

JAN ANDREAS WESSEL

ORCID: 0000-0002-8093-3817

Independent Researcher

Towards “The Nature and Secrets of Music”: W. C. Printz and the natural history tradition

ABSTRACT: The present article provides a recontextualization of Wolfgang Caspar Printz’s (1641–1717) landmark music history published in 1690 (*Historische Beschreibung der edelen Sing- und Kling-Kunst*). Later commentators have read it as a primitive, naïve and even failed attempt at writing the history of music. Still, they seem to agree that the text, in virtue of its subject matter, forms part of a canon of music historiography. The present article will seek the interpretative key in the wider intellectual context, outside of the narrow confines of texts about the musical past. It will advance the thesis that Printz built his music historiography from elements of the natural history tradition. Two arguments support this thesis. First, it will be argued that the organization of the material in chapters XIV, XV and XVI betrays the influence of a classical version of taxonomy closely associated with the natural history tradition. Secondly, that Printz’s inquiry into the purpose of music reveals his reliance on a concept of nature similarly rooted in natural history.

KEYWORDS: W. C. Printz, music historiography, natural history, 17th century

Introduction

Wolfgang Caspar Printz’s (1641–1717)¹ *Historische Beschreibung der edelen Sing- und Kling-Kunst* (*Historical Description of the Noble Sing- and Sound-Art*, from now on *HB*) has stood as a milestone in music historiography since its publication in 1690, being the first of the great monograph histories of music written in a European vernacular language.² At the same time, ever since

¹ Printz was a musician, composer and writer, whose literary output spanned fictional and non-fictional genres. He originated from the town of Waldthurn in the Upper Palatinate district of Bavaria. In 1664 he settled in Sorau (Żary in present-day Poland), which at the time was part of the Electorate of Saxony. Here, he first held a position as a church cantor and subsequently as *Kapellmeister* at the local princely court.

² Although the English founders of the “new” music historiography seem to only have had limited access to the work (Burney admitting that he only knows it indirectly through the quotations provided in Marpurg’s later history), they nevertheless recognize its pioneer status. While Charles Burney credited the ancients—whose works have been lost—with the invention of the genre (Burney,

the 18th century commentators have regarded it as an immature and misguided attempt at writing the history of music. It has been accused of presenting the reader with an extremely primitive kind of music history (Langhans, 1887, p. 275), being nothing more than a collection of often curious facts and stories (Benndorf, 1894, p. 457), bundled together in an uncritical and compilatory manner (Osthoff, 1933, p. 98), into something that cannot be considered a true work of history (Hegar 1974, p. 3). It has thus found itself relegated to what Enrico Fubini (1994, p. 154) has called “the prehistory of historical research true and proper,” where the music historian appears to have been “primarily interested in amassing scraps of information, curiosities, and anecdotes on music and musicians, without providing a cohesive picture of his subject.”³ For Fubini, as for many of his fellow commentators in this field, the year 1776 marks the birth of music historiography “true and proper.” This year saw the publication of the first volume of Charles Burney’s four-volume *A General History of Music* and all five volumes of John Hawkins’s *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*. These are “the first true and proper music histories, in the modern sense of the term,” since they “are based on an explicitly stated methodology” which enabled them to “serve as models for the future development of music historiography” (p. 28).

There is an obvious anachronism to these assessments, in that they measure the merits of the text by standards developed much later, and which the author, therefore, could not have shared. Warren Dwight Allen made the point in an article published in 1939. Allen argued that it would be more fruitful to view Printz’s work as “a culmination of Baroque research in historical musicology” than as the first music history, as “most bibliographies” would have us believe (Allen, 1939, p. 201). While Allen outlines some of the common features in the literary output of the Baroque musicological tradition,⁴ he leaves the wider cultural and intellectual context of this type of scholarly endeavor unaddressed.

The present paper will seek the sources of Printz’s music historiography in the wider intellectual context of the age, outside of the narrow confines of the literature on music historical topics published before 1690. Printz himself certainly believed, or wanted the reader to believe, that his historical description of music was the first of its kind. He tells us in the preface that he had searched in vain for an existing text on the main topics covered in the book (Printz, 1979, p. 244). Judging from the references provided in *HB*, it appears he knew only one of the three prior music histories mentioned by Allen,⁵ namely Athanasius

1935a, p. 11–12), he gives Printz “the merit of being the first, in modern times, to publish a History of Vocal and Instrumental Music” (Burney, 1935b, p. 459). Hawkins lists *HB* as the second music history to appear in print, only preceded by a work published in 1637 by a certain Johannes Albertus Bannius (Hawkins, 1875, p. xviii).

