Introduction

The Erotic Symphony

I, with the rest,
Sat there athirst, atremble for the sound;
And as my aimless glances wandered round,
Far off, across the hush'd, expectant throng,
I saw your face that fac'd mine.
Clear and strong
Rush'd forth the sound, a mighty mountain stream;
Across the clust'ring heads mine eyes did seem
By subtle forces drawn, your eyes to meet.
Then you, the melody, the summer heat,
Mingled in all my blood and made it wine.
Straight I forgot the world's great woe and mine . . .

—Amy Levy, from "Sinfonia Eroica: To Sylvia" (1884)

Is the concert hall more erotic than the bedroom? Amy Levy's "Sinfonia Eroica" seems to suggest so. The thirty-nine-line poem unfolds as the speaker attends a performance of Beethoven's Third Symphony on a "drowsy, golden afternoon" in June.[1] As the music swells and swirls throughout the hall, the speaker locks eyes with the addressee ("Sylvia") and admires her "body fair" and "perfect throat."[2] Yet Levy's speaker is just as aroused by the music itself as by the sight of their lover's body. They await the first notes "athirst, atremble for the sound" and "quiver[]" as the symphonic strains rise and fall.[3] It is Sylvia *and* "the melody" *and* "the summer heat" that "mingle" in the speaker's "blood."[4]

Scholars often read "Sinfonia Eroica" as a representation of same-sex desire (most gender the speaker as female) that can be experienced only

through a longing glance across a crowded room. Critics not only point to the tantalizing wordplay offered by the subtitle of Beethoven's symphony ("Eroica") but also highlight music's figurative role in the poem, as an "extended metaphor for love-making," a symbol of "implied sexual climax," a vehicle to "safe[ly]" express "passions in public," or, more somberly, a representation of queer sadness in which the music's ephemerality ties same-sex desire to "absence," "negation," "doubt," and "delusion."[5]

However, "Sinfonia Eroica" also invites less figurative—and more reparative—readings, to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term for analyses that center "the many ways in which selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture, even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them."[6] Levy's poem presents not simply a euphemism for sexual contact desired but denied, but also a concrete evocation of the physical and physiological experience of listening to music—an experience that is itself erotic and shared among the entire "thronging" crowd in the concert hall.[7] Music listening is a luscious sensory event in its own right; Beethoven's symphony stirs the blood and ignites the pulses, making the very air quiver with delight and bringing bodies—both human and nonhuman—into pleasurable relation.

The context of nineteenth-century acoustical science, flourishing when Levy was writing her poem, urges such a concretely physiological interpretation. Amid the mid-nineteenth-century "English Musical Renaissance," which witnessed a flood of symphony orchestras, concert halls, and conservatories in cities across Britain, scientists like the German physician and physicist Hermann von Helmholtz and the British physicist John Tyndall researched how and why this newly omnipresent music so deeply affected its listeners and players.[8] While eighteenth-century and Romantic philosophers often conceptualized music as an ineffable, transcendent entity, Victorian acousticians mobilized the tools of experimental science to reveal music's material properties. Embraced by thinkers across a range of scientific fields—including physics, physiology, anatomy, biology, evolutionary science, psychology, and medicine—nineteenth-century acoustical science centered on two main areas of study: "physical acoustics," which focused on the material processes of sound transmission, and "physiological acoustics," which explored the effects of sound on the ear and the human body.[9] Sound, acousticians discovered, is a physical entity composed of particle-filled waves that vibrate the air, tickle the nerves of the ear, and activate the body's muscular and circulatory systems.[10] They argued that music in particular arose from waves that vibrated especially regularly and frequently.[11] It is due to nineteenth-century

acoustics that scientists now understand, for instance, why an opera singer's voice can break glass, why dancers feel propelled to move when the beat drops in a nightclub, and why ASMR videos "tingle" some viewers' brains and cause goosebumps.

By the late nineteenth century, as Helmholtz biographer Benjamin Steege writes, there was a "robust . . . market for popular acoustics in a Helmholtzian vein," particularly in Victorian England.[12] Articles about acoustics appeared in periodicals ranging from *Nature* to *Punch*, and scientists gave wildly popular public lectures on the subject at venues like the Royal Institution and the Athenaeum and at universities across Britain.[13] Once thought of as an abstract, intangible phenomenon that transcended the physical world and sent the spirit soaring, music came to be understood as a physical entity that could be studied and quantified and that could affect bodies and things in measurable ways.

These emerging discoveries in acoustical science gave Victorian writers like Levy—and the other authors discussed in this book—a new understanding of music's material potential and the language to describe its physical and physiological powers. Music not only provides the metaphorical backdrop against which Levy's speaker "cruises the concert hall" but also takes physical shape and substance, inducing bodily pleasures in an entire community of listeners.[14] In acoustical terms, the trembling that the speaker experiences—the music's very presence in their "blood"—reads not as a vague euphemism for sexual arousal but as a concrete and profuse evocation of music's actual effects on the human body. Levy's poem resonates just as much with acoustical theories of sonic nerve stimulation or musically induced blood circulation as it does with fin-de-siècle Decadent poems that euphemize sexual "deviance." When examined through an acoustical lens, Levy's poem represents not simply a coded expression of lesbian desire but rather a much more explosive unsettling of Victorian norms of bodily propriety—an enticing illustration of a delicious, head-to-toe sensual experience shared among a quivering, vibrating "throng."

