**Secret Knots and Centaurs: Archaeologies of Style and Music in the Long Eighteenth Century**

Style is a centaur, joining what nature, it would seem, has decreed must be kept apart. It is form and content, woven into the texture of every art and every craft—including history. Apart from a few mechanical tricks of rhetoric, manner is indissolubly linked to matter; style shapes, and in turn is shaped by substance.

---Peter Gay, *Style in History* (1974)

There is nothing inevitable about the life course of an organism—nothing other than death, that is. The vicissitudes of organic life are just as much a matter of accumulating contingencies as is the fate of a musical work or style.

---Holly Watkins, *Musical Vitalities* (2018)

Mythological creature, curious and obstinate hybrid: style the centaur. This “familiar yet really strange being”[[1]](#footnote-1) is animated by a principle, known and yet unknown, a logic only liminally natural—intricate, malleable, permeant. This dissertation argues for renewed critical engagement with the concept of style both in and as music. Starting from the heightened ideological importance of style in several mid eighteenth-century European environments, I show that a revised history of the “style concept” in musical practice opens up subversive new perspectives on profoundly current questions—about sound and inscription, body and tool, human and nonhuman, sign and material, nature and culture. It may even be that “style” names an elusive configuration that modernity cannot do without.

To say that style criticism is currently out of fashion would be an understatement. Today, the very concept of style connotes discredited regimes of art connoisseurship, presumptuous forms of humanism and anthropocentrism, and colonial taxonomies of nature and culture.  And yet the word persists peripherally in the terminological vernacular of even the most modish corners of music studies, though it rarely receives sustained attention, useful in part because the term remains so unfocused and undertheorized. Rachel Mundy—one of the few music scholars to have discussed the style concept at any length of late—has argued that even the most casual usage should give music scholars pause.[[2]](#footnote-2) The style concept, she reveals, has a heavily freighted history, not easily or even desirably overcome: “style” will always produce and reinscribe problematic binaries between European and other, human subject and world, nature and culture.

Her argument is hard to disagree with, in part because she treats the nineteenth-century development of musical *Stilkritik*, with its undisguised indebtedness to evolutionary cultural politics, as coextensive with the historical style concept itself. The evolutionary models of musical style formulated by disciplinary founding fathers like Guido Adler were explicitly based on biologically conceived typologies—what Mundy terms “audiotypes.” This conception of style was accordingly bound up with contemporaneous projects of racial categorization, which readily situated a particular kind of “western” music at the top of a “biocultural hierarchy.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The explicit racism of these typologies, and their reliance on discredited appropriations of Darwinian theory, eventually became anathema amid the political and intellectual tussles of the early twentieth century, leading to a retreat into the supposedly autonomous and bio-culturally divested musical work. Yet the prewar audiotypes persisted, Mundy claims, now submerged, in this formalist context—only to be rediscovered and denounced once more with the “new musicology” of the 1980s and 1990s. The problematic cultural politics that pervades the nineteenth and twentieth-century history of the style concept can only be surmounted, Mundy argues, by dismantling its conceptual basis: its humanism. Style will always describe an egregious and irredeemable anthropocentrism, predicated on essentializing and “biologizing” human culture.[[4]](#footnote-4) As a solution, she proposes a new disciplinary paradigm, the “animanities”—the study of living cultures not restricted to the human species—in order to move past humanistic inquiry and categorization. Rather than rethink style as a theoretical category—her project does not require her to escape the equation of style and biology—Mundy does away with the human. But this move does not fully account for the persistence of style, or musical audiotypes. She does not make clear whether audiotypes are the mere product of humanist fantasy or whether, however crudely, they delineate a more generalizable form of biosemiosis. Is style rescued and cleansed by provincializing the human? Or should scholars and critics dispense with the style concept—and its untidy and unresolved tensions between nature and culture—altogether?