³ Fubini is here specifically referring to Bourdelot & Bonnet’s *Histoire de la Musique* (1715).

⁴ This specifically Baroque music-historiography is defined by its strict chronological narration of musical events, its pluralistic view of musical origins, its emphasis on practical utility and its adherence to a particular notion of musical progress (Allen 1939, p. 201).

⁵ The two others being Sethus Calvisius’ (1556–1615) *De origine et progressu musices* (1600) and the first volume of Michael Praetorius’ (1571–1621) *Syntagma Musicum* (1614).

Kircher's (1602–1680) *Musurgia Universalis* (1650).⁶ This is a text that Printz repeatedly refers to throughout *HB*. Still, he doesn't seem to have recognized it as a precursor to his own historical description of music. This does not change the fact that Printz's endeavor, by necessity, had to begin with some preconceived notions about the subject matter, and how it should be approached and presented to the reading public. In other words, there must have been a pre-existing scholarly discourse and a canon of literary models that provided the conditions of possibility for addressing the topic at hand. In the following, I will advance the thesis that Printz constructed his music historiography, at least in part, from elements inherited from the natural history tradition.

While the term "history" has now become almost synonymous with the domain of past human affairs, in Printz's time the terminology did not refer exclusively to the past or even to human affairs (Seifert, 1976; Pomata & Siraisi, 2005). During the 16th and 17th centuries books with "history", "historical description" or "historical narration" in their titles were published on subjects as diverse as minerals, plants, animals, kings, wars, geographical locations and supernatural beings. Neither was history restricted to the past or the present as illustrated by the title of a book published in 1682 that promised to give a "historical description of the future things of the world."⁷ Later commentators appear to have taken it for granted that "music"—as an object of historical research—refers to a phenomenon of human culture. However, the fact that the Latin *historia* and derived terminology occupied a very different semantic field in the 17th century should caution us not to assume that Printz, in using the phrase "historical description", shares this modern notion about the objects of historical inquiry.

Particular attention will be paid to two elements in Printz's historiography that both point in the direction of the natural history tradition. One concerns methodology, the other, the ontology of the object of inquiry. First, it will be argued that Printz's organization of the material in chapters XIV–XVI reveals the influence of a classical version of taxonomy, the art of classifying and naming cultivated within the natural history tradition. Secondly, it will be argued that Printz's inquiry into the nature of music relies on a particular conception of nature similarly associated with the natural history tradition. This concept of nature is first encountered in the first chapter, where Printz carves out a space for music in the story of creation. It reappears in the later discussions on musical purpose and on the enemies of music. The primary focus will be on three chapters at the end of *HB*. These are chapter XIV "On the purpose and many applications of music," chapter XV "On all kinds of strange and marvelous music" and chapter XVI "On the enemies and despisers of music." These chapters stand isolated at the end of the book—distinct in structure and content from the chronological narration of music history presented in the preceding thirteen chapters. Yet, it might

⁶ Eugen Schmitz has, however, noted that Printz appears to have loaned extensively from Michael Praetorius' *Syntagma Musicum* without providing reference to it (Schmitz, 1904, p. 107).

⁷ Dionysius von Luxemburg (1652–1703) *Leben Antichristi, oder ausführliche, gründliche und historische Beschreibung von den zukünftigen Dingen der Welt*.

well be here that we come closest to the essence of Printz's music historiography. They stand at the center of a project of establishing order in the realm of music; whose logical conclusion is the creation of a universal lexicon where each musical phenomenon is named in accordance with its nature.

