

Musicology is not Musical PR

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A good many non-musicians look bewildered when I tell them I am a musicologist as well as a performer, wondering what on earth a ‘musicologist’ is. I usually answer by saying something like ‘I am also engaged in critical historical study of music and music-making’, aware that this is far from being an exhaustive definition of the range of activity encompassed by musicology. Some musicologists are engaged primarily in highly technical analysis, others do fieldwork, some spend long periods in detailed study of old manuscripts, others investigate non-Western musical cultures, philosophies of and strategies for musical education, the psychology of music, and so on; my own work concentrates on document-based historical study, some analysis, sketch study, lots of historical contextualisation, ideology critique, performance practice, and in general a wide range of music and music-making from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing not least upon the institutions of music (including educational institutions) as well as musicians.

But, whilst many people would understand the difference between the critical study of literature such as one might undertake in an English degree, and a course in Creative Writing, designed to help students develop their skills for becoming a writer, the equivalent distinction is insufficiently understood and appreciated for music. This can be a major issue with prospective students and their parents, who imagine that a music degree is essentially a vocational qualification in order to become a professional musician. Unfortunately only a small minority of those who go through the advanced professional training provided by conservatoires succeed towards this end; the chances for those who go to university are correspondingly less.

Much can be said about the wider benefits of a music degree, the range of transferable skills it can entail, which not only prepares students well for many fields of life in which they might work, but also opens up an enriching outlook on culture and society in general. But this relates to a much wider conception of the study of the subject than would be involved in a more narrowly vocational degree, and in particular to the role of musicology.

Many musical practitioners (performers and composers) are sceptical or even downright hostile to musicology as a discipline with a degree of autonomy, seeing it as of secondary importance compared to the acts of making or producing music. Certainly as a formalised academic subject, dating from the mid-nineteenth century in the German-speaking world, musicology is very young compared to practical musical

activity, though wider thinking and writing about music can be dated back a lot further. As long as human beings communicate with one another about music, then some verbal discourses are established; musicology attempts to find ways to develop these discourses into something employing more rigorous and self-critical methods for arriving at conclusions.

Not all of those who listen to or take an interest in music are necessarily involved in producing it, any more than all readers are professional writers, or viewers of art are themselves artists (I personally have interests in a wide range of visual art, but my abilities to produce anything of the type are practically zero). And the priorities of those interested in music might be quite different to those who have a professional stake in certain outcomes. In this context the intermediary role of the critic can be important – bridging the intentions and desires of the producers with the wishes and requirements of the consumers, whether reviewing concerts or restaurants. In the case of reviews of atonal contemporary music, this relationship can become fraught, depending upon the target readership; a critic writing mostly for an audience already likely to be broadly sympathetic (such as the readership of a specialist new music journal) has a different task from one writing for an audience whose sympathy might be highly selective, or may even be actively hostile to such music, and are reading this critic for advice on what they might listen to. This latter type of critic would in some sense be failing their readers if they simply reiterated composers' own perception of their work with no consideration as to how it might be perceived by someone who does not necessarily share all of those composers' assumptions and priorities.

When considering historical composers, there are many obvious ways in which listeners may also approach the music in question in ways very different from those of the composers (or others from the time). One does not have to be a strict Lutheran to appreciate Bach, nor necessarily accept some of the theological motivations proffered for some of the musical decisions. An atheist would believe these were a delusion or at least a fiction, and might consider them as the expression of some wider human issues. A similar situation can apply to the tropes of heroism which inform some of Beethoven's mid-period work (and a good deal of subsequent reception), or more ominously the anti-semitic views expressed by Wagner in his 1850 article 'Das Judenthum in der Musik'; much work has been done considering the question of the extent to which these views, and other common anti-semitic views of the time, might have informed some of the characterisations in his music-dramas, and been understood as such by audiences of the time. If one concludes that this might indeed have been the case, this does not require automatic rejection of the work, but can facilitate an engagement with the music-dramas not simply as art works existing outside of time and place, but ones which reflect a particular set of ideologies of the time, held by the composer, which a reasonable person would today reject without necessarily rejecting all cultural work which sprang up in a context where they were

indeed acceptable. Similar positions are possible with respect to representations of women, of characters from outside of the Western world, in musical works involving theatre or text; on a deeper level it is also possible to consider the ways in which abstract instrumental music might itself have grown out of texted/stage work and inherited some of the oppositions between musical materials (especially as had become codified to represent masculine and feminine characters) which were intrinsic to the latter.