This project proposes an alternative approach to the philosophical aporias and political challenges presented by musical style, beginning with a return to earlier, eighteenth-century conceptions of style that predate the taxonomies and binary oppositions critiqued by Mundy. In the eighteenth century, we glimpse conceptions of style that were, I argue, yet to congeal into the institutionalized hierarchies and racialized schemas of nineteenth-century disciplinarity. Consider, for example, the 1765 entry on style written by Louis, chevalier de Jaucourt in the *Encyclopédie*.He describes style in terms typical of the period, as a content-derived and prescriptive mode of expression and verbal arrangement in either speech or writing conceived after particular ancient rhetorical models. Maintaining that style should change according to content, even within a single work, Jaucourt proceeds to an intriguing comparison: “as in matter everything holds together linked by secret knots, everything has to hold together and be linked through style.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Though style merely clothes content with appropriate rhetoric, here Jaucourt suggests that the “secret knots” of style are themselves a kind of matter—perhaps unknowable or mysteriously gathered—necessary for literary integrity. Indeed, his entry opens, tellingly, with an acknowledgement that style had formerly referred to the needle (*stilus*) used to write on wax tablets. Jaucourt describes the needle in some detail: pointed at one end and flat on the other, meant for writing and erasures both—a design that prompted Horace to aphorize “*soepe* [sic.] *stylum vertas*,” “erase often.”[[6]](#footnote-6) With these oblique forms of eighteenth-century stylistic materialism in mind, I ask how music scholars might articulate the relation of style as rhetoric to style as matter. Is it possible to reconceive and remake the history of musical style via tools, instruments, and practices of inscription and erasure?

**Styling the Human**

Scholars outside of music studies have been turning to the style concept once again—though fitfully, and without a coherent disciplinary program. Richard Neer and Jeff Dolven, writing from the perspectives of art history and literary criticism, are two of the most prominent recent theorizers of style: they treat style as an unavoidable discursive device, shaping every dimension of human thought and habit. The appeal of returning to style is clear. To talk of style is to return to foundational questions about the relation of humanity to nature, questions that are newly fraught and politically contested in our increasingly posthuman humanities. In Neer’s analysis, these questions are raised most bluntly in the primordial Enlightenment scene of encounter described by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*. Kant famously insists that art is a consequence of “production through freedom” (that is, of choice grounded in reason): the honeycombs of bees, he argues, may be called “art” only by analogy. He elaborates with a kind of parable:

If someone searching through a moorland bog finds, as sometimes happens, a piece of carved wood, he does not say that it is a product of nature, but of art; the cause that produced it conceived of an end, which the wood has to thank for its form. In other cases too one sees an art in everything that is so constituted that a representation of it in its cause must have preceded its reality (as even in the case of bees), although it may not exactly have thought of the effect; but if something is called a work of art without qualification, in order to distinguish it from an effect of nature, then by that is always understood a work of human beings.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The bog-walker, in other words, discerns something human about the piece of carved wood he discovers. The mysterious piece of wood thus becomes an artifact—a thing in the “style of humans,” as Neer puts it.[[8]](#footnote-8) Yet this apparently elementary act of classifying—what Neer terms “degree-zero connoisseurship,”[[9]](#footnote-9) or the one-on-one confrontation with artifacts (especially in archaeological settings)—is actually quite extraordinary. This scenario—characteristically Kantian in its reduction of a complex web of negotiations and judgments to a simple confrontation between interpreting subject and ambiguous object—is thinkable only through a generalized, prior, and tacitly shared concept of style: there is “nothing before or outside style,”[[10]](#footnote-10) Neer concludes. This is a Wittgensteinian conception of style as *Lebensform*: a communal and productively inexact part of the human language game that produces the distinction between archaeology and geology.[[11]](#footnote-11) “Neither quite ordinary nor quite exceptional, connoisseurship is a boggy and swampy sort of enterprise, exemplary precisely in its shiftiness and uncertainty,”[[12]](#footnote-12) writes Neer. Productive imprecision is constitutive, then, of style, stylistic etiology, and perhaps even the human itself. If style and style criticism are thus, in Neer’s view, far from being relics of “elitism, subjectivism, and radical individualism,”[[13]](#footnote-13) as Mundy implies, they nonetheless index, in their very swampiness, primarily human feats of creativity and discrimination.

