

CHAPTER THREE

Towards a Musical Monadology: Embracing the Sensation of Sound

During much of the 18th century, philosophers who wrote about music viewed wordless instrumental music with suspicion: they believed that music needed a text in order to communicate clearly; without a text, music seemed vague, superficial, and incapable of imitation or expression, and therefore at odds with the way all the other arts were understood to behave. Yet by the end of the century, instrumental music emerged as a powerful genre, praised by a new generation of writers who celebrated wordless music for its ability to fathom human interiorities. We generally call this emergence the “rise” of instrumental music, and most narratives of this emergence emphasize how late 18th century music depended on contemporary philosophical developments. Scholars have turned to formalism, idealism, and the idea of “absolute” music to explain the aesthetic preconditions for instrumental music’s new prominence. As discussed in the Introduction, scholars such as Mark Evan Bonds, Carl Dahlhaus, Lydia Goehr, John Neubauer, Daniel Chua have all treated developments in musical aesthetics apart from musical practice.

As depicted by these scholars, the “rise of instrumental music” amounted to a transformation of the language used to discuss and describe music; 18th-century philosophers fashioned new vocabularies for discussing the abstract wonder of music. Wilhelm Wackenroder connects music with the infinite, Johann Gottfried Herder speaks of “religious contemplation,” Immanuel Kant stresses formal beauty, and E. T. A. Hoffmann tells us that the lyre of Orpheus opens the doors to

the underworld. Each confirms that “music” had been transformed into an abstract vehicle ideally suited for communing with distant spirit worlds. In other words, in these narratives, instrumental music’s expressive voice was imposed upon it from the outside music was allowed to escape both the need for a sung text and the pressures of imitative theories of art. What has been little noticed, however, is that these philosophies replace the vocal text with a philosophical one: though philosophy cannot directly explain what the music “means,” as a sung text can, it nevertheless educates the listener that the musical experience is a sublime one. The “meaning” of the music is thus predetermined: before the quartet or symphony has even begun, the listener already knows that it hints at ideal realms and untold profundity.

This approach, however, leaves out a necessary step: before instrumental music could shed its status as mere “jingle-jangle” and be received as a “sublime” art form, attitudes towards the musical *medium* had to change, and this change came as much from new musical practices as it did from developments in aesthetics. Instrumental music’s reputation had suffered not only because it fit awkwardly with imitative theories of art, but also because it depended upon what was deemed a merely sensual and ultimately vapid medium. Formalism, idealism, and the notion of “absolute music” all presuppose certain ideas about the nature and value of the musical medium. Musical sensation itself had to acquire an aesthetic credibility it had never before enjoyed.

Kant's difficulty with musical sensation

Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1791) illustrates why musical formalism requires fundamental changes to 18th-century attitudes towards musical sensation. The work has played a central role in narratives of the rise of instrumental music. Many criticisms leveled against instrumental music during the 18th century—especially those positing that music without words as meaningless—seem to be answered in the *Critique*: according to Kant, the judgment that something is beautiful is not based on the usefulness or agreeableness of the object under the philosopher's gaze; rather, the aesthetic judgment stems from a pure and disinterested estimation of the beauty of the object's form. At a time when composers were manipulating musical form in increasingly artful and expressive ways, Kant's theory seems especially suited to judgments on instrumental music. His aesthetic theory, however, is Janus-faced: though he lays out the foundations of a formalist aesthetic that went on to have profound influence on later musical aesthetics, he also dismisses music: like earlier 18th-century thinkers, he finds it ephemeral, superficial, and unable to stimulate cognition. He briefly mentions instrumental music as a kind "free beauty," but in the larger picture, music is ranked lowest among the fine arts, condemned as a transitory art form that leaves behind "no food for reflection." But though musicologists may be dismayed at Kant's low opinion of music, we can remind ourselves that his musical education and experience were limited, and that even when given the choice between subtle and bombastic music, the great

metaphysician often preferred the bombastic.¹ It thus becomes easier to ignore his condemnatory remarks about music's lack of food for thought and to extract from the *Critique* those things that contribute to a formalist understanding of music. Rather than focusing on the ways in which Kant's aesthetic theory can redeem instrumental music, however. I would like to examine why music poses difficulties for his theory and what this fact can tell us about his conception of the musical medium.²

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The aesthetic project of Kant's third *Critique* centers on a series of binary oppositions between types of beauty and of aesthetic judgments: he distinguishes between, among others, form and presentation; design and color; free beauty and accessory beauty; reflection and sensation; beauty and agreeableness; culture and charm. In each dyad, the former contributes to, or is a necessary component of, "pure" aesthetic judgments, in which the object is truly beautiful, while the latter contributes to "material" aesthetic judgments, in which the object is either merely agreeable, or else is contingently beautiful. Kant writes:

There are two kinds of beauty, free beauty (*pulchritude vaga*) and merely accessory beauty (*pulchritude adhaerens*).

Free beauty does not presuppose a concept of what the

¹ See Ehregott Wasianki's biography of Kant, *Immanuel Kant in seinen letzten Lebensjahren* [1804], reprinted in *Wer war Kant? Drei zeitgenössischen Biographien von Ludwig Ernst Borowski, Reinhold Bernhard Jackmann, and E. A. Ch. Wasianski*, ed. Siegfried Drescher (Pfullingen: Neske, 1974), p. 268. Wasianki describes Kant's love of marching bands and surprising indifference to the music of great masters such as Haydn.

² For a close reading of Kant's third *Critique*, see Marianne Tettlebaum, "Kant's noisy neighbors: the experience of music and community in the critique of judgment," (PhD. Dissertation, Cornell University, 2004). See also Herman Parret, "Kant on music and the hierarchy of the arts," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 56, issue 3 (1998), pp. 251-264.

object [is meant] to be. Accessory beauty does presuppose such a concept, as well as the object's perfection in terms of that concept. The free kinds of beauty are called (self-subsistent) beauties of this or that thing. The other kind of beauty is accessory to a concept (i.e., it is conditioned beauty). And as such is attributed to objects that fall under the concept of a particular purpose.³

Unlike the imitative theories that dominated much of 18th century aesthetics, Kant's concept of beauty radically breaks away from notions of representation, eschewing notions of purpose and imitation. Within Kant's theory, intrinsic purposiveness would only demote the object from a free beauty to a dependent beauty. Here Kant seems to rescue music from the criticisms of vagueness made by so many earlier thinkers:

Flowers are free natural beauties. Hardly anyone apart from the botanist knows what sort of thing a flower is [meant] to be... Hence the judgment is based on no perfection of any kind, no intrinsic purposiveness to which the combination of the manifold might refer. Many birds (the parrot, the humming-bird, the bird of paradise) and a lot of crustaceans in the sea are [free] beauties themselves [and] belong to no object determined by concepts as to its purpose, but we like them freely and on their own account. Thus designs *à la grecque*, the foliage on borders or on wallpaper, etc. mean nothing on their own; they represent nothing, no object under a determinate concept, and are

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), §16, p. 76.

free beauties. What we call fantasias in music (namely, music without a topic [Thema]), indeed all music not set to words, may also be included in the same class.⁴

A pure judgment of taste, it follows, is when the object is judged according to its form alone, ignoring any purpose or function. An ancient cooking utensil, even though it clearly had a purpose, can still be a work of art. In considering the utensil, we would judge its form, its shape and proportions, ignoring any function or the object's suitability for accomplishing this function. The application of Kant's formal theory to music would appear straightforward: instrumental music, like birds and wallpaper designs, would be judged according to its "outward form." For the formalists who follow Kant, music's form is the way in which the composer has organized the sounds into an overarching structure. Kant, however, has no comparable notion of musical form, and never discusses music in terms of melody and harmony, but rather as a "play of sensations."

