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Author(s): Deborah M. Vlock

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Sterne, Descartes, and the Music in *Tristram Shandy*

DEBORAH M. VLOCK

Relatively few critics have addressed the role of music in *Tristram Shandy*, a surprising omission from the corpus of Laurence Sterne criticism given the novel's extensive references to the subject.¹ Like all of Tristram's commentaries, his notes on the practice and theory of music are rich and obscure, and they warrant serious inquiry. It has been argued that Sterne, an enthusiastic instrumentalist, was deeply informed about the state of contemporary composition and performance.² Certainly his writings show that his concern with structures of meaning and representation encompassed musical as well as verbal discourses. They also indicate that he was well versed in the works of seventeenth-century theorists such as René Descartes, as well as in the current debates over the science of music. In fact *Tristram Shandy* explicitly satirizes Descartes's *Compendium Musicae*, registering Sterne's contempt for the chaste, mathematical discourse of Baroque music theory.

If Sterne disliked the current talk about music, he equally disdained a trend he heard in the Baroque—and arguably, classical³—music consumed by eighteenth-century English audiences: the reliance, particularly in dramatic (operatic or oratoric) music, on *Affektenlehre*, or affective theory. Baroque theories of musical apprehension, dominated by the *Affektenlehre*, turned on mathematics and logic: numerical (or chordal) combinations could be counted on to elicit certain listener

Deborah M. Vlock has published several articles on literature and its relationships with other disciplines. Her book, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre*, will be published in November 1998.

responses, leaving little to the play of imagination. While modern musicologists have argued about the relationship between Enlightenment musicology and the practice of music,⁴ eighteenth-century ears, including Sterne's, heard theory realized,⁵ and we may thus read in the author's attacks on Descartes's treatise a certain frustration at the tenacity of his affective theory's hold on music, a resentment at being "play'd on [like] a pipe," to borrow a conceit from *Hamlet*.⁶ Sterne offers, as we shall see, an alternative theory, a Shandean compendium of music—a treatise on a joyful and erotic art, one which is affiliated with sex, deeply personal, and ultimately subversive of the order of the Enlightenment. For Sterne, music is not merely a branch of rationalist philosophy, but is, on the contrary, a creative and procreative force of its own, one which may be used to deconstruct the intellectual underpinnings of the Enlightenment.

The fact that *Tristram Shandy* deconstructs rationalism is widely acknowledged; most critical treatments of the novel start from that point and then move into specific areas of interest. While the text's relationship to music has been neglected, its interest in creative—and procreative—energies has been widely discussed; essays on such subjects as sex, the body, laughter, and jokes in *Tristram Shandy* abound, and they provide an important critical context for the present essay, which affiliates music with all of the above. Jacques Berthoud has described the eroticization of language in the novel, in which "[o]rdinary domestic objects like button-holes and candles and empty bottles and sausages and old hats and sealing wax and slippers and buttered buns start to look like articles in a sex-shop catalogue. Blameless locutions like 'rise up trumps' or 'get it out of him' or 'to make ends meet' turn into ideas we can scarcely permit ourselves to entertain."⁷ The haunting of the mundane with "animal spirits," the planting of erotic possibility in patently unerotic words, comes to represent a protest against propriety, against what Sterne sees as the chaste intellectualism of Enlightenment thought. In Berthoud's reading, Sterne disingenuously positions himself as an outraged moralist decrying the "manners of the court of Navarre . . . declaring that nothing is safe in a society that combines the extremes of delicacy with the beginnings of concupiscence."⁸ But his text slyly forces its reader into complicity with the Navarreans, into an obsession with "whiskers" and the dark and damp possibilities therein, so that the very act of reading *Tristram Shandy* is one of unsettling established meanings, substituting a very powerful kind of nonsense for "sense."

Nonsense takes over and becomes more meaningful, in its resonance of meanings, than sense could ever be.

It is possible to read a certain sexual politics in the privileging of disorder over order. The destabilizing of words and meanings tends to generate erotic tones, Juliet McMaster suggests, as in the "very characters, [who,] identified by their names, grow out of a synecdoche, the low part standing for the whole. 'Toby' is slang for the buttocks, and the name calls attention to Uncle Toby's function as the down-to-earth and practical Shandy brother, the body to Walter's brain. 'Tristram,' the 'child of . . . interruption,' recalls the *triste* of Aristotle's quoted dictum, '*omne animal post coitum est triste*' (V, 36, 397). 'Jenny' is the name for the female of the species, especially of donkeys or (as Tristram prefers to call them) asses. That is, Tristram's 'dear, dear Jenny' is the female ass."⁹ Names contain bawdy possibilities within them, meaning more—and less—than they announce. Dennis W. Allen argues that Tristram Shandy "reject[s] a perspective which links phallic power to language's ability to reflect reality and stress[es] instead the divergence of word and world, the impotence of language, and man's inability to control it."¹⁰ Certainly, impotence is affiliated with (failed) structures of order in the novel, such as Walter Shandy and his "rational" theories, but I would argue that sexual potency lies in that very "divergence of word and world" that Allen sees as a symptom of male impotence and representative of a counter *female* sexual energy. The novel's primary sexual paradigm is a male one, stressing functional versus dysfunctional penises; functional sexuality, as we shall see, is linked to the irrational, the deeply felt: those things such as music and Tristram's narrative itself which defy systematic representation.

