

Variations on the Musical Sublime

KATHERINE FRY

Music and the Sonorous Sublime in European Culture, 1680–1880, edited by Sarah Hibberd and Miranda Stanyon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xvi + 318 pp. ISBN 9781108486590 (hard cover); 9781108761253 (ebook).

Miranda Eva Stanyon, *Resounding the Sublime: Music in English and German Literature and Aesthetic Theory 1670–1850*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. x + 274 pp. ISBN 9780812253085 (hard cover); 9780812299564 (ebook).

It can sometimes seem as if musicology is perpetually running late. At least, that is the impression that emerges from two new histories of music and the discourse of the sublime in European culture and aesthetics. Both books stress an imbalance between music and other scholarly fields as a premiss for revisiting the long history of the sublime, charting its rise to prominence in the late seventeenth century with the reception of *Peri Hupsous* ('On Sublimity', attributed to the Greek critic Longinus) and following it through to its dominant place in British, German and French aesthetics and criticism in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century. During this period, the sublime was debated by critics, literary writers, theologians, philosophers and musicians, and used to evoke multiple meanings and applications. Put simply: the sublime was more than a set of intrinsic qualities – such as elevation, grandeur, excess, power, persuasion, innovation and so on – to be located in an external object, style or mode of expression. It was also an experience and state of mind identified with the (usually male) perceiving subject, an emotional and cognitive confrontation with that which is overwhelming, unknowable or indescribable.¹

Since the late twentieth century, the category of the sublime has been intensely historicized and debated from within literary studies – not least from the standpoint of feminist critics of Romanticism such as Christine Battersby, Anne K. Mellor, Barbara Claire Freeman and

Email: katherine.fry@kcl.ac.uk

¹ For overviews see, for example, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006); and Anne Janowitz, 'The Sublime', *A Handbook of Romanticism Studies*, ed. Joel Faflak and Julia M. Wright (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Royal Musical Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Catherine Maxwell.² These writers in different ways addressed constructions of ‘the feminine’ and the historic exclusion of women from the category of the sublime, particularly as it was theorized in explicit opposition to the beautiful in the writings of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. Such criticisms certainly did not go unnoticed amidst the wider growth of feminist musicology in the 1990s, though specific discussions of the sublime in music initially focused more on the historical and analytical parameters of the concept, exploring its applicability to the eighteenth-century Handel cult on the one hand, and to a post-Kantian veneration for music’s non-mimetic expressivity on the other.³ This story is hardly a new one. Some 15 years ago, Judy Lochhead identified a disciplinary blind spot when she reflected on a resurgent attraction to concepts of the sublime and the ineffable in contemporary music studies.⁴ Lochhead was principally concerned with exposing the legacy of entrenched gender-binaries in aesthetics of the sublime and the beautiful, insisting that ‘we swim in dangerous waters’ when we forget that such categories have a history.⁵ Since the publication of Lochhead’s critique, scholars have increasingly explored the sublime as a varied and interdisciplinary discourse, while elucidating localized intellectual contexts and artistic practices. Historical approaches to music and aesthetics in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have sought to break down distinctions across vocal and instrumental genres, exploring the messy territory that lies between polarized connotations of power and freedom, harmony and dissonance, representation and idealist autonomy.⁶ At the same time, interest in the concept has persisted amidst the wider material and sonic ‘turns’ in the humanities, resulting in renewed attention both to the sonorous dimensions of industrial and urban sublimities, and to the capacity for musical and multimedial experiences to blur the boundaries between technological utility and aesthetic wonderment.⁷

The essays gathered in *Music and the Sonorous Sublime* build upon and expand these developments, signalling that music studies is finally ‘catching up with the near obsession with the sublime in other disciplines’.⁸ In their introduction, Sarah Hibberd and Miranda Stanyon stress the need to demystify a ‘principal narrative in modern musicological scholarship’, one that proceeds in a linear fashion from the mass performances of Handel’s oratorios in

² Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Women’s Press, 1989); Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

³ On Handel, see, for example, Claudia L. Johnson, ‘“Giant HANDEL” and the Musical Sublime’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 19/4 (Summer 1986), 515–33; and Ruth Smith, *Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). On the applicability of the sublime to repertoire of the later eighteenth century, see the bibliography in Wye J. Allanbrook, ‘Is the Sublime a Musical Topos?’, *Eighteenth-Century Music*, 7/2 (2010), 263–79.

