

**Email Reply to Richard Taruskin: 21 July 2008 (slightly edited, 2019)
Follow-up to the May 2008 Cambridge Beethoven/Rossini Conference**

RT: You seem to agree with me about Gumbrecht. Do you also agree with the more general point that a scholar is a professional disenchanter? I'll bet you have some reservations there, and I'd like to hear what they are.

JH: This is a provocative (and important) question, and I've given it some thought. It deserves much more space than I can give it in an email. Here's a short reply touching on some of the main points.

It's not an easy question to answer, especially since you seem to be asking for a yes or no response. If that's the choice, then, yes, at some level I agree with that more general point: I would advise any writer or student to consider that claim very seriously. (I certainly agree with it far more than the alternative, namely that we are here to sustain and advance the enchantment, a point of view that I utterly oppose. I have a distaste for any scholarship that has the flavor of a p.r. campaign on behalf of this composer or that. I try to avoid this sort of thing as much as possible [even in—especially in?—class lectures], and I try to encourage [or browbeat] students to weed that lotus-eating mindset out of their writing and speaking: the concept never seems to take, though, with the naïve. Speaking of the naïve, by the way, note that most noncanonical or pop/rock-music scholars—many of whom prize themselves on their rip-tide, counter-institutional credentials—typically fall directly into this oldest trap of all, thus replicating, sometimes even more explicitly, the worst, most sanctimonious excesses of old, Germanocentric musicology)

....

Disenchantment. Yes. *Gott ist tot*. But my view or way of pursuing this might be a little bit different from yours, I think, even as we would agree on many, many things. I.e., for me the disenchantment is already a point-blank “fact” and hardly needs us to spur it on further: one can, in a sense, take it for granted. The issue is: what's on the other side of it? What is our position vis à vis what still remains as a rather astonishing repertory (even one with many rewards) *after* its inevitable demise? How can one “preserve” a regard for these achievements (or can one at all? should one?) without falling for all the old lines?

(Here's a telling remark from Adorno—I agree with much [though not all!] of this one: It's from the *Missa Solemnis* essay (p. 142 of the Stanford book): **"The aim is not to debunk, to topple approved greatness for the sake of doing so [What's required is the] fulfillment of a duty towards the matter itself, not the gratified sneer at finding one thing less to respect in the world."**)

(I can anticipate your first response: Of course, I reject the regrettable, Germanic “duty” part, which makes my hackles rise and sets off all the standard alarms. But I rather admire the general idea behind the passage, especially since debunking and gratified sneering is such a cheap and easy posture to assume. But what can replace (in a

responsible way, and in a disenchanted [postmodern? late-modern?] world) what Adorno himself, unpleasantly to us, regarded as a *moral* “duty”?)

As musicologists we dwell among ruins. The main thing—and here I think we are on the same page—is to realize (as step one) just how difficult and strained these historical problems are...and not ourselves to fall into the old, credulous ways, which now sound stunted, naïve, stupid. (Much of my research, writing, and teaching falls into the general category of a) self-critique and nuance [on the page—one might always be wrong, misled]; and/or b) ideology-critique or “philosophical” analysis of existing partisan-positions in today’s musicology—unstated axioms, assumptions, alliances, hidden interests, etc. Some of this last bit formed the substance of my Cambridge talk on Dahlhaus, Text and Event.)

Struggle, then, against any simple-minded, old-style “re-enchanters” of today, not against the repertory itself. Struggle also against those who merely reinscribe old-think, who do not look at past evidence (and reception histories) from a properly critical perspective. (Worst of all are those who do all this for commercial profit or career-building [I’m thinking of advertising-copy and “conservatory-thinking” here, but that’s another topic]).

One mode of scholarship today might inquire what it means to live among such ruins, amidst such music, being rapidly forgotten and increasingly belittled, in which people once believed. (To paraphrase Heidegger, the ancient Greek temple still stands, sometimes magnificently for those with eyes to see, but the god has fled the temple.) Do we wish to add to the forgetting, to the belittling? One aspect of my own more recent work has been, however tacitly or behind the scenes, to explore the melancholy of loss (what *was* this music? What was the manipulative illusion—or delusion—that led to its “belief”? What is the nature of ritual, of commitment, of belief? And why do such ceremonial postures take hold?) rather than prosecutorially to root out the last vestiges of still-persisting old ways (which last I take to be one of your aims, in part because of the noxious interactions that many of the old ways have had with political life in the real world). I have no grudges or scores to settle with the repertory. I just want to try to understand what it was and why it was. That it is in one way or another “important” (like so many other things) seems still self-evident to me: but why does it seem important at all?

By the late 1970s or mid-1980s at the latest—maybe even earlier—I became aware that the enchantment associated with the art-music world had collapsed, was utterly unsustainable. In other words, the repertory, *de facto*, had already lost its claims and existed only as a shell of its former self. (Since the 1980s I had regularly ended my 20th-c. survey with a peroration on the death of art music—maybe originally a little Danto-influenced in those early days—but it never failed to arouse the students...sometimes with shock, sometimes with indignation.) Performers and consumers, it seems, still need to “believe” or “pretend to believe” (if only temporarily), but in scholarship it’s now a sign of naiveté and bad taste. Probably rightly so.

So I still have a high regard (dare one say, “love”?) of the now-fallen, now-disenchanted canonical repertory, and I do want to think about what it was and (for me, above all), “how [compositionally] the trick was done”—along with “how ideology works” within the realms

of art (and also within current musicological/theoretical practice). (This gets me into structure, analysis, and hermeneutics—genre implications, etc. I’m very interested in the details of “how pieces work” and what they might imply, moment by moment.) But that’s different from employing an abject, uninterrogated “language of belief” or not realizing the darker undersides of the social worlds to which such repertoires have appealed.

If one is looking for an ultimate disenchanter (one who has had a profound effect on the way that I construe all of this), revisit Pierre Bourdieu. In my own Current Issues/Methodologies graduate seminar, I always end with several essays from *The Field of Cultural Production*—the first three or four in the book. While I am no mere Bourdieu acolyte, I suspect that he’s gotten the matter pretty much exactly right. For those believers in the canonical repertory and the timeless “goodness” of elite music, the experience must be like strong creationists in 1859 opening up Darwin’s *Origin of Species*.

So I join you in disenchantment, though not so much in avid prosecution: I take less satisfaction in arraigning individuals and putting them in the dock, though I’m glad that someone is doing it. And by the way, since the issue came up once again in Cambridge, let me reaffirm that of course I knew precisely what I was doing in writing that ancient Dahlhaus piece in 1991. (I like to think that I always know exactly what I’m doing—and what the implications are.) I have tended to lace everything written in the last 18-20 years or so with small (?) sentence-bombshells that, if actually pursued in extended thought, tend to undermine a lot. In part I learned some of this technique from Dahlhaus himself: try to write individual, compact-explosive sentences (or paragraphs) that others could expand into a challenging and potentially world-reversing thesis. As of yet, though, no one seems to have noticed this. So it’s probably all been in vain. But it probably doesn’t matter (in a disenchanted world).

Best,

Jim