

On Canons (and teaching *Le sacre du printemps*)

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I have been meaning for a while to post something detailed in my ‘Musicological Observations’ on the vexed subject of musical ‘canons’. A debate will take place tomorrow (Wednesday 23rd November, 2016) at City, University of London, on the subject, which I unfortunately have to miss, as I am away for a concert and conference in Lisbon. Having for a long period taught canonical (and also less canonical) music, and also lectured on the subject of canons in general, I naturally have plenty of thoughts and would have liked to contribute; I suggested most of the texts below (a list which is generally weighted in an anti-canonical direction, which is not my personal view). Nonetheless, the organiser of the debate, Christine Dysers, was very keen when I suggested I might blog something in advance of the debate, including some sceptical thoughts on the abstract. So here goes....

The abstract for this debate reads as follows:

“Dead White Men? Who Needs Musical Canons?”

What is the nature and purpose of musical canons? And what are the systems of authority that they sustain? Do they tend to act, as Jim Samson has suggested, ‘as an instrument of exclusion, one which legitimates and reinforces the identities and values of those who exercise cultural power’ (Samson 2001:7; from ‘Canon (iii)’, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (2nd edn). Volume 5:6-7. London: Macmillan).

In this debate, speakers will explore notions of canonicity, particularly in relation to Euro-American art music. They will examine the reasons for the emergence of (largely composedly) canons and ask whether they still serve a useful purpose in the 21st Century.

Among other issues, speakers will consider the relations of power that underpin processes of canon-formation and ask whose ‘voices’ become marginalised, excluded or even forgotten. This will include, but not be restricted to, consideration of gender dimensions of canon-formation and how processes of inclusion/exclusion reflect underlying values, and ultimately ideas about the very ontology of ‘music’ itself. Such debates also raise questions about the role of canons in shaping categories of creative agency and hierarchies between ‘composer’, ‘performer’ and (often presented as rather passive) ‘listener’.

Suggested preparatory reading:

1. Charles Altieri, ‘An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon’, *Critical Inquiry* 10/1 (Canons) (September 1983), pp. 37-60 – on literature, but one of the most notable essays which is more sympathetic to canons – https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343405?seq=1#fndtn-page_scan_tab_contents

2. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (eds), *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992). In particular Bergeron, 'Prologue: Disciplining Music', pp. 1-9, and Randel, 'The Canons in the Musicological Toolbox', pp. 10-22.
3. John Butt, 'What is a 'Musical Work'? Reflections on the origins of the 'work concept' in western art music', in *Concepts of Music and Copyright: How Music Perceives Itself and How Copyright Perceives Music*, ed. Andreas Rahmatian (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015), pp. 1-22.
4. Joseph Kerman, 'A Few Canonic Variations', *Critical Inquiry* 10/1 (Canons) (September 1983), pp. 107-125 – one of the first major essays on canon issues in a musical context, and still an extremely important text on the subject – https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343408?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
5. Simon Zagorski-Thomas, 'Dead White Composers' – full text, link to recording, and a series of responses can be read here – <https://ianpace.wordpress.com/2016/04/27/responses-to-simon-zagorski-thomass-talk-on-dead-white-composers>

I find this abstract very deeply problematic in many ways. It is permeated throughout with a great many assumptions presented as if established facts, when they should actually be hypotheses for critical engagement, as if to try and bracket out any type of perspective which is at odds with those assumptions.

The first paragraph is almost a model of leading questions:

What is the nature and purpose of musical canons? And what are the systems of authority that they sustain? Do they tend to act, as Jim Samson has suggested, 'as an instrument of exclusion, one which legitimates and reinforces the identities and values of those who exercise cultural power' (Samson 2001:7; from 'Canon (iii)', The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, ed. Stanley Sadie (2nd edn). Volume 5:6-7. London: Macmillan).

Who has determined *a priori* that canons do indeed serve to sustain systems of authority? Whether indeed this is the case needs to be answered, and substantiated either way, rather than assumed. And, for that matter, how is a 'canon' defined (below I argue that fundamentally it is a necessary teaching tool)? Is it the set of composers who are regularly taught in particular institutions, or those who have sustained a regular listenership over a period of time, or those seen as epitomising particular strains of musical 'progress' through advanced and innovative compositional techniques, or indeed groups of musicians other than composers? Those questions may be said to fall within the issues of the 'nature and purpose of musical canons', but a less leading second question would be something along the lines of 'Do canons serve to sustain other systems of authority, and if so, how?'

