

*The Resounding Fame of Fingal's Cave**Jonathan Hicks*

The words were 'Ouwa Eehn'. Or that is what they sounded like to English ears when heard in the mouth of a Hebridean cave. This primal scene of Romantic aurality, documented as taking place on 13 August 1772 on the shore of the island of Staffa, is both familiar and strange: the 'discovery' of Fingal's Cave is a story now told many times over, its contours and connotations explored at length in a critical literature almost as old as the event itself.<sup>1</sup> Yet the importance of sound in this story has received relatively little attention. While Felix Mendelssohn visited the cave in 1829 and went on to write an overture in response to his experience, the question of how landscape (or seascape) is manifest in music is not my chief concern here.<sup>2</sup> Long before the arrival of a talented and sensitive composer, the auditory domain was already implicated in the description and popularization of Staffa's natural enigma. In elite and cheap print, on the stage and in concert performance, the representation of the cave nominated as 'Fingal's' entailed repeated acts of re-sounding. In this chapter I aim to show how, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the mythology and geology of this small and rarely populated island coalesced in a sonorous landmark that garnered fame across Britain and beyond, attracting boatloads of tourists as well as varied readerships and audiences. As an object of Romantic fascination, the fame of Fingal's Cave echoed far beyond Mendelssohn's manuscript. The cave's meaning accrued from the repeated and often banal reproduction of its supposed sublimity – a kind of sublimity that was continually propped up by discourses of genius and quasi-Kantian conceptions of nature.<sup>3</sup> I suggest that the case of this celebrity sea cave allows for a reconsideration of reverberant sound more generally as both a medium of signification and a metaphor for mediation. Such an approach runs counter to established theories of resonance in Romanticism and sound studies, which typically posit an analogy between acoustic vibration and poetic or philosophical imagination.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, I seek to develop a more material and mundane

conception of Romantic resonance. My argument calls attention to an almost unthinking repetition, wherein sound and sense are enmeshed in a process of meaning making that exceeds any individual human intellect. First, however, I explain how it was that Fingal's Cave came to be so famous.

### In Search of Staffa's Enigma

The best place to begin this story is just before the aforementioned beginning: Joseph Banks, the renowned botanist and veteran of Captain Cook's first voyage (1768–71), arrived on the island of Staffa in the evening of 12 August 1772, hoping to visit geological formations recommended to him by Mr Leach, an 'English gentleman' Banks had met, by chance, at a boarding house on the mainland.<sup>5</sup> The formations of which Leach spoke were 'pillars like those of the *Giant's-Causeway*' on the northern Irish coast, and the excitement among Banks's party was such that 'every one was up and in motion before the break of day'.<sup>6</sup> The observations Banks made that day – first published as an 'Account of Staffa' included in Thomas Pennant's *Voyage to the Hebrides* (1774)<sup>7</sup> – were famously full of wonder: 'we no sooner arrived [at the south-west part of the island] than we were struck with a scene of magnificence which exceeded our expectations'.<sup>8</sup> One measure of this magnificence was the semblance of natural architecture in the island's geology: as well as 'natural pillars' and 'natural colonnades', he observed an ample pediment' formed by the hills, 'which hung over the columns below'.<sup>9</sup> Banks expanded on this idea in a paragraph that would go on to provide some of the most quotable material in his much-circulated text:

Compared to this what are the cathedrals or the palaces built by men! mere models or playthings, imitations as diminutive as his works will always be when compared to those of nature. Where is now the boast of the architect! regularity the only part in which he fancied himself to exceed his mistress, Nature, is here found in her possession, and here it has been for ages undescribed. Is not this the school where the art was originally studied, and what has been added to this by the whole *Grecian* school? A capital to ornament the column of nature, of which they could execute only a model; and for that very capital they were obliged to a bush of *Acanthus*: how amply does Nature repay those who study her wonderful works!<sup>10</sup>

Being himself a good student of natural history, Banks tells the reader how he continued to explore the shoreline with his party until they arrived at the mouth of a now-famous cave. As above, it is the shock of the regular that characterizes his account: 'The mind can hardly form an idea more

magnificent than such a space, supported on each side by ranges of columns; and roofed by the bottoms of those, which have been broke off in order to form it.’<sup>11</sup> With each sentence a new detail is added to this well-formed picture: ‘a yellow stalagmitic matter [between the columns] . . . serves to define the angles precisely’; ‘the whole is lighted from without; so that the farthest extremity is very plainly seen’; ‘the air being agitated by the flux and reflux of the tides, is perfectly dry and wholesome’. It was at this point in the account of the cave that Banks and his company did the obvious: ‘We asked the name of it.’<sup>12</sup>

