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· 1 ·

The musical work and nineteenth-century history

JIM SAMSON

Compositional and contextual histories

Even the formula 'compositional and contextual', suggestive of a dual perspective – a 'double root'[1] – may not fully embrace the materials and methods of a music history, whose very subject-matter must be open to debate. Texts, sounds, activities: all are primary data – objects, facts and events that are variously foregrounded, ordered and interpreted to generate our narratives. One obvious starting-point would be to place musical works centre stage, prioritising the cultural forms in which art music has most often been presented in the West. But that signals an analytical enquiry. If we want to write history we need to fill the spaces between works, to find strategies for connecting them. Two such strategies, conversely related, are prominent in histories of nineteenth-century music. One is intertextuality. We join up the works through similarity, as we might note the resemblances between visual stills. This quickly brings us to composers, to suggestions of influence or mutuality, and eventually to stylistic genealogies. The explanatory focus shifts – one may justly say 'reverts', for this is the mode of the past, of the nineteenth century itself – from the work to its creator. The present volume is well served by this approach, and there are strong arguments for privileging it, given the historicism of the age. Yet, paradoxically, intertextuality risks undermining 'work character'. If I choose to focus on the work, after all, I presumably value that quality of uniqueness that marks it off as more than the instantiation of a type. I celebrate its individuality, its embodiment of a singular idea.

This invites my second strategy. We might term it individuation, and its concern is to trace the historical process by which the particular (the special) emerges from the general (the generic). This too was privileged in the nineteenth century, an age of individualism no less than historicism. Indeed Harold Bloom suggests that the two are locked together in symbiosis – the weight of the past and the quest for a voice, dependency and originality.[2] His proposal

1 The notion of a 'double root', social and stylistic, was developed for art history especially by Heinrich Wölfflin; see his *Principles of Art History*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (New York, 1950; original edn 1917).
2 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford, 1973).

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unites two of the big themes of nineteenth-century art histories. At the same time it unites the artwork and its author. For Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' really describes a kind of collective authorial *mentalité*, shaped by certain aspects of Enlightenment thought, and as such it is an implicit celebration of authorship (indeed the celebration becomes explicit in his later writings).[3] Again the focus shifts inexorably from the work to its composer. Music history becomes the story of certain highly valued composers, whose genius and originality made possible our present-day canon of masterpieces. The work becomes part of an output or *oeuvre*. It finds its place within a larger narrative, one that characteristically develops from the composer's earliest formative stages to his full creative maturity and, often, his final flowering (the organicist metaphor is unmistakable). It is characteristic or exceptional – early, middle-period or late. It becomes a fragment of biography, since it is deemed to express particular thoughts and emotions in response to a shared culture, and to exemplify a unique style in relation to a more general style system.

To identify the work with its composer may seem a minimal rationalisation. But actually the work may exemplify other things – its performance, for instance. Even the most basic ontology recognises that the written score underdetermines a musical work, which can only be fully realised in performance. During the eighteenth century the space between notational and acoustic forms widened considerably. That century strengthened the autonomous character of the work by loosening the threads binding it to genre and social function. But it also 'created' the virtuoso, an international figure in whom the activity of performance gained (or regained) its own measure of autonomy.[4] In the nineteenth century the separation between 'text' and 'act' increased.[5] On the one hand the score was thought to embody a kind of intentional knowledge – an 'idea' that originated with the composer, so that the performer's responsibility was to unlock the mysteries, to make available the idea, to interpret. On the other hand the virtuoso performer could act as a magnet drawing the listener away from the qualities of the work towards the qualities of the performance. This of course rehearsed an ancient argument about vocal music – that virtuosity threatens meaning. But in the nineteenth century the terms of the argument were transformed by an ascendant individualism. Great performers, no less than great composers, could stake their claim to the high ground of a liberal ideology. They could transform the work, and even redeem it.

A musical work, then, may exemplify its composer and its performer. It may

3 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (London, 1995).
4 See Sylvette Milliot, 'Le virtuose international: un création du 18e siècle', *Dix-huitième siècle*, 25 (1993), pp. 55–64.
5 My terms here pay tribute to Richard Taruskin; see *Text and Act* (Oxford, 1995).

