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978-0-521-88260-6 - The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming
from Haydn to Brahms

William Weber

Excerpt

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Introduction

Designing a concert program necessarily involves a set of compromises among publics, musicians, tastes, and, by extension, social forces. Because most concerts serve a variety of groups with different tastes, desires, and needs, planning a program is a kind of political process. Musicians and concert administrators learn to negotiate among these groups, seeking ways to satisfy them separately and jointly. But such social accommodation went much deeper in musical life during the eighteenth century than it does today. Fewer concerts then took place, the public was far smaller, and musical life was much more tightly bound and necessarily collegial. Writers liked to talk about the Republic of Music, where disputes occurred comparable to those among monarchs, legislative bodies, and public opinion. Conflict over taste was built into this social system, and some listeners found musical dispute an intellectual pleasure. This dialogue on musical values served as the public forum where musical values were transformed fundamentally during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The guiding principle for designing concert programs in the eighteenth century, often called “miscellany,” grew out of longstanding musical traditions. Given the limited number of concerts at that time, musicians and listeners assumed that they would have to accommodate one another in programming, taste, and social behavior – concerts were a collegial undertaking. Whereas we expect a typical orchestral concert to offer three works by great composers, programs around 1780 included between eight to fifteen pieces, a few by deceased composers. On one program one would hear a mix of opera numbers, concertos, instrumental solos, overtures, or symphonies, and possibly a string quartet or a song. There existed no great distinction between serious and casual interest in music; people with a variety of musical needs and tastes came together to hear the same program.

Still, we should not exaggerate the extent of miscellany in eighteenth-century concerts. Songs composed for the salon, tavern, or men’s clubs were excluded from most concerts because formal and informal kinds of

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music-making were thought best kept separate. No hierarchical scheme differentiated these areas of music-making, though the aesthetic status of songs differed significantly in France, Britain, and Germany. Indeed, conventional miscellaneous programming entered into crisis when songs became more numerous in public concerts in the early nineteenth century. By 1830 many new kinds of music appeared in programs – dance music, sentimental ballads, and medleys of opera tunes. That raised serious questions about how diverse a program ought to be musically and socially, producing conflict among sections of the public such as had not occurred during the eighteenth century. An idealistic movement arose with a vision for taste and programming according to “higher” principles than those seen in what was called “salon” music, the latter consisting of opera excerpts and variations on popular opera tunes. Because the old framework of concert life could not maintain order in that new context, musical life began to break apart into separate regions of repertory and taste. During the 1850s a dichotomy between music deemed more serious and that deemed less serious became established, even though the word *popular* was not widely used in this sense outside Britain and North America.¹

Aggressive composers did much to initiate the transformation of musical culture, seen in W.-A. Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786), Luigi Cherubini’s *Médée* (1797), Joseph Haydn’s *Schöpfung* (1798), and Ludwig van Beethoven’s “Eroica” Symphony (1805) and string quartets. More broadly conceived, the breakup of musical life took place within a context of deep instability in European politics and society between 1789 and 1848. The sovereignty of the state having been more or less achieved by around 1750, a fundamental rethinking of the nature of government developed among the educated upper and middle classes. Internal upheavals occurred widely throughout Europe. The French Revolution and Napoleon’s reorganization of Europe opened up new possibilities that destabilized politics almost everywhere.² Along with political upheaval came an efflorescence of utopian thinking about ideal communities or the reform of professional or cultural worlds. Such movements developed separately from one other and could conflict intellectually or politically, but their influence proved mutually

¹ I discussed this topic in “Wagner, Wagnerism, and Musical Idealism,” *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 28–71.

² Robert Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959–64); Jost Hermand and Michael Niedermeier, *Revolutio Germanica: Die Sehnsucht nach der “alten Freiheit” der Germanen, 1750–1820* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003); Esteban Buch, *Beethoven’s Ninth: A Political History*, Richard Miller (trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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reinforcing. Thus the idealistic movement in musical life formed part of a broader rethinking of culture and politics within Europe as a whole.

