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# Shall We Change the Subject?

## A Music Historian Reflects Part I

Richard Taruskin

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The most frequent question I am asked, since the appearance of my six-volume monster, *The Oxford History of Western Music*<sup>1</sup>, is «What will you do *now*?», the emphasis suggesting that there may not in fact be anything left to do, now that I've set down a narrative encompassing the whole thousand-year panoply from Gregorian chant to the chaos of postmodernism, and especially since, as those who had actually read my book knew, I had ventured to predict the end of the tradition of which I had written the history. Every so often, while working on it, I had to admit a superstitious little pang that I was putting myself out of business, and — harder to admit now — the hubristic thought that I might be putting my colleagues out of business, too.

But by the time I finished writing I knew better, to my combined relief and horror. The relief was similar to the relief Steve Martin describes in *Born Standing Up*<sup>2</sup>, when he writes of his «short-lived but troublesome worry» that writing comedy might be «a dead end because one day everything would have been done and we writers would just run out of stuff». «I assuaged myself», he goes on, «with my own homegrown homily: Comedy is a distortion of what is happening, and there will always be something happening.» That's just as true of historiography, which could be described as a distortion of what has happened. The very attempt at capturing it shows up the extent of the distortion, so nobody knows better than we historians how distorted the tale becomes in the telling.

I set out on my task of narration full of ideas about what was wrong with the tradition in which I had been trained, and set myself in opposition to it, with the result that my work has become controversial within the discipline. But as many of you will have realized by the time I finish this talk, in no other discipline than musicology would work like mine be thought of as radical, or even especially advanced. Why has music history been such a «laggard, insular subject», as Joseph Kerman, a perennial

gadfly, complained in print only last December<sup>3</sup>? Kerman attributes the lag to musicology's «traditional paradigm», which he characterizes as «Whiggish or Hegelian», and he notes that «for many reasons, some of them obvious enough, this paradigm stopped working». But my perception is less optimistic. The old paradigm has not stopped working; it goes deeper than Whiggishness, even deeper than Hegel's influence; and its consequences have affected not only the historiography of music, but the history and practice of music as well.

By the time I had finished the *Oxford History* I was far better aware of its shortcomings than my critics, who mainly complained about missing persons (a complaint that I regard as at once insignificant and telling). I knew better than they how I might have done it differently. And that was the horror. What gave me that troubling perspective on my own work was my concurrent activity as a music journalist. A journalist is by definition concerned with the present, not the past, and in the case of an arts journalist like me, with artifacts of the past only insofar as they exist in, and continue to affect, the present. I found that I was able as a critic to confront head-on issues that I had to confront only askance as a historian. It was not a question of academic propriety or scholarly circumspection, because I regarded my journalistic arguments as altogether proper and responsible. One of my main purposes in writing the *Oxford History* was to expose the historical contingency of our default assumptions, the truths we hold to be self-evident. And yet I found myself unable to shake these limiting assumptions when writing history to the extent I was able to do when writing journalism. It was not that I was altogether helpless. Part of it was calculation, knowing, as Cocteau would say, «jusqu'ou on peut aller trop loin», how far one can go too far and still retain credibility with those whom one would persuade. But when I think back on what I've written, I see how much further I might have gone, and I wish I had.



For the stakes are high. The «Western music» in my title, of course, is «Western classical music», or «art music», or —to put it as precisely as I tried to do in formally framing my topic —«music in the European literate tradition». And that music, as everybody knows who thinks or cares about it at all, is in trouble. To quote Peter van der Merwe, a South African music historian whose work I recently had occasion to review, «for the general public, «classical music» belongs mainly to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, carries on with rapidly diminishing vigor into the first few decades of the twentieth, and has ceased to exist by 1950»<sup>4</sup>. The truth of this observation can hardly be disputed. There is of course a wide range of opinion as to its import, as opposed to its accuracy. Some maintain, with varying degrees of equanimity, that the situation is inevitable, given the historical realities. But I oppose that sort of fatalism. Historical realities are made, not given, and responses to them are chosen, not mandated. And the situation we are in cannot be considered healthy. Think of it: at this institution, and of course at mine as well, composers are being trained every year to contribute to a tradition for which a public has been lacking for more than half a century. With almost negligible exceptions, although those exceptions are well known, contemporary classical music exists only within the academy. That is not true of any other contemporary fine art —not even of poetry. What troubles me is the thought that music historiography has contributed, and still contributes, to the creation of the historical realities that we now deplore, when it might have ameliorated them. In the time left to me as a historian I mean to try. This talk is a down payment. To put it in a preliminary nutshell : as Forster said, «Only connect», I say (somewhat aversely paraphrasing Frederic Jameson) «Only historicize». Situating our present moment in history —seeing how we arrived at our present situation —is the first step toward leaving it behind.

