

The Rules of Engagement: Richard Taruskin and the History of Western Music

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A review of RICHARD TARUSKIN, *THE OXFORD HISTORY OF WESTERN MUSIC* [in six volumes: 1: *The Earliest Notations to the Sixteenth Century*; 2: *The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*; 3: *The Nineteenth Century*; 4: *The Early Twentieth Century*; 5: *The Late Twentieth Century*; 6: *Resources: Chronology, Bibliography, Master Index*] (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), ISBN: 0-19-516979-4, 4252pp., £400/\$699.

If Sebastian Bach and his admirable son Emanuel, instead of being musical-directors in commercial cities, had been fortunately employed to compose for the stage and public of great capitals, such as Naples, Paris, or London, and for performers of the first class, they would doubtless have simplified their style more to the level of their judges; the one would have sacrificed all unmeaning art and contrivance, and the other been less fantastical and *recherché*, and both, by writing in a style more popular, and generally intelligible and pleasing, would have extended their fame, and been indisputably the greatest musicians of the present century.

Charles Burney, *A General History of Music* (1789)

A true History of Music¹

The sense of an ending has never loomed larger in musical studies. Perhaps that is one reason why academic publishers are so conspicuously given to companions, guides, dictionaries and periodic histories of every conceivable kind: between the modest handbook and the massive encyclopaedia, musicology is now marketed as a vast collective enterprise in which the general survey (propped up by 'suggestions for further reading') almost invariably takes precedence over the solitary preoccupations of the specialist and the less profitable deliberations of individual scholarship. This trend is especially apparent in Anglo-American studies, at least since the appearance

¹ Taruskin describes this project as 'an attempt at a true history' because 'most books that call themselves histories of Western music...are in fact surveys, which...make little effort truly to explain why and how things happened as they did.' (1: xxi-xxii). In this essay, all references to the publication under review are given by volume and page number.

in 1980 of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, which itself produced an army of smaller *Groves* that marched into the uncertain future equipped with generic and thematic passports to the market itself: ‘American Music’, ‘Women Composers’, ‘Opera’, and so on. Who can have failed to notice the resurgence of this essentially positivist spirit in musicology, abetted to be sure by the publishers themselves, and in vital contradistinction to the ideological critique of the New Musicology and its radical deconstruction of the male-dominated hegemony of western music?² At one and the same time, the canon of classical music has been radically re-contextualized to such an extent that the English language now accommodates a plural for that hitherto singular noun ‘music’, even as classical music itself, what Richard Taruskin calls ‘the literate tradition’, continues to dominate the scrutiny of musicologists as never before. One only has to glance at the review pages of a journal such as *Music and Letters* to confirm that contemporary musical scholarship, for all its welcome plurality, remains vitally engaged with European art music.

The Oxford History of Western Music is symbolic of that engagement. It is an annunciation, a farewell and a lament, and it is also a characteristically American attempt to set the musical world straight in one Polyphemic utterance. The sheer magnitude of the thing, as I shall want to argue in this essay, is part of its essence, not in the sense that the twenty volumes of the 1980 *New Grove* expressed the enlargement of the musical world from the purview of white, Anglo-Saxon musical interests to an unprecedented engagement with global musical culture, but rather in terms of one literate tradition *within* that culture. It is a massive act of retrieval at a moment when, for Taruskin at least, the classical music day is all but done. The ‘number-one postulate’ of this retrieval is that ‘the literate tradition of Western music is coherent at least insofar as it has a completed shape. Its beginnings are known and explicable, and its end is now foreseeable (and also explicable).’³

These confident (but not crowing) assertions can’t be verified insofar as the future is concerned, but they obviously inform Taruskin’s attempt to write ‘a true history’ of

² In terms of Irish musical scholarship, this trend is perhaps exemplified by the preparation of an *Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, which is due to be published by UCD Press in 2009. The general editors of this project are Barra Boydell and the present writer.

³ 1: xxiii. My recourse to imagery drawn from the libretto of Handel’s *Acis and Galatea*, in which the giant Polyphemus tries (unsuccessfully) to woo Galatea, is prompted by the sheer size of Taruskin’s text in which the ‘ample strides’ of this massive engagement, by comparison with previous single-author histories, do not necessarily ensure a correspondingly greater degree of success. To be fair to Taruskin and to myself, I make this point only because Taruskin (as noted above) makes much the same point in respect of his predecessors.

western music. In this respect, too, the sense of an ending looms, but so also does a conviction, justified or otherwise, that Taruskin, with his 'hundred reeds of decent growth' (or more prosaically, his four thousand pages of text), can win the fair Galatea (or less allusively, understand the true course of classical music) where mere mortals have failed. Things do not work out so well for Polyphemus (or for Galatea, it must be said), but the magisterial scale of Taruskin's encounter does seem to be connected, from the very first page, to his own sense of being the first ('and perhaps the last') true chronicler of a nearly defunct tradition, unfettered by the burdens of German musicological orthodoxy.⁴

Because this orthodoxy is variously described by Taruskin at the outset as 'senseless', 'pernicious' and 'preposterously overrated', it only seems fair to add that these strident dismissals are not characteristic of the text as a whole.⁵ In a reading which brilliantly identifies the *maxima culpa* of historicism in general and German historicism in particular, as a dominant (if not intransigent) condition of European reception history, Taruskin's abrasive preliminaries are eclipsed by two things in particular. One is his astounding erudition, whereby the analysis of individual musical works is foregrounded to a highly significant degree; the other is the sheer generosity and breadth of his narrative engagement (within the domain of the literate tradition). These are qualities which do much to palliate certain omissions. These omissions do not in themselves redeem the chronicle from its tendency to substitute one 'master narrative' (which we might call 'the perils and pitfalls of historicism') for another (which Taruskin authoritatively and comprehensively identifies as historicism itself). Throughout these volumes, there is a massive *cantus firmus* which grumbles below the text or suddenly surfaces in vehement insistence upon the determinism and elitism of German musical thought. It is hard to escape the impression that Taruskin wants to 'tell it like it is', after centuries of obeisance (philosophical, social, political, artistic) before the hegemony of German idealism. Even if one had read nothing else by him, I think it fair to suggest that this impression is carried forward throughout *The Oxford History of Western Music*.

It is an impression that arises naturally and easily from the discourse of recent musicology (new or otherwise) at least insofar as the autonomy of musical works is

⁴ See 1: xxii ff., in which this history is offered as an 'interrogation' of the literate tradition emancipated from the canonical authority of German models of writing music history.

⁵ The last of these terms is applied to Adorno and the 'gross errors' of the New Musicology; Dahlhaus's 'pernicious' influence is based on a 'veritable salad of empty binarisms', and so on. See 1: xxv-xxviii.

concerned. There is no need to rehearse this discourse here, except to remark that in this essay, I will be contemplating Taruskin's partial recourse to it from a particular point of view, namely the challenge of writing a different kind of musical history where the autonomy of musical works is much less relevant than it otherwise might be, simply because there are so few works to consider.⁶ When, very early in his historical narrative, Taruskin identifies reification as a cardinal expression of the autonomous concept (and one moreover that he feels compelled to discount before the invention of staff notation), one is forcibly struck not by the anachronism which he wishes to establish (and warn against), but by the sheer prodigality of musical works which he nevertheless surveys. It is perhaps less axiomatic to me than it is to Taruskin that 'music only became autonomous when it stopped being useful':

And yet the divine service was after all human activity, and the music that both accompanied this activity and gave it shape was a music that functioned in symbiosis with a social framework as yet undivorced from daily life. A lot of music is still like that; we call it 'folk'.⁷

In this passage, Taruskin is referring to Frankish additions to the Roman chant and to highly elaborate tropes, and also to melismatic settings of the Mass Ordinary (in addition to much else) which date from the ninth and tenth centuries. I don't even begin to understand the relationship between these elite musical settings (elite in the simple sense of belonging to a literate and privileged clergy) and 'folk' music (however generously we might define the latter). From *whose* 'daily life' were these sophisticated ornaments and conduits of liturgy 'as yet undivorced'? Nor can I concede that the liturgical function of the chants deprives them of autonomy, even if I can immediately understand why their transmission in elaborate, novel and carefully protected manuscripts enhances that autonomy and even increases it. To invoke a cardinal insistence of Taruskin's own making: 'there is nothing *a priori* to rule out both/and rather than either/or...'.⁸ In this instance, that is strikingly true. It does not

⁶ Insofar as my own work on music in Ireland has any relevance to this reading of Taruskin, I would say that the astonishing plurality, centrality and continuity of musical works which Taruskin surveys and discusses stands in marked contrast to a cultural history such as Ireland's, in which literary works rather than musical ones enjoy a similar status and continuity. This is not to dispute the newfound prestige and status of the traditional arts in Ireland, only to compare like with like, insofar as the relationship between political authority and cultural identity is concerned. Ireland's verbally-dominated culture brings a different perspective to the prominence of art music in Europe, perhaps, than the one which is established in this study.

