

Dialogues and Duets, System and Sensibility in Heinse's "Hildegard von Hohenthal"

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1. *Hildegard and the heavyness of talking about music*

The following sketch is concerned primarily with the problem of an object and its unfolding and integration within a narrative. This object may have had a “history”—something that was discovered in more than one “wave” of interest in the eighteenth century, but it isn’t itself a “story”, it doesn’t even yield a “minimal narrative”, it has no plot. I am speaking here about music as a form of art. Many observers of Wilhelm Heinse’s *Hildegard von Hohenthal* have noted that the novel is a remarkable exception within the category of writings from about 1770 onwards that Ruth E. Müller has brought together under the label “narrations in music”, in so far as Heinse attempts so thoroughly and completely to fuse a narrative plot with a discrete musical repertoire. An important component of the fusion is talking about musical objects, particularly the explication of entire operas and oratorios. These descriptions, with too much haste, I think, were elevated somewhat anachronistically to the status of “analyses” that are “not only of interest to Heinse and his era” but are instead even somehow “objectively true” (Haase). Even though talking about music, a performative practice on the part of the novel’s characters, functions itself as a part of the novel’s plot, there seems to be a discontinuity between the telling of the story and the “telling” of the music. This discontinuity has been the basis of many negative judgments of the novel as a novel; it has also, however, led some to read the novel as a sort of abortive musical essay. As late as the 1980s, none of the literature on *Hildegard* had reflected adequately enough on the “medial” context of all this staged talk about music, even though the discontinuity between the many passages in

which words fail to describe music, and novel's plot, concentrated as it is on the body, the (male) gaze, and the (groping) hand, is occasionally so extreme as to enter the realm of satire. Often the verbal explications of musical works begin just at the point where the continuation of lascivious gazing, sexual desire, and encroaching hands would be—even for Heinse—in violation of good taste. Talking about music becomes, on the one hand, a kind of regulator of sexual instinct, and on the other a continuation of sex by other means, a not at all satisfying compensation.

As regards the making of music, this surrogate relationship is already worked out programmatically in the famous (one might say infamous) telescope scene in the novel's opening pages, in which Kapellmeister Lockmann, sexually aroused by the sight of Hildegard bathing unclothed in the garden beneath his window, then (almost automatically, it seems) is constrained to let his "feelings flow into the strings" of his clavichord. In the first two books of *Hildegard* the telescopic distance between the two protagonists is progressively decreased; it comes increasingly to glimpses of naked skin at shorter range and body contact. But there is no consummation, and like was the case in the relationship between the eponymous protagonist and Cäcilia in Heinse's *Ardinghello*, the sexual tension is ratcheted up to an almost unbearable level. And the more unbearable this tension becomes, the more annoying become the theoretical explanations, and the more obvious the abject failure of words before unmediated sensation, for which music, for its part, is supposed to provide the most sublimated of metaphors. Now it may be that Heinse is simply unable to build a bridge between music and bodily eros, Goethe and Schiller sensed this imbalance—arrogant as usual—in *Xenien* number 504, where they wrote "Gladly we would listen to you making music with words, / if you didn't always have to mix it with canine love." E.T.A. Hoffmann expressed the novel's lack of proportions somewhat more clearly in 1822, when he wrote that one could hardly imagine how so fine a young woman as Hildegard, in whom her music teacher was "in love in a not a very decent manner," could possibly stand Lockmann's pedantry, his mind-numbing lectures on the "mathematical parts of musical science."

Both judgments, "indecent" and "pedantry," are taken word for word from Johann Friedrich Reichardt's devastating review in his journal *Deutschland*, published in 1796. What applies to the entire early secondary literature of *Hildegard* applies to Reichardt's reading: none of these see any difference between the novel's main character

and its author. This early reception aims primarily to read Heinse's musical aesthetics in the novel as a closed system. Müller is correct to criticize Goldschmidt's identification of Lockmann with Heinse (17), only to go on herself to describe the descriptions of music in the novel as "fictionalized examples of the author's views on music" (132), and even attempting to derive a coherent terminological network out of these (138ff). Of course it would be senseless to argue that Heinse has his Kapellmeister voice opinions about music that completely contradict his own. But had he wanted to take so clear a position as he had in his "Düsseldorfer Gemäldebriefen" *against* Bellori's classical Idealism and the pure lines of Winckelmann's forms, and *for* Rubens and the primacy of living color, then he could just as well have written a pamphlet. Already in the 1770s Heinse had placed his bets as an author on an open dialogic principle. Here I will spare you a long digression on the functional-reductive concept of the author in, say, Foucault and Barthes. I will point out, however, that in Heinse's unpublished response to Reichardt's rather blunt criticism, he replies with remarkable restraint. Heinse speaks of himself as an author hardly at all; rather he speaks almost completely of the characters in the book— until one important passage, which ought to give us pause: "[to the reviewer] Lockmann is a pedant...the author would take this as a compliment, if only it were true!"

