Journal of the Royal Musical Association, 2018
Vol. 143, No. 2, 473–482, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1507125

Review Articles

Why We *Can't* All Just Get Along

KATE GUTHRIE

William Cheng, *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2016. xiv + 160 pp. ISBN 978 0 472 90056 5. Open access version: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/u/ump/14078046.0001.001>.

> To inspire interest is to be guaranteed a paranoid reading.[1]

A perception of a crisis within the humanities is far from new. At least since the late 1960s, higher-education institutions in Britain and America have struggled against a recurrent 'crisis of legitimation'.[2] Although the contours of the wider political, economic and social landscapes have changed significantly in the intervening decades, the underlying source of anxiety has remained fairly consistent: how can we justify what we do – not just to ourselves, but to the world at large? Whether the crisis is any more real or urgent than it was several decades ago has recently been a subject of heated debate. In the wake of one particularly polemical call to arms, the historians Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler have argued strongly against alarmist narratives of decline, citing the huge expansion in student numbers, as well as the new possibilities for public engagement created by the internet and social media platforms, as evidence of the contrary.[3] The detrimental impact of 'crisis rhetoric' on public perceptions of the humanities has similarly been challenged by the musicologist David Blake, who observes that although the discourse is usually invoked by scholars campaigning for a more progressive discipline, the language of crisis ironically risks promoting the very image it sets out to

Email: kate.guthrie@bristol.ac.uk
I am grateful to Christopher Chowrimootoo, Sarah Collins, Sarah Hibberd and Roger Parker for their thoughtful feedback on earlier drafts of this piece.

[1] Leo Bersani, quoted in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 126.

[2] Michael Bérubé and Cary Nelson, 'Introduction: A Report from the Front', *Higher Education Under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities*, ed. Bérubé and Nelson (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 1–35. As these authors note, the sense of crisis has paradoxically gone hand in hand with the rapid expansion in higher education which in America was fuelled in part by cold-war anxieties about ideological manipulation, and in Britain by the post-Second World War emphasis on meritocracy.

[3] Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler, '*The History Manifesto*: A Critique', *American Historical Review*, 120 (2015), 530–42, published in response to Jo Guldi and David Armitage's *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

© 2018 The Royal Musical Association

https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1507125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

undermine.[4] Whatever position one takes in this debate, one thing is clear: that crisis rhetoric has served an important – and perhaps also a paradoxically enriching – purpose within the academy itself. It has, if nothing else, provided a basis for novel scholarly interventions: the currency on which our careers and reputations depend.

Among recent publications to turn the perceived crisis to strategic ends is William Cheng's *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good*. A manifesto advocating a more caring discipline, *Just Vibrations* answers the question of how scholars can justify being scholars with an appeal to ethics. Drawing inspiration both from contemporary reactions against a neo-liberal academy that allegedly values production over people and from the related social justice turn within the same, the book makes a case for putting the 'humanism' back into the humanities. Its starting point is a new, expansive definition of musicology as encompassing 'all the activities, care, and caregiving of people who identify as members of the musicology community' (p. 7). From this basis, it aims not simply to foster a more congenial atmosphere within the discipline, but – more boldly – to explore the unique potential of musicology to serve as a model to the larger world out there: 'Is it possible', the author asks, 'that people who work with music for a living can lead by example in agendas of interpersonal care and communication?' (p. 10).

The central foundation on which Cheng builds his case is drawn from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's celebrated 2003 essay 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You', in which the author diagnosed a mode of discourse that has dominated the academy since the 1960s: 'paranoid reading'.[5] Associated with what Paul Ricoeur famously termed the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', this scholarly approach is premissed on exposure and demystification.[6] It is committed to the kinds of deep reading that promise to unveil hidden meanings and to the anxiety-ridden process of anticipating and disarming criticism. Reacting against the hegemonic status that such paranoid methods had secured within academia, Sedgwick imagined an alternative mode of scholarly engagement which she termed 'reparative reading'.[7] Whereas paranoid readings start out from a defensive position, reparative readings look to empathize and find common ground, promoting epistemologies rooted in affective experiences and encounters.

