Absolute Music

This book is born out of two contradictions: first, it explores the making of meaning in a musical form that was made to empty its meaning at the turn of the nineteenth century; secondly, it is a history of a music that claims to have no history – absolute music. The book therefore writes against the notion of absolute music which tends to be the paradigm for most musicological and analytical studies. It is concerned not so much with what music is, but why and how meaning is constructed in instrumental music and what structures of knowledge need to be in place for such meaning to exist. Instead of existing in a pure and autonomous form, music is woven back into the epistemological fabric, and tangled with the discourses of theology, visual perspective, biology, philosophy, gender, chemistry, politics, physics. Such contextualisation, far from diminishing the significance of music, actually demonstrates the centrality of music in the construction of modernity. From the thought of Vincenzo Galilei to that of Theodor Adorno, Daniel Chua suggests that instrumental music has always been a critical and negative force in modernity, even with its nineteenth-century apotheosis as ‘absolute music’.

The book discusses the ideas of thinkers such as Vincenzo Galilei, Descartes, Diderot, Rameau, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Hanslick, Wagner, Max Weber and Adorno and considers the works of composers such as Monteverdi, C. P. E. Bach, Haydn, Mozart and, most importantly, Beethoven, whose music defines the notion of absolute music for the nineteenth and twentieth century.
New perspectives in music history and criticism

GENERAL EDITORS
JEFFREY KALLBERG, ANTHONY NEWCOMB AND RUTH SOLIE

This series explores the conceptual frameworks that shape or have shaped the ways in which we understand music and its history, and aims to elaborate structures of explanation, interpretation, commentary and criticism which make music intelligible and which provide a basis for argument about judgements of value. The intellectual scope of the series will be broad. Some investigations will treat, for example, historiographical topics – ideas of music history, the nature of historical change, or problems of periodisation. Others will apply cross-disciplinary methods to the criticism of music, such as those involving literature, history, anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, or gender studies. There will also be studies that consider music in its relation to society, culture and politics. Overall, the series hopes to create a greater presence of music in the ongoing discourse among the human sciences.

ALREADY PUBLISHED
Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (eds.), Embodied voices: representing female vocality in Western culture 0 521 58583 X
Downing A. Thomas, Music and the origins of language: theories from the French Enlightenment 0 521 47307 1
Thomas S. Grey, Wagner’s musical prose: texts and contexts 0 521 41738 4
Absolute Music

And the Construction of Meaning

DANIEL K. L. CHUA
CONTENTS

List of illustrations page ix
Acknowledgements x
On the preface xi

Part 1
The Garden of Eden

1 On history 3
2 On modernity 8
3 On disenchantment 12
4 On division 23
5 On opera 29
6 On machines 41
7 On space 51
8 On style 61

Part 2
The Fruit of Knowledge

9 On being 75
10 On the mind 82
11 On biology 92
12 On the body 98
13 On the soul 105
14 On morality 114
15 On women 126
16 On masculinity 136
17 On independence 145
18 On heroes 150
19 On politics 162
20 On nothing 167
21 On God 171
22 On infinity 177
23 On self-deification 183
24 On invisibility 191
## Contents

25 On conscious life-forms 199
26 On artificiality 209

Part 3
The Tower of Babel

27 On death 221
28 On absolute music 224
29 On the beautiful and the sublime 228
30 On monuments 235
31 On the apocalypse 245
32 On the end 257
33 On suicide 266
34 On absolute drivel 276
35 On Babel 287

Bibliography 291
Index 307
ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plate 1</td>
<td>Robert Fludd, monochord from <em>Utriusque cosmi</em> (1617–19)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 2</td>
<td>Bernardo Buontalenti, ‘The Harmony of the Spheres’, stage design for the first <em>intermezzo</em> for <em>La Pellegrina</em> (1589), Victoria and Albert Museum, London</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3</td>
<td>Auctor Lampadius of Lüneburg, printed score of Verdelot’s ‘Sancta Maria’, <em>Compendium musices</em> (1537)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4</td>
<td>Giovanni Alfonso Borelli, illustration from <em>De motu animalium</em> (1680), by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 5</td>
<td>Abraham Trembley, an illustration of a polyp from <em>Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire d’un genre de polypes d’eau douce</em> (1744), by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 6</td>
<td>John Barclay, ‘The Female Skeleton from Sue’, <em>A Series of Engravings Representing the Bones of the Human Skeleton</em> (1820), by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 7</td>
<td>Jacques-Louis David, <em>The Oath of the Horatii</em> (1784), Paris, Louvre</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 8</td>
<td>Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, <em>The Third of May 1808</em>, Prado, Madrid</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 9</td>
<td>Frontispiece to <em>Alexander von Humboldt und Aimé Bonplands Reise</em> (1807)</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 10</td>
<td>Josef Danhauser, <em>Liszt at the Piano</em> (1840), Nationalgalerie, Berlin</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 11</td>
<td>Otto Böhler, <em>The Musician’s Heaven</em> (c. 1897), silhouette</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has only been made possible by the support and encouragement of many friends and colleagues. I offer my heartfelt thanks to them both for their input and for what they had to put up with.