⁷ 1: 65.

⁸ 1: xxvii.

seem fallacious to identify the literate tradition as one in which autonomy and function coexist. That duality, as far as I can see, is what the invention of notation means.

This is not to deny the formal category of reification as an event in the history of philosophy, nor to argue against the more general historicism which reification helped to nurture in the dissemination of musical works in the late eighteenth century. It's just that the difference between formal categories and experience could scarcely be negotiated if one had to wait for a committee of German idealists to pronounce upon the nature of musical works when writing musical history. To impugn the motives of German romanticism and to negate the autonomous condition (however latent or partial) of Plainchant are not one and the same thing. Taruskin often seems to write as if they were. Such doctrinaire asides (in which the rhetoric of keeping it simple for the kids sits oddly with the adjacent depth of technical discussion) may be intended to substantiate the textbook value of Taruskin's work, but in any case their impact on me is otherwise.⁹ They fortify the impression that the whole narrative is intended not only to present the story of western music as it is meant to be told (in which the misreadings of earlier historians are duly corrected), but to indict the process of composition itself, once this has become an explicit agent of German historicism. By far the most perplexing (and compelling) aspect of this book is its intensive technical engagement with (and implicit celebration of) a literate tradition which it nevertheless constantly undermines. Although this tendency is notably increased from chapter 31 onwards (when the historicist villains come downstage), it is sufficiently a feature of the whole enterprise to call for comment here.

Even if it were still true that we live in a 'hopelessly literate day and age'¹⁰ (my impression, mildly speaking, is that it may be otherwise), we would be justified in

⁹ As an aside, it is unclear as to whether or not Taruskin's *magnum opus* (the term was practically invented for a book like this) can really function as a textbook. Its enormous size apart, the book wavers between the explanation of elementary terms and a formidably involved rhetoric of analysis and commentary that jars with occasional stabs at popular simplification. As Taruskin progresses, he frequently advises the reader to examine his analyses 'with score to hand'...so that the textbook tone is eclipsed by the deportment of a professor addressing senior undergraduates or graduate students. As a final observation on this matter, I would say that whereas the intellectual audacity (and verve) of this *History* compels admiration (and fruitful dissent), the notion of a 'soup-to-nuts' [1: xxxi] *textbook*, with so much commentary, analysis and historical narrative beholden to the perspective of a single author, has very little to recommend it. The whole book is written against the grain of such an outmoded orthodoxy.

¹⁰ 1: 123.

drawing attention to the fact that Taruskin's own narrative from the start depends on the notion of 'coherence' in respect of a literate musical tradition. This means in turn that it is the conceptual and expressive intelligence of notation itself which largely determines not only the transmission but frankly the realization (however hazardous and uncertain in the case of earlier periods) of western art music. Orally transmitted features remain secondary. Almost exactly the opposite (or converse) is true of traditional music, which largely falls beyond the domain of Taruskin's purview. But is it not at least reasonable to allow that traditional music confers a very different meaning on the literate tradition, especially where the former becomes a primary agent of expression in domestic, regional and national settings? Is it likewise unreasonable to suggest that the progressivism which Taruskin identifies as the *bête noir* of European and American art music after the French Revolution is an historical construction as well as a selfish gene which promoted the rich man's (and woman's) music? I raise such questions because the narrow template of historicism may not always satisfy Taruskin's own quest for a causal explanation in relation to those musical styles which he analyses throughout his text, and also because the *relative* meaning (or meanings) of art music in relation to folk music (whether or not through the medium of nationalism or any other germane social or political agent) is, to put it simply, more various and elusive than Taruskin's text might suggest.

Late in the first volume, Taruskin observes that:

The question thus raised—whether the history of art is an idyllic parallel history, a transcendent history that is separate from that of the (rest of the) world, or whether world history and art history are mutually implicated—has been the urgent subtext of this book from the very first page.¹¹

By now (which is to say in the first decade of the twenty-first century) it seems much less plausible to attach urgency to this question than might have been the case a generation ago. I cannot think of any musicologist who would credibly maintain that the history of classical music is unrelated to other kinds of history, or that musical works float about in a parallel world unconnected to the invasion of Iraq or the problems of global warming. But yes: the sea-change in musical studies within the past thirty years has meant that the questions that animate Taruskin do not originate with him, but with that whole seam of Anglo-American scholarship which radically departs from those traditions of 'style history' and 'analysis' upon which the history of art and the history of music were for so long related to one another. This intimacy is

¹¹ 1: 653.

no longer evident. If anything, the radical deconstruction of musical works promoted by the New Musicology has not only thrown analysis and style history into sharp (and sometimes defensive) relief, but forced the issue of music as an expression of political and social relations to such a degree that the authority of musical discourse has given way to an insistence upon value-free reception (what Julian Johnson has provocatively described as ‘cultural illiteracy’) which in turn has produced a notable polarization (as between analysis and musicology).¹² In short, the history of ideas which energizes Taruskin’s own work is not in conflict with the author’s insistence upon the social answerability of musical works. And *pace* the dismissal of Carl Dahlhaus, it is difficult to deny how much Taruskin owes to *Foundations of Music History* and *Nineteenth-Century Music*, if only because his own work so strikingly insists upon music as a vital expression of the history of ideas, and upon musical works as a nexus of social, political and aesthetic thought.

Subtexts and scare quotes

Taruskin’s work also insists on something else: the tendency, as he sees it, to construct musical history as a narrative of progressivism in which Josquin, for example, becomes a ‘surrogate Beethoven’ mainly on account of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ‘ideal[s] of personal liberation’.¹³ The problem with such an interpretation is that it succeeds in warning the reader against all errors but the author’s own. This is not to discount the value of assessing the pitfalls of historiography *per se* (Taruskin is explicit and unapologetic about his determination to do just that), but rather to enquire, ‘who will guard the guards themselves?’ Taruskin’s close reading of Josquin’s motet, *Ave Maria...Virgo serena* is characteristically juxtaposed with a painstaking account of its recent musicological reception, in which Edward Lowinsky’s fundamental claims for the significance of the piece are subverted by subsequent scholarship. Granted that this should have occurred, and granted, too, Taruskin’s own opinion that the piece ‘resonates...with...the influence of local, non-literate popular

¹² See Julian Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 77–9. Johnson gives emphasis to the intertextuality of musical works, without which the semantics of musical discourse in any given work cannot properly arise. He uses the term ‘cultural illiteracy’ to denote those critical approaches which simply flout (or are ignorant of) the intertextual references implicit in a given musical work. It is not too much to add that where a work is removed from its context or interpreted through the medium of an historically anachronistic phenomenon, its meaning is correspondingly diminished. Johnson points out that musical works are more vulnerable to this kind of *ad hoc* criticism than is literature or painting.

