

# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Leitmotif

Arthur Schopenhauer

Die Walküre

## DESIRE AND HOW TO CHANNEL IT

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

That “more” is a technique that composers ever since the Counter Reformation had employed to induce a sort of esthetic ecstasy in listeners and save their souls from the snares of rationalism. It consists in strategic harmonic delays, and what is delayed is “closure,” or functional resolution. The heightened expressivity thus connoted arises not out of cognitive symbolism or “extroversive” reference, the representational mode of which Wagnerian leitmotives would be the supreme example. Rather, that expressivity arises out of “introversive” reference whereby the music, by forecasting closure and then delaying it, calls attention to its own need for cadential resolution.

“Its” need is actually the listener's psychological need, of course. The fluctuating musical tension analogizes the fluctuating tensions—psychological, emotional, sexual—of our lives as we live them. And here is where the process leaves the realm of representation altogether. Harmonic forecasts and delays play directly upon the listener's expectation, or, to put it more strongly, on the *desires* that the music induces in the listener. And so the musical events, relative to listener expectations, are translated directly into the intensified emotion that the fulfillment or frustration of desire produces in any context.

This aspect of music's effect on the listener—this uncanny directness—has been recognized (as the *ethos* of music) from ancient times. As early as Plato, it has led to calls for police action. The enhancement and ultimate perfection of this emotional potency had long been touted as the primary achievement of the “functional” harmonic practices that began with the composers of Palestrina's generation in the sixteenth century and reached fullest elaboration with Beethoven (or so it was thought until Wagner's time).

As Karol Berger, a musicologist who has branched out into general esthetics, reminds us, this power of “tonal” music goes much deeper than rational cognition into the wellsprings of our conscious experience as temporal. While it could be argued that what music evokes is a representation of that deep experience, it is a representation that is uniquely concerned with our mental and spiritual innards rather than with the world outside. “What I actually experience,” Berger writes in a discussion that is crucial for understanding Wagner,

when I experience the tonal tendency of a sound is the dynamics of my own desire, its arousal, its satisfaction, its frustration. It is my own desire for the leading tone to move up, the satisfaction of my own desire when it so moves, the frustration thereof when it refuses to budge or when it moves elsewhere, that I feel.... Thus, the precondition of my being able to hear an imaginary pattern of lines of directed motion in a tonal work is that I first experience the desires, satisfactions, and frustrations of this sort. In tonal music, the direct experience of the dynamics of my own desire precedes any recognition of the represented object, of lines of directed motion, and is the necessary precondition of such a recognition. I must first experience the desire that the leading tone move up, before I can recognize the representation of an imaginary ascending line when it so moves.

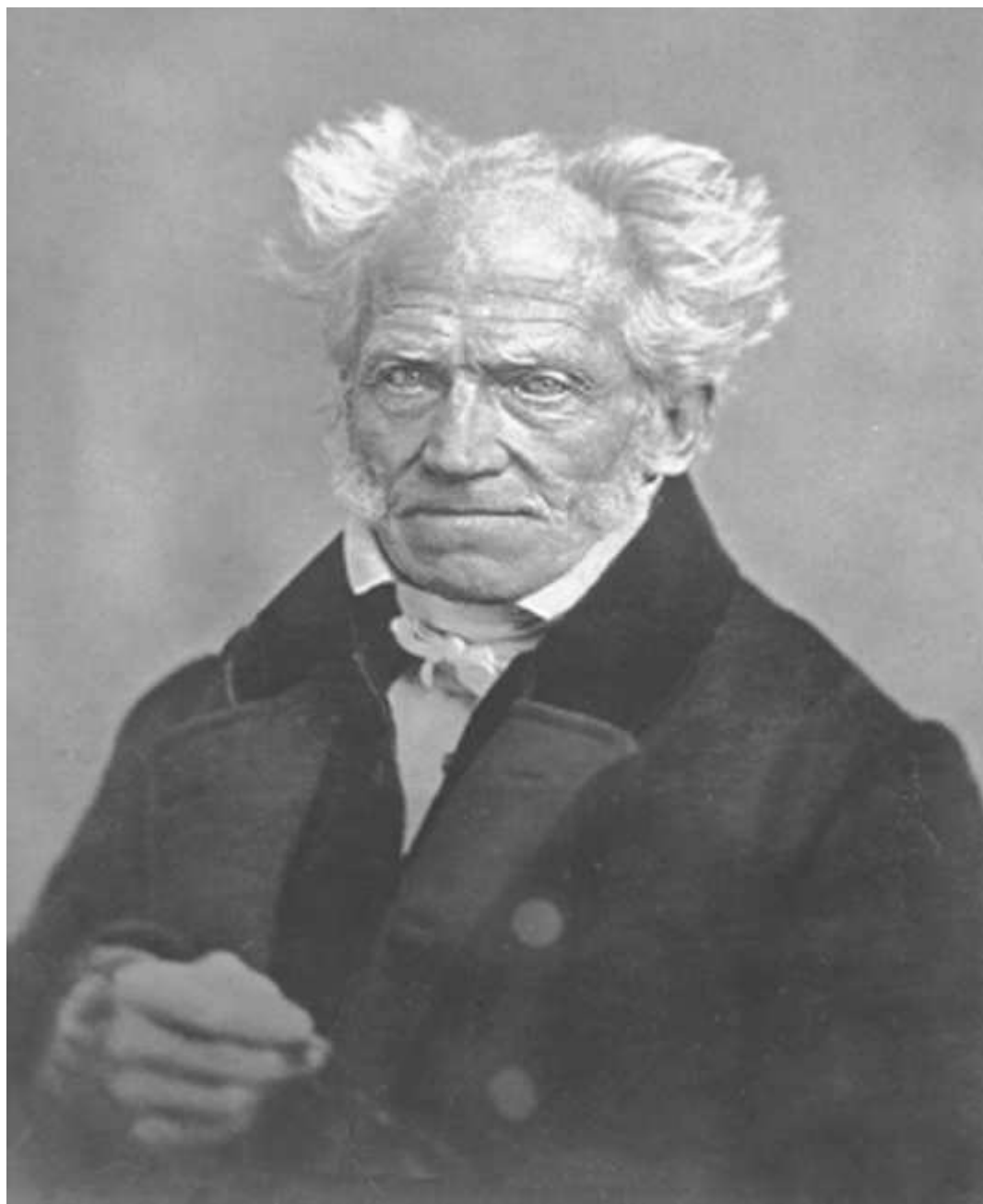
Therefore, Berger concludes,

It follows that tonal music, like a visual medium, may represent an imaginary object different from myself, an imaginary world, albeit a highly abstract one, consisting of lines of directed motion. But, unlike a visual medium, tonal music also makes me experience directly the dynamics of my own desiring, my own inner world, and it is this latter experience that is the more primordial one, since any representation depends on it.

While visual media allow us to grasp, represent, and explore an outer, visual world, music makes it possible for me to grasp, experience, and explore an inner world of desiring. While visual media show us objects we might want without making us aware of what it would feel like to want anything, music makes us aware of how it feels to want something without showing us the objects we want. In a brief formula, visual media are the instruments of knowing the object of desire but not the desire itself, tonal music is the instrument of knowing the desire but not its object.<sup>43</sup>

Berger purports to write about all tonal music, but his remarks have special relevance to Wagner, who (precisely because of his ideological commitments, it could be argued) was more explicitly conscious of these aspects of the musical experience, and more determined to exploit them, than any other composer before or since. With Wagner, moreover, we are in an unusually favored position to investigate his aims, since he wrote so prolifically about them, and because, aspiring to their intellectual status, he read widely among his philosopher contemporaries in search of corroboration for his intuitions and theories.

Berger, in fact, builds his case about music on precisely those philosophers who most closely paralleled Wagner's thinking and eventual practice. One of them was the Danish religious thinker Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), who argued that our most elemental knowledge of “the sensuous-erotic”<sup>44</sup> comes to us from music, the only art that can present desire to our minds “in all its immediacy.” Even more fundamentally “Wagnerian” were the views of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), already mentioned as an influence on the composer's thinking, who was so impressed with the influence of music on his feelings that he promoted music to a status beyond any of the other arts, where it directly embodied the experience of “striving” that not only constitutes our life but also embodies the “Will,” or essential axiomatic basis of all reality. “Music,” Schopenhauer famously wrote, “gives the innermost kernel preceding all form, or the heart of things.”<sup>45</sup> What better precept for a composer who wants to create worlds in music, and what better motivation or justification for the “formlessness”—a formlessness that goes to the very heart of things—that leitmotif technique enables.



**fig. 10-11 Arthur Schopenhauer, photographed in 1858.**

That technique was the mechanism by which the channeling of desire took place, providing the thematic medium for a ceaseless process of harmonic movement that continually forecasts goals, and just as continually subverts them, subjecting us who listen to a constant manipulation of “the dynamics of our own desire,” to use Berger’s term. More than any other music, Wagner’s plays on these basic sensations, magnifying the direct impact all music has on our nerves and bodies. Moreover, the leitmotives—which supply exactly that which, in Berger’s formulation, music does not inherently possess—complement presentation or embodiment (Schopenhauer’s “will”) with representation, thus in Schopenhauer’s terms completing a “world.” By combining precognitive musical process with cognitive symbolism, in other words, Wagner had it both ways: the music through which he constructed his mythic dramas was the instrument of *both* “desire itself” *and* of “knowing the object of desire.” It was frighteningly powerful, as Hanslick, the high priest of the Wagnerian opposition, knew best of all. The whole reason for writing his book in opposition to the current that produced the New German School, which immediately adopted Wagner as its standard-bearer, was Hanslick’s acknowledgment that “music works more rapidly and intensely upon the mind than any other art,” and, more strongly yet, that “while the other arts persuade, music invades us.”<sup>46</sup> That is why music needed, in Hanslick’s view, to be contained—and Wagner’s above all. Hanslick’s theory of musical beauty was above all an instrument of containment.

The act of freely submitting to such music turned one temporarily into a solipsist, for whom there is no external reality, only the inner reality of the psyche. Succumbing to its hypnosis—a hypnosis that differed from the music trance of Schubert's time because it was so actively manipulated and directed by the composer-operator—was valued as religious experience, as erotic experience, as narcotic experience, in any combination or all at once. Music that could produce such experiences and such states of consciousness was thought by its devotees to be the most sanctifying and exalting art in the world. Which is precisely why such music—for Hanslick, for Rimsky-Korsakov, and for so many since—could seem the ultimate in dangerous, degenerate art.

With these weighty thoughts in mind let us return now to the second scene of the *Götterdämmerung* Prologue, where Siegfried and Brünnhilde have just achieved their ecstasy of false consciousness in E ♭ major. Where the Norns' scene, as befit its recapitulatory role, was built entirely out of existing leitmotives, the scene of the hero and heroine is a forging ground for new ones. Besides the two characters' own themes, there is an arching cadential phrase that first accompanies Brünnhilde's ejaculation, "dir zu wenig mein Wert gewann!" ("in winning me your reward was too small," Ex. 10-12), is immediately thrice repeated for emphasis before subsiding on the baleful F-A ♭ -C ♭ -E ♭ chord, and thereafter underscores references to their union.

Apart from transient specific allusions of a kind that would have made Rimsky-Korsakov snicker, the three new leitmotives make up the whole thematic content of the scene, giving it the character of a purposeful thematic development. And its harmonic content, apart from brief departures the more forcefully to return, is similarly straightforward and stable. It is simply a reiterated approach, signaled both harmonically and by the use of the Union motif, to the key of E ♭, the false "promise of happiness." In effect, Wagner replays and replays again the tense and finally triumphant "retransition" in the first movement of Beethoven's "heroic" Third Symphony. But where Beethoven's avowals were indubitably (that is, psychologically) "true," here the successive reiterations of arrival, each capping a longer temporal span than the last and controlling a greater modulatory range, further the cause of the Big Lie, the desire for the tonic analogizing both Siegfried and Brünnhilde's ill-fated desire for triumph over Alberich's curse and their henceforth-to-be-frustrated desire for each other.

What might be called the coda of the scene—beginning with the last approach to E ♭, its seemingly ultimate confirmation, and its loss—is worth tracing in some thematic and harmonic detail (Ex. 10-13). The triumph of E ♭ major at its outset is made all the sweeter by its proximity to the half-diminished harmony that played such a baleful role in the Norns' scene, functioning here in its most ordinary cadential capacity (as ii<sub>7</sub> of the parallel minor). Siegfried and Brünnhilde are singing of their oneness. The two of them now launch together into a little set piece in which the orchestra harps on a tune the young Siegfried sang in the opera named after him, all about the joy of freedom from fear. That Brünnhilde sings first to its accompaniment is a testimony to the merger of their identities. The irony of their fearlessness in the face of imminent destruction is all the more poignant because of their perfect subjective oblivion, symbolized by page after page with hardly a sharp or a flat to disturb the ecstatic stability of the soon-to-be-subverted key.

At the other end of the coda, the height of rapture, with both characters now reduced to a single word ("Heil! Heil! Heil! Heil!"), a theme from Brünnhilde's carefree youth (first heard in *Die Walküre*, the opera named after *her*) likewise insinuates itself into the texture, at first in counterpoint with the Union motif. An arpeggio in dotted triplet rhythms, it dates back to the early sketches of 1850, where (as a glance back at Ex. 10-1 will confirm) its contour informed the Norns' refrain. Later the same year Wagner recast it as a song for the Valkyries, Wotan's warrior daughters, as they sweep through the skies on winged horseback (Ex. 10-14).



BRÜNNHILDE

375

we - nig mein Werth ge - wann.

*mf* *poco f*

378

B.

Was Göt -

*dim.* *p*

Detailed description: The image shows two systems of a musical score. The first system, starting at measure 375, features a vocal line for Brunnhilde in a soprano clef and a piano accompaniment in a grand staff. The vocal line has a melodic line with a trill and a triplet. The piano accompaniment has a complex texture with triplets and a trill. Dynamics include *mf* and *poco f*. The second system, starting at measure 378, features a vocal line in a baritone clef and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has a melodic line with a triplet. The piano accompaniment has a complex texture with triplets and a trill. Dynamics include *dim.* and *p*. The lyrics are in German: 'we - nig mein Werth ge - wann.' and 'Was Göt -'.

ex. 10-12 Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, mm. 375–381

588 BRÜNNHILDE

Se ver - ö - det mein Fel - sen - zack!

SIEGFRIED

Bei - de Ver-

592 SIEGF.

mit Faust er um weilt

596 BRÜNNH.

O hei - li - ge Göt - ter!

600

Heh - re Ge - schlech - ter! Wei - der eu'r

603

B.

Aug an dem weih - zel - len Paar

606

B.

Ge - trennt, we: will uns schei - den?

610

B.

Ge - schie - det, trennt es sich

614

B.

niel

Sing.

Heil dir Bruun - hil - de, pran - gen - der

618

B Heil dir, Siegfried, siegen-des

S Stern!

621

B Licht!

S Hei, strahlen-de Liebel

625

B Heil, strahlen-des Leben! Heil, siegen-des

S Heil, strahlen-der Stern!

628

T. Licht! Heil! Heil!

S. Heil, Brünn - hild! Heil! Heil!

631

T. Heil! Heil!

S. Heil! Heil!

634

**ex. 10-13 Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, leitmotives labeled as in Ex. 10-2, mm. 588–635**

By the time he actually composed *Die Walküre* the song had given way to an orchestral fantasy (“The Ride of the Valkyries”), which functioned in context as the prelude to act III, but is more often heard (in slightly different form) as a concert showpiece. It brings the duet at the end of the *Götterdämmerung* Prologue to a wild conclusion: set over the plagal harmony of Siegfried’s freedom song, it even gives the soprano a chance to end with a traditional high C (albeit over the subdominant rather than the tonic harmony, which forces the singers to fall silent at the true cadence).

That cadence is the last we will hear of E  $\flat$  major for some time (and never again in so unclouded a form). It disappears along with Siegfried himself at m. 649, liquidated by a series of “common-tone” progressions—the key’s leading tone (D) re-identified as the fifth of a G major triad and the seventh of a dominant seventh on E—into what sounds like a looming A major, an antipodal tritone away from E  $\flat$  along the circle of fifths. But after prolonging the dominant of A with a pedal lasting twenty bars, Wagner evades the promised key with a deceptive cadence borrowed from the parallel minor, when Siegfried’s horn call is heard from offstage, accompanied by another dominant pedal promising F.

The apparition of F major lasts a good while. After a transitional passage played entirely over the dominant pedal, in

which a leitmotif as old as *Das Rheingold* (labeled “*Liebesnot*”—“Love's distress”—by Wolzogen) gives way to the main theme from the Siegfried/Brünnhilde duet in the last act of *Siegfried* (*Liebesbund*—“Bond of love”—according to Wolzogen), the curtain falls, the dominant resolves, and we seem to be at the beginning of a jaunty orchestral piece reflective of Siegfried's euphoria and full of his themes, sometimes in counterpoint with the themes of others (e.g., Loge, one of whose attributes is god of fun, appearing at one point against the horn call in the bass).

Nach sü - den wir zie - hen, sie - ge zu zeu - gen kämp - fen - den hee - ren zu  
 kie - sen das loos, für hel - den zu fech - ten, hel - den zu fäl - len, zu  
 füh - ren nach Wal - hall er - schla - ge - ne sie - ger:  
 kämp - fen - den hee - ren zu kie - sen das loos!  
 füh - ren nach Wal - hall er - ge - ne sie -

#### ex. 10-14 Richard Wagner, *The Valkyries' Song* as sketched in 1850

A deceptive cadence tosses us suddenly into the key of A major as Siegfried's boat rounds the bend to meet the main current of the Rhine (identifiable by its leitmotif; compare the analogous spot in Smetana's almost exactly contemporaneous *Moldau*, described in chapter 9). This is harmonic “navigation” at its most literal. The key seems altogether unprepared until we remember its very elaborate unconsummated preparation (twenty bars over a dominant pedal), that set the Rhine journey in motion. Again we must acknowledge the long-range design that gives harmonic coherence to the seemingly random vagaries of the Wagnerian surface. And yet we are not really in the key of A: it is just another apparition. While it confirms retrospectively the dominant sounded minutes ago, on this appearance it remains unconfirmed by a cadence. That makes it a prime target for liquidation; and sure enough, before any cadence in A has a chance to be heard, another bend is metaphorically rounded and the key of E $\flat$  seems to return after all, in just as sudden and unprepared a fashion as its predecessor.

But wait: the E $\flat$  harmony returns in the first inversion, and the descending scale, with its seemingly Lydian fourth degree (A-natural), identifies the chord as Neapolitan and the leitmotif as one of those (*Götterdämmerung*, *Liebe- Tragik*) portending doom. So even when the harmony settles down (through a plagal cadence) into root position for another bout of Rhine music, it has been destabilized both musically and dramatically. Memories of Brünnhilde (the Ride motif in the cylindrical brass) bring both a rush of joy (motif in the woodwinds) and an attempt to stabilize the key with an authentic cadence.

But liquidation has already been as if preordained, and we are not surprised to hear the bright subdominant replaced by its functional equivalent (but dramatic antinode) the half-diminished E–A $\flat$ –C $\flat$ –E $\flat$  that recalls the debacle of

the Norns forcibly to mind. After this baneful substitution, in which the noisome harmony supports the Ring motif redolent of Alberich and his curse, recapture of E ♭ is impossible. The next attempt at resolution of the dominant produces only the Liebe-Tragik motif over an inverted C ♭ major triad (another recollection of the Norns), in which the bass E ♭ is roundly contradicted and rebuked by everything it is trying to support. Its loss of control is complete by m. 876, when the half-diminished harmony (in extraordinary third inversion) usurps the place of the tonic triad altogether (Ex. 10-15).

876 *Sehr zurückhaltend im Zeitmass.*

884

*sempre p* *pp* *tes.* *p* *dim.* *pp*

*marc. e pesante*

**ex. 10-15 Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, mm. 876–92**

Repelled enharmonically, with sharps in place of flats, the half-diminished chord is rerouted toward the key of the scene about to open, in which Siegfried's doom is plotted. That key, as already shown in Ex. 10-8b, is B minor (=C ♭, similarly respelled), strongly prefigured but unconfirmed at the end of the Norns' scene. Its recuperation here brackets the confident euphoria of the immediately preceding scene and exposes its false consciousness. When next Siegfried and Brünnhilde meet, it will be as enemies whose misguided quarrel makes the final crisis of the drama inevitable.

## Notes:

(43) Karol Berger, *A Theory of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 33–34.

(44) Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (1843), Vol. I, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 64.

(45) Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. I (1819), trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 263.

(46) Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854), trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), p. 50.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

Tristan und Isolde

'Tristan' chord

## THE ULTIMATE EXPERIENCE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The articulation of the drama through musical analogues—Wagner, of course, would have called it the articulation of the music through dramatic analogues—and its uncanny psychological potency are perhaps sufficiently illustrated by the *Götterdämmerung* Prologue. We will not have room for another musico-dramatic exploration so detailed. But one more Wagnerian experience needs to be sampled if we are to have an idea of the composer's accomplishment adequate to its historical resonance, because its repercussions will be felt on virtually every subsequent page of this book. Though *Götterdämmerung*, the culminating work in the *Ring cycle*, could be fairly described as Wagner's crowning achievement, bringing to consummation as it did the largest musical entity ever conceived within the European literate tradition, it is not his emblematic work. That distinction belongs to *Tristan und Isolde*, completed (between the second and third acts of *Siegfried*, as it were) in 1859.

What makes *Tristan* the extreme or limiting case, and a touchstone for all subsequent music-making and music-thinking, has to do with its subject matter—a tragic love story adapted from a famous medieval poem and treated on a typically monumental, archetypal scale—but even more with the relationship between its “deeds of music” and the responses they have elicited. If, as the British philosopher Bryan Magee suggests, Wagner's music “is both loved and hated more immoderately than that of any other composer,”<sup>47</sup> the same is true *a fortiori* of *Tristan* among his works.



**fig. 10-12** Lillian Nordica (1857–1914) as Isolde, ca. 1900.

The balance we have observed in *Götterdämmerung* between its cognitive symbolism and its precognitive or subliminal modes of signifying—between the *representational* as embodied in the leitmotives and the directly *presentational* as embodied in the sea of harmony—is drastically skewed in *Tristan* in favor of the latter. Where *Götterdämmerung* powerfully enacts a complex story, *Tristan* powerfully projects a sustained feeling. But in fact they are not equally powerful. If *Tristan* shows anything it shows that, unless protected, our minds (or the rational part of our minds, at any rate, the part that understands and interprets stories) must give way before our feelings, and that music—“tonal” music, Wagner's music—is their most powerful catalyst on earth.

The story is negligible: a man and a woman are seized with a forbidden love (act I); they attempt to act upon it but are forcibly separated, the man being mortally wounded in the process (act II); the man dies and the bereft woman, overwhelmed at the sight of his corpse, dies in sympathy (act III). In a program note he published around 1860, meant to elucidate the content of the work as embodied in its Prelude five years before the first performance of the whole opera, Wagner reduced the story quite graphically to the feeling it symbolized, a feeling to which only music—his music—could do full artistic justice: “Suddenly aflame,” he wrote,

they must confess they belong only to each other. No end, now, to the yearning, the desire, the bliss, the

suffering of love: world, power, fame, splendor, honor, knighthood, loyalty, friendship—all scattered like an empty dream; one thing alone still living: yearning, yearning, unquenchable, ever-regenerated longing—languishing, thirsting; the only redemption—death, extinction, eternal sleep!<sup>48</sup>

And here is the musical equivalent of the condition Wagner describes—or rather, the “deed of music” to which not only Wagner’s description but the entire opera forms a “visible” outer garment (Ex. 10-16). The first three measures of the *Tristan* Prelude constitute perhaps the most famous, surely the most commented-on, single phrase of music ever written.

**ex. 10-16 Richard Wagner, Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, mm. 1–11**

Long singled out for extensive glossing in its own right is the dissonant first harmony, so distinctive and seemingly unprecedented that it has been christened the “*Tristan*-chord.” Its quality as sheer aural sensation is much enhanced by the mixture of orchestral colors in which it is clothed; and this in turn is the result of its being the point of confluence between two leitmotives that later function independently: the rising sixth with conjunct chromatic “recovery” in the cellos, and the rising chromatic tetrachord in the oboe, accompanied by (predominantly) other double reeds.

A closer look, however, shows the *Tristan*-chord (as sheer sound, anyway) to be nothing new. In fact it is a harmony that has already figured prominently in this very chapter, albeit spelled  $F-A\flat-C\flat-E\flat$  and functioning as the supertonic of  $E\flat$ . In that guise it was the Norns’ horror chord. In its new tonal context, that of A minor, it is famed as the chord of love’s unquenchable desire. In musical semiosis (or “signing”), as in real estate, location is everything.

But what is its function in A minor, and how do we even know that A minor is the key in which it is functioning? True, the first note is A, but there are no A minor triads in the vicinity. Indeed, there is no simple triad of any kind until m. 17, and the triad that finally appears there is F major. The blank key signature, given the chromatic (or in any case “chromaticized”) context, could merely be the absence of a key signature. If a key must be named, why not C major?

And yet if our experience with Wagner’s sea of harmony has taught us anything, it has taught us to expect keys not to assert themselves explicitly but to loom. And what makes a key loom is not the tonic, which cannot identify itself as such without a cadence, but the dominant, which carries the implicit promise of that cadence within it. The end of the first phrase of the *Tristan* prelude is not only in terms of its intervallic structure (its “sound quality”), but also in terms of its preparation, the unambiguous dominant of A minor. The chord that fills the ensuing silence in the listeners’ inner ear, assuming that they have any experience at all with tonal harmony, is the unstated—indeed, never to be stated, and ultimately needless to be stated—tonic of that key.

So the *Tristan*-chord, which so clearly (though only in retrospect) performs the function of a “pre-dominant” in A minor, must be interpreted as having F as its root—but an F that seeks resolution not along the circle of fifths (as it would—and has!—in  $E\flat$ ) but by semitonal descent to the dominant, since its degree function is VI. The spelling of the chord in which F and  $D\sharp$  coexist is thus revealed to be quite traditional since it is on the minor sixth degree

that augmented-sixth chords have been occurring ever since there has been such a thing. What makes the *Tristan*-chord unusual, then, and deserving of a name after all, is the fact that its “half-diminished” quality is the result of its containing a long, accented appoggiatura (G $\sharp$ ), which on its resolution to A clarifies the nature and function of the chord as a French sixth in A minor, resolving normally to the dominant.

This, too, is something that Wagner fastidiously prepares us to observe, if only in retrospect. The F on the first downbeat is a retrospectively recognizable appoggiatura to E, and the nature of the A $\sharp$  in m. 3 as a chromatic passing tone is self-evident. (Nobody, it seems, has ever heard the downbeat sonority of m. 3, which could be read as another French sixth, as another sort of *Tristan*-chord.) Thus all three downbeats are dominated melodically by accented nonharmonic tones. Their restlessness contributes tellingly to the affect of unfulfilled desire that Wagner described in his program note, but that we surely need no program note to detect. That restlessness, it should be emphasized, occurs within a fully operational (and fully “normal”) tonal context, one that Wagner shared, say, with Mozart (compare Ex. 10-17, offered with apologies). Only against a background of normality, after all, with its implied promise of repose, could such a restlessness be evoked.



**ex. 10-17 *Tristan*-chord conflated with the theme of Mozart's *Fantasia* in D minor, K. 397**

The affect is palpable—and *immanent*, rather than merely symbolized—in the unresolved dominant seventh in m. 3. And it is made even more oppressively palpable in the sequential repetitions of the opening phrase (as given in Ex. 10-16). Each phrase of the continuation begins with cello notes drawn from the dominant harmony previously left hanging, and proceeds through a *Tristan*-chord to a new dominant to be similarly left ringing, unconsummated, in the air. The affect of the third phrase is intensified and prolonged, in fact, in a manner that may be fairly described as sadistic: its harmonized portion is repeated after a fermata that extends the agony of incompleteness, and after another similarly agonizing fermata the last two melody notes are repeated—and repeated again at the octave to rub it in—then reharmonized with the hanging dominant from m. 3, only to resolve, appallingly, in a deceptive cadence supporting yet another accented appoggiatura.

