

Elisabeth Le Guin. 2006. *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Reviewed by Suzanne G. Cusick

In early 2006, I did something I had never done before. I sent a musicology book as a gift to a friend. No, to two friends, one a former musicologist who now works as a gambist, the other a former musicologist who now works as a writer. I wrote to each of them that Elisabeth Le Guin's *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* had restored my faith in musicology.

Boccherini's Body addresses the joy, passion, and erotic impulse; the thrill at beautifully shaping sounds with the work of one's sensate body; the sheer sensual wash of such sounds; the intellectual fascination of experiencing through them a concrete, material contact with peoples and worlds long dead; the desire for something like time-travel so as truly to know the European past as the product of profoundly different values from my own that drive my best efforts as a scholar. I have been waiting all my life for a book that simultaneously explains the loves and desires that drive the musicological enterprise, and satisfies them, without requiring that I renounce my entangled loves for music and history.

Elisabeth Le Guin would never write such wild sentences as these. Indeed, one of the many pleasures of her book is the clarity, elegance, and wit of her prose, even when she writes in a voice that seems as swept away in a transport of *sensibilité* as that of an eighteenth-century listener responding to music heard in a salon. Le Guin has used her impressive literary gifts to produce a rich and subtle book that is both a tour de force of embodied, historicist criticism illuminating much of Boccherini's music and a sustained (if sympathetic) critique of musicology's commitment to the disembodied, transhistorical, and scientific. Moreover, in her insistent embrace of relationships, embodied knowledges, and the responsive, sympathetic ethos of *sensibilité*, and in her insistent refusal to admit even the possibility of unitary knowledge, Le Guin has written the most formally and methodologically feminist musicology I have yet read—even though neither “feminism” nor “gender” are even minimally present in its content. Fascinating as an introduction to eighteenth-century ways of receiving art, replete with models of beautiful writing about music as sound and embodied action, *Boccherini's Body* merits careful reading from everyone interested in the future of our discipline.

Like many recent musicology books, *Boccherini's Body* exists in a tense

Current Musicology

relationship with our discipline's usual genres. Both its title and its close scrutiny of a single musician's work can imply a relationship to the life-and-works genre, but it defies that categorization on at least two grounds. First, unlike most such books, *Boccherini's Body* never quite separates the composer's life and works from each other, as if the one were historically embedded while the other transcended such entrapment. Second, the book is not so much about Boccherini as it is about the consequences of Le Guin's relationship with Boccherini—the things her performing intimacy with his music have led her to investigate and thus to know. In that sense, the book's unfolding models the deepening intimacy that can follow from carnal knowledge in the biblical sense. In another sense, the book reads almost like an old-fashioned novel in its fascinating explanations of how people lived—how eighteenth-century people looked at things, how they responded physically to what they read, how they held their bodies and moved them to dance, how these things changed in the course of one person's (Boccherini's) lifetime, and how the traces of eighteenth-century life can be tracked in the writings of novelists, choreographers, philosophers, and physicians, as well as in the compositions of people like Boccherini. In yet a third sense the book can be read as replacing many of traditional musicology's most cherished shibboleths with the critical methodology Le Guin has dubbed "carnal musicology."

In conceiving a "carnal musicology," Le Guin has used her own embodied knowledge as a cellist as the opening gambit of a post-Kerman critical approach to music. Sharing with Kerman an interest in interpretation, she seeks a way to resist the hermeneut's tendency to reduce "pieces of music" to the musical equivalent of literary texts. Le Guin found a theoretical basis for her own critical perspective in the work of art historians Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall (1994) on the early eighteenth-century painter Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770). Alpers and Baxandall had set out to find a non-narrative way of writing critically about painting, one that would draw insights from painting's intrinsic independence of the narrative temporality that, they claimed, had dominated art criticism since the fifteenth century. They found in Tiepolo an artist whose work offered them "an example of pictorial creativity from premises that are not literary" (1994:3). Not coincidentally, Tiepolo was also a well-known but not canonic painter, one whose appeal was not considered universal. As a result, without ruffling disciplinary feathers Alpers and Baxandall were able to use a study of Tiepolo's paintings to demonstrate how an artist's work could be enmeshed in the preconceptions of his own time and in his physical relationship to his materials. Thus creating an approach to fine art scholarship that dodged both the culture of connoisseurship and its opposite, the tradition of studying *kleinmeisters*,

Alpers and Baxandall reveled in the freedom Tiepolo's lifelong preference for frescoes gave them to elaborate a way of looking that depended on motion, not the fixity imposed by a framed painting's location on a museum wall. For, as they write, to look at frescoed ceilings "one must keep moving about, coping with the distance, eccentric angles and fluctuations in light as one is looking" (1994:7–8). Although she does not say so directly, Le Guin may be seen to have similarly focused on a well-known but non-canonic figure whose music offered the opportunity to think critically about the gestural, visible, and dramatic elements of music as performed, without ruffling disciplinary feathers. It is as if Alpers's and Baxandall's work on Tiepolo set her free in the "imaginary museum of musical works" Lydia Goehr (1992) had described two years before their book appeared—free to move about, "coping with the [historical] distance" that both separates and unites contemporary musical bodies with bodies long dead.