Reading "Sinfonia Eroica" through an acoustical lens illuminates the poem's depiction of the symphony concert as an erotic and queer event. I use the term *erotic* in the vein of feminist, queer, trans, and asexuality theorists—most famously Audre Lorde and more recently thinkers like Tim Dean and Ela Przybylo—who argue that the "erotic" need not necessarily be limited to genital or even sexual experiences but can refer to, as Lorde writes, any experience or activity (sexual *or* "sensual") that brings an "internal sense of satisfaction," a "lifeforce," or "creative energy empowered."[15] In

Levy's poem, after all, the physical sensations induced by the music extend far beyond genital contact, same-sex desire, or even sex itself. Similarly, I use the term *queer* as it is articulated by theorists such as Sedgwick, Cathy Cohen, Jack Halberstam, Elizabeth Freeman, and Sara Ahmed, who do not limit queerness to the "gender of object choice," as Sedgwick writes, or even to sexuality at all, but understand *queer* as a broader term for modes of living that interrogate the "logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time," to quote Halberstam.[16] The musical space that Levy imagines is queer because it facilitates a desirous gaze between (presumably) two women but also because it makes erotic sensations available to nearly every entity, human and nonhuman, in the concert hall: the speaker, the "throng" of audience members, the music itself, the very air in the room. The speaker derives pleasure from the glimpse of a potential lover as well as from corporeal contact with the music itself, which represents a powerful physical force—a "swell[ing]," "mighty strain" that enters their body and makes them "quiver[]."[17] In the context of new acoustical understandings of music as a material, particle-filled entity with the ability to enter the human body and ignite sensations therein, it is entirely possible that Levy's speaker genuinely does not know "which was sound, and which, O Love, was you."[18] At the risk of making too much of a potential musical pun, the lines "I, with the rest, / Sat there athirst, atremble for the sound" could be read as a reference to a *musical* rest, and thus the formulation of the speaker joining "with" it—awaiting the symphony's start, "athirst, atremble for the sound"—could be seen as another nod to the speaker's visceral connection to, and nervous alignment with, the music.[19] Levy's poem affirms feminist musicologist Suzanne Cusick's famous 1994 inquiry, "What if music IS sex?"—what if music is a source of pleasure and intimacy in its own right, not just a something that is "*like* sex, or [has] the capacity to *represent* sexuality and gender?"[20] For Levy's speaker, sound waves provide as much (if not more) physical intimacy as a sexual partner—a subversive suggestion in a society invested in curtailing women's sexual autonomy and promoting strictly reproductive sex. If music makes for the best kind of lover, what does that mean for the codes that govern Victorian gendered and sexual life?

What it might mean, at least for Levy, is a new framework for eroticism that is not confined to encounters between two bodies. Importantly, it is not just the speaker, nor Sylvia (with her head "lean'd" back), who experiences this erotic musical rapture; it is the entire "expectant throng" of multiply-sexed bodies in the concert hall (the group of "clust'ring heads,"

"*each man* [who] held his breath").[21] Even the atmosphere seems to get in on the action; the poem repeatedly highlights the physical contact between the music and the air, which is described as "waiting" to be "smote" and "swell'd" upon by sound.[22] Levy imagines the symphony as a queer, utopian space bursting with communal pleasures and reverberating with music that bounces off the walls and seats, permeates the listeners' bodily orifices, and leaves the very air charged with sonic sensation. The music of Beethoven's "Eroica" is thus not a meager replacement for something the speaker would rather be experiencing between the sheets but a vibrant source of erotic contact in and of itself, shared among the entire "thronging" concert hall. As this book shows, Levy was not alone in imagining music's queer, erotic possibilities.

Acoustical Readings

Sounding Bodies argues that nineteenth-century acoustical science enabled some of Victorian literature's most explicit representations of erotic corporeality. At a time when bodies—particularly gendered and sexual bodies—were most often described figuratively in literary texts, acoustical science enabled overt descriptions of bodily affects and sensations. Though acoustical scientists themselves were relatively uninterested in gender or sexual politics, Victorian writers like Levy put acoustical ideas to "queer use," to use Sara Ahmed's term for "how things can be used in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended."[23] From realist novelists such as George Eliot and Thomas Hardy to New Woman writers such as Sarah Grand and Bertha Thomas, from creators of fin-de-siècle ghost stories such as Vernon Lee and John Meade Falkner to anonymous authors of underground pornography, a wide range of Victorian writers drew upon acoustical science to depict scenes of music listening and performance as intensely embodied and politically destabilizing events, though ones safely explained and supported by experimental science.

Acoustical science's facilitation of such explicit bodily description had enormous implications for Victorian understandings of gender, sexuality, intimacy, and eroticism. What might it mean, for instance, to have those quivering and pulsing bodies—or those bodies that *produced* the quivering and pulsing music—be *female*, in a world and a literary sphere that rarely granted women such overt moments of physical agency? What might it mean to imagine vibratory musical exchanges between men, or even between

groups of people, in a society that virulently insisted on categorizing and demonizing "aberrant" sexualities and kinship structures? What might it mean for a musician to achieve their deepest sense of erotic gratification not from touching another human but from pouring their kinetic energy into their instrument and feeling it resound in response?

