

Omniaudience: Listening to Voices in the *Specimens of Various Styles of Music*
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In the early years of the nineteenth century, the Oxford professor, composer, and organist William Crotch initiated the Royal Institution lectures on music, a series of public talks with an astonishing geo-temporal range. From 1807, his music examples, which he had demonstrated in the course of his lectures, were gathered together as the *Specimens of Various Styles of Music* – compendiums of keyboard transcriptions that arranged symphonic movements by Haydn next to songs from ancient Israel, Chinese melodies next to choruses from oratorios by Handel, and compiled all sorts of madrigals, hornpipes, and Hungarian dances, not to mention “national music” from Canada to Scotland and Madras to South Africa.

Crotch described his global sampling of musical “styles” as *specimens* – exemplars of various species, as in the natural sciences, which at that time was the main concern of the Royal Institution. Indeed, his lectures condemned the conceptual habits associated with an earlier generation of English music historians, primarily Charles Burney, who tended to assume that art was constantly improving. Crotch thus organized his specimens in order to disrupt any story of linear progress, and aimed instead to inculcate “discrimination”: each specimen, he argued, could be distinguished by its proper musical voice, appreciable precisely because he had made every one newly knowable and comparable via the medium of the keyboard.

This paper argues that Crotch’s early instance of globally oriented style criticism (a precursor of the disciplinary mode recently interrogated by Rachel Mundy) has much to teach us about the liberal politics (and continuing liberal project) of *listening* – especially of listening to diverse yet legible (musical) voices. Crotch’s *Specimens*, and the proliferating media forms that made his synoptic enterprise viable, promoted the ethical fantasy of “omniaudience” – a fantasy that retains a powerful hold over music studies: the idea that, equipped with the appropriate tools, one might potentially listen to everything, discriminate all distinctive voices. Yet in Crotch’s *Specimens*, I argue, we can discern the foundational relationship between an ethic of listening and an ethic of “giving voice,” the central role of new media technologies in extracting voices and making them audible, and the primacy of an acquisitive, colonial conception of attentiveness.