Samson is a subtle and nuanced thinker, who has written perceptively on (relatively) canonical composers such as Chopin and Liszt, and whose PhD dissertation, later published as a book, *Music in Transition: A Study of Tonal Expansion and Atonality 1900-1920* (London: Dent, 1977), focused on mostly canonical figures associated with the period of 'transition' at the beginning of the twentieth century. So I went

back to the context of this quote (I do not have a hard copy of *New Grove* to hand, but see no reason to believe that the online version is different). Here is the actual quote:

The canon has been viewed increasingly as an instrument of exclusion, one which legitimates and reinforces the identities and values of those who exercise cultural power. In particular, challenges have issued from Marxist, feminist and post-colonial approaches to art, where it is argued that class, gender and race have been factors in the inclusion of some and the marginalization of others.

Samson does not ‘suggest’ this view, he points out that certain types of thinkers in particular have thought this – a view is being attributed to him which he is attributing to others. In this sense, the abstract misrepresents Samson’s balanced entry on the subject. I would draw attention to his second paragraph, which offers a wider (and global) perspective, and provides a good starting point for discussion:

Music sociologists such as Walter Wiora have demonstrated that certain differentiations and hierarchies are common to the musical cultures of virtually all social communities; in short, such concepts as Ars Nova, Ars Subtilior and Ars Classica are by no means unique to western European traditions. Perhaps the most extreme formulation of an Ars Classica would be the small handful of pieces comprising the traditional solo shakuhachi repertory of Japan, where the canon stands as an image of timeless perfection in sharp contrast to the contemporary world. But even in performance- and genre-orientated musical cultures such as those of sub-Saharan Africa, or the sub- and counter-cultures of North American and British teenagers since the 1960s, there has been a tendency to privilege particular repertoires as canonic. Embedded in this privilege is a sense of the ahistorical, and essentially disinterested, qualities of these repertoires, as against their more temporal, functional and contingent qualities. A canon, in other words, tends to promote the autonomy character, rather than the commodity character, of musical works. For some critics, the very existence of canons – their independence from changing fashions – is enough to demonstrate that aesthetic value can only be understood in an essentialist way, something we perceive intuitively, but (since it transcends conceptual thought) are unable to explain or even describe.

To present a range of different views on the role of canons might be more in the spirit of a debate.

Moving to the next paragraph:

In this debate, speakers will explore notions of canonicity, particularly in relation to Euro-American art music. They will examine the reasons for the emergence of (largely composedly) canons and ask whether they still serve a useful purpose in the 21st Century.

Phrases like ‘speakers will explore’ or ‘they will examine’ sound almost like diktats; more to the point, why single out Euro-American art music? Why not consider, say, the Great American Songbook, or some other repertoire of musical ‘standards’, which could be argued to serve an equally canonical purpose? Or how about looking at what I would argue is the canonical status of various popular musicians or bands – the Beatles, Madonna, and others – within popular music studies in higher education? Or at aspects of Asian musical traditions which some would argue are also canonical in the manner described in the Samson paragraph above?

Then the third paragraph:

Among other issues, speakers will consider the relations of power that underpin processes of canon-formation and ask whose 'voices' become marginalised, excluded or even forgotten. This will include, but not be restricted to, consideration of gender dimensions of canon-formation and how processes of inclusion/exclusion reflect underlying values, and ultimately ideas about the very ontology of 'music' itself. Such debates also raise questions about the role of canons in shaping categories of creative agency and hierarchies between 'composer', 'performer' and (often presented as rather passive) 'listener'.

Once again we encounter many hypotheses presented as if established facts (and more diktats: 'speakers will consider...'). Many of these loaded statements could be reframed as critical questions: for example, do canons indeed serve a function of marginalisation and exclusion?. I would ask *whether*, not *how*, processes of inclusion/exclusion reflect underlying values, *whether* canon-formation is a gendered process, and *whether* they shape the very categories of creative agency and hierarchies mentioned above. As **I have recently criticised in some blurb accompanying a lavishly funded research project**, this reads like an attempt to skip the difficult questions and present conclusions without doing the research first.