#### TELEOLOGY IN CRITICISM: «GENIUS» AS PREMISE

My awareness of the problem —at first a dim and inarticulate awareness —goes back to the very beginning of my professional career. My original academic specialty was Russian music in the nineteenth century. After defending a dissertation on Russian opera in the 1860s, I was assigned my first graduate seminar, at Columbia University in the fall of 1975. It was on Modest Musorgsky (and the first session was devoted to teaching the class how to pronounce his name, since everyone in America says «Musórgsky»). One reason why Musorgsky was an appropriate subject for a seminar, even for students who did not know any Russian, was that his works gave rise to several standard-issue musicological problems. One of these was the problem of «versions». Because Musorgsky grew up in a country that had no institutions of higher instruction in European classical music, and where musicians, let alone composers, had no social standing as such, Musorgsky took his place in a long line of gentry dilettante composers (the leisure class being the only one that could possibly cultivate a taste for such music or devote working time to its pursuit). He matured slowly as a composer and died young (shortly after his forty-second birthday), so that he never gained what most musicians would consider an adequate professional grounding or a reliable composing technique. As a result, he hardly ever finished any of his large-scale compositions, with the exception of the opera *Boris Godunov* (and the second session of the seminar was devoted to pronouncing that name, in preference to «Bóris Goodenough»). *Boris Godunov* got finished not once but twice. Even up to the time of my seminar, however, that opera was rarely given in either of Musorgsky's own redactions. Usually it was Rimsky-Korsakov's edition of Musorgsky's second version, made after Musorgsky's death, that was actually performed in the theater —or if not Rimsky-Korsakov's



then Shostakovich's, or if not Shostakovich's then Karol Rathaus's, or else one of several others. So comparison of these versions was an inescapable part of studying Musorgsky's legacy, and sure enough, one of the students in the seminar chose to compare the two authorial versions of the opera's second act with the other published redactions of the score. I still remember the conclusion of the paper he wrote, foreshadowed at the end of the first paragraph: «There can be no doubt that Musorgsky himself was the best editor of his own music». What bothered me, at first vaguely, but stubbornly, was my impression, which grew to utter certainty, that this conclusion was not a conclusion but a premise; that my student could have reached no other conclusion—or at least, that he could have expressed no other opinion as the conclusion to a musicological research paper. It was not that I disagreed with the point. I thought I agreed with it at the time, and perhaps I still do. What bothered me was my consciousness even then that the foregone conclusion was mandated by the discipline, and that the discipline in some sense existed for the purpose of ratifying it. It was one of a number of standard-issue research problems that gave rise to standard-issue conclusions.

#### COULD BEETHOVEN «SCREW UP»?

Another was the sort of sketch study that found, invariably (and inevitably), that «Beethoven started with this, then he did that, and then he did the other thing, and the piece got better and better and better», until it achieved the perfection we expected of Beethoven—or rather, until it achieved the perfection that Beethoven defined. Like the superiority not only of Musorgsky's conceptions but also of his realizations to those of his later (and better-trained) redactors, the perfection of Beethoven's work was an axiom—a fact assumed, not observed. Observation had to be tailored to the assumption. What we thought of as empirical research really amounted to a vast project of circular logic.

