

ROBERT O. GJERDINGEN, *MUSIC IN THE GALANT STYLE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ISBN 978-0-19-531371-0, xii + 514pp, £34.99.

This is one of the most unusual books on music that I have encountered in a long time. Its design is eye-catching and it is packed with flights of fancy, such as a subordinate long-title in impeccable eighteenth-century style, reproduced both on the dust jacket and within, and ending with ‘...Said Music All Collected for the Reader’s Delectation on the World Wide Web.’ It quickly becomes clear that Robert O. Gjerdingen’s fun is not frippery. The depth of his engagement makes it seem entirely natural that he should affectionately emulate his beloved. If there is one other labour of love to which his work relates closely, it is Daniel Hertz’s *Music in European Capitals: The Galant Style 1720–1780*, to which Gjerdingen pays warm tribute as providing ‘a wealth of historical and biographical detail that complements my own, more modest volume’ (viii).¹ Together, Hertz and Gjerdingen form ‘as it were, a “history and theory” of the galant style’ (viii).

Gjerdingen wrote this book because his love for galant music has made him ask searching questions. Some of his questions might have flitted through the minds of others, in class discussion perhaps or a dinner conversation; but he is the first to have explored these deep issues in print and thereby to have provided answers that are rooted in firm evidence and in a musical insight that is as verifiable as it is perceptive. One question he attempts to answer is this: What was it that enabled so many composers of the eighteenth century to produce vast quantities of music that ranged so widely in character, and to do so rapidly and, it seems, so effortlessly? Although that question is in danger of simplifying complicated issues, it has validity, for there seems little doubt that the eighteenth century was one in which prolific composers were particularly common—Haydn, Mozart, Quantz, Telemann and a host of lesser-known others. Gjerdingen’s answer unfolds across the book as a whole; and although the bones of the answer emerge very early on, the meat offered by the many following chapters gives his arguments a striking authority. Gjerdingen sees galant music not as an autonomous art in the nineteenth-century sense (a concept so dominant that it still hinders the reception of galant music), but as a highly sophisticated manifestation of that ‘collection of traits, attitudes, and manners associated with the cultured nobility’ (5). Just as cultivated people of the eighteenth century had a vast, now-lost repertoire of gesture, language and deportment that were important in oiling the wheels of polite society, so ‘a hallmark of the galant style was a particular repertory of stock musical phrases employed in conventional sequences.... Even J. S. Bach, whom the general

¹ Daniel Hertz, *Music in European Capitals: The Galant Style 1720–1780* (New York: Norton, 2003).

public has long viewed as the paradigmatic Baroque composer, created galant music when it suited his and his patrons' purposes' (6).

To a level that few books on music history have managed to achieve, this one reveals the limitations of inherited concepts of style and period. If its view of galant style seems strange or new to us, the problem is ours, for terms such as Baroque or Classical are foreign to the times they purport to represent, and 'obscure rather than illuminate eighteenth-century music...to call the music of the great galant musicians pre-Classical is no more enlightening than to call George Gershwin pre-Rock' (5–6). Gjerdingen also engages in a neat piece of iconoclasm in demonstrating how inadequate 'the Romantic ideal of a three-part sonata of "exposition, development, and recapitulation"' (364) is when faced with the music of Mozart, and in particular with the first movement of his celebrated Sonata in C K545. As an antidote we get an analysis that goes a long way towards demonstrating how differently Mozart thought, and that makes one reconsider what lies behind the so-called subdominant recapitulation that starts in bar 42.

There is nothing new about debunking concepts of period, form and style; and in his discussion of that Mozart sonata Gjerdingen acknowledges the pioneering work of Leonard Ratner. But the way in which Gjerdingen debunks is strikingly independent and includes a rare ease in drawing on telling extra-musical analogies. Galant music, 'like the art of figure skating, is replete with compulsory and free-style "figures"' (7). He then gives us a list of figures used in a recent skating performance, and compares it to the 'musical figures or schemata presented in the second half of a slow movement by the eighteenth-century Venetian composer Baldassare Galuppi' (7). The last four of these are 'Clausula Vera/Ponte/Cudworth cadence...deceptive/Passo Indietro to Mi-Re-Do cadence'. (8) This use of period terms is central to Gjerdingen's methods; and unlike many who seek to avoid using anachronistic analytical terminology, he has a happy knack of supporting those terms with direct reference to the musical sound and not merely to the theoretical concept. While the result is a book replete with learning, it is also a book dominated by readable and informative language, epitomized in the 'Notes for the Reader' (19) that come at the end of the introductory chapter. There we learn that his terminology for schemata follows 'in the footsteps of Joseph Riepel, the eighteenth-century writer and chapel master at Regensburg who gave names to several important musical schemata' (20). He avoids the roman-numeral system for describing chords, favouring instead the normal eighteenth-century shorthand of thoroughbass. And, in one of his most revealing paragraphs on methodology, he declares that because 'The relationship between local and global meanings of chords and keys was fluid in galant music' (21), he wishes to avoid discussing this music via concepts of tonality that are rooted in the preoccupations of later times. As he says, 'Indeed, the craft of the galant composer depends heavily on the ability to modulate

between perceived certainty and uncertainty, between, on the one hand, giving the courtly audience a sense of security and groundedness and, on the other hand, taking listeners down dark alleys of strange chords and keys where they may feel utterly lost' (21).

