

Rewriting Nineteenth-Century Music History

1. The idea of this paper is really just to introduce and provoke some discussion about the issues involved in writing nineteenth-century music history. Of course, where music is concerned, the nineteenth century has, as we all know, been identified as an age of historicism. It was the age of the spirit of the age; it was an era increasingly preoccupied by the forwardness or backwardness of culture, and (where music is concerned) by an ordering of musical production on the basis of the case, the date, the situation.

I tackled issues of historiography some years ago when I edited the *Cambridge History of 19thC Music*, so I thought it might be useful to take that volume as a starting point.¹ The aims were straightforward. First I wanted to try at least to do justice to both compositional and contextual histories of music, and as far as possible to explore the relation between the two. Now it goes without saying that there is something of an ideological charge to this distinction, pulling us in rather different directions. For fairly obvious reasons compositional history tends to reinforce Western canons, while contextual history tends rather to democratise repertory, if anything foregrounding non-canonised music. One of my aims was to get a balance between these two approaches. I was also anxious to take on board certain relatively recent rationalisations of 19thC music history, notably Lydia Goehr's book; this is ostensibly a work of ontology, but I think it may also be regarded as a work of music history, with implications for the periodisation

¹ Jim Samson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge, 2002).

of music history and indeed also for the interpretation of long-standing debates about vocal-instrumental priority.²

2. Of course one reasonable question is whether we should be producing histories of this kind at all these days. We should perhaps be open to more radical alternatives, such as the history of simultaneities (there's a paradox for you) advocated by Hans Gumbrecht, undermining any suggestion of narrative.³ But even if we allow stories, and Gumbrecht certainly would not, it might be better to avoid big stories. Some musicologists these days prefer to offer us little stories, historical minutiae, assortments of cast-off moments, where radically unfamiliar events speak through to us, giving what New Historicists have called the 'touch of the real'. Here you might say that the archive preserves its sense of strangeness, of distance, and that helps to give it a voice. Examples would be micro-histories such as those of James Davies, who attempts a year study of 1829: he looks at a danced Beethoven symphony in terms of ballet and concert trends, at a melodrama in the light of imperialism, at a castrato's career in terms of the emergence of the biological sciences, and so on; all of it from what we would now perceive to be the margins of culture.⁴ We look around the edges of conventional narratives. There's a strong element of deconstruction here: little stories deconstructing big stories, or maybe performing the big stories; or mediating them. And I have a lot of sympathy with this position.

² Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford, 1992).

³ Hans Gumbrecht, *Living at the Edge of Time* (Chicago, 1996).

⁴ James Quail Davies, *A Year Study of 1829* (Diss., U. of Cambridge, 2004).

3. This is the radical view. There is no longer a place for big histories, only little ones, and fragmented at that. A less radical view would be that there is still a place for such volumes, but let us try to do them better. Since preparing this volume, I have read a couple of authors who I think might have helped me do it better. One is Roger Chartier, whose book *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations* opens up (among other things) the idea of ‘culture as appropriation’.⁵ Now Chartier’s criterion of social utility can lead in some cases to really very interesting transformations and even inversions of categories such as ‘private’ and ‘public’, ‘elite’ and ‘popular’, even ‘new’ and ‘old’. The suggestion here is that some of our categories will need to be revisited if we put the use value of art centre stage rather than subsuming art objects under a kind of identity principle, which very often seems to happen in music histories. This approach can give us a way in to examining not just issues of cultural identity but also bigger political questions: how music can be used to unite people, and also to divide them.

I’ve also been reading Alain Badiou, whose work on the ‘event’ seems germane to how we write cultural histories these days, even if this involves some element of creative misreading.⁶ Briefly, an ‘event’ involves some sort of exceptional break with the status quo, usually occurring in a context where prevailing values have been at least temporarily neutralised. The flow is, as it were, arrested, and in the space left available (the ‘evental site’) new directions, alternative visions, become possible, driven by human agency. I

⁵ Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Ithaca and New York, 1988).

