

Introduction

On 18 June 1864 John Addington Symonds was at a concert at the St James's Hall in London. The New Philharmonic Society, conducted by Dr Henry Wylde, performed a programme that included Carl Maria von Weber's *Konzertstück* in F minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 79, Ludwig Spohr's 'Dramatic' Concerto No. 8 in A minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 47, and overtures by Mendelssohn and Rossini.¹ The concert culminated with a rendition of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67. Symonds recounted his experience of Beethoven's music to a friend the following day:

Every nerve seems as if it had been stripped of its integument & opened to the world [...] It is no exaggeration when I say that every note found a place here – in my heart. I was so weak and sensitive that he played upon me as an instrument. I never so heard music before & I was obliged to leave the concert.²

Three days earlier, Symonds had attended the home of the noted genitourinary surgeon William Acton. As Symonds was to recall some years later in his *Memoirs* (1893), he was at this time suffering from a debilitating 'nervous malady', which was 'expressed by a terrible disturbance of the reproductive organs'.³ Acton performed upon Symonds a procedure that he prescribed for all those suffering from what he called 'spermatorrhea' – the involuntary emission of semen: cauterization through the urethra. As described in detail in Acton's *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* (1857), the procedure involved inserting a syringe 'down to the *veru-montanum*' and injecting into it a solution of 'nitrate of silver'. This 'caustic', Acton suggests, acts to 'modify the local condition' of the ejaculatory duct and allows the 'patient [to] succeed in obtaining a control over the will which he never had before': 'the morbid irritability of the canal disappears – the emissions cease, and the health improves'.⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, this did little to improve Symonds's fragile health.

In a letter written many years later, it is clear to Symonds that his ‘malady’ was the result of his inability to ‘indulge [his] sexual instincts’ – that is, his same-sex desire. In seeking out such treatment, Symonds reflects, he ‘did everything, in short, except what nature prompted’.⁵ Following the procedure, Symonds felt both humiliated and acutely embarrassed. On the day he attended Acton’s surgery, he wrote to his closest friend, Henry Graham Dakyns, referring allusively to the treatment he had just endured, but insisting that Dakyns should ‘please be kind enough not to mention this even to my most intimate friends’.⁶

Symonds’s account of listening to Beethoven is notable in the extent to which it emphasizes the impact of this music on the material body. It is doubly fascinating for the way in which his sense of bodily vulnerability is so closely entangled with the embarrassment and shame that attaches to his pathologized same-sex desire. He appeals to the language of physiology – ‘nerves’, ‘integuments’ – to evoke the extent to which the force of this music has rendered his body passive, exposed and defenceless. The notes of Beethoven’s music are figured as the aggressively piercing and intrusive arrows of Cupid’s bow, hitting their target *in* the depths of Symonds’s desiring heart. This ‘weak and sensitive’ body, painfully receptive to the emotional force of Beethoven’s music, has been rendered so by a humiliating medical procedure designed to eliminate queer sexual desire.

In English literary texts of the *fin de siècle*, music is endowed with a queer agency that acts to make and unmake the material body. The embodied experience of musical performance in literature brings some queer bodies into closer contact while placing others out of reach; it indulges queer fantasies of disembodiment while leaving other bodies burning with shame; and it places some queer bodies out of temporal sequence while drawing others into an affirmative future. In these terms, *Music and the Queer Body* shows how music operates in *fin-de-siècle* literature to challenge foundational accounts of identity written on the body. In drawing upon the ‘antisocial’ provocations of contemporary queer theory, it moves debates in queer musicology beyond their broad focus on the ways in which music acts to affirm positive homosexual identities, to sidestep the restrictions of the closet, or to afford a utopian space for the exploration of gender fluidity. It suggests ways in which music is often recruited to psychic fantasies of masochistic self-divestiture, particularly by those queer subjects who wish to resist the discursive construction of an essentialist ‘homosexual’ subject. By drawing attention to modes of queer musical consumption that are often unsettling and disturbing, I ask us to look beyond narratives that focus only on heroic queer self-assertion and

