PART I

JOHANN GEORG SULZER
GENERAL THEORY OF THE FINE ARTS (1771–74)
SELECTED ARTICLES

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I

"Can genius suffer to be shackled and imprisoned by rules?" the architectural theorist Charles Briseux worried in 1752. "Would it not suffocate its fire to fix limits to the sphere of its activity?"[1] Goethe was treating much the same question when he narrated the tragic struggle of the impetuous young Werther, who tried in vain to tame the fires of his heart's passions within the unyielding confines of society's moeurs. The tension both Briseux and Goethe addressed was a critical one in the self-proclaimed age of Enlightenment: How does the artist reconcile the competing demands of imagination and reason? To what degree can the artist submit to the more volatile forces of inspiration and passion while the art work itself remains bound to the rules of propriety and convention? To be sure, these were not questions posed only in the eighteenth century. Since Plato's criticisms directed to the Rhapsodes in his dialogue *Ion*, one of the central problems in Western philosophical aesthetics – or, as it was more commonly called before Alexander Baumgarten coined the term "aesthetics" in 1750, "poetics" – has always concerned the fixing of artistic boundaries, reconciling the Dionysian urge for expression and originality with an Apollonian demand for order and control. It may not be too much of an exaggeration to say that the development of Western aesthetic thought can be plotted out upon a continuum running between these two antipodal positions.

But if this tension is an ageless one, it was in the eighteenth century that the dialectic of reason and imagination was pursued most tendentiously, whether in a French treatise on aesthetics or a German *Bildungsroman*. For it was during this period that the two opposing aesthetic doctrines that define this polarity most sharply met in dramatic collision. On the one side, there was an entrenched neo-classical tradition articulated by French writers such as Boileau and

1 Quoted in Francis X. J. Coleman, *The Aesthetic Thought of the French Enlightenment* (Pittsburgh, 1971), 69.

Batteux (and propagated by German proselytes such as Gottsched), in which rationalized norms of decorum, style, and genre governed the composition and function of art. On the other side, there was an emerging "sensualist" aesthetic favored by British critics that was largely inspired by Locke's pioneering work in empirical psychology. In the writings of Addison, Hutcheson, Hume, Young, Harris, and Burke, attention turned from the objective conventions governing the art work itself to the more subjective conditions of its reception: our sensory perceptions and emotional responses. Reduced to a curt formula, one may say that criticism began to focus less upon the *product* than the *process* of art.

Now, properly speaking, there was nothing essential to the sensualist position that was incompatible with neo-classical doctrines. Granting a larger role to the senses did not necessarily entail any slackening in the tenets of mimesis or the unities. It is thus not odd that many of the earliest empirical aestheticians – such as DuBos and Hutcheson – remained adherents to the strictures of Aristotelian poetics. Indeed, we might say that the essential challenge of empirical aesthetics in the early eighteenth century was to explain how psychology could be integrated into received classical doctrines.[2]

By the middle of the eighteenth century, though, it was becoming increasingly clear that any accommodation would not be an easy one. This was particularly true in Germany, where nascent Romantic notions of *Empfindsamkeit* and the cult of the sublime – volatile ingredients that would be ignited in the intense but brief outbursts of the *Sturm und Drang* in the 1770s – together would help to corrode the atrophizing conventions and porcelain sentimentality emblematic of Rococo aesthetics.

Tensions between neo-classicism and sensualism were especially apparent in discussions of music. It was in the eighteenth century, as we know, that instrumental music attained a relatively commensurate position of practice and social acceptance in relation to vocal music.[3] Yet there was no firm mimetic foundation (the *ut pictura poesis*) upon which this music could be grounded comparable to that traditionally

2 In this and all subsequent references to "psychology" – a science that properly was not established until the nineteenth century – I use the term to designate the general empirical concerns of philosophers and natural scientists in the eighteenth century with the cognitive implications of sense perception.

