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ASHGATE CONTEMPORARY THINKERS ON CRITICAL MUSICOLOGY SERIES

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Introduction

The fifteen essays collected in this volume span a number of years and address a wide variety of topics. Considered as a whole, they strive to forge a productive synthesis among pressing issues in philosophy and cultural studies, musicological methodology, and current music-theoretical practice. They are bound together by three persistent concerns. First, each in its own way addresses the labyrinthine problems associated with the task of exploring recoverable musical meaning in a sufficiently reflective, musically responsible manner. How is it, for instance, that we can come to believe that music means anything at all? For which overt or covert purposes might we wish to pursue or advocate on behalf of such connotations? (Within any piece there is typically no single meaning to be uncovered as one of its facts. What is at issue is our own, by no means disinterested, productions of such implications through the practice of hermeneutics.) Second, by way of example nearly all of them hope to demonstrate, against the dominant musicological currents of the 1990s and 2000s, that whenever substantial claims are to be grounded in the properties of individual compositions or passages, close and professionalized analyses should continue to be prominent features of our work. At least within the confines of the musicological field—even when that field pursues broadly interdisciplinary questions—consistently to downplay the advantages of such technical expertise is foolhardy, especially when adopted as a matter of professional principle. Any such minimization brackets out what is specifically musical from emphatically musical texts, shying away from a critical study of the socially constructed materiality, historicity, and traditions of the very language that preoccupied the composer as craftsman (for instance, in the labor of composition) and that attracted its listeners in the first place.[1] Third, and complementarily, most of the essays convey a skepticism about relying exclusively on received regimens of purely work-imminent analysis (in-place systems of music theory), seeking instead to suggest the benefits of combining them with new, more open categories of inquiry and interpretation. One of my aims has been to urge readers and listeners to hear long-familiar music in different ways. The point is not only to startle such texts awake but also to uncover latent, ideological aspects within them that can invite us to ask more provocative, more unsettling questions.

As is obvious to any reader, I wrote these studies at different stages of my own thinking. Like that of many of my generational colleagues in musicology and music theory, this has

1 It goes without saying that close technical analysis is not unalterably relevant to all areas of musicological inquiry. Also self-evident is that stimulating commentary and criticism can come from those from outside the field. The point is only that if a musicological study, addressed primarily to a professionalized readership, chooses to address the implications of (or the explication of) an individual work or passage, the sophistication of its music-technical expertise should be commensurate with that of its other procedures of inquiry.

undergone a series of metamorphoses—watershed jolts—out of the old disciplinary assurances in which we had been trained and into larger issues of cultural discourse and the production of meaning-effects. Assembling these scattered pieces for re-publication and browsing through them once again, I was reminded that I had written some of the earlier ones as "extra" studies, asides, that waded into what were my real interests of the time—broader, interpretive topics that lay outside of the expected boundaries of what then appeared to be my own areas of disciplinary specialization. In the 1980s, starting out a career with a freshly minted Ph.D. in hand (having completed a straight-arrow, empirical dissertation on "The Compositional History of Verdi's *Falstaff*"), most of my research and writing was absorbed with historical and analytical inquiries into Verdi's operas. In terms of the discipline's preformatted subject-categories at that time (largely concerned with uncovering new historical information or correcting longstanding errors about one's "great composer" of choice), I marketed myself as a Verdian, with all that that implied in terms of non-Germanic interests, musicological mentors and colleagues, corridors of academic circulation, and so on. In time and on schedule, this resulted in three small books and several articles, most of which stemmed from archival research and analytical commentary in tune with the dominant professional ethos of that decade: knowledge-production coupled with modest interpretation.

I now regard that Verdian work from the 1980s, none of which appears here, as a preparatory, professionally advantageous holding-ground that encouraged other, more challenging ideas to arise as potentially fertile provocations within it. What was needed was to break out of conventional disciplinary scripts. This entailed a rethinking of basic issues from square one, coupled with a resolution not to fall into one of the new, self-consciously combative but often musically shallow orthodoxies that were sprouting up on all sides. At least from this perhaps limited perspective, my work has sought to be radical, though not in the partisan-political sense, caught up in activist social agendas, but rather in the etymological one: trying to rethink to the root (*radix*) the most fundamental questions that we ask of music. From the start, this enterprise has been marked by an abiding wariness vis-à-vis the discipline's several conventional wisdoms and single-minded, entrenched factions—both old and new. As a result, each analytical study in this volume carries with it a demonstration of larger interpretive principles and modes of current, dialogical questioning, in part, self-reflexively, to problematize the act of interpretation. What happens to our studies of music when we try to wrest free from comfortable orthodoxies and begin to come to terms with the historical limitations on our own ability to produce adequate readings at all?