⁴ Judy Lochhead, ‘The Sublime, the Ineffable and Other Dangerous Aesthetics’, *Women and Music*, 12 (2008), 63–74.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶ See, for example, Nicholas Mathew, ‘Beethoven’s Political Music, the Handelian Sublime, and the Aesthetics of Prostration’, *19th-Century Music*, 33/2 (November 2009): 110–50; and Sarah Hibberd, ‘Cherubini and the Revolutionary Sublime’, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 24/3 (2012), 293–318.

⁷ See for example Emily Dolan and John Tresch, ‘A Sublime Invasion: Meyerbeer, Balzac, and the Opera Machine’, *Opera Quarterly*, 27 (2011): 4–31; and Ruth A. Solie, ‘Of Railroads, Beethoven, and Victorian Modernity’, in *Musicological Identities: Essays in Honor of Susan McClary*, ed. Steven Baur, Raymond Knapp, and Jacqueline Warwick (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 149–162.

⁸ Sarah Hibberd and Miranda Stanyon, ‘Sonorous Sublimes: An Introduction’, *Music and the Sonorous Sublime*, ed. Hibberd and Stanyon, 1–25 (p. 10).

eighteenth-century London, to the late choral works of Haydn, to the development of the German symphony as emblematic of Romantic ideals of transcendence in the years around 1800. This progression towards the symphony as the epitome of a post-Kantian model of sublimity has – they argue – become ‘imbricated in German-dominated accounts of cultural nationalism, romanticism, the rise of instrumental music and the emergence of the work concept’.⁹ It is notable, then, that four of the ten chapters in *Music and the Sonorous Sublime* concern opera, and that the genre of the symphony is conspicuously absent (with the exception of a marginal piece by Louis Spohr). At the same time, a core group of essays – by Suzanne Aspden, Keith Chapin, Elaine Sisman and Benedict Taylor – offer new angles on some familiar territory by exploring characteristics of a sublime style associated above all with the choral music of Handel, C. P. E. Bach and Haydn.

In these chapters, the centre of gravity tends to fall on the inheritance and afterlife of eighteenth-century musical monuments, bringing iconic moments of artistic power and complexity into confrontation with instances of imitation, anxiety, failure, simplicity or the everyday. In her discussion of musical historicism in eighteenth-century Britain, for instance, Aspden is keen to stress that her interest is ‘not primarily the connection between Handel, his music and sublime rhetoric’, an association that was commonplace in musical criticism by the 1770s and has been much discussed in accounts of eighteenth-century canon formation.¹⁰ Instead, she explores links between the discursive formulation of a Handelian sublime and the wider emergence of historicism in British culture. It was not only critics such as Charles Burney and Charles Avison who adopted this canonizing tendency. English composers – including Thomas Arne, Maurice Greene, William Hayes and Thomas Linley the Younger – contributed to the process of canon formation by anxiously appropriating a Handelian style and evoking a sense of national inheritance. In a similar vein, Sisman explores the boundaries of the musical sublime in her discussion of Haydn’s late oratorios. Taking her cue from Jean Paul Richter’s assertion in 1803 that ‘after every pathos-driven tension man craves humorous relaxation’, Sisman suggests that the experience of the sublime can be at once undermined and enhanced by recourse to the quotidian.¹¹ She explores this dynamic via a close reading of Haydn’s *The Seasons*, interrogating its status as the ‘lesser counterpart’ to its forerunner *The Creation*. Whereas the latter’s opening ‘Depiction of Chaos’ famously dramatized an established tradition of sublime poetics with its sonorous depiction of the creation of light in Genesis, *The Seasons* bears the traces of Haydn’s subsequent anxiety about recreating such profundity in the wake of his own success. Rather than interpret Haydn’s portrayal of seasonal change and the life cycle in accordance with categories of the pastoral or the picturesque, Sisman alludes to the possibility of a ‘quotidian sublime’, one rooted in musical sequences of despair, excess and repose. Sisman’s essay can be productively read alongside Taylor’s consideration of Haydn’s *Creation* as a model for Weber and Spohr, whose self-conscious attempts to reproduce sublimity resulted in varying degrees of success.¹²

