

Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna  
Archivio istituzionale della ricerca

Writing about Polyphony, Talking about Civilization: Charles Burney's Musical 'Corns and Acorns'

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*

Semi M (2022). Writing about Polyphony, Talking about Civilization: Charles Burney's Musical 'Corns and Acorns'. MUSIC & LETTERS, 103(1), 60-87 [10.1093/ml/gcab079].

*Availability:*

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/840076> since: 2022-05-23

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcab079>

*Terms of use:*

Some rights reserved. The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

This item was downloaded from IRIS Università di Bologna (<https://cris.unibo.it/>).  
When citing, please refer to the published version.

(Article begins on next page)

# WRITING ABOUT POLYPHONY, TALKING ABOUT CIVILIZATION: CHARLES BURNEY'S ATTITUDE TOWARD WORLD AND NATIONAL MUSICS

BY MARIA SEMI\*

<epigraph>Men at a distance from the objects of useful knowledge, untouched by the motives that animate an active and a vigorous mind, could produce only the jargon of a technical language, and accumulate the impertinence of academical forms.</epigraph>

<epigraph source>Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*,  
1767</epigraph source>

*POLYPHONY* MIGHT AT FIRST seem a plain and easy term in musicology, but its meaning, uses and values have changed across time and space. Over time an ideal of polyphony did combine with several other cultural concepts and representations and was used as a means to judge the musical achievements of different populations. This article follows the history of the grappling of the ideal of polyphony with ideas about civilization and national songs in a specific context, that of eighteenth-century Britain, and to this purpose exploits the well-known figure of the music historian Charles Burney. My aim in this article is on the one hand to show that 'ideals of polyphony' in the eighteenth century were linked to assumptions about the degree of civilization attained (or not) by a determined people. On the other hand my aim is to highlight how these ideals were challenged both by the discovery of new lands and cultures and by the new value attributed to what came to be defined as 'oral tradition'. In order to attain this goal, I will ask my readers to embark on a long journey that will lead them from Scotland to China (and back again).

This article, though written at a time when Reinhard Strohm's *Studies on a Global History of Music* were yet unpublished, clearly stems from the same cultural climate that is bringing musicology more and more to question the narrative it builds around its history, asking scholars to engage with postcolonial thought and global history.<sup>1</sup> A trend which is

---

\*{affiliation here. Email: }

<sup>1</sup> Two chapters of Strohm's volume share core questions together with a significant amount of scholarship and primary sources with this article: David R. M. Irving's 'Ancient Greeks, world

well epitomized by many of the contributions one finds in the ‘bite-size provocations’ offered by the International Musicological Society in its column *Musicological Brainfood*, and which was already clearly discernible in *The Cambridge History of World Music* edited by Philip V. Bohlman.<sup>2</sup>

Two major musicological studies, published in 2007 and 2008, shape the background from which my own research started. The first is Vanessa Agnew’s *Enlightenment Orpheus*, a book which investigates ‘the relationship between Enlightenment travel and evolving musical thought’.<sup>3</sup> The Enlightenment travels examined by the author range from Burney’s European tours to Cook’s expeditions, and in both cases Agnew valiantly addresses questions related to cultural contact and to the clash between aesthetic conceptions and empirical experience. In particular, Agnew acknowledges the unwillingness of men of letters, such as Burney, to question their historical and aesthetic views about music even when challenged by direct or mediated experience. My second source of inspiration is Matthew Gelbart’s *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”*<sup>4</sup> which, read contrapuntal with Agnew’s work, provides an interesting perspective on the relationship between idea(l)s of polyphony and civilization and a third element: the emerging category of ‘national music’ and of the concept of oral culture.

I will devote the first two paragraphs of this article to two crucial terms of the following narrative (polyphony and civilization) in order to explain their use in this context. I will then introduce the readers to a debate that occurred during the quarrel of the Ancients

---

music, and early modern constructions of Western European identity’ (21–41) and Estelle Joubert’s ‘Analytical encounters: global music criticism and enlightenment ethnomusicology’ (42–60), *Studies on a Global History of Music* (SOAS Musicology Series, Abingdon - New York, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *The Cambridge History of World Music*, ed. by Ph.V. Bohlman (Cambridge, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Vanessa Agnew, *Enlightenment Orpheus. The power of Music in Other Worlds* (Oxford, 2008), 6. Together with this book, also David Irving’s many contributions have provided much food for thought (in particular: ‘The Pacific in the Minds and Music of Enlightenment Europe’, *Eighteenth-Century Music*, 2/2 (2005), 205–229; ‘Comparative Organography in Early Modern Empires’, *Music & Letters*, 90/3 (2009), 372–98; *Colonial Counterpoint: Music in Early Modern Manila* (New York, 2010).

More in general, I owe the inception of this research interest to the two fruitful years spent at the *Lichtenberg Kolleg* (Göttingen) and to the activities of its research group on the Enlightenment where junior and senior fellows weekly met to discuss books and ideas (special thanks go to Dominik Hünninger, Hans Erich Bödeker, Avi Lifschitz, Andreas Waczkat and Andrea Speltz).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”. Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge, 2007) and his articles ‘Allan Ramsay, the Idea of ‘Scottish Music’ and the Beginnings of ‘National Music’, *Eighteenth-Century Music*, 9/1 (2012), 81–108; “‘The Language of Nature’: Music as Historical Crucible for the Methodology of Folkloristics’, *Ethnomusicology*, 53/3 (2009), 363–395.

and the Moderns which regarded the question of whether the Ancient Greeks knew harmony or not: this debate and the way it was handled set the scenario in which our narrative takes place. In particular my focus will be on the use of a historical frame that interpreted human development as proceeding by (unavoidable) stages, and which assigned specific musical practices (particularly monody and harmony) to some of these stages. Once depicted the scenario, I will proceed to discuss the position Charles Burney holds in this history, focusing particularly on the way the historian of music gathered information about foreign musical traditions and on the way he interpreted it, especially commenting on his position toward Chinese (or supposed so...) music. The second part of the article will try to show that coeval discussions about national musics and oral culture provided strong counter-arguments to the view of history as a triumphal march toward refinement and politeness (and music in parts). The case of Scottish national music will be my major focus and I will get back to Charles Burney in order to analyze his attitude toward western national musics. I will then conclude trying to understand what the displayed narrative can tell us about eighteenth-century's concerns regarding the universal powers of music and about Burney's historical perspective.

Polyphony, civilization and national music are three elements of eighteenth-century intellectual discourse that frequently crossed each other's paths, in ways not always clear or coherent. As symphony or cacophony did they often concur to form a widespread discourse on the music of the Other, be it a distant or a neighbouring one. Bohlman writing about the practice of collecting says that collecting 'had the power to historicize. It not only collected evidence from the past; it recollected the past itself. Firing the collector's passion was the urge to find the "oldest" evidence, which in turn would allow one to recuperate authenticity. The "oldest" had its place on the musical landscape, but that place was never in the centre but rather inevitably at the edges, indeed so situated that it defined the edges'.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Scottish songs this holds true, and later in this essay we will perceive in the struggle between the élite Londonian taste promoted by Burney and the taste for National music also a struggle between centre and periphery. In the case of non-European traditions we can add that collecting (musical instruments, musical specimens etc.) marked the difference between the collector and the collected, creating an immediate power unbalance.<sup>6</sup> What we,

---

<sup>5</sup> Philip V. Bohlman, 'The Remembrance of Things Past: Music, Race, and the End of History in Modern Europe', in Ronald M. Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (eds.), *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago, 2000), 660.

<sup>6</sup> The power unbalance inherent to the practice of collecting recalls the way in which culture has been used as a marker of difference. In the words of David Lloyd 'the civilized society, with the complex differentiation of spheres that distinguish modernity, *has* culture. The uncivilized, who fail to differentiate the spheres of religion, art, labour, and so forth, *are* culture', 'The Pathological Sublime. Pleasure and Pain in the Colonial Context', in Daniel Carey and Lynn Festa (eds.) *The*

furthermore, will perceive, is that ‘recollecting the past’ and ‘defining the edges’ have been instruments for the constitution of an idea of the (collective) self that much later came to be defined as ‘Western’. Saree Makdisi has argued that at the turn of the nineteenth century a process took place which concurred to the creation of an ‘Occidentalism’ as the counterpart of ‘Orientalism’. In this process ‘some parts of the English population could be captured or woven into the racial, the civilizational, the Occidental, or perhaps the national “us”, and others simply had to go, be eliminated in one way or another’.<sup>7</sup> Entangled in this process of selection of what defines ‘us’ for what we are, were also the discourses about music, and the self-representation of Westerners as being those who invented, cultivated and brought to perfection harmony will prove particularly strong. But not all of Western music was polyphonic, and there were those who precisely bolstered the lack of harmony in their songs.<sup>8</sup> Which is why I find it interesting to close read Charles Burney’s remarks about non-Western musical traditions together with his remarks about Scottish music, as both musics challenged in some way the grandiose self-esteem of élite western culture. But if non-Western musical traditions seldom found advocates to plead their cause,<sup>9</sup> Scottish music had plenty of qualified support.

As highlighted by Matthew Gelbart, the juxtaposition of different national musics, in terms of origins, by the end of the century converts into an opposition between national and cultivated music: ‘two categories of music that could be written in any country, supposedly at any time – a separation based on the criterion of personal origin: professional origin versus anonymous peasant origin. Furthermore, the low “national music” side of the binary at least was at the close of the century approaching the modern idea of “folk music”’.<sup>10</sup> The

---

*Postcolonial Enlightenment. Eighteenth-Century Colonialism and Postcolonial Theory* (Oxford, 2009), 73.

<sup>7</sup> Saree Makdisi, *Making England Western. Occidentalism, Race and Imperial Culture* (Chicago and London, 2014), xix.

<sup>8</sup> For example Joseph Ritson, in the preface to his *Scottish songs* wrote that ‘The base part, which seems to be considered as indispensable in modern musical publications, would have been altogether improper in these volumes; the Scottish tunes are pure melody, which is not unfrequently injured by the bases, which have been set to them by strangers: the only kind of harmony known to the original composers consisting perhaps in the unisonant drone of the bagpipe.’ (London, 1794, vol. I, VII)

<sup>9</sup> William Jones being a notable eighteenth-century exception. Writing about the founding father of oriental studies, Zon writes that ‘Unlike many of his time, for whom the Enlightenment paradigm of developmental progress, from savage to barbaric, and barbaric to civilized, seemed to exclude whole swathes of non-Western peoples, Jones appears to have resisted these categorizations especially in relation to India’, *Representing non-Western Music in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Rochester, 2007), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Gelbart, *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”*, 101–102.8

recognition of this divide generated different kind of reactions and processes, such as the one of ‘sanitizing’ the products of oral traditions, as Paula McDowell has defined it.<sup>11</sup> Endorsing the cause of ‘low national music’ also implied, once more, selection of what one wanted to label as ‘authentic’ (and therefore worthy of preserving) and what was not. This sanitizing and disciplining process made it possible for the bourgeois and literate middle-class to appropriate and support genres associated with the lower classes, and produced a dramatic shift in the perception of what was and what wasn’t appropriate. Makdisi quotes some manuscripts of Francis Place (1771–1854) who recorded notes on songs sung in London streets during his youth and who commented that ‘it will seem incredible that such songs should be allowed but it was so’.<sup>12</sup> At the same time as these normalizing processes were taking place, many of the ideas discussed by our Scottish literates did find a fertile soil in other contexts, and especially in Germany and in Herder’s works. As Bohlman has it: ‘Crucial to [Herder’s] program for a new historiography was an insistence that the histories of past cultures were encountered only within those cultures themselves, in their own time and terms, without imposing the values purportedly imminent in a universal history’.<sup>13</sup> So, in this latter case, the examination of the cultural products of the *Volk* could be considered in a different setting, disenfranchised from the normative logic of the ‘irreversible civilization’. But this would be the start of another history. Let’s start ours.

## IDEALS OF POLYPHONY

The author of the historical western definition of the word ‘Polyphony’ in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Wolf Frobenius) lists at least five meanings for it (Multiplicity of parts, Several parts of equal importance, Equal development of individual parts, Subordinate importance of harmony, Simultaneous use of several structures). Particularly interesting to our purpose is the fact that, after having unfolded these meanings, placing them along the historical timeline, he adds to his entry a section entitled ‘Ideals of Polyphony’, aimed at explaining that ‘the different emphases of meaning conveyed by the term ‘polyphony’ reflect different concepts of the polyphonic ideal’.<sup>14</sup> Although Frobenius

---

<sup>11</sup> Paula McDowell, *The Invention of the Oral. Print Commerce and Fugitive Voices in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Makdisi, *Making England Western*, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Philip V. Bohlman, *Song Loves the Masses. Herder on Music and Nationalism* (Oakland, CA, 2017), 259.

