

The Nature of Music Listening in the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

Essay ini adalah suatu respon dari penulis kepada artikel yang ditulis oleh Profesor William Weber, profesor emeritus dari California State University, Long Beach, California, Amerika. Artikel ini ditulis di koleksi jurnal *Early Music* yang diterbitkan pada bulan November, 1997.

Artikel ini membahas tentang sudut pandang akan mendengarkan musik di abad ke delapan belas dibandingkan dengan abad dua puluh.

The concept of listening to music as an art has always been a critical aspect for both performers and audiences. The word "listening" may be interpreted in many different ways, such as simply hearing it, paying attention to it, analyzing/interpreting it, et cetera. But there is another important aspect that links to this listening concept, which is the culture during a certain period; different cultures result in different concepts of listening. William Weber in his article "Did People Listen in the 18th century?" conveys the idea that people through periods have different cultures and behaviors in listening to music that "we must be open to the very different ways in which people have experienced music and written about it if we are to understand other musical cultures in their own terms."¹ In other words, we surely should not use our standards (19th century and 20th century – as in the article) to judge the 18th century culture and music listening.

Musicologists, historians, and even philosophers have misjudged behavior of the 18th century people not to have enough appreciation to music and unreasonably called the behavior harsh.² There are two reasons for this misjudgment: first is that they compare the 18th century people's behavior with the expected and idealized listening habit of the 19th century people, which is seen to absorb or to have a complete attention to the music itself as opposed to social gathering's purpose. The

¹ Weber, William, "Did People Listen in the 18th Century?" *Early Music*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (November, 1997): 679.

² *Ibid.*, 678.

second reason of the misjudgment is their views that might be distorted based on their musical experiences in this modern era. Weber offers and proposes a better explanation than condemnation to this “misbehavior” of 18th century listeners by defending the integrity of the listeners as a whole from 19th and 20th century criticisms.

As briefly mentioned above, the purpose of a concert performance was as a social gathering in the 18th century. What exact kind of behaviors did 18th century people really do that were terribly justified by later historians and musicologists? Did these behaviors portray the literal meaning/reality? How to explain them both in musical and social terms? These three questions cover the issue presented in this article. Weber describes the nature of music listening in the 18th century that “adhered to a social etiquette that tolerated forms of behavior more diverse than those generally permitted today. But that does not mean that people did not listen at all or that they had no serious interest in the music. They paid attention to it in ways different from our own, and they wrote about it from a perspective that, though seemingly strange to us, had musical and intellectual integrity.”³

An example that may look disturbing and horrifying to the modern day is the famous picture/scene in 1766 in Paris, which depicts people chatting and socializing while Mozart is playing. There is a very good explanation on this matter. The ideology of “classical” music did not happen yet during the time – not until the modern era that we called them as classical music. “Today the words ‘classical,’ ‘serious,’ or ‘musical’ – not to speak of ‘genius’ or ‘masterpiece’ – carry a set of overtones foreign to the 18th century.”⁴ During the time, music was indeed written for entertainment, which included chatting, talking, socializing, and other gathering-related purposes. The concept of classical music and expected listening culture dated mostly from the early 19th century. Weber helps answering this picture by offering three suggestions by James Johnson, Peter Gay, and Lydia Goehr. While Johnson argues on this misbehavior, Gay offers a rather plausible perspective. He brings up the question “how did the sociability of musical contexts in that time relate to the ways by which people heard and interpreted music? We can see that happening in the 18th century in the pervasive influence of archetypes of dance music within both and instrumental

³ Ibid., 678.

⁴ Ibid., 679.

music.”⁵ This is a practical reason to explain why people talked, clapped, or did other “disturbing” things during a performance. Goehr supports Gay’s perspective by showing “how the principle of an integral work of art did not come about in music until after 1800, as did many of the most basic tenets of modern musical culture.”⁶ Weber raises the point that it is important to avoid presumptions to a specific culture and its people that they may live unacceptably in comparison to our nowadays culture.

