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978-0-521-11733-3 - Romanticism and Music Culture in Britain, 1770-1840: Virtue and Virtuosity

Gillen D'Arcy Wood

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: virtuosophobia*

I

The heroine's introduction to the sights of London in Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) includes a visit to Cox's Museum, an exhibition of mechanical wonders staged by James Cox at the Great Room in Spring Gardens in the early 1770s. Burney herself visited the exhibition. She joined thousands of Londoners in marveling at sumptuously gilded musical cabinets and clocks with elaborate chiming mechanisms, including one hidden within "a Griffin seated upon a rock, supporting a Vase . . . the pedestal itself being supported by four beautiful Palm Trees." Three times a day, the musical automata sprang into brilliant sound, a mechanical gala concert that featured a "magnificent Asiatic temple . . . out of the dome of which gradually rises a Pagoda to the musick of its chimes."¹ The *coup de grâce* of Cox's show was "a pineapple, which, suddenly opening discovered a nest of birds, who immediately began to sing."²

The musical pineapple captures the attention of the party in *Evelina*, whose debate on Cox's dazzling automata rehearses a popular eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse: the critique of virtuosity. The vulgar Madame Duval has seen nothing "elegant," while xenophobic Captain Mirvan derides it as "all *kickshaw* work," and demands to know the "use" of such vanities. Ornamental musical machines were the height of fashion at the time of *Evelina*. Their repertory "combined pretty *galanteries* with . . . fast passage-work and elaborate ornamentation that took advantage of the machine's capacity for unlimited virtuosity."³ *Evelina* herself finds the exhibition "astonishing" but dismisses it in the same breath as "mere show," a virtuosophobic formulation we will meet with continually throughout this book (77). For the Georgians, virtuosity was a Janus-faced bogey: it produced both anxiety over luxury, historically associated with the aristocracy, and a style of future shock encounter with technological modernity. The established Georgian opposition between luxury and utility thus blends, in the Cox's

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Museum episode, with a distinctly modern debate over the union of music with the engineering wonders of the machine. The scene concludes with a performance of a Handel Coronation Anthem played (in fact) by a mechanical band of kettle-drums, trumpets, and organ. The music lovers among Cox's clientele who remembered the exhibition space as a concert hall in the 1760s – for performances by the composer J. C. Bach and the Viennese prodigy Mozart – would have been delighted, or perhaps disquieted, at the ironies of Cox's mechanical concert. But certainly not surprised. The musical history of the Great Room shows an interpenetration of urban-commercial and "high culture" elements rivaled only by the Georgian book trade.

Burney grew up in a family of professional musicians, and the heroine of her novel *The Wanderer* (1814) is a "virtuosa," a modern usage, signifying technical proficiency on a musical instrument, which appears distant from its early modern English definition as a gentleman collector of curios.⁴ In the fifteenth century "virtuoso," derived from the Latin *virtus* (virtue), connoted manliness, but by the mid-1600s the opposite signification, effeminacy, had come into use, allowing Henry Stubbe, in a lament for cultural decline that would become a standard of Georgian commentary, to originate the wordplay revived by my book's title: "We are regenerated from the School of Aristotle to that of Epicurus, from all Moral Gallantry and Virtue, to a most impertinent and effeminate virtuosity."⁵ As late as 1751 Samuel Johnson continued to define the virtuoso as an amateur devoted to "subjects of study remotely allied to useful knowledge," a gentle summary of a century's worth of attacks on virtuosity as a "useless" and potentially dangerous amusement of the leisured aristocratic class.⁶ In Thomas Shadwell's comedy *The Virtuoso* (1676), Sir Nicholas Gimcrack enrages the local peasants with an invention they believe will supplant their labor. His defense is characteristic: "We virtuosos never find out anything of use, 'tis not our way."⁷ The statement echoes the doyen of virtuosi, Sir John Evelyn of the Royal Society, who distinguished between "use" for which God had provided and "Curiosity, which is Endless."⁸ By the early eighteenth century, however, proto-professional elements within the Royal Society committed to new "scientific" values were exerting increasing pressure on the amateur virtuoso ethos.⁹ The consummation of the virtuoso's career, according to the Earl of Shaftesbury, was no more than a useless "cabinet of curiosities," his description of which reads like a negative review of Cox's Museum: "he has erected a Cabinet in due form, and made it the real Pattern of his Mind, replete with the same Trash and Trumpery of correspondent empty notions, and chimerical Conceits."¹⁰