In taking on the question of musical affect in *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne enters a highly charged theoretical discussion, a prominent public debate. The sheer quantity of papers on the subject indicates its importance in contemporary intellectual discourse, especially as Baroque theory was considered to be, in spite of some recent arguments to the contrary (see note 4), intimately linked with composition and performance; the affective theory delineated by Descartes and propagated by many other theorists lay at the heart of *opera seria* and oratorio, at least through George Frederick Handel. Hence composer-theorists such as Jean-Philippe Rameau and Johann Mattheson confess their debt to Descartes, "whom fortunately I had read and by whom I had been impressed" (Rameau), and who "is especially worth reading [on the subject of the affections] since he has contributed

a great deal to music" (Mattheson).¹¹ Mattheson points out that the Cartesian doctrine of the affections is "more indispensable to a practical musician than a theorist";¹² a statement which indicates that eighteenth-century ears heard the dominant musical theory borne out in music, as does Wye Jamison Allanbrook's more recent argument that "represent[ing] the passions through [music was] . . . the common practice of composers of [this] time, a practice observed even in the domain of instrumental music, where it would seem one could most easily make a case for music as an abstract or private art."¹³

Sterne was consuming both the music and the theory which quantified aesthetic response and sought to manipulate listeners' responses. Theoretical works as old as the *Compendium Musicae* were circulating in English translation in the eighteenth century, and most of the various discussions about music, old and new, turned up in journals and books of the period. And in England, where the musical canon was codified and "old musical works were performed regularly and reverentially,"¹⁴ Handel's oratorios were a musical staple, along with music by other Baroque composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach, Arcangelo Corelli, and Henry Purcell. The available music and musicological writings, in other words, convinced Sterne that the discipline needed an overhaul; this is not to suggest that he did not like the hugely popular Handel, for example, but that he disliked the assumptions—about listeners—expressed by his music. He saw the theory he disliked realized in compositions that subscribed to the theory of affections—compositions that used affective theory to manipulate the listener's response—and fully acknowledged, in his Shandean attacks, the connection between theory and praxis which resounded in many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ears.

Many of the musicological writings that would have contributed to Sterne's negative opinion of the discipline were authored a century earlier in the French and English Royal Academies. Music, in the seventeenth century, belonged to the sciences; the most authoritative theoreticians were primarily scientists and mathematicians.¹⁵ While much of the pioneering work on the science of music—the physics of sound, the ear, the structure of music—was conducted under the auspices of the French Academie des Sciences,¹⁶ the English Royal Society, from its inception in 1660, also granted music a privileged place among its topics of scientific inquiry. The early *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* indicates that English musical discussion resembled the French, especially in its heavy dependence

on mathematics; French influence on English texts was strong, and French scientific essays made their way, albeit often piecemeal, into English journals. This academic exchange helps to explain Sterne's association of Baroque musicology with Descartes as opposed to any of the seventeenth-century English theorists whose works were still in currency. Indeed, Descartes not only continued a strong presence in European scientific discourse long after his death, but his authority in musical matters was widely assumed. "After 1650 Cartesianism . . . may be said to have been a dominant frame of mind rather than a systematic philosophy. Descartes's name was a household word . . . the main tenets of his *Discours de la Methode* (1637) were universally professed by the educated public, and sundry creeds and beliefs were attributed to him."¹⁷

The designation of music as a species of science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries rendered it, along with arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, open to extensive academic experimentation and debate. Descartes's writings on music are representative of a large body of contemporary theoretical works; they assume an essential relationship between music and mathematics, and proceed to test the limits of that relationship, basically functioning as large-scale mathematical proofs. He first articulated his musical theory in the *Compendium Musicae* and later developed it in his correspondence with Marin Mersenne.¹⁸ Both the letters and the *Compendium*, after establishing a mathematical basis for music, posit a material link between music and the passions. Descartes has been credited with

[t]he real beginnings of the systematic theory of affections . . . His *Compendium musicae* and his *Traité des passions de l'âme* (1649) were widely studied. Now the musicians could read such concrete and practically feasible instructions for the affective use of intervals as the following: When representing happy emotions the intervals tend to widen, whereas when the mood is sad they narrow . . . [Descartes's] influence was tremendous. Mattheson, the principal author of the Bach-Handel era, still quotes the *Traité*, summarizing Descartes' findings.¹⁹

The doctrine of affections presupposed a finite set of human emotions which could be accurately represented by certain musical gestures. This doctrine was "the vital concept of the Enlightenment, its musical nerve center,"²⁰ and a central concept in the *Compendium Musicae*.

There is clear evidence of Descartes's influence on eighteenth- and even nineteenth-century perceptions of human emotional response. Jean-Philippe Rameau cites him as an authority on the subject in the *Traité de l'harmonie* (1722): "Meter is so powerful in music that it suffices to excite in us all the different passions . . . We may say that meter comes naturally to everyone: it forces us, as if against our will, to follow its movement . . . 'It is evident from this,' as Descartes affirms, 'that animals might be able to dance metrically, if they were so trained.'" ²¹ Rameau was not the only Baroque theorist to borrow from the *Compendium*. According to Lucinda Heck Sloane, half a century earlier Bernard Lamy, whose *L'Art de parler* (1675) links verbal expression to the passions, argued "that our different manners of speaking are a result of the passions . . . Lamy then proceeds to show what makes sound agreeable . . . [It] has [been] pointed out . . . that the conditions Lamy lists for agreeable sound are almost exactly those listed by Descartes in his *Compendium musicae* [as conditions for making pleasurable music]." ²² As late as the end of the nineteenth century, English imaginations accommodated the possibility that specific gestural signs produced correlative emotional reactions; the period's acting theories presumed that the "passions" were invoked in certain postures and gestures, physical and vocal. Regency, Victorian, and Edwardian acting manuals bear this out, ²³ and indicate the reach of Descartes's ideas. If not the first, Descartes was certainly one of the most powerful—and famous—proponents of the affective theory which would dominate Baroque music, that is, the music in currency during much of Sterne's adult life.