When we try to unpack Kant's notion of musical sensation, we find ourselves in a murky region where his clean divisions between kinds of aesthetic judgments and kinds of beauty begin to disintegrate. Musical sensation—tone—as well as color continually waver between the aesthetic categories of the "beautiful" and the merely "agreeable." Here Kant calls upon the familiar delineation between color and design. In Kant's view, design, because it has form, is the source of an object's beauty. Color and tone (by analogy) because they belong to the "presentation" of the object, are merely agreeable: one can speak of the

⁴ Ibid., §16 76-77.

“charm” of a color or tone, but not of their beauty. Yet Kant continually hints at the possibility that a color or tone could be beautiful in and of itself:

Most people will declare a mere color, such as the green color of a lawn, or a mere tone (as distinct from sound and noise), as for example that of a violin, to be beautiful in themselves, even though both seem to be based merely on the matter of presentations, i.e., solely on sensations, and hence deserve only to be called agreeable. And yet it will surely be noticed at the same time that sensations of color as well as of tone claim to deserve being considered beautiful only insofar as they are *pure*. And that is an attribute that already concerns form...⁵

Kant argues that this property of purity, can only be judged by scientific knowledge of the form of the vibrations of air or light that constitute the tone or color.⁶ Here Kant’s concept of pure (and therefore truly beautiful) color or tone remains much more a theoretical possibility than a working component of his aesthetic theory. He goes on to downplay the importance of color and tone by arguing that they fill a subsidiary role in aesthetic judgments, and cannot make an object beautiful. They can be added to the object , but “...all they do is to make the form intuitable more precisely, determinately, and completely, while they also enliven the presentation by means of their charm, by arousing

⁵ Ibid., §14, p. 70.

⁶ Aristotle believed that colors functioned like musical tones, and therefore had their own consonances and dissonances that were governed by simple ratios—i.e., that the most consonant colors, like the most constant intervals, had the simplest ratios. See *De Sensu et Sensibili*, B5v.

and sustaining the attention we direct towards the object itself.”⁷ The role of color and tone, then, seems analogous to that of wisely-used spices—they can heighten the experience of filet mignon, but do not constitute a meal in themselves.

Later, when discussing the divisions of the fine arts, Kant revisits the aesthetic status of color and tone, and again entertains the possibility that the very act of sensing color and tone already implies a kind of formal reflection. He writes:

... we cannot say with certainty whether a color or a tone (sound) is merely an agreeable sensation or whether it is of itself already a beautiful play of [component] sensations and as such carries with it, as we judge it aesthetically, a liking for its form. Just consider the rapidity of the vibration of light, or in the case of tones, of the air, which probably far exceeds all our ability to judge directly in perception the ratio in the temporal division [produced] by these vibrations.⁸

If we can judge the “temporal division” of the vibrations—that is, the *form* of the vibration— then these sensations can be beautiful in and of themselves. If we merely sense the *effect* of the vibrations, then we never connect colors and tones with anything more than agreeableness. Though direct perception of the vibration’s form seems impossible, Kant reminds us that people can be, in spite of keen vision or hearing, color-blind or tone-deaf, in which case, they are lacking an innate ability to

⁷Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §14, p. 72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, §51 p.194.

judge the sensation's "temporal division." In turn this implies that we are usually able to judge the form of the vibration of a tone or color, a fact that has important ramifications for how we consider music as an art:

If we consider all of this, we may feel compelled to regard sensation of color and tone not as mere sense impressions, but as the effect of our *judging of the form* we find in the play of many sensations. However, the difference that one or the other opinion would make to our judging of the basis of music would affect the definition only in this: we would declare music either, as we did above, to be the *beautiful* [*schön*] play of sensations (of hearing), or [to be the play] of *agreeable* sensations. Only under the first kind of explication will music be presented wholly as fine [*schön*] art, while under the second it would be presented (at least in part) as *agreeable* art.

Music is thus casually pushed to the threshold between beauty and agreeableness. While his ambivalence over the status of musical sensation ultimately seems of little consequence to the aesthetic project of the third *Critique*, it is one reason for Kant's difficulties with music altogether. Because he sees music fundamentally as a "play of sensations" and does not discuss other aspects of musical form, he forces music to assume the same fate as its constituent parts, and therefore to waver between the categories of the agreeable and the beautiful. Music can stimulate the mind, but because it is fundamentally sensation, it can never fuel cognition. Damning with

faint praise, Kant ranks music highly on account of its “charm and mental agitation”: “...though [music] speaks through nothing but sensations without concepts, so that unlike poetry it leaves us with nothing to meditate about, it nevertheless does agitate the mind more diversely and intensely, even if merely temporarily.”⁹ In the end when he judges the arts according to “the culture they supply to the mind” Kant is obliged to demote music to “the lowest place among the fine arts,” awarding highest rank to the visual arts:

For by putting the imagination into a free play that yet is also commensurate with the understanding, [the visual arts] carry on a task at the same time: they bring about a product that serves the concepts of the understanding as an enduring vehicle, a vehicle that commends itself to these very concepts, for furthering their union with sensibility and thereby the urbanity, as it were, of the higher cognitive powers. The two kinds of art pursue quite different courses: music proceeds from sensations to indeterminate ideas; the visual arts from determinate ideas to sensation. The latter [arts] produce a *lasting* impression, the former only a *transitory* one¹⁰.

Music for Kant, is above all, sensation—sonority. His aesthetic project depends on the “abstractability” of the form from the object of contemplation: sensations must turn into lasting ideas and concepts for the mind. Music cannot rank highly among the fine arts, since, for

⁹ Ibid., §53 p. 198.

¹⁰ Ibid., §53, p. 200.

Kant, transient sensations are anathema to abstraction and supply little to human cognition.

Kant's negative evaluation of music is consistent with much 18th century thought on music. Indeed, his low opinion of musical sensation was quite similar to that of earlier 18th-century thinkers. The difference between Kant and other thinkers is that, while he insisted music was fundamentally sensation, others struggled to connect music to something greater than its mere sounds. We'll recall that Rousseau, for example, claimed that the beautiful colors and sounds was "purely one of sensation" and called for the careful use of melody to create meaningful design.¹¹ He carefully separated musical elements that supply meaning from those that merely provide pleasurable sensation. This is representative of the dominant 18th-century view that music's meaning lay in its extra-musical association—music should imitate or represent appropriate subjects or emotional states. Music that had no clear "meaning" or appeared to be "only" a play of sound had little aesthetic value—criticisms often leveled against instrumental music. While other thinkers are able to argue for some sort of extra-musical or imitative meaning for music, Kant, precisely because he champions a purely formalist approach to art, cannot draw upon the same resources for the evaluation of music. Without a radically different conception of the musical medium, Kant was forced to rank music low among the arts.

¹¹Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Origin of Language*, from *Music and aesthetics in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries*, Peter le Huray and James Day, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 93.

Musical formalism could only take hold after particular philosophical and practical developments had altered music's basic ontological identity. To impose a formalist approach on music without reassessing the nature of musical sensation could only devalue music, since formalism denies music access to extra-musical associations. The musical medium, however, began to take on a new identity as the orchestra solidified as a concept, musical body, and institution. The new stabilized orchestra, with a fixed body of musicians, allowed composers to employ instrumental sonorities with increasing specificity, and gave rise to the idea that instruments had definable and inherently expressive characters. This new conception of the aesthetic capacity of the musical medium not only had lasting effects on musical composition, but also fueled a radical reevaluation of the musical medium from the point of view of philosophical aesthetics.