The overt corporeality of these musical moments renders them powerful sites for articulations of feminist and queer politics—terms that, while anachronistic in a nineteenth-century context, capture music's interventions in urgent conversations, both then and now, about phenomena such as female agency, gender play, sexual violence, same-sex desire, and nonnormative kinship formations.[24] Victorian writers drew upon the language of sonic sensation to depict and defend the *kinds* of bodies criminalized in their world, particularly those whose gender presentations or preferred forms of intimacy or kinship incited social stigma, legal punishment, and violence and whose overt depiction in literary texts risked censorship or moral scorn. This was especially true for writers marginalized by their own gender identities and sexual practices—protofeminist novelists like Grand and Thomas, or queer writers like Levy and the anonymous authors of *Teleny*—but also for canonical figures like Eliot and Hardy. Music was invisible and intangible yet, in the context of nineteenth-century acoustical science, undeniably palpable—and thus represented the perfect tool through which Victorian writers could imagine new embodied possibilities for their characters' lives. Moreover, the notion, advanced by acoustical scientists, that humans' responses to music are automatic (reflexive and preconscious) and universal (experienced by all living beings) proved politically useful for writers seeking to validate transgressive desires and pleasures as natural and expected rather than degenerate or perverse.

Contemporary scientific understandings of music listening and performance as physical and physiological experiences enabled Victorian writers to depict musical scenes as brimming with a much more capacious range of desires and pleasures than scholars have allowed. In the texts discussed here, female violinists burst onto the stage and activate their arm muscles to produce rapturous sounds that make their audiences writhe; male lovers convulse to each other's piano music; anthropomorphized instruments long for their players' touch; listeners vibrate to the haunting sounds of musical ghosts from previous centuries; and, as in Levy's poem, listeners and players revel in erotic sensations in response to the music itself. Victorian authors used acoustical science to illustrate female bodily power and pleasure, imagine destabilized gender subjectivities, capture the horrors of rape, defend queer

sexual desire, and conceive of forms of intimacy outside of nuclear, reproductive kinship structures and even beyond the human world. What makes music such a powerful mode of feminist and queer representation, then, is that it not only gives characters access to gendered and sexual experiences often denied to them but also offers them access to entirely new kinds of erotic sensations altogether. The Victorian writers discussed in this book were onto the ways in which music can provide, as musicologist Jodi Taylor wrote over a century later, "a queer erotic reality beyond the boundaries of gender, sexed bodies, and specific bodily orientations."[25] In the context of acoustical science, musical scenes represent some of the queerest moments in Victorian literature—queer not simply in their descriptions of transgressive gendered or sexual identities and practices but also in their imaginations of broader sets of relations, affinities, and ways of being in the world.

Sounding Bodies locates unexpected feminist and queer possibilities in three famously conservative and exclusionary cultural realms: Victorian literature, nineteenth-century physiological science, and Western classical music.[26] However, my aim is not to ignore the deeply racist and classist histories and traditions of these realms. As Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong argue, scholars of Victorian literature must name the whiteness of their objects of study and critical projects rather than "read[ing] right through them."[27] The Victorian literary texts treated in this book were all written by white British or Irish authors. Their centrality here is a result of what Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong describe as "the racism that undergirds the history of aesthetics, canon formation, and curricular bias," as well as a symptom of the exclusion of nonwhite people from the Victorian classical music world and thus their erasure from British Victorian literary texts set in musical spheres.[28] Western classical music's notoriously repressive and homogeneous culture means that the modes of resistance charted in these texts, while subversive in some ways, were available only to those with the literal and cultural capital to access musical education, gain permission to play onstage, or accumulate the know-how to obey classical music's stringent codes of etiquette. Moreover, as I discuss further in chapter 1, the physiological discourses used by these authors, including physiological acoustics, were often mobilized for racist and eugenicist ends in the nineteenth century. Thus, while the authors in this book draw upon musical science to articulate what I would deem a feminist and queer politics, these politics were far from fully intersectional. One doubts whether the writers I study would have been as eager to attribute such innate musical abilities and natural musical sensations to bodies that were not, like most

of those discussed here, white, British, and middle or upper class. Indeed, the archive suggests they were not. For example, despite the late-century success of Black classical performers such as Amanda Aldridge and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor—two of the first Black musicians to be admitted to the Royal College of Music—to my knowledge, no as-yet-discovered nineteenth-century British fiction portrays Black classical musicians.[29]

The works I discuss are thus ripe for thinking about in the context of Kadji Amin's framework of "deidealization," which he defines as a "form of the reparative that acknowledges messiness and damage" and that acknowledges the unsettling enmeshment of reparation and repression in works often hailed as radical.[30] Texts that offer transgressive imaginings of erotic life do not always realize fully utopian or liberatory representations, and it is dangerous for critics to create a "romance of the alternative" that obscures texts' and authors' other, sometimes more troubling, investments.[31] As Kristin Mahoney, also drawing on Amin, writes in her recent study of queer kinship, it is important to acknowledge phenomena from the past that are "neither entirely radical and ethical nor fully conservative and exploitative" and to attend to the "tension between radical desires and conventional tendencies."[32] My feminist and queer readings of Victorian musical scenes are similarly "deidealized." I do not hail any of these texts as fully (or even mostly) liberatory; indeed, their whiteness, their situatedness in middle- and upper-class realms, and their ties to the exclusionary and often violent spheres of nineteenth-century physiology and classical music preclude such an argument. Rather, I identify moments in which Victorian texts either critique or, to quote Sedgwick, "extract[] sustenance" from their culture.[33] I locate in these works brief glimpses of what the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz describes as the "utopian" promises of queerness—to "dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds."[34] In the texts discussed here, acoustical science creates space for communal forms of queer eroticism too often rendered—like sound itself—invisible.