Banks offered the following answer to this apparently simple question: ‘Said our guide, the cave of *Fhinn*; what is *Fhinn*? Said we. *Fhinn Mac Coul*, whom the translator of *Ossian*’s works has called *Fingal*.’<sup>13</sup> This stylized reported speech stands out in Banks’s prose, as if the author were temporarily affecting a bardic register appropriate to his new-found knowledge. Certainly, Banks was among those willing to take pleasure in a site associated with Macpherson’s wildly popular Ossianic fragments: ‘How fortunate’, he exclaimed, ‘that in this cave we should meet with the remembrance of that chief, whose existence, as well as that of the whole *Epic* poem is almost doubted in *England*.’<sup>14</sup> Not all subsequent observers were as credulous as Banks and Pennant.<sup>15</sup> Among other things, Staffa became a touchstone for enlightened scepticism, with Dr Johnson and Boswell the most prominent unbelievers to pay the cave a visit. These travelling companions arrived in October 1773, which suggests that news of the cave had spread before the publication of Pennant’s book. Although poor weather prevented their landing on Staffa’s shore, as it had for Pennant the previous year, Johnson and Boswell nevertheless mentioned the island, albeit briefly, in their respective journals. In Johnson’s case, the tone is notably bathetic; he suggests that the locals were disenchanted by the place ‘so lately raised to renown by Mr. *Banks*’. As Johnson put it in another passage much quoted down the years:

When the Islanders were reproached with their ignorance, or insensibility of the wonders of *Staffa*, they had not much to reply. They had indeed considered it little, because they had always seen it; and none but philosophers, nor they always, are struck with wonder, otherwise than by novelty. How would it surprise an unenlightened ploughman, to hear a company of sober men, inquiring by what power the hand tosses a stone, or why the stone, when it is tossed, falls to the ground!<sup>16</sup>

Given that Johnson never set foot on Staffa, it is likely that the islanders of whom – or *through* whom – he speaks are fictitious.<sup>17</sup> The purpose of such journalistic ventriloquism was to advance an existing agenda. As Nigel

Leask observes, Johnson's critical views on the authenticity of Macpherson's 'found' poetry were well established by the 1770s. Banks's willingness to endorse a connection between the father of Ossian and the first fanciful cave he entered was, for Johnson, yet further proof of the wrongheadedness of so many of his otherwise well-educated contemporaries.<sup>18</sup> Leask points particularly to the work of Ian Duncan, who identified a 'metaphysical desertification' in Johnson's view of Scotland.<sup>19</sup> Staffa's treeless isolation certainly fits this bill, and it seems that Johnson preferred to imagine the island in terms of what it lacked, whether geological wonder or literary genealogy. What makes Johnson's view so pertinent to our purposes is that he pursued this sense of lack by elaborating the differences between print and oral traditions: 'Earse [Scottish Gaelic] was never a written language . . . there is not in the world an Earse manuscript a hundred years old . . . *Earse* merely floated in the breath of the people.'<sup>20</sup> On this point, to be clear, Johnson was quite wrong: there are a great many Gaelic manuscripts dating from as early as the eleventh century, including some from the Inner Hebrides; by the late eighteenth century it took a wilful act of misrepresentation to assert the illiteracy of the Gaelic language. Johnson's main aim, however, was to refute Macpherson's claims and indict those, such as Banks, who seemed to set too much store by what they thought they had heard their translator say. The offending words in this case were the ones quoted at the top of this essay, 'Ouwa Eehn', which Banks had noted in his private journal as the answer to his party's question about the name of the remarkable cave. For one reason or another these words – somewhere between a phonetic record and a souvenir in Gaelic style – are missing from the published version of Banks's account. The spelling of 'Fiuhn' in his journal entry was also partially Anglicised as 'Fhinn' by the time it reached Pennant's *Voyage*, even though the name was offered in that context as an article of Earse authenticity, one that had been translated, by Macpherson, as 'Fingal'.<sup>21</sup>

It seems Johnson was at least partly right: the signifiers *were* floating, and not only in the mouths of 'the people' but also in the pens and presses of the intelligentsia. By the turn of the nineteenth century the ambiguities and arguments surrounding the etymology of the cave's name had only increased, in no small part thanks to the intervention of the French geologist Barthélemy Faujas de Saint-Fond. His *Voyage en Angleterre, en Écosse et aux Îles Hébrides*, published in 1797, included a lengthy footnote querying Banks's translation from the Gaelic.<sup>22</sup> Although it would be some time before the whole of Saint-Fond's work appeared in English, the burgeoning journal culture of the day was such that key sections of it were

excerpted in British publications before the decade was out. The first article in *The Critical Review* of September 1799, for instance, begins by noting that Saint-Fond ‘visited Great-Britain in the year 1784; but his travels were not prepared for the press before 1792; and, after that time, the disturbances in France long prevented their appearance’.<sup>23</sup>

*The Critical Review’s* commentary places Saint-Fond’s work in the context of a growing body of scholarship on Staffa, including that by the Swedish clergyman Uno von Troil, who had travelled with Banks. We learn that Saint-Fond’s unique contribution was triggered by a remark in Troil’s account concerning the movements of air and water in the cave. Banks had made similar observations, but Troil’s account went further by noting that ‘Very far into the cave there is a hole in the rock, somewhat lower than the surface of the water standing in it, which makes a pleasing kind of noise on every flux and reflux of the tides.’<sup>24</sup> On this point, Saint-Fond begged to differ:

As the sea was far from being completely still, when I visited [the cave], I heard a noise of a very different nature every time that the waves, in rapid succession, broke against its bottom. This sound resembled that which is produced by striking a large hard body with great weight and force against another hard body in a subterraneous cavity. The shock was so violent that it was heard at some distance, and the whole cavern seemed to shake with it.<sup>25</sup>

