

# Frank Cox on Richard Taruskin's *The Oxford History of Western Music*

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Originally posted in two parts on blog *Desiring Progress*, on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012 and November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013, at <https://ianpace.wordpress.com/2012/11/28/a-comprehensive-and-brilliant-critique-of-taruskins-oxford-history-of-western-music/> and

### Part One

Since its appearance in 2005, there have been more than a few words written about Richard Taruskin's mammoth six-volume *Oxford History of Western Music*, likely to be a key text in music history for a long time. But not many of the reviews or other articles have looked in detail and critically at a good deal of Taruskin's underlying assumptions, ideologies, exalted claims made for the work, hidden agendas, and so on. A few that have would include Gary Tomlinson, 'Monumental Musicology', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, Vol. 132, Part 2 (2007), pp. 349-374, and also, interestingly, Susan McClary, 'The World According to Taruskin', *Music and Letters*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (2006), pp. 408-415; there is also a blog created by grad students Mark Samples and Zach Wallmark dealing with their reading through the whole work [here](#).

A new article which does indeed do these things has been placed on the online *Search* magazine, by composer and cellist Franklin Cox. It can be read here – [http://www.searchnewmusic.org/cox\\_review.pdf](http://www.searchnewmusic.org/cox_review.pdf).

I would really welcome all comments and thoughts emerging from this article, as part of a wider discussion of music history and historiography.

### Part Two

The latest issue of *Search*, the journal for new music and culture, is now online [here](#). There are numerous interesting articles contained within; I am particularly interested in the second part of Franklin Cox's extended and well-researched critique of Richard Taruskin's *Oxford History of Western Music* (see my earlier post on Part 1 [here](#)). There is much of great interest in this 79-page essay, but I would especially draw attention to the sections on Chaikovsky. I have previously worked under the assumption that many of Taruskin's claims about Chaikovsky (and other Russian composers) are likely to be basically sound, even where I might differ with respect to

the valorisation, and have used some of them (alongside material on Chaikovsky from other writers) for teaching purposes. But this critique sets some of these into relief. Cox not only looks sceptically at some of the populist claims made by Taruskin about audiences for opera in general in the nineteenth century (as Dana Gooley had similarly done in his landmark study *The Virtuoso Liszt*, comprehensively demonstrating how Liszt's audiences, far from entailing wide sections of the populations of the regions where he performed, tended to be dominated rather by slightly lower strata of the higher classes than those for some of his contemporaries), but also gives a strong argument for why Taruskin's espousal of the 'asocial' Brahms as against the 'social' Chaikovsky falls apart according to Taruskin's own neo-liberal criteria:

One must also draw attention to the uncomfortable fact that in terms of the sort of free-market ideology that Taruskin often appears to favor, Tchaikovsky was not particularly successful on the strength of his own efforts. The music of composers such as Rossini, Johann Strauss II, or François-Adrien Boieldieu was widely performed and enjoyed by a great variety of audiences outside of a narrow aristocratic support structure. In contrast, without state and wealthy patron support, Tchaikovsky would not have achieved the great success he did; indeed, he would not have even been able to compose most of the works for large forces that are the centerpiece of his output. The comparison to his "dialectical" opposite, the "asocial" Brahms, is instructive. Brahms spent a great portion of his career writing for and conducting amateur choral societies, which is clearly a social activity. He also succeeded in attracting a sufficient audience for his "asocial" music allowing him to amass a respectable fortune by the end of his life. In free-market terms, it was Brahms, not Tchaikovsky, who was successful as a composer-entrepreneur. (p. 16)

It is equally worth noting in this context how Brahms himself chided Clara Schumann for being 'too aristocratic', writing to her in June 1858:

Art is a republic.

You should make this more of a maxim than you do. You are much too aristocratic. I cannot deal with this at length now, but will do when we meet in person. This has struck me very much in the case of Henkel, and in a different way with Grimm.

Do not confer a higher status upon any artist, do not expect those lower down to look up to him as a consul. Because of his abilities, he is a beloved and respected citizen of the said republic, but not a consul or an emperor.

Die Kunst ist eine Republik.

Das solltest Du mehr zu Deinem Spruch machen. Du bist viel zu aristokratisch. Ich kann Dir das nicht lang ausführen, aber mündlich einmal. Mir ist das bei Gelegenheit Henkel und anders herum bei Grimm scharft aufgefallen.

Weise nicht einem Künstler einen höhern Rang an, und verlange nicht von Kleinern, sie sollen ihn als Höhern, als Konsul ansehen. Durch sein Können wird er ein geliebter und geachteter Bürger der besagte Republik, aber kein Konsul oder Imperator.

Brahms's 'republic' was almost certainly modelled upon the bourgeois concert-going public of the cities he frequented – eventually Vienna, though he had not yet located himself there at the time of this letter. In the summer of 1858 Brahms was in between periods working at the principality of Detmold, conducting the mostly aristocratic *Singverein* there, which he described as 'larded with nobility, without a necktie'; his frustrations with this period in his career are clear from his letters to Joachim, and Brahms became much happier when returning to Hamburg to conduct the amateur bourgeois *Frauenchor* there, the prospect of which had been put to him by his friend Julius Otto Grimm during that very summer of 1858 when he wrote to Clara. If Brahms was ultimately a composer for the comfortable bourgeois audiences of Vienna and elsewhere, rather than producing music for some nebulous idea of 'all people', his own claims to being 'social', especially in terms of whether or not he privileged an aristocratic listenership, are at least as strong if not more so than those of Chaikovsky.

