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POETRY AND THE ROMANTIC MUSICAL AESTHETIC

James H. Donelan describes how two poets, a philosopher, and a composer – Hölderlin, Wordsworth, Hegel, and Beethoven – developed an idea of self-consciousness based on music at the turn of the nineteenth century. This idea became an enduring cultural belief: the understanding of music as an ideal representation of the autonomous creative mind. Against a background of political and cultural upheaval, these four major figures – all born in 1770 – developed this idea in both metaphorical and actual musical structures, thereby establishing both the theory and the practice of asserting self-identity in music. Beethoven still carries the image of the heroic composer today; this book describes how this image originated in both his music and in how others responded to him. Bringing together the fields of philosophy, musicology, and literary criticism, Donelan shows how this development emerged from the complex changes in European cultural life taking place between 1795 and 1831.

JAMES H. DONELAN teaches in the Writing Program and the Departments of Comparative Literature and English at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His areas of interest are music, aesthetics, poetry, and the teaching of humanities writing, and his articles have appeared in *Philosophy and Literature* and *Critical Texts*. He is the lead classical music critic for the *Santa Barbara Independent*. This is his first book.

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For my wife and children

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University of California, Santa Barbara



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I hear the motions of the spirit and the sound
 Of what is secret becomes, for me, a voice
 That is my own voice speaking in my ear.
 – Wallace Stevens,
 “Chocorua to its Neighbor”

These lines, although written by a twentieth-century American, nevertheless provide an eloquent summary of what I intend to examine in European poetry, philosophy, and music between 1798 and 1830. Although many critics have studied vision and the visionary in Romantic poetry, relatively few have confronted the related issues of sound, voice, and music, and even fewer have looked into corresponding moments in musical aesthetics and composition. I attempt to answer several questions about these concepts and practices in all three fields and relate these answers to each other. How does musical sound become the articulate voice of the self? How does natural sound become music? How can music represent self-consciousness? I argue that Hölderlin and Wordsworth, despite their obvious differences, follow a similar path of self-constitution through a musical conception of poetic sound. Furthermore, I maintain that Hegel and Beethoven, although working in radically different fields, nevertheless establish music and self-consciousness as mutually positing, reciprocal dialectical structures. In other words, at the core of early Romanticism lies a structure – the dialectic of Idealist self-consciousness – and a metaphor – the self-sustaining aesthetic of absolute music – that mirror and support each other, often in ways difficult to discover.

Proving this contention necessarily involves integrating arguments from all three disciplines; I therefore engage the scholarship of the fields of literary criticism, philosophy, and musicology and, when necessary, create ways to bridge their differences. In doing so, I hope not only to prove something that could not be proved by any other means but to follow the example of other researchers in all three fields who have recently created useful,

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profound scholarship that is nevertheless available to a wide audience. Among these authors, I include many whose works have been the basis for my own methodology. Lawrence Kramer, for instance, has revealed new possibilities for critical discourse in his recent work on the relationship between music and poetry, as well as on the possibilities of meaning in music. In musicology, Scott Burnham's works on A. B. Marx and Beethoven, as well as Charles Rosen's landmark studies of musical style and form, have provided a sound basis for a humanistic yet sophisticated understanding of the Vienna School. In philosophy, Andrew Bowie's examinations of aesthetics, subjectivity, and the problem of music in Idealist philosophy have also enabled long-standing traditions in philosophical scholarship, literary criticism, and musicology to speak to each other.

My purpose is to bring these strands of new interdisciplinary studies together into a single work of philosophical criticism. In calling this work "criticism," I mean that my primary goal is to interpret individual works through historical, social, or biographical materials rather than to understand or create something outside them. However, that is not to say that this work is not also intellectual history; the nature of these figures and their works makes historical arguments inevitable. Hölderlin and Hegel, for instance, knew each other well. They attended the Tübinger Stift together, sharing a room with Schelling; they read the same books and even worked on a strange manuscript together, which I examine in the introductory chapter. Idealist philosophy, in various ways and forms, also came to Wordsworth's attention, mainly via Coleridge; Beethoven praised both Kant and Schiller, the great predecessors of Hegel and Hölderlin. All four lived in Europe during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars and could not help but be affected by these events and the enormous social upheaval they precipitated.