¹³ 1: 579.

genres', it is Taruskin's stylistic reading of the motet, together with his own scholarly disclosure of its contemporary reception (i.e., in the early-sixteenth-century parody mass) which is of much greater significance. This is because the deconstruction of earlier readings is itself immediately prone to further subversion, whereas the presentation and analysis of Josquin's music (in modern notation) carries forward the prevailing idea that the music, after all, justifies the history. The score (and the partbooks) reign supreme. The notes, of which Josquin is 'the Master' (and *that* comment is not an invention of historicism) endorse those very ideals of authorial control and technique which Taruskin identifies in such detail. In what sense can we usefully distinguish between Josquin's responsibility in such matters and his immediate reception in the sixteenth century? If the Middle Ages and the Renaissance deserve 'scare quotes', does Taruskin's reading likewise require such cautionary indications? 'But if *Ave Maria...Virgo serena* was an exemplary sixteenth-century composition, it was not Josquin who made it so, but the sixteenth century': Why cannot Taruskin see (or more likely, allow) that this would be true even if Josquin had written it on his deathbed?¹⁴

Another way of framing this question would be to investigate the difference in value (empirical value, aesthetic value, historical value) between immediate reception history (as in Glarean's reception of Josquin) and the master narratives (good or bad) of the modern historian. Here is an astonishing paragraph which promotes a master narrative of its own:

It is because commitment to high ideals, and the tendency to universalize them, can themselves shackle empirical perception and impede rational inference that we try to bring them to full consciousness and surmount them in our professional work. ... It is much easier to see how values become prejudices on the lower levels of scholarly work than at the higher ones. If, therefore, we raise our conceptual sights higher than before, it is in hopes of being freed to engage more directly with the perceptual materials of our trade (like manuscripts) and derive concepts from them (like the dates of their contents) with more confidence.¹⁵

I am not being disingenuous when I assert that I don't know how to 'raise our conceptual sights higher than before' (other than to express bewilderment that this

¹⁴ The discussion of *Ave Maria...Virgo Serena* extends over twenty pages (1: 565–84). Despite this detailed engagement, Taruskin does not really connect his internal analysis with his historical conclusions, not least because these conclusions are too general in nature: no work can attain exemplary status in any period without the benefit of an immediate reception history. Why this point needs to be laboured I cannot tell.

¹⁵ 1: 580.

seems to entail an equivalence between ‘concept’ and empirical information), but I can recognize the indictment of high culture which this paragraph expresses in the context of sixteenth-century musical elitism (Glarean) and Edward Lowinsky’s apparent commitment to a *Zeitgeist* reading of Josquin.¹⁶ Such an indictment comes dangerously close, in my view, to prescribing what ought to have been, rather than evaluating what was actually there. At issue here is not the mistaken perception of earlier historians, but the ‘mistaken’ trajectory of the music itself, insofar as it subscribed to a culture of social elitism and discrimination. As far as I can see, that is *exactly* what Josquin’s music did, along with almost everything else that survives of European art and architecture before the end of the eighteenth century. But to condemn this trajectory under the flag of ‘empirical perception’ seems to me an egregious misdirection.

This problem becomes even more pronounced as Taruskin approaches the middle of the eighteenth century. In this matter, his reading of Bach is of serious account. Bach is presented not merely as the purveyor of an elitist musical culture but an ‘antihumanist’ one, a culture which expresses contempt not only for human hierarchies and power relations but which confirms Bach’s pre-Enlightenment abhorrence of ‘social justice, reasoned discourse and personal integrity’. If that seems a harsh reading of Lutheran orthodoxy, consider the following gloss on a tenor aria from BWV 178, *Wo Gott der Herr nicht bei uns hält*:

...we have every reason to assume that he [Bach] believed not in freedom, equality, and human institutions of justice as saving forces in the world, but in faith and God’s grace—as we may learn from a harrowing tenor aria, ‘Schweig nur, taumelnde Vernunft!’ (‘Shut up, stumbling reason!’) from Cantata BWV 178, composed in Leipzig in the summer of 1724. The text is a paraphrase of a verse from a sixteenth-century hymn. Past the first line the message of the text is one of comfort, but Bach is fixated on that fierce and derisive opening line—indeed on just the opening word. Out of it he builds practically the whole first section of his *da capo* aria, crowding all the rest into a cursory and soon superseded middle section.

Over and over the tenor shrieks, ‘Schweig nur, schweig!’ leaping now a sixth, now a seventh, now an octave. (Ex. 26–13). Meanwhile, the accompanying orchestra, Reason’s surrogate, reels and lurches violently. The effect is nothing short of terrifying—perhaps even more now than in Bach’s own time, since we who remember the twentieth century have greater reason than Bach’s contemporaries ever had to wince at the sound of a high-pitched German voice stridently shouting reason down.¹⁷

¹⁶ The paragraph cited here comes on foot of a discussion of Lowinsky’s dating of this composition and the subsequent revision (with its historic consequences) proposed by a younger scholar, Thomas Noblitt.

¹⁷ 2: 368–9.

I don't feel 'phobic revulsion'¹⁸ when I read this kind of thing, but by the time the Nazis show up in that last sentence my credulity has reached breaking point. Easily the most disturbing passage in the whole five volumes of text (at least to me), I cite it here because it illustrates *in extremis* what can happen when one master narrative replaces another. The crowning glory of *The Oxford History of Western Music* lies in the integrity of its descriptive and analytic engagement with so much music. This makes the passage here seem all the more wilful a distortion, beginning with the translation of the opening phrase as 'Shut up...'¹⁹ and building on that provocation to misrepresent the anguish of the vocal writing, and the symmetry and sequential reassurances of the ensemble, all of which is easily disclosed in the very example to which Taruskin refers. I don't know when I have ever read a more complete contradiction in prose of a musical composition. The only possible motivation that I can imagine for this is to confirm Bach's more general 'undermining of human agency' in contrast to his recall to 'active cultural duty' by German nationalists in the nineteenth century.²⁰ I don't much mind that this reading is not my own, and that the questions Taruskin asks about Bach's historical responsibility seem to me to apply at every level of reception, artistic and otherwise, to *all* publicly transmitted musical works.²¹ I don't even mind that the author can say that 'the problem of the anti-Semitic message in the St. John Passion...would never have become a problem had Bach never been revived' even though this seems to me both a dangerous exaggeration of Bach's anti-Semitism (in the sense that National Socialism neither requires nor deserves this antecedent) and a confusion of two levels of reception history (insofar as the anti-Semitism of German states in the late eighteenth century is an integral and problematic issue for historians, irrespective of whether or not the music is revived afterwards in public performance). But I do mind that Bach's imaginative autonomy, his cerebral engagement with musical forms that far exceed their social or religious purpose, and his generic extremism should be collectively construed as an arch example of historicism. To suggest that it was the historic perspective of (German) romantic nationalism which 'vouchsafed the [St John Passion's] survival' seems just as wide of the mark as Burney's identification of 'all unmeaning art and contrivance' as a

¹⁸ The term used by Taruskin to describe the reaction of a specialist to his sections on Bach (1: xxxiii).

¹⁹ 'Schweig nur' might be more reasonably translated as 'Be quiet'. To describe the orderly sequence of motives in the orchestra (which in part doubles the voice) as something which 'reels and lurches violently' is especially misleading (and perplexing).

²⁰ 2: 374ff.

²¹ See the passage headed 'Cursed Questions' (2: 389-90)

permanent obstruction to Bach's reception, cited at the beginning of this essay.²² Burney's Enlightenment position, which to an extent Taruskin adopts, gives us some idea what the late eighteenth century thought of Bach; therein lies its chief historical value. It neither demeans Burney nor devalues the role of historicism in this book to add that our current reception of Bach may be unrelated to (or in spite of) the influence of German romantic nationalism. Burney would have preferred a Bach in keeping with the taste of his judges; Taruskin likewise reads the composer's demands on his performers either as outright contempt or 'the undermining of human agency'. But neither of these readings prevents us from constructing other contexts for Bach which are no less responsible (perhaps even more responsible) to empirical evidence. I must resist the temptation to construct one here, other than to remark that the extremism of Bach's imagination, when judged against the production of his contemporaries, can legitimately represent a degree of autonomy which strikingly contradicts a more general discourse of musical servitude in the early decades of the eighteenth century. Rather than invest Bach with anti-Enlightenment tendencies before the fact, I would sooner construct a musical *status quo* which situates Bach's deliberate exhaustion of musical genres (and styles) in the context of contemporary norms, as these obtain (for example) in Vienna and London. But that really is another day's work.²³

The iron rule of romanticism

I wish this book, in its historical asides, were more subjunctive in tone, but in any case it comes as a relief to discover that the immanence (and invention) of historicism solicits from Taruskin a much milder and more dispassionate engagement than the chapter on Bach would lead one to expect. Perhaps this is because the historicism speaks for itself so loudly and abundantly in Beethoven (no retrospective application

²² See 2: 390. Even if we were to concede that Mendelssohn's revival of the Bach passions was primarily an explicit act of German romantic nationalism (something which few scholars would want to maintain), the survival of the work has, self-evidently, nothing to do with its function in such a context and everything to do with its aesthetic, expressive and structural impact as a musical work, then and now.