Again, it was not that I necessarily disagreed with the conclusion. I used to joke with my friends, though, as these ideas crystallized, that I was waiting for the study of versions that would uphold the hack over the genius or the sketch study that would conclude that Beethoven had screwed up. Even if one rejected the finding, its advancement would testify to a certain freedom of thought. But to suggest that Rimsky-Korsakov, let alone Rathaus, might have known or done better than Musorgsky or that a rejected sketch might be preferable to the one that Beethoven ended up choosing was simply unthinkable within the terms of my discipline. To advance such ideas would discredit the advancer. There was no freedom of thought. And if it seems any different now, it is mostly a matter of lip service. Just last month, Philip Gossett, the dean of Italian opera scholars, published an article on some newly discovered drafts for Verdi's opera *Un ballo in maschera*, in which the final paragraph contained these words: «While I do not believe that every compositional decision made by a composer during the

course of his work on an opera is—almost by definition—an improvement, in this case there can be little doubt that [it] was an act of genius»<sup>5</sup>. Need I add that virtually every case Professor Gossett has considered in the course of a long career has turned out to be *such* a case?

How literally musicology bound its votaries to praise famous men one learns from a story that Rose Rosengard Subotnik, a colleague who has preceded me in complaint, tells in the introduction to *Developing Variations*<sup>6</sup>, her first collection of essays. Her first teaching job after earning her doctorate in 1973 was at the University of Chicago, where the senior musicologist was the very eminent Edward Lowinsky, one of the German émigrés who, fleeing Hitler, established the discipline of musicology, very much on the German model, in the United States. Subotnik had written an article, eventually published in 1976, which is now a historic document within our profession, since it was the first essay by an Anglophone music scholar to take seriously the contribution of the Frankfurt School, and in particular the music criticism of T. W. Adorno, as a part of the reception history of the European musical canon. She had taken Adorno's critique of Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*—in which the philosopher saw a retreat from the assertive musical rhetoric of Beethoven's middle-period instrumental music, which implied social protest and, well, the audacity of hope, into an «imploing» spiritual solipsism and an implied social impotence—and she extended this critique to the *Ninth Symphony* as well. She related the introduction of words into the symphony's finale in the form of Schiller's *Ode to Joy*, with some less optimistic, less affirmative words of Schiller's—«Wenn die Seele *spricht*, / spricht, ach, *die Seele* nicht mehr» (If the soul speaks aloud, alas, it is no longer the soul that speaks)—and she suggested that «Beethoven not only failed to communicate the content of his last symphony but actually came very near to violating that content in the attempt to communicate it»<sup>7</sup>. Having read this essay, Professor Lowinsky warned his younger colleague that «if [she] did not delete [this] particular reference to Beethoven, [she] would bitterly regret it in the future», so unthinkable was an ascription of any sort of failure to Beethoven. Subotnik interpreted the gesture less as a threat than as an expression of genuine concern for her future peace of mind, for, as Lowinsky put it, «a scholar must be able to stand by his or her work throughout an entire career». He could not imagine that upon mature reflection, or after longer experience, she would not come to her senses.

Professor Lowinsky was right to be concerned about Rose Subotnik's future. She was denied tenure at Chicago effectively because, as another senior colleague told her, she approached the study of music with a philosophical orientation and was therefore bound to falsify music and music history. What Subotnik in 1980 called the «patent naïveté» of that view will be obvious today, I trust, to one and all, and that in itself will testify to an improvement in the American scholarly weather, even in musicology, over the last two or three decades. But the evolution has not gone all that far. We all may be inclined now to regard our positions as philosophically oriented, even ideologically oriented. We may even accept our philosophical



orientations as historical, hence as contingent and therefore provisional. But as someone once observed, accurate description is fine but what we need is change. (Yes, it was Marx.)

Knowing that our consciousness is historical and philosophically, even politically oriented offers no immunity from error. Adorno has been taken well on board. (Even Subotnik's former critics now read him and teach him.) But he has joined Beethoven as another worshipped personality, and another infallible authority. He has been accepted uncritically, at the cost of almost total distortion, as is apparent from the fact that the first uncritical appropriators were scholars of popular music, a field that Adorno only deprecated. Undaunted, popular music scholars have co-opted him to the project of idealization, and we may now read Adornian studies of Madonna or even Beyoncé that describe them the way Adorno described Schoenberg, or as my old pupil described Musorgsky. The construction and preservation of an authentic and resilient subjectivity is now the reigning cliché of popular music studies, a stance even more utopian, and even more oblivious of historical realities than studies of Beethoven or Musorgsky ever were. Today, no less than in the bad old 1970s, musicology and music historiography, whatever their ostensible subject matter, are still all about defending autonomous art—and autonomous artists—against social mediation, and justifying their ways to man.