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further exemplify its tradition, as also its style, medium or genre. These categories make their own claims on the historian, and it will be worth considering each of them briefly as components of the chronicle. Tradition is perhaps the most implicative, though it is also the most elusive. The construction of traditions is usually linked to larger issues of cultural politics, and in particular to the politics of national identity. The 'invention' of a German tradition in the nineteenth century (converted to 'Austro-German' in the twentieth) is certainly the paradigmatic instance. But the case for a tradition might also be made on geographical (as distinct from national) grounds, as in discussions of a putative northern identity that subsumes the individual identities of the Scandinavian and Baltic nations in the late nineteenth century. Whatever the rationale, the tradition to which a work might be said to belong is invariably culturally and politically contingent. Yet for all its contingency the act of transmission – the process of 'handing over' (Latin: *tradere*) – still depends on the persuasive qualities of individual works. Cultural and political establishments may make their claims on these works, manipulating them to their own ends. But they do so mainly because the music is thought to be well worth claiming. However we locate its ideological roots, then, a tradition is usually closely identified with a corpus of significant works that have certain shared characteristics. In other words, it is described at least partly through commonalities of style.

When Guido Adler formulated his influential scheme for academic musicology, he presented musical styles – their growth and development – as central to the historical, as distinct from the systematic, branch of the discipline.[6] Adler's periodisation of stylistic history will be discussed presently, but we may note here that it privileges only one of several hierarchical levels on which the concept of style may function. That concept is defined by processes of selection and negation, but also by processes of standardisation. Leonard B. Meyer focuses on one side of this coin, observing that it is the selection of some elements rather than others from an existing stock of handed-down, 'pre-formed' materials that constitutes a style.[7] But a style also establishes its own normative markers, and it confirms these by temporarily falsifying them – by deviating from the norms. Thus style in music may be understood in relation to a dialectic between universal and particular, collective and unique, schema and deviation. The difficulty for the historian is that this process is almost endlessly recursive, taking us from something larger than a tradition (the Classical style) to something smaller than a work (the contrasted middle section). As an

6 Guido Adler, 'Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft', *Vierteljahrsschrift für Musikwissenschaft*, 1 (1885), pp. 5–20.
7 Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and Music: Theory, History, Ideology* (Philadelphia, 1989).

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historical tool, then, it is valuable in that it allows for a discussion of normative elements that help us to place the musical work, yet limited in that its range of application is so wide as to seem permissive. It is arguably at its most useful when it functions in tandem with other categories such as medium or genre.

Both medium and genre have commonly been used as principal categories for organising and presenting music histories. This elevated status has been assigned them partly for categorical convenience, but also because they possess a degree of internal consistency that can override stylistic differences, providing a narrative thread that connects composers from very different musical worlds. Even more crucially, both concepts can provide us with useful strategies for linking music to its immediate social context. To take an example: a history of the string quartet medium in the nineteenth century would trace a stylistic journey that can be adequately explained only in relation to a social journey. Like the orchestra before it, the quartet crossed from private to public arenas, and that shift made its own demands on musical materials. Or consider the rise of the piano. Not only did the instrument generate a new repertory, where style and medium are locked together by an idiomatic imperative. It also transformed the social history of music; the instrument itself became a social agent. And here we return to performance. There is a case to be made – indeed I shall make it later in this chapter – for an 'alternative history' of nineteenth-century music, one that centres on practices rather than composers, works and institutions, that builds the instrument and the performer – the act of performance – centrally into the historical study of a repertory.