Any listener who by now is not feeling “yearning, yearning, unquenchable, ever-regenerated longing—languishing, thirsting,” et cetera, has simply never learned to respond to the syntax of tonal music. For such a listener a program note will be of no assistance. For those capable of responding, explanation is superfluous.

So it is quite misleading to say that it is merely the first phrase of *Tristan und Isolde* that has excited so much comment, even if it is usually quoted (as in Ex. 10-16) and analyzed all by itself. To understand its fascination one must observe it in context, a context of unresolved dominant tension that lasts throughout the Prelude, sustained by Wagner's unprecedented skill in the arts of transition and feint, and that is revived and intensified at various points in the opera until it is at last cataclysmically discharged at the very end of the final act. These are the aspects of *Tristan und Isolde* that have made it a technical tour de force, an esthetic watershed, and even a moral touchstone, and that urgently demand our attention.

## Notes:

(47) Bryan Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher* (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 270.

(48) Richard Wagner, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Dichtungen* (Leipzig, 1895), pp. 163–64; trans. Piero Weiss in P. Weiss and R. Taruskin, *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, 2nd ed., p. 320.

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Wagnerism

'Tristan' chord

# HOW FAR CAN YOU STRETCH A DOMINANT?

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

But before making closer inspection of Wagner's mechanisms of arousal, a general comment will be in order. As the most influential composer of the later nineteenth century, Wagner had an effect on his progeny similar to Beethoven's. Just as a multitude of nineteenth-century composers in the "post-Beethoven period" claimed Beethoven as a father however antagonistic their positions, so did a multitude of turn-of-the-century and early twentieth-century composers in the period post-Wagner claim descent from him. And just as Beethoven's contesting heirs made of him what they would, so did Wagner's. On the basis of the chromaticized harmony and the fluid modulatory schemes that we have observed in *Götterdämmerung* and will observe in *Tristan*, Wagner has been cast by many of his followers as the subverter or saboteur of tonal harmony.

He was anything but that. On the contrary, Wagner brought many aspects of traditional tonal practice to their technical and expressive zenith, always by working within the system. To put this proviso in more rigorous technical terms, Wagner's most important innovations had the effect, as we have already observed, of prolonging and intensifying the traditional dominant function. The true revolutionizers and subverters of tonal practice were those composers, beginning with Liszt in his New German phase, who sought to attenuate or even eliminate the dominant function from their music by replacing the structural functions of the circle of fifths, of which the dominant function is the most potent, with circles of major or minor thirds (see chapter 8).

It would be very easy to imagine a Lisztian variant of the *Tristan* Prelude. Liszt was very interested in the half-diminished seventh chord as a sonority, and may well have played a part in sparking Wagner's interest in the chord whose function he would so radically transform. We have seen how conspicuous the F–A $\flat$ –C $\flat$ –E $\flat$  harmony and its transpositions were in Liszt's symphonic poems and program symphonies, as a glance back at Ex. 8-8b will recall. The introduction to Liszt's song *Die Lorelei* ("The mermaid"), after Heine (Ex. 10-18a), has often been cited as a Wagnerian prototype, though the resemblance is more melodic than harmonic (the chord usually cited as the *Tristan* precedent is in fact not of half-diminished quality). There is an even closer precedent in Weber (Ex. 10-18b), where the harmony before the resolution of the appoggiatura has the same half-diminished quality as the *Tristan*-chord, even if resolution is made downward to a diminished seventh rather than upward to a French sixth.

But such examples are trivial; they can easily be multiplied, even in eighteenth-century music. The Wagnerian innovation, as we have seen, was not the *Tristan*-chord itself, but rather the deliberate failure to resolve the dominant seventh that follows it. But it is a false failure that achieves its awesome expressive power because the traditional resolution is insistently honored in the breach (that is, in our mind's ear).

Non strascinando (*Nicht schleppend*)

ex. 10-18a Franz Liszt, *Die Lorelei*, mm. 1–7



**ex. 10-18b *Tristan*-chord in Carl Maria von Weber, *Euryanthe* Overture**

Ex. 10-18a already shows the fundamental difference between the Lisztian approach and the Wagnerian. Liszt's two phrases are in literal sequence, at a transposition of a minor third (expressed in the notation as a diminished seventh). The two finishing chords, therefore, are the same, since the diminished seventh chord, consisting of a stack of minor thirds, replicates itself when transposed by the interval of which it is exclusively composed. The passage neither accomplishes nor forecasts any harmonic motion and embodies little desire. The first sequential repetition in the *Tristan* Prelude is also at the minor third, making its "Lisztian" continuation easy to extrapolate (Ex. 10-19).

**ex. 10-19 "Lisztian" variant of Richard Wagner's Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* (opening)**

This variant is much more "radical" than Wagner's, and much less effective. In fact it is trivial in its fatal predictability and harmonic stasis. By the third phrase all sense of desire for the dominant seventh resolution has been liquidated by the sequence, just as it is liquidated in the famous passage from the Prologue to Musorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov* (1872) in which the tintinnabulation of coronation bells is simulated (Ex. 10-20) by two oscillating dominant sevenths with roots a tritone apart (and that consequently share a complementary tritone in common).

ex. 10-20 Modest Musorgsky, coronation bells in *Boris Godunov* (Prologue, scene 2)

So despite the reputation of *Tristan und Isolde* as having instigated a “crisis of tonality” with its notorious freedom of chromatic modulation, Wagner (unlike Liszt and Musorgsky) exercised his freedom entirely within the established practice of functional harmony. Far from threatening it, he managed to wring from the common practice an unprecedented realization of its interdependent structural and expressive potentials, harnessing them together with unprecedented synergy. The paucity of cadences and the frequent changes of harmonic direction in no sense negate or dissolve the efficacy of the traditional harmonic functions (least of all the attraction of the dominant for the tonic). On the contrary, these functions operate in *Tristan und Isolde* with unexampled intensity. That overwhelming intensification of attraction and desire, as we have seen, is the whole poetic point.

The assumption that *Tristan* somehow started the process whereby functional harmony was fatally and inexorably weakened is an excellent example of historicist mythmaking. It embeds the opera in a progress narrative that justifies the radical departures of a later generation of German composers who did in fact attempt to attenuate, and finally eliminate, the role of functional harmony as a governor of musical structure. Their story, sometimes narrated as if it were about the collapse of tonality rather than about the changing techniques of a small group of composers, is a twentieth-century extrapolation. It is in no way implicit in this chapter's tale. It was worth foreshadowing here not only because the myth of Wagner, or of *Tristan*, as the instigator of the collapse has become so entrenched, but also because its entrenchment illustrates so well the historicist tendency to write history backward with an eye toward giving the present a justification, a desired past. Looking at the opera and listening to it, as far as possible, with contemporary eyes and ears (that is, the eyes and ears of *its* contemporaries), we will observe Wagner's reliance on the common practice at all levels from the most local to the most global, and will be all the better able to appreciate his expert manipulations of it. Putting the matter in terms of Wagner's manipulations of his materials—in terms, that is, of compositional technique—is to describe his achievement in “poietic” or “maker's” terms. But Wagner's manipulations of his materials translate directly into esthetic or experiential terms as well, as forcible manipulations of the listener's expectations and responses. Some find the manipulation of their consciousness and their appetites thrilling, others disconcerting, even frightening. It is another of the many factors that have made Wagner an incorrigibly controversial figure.

So we should not be surprised to find that Wagner's superb expressive efficacy depends on a relatively conservative approach to tonality. Comparison of Ex. 10-16, which contains the first eleven measures of the *Tristan* Prelude, and Ex. 10-19, its hypothetical Lisztian counterpart, tellingly illustrates that conservatism. The first difference between them comes at the beginning of the second phrase, which Wagner adjusts so that its first two notes are drawn directly from the preceding dominant harmony: the dominant function remains special for Wagner in a way that it does not for “Liszt,” the author of our hypothetical example—or for the actual Liszt, to judge by the “Faust” or “Mountain” Symphonies sampled in chapter 8.

The differences between the respective third phrases are even more telling. Again Wagner adjusts the first note to retain a pitch from the preceding dominant-seventh chord. But then he interpolates an extra semitone both into the descending chromatic line in mm. 8–9 and into the ascending one in mm. 10–11, meanwhile inverting the *Tristan* chord in m. 10 so that the tritone is on top and the perfect fourth below. The net result of these adjustments



is the gaining of a semitone in the second transposition of the phrase. Instead of a simple Lisztian circle of minor thirds, Wagner has transposed the opening phrase first by a minor third and then by a major third. In this way the ending chords apply dominant functions in turn to the root, the third, and the fifth of the governing A-minor tonic triad. Thus the tonic also remains privileged in Wagner in a way that it no longer is in Liszt, whether the hypothetical “Liszt” of Ex. 10-19, or the actual historical Liszt of chapter 8.

As a result of these manipulations, the ending harmony in Ex. 10-16 is the tonally efficacious V of V rather than the tonally meaningless dominant of E $\flat$  in Ex. 10-19 (or its further sequential extension, the dominant of G $\flat$ ). A glance at the full text of the Prelude will reveal that Wagner's V of V is applied quite conventionally to V, which is then applied quite conventionally to I—except that the last connection is frustrated by the grating deceptive cadence on F. The frustration of the cadence becomes the listener's frustration in Wagner the way it no longer does, or even can, within Liszt's more “progressive” and experimental harmonic ambience.

Thereafter, the Prelude is a voyage on the sea of harmony that may be thought of as analogizing the voyage of the ship transporting Tristan and Isolde from Ireland to Cornwall, aboard which the performance of act I takes place. Schopenhauer, who glorified music as a direct sensuous copy of the Will, the primal or essential impulse to be and to become, had used navigational metaphors to describe both music and the Will itself. In its surges and swells, its climaxes on restless harmonies rather than on their resolutions, and its seemingly perpetual state of modulation, the Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, which Wagner began sketching in 1856 after immersing himself in Schopenhauer's work, was an attempt conjointly to embody the motion of the sea, the very shape of desire, and (in its abstract, textless, “absolute” character) the pure reality of the Will, as only music could reflect them.

And then, when the curtain goes up on the first act to depict an actual ship at sea on which the flare-up of unquenchable passion will be enacted by a pair of actual lovers whose actions are explained by actually enunciated words, we have the most literal possible demonstration of Wagner's concept of musical drama as “deeds of music made visible.” The entire drama, or at least its essential premise, is powerfully if abstractly enacted in the realm of the “real” before its visual and cognitive embodiment in the realm of “appearances” even begins.

The Prelude's tonal trajectory is in essence that of a single harmonic gesture, announced at the outset, and sustained through a wealth of surface variety to an appearance of climax, followed by a still unconsummated subsidence. Whatever else it may have been, it was a display of composerly virtuosity that no contemporary could deny (or equal), however grudging their acknowledgment. Wagner was surely the greatest master of dominant prolongation since Beethoven. That, far more than the devices of motivic development and thematic transformation that were already the common currency of the New German School, was the essence of Wagner's kinship with his great predecessor.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano. The first system, starting at measure 16, features a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a harmonic accompaniment. Dynamics include *più f*, *ff*, and *p*. The second system, starting at measure 21, continues the melodic and harmonic development with a *dim.* marking. The notation includes various note values, rests, and articulation marks.

ex. 10-21a Richard Wagner, Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, mm. 16–23

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Richard Wagner's Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, measures 55-63. The first system (measures 55-59) shows a complex, fluid melodic line in the right hand and a more rhythmic bass line in the left hand. The second system (measures 60-63) continues this texture, with dynamic markings 'piu f' and 'meno f' indicating changes in volume. The key signature is G major and the time signature is 3/4.

**ex. 10-21b Richard Wagner, Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, 55–63**

Far less often remarked is the fluidity of Wagnerian phrase structure, an aspect of rhythm that is every bit as original as the novel harmonic shadings, and every bit as important in achieving the seamless, uncanny transitions to which Wagner gave the name “infinite melody.” Upbeats and downbeats can be as ambiguous as harmonic pivots. The main theme of the Prelude, which seems to grow out of the great harmonic balk where the cadence to A major is thwarted by F (and which will come back—once only—in act I, when the lovers have drained their potion and are reduced to the spellbound repetition of each other's name), is the prime case in point. It arises, and mainly recurs, on the upbeat (Ex. 10-21a), but is imperceptibly shifted to the downbeat in the turbulent middle of the piece—imperceptibly, that is, until its next entry cuts off its predecessor after seven beats (= measures; see Ex. 10-21b). Effects like this are as disorienting to the listener, as consciousness-altering, as modulations. In the strictest (Kantian) sense they produce an intimation of the sublime—something uncountable and ungraspable, in the presence of which the Self is dwarfed.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Wagner: Dramatic works

Tristan und Isolde

## WHEN RESOLUTION COMES...

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The Prelude is thus the opera's essential deed of music, made immediately visible with the raising of the curtain. The resolution of the drama, as Wagner put it in his program note, cannot take place in the visible realm, but only in blissful extinction, which is transcendence of the Will:

the rapture of dying, of being no more, of ultimate release into that wondrous realm from which we stray the furthest when we strive to penetrate it by the most impetuous force. Shall we call it death? Or is it not night's wonder-world, out of which, as the saga tells us, an ivy and a vine sprang up in locked embrace over Tristan's and Isolde's grave?<sup>49</sup>

The second act of the opera represents “night's wonder-world” on the level of sensuous appearance—the “phenomenal” level, to speak the language of philosophy. The third and final act portrays the attainment of the rapturous fulfillment in extinction: night's wonder-world on the level of the Will, of the truly real, or (as the German philosopher would put it) the “noumenal” plane. The musical relationship between the two acts—in particular, between their climaxes—will once again harness what the music theorist Heinrich Schenker would later call “*der Tonwille*” (the “tones’ will”),<sup>50</sup> the essential structural functions of harmony and rhythm that undergird the visible action. In the Prelude, we have observed these forces in action on the local level, organizing a musical statement of some hundred measures. Now we shall see them functioning on the most global plane, organizing a pair of acts that between them last three hours.

Obviously we cannot encompass the entire two-act, three-hour span in a discussion like this. We shall have to settle on a *metonymy*: a part (or pair of parts) to represent the whole(s). But in doing so we will actually be following Wagner's own plan with optimal economy and focus.

The main event in act II is an extended nocturnal tryst, arranged with the reluctant compliance of Isolde's maidservant Brangäne, who stands watch over the lovers. The situation is that of the *Tagelied*, a genre of medieval German song on which Wagner knowingly drew in order to invest his concept with the historical and national authenticity his theory of art demanded. The long central action of Wagner's act II is in effect an enacted or acted-out *Tagelied*. It is cast in three big sections. It is in the second of these that the music settles down for the first time in the act into a relatively stable key area (A  $\flat$  major); the lovers lose themselves in the higher reality of night's wonder-world; and the hugely protracted formal patterns of the medieval courtly song with refrains come to the fore.

The refrains are Brangäne's, and they consist of the warning—“Habet acht!” (“Beware!”)—to which, locked in their love trance, the lovers pay no heed. Her alarms, though shouted urgently at close range, might as well be coming from another planet so far as Tristan and Isolde are concerned, and Wagner represents the situation with great subtlety. The onset of the trance coincides with a rare authentic cadence, to A  $\flat$ , which establishes, as it were, the home-key of erotic bliss. Beginning with the words “O sink’ hernieder, Nacht der Liebe” (“O descend upon us, night of love”), the music the lovers sing is a paraphrase of a song (*Traüme*, “Dreams”), one of five composed by Wagner in 1857 to words by Mathilde Wesendonck, a German poet whose wealthy husband, Otto Wesendonck, was the composer's chief benefactor during his exile in Switzerland. Their passionate though perhaps unconsummated affair (detected by Wagner's wife Minna, leading to divorce and a chaotic period of destitution and wandering) is assumed to have been, along with the discovery of Schopenhauer, one of the main stimuli toward the composition of this most spiritually erotic (or erotically spiritual) of operas.



**fig. 10-13 Mathilde Wesendonck (1828–1902), detail of a painting.**

The whole section thus initiated, and ending with Brangäne's first intervention, is virtually quiescent in harmony. The tonic pedal initiated at the start holds uninterrupted for twenty-two measures, and is interrupted thereafter only for the briefest digressions, all of which, by circling right back to the pedal tone, may be regarded as embellishments or prolongations of the unchanging, transfixing harmony of night. In one case, excursions to the  $\flat$  VI in both the tonic and dominant regions, of a kind familiar since Schubert, are made; in another, the enharmonic transformation of the tonic pedal into a leading tone introduces a series of modulations by ascending chromatic degrees (to A, B  $\flat$ , C  $\flat$ , etc.) that goes exactly as far as the first primary function of the original key (D  $\flat$ , the subdominant) before being redirected homeward; in a third, it is the *Tristan*-chord itself that briefly intrudes to press the harmony voluptuously toward the Neapolitan by way of its dominant.

Only Brangäne breaks the spell—or tries to. That her warnings fall on deaf ears is signaled by the fact that the lightly pulsing syncopations and the shimmering orchestration that together conjure up the lovers' state of ecstasy are unaffected by her entrance. (Wagner's care in marking the score "*Sehr ruhig/molto tranquillo*" at the very point where Brangäne begins to shout is in itself a pointed commentary on the action.) That her voice impinges from "out there," casting the action on a double plane of lower reality (hers—and possibly ours) and higher (theirs—also potentially ours!) is signaled by the harmonic modulation that her entrance initiates. By the time she actually

enunciates her warning, the music is securely anchored in F# (minor, according to the key signature, but major according to the actual harmonies) on its way to a B major that is no sooner sounded than liquidated as the music gradually wends its way back to the lovers' key. The final section or coda of the love-duet-plus-Brangäne, a compressed and frenetic replay of the previous section as the lovers near their climax, begins with a new lyrical theme (Ex. 10-22). That the theme is a transformation of the opening measures of the Prelude (Ex. 10-16) is clear from its contour—an upward skip followed by a descent by chromatic degrees—and from its harmonic plan, consisting of sequential repetitions at the minor third corresponding to the first sequential repetition in the Prelude, only this time going a full Lisztian round (rising fourths respectively pitched E b → A b , G b → C b , A → D, and C → F).

261 TRISTAN

stür - ben wir, um un - ge - trennt, e - wig

*pp trem.* *pp*

The image shows a musical score for Tristan, measures 261-265. The score is in 6/8 time and features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in the treble clef and has a key signature of three flats (F major/D minor). The piano accompaniment is in the bass clef and has a key signature of three flats. The piano part consists of a tremolo in the right hand and a single note in the left hand. The lyrics are 'stür - ben wir, um un - ge - trennt, e - wig'. The score is marked with 'pp trem.' and 'pp'.

265  
T  
ei - nig, oh - ne End', ohn' Er -

270  
T  
we - chen, ohn' Er - ban - gen, na - men - los in

275  
T  
Lieb' um - fan - gen, ganz uns selb' ge - ge -

280  
T  
ber, der Lie - be nur zu le - ben!

**ex. 10-22 Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isode*, Act II, Love Duet (“Tagelied”), mm. 261–284**

Except for an abrupt but sumptuous detour to G major caused by Brangäne's second warning, this final section pursues a furious trajectory in which everything seems at once to rise and to accelerate toward liftoff over a dominant pedal that is prolonged even more spectacularly than the one in the Prelude. The dominant in question is F# (=G b), the dominant of B (=C b). Its implied resolution corresponds to the second of the melodic fourths enumerated in the paragraph above, which itself corresponded with the first upward sequential swing in the Prelude. The whole body of the love scene, beginning in A b and now approaching a cadence on B, is thus a vast composing-out of this minor-third motion—the essential harmonic impulse, the “molecular” embodiment, as Schopenhauer would have grasped with joy, of the Will.

The F# pedal is sounded where the music is first notated with the key signature of B major. That key will always be announced by its dominant, never the tonic, for it is always represented, like the procreative impulse itself, in a state of perpetual becoming. As in the Prelude, there are various departures, but only to return. The first initiates a chromatic bass descent that gets as far as C#, the dominant of the F# pedal, which is prolonged through a series of Neapolitan relationships and finally redirected to F# to coincide with the return of the B-major key signature. That is the first span of the pedal's prolongation.

The next span encloses a rhythmic compression of the previous acclamation to the night in a key area much closer to



home. The combination of shorter note values, suggesting greater speed, and a more insistently goal-directed harmony produces the tremulously impending mood of a retransition. The sounding of the inexorably cadential tonic initiates a hundred bars containing virtually nothing but sequences of ever-diminishing (that is, “accelerating”) note values and unit durations. At first the singers’ parts move in half notes and six-bar phrases. A dozen bars later they are trading two-measure units in four-measure phrases, the second unit in each phrase containing quarter notes. After ten more bars, eighth notes and even sixteenths are introduced (as embellishments) into the vocal parts. After another twenty they are trading phrases made up almost entirely of quarter notes.

In a final approach to the looming, inevitable cadence, the singers’ by-now delirious sequences are accompanied by a steady chromatic descent in the bass that spans an entire octave, finally zeroing in on F# for what one feels sure is to be the long-awaited consummation. It *almost* happens. In m. 482 the subdominant is shunted in where the tonic was expected, and the tonic, when it finally comes a bar later, is in the irresolute first inversion—a classic Wagnerian feint. But now (Ex. 10-23) the process is repeated: the same melodic trade-offs in the vocal parts; the same chromatically descending bass. This time, however, another ingredient, even more insistently directed at the goal, is added in the form of a sequence in the orchestra of a single bar's unit duration, consisting of nothing other than endless reiterations of the four-note chromatic ascent first heard in the second measure of the Prelude, rising from the *Tristan*-chord.

Twenty-eight times in all this motive resounds. At irregularly contracting intervals it is extended by an extra note smuggled in via a triplet to jack the sequence up by a single chromatic degree in contrary motion against the chromatically descending bass. After another classic Wagnerian feint in the form of a shocking *piano subito*, the singers’ parts are drawn into the irresistible soaring sequence. The bass, meanwhile, finally hits bottom on F# and stays there, grinding out twelve bars of dominant pedal intensified by a *molto crescendo*, at last pounding out the complete dominant seventh of B major in root position. At this point the rising sequence finally delivers Isolde's part to the leading tone. No composer had ever generated a comparable dominant-tension, for never before had a composer felt the need so to dramatize music's most basic business.

ISOLDA

los - c - wig

TRISTAN

wusste e - wig und - los

beiss er - glüh - ter Brust

erd - lor

höch - ere Lie - bes - (art)

e - wig

Heiss er - glüh - ter

The musical score is written in a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 2/4 time signature. It features two vocal parts: Isolde (Soprano) and Tristan (Tenor). The piano accompaniment consists of a right-hand part with chords and a left-hand part with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The lyrics are in German and describe a moment of intense passion and desire.





correspondence between the two sections is virtually exact: splice mm. 261–282, 414–459, and 462–514 of the duet together and you get the *Verklärung* through m. 60. But at mm. 61–62 the bloodcurdling deceptive cadence that cut off the duet before its consummation is replaced by a cataclysmic authentic cadence (Ex. 10-24), the most strongly voiced cadence in the entire opera, in which the B-major triad in root position, ardently anticipated but thwarted in act II, is finally allowed to sound forth in glory. At this radiant moment, one may say, Isolde's soul passes irrevocably into “night's wonder-world” where it can join Tristan's, the lovers achieving in that transcendent space the union denied them on the terrestrial plane.

57 ISOLDE  
hau - chen? In dem wo - gen - den

59  
Schwall, in dem tö - nen - dem Schall, in des

61  
Welt a - themis

The image shows three systems of musical notation for Isolde's vocal line and piano accompaniment. The first system (measures 57-58) shows the vocal line starting with a half note G4 and a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note A4, and then a half note G4. The piano accompaniment features a complex texture with triplets and sixteenth notes. The second system (measures 59-60) continues the vocal line with a half note G4, a quarter rest, and a half note G4. The piano accompaniment continues with similar textures. The third system (measures 61-62) shows the vocal line with a half note G4 and a quarter rest, followed by a half note G4. The piano accompaniment features a powerful *ff* dynamic with a descending bass line and a complex texture. The key signature is B major (two sharps) and the time signature is 4/4.

63 we liss' die All

65 er trin lere, ver

67 sin ken, un be

69 wisse, höch ste

71 laut

75 *morendo* *pp* *rallentando*

**ex. 10-24 Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Isoldes Vrklärung***

Wagner consolidates the sense of long-postponed consummation by attending in the last five measures of the opera to a bit of unfinished business left over from the first three measures of the Prelude. He allows the original *Tristan*-chord to sound one last time along with its attendant leitmotif, the four-note chromatic ascent. Only this time he replaces the dominant seventh on E with an E-minor triad that can function as the subdominant of B major; and he extends the leitmotif in a pair of oboes, moving through C# to D#, the third of the tonic triad. That D#—the note that finally resolves the *Tristan*-chord, in the process becoming perhaps the most symbolically fraught single note in all of opera, if not all of music—is given an extraordinary spotlight when Wagner clears all of the surrounding harmony away (in some cases by notating actual rests, in others by the use of a staccato dot), allowing just the oboes to neep through for a brief instant, immediately before the final chord

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## Notes:

(49) *Ibid.*, p. 321.

(50) See Heinrich Schenker, *Der Tonwille: Pamphlets in Witness of the Immutable Laws of Music* (1921–1923), trans. and ed. William Drabkin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

**See also from Grove Music Online**

Wagnerism

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg

## THE PROBLEM REVISITED

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

No matter what they thought of Wagner or how they valued his achievement, his contemporaries, and many listeners ever since, have been forced to acknowledge the unprecedented and perhaps never equaled rhetorical force of his music. Whether they loved the experience or hated it, all recognized that the experience of Wagner was emotionally draining and even physically exhausting in a way that no musical experience had ever been before. And all were aware that Wagner's force of expression was a force arising precisely out of his novel and audacious manipulations of the same age-old functional relationships that had governed musical structure and undergirded its coherence since the seventeenth century—since precisely the time, that is, when music's role as “the great persuader” was upheld by the Florentine neo-Platonist academicians who midwived the birth of opera out of the spirit of the ancient drama.

But as Plato himself was the first (at least in the European tradition) to recognize and warn, if music is the great persuader, then we have to ask what it is that music persuades us of, and we have to be wary of it. Clara Schumann, the aging widow of Robert Schumann, and (as the secret dedicatee of Schumann's *Phantasie*) a woman who knew a thing or two about love music but had ample reason to hate Wagner for snubbing her husband, was only one of many who saw in *Tristan und Isolde* an affront to moral decorum and, ultimately, a threat to social stability. After attending a performance in 1875, ten years after the opera's premiere, she wrote in her diary that

it is the most repulsive thing I ever saw or heard in my life. To have to sit through a whole evening watching, listening to such love-lunacy till every feeling of decency was outraged, and to see not only the audience but the musicians delighted with it was—I may well say—the saddest experience of my whole artistic career..... It is not emotion that the opera portrays, it is a disease, and they tear their hearts out of their bodies, while the music expresses it all in the most nauseous manner.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, anyone who, as Clara Schumann observed, takes delight in Isolde's orgiastic death by love (and delight is a mild word indeed to describe the reaction many listeners experience) has been momentarily persuaded that the resolution of the dominant-seventh chord on F# to the tonic triad of B major is the most important thing in the world—from which it follows that the visible embodiment of that deed of music, Isolde's mystic union with Tristan in death, was, as Shakespeare's Hamlet might have remarked, “a consummation devoutly to be wish'd.”<sup>52</sup> Whether looked upon in Schopenhauerian terms as a transcendence of the world of appearances, or in terms more in keeping with our terrestrial experience as a symbolized (or simulated) sexual orgasm, the opera's all-conquering climax validates (and justifies?) a passion that defied every social norm and behavioral constraint of Tristan's and Isolde's world—and, by extension, if we revel in it, of our own.

Going beyond the more obvious question whether music, by virtue of its wordlessness and its invisibility, was exempt from normal taboos on the explicit representation of sexual behavior, we are prompted to ask another. If we can be so easily persuaded of the superior claim of passion over propriety in the imaginary world of the opera, are we not susceptible to similar persuasion in the actual world that we inhabit? Wagner's contemporaries had to ask themselves that question when confronted not only by Tristan's and Isolde's licentious deeds but by Wagner's own flouting of moral law: first in his dalliance with his benefactor's wife in Zürich, in which the triangle of the composer and the two Wesendoncks vividly paralleled that of Tristan, Isolde, and King Marke; and second, even more notoriously, in his wooing of Liszt's own daughter Cosima, who deserted her husband, the pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow (a devoted Wagnerian, even afterward), to become Wagner's second wife in 1870.