Below, I outline the book's contributions to several ongoing conversations in the field of Victorian studies: discussions of sound and the senses, music-literature studies, and scholarship on gender, sexuality, and eroticism. *Sounding Bodies* not only teaches readers new things about Victorian literature but also suggests that Victorian literature has much to teach readers about embodied and erotic life. In a twenty-first-century world in which the pay gap between men and women, especially women of color, remains wide; where rape proliferates on college campuses; where abortion is increasingly

criminalized; where "eroticism" is still often defined in relation to genital sex, even decades after Lorde's expansion of the term; and where exceedingly narrow frameworks for gendered subjectivities and family structures still dominate, as reflected by the persistence of "gender reveal" parties, the wedding industrial complex, and the state's failure to provide sufficient support for childcare, Victorian gender and sexual mores are not as historically distant as modern-day readers might prefer to think.[35] It is important, even urgent, to look for moments in the past where writers and thinkers were able to imagine alternative possibilities for their characters' erotic lives and occasions for pleasure, intimacy, and community. As scholars continue to think through how (and *why*) Victorian literature should be read and taught, one possibility is that it sometimes offers models, however imperfect, for "other ways of being in the world."

Listening In: Sound, Sensation, and Science in Victorian Studies

Reembodying Victorian Sound Studies

As its title suggests, this book argues that the body should be central to discussions of sound in Victorian literature. Such a corporeal focus illuminates the feminist and queer potential of sonic moments in nineteenth-century texts. *Sounding Bodies* threads together two existing scholarly conversations about Victorian literature and science: studies of acoustics in Victorian literature and studies of physiology and the senses in Victorian literature. Scholars in the field of sound studies have done important work to define the nineteenth century as an "Auscultative Age"—one in which scientists, philosophers, and writers were just as preoccupied with sound as with sight.[36] Literary critics most often focus on sound *physics* in Victorian texts. Gillian Beer, for instance, identifies Gerard Manley Hopkins's fascination with invisible waves of light and sound and his attention to the musicality of language and speech, which were spurred by his readings of Helmholtz and Tyndall.[37] John Picker has demonstrated how Helmholtz's studies of sound waves and pitch frequencies provide rich metaphorical inspiration for Eliot's depiction of the "roar on the other side of silence," Charles Dickens's and George Eliot's illustrations of urban street noise, and Alfred Tennyson's engagement with new sound-recording technologies.[38] Building on this work, I argue that sonic moments in Victorian literature should be read physiologically as well as physically. Victorian acoustical scientists were

just as focused on sound's effects on the human body as on its interactions with the air and atmosphere. After all, the subtitle of Helmholtz's landmark 1863 book *On the Sensations of Tone* is *A* Physiological *Basis on the Theory of Hearing* (emphasis mine). Helmholtz himself noted, "Hitherto it is the *physical* part of the *theory of sound* that has been almost exclusively treated at length. . . . But in addition to a *physical* there is a *physiological theory of acoustics*" of which "not many results have as yet been established with certainty."[39] Helmholtz made it his mission to develop a robust "theory of the sensations of hearing"—one that filtered into Victorian literary texts in ways that scholars have not yet fully explored.[40]

Studies of Victorian literature and acoustical science can thus be brought into productive conversation with studies of Victorian literature and physiology. Literary critics such as Nicholas Dames, William Cohen, and Benjamin Morgan have highlighted the vibrant sensory worlds of Victorian literature, showing how Victorian authors drew on physiological science to illustrate embodied reading practices, describe sensual experiences of sight and touch, incorporate poetic techniques calculated to arouse maximal physical excitement, and create artwork designed to appeal to the human eye.[41] Whereas scholars have tended to focus mainly on the sights, tastes, and smells of Victorian literature, *Sounding Bodies* tunes into its sounds and listens to what they reveal about Victorian writers' engagements with gender, sexuality, and intimacy.

Understanding acoustics as a study of embodied sensation enables feminist and queer readings of Victorian musical scenes. The language and ideas of physiological acoustics were uniquely useful for writers seeking to portray bodily sensations—including pleasure, arousal, and desire—that were otherwise difficult to capture in the nineteenth century for fear of moral offense or censorship. In this context, scenes of music making and listening served as useful sites for authors to delve into the minutest details of their characters' bodies and describe concrete forms of bodily contact. Acoustically, music making and listening are forms of penetration and reception; to play music for another is to enter and stimulate their body. And yet, during musical exchanges, no bodies actually touch; no tactile contact occurs; visually, everything is as it ought to be. The sensations that *do* take place are safely attached to an acoustical-scientific discourse rooted in empirical observation and experimental science—realms that had particular cultural cachet in an era that increasingly prized "objectivity."[42] A violinist's sweating body, for instance, could be traced to contemporary scientific understandings of the physical exertion required to play an instrument—evidence of

a biological phenomenon rather than an autonomic response to romantic or sexual attraction. A virtuosic female violinist could be cast not as a dangerous or self-absorbed diva but as an artist whose nerves and muscles are innately primed for high-level performance. A listener's beating heart and quaking limbs at a piano performance could be explained just as easily by the physiology of music as by a sexual attraction to the player.

