

In the book's conclusion, André envisions a broadening audience for opera performance in the United States and South Africa without claiming naively that opera is for everyone. She admits that there are many hurdles to be overcome when attempting to make opera more accessible to those who have historically been excluded from this artistic tradition. Not even all-black casts and plots relevant to black experiences and histories will change the fact that opera is still expensive, usually exclusionary, often intimidating, and thus viewed as elite art. Yet opera can also be relevant, provocative, empowering, and ripe with potential for critical inquiry, activism, and even social change, according to André. What does it mean to stage a trans Carmen in prison? How about a countertenor singing the role? These are components of contemporary versions of Bizet's warhorse that lead her to posit that opera may be approaching a new frontier. These reinventions can communicate novel ideas about race and gender, because the contemporary performance engages with the historical performance practice of the work. André convincingly argues that while historical knowledge is essential, attempting to recreate the original composer's vision for the work should not always be the goal. She ends the book optimistic about the potential for "engaged musicology," and I hope she is right about approaching a new frontier for opera. I hope, too, that we will have need of a sequel to this book and that Naomi André will write it.

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Musical Vitalities: Ventures in a Biotic Aesthetics of Music, by Holly Watkins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. 200 pp.

In *Musical Vitalities: Ventures in a Biotic Aesthetics of Music*, Holly Watkins invites her readers to vegetate. But what is it to summon one's "vegetal energies" (p. 45)? A gauche colloquialism today, to "vegetate" is a slight directed at indolent humans. But, as Watkins explains, attunement to the "vegetal" is a step away from anthropocentrism and toward concern for the biosphere. Building a philosophy of musical form and meaning around the idea of music's vitality, Watkins brings humanistic and scientific approaches to bear on the question of how the aesthetic realm, and specifically music, exposes cross-species biological commonalities. As she undertakes it, listening for traces of organic vitality in music involves three main modes of audition. She is interested in metrical or melodic patterns that create the impression of animation and can seem to endow music with a self-consciousness and will to self-generation. Second, Watkins enjoins readers to take seriously environmental sounds that inspired fight-or-flight reactions in our ancestors and continue to trigger physiological responses in us today. Finally, she suggests that the dynamic participation enabled by music can prompt listeners to inhabit a range of selves, human or otherwise.

Watkins's project is methodologically ambitious and far-reaching in terms of the repertoire it encompasses; but it is centered in an archive drawn from the texts and mentalities of the German Enlightenment and Romanticism, a tight focus that allows for concentrated attention to relationships among music, nature, and human consciousness. In the first three chapters, the animating potential of musical vitality is brought to bear on canonical topics such as organicism, formalism, and Schopenhauer's theory of the Will. Grounded in intellectual and material history, chapter 4 proffers Robert Schumann's *Blumenstück*, op. 19, as musical mediator of the nineteenth-century flower trope's legibility across seemingly oppositional aesthetic categories, including the mundane and the transcendent. The final two chapters open out into broader questions of music's definition of "the human," but remain anchored in Romantic conceptions of nature and of the mind. Chapter 5 confronts the blurry distinction between musical reaction and response. Watkins's historical interlocutors—none of whom are comfortable with the notion that music can override reason to provoke involuntary, animalistic bodily reaction—are brought into dialogue with recent studies of embodied cognition to posit musical listening as collapsing boundaries between human and animal. Chapter 6 begins from the idea frequently invoked in certain strains of avant-garde musical aesthetics that sound can be purely acoustic and nonreferential if, in John Cage's words, the composer "transfer[s] nature's manner of operation into art" (p. 133). Drawing on Peircean semiotics, Watkins demonstrates that natural sounds are never simply "themselves," but are endowed with a spectrum of semiotic meaning accrued via relational listening. The chapter's case studies take various approaches to approximating nature's sonic, semiotic, and sensuous signatures. They include Jana Winderen's sound installation *Ultra-field*, which falters in its promise to offer nonhuman aural experience, and "Vogel als Prophet" from Schumann's *Waldszenen*, op. 82, which counterpoises gestures of birdsong with the distinctly human character of the intervening chorale, creating an expressive and semiotic hybrid across species lines.