Wagner was perhaps the most powerful advocate for the implied proposition that a great artist's private life, however scandalous, was to be condoned out of reverence for his artistic genius; that art, in Nietzsche's famous phrase, was "beyond good and evil";<sup>53</sup> and that artists were not subject to the same moral strictures as "ordinary mortals." Even more disquietingly, artworks like *Tristan und Isolde*, in their "liberatory" message, could seem to invite its audience to emulate the characters and their creator in their dangerously emancipated behavior. The questions that Wagner forced thus represented an encroachment of the Beethoven myth into dangerous territories that the original creators of the myth never foresaw.

As Brian Magee has put it, Wagner's art, unlike Beethoven's, is not only "aspirational": it does not seek only to express what is highest and best in us, but also what is forbidden. That is what gives his works their very special persuasive power, or in Magee's words their "special emotional impact which everyone, including people who do not like them, acknowledges."<sup>54</sup> The philosopher continues, "They give us a hotline to what has been most powerfully repressed in ourselves, and bring us consciousness-changing messages from the unconscious." This begins to suggest what many in the twentieth century have suggested: that the most appropriate context in which to appreciate Wagner's achievement is not the one into which Jacques Barzun inserted him in the book cited near the beginning of this chapter. Rather than with Darwin or with Marx, Wagner should perhaps be ranged as an artist with Sigmund Freud, another explorer of the unconscious desires that drive our conscious lives in directions we might be loath to acknowledge.

Nor are these the only parlous terrains toward which Wagner beckoned his listeners with his astounding persuasive skills. Here we circle back to the beginning of the chapter, where Wagner's relationship to his nation was broached. His tendency toward xenophobia and tribalism, expressed in bigotry—against the cosmopolitan Jews, against the "Enlightened" French, and by extension against internationalism and rationality themselves—was both symptomatic of the late nineteenth century's new exclusionary and aggressive brand of nationalism, and, to a much-debated extent, among its formative influences. His persuasive skills can look to those implicitly excluded like demagoguery. His appeal to the feeling's-understanding, implying a cerebral bypass, can look like the appeal of later German demagogues to "think with the blood"<sup>55</sup> rather than with the reasoning brain.

The ending of Wagner's single mature comic opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* ("The master-singers of Nuremberg," composed 1861–67, performed 1868), is often cited as a case in point. The story, set in the sixteenth century, is an attractive one to say the least: proud young Walther von Stolzing, guided by the wise old master singer Hans Sachs (a real historical personage), harnesses his native genius to his national traditions and produces the greatest artsong of the day, winning not only the singer's prize but also the hand of the maiden he loves. But Wagner could not resist the urge to give the final scene a didactically nationalistic turn, somewhat sinister even in its own contemporary context, when the German states under Prussia's leadership were preparing both for national unification and for a vindictive war on France, and increasingly sinister over the course of the twentieth century, with its two world wars largely caused by German aggression.

While the orchestra gives out the themes of the Master Singers, the Apprentices, and Walther's own *Preislied* (Prize Song), montaged in exquisitely wrought counterpoint, Sachs exhorts the assembled performers to

Habt Acht! Uns dräuen üble Streich':	Beware! Evil threatens us:
zerfällt erst deutsches Volk und Reich,	if the German land and folk should one day decay
in falscher welscher Majestät	under a false foreign rule
kein Fürst bald mehr sein Volk versteht;	soon no prince will understand his people any more;
und welschen Dunst mit welschem Tand	and foreign mists with foreign conceits
sie pflanzen uns in deutsches Land;	they will plant in our German land;
was deutsch und echt, wüß't keiner mehr,	what is German and pure no one will know
lebt's nicht in deutscher Meister Ehr'.	if it does not live in our esteem for our German masters.
Drum sag ich Euch:	Therefore I say to you:



ehrt Eure deutschen Meister!	Honor your German masters!
Dann bannt Ihr gute Geister;	Then you will have protection of the good spirits;
und gebt Ihr ihrem Wirken Gunst,	and if you remain true to their endeavors,
zerging' in Dunst	even if mists should dissolve
das heil'ge röm'sche Reich,	the Holy Roman Empire,
uns bliebe gleich	there would still endure
die heil'ge deutsche Kunst!	our holy German art!



**fig. 10-14** *Die Meistersinger*, Act II in the first production (Munich, 1868).

Not only does the opera end on this note, but the music that accompanies the crowd's repetition of the last exhortation resounds with the leitmotif of ridicule for the old pedant Beckmesser, the comic baritone, whom many (and not only Jews) have recognized as a caricature of the impotent Jewish artist Wagner had already derided in his notorious essay of 1850. Beckmesser alone is unhappy at the end of the opera; indeed he has been banished from the happy people's midst. But the music is heavenly, all the better to persuade, and in its very heavenliness has confronted music lovers with a moral dilemma.

The first to face it were the “*welschen*” themselves. The word, translated (quite properly) as “foreign” in the extract just given from the libretto, has “Romance”—that is, Latinate—as its primary meaning. Often it simply means “French,” and that usage gave Sachs's speech an inescapable subtext for the opera's original audiences, who in their everyday speech used the word “*Welschtum*” to mock “fancy Frenchy manners” or any pretension or foppishness. The French knew the word, too, and what the Germans meant by it. And no one greeted the humiliating outcome of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 more gleefully than Wagner, who even wrote a malicious one-act farce called *Capitulation* to rub French noses in defeat.

The irony and the difficulty was that French musicians—fascinated by effects of harmony ever since the days of Rameau and very much aware of the power of symbolism in the work of their poet countrymen such as Charles Baudelaire (a hardened Wagnerolater)—were perhaps the most receptive of all to Wagner's musical innovations, and most susceptible to his spell. Their attempt to solve the dilemma by severing all consideration of Wagner's nationalism from appreciation of his music, and to declare “extramusical” considerations off-limits to any discussion of musical values, has set the tone for more than a century of still-raging controversy. Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921), already a famous composer by the time of the second *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth in 1876, covered it for a French newspaper. His aggressive intervention on Wagner's behalf was received by many as a breach of national honor. His arguments, however, were influential and are still relevant to the issue as it is debated today. “From the outset,” he declared,

let us avoid any confusion between nationalism and art. Richard Wagner hates France—but does that matter in considering the quality of his works? Those writers who have been insulting him in the crudest fashion for fifteen years now think him ungrateful—in this they may well be right, because nothing gave him greater publicity than their ceaseless attacks.... Let us, however, forget the author of this work and deal solely with the *Nibelungenring*. That poem was written out and published in 1863 and has nothing to do with the difficulties between France and Germany since that date....

I myself have studied the works of Richard Wagner for a long time. I have given myself completely to this study and all the performances I have attended have left me with a profound impression that all the theories in the world will never succeed in making me forget. Because of this I have been accused of being a Wagnerian. Indeed, for a while, I believed myself to be one. What a mistake and how far from the truth! I had only to meet some true Wagnerians to realize that I was not one of them and never could be! Because for the Wagnerian, music did not exist before Wagner, or rather it was still in embryo—Wagner raised it to the level of Art....

But what is there to be said about those who feel their sense of patriotism outraged at the very thought of Wagner having his operatic tetralogy performed in a small Bavarian town? Truly it is possible to impute much to this patriotism and it might be more sensible not to so misuse one of the finest of mankind's sentiments but to preserve it carefully as a weapon to be drawn only on special occasions. Others, true and proven Frenchmen, would gladly immolate themselves on their idol's altar if it took his fancy to ask for human sacrifices. I regret I am not able to share any of these feelings, I merely respect them.<sup>56</sup>

It seems clear that the anxieties surrounding Wagner have played a key role in inspiring the “aestheticism” that came to dominance around the turn of the twentieth century and continues to infect discussions of art even now. Estheticism is the doctrine that the arts are concerned only with beauty and that beauty is an autonomous entity existing in a world apart from the “worldly” and the “historical,” and (to re-borrow that useful phrase from Nietzsche) beyond good and evil. In uneasy alliance with the historicism encountered in the previous chapter—the belief that all history, including the history of art, is self-motivated and deterministic—estheticism has undergirded and safeguarded the autonomy of twentieth-century art and artists to the point where many have seen estheticism as a prerequisite for creative freedom, indeed for the continued possibility of artistic creativity itself.

And that is how an art conceived in politics and dedicated to social utopia has been resolutely depoliticized and desocialized even as (in the opinion of many) it has continued to have a momentous political and social influence in the sometimes horrible history of the twentieth century. Like historicism, estheticism has created a crux—a tangle, a knot, a quandary—in the history of modern art that will color every succeeding page of this book. Wagner—anything but an estheticist himself but unavoidably and tendentiously misunderstood—was its chief begetter.

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## Notes:

(51) Clara Schumann, diary entry (Munich, 8 September 1875); in Irving Kolodin, ed., *The Composer as Listener* (New York: Collier, 1962), pp. 206–7.

(52) Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III, sc. 1, lines 63–64.

(53) Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886).



(54) Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher*, p. 269.

(55) Slogan attributed (or misattributed) not only to Adolf Hitler but to a wide variety of English writers, including D. H. Lawrence and Rudyard Kipling.

(56) Camille Saint-Saëns, *Harmonie et Mélodie* (1885); quoted in Robert Hartford, ed., *Bayreuth: The Early Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 57–58.

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

# CHAPTER 11 Artist, Politician, Farmer (Class of 1813, II)

## Verdi

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 11 Artist, Politician, Farmer (Class of 1813, II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

## SPOOKED

*The invisible orchestra! The idea is not mine, but Wagner's; and it is excellent. It is impossible today to tolerate horrible tailcoats and white ties against Egyptian, Assyrian, and Druid costumes; to set the orchestra, part of an imaginary world, so to speak, in the middle of the floor, right in the crowd as it claps or hisses. Add to all this the objectionableness of having harps, double basses, and the windmill arms of the conductor himself jutting into the air.<sup>1</sup>*

*Endless chatter about ... how I don't know how to write for singers; how the few bearable things are all in the second and fourth acts (nothing in the third); and how on top of all that I am an imitator of Wagner!!! A fine outcome after thirty-five years to wind up as an imitator!!!<sup>2</sup>*

*Our young Italian composers are not good patriots. If the Germans, proceeding from Bach, have come to Wagner, they do so as good Germans, and all is well. But when we, the descendants of Palestrina, imitate Wagner, we are committing a musical crime and are doing a useless, nay, harmful thing.<sup>3</sup>*

*You do well to honor your Maestro. He is one of the greatest geniuses. He has made people happy and presented them with treasures of immeasurable and immortal worth. You will understand that I, as an Italian, do not yet understand everything. That is due to our ignorance of German legend, the strangeness of Wagner's subject matter, its prevailing mysticism and the pagan world with its gods and Norns, its giants and dwarves. But I'm still young. I never cease exploring Wagner's sublime world of ideas. I owe him an enormous amount—hours of most wonderful exaltation. The work that always arouses my greatest admiration is Tristan! Before that gigantic work I stand in wonder and terror. I consider the second act, in its wealth of musical invention, its tenderness and sensuality of musical expression and its inspired orchestration, to be one of the finest creations that has ever issued from a human mind.<sup>4</sup>*

These remarks about Wagner, by turns admiring and impatient, generous and resentful, were made at various points during the latter part of his career by Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901), Wagner's exact if longer-lived contemporary and the preeminent late nineteenth-century representative of what was by then the oldest and most distinguished living tradition in European music, that of Italian opera.

The first of them is from a letter from Verdi to his publisher Giulio Ricordi, dated 10 July 1871, several months before the first Italian production of a Wagner opera (*Lohengrin* in Bologna) and five years before the Wagnerian “invisible orchestra” was actually realized at Bayreuth. It serves as a reminder about yet another Wagnerian watershed that has profoundly affected the world of music in which we now live: not the invisible orchestra, which has remained a rarity, but the practice of lowering the houselights, not only at operatic performances, but at symphony concerts and solo recitals as well.



**fig. 11-1 Giuseppe Verdi, portrait by Giovanni Boldini.**

Most of us now take the darkness for granted, for we have never known another way. In the case of opera performances it was a matter of enhancing the “stage illusion” (the illusion that what we are witnessing is really happening) by as far as possible shutting out distracting competition from everyday reality. In the case of “absolute music” the darkness abetted romantic “interiority” (the music trance, as we have been calling it since chapter 2). But while it favored esthetic reverie (not to mention the traditional use of the theater for amorous pursuits) it made reading librettos impossible (as well as card games), and was strongly opposed by many, especially aristocrats who sensed that lowering the houselights would diminish their traditional proprietary rights over the theater and its mores. It also fostered somnolence and made countervailing efforts, which could be quite burdensome, a part of everybody's musical experience.

In demanding such efforts, musical occasions became even more like church attendance. Many felt themselves oppressed. An exasperated Chaikovsky wrote to his brother in St. Petersburg after the first Bayreuth *Ring* (which like Saint-Saëns he covered for a newspaper so as to receive free tickets), that “before, music strove to delight people; now they are tormented and exhausted.”<sup>5</sup> In addition to the usual complaints about the sheer length of the spectacles, the endless dialogues and narratives (which could no longer be followed with the eye), and Wagner's “conglomeration of the most complex and *recherché* harmonies,” Chaikovsky railed bitterly at “the pitch-darkness in

the theater.” It was a symptom, in his eyes, of that dangerous shift in the balance of artistic power from the consumer to the producer that was being fostered by promoters of the New German School, to recall some pseudo-economic jargon from chapter 8.

Verdi's enthusiasm at the prospect of an invisible orchestra is interesting in view of the difference between his artistic world and Wagner's. Compared with Wagner, Verdi was very much a “realist.” His subject matter was almost always of this world. He often used contemporary plays and even novels as source material. He was the first composer (in *La traviata*, 1853) to set an opera in the recognizable (near-)present. But he, too, favored a heightened stage illusion, which could serve to enhance any stage reality whatever its degree of proximity to the surrounding reality. And in seeking to abet the illusion he tacitly admitted that even a stage setting in the “here and now” required esthetic distancing from what was truly here and truly now if the stage action was to have any dramatic effect. (But terms are always slippery: Wagner, too, was often called a realist because of his hostility to conventional form and the so-called “musical prose” of his vocal parts, which, accompanied by a network of leitmotives, often had an irregular, seemingly ametrical phrase structure even at their most lyrical.)

The second epigraph is from another letter to Ricordi written about a year later than the first, when Verdi's grandest opera, *Aida*, was being rehearsed for its Italian premiere. The world premiere had been in Egypt, the opera having been commissioned to inaugurate a new theater built to mark Cairo's bid for status as an international center following the opening of the Suez Canal. (In the event, the new opera being late, the theater opened with *Rigoletto*.) No other composer, not even Wagner, had an international reputation at that moment that would have recommended him for such a commission (although, needing to make contingency plans, the commissioners listed Wagner after Verdi, and Gounod after Wagner). And yet to the extent that the new opera seemed stylistically up-to-date or in any way different from what Verdi's audience expected, the difference was automatically attributed to Wagner's influence despite the fact that Verdi was a world-famous master and Wagner's music was still practically unknown in Italy. (The Bologna *Lohengrin* had not yet been followed up by any other Italian theater.) This shows to what extent Wagner, with his voluminous theorizing and his genius for self-promotion, had managed to get himself accepted everywhere as the standard of musical “contemporaneity.” Verdi's tone (exclamation points in threes!) betrays a private anxiety that practically everybody shared.



**fig. 11-2 Emma Eames (1865–1952) as Aida, ca. 1900.**

It made him fearful for the future of Italian opera, as he confessed to another correspondent a year later still, in 1873, after *Aida* had had a grandiose success that stilled murmurings about “Wagnerism.”<sup>6</sup> He was strong enough and well enough established to withstand the pressure, he wrote, but imagine today, for example, a young man of the temper of Bellini: not very certain of himself, shaky because of his scanty training, guided by his instinct alone. And now imagine him attacked by the Wagnerites. He would finally lose confidence in himself, and he would be lost.

These were the fears that nudged Verdi over into pronouncements like the third epigraph above, from a letter written in 1889 (six years after Wagner's death) to a British impresario. Verdi's sentiments here offer Wagner's aggressive nationalism a riposte in kind, testifying to a generally heightened nationalistic tension all over Europe—even in Italy, which had gone through a national unification comparable to Germany's, and did so fully a decade earlier. But after the Franco-Prussian War, Germany was regarded everywhere as a ferocious nation, and Wagner as its bellwether. Not only did representatives of threatened traditions regard him thus; so did the Germans themselves, avidly. “Wagner's music was not only the best and most significant of its age,” Arnold Schoenberg could still gloat half a century later, “but it was also the music of 1870 Germany, who conquered the world of her friends and enemies through all her achievements, not without arousing their envy and resistance.”<sup>7</sup> Verdi in 1889 certainly gave evidence in support of Schoenberg's claim.

But by 1899, when, an eighty-six-year-old Titan, he was fawningly interviewed by a reporter for a German newspaper, Verdi relaxed his guard and issued the very diplomatic and (with regard to *Tristan*) even admiring assessment of Wagner that is cited as the fourth epigraph above. And yet there is sufficient evidence of leg-pulling (“I do not yet understand everything ... but I'm still young”) to justify a suspicion of irony, especially where Verdi writes (compare Chaikovsky!) about “making people happy,” or about Wagner’s “sublime world of ideas.” Still, there comes a time when a survivor can afford generosity.

The question remains, why did Verdi feel the need so insistently to position himself and reposition himself vis-à-vis “Vanyer” (as he always pronounced the name)? He was a more famous composer than Wagner for most of his career. His works had formed the bedrock of the standard operatic repertory since the 1850s, and they continue to form it today. And his lineage, however you measure it, was far more ancient and distinguished. The tradition of German opera, where Wagner reigned supreme, was separated from the lifetime of Bach (the figurehead from which Verdi traced the German line in the third epigraph) by some decades at least. Its origins in the singspiel were lowly. The tradition of German symphonic music, where Wagner asserted a far more controversial claim to preeminence, was even younger. But the tradition that Verdi dominated went back almost a century before Bach's time, practically to the time of Palestrina himself, Verdi's equally artificial, equally mythologized Italian figurehead. In its Florentine humanistic origins Verdi's was the most aristocratic of traditions, whether one measured aristocracy in terms of patronage or in terms of culture.

By Verdi's time, Italians had gloried in musical preeminence for centuries. And thanks to the exportability of their product, so extensively documented in this book, Italian musicians had long come to see themselves as world conquerors, arbiters of “universal” taste. Since the rise of German instrumental music, with its heavy baggage of (to Italians) questionable philosophy, Italian musicians were happy to divide the musical world into spheres of influence: the vocal, where their superiority was unassailable (and which they regarded as the higher sphere because it was the one that the human organism could produce “naturally,” without mediation), and the instrumental, which the Germans were welcome to if they wanted it. Any German (Mozart, say, or Handel) who wanted to excel in vocal music had to learn his trade from them, and practiced it on their terms, even when it came to language. Beethoven, with his one opera, and Weber, with his glorified singspiels, could be tolerated with condescension. They posed no threat.

But now, through Wagner, the parvenu German tradition had put the Italian on the defensive, and had begun to assert universalist claims not only at home but abroad. The nature of the Wagnerian music drama implied a dual claim to dominance, incorporating both vocal and instrumental supremacy. And it was winning converts even in Italy, where in the 1860s an increasingly vocal group of self-styled musical intellectuals called *scapigliati* (“shaggy folk,” or “the long-hair set”) began agitating for a “Wagnerian reform” of the local product.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that Verdi's ambivalent but nervously intense interest in Wagner went completely unreciprocated. Wagner seems never to have uttered a single public word about Verdi, whether in writing or to an interviewer. The Italian goes almost unmentioned in Wagner's private correspondence. Even his wife Cosima's minute and worshipful diary that recorded his every word and deed for the duration of their marriage, a document that when published occupied some twenty-four hundred pages, deigns to notice the composer who now figures in history as Wagner's greatest rival only six times in passing. Wagner's remarks are usually quite noncommittal. It is only Cosima who registers active condescension or distaste. One evening in 1871, for example, in connection with the Bologna *Lohengrin*, the conversation turned toward things Italian. When a guest seated himself at the piano and tactlessly treated the Wagners to “a dreadful musical tour, Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini, Verdi, one after the other,” Cosima reported, “feeling physically ill, I pick up and seek refuge in a volume of Goethe.”<sup>8</sup>

The one-sidedness of the Wagner-Verdi relationship was not only a sign of the times, but also a portent; for Wagner was a “spook”—a crisis point, a phenomenon that nobody could ignore, and even more than that, a polarizing force, a phenomenon about which one had to take sides. Wagner's ironically counter-Hegelian legacy was the intensification of antitheses and the prevention of synthesis. The convergence often predicted in the nineteenth century—most explicitly, ironically enough, by the Italian revolutionary patriot Giuseppe Mazzini (1805–72) in an early essay on music—whereby Italian and German music would meet in the middle and bring forth a universal style that would combine their virtues, never took place. In Wagner's polarizing wake everything and everybody became “more so.” Difference, celebrated since Herder's time, now became a fetish and a narcissistic obsession. Only because of Wagner (and the rampant “1870 Germany” he represented) did Italian and French musicians, whatever their level of patriotism, feel the need to become stylistic nationalists. Previously the style of Italian music had been the one

European style virtually free of self-consciousness—a luxury enjoyed only by the self-confidently topmost, and a testimony to that happy state of security. But as we have just seen, by the end of his career even Verdi had been spooked. Even he needed to situate himself stylistically vis-à-vis the wizard of Bayreuth, and so have practically all composers ever since. Wagner's own style, as we have also seen, was probably the most self-conscious, self-willed, and deliberately assumed style in the history of European music. Unself-conscious style has not been an option for composers in the post-Wagnerian age, and that may be the post-Wagnerian age's best definition.

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## Notes:

- (1) Franz Werfel and Paul Stefan, eds., *Verdi: The Man in His Letters*, trans. Edward Downes (New York: Vienna House, 1973), p. 305.
- (2) *Ibid.*, p. 310.
- (3) Verdi to Franco Faccio, 14 July 1889; *Ibid.*, p. 392.
- (4) Felix Philippi, "Begegnung mit Verdi," *Berliner Tagblatt*, 13 July 1913; in Marcello Conati, ed., *Encounters with Verdi*, trans. Richard Stokes (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 328–29.
- (5) Pyotr Chaikovsky to Modest Chaikovsky, quoted in Alexander Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man* (New York: Schirmer, 1991), p. 181.
- (6) Verdi to Clarina Maffei, 9 April 1873; *Verdi: The Man in His Letters*, p. 322.
- (7) Arnold Schoenberg, "National Music," in *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 172.
- (8) Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, eds., *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, Vol. I (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), pp. 335–36.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

Verdi's Operas: 'Oberto' (1839) to 'La traviata' (1853)

Nationalism

## THE GALLEY YEARS

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 11 Artist, Politician, Farmer (Class of 1813, II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

What made Verdi possible, first of all, was of course his talent. Why insist on such a truism? Because it is especially important to set Verdi's career in the context of his time and place. That will tell us what made Verdi not only possible but necessary.

The time and place were in a very volatile counterpoint just then. Pursuing an operatic career in that place still meant coping with the hectic factory conditions described in chapter 1, conditions that made adherence to manifold conventions—the old Code Rossini—a necessity. Verdi spent the first seventeen years of his career—from 1836, when he began his first opera, *Oberto*, to 1853, when *La traviata* was performed—as a *compositore scritturato*, a contract (or staff) composer, in constant negotiation with theaters and casts, writing frantically on commission, with only limited control of subjects and libretti, and then revising furiously during rehearsals. Verdi looked back on this period as his “years in the galley,” comparing himself to the slaves who sweated over the oars in Roman ships of old.

During this time, between the ages of twenty-three and forty, Verdi produced nineteen of his twenty-eight operas in collaboration with seven librettists and nine theaters. At the height of his early fame, 1844–47, he managed to turn out eight operas in less than four years. None of this batch had permanent success, but one (*Macbeth*, 1847, after Shakespeare) was later reworked at leisure and has earned a place in the standard repertory. Signs of international recognition begin in 1847, with commissions from London (*I masnadieri*, after Schiller's play *The Robbers*) and Paris (*Jérusalem*, reworked from *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*, a historical drama set at the time of the Crusades). At the end of the galley period he produced a trio of masterpieces—*Rigoletto* (1851), *Il trovatore* (*The Troubadour*), and *La traviata* (*The Fallen Woman*, 1853)—that have remained the cornerstone of the Italian repertory in opera houses throughout the world. The triumph of this “popular trilogy,” as it used to be called, bought Verdi's freedom from galley slavery.

One of the reasons for the traditional stylistic “unself-consciousness” of Italian opera was the galley system itself, the merciless conditions under which operas were produced. When writing under so many prescriptions and requirements one is not conscious of having a style, only a method. An opera, however, did have to have a style—a *tinta* (color/tone), as it was called—to make it effective and memorable. According to Abramo Basevi (1818–85), a famous music critic who in 1859 published the earliest full-length study of Verdi's operas and may have coined the term, it was his infallible capacity for endowing his operas with an effective *tinta* that made Verdi supreme.

It was something of an intangible, this *tinta* (or *colorito*, to use the word Verdi preferred). It might consist in one opera of recurrent tone colors or instrumental combinations, in another of recurrent harmonic effects. It could be the result of melodic turns, or of characteristic rhythms, or any combination of idiosyncrasies that provided a characteristic musical “substratum” below the level of theme or even leitmotif, and also below the level of whatever “local color” a libretto might require.

Julian Budden, the author of the most detailed published survey of Verdi's operas and a matchless connoisseur of their contents, speaks of “the upward thrust of so many melodies” in one opera, “the abundance of andantino in broken [i.e., with rests on beats two and five]” in another, “the bow-shaped melodic designs” in a third and “the minor-third figurations”<sup>9</sup> in a fourth as constituting their respective *tinte*. But Roger Parker, another Verdi expert, just as cogently cites the prevalence of syncopation as the decisive ingredient that tinctures *Ernani* (1844),<sup>10</sup> the first of Budden's four and Verdi's first international success. (It was based on a notorious blood-and-thunder melodrama by Victor Hugo.)



However difficult it may be to define, it is on the level of *tinta* that the influence of the times may be most strongly felt in Verdi's early work, setting it apart from that of his predecessors and contemporaries and giving it what, in historical hindsight anyway, may be called an individual manner. The time during which Verdi became the most famous and frequently performed Italian opera composer in Europe was a famously turbulent period in Italian history known as the Risorgimento (resurgence)—the name given by Count Vittorio Alfieri (1749–1803), an early nationalist poet, to Italy's struggle toward independence and national unity.

As Alfieri's noble rank implied, the Risorgimento was a revolutionary movement led “from above,” by the aristocracy and the educated bourgeoisie, the art-consuming classes. The objective was to rid Italy of foreign rulers—Austria in the north, Napoleonic France in other areas including the environs of Rome—and to unite the independent Italian states under a single authority. The factions furthest to the left backed republican rule, those furthest to the right the papal rule; the ultimately successful liberal middle favored a constitutional monarchy under Victor Emmanuel, king of Sardinia, scion of the house of Savoy, whose capital was the industrial city of Turin in the Piedmont region of northwestern Italy.

Independence and unification were won in stages, beginning with abortive uprisings organized in the 1820s in the wake of the Congress of Vienna; continuing through a series of more violent revolts (some briefly successful) in the revolutionary years 1848–49; a successful Sardinian campaign against Austria in 1859, after which Lombardy was joined to Victor Emmanuel's kingdom; a series of plebiscites in 1860; Garibaldi's conquest of Sicily later that year; and the proclamation of the kingdom in 1861 with its capital first at Turin, later at Florence. Venice and Rome were the last areas to be incorporated, the former as a diplomatic by-product of the Austro-Prussian war of 1866 (Victor Emmanuel having prudently allied himself with Prussia), and the latter as a similar by-product of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. The Italian state as it exists today with Rome as its capital—the first political entity incorporating the entire Italian peninsula since the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century—was established in 1871.

