

H-France Review Vol. 16 (July 2016), No. 105

Martin Wählberg, *La Scène de musique dans le roman du XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 456 pp. 56.00 € (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-3626-0.

Review by Julia Simon, University of California, Davis.

As disciplines, literary analysis and musicology present significant obstacles to interdisciplinary cooperation due in large part to significant differences in methodology. Technical vocabulary and analysis in musicology differs from that of literary studies (often with its own theoretical jargon), resulting in a mismatch of discourses that resists collaboration and reinforcing the seeming separation of the academic fields. While some studies in the history of ideas attempt to make the two sides of the disciplinary divide talk to one another on philosophical questions related to aesthetics, few have attempted to work through the historico-musicological implications of Enlightenment literature. Martin Wählberg's *La Scène de musique dans le roman du XVIIIe siècle* makes a compelling argument for using the novel as a kind of archival source for understanding musical practice in the eighteenth century, thereby opening a path to promising interdisciplinary work.

Reading a vast corpus of both well-known and obscure works, Wählberg establishes eighteenth-century novels as a corrective to the significant lacunae in the historical documentation of musical practice, reading the representations of music as rich sources of a kind of practical knowledge about how music was actually lived and performed. As he asserts, music in the eighteenth century is necessarily a lived experience and novels by necessity represent music as an act (p. 16). His definition of the "*scène de musique*" takes its cue from contemporary usage of the phrase by novelists to underscore the theatricalization of music in the novel and, especially, the staged forms of performance and reception. An undercurrent of the argument that surfaces at various points in the analysis stresses the novels' ability to become "un laboratoire scientifique [où] l'exécution des pièces sert à étudier les réactions sur les personnages soumis à l'écoute" (p. 19). By exploring the variety of forms of musical scenes in eighteenth-century literature, a case is built for understanding the novel as a domain of music (p. 410).

With a clear and direct style, *La Scène de musique* provides a taxonomy and analysis of musical scenes in novels shaped by an extensive knowledge of the sociology and history of music. The book is divided into three parts that are then subdivided into logical sections that painstakingly detail the forms of musical representation in the eighteenth-century novel, giving clear examples of each type or form under analysis. The first part focuses on a typology of scenes in which music is performed within the novel, the second follows the sub-genre of novels that includes specific musical notation of various types and the third section examines novels that stage philosophical discussions of music. From the sheer quantity of detail and fine distinctions, a subtle and nuanced analytical understanding of the ways in which music functions in the novel emerges. Culling from a corpus of over 100 novels and short stories, the taxonomic analysis constructs a theory of how music was practiced, both in terms of performance and reception, that fills in significant gaps in the historical record.

The opening section identifies more or less stable forms of novelistic musical practice in the form of familiar scenes: the lesson, the concert, the rehearsal or practice, the opera, and the mass (p. 84). Contextualized within the historical specificity of eighteenth-century musical practice, these scenes reveal an attention to detail that supports their usefulness for understanding how music permeated daily life. Not just superfluous set pieces, these music scenes, although related to and often sharing traits in common with *tableaux*, advance the plot in novels, making the understanding of them dependent not only on a knowledge of eighteenth-century music, but also novelistic practice. Perhaps most fascinating in this section of the analysis is an extended discussion of Goethe's use of music in *Elective Affinities* to advance the central thesis of the novel: the forces of attraction that reconfigure the two couples. The fine attention to the depiction of accompaniment scenes and how the musicians interact with one another reveals Wählberg's own sensitivity to musical practice. This sensitivity is evident as a subtle background undercurrent that supports the entire analytical endeavor of the book. Also noteworthy in this first section on the musical scene is a revelatory discussion of Sade's (and other libertine novelists') use of representations of music in an almost ekphrastic form to accompany scenes of debauchery. Wählberg argues quite persuasively that music enables Sade to combine contradictory aesthetic modes: "La musique seule permet cette réunion particulière de l'esthétique rococo et l'esthétique de la barbarie typiques de l'écriture sadienne, car la musique seule peut assurer l'expression simultanée de plusieurs discours esthétiquement opposés" (p. 117).

The second section of the book, which covers novels in which actual musical notation of one form or another is inserted, is the richest in historico-musicological detail. The extant corpus of novels (38 in the bibliography) represents a body of work rarely studied. Wählberg further subdivides the genre into novels that contain indications of well-known tunes to which lyrics are to be sung (*timbres*), novels that include musical notation, and novels for which music was composed and subsequently published in accompanying anthologies. When set within the context of the vogue for "medieval" tales and *opéra-comique*, these insertions of vocal music into the novel reveal continuity with other mixed-genre productions of the period. Wählberg reads both *opéra-comique* and the novel as "insurrectional forms" with a "rebellious spirit" for their reworking of the rules of genre through aesthetic experimentation (pp. 169-70).

