

Attention, Instrumentality, and the Orchestration of Mind

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The last several decades have seen an explosion of texts by psychologists and cognitive scientists detailing the erosion of our attentive capacities and the rise of “disorders” including ADHD. In explaining this apparent crisis, many draw on the metaphor of the “neural orchestra,” popularized by (among others) the neurologist Elkhonen Goldberg. According to this model, individual areas of cortical specialization are troped as players in a large-scale ensemble who must be well-conducted in order to operate at peak levels of focus and efficiency. Absence of a strong cognitive leader generates chaos, unproductivity, and—in the most apocalyptic versions of the story—a collapse of the attentional networks that denote human “civilization.”

This paper interrogates the origins and ideological resonances of the brain-orchestra. Although the metaphor was embraced as a novelty in the mid-1990s (a substitute for computational models of cognition), it has much older roots, originating in phrenological theory of the 1810s. From the early craniology of Franz Joseph Gall and Johann Spurzheim to the phreno-magnetism of Mariano Cubi y Soler, orchestral cartographies of mind flourished. Replacing (or fusing) metaphysical concepts of bodily harmony with theories of hierarchical cerebral organology, these models conflated the focused mind with the centrally-organized orchestra. The concept of attention was crucial in both arenas, conceived as a controlling force yoking players (musical or cerebral) into powerful cognitive, musical, and political wholes. Orchestral and neurological models enframed one another: the orchestra in the brain was also a brain in the orchestra. Instrumental music itself, as it accrued cultural capital through the early nineteenth century, refracted cognitive theory, demanding intensely conducted forms of attention—the unwavering focus first celebrated by Wackenroder and enforced by newly powerful podium leaders. Today, the historical and neuropolitical forces that generated the Romantic mind-orchestra have been largely forgotten, but they continue to exert a spectral influence, hovering behind our fetish for cognitive focus and our psychopolitical fear of distraction.