#### MUSICAL «AUTHENTICITY» UNDER SCRUTINY

Let me return to Musorgsky now and offer as a parable an account of the social mediation of *Boris Godunov* that relates it from a different perspective to the question of artistic quality—a perspective that does pay attention, I think, to social, cultural, political and economic realities alongside esthetic desiderata. The most moving version of the opera I know—hence, according to at least one defensible (or, at least, one frequently defended) esthetic criterion, the best version of the opera—is the version that I first came to know, long before I had embarked on close study of Musorgsky or of his works, as a movie. It was produced in Moscow in 1954, and its soundtrack was based on a recording made by artists from the Bolshoi Theater. The version of the score that it preserved and cinematographically «opened up», therefore, was the one performed at the Bolshoi as the official Soviet canonical version since 1939, when it was first staged in honor of the composer's birth centennial. It was very much a Soviet, even a Stalinist, product.

This version was basically the standard Rimsky-Korsakov redaction of Musorgsky's second version, with the scoring thoroughly redone and with the many changes in harmonization (and, occasionally, the deployment of the voices) for the sake of conventional effectiveness that had given rise to so many derisive attacks from purists and modernists beginning in 1908, when it was first shown abroad (by Sergei Diaghilev). The one unconventional aspect of the Bolshoi production was the inclusion, from the first authorial version, of the then

little known scene that takes place on Red Square, before the multicolored chapel of the Blessed Vasili (known popularly in the West as St. Basil's Cathedral), in which the Holy Fool or *yurodiviy* directly confronts the title character with his crime. This scene, originally the opera's penultimate scene (followed only by the death of Boris), was drawn, like the rest of the first version, directly from the opera's source-text, a play by Pushkin. When he revised the opera, Musorgsky replaced this scene with a new one that was to follow the death of Boris and provide the new version with its finale. This is the so-called Kromy Forest Scene, which has no counterpart in Pushkin's play.

The two scenes are mutually exclusive. They portray the crowd in contradictory ways, following differing historiographical traditions. Pushkin, hence Musorgsky's first version, followed the tradition of Ivan Karamzin, the Romanov dynasty's handpicked Official Historiographer, which portrayed the crowd as submissive to the Tsar and suppliant. The replacement scene, following the more recent—in fact then contemporary—interpretation of the populist historiographer Nikolai Kostomarov, portrayed the crowd as openly rebellious and seditious, and enthusiastic in its support of the False Dmitri, Boris's rival and nemesis. Not only that, but Musorgsky had made conflation impossible by transferring a big chunk of music, encompassing the Holy Fool's song and the episode in which a gang of boys steal his kopeck, from the one scene to the other.

But that manifest impossibility did not deter the Bolshoi Theater from commissioning a Rimsky-style re-orchestration of the St. Basil's scene from the veteran composer Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov and incorporating both scenes, redundancy and contradiction be damned, into the new production, using them to flank the scene of Boris's death. One cannot make a coherent logical case for such a conflation, and there is good reason to think it was motivated in the first place by a Stalinist view of the opera's potential as a commentary on the illegitimacy of Tsarist rule, hence as a justification for the Russian Revolution, each scene contributing its mite to that propagandistic task. And yet both scenes are searingly effective musical and dramatic achievements. Both bring tears to the eyes of the audience, and the reprise of the Holy Fool's lament (which is not a reprise unless the two scenes are both included) is perhaps the opera's crowning stroke of musical and dramatic genius. No wonder the version of the opera concocted in Moscow possibly for political purposes became canonical in the Soviet Union, and is still often performed in post-Soviet Russia. Although unforeseen and seemingly disallowed by the author (even though it uses only material he composed), it is, I believe, a greater work than either of the two authorial versions.

It took me a long time to find the courage to say this. In fact, I once wrote a long article on the versions of *Boris Godunov* that ended with an explicit repudiation of conflation on grounds of dramaturgical and historiographical consistency and musical integrity. Even when I wrote this I knew perfectly well that when it came to satisfying my own pleasure in the opera, the version I was disallowing was the one I preferred.