In the twenty-nine chapters that follow, each devoted to specific schemata or figures, or to exemplary works, Gjerdingen keeps his intellectual eye and his musical ear firmly focussed. On the whole, his method is built upon the discussion of specific works of music, with his aural and intellectual perceptions supported by frequent reference to period treatises and other instructional material.

He begins with a discussion of one of the most enduring schemata, the Romanesca, and follows through several treatments of this classic bass pattern and its associated upper voices, showing how composers as varied as Pachelbel, Handel, Cimarosa and Mozart found contrasting solutions to the challenges and wealth of possibilities it offers. To anyone familiar with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century concepts of music theory, this chapter typifies one of the greatest challenges of the book's subject—and one of the strongest examples of how the challenges are met. For example, as Gjerdingen discusses what he calls variants of the Romanesca, many of us may think, as I did at first, that he implies an intellectually aware association between these variants and the original. For example, is it right to describe the descending scale C–B–A–G–F–E as the 'stepwise variant' (33) of the Romanesca's C–G–A–E–F–C? The sceptic might answer that some notes go up and some notes go down, and that these are among common patterns used by composers who were quite unaware of the Romanesca itself. However, Gjerdingen provides an effective answer, one that avoids having things all ways at once by rooting itself in the relationship between theory and practice, including the principles of solmization as taught by eighteenth-century pedagogues and composers. He draws on this to show that one of the most important qualities of galant music is its concept of good taste in the ways pitches relate to one another in sequence. For example, in discussing the bass progression E–F in the old Romanesca, he demonstrates that 'galant musicians responded with a 6/3 chord on *mi* and a 5/3 chord on *fa*. To do otherwise would have been a faux pas' (39). And his conclusion is that 'a musical schema can be a patchwork, the result of interactions between numerous small practices and the larger forces of both historical precedent and contemporary fashion. The musicians who developed the galant Romanesca preserved a number of venerable traits from its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century antecedents' (39); and their adaptations of it were specifically designed to suit the schemata they were deploying.

This is a dynamic, mobile view of how galant music came about and of how it works. So, as the chapters accumulate more and more detailed knowledge, Gjerdingen

turns increasingly to the analysis of entire movements. One of the most interesting is Chapter 24, 'An Andantino Affettuoso by Niccolò Jommelli'. The background to this duet for lovers, with two violins and continuo, is sketched out with a striking awareness of the ways in which Jommelli deploys schemata for calculated expressive purposes. This master of *opera seria* draws on formulae that would have appealed to the ears and intellectual knowledge of the musical cognoscenti, yet that also would have made their mannerly point to those unversed in the niceties of musical technique. The result is terrific music; and some of the music's power lies in the way that the composer constantly sidesteps the obvious consequences of the schemata he uses. It's not the schemata alone that count; it's how things are put together, and how the composer's inventive musical speech stretches boundaries without transgressing the good taste that the schemata represent. Gjerdingen lets us see and hear what Jommelli does by providing a richly annotated full score, with just a handful of detailed written observations in the main text. For the rest, he lets a diagrammatic presentation do its work. More importantly, he encourages our ears to discover for ourselves.

One of the great strengths of this book is the way in which it relates theory and pedagogy to compositional practice. The discussion of pedagogy is dominated by *partimenti*, and by various composers' examples of this 'intense nonverbal form of instruction originally intended for poor boys learning a trade' (171). Gjerdingen also shows how and why this method became supplanted by something more suited to well-to-do amateurs—by prototypes of 'the sort of handy "how-to" book that would become a middle-class staple' (171); and there is plenty of discussion of thoroughbass. But what he does not mention very much at all is the relationship between all these things and the formal instruction in counterpoint that so many of the composers represented in this book would have received. This comes across not so much as a lack as an implied but unanswered question. After all, so many of the composers were church musicians; and much of the florid passage work demonstrated in the legion of music examples elaborates two- or three-part counterpoint. Mozart's technical flair, and his ability to deploy schemata imaginatively, is given plenty of attention in the two chapters focussing on him. However, it is well worth remembering that Mozart himself was altogether typical of his century in seeing formal training in counterpoint as a cornerstone of teaching, as the celebrated *Attwood Studies* show. Gjerdingen gives many interesting examples of contrapuntal skill, including fugal and canonic writing; but they appear fully fledged, and I for one was left wondering what instructional links, if any, were made between the florid surface of so much galant music and the underlying structures that, so often, are themselves elaborations of progressions demonstrating the precepts of traditional contrapuntal instruction.

One of Gjerdingen's main areas of research is music cognition, and this book is a remarkable testament to the ways in which disciplined thought about musical

perception can challenge musical preconceptions and analytical orthodoxies. One of its most pleasing attributes is its refusal to be doctrinaire. For example, although the author rejects the application of nineteenth-century harmonic concepts to galant music, he also makes it clear that each age will see a single piece of music through a slightly different lens. In some ways it represents an attempt to understand how the composers themselves thought; and in that respect his approach bears some comparison with the work Laurence Dreyfus has undertaken on Bach.² It's the sort of book that will stimulate readers to think afresh about galant music. I suspect that it will also stimulate creative minds with good ears to ask equally searching questions about other music.

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² Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).