⁶ Alain Badiou, A: *L’_tre et l’événement* (Paris, 1988).

think this has relevance for the writing of music history. Music history, I'm anxious to suggest, is not just about works, institutions and structures. It is also about agency, about actions occurring within a practice, and often diverging from the ethos of the practice. Just as, on another level, there is often a divergence between the interests of practices and those of the institutions that house them.⁷ It is interesting to contrast this approach, suggestive of explosive transformative innovation, with a more traditional, Dahlhausian view.⁸ These are two very different representations of the dynamics of cultural history, and it now seems to me necessary and important to find some accommodation between them: between Dahlhaus's *kairos* and Badiou's 'event', between structures and agencies, in the terms of a wider debate in the Social Sciences.

4. These perspectives might well have enriched the Cambridge History. But they would not have resolved its bigger problems, and it's those problems I want to turn to now. Three main things are under-represented in the History, respectively women, performances, and regions. I will say very little about the first of them. There is certainly some room for revisionism here: for looking not just at women composers but also at the contribution of singers such as Sontag and Malibran to both performance history and compositional history (through transposition, ornamentation, interpolation and substitution). There is also room for serious social-historical work, notably on patronage, and I'm thinking here of pioneering bottom-up history such as the on-going study of the

⁷ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue* (London, 1981).

⁸ Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J. B. Robinson (Cambridge, 1983; orig. edn. 1967). See also his *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. B. Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989).

early 19th-C salon as an institution by Jolanta Peckacz. Such work demonstrates just how undervalued women have been in conventional narratives of music history.

5. However, I really want to move on to second major lacuna in that volume: musical performance. Indeed iff we rewrote nineteenth-century music history in such a way that we placed performance closer to centre stage, a number of other things, including gender balance, would also shift around a bit. And also geography, actually. London might emerge as the musical capital of Europe during the age of Beethoven and Schubert, for example. Anyway, it seems to me fairly obvious that, at least until recently, our instincts as historians (and also as analysts, though that is a different issue), have been by and large to value composers rather than performers, even to the point of disguising the rather basic condition of music as a performing art. I want to suggest that performers can make a more essential claim on our reading of music history; they are not merely faithful servants of the text. Their qualities are in part redemptive. They can complete the incomplete, improve the mediocre, give expression to the expressionless. And they can even reconfigure the technical dimensions of a work through performance strategies. To adapt a point of Charles Rosen's, I am tempted to ask whose voice-leading we hear when, say, Rubinstein performs a Chopin ballade? Chopin's or Rubinstein's?

Now what all this is leading towards is an attempt to emancipate performance from the paradigm of interpretation, to recognise that performers don't really uncover original meanings when they interpret; they create new ones. In a sense this simple shift of orientation has the potential to liberate discourses about performance, as Nicholas Cook

and others have recognised. To borrow for a moment the language of the young German scholar Christa Brüstle, it enables us to speak of ‘performance in’ rather than ‘performance of’ a work.

I would hope that a performance-orientated history might involve a kind of seeing back through Lydia Goehr’s ‘era of the work concept’ to an earlier understanding of performance as the final stage (in rhetorical terms, the execution) of a largely undifferentiated process of making music. Of course the intervening history of text and act is well known: a space opens up between notational and acoustic forms; on the one side we have the strengthening of a work concept by establishing the relative autonomy of the work (loosening the threads binding it to genre and social function). And on the other side we have the invention of the modern virtuoso, in whom the activity of performance gained its own measure of autonomy. We have in short a developing tension, then a dialectic, and ultimately a separation, between virtuosity and the musical work. I did actually go on to write a book about that.⁹

6. Well, the third of my lacunae concerns what we might call the geography of music history. Actually, although I won’t develop this here, I do think that one of the major new perspectives in musicology today is the increasing importance of cultural geography as a way of grounding music. Geography, we might say, is increasingly vying with history as a kind of Ur-discipline for musicology. But that is in passing. Undoubtedly one of the really big rationalisations of music history involves plots about centres and peripheries,

⁹ Jim Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: the Transcendental Studies of Liszt* (Cambridge, 2003).

about mainstreams and tributaries. And these plots can rather easily skew the discourse. Where the regions are concerned, we can end up with a kind of assimilationist history which ignores measures of difference. Alternatively (and this is probably the greater danger, actually) we can fetishise what we perceive to be the differences. In any event, very little of the Cambridge History does justice to the regions, the peripheries. Its geographical focus is very much on certain charismatic cultural centres. And actually, I'm not sure how far we can go with deconstructing the centric nature of our music historiography, beyond of course trying to recognise chauvinism for what it is. Thinkers such as Levinas have argued that at the heart of a Western mind set lies a philosophy of the centre, where truth is disseminated to the peripheries, and that voices from the peripheries effectively end up adopting a language of the centre, which is of course a language of power.