To get a sense of what reparative scholarly writing looks like in practice, we can turn to chapter 3 of *Just Vibrations*, specifically to its discussion of the It Gets Better Project (IGBP; pp. 59–63). Founded in 2010, IGBP is a charitable, online initiative that aimed to stem the tide of teenage

[4] David Blake, 'Musicological Omnivory in the Neoliberal University', *Journal of Musicology*, 34 (2017), 319–53 (p. 322).

[5] The essay is published in Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, 123–52. An earlier version of this material was included in the introduction to *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

[6] Ricoeur's terminology was taken up by philosophers and intellectual historians among others, but proved less popular in literary studies, where the ready embrace of post-structuralism superseded interest in the hermeneutic tradition: Rita Felski, 'Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion', *M/C Journal*, 15/1 (2012), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/431> (accessed 16 April 2018).

[7] Recent years have seen a growing tide of dissent against paranoid critique. Other significant works in this field include: Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), and Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1507125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

suicides prompted by homophobic bullying. Its medium was motivational video testimonies from adults, who could offer reassurance that 'it gets better'. In his analysis, Cheng makes use of several reparative techniques. For one thing, he employs a deliberately accessible writing style (although in another context most of the rhetorical and grammatical devices that facilitate this might simply be equated with writing well). For another, he draws on a variety of evidence, including 'personal anecdotes', 'polemical blogposts' and his own life experiences – ways of knowing that have traditionally featured peripherally in musicology.[8] Over and above these general traits (which run throughout the book), this discussion is notable for the way it relates Sedgwick's theories to its analysis of the initiative's reception. Giving voice to a range of perspectives, Cheng contrasts what he sees as the paranoid responses of academics with the messages of hope held out by contributors, some of which were subsequently collected in an anthology. The primary concern of the former, sceptical group, he explains, was to expose what they perceived to be a naive idealism – one that in many cases seemed bound up in a lack of awareness of or disregard for contributors' relative status and privilege. Making a self-consciously reparative intervention, Cheng throws out a challenge: that we should take seriously contributors' desire to inspire positive change and admit the project's potential to transform individual lives, rather than simply drown their hope in paranoid critique.

The application of Sedgwick's theory here is compelling on two grounds. First, Cheng seems to arrive at a position of both-together rather than either-or: he demonstrates the value of a reparative approach, even as he acknowledges that the promises in the videos are utopian and, in some instances, ethically problematic in that they proffer hope on false grounds. The two approaches, he concludes, 'need to be held in tension and held mutually accountable, but one doesn't need, in neoliberal fashion, to co-opt or cannibalize its counterpart' (p. 62). This position appeals because it seems less irresponsible to believe in change if its limits are simultaneously recognized. Secondly, his response to the paranoid critiques demonstrates a reparative urge in that it sympathetically explores the scholarly sensitivities that might drive such anxiety. It is, he admits, an uncomfortable reality that 'someone's five-minute It Gets Better video could achieve more immediate results than a five-hundred-page monograph with a university press' (p. 62). By affording even the most anxious scholarly accounts a sympathetic hearing, Cheng prevents any drawing up of battle lines between the reparative 'goodies' and paranoid 'baddies'.

Besides the queer topics addressed in chapter 3, *Just Vibrations* also seeks to explore how reparative agendas might intersect with a broader variety of contexts, ranging from the close-to-home to the remote, from the exceptional to the mundane.[9] Chapter 1 makes use of the confessional style of writing that to date has largely been the preserve of scholars working in literary and cultural studies, as Cheng openly recounts his experiences of chronic pain, its impact on his capacity to work and the resulting challenges to his sense of academic identity.[10] An equally unusual normality – that of music and torture – is the focus of

[8] These are just some of the less traditional, non-specialist sources that Cheng draws on throughout the book. For his fuller list, see p. 14. The broadened evidence base intersects (among other things) with an emerging trend in media and fan studies, where web ethnography is on the rise. For example, see Kiri Miller, *Playable Bodies: Dance Games and Intimate Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[9] For an explanation of why paranoid and reparative modes are especially pertinent to queer studies, see Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, 124–6.

[10] Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999) similarly charts her experience of the therapy for depression she underwent in the wake of breast cancer, although through more poetic

https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1507125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

chapter 4.[11] Meanwhile, chapter 2 and the conclusion seek to draw the discipline into a broad dialogue, making use of anecdotal evidence from academic conferences, online discussion forums and the classroom.