Saint-Fond attempted to follow the sound to its source: ‘a little below the basis which supported the organ-fronted colonnade’, he observed, ‘there was an aperture which formed the outlet of a hollow, or perhaps a small cave. It was impossible to penetrate into this cavity, but it may be presumed that the tremendous noise was occasioned by a broken rock, driven by the violent impetuosity of the surge against its sides.’ The notion of natural architecture found in Banks’s inaugural description of Staffa melds, in Saint-Fond’s account, with the impression of a natural instrument: ‘By the boiling motion of the water . . . it is evident that there are several other small passages, through which it issues.’ If we substitute pipes for passages and (as Saint-Fond does in the following hypothesis) air for water, then the logic of his account is clear: ‘when the sea is not sufficiently agitated, to put the imprisoned [*sic*] rock in motion, [it is not impossible] that air, strongly compressed by the weight of the water, which is in incessant fluctuation, should, on rushing out by the small lateral passages, produce a particular strange sound’. The cave, he remarks in conclusion, ‘might then be truly regarded as an organ created by the hand of nature’. For Saint-Fond, this mechanistic account of a distinctive acoustic

environment is evidence in support of an etymological claim: the organ-like action of the water in the air in the cave's invisible passages 'would fully explain why the ancient and real name of this cave in the Earse language is, *the melodious cave*'.<sup>26</sup>

The mention of '*the melodious cave*' is where the footnote to Banks comes in. Saint-Fond confirms that the British naturalist was 'the first who gave to the cave of Staffa the name of the Cave of Fingal', but he also suggests that this designation was made in error:

I made inquiries to know what relation this cave had to the father of Ossian. I was assured [by unnamed informants that] the mistake was owing to the name being equivocal. The following is their explanation: The true name of the cave is *An-ua-vine*. *An*, the; *ua*, grotto, caver, cavern; *vine*, melodious. The name of Fingal, in the same language, is spelled and pronounced *fion* in the nominative. But the Earse nouns are declinable, and the genitive is *fine*: so that if one wished to express the cave of Fingal in the Erse language, he would write *an-ua-fune*' – In this case, the observation of Mr. Troil, on the agreeable sound which he heard issuing from the bottom of the cave, when the water rushed in, is valuable, and comes in support of the true denomination.<sup>27</sup>

By the time Saint-Fond's critique gained traction the name 'Fingal's Cave' was already sufficiently stable to shoulder a fair amount of scholarly doubt. Indeed, Saint-Fond's own title page referenced 'la Grotte de Fingal', which suggests he was fighting a losing battle. But the point with disputes like this is that they are never truly settled; they rather circulate in perpetuity, exhibiting bursts of energy now and then. Leask's recent intervention, for instance, casts doubt on Saint-Fond's linguistic claims.<sup>28</sup> But the same article also acknowledges that, regardless of whose 'version was correct, the name "Fingal's Cave" appeared on Stevenson's *Chart of the Coast of Scotland* in 1832 and remains on Ordnance Survey maps and tourist brochures to this day'.<sup>29</sup> I have neither the will nor the ability to contribute anything new on the subject of Gaelic grammar, but I would query Leask's suggestion that, in reporting the vibrations of the 'emprisoned rock', Saint-Fond was seeking to 'describe a verifiable natural (rather than a nebulous Ossianic) sublimity'.<sup>30</sup> My issue is with the 'rather'.

Even supposing the French geologist shared the scepticism of a Johnson or a Boswell (and I am not sure that he did), his adoption of musical imagery cannot help but blur the boundary between the natural and the cultural.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the opposition between nature and culture is always in the balance when Fingal's Cave is concerned. This much is evident in the elision of inorganic rock and organ-like construction. It is also apparent in

the practical impossibility, for so many writers at the time, of disentangling Earse and noise. This was partly a matter of linguistic incompetence: while plenty of Scots, especially in the north and west of the country, were conversant in Gaelic, most visitors from further afield had limited means of making sense of the language, at least when they heard it spoken. Listening to any language you do not understand is, to some extent, a sonic more than a semantic experience, and that tension between knowing and hearing is manifest in the discourse on Fingal's Cave.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, the non-linguistic noisiness of the cave – whether caused by water in hidden passages or by some other physical mechanism – was entirely congruous with the reception of Macpherson's poetry, wherein allusions to Fingal (despite the fact that he was the heroic father and not the poetic son) licensed an array of rude instruments and novel sonorities.

This was written into the poems with numerous allusions to 'sounding shields' that might be struck in preparation for battle. And it continued in various stage works such as the 1791 ballet-pantomime *Oscar and Malvina*, for which London's Covent Garden theatre hired a piper named O'Farrell. Across the Channel, Jean-François Le Sueur's *Ossian, ou Les bardes* (1804) called for half a dozen harps to augment the Paris Opéra's orchestra. Two years later, Étienne Méhul's *Uthal* premiered at the Opéra-Comique with a string section devoid of violins. The sunken tessitura in this last example did not go down well with contemporary critics, but it was indicative of attempts to make audible the peculiar atmosphere of Ossianic lore.<sup>33</sup> We can find kindred attempts in ostensibly non-fiction sources. Take the example of the Swiss geographer Louis-Albert Necker de Saussure, who, after a period of study at Edinburgh University, followed in the footsteps of Saint-Fond, writing his own *Voyage en Écosse et aux Iles Hébrides* (1821). As you might expect, Necker had his own views – and his own pedantic note – on the etymological debate.<sup>34</sup> Yet this did not prevent him from enjoying a moment or two of wonder: 'Fingal, Ossian, and his bards may have once gathered under these vaults, the harmonious music of their harps accompanying the sound of their voices, and blending with the waves and winds, resonating in the cavities of the cave.'<sup>35</sup> Whether or not Fingal and friends ever gathered there, such fantasies were, for the most distinguished visitors in the early nineteenth century, not so far from reality.