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3

Textual evidence strongly suggests that Burney studied Cox's *Descriptive Catalogue*, which commends the exhibits as "*usefull and philosophical enough to defend them from the reproach of being only glittering gewgaws*" – exactly the debate Burney stages in *Evelina*. Cox points to the very useful business to be made in selling luxury clocks and mechanical toys to China, a voracious market for expensive "Jem cracks," as the skeptical Captain Mirvan terms them. The volume of this eighteenth-century luxury trade, dominated by Britain, amounted to tens of thousands of items.¹¹ Cox's collection at the Great Room alone was valued at almost £200,000 and "brought half a million [pounds] into the kingdom, [and] for years they furnished employment to hundreds." The Chinese emperor Ch'ien Lung alone owned four thousand mostly English clocks and other bejewelled curiosities for display in his palace. The change of venue for Cox's automata – from emperor's palace to urban show-space – exhibits in miniature the expansion of the luxury goods trade in the eighteenth century from royal courts to the bourgeois marketplace. According to this historical trajectory, Cox's Museum represents a modern, commercialized form of the aristocratic pleasures of collecting, a symbolic transition of virtuosity "from 'natural philosophy' ... to the Industrial Revolution," and from private cabinet to public musical spectacle.¹² In terms of cultural consumption, Cox's exhibit, like the word "virtuoso" itself, tracks the shift in eighteenth-century cultural leadership in Britain from elite circles of connoisseurs, such as the Royal Society, to an urban, commercial market patronized by a mixed metropolitan gentry.

In the same terms as the critique of Cox's automata in *Evelina*, the performance of virtuoso musicians was compulsively attacked through the Georgian period as the "mere show" of technical accomplishment without deeper meaning, the exhibition of an automated body detached from the heart and sensibility. It remains a standard trope of music criticism more than two centuries later when "some critics seem unable to utter the word virtuosity without the appendages 'empty' or 'meretricious.'" ¹³ The connection between the virtuosity of Cox's Museum and the modern meaning of superlative instrumental technique lies in the substance of Shaftesbury's critique of virtuosic "emptiness." In eighteenth-century London the crazy, useless machines of Sir Nicholas Gimcrack and the luxury wonders of James Cox took human shape. Musicians such as Charles Burney had long struggled against the social stigma of music's association with the artisanal trades, and the relegation of its "professors" to a glorified servant class. With the advent of bravura Italian singing in Britain and its adaptation to the violin and piano, however, public music culture and

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the wonders of virtuosic musicianship gained greater visibility, while raising, for its critics, the specter of a mechanized humanity driven by (merely) technical accomplishment.

Subsequently, in the early nineteenth century, the improved technologies of piano manufacture in particular seemed to amplify the sonic power of the virtuosic medium beyond natural limits. “The ten fingers of a single man,” exulted Franz Liszt, “are sufficient to render the harmonies produced by the combined forces of more than one hundred instruments of the orchestra.”¹⁴ The virtuosic feats of these visiting musical celebrities – from Farinelli in the 1730s to Liszt in 1840 – impressed English audiences as a wonder of superhuman discipline but were devoid, it was feared, of any greater aesthetic or moral value, especially if imported to the domestic sphere and opened to women. In Burney’s *The Wanderer*, the hero Harleigh’s doubts about the gentility of the mysterious heroine are removed by the spectacle of her virtuosity on the piano and harp, but her attempts to commercialize her accomplishments are disastrous. The Georgian critique of virtuosity dwelt on this paradox of luxury and labor, on what the conservative music historian Sir John Hawkins called “the languid effects of misapplied industry.”¹⁵ In the emergent industrial and professionalized order of Romantic-era Britain, the virtuoso represented the lure and threat of gratuitous, non-productive labor, a dangerous residue of aristocratic uselessness.