3 This story is richly narrated and documented by Bellamy Hosler in *Changing Aesthetic Views of Instrumental Music in 18th-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor, 1981).

granted to vocal music. If music was to imitate the passions – the traditional means by which music could be accommodated within Aristotelian mimetic theory – then what exactly did instrumental music imitate? Lacking any words or programmatic context to define its affective motivation, instrumental music was necessarily nonsensical and incapable of moving the heart of any listener.

The task of finding an aesthetic justification for instrumental music was thus an urgent one in the eighteenth century. And not surprisingly, a solution was found precisely in the psychological processes studied so intently by the empiricist philosophers. It was only by enfranchising the sentient responses of a listener that the strictures of traditional mimetic theory could be countered. If instrumental music was ever to attain a worth commensurate to vocal music, a strong aesthetic of sentiment needed to be formulated and defended. Again, it must be kept in mind that such a development was hardly a uniform one; the trajectory of eighteenth-century musical aesthetics cannot be plotted as a single teleological course in which mimetic theory evolved into a doctrine of aesthetic autonomy, as at least one recent study portrays it.[4] But if German musical thought in the later eighteenth century developed in ways that were neither uniform nor directed, it did grapple with a common core of questions, ones that can with qualification be plotted as a dialectic between rationalist and sensualist poles.[5]

Johann Georg Sulzer (1720–79) stands at an important juncture in this history. His many collected writings together constitute the most ambitious attempt in mid-century Germany to integrate the new sensualist epistemology with classical aesthetic doctrine. Above all, Sulzer was interested in explaining the process of artistic creation. Taking the perspective of the natural scientist, Sulzer hoped to analyze the psychological conditions by which the artist conceives his art work, without, however, enervating his subject by over-rationalizing those refractory qualities of inspiration, genius, and passion. If his answers were not uniformly convincing, it was not because his effort was lacking, or his intellect and insight deficient; the neo-classical framework he struggled mightily to salvage simply could not bear the

4 John Neubauer, *The Emancipation of Music from Language* (New Haven, 1986).

5 Edward Lippman, in his helpful study of historical musical aesthetics, pithily characterizes this polarity as one of imitation versus expression. See his *A History of Western Musical Aesthetics* (Lincoln, Nebr. and London, 1992), 83–136.

weight of the empirical apparatus that he placed upon it. A complete reconceptualization and rebuilding of the rationalist framework was required for this integration to take place, something that was only accomplished at the end of the century with Kant's critical philosophy. Nonetheless, Sulzer's writings are valuable and revealing to us today, since in an almost innocent fashion they betray so transparently the forces acting upon German aestheticians in the mid eighteenth century.

For music historians, Sulzer's writings are particularly valuable, since in them we find problems of musical aesthetics addressed with a perspicacity not to be encountered again until the nineteenth century. The most important topics of musical creation, expression, and meaning found a place in Sulzer's systematic theory. Of particular originality was his appropriation of traditional rhetorical tropes to explain the process of musical invention. Sulzer's revitalization of rhetoric, as we will see, would offer part of the solution for an aesthetic grounding of instrumental music. It is true that Sulzer stopped short of offering a detailed analytic application of this relation; this was to be the important contribution of Heinrich Koch. But, aided by the many professional musicians whose advice he solicited, Sulzer was at least able to make a start in that direction, one which would provide the bearings for the next generation of musical aestheticians.

II

Johann Georg Sulzer was born in 1720 in the Swiss city of Winterthur – the twenty-fifth child of a minor civil servant. When just a young boy, Sulzer left home for nearby Zurich, where he also eventually attended university.[6] Zurich in Sulzer's day was a conservative place, pervaded by an orthodox Calvinism that was to be a lasting influence upon his own personality. Nonetheless, Zurich was hardly insulated from the more progressive ideas associated with the still-young European Enlightenment. While at the university studying theology, Sulzer cultivated a number of interests that would prove to be influential in his subsequent intellectual development.

