

*Seachanges: Music in the Mediterranean and Atlantic Worlds, 1550–1800*, edited by Kate van Orden. I Tatti Research. Rome: Officina Libraria, 2021. 319 pp.

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This provocative and important collection of essays came out of a conference entitled “Music in the Mediterranean Diaspora” held at the Villa I Tatti, Florence, in May 2017. The intention of that conference was to “[privilege] displacement as its critical lens with the specific aim of crystalizing new theoretical approaches to mobility,” asking “how border-crossing histories can shift our critical appraisal of cultural production and, conversely, how the study of musical performance can help us sight instances of ethnic encounter, creolization, and cultural *métissage* that are otherwise difficult to trace.”<sup>1</sup> Invoking “mobility” and linking it directly to a practice-centered approach is an ambitious contribution to a historiography capable of turning the tide on what Kate van Orden bluntly calls “conventional, composer-centric histories of Renaissance and Baroque music” (p. 12), in this case by “shattering the coherence of static accounts rooted in national, religious and ethnic identity into a glittering array of new subjects privileging hybridity, cosmopolitanism, and the global” (p. 9). Van Orden’s excellent introduction crackles with this kind of refreshingly direct (and sometimes fervent) rhetoric, ensuring the readability and persuasiveness of an erudite and closely argued proposal for a different kind of history, born out of two urgent questions: “[W]hen we accept that music has always moved, what happens to our intellectual frameworks for understanding it?”; and “How can we avoid merely adding minority repertoires and marginalized musical communities to historical canons that otherwise remain unchanged?” (p. 9).

“Mobility Studies” has, as van Orden notes, opened up “new horizons” for scholars to stake out “new methodological points of orientation” (p. 18). As one of its leading theorists, Mimi Sheller, writes, “[mobility studies] encompasses both the embodied practice of movement and the representations, ideologies and meanings attached to both movement

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<sup>1</sup> “Conference: Music in the Mediterranean Diaspora,” I Tatti website, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://itatti.harvard.edu/event/conference-music-mediterranean-diaspora>.

and stillness," bringing together "concerns of sociology (inequality, power, hierarchies) . . . geography (territory, borders, scale) and . . . anthropology . . . (discourses, representations, schemas)."<sup>2</sup> Such an expansive canvas provides a flexible enough surface on which to inscribe what van Orden characterizes as "soft forms of global history that take into account cultural variabilities and the crossing of peoples, religions, musics, and languages" (p. 11).

All twelve essays in this collection, written by some of the most prominent scholars working in the field, fit comfortably into Sheller's framework. Nevertheless, viewing music history through the lens of migration and mobility ("sighting . . . musics on the move," p. 10) neither guarantees a "shattering . . . of static accounts rooted in national, religious, and ethnic identity," nor necessarily "blur[s] the boundaries of a 'Europe' that was only coming into being" (p. 17). Notably, another recent collection proposes the contrary: "By stimulating innovation, changes of style and patterns of musical and social behavior, musical migrations have contributed toward cohesion within a common European cultural identity."<sup>3</sup> Van Orden challenges such a model of homogeneity and implied exclusivity through a turn to "global microhistory," proposing it as "a model . . . by which our discipline's traditional strengths in textual criticism, source study, and archival work might be leveraged to new ends . . . by identifying subjects that defy assignment to a single place, language, or ethnicity" (p. 11). The potential of what van Orden is attempting here has been outlined by Francesca Trivellato: "microhistorians unravel hidden connections between aspects of a social and cultural system that would be invisible to a macro analysis"; but even though "[microhistory] digs out details that are significant enough to undermine the foundations of existing grand narratives, [it] struggles to replace them with new ones."<sup>4</sup> This collection is an attempt to demonstrate how focusing on "mobility" might redress deep-seated biases and erasures in

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<sup>2</sup> Mimi Sheller, "Mobility," *Sociopedia.isa*, 2011, <https://sociopedia.isaportal.org/resources/resource/mobility>.

<sup>3</sup> Gesa zur Nieden and Berthold Over, eds., *Musicians' Mobilities and Music Migrations in Early Modern Europe: Biographical Patterns and Cultural Exchanges* (Mainz: Johannes Gutenberg University, 2016), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Francesca Trivellato, "Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?," *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.5070/C321009025>.

existing “grand narratives”: “No matter how peripatetic the musicians and how extensive the circulation of instruments, practices, and repertoires in the past . . . the micro-realities of musicking require local, individual, connected explanations” (p. 12).

Methodological priorities outlined in van Orden’s introduction (applying performance and listening to musical analysis; focusing on orality, mobility, exchange, and hybridity; oscillation between micro- and macrohistorical viewpoints) are admirably demonstrated in her own essay, which opens the collection. Beginning with two strangely anomalous “chansons turquesques,” published in 1604, whose texts have consistently been dismissed as, at best, “exotic” and “parodic,” and most recently as mere “pseudo-Turkish gobbledegook,” she rejects such racist disparagement and sets out to decipher the songs on the page by first having a Turkish singer familiar with sixteenth-century French pronunciation perform them: “Giving [these songs] a fair hearing thus began in the voice” (p. 41). Further collaboration with Turkish and Persian linguists and musicologists led to a reconstruction of what seem to have been actual Turkish songs, presumably transmitted orally at several removes, and then forced into “the clean appearance of white mensural notation” (p. 60) in order to facilitate written transmission to French singers. Out of the hybridities and cross-cultural exchanges revealed through microhistories of two tiny songs, van Orden builds a macrohistorical account of Franco-Ottoman relations in the early seventeenth century that ultimately helps undo prevailing Orientalist views of intra-Mediterranean musical encounter and exchange. Similar processes of “translation into print” of an otherwise orally transmitted performance style—Spanish guitar technique—are outlined in Cory Gavito’s essay, “*Alla [vera] spagnola*: Hearing Spain and Playing Guitar in Early Modern Italy.”