Evelina finds “little pleasure” in Cox’s exhibit, but it is important enough to Burney’s novel for the question of its “use” value to be revived later, when the hero Lord Orville summarizes the Georgian anti-virtuosic critique:

“The mechanism,” answered he, “is wonderfully ingenious: I am sorry it is not turned to better account; but its purport is so frivolous, so very remote from all aim at instruction or utility, that the sight of so fine a shew, only leaves a regret on the mind, that so much work, and so much ingenuity, should not be better bestowed.” (III)

Lord Orville’s judgment, which Burney grants the honor of the last word, is reminiscent of contemporary critiques of the novel. The critic John Moore remembered the 1780s as a time when “the very words Romance or Novel conveyed the idea of a frivolous or pernicious book.”¹⁶ Burney was clearly mindful of the charge. After the publication of *Cecilia* (1796) – at a time when the status of the novel “was at its nadir” – she took care to record in a letter to her sister Mary Delaney’s remark that “No Book . . . ever was so *useful* as this.”¹⁷ In her preface to *The Wanderer* almost

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: virtuosophobia*

5

two decades later, Burney still felt anxious to defend her fiction on the question of “utility”:

Divest, for a moment, the title of Novel from its stationary standard of insignificance, and say! What is the species of writing that offers fairer opportunities for conveying useful precepts? ... And is not a Novel, permit me, also, to ask, in common with every other literary work, entitled to receive its stamp as useful, mischievous, or nugatory, from its execution? Not necessarily, and in its changeless state, to be branded as a mere vehicle for frivolous, or seductive amusement ... [as] mere entertainment?¹⁸

By the time of *Evelina*, where this study begins, the music business was coming increasingly to resemble literary culture in its middle-class, commercial character, with an explosion in publishing and a network of distribution modeled on the book trade.¹⁹ A fashionable young woman might receive the latest novel with the most current operatic arrangements for piano in the same mail. We are assured, for example, that Burney's Cecilia, though growing up in the country, had “regularly received from London the works of the best masters.”²⁰ Burney's anxieties for her own novel's place within this new bourgeois luxury economy extend beyond the familiar debate over the novel's role as a virtuous repository of “utility and instruction,” to the question of whether the production of fiction might itself be a “frivolous or seductive amusement,” a performance of mechanical, specialized labor without deeper significance or use. “The *commercial* fashion of writing gains Ground every day,” Hester Thrale remarked pointedly to Burney, soon after the young novelist's admittance to her salon at Streatham.²¹ Was Burney no more than a machine-like virtuoso of manners, “a Camera Obscura in a Window of Piccadilly,” as Thrale once described her?²² And were her readers no better than the tourists of Covent Garden, “a multitude of listless idlers” – as Thomas Love Peacock would portray the modern literary consumer – “yawning for amusement, and gaping for novelty?”²³

II

The anxieties implicit in the Cox's Museum episode in Burney's *Evelina* capture the tense history of literary and music culture in Georgian Britain as I shall describe it in this book, a period in British history when “disputes over music were among the most significant episodes of cultural politics.”²⁴ From the mid-eighteenth century the expanded publishing industries of polite music and literature began to flood the same marketplace, sharing forms of distribution and consumption, as well as cultural capital.