Sterne undoubtedly had liberal access to Descartes's musical treatise, which had begun circulating in three languages in the 1650s. An English translation of the Latin *Compendium Musicae* first appeared in 1653 and was shortly followed by a French translation in 1658. ²⁴ The latter was probably the edition used by Lamy and Rameau. While much of the *Compendium* is obscure or obsolete, its most basic tenets merit discussion, including, obviously, those which provoked Shandean satire 150 years later. The treatise opens with a comment on the nature of the medium: "The basis of music is sound; its aim is to please and to arouse various emotions in us." ²⁵ Sound, like emotion, is for Descartes a purely physical and physiological phenomenon; the various charts and drawings in his *Compendium* attest to that. From a syllogism constructed in the first three paragraphs of the text, we may derive the following facts: that music equals sound; that sound is a physical or literal property; and that music is

hence a rational medium. One of the attractions of circumscribing music within the discourse of reason lay in the possibility that the passions, which were “naturally” sounded in musical notes and rhythms, could be concurrently tempered, controlled. The Baroque musicologist strove to mathematize music so that he might also mitigate the wayward passions of the soul, purging the self of its least noble parts. That music had some hand in this “physic” is repeatedly demonstrated by Enlightenment writings and Baroque compositions.

Consider, for example, a paper submitted to the English Royal Society between 1700 and 1720 by one T. Salmon. Salmon takes a Cartesian position on the moral duty, as it were, of modern musicology, which he thinks should contain musical expression within the boundaries of mathematical discourse. His treatise on “The Theory of Music *Reduced* to Arithmetical and Geometrical Proportions” (my emphasis) asserts that

the *Theory of Music*, which is but little known in this Age, and the *Practice* of it which is arriv'd to a very great Excellency, may be fixed upon the sure Foundations of *Mathematical* Certainty. [One of the] Propositions, upon which the Experiment was admitted [before the Society, was that] Music consisted in Proportions, and the more exact the Proportions, the better the music.²⁶

This passage triumphantly describes the reduction of music to mathematics, “reduced” suggesting a containment of the irrational. “Good” music is identified by the purity of its numbers rather than its beauty or pathos or sweetness. The bare fact that a piece evoked the passions would have seemed unremarkable to Salmon: all music did that. But by regulating musical expression, by constructing musical relationships as numerical relationships, the theorist could also regulate those passions and defuse the potentially disruptive side of music—its provocation of excessive, undisciplined, and possibly erotic emotions, which, as Descartes had written, could lead to madness.²⁷ Salmon’s pleasure over conquering the uncertain, rescripting music in the sure language of numbers, reflects the dominant mood of the Enlightenment: in all areas of study, in Britain and on the Continent, reason was to take precedence over emotion. One could substitute Salmon’s comments on music for those of many of his contemporaries and virtually all of his immediate predecessors, including Descartes. Well into the eighteenth century, the English and

Continental academies promoted reason, mathematical exactness, as a ruling principle of even the most creative humanistic disciplines.

The mathematical "reductions" performed in Descartes's *Compendium* and celebrated in Salmon's treatise were practiced by most seventeenth-century musicologists.²⁸ Of course music continues to be theorized mathematically today, and in many cases Descartes's assumptions have been borne out by later scholars. His impressive understanding of music (he must have had a fine ear) is very clearly demonstrated in the *Compendium*—where, unfortunately, music's vibrancy and sensuality are frequently obscured by complicated mathematics. Take, for example, the discussion of musical relationships in which he perceptively notes that "the parts of a whole object [e.g., an octave] are less different when there is greater proportion between them."²⁹ In other words, the notes C and D struck in unison on a piano will jar the ear, while C and E (the major third) will harmonize sweetly, and C and C¹ (the octave) will sound identical, save in pitch. While he muddies things by endeavoring to prove why "[t]his proportion must be arithmetic, not geometric, the reason being that in the former there is less to perceive,"³⁰ anyone with musical ears—and no real knowledge of music theory—must see the truth in his reasoning. The problem, as Sterne would later represent it, lies in his extension of mathematical reasoning to his discussion of musical affect; not only does Descartes prove the physics of consonance arithmetically, but he explains human responses to the consonances, and to musical gestures like meter, in the same spirit: "As regards the various emotions which music can arouse by employing various meters, I will say that in general a slower pace arouses in us quieter feelings such as languor, sadness, fear, pride, etc. A faster pace arouses faster emotions, such as joy, etc. On the same basis one can state that duple meter, 4/4 and all meters divisible by two, are of slower types than triple meters . . . The reason for this is that the latter occupy the senses more, since there are more things to be noticed in them."³¹ The effect of a piece depends upon the mathematical proportions in its meter: "all meters divisible by two are of slower types"—and will evoke "quieter feelings"—than those divisible by three, like dance rhythms. In one sense, effect here precedes cause: the set of possible responses exist a priori to the musical patterns that excite them and need only be stirred by the appropriate metrical patterns. Descartes never considers the reverse possibility: that triple meter pieces "arouse faster

emotions" because they are often used to accompany social activities like dancing, which itself quickens the pulse and stimulates sociosexual pleasure. As he sees it, "faster" meters—those with complicated metrical numbers—are more apt to distract the senses, much as geometry, with its larger parts and greater complications, will tax the attention more than simple arithmetic. It is this typically Cartesian use of abstract reason to demystify music which Sterne deplored, and which, at last, takes us to *Tristram Shandy*.

