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## Introduction

Since the downfall of the approach to cultural history known as *Geistesgeschichte* – a downfall all the more irreversible for having occurred without fuss or controversy, like overnight bankruptcy – wrangling over the definition of terms such as ‘baroque’, ‘romanticism’ or ‘realism’ has the appearance of an obsolete activity, scarcely worth the effort for a serious scholar. The lazy compromise whereby these now questionable expressions continue to be used but are kept at a safe distance by being placed between imaginary quotation marks – no need to use real ones because they are so much taken for granted – has become a firmly entrenched habit among music historians, one of those countless provisional measures which are as indispensable as they are questionable. We use a discredited nomenclature and placate our scholarly consciences with the plea that it is always subject to recall.

All the same, rather than remain in an inconclusive state where, to put it bluntly, philosophical nominalism is misused to excuse terminological slovenliness, it might be possible and by no means futile to take up a debate broken off when *Geistesgeschichte* was renounced, and to demonstrate in justification that it can still be conducted – with altered premisses and having got rid of the awkward *Zeitgeist* hypothesis. ‘Realism’ is not a bad subject for an investigation of the advantages and disadvantages of stylistic concepts which have their foundations in the history of ideas (*Ideengeschichte*), precisely because it was a term which was ignored and pushed into the background by the adherents of *Geistesgeschichte*. They interpreted the nineteenth century *en bloc* as the age of romanticism in music, although strictly speaking the concept of a unifying *Zeitgeist*, permeating every level and area of a culture, positively demanded the construction of a notion of musical realism. (Among music historians of the *Geistesgeschichte* school, only Hans Albrecht seems to have been consistent enough to declare openly, if without further

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comment, that ‘the so-called neo-romanticism, to which Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner too were customarily assigned, was nothing other than the musical realism of the nineteenth century’.<sup>1</sup>

The *modus operandi* derived from the premisses of Geistesgeschichte may be dead and buried (though it would be rash to suppose that the problems left behind by it can be solved by being forgotten or swept under the carpet); on the other hand in recent decades the counterpart of idealism, historical materialism, which claims to turn Geistesgeschichte the other way up (from its head on to its feet, as Marx put it) has been granted a monopoly in the discussion of realism in music in both the aesthetic and the historical aspects. And although, in an enquiry whose subject is realism in the music of the nineteenth century (more specifically, 1814–1914), it would be quite in order to avoid the complex and often tiresome issues associated with socialist realism altogether, it may not be entirely superfluous at least to sketch an outline of the theory, for the picture any age forms of a section of the past is never totally independent of the controversies of its own time, in which it seeks to ascertain the nature of its own historical essence. There is a danger that (since every historian is also a child of his own time) historical judgements will be based indiscriminately and uncritically on the norms we all (necessarily) use to orientate ourselves in our own time. The best way to avoid or at least reduce the danger is to recognize it and thus seek to neutralize it, instead of allowing it to seep into the investigation of a past epoch in the form of implicit assumptions.

In exploring the theory of socialist realism, as formulated in the 1930s and incessantly modified ever since, it would be easy never to get beyond abstract discussions of shadowy dictionary definitions. If we are to grasp its concrete significance, we must surely analyse it first and foremost in its function as an instrument of socio-political interests. (The fact that there is an interest behind an idea does not, in principle, either diminish or enhance the substance of fact and truth contained in the idea; the logical standing of a truth is not altered by the truth’s being of more benefit to one side in an argument than another.) But if, on the other hand, our goal is to formulate a concept of realism which is valid within the context of the history of the arts and has special reference to the later nineteenth century, then we can discuss the features regarded as basic to and characteristic of socialist realism, whether in the field of aesthetics in general or of music in particular, from the point of view of what remains in the way

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of tangible and functioning criteria of realism after the argumentational processes of ideological criticism on the one hand and historical theory on the other have finished their mutual illumination of each other.