The constitutive precarity of the myriad ways in which the style concept is used serves as the starting point for the wide-ranging discussion by the literary critic and poet Jeff Dolven.[[14]](#footnote-14) Investigating what he calls the four ironies of style—part and whole, art and nature, individual and group, description and judgment—Dolven argues that each irony commits “style” to a middle space, allowing for a practical suspension and easy movement between two otherwise uncomfortable or even incompatible extremes: the word, he claims, creates a “human space in between the stringency of our thinking categories.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In its role as a mediating or middle term, Dolven’s style is thus a way in which humans continue and connect—in thought, creativity, and action. Its basic operation is imitation: style is nothing less than the “management of the predicament of our imitative essence,” argues Dolven.[[16]](#footnote-16) As this formulation suggests, Dolven conceives style as a transpersonal but essentially human phenomenon: nature has no style, he insists, because nature does not imitate itself in the same ways that humans imitate ourselves and each other.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Both Neer and Dolven imply that style is uniquely human—that it may even delineate, in its swampiness and liminality, the human altogether. In a disciplinary moment when sign-making and semiosis—activities that were, in the Enlightenment outlook, self-evidently and exclusively human—have been extended to animals, plants, and other nonhuman beings and things, such humanly inflected senses of style seem questionable at best. But this dissertation does not argue for the sympathetic extension of signifying potential, consciousness, or agency to “nonhuman” things through the concept of style. Rather, I retain something of the enduring and productive ambiguity that animates the style concept—including the moments in which it uncertainly appears to articulate and rearticulate humanness and otherness. That style is inextricably bound up with the human is obvious. And Neer, Dolven, and Mundy all make clear the challenge in thinking style or the concept of style otherwise, as something neither human nor nonhuman, neither nature nor culture.

**Material Style**

The question of nature-culture entanglements, and thus of human-nonhuman imbrications, is at the center of recent forms of materialism across the humanities. Scholars have for some time explored literary techniques—printing and inscription, but also metaphor and narrative—as substantive and material, and hence not exclusively or primarily lying within the domain of the human or “cultural.” One strain of literary criticism emphasizes in particular the materialist conceptions of figuration that, as Natania Meeker has shown, emerged in eighteenth-century natural philosophy and aesthetics, in works by French authors such as Julien Offray de la Mettrie and Denis Diderot.[[18]](#footnote-18) For Amanda Jo Goldstein, who focuses on the figurative strategies and Lucretian philosophies of romantic poetry and science, “figuration” should not be taken to mean mere rhetorical fabulations but rather the material world-making processes of poetic language. Figures, “fractions of the real estranged from their sources,”[[19]](#footnote-19) are central to the reality of things, she asserts, and they “originate in and index this general reality, rather than betray an insuperable gap between human knowledge and other things.”[[20]](#footnote-20) As Monique Allewaert has argued, these conceptions of figuration offer a direct challenge to traditional kinds of formalism, insofar as they place matter prior to and higher than form: figuration is “the shaping, dressing, ornamentation, or fabulation of and with *matter* […] a process of shaping matter that does not presume form as such, much less the permanence of form.” Moreover, as Allewaert also indicates, the materialist conception of figuration is implicitly posthuman in orientation, as it describes “a *process of making* that is in no sense exclusively driven by human beings.”[[21]](#footnote-21) The material-poetic processes through which world and representation, matter and form entwine are, she claims, “conduits for the exchange between nonhuman and human forces, which together act on and produce the material field.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

My contention is that these discussions of figuration actually restage and recast arguments already present in conversations about style, especially as it was construed in the eighteenth century. The constitutive ambiguity of style—the feature highlighted, and to an extent celebrated, by Neer and Dolven—and the fact that style seems permanently adjacent to pressing questions about humanness and thing-ness, were, I argue, already central to eighteenth-century discourses of style. We have much to learn by telling a longer history of style that begins before its fatal entanglement with late nineteenth-century ways of knowing—through a reconsideration of aesthetic, natural historical, and musical sources from various transnational contexts. The aesthetics and musical practice of the keyboardist C. P. E. Bach will initially prove central to this story, partly because of his active engagement, from Hamburg and Berlin, with the most current trends in French, German, and English aesthetics, and partly because his contemporary reputation was inseparable from the growing importance of newly accessible keyboard technologies and the reproducible prints that were designed to sit upon them. Recovering and re-examining these early modern conceptions and enactments of musical style, I contend, will prompt fresh engagements with questions about sound and the material world, as well as the ways in which musical style has constituted and reconstituted human and nonhuman bodies.