While these authors gently enlarge the parameters of the musical sublime by reading canonic figures in counterpoint with overshadowed works or peripheral imitators, Hibberd and Dana Gooley address the politics of aesthetics, and the distribution of agency at stake in musical

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ Suzanne Aspden, ‘The Idea of the Past in Eighteenth-Century British Music’, *Music and the Sonorous Sublime*, ed. Hibberd and Stanyon, 63–90 (p. 67).

¹¹ Elaine Sisman, ‘When Does the Sublime Stop? Cavatinas and Quotations in Haydn’s *Seasons*’, *ibid.*, 141–76 (p. 142).

¹² Benedict Taylor, ‘The Consecration of Sound: Sublime Musical Creation in Haydn, Weber and Spohr’, *ibid.*, 200–21.

experiences of overwhelming power and transport. In her discussion of Cherubini's *Médée*,¹³ Hibberd reveals how much of the sublime rhetoric that permeated critical responses to this opera in 1790s Paris referred to the performing talents of the soprano Julie-Angélique Scio. Hibberd builds here on her prior argument about the specificity of French conceptions of the sublime during the revolutionary years. In turning from a case study of Cherubini's *Lodoiska* (the focus of her article for *Cambridge Opera Journal*) to that of *Médée*, she explores the role of the sublime in perceptions of political oratory, and in the new admiration for a naturalized style of acting rooted in the ideal of sentiment. Attitudes to the embodied experiences of oratory and acting – she argues – fed into the critical inscription of Scio's voice and body as exemplary of a uniquely feminized sublime combining qualities of frailty and strength. Issues of agency and political power also come to the fore in Gooley's chapter on the appearances of Jenny Lind and Pauline Viardot-Garcia on the London stage in 1848.¹⁴ Focusing on two operatic events that took place in the presence of Queen Victoria (*La sonnambula* at Her Majesty's Theatre and *Les Huguenots* at Covent Garden) Gooley explores how the elite spectacle of these 'command' performances played out in the aftermath of Chartist mass protest at Kennington Common. Elucidation of the musical sublime is arguably secondary here to a post-Latourian argument about the enduring entanglements between operatic performance and political ritual in mid-Victorian London: a site where 'queen and diva emerge as actants in a performance network geared towards the production of impressions of great and unassailable power'.¹⁵

A further revisionist theme to emerge from *Music and the Sonorous Sublime* concerns the status of noise and the sonic as experiential phenomena that threaten to exceed the boundaries of music, invoking the paradox of the sublime as a state of pleasure mingled with shock and pain. In a rich discussion of 'Wagner's Sublime Effects' (which closes the collection), David Trippett traces a path from the composer's lived experience of wartime sounds during the Dresden uprising of 1849, to the use of metallic sound effects in *Parsifal* and *Das Rheingold*, via philosophies of sublime contemplation and aesthetics of rhythm and resonance.¹⁶ In his autobiography *Mein Leben* ('My Life'), Wagner bequeathed a vivid account of his role in the uprising as a lookout atop the Dresden Kreuzkirche, a position that provided intense immersion in a deafening, yet 'intoxicating', cacophony of bells, cannons and artillery. The account is well known within Wagner scholarship, though Trippett recalibrates its significance as 'less biographical than conceptual', prompting broader reflections on the unsettling allusion to pleasure within this recollection of excessive noise and violence. On the one hand, Trippett finds a philosophical explanation for Wagner's disturbing aestheticization of industrial machines and deafening noises by turning to Kant and Schopenhauer, who regarded serene detachment and safe distance as essential to the subjective contemplation of threatening or powerfully sublime phenomena. On the other, he turns from the soundscape of war to the use of composed rhythmic sound effects in opera. In so doing, he destabilizes commonplace assumptions about the Wagnerian sublime as aligned with tropes of harmonic complexity verging on dissonance. Instead, he isolates two transitional moments of musical realism, wherein the layering of basic percussive ostinatos evoke physical distance and transport: the

¹³ Sarah Hibberd, 'Cherubini's *Médée* and Sublime Vengeance', *Music and the Sonorous Sublime*, ed. Hibberd and Stanyon, 120–40.

