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The Mighty Maestro on Screen

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In this audiovisual study, I look at music-performative gestures of ‘fetishisation’. Against the backdrop of the mid-century celebrity conductor figure, as well as larger historical discourses around mediated music consumption, I focus on two conductors in two films, which draw on the same musical composition: Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940) and Hugo Niebling’s *Pastorale* (produced for

the German television channel ZDF in 1967). Beethoven's 6th Symphony (The Pastorale) features in both of them, with Leopold Stokowski conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra in the former, and Herbert von Karajan leading the Berlin Philharmonics in *Pastorale* in the latter. Niebling's film at first glance is a regular concert film, yet quickly reveals highly experimental and innovative visualisations of music that diverted from contemporary concert broadcasting conventions. In *Fantasia*, the Beethoven episode is set to a loose narrative based on Greek mythology. The film also features segments of more abstract 'visual music' and stylised depictions of the Philadelphia Orchestra under Stokowski's direction.

Given the conceptual and stylistic differences between the two films (and the twenty-seven years between them), one might find the comparison counterintuitive, but a focus on gestures of visual fetishisations of musical production and figures reveals their complex comparative potential. I particularly noticed the following commonalities: the fetishisation of individual gestures of performers and the conductor's hand movements (his instrument so to speak); the fragmenting of individual instruments and displaying of their mechanisms; and an emphasis on colors that evokes synaesthesia aesthetics. These stylisations can serve as a micro focus on musical gestures on screen that speak to larger discourses on visual music, attention economy, and mediated celebrity in mid-century music cultures. I pair split screens and superimposed images with excerpts from a few scholarly and historical texts that are relevant to this history. The soundtrack comes from the two films and at times I let both versions of the Beethoven piece play simultaneously to reveal the conductors' interpretative overlaps and divergences.

Contextualising this study within historical debates about music-listening practices via electronic media, two contrasting impulses emerge: a progressive embracing of the sensoric potentials of audiovisual media to enhance and expand the musical experience, which provoked some conservative cultural critics to decry the end of 'serious' music-listening as they knew it; and implicit and explicit stylisations of the musical genius figure. The latter refers especially to the conductors on screen (and their physical performances), but the prominence of Beethoven as the figure in music history around whom the genius cult may have manifested and been reproduced most dominantly also holds significance in these films.

After the introduction of the gramophone and radio had already triggered heated debates among cultural critics and music industry professionals in the early decades of the twentieth century, the middle decades, especially

the early years of television broadcasting (mainly the 1940s), posed another major moment of contention. Musicians and television producers pondered to what extent musicians should be visible or invisible on television, and many critics were concerned that visual media in general would pose a distraction to the music-listening experience. As Keith Negus points out, these ‘anxieties were informed by a particular aesthetic of art-music listening, consolidated during the nineteenth century, whereby music became valued for its invisibility’,[1] which would make symphonic music specifically unsuitable for film and television.

At the same time, others in the music industry (including Stokowski and Karajan) regarded film, radio, and television as opportunities to branch out into further markets and reach larger audiences, as well as to show musical performances and their own physical performances in a more intimate way. Close-up depictions of the conductor became the most dominant visual media trope of classical music performances, and – one should note – is a sight usually not granted in live performances where conductors turn their backs on the audience. My use of citations from historical and critical sources juxtaposes some of the contradictory, conflicting voices around music mediation and projects them onto the audiovisual material of *Fantasia* and *Pastorale*. For Theodor Adorno, the phenomenon that Joseph Horowitz calls a development from a ‘creative’ to a ‘performance’ culture resulted in a fetishisation of the authoritative conductor[2] figure (a musical dictator)[3]; for technology ‘optimists’ like Glenn Gould they held a liberating potential.[4]

I use the experimental nature of the videographic format to both connect and juxtapose the sounds, images, and ideas of my material. In the spirit of Mulvey’s concept of the ‘possessive spectator’[5], the videographic reproduction and fragmenting of the audiovisual material suggests an(other) meta-reflexive ‘gesture’ of fetishisation. To some degree it even mimics the kind of musical fragmentation through electronic media that Adorno criticised so vocally, albeit on a visual and textual level. And yet I noticed that the musical flow of Beethoven’s composition (even when split up, and even when two different recordings of the same work play out simultaneously) still maintains an interesting, perhaps even unnerving, suturing quality that the videographic approach does not disturb.

Author

Evelyn Kreutzer is a PhD candidate in Screen Cultures at Northwestern University. Her research focuses on taste politics in uses of European classical music in American television and video art of the Cold War era. Her further research interests include sound studies and museum practices, and she employs videographic methods across her work.

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Notes

- [1] Negus 2006.
- [2] Horowitz 2005, p. 384.
- [3] Adorno 2002, pp. 288-317, 301.
- [4] Glenn Gould quoted in Hughes 2006.
- [5] Mulvey 2006, p. 161.