The point of this short observation is more than that Reichardt, even if he does so negatively, is paying a compliment to Heinse's theoretical knowledge of music by calling him a pedant. The comment makes the distance between author and character all the clearer, for Lockmann *is* clearly portrayed as a pedant in novel, however much his observations agree with his creator's positions. The fault for this need not only lie with Lockmann's specific qualities; rather, one suspects that the problem is a more general one, a problem having to do with music-theoretical discourse itself. Is learned talk about music *per se* pedantic? And if it were, couldn't we perhaps read the novel, even in its enthusiastic and sentimental passages, as an ironic thought-experiment about the possibility of speaking and writing about music at all? If we think about Heinse's final novel, *Anastasia and the Chess Game*, an alternative way of reading *Hildegard* seems possible; in the former the words are about chess, in the latter all the talking is about music. Both lie on the bed of a kind of experimental poetics, of communicative play beyond words.

2. Systems: On diverse archives of music and the “physical sense of the ear”

In contrast to the most prominent discourse of art history, the discourse of *Ekphrasis* and its tradition—which Heinse, in the *Gemäldebriefen* and in *Ardinghello*, attempted to engage and to undermine—the discourses of music around 1790 are missing much. They are missing a clear terminology for even the simplest phenomena, such as timbres and melodic shapes, an adequately precise and binding classification system for genres, and finally an archive in which the best piece or works could offer a historically founded orientation to those interested in music. Music is transitory, and its performative aspects are inadequately conserved in written media. Further, music had no canon: music history knew no Apollo of Belvedere, no Venus of the Medicis. The level of meta-reflection was low: It is hard to imagine musical discourses around 1790 bringing forth something comparable, say, to Lessing’s *Laokoon* or Winckelmann’s *History of Ancient Art*. To make things even more difficult, there was no usable, up-to-date, annotated bibliography on musical subjects when Heinse began to assemble the notes on music that were to flow into *Hildegard*. Forkel’s *Allgemeine Literatur der Musik*, published in 1792, seems not to have reached Heinse’s desk in time, if at all.

The second part of the novel begins with a description of Hildegard’s private library. Her collection of books about music is—this seems an important detail—stored in the music room, that is, it is segregated from the others. It is possible to reconstruct the contents of the collection from the discussions in the novel. There are only six titles. The most important of these would be Rousseau’s 1768 *Dictionnaire de musique*; Heinse himself copied out and commented upon selected passages from the letter A to the article “Chronometre.” Lockmann’s remarks on Tartini and Rameau probably are also informed by Rousseau’s dictionary. German music theory before Rousseau is represented only by Emmanuel Bach’s *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, which is mentioned only in passing, as “cold in its theorizing.” Literature after Rousseau includes Kirnberger’s system (probably the short *Wahre Grundsätze zum Gebrauch der Harmonie*), Gerbert’s *Scriptores*, from which Heinse cites Guido of Arezzo, Abbé Roussier’s *Mémoire sur la musique des anciens* (1770), and finally Marpurg’s *Legende einiger Musikheiligen* (1786), the source of several anecdotes. All in all, Heinse seems to

have had but little interest for the meta-musical literature of his time, and he doesn't reveal the source of his historical observations, for example the music histories of Hawkins and Burney.

As I just mentioned, Heinse gave up copying out excerpts from Rousseau. He was frustrated, it seems, because he had hoped that the dictionary, and other music-theoretical writings, would be of more help to him. His disappointment recalls Herder's in the unpublished *Viertes kritisches Wäldchen*: everything that had been written on music seems to both to be too narrowly conceived, too detailed, unrelated to the sensuous, the aesthetic, and the anthropological. Of the music-aesthetical constructions which precede the Rousseau excerpts in his notes, Heinse says that he has "written them without any recourse to any other theory whatsoever" (Aufz II 502). An intellectual who poses as a hater of theory and books, as an anti-intellectual, for whom knowledge is only to be trusted when it can be related back to experience: this is certainly not a new figure in the 1790s. Indeed, this pose was (as Panajotis Kondylis has shown) one of the "standard options" available to an enlightened intellectual in search of the right habitus.

In *Hildegard* Heinse attempts more than once to bridge the gap between knowledge that is learned and reflected upon and knowledge that stems from experience. On the one hand, fictional characters are made to argue specific aesthetic positions; these are, so to speak, thus put between inverted commas and thus made relative. On the other hand, Heinse constructs a canon of musical works that is meant not just to be read on paper or plunked through at the clavier, but for its actual sensual experience in performance. Without admitting it explicitly, in the latter Heinse is taking up ideas that one might find in Sulzer or Forkel, ideas that for these were related to the project of an ideal "musical academy." Heinse's concerts are meant to be the equivalents of picture galleries or sculpture collections; they are meant to become sounding institutions of music history.

