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FROM CLASSICISM TO MODERNISM

Western Musical Culture and
the Metaphysics of Order



Brian K. Etter

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BRIAN K. ETTER

Ashgate

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Preface

For nearly a century the avant-garde has defined the authority for new composition. This movement, extending from Schoenberg and his pupils to Boulez and Stockhausen, Penderecki and Crumb, and the academic composers influenced by them, dominates the modern conception of musical creativity. Serious music is held to demand new styles, new forms, and new ways of listening and hearing. This involves, specifically, the rejection among composers of the long tradition extending from the Baroque to the late masters of symphonic music, Shostakovich and Prokofiev. Yet the concert and operatic repertoire is largely devoted to the long tradition, represented in canonic works which appear increasingly problematic to critics today, but which audiences continue to love.

The need to accommodate and encourage musical creativity leads, then, to tensions in the concert hall: the works of the avant-garde are juxtaposed against works from the longer tradition, to the frequent discomfiture of audiences and performers alike. This juxtaposition creates a dichotomy of repertoires, but it also implicitly raises aesthetic questions about the nature of the two approaches to music. Yet such questions become muted by the fact that the avant-garde has so largely defined the creative side of contemporary musical culture.

The authority of the avant-garde also has implications for its representation in the historical and critical literature. For in general, critics and music historians have understood the avant-garde's historical importance as determinative for the direction of musical composition for the future.¹ That is, academic observers have usually understood the movement in the same way that it understands itself, so that the musical tensions of the twentieth century become defined by radical innovation and the opposition of tradition. The prevailing belief is that originality is always rejected in its day, but will someday come to be accepted. In this light even normal critical debate appears as illegitimate.

The arguments justifying the avant-garde are various and deserve to be taken seriously: this new music is seen by its proponents as the inevitable continuation of the tonal tradition, or as the necessary rejection of an exhausted tradition, or as a commentary on the evils of the twentieth century which could not be ignored. The arguments, however plausible in spite of apparent contradictions among them, never convince audiences to modify their tastes. But they also fail to suffice for a philosophical understanding of the avant-garde. For since its justification is bound up with its relation to the prior historical tradition, a philosophical understanding of the avant-garde will necessarily have to take its history into account. The questions remain:

Whence came the avant-garde into history? What is its relation to modernity? What is its inner, aesthetic logic?

The puzzles posed by the dichotomy of the tradition and the avant-garde have had their origin in the avant-garde's rejection of the tradition from which it claimed both descent and emancipation. But if the new music could be understood only by reference to the tonal tradition of the past, then parallel questions deserve to be asked of that tradition: What did tonality signify? How did it originate? What was its aesthetic logic? The critique of the tradition begun by the avant-garde appears plausible now precisely because the traditional aesthetic is not well understood. The long academic silence with respect to the aesthetic of the tonal tradition has largely continued; the twentieth century's exorcism of its aesthetic logic has left few means of recovering an understanding of the integrity it once possessed. This book, therefore, attempts to understand the dichotomy of concert music by recovering the origins and logic of both the tonal tradition and the modern avant-garde.

In sketching the above account of the core concerns of the book, I speak from within a particular musical culture – that of the United States – and from the dual perspective of both a scholar and a professional orchestral musician. Yet my experience attending concerts in European halls suggests that American musical life is not atypical among Western nations, and my perspective as a musician gives me first-hand knowledge of repertoire and programming decisions. Thus, to emphasize the essential point: although a purely academic knowledge of the history of music may point to an ever increasing fragmentation of styles and approaches in the twentieth century, the facts of musical life point rather to the continued centrality of the traditional orchestral and operatic repertoires. The tradition is still a vital presence, even if little is now written within its stylistic parameters. The recognition of this fact is a fundamental premise of this enquiry.

A few words need to be said in explanation of the terms and conceptual framework employed in this study. This book is a study in the history and philosophy of ideas about music. Because the determining questions are posed within what has been the prevailing understanding of the history of music, I take the dichotomy of the tonal tradition and the avant-garde as the typology best suited to conceptual clarity. Hence the principal title of the book: I employ the term 'classicism' to refer to what is casually, but not altogether incorrectly, referred to as 'classical music', and I use the term 'modernism' to refer specifically to the avant-garde movement of the twentieth century. This corresponds to the actual dichotomy of concert life that arose during the twentieth century and still remains in place.