Rameau's corps sonore and Herder's monads

To understand how philosophical attitudes towards the musical medium evolved, we must turn to early 18th century discussions of musical sensation. The study of the nature of musical sensation had previously been primarily the study of the science of music. Since ancient times, music theory had been treated as a branch of mathematics, as evidenced by music's place in the Medieval *quadrivium* alongside astronomy, geometry, and arithmetic. A powerful metaphor for the order of the universe, music often played a central role in cosmology; it is easy to forget that Kepler's formulation of the laws governing planetary movement was a step along the journey to the

discovery of the harmony of celestial bodies. Because of music theory's scientific identity, it could not—and did not try to—shed light on musical practice. When musical sensation was discussed outside of a scientific context, it shed its celestial status; within aesthetics, sensation was considered meaningless on its own.

In 1722 the gaping chasm between theory and practice was bridged by the publication of Rameau's *Traité de l'harmonie* in which he put forth the doctrine of the *basse fondamentale*. His objective was to reduce music to a single overarching principle, one that could join musical science with compositional practice. This principle was the seemingly banal idea that a single string could be divided into simple ratios to produce other tones. He writes:

We should first assume that [an] undivided string ... produces a given sound; the properties of this sound must be examined by relating them to those of the single string and even to those of the unit, which is the source of all numbers. ... The different divisions are marked on all the strings equal to the first and are determined by the magnitude of the number alongside the strings...Thus, the sounds which these divided strings produce are generated by the first sound, which is consequently their source and their fundamental.¹²

Rameau's more brilliant move was his systematic derivation of the major and minor triads, as well as dissonant chords, from the single

¹² Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Treatise on Harmony*, trans. Philip Gossett (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), p. 7.

generating string.¹³ Within practical composition, the bass functioned as the fundamental, producing the harmonies above it. The work radically transformed the concept of music theory and provided the groundwork for many subsequent generations of music theorists for whom “theory” meant a theory of composition and not cosmology. As Thomas Christensen, Rameau’s great accomplishment was the reconciliation between theory and practice, that the *basse fondamentale* was “at once a *theoretical* explanation of the origin of all musical material, as well as a *practical* description of the same material as used by musicians.”¹⁴

After the publication of the *Traité*, Rameau discovered the overtone series, which led to his postulation of the *corps sonore*. No longer relying on divisions of a string, he could argue that all harmony was always already contained within sounding body: a single note contained harmony within the overtones resonating above it. Rameau’s obsession with the *corps sonore* went far beyond music; geometry, indeed all natural phenomena, manifested this concept; everything, it seemed, could be explained by reference to the *corps sonore*. Regardless of his overzealous application of the concept of the *corps sonore*, Rameau’s theory is radical in its push to endow single tones with real musical significance. While many of his contemporaries heard single tones as meaningless color splotches, Rameau could hear in them the foundations of music itself.

¹³ For details of Rameau’s theory, see Thomas Christensen, *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Christensen, p. 31.

Despite Rameau's lasting influence on music theory, he faced much criticism in his lifetime. Rousseau famously objected to Rameau's insistence that harmony was the fundamental element of music, a criticism that was inextricably bound up to the many problems Rousseau saw in French opera. In 1753, Rousseau published his *Lettre sur la musique française*, in which he criticized both French opera and Rameau's musical theory. Rameau first published a direct reply (*Observations sur notre instinct pour la musique*, 1754), and then launched a full out war when he began to criticize Rousseau's musical entries for the *Encyclopédie*. Because of his criticism of Rousseau, and his continued insistence that the *corps sonore* was the fundamental principle behind a wide range of natural phenomena, he soon made enemies, somewhat ironically, with d'Alembert.

D'Alembert had, in 1752, helped popularize Rameau's theory with his publication of *Elémens de musique théorique et pratique suivant les principes de M. Rameau*. But after Rameau's attacks on the musical entries in the *Encyclopédie*, he soon became openly critical of Rameau. His entry for "*fondamental*" simmers with hostility and contempt for Rameau's theory:

What will we say about what has been suggested lately, that geometry is founded upon the resonance of the *corps sonore*, because geometry, it is said, is founded upon proportions, and that the *corps sonore* generates them all? Geometricians would not be grateful if we take seriously such assertions. We will permit ourselves only to say here

that the consideration of proportions and progressions is entirely useless to the theory of musical art.¹⁵

Though the criticisms of d'Alembert and Rousseau have been explored in recent musical scholarship, one contemporary critic of Rameau has been largely overlooked: Johann Gottfried Herder. While d'Alembert objected to Rameau's theory because so much of it was based on sensory input (rather than rigorous scientific reasoning), Herder, as it were, believed that Rameau made too little of sensory input. Pushing the entire discussion of music outside of the realm of mathematics, Herder argued that the art of music lay not in the generation of harmony, the primacy of melody, but in music's powerful impact on the listener. While Rousseau and d'Alembert aimed to debunk Rameau's *corps sonore*, Herder focused on musical perception. Though he was as critical of Rameau as his French contemporaries, he extracted a radical element from Rameau's thinking: the idea that single tones were aesthetically significant.

Herder and the fourth Kritische Wäldchen

Herder turned to music several times during his career; though his writing on folk song and his notion of the "religious contemplation" of music are familiar today, a good deal of his writing on music remains little known; indeed, only a small handful of excerpts have been

¹⁵ Denis Diderot, Jean Rond D'Alembert, ed., *Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1751-65) s.v. "Fondamental," trans. Christensen, *Rameau and Musical Thought*, p. 262. See also Christensen, "Music theory as scientific propaganda: The case of d'Alembert's *Éléments de musique*," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 50, issue 3, (1989), pp. 18-41, and idem, "Eighteenth-century science and the *corps sonore*: The scientific background to Rameau's principle of harmony," *Journal of Music Theory*, Vol. 31/1 (spring 1987), pp. 23-50.

translated into English. This is true of a large body of his philosophical writing: though Herder initiated a wide range of philosophical inquiry, the subsequent generations of philosophers who followed his lead—for example Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Nietzsche—are today better known. But it was precisely because his scholarly interests were so catholic—ranging from the study of the origin of language to the philosophy of history, from theorizing the idea of national culture to aesthetics—that it is today difficult to pick any single text as representative of Herder’s oeuvre as a whole. Recent scholarship has seen, if not a renaissance, at least a renewal of interest in Herder’s work.¹⁶

Herder first turned to music early in his career. In 1764, he took up his first teaching position at the *Domschule* of Riga; in the years that followed he published his first two books, *Über die neuere deutsche Literature: Fragmente*, and the first three *Kritische Wäldchen*. He published anonymously, which was not an unusual practice, though Herder was perhaps overly confident that his identity would remain secret. He was bitterly disappointed when his authorship was discovered, and he began to receive criticism for some of his ideas.¹⁷ Shaken, he abandoned the publication of the fourth *Kritische Wäldchen*; it was not published until the 19th century, well after Herder’s death. One can only speculate what effect the work would have had on 18th-

¹⁶ See, for example, recent scholarship such as *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), *Johann Gottfried Herder : Aspekte seines Lebenswerkes*, ed. Martin Kessler and Volker Leppin, (Berlin: de Gruyter 2005), John Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹⁷ On Herder’s unmasking, see Wulf Koepke, *Johann Gottfried Herder*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), pp. 16-20.

century musical aesthetics had it circulated earlier; while the first three *Wäldchen* focused primarily on the visual and literary arts, the fourth included a lengthy discussion of music and a proposal for a radical new aesthetics of music.¹⁸

As a whole, the fourth *Wäldchen* explores the role of sensation in cognition and aesthetic judgments. The work was conceived as a critique of the theories of Friedrich Justus Riedel. In 1767, Riedel had published his *Theorie der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften*, in which he propounded his notion how immediate, unreflective sensations affected cognition.¹⁹ Herder set out to show how sensation is never unreflective, and that it is impossible to separate sensation from cognition and judgment. Rather, all sensation implies cognition. Aesthetics, for Herder, was as much a study of human perception as it was of works of art. Herder writes:

To recognize a thing clearly, even in the slightest degree, means that one has already distinguished it; and no distinction ever occurs without judgment, and a judgment is no longer an immediate feeling. And to recognize something distinctly: that requires a clear cognition of its subordinate concepts as such, as the distinguishing marks of the whole, and thus involves an act of the inner workings of reason.²⁰

¹⁸ See Robert Norton, *Herder's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp.150-156.