One consequence of this choice of themes is that issues of very different magnitude frequently appear side by side. To offer just one example, in the conclusion, an account of the highly controversial use of long-range acoustic devices segues into a discussion about the feedback language academics use when grading student papers (pp. 98–9). What these incidents have in common, the author suggests, is that they both constitute acts of sonic violence that bring injustice into the world. The juxtaposing of such divergent scenarios is a deliberate strategy: Cheng sees the refusal to find common ground as indicative of a paranoid assumption that doing so necessarily equates to 'insensitively asserting their equivalency' (p. 83). 'While we must not facilely conflate injuries big and small,' he urges, 'we have to reflect on how our problematic mentalities toward acoustic offenses (big *or* small) intersect and interrelate' (*ibid.*). The suggestion that seemingly minor transgressions might in some ways connect to broader sociopolitical issues is a central aspect of the methodology through which *Just Vibrations* poses its ethical challenges to the discipline. For drawing parallels between gross violations of personhood (such as rape or torture) and more minor cases of interpersonal friction (such as scholarly disagreements) raises the stakes across the board. It implies that to find value in academic disagreement and paranoid critique is to risk condoning more extreme instances of 'sonic violence'. Scholarly practice thus becomes a matter of social justice.

To make the point more explicitly: in *Just Vibrations*, the use of reparative versus paranoid modes of scholarship is presented as an ethical matter. Indeed, if the discussion of the IGBP is fairly even-handed in its treatment of the two modes, elsewhere in the book the ethical stakes are laid out on less equivocal grounds. A prime example is found in chapter 2, where the author introduces the two concepts in dichotomous terms. On the one hand, paranoid scholarship is presented as destructive: engaged in a belligerent pursuit of academic infallibility, its goal is to 'quash opposition' through 'rapier wits' (note the combative implications invoked by 'rapier', a thin, pointed sword; p. 40). On the other hand, reparative modes aim to rejuvenate, 'reconstructing a sustainable life' in the wake of injustice (*ibid.*).[12] With one mode supposedly perpetuating violence and the other restoring life, the author seems to imply that the moral high ground is held by those committed to repair. The publicity materials for the book are yet more categorical. The blurb on the publisher's website opens by pitting paranoid readings that aim 'subtly [to] denigrate anyone who disagrees' against 'softer-spoken reparative efforts which forego forceful argument in favor of ruminations on pleasure, love, sentiment, reform, care, and accessibility'. Having polarized the two modes of scholarship, it goes on to suggest that 'how we choose to think about the perpetration and tolerance of critical and acoustic offenses may ultimately lead us down avenues of ethical ruin – or, if we choose, repair'.[13] The ethical option is apparently clear.

---

language. For an introduction to confessional criticism, see *Confessions of the Critics*, ed. H. Aram Veseer (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

[11] This field of study follows Suzanne Cusick's seminal article 'Music As Torture / Music As Weapon', *Trans: Revista transcultural de música*, 10 (2006), <http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/articulo/152/music-as-torture-music-as-weapon> (accessed 26 October 2017).

[12] For this reparative definition, the author cites the literary theorist Ellis Hansen.

[13] University of Michigan Press, 'Just Vibrations', <https://www.press.umich.edu/9293551/just_vibrations> (accessed 7 December 2017).

https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1507125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Or is it? For an alternative perspective, we need only turn back to the essay from which these terms were drawn, since Cheng's position diverges from Sedgwick's on two notable grounds. First, when Sedgwick wrote her article, paranoid methodologies retained their original connotations: as a means of combatting forms of societal oppression that were hidden in plain sight. In the years since its publication, the scholarly terrain has been reconfigured in such a way that in Cheng's account the two approaches have switched positions: reparative modes are now reimagined as a primary mode for ethical scholarly conduct – the 'barometers of better worlds' (p. 16) – not least because they promise to combat some of the 'unlovelier' sides of academia (to borrow an adjective from Sedgwick).[14] The second difference stems from the fact that, in Sedgwick's mind, the association between paranoia and ethics was so strong that in making the case for reparative readings she felt it necessary to emphasize that this did not equate to a shirking of ethical responsibilities – and crucially, she defended her new methodology on the grounds that knowledge and action do not have to go hand in hand:

> For someone to have an unmystified view of systemic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences. To be other than paranoid […] to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression.[15]

In other words, Sedgwick wanted to separate knowledge of injustice from the forms that scholarship might take, whereas Cheng implies that we have a moral obligation not only to be aware, but also to engage. *Just Vibrations* thus imbues Sedgwick's typologies with a moralism that she resisted. Perhaps, then, we could invoke her case again here, similarly turned on its head, to defend the (ethical) right to remain committed to paranoid methodologies: to recognize that there is oppression in the world does not necessarily enjoin us to fight it through reparative approaches.