The year 1848 marked a watershed in musical life just as much as in political history. The revolutions forced members of the musical community to come to grips with its fragmented structure, and a new order came into being. Classical music achieved a hegemonic status within musical thinking, pedagogy, and public ceremony. “What was fundamentally new about nineteenth-century music culture was the overpowering presence of earlier music, a presence that has apparently become irrevocable in our century,” Carl Dahlhaus noted.³ At the same time, new types of concerts were organized for the general public – ballad concerts, music halls, *cafés-concerts*, and programs of opera excerpts and songs – that formed worlds of their own with limited relationships to classical music life. Moreover, an intense battle broke out over claims that contemporary music was now neglected in the classical music concerts. Ideological warfare broke out between those for and those against forward-looking musical styles.

Thus did a “great transformation” occur within musical culture. I use the word *great* for the title of this book because of the contrasting meanings it implies.⁴ First, the word indicates the massive scale of changes that occurred in musical life. Second, it defines the cultural authority newly invested in canonic repertoires, an institutionalized belief in greatness. But, third, a “great” transformation could happen only under the pressure of social and political movements. The process by which concert programs changed from replacing old works with new ones to the revering of classics was by definition political in nature. Cultural historians often take for granted that the musical classics were foreordained and use the words *canon*, *classic*, or *masterpiece* in ahistorical terms. It is easy to glide through the first half of the nineteenth century without recognizing how massive a set of changes was occurring in the most fundamental aspects of repertoire, taste, and musical values. By contrast, the worlds of painting and sculpture came out of the Romantic period having experienced a less drastic shift from contemporary to classical standards in the definition of taste. A “high” art had long existed in those worlds but was late arriving in music, save for pedagogy and philosophical thinking. The field of painting did not undergo as major an ideological alienation from commercial culture; indeed, private

³ Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, J. Bradford Robinson (trans.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 22.

⁴ Karl Polanyi used the term in his essays on the reshaping of European economy and politics, *Origins of our Time: The Great Transformation* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1945).

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dealers took over from public salons in the last decades of the century. Thus, to understand how and why musical culture changed as it did, we must first define the nature of its old order before tracing the rise of the new one. We cannot understand the transformation of institutions and tastes after 1800 without laying a firm historical groundwork.

Two contrasting perspectives tend to recur in scholarly discussion of musical taste during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the one hand, those we might dub the “classicists” have as a principal concern the process by which high standards of taste and social behavior became established, and indeed can be protected, in musical life. James H. Johnson traced a movement for disciplined listening in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; Julian Johnson deplored the slippage from such standards in the late twentieth century.⁵ On the other hand, scholars we might call “populists” mourn the isolation of classical music from larger musical life, indeed from society as a whole. Lawrence Levine argued that a “shared culture” whereby works by William Shakespeare and Mozart were performed without canonic definition ended with the “sacralization” of a new high culture during the late nineteenth century.⁶ Still another perspective has raised questions about the declining interest in contemporary works that came with the hegemony of classical repertoires in serious concerts.⁷ When did the hegemony of classics create the necessity for New Music concerts?

Each of these points of view will come into our purview. While I have criticized the “classicist” viewpoint for making an overly negative assessment of eighteenth-century listening, I find its argument about the nineteenth century compelling in scope and implication.⁸ This book attempts to show specifically when, and in what kinds of concerts, a macroscopic division between supposedly “light” and “serious” music arose, related to the notions of “popular songs” and “classics.” Though opera overtures and selections kept alive a “common culture” among many kinds of concerts, recurrent dispute over how the music should be interpreted makes the word *shared*

⁵ James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Julian Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music? Cultural Choice and Musical Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁶ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁷ Nicholas Slonimsky, *A Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers since Beethoven's Time* (New York: Scribner's, 1953); Martin Thrun, *Neue Musik im deutschen Musikleben bis 1933* (Bonn: Orpheus-Verlag, 1995); Michel Duchesneau, *L'Avant-garde musicale à Paris de 1871 à 1939* (Liège: Mardaga, 1997).