¹⁴ Dana Gooley, 'Commanding Performances: Opera, Surrogation and the Royal Sublime in 1848', *Music and the Sonorous Sublime*, ed. Hibberd and Stanyon, 222–44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁶ David Trippett, 'Wagner's Sublime Effects: Bells, Cannon and the Perception of Heavy Sound', *Music and the Sonorous Sublime*, ed. Hibberd and Stanyon, 245–72.

sound of bells accompanying the funeral procession for Titurel in Act 3 of *Parsifal*, and the crescendo of 18 offstage anvils depicting the descent of Wotan into Nibelheim.

The majority of chapters in *Music and the Sonorous Sublime* thus explore – in exemplary fashion – how a variety of literary, philosophical and political theories of the sublime can be effectively brought to bear on particular composers, performers, works and fields of reception, reflecting an overriding insistence that ‘study of the sublime be separated from an aura of ineffable transcendence and rarefied aestheticism, and be located in specific, contextualised and contingent histories’.¹⁷ While Hibberd and Stanyon acknowledge the need to deconstruct traditional historiographies of the musical sublime, however, there is a lingering suggestion – reflected in the overall arc of the book – that the core territory of this aesthetic category still properly belongs to the arena of public culture and spectacle, to a virile monumentality running from Handel to Germanic late Romanticism via French *grand opéra*. As they put this: ‘A clear sense emerges of the “core” characteristics and musical signifiers of the sonorous sublime by the late eighteenth century: with notable exceptions, the genres in focus are large-scale, ceremonial and ambitious, even when the ambition is to convey sublime simplicity and fragility.’¹⁸ It would appear, then, that there is little room for chamber music and domestic music-making, or indeed for repertoire and aesthetic discourse by women and people of colour, within our narratives of the sublime in music – perhaps confirming Lochhead’s suggestion that this venerable concept is inherently ‘contrary to the philosophical and political goals of feminism’.¹⁹ However, a focus on the figure of the operatic diva in several of the chapters points to a growing fascination with feminine and queer sublimines as integral to the recovery of pre-phonographic singing voices, while the book’s emphasis on the adjective ‘sonorous’ (as opposed to the more narrowly circumscribed term ‘musical’), allows for a range of new historicist and materialist approaches to the corporeal and experiential dimensions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics.²⁰

Meanwhile, some of the most thought-provoking arguments of *Music and the Sonorous Sublime* come from those authors (including Sophie Hache, Matthew Head and Stanyon) who treat music less as an external object to be categorized, more as an integral constituent of theological, literary-theoretical and poetic discourse. Head interrogates the rhetoric of sexual violence and male same-sex desire in the writings of John Dennis: poet, critic, dramatist and contemporary of John Dryden and Handel in London, who (in his 1704 treatise *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*) likened the force of sublime poetic genius to ‘a pleasing rape upon the very Soul of the Reader’.²¹ Head situates Dennis’s foundational criticism of sublime ‘ravishment’ within his homosocial literary context on the one hand, and in relation to his moralizing attitudes to English drama and Italian *opera seria* on the other. In so doing, he reveals the close entanglements between Dennis’s conflicted relationship with same-sex desire and his ambivalence towards the power of music. Within this reading, music ‘moves promiscuously in and out of the sublime’, highlighting ‘tensions within the sublime itself, both as a category of thought and as an experience of penetration alternately elevating and undoing the male subject’.²² Seen within

¹⁷ Hibberd and Stanyon, ‘Sonorous Sublimes: An Introduction’, 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ ‘The Sublime, the Ineffable and Other Dangerous Aesthetics’, 63.