In chapter 1, "Cello-and-Bow Thinking," Le Guin presents the most literal form of carnal musicology—intimate knowledge of a piece based on what she claims as "a physically reciprocal relationship with someone no longer living" (24). Playing music he wrote for his own performance as a young concert artist, Le Guin brings into being both the capacities of Boccherini's own body and the capacities he evidently expected in other cellists' bodies (when he preserved these pieces for posterity). For Le Guin, such playing brings something like Boccherini's presence into being, as if it were a hologram present to her. Anticipating the charge that her resulting interpretation of the piece could be nothing more than "narcissistic free association by a particularly verbose performer," Le Guin freely acknowledges that it is only one reading among many that are possible (25). She ends by claiming both that subsequent historical and cultural research will confirm the plausibility of her reading and that "the complex layering of interpretations that builds up around any work of art" functions as the "compost" that enables it to survive.

Chapter 2, "As My Works Show Me to Be," begins as if it were a brief biography of the virtuoso cellist and composer Luigi Boccherini (1743–1805). But in the absence of new details of how Boccherini lived his mature working life in Spain, it ends by using the fact of his itinerant youth as an opportunity to explore the contexts that probably formed his artistic habits. The Boccherini family, we learn, was immersed in producing music for the theatre; one of Luigi's brothers became a successful librettist in Vienna, two of his sisters important theatrical dancers. Boccherini himself spent two years in Paris (1767–68) when the city was alive with debates about the representation of human emotion, and when the hottest theatrical genre was the pantomime-ballet. Le Guin thus lays the groundwork for her subsequent emphasis on

Current Musicology

social, choreographic, and theatrical gestures, and on the culture of *sensibilité* (or, as Jane Austen called it, sensibility—intensely sympathetic responsiveness) as the “cultural current” Boccherini “imbibed” (53).

In chapter 3, “Gesture and Tableaux,” Le Guin literally fleshes out the implications of the material presented in the previous chapter. She extrapolates from comments in Diderot’s essay “La Mère bien-aimée (esquisse)” a working definition of *sensible* performance as that

in which the viewer/listener is every bit as active and sensitized as the painter/executant. A performance so constituted is very much a mutual undertaking by artist and recipient—a joint “speculation,” as it were. What is being improvised . . . is not any particular configuration of tones, but rather the relationship between the parties involved. (75; see also Diderot 1988)

Showing a gift for the telling detail that informs nearly every section of the book, Le Guin quotes Diderot’s vivid description of a Richardson reader to remind her own readers how physical and visually legible *sensible* reception could be.

There he is—he seizes the book, retires into a corner and reads. I watch him: first I see tears flow, he breaks off, he sobs; suddenly he gets up, he walks without knowing where he is going, he utters cries like a desolate man, and he addresses the bitterest reproaches to all the Harlowe family [of Richardson’s *Clarissa*]. (81, 295n36)

Tracing representations of *sensibilité* in literature, painting, eighteenth-century cultural theory (notably the writings of Diderot and Rousseau), tableaux, the detailed notes left by choreographers of pantomime-ballets, and accounts of behavior in salons and their Spanish equivalents, *tertulia*, Le Guin reconstructs the elements of a fully embodied, often visible *sensibilité* that she believes Boccherini and those who played or heard his chamber music in salons shared. Le Guin notes that by the early nineteenth century *sensible* listening’s utter absorption into the performance had been supplanted (especially in Germany) by a “disinterested contemplation” that seems much closer to contemporary ways of listening. Continuing to develop an understanding of the *sensible*, she concludes by acknowledging that while *sensible* reception was visually legible, the *sensible* effects produced by the bodies of musical performers were not, confirming Benito Jerónimo de Feijóo’s claim that “To those who would know the interior of another, what is most important is not to see him, but to hear him” (82, 295n37). Accordingly, in chapter 4 Le Guin returns her attention to the relationships of *sensibilité* to musical sounds.

