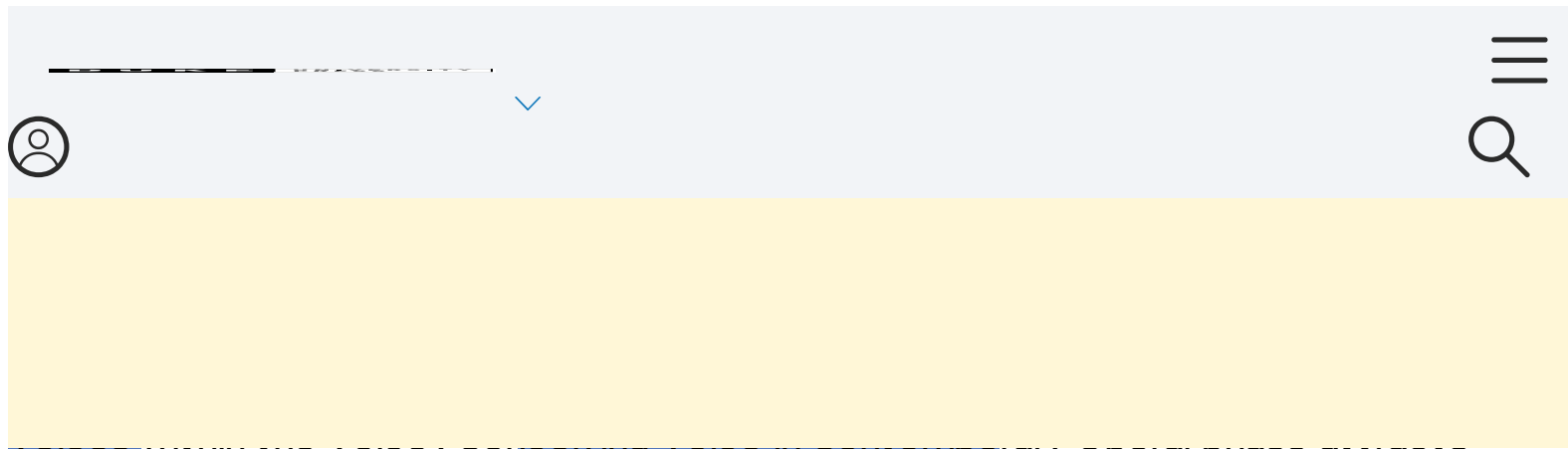


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Fall 2001

# The Music of Sympathy in the Arts of the Baroque; or, the Use of Difference to Overcome Indifference

[Ruth HaCohen](#)




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<https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-22-3-607>

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*Sympathy*, in the sense of the ability to suffer with or for the other, entered English usage toward the end of the sixteenth century. This marks an important moment in Western culture, the birth of a new artistic sensibility nourished by the Aristotelian notion of poetic compassion. This article delineates strategic points in the emergence of this sensibility and the forms and contexts of its presence in art during the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century. The primary thesis is that sympathy thrived where mimetic illusion failed. In the figurative terms of the period, this amounted to the substitution of Echo, the compassionate nymph, for Narcissus, the self-centered deity. This analysis is informed by the fate of these cultural figures as well as by theoretical discussions of sympathy/compassion in antiquity (Plato and Aristotle) and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (primarily Descartes and Rousseau). Against this background the article examines certain artistic enactments of sympathy and tries to identify the values and beliefs that underlay them. Here music played a central role. The phenomenology of the auditory and of contemporary musical language in particular lent themselves to various manifestations of sympathy without trespassing on the domain of deceptive illusion. The wedding of music and sympathy opened up the possibility for musicians to re-cover faith in communication across differences and distances. Although the focus of this essay is primarily on music, related tendencies in the other arts (literature and painting) that contributed to a new awareness of the role of sympathy in the universes of the modern individual and society also are examined.

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Online ISSN 1527-5507

Print ISSN 0333-5372

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