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## MUSIC, MUSICOLOGY AND THE SURRENDER OF AESTHETICS TO IDEALS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Paper given at conference 'The Pursuit of Beauty', Peterhouse College, Cambridge, 16 September 2023.

I am very grateful to Fisher Derderian for inviting me to speak at this conference. He initially suggested that I might speak on the state of play in musicology and the challenges faced therein.

So – the title of this conference is 'The Pursuit of Beauty'. This is an entirely laudable aim, I believe. Nonetheless, while believing ideals of beauty are far from arbitrary or entirely culturally constructed, I do maintain that they can be nurtured, developed, refined. And therein lies the crucial role of *education*. My central argument today is that the eschewal of this role for education has played a major role in relegating education in the arts to a relatively marginal position.

Time does not permit to engage in detail writings on aesthetics and education, especially those of Friedrich Schiller, which are of great interest to me, and of course Scruton's own. Here I will outline the processes which have occurred in my own field of musicology and music in higher education, and invite you to consider these in terms of these wider lenses.

So, I recognise the very term *musicology* may not be wholly transparent to all here. The term in English is generally taken to derive from the German *Musikwissenschaft*, simply 'music scholarship', which emerged as a discipline in its own right in the second half of the nineteenth century. Key developments were the establishment of the journal *Vierteljahrsschrift für Musikwissenschaft* in 1885, and Austrian scholar Guido Adler's essay 'Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft' ('The Scope, Method and Aim of Musicology'), published in the same issue. There were various earlier writings on music which can be considered musicology, including the treatise of Eduard Hanslick, Adler's predecessor as Professor at the University of Vienna, about whom we heard yesterday. However Adler's essay and the journal established the discipline on a systematic basis.

Adler focused upon music at the point where it had been established in a final form as a score, rather than compositional process, whilst allowing for some consideration of historical context and indeed performance practice. But he said that:

The determination of the mood-substance [*des Stimmungsgehaltes*], the aesthetic content, may be seen as the touchstone of critical reflection. Frequently, of course, this counts as the sole point, the alpha and omega of critical analysis. Scientifically speaking, this aspect can be perceived only when the other determinations have been made. However, in most cases it will be a futile effort to try to translate this into words....

Adler aimed to place the study of music on a quasi-scientific basis, much more so than earlier writers. He thought that musicological research was subdivided into historic and systematic sections, which can be mapped loosely onto contextual and theoretical/analytical approaches. Historical work dealt with (1) the knowledge of notations; (2) the study of musical forms; (3) the investigation of the laws of art in

different periods. He also linked this field to (1) general history and ancillary sciences including paleography, chronology, bibliography, archival knowledge, etc.; (2) history of literature and philology; (3) history of mimetic arts, in particular dance; and (4) compositional biography. Systematic musicology divided into (a) music theory; (b) music aesthetics; (c) music paedology, and would study (1) rhythm; (2) harmony; (3) melody. In the context of aesthetics he did ask 'must every work of art be beautiful? Are those tonal products which do not correspond to these criteria of the beautiful not also works of art?'

Then Adler also identified a field adjacent to systematic musicology, which he called 'comparative musicology' (*Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft*), which involved comparing tonal products, in particular folk songs, from many peoples, countries and territories.

Through the course of the twentieth century, as musicology developed in various regions, Adler's categories were modified but not wholly rejected. Musical forms moved into the realms of systematic musicology the more they became understood as highly dynamic entities, existing in an intimate relationship with the more microscopic aspects of musical composition, rather than reified constructions. Systematic musicology came to incorporate orchestration, timbre, and later on the use of electronics and other technology. In some regions including the UK the distinction between historical and systematic musicology was less stark than elsewhere, and scholars often fused aspects of both. Performance practice emerged as an important branch of scholarship with the growth of *Aufführungspraxis* in Germany in the 1920s, with associated disciplines such as *organology*, the study of musical instruments. Musical aesthetics came in some hands to develop into an area to study in its own right. But the most dramatic shift was with the replacement of comparative musicology with *ethnomusicology*, following the publication of Dutch scholar Jaap Kunst's *Musicologica: A study of the nature of ethno-musicology, its problems, methods, and representative personalities* in 1950. In the third edition of this book, published in 1959, Kunst wrote that:

The study-object of ethnomusicology, or, as it originally was called: comparative musicology, is the *traditional* music and musical instruments of all cultural strata of mankind, from the so-called primitive peoples to the civilized nations. Our science, therefore, investigates all tribal and folk music and every kind of non-Western art music. Besides, it studies as well the sociological aspects of music, as the phenomena of musical acculturation, i.e. the hybridizing influence of alien musical elements. Western art- and popular (entertainment-) music do not belong to its field.

The original term 'comparative musicology' (*vergleichende Musikwissenschaft*) fell into disuse, because it promised more - for instance, the study of mutual influences in Western art-music - than it intended to comprise, and, moreover, our science does not 'compare' any more than any other science.

Many have traced the development of the term and field since Kunst's publications. Suffice to say that ever since the writings of Alan P. Merriam in the 1960s and especially his 1964 book *The Anthropology of Music*, a branch of ethnomusicology has been concerned strongly with the study of music in culture, as a cultural practice

and in terms of its relation to the wider culture and society it inhabits. It was perhaps inevitable, and far from undesirable, that this type of ethnomusicology would venture into Western art music, in line with the subdiscipline known as ‘Anthropology at Home’ thus exceeding Kunst’s definition.

I will return to this shortly, but wish first to draw attention to a phenomenon generally known as the ‘new musicology’, usually dated as beginning with the publication of Joseph Kerman’s *Contemplating Music* in 1985. Kerman identified the need for ‘the study of music as aesthetic experience’, which relates at least in part to the study of musical reception, and also suggested it should draw upon fields such as literary and cultural study and new ones such as gender studies. Reception study was in no sense new and could be dated back a long way at least in German. Nor was it new to draw upon literary study or indeed cultural and contextual study – a whole tradition of the study of music in its social context can be identified prior to Kerman, not least the highly politicised hermeneutics of Theodor Adorno. What was less familiar was the focus on gender, and soon afterwards sexuality and racial identity. In the work of such scholars as Susan McClary, Rose Rosengard Subotnik, Lawrence Kramer, Ruth Solie, Philip Brett and others, these became central concerns for musicology, often considered (not least by McClary) to far exceed in importance questions of taste and aesthetics. Nonetheless, this was still primarily a *hermeneutical* tradition of scholarship, dedicated to eliciting meanings from actual examples of music. In this respect it would come to be relatively superseded by subsequent tendencies.

Ethnomusicology, as it had been developing in the meantime, was a no less heavily politicised field, some of whose protagonists, such as John Blacking, compared Western musical practises and culture unfavourably with those in other cultures in the developing world in which no such phenomenon as professionalisation had yet occurred and it was common for *everyone* to be considered a musician. The field also became deeply linked to emerging post-colonial theory, and its protagonists frequently set themselves in diametric opposition to most other varieties of musicology, and indeed often to Western music in general. I have argued elsewhere that their arguments were often based on straw man characterisations of this field.

[See my lecture ‘The Ethnomusicology of Western Art Music and the Application of Meta-Critical Scholarship on Ethnography: Reinscribing Critical Distance’, delivered for Colloquium, Music Faculty, Cambridge, 28 October 2020 – at <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/30389/> ]

In particular, a range of ethnomusicologists declared musical value judgement to be invalid, and in the process espoused what on one hand appeared like a value-free relativism, but which closer observation revealed to be a highly loaded set of moral and political values to fill the aesthetic void. The same process could be observed amongst scholars identifying with postmodernism, such as former Cambridge Regius Professor Nicholas Cook, who gave the following somewhat neo-Rankian formulation:

It seems to me that the idea of the musical academy acting as some kind of quality control, with musicologists or theorists issuing admission tickets to a canonic hall of fame, is way past its sell-by date, and that the prerequisite for a more open-minded approach to musical culture than musicology has traditionally had is a

more modest intellectual ambition: to register, to describe, to establish the facts as they are.

