

Music Iconography and the History of Ideas

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Music iconography has potential to throw into sharp relief developments in musical thought over time. As James McKinnon argued over 30 years ago in a vision of music iconography still far from realized, the essential character of the field is the study of musical ideas not artifacts. As such, music iconographers are not only in a unique position to aid in the identification and understanding of shifts in musical thought, but also reflect upon the nature of disciplinary boundaries through their own interdisciplinary practice. The obsession with artifact over idea remains a dominant and restrictive strand in music iconography however, and is reflected in ways such as the preoccupation with historically “authentic” images of composers. Portraits hold great potential as a historical source for musicologists as they embed a wide range of assumptions relating to musical values and classifications, as well as reflect putative biographical development or periodization of their particular sitter. Using case studies of Mozart imagery from the 19th century, this paper will examine the value of portrait iconography as a source for biographical, reception and historiographical research, and how portraits not only indicate socio-musical values and categories of their own time, but also how their subsequent reception. In other words, images function as a measure of changing judgments and shifting ideas in musical thought. One particular area of interest will be “death-bed” scenes of Mozart, usually categorized as kitsch, but in fact intriguing images that relate to the composer’s reception in the 19th century. These images, starting from approximately the middle of the century, reveal contradictory understandings of Mozart’s personality (Apollonian or Dionysian) and attempts to reconcile his early death with his music and life generally. Once images are taken to be part of a normal process of musicological research, then a dynamic new relationship can be developed between studies of documentary and visual sources. Moreover,

musicologists will be able to engage with an influential medium that has doubtless played an important part in our collective preconceptions of music and musicians Ultimately, however, the onus is on music iconography as a practice to demonstrate its efficacy as a method, and to see itself as part of the history of ideas’ study and not of artifacts *per se*.