

Introduction: Music and Biography

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Musical biography is a topic that is constantly referred to in scholarship but rarely interrogated sufficiently critically. However, it has particular relevance to the study of nineteenth-century music. The Romantic construction of a genius-composer figure and the transcendence of the musical work are powerful and enduring concepts that are grounded in nineteenth-century musical biography. Perhaps more significantly, both nineteenth-century music and biography take the exploration of the subjectivity of the individual as a point of creative departure, encouraging readers and listeners to conceive of life and work as related. Yet this relationship has been a source of contention as much as fascination to musicologists and biographers.¹ The last two decades have seen a revived

interest among scholars in tackling the unique problems and opportunities presented by musical biography: the focus of this special issue.

The fascination with the self as a literary subject, or rather the emergence of modern autobiography, began in the later eighteenth century. It coincided with the rise of Romanticism, and the related concerns of the exaltation of genius, the development of modern individualism, and the newfound importance placed on subjective experience.² These aesthetic concerns also affected ways of listening to music in the first half of the nineteenth century. Listeners began to hear

Jim Samson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–8.

²See Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 51, for a discussion of the relationship between Romanticism and the emergence of autobiography. See Eugene L. Stelzig, *The Romantic Subject in Autobiography: Rousseau and Goethe* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), for an excellent discussion of some of the impulses in Romantic autobiography.

¹For an introduction to some of the issues presented by biographical approaches to the relationship between life and work, see Jim Samson, “Myth and Reality: A Biographical Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*, ed.

music as a form of autobiographical expression, and writings about music began to read life into work and vice versa.³ At the same time, composers experimented with strategies that still entice us into attempting autobiographical interpretations. Programmatic titles or accompanying notes often point to a protagonist who is closely associated with the composer's image within the contemporary press or in their own writings;⁴ characteristic recurring motifs, topics, or rhetorical features might depict subjects and their actions within various pictorial settings, and intertextual references might be read as veiled allusions to other individuals.⁵

Undoubtedly, the concept of subjectivity is closely intertwined with nineteenth-century aesthetics. Life-writing opens up fruitful avenues for understanding its representation in music. Subjectivity is constructed in many ways in nineteenth-century life-writing. It can be aligned with the broader social and political ideals of its age, representing a kind of collective subjectivity, or it can be determinedly unique, displaying individuality. At times it appears to be unified, coherent, and knowable; at others it is fragmented, shifting, and multivalent. Take, for example, Berlioz's *Mémoires*: a complex and fascinating essay in Romantic subjectivity.⁶

³Mark Evan Bonds, *The Beethoven Syndrome: Hearing Music as Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), examines these issues and the philosophical, cultural, and economic changes around 1830 that led to a rise in "autobiographical" listening and composing.

⁴For an example of this association, see Laura Tunbridge, "Schumann as Manfred," *Musical Quarterly* 87 (2004): 546–69. Tunbridge examines the different meanings arising from Schumann's contemporaries' association of Schumann with the character of Byron's Manfred.

⁵For a discussion of the relationship between intertextuality and subjectivity in nineteenth-century piano music, see Joanne Cormac, "Intertextuality, Subjectivity, and Meaning in Liszt's *Deux Polonaises*," *Musical Quarterly* 102/1 (2019): 111–52. It is no coincidence that the majority of research on subjectivity in music has focused on nineteenth-century repertoire. The classic text is Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974). See also Michael P. Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), and Benedict Taylor and Ceri Owen's special issue, "Subjectivity in European Song: Time, Place and Identity," this journal 40 (2017): 185–305.

⁶*Mémoires d'Hector Berlioz de 1803 à 1865 1865 et ses voyages en Italie, en Allemagne, en Russie et en Angleterre: Écrits par lui-même*, ed. Peter Bloom (Paris: Vrin, 2019).

Drawing on multiple genres of life-writing, from the Romantic "Confession" as popularized by Rousseau to the travelogue, and presenting a unique blend of fact and fiction, the *Mémoires* represents an attempt to construct and reconstruct the self in manifold ways. Equally, Berlioz's program notes and comments on the *Symphonie fantastique*, *Lélio*, *Harold en Italie*, and *Roméo et Juliette* invite autobiographical interpretations of his music, as do particular features of the music itself. An understanding of the techniques and contexts of nineteenth-century life-writing can help to uncover compositional approach and to nuance hermeneutic interpretations of the musical work.⁷

By the time Berlioz decided to write his *Mémoires* in 1848⁸ autobiography had flowered into a full-fledged literary genre. The numerous biographies and autobiographies of composers that appeared in the first half of the nineteenth-century reflect not only creative and philosophical Romantic experiments in exploring individuality and the concept of the self, but also the public appetite for details about the lives of extraordinary individuals.⁹ Autobiography developed a more commercial strand from around 1830, as composers felt compelled to fashion their own image at a time when celebrity culture was emerging into a

⁷Francesca Brittan, for example, has probed the *Mémoires'* dissection of emotional experience, and its layering of imaginary and real selves, to offer not only a contextualization but also a new interpretation of the self-referentiality of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. Francesca Brittan, "Berlioz and the Pathological Fantastic: Melancholy, Monomania, and Romantic Autobiography," this journal 24 (2006): 211–39.