Terms such as these are sometimes fraught with ambiguity, and the

divergent ways philosophers, historians and art critics use the term 'modern' offers ample opportunity for misunderstanding. 'Modern' in particular may mean, depending on the discipline of inquiry, post-Renaissance, post-French Revolution, or post-Nietzschean; 'post-modern', then, arises as a desperate search for a term to distinguish the third alternative from the first. Fortunately, 'modernism' itself is used with more consistency in the history of the arts than 'modern'; it denotes both a chronology and an approach distinct from what went before. Chronologically, modernism in the arts had its origin at the beginning of the twentieth century; conceptually, its origin and essence remain masked behind the spirit of its revolution against the tradition. For the sake of clarity in this book, I shall seek consistency by taking 'modern' and 'modernism' to be related philosophically as well as chronologically: they shall denote the post-Nietzschean enterprise of the rejection of the inherited intellectual tradition. I shall restrict the use of the neologism 'post-modern' to the contemporary movement in the academy seeking to disestablish the received intellectual tradition from its privileged position. I note, however, that post-modernism in this sense is itself descended from the modernist impulse.

The concept of 'classical music', as embracing the Baroque, the Classical era and the Romantic effusions of the nineteenth century, may appear more problematic, but, again, there is a common concept providing a unity at the core: that is the idea of tonality in its traditional sense of tonal unity achieved by a functional harmony. The older term, 'the common practice period', recognized this dimension of harmonic unity amidst stylistic change. As we shall see, the dependence of this music on classical metaphysics provides an additional reason to conceive these periods of music history as governed by a common set of principles. 'Classicism' is thus a warrantable term.

For any reader troubled by a seemingly over-simple dichotomy of classical and modernist styles, I would point first to the way that apologists for the avant-garde have conceived the relation of modernism to history and the general culture. The self-understanding of the avant-garde is precisely in contrast to the received tradition, whatever the continuity that may also be claimed. But another perspective is possible: surely there was a mainstream of twentieth-century music, embracing the sometimes expressionistic and sometimes classically inspired works of Stravinsky, Bartók, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, as well as others such as Benjamin Britten, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Samuel Barber and Leonard Bernstein. This mainstream is music that is performed; it is accepted by audiences in ways that the avant-garde never has been. Were I writing a history of twentieth-century music, I would recast the conventional telling of it in this way. Yet it remains true that the driving force in twentieth-century musical history has been the avant-garde, and in particular its influence on Stravinsky, Bartók, and Shostakovich was great indeed.² The predominance of rhythm over melodic interest, the use of

dissonance treated as sonority and non-functional harmonic language in this mainstream all testify to the departure from the classical tradition. Thus, the conceptual dichotomy of the recognizably tonal tradition and the revolutionary avant-garde has a justifiable foundation in historical reality; it establishes a basic typology for understanding the aesthetic issues. To achieve an understanding of the origins and aesthetic logic of each side of the dichotomy will illuminate the dynamic of history, if not all its details. The achievement of even this modest goal must have some merit in the present climate of musical confusion and aesthetic debate.

Yet the mainstream described above appears largely to have come to an end; what will take its place remains uncertain. The so-called minimalism of John Adams, Philip Glass and Henryk Gorecki fails as a substitute, appearing instead as a highly particularistic school of composition. But since there may be composers now who seek a place in the canon, and who find it difficult because the canon appears closed against virtually all new music, it is not out of place to reflect on the degree to which the tension between the modernist avant-garde and the tradition of classicism has created a climate little conducive to the reception of new music. If 'new' is understood as 'modernist', after a century of 'New Music' defined largely by the avant-garde programme, then it is little wonder that audiences automatically associate the two terms. If they are apprehensive of the avant-garde, they will be apprehensive of anything new; hence, the closure of the canon against new additions may well be one result of the domination of musical creativity by the ideology of the avant-garde. But it seems to me that this is not an altogether healthy situation; if an understanding of the assumptions of both the avant-garde and the prior tradition could clear the way for less suspicion on the part of both composers and audiences, perhaps a more vibrant musical life might result. Perhaps, too, the concept of a canon might appear less problematic than it does to many academicians today.