Moreover, acoustical theories of musical response as an automatic, involuntary, and universal phenomenon rendered it an even more useful tool for Victorian writers to depict gendered and sexual bodies. New Woman novelists, for instance, described at length the visceral powers of their violin-playing heroines, such as their abilities to harness their muscular and nervous strength to make their listeners quiver in response, in order to confront misogynistic Victorian music critics who believed that virtuosic playing was an impossible feat for feeble female bodies. The authors of queer pornography tied same-sex desire to musical response so as to describe both as natural and organic—a powerful intervention at a time when the former was most often thought of as *un*natural. Realist novelists drew upon acoustical understandings of embodied musical response as automatic and uncontrollable to overtly illustrate and critique the harms of gendered violence. That these descriptions were so overt does not, of course, mean that they were categorically "better" or "more radical"; rather, they captured in new ways the phenomenological contours of gendered and sexual life. In the context of Victorian acoustics, music enabled Victorian authors to depict a wide range of bodily sensations and encounters—especially those that were not supposed to happen or that authors were not supposed to describe. While overt portrayals of gendered and sexual bodies were often invisible in Victorian literature, they were sometimes audible.

The Feminist and Queer Uses of Acoustical Science

This book uncovers moments in Victorian literature in which physiological science was accommodating of, rather than hostile to, feminist and queer politics. Literary critics and historians of science most often discuss Victorian physiology as part of Foucault's "medico-sexual regime" that framed "deviant" genders and sexualities as "lesion[s]," "dysfunction[s]," or "symptom[s]."[43] As scholars have long noted, nineteenth-century physiological science was often weaponized against those already marginalized by gender, sexuality, race, class, or ability. Evolutionary and biological science that framed particular kinds of bodies as "naturally" behaving in certain ways often threatened "women's

egalitarian aspirations," as Carolyn Burdett writes, or "reduc[ed] queers to mere bodies, passively in thrall to diseased impulses beyond their control," as Dustin Friedman argues.[44] Fraser Riddell outlines how some fin-de-siècle sexologists even drew on the insights of sound science to frame "homosexuals" as "pathologically" sensitive to music.[45] In fact, several of the writers and scientists discussed in this book at times displayed such violent body politics. Sarah Grand was known for her eugenicist beliefs about marriage and reproduction; the authors of *Teleny* cast women as scabby, slimy, diseased, and cadaverous; and both Herbert Spencer and Helmholtz established a sonic hierarchy that, as I discuss in chapter 1, privileged Western music's "natural" tones over "savage" music's rudimentary "noises."[46]

Yet the Victorian writers discussed in this book also, at times, put physiological science to "queer use."[47] *Sounding Bodies* thus resonates with recent work in feminist, queer, and trans science studies that, while still taking seriously the violent potential of essentialist thinking and the exclusionary ways in which scientific knowledge is shaped and produced, argues for renewed attention to the affordances of embodied experience for feminist, queer, antiracist, and anticolonial resistance. Working against what they see as a long tradition of "antibiologism" in gender and queer studies, several theorists have proposed that attending to the body is crucial for registering corporeal experiences of pleasure, desire, pain, and trauma, as well as embodied events like sex, childbirth, breastfeeding, and gender transition.[48] Thinkers like Elizabeth Grosz, Jay Prosser, and Angela Willey have called for, respectively, a "corporeal feminism," a focus on the body's "fleshiness, its nonplasticity, and its nonperformativity," and a "queer feminist critical materialist science studies."[49] The sounding bodies of Victorian literature likewise demonstrate the feminist and queer possibilities that physiological science can open.

Hearing New Things: New Directions for Music-Literature Studies

Music Beyond Metaphor

Sounding Bodies introduces a method for music-literature studies that shifts away from traditional readings of music as a metaphor in literary texts.[50] Much of the existing work in music-literature studies emphasizes what Nina Eidsheim calls "the *figure of sound*"—music as a symbol, metaphor,

synecdoche, code, or trope to describe events that can only occur off-the-page.[51] Such figurative interpretations are particularly evident in discussions of music alongside gender and sexuality. This is unsurprising. Even apart from musical contexts, gender and sexuality are often relegated to what Claire Jarvis calls the realm of "fuzzy metaphor," as recent work on "coded erotic scenes," "hidden" abortion plots, "clandestine" representations of marital rape, and concealed pregnancies makes clear.[52] William Cohen argues that the "unspeakability" of sex in Victorian England prompted novelists "to develop an elaborate discourse—richly ambiguous, subtly coded, prolix and polyvalent" to describe things that were "*incapable* of being articulated as well as . . . *prohibited* from articulation."[53] As music-literature scholars have long emphasized, music was one of these "elaborate discourse[s]." When birdsong symbolizes romantic longing, or a heroine's piano skills encode her marriageability and maternal potential, or two lovers' musical exchanges metaphorize the "love that dare not speak its name," music serves as a stand-in "for what cannot be put into words."[54] Drawing on Theodor Adorno's description of music's "indefinite" nature, for example, Joe Law writes that nineteenth-century writers often used music as a "coded reference to same-sex desire."[55]

This work is crucial, to be sure, as it has uncovered important moments of queer representation throughout Victorian literature, such as the insinuations of same-sex love in "Sinfonia Eroica" or the coded descriptions of the murderous "excellent musician" Alan Campbell (a violinist, piano player, and frequent operagoer) in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.[56] "Coded" representation was, after all, necessitated by the very real dangers of overt representation. Readers need only think of Hardy's lifelong struggles with censorship or Wilde's imprisonment at Reading Gaol, where he was forced to pick fibers out of rope until his fingers bled, to recall the material consequences of overtly describing corporeal life—and especially sexual transgression—in the nineteenth century.[57] For many writers, music represented a crucial tool—even survival strategy—for hinting at experiences whose explicit representation would have been outright dangerous in Victorian England.