⁸The *Mémoires* contained some material published earlier as stand-alone fragments, but the majority of the text was written in 1848. See Pierre Citron, "The *Mémoires*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Berlioz*, ed. Peter Bloom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 125–45 (especially 128–30) for details of these fragments and for an overview of the chronology of the book as a whole. Berlioz wrote the majority of the book between 1848 and 1854, but continued working on it until 1865. For full details of sources and chronology, see the introduction of Peter Bloom's new critical edition, *Mémoires d'Hector Berlioz de 1803 à 1865*, particularly 29–52.

⁹For an interdisciplinary discussion about the development of celebrity culture during the Romantic period, see *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750–1850*, ed. Tom Mole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

multimedia phenomenon.¹⁰ Accordingly, biographies such as Franz Liszt's influential *F. Chopin* (1852) reflected on intimate aspects of Chopin's life, whetting public curiosity about Chopin's relationship with George Sand, and also enabled Liszt to capitalize on the celebrity of his friend.¹¹ Biography also helped crystallize the figure of the composer-genius in the popular imagination, creating a compelling image that continues to infiltrate our understanding of creative individuals and the creative process itself.¹²

At the same time, musical biography developed hand in hand with music history, as the two genres shared the same authors.¹³ Although the hagiographical tendencies of nineteenth-century biography later came under fire, many of the biographical texts published at this time formed the backbone of modern musicology. Even now, their powerful historiographical

narratives, and their cultural and political assumptions, continue to influence not only the narrative structures of modern biographies, but also the image we have of particular composers, the way we understand their music, and the position of composers and works within the canon. In many cases, these early biographies contain an unrivalled level of biographical detail, including extracts from letters and eyewitness accounts.

On the other hand, myth-making is never far from view, and this has shaped the relationship that has since evolved between the disciplines of musicology and biography.¹⁴ Some composers have been more subject to processes of biographical mythologization than others. Biographical work on Mozart in the second half of the twentieth century, for example, has prioritized the collecting of new facts and the correcting of errors and embellishments. This has been a reaction to the powerful hold that early biographers, such as Friedrich Schlichtegroll, Franz Xaver Niemetschek, and Johann Friedrich Rochlitz have had on the public imagination, in constructing a seductive image of Mozart as an eternal child and in popularizing the mystery of the circumstances surrounding his death.¹⁵ Chopin has inspired a similar level of biographical mythologization, causing one frustrated biographer to make a study of the existing biographies, interrogating those that generated myth and legend.¹⁶ More recently, the zealotry

¹⁰The period also saw the proliferation of composer iconography, including death-bed scenes in which viewers were allowed a glimpse of a famous individual at their most private, intimate moments. Alan Davison has conducted significant research into composer iconography of the nineteenth century. For an introduction to this area, see Alan Davison, "The Musician in Iconography from the 1830s and 1840s: The Formation of New Visual Types," *Music in Art* 28 (2003): 147–62. For a discussion of deathbed scenes, see Davison, "Painting for a Requiem: Mihály Munkácsy's *The Last Moments of Mozart* (1885)," *Early Music* 39 (2011): 79–92.

¹¹See *Liszt's Chopin: A New Edition*, ed. Meirion Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) for a translation of and critical commentary on this fascinating text.

¹²See R. Keith Sawyer, *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23–25, for a discussion of the Romantic conception of creativity. This view of creativity still informs popular biographical depictions. See Joanne Cormac, "Cinematic Depictions of Music Creative Processes in Classical and Popular Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Creative Process in Music*, ed. Nicolas Donin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), citing advance online publication: DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190636197.013.31; and John Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

¹³For example, Johann Nicolaus Forkel worked on his comprehensive music history, *Allgemeine Geschichte der Musik* (1788–1801) alongside his seminal biography, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke: Für patriotische Verehrer echter musikalischer Kunst* (1802). Similarly, François-Joseph Fétis completed two biographical dictionaries: the *Biographie universelle des musiciens et bibliographie générale de la musique* (1835–44 and 1860–65), and later also worked on a broader history of music: *Histoire générale de la musique* (Paris: Firmin Didot frères, 1869–76).