²³ There is no doubt that as a musical work travels through time it acquires a lot of baggage along the way (as in the case of Bach's rehabilitation through the agency of German idealism). But the cultural significance which attaches to music can, I think, be distinguished from its (later or earlier) aesthetic impact, as the case may be. Although the purview of history allows us to make comparisons (between composers who are contemporary with each other) which would otherwise be unavailable, this does not in itself invalidate style history as a species of cultural history. The safeguard of 'cultural illiteracy' is justly invoked in such cases.

of historicism is necessary). Nor is it surprising that the advent of Beethoven coincides with the beginnings of public concert life in London which is specifically ‘devoted to the work of dead composers’. No-one could reasonably dispute this moment as the one in which canonic formations truly get underway, even if one might pause at the suggestion that it was this which ‘killed off the busy music marketplace, with its premium on spontaneous public invention’.²⁴ Given that Haydn’s subscription concerts ‘symbolized the nascent democratization of high art’ at just this time, and that he and Mozart ‘move an audience through representations of its own humanity’ (in a notably benign reading which enlists this moving phrase from Wye Allanbrook on several occasions), it is hard to agree with Taruskin that the literate tradition took hold as a democratized model of public engagement at the expense of oral musical culture.

It is a striking feature of Taruskin’s Mozart and Haydn chapters that their music and his ideological critique seem to be in harmony. At the close of an especially fine engagement with the late Haydn symphonies, Taruskin concludes that ‘the more consistent and rigorous the thematic process, and the more adventurous the tonal range, the more one is left with in one’s heart.’²⁵ I think Taruskin means the heart of the contemporary listener. But this conclusion begs the question as to how musical works behave in history and how we might separate our own response to them from their immediate reception history. It is a question that perhaps can never be satisfactorily resolved, but in this book there are moments when aesthetic interpretation and the empirical results of writing history seem to be merged. If one wants subsequently to separate these two modes of engagement, does one impugn the validity of Taruskin’s readings? A passage on *The Magic Flute* can illustrate this problem:

Sarastro...expresses the opera’s humanistic creed in the purest, most exalted sacerdotal manner (Ex. 28–7b). George Bernard Shaw, the famous British [sic] playwright, worked in his youth as a professional music critic. Perhaps his most famous observation in that capacity pertained to this very aria of Sarastro’s [*In diesen heil’gen Hallen*], which he called the only music ever composed by mortal man that would not sound out of place in the mouth of God. That is as good a testimony as any to the hold Mozart has had over posterity, but it is also worth quoting to reemphasize the point that such sublime music was composed for use in a singspiel, then

²⁴ 2: 639 and 637–9 on the larger question of ‘museum culture’.

²⁵ See especially 2: 555–88; the observation quoted here is on p. 588.

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thought (because it was sung in the German vernacular) to be the lowliest of all operatic genres. That was in itself a token of Enlightened attitudes.²⁶

Before commenting on this reading, let me set beside it Ivan Nagel's comment on the same aria from *Autonomy and Mercy. Reflections on Mozart's Operas*, published in English translation in 1991:

Anyone who as a child listened to the 'Hallen' aria sung by the Reich's basses Strienz, Hann, Weber in broadcasts from unholy national memorial halls, offering 'strength through joy' to a murderously triumphant *Wehrmacht*, will never again hear that tune without anguish or shame.²⁷

Nagel doesn't say that Mozart is a proto-Nazi or that the music *per se* enacts an unreason which induces shame (because this unreason infects his childhood memories of the 'Hallen' aria performed in the service of Nazi propaganda). He expresses anguish because the music now carries within itself the memory of this abuse. The music has the power to summon the memory.

Taruskin (thankfully) doesn't say that Mozart is a proto-Nazi either, but he does, so to speak, put Enlightenment 'scare quotes' around the word 'sublime' to emphasize Bernard Shaw's apotheosis of sublimity which itself stems from the low/high contrast between the loftiness of the aria and the lowliness (indeed the humanity) of its original setting. But no matter how much common ground we might seek between Shaw, Nagel and Taruskin, the music will always remain vulnerable to (and potentially expressive of) contexts that reinforce the autonomy of the work itself. Which is to say: a Mozart aria can (and does) exist in history at multiple levels of meaning, all of which affirm the common denominator of the musical work as a self-standing agent (whatever its self-evident dependencies might be). Perhaps notation, as with tonality itself, might be advanced explicitly as a 'cognitive universal' within the classical music tradition, if only because this autonomy far transcends its local function as an expression *par excellence* of German idealism.

I dwell on this because after 1400 pages of music history, a substantial part of which is given over to the detailed scrutiny of notational forms and individual musical works, it seems a bit rich to invoke the flippant assertion (attributed to Dahlhaus) that,

²⁶ 2: 481. In passing, it may be of some interest to readers of this journal to note that the Irish presence in this *History*, invariably modest, is also a little bit wayward. Thus Bernard Shaw (as above), is British, Tom Moore is Irish, Edmund Burke is 'English', Hamilton Harty is 'English' and *Messiah* was first given in the 'Chapel at the Foundling Hospital, Dublin'.

²⁷ Ivan Nagel, *Autonomy and Mercy. Reflections on Mozart's Operas*, translated by Marion Faber and Ivan Nagel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 29.

prior to Beethoven, musical scores were *a mere recipe for a performance*.²⁸ Not all the cadential fermatas in Mozart laid end to end come close to justifying this sweeping assertion, to say nothing of the literate tradition as a whole prior to Beethoven. To acknowledge a local and well-defined instance of musical autonomy in Vienna at the beginning of the nineteenth century (as in Beethoven's music) is surely not to forbid any cognizance of it elsewhere (in Bach, for example) except under the tyranny of intellectual conformism of the worst kind. And likewise, I find it difficult to see how the museum culture of nineteenth-century musical life in Europe represents anything more sinister than a characteristically romantic progression from church to concert hall which bears out that definitive trajectory from religious to spiritual experience in European literature and music (for 'Beethoven' read 'Wordsworth').²⁹ Taruskin's account of Beethoven is a magnificent performance (although I suspect many will challenge it) especially in its sovereign allusions to Napoleon and its trenchant preference for public (as against private) modes of musical expression. But we are never far from a provocation:

One listens to a movement like this [the first movement of the *Eroica* symphony] with a degree of mental and emotional engagement no previous music had demanded, and one is left after listening with a sense of satisfaction only strenuous exertions, successfully consummated, can vouchsafe.³⁰

It isn't the implication that Beethoven is better than (or as good as) sex that provokes, but the proposition that no music before Beethoven requires the same level of intellectual or emotional engagement. Or has Taruskin momentarily succumbed to the

²⁸ Cited in 2: 650.

²⁹ Dare one ask, in the *sotto voce* of a footnote, why there exists such vehement disdain for the 'concert hall as museum' among musicologists? What terrible crime is being committed there? What injury is perpetuated against the human spirit, in these warm, well-appointed (or comfortably air-conditioned) chambers of repression? What assaults on the post-revolutionary freedom of the individual are licensed in the interest of attending with due courtesy on the music? 'Heaven knows', the received wisdom seems to say, 'we shout and stamp as we please in all other walks of life, why not in the concert hall?' It is not politically correct, but socially intelligent, to resist the tyranny of this cant, which would impugn people who cherish the opportunity to hear music in optimum conditions on the basis that a couple of centuries ago their forbears did otherwise.