And I also knew that the reason why I preferred it was not, as I at one time tried to convince myself that it was, because the role of the Holy Fool was so wonderfully performed in the movie by the great tenor Ivan Kozlovsky. I had seen the same version performed live at the Bolshoi during my year as an exchange student in Moscow in 1971-72. Indeed, I saw it that year as often as possible, so moving did I find it, despite the fact that the performances, by artists vastly inferior to the ones whose voices were preserved twenty years earlier in the film, were mostly pretty bad. One of the things that most thrilled me, as an American abroad, was leaving the theater and strolling over to the very place where the action of the scene at St. Basil's occurred. But that was not my reason for wanting the scene included despite its dramaturgical and musical inadmissibility. I already knew the scene and loved it before going to Russia to study it. The reason for my wanting it included was simply my goosebumps and tears. Why do goosebumps and tears fall so far outside the purview of professional musicology that, when acting in the capacity of a professional musicologist, I felt I had to disavow them—or worse, disavowed them without even posing to myself the question I am now posing to you? And, why might I myself still be inclined to offer Lowinskian warnings against self-marginalization to a younger colleague who posed them publicly before reaching the safe haven of tenure?

The reason, as I diagnose it now, is that the discipline of musicology is still in thrall to an unhistoricized historical legacy: a legacy of German romanticism that travels incognito as general esthetic principles. If, as I believe, the resilience of this ancient heritage within musicology is greater than in other humanistic disciplines, it may be as a result of musicology's relative youth and its specific history in the Anglophone world as I have already described it when speaking of Lowinsky. In the United States, musicology has been basically a German import dating from the forced emigration of the cream of German musicology, which took place beginning in the run-up to World War II, and has been an established and productive discipline here only since that war. (The first American PhD in musicology was awarded as recently as 1945, at Columbia University. The recipient was Dika Newlin, for a dissertation, later published as a book, called *Bruckner, Mahler, Schoenberg*<sup>8</sup>. Her dissertation sponsor was Paul Henry Lang, a somewhat exceptional member of the founding generation in that he was Hungarian, non-Jewish, and an immigrant somewhat in advance of the tide, but intellectually he was altogether typical of the cohort. I was one of his last students, so I know whereof I speak.)

The authority within the Anglophone sphere of German musicology in the Romantic tradition has been questioned from time to time, but it continues relatively unabated. Persistent questioners have been marginalized within the discipline. Those who, like me, prudently waited till their professional status was safe before opening fire, have attracted ferocious counterfire. Since the growth period of American musicology coincided with the cold war, the German Romantic heritage

was rather improbably attached to a longstanding American pragmatism and became a truly impregnable position. The German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus was assimilated to it and his writings became fetishes, sacred texts, as did Adorno's. One need only take a peek at the indexes in two recent authoritative compendia, the *Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*, published in 2001, and the *Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*, published in 2004 (both the collaborative work of British and American scholars), to confirm the extreme dependency of English-speaking musicology on these two preceptors (despite Adorno's many warnings against such a reception of his own writings)—but that is because both Germans were read selectively, in support of what I have taken to calling the poietic fallacy.

### THE POIETIC FALLACY AND THE IDEOLOGY OF TRANSGRESSION

The term *poietic*, derived from the Greek *poiein* (to make) is borrowed from the so-called semiotic tripartition devised by the Swiss linguist Jean Molino and popularized within musicology by his pupil, Jean-Jacques Nattiez<sup>9</sup>. According to this model, musical utterances have makers and receivers. Information and observations related to the making constitute poietic data. Information and observations related to the receiving are called *esthesis* data, from the Greek *aisthesis* (perception). The reason for the fancy terminology is merely to avoid confusion with the more ordinary but obviously related terms *poetic* and *esthetic*. Molino called what lies between the poietic and esthetic poles, namely «the work itself», the *niveau neutre*, the «neutral level». It is clearly chimerical, since any act of describing it, or even observing it, must be in the realm of the esthetic. But so must be any act of describing or observing, as opposed to performing, the poietic function. So the whole tripartition is more or less chimerical and has been discarded everywhere but French Canada. There is one aspect of Nattiez's adaptation, however, that was not chimerical, and that was his assignment of roles within musicology. The poietic is the province, in Nattiez's description, of historical musicology (the region I inhabit); the neutral level is what musical theorists and analysts think they are studying; and the esthetic is the province of criticism, or «critical musicology». Nattiez's account, therefore, is a realistic account of the chimeras of contemporary musical scholarship. As practice they are all inadequate and incoherent, but Nattiez has correctly observed them.