An alternative interpretation of these three chapters has been provided by Bernhard Jahn in an article published in 2001 (Jahn, 2001, pp. 508–511). Jahn connects the topics covered in these chapters to the structure of the *Encomium Musicae*, the written speech in praise of music, which for centuries had been the primary vehicle for rehearsing the musical past. Analogous to how the recounting of past events was used to strengthen the authority and reputation of political entities or dynasties, the *Encomium Musicae* conferred glory on music by providing it with a noble origin and a great age, as well documenting the growth and advances made on the path between its origin and the present. This essentially genealogical discourse was organized around two of the four traditional topoi of the *Encomium*, namely that of *ortus* (origin) and *progressus* (progress). The remaining two, *usus* (utility) and *abusus* (misuse), would gradually be pushed to the side as the *Encomium Musicae* morphed into (or was superseded by) music history. By pointing to similarities between chapters XIV to XVI of *HB* and the treatment of corresponding topics in 17th century musical encomia, Jahn makes a compelling case for regarding *HB* as a transitional work in this development. For while Printz still rehearses the topoi of *usus* and *abusus*, they now take on more peripheral roles, being restricted to the three mentioned chapters.

The present paper will highlight the epistemic—rather than the rhetorical or political—aspects of Printz's music historiography. But as we shall see, natural history did not recognize any hard and set border between the “is” and the “ought”, or between the “is” and the “for what.” Questions of meaning and purpose were essential to the way it conducted its inquiries into the nature of things.

The preface

Noble MUSIC had already then / before I thought of / making a PROFESSION out of it / through its indescribable charms / and the wondrous effects / that it tends to exercise on human minds / pulled my heart in such a way / that I in those hours / dedicated to my RECREATION / eagerly endeavored / to explore its nature and secrets.⁸ (Printz, 1979, p. 244)

So begins the preface to *HB*, with a declaration about what appears to be the driving motivation behind Printz's inquiries into music history. We subsequently learn that the decision to undertake the project of writing a general history of music was made after he had searched in vain for a text on the origin,

⁸“Die Edele Music hatte schon damals / ehe ich noch daran gedachte / von derselben einigen PROFESSION zu machen / durch ihre unbeschreibliche Lieblichkeit / und wundersame Würckungen / so sie in denen menschlichen Gemüthern auszuüben pfeget / mein Hertz dergestalt an sich gezogen / daß ich in denen Stunden / so zu meiner RECREATION gewidmet seyn sollten / mich begierigst bemühetete / deroselben Natur und Geheimnisse zu erforschen.”

invention, proliferation, and improvement of music up until its present excellence (p. 444). He substantiates his qualifications by informing the reader that he has always been a great lover of history, and has read a lot of historians, old as well as new.

[Here] I found a lot of the said material; though scattered about / in one author this / in another / something different: which I diligently excerpted / such / that I finally brought together a very large pile of these things. I was, however, so unlucky that I lost a large part of it on my travels. But after the omnibenevolent God wanted / that I should make a PROFESSION out of music / and presently holding an OFFICIO PUBLICO: I gathered the remaining EXCERPTA / brought them in order / and gradually augmented them / until they finally grew into the present historical description of noble music.⁹ (Printz, 1979, pp. 244–245)

These brief methodological considerations, if one could call them that, give us a glimpse into the aims and methods of Printz's music historical inquiry. The aim seems to be related to the exploration into the nature and secrets of music. The method consists in collecting textual excerpts from the writings of the historians, and thereafter bringing them in order. Although Printz does not clearly define the term "historical description," it must nevertheless point to the process of transformation—the not further specified "bringing to order"—through which the pile of excerpts becomes a finished, coherent whole, presentable for publication. Further inquiries into the principles behind this ordering must begin with an observation of how the order manifests itself in the organization of the text.

The order of history

With regard to structure, the most conspicuous trait of *HB* is its strict adherence to the principle of chronology. Throughout the text, facts and stories appear as independent and self-sufficient units, with chronology as the glue that keeps the whole thing together. Chronology permeates the structure on the level of chapters as well as in the organization of the material within each chapter. This almost slavish reliance on chronology was among the features that attracted criticism from later commentators. There appears to be a disconnection between the explicit promise of telling the story of the progress and improvement of music, and the resulting compilation of otherwise unconnected facts and sto-