³⁰ 2: 668. This comment follows upon (and may even subvert) some fourteen pages of analysis and discussion of the movement, in which Beethoven's re-titling of the symphony is said to take the work 'beyond the level of representation into the realm of transcendental ideas.' (2: 656). Taruskin's analysis nevertheless shows that the music itself is a more persuasive (and plausible) agent of this progression than Beethoven's incensed abrogation of the original dedication to Napoleon.

myth he otherwise so patiently and passionately deconstructs? One wonders (in turn) whether Taruskin wants to winch the statue of Beethoven even higher so that *Kampf und Sieg* (struggle and victory) can come crashing to the ground along with the rest of the edifice. Whatever the explanation, Beethoven's impact on the 'national character' (those Nazis are just waiting in the wings again)³¹ is a matter for 'continued, and possibly unsettleable debate.'

To suggest that in these long post-Beethovenian days we still 'live under the iron rule of romanticism' is surely another matter.³² That is akin to saying that we all live under the iron rule of English grammar or the iron rule of lawn tennis or the iron rule of the New Musicology. But the rules of tennis can be changed. And nobody is forced to have sex with Beethoven. As Taruskin himself remarks, we are heirs to a musical culture which is 'ours to modify as we see fit'.³³ Does this new model of cultural ownership ('ours') entail *any* responsibility for its future preservation? If we are to judge by Taruskin's own acutely sensitive relations to Beethoven's late works, the answer is an imperative yes. A passage on the post-symphonic chamber music presses this home:

The intimacy of chamber music offered the composer the possibility of a heightened subjectivity, a medium where he could speak his inmost, private thoughts and confide his deepest private moods as if to a musical diary. There are pages in the late quartets that can seem almost embarrassing to hear in public, as if hearing were overhearing—eavesdropping on the composer's afflicted personal existence, invading his privacy...

Beethoven bequeathed to future composers of the romantic persuasion not only an esthetic purpose, and not only a general approach to instrumental music that invested it with 'voice', but an actual *topos* [the key of the flat submediant as a symbol of inwardness]. For a musical work may indeed point outside itself to another musical work, and after Beethoven, the work that failed to point to his colossal example was a rarity.³⁴

It is not only that the autonomy of musical works is here part of the historian's discourse (just as the explication of myths is the cultural historian's stock-in-trade, as in the 'Beethoven myth' itself) but that the prose in this passage seems to identify, almost to *identify with* those registers of intimacy and confessional privacy which

³¹ As in the following 'perilous' consequences of reception history: 'To the extent that it [Beethoven's music] exalted the representation of violence..., it could serve as justification for aggressive or even militaristic action.' (2: 670).

³² 2: 651.

³³ 2: 739.

³⁴ 2: 684-6.

Beethoven made his own. Even if this consideration yields to a recovery of the Beethoven-as-hero myth (the mourners at the graveside, the fusion of Napoleonic and Beethovenian models of struggle and victory), what finally distinguishes Taruskin's reading is a most remarkable synthesis of musical and cultural hermeneutics, exemplified by his analysis of the Fifth Symphony and the piano sonata in C minor (opus 111). What is most striking about this analysis—as with almost all of Taruskin's tonal readings—is the emphasis on harmonic thought. Contrapuntal and figurative designs are certainly engaged in abundance (not least in the controversial assertion of the 'conceptual damage' that fugal discourse inflicts on Beethoven's late sonata structures) but tonal harmony itself, most especially in terms of dramatic and structural design, remains paramount. Even where fugue becomes an agent of narrative discourse (in this case, Beethoven's withdrawal from the world), the tonal context of such fugal signifiers never fails to predominate.³⁵

These considerations of tonality and structure are especially important to Taruskin's own master narrative because they carry forward in his later chapters on German music and they underwrite, with impressive authority, his diagnoses of musical historicism. But it might have helped to widen the lens a little in respect of music after the French Revolution, rather than focus so dramatically on Beethoven's admittedly dominating presence in European musical affairs. It has often occurred to me that the ability of certain musical genres (symphony, opera and string quartet, to name three which feature prominently in Taruskin's narrative) to survive the social and political upheavals of revolutionary Europe must somehow be connected to their drastic reduction in number and corresponding increase in individual length in a remarkably short period of time. Haydn's 104 and Beethoven's nine symphonies are convenient instances. Does that twelve-fold reduction in individual symphonies signify anything, given the radical expansion of individual movements achieved by Beethoven? The further back one goes (to the early eighteenth century) the stronger is the impression that musical time expands as the century progresses, even as the number of musical works in any given genre sharply declines (from the mid-1750s to the 1780s and more sharply still from the 1790s into Beethoven's heyday).

Culture wars

This expansion of musical time (if such it is) would seem to characterize German and Austrian music more easily than any other in the nineteenth century (with Bruckner's

³⁵ See chapter 32, entitled 'C-Minor Moods. The "Struggle and Victory" Narrative and Its Relationship to Four C-Minor Works of Beethoven' (2: 691–739).

symphonies as the late confirmation of this tendency). It is a phenomenon which supports that reading of European music in the nineteenth century as a decisive polarization between German idealism and Italian entertainment. The Age of Beethoven and Rossini, in other words. As Taruskin points out, this antithesis was not an invention of scholarship (although it has flourished there) but an immediate, one might say instinctual characterization of the difference between romantic sensibility and the lure of the footlights. Even if Taruskin can show that Rossini's techniques partly derive from Beethoven's (and he can), this does not mean that the resistance to German musical hegemony which Italian opera implicitly advanced (and which French music in the late nineteenth century self-evidently promoted) was founded upon 'an absolutely needless polarization of values'.³⁶ The cult of intimacy, introspection and instrumental sovereignty advanced by German musicians (and their intellectual peers) throughout the nineteenth century does indeed stand in vital contrast to the public adulation and diva-worship of Italian opera in the same period, but this did not stop Rossini, as Taruskin points out, from achieving 'a prestige and authority that easily rivalled Beethoven's':³⁷ in either tradition, the composer looms larger and larger as the century moves on.

This being the case, it seems clear that the 'culture wars' which raged between Italian and German modes of musical thought if anything enhanced the position of music as perhaps the primary intelligencer of artistic engagement throughout continental Europe, an engagement which supervened even literature, given the international reach of genres which travelled easily between nations, traditions and ideologies. The ascendancy of German idealism, for example, did little (if anything) to stem the tide of opera as the definitive musical response to nineteenth-century realism in the novel; nor did it inhibit (if anything, the reverse) that collusion between national identity and musical genres which for so long defined the redevelopment of opera and symphony in the Czech lands and in Hungary. As Taruskin shows (by way of an adroit summary of Michael Beckerman's research) such ease of assimilation allowed Smetana to become a definitive Czech composer even as he 'remained adamant that a true national opera need not and should not rely on folk songs'.³⁸ More generally, when Taruskin relates Smetana's pictorial and narrative techniques not only to the 'New German School' and to Mozart, but also to Monteverdi, Chopin and Weber, he affirms, deliberately or otherwise, that continuity of musical discourse so dear to those

³⁶ 3: 22. Taruskin describes such polarizations as 'culture wars'.

³⁷ 3: 10.

³⁸ 3: 448.

who would proclaim the ascendancy of European art music as an outgrowth of German culture. It is not just that opera (at least in terms of reception history) all but fell silent in Germany until its vehement (and nationalist) recovery in Wagner, whereas it flourished in Italy and Bohemia. More fundamentally still, opera carried forward the creed of nationalism itself, and not only as a triumphant shibboleth of German domination in the arts. George Steiner's remark that 'in a society made inert by repressive authority, the work of art becomes the quintessential deed' deftly formulates the process by which essential (and essentialist) German and Italian musical genres were harnessed by avatars of nationalism across Europe, irrespective of the explicit intentions of individual composers.³⁹ And if we view this development from the perspective of a country in which art music had virtually no standing other than as an expression of precisely that 'repressive authority' (Ireland comes to mind), then it only seems fair comment to add that it was the central presence of music in the Habsburg dominions that was the ultimate source of Smetana's nationalism and that of his successors. The first performance of *Don Giovanni*, which took place not in Vienna but in Prague, is emblematic of that presence, but of course we could go much further back than that.⁴⁰

The history of something else

The third volume of Taruskin's book, devoted as it is to the nineteenth century, represents a decisive turn in the narrative insofar as the impact of historicism (and its most influential progeny, described here as 'estheticism') are confronted as agents in their own right. Although Taruskin cannot be accused of writing 'lives of the great composers' (biographical information is kept to a pertinent minimum throughout), one cannot escape the impression that sooner or later the big guns must be faced. In volume 3, these are (unsurprisingly) Wagner and Brahms. It is true that other composers enjoy extensive and far reaching assessments (Schubert, Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky, among many others) but Wagner in particular transcends the history of

³⁹ See George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle. Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 29.