1. Any musical realism, whether 'socialist' or 'bourgeois', presupposes the existence of a heteronomous aesthetics; one where content takes precedence over form: this is so self-evident that it would scarcely need to be stated were it not that the fact that the doctrine of socialist realism has normative functions to fulfil has had consequences which distort the historiographical outline. Socialist realists are inclined to decry the simple description of a state of affairs as 'objectivism' (as if the addition of a pejorative suffix was an argument in itself). The polemic against an autonomous aesthetic, one where form takes precedence over content, can take one of two lines: it either denies the existence of autonomous music, in flat contradiction of self-evident facts, by exploiting the double meaning of the word to prove the 'functionalism' of the apparently autonomous, or else, while admitting the existence of autonomous music, condemns it as pernicious. And this polemic, in either form, is obviously the inescapable complement of a proclamation of musical realism, an apologia which takes an aesthetic 'order of the day' as its starting-point and scrutinizes history for good and bad tendencies. It blinds its proponent to the simple fact that in the later nineteenth century the two aesthetics, as represented by Hanslick (*Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, 1854) and Wagner (*Oper und Drama*, 1851), existed side by side; but the historian, if he makes the honest attempt to be descriptive, is not permitted to measure the one tendency by the criteria of the other. Yet it seems that socialist realists, even when they are being historians, never relinquish their didactic habits.

2. That socialist realism proceeds from 'historicist' premisses (I use the adjective in no pejorative sense) is a peculiarity which it shares with the bourgeois realism of the nineteenth century (and which is characteristic of the nineteenth century, by contrast with the 'realisms' of the art and literature of earlier epochs, whether of the late classical era or of the Renaissance). The postulate that the reality which is depicted in realist art ought to be perceived and represented as something determined by history and capable of alteration by history, dates from the Vormärz, the years preceding the outbreak of revolution in Germany in March 1848, when a socio-political commitment met

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and mingled with the legacy of Hegelianism, which looked for the essence of all phenomena in their history. The historical interpretation of social and aesthetic phenomena replaced the 'natural' interpretation which had previously been dominant but now came under suspicion of being 'mythical', in other words untrue. From the late 1830s onwards it was not the 'nature of things' but their 'historical conditionality' – understood to be intrinsic substance rather than accidental circumstance – which was regarded as the decisive yardstick of a statement with aspirations to realism. And the specific essence of reality was sought in the processes whereby it alters, rather than in its circumstances, which are apparently permanent or recurrent. The realism of the nineteenth century – and in this respect the twentieth-century socialist variant or assimilated form of the phenomenon differed little if at all – was not 'naturalism' but 'historicism'.

3. Although it was Friedrich Engels (in the draft of a letter to Margaret Harkness, April 1888) who first formulated the idea that the representation of a character, whether in literature or in music, ought to centre on what is 'socially typical' about the person and the situation, the requirement is one of those awkward Marxist aesthetic maxims which are wide open to ideological misuse. The bureaucrat who has administrative responsibility for the arts without ever exposing himself to the experiences art transmits will never have any real difficulty in disposing of the representation of a piece of reality which he would like to banish from public consciousness, on the grounds that it is 'not typical'. There is no shortage of interpretations of the postulate of the 'socially typical' which have greater claims to academic respectability than that, and can be seen to take their orientation from phenomena which are patently connected with the fundamental structure of a society, rather than being apparently accidental or peripheral. At such a level, 'socially typical' indicates that reality should not simply be 'depicted' unthinkingly; its representation should be so structured that its underlying preconditions and its consequences are unmistakable and plain to see. Not infrequently, however, the possibility of different levels of interpretation provides the hackneyed use of 'socially typical' in everyday currency, where it does ideological service, with the cover of intellectual legitimacy. It would be less damaging to make a plain distinction between naive realism and considered thought-out realism than to use an equivocal vocabulary which

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oscillates between the language of the academic and that of the administrator. Moreover, as I hope to demonstrate, a realism which is not exhausted in 'pictorial' reproduction but extends to the reconstruction of whole contexts of significative and functional nexuses offers the prospect of a music which aspires to perceive and to transmit the substance of a reality beyond the narrow boundaries of Tonmalerei.