¹⁹ For an extended discussion of Riedel's philosophy, see Norton, pp. 159- 62.

²⁰ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan, (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1877-1913), IV, p. 6; quoted and trans. in Norton, p. 162.

The idea that sensation always already implied cognition has deep implications for musical aesthetics. Whereas many 18th century thinkers were suspicious of music because it seemed so dependent on fleeting sensations (and thus lacked appropriate educational and moral value), Herder was able to embrace music *because* it stimulated judgment and cognition. His discussion of music in the fourth *Kritische Wäldchen* reveals that he was familiar with Rameau's musical theory, Rousseau's entries on music for the *Encyclopédie*, and the various debates and conflicts surrounding the primacy of melody or harmony and the *corps sonore*. Capitalizing on the implications of his conception of sensation, Herder's radical move was to insist aggressively that the human listener—and his bodily and mental reaction to music—be made an integral part of the study of music. Again and again, he demands that the study of the musical art be a study of the ways in which humans respond to tones, not the study of the physics of sound or mathematical ratios.

Physics and mathematics: how do they differentiate and determine tones? By the oscillations of the string in a given time, by the proportion of the tensioned force, of the physical constitution and length of the string. And what is it that is calculated from these proportions in the tone? Nothing except proportions, highness and lowness, strength and weakness, intervals, simultaneity and non-simultaneity, etc.: nothing but proportions, which in the sciences, to which they belong, suffice to recognize the tone in them, and from this knowledge to derive consequences; however, as we shall see, they are worthless for the

aesthetics of tones. They explain nothing about *simple tones; nothing of their force on the sense of hearing; nothing of their beauty, individually or combined; about everything, they explain nothing*. Thus [proportions] do not contain a single iota of the philosophy of the beautiful in the art of tones [Tonartig Schönen].²¹

For Herder, no true aesthetics of music existed yet; in his eyes, musical discourse was still divided between the study of the mathematics of music, as carried out by Euler, Diderot, Mersenne, Sauveur, and d’Alembert, and that of musical practice, such as the treatises by Leopold Mozart, C.P.E. Bach, and Quantz. In particular, Herder took Rameau’s theory to task, for Rameau had attempted to unify theory and practice by explaining both sides through mathematics. Thus a kind of acoustical theory masqueraded as an aesthetics of musical tone.

Still fewer concern themselves as to how tone, as tone, *affects us*. Not the physicist, who knows it only as resonance. He tracks it from the string through the air, from the air to the ear, through the entire organ of hearing to the nerves, but still only as resonance. Thus how can he know how resonance affects the nerves when it is no longer

²¹ “Physik und Mathematik, wie unterscheiden und bestimmen die die Töne? Aus den Schwingungen der Saite in einer gegebenen Zeit, nach Proportion des spannenden Gewichts, des Körperlichen Inhalts und der Länge der Saite. Und was ists, was aus diesen Verhältnissen im Töne selbst berechnet wird? Nichts als selbst Verhältnissen, Höhen und Tiefen, Stärke und Schwäche, Intervallen, Gleich- und Ungleichzeitiges usw. lauter Verhältnisse, die in den Wissenschaften, für die sie gehören gnug sind, im in ihnen den Ton zu erkennen, und aus diesen Känntissen Folgen abzuleiten, die aber, wie wir sehen wollen, für die Ästhetik der Töne durchaus nichts sind. Sie erklären nichts *vom einfachen Tone selbst; nichts con der Energie desselben aufs Gehör; nichts von der Anmut derselben, einzeln und in der Folge; von allem Nichts*. Es gibt also mit ihnen noch kein Jota zur Philosophie des Tonartig Schönen.” Herder, *Werke*, ed. Wolfgang Pross, Vol. II: *Herder und die Anthropologie der Aufklärung* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1987), p. 140.

resonance, but a simple tone? How this tone functions in the soul and moves it?²²

Rameau's theory came no closer to providing a true philosophy of music, for Rameau only saw single tones as corporeal manifestations of an underlying abstract concept, expressible as a series of mathematical ratios and proportions. Herder writes:

*The relationship of the overtones, says Rameau, which one hears resonating especially in the main tone of a long string, and which make up his great, perfected chord. One knows that Rameau built his entire harmony from this experience, and his interpreter, d'Alembert, his entire system of music. Now, it does not concern us here from which principle one can explain and produce all musical laws, or whether the Rameauian one—which I very much doubt—is the main principle. But it is certain that this does not explain the effect of music on the soul in the least...*²³

Herder not only rejected Rameau's concept of the *corps sonore*, but also believed that the study of music could not begin with the study of harmony. Like Rameau, Herder believed harmony to be a natural

²² "Noch weniger bekümmern sich beide, wie Ton als Ton *auf uns würrt*. Nicht der Physiker, der ihn bloß als Schall kennet. Der verfolgt ihn von Saite durch die Luft, von Luft zum Ohr, durch alle Gehörgänge des Ohrs zur Nerve; aber noch immer als Schall. Wie will er also wissen, wie die Nerve von dem, was nicht mehr Schall, was nur einfacher Ton ist, getroffen wird? wie dieser in die Seele würrt, und sie bewegt?" Ibid., p. 142.

²³ "*Verhältnis in den Beitönen, sagt Rameau, die man insonderheit bei einer groben Saite dem Haupttone nachschallen höret, und die seinen großen vollkommenen Akkord ausmachen. Man weiß, daß Rameau auf diese Erfahrung alle seine Harmonie, und sein Erklärer d'Alembert sein ganzes System von Musik gebauet hat. Nun gehts uns hier nicht an, aus welchem Grundsätze man alle Hauptgesetze der Musik erklären und hervorwälzen könne; noch ob der Rameausche, wie ich sehr zweifle, der erste Grundsatz sei; aber das ist gewiß, daß dieser die Würkung der Musik auf die Seele gar nicht erkläre...*" Ibid., p. 143.

phenomenon; but while Rameau took that belief as the foundation of his musical theory, Herder used the same notion to dismiss harmony as an *aesthetic* element. If chords were the natural outcome of the resonance of sounding bodies, as Rameau believed them to be, then they were unable to inform an understanding of how a *tone* affects a human listener. The distinction between resonance [*Schall*] and tone [*Ton*] is important for Herder: the former implies a kind of composite of natural phenomena, while the latter belongs properly to the realm of aesthetics:

Even if Rameau's account were, in and of itself, as true as it today perhaps appears to be false, for the philosopher of tone-pleasure [*Wohllaut*], it is a dry, one-sided, sterile experience. Chords are mere resonance, and all harmonies of chords are mere resonance; ... Students of tone-pleasure, do you thereby comprehend even the smallest part of the inner being of a tone? Of the power of a single accent over the soul?²⁴

Herder's demand that the "philosopher of tone-pleasure" turn away from the study of harmony did not imply, as it often did in the 18th century, that he located the true heart of music within melody. Rather he advocated the study of *single* tones and how they penetrate the soul of the listener at "the first moment of sensation" [erste Moment der

²⁴ "Wäre die Rameausche Erfahrung also auch an sich so wahr, als sie jetzt schon vielleicht an sich scheinbare Unwahrheit ist, für den Philosophen des Wohllauts ist sie eine trockne, einseitige, unfruchtbare Erfahrung. Akkord ist nur Schall, und alle Harmonien von Akkorden nur Schälle... Schüler des Wohllauts weißest du damit auch das kleinste Etwas vom innerlichen Moment Eines Tones? Etwas von Einer Kraft Eines einzelnen Accents auf die Seele?" Ibid., p. 160.