<sup>14</sup> Wolf Frobenius, ‘Polyphony’, *Grove Music Online*, 19 Apr. 2018, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000042927>

unfolds the meaning of these different concepts bearing in mind almost exclusively the realm of music theory and music history, *ideals of polyphony* entertain many relationships with the cultural world at large in which they are conceived. Though ‘polyphony’ is not the term one finds in the eighteenth-century sources I quote (where authors commonly refer to ‘music in parts’, ‘counterpoint’ or ‘harmony’), I will use this modern term to refer to a ‘multiplicity of parts’.

In a Festschrift contribution of 1963, originally conceived as a lecture before the Southwestern Chapter of the AMS in 1960, Bruno Nettl devoted several pages to the ‘Concept and Classification of Polyphony’. Among the questions he asked, the following bear a close relationship to our research:

<EXT>While we can usually describe and measure the number of pitches heard at one time and thus come to a rigid definition, there is the possibility that members of cultures other than ours might not consider materials which we call polyphonic as polyphonic at all, or, perhaps more likely, consider as polyphonic a kind of music which we consider monophonic. This problem has been explored hardly at all in ethnomusicological field work. [...] Is polyphony, once invented or discovered by a culture, bound to expand into several of the various forms of polyphony in existence? [...] Or must each type of polyphony [...] be discovered separately? Is there, as Marius Schneider implies, a given order in which polyphonic types appear in a culture, an evolutionary mechanism? Is a particular level of musical complexity necessary before a society is capable of assimilating polyphonic practice once it is presented or discovered?<sup>15</sup></EXT>

The intellectual road that brought a twentieth-century scholar to ask such questions in a non-rhetoric way has been long: in the century we will be dealing with, the perspective here displayed would have been simply unthinkable. Among the questions Nettl asks, the last one would have been thinkable with a little rephrasing, that would have made it sound like this: ‘Is a particular level of political and social complexity necessary before a society is capable of assimilating polyphonic practice once it is presented or discovered?’ As we will see, in the eighteenth century a particularly influential historiographical model established a close link between economic, social, political and—we would nowadays say—‘cultural’ development. Music was made to fit into this scheme, but it proved problematic.

If, as Reinhard Strohm has it, history is ‘the knowledge of how things *have*

---

<sup>15</sup> Bruno Nettl, ‘Notes on the Concept and Classification of Polyphony’, in *Festschrift. Friedrich Blume zum 70. Geburtstag* (Kassel, 1963), 248–49.

*become*',<sup>16</sup> this article will explore part of a history which shows how thinking in Nettl's terms has been an uneasy task for western culture.

## CIVILIZATION AND THE BIRTH OF CONJECTURAL HISTORY

The word 'civilization' in French significantly makes its first appearance in the XVIIIth century in Mirabeau's best-selling book *L'Ami des hommes ou traité de la population* (1756).<sup>17</sup> In the passage where the term appears Mirabeau is questioning the idea that *civilization* should be allowed to proceed in its refining and policing process as it erases the *simplicité nationale*: civilization is from the start connoted by the idea of complexness.<sup>18</sup> In 1771 the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* defines 'civilization' as a synonym for *sociabilité* (more akin to the English use of the term 'civility'), after having specified that the origin of the term lies in jurisprudence. Many continental scholars have identified in a writing by John Gordon the first appearance of the term in English (1761), but Keith Thomas has recently brought evidence of a much earlier use of the term.<sup>19</sup> Johnson's *Dictionary* in 1772 still does not acknowledge the term, hosting only the entry 'civility'. 'Civilization' will first be defined in 1775 in John Ash's *New and Complete Dictionary*, and distinguished from the jurisprudence term 'civilisation'. The latter's definition is 'The law or act which renders a criminal process civil', where 'civil' is defined as something which is 'not criminal, not ecclesiastical, not natural'. Whereas 'civilization' and the cognate terms 'civilised', 'civilize', and 'civilized' all draw back to the idea of 'being reclaimed from savageness', of 'being instructed in the arts of civil life'. *Civilization* is further defined as both a state ('of being civilized') and an act ('of civilizing'). Thomas explains that the term initially

---

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.musicology.org/pdfs/publications/brainfood/ims\\_brainfood\\_02\\_2018.pdf](https://www.musicology.org/pdfs/publications/brainfood/ims_brainfood_02_2018.pdf)  
*Musicological Brain Food* 2018/2, 7.

<sup>17</sup> For the history of the term and of its uses I am indebted to Bertrand Binoche's edited study *Les equivoques de la civilisation* (Seyssel, 2005). A history of the term 'civilization' is also to be found in Brett Bowden's *The Empire of Civilization: the Evolution of an Imperial Idea* (Chicago and London, 2009), 23–46.

<sup>18</sup> Mirabeau, *L'Ami des hommes* (Avignon, 1756), IV, 238. Mirabeau's critique of some aspects of the 'civilization process' are coherent with the target of his economic critique against luxury and unbounded consumption. About the significance of his work in the context of the luxury debate of the eighteenth century see Michael Kwass, 'Consumption and the World of Ideas : Consumer Revolution and the Moral Economy of the Marquis de Mirabeau', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37/2 (2004), 187–213.

<sup>19</sup> John Gordon, *A New Estimate of Manners and Principles: or a Comparison between Ancient and Modern Times* (Cambridge, 1760–61). Keith Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility. Manners and Civilization in Early Modern England* (New Haven and London, 2018), 'EEBO, s.v. 'civilization', eighty-six hits in forty-six records before 1700', 351 note 18.



characterized the action of civilizing, but in the end it came to be used to express the end of the action, its product: 'it is hard to say when exactly the word acquired this new sense. The first meaning gradually slid into the other. [...] But only from 1760s onwards did English writers unambiguously describe the state of those who had been civilized as one of 'civilization''.<sup>20</sup> As Binoche indicates, it is to Scotland we have to turn our gaze if we are looking for 'les grands théoriciens de la "civilisation"'.<sup>21</sup>

Much has been written about the birth of a specific type of historical narrative in eighteenth century Scotland that goes under the name of 'stadial history' or 'conjectural history': a new cultural approach to history that contemporaries themselves had the feeling they were creating.<sup>22</sup> I will here only briefly retrace some important aspects of this intellectual tradition, without which it would be impossible to understand the significance of the connection established during Enlightenment's age between polyphony and civilization.

In the words of David Allan 'Smith and his colleagues were recognised very quickly by contemporaries as having developed a new type of historiography marked by a strong abstract or conceptual content informed by essentially philosophical concerns'.<sup>23</sup> In particular it was their analysis of social and economic factors and of the influence these had

---

<sup>20</sup> Keith Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Les équivoques de la civilisation*: 'Dans la seconde moitié du siècle, en France, le destin de "civilisation" est comparable à celui de "sociabilité" [...]. À la différence de la « perfectibilité », la civilisation est devenue un schème dès les années 1760 dans un corpus spécifique, celui des histoires naturelles écossaises de l'humanité et de leurs avatars français. [...] Les Ecossais furent certainement les grands théoriciens de la « civilisation ». Les Français, quant à eux, en furent plutôt de simples exécutants : le schème fut moins leur objet qu'un instrument dont ils usèrent pour traiter de la question bien particulière de la Russie. Dans les années '80, on voit s'effectuer un déplacement décisif, ordinairement inaperçu. D'abstraction induite à partir de l'analyse des histoires empiriques, c'est-à-dire d'histoire naturelle de l'humanité, la civilisation devint *l'histoire universelle du genre humain* [...] En s'universalisant ainsi, la civilisation devient aussi *irréversible*.' 14–16. On the development of the concept of civilization in Europe see also the first chapter of George Stocking's *Victorian Antropology* (New York, 1987), 'The idea of civilization before the Chrystal Palace (1750–1850)'.

<sup>22</sup> Think of Hume's letter to William Strahan in August 1770 where he says 'I believe this is the historical Age, and this the historical Nation' (quoted in David Allan, 'Identity and Innovation: Historiography in the Scottish Enlightenment' in Sophie Bourgault and Robert Sparling (eds.), *A companion to Enlightenment Historiography* (Leiden, 2013), 307). About Scottish historiography see also chap. 5 in Nicholas Phillipson's monograph *Adam Smith: an Enlightened Life* (London, 2010), and Silvia Sebastiani, 'National Characters and Race: A Scottish Enlightenment Debate', in Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning (eds.), *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment*, (New York, 2011), 187–205.

<sup>23</sup> David Allan, *Identity and Innovation*, 319.

on political institutions and laws that gave their histories a peculiar and innovative flavour.<sup>24</sup> What matters mostly to our discourse is that the arts and what we would nowadays call ‘cultural aspects’ were englobed in these histories. Civilization proceeded by stages, equally valid for any population, and each stage was characterised by specific forms of government, laws and customs. Since especially the first stages of humanity were thought to be universally partaking in the same characteristics, general histories also provided the means for transcultural comparison.

A main theme that underlies many of the works written by these philosophers and historians was the understanding of change and difference. Encapsulating diversity in a historical dynamic has been a peculiar way in which the Scottish Enlightenment tried to deal with it, as Carey observes: ‘The strategy that eventually gained favour among Scottish writers was to recast difference as a product of history, conditioned by varying economic and social situations’.<sup>25</sup> One of the categories that was going to benefit from this new trend was ‘taste’, which acquired too a historical dimension. The ideal “history of taste” was interpreted as presenting an imagined uniformity at its beginning (in a natural, simple world, devoid of the needs induced by commercial society) and a subsequent differentiation brought by economic and social change. A statement like the one of Racine, who in his preface to *Ifigénie* said that he was happy to ascertain that ‘common sense and reason don’t change over the centuries. The taste of Paris is therefore in accordance to the one of Athens’,<sup>26</sup> would not have been prevalent a hundred years later. In musical terms, a conjectural history of taste would have described the taste of ‘natural peoples’ as inclining towards an appreciation of simple melody, whereas ‘civilized nations’ would delight in the magnificent invention of polyphony.<sup>27</sup> In the words of David Irving, Europeans:

<EXT>used counterpoint as a self-conscious cultural emblem to emphasize their difference from the

---

<sup>24</sup> Milestones of this historiographical tradition are Robertson’s *History of Scotland* (1759), Ferguson’s *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), many of Hume’s essays in *Essay and Treatises on Several Subjects* (1772), Smith’s *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Millar’s *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (1771), and Kames’ *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774).

<sup>25</sup> Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson, 188

<sup>26</sup> Quoted by M. Fumaroli, *Les abeilles et les araignées* in Anne-Marie Lecoq (ed.), *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* (Paris, 2001), ‘le bon sens et la raison étaient les mêmes dans tous les siècles. Le goût de Paris s’est trouvé conforme à celui d’Athènes’, 171.

<sup>27</sup> On developmentalism as an ‘immutable and universal law of cultural and human progression’ and its role in shaping the beginnings of ethnomusicology in Britain see Bennet Zon, ‘Non-Western nations and the evolution of British ethnomusicology’, *The Cambridge History of World Music*, 298–318.

non-European Other: one of the principal ways they could maintain a sense of musical “uniqueness” and “superiority” was to point to the apparent absence of counterpoint elsewhere, thereby increasing intercultural difference. Essentialist ideas about the exceptionalism of European musical theory and practice have long pervaded historical musicology, and contrapuntal polyphony was considered to be the exclusive preserve of early modern European music.<sup>28</sup>

As we all know, this was—of course—untrue, but given the symbolic value acquired by polyphony in the course of time, European scholars who—like Charles Burney—were given direct experience of specimens of ‘savage polyphonic practice’, would not be ready to give their historical *credo* away. Polyphony thus became not only an instrument of geographical, but also of historical demarcation.