¹⁴An excellent introduction to mythologizing motifs in biographies of artists is Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). As regards the mythologization of composers in biography, see Christopher Wiley, "Mythological Motifs in the Biographical Accounts of Haydn's Later Life," in *The Land of Opportunity: Joseph Haydn in Britain*, ed. Richard Chesser and David Wyn Jones (London: British Library, 2013), 195–211, and Kristina Marta Knittel, "The Construction of Beethoven," in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*, ed. Jim Samson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 118–50.

¹⁵For a useful overview of early Mozart biography and the emergence of Mozart myths, see William Stafford, "The Evolution of Mozartian Biography," in *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 200–11.

¹⁶See Adam Harasowski, *The Skein of Legends around Chopin* (Glasgow: William MacLellan, 1967).

with which biographers of the second half of the twentieth century attempted to separate fact from fiction in musical biographies has been criticized for its underlying assumption: that it is possible to achieve a definitive interpretation of a life.¹⁷

Debunking myths represents one of the main ways in which musicologists have engaged critically with musical biography. Another is to interrogate the impact biographical interpretations have had on reception: sometimes arguing that this has led to a limited, one-sided interpretation, or even neglect, of particular musical works.¹⁸ Together, these two impulses reveal the ways in which musicologists have generally approached biography: as something misleading and problematic, if not suspect. However, since the turn of the century, musicologists have also begun to acknowledge biography's potential as a barometer of cultural and social values and tastes, which can help explain the reception fortunes of particular individuals and processes of canon formation.¹⁹

In recognition of both the pitfalls and the unmined potential of musical biography, Jolanta T. Pekacz called for a reconsideration of the "premises, boundaries, and objectives" of the discipline in the wake of the upheavals in the epistemological foundations of historical writing in the last decades of the twentieth century.²⁰ In particular, she called for new musical biographies to be written that are skeptical of positivist, linear, causal, teleological narratives. Pekacz's criticisms of musical biography were

predicated on the assumption that historical biography is a subfield of history, and therefore it is necessary for it to keep step with changes in the broader discipline.²¹ This perception mirrors the increased scholarly interest which biography has enjoyed over the past couple of decades, leading to a "biographical turn" in the humanities and social sciences. This has seen scholars advocating biographical methods as a research methodology to emphasize the relationship of individual agency to broader social and political forces, and to stress the ways that individuals (including forgotten individuals) can influence historical change.²²

This focus on forgotten individuals has offered one of the most important contributions of biography to musicology in recent years. It represents yet another way in which the two disciplines are closely connected, developing in similar directions with shared concerns. The last few decades have seen biographers engaging with new subjects, particularly women. This began with biographies of the lives of the sisters, wives, and mothers of prominent men, but has since broadened to include little-known women of various social standing and occupation. Biographical lives of women often use the life of an individual to illuminate historical patterns, the relationship of women to particular institutions, and the forces of social change. They present unique challenges for the biographer: often these lives are based on fragmented documentary evidence, and the traditional focus of biographies on public life has meant that the lives of women do not fit typical biographical narratives.

These trends are mirrored in musicology. The increased interest in women composers, which has been growing steadily for several decades, has relied heavily on biographical work. Often new audiences access women composers through

¹⁷See Jolanta T. Pekacz, "Memory, History and Meaning: Musical Biography and Its Discontents," *Journal of Musicological Research* 23 (2004): 39–80 (at 44).

¹⁸For example, Laura Tunbridge has argued for a re-evaluation of Schumann's late works, demonstrating that excessive focus on Schumann's mental illness has led to the late works being dismissed and misunderstood. See Tunbridge, *Schumann's Late Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁹For example, see Christopher Wiley, "'A Relic of an Age Still Capable of a Romantic Outlook': Musical Biography and The Master Musicians Series, 1899–1906," *Comparative Criticism* 25 (2003): 161–202. Wiley's article places the original twelve volumes of the Master Musicians series within their late Victorian historical context, noting the ways in which the series' writers constructed their subjects to appeal to prevalent values of the day.

²⁰See Pekacz, "Memory, History and Meaning," 39–80.

²¹An excellent introduction to the relationship between the disciplines of biography and history is Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

²²For a recent overview of the ways in which the biographical turn is changing the humanities, see *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, ed. Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, and Jonne Harmsma (London: Routledge, 2017).

various forms of biographical writing before they hear their music. In parallel to life-writing of women in other disciplines, feminist musicology has used biography to understand obstacles to social change and the impact of gender on women's musical opportunities and ambitions.²³ Biography is also closely intertwined with other impulses in musicology, particularly the study of sexuality and music.²⁴

Over the past decade or so, biography has increasingly claimed the attention of musicologists as a field demanding greater theoretical reflection, and one that offers new methodological approaches to the study of music history.²⁵ We have also seen musicologists applying new, experimental approaches to the writing of biography.²⁶ The nineteenth century is a particularly fruitful period for the study of musical biography. It saw the appearance of the first musicians' autobiographies, representing both a profound fascination with subjectivity in both musical and biographical realms and a growing appetite for self-commodification to satisfy the expanding market for music and the emerging culture of celebrity. Meanwhile, the period saw the

cementation of biographical practices and approaches that persist to this day.

