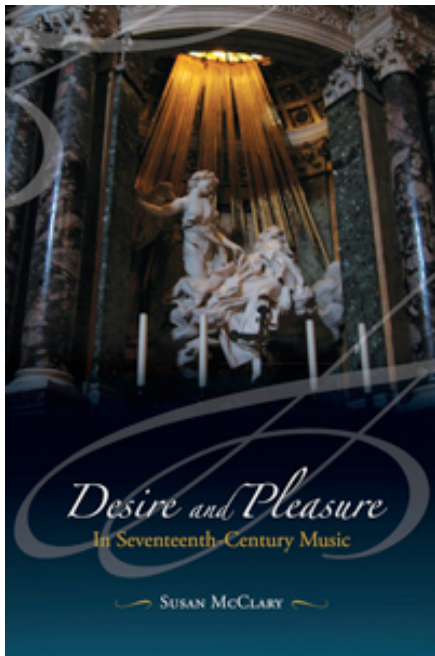


Book Review**Susan McClary:*****Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music***

by Nicholas Jones



While what we call 'Baroque music' (largely, the instrumental works of Vivaldi, Handel and J.S. Bach) can be heard on any classical music station, the really Baroque tunes don't often get played. We don't catch much Frescobaldi, D'Anglebert, Schütz or Cavalli on the way to the grocery store. The 17th century seems too far removed from us to be entertainment material, even, I'd guess, for most readers of ClevelandClassical.com. And yet there is much pleasure in it.

This wonderful and seldom-heard music is taken up by musicologist Susan McClary in a passionate, learned and often thrilling new book, *Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music*, published by the University of California Press. McClary, especially known for her controversial work on feminist musicology (in particular, *Feminine Endings*, 2002), has recently moved to Cleveland to join the CWRU Department of Music.

There were three main stories that I found myself following in this book, which ranges in subject-matter over keyboard music, violin sonatas, religious works and opera.

One story is about place, exploring the contrast between the music of the city-states of Italy — virtuosic, energetic, directional — and the very different music produced in the absolutist court of Louis XIV of France — elegant and (on the surface, at any rate) orderly. As the author points out, this is far from a merely scholarly pursuit: it is essential for a practicing teacher and performer (and teacher *of* performers, as she is) to understand how the expectations of noble patrons affected the shapes of these compositions.

A primary tool of McClary's analysis, as one would expect of a musicologist, is analysis of the score, which is done with clarity and zest. At times, I — not an accomplished theorist by any means — got a little lost in the details, but the author always pulled me back with her reminders of why the details matter. And they clearly do.

McClary writes with the urgency of an investigative reporter doggedly pursuing clues — a reporter who also plays the harpsichord! One example: “I decided I could not stand my-

self anymore if I continued to have no idea how French seventeenth-century dance music worked”. And how to figure it out? By playing nothing but these dances for an entire summer, “until I was able to look at a new one and recognize what was special about it”.



Another of this book's stories is about time. McClary argues that the reason seventeenth-century music sounds strange to us is that it lacks the time-based cadence structures of the eighteenth century. That is, it doesn't pause, or end, where we expect it to. Largely, that is because it is written in an older harmonic language, that of modes, rather than in the language of classical tonality. Modes do not share with tonality that drive towards cadence (the inevitable V-I, dominant-tonic of music since, say, Haydn).

McClary writes with obvious delight about how this earlier music expands time and extends our pleasure, in winding and often extravagant elaborations. Her chapter about the almost infinite time-extensions possible in the chaconne, that strange import from the New World (which she wryly refers to as a 'groove' — the book is full of crossover references to contemporary jazz and pop music), is a fascinating counterbalance to Alex Ross's recent treatment of lament in that same form (in *Listen to This*).

Enjoying the extension of time is key to performing and listening to these works. McClary's analyses plunge us into the operational details of compositions on so many levels that we start to see their complexity as a performer might: a delay of return to the tonic, supported by a sudden leap in the melody or another striking flourish of sixteenth-notes in the inner voices, then the “exquisite mordent” that leads to a “swirl of circular activity” and a subsequent “nonsimultaneity of arrivals”.

This kind of “inchworm's-eye analysis” (her expression) is done with such panache that, even when I didn't completely understand it, I loved reading about it; McClary's seminars must be really fun. After all, the book *is* about pleasure! Even the fingers get their chance at pleasure in an anecdote about performing: “Harpichordist Lisa Crawford [of Oberlin] used to smile with delight at her hands when they played these pieces, as though they were adorable pets who were frolicking of their own accord”.

Speaking of pleasure, the third story this book tells is about sex. In McClary's view, sex is all over seventeenth-century music — and, from my experience with the literature of the day, this is no surprise. The operas are obviously based on librettos of (often frustrated) desire. The ambiguities of gender are built into Italian opera: the women characters, sung by male *castrati*, are allowed remarkable degrees of social deviance — and often have the most thrilling music, even in the intensely masculinity cultures of the time.

High voices were signals of erotic frisson: the dangerous women of the operas, the violin, just then coming into its own as a solo instrument capable of extraordinary virtuosity, even the sopranos of church music with its emphasis on the mysterious and ecstatic love

of God — all used the current fascination (McClary calls it “fetish”, even) with the higher registers, vehicles of eroticism in melody, register, and extension.

Every analysis of art, whether of poetry, sculpture, or sonata, makes that art new by insisting its importance for our own time. We, too, are fascinated by national difference (in a globalizing world), by time (in the hectic pace of modernity) and by sex and sexual ambiguity (Michael Jackson might be one example, if any is needed).

This fascinating study of a far-distant time rightly registers how paying attention to our own concerns opens up a neglected music, powerful pieces that otherwise we might have seen as irrelevant. It's an essential book not only for scholars but also for performers and for those of us who listen to those performances. I know that it will change how I listen to Paul O'Dette, Andrew Manze, Les Délices and Apollo's Fire.

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