

Late for the Picturesque: English Music's Resistance to Nature's Clothing in Art

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In 1994, Malcolm Andrews wrote: 'The Picturesque [has now been] gendered, politicized, deconstructed, rehistoricized.'¹ Recently renewed interest in the Picturesque reflects moves in Anglo-American cultural history that view aesthetics as ideology, developing tropes as town versus country, art as a promotion of the common good and expressions of nationhood.² Yet, very little musicology has engaged with any musical formulation of the Picturesque aesthetic. A striking exception is Annette Richards's book, *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque* (2001).³ Richards's work is very much of a piece with this recent scholarly turn, as well as the postmodern musicological move to create new readings of the central Viennese classics that go beyond traditional applications of music analysis.

For Richards, the central question is to what extent can music claim a share of the eighteenth-century Picturesque spirit? Music's separateness from the other arts makes claims on the territory of the Picturesque problematic. How can a series of sounds *be* Picturesque and how can man-made sound represent a Picturesque scene other than through crude attempts at precise imitation? Richards's book alights on the keyboard fantasias of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and the late symphonies of Joseph Haydn to expose their shared aesthetics with landscape painters and gardeners, as well as English novelists such as Laurence Sterne. Sterne's German admirers saw his writing as an embodiment of the same Picturesque sensibility as the English garden landscapers with his analogous employment of surprises, digressions and non-linearity. In turn, Austro-German commentators explained the digressive and tangential strategies of Emmanuel Bach's keyboard fantasias as similar to the tactics found in Sterne's novels, much admired in Northern Germany at the time. In eighteenth-century England, music and the Picturesque conjoined in the theories of Sir Uvedale Price, who explained ideal Picturesque scenes through analogies with music that contained variety and contrast, and of William Crotch, who adopted Price's tripartite division of aesthetic categories into Beautiful, Sublime and Picturesque to assign these categories to a selection of instrumental and vocal works. (He concluded that Picturesque music was the lowest form of the three. It was, he felt, skittish, comic and lacking nobility).

Annette Richards thus presents the fantasias of Emanuel Bach and the 'London' symphonies of Haydn as belonging to this Picturesque kinship, supporting her thesis with a variety of contemporaneous German reception. This reception grapples with the effusions of 'genius' of these two masters by citing the English gardens and Sterne's novels; Haydn is the Viennese Sterne, while Emmanuel Bach is the composer of landscapes of the mind.⁴ The chief unanswered question that Richards's thesis raises is this: since it confirms the view that the English set the Picturesque pace in the design of their country houses, landscape gardens and parks (and was therefore a suitable and receptive setting for the performance of Haydn's 'Picturesque' symphonies), what is the reason for the absence of reference to music by native composers? Phrased another way, why is there no explanation for English composers' apparent resistance to the stylistic principles of the Picturesque?

The Picturesque engenders the pleasure caused by nature's works. Its pleasing composition of forms prompts human responses that show our delight in the appearance of our natural environment. These responses range widely, from the discussion of relative values of the natural world to the seeking out of pleasurable experiences of it. This behaviour can be seen as forming part of a debate. Art that is stimulated by the contemplation of nature's wonder is arguably the driving force of this debate as it derives from, and is expressive of, both these responses – evaluative and experiential.

But the art-nature relationship is a nexus of particular complexity in the realm of art aesthetics: is there a connection between the aesthetics of art and the aesthetics of nature? Is nature beautiful to us because it resembles art or is it the reverse? And does our appreciation of one improve with greater understanding

¹ Quoted in T. Plebuch, 'Listening to Picturesque Music', in *Nineteenth Century Music*, 27 (2) (Autumn 2003), pp. 156-165 (a review of Annette Richards's *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque*), p. 156.

² See S. Copley & P. Garside, 'Introduction', in S. Copley & P. Garside (eds.), *The Politics of the Picturesque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 3.