## ANCIENT AND MODERN MUSIC, OR: THE IRREVERSIBILITY OF CIVILIZATION APPLIED TO MUSIC

There is a major discussion that occurred in the first half of the eighteenth century, actually starting at the end of the previous century, which acted as musical counterpart of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns and which helped to shape the terms in which the relationship between the development of polyphonic practices and civilization was thought. I am talking about the much-debated topic ‘whether the Ancients knew counterpoint’. It is interesting to read in detail some of the writings about the music of the Ancients dating from the last quarter of the seventeenth century and to compare them with others written in the second half of the eighteenth century: the change of perspective is impressive.<sup>29</sup> In 1680 the French surgeon Claude Perrault in his *Essays de physique* inserted a short chapter titled ‘De la musique des anciens’. In this work he took the part of those who denied that the Ancients ever practised polyphony, making some remarks about an anthropological difference among the Ancients and the Moderns: the first were interested in touching the heart, the second in appealing to the intellect. Therefore ancients and moderns find their pleasures in different objects. But here comes the difference in perspective: Perrault does not think that the Ancients *could not* have developed counterpoint, he thinks that they made a choice, and that in the end all their histories about the marvellous powers of music ‘do not prove anything else, but the fact that they enjoyed their music just as it was’.<sup>30</sup> The Ancients were simply

<sup>28</sup> David Irving, *Colonial Counterpoint. Music in Early Modern Manila* (New York, 2010), 18

<sup>29</sup> For the history of this querelle as it evolved in France see Philippe Vendrix, *Aux origines d’une discipline historique: la musique et son histoire en France aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Geneva, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> Claude Perrault, *Essais de physique, ou recueil de plusieurs traités touchant les choses*

not interested in changing or developing their music, they were happy with it. Had they been presented with polyphonic practice, they probably would not have assimilated it, as a result of a lack of interest. After the final victory on the part of the Moderns, and when the logic of ‘irreversible civilization’—as Binoche called it—steps in, the ‘Ancients’ will lose their chance in making a choice in the history of musical development, just as will many contemporary populations taken as living witnesses of ‘the infancy of mankind’. The process of ‘debunking the ancient Greek tradition’<sup>31</sup> and of putting it into historical perspective made it possible to question its cultural achievements, including the perfection of the music of the Greeks. In a historical framework that increasingly assumed the straight shape of progress towards the accomplishments of the enlightened age, the consideration of ancient Greek tradition received a double blow: on the one hand, ancient Greeks began to be compared with contemporary populations that were not exactly considered perfect matches to XVIIIth century European civilization,<sup>32</sup> on the other hand, they also ceased to be the unquestioned spring of all of western culture, with researches on national origins beginning to emphasize the role of northern cultures and local traditions. Classic mythical figures were thus given new roles, as Katherine Butler has shown in her article which considers attitudes towards classical mythology in early modern England:

<EXT>Whereas Orpheus had traditionally represented the civilizing power of the highest musical artifice, he was now allied with the ill-trained, common minstrel, satisfying the passions of ill-educated, rural crowds, while the modern, contrapuntal composer assumed the role of master of musical harmony for the appreciation of elite listeners.<sup>33</sup></EXT>

This association with minstrelsy, as we will see later on, will however prove to be a much more favourable one than it seemed to be at the end of the XVIIth century, thanks to the new

---

*naturelles*, t. II (Paris, 1680), ‘ne prouvent rien autre chose, sinon qu’ils estoient fort contents de leur Musique telle qu’ils l’avoient’, 380.

<sup>31</sup> See Pierre Dubois, ‘La démythification respectueuse de la musique de la Grèce antique’, *XVII–XVIII. Revue de la Société d’études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, 60 (2005), 243–259.

<sup>32</sup> Think of Burney’s comment on ancient Greek music: ‘I know not whether justice has been done to these melodies; all I can say is, that no pains have been spared to place them in the clearest, and most favourable point of view: and yet, with all the advantages of modern notes and modern measure, if I had been told that they came from the Cherokees, or the Hottentots, I should not have been surprised at their excellence. There is music that all mankind, in civilized countries, would allow to be good; but these fragments are certainly not of that sort’, *General History of Music* (London, 1776), vol. I, 103.

<sup>33</sup> Katherine Butler, ‘Changing Attitudes Towards Classical Mythology and their Impact on Notions of the Powers of Music in Early Modern England’, *Music&Letters*, 97/1 (2016), 42–60 at 58.

role attributed, especially by antiquarian learning, to minstrels and bards, who were seen as the bearers of a wild, but noble, antiquity.

I wanted to draw attention to this episode in the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns because it also shows how much the ideal of polyphonic practice had become a touchstone for evaluating the degree of refinement of musical cultures. And it is also clear that we are here referring more to the ideal of polyphony than to real polyphonic practice. As Butler has noticed, already in the late seventeenth century:

<EXT>the reassessment of music's powers was still based more on reason than experience. None of the authors cited above drew on personal observations of particular performances [...]. Nor are their arguments necessarily fully in line with contemporary musical practice: despite the emphasis of Wallis and Wotton on the sophisticated combination of multiple parts as defining the superiority of modern music, complex polyphonic genres such as the instrumental fantasia were becoming old-fashioned in this period, and simpler melody-and-accompaniment textures were prevalent in song, opera, and instrumental dance genres. As a result, such arguments had more impact on musical thought than on practice.<sup>34</sup></EXT>

This picture will grow more complicated fifty years later, as, on the one hand, the polyphonic ideal will be as strong as ever when used as a means of value judgement in cultural comparisons but, on the other hand, the 'simplicity' of pure melody—celebrated by Rousseau and represented by 'national songs' discovered and forged in various European traditions—will itself become a value to be prized.

It wasn't only Greek music, though, which challenged traditional judgemental values of western historiography. Chinese music constituted an even more puzzling example, as Chinese culture was recognized as being one of the oldest and most enduring on the globe, and China had also become fashionable, with Chinese wares being *de rigueur* in eighteenth century Britain. There:

<EXT>the "Chinese taste" reached remarkable heights of popularity. Extravagant spectacles featuring Chinese costumes and ornaments drew crowds to the theatres. Chinese plays were adapted and widely performed. A craze for chinoiserie furnishings and architecture transformed sitting rooms and gardens across the country and fuelled the flames of classicist satire on the degradation of

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, 59.

contemporary taste.<sup>35</sup></EXT>

The relationship with the Chinese empire was not one which diplomatically placed Europeans in favourable conditions: in the end it was up to the Chinese to decide whether they condescended to trade with westerners or not, so Britons and Europeans in general were not in their usual comfort-zone on the power scale. Much of what was known about the musical tradition of China was due to the indefatigable work of the missionaries. The two Frenchmen Joseph-Marie Amiot—who resided in China for more than 40 years, from 1751 till his death in 1793—and abbé Roussier, who (heavily) edited Amiot’s manuscripts for print, especially contributed to the diffusion of knowledge about Chinese music in Europe. In England Charles Burney tried to gather direct information about Chinese music on many occasions, and it is to his evaluation of Chinese music that we will now turn our attention.

### CHARLES BURNEY’S QUERIES ABOUT CHINESE MUSIC: A WESTERN-ORIENTED LISTENING GUIDE

In a letter dated 19 September 1777 to James Lind, who visited China in 1766 as surgeon for an East Indiaman, Burney states to have ‘sent some queries to intelligent persons in that country by two or three ships’,<sup>36</sup> and solicits Lind for answers to many questions about Chinese music. The historian of music asks Lind to confirm ‘their melodies very much resembled the old Scots tunes’<sup>37</sup> and that they have no ‘music in parts’. He further asks the surgeon to confirm Chinese music has no semitones and uses a purely diatonic scale<sup>38</sup> and in the end he presses him with a few other queries that give us an idea of the kind of questionnaire Burney was sending to China by ship: ‘Is music much cultivated among them, and have you had any opportunity of proving whether the European melody and harmony are more grateful to their ears than their own? Have they any notation for this music? Or is it traditional, learnt merely by the ear, and retained by memory?’.<sup>39</sup> Here we find Burney’s core interests, and his methodology in trying to understand other musics: he tries to compare them with the music he knows, and therefore asks about polyphony, scales, notation (note

---

<sup>35</sup> David Porter, *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford, 2001), 134.

<sup>36</sup> Alvaro Ribeiro (ed.), *The Letters of Dr. Charles Burney* (Oxford, 1991), 173.

<sup>37</sup> Ribeiro in a footnote reports Lind’s answer: ‘Some of their Music, but I cannot say wither all, resembles very much that of the Highlands of Scotland’, *The Letters*, 173 n. 6.

<sup>38</sup> And here he observes ‘it is impossible to produce any melody from these scales which will not resemble that of the ancient Scots’, *The Letters*, 174.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem.

that rhythm is never considered as a relevant aspect)<sup>40</sup> and he is interested in the effect of European music on other peoples.<sup>41</sup> A few days after his letter to Lind, Burney corresponded about the same subjects with Matthew Raper, who resided for some years at Canton and who returned to him the questionnaire the historian had sent to China, with answers from two missionaries (an Italian and a Frenchman). The question that still seemed to puzzle Burney more had to do with the scale and the use of semitones, because on the one hand the missionaries confirmed that the Chinese used no semitones, but on the other hand they enclosed several transcribed specimens of Chinese music with semitones. He therefore conjectured that ‘perhaps in the ancient National Music of China, like that of Scotland, these Intervals were avoided; but either by Corruption, Refinement, or imitation, of other Music, the Moderns not only use the Semitones in their New Melodies, but apply them, in varying and gracing the ancient’.<sup>42</sup> Another possibility though comes to his mind, and it points to the difficulty of musical transcription: may it not be that western staff notation is not perfectly adequate for recording Chinese music?

<EXT>Your correspondent says ‘the Chinese are astonished and unable to give a satisfactory answer when interrogated about Semitones’ [...] It seems, from the specimens of Chinese music with which I am favoured from your French correspondent, that to reduce it to European Intervals and Measure is a very difficult task; for by its wildness in these particulars, I am convinced that it is very different

---

<sup>40</sup> It is interesting to read in this regard some observations Woodfield makes in his study of the transcriptions of the *Hindostannie airs*: ‘On the whole, Europeans could hear drones, appreciate the absence of ‘harmony’, and recognize melodic features, even modal inflections, but Indian systems of rhythm usually defeated them entirely’, *Music of the Rai. A Social and Economic History of Music in Late Eighteenth-Century Anglo-Indian Society* (Oxford, 2001), 162. The attribute of ‘wildness’ is actually very often attributed to either extra-European musics or to national European music, and this ‘wildness’ usually refers to rhythmic and organisational aspects of music which learned Europeans did not understand: in fact, they did not even suspect there could be extremely complex rhythmic features, accurately organized, which completely escaped their listening abilities. The underplaying of rhythm, qualifying it as the chief characteristic of the music of primitive people is made evident in the words of the reviewer of Dalberg’s edition of William Jones’ *Über die Musik des Indier* in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 5 (1803) when he writes that ‘primitive peoples, as well as completely uncultivated people among us, have absolutely no real tonal art nor any feeling for it, but rather only rhythm, and feeling only for that. What intones to their ears does not really intone, but only sounds and resounds; it is only there for them as the condition of noticing the rhythmic’, quoted by David Gramit, *Cultivationg Music. The Aspirations, Interests, and Limits of German Musical Culture, 1770–1848* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2002), 39–40.

<sup>41</sup> Here again Lind’s reply is interesting, as he states that ‘The Chinese are much pleased with a simple Scotch tune, and with them only; other music being much above their comprehension’, *The Letters*, 174 n. 14.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Burney to Matthew Raper, Sept.–Oct. 1777, *The Letters*, 232.

– and I suppose both can only be expressed in our Characters, *à peu près*.<sup>43</sup></EXT>

This is a very interesting and quite rare remark in the eighteenth century. Rousseau in his music dictionary had expressed a similar, though not identical, concern. After having quoted, at the article ‘musique’, some specimens of music from distant countries (including China), he observed that these pieces all shared a suspicious ‘conformité de Modulation’ which made him doubt the skill or of the intellectual integrity of those who transcribed them.<sup>44</sup> But Burney goes one step further, as here he openly questioned the possibility of notating all existing music using the notation system developed for western music.<sup>45</sup>

As reported by Burney himself in his article about ‘Chinese music’ for Rees’ *Cyclopaedia*, the third major effort to get information about Chinese music was via Macartney’s embassy.<sup>46</sup> George Macartney, in charge of a relevant, but eventually unsuccessful, diplomatic mission for King George III at the court of Emperor Qiànlòng (1792–94), described his as an ‘Embassy to the most civilized as well as most ancient and populous Nation on the Globe’.<sup>47</sup> On this occasion Burney both furnished Macartney with some ‘Musical Queries for China’, which must have been extremely similar, though not identical, to the ones Burney formerly sent to Raper, and with a memo containing information about Chinese music. The musical queries read as such:<sup>48</sup>

<EXT>1. What is the usual Scale from which Music is at present composed in that country?