The quality and diversity of the contributions to this rich collection are impressive. Each author has responded—according to their particular areas of interest—to the brief: to “address basic features of musical mobility such as hybridity, translation (verbal, practical instrumental, notational), and polyglotism.” (p.18) Some, including van Orden herself, start from the smallest point of departure—individual musicians or single musical works—and work outward. Emily Wilbourne recovers the career of the (possibly) enslaved Black castrato singer known as “il Moro,” active in Florence and Venice in the mid-seventeenth century, with the intention of “troubl[ing] the presumed whiteness of European music making,” (p. 22) while Pedro Memelsdorff deconstructs layers of self-fashioning and the “staging of slavery” exemplified by the performances of the opera star of color Minette (Élisabeth-Alexandrine-

Louise Ferrand) in Desfontaines and Dalayrac's *L'amant statue* in pre-revolutionary Haiti. With a dazzling range of reference and archival prestidigitations, he extrapolates—via the opera's denouement and the (possibly) enslaved musician who ventriloquized its flute-playing statue, and the later production of racialized flute-playing automata—"the controversial link between animation and slavery" (p. 289). Olivia Bloechl focuses on the disguised gender politics of the underworld scenes in a single opera, Lully's *Proserpine* (1680), while Scott Lee Edwards unpicks the ethnic, political, and religious complexities of a singularly ideological book of sacred vocal music that uses polyglotism both to represent and to unite an international population of displaced soldiers and civilians caught up in religious war in Bohemia.

By contrast, others think of microhistories of marginalized music makers of the "Mediterranean diaspora" in terms of whole communities. Théodora Psychoyou reconstructs early modern Catholic music practices in the majority Greek Orthodox Cycladic islands through liturgical books produced in *frangochiotika* (Latinized transliteration of demotic Greek). This particularly concrete hybridity facilitated cross-cultural exchange, enabling immigrant reformists—especially Jesuits—with limited or no ability to read Greek to missionize among a population otherwise alienated by the ancient Hellenistic Greek of the Orthodox church. As Psychoyou remarks, "The simplicity and expressiveness of effective language was central to the ideals of the Catholic Reform" (p. 81). Thus, "mobile" missionizers were exploiting essentially fertile cultural ground among a well-settled, "immobile" community. Francesco Spagnolo, meanwhile, investigates the Jewish community of Corfu, formed from sedimented layers of diasporic settlement from different parts of the Mediterranean over many centuries, each bringing their own particular languages and paraliturgical traditions, who found ways to coexist, in part through exchanging and sharing musical practices between their respective synagogues. Despite being a community made from the exigencies of forced migration, such adaptations in the face of changing circumstances helped them to stay put for centuries until their near annihilation in 1944. This allows a degree of confidence in "projection backward" from the recent past in reconstructing much earlier musical practices.

In his manifesto "Rethinking Early Modern 'Western Art Music,'" David R. M. Irving suggests that the macrohistorical is essential to building alternatives to discourses of European musical exceptionalism: "The global history approach is not simply a matter of

shifting the spotlight to a niche of unstudied musical practice somewhere in the world; rather, it is an interpretation and analysis of large-scale frameworks, connections, comparisons, and exchanges that explicate and elucidate a specific action or process.”<sup>5</sup> Each essay in *Seachanges* strives to follow such a path, working to avoid merely “add[ing] unknown or ‘quirky’ micronarratives to music history” (p. 12). In the absence of studies of musics (and by scholars) from the African and Levantine half of the Mediterranean, however, breaking free from what ultimately remains a story of “European(ized)” music clearly remains a work in progress.

Van Orden highlights “‘Listening in’ . . . as a core value . . . for hearing beyond the printed and manuscript sources that are the stock-in-trade of historians” (p. 12). With the exception of the contribution by Jordi Savall—the only author to speak directly from experience as a performer—these essays are written from essentially etic rather than emic positions. Who, then, is listening, and from what standpoint? Who gets to decide—and interpret—what is being heard? And, indeed, who gets to tell musicians’ stories? In a rather curious sentence, van Orden says that “keeping musicians at the center of history allows us to write from the vantage of a philosophical ‘elsewhere’ that validates all forms of musical knowledge” (p. 13). This highlights basic questions of scholarly positioning: where (and under whose control) is this “elsewhere”? And who, exactly, is doing the validating of “all” musical knowledge?

In these essays, the displaced and marginalized reveal over and over again their resilience and ability to carry with them and adapt their musical identities in the face of diaspora—voluntary or involuntary. *Seachanges* is a beacon of brilliant light in an ocean of present migration darkness and despair, pointing the way toward new ways of making genuinely global histories of music.

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<sup>5</sup> David R. M. Irving, “Rethinking Early Modern ‘Western Art Music’: A Global History Manifesto,” *IMS Musicological Brainfood* 3, no. 1 (2019), [https://brainfood.musicology.org/pdfs/ims\\_brainfood\\_3\\_no1\\_2019.pdf](https://brainfood.musicology.org/pdfs/ims_brainfood_3_no1_2019.pdf), 6–10, here 7.