4. The moral political commitment, without which Marxist aesthetics would not be what it is, was characteristic of Russian nineteenth-century realism, in which socialist realism had its roots, but it is not characteristic of realism *per se*. Realism in art implies an element of rebellion, that is, the representation of real phenomena which were previously excluded from the domain of art is felt to be particularly and emphatically realistic. From there it is only a short step to association with a moral political engagement, because the reality which has previously been banned for aesthetic reasons is simultaneously almost always a socially disturbing one. The association is not absolutely inevitable, however. The realist exploration of levels of subject matter previously regarded as unfit for art can also be motivated by purely 'aestheticist' considerations, as witness the novel *Germinie Lacerteux* by Edmond and Jules de Goncourt. The representation of repulsive, ugly and pathological features is not undertaken in order to stir the social conscience of the reading public in such a case – if morality plays a role at all it is subsidiary – but because it offers stylistic stimuli which introduce an unfamiliar colouration into art and thereby – according to the premiss that only what is novel is aesthetically authentic – justify the claim that it is in fact art. Even when the realism can be shown to be motivated by aesthetics rather than moral political reasons, there is no cause to withhold the epithet; whether an author is filled with compassion or outrage, or, like Gustave Flaubert, withdraws into 'impassibilité', has little or no relevance to the realist character of his work.

5. The dispute over 'partiality', a labyrinth of partly involuntary, partly deliberate misunderstandings, can, it would appear, be reduced to the one issue of what conclusions should be drawn from the scarcely disputable fact that historical judgements – and even historical descriptions – are never entirely independent of the categories whereby the author perceives and interprets his own time: its preconditions, its present structures and its prospects. If partiality can be justified by the argument that no one

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can escape his own situation, and therefore the historian, too, should acknowledge his situation rather than seek to deny it, then partiality can in turn be repudiated with the postulate that the reflection of one's own 'innate' prejudices is a means of neutralizing them or at least of diminishing their immediate pressure. In other words, self-reflection serves either to consolidate and accentuate or to limit and qualify. It is an instrument either of affirmation or of doubt.

6. The concept of the 'socially typical' and the principle of 'partiality' are closely bound up with a third factor, the requirement that a work of art must display a 'perspective' if the representation is to count as 'realist'. (Lack of perspective, and hence a shortfall in factual substance and truth, is the most common Marxist charge brought against realism whose verisimilitude cannot be refuted by any other means.) If – according to Kant – a fact is always a fact formed categorially by a human consciousness, and if furthermore – according to Marx – the consciousness of human beings is dependent on their social existence, it follows that what is judged to be a fact is determined or coloured by the position which the person making the judgement occupies in society – a society which must be understood as a nexus of functions and a process of development. In other words: reality is always perceived in a perspective, and which of the concurrently contesting perspectives will prove in the end to be correct cannot be decided logically but only pragmatically: by the establishment in power of a form of society which will have succeeded in asserting its own particular perspective as the truth. The precept that truth is always the victors' truth is thus not repudiated by Marxism but merely projected into the future which Marxism sees as belonging to it.

7. There was always a minority among the adherents of the doctrine of socialist realism – from Lunacharsky to Brecht and Eisler – who possessed enough knowledge and understanding of art to recognize that it was not an established style and could have no kind of pretension to be a norm but, in any reasonable and liberal interpretation, must tolerate the existence under one roof of some extremely various methods of mastering reality by artistic means. It is a belief that was continually emphasized and demonstrated by example, but its degree of acceptance varied. The next step, however – given a dogma whose claims to universal validity were not to be shaken – has been the tendency to formulate and define it in terms sufficiently comprehensive and

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capacious to accommodate diverging methods; but for all the merits of this as a strategy for artistic survival it has resulted in a concept of realism which is almost unusable for the purposes of art history. In the cut and thrust of aesthetic debate it was an advantage to be able to dissolve into the unspecific and the limitless, but it has been an obstacle to historiography. The conception of realism held by Brecht and Eisler was motivated first and foremost by tactical considerations, and has little or nothing to contribute to an attempt to understand the nineteenth century.