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[More information](#)

This produced, in reaction, a discursive *cordon sanitaire* designed to separate the luxury, effeminacy, empty sociability, and mechanical display associated with music from the nascent values of interiority, sincerity, and sublimity that would define Romantic literary culture. As it does for Burney in *Evelina*, virtuosity served for Romantic writers as a composite bogey embodying both the aristocratic tradition of the amateur against which their own professionalized practices would be drawn, and the forbidding mechanistic potential of that new order of specialization and mass production. English virtuosophobia, which the early nineteenth century inherited from the Georgians, provided a readymade vocabulary for Romantic self-articulation. Expression, sincerity, and the sublime acquired their power as Romantic tropes to a great extent from their opposition to the virtuosic “world” of fashion, performance, and material luxury, all deeply associated with metropolitan music culture. Though never so elegantly theorized as the sublime and beautiful – that binary beloved of literary and art historians – the “musical” opposition between virtue and virtuosity, in its various coded forms, was one of the rhetorical preconditions of British Romanticism and, no less than the aesthetics of the sublime, represents a founding trope of modernity itself.²⁵

The virtuoso is a prominent figure in the work of Lawrence Kramer, Richard Leppert, and Dana Gooley among others, and is synonymous with musicology’s recent turn toward cultural historicism. This focus, however, as in traditional music history, is concentrated on continental Europe, in particular the talismanic figure of Liszt, whom I follow to England in my final chapter. The purpose of this book is to extend a material history of virtuosity geographically to Britain and rhetorically to readings in the literary and cultural history of the Romantic period. In writing *Romanticism and Music Culture* I have found the relation between late Georgian literary and music culture to be a history of politicized conflicts about art, fashion, commerce, gender, and nation, with the image of the virtuoso as its perpetual irritant. Accordingly, each chapter exemplifies a significant instance of the Romantic critique of virtuosity.

In chapter 1 I read Cowper’s attack on the 1784 Handel Commemoration in *The Task* as a repudiation of the sociable model of culture embodied in the public performance of Handel’s oratorios. Cowper perceived, in the ritual apotheosis of Handel, the coercive operations of a monarchical-nationalist consensus, of which his literary rival in the 1780s, Anna Seward, was a celebrated “muse.” Seward’s “musical” poetics in her popular verse novel *Louisa* (1785)²⁶ advertised just that sociable, virtuosic lyric voice against which Romantic poets such as Cowper and Wordsworth would

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[More information](#)*Introduction: virtuosophobia*

7

come to define their own practice. The high Romantic repudiation of musical sociability is likewise the subject of chapter 2, in which I read the shape of Frances Burney's career as an increasingly dogged assertion of Romantic literary "virtues" against her musician father Charles's "toadyism" – his dependent status in the aristocratic, luxury economy of music – and against the virtuosic musical values of the Italian opera he championed. For Burney, her father's aristocratic style and tastes, identified with music culture, threatened to obscure her trademark literary ethos of "natural" gentility – the defining virtue of both her bourgeois heroines and her own social persona – within the leveling domain of metropolitan fashion. Chapter 3 further explores the theme of literary Romanticism's ambivalent relation to virtuoso culture by examining the tropic conjunction of music, poetry, and effeminacy in one of its core texts. For his attack on the "inane phraseology" of fashionable poetry in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth drew upon an anti-virtuosic language with a long pedigree in Georgian cultural commentary. But placing the masculinist virtuosophobia of the famous 1802 Preface alongside Wordsworth's little-known translations of gender-bending opera lyrics for the *Morning Post* that same year exposes, I will argue, the "effeminate," virtuosic strains of the ballads themselves.

Music was the most cosmopolitan of the Georgian arts and relied upon a steady continental traffic both in performers and printed music. The Napoleonic Wars disrupted this trade to a significant extent. Consequently, the second half of *Romanticism and Music Culture* resumes its history in the 1810s, with the introduction of Mozart and Beethoven to Britain as emblems of avant-garde taste and bourgeois ambitions for cultural leadership. Like Cowper, Leigh Hunt doubted the politics of the traditional noble patrons of London's polite music culture. In chapter 4 I show how the *Examiner's* campaign to bring Mozart's operas to the King's Theatre against the will of its aristocratic leaders politicized both Mozart and the opera house, and converged with Hunt's larger reformist agenda centered on Parliament. The "literary" reform of music culture is the theme also of chapter 5, where Jane Austen's conventional critique of female musical accomplishment as a corrupting mechanical labor in her novels is accompanied, in the hidden figure of Beethoven in *Emma*, by marks of a convergence of interest in Regency literature and music in the construction of a middle-class professional subject through a Romantic poetics of interiority and *Bildung*.