(‘Writing on Music or Axes to Grind: road rage and musical community’, *Music Education Research*, vol. 5, no. 3 (November 2003), pp. 249-261, quote p. 259)

That Cook could only view value judgement as some sort of hegemonic judgement from above, rather than a process which goes on all the time amongst musicians and listeners (or those partaking of other forms of culture) tells me everything about how much his view was borne of a life spent primarily within academia. But his views have been echoed by many attacking musical ‘canons’. For music between Bach and the early twentieth century, there is a considerable overlap between the canons of taught music and the standard repertory – things change as one progresses into the twentieth century, or for music pre-Bach. But here is the view, or perhaps rant, of ethnomusicologist Philip V. Bohlman:

To the extent that musicologists concerned largely with the traditions of Western art music were content with a singular canon- any singular canon that took a European-American concert tradition as a given – they were excluding musics, peoples, and cultures. They were, in effect, using the process of disciplining to cover up the racism, colonialism, and sexism that underlie many of the singular canons of the West. They bought into these “-isms” just as surely as they coopted an “-ology.” Canons formed from “Great Men” and “Great Music” forged virtually unassailable categories of self and Other, one to discipline and reduce to singularity, the other to belittle and impugn. Canon was determined not so much by what it was as by what it was not. It was not the musics of women or people of color; it was not musics that belonged to other cultures and worldviews; it was not forms of expression that resisted authority or insisted that music could empower politics.

(Philip Bohlman, ‘Epilogue: Musics and Canons’, in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons*, edited Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 198).

Returning to Nicholas Cook: he, like many new musicologists and ethnomusicologists, could not avoid judgement, however, and simply displaced it from the aesthetic realm, in ways which have become all-pervasive in the last two decades. Now we have seen the rise of musicological ‘grievance studies’, in which one can be assured that the central concern will be how in some musical context one or other identity group has been excluded or demeaned, used as an argument for wholesale denigration of the musical context in question. There has equally been the move to ‘decolonise the curriculum’ in music, which in general has referred to the removal of Western classical music, viewed in a blanket manner as relating to ‘colonialism’ even when emerging from regions with no clear connection to colonialism at the time the music in question was composed. Musical notation, in particular, has come to be viewed as a colonial phenomenon, and music theory, as most of that taught regularly in the West originated from there. [For more on this, see Ian Pace, ‘Is classical colonial?’, *The Critic*, July 2022, at <https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/july-2022/is-classical-colonial/> ]. By contrast, non-

Western musical traditions, even when directly linked to colonial and slavery practices outside of the West, are frequently idealised.

For sure, there is important scholarship on musical life in colonised areas, but it is hard to imagine such a specialised niche forming the basis of an undergraduate curriculum. The more likely outcome of decolonisation, whether intended or not, is a curriculum centred primarily around contemporary Anglo-American pop, with a certain amount of 'global pop' rooted in the same tradition. And I would argue that this is the tradition which is really colonising the world today.

With the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and consequent growth of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, both musicians and musicologists have been lining up to say that music and musical study can never be the same again. Somehow the mass murders under Stalin, Mao or Pol Pot never inspired anything like the same reaction. All of this has been used to attack the idea of music study or making which stand apart from certain political concerns, employing the tropes of critical race theory to this end.

But perhaps most sinister, in my opinion, has been the work of William Cheng, a former pianist who shifted to write primarily on music for video games. Cheng's 2016 book *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good*, which won an award from the American Musicological Society and some fawning reviews, dismissed out of hand concepts of aesthetic autonomy, and for that matter academic freedom, or scholarly rigour (calling this indicative of a 'paranoid style'), calling instead for a 'reparative' musicology in which musicologists were supposed to be 'care givers and social agents'. Their work was to be judged and valued by certain gatekeepers of these concepts. I believe Cheng's passive-aggressive arguments (whose claims to 'care' are utterly belied by the attitude taken in his writings and those of his acolytes towards anyone who disagrees) to be one of the biggest threats to the future of musicology as an academic discipline of any worth, and are similar to those found in the Soviet Union in which ideological conformity superseded any considerations of aesthetics, academic freedom and integrity.

