

Sublimity and Force: On the Intellectual Background of J. F. Reichardt's Report on a Crescendo Experience

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This essay examines the intellectual underpinnings that facilitated the description of an orchestral crescendo experience, as documented in a book by J. F. Reichardt, which was published in 1774. Through this examination, this essay proposes a viewpoint that regards “musical effect” as a manifestation of a historically conditioned intellectual context. In the introduction, as the premise of the argument, the epistemic conditions essential for musical effects are presented. To ascribe a physiological or psychological response to a musical work necessitates the binding of the musical stimulus and the ensuing response, culminating into a holistic experience. This construction is significantly influenced by the contemporary intellectual background of the era. The first section of the present essay focuses on Reichardt's account, wherein the audience, while listening to an orchestral crescendo, gradually rose from their seats while holding their breath. This distinct reference repeatedly appears in other German writings spanning from the second half of the 18th century to the early 19th century. In the second and third sections, the essay examines the reasons behind why the reference was so convincing to the contemporary German people. The second section states that the assertion of breathlessness among the listeners reflected a contemporary understanding of gradual augmentation as a form of sublimity. The third section contends that people gradually standing up reflects a contemporary understanding of force as a measurable entity. The ideas of crescendo as the sublime in the second section and as an augmenting force in the third section both exhibit an inherent sense of ascent. However, they presuppose different ideas of human agency. The former understands humans as subjects, while the latter as objects. Nevertheless, these contradictory ideas of human experience coexist in the report by Reichardt.