual networks that illuminate, without over determining, nineteenth-century performance. Chapter 2, for example, begins with a passage from a medical dissertation penned by one of Frédéric Chopin's close friends. According to Jan Matuszyński, Chopin often had trouble urinating, but the sound of a few chords played on the piano would ease his troubles. As Davies shows, Matuszyński's account of the automatic action of music on the body was indebted to beliefs about the nature of human sensation. Beginning in the 1830s, the widespread belief that the external world could be accessed through a thin layer of moisture on the hands gave way to a view that saw sensation as produced from within the body itself. Given this change, how might have nineteenth-century pianists approached the keyboard and how did the differentiation of touch, and the prioritization of the individuality of the fingers over uniform dexterity, reflect this view of the body? In partial answer, Davies provides an original and intriguing interpretation of Chopin's op. 25 no.3 Étude. "What kind of body—what kind of *moi*—might this score commend?" he asks (59). And he finds in Chopin's composition an "instrument for the induction of cultivated feelings" amongst the Parisian elite, who would have enjoyed the quasi-automatic, rebounding motions it cultivated in each of their fingers (64).

Davies's scholarship cuts across divisions between performers and listeners, professionals and amateurs, by juxtaposing performance and pedagogy. Chapter 4 considers Sigismund Thalberg's famous "third hand" technique as a site of disagreement among critics and listeners. The "third hand" was nothing more than a tenor voice played by the thumb, which emerged out of arpeggiated textures. Audience fascination with the "third hand," Davies points out, would have been impossible without a culture of visual listening, one that marked the difference between seen bodies and heard sounds. Davies connects Thalberg's performances with the proliferation of exercise books that sought to correlate theoretical knowledge with the activities of the hand and served to "instrumentalize the hands, to form them as an uncomplicated effusion of the soul" (105). Mechanical hand devices, such as the Thalberg-apparat, in contrast, pointed to a view of the hand as essentially inexpressive, as a barrier in need of physical reconstitution. A key methodological step of this chapter is to treat hands as a sign.

For Robert Schumann, Thalberg's hands stood for his repetitiousness and superficiality. For François-Joseph Fétis, in contrast, Thalberg represented the expression of the singular, politically emancipated bourgeois political subject. In this way, Davies shows how debates among critics were beholden to both theories of the body, and, perhaps more importantly, to the practices through which their readers would have trained their own hands.

The final chapter begins with Gérard de Nerval's 1832 "La main de gloire," in which the protagonist promises a gypsy use of his hand after his death in exchange for the same hand's power to win a duel. Davies skillfully connects the concern with disembodied hands to Liszt's conception of the pianistic hand as separated from the body and soul. In other words, pianism participated in a greater cultural change, a shift in the "somatic regulation of handedness" (161). In this later paradigm, the hands' sheer materiality could oppose the self, and hence the hands were a force that must be tamed in the service of musical poetics. In arguing that Liszt's version of transcendental musical performance was premised on the disciplining of the body and suppression of manual labor, Davies arrives at an important theme of the study. By arguing that the ideology of nineteenth-century music was inextricable from labor and bodies, Davies joins both Emily Dolan (2013) and John Tresch (2012) in attempting to uncover the material foundations of romantic aesthetics.

The odd-numbered chapters treat the voice, and here, Davies more explicitly positions his argument in relation to an, in his view, a-historical and essentialized view put forward most famously by Roland Barthes. "Are bodies *just there*, awaiting expressive release?" Davies asks. Indeed, his account stresses how foreign the present-day concept of a singular, individual voice would have been to nineteenth-century musicians. His narrative of vocal difference begins with an assessment of how the castrato became anathema and even a source of nightmares. In Chapter 1, Davies first considers how mechanistic theories of the voice (is the voice most like a wind, string, or a reed?) were replaced by a concern for hearing age and sex in the "the stamp" of a voice. If voice was a function of sex or race, there could simply be no place for the castrato. Additionally, he considers how in concerts a type of powerful and individual voice gained prominence; song in this sense was the "*presentation* of inscrutable personality" (18). The castrato could not adapt to these new theories of voice since he had earlier been valued for his mirror-like qualities, for his ability to express others' feelings through the absence of such expressive qualities in himself.

