

ENLIGHTENMENT
ORPHEUS

The Power of Music
in Other Worlds



VANESSA AGNEW

Enlightenment Orpheus



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*Enlightenment Orpheus:
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*For my parents, Patricia and Neville,
who love music and learning,
and for Kader and Sefa,
who sing in many languages.*

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CONTENTS

	<i>Illustrations</i>	<i>xiii</i>
	<i>Introduction</i>	3
CHAPTER 1	Argonaut Orpheus	11
CHAPTER 2	Music's Empire	73
CHAPTER 3	Anti-Orpheus	121
CHAPTER 4	Conclusion	169
	<i>Notes</i>	177
	<i>Bibliography</i>	209
	<i>Index</i>	245

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ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure 0.1 George Dance (1741–1825), *Charles Burney* (1794) 4
- Figure 0.2 James Barry (1741–1806), *The Thames, or the Triumph of Navigation* (1791) 5
- Figure 0.3 Anon., *Orphée charmant les animaux* (sixteenth century) 8
- Figure 1.1 Orpheus Painter (fifth century BCE), *Orpheus among the Thracians* 12
- Figure 1.2 François Perrier (1590–1650), *Orpheus before Pluto and Persephone* 13
- Figure 1.3 Christoph Daniel Ebeling’s letter to Charles Burney, June 20, 1773 17
- Figure 1.4 Johann Georg Keyssler (1693–1743), *Keisler’s Travels* 36
- Figure 1.5 Benjamin West (1738–1820), *Mr. Joseph Banks* (ca. 1773) 38
- Figure 1.6 “Mozart’s Journeys, 1762–1791” 43
- Figure 1.7 Map. “Charles Burney’s Journey through Central Europe and the Netherlands (1772)” 49
- Figure 2.1 “Ulysses and the Sirens,” Python Painter (fourth century BCE) 77
- Figure 2.2 Pieter de Ring (1615–1660), *Still Life with Musical Instruments* (1650) 82
- Figure 2.3 Georg Wilhelm Steller (1709–1746), “Itelmen Air” 85
- Figure 2.4 “Friendly Isles Song.” As recollected by Susanna Phillips in a letter to her father, Charles Burney 91
- Figure 2.5 F. Bartolozzi after Giovanni Battista Cipriani (1727–1785), *A View of the Inside of a House in the Island of Ulietea* 96
- Figure 2.6 Georg Forster (1754–1794), “Tongan welcome song, sung ‘in parts’” 97
- Figure 2.7 Georg Forster, “New Zealand dirge” 98
- Figure 2.8 Georg Forster, “New Zealand tune sung in thirds” 98

-
- Figure 2.9 John Webber (1751–1793), *A Night Dance by Men at Hapae* 98
- Figure 2.10 John Webber, *A Night Dance by Women at Hapae* 101
- Figure 2.11 [Friedrich Arnold Klockenbring], “Nachlese zu dem Auszuge aus Cooks Reise um die Welt; aus Georg Forsters Beschreibung eben dieser Reise” 109
- Figure 2.12 [Johann Nicolaus Forkel], “Neu-Seeländische Contrapunkt” 111
- Figure 2.13 Ferraresischer Meister, *The Death of Orpheus* (ca. 1480) 118
- Figure 3.1 Christoph Willibald von Gluck (1714–1787), “Che farò senza Euridice,” *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) 122
- Figure 3.2 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791), “Hu, hu!” *Die Zauberflöte* (1791) 123
- Figure 3.3 Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg (1740–1812), *Chief Mourner Otahaite* (1785) 131
- Figure 3.4 William Shield (1748/49–1829), “Chorus of the Villagers of the Friendly Islands,” *Omai, or, a Trip round the World* (1785) 132
- Figure 3.5 Hippolyte Vanderburch, *Tombeau de Pangai a Hifo, Tonga Tabou* (Paris): Tastu (1833) 133
- Figure 3.6 William Shield, “In de Big Canoe,” *Omai, or, a Trip round the World* (1785) 134
- Figure 3.7 William Shield, “Trio,” *Omai, or, a Trip round the World* (1785) 135
- Figure 3.8 William Hogarth (1697–1764); J. Barlow, *Farinelli, Cuzzoni, and Senesino (and Berenstadt)* (1798), performing Handel’s *Flavio* at the King’s Theatre 143
- Figure 3.9 Michael Bernhard Valentini, “Katzenklavier” 158
- Figure 3.10 Christopher Smart (1722–1771), “Mrs. Midnight’s Maggot. A New Country-Dance for the Cat-Organ” 159
- Figure 4.1 *Orpheus’s Beastly Listeners*. Paphos, Cyprus, 1989 175