⁴⁰ One thinks of the coronation opera *Costanza e Fortezza* given in Prague in 1723 ostensibly in celebration of the Empress Christine's birthday but plainly intended to mark the coronation of Charles VI as King of Bohemia. The consolidation of musical infrastructures across the Holy Roman Empire (or what remained of it) in the eighteenth century must be distinguished, I think, from the imposition (or more mildly, the importation) of musical traditions from outside. In Smetana's case, certainly, it is hard to detect any sense of 'exogamous' musical culture in his ready assimilation of Mozart in the formation of his own imaginative identity.

music in order to become a seminal figure who, along with Darwin and Marx, dominates the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries far beyond the domain of privilege and high art. In this regard, the projection of Wagner as the disseminator of 'ethnic nationalism' represents not only the influence of his operas and music dramas in the creation of Nazi Germany but more widely (and less controversially) the supreme status of music among the arts in Europe throughout the nineteenth century.⁴¹

This magisterial (and thereby vulnerable) reading of Wagner's afterlife (in political history no less than in art) does not lessen one whit Taruskin's appetite for direct engagement with the musical works themselves. On the contrary, the deeply felt (and closely argued) readings of the *Ring* and *Tristan* in particular lend compelling authority to the view that Wagner's musical imagination remained essentially conservative (the *Tristan* chord as a French sixth) and distinct from the aesthetic autonomy of twentieth-century art for which he was nevertheless responsible. But even a non-specialist may be induced to wonder at the trenchant convictions which about this view, given especially Taruskin's insistence that both Wagner's contemporaries and successors 'unavoidably and tendentiously' misunderstood him.⁴² In the aftermath of this argument, Taruskin's curious defence of Puccini (in which the charge of voyeuristic sadism nevertheless persists), leads to a central assertion which confers even further significance on this projection of Wagner as conservative and revolutionary all at once:

Puccini's treatment at the hands of historians is symptomatic of a general trend that merits study in its own right. That trend is the gradual divergence, over the course of the twentieth century, between the repertoire, the musical works actually performed for—and 'consumed' by—the 'contemporary listener' and what is often called the 'canon', the 'body of works (or the pantheon of composers) that are considered worthy of critical respect and academic study. That divergence, in which the history of music becomes not the history of music performed but the history of, well, something else, is the result of 'historicism', the intellectual trend first described in chapter 40, according to which history is conceived in terms not only of events but also of goals. In the case of music these goals have chiefly pertained to the 'disinterested' advancement of style, a concept that depends on German esthetic philosophy (for the notion of 'disinterestedness'), but also—quite circularly—on the narrative techniques of history itself (for the notion of advancement).

Accordingly, the historiography of music in the twentieth century has been fundamentally skewed, on the one hand, by the failure of actual events to conform to the purposes historicists

⁴¹ See in particular the assessment of Wagner's wider position in nineteenth-century thought in 3: 479–90; Wagner's 'crucial role' in the promotion ethnic nationalism occurs on p. 480.

⁴² 3: 562.

have envisioned, and on the other, by the loyalty not only of many historians but also of many greatly talented and interesting composers to historicist principles.⁴³

I am not sure that this last sentence is music history, but I am fairly certain that it represents the heart of the matter as far as Richard Taruskin is concerned. Coming as it does at almost exactly midpoint in his text, one is tempted to suggest that not only the Wagner chapter but all of the first three volumes are in some sense a preparation for the massive indictments that will follow. These volumes are almost akin to Wagner's (subsequent) composition of the texts of the first two dramas of the *Ring* as an essential prelude to *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. The bittersweet dissonance between repertory and the canon of musicological good taste is Taruskin's *Tristan* chord, and it heralds the debate that rings through volumes 4 and 5. The gods of German idealism will falter at its sound.

But the indispensable distinction between repertory and canon offered in this passage is not new; it is no longer even controversial, and may in fact be a little out of date, to judge by the roaming brief which the New Musicology has enjoyed over the past twenty years. If the writing of music history has been 'fundamentally skewed' as a result of this adherence to an intellectualized code of canonic inclusion and exclusion (so that Schoenberg's music, for example, is the very heartland of analytic discourse even as most of it languishes unperformed, while Puccini packs the opera house but empties the conference room), this does not itself mean that composition has likewise fallen off the track. Even if we might establish that most composers between 1890 and 1950 somehow were full-blooded disciples of historicism, there is something odd about confusing the prestige of serialism (for example) with the pressures of contemporary history. There are much better explanations than that, and they abound in the fourth and fifth volumes of this study. I also think—for what it may be worth—that the musicological canon is not as uniform as Taruskin seems to believe, and I have no doubt that the repertory is likewise much less definite. The complete exclusion of Elgar's music from this *History* is a case in point.⁴⁴

⁴³ 3: 665.

⁴⁴ The curious thing about Elgar's exclusion is that he belongs to that comparatively rare group of composers who belong both to the (musicological) canon and the international repertory. And even if that were not the case, it is hard to understand why Taruskin should not consider Elgar's orchestral music at least in terms of the rehabilitation of the symphony (to which he devotes two substantial chapters in volume 3), if not in the context of British musical culture before and after the First World War. The almost total exclusion of Sibelius is equally puzzling, if for different reasons.

One illustration of the repertory/canon divide which is perhaps better placed to avoid the solecism of usurping one master narrative with another, is touched upon by Taruskin at the end of his Puccini chapter. The proposition that films 'are the operas of the twentieth century' is there to affirm that those impulses excluded from the canon found an outlet nevertheless in (Italian) cinema.⁴⁵ One would wish this to be more fully explored, if only because musicology has been slow to acknowledge music for cinema (especially American cinema) as the pre-eminent domain it surely ought to be. Given, for example, the prominence which music enjoys in the narrative and structural intelligence of cinema, and given the predominance of cinema as the most prolific and widely accessible art form of the twentieth century, it seems regrettable that film music continues to occupy the specialist but finds only peripheral attention in a study such as this one. Granted that Taruskin has had to omit much from his purview (the musical is another striking *lacuna*), the gulf that currently exists between the production of music for film and its critical reception (which is another version of the repertory/canon divide) seems especially wide in this case.

The naked ear

By the time he reaches the twentieth century, it is abundantly clear that the narrative condition of tonality and the modernism which engulfed it will generate the conflict that animates much of the fourth and fifth volumes of Taruskin's study. It is an admittedly complex story: Mahler's position, for example, as 'the emancipated, urbanized Jew' becomes emblematic of modernism when viewed from the perspective of reactionary nationalists (following Wagner's Anti-Semitic invective), but modernism itself seems here to embrace too many contradictory elements to function with the same binding force as historicism does in the earlier volumes. Put plainly, it becomes a flag of convenience which is made to identify too many things. (If Richard Strauss is a modernist, it is certainly not in the sense that Ortega intended when he published his seven-point definition of the term in 1925; Strauss's 'misogynistic modernism', moreover, points to a history of 'bad women' in opera that goes all the way back to those ruthless girlfriends in *Così fan tutte*). If we allowed the repertory rather than the canon to be our guide, it does seem as if Strauss was very rapidly attached to the operatic *status quo*, notwithstanding the decadence of setting Oscar Wilde almost word for word. And not only that, but the human scale of his subject matter (at least in some cases) comes as a relief after the unbroken elevations of

⁴⁵ 3: 674.

Wagner, so that *Der Rosenkavalier* feels like a warm embrace with nothing of the hysteria, irony and alienation we associate with the expressionist theatre.