A start had already been made with the earliest article included here, which deals with the quasi-ritualistic significance of recurring opening-pattern gestures in Debussy, the staging of musical entryways into artificially sacralized, aesthetic spaces. Back in 1984, I wrote "Formulaic Openings" as an early-career experiment. It was a tentatively explored alternative to document-collection and the reigning concerns of Italian opera studies, and it put forward a style of interpretive language that was anything but normative in those years—in which only faint, anticipatory rumbles of the new-musicology-to-come were beginning to register on the field's seismic monitors. (What I most remember, with both affection and amusement, about its publication was that the editor insisted that I alter my poetic-anthropomorphic wording, "breaths," into the more suitably neutral "[opening] gestural phases"—which I dutifully did, though in my final revision I managed to insert a concealed rebuttal in n. 6.) In retrospect, the

Debussy article was the first-published indication of the interpretive direction that I preferred to follow and that my later work would take, merging literary and historical categories with new music-analytical constructs that lead to refreshed interpretive readings and ways of hearing. It would be this strand that I would develop throughout the 1990s, by which time the new musicology, in its differently inflected modes of procedural and social advocacy, was rearranging the (inter)disciplinary landscape.

Music and thought; music *as* thought; analytical illumination of individual pieces as illustrative metaphors of larger interpretive strategies; contested modes and ideologies of current methodological practice and the critical investigation of their tacit assumptions and axioms: these became my ongoing concerns. But I was also interweaving another strand, more rueful, into my writing as a background theme. While this strand might be less apparent to readers of any individual essay, it is more clearly perceived in the collection as a whole, especially in the choices of topic and the ways in which the essays conclude. This is the historical collapse of the art-music project, now reflected upon amidst its remaining, commercialized residues. Here one faces the problem of the interpretation of musical content in the context of a late-modern world in which a loss of faith in the institution of art music and its once-exalted aims has been an ever-advancing reality. The era of writing gleaming, confident affirmations of "great music" is long past. It is now difficult to continue to pretend that this is our music, still capable of speaking to us in an elevated language of transhistorical immediacy and permanence. Consequently, our task as scholars is not to promote it with a codified language of naive belief but rather to try to understand what it was (or to decipher what differing interest groups once thought it was) and, equally important, to come to terms with our own deep aesthetic nostalgia for enchanting illusions that have now slipped beyond our grasp.

To be sure, the cultural situation is more complex, more gnawingly ambiguous, than the above might suggest. For those who care about it at all, the art-music canon, or at least its externalized sound-shell, persists as an assemblage of still-sumptuous, bewitching sonic-images, suffused in their own well-promoted aura of presence and astonishing high craft. Fans, collectors, patrons, and ever-shrinking circles of aficionados have by no means disappeared completely. Nevertheless, as the community of scholars has come increasingly to acknowledge, the canon and its offshoots (not to mention our own commentaries on them) are historical phenomena ("historical through and through"), not indelible benchmarks of value and uplift for all times and cultures. As historical interventions these works (along with our commentaries) are shot through with strains of ideological wishful thinking, often-unsettling political or social agendas, and, at times, breathtaking self-delusion. Here on our side of this disenchantment—from a region of loss where everything has become problematic—is it possible to dwell even more historically (or, as I would say, dialogically) in the close-reading specifics of recoverable musical content and implication? And to what end?[2]

While I have typically steered clear of manifestos (although my recent "Some Grounding Principles of Sonata Theory" from 2006 comes close to being one), nearly everything that

2 The watershed passage about this in my own writing occurred in the final pages of my book on *Otello*, after which, for me, nothing was ever the same: *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 187–89 (not included in this volume).

I have written has sought to devise and apply innovative paradigms of inquiry. Some of my writings have examined methodological issues, such as the Dahlhaus essay from 1991 and, in their own ways, the two short pieces on operatic staging, but my more typical practice has been to take up individual compositions and to reconfigure the terms under which we approach them. Throughout the 1990s, dissatisfied with the normal-science answers that I was getting from traditional modes of inquiry, I was constructing a new style of analysis and interpretation. By the mid-1990s I was joined in this endeavor by the music theorist Warren Darcy, whose input and acuity contributed mightily to this enterprise. By the end of the decade we were on our way to formulating an alternative method for music analysis (grounded in the new concept of dialogic form) and for sonata-form analysis in particular. The result took some twelve years to ripen and finally emerged in 2006: *Elements of Sonata Theory* (originally—and explicitly—conceived to blaze a *via media* between the often-differing concerns of professionalized music historians and music theorists).