However, such "coded" readings often ignore the glimpses that readers sometimes get of characters' phenomenological experiences of music playing and listening. What if Victorian writers were just as interested in music *itself* as a source of erotic sensation? What if readers shift away from interpretations of music as a figurative tool and listen instead for what the actual sounding bodies in nineteenth-century literature have to say? What

if scenes of music making and listening in Victorian literature are, above all, about bodies feeling and doing things and interacting with other bodies? Acoustical science propelled Victorian authors to approach music in distinctly less figurative and emphatically *non*-euphemistic ways, rendering scenes of music listening and performance some of the most overtly visceral moments in Victorian literature. It is for this reason that I focus just as much on fiction as on poetry, the latter being the preferred genre of many music-literature scholars. I am interested in concrete descriptions of bodies onstage and in the audience as they play and listen, which unfold most commonly (though not exclusively) in lengthier prose scenes set in concert halls or conservatory studios. This book thus performs what critical musicologists and scholars of music cognition and auditory neuroscience have described as "carnal musicology" or "embodied music theory," which, Cusick writes, offers a "renewed awareness of what is mortal, fleshy, and erotic in our musical pleasures and loves" and, Dana Baitz suggests, invests in the relationship between "musical and bodily materiality."[58] As the nineteenth-century scientists and writers discussed here show, tuning into the musical body—the hands that hold the violin, the fingers that stroke the keys, the spine that tingles in response to a sound wave—can awaken erotic sensations that characters might not otherwise experience or that authors might not otherwise express. For many Victorian writers, music was not merely a way to encode dangerous ideas that needed to remain shrouded in metaphor but also a way to open up their works and make space for a wide range of embodied experiences.

Queering the Concert Hall

By zooming in on actual scenes of music listening and performance in Victorian literature, *Sounding Bodies* highlights the concert hall as an unexpected site for feminist and queer critique. Musicologists and literary critics rightly focus on classical music as one of the most infamous bastions of exclusion and conservatism in Western culture, dominated as it is by "dead white men in wigs."[59] In Victorian England, a society long anxious about its perceived status as the "land without music" compared to the Continent, music critics and practitioners eagerly embraced opportunities to solidify Britain's high-cultural musical status, often by controlling its audiences, training new generations of players and listeners, and defining itself against a series of "others," including bawdy, licentious, and, crucially, lower-class East End music halls, as well as "dangerous" or "demonic" foreign virtuosi.[60]

Victorian music critics dictated rigid rules of comportment for audience members and performers; educators used music drills to discipline schoolchildren, particularly those from lower classes; religious officials used hymns to promote (and sometimes enforce) Protestant ideals; and moralists urged young women to learn piano in order to tame their passions.[61]

It is this picture of Victorian musical culture—dominated by its status insecurities, strict codes of conduct, and anxieties about musical others—that scholars have argued most captured the Victorian literary imagination, particularly in moments when music plays into representations of gender and sexuality. Many literary critics discuss music's imbrication in dominant Victorian gender ideologies. Mary Burgan, for instance, points to the common literary trope of the "heroine at the piano"—the sweet-tempered, gentle female musician who performs solely in the drawing room for her family members and suitors and, in doing so, shores up cherished Victorian ideals of femininity, docility, and domesticity.[62] Phyllis Weliver examines literary constructions of musical women as either "angels" or "demons" (and often a blurring of both).[63] Alisa Clapp-Itnyre argues that music was at once a "corrective to foster patriotism, morality, spirituality, and domestic tranquility" and a dangerous source of " 'artificial' display" and " 'immoral' sensuality."[64] Moreover, as a result of Victorian sexological writing that disparaged the musical affinities of "homosexuals" as "pathological," Riddell argues, queer writers often made efforts to distance music from the body, "refusing an embodied materiality that taints musical experience with sexual abnormality."[65]

However, this book reveals a set of authors who saw embodied music making and listening as opportunities to imagine gendered and sexual subversion. A musical performance was not only a time to sit still and be silent but also a moment where one's every nerve could be ignited. If, as acoustical science explained, classical stages and concert halls were full of vibrating bodies, then weren't they always already queer spaces?

Good Vibrations: Expanding the Erotic in Victorian Studies

Sounding Bodies expands current scholarly understandings of the queer, erotic contours of Victorian musical representation—and of Victorian literature in general. Once readers see Victorian musical scenes as brimming with all kinds of vibrating bodies, a range of queer, erotic relations come into view—between performers and listeners, ensembles and audiences, players

and instruments, and humans and music itself. While sometimes sexual, as when the protagonist of *Teleny* experiences an orgasm in response to his lover's piano playing, the pleasures of music do not always involve genital or even sexual arousal but are nonetheless intensely corporeal—inducing full-bodied sensations of arousal and stimulation. In this context, queer musical erotics are just as likely to appear in canonical realist novels as in fin-de-siècle pornography. The Victorian texts I discuss can thus be said to anticipate efforts by twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist, queer, and asexuality theorists to expand the definition of the "erotic," as discussed earlier.[66] In their portrayals of listening and hearing as fundamentally corporeal experiences shared among collections of human and nonhuman bodies, these works conceive of what Przybylo describes as "erotic . . . forms of intimacy that are simply not reducible to sex and sexuality and that challenge the Freudian doxa that the sexual is at the base of all things."[67]