Introduction

3

emancipation. This study explores these dynamics of embodied experience through readings of texts by authors who have been central to discussions of queer identities in studies of *fin-de-siècle* literature: John Addington Symonds, Walter Pater, Vernon Lee and E. M. Forster. It also turns to consider works by more neglected figures such as Arthur Symonds, Richard Marsh, John Gambriel Nicholson and E. F. Benson. At a time when these writers were shaping understandings of alternative sexual identities in Britain, their descriptions of intense, embodied engagements with music became an important site for their articulations and evasions of same-sex desires. The focus of the study is broadly on texts by queer male writers, not least because the ‘musicality’ of the male homosexual subject was a persistent fascination of late nineteenth-century sexologists. However, it also foregrounds examples of lesbian encounters with music marked by intense or unsettling experiences of bodily materiality. In doing so, it offers an alternative to accounts of lesbian desire in this period that have often emphasized the ‘apparitional’ or the ‘spectral’.⁷

Recent studies of representations of music in Victorian literary texts have offered important new insights by situating such texts within the vibrant musical culture of nineteenth-century England. The readings offered in this book demonstrate the value of combining such a historical approach with one that responds to the provocations of contemporary queer theory. *Music and the Queer Body* represents the first sustained application of contemporary queer theory – in its concern with negativity, temporality and phenomenology – to central issues in both queer musicology and studies of Victorian musical cultures. It draws upon such theoretical models in order to open up new avenues of enquiry into a diverse range of issues in Victorian musical culture: the body in aesthetic response, the child’s singing voice, the phenomenological experience of touch and the degenerate body.

Music and the Queer Body gives an account of the diverse forms of queer agency that music is afforded in literary texts of the *fin de siècle*: to challenge essentialist identities, or to facilitate reconceptions of embodied subjectivity, or to present alternative conceptions of occupying a sense of space and time. In this respect, it does not attempt to offer a systematic cultural history of how *fin-de-siècle* homosexual subjects listened to music or to demarcate a canon of music that was associated with homosexuality at the *fin de siècle*. Indeed, my study generally avoids speculating about the sexual identities or self-conceptions of those authors whose writings it has examined. My discussion maintains a dual emphasis by moving between specific case studies of musical performance and consumption and more

abstract views on music offered by *fin-de-siècle* reformulations of myths of Dionysus, Marsyas and Pan. Such an approach allows a variety of both complementary and opposing perspectives to emerge, wilfully embracing the heterogeneous messiness that must underlie critical attempts to think seriously about queerness. In doing so, my study asks us to consider more carefully how to account for those aspects of historical musical experience that often leave little trace in the conventional archive: ephemeral bodily gestures; negative emotional responses; problematic musical pleasures; transient structures of feeling.

Music, Homosexuality and Queer Musicology

What if music IS sex?

Suzanne Cusick⁸

The connection between musicality and male homosexuality was firmly established in public discourse as an indirect result of the works of sexologists, beginning with Karl Heinrich Ulrichs's work on 'Uranism' in the 1860s and expanded by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Magnus Hirschfeld, Albert Moll, and others. As explored in detail in Chapter 1, a number of sexological studies of the 'invert' or the 'Urning' in English in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made similar comparisons, frequently drawing upon German sources. In recent decades, queer musicology has turned its attention to the manner in which musical culture represents and responds to non-normative sexual identities. Much of the earliest work in queer musicology, originating with Philip Brett's 'Britten and Grimes' (1977), was strongly influenced by gay and lesbian studies and the imperatives of identity politics.⁹ Influential studies by musicologists such as Susan McClary and Elizabeth Wood sought to rescue from historical erasure the lost pasts of gay and lesbian composers and examine the performative aspects of musical style in the staging of marginalized subjectivities.¹⁰ More recent studies have drawn upon queer theory to explore music as an extension of sexual and affective practices that serve to articulate non-normative subjectivities and erotic relations. Suzanne Cusick has theorized music as a privileged site of sexual pleasure that exists outside the phallic economy of power; Nadine Hubbs has explored the articulation of queer subjectivities through tonal composition in American musical modernism; and Judith Ann Peraino has demarcated a long cultural history of music as a Foucauldian technology that subverts normative identities.¹¹

For the pioneering first wave of queer musicologists, such as Brett and Cusick, the linguistic indeterminacy of music and its alignment with