²⁰ For further discussion of the feminine vocal sublime and the recovery of lost voices see Jessica Gabriel Peritz, ‘The Female Sublime: Domesticating Luigia Todi’s Voice’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 74/2 (2021), 235–88.

²¹ Matthew Head, ‘A Pleasing Rape: John Dennis, Music and the Queer Sublime’, *Music and the Sonorous Sublime*, ed. Hibberd and Stanyon, 44–62.

²² *Ibid.*, 58.

the longer history of eighteenth-century music and aesthetics, the ambivalence of this queer sublime in anglophone discourse *c.*1700 suggests a precursor both to the gendered dichotomy of the sublime and the beautiful later epitomized in the philosophy of Burke, and to the critical elevation of Handel's choral music as 'a manly force able to seize and penetrate'.²³

Miranda Stanyon adopts a similar approach in her chapter on the poet, critic and life writer Thomas De Quincey, whose autobiographical *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) contains a vivid recollection of opera-going at the King's Theatre in London as a habitual site for enjoying the highs of opium. In a brief yet pivotal scene from the *Confessions*, the narrator recollects hearing the celebrated contralto Josephine Grassini in the role of Andromache, an experience that he describes as triggering and mediating a sublime vision of his 'whole past life'. Rather than read De Quincey's account of Grassini as reflecting a simple binary power dynamic between male listener and female voice-object, Stanyon returns to the music-historical evidence to interpret Grassini–Andromache as an emotionally charged queer voice, described by critics as 'masculine' and 'deep'. By reading De Quincey's opera scene as an extension of the critical discourse surrounding Grassini's voice, Stanyon elucidates a specific strand of Romantic criticism after Schiller, in which the sublime is bound up with pathos rather than detachment. Moreover, she builds a larger argument about the relationship between harmony and sublimity, seeing in De Quincey's account of musical listening a configuration of the sublime that complicates a more familiar post-Kantian model, in which 'interlocking narratives about knowledge, politics, music and the arts more generally encourage us to think sublimity through dissonance'.²⁴

Stanyon develops this argument further in the context of her single-authored monograph *Resounding the Sublime*, which charts the long-standing significance of music and aurality to the history of the sublime via close readings of English and German literary and philosophical texts. In the concluding chapter of this richly textured history, Stanyon revisits De Quincey's opera scene, this time connecting it with evocations of sound and music scattered across his autobiographical prose. In addition to the opium–opera pleasures recounted in the *Confessions*, Stanyon explores De Quincey's revival of a Handelian sublime in the poetic essay *Suspiria de profundis* (1849) as well as his deployment of musical motifs in *The English Mail-Coach* (1849), particularly in the closing sequence called 'Dream-Fugue'. Evocations of music and sound in these texts are brief and at times obscure. Yet several interlocking themes emerge from Stanyon's readings, not least the importance of music to the writing of memory, trauma and the autobiographical self. Central to her discussion is a tension between states of indefiniteness and clarity embodied in De Quincey's repeated yet conflicted allusions to harmony and reverberation. As she points out, the concept of harmony might more readily evoke the category of the beautiful in the modern discourse of the sublime. But while De Quincey's depictions of sublime harmony evoke stability and repose at certain points, they also reveal how 'harmony, rest, coherence, and the overmastering power of totality are frequently just as problematic as dissonance, restless movement, or incoherence'.²⁵

²³ Head, 'A Pleasing Rape', 62. On the musical sublime and the beautiful in eighteenth-century historiography, see also Head's *Sovereign Feminine: Music and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

²⁴ Miranda Stanyon, 'Counterfeits, Contraltos and Harmony in De Quincey's Sublime', *Music and the Sonorous Sublime*, ed. Hibberd and Stanyon, 177–99.

²⁵ Stanyon, *Resounding the Sublime*, 180.

