

BOOK REVIEW

Samantha Owens. *The Well-travelled Musician: John Sigismond Cousser and Musical Exchange in Baroque Europe*

London: Boydell & Brewer, 2017 (Music in Britain, 1600–2000)

ISBN 9781783272341. 403pp., ill., append.

Reviewed by Hannah Spracklan-Holl

Traditionally, the lives and works of the ‘great’ composers—and, increasingly, lesser-known ones as well—have been the primary focus of historical musicology. While the cultural turn of the 1980s and 1990s encouraged critical developments to the discipline’s methodological tool-kit, the challenge of combining historical detail with wider cultural or theoretical concerns persists. A rewarding balance has been achieved with Samantha Owens’s monograph on John Sigismond Cousser (1660–1727). Until recently, Cousser (born Johann Sigismund Kusser in Pressburg, Hungary) was most recognisable to musicologists as a successful conductor, performer, and composer active throughout the German-speaking lands. However, Cousser’s extant 450-page notebook, purchased by a New Haven collector in 1951 and now housed in Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, tells a rich story of a cosmopolitan man whose career took him across western Europe and required proficiency in many elements of the early eighteenth-century musician’s trade. Owens’s handling of the notebook’s wealth of primary evidence is impressive: her monograph consists of eight detailed biographical chapters covering Cousser’s career from the European mainland to Dublin, a final ninth chapter concerning the practicalities of musical exchange in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and five very useful appendices that catalogue and describe the contents of the notebook, a task which no other scholar has yet undertaken.

As Associate Professor of Musicology at the New Zealand School of Music, Victoria University of Wellington, Owens has recently made several significant contributions to

scholarship on eighteenth-century court music in the German-speaking lands. Just one of these is the co-edited volume *Music at German Courts, 1715–1760: Changing Artistic Priorities*,¹ which is an essential source for those interested in the rapid, modernising changes to the musical culture of the German world that occurred during the eighteenth century. With this new monograph, Owens makes another valuable contribution, this time to the study of musical exchange. Owens's study makes clear that this term can refer both to the practice of collecting and disseminating physical copies of music by means of collegial networks and to the intermingling of musical styles in geographical locations through which different people move. While these ideas are not new to historical musicology, they are newly illuminated in *The Well-travelled Musician* through Owens's close reading of Cousser's notebook. In Owens's hands, the notebook unlocks many important clues about the nuances and particularities of musical exchange in the eighteenth century and its broader implications for cultural, social, and musical life during this period.

Cousser's notebook—as Owens is careful to call it, avoiding the more commonly (and often incorrectly) applied term 'commonplace book'—was studied briefly by Harold E. Samuel (1924–1999) in the 1980s but has otherwise received no close scholarly attention. As Owens explains, it is neither a commonplace book, which normally consists of passages taken from other texts to be drawn upon at a later date, nor a diary. Cousser started compiling his notebook in the 1690s and continued adding to it until 1727. The revealing entries it contains thus span most of Cousser's professional career, encompassing a diverse range of material. Owens divides the first half of the notebook into two categories, the first focusing on a variety of musical subjects including music theory, tuning instructions, and short pieces of music, while the second consists of a large selection of remedies, medicinal and otherwise, including eight different remedies for toothache and a 'method of making a love-enchanted ring' (p. 186).

Additionally, the notebook includes Cousser's sixty-two-page address book with contacts from 'Dublin in the west to at least as far as Dresden in the east, and from Kiel in the north to Palermo in the south' (p. 182) and a large inventory of musical works. Owens makes clear, however, that while the notebook is brimming with fascinating individual entries rich with descriptive detail, these are much more than curiosities. Throughout her monograph, Owens teases out seemingly unconnected threads, weaving them together to demonstrate how they affect, and relate to, musical practices, in turn clarifying the role of music in everyday eighteenth-century life. It would no doubt be tempting, for some, to home in on only the musical details of Cousser's notebook, which are certainly worthy of examination in their own right. Rather than taking this approach, however, Owens considers the entire story the notebook tells, highlighting the physical position of notes concerning music amongst a variety of other everyday records. In doing so, Owens emphasises that during Cousser's lifetime music was rarely considered a high art (a status it gained only after 1800) but was simply a profession. This does not reduce the importance of music to eighteenth-century life; on the contrary, Owens uses the evidence in Cousser's notebook to foreground the important dialogue between music and the everyday, noting how they interact and intertwine with each other. By using his notebook as a window into the wider context and environment in which Cousser lived, Owens highlights

¹ Samantha Owens, Barbara M. Reul, and Janice B. Stockigt, eds, *Music at German Courts, 1715–1760: Changing Artistic Priorities* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011).

the ways in which knowledge about the lived experience of life in the eighteenth century contributes to a deeper understanding of music of this period than is otherwise accessible through the study only of works and their performance. This perspective creates a detailed, vivid and humanising picture of the function and practice of music during Cousser's lifetime and represents a significant contribution to the current literature on eighteenth-century music.

