

REVIEW ESSAY OF: IRVINE, THOMAS. 2021. *LISTENING TO CHINA: SOUND AND THE SINO-WESTERN ENCOUNTER, 1770-1839* (CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS)

Samuel Cheney¹

Abstract

This essay reviews Thomas Irvine's 2021 book "Listening to China: Sound and the Sino-Western Encounter, 1770–1839". The author highlights the central tenets of Irvine's work (published by the University of Chicago Press), and considers its implications for histories of Sino-Western cultural exchange more broadly.

Keywords

Global Music History, Sino-Western, Enlightenment, Soundscape, Thomas Irvine

Thomas Irvine's (2021) *Listening to China: Sound and the Sino-Western Encounter, 1770–1839* innovatively examines the sonic dimensions of Sino-European interaction at the turn of the nineteenth century. By looking at European reports of the Guangzhou soundscape during the 'Canton trade system', and sonic accounts of Britain's 1793 Macartney Embassy to the Qianlong Emperor 乾隆, Irvine seeks to bolster his provocative opening claim that in this period, "through its encounter with China, the West remade itself in sound" (Irvine, 2021:1). To do this, he explains how Enlightenment music theorists – in particular Charles Burney, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, and Adolf Bernhard Marx – used these firsthand reports of China's aural profile to conceptualise general definitions of music. *Listening to China* is not just a novel study that scrutinises "how China sounded to Westerners around 1800" (Irvine, 2021:2). It crucially shows the 'impact' of these transcontinental musical exchanges upon European musical identities during the Enlightenment. Overall, Irvine charts when and why Chinese music came to be denigrated in Europe. While early eighteenth-century theories constructed China as the extreme limit of a 'universal' world music culture, by the nineteenth century Chinese music had been 'othered', diminished to a status of primitive barbarity above which Western Art Music was considered preeminent (Irvine, 2021:191).

Irvine is not the first to study Chinese and European identities as interlinked and mutually generating. Indeed, he acknowledges his scholarly debt to literary and intellectual historians such as Zuroski (2013), Kitson (2013), and Porter (2010), who all explore China's function in constructing eighteenth-century English selfhoods. Most informatively, Irvine draws upon Hayot's (2009) *Hypothetical Mandarin* (which claims eighteenth-century European philosophers represented China as the limit point of possible human experience) to claim that in the eighteenth century, China was the "limit and horizon of how Europeans thought about music" (Irvine, 2021:2). However, while such scholarship on 'China in Western minds' is well established, Irvine's sonic approach to the eighteenth-century Sino-Western encounter is innovative. Alongside a small but significant body of scholarship that explores more modern Sino-Western musical exchanges – including Yang and Saffle (2017), Janz and Yang (2019), Utz (2021), Lam (2008), and Jones (2001) – *Listening to China* contributes a crucial pre-modern perspective on this history.

Methodologically, Irvine interprets the eighteenth-century sonic encounter between Europe and China through three key theoretical paradigms: sound studies, postcolonial theory, and global histories of the Enlightenment. Although a musicologist by training, Irvine proclaims his work as a 'sound study' focused on uncovering historical listening practices. The conviction that "listening is a particular kind

¹ Samuel Cheney is a PhD researcher in history at the University of Edinburgh, UK. His research considers musical interactions between Britain and China in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