Enlightenment Orpheus

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INTRODUCTION

IT WAS 1772 and travel was the rage. Captain Cook was en route to the Pacific to look for the prized terra australis incognita, and James Bruce was returning from Africa, where he had bagged the source of the Nile. That summer Charles Burney, the central figure in this book (figure 0.1), was in Europe to do some exploring of his own. While most English tourists favored Italy and France, our music scholar headed for the German states, then said to be too little traveled even by Germans themselves.¹ He ventured south along the Rhine to Munich, via the Danube to Vienna, then by post chaise to Prague, Dresden, Leipzig, and Berlin. From there he turned west to Hamburg and Amsterdam, arriving at last in Calais to catch the packet back to Dover. Along the way he heard folk songs, hornpipes, and shanties; operas, symphonies, chorales, and chamber works—music that was surprisingly powerful and numbingly dull. Along the way he performed and he listened.

Burney (1726–1814) is often remembered as the father of talented offspring, two of whom appear in this book. His son James (1750–1821) became a rear admiral, and his daughter Fanny (later Madame d'Arblay, 1752–1840) was a novelist, whose best-known work, *Evelina*, made her famous in her own day.² But there are other ways of thinking about the paterfamilias. Until Burney set foot on the Continent, the image of German music in Britain had been shaped by people like C. F. Abel and J. C. Bach, and the many composers, performers, and impresarios who toured or took up residence in the well-paying capital. German musical life, on the other hand—its courts, theaters, concert rooms, and churches, its burgeoning publishing industry and increasingly important journalistic activity, its repositories of ancient manuscripts and instrument collections, to say nothing

FIGURE 0.1. George Dance (1741–1825), *Charles Burney* (1794). By permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.



of its plebian musical traditions—all remained beyond the ken of most Britons. Burney’s central European journey was thus unusual. It opened a vista on regions that had previously remained shuttered and turned him into an important cultural interlocutor between Britain and the German states. Though he had ample detractors, supporters came to think of him as a Captain Cook of the Continent, a traveler harkening after new and uncharted sonic worlds (figure 0.2).³

Travelers had commented on exotic song and dance since Tacitus remarked on the Germans. Prior to Burney, however, the pursuit of musical knowledge was not in itself a motivation for travel.⁴ His journeys, including an earlier one to France and Italy in 1770, pioneered a new genre, the specialized musical travelogue. With this came a related set of epistemological claims about the capacity of travel writing to convey knowledge about music. Conducting a sociological study of music before sociology, Burney ascribed indexical status to music by asking who and what music was for, what it did, and what this in turn signified about society at large.

This book focuses on two journeys that year: the first, Burney’s tour through central Europe and the Netherlands to conduct research for his universal history of music; the second, Cook’s state-sponsored voyage to the



FIGURE 0.2. James Barry (1741–1806), *The Thames, or the Triumph of Navigation* (1791). By permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London. Charles Burney, at a keyboard, looks over the left arm of the water nymph, while Captain Cook (below Father Thames's compass) and other naval heroes pull the chariot toward Asia, America, and Africa.

Pacific, where voyagers remarked on Polynesian music. These journeys were linked by a minor biographical detail—Burney’s son James sailed with Cook. More importantly, the journeys were representative of the Enlightenment enthusiasm for travel, and each in its own way provided a litmus test for ideas about music. Confronted by unfamiliar vernaculars and new performance practices, the travelers were forced to examine long-standing assumptions about music. Was music’s action universal or relative? What was its social purpose? How did it mediate between societies? And on what grounds could one form of music be called superior to another?