⁹"In dem ich aber jeder Zeit ein trefflicher Liebhaber der Historien gewesen / und / ohn allen eitelen Ruhm zu melden / sehr viel HISTORICOS, SO wohl alte / als neue gelesen: fand ich viel von besagter Materi; jedoch zerstreuet / in einem AUTORE dieses / in dem andern / ein anders: welches alles ich fleißig EXCERPIrete / dergestalt / daß ich endlich einen sehr grossen Hauffen von dergleichen Sachen zusammen gebracht. Ich bin aber so unglücklich gewesen / daß ich auff meinen Reisen einen grossen Theil davon wieder verlohren habe. Nachdem aber der allgütige GOTT gewollt / daß ich PROFESSION von der Music machen sollte / und ich numehr in OFFICIO PUBLICO lebete: nahm ich die jenigen EXCERPTA, SO mir übergeblieben / zur Hand / brachte sie in Ordnung / und vermehrete sie nach und nach / biß endlich gegenwertige Historische Beschreibung der Edlen Music daraus erwachsen."

ries presented in strict chronological order. As early as 1759 the music historian Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg described *HB* as “a musical calendar,” complaining that “Printz has not provided us with much more than a sort of disposition to a history of the art of music” (Marpurg, 1759, Vorbericht section, para. 2).¹⁰ John Hawkins—when specifically commenting on Printz’s treatment of the history of music theory—similarly objects to calling *HB* a proper history of the science of music, since it contains “little more than a list of writers on music disposed in chronological order” (Hawkins, 1875, p. xviii).

In chapters XIV–XVI, Printz abandons chronology as the principle of order. Each chapter begins with a definition or delimitation of the particular subject of investigation. Printz then proceeds to subdivide the general kind covered by the definition into smaller classes. In so doing, he discloses the web of relations—similarities and differences—that constitutes the order among the members of the general kind. Chapter XV, “On all kinds of strange and marvelous music,” begins with a definition: Music should be named strange and marvelous if it is, first of all, uncommon and unfamiliar, and secondly, leaves the audience in a state of astonishment (Printz, 1979, p. 460).¹¹ This domain of the musically strange and marvelous hosts a heterogeneous group of specimens. Printz presents the reader with descriptions of animals playing and listening to music, of unusual-looking or sounding instruments, and an eyewitness account of a nine-year-old girl giving a virtuoso performance on multiple musical instruments. The order in which these historical *exempla* appear in the text is determined by an initial analysis of the specimens. Printz divides the field of the strange and marvelous into five distinct classes, stretching from two degrees of ridiculousness via the fantastic and the unusual sounding to that which is artful in an uncommon fashion. Following the initial definition, the relevant *differentiae* reside both in the music (i.e., musicians, instruments, and sounds) but also, importantly, in the audience’s reaction.

Printz’s method of classification is a version of the ancient method of collection and division, devised in the writings of Plato and Aristotle¹² as a tool for discovering “how to display in words the things there are” (Plato, 1997, p. 330 (*Statesman*, 287a)). The method comprises the two steps outlined by Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedrus*: “The first consists in seeing together things that are scattered about everywhere and collecting them into one kind... [the second] ...to be able to cut up each kind according to its species along its natural joints, and to try not to splinter any parts, as a bad butcher might do” (Plato, 1997, p. 542 (*Phaedrus*, 265d–e)). The method became the hallmark of natural history, making it the science of naming and ordering the things of the world. It rests on the metaphysical

¹⁰ “Printz hat uns nicht viel mehr, als eine Art von Disposition zu einer Geschichte der Tonkunst geliefert. Sein Buch sieht, in verschiedene Capiteln, einem musikalischen Calender...”

¹¹ “Eine seltzame und wunderbarliche Music nennen wir alhier diejenige / welche ungemeyn und rar / über dieses auch so beschaffen ist / daß man sich darüber verwundern muß...”

¹² Within the platonic corpus the method is particularly associated with the dialogues that are customarily regarded as late works, like *Phaedrus*, the *Sophists* and the *Statesman* (Devin, 2011). Aristotle develops the method in several of his logical works, like the *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics* and *Topics*, as well as in his biological works, like the *Parts of Animals* (Falcon, 1997).

assumptions that it is possible to establish a lexicon isomorphic with the essences of things with the help of taxonomy, that is, the naming, describing and classifying of the things of the world (Slaughter, 1982, pp. 3–4).