8. The Leninist principle that art should be 'a mirror', which is a central dogma weighing on the aesthetic theory of socialist realism, would be wholly unexceptionable as a doctrine if, firstly, it was not accompanied by the arrogant claim of being the only principle necessary in the interpretation of art as a whole – or 'true art' at least – and, secondly, if it had not been inextricably bound by Lenin to an obscurantist polemic against the 'irrationality' and 'obfuscation' of symbolism. The result was that Marxists who felt themselves to be Leninists but were not inimical to art have had to expend immense quantities of ingenuity in order to smuggle an atom of reason into a trivial argument they were not permitted to contradict.

Out of the fact that the concept of 'mirroring' is obviously too limiting to serve as the foundation for an aesthetics with pretensions to universality – a failing which is especially conspicuous with regard to the aesthetics of music – there has grown an interminable controversy: either art is governed entirely by the laws deriving from the obscurantist conception of its duty to 'mirror', or else a certain tolerance of the avant-garde leads to the situation where that same conception, although impossible to abandon altogether, is stretched and thinned to the point where it is no longer recognizable.<sup>2</sup> As a result the category is either rigidly exact and menacing or empty and harmless, according to the state of cultural policies.

While the concept of 'mirroring' was thus a function of the policies it had to serve, on the other hand the disapproval of symbolism inherited from Lenin distorted the depiction of the relationships which exist between music and reality. (The disapproval led in the end, incidentally, to the adoption of a complicated linguistic nomenclature in order to avoid speaking of symbolism in respect of simple musical facts.) Without some reference to symbolism, as understanding of it has developed in the Hegelian, neo-Kantian phenomenological and psychological



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aesthetics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is absolutely impossible to interpret the procedures and techniques whereby (1) acoustic phenomena of the physical world, (2) progressions and developmental processes, (3) spiritual and emotional states and processes, (4) language and its ‘cadenced interjections’ (Hegel) and (5) natural or social principles of order assume audible shape in musical structures, except at the cost of self-imposed regression into banality. (Some Marxist aesthetic theorists take the escape route of equipping the concept of the ‘picture’, which is counted as unexceptionable, with the most essential components of the taboo theory of symbolism, in order to avoid the consequences of Lenin’s philosophical obscurantism, his lack of comprehension of Helmholtz’s theory of signs.)

The theory of ‘abstract mirroring’<sup>3</sup> – that is, the idea that music as a form or structure can be a depiction of natural or social orders – goes back to Pythagoreanism. It undoubtedly represents the most extreme point to which the category can be stretched, and for Marxists who are more liable to attack than to accept ‘absolute’ music it is as suspect as, from another point of view, it is apparently ill-suited to be the foundation of a concept of realism specific enough to include historically delimited trends.

It is clear, however, that T. W. Adorno’s practice of interpreting music in terms of social history is based on a variant of the theory of ‘abstract mirroring’ which replaces the suspect Platonic–Pythagorean theory that musical forms ‘depict’ natural or social order with the concept of ‘negative dialectics’. For example, the music of Beethoven (more precisely, that of the ‘middle period’) is interpreted by Adorno as an expression in sound of fundamental categories which simultaneously sustain the functional nexus of society.

In Beethoven’s music, for all the idealism of its tone and posture, the essence of society, for which he speaks as viceroy of the total entity, becomes the essence of music itself. Both are comprehensible in the interior of the works alone, not in mere depiction. The central categories of the artistic construction can be translated into social ones.

