



COMMUNICATION: CONFERENCE REPORT

## Chamber Scenes: Musical Space, Medium, and Genre c. 1800

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In mid-February scholars and performers gathered in San José to address what some might think are long-answered questions. What was chamber music around the turn of the nineteenth century? What were its conventions, contours and uses? Who listened to it, played it and paid for it? The presenters and participants at ‘Chamber Scenes: Musical Space, Medium, and Genre c. 1800’ amply addressed these questions and others. The conference was hosted by the Ira F. Brilliant Center for Beethoven Studies at San José State University, and adroitly organized by Erica Buurman, director of the Center, and Nicholas Mathew of the University of California Berkeley. Although this was not specifically a conference on Beethoven, Ludwig loomed large, as he is likely to at any conference on instrumental music around the year 1800, and particularly one held at a centre for Beethoven scholarship. In the wake of the unexpectedly curtailed ‘Beethoven year’ of 2020, there was palpable enjoyment among attendees at the meeting of colleagues and friends, and much to appreciate about being together in physical space to present and experience a variety of thought-provoking and enjoyable papers and performances.

A number of presentations focused productively on questions of genre, with particular attention paid to dismantling (or at least complicating) the oppositional dualities common in chamber-music scholarship. As Ellen Lockhart (University of Toronto) observed in her paper, the widely accepted definition of chamber music both invokes and invites binaries: public/private, commercial/aesthetic, male/female and professional/amateur, among others. In the first of three lecture-recitals at the conference, Erica Buurman, assisted by the Takács Quartet and historical dance expert Joan Walton (San José State University), demonstrated the heretofore underexplored influences of ballroom and social dance on the second movement of Beethoven’s String Quartet Op. 132. Considering the binary between ‘bodily’ music (in this case, music for dance) and ‘cerebral’ music, Buurman suggested that, contrary to the ideologies of critics such as Eduard Hanslick, chamber music drew on the former as well as the latter. Lockhart too engaged with a binary that might seem inherent in the genre: that of instrumental versus vocal music. Tracing the origins of the term ‘chamber music’, she suggested the term’s indebtedness to baroque vocal genres, and observed the continuing presence of vocality in later chamber music, as in the cavatina movement of Beethoven’s String Quartet Op. 130. Sarah Waltz (University of the Pacific) complicated the aforementioned public/private binary in an English context, noting that the repertoire for ‘public’ stage concerts and ‘private’ house concerts may not have differed as widely as one might think. ‘Domestic’ chamber genres were often performed publicly, just as ‘larger’ genres, like the concerto, sometimes found their place in domestic venues.

Other papers called into question a further entrenched binary: original compositions and arrangements. Nancy November (University of Auckland) suggested that performance parameters rather than compositional parameters were definitive for musicians around 1800. Used for both educational and performance purposes, small-ensemble arrangements of operas were indeed considered ‘real’ chamber music. A lecture-recital by Kumaran Arul (Stanford University) further

emphasized the importance of chamber arrangements, as he noted that Richard Wagner's style of conducting was built on the practice of playing arrangements of Beethoven symphonies at the piano. Arul suggested that the Wagnerian symphonic ideal, which shaped the practices of many conductors well into the twentieth century, was based on pianistic interpretation developed from these arrangements. Although most arrangements in a nineteenth-century context involved larger works (such as operas or symphonies) compressed into a smaller format (such as a string quartet), this process is sometimes reversed, as Christine Siegert (Beethoven-Haus Bonn) noted. For example, Beethoven arranged his own Piano Sonata Op. 14 No. 1 for string quartet. Siegert used the practice of arrangement further to interrogate the binary between instrumental and vocal music when she noted that numerous chamber melodies from Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven were borrowed and used for vocal genres. These uses were both secular (as in Franz Wegeler's song 'Die Klage', which takes its melody from the slow movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1) and sacred, as in various hymn tunes of the Church of England and other denominations. In observing the importance of print media in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Desmond Sheehan (University of California Berkeley) showed how musical magazines and periodicals also circumvented the opposition between 'church' and 'chamber' genres by commingling works of various types, suggesting that such an opposition may not have been as clear-cut to contemporary musical amateurs as scholars today imagine.

