

Writing the Genealogy of Music in the 17th Century

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Abstract: *The present investigation focuses on the writing of music history in the 17th century. Early modernity conceptualized its musical past in ways that are radically different from what we have come to know today through the prism of the concept of the musical work. The present study will suggest that certain aspects of early modern music historiography are best understood in light of the important role of genealogy in the early modern era. Three aspects of genealogical discourse will be singled out: the identification of origin and descent, the concern for the unbroken lineage, and the closing off of alternative genealogies. The study will focus on how these features of genealogical discourse manifest themselves in one of the pioneering works of music history written at the end of the 17th century, W. C. Printz's *Historische Beschreibung der Edelen Sing- und Kling-Kunst* published in 1690.*

Key-words: *W. C. Printz, music historiography, genealogy, 17th century*

1. Introduction

Throughout the 17th century, the Old Testament remained a crucial source for anyone writing the history of music. The central importance of the origin and early history of music, and the fact that the Old Testament was still regarded as the authoritative source to the earliest times of the world, explains why it became such an important source for the writing of music history. However, the music historian—who was typically a professional musician—would often find scripture ambiguous or silent on important issues. At these junctures, there is a tendency to venture into speculation, weighing the options, before eventually falling down on a favored thesis for how the unwritten event most probably must have unfolded. In these instances, we find the music historian engaging in scriptural exegesis, and, where possible, drawing support from authoritative interpretations by famous theologians. The present investigation takes this gap-filling enterprise as its point of departure.

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“Origin” and “progress” were two core concepts guiding the production of music historical writings prior to the 18th century. The quest for the origin of music was intimately bound up with present concerns. On the one hand, it finds motivation in the requirements of a particular rhetoric of praise, in which attributes like a noble origin and a great age were used to elevate the object of praise (see, Jahn 2001). On the other hand, it was also the site where the nature of the thing revealed itself, as what it is, or what it was supposed to be. This gave the identification of origins a tremendous rhetorical force. It could be used to praise the present by presenting it through the “mirror” of its origin, or, alternatively, provide corrective examples, where present practices are shown to have strayed from the paradigm of the origin. From this, we see that origin stands in a paradoxical relationship with progress. If it is so that “things are most precious and essential at the moment of birth,” (Foucault 1977, 143)² then all movement away from the origin must be counted as decline.

A way to make sense of this apparent paradox is to view the relation between origin and progress as a genealogical one. As Markus Friedrich stresses in his recent study on *Jakob Wilhelm Imhoff and the Meanings of Genealogy in Early Modern Europe* (2023), genealogy had a profound impact on the lives of early modern people. “Wars were fought in the name of family relations, and genealogical facts of descent and marriage often decided whose claims to power were considered credible” (Friedrich 2023, 4). However, it was not only in issues related to dynastic succession that the principle of genealogy held sway. Artisans and craftspeople also used genealogy as a literary vehicle for elevating their collective status by portraying themselves as descending from an ancient and noble origin (Smith 2022, 107). Here, bloodlines were substituted by lineages made up of master-apprentice relations—which often, though not always, was also a family relation—or membership in artisan- or craft guilds.

Genealogy brings the question of filiation to the fore. Filiation is no longer part of the horizon of musicological issues, at least not in the sense of providing rules for the transference of rights, legitimacy, and authority based on descendancy. However, as the present study will argue, it is exactly such a legalistic notion of filiation that provides the rhetorical motive behind many of the early modern attempts to write the history of music based on the concepts of origin and progress. In the following, I will focus on three distinct but interrelated aspects of genealogical discourse. The first is the identification of origin. The second is the securing of the lineage, i.e. the unbroken chain connecting the origin and its

² Foucault quoting Nietzsche from *The Wanderer and His Shadow*

present-day descendants. The third, which can be regarded as a variation of the second, is the closing off of alternative genealogies.