Music and Homosexuality in Fin-de-Siècle Literature 5

formal aesthetic autonomy saw it closely bound up with the regulatory dynamics of the 'closet', as influentially articulated in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).¹² Music's apparent ability to powerfully articulate sexual desires while simultaneously remaining somehow unspecific or ambiguous about such articulation closely aligns with the complex process of revelation and concealment that define the negotiation of identity based on the in/out binary of homosexuality imposed by the closet. As Wayne Koestenbaum suggests, 'music has been defined as mystery and miasma, as implicitness rather than explicitness', with the result that 'in music we can come out without coming out, we can reveal without saying a word'.¹³ For Brett, the expression through music of a desire which otherwise remained 'closeted' in inarticulacy led to an unfortunate form of political quietism: music remained an essentially private forum for the exploration of listeners' sexual desire while leaving unchallenged the heteronormative assumptions of society more generally.¹⁴

In similar terms, much early work in queer musicology was preoccupied with charting the ideological mechanisms through which music's associations with the spectre of queer sexuality were institutionally denied and effaced. Music became insistently dissociated from homosexuality through the work of what D. A. Miller calls an 'open secret', a process which functioned 'not to conceal knowledge, so much as to conceal the knowledge of the knowledge'.¹⁵ The self-styled 'virility' of European musical modernism; the masculinist misogyny of the music profession; the arcane seriousness of 'scientific' musical analysis; the insistence on music's social autonomy: all might be understood as a strategic response of twentieth-century musical culture to the taboo of homosexuality.¹⁶ While queer musicology has been closely attentive to disciplinary processes that seek to counteract music's queerness, it has also done much to chart music's privileged place as a site of resistance to normative ideologies. Work in critical musicology by scholars such as Lawrence Kramer and Susan McClary has been instrumental in exploring the ways in which music by canonical Western composers performatively articulates queer subjectivities.¹⁷ Similar work in studies of popular music has approached, from a sociological perspective, the place of music in expressing subjectivities that resist heteronormativity.¹⁸

Music and Homosexuality in *Fin-de-Siècle* Literature

Despite this burgeoning interest in music and sexuality in musicology, the significance of the relationship between music and queer subjectivities in

English literary texts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has received only limited sustained critical attention. Such work as exists has done much to situate literary representations in the historical context of *fin-de-siècle* England's vibrant musical culture. Yet such an approach has often occluded modes of theoretical investigation that would more fully reveal the complexities and ambiguities of the texts under discussion. A brief overview of two particularly important contributions by recent scholars – Joe Law and David Deutsch – affords a sense of prevailing critical tendencies while allowing my own argument to come into sharper focus.

Joe Law's 'The "Perniciously Homosexual Art": Music and Homoerotic Desire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Other *Fin-de-Siècle* Fiction' (2004) articulates the prevalence of the association between music and queer identities in late nineteenth-century texts.¹⁹ Law's interest in the queerness of music, although not stated explicitly, relates to its function within the dynamics of the closet. His discussion suggests that references to music in Oscar Wilde's writings function as a 'homosexual code' that signifies 'that which could not be named': erotic love between men. Music, Law argues, becomes one of the central strategies in *fin-de-siècle* fiction for articulating prohibited same-sex desire. 'As an inarticulate medium with the power [...] to communicate some indefinite message', he suggests, 'music is an ideal emblem for that which could not be named but would be recognized by those who shared in it'.²⁰ Focussing in particular on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Law addresses the central role played by music at key points in the novel, drawing particular attention to its association with the transgression of normative gender expectations. Law's work also draws attention to the centrality of music in the work of other queer writers at the *fin de siècle*, such as Alan Dale, Count Eric Stenbock, E. F. Benson and Xavier Mayne (a pseudonym of Edward Prime-Stevenson). Such texts, he suggests, give 'a powerful indication of the significance of music in the formation of [homosexual] identity' as it emerges at the close of the nineteenth century.²¹ Law suggests that the non-representational nature of music in Wilde's text sees it function as a 'discursive silence', which, as Foucault influentially argued, can be understood as a central strategy for the articulation of sexuality.²²

David Deutsch's recent work in *British Literature and Classical Music: Cultural Contexts, 1870–1945* (2015) situates associations between music and queer sexuality in the context of English musical culture's broader connection with liberalism and aestheticism.²³ Examining a range of texts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Deutsch suggests

