

Book review

Marjorie Fitzpatrick, *Music and power in eighteenth-century court society: Handel's Messiah and Protestant Ascendancy* (Lewiston, New York, and Lampeter, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2016) ISBN 9781495504495, pbk, 571pp

Each year at Fishamble Street in Dublin, excerpts from *Messiah*, the well-known oratorio by the German-born composer George Frederic Handel (1685–1759), are performed in commemoration of its premiere there in 1742. Among the performers who commemorate this significant event in Irish music history is Marjorie Fitzpatrick whose doctoral dissertation, 'Music and power in eighteenth-century court society' completed at University College Dublin in 2004, forms the basis of her book. Published with the subtitle *Handel's Messiah and Protestant Ascendancy*, this is a sociological study of music and power in eighteenth-century 'court society'. Its stated aims are 'to find out if music reflects cultural changes and whether music is an indicator of power positions within court society.' (p.i)

The author's dissertation supervisor, Stephen Mennell, provides a cogent foreword, revealing that *The Court Society* (1969) by the German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990) was the 'single most important influence' on this study (p.iii). Elias's studies of social conduct and generally accepted manners contended that governance by absolutist rulers was deemed a necessary phase in the development of structured European states in their transition from feudalism to capitalism while the lives, possessions and behaviours of members of 'court society' – elite social networks – served as a gauge of power ratios and collective prestige values. Citing several of Elias's publications and articulating one of Fitzpatrick's central arguments, Mennell contends that although early modern Ireland did not conform to the continental model of absolutism – France under Louis XIV – eighteenth-century Dublin had in the Protestant Ascendancy an elite social network that displayed some of the social and cultural characteristics of continental 'court society'. He acknowledges Elias's examination of the role of music at court in his work on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1891) but adds that it had largely been left to Fitzpatrick to 'develop thoughts about the role of music more generally in societies where courts played a dominant role in the shaping of taste.'(p.x)

Over nine chapters and five appendices, Fitzpatrick takes the reader through her dissertation on the relationship between the sociology of music, Elias's conceptions of 'court society' and 'power ratios' in the eighteenth century – featuring Handel and the ubiquitous Mrs Mary Delany – and a lengthy analysis of the *Messiah* text. Here lies the book's main weakness: punctuated by headings and short sub-sections, it attempts to cover too many related topics in one publication. It could have been a significantly shorter distillation of the original doctoral dissertation, rearranged and reformatted to allow for a more cohesive, sophisticated, and accessible narrative.

The first chapter is concerned with 'sociological perspectives on music' and provides an overview of literature relating to music in society and theoretical work by two sociologists of music, Tia DeNora and Theodor W. Adorno. It provides a sweeping history of developments in Western art music from the Renaissance to the Romantic period, with examples from a number of European states. The primary conclusions drawn are that 'music is a prism of society' and 'music can be used as an indicator of power positions in a particular society, thus reflecting cultural changes within'. (p.75). The second chapter is a consideration of Elias's concept of 'power ratios' in court society with a secondary discussion about French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's conception of 'habitus' or norms that shape social behaviour and thinking.

Bourdieu's concept of social, cultural or symbolic 'capital' is also considered in the context of music as an elite expression of prestige and identity. The following two chapters provide examples of 'power ratios' in France, England and Ireland and 'habitus' in the world of Mrs Mary Delany, the English wife of the Irish clergyman Dr Patrick Delany. It is only from the middle of the third chapter then that the author's engagement with the notion of an Irish 'court society' begins to emerge in a discussion on the centralisation of power in the eighteenth century. Mrs Delany (née Granville) is portrayed as 'a leading member of the Protestant Ascendancy "court society" in Dublin' with lengthy quotations from some of her published letters that provide her observations on social and musical life in Dublin city. The fifth chapter centres on interconnected ideas of music, power and 'habitus' in Handel's world, recounting published details of Handel's life and some analysis on Handel in Ireland that draws on *The keeper's recital: music and cultural history in Ireland, 1770-1970* (1998) by Irish musicologist and cultural historian, Harry White.

The latter part of the book (chapters six, seven and eight) is probably the most thought-provoking. The focus is on the *Messiah* libretto written by Handel's friend, Charles Jennens (1770–1773), a wealthy English landowner, amateur musician and patron of the arts. It considers the libretto as allegory, employing scriptural references to promote conceptions of absolute monarchy and 'divine right' theory. There are three related appendices labelled in the Table of Contents as: 'Ch.6 Further Analyzed [sic]'; 'Ch.7 Further Analyzed [sic]'; 'Ch.8 Further Analyzed [sic]'. Another appendix, 'Musicians Chart', which appears to be a timeline of European composers, 1500-1900, colour coded by nationality, is illegible in black and white, and redundant without context or explanation. Chapter nine is a brief reiteration of the conclusions drawn in the preceding chapters.

Unfortunately, the importance of Fitzpatrick's research is lost in a poorly-produced publication. The content should have been revised and updated through the peer-review process to reflect recent developments in the historiography of social networks and musical culture in eighteenth-century Britain and Ireland, particularly in the context of the landed elite – Fitzpatrick's Irish 'court society'. The 34-page bibliography does not feature any scholarship later than 2004 when the thesis was completed, and few sources later than 2000. From the historian's perspective, it would have been helpful to have encountered a division of contemporary and secondary materials and a more useful listing of online materials than a catalogue of Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) with the heading 'World Wide Web (WWW)'. The index, too, is unnecessarily lengthy on account of the formatting. A more rigorous copy-editing process would have resulted in a final publication that was more substantively and substantially refined than the doctoral dissertation upon which it is based. Overall though, it represents an interesting approach to the study of the making, performing and consuming of music in the cultural context of eighteenth-century elites.

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