THE IDEA OF TIMBRE IN THE AGE OF HAYDN

A Dissertation
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Doctor of Philosophy

by
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At the end of the 18th century, instrumental music, formerly subordinate to vocal music and shackled to the doctrine of imitation, dramatically emerged as a new and powerful form or art, capable of expression. Many scholars today turn to developments in aesthetic philosophy—the birth of German Idealism, “absolute music,” or Kantian formalism—to explain the changing perception of instrumental music. Such explanations, though they illuminate important aspects of contemporary philosophy, ultimately blind us to fascinating developments in musical practice. This dissertation locates the heart of this transformation not in philosophical aesthetics, but in the musical medium itself, specifically focusing on the birth of the concept of timbre and the ensuing transformations to musical discourse.

Tracing the concept of timbre from its birth in the writings of Rousseau through its crystallization in the early 19th century with the emergence of “orchestra machines” and a widespread obsession with effect, the dissertation explores the impact of the new focus on the musical medium in different registers of musical culture. The project examines the use of the metaphor of color borrowed from painting and Newtonian science, the philosophical attitudes towards transience and
sensation in the writings of Kant and Herder, ideas of composition and orchestration in music treatises, and composers’ new uses for the orchestra through close analysis of Haydn’s style of orchestration in the 1790s. In addition, the dissertation draws upon as resources many now-forgotten instruments that were invented in this period. Celebrated in their day, these instruments serve as invaluable repositories of the sonorities that captured the 18th- and early 19th-century ear.

These changes in musical practice were fueled by the solidification of the orchestra as a concept, musical body, and institution. Whereas earlier critics likened instrumental sonorities to random paint splatters, later thinkers emphasized the individual character and inherent expressive capacity of each instrument. Only after this radical reevaluation of its foundations could music begin to be recognized as a means to connect with the human heart and mind.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in 1977 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Emily Dolan attended the University of Minnesota between 1993 and 1999. She studied classics, music, and philosophy, graduating with B.A. *summa cum laude* in Latin. In 2000, Dolan began her studies at Cornell University, where she worked with Neal Zaslaw, Richard Leppert, Annette Richards, and James Webster. She has presented papers at conferences including the national and chapter meetings of the American Musicological Society, the British and American Societies for Eighteenth Century Music, the International Association for Popular Music Studies, and at the Research Center for Social Common Capital at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan. Her article, “The Origins of the Orchestra Machine” appeared in *Current Musicology* in the fall of 2003. In 2005, Dolan received an Alvin H. Johnson AMS-50 dissertation fellowship. Dolan will begin a position as assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania in the fall of 2006.
To my mother and the memory of my father,
for everything.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch iii
Acknowledgements v
List of Figures x
List of Musical Examples xi
Preface xii

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: Paint Splatters and Ocular Harpsichords: the Metaphor of Color in Musical Discourse 10
Musical aesthetics in the 18th century: music’s flexible identity
Criticisms against instrumental music
Musical Science and the ocular harpsichord
Design, color, melody, & harmony
Random splatters and obscuring shadows
The metaphor settles in

Chapter 2: The Birth of “Timbre” 60
18th-century notions of beautiful sonority
The glass harmonica as mediator
Instruments and beauty
Mozart’s Beautiful Orchestration
A new conception of orchestral sonority emerges
Variety, nuance, and the symphony
Timbre and Klangfarbe
Case studies: Mozart and Haydn
   Mozart K. 617
   Haydn, Symphony 100 “Military” & Symphony 94 “Surprise”
Chapter 3: Towards a Musical Monadology: Embracing the Sensation of Sound

Kant’s difficulty with musical sensation
Rameau’s *corps sonore* and Herder’s monads
   Herder and the fourth *Kritische Wäldchen*
Herder’s later thought & *Kalligone*
The little clavichords in our souls
Other “early romantics” who embraced tone
   Mere romantic rapture?
Tones redeemed

Chapter 4: “Effect! Effect!”: Immediacy and Early 19th-Century Musical Practice

Clamoring for (and against) orchestral effect
The Invention of the Orchestra Machine
The Problem with Orchestral Sonorities
   The Wind Instruments
   The Idea of Form

Bibliography
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Newton’s color wheel with musical pitches</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Newton’s color-tone scale</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Newton’s color “tonic triad”</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Castel’s color-scale</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Voltaire, <em>Table des couleurs &amp; des tons de la Musique</em></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Thomas Anton Kunz’s Orchestron</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Franz Leppich’s Panmelodion</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Johann Strasser’s Mechanical Orchestra</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Gurk’s Panharmonicon</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>London Advertisement for Gurk’s Panharmonicon</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

2.1: Mozart, Adagio and Rondo, K. 617, mm. 53-56 114
2.2: Mozart, Adagio and Rondo, K. 617, mm. 196-205 115
2.3: Mozart Adagio and Rondo, K. 617, mm. 1-3 116
2.4: Mozart, Adagio and Rondo, K. 617, mm. 17-20 117
2.5: Mozart, Adagio and Rondo, K. 617, mm. 76-90 119
2.6: Mozart, Adagio and Rondo, K. 617, mm. 91-93 & 178-180 120
2.7: Haydn, Symphony 100 in G major, "Military," i, mm. 24-31 123
2.8: Haydn, Symphony 100, i, mm. 32-38 124
2.9: Haydn, Symphony 100, i, mm. 39-48 125
2.10: Haydn, Symphony 94 in G major, “Surprise”, ii, mm. 1-16 128
2.11: Haydn, Symphony n. 94, II, mm. 75-81 130
2.12: Haydn, Symphony n. 94, II, mm. 107-115 131
PREFACE

The title of this dissertation reflects the initial plan for the project, which included a chapter devoted to Haydn’s “London” Symphonies. This chapter was cut, but Haydn’s role in the formation of a new orchestral aesthetic remained central to this project. Because Haydn’s presence permeates the remaining chapters, I kept the original title.

I have been asked on several occasions how I originally thought of this topic. In January 2000, shortly after I had mailed in my applications to graduate school, I was driving with a friend when our conversation was brought to halt by curious tones on the radio. We listened with rapt attention to a piece of music that was certainly classical, but performed on an unusual-sounding instrument. I later learned that it was a glass harmonica, an instrument invented by Benjamin Franklin in 1761; the piece of music was Mozart’s Adagio and Rondo K617. I was intrigued by the instrument itself (which later became the subject of my research); even more so, I was struck by my reaction to the music. What did it mean to be that captivated by the immediate sound of an instrument? Was that simply because I had never heard it before? How did people listen to the instrument in Mozart’s time? What about other instruments? Did inventors produce other instruments with such striking timbres? These queries led to the question that became the frame for this dissertation: when did people start to talk about timbre apart from performance? Exploring this question has been enormously enjoyable, and I often think back to that fortuitous car ride six years ago.