This special issue attempts to capture some of the richness and diversity of biographical activity during this period, as well as the current state of scholarship addressing the complex relationship between musicology and biography. Together the articles aim to further our understanding of how we might use musical biography as a research tool. Rather than attempt to vindicate the genre, we embrace the issues that have marred its reputation, such as its use of gossip and rumor, and its tendency to mythologize, as fascinating areas of enquiry that shed useful light on historiographical issues and methods. But the articles in this issue also encourage greater reflection on how we should approach writing musical biography in the future.

Each article explores a group of interrelated themes: namely, the influence of biography and biographical ideas on the reception of composers and their music, the relationship, at a macro level, between biography and musicology as discipline, and at a micro level between author and subject, the role of biography in constructing subjectivities and identities, and the use of anecdote and the blurring of fact and fiction as a biographical approach. Each article takes its own direction: the issue includes investigations of biographical work relating to a range of musical figures, from Mozart to Marie Lloyd, and of biographical writing from across the long nineteenth century and beyond.

The issue begins chronologically with Simon Keefe's article on Mozart and Haydn biographies written during the 1820s and 30s. Keefe highlights the intertwined nature of the composers' reception during this period by analyzing the influence of Mozart biographies on those of Haydn. He reveals how existing narratives converged and diverged during this time, and how the popularity of anecdotes blurred the boundaries between biography and fiction.

My article takes up the themes of reception, identity construction, and fiction within the context of the London musical press in the 1840s and 50s. It contextualizes London critics' biographical constructions of Berlioz against historical musical debates taking place in England at mid-century. I argue that the "Berlioz" that emerges

²³Marian Wilson Kimber has argued that feminist musicologists sometimes invent or embellish obstacles in order to heighten the impression of women composers as suffering artists. See Marian Wilson Kimber, "The 'Suppression' of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography," this journal 26 (2002): 113–29. The article caused some controversy. For responses to it, see Marcia J. Citron, "Feminist Waves and Classical Music: Pedagogy, Performance, Research," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 8 (2004): 47–60, and Citron, "A Bi-centennial Reflection: Twenty-Five Years with Fanny Hensel," *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 4 (2007): 7–20, to which Wilson Kimber responded with "Of 'Bumps' and Biography: A Response to Marcia Citron," *19th Century Music Review* 5 (2008): 171–76.

²⁴Pekacz positions musical biography as a "site of struggle over the control of cultural memory," pointing to the role biography has played in "outing" composers including Schubert and Handel. See "Memory, History and Meaning," 60.

²⁵Jolanta T. Pekacz's edited volume *Musical Biography: Towards New Paradigms* (Oxford: Ashgate, 2006) brings together musicologists and historians to offer a critical reassessment of older biographies and helps forge new approaches to musical biography.

²⁶For example, see the creative approach taken by Paul Kildea in *Chopin's Piano: A Journey through Romanticism* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), which traces the history of Chopin's *Preludes* through the instruments on which they were played.

is a paradoxical figure, adaptable to suit competing needs. The images of Berlioz circulating in the press shed new light on the agendas of a small group of influential critics and reveal the fluidity of the power relationships between Berlioz and his biographers.

Kristin Franseen's article further interrogates the motives and practices of the biographer. Franseen examines the relationship between biography and queer musicology in her discussion of Rosa Newmarch's and Edward Prime Stevenson's early-twentieth-century readings of queer subjectivities in nineteenth-century repertoire: namely Tchaikovsky's instrumental music. Franseen argues that the very aspects of life-writing that make it appear suspect to scholars—its use of anecdotes and rumors—offered rare spaces for addressing issues of

sexuality in symphonic music and enabled a queer musicology to develop.

Finally, Paul Watt takes up the theme of the relationship between biography and music history in his article on the music-hall singer Marie Lloyd. Watt argues that the vocal style of Lloyd offers a missing dimension to our historical understanding of operatic vocal styles. Biographical constructions of Lloyd have contributed to this neglect and to the position of music hall within the discipline, as they tend to focus on Lloyd's physicality in contrast to constructions of opera singers that lay greater emphasis on their voices. Watt confronts the problem of how to combine life and music in biography and interrogates the musical absences that occur when life takes priority. 