Just Vibrations

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McClary, Susan and William Cheng.
Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good.

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Many people choose to specialize in the humanities because they promise a life of the mind, a labor that involves reading poetry, gazing at paintings, listening to music. With the humanities growing ever more embattled in today’s institutions of higher learning, our advocates often claim that immersion in cultural media makes our students better people: more open to empathy, more fully acquainted with and tolerant of multiple points of view. If only world leaders would take time out to attend to da Vinci or Schubert or Proust; then, we’d like to imagine, there might be universal peace. A worthy goal, of course. But to what extent do the humanities (as practiced in our universities) actually foster the ideals to which we give voice?

I recall vividly the first time I noticed a turning point in literary studies. I was serving as a member of the doctoral committee for a candidate in an English department, and I admired her close readings of Derrida, de Man, and Deleuze. But I kept thinking that this must be a prolegomenon to an analysis of a novel or a poem—an analysis that never materialized. At the dissertation defense, I asked the candidate to demonstrate
her points with respect to an actual work. She was shocked that I would expect such a thing. When pressed further, she could not offer a single title within her stated area of specialization.

And I feared that young musicologists would eventually jump on this bandwagon of French theory and obfuscating prose. The urge to do so may be all the more tempting for those who were spooked by undergraduate classes that focused on the labeling of chords. Resisting now the analysis of what they dismissed cavalierly as “the music itself” could become a moral high ground. Never mind that relatively few scholars can understand the gnarliest prose styles of critical theory; this lack of popular comprehension only renders the writer more smug, and, alas, worthy of greater adulation. Certain humanists effectively seal themselves off with hermetic language and competition for impenetrability.

The so-called New Musicology is sometimes blamed for spreading these trends from other disciplines into music studies. To be sure, some of us did introduce Adorno, Foucault, and the like into the field. But much like the hapless Australians who imported rabbits only to have those lagomorphs take over their environment, so we occasionally witness theory usurping our publications. If I might raise a word of justification, musicologists such as Lawrence Kramer, Rose Rosengard Subotnik, and myself first turned to cultural theory in order to break through the thick wall of aesthetic autonomy that musicology had erected around its subject matter. Creatures of the 1960s, we had witnessed popular music’s power to transform genders, sexualities, race relations, and the political status quo. Our goal was not to exchange the jargon of music theory for that of deconstruction.

Will Cheng’s Just Vibrations holds a mirror up to musicology and other humanities disciplines, inviting scholars who focus on the arts to take stock. As a young gay man, he never had to fight those tawdry battles over gender and sexuality that wrenched the field in the 1990s; as an individual who experiences severe chronic pain, he did not have to invent the field of disability studies. Thanks to Philip Brett, Joseph Straus, and other pioneers, he seems to have inherited a musicology perfectly suited to his needs.

And yet for all the strides we have made in the last two decades, Cheng demonstrates that we still fall short of meeting our goals. Is there room for caring, he asks, in what can sometimes manifest as a dog-eat-dog academy? Does the hermeneutics of suspicion discourage restorative approaches to our research? To what extent do we flaunt prohibitive prose as a defense mechanism against insecurity and fears of seeming soft?
If the Nazis taught us anything, it is that one may listen to Mozart and still act in barbaric ways. Today’s musicians are not likely to offend so egregiously—though the television series *Mozart in the Jungle* reveals that classical music does not guarantee good behavior. And at conferences of the American Musicological Society, some of the most confrontational sessions still resemble blood sport.

Perhaps we can aspire to the grace and balance we experience when we listen to music. Perhaps we can bring that beauty and humaneness into our relationships with our colleagues and students. Rodney King asked, “Can we all get along?” Will Cheng brings that question back to those of us who purport to identify with music. He challenges us to infuse the humanities with the ideals we profess to uphold.