

Introduction

The theater is neither a school nor a portrait of manners, but it can be considered their mirror in the sense that it is the place where they are concentrated and reflected. There you see the play of passions, prejudices and public opinion most clearly. The choice of works to be performed most often, the manner in which one listens, the type of pleasure or discomfort that the mass of spectators feels most readily, the lines most vigorously applauded, the silliness mocked, the moods one shows at the theater, the behavior one assumes, the people with whom one goes: all of these are so many observations to be collected—observations according to which, without the slightest knowledge of events or incidents, one could form a complete picture of national habits.

Étienne de Jouy, *L'Hermite de la Guiane*
(1816)

This book grew from a simple question. Why did French audiences become silent? Eighteenth-century travelers' accounts of the Paris Opéra and memoirs of concertgoers describe a busy, preoccupied public, at times loud and at others merely sociable, but seldom deeply attentive. Why, over the hundred years between 1750 and 1850, did audiences stop talking and start listening? The answer is anything but simple. This transformation in behavior was a sign of fundamental

change in listening, one whose elements included everything from the physical features of the hall to the musical qualities of the works. These elements slowly pacified musical experience from the Old Regime to romanticism, a remarkable feature of which was growing silence.

The cultural history of listening encompasses change in aesthetic response and public behavior. In writing this history of perception, I have worked within a general conceptual framework inspired by the idealist philosophical tradition, which places the perceiver at the center of meaning. This means, simply, that we cannot hear a Haydn symphony the same way Haydn's contemporaries did. Musical meaning does not exist objectively in the work—or even in its composer's intentions. It resides in the particular moment of reception, one shaped by dominant aesthetic and social expectations that are themselves historically structured. To paraphrase the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, meaning occurs when sound meets prejudice.¹ That charged word “prejudice” is important, for it reminds us that there is no musical meaning without interpretation.²

I have resisted following the extreme application of this logic, however, to conclude that there are as many *Don Giovannis* as there have been listeners. Nor do I think that denying a fixed musical meaning necessarily warrants this conclusion. For just as important as the culturally embedded associations a listener brings to a performance is the structure of the actual musical work. Wolfgang Iser, the literary theorist, is insightful on this point. His view is that a text allows for different meanings while also restricting the possibilities.³ I believe the same can be said of music, though the matter is more complicated here, given the more elusive nature of musical signification. The insistent oboe playing the dotted eighth-sixteenth note pattern in Haydn's Symphony No. 83 is the image of a hen to some, the expression of merriment to others, and an essential thread in a web of indescribable content to others. But it would be hard to argue credibly that it is a funeral dirge, or paints the storming of the Bastille, or promotes slavery.⁴

The way audiences have listened over time can be generalized according to these sorts of categories: sounds, images, ideas, emotions, vague feelings, and so forth. It is also possible to sketch the process by which a cohort of spectators passes from one type of listening to another. This is a matter of discovering how the musical structures and styles of a given generation helped to create listeners' expectations for musical expression, speculating about what the listeners heard (and couldn't have heard) within the boundaries of those expectations, and determining

what sort of individual engagement that content compelled. Set in the stream of time, listening becomes a dialectic between aesthetic expectations and musical innovations. It is a continuous negotiation conducted at the boundaries of musical sense. Change occurs when music accessible enough to meet listeners' criteria for meaning is at the same time innovative enough to prod them into revising and expanding those assumptions.

Intellectuals writing on the relationship between text and reader have called the mental set that orients the reading of a given generation a horizon of expectations. That phrase should also be applied to listening.⁵ A music lover of 1750 magically transported in time could no more appreciate Beethoven's Ninth at first hearing than a contemporary of Titian might comprehend *Nude Descending a Staircase* at first sight: these works would be so far beyond the horizon of expectations as to seem another language, pleasant to hear or see, perhaps, but nonetheless foreign, indecipherable, and therefore meaningless. From the public's point of view (if we might telescope several generations of responses into a single conceptual moment), the perceptual change from Rameau to Beethoven, or from Titian to Duchamp, represents the steady expansion in boundaries of possible meaning. The popular comprehension of new aesthetic styles stands for more than just artistic innovation. It signifies the emergence and refinement of new modes of perception. This helps to explain why listening—no less than reading or seeing—is historically constituted and changes over time.

A rough correlation can be made between the horizon of expectations among listeners and their degree and depth of engagement while listening: to oversimplify, listening for storms, birds, and battles, as Rameau's audiences did, demanded much less attention than did listening for indescribable feelings and urges, as Beethoven's audiences did. By comparing the expectations for meaning with the compositional features of the works French audiences heard, I have constructed a conceptual framework to explain the shift from superficial to engaged listening and, by extension, from talkative to silent audiences.

