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Neil Gregor:

*Listening Spaces: Art Music and its Audiences in the Concert
Hall and Beyond, c.1850–1945*

Conference Report

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Listening Spaces: Art Music and its Audiences in the Concert Hall and Beyond, c.1850–1945. One-day workshop held at the German Historical Institute London, 21 Oct. 2011. Conveners: Neil Gregor (Southampton), James Mansell (Nottingham), and Andreas Gestrich (GHIL).

Since the early nineteenth century the concert hall has been acknowledged as a key site of sociability, education, discipline, and display, in European cities both large and small. Much recent research on what is conventionally taken to be the high era of the bourgeois consumption of art music has sought to differentiate the image of the 'attentive audience' contemplating the timeless art object in the auratic space of the concert hall. Instead, it seeks to recover a wider range of musical listening experiences located in a greater variety of spatial contexts, shaped not just by the physical environs of the immediate listening space but also by the peculiarities of civic or regional culture more generally. This informal one-day workshop at the GHIL brought together historians, musicologists, and cultural geographers to present and discuss the findings of recent work in this inter-disciplinary problem field.

The first session focused on regional and civic cultures as factors influencing cultures of musical listening. In his paper, 'Concerts and their Audiences in Bradford, West Yorkshire, c.1850–1939', Dave Russell (Leeds Metropolitan) focused on the extent to which events were organized on a 'free market' principle; the social uses of concerts and elements of social stratification they reflected and reinforced; and the extent to which they could be accessed by the working class. As he argued, concert publics were socially diverse and open but still reflected political, social, and cultural hierarchies. The Bradford Subscription Concerts, founded in 1865 and held in the 3,300 seat St George's Hall, became the city's most prestigious cultural event and an opportunity for the display of wealth and, via seat pricing, a practical demonstration of the hierarchies existing within the local middle class. Sections of the city's working class exhibited a strong musical culture rooted in brass bands, choral societies, amateur orchestral societies, and popular opera. Attempts were also made to provide opportunities for this group, invariably financially

The full conference programme can be found on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk> under Events and Conferences.

unable to attend the concert hall in any number. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, he argued, these particular forms of local sociability were in crisis with audiences falling and finances in disarray. Many saw this moment of rupture as strongly suggestive of fundamental shifts in taste as sections of the audience turned to the gramophone and especially the wireless for serious music, and/or came to place more obviously popular genres at the core of their musical lives.

As George Revill (Open University) showed in his paper, 'Cecil Sharp and Alan Lomax: Nationalism, Heterogeneity, and the Politics of Culture Areas', music was used to construct urban or regional identity not only from within, but also from without, as ethnomusicologists, collectors, and other writers explored cultural space through music too. In the one paper in the workshop which focused on something other than European art music, Revill examined the way in which folk collectors negotiated the inherent heterogeneity of folk music practices as they constructed ideas of the nation, exploring their contrasting approaches to folk music within the context of the broader cultural politics of folk collecting. Between 1916 and 1918 Cecil Sharp spent twelve months in the Southern Appalachian Mountains, collecting folk songs, convinced that he might find the 'lost' folk music of his own country, England, in the southern Appalachians. The American Alan Lomax also collected folk songs in the Appalachians on several occasions, most notably with his father in the 1930s and again during the period 1959 to 1965. As Revill outlined, there were evident contrasts between the folk collecting strategies of Sharp and Lomax as represented by their work in the Appalachians. Sharp went in search of cultural survivals in order to locate and define a historically isolated outlier of English culture, while Lomax, on the contrary, was well aware of the hybrid nature of Appalachian music. For him, however, this was not a threat to the integrity of American national identity but a primary building block for a democracy built on the idea of the melting pot.

The second session focused on concert hall listening in Germany and France. Hansjakob Ziemer (MPI for the History of Science, Berlin) gave a paper entitled 'Integration through Listening: Social Imagination, Concert Halls, and Music in Frankfurt am Main, 1860–1930', which placed concert listening in the context of a city with a particular set of liberal political traditions. The problem of access to concerts was particularly felt in Frankfurt where, in part through

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rigid subscription policies, concerts seemed to be an almost exclusive possession of the wealthy middle class. Ziemer explored how Frankfurt attempted to use architectural space and musical experiences to solve social problems. Drawing on ethnographer Christopher Small's insight that concert halls are social constructions that dramatize and make visible how a society imagines itself, Ziemer used Frankfurt as a case study for Small's argument that concert halls have two functions: on the one hand, the spatial organization can reflect present social and political convictions in society; on the other, it can shape new kinds of social behaviour. The point is that architectural constructions can steer social relationships and suggest ways in which listeners relate to the sounds, to each other, and to society. This was demonstrated through exploration of three concert hall designs: the 1861 construction of the first concert hall in Frankfurt, the Saalbau; the Festhalle which opened in 1909; and the 1927 blueprint for a new concert hall.

