

RECERCARE

XXXI/1-2 2019



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Memory of the past and perception of sound in the Renaissance:
the Aristotelian perspective

What did embracing a humanist perspective signify for a musician of the late sixteenth century? The question is complex and a comprehensive answer is impossible. However, if a humanist perspective is, first and foremost, an anthropological perspective, perhaps it is possible to illuminate a central aspect of this humanist-oriented anthropology: memory. If the sense of the past and the sense of the new are linked by memory, how does memory operate to produce both the past and the new?

It is broadly recognised that the earliest statements apparently suggesting a musical ‘renewal’ — those of Martin Le Franc and Johannes Tinctoris — are also considered important steps in the construction of music as an *ars poetica*, a work-creating practice with its own history and protagonists, although the long-term influence of this new conception remains an open question.¹ Moreover, historical musicology has often considered the relationship between Renaissance music and the past to be extremely problematic. Why? Jessie Ann Owens gives us a widely accepted answer:²

Even given the very real limits to our understanding of the musical ‘canon’ at various times and places, it is clear that musicians in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries [...] had a restricted view of the past. Music had an immediate past, but no distant past beyond the span of human memory.

1. REINHARD STROHM, “Music, Humanism, and the idea of ‘rebirth’ of the arts”, *The New Oxford History of Music*, III: *Musica as concept and practice in the late Middle Ages*, ed. Reinhard Strohm and Bonnie J. Blackburn, London, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 346–404: 360–385.

2. JESSIE ANN OWENS, “Music historiography and the definition of Renaissance”, *Notes*, second series, XLVII, 1990, pp. 305–330: 324. The periodisation by writers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is summarised in Table 1 (pp. 320–321).

Can we share Owens's conclusion? It certainly appears to be consistent with the conditions that produced it; for historical musicology, the musical past consists mainly of the relationship between *author* and *work*, and even the most methodologically advanced histories of music cannot ignore this dyad. Nevertheless, our conception of the musical past and that of Renaissance musicians and theoreticians could be significantly different.

As Owens rightly says, the musical past cannot be seen on the walls of churches,³ or, to paraphrase Leonardo da Vinci, in the cathedral windows that give eternity to figurative art, but, as Burney states, the musical past can be recovered in the libraries that conserve the books of the theoretical tradition.⁴

From the decline of the Roman empire to the period under consideration [i.e., music after the invention of printing], but few names of great musicians have come down to us, though there cannot be the least doubt but that every age and country in which arts and sciences have been cultivated had their favourite and popular musicians, who contributed more to the delight of their contemporaries than the rest of their brethren. But practical musicians and performers, however wonderful their powers, are unable, from the transient state of their art, to give permanence to their fame: age, infirmities, and new phenomena soon complete its destruction. To the reputation of a theorist, indeed, longevity is insured by means of books, which become obsolete more slowly than musical compositions. Tradition only whispers, for a short time, the name and abilities of a mere performer, however exquisite the delight which his talents afforded to those who heard him; whereas, a theory once committed to paper and established lives, at least in libraries, as long as the language in which it was written. We are now not certain that Boethius could play a tune or sing a song; and yet, his name is recorded in every treatise which subsequent ages have produced on the subject of music. Nor are we sure that Guido and John de Muris were great composers or performers, and yet their names are embalmed in a way that will render them more durable than the mummies of Egypt.

These words reveal a sensitivity in grasping the essence of the memory of music that more recent epochs have no longer shown; perhaps the link between Burney's mentality and that of Renaissance musicians had not yet

3. OWENS, "Music historiography and the definition of Renaissance", p. 323.

4. CHARLES BURNEY, *A general history of music from the earliest ages to the present* (London, 1776–89), 2d ed. with notes by Frank Mercer, New York, Foulis, 1935, reprint New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1957, vol. 1, pp. 705–706.

been completely severed. The passages analysed by musicologists in search of a relationship with musical works of the past are indeed frequently short discursive extrapolations from other discourses in those very books, conserved on the shelves of those very libraries. But what about these other discourses in which the sporadic citations of musical works and authors are found? Do they not perhaps speak of the musical past? Do they not perhaps represent the memory of music?