The poietic fallacy, then, is the limitation of the purview of traditional music historiography to the history of composition. Only the maker's input is studied; only composers are regarded as authentic historical agents. Newlin's *Bruckner, Mahler, Schoenberg* already set the tone, because its objective was the establishment of a creative or poietic dynasty, viewed and defended from an entirely internalist perspective. The overwhelming majority of music-historical writings have had a similar mission, including the studies of versions and sketches



at which I have been grumbling. And that mission has even invaded criticism, which was supposed to be the bastion of the esthetic.

A representative example of poietic aggrandizement cropped up on the very morning I drafted this paragraph, on February 2, 2008. Writing in the London newspaper *The Independent*, where he is a regular editorial page columnist, Dominic Lawson, Britain's premier global-warming scoffer, scoffed at impending commemorations of Herbert von Karajan's birth centenary this year by observing that «the cult of the conductor is often tiresome and meretricious; it is the composers themselves whom we should always celebrate». Always and only celebrate, I would add. A few days later, on February 6, Bernard Holland of the *New York Times* published a scathing if predictable column called «When Histrionics Undermine the Music and the Pianist», in which he chided performers who by their body language call attention to themselves—rather than to «the music»—when performing. (He was roundly answered in the letters column on February 8, by Tim Chadwick, an actor from Santa Monica, who wrote in to say that «If Mr. Holland wishes to attract more young people to classical music, I suggest he lighten up. Telling them that they must sit still and be good little musicians is not going to get their attention». Amen to that.) The limitation that Jean-Jacques Nattiez has accurately diagnosed in music history now applies to pretentious music criticism as well. But to account for it we have to leave semiotics and return to German Romantic philosophy and its postulate of esthetic autonomy.

To summarize and simplify this big and complex topic as concisely as I can, it is the theory of art that grew up in the wake of the social emancipation, or perhaps I should say the social abandonment, of artists between the middle and the end of the eighteenth century. Although it had predecessors, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, which appeared in 1790, looms in retrospect as the foundation of the tradition. The standard of disinterested apprehension, Kant's definition of a purely esthetic attitude, corresponded with that of «Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck» (purposiveness without purpose), that now characterized the object made by artists. Works of art were now defined by their detachment from utility. Artists, who produced objects for pure contemplation, were now defined in contradistinction to craftsmen who produced objects for use. Purposeless but purposive art could serve as the symbolic embodiment of human freedom and the vehicle of transcendent metaphysical experience. My language is of course ironic, since verbs like «serve» and nouns like «vehicle» imply purpose after all; and that is the kernel of my critique. But let me finish with description before elaborating the critique.

Kant himself had little appreciation for music as a fine art. For him it was more to be compared with perfume as a sense experience than with philosophy as a cognitive one. Nevertheless, Kant's esthetics provided willy-nilly the means for the elevation of music to the status of philosophical model for all the other arts—the art, to recall Walter Pater's famous remark, to whose condition all the other arts aspire. And this is

because if the arts are to be ranked in order of their autonomy—that is, their freedom from worldly function—then that art will come out best which specifies its content least, for in that lack of specificity—that abstraction—lies its freedom from limitation and possible constraint. Now we are dealing with autonomy on yet another level, paradoxically (or, perhaps I should say, dialectically) tied to politics. Artists, responsible to themselves alone, provide a model of human self-realization. All social demands on the artist—whether made by state, by church, or by paying public—and all social or commercial mediation are to be regarded as inimical to the authenticity of the creative product.