Hysteria, irony and alienation: they seem like watchwords for the modernist aesthetic, but they are insufficient to describe that vast topography of musical discourse which Taruskin presents in such high colours. The boldest division in this terrain is made between music written for its own sake and music which still admits of some degree of ethical value and public responsibility. It is the scale (and tenacity) of this discrimination which underwrites Taruskin's reading of twentieth-century music from Schoenberg to the Rolling Stones, so that one comes to associate composers with one camp or the other as the narrative gets into its stride. Perhaps the biggest surprise in this regard, and certainly the most instructive one, is Taruskin's damning indictment of Stravinsky. Here, certainly, the division of responsibilities between critic and historian (identified in the introduction to the first volume) is at its sharpest, and it is Stravinsky's vehement self-interest, opportunism and 'de-humanizing' tendencies which hold and horrify. In a rare moment of agreement, Taruskin appears to endorse Adorno's reading of *The Rite of Spring* as a 'great strip-down from culture to nature, from individual reflection to collective action, from psychology to automatism, ultimately from humanism to biologism.'⁴⁶ These intimations of fascism—which are pursued and ruthlessly exposed by Taruskin in subsequent chapters—cast a decisive shadow over Stravinsky's immense standing as a formative influence in twentieth-century musical thought. To write music in the decades after *The Rite* which 'completely sacrificed sincerity to irony'⁴⁷ was to endorse a fundamental contempt for composition as a means of extra-musical engagement, humane or otherwise. When Taruskin cites Stravinsky's chilling disavowals of meaning ('I consider that music is only able to solve musical problems; and nothing else, neither the literary nor the picturesque, can be in music of any real interest'), the writing is on the wall.⁴⁸ When these disavowals come in the historical context of Stravinsky's enthusiasm for Mussolini, the wall itself is covered in ignominy.

To say the least of it, such indictments do not apply to Schoenberg, whose (predictably) negative assessment here is nevertheless buttressed not only by acutely perceptive analyses but also by a characteristically ethical consideration of Schoenberg's enormous prestige among composers (beginning, self-evidently, with his

⁴⁶ 4: 189.

⁴⁷ 4: 471.

⁴⁸ 4: 490.

students) by contrast with his exceptionally limited transmission in performance. Taruskin concedes to Schoenberg a profoundly extra-musical (and socially utopian) motivation for his 'breakthroughs' but I am not sure that everyone will sympathize with his insistence that the serialism he invented can simply be regarded as an 'option.' Taruskin accordingly declares that the collapse of tonality is a 'myth' and that music historians have unwittingly taken this error over from one generation to the next.⁴⁹ But I think that this correction is undone by the music which Taruskin advances for scrutiny, written long before Schoenberg sought to emancipate the dissonance. We might as well suggest that Russian communism was a myth, on the grounds that it co-existed (as an 'option') with other, older models of political and social organization. In any case this historical revisionism doesn't sit well with Taruskin's general argument, which is that serialism begot an ideal mode of late musical modernism in which the template of mathematical exactitude emancipated new works from any obligation to engage (socially, paralinguistically, extra-musically) with an audience. At either extreme of modernism (the neoclassical, the serial), the autonomy of the work and the commendation of one's peers supervened any other consideration. In a brilliant aside, Taruskin remarks that 'prestige attaches itself more readily to the esoteric than to the popular. It has been the lonely modernist's chief consolation, and it has been as avidly sought by some as social acceptance has been sought by others.'⁵⁰ for the modernist composer, certainly, tonality became the most untenable myth of the lot.

Not so with a host of others, and this is the chief strength of Taruskin's argument. Assertive and provocative as Taruskin often is, he is never crude and simplistic. This is especially true of a delicate thread which weaves together the proposition that audible structure, the cognitive universal of tonality and a humane engagement with music as a mode of communication remain of paramount interest throughout the travails of modernism to Bartók, Janáček, Shostakovich and Britten. Not only to these, of course, but the composers listed here are the principal witnesses for the defence of music as a conduit of extra-musical intelligence and feeling in the twentieth century. (Insofar as serial music admits of extra-musical meaning in this account, it tends to connote precisely those elements of hysteria, irony and alienation which we associate more generally with modernism. That is why, for example, Taruskin locates 'serial' music as a standard trope for the conveyance and recognition of mental disorder in American

⁴⁹ See 4: 359–60.

⁵⁰ 4: 444.

cinema, no less than in the operas of Alban Berg.)⁵¹ These historical judgements (humanists, as it were, lined up against elitists, and social consensus against societies 'for the private performance of music') are never advanced in isolation from pretty formidable technical engagement with individual musical works that promote the expressive autonomy of a composer's voice, as when Bartók's ideals of social consensus are juxtaposed with intensive scrutiny of the same composer's axial harmony and 'octatonic interactions'. But as Taruskin's analysis of *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste* makes clear, these systemic complexities are never allowed to submerge the narrative function, audible structure and contrapuntal discourse which comprise Bartók's habitual sense of musical engagement. The fugue in *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste* is an exemplary illustration of precisely this compositional hierarchy, which favours at every turn the notion that compositional technique and formal structure such as fugue and sonata are fundamentally tonal and cannot be otherwise 'heard'. Likewise, when Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony and its successors are read as 'the secret diary of a nation',⁵² we can see that such a description is derived not only from historical circumstance but from the aesthetic impact of the composer's technique. The two things go together. Whatever historical meaning may accrue to such works, the 'naked ear'⁵³ (and not the mathematical eye) must be satisfied.

The problem with this reading is that the history of twentieth-century music becomes (in significant part) a history of mathematical abstraction undone by the human warmth and communicative reach of tonal discourse. A tiny, transient moment in *Wozzeck*, in which an utterance of (proverbially) Christian compassion comes to rest on a dominant seventh chord, elicits from Taruskin the suggestion that 'Berg has turned his irony on his own 'normal' [i.e., serial] musical language, which is now paradoxically branded as abnormal or subnormal in its distance from true human feeling'.⁵⁴ This seems to me to overstate the case, but the same sentences more easily apply to the Bach chorale *Es ist genug* when it appears in the Violin Concerto. And

⁵¹ 4: 520: 'The reason why audiences respond to *Wozzeck* "despite" its atonal language turns out to be the same as the reason why atonal music has become popular in film soundtracks as a representational device. Audiences understand it in both contexts as a metaphor for physical or psychological abnormality: it symbolizes stress, aberration, horror.

⁵² 4: 796.

⁵³ Taruskin uses this phrase ('the naked ear') to distinguish between the inaudible structure of atonal music and its nevertheless pellucid disclosure through analysis. 4: 700.

⁵⁴ 4: 511.

tonality won't always save the day. In a discussion of music in totalitarian society, Taruskin selects one of only two musical examples which I found utterly inexplicable throughout the whole study. In this instance it is an excerpt, extending over five pages, from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. As Taruskin demonstrates, this glamorous exercise in fascist populism takes its cue from Stravinsky (*quelle surprise*) but having read Taruskin's analysis I cannot understand why the tonal and modal intelligibility of this work should require such puzzlement and extensive commentary. When Taruskin remarks that 'If Bach and Beethoven could not prevent Nazi barbarity it is hard to claim that Orff could have inspired it' he not only invents a problem that scarcely exists (if at all) but overlooks one that is staring him in the face.⁵⁵ The very evidence he adduces is sufficient to attest that Orff's music *celebrates* Nazism in ways which compare very closely to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* or the massed displays which that film so vividly captures. Fascist trash is surely not to be countenanced because it is effective, imaginative and boldly conceived? Or perhaps I miss the point. How or why Orff should deserve a 'defence' is beyond me, even if the tonal power of the music is no less audible to me now than it was to people in Germany (a mere) seventy years ago.⁵⁶ It's right up there with the *Horst Wessel Lied* for stirring the blood. Perhaps we should give that an outing as well.