Analysis and hermeneutics: in principle, the two should be inseparable, one and the same thing, hermeneutically charged analyses, analytically charged hermeneutics. Within the professional field of musicology such a procedural stance encourages us to merge close, musically aware structural analysis with an urge to probe for larger, sometimes overlooked implications: ideological content and its claims; hidden or explicit programs and their problems (how are we to regard programs at all?); modes of audience-manipulation; gamelike elements of careerist enhancement, compositional self-presentation; personalized interactions with the social practice offered by established musical genres; and so on. In all of this I have sought to combine the disciplinary methods of Anglophone scholarship and music analysis with (often continentally inflected) philosophical-literary questions that have been informed by my own consideration of such writers as Dahlhaus, Adorno, Gadamer, Habermas, Ricoeur, Genette, Bürger, Hohendahl, Jameson, Iser, Bourdieu, and several others.

The essays in this volume are divided into four interrelated topic-groups, all of which cycle around the same set of analytical and interpretive problems. The first group deals with broad questions of "historiography, history, [and] methodology." The 1991 essay on Carl Dahlhaus approaches these matters by investigating the conceptual formation and purposes of one of the most influential music historians of the later twentieth century, an indispensable thinker (even when—perhaps especially when—we disagree with him). At the time, I thought of this piece as nothing more than an elementary introduction to Dahlhaus's intricately nuanced, Germanocentric world of ideas, which demanded, above all, to be historicized. In 1991, two years after his death and following a decade of translations of his writings, it seemed to me that the predominant English-language response to him was steering an uncertain course between bewilderment and outright misunderstanding. While some readers construed my essay as an exercise in skepticism, *lèse-majesté*, or explaining away, that was not its purpose. Its intentions were expository and analytical, striving only to situate a compelling writer within a culturally fraught arena of thought and history. From another perspective, the article also sought implicitly to raise the issue of what it might mean to contextualize not only that writer's thought-world but also our own, the axioms and agendas that were motivating our own writing: how could each of us be historicized?

The much-later, 2002 sketch on "Beethoven Reception: The Symphonic Tradition" was commissioned as a chapter of *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*. Given such a shopworn topic, my hope was to sidestep standard approaches in order to suggest a more sociological view of this ideologically charged music: in short, to reframe the entire subject. On the one hand, while still laying out a succession of familiar factual details, I tried to steer clear of any affirmational statement of greatness. Instead, I depicted nineteenth-century symphonism as playing out on a contested (quasi-Bourdieuian) field of cultural production, marked by different *prises de position* in a struggle for the acquisition of prestige and cultural capital. As a separate concern, the chapter also attempted to reformulate some driving concepts of the century (such as "programme music," pp. 35–52 in this volume, and "early modernism," pp. 61–63) along with a few of the analytical categories that we use to describe this music ("structural deformation," pp. 52–59).

"Some Grounding Principles of Sonata Theory" is a thumbnail outline of the point to which my own procedural preoccupations had developed through 2006. While this "Appendix 1," an extract from the otherwise jointly authored (with Warren Darcy) *Elements of Sonata Theory*, was included in that quasi-technical book to complement its theoretical concerns and approaches, it can also stand as a separate piece dealing with larger methodological questions in music analysis and hermeneutics. Its origins lay in my own wrestling with contentious disciplinary and interdisciplinary issues in a 1994 lecture (unpublished), "Theses on the Sociology of Genres: Bridging Hermeneutics to a Sense of the Postmodern," which I presented at the University of California, Berkeley, and Stanford University. It was the writing of that lengthier paper in the early 1990s, along with sustained work on another unpublished paper that surveyed the conceptual problems associated with the ideas of "modernism" and "institution" toward the end of the nineteenth century (presented as only a work-in-progress at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in 1993), that finally marked the fuller, more clarified emergence of the new perspective that would govern my work in subsequent years.

The second group of writings focuses on topics in Italian opera. Each piece is explicitly or implicitly oppositional, particularly when read within the context of an operatic discipline that was then moving rapidly in very different directions. A shorter version of "*Ottocento* Opera as Cultural Drama" (1997) was first delivered at a Verdi conference in Belfast in 1993. I consider it to be my last full-blown example of purely Verdian writing: an exit-aria, perhaps even too self-consciously slamming the door on the way out. I originally planned it, though, to be the second of a trilogy of essays that would summarize *ottocento* operatic genres and their musical and cultural implications. The first of these, not included here, was an article in the *Cambridge Opera Journal* from 1989, "Genre and Content in Mid-Century Verdi: 'Addio, del passato' (*La traviata*, Act III)." The third, delivered as a paper in Sarasota in 1994, remains unpublished.[3] The two Puccini essays (2004 and 2008)—on the manipulative manufacturing of images of delusion in *Suor Angelica* and *Madama Butterfly*—deal with the same kinds of issues, but as more recent studies I also intended them as model-analyses that illustrate how close analytical reflection on individual pieces or moments within an opera (incorporating such new analytical approaches as rotational form) can be leveraged