Sensation]. He writes, “[*The*] ear, as an ear, cannot sense proportions... the basis of all music lies in the first moment of sensation, in simple tone-pleasure.”²⁵ Herder, like Hegel after him, adopted Leibnitz’ concept of the monad, a simple substance “where no parts, neither extension, nor figure, nor divisibility is possible.”²⁶ Single tones, when considered aesthetically as tones and not mathematically as resonance, admit no division; they are characterized by their own “accents of passion,” and can combine to produce melody:

First nothing but simple, effective moments in music, single pitched accents of passion—that is the first thing [the student of music] feels and collects, and this becomes a *musical monadology*, a philosophy of the elements of music. Because if he connects them by the chain of succession, by the pleasure they cause the ear, by their effect on the soul, it becomes melody...²⁷

The power that Herder found in musical monads was something that was not understood through physics: he heard a quality in single tones that went beyond volume and pitch:

Experience shows that certain, distinct tones make different impressions on us, independent of their height or

²⁵ “... *Ohr, als Ohr kein Verhältnis empfinden kann, und doch im ersten Moment der Sensation, im simplen Wohllaut, die Basis aller Musik liegt...*” Ibid., p. 144.

²⁶ See Gottfried Wilhelm Von Leibnitz, *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, trans. Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker (New York: Macmillan/Library of Liberal Arts, 1965).

²⁷ “Erst lauter einfache, wirksame Momente der Musik, einzelne Tonaccente der Leidenschaft—das ist das Erste, was [der Schüler der Musik] fühlt und sammlet, und das wird eine *Musikalische Monadologie*, eine Philosophie *ihrer Elemente*. Denn verbindet er sie durch das *Band der Folge*, in ihrer Annehmlichkeit auf Ohr, in ihrer Würksamkeit auf die Seele: das wird Melodie...” Ibid., p. 161.

depth, strength or weakness, length or shortness, by their inner nature. The one strikes us, as it were, smoother and brighter; another, rougher and more gloomy. The one seems to wake up and elevate our nerves, the other turns them down and puts them to sleep. The one strains them into astonishment, another melts them into gentle feeling. This is our experience, and it should become our fundamental principle.²⁸

Herder describes *timbre* in this passage, for once we remove pitch and volume, the quality that remains changeable from one tone to another is tone-color; he even refers to the actual word *timbre* (“so far the French call it *timbre*”). He continues, appealing to a listener:

You, you who know nothing but the strength and weakness, of the height and depth of a tone, pay attention to whether the sound of a flute and of a shawm, a lute and violin, a trumpet and a *Nachthorn*—where no strength or weakness, no height and depth can be the topic of discussion—still have the *same nature* and, as it were, *a specific substance of sound*, whether each of all of these sounds has the same effect on your feeling?²⁹

²⁸ “Es ist Erfahrung, daß gewisse einfache Töne, unabhängig von Höhe und Tiefe, von Stärke und Schwäche, von Länge und Kürze, *ihrer innern Art nach*, verschiedene Eindrücke auf uns machen. Der eine trifft uns gleichsam glatter und heller; ein ander rauher und finstrer. Der eine scheid unsre Nerve aufzuwecken und zu erheben; der andre niederschmiegen und einzuschläfern. Der eine strengt sie zum Staunen an; ein anderer schmelzt sie in sanftes Gefühl hin—dies ist Erfahrung, und sie soll uns Grundsatz werden.” Ibid., p. 146.

²⁹ Du, der du von Nichts als von Stärke und Schwäche, von Höhe und Tiefe der Töne einen Begriff hast, gib Acht, ob der Schall einer Flöte und einer Schallmei, eine Laute und Geige, einer Trompete und einest Nachthorns auch in der Vermischung aller Töne, wo von keiner Stärke und Schwäche, von keiner Höhe und Tiefe die Rede sein kann, noch *Einerlie Art* und gelichsam *Eine spezifische Masse des Klanges* habe? Ob

Herder clearly sees timbre as something distinct from pitch and volume, governed by an entirely different set of criteria. While pitch and volume were *scientific* qualities, timbre was, for Herder, the *aesthetic* quality of tone. That timbre was, at the time, intractable to scientific analysis only bolstered its non-mathematical status; timbre reflected, for Herder, a spiritual quality of the tone. Rousseau had commented on the acoustical mystery surrounding timbre in his article on sound in the *Encyclopédie*. He begins:

There are three aspects of sound to consider: 1. the range between low and high 2. the degree of intensity between loud and quiet 3. the quality of its timbre, which is always subject to the comparison between dullness and brightness, or between harshness or softness.³⁰

After a lengthy discussion of the acoustical foundations of pitch and volume—both of which were fairly well understood at the time—Rousseau turns his attention to the third aspect of sound, timbre:

The difference between sounds described by timbre cannot be accounted for by a sound's pitch or volume. An oboe would be difficult to mistake for a flute: it could not soften its sound to the same degree. The sound of a flute would always have a certain *je ne sais quoi* of softness and

jeder dieser ganzen Schälle gleiche Wirkung auf Deine Empfindbarkeit habe?" Ibid., p. 147.

³⁰"Il y a trois choses à considerer dans le son : 1, le degré d'élevation entre le grave & l'aigu : 2, celui de véhémence entre le fort & le foible : 3, & la qualité du timbre qui est encore susceptible de comparaison du sourd à l'éclatant, ou de l'aigu au doux." Idem, "Son," *Encyclopédie*.

pleasantness, while that of an oboe would have a certain dryness and harshness, which makes it impossible to confuse the two. What could we say about the different timbres of voices with the same force and pitch?... At any rate, no one I know has examined this aspect, which may have as many difficulties as the others since the quality of timbre cannot depend on the number of vibrations, which determines whether a sound is low or high, or on the intensity of these same vibrations, which determines whether a sound is loud or quiet. There must therefore be found among the aspects of sound a third quality different from these two that can explain this last property; this does not seem very easy to me; we must refer to the *Principes d'acoustique* of M. Diderot if we wish to further address this issue.³¹

The difficulty describing timbre is evident in this passage: after an awkward description of timbre as the quality that prevents an oboe from sounding like a flute, he is forced to define it negatively. Because it is not understood by acoustical science, he can only say that it depends neither on the number of vibrations nor on their intensity. While

³¹ “Quant à la différence qui se trouve encore entre les sons par la qualité du timbre, il est évident qu'elle ne tient ni au degré de gravité, ni même à celui de force. Un hautbois aura beau se mettre exactement à l'unisson d'une flûte, il aura beau radoucir le son au même degré, le son de la flûte aura toujours je ne sai quoi de doux & de moëlleux, celui du hautbois je ne sai quoi de sec & d'aigre, qui empêchera qu'on ne puisse jamais les confondre. Que dirons-nous des differens timbres des voix de même force & de même portée? chacun est juge de la variété prodigieuse qui s'y trouve. Cependant, personne que je sache n'a encore examiné cette partie, qui peut-être, aussi-bien que les autres, se trouvera avoir ses difficultés: car la qualité de timbre ne peut dépendre, ni du nombre de vibrations qui font le degré du grave à l'aigu, ni de la grandeur ou de la force de ces mêmes vibrations qui fait le degré du fort au foible. Il faudra donc trouver dans les corps sonores une troisieme modification différente de ces deux, pour expliquer cette derniere propriété; ce qui ne me paroît pas une chose trop aisée ; il faut recourir aux *principes d'acoustique* de M. Diderot, si l'on veut approfondir cette matiere. Ibid..