A drawing of a face

Description automatically generated

The revised account of style that this dissertation proposes emerges not only from its historical purview. This project promises to revise many of the theoretical tropes of older style criticism and newer literary materialisms through its focus on music and sound. Indeed, the relation of sound to practices of inscription has a complex and distinctive history, which, in disruptive and illuminating ways, both intersects with and diverges from mainstream literary-philosophical theories of speech and writing.[[23]](#footnote-23) Similarly, the notion of musical composition precisely as *com*-position—that is, as the gathering of parts, the assembling of a whole—has a pedagogical and theoretical history in music that has long seemed to demand specialized methodological paradigms. And the relationship between music-making, the human hand, and the performing body has been theorized by numerous music historians—Elisabeth Le Guin, Annette Richards, Mary Ann Smart, James Davies, Ellen Lockhart, and Roger Moseley, to name just a few—in ways that could enrich and transform the most recent materialist reconceptions of figuration.[[24]](#footnote-24) “Being a body in time means shedding figures of self,”[[25]](#footnote-25) asserts Goldstein, in a vein decidedly redolent of C. P. E. Bach and his eighteenth-century acolytes.[[26]](#footnote-26) So too have music scholars such as Emily Dolan and Deidre Loughridge done important work on the histories of eighteenth and nineteenth-century musical instruments and tools.[[27]](#footnote-27) Meanwhile, the uncertain ontological status of music in the history of European thought, balanced precariously between material vibration and semiosis, unmediated feeling and imitation—an old story most recently retold as a “deep history” of affect theory by Roger Grant—inevitably complicates and nuances the relation between style and mimesis upon which Dolven, among others, insists.[[28]](#footnote-28) Music—performative, bodily, vibrational, syntactical, and semiotic—may have greater potential than poetry or literature as the domain that helps us to think through and beyond the challenge of style.

Four chapters articulate four problematics of sound and style as they emerge from a particular nexus of eighteenth-century compositions, musical technologies, and cultural techniques: sound writing and inscription, character and surface, identity and taxonomy, and form and content.

**Chapter One: Fantasies of Musical Inscription**

In 1747, the Rev. John Creed presented before the Royal Society a design for a machine that would make accurate transcriptions of keyboard improvisations. In his short exposition of this new device, Creed described a rotating cylinder spinning at one inch per second, wound with a paper scroll prepared with red lines. These red lines aligned with steel pencils attached to each key on the instrument. The cylinder is then placed such that when each key (together with its inscriptive appendage) is depressed, the pencil will “make a very black impression”[[29]](#footnote-29) on the scroll as it rotates: the length of each line or break indicates the length of each note or rest, and which particular note is played is apparent from its position on the red lines. Thus, wrote Creed, whatever is played at the keyboard would be “inscribed upon [the scroll] in intelligible Characters.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Musicological accounts of Creed’s machine—along with a handful of similar inventions that contemporaries often called “fantasy machines”—have typically focused on its ostensible objective (almost always judged unsuccessful) to capture the fleeting improvisations of musical genius, undistorted by memory or later composerly reflection. Annette Richards has described the fantasy machine and its attendant aesthetic discourse as musical counterparts to contemporary schemas designed to help with the impromptu sketching of picturesque landscapes, and she accordingly emphasizes the sketch-like qualities of the genre of the free fantasia, poised ambiguously between improvisation and composed work.[[31]](#footnote-31) Yet it is notable that Creed’s description of his fantasy machine was not concerned, as present-day musicologists are, with the compositional process, nor even with the challenge of capturing the ephemeral traces of improvisation. At the heart of Creed’s quest to delineate what he called the “minutest Particles of Sound”[[32]](#footnote-32) were rather the “black impressions” and “intelligible characters” that appeared via a mechanized process of inscription: this curious instance of early phonography was premised on the distinctively eighteenth-century imbrication of sonic expressivity and musical writing. Creed and his contemporaries were concerned above all with the production and reproduction of the notational-expressive matter that they called musical *character*—the semiotic materials that relayed sonic information and musical gesture via paper and writing instruments.

The foundational tensions and aporias of style are thus ever present in the discourse of the eighteenth-century fantasy machine.  Indeed, the machine reminds us of the widely noted etymological and philosophical entanglement of style and *stilus*.  Starting from the assumptions and aspirations of the fantasy machine, this chapter asks how music scholars might retell the story of “musical style” from the perspective of inscriptive practices.  Drawing on the contemporary aesthetics of William Hogarth and C. P. E. Bach, this chapter proposes a mid-eighteenth-century conception of sonic fabric that was predicated on the complex intentional object that was the (musical) *line*.  The aesthetic of *line*, I argue—not least as it was performed and elaborated in published fantasies by C. P. E. Bach himself—amounted to a complex renegotiation and theorization of the relationship between human hand, inscriptive tool, and the processes of musical com-position.

**Chapter Two: Musical Characters**

Eighteenth-century writers on music deployed the style concept most pervasively in discussions of the so-called learned and *galant*.  This commonplace stylistic distinction—perhaps most appreciable when surveying genres that circulated widely in print—reorganized longer-standing conceptions of the rhetoric appropriate to church, theater, and chamber, as well as the perceived breach between ancient and modern styles.  Yet, as the most widely circulated instructional texts of the period demonstrate—C. P. E. Bach’s *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* is a prominent example—the learned and *galant* styles indexed not only particular musical textures and syntax, and the printed or hand-written media in which they were materialized, but also forms of bodily comportment, and the spaces in which bodies might move.