In her paper, 'Musical Art and Music as Leisure: Nineteenth-Century French Audiences Talk Back', Katharine Ellis (Royal Holloway) challenged the influential thesis advanced by James Johnson in 1995 that audiences 'fell silent' in the early nineteenth century, arguing instead that even in the case of art music, many of the noisy phenomena of the eighteenth century resurfaced in a new guise. Drawing on many examples which reflected the wide variety of ways in which music was consumed in nineteenth-century Paris, Ellis argued that audiences were far often less still, and less attentive, than Johnson's argument implied. The tendency for audience members to leave concerts early, for instance, was ingrained, while telling visual material documents their habit of getting up and moving about in the middle of pieces. And even when they were sitting still, Ellis pointed out, it is not clear that they were concentrating. Read carefully, much evidence suggests that the body postures associated with attentive listening in fact embodied acts of simulation: audiences, as much as musicians, in other words, were part of the performance. Ellis also questioned the rigid distinctions between entertainment and seriousness that much work on the nineteenth century continues to foreground, and the directness with which that might map onto social distinctions between different classes of listeners. She noted, instead, a clear capacity on the part of listeners to move between the two, and pointed out a trend for new forms of concert-

as-entertainment to emerge over the period and for the informal behavioural patterns exhibited by listeners in one space to reproduce themselves in ostensibly more serious venues.

The final session consisted of two papers, each of which explored, in different ways, music-making in domestic space and the relationship of this to wider discourses on aesthetics and emotion in the period. In her paper, “‘New links between them’: Modernist Historiographies and the Concerts of Nadia Boulanger”, Jeanice Brooks (Southampton) took the example of Nadia Boulanger’s concerts to examine how concepts of tradition and innovation marked the reception of both early and new music in the inter-war years. Boulanger’s programming practice exemplified the dramatized relation to history that characterized French musical neo-classicism. She was influential in promoting this strand of thinking in the New World. A material counterpart to Boulanger’s approach can be seen in the Music Room at Dumbarton Oaks, where Boulanger conducted in the late 1930s. Here, the owners showed a disinclination to segregate their collecting similar to that visible in Boulanger’s eclectic programmes. The room incorporated pieces from a range of centuries and countries, and there was no systematic chronological or geographical order to the display. Nadia Boulanger seems to have been particularly sensitive to the potential resonance between this setting, the compositional concerns of the new piece she was directing, and her own experiments in concert planning. She continued to promote similar links in her work in the United States in the following years, often performing concerts and lecture-recitals in house museums and art galleries as well as on conventional concert stages, and continuing to evoke visual analogies to make her music-historical points.

In her paper, ‘Music in the Home: Some *Longue-durée* Reflections on Domesticity, Sexuality, and Bourgeois Identity’, Maiken Umbach (Nottingham) took the example of domestic music rooms in Wilhelmine Germany as a case study through which to challenge Norbert Elias’s influential argument that the ‘civilizing process’ of modernity was driven by a desire to control and discipline emotion, and, by extension, to pursue the government of the citizenry through implicitly coercive regimes of bodily (self-)discipline. Instead, her paper situated the interior design projects of architects such as Hermann Muthesius within the wider context of a bourgeois reform movement aimed at fostering a particular form of selfhood which sat uneasily

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with inherited images of a supine, conformist, or reactionary middle class for whom learning to domesticate one's own emotions was part of a wider project by which the bourgeoisie was *itself* domesticated. Rather than simply regulate emotions, the designs of music rooms aimed to stimulate and stage the very affective states that needed to be channelled and controlled. A wide range of visual material, both historical and contemporary, testified to the ambiguities of the music room's role and its place in both fostering and containing a particular form of bourgeois sensibility. Accordingly, in the civilizing process, rationality and affect were not two mutually exclusive states or modes of being, but existed in a mutually constitutive relationship in which, crucially, power called forth the very transgressiveness it claimed to seek to control.

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