Rousseau attempted to minimize music's dependence on immediate sensations, Herder seized upon timbre in order to refute Rameau's wholly scientific approach to the sounding body.

Rudolf Bockholdt, in his brief essay on Herder's fourth *Kritische Wäldchen*, sees this turn towards timbre as a form of short-sightedness: naturally, the production of timbre has a physical explanation; indeed, timbre originates in the subtleties of the overtone series, the very same phenomenon so looked down upon by Herder.³² But though Herder might have been dismayed to learn that timbre was dependent on the overtone series, such an explanation would hardly have satisfied his demand for a musical monadology or deterred him from his argument: he longed for a study of how the tones affected the listener, not how they were produced. Timbre—and its immediate and powerful ability to convey a sense of agitation or calm—was for Herder a proof that a listener, in hearing such impassioned tones, did not experience a mere “raw” sensation, but something always already imbued with aesthetic qualities. The very process of discerning the varying timbres of different instruments was always and already to have an aesthetic experience. Herder's concept of musical sensation provides a potential solution to the problems Kant encountered in his third *Critique*, more than twenty years before Kant published the work. Kant deliberates what Herder assumes to be true: that the act of sensing a tone implies a kind of aesthetic judgment.

³² Rudolf Bockholdt, “Von unten herauf,” nicht “von oben herab”: Zu Herders Betrachtungen über Kunst und Musik,” *Musik Theorie*, Vol. 15, n. 3 (2000), pp. 247-54.

Herder's later thought & Kalligone

You, then, you who scorn the music of tones as such and can derive nothing from it, have nothing to do with it without words! Keep away from it! Regard it as a play in which “purposive-purposeless” instruments are exercised! But you, musicians, set down before your music hall in the fashion of Plato the words: “Let no stranger of the Muses enter here!”³³

Herder had attended Kant's lectures early in his studies. He was less interested in Kant's views on metaphysics, instead enjoying Kant's more general lectures on history. Herder and Kant soon parted ways when their philosophies took them in opposing directions. After the publication of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Herder returned to aesthetics and published his *Kalligone* in 1800. The work is a critique of Kant's third *Critique*, and alternates between describing his own aesthetic theory—which often takes the form of dialogues between three characters—and explicitly attacking Kant (as in the above quotation). The importance of *Kalligone* has been underplayed in most accounts of Herder's *oeuvre* and in musical aesthetics. Robert Norton argues that *it* is not connected to Herder's earlier thought, and accordingly does not discuss the work in his study on Herder's aesthetics. Neubauer briefly mentions *Kalligone* but, like Norton, sees little connection between it and Herder's earlier writing on aesthetics, instead expressing dismay

Idem., *Kalligone* (1800), trans. in *German Essays on Music*, ed. Jost Hermand and Michael Gilbert (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 47.

that Herder never finished the project of a musical monadology that he outlines in the fourth *Wäldchen*.³⁴

To suggest that the development of Herder's musical aesthetics ended with the fourth *Kritische Wäldchen*, or that no other part of his oeuvre sheds any light on his conception of the relationship between humans and music, is to ignore the ways in which music and the importance of sensation infiltrate his philosophy as a whole. Running through much of his work is the continued attempt to argue for the inherently "cognitive nature" of sensation.

Herder's essay on Cognition and Sensation of the mid-1770s continues arguments laid out in the fourth *Kritische Wäldchen*. He complains of contemporary metaphysics (surely referring to Kant, among others), "What a dead, wooden clock the soul and the science of the soul has now become. In all the mutual perceptions of thought and sensation it lacks deep derivation, fruitfulness, and truth."³⁵ The idea that one could discuss the mind and cognition in abstract terms, apart from feeling and sensation, was a philosophical impossibility for Herder: sensation and cognition are one and the same.

In discussing cognition and sensation, Herder frequently invokes the metaphor of a string instrument to explain how humans respond to sensory input. The human mind, for Herder is a kind of "string play," tuned and played upon by outside forces. He writes:

³⁴ See Neubauer, *The Emancipation of Music from Language*, p. 160

³⁵ Herder, "On Cognition and Sensation, the Two Main Forces of the Human Soul" (1775) in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 182.

Contradictions in the human being, apparent enemies, to what extent do you mutually support each other?, where do you eliminate each other? How do you relate to the happiness of each human being and of all human beings? You great string-play of all manners of thought and sensation, human nature, who tuned you? Who strung you? Who plays on you? Who listens to you?³⁶

In a later version of the same essay, he writes:

The extent to which we participate in what surrounds us, how deeply love and hate, disgust and revulsion, vexation and pleasure, plant their roots in us—this tunes the string-play of our thoughts, this makes us into the human beings we are.³⁷

In shunning the abstract, Herder created a philosophical framework in which individual sensations could be appreciated for their own value. Indeed, Herder, because of his holistic approach, believed that regard for the individual was precisely what was lost in philosophical generalizing. He writes: “Metaphysics reveals the unity in everything splendidly, but does it also reveal as distinguishingly the eachness in each thing?”³⁸ And later: “Natural science was unable to arrive at forces as long as people failed to regard each individual thing as what it is, as unique, as long as they always only imputed to it what it could be or should be in general.”³⁹

³⁶ Ibid., p. 184

³⁷ Herder, “On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul” (1778), *Philosophical Writings*, p. 196

³⁸ Herder, “On Cognition and Sensation,” (1775), p. 180.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 181.

When Herder returned to music in *Kalligone*, he was able to draw upon many of the ideas he had developed in the thirty years since he completed the fourth *Wäldchen*. Indeed, rather than representing a break from his early aesthetic thinking, Herder's *Kalligone* reinforced his theory of sensation, not by producing an aesthetics of single tones (as Neubauer wanted), but by fleshing out his theory of how humans respond to musical sensation. Though *Kalligone* addresses the arts in general, much of the project is centered on rescuing music from Kant's low ranking in the third *Critique*.

The little clavichords in our souls

Herder's metaphor of the string-play of our minds gained new significance in *Kalligone*. It had served as a useful way of explaining how humans responded dynamically to a variety of sensory input; in the context of musical aesthetics, however, the metaphor suggested a natural affinity between musical sensation and the human mind. Indeed, throughout *Kalligone*, musical sensation seems to accrue increasing power and significance. In Chapter Three, several of his characters discuss how tones communicate to human listeners:

A: A blow disturbs a body; what message does that body's sound communicate?

B: 'I have been disturbed; my members are consequently vibrating and eventually coming to rest.'

A: Is that what they say to us?

B: Every fiber of our being is capable of responding; our ear, the hearing-chamber of the soul, is extraordinarily sensitive, an echo-chamber of the finest kind.

A: So if single sounds *arouse* us, what do intermittent sounds do?

B: They renew and reinforce the stimulus, like a trumpet; they reawaken.

A: And *long-sustained* sounds?

B: They sustain the emotion by prolonging the stimulus. They create an extraordinarily powerful effect.

A: What about sounds that get louder or softer, faster or slower, sounds that rise or fall, that are increasingly or decreasingly intense, harsh, or soft, regular or irregular, sadder or gayer; what about blows, accents, waves, emotion and pleasure—what effect do all these have on us?