The emancipation of noise

Taruskin glosses the relationship between music and totalitarianism with far more assurance in Russia, as the brilliant chapters on Shostakovich attest. These exegeses additionally produce the effect of wanting to hear more on Rachmaninov and Prokofiev, if only because their music so successfully meets that acid test of public engagement which Taruskin sets throughout these later volumes. Early in volume 4 there is a compelling address on the Great War and the massive disenchantment with romanticism that it induced, but even this does not wholly explain the enduring popularity of Russian composers in particular who sustained the composer-performer model of mid-nineteenth-century music for long after it had been abandoned elsewhere.

Many readers may feel that the fifth (and final) volume of Taruskin's study overprivileges American music, even if its treatment of jazz is modest. There is, moreover, no real acknowledgement of American musical theatre or any effort to relate this ebulliently successful tradition to European operetta, its well-established

⁵⁵ 4: 765.

⁵⁶ 4: 764-5.

progenitor. No: in this history, America rivals and often exceeds Europe in its claim upon the 'literate tradition', so that the fifth volume is structured around two massive contrasts as between Milton Babbitt and John Cage in the first instance and Elliott Carter and Benjamin Britten (England, at last) in the second. It would be unfair to Taruskin to suggest that the book suddenly becomes an *Oxford History of American Music* (I feel sure one is on the way even as I write this), especially because Taruskin constantly emphasizes the intimacy between European and American modes of composition and the natural overlap between these two, but one still feels that so much space given to Ives (in volume 4), to Copland and to musicians domiciled in America inevitably attenuates the problem.

This American (over-)emphasis does however force the issue of historicism to its keenest point of exploration, so that the construction of a cold-war reading of total serialism in contrast to the ultramodernist hermeticism of John Cage provides an intelligible context which the history of twentieth-century music has long required. However prone to vigorous dispute, such a context at least recovers the precious thread between music and society in preference to ignoring history altogether except as an unthinking narrative of stylistic innovations.

Taruskin's reading of Babbitt and Cage will surely be ardently contested, but I cannot help noticing that he reserves his more vehement *j'accuse* for Cage, whose musical project is related to Schoenberg's 'emancipation of the dissonance' insofar as 'Cage now proposed to complete the job and emancipate noise'.⁵⁷ In terms which uncomfortably summon the indictment of Bach noted earlier, Cage's emancipation of noise is characterized with justifiable severity: in his music, 'the liberation of sound demanded the enslavement, indeed the humiliation, of all human beings concerned—composer, performer and listener alike—for it demanded the complete suppression of the ego.'⁵⁸ Even Boulez, whose own intransigence and technical extremism Taruskin reads as a flight from the nightmare of history, does not fare as badly as that.

The glass bead games of total serialism and the dehumanizing noise of composers like Cage and Xenakis (a curious alliance but one which is insisted upon here) become, in this history, the principal conduits of that phenomenon which George Steiner famously described as 'the retreat from the word' in the late 1950s. Steiner did not relate these 'flights from the neighbourhood of language' directly to the Cold War, but rather to the crisis in humane literacy and in the humanities at large which the Second

⁵⁷ 5: 56.

⁵⁸ 5: 62.

World War had decisively exposed.⁵⁹ Taruskin understands Elliott Carter's lustre as a composer as an expression of this crisis. In place of language and its betrayals, there is the promise of mathematics. In place of communication, there is an unassailable complexity of musical discourse. In place of the German masterwork, there is cold-war cerebralism. We see just how skewed Taruskin believes the history of music in the twentieth century has, as a consequence, become: 'Institutional, critical and corporate support made it possible for such artists [as Carter] to have outstandingly successful public careers in the virtual absence of an audience: a unique and perhaps never to be repeated phenomenon.'⁶⁰

When Taruskin adds that Carter was supported by the 'Congress for Cultural Freedom' in the early 1950s, an organization 'surreptitiously funded by the CIA', the cold-war connections are (uncomfortably) complete.⁶¹ Taruskin invokes a literary comparison to describe the way in which Carter's second String Quartet 'unfolds like a Samuel Beckett play, a colloquy of archetypal personalities who are basically oblivious of one another',⁶² but, dismal as this sounds, I'll bet there are more laughs in the Beckett. As with Boulez, the chief European architect of musical elitism and historicism in the second half of the twentieth century, Carter's complexity of utterance stands in ironic (and tense) contrast to his restricted, if not non-existent engagement with an audience.

But what might this audience be? This problem is larger than the historicism which has 'infected' (a favourite verb) twentieth-century music, so that even a composer like Britten, whose operas here represent a degree of reciprocity between artist and audience which serialism just as certainly disavowed, cannot stem the tide of disillusion on which the literate tradition drifts away. This book ends, by its own admission, 'in the middle of things', but not without a fair indication of where the future direction lies: in an increased commitment to that museum culture which shores up the ruins of a disgraced civilization, and in a quest for new forms of musical 'holiness' that might escape the burdens of history and privilege. Even the recovery of tonal discourse, poignantly adumbrated in this study by the singular pathos and intensely personal motivation which induced George Rochberg to abandon his position as an 'untroubled academic modernist' and write the second movement of his

⁵⁹ 'The Retreat from the Word' is published in *Language and Silence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965).

⁶⁰ 5: 295.

⁶¹ 5: 293–5.

⁶² 5: 296.

Third String Quartet with 'disconcerting sincerity', can seem to place in question the whole 'necessity' of twentieth-century music.⁶³

Not everyone will agree with this gloomy reading, but there are few who would contest that the plurality of twentieth-century musical discourse, whatever its historical origins, has radically reduced the prestige and reach of classical music in relation to the other arts, and most notably in relation to cinema and literature. These thrive, not as museum cultures of preservation and retrieval, but as universally acknowledged and self-renewing forms which maintain a narrative continuity with older forms (opera and cinema have been thus represented here) without having to abrogate one in favour of the other, and certainly without having to declare war on the prior condition of individual genres and modes of discourse. I don't myself subscribe to the theory of musical modernism as a dreadful mistake (modernism as a phenomenon akin to communism, so to speak) and I wouldn't wish to attribute this theory to Richard Taruskin either. But for a book that so often says the hitherto unsayable, this *History* draws back from pressing home its conclusions. Perhaps it is prudent to exercise such restraint, although prudence isn't a virtue much in evidence elsewhere. As soon as European social institutions (the Church, the State) released music from its primary obligation to serve something other than itself (a process which the French Revolution both hastened and confirmed), the endgame of ultimate irrelevance was inevitable. But for a very long time, all that could be seen of this process was the promise and growth of the romantic imagination.

This promise, realized in the cult of originality endemic not only to German idealism but to the whole romantic movement across Europe, can be regarded, as it is in this book, as a primary expression of historicism. The final result of such a reading, like it or not, is to affirm the integrity and autonomy of the musical work as defining characteristics of the literate tradition. Such an outcome is underpinned again and again by the sheer prominence of critical and analytical discourse throughout this study, so that the historical asides, and sometimes the historical conclusions, are frankly less impressive than the readings which precede them. The consequences of historicism do provide a very potent *Urthema* for Taruskin's narrative, but the narrative itself brings us back again and again to those fundamental rules of engagement which require that the musical work be regarded not as a value-free object, and not as a privileged domain of social indifference, but as a nexus through

⁶³ 5: 431: 'To write in an obsolete style as if it were not obsolete was to challenge the whole idea of stylistic obsolescence. And to challenge that idea was to put in question the "necessity" of the twentieth century's stylistic revolutions—the most sacred of all modernist dogmas.'

which a particular history of ideas is expressed in sound. If this book does nothing else, it affirms the autonomy of such works precisely on this account.

In *Untold Stories*, the English writer Alan Bennett relates that he received his first real music education as a teenager in the early fifties in Leeds Town Hall, where he attended the weekly concerts of the Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra. Sometimes he would see the musicians on the way home on the tram, and he realized that they were just like everyone else—shabbily dressed, and smoking. People who ‘half an hour ago, were artists and agents of the sublime’.⁶⁴ It’s a perceptive memory, because both sides of the equation are true. And it summons an experience of the kind which will endure long after the musical world has forgotten what it feels like to be Taruskinized.

⁶⁴ Alan Bennett, *Untold Stories* (London: Faber and Profile Books, 2005), 412.