⁸ “Did People Listen in the Eighteenth Century?” *Early Music* 25 (1997), 678–91.

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inappropriate. We will not, however, attempt to discuss philosophical aspects of taste in depth. Our perspective will instead be aimed at the conventional language whereby musicians, concert managers, and concertgoers talked about issues in the musical community. The book examines the period between 1750, when a significant number of programs can be found, and 1875, the point at which a new order in musical culture was established. The Epilogue assesses the state of the musical community in 1914 in reference to these issues.

THE TRANSFORMATION IN BRIEF

A major goal of this book is to survey the typical kinds of concert programs performed between about 1750 and 1875. In the course of several decades I have read thousands of programs, gaining an acquaintance with programming in a wide variety of places. My focus has been on Europe's four main musical cities – London, Paris, Leipzig, and Vienna – but I have also studied programs performed in such cities as Oxford, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Bordeaux, Berlin, and Boston. We will see that provincial cities were often in advance of the capitals, and that American concert life was intimately bound with what was happening in Europe, in Britain most of all – indeed, the popular song emerged earliest in Anglo-American culture. We will not examine all types of concerts. Our main concern will be in the strictly defined chamber music concert; the benefit or virtuoso concert and its successor, the recital; the orchestral series and its rival, the promenade concert; and events focused on vocal music, particularly the ballad concert, the *café-concert*, and the early form of the *opera gala*.

For an overview, let us take a brief look at the transformation of concert programming through photographed programs in the center of the book. We begin with the virtuoso or “benefit” concert, because it drew noticeable public attention during the first half of the nineteenth century. Organized by one or two musicians, it included a variety of soloists or ensembles accompanied by an orchestra. The organizer performed as soloist in a few numbers; his or her main intention was to impress the audience with a richness of musical talent mingling vocal and instrumental virtuosity equally. In 1785 a rising young violinist named Bartolomeo Campagnoli, later concert master of the Gewandhaus orchestra, gave a program that was typical for the time in its alternation between operatic excerpts and concertos (Ill. 1). The week before, a female singer from Italy gave a program with an identical pattern of genres. Concerts given in London, however, tended to be unusually long and diverse in historical

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periods represented. In 1801 the bass player Domenico Dragonetti offered a program of thirteen pieces, all but three vocal numbers, and he performed only in the concerto (Ill. 2). A canonic sense of Mozart's music was beginning to emerge when Dragonetti offered five of his pieces, but because none of the operas had arrived in London, selections from them counted as novelty.⁹ The duet by Benedetto Marcello (1686–1739) had a firm canonic status, and his music was rarely performed anywhere else in Europe.

Benefit concerts changed a great deal from the 1820s onward, as virtuosos made them commercial undertakings, moving rapidly between cities and filling opera houses several nights in a row. Nicolò Paganini, who lent this practice prestige, gave a program in Vienna's main opera hall in 1828 (Ill. 3) that alternated between vocal and instrumental pieces but, in comparison with Campagnoli's program, was imbued more completely with operatic music – overtures, vocal selections, and fantasies on well-known themes. The aria by Mozart and the variations on a theme by Haydn carried strong canonic implications by that time. In the next fifteen years virtuoso concerts became even longer and centered on vocal pieces, the start of a major change in programming. In 1841 pianist Louise Dulcken presented what a critic called “London's present glittering galaxy” performing twenty-three numbers, sixteen from opera, aided by Franz Liszt and her brother the violinist Ferdinand David (Ill. 4). The audience paid attention to the music, for a critic admitted that the audience “of beauty and fashion . . . sat it out with exemplary patience and evident gratification.”¹⁰

Revolutionary changes came about during the first half of the nineteenth century with the abandonment of vocal music in some programs and the focusing of a repertory on classics in others. A few pianists made a drastic break from the collegial tradition of the benefit concert by performing entirely alone at some concerts. Having originally offered conventional programs (Ill. 5), Liszt took this new path flamboyantly, pointing out what he was doing in bold type in Vienna in 1846 (Ill. 6). In the 1850s Clara Schumann and Charles Hallé took a different path, adopting a repertory focused on classical works and identifying themselves as interpreters and only occasionally as composers, shaping a new form of virtuosity. They usually included a few vocal pieces and perhaps a chamber work on their programs.