The foregoing remarks, cast more as the definition of an interpretive position than as formal argument, identify the core concerns of this book. Nevertheless, while they may suffice for the non-specialist reader, they necessarily raise certain questions in the context of current academic discussions of music, many of them arising in the post-modernist critique of the hegemony of Western culture and of the dominance of determinate traditions within that culture. The first question is why the concern of the book is limited to Western art music, that is, the concert and operatic repertoires. Especially inasmuch as there are so many native folk musics in the world and an ever-growing presence of popular music, the restriction to art music may well appear artificial. In comparison with the entire field of music, art music appears ever so narrow to critics who wish to speak of all musics.

My answer to this question (and implicit charge) is that what is at issue here is the definition of music itself: is it all organized sound, or an art created within particular traditions? The prevailing conception of music regards it as any system of organized sound. The philosopher hopes that universal statements might be deduced about music in general, whereas the post-modernist critic would point to a multiplicity of voices heard in many different musics. Here I will simply say that I reject such a conception of music: music is an example of historically contingent activity which acquires its significance and meaning through shared experiences and a common language developed over time. The philosophical understanding of historical contingents such as music must therefore seek an understanding of the particular constitutive traditions, not of all possible constructs. Music is not simply an art of the organization of sound; a philosophy of music so understood would be meaningless. Rather, music is an art created within particular traditions. But these traditions are not simply different voices, as the post-modernist critic would assert: they are deeply imbedded within particular civilizations, of which they are in part constitutive.³ A musical tradition so understood cannot be displaced from its normative status lightly or easily.

The tradition of Western art music, from the Middle Ages through the twentieth century, may not be stylistically continuous, but it belongs to a continuous artistic enterprise, constantly developing and changing. It belongs to the same civilization as the author and the intended readers: it is our most important musical heritage. And it belongs to much of the rest of the world as well: there are nine orchestras playing Western classical music in Tokyo, and five in Beijing. The appeal of Western art music would appear intrinsic and not merely an accidental fact of history or a case of imperialist hegemony. To make the field of enquiry Western art music is not to assert that there is no other kind of music, but rather to recognize the existence and coherence of a determinate tradition and heritage. As such a tradition and heritage, Western art music surely merits understanding.

This takes us to the second question and the need for a clarification of the subtitle of the book: why 'musical culture' is restricted to the domain of art music. Here it is simply a matter of definition. I employ the word 'culture' in its principal dictionary meaning, its original sense and its most common usage. 'Culture' is the cultivation of the intellectual and moral faculties through the arts and letters. This is the way in which Matthew Arnold used the word in his *Culture and Anarchy* of 1869; the alternative to culture, he argued, is anarchy.⁴ On this, I agree completely. Culture is the result of education; the task of education is to lead out of ignorance into knowledge. Thus, if it be objected that the term 'culture' ought to be used in a more modern, anthropological sense to refer to the whole way of life of a people – what used to be called the manners of a people – I would have to respond that we need to retain some

word that will allow us to speak of the end product of an education. To be cultured is not just to be learned, although it entails that quality. Rather, the concept of culture also embraces the achievement of a high degree of moral rectitude and the cultivation of taste in the arts. It is a goal that defines the aim of a systematic education of the entire soul.

It is a matter of great irony, therefore, that the contemporary academic preoccupation with 'culture' in its anthropological sense works against this concept of culture as the goal of an education of the intellectual and moral faculties. For to assert that the object of study ought to be the whole way of life of a people is necessarily to call into question the value of a goal of education, which will be achieved empirically with perhaps comparative rarity. Instead, it becomes possible to speak of 'popular culture' as well as 'elite culture', and then the anti-elitist bias of the contemporary academy decides firmly against the validity of the latter. But a 'popular culture' is little likely to lead to significant cultivation of the intellectual and moral faculties, especially in its modern, commercialized forms.' Indeed, the term 'popular culture' bears within itself an inherent contradiction if the term 'culture' be understood within its original boundary of meaning. From such confusion will come little understanding.