However, my objection to the way in which *Just Vibrations* imputes ethics to scholarly modes is not *just* a matter of differing moral perspectives. More importantly, it has to do with the fact that the book's claims are strangely at odds with its own methodology. For the entire book is shot through with anxiety, making ample use of many of the tools traditionally associated with paranoid critique. To offer an easy example, the introduction is littered with the equivocal 'seems' and 'mights' that, as Cheng points out in chapter 2, betray the paranoiac's desire to convey an understanding of nuance and protect against contradiction. Meanwhile, the book makes conventionally prolific use of footnotes to position and substantiate the argument – another strategy to demonstrate the rigour that limits criticism. There are also a multitude of moments when Cheng performs the classic manoeuvre of anticipating the counter-argument in order to disarm it. One ironic example comes when he acknowledges the limitations of reparative modes as a means of moving beyond paranoia, but does so through rhetoric that bears all the hallmarks of a paranoid defence: 'Shortcomings of repair lie in the stark implausibility of its own lofty promises […] paranoid traces of insecurity, despondence, and even gotcha […] undoubtedly show up in *Just Vibrations* and in all of our writing' (pp. 41–2). The wording of the admission is revealing: it at once makes transparent the limitations of his own work and light-heartedly dismisses the problem as a topic for extended consideration.

[14] Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, 2.
[15] *Ibid.*, 127–8.

https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1507125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The problem, however, is that paranoid modes do not just 'show up'; they are a fundamental part of the critical apparatus through which Cheng advances his case.

To draw attention to such moments might seem unfair. It is, after all, unsurprising that paranoia pervades the book, given that this has, as noted, been the dominant mode of discourse within the academy since the 1960s. Presumably trained by the generation of scholars who cut their academic teeth on this school of social and cultural theory (moreover, at a time when it seemed to hold out the same revolutionary promises as reparative modes now appear to possess), Cheng is inescapably a child of this epistemological legacy. Indeed, if *Just Vibrations* is a critique of critique, its target audience is predominantly scholars working in the paranoid tradition. Nevertheless, given that he takes such a strong *ethical* stand against this tradition, his tacit recourse to its modes and methods is problematic.

At the same time, the portrayal of repair as conciliatory, sentimental and gentle is complicated by its strong association with social justice. The tension between these two impetuses is reflected in Cheng's definition of 'care', which subsumes a range of more and less reparative perspectives under the notion of repair. For instance, to illustrate how care can lead to social action, he uses Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings*, a text that 'got people to care' (p. 8).[16] But it did so in a way that was far from gentle or sentimental. On the contrary, McClary's deliberately provocative tone, epitomized in her now legendary accusation against Beethoven (an act of such great rhetorical violence that it had to be reworded for the book), proved hugely divisive within the discipline. We could debate whether the end justified the means, but my point is a simpler one: validity of the cause aside, such rhetoric sits uncomfortably alongside the 'soft' values that the author elsewhere ascribes to reparation. If slippery definitions exemplify the 'weak' theory associated with reparative agendas, in this instance they have obscured crucial factors that shape how we make sense of 'care' and how it translates into practice. This matters because McClary was far from exceptional: the current social justice turn within musicology has witnessed plenty of belligerent language that seeks to antagonize, expose or shame its opponents – in the most insensitive cases, clearly shunning or demeaning positive motives.[17]

What is more, for all that *Just Vibrations* advocates a reparative musicology, it takes a jarringly adversarial stance towards 'the discipline', which serves as the errant Other against which Cheng positions himself. (Such polemical distancing is, of course, another staple rhetorical device of the paranoid tradition.) In seeking to expose musicology's uncaring, anxious character, Cheng personifies the discipline through a number of archetypal characters; for example, the introduction features an anecdote about an anonymous male professor who in 1988 publicly denied his responsibility for combatting on-campus rape culture (pp. 5–6). Later, in chapter 2, we meet some of the 'big-name academics […] the clarion giants whose radioactive words edify, entertain, or perturb the younger colleagues who might not feel personally or professionally