So, on to some thoughts of my own on the basic debate. Proper responses to the texts in questions (and others) will have to wait for a later post. I started thinking in a more sustained fashion about issues of canons first in the context of reading widely about the teaching of literature, then during my time as a Research Fellow at Southampton University, where the 'new musicology' was strong (I started off very sceptical, but was determined to familiarise myself with this work properly, then for a period believed that these musicologists were raising some important questions, even if I did not agree with many of their answers; nowadays I wonder if that engagement was a bit of waste of time and energy). There I taught a module on 'Classical Music and Society', which looked at various explicitly social/political paradigms for engaging with Western classical music, going back as far as Plato, and including a fair amount of Adorno, requiring students to actually read some of the original writings rather than simply rely upon secondary literature, though a critical approach was strongly urged (whilst basically sympathetic to the broad outlook of Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School, I have many serious problems with this work, not least in terms of the reliance upon Freudian psychoanalysis). Some of the best essays which resulted were quite scathing about Adorno – though also some excellent ones were quite sympathetic.

Anyhow, in a lecture on Adorno's views on modernism and mass culture, I contrasted the compositional technique and aesthetics on display in Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* and in a range of works from Arnold Schoenberg's 'free atonal' period. I did not expect many students to be familiar with Schoenberg, but was quite shocked when only a tiny number had at that stage heard *Le Sacre*. This made engagement with the issues Adorno raised all the harder.

I determined from that point that if I had the opportunity to teach a broad-based music history module, I wanted to ensure that the students taking it would at least have encountered this work – and numerous others. Not that I would demand any of them necessarily view it or other works positively (as **Simon Zagorski-Thomas**

erroneously suggests is the primary purpose of musical education in Russell Group universities), but they had to have heard it properly in order to be able to develop any type of view.

Now *Le Sacre* remains a controversial work, about which I have many reservations, despite having played the two-piano/four-hand version a number of times with two duo partners, and listened to countless performances and recordings, and studied the work in some depth. But by so many criteria – in terms of lasting place in the repertoire and long-term popularity, influence on other composers, strong relationship to many other aesthetic and ideological currents, or revolutionising of musical language – *Le Sacre* is a vastly important work. *Petrouchka* runs it close (and possibly some later Stravinsky works as well). But I have yet to hear a convincing argument that, say, the contemporary works of Aleksander Glazunov or Nikolay Roslavets, or those of Max Reger, Albert Roussel, Pietro Mascagni after *Cavalleria Rusticana*, or Amy Beach, can be considered of equal significance by any measure (which is not to deny that their work can be of interest). But if comparing the work of Claude Debussy, Schoenberg, Aleksander Skryabin, Giacomo Puccini, Serge Rachmaninoff, and others, such an argument may be plausible. Or with respect to the work of leading jazz musicians – King Oliver, Kid Ory, Louis Armstrong, Lil Hardin Armstrong, The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Jelly Roll Morton, James Reece Europe, Earl Hines, Fletcher Henderson and his orchestra, Paul Whiteman and his orchestra, Bix Beiderbecke, and many others active a decade after the premiere of *Le Sacre*. That is simply to allow for a diverse range of tendencies, all perceived to be of palpable importance, not to dissolve any judgement of value or indeed exclude the possibility of canon.

In short I want to argue for a reasonably broad and inclusive canon, if the term is viewed as a teaching tool. Anyone who has taught music history knows that the time available for teaching is finite, and so making choices of what to include, and what not, is inevitable (as with any approach to wider history). Students entering higher education in music often have only very limited exposure to a wider range of music, and need both encouragement and some direction in this respect; the only way to avoid making choices and establishing hierarchies is to give up on doing this. The moment one decides, when teaching Western classical music, to spend more time on Ludwig van Beethoven than Carl Stamitz, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart than Antonio Salieri, or Frédéric Chopin than Friedrich Kalkbrenner, one has established hierarchies of value.