In 1820, for instance, Walter Scott wrote to Joanna Baillie describing his time on the island:

I had become a sort of favourite with the Hebridean boatmen, I suppose from my anxiety about their old customs, and they were much pleased to see me get

over the obstacles which stopped some of the party. So they took the whim of solemnly christening a great stone seat at the mouth of the cavern, Clachan an Bairdh, or the Poet's Stone. It was consecrated with a pibroch [an artful pipe tune], which the echoes rendered tremendous, and a glass of whisky, not poured forth in the ancient mode of libation, but turned over the throats of the assistants. The head boatman, whose father had been himself a bard, made me a speech on the occasion; but as it was in Gaelic, I could only receive it as a silly beauty does a fine-spun compliment, bow, and say nothing.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the self-deprecating conclusion, this account of a dumbstruck Scott is emblematic of an ideal Romantic encounter with Fingal's Cave.<sup>37</sup> The author's inability to understand the speech in his honour does not impede his investment in the scene; on the contrary, it ushers the Gaelic oration into the elevated register of the pibroch, which resonates – echoically and poetically – with the ancient setting.

This is part of what I allude to in my title: the fame of Fingal's Cave can be said to have *re-sounded* with a play of affinities among speech and song, tune and tide, custom and cavern. With head bowed and lips closed, Scott responded to what he heard the only way he knew: with bashful silence. All the while, though, he was committing sufficient detail to memory so that he might reconstruct the scene for the next Anglophone reader. Listening, remembering, representing, resounding – therein lies at least part of the means by which Fingal's Cave found such remarkable fame. Time and again, the cave occasioned the transposition of sound heard into sound told. This process of repetition obviously pre-dated Scott's involvement, and it was not confined to Staffa. Boswell, for instance, reported the tradition that, on the adjacent coast of Mull, 'a piper and twelve men once advanced into [Mackinnon's C]ave, nobody can tell how far, and never returned'.<sup>38</sup> In this tale the lithic orifice swallowed the performer and his companions whole in order that the performance might endure by other means. The effect of the vanishing piper was thus not lessened by his disappearance; it was amplified and resounded with each telling. And as the story was retold and reprinted it acquired a familiar association, with later nineteenth-century editions of Boswell's *Journal* adding a footnote that identified a large flat stone towards the back of the cave as none other than 'Fingal's Table'.<sup>39</sup> Resonance, to repeat, is not only a property of the audible; it is an excitement both physical and psychic. Any old cave has a reverberant acoustic, but that is not the half of it. The anatomy of Fingalian fame is far more confounding: a mouth without a tongue, an organ without a maker, a cryogenic echo chamber for the preservation of heroic poetry. No wonder Scott was speechless.



### In Perpetuation of Romantic Resonance

Since 1772, this corpus of rock and wave and myth and melody has been caught up in the business of its own excess. Scott's written correspondence with Baillie is one small part of that. The sheer frequency with which the wonders of Staffa recurred on early nineteenth-century bills of plays, fairs, dioramas, exhibitions, lectures, and concerts is remarkable, yet it is also indicative of a broader culture of display in which many famous things, places, and events were repeatedly represented to paying publics.<sup>40</sup> Two examples will suffice here to make the point. Firstly, Charles Nodier's 1820 *mélodrame* *Le vampire* (adapted for the English stage, in the same year, by James Robinson Planché as *The Vampire; or, the Bride of the Isles*) begins with an overture 'expressing a storm' before the curtain rises on a dimly lit stage, which brightens to reveal 'a basaltic cavern whose long prisms end in unequal angles facing heaven . . . the cavern is strewn with tombs and diverse shapes, columns, pyramids, cubes of rough and clumsy workmanship'. For those who might not recognize this setting on sight, the first speech makes the mysterious location explicit: 'Of all the lugubrious scenes of the night . . . none fills me with such horror as the approach to the cave of Staffa.'<sup>41</sup> Unlike the Grand Tourist of Poldiori's 1819 short story *The Vampyre* – or the first French spin-off, Cyprien Bérard's 1820 novel *Lord Ruthwen* – Nodier's melodramatic villain (still named Lord Ruthwen) is drawn to Fingal's Cave, and this latest iteration of the age-old bridal rape fantasy plays out amid the supernatural landscape of Ossianic lore. Planché's memoirs imply that the suggestion to keep Nodier's Scottish setting came from the theatre manager; in a revised 1830s version of the same piece, after his conversion to historical accuracy, Planché decided that the drama was best played out in central Europe.<sup>42</sup> But for much of the 1820s the initial combination of place and genre proved remarkably successful. Heinrich Marschner's 1828 Leipzig opera *Der Vampyr*, for instance, was also set in Scotland, complete with cave and kilts.

