

Music, the Mind, and the Interior Sensory Experience

This project began with the nebulous but captivating idea of investigating the musical experience in the middle ages; it is still very much a work in progress, begun only in the first few days of March. The breadth of medieval musical expression is immensely complex and varied, necessitating quite a bit of work in narrowing the subject into something workable for 15-20 page paper, which has been my primary focus for the past few weeks. My interest was initially piqued by an article entitled “Sensory Experience in Medieval Devotion: Sound and Vision, Invisibility and Silence”, which suggested the notion of the “inner ear” – along the same lines as the “inner eye” – as a topic of apparently unplumbed potential. However, the farther I’ve read, the deeper the rabbit’s hole of music and its conceptually related topics seemed to become. I’ve remained captivated by the idea of the “inner ear” – a concept that will hopefully become clearer as this paper progresses. The research process has refined – but also complicated - my early notions of the interior senses, but I believe it will continue to percolate into an intriguing paper.

“Sensory Experience in Medieval Devotion” has become both my touchstone and my jumping-off point. It is a fascinating article, a survey which seeks to call attention to certain ideas which the author, Beth Williamson, believes have been overlooked: sound and the “inner ear”, but also the effects of silence in music, the interplay between notation and text (including illuminations), and representations of music in art. The article is also intensely frustrating, in that it leaves all its ends untied – which is exactly what makes it effective, of course, as a think piece. My first step, after falling hook, line, and sinker for Williamson’s bait, was to scour her footnotes for works of interest, and to compile a tentative bibliography. I have had experience with

previous research projects, so I am very familiar with the library's multi-search tool, which has been my standard method of finding materials, especially early on in the research process.

After reading abstracts and reviews of the pieces I had picked from Williamson's footnotes and paring down my list, it became quite obvious that I needed to broaden my searches and work on building a background before I could reasonably attempt a deep dive into the sources. My next round of searches brought me to some dead ends. The "inner ear" seemed virtually unknown in scholarship on the time. Topics which I thought would be illuminating – the development of polyphony, the relationship between secular and sacred music, examinations of silence – failed to connect with what had originally piqued my interest in "Sensory Experience in Medieval Devotion", which I repeatedly returned to, in order to keep my ideas grounded. I met with Dr. McMurry, who advised me to search specific databases which might not have been covered in multi-search, such as IIMP FT, Music Index, and RILM; additionally, she recommended searching specific journals which published the most on the subject. She also pointed me in the direction of librarians who specialize in music, to help me leverage the library's collections beyond what I could easily do on my own.

Before I met with one of the music librarians, Guy Leach, I talked over my bibliography with my professor, Dr. Kreiner, who is a medievalist. Her perspective, as a historian rather than a musicologist – which many of the authors of my sources had been – was incredibly helpful. Our conversation seemed to gravitate towards the idea of memory, a titanically important subject in the middle ages, and a connection which had not occurred to me. Dr. Kreiner shared a syllabus for a course called "Music and Memory", taught by a colleague at Stanford. The class explored some of the subjects I touched on above, notably, the relationship between notation and text, but also broke some new ground for me. A host of other related topics opened up - intersections

between medieval memory techniques and musical notation, the idea of creativity in a tradition dominated by memorization, textual exegesis combined with artistic and musical guidance – which seemed to explode my vision of the topic. Dr. Kreiner also urged me to consider consulting primary sources which came up repeatedly, to probe the original sources for clarification. My conference with Mr. Leach was directed towards finding some primary sources, specifically facsimiles of manuscripts housed in the library, or extensive collections of scores scanned and accessible online.

Toting a substantial list of new search tools and terms, I embarked on another round of investigations which, this time, began to turn up more pertinent material. Memory seems to be a particularly up-and-coming subject in scholarship just at present, and there was an abundance of material across many disciplines relating to it. However, I still felt very drawn to the notion of the interior senses, and was able to turn up some thought provoking work on intersections between the “inner eye” and “inner ear”, particularly as they were used to direct devotion. Some of the most important questions raised for me surrounded parallels between levels of religious understanding, Augustine’s concept of “tripartite seeing” and in layers of musical meaning. These parallels each relate, in some way, to memory, which has turned out to be an important theme in my research; more importantly, this nexus of ideas seems to hit a historiographical sweet spot.

The interior sensory experience, in particular the “inner ear”, has yet to receive a substantial amount of scholarly attention. Yet studies of the congruent topic areas – memory techniques, sound/silence, the science of listening, examinations of musical notation, and exegesis in music – have been increasingly well-studied in recent years. This project is, once again, a work in progress. I am still clarifying my ideas, and I have yet to examine primary

sources, or to listen to more than a handful of recordings. But the pith of the project has emerged;
all that's left is a deep dig.

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