⁹ Rachel Cowgill, “‘Wise Men from the East’: Mozart's Operas and their Advocates in Early Nineteenth-Century London,” in *Music and British Culture, 1785–1914: Essays in Honour of Cyril Ehrlich*, Leanne Langley and Christina Bashford (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 39–64.

¹⁰ “Musical Intelligence,” *MW*, 3 June 1841, p. 363.

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Schumann offered a concert in 1862 that was rigorous in its choice of serious works, abandoning the opera *fantaisie* and carefully selecting recent pieces, in this case by her deceased husband (Ill. 7). Julius Stockhausen likewise led in the creation of a canon for song, often aided by Johannes Brahms, as seen in a concert they gave together in 1869 (Ill. 8).

Concerts given by string quartets abandoned tradition most abruptly of all by excluding vocal music altogether and defining their public as a cultural elite separate from the general public. In 1804 the Viennese violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh put on the first known public concert devoted entirely to string quartets and related genres, and in 1814 Pierre Baillot presented similar events in Paris. Everywhere the repertory was focused on pieces by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, as we see in a program of the Beethoven Quartet Society in London in 1846 (Ill. 9). Nevertheless, in Vienna for a while, and in Britain and North America generally, chamber music concerts usually included several vocal or solo instrumental pieces deemed worthy of performance with the great quartets. In Boston in 1855 William Mason offered a program with the Mendelssohn Quintette Club that included pieces for piano by Frédéric Chopin, Stephen Heller, and Mason himself, along with chamber pieces by Beethoven, Mozart, and Brahms (Ill. 10).

Orchestral concerts moved more gradually toward programs devoted to instrumental classics. A subscription concert at the Gewandhaus in 1787 (Ill. 11) typified the carefully patterned format, featuring opera selections, that was conventional throughout Europe from the mid-eighteenth century through at least the 1830s. The programs of the Philharmonic Society of London retained such a format through the 1880s, always including at least one opera overture and vocal selection, as we see in a program from 1826 (Ill. 12). Nevertheless, Beethoven's symphonies were institutionalized systematically in almost all orchestral concert series by the 1830s. The Gewandhaus subscription concerts first gave a symphony (Beethoven's "Eroica") the privilege of being the only piece after intermission in 1807, and the Philharmonic Society did the same with the Ninth Symphony in 1825.

Concerts became either much longer or shorter during the 1830s and 1840s. On the one hand, a "Grand Miscellaneous Concert" given by the Oxford Musical Society on 16 June 1832 offered thirteen pieces by dead composers and thirteen by living ones – a mixture of oratorio and opera excerpts, parlor songs, glees, and instrumental solos (Ill. 13). On the other hand, the Viennese series called Concert Spirituel set a new benchmark Europe-wide in self-consciously serious programming. A concert in 1833, for example, offered an overture, a symphony, and a movement from each of two sacred works (Ill. 14). In the mid-1840s the Vienna Philharmonic

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went so far as to offer as few as three works, in one case works entirely for orchestra. But most orchestral series – even the Gewandhaus – continued to include solos for voice or instrument throughout most of the nineteenth century. The primacy of classical works in orchestral concerts led, in turn, to other events devoted to new music, as at the annual meeting of the Allgemeine Deutsche Musikverein in Hannover in 1877 (Ill. 15). We will see the origins of such concerts in the practice whereby a composer devoted a program almost entirely to his or her own music, seen in concerts given by Mozart, Beethoven, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Hector Berlioz, and Louise Farrenc.