In all of these cases, the approach of the writer or listener amounts to something different from simply reiterating the composer's intentions and wishes, or at least applying a different set of valorising standards to them. When applied with sufficient care for proper and balanced investigation of factual evidence (with proper referencing), rigour and transparency of argument, and elegance of presentation, not to mention some commitment to producing an argument which does more than simply reiterate that of numerous previous writers, this constitutes one variety of critical musicology. Not all or even most such work need arrive at negative conclusions, and some might affirm existing perceptions, but it does so as a result of serious consideration of alternative possibilities, rather than simply declaring them off-limits from the outset.

To some extent, I believe the value of this type of work is more widely accepted than it would have been several decades ago. The situation might be different with other forms of critical investigation, such as examination of the cult of artistic genius, the privileging of particular forms of music (orchestral, chamber) over others (opera, some solo music) on grounds of apparent 'depth' and 'substance', or for that matter the devaluation of some popular music or musical forms rooted in practices from minority groups as compared to a Western art music tradition, taking on board the associated assumptions and ideologies upon which such positions are founded. All of this involves countenancing the notion that music, music-making and musical reception may not be ideologically neutral fields belong to the realms of 'pure art', but might themselves reflect and reflect back upon wider social perceptions.

But the situation is more contested in the field of contemporary classical music. This is itself a field in which many practitioners feel themselves to be marginalised, with very little music of an atonal nature having won any degree of widespread public acceptance (even to the extent of that of composers such as Stravinsky, Britten or Shostakovich). Yet there are musicological critiques of some of this body of work emerging from people other than conservative classical music listeners. A body of work by various scholars associated with the 'new musicology' has contested the claims for primacy of various avant-garde music, drawing attention to what is argued to be its elitism, individualism (maintaining a nineteenth-century focus upon the 'great composer'), abstraction and consequent social disengagement, white male middle-class bias, and artificial institutionalisation (including institutionalisation in

higher education) despite its being a small minority interest. This latter point is extremely charged considering that some such musicologists inhabit university departments which they will share with some of the practitioners said to benefit from such institutional privilege.

As both a practitioner (as an active performer) and a musicologist, I was naturally somewhat thrown when first spending serious time with this body of work in the early 2000s. At first I was hostile, as it seemed simply another nail in the coffin of the type of avant-garde music I felt bound to defend. I began framing an extensive critique of several of the key writers concerned (to date unfinished but in a quite advanced state of development, which I will return to at some point), after realising the extent to which much of this work had become easily absorbed and was now little questioned within academia, despite sometimes being based upon major assumptions which I felt never to have been properly tested. But after spending a considerable amount of time reading the work in question, I felt myself forced to conclude that it did indeed raise many issues which could not be dismissed out of hand, however much these issues might be difficult for those of us intensely involved in the field being critiqued. From this point onwards I began to take a somewhat more sceptical attitude towards various aspects of the musical world in which I was most deeply involved as a practitioner, and especially became aware of conflicting priorities as a scholar and a performer, a conflict I have never wished to artificially elide.

For those writing about contemporary composers and their work (of which I am one) this can create a very difficult situation. The work concerned is already deemed marginal, and the scholar can encounter distrust or even hostility if their own work takes a critical perspective. Such scholars value opportunities to speak and write about composers outside of the usual academic arenas, but many of these opportunities are determined by the composers in question; in several cases I know of these opportunities promptly being curtailed after the scholar in question dared to express an even mildly critical opinion about some aspect of the work of the composer in question. Perhaps as a result of this, a lot of scholarly work on new music has tended to be defensive or hagiographic – and I would include a good deal of the early writing on Boulez, Stockhausen and John Cage in this category, as well as some of the writing on Michael Finnissy by myself and others – or else simply outright hostile. Little middle ground exists between this ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ mentalities towards new music, though the situation is changing a little. The failure on the part of many actively involved with the composition and performance of new music to address the issues raised by new musicologists and others has allowed the sometimes simplistic arguments of the latter a free ride.