The late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century reception of these travel findings coincided with decisive cultural changes in western Europe, particularly in the field of music. At the beginning of our period in the 1760s and 1770s, German instrumental music was still considered inferior to French and Italian vocal music; yet, by the 1810s or so, the German states were no longer *terra incognita*, and German music was being called the very apogee of human artistic achievement. The task of this book, then, is to investigate the relationship between Enlightenment travel and evolving musical thought. By examining the kinds of cultural and political investments in Anglo-German writings about music, I argue that the musical encounter was a critical site for working out some of the new aesthetic ideas. At the same time, the musical encounter was used to articulate national and imperial imaginaries at moments of domestic tension.⁵

We can think of the musical traveler as an heir to the Neoplatonist tradition that emphasized music’s utilitarian character. Among the many properties attributed to music were regulating labor, demonstrating power and intimidating enemies, rousing ire and inspiring bravery, socializing and educating the young, treating disease, and civilizing the savage.⁶ We find these ideas expressed in a range of textual and visual sources that included travel reports, journalistic criticism, music histories, medical treatises, paintings, and plays. Although they remain in the background of this book, such ideas were, of course, also taken up by eighteenth-century composers, including Telemann, Gluck, Benda, Mozart, and Haydn, who adapted the theme of Orpheus and the “wonder-working bards” for their operas, cantatas, and other musical works.⁷ Orpheus stood at the head of the operatic tradition with Peri and Monteverdi and continued to be well represented in musical works throughout the eighteenth century.

It seems fitting to refer to the Enlightenment engagement with Neoplatonic thought as Orphic discourse, named for the classical hero whose music exerted irresistible effects on its listeners. It would be the task of Burney and other travelers to investigate utilitarian ideas about music—

arguably the most tenacious idea in the history of musical thought. We will find that these cross-cultural encounters forced a reevaluation of traditional assumptions about music's agency. Listeners were not necessarily charmed, swayed, or improved; sometimes they were indifferent or hostile. Sometimes, too, they ceased to be listeners and became performers instead. If such findings had implications for music aesthetics and the emergence of music historiography in the late eighteenth century, they also had implications for ethnomusicological thought. Orphic discourse constituted a kind of ethnographic yardstick that categorized and hierarchically ordered people according to their musical practices. At the same time, this book argues against the notion of an aesthetic break between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by showing that utilitarian ideas were adapted to the new purpose of promoting serious music. In the early nineteenth century, claims about music's wondrous power became a basis for leveraging certain kinds of music over others.

Reading Orpheus

My historical argument is complemented by a metalevel that operates outside of time. Here, the Orpheus myth functions as a frame through which to read musical action. This frame can be understood, first, as the Enlightenment's inherited episteme, the intellectual and cultural legacy of classical antiquity that was both advanced and interrogated by eighteenth-century music scholars. Second, it serves the contemporary reader as an archetypal story about music's utilitarian potential by acknowledging how music acts in the world.⁸ Via Orpheus we will thus examine the utopian possibilities and dystopian warnings about music's capacity for either constituting or dissolving society.

Orpheus is a familiar myth, but, since it is central to this book and its interpretation important for my argument, it is worth rehearsing here. The story deals with the archmusician Orpheus, whose bride Eurydice dies on their wedding day after being bitten by a snake. The inconsolable Orpheus travels, as Ovid tells us, to the underworld, where Orpheus sings to the gods and entreats them to return his bride to the land of the living. The gods are unexpectedly moved by his powerful music and grant his wish on condition that he not look back at Eurydice while leading her out of the underworld. Orpheus violates this condition, only to see her slip irrevocably into the realm of the shades. His grief now redoubled, the musician returns to his home in Thrace, where he renounces women for adolescent boys.