Art and Nature

The title of *HB* identifies the subject matter of the historical description as an art (*Kunst*), the art of singing and playing instruments. However, Printz's use of this particular word should not be taken as a reference to the fine arts. The text predates the establishment of the modern system of the arts. Like its conceptual relatives, the Aristotelian *techne* (τέχνη) and its Latin counterpart, *ars*, art (*Kunst*) was still used to designate a large variety of activities based on knowledge or science (Kristeller, 1951, p. 499). As Larry Shiner notes (2001, p. 99), the modern way of conceptualizing the distinction between artists and artisans did not take hold before the middle of the 18th century. *Musica activa*, the art of singing and playing instruments, belonged to a class of activities that not only included its later fellow "fine arts," painting and sculpturing, but also the arts of masonry, carpentry and medicine. An art was a knowledge-based practice used to bring about particular beneficial effects through the strategic manipulation of nature.

Furthermore, the conceptual dichotomy between "the natural" and "the artificial" wasn't as pronounced in early modern Europe as it would later become. Instead, the natural was typically defined in opposition to the concepts of "the accidental" and "the supernatural" (Hatfield, 1990, p. 23). When paired with the supernatural, the natural represented the created world as opposed to the creator and other divine beings. When paired with the accidental, the natural comes to signify essence. Entities were thought to consist of both essences and accidents. While the former belongs to the definition of the thing, the accidents are that which varies among similar entities and have no influence on their definition. Thus, "to ask whether a property or an activity is 'natural' to something was to ask whether it flows from the thing's nature (as in 'the soul's nature is to think')" (p. 23).

Purposefulness

Printz begins the first chapter with the assertion that music is a divine creation. Early humans would have encountered music or music-like phenomena in nature, like the singing of birds or the sound of the wind blowing through the trees (Printz, 1979, pp. 249–250). Printz calls these phenomena divine incentives (*Anreitzungen*) implanted in nature, where they have been able to serve as inspirations for the rise of *musica humana*. Like a domesticated plant or animal, music was discovered and modified by humans, but it is not a human creation in and of itself. When music is a divine creation rather than of human invention, it has also been endowed with a nature, that is, an essence and a purpose,

like all other things of nature. The biblical account of creation tells us that the plants and fruits were created for the sake of nourishing animals and humans (1 Genesis: 29–30 & 2 Genesis: 9). The same with rain and rivers in relation to plants (2 Genesis: 5–6). We also read that God created Eve and the animals to provide companionship for Adam (2 Genesis: 18–22). Similar ideas on natural purpose were developed within the pagan philosophical tradition. Aristotle infers that “after the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and that the other animals exist for the sake of man, the tame for use and food, the wild, if not all, at least the greater part of them, for food, and for the provision of clothing and various instruments” (Aristotle, 1984, p. 1993 (*Politics*, 1256b)). This idea becomes an integral part of the Aristotelian natural philosophy through the concept of final causation. A final cause is the nature (φύσις) of a thing or activity, “that for the sake of which” it exists or is done; for instance, when health is said to be the cause of walking, to use Aristotle’s own example from when he introduces the concept in his *Physics* (Aristotle, 1984, pp. 332–333 (*Physics*, 194b)).¹³

We encounter a similarly purposeful and anthropocentric nature in the natural history tradition. As Mary Beagon writes in relation to Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*, the “nature” of natural history was not a scientific entity, “but the theatre of human life in which the focus is human interaction with nature” (Beagon, 2005, p. 21). This was as true in the 16th and 17th centuries as it was at the time Pliny was writing his natural history (Ogilvie, 2006). Nature, in its most paradigmatic forms, is revealed in the instances where its inherent purposes are realized in interaction with humans. “[The *Naturalis Historia*]’s books on plants are not merely classificatory lists of species, but are based primarily around the plants’ usefulness to the human race in medicine, agriculture, and horticulture. The description of minerals is actually subsumed into a history of human art, since the bulk of human contact with them revolves around their use in painting, sculpture, and architecture.” (Beagon, 2005, p. 21). This is why textual sources were of prime importance for natural history. They provided the historian with recordings of particular instances of human-nature interactions, where the purposefulness inherent in nature is made manifest through its encounter with art.