[16] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

[17] The violent reactions to Pierpaolo Polzonetti's ill-fated blogpost for Musicology Now are a recent case in point: 'Don Giovanni Goes to Prison: Teaching Opera Behind Bars' (16 February 2016), available at <http://musicologynow.ams-net.org/2016/02/don-giovanni-goes-to-prison-teaching_16.html> (accessed 16 February 2016). Although less extreme in tone, Cheng's curt dismissal of Richard Taruskin's critique of actor-network theory also comes uncomfortably close to the acts of 'rhetorical violence' against which he professes to make a stand (pp. 49–50). For Taruskin's critique, see his 'Agents, and Causes, and Ends – Oh My', *Journal of Musicology*, 31 (2014), 272–93.

https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1507125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

safe enough to enter the fray', as Cheng recounts the heated dispute that took place in the early 1990s between McClary, Pieter van den Toorn and Ruth Solie (p. 39; pp. 47–8). These are just two of the instances in which Cheng stakes out the disciplinary terrain by appealing to a generational divide: younger scholars, assumed to be working on the peripheries, are pitted against an older generation, assumed to dominate the centre. The latter, save for a handful of radical voices, are charged with fostering an uncaring academy.

This perspective is problematic on several grounds. First, it is notable that many of the incidents he uses to depict 'the discipline' are now several decades old, which raises the question: if they took the measure of musicology three decades ago, are they representative of it now? As McClary's frank foreword to the volume suggests, the answer is surely a resounding *no*. A lot has changed since the late 1980s. Drawing attention to the intergenerational insensitivities in no uncertain terms, McClary reminds the author and his readers that:

> As a young gay man, [Cheng] never had to fight those tawdry battles over gender and sexuality that wrenched the field in the 1990s; as an individual who experiences severe chronic pain, he did not have to invent the field of disability studies. Thanks to Philip Brett, Joseph Straus, and other pioneers, he seems to have inherited a musicology perfectly suited to his needs. (p. xviii)

Of course, as she goes on to acknowledge, injustices persist, both within academia and more widely. But, at least within our privileged Western academic world, we have come a long way towards a consensus that homophobia, misogyny and ableism (to cite just a few forms of discrimination) are unacceptable. Indeed, as Blake suggests, the current penchant for pitting out-of-touch and non-progressive 'established disciplines' against visions of more equal and inclusive new ones is premissed on a neoliberal fantasy that depends on 'casting musicology as a straw man bearing scant resemblance to the intellectual work currently undertaken within the discipline'.[18] Perhaps, then, younger scholars (of whom I am one) would be wise to cultivate a more reparative relationship with our discipline: to acknowledge and give credit for battles fought, even where they have only partially been won.

Besides setting up a dubious generational divide, the reification of the discipline through the stock characters of an earlier time also plays into a simplistic, imagined divide between musicologists and the public at large. Aligning himself with age-old populist reactions against academia, Cheng invokes classic critiques of academic elitism to articulate the humanizing relevance of the reparative approaches he advocates. If paranoia stands for 'vicious' and inaccessible intellectualism, the reparative mode (and here he cites Suzanne Cusick) is 'sappy' and 'anti-intellectual', finding truth in experiential categories such as 'joy' and 'pleasure' rather than in rigorous critical enquiry (pp. 39–40). Indeed, Cheng even goes so far as to claim that 'public scholarship, for what it's worth, cannot flourish in the paranoid mode. Scholarship qualifies as publicly salient only if it accommodates critiques *by* the public. It has to be accessible and comprehensible, open to praise and pushback from more than specialists alone' (pp. 13–14). While it seems reasonable to acknowledge that much of the discourse generated by paranoid methodologies is not particularly accessible, the suggestion that this mode is incompatible with 'public scholarship' sets up a strange us-and-them dichotomy – a strategy that risks reinforcing the view of musicology it is intended to undermine. At the same time as seeking to validate non-specialist perspectives, this strategy also comes across as weirdly

[18] Blake, 'Musicological Omnivory', 322.

https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1507125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

elitist because it implicitly denies the possibility that a member of the public could contribute to scholarly debate with rigour sufficient to stand up in academic court.

