

Music and History

It is entirely owing to our ways of learning and teaching music that there are relatively few who clearly perceive what music means within the history of civilization, and thus what it means to the nation and its culture. In a fog in which all contours of thought are lost, the figures of the past other than the principal heroes of recent times sink to the status of mere means by which the music historian satisfies his desire for a play with aesthetics, forms, and techniques. We might call this sort of art history—to use a terminology much in vogue these days—a mere historical eroticism, for it eschews the essence of the scholarly procedure: objectivity and rigorous regard for the truth. Historiography, even in the arts, cannot be legitimized on grounds of beauty alone.

The most common approach to music history is, of course, the time-honored biographical or “personal history” method. We might call this the method of idealization by isolation. But the detached single individual, even if he becomes a typical representative of a historical epoch, cannot always be grasped as such; in fact, in many instances he appears as a strange, not readily understandable phenomenon that refuses to be reconciled with the milieu.

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