6 The most detailed biography of Sulzer is Hans Wili, *Johann Georg Sulzer: Persönlichkeit und Kunstphilosophie* (Ph.D. dissertation, Freiburg University, 1945; published St. Gallen, 1954). Also of value is Anna Tumarkin's study, *Der Ästhetiker Johann Georg Sulzer* (Frauenfeld, 1933). I have drawn freely from both of these works for most of the biographical information that follows.

One of his earliest passions was the study of the natural sciences, stimulated under the tutelage of Johann Gessner and Johann Jakob Scheuchzer. As a young student at the university, Sulzer became fascinated by all aspects of natural science, and he avidly read many of the newest writings on biology, astronomy, and geology. (He was particularly enamored by Linnaeus's system of botanical classification.) Through his study of the natural sciences, Sulzer learned the value of careful empirical observation and systematic analysis, qualities he strove to incorporate in his first scientific publications.[7] Moreover, he learned a valuable lesson in metaphysics: behind the great diversity of nature, there was a unity that could be discerned by the patient and observant scientist, and this unity could be expressed deductively in the laws of that particular science. Sulzer saw the task of the aesthetician to be much like that of the scientist: to analyze carefully all the various arts in their great diversity in order to discover the unifying laws that underlie them.

Sulzer's involvement in science never took the materialist turn that was characteristic of so much other scientific thinking in France during the Enlightenment. Instead, for the pious Sulzer, natural science offered the greatest proof of an omnipotent and benign Deity. Following the lead of Leibniz, Sulzer expressed awe at the order, purpose, and morality that nature seemed everywhere to display, qualities that for Sulzer were obvious evidence of God's handiwork. There was no greater act of devotion and piety in his view than for one to pay homage to the Creator by the most careful, disciplined, and systematic study of His creation.

While a student in Zurich, Sulzer also fell under the sway of two of the most prominent and important literary critics at mid-century: Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger. It was through his studies with Bodmer and Breitinger – the former eventually becoming a life-long friend and correspondent – that Sulzer's interests turned to aesthetics. The most consequential contribution of the two "Swiss Critics" (as they were dubbed in their own day) was the loosening of the rationalist literary poetics laid down by Gottsched. Contrary to Gottsched's strict neo-classicist prescripts, Bodmer and Breitinger argued for a greater role for the imagination of the artist (or, as it was also called in the eighteenth century, the "fantasy").

7 *Versuch einiger Moralischer Betrachtungen über die Werke der Natur* (Berlin, 1745); *Unterredungen über die Schönheiten der Natur* (Berlin, 1750).

Conventions of genre and mimesis were all well and good, Breitinger had argued in his 1740 treatise *Critische Dichtkunst*, but they should never constrict the creative impulse and poetic enthusiasm of the artist.[8] Neither Milton nor Shakespeare adhered to the classical unities in their poetic and dramatic works, Breitinger would often point out; yet their writings undeniably constitute some of the most sublime and emotionally moving literature of any nation. In his *Critische Abhandlung von der Natur* (Zurich, 1740), Bodmer argued that the artist's job was not the slavish imitation of nature, but rather a more creative *expression* of nature. Whereas Gottsched had argued for the verisimilitude of art by its remaining within the realm of the probable, both of the Swiss critics allowed the artist more freedom by alluding to an inner moral truth that could be known not rationally but only through feeling.[9] The true artist of genius would have the ability not only to perceive this inner truth, but to give it expression. And such expression should not be shackled by time-worn literary conventions.

Despite the Swiss critics' attempts to leaven Gottsched's rationalist poetics, they agreed with many of its major parts. Art was still considered to be morally edifying and its content mimetic, even if the nature of its imitation became less clear. While Bodmer and Breitinger offered a privileged place for emotion in their aesthetic theories, the emotion they had in mind must not be identified with the more powerful passions of the *Sturm und Drang*. Their ideals were far closer to those associated with the Pietistic movement that gained many adherents throughout German-speaking lands in the eighteenth century. The elevation by the Pietists of personal devotional experience, introspection of one's soul and heart, and, above all, the moral value and truth of naive sentiment, proved compatible with – and indeed was one of the catalysts of – an emerging *empfindsam* aesthetic in the secular arts.[10] Pietistic ideas enjoyed widespread currency in Sulzer's hometown of Winterthur during the eighteenth century, and we know

8 The title of Breitinger's work is obviously drawn from Gottsched's *locus classicus*, the *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*.