of material experience accessible through historical sources” shapes Irvine’s “acoustically tuned” reading of multiple textual sources, whereby he understands “the complexity of sound’s presence in the written archive” by reading textual references to sound side-by-side (Irvine, 2021:8, 11). Through this sound studies approach, Irvine successfully analyses historical listening practices in an age before sound recording technologies. The approach is used to tackle a central analytical problem in eighteenth-century studies, epitomised by Conrad’s influential 2012 article “Enlightenment in Global History”, which demands intellectual historians question the assumption that the Enlightenment (a philosophical movement traditionally considered the harbinger of Western liberal modernity) was an exclusively European creation – other works on this ‘global’ Enlightenment include Carey and Festa (2009), Agnew (2008), and Aravamudan (2012). Irvine takes this global approach to Enlightenment music theory, showing how forces of eighteenth-century globalisation (worldwide maritime trading, imperial rivalry, and Catholic missionary expansion) generated Sino-Western entanglements that shaped contemporary musical thought (Irvine, 2021:4). In so doing, Irvine seeks to ‘decolonise’ the history of European music theory by showing how European beliefs about the superiority of Western Art Music in the late 1700s were rooted in imperial anxieties generated by the deep imbrication of Western Europe and Qing Dynasty China (Irvine, 2021:13).

This deconstruction of the artificial boundaries drawn between European and non-European music (as widely critiqued by contemporary ethnomusicologists) is also informed by postcolonial studies (Irvine, 2021:21). In particular, Irvine draws upon Pratt’s (1992) *Imperial Eyes* (which argues that European colonialism was perpetuated by a mode of visibility that dominated colonised spaces by looking and categorising, often imaginatively removing non-European people from the landscape of conquest) to argue that Europe heard eighteenth-century China with “imperial ears” (Irvine, 2021:6). Much like Pratt, Irvine claims that European imperial ears depopulate the colonial soundscape by hearing:

“A good number of the “scientific” visualisations Pratt discusses are devoid of human agency. Likewise, for many of the earwitnesses in this book, listening to China often meant removing Chinese from their own soundscapes: sounds that people made (such as the ringing of temple bells or the cracking of fireworks) often appear autonomous, separated from the people who made them. They seem timeless, as if they had always already been there” (Irvine, 2021:6).

Irvine also draws on Gaultier’s influential arguments in *Aurality* (2014), claiming that Europe’s imperial ears positioned Chinese sounds as part of the natural soundscape. He claims that, in most Western ears, Chinese human noises (including music) were rendered “indistinguishable from environmental sounds like those of wind or insects”, so that, “depopulated, China [came] across as an aural *terra nullius* waiting to be exploited for Western gain” (Irvine, 2021:7). By complicating these theories of imperial listening with the inevitable exceptions of individual case studies, Irvine asks whether the listening ear is truly free to hear in moments of encounter – can we escape the cultural conditioning that shapes listening practices to participate in a subjective aural encounter?

Listening to China is structured to reflect Irvine’s conviction that Sino-Western acoustic encounters in various Chinese ‘contact zones’ directly impacted the generation of musical knowledge within Europe – from Chinese soundscapes like the imperial palaces of Jehol (*Chengde* 承德) to Western soundscapes in China like the military bands of East India Company ships on the Pearl River (*Zhujiang* 珠江), or even Chinese soundscapes in Europe like Charles Burney’s London home where he experimented with a *sheng* 笙 (Irvine, 2021:10). Resultantly, the geographical centre of Irvine’s analysis frequently moves between Europe and China, much like the musical knowledge that he studies. Chapter one, “China and the Enlightened Ear”, sets the context for the work, examining how four key Enlightenment thinkers (Christian Wolff, Jean-Philippe Rameau, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Johann Gottfried Herder) drew upon Jesuit writings about Chinese music to furnish their own musical arguments. The chapter charts a shift in Enlightenment musical thought across the eighteenth century, whereby earlier cosmopolitan theories of a universally consistent human ear were gradually replaced by arguments of Enlightenment “new anthropology” that recognised the cultural diversity of listening practices around the globe (and resultantly detached “Chinese listening from Western listening”) (Irvine, 2021:27). Irvine’s discussion of the French composer Rameau’s long-distance textual exchanges with the China-based Jesuit Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot encapsulates this shift. Rameau claimed that Chinese music theories about the twelve-tone division of the musical gamut (derived from Amiot’s