A second example, from a composer compatriot of Marschner's, is the Mendelssohn overture I mentioned in passing in my introduction. Reporting on the 1832 London première, the *Athenaeum* commended the new composition, which 'strongly reminded us of Beethoven', but concluded by remarking that 'as descriptive music, it was decidedly a failure'.<sup>43</sup> It seems *The Hebrides* made a more positive impression on the critic for the *Spectator*: 'The only composition of the evening that excited any interest was MENDELSSOHN'S new Overture', he wrote, before embarking on a description of descriptive aesthetics: 'It is not the overture to an opera, but may be rather called the result of a visit to the Isles of

Fingal on a mind which embodies its conceptions of beauty and grandeur, of ideal as well as natural pictures, in music and which employs not the pencil, but the orchestra, as the means of imparting them.<sup>44</sup> The critic is quick to point out that such music requires a special sort of listener: whereas 'the mere rule-of-three musician' will be able to admire the composer's skill and accomplishments, he will 'fail to discern all the beauties of this beautiful composition'. In order to achieve this higher goal, the listener must do more than appreciate musical complexity:

he must, in imagination, visit the scenes which gave these creations birth, – he must call up the mountains and forests, the cataracts and glens of the Highlands, and, peopling this magnificent country with its native lords, hear the horn answering from hill to hill, and the busy gathering of its tribes, their stately march, their wild music, their impetuous onset; in a word, he must dwell in Highland scenery and Highland history, and then he will understand the process which originated the Overture to the Isles of Fingal, and realize its beauties.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, a review in the *Harmonicon* states that 'The idea of [*The Hebrides*] was suggested to the author while he was in the most northern part of Scotland, on a wild, desolate coast, where nothing is heard but the howling of the wind and roaring of the waves; and nothing living seen, except the sea-bird, whose reign is there undisturbed by human intruder.' Of course, Mendelssohn's 1829 trip did not take in the 'most northern part of Scotland' – Staffa belongs to the Inner Hebrides to the west of the mainland – but this is largely beside the point. What matters is that the self-appointed guardians of elite musical taste (*Harmonicon* writers very much included) used the available anecdotes of the composer's visit as an occasion to rehearse some semiotic theory:

So far as music is capable of imitating, the composer has succeeded in his design: the images impressed on his mind he certainly excited, in a general way in ours: we may even be said to have heard the sounds of winds and waves, for music is capable of imitating these in a direct manner; and, by means of association, we fancied solitude and an all-pervading gloom.<sup>46</sup>

The review goes on to note how the choice of key (B minor) was 'well suited to the purpose [of conveying all-pervading gloom]' and hails the 'vivid imagination' of 'one of the finest and most original geniuses of the age'. In sum, 'Works such as [*The Hebrides*] are like "angel's visits", and should be made the most of.'

Mendelssohn's piece appears to have been a lightning rod for debates about music's distinctive abilities to describe and transport. Yet, as much as I love the work in question, I must disagree with that last remark. Far

from being exceptional, Mendelssohn's overture was typical of the broader processes that I have been tracking in this chapter. In print no less than performance there are countless examples of similar iterations (or invitations to reiterate, if you will) that sought to bring something of Staffa to the threshold of a reader's or listener's perception. The volume of critical discourse Mendelssohn's music received, and the fixation on composerly creation it engendered, ought not to overshadow the other multifarious and analogous (if typically less prestigious) modes of encoding and resounding the awesome sense of Fingal's Cave. While it is common to rehearse the names of those lauded artists (poets, painters, composers, et al.) who made the trip to Staffa, as if their journeys were integral to its renown, I suggest that it did not take a genius to make Staffa famous. In fact, the way I understand the resounding fame of Fingal's Cave is almost anathema to genius.

My own use of the term 'resonance' departs from existing scholarship on sound in this period, which has been more centred on singular, creative subjectivity. The most obvious point of reference here is Veit Erlmann's influential account of the interdependence of listening and thinking.<sup>47</sup> Arguing against the assumption that sight is the privileged sense of enlightened philosophy, Erlmann elaborates the connections between reason and resonance in a series of case studies focusing on eminent scholars and scientists. He contrasts the vibrating string with the reflective mirror in order to explore the significance of the ear as well as the eye in the formation of modern subjectivity and sympathy. What emerges is a compelling thesis about the correspondence between sound and mind, a correspondence explored much earlier by M. H. Abrams in the context of Romantic poetry.<sup>48</sup> Like Erlmann, Abrams was concerned with exemplary thinkers, focusing on the relationship between the breath of wind and the poet's inspiration. More recently, Michael P. Steinberg has explored how music (more than sound) began to model a sense of rational subjectivity in the nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup> My sense of resonance encompasses more than individual subjectivity, however, and it is certainly not an attempt to model elite-level intellect. In fact, the sort of resonance I am interested in here could more readily be described as *mindless*.