Between 1754 and 1757, C. P. E. Bach composed twenty-eight *charackterisirte Stücke* (“characterized pieces”) for solo keyboard.[[33]](#footnote-33) These character pieces were musical portraits of his colleagues and acquaintances in Berlin, each titled with the French article *la* (to imply the word *pièce*, following the precedent set by Couperin decades before) followed by a human characteristic or the name of the person in question—*La Capricieuse* or *La Caroline*, for example. Usually treated by music scholars as straightforwardly mimetic or affective—indexing the inner passions of a particular soul—and inexplicable without their titles, these pieces, I argue, offer an intense convergence between expressive musical surface, thematic gesture, and performing (and represented) body.[[34]](#footnote-34) Moreover, they suggest a potential relation between musical and facial expression—an opportunity to take seriously Bach’s well-known physiognomic interests.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The indivisibility of the musical-syntactical, typographical, and corporeal within the eighteenth-century style concept is most evident in discussions of musical “character.”  Creed professed that his fantasy machine was able to “write Extempore Voluntaries” in a “Character more natural and intelligible, and more expressive […] than the Character now in Use”[[36]](#footnote-36)—character here referring to the material markings on the page.  Creed draws attention to an eighteenth-century understanding of “character” that Deidre Lynch has excavated in detail: character “as *reading matter* in the most emphatic way.”[[37]](#footnote-37) In this earlier “typographical culture,” character did not yet signal individuality, personality, or inner (deeper) meaning (as it would come to later in the eighteenth century), but referred instead to the material surfaces and visible bodies (alphabetic and otherwise) that made knowledge legible.

This chapter unpicks the associations between character, affect, and unity (and its potential disruption) commonly assumed by musicologists in relation to eighteenth-century repertoire.[[38]](#footnote-38) Starting with eighteenth-century “character pieces” and what present-day music theorists have come to consider their “topical” textures, I explore the contingent legibility of musical gesture and expression—and the ways in which they are learned, produced, reproduced, insinuated, and incorporated anew. How might the ostensibly transparent and familiar eighteenth-century conceptions of musical style, such as learned versus *galant* and ancient versus modern, be reconceptualized as forms of embodied cultural praxis—modes of being in given spaces? Answering this question requires teasing out the relationships between musical practice and the classicizing stylistic taxonomies developed by thinkers such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann, and their surface-oriented archaeological paradigms. I thus return to questions of style and “surface,” of the kind thematized by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus: their commitment to the “evident, perceptible, [and] apprehensible in texts”—to things that insist on being looked atrather than seen through,and which, like the Hogarthian line, have “breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

**Chapter Three: Music Before Race**

In 1789, William Hamilton Bird, an Irish musician living in Calcutta, published *The Oriental Miscellany*, a collection of Hindustani airs—a European keyboard genre based on Persian and Hindustani *nautch* songs, popular in the 1780s and 90s in British colonial society in North India and across the British Empire.[[40]](#footnote-40) A forerunner to many European publications and performances of Hindustani airs, the *Miscellany* included thirty transcribed and harmonized songs arranged for solo harpsichord, plus a sonata by Bird himself, based on melodic fragments of the songs. Describing the four different “styles of music” contained in the volume (Rekhtahs, Teranas, Tuppahs, and Raagnies), Bird points to the Raagnie as the most irregular:

The grand essentials in all music are, meaning, and expression; the Raagnies sometimes possess the latter, but are so deficient in the former, that the Compiler has laid them aside. He has, however, selected one as an example that will prove his solicitude to render the collection as complete as possible; but, at the same time evince, that to put a Raagnie into form, it will resemble, in too forcible a manner, a style not its own.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Scholarly discussions of these and other transcriptions have interpreted them, unsurprisingly, as instances of colonial violence and extraction. Recently, however, Katherine Butler Schofield has suggested that this “music-induced intimacy” at the court of Lucknow—where collectors like Englishwoman Sophia Plowden would even dress as a courtesan and sing and perform at the harpsichord alongside the Indian musicians—ought to be reconsidered. A “two-way affair of mutual curiosity and delight in musical minutiae,” this kind of exchange was perhaps “an open exploration of affinities and possibilities through trained bodily proficiencies, rather than a closing of ears to offensive differences,”[[42]](#footnote-42) she argues. This chapter asks what these exchanges, as well as other “extracted” colonial musics and ancient repertoires popular during the mid to late eighteenth century, have to tell us about the intertwined history of style and emerging conceptions of racial and cultural categorization.