[1754] translation of a music theory text by the early eighteenth-century literatus Li Guangdi 李光地) paralleled Pythagorean theories of music, therefore proving the existence of a single mode of human listening, the *corps sonore* (Irvine, 2021:34). However, Amiot later disproved the composer's theory when he performed Rameau's keyboard piece *Les sauvages* in Peking to an unreceptive audience of Chinese scholar-officials: "The auditory universalism of Rameau, a key protagonist of musical Enlightenment, was put to the test, and Amiot's interlocutor found it wanting" (Irvine, 2021:39). Amiot thereby developed the belief that "anatomy and culture ('our ears') make musical taste", an argument that was eventually articulated by both Rousseau and Herder and saw Chinese and European listening practices become fundamentally separated (Irvine, 2021:39). As Irvine concludes the chapter: "Universalism, as unsuitable as it may have proved in practice, had enabled Europeans and Chinese to communicate with one another, briefly, about how music worked. Herder's discovery of difference sounded the death knell of this dialogue" (Irvine, 2021:52).

Chapter two, "Soundscapes in the Contact Zone: Listening in Canton, 1770–1839", shifts the geographic focus of analysis, exploring how European modes of listening to China functioned in practice. By exploring the listening experiences of European participants in the Canton trade system (*yikou tongshang* 一口通商, a Qing commercial policy whereby all European trade with China between 1757 and 1842 was restricted to the southern port of Guangzhou), Irvine argues that European imperial ears sought to discipline the Chinese sounds that they heard by either "turning them down" or "drowning them out" (Irvine, 2021:86). In this sense, European regimes of listening to China during the Canton trade system aligned with broader imperial desires to dominate the Sino-centric eighteenth-century world economy (Irvine, 2021:53). The extensive comments on Canton's soundscape recorded in Charles Toogood Downing's (1837) *The Fan-Qui in China* allow Irvine to describe how British ears were invariably awestruck by the vastness and difference of Canton's sound worlds, ranging from commercial noise (including timekeeping gongs and cannon-fire at customs inspections) to the musical "pandemonium" of the Chinese city's religious festivals, street sellers, and beggar musicians (Irvine, 2021:54–85). Irvine also argues that the sounds made by Europeans in Canton (including hymn singing, military brass bands, and even Sunday evening chamber ensemble recitals at the English factory) constituted a form of sonic imperialism that attempted to dominate and discipline Canton's soundscape. However, despite this implication that European imperial ears altered the Chinese soundscape, Irvine also highlights the individual exceptions who engaged with Chinese music more sympathetically – James Lind, who transcribed several *naamyam* 南音 songs that he heard in 1766, and Matthew Raper, who learned to play *erhu* 二胡 to a standard sufficient to play with a local ensemble in the 1770s (Irvine, 2021:74–78).

The documents produced by Lind and Raper form the basis of the transcontinental musical connections analysed in chapter three, "Charles Burney Discovers China". In this chapter, Irvine considers the sources of the music historian's engagement with China in his four-volume *General History of Music* (1776–1789) and 1807 article "Chinese Music" for Abraham Rees's *Cyclopaedia* (Irvine, 2021:87). The chapter shows that while Burney first encountered Chinese music (like most Enlightenment intellectuals) through Catholic missionaries, he soon departed from this to directly solicit information about China from British travellers. While Matthew Raper exchanged letters with Burney answering the latter's specific questions about Chinese musical culture, James Lind supplied anecdotes about the supposed similarity of Scottish and Chinese pentatonic music that enabled Burney to formulate a theory of global musical development from a single source (Irvine, 2021:100, 95–98). Irvine does, however, note the limitations of Burney's research – even though Lind provided Burney with a score in *gongche* 工尺 notation for *dizi* 笛子 (a document that reflected positively on the Enlightenment notion linking musical cultivation and literacy), Burney never integrated this information into his music histories (Irvine, 2021:99). Nonetheless, by highlighting Britain and China's intensified musical entanglements in the late eighteenth century, Irvine shows how Burney acquired "more empirical information than any previous European writer on Chinese music working outside the country" (Irvine, 2021:88). Indeed, Irvine claims that Burney had in fact collected too much information by the time of the *General History*'s completion in 1789. This resultantly prompted him to continue researching Chinese music into the nineteenth century, until he published his 1807 article "Chinese Music" in Rees's *Cyclopaedia* (Irvine, 2021:88).