To explore this further, let us return to Scott, whose own writing would soon become part of the repetitive discourse on Staffa. One mid-century *Treasury of Nature, Science, and Art*, for instance, began with the customary caveat about how the Ossianic title 'has been greatly doubted', observing that 'the name of the cavern is said to be "Uamh an Binn", – "Cave of Music"', before quoting Scott on 'the tremendous noise of the swelling

tide, mingling with the deep-toned echoes of the vault'.<sup>50</sup> To this prose were added the following lines from *The Lord of the Isles* (1815):

Where, as to shame the temples deck'd  
By skill of earthly architect,  
Nature herself, it seem'd would raise  
A minster to her Maker's praise  
Not for a meaner use ascend  
Her columns, or her arches bend;  
Nor of a theme less solemn tells  
That mighty surge that ebbs and swells,  
And still, between each awful pause,  
From the high vault an answer draws,  
In varied tone prolong'd and high,  
That mocks the organ's melody.

Nothing here is new: the fixation on natural architecture, the liquid rhythms of the tide, the double exposure of the basalt organ, the evocation of a sound that would never reach the ears of Scott's readers (at least not by the medium of vibrations in air). We have heard all this before. In ascribing a subtle yet ecstatic epiphany to the realm of aurality, Scott was repeating, or re-sounding, countless other ascriptions. These were not always scripted; they could just as well be acted, painted, notated, or debated. What matters is that Scott's melodious memory was itself a familiar tune. Every utterance repeats a precedent. Yet no precedent can claim priority, certainly not Banks's account, which relies on the metamorphic histories of stone and voice.

Indeed, the conventional sense of the originating Romantic imagination is not at the heart of this enquiry. The resounding fame of Fingal's Cave did not rely on the singular rush of creative genius so much as on 'ebbs and swells' (to borrow from Scott) or 'flux and reflux' (to return to the favoured terms of Banks and Troil). The sense of resonance I am seeking to describe is less a matter of invention than a process of perpetuation. We see this in another treasury-style text, this time from the 1870s, including yet another account of Fingal's Cave, 'sometimes called in Gaelic, Uamh an Binn – the Cave of Music, from a supposed hole in the rock, through which the water flows in and out with an harmonious sound'.<sup>51</sup> Here we find the familiar information sandwiched between entries on 'The First Marine Chronometer' and 'The Wonders of Steam Power', but the context is largely inconsequential. What matters is the sheer force of predictability and repetition.

Such ceaseless iterability of Fingalian trivia had already been remarked upon earlier in the century. In the first column of a spread for the *Penny*

*Magazine* in 1832 an anonymous writer notes that ‘most of the late accounts of [Staffa] . . . are in great part copied from one another’.<sup>52</sup> In a publication that specialized in amalgamating knowledge in order to ‘diffuse’ it to as wide a readership as possible, this observation was not necessarily meant as a rebuke. The point was not to be original or current but rather to *be* the current by which information extended its reach. By this measure, the 1830s article was a resounding success, since it featured the same conversation about the cave’s Gaelic name that would persist into the 1870s alongside the same paraphrase of Troil (in this case ‘a hole in the rock below the water . . . [which] makes a singularly agreeable sound on the flux and reflux of the tide’).<sup>53</sup> There was even a description of the ‘the echo of the measured surge as it rises and falls’, which was at once a gloss on the Troil paraphrase, a quotation (from the geologist John MacCulloch), and a metaphor for the fluid dynamics of fame.<sup>54</sup>

This is, I suggest, Romantic resonance in action. And once you get your ear in, the iterative re-soundings are unmissable, even irresistible. We know as much from contemporary commentary. ‘It is superfluous to attempt a description of the great cave’, suggested MacCulloch in a learned journal of 1814. ‘The language of wonder has already been exhausted on it, and that of simple description must fail in an attempt where hyperbole has done its utmost.’ In the same piece, the author betrayed his grumpiness about the mania for Fingal’s Cave by entreating his readers to consider the ‘Many other caves of less note [that] are to be seen in various parts of the cliff around the island’. Into these, he continued, ‘the sea breaks with a noise resembling that of heavy and distant ordnance’.<sup>55</sup> In contrast to the likes of Necker, MacCulloch would not be found (or at least not found in print) imagining a harmonious meeting of humans and their surroundings; his implicit aim was to amass observable data and to arrive at a fuller understanding of the geological formation of the island. However, the intention of the author is neither the beginning nor the end of the matter.

MacCulloch himself, in a passage quoted at the conclusion of the piece in the *Penny Magazine*, granted that ‘we shall be compelled to own it is not without cause that celebrity has been conferred on the Cave of Fingal’.<sup>56</sup> The tortuous syntax of this statement – both passive and coercive – is indicative, I think, of the nature of resonance and fame. MacCulloch knew that Staffa had the X-factor, and he knew he could not say why. That is the vanishing spot the big X marks. Or, if you prefer, the acousmatic lure of a sound without a source.<sup>57</sup> Saint-Fond got closest with his account of an ‘emprisoned rock’, but even this was axiomatically inaccessible: a conjecture, a placeholder, a fetishistic object of discursive and touristic attention.

The noisy-invisible thing at the back of the once-obscure cave nevertheless remains suggestive, in part because it testifies to the importance of aurality across multiple domains of Romantic knowledge and affect. But we already know that the Romantics liked to listen. What I find more provocative about Saint-Fond's hypothesis is the dynamic of inorganic agitation: whether or not it ever existed, his inert object of desire was the very model of dumb repetition. It required the reflective surfaces of basalt and paper and theatrical architecture to even register as an entity. Yet once it was lodged in the collective imagination, it stayed there for a good while, repeating and resounding ad infinitum. Somewhere in there is a parable of fame: an early, and highly successful, experiment in the energetics of mediation. Perhaps if you listen closely you still hear it – a lifeless, deathless knocking, a hostage to earthly fortune.