2. Is every melody confined rigidly to one key without modulating into other keys by means of

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, 234.

<sup>44</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de musique* (Paris : veuve Duchesne, 1767), 317.

<sup>45</sup> Note that this thought did not, for example, occur to him when he stated that Greek music seemed deficient to him ‘yet with all the advantages of modern notes and modern measure’ (see quote at footnote 32).

<sup>46</sup> About the embassy and the role music played in it see Joyce Lindorff, ‘Burney, Macartney and the Qianlong Emperor: the role of music in the British embassy to China, 1792–1794’, *Early Music*, 40/3, 441–453. Though I share some quotes with Lindorff’s article, the use I make of them is different, as my main interest lies in Burney and in the way he collected information and used it to study cultures different from his own.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted by Greg Clingham, ‘Cultural Difference in George Macartney’s *An Embassy to China, 1792–94*’, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 39/2 (2015), 9.

<sup>48</sup> I acknowledge here my debt to Stewart Cooke, who is in charge of the edition of the third and fourth volumes of Burney’s correspondence (1794–1801; 1802–1807), who with extreme generosity communicated to me the material he had on the subject of Chinese music. Among the papers he shared with me there was an ‘Appendix’ which contained both the ten queries which originated this footnote, and the transcript of the memo of Charles Burney to Lord Macartney.



accident flats and sharps?

3. Are there 2 Semitones in the course of the octave? or does it, like the ancient Scots' Scale, consist only of 5 Tones, as thus: [my source does not provide the example]

4. Is Harmony, like the European counterpoint cultivated in China? Or is the music of that country confined to the mere melody of unisons and octaves?

5. A Specimen of the Pierres sonores, or sonorous Stones, is very much wished, and an account of their use in concerts, in the field or as Carillons

6. The Scale and manner of playing the instrument formed of reeds like a column of Organ pipes

7. A general list of the principal Musical Instruments of the Chinese, with their Scales, the manner in which they are played, and a few tunes or compositions for each. N.B. The time, and accuracy of the Chinese melodies that are set on His Excellency Lord Macartney's Barrel organ are wished to be ascertained; as well as the Hymn sung in honour of illustrious ancestors?

8. Have the Chinese Instrumental Music distinct from the vocal, or have they only such melodies for instruments (like the ancient Greeks) as were originally composed to words in order to be sung?

9. Are the Dramas of the Chinese sung in a kind of recitative, or declaimed without music?

10. Is music an honorable profession in China, cultivated by the Nobility and Literati, as an elegant amusement for themselves and their families? or is it confined to a lower cast or order of men, merely for the amusement of others?</EXT>

We find here many of Burney's already mentioned core topics, together with a clear glimpse at his comparative approach ('like the ancient Scots...', 'like the Europeans...', 'like the ancient Greeks...').

The following is the text of the memo Burney enclosed to Macartney:

<EXT>A band of Instrumental Musicians, consisting of 6. performers, w<sup>d</sup> be able to execute the greatest variety of good compositions, and, in Europe, give the greatest satisfaction to real judges of the Art, if they consisted of 2 Violins, a Tenor & violoncello (for Quartets) w<sup>th</sup> a Hautbois & Bassoon (for Symphonies.)

But as the Asiatics are chiefly pleased with wind Instruments & Instruments of percussion, if some of these 6 Musicians c<sup>d</sup>, occasionally, play on the French Horn, Trumpet, Clarinet, Harp, Germ. Flute, and even Fife, & Kettle-drum, they w<sup>d</sup> probably be more admired by the Chinese in the performance of simple melodies, than a complete opera band w<sup>d</sup> be in executing the most artful & complicated compositions: As Harmony, or music in different parts seems to be utterly uncultivated & unknown in every part of the world, except Europe.

The Chinese not having been used to Music in parts, meaning in notes of different duration, Though in harmony & proportionate measure, are unable to comprehend or receive pleasure from our counterpoint. It is not certain that they have long had a musical notation of w<sup>ch</sup> at present They are s<sup>d</sup> to make little use. Their melodies, if not traditional, are sung & played by heart, in public. And a musician playing by book has been thought, not only ignorant of his Art, but to have been denied the gift of inspiration.<sup>49</sup></EXT>

Instructed by this note, which describes the Chinese especially by what they lack ('they do not...', 'they are unable to...') the diplomats were sailing with their ears already prepared to hear and note certain things and not others.

## BETRAYING OTHERS INTO 'A LOVE OF HARMONY': THE CHINESE TEST-CASE

It seems to be thanks to the Macartney embassy that Burney received the best answer to a question he already made to Lind many years before, which related to Chinese reactions to western music. In his article on 'Chinese Music' in Rees's *Cyclopaedia*, a Chinese audience is reported to having been introduced to three types of music, 'our best popular tunes' and:

<EXT>several favourite airs of their own country; to some of which a base was added, and others were set on the barrel [organ] in their native state, without any accompaniment whatever. The first they did not feel, and the others, perhaps, from not being played in the time and with the expression to which they were accustomed, they would hardly acknowledge. As it was well known that, with all their long cultivation of music, the Chinese had not arrived at counterpoint, or music in parts, the author of this article tried to *betray them into a love of harmony*, and "the concord of sweet sounds".<sup>50</sup></EXT>

---

<sup>49</sup> Charles Burney, 'For Lord Macartney drawn up when preparing for him a band to attend his Lord<sup>p</sup> in his Chinese Embassy. 1792', Carl Pforzheimer Library (Misc. 963). Communicated to me by the generosity of Stewart Cooke. Also quoted in Lindorff, 'Burney, Macartney and the Qianlong Emperor', 444.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Burney, 'Chinese music' in Abraham Rees (ed.) *The Cyclopaedia; or, Universal*

It is possible to conjecture that among ‘our best popular tunes’ some Scottish airs were included, and that Burney wanted to have Lind’s observations on the appreciation of Scot’s tunes tested. Unfortunately Burney relates here nothing about the reaction to these tunes. The comments to the two other types of music presented to the Chinese audience are nonetheless of extreme interest and were elicited by the ‘Nota Bene’ appended to the seventh question of his ‘Musical Queries’. Burney, using the specimens of Chinese music he gathered by previous exchanges, provided both pieces ‘in their native state’ and others with added bass to lure Chinese people into an appreciation for western harmony, and he explicitly asked to ascertain the authenticity of those specimens regarding time and melodic outline. The result of this empirical enquiry was that the pieces Burney consciously tampered with, those to which he provided an accompaniment, were not ‘felt’, and those for which he desired the authenticity to be ascertained were not even recognized. Together with some episodes relating to the case of the *Hindostannie airs*, studied especially by Ian Woodfield, these anecdotes should make us actually wonder about ‘what’ westerners really heard when they listened to musics to which they were unaccustomed, and therefore what they tried to reproduce in their transcriptions. In the case of the *Hindostannie airs* we know, from the collections we have, that the transcriptions being made were far from being faithful (in our sense of the word) and, as Woodfield remarks, ‘given the fundamentally different melodic and rhythmic systems of Indian music to say nothing of instruments and performing styles, the avowed aim of producing ‘authentic’ versions of the originals was destined to fail’.<sup>51</sup> So that it is even more striking to read Warren Hastings’ reaction to Margaret Fowke’s collection of *Hindostannie airs* when he states:

<EXT>You know [...] that I have always protested against every Interpolation of European Taste in the Recital of the Music of Hindostan. I have now a confirmed Objection to it from the Demonstration before me that your Airs will never be accompanied again with such *Graces* as they have already received in a different sense of the Word.

I have had the Pleasure to hear them all played by a very able performer, and can attest that they are genuine Transcripts of the original music, of which I have a perfect Remembrance.<sup>52</sup></EXT>

Woodfield supposes that for something being perceived as a ‘genuine Transcript of original music’ probably a ‘however distantly [...] recognizable [...] memory’ was all that was

---

*Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature* (London, 1819–20), vol. VII (emphasis mine).

<sup>51</sup> Woodfield, *Music of the Raj*, 159

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, 174.

required,<sup>53</sup> but this was possible in the case of communication between two people who, like Fowke and Hastings, listened to the Indian repertoire with the same cultural ‘aural’ background. In the case we have observed above, after the Chinese melodies made their roundtrip from Britain to China, Chinese hearers couldn’t find anything that was even ‘distantly recognizable’.

## MUSIC FROM THE ‘LANDS OF UNPROVIDED WRETCHEDNESS’: BURNEY AND WORLD MUSIC

After our British musical historian collected the latter information about Chinese music, he acknowledged—in a letter to Walker in 1796—he had so much material on this topic he could ‘fill a Volume’. Burney ‘had long formed a design of adding a 5<sup>th</sup> Vol. to his Work, on the subject of National Music; and had collected specimens from every civilized Part of the Globe’,<sup>54</sup> but in the end, as he communicated to Joseph Cooper Walker in the 1796 letter:

<EXT>I have little inclination to embody the fragments & various communications w<sup>ch</sup> I have rec<sup>d</sup>: as the generality of Musicians & musical Dilettanti, however enthusiastic for the *practical* part, care so little ab<sup>t</sup> the Theory, or hist<sup>y</sup> of what they call *barbarous melodies*, that whatever pains I might bestow on a work w<sup>ch</sup> yourself may wish, & perhaps at most a hundred more curious enquirers into the origin, hist<sup>y</sup>, & kind of simple & natural strains w<sup>ch</sup> prevail in the several parts of the world, I sh<sup>d</sup> not obtain a sufficient number of readers to defray the expence of printing.<sup>55</sup></EXT>

We have many letters concerning Burney’s interest in the music of India,<sup>56</sup> Africa—think of

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, 177.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Burney to Christian Hüttner, 13 Mar. 1802, by courtesy of Stewart Cooke. From this letter we can infer the wealth of material Burney must have had in his hands by that time, because he does not here talk of his old plan of adding a chapter to a volume of his *General History*, but of devoting a whole new fifth book to it.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Burney to Joseph Cooper Walker, 13 Oct. 1796, by courtesy of Stewart Cooke.

<sup>56</sup> In a letter to Joseph Cooper Walker, 1 Jul. 1793, Burney declares to be already in possession of lots of materials concerning ‘Asiatick music’: ‘Want of health prevented me from acknowledging your last favours & communication of oriental melodies for some time after they came to hand; and when I was sufficiently recovered to attempt paying my literary debts, I was unable to find your letter. After a long search, I have at length deterred the Extract from M<sup>r</sup> Ousley's letter, & the melodies w<sup>ch</sup> accompanied them. They are both curious. I am in possession of many Persian & Indian national tunes, & we are promised a Dissertation on the Music of the Hindus in the 3<sup>d</sup> Vol. of Asiatic researches, w<sup>ch</sup> is dayly expected from Calcutta. This, with the assistance of your friend M<sup>r</sup> Ousley's labours, will furnish all the knowledge concerning Asiatic Music w<sup>ch</sup> it seems to deserve’. The M<sup>r</sup> Ousley Burney refers to, must be William Ouseley, author of the *Persian Miscellanies* (London, 1795). In this work Ouseley declared to have in his possession original notes of ‘Eastern compositions’ which he did not publish in his volume because a friend of his ‘whose exquisite skill,

his correspondence and encounters with James Bruce—and the music of the South Seas, but it is perhaps a little surprising to read Burney saying that it is ‘others’ who call these ‘barbarous melodies’, when, in the end, this was his idea too. As he summed it up himself in the article on ‘Arabian music’ in the *Cyclopaedia*:

<EXT>we are inclined to imagine that music in Europe has been cultivated with so much more success than in any other quarter of the globe; our instruments, our harmony, and our melody, are arrived at such a superior state of perfection, that to abandon or neglect them for any refinements or properties which the music of Asia, Africa, or America could furnish, would indeed be letting our cornfields lie fallow, and feeding on acorns; or throwing aside the poetry of Milton, Dryden, and Pope to read and imitate only Chaucer, Gower and Lindgate.<sup>57</sup></EXT>

Whatever his final judgement about non-European musics, Burney continued gathering information about them almost till the end of his life. He also had many lucky connections that helped him in his research: his son James was on board Cook’s ships during his second and third expeditions, another member of the third expedition’s crew, Captain Molesworth Phillips, married his daughter Suzanne. His daughter Charlotte married Clement Francis, a surgeon who had been Warren Hastings’ secretary. Besides his familial relations, Burney had such an extended network of informants which really rendered him the best suited man to write what would have indeed been the first history of ‘World Music’. The questionnaire, compiled by Burney in order to understand non-European musics, shows that his approach was comparative and that—as ways of recording music were yet to come—the examination of instruments from distant lands was one of the few tools he believed available to him to access alien musical worlds.<sup>58</sup> It would indeed have been too much to ask of

---

both practical and theoretic, qualifies him admirably for the task, has long been engaged in the study of oriental music, and has formed a large collection of Melodies, Persian, Hindû, and Cashmerian, which he will, probably, in a short time, offer to the public’, *Persian Miscellanies*, 162.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Kerry S. Grant, *Dr. Burney as Critic and Historian of Music* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1983), 298.