Printz begins chapter XIV of *HB*, “On the purpose and various applications of music,” by stipulating that music has a twofold nature or final cause (*End=Ursach*) (Printz, 1979, p. 435).¹⁴ Firstly, and like all other disciplines, music serves to glorify God. Stories illustrating the importance of music in the worship of Pagans, Jews and Christians alike, reveal this divine purpose to be a universally recognized part of music’s nature. While music is pleasing to God, it also serves to repel evil. Among the evidence presented to support the latter, we find the celebrated story from 1 Samuel 16:14–23, where David banishes the evil spirit from king Saul with the help of his harp playing. Music has also

¹³ Aristotle elaborates on the concept of final causation in sections 198–199 of *Physics* (1984, pp. 339–341).

¹⁴ “Final cause” (*End=Ursach*) must here be understood as referring to “nature” in the Aristotelian sense as that for the sake of which a thing is done.

a second and discrete nature that makes it distinct from the other disciplines. This second nature manifests itself in music's ability to move the human mind and body, as testified by the many stories of beneficial effects accomplished with its help. In the ensuing exposition, Printz shows how music has been used to dispel diseases, cure back pains, counteract the poisonous effect of spider and snake bites, banish melancholy and lighten the mind, alleviate the burden of work, and put small children to sleep. Printz illustrates this last-mentioned attribute of music with a story from his own life. He recalls the moment he discovered that a tune played on his Spanish cithara would make his then 14 days old son stop crying and fall into a deep sleep. "When I have since frequently tried to accomplish the same / I have observed with the greatest amazement / that my music always had this intended effect" (Printz, 1979, pp. 458–59).¹⁵ Additional examples show that music has also been used to bring adults and old people to sleep. This therapeutic utility of music has a definite affinity with the medicinal properties natural historians had ascribed to various herbs. This coalescing of medicinal and musical discourses aptly illustrates how Printz at the end of the 17th century still understood musical purpose in terms of the direct practical benefits of the art. Music was yet to withdraw into the province of disinterested aesthetic contemplation.

Besides healing illnesses and ailments, this second nature of music has also made it a perfect tool for practicing manipulation and control. The second part of the chapter begins with an enumeration of the different ways that music has been used to bring people together. Like when "the servants of the Roman authorities used to blow horns / and in this way call the common people together / if something should be recited to them / as Dionysius of Halicarnassus [...] testifies" (Printz, 1979, pp. 438–439).¹⁶ Printz finds similar applications of music in the present day, like when "the Christian congregation is brought together to church service through the sound of bells" (p. 439). Or when military units are gathered by the sound of trumpets or drums. History also testifies to the benefits of music in battle, where it has been successfully used to instill bravery in soldiers or to scare off enemies (pp. 436, 443–444). It has furthermore proved itself able to soften and civilize the mind of citizens (pp. 439–441) and to quench rebellions (p. 444). It is easy to imagine that such stories must have been popular among the members of a musical profession whose livelihood depended on the employments offered by secular and ecclesiastical authorities.

¹⁵ "Als ich dieses hernach öffter versuchet / hab ich mit höchster Verwunderung gesehen / daß meine Music allezeit ihre verlangte Wurckung gethan."

¹⁶ "Also pflegten die Diener der Römischen Obrigkeit auff Hörnern zu blasen / und dergestalt die Gemeine zusammen zu ruffen / wenn ihnen sollte was vorgetragen werden / wie DIONYSIUS HALICARNASSEUS L. 2. Bezeuget. §. 21. Dieser Gebrauch ist noch heut zu Tage üblich. Denn durch den Glocken=Klang wird die Christliche Gemeine zum Gottes=Dienst zusammen beruffen. Durch den Trombetten=Schall werden die Reuter; durch den Trommell Schlag die Musquetirer und Tragoner zusammen gefordert: und an vielen Orten ist es gebräuchlich / daß die Kunst=Pfeiffer / vor dem Hochzeit=Hause / auff mancherley INSTRUMENTEN blasen / denen eingeladenen Gasten dadurch anzudeuten / daß sie sich einstellen sollen."

we find animals—birds, monkeys and dogs—not only as passive recipients, but also as active musicians.