### Notes

I am indebted to many colleagues and friends for reading versions of this chapter at workshops in New York, Newcastle, and Aberdeen. It has been a pleasure to develop these ideas in such excellent company. Special thanks go to Amanda Hsieh for her late-stage input and allergy to obfuscation.

- 1 As we shall see, the day of discovery was quickly followed by a discourse of learned debate. For a recent contribution to the very same discourse, see Nigel Leask, 'Fingalian Topographies: Ossian and the Highland Tour, 1760–1805', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 2 (2016): 183–96. For an example of the discovery being brought into a narrative of Romanticism, see Christopher Thacker, *The Wilderness Pleases: The Origins of Romanticism* [1983] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 173.
- 2 If the analysis of musical seascapes is your main concern, see Benedict Taylor's excellent essay 'Seascape in the Mist: Lost in Mendelssohn's Hebrides', *19th-Century Music* 39, no. 3 (2016): 187–222.
- 3 For a compelling, sound-centred account of such discourses, see Miranda Stanyon, *Resounding the Sublime Music in English and German Literature and Aesthetic Theory, 1670–1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).
- 4 More on this below, but two key points of reference here are M. H. Abrams's essay 'The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor', *The Kenyon Review* 19, no. 1 (1957): 113–30, and Veit Erlmann's monograph *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone Books, 2014).
- 5 Joseph Banks, quoted in Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland, and Voyage to the Hebrides, MDCCLXXII* (Chester: printed by John Monk, 1774), 299.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 299 and 300.
- 7 For more on Pennant's published tours, see Alex Deans and Nigel Leask, 'Curious Travellers: Thomas Pennant and the Welsh and Scottish Tour

- (1760–1820)', *Studies in Scottish Literature* 42, no. 2 (2016): 164–72. Deans and Leask are both contributors to [curioustravellers.ac.uk](http://curioustravellers.ac.uk), a web-based project including reproductions of Pennant's travelling maps alongside modern scholarly commentary.
- 8 Banks, quoted in Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland*, 300.
  - 9 *Ibid.*, 300–1.
  - 10 *Ibid.*, 301.
  - 11 *Ibid.*, 301–2.
  - 12 *Ibid.*, 302.
  - 13 *Ibid.*
  - 14 *Ibid.* For a classic account of the popularity and controversy of Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, first published in 1760, see Fionna Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988). See also Howard Gaskill (ed.), *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (London: Thoemmes, 2004).
  - 15 Pennant was clearly enthusiastic about Banks's account, and his text elsewhere related his own 'vision at Ardmaddie', which suggests a willingness to suspend disbelief. See Leask, 'Fingalian Topographies', 188.
  - 16 Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, new ed. [1775] (London: printed for A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1791), 330–31.
  - 17 Johnson and Boswell did stay on Ulva with Lauchlan Macquarrie, the last chief of Clan MacQuarrie, who maintained a hereditary claim on Staffa until he was forced to sell in 1778.
  - 18 Leask, 'Fingalian Topographies', esp. 188–89.
  - 19 Ian Duncan, 'The Pathos of Abstraction: Adam Smith, Ossian, and Samuel Johnson', in *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, ed. Leith Davis, Ian Duncan, and Janet Sorensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 39.
  - 20 Ronald Black (ed.), *To the Hebrides: Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and James Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2007), 209, quoted in Leask, 'Fingalian Topographies', 189.
  - 21 I thank Ralph O'Connor for noting that, while 'Fiuhn' is a decent Anglicized approximation of the Scottish Gaelic pronunciation of 'Fionn', the published spelling of 'Fhinn' makes little sense except as a Gaelic-looking decoration, since the 'fh' in Gaelic is a silent consonant in this context.
  - 22 Barthélemy Faujas de Saint-Fond, *Voyage en Angleterre, en Écosse et aux Îles Hébrides . . .*, vol. 2 (Paris: H. J. Jansen, 1797), 59, note.
  - 23 Anon., 'Travels in England, Scotland, and the Hebrides . . . [review]', *The Critical Review* (September 1799): 1–14, at 1. Excerpts from the same work also appeared in *The Monthly Review* (March 1800): 239–47. And before either of these was available in English, readers could access excerpts of the French original in *The British Critic* (July 1798): 203–9. Each journal chose to include the etymological queries.