<sup>58</sup> An example of the use of organological enquiry to try to understand foreign music is represented by Joshua Steele’s ‘Account of a Musical Instrument, Which Was Brought by Captain Fournex from the Isle of Amsterdam in the South Seas to London in the Year 1774, and Given to the Royal Society’, *Philosophical Transactions*, 65 (1775), 67–71 and ‘Remarks on a Larger System of Reed Pipes from the Isle of Amsterdam, with Some Observations on the Nose Flute of Otaheite’, *Philosophical Transactions*, 65 (1775), 72–78. Burney and his contemporaries were however completely unaware that some of the instruments that made their way to Britain, when being especially made for foreigners, completely lacked in accuracy (see James Q. Davies’s essay ‘Instruments of Empire’ and his examination of the Raffle *gender* at Claydon House in James Q. Davies and Ellen Lockhart (eds.), *Sound Knowledge. Music and Science in London, 1789–1851* (Chicago and London, 2016), 145–174 at 153–155. See also David R. M. Irving, ‘Comparative

Burney to approach other cultures in their own terms: even authors who actually called for such an approach, as Charles Fonton did in his *Essai sur la musique orientale*, did not manage to apply it thoroughly to their research object.<sup>59</sup> When Grimm in his *Lettre sur Omphale* wrote ‘When the French assure us that Chinese music is hideous, I don’t think they asked the Chinese for their opinion about it’ he indeed just saw one half of the problem.<sup>60</sup> For even when, as in Burney’s case, the opinion of the Chinese was taken into account (though maybe ‘tested’ would be a better definition), this neither implied questioning the values of western musical tradition, nor the possibility of the coexistence of different values. If the Chinese loved their own music and scorned western polyphonic music it was because they were not ‘ready’ for it: their civilization was not there yet. It was not simply a ‘matter of taste’ it was a matter of the historical development of taste. Unlike Perrault’s statement about the Greeks having in some way ‘chosen’ not to develop polyphony, the Chinese proved ‘unready’ for it.

Referring to the newly discovered South Sea Islands Burney, in the dedication to the King of *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster-Abbey...in Commemoration of Handel*, thus exposed *in nuce* his historical view of music:

<EXT>...wherever there is humanity, there is modulated sound. ... Thus in those lands of unprovided wretchedness, which Your Majesty’s encouragement of naval investigation has brought lately to the knowledge of the polished world, though all things else were wanted, every nation had its Music; an art of which the rudiments accompany the commencements, and the refinements adorn the completion of civility, in which the inhabitants of the earth seek their first refuge from evil, and, perhaps, may find at last the most elegant of their pleasures.<sup>61</sup></EXT>

---

Organography in Early Modern Empires’, *Music & Letters*, 90/3 (2009), 372–398.

<sup>59</sup> Commenting on the European habit of describing oriental music as a “Symphonie monstreuse”, Fonton argues: ‘Voilà l’idée qu’on se forme de tout ce qui n’est pas musique européenne: idée fausse, et purement fondée sur le préjugé universel qui prononce sans examiner, et condamne sans connoître. En effet tout juge qui n’est pas préoccupé doit convenir que la musique orientale a dans son genre des beautés et des agréments qui luy sont propres’, *Essai sur la musique orientale, comparée à la musique européenne*, reprinted in Appendix to Thomas Betzwieser *Exotismus und »Türkenoper« in der französischen Musik des Ancien Régime. Studien zu einem ästhetischen Phänomen* (Laaber, 1993), 370–419 at 373.

<sup>60</sup> Friedrich Melchior Grimm, *Lettre sur Omphale, tragédie lyrique* (Paris, 1752), 2–3: ‘Quand ces même Français nous assurent que la musique chinoise est détestable, je ne crois pas qu’ils se soient donné la peine de prendre l’avis des Chinois pour prononcer ce jugement’.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Burney, *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster-Abbey and the Pantheon, May 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>; and June the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, 1784 in Commemoration of Handel* (London, 1785).

The refinement of music is considered to be the development of polyphonic music, and this comes with the ‘completion of civility’. The problems in this straightforward historical perspective arose whenever something did not seem to fit into it, which actually happened relatively often. In the case of Greek ancient music the problem was more or less solved by diminishing the prestige of this ancient classic civilization (and Charles Burney never missed an opportunity to criticize ancient Greek Music) and, in the case of the Chinese tradition, by assessing the extreme antiquity of their culture, and at the same time its stillness. Indeed, Europeans felt so sure about the undeniable superiority of their polyphonic practice over any other kind of music (corns *versus* acorns in Burney’s language), that whenever some other culture they came in contact with did not immediately embrace their musical *credo*, they felt surprised. So, for example, in Jean-Baptiste Labat’s work (which is a publication of the memoirs of the French cartographer and traveller Renaud des Marchais), in a section relating to today’s Benin music, we read that:

<EXT>It is surprising that the Europeans in the Kingdom of Juda, and especially the French who introduced there the luxury of their furniture and the wealth and graces of their food, have not yet transmitted to these people their music and their symphony. That would be the simplest thing to do as these people have taste, and it wouldn’t require much time to persuade them to abandon their barbaric concerts, which rip the hardest ears apart, and to make them appreciate our instruments and our music.<sup>62</sup></EXT>

Just as Burney tried to ‘lure the Chinese’ into the appreciation of Western music, we find here the idea of an unquestionable preference which should naturally be given to European art music tradition.

Other cracks however appeared in the polished veneer of the music-historical

---

<sup>62</sup> Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Voyage du Chevalier Des Marchais en Guinée, Isles voisines et a Cayenne...* (Amsterdam, 1731), II, 200 : ‘Il est surprenant que les Européens établis à Juda, et particulièrement les François qui y ont introduit le luxe de leurs meubles et l’abondance et la délicatesse de la table, n’ayent pas encore fait passer chez ces peuples leur musique et leur symphonie. Rien n’est plus aisé : car ces peuples ont du gout, et il ne faudroit pas beaucoup de tems pour les persuader d’abandonner leur concerts barbares qui déchirent les oreilles les plus dures, et leur faire aimer nos intrumens et notre musique’. Similarly, we can read in rev. Richard Eastcott’s *Sketches of the Origin, Progress and Effects of Music, with an Account of the Ancient Bards and Minstrels* (Bath, 1793), 256: ‘I have in my possession, a number of native airs, collected from different parts of Hindoostan, by Mr. William Bird, of Calcutta; and I was surprised to find by him, that accompaniments are totally unknown in every part of India; he says, that during a residence of nineteen years in India, and with the most favourable opportunities, he never heard the addition of a third or fifth, and that neither composers or performers have an idea beyond an octave. I bring this forward only as an extraordinary circumstance, considering the long intercourse which has subsisted between the people of that country and the Europeans.’

narrative, for example, when the music of the ‘lands of unprovided wretchedness’ were shown to have some power over cultivated European ears, and not random ones, but over those of Burney’s own musically-trained son who was affected by Tongan and Maori music. James Burney and his fellow explorers were also faced with a second problem: in the South Seas, musical accomplishment did not seem to be paired with social and cultural development. In Agnew’s words:

<EXT>As the two men [Georg Forster and James Burney] saw it, the problem that extended beyond the narrow preserve of music scholars to the broad-ranging interests of philosophers, historians, geographers, and social theorists was this: First, Tongans and Maori were simple people with unaccountably complex music; second, their music was surprisingly affecting ....<sup>63</sup></EXT>

The Tahitians, regarded as the most developed peoples of the archipelago, with their three-note scale ‘were thought to verge on the musically barbaric’.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, as observed by David Irving, ‘the existence of harmony was the measure by which James Burney determined the worth or sophistication of the respective musics’<sup>65</sup> but this measure seemed at odds with other cultural parameters. Regardless of his son’s observations and the proof of existing polyphonic practices in the South Seas, Burney senior did not retreat from classifying this musical tradition at the bottom of the scale of musical development. As assessed in a 1784 letter to Lord Sandwich, where Burney examined some remarks made by Captain Phillips about a live performance of music:

<EXT>Some of the circumstances seem, indeed, worth mentioning. Each performer having only one note consigned to him, which is regulated by the sound of his Bamboo, is something like the limited power of our ringers in a Belfry, where no one has more than a single sound to his share. During the infancy of Music, in Greece, the Syrinx had a Pipe for every sound, before a single pipe, by being perforated, produced the whole scale. Capt. Phillips’s Bamboo Story *implies infancy* in the South Sea Music.<sup>66</sup></EXT>

Polyphony and civilization seem, thus, to have been two powerfully allied members in the discourse and evaluation of non-western musics. The development of conjectural history and the adoption of the logic of ‘irresistible civilization’ offered a ready-made scheme to rank

---

<sup>63</sup> Vanessa Agnew, *Enlightenment Orpheus*, 99.

<sup>64</sup> Vanessa Agnew, ‘A Scots Orpheus in the South Seas: Encounter Music in Cook’s Second Voyage’, *Journal for Maritime Research*, 3/1 (2001), 1–27 at 14.

<sup>65</sup> David Irving, ‘The Pacific in the Minds and Music of Enlightenment Music’, *Eighteenth-century Music*, 2/2 (2005), 205–229 at 210.

<sup>66</sup> Charles Burney to Lord Sandwich, 11 Feb. 1784, *The Letters*, 407 (emphasis mine).



music according to a scale that considered western harmony as the supreme achievement. In this panorama there was seemingly no opportunity for foreign music traditions to depart from the path paved by the evolution of western art music: its footsteps had to be followed and retraced.

## A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE: WHEN BARBARISM BECAME ‘NATURAL SIMPLICITY’

As the intellectual world is always complex and nuanced, we have to emphasize that the idea that ‘we [Eighteenth-century Britons] live in the best of all possible worlds [and enjoy the best of possible musics]’, certainly did not go unchallenged. Civilization had also its foes, or—at least—its sharp critics.

The angle from which I will now approach our pair ‘national music and civilization’ is the one of the luxury debate that took place in the eighteenth-century, because it helps to better understand the cultural context and resonances of many judgements made about national musics. Here again we will come across the question of monody *versus* polyphony, but we will see that monody will find powerful advocates to claim a rightful place for pure melody in the Parnassus of Western music.