At first glance, placing De Quincey as the culminating figure in an intellectual history of the musical sublime might seem peculiar. Although music in general (and opera in particular) clearly played an important role in his life, it is only relatively recently that literary scholars have explored the musical and sonorous sides of his writings.²⁶ Stanyon certainly makes a convincing case for appreciating sound and music as enmeshed in his multifaceted account of the pleasures and pains of opium addiction, an account that is itself closely bound up with the contradictions and paradoxes of the Romantic sublime. But more than this, De Quincey's autobiographical recollections and dream sequences present an 'unstable coordination of different varieties of the musical sublime',²⁷ suggesting a way of thinking about narrative and history that chimes with the larger story of *Resounding the Sublime*. Throughout, Stanyon treats the sublime as a 'variegated discourse' rather than as a stable concept, identifying variation and multiplicity as the recurring 'keynotes' of her book. In the final part (which concerns the period c.1770–1850), we might expect to encounter the dominant philosophies of Burke and Kant, or of Christian Friedrich Michaelis, usually seen as the first theorist to apply the Kantian sublime systematically to music. Instead, these chapters present alternative histories of Romantic musical thought in the wake of Kant's aesthetics. Alongside discussion of De Quincey, detailed close readings of Johann Gottfried Herder's writings from 1773 to 1793 reveal the individual development of his musical thinking on the sublime as distinct from and critical of Kant and Burke. This distinctness is seen less as a relic of a bygone intellectual era, more as anticipating a tradition of 'sublime moderation and harmony' discernible in later German-language poets and thinkers: from Hölderlin, Schiller and Ludwig Tieck to Nietzsche, Eduard Mörike and Hermann von Helmholtz.

If *Resounding the Sublime* resists the allure of a Kantian paradigm shift in the history of aesthetic theory, it also allows for a dynamic relationship between music, sound and literature. One of the book's most significant insights concerns the genealogy of the concept and the nature of its musical incarnation. In Part I, Stanyon disputes an influential story about the origins of the musical sublime in eighteenth-century Britain: namely, that the term first arose as a literary-philosophical construct before migrating to the domain of music criticism, where it was famously deployed in celebration of Handel. Focusing on poetry and criticism by Dryden and Dennis, chapter one shows how expressions of antagonism or ambivalence towards the power of music were just as important to the formation of the early modern sublime as articulations of reverence for particular musical figures. Revisiting the context of the Handel cult, meanwhile, chapter two sheds light on the intellectual world of the writer, theatre manager and promoter Aaron Hill, whose circle included the poet Joseph Mitchell, the writer and actress Eliza Haywood, and the actor, playwright and musician Samuel 'Hurllothumbo' Johnson. Seen within this network, key texts associated with the apparent 'application' of a literary-philosophical sublime to the domain of music – including Johnson's *Harmony in an Uproar* (1733/4) and William Hayes's *Remarks on Mr Avison's Essay on Musical Expression* (1753) – form part of a rich musico-literary milieu, one that predates the much later specialization and professionalization of musical criticism in the mid-Victorian era.

²⁶ De Quincey worked for a brief period as opera critic for the *Edinburgh Saturday Post* in 1827–8. See David Groves, 'Thomas De Quincey and the *Edinburgh Saturday Post* of 1827', *Studies in Bibliography*, 55 (2002), 235–63; and Daniel O'Quinn, 'Ravishment Twice Weekly: De Quincey's Opera Pleasures', *Romanticism on the Net*, issue 34–35 (May 2004), <<https://doi.org/10.7202/009436ar>>.

²⁷ Stanyon, *Resounding the Sublime*, 176.