In *Hildegard* both the aesthetics of music and the theory of music are made discursive. That is, the novel's dialogic construction makes it possible for Heinse to convey what his age would have called "a complete system of music" in a loose series of conversations. One of the main challenges was the conception of an organic system of ordering and classification, and Heinse, who works within a much looser system of free association, doesn't need one. His approach enjoys the advantage of allowing him to

speak of almost every weighty point of music theory without having to subject his thoughts to any tightly bound encyclopedic corset. But as a matter of fact Heinse does deliver the building blocks of “a complete system of music,” from a theory of intervals and key characteristics, to a system of styles and genres, to the foundations of musical hermeneutics, to criticism via comparison of works, to, finally, a physiological theory of music (we would call this music cognition, see Tom Irvine’s paper) based on the research of his friend the anatomist Samuel Thomas Soemmering. On account of this last point even Forkel, who was trying to construct just the kind of system Heinse avoided by writing a novel, found *Hildegard* worthy of a footnote in his *Allgemeine Geschichte der Musik*, a footnote that praises the novel as a worthy contribution to music literature.

As for the second point: all of the attempts at a so-called system of music in the second half of the eighteenth century were as a rule subject to two standard kinds of criticism: first, that they were too speculative in their methods and second, that they lacked enough examples taken from real music. They were missing a canon of composers and works that would have made a broader aesthetic discussion possible. As a surrogate for these one often finds comparisons of musicians and painters. Such comparisons are more often than not a kind of crutch to orient the reader: who is the Raphael, the Titian, or the Correggio of music? Although one would expect to find plenty of these in *Hildegard*, they are in fact very rare. In their place Heinse offers the reader a chance to appraise the relative worth of each composition based on its place in a given repertoire, sparing the paragonistic figure. The body of musical works Heinse introduces in the novel, and out of which he distills a “classical phase” of Italian opera between 1740 and 1770, is comprised of more than 80 pieces; 31 of these are subject to direct critical comparison with one another (*here you can have a short look on this body of musical pieces on the second page of your handout*). No writer on music before him comes even close to treating a comparable volume of works. Nonetheless, Heinse chooses only a few of those works that were well-known, well-loved, or even the subjects of critical interest in Germany. One searches in vain for lieder, the North German oratorios of Rolle, or anything by Emmanuel Bach; the much-beloved Grétry is nowhere to be found. Among the works in Heinse’s canon only Graun’s *Der Tod Jesu*, Handel’s *Messiah*, and Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* count as genuinely famous, some of the Gluck operas ought to have been familiar, and every reader of Italian travelogues would have recalled the

mythical powers ascribed to Allegri's *Miserere*. But for the rest of his so called "classical" works—compositions by Leo, Traetta, Majo, and Jomelli, for instance—Heinse could assume no familiarity on the part of his audience with their musical texts or even with their general "sound."

It would be too simple to pronounce Heinse an eccentric, or his taste old-fashioned, just because his canon includes so many works that were so obviously out of date and taste. Indeed, what Heinse's canon does do is demonstrate a further critique of the possibility of a "complete system of music" and, further, of speaking about music at all. On the one hand, we can read *Hildegard* as a plea for a work-aesthetic and for a musical museum culture. On the other hand, however, an ironic wrinkle on Heinse's strategy appears: all this talking about music gives birth to *ideal* works, to phantasmagoria. It is no accident that the work that elicits the most praise, and plays a most critical role in the plot, is Lockmann's own *Achille in Sciro*, a fully fictional composition. For all of the detail lavished on its description, the protagonist's own opera remains a music made only of words. A second-order work of art is born, one that follows the utopian poetics of musical ideals. Talk about music thus receives a positive reappraisal, and its very incompleteness becomes a launching-pad for the synthetic powers of imagination itself.

Such an imagined music depends on the "physical sense of the ear" as a sense that functions not only as a receiver of empirical data, which are then in a second step assimilated rationally. It is also, indeed, a part of a *sensorium commune*, as Soemmering attempted to describe it, upon which the whole human being, with all of his or her powers of perception depends. This is how it is possible to imagine the construction of a "complete system of music" built on a modern anthropological and physiological basis. The solution to the problem of how to bridge the gap between such a free-flowing and yet immediately integrated sense of hearing and sensation on the one hand and the dry ungraceful hermeneutics of the music lessons in the first part of the novel on the other remains. We are left asking if such a solution is something one can explain or narrate at all.