Tristram Shandy devotes itself to questioning the rationalist discourses in disciplines, including music, theology, and physiology, of philosophers such as Descartes. One of the text's more amusing satires, the *coitus interruptus* which Tristram suggests has determined his assortment of sexual, social, and narrative dysfunctions, defuses the dominant Enlightenment theories of association and reproduction by exposing the insufficiency of both concepts to account for actual human experience,³² which is always too unreasonable to be explained by conventional philosophy. In Sterne's hands such serious philosophical subjects turn silly and irrelevant, and they confound anyone who takes them at face value. Instead of privileging the philosophic theories themselves, Sterne insists on the primacy of his characters' personal responses to them, and this insistence on the subjective is, in itself, a rejection of Cartesianism. The text's musical satires work in much the same way, illustrating the inadequacy of a concept by weaving absurd stories around it, focusing on the inevitably personal human responses to a condition rather than the *a priori* truths behind it.

Tristram Shandy's first attack on Cartesian musicology invokes the theory of affections, which Tristram introduces into his narrative in a typically complex, overdetermined manner:

our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystallized flesh and blood; so that, if we would come to the specific characters of them, we must go some other way to work . . . Some, for example, draw their characters with wind instruments . . . but it is as fallacious as the breath of fame;—and moreover, bespeaks a narrow genius. I am not ignorant that the Italians pretend to a mathematical exactness in their designations of one particular sort of character among them, from the *forte* or *piano* of a certain wind instrument they use,—which they say is infallible.—I dare not mention the name of the instrument in this place;—'tis sufficient we have it among us.³³

The sexual innuendo in the wind instrument serves a variety of purposes, including but not limited to the licentious. Sterne also uses it to suggest, in the association of penis and voice, the Italian *castrato*, a figure who dominated the opera scene through the first half of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, "wind instrument" refers metonymically to the collective orchestral or operatic voice. The passage implicitly criticizes the reliance, by composers of Italian *opera seria* (who employed *castrati*), on conventional formulae for their instrumental and vocal representations of the passions,³⁴ condemning the pretense to "mathematical exactness in their designations of . . . character."³⁵ By the time Sterne commenced writing *Tristram Shandy*, this "pretense" was common; Handel, the primary operatic composer of the day, relied heavily on *Affektenlehre* in his operas, and so did his followers.³⁶

The Baroque *opera seria* is entirely dependent upon those rationalistic gestures, for example the affiliation of passion with key or meter, which flourished during the Age of Reason. Charles Rosen's discussion of the failures of early-eighteenth-century serious opera illustrates the musical condition Sterne satirizes in *Tristram Shandy*:

High Baroque rhythm was almost unmanageable for dramatic purposes . . . Dramatic movement was impossible: two phases of the same action could only be statically represented, with a clear division between them. Even a change of sentiment could not take place gradually: there had to be a definite moment where one sentiment stopped and another suddenly took over . . . [Baroque] musical drama had always been so arranged that the more formally organized music was reserved for the expression of feeling—generally only one sentiment at a time—in an aria or duet . . . An aesthetic of music as the expression of feeling was ideal for Baroque opera: it fitted the da capo aria like a glove, with its homogeneous rhythmic texture, its principle of additive extension of a central motif, and its relatively equal distribution of tension throughout—even the contrast provided by the middle section was so static as to raise no contradiction. The difficulty—leaving aside the rupture between music and the essential scenic movement—is that in so far as music is an expressive art, it is pre-verbal, not post-verbal. Its effects are at the level of the nerves and not of the sentiments. For this reason, in music like the Baroque da capo aria, devoted to the depiction of one sentiment or *Affekt*, the words come to seem like a commentary, generalized and denatured, on the music.³⁷

Without ignoring the probability that what seems stilted and inadequate by twentieth-century operatic standards met the expectations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century audiences in general, I want to suggest that Sterne's experience with contemporary opera left him unsatisfied for many of the same reasons listed by Rosen. The failure of conventional affective gestures in dramatic representation, the exaggerated artifice of the genre, must have confirmed his negative reactions to the music scene in general, especially as the state of opera appeared to be causally linked to the philosophical theories he disliked. Sterne voices his musical dissent in *Tristram Shandy* by privileging the musically transgressive, the irrational, the erotic, over the "reasonable"—that is, if "transgressive," "irrational," and "erotic" suggest departure from the tight artifice of Baroque opera, music, and musicology.³⁸

In contrast to the heavy controls employed in contemporary operatic and instrumental music, Sterne's aesthetic emphasizes the pulse of uncertainty, of possibility—social, sexual, aesthetic—that sweeps through musical expression. That quality of uncertainty in music often deprives Tristram of metaphors with which to structure his story because it renders all of the terms conventionally used to describe musical expression unreliable, ineffective. Tristram's attempts at using musical metaphor to stabilize meaning invariably fracture it instead, and this paradoxically enriches the experience of reading by endowing his narrative with all of the resonance, the multiple valences, one finds in music itself. When Uncle Toby's hobby horsing nearly drives Walter mad, Tristram uses a series of hybrid musical-painterly-physiognomical metaphors to register the moment, compromising the purity of the various scientific languages while confounding their power to represent the self:

Any man, Madam, reasoning upwards, and observing the prodigious suffusion of blood in my father's countenance,—by means of which . . . he must have reddend, pictorially and scientifically speaking, six whole tints and a half, if not a full octave above his natural colour;—any man, Madam, but my Uncle Toby, who had observed this, together with the violent knitting of my father's brows . . . would have concluded my father in a rage; and . . . had he been a lover of such kind of concord as arises from two such instruments being put into exact tune,—he would instantly have skrewed up his, to the same pitch;—and then the devil and all had broke loose—the whole piece, madam, must have been played off like the sixth

of Avison Scarlatti—*con furia*,—like mad.—Grant me patience!—What has *con furia*,—*con strepito*,—or any other hurly burly word whatever to do with harmony?