The 1840s, the decade of Verdi's apprenticeship, was the period when the arts, led by the example of poets and novelists like Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873) and Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837), began to be significantly affected by Risorgimento ideals, and to affect the movement in turn. It was, in Mazzini's words, a time of “social poetry.” The romanticism it embodied, unlike the northern romanticism with which we are already very familiar, was hostile to morbid individualism. For Mazzini, a suffering Byronic hero was a thing of “wretchedness and impotence.”<sup>11</sup> The proper role of romantic literature, he averred, using the very word (*risorgere*) that gave the great movement its name, was not to glorify or wallow in private pain but “to soothe the suffering soul by teaching it to *rise up* toward God through Humanity.”

Part of the project was, simply, to teach the suffering Italian soul that it was suffering. As David Kimbell emphasizes in his study of Verdi, Austrian rule was not particularly burdensome to the northern Italians, and Milan, both the seat of the Austrian administration and the site of La Scala, Italy's most prestigious opera house, was a flourishing and contented city for most of Verdi's galley period.<sup>12</sup> It became the function of art to rouse not only the rabble but also the educated classes to action, to give the latter a political conscience despite their relative material well-being and the passivity to which contentment so easily gave rise. Morse Peckham, a prominent critic of romantic literature, has put the matter bluntly but memorably: “If the Austrian domination was to be overthrown, the level of aggression in enough Italians to make that possible had to be significantly raised.”<sup>13</sup>

All national art became double-coded: an implicit model, even a manual of action that exemplified what could not be openly advocated by direct public exhortation. Peckham goes so far as to suggest that

for the purposes of raising the level of aggression it made no moral difference if historical romances, paintings, and operas show Italians as brutal, bloody, and revengeful. They were Italians being highly aggressive. An Italian fictional or operatic villain was ambivalent and had a dual function—to raise awareness of oppression and to show an Italian as highly aggressive and capable of seizing and wielding power.

Italian romanticism of the Risorgimento period thus provided the impetus for perhaps the first self-conscious political vanguard—an avant-garde in the literal, quasi-military sense—to be actively promoted, and even led, by artists. And this vividly suggests the source of the special Verdi *tinta* that vouchsafed his early eminence. It was the *tinta* of cruelty, of strife, of force—in Peckham's word, of aggression—the *tinta* summed up by the epithet *il Verdi brutto* (“nasty Verdi”) with which his more fastidious detractors tormented him in his galley years.

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## Notes:

(9) Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, Vol. I (New York: Praeger, 1973), p. 40.

(10) Roger Parker, "Ernani," in *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Vol. II (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 71.

(11) Giuseppe Mazzini, "Byron and Goethe," trans. A. Rutherford, quoted in David Kimbell, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 12.

(12) Kimbell, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism*, p. 16ff.

(13) Morse Peckham, *Romanticism and Ideology* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1995), p. 37.

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Nabucco

Milan: 19th century

### THE POPULAR STYLE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 11 Artist, Politician, Farmer (Class of 1813, II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin



fig. 11-3 Interior view of Teatro alla Scala, Milan, ca. 1830; painting by Ladislaus Rupp.

The most striking effect in the early Verdi operas, and the one most obviously allied to the mood of Risorgimento, was the big choral number sung—crudely or sublimely, according to the ear of the beholder—in unison. As a symbol of solidarity and of concerted action it could be read as political allegory no matter what the actual dramatic context. The prototype was “Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate” (“Go, my thought, on golden wings”), the chorus of Hebrew slaves in the third act of *Nabucco* (short for *Nabucodonosor*, “Nebuchadnezzar,” 1842), Verdi's third opera and the one that first made him a national figure (Ex. 11-1). Its text, by Temistocle Solera (1815–78), a poet and occasional composer of herculean physique, already known for his booming verses, paraphrases the famous 137th Psalm (“By the waters of Babylon ...”). It was an inspired interpolation, precisely for the sake of *tinta*, into what was otherwise a love triangle—a prince of Jerusalem vs. two rival princesses of Bablyon—set against a background of biblical warfare.

A Chorus, *tutti sotto voce*

Va, pen - sie - ro, sull' a - li do - ra - te; Va, ti po - sa sui cli - vi, sui col - li,

O - ve o - lez - za - no te - pi - de e mol - li l'au - re dol - ci del suo - lo...na - tal,

Del Gior - da - no...le ri - ve...sa - lu - ta, Di Si - on - ne le tor - ri at - ter - ra - te...

Oh mia pa - tria sì bel - la e per - du - ta Oh mem - bran - za sì ca - ra e fa - tal!

Go, my thought, on golden wings;  
 go, alight upon the slopes, the hills,  
 where, soft and warm, the sweet breezes  
 of our native land are fragrant!  
 Greet the hawks of the Jordan  
 and Zion's razed towers. . . .  
 Oh, my homeland so lovely and lost!  
 Oh, remembrance so dear and ill-fated!

#### ex. 11-1 Giuseppe Verdi, *Nabucco*, “Va, pensiero”

Rossini, struck by the originality of its conception, called “Va, pensiero” “a grand aria sung by sopranos, contraltos, tenors and basses.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed the melody was as ornate as a Bellinian cantabile, the noble opening section of a bel canto aria, but its format was the one identified in chapter 1 with the concluding section, the square-cut cabaletta: four phrases cast as A A' B A', where A is “open” (ending on a half cadence) and A' is “closed” (ending on a full cadence). Variants of this scheme can be found as early as the fixed forms of medieval danced poetry, and it is still commonly used in popular songs and show tunes (the “32-bar chorus”). It was a “demotic” (common) or “vernacular” (indigenous) type that served folk and street music as well as opera. Arias cast in such a popular form all the more easily traveled back to the street and into the oral tradition, helped on its way by the ubiquitous organ-grinders and street singers who populated the thoroughfares of nineteenth-century Italian cities and disseminated theatrical hits just as radio and jukeboxes would later do.

“Va, pensiero” was certainly translated “back” into folklore in this way. It was sung by the throngs surrounding Verdi's horse-drawn hearse on the day of his burial, led by the augmented chorus of La Scala (the Milan opera house where *Nabucco* had its premiere almost sixty years before), under the baton of the young Arturo Toscanini (1867–1957), who though only a conductor rather than a composer inherited Verdi's mantle as national emblem and musical ambassador to the world. By then the chorus had become an emblem not only of Verdi (as Italy's “national” composer-laureate) but of the Italian *patria* itself.

Much of this significance was read back on the chorus from the perspective of the united Italy of the 1860s, in which Verdi had been honored with a personal seat in the new national parliament. Two legends in particular had sprung up around it: first, that the original audience of 1842, in a patriotic delirium, had compelled an “encore” (or *bis*) despite La Scala's normally rigid house rule against acknowledging requests for repetition; and second, that the cries of *Viva Verdi!* (“Long live Verdi”) that rent the air on that occasion were a code for *Viva V. E. R. D. I.*—“Long live Vittorio Emmanuele, Re d'Italia” (Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy).





**fig. 11-4 VIVA V.E.R.D.I.! (engraving at Istituto di Studi Verdiani, Parma).** During the war of 1859 between Sardinia and Austria over the northern Italian territories that included Milan and Venice, Verdi's name became a rallying cry as an acronym for Vittorio Emanuele, Re d'Italia, who was supported by Italian patriots like Count Camillo Cavour (and Verdi). The defeat of Austria paved the way for the first united (northern) Italian state, proclaimed in 1861, in which Verdi was an honorary senator. (It took another decade for the whole Italian peninsula to be united under Victor Emmanuel.)

As to the first legend, Roger Parker has ascertained on the basis of contemporary documents that there was indeed an encore that night—but of another number, not “Va, pensiero”; and as to the second, the use of Verdi's name as an acronym for the king of united Italy only started up on the very eve of unification, when demonstrations in support of Victor Emmanuel's claim to the throne were no longer politically risky.<sup>15</sup> In 1842, when the Austrians ruled Milan, and when an acclamation there to an Italian king would have invited reprisals, nobody made them (at least not via Verdi). The growth of the Verdi myth proceeded in stages corresponding to those of the Risorgimento itself.

But while less dramatic, that correspondence in myth is still evidence of the connection between the composer and the cause, and still points to the Verdi *tinta* as a catalyst to political militancy and eventual action. In any case, the success of the patriotic unison chorus in *Nabucco* stimulated Verdi himself to further action. His next two operas (the first of them again to a libretto by Solera) also made a point of incorporating a similar choral set piece. Audiences were demanding them.

Ex. 11-1, since it shows only the first stanza of “Va, pensiero,” stops short of the blazing middle section, in which the chorus suddenly opens out, rabble-rousingly, into chordal harmony, *fortissimo*. Also fairly subdued is Ex. 11-2a, which shows the first stanza of the chorus of pilgrims and crusaders, the analogous item in *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* (*The Lombards on the First Crusade*, 1843), in which the Lombards, medieval denizens of Milan and its environs, dying of thirst in the desert near Jerusalem, recall their beloved homeland (that is, the exact territory in which the opera, written for La Scala, was being performed at its premiere).

Not so gentle is the unison chorus in *Ernani* (1844), which bursts like a bombshell and leads directly to decisive stage action. Its parent play, Victor Hugo's *Hernani* (1830), a self-avowed manifesto of ‘liberalism,’ was politically risky, depicting as it did an attempt on the life of a future Holy Roman Emperor by a character (the Spanish bandit Hernani) who, as the romantic lead, is portrayed very sympathetically. The chorus, “Si ridesti il Leon di Castiglia”

(“Let the Lion of Castile awake!”), is the conspirators’ battle hymn, easily transferable to the patriots of Venice (also traditionally symbolized by a lion!), the site of the first performance, then struggling to free itself from the descendants of the same Holy Roman Emperor. This chorus was an especially clear instance of opera as a spur (or at least a testimonial) to aggression (Ex. 11-2b).

Its form, slightly more complex than those already in evidence, illustrates the way the basic “popular” AA’BA’ model could be expanded for the sake of enhanced dramatic scale. The “B” phrase is augmented into a full-fledged middle section in the dominant with an AA’BA <double prime> format of its own (here necessarily labeled BB’CB <double prime> because of the prior use of A), balanced at the end by a full reprise of the initial AA’, plus a concluding tag. The “C” strain, veering into G major (♭ VI), provides a traditional harmonic far-out point that enhances scale in another dimension, so to speak. The result was at once popular and grand—grand in a sense that had formerly connoted regal pomp, not popular triumph. The combination, as much a political as a musical novelty, sounded a new note in European music, and a momentous one.

*Cantabile con espressione*

*p* O si - gno - re, dal tet - to na - ti - o ci chia - ma - sti con san - ta pro - mes - sa;  
 noi siam cor - si al l'in - vi - to d'un pi - o, giu - bi - lan - do per l'as - pro sen - tier.  
*pp* Ma la fron - te av - vi - li - ta e di - mes - sa han - no i ser - vi già bal - di e va - len - ti!...  
 Deh! non far che lu - di - brio al - le gen - ti sic - no Cris - to, i tuoi fi - di guer - rier!...

O Lord, Thou didst call us  
 with holy promise from our native hearths;  
 We have hastened at the bidding of a holy man,  
 rejoicing on the rough road.  
 But the heads of thy bold and doughty servants  
 are bowed and humbled.  
 Ah! Let not thy faithful warriors,  
 O Christ, serve but as laughing stock to the world.

**ex. 11-2a Giuseppe Verdi, *I Lombardi*, “O signore, dal tetto natio”**

All embracing and reaching a pitch of exaltation, drawing their swords

*ff* Si ri - de-sti il Le-on di Ca - sti - glia, e d'I - be - ria o-gni mon - te, o-gni li - to  
 e - co for - mi al tre - men - do rug - gi - to, co - me un di con - tro i Mo - ri op - pres - sor.  
*con entusiasmo* Sia - mo tut - ti u - na so - la fa - mi - gia, pu - gne - rem col - le brac - cia, co' pet - ti;  
*con forza* schia - vij - nul - ti più a lun - go e ne - glet - ti non sa - rem — fin - chè vi - ta ab - bia il cor.  
*ff* Mor - te col - ga o n'ar - ri - da vit - to - ria, pu - gne - rem, ed il san - gue de' spe - nti  
*pp* nuo - vo ar - dir - ai fi - gli yo - li vi - ve - nti, for - ze nuo — ve al pu - gna - re da - rà.  
 Sor - ga al - fi - ne ra - dian - te di glo - ria, sor - ga un gio - mo a bril - la - resu no - i...  
 sa - rà | - be - ria fe - con - da d'e - ro - i, dal ser - vag - gio re - den - ta sa -  
 Coda  
 rà, re - den - ta sa - rà, re - den - ta sa - rà.

ex. 11-2b Giuseppe Verdi, *Ernani*, “Si ridesti il Leon di Castiglia”

## Notes:

(14) Quoted in Carlo Gatti, *Verdi*, Vol. I (Milan: Alpes, 1931), p. 107.

(15) R. Parker, *Leonora's Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 33.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Verdi's Operas: 'Oberto' (1839) to 'La traviata' (1853)

Opera: The 19th century

Tenor: 19th century

La traviata

## TRAGICOMEDY

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 11 Artist, Politician, Farmer (Class of 1813, II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The librettist of *Ernani* was Francesco Maria Piave (1810–76), with whom Verdi collaborated over the next eighteen years on more than a dozen projects, making Piave the composer's most faithful and prolific accomplice. Their partnership was by no means an equal one. The composer dominated the librettist mercilessly, reversing the traditional theatrical hierarchy and in so doing epitomizing the vastly heightened status of music—or, to put it more precisely, of musical originality (“genius”)—in the later nineteenth-century scheme of things artistic, even in Italy.

The mature Verdi always had precise notions of what the dramatic situation required in terms of music. He demanded from his librettists both precisely tailored versification and an extreme economy of words that an ornate stylist like Solera (or any early nineteenth-century librettist) would have been loath to provide. Piave, verbally adept yet without any independent literary reputation or ambition, could afford to be accommodating. As a result, Verdi's mature operas were controlled—indeed, “micromanaged”—by the composer almost as completely as Wagner's, in which the words and music both actually issued from a single mind. But there the resemblance ceased. Where Wagner wanted to take opera back to its cultic or epic roots by impersonating Aeschylus or some other real or fancied Greek tragedian, Verdi wanted to become a Shakespeare.

What “being a Shakespeare” meant to a nineteenth-century dramatist was, in a word, dramatic “realism”: the fusing of all existing dramatic genres into a single supple, pliant idiom known as “tragicomedy”—the true reflector of human character and experience. Fusion (and the implied overthrow of formal constraints) had been Victor Hugo's watchword, as expressed in the preface to *Hernani*, the very play on which Verdi modeled his fifth opera. Hugo, too, had invoked Shakespeare and the tragicomic, and so did Verdi's great contemporary, the novelist and fellow *risorgimentista* Alessandro Manzoni, when he remarked that “it was not any mere violation of rules that led Shakespeare to this mixture of the grave and the burlesque, the touching and the low; he had simply observed this mixture in reality and wished to convey the strong impression it made on him.”<sup>16</sup> The literary scholar George Steiner deftly summed up the difference between the epic and the tragicomic—the Wagnerian and the Verdian—by noting that

even in the blackest hours of a Shakespearean tragedy or a Verdi opera the morning light of human laughter, the feline energies of human rebound are close at hand.... The masters of the absolute—Aeschylus, Sophocles, [the French tragedian] Racine, Wagner—concentrate the sum of the world to a single immensity of encounter. Shakespeare and Verdi, on the contrary, know that the instant in which Agamemnon is murdered [in Aeschylus's tragedy] is also that in which a birthday party is being celebrated next door.<sup>17</sup>

The tragicomic vision, then, is one that projects drama in terms of foils and contrasts, not even excluding the contrast of poetry and prose. The most famous Shakespearean contrast of this sort is the famously farcical prose scene of the drunken porter at the gate (act II, sc. 3) that follows immediately on the horrific murder scene in *Macbeth*; and the most sustained example of Shakespearean tragicomedy is the character of the Fool or jester who shadows King Lear, the most pitiable of all Shakespearean tragic victims, in the play that bears the latter's name. Nothing was ever less a coincidence than the fact that Verdi's tenth opera (and third with Piave) was a *Macbeth* (1847); or that the phantom haunting Verdi's career from 1843 to the end of his days was his unrealized ambition to create an operatic *King Lear*.

True, Verdi's *Macbeth* has no porter. (The presence of supernatural characters—Shakespeare's witches—in a tragedy proved controversial enough). And (as the opera historian Piero Weiss has pointed out) the reason for his failure to produce *Il re Lear* was, in all likelihood, precisely the difficulty of imagining a musical technique for shadowing the tragic title character with the comic Fool, which would mean making the Fool a major character in a serious opera.<sup>18</sup> Yet despite his apparent failure or disinclination to emulate Shakespeare's most radical mixtures of genre, the fact remains that the double-edged Shakespearean ideal of fusion and contrast was Verdi's main objective in tweaking the conventions of Italian opera (with Piave's help) into new configurations that depended to an unprecedented extent on devices of irony.

The new Verdian manner reached its climax with that amazing trio of operas, composed all in a row between 1850 and 1853. Like *Ernani*, Verdi's *Rigoletto* was modeled on a politically “liberal” verse drama by Victor Hugo. That play, *Le roi s'amuse* (“The King amuses himself,” 1832) had actually fallen afoul of the French censor because it portrays a French king (the early sixteenth-century monarch Francis I) as a philanderer. (In Piave's libretto, the royal rake is demoted to the level of a duke—and his duchy, Mantua, was by the nineteenth century no longer an independent city-state but a part of Lombardy then under Austrian rule, thus neutralizing any danger of affronting a sovereign.) Verdi immediately saw in Hugo's play an ideally “Shakespearean” subject for an opera, since the eventual libretto's title character, the hunchback Rigoletto (Triboulet in Hugo), was at once the tragic victim and a court jester by trade—Fool and Lear in one!

The whole plot of *Rigoletto* hinges on a single wrenching irony. As the Duke's court jester, Rigoletto mocks the father of a girl his master has seduced and abandoned, and receives a furious parental curse (act I). His own daughter, Gilda, is seduced by the Duke; Rigoletto contracts a professional hit man to avenge his paternal honor by murdering the Duke (act II). By a series of chilling mischances, Gilda is murdered in the Duke's place, devastating the poor jester and fulfilling the curse (act III). The two roles Rigoletto played in life—jester and father—thus fatally collide. The contrast, embodied starkly in act I, was made for music: Up until the moment of the curse, the first scene is purest comic opera; the second is purest tragedy (as reflected in its musical forms, which include an extended coloratura aria for Gilda). Act III, which we will examine in detail, is an unprecedented mixture throughout of the comic and the terrible.

*Il trovatore* was based on a fairly recent play (*Il trovador*, 1836) by the Spanish poet Antonio García Gutiérrez (1813–84), a follower of Hugo. The libretto was by Salvatore Cammarano (1801–52), one of Donizetti's chief collaborators (hence a poet of the “old school”). Although it was the last of the distinguished Cammarano's thirty-six librettos, it needed some doctoring (by Leone Emanuele Bardare) to suit Verdi's neo-Shakespearean needs. In an effort to get the venerable poet to modernize his style a little, Verdi came on to him for all the world like a Wagnerian (if an independent one, Verdi being as yet unacquainted with Wagner's theories):

As for the distribution of the pieces [into “numbers”], let me tell you that when I'm presented with poetry to be set to music, any form, any distribution is good, and I'm all the happier if they are new and bizarre. If in operas there were no more cavatinas, duets, trios, choruses, finales, etc. etc., and if the entire opera were, let's say, a single piece, I would find it more reasonable and just.<sup>19</sup>

But Cammarano stuck to his habits, and of the three “middle Verdi” masterpieces *Il trovatore* is the most formally conventional. Its very conventionality can serve our analytical purposes, however, since it will provide us, when the time comes, with a lens through which to view the idiosyncratic departures in the last act of *Rigoletto*.

The plot of *Il trovatore*, complicated to the point of proverbial incoherence, is all but impossible to summarize. Here all we need to do is describe the main characters. The title character, the troubadour, whose given name is Manrico (tenor), is a nobleman (the son and heir of the Count di Luna), who was stolen as an infant by a gypsy woman, Azucena (mezzo-soprano or contralto) and brought up as a gypsy chieftain. All of this takes place before the action begins, and is revealed in narrative flashback. When the opera begins, Manrico and his unknowing half-brother, the present Count di Luna (baritone), are in love with the same woman, Leonora (soprano), the Duchess of Aragon. We learn from a conversation with her confidante Inez (soprano) that she loves an unknown knight whose troubadour has been serenading her.

What the main action of the opera accomplishes through a host of contrivances and coincidences is the progressive revelation of the truth despite many setbacks, the unmasking of Manrico's mistaken identity, and his union with Leonora. The plot's whole thrust and trajectory, in other words, was to get the prima donna out of the clutches of the

baritone and into the arms of the true *primo uomo*, the tenor. Soprano and tenor were the new obligatory couple: their ardently romantic duet had to be vouchsafed come hell or high water. And thereby hangs a tale.

In the days of the *opera seria* the leading couple had been a soprano and a castrato—and then for a while (even more artificially) a soprano and a “musicò” (woman in trousers and false whiskers). Only with the generation of Bellini and Donizetti had the romantic hero become a natural-voiced man—but only relatively speaking, since the conventions of bel canto demanded an extremely high tessitura for the tenor, a level of coloratura in his part comparable to that of the prima donna, and (for these reasons) a vocal delivery that depended on the free admixture of falsetto singing (or “head voice”), by definition soft and supple rather than forceful.

The great change in the distribution and definition of opera roles between Donizetti's time and Verdi's—hence the great change in the technical training of singers—was the institution of the *tenore di forza* (or *tenore robusto*), the “strength tenor,” as romantic lead. Manrico was the quintessential, defining role for this urgently virile voice type, which had virtually no place in Italian opera before the 1840s. This, too, was a “realistic” innovation in its way, but the type of voice it demanded was as unnatural—and as arduously manufactured—as any other. Composers of the old school, notably Rossini (with whose nostalgia for bel canto we are familiar since chapter 1), found the noises made by *tenori di forza* intolerable. He compared the singing of Gilbert Duprez (1806–96), the first of the breed, who made a sensation in the role of Arnold in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, to “the squawk of a capon with its throat cut.”<sup>20</sup> Receiving another famous *tenore di forza* late in life, Rossini asked him to kindly leave his high C# at the door.

For *tenori di forza* maintained their full (or “chest”) voice over their entire range—even up to their highest notes, which assumed the vibrant, ringing (or, for those who hated it, the raucous, earsplitting) tone we now associate with Italian tenors. A tenor's ability to reach these notes in “chest” is now the most sought-after of all operatic skills. Those who have excelled at it—Enrico Caruso (1873–1921), Richard Tucker (1913–75), not to mention the “Three Tenors” (Plácido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti, and José Carreras) who in the 1990s became the highest-paid classical music act of all time—were the emblematic opera stars of the twentieth century.

It goes without saying that they were all outstanding Manricos. Their line goes back to the relatively obscure Carlo Baucarde, who created the role, but in terms of enduring fame the line goes back to Enrico Tamberlik (1820–89), who sang Manrico for the first time in London in 1855, and virtually owned the role thereafter. (Tamberlik was the singer to whom Rossini made his cutting request; the C# Rossini so detested was one that Tamberlik was celebrated for interpolating into the bel canto role of Arnold in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*.) The great defining moment for Manrico, hence for the *tenore di forza*, was “Di quella pira” (“Tremble, O tyrants, at my torch!”), a number with good Risorgimento credentials, that constituted the cabaletta to a big scene with Leonora and the chorus at the very end of act III (Ex. 11-3). As an act closer, it was designed to bring down the house.

Like many cabalettas in the past (including some we have witnessed ourselves in chapter 1), “Di quella pira” is cast in the meter and characteristic rhythm of a polonaise, the regal dance par excellence. (Here the “revolutionary” Manrico reveals his “nobility” after all.) Its form is the familiar AA'BA' with a coda in which first Leonora, then the chorus, join in. Its high Gs, A b s and As are all to be sung *forte*, from the chest, as Verdi still saw fit to remind the singer with the notation *con tutta forza*. The flourish on the final line of each stanza (“o teco a morir!”) is notated up to the high A, but singers since Caruso have treated the composer's notation as a minimum expectation. Indeed, any singer who does not have a version of that final roulade up to Caruso's high C runs the risk of being hissed off the stage. (The matter became a scandal in December 2000, when the conductor Riccardo Muti, launching La Scala's Verdi centennial year with a new production of *Il trovatore*, based on a new critical edition of the score, treated the composer's notation as a limit and forbade his *tenor robusto* to sing the traditional high C, which one indignant journalist called “a gift to Verdi from the Italian people.”)<sup>21</sup>

(A) Allegro

Di quel - la pi - ra l'or - ren - do fo - co tut - te le fi - bre m'ar - se, av - vam - pò!

(A)

Em - pi, spe - gne - te - la, o ch'io fra po - co col san - gue vo - stro lo spe - gne - rò!

(B)

*p* E - ra già fi - glio pri - ma d'a - mar - ti, non sa fre - nar - mi il tuo mar - tir...

(A)

*f* Ma - dre in - fe - li - ce, co - ro\_a sal - var - ti, o te - co al - me - no cor - ro\_a mo -

Coda

*Più vivo*

rir o te - co al - men cor - ro\_a mo - rir, o te - co al - men, o te - co\_a mo - rir!

**ex. 11-3 Giuseppe Verdi, *Il trovatore*, “Di quella pira”**

*La traviata* (“The fallen woman”), the most radically realistic opera of the three, was based *La dame aux camélias* (“The lady of the camélias”) by Alexandre Dumas the younger (1824–95), a play (based on the author’s own novel of 1848) that Piave adapted into a libretto during the first year of its run, 1852. Adapting a current theatrical hit with a contemporary setting into an opera was an unprecedented move. Even bolder was Verdi’s determination to keep the time frame of the opera as contemporary as that of the drama. (Here he was overruled by the Venetian censors; the setting of the first production was pushed back to the eighteenth century.) Boldest of all was the choice of a drama centering on the life and loves of a courtesan—a euphemism for a high-class or “courtly” prostitute. But as Verdi wrote to a friend, it was “a subject of the times,” and that justified all license. Only a composer who had been conditioned by the Risorgimento to associate art with “timeliness,” or topical pertinence, could have reasoned so. Such a notion might seem the very antithesis of Romanticism.



fig. 11-5 Cover of the first edition of *La traviata* in vocal score (Milan: Ricordi, 1853).

And yet the character of Violetta, the fallen woman of the title, was perforce greatly idealized—that is, romanticized—by Dumas, and even more by Verdi. The Preludio to the opera seems a curious chip off the Prelude to Wagner's *Lohengrin*, and serves a similar purpose. Rather than setting the scene for the beginning of act I, which depicts a lively party in progress, it paints a spiritual or internal portrait of the heroine that contrasts utterly with her public facade. Where she is outwardly insouciant and flirtatious, the prelude shows her melancholy and sincerely amorous, and hints, by way of dissonant deceptive cadences and *tremolandi*, at her fatal malady.

The plot concerns the love of Violetta for Alfredo Germont, a young man “of good family,” and its thwarting first by her unacceptability to Alfredo's father and finally by her early death. The whole story is narrated against the background of Parisian ballroom festivities, and the opera's *tinta*, unusually easy to discern and describe, is carried by its many actual, remembered, and etherealized waltz tunes. Both the cantabile (“Ah fors'è lui,” “Ah, was it he?”) and cabaletta (“Sempre libera,” “Always free”) in Violetta's scena at the end of act I are cast as waltzes in contrasting tempos. The cantabile reaches its climax in an expansively rounded melody in which Violetta recognizes true love, and which will function throughout the rest of the opera as a poignant reminiscence motif (Ex. 11-4a), while the cabaletta, in which she puts the thought aside with determined abandon, has become as much a showpiece for the



Verdi soprano as “Di quella pira” is for the Verdi tenor (Ex. 11-4b).