The origins of what North Americans now call the “pops” concert can be found at virtually the same time as that of classical music concerts. “Promenade” concerts begun in the 1830s offered just orchestral music with only occasional exceptions, chiefly waltzes, quadrilles, opera overtures, and potpourris on opera tunes or topical themes. An early such concert at London’s Royal Lyceum Theatre in 1838 alternated between dance pieces and opera overtures (Ill. 16), while a program given by Johann Strauss, the Younger, while on tour in Leipzig in 1852, focused on potpourris, many of them based on music from an opera (Ill. 17). The pieces by Mozart, Weber, or Beethoven given at such events were associated in listeners’ minds with the theatre rather than classical music concerts. In 1849 a group of Berlin expatriates who toured American cities as the Germania Musical Society gave a concert with a similar mixture of genres (Ill. 18).

An equally fundamental innovation arose in concerts focused on music written for the theatre and the parlor, associated with the word *popular* by the last decades of the century. Songs and opera selections were the unifying point of taste for a general public different from that for the more specialized classical music world. As early as 1787 we find a “breakfast concert” at a public house in aristocratic Bath offering a program made up almost entirely of English songs and glees (Ill. 19). In 1822 one of Boston’s leading singers advertised a program focused on pieces from well-known recent Italian and British operas, only one piece more than ten years old (Ill. 20). In 1834 a singer advertised a “Miscellaneous Entertainment” in Hull as full of “popular songs” and comic acts that looked ahead to the music hall (Ill. 21). Concerts with similar ambience occurred in Germany: a show entitled “Singspiel-Halle (Salon Variété)” in Leipzig in 1866 included waltzes, comic acts, piano solos, and excerpts from German comic opera (Ill. 22). The *café-concert* and the music hall developed an unprecedented mass audience for concerts of this sort in the 1850s. A program at the Grand

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Casino de Paris in 1868 opened with *vaudeville*-like acts and concluded with eighteen well-known opera duos (Ill. 23).

At the same time the opera “gala” arose, a concert of opera selections and songs. Jacques Blumenthal drew an elite audience to one he directed in London in 1857, the opera numbers punctuated by him singing and playing his own music (Ill. 24). We see how large a repertory of canonic opera selections developed in these concerts in a program performed in Paris in 1869 (Ill. 25). Finally, an edition of *potpourris favoris* published in the 1860s illustrates a canon of composers represented at that kind of concert, seen from a German perspective (Ill. 26).

Thus did canonic repertories emerge in quite different forms at concerts presented by quartets, orchestras, and singers after the middle of the nineteenth century. We will follow the transformation of musical taste through the evolution of specific practices: miscellany giving way to homogeneity of genres, vocal and instrumental pieces no longer alternating, and contemporary repertories being replaced by ones called “classical” music. Richard Taruskin has traced the history of canons and standard repertory in broad and discerning terms. Impressed by the rise of such practices during the eighteenth century, Taruskin identified aspects of the music of Handel, J. S. Bach, and Domenico Scarlatti – the “Class of 1685” – that made certain works the *foundation stone* of classical music, even though some were not widely known in the composers’ lifetimes. He then raised the issue of whether the German canons, works of Beethoven most of all, can be considered authoritative as a musical *universalism* by the middle of the nineteenth century.¹¹ We will explore similar issues here. Chapter 1 outlines the principal concepts and contexts of the subject and then traces the evolution of musical taste within specific concert programs.¹²

¹¹ Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), vol. 2, pp. 233–5, 735–9; see also vol. 2, pp. 637–51, 691–4, and vol. 3, pp. 664–6, 676–87.

¹² See also *Concert Programmes, 1790–1914: Case Studies by William Weber*, found at <http://www.cph.rcm.ac.uk/Programmes/Pages/Index.htm>.

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PART I

Miscellany and collegiality, 1750–1800