(3.5, p. 175)

This description of Walter Shandy's rage uses musical proportions—consonances—to signify his emotional state. His depth of emotion is registered on a musical-pictorial scale—"a full octave above his natural colour"³⁹—and the scene narrates itself in musical terms as a scene to be played out *con furio*, *con strepito*. While the passage begins with a concession to the affective powers of music, attempting in apparent good faith to evoke Walter's passion musically—that is, nonnarratively, with a resonance created by its rhythms and repetitions—it ends by rejecting the "hurly burly" of musical words—"hurly burly" suggesting the inherent randomness, and even violence, of the scientific lexicon. Musical language is further destabilized by its affiliation with the erotic; here music becomes sex, with Walter's rising flush measured on the octave suggestive of rising penises, confirmed in the potential concord of Uncle Toby's "skrew[ing] up his [if he could] to the same pitch." Clearly Sterne's conception of "harmony" differs from the standard, and that is why, in his opinion, Baroque music has "[nothing] whatever to do with harmony." To the Renaissance and Baroque mind, the term meant something including, but larger than, musical harmonics; the "harmony of the spheres" signified a universal orderliness which musical structures reproduced in miniature.⁴⁰ The harmony which Tristram seeks but fails to find in contemporary musical discourse is based on the deeply personal pleasure found in listening, as well as the literal blending of compatible tones. The movement in this paragraph from its relatively direct opening proposal to illustrate Walter's reaction, to its increased fragmentation and inevitable eroticization—its resistance, that is, to "rational" exposition—reads like a movement from Cartesian to Shandean music, from the harmony of rational order to a harmonics of disruption and irrationality. Although Sterne ostensibly places the Cartesian and Shandean brands of music in opposition to each other, one may find playfulness and irrationality in his invocations of even the most tightly controlled musical discourse if one simply peels away their bindings, their outer leaves of reason, so that all of the music, in *Tristram Shandy*, is ultimately Shandean. Tristram does the peeling when he finds a parcel of Yorick's sermons, each one

marked with its author's editorial comments, which take the form of standard musical terms:

On the back of half a dozen I find written, *So, so*, and no more—and upon a couple *Moderato*; by which, as far as one may gather from Altieri's Italian dictionary,—but mostly from the authority of a piece of green whipcord . . . with which he has left us the two sermons marked *Moderato*, and the half dozen of *So, so*, tied fast together in one bundle by themselves,—one may safely suppose he meant pretty near the same thing.

There is but one difficulty in the way of this conjecture, which is this, that the *moderato's* are five times better than the *so, so's*;—shew ten times more knowledge of the human heart;—have seventy times more wit and spirit in them . . . and . . . are infinitely more entertaining than those tied up with them.

(6.11, p. 414)

Here “*moderato*” loses some of its strangeness and sternness, opens itself to the comic incongruity of a green whipcord, and it is at this moment that the word, peeled back to the quick, exposed, as it were, fulfills its potential. There is hope for conventional musical language after all: the “*moderato's*” outdo the “*so, so's*” every time. Tristram's assertion that the former “shew ten times more knowledge of the human heart” may be taken ironically, but it also suggests that Sterne's relationship to conventional musical discourse was problematic: the only music he can imagine exists within the framework he criticizes, which of course precludes an unqualified rejection of “conventional music.” It has always been *possible* for “*Moderato*” to show more spirit and genius than “*So, so*,” and Sterne tries to realize that state in a chapter filled with playful musical directions, phrases with enough space around them to allow for variations, surprises:

What could Yorick mean by the words *lentamente*,—*tenute*,—*grave*,—and sometimes *adagio*,—as applied to these logical compositions . . . I dare not venture to guess . . . All I know is, that they are musical terms and have a meaning;—and as he was a musical man, I will make no doubt, but that . . . they impressed very distinct ideas of their several characters upon his fancy,—whatever they may do upon that of others.

(6.11, p. 414)

It was music's impression on the fancy, its capacity for striking a personal tone within its universal idiom, that Sterne appreciated, and this he saw devalued or ignored in contemporary musical discourse. His text, like Yorick's sermons, attempts to fill in the empty spaces, the musicological refusals to speak about music, by making music the voice of subjectivity.