In any event a reasonable question might be how to give a voice to the regions in music history. For many World Historians these days the most urgent issue of our own time is precisely how to reconcile membership of dynamic primary communities with the imperatives of an all-conquering cosmopolitanism.¹⁰ I think this should maybe be a leading question for music historians too, as it already is for ethnomusicologists. In a way the tension it describes already existed in nineteenth-century elite musical cultures, where it was coded as national versus international. That was a tension grounded, I suggest, in

¹⁰ See William McNeill, 'The Changing Shape of World History', in Philip Pomper, Richard H. Elphick and Richard T. Vann (eds.), *World History: Ideologies, Structures, and Identities* (Oxford and Malden, 1998), 21-40.

urbanisation. For, paradoxically, both an inclusive cosmopolitan culture and an exclusive national consciousness were centred in the modern city. In other words, the advance of cultural nationalisms, promoting separatism, couldn't really conceal the ever more homogeneous and *international* character of a modern urban culture. My own view is that where music history is concerned this tension between the national and the cosmopolitan was often skin-deep. Cultural nationalisms, after all, staked their claims on a respected contribution to a generalised high-prestige culture; they were in reality a variety, a species, of that culture. And we need to ask how far they penetrated through to the bedrock forms of music and for that matter of musical life. What is it anyway that can transcend the national? Well, the international of course, but also the intra-national. There is the global, but there is also the regional. And it seems to me that there's often a kind of mixing-up of narratives in the common tendency to place regional histories within the framework of national histories. For the regional histories in reality introduce another kind of *global* discourse, albeit an intransitive global discourse.

Well, you can choose your own periphery. For me, the Balkan region raises questions about periphery in an especially interesting way. And that's really why I am here in Macedonia. I am interested in allowing this region to bring into focus key questions about the construction of cultural traditions, East and West, and about the consequent relationship between cultural politics and aesthetic value. I want to investigate, in short, how cultural traditions (west European and Ottoman-Turkish), together with their associated values, are shaped, supported and promoted through symbiotic processes of marginalisation and canon formation; the two are mutually dependent. The point at issue

is the triumph of particular sets of values from which the Balkans have been sidelined. I am interested especially in questions of liminality and transitional states.

I want to ask, in other words, if we can really do justice to repertoires from the Balkans by identifying them as a site of transformation which contains elements of two cultural spheres (let us call them 'East' and 'West'), or if we should rather be locating a third sphere, which really does invest in transition? There are historical questions here about how we view both Europe and the Ottoman ecumene. We can of course write our music history from the standpoint of a European Modernist tradition, privileging progress and evolution. If we do so we will inevitably create a narrative in which three categories of music---classical, avant-garde and commercial---are increasingly firmed up and separated out, with less and less leakage between them. But equally we might write our history from the standpoint of an ecumene, as Edgar Morin does for instance in his revisionist book *Penser l'Europe*.¹¹ If we do that, we might revise not only our view of the Western canon, but its relationship to Ottoman repertoires. And we might also find ourselves re-evaluating periphery and transition.

Of course this region also raises in acute form questions of cultural identity, which inevitably means exploring appropriation, transformation or revival. Many musics jostle for attention in the Balkans, crossing over in novel ways, resisting easy affiliation to particular political and social units. In such a context collective cultural identities are hard

¹¹ Edgar Morin, *Penser l'Europe* (Gallimard, 1987).

to maintain, and the more so because a global culture homogenises as it diversifies. Here again cultural geography comes centre stage, with place and space held in precarious balance. Place, in other words, threatens constantly to lose its specificity, to disperse into space, but at the same time ethnonationalist agendas do their best to anchor music in place. Methodologically, the attraction here is that we are invited to bring many, very different musics under one scholarly roof, notably in relation to themes of modernity. We can both explore European projects of modernity by way of Balkan alterities, and at the same time investigate the impact of westernisation and modernisation (and, conversely, of orientalisation) on the Balkans themselves, perhaps especially in relation to popular music. I'm very much at the beginning of the road here. Which is why I need to talk to many of you.