B: As every involuntary reaction of our emotions to music proves, these all produce similar responses. The tide of our passions ebbs and flows, it floods, it meanders and trickles. At one moment the passions are intensified, at another they are aroused now gently, now powerfully; at yet another moment they are satisfied; their movement and the way they move varies in response to every melodic nuance, and every forceful accent, let alone every change of key. Music performs on the clavichord within us which is our own inmost being.⁴⁰

Musical sensation communicates with the human soul more readily than any other form of sensation; as we saw in Chapter two, Herder dismisses the idea of an ocular harpsichord that would produce colorful

⁴⁰ Herder, *Kalligone*, trans. in le Huray and Day, ed. *Music and Aesthetics*, p. 253.

sensations because such an instrument is in no way analogous to our inner nature:

A: Might it not be *Castel's* color-keyboard, or a keyboard of visual shapes that is played within us?

B: Visual shapes indeed! What have these to do with our inner responsiveness to emotional currents, vibrations and passions? You are implying that sounds *illustrate* things.

A: Does every person who is responsive to nature experience a similar reaction to sounds?

B: I should imagine so. A certain kind of music makes everyone sad; another flowing or lilting kind makes everyone cheerful, lively, and gay. One person may be more responsive to the former kind of music, another to the latter, according to his mood at the time. A person's response to music that is fast or slow, harsh or gentle, powerful or tender, grave or gay may depend on his physical build or character, but every person is none the less endowed with a basic pattern of varying emotional and tonal responses.⁴¹

Later in *Kalligone*, when Herder addresses Kant's evaluation of music directly, he takes up the same argument about the nature of tone versus that of color. While Kant treated the sensation of color and tone as similar problems (recall that he entertained the possibility that the act of sensing a color might imply a kind of formal judgment), Herder scoffs at the possibility that the two types of sensation could be

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 254.

discussed together: “... *the art of tone and the art of color* [are] fully equated; as though colors without drawing can be set equal to tones as a medium of art...”⁴² Tones, unlike colors, are imbued with a kind of “significant power” that both reveals the nature of the instrument giving forth the tone and the constitution of the listener who hears that tone.

In the whole of nature, all elastic bodies upon being struck or stroked *make known* (audibly or less audibly to us) their *interior*, that is, their excited and restorative forces. This we call *sound*, and more finely excited, *tonal sonority*; tonal sonority, which sets every similarly organized object into equivalent vibration, and in sensitive beings brings about an analogous sensation.⁴³

He goes on:

...man is a general participant, and auditor of the universe, [and] he must lend his sympathy to every aroused being whose voice reaches him. According to observations, his auditory organ, hidden mostly deeply from the outside, reaches most deeply into the interior of his head, approaching first of all his perceptive organ of common sense, and spreads out in such a way that, as experiments reveal, we hear with almost our whole body.⁴⁴

⁴² Herder, *Kalligone*, trans. in *German Essays on Music*, ed. Jost Hermand and Michael Gilbert (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

The listener, depending on his mood, will respond differently to various styles of music: his disposition determines the kinds of sounds to which he will be emotionally susceptible. The inherently probing nature of sound means that we respond to sound far more powerfully than to color or even word: “Orpheus by the language of his strings moved Orcus; to the words of a mortal the Eumenides would not have hearkened.”⁴⁵

Music underlies Herder’s conception of the human being. This is a major difference between Herder’s earlier thinking and that of *Kalligone*. We do not simply readily respond to musical sensation (as he argues in the fourth *Wäldchen*), we are ourselves a kind of musical instrument, one capable of responding to a variety of sensory input. Kant, with his emphasis on enduring concepts, seems to conceive of the mind as a library capable of preservation; for Herder, the mind is an instrument, designed to respond dynamically to different sensations.

To understand fully the implications of Herder’s musical aesthetics, it is helpful to turn to his critique of Condillac’s theory of language. In his essay on the origin of language, Condillac postulated that two isolated children, deprived of linguistic stimulus, could “invent” language by gradually associating sounds they make with the objects that surround them.⁴⁶ Herder dismisses Condillac’s theory, arguing that in order for the two children to begin to invent language, they must already have some concept of meaning and what language

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 47.

⁴⁶ Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *L’origine des connoissances humaines*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002).

is.⁴⁷ In other words, he argues that humans are always already linguistic—humans are designed to use and understand language. Herder’s linguistic theory and musical aesthetics are conceptually analogous: humans respond emotionally to music because we are *always already musical*.⁴⁸

Other “early romantics” who embraced tone

Up to this point, I have focused exclusively on Herder’s philosophy because it provides the most carefully theorized notion of the significance and power of the musical medium from this period. Not only does he offer fascinating ideas of how humans respond to musical sensation, but his critique of Kant’s evaluation of music highlights much of what is at stake in 18th century discussions of musical sensation. Once we are attuned to the Herder’s notion of inherent receptivity to musical sensation, however, we can find it at work in slightly different guises in other “early romantic” writing on music.

The fanciful prose of philosophers Wilhelm Wackenroder and Ludwig Wieck is littered with romantic outpourings, and the expression of their profound love of music often breaks into poetic outbursts, as if mere prose could not do justice to the beauty of music. Such writing has been seen as a kind of bastardization of musical criticism. Mark Evan Bonds notes how F. E. Sparshott accuses Wackenroder of having,

⁴⁷ See Herder, *On the Origin of Language*, trans. by Alexander Gode in *On the Origin of Language: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 99- 102.

⁴⁸ On the role of Herder’s linguistic theory on the 19th and 20th centuries, see Charles Taylor, “The Importance of Herder,” *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 79-99.

“permanently lowered the acceptable tone for serious writing on music. For the first time, cultivated men... conceived an unfocussed rapture to be a proper aesthetic response, thinking of musical techniques not as rational means of construction and expression but as occult mysteries.”⁴⁹ Wackenroder and Tieck fare no better in the eyes of Dahlhaus, who, in the apt words of Bonds, harbors “barely concealed annoyance” towards their writing. Bonds rallies for a more positive and constructive reading of Wackenroder and Tieck, arguing that they, along with other thinkers such as E. T. A. Hoffmann and C. F. Michaelis, played a central role in the formation of an idealist aesthetics of music, and therefore expressed a “fundamentally new way of approaching instrumental music.”⁵⁰ Bonds argues such an idealist conception of music— through which music gains access to distant spirit lands—is an important change that is distinct from, though related to, musical formalism and the idea of “absolute music.” Bonds, however, treats the development of idealism as a phenomenon unrelated to musical practice; idealism, in his view, forms the basis for a discourse of music that tells us more about how instrumental music communes with spirit worlds, rather than revealing anything specific about the actual nature of music.

Similarly, in *The Idea of Absolute Music*, Dahlhaus impatiently reads the philosophy of the late 18th century with a keen eye towards the formation of the concept of Absolute music. Clearly underwhelmed

⁴⁹ E. G. Sparshott, “Aesthetics of Music” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, quoted in Bonds, “Idealism and the Aesthetics of Instrumental Music,” pp. 387-88.

