

Architecture and Music

Description

Musicians are familiar with the discrepancies evident in musical scale systems. The cycle of fifths and the cycle of octaves work together to produce a harmonious and well-ordered system of relationships between notes – almost. The superimposition of the two systems that is so essential for free and inventive modulation across musical scales in fact produces discord. By most accounts, advances in the expressive power of music were accomplished with the invention of standardised adjustments to the twelve-tone musical scale system around the time of J.S. Bach: the even-tempered musical scale.



Baroque harmonies: Karlskirche, Vienna, undergoing restoration

Though less constrained by microscopic arithmetical and geometrical calculation, architecture is similarly subject to the necessity for small adjustments. Vitruvius indicates how the construction of buildings of necessity involves adjustment: “The length of a temple is adjusted so that its width may be half its length”; “Order is an adjustment according to quantity.” It seems that harmony, order, and symmetry depend on proper adjustment, as if things need to be brought into alignment from an initial position that is a deviation from the norm or the ideal. Adjustment is an active term, and resonates with processes on a construction site. Blocks of stone do not just fall into place, but have to be manoeuvred. The Latin word rendered as “adjustment” in English translations of Vitruvius is usually *temperantur*, a form of the verb *temperare*, to which temperature also relates, and which, according to the OED, carries connotations of dividing proportionally, combining properly, keeping within limits, regulating, and of course tempering. Adaptation to local conditions demands such adjustments.

Adjustment relates to standardisation, a concept well understood in music as well as in architecture. The social theorist Max Weber saw the quest for even temperament of the musical scales as symptomatic of the unfortunate imposition of industrialization and standardization into the arts. Consumers benefit in the age of industrialization from the transportability of music across national boundaries, but according to his argument, in the process music has lost regional nuance and colour. In fact, even temperament represents a form of colonial domination and Eurocentrism. Adorno advances a

related claim that of all the musical scales or modes, the classical tradition favors those that are the most militaristic.

So the relationships between musical scales and architecture are most compelling when we think of the necessity to make small-scale adjustments, in contrast to the orthodox meeting of architecture and music through concepts of proportion, or architecture as participation in the harmony of the spheres, or the conjunction suggested by architecture as "frozen music."

Bibliography

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Category

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Author

rcoyne99