
Reviewed by Julia Dokter (Georgia State University; Agnes Scott College)

Published on H-German (May, 2023)

Commissioned by Jasper Heinzen (Department of History, University of York)

*Music and Urban Life in Baroque Germany* documents in wonderful detail how the various layers of society during this period (mostly after the Thirty Years War until ca. 1750) and geographical area (data gleaned mainly from the cities of Augsburg, Munich, Erfurt, Gotha, and Leipzig) were saturated with musical and nonmusical sound. Tanya Kevorkian describes the musical activities of the lowliest to the most exalted ranks of society—from tower guards to the journeymen who traveled from town to town hoping to find employment, to higher-level city musicians, to the upper tiers of the musical hierarchy such as organists, cantors, and various types of court musicians—and how all these figures interacted with their employers, be they the various city councils, the church, or the nobility.

As the reader traverses each chapter, there begins to form an imaginary mental picture very similar to an immense and complex spider web, wherein the thousands of musical interactions form points, each of which are connected by multiple strands to other nodes. The value in Kevorkian's inquiry is that it is somewhat opposite of how we often approach historical musical activity: traditionally, modern musicians and scholars have tended to begin with investigations into one of the “Greats,” such as Johann Sebastian Bach, Georg Philipp Telemann, and others; subsequently, in order to understand their lives and musical output better, they then touch on the various individuals and events that influenced them. Kevorkian's research, by contrast, subsumes these great musicians into her musical-societal “spider web,” every so often touching upon the activities of one of the Greats to show how such stellar musicians were actually in some sense merely gears in a large musical clock ticking away, telling the musical time-story of the age. Kevorkian's approach, therefore, is not top down, but includes the perspectives of the “little people” and audiences/auditors as part of the whole culture's music-making activities.

And indeed, in her introduction Kevorkian advertises her work precisely as this: as having a different perspective from most modern scholarship in this area. She specifically notes that she in-
cludes all types of music—both musical and non-musical sounds, both the performer and the listener, and both educated and noneducated (musical) sounds. She then integrates all of this into the urban social and political structures of the time, treating music- and sound-making as a holistic experience instead of maintaining more traditional yet artificial distinctions between performer and audience. And perhaps this is a novel perspective for the audience she seems to be targeting—that is, historians who generally operate outside the field of music history. To music historians and performing musicians, however, who are familiar with the lives and work of the great musicians of this time period and geographical area, Kevorkian’s revelations are not wildly surprising. We are now—thanks to the research and publications by academics such as Christoph Wolff, Kerala Snyder, Andrew Talle, and others—generally used to reading about the various types of musicians J. S. Bach had to work and interact with, which ones annoyed him, and which contacts he particularly cultivated; we are used to hearing about wedding/funeral/incidental music and how important this was; we generally know the purpose of tower guards; we read of all sorts of sound taking place on the street; we know musicians traveled from one town to the next in search of greater musical experience, education, and employment; and we are often amused at the many reports of (mainly) audience-induced chaos surrounding various musical offerings in both sacred and secular spheres. [1] Nevertheless, having all this information decentralized (i.e., not from the research perspective of “merely” illuminating the activities of a musical Great), and compacted within one volume (i.e., saving us from gleaning it from various primary and secondary sources ourselves) is incredibly valuable for musicians and music historians as well.

Kevorkian has done an impressive job of assembling thousands of points of primary source data into a cohesive picture, which is not an easy thing to do! I hesitate, therefore, to point out two issues with her writing style. The first is that her shifts of thought and subject are sometimes so abrupt that one develops a little bit of mental whip-lash. At times the subject matter seems to be abandoned and then resumed at a later point, which makes it harder work for the reader to follow. A few guiding sentences to help clarify the connections the author had in mind, therefore, would have been very helpful. However, if one reads Kevorkian’s research by simply going with the flow, this barrier can be overcome.

Secondly, Kevorkian’s conclusion chapter is actually a chapter in its own right, detailing new information showing how the musical aspects of this culture gradually disappeared over the following centuries, so that only shadows remain today. In this conclusion, however, I was hoping to find a more comprehensive synthesis of the various concepts she discussed (rather than just three paragraphs’ worth of summary in the final page of the book). Perhaps she could have switched emphasis from the “what” of things that occupies the seven chapters of the book, to spending a little more time on the “why.” For example, Kevorkian spends a great deal of time in her introduction on the more philosophical reasons for choosing to cover this topic in the way she did, and therefore it would have been helpful to have had more of her thoughts on this again at the end of her book after we have digested all the data. As another example, Kevorkian gives us some tantalizing examples of what kinds of sound people of the time considered musical and what kinds they did not: for example, a tantalizing bit of data is dropped in which suggests that some did not consider hymns to be music (p. 12). Perhaps Kevorkian could have opined on this, or presented the reasons people of the time thought this way.

Despite these two very minor detractions, I thoroughly enjoyed this eminently readable study. The author deftly avoids penning what could have been a grueling book filled with dry data by providing relatable stories from the perspective of
people living during the Baroque. Besides the many educational aspects, I found it amusing to read about the fights between students, drunken parties, and unwelcome noise in the streets (pp. 172-174); and about interruptions or other elements of chaos during opera performances and church services (pp. 181-185). Conversely, it is sobering to contrast the working and living realities of tower guards and their families (pp. 70-84) with the opulent wealth of the ruling classes, as exemplified by the building of the (first) Bayreuth opera house for the wedding of Margravine Wilhelmine of Brandenburg-Bayreuth’s (1707-58) daughter Elisabeth Friedericke Sophie (p. 206). Some things never seem to change when we examine them through the lens of the lowest common denominator. I will most definitely be keeping this book close at hand for further reference, course material, and personal research in the future.

Note

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-german


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58529

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.