We have reached a situation in which large swathes of musicology, as with other fields of the study of art and culture, are dominated those who are first and foremost political activists, and see no distinction between this and scholarship. As such, any work which does not ideologically conform is not to be addressed directly or critiqued in a scholarly manner, but its authors attacked in personalised fashion, and underhand moves taken to try and eliminate it. Some of the UK and US's musicological associations have become little more than political gatekeepers. Any idea that musical work might be considered in aesthetic terms, or that there may be value in scholarship devoted to examining it in such a manner, is routinely derided.

Now let me give some data relating to the situation of music in higher education in the UK, based upon research I have done over the last few years into institutions, student numbers, faculties, courses and more. I divide the sector into six categories: (a) Russell Group institutions; (b) 'Mid-ranking' institutions (neither Russell Group nor former polytechnics); (c) 'Post-92' institutions which were previously polytechnics or colleges of higher education; (d) Those small few which award degrees but are still denoted as colleges of higher education or the like; (e) conservatoires (of which there are 9 in the UK); (f) private providers, such as BIMM, the Institute for Contemporary

Music, Futureworks, and the like. Data for entries for (f) are not available at present, due to their not being a full part of the Higher Education Standards Authority (HESA), while those for (d) are patchy, but the relatively few small institutions here mean that these would not likely affect overall data trends.

The undergraduate degrees offered overwhelmingly fall into one of five categories, as follows:

- (i) Plain *Music* (generally with no other qualifier in the title).
- (ii) *Music Technology/Production/etc*: this term is an umbrella one for most courses focused upon technology.
- (iii) *Musical Theatre*.
- (iv) *Popular/Commercial Music*.
- (v) *Music Performance*. At the conservatoires this can cover various genres; in the post-92s such degrees are overwhelmingly focused on commercial music.

Other degrees in Music Journalism, Film/Media Music, Music and Gaming and Music Business/Industry, but none of these has as many students across the sector as the above (though Music Business/Industry may be growing).

Now have a look at the next slide which gives data for students joining courses in 2020-21. This was an unusual year, for sure, because of lockdown, but the figures show no major break compared to those from previous years.

#### **Numbers of Undergraduate Students by Type of Institutions in 2020-21 (not including Colleges of HE or Private Providers)**

Russell Group: 1778 students (25.1% of university students, 19.9% of those in whole sector)

Mid-Ranking: 775 students (10.9% of university students, 8.7% of those in whole sector)

Post-1992: 4534 students: (64% of university students; 50.7% of those in whole sector)

Conservatoires: 1853 students (20.7% of whole sector).

#### **Numbers of Undergraduate Students by Type of Degree in 2020-21 University Departments (not Conservatoires)**

Music: 1381 (19.5%)

Music Tech: 2214 (31.2%)

Popular Music: 773 (10.9%)

Musical Theatre: 1558 (22%)

Performance: 453 (6.4%)

Other: 389 (5.4%)

#### **Conservatoires**

Music: 30 (1.6%)

Music Tech: 137 (7.4%)

Popular Music: 260 (14%)

Musical Theatre: 115 (6.2%)

Performance: 1000 (54%)

Other: 273 (14.7%)

## All

Music: 1411 (15.8%)  
Music Tech: 2351 (26.3%)  
Popular Music: 1033 (11.6%)  
Musical Theatre: 1673 (18.7%)  
Performance: 1453 (16.3%)  
Business/Management: 269 (3%)  
Other: 393 (3%)

[For wider data on this subject, see my 'Academic Music in the United Kingdom and the Dalliance with Practice', lecture given at Oxford University Faculty of Music, 25 April 2023 – at <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/30326/> ]

Between 2015-16 and 2020-21 the total number of students taking a first degree in music rose very slightly from 8288 to 8904, a net increase of 650 students, or 7.9%. These figures do not include those attending private providers.