This idea of a unity among creation in the love of music could also provide ammunition against the enemies of music. 25 years before the publication of *HB*, the Otterndorf pastor Hector Mithobius (1631–after 1677) published a collection of sermons, *Psalmodia Christiana*, where one was dedicated to the refutation of the music enemies. Here, we find the rhetorical force in this notion of a unity of nature in music exploited to its full potential.

It is really astonishing / that such inhumans can be found / who are lower than the unreasonable animals / in that they despise and hate this noble / lovely / graceful and delightful gift of God / which can move and delight even the unreasonable creatures. [...] It is certain / that animals and birds also love music; for the birds can be lured and caught by whistles and flutes; just like the deer and lamb; the nightingales are moved to sing more sweetly by human singing and string sound. It is also written about the elephant / that it is captured with the help of the drum / just like the dolphin / with the harp; the swan / with the cithara / and other animals with the help of other instruments.¹⁸ (Mithobius, 1665, p. 242)

Printz presents a similar overview of sympathetic relations between instruments and animals at the end of chapter XIV, though without explicitly turning these stories against the music enemies. Nevertheless, Printz and Mithobius share the idea that it is natural to love music, and against nature to hate it. Both authors rely on the same passage from the ancient Greek poet Pindar to spell out where this line of reasoning is leading. “To whom God is not favorable / he is the music enemy: A properly assembled human is [music’s] friend” (Printz, 1979, p. 478).¹⁹ Thus, the music enemy stands out as an out-of-tune string amid this universal harmony, like a freak of nature, rendering music incapable of performing its divinely ordained purpose.²⁰ There is no need for a listener in the musical universe of Printz and Mithobius. The enjoyment of music is intimately bound up with the question of divine grace and the ability to sympathetically resonate with the universal harmony set at creation.

¹⁸ “Es ist wol hoch zu verwundern / daß sich solche Unmenschen finden lassen / welche ärger sind als die unwernünftigen Thiere / in dem sie diese edle / liebliche / anmuthige und hocheerfreuliche Gabe Gottes verachten und hassen / welche auch die unvernünftigen Creaturen bewegen und erfreuen kann. [...] So ist gewiß / daß auch die Thiere und Vögel die Music lieben; Denn die Vögel lassen sich durch Pfeiffen und Flöten locken und fahen; wie auch die Hirsche und Schäflein; Die Nachtigalen werden durch Menschen=Gesang und Sayten=Klang lieblicher zu singen angereißet. Also schreiben man von dem Elephanten / daß er durch die Trommel; der Delphin / durch die Harffen; der Schwan / durch die Cithar / und andere Tier durch andere Spielwerck gefangen werden.”

¹⁹ “Wem Gott nicht günstig ist / der ist der Music Feind: Ein wohlgeschaffner Mensch hergegen ist ihr Freund.” Mithobius’ translation of the passage gives it a somewhat different thrust: “Those whom God does not like / are terrified / when they hear the voice of the muses / or musicians.” [“Welche Gott nicht lieber / die erschrecken / wenn sie die Stimm der Musen / oder Musicanten / hören.”] (Mithobius, 1665, p. 246).

²⁰ Rob C. Wegman has identified a similar figure, the music hater, evoked by musicians and their allies during the early 16th century controversies concerning the use of vocal polyphony in Christian worship (2005, pp. 77–88).

Postlude

The 17th century is often portrayed as the age in which the gaze of intellectual culture shifted from the books of the ancients to the book of nature. Nevertheless, the era still accommodated a largely book-centered epistemic order. Knowledge production continued to involve the reading, excerpting and reorganizing of texts. The study of nature was no exception. As remarked by Michel Foucault, the natural history of a plant involved much more than the mere description of its elements. Of equal concern were “the resemblances that could be found in it, the virtues that it was thought to possess, the legends and stories with which it had been involved, its place in heraldry, the medicaments that were concocted from its substance, the foods it provided, what the ancients recorded of it, and what travellers might have said of it” (Foucault, 1994, p. 129). The fact that Printz constructs his history of music from “scraps of information, curiosities, and anecdotes” should not be taken as a failure to address the subject matter of music history. Rather, they form the essential components of a history whose purpose was, to paraphrase Foucault, to map the whole semantic network that connected music to the world. It is in this prose of the world that Printz found his path of discovery into the nature and secrets of music.

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