Like media, genres are rooted in social functions, and their classifications to some degree codify those functions musically – even in the nineteenth century, as the generic histories embedded in this volume will demonstrate. Yet it has been argued (by Adorno and Dahlhaus among others) that the potency of genre as a classificatory mechanism declined during the Romantic era, a consequence of the rise of aesthetic autonomy and of a swerve towards the musical work.[8] Self-contained works, in other words, resisted the closure and finality of meaning conventionally offered by a genre title. It may be nearer the mark to speak of transformation than decline. Increasingly genres took on a crucial role as orientating factors in communication, allowing conventional expectations to be manipulated in various ways. This rhetorical role was by no means new to the nineteenth century, but it came into its own, with its potential for irony fully realised, during that period. Moreover the 'rhetoric of genre' had repercussions on musical form, notably through the deployment of generic

8 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Christian Lenhardt (London, 1983), pp. 285–9; and Carl Dahlhaus, 'New Music and the Problem of Musical Genre', in *Schoenberg and the New Music*, trans. Derrick Puffett and Alfred Clayton (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 32–44.

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fragments as 'topics'.[9] The ordering of such topics by way of underlying plots had some potential to replace, or at least to complement, the structuring devices of a Classical repertory, and some commentators have found it helpful to describe this process through the metaphor of narrative.[10] Again a social dimension is inescapable here, since the topics (especially when drawn from popular culture) carry with them some memory of an original social function. Adorno referred to the 'clatter of dishes' accompanying Mozart.[11]

It will be worth retracing our steps. We began with a working assumption that a history of music is primarily a history of musical works. However, in order to discuss works in historical terms it was necessary to make concepts of them, and that meant grouping them into classes. As we did this our approach began to shift from the compositional towards the contextual, from a consideration of the objects themselves towards a consideration of the uses to which they are put and the responses they engender. Thus, performance is already a category of reception history. So too is tradition, which, as we are reminded by Foucault, is contained within, rather than prior to, the discourses about it.[12] And as soon as we begin to work with categories such as style, medium and genre we become aware that they can only be partially explained as aggregates of musical works. They take us inexorably into the social domain. We might indeed have begun there – not with a history of music, but with a history of 'musical life' (a much-used if mysterious term), of music as lived experience. We might have begun, in short, with context. Our subject-matter, then, would range widely across the many and varied practices involved in making music, promoting music, listening to music, and thinking about music. It would embrace performance, teaching and manufacturing sites, together with their several related professions; taste-creating (and one might say tradition-carrying) institutions such as journals and publishing houses; ideas about the nature and purpose of music; and – most important – responses by listeners from particular social and cultural communities.

On the face of it that represents a very different history. And even if the two histories shade into one another (as my discussion of work-based categories

9 See the chapter 'The Function of Genre', in Heather Dubrow, *Genre* (London, 1982). Jeffrey Kallberg has developed this idea in several papers, including 'Understanding Genre: A Reinterpretation of the Early Piano Nocturne', *Atti del XIV Congresso della Società Internazionale di Musicologia* (Bologna, 1987), pp. 775–9.

10 See, for example, Anthony Newcomb, 'Once More Between Absolute Music and Programme Music', *19th Century Music*, 7 (1984), pp. 233–50, and 'Schumann and Late Eighteenth-Century Narrative Strategies', *19th Century Music*, 11 (1987), pp. 164–74. Also my discussion of narrative in *Chopin: The Four Ballades* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 81–7, and Jean-Jacques Nattiez, 'Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?'; *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 115/2 (1990), pp. 240–57.

11 In Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. R. Livingstone (London, 1981), p. 48. Strictly speaking, he cites Wagner's reference to this in Mozart.

12 See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London, 1972; original edn 1969).

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suggests) they have two quite separate starting-points; they ask different questions of the past. In a word, the one focuses on works that have survived (and therefore on questions of aesthetic value), the other on practices that need to be reconstructed (and therefore on questions of social and ideological function). The stories can be told separately, and frequently are. Even in this book several chapters address contexts almost exclusively, while others are primarily concerned with repertory. But it is perhaps more usual to find them intertwining informally, or alternatively – as in many English-language histories – to see the music projected against a backdrop of 'general' history. In such cases it is not always easy to see just how text and context are supposed to interrelate. Indeed to locate the interface between the compositional and the contextual – crudely, between the notes and the world outside the notes – is probably the greatest single challenge facing any music historian. We may at least make a start by identifying three distinct levels on which social content can be made available to the music historian, three levels of mediation that are all addressed in different ways by this volume. These levels, corresponding more-or-less to categories familiar to semiology, are the social cause of a work, the social trace imprinted on its materials, and the social production of its meanings.