In the case of *Just Vibrations*, however, there is another, more pressing issue, which complicates the book's claim to occupy the ethical high ground: distancing oneself from the discipline in this way belies one's own complicity in the system. Indeed, for scholars using reparative modes just as for those working in paranoid ones, complicity is inescapable. The literary theorist Paul Bové is among those to have spelt out the catch-22. Beginning with paranoid critique, he argues that for all that this mode of scholarship traditionally professed an antagonistic relationship with the world and sought to expose its hidden injustices, it remained inescapably a function of discourse. Consequently, 'the critique of discourse could not bring the mastery of discourse' that it sought.[19] Recognizing paranoia's ultimate failure to transcend the very structures it set out to critique, scholars – including Cheng – have imagined instead that 'acting to change the world in line with more rational, just, and rewarding ideals will alter the world and consciousness, thereby overcoming the dilemma from within it'.[20] However, as Bové goes on to observe, even this is premissed on the same fallacy, for attempts to reform the system from within remain bound up in the notion that 'history is a struggle for mastery and recognition'. In other words, even this vision of transcendence 'derives […] from a hope to become masters'. Again, Cheng is no exception. Even at the time of writing, as a widely published, tenure-track scholar, he was part of the fabric that makes up the very discipline he critiques. More ironically, since *Just Vibrations* was published, the things to which he appealed to define his alterity have become the very grounds for his elevation as a leader within the discipline. Besides being invited to respond publicly to disciplinary controversies, he was also recently announced as co-editor of a new series on music and social justice from the University of Michigan Press.[21] For all that repair supposedly eschews power, Cheng has been drawn into a classic power battle over conflicting visions of musicology.

None of this is to suggest that we should not take Cheng's call to repair seriously. But it is nevertheless to insist that the relationship between paranoia and repair is more complicated than their frequently polemical presentation in *Just Vibrations* lets on. To restore some of this complexity, we might revisit Sedgwick's seminal article, which sets up the two modes as 'changing and heterogeneous relational stances', bound together in an 'oscillatory context'. Drawing on psychological theories developed by Melanie Klein, she argues that where paranoia is a defensive 'alertness' that defines itself in opposition to others, reparative modes constitute 'an anxiety-mitigating achievement […] the position from which it is possible in turn to use one's own resources to assemble or "repair" the murderous part-objects into something like a whole'.[22] Although the two perspectives seem diametrically opposed, they are also inextricably wedded to one another (as the tensions between the agenda and methodology of *Just Vibrations*

[19] Paul A. Bové, *Mastering Discourse: The Politics of Intellectual Culture* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1992), xii.

[20] *Ibid*.

[21] See, for example, Cheng's invited public response to Polzonetti's 'Don Giovanni Goes to Prison': 'Musicology, Freedom, and Uses of Anger' (21 February 2016), available at <http://musicologynow.ams-net.org/2016/02/musicology-freedom-and-uses-of-anger.html> (accessed 2 November 2017). And for the University of Michigan Press series announcement, see <http://musicologynow.ams-net.org/2017/10/announcing-music-and-social-justice-new.html> (accessed 10 October 2017).

[22] Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, 128.

https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1507125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unwittingly suggest). A notable benefit of Sedgwick's equivocal stance is that it facilitates a more sympathetic treatment of the paranoid tradition. For one thing, she never intended reparative modes to replace their obverse as the sole mode of scholarly critique.[23] What is more, she is sensitive to 'the powerful reparative practices' that she believes 'infuse self-avowedly paranoid critical projects'.[24] In contrast, although Cheng admits that 'in efforts to do well and to do good, people can hold paranoia and repair in perpetual tension, recognizing that neither means (or feels like) much without the other', there is little to redeem paranoia in his account (p. 42).