By elucidating the pre-disciplinary environments in which music and sound were theorized and contested, *Resounding the Sublime* provides a valuable corrective to narrowly circumscribed and linear histories of musical sublimity. At the same time, it models a transnational approach, whereby ‘each part of *Resounding the Sublime* highlights an aspect of Anglo-German exchange in forming the musical sublime’.²⁸ This comes to the fore especially in Part II, which centres on two little-known Zurich poets and theorists, Johann Jacob Bodmer and Johann Jacob Breitinger, as well as the more famous German poet of the sublime, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock. Stanyon explores in depth the ‘intimate antagonism’ between music and the sublime in the poetics of Bodmer and Breitinger, before charting the transformation of this aesthetic in the musicalized poetry of Klopstock. Paradoxically, these Germanophone poetics belong – she argues – to a wave of Anglophilia that gave rise to the translation and reception of an English literary sublime as exemplified in Dryden and Milton. Going beyond a focus on cosmopolitan composers and performers (Handel being the most obvious example), *Resounding the Sublime* thus illuminates the place of music and sound in the circulation of literature and aesthetic theory across national and linguistic traditions. In some ways, this broader transnational argument could have been more fully integrated; for the most part, detailed analyses of individual texts take precedence over concrete mappings of cross-cultural influences and comparisons. Yet Stanyon’s approach will be valuable for readers invested not just in the history of the sublime as a concept rooted particularly in British and German thought, but also in transnational music history and Anglo-German cultural relations more generally.

The literary-philosophical direction of *Resounding the Sublime* – part of the new series *Sound in History* for the University of Pennsylvania Press – supplements the more culturally grounded and composition-orientated arguments of *Music and the Sonorous Sublime*. Stanyon regards literary and critical texts as participating in the wider activity of ‘musicking’, regardless of whether these texts pertain to representations and experiences of the sublime in and through musical practice. Her intellectual history thus seeks to break down the dividing lines that can too often cordon musical practice from writing *about* or *against* music and the sonorous. As a result, poetic allusions to sound and music in her textual readings can sometimes verge on opaqueness, while key terms such as harmony, dissonance, fugue, antiphony, resonance and vibration can take on a loose array of metaphoric and symbolic meanings. Such elusiveness may well be symptomatic of defining the sublime itself as a complex category of analysis. As Stanyon admits in her introduction, the concept is so often associated with excess, extremity and resistance to representation that the task of elucidating its history risks sliding into these selfsame tropes. As if to illustrate the point, she suggests – in a particularly elaborate passage – that the musical sublime is best imagined as ‘a discursive field where various configurations of harmony and dissonance were cultivated or as an instrument that can be tuned to different temperaments, played in many keys and modes, calling up a plethora of melodies and harmonies, and employed by wildly different collaborators in churches, drawing rooms, opera houses, and installations’.²⁹ The generous plurality of this discursive model serves, on the one hand, as a counterargument against entrenched dichotomies of the sublime and the beautiful in narratives of musical Romanticism. On the other hand, this same insistence on multiplicity and variety risks reinforcing the sublime as our most highly valued and dominant aesthetic category, leaving other categories (the beautiful, the sentimental, the domestic and so on) to become assimilated into this larger discourse, or simply to trail in its wake.

²⁸ Stanyon, *Resounding the Sublime*, 16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

I began this review by alluding to the belatedness of music studies to critical engagement with the sublime; yet there has been a reciprocal delay in literary studies when it comes to acknowledging the sonorous dimensions of the sublime. While most of the contributors to *Music and the Sonorous Sublime* are concerned on the whole with locating tangible aesthetic qualities and compositional features, Stanyon is one of several writers to go further in exploring how a turn to music (and sound more broadly) can complicate and reconfigure our understanding of literary and philosophical configurations of subjectivity. This is not surprising given her background as a scholar of comparative literature; while her book has much to say to scholars and students of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music history about the persistence of the sublime and its diverse configurations across a range of texts, it also belongs to a growing body of scholarship concerned with recuperating the central place of sound and aurality in constructions of the modern subject.³⁰ Musicology is indeed 'catching up' with the extensive critical preoccupation with the sublime that has taken place in other fields. But as much as these books enrich and complicate our histories of Enlightenment and Romantic music culture by drawing upon insights from aesthetic theory and philosophy, they also reveal how particular conceptions of sound and music can rejuvenate understandings of literary history and epistemology. Perhaps it is now time to return to those other aesthetic categories and affective modes, to excavate with equal nuance the constructs that helped to define and augment the musical sublime by pointing to what is *least* grand, lofty and vast (though no less important) within our narratives of music and its long entanglements with literature and philosophy.

³⁰ Stanyon aligns her approach in particular with Veit Erlmann's *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).