In my own more recent work on Finnissy (which I have been revising and editing over the last months) this has been a continual concern. Finnissy can be most articulate about his own intentions and ideas behind certain works, but it ill behoves a

scholar of integrity to simply reiterate these without asking any questions first. In his piece *North American Spirituals*, Finnissy finds ways of combining eighteenth-century white American hymns with African-American spirituals, to make a comment about racism and racial tension. A brilliant idea (especially in the sophistication of its implementation), but to what extent does the sounding result necessarily communicate the latter to someone who has not been told what they are meant to be hearing and interpreting? And what are the wider implications of appropriating music borne of slavery into a concert hall environment generally populated by white middle class people? For reasons too detailed to explicate here, the view which I ultimately concluded was mostly affirmative of some of Finnissy's positions, but not without attempting to consider how they might be interpreted quite differently.

The 'intentional fallacy' (the fallacy of granting primacy to the intentions of an author) has been widely recognised as such in literature ever since the publication of W.K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks' 1946 essay of the same name. But in much writing about new music, the composer's intention remains almost sacrosanct, and some writing is judged better or worse by the extent to which it concurs with this. This is a very poor state of affairs compared to that appertaining to literature. The composer is an individual existing in a particular time and place, having inherited (and of course themselves mediated) a range of beliefs and ideologies, who is inevitably a flawed individual with their own set of interests, prejudices, perhaps petty jealousies, and so on, not the be-all and end-all of meaning in the way that is implied through a deferential attitude towards 'great men' (and the odd 'great woman').

One can read any number of pieces of writing which will present the finest detail of compositional technique involved in creating a piece – in a duly 'respectful' manner – but when it comes to dealing with the sounding result, restrict themselves to a few choice adjectives of praise, saying little about what relationship exists between the means and the ends, let alone about why (or if) the final result might be capable of generating any type of meaningful response amongst listeners. This may not be entirely unwilling: to address the latter issue would involve asking difficult questions relating to the fact that much new music has never succeeded in gaining more than a very small audience relative to the totality of the listening population, and many of them have professional connections to the work concerned. That some artistic work is a small minority interest need not necessarily be cause for censure or dismissal, but to pretend that this is not the case, or continue with the far-from-proved assumption that simply a greater amount of promotion and publicity will generate these so-far elusive audiences, is simply naïve.

At a round table discussion at a conference a few years ago on the symphony orchestra as cultural phenomenon, one musicologist opined that whilst it was all very well for such musicologists to look critically at these types of institutions, at a time when funding is in question this was the wrong thing to do, and we should all be

putting our weight behind supporting them. But this would be a prime example of substituting propaganda for scholarship. In other contexts, musicologists may want to lend their names to campaigns to preserve state funding of symphony orchestras, but to censor critical scholarship for this reason is a betrayal of every principle upon which rational investigation is based.

There are many ways in which legitimate criticisms can be made of a whole range of musicological work (some of which I intend to consider in some later posts on here); I personally would identify excessive use of jargon, sometimes to mask a paucity of any more incisive argument, and simply the production of work which seems intended primarily to satisfy a few other like-minded academics in a particular sub-field, with no real interest in whether it might have any wider impact. But the alternative to this is not simply for musicologists to line up to write what practising musicians want them to, and sacrifice any independent perspective in the process.

Musicology should be properly valued as an independent discipline which enhances understanding of music, the role of music in different societies and cultures, approaches to performance, modes of listening, and much else. These ends are not served by its inhabiting a subservient position relative to practical music-making and producing material more akin to that one might expect from composers' publishers or musicians' agents. And the study of music can be an enhancing experience for a great many people, regardless of whether they go on to practise it professionally.