

Ideology in Britten's Operas

This thematic examination of Britten's operas focuses on the way that ideology is presented on stage. To watch or listen is to engage with a vivid artistic testament to the ideological world of mid-twentieth-century Britain. But it is more than that, too, because in many ways Britten's operas continue to proffer a diagnosis of certain unresolved problems in our own time. Only rarely, as in *Peter Grimes*, which shows the violence inherent in all forms of social and psychological identification, does Britten unmistakably call into question fundamental precepts of his contemporary ideology. This has not, however, prevented some writers from romanticizing Britten as a quiet revolutionary. This book argues, in contrast, that his operas, and some interpretations of them, have obscured a greater social and philosophical complicity that it is timely – if at the same time uncomfortable – for his early twenty-first-century audiences to address.

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*For Arnold,
in friendship and admiration*

Hannah Arendt . . . is undoubtedly right in the identification of evil with triviality. But I would put it the other way round; I would not say that evil is trivial but that triviality is evil – triviality, that is, as the form of consciousness and mind which adapts itself to the world as it is, which obeys the principle of inertia. And this principle of inertia truly is what is radically evil.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics*

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Preface

Some Notes on ‘Subjects’, the Universal, and the Particular

Figure 0.1 shows Kazimir Malevich's 1932 painting, *Red House*, which is reproduced in colour on the cover of this book. It is an image of some indeterminacy. The house could be on the coast, separated from a choppy sea by a white shingle beach. (It could be Aldeburgh. It could be *the* Red House!)¹ Or it could be on the land, separated by a black tarmac road and empty white space from the sky. In the blank wall of the house, looking like a red Suprematist rectangle, there are no windows to allow us to see in or to allow the occupants to see out, at us looking at them. Nor are there any identifying marks that enable us to identify this as a particular house. Neither the landscape nor the weather nor the building itself nor its occupants or observers can be reduced to any particular existence. They are all universal, all caught up in a communal being-in-the-world. Like the faceless peasants or sportsmen whom Malevich painted at the same time, the house shows how the everyday and ordinary may be elevated by collective spirit. Britten's operas, like this painting, lie elementally open to analytical interpretation; and like this painting, the particularities of each opera quickly become, after a period of reflexion, indeterminate, shifting, and slippery. Ultimately, what appears on the surface to be a particular tale about an individual's suffering, sinning, or redemption, reveals itself to be more universal, a reflexion not just on an individual but on a social totality: a work, that is, that is shot through with ideology.

With a focus on the operas of Britten, this book is more particular than my last, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism* (which was in essence a general theory), but it addresses the problem of the universalism of music no less directly, and in important ways it builds on the foundations of the earlier book. In choosing to examine the ideological themes that I do in this book, I inevitably have to shine an interrogative light not only on Britten's representation of ideology but also of our society's continued embroilment in it.

In this book I shall have frequent recourse to the philosopher Alain Badiou's theory of the event, and the logically possible ‘subjective responses’ to it, and

¹ Sad to say, it is not. In any case, the Red House that Britten lived in is not on the coast.

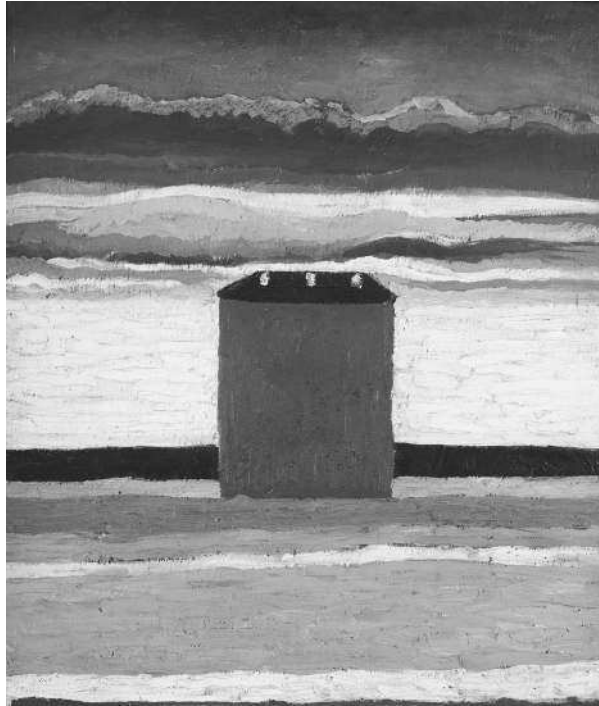


Figure 0.1 Kazimir Malevich, *Red House*, 1932. © Lebrecht Music & Arts. Reproduced with permission

for readers who are unfamiliar with the theory – which, though complex and multi-faceted, is not made useless by a fairly simple presentation – I shall give a brief summary of it here, where it may easily be referred to as the need arises. Badiou is a highly political philosopher, and a mathematically inclined one. For both reasons he is feared and loathed, and attempts are frequently made to ridicule his thinking. I shall discuss what he means by an *event* in Chapter 2, but what it occasions is three responses from assemblages that he calls ‘subjects’. Subjects are not individual persons, and so to speak not ‘things’ at all, but of course really, empirically, factually existing people like Beethoven or Galileo do become involved in the process of ‘subjectivization’. They do so by forming a *body*: in science and art, this is a ‘result’ of some kind (a law, theory, set of principles), or a work (symphony, concerto, sonata). The three subjects go by the names *faithful subject*, *reactive subject*, and *obscure subject*.²

² See Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2 (London and New York, NY: Continuum, 2009), 45–89, for the fullest general exposition of the metaphysics of these subjects, and J. P. E. Harper-Scott, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism: Revolution, Reaction, and William Walton* (Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Chapter 4, for my development of the theory in the case of music.