The first, the province of a social history of music, explains the work with reference to the conditions of its production. A traditional Marxist historian might want to argue that these conditions are the primary and exclusive cause of the work,[13] but it goes without saying that we can recognise the explanatory value of functional contexts without committing to any single ideological position. Put simply, this approach investigates the external motivation for a work, and the environmental and circumstantial factors that may have shaped it. To return to my earlier example of the string quartet in the nineteenth century. Behind those transformations of style lay a whole array of historical causes. Socio-political contexts take pride of place, as aristocratic societies gave way to a bourgeois-liberal ascendancy that increasingly shaped and directed the formal musical culture of Europe. That has an obvious bearing on practical contexts. From an intimate drawing-room genre (promoting instrumental characterisation and thematic-motivic exchange), the quartet became a public genre, positioned on the platform, with obvious implications for both the manner of writing new quartets and the manner of playing old ones. Intellectual contexts are also invoked, especially by the subscription series devoted to chamber repertories, 'classical' and 'modern', which were common by the mid-century. These, after all, reflected the historicism and aestheticism of an age in which

13 We might consider here, for example, George Knepler, *Musikgeschichte des XIX. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1961), though there is much more to Knepler's history than this formulation of its ideological starting-point suggests.

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cultural roots and cultural ambition were established through canon formation and an avant-garde. We could go on to discuss pedagogy, public taste, and many other factors making up the complex ecology within which composers and performers made decisions about the shape and character of individual string quartets.

The second level (social trace) is a good deal more elusive, concerned less with immediate shaping influences than with a deeper level of causality. This is really the terrain of a sociology of musical materials, and it is naturally subject to the interpretative licence of particular positions in critical theory. The core assumption is that changes in the nature of musical materials – in what is often called 'musical language' – do not occur in a vacuum, unrelated to the broader sweep of political, social and intellectual histories. Rather these changes, appropriately interpreted, can actually function as a mode of cognition, a way of understanding the world, since they encode its history at very deep levels. Music in this sense is a cipher; it possesses what Adorno described as a 'riddle character'.[14] To take a simple example: we might view the development of the nineteenth-century orchestra as an analogue to the rise of industrialism, with all the attendant connotations of a division of labour, dehumanisation of resources, and so forth, without suggesting for a moment that composers promoted, or were aware of, any such link. More radically, we might propose that the long, overarching 'project of autonomy' within European art music (manifest in the rise of instrumental music and of a subsequent and consequent aesthetic of absolute music) was mapped on to musical materials themselves through the rise and development of harmonic tonality. And that, incidentally, would make heavy interpretative demands of the post-tonal music developed in the early twentieth century.

The tendency of enquiries into these first two levels (social cause and social trace) is to congeal the musical work into a stable configuration. The third level (social production of meanings) proposes rather an unstable work, one that recedes or 'vanishes' before our eyes as it encounters the different preconceptions of particular cultural communities.[15] This is really the province of reception histories. Long before the term 'reception' came into general use in art histories, musicologists attempted to generalise about people's awareness of, and attitudes towards, particular repertories, and even to uncover the ideology informing their responses. The afterlives of works, in short, have long been integral to the study of music history, and perhaps especially for the nineteenth

14 See the discussion in Max Paddison, 'The Language-Character of Music: Some Motifs in Adorno', in R. Klein and C.-S. Mahnkopf (eds.), *Mit den Ohren denken: Adornos Philosophie der Musik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), pp. 71–91.

15 Stanley Fish refers to a 'vanishing text' in *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980).

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century, which cultivated Palestrina and Bach alongside Mozart and Beethoven. But dedicated reception histories have allowed us to observe more closely just how a work can thread its way through many different social and cultural formations, attaching itself to them in different ways, adapting its own appearance and in the process changing theirs. Of course such histories may choose to focus on certain unchanging themes (as in Eggebrecht's study of Beethoven),[16] implicitly reinforcing a characteristic identity for the music. But more often (as in Lissa's study of Chopin),[17] they demonstrate that the music is heard 'with a different ear' by particular cultural communities, indicating in the process just how susceptible it can be to appropriation, and how easily its identity can slip away from us.