Since musical sources do not sufficiently document what for us is the centrality of recollection in relation to the concept of work, which continues to strongly influence the status of our discipline, “music had an immediate past, but no distant past beyond the span of human memory”.⁵

For instance, in 1601 at the University of Krakow the *de examine magistrandorum* for the disciplines of arithmetic and music was based on discussion of *propositiones* taken from the fourteenth-century treatises of Johannes de Muris, after which each of the candidates would play some melodies on the monochord.⁶ The musical treatises of de Muris continued to be used in the same university until at least 1745.⁷ Does music really have so much difficulty in recollection? Certainly, it is easy to dismiss this episode as the survival of an erudite and fossilised theoretical tradition, but perhaps instead it is simply the consequence of the scientific status of music: in the same exam the knowledge of geometry was verified with reference to Euclid. For the *magistri* of the University of Krakow, even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, music wasn't so very different from geometry, nor Euclid from de Muris.

The scientific status of the discipline influences thought, imagination, mentality and even sound much more profoundly than one might think. Consequently, the past we find in the musical treatises cannot be regarded merely as the past of musical theory but rather *as the only conceivable past* of the discipline of music in its entirety. This apparent immobility conceals a

5. OWENS, “Music historiography and the definition of Renaissance”, p. 324.

6. “Arithmetica et Musica simul, auctoris Joannis de Muris. Ad extremum singuli candidati in monochordo aliquam melodiam effinget, examinadoribus jubentibus”. GERHARD PIETZSCH, *Zur Pflege der Musik an den deutschen Universitäten bis zur Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1971, p. 34.

7. “Der Index lectionum in Facultate philosophica tradendarum vom Jahre 1745 enthält unter den Lectiones matutinae pro gradu: Musica speculativa cun Arithmetica Joh. De Muris pro 2.do gradu”. PIETZSCH, *Zur Pflege der Musik an den deutschen Universitäten*, p. 35.

different notion of the past, another form of memory proper to them, not us: perhaps the things they wished to recall were different from those we wish they had remembered.

Theory and practice are not two distinct faculties, but rather distinct operations and purposes of the *same faculty*. Although abstraction prevails, it does not eradicate practice or eliminate it from its horizon of thought. The imaginary reader of a Renaissance treatise had a concept of abstraction that allowed him to construct a bi-dimensional link between theory and practice which our concept of abstraction is no longer able to grasp. This is illustrated by the obstinacy with which musicology has always sought to separate these two dimensions, constructing an evolutionary model that establishes the increasing irrelevance of theoretical tradition for the real existence of practical music. This antinomic model re-establishes a 'false consciousness', which probably has its roots in the Hegelian interpretation of medieval philosophy. Hegel postulates an unresolved dualism between the theoretical and the practical dimensions, between reality and the mind: two entities conceived to be in reciprocal otherness, waiting to be reunited, in later times, through the unifying action of the Spirit:⁸

We must now speak of the methods and manners of the scholastics. In this scholastic activity thought pursues its work quite apart from all regard to experience; we no longer hear anything of taking up actuality and determining it through thought [...]. In this absence of rationality in the actual, or of rationality which has its actuality in ordinary existence, is found the utter barbarism of thought, in that it keeps to another world, and does not have the Notion of reason—the Notion that the certainty of self is all truth.

Such an approach, more or less consciously assumed, can provide the theoretical justification for embarking on a 'war of liberation' from the trappings of *musica scientia*, which is also the war of the conquest of critical thought finally entering the world. However, what this sort of false consciousness of anachronism probably ignores is that in that world, which is not our world, the *link with social reality is built precisely through abstraction*, which profoundly influences perception.

8. GEORG WILHEM FRIEDRICH HEGEL, *Lectures on the history of philosophy*, translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, London, Paul-Trench-Trübner, 1896, vol. III, pp. 42–43.