Luxury has always been a term (and a way of life) subject to criticism. The eighteenth century, with the birth of the ideology of civilization, marks a great discontinuity in the tradition of considerations about luxury. As is well known, it is especially thanks to Bernard Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* (1714) that we owe the huge debate that brought to new discussions equating the pursuit of luxury with the development of modern commercial societies and which attributed to luxury a positively connoted civilizing force. Mandeville, and later Hume, defined luxury as a ‘refinement in the gratification of the senses’ and it is important to stress that this refinement was not only ‘about goods, but about social behavior. It was increasingly perceived as a sociable activity’.<sup>67</sup> Discussions about taste, itself a sociable activity, were tightly woven into the luxury debate, taste itself being an instrument of luxury, of refinement of the senses. In themselves luxury, taste and civilization were neither negatively nor positively connoted. Luxury could be considered as conducive to civilization and a higher (indeed ‘fine’) taste, but it could also be considered as conducive to

---

<sup>67</sup> Maxine Berg and Elisabeth Eger (eds.), *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century. Debates, Desires, and Delectable Goods* (New York, 2003), 13

artificial refinement and disruptive of the social equilibrium.<sup>68</sup>

Refined taste *vs* natural taste were often discussed in musical context, changing in the last decades of the eighteenth century into a discussion between art music *vs* national music. But if in the context discussed in the previous paragraph western polyphonic music was normally made to assert its supremacy over other musical traditions without often facing contradictory positions, when the debate took place in an intra-European setting, where the national tradition could also sport its (published) supporters, things became different and the logic of luxury/refinement against nature/simplicity became prominent: what in the previous context was understood primarily as civilization *vs* barbarism transforms into luxury *vs* simplicity, with a consequent value reversal. In an essay entitled *On Music as an Amusement* (1779) Vicesimus Knox asked:<sup>69</sup>

<EXT>Of what kind is the music that delights those who are stigmatized by the name of the vulgar, but who possess all the faculties of perception, in a state undepraved by artificial refinement? Such persons are the unaltered sons of nature; and the sounds which universally please them, are sounds which nature intended should please, and for which she adapted the finely-susceptible sense. The drum, the fife, the trumpet, the harp, the bagpipe, and the dulcimer, are the instruments which inspire the lower ranks with joy and with courage, and which alleviate the sense of the greatest labours and the greatest dangers. If we were to suppose a Giardini condescending to play a fine Italian piece of music at a rural fair, there is little doubt but his audience would be stolen away from him by the itinerant performer on a Scotch bagpipe or the hurdy-gurdy. There are certain ballads, and certain tunes adapted to them, which are known to almost every individual in a nation, and which please on every repetition. The music, as well as the poetry of these, is simple in the extreme. The Scotch tunes have a sweetness which delights every ear unspoiled by the complex productions of laborious ingenuity, but which the Italian master knows not to intermix in his boasted composures. And yet, nothing can be more natural and easy than the sweet wild wood-notes<sup>70</sup> of the Highland

---

<sup>68</sup> Doubts about the benefices of civilization are often encountered in relation to contacts with other populations, as the Tahitian, who actually seemed to fare pretty well without (and prior to) western refinements. Richard Eastcott, at the end of his section about the ‘State of music among the Russians, Swedes, the Indians of the North America, and the inhabitants of the newly discovered Islands of the Pacific Ocean’, inserts the following reflection: ‘Let us look with pity on these *once* happy islanders, and reflect that natives of an enlightenment kingdom, without (as we have every reason to believe) premeditating evil, broke in upon their peace, and communicated little to them but what was destructive of their happiness’, *Sketches of the Origins, Progress, and Effects of Music, with an Account of the Ancient Bards and Minstrels* (Bath, 1793<sup>2</sup>), 249.

<sup>69</sup> Vicesimus Knox, *Essays Moral and Literary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London, 1779), II, 294–95.

<sup>70</sup> Very often Scottish songs are referred to as ‘native wood-notes wild’, which is actually a quote from Milton’s *L’Allegro* (v.134), originally referred to that ‘Fancy’s child’: Shakespeare.

swain.</EXT>

In Knox's rhetoric we notice the lexicon used in the 'luxury debate', eg. when he states that national music is a music 'undepraved' by artificial refinement, thereby implying a negative view of the refinement brought about by civilization. This way of approaching the topic of national music in the second half of the eighteenth century, and especially in Britain after the Ossian debate, benefitted from the attention it received through uncovering a (one hopes heroic) national past, endowed with peculiar and unique cultural features best expressed in poetry and song. The 'artlessness' of these songs, instead of being interpreted as a sign of poverty, came to be considered (of course not universally) as an expression of sublime beauty. In the words of Adam Ferguson:

<EXT>the artless song of the savage, the heroic legend of the bard, have sometimes a magnificent beauty, which no change of language can improve, and no refinements of the critic reform. Under the supposed disadvantage of a limited knowledge, and a rude apprehension, the simple poet has impressions that more than compensate the defects of his skill. The language of early ages is, in one respect, simple and confined; in another, it is varied and free: it allows liberties, which, to the poet of after-times, are denied. In rude ages men are not separated by distinctions of rank or profession. They live in one manner, and speak one dialect. The bard is not to chuse his expression among the singular accents of different conditions [...]. The name of every object, and every sentiment, is fixed; and if his conception has the dignity of nature, his expression will have a purity which does not depend on his choice.<sup>71</sup></EXT>

It is interesting to underline here that evaluation of 'the artless song of the savage' takes always place in the context of the irreversible logic of civilization: the bard's sublime production does not derive from a deliberate choice. It is the product of an 'original genius'. The coupling of the 'artless song of the savage' with the 'heroic bard' in this text also reminds us of the fact that in this period 'national' and 'natural' music were considered one and the same thing.

An influential author who unequivocally coupled the logic of progressive consumption to a civic loss was, from his very first and highly successful work, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>72</sup> The widely read *First Discourse*, winner of the Academy of Dijon's prize in 1750, asserted from the beginning that 'mind (*esprit*) has its needs, as does the body.

---

<sup>71</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 1767, 290 and *passim*.

<sup>72</sup> For an interpretation of Rousseau's critique against commercialization in the wider intellectual context of classical republicanism see Keith M. Baker, 'Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France', *Journal of Modern History*, 73 (2001), 32–53.

The needs of the body are the foundation of society, those of the mind make it agreeable. ... Letters and Arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful [than laws and governments], display garlands of flowers on the iron chains that lie on men's shoulders, stifle in them the feeling for that original liberty for which they seemed to be born, make them love their state of slavery and form what we call 'civilized people' (*peuples policés*).<sup>73</sup> Linked to his interpretation of the progress of civilization and of the arts were also Rousseau's views on simplicity and on the natural qualities of music, together with his endorsement of the power of melody and of the nature of genius: this philosophical interpretation of musical developments concurred to supply Scottish national music's cause with useful weapons.

## ORAL TRADITIONS AND 'ARTLESS SONGS': CHERISHING THE NATIONAL CHARACTERS OF MUSIC

As I already mentioned, judgements about art music vs national music were usually consistent with the side one took in the luxury debate. The typical discourse that was made by supporters of the refinements of civilization can be epitomized in the following quote by the rev. Richard Eastcott, author of *Sketches of the Origins, Progress, and Effects of Music* (1793):

<EXT>Dr. Blair says,<sup>74</sup> that the inequality of taste among men, is owing without doubt in part, to the different frame of their natures, to nicer organs, and finer internal powers, with which some are endowed beyond others. But if it be owing in part to nature, it is owing to education and culture still more. With respect to a taste for music, only the simplest, and plainest compositions are relished at first; use and practice extend our pleasure; teach us to relish finer melody, and by degrees enable us to enter into the intricate and compounded pleasures of harmony. To a common ear, the subject of a complex concerto or a chorus, as it is carried through the several parts, in an unmeaning jumble of sounds; few but of those who are acquainted with the principles of simultaneous harmony, or music in parts, feel its influence: the ear must have been a long time in the habits of improvement, before it

---

<sup>73</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts* (Genève, 1750), 'L'esprit a ses besoins, ainsi que le corps. Ceux-ci sont les fondements de la société, les autres en sont l'agrément. ...les sciences, les lettres et les arts, moins despotiques et plus puissants peut-être, étendent des guirlandes de fleurs sur les chaînes de fer dont ils sont chargés, étouffent en eux le sentiment de cette liberté originelle pour laquelle ils semblaient être nés, leur font aimer leur esclavage et en forment ce qu'on appelle des peuples policés.', 5–6.

<sup>74</sup> Reference here is to Hugh Blair's influential *Lectures on Rethoric and Belles Lettres* (Edinburgh, 1783).

can perceive beauties; it is not the *voice* of nature, but the *language* of education.<sup>75</sup></EXT>

However unappealing to Eastcott, the ‘voice of nature’ and the songs of her gifted sons gained an unprecedented reputation in eighteenth century Britain, were a re-evaluation of oral tradition was taking place. According to Hudson, scholars ‘began to recognize more clearly the special powers of speech not possessed by written language, a development that led to a deeper appreciation of so-called ‘primitive’ language in non-literate societies’<sup>76</sup> and a school of thought developed (Hudson quotes especially Rousseau and Thomas Sheridan) which contended that ‘the propagation of literacy and print culture had destroyed the expressive force of speech, rendering it toneless and cold’.<sup>77</sup> It is interesting to recall, for example, the remarks on Chinese writing made by the ballad collector Thomas Percy, editor of the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. In his *Dissertation on the Language and Characters of the Chinese*<sup>78</sup> Percy traced his own conjectural history of writing, itself articulated in the classical four stages: in the state of wild nature, hieroglyphic must have been the first written sign. The Egyptian hieroglyph type, capable of expressing also abstract ideas, was considered as representing the second stage. Chinese characters were considered as a third stage, constituted by arbitrary signs. European’s alphabetic writing was, needless to say, the representative of the fourth and last stage. Now, if other writers who stressed the beauty and musicality of Chinese language did so as real praise for Chinese culture, the same remark in Percy leads us to observe that the divorce between oral and written language in Chinese culture, combined with the hardship of learning Chinese characters, made the Chinese unfit for poetry, as their compositions were lacking in ‘that noble simplicity, which is only to be attained by the genuine study of nature, and of its artless beauties’.<sup>79</sup> In the

---

<sup>75</sup> Eastcott, *Sketches of the Origins, Progress, and Effects of Music*, 155.

<sup>76</sup> Nicholas Hudson, ‘Constructing Oral Tradition: the Origins of the Concept in Enlightenment Intellectual Culture’, in Adam Fox and Daniel Woolf (eds.), *The Spoken Word. Oral Culture in Britain, 1500–1850* (Manchester – New York, 2002), 240–255 at 242. Think of Rousseau’s straightforward assertion in his *Essai sur l’origine des langues*, ‘L’art d’écrire ne tient point à celui de parler. Il tient à des besoins d’une autre nature qui naissent plus tôt ou plus tard selon les circonstances tout à fait indépendantes de la durée des peuples’, in Raymond Trousson and Frédéric S. Eigeldinger (eds.), *Jean-Jacques Rousseau - Édition Thématique du Tricentenaire. Œuvres Complètes*, XII, (Geneva, 2012), 417.

<sup>77</sup> Nicholas Hudson, ‘Constructing Oral Tradition’, 246.

<sup>78</sup> Published in *Miscellaneous Pieces Relating to the Chinese* (London, 1762). The historical view on the development of writing starting with pictorial representations and proceeding with hieroglyphs was, of course, not new.

<sup>79</sup> For this quote and for the whole discussion about Percy’s theory of Chinese language I am indebted to Eun Kyung Min’s article ‘Percy’s Chinese Miscellanies and the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 43/3 (2010), 307–324 at 314–16.

Chinese case, according to Percy, writing destroyed the musico-poetical potential of the Chinese spoken language, because it focussed all the attention on itself and as a result the common language was neglected. Though his negative interpretation of the divorce between written and oral Chinese was original, we should stress that its logic is akin to Ferguson's remarks in support of the language 'of early ages', which not yet implied a separation between writing and oral language. These reflections found fertile soil in the intellectual endeavours such as those undertaken by Macpherson, who—in the words of Mulholland—created an 'oral voice' for the poet's speech,<sup>80</sup> and they were seminal in the re-evaluation of popular songs.

It is relevant to single out a specific feature of the reasoning about national music and its authors: what emerges is 'the important role that Scotland's native culture played in upper-class musical taste, in contrast to the elitist preference for Continental musical forms held elsewhere in Britain',<sup>81</sup> and which will be discussed later, when examining Burney's position toward national music. Scottish writers when dealing with their own tradition are apt to assert that, even if they don't expect others to fully understand their music, it conveys to them sublime ideas. For example James Beattie in his essay *On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition* refers to the *pibroch* 'which in every other country would appear a jumble of unmeaning sounds' but which 'may communicate sublime impressions to a highlander of Scotland'. In a footnote Beattie explains that the *pibroch*'s rhythm 'is so irregular, and its notes, especially in the quick movement, so mixed and huddled together, that a stranger finds it almost impossible to reconcile his ear to it, so as to perceive its modulation'.<sup>82</sup> This observation is extremely interesting, because it gave a strong counter-argument to the idea, which we have found in Eastcott's quote, that it was only 'art music' which required training to be appreciated and understood. James Beattie and John Gregory have been singled out as the two Scottish philosophers who most influenced the learned discussion about 'National music'. Indeed Beattie devotes a whole paragraph of his *Essay on Music and Poetry as they affect the mind* to the topic 'Conjectures on some peculiarities of National Music', where he discusses both Italian and Scottish music from the point of view of 'national Taste'. As pointed out by Matthew Gelbart, a significant aspect of Beattie's conjectural history of Scottish National music is that he doesn't only trace back the origins of Scottish songs to the

---

<sup>80</sup> See James Mulholland, 'James Macpherson's Ossian Poems, Oral Traditions, and the Invention of Voice', *Oral Tradition*, 24/2 (2009), 393–414.