9 This transition in aesthetic thought is discussed more fully by Steven D. Martinson, *On Imitation, Imagination and Beauty: A Critical Reassessment of the Concept of the Literary Artist During the Early German "Aufklärung,"* (Bonn, 1977), 56–94.

10 The close relationship between German *empfindsam* aesthetics and Pietist ideals has long been noted by scholars, although its particular role in Sulzer's own intellectual development has rarely been stressed. For a valuable discussion of the Pietistic movement and its general influence upon German aesthetic thought in the eighteenth century, see Ernst and Erika von Barries, *Aufklärung und Empfindsamkeit, Sturm und Drang* (Munich, 1991), esp. 30–32.

that Sulzer was one of those identifying with many of them.[11] His unshakable faith in the moral integrity of the unmediated emotional response is an unambiguous reflection of Pietistic ideals. At the same time, though, his life-long suspicion of unbridled emotional expression – the poetic and even agonistic outbursts that would be characteristic of the radical *Sturm und Drang* – reveals an entrenched Calvinistic conservatism. The passions were certainly natural and even vital qualities of mankind, Sulzer agreed, but they were potentially dangerous in excess, and always needed to be kept in check lest they seduce or overpower us.

Sulzer's accent upon the cultivation of individual morality is symptomatic of the general character of the German Enlightenment – the *Aufklärung*. The socially prescriptive orientation of the French *philosophes* – with their many ambitious programs of political and economic reforms, faith in technical progress and the general material betterment of mankind – was less characteristic of German critics of the time.[12] The question "Was ist Aufklärung?," so famously answered by Kant in his 1787 essay of the same title, captures in a curt formulation the more personal, spiritual character that colored so peculiarly the German experience of the Enlightenment: it was the liberation of man from his self-incurred tutelage, Kant tells us. The German Enlightenment, we might say, was more a process internal to the individual than a social program. Sulzer shared this outlook, although he did hold that a general elevation of social morality was possible through a well-designed educational curriculum.

Pedagogy was in fact a dominating concern of Sulzer throughout his life. One of his earliest publications was a treatise on the education of youth.[13] But virtually all of his writings were didactic in one way or the other. Convinced as he was of the moral and ethical lessons contained in both the sciences and the arts, he felt compelled to draw these lessons out explicitly in his many writings. At times his moralizing zeal verged on pedantry. (Not surprisingly, perhaps, overtly didactic and moralizing works such as Rousseau's *Emile* and the novels of Richardson were among his favorites.) Sulzer had a chance to exercise

11 Wili, *Johann Georg Sulzer*, 2.

12 See the useful collection of excerpts with intelligent commentary in Raffaele Ciafardone, *Die Philosophie der deutschen Aufklärung* (Stuttgart, 1990).

13 *Versuch einiger vernünftiger Gedanken von der Auferziehung und Unterweisung der Kinder* (Zurich, 1745).

his pedagogical appetence in his first job. After graduating from the university in Zurich, he accepted a teaching post in Magdeburg (1743). Four years later, he moved to Berlin as professor of mathematics at the Joachimsthalisches Gymnasium. He was also charged with the reorganization of the Prussian educational system.

With his move to Berlin in 1747, Sulzer entered into an intellectual world, which, if comparatively adolescent, was rapidly gaining in prominence. Frederick II ("the Great") had just ascended to power, and was beginning to lure prominent scientists, philosophers, and musicians to his court. In quick succession, Berlin attracted the likes of the mathematicians Euler and Maupertuis, the poets Gleim and Lange, the theologian August Friedrich Wilhelm Sack, the aesthetician Krause, and musicians such as Quantz, C. P. E. Bach, and Carl Heinrich Graun. To these, we must also add the numerous luminaries from abroad who would make prolonged visits to Sans Souci as guests of the King (Voltaire being perhaps the most famous of these).