I have already shown that Sterne located many of these musicological "silences" in the *Compendium Musicae*. Some of his musical satires invoke specific passages in Descartes's treatise; for example, Tristram's "translation" of Slawkenbergius's untranslatable tale, "The Intricacies of Diego and Julia," underscores the insufficiency of music to narrowly evoke emotion while indirectly and directly attacking Descartes's notes on consonances and string vibration: "What can he [Slawkenbergius] mean by the lambent pupability of slow, low, dry chat, five notes below the natural tone,—which, you know, Madam, is little more than a whisper? The moment I pronounced the words, I could perceive an attempt towards a vibration in the strings, about the region of the heart—The brain made no acknowledgment" (4.1, pp. 274–5). This strange passage suggests that music signifies through a kind of digression or indirect resonance. The "slow, low, dry chat" which is "little more than a whisper" suggests a kind of erotic rhythmic chanting, an amorphous but deeply resonant sound. It also represents the consonance known as a sixth—a note played against the "natural tone" five steps above it. Descartes describes the sixth as one of the four most expressive consonances, a musical proportion of great dramatic potential, and additionally outstanding for its liveliness: "the greatest variety [of emotions] arises from the use of these last four [consonances]. Of these, the major third and the major sixth are more pleasing and more gay [than the others]."⁴¹ Tristram's sixth is expressive in an eccentric way—that "slow, low, dry chat" does succeed in narrating the inexpressibility of erotic desire—but it fails to evoke any of the passions Descartes had designated for it. Instead Sterne emphasizes the personal nature of musical affect; his emphasis on the sixth at a moment of narrative breakdown, of pure irrationality, invokes and discredits Descartes's discussion of that consonance.

In *Tristram Shandy* "musical" expression almost always marks a failure of conventional representation, as it so clearly does in the "Diego and Julia" episode. In Sterne's novelistic universe, music's relationship to "truth"—that is, to reason and causality—is troubled, arbitrary, and constructed; to prove it, the "slow, low, dry chat" of erotic song produces a vague "vibration in the

strings" (in the heart? the loins?), an idiosyncratic rather than universal meaning. The ambiguous "strings" contain another reference to Descartes, who found a different sort of vibration—a physical phenomenon—in the strings of a lute:

Let no one think that it is mere fancy when we say that by the division of the octave we generate properly only the fifth and the major third, and the other consonances only secondarily. I have proved this by experimenting with the strings of the lute . . . If we pluck one of its strings, the force of its sound will set in vibration all the strings which are higher by any type of fifth or major third, but nothing will happen to those strings which are at the distance of a fourth or any other consonance. This power of the consonances can derive only from their relative perfection or imperfection. The former are, so to speak, primary consonances, the others only secondary, for they result necessarily from the former.⁴²

Descartes explains the phenomenon later called "sympathetic vibration" in moral terms: the perfection of the fifth and third consonances is proved by a sympathetic movement of the lute strings only in those proportions to the plucked string. In other words, he suggests that morality, or truth, precedes and informs every physical event. To this Sterne demurs: if there is a causality in music, he renders it personal, contextual, as when the sixth conveys a dry-mouthed sexual longing, a dim and intense desire which exceeds the boundaries of reason.

The lack of rational boundaries in Sterne's music often manifests itself in shifting meanings, words, and sounds which refuse to surrender the information novel readers expect, promoting instead a powerfully visceral kind of experience. Tristram demonstrates the shiftiness of musical expression with his "fiddle." "Ptr . . . r . . . r . . . ing—twing—twang—prut—trut—'tis a cursed bad fiddle . . . trut . . . prut . . .—They should be *fifths* .—'Tis wickedly strung—tr . . . a.e.i.o.u. -twang . . . 'Tis not so bad a tone" (5.15, p. 365). The fifths which so actively elude Tristram are, according to Descartes, the most perfect of the consonances, "the most pleasing and acceptable to the ear; [the fifth] plays, therefore, the most prominent and important role."⁴³ Instead of perfect consonance and its attendant pleasurable feelings, Tristram delivers a most painful dissonance—one can almost feel the harsh shiver of poor violin tone, of a clumsy or unpracticed bow on the strings. This music is not only clumsy but impure, muddled with verbal language—notice that the

English vowels make up part of a fiddle yowl—and it fails in achieving any sort of conventional representation. Is the fiddle good or bad? “Wickedly strung” or of fine tone? It is worth suggesting that “fiddle,” like “wind instrument,” also suggests penis; Tristram aligns the act of music making with the sex act, yet he finally manages to define neither. One can argue for either condition—that his fiddle is “wickedly strung” or well tuned; that he is sexually functional, or dysfunctional like the rest of his family, in which “nothing was well hung” (5.17, p. 369). One thing only is clear: the perfect consonance, the fifth, fails to strike its “natural” affect, because it fails to appear at all. Tristram himself is responsible for the omission; as if to emphasize the inadequacy of Descartes’s concept, this passage, with its conspicuously absent fifths, is one of the most dramatically effective—and least conventional—in the novel.

The consonances, which lie at the heart of Descartes’s music theory, play a central role in Sterne’s musical satires; Tristram repeatedly borrows the most “expressive” chords to help him render human experience, and they repeatedly fail him, sounding anything but their prescribed emotions. For example, when Phutatorius finds a hot chestnut in his codpiece, he sings out an extraordinarily resonant curse. Tristram’s story about the curse and the events preceding it is dotted with ambiguous musical notes, including thirds and fifths which block rather than facilitate interpretation:

Z—ds! cried Phutatorius, partly to himself—and yet high enough to be heard—and what seemed odd, ’twas uttered in a construction of look, and in a tone of voice, somewhat between that of a man in amazement, and of one in bodily pain.

One or two who had very nice ears, and could distinguish the expression and mixture of the two tones as plainly as a *third* or a *fifth*, or any other chord in music—were the most puzzled and perplexed with it—the *concord* was good in itself—but then ’twas quite out of the key, and in no way applicable to the subject started;—so that with all their knowledge, they could not tell what in the world to make of it.