Scholars of Victorian literature and culture have for decades prioritized locating gender and sexual identities, social relations, and forms of kinship that challenge stereotypes of the period as unequivocally prudish and conservative. For example, Lisa Hager, Simon Joyce, and Ardele Haefele-Thomas underscore how Victorians "negotiated the possibilities of gender diversity well before sexologists invented the clinical term 'transgender,' " as Haefele-Thomas writes.[68] Resonating with claims by queer theorists that "queer" does not always mean "antinormative," Victorianist scholars have also emphasized that queerness was often hiding in plain sight in nineteenth-century literature and culture—recognized, acknowledged, overtly discussed, and sometimes sanctioned by mainstream society and even found in canonical novels.[69] Critics such as Deborah Lutz, Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, Sharon Marcus, Holly Furneaux, Abigail Joseph, Talia Schaffer, Dustin Friedman, and Kristin Mahoney have identified scenes of male nursing, sibling intimacy, female friendship, religious interaction, medical examination, textual exchange, and artistic brotherhood as sites of eroticism that, while not necessarily genital or even sexual, are nonetheless corporeal, intimate, pleasurable, and sustaining.[70] *Sounding Bodies* adds music players and listeners to this growing list. Not only is *Teleny*'s musical orgasm erotic, but so is the energy a female violinist gathers while performing, the arousal that audience members feel while attending a concert, and the tactile intimacy a lonely musician finds by fingering her piano keys. It is hard to imagine a more vivid moment of erotic bodily gratification, for instance, than in Mary Augusta Ward's *Robert Elsmere*, in which a woman feels her "strange little veins of sentiment running all about her" as she hears the protagonist play her violin, or in M.

E. Francis's *The Duenna of a Genius*, when the heroine attends a concert at St. James's Hall and eagerly and automatically fingers along with the violin passages, "her hands working, the fingers curving themselves involuntarily, as though they too itched to handle bow and strings."[71]

The works discussed here present fictional instantiations of Cusick's landmark proposal ("what if music IS sex?") and the feminist and queer musicological threads that followed, including Taylor's notion of "aural sex" and further discussions by Cusick, Judith Peraino, and Fred Everett Maus of music as an erotic experience.[72] Note the striking resemblance between Levy's "Sinfonia Eroica" and Cusick's description of her erotic experience at the Metropolitan Opera in 2013:

> I felt Lorde's erotic energy in the intimacy I shared with singers whose vocal intimacy with each other was enacted hundreds of yards away. . . . If I listened with eyes closed or averted there was no distance, only the sounding intimacy all around me. That intimacy was in (and with) the vibrating air, wood, gold leaf, plush, and the four thousand human bodies who listened with me, as much as it was between the two singers on that distant stage. All of us, animate and inanimate, were in an intimate contact with each other that preserved yet overflowed our differences.[73]

Eroticism can be found in making music for or with another, in touching one's instrument and having it reverberate in turn, in sensing the electric charge of being part of an audience, or in being enveloped by pulses of vibrating air. All one has to do is listen.

Program Notes: Plan of the Book

Sounding Bodies surveys the "queer use[s]" of acoustical theory by a wide range of Victorian authors. The first chapter lays the historical groundwork for this study by chronicling the emergence of acoustical science and the intellectual debates it sparked in the nineteenth century. Acoustical science was controversial, as it unsettled long-held Romantic and idealist philosophies that hailed music as a transcendent phenomenon whose mysteries needed to be preserved. These new acoustical theories also undermined cherished humanist notions of the musical genius, the sophisticated listener, and even the autonomous,

conscious individual. Contested as it was, however, acoustical science filtered into almost every sector of Victorian culture, capturing the imaginations of musicians, philosophers, educators, politicians, physicians, and writers and compelling them to consider anew the visceral aspects of aesthetic experience.

Each subsequent chapter of the book highlights a set of Victorian authors who used acoustical science to articulate feminist and/or queer politics. The chapters are organized thematically rather than chronologically, with the focus of each shifting from gender (chapters 2 and 3), to sexuality (chapters 4 and 5), to broader forms of eroticism beyond the strictly sexual realm (chapters 6 and 7). Over the course of the book, the queer possibilities afforded by music become more and more capacious. Chapter 2 focuses on a pair of late-Victorian novels—Mary Augusta Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1880) and M. E. Francis's *The Duenna of a Genius* (1898)—that imagined a rather rare figure in Victorian literature and culture: the professional female violinist. While most musical women in the nineteenth century resembled Burgan's "heroine at the piano," the "lady violinists" in Ward's and Francis's texts pursue professional ambitions, access high-level musical training, perform in public, and garner worldwide acclaim.[74] In an environment where string playing by women was often deemed either inappropriate or impossible, the heroines of these novels perform with intense physical and physiological power, their music reverberating through large spaces and driving audiences to sweat and quiver. Acoustical science enabled Ward and Francis to cast the musical pursuits of their heroines not only as gratifying and pleasurable but also as empirically explained and thus defensible to a Victorian public deeply suspicious of musical women.