<sup>81</sup> Claire Nelson, 'Tea-table miscellanies: The Development of Scotland's Song Culture, 1720–1800', *Early Music*, 28/4 (2000), 599.

<sup>82</sup> James Beattie, *On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition* in *Essays* (Edinburgh, 1778), 442.

noble and respected bards, but rather he believes that ‘it took its rise among men who were real shepherds, and who actually felt the sentiments and affections, whereof it is so very expressive’.<sup>83</sup> The so-called ‘artless simplicity’ of Scottish music is taken as a proof of its antiquity, together with its use of the ‘plain diatonic scale, without using the semitones, or sharps and flats’. The use of a pentatonic scale is actually the tool which the author of the *Dissertation on the Scottish Music*, William Tytler, embraced to distinguish ancient compositions from modern ones in his conjectural history—needless to say, in four stages—of Scottish songs. As Beattie stressed, he wished to discuss Scottish songs in his chapter on National Music because Scottish songs had something peculiar that singled them out, just as much as Italian music (making here no distinction between art and national music); Tytler too underlines the exceptionality of Scottish songs, ‘flights of genius, devoid of art’: ‘It were endless to run through the many fine airs expressive of sentiment and passion, in the number of our Scots songs, which, when sung in the genuine natural manner, must affect the heart of every person of feeling, whose taste is not vitiated and seduced by fashion and novelty.’<sup>84</sup> As happened here, Scottish writers would often elevate the taste for their songs to a ‘new, but old’ universal taste, and this was especially possible thanks to the ideology of conjectural history, which dictated that in the earliest stages of humanity cultural differentiation was almost non-existent. If ‘Scots tunes’ were the expression of these first cries of mankind, the taste they presuppose must be trans-culturally sharable (that’s why Chinese people were supposed to like Scottish tunes!). Beattie’s consideration about the *pibroch*, however, undeniably goes in another direction, which is the one that asserts that for any music to be fully appreciated it must be considered in its own terms, and cultural context.

In Tytler’s quote above we can once again notice the use the lexicon of the luxury debate, and I would like to return to it in the conclusion of this section. Many studies relating to balladry, to the birth of the idea of ‘folk music’ and ‘oral tradition’ have highlighted important facets of the cultural shift that took place especially in the second half of the eighteenth century: they rightly emphasize the peculiar political situation of Britain after the Act of Union and in post-Culloden Scotland, the rise of Britain as an imperial power, the role antiquary learning played in shaping a collective identity and the quest for origins. I would like to add to all these crucial elements a hint to the fact that the conspicuous presence of the typical language of the ‘luxury debate’ to describe the characteristics of National music, allows us to maintain that concerns about the aesthetics of luxury also had a powerful hold

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibidem, 189.

<sup>84</sup> William Tytler, *Dissertation on the Scottish Music* appended to Hugo Arnot, *The History of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1816), 498.

on discussions about taste and the arts.<sup>85</sup>

In the eighteenth century a new sensibility for the national characters of music began to spread in various parts of the western world, and the premises for this cultural shift were rooted in contemporary discourses about human diversity, history, oral traditions and national origins. The interest in the origin of civilization, and in the origin of one's own culture, together with the need to distance one's self from a common monogenetic origin from classic culture, and the new fashion for direct or mediated travel experiences helped to put into historical perspective cultural products, such as songs, making them into a *national* phenomenon. The Scottish literati, with Macpherson's great epic at their head, bestowing dignity on their 'rude and noble' national past fostered an appreciation for the kind of 'sublime beauty' provided by the vestiges of their pre-commercial (and therefore pre-luxuriant) society. In so doing, while being no revolutionaries, they somewhat unsettled the classical élite discourse of hegemonic 'polite taste' by admitting the existence of a taste (national, but with claims of universality when stressing the virtually universal appreciation of Scots tunes and Ossianic poetry) possessed by persons of feeling for 'artless but ingenious' products of culture. Though not polyphonic, and not related to the 'heights of civility', the beauties of national (western) music could begin to be publicly acknowledged. The discussion about Scottish musical and poetical production shows the richness of this peculiar *contact zone*, defined—in the words of Marie-Louise Pratt—as a social space 'where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination'.<sup>86</sup> Scottish ballad and song culture is a social space where popular and literate cultures meet (where the second tries to dominate the first by selecting appropriate traditions to be preserved, and letting anything considered inappropriate sink into oblivion, especially popular political culture),<sup>87</sup> but it is also a space where different literate perspectives clash and grapple.

---

<sup>85</sup> The volume *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century* indeed recognised such an influence, by devoting the third section of the book to 'Beauty, Taste and Sensibility'. The three chapters of this section, however, only relate to the 'important relationship between visual and literary culture in the development of an aesthetic of luxury' (3). The auditory dimension is completely absent.

<sup>86</sup> Marie Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New-York, 1992), 4.

<sup>87</sup> On the topic of the selection in the type of popular song being admitted as worth conserving, see e.g. P. McDowell, "'The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of Ballad-Making": Broadside Ballads in Long Eighteenth-Century Ballad Discourse', *The Eighteenth Century*, 47/2 (2006), 151–178.



## FEEDING ON ACORNS: BURNEY'S VIEW OF NATIONAL MUSICS

I wish to conclude this article by focusing on the undulating considerations of a prominent judge of musical matters in the eighteenth century: Charles Burney. We have already in part analyzed Burney's approach to the study of national musics. That the topic was relevant to him, we cannot doubt from the evidence of the efforts he employed to gather information from around the world. That his historical view of music was progress-oriented and that he esteemed polyphonic practice to be the peak (and destiny) of any musical development we also cannot doubt. It is easy to infer from these observations that his judgements about national musics (whether western or not) will hardly be positive. There are a few episodes of Burney's tour in Germany that give us a flavor of what discussing the topic of national musics with Dr. Burney might have looked like. I will refer to two of them. The first one is an encounter occurred in 1771 with Lord Marischal (George Keith, c.1693–1778), an exiled Jacobite. The discussion between the two men is thus painted by the celebrated music historian:

<EXT>as to music, he said, that I was unfortunate in being addressed to him, for he was such a Goth, as neither to know any thing of it, nor to like any music, but that of his own country bagpipes. On this occasion, he was very pleasant upon himself: here ensued a discussion of Scots music, and Erse poetry; after which, his lordship said, "but lest you should think me too insensible to the power of sound, I must tell you, that I have made a collection of *national tunes* of almost all the countries on the globe, which I believe I can shew you". After a search, made by himself, the book was found, and I was made to sing the whole collection through, without an instrument; during which time, he had an anecdote for every tune. When I had done, his lordship kindly wrote down a list of all such tunes as had pleased me most by their oddity and originality, of which he promised me copies, and then ordered a Scots piper, one of his domestics, to play to me some Spanish and Scots tunes, which were not in the collection; "but play them in the garden, says he, for these fine Italianised folks cannot bear our rude music near their delicate ears."</EXT>

This episode is telling in many ways and we regret not having Marischal's version of the encounter. National songs are here the object of polite conversation, but Lord Marischal seems to proceed cautiously, in order to see if his interlocutor, being "Italianised", considers the topic worthy. The fact that their chat proceeds with the discussion and performance of national music shows that Marischal must have found fertile soil; nevertheless, an evident uneasiness shines through (sending the piper into the garden) when discussing national music with Burney, especially when one bears in mind how Burney reworked his experience in literary form, writing publicly about his sources always in commendatory terms. Burney

would never have inserted here anything critical about his host, but note also the neutrality of his narrative, that says almost nothing of his true reactions to the music he was presented with. An even more interesting example is the one of the encounter with the celebrated musician and theoretician Schubart, and the reason of interest here is that in this case we have also Schubart's version of his encounter with Burney. In the words of our musical traveller:

<EXT>[Schubart] was the first real great harpsichord player that I had hitherto met with in Germany, as well as the first who seemed to think the object of my journey was, in some measure, a national concern. ... In the evening, he had the attention to collect together, at his house, three or four boors, in order to let me hear them play and sing *national music*, concerning which, I had expressed great curiosity.<sup>88</sup></EXT>

Burney's reference to his episode is again very neutral, only talking about his 'curiosity', but saying nothing of his reaction to the music he heard. Schubart's recollection sounds quite different:

<EXT>[...] particularly enjoyable and instructive was the visit payed to me by the, at the time, one and only musical Doctor of Europe: Burney. I was sorry that just at that time the town's orchestra was away with the Duke, so I tried to provide in the best way I could for the failing of the main goal of his visit. Burney was looking for German music, and in Ludwigsburg it was impossible to find it as the present music was a branch chopped off the big Italian trunk, and planted on Swabian soil. I tried to give him an idea of original German dances, let Swabian folk dances (Schleifer und Dräher) be played to him, let him listen to national songs, and I myself played Chorals and anything that came to my mind that was not iced with Italian or French taste, but was truly German. But Burney travelled too fast, and let his judgements out too hurriedly and boldly. His knowledge was also shallower than one would have expected from his remarks on the characteristics of German, French and Italian music.<sup>89</sup></EXT>

---

<sup>88</sup> Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands, and United Provinces* (London, 1773), 105–8.

<sup>89</sup> Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart, *Leben und Gesinnungen, von ihm selbst im Kerker aufgesetzt* (Stuttgart, 1791), I, 'sonderlich war mir der Besuch des damals einzigen Doktors der Musik in Europa, Burney, sehr angenehm und lehrreich. Ich bedauerte, daß just dazumal das Orchester mit dem Herzog entfernt war, und suchte ihm die Verrückung seines Hauptzweckes so gut zu ersetzen, als es mit möglich war. Burney wollte deutsche Musik aufsuchen, und die konnt' er in Ludwigsburg ganz und gar nicht finden, denn die dasige Musik war einer der schönsten Aeste von grossen welschen Stamme abgehauen, und auf schwabischen Grund und Boden verpflanzt. Ich half ihm zu einigem Begriffe von ursprünglich deutschem Tanze, ließ ihm schwäbische Schleifer und Dräher vorgeigen, Nationalgesänge vorsingen, spielte ihm selbst Choräle und Alles vor, wovon ich

According to this narrative, Burney in the flesh must have been less neutral and more dismissive than his own story lets us imagine. Schubart reckons Burney lacked specific ‘knowledge’ to judge the music he heard, and that he let out his judgements without weighing them. As Agnew recognised, ‘Schubart implied that Burney [in his German tour] had heard only what he wanted to hear and been deaf to the music that really counted’.<sup>90</sup> Interestingly enough, what Schubart would have asked of Burney is that which was almost always denied in the examination of the “music of the Other”: to consider it in its own terms.

For all of his interest in the matter, a lack of sympathy for the qualities of national musics is perhaps nowhere better witnessed than in the example of Scottish melodies. And besides, who could have expected it to be otherwise from this ‘Italianised folk’, champion of élite taste, and of the refinements of ‘art music’, devoted friend to Samuel Johnson, himself a harsh critic of Macpherson’s works? What is curious in this history is that actually our music historian was less critical on the subject of ‘national poetry’ than one would have expected, paralleled to the subject of ‘national music’.

It is to Roger Lonsdale’s two articles published in 1964 on ‘Dr. Burney and the *Monthly Review*’ that we owe the first reference to Burney’s different attitude towards literary and musical national products: ‘The new demand – in most cases a combination of primitivism and nationalistic antiquarianism – was for a return to ‘nature’ and to ‘simplicity’. Burney’s response to it varied: to its musical manifestations he was consistently antagonistic, but in so far as it affected literature he was unusually open-minded’.<sup>91</sup> And it is to this seemingly uncoherent position that we will turn our attention.

