

Introduction: Ideas and Matter

DAVID TRIPPETT

The legacy of idealism has been a guiding doctrine for the study of nineteenth-century music, from an emphasis on neo-Platonic musical works, acousmatic voices and intangible forms, to listening experiences disembodied, ineffable, and within the scene of what Mark Evan Bonds has called “music as thought.”¹ This special issue presents a quartet of articles whose subjects mark a deliberate departure from this legacy. Collectively, they pose the question of whether the regime of idealism has obscured the emergent perspective of natural science during the period, and with it, those of philosophical and scientific materialism that engaged composers, listeners, and their art.

To an extent, this approach aligns with a recent impulse within the humanities, one that

led Michel Serres to declare that “our body-box, strung tight, is covered head to toe with a tympanum. We live in . . . sound waves just as much as in spaces.”² The same materializing impulse might be cited in relation to Bernd Schulz’s claim from 2002 that “sound has become material within the context of an expanded concept of sculpture.”³ But for present purposes, these articles in this collection adopt a strictly historical approach, seeking out historical witnesses to the break with idealism rather than rearticulating recent disciplinary orientations toward new theories of matter, vibrant or otherwise.⁴

¹Mark Evan Bonds, *Music as Thought: Listening to the Symphony in the Age of Beethoven* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), 141.

³*Resonanzen: Aspekte der Klangkunst*, ed. Bernd Schulz (Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, 2002), 14.

⁴Here I allude, of course, to Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

Amid the intellectual energy of the Jena Romantics, at least two writers asserted an essential kinship between musical sound and idealism. "One must accord music the advantage of being ideal in its essence," August Schlegel remarked in 1802. "It purifies the passions of the material filth that clings to it by representing the passions in our inner mind without reference to objects, but only by their form."⁵ Such mental purity, a kind of acoustic hygiene isolated from material contact, would intrigue later thinkers. Four years later, Christian Friedrich Michaelis marveled at the paradoxical condition that sound was sensible yet invisible, present yet untouchable, occupying space yet ungraspable: "We cannot accept [sounds] as part of the physical world," he avers, "as witnessed by visual and tactile senses. Sounds are to a certain extent *un-physical*, although they originate from bodies in motion; and just as spiritual things are invisible, so too are sounds."⁶ This association proved appealing for criticism in the wake of E. T. A. Hoffmann, and it had stamina. Even by the end of the century Busoni could still assert confidently: "Immateriality is music's very essence."⁷

If we cast a sidelong glance at the Pythagorean legacy, an entwinement of idealism and sound becomes traceable in the long history of Greek thought. And it is perhaps unsurprising that the arch-idealist George Berkeley, for one, believed in an unbroken chain between Greek thought and the immaterialism he espoused in the late eighteenth century.⁸ In what Peter Sloterdijk

calls the "great migration of the mind from Ionia to Jena," sound and idealism have proven kin, recalcitrantly so.⁹ They arguably underpin the familiar narratives of the early nineteenth century that chart the rise of musical autonomy; the separation of musical sound from those of nature and the urban environment; the crystallization of the musical work as a metaphysical reality, with its defining trait the obligation of *Werktreue*; the emergence of music as part of a *Kunstreligion* that co-opted Christological imagery to legitimize subjective reaction (which Kant, notably, had discredited); and all amid a deepening cult of genius, wherein a cultural attraction to greatness, a need to worship cultural achievement typified in Thomas Carlyle's—gendered—"Universal History . . . the History of the Great Men" (1840), fed on idealized histories and, in many cases, veneration of idealized objects.¹⁰

Against this legacy of abstraction, the coeval impulse toward empirical science treated sound quite separately, as a fact of the physical environment, a kind of primitive or raw artifact emerging from instruments just as light and fire emerge from the burning of magnesium and sulphur. Witness the deadpan empiricism that closed Ernst Chladni's first dissertation on plate vibration: "A sound results when an elastic body produces coincident and audible vibrations. . . . By tone, we simply mean a sound where we consider only the height or depth, i.e., the greater or lesser rate of vibrations."¹¹ Yet the desire to eschew metaphysical essences in favor of what can be verified by the senses was never entirely distinguished from idealism. Knowledge (within the natural sciences, at least) needed the potential of being certain; this meant that only a science grounded in metaphysical concepts could

⁵"So muß man der Musik den Vorzug zugestehn, ihrem ganzen Wesen nach idealisch zu seyn. Sie reinigt die Leidenschaften gleichsam von dem materiellen ihnen anhängenden Schmutz, indem sie selbige ohne Bezug auf Gegenstände bloß nach ihrer Form in unserm inner Sinn darstellt." August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über schöne Litteratur und Kunst* (1801–02), ed. Ernst Behler (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1989), I, 375.