Berlin soon became a center of progressive – not to say, radical – intellectual thought in Germany.[14] The most recent ideas from France and England made their way to Berlin; indeed, several of the more subversive works of the French *philosophes* were published in Berlin before ever appearing in their native land. Writers such La Mettrie, Voltaire, d'Holbach, and de Prades found a hospitable environment for disseminating their deistic or materialist heresies.

Sulzer was certainly familiar with the ideas of all these writers. He joined the Prussian Académie royale des sciences in 1750, through whose regular meetings he would have contact with all the leading intellectuals of Berlin. But he was shocked by the more radical strains of materialism he would encounter in his Berlin years. He responded to some of these in several of his publications from the 1750s, for example, vigorously defending in one the doctrine of the immortality of the soul.[15]

One area in which Sulzer evidenced substantially more progressive views was in psychology. The nature of sensory perception and cognition, as we have already noted at the beginning of this intro-

14 A useful collection of essays on Berlin intellectual life in the mid-eighteenth century is found in *Aufklärung in Berlin*, ed. Wolfgang Förster (Berlin, 1989). Unfortunately, Steffen Dietzch's essay on Sulzer from this book (pp. 265–73) offers little insight.

15 For more on Sulzer's negative reactions to most of his Berlin colleagues and their tastes, see Tumarkin, *Johann Georg Sulzer*, 54–57.

duction, became a dominant topic of concern among European intellectuals at mid century. Spurred above all by Locke's groundbreaking *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1690, in which Locke argued that knowledge has its roots in sensory perception, subsequent generations of philosophers developed Locke's ideas and extended them to the fine arts. The development of a sensualist aesthetic, as we have seen, helped to counter and eventually turn back the rationalist neo-classical doctrines that had so entrenched themselves in France and Germany.

Sulzer was fascinated by empiricist philosophy, and he avidly read all contemporaneous literature he could find on this topic, particularly those works emanating from Britain. (Indeed, he took it upon himself to translate and annotate Hume's famous *Essay on Human Understanding* in 1755, although he rejected the materialist underpinnings and skepticism implicit in Hume's theory.[16]) Sulzer's interest in psychology was understandable as it impinged directly upon his most favored subjects of science, pedagogy, and, above all, the fine arts. Like so many of his contemporaries, Sulzer was keen to define and distinguish the peculiar conditions of the aesthetic experience. What is the origin and nature of the pleasurable feelings aroused by works of art, he asked in his earliest aesthetic writings?[17] What criteria can be laid down for the creation and judgment of art capable of instilling such emotions? In order to answer these questions, Sulzer believed it was necessary to go back and study the nature of human perception.

Now the coupling of psychology and aesthetics was certainly not new with Sulzer.[18] Again relying upon Locke, many continental philosophers had tried to analyze artistic beauty as commensurate with sensation.[19] In the cruder materialist philosophies, artistic beauty was explained as a mechanistic resultant of pleasurable sensory stimulation. Christian Wolff tried to be more discriminating. Taking his cue from Leibniz, Wolff had sought to differentiate systematically in his

16 *D. Hume, Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Erkenntnis; Aus dem Englischen übersetzt und mit Anmerkungen des Herausgebers begleitet* (Hamburg and Leipzig, 1755).

17 *Untersuchung über den Ursprung der angenehmen und unangenehmen Empfindungen* (Berlin, 1751); and *Gedanken über den Ursprung und die verschiedenen Bestimmungen der Wissenschaften und schönen Künste* (Berlin, 1757).

18 A study that systematically traces the penetration of empirical psychology within aesthetics is Horst-Michael Schmidt, *Sinnlichkeit und Verstand: Zur philosophischen und poetologischen Begründung von Erfahrung und Urteil in der deutschen Aufklärung* (Munich, 1982).

19 See Jeffrey Barnouw, "Feeling in Enlightenment Aesthetics," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 18 (1988), 323–42.