(4.26, p. 315)

Here Tristram represents music as a self-contained structure of meaning, in tune with itself but displaced from the “subject started”; those of the company with musical ears are merely puzzled by the thirds and fifths, which don’t provide clear

information about their friend's emotion. Phutatorius, suspended between "amazement" and "bodily pain" because Tristram cannot identify the affect in his note, is himself as ambiguous as are his relationship to Yorick, the origin of the wayward chestnut, and the pitch of his cursing voice. The overwhelming instability in this passage arises from the fact that the several present consciousnesses each hear something different in Phutatorius's "music." The intense subjectivity of musical expression precludes using music to voice conventional states of emotion. While it must use a standard idiom in order to be recognized and understood, music, for Sterne, means imagination, drama, and personal relationship. The Phutatorius episode, like the others cited above, proves this by dramatizing the confusion which attends Tristram's conventional invocations of music, and by rewarding his musical transgressions with some of the most curious but deeply resonant narrative moments in English literature.

And this seems perfectly "natural," after all, for *Tristram Shandy* is nothing if not a testament to the rewards of transgression. Broken rules are always well compensated in this text, especially when those rules bleed a thing of its best parts, its peculiarities and dramatic potential. That Descartes should serve as Sterne's aesthetic foil seems natural as well, for he devoted his life to committing music and other "irrational" phenomena to the laws of reason, to emphasizing their universal values at the expense of their individual pleasures. The *Compendium Musicae*, with its algebraic and geometric proofs of chords and scales, dissonance, consonance, and meter, offers a neat demonstration of Cartesian rationalism at work. A relatively small work, its tremendous authority is demonstrated by its influence on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century musical theories and by its strong presence in *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne clearly felt Descartes's spirit in contemporary music and musicology, and his forays into music serve his antirational aesthetic, his privileging of the personal and dramatic in art. Sterne's own compendium of music, *Tristram Shandy*, looks forward to the musical style that emerged tentatively in the latter part of the eighteenth century and fully in the nineteenth century—structured but deeply human, capable of play and tuned to the depths of personal experience.

NOTES

¹The most substantial treatment of music in *Tristram Shandy* that I have found is in William Freedman, *Laurence Sterne and the Origins of the Musical Novel*

(Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1978), which interestingly but dubiously justifies its reading of the novel as "musical" with references to modern and post-modern texts. The few other critics interested in *Tristram Shandy's* ties to music have generally treated the subject incidentally. One of the best of these "incidental" treatments is by Mark Evan Bonds, whose primary interest in his article "Haydn, Laurence Sterne, and the Origins of Musical Irony," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 44, 1 (Spring 1991): 57–91, is to illuminate the cultural significance of Joseph Haydn's musical wit by exploring contemporary associations of Sterne with Haydn.

²Freedman, pp. 14–6.

³In her important study *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: "Le Nozze di Figaro" and "Don Giovanni"* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), Wye Jamison Allanbrook has argued that even the psychologically profound Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart relied on conventional notions concerning the passions in his operatic characterizations.

⁴Some, like Lorenzo Bianconi (*Music in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. David Bryant [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987]) and Charles Ford (*Così? Sexual Politics in Mozart's Operas* [Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1991]), see no commerce between musical theory and practice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (although Ford's book relies heavily on writings by theorists to support its arguments about Mozart's music). Others—Julie Ann Sadie (comp. and ed., *Companion to Baroque Music* [New York: Schirmer Books, 1990]) and Enrico Fubini (comp., *Music and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Europe: A Source Book*, trans. from original sources by Wolfgang Freis, Lisa Gasbarrone, and Michael Louis Leone, trans. ed. Bonnie J. Blackburn [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994]) come to mind—find a profound mutual influence between the two. This article presumes the latter condition, and it is supported by baroque theorists and musicians themselves, who believed fully in the interplay between musical theory and practice.

⁵Johann Mattheson, for example, writes that "[René] Descartes is especially worth reading since he has contributed a great deal to music" (Fubini, p. 279). Carl Philippe Emanuel Bach is only one of many composers who confirms the "truth" of Descartes's affective theory: "in what does good performance consist? In nothing other than the ability to make musical thoughts perceptible by singing or playing according to their true content and affect" (Fubini, p. 293). Leopold Mozart would agree: "It is by far more artistic to read musical pieces by great masters correctly according to the written instruction, and to play according to the affects governing the piece, than to study the most difficult solos and concertos" (Fubini, p. 287).

⁶William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), pp. 1135–97, III.ii.370.

⁷Jacques Berthoud, "Shandeism and Sexuality," in *Laurence Sterne: Riddles and Mysteries*, ed. Valerie Grosvenor Myer (London: Vision, 1984), pp. 24–38, 25.

⁸Berthoud, p. 24.

⁹Juliet McMaster, "'Uncrystallized Flesh and Blood': The Body in *Tristram Shandy*," *ECF* 2, 3 (April 1990): 197–214, 209.

¹⁰Dennis W. Allen, "Sexuality/Textuality in *Tristram Shandy*," *SEL* 25, 3 (Summer 1985): 651–70, 660.

¹¹Fubini, pp. 9–10, 279.

¹²Fubini, p. 279.

¹³Allanbrook, p. 6.

¹⁴William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. vii.

¹⁵See Claude V. Palisca, "Scientific Empiricism in Musical Thought," in *Seventeenth Century Science and the Arts*, ed. H. H. Rhys (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 91–137, for a discussion of seventeenth-century musician-scientists including Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler, Christian Huyghens, and Gioseffo Zarlino.