The Faithful Subject

This 'revolutionary' subject:

1. discerns a truth in some kind of trace (e.g. *the emancipation of dissonance*)
2. forms part of a body which is committed to the instantiation of the eventual truth (e.g. some post-tonal musical works)
3. is an operation which produces a new *present* in which the truth will have been manifested (e.g. a world in which tonality is no longer the sole controlling principle in musical composition)

The present is the distinctive creation of the faithful subject. In science it will be a new enlightenment, manifested as a theory that can account for the new truth (heliocentrism, general relativity). In artworks it is a new intensity of expression, an artistic configuration enriched by the inbreaking of new possibilities for mediating expression and form (the emancipation of the dissonance emerging not as a mere artefact of convention but as a subjective necessity unfolding in a newly heightened drama within a body of musical works). The faithful subject is revolutionary because it exhibits a high degree of 'fidelity' to the truth. It subordinates the body entirely to the production of the present, heedless of the cost. The subordination of a body of artworks to the faithful production of a present from the trace of a truth can lead to ridicule or rejection (Beethoven's late quartets, Schoenberg's free atonal music after 1908, Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge*). But more often than not it is met in the situation by a moderate reaction, a realistic response in the form of the second subjective operation.

The Reactive Subject

This 'realistic subject':

1. denies that the truth which it discerns in the trace is realistic
2. distances itself from the faithful subject as a means of denying the reality of the discerned truth
3. is an operation which produces an *extinguished present* in which the truth is accommodated to existing modes of understanding

The reaction does not come as an attempted reinstatement of the old and the abolition of the new; the reaction denies but it does not destroy, and it remains productive. The reactive subject is the majority response to an event. If in music the faithful subject is embodied in works which declare a new world of artistic communication, the reactive subject is embodied in works which adopt some of the new expressive possibilities but accommodate them to existing formal archetypes. The musical reactive subject in the period of modernism might recognize the expressive value of the emancipation of dissonance

as something which can enable a response to a contemporary new subjective necessity; but the extended tonality of the handed-down forms from the romantic period is not (as in the case of the faithful subject) reconstructed from the bottom up, emerging from the nature of the musical material itself. There is a heightened freedom, but not an emancipation, of melody and harmony, so that, for instance, a tonic chord might comfortably accommodate non-tonic elements. The new expressive intensity of the faithful subject is therefore directly referenced, perhaps on the surface of the music, only to be set aside, differentiated from the goals of the piece, so that the body of works does not submit to the same dangerous advocacy of the radical new present, and the reactive subject may enjoy some of the chic of progressiveness without any of the attendant dangers of losing an audience in the concert hall. Although the extinguished present of the reactive subject is still a production of something new (Badiou calls them 'reactive novelties'), its energetic denial of the trace of the truth clears the way for the final subjective response.

The Obscure Subject

This 'ideological subject':

1. affirms and endorses that there is a hegemonic *Body* of supreme, transcendent power
2. flatly denies both that there is any validity at all in the trace and that it is legitimate for any body to affirm such a trace
3. is an operation which examines and destroys the new present brought into being by the faithful subject

The obscure subject conceives the creation of the present as altogether impossible, base, fallacious, and unacceptable for intellectual or moral reasons. Structurally it is recognized by its blank refusal of the present. In order to appeal to an uncontaminated, pre-evental form of appearance, the obscure subject proposes a pure and transcendent Body, that is to say a Body conceived as if it were natural and eternal, morally neutral, obviously 'right', and not a product of history or cultural relations of power (all of which claims are ideological). The assertion of this immaculate Body eradicates both the trace and the body of the faithful subject. So, the seventeenth-century trace of the truth of heliocentrism, and Galileo, the most famous part of the body that bore it, yielded an obscure response from Pope Urban VIII, whose Inquisition extracted a recantation under threat of torture and then placed the scientist under house arrest for the remaining decade of his life. The idea and its spokesperson are thus negated by the assertion of the Body, and the present of a new enlightenment is 'occulted' by the exigencies of the subjective operation. In

modernity, the obscure subject's principal goal has, time and again, in every sphere of human activity, been the maintenance of the influence of capital and the centuries-long process that has led us close to the commodification of everything: this is its fundamental ideological commitment, however much it may vary the means of achieving it. Thus one finds the obscure subject not only in the development from nineteenth-century 'trivial music' to twentieth-century 'popular music', or in the historically parallel shift in focus from sheet music to sound recording as the favoured commodity form, but also in the mechanization of compositional process. To a subject such as this, claims to transcendence and emancipation make absolutely no sense.

In this book I shall often locate Britten, his characters, his critics, and his early twenty-first-century receivers at different points on this theoretical map, so that I can draw out the political effects of certain apparently 'innocent' or 'meaningless' aesthetic and critical particulars.

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As is always the case in the production of a book, many hands other than the author's have helped behind the scenes. I cannot recall every conversation that has spurred on a new thought, or which has enabled me to formulate a useful concrete example to help me to make an abstract point, and can only hope that, if I neglect to mention anyone who ought to have been credited, I will be forgiven. I do not blame them for any shortcomings that it will definitely have. (Blame those on the Tory government, which have been disgusting and outraging me throughout the period of composition.)

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