Davies contrasts these more theoretical narratives with the reception of Giovanni Battista Velluti's London concerts. For London audiences, creative production would be unimaginable for someone incapable of

sexual reproduction, and Velluti's performances played into worries about effeminacy and dandyism as well. The London audience "extrapolate[d] backward, from sonority heard to the situation of the expressive body that generated it" (31). For modern listeners, the castrato is also encountered through his absence. But Davies draws on a score published with annotations that reflect Velluti's vocal style. His reading provides intriguing evidence about how Velluti's individuality was expressed through selections from a "vocal armory" of grupetti, trilli, and mordenti among ornamental figures. Yet it was precisely this combinatorial and seemingly un-individual vocal style that London audiences found incompatible with their theories of the body.

Chapter 3 considers the first use of the term "diva" to refer to an operatic star. Or rather, to *two* operatic stars, as it was the duet of Maria Malibran and Henriette Sontag that first earned the epithet. Criticism of their duo stressed the co-constitutive nature of the performance. Often critics appealed rather directly to sexual imagery, leading to florid descriptions of the comingled bodies and even pornographic literature on Sontag. In this way, the Malibran-Sontag duo and its reception contributed to the interpretation of voices as markers of sexual difference. Davies follows the "undoing" of the operatic diva and her dispersal through myths, commodification, and ultimately identification of the operatic voice with the body itself. Malibran was commonly believed to have been killed by her own voice, and the concerts preceding her death were especially popular because they allowed the audience to witness this demise.

The concluding chapter on voice (chapter 5) offers an examination of the search for voice, that is, the search for a single voice, located deep inside of the body. Earlier, a singer would cultivate a plurality of voices, treating these much like instruments. A failure to achieve multi-voicedness was considered a weakness and evidence of a lack in training. Medical and pedagogical attempts to locate the voice pushed it deeper into the body, allowing a change from an "instrumental to relational experience of voice" (139). To conclude, Davies brings the discussion of individual voice to reflect on national voice, drawing on the collaboration between Adolphe Nourrit and Joseph Mainzer, in which untrained French voices were to be made capable of singing. This new French voice would be the bulwark of French identity. Ultimately, for Davies, such attempts only go to show the inherently politicized nature of voice, but it is a politics independent of any inherent or natural relation between bodies and vocal production.

*Romantic Anatomies of Performance* is characterized by a creative and productive messiness. While each of Davies's chapters advances compelling theses, each also engages with the historical record in its full complexity,

rarely attempting to force source materials into tidy narratives. His writing imparts a wonderful sense of the contradictions and disagreements that must have characterized music circa 1830. Any attempt at thick description, however, must come to terms with a basic tension, for while the author wishes to represent the complexities of the materials themselves, she is also under pressure to convince the readers that these (often unconventional) sources are worthy of attention in the first place. One of the ways Davies resolves this tension is by positioning his work as an excavation of present-day beliefs about the hands and the voice. In the concluding section, he summarizes that his “claim is that the commonplace matters of musical understanding that we so triumphantly inherit are in fact crossed by contradiction. Many of the most orthodox assumptions about expressive performance . . . have disconcerting beginnings” (181). In the case of pianism, he draws an even more explicit parallel between the 1830s and present-day practice: “The story of Liszt’s long-suffering hand would be only mildly amusing, of course, were it not that twenty-first-century keyboard pedagogy and practice *tout court* is still so in thrall to the fiction, originally promulgated in relation to Liszt, that pianists must work beyond their hands” (176). He goes on to suggest that conservatories, music teachers, and musicologists may be responsible for the long life of this practice. Intriguingly, Davies shows how a period of embodied contradictions gave way to the dominance of a single approach to the pianistic body, one that has lasted for nearly 200 years. This is one of the few cases in which Davies mentions continuities instead of changes or disruptions. To be sure, a detailed explanation of *why* we are still in the thralls of Liszt’s pianism would be a book unto itself (see Hamilton 2008 for one potential account), but its emergence as a concluding theme suggests a more fundamental methodological concern: while the framing of the book suggests that the discontinuities and complexities of embodiment could adhere in any time period, the text’s methodology—with its attention to the rich world of printed materials generated in Paris and London—is perhaps more nearly specific to the “capitals of the nineteenth century,” in which theories of productivity, citizenship, and labor fomented.

#### References

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