Nowhere, perhaps, can we have a better glimpse of Burney’s “real” character than in his reviews, where anonymity permitted him to show a sour mood not usually displayed in public writings.<sup>92</sup> Lonsdale points to the fact that when Burney reviewed poetical works such

---

wußte, daß es mit welschem oder französischem Geschmacke nicht kandirt, sondern ächt deutsch war. Aber Burney reiße überhaupt zu geschwind, und urtheilte zu rasch und kühn, auch hatte er zu untiefe Kenntnisse, als daß man von seinen Bemerkungen das Charakteristische der deutschen, welschen und französischen Musik hätte abziehen können.’, 135–36. For a discussion on the use of the term ‘welsch’, see Agnew, *Enlightenment Orpheus*, 189, note 248.

<sup>90</sup> *Enlightenment Orpheus*, 68.

<sup>91</sup> Roger Lonsdale, ‘Dr. Burney and the *Monthly Review*’, *The Review of English Studies*, 14/56 (1963), 346–358 and 15/57 (1964), 27–37 at 33.

<sup>92</sup> As documented, for example, in Lonsdale’s article, Burney sometimes made scathing reviews of books by people he corresponded with and who considered him as a friend. The Irish antiquarian Joseph Cooper Walker, whose correspondence with Burney we have quoted in the previous paragraph, was one of his unaware victims.

as those of Robert Anderson (1770–1833), who wrote dialectal poetry, our historian of music praised this ‘rural bard’s’ poetical merits and even found him ‘not sufficiently wild and inaccurate’.<sup>93</sup> Later in that same year Burney reviews the anonymously published *Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth) and again we find a sincere appreciation of the poet’s merits, though in the opening general considerations we find the kind of statements we would have expected to be dominant with the musical Doctor’s critique of this kind of poetry:

<EXT>Would it not be degrading poetry, as well as the English language, to go back to the barbarous and uncouth numbers of Chaucer? [...] None but savages have submitted to eat acorns after corn was found. – We will allow that the author before us has the art of cooking his acorns well, and that he makes a very palatable dish of them of *jours maigres* [...]. We have had pleasure in reading the *reliques of antient poetry*,<sup>94</sup> because it was antient; and because we were surprised to find so many beautiful thoughts in the rude numbers of barbarous times. These reasons will not apply to *imitations* of antique versification.<sup>95</sup></EXT>

In the appreciation of the *Reliques* by reason of their being ancient, we find clearly depicted what has been recognised as a typical attitude of a late eighteenth-century discourse on rhetoric and belles-lettres that strains in contrary directions. In the words of the editors of *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, on the one hand there is the historical integrity of primitive cultural conditions which ‘opened philosophical space for “Romantic” projects of revival. On the other, its ideological commitment to politeness tended to condemn regional vernacular forms, those contemporaneous “relics” of traditional ways of life, as “rude and barbarous”, obsolescent and moribund’.<sup>96</sup>

We can also conjecture that if Burney’s praise of Robertson’s poetry did not elicit the same kind of critique here deployed (with his all-time favourite culinary metaphor of corns and acorns) it was because he did not feel as moved as he did by Wordsworth’s poetry and therefore he also felt it less ‘dangerous’. When we read Burney’s comments on the single specimens of the *Lyrical Ballads* one praise follows the other (‘a strain of true and beautiful poetry’, ‘beautiful sentiments of a polished mind’, a ‘portrait, admirably painted’, ‘ingenious and natural’, etc.). If poetical acorns were considered edible, authors who instead tried to promote the view that music ‘ingenious and natural’ was also tasty, encountered Burney’s

---

<sup>93</sup> *The Monthly Review*, May 1799: 104–105.

<sup>94</sup> Burney’s reference here is to Percy’s work, *Reliques on Ancient English Poetry*.

<sup>95</sup> *The Monthly Review*, June 1799, 202–203.

<sup>96</sup> *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, ed. by Ian Duncan, Leith Davis and Janet Sorensen (Cambridge University Press: 2004), 12

unmediated wrath. As we have already mentioned, Burney's correspondent Joseph Cooper Walker's book on the *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (London: 1786), reviewed in the *Monthly Review* (December 1787), paid the price of such an attitude and was ridiculed by him.<sup>97</sup> It is however in Burney's review of Thomas Robertson's *Inquiry into the Fine Arts* published in the *Monthly Review* in the same year 1786 that we find the most scathing words. Being lengthy, the review was spread over two issues (March and April). Each of them deserves one long quote. In the March issue, Burney makes a first attack centred on the idea that if Robertson's aim was to talk about the 'fine arts', then Scottish music shouldn't have been there:

<EXT>After bestowing so many pages on definitions and rules of composition, the Author, in pure predilection for the wild and national music of Scotland, tells us, that 'nothing sometimes misleads so much as the very term *rule*. In the Scottish music, *some of the finest melodies in Europe* begin in one key, and end in another.' But whoever undertakes to write a grammar of the English tongue, means to recommend pure English, such as is spoken by well educated people at court and in the capital, and written by the learned; not the *patois* and jargon of Devonshire, Yorkshire, or Scotland. The ploughman's language, or the ploughman's whistle, wants no treatise or masters: our Author set off with music as one of the *fine arts*; and now it is debased by artists, and best in a native and unprincipled garb.<sup>98</sup></EXT>

It is however at the end of his review that Burney gives the severest blow not only to Robertson, but to all the authors who dared to support a taste for national Scottish melodies:

<EXT>We honour our Author's patriotism on all occasions, though we have hitherto let it pass in silence. The triumph with which he always speaks 'of those charming songs, which took their birth in happy intervals of peace,' and which, if regarded only as national, natural and artless tunes, must be allowed to be characteristic, simple, pleasing, and often affecting; but when they are opposed to works of the greatest art and refinement; to the learning of church music, the colouring of dramatic, and the invention, grace, fire, and effects of instrumental music for the chamber, we must say that they are over-rated; and that *the natives of Scotland, with respect to music, considered as a fine art*,

---

<sup>97</sup> The general tone used by Burney is such: 'The *dress* of the Irish Bards has been thought as worthy of inquiry and dissertation as the wardrobe of an African prince, or European damer; as if the luxury of *truisse*, or *shoes*, was ever known to a wild Irish minstrel'. On Walker's *Historical Memoirs* see Leith Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender. The Construction of Irish National Identity, 1724–1874* (Notre Dame, 2006), esp. chap.2 'Harping on the Past: Joseph Cooper Walker's *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* and the "Horizontal Brotherhood" of the Irish nation'.

<sup>98</sup> *The Monthly Review*, March 1786: 194–95.

*are as yet wholly uncivilized; and will listen to no music but their own wild strains.*<sup>99</sup></EXT>

Here they are, our three elements, all together. Polyphony (the ‘works of the greatest art’), civilization (the ‘wholly uncivilized’ Scots), and National song. What the same Burney that judged the music of the Chinese and of the South Sea Islands by the standards of western polyphony (finding them deficient) could not stand, is that someone else did the same kind of operation to the advantage of National music. The taste for refined music and the taste for ‘artless tunes’ cannot be considered in this case on equal footing. His practice of comparing specimens of national foreign music to western ‘art music’ felt legitimate in that it served to show that the ‘Others’ variously considered were still in the ‘infancy of civilisation’, that they proved to be at best at the same stage of musical civilisation as the Ancient Greeks had been (indeed a very low state according to our Dr.). But the idea of a learned British man of the eighteenth-century praising a form of national music ‘wild and irregular’ went against all that was dear to Burney, and against all he strived for in his difficult life: legitimating musical studies and activities, making them an important part of the polite world. We feel indeed the same kind of fear and resentment in the anonymous German reviewer of Dalberg’s edition of William Jones’ *Über die Musik des Indier*, who—as highlighted by David Gramit—criticizes the praise of Indian music pointing to the fact that the author and editor ‘confuse poverty with simplicity and clumsiness with originality and sensible daring, in support of the value of Indian music’. In his critique, the author states that whether in the reviewed book ‘the *special worth* of Indian music is established, upon which the author insists so powerfully that he seeks to overshadow even our own progress in music by contrast [...] – that is another question, which this reviewer has no hesitation at all in *denying*’.<sup>100</sup> Once again: élite culture ‘strikes back’ whenever it feels a (real, or—more frequently—imaginary) threat from a ‘subordinate’ tradition.

## CONCLUSIONS

In our intellectual journey we have examined the interplay between three interpretative categories. The various combinations of our triad provided different answers to some of the core musical questions of the age: is music’s action universal or relative? on what grounds can one form of music be called superior to another?

That the action of any music could be universal was clearly disputed. Burney’s

---

<sup>99</sup> *The Monthly Review*, April 1786: 248. (Emphasis mine)

<sup>100</sup> Quoted in David Gramit, *Cultivating Music*, 30.

attempt to lure the Chinese into the appreciation of polyphonic music proved, if anything, that western art music did not have the same effect on every listener. European music had lost its universal Orphic powers in leaving savagery for civilization and learned Europeans could accept this outcome by asserting, as they did, that listeners who didn't appreciate their music were just not ready for it, not polished enough. So the question 'on what grounds could one form of music be called superior to another' could be thus officially answered: 'on the grounds of the grade of civilization attained by the people who originate (and write about) these forms of music'. Though Agnew has shown how, for example, the power of the music heard by the British in the South Seas did not leave them indifferent to it, she has also emphasized how this experience did not influence the aesthetic views expressed in polite writing and elite theoretical undertakings. In this respect it is the discussion set in the Scottish context about 'national music' that must have seemed, and posed, the major threat to theoreticians à-la Burney, as Scottish writers did indeed claim the universal power of their music, stressing its diffusion and popularity all over Europe (and indeed elaborated marketing strategies to sell counterfeit, "tamed" versions of their music, commissioning Scottish pieces to foreign celebrated composers), and their claims, coupled with the dignity attained by antiquarian researches on national pasts, and by the dignity bestowed on Scottish music by learned and widely read man such as James Beattie, provoked the hard reaction of Burney. Burney the Englishman who clearly had no interest in Scotland's battle for self-recognition and identity, and Burney the Englishman who during all of his life promoted exactly the kind of music that was always opposed to the Scottish one: the refined, luxuriant, civilized Italian music. In his writings, our historian of music created a typical narrative of empire, 'a literature based largely on the racial inferiority of non-Western (European) peoples, but one equally well adapted to denigrate all peoples, domestic or foreign, perceived to be lower placed in the sliding scale of geographical or social ranking'.<sup>101</sup> Burney clearly considered music as a unit and we have seen first-hand that, while trying to gather information about the musics from distant lands, he acted having in mind a 'history of *music*' and not a 'history of *musics*'. Ironically, the words Bohlman used a few years ago to describe a phenomenon typical to twentieth-century musicology, could be used to describe Burney's attitude too, letting us catch a glimpse of an encrusted habit in the way of practising our discipline: 'Music, alone as an essentialised symbolic system, is a construction of the Western image of itself. Other people can be fitted to this system, but they must march in Hegelian fashion through history toward the Western privilege accorded by Central

---

<sup>101</sup> Bennet Zon, *Representing non-Western Music in Nineteenth Century Britain*, 21

Europe to itself'.<sup>102</sup> The polyphonic ideal has proved crucial in shaping this image of itself and has been used as a yardstick for all the other musical cultures. Although, as I have previously stated, Burney would have been the best suited man in the eighteenth century to write a history of world music, we have to acknowledge that his would have been in any case a very 'western history' of world music. As Bohlman has it, 'historians of Western music are primarily interested in celebrating selfness—their music history, the world wherein they live—and the historians who engage with world music [...] are primarily interested in proclaiming otherness'.<sup>103</sup> Burney's way of studying the music of non-Western traditions shows that in a certain way he did not 'engage' with world music: it was useful to him to celebrate his own tradition with its dear corn fields. In his contribution *On world music as a concept in the history of music scholarship* Nettl declares that 'scholars and scientists coming from Western culture and seeing music as basically a unit were, while perhaps using a basic assumption that each society has its own "music", inclined to feel that at some level, all of the world's musics are one, and that whatever the differences among them, in some respects they must have had a common origin'.<sup>104</sup> We can add that according to many scholars in the eighteenth century they not only had a common origin, but also shared the same end: the end of western music to become world music.<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> Philip V. Bohlman, 'Musicology as a Political Act', *The Journal of Musicology*, 11/4, 1993, 411–436:426.

<sup>103</sup> Id., *The Cambridge History of World Music*, 2.

<sup>104</sup> Bruno Nettl, 'On world music as a concept in the history of music scholarship', in *The Cambridge History of World Music*, 25.

<sup>105</sup> See Nicholas Cook's contribution to *The Cambridge History of World Music*, 'Western music as world music', 75–99.