Locating the antecedents of musical patterns and formal design in biological processes, chapter 1 introduces the intellectual framework for Watkins's reconceptualization of music's "organicism." This chapter probes various Enlightenment models of the organic that drew on both the continuous, free-form growth characteristic of plants and a more structured, anatomical view based on the study of animals. We now know that organisms are not end-oriented, but rather self-organizing and emergent, their "wholeness . . . continually in the process of being produced" (p. 25). Watkins argues that music's organicism can be detected in its "dynamic process of pattern formation" (p. 26), which can create the impression that music is self-generating. In more concrete terms, listening for music's organic qualities might amount to recognizing the gradual organization of localized musical or formal patterns evolving into larger, anticipated ones over time, the mind's "musical present" at once containing traces of past, present, and future versions of

recognizable patterns. When understood in these terms, music seems to aspire to the true “mode of being” of the vegetal organism (p. 28), including its self-organizing maintenance and self-determined pattern formation. Watkins derives support for this approach from Niklas Luhmann’s theory of social systems, which posits that any expressive being or group (whether an individual, social group, or musical work) is composed of interdependent systems. Luhmann’s innovation is to show that change can occur only recursively—that is, when a small social gesture reacts to some aspect of an existing system and sets in motion a series of subsequent changes. Watkins beautifully applies this model to late eighteenth-century Viennese instrumental music, which can be heard as taking shape through a series of reactions, imitations, and allusions to existing music, giving the impression of autopoiesis.

In some ways, Watkins’s reckoning with competing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of organic metaphor is familiar. In 1980, Ruth Solie traced organic metaphors in nineteenth-century philosophical texts to contemporary biology and transcendental idealism. She showed that organicist methods give the impression that music has “a mind of its own” when analysts apply predetermined rubrics of process- or product-oriented natural order to music. This approach casts the composer not as maker, but as “midwife to this immanent life force,” obscuring the agency of the composer.¹ Where Solie couched her inquiry as a critique of analytical methods that glorified composers and works while ignoring the human thought and interactions that had produced those works, Watkins finds reason to celebrate an agentless view of musical composition. This is not to say that she is a transcendental idealist: she wants to endow music with a “semblance of the organic” (to use Adorno’s words, p. 15), not in order to celebrate the composer as oracle of nature but because she sees the composer as a “normal” human being, sharing cognitive features and creative tendencies with forms of organic life that manifest in his or her musical products. *Musical Vitalities* sees the task of the theorist not as fathoming the mind of the composer-genius, but as discerning the bearing of cross-species cognition on musical rules. The theorist can thus develop a deeper understanding of the human, the world in which we live, and ways in which cultural products and biological processes inform each other. If there is any deification here, it is directed not at the composer but at the omniscient analyst.

Chapter 3 ventures into the inorganic realm via Schopenhauer’s analogization of musical register to earthly *strata*, and of both, in turn, to the “grades” of the Will. Watkins asks how Schopenhauer’s “distinctive brand of musical naturalism” might be mobilized “to think the human together with the nonhuman” (p. 69). The main innovation of the chapter lies in Watkins’s

1. Ruth Solie, “The Living Work: Organicism and Musical Analysis,” *19th-Century Music* 4, no. 2 (Autumn 1980): 147–56, here 155.

redirection of Schopenhauer's abstract, cross-species musical analogies away from his familiar metaphysical imperative toward the "bodily element" of musical listening (p. 75). She shows that Schopenhauer does not merely *analogize* musical register to those nonhuman "dimensions of existence" that, he suggested, always already existed within us (p. 67). Instead, he argues that music physically *animates* traces of the nonhuman within our bodies. As we listen to music, she explains, our bodies are beset with an enormous range of seemingly instinctual physiological reactions, what Schopenhauer identified as physical symptoms of gradations of the human and nonhuman Will within us. Recognizing nonhuman presence in music might, Watkins argues, cause belief in human autonomy to recede and be supplanted by humble co-existence with our nonhuman comrades.

Every chapter of *Musical Vitalities* explores the ways in which musical experience enables contact with nonhuman vitality. In chapter 5, this venture becomes fraught with anxiety. It begins with passages by Sulzer and Hanslick, replete with anxiety over the human tendency to respond passively to music; for these aestheticians, the acknowledgment of music as arousing involuntary reactions was to admit the fallacy of human exceptionalism and expose a psychophysical path from enlightenment to social regression. As Watkins demonstrates, recent research into animal communication and embodied cognition confirms that music evokes multiple forms of embodied reaction, some unconscious, and some culturally conditioned. The "reactionality" of musical response (to use Derrida's term) also makes it impossible to deny commonalities between human and animal musicality, of which Watkins points to many examples (p. 113). Taking stock of cross-species creative and perceptual tendencies, she suggests that "the history of human music is partly the history of cross-species encounters" (p. 129).

Musical Vitalities is imaginative and stimulating in its nuanced rethinking of relationships among music, consciousness, and the nonhuman. The text is especially provocative in its challenges to anthropocentric notions of subjectivity and the richness of its approach to the dynamism of human and ecological nonhuman, as opposed to the mechanized nonhuman, the more familiar approach to posthumanism in musicology. An ecological orientation toward posthumanism enjoins examination of interactions between conscious and unconscious thought in the histories of music making and listening, as well as of cross-species cultural debts and the intellectual provocations of environmental instability.