*con espansione*

Di quell' a - mor, quel - l'a - mor — ch'è pal - pi - to del - l'u - ni - ver - so, del -  
 l'u - ni - ver - so in - te - ro, mi - ste - ri - o - so, mi - ste - ri - o - so, al -  
*f* *leggero*  
 te - ro, cro - ce, cro - ce e de - li - zia, cro - ce e de - li - zia, de - li - zia al cor.

ex. 11-4a Giuseppe Verdi, *La traviata*, “Ah, fors'è lui”

*Allegro brillante*

Sem-pre li - be-ra — deg - gi - o fol - leg - gia - re di gio - ja in gio - ja, vo' che  
 scor - ra il vi - ver mi - o pei sen - tie - ri del — pia - cer. Na - sca il gior - no, o il gior - no  
 nuo - ja, sem - pre lie - ta ne' - ri - tro - vi, — a di - let - ti sem - pre  
 nuo - vi dee vo - la - re il — mio pen - sier, dee — vo - lar, dee — vo - lar.

(Coda)

ex. 11-4b Giuseppe Verdi, *La traviata*, “Sempre libera”

At the other end of the opera, having been told by the doctor that death is imminent, Violetta takes leave of the world—her world—to the strains of another slow waltz-time cantabile (Ex. 11-4c); and when Alfredo arrives just in time to see her die, they sing a duet that functions as the corresponding fast-waltz cabaletta (Ex. 11-4d). Having at the last minute received the remorseful blessing of Alfredo's father, Violetta expires to a reprise of Ex. 11-4a, the opera's most full-blooded waltz number.

Legato e dolce

Ad - di - o del pas - sa - to bei so - gni ri - den - ti, le  
ro - se del vol - to già so - no pal - len - ti; l'a - mo - re d'Al - fre - do per -  
fi - no mi man - ca, con - for - to, so - ste - gno del - l'a - ni - ma stan - ca, ...

ex. 11-4c Giuseppe Verdi, *La traviata*, “Addio del passato”

Dolcissimo a mezza voce

*pp* Pa - ri - gi, o ca - ra noi la - sce - re - mo, la - vi - ta u - ni - ti  
tra - sco - re - re - mo de' cor - si af - fan - ni com - pen - so a - vra - i,  
la - mia sa - lu - te ri - fio - ri - rà. *f* So - spi - ro e lu - ce  
tu - mi sa - ra - i, *f* tut - to il fu - tu - ro *pp* ne ar - ri - de - rà.

ex. 11-4d Giuseppe Verdi, *La traviata*, “Parigi, o cara”

Throughout, but most conspicuously in the last scene, the tragic strains that accompany the sufferings of the protagonists are shadowed either downstage or offstage by the happy strains of revelry, underscoring the contradiction at the heart of Violetta's existence, but also providing that ironic mix of tragic and comic that, for Verdi as for Shakespeare, added up to “life.” As Steiner puts it, “The joy of the Parisian revelers beats against the windows of the dying Violetta in *La traviata* not in contrapuntal mockery but simply because the varied pulse of life is more constant than any particular sorrow; Shakespeare and Verdi anchor their host of characters in history, in the local color of historical epoch and circumstance, distrusting that monotone of eternity so compelling to Wagner.”<sup>22</sup> The thought rings true, but the word “simply” jars. It is no simple fact but profound insight and calculation that produces so potent a dramatic effect.

## Notes:

(16) Alessandro Manzoni, “Lettre à M. C\*\*\*,” quoted in Piero Weiss, “Verdi and the Fusion of Genres,” *JAMS* XXXV (1982): 141.

(17) George Steiner, “Maestro,” *The New Yorker*, 19 April 1982, p. 171.

(18) Weiss, "Verdi and the Fusion of Genres," p. 15off.

(19) Verdi to Cammarano, 4 April 1851; quoted in Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, Vol. II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 61.

(20) John Warrack and Sandro Corti, "Duprez," in *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Vol. I, p. 1281.

(21) Quoted in Philip Gossett, "Scandal and Scholarship," *The New Republic*, 2 July 2001, p. 30.

(22) Steiner, "Maestro," p. 171.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Rigoletto

## OPERA AS MODERN DRAMA

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 11 Artist, Politician, Farmer (Class of 1813, II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The third and final act of *Rigoletto* gives us Verdi's irony at fullest strength. It is perhaps the most "Shakespearean" scene in all of Verdi despite its source in Hugo, and Verdi knew it. "*Le Roi s'amuse*," he wrote to Piave,

is the greatest subject and perhaps the greatest drama of modern times. Triboulet is a creation worthy of Shakespeare!! What is Ernani next to him?!! This is a subject that cannot fail. You know that six years ago, when *Ernani* was proposed to me, I exclaimed: Yes, by God, it can't miss. Now, going over several subjects, when *Le Roi* crossed my mind it was like a flash, an inspiration, and I said the same thing: Yes, by God, it can't miss.<sup>23</sup>

"There is such a ringing conviction to Verdi's words," Piero Weiss notes drily, "that one is apt to forget that what he was calling 'perhaps the greatest drama of modern times' was possibly the most notorious theatrical failure of the century." *Le roi s'amuse* had had one and only one performance in 1832, was condemned from all sides, political and artistic alike, and had been banned ever since. (The original play would see the footlights again only on its fiftieth anniversary, in 1882, by which time it was altogether overshadowed by Verdi's opera; it was received in virtual silence.) The reason for its continued failure was precisely the Shakespearean mixture of genres that so attracted Verdi. The critic in the *Journal des Débats*, where Berlioz wrote the music reviews, made no bones about this:

Whenever the author rose to the heights of passion, whenever he thrust noble thoughts, true feelings of the human heart, into his dialogue, then all sympathies were awakened, and all literary factions even rallied to do him honor; but when he sank back into the buffoonish, the trivial, the popular, then inattention and disgust set in once more. *Le Roi s'amuse* embodied all the brilliant theories that bold innovators have been propounding for some time; only human life in this dramatic form seemed not truer, only uglier. The mixture of the buffoonish and the sublime threw the audience into a painful confusion.<sup>24</sup>

Far from pandering to current taste, then, Verdi was actually flying in its face by seizing on this ill-fated drama of Hugo's. But he knew, first of all, that music could do the job that the spoken theater had failed to accomplish; and, second, that (as he put it in the letter to Antonio Somma, a poet friend and future librettist),

all the horrible plot vicissitudes arise from the frivolous, rakish personality of the Duke. Hence Rigoletto's fears, Gilda's passion, etc. etc., which make for many excellent dramatic moments, among others the scene of the quartet which as regards effect will remain one of the best our theater can boast.<sup>25</sup>

The quartet to which Verdi refers here is the centerpiece of the final act; and he achieved the "excellent dramatic moment" he predicted by tweaking the conventions of the genres he was fusing to cast the "frivolous, rakish personality of the Duke" in maximum relief. A virile *tenore di forza* role fashioned from the same cloth as the ardent Manrico, the Duke is the very opposite of the character type implied by his voice type. He uses his ringing tones not to affirm but to mock romantic love, most spectacularly in his heartily cynical act I *ballata* (dance song) "Questa o quella" ("This one or that"), in which he professes to love and value (that is, scorn and slight) all women equally. Sentiments formerly associated with buffo baritones like Don Giovanni—or even basses, like Leporello—are here enunciated through the mouth and vocal chords of a romantic tenor, a voice type created for the purpose of expressing ardent love in all its heartrending sincerity, as the late nineteenth century had come to value it. This drinningly, shockingly ironic item is the opera's very first set piece. By placing it at the outset, Verdi as much as

announces that ironies and reversals, set off by the Duke's baleful frivolity (at first enthusiastically encouraged by his jester, Rigoletto) and communicated through the sign language (or “semiotics”) of genre, will be the very stuff of this singular opera.



fig. 11-6 Cover of the first edition of *Rigoletto* (Milan: Ricordi, 1851), showing the quartet in act III.

And this brings us to the last act, in which ironies and reversals are compounded and end in tragedy. The setting is a ramshackle inn to which the Duke has been lured, there to be murdered by Sparafucile, the mercenary assassin or hit man with whom Rigoletto has made a contract, and whose sister Maddalena manages the inn. The whole act is played on a split set that depicts both the interior of the inn (both upstairs and downstairs) and the road outside. The all-pervading device that will lend irony to every number is the mutual isolation of the two halves of the stage and the characters inhabiting them. On the inside are the Duke, Sparafucile, and Maddalena. On the outside are Rigoletto and Gilda.

Rigoletto has brought Gilda to this brutal place not to witness the impending murder of which she has no inkling, but so that she can witness the lewd behavior of the man whose feigned love for her has awakened a sincere response that Rigoletto wants to quash. Through a chink in the wall the two outsiders observe the Duke's arrival, and hear him sing a carousing ditty over wine as he awaits Maddalena's services as prostitute. That song (*canzone*), the sublimely bumptious and hypocritical “La donna è mobile” (“Woman is fickle,” Ex. 11-5), is another of the Duke's little pop tunes, like the act I *ballata*. Aware that despite its nauseating immorality (or because of it) the song would be the opera's great hit, Verdi had gone to unusual lengths to keep it under wraps until the first performance, so that the organ-grinders and sheet-music pirates would not leak it prematurely to the street. He held it back from orchestral rehearsals almost to the last minute, coaching the tenor (Raffaele Mirate) in private.



18 RIGOLETTO GILDA

E se tu cer-ta fos-si ch'ei ti tra-dis-se, l'a-me-res - ti an-co-ra? Non sò...

22 RIGOLETTO GILDA RIGOLETTO GILDA

ma pur\_m'a - do-ra. E-gli? Sì. Eb-ben, so-ser-va dun-que. Un-uo-mo

27 RIGOLETTO *Allegro* (♩ = 132)

ve-do. Per po-co at-ten-di.



30 GILDA (singing) DUKE (to Sparafucile) RIGOLETTO DUKE  
Ah pa-dre mi-oi! D'ac-co-se, e to-sto Qua-lit' J-na

33 RIGOLETTO SPARAFUCILE  
stan-za e del vi-nc (Son que-si i suoi co-stu-mil) (Oh! il bel zer-bi-no!)

37 Allargretto (♩ = 138)

44 DUKE (canto)  
La don-na è mo-bi-le qual piu-mal

50 legato  
ven-to, mu-ta d'ac-cen-to e di pen-sie-ro.

**ex. 11-5 Giuseppe Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act III, “La donna è mobile”**

Its eventual success was almost *too* great, since many who do not really know the opera ascribe to it, or even to Verdi, the song's trivial gaiety without realizing that its brashness was a calculated ironic foil. (A case in point is a *graffito* the author once saw in the New York subway: “Who Says Women Are Fickle?” read the billboard advertising some cheap lingerie or perfume, next to which someone had scrawled, “Verdi, that's who.”) At first hearing, the irony is a mere matter of clash between jolly song and gloomy setting. But over the course of the act its range of reference, and consequently the range of its ironic resonance, will grow as it begins to function as a reminiscence motif, one of the most hair-raising in all of opera.

The next number is the quartet, *Bella figlia dell'amore* (“Comely daughter of love”), the most famous ensemble Verdi ever composed. The similarity of its opening tune to that of “Chi me frena?,” the great sextet in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Ex. 1-11), is often remarked, and Donizetti's work might well have served Verdi as a conscious or unconscious model. But the surface likeness only heightens the far more significant underlying contrasts. Besides the typically more popular cast of Verdi's melody, full of internal repetitions and “melodic rhymes” (in contrast to Donizetti's seamlessly long-limbed, “aristocratic” arc to climax), there is, again, the underlying dramaturgical irony. For this is not a traditional quartet in which four characters each reflect in lyric stop-time on a change in the dramatic course. It is, rather, a double duet that takes place in real time, with two “insider” characters, the lascivious Duke and the beguiling Maddalena (dressed up for sex in a gypsy costume), and two “outsiders” the indignant

Rigoletto and the heartbroken Gilda. The introduction, forty-eight bars of furious *parlante* of a sort that traditionally substituted for the even more traditional recitative, does not give way, as in earlier operas, to a single moment of shared reflection telescoped out into a collective aria, but prepares yet another cynical strophic song for the oblivious Duke, accompanied by three simultaneous commentaries from vastly differing perspectives. Action is not halted. It continues, but ironically, on multiple contradictory levels.

Thus the Duke's first stanza is answered first by Maddalena's flirtatious simpering, then by Gilda's restrained outcry and Rigoletto's admonition to keep her voice down. The bottled-up emotion of the two muffled outsiders, unable to find an outlet in sheer volume, seeks an alternative vent in harmony, coloring the music briefly with the chord of the flat mediant before returning to the original key so that the Duke can continue his song.

His second stanza (Ex. 11-6) is accompanied by the three other characters not in response but in actual counterpoint. Maddalena resumes her brittle flirting; Gilda resumes her long lyrical sighs descending in despair from ever higher, more piercing high notes; Rigoletto gives his daughter moral (and harmonic) support. At the coda, the two women's voices come into the foreground, again in ironic contrast: Gilda, her voice breaking with grief, begins to pant on pairs of sixteenth notes slurred into the beats, while Maddalena laughs merrily in staccato sixteenths that fill the gap between Gilda's, hocket-fashion.

The musical score for Ex. 11-6 is a vocal and piano setting. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system (measures 74-75) includes vocal lines for Gilda, Maddalena, Duke, and Rigoletto, and a piano accompaniment. The second system (measures 76-77) includes vocal lines for Gilda, Maddalena, Duke, and Rigoletto, and a piano accompaniment. The vocal parts are written in a key with two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor) and a 3/4 time signature. The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern of sixteenth notes and chords.

**System 1 (Measures 74-75):**

- GILDA 74:** In - - - fe -
- MADDALENA:** Ah! ah! ri - do ben di co - re, ché tai ba - ie co - stan
- DUKE:** Bel - la fi - gla del l'a - mo - re, schia - vo
- RIGOLETTO:** Ch'ei men -

**System 2 (Measures 76-77):**

- GILDA 76:** li - ce cor rez -
- MADDALENA:** po - co, quan - to val - ga il vo - stro gio - co, mel cre - de - te, sò ap - prez -
- DUKE:** son de' vez - zi tuo - ti con un
- RIGOLETTO:** ti - va, ch'ei men -

78

G. di - to, ah!

M. zar. So - no av - vez - za, bel si - gnò - re, ad un si - mi - le scher -

D. det - to, un det - to sol tu puo - i le mie

R. ti - va sei si -

81

G. — no, non scop - piar. In - fe - li - ce co - re, cor tra -

M. za re. Ah! ah! ah! ah! ri

D. pr - ne, le mie pe - ne con - so - lar. Ah! con un

R. cu - ra. Ta - ci, c'è mia sa - rà la

**ex. 11-6 Giuseppe Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act III, Quartet, “Bella figlia dell'amore”**

At the repetition of the coda, the contrast between the insiders and outsiders becomes unbearably poignant: the former get ready to embrace, their voices mingling in the time-honored lovers' way, that is, with lyrical legato lines in well-lubricated parallel motion, while the latter, their spirits pulverized by the sight of the other pair, sing correspondingly broken melodies, alternating sixteenth notes and rests. At the end of the quartet the four characters are a study in contrasts: the Duke, as ever, oblivious to all but his fleshly desires; Maddalena, as ever, mordantly detached (but aroused); Gilda crushed; Rigoletto bent on revenge.

Next comes a little clump of dialogue, played against a variety of picturesque musical backgrounds, to move the plot to the point from which the next dramatic ensemble is set to depart. Rigoletto, not wishing Gilda to witness the murder, sends her off to disguise herself in male traveling attire and await him in Verona. Against a background suggestive of a tolling clock, Rigoletto gives Sparafucile the down payment on the contract (Ex. 11-7).

8 Allegro (♩ = 84) *pp*

*estremamente* *p*

20 RIGOLETTO  
Ven-ti scu-di hai tu det-to? ... De-co-ne die-ci, e do-po l'op-ra il res-to. E qui ri-

24 SPARAFUCILE  
ma-nel Si. Al-la mez-za-not-te ri-tor-ne-rò. Non ca-le. A get-tar-lo nel

27 RIGOLETTO SPARAFUCILE  
fù-me bas-to jo so-o. No, no, il vo' far io stes-so. Si-a! Il suo

30 RIGOLETTO  
no-raet Vuoi sa-per an-che il mi-ò? E-gli è De-stit-to, Pu-ni-zion sor-i-o.

*ppp*

**ex. 11-7 Giuseppe Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act III, Rigoletto conspires with Sparafucile**

This part of the scene, incidentally, is of special interest to the historian of “performance practice” because of Verdi’s explicit admonition that “this recitative must be sung without the usual appoggiaturas,” according to which the first note of the word “dieci” would be sung as a G, and the first note of the word “resto” in the next measure as an E. This is precious evidence, first, that unwritten ornaments were still routinely employed and expected in Italian recitative as late as the 1850s, whereas many performers beginning in the 1880s took to “weeding them out” even in Mozart, reflecting a new literalism that affected the way in which notation was interpreted as soon as unwritten (“oral”) traditions lost their sway in pedagogy. What was mistakenly viewed as the removal of inauthentic accretions was in fact a modernization. (The same probably goes for Maestro Muti’s “restoration” of Manrico’s “original” cabaletta in *Il trovatore*.)

Verdi’s performance direction is also evidence of when that modernization took place, and suggests that operatic “realism” was its original impetus. To give his scene a heightened sense of reality, Verdi purged it of conventions known to be operatic. Hearing bumpy thirds as notated where one expected the suave seconds that were usually interpolated effectively defamiliarized the music and gave it a refurbished dramatic immediacy.

The scene continues: against the background of a gathering storm, Sparafucile and the Duke make conflicting demands on Maddalena (the former to help with the murder, the latter to bed down with him), putting her in an unexpected quandary. (The appoggiaturas, by the way, have returned, but now—and henceforth—they have to be explicitly notated.) Sparafucile invites the Duke to spend the night and leads him to the bedchamber, where the Duke, expecting Maddalena in an hour's time, dozes off with *La donna è mobile* on his lips, planting in the ears of the audience a reminder of how it goes. The clock chimes again, signaling the start of what should be the last half hour of the Duke's life.

Unexpectedly, however, Gilda (disguised as a boy) returns to the scene against her father's instructions. Her entry signals the transition into another ensemble, one that will be even more peculiarly motivated than the preceding quartet. Still besotted by love, she is drawn back to the Duke, and from her wonted position on the outside overhears Sparafucile and Maddalena plotting inside the inn. As background to another introductory *parlante*, the storm continues to gather (Ex. 11-8)—a “Shakespearean” storm that, in the opinion of Verdi scholars, contains music that Verdi may originally have conceived in connection with his never-to-be-realized *King Lear* project.

Allegro (♩ = 84)

GILDA

Ah più non ra - gio - no ... A - mor mi tra - sci - na! ... mio pa - dre, per

do - no ... Qual not - te d'or - or - re!

CHORUS

*ppp*

**ex. 11-8 Giuseppe Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act III, beginning of storm**

Its most daring touch of realism is the use of a male chorus, humming closed-mouthed behind the scenes, to represent the voice of the howling wind. It may seem paradoxical to call such an artificial device realistic, but by now we have had many opportunities to absorb the lesson that artistic (especially dramatic) realism is not a matter of literal fidelity to nature, but of fidelity to the affective circumstances—to “human nature,” so to speak. “Humanizing” the sound of the storm sends the same subliminal message as does the addition of a new orchestral effect—a staccato woodwind figure representing the start of heavy rain or hail—when Gilda takes action by knocking at the door, as if a rise in dramatic tension actually affected the course of nature. But of course storms (or musical reminiscences of them) had functioned as external reflectors of inner agitation since the earliest days of opera. Stage murders rarely take place in good weather.

The storm music gives shape to the drama's dénouement and lends a gruesome *tinta* to the final act. The musical

climax is a fleet yet resounding two-stanza *terzetto* for Sparafucile and Maddalena, bickering on the inside, and Gilda on the outside, beside herself at first with fear and then with frenzied resolve. Again, the ensemble follows not the Donizettian model of reflective stasis, but the older (Mozartean) one of evolving action (*strepitoso, strepitosissimo...*) that had its origin in comedy. In the first stanza Sparafucile and Maddalena compromise on a plan whereby if anyone should unexpectedly come knocking, that person shall be killed in the Duke's place; the disguised Gilda, overhearing this, immediately decides to sacrifice herself for her unworthy lover. Between the stanzas she screws up her courage and knocks, bringing on the heavy weather. During the second stanza the evil brother and sister get ready for murder and Gilda, steeling herself, prepares to die. At its conclusion she knocks again. The deed is quickly done, and the orchestral storm bursts forth in full fury, all piccolo scales and diminished seventh chords.

Two brief scenes remain. The first brings Rigoletto back onstage at the stroke of midnight to receive the promised body in the promised sack. Up to a point it is played entirely in recitative: Rigoletto natters in anticipation, Sparafucile hands over the sack, Rigoletto gloats. And then recitative suddenly gives way to song—"La donna è mobile," jaunty and insouciant as ever, as the unsuspecting Duke makes his merry way homeward at stage rear after his rendezvous with Maddalena. Irony compounded and recompounded! First the global irony: as Piero Weiss observes, for the Duke, unsuspecting instigator of it all, act III is "just a happy ending to an ordinary day."<sup>26</sup> But then there is far more bitter local irony—the irony, so to speak, of the masks. The merry song, giving evidence that the body in the sack cannot be the Duke's, now jars not only with the setting but with the plot itself. It no longer merely signifies the Duke's happy-go-lucky existence, but carries a horrifying double message to Rigoletto and the audience, who now must witness the terrible outcome of the curse.

"Comedy no longer alternates with tragedy but is superimposed on it," Weiss comments, underscoring Verdi's unprecedented Shakespearean achievement, "a drama in which a king (or duke) is a fool, a fool (or jester) a tragic hero, in which life, far from manifesting any intrinsic logic, produces unexpected results from dimly-percieved premises." Not everyone was ready to accept this bonfire of the traditional categories. But all agreed that they were witnessing a major innovation. Negative reviews of innovative works are often more illuminating than positive ones; the critic's resistance itself casts light on the specific nature of the novelty, and the threat that it implies. So here is one of the most resistant critiques *Rigoletto* received on the morrow of its Venice premiere, in the pages of the *Gazzetta ufficiale di Venezia*, the city's official newspaper:

An opera of this sort cannot be judged in one evening. Yesterday we were overwhelmed by novelty; novelty, or rather strangeness in the subject; novelty in the music, in the style, in the very form of the pieces, and we did not grasp the work as a whole. It has something of the *opera semiseria*; it begins with a dancing song, its protagonist is a hunchback; it issues forth with a feast and concludes, none too edifyingly, in a nameless house where love is for sale and men's lives are contracted for: it is, in sum, Victor Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse* plain and unadorned, with all its sins. The maestro, or the poet, succumbed to a posthumous affection for the Satanic school, by now antiquated and extinct; they sought ideal beauty in the misshapen, in the horrible; they aimed at effect not by the customary [Aristotelian] paths of pity and terror, but in the soul's distress and repugnance. In all conscience, we cannot praise such tastes.<sup>27</sup>

Yet another shock was the realistic end of the opera, with only two characters onstage, and only one of them alive. Again, what is likely to strike viewers of today as stylized or contrived—the stabbed and dying Gilda left with just enough energy to sing a final duet—could only have been read at the time as a bold departure from operatic norms (which would have demanded a full stage at the end) for the sake of the "truthful" portrayal of the specific human circumstances, the final reversal that leaves Rigoletto alone in the world and unloved.

But then the third act of *Rigoletto* honors convention almost entirely in the breach. As Julian Budden remarks at the end of the first volume of his massive study of Verdi's operas, "just after 1850 at the age of thirty-eight Verdi closed the door on a period of Italian opera with *Rigoletto*,"<sup>28</sup> and this after mastering all the difficult conventions of that period by the sweat of his brow. Instead, he placed his mastery on the side of realism and, as Budden goes on to observe, "the so-called *ottocento* in music was finished." There is shrewd irony in that remark, since *ottocento* simply means "the nineteenth century," which by the calendar was only half over. But before *Rigoletto* the term would have meant a period not only of time but also of style, a style created out of a recognizable common practice that (by definition) everybody followed, no matter how they tweaked it. After *Rigoletto* the nineteenth century was just a time period, during which Italian opera, no less than German, sailed out on uncharted seas. The *solita forma*, the "customary form" of cantabiles and cabalettas, was moribund. Over the 1860s and 1870s it would die out. Italian opera followed the general trend toward a form that strove to follow content as if spontaneously. In becoming



“realistic,” Italian opera inevitably lost its special identity, since the latter was a product or function of the conventions that were losing their grip. What it gained was immediacy of pathos—an immediacy Verdi learned from no musical contemporary (least of all Wagner), but rather from literary models like Hugo, and in back of him, the inevitable Shakespeare.

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## Notes:

(23) Quoted in Weiss, “Verdi and the Fusion of Genres,” p. 152.

(24) Etienne Béquet, *Journal des Débats*, 24 November 1832; quoted in Weiss, “Verdi and the Fusion of Genres,” p. 153.

(25) Verdi to Antonio Somma, 22 April 1853; quoted in Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, Vol. I, pp. 483–84.

(26) Weiss, “Verdi and the Fusion of Genres,” p. 155.

(27) Quoted in Weiss, “Verdi and the Fusion of Genres,” pp. 155–56.

(28) Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, Vol. I, p. 510.

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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## A JOB BECOMES A CALLING

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 11 Artist, Politician, Farmer (Class of 1813, II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

It is absurd to look back on Wagner and Verdi as “progressive” and “conservative” poles (though that is how historians in the tradition of the New German School have tended to view them), just as it is absurd to attribute the special qualities of Verdi's late work, beginning in the 1870s, to Wagner's influence, even though that was the decade during which Wagner began to receive staged performances in Italy. Verdi's greater knowledge of Wagner's work translated not into imitation but into a fascinating dialectic; nor was acquaintance with Wagner the biggest or most telling change that took place in the composer's life during the decade in question.

The main event in Verdi's life during the 1870s was, quite simply, his retirement. The two decades following *La traviata* had been extremely lucrative ones for the composer. He followed the footsteps of Rossini and Donizetti to Paris for two grand operas—*Les vèpres siciliennes* (“The Sicilian vespers,” 1855) and the especially grandiose *Don Carlos*, after a historical play by Schiller (1867). In between these came a commission from the tsar's own imperial Italian opera house in St. Petersburg, partly because of its remote location the highest-paying opera theater in Europe for star singers and star composers alike. For *La forza del destino* (“The power of fate,” 1862), his last collaboration with Piave, Verdi received 60,000 French francs from the Russian treasury, more than twenty times the stipulated maximum payment a Russian composer could receive for an opera in the local language, in addition to an expense account of 5,000 rubles (approximately 10,000 francs) and a per-performance honorarium of 806 rubles and 45 kopeks. Widely regarded as a scandal, this extravagant outlay to the visiting foreigner did a great deal to foment nationalist sentiment among Russian musicians.

Rossini's death in 1868 left Verdi the richest composer-entrepreneur in Europe, another quintessential self-made man of art. Twice already he had been tempted to do as Rossini had done and use his earnings to escape from the hectic, exhausting world of opera, the more so as he was genuinely interested in farming the land on an estate called Sant'Agata near his north Italian birthplace of Busseto, which he had purchased in 1851. After *Aida*, the grandest of the grand, Verdi called it quits. Composing for him—in keeping with his hard apprenticeship and the unsentimental attitudes of the professional theater—was a job, not a “calling” from above, and he regarded the opportunity to renounce it in favor of gentleman farming as a promotion. This was the greatest, most telling measure of his cultural distance from Wagner, a distance that applied to their respective national traditions as much as it did to them as individuals.