It goes without saying, but I'd better say it anyway, that this is the most asocial definition of artistic value ever promulgated. And the activity of art historians, and especially music historians as their practices have evolved, has been designed to protect and defend its asociality. In the twentieth century, such a theory of art could be seen as a bulwark against totalitarianism, which only intensified the pressure on musicology to adhere to the poietic fallacy. Adorno held up the German Romantic esthetic as a counterforce, as well, to the instrumentalizing and rationalizing tendencies of «administered» capitalist society, which turns human subjects into objects of economic exploitation. Since Adorno, alone among twentieth-century philosophers and sociologists, was trained in musical composition, he unsurprisingly held up classical music in its least «compromised» form (epitomized in the resolutely esoteric and unsellable work of Arnold Schoenberg) as the chief example of «truth-bearing» art, as opposed to the dehumanizing popular music churned out by the culture industry for mass dissemination. That explains, perhaps, why Adorno's writings have been so fetishized by music historians—and also why his appropriation against the grain by popular music scholars, eager to prove that the music they promote is also valuable (which necessarily means, also autonomous) has been at once so logical and so ridiculous.

Of course Hegel, too, has played a part, to recall Joseph Kerman's diagnosis. The neo-Hegelian strain was first self-consciously advanced by Franz Brendel, whose *History of Music in Italy, Germany and France from the Earliest Christian Times up to the Present*, first published in 1852, remained the most widely read book of its kind (a one-volume general history of music) until the first decades of the twentieth century. The book is an application to music of Hegel's ruling dictum that «the History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom», and must therefore take the form of an ineluctable sequence of emancipations, with the great composers from Palestrina to Liszt and Wagner cast in the role of progressive liberators. This is the source of the stubborn «Whiggishness» that Kerman cites as the reason for musicology's laggard state. But as long as this political model found support in the wider world, its status as musicological orthodoxy was virtually unquestionable. The good political vibes were irresistible.

But outweighing Hegel and his good vibrations there has been another strand, and a far less attractive one, feeding the





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poietic fallacy. It is related to the happy Whig version, but what it celebrates is an even more asocial tendency, this one getting closer to the frankly antisocial. This predisposition on the part of artists and their spokesmen has been most recently historicized by Anthony Julius, the celebrated British barrister, who identifies it as the postulate of transgression, which Julius places at the heart of the modernist esthetic. «There have always been transgressive artworks», he writes. «Transgressions are as old —almost as old—as the rules they violate or the proprieties they offend.» But, he adds, «it is only from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the making of such works itself contributed to the definition of the project of art-making»<sup>10</sup>. For a twentieth-century artist, not to transgress —against the norms of taste, or against the rules of traditional practice, or against social taboos, or against the peace —was tantamount to renouncing the vocation of artist. If a work of art did not transgress in one of these ways it was no longer art but kitsch, or (perhaps worse) entertainment. It is Julius' very interesting thesis that modernist art —which (as I would define it) means art created in the twentieth century according to the canons of nineteenth-century philosophy —must both embody transgression and disavow it when challenged by appealing to various «defenses», as Julius lawyerishly puts it —or alibis, as I would put it —invoking such higher principles as the raising of public consciousness (which Julius calls the «estrangement defense»), or the quality of its execution

(the «formalist defense») or its place in the sanctified history of its medium (the «canonical defense»).

This typology provides a framework into which a host of examples can be sorted. To the dozens of illustrations from the visual arts that Julius adduces one can easily supply musical counterparts. There is Arnold Schoenberg, the twentieth century's premier transgressor against the rules of traditional musical practice, protesting that he is not a revolutionary but a faithful follower of Wagner and Brahms, whom he has uniquely succeeded in synthesizing. (There's the canonical defense.) There is Igor Stravinsky, protesting that his ballet, *The Rite of Spring*, which shocked its early audiences into legendary outrage with its transgressions against the norms of taste, was «une œuvre architectonique et non anecdotique» —an architectural, not an anecdotal, work. (There's the formalist defense.) And there have been any number of composers who —foolishly, in my view —justify their avantgardism by confusing the transgressive with the progressive, insisting on the capacity of stylistically radical art to inspire radical social action, according to the idealistic terms of the estrangement defense. One of the most conspicuous was the Italian composer Luigi Nono, Schoenberg's son-in-law, who used his father-in-law's advanced compositional techniques to promote a political program that, when successful, invariably resulted in the suppression, as socially parasitical, of audience-alienating art like his.