Chapters four and five explore the musical dimensions of the 1793 Macartney Embassy to China and how this diplomatic mission revived Burney's interest in Chinese music at the turn of the nineteenth century. In chapter four, "Sound and the Macartney Mission, 1792–1794", Irvine focuses on the Chinese soundscapes heard by Macartney and his entourage across the cities, roads, rivers, and palaces of northern China, imagining the embassy "as a Grand Tour of Listeners", where "the embassy made music in China, and its members listened to Chinese music" (Irvine, 2021:110). The chapter argues that members of the embassy (which was primarily a commercial mission to ease Sino-British trade relations) often listened to China with imperial ears – such as John Barrow's interpretation of the "peyho song" sung by boatmen on the *Haihe* 海河 river as the sound of an exploitable labour resource – and regularly interpreted Chinese music through their own preexisting aural frames of reference – such as Lord Macartney and George Staunton hearing Buddhist monastic chanting respectively as Catholic plainsong and a glass harmonica (Irvine, 2021:116, 132). It also examines the significance of the British music played within this Chinese soundscape. While Burney provided Macartney's five-strong band of musicians with a repertoire that sought to proclaim the grandness of British sovereignty, the embassy also presented this music as an example of "the most advanced and useful British manufacturing technologies" that the country could offer the Qianlong Emperor (Irvine, 2021:110). Overall, as Irvine rightly claims, attending to sound yields new perspectives on Macartney's motives and intentions, showing how "his agenda reached beyond matters of commerce to more abstract issues of sovereignty and its performance", issues where musical interactions with the Chinese soundscape were of paramount importance (Irvine, 2021:138).

Chapter five, "Reading Burney Listening to China", returns to Charles Burney and explores how the music historian's direct connections to the Macartney embassy supplemented his earlier engagements with British participants in the Canton trade and shaped his later writings on Chinese music. It describes how Burney vicariously used the embassy as a fact-finding mission about Chinese musical culture (by providing Macartney with questions to ask upon arrival in China, concerning the Chinese use of harmony and the similarity of this music to the Scottish pentatonic scale), and how the embassy's German member John Christian Hüttner wrote Burney a detailed account of the music he encountered (which praised the *erhu* 二胡 and *yueqin* 月琴 as pleasant, while simultaneously denigrating the "most disgusting noise" of Chinese percussion) (Irvine, 2021:140, 143). In this chapter, Irvine not only illuminates the intellectual networks through which musical knowledge in the global Enlightenment was created but also shows how these contacts contributed to Burney's overall conclusion about the differences between Chinese and British music: while British music "combines entertainment through novelty with musical 'science'", Chinese music "is bound to unchanging rituals and thus 'torpid'" (Irvine, 2021:151). This assessment, Irvine claims, shows that, despite his best efforts to learn, Burney's "ears were closed" to a sympathetic understanding of Chinese music because of the "iron processes of Western imperialism" that came to cloud his interpretations with Eurocentric cultural biases (Irvine, 2021:158).