In my final chapter, the figure of the Byronic Liszt revives the eighteenth-century aristocratic vices of effeminacy, spectacle, and ritual power, while

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evoking, in the display of “mechanical” genius, an anxiety over the modern regime of automation and specialized skill that was the flipside of virtuosophobia. My examination of Liszt’s Byronic disillusionment during his 1840 tour of Britain, and of the “virtuosic” poetry of Byron he carried with him as a talisman, offers a summary image of the Georgian history of antagonism between literary and music culture centered on the virtuoso: the transcendent union of musical performance and literary sensibility proposed by the “tone-poet” Liszt meets with a chilly British reception. Liszt’s response was to describe the London musical scene as an “aristocracy of mediocrity,” a wry articulation, at the beginning of the Victorian era, of an increasingly influential middle-class cultural regime that wished to be purified of virtuosic display.²⁷ In the brief coda to the book I examine the popularity of the nightingale, and its mechanical nemesis, as a definitive melopoetic figure expressive of this enduring anti-virtuosic agenda. Shadowed by its automaton “other,” the ubiquitous nightingale in Georgian poetry and music embodied virtuosity as a mode of social being tainted by both past and future prospects, by the discredited legacy of aristocratic luxury and the looming demands of the technocratic, bourgeois nation state.

Thus, while the focus of this book is on Romantic-era texts, my examination of the conflict of virtuosity with literary idealism spans the entire eighteenth century. It was the business of professional writers, beginning with John Dennis and Joseph Addison, to place a hygienic distance between an emergent metropolitan, middle-class literary industry, centered on the poets and periodicals, and a decadent aristocratic music culture symbolized by the virtuoso foreign singers of the Italian opera: “Nonsense grew pleasing by his Syren arts,” lamented Addison, “And stole from Shakespear’s self our easie Hearts.”²⁸ The King’s Theatre opera house – the most important in Europe outside Italy – embodied a multitude of perceived dangers to the English nation: effeminacy, cosmopolitanism, luxury consumption, the tyranny of fashion, and a thriving aristocratic culture of patronage. Georgian virtuosophobia thus belonged to a larger xenophobic and reform discourse, which viewed bravura musical style as another dangerous continental import, like Parisian dress, absolute monarchy, or Popery. Of virtuosity, the early Victorian music critic John Davison stated, “happily no such thing exists in England . . . The ‘virtuosi’ . . . though artistically incontinent, are exclusively continental.”²⁹ Virtuosity existed in Britain, of course, but was not allowed to be native – was greedily consumed but never generated. In his disavowal of virtuosity, Davison, like his Georgian predecessors, policed a fragile boundary between British character and British taste, asserting the integrity of one against the corruptions of the other.

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[More information](#)*Introduction: virtuosophobia*