But returning to Chaikovsky, Cox delivers the following damning verdict:

Empirical facts were supposed to have supplied the fabric of his "true history," but in this case, in order to satisfy his "asocial/social" thesis, Taruskin is forced to postulate not only a compositional intent on Tchaikovsky's part against which a great deal of evidence militates, but also a robust and well-defined century long symphonic tradition for which little clear evidence exists. (pp. 16-17)

To substantiate this, Cox draws upon some correspondence from Chaikovsky in which he expresses very mixed feelings about public approval, criticising Berlioz for 'wanting to please', demonstrates how much Chaikovsky's criticisms of Brahms (which were indeed very strong) related to some of his own self-doubts, in terms of handling of form, and considers the contradiction between Taruskin's 'social' construction of Chaikovsky and the fact that the composer wished to keep the programmes behind some of his works secret, all helping to provide a much more nuanced view of Chaikovsky's relationship to his public than that which is given by Taruskin to suit his own didactic aims. Taruskin's adoption of Chaikovsky (and numerous other Russian composers) towards the propagation of a 'realist' aesthetic becomes more problematic in the context of scenarios for opera and ballet alluding heavily to the supernatural, the exotic, or that derived from fairy-tales and other mythologies. Furthermore, as Cox points out, there are innate problems inherent in the application of a realist principle to such heavily formalised and stylised media as opera and ballet. This is one reason that some of the most radical experiments in 'realist' opera by Dargomizhsky (in *Rusalka*) and Musorgsky (in his unfinished opera *The Marriage*) remain primarily of purely historical interest, mostly in terms of how (in Musorgsky's case) they could contribute to a widened operatic musical language, rather than serve as the basis for the very nature of operatic composition. But perhaps most acute is Cox's critique of Taruskin's postulation of the relationship between Chaikovsky and Mozart. That Chaikovsky admired Mozart very greatly,

perhaps as much as any composer, is not in doubt, but Taruskin (as earlier in the section on Chaikovsky in his book *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays*) extrapolates from this that Chaikovsky therefore adhered to an eighteenth-century, in particular pre-Beethovenian, model of the legitimate role of the composer. Taruskin draws up an alternative non-Germanic canon, including Rossini, Auber, Gounod, Bizet and Délibes, which he presents as a shining counter-example to those wicked Teutons who represent the 'other' of most of his arguments. Chaikovsky then naturally takes his place within this tradition.

This is a powerful argument in its own way against a more conventional Austro-German canonical view of history, and one which has informed some of my own teaching of music history. But Cox aptly demonstrates how problematic is its rendition at the hands of Taruskin. To attempt to posit a clear separation between Mozart and the Austro-German tradition which followed him is already fraught with difficulties, particularly on account of the fact that it took quite some time before he was widely appreciated in France in particular. The links between Rossini, Auber and Gounod are tenuous at best; for Taruskin it seems mostly to suffice to place them together on grounds of being non-German. But, in France and Russia in particular, there were (something not really followed up so much by Cox) very strong attempts to develop operatic idioms pointedly different from the still-dominant and highly formalised (especially at the hands of Rossini) conventions of Italian traditions, and furthermore delineations between social classes in terms of which types of operas they would attend (some members of the high nobility in either country would never deem to visit any opera not in Italian). To write history as a Manichean struggle between the Germans and the rest is not only to continue to fight World War Two in the realms of music history, as seems to be Taruskin's continual wish, but also to remain fixed within the categories bequeathed by some earlier historians, who Taruskin rightly critiques, who would place most non-Germanic music from the nineteenth century into an essentially supplementary chapter entitled 'Nationalisms'. French, Russian, Italian operatic traditions (not to mention the smaller traditions to be found in Poland, Hungary and elsewhere) do not constitute a unified body of work, let alone a new linear canon; they do indeed deserve to be studied with respect and attention (as do non-operatic traditions from these countries) with an eye to their many differences, which could sometimes become quite antagonistic.

Cox, on the basis of detailed readings of Chaikovsky's letters, finds Taruskin's claims that Chaikovsky essentially bypassed a Beethovenian symphonic tradition to be hollow. He makes this argument on the basis that Chaikovsky made repeated references to Beethoven, Wagner and some others and was clearly highly conscious of this tradition and its relationship to his own work, but never constructed the sort of alternative canon that Taruskin would like. This does not exclude the possibility that Chaikovsky might have thought a little in such terms, though not written it down, but

much more evidence is needed to justify Taruskin's at the very least exaggerated claims.

This is just one part of this essay on the basis of which I will personally look differently at a historical model of Chaikovsky which I had perhaps accepted too readily from Taruskin. The political power exerted by a senior and renowned musicologist can be a dangerous thing, especially when that power makes other more junior figures reluctant to question his findings, whatever basis upon which they are founded. Cox has done a valuable service in this respect – as has Paul Harper-Scott in a scathing critique of Taruskin's alleged xenophobia and dogged adherence to the values of American free market capitalism in his recent book *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism*. There are many ways in which Taruskin's arguments have helped to shake up lots of earlier complacencies within Anglo-American musicology; but it is important to continue to interrogate his highly particular and not always well-founded or informed conclusions, rather than allow them to assume the status of ideology in an academic world which can sometimes yearn for easy certainties which accord with a neo-liberal status quo.