While chapter 2 centers on literary articulations of strong and stable female subjectivities, chapter 3 is more concerned with destabilized gender identities. Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and Bertha Thomas's *The Violin-Player* (1880) feature female performers who do not always perform *as* women; both heroines repeatedly cross-dress to gain access to all-male musical spheres. These novels thus reveal a compelling tension between the performance of music and the performance of gender. While the heroines' cross-dressing destabilizes their gender identities, the references to acoustical science in these scenes continually recall the presence of the body. Ward and Francis celebrate the specifically *female* musician, whereas Grand and Thomas prioritize their heroines' musicality above their womanhood. At a time when women's deepest gratification was supposed to derive from their patently feminine roles (marital sex, motherhood), Grand and Thomas find an alternative in cross-dressed violin playing.

Though the works treated in chapters 2 and 3 gesture toward new and promising possibilities for their characters' gendered lives, chapter 4 examines how rapturous music can facilitate sexual violence. Focusing on Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Hardy's *Desperate Remedies* (1871) and "The Fiddler of the Reels" (1893), I argue that both authors foreground the physical harm that occurs when male players use their music to violate the bodies of their female listeners. I refer to these encounters as musical rapes, drawing on the work of feminist rape theorists such as Erin Spampinato, who argues for a more "capacious conception of rape" that is not limited to forms of nonconsensual genital penetration.[75] Understanding these violent musical encounters as nothing less than instances of rape brings into focus Eliot's and Hardy's profound—and strikingly explicit—explorations of gendered and sexual violence.

While chapter 4 focuses on sexual practices that *should* have been criminalized but were not, chapter 5 focuses on those that *were* criminalized but should not have been. Chapter 5 examines the anonymously published pornographic novel *Teleny* (1893), which famously opens with the protagonist, Camille Des Grieux, experiencing an orgasm in a Parisian concert hall in response to the piano music of his future lover, René Teleny. By suffusing the depictions of their relationship with acoustical language, the authors cast same-sex desire as natural and empirically explained—patently *not* a "crime against nature," as the law suggested.[76] The authors of *Teleny* invite readers to ask: If the tingles of a lover's touch approximate the quivers induced by the sounds of a sonata—ones that everyone in the concert hall experiences—how "diseased" can they really be? In *Teleny*, then, music serves not as a code or symbol for hidden desires but rather as a tool to defend "deviant" sexual lives. I propose that *Teleny*'s queer narrative also extends beyond its depiction of same-sex desire to encompass the erotic potential of humans' interactions with music itself. After all, Des Grieux, Teleny, and the other audience members are just as aroused by sound as by sex. The authors of *Teleny* imagine eroticism as something that can occur beyond the realm of strictly human-human encounters.

Chapters 6 and 7 pull further on these nonhuman threads by exploring texts that depict forms of intimacy between humans and their instruments (chapter 6) and between humans and ghosts (chapter 7). Though these interactions are not always strictly sexual, they are still deeply erotic and thus offer further glimpses into the vast range of embodied experiences explained by nineteenth-century acoustical science. Chapter 6 focuses on human-instrument intimacies in four Victorian texts: Dickens's *Dombey and*

Son (1848), Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Anthony Trollope's *The Warden* (1855), and Hardy's "Haunting Fingers" (1928). While scholars often read musical instruments as conduits for human-human relations, these works depict instrument playing as an acutely gratifying experience in its own right, one that grants both the musicians and their instruments powerful sensations of bodily pleasure and sustaining experiences of intimacy, eroticism, and kinship. In their depictions of human-instrument encounters, then, the authors discussed here imagine erotic pleasure as something available not just between lovers but also between fingers and keys, arms and bows, and skin and resin.

The final chapter takes the discussion of musical erotics even further beyond the human world and into the realm of the supernatural. Chapter 7 considers two fin-de-siècle ghost stories—John Mead Falkner's novella *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895) and Vernon Lee's short story "A Wicked Voice" (1890)—in which young men develop erotic attractions to the music of ghosts who return from previous centuries to haunt them. Both authors use the language of physiological acoustics to cast the ghosts' supernatural music as paradoxically material, exerting palpable effects on the human protagonists, who throb, shake, sweat, and moan in response to the sounds they hear. While critics often discuss ghost stories as representations of queer absence or loss, I argue that Falkner and Lee depict musical hauntings as encounters that provide their protagonists with bodily pleasures and intimacies otherwise inaccessible to them. Moreover, as ghosts are, by definition, figures from the past, these musical hauntings offer forms of intimate contact with history itself in ways that resonate with twenty-first-century theories of queer temporality, such as Elizabeth Freeman's notion of "erotohistoriography."[77] These musical ghost stories reveal that aesthetic experience—and its attendant embodied pleasures—can exist far beyond the land of the living, vibrating across continents and centuries.

Although the story of *Sounding Bodies* unfolds mainly in the nineteenth century, its discussions of music and embodiment reverberate with urgent concerns in today's classical music world. Western classical music culture, after all, still often insists on erasing any traces of the bodies of players and listeners by dressing performers in concert black, silencing audience members' coughs and claps, and systemically excluding bodies that are not white, male, or abled. As I propose in the brief coda, contemporary classical music culture could take a cue from the Victorian scientists and writers discussed in this book, who understood that the powers and pleasures of a musical performance stem from music's ties to the body. After all, as the

Victorian writers featured here demonstrate, even the most sublime sounds are produced by live bodies, ones that move and breathe with the music and whose muscles and nerves create tones that excite the senses and can, at least for a moment, erase the "world's great woe."