As *Musical Vitalities* suggests, reckoning with these dynamic relations is especially urgent under anthropogenic climate change, a crisis that raises intellectual challenges for humanists. Confronting climate change necessitates new conceptions of humanity and society, not as dominating or ontologically distinct from nature, but as chaotically entangled with it. Ecocriticisms that register this fatal imbroglio sometimes use it to underwrite the claim that

nonhuman suffering is equal to, if not greater than, that of humanity and that it is our responsibility to protect the nonhuman from the climate crisis we have precipitated. While it is an ethical obligation to acknowledge the scope of human responsibility as our planet faces existential threat, it is also important to recognize that these convictions spring from a specific ecological philosophy. As Timothy Morton explains in *Ecology without Nature*, “ecocentric” philosophies flatten living beings and their interests into a single field of value.² Under this model, human interests sometimes become subservient to environmental ones, as the nonhuman is valued for ethical, not just economic, reasons. As virtuous as this may seem, by elevating all organisms to an equal plane, it is possible to lose sight of the impact environmental change is having on the world’s neediest populations. The ethical thrust of ecocentrism is misguided precisely because it purports to be *more* ethical than exceptionalist or anthropocentric humanistic mentalities, when it is arguably *less* so because it suppresses the needs of those most severely affected by climate instability.

As Morton has argued, the very word “nature” is central to the problem of devising proactive responses to these environmental challenges. When we invoke “nature,” he suggests, we tend to construct holistic, Romantic “images of nature” that sanction a lack of strategic thinking about environmental stewardship.³ Thus, he advocates for an “ecology without nature” (hence his book’s title), unfettered by historically conditioned—and often compromised—constructions of what “nature” means or demands. Throughout *Musical Vitalities*, Watkins is also concerned with revising Romantic metaphors for the Anthropocene: she seeks to replace the old, teleological organicist model with an approach that follows degrees of vitality shared across the species divide. Even so, her ecology perpetuates a familiar search for unity, wholeness, and common structure across music and human/nonhuman life that reduces difference to order. In this way, her new organicism is not so different from its predecessor, a Romantic environmental aesthetic that fosters the myopic ethics of ecocentrism.

Musical Vitalities often appears to harbor an ecocentric disposition. There are also, however, those strands of argumentation that complicate Watkins’s position on the spectrum from ecocentrism to anthropocentrism and thus query her ethical vision. In chapter 3, for instance, she proposes that musical listening offers access to “dimensions of existence” that are not simply shared across the human and nonhuman but exist on a vital plane beyond material bodies (p. 68). This transcendental concept might be a catch-all for the equalizing ecological philosophy that guides the text. But it also highlights Watkins’s desire to propose rhetorical categories that challenge

2. Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

3. *Ibid.*, 18.

anthropocentric thinking and honor the diversity of nonhuman life and its suffering under environmental instability. While her gaze is often directed toward the nonhuman, her ecology honors diversity in this moment of environmental crisis with compassion, humility, and care attuned to the neediest human *and* nonhuman lives.

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Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America, edited by Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xix, 343 pp.

“Experimentalismo” has long been a problematic category in Latin American art and music, particularly within the intellectual and artistic communities Ángel Rama has called “la ciudad letrada.”¹ As several chapters in this book show, leading avant-garde composers rejected the label “experimental” for their music. *Experimentalisms in Practice* comprises thirteen chapters that examine a wide range of artists, composers, and sonic practices, showcasing the irreducible heterogeneity of avant-garde scenes in Latin America while displaying a stimulating diversity of methodological approaches that take their cues from recent scholarship in Anglo-American academia. In an incisive introduction, the editors lay out several key issues that stem from the uneasy relationship between practice and discourse in Latin American “experimentalisms,” and propose an ambitious research program that reads as a vibrant manifesto for future scholarship in the field. Their emphasis on practice, the plurality of experimentalisms, and the highly localized condition of sonic practices constitutes one of the book’s strongest contributions. The only caveat lies in the lasting performative effects that the very use of “experimentalism”—a label reified as a disciplinary category in the global North—may have in homogenizing the case studies under discussion. As this volume shows, music scholars actively participate in the institutional processes of enunciation that transduce sonic practices into the conceptual entities that inscribe them in the historical record.

Addressing a key lexical issue, the editors reject Benjamin Piekut’s suggestion that “experimentalism” and “avant-garde” be used interchangeably. Instead, they recognize the relevance of the terms’ indexical differences in order to underscore rhetorical inconsistencies inherent in Latin American *vanguardismos* while foregrounding their highly localized condition. Their emphasis on locality goes hand in hand with wide-ranging methodological goals such as the undoing of reductive dichotomies between the local and the global, and the decolonization of structures of thought and practice that

1. Ángel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Montevideo: Arca, 1998).