- 24 Uno von Troil, *Letters on Iceland* ... (Dublin: printed by G. Perrin, 1780), 276.
- 25 'Travels in England, Scotland, and the Hebrides ... [review]', 10–11.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 '[A]lthough the Gaelic genitive for "Fingal's Cave" is indeed "Uamh Fhinn", the initial "F" is silenced by lenition, whereas the initial consonant of "Uamh Bhinn" (the melodious cave) is pronounced as a "v". Banks's phonetic rendering of the cave's Gaelic name ("Ouwa Eehn") accurately transcribes it as it would have been spoken by a Gaelic speaker.' Leask, 'Fingalian Topographies', 185.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 The engravings of Staffa that Saint-Fond commissioned for his *Voyage* certainly emphasize the architectural, even theatrical aspect of the cave's entrance.
- 32 Conversely, the sound of a place name can reinforce a cultural association, as in Mendelssohn's remarks about another Hebridean island, Iona: 'there is truly', he wrote, 'a very Ossianic and sweetly sad sound about that name'. Sebastian Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family: From Letters and Journals*, 2nd ed., trans. Carl Klingemann and an American collaborator (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1882), vol. 1, 205. For a discussion of this remark in the context of Mendelssohn's broader interests in the Hebrides and beyond, see Matthew Gelbart, 'Once More to Mendelssohn's Scotland: The Laws of Music, the Double Tonic, and the Sublimation of Modality', *19th-Century Music* 37, no. 1 (2013): 3–36, esp. 22–23.
- 33 For musicological studies exploring the broad significance of Ossian in this period and after, see Gelbart, *The Invention of 'Folk Music' and 'Art Music'* and James Porter, *Beyond Fingal's Cave: Ossian in the Musical Imagination* (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2019).
- 34 Louis-Albert Necker, *Voyage en Écosse et aux Iles Hébrides* ... , vol. 2 (Geneva: J. J. Pachoud, 1821), 301, note.
- 35 'Fingal, Ossian, et ses bardes se sont peut-être jadis assemblés sous ce voûtes, la musique de leurs harpes harmonieuses accompagnoit le son de leurs voix, et mêlée à celui des vagues et des vents, elle a peut-être plus d'une fois fait résonner les cavités de cette grotte.' *Ibid.*, 300–1. Translation my own.
- 36 Walter Scott, quoted in J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 1 (Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1838), 405.
- 37 The inverse of the ideal encounter was the tourist frenzy bemoaned by Wordsworth in "The Cave of Staffa" (1833), who found on the island "a motley crowd ... hurried and hurrying, volatile and loud."
- 38 James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, with Samuel Johnson LL.D.* (London: printed by Henry Baldwin for Charles Dilly, 1785), 343.
- 39 See, for instance, James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, with Samuel Johnson ... A New Edition, with Introduction and Notes, by Robert Carruthers* (London: H. Ingraham & N. Cooke, 1852), 263.



- 40 For snapshots of the appearance of Fingal's Cave in such contexts, see Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978), 213, 237, and 320.
- 41 'La scene se passe dans une grotte basaltique, dont les longs prisimes se terminent à angle inégaux ver le ciel . . . . L'enceinte de la grotte et semée de tombeaux de forme diverses, des colonnes, des pyramides, des cubes d'un travail brut et gossier.' MM. \*\*\* [Charles Nodier], *Le vampire, mélodrame en trois actes, avec un prologue, musique de M. Alexandre Piccini, décors de M. Ciceri* (Paris, 1820), 3. Translation my own. Planché's instructions are similar, referring to 'the Interior of the Basaltic Caverns of Staffa: at the extremity of which is a Chasm opening to the Air. The Moonlight streams through it, and partially reveals a number of rude Sepulchres.' J. R. Planché, *The Vampire; or, The Bride of the Isles, a Romantic Melo-Dram in Two Acts, Preceded by an Introductory Vision* (London: John Lowndes, 1820), 5. In keeping with the conventions of contemporary Parisian melodrama, Piccini's score was unpublished and is not known to have survived. For a discussion of the music in the London version, some of which was published, see Ryan D. Whittington, 'Music to Save an Audience: Two Melodramatic Vampires of 1820 and the Music That Betrays Them', in *All Around Monstrous: Monster Media in Their Historical Contexts*, ed. Verena Bernardi and Frank Jacob (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2019), 245–70.
- 42 James Robinson Planché, *Recollections and Reflections*, rev. ed. (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1901), 26–27.
- 43 'Sixth Philharmonic Concert', *The Athenaeum: Journal of English and Foreign Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts* 238 (19 May 1832): 326. For more on the category of descriptive music in early nineteenth-century German musical thought and practice, see Richard Will, *The Characteristic Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 44 'The Philharmonic Concerts', *The Spectator* (5 May 1832): 15.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 'The Philharmonic Concerts', *The Harmonicon* 10, no. 6 (June 1832): 141–42.
- 47 Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance*.
- 48 Abrams, 'The Correspondent Breeze'.
- 49 Michael P. Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- 50 'Fingal's Cave, Staffa', in *Treasury of Nature, Science, and Art, for the Young*, ed. William Anderson (Edinburgh: Paton and Ritchie, 1853[?]), 114–17, at 114 and 117. The excerpt from *The Lord of the Isles* is taken from canto 4, stanza 10.
- 51 Anon., 'Fingal's Cave', in *The World of Wonders: A Record of Things Wonderful in Nature, Science, and Art* (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1874), 141–42, at 141.
- 52 Anon., 'Fingal's Cave', *The Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* (15 September 1832): 236–38, at 236.

53 Ibid., 238.

54 Ibid.

55 J. MacCulloch, 'On Staffa', *Transactions of the Geological Society of London* (1814): 501–9, at 506.

56 Anon., 'Fingal's Cave', 238.

57 The most substantial recent study of the acousmatic – Brian Kane's *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) – begins with a discussion of a cave near the New Hampshire village of Moodus, a name 'Derived from the Wangunk term "Machemoodus", meaning "Place of Noises"' (1).