⁶"Wir können sie nicht als Bestandtheile der Körperwelt gelten lassen, für welche das Gesicht und der Betastungssinn zeugt. Die Töne sind insofern etwas Unkörperliches, ob sie gleich durch gewegte Körper entstehen; mit dem Geistigen haben wie wenigstens das Unsichtbare gemein." Christian Friedrich Michaelis, "Ein Versuch, des innere Wesen der Tonkunst zu entwickeln," *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 9, no. 43 (23 July 1806): 674 (emphasis added).

⁷Ferruccio Busoni, "Die Melodie der Zukunft," *Zeitschrift für Musik* (February 1930): 94.

⁸George Berkeley, *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar-Water* (London: C. Hitch and C. Davis, 1744), § 311.

⁹Peter Sloterdijk, *Philosophical Temperaments: From Plato to Foucault* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 67.

¹⁰Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: James Fraser, 1841), 1.

¹¹"Ein Klang entsteht, wenn ein elastischer Körper gleichzeitige und hörbare Schwingungen macht. . . . Ton nennt man einem Klang, bey dem man nur auf seine Höhe oder Tiefe, i.e. auf die mehrere oder mindere Geschwindigkeit der Schwingungen, Rücksicht nimmt." Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni, *Entdeckungen über die Theorie des Klanges* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1787), 71–72.

be true. And it explains why Schelling would define a philosophy of nature as nothing less than the “physical explanation of idealism” itself.¹²

The articles in this issue set out from this context. They first arose from a conference at CRASSH (Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities) in Cambridge, supported by the European Research Council, that sought to enlarge substantially our understanding of the dialogue between nineteenth-century music and natural science, examining in particular how a scientific-materialist conception of sound was formed alongside a dominant culture of Romantic idealism. My hope is that they can begin to fill in a set of residual gaps—exemplified here by Carl Stumpf’s praxis as a violinist (Julia Kursell), playful extrapolations of dance music’s numerical undergirding (Nikita Braguinski), philosophical traumas over what the “real” matter of sound might be (David Trippett), and musical mimicry of medical

diagnoses (Peter Pesic)—in musicology’s recent turn toward the history of science.

Seen in the round, these articles—like pointillist spots—are individual but perhaps not isolated. They hint at a more seismic turn underway, one that investigates the view that sound, alongside what Dahlhaus once called the “metaphysical excesses” of Wackenroder’s generation,¹³ was also regarded by writers, composers, scientists, and engineers as tangible, material, and subject to physical laws; that scientific thinking was not anathema but—at key moments—intrinsic to music aesthetics and criticism; that philosophies of mind and theories of the creative process also drew on mechanical rules of causality and associative “laws”; and that the technological innovations brought about by scientific research were accompanied by new concepts and new ways of listening that had a significant impact on the sound world of composers, critics, and performers.



¹²F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling, 14 vols. (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856–61), IV, 76.

¹³Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 23–24.

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE (SPRING 2020)

ABIGAIL FINE: Beethoven's Mask and the Physiognomy of Late Style

JANET SCHMALFELDT: From Literary Fiction to Music: Schumann and the Unreliable Narrative

MARCUS R. PYLE: The Rhetoric of Seduction; or Materiality under Erasure

Corrigendum

In our Summer issue (43/1, 2019), there was an error in the article by Daniel Melamed. The caption for Example 1 (printed on p. 13) reads: Bach, Cöthen Funeral Music, BWV 244/49. The caption should read: Bach, *St. Matthew Passion*, BWV 244/49.

We regret the error.