The primary source of the present investigation is Printz's *Historische Beschreibung der Edelen Sing- und Kling-Kunst* (*Historical Description of the Noble Sing- and Sound- Art*, from now on *HB*) published in 1690.³ While commentators have occasionally referred to it as the first music history, it is more fruitful to view it, as Allen has suggested, as "a culmination of baroque research in historical musicology" (Allen 1939, 201). It belongs to a hybrid genre of music historiography particular to the late 17th -century, with the two other notable examples being Giovanni Bontempi's *Historia Musica* (1695) and *Histoire de la musique et de ses effets* commenced by Pierre Bourdelot during the second half of the 17th century but finished and eventually published in 1715, more than thirty years after his death. These three histories were all written in a European vernacular instead of scholarly Latin. They maintain the formal and rhetorical features of the "origin and progress of music" -genre usually encountered in prefaces to theoretical or pedagogical works or as part of written speeches (*Encomia*) or sermons in praise of music. The histories of Printz, Bontempi and Bourdelot differ from this short-form genre in their inclusion of a broader range of topics more in line with the large encyclopedic overviews of music that had emerged in the first half of the century.⁴

2. Progress and origin

The root meaning of the Latin *progressu* is found in the merger of *pro* (forward) and *gradi* (to walk). With the metaphorical mapping of space to time, it comes to designate that kind of transit various entities undertake—be it humans, political bodies, or the arts and sciences—through the dimension of time. Since the 18th century, progress has come to designate a universal advance or improvement through all regions of history as a necessary consequence of the passing of time (Benoist 2008, 7). There is also an older or classical idea of progress that has been a mainstay of Western thought since antiquity (Nisbet 1980, 46). This idea holds the arts are subject to improvement in a step-by-step fashion through the cumulative (and intergenerational) acquisition of knowledge through experience. Printz gives expression to this classical idea of progress at the beginning of the fourth chapter of *HB*.

³ All translations are those of the author.

⁴ The most notable examples are Michael Praetorius's *Syntagma Musicum* (1614-1620), Marin Mersenne's *Harmonie Universelle* (1636), and Athanasius Kircher's *Musurgia Universalis* (1650).

For the arts were not directly brought to excellence immediately following their invention: on the contrary, they remained flawed and primitive / until they eventually were improved by their diligent practitioners, gradually with the passing of time; Which / amply testify the truth / [of the saying] that experience / is the best teacher (Printz 1979, 288-289).⁵

What distinguishes this idea of progress from the post-enlightenment one is that it lacks the universal pretensions of the latter. Instead, we typically find it restricted to the arts, crafts and sciences. Progress is local rather than universal, and the threat of decline is constantly present. This is also why the idea is so appealing to the practitioners of the arts, crafts and sciences, since it is they (and the patrons providing them a livelihood) that are to be credited for the advances.

While Printz apparently finds the classical idea of progress convincing, he interestingly denies the validity of its dictum to the era defined by the rule of the Old Testament kings David and Solomon, which is the period under investigation in this fourth chapter. The reason for introducing the principle of improvement through temporal progress seems instead to be to excuse Martin Luther for expressing the erroneous opinion that “David’s music was flawed and primitive, not unlike our present-day Choral music” (Printz 1979, 288).⁶ Like many music historians of the 17th century, Printz was of the opinion that the music of the age of David and Solomon was not only perfect, but that it also was similar (to the degree of being identical) to the so-called *figural* music of his own time, which was the kind of music that musicians like Printz earned their income from performing. While Printz was just one of many authors who advanced this opinion during the 17th century, the fourth chapter of *HB* must count as the most ambitious attempt to prove that the Davidic-Solomonic music was figural. In the second chapter, Printz proclaims that church music originated with David when he became the first to introduce music into public worship in the church of God, and that his son Solomon brought it to its greatest flowering (Printz 1979, 272-273). The Davidic-Solomonic music comes to represent an exemplary origin. The music is perfect exactly because it fulfills its purpose to perfection, being the music that God instructed David to perform for his worship.