When I got to teach my broad historical module – which covered the period 1848-2001 and I ran for six years – I attempted some breadth of approach (which made the module more than a little intense), incorporating various urban popular musics as much as classical traditions, including a substantial component on the histories of jazz, blues, gospel, rock ‘n’ roll, and many diverse popular traditions from the 1960s onwards, as well as much wider consideration of the possible historical, social and political dimensions of music-making and musical life during the period in question, which necessitated incorporation of a fair amount of wider history as well, working under the assumption that many students would not be that familiar with such events as the revolutions of 1848, or the shifting allegiances and nationalistic rivalries between the major powers in the period leading up to World War One. But this was still a course in *music* history, not a wider history course in which music was just one of many possible cultural tangents (the first time I taught it, I realised it was in danger

of going in this direction, and I modified it accordingly in subsequent years), and so I needed to include a fair amount of actual music, music which could be listened to, not just read about, so that entailed compositions or recorded performances (the latter is obviously not an option for those teaching earlier musical periods, a very straightforward explanation for why musical composition, for which texts survive, has tended to be quite central in such teaching). So this necessitated some choices relating to inclusion/exclusion – one priority was not to give disproportionate attention to Austro-German nineteenth century compositional traditions, and consider more seriously those traditions existing in particular in France, Italy and Russia; another was, as mentioned before, to give proper space to non-‘classical’ traditions. There were numerous other criteria I attempted in this context, not least of which was to present plenty of music for which a link with the wider context was relatively easy to comprehend – but with hindsight, I think this was a very dubious criterion, and which artificially loaded the attempts to ask students to look critically at the relationship between music and history/society, not take some assumed relationship as a given. There are a great many positions which have been adopted by musicologists and music historians, from a staunch defence of autonomous musical development to a thoroughly deterministic view; I have my own convictions in this respect, but the point is not to preach these, but try to help students to be able to shape their own in an intelligent and well-informed manner.

Someone in another department commented to me quite recently of his astonishment that he encountered students who had never heard Brahms’s Second Symphony (said with some special emphasis as is characteristic of those with a strong grounding in a tradition, and for whom not knowing this would be like a literary student never having read or seen *Macbeth*). I replied that if I encountered a few students who had already heard a work like that before it was presented in a class, I would feel lucky. But that situation is now to be expected, and in my view musical higher education can do a lot worse than try to introduce students to a lot of music which lecturers, audiences, and many musicians over an extended period have found remarkable. Not in order to dictate to those students that they must feel the same way, but to expose them to work which has been found by a significant community to be of historical and aesthetic significance, and invite them to form their own view – which may be heretical.

So it is on this basis that I believe ‘canons’ are valid, indeed essential, teaching tools for musical history – whether dealing with histories of composers, performers or even institutions – if students are to be given some help and guidance in terms of studying sounding music. I refuse to accept the singular use of the term ‘the canon’, for this is not, and has never been, fixed when one considers different times and places. Mikhail Glinka and Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov occupy hallowed places within Russian musical life and history, so far as I can ascertain (not being a Russian speaker, so dependent upon secondary literature), but this view is only relatively rarely shared elsewhere. The canonical status of Hector Berlioz and Franz Liszt has never been unambiguous, whilst that of Puccini and Rachmaninoff, as compared to the composers of the Second Viennese School, continues to be the source of healthy and robust debate. The place of Italian opera within wider canons of music from the eighteenth century onwards varies; I would also note, though, that within operatic history, Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini and Gaetano Donizetti are often canonised, but Giovanni Pacini and Saverio Mercadante are generally viewed as less central, to my mind an entirely natural decision. In terms of pre-Baroque or post-1945

repertoires, there is even less consensus. I for one find it very difficult to accept the particular choices of key works from the last few decades in the ninth edition of *A History of Western Music* by Donald Grout and Claude Palisca, revised by J. Peter Burkholder (New York: Norton, 2014).

I offer the following hypotheses (some of which I have no time to substantiate here) for critical discussion:

Aesthetics are more than a footnote to political ideologies, and canons reflect aesthetics in ways which cannot be reduced to the exercise of power.

There is not a singular canon, but a shifting body of musical compositions which are canonised to differing extents depending upon time and place.

Sometimes the process of canonisation is simply a reflection of what may not be a hugely controversial view – that not all music is equally worthy of sustained attention.

Canonical processes exist in many different fields of music, not just Euro-American art music in the form of compositions.

The most casual of listeners exhibit tastes and thus aesthetic priorities. These are not necessarily perceived as solely personal matters of no significance to anyone else, or else they would not be discussed with others.