⁵⁰ Bonds, “Idealism and the Aesthetics of Instrumental Music,” p. 413.

by Wackenroder and Tieck's florid prose, he pays little attention to much of the content of their writing, arguing that any attempt to read early romantic authors as performing a kind of exegesis of the musical text is futile and misinformed. Rather, their flights of poetic fancy testify to the new philosophical attitude that mere words cannot capture music's true profound nature.⁵¹ Dahlhaus turns to a passage by Tieck to illustrate the verbal insufficiency of such writing on music. Tieck writes:

But what words should I resort to, should I grasp, in order to express the power of that heavenly music, with its full tones, its charming reminiscences, has over our heart? With its angelic presence, it enters the soul immediately and breathes heavenly breath. Oh, how all memories of all bliss fall and flow back into that one moment, how all noble feelings, all great emotions welcome the guest! Like magical seeds, how rapidly the sounds take root within us, and now there's a rushing of invisible, fiery forces, and in an instant a grove is rustling with a thousand wonderful flowers, with incomprehensibly rare colors, and our childhood and an even more distant past are playing and jesting in the leaves and among one another, color gleams upon color, luster shines upon luster, and all the light, the sparkling, the rain of beams, coaxes out new luster and new beams of light.⁵²

For Dahlhaus, this is a typical attempt to express the inexpressible in music. "...it is just the arbitrariness," he concludes,

⁵¹ Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 68.

⁵² *Ibid*, pp. 68-69.

“the unbounded imagination with which Tieck wounds prosaic logic, that turns this exegesis into a poetic text that lets the reader imagine what is granted the hearer of absolute music: an experience that overcomes him for an instant, but which cannot be held fast.”⁵³

Dahlhaus focuses on the form of Tieck’s writings, and treats the *content* of Tieck’s prose poem as predetermined romantic rhetoric; for Dahlhaus, it differs from other early romantic poetic attempts to write about music only in surface detail. While Dahlhaus makes observations that are perceptive and reflect real tendencies that surely did influence the formation of a formalist aesthetics of music, he ignores, through his disbelief that Tieck and others are actually saying something constructive, an essential aspect of Tieck’s thinking, namely, that Tieck and his contemporaries were, for the one of the first times in musical history, attempting to validate the sensual experience of music as something not only truly aesthetic, but also potentially profoundly moving. Indeed, what Tieck expresses so viscerally in the passage above is music’s ability, through its powerful medium of tones, to affect the mind and soul. The human experience of “luster shining upon luster” and the sparkling play of color are profound ones and speak to the receptiveness of human cognition to musical sensation. Indeed, when we read Wackenroder and Tieck for more than their rhetoric, we find many of the themes that were central to Herder’s aesthetics: they believe that the musical medium is ideally suited to express emotion to a human listener and that humans are inherently musical because the human soul is a kind of string instrument.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 69.

Wackenroder bolsters his argument for the power of tone by drawing a striking analogy between the development of music and the progress of humanity, making it appear as if the two are inextricably linked and destined to remain so. He writes:

The sound wave or note was originally a crude material in which uncivilized peoples strove to express their undeveloped emotions. When their souls were deeply shaken, they also shook the air with screaming and the beating of drums, as if to bring the external world into balance with their inner spiritual excitation. However, after incessantly active Nature has, over many centuries, developed the originally stunted powers of the human soul into an extensive web of finer and finer branches, so too, in the more recent centuries, an ingenious system has been built up out of tones, whereby in this material too, just as in the arts of forms and colors, there has been set down a sensual copy of and testimony to the beautiful refinement and harmonious perfection of the human mind of today.⁵⁴

When humans experienced “undeveloped emotions,” they expressed them with equally crude tones; the development of the mind necessitated the refinement of the tone, since the latter is simply an external manifestation of the former. He goes on:

⁵⁴ Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, “Das eigentümliche innere Wesen der Tonkunst” in *Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder: Werke und Briefe*, (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1984), p. 324, translated in Mary Hurst Schubert, *Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Confessions and Fantasies* (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park and London, 1971), p 189.

The sensual power which the tone as carried within itself from its origin has, through this learned system, acquired a refined diversity. The dark and indescribable element, however, which lies hidden in the effect of the tone and which is to be found in no other art, has gained a wondering significance through the system. Between the individual, mathematical, tonal relationships and the individual fibers of the human heart an inexplicable sympathy has revealed itself, through which the musical art has become a comprehensive and flexible mechanism for the portrayal of human emotions.⁵⁵

One could read this simply as evidence of the gradual giving away of imitative theories of art to expressive theories. But the idea that music was “a comprehensive and flexible mechanism for the portrayal of human emotions” is predicated on the more basic notion that humans are fundamentally musical. To highlight the idea of musical expressivity without recognizing the necessity of inherent musicality is to gloss over precisely what makes the first concept possible. Like Herder, Wackenroder believes humans to be predisposed to express themselves musically and to be moved by music. Furthermore, he uses the same metaphor of the inner vibrations of the instruments of our soul to show *how* we respond to tone:

Whenever all the inner vibrations of our heartstrings—the trembling ones of joy, the tempestuous ones of delight, the rapidly beating pulse of all-consuming adoration,— when all these burst apart with one outcry the language of words, as

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 188.

the grave of the inner frenzy of the heart: -- then they go forth under a strange sky, amidst the vibrations of blessed harp-strings, in transfigured beauty as if in another life beyond this one, and celebrate as angelic figures their resurrection.⁵⁶

When discussing the properties of musical tones and sensation, Wackenroder reiterates many of the same notions as Herder. While Herder argued that tones should be distinguished as a medium of art because they exert such power over a listener, Wackenroder used the metaphor of the virgin birth to explain the natural expressivity of the musical medium:

... no other art has a raw material which is, in and of itself, already impregnated with such divine spirit. Its vibrating material with its ordered wealth of chords comes to meet the creating hands halfway and expresses beautiful emotions...⁵⁷

Both Wackenroder and Herder saw tone as superior to color; both similarly distained the idea of an ocular harpsichord. We'll recall from Chapter two that Wackenroder, in one paragraph, dismissed the notion of an ocular harpsichord as "a childlike toy" while also cementing the notion that instrumental sonority was the source of musical color. For Wackenroder, the color of an instrument is its main expressive character, and therefore analogous to Herder's notion of "significant power." While the metaphor of color had been to make value judgments about musical parameters (i.e., melody is analogous to design, and

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 190-1.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

therefore superior to harmony, which is merely color), here the notion of color is intimately tied to the idea of expression.

Herder, Wackenroder, and Tieck all provide pieces of the philosophical framework for appreciating musical sensation as something always already aesthetic. It is only after the notion of inherent receptivity to musical sensation became commonplace that instrumental music could become a self-sufficient art form, free from the shackles of imitative theories and ready to be embraced by idealist and formalist aesthetics.

Kant, as it were, stripped music of its extra-musical associations, leaving music exposed as sensation; Herder and others argued that this position, far from exposing music's weakness, revealed precisely the source of its strength. But it is here that we can see that Kant was also progressive in this regard. Even though it ultimately leads him to place music low among the fine arts, his claim that music speaks by means of sensations, that music is *fundamentally* sensation, is a necessary precondition for the formation of a formalist aesthetics of music. The radical leap of the third *Critique* is not only Kant's turn away from representation, but rather his blunt belief that music cannot transcend its mere sensations. The difference, then, between Kant and those of his contemporaries who lauded instrumental music was that, while he enjoyed music, he found little real aesthetic value in *sensation*. The very act of criticizing music opened the possibility for its liberation; it fell to Herder and others to complete the transformation and construct a positive aesthetics of sensation.

Most importantly, the writings of Herder, Wackenroder, and Tieck reflect real tendencies in musical practice. Just as their philosophies provided a framework in which we can appreciate the importance of each sensation, so too the contemporary orchestra, with the emergence of orchestration, treated each instrument with increasing precision and specificity. Orchestration, in part, is the art of employing each instrument for its “eachness,” that is, its particular quality that gives the instrument its unique identity. Because composers could combine and contrast instruments in novel ways, the 18th century orchestra created a forum for the exploration of the musical medium. Herder and Wackenroder invite us to do precisely what composers of the time did: to embrace the materiality of sound in all its wonder and variety and to fall in love with the very medium of music.