The anthropological sense of 'culture', however, contains an even greater danger. For, having become the common currency of post-modernist critics of the Western heritage of arts and letters, it has passed into the service of an explicit relativism that denies the existence of intellectual and moral norms. Now, when an anthropologist studies the whole way of life of, say, a tribe, he would certainly say that a tribal culture contains within it such norms. But the concept of a way of life does not itself specify the norms; those remain to be discovered by the researcher. Hence, for the post-modernist sense of 'culture', the absence of norms becomes exactly the attractive feature: one way of life has no intrinsic claim on one's allegiance or judgement in the way that the original understanding of culture did. I would argue, on the contrary, that 'culture' as the cultivation of the intellectual and moral faculties is precisely the concept we need to recover, a term we must not allow to disappear from the language, because it contains within it the norms required for making us civilized human beings. Or rather, it is culture, which, in civilizing humanity, makes us fully human.

Culture in the authentic sense, therefore, requires an education in order to participate in it. At the same time, such culture is shared among those having the appropriate education. Hence, it is possible to speak of 'musical culture' as the sharing in performance of the music which cultivates the intellectual and moral faculties to a high degree. Such culture becomes public, rather than remaining simply private, and so it becomes indeed part of a way of life, although never the whole way of life. But this sense of 'culture' is not invalidated because the segments of a society possessing the requisite

education are fewer in number than the entire population, nor is it invalidated by not being shared among all the peoples of the globe. It is a question of intellectual and moral standards within a particular civilization, not of the exclusion of anyone's favourite music. Indeed, the prevailing post-modernist assumption that culture is a means of forging identity, either personal or ethnic, is both socially fragmenting and strikingly at odds with former assumptions. Not so long ago, music was regarded as the universal language, not burdened with the singularities of spoken language. As a result, the various national styles of classical music freely crossed national boundaries, as they still do today. The tribal fallacy has no place in musical culture.

There is a genesis of culture in the original sense of the word, however, and this takes us to the heart of the post-modernist critique of the tradition. That genesis is historical and, for this reason, culture is preserved in the institution of canons. It has always been so: in the ancient world, the works of Homer, and later of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, were preserved because they embodied the moral and literary norms the Greek *polis* required. Similarly, long after the Roman Empire fell into ruin, the masterpieces of Cicero, Virgil, Ovid and Seneca were maintained as exemplars of literary and philosophical achievement; they formed the cornerstone of the Renaissance in Western Europe, and through their place in the newly formed secondary schools of the time, they helped to shape the intellectual horizons and artistic imagination of the Western world.⁶ Finally, there is a canon of English literature, valid wherever English is spoken: it includes surely, but not solely, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Poe and Tennyson.⁷ In music, too, there is a canon, which is simply a fact of life for the musically educated. This book's argument proceeds from the recognition of that fact, rather from a hypothetical position outside the culture aiming at a critique of the canon. Judgements of canonicity are an inevitable part of any culture; indeed the existence of canons would appear to be a necessary condition of civilization. The post-modernist critique of canons is either naïve or disingenuous.

Nevertheless, there is inevitably a debate about the content and extent of the musical canon, which has been particularly acute in the twentieth century because of the conflict in style between classicism and modernism. This book will argue that there is more to this debate than simply a clash of styles in the ordinary course of historical development. Rather, there is a conflict over the nature of order underlying the conflict over the particular stylistic orders in classical and modernist music. I refer to this element as the 'metaphysics of order', but it would be well to offer some clarification on this final aspect of the subtitle of the book. For Aristotle, metaphysics was the science of being as being; it was the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature, not of the things of the visible world, but of the categories by which the world must be understood. As such, the nature of order was central to metaphysics in this

sense. Understood as a system of fundamental principles, then, metaphysics is not simply a branch of philosophical inquiry, but the set of core ideas about the nature and order of things; it is in this sense that I employ the term. Although metaphysics as a discipline has passed out of fashion among many in the philosophical community of the twentieth century, ideas about the nature and order of things are unavoidable. The argument of this book is that if there are norms in music, they are necessarily rooted in metaphysical concepts. The question is whether there are indeed musical norms, and whether there ought to be order in music. On this depend all questions of musical canonicity.

A word about sources, finally, is in order. This historical and philosophical enquiry depends on many German and French sources. I have provided citations to readily available English translations of foreign-language sources wherever possible, for one of the great benefits of modern scholarship is the large abundance of translated literature. For more recent sources where there is an accessible edition of collected works, I have provided citations to the original as well as to the translation. For less readily available original sources, however, the reader is referred to the translated text if there is one. For classical or other older philosophical sources, I have followed standard format and provided citations to line number or section number, citing a specific edition only if there is a quotation or if the argument depends on specific wording of the passage.

