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 revivified 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

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

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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): 545–69. Tunbridge examines the different meanings arising from Schumann’s contemporaries’ association of Schumann with the character of Byron’s Manfred.


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. The 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.

8For 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. 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. 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.

At the same time, musical biography developed hand in hand with music history, as the two genres shared the same authors. Although operated hand in hand with music history, as the creative individuals and the creative process itself. 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.

13 The 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.


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

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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.
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. Biography is also closely intertwined with other impulses in musicology, particularly the study of sexuality and music.

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. We have also seen musicologists applying new, experimental approaches to the writing of biography. 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

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24 Pekacz 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.


26 For 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.