Irene Auerbach, Sam Barrett, Olav Beckmann, Andrew Bowie, Scott Burnham, Tim Carter, David Chung, John Deathridge, Laurence Dreyfus, Cliff Eisen, Annegret Fauser, Michael Fend, Berthold Hoeckner, Brian Hyer, Paul Jordan, Jeffrey Kallberg, Scott Kim, Gudrun Pebody, Beate Perrey, Alex Rehding, Ulinka Rublack, Penny Souster, Joan Steigerwald, Henry Stobart, W. Dean Sutcliffe, Christopher Wintle, Alison Winter.
A preface often speaks of anxiety. When Giulio Caccini published his *Le nuove musiche* of 1602 he attached a preface to annotate his notation; the notes, he says, ‘are written in one way, but to be more graceful [they] are affected in quite another’. His words carry the anxiety of Baroque performance practice, a fear that always lurks behind the notes whenever a text demands the creative interaction between the performer and the notation; in such cases, the preface greets the reader as a defence mechanism to safeguard the author’s intentions, lest the text be misinterpreted. So it is not simply out of politeness that I greet you. This preface is written out of an anxiety about your performance practice. How will you read this book? Will you get it? Let me invoke three words both to guide your reading and to allay my anxiety:

1. Constellation: this word murmurs with the aura of Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin things simply refuse definitions, for a concept cannot live up to the thing it names, but limits the meaning by making it identical to the concept. Similarly, absolute music cannot be defined; its identity is nebulous and its history too volatile to pin down with precision. To write about it as if it were a single, stable concept would miss the point, for its meaning is situated in an ever-changing constellation of elements. This book is therefore arranged as a constellation of tiny, fragmentary chapters that gather around the object, often in an extreme manner to exaggerate the tensions between the concepts, without collapsing everything into the black-hole of absolute music or by allowing one star to outshine the others. There is no attempt to exhaust the history of absolute music or to focus on a single period. What I present are selected splices of time, which are momentary flashes of thought made to illumine the object without overcoming it. The story I tell is an invisible thread that connects these momentary glimmers together, like a sign of the Zodiac picked out from among the stars.

---

On the preface

2. **Archaeology**: this word relates to the historical method of Michel Foucault. His attempt to dig out deep epistemological layers is designed to remove the subject as the agent of history, replacing it with a clinical structure. The question, for Foucault, is not ‘who makes history?’ but how things are ordered. So in this book it is not so much who makes absolute music but what structures of knowledge need to be in place before absolute music can exist at all. This means that absolute music cannot be confined to the history of music as if it were purely musical, circling in its own autonomous sphere. What it claims to be is embedded in structures outside music(ology), and it is only by excavating these sites that the meaning of absolute music can be reconstructed.

3. **Dialectic**: this word is meant to conjure up the apparition of Theodor W. Adorno, who, unlike Hegel, offers no synthesis in his dialectical process. And neither is there one in this book; the constellation remains in tension and the epistemological sediments do not mingle. Moreover, this immiscible concoction of the stars and the earth also demands a dialectic between the twinkling particulars, which function as forensic details that might clinch the case, and the general epistemological shift that bulldozes all differences in the name of totality. Benjamin and Foucault do not mix, and Adorno’s dialectic does not arbitrate between them but maintains as necessary the unresolved dissonance at the core of Western knowledge. This dissonance also disturbs the centre of absolute music which claims to be both general (the absolute) and particular (the work) at the same time. The dialectical strain between a flash of thought and the epistemological strata or between the analysis of a work and a general theory of music is a condition of absolute music itself. Either/or is not an option.

These three words – constellation, archaeology, dialectic – have no absolute power over you; they are not magic spells designed to instil the fear of the author or to constrict the imagination of the reader. Quite the opposite; these words are meant to put the onus on the reader to perform in the gaps between the stars or along the geological lines. To paraphrase Caccini, the text is ‘written in one way, but to be more graceful [it should be] affected in quite another’.