More directly and specifically, during the 1760s, *opéra-comique* presents a form that alternates between declamation and singing, while the novels of the same period with inserted music provide a similar formal structure of alternation. Although there are many differences that distinguish the two genres, and Wählberg copiously documents and attends to those differences, there are nonetheless underlying formal and aesthetic similarities that are only revealed through an attention to this particular corpus. Finally, in a tantalizing comment about the marketing strategy that the inclusion of musical scores within novels represents, Wählberg argues, "Ce n'est pas la qualité ou la forme de la musique qui sont mises en avant dans ces annonces. La musique fait partie d'une stratégie commerciale de réification qui consiste à faire de l'objet physique du livre un produit soigné" (p. 230). This argument aligns nicely with analyses of the use of engravings, as well as the marketing of toys with some children's literature of the period.

The final section of *La Scène de musique* turns to representations of musical debates within novels. The specific focus of the analyses tracks the adherence to and departure from Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of music. Wählberg again highlights the novel's ability to stage the effects of music on listeners in his tracing of the influence of classical music theory in the context of debates about antiquity. While the historical emphasis and methodology in the first two sections of the book provided a rich context for understanding the novels as a kind of archive of daily practice, in the final section, the avoidance of philosophical questions in aesthetics leads to readings that are correct and interesting, as far as they go. In particular, discussions of Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau* and Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* make subtle points about the relationship to and/or distance from Platonic conceptions of the effects of music, but fail to provide a compelling argument for a new understanding of these canonical works that exceeds the narrow bounds of the task at hand.

While the reading of *Le Neveu de Rameau* centers on an ironic (and ambiguous) reference to Plato and Aristotle in the form of cameos on rings on the fingers of rogues (*coquins*) made by the nephew to develop a critique of classical music theory in the text, the reading of *Julie* is more problematic in its faith in a kind of truthfulness or transparency of the values expressed in the letters that compose the text. Focusing on the famous “*vendanges*” letter, Wählberg takes at face value statements made about the use and place of music at Clarens that obscure deeper and more troubling inconsistencies and contradictions. While Saint-Preux praises the domestic economy at Clarens and its “equality,” the scenes depicted of the wine harvest undermine the assertion of equality in their representation of hierarchical work relations. In a final paragraph that acknowledges the manipulative use of music at Clarens, Wählberg echoes Rousseau’s language in an uncritical way, creating an uneasy feeling that he endorses the benign dictatorship that mobilizes music for social control (p. 320). He later argues that this use of music in Rousseau’s representation brings it into line with classical understandings of the social and political function of the practice of vocal unison, particularly in Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws* (p. 369). While this is most certainly true as a reading of Rousseau’s understanding of the social and political role that Plato accorded to unison singing, it fails to raise deeper questions about how such a practice subverts assertions about equality at Clarens. While beyond the scope of the study, some consideration of discussions of the political uses of singing in Rousseau’s corpus might have provided a subtler and more critical reading of the wine-harvest letter in *Julie*.

Before concluding, Wählberg takes up the question of music and the body in musical debates in novels, with particular attention to medical discourses about music. In a fascinating reading of Sophie Cottin’s novel *Malvina*, Wählberg develops a theory of music therapy in the eighteenth century designed to have beneficial effects both physically and psychologically. Rejoining his earlier considerations of effects, this final section argues that the question of how music affects us is answered by novels that propose something other than either a mimetic theory or reference to a *je-ne-sais-quoi* quality for understanding music. The attention to the body in the novelistic music scenes reflects a concern with comprehending music through its analyzable effects, an argument that moves decidedly away from and provides a counterweight to aesthetic discourses of the period.

La Scène de musique makes a compelling case for reading the eighteenth-century novel’s theatricalization of musical practice as a rich archive for a sociological understanding of how music was practiced in Enlightenment France. Most welcome are its capacious corpus and taxonomy of scenic types that flesh out a rich and detailed context for understanding music performance and reception. Wählberg’s attentive and careful readings of both well-known and seldom (if ever) read novels construct an embodied practice for understanding music and remind us more generally of the rich documentary resource that novels, as well as other forms of artistic creation, provide.

Julia Simon
University of California, Davis
jsimon@ucdavis.edu

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.