9

By Davison's time, as the metropolitan middle class came to assume more control of the forums of Britain's musical life, the focus of anti-virtuosic anxiety had shifted from the dangers of luxury and effeminacy to those of mechanization, toward the increasingly professionalized, industrial order of the post-Waterloo state. By "professional," I refer here not only to its technical definition – remunerated labor in a non-manual field requiring specialized skills – but also to its larger sociological sense of self-regulating professional bodies advocating legal status and protections (such as copyright), and managing a discursive presence in the public sphere by which both to represent their claims to cultural leadership and to disguise their connection to industrial labor.³⁰ The founding of the London Philharmonic Society by a group of professional musicians in 1813, and their promotion of Beethoven as a model of Romantic genius – a history I discuss in chapter 5 – is an exemplary instance. The cultural movement we call Romanticism was coincident with the rise of professionalism in British society because it was the professional classes who required the romanticization of their being and labor. Deep into the nineteenth century, virtuosity remained a diabolical nemesis of that project, of the Romantic consecration of art, individual genius, and the auratic "work." The eighteenth-century virtuoso, whose amateurism had to be surpassed, was consequently demonized on new terms as the incarnation of soulless technical efficiency. Virtuosity was not endemic to professionalism in reality, but its toxic image was used to establish boundaries between Romantic construction of an independent high culture and an increasingly specialized, market-driven society. The virtuoso – a figure of extraordinary ubiquity, pliability, and menace – was thus the *pharmakon* of Georgian cultural discourse, beginning the eighteenth century as the very definition of the effeminized aristocratic amateur, and the nineteenth as the bogey image of middle-class professionalism. Like a radical noble in 1790s France, the virtuoso shed its aristocratic skin to ensure relevance in the new age.

Virtuosophobia, as an integral element of Romanticism, thus belongs to the general challenge to aristocratic cultural leadership in the eighteenth century. The attack on virtuosity was essentially an attack on style – a bravura mode of music, language, or display – but also on style itself as a description of the performative and ephemeral in art. A central characteristic of what we now describe as high Romantic literary culture lay in its mission to naturalize language in such a way that "style" itself could be said to disappear. Burney and Austen, for example, both looked to Johnson and the middlebrow periodical prose of the eighteenth century

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

as the model for a new form of “standard” English that would transcend class and region. Likewise Wordsworth’s linguistic localism was in fact the construction of an alternative standard English, a new literary anti-style the heralded “commonness” of which was both a class and regional description *and* a universalizing prescription: it was a language that all English writers *should* practice in place of the virtuosic “inane phraseology” of the recent past. In short, both Burney’s and Austen’s prose and Wordsworth’s poetry attempted to place literary language outside the space of performance and beyond the reach of fashion, with both of which music culture was intrinsically identified.

In sum: the interdisciplinary purpose of this book is to compose a historical narrative of Romantic literary culture in Britain, and revisions of some of its dominant figures, through the lens of the contemporary music culture those writers inhabited – by which, in some instances, they were wholly absorbed. Anna Seward, for example, was a devoted Handelian, and as passionate a consumer and patron of music as producer of poetry. Likewise Frances Burney lived the first thirty years of her life at the heart of opera culture in London, as a daughter of Britain’s leading music historian and opinion-maker. Her first “literary” tasks involved the copying out of her father’s music criticism for the press. Wordsworth, meanwhile, from his days at Cambridge, harbored a student’s love for the Italian language and the poetry of Pietro Metastasio, both synonymous with the opera house. At the other end of the Napoleonic period, Leigh Hunt’s passion for Mozart’s operas was integral to the political program of the *Examiner*, while Austen was a lifelong participant in a provincial music culture at precisely the time when the piano revolutionized amateur music-making and came to symbolize female bourgeois domesticity itself. Finally, Byron looms as the arch-virtuoso of British Romanticism. An accidental aristocrat commodified as a scandalous curiosity, Byron (and Byronism) bear the marks of cultural “lateness,” in the sense of a novelty grafted upon cultural memory. Just as the Byronist Franz Liszt’s pianistic style and repertoire were deeply influenced by the Italian opera, rich in *cantabile* melodic lines, so Byron’s notoriety traced its rhetorical origins to the opera stars of the eighteenth century – Thomas Moore once called him a castrato.³¹ The Byronic persona accordingly revived a species of old-order aristocratic “uselessness,” a virtuoso exhibit brought to commercial realization in the modern space of celebrity colonized by the book trade. My reading of Byron here thus challenges the more conventional opposition between Byronic irony and Wordsworthian sincerity. Indeed, Hazlitt’s influential trope of Byronic insincerity, I will argue, shows how