What, then, might we gain from taking a more reparative perspective on paranoid practices? As the Bersani epigraph to this review article points out, for all its flaws, there is something implicitly complimentary about provoking paranoia: the suggestion of having aroused real interest, perhaps even to the point of challenging scholarly identity. While this might not be the most comfortable space to inhabit, it can also be enriching. It creates a melting pot for the forging of new ideas, for the refining of one's own convictions. For proof, one need only look to the wealth of inspirational scholarship produced during the heyday of critique. What is more, it is not just a feeling of insecurity that creates fraught exchanges. On a simpler level, impassioned scholarly disagreements reflect the fact that we do not live in a straightforward world. It is, then, problematic to assume that there is a consensus about what a 'better' world might look like. Admitting this, of course, risks perpetuating a world in which viewpoints that we consider highly objectionable continue to be aired. Nevertheless, to create space for a diversity of opinions is not necessarily to condone violence, but rather to recognize the broader value of promoting a critical engagement with the world. Doubtless we could often find language to express divergences of opinion more graciously; but this would not necessarily make those moments any less painful. If it is precisely where such matters of scholarly dissent are concerned that Cheng would stake a claim for reparation, his negative portrayal of critique frequently comes close to disarming the possibility of disagreement altogether. Conversely, as a mode of conversation, reparation – as it is characterized in *Just Vibrations* – often seems to foreclose discussion other than that based on agreement: if 'Can't we all just get along?' is 'the reparative's plea' (p. 40), where is the space for divergent opinions?

At the same time, we might also ask what is lost when reparative practices become associated predominantly with scholarship on heavily politicized topics – scholarship that also often strives to function as a form of social action. This brings us full circle, back to an issue raised at the start of this review: how do we realize the humanist imperative underlying the humanities? For Cheng, the primary grounds for 're-humanization' pertain to talking about issues of care *openly*. 'Momentum is building,' he enthuses – 'not fast enough, but building all the same. The 2015 annual meeting of the American Musicological Society in Louisville, Kentucky, hosted more papers on accessibility, disability, labor, and public scholarship than ever before in AMS conference history' (p. 13). There is, of course, obvious value in bringing injustice into the open: to identify it is to open up the possibility of repair. But to express humanism primarily through social activism is to miss out on the wealth of other enriching human experiences that studying the humanities can bring. It also overlooks the ways in which reparative practices intersect with and might usefully enhance more traditional subjects of musicological research.

[23] *Ibid.*, 124.
[24] *Ibid.*, 128.

https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1507125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To offer a contentious example, if reparative modes are (among other things) about 'a sustained seeking of pleasure' (p. 39), perhaps they offer one solution to the recent calls for musicologists to be more honest about their love of music.[25] In creating space for experiential forms of knowing, reparative readings might not only help scholars to find a language to articulate musical enthusiasm; they also – *pace* Cheng – suggest the validity of this endeavour as one among many fields of academic enquiry.[26]

Given the agenda underpinning *Just Vibrations*, it seems appropriate to end on a reparative note. It is in this spirit that I want to suggest that perhaps the book's most positive contribution has less to do with its polemical promotion of reparative reading – at times simplistic, at times disingenuous – and more to do with its internal contradictions: with the tension, that is, between the advocacy of reparative modes on the one hand and paranoid impulses on the other. This liminal zone lacks the straightforward appeal of nailing colours to a particular mast, of signing up to a cause, of taking an unequivocal stance on perceived injustices. But it is precisely its messiness that makes it more human. It acknowledges the complicated pushing away from and pulling towards that characterize human interaction. It allows for the fact that we can perceive academia to be wracked with inequalities, and yet also feel exhilarated by the sense of self-worth that so often accompanies disciplinary affirmation. It creates space for us to be committed to building a better world, even as we recognize the limits of our own efforts and inevitable entanglement in, even dependency on, the very institutions at which we level our critiques. Any scholarship that seeks to justify itself by appealing to ethics and the human needs to allow for the complicated motives – good, evil and otherwise – that underpin most human activity.

[25] For a diagnosis of and responses to the current musicological uneasiness in talking about the aesthetic objects of our studies, see *Quirk Historicism: A Special Forum*, ed. Mary-Ann Smart and Nicholas Mathew, *Representations*, 132 (2015).

[26] Cheng questions whether aestheticism can have any place in a humanistic discipline, insisting that scholars cannot ethically claim the 'extreme immunities' encapsulated in concepts such as academic freedom 'without also attending to others' extreme vulnerabilities' (p. 49).

https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1507125 Published online by Cambridge University Press