Pitching the Queer

7

that authors sought to legitimize and validate same-sex desire by portraying individuals in terms that emphasized their ‘musicality’. Such texts, he observes, ‘use music to portray contemporary, same-sex desiring individuals as talented [and] sophisticatedly sensitive’.²⁴ In Deutsch’s account, English musical culture is presented as closely aligned with an apparently humane late-Victorian liberal individualism, which facilitated the articulation of homoerotic subjectivities. Authors such as E. M. Forster, Beverly Nichols and Lord Berners, he suggests, purposefully associated ‘socially alienated individuals’ with music in order to ‘promote their cultural value both to themselves and to society at large’.²⁵ To represent queer characters as innately musical, Deutsch contends, became an affirmative gesture that posited them as ‘uniquely valuable’.²⁶ This, in turn, had the effect of bolstering queer musical subcultures that developed in the face of legal and social persecution. *Music and the Queer Body* builds upon the critical curiosity about music, sexuality and identity fostered by such work. It seeks to bring the important insights garnered from such scholarship to bear on recent theoretical questions, and in turn to suggest how such theory might refine or complicate aspects of our historical understanding of the musical encounter.

Pitching the Queer

Such critical work located at the intersection of queer musicology and *fin-de-siècle* literary studies has, with a few notable exceptions, done little to respond to the provocations of recent developments in queer theory.²⁷ A closer engagement with the central concerns of such theory – negativity, shame, phenomenology, temporality – allows for the emergence of fresh perspectives on the queerness of music, both in *fin-de-siècle* literature and more broadly. This section offers an overview of such developments, before proceeding to discuss the ways in which they can stimulate more creative ways of understanding queer identities in the musical cultures of the *fin de siècle*.

Queer negativity finds its origins in the work of Leo Bersani, most influentially in ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ (1987) and *Homos* (1995).²⁸ Bersani’s work called for a shift away from a queer theoretical project predicated solely upon redemption, reconstruction, restoration and reclamation, instead articulating a theory of sexuality focussed on the antisocial, negative and anti-relational. ‘Useful thought’, Bersani suggests, might result from ‘questioning the compatibility of homosexuality with civic service’.²⁹ For Bersani, the sexual instinct, properly understood, is closely

bound up with the self-destructive imperatives of the death drive. The sexual act – in particular, those sexual acts associated in the psychic order with humiliation, disempowerment and passivity – exists in opposition to ‘the tyranny of the self’.³⁰ Drawing upon his reading of Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (*Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, 1905), Bersani conceptualizes sexual pleasure as always already bound up with a masochistic urge to self-destruction:

[S]exual pleasure occurs [...] when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes somehow ‘beyond’ those connected with psychic organization, [...] the sexual emerges as the *jouissance* of exploded limits, as the ecstatic suffering to which the human organism momentarily plunges when it is ‘pressed’ beyond a certain threshold of endurance.³¹

For Bersani, rather than affirming the value of survival, life and futurity, sex offers the pleasure of a self-shattering undoing, releasing the self from the fantasy of mastery and coherence. ‘The value of sexuality itself’, he concludes, ‘is to demean the seriousness of efforts to redeem it’.³² Bersani’s contention is not that gays and lesbians are somehow unsociable: ‘everyone knows’, as Tim Dean playfully asserts, ‘that homosexuals throw fabulous parties’.³³ The ‘antisocial’ force of what Bersani calls ‘homo-ness’ lies rather in its challenge to social forms predicated not only on sexual reproduction, but also on domination, assertion and control. ‘Homo-ness’, Bersani argues, ‘necessitates a massive redefining of relationality’, instancing ‘a potentially revolutionary inaptitude, perhaps inherent in gay desire, for sociality as it is known’. If there is anything at all which can be said to be ‘politically indispensable’ in homosexuality, Bersani concludes, it is its ‘politically unacceptable’ opposition to community.³⁴ Only by embracing the negativity of the sexual, rather than tidying it up into pastoralist fantasies of the communitarian, might we then recognize new modes of sociality not grounded in the imaginary coherence of the self.