Weber continues his article by discussing the sociable aesthetic in context – “why did musical life have a different social etiquette in the 18th century?”⁷ There are three answers to this question. First is that a concert performance equaled to mixed social etiquette, which “people took for granted that they would socialize during parts of the performance.”⁸ There was a contradiction that people who came to a concert were both “high” and “low” levels of musical art experience; therefore, not everyone could really “listen” to the performance itself. Again, it does not mean that people could not or did not listen, but they listened to it in a different way as mentioned above. The second answer is the explanation by Goehr, which the concept of integral art work did not exist until the early 19th century. Besides, “the most important development in the nature of musical listening during the first half of the 19th century did not come in actual behavior but rather in the rise of ideology by which to reform it.”⁹ This “misbehavior” was considered conventional because concert attendance was linked to social-gathering; thus, the function of public theatre was more of a “functioning community.”¹⁰ In addition, “before the rise of public opera and concerts there existed social contexts where music was performed with attendant religious or social purposes separate from music, but where quite serious music-making took place.”¹¹ The last answer has something to do with the tradition of courts, in which the patrons were used to put music informally and usually after dinner; thus, the atmosphere was in the context of social-gathering rather than paying attention to and experiencing the music itself.

⁵ Ibid., 680.

⁶ Ibid., 681.

⁷ Ibid., 681.

⁸ Ibid., 681.

⁹ Ibid., 689.

¹⁰ Ibid., 682.

¹¹ Ibid., 688.

At the end, Weber discusses Barbara Hanning's perspective to the "disturbing" scene's that "pictures of human activity were not meant to depict a specific or frozen moment in time, but rather to 'telescope' or 'ensemblize' events happening progressively within a social context."¹² Weber's defend is to keep the integrity of 18th century people in listening music from the harsh criticism from later musicologists and historians who said that these people could not and did not listen well; they just came for social reasons and considered it as a meeting place. Again, "18th century musical life adhered to a social etiquette that tolerated forms of behavior more diverse than those generally permitted today. But that does not mean people did not listen at all or that they had no serious interest in music. They paid attention to it in ways different from our own, and they wrote about it from a perspective that, though seemingly strange to us, had musical and intellectual integrity."¹³

At first, my initial reaction to the article is that I have never known this "surprising" fact written wonderfully by Weber. After reading the article, I start thinking of two contradictory opinions of my own regarding the listening concept of 18th century people. First, we have seen the typical opera seria performance in Baroque tradition that showed "disrespect" from audiences to the performance except to the castrato they "worshipped." The audiences ignored the ensemble and the conductor; they were talking, chatting, shouting, and throwing flowers to the stage for their castrato-idol. By saying this, I have no confusion whatsoever that 18th century people would continue this tradition and behavior. Moreover, the 18th century music was composed in a "fashionable" way which purpose is to please/to entertain; thus, it makes sense for people to move and enjoy the entertainment while listening to a music performance. On the other hand, I always have this thought that 18th century people were so sophisticated, partly due to the enlightenment movement, which valued human's reasons that became plausible for them to sit and had the "artistic experience" rather than merely social-gathering purpose.

Second, I generally agree with two ideas presented in the article: Weber's defend and optimism to 18th century people's behavior and Hanning's perspective that a picture is not to be interpreted as a "frozen" moment, but rather as a progressive analysis within a social context. Weber sees the musicologists and

¹² Ibid., 688.

¹³ Ibid., 678.

historians to analyze the 18th century people's behavior in a wrong way, both in moral and ideological terms; the reason to it is that they, in comparison to their modern thoughts and ideologies, directly "condemn" them in an unreasonable way. They also tend to conclude that the 18th century people showed lack of respect and interest in the art itself by replacing it as a social gathering purpose. I support Weber's defend by conforming that those audiences paid attention to a performance in their own way, which was surely different from our own yet it was intellectual.

Weber strengthened his defend by quoting from Barbara Hanning's view that a picture should be interpreted as a progressive analysis within social context rather than as a frozen moment. I believe that Hanning's perspective is very important that influences our ways of thinking and analysis, especially to something happening in the past. Living in the 21st century, we are fortunate to enjoy any kind of different and varied arts, especially paintings and music. But should we really feel so? Are we going to be positively and optimistically critical in analyzing these arts? Or we rather let our minds viewing the past "be distorted by the aesthetic and ideological assumptions through which we interpret our own musical experience?"¹⁴

As my last remark, I now become really interested in reading and knowing more about musical life in the past. I assure myself that the development of music not only just involving composers and styles, but also involving society and their behaviors toward music and performances. Reading Weber's article opens my mind to have a thorough study and analysis of a subject instead of directly believing and judging it, especially using my own understanding and ideology.

¹⁴ Ibid., 678.