**fig. 11-7 Verdi in St. Petersburg for the première of *La forza del destino* (1862).**

Accordingly, Verdi's correspondence, the mother lode for biographers of any nineteenth-century figure, suddenly emptied itself of artistic or musical content (and political content too, Verdi having resigned his honorary seat in parliament) and began filling up with discussions of crops, livestock, soil, manure. He did not cease all musical activity. One of his most famous works, in fact, dates from the 1870s, but it was not an opera: it was a Requiem Mass composed in commemoration of the venerable Manzoni, like Verdi a symbol of the Risorgimento and an honorary senator, first performed on 22 May 1874, the first anniversary of Manzoni's death at the age of eighty-eight (the very age that Verdi would eventually reach). Even though it retains a vivid theatrical flair (especially in the *Dies Irae*), Verdi put it in a wholly different category from his operas—that of “serious music.” To Camille du Locle, one of the librettists for *Don Carlos*, he declared that having written it he was “no longer a clown serving the audience, beating a huge drum and shouting ‘Come on! Come on! Step right up!’”<sup>29</sup>

The irony here is delectable, because the most famous detail in the entire Requiem is the furious beating of the huge bass drum in the *Dies Irae* in counterpoint against the whole rest of the orchestra. But Verdi's double standard was understandable, and revealing. He wrote his operas as a hired hand, which in retrospect meant a servant and a clown; the Requiem he wrote on his own initiative, as a “free artist.” Serious art was beginning, even in Italy, to mean art

created not on commission but “for art's sake.” Revising an opera “disinterestedly”—just to make it better, not because anyone asked—could also count as art for art's sake, and so Verdi lavished a great deal of time during his “retirement” on two of his weightier historical operas: *Simon Boccanegra* (1857, revised 1879–81) and *Don Carlos*, which virtually became a new opera in 1882–83 (usually performed in Italian as *Don Carlo*).

Finally, in 1884, thirteen years after *Aida*, Verdi allowed himself to be persuaded by his publisher Ricordi, and by his ardent would-be literary collaborator Arrigo Boito (1842–1918), to attempt an opera under these new, utterly unoperatic conditions of creative emancipation. The result was one of his greatest achievements. That outcome, and the esthetic attitudes that had conditioned it, added a new chapter to the ongoing postromantic debate about the nature and purposes of art.

The positions Verdi now espoused were those associated since Kant with German art (or at least with German art-theorizing), positions traditionally regarded by Italians (including the earlier Verdi) with some suspicion, lately renewed and enhanced by association with Wagner. Boito, who was a composer in his own right, had been one of the leading *scapigliati*—“scruffy” Wagnerians who thought the likes of Verdi outmoded—in the 1860s, and had a noble fiasco, an opera called *Mefistofele* to his own very metaphysical libretto after Goethe's *Faust*, under his belt to prove it. (Twice revised, *Mefistofele* had begun to make its way in the theater by the time Boito summoned the courage to approach Verdi.) Impressed with a libretto that Boito proffered him in 1879, Verdi tested him as a collaborator by having him supply a crucial scene for the revised *Simon Boccanegra*. Finally convinced of Boito's ability and his devoted respect, Verdi left off full-time farming and took up his old job, but this time as a calling.

As anyone might have guessed, the subject that lured Verdi out of retirement came from Shakespeare—a Shakespeare treated with unprecedented fidelity and (with one huge exception, the climactic *concertato* or ensemble finale in act III) an adventurous disregard of traditional libretto structure. That disregard was especially evident because the subject, *Othello* (or *Otello*, to use the Italian form to designate the opera rather than the play), had already been used some seventy years earlier by Rossini in a hugely successful, traditional *opera seria* that still maintained a toehold in repertory. The implied contrast or contest suggested bravado—a bravado that the aging Verdi, eager (probably for that very reason) to appear up-to-date, shared with his much younger, formerly scruffy accomplice.



fig. 11-8 *Illustrazione italiana*, cover of special issue, “Verdi and Otello” (1887).

Thus, at the very outset, the opera fairly screams its freedom from galley routines by opening not with an overture, nor even with a prelude, but at the very height of the tempest with which Shakespeare's second act begins (Ex. 11-9a). To take the audience literally “by storm,” with a chord of such squalling dissonance, was a veritable act of modernist aggression, justified (as artistic aggression is always justified) by its “truth.” And where many operas (especially comic ones) had begun with choruses, the one in *Otello* is reminiscent of the grisly trio in the third act of *Rigoletto*, also played against a storm: its “lyrical” content is pared down to thirty-three bars in the middle (Ex. 11-9b), preceded and followed by elaborate *parlante* passages in which choral and solo voices interact unpredictably over a surging orchestral tide.



Allegro agitato  $\text{♩} = 76$

*ff*

*dim. sempre*

*pp* *ppp*

*pp*

14

A Scene I

CHORUS

4 Tenori  
CIPRIOTTI

4 Bassi

U - na ve - la!

A

U - na ve - la!

ex. 11-9a Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello*, Act I, scene 1, mm. 1–16



CHORUS

*ff*

Dio, ful - gor del - la bu - fe - . . .

Dio, ful - gor del - la bu - fe - . . .

Dio, ful - gor del - la bu - fe - . . .

*mf* *tutta forza*

8

4

ra! Dio sor - ri - so del - la

ra! Dio sor - ri - so del - la

ra! Dio sor - ri - so del - la

8

7

du na!

du na!

du na!

8

8

CHORUS: God, whose wrath has roused the waters,  
At whose smile the whirlwind tarryies!

ex. 11-9b Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello*, Act I, scene 1, Lyrical climax of chorus, mm. 1–8

Continuity and compression: these are the ruling criteria. They could be called “realist.” At the time, many called them “Wagnerian.” Yet it is possible, and desirable, to view the matter from a more elevated historical perspective that places both Wagner and Verdi in a single context (rather than Verdi in Wagner's). From that perspective, both composers were striving to achieve what opera critics since the beginning of the century had called the “continuous finale”: a flexible interaction of literary and musical devices modeled on the finales of the Mozart/Da Ponte comedies, now stretched over whole acts. The German claimed to be destroying the past and rebuilding from scratch; Italians tended to see the historical process as evolutionary or synthetic, the mutual adaptation of traditional categories. But for both the process had similar historical roots and a similar goal.

For the sake of continuity, both composers committed wholesale violations of traditional “form,” though only Wagner boasted of it. For both composers, ultimately, the conscious objective became fidelity to artistic ideals, abstractly conceived, rather than to their audience's expectations. That was the cradle of what we now call modernism, shrewdly characterized by Leonard B. Meyer, an American music theorist, as “the late, late Romantic period.”<sup>30</sup> And once Verdi could be viewed as a modernist, it became possible for academic critics to view him as great.

These new virtues can certainly be explained without recourse to Wagner, but the esthetic parallel with Wagner need not be overlooked. The most essential parallel, to repeat, was the protomodernist conviction that artworks were not created only for the sake of enjoyment—that is, at any rate, for the audience's enjoyment. Artists wrote to please themselves. While working on *Falstaff*, the opera (also Shakespearean, also with Boito) that followed *Otello*, which he finished composing in his eightieth year, Verdi let it be known that “I am writing it in moments of absolute leisure, simply for my own amusement.”<sup>31</sup> That made it respectable. And so did the assumption that underlay the composer's disinterested amusement: consciousness that his new manner of continuity and compression served the purposes of art.

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## Notes:

(29) Verdi to Camille du Locle, 24 February 1874; Alessandro Luzio, ed, *Carteggi verdiani*, Vol. IV (Rome, 1947), 176n.

(30) Leonard B. Meyer, "A Pride of Prejudices; or, Delight in Diversity," *Music Theory Spectrum* XIII (1991): 241.

(31) Verdi to the mayor of Parma, 29 April 1891; *Verdi: The Man in His Letters*, p. 401.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Otello

'Tristan' chord

## COMPRESSION AND EXPANSION

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 11 Artist, Politician, Farmer (Class of 1813, II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

That was the rhetoric. The reality, of course, was far more complicated and far more interesting. Take compression, to begin with. Fidelity itself demanded it: if Shakespeare was to be followed fully (even, as far as possible, at the level of actual dialogue), he would have to be radically condensed, since musical time moves so much more slowly than that of unmediated speech and action. Room had to be made for music, and that meant stripping away all nonessentials. In the case of *Otello*, Shakespeare's whole first act was famously treated as a nonessential, simply snipped. But to put it this way is obviously wrongheaded, for what is music if not the greatest “nonessential” of all; and what is supplying it unasked-for if not the most willful dramatic infidelity? Shakespeare's play, after all, had worked perfectly well all by itself for centuries.

Obviously, the music was thought to compensate in some way for whatever it crowded out. But in fact a great deal was added to the libretto for the sake of music that was not even in Shakespeare to begin with—and not just ballets or choruses, either, but the whole incandescent last scene in act I, with which our main musical discussion will begin. The opera was no mere condensation of the play, but a complex product of simultaneous compression and expansion. The result was manifestly *not* faithful to Shakespeare, or rather—to put it in a paradoxical way that has become popular with critics—it broke faith with the original (in literal or practical ways) so as all the better to keep faith with it (on a higher, “esthetic” plane).

The big departure from Shakespeare in act I is the love scene for Otello and his wife, Desdemona, whom he will eventually murder in a jealous rage. Boito cunningly extracted many of its words from Shakespeare's own text (lines spoken by each character about the other but not to each other, including a few from the otherwise omitted first act), but Shakespeare had provided no such scene. Neither, even, had Rossini. Verdi's (and Boito's) supplying one, which adds nothing to the plot but only (it seems) to the opera's musical range or at best to the lovers' characterization, might seem at first to be a throwback to the very conventions the composer and librettist now affected to despise, especially since the role of Otello is by all odds the most heroic *tenore di forza* role in all of Verdi, and what is a *tenore di forza* for, if not to sing a love duet with the prima donna?

Indeed, it is even possible to parse the duet, albeit somewhat disproportionately, into the four components of a traditional *grand scena*: introduction (mm. 1–50), characterized by the luscious sonority of a cello quartet; cantabile (mm. 51–96), beginning with a rounded sixteen-bar period for Desdemona and ending with a rapturously climactic melody sung by both lovers in succession (“set,” Budden observes, “in an enchanted twilight between F major and minor”);<sup>32</sup> *tempo di mezzo* (mm. 97–126) introduced by a *poco più mosso*, which introduces emotional agitation and physical palpitations; and finally a coda (or, to borrow a phrase from Budden, a “cabaletta-digest”) in which the accumulated ardor is discharged in passionate kissing (mm. 127–156).

127  $\text{♩} = 88$   
DESEMONA *pp*  
O - tel - lo! ...  
OTELLO  
un ba - cio ... Un

130  
ba - cio ...

133 Poco più lento  $\text{♩} = 80$   
an - co - ra un ba - cio.

136  
Già la ple - ia - de ar - den - te in mar di -

139 Des.

Tar - da è la

scen - de.

142

noe - te.

Vien... Ve - ne - te

*pp*

146

O - rel

splen

*mf*



147

D

O

148

D

O

lo!

de!

149

dim. allarg. un poco

In tempo

sua corda sola

150

ppp *le parti in su*

dim. sempre

morendo

**ex. 11-10 Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello*, Act I, scene 3, end**

The concluding section (Ex. 11-10) is the least conventional, because (completely belying the nature and function of a cabaletta) the chief musical interest is transferred to the orchestra: first in the threefold arching melody that even without benefit of the disconnected words to which the libretto has descended (“a kiss ... Othello! ... a kiss ... another kiss ...”) obviously accompanies three separate osculations; afterward in the music that (following, yet transforming, longstanding customs of timbre, register, and contour) paints the starry sky; and finally in the reappearance of the cello quartet, a reminiscence of the scene's opening measures and a reassertion of its blissful opening mood. The sudden dominance of the orchestra—or, to put it more poetically, the sudden transfer of dramatic weight to the word-transcending medium of “pure music”—was widely read as the ultimate Wagnerization of Verdi's musico-dramatic technique.

And so it was, perhaps—but in a very special, very exact way. There is good reason to regard this scene not as a case of generalized Wagnerian “influence” but as Verdi's deliberate commentary on (or, if the word can be divested of its satirical connotation, his parody or remaking of) a specific work of Wagner's which we already know, and which we already know that Verdi admired: namely, *Tristan und Isolde*.

Imagine for a moment that Tristan and Isolde's world-transcending passion had been not tragically thwarted but had triumphed over its social obstacles. and that it had been able to evolve over time into mature wedded bliss. And now

take a closer look at the “kiss” music in Ex. 11-10. Increasing harmonic tension tells us that each of the three kisses (that is, the three parallel two-bar phrases) is more ardent than the last. The first begins with a melodic appoggiatura (C#) to the tonic triad. The second begins with the same melody note cast as appoggiatura to the dominant triad, producing a more complex, more dissonant harmony. And what harmony? None other than a *Tristan*-chord—a half-diminished seventh treated, just as Wagner treated it, as a chord containing an appoggiatura. Since the appoggiatura in this case resolves to a dominant seventh rather than a French sixth, the two chords—Wagner's and Verdi's—are functionally dissimilar. The tension of the one is never discharged (and that's the whole point of it), while the other is led smoothly back to cadential (and emotional) satisfaction.

The third kiss-phrase begins on a yet more restless harmony, a chord containing both the C# and the B, the note to which it nominally resolves. And this is another, yet more potent *Tristan*-chord, or rather another half-diminished sonority that is homonymous to the *Tristan*-chord, but whose constituent appoggiatura (F) resolves immediately to the third of the tonic triad, evoking not the torment of unconsummated passion but, once again (to quote a famous poem by William Blake), “the lineaments of gratified desire.”<sup>33</sup> What could better delineate the difference between Wagner's lovers and Verdi's—but also, at the same time, their kinship? Once we have spotted the ersatz *Tristan*-chords at the climax of Verdi's love scene, many more will leap to our eyes and ears. Such harmonies were by no means common coin in Italian music, nor will we find them in any great profusion in Verdi's earlier music, however torrid. They lent this particular duet its special *tinta*, and their Wagnerian associations—surely deliberate!—added an element of typically Verdian (or should we say typically Shakespearean?) irony to the characterization. Tristan and Isolde as old marrieds! Stated baldly, as an oxymoron, the idea is merely amusing. Suggested by harmonic implication, its endorsement of uxorious “family values” over transcendent illicit desire is—how to put it?—morally seductive.

The first Tristanesque reference comes in m. 92, right after the lyrical peak of what earlier we called the duet's “cantabile” section. It maximizes harmonic tension (=ardor), but again, only so as to prepare its gentle resolution. The more agitated passage beginning there, which has already been compared to the *tempo di mezzo*, is riddled with Tristanesque harmonies. The most conspicuous ones (mm. 117, 119) again occur in a stingingly ironic position, supporting the “Amen” that follows the lovers' prayer that their bonds will last and grow with time.

The last Tristanesque reference (m. 137) introduces the final section of the duet, when the lovers contemplate the benignly shimmering sky. Again, the appoggiatura (A#) resolves unproblematically to a member of the tonic triad, ironically reversing the chord's functional (=psychological) trajectory. No one ever demonstrated a greater understanding of *Tristan und Isolde* or its musical and dramatic implications than Verdi did in reversing them all. Ex. 11-11 summarizes all of these sightings of the *Tristan*-chord in the *Otello* love music, and compares their very different contexts and resolutions with the Wagnerian originals.

For a fuller appreciation of the love duet, its dramatic function, and the reason for its insertion into the libretto, we need to look to the other end of the opera, the fourth act, in which all the happy predictions that the lovers have made in act I come to grief on the shoals of Otello's misguided jealousy. This brief act, set in Desdemona's bedchamber, is fashioned out of Shakespeare (act IV, sc. 3; act V, sc. 2) almost without departure or digression although, inevitably, the action is much condensed. That very condensation, however, gives it an ideal shape for a memorable drama borne by music: a suspenseful stasis taken up with broad if heavily fraught lyricism, followed by a swift, terrifying denouement in which highly contrasted musical impressions come flying thick and fast.

It begins with Desdemona's lonely preparations for bed following her great humiliation at the act III curtain. As in Shakespeare, she vents her sad forebodings by singing a folksong to herself whose refrain, “O willow, willow willow,” has caused it to be known as the Willow Song. Verdi captures its mood with yet another half-diminished harmony, set out as an arpeggio within the melody itself. The act opens with an anticipation of this phrase in the melancholy timbre of the English horn, answered by another phrase, even tinier (played by three flutes in unison), that will likewise prove to be a thematic anticipation (Ex. 11-12).

92 117

129 131

137

ex. 11-11 Giuseppe Verdi's *Tristan*-chords compared with Wagner's

Andante ♩ = 72  
p dolce  
con espressione

6 mf

**ex. 11-12a Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello*, Act IV, mm. 1–11**

Since the half-diminished sonority here functions in its most ordinary diatonic usage, as  $ii_7$  in the minor, there would be no reason to associate with its more exotic cousin in Wagner were it not for the love music in act I, which insists on that association. Since the whole fourth act is going to be an agonizing reversal or negation of that love scene, the opening harmony, as outlined by the English horn, can be seen as part of an all-encompassing web of ironic associations.

To prolong the suspense before Otello's sinister appearance, Verdi has Emilia (Desdemona's confidant as well as the wife of Iago, the villain) exit, leaving the victim alone onstage. To fill the time, Verdi and Boito make their one insertion into the Shakespearean action, borrowing an idea, as it happens, from the libretto to Rossini's old *Otello*, where it served a similar purpose: the good Desdemona prays, her *Ave Maria* beginning as a monotone “chant” recited by rote, but gradually taking on lyrical profile as the prayer becomes more personal and passionate.

At its dying away Otello appears among the shadows, his murky entrance—surely prompted by Shakespeare's “Put out the light, and then put out the light”—famously represented by a solo for the muted double basses extending from the very bottom of their compass to something like the very top (Ex. 11-12b). He raises the bed curtains and looks longingly at his sleeping wife, while the double basses' motive passes to Desdemona's plaintive English horn, in the parallel minor. Despite his murderous intent, he cannot forbear a kiss—or rather three kisses, accompanied by a reprise of the culminating music from act I. This reprise has the very same intent, and accomplishes the same dramatic work, as the first reprise of “La donna è mobile” in the third act of *Rigoletto*: it reminds the audience of an important musical association, and prepares them for the really crucial reprise that is yet to come.

**ex. 11-12b Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello*, Act IV scene 3 (Otello enters Desdemona's bedchamber)**

She awakes. In fifty measures of gruesome *parlante* (recitative over a continuous orchestral motive), he accuses her; she denies it; he rebuts her denial with a lie; she protests; he smothers her. In one hundred measures more, the horrible truth is revealed to Otello and he embarks on his final aria, “Niun mi tema” (“Fear me not”), a mere seventy-four measures that can nevertheless be parsed into a full *scena*: introduction, cantabile (Adagio), *tempo di mezzo*, and cabaletta-digest. Except for the *tempo di mezzo*, where Otello suddenly stabs himself amid a general panic, each part of this painfully reflective aria is fraught with ironic reminiscences conveyed by lacerating musical recalls.

The first section reaches a bitter climax on the word “Gloria!” set in a manner that recalls Otello's first appearance in act I, as the victorious naval hero. “*Esultate!*,” he had sung then, “*L'orgoglio musulmano sepolto è in mar, nostra e del ciel è gloria!*”: “Rejoice! The pride of the Turks is entombed in the sea; Heavens be ours and the glory!” What had been the Turks’ fate, to fall in consequence of their pride, is now Otello's.

The Adagio (Ex. 11-13a), in which Otello's utter loneliness is underscored by suddenly withholding the orchestral accompaniment, is largely based on the little flute refrain at the beginning of the act, associated there with

Desdemona's melancholy (compare Ex. 11-12a). To that motive, a third descending through an accented passing tone, Otello describes Desdemona's aspect in death—*pallida, e stanca, e muta, e bella* (“pale and worn and still and lovely”)—and, in another suddenly unaccompanied outburst at the end of the section, calls vainly on her name and grasps that she is dead. In a letter to his publisher, Verdi described the end of this burst (“*Ah!, morta! morta! morta!*”) as “sounds almost without key.”<sup>34</sup> What makes it seem so is its conclusion, a descending phrase that implies tonic harmony (in C# minor) at its beginning but subdominant at the end. Its last four notes, of course, recapitulate the already fraught half-diminished harmony of Desdemona's Willow Song; far from being “without key,” they are in precisely the key of the opening English horn solo.

OTELLO  
Adagio ♩ = 69

*pp*

E tu... co-me sei pal - li-da! e stan - ca, e mu - ta, e bel - la,

*p*

*ten.*

pia cre - a - tu - ra na - ta sot - to ma - li - gna stel - la.



Fred - da co-me la ca - sta tua vi - ta,

e in cie - lo as - sor ta. De -

sde - mo - na! De - sde - mo - na! Ah! ... mor - ta! mor - ta! mor - ta!

*pp dolciss.* *sempre pp*

ex. 11-13a Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello*, Act IV scene 4 (Otello's remorse)

Andante come prima OTELLO

Pria d'uc - ci - der-ti ... spo - sa ... ti ba -

cia - i. Or mo - ren - do ... nel - l'om - bra in cui mi gia - cio ...

*pp*

**ex. 11-13b Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello*, Act IV, scene 4 (Death of Otello)**

The final section (Ex. 11-13b), which brings the opera to an end, is a setting of Othello's last line in Shakespeare, itself a heartbreaking reminiscence: "I kist thee, ere I kill'd thee; No way but this, /Killing my selfe, to dye upon a kisse." It recapitulates the musical content of the moment in which, before killing her, Otello had gazed upon his sleeping wife and been overwhelmed with the grief of love lost. The last music heard before the curtain, then, is the kiss music from act I, in its final, crucial, reminiscence.

And now we know why the love scene in act I had to be written. It was not only to fulfill an operatic requirement. Nor was it merely to plant a motive for later reminiscence—or rather, to put it that way is to put the cart before the horse. What motivated the love scene was the dying Otello's last line, and the need to provide a "past in music" on which his concluding recollection could draw, thus justifying through music's word-transcending immediacy of feeling the whole project of turning what was already a great play into an opera.

Exactly this, we may recall, had been Wagner's motivation for expanding the *Ring* into a tetralogy—to provide the narrative of the Norns in *Götterdämmerung* with a past *in music* on which to draw. If we write off the *Otello* love duet off as a studied or cynical "plant," then we are bound likewise to regard the whole of *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, and *Siegfried*. If Wagner's operatic tetralogy is regarded, contrariwise, as a noble attempt to create a world in music, then so, in its far more humane and economical way, is *Otello*.

The feature that most decisively distinguishes Verdi, even at his most monumental, from Wagner is his insistence on a human scale. In this the two composers can truly be taken as opposites and as standard-bearers for opposing national traditions. Verdi's goes back to the humanism or man-centered philosophy of the Italian Renaissance, while Wagner's embodies centuries of accumulated antihumanistic German metaphysical thought, in which answers to fundamental human questions were automatically sought on a superhuman plane, a plane for which orchestral rather than vocal music was the ideal medium of representation. Only one of Verdi's operas, *Macbeth*, invokes a crucial supernatural or miraculous agency. Only one of Wagner's, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, fails to do so. At the emotional climax of *Otello*'s final scene ("Desdemona ... Desdemona ... Ah, morta! morta! morta!") the orchestra is silent. At the corresponding moment in *Tristan und Isolde*, the orchestra sweeps the singer away.

The dramatic tradition that leads to Verdi is at bottom the comic tradition, which is the one in which humankind is essentially responsible for its own fate. The specifically operatic tradition that leads to him is the one that proceeded through ever greater infusions of *buffa* styles, forms, and attitudes into the *opera seria*. The dramatic tradition that

leads to Wagner is the tragic tradition, in which humans are the helpless playthings of the gods. The specifically operatic tradition that leads to him is the perpetually “reformist” or neoclassical tradition—the eighteenth-century tradition of Metastasio and Gluck—that sought to enforce the purity of dramatic categories and in particular undertook periodic purgings from tragic opera of comedic admixtures and accretions.

Thus it is no surprise to find that Wagner's last opera, *Parsifal*, was an out-and-out religious drama, replete with actual sacred rituals enacted onstage, and ending with miraculous healings and redemptions—or that Verdi's last opera, *Falstaff* (fashioned by Boito after Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, with admixtures from the Henry IV plays), was a worldly-wise comedy, Verdi's first “*buffa*” in fifty years. It was an astonishing departure for a composer approaching eighty, the most astounding feat of artistic self-rejuvenation since Monteverdi, also a retired septuagenarian, came forth some 250 years before with his last opera, *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*. But with benefit of hindsight one could hardly imagine a more fitting consummation to Verdi's career, or a more logical outcome of its trajectory.

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## Notes:

(32) Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, Vol. III (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 354.

(33) William Blake, “Several Questions Answered” (*Songs of Experience*, 1794).

(34) Verdi to Giulio Ricordi, 21 January 1888; quoted in Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, Vol. III, p. 398.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Opera: The 19th century

The Stone Guest

Alexander Dargomīzhsky

## COMEDIZATION

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 11 Artist, Politician, Farmer (Class of 1813, II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The “comedization” of late-nineteenth-century opera was an unstoppable tide. The term should not be misunderstood. It does not necessarily have to do with humor, although the process it denotes did give humorous opera (among other things) a boost. It designates, rather, what is more often termed (or mistermmed) “realism.” Comedization works better than realism in this context because it suggests something concrete about forms and styles (namely, their shrinkage and “popularization”) without making unwarranted claims about the nature of plots, which were often far from “realistic.”



**fig. 11-9** *Illustrazione italiana*, cover of special issue, “Verdi and Falstaff” (1893).

As a case in point consider *The Stone Guest* (*Kamenniy gost'*) by the Russian composer Alexander Dargomizhsky —another member of the class of 1813, if a minor one. Left almost completely composed in vocal score at the time of its author's death in 1869, its holes were plugged by César Cui, its orchestration supplied by Rimsky-Korsakov, and it was first performed in St. Petersburg in 1872. Its literary source was a “little tragedy” by Alexander Pushkin that was inspired by Mozart's *Don Giovanni*—with its walking, talking statue (the title character in the Pushkin/Dargomizhsky version) not the most realistic of plots. What made Dargomizhsky's version a landmark of realism nevertheless was the composer's decision to base his work directly on Pushkin's dramatic poem without any mediating libretto—a demonstratively anti-operatic decision taken very self-consciously in the name of “truth.”

Without a specially-fashioned libretto, there could be little or no provision for purely musical unfolding: no arias, no ensembles. There are two Spanish romances, interpolated by Dargomizhsky where Pushkin merely indicated that a character sing a song. (The critic Hermann Laroche had fun with this, foreseeing a future when “truth” prevailed and composers would have to smuggle music into their operas by constantly having their characters invite one another to make some.)<sup>35</sup> For the rest, Dargomizhsky treated Pushkin's verse drama as if it were the text of a gigantic through-composed art song, setting it not as recitative but quite lyrically, yet without formalizing repetition of lines (though

continuous accompaniment figures often gather musical stretches up into perceptual units).

The most aria-like moment comes when Don Juan, seducing Donna Anna, reacts heatedly to her insinuation that he is mad. Here Pushkin used repetition as a rhetorical device, thus giving Dargomizhsky permission to follow suit (Ex. 11-14): “If I were a madman,” Don Juan remonstrates, in prose translation:

I would wish to remain among the living; I would nurture hope of touching your heart with tender love.

If I were a madman,

I would spend my nights at your balcony, troubling your sleep with serenades; I would not hide myself; on the contrary, I would try to be noticed by you everywhere.

If I were a madman,

I would not suffer in silence.

[To which Donna Anna retorts, “You call this silence?”]

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in the upper staff, and the piano accompaniment is in the lower two staves. The music is in 7/4 time and consists of two measures. The first measure is in 7/4 time, and the second measure is in 5/4 time. The lyrics are: "Kog - dab ya bil bez - u - mets, ya-b kho - tel v zhi-vikh o - stat' - sya,". The piano accompaniment is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The score is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat major or D minor).



ya-b i - ml na-dezh-du lyu-bov'-yu nezh-noy tv - nu' va - she serd-tse; Kog -

dab ya li bez - u - mets, ya bi no - zhi stal pro - vo - dit' u

va - she - go bil - ko - na, tre - vo - zha se - ra -

na - da - mi vash soo, ne

stal bi ya skri - vat' - nya ya, na - pra - tiv, sta - ral - syah bit' vez - de za -

me - chen va - mi. Kog - dab ya bil bez - u - mets, yab ne stal stra - dat' v bez - mol - vi - i.

ex. 11-14 Alexander Dargomizhsky *The Stone Guest*: Act II, Don Juan's Arioso

Allegro con brio ♩ = 112  
FAL. *leggeriss.*

Quand' e - ro pag - gio del Du - ca di Nor - folk e - ro sot -  
ti - le, sot - ti - le, sot - ti - le, E - ro un mi - rag - gio va - go, leg -  
gie - ro, gen - ti - le, gen - ti - le, gen - ti - le.