In his *Histoire Naturelle*, George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon devotes a lengthy passage to human variation. After describing the inhabitants of each continent, Buffon concludes that there are three principal factors that give rise to distinctions among human bodies, including skin colour, bodily form and facial features: climate, nutrition, and manners or mode of living.[[43]](#footnote-43) White, he argues, is the “primitive colour of Nature,”[[44]](#footnote-44) which climate, food, and manners alter (or cause to degenerate) into yellow, brown, or black.

In addition to being the most prominent eighteenth-century theorist of style, Buffon was also one of the most famous popularizers of climatic theories of race. These theories, as Dror Wahrman has argued, made “race” unusually contingent in the eighteenth century, more mutable and fluid than later taxonomies of nineteenth-century racial science. Before certain physical traits became essentialized and inflexible indicators of race, skin colour and physiognomy were not reliable markers of identity, but changeable depending on circumstance. Wahrman argues that, in the eighteenth century, notions of secular human agency supplemented earlier climatic, environmental, and religious views of human diversity. Education, custom, and civilization—that is, “cultural” markers rather than “natural” ones—catalyzed the “climatic-cum-cultural transformation of skin-and-clothes.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

Developing the Winckelmannian typologies of “surface” discussed in Chapter Two, this chapter attends to the relation between style and race, proposing a deep history of the racial-sonic markers that Mundy has dubbed audiotypes.[[46]](#footnote-46) The musics compiled by Bird in his *Oriental Miscellany* were later included in *Specimens of Various Styles of Music* by William Crotch, which appeared in three volumes between 1807 and 1810. This collection of stylistic specimens (354 in volume one, all adapted for keyboard instruments) comprised notated ancient and western music by the “eminent masters of every age,” as well as the “unwritten, or national” music from across a newly conceptualized “globe.” One of its stated objectives was to offer composition students a “great variety of matter for [their] study and imitation.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Publication projects such as these, I argue, enshrined a new set of relationships between categorizable musical styles and racial or national characters.

**Chapter Four: Metamorphosis**

*Les Paysans changés en grenouilles*—the sixth of twelve symphonies composed by Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf between 1781 and 1786 based on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—tells the legend of the goddess Latona and the Lycians.[[48]](#footnote-48) Latona—mistress of Jupiter, forced by jealous Juno to wander the earth before giving birth to twins Apollo and Diana—discovers a pond where, exhausted and parched, she stops to have some water. The peasants gathering rushes and algae in the pond repeatedly deny her water, ordering her to leave and muddying the water with their hands and feet. Furious, Latona curses them to live forever in the slime of their pond. The peasants begin diving into the pond, surfacing and diving again, continuing to shout abuse at the goddess as they slowly metamorphose: their voices become hoarse, their mouths widen, their necks contract. Their backs now green and their bellies round and white, as frogs they continue to leap around their muddy pond.

Rendered musically in the fourth movement of the symphony, the croaking frogs were a source of much critical consternation. Sulzer, for example, vehemently dismissed them, and Dittersdorf, as “utterly tasteless and degrading.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Indeed, these symphonies are most often discussed in relation to unfolding squabbles over so-called “program” music, the disputed reputation of tone-painting and directly mimetic or material representations, and aesthetic visions of musical autonomy that apparently began to crystallize in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This chapter asks instead how renewed critical attention to the concept of metamorphosis in the eighteenth century—both mythic and newly empirical in contemporary natural history—might offer us a new way of understanding these symphonies, and by extension, the ways in which eighteenth-century musicians thought of form and the processes of sonic forming. Music and musical practices were not merely subject to specious organic metaphors in the course of the nineteenth century, as musicologists have long observed. Rather, they were themselves crucial to eighteenth-century discourses of nature and form that, much like the style concept, confuses later divisions of nature and culture.