¹⁶See Albert Cohen, *Music in the French Royal Academy of Sciences: A Study in the Evolution of Musical Thought* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981).

¹⁷Charles Paul, *Rameau's Musical Theories and the Age of Reason* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1967), pp. 5–6.

¹⁸The correspondence with Marin Mersenne, whose *Questions Harmoniques* was indebted to Descartes's musical writings, extended over many years and engaged with an astonishing variety of intellectual issues. Charles Kent lists some of the early "musical" letters (1619–34) in an addendum to the *Compendium* (Descartes, *Compendium of Music [Compendium Musicae]*, ed. Kent, trans. Walter Robert, Musicological Studies and Documents 8 [n.p.: American Institute of Musicology, 1961], pp. 55–6).

¹⁹Paul Henry Lang, "The Enlightenment and Music," *ECS* 1, 1 (September 1967): 93–108, 101.

²⁰Lang, p. 96.

²¹Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Treatise on Harmony*, ed. and trans. Philip Gossett (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), p. 164. The passage from the *Compendium* Rameau has in mind reads, "even animals can dance to rhythm if they are taught and trained, for it takes only a physical stimulus to achieve this reaction" (Descartes, *Compendium*, p. 15).

²²Lucinda Heck Sloan, *The Influence of Rhetoric on Jean-Philippe Rameau's Solo Vocal Cantatas and Treatise of 1722* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 47.

²³See, for example, Henry Siddons's *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gestures* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), and Edmund Shaftesbury's *Lessons in Acting* (Washington DC: Webster Edgerly, 1889).

²⁴The introduction to Kent's English edition provides specific information about the *Compendium*, its conception, and its dissemination.

²⁵Descartes, *Compendium*, p. 11.

²⁶T. Salmon, "The Theory of Music Reduced to Arithmetical and Geometrical Proportions," in *Philosophical Transactions and Collections of the Royal Society*, 5th edn., vol. 4 (London, 1749), p. 469.

²⁷Here is Descartes's description of an excess of the "first of all the passions," wonder: "But it happens much more often that one wonders too much and is astonished, in perceiving things worth considering only a little or not at all, than that one wonders too little. This can entirely eradicate or pervert the use of reason" (*The Passions of the Soul*, ed. and trans. Stephen Voss [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989], pp. 52, 59–60).

²⁸Descartes's friend Mersenne had this to say about music: "In truth, musical knowledge is so easily derived, that one can assimilate in one hour all of its most important elements, and a minor geometric demonstration will illuminate all the principles of harmony" (*Questions Harmoniques* [Stuttgart: F. Frommann, 1972], p. 13; my translation).

²⁹Descartes, *Compendium*, p. 12.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Descartes, *Compendium*, p. 15.

³²While John Locke (in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*) is usually credited for the theory of association by which Mrs. Shandy remembers the clock, Descartes describes the same phenomenon as early as 1618, when he suggests in the *Compendium* that "even animals can dance to rhythm" (see note

21). He later develops the concept in his letters to Mersenne; see, for example, the letter of 18 March 1630 (*Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, trans. and ed. Anthony Kenny [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970], pp. 7–8).

³³Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, ed. Graham Petrie (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), 1.23, p. 97. Further references to the novel are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

³⁴For example, D-minor was thought to signify “rage”; G-minor expressed “lyrical yearning”; the use of G-major indicated a “pastoral” scene and sensibility (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 6th edn., s.v. “opera, §II, 1: Italy—up to Scarlatti”).

³⁵A reference to *Hamlet* further registers Sterne’s doubt that music can facily manipulate the emotions. Hamlet, like Tristram, resents the reduction of character study to the level of pipe playing; he accuses Guildenstern, “You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery” (Shakespeare, III.ii.364–6). Hamlet could, if not for the anachronism, be indicting the practice of Baroque composers with such a statement, with their relatively strict affective conventions designed to “pluck the heart out of” the mystery of the human soul.

³⁶See Winton Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969), for discussions of the Baroque serious opera and of Handel’s operatic idiom.

³⁷Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*, rev. edn. (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), pp. 167–73.

³⁸I should add here that Sterne was certainly not advocating, or even imagining, a formless music; in fact, his tolerance for musical experimentation was probably smaller than his tolerance for the same in novel writing, for the obvious reason that changes in musical style are harder to conceive for those who do not write music than are changes in literary style for the accomplished writer. His young countryman James Boswell’s prescription for poetry would be applicable to Sterne’s ideal music, which is “[kept] within *just* bounds by the power of reason, without losing the agreeable feeling and play to the imagination which it bestows” (Boswell, 15 November 1762, in *Boswell’s London Journal*, 1762–63, ed. Frederick A. Pottle [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950]; my emphasis).

³⁹This passage also contains a reference to *The Passions of the Soul*: “About changes in color: One cannot so easily keep from flushing or turning pale when some passion so disposes, because these changes . . . come . . . directly from the heart, which may be called the source of the passions insofar as it prepares the blood and spirits to produce them” (Descartes, p. 80). Descartes goes on to show “How Joy makes one flush,” “How Sadness makes one turn pale,” etc.

⁴⁰See S. K. Heninger’s *Touche of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Projects* (San Marino CA: Huntington Library, 1974) for a discussion of the relations between music and the cosmos in ancient and Renaissance thought.

⁴¹Descartes, *Compendium*, p. 27.

⁴²Descartes, *Compendium*, p. 21.

⁴³Descartes, *Compendium*, p. 23.