But musical experience is never just musical. Beyond the particular negotiation between the listener and the music, it also implies a performance space, with its own particular personality, and a unique historical moment, with its styles of expression and political preoccupations. All public expression of musical response—even silence—is inevitably social. Public expression, although freely chosen, is drawn from a finite number of behaviors and styles of discourse shaped by the culture.

Le Sacre du printemps did not cause a riot on its premiere at the Théâtre du Champs Elysées in 1913; fighting in the theater, rather, was one of several possible responses expressing extreme divergence in taste. Why fighting in the aisles was an available behavior in 1913—and, indeed, why the spectators that night opted for this rather than other expressions of mutual contempt—is a question better posed to politics and society than to the music of Stravinsky.

I have used two broad categories to understand the political and social influences upon public responses to music, the structural and the personal. On the largest scale, structures of society—monarchical, aristocratic, meritocratic, democratic—produce patterns of behavior that underlie everyday interactions. To these structures can be attributed certain patterns of behavior during musical performances, patterns that occasionally spill over into the aesthetic and influence how the music is heard. Hence the aesthetically distracting habit of commenting upon other spectators during performances in a society structured by a courtly etiquette rooted in reputation, or the imperative of bourgeois politeness not to bother other spectators. Working very generally from the methodological framework employed by Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing Process*, wherein social configurations are seen to create behavioral constraints that individuals internalize as self-restraints, I have attempted to understand behavioral shifts as part of larger social transformations.⁶

At the same time, spectators' behavior during performances includes conscious responses to immediate stimuli—everything from the latrines overflowing in eighteenth-century halls, to the threat of decapitation for insufficient patriotism during the Revolution, to explosions coming from the new gas lamps. For this reason I open each major section of the book with chapters recreating the physical and psychological atmosphere of the hall from the spectator's point of view. The German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus has written that insofar as reception history attempts to illuminate how competing views of a work represent an age, a nation, a class, or a social group, the rhetorical mode of that history must be broadly narrative.⁷ This view has guided much of my writing, which takes selected themes in social and intellectual history as reference points.

This book is not an institutional history of French opera or concert life. Nor is it a thorough account of French music. Rather, I have tried to isolate significant moments in the historical construction of listening. I have therefore discussed *opéra-comique* only in the section treating the French Revolution, the period when the form had its greatest impact

upon musical experience. For the same reason I have chosen to treat the Théâtre Italien chiefly in the 1820s but do not follow its audiences into the 1830s. The Opéra is present throughout the book, although as a defining force in musical experience it recedes in importance during the Restoration years. For social and aesthetic reasons that will become clear, concert life figures with increasing prominence in the nineteenth-century sections. I hope that this approach will not seem distractingly selective.

Each major section contains passages of musical analysis in which I attempt to locate those salient musical features that reinforced, challenged, or changed existing aesthetic assumptions. I offer these sections as a musically literate listener rather than as a musicologist, which I am not. For the most part they point to the obvious, or what I think was obvious for spectators with a particular horizon of expectations, in an attempt to distinguish between the familiar and the foreign.

Inevitably, questions will arise concerning the legitimacy of generalizing about the experience of audiences based upon the musical descriptions of critics and journalists. Even taking into account the surprising number of ordinary spectators who recorded their musical perceptions in letters to newspapers or whose remarks were heard and used by others, the fact remains that the aesthetic evolution described here is drawn largely from those with a particular reason to listen critically and think systematically about what they heard.

Yet if the chapters on horizons of expectations are understood as attempts to isolate what made certain interpretive stances possible, as well as which musical innovations broadened those expectations and in what direction, then the use of critics and journalists is as valid an indicator of the mechanism of change in perceptions as any. Moreover, by correlating these aesthetic assumptions with their manifestations in behavior as I have attempted to do, one may perhaps make useful generalizations about the musical perceptions of those spectators whose behavior we see but whose thoughts are silent. That sort of logic is dangerous, I know, especially when one is also sensitive to the social—and often imitative—nature of behavior. Still, if applied prudently, the method is not entirely without merit.

There may appear to be a tension at the center of this book between two visions of history, one characterized by slow, piecemeal change and the other composed of clean breaks and successive structures. In the narrative sections I describe particular moments that contain a variety of perceptions and behaviors, while in the sections of social and musical

analysis I give the impression that the culture compelled identical response in thought and action. I am aware of the two souls in my method (Macaulay and Foucault?) and have embraced each for a specific reason, which I hope is not Mephistophelean. In fact I believe that historical change occurs slowly and steadily and not by Foucault's discursive leaps. But if narration alone can paint the details of experience in vivid colors, it is insufficient as a rhetorical mode to illuminate the structures of experience, which is the aim of the analytic sections. The historian's choice, wrote the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, is always between history "which teaches us more and explains less, and history which explains more and teaches less."⁸ In this book I've resisted choosing, preferring instead to do a little of each.