In the analysis of details, admittedly, the threads that are supposed to construct a dialectical model get crossed, for it is left unclear whether, in order to extract a social utterance from Beethoven’s thematic-motivic working, Adorno starts from the premiss that a perfectly functioning economic-social system will issue out of the clash of egoisms, or from the totally opposing



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idea that in a 'managed world' individuals shrink to the sum of the functions which they have to fulfil to keep the clockwork of society running.

What we call Beethoven's thematic working is the mutual abrasion of antitheses, of individual interests; the totality, the whole, which governs the chemism of his work is not an overriding concept schematically subsuming the various elements; it is the epitome of both that thematic work and its outcome, the finished composition. The tendency is, as far as possible, to dequalify the natural material with which the working occupies itself; the motivic germs, the particular matter to which each movement attaches itself, are themselves identical with the general: they are formulas of tonality, reduced to nothingness on their own account, and as much preformed by the totality as the individual is in individualistic society.<sup>4</sup>

Georg Lukács, finally, attempted to bracket the Leninist 'mirror' principle with the popular and romantic aesthetic maxim that music is the expression of emotions, by means of a philologically somewhat unsound reference to Aristotle, designating music as 'double mimesis': reality is depicted in emotions, and emotions in turn are depicted in music. But although the simplicity of this thesis makes it highly attractive, it comes to grief on its very universality of application: it receives far too much heterogeneous matter in its embrace, and therefore serves to explain virtually nothing.

Given the intention of examining, analysing and establishing facts about the nature of musical realism as a characteristic phenomenon of nineteenth-century art, then clearly Marxist theory, condemning any avant-garde tendencies on the one hand and burdening itself on the other with universal pretensions, will hardly serve as a basis for the undertaking. Of course it will be necessary to give as much consideration to the elementary features which constitute music's depictive character, from the simple imitation of acoustic events to the 'world symbolism' of musical forms, as they have received in Marxist aesthetic theory, although there they sometimes appear curiously distorted. But these premisses, necessary though they are, are far from being the only terms of reference. Realism, as the representative style of an age, possesses characteristics (the element of radicalism, without which it is hardly conceivable; the principle of mixing 'high' and 'low' styles, in contravention of the aesthetic and social rules requiring their separation; finally, the postulate that in the

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depiction of social phenomena their historical conditioning must be apparent) which are independent in principle of the depictive features of music. Their presence is unavoidable, however, and they must clearly play a part in any definition of the concept of realism which is to be conducted according to historiographical principles and relate specifically to the nineteenth century.

## 2

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## What is musical realism?

The concept of ‘musical realism’ is a category which, it would seem, is as indispensable as it is questionable: we all use it from time to time, but with something of a bad conscience, because we should be in a quandary if we were challenged to say exactly what we meant. It is not that the term is an empty or meaningless one, a terminological ornament which can be added to a sentence without affecting its significance. On the other hand it is uncertain whether, or to what extent, there is any underlying coherence or agreement between the different senses in which the word is used; that is, whether ‘musical realism’ is an objective entity with an integrity which will stand up to examination, or merely the illusion of an object, generated by verbal usage.

Even whether it is possible to speak meaningfully of realism in respect of music, as it is in respect of literature or the visual arts, is a moot question. In the nineteenth century it was generally held that music was ‘of its nature’ romantic. Composers like Ferruccio Busoni, Arnold Schoenberg and Kurt Weill, none of them starry-eyed rhapsodists, all held the opinion that music is a fundamentally unrealistic art, and that therefore the concept of musical realism represents an error either in the thing so designated or in the judgement formed of it.

Busoni declared the principle of *verismo* ‘untenable’ because the only way to make the improbability of ‘people performing actions while singing’ aesthetically plausible was to set the action in the realm of ‘the incredible, the untrue, the improbable’, so