3 Some of its conclusions are cited in nn. 8 and 9 of the "Un bel dì?" essay included in this volume.

into broader readings. I have included in this group two short session-papers (1995 and 2001) on operatic staging. Branching out from issues in Verdian production, each leads into more problematic questions of staging and performance: on the one hand, a discussion of the fundamental irrecoverability of past practices (including, for instance, any naïve claim on behalf of the absolute value of historical performance buttressed by the empty hope of recapturing an abandoned authenticity); on the other hand, a contrarian response to incautious proclamations on behalf of less traditional or even radicalized staging.

The third group ("Structure and Content") comprises a collection of *obiter dicta* on diverse topics. I have already mentioned "Formulaic Openings in Debussy," the earliest essay in this collection. The remaining three members of this group are short essays from *The Musical Times*, 1993-94. The Dvořák piece ("Culture Clash") offered a four-movement reading of the "New World" Symphony in terms of the composer's apparent wish to illustrate in it portions of Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*—the consideration of which (especially when merged with the similar Dvořákian intention to flavor some of the work with allusions to African-American song-styles) brought up vexing issues of cultural representation, stereotyping, European hegemony, and the like. My reading, which extended the stratum of *Hiawatha* allusions thoughout all of the movements, then read them metaphorically, took issue with the more constricted interpretation of Michael Beckerman, who had documented the outlines of this literary connection a few years earlier.[4] The essay "Masculine-Feminine," from 1994, replied to the overextended gender-claim then being advanced (grounded in a much-noted remark by A. B. Marx in the mid-nineteenth century) that secondary themes of sonata expositions were all (or at least mostly) feminine representations, while primary themes were masculine. This counter-argument was later incorporated into *Elements of Sonata Theory*. And "*Temps perdu*"—a reflection on Ives and the significance of incomplete or fragmentary quotation in his works (icons of loss)—was an attempt to raise doubts about the prevailingly rosy boosterism of several leading Ives commentators by darkening the question of what such quotation-fragments might be understood actually to imply.

The last group, "Symphonic Readings," brings together three more extended considerations of individual works. Apart from any local details that they might convey about the pieces in question, all three were written to serve as exemplary studies bringing together historical research, professionalized analysis, and current modes of questioning and interpretation. (In this respect they are companion pieces to the two Puccini essays in the second group.) The earliest, the 1992 article on Strauss's *Don Juan* (originally devised as a paper for a 1990 Strauss conference at Duke University) was undertaken—along with the Dahlhaus article and the "*Ottocento* Opera" paper—in the years when my own work was beginning to take a stronger turn away from conventional practice. In that sense I regard it as a transitional piece: I had developed, for instance, a more or less new concept of program music, in part inflected by Genette's concept of the paratext (see pp. 232–37), but my music-analytical method had not yet crystallized into the fully developed Sonata Theory approach (as it would by the mid- and late-1990s). This was not the case for the last two inclusions in the group, both of

4 Beckerman still stands by his own reading; I by mine. See, e.g., his riposte in Michael B. Beckerman, *New Worlds of Dvořák: Searching in America for the Composer's Inner Life* (New York: Norton, 2003), esp. pp. 25–65.

which are recent: the essays on Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel* (2006) and Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* (2007). These studies—along with the two on Puccini—demonstrate the whole analytical-historical-hermeneutic system in play.

Music, structure, thought. Written over the period of a quarter-century—and during a time of disciplinary reformulation and factional struggles within the fields of musicology and music theory—these essays document little more than my own interactions with the passing show, along with sustained efforts to resist assimilation into any established school of thought, particularly those in which the "correct" attitudes and answers are pre-given. Interpreting music is a difficult enterprise, a serious and important one confronting issues central to late Western modernity. I hope that my own experience in grappling with some of these problems—opening new questions, perhaps, or proposing new conceptual frames—might be of value to some readers down the road, probably in ways that I cannot begin to foresee. And it is my hope that as we all proceed, we might recall such counsel as we find nearly a century ago from the classical humanist Gilbert Murray, who exhorted the scholars of his day to be "careful always really to seek for truth and not for our own emotional satisfaction, careful not to neglect the real needs of men and women through basing our life on dreams; and remembering above all to walk gently in a world where the lights are dim and the very stars wander."[5]

5 Gilbert Murray, *Four Stages of Greek Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), p. 153; rev. ed. as *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925), p. 206.