Nevertheless, another, less identifiable aspect of their lives and careers demands that I take a somewhat less historical approach. All four achieved, both within their lifetimes and in the two centuries afterward, a degree of autonomy that precludes any interpretation dependent on simple ideas of influence or causality. As precise contemporaries (all were born in 1770), none was the mentor or patron of another, and contact between any of them after Hegel's mysterious break with Hölderlin was minimal to nonexistent. Moreover, each embraced a principle of independent creativity and produced works of undeniable individuality. Whatever skepticism we may show in the present toward the idea of the creative genius, as well as toward the idea of subjectivity itself, the Romantic ideal of the autonomous self has an undeniable durability within these modes of discourse and in our

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understanding of philosophy, poetry, and music. I examine how the concept of self-consciousness became associated with music and musical creativity and describe the relationship between the highly abstract discourse of philosophy and the concrete works of poetry and music of the early Romantic period. My objective, therefore, is to understand their works in their cultural context while acknowledging the continuous tradition of interpretation each of these figures has generated in the intervening two centuries. In doing so, I hope to reconcile the philological and philosophical sides of current academic criticism, which have been engaged in a complex set of ideological disputes.

The construction of the subjective self remains a live issue, despite many efforts to declare it dead. In the last few decades, examining Romantic subjectivity has not only involved acknowledging or denying that the idea still has currency but also determining whether it constitutes part of a destructive ideology. I hope that the present study establishes (among other things) that subjectivity, then and now, is more than a mere mask, and a great deal more benign than its detractors suggest. I admit that I believe that Idealist philosophy maintains an illuminating role in current intellectual life, but I must also acknowledge the insights of deconstructionist interpretations of Romantic era writings, especially those of Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, and Andrzej Warminski, whose conclusions of unreliability, unreadability, and instability remain firmly within the rigorous tradition of Idealist philosophy and philosophical criticism even as they call its assumptions into question. Other critiques of the ideological basis for Romanticism – in literature by Jerome McGann and Terry Eagleton; in musicology by Rose Rosengard Subotnik and Lydia Goehr; and in philosophy by Judith Butler, among others – have also established an understanding of these works and ideas that represents, in my view, more a continuation of the history of Idealism than a break from it.

Self-consciousness, as I demonstrate in the introductory chapter, emerged as the central principle of Idealist epistemology in a demonstrable progression from Kant's distinction between a priori and empirical knowledge, to Fichte's assertion of the self-positing subject, and from there to Hölderlin's and Hegel's (and possibly Schelling's) reworking of the idea in their early joint project in aesthetics, the *Systemprogramm* fragment. This progression depends on history, as represented by the personal, political, and chronological relationships among particular people at particular moments, yet it also depends on the internal history of philosophy itself – the contention between competing ideas within philosophical discourse that continues in our era.

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At this moment in cultural history, as I also argue in the first chapter, “Self-Consciousness and Music in the Late Enlightenment,” a new ontology of music began to emerge, partly because of Enlightenment developments in musical aesthetics, but primarily due to the achievements of Mozart. The autonomy of the artist, as a self-motivating creative force, is closely allied to the autonomy of the self; little of this Romantic notion would exist without Mozart’s struggle to overcome the noble patronage system of his time. Moreover, Mozart’s music reflects not only his extraordinary talent but also a new paradigm for music and its effects on listeners and musicians alike. Before Mozart, Western art music had two fundamental purposes: to proclaim the glory of God in His churches and to provide musical decoration for the powerful in their courts and homes. As Mozart’s influence grew, his compositions began to assume a larger role in intellectual life. By the time of the French Revolution, music had increasingly become a reflection of the composer’s self-conscious mind, rather than a celebration of God or patron.