In his 1790 treatise, *Metamorphosis of Plants*, Goethe sketched the development of annual plants through healthy heterosexual reproduction from seed to their flowering and fruiting. In his view, the leaf organ served as the homologous basis for every other part of the plant, undergoing various degrees of expansion and contraction throughout its process of growth: he was searching here for the “archetypal type” or *Urpflanze*, the prototypical plant from which all plants, past and present, could be extrapolated. His quest follows a process of change that he calls metamorphosis. Goldstein has shown that, unlike most of his contemporaries, who attributed natural growth and transformation to an animate force or drive, Goethe makes shape change conditional: dependent, that is, on changing circumstances and contingent interrelationships among living and nonliving things, not bound by organicist notions of autotelic power.[[50]](#footnote-50) In a 1798 poem with the same name, which presents a condensed version of his earlier theory, Goethe extends this conception of metamorphosis beyond the realm of plants, to describe not just the flowers in front of the narrator and his beloved—who is confused by the profusion of dissimilar but formally alike flowers—but eventually to the other living beings (such as insects and butterflies) around them, and ultimately even to themselves. The flowers audibly “declaim” their metamorphosis to the observant human onlookers, making the vegetal visible in other living forms.

While Dolven—one of the most recent theorists of style—insists that nature has no style, Goethe suggests otherwise. Indeed, Dolven reinscribes a sharp distinction between nature and culture typical of most theorizers of style since the nineteenth century: style is the contingent, local bearing of universal natural tendencies. In this scheme, these tendencies frequently appear as formal types—the unchanging paradigms that underlie a kaleidoscopic variety of stylistic expressions. In contrast, the Goethean conception of metamorphosis explicitly confounds the stylistic and the formal: the supposed blind determinism of nature and the human caprice of culture. This chapter takes up the Goethean valences of Dittersdorf ’s *Metamorphoses* to subvert the relationships between style and form upon which musicologists have tacitly depended, and to show how an attention to musical practices furthers the aims of recent literary materialism that strives to trouble the permanence and priority of form. Metamorphosis emerges, then, not as the prehistory of nineteenth-century organicist discourses, as it does in the neo-organicist work of Holly Watkins.[[51]](#footnote-51) Instead, as a fascinating rupture in the taxonomic projects of eighteenth-century natural philosophy, metamorphosis is, I argue, a distinctively musical concept, registering in its undecidable principle of form-style, the labile ontological models of sound.

