

Carolyn Abbate

## Hearing Awry



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I was returning to Berlin three years after a previous sabbatical spent here, under very different circumstances (during reunification, as a *Gastprofessorin* at the Freie Universität, living on Savignyplatz and for all these reasons without much contemplative leisure). Earlier memories of Berlin were intense, and that initial experience could not be replayed; still, one pleasing aspect of the second visit was coming back to friendships and professional contacts made during the first. I arrived four months in advance of the academic year, in June 1994, with a project (on musical disembodiment) being at the difficult stage of having been begun but not yet in written form. During the summer at the Kolleg (as a *Phantom-Fellow*, all but invisible administratively) an essay about Wagner was completed, which began with the acoustics in the *Festspielhaus* at Bayreuth, and why invisible orchestras can be thought to possess their own (phantom) subjectivity. In August I was able to renew my acquaintance with Bayreuth's acoustics *in situ*. Perhaps a *Grundton* was thus struck in advance, since invisible sound sources on one hand, and the metaphysics of performance on the other — as a visible channel for musical thought — became intellectual concerns for the year. In the fall this involved much speculation about castrati, a subject long considered, that was at last finished here. Without the efforts of the library staff, it would have been much poorer: large quantities of obscure literature, requested without much hope, materialized as if conjured by higher forces on my shelf. From a purely personal viewpoint, the most interesting pamphlet that materialized was one with a contribution

by a great-grandfather, an Italian exile living in Cairo (shadowy presence in family legend) who was styled on the title page "Dr. Abbate Pasha" (such a solid, yet alien, title: I admired it greatly), apparently an authority on the medical pathology of eunuchs. How unsettling to encounter a long-dead relative with similar interests, brought back to life in written form by the Kolleg's librarians.

My intentions to start on another long-planned book chapter (on musical automata as a form of meditation on performance) were derailed by a question that struck me during Caroline Bynum's colloquium on the resurrection of the body in the Middle Ages. Who (or what body part) hears the last trumpet? This motif of music "raising the dead" takes two forms in Western music history, as the Orpheus myth and the trumpet call on judgement day. A suggestion by Pauline Schmitt-Pantel (concerning the *pneuma* as a metaphor for the execution of music) had already led me to classic Greek tragedy in another context, and pursuing the motif involved a chase over many maps, including 18th-century writings on sensual perception, anatomy, versions of *Medea* (whose crime was *claiming* her singing could resurrect those she murdered), *Orpheus* settings, and the *tuba mirum* section of the Requiem mass. There appeared to be a reciprocal economy between Orpheus and the trumpet, the former disappearing from opera (in the 18th century) just as the latter began to be composed into requiems. An unanticipated essay thus ensued from a random collision of the sort that, one assumes, is classic in the setting of the Wissenschaftskolleg.

Intellectual obsession produces a wild illusion that many things one encounters during a year of mental leisure reflect back on one's own concerns. To cite only one example of many, which has to be described in the subjunctive: during Walter Levin's *Gesprächskonzert* with the Vogler Quartet, a particular passage in the *Große Fuge* (the recurring chorale) sounded *not* as if it were being played by the Vogler quartet in the present, but rather as if it had once been played in the past, by some numinous quartet not actually there. We were hearing music that had had physical life long ago, music now channelled through a channel until one could not be sure where it came from. Misleading sound — this passage in the *Große Fuge* was exactly that — became a compositional leitmotif after about 1750, and much of the writing I did during the year was concerned to trace of certain philosophical notes adhering to the phenomenon. I became more convinced, however, that sounds of indeterminate origin could take on vaguely political overtones as well. Musical performance in effect undermines many general notions about authority, since in the case of music, the story (or text, or history, along with their representations) tends to disappear, while power to convince

devolves from the live execution, not the material trace of the work. This position was provisionally worked out in some journalistic fragments that appeared throughout 1994-95. When, after this brief spell as a feuilletonist (and after having played some concerts myself), I returned to my book chapter on automata, they appeared in a different light, more as physical icons that attempt to represent the miraculous. But possibly in those discussions Arnold Davidson, with his own unique view of miracles and illusion, had something to do with this metamorphosis.

During most of the year I was thinking in English and writing in German with the aid of Eva Hund, to whom I am grateful for having at last made clear so many very fine linguistic points. My thanks go also to the entire staff of the Kolleg, for making practical burdens light, for making possible the luxury of free mental improvisation.