Among the most influential and controversial works in queer theory following Bersani’s ‘antisocial’ turn is Lee Edelman’s 2004 study, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.³⁵ In Edelman’s Lacanian account of the place of the queer in contemporary society, the function of queerness is to disrupt heteronormative society’s alignment with the final signifier by ‘embodying the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order’.³⁶ Such disruption is achieved by refusing what Edelman calls ‘reproductive futurism’: society’s psychic investment in a perpetually deferred future that is figured through the abstract symbol of the Child. The figure of the Child, in Edelman’s work, becomes

Pitching the Queer

9

emblematic of those forms of social legitimacy that are co-extensive with sexual reproduction. The Child stands in opposition to those subjects denied symbolic legitimacy on the grounds that their non-reproductive sexuality represents a *jouissance* of the present moment, rather than an imperative towards an imaginary future. In this resistance to the future, the queer constitutes a figure of the death drive, representing a 'queer negativity' whose 'value [...] resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself'.³⁷

Edelman's thoughts are further developed, in discussion with Lauren Berlant, in *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2013).³⁸ Queer negativity, Edelman and Berlant suggest, is not about existing outside of the social or in perpetual opposition to the possibility of sociality. Rather, in its quest to articulate 'more capacious social worlds', it exists as a form of resistance to the static fixity of social forms that seek to define the limits of relationality.³⁹ Such resistance finds its most powerful expression in the radical incoherence of the sexual act, where sex is understood not as an 'encounter with otherness that attains the stability of a knowable relation' but as aligned with that which 'exceeds and undoes the subject's fantasmatic sovereignty'.⁴⁰ Sex, for Edelman, is 'something to do with experiencing corporeality, and in the orbit of the libidinal, the shock of discontinuity and the encounter with nonknowledge', and it is in this that its queer promise lies. The negativity of sex arises from its resistance to a heteronormativity that aims to 'snuff out libidinal unruliness', 'drown[ing] out the subject's constitution by and attachment to varieties of being undone'.⁴¹

Alongside Edelman's articulation of queer negativity, a similar trend has shown renewed attention to the significance of shame, failure and loss in queer studies. Such work finds its origins in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ground-breaking work on queer performativity, first published in 1993.⁴² Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007) and Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) are exemplary in this respect.⁴³ Love's study examines the construction of queer history, drawing attention to the manner in which negative affects have been marginalized in accounts of queer subject formation. Focussing on literary texts written around the time when discrete sexual 'orientations' emerged, Love demarcates the centrality of loss and loneliness to texts that 'turn their backs on the future'.⁴⁴ In challenging those accounts of queer history that present it as the teleological march of progress from isolation and shame towards assimilation and pride, Love aims to draw attention instead to the centrality of abjection and degradation to queer life

experience. Rather than shrouding the affective inheritance of loss in gay-affirmative triumphalism, queer history should acknowledge, she argues, that 'queer history is, in a sense, nothing but wounded attachments'.⁴⁵ Halberstam's project is directed, in similar ways, at recuperating the place of failure in queer studies. Utilizing the tools of what she calls 'low theory', Halberstam examines texts that range eclectically from children's animated films, 'gross-out' comedies and art photography. Like Love, she is interested in those aspects of queer history that cannot be reconciled with a triumphant narrative of emancipatory progress. Halberstam's playful analyses identify moments of failure that offer a critique of contemporary ideals of success defined by mastery, maturity and the accumulation of wealth. 'Failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing', Halberstam suggests, 'may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world'.⁴⁶

Such work by Halberstam, Love and Edelman might also be understood as part of a turn towards ideas of temporality in queer studies, which has drawn attention to the way in which subjectivities are formed around certain experiences of time. Valerie Rohy has drawn attention to the significance of temporal 'misplacements' in discourses that construct queer identities.⁴⁷ Elizabeth Freeman has articulated a queer sense of 'temporal drag': the experience of 'retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present'.⁴⁸ A stubborn 'lingering of pastness' defined by anachronism, the reappearance of bygone events, and arrested development has, Freeman suggests, long been a hallmark of queer style.⁴⁹

While such work has done much to interrogate the placing of the queer body in time, Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) has, in a similar way, investigated the idea that sexuality may have an impact upon 'how we reside in space'.⁵⁰ Ahmed appropriates for the study of queer bodies and sexualities ideas from phenomenology concerning how human perception relates to its objects through the intentionality of consciousness. Building upon the work of theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz, Ahmed's work articulates the modes of 'orientation' through which queer subjects come to experience their embodied subjectivity.⁵¹

Such work opens up a variety of new avenues for critical exploration in queer musicology. Rather than insistently recruiting music as a tool for the affirmation of queer liberal subjects – as recent work by scholars such as David Deutsch has maintained – an *antisocial* queer musicology might look instead to aesthetic encounters in which music is bound up with psychic masochism and the refusal of social connectedness. Instead of charting those encounters with music in which the desiring self is affirmed,