Owens's most significant contributions in this monograph are to our understanding of the practicalities of musical exchange in the eighteenth century. These are at the forefront of her analysis of the ways in which Cousser and his colleagues cultivated networks in order to collect music from London and continental Europe and disseminate it in the 'comparative backwater' of Dublin (p. 165). Particularly interesting in this respect are the social aspects and implications of this practice, which, from a twenty-first-century perspective, may seem easy and somewhat unremarkable. As Owens notes, however, Cousser's efforts to establish and maintain relationships with cross-continental colleagues with whom he could exchange music made a significant contribution to his career successes. By attributing Cousser's accomplishments to the obvious emphasis he placed on musical exchange, Owens points to the idea that such a practice was well established and refined, and happened 'perhaps more frequently than is currently generally considered to be the case' (p. 178). The detail with which Owens reconstructs Cousser's networks newly illuminates their inner workings and wider implications, revealing aspects of early modern musical life that have been previously under-examined. Her investigation—particularly in her ninth chapter—thus has the potential to awaken musicological consciousness of the extent to which music was exchanged throughout Europe in this period, inviting further reassessment of musical channels of exchange and communication in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, their development, and their wider impact on the places and people they connected.

Owens's monograph also reveals new details about how the development of the now well-understood mixed musical style relied on and interacted with musical exchange. When discussing Cousser's life and career trajectory—chronologically, from Pressburg through Ansbach, Wolfenbüttel, Braunschweig, Hamburg, Württemberg, London, and Dublin—Owens consistently reminds her reader that, with regard to late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century European music, geographical location is often a poor indicator of style. While this idea is widely acknowledged in musicological discourse, the emergence of the mixed style is often attributed only to a composer's exposure to a range of styles—via travel or other means—that are then introduced into their own music and in turn to new locations. Owens uses Cousser's role as musical director at the Gänsemarkt opera house to illustrate succinctly and deftly that there were, on the contrary, a variety of means by which the mixed style could emerge:

[I]t was in this role that Cousser made a number of further contributions to the development of German-language opera, including training local performers in the so-called 'new or Italian art of singing' and introducing a significant selection of Italian operatic repertoire (performed in German), while also composing three new German-language operas that drew upon his own substantial experience in both the French and Italian musical styles. (p. 66)

Here, Owens demonstrates that fluency in a range of styles and the ability to breathe new life into existing music (with the performance of Italian opera in the German language) was essential for Cousser's role in Hamburg. She also successfully shows that Cousser's stylistically diverse

compositional output was only one way in which he contributed to the development of the mixed style, adding a new perspective to our understanding of the context of this development by drawing attention to Cousser's educational and directorial practices. The overall image of Cousser that emerges in Owens's monograph is thus one of a successful music-maker whose surviving compositions do not represent his sole contribution to our understanding of musical life in the eighteenth century.

Owens's multi-faceted approach to her topic also allows sometimes neglected areas of musical life to come vividly into view. Her study is valuable to our understanding of musical practices at the time and, furthermore, reveals much about the connections and inter-relationships within the wider musical community in which Cousser worked. For example, Owens explores the functional role of Cousser's large music collection, which, due to the cost of 'writing materials, candles, and personnel' necessary to assemble and maintain it, represented a source of considerable cultural and financial capital (p. 162). As was true of collections of music belonging to other eighteenth-century musicians, Cousser's collection likely also served a more practical purpose in supporting his applications for a position such as musical director or Kapellmeister.

The Well-travelled Musician is an exciting contribution to the study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century musical life through the unique lens of the everyday experiences of music-making. Owens's appendices will no doubt serve as a point of reference for future research on the composer and his contemporaries, as they provide details regarding the practicalities of everyday musical life at a time when Europe's wider musical landscape underwent considerable transition. These details are useful not only to the study of Cousser but are also evidence for the place of music in eighteenth-century culture and its connection to broader economic and social practice and change. Furthermore, they highlight the ongoing need in contemporary historical musicology for a balance between detailed source study and discussions about culture and theory; without a strong connection to primary documentary evidence, there is a risk of losing meaning. This is a balance that Owens strikes expertly in her monograph, leaving her reader with the firm impression that we can learn as much from a musician who left behind his personal notebook and collections of music—but few of his own compositions—as we can from a composer with an established place in the canon and an abundance of surviving music. This is a valuable perspective that hopefully will encourage future studies of a similar kind, and for which Owens's monograph would serve as an excellent model.

About the Author

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