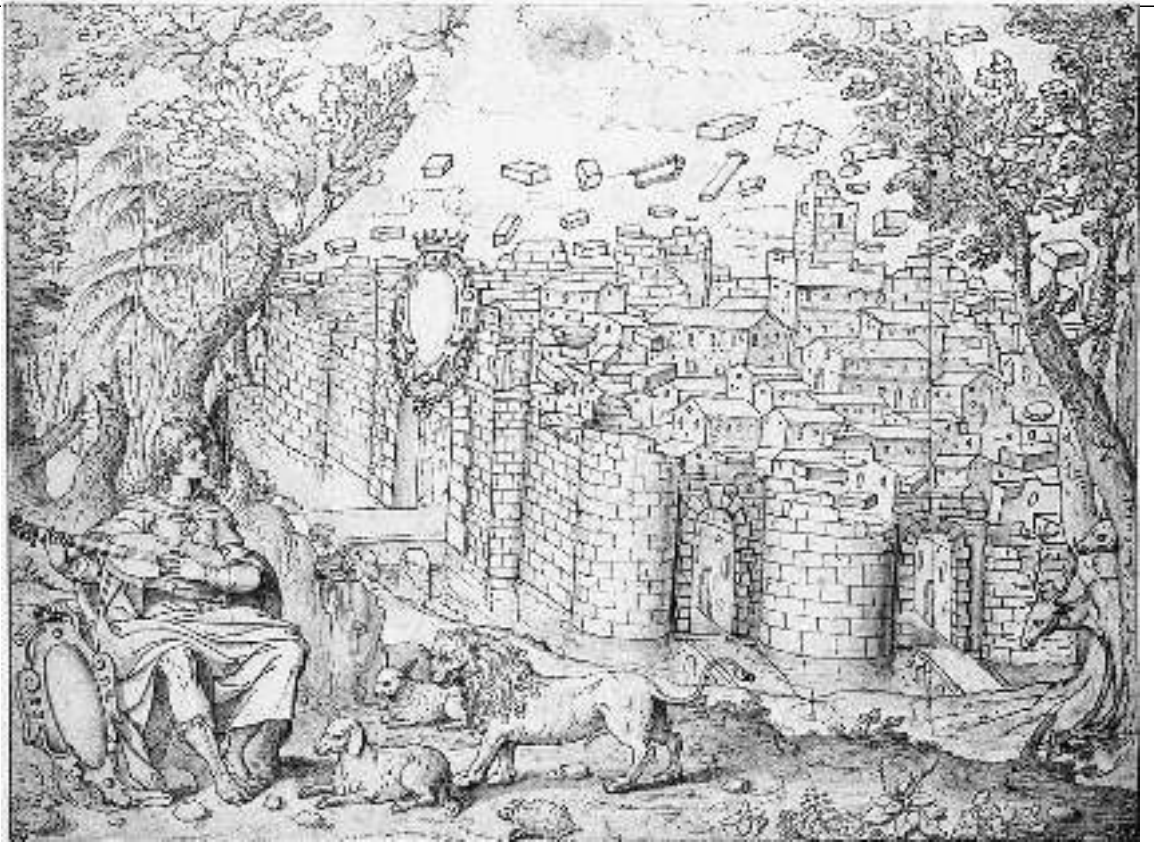


FIGURE 0.3. Anon., *Orphée charmant les animaux* (sixteenth century). Drawing, 27 × 36.3 cm. Photo: Madeleine Coursaget. Louvre, Paris, France. By permission of Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York.

Still he sings, and his new listeners are the ones we remember him for—trees and plants, beasts, birds, rocks, and rivers that come to hear songs of mourning, regret, and forbearance (figure 0.3). Orpheus tunes the strings of his lyre as if to “temper them into a concord,” evoking a “cosmic order, a pattern.”⁹ His musical idyll is interrupted, however, when, in the subsequent book of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells us that Orpheus is discovered by a group of Thracian women. Screaming, they swarm from the hillside to attack him. At first, his singing transfixes their spears and rocks. Then the women bang on their drums, blast their horns and flutes, and ululate riotously. His music loses force, for the frenzied women either do not listen or will not hear. Their missiles strike him, and they butcher the birds and animals. Then they set upon him, tearing his body to pieces. With this, the world grows silent, rivers weep, and the trees shed their leaves in grief. Orpheus’s head, still singing, floats down the Hebrus with his lyre and washes up on the shores of Lesbos. At length, Orpheus is able to reenter the underworld to join Eurydice.¹⁰

Conclusion

Orpheus constituted a foundational, self-reflexive gesture for music scholarship in the late eighteenth century. This was articulated at the moment when music scholars were beginning to carve out their intellectual turf and to insist on their own specialist knowledge, as well as their prerogative to interpret music on behalf of the nonprofessional listener. With Orpheus as their emblem, scholars attempted to mediate a new place for serious music in relation to society as a whole. This attachment to reflexivity warrants the elevation of Orpheus to a hermeneutic paradigm for this book. As I contend, however, the Orpheus myth is also a discourse of alterity, a story about music’s privileged responsibility vis-à-vis otherness. Orpheus’s listeners—wild animals, trees, rocks, and savage women—exist outside the bounds of society, and his playing represents an effort to draw these listeners into the realm of the social.

We can thus see Orpheus as an ethical paradigm for one of our most pressing contemporary concerns: managing the boundaries of the societies in which we live. Instead of the right of blood or soil, criteria that are thought inherent to the subject, Orphic belonging is based on a form of social action. The mere act of listening—manifest as interest rather than pleasure—is what qualifies the listener for membership. In prioritizing the socially constitutive role of culture, Orpheus prompts us to ask how music can be used to manage this line between sociopolitical inclusion and exclusion. Within this

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