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

Gillen D'Arcy Wood

Frontmatter

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ROMANTICISM AND MUSIC CULTURE IN BRITAIN, 1770–1840

Music was central to everyday life and expression in late Georgian Britain, and this is the first interdisciplinary study of its impact on Romantic literature. Focussing on the public fascination with virtuoso performance, Gillen D'Arcy Wood documents a struggle between sober “literary” virtue and luxurious, effeminate virtuosity that staged deep anxieties over class, cosmopolitanism, machine technology, and the professionalization of culture. A remarkable synthesis of cultural history and literary criticism, this book opens new perspectives on key Romantic authors – including Burney, Wordsworth, Austen, and Byron – and their relationship to definitive debates of the Georgian age.

GILLEN D'ARCY WOOD is Professor of English at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

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For Nancy, Lucas, and Clara

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Preface

This is, in many ways, a personal book. Its official brief is to unite the fields of literary Romanticism and musicology, but it also, in its more ineffable margins, answers questions raised by my own experiences in literature and music. In music school in Melbourne in the late 1980s, I labored long days upon digital exercises for the piano, while at the weekly concert I joined in laughing scorn for a fellow pianist who displayed all the technical proficiency I so conspicuously lacked. He employed his technical facility to shallow ends, we all agreed, arpeggiating mindlessly up and down the keyboard. Only much later was I struck by the contradictions in my own relationship to the piano, and moved to investigate the easy consensus that designated the class virtuoso an object of ridicule.

Having belatedly recognized that my deficiencies as a musician were not “merely” technical in nature, I came to the United States in the early 1990s to embark on a graduate program in English. Here I was struck again by the singularities of music culture, this time in comparison with my new literary-scholarly community (or its lack). While in my experience as a musician it was accepted that egotism be put aside for the common purpose of making music, I found no such sociable imperative enlivening graduate studies in literature, which seemed demoralizingly competitive and isolating by comparison. I thus began this study with the object of better understanding, through history, the seemingly insuperable differences separating the cultures of literature and music. As bookwriting happily tends to do, however, it soon forced me to confront the imperfect assumptions of my own premise, and so I made the book about those instead. The result is a kind of sequel or companion volume to my earlier study, *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760–1860* (2001). Taken together, the books represent my long-term scholarly interest in the metropolitan culture of Romantic-era Britain – in particular the sometimes rough crossings between Romantic literary

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Preface

aesthetics, Georgian cultural politics, and the rapid commercial expansion of visual and performance media that we associate with industrial modernity.

The sociable structures of literary-academic culture are certainly evident in the generous support of institutions and individuals I have enjoyed while writing this book. Fellowships from the Mellon Foundation and the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities provided invaluable time for research as well as, in the latter case, a highly productive seminar in which to present work-in-progress. The wonderful libraries at the University of Illinois have been indispensable, and I wish to thank the staff of the Music Library, John Wagstaff and Marlys Scarborough in particular, for their helpfulness and patience. My self-education in musicology owes much to them. Among the broader world of Romantic studies and musicology, I am grateful to Kevin Hart, Peter de Bolla, Christina Bashford, Simon McVeigh, and Tom Mole for their invitations to present my ongoing research. I am indebted likewise to those colleagues who offered their time and expertise to comment upon various portions of the manuscript – Jack Stillinger, Clara Tuite, Marshall Brown, Jed Esty, and Ted Underwood – to Teresa Barnard for so generously sharing her unpublished book manuscript, and to the editors of *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Studies in Romanticism*, *English Literary History*, and *The Blackwell Companion to Jane Austen* (2009), all of whom published early versions of various chapters and have graciously consented to their appearance in revised form here.

During my year in Australia, Melissa Bailes was a conscientious and utterly dependable research liaison at Illinois. At the University of Melbourne I enjoyed the support of the School of Culture and Communication (latterly the English Department) to whom my sincere thanks are likewise due. And no mention of Australia must pass without loving mention of my musical family who, in the distant past, first sat me down at our storied Bösendorfer piano, and introduced me to the grand and life-affirming mythologies of music. Through all these peregrinations – intellectual and geographical – my wife, Nancy Castro, and our children Lucas and Clara have been my beloved daily companions. Bookwriting is proverbially tough on families; this one has been no exception, and my debts of unsociability are greatest to them.

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