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1. Peter Gay, *Style in History* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rachel Mundy, “Evolutionary Categories and Musical Style from Adler to America,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 67, no. 3 (2014): 735*-*768. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 742. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 761. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Et comme dans les matières tout se tient, se lie par des noeuds secrets, il faut aussi que tout se tienne et se lie dans les styles.” Louis, chevalier de Jaucourt, “Style (*Grammaire. Rhétorique. Eloquence. Belles-Lettres.*)” in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de Gens de lettres*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, vol. 15 (1765), 551*-*4, here 552. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 552. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2001), §43, 182*-*3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Richard Neer, “Connoisseurship and the Stakes of Style,” *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2005): 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Neer draws extensively on Wittgenstein, in particular from his *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell: 2001). See Neer, 16ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Neer, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jeff Dolven, *Senses of Style: Poetry Before Interpretation* (University of Chicago Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Dolven, §260. His text is organized into 396 aphoristic pithily titled remarks arranged into themed chapters. I reference quotations here by their paragraph number (rather than page number). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., §259. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Nature is his fourth limit of style—he explores nine limits throughout the book: incoherence, plainness, helplessness, nature, sameness, action, passion, God, and death. It seems telling that of his nine limits of style, the only one he repeats (and thus emphasizes) is nature. See §202 and §250. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Natania Meeker, *Voluptuous Philosophy: Literary Materialism in the French Enlightenment* (Fordham University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialisms and the New Logics of Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Monique Allewaert, “Toward a Materialist Figuration: A Slight Manifesto,” *English Language Notes* 51, no. 2 (2013): 61*-*77, here 63. In this manifesto, Allewaert proposes a new methodology for literary criticism in the age of the Anthropocene, arguing against Object Oriented Ontologies in favour of New Materialisms. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Allewaert, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. On work that theorizes sound and inscription, see, for example, Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford University Press, 1999); Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003); Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Duke University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. A sampling of works by these authors that makes my project possible: Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini’s Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (University of California Press, 2006); Annette Richards, *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (University of California Press, 2004); James Davies, *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* (University of California Press, 2014); Ellen Lockhart, *Animation, Plasticity, and Music in Italy, 1770-1830* (University of California Press, 2017); Roger Moseley, *Keys to Play: Music as a Ludic Medium from Apollo to Nintendo* (University of California Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Goldstein, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Perhaps such formulations might allow us to reconsider the “drops of effervescence distilled from his countenance” as he played the clavichord, famously recorded by Burney during his visit to the composer. See *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands, and United Provinces* (London, 1775), 2: 269*-*271. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Emily Dolan, *The Orchestral Revolution: Haydn and the Technologies of Timbre* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Deirdre Loughridge, *Haydn’s Sunrise, Beethoven’s Shadow: Audiovisual Culture and the Emergence of Musical Romanticism* (University of Chicago Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Roger Grant, “Music Lessons on Affect and Its Objects,” *Representations* 144 (2018): 34*-*60. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. His paper was published in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society for the Year 1747* vol. 44, no. 2 (London, 1748), 445*-*50 and Table 1. Here, 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 448. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Richards, *The Free Fantasia*, see esp. 73*-*99. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Creed, *Philosophical Transactions*,450. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Miscellaneous Keyboard Works*, vol. 1, ed. Peter Wollny (Packard Humanities Institute, 2006). Music scores and introduction to this volume are available online [here](https://www.cpebach.org/toc/toc-I-8-2.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. One such analysis is by Joshua S. Walden, “Composing Character in Musical Portraits: Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and *L’Aly Rupalich*,” *The Musical Quarterly* 90, no. 3/4 (2008): 379*-*411. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Annette Richards has explored his interest in physiognomy (and connections with Johann Kaspar Lavater) in her work on his portrait collection, but without any discussion of his music. See “Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Portraits, and the Physiognomy of Music History,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 2 (2013): 337*-*396. Tom Beghin has also explored the relations between physiognomy, bodily performance, and Haydn’s *Auenbrugger Sonatas* in *The Virtual Haydn: Paradox of a Twenty-First Century Keyboardist* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), see esp. 169*-*218, Plate 5, and Appendix A. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Creed, 445. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture,* *and the Business of Inner Meaning* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. A brief selection of literature that attends to these topics includes Richard Will, *The Characteristic Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Beethoven* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *The Secular Commedia: Comic Mimesis in Late Eighteenth-Century Music*, ed. Mary Ann Smart and Richard Taruskin (University of California Press, 2014); Danuta Mirka, “Introduction” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199841578.013.002 (Oxford University Press, 2014);Roger Grant, “Music Lessons on Affect and Its Objects,” *Representations* 144 (2018): 34*-*60. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. William Hamilton Bird, *The Oriental Miscellany; being a collection of the most favourite Airs of Hindoostan compiled and adapted for the Harpsichord etc.* (Calcutta: Joseph Cooper, 1789). The *nautch* were intimate musical parties at which troupes of high-status North Indian courtesans would sing and dance, recite poetry, and converse with the present company, often to mark special occasions like marriages or festivals. In the late Mughal and early colonial period, *nautch* troupes were employed by both Europeans and Indian gentlemen. On Hindustani airs and the women involved in their transcription see also Ian Woodfield, “The ‘Hindostannie Air’: English Attempts to Understand Indian Music in the Late Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of the Royal Music Association* 119, no. 2 (1994): 189*-*211. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Bird, *The Oriental Miscellany*. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Katherine Butler Schofield, “[Sophia Plowden, Khanum Jan, and their Hindustani Airs](https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/101190819/CourtesanMemsahibSm.pdf),” originally published on the British Library *Asian and African Studies Blog* in 2018 to accompany the podcast “[The Courtesan and the Memsahib](https://soundcloud.com/user-513302522/the-courtesan-and-the-memsahib-khanum-jan-meets-sophia-plowden-at-the-18c-court-of-lucknow)” (Soundcloud link), produced by Chris Elcombe, with music from *The Oriental Miscellany* by harpsichordist Jane Chapman. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon and Louis Jean Marie Daubenton, *Histoire naturelle Générale et Particulière avec la description du Cabinet du Roy*, vol. 3, 2nd ed. (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1750), 446. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. “Le blanc paroît donc être la couleur primitive de la Nature […].” Ibid., 502 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (Yale University Press, 2004), 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. The word audiotype—used by Mundy—is heavily encumbered, I think, by a modern, technologically mediated apparatus. I retain it here only for the coherence of the prospectus but intend to reformulate it for the dissertation. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. William Crotch, *Specimens of Various Styles of Music referred to in a Course of Lectures read at Oxford and London and adapted to Keyed Instruments*, vol. 1 (London: R. Birchall, n.d.), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book VI: 313*-*381. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Quoted in Will, *The Characteristic Symphony*, 140. Will provides an extensive analysis of *Le Quatre Ages du monde*, the first symphony in the series, in chapter one. See 29*-*82. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Goldstein, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Holly Watkins, *Musical Vitalities: Ventures in a Biotic Aesthetics of Music* (University of Chicago Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)