The confluence between musical aesthetics and the philosophical concept of self-consciousness manifests itself as a distinctly Romantic phenomenon in Hölderlin’s poetry and prose, the subject of the second chapter, “Hölderlin’s *Deutscher Gesang* and the Music of Poetic Self-Consciousness.” Hölderlin remains an enigmatic figure for both philosophy and poetry, having published little during his lifetime, mainly because he spent his last forty years almost completely incapacitated by madness. His contributions to philosophy have only recently come to light in scholarship by Warminski and Henrich, and his fragmentary essays on poetry, especially “Wechsel der Töne,” remain little understood. I will argue that this essay, the title of which can be translated as “Changing of Tones,” or “Modulation,” proposes a theory of poetry based on musical form, and that aspects of this theory led to specific metrical and thematic decisions in the composition of many of his poems, including “Dichterberuf,” “Patmos,” “Wie wenn am Feiertage . . .” and “Brod und Wein.” For Hölderlin, music becomes a crucial site for mediation between the theory and practice of poetry, as well as between Greece and Hesperia, and between the divine and the human. These binary oppositions consistently return to issues of temporality and memory, revealing a close connection between Hölderlin’s theory of poetic consciousness and musical form.

Similarly, the temporal and teleological aspects of music play a surprisingly important role in Hegel’s philosophy. In the third chapter, “Hegel’s Aesthetic Theory: Self-Consciousness and Musical Material,” I examine how the relatively unexplored chapter on music in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*

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contains a subtle yet crucial link between self-consciousness and sensory apprehension through the material of sound. In addition, the cultural and historical context of the music chapter indicates that Hegel was responding to contemporaneous statements on the importance of music by E. T. A. Hoffmann, among others. Far from being the isolated comments of an amateur (as Hegel uncharacteristically calls himself), the music chapter contains the traces of a continuing and influential discussion of the relevance of music to philosophy.

This discussion, in one form or another, even reached Wordsworth, who far preferred the sounds of nature to those of concert hall. Nevertheless, his views of music have suffered surprising neglect, despite their importance at significant moments in both his prose and his poetry. In the fourth chapter, "Nature, Music, and the Imagination in Wordsworth's Poetry," I investigate his use of metaphors of music in *The Prelude*, "On the Power of Sound," and other poems, as a reflection of his attitude toward poetic form and metrical structure and the relationship between natural and communicative sound. Like Hegel, Wordsworth employed music as a structural metaphor for the dialectical workings of the mind and the differentiation between poetic and natural sound. Unlike Hegel, he continued to hear music in natural sound, complementing the visionary with the musical in his construction of the imagination.

Finally, this account of the relationship between self-consciousness and music requires an investigation of the extent of its manifestation in actual musical composition. In the fifth chapter, "Beethoven and Musical Self-Consciousness," I examine the basis for the attitudes toward music demonstrated in the previous chapters and determine the relationship between actual musical practice and philosophers' and poets' ideas of it. Among the most important issues is the question of meaning in absolute music. Does a work of instrumental music, such as a symphony or a string quartet, have a demonstrable, extra-musical meaning? I argue that it does and that the late works of Beethoven, especially String Quartet No. 13 in B ♭ major, op. 130/133, contain clear, audible, and provable indications of self-conscious reflection in musical form.

The consequences of these interpretations become the subject of the afterword, "The Persistence of Sound." The concept of self-consciousness, the category of the aesthetic, and actual manifestations of aesthetically ordered sound in Romantic poetry and music, I argue, are parts of a continuous matrix of understanding that emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century and persist at the turn of the twenty-first. Above all, self-consciousness and music developed at this moment in the history of ideas

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and artistic practice as mirror images of the dialectical process of becoming an autonomous being. Moreover, they depend on each other, and we, even in this skeptical era, depend on them for a remarkable number of fundamental principles. Although we may repeatedly call into question the conditions and circumstances that brought these ideas into being, few composers, poets, or artists of any kind create without an idea that they are somehow, to some degree, constructing something of themselves into their work. Similarly, even the most socially conscious participants in civic life acknowledge that on some level, the “we” of any movement begins with the recognition of an “I.” That self can only come to consciousness through an articulate voice, and the “sound of what is secret,” as Wallace Stevens says, is the sound of each individual voice, saying “I am I” to each of us. It is a sound that keeps speaking, and when it speaks, we hear the music of Beethoven.