I would like to thank Professors John Wiley, Stephen Tonsor and Thomas Tentler of the University of Michigan for their encouragement in this project. Through extended conversations with them in the years following the completion of my dissertation, I found the stimulation to embark on a new direction of enquiry altogether. Nevertheless, the arguments presented herein are my own, and I take full responsibility for the views expressed and any deficiencies. I also owe an acknowledgement to my students, who, lacking any prior musical education, often found it difficult to understand the tradition of musical classicism, the claims of modernism and the demands of musical culture; the challenges they posed must be taken seriously by anyone who thinks the art of music worth cultivating. Finally, I would like to thank the anonymous reader at Ashgate Publishing Limited for his careful reading of the manuscript, and judicious criticisms. Most of all, I would like to thank my wife, Linda, for sharing a deep interest in this book's argument, and for reading drafts of the chapters with a critical eye. If this book is at all able to persuade other readers that musical culture matters, and that the nature of order embodied in musical norms matters, then it will be in no small measure due to the contributions of these people to my thinking about a problem which has puzzled me for many years. Accordingly, I hope that this book speaks to

both an academic and a musical audience: it is a book about ideas, for the sake of the love of music.

Notes

1. See, for example, Donald Mitchell, *The Language of Modern Music*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), or Laurence Davies, *Paths to Modern Music: Aspects of Music from Wagner to the Present Day* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1971).
2. William W. Austin, for example, took these three as the chief figures of his *Music in the 20th Century: From Debussy through Stravinsky* (New York: Norton, 1966).
3. For an explanation and defence of this sense of tradition, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984).
4. For a modern edition, see Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), pp. 44–8 on 'culture' as the cultivation of harmonious perfection. It is important to note that this was standard usage before the twentieth century.
5. For an excellent critique of an important part of modern popular culture, see Martha Bayles, *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (New York: The Free Press, 1994). Her argument that popular music has been deeply affected by the modernist movement in serious music shows the importance of understanding the latter even for this purpose.
6. On this, see Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, ed. Michael Mooney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).
7. For a lively defence of the concept of a canon in literature, see Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994).

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Introduction

Western musical culture since the early twentieth century has appeared irremediably bifurcated. On the one hand, there has been the concert repertoire and the operatic canon; these constitute what most people understand by the term 'classical music'. It is perhaps not too much to say that these canonic repertoires appear closed, or at least additions are made to them only with great difficulty and with rare frequency. On the other hand, there has been the musical world of the avant-garde, in which experimentation has taken place often quite radically, and where the search for new ways of self-expression continues apace. If few people outside of the devotees of new music pay it much attention, or if it rarely affects the concert repertoire, that condition seems to alter little about its accepted status as the expression of new music most appropriate to modern times. Indeed, the academic community, with its claim to arbitrate the status of music, appears increasingly committed to the kind of critical approaches to the study of classical music that may well end in a decline of its prestige in the general culture.¹ For it is the new, the absolutely unprecedented, that has been celebrated as the authentic product of musical creativity for over nine decades. The new and the old, therefore, appear in stark contrast as the two poles of musical culture in the modern world.

It is perhaps more appropriate, however, to describe this cultural situation as the existence of two separate musical cultures, one defined by the impulse to preservation and the other by the impulse to innovation. While this dichotomy runs the risk of oversimplification, such a typology is neither unprecedented nor unwarranted. Certainly there are other similar cultural dichotomies: C. P. Snow has described the opposition of the scientific and literary cultures of the twentieth century in such terms.² Within the sphere of music, the rival approaches of Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky have often been taken as representative of the polarity definitive of modernist approaches, even in spite of the many successful composers who lie outside their realms of direct influence.³ Thus Schoenberg and his school stand for the most radical direction of musical innovation, while Stravinsky represents the more conservative, yet still modernist, direction. It is as if little else counts.

To be precise, what does not count is the concept of musical creativity that operates within the boundaries of an organic tradition. Modern creativity, indeed, is virtually defined by the rejection of tradition.⁴ From this point of view, the concept of a culture defined by the explicit retention of a traditional canon appears intrinsically retrograde and ultimately indefensible. The concept of a canon becomes suspect, the process of its formation reduced to that of the creation and introduction of new works. As a consequence, it is easy to lose sight of the concept of a culture defined by the reception of works,