Then and now

The history of nineteenth-century music, then, is a history of works, composers and performers; of traditions, media and styles; of institutions, ideas and responses. Importantly, it is also a history of mediation between these several categories, and above all between text and context, between music and the world around it. As I intimated earlier, this can also involve the mediation of aesthetic value and social function. If our principal concern is with musical works, we will tend to value their atemporal quality, their presence and greatness (qualities that may be easier to recognise than to demonstrate), their capacity to endure what is often called the 'test of time'.[18] Thus there is a sense in which the major repertory chapters of this book present a kind of syllabus of masterworks. This position will be mediated, however, by our knowledge that a powerful ideological element participated in the formation of this syllabus, which is not to deny the presence and greatness. If, on the other hand, our interest lies primarily in musical life, we will focus initially on the role that music plays in people's lives, on the nature and immediacy of its functions rather than on its quality *qua* music. The mediating factor here will be our realisation that social responses to art are in considerable measure shaped, and may even be controlled, by the character and quality of the cultural artefacts themselves. Moreover, as Simon Frith has argued,[19] it is by no means easy to do justice to the full range of social and psychological functions performed by music, beyond the most obvious ones.

16 H. H. Eggebrecht, *Zur Geschichte Beethoven-Rezeption: Beethoven 1970* (Wiesbaden, 1972).
17 Z. Lissa, 'The Musical Reception of Chopin's Works', in D. Żebrowski (ed.), *Studies in Chopin*, trans. E. Tarska, H. Oszczygieł and L. Wiewiórkowski (Warsaw, 1973), pp. 7–29.
18 See A. Savile, *The Test of Time* (Oxford, 1982).
19 Simon Frith, 'Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music', in Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (eds.), *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 133–50.

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In other words, there are no absolutes in this antinomy (if it is an antinomy) between value and function, as a glance at music in our own time will confirm. A superficial view would contrast the contingency and functionalism of today's popular music with the relative autonomy of classical music and an avant-garde. But a second's thought is enough to remind us that the classical concert, no less than the popular music event, has its ceremonies and rituals, and that these speak eloquently of social identifiers and validating social functions. Moreover, even the genres and materials of the classical repertory are themselves 'grounded' in very particular socio-political contexts. Likewise, it would be entirely misleading to suggest that the aesthetic ambition associated with the Romantic and modernist art work is unknown in popular music circles (though it does perhaps remain rather more clearly subordinated to the commodity status of the record-as-artefact within the culture industry). Indeed a case could be made for reversing conventional approaches to these repertories, if only as a potentially illuminating sleight-of-hand of historical method – a corrective to pedigreed habits of thought. In other words, we might learn something by examining popular music (and for that matter much of the non-Western repertory examined by ethnomusicologists) as 'works', capable of making their own statement in the world and of yielding some of their secrets to analytical probing. Conversely we might regard art music primarily as a 'practice', its shared materials revealing the social world of which it is a part.

All that said, the broad sweep of music history in the West does seem to take us from functional contexts towards that 'project of autonomy' mentioned earlier. And within this trajectory the nineteenth century again occupies a privileged position. It was in the late eighteenth century that music slowly disengaged itself from existing social institutions and began to create its own institutions, its own share in what Peter Bürger called the 'institution of art'.[20] The rapid growth of public concerts in the early nineteenth century was the most obvious marker of that shift (a 'cultural explosion' is how William Weber described it),[21] but, as chapter 3 will indicate, this was just one dimension of a more widespread professionalisation of musical life, embracing the conservatory, the music shop and the manufacturer's *salle*, as well as the benefit concert and the subscription series. This is not to suggest that a patronal culture disappeared from view. But even where court institutions persisted (as in the German states) they were increasingly transformed into public institutions, and were therefore subject more and more to market forces – to the rule of the box office. Moreover the project of autonomy also found expression and support in the world of ideas, initially through the rise of the aesthetic

20 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. M. Shaw (Manchester, 1984; original edn 1974).
21 William Weber, *Music and the Middle Class* (London, 1975).

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