⁵ Denn alle Künste seyn am Anfang ihrer Erfindung nicht bald zu einer Fürtrefflichkeit gebracht worden: sondern seyn vielmehr schlecht und einfältig gewesen / bis sie endlich mit der Zeit von ihren fleißigen Ausubern je länger je mehr verbessert worden; Welches / daß es wahr sey / die Erfahrung / als die beste Lehrmeisterin gnugsam bezeuget.

⁶ ...die Music des Davids sey gar schlecht und einfältig / auch unserer CHORAL-MUSIC nicht ungleich gewesen.

3. The descendants of Jubal

The first mention of music in the bible is in Genesis 4:21, where a ninth-generation descendant of Adam, Jubal, is described as “the father of all those who play the harp and flute.”⁷ He appears in the section of Genesis titled the “genealogies of Cain,” (Genesis 4:17-26) where we find him flanked by two brothers, Jabal, “the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock” (Genesis 4:20 [NIV]), and Tubalcain, “who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron.” (Genesis 4:22 [NIV]). Printz introduces Jubal in the middle of the first chapter, after having presented God as the ultimate creator of music, and Adam as the most likely inventor of vocal music. It is clear from the beginning that Printz is here concerned with establishing exactly who descends (*herkommen*) from Jubal. It is also clear that he believes the answer needs to be reached by way of scriptural hermeneutics. He quotes the passage in Hebrew, and with the assistance of Luther’s commentary, he arrives at the conclusion that the sentence must mean that everyone who plays stringed- or wind instruments descends from Jubal. Not because Jubal invented every type of stringed and wind instruments, but since he, as Printz’s puts it “showed them the way” to invent new and different ones. (Printz 1979, 251-252).

After identifying the origin and its present descendants, the challenge becomes to secure the lineage, to show that there is an unbroken line connecting the present to the origin. Printz is sensitive to the particular issues facing the musical genealogist wanting to connect Jubal to the present. In between is the great flood. The lack of any direct scriptural evidence for how music managed to survive the great flood raises the suspicion that it might not have survived and subsequently had to be reinvented after the water had receded. The central question is then whether there were any musicians on board Noah’s Ark. Printz devotes the last paragraph of the first chapter to answering this question. He finds the answer buried in his earlier interpretation of Genesis 21:4, where he arrived at the conclusion that Moses must have meant that all string- and wind instrumentalists descended from Jubal.⁸ Since Moses lived long after the great flood, it thus followed that at least one musician must have been present—either Noah himself or one of his sons—for the 21st verse of Genesis 4 to make sense.

⁷ New King James Version

⁸ Few in the 17th century (with some notable exceptions) doubted the mosaic authorship of Genesis or the Pentateuch as a whole.

For if it hadn't been at least one MUSICANT aboard the ark / then music would have drowned / perished together with the people [of the earth] / and if so, JUBAL could not be called the father of string- and wind instrumentalist / since this honorary title would appropriately belong to the person who reinvented musical INSTRUMENTS after the great flood. But when Moses gives JUBAL this title long after the great flood / music must certainly not have perished [in the waves] / but at least one MUSICANT must have been rescued in the ark. (Printz 1979, 254)⁹

The question of the fate of music during the diluvian rupture is intimately bound up with the genealogical concerns of music historiography. Even though Printz would expect everyone to agree that music had existed both before and after the great flood, it remained to be demonstrated that postdiluvian music descended from the antediluvian one. This bridge across the diluvian gap buttresses the musicians' claim to be part of an unbroken lineage of masters and apprentices stretching back to the origin of music with Adam and Jubal.

The second chapter ends on a similar note when Printz presents Athanasius Kircher's thesis that the first sages of Greek wisdom, Linus, Orpheus and Amphion, took everything they knew about music from David and Solomon (Printz 1979, 273-274). The theory is presented in the form of an extended quote from Kircher's *Musurgia Universalis*. Printz declares that he does not want to conclude on this matter before having consulted another text in which Kircher is said to provide a more detailed argument for the thesis. Nevertheless, by presenting this excerpt from this most authoritative source (as Printz does not fail to emphasize both before and after the quote) Printz delivers a caution against constructing alternative musical lineages.