Beyond what chamber music is, a number of papers addressed the question of what chamber music *does*: how it works upon players, listeners, analysts and audiences. Emily Dolan (Brown University) suggested that timbre, often ignored in the context of string quartets, might provide insight into some of the conventions and rhetoric of the genre. She set out a useful and thorough typology of pizzicato (a conspicuous variation of timbre in the context of a string ensemble) in quartets of this time, using the proliferation of pizzicato in Beethoven's 'Harp' Quartet Op. 74 as a counterexample to more conventional uses. In a lecture-recital that was unfortunately abridged because of technological constraints, Dorian Bandy (McGill University) and Elizaveta Miller (McGill University) discussed Beethoven's Violin Sonata Op. 12 No. 3 and its unusual place in the duo-sonata genre as an example of textural, topical and generic ambivalence. It is, as they noted, primarily the performers of this work whose generic expectations are both piqued and confounded. Also considering the contemporary performance of Beethoven, Edgardo Salinas (The Juilliard School) discussed the social and textual implications of pianist Igor Levit's 2020 online 'house concerts'. In the context of the Covid-19 shutdowns, Levit's live-streamed concerts provided a physically absent but aurally present ritual for listeners, in which the low quality of audio and video belied the high level of meaning Levit's audiences drew from the performances. Roger Grant (Wesleyan University) returned to the eighteenth century, but moved to South America. Grant observed that manuscripts of trio sonatas are some of the only original documents in Indigenous hands from the Jesuit missions of Chiquitania, a region now part of central lowland Bolivia. In our understanding of eighteenth-century Chiquitania, chamber music is a special type of archival material the analysis of which has the potential to reveal much important information about the practices of Indigenous people in the colonial missions.

Another approach to considering what chamber music does was offered by papers exploring the genre's role in and engagement with contemporary social, intellectual and economic currents around 1800. Adeline Mueller (Mount Holyoke College) investigated the way musical performances by blind students in Vienna in the first decades of the nineteenth century played an important role in challenging ableist perceptions: chamber-ensemble performance in particular became a metaphor for disabled productivity and suggested to sighted audiences the potential for the integration of blind people into Viennese society. My own paper (M. Lucy Turner, Columbia University) explored how the increasing public performance of chamber music in the first decades of the nineteenth century led to the demonstrable decline of the multi-work opus, a common eighteenth-century practice of publishing chamber works in sets of three or six. Taking Beethoven's last

such publication, the two Cello Sonatas Op. 102, as an example, I reflected on the impact the practice of multi-work opus publishing has had on scholars' understanding of the two sonatas as simultaneously progressive and retrospective works. Eric Coutts (King's College London) considered the function of copyright in the musical economy, noting that Beethoven's professional life was shaped by a lack of copyright, particularly relevant to his dealings with publishers and his constant fight against unauthorized editions. Coutts further observed that the dismantling of earlier patronage systems, in which ownership of musical output resided with the patron rather than the composer, was connected to the emergence of the 'work' as an artistic ideal. Fabio Morabito (University of Alberta) reflected on chamber music as a field for aesthetic progressiveness and experimentation, taking as a starting-point Antoine Reicha's *Trente six Fugues*, which the composer dedicated to Haydn. Connecting the consumption and appreciation of chamber music by composers like Reicha and Haydn to the work of writers such as Francesco Algarotti, whose *Il Newtonianismo per le dame, ovvero dialoghi sopra la luce e i colori* (Naples, 1737) brought cutting-edge scientific knowledge to members of high society, Morabito revealed chamber music as part of a wider practice of philosophical and aesthetic edification for *le beau monde* around the turn of the nineteenth century.

Among the many delights of the event was a generous array of live music. In addition to the three lecture-recitals mentioned above, the conference began with a concert by the renowned and venerable Takács Quartet (University of Colorado Boulder). A sensitive and lively performance of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel's only string quartet was juxtaposed with a rendition of Benjamin Britten's electrifying, timbrally dense String Quartet No. 1. Fans of the Takács's interpretations of Beethoven (and there are rightfully many) were not to be disappointed, as the concert closed with his String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132. At a lunchtime concert, soprano Christine Brandes (University of California Berkeley) and fortepianist Nicholas Mathew, playing an original 1823 Broadwood, treated listeners to a beautifully sensitive performance of Beethoven's song cycle 'An die ferne Geliebte' and 'Adelaide'. To cap off the event, the conference closed with a concert from violinist Lucy Russell (Royal College of Music) and fortepianist Sezi Seskir (Bucknell University), who presented a strikingly intimate performance of three of Beethoven's sonatas for this pair of instruments, Op. 24 and Op. 30 Nos 1 and 2. The omnipresence of live performance throughout the three days of the conference served not only to ground participants in the aural substance of their scholarly studies, but also to affirm: whatever chamber music is or is not, whatever it does or doesn't do (to corrupt the phrase of Justice Potter Stewart), we know it when we hear it.

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