Like the book as a whole, chapter 4 (“Virtuosity, Virtuality, Virtue”) begins with an eloquent description of Boccherini’s music that is thoroughly grounded in Le Guin’s own bodily experiences. She quickly moves beyond those experiences, however, to paraphrase the slow movement of the composer’s Sonata in C, G. 17, through a fantasy identification of certain gestures with the literary and operatic character Dido that is wittily reminiscent of Momigny’s famous reading of Mozart’s String Quartet in D Minor, K. 421 (Momigny [1806] 1998). The resulting close description thus recapitulates the carnal epistemologies outlined in chapters 1 and 3, arriving at last at the interpretive questions that drive this chapter. What are the artistic uses of Boccherini’s well-known use of cyclic repetition in multi-movement works? Is the *persona* of the Sonata in C an authentic *sensible* or an automaton? What relationships linked the concepts of virtuosity, virtuality, and virtue in eighteenth-century performance culture? From these questions, never fully answered, others proliferate, leading Le Guin to explore the conflicting eighteenth-century valuations of musicians who played (*cantor*) versus musicians who created (*musicus*), of *poiesis* (making) versus *phronesis* (doing), of the *sensibilité* that imagined middling-class people identifying with each other versus a virtuosity so athletic in performance as to preclude any listener’s identification with such a masterful (or grotesque) Other.

For me the best part of this chapter is the section that elaborates the necessary deceptions of which *sensible* performances are made. Le Guin shows that every *dolcissimo* inviting a listener to *sensible* response results from a restraint in the performer’s body that feels unnatural to the player. Thus the audible effect of *sensibilité* results from a kind of virtuosity that does not seem athletic but is no less alienated. Many readers will know this paradox from their own performing experiences. Le Guin historicizes it by reference to Diderot’s “Paradoxe sur le comédien,” after fascinating excursions into eighteenth-century kinds of bodily discipline, including the instructional methods by which cellists’ habits of hand were taught, and the ways one of her students has argued that Scarlatti’s keyboard sonatas require once-characteristically Spanish gestures of the player’s hands. Here Le Guin completely fuses a historian’s commitment to understand embodiment as Boccherini and his contemporaries might have done with her initially abstract desire to develop body-centered critical insights about Boccherini’s music. One might infer that a well-executed carnal musicology would require an understanding of both how contemporary bodies “know” music and how historical bodies might have known it. Rather like the *sensible* performance Le Guin theorized in chapter 3, then, carnal musicology would seem to be a “joint speculation” that improvises “relationships between the parties involved” (75), both living and dead.

Current Musicology

Chapter 5, “A Melancholy Anatomy,” can seem like a dark satire both of Le Guin’s own insistence on such relationships and of musicology’s fascination with the physical and aurally meaningful traces (manuscripts, scores, treatises, instruments) the dead leave behind. Opening with an account of Boccherini’s 1993 exhumation and autopsy, Le Guin quickly moves beyond the morbidly biographical (the composer’s apparent death from consumption, consumption’s association with melancholy, and the frequent ascription of melancholy to his music) to explore seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ideas about the physiological experience of *sensibilité*. The sympathetic resonance of one person’s nerves with another’s, as if both sets of nerves were tuned strings, turns out to have been the perceived cause of *sensibilité*’s characteristic vulnerability. That vulnerability, sometimes perceived as effeminate, was considered both an ennobling characteristic of great intellects and a danger to one’s mental and physical health. As Le Guin points out, such a notion of human beings’ physically real relatedness to one another is profoundly foreign to twenty-first century persons, especially in a culture as radically individualistic as ours.

The hardy postmodernist reader . . . may smile at such quaint warnings [that music might drive a melancholic mad] but in so doing betray the extent to which her own culture has divorced soul and body—an extent undreamed of by Descartes himself. We simply can no longer believe that too fine an attention to a melancholic piece of music might result in physical illness; and in this ability we see the gulf of our difference from the culture that produced and consumed such music. To attempt to cross the gulf is, at least in theory, to lay ourselves open to the possibility of making ourselves ill. (206)

In chapter 6, “It Is All Cloth of the Same Piece,” Le Guin uses discussion of Boccherini’s early quartets, and of the minute differences in execution that make a single motive echoing through a texture seem to mutate under each player’s fingers, to introduce a fictionalized dialogue with her colleagues in the Artaria Quartet that irreverently debunks the artful brilliance of her consistently carnal, richly historicized interpretations. Thus she both destabilizes the imagined usefulness of historicist critical musicology to historicist performance and thoroughly dismisses the possibility that any one critical strategy (much less any one critical interpretation) could be authoritative—not even her own.