FAL.: Once when I served as the Duke of Norfolk's page,  
I was a picture of elegant splendour;  
I was perfection, gracefully, tenderly, splendidly, slender, so slender.

**ex. 11-15 Giuseppe Verdi, *Falstaff*, “Quand'ero paggio”**

The repeated line is treated musically as a refrain, and is transposed up a step with every appearance. Between these markers, however, there is only minimal musical “rounding,” chiefly a matter of short phrases set in sequence. And yet a minuscule “number” has been allowed to form in response to the structure of the text: a new application of the well-worn reformist plea (going all the way back to Monteverdi) that “poetry be the mistress of the music.”

Needless to say, Dargomizhsky's “formlessness” was derided in its day as Wagnerian; but what his procedures really resembled—by anticipation rather than by imitation—were Verdi's in *Otello* and, especially, *Falstaff*. We have already seen how the elevated lyrical style of the *Otello* love duet was achieved: it was a matter of allowing occasional climactic phrases to coalesce into repetitive sequences or fleeting rounded periods within an overall through-composed design. The same is even more typical of *Falstaff*, in which (as in *The Stone Guest*) only one tiny “number” emerges from the incessant lyric flux and flow: “Quand'ero paggio” (“When I was a page”), the bulky title character's brief reminiscence of his limber youth in the retinue of the Duke of Norfolk (Ex. 11-15).

The similarity of style, in particular the strictly syllabic declamation on short note values normally employed in recitative, may not have been a coincidence. Verdi, who (as we know) had visited Russia, and who had run into Dargomizhsky, a high-society dilettante, at various salons and social functions, knew about *The Stone Guest* before it was performed or published, professed a collegial admiration for it, and owned a copy of the vocal score. But whether

or not a direct line is traced from the one work to the other, *The Stone Guest* and *Falstaff* both exemplified the process of comedization that cut the imposing formal blocks of traditional opera down to size.

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## Notes:

(35) Hermann Laroche (German Larosh), review of *The Stone Guest*, in *Vestnik Yevropi*, no. 4 (1872), p. 895.

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

# CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

### **Russian Realism (Musorgsky, Chaikovsky); Opéra Lyrique; Operetta, Verismo**

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

## GOING TOO FAR

To continue the argument of the previous chapter, the concept of “comedization” can accommodate without contradiction not only realism but also some other developments in European musical theater that on the face of it seem quite incompatible with realism. A defining moment for the concept, a sort of limiting case, was a creative crisis that unexpectedly intervened in the work of the century’s most committed musical realist, altering the course of his career.

That composer was Modest Musorgsky, already mentioned in chapter 8 as a realist, and in chapter 9 as a member of the “mighty little bunch” of Russian nationalist composers who grouped themselves around Mily Balakirev in the 1850s and 1860s. Musorgsky’s nationalism, combined with his insecure nonprofessional status (having been trained not for a musical but for a military career), led him to adopt an extreme “outsider’s” attitude toward the existing traditions and institutions of musical Europe. He rejected with equal fervor both the traditional curriculum of the German conservatory—counterpoint, mastery of “form,” systematic theory, any manifestation of “braininess”—and the esthetic of Italian opera: bel canto, refined or ornate melody, all conventional canons of musical “beauty.”



**fig. 12-1 Modest Musorgsky, painted by Ilya Repin in the hospital a week before the composer's death in February 1881.**

Such a stance is easy enough to write off as a case of sour grapes. There was no Russian conservatory where Musorgsky might have studied until 1862, when he was already overage; and the Russian musical stage was dominated during his formative years by a state-supported Italian opera troupe from which the work of native composers was barred by official policy. Russian composers of Musorgsky's generation were effectively frozen out of the country's musical establishment—a situation comparable to that which existed in America, and lasted longer. Unless one went abroad for training, as Glinka and Gottschalk did, one had to content oneself with correspondence courses or self-education. And there were next to no performance outlets for one's creative labor unless one was a performing virtuoso, as Musorgsky (while a fine and much sought-after accompanist) was not.

What is left, though, after both brains and beauty have been renounced? Good character, obviously. That is where Musorgsky's high moral commitment to “truth” was born (a commitment he thought of as being particularly Russian, in opposition to the falsities of German and Italian routine) and hence his commitment to realism, with its contempt for fine manners and convention. He found a mentor in Dargomizhsky (like him an aristocratic dilettante frozen out by the professional establishment), and a model in *The Stone Guest*, the opera mentioned at the end of the previous chapter. Dargomizhsky had solved the problem of operatic “form” by dispensing with the libretto

altogether, and that made him “the great teacher of musical truth,” as Musorgsky put it in two separate dedications.

But Dargomizhsky's solution was not complete, because the text of *The Stone Guest* consisted of artistic (that is, artificial) verse. In what may have been the most extreme “reformist” position ever adopted by an opera composer, Musorgsky proclaimed that the ultimate in musical truth could be achieved only if composers set librettos in conversational prose, with the music faithfully mirroring the tempo and contour of actual conversational speech. This was a particularly strict application to music of the old neoclassical (or “Renaissance”) precept of *mimesis*, or “imitation of nature,” the idea that art derives its power from the mimicking of reality. It was the same idea that had inspired the invention of opera in the humanist academies of Florence almost three centuries before.



**fig. 12-2 Alexander Dargomizhsky, engraving from a photograph.**

But music had always fit uneasily into the mimetic scheme of things because it had no obvious natural model. The old Florentine solution was similar to Musorgsky's: the idea that, if speech is taken to be the outward embodiment of emotion, then imitation of speech was tantamount to the imitation of emotion—that is, human psychological reality (“human nature”). The difference lay in the type of speech to be imitated. For the Florentines, living in the age of humanism, it was poetry composed in the style of Greek drama. For Musorgsky, living in an age of burgeoning scientific empiricism (or “positivism”), it would be the “natural” speech one observed in “real life.”



This was unprecedented. Never had a composer envisioned the renunciation of verse, however terse, as the basis of musical setting. Outside the realm of functioning church liturgies in oral tradition (e.g., Gregorian chant), no one had ever seriously questioned the status of regular meter as a basic musical ingredient. In his quest for the ultimate musical embodiment of nature, Musorgsky did not shrink from questioning any assumption about “the nature of music.” This was surely the most radical posture ever assumed by a nineteenth-century composer, and he gloried in it for a while because it turned all of his liabilities into advantages. Far from handicapped, he was *privileged* by his maverick, autodidact status to think the unthinkable. “On nature’s scale,” he wrote to a friend (typically imitating the language of science),

man is the highest organism (at least on earth), and this highest organism possesses the gift of word and voice without equal among terrestrial organisms. If one admits the reproduction by artistic means of human speech in all its subtlest and most capricious shades—to depict it naturally, as life and human nature demand—would this not amount to the deification of the human gift of words? And if by this simplest of means, simply submitting strictly to artistic instinct in catching human vocal intonations, it becomes possible to capture the heart, then is it not a worthy enterprise? And if one could, along with that, catch the thinking faculties in a wise, then would it not be worthwhile to devote oneself to such an occupation?<sup>1</sup>

His conservatory would be the conservatory of life. To another correspondent he wrote, “whatever speech I hear, whoever is speaking (or, the main thing, no matter what he is saying), my brain is already churning out the musical embodiment of such speech.”<sup>2</sup> These optimistic letters were written during the summer of 1868, when the twenty-nine-year-old Musorgsky was making his first attempt to realize these ideals in practice—or, to put it in the “scientific” terms he preferred, to carry out his first “experiment in dramatic music in prose.”

The exercise in question was similar to *The Stone Guest* in concept: a verbatim setting of a preexisting play. The play in question, though, had to be a prose play, and that meant, according to the conventions of the nineteenth-century theater, that it had to be a comedy. Musorgsky chose *Marriage*, a farce by Nikolai Gogol about the vacillations of an unwilling bridegroom. The naturalistic dialogue in which it is cast must surely rank among the most unlyrical prose ever put on paper. For a sample of the unlyrical music with which Musorgsky clothed it, we can start right at the beginning with the main character’s opening speech (Ex. 12-1).

*Dovol'no medlenno (rather slow)*

Vot, kak nach - nyosh' è - tak o - din na do - su - ge po - dum - ìvat',  
 tak vi - dish', chto toch - no, na - do zhe - nit' - sya.  
 Chto, v sa - mom de - le? Zhi - vyosh', zhi - vyosh', da ta - ka - ya na - ko - nets,  
 skver - nos' sta - no - vit - sya. Vot op - yat' pro - pus - til mya - so - yed.  
 A, ved', ka - zhet - sya, vsyo go - to - vo, i sva - kha vot uzh tri me - sya - tsa kho - dit.  
 Pra - vo! Sa - mo - mu kak - to sta - no - vit - sya so - vest - no Ey! Ste - pan!

Well, when you begin thus, alone and at leisure, to think about it, you see that you positively have to get married. What do you find? You live your life, but in the end, finally, what a horror it becomes. Again I've let the winter go by, and all the while, it seems, everything is ready: the matchmaker has been coming three months already. Really! You get to feeling ashamed of yourself. Hey! Stepan!

#### ex. 12-1 Modest Musorgsky, *Marriage*, opening speech

As a Russian, Musorgsky had an actual advantage in writing naturalistic prose recitative, because the accentual pattern of the spoken language imposes a sort of beat on most utterances that can be represented fairly accurately in ordinary musical notation. In ordinary Russian speech accents are distributed evenly, within a tempo that varies according to affect. At the outset, Podkolyosin, the prospective bridegroom, is lying on a divan, smoking his pipe. The accented syllables (*Vot*, *-nyosh'*, *-din*, *-su-*, etc.) fall regularly on a half-note tactus as befits his lethargic state. Unaccented syllables are arranged in patterns of short equal values between the accented ones. An unaccented syllable is never allowed to occupy the beginning of a beat, lest it introduce an un-Russian secondary accent. (No matter how many syllables it may contain, a Russian word takes only one accent: English-speaking students, who are used to introducing secondary accents even in two-syllable words, often practice the word *dostiprimechátel'nosti*, which means “points of interest,” as in sightseeing.)

Where the notated beat is the quarter note and the accents fall on the half note, as here, this means that the intervening quarter-note pulses will be occupied by rests, as is uniformly the case in this example up to the words *nádo zhenít'sya*. The resultant strings of little notes, evenly crowded into the space of one beat (entailing the very free use of triplets and other *gruppetti*) and interrupted by a rest at the beginning of the next, are instantly recognizable as “Musorgskian.” Beginning with *nádo zhenít'sya*, (“you have to get married”), the accents begin falling on the quarter notes in response to the anxiety that the thought of marriage has aroused in a confirmed bachelor.

The other noteworthy feature is the fastidiousness with which note values are assigned. Musorgsky's ear for the

tempo of Russian speech, as the quoted letter suggests, was practiced and marvelously refined. The rhythm of *na dosúge*, for example, decelerates (triplets followed by eighths), while the next word, *podúmivat'*, reverses the order of note values and accelerates. These rhythms are not arbitrarily chosen; Musorgsky is indeed drawing faithfully and “scientifically” from life (from his own observed declamation, in all likelihood). Similarly, the lengths of upbeats vary according to the natural model. The first syllable of *odín* and the unaccented word *chto* are set as sixteenth notes, while the word *tak*, even when unaccented, is usually drawled in spoken Russian, and hence is entitled to an eighth note.

Yet the composer exercises a careful “artistic” control over the shape of the line, directing all tension to release on the explosive *nádo zhenít'sya*. This culminating phrase is the first since the initial word in which the first syllable is an accented one, hence unpreceded by an upbeat. It therefore gives the impression of being delayed, which heightens the sense of climax. Melodic contour is also handled naturalistically, but with artistic control. The climactic *nádo zhenít'sya* is exceeded, as melodic high point, only by *takáya skvérmnost'* (“what a horror”).

These emotional climaxes stand out all the more because they are surrounded with neutral utterances that reproduce the characteristic Russian monotone quite accurately. Podkolyosin's turbid deliberations at the outset are deftly transmitted by singsong oscillations between a “reciting tone” of sorts (E/E ♭), which takes the strings of unaccented syllables, and a higher pitch area (A/A ♭) that alternates with the lower pitch on accented syllables. Where irony is called for (*zhiviyosh', zhiviyosh'*), the contour of this oscillation is widened to a grotesque seventh. The intonational model is always provided by the spoken language, and melodic contour is dictated by the type of utterance—declarative, interrogative, exclamatory—that the music must reflect.

One of Musorgsky's most striking “antimusicalisms” is the harmonic ambience. In this musical prose, tonal motion is kept purposefully static and ambiguous for long stretches, since functional harmony tends to periodize phrase structure. There is no key signature anywhere in *Marriage*, and tonal ambiguity is maintained by means of an unprecedented reliance on augmented and diminished intervals, with chords of corresponding intervallic content in the accompaniment. These, of course, are the “unvocal” intervals shunned in lyrical melodies, hence all the more desirable if lyricism is to be renounced and the illusion of “ordinary speech” sustained despite the use of fixed pitch.

But needless to say, there is nothing ordinary about such music. It is a highly distinctive medium, and Musorgsky was certainly its master. Within his own domain he had evolved a very sophisticated and elegant technique. After setting a few scenes from *Marriage* (in Russian, *Zhenit'ba*) he was ready for a task that would put to a worthy test his conviction that his new style could produce a music of unprecedented moral and intellectual force, “capturing the heart and catching the thinking faculties in a vise.” The worthiest task of all would surely be a historical drama with a national theme; and this, too, reflected conditions in Russia.

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## Notes:

(1) Musorgsky to V. V. Nikolsky, 15 August 1868; in M. P. Musorgsky, *Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. I, eds. Mikhail Pekelis and Alexandra Orlova, (Moscow: Muzika, 1971), pp. 102–103.

(2) Musorgsky to N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov, 30 July 1868; Musorgsky, *Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. I, p. 102.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Modest Musorgsky

Boris Godunov

## ART AND AUTOCRACY

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Historical dramas were popular everywhere in the nineteenth century; the Parisian *grand opéra*, as we know, consisted of virtually nothing but. Artistic representations of history in all media had a special importance in Russia, however, and a special cachet. That was because by the latter half of the nineteenth century Russia was the only remaining autocratic state in Europe. Everywhere else monarchies had been at least to some degree constitutionalized, but in Russia the tsar's authority was absolute, neither fettered by law nor shared with a parliament. Public debate of social and political issues was more severely circumscribed than anywhere else, and liberal opinion usually had to be camouflaged in what was called “Aesopian” language. That is, it had to take place in the guise of scholarship or art, on the understanding that sophisticated readers would interpret such writings, objects, and performances metaphorically, alive to its potential contemporary relevance.

As a result, artists and scholars in Russia felt a greater obligation than anywhere else to invest their work with content “worthy of the attention of a thinking man,”<sup>3</sup> to quote the radical writer Nikolai Chernishevsky (1828–89), an expert Aesopian (but not always a successful one: he spent many years of his life in prison or exile). Nowhere else was the content of art ever subjected to such scrutiny, both by official censors on the lookout for subversion, and by subversive thinkers on the lookout for ammunition. Nowhere was art so fraught with subtexts, nowhere was it invested with greater civic or social value, nowhere was it practiced with greater risk or greater zeal. Nowhere was there less interest in art's purely “decorative” role. Russian esthetics tended toward the ethical, even the “utilitarian.” Art was valued to the extent that it was seen to do good. And so it was very difficult if not impossible to say whether the subtexts and the values that engaged “the thinking man” were drawn out of the artworks in which they were spotted, or were being read into them. Interpretation is always a two-way street. In Russia it became a teeming thoroughfare.

This set of values disrupted the nexus of “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful” on which romanticism was founded, and greatly magnified the general drift away from romanticism toward realism, which regarded beauty with skepticism. (To make things look beautiful was usually to lie; nothing good could come of that.) It gave “outsider” artists like Musorgsky, already predisposed toward a countercultural, “avant-garde” posture, a greatly empowering sense of mission. His artistic and esthetic coming-of-age, moreover, coincided with one of the most permissive moments in Russian intellectual history: the aftermath of the disastrous Crimean War, and the upheavals wrought by the emancipation of the serfs (Russian peasants bound by feudal law to work the estates of landowners as chattels; Musorgsky's own family was one of the many petty aristocratic clans that were ruined by the emancipation). To curb social unrest and maintain the good will of the educated classes, or intelligentsia, Russian censorship was significantly relaxed in the 1860s and 1870s.

Musorgsky's letters began filling up with memorable slogans. He became, as one critic eventually dubbed him, the “thinking realist of the Russian operatic stage.”<sup>4</sup> To a friend he exclaimed, “the past in the present—there's my task!”<sup>5</sup> In so saying, he explicitly embraced the “Aesopian” cause and implicitly acknowledged that he had evolved his radical new style for its sake.

The recipient of this avowal, a history teacher named Vladimir Nikolsky, supplied Musorgsky with the ideal subject on which to exercise his skills: *Boris Godunov*, a fairly old (1825) but little-known play by Alexander Pushkin, composed in deliberate imitation of Shakespeare's “histories,” and of *Henry IV* in particular. Like Shakespeare's King Henry, with his famous soliloquy, “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,” Boris Godunov was a troubled ruler. According to widely accepted (but now refuted) tradition, Boris had ascended to the Russian throne in 1598 by

having the legitimate heir, the nine-year-old Tsarevich Dmitry (youngest son of Ivan the Terrible), murdered. Tormented both by his conscience and by a pretender to the throne who claimed to be the risen Dmitry, Boris undergoes a steady decline, throughout the opera, to an early death, even as chaos tragically envelops Russia.

Immediately Pushkin's play became a covert treatise on kingship and legitimacy, dangerous subjects to raise within the borders of an absolute monarchy. If it was still little known in 1868, that was because until 1866 it had languished under the censor's ban, and was as yet unperformed. That did not faze Musorgsky in the slightest, even though censorship restrictions on operas were even more stringent than those on plays, and included one proviso that would seem to doom the project from the start: according to law, no Russian ruler could be portrayed in the servile act of singing before an audience.

The composer's antiprofessional attitude insulated him against such practical considerations, and this play had everything he needed: the same "Shakespearean" mixture of poetry and prose, tragedy and comedy, that had attracted Verdi; a wide range of character types from noble to beggar, to be characterized by distinctively musicalized speech; a large role for the crowd, which could (in unprecedented fashion) be treated as naturalistically as the soloists, thus advancing the realist program "toward new shores,"<sup>6</sup> to quote another Musorgskian slogan (for like any "scientist," Musorgsky was a firm believer in technological progress).

He never noticed, at first, that there were hardly any female characters, or that Pushkin had treated the one character who might have been suitable for a prima donna role in sketchy fashion and never provided her with a proper love scene. Indeed, Musorgsky cut her out of the opera altogether, because the one drawback Pushkin's play presented was its length. The composer intended to set it verbatim, as he had *Marriage* (or Dargomizhsky *The Stone Guest*), but unlike those, Pushkin's was a full-evening's spectacle. If set to music as it stood, it would have rivaled Wagner's *Ring*. It had to be radically scaled down.

Musorgsky retained two scenes just as Pushkin had written them, and placed them side by side for maximum "Shakespearean" contrast. One took place in a monastery where the monk Grishka Otrepyev, egged on by Pimen, a chronicler who reveals to him Boris's criminal illegitimacy, hatches his plan to topple the tsar by becoming a pretender. It is cast in Shakespearean poetry: blank (that is, unrhymed) iambic pentameter, a new meter for the Russian language, and one that maintained a lofty cadence without sounding "artificial." The other scene set verbatim was one that took place in an inn near the Lithuanian border, where Grishka, posing as Dmitry and accompanied by a pair of roistering monks modeled on Shakespeare's Falstaff, barely escapes capture. It is a comic scene, cast in prose, and therefore a Musorgskian must. For the rest, as if cutting the Gordian knot, Musorgsky simply threw out every scene in which the title character failed to appear, then regrouped and conflated what remained. Almost every line of the opera's text came from Pushkin, but less than half of Pushkin was used: it was the truth and (pretty much) nothing but the truth, so to speak, but not the whole truth.

To give an idea of Musorgsky's *Boris* at its poetic and prosaic extremes, we can compare two starkly contrasting scenes in which Boris confronts the crowd. The first, the most famous in the opera, is the second scene of the prologue, the so-called Coronation Scene. Its text consists of a single speech for the title character, set off by one of Musorgsky's few additions to Pushkin's script: a choral procession, sung to the tune (and most of the words) of an old Russian folk song. The song is there, of course, to lend an authentic period flavor to a scene of public ritual, and also because more traditional theorists of realist esthetics (including Chernishevsky, who wrote a treatise on the subject) cited folk song rather than speech as the "natural model" for music.<sup>7</sup> But Musorgsky's attitude toward this sort of verisimilitude was actually rather lax compared with his exacting standards of fidelity to the patterns of speech. On this level it was enough for him to conform to his audience's casual expectations rather than chart new ground.





fig. 12-3 *Boris Godunov*, Act III, scene 2 (“Death of Boris”): Martti Talvela on the throne in the title role with set by Ming Cho Lee (Metropolitan Opera, New York, 1974).

The tune he used was famous—not least, ironically enough, because Beethoven had used it in a quartet dedicated to Count Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador in Vienna, who had given Beethoven a folk song anthology to mine for the purpose. The song from that collection (first published in 1790) to which both Beethoven and Musorgsky had recourse is shown in Ex. 12-2. The words—“As to thee, God in heaven, there is glory, let there be glory to the Tsar”—clearly recommended themselves as Coronation fodder. And yet anyone who really knew folklore (as Musorgsky, despite his reputation as a “nationalist,” did not!) would have known from the heading in Ex. 12-2 that the song was a Yuletide song, not a coronation anthem, and would have known from the very word that caught Musorgsky’s eye—*Slava* (Glory)—that it was a song meant to accompany a girls’ fortune-telling game.

ex. 12-2 *Slava*, original folk melody (from Nikolai Lvov and Johann Pratsch, *Ruskiye narodniye pesni*, 1790)

It would be worse than pedantic to accuse Musorgsky of an error here. The knowledge that it takes to spot it is mere

“book learning”; a more authentic original might well have been less “legible” to the audience as an emblem of Boris's power, representing the zenith from which he will spend the rest of the opera falling. Far more important to Musorgsky was the declamatory realism that informs the brief central monologue, for this was, according to his theory, the very crux of dramatic truth. The broad features of Podkolyosin's comic recitative, as we observed them in Ex. 12-1, are all in place. The range has been much widened, however; upbeats are sometimes lengthened to full-beat quarter notes; and the use of consonant melodic leaps in place of Podkolyosin's augmented and diminished intervals “lyricalize” the utterance. These departures from the conversational norm are admitted in order to elevate Boris's diction to the level of tragic eloquence; he assumes, as it were, the emotionally exalted tone that Russians actually adopt, even in casual or domestic surroundings, when they recite poetry.

The composer-critic César Cui, also a “kuchkist” (member of the *moguchaya kuchka*, or “mighty band,” around Balakirev), christened this style “melodic recitative” in his newspaper reviews.<sup>8</sup> It is still classifiable as recitative because of its strict one-note-per-syllable declamation, its abundance of short repeated notes, its faithful mirroring of the intonational contour of the spoken language, and (beyond the two opening phrases) its absence of melodic repetitions, so that its shape is wholly dependent on that of the text. The poetry is the mistress, as Monteverdi would have said, the music the handmaiden. But each melodic phrase has “song potential”; one can easily imagine its development into an arioso.

The harmonization is deliberately archaic, “modal.” Halfway through (Ex. 12-3) the key signature is “cleared”; at m. 18, the tone centers become difficult to identify in terms of functional harmony. Is Boris's first line (*Teper' poklonimsya...*, “Now let us bow down”) centered on A? Then why does it end on B? Is the mode “Aeolian,” as the little progression before Boris's entry seems to suggest with its minor V chord? Then what is the status of the F#? Part of an applied dominant to G? But what is the status of G? Or is the mode “Dorian”? Even within a tonal idiom as resolutely diatonic as this one it is possible to make radical departures from functional norms to evoke “otherness” (another time, another place), yet do it with “realistic” (albeit imaginary) specificity.

Te-per' po - klo-nim-sya po - chi - yu-shchim vsa - sti - te-lyam Ro - si - i.

A tam - szi - vat' na - rod na pit, vskh et bo -

yz. do mi-shche-go slep - tsu; vsem vol'-niy vkhod. vse — go - sti do - ro - gi - ye!

ex. 12-3 Modest Musorgsky *Boris Godunov*, Coronation Scene, Boris's monologue

## Notes:

- (3) Nikolai G. Chernyshevsky, "The Aesthetic Relation of Art to Reality" (1855), in N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), p. 379.
- (4) Hermann Laroche (German Larosh), "Mislyashchiy realist v russkoy opere," *Golos* (St. Petersburg), 13 February 1874.
- (5) Musorgsky to V. V. Stasov, 13 June 1872; Musorgsky, *Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. I, p. 132.
- (6) Musorgsky to V. V. Stasov, 18 October 1872; *Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. I, p. 141.
- (7) See R. Taruskin, "Realism as Preached and Practiced: The Russian *Opéra dialogué*," *Musical Quarterly* LVI (1970): 434-37.
- (8) See César Cui, "Operniy sezon v Peterburge" (1864); in Cui, *Izbranniyе stat'i* (Leningrad: Muzgiz, 1952), p. 36.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Liszt: Symphonic poems

Mussorgsky: Music

# STALEMATE AND SUBVERSION

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The most radically “realistic” harmonic effect of all is the one with which the scene opens, already quoted in Ex. 10-20 for comparison with Wagner's harmony. The stage direction specifies a “solemn peal of bells,” and that is what the lengthy orchestral prelude depicts. It consists of just two chords, both of them describable in common-practice terms as dominant-sevenths with their roots on A  $\flat$  and D respectively. The common practice description is quite misleading, however, since neither of them ever resolves to the implied tonic (respectively D  $\flat$  and G). Nor, once their oscillation really gets going, do we even expect them to do so; for the oscillation emphasizes another relationship, namely their shared tritone (C and F  $\sharp$  G  $\flat$ ). The two tritones, the one they share and the one their roots describe, arrest or neutralize their functional tendency.

It is not difficult to trace this progression, in concept, back to its source in Liszt's experiments with circles of major and minor thirds (see chapter 8). A tritone, after all, is equivalent to two minor thirds; Musorgsky's progression could be viewed as a sampling from the Lisztian one. As a matter of fact, Liszt's *Orpheus* (Symphonic Poem No. 4, 1854) begins with the very progression Musorgsky has borrowed: a dominant seventh on E  $\flat$ , drawn out long by means of the “title character's” harp arpeggios, followed by one on A (Ex. 12-4). Liszt follows this opening pair, however, with another dominant seventh on C, as if splitting the difference between the opening pair, and maintaining a forward-moving harmonic drive.

Andante moderato

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Andante moderato". It consists of three systems of music, each with a piano (p) part on the upper staff and a harp part on the lower staff. The piano part begins with a series of sustained chords, while the harp part features arpeggiated figures. The tempo is marked "Andante moderato".



**ex. 12-4 Franz Liszt, *Orpheus*, opening**

Musorgsky's progression produces no motion forward, but a stalemate. He shapes the passage in which it occurs by rhythmic rather than harmonic means: at first by surface diminutions, then by doubling the harmonic rhythm, both of them devices actually copied from bell-ringing techniques. Then the whole thing is repeated with the position of the two chords reversed (but since they are functionally undifferentiated, their reversed positions make no difference to the character of the progression and can easily pass unnoticed by the listener). All he can do to bring the second passage to an end is drown it out with the heavy percussion. There is no possible functional cadence.

And that is why Musorgsky's progression, though much simpler in concept than the famous opening of *Tristan und Isolde*, was in fact far more subversive of tonal practice than Wagner's (just as Liszt's practice, as noted in chapter 10, was potentially more "radical" than his son-in-law's). However ingenious and sophisticated Wagner's usage (and there is no denying that Wagner gave his innovatory idea far more resourceful and sophisticated treatment than Musorgsky could hope to do), it remained within the system of functional relations. Musorgsky's was at the limits of the system, and perhaps beyond it. In the years to come, younger Russian composers would build on Musorgsky's idea in such a way as to circumvent major/minor tonality altogether. In that way, Russia did succeed in "breaking free of Europe," and later exerting a satisfying counter-influence on "the West."