The conservatoires represent something quite distinct from the rest of the sector; all except that at Leeds are focused on classical performance, with some representation of jazz and popular genres. But in terms of universities, it can be seen that fewer than 20% of students are enrolled on plain 'Music' courses, the only ones in which classical music plays any significant role.

Then here are some figures for faculties, which I divide up into two major categories, to do with *scholarly investigation* and *practical activity*. Musicologists of all types (including ethnomusicologists, those doing academic work on popular music and jazz, or in sound studies) are considered scholars, but those whose primary work is as composers, performers, music therapists, undertaking practical music technology/production/etc or sound design, are designated practitioners. Here are the figures as of earlier this year for faculties:

**Russell Group:** 202.5 scholarly (65.5%); 104.5 practical (33.8%); 2 other (0.6%).

**Mid-Ranking:** 62.5 scholarly (48.8%); 61.5 practical (48%); 4 other (3%).

**Post-92:** 101.5 scholarly (26.3%); 275 practical (71.2%); 9.5 other (2.4%).

**Colleges of HE, etc:** 2 scholarly (25%); 6 practical (75%).

**TOTALS:** 368.5 scholarly (44.3%); 447 practical (53.8%); 15.5 other (4%).

The picture is clear – the Russell Group has a stronger tendency towards scholarly investigation, though still a sizeable component of practical activity; the two things are roughly matched in Mid-Ranking institutions; and there is a very strong tendency towards practical activity in Post-92 institutions and Colleges of HE, etc.

Now, let me also note some wider factors in terms of closures of departments and programmes. Before 2004, there were only a few music departments which closed, mostly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But there have been a steady stream since 2004.

**Departments which have closed or stopped running undergraduate programmes since 2004:** Reading, Exeter, Roehampton, East Anglia, Lancaster, Essex, Abertay Dundee, Cumbria, Wolverhampton.

**Departments which have removed plain ‘music’ degrees in the last decade:** Kent, Keele, City, SOAS, Chester, Kingston, Edge Hill, Manchester Metropolitan, Coventry.

**Departments which have made significant redundancies or cuts in recent years:** including Southampton, Surrey, Royal Holloway, Huddersfield, Middlesex.

**Fall in those taking A-Level Music, 2010-2018:** 38% (Music), 10.6% (Music Technology) (source <https://www.ism.org/images/images/State-of-the-Nation-Music-Education-WEB.pdf> (2019))

**Overall fall in A-Level Music Entrants, 2010-2023:** 45%.

It is no exaggeration to talk about a crisis in education in classical music education in the UK. In part this has been the result of significant cuts to provision in the state sector, but a view which is widespread amongst educationalists and some teachers, which wishes to afford that 1000-year tradition no particular importance, despite the fact it is the Western tradition which most demands and benefits from formal education. Playing or singing along to some pop songs can be an easier option in many schools, especially when staffed by teachers with little if any knowledge of the classical tradition, or even musical notation, themselves, skills which can no longer be guaranteed from music graduates.

Two terms of which I have made much are the ‘deskilling’ of musical education, whereby young people fail to learn basic skills, not least those from less privileged backgrounds who would not encounter them otherwise; and ‘musicology without ears’, an approach to musicology in which the sounding music is no longer a consideration, and the musicologist is not required to actually listen to it. The extent to which both of these phenomena have grown should not be underestimated. Without listening, or indeed engagement with the products of listening (music analysis), musicology loses anything which distinguishes it from that which other disciplines (sociology, anthropology, etc) do better.

It was right that Adler’s categories would be developed and modified as the discipline matured. But now we face a situation in which there are few things which continue to legitimise musicology as a discipline at all.

We have a situation, in musical creation as well as musicology, by which aesthetic concerns have become secondary and immaterial, and work is judged by the extent to which those of certain political persuasions deem it to represent social justice. There is no real place for art in this climate, and some artistic education may no longer be preferable to no such education at all. It is important for all those who care about art and beauty, whether from a relatively traditionalist perspective or one like my own sympathetic to high modernism, to recognise this and engage in the proper critique it deserves.