Chapter 7, “The Perfect Listener,” continues the work of problematizing the solipsistic dependence on one’s own embodied experiences to which a carnal musicology might tempt. Le Guin points out explicitly that as soon as there is an effort to listen from an embodied subject position the possibility of generalization evaporates, leaving behind an infinite number of

possibilities. Would a perfect listener be Parisian? Madrilenian? Melancholy? Consumptive? Proficient in string performance? Innocent of performance? An opera-goer? As she puts it, all “acts of trans-historical identification are necessarily gross compromises” (259). Yet Le Guin confronts the aporia, writing an admittedly speculative “thought experiment” in the form of a letter that envoices how *a* perfect listener might respond to *a* particular performance. She freely acknowledges that her letter, like the dialogue that ended chapter 6, is an example of musicology as fiction, challenging us all to acknowledge that the same is true of our own work.

The long introduction to this epistolary ending encouraged me to move beyond Le Guin’s literary performance as a perfect listener, and to imagine my own responses to the music described (Haydn’s G Major keyboard sonata, Hob. XVI: 39) through my own memories of the way such pieces usually go. For me (who once knew this piece as a pianist), a deceptive cadence that Le Guin finds darkly troubling seemed mischievous, a deliberate if playful tug of the listener’s attention away from convention and toward the unforeseeable. As it was with that moment, so it is for me with *Boccherini’s Body* as a whole. I find it a gracious, graceful invitation to experience historical musics in an ever-richer, unforeseeable variety of ways. In her erudite, imaginative survey of eighteenth-century modes of embodiment, Le Guin has broadened the possibilities I can imagine, broadened the field of possible encounters a twenty-first-century embodied self might have with the embodied selves that Boccherini and his contemporaries knew.

Ultimately, the carnal musicology Le Guin proposes in *Boccherini’s Body* is a twenty-first-century echo of *sensible* reception, requiring sympathetic leaps of imagination to the extremely vivid places where living and no-longer-living bodies might meet. Le Guin makes no excuses for her method’s dependence on imagination, nor does she claim that her own interpretive leaps, however based on a virtuosic accumulation of knowledges, can produce definitive, irrefutable readings. Rather, in her final chapters she demonstrates the dissolution into fiction of musicology’s pretense to scientific knowledge, and invites us to contemplate the extent to which all scholarly writing participates in the art of fiction, including the fond fiction that historians and performers of “classical music” share—that by skillful reading and disciplined imaginings we can know the worlds inhabited by others who have long been dead. At the same time, by writing each of these chapters’ second half in a characteristically eighteenth-century literary form (the pedagogical dialogue, the letter), she articulates with brave precision the border that separates responsibly carnal musicology from the descent into sympathetic madness to which an excess of *sensible* imagination might lead.

No book this complex could be without flaws. One might easily quibble about any number of minor matters, not least the absence of any straightforward gesture toward the musicological neophyte who could wonder who Boccherini was, or why and how anyone remembers him today. One might also question Le Guin's occasional use of performative writing (writing that strives to do things to its readers) to plunge readers into an eighteenth-century subjectivity, rather than simply describing such a subjectivity's components. Some readers may simply find these passages bewildering; others may find that they contradict or undermine Le Guin's frequent protestations that she does not intend her interpretations to be authoritative. Occasionally Le Guin seemed to me to overstate Boccherini's particular suitability for study by a carnal musicology, thus making her method seem less transferable to other subjects than I think it to be. But these *are* quibbles: none detract from the historical and musical richness, the disciplinary importance, or the sheer beauty of this book.

Boccherini's Body is beautifully produced, complete with a table of contents that wittily evokes the possibility that it might be read as an eighteenth-century novel. The choice for endnotes rather than footnotes allowed for a spacious presentation of both text and musical examples on the page; the appendices and bibliography will prove immensely helpful to specialists. A meticulously edited CD, recorded by the Artaria Quartet, illuminates Le Guin's sometimes microscopically close descriptions of Boccherini's music—if, that is, the reader succeeds in extracting it from the unwieldy plastic prison in which it is encased. I had to completely destroy that case in my copy, only to discover the CD was so gunked up by adhesive that I dared not play it; fortunately, I was able to get a second copy from someone else. Finally, a website includes full texts and translations of contemporary comments on Boccherini's music too long to quote in the book, along with additional recorded examples of quartets and sonatas (<http://epub.library.ucla.edu/leguin/boccherini>).

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