The final chapter, "Listening to China with Forkel and Marx", offers a comparative perspective to the predominantly Sino-British history of the rest of the work by focusing on the impact of Chinese music on the German music historians Johann Nikolaus Forkel and Adolph Bernhard Marx. In another example of the malleability of ideas about Chinese music in a variety of European intellectual projects, Irvine shows how these two music theorists used China to articulate a new German nationalist musical identity (Irvine, 2021:159). While Forkel argued that ancient Chinese music theory showed non-European people could potentially 'advance' to greater musical cultivation, Marx integrated a negative opinion of Chinese musical culture into a Hegelian outline of music history (whereby China, despite developing an ancient theory of music, did not subsequently undergo the dialectical progress that European music did, thereby leaving it stagnant) (Irvine, 2021:171, 175). The chapter shows how, for these two authors, China became a touchstone for German musical identities, whereby German practices of listening were constructed as fundamentally opposed to Chinese (Irvine, 2021:161). Overall, as Irvine summarises in his concluding chapter, *Listening to China* charts the global process that prompted an intellectual shift in European attitudes towards Chinese music across the eighteenth century. By 1800, unlike half a century earlier, "Chinese sounds, instead of representing an 'absolute limit' to a shared universal sense of the audible, became for some influential listeners something 'other'" (Irvine, 2021:191). As Irvine rightly claims, in order to decolonise Western art music, we

need to open our ears to historical musical exchanges to understand the global impulses through which European music was falsely imagined as preeminent.

By his own admission, Irvine is linguistically restricted from accessing the “unmediated Chinese perspectives” that would illuminate the Chinese dimension of this symbiotic musical exchange, nor does he engage with any Sinophone literature on the subject of China’s musical encounter with the West (Irvine, 2021:12) – for example, Tao (2001). *Listening to China* could even be considered a clarion call for future bilateral study of Sino-Western musical exchange. Nonetheless, *Listening to China* is an excellent example of how the admirable ideals of ‘global music history’ can be applied in practice. Irvine successfully provincialises our understandings of Enlightenment music history by showing the tangible trans-Eurasian connections that enabled three doyens of Enlightenment (Burney, Forkel, and Marx) to formulate theories of world music into which China was integrated. Rather than producing a diffuse and imprecise study, as global histories of long-distance cultural influences are frequently criticised for doing, Irvine successfully shows exactly *how* eighteenth-century global contacts between Europe and China impacted Enlightenment theories of music. Indeed, *Listening to China* shows that China and its musical culture were, and indeed still are, an important touchstone in the construction of European cultural identities.

REFERENCES

- Agnew, Vanessa. 2008. *Enlightenment Orpheus: The Power of Music in Other Worlds*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Aravamudan, Srinivas. 2012. *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Carey, Daniel, and Festa, Daniel, eds. 2009. *The Postcolonial Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Colonialisms and Postcolonial Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Conrad, Sebastian. 2012. Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique. *The American Historical Review*, 117(4): 999–1027.
- Gaultier, Ana María Ochoa. 2014. *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hayot, Eric. 2009. *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Irvine, Thomas. 2021. *Listening to China: Sound and the Sino-Western Encounter, 1770 – 1839*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Janz, Tobias, and Yang, Chien-Chang, eds. 2019. *Decentering Musical Modernity: Perspectives on East Asian and European Music History*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Jones, Andrew. 2001. *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kitson, Peter. 2013. *Forging Romantic China: Sino-British Cultural Exchange, 1760 – 1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lam, Joseph. 2008. Chinese Music and its Globalized Past and Present. *Macalester International*, 21(9): 29–77.
- Porter, David. 2010. Sinicizing Early Modernity: The Imperatives of Historical Cosmopolitanism. *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43(3): 299–306.

- Pratt, Mary Louise. 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge.
- Tao, Yabing [陶亚兵]. 2001. *Mingqing jian de zhongxi yinyue jiaoliu* 明清间的中西音乐交流 [Musical Exchange Between China and the West in the Ming and Qing Dynasties]. Beijing: Dongfang Press.
- Yang, Hon-Lun, and Saffle, Michael. eds. 2017. *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Utz, Christian. 2021. *Musical Composition in the Context of Globalisation: New Perspectives on Music History in the 20th and 21st Century*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Zuroski, Eugenia. 2013. *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.