There seems to be an implicit interlocutor present in this genealogical discourse, who seems to be arguing that the music of the present does not descend from that particularly glorious origin. Instead, the interlocutor appears to suggest that it might be a descendant of another origin, perhaps a later, less noble, and less pure one. If that is the case, it follows from the logic of genealogical succession that its present practitioners are less deserving of the position that they enjoy (or aspire to enjoy) in the social fabric. These objections represent real-world challenges that musicians faced when navigating the stratified social reality of early modern society.

⁹ Denn wofern nicht zum wenigsten ein MUSICANT mit in der Arche gewesen / so wäre die Music zugleich mit denen Menschen / so ersoffen / zu Grunde gegangen / und könnte also JUBAL nicht ein Vater der Geiger und Pfeiffer genennet werden / sondern dieser Ehren«Titul gebührete billicher dem jenigen / so die Musicalischen INSTRUMENTA nach der Sund=Fluth aufs neue wieder erfunden hatte. Weil aber Moses lange nach der Sund=Fluth dem JUBAL diesen Titul giebet / so muß gewißlich die Music nicht verlohren gegangen / sondern vielmehr zum wenigsten ein MUSICANT mit in der Arche erhalten worden seyn.

Any account of legitimacy must also include an account of its opposite, illegitimacy. Even if such an account does not appear explicitly, it must nevertheless follow from the negation of the criteria that constitute legitimacy. In the early 1690s, at the same time his music history was published, Printz also authored three so-called musical novels. Stephen Rose has described these as “fictitious autobiographies of civic instrumentalists,” written for the purpose of countering prejudices against musicians (Rose 2011, 75). Lurking throughout these novels is a counter-figure to the honourable musician, “the so-called *Bierfiedler* (beer fiddler) - a figure that encapsulates all the negative connotations of instrumentalists. Drunken dissipated and unskilled, the beer fiddler acts as a foil to the honourable status of the municipal musician” (76). Rose also notes that Printz's portrayal of the *Bierfiedler* “drew on a guild-inspired mindset that perceived freelancers and outsiders as threats to the monopoly of local craftsmen” (76). The figure appears to play a role analogous to that of the usurper in early modern fiction, as documented by Doyeeta Majumder in her *Tyranny and Usurpation: The New Prince and Lawmaking Violence in Early Modern Drama*. The usurper is the ruler “who, having acquired the throne by means of force or trickery, finds himself propelled into tyranny” (Majumder 2019, 2). The figure is perhaps best known from the plays of Shakespeare, in which usurpation remains a recurrent theme. Both the *Bierfiedler* and the usurper fail to fulfill the requirements demanded of their position because they lack the hereditary rights possessed by those being the legitimate heirs to their respective positions. The lack of skills, wisdom, or other virtues follows as a secondary effect of this primary defect.

4. Closing remarks

The readiness with which the music historian engages in the construction of bridging theories is a testament to the critical importance of genealogy for early modern approaches to its musical past. While the focus of this study has been Printz's *HB*, these concerns appear to be among the important driving forces behind the production of music historical writings, right until the middle of the 18th century. Viewing music historiography as a genealogical enterprise throws new light on the concept of progress in musicology. While acting as a forward-looking concept today, in the early modern era, progress appears to be something that emerges retrospectively. When allied to improvement, it casts glory on the present through a comparison with the past prior to improvement. When serving the cause of genealogy, it acts as the connecting fluid creating unity between past and present, creating something like what Gabrielle Spiegel (1983) in relation to

medieval dynastic genealogies has called “a mythic homogeneity.” (50) The music historian substitutes the bloodlines of dynastic genealogies with lineages defined by the transference of knowledge based on experience, handed down from master to apprentice. Just as the legitimate prince descends from an ancient and noble lineage, the honourable musician descends from a line of masters-apprentices stretching back into the depths of history, down back to the origin of the craft. By tracing the path from origin to current practice, the music historian demonstrates that present-day musicians and their music are genealogically connected, through an imaginary chain traversing time and space, to a noble origin in the distant past.

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