³ A. Richards, *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁴ Richards cites J. Friedrich Triest's description of Haydn, p. 142 and C. Czerny's of C.P.E. Bach, p. 71.

and knowledge of the other? These were key questions for eighteenth-century thinkers engaging in the new discipline of aesthetic thought. Joseph Addison, writing in 1712, suggests that:

. . . we find the works of nature still more pleasant, the more they resemble those of art: for in this case our pleasure rises from a double principle, from the agreeableness of the objects to the eye, and from their similitude to other objects.⁵

In England, in the mid to late eighteenth century, nature, in the form of native landscape, was found to be 'still more pleasant', as painters, gardeners and writers expressed, through their work, appreciation of their natural surrounds. The English Picturesque movement represented an awakening to the glories of the rural outdoors and emphasized the enjoyment to be had in engaging with it. The English landscape garden is perhaps the purest expression of this awakening. It was possible to claim that it, with even more force than landscape painting, possessed a dual benefit of both resembling nature and being 'about' nature.



Holkham Park, Norfolk. Photograph – Author 2010

In English music of the late eighteenth century, identities tend to be forged in a negative sense; English music is signified by what it is *not* and from what it disassociates itself. Inherent in these identities is a clear disjunction between composers and theorists on the one hand, and consumers on the other. Thus, it is plausible to account for the notable absence of Picturesque style in native instrumental music by the first group's alignment of Picturesque 'affect' with a particular 'foreign' flamboyance and disregard for 'rules' of taste and propriety of gesture. Modern received wisdoms speak of a polarized English musical scene in the late eighteenth century, the dominance of imported composers or settlers producing a dearth of opportunities and a resulting 'inferiority complex' felt by English composers.

Both this promulgation of a compositional ideal and the corresponding suspicion of foreign 'modern' excess were located in a sizeable literature, centred on a like-minded and influential group of commentators and teachers – the Ancients. The Ancients' philosophy is founded on notions on the importance of good technique, the balancing of well-crafted melody and a sound understanding of harmony, but crucially is underpinned by the repeated appeal to 'good taste'. John Potter, who published a musical treatise at this time, averred that 'taste' and 'principles' were analogous respectively to 'elegance' and 'correctness'. Principles, by which he meant training, are learnt before taste can be acquired. Good taste here is invariably invoked not philosophically or aesthetically but as a clinically technical element that, whilst being often instinctive, can also be 'caught' and more crucially 'taught'.⁶ Furthermore, the characteristics of the modern

⁵ J. Addison, 'Essay on Taste and the Pleasures of the Imagination', in *The Spectator* (London: John Taylor, 1834), p. 26.

⁶ J. Potter, *Observations on the present state of Music and Musicians* (London: 1762), p. 6. See also A. Smith, *Of the Nature of that Imitation which takes place in what are called the Imitative Arts, Part II*, 32 (1795), reprinted in W. Wightman & J. Bryce (eds.), *Essays on Philosophical Subjects: Adam Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). Smith

instrumental idiom offended the Ancient mindset, which, as in particular did a figure such as Sir John Hawkins, viewed music that sought merely to entertain as morally degenerate. *Picturesque* art, in its musical manifestation, with its irregularities, surprises, and provocations, lying at the extremes of the modern aesthetic, would be considered beyond the pale, inimical to the requirements of 'good taste', as practiced by the English gentleman, in the same way as comic disruptions in North German music were discouraged for upsetting an agreed sense of decorum. Good taste recognised not just propriety and grace but also avoidance of unnecessary affectation, histrionics or virtuosity. For Hawkins such taste could only be acquired through an education and knowledge of the central tenets enshrined in theology, Classical philosophy and art.

Several English composers joined Hawkins in marginalising the music of Haydn and fellow symphonists. We cannot be certain which symphonies they refer to, nor indeed whether we might be able to apply our definition of Picturesque to the works described, but the reactions certainly engender a strong hostility to a foreign, tasteless 'otherness'. Charles Dibdin disliked the 'strong effusions of genius turned into frenzy'.⁷ In *The Musical Tour of Mr. Dibdin* (1788), in a colourful turn of phrase that clearly *does* censure the musical Picturesque, Dibdin likens Haydn to 'a rope-dancer who, though you cannot too much admire how prettily he frisks and jumps about, keeps you in a constant state of terror and anxiety for fear he should break his neck'.⁸ In his *Musical Tour* he broadens his attack by accusing 'Germans' of novelty for its own sake and vapid, ear-catching provocations:

As to the other *Germans* – as they have no *opera*, so they import no vocal music; and thus by torturing sounds into new positions, to make old ideas wear a novel shape, *difficulty* is the only characteristic of their compositions; and by this means the ear gets accustomed *not* to what *pleases* in music, but to what *surprises*.⁹

Once again, the Picturesque is unmistakably invoked through references to 'surprises' and even 'old ideas' [that] 'wear a novel shape'. Thomas Robertson found the 'unlimited modulation' of Haydn distasteful, as did Rev. William Jackson who likened his symphonies to the 'ravings of a Bedlamite'.¹⁰

All of these discussions point to a problem of intelligibility. Jackson felt that Haydn favoured 'dischords so entangled that it is past the art of man to untie the knot'.¹¹ The Ancients, then, demanded to know what this 'excessive modulation' signified. Sir Charles Burney invoked his friend Dr. Johnson when explicating the seeming incomprehensibility of C.P.E. Bach's music:

Emmanuel Bach used to be censured for his extraneous modulations, crudities and difficulties; but like the hard works of Dr. Johnson, to which the public by degrees became reconciled, every German composer takes the same liberties now as Bach, and every English writer uses Johnson's language with impunity.¹²

Burney had clearly reached a 'reconciliation' with this music and assimilated its 'difficulties' and 'liberties'. It is, therefore, tempting to suggest that he counselled both a patience, and an intellectual rigour, that he felt was clearly lacking amongst Dibdin and his fellow complainants.

The criticism of Haydn's symphonies in particular, and the distaste for the modern way found in the modern symphonists in general, are concerted and voluble enough to be considered inhibiting to English composers who might feel moved to express the Picturesque through the use of strong, provocative gestures of surprise – a marked mix of affect and irregularity. Furthermore, these approaches are repeatedly associated with a kind of 'selling out', a rhetorical olive branch to the lowest common denominator embodied by a certain kind of concert-goer that endlessly seeks the new and the fashionable. And, just as

takes issue with Avison's tripartite division of melody, harmony and expression by arguing that both melody and harmony are intrinsically *expressive* 'arts or merits', p. 206.

⁷ C. Dibdin, *The Musical Tour of Mr. Dibdin* (Sheffield: The Author, 1788), p. 182.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹⁰ Quoted in R. Fiske, 'Concert Music II', in *Blackwell History* (4), p. 253. Here Jackson apparently associates musical incomprehensibility with mental illness. This contrasts compellingly with Friedrich Rochlitz's study, published in an 1804 issue of *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, of the inmate of a lunatic asylum named Karl who played the keyboard with such sensitivity and had a gift for tuning pianos. This is generally symptomatic of a preparedness on behalf of the German commentators to be able to contemplate, and assimilate discourses of insanity in a musical context. See Richards, pp. 145-149 and p. 130 for her discussion of Cramer on Bach fantasias.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹² C. Burney, *A General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (4) (London: Robson and Clark, 1789), p. 596.

often, this discourse associates this approach with foreignness and commercialisation – two charges conjoined by the view that the continental imports were opportunists chasing cash. Several tropes emerge from this overview: the powerful lobby of Ancients and their complex about modern, invariably foreign ‘improvement’; the displacement of native born artists by the forces of capitalism that favoured European opportunists and pushed them to the margins through the increasing commercialisation of the concert scene; and the growing debate about what it is to be English, British or foreign. Our search for the Picturesque in English music necessarily holds these tropes at the forefront of our considerations.

So in what sense *does* a nascent awakening towards the English countryside, celebrated in the purple prose of the tourist guide and captured within the frames of landscape pictures and borders of landscaped gardens, register with the English composer? Can it be traced at all in his work? Is a sense of national pride in the English landscape a viable topic for English music of this period? Why does English music seem to miss the boat, late both for the defining moments of the mature English Picturesque in the 1790s, and that musical sense of the Picturesque apparently re-imported for the benefit of English audiences by Austro-German composers? If the musical Picturesque is identified most readily in a particularly Germanic approach to instrumental music, then an examination of the textual *subject matter* in English opera and song of the end of the century might uncover music possessed of a nationalistic sentiment enfolded within a more literal, vivid, pictorial sense of the Picturesque.

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