As the case of Nono makes especially clear, these utopian defenses are damaging to the cause of art in the real world. Writing of one of the fountainheads of the transgressive tradition, Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (a work, as it happens, that has been much commented on in recent musicological literature), Julius first acknowledges that Manet's portrait of a prostitute meeting the viewer's gaze with a knowing look effectively countered the old hypocrisy of «pandering to, while affecting to deny, the erotic interest of the male viewer in the female nude», but notes, nevertheless, that it did not stop pandering. In Manet's work, and even more in Matisse's, Julius alleges, the artist «delivered nudes possessing a considerable erotic charge while rendering them in a certain sense unintelligible». I am tempted to say that all of musicology is indicted in this sentence, for it unmasks the power of formalism to deflect attention from moral issues. I am reminded first of all of Stravinsky's *Cantata* of 1952, which set a poem maligning the Jews, but at the same time employed—for the first time in Stravinsky's work—the serial technique pioneered by Schoenberg. The mountainous scholarly and critical literature about it analyzes the transgressive structure to a fare-thee-well but never once mentions the text, which belongs to a category that the Holocaust rendered inescapably transgressive. The formalist defense provided it with an alibi. Ultimately we are led into the topsy-turvy realm of false converses, where if art is by nature transgressive then any transgression may be dignified in the name of art—as Karlheinz Stockhausen proved the morning after 9/11, when he called the destruction of the World Trade Center the «greatest work of art in the universe».

So Anthony Julius's legalistic typology is more than tidy. It is wickedly strategic, because it exposes the contradiction at the heart of the modernist enterprise. The nonconformism of the modernist artist is regulated by a virtually irresistible conformist pressure. The transgressive artist works within constraints he dare not transgress. And, as Julius adds, it contributes to the impasse in which high art now finds itself, for «to the extent that the transgressive continues to animate artists' understanding of art, it tends to be a constraint on the emergence of genuinely new art». His conclusion is beautifully paradoxical: «The transgressive inhibits; it represents a boundary that today's artists must transgress.» To the demoralization of audiences by relentless transgression, Julius suggests, must now be added the demoralization of artists themselves as their self-created dilemma continues to resist solution.

Julius's analysis, which appeared in 2002, reflected the post-cold-war order in which so-called Western values were perceived to have triumphed everywhere, and that made it possible for him to represent his case as universal. Had he been writing a couple of decades earlier, he would have had to acknowledge the persistence of pre-Romantic esthetics in large parts of the world, even a world viewed through Eurocentric spectacles. In those parts of the world it was the non-transgressive artist who received honors, and the value system that rewarded conformity was supported by an educational and

socializing machine every bit as efficacious as the one that valorized transgression in the west. In the East, or non-West, of course, conformity went by other names, like service and cooperation, names that to westerners could only sound like euphemisms. But western values like creative freedom and originality (which protected the transgressive esthetic) could also be construed as euphemisms—for self-indulgence, immaturity, vainglory—and certainly were so construed at the time. «That», to quote Stravinsky after a morning spent listening to tapes of recent compositions at the Union of Soviet Composers in 1962, «was the real iron curtain».

*Editor's note: Richard Taruskin's reflection (a lecture given in Stanford University on March 3, 2008) continues in «dissonance» 113, with reflections on morality and censorship in contemporary musical practice. The discussion will include, among other things, a detailed examination of John Adams' opera «The Death of Klinghoffer».*

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- 1 Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005 (6 vol.).
  - 2 Steve Martin, *Born Standing up: A Comic's Life*, New York, Scribner, 2007.
  - 3 In a review of Alex Ross' *The Rest is Noise*, in *The New Republic Online*, now available at <http://www.powells.com/blog/?p=2757>.
  - 4 Peter van der Merwe, *Roots of the Classical: The Popular Origins of Western Music*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004. The review can be found at <http://ml.oxfordjournals.org/content/88/1/134.full>.
  - 5 Philip Gossett, «The Skeleton Score of Verdi's *Una vendetta in domino: Two Surviving Fragments*», *Note*, vol. 64, no. 3, March 2008, p. 417-434. It is also accessible through Project Muse: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/notes/v064/64.3gossett.html>.
  - 6 Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
  - 7 Subotnik, *ibid.*, p. 34.
  - 8 Dika Newlin, *Bruckner, Mahler, Schoenberg*, London, New York, W. W. Norton, 1978.
  - 9 See Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Towards a Semiology of Music*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990.
  - 10 Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003.
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