It is impossible to teach any type of historical approach to musical composition and performance without including some examples, excluding others.

Many canonical decisions are made for expediency, and in order to provide a manageable but relatively broad picture of a time and/or place in musical history.

The broad-based attacks on canons, almost always focused exclusively on Western art music composition, are often a proxy for an attack on the teaching of this repertoire at all.

A very different view can be found in an essay of 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).

I can only characterise the above as a rant: musical canons are presented in language which might seem too extreme if describing Jimmy Savile or Slobodan Milosevic, and stops just short of indicting these in terms of complicity with widespread global dispossession and even genocide. But the paragraph is in no sense substantiated, and amounts to a series of rhetorical assertions. Furthermore, I would like to know more about how Bohlman thinks that music has indeed 'empowered politics' in any significant number of cases, or why he thinks music is best rendered secondary to other uses, basically reiterating the rhetoric associated with *Gebrauchsmusik* in the 1920s and 1930s.

It is certainly true that Western classical music (and a fair amount of Western popular musics too) has at least until recently predominantly been made by white men, in part because the opportunities available to them did not exist to anything like the same extent for other groups. Complaints, for example, about lack of staging of operas by women composers make little sense without suggestions of works (other than Ethel Smyth's *The Wreckers* and a small few others) which might feasibly be produced and would be acceptable in musical terms to a lot of existing opera audiences; relatively few women before recent decades were given the opportunities to write operas (which were rarely produced in isolation, but much more often in response to specific commissions). Only a shift to a greater amount of contemporary work in opera houses – which would create a new set of problems – opens up the possibility of a significantly increased representation of women composers. It is also hardly surprising that music produced in the Western world, at least in Europe, was only infrequently produced by 'people of colour' during times (basically, before the fall of many of the major European empires) when such people formed much smaller communities in European societies.

This is not to make light of the fact that opportunities for artistic participation have been strongly weighted in favour of certain groups in Western society over a long period (and, for that matter, in many non-Western societies as well). But the same was true of access to politics and government, the diplomatic service, banking, and very much else – the historical study of the figures who obtained and exercised power in these fields in Western societies before the twentieth century will be in large measure a history of white men. To arrive at a blanket decision on the workings of those fields on the basis of that information alone would be massively crude; the alternative is to spend time studying these histories before arriving at prognoses. To employ an *ad hominem* fallacy to dismiss vast bodies of creative work simply on account of the gender, class, ethnicity or other demographic factors relating to those who had the opportunities to produce, is myopic in the extreme, and smacks of a narrow politics of resentment. This is not a mistake that would have been made by Friedrich Engels, or the Hungarian Marxist intellectual György Lukács, both of whom wrote eloquently on the immense value of literary work by avowedly non-socialist thinkers such as Honore de Balzac, Sir Walter Scott, or Thomas Mann, in obviously political as well as aesthetic terms. The true believers in establishment values were those who – when nonetheless good writers who were prepared to allow their scenarios and characters to take on 'lives of their own' – could, according to these thinkers, reveal more about the inner contradictions damaging these milieux, sometimes more so than some writers who identified with the left.

I would personally argue that the ubiquity of Anglo-American popular music (much of which interests me very much, and which as mentioned before I have taught extensively) is a far more hegemonic force in many societies than any sort of classical 'canon', which plays an increasingly marginal role in large numbers of people's lives, especially in the face of cuts to and dumbing-down of musical education at many levels. As I argued (more than a little ironically!) in my [response to Simon Zagorski-Thomas](#):

Personally, I can rarely go into a bar without being barraged by Japanese gagaku music, cannot go shopping without a constant stream of Stockhausen, Barraqué, mid-period Xenakis, or just sometimes examples of both French and Rumanian musique spectrale, piped over the loudspeakers, whilst when I jump into a taxi cab in most countries, I can be sure that there will be no escape from music of the Italian trecento. This is not to mention the cars going past blaring out the darkest Bach cantatas, or the endlessly predictable torrents of Weimar modernism which the builders will always put on the radio.

In a world which has recently witnessed the vote for Brexit, the election of Trump, and the growth of the far right in European politics, not to mention horrifying revelations of the abuse of children in a great many fields of life, a degree of economic collapse since the 2007 crash which does not appear to be recovering (especially in various Mediterranean countries), a wholly unholy civil war in Syria between the equally brutal forces of the Assad government and ISIS, the approaching 50th anniversary of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and subsequent dispossession and humiliation of the native population there, with no signs of change, ominous possibilities for catastrophic climate change, and so on, making such a big deal and assigning such loaded political associations to whether the teaching of music favours some types of music more than others seems a trivial, even narcissistic concern of musicians and musicologists. It may enable some to gain some political capital and concomitant advancement in the profession, but it is hard to see much more significance – indeed this may be a convenient substitute for any other political engagement, some of it directly related to academics' professional lives, whether demonstrating against massive increases in student fees, or supporting and participating in industrial action in opposition to such things as the gender pay-gap. Perhaps energies could also be better spent elsewhere – such as playing a small but important role in trying to help some reasonable politicians get elected, rather than leaving the ground open to grotesque populist demagogues? This would be a much more laudable aim than fighting to ensure far fewer music students ever hear *Le Sacre*.

I wanted to end with some brilliant quotes from Charles Rosen, much better words than I could produce:

The essential paradox of a canon, however—and we need to emphasize this repeatedly—is that a tradition is often most successfully sustained by those who appear to be trying to attack or to destroy it. It was Wagner, Debussy, and Stravinsky who gave new life to the Western musical tradition while seeming to undermine its very foundations. As Proust wrote, “The great innovators are the only true classics and form a continuous series. The imitators of the classics, in their finest moments, only procure for us a pleasure of erudition and taste that has no great value.” Any canon of works or laws that forms the basis of a culture or a society is subject to

continuous reinterpretation and to change, enlargements, and contractions, but to be effective it is evident that it must retain a sense of identity—it must, in fact, resist change and reinterpretation and yield to them reluctantly and with difficulty. A tradition's sense of identity is dependent on the way it is transmitted, on what kind of access to it is made available to the members of the society concerned, and on whether the transmission makes the canon too rigid or too yielding.

(Charles Rosen, 'Culture on the Market' (2003), in *Freedom and the Arts: Essays on Music and Literature* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 17-18).

Access to what are considered the great works of painting and sculpture is adequately provided by museums. They stand as a formidable barrier to those who would like to get rid of a canon, or radically alter its character (generally replacing dead white males with candidates selected by ideology, politics, or sexual preference). As I have said, a canon properly resists change, although, in the end, it must change if it is to exert a living influence. However, an abrupt and radical alteration is generally impossible to achieve: the old values spring immediately back into place once the new ideology's back is turned. Introducing new figures into the canon is therefore, with few exceptions, a slow process, the additions generally reaching public acceptance only after decades of professional interest.

The example of two poets, John Donne and Friedrich Hölderlin, often said to have been discovered at the end of the nineteenth century after years of neglect, can show that the pathos of neglect and rediscovery is largely a myth. The present fame of Donne is popularly supposed to be owing to the influence of T. S. Eliot, but he was greatly admired by Coleridge and influenced Browning; and editions of his poetry were available throughout the nineteenth century. Perhaps the most influential academic critic of the time, George Saintsbury, wrote of Donne as "always possessing, in actual presence or near suggestion, a poetical quality that no English poet has ever surpassed." The criticism of Eliot brought Donne to the attention of a larger public, but he had never lacked admirers. Hölderlin is said to have been rescued from complete obscurity at the same time as Donne by the interest of two great poets, Rainer Maria Rilke and Stefan George, but earlier Robert Schumann wrote music inspired by his work, and Brahms set his verses to music. The fame of both Donne and Hölderlin increased greatly at the opening of the twentieth century, but these additions to the canon were made possible by the earlier existence of a continuously sustained admiration.

The efficacy of a tradition, however, can be weakened by swamping it with a host of minor figures, and we have seen this happen in our time. The fashion for Baroque music has awakened the interest of recording companies and concert societies, and the novelty of an unknown figure has a brief commercial interest. A brilliant essay by Theodor Adorno mocked the way the taste for Baroque style reduced Bach to the status of Telemann, obliterated the difference between the extraordinary and the conventional. Concerts of music by Locatelli, Albinoni, or Graun are bearable only for those music lovers for whom period style is more important than quality.

(Ibid. pp. 20-21).