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Boris Godunov

## CRISIS

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The complementary scene to the Coronation in *Boris Godunov* is the stark “Scene at St. Basil's Shrine” at the other end of the opera, in which Boris again confronts the crowd, but now a starving crowd that is no longer acclaiming him but cursing him and demanding bread. At the beginning of the scene they discuss the pretender's progress, and the anathema that is being pronounced on him inside the church on Red Square, where they have gathered. Then there is a bit of byplay for a group of boys tormenting a religious mendicant (called the *yurodiviŭ*, or Holy Fool), who croons a little song that degenerates into recitative as the accompanying harmony descends in a strange mudslide by semitones. The boys steal his penny. At this point Boris and his retinue come out of the church, and the *yurodiviŭ* confronts him, asking that he have the boys who vexed him killed, just like the tsarevich. When Boris has recoiled in horror and left the stage, the *yurodiviŭ* resumes his chaotic song, turning it into a lament for suffering Russia. The scene grinds to a baleful halt on an unprecedented unresolved dominant in the bass.

It is a searing moment, this scene of “speaking truth to power,” and Musorgsky must surely have been counting on the audience to “read” it in terms of its subversive contemporary relevance. In its “thematization” of truth, the great cause for which realist art was prepared to sacrifice all beauty of form, the scene can be deemed an emblem of its moment in history, and Musorgsky did everything he could to accentuate its blunt primitiveness, which he regarded as the source of its power. Except for the *yurodiviŭ*'s song, which begins in the manner of a folk tune but dissolves into slime, and the choral song of supplication that greets the tsar, the whole scene is carried along in prose recitative, even the long choral “discussion” in which the various sections of the chorus confront and react to one another, and to the peasant Mityukha, whom they are questioning, like individual characters.

Boris's own role in the scene is very short but telling (Ex. 12-5). His manner of declamation has changed. All of his upbeats are now carried by eighth notes rather than quarters—a sure sign of prose setting, and a clue that the character's stature has been diminished. All in all, the Scene at St. Basil's Shrine, completed “during the night of May 21–22 1869” according to a note on the autograph vocal score, is the most extreme and concentrated dose of serious musical realism ever to be administered during the nineteenth century. But to say that is misleading, for the scene was never performed during Musorgsky's lifetime, nor published until 1926, two years before its public premiere. It was dropped in the course of revising the score in 1870–72, after the opera had been rejected for staging by the Russian imperial theaters.

The rejection might have been predicted, but it was not an ideological rejection. The review committee comprised musicians only, and the single reason given for turning the opera down was the lack of a prima donna role. It was easily supplied, since Pushkin had included some scenes showing the pretender's progress in Poland, where the Princess Marina Mnizsek seduced him and co-opted his campaign at the behest of the Jesuits. Musorgsky expanded their “scene at the fountain” into the required love duet, and even added a scene in Marina's dressing room to give her a solo aria.

That made the opera more conventional, far less a “realist” manifesto. The legend has arisen that Musorgsky had to revise the opera against his will in order to make it palatable not only to musical but to political authorities. (It is a legend all the more readily believed in the twentieth century, when Russian artists were often forced to make highly publicized compromises with a totalitarian regime.) In fact, Musorgsky went so much further than required in his revisions that duress cannot account for them all. They went to the root of his dramatic and musical conception, something in which the bureaucrats vetting the libretto's content took little interest.

The Completion      Boris      The Simpleton

O - c-m on - pla - det! Mol -

dub - le - et - aya - li - ko - pe - yech - ka, ve - li - ka - ih - za - re - at!

kak - v' - za - v - at - ml - en - ko - go - to - re - vne - a. Mol - ca - du - tak!

Shtu - ti - to - du - ra - ba      Na -

tan - ti...      Ma - li' - za - mri - ya - ba - shu - ni - ty!

**ex. 12-5 Modest Musorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, Scene at St. Basil's Shrine**

In order to create the “Polish” scenes, Musorgsky had to add a great deal of his own to Pushkin's text. But then he went back and de-Pushkinized a great deal more. In particular he took out the Scene at St. Basil's Shrine, which followed Pushkin, and replaced it with another scene, with which he eventually ended the opera, in which the crowd is shown in active revolt against Boris—something far more potentially subversive than the deleted scene, and quite contrary to Pushkin's view of history. The only part of the original scene that survived was the episode of the *yurodiviy* and the boys, and the concluding song of woe, which now ends the entire opera (on the dominant!) to harrowing effect.

If the opera's revision is assumed to have been an ideological one, these facts are simply paradoxical. A more plausible explanation for the replacement is found in a letter the composer sent a friend in July 1870, while the opera was in limbo between submission and rejection. He had played it through for a select group of friends and sympathizers, and was disconcerted at its reception: “As regards the peasants in *Boris*,” he wrote, “some found them to be *bouffe*(!), while others saw tragedy.” (The parenthetical exclamation point is the composer's.)<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the composer found that in the eyes—or rather, ears—of his audience, even a handpicked audience,

prose recitative ineluctably spelled “comedy,” its traditional medium, however tragic the actual content of the drama. Musorgsky's first impulse to revise his opera came not from the demands of the imperial theaters, but from his own private experience of communications-failure. It led him to reconsider his whole operatic technique, indeed his entire esthetic stance, with an eye toward clarifying the *genre* of the opera—that is, toward making decisive the contrast between what was “*bouffe*” and what was not, and generally toward elevating the tone of the opera to the level of tragedy, Shakespearean or otherwise. The lesson we may draw from his experience is that realism = comedy and comedy = realism, and that realism, like comedy, entails a lowering of tone. All of this, of course, is saying no more than what common sense already knows—that tragedy, like all beautiful or uplifting (“high”) art, is a lie. Fully to disenchant or disillusion art in the name of literal or “scientific” truth risks destroying its power.

Thus the motivation for the most telling revision of all. In order to restore Tsar Boris to his full tragic dimension on the operatic stage, Musorgsky turned his back on all his prized theories and (as he put it in a letter to his best friend, the arts publicist Vladimir Stasov) “perpetrated” a traditional aria for the title character.<sup>10</sup> What in the original version had been a naturalistic recitative setting of Pushkin's counterpart to Shakespeare's great “Uneasy lies the head” soliloquy, cast amid a tissue of leitmotives, became after revision a lyrical outpouring in the grand manner, for which purpose Musorgsky borrowed a broad melody from an old abandoned opera project on the subject of Gustave Flaubert's “orientalist” novel *Salammô*, and gave it a spacious development not only in the orchestra but in the voice as well.

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## Notes:

(9) Musorgsky to Rimsky-Korsakov, 23 July 1870; *Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. I, p. 117.

(10) Musorgsky to V. V. Stasov, 10 August 1871; *Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. I, p. 122.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

Realism (Verismo)

Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky

Eugene Onegin

## CODES

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Musorgsky's extremist realism was something that eventually had to be recoiled from because of its literalistic concept of truth—truth to empirical experience, to the conditions of daily life, without possibility of compromise. Art, the composer learned, lives in the compromise. It trades not in verbatim transcripts of existence but in metaphors. The Russian composer who understood this best was Chaikovsky. In *Eugene Onegin*, an opera based, like *Boris Godunov*, on a work by Pushkin, Chaikovsky created the other great monument of Russian realism in music.

But since the literary model in this case was not a Shakespearean historical drama but a novel of (almost) contemporary Russian society and mores, “monument” is not quite the right word. Its scale is small. Originally intended for performance by the Moscow Conservatory's opera workshop, it makes modest technical demands. Its remarkable emotional potency comes from its canny manipulation of symbols that interrelate genres of popular art with their associated social milieus. If Chaikovsky was the “great poet of everyday life,” and “a genius of emotion,” to quote two critical comments that have stuck to him, it was not because he alone found poetry in everyday life (every novelist does that) or because he was a genius at having emotions (we're all geniuses at that). It was because he knew how to channel life and emotion with great power and precision through coded conventional forms.

To describe him thus somewhat belies his reputation as a romantic artist, for romanticism distrusted conventions and sought to portray people (especially romantic artists) as uniquely free and spontaneous beings. Chaikovsky, as a realist, viewed people primarily in social contexts, as did Pushkin, and drew his power of expression from irony: that is, he took great delight in showing to what extent the emotions we subjectively experience as our own unique spontaneous experience are in fact mediated by social codes and standards of group behavior.

Pushkin's novel is famously short on plot. The title character, a dandy from the city, meets Tatyana, an openhearted country girl; she is smitten, he brushes her off; six years later he is smitten, she is married. There is also a subplot about the fop's friend, a country squire who dabbles in poetry and fancies himself a uniquely sensitive soul, and the country girl's sister, a shallow beauty with whom the poetaster is in love. Fop and friend fight a pointless duel over the sister and friend is (for no good reason) killed. It is the highpoint of the action in both novel and opera, but—another irony—it is only a distraction from the main concern, suggesting that the essence of life is not in dramatic events but in the small daily round, and that we learn to function happily in the social world not by giving our emotions free reign but by learning to sublimate them in conventional behavior. Once we have been successfully “socialized,” our feelings are never entirely spontaneous but always mediated by the conventions and constraints, as often learned from literature as from “life,” to which we have adapted. Therein lie both the tragedy (the constraints) and the salvation (the adaptation) of human society.

Chaikovsky embodied this worldly, unromantic but not unconsoling message in his opera by abstracting its musical idiom from the characteristic melodic and harmonic turns that identified the music of its time and place. In a book called *Musical Form as Process*, the Russian musicologist Boris Asafyev coined the word “intonation” (*intonatsiya*) to denote these characteristic stylistic components. Linguists would call them “morphemes,” minimal units that convey meaning within a conventional sign-system. Chaikovsky used these units to “sing” his opera in the musical language of its—its, not his—time. The period flavor that pervades the music becomes the carrier of Pushkin's novelistic irony.

The most conspicuous period “intonation” or morpheme in *Eugene Onegin* is the characteristic use of melodic sixths

in shaping melodies, either as direct skips or as filled-in contours. The interval abounded in the so-called “household romance” (*bītovoy romans*) of the 1830s and 1840s, songs composed not for the professional recital stage but for sale as sheet music for amateur performance at home. The outstanding composer of these sentimental popular songs at the time of *Eugene Onegin's* action was Alexander Varlamov (1801–48). Ex. 12-6 contains two of his most famous melodies, one in the major, the other in the minor, with their constituent sixths bracketed for eventual comparison with Chaikovsky's music.

The first music sung in *Eugene Onegin* is an imitation Varlamov romance by Chaikovsky, sung offstage by Tatyana and her sister to an early lyric poem by Pushkin called “The Poet” (Ex. 12-7a). At the end of the verse it incorporates a reference to a tune already heard at the beginning of the opera's prelude (Ex. 12-7b), which will function throughout the drama as Tatyana's leitmotif. It, too, outlines a descending melodic sixth, showing the first stage of the interval's abstraction from its “natural habitat” in Varlamov (or imitation Varlamov) into the musical ambience that suffuses and symbolizes the lives of Chaikovsky's characters.

Umerenno skoro (Allegro moderato)

mp N.B. N.B.

Ne shey tī mne, ma - tush - ka, kras - niy sa - ra - fan,

N.B. N.B.

ne vkho - di, ro - di - ma - ya, po - pu - stu - viz' - yan.

ex. 12-6a Alexander Varlamov, *Krasniy sarafan* (romance)



Umere no skoro (Allegro moderato)

*p* N.B. N.B.

Na za - re t - ye - yo ne bu - di,

*p*

N.B.

na za - re o - na slad - ko tak spit;

ex. 12-6b Alexander Varlamov, *Na zarye ti eyo ne budi* (romance)

6 TATIANA

Sli - kha - li! vi za ro - shchey glas noch - noy pev - tsa lub -

OLGA

Sli - kha - li! vi za ro - shchey glas noch -

*p*

9 T. vi, pev - tsa svo - ey pe - cha - li! Kog - da pol - ya vchas ut - ren - ni mol -

O. noy pev - tsa lub - vi, pev - tsa pe - cha - li! Kog - da pol - ya e - shchē mol -



12

T. *cha - li, svi - re - li zvuk u - ni - liy i pros - roy Sli - kha - li.*

O. *cha - li, svi - re - li zvuk u - ni - liy i pros - roy sli - kha - li' vi?*

13

T. *vi? Sli - kha - li' vi? Sli - kha - li' vi? Sli - kha - li'*

O. *Sli - kha - li' vi? Sli - kha - li' vi? Sli - kha - li' vi?*

14

T. *rog - da svi - re - li zvuk u - ni - liy : pros - roy, sli - kha - li' vi.*

O. *Sli - kha - li' vi rog - da svi - re - li zvuk u - ni - liy : pros - roy, sli - kha - li'*

21

T. sli - kha - lil' vi, sli - kha - lil' vi, sli - kha - lil' vi?

O. vi? Sli - kha - lil' vi, sli - kha - lil' vi, sli - kha - lil' vi?

**TATIANA:** Have you not heard the forest nightingale?  
 All through the night, he sang of love and sorrow;  
 when dawning light foretold a new tomorrow,  
 a shepherd's flute rehearsed his simple tale.  
 Have you not heard? Have you not heard?  
 Have you not heard? Have you not heard  
 the song that echoed in the dawn, the shepherd's tale?  
 Have you not heard? Have you not heard?  
 Have you not heard, have you not heard?

**OLGA** Have you not heard the forest nightingale?  
 He sang all night of love and sorrow;  
 when dawning light foretold a new tomorrow,  
 a shepherd's flute rehearsed his simple tale.  
 Have you not heard? Have you not heard?  
 Have you not heard? Have you not heard  
 the nightingale that sang his song  
 and in the dawn the shepherd's tale?  
 Have you not heard? Have you not heard?  
 Have you not heard, have you not heard?

ex. 12-7a Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *Eugene Onegin*, beginning of Act I (first verse of "Slikhal li vi" with sixths labeled)

N.B.

ex. 12-7b Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *Eugene Onegin*, Tatyana's leitmotif

The full meaning of Chaikovsky's sixths is revealed when Tatyana has her most private and personal moment onstage, the so-called Letter Scene, in which she recklessly pours out her heart on paper to the object of her infatuation. One of the most extended arias in all of Russian opera, it is actually a string of four romances linked by recitatives:

- 1. *Puskai pogibnu ya* (Even if it means I perish): Allegro non troppo, D ♭ major, da capo form (eighteen measures).
- 2. *Y ka vam pishu* (I'm writing you): Moderato assai quasi Andante, D minor, strophic form (fifty-six

measures, including recits)

- 3. *Net, nikomu na svete ne otdala bī serdtse ya* (No, there is no one else on earth to whom I'd give my heart): Moderato, C major, (accompaniment in ), da capo form (eighty measures, including recits and transitions)
- 4. *Kto tī: moy angel-li khranitel'?* (Who art thou—my guardian angel?): Andante, D ♭ major, , da capo form (75 measures, 129 counting orchestral introduction and orchestral/vocal coda)

The resonances between the music of this scene and the duet-romance at the outset are many, conspicuous, and calculated: they are the resonances between Tatyana's inner and outer worlds. Both incorporate Tatyana's leitmotif (in the Letter Scene it comes in the middle of the last romance), but the leitmotif is already a bearer of a more generic resonance embodied in the melodic sixth. As Ex. 12-8 illustrates, the role of Tatyana (with that of Lensky, the doomed poetaster) is perhaps the “sixthiest” in all of opera.

N.B.                      N.B.

Pu-skai po - gib - nu ya  
Even if it means I perish ...

ex. 12-8a Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *Eugene Onegin*, sixths in Tatyana's letter scene, beginning of first romance

N.B.

Za-chem, za-chem vī po-se - ti - li nas?  
Why, oh why did you visit us?

ex. 12-8b Tatyana's letter scene, second romance, beginning of second strophe

N.B.                      N.B.

Net, ni - ko - mu na sve - te ne ot - da - la bī serd-tsa ya!  
No, there is no one else on earth to whom I'd give my heart!

ex. 12-8c Tatyana's letter scene, beginning of third romance

The image shows two systems of musical notation for piano. The first system consists of three measures. Above the first measure is 'N.B.' with a star symbol. Above the second measure is 'N.B.' with a star symbol. Above the third measure is 'N.B.' with a star symbol. The second system consists of two measures. Above the first measure is 'N.B.' with a star symbol. Above the second measure is 'N.B.' with a star symbol. The music is in 2/4 time, key of B-flat major, and includes dynamics like 'p' and 'espress.'

**ex. 12-8d Tatyana's letter scene, introduction to fourth romance**

In Ex. 12-8 d, melodic sixths are nested within a harmonic idiom that displays a very telling “sixthiness” of its own: the constant use of the minor submediant  $\flat$  VI (for “flat sixth”; of course you'll use the flat sign) as alternate harmonic root or tone center. As we have known since the time of Schubert, this alternation can take the form of an immediate local progression, as shown, or it can be projected in the form of a subsidiary key governing large spans within the tonal structure. The orchestral prelude to act I of *Eugene Onegin* sets the precedent: its development section is all within the key of the submediant, which resolves to the dominant by way of “retransition” through a portentous descending semitone in the bass. In the Letter Scene, the whole vocal coda (*Konchayu! strashno perechest'*, “Finished! I dare not reread”) is cast within the key of the starred chord in Ex. 12-8d, spelled enharmonically as A major.

The melodic-harmonic idiom is only one of many genre resonances that tie Tatyana's Letter Scene to the opening duet and thence to the whole sentimental world of the Russian romance. The harp-heavy orchestration of the first two sections is another. But the harp does more than evoke the sounds of domestic music-making. The harp chords that punctuate the woodwind phrases in Ex. 12-9, the actual letter-writing ritornello (at the ends of mm. 2, 4, 6, and 8), take their place within a marvelously detailed sound-portrait of the lovesick girl, in which Chaikovsky shows himself an adept practitioner of Mozart's methods of “body portraiture”—the realism of an earlier day—as outlined in the famous letter from Mozart to his father about *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. As in the case of Mozart's Belmonte or Osmin, we “see” and “feel” Tatyana—her movements, her breathing, her heartbeat—in her music. This iconicity shows off music's advantages especially well: what the novelist or poet must describe, the composer (unlike the dramatist, who must depend on the director and the cast) can actually present.

And yet the use of the romance idiom signifies even more than we have noted up to now. It is more than just evocative. It also sets limits on scale—both the formal scale of the aria and the emotional scale of the character. However touching her portrait, Tatyana remains (like all the characters in the opera) the denizen of a realistic novel, not a historical spectacle or a “well-made” romantic drama. Compared with Chaikovsky's grander operas, or even with *Boris Godunov* in its revised form, *Eugene Onegin* exemplifies to excellent advantage the special late-nineteenth-century wedding of melancholy or poignant content and comic form.

Moderato assai quasi Andante (♩ = 84)

ex. 12-9 Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky *Eugene Onegin*, letter scene, "writing music"

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

Drame lyrique

Charles-François Gounod

Jules Massenet

Georges Bizet

## LYRIC DRAMA

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The closest parallels and antecedents to *Eugene Onegin* can be found in France, where a new genre—sometimes rather redundantly called *opéra lyrique* (or *drame lyrique*) after its bastion, the Paris Théâtre Lyrique (opened 1851)—had arisen in more or less conscious opposition to the bloated *grand opéra*, or at least as an alternative to the latter and a challenge to its proud status as the national opera of the French. The Théâtre Lyrique's showpieces were two operas by the prolific Charles-François Gounod (1818–93): *Faust* (1859), after Goethe's famous dramatic poem, and *Roméo et Juliette* (1867) after Shakespeare. As exemplified by Gounod, the genre could be described as a hybrid that retained the accompanied recitatives of the grand opera (albeit tuneful ones), but that cut the musical forms (and, consequently, the characters who express themselves through them) down to comic-opera size. The musical emphasis, like Chaikovsky's, is on characterization through attractive melody reminiscent of “domestic romances” and ballroom dances, rather than impressive musico-dramatic structures.

Thus unlike Boito, whose fame as Verdi's late literary collaborator has eclipsed his reputation as a composer, Gounod made little attempt to embody the metaphysical content of Goethe's poem in his *Faust* opera. Its character as a religious drama of redemption through love is surely respected, but the accent is placed not on the “message” but rather on the emotional lives of the leading man and leading lady. There is no lofty Prologue in Heaven, and Gounod's very unsatanic Méphistophélès is for the most part reduced to a merry puppet master who sings in an appropriately swaggering opera buffa style: his strophic “Calf of Gold” aria in jig time, one of the opera's most popular numbers, is a drinking song in everything but name. The comedization or “lowering” of the role is entirely calculated, and a well-aimed slap at German pretension.

That has not prevented many critics, in thrall to German thinking in its “historicist” phase, from excoriating Gounod for “popularizing” (that is, trivializing) a great play. For Joseph Kerman, Gounod's opera was, “as Wagner observed, the classic case” illustrating the threat an unworthy opera can level at a literary masterpiece. “Goethe's play has given us an adjective, ‘Faustian,’” he wrote, “but the world in which the Faustian spirit strives is entirely dissipated by Gounod's pastel timidities.”<sup>11</sup> The suggestion that the dissipation in question was unintended surely misses the point of *opéra lyrique*.





**fig. 12-4** The French bass Pol Plançon (1851–1914) as Méphistophélès in Gounod's *Faust*, a role with which he was particularly associated.

Pastel shades will not be thought amiss in *Roméo et Juliette*, and the same expert muting of Goethe and Shakespeare can be observed in the work of Gounod's slightly older contemporary Ambroise Thomas (1811–96), whose most successful operas were *Mignon* (1866), after Goethe's romantic novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, and *Hamlet* (1868), written in collaboration with the same team of librettists (Michel Carré and Jules Barbier) as Gounod's *Faust*. Thomas's *Hamlet* ends (timidly? audaciously?) not with the title character's death but with his victory and coronation.

Gounod's and Thomas's heir in the next generation was Jules Massenet (1842–1912), who combined the techniques of *drame lyrique* with the more contemporary and realistic subject matter favored by Bizet, Chaikovsky, and others of his generation. He, too, paid his respects to Goethe (*Werther*, 1892), but his most enduring contribution is *Manon* (1884), after an eighteenth-century novel about rapturous but ultimately disastrous illicit love, *L'histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (1731) by Antoine-François Prévost d'Exiles, known as Abbé Prévost. Under cover of a period setting, the opera treats its subject with a frankness that surpassed that of *La traviata*, prefiguring the naturalism (or verismo) that soon radiated from Italy throughout the world of opera. (In fact the same novel furnished the subject for the first significant opera by Giacomo Puccini, whose works will come into

focus at the end of this chapter.)

Even more at seeming variance with its comic form was the stark horror at the core of Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), after a luridly naturalistic novella of seduction and murder by Prosper Mérimée (1803–70). It was composed, originally with spoken dialogue, for performance at the Théâtre National de l'Opéra Comique, a “family theater” whose codirector, Adolphe de Leuven, resigned rather than present an opera that culminated in a brutal “crime of passion” in which the tenor stabs the soprano in full view of the audience. Some comedy! Even the music gave offense to some, because the popular genres on which its music was based were not those of good French homes, but of vagabonds, gypsies, and others thought socially undesirable.

But of course what gave offense to some was powerfully alluring to others. As the title character's famous *couplets* or strophic song in the form of a Habanera shows (see Ex. 7-8), Bizet's opera drew the connection more strongly than ever between “orientalism”—the musical evocation of what from the audience's perspective were essentially alien or forbidden beings (in this case gypsy girls who worked in a cigarette factory, an only slightly camouflaged “house of ill repute”)—and forthright sex appeal. The Habanera (literally, “Havana song”) was a Cuban import of supposedly Negro origins. Bizet's was a “found object”: a song (*El arreglito*) by Sebastián Yradier (1809–65), a Spanish composer who claimed to have collected it on location, leading Bizet to believe it was a folk song. As we may remember from chapter 7, its descending chromatic scale was a badge worn by “oriental” femmes fatales all over Europe. One could hardly spell things out more plainly than *Carmen* does in her refrain: “If I say I love you, watch out!”



fig. 12-5 Georges Bizet in 1874.

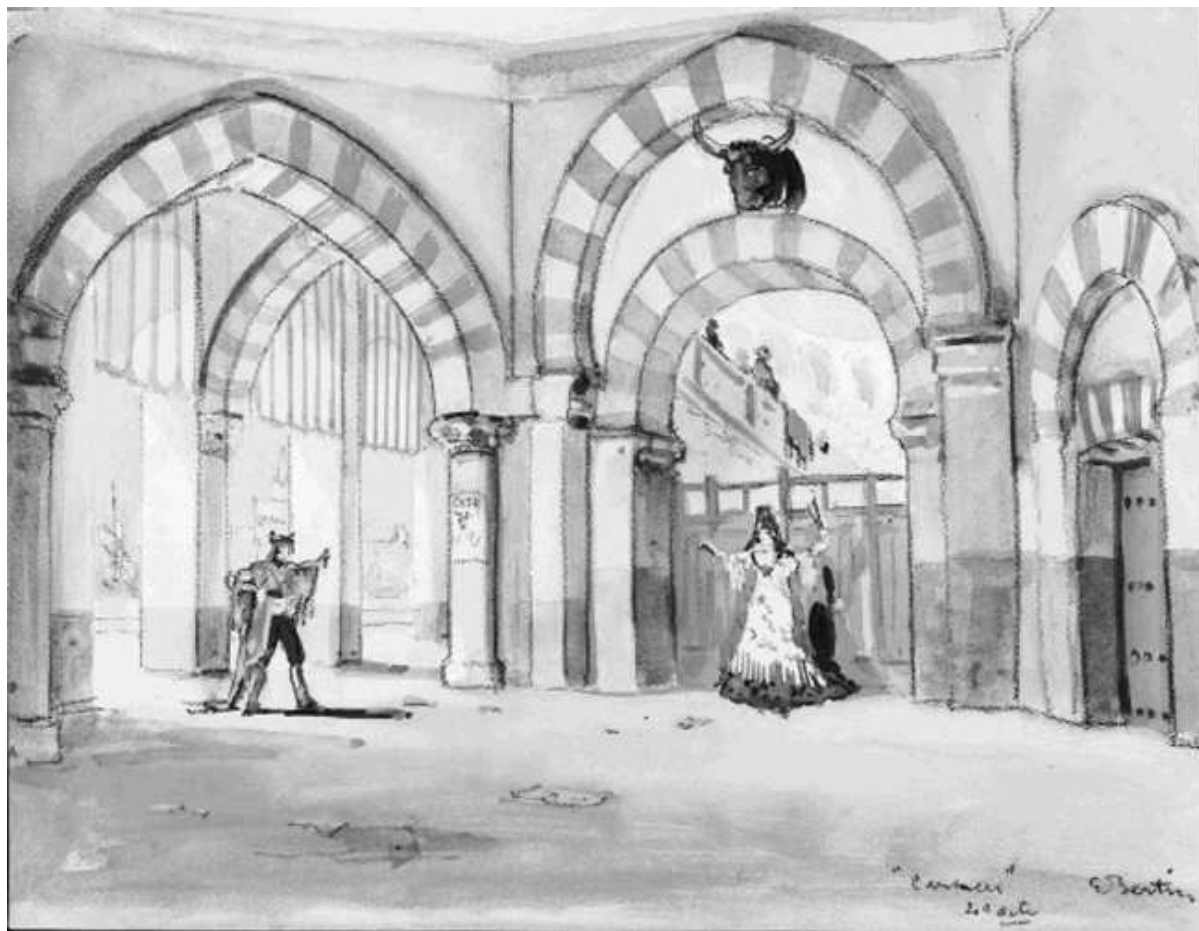


fig. 12-6 Set and costume sketch by Émile Bertin for the last scene in the original production of Bizet's *Carmen*.

In the end, of course, “morality” wins out (and so the opera, for all its brutality and sexuality, has become a family favorite after all). The seductress is killed by her prey, exacting society's revenge. The music powerfully endorses his act, even as it had formerly intensified her dangerous appeal. Nowadays it is as easy to question the justice of the plot's horrific resolution as it is difficult to resist the music's blandishments. As in *Manon* and *La traviata*, a woman whose allure has led a man astray pays with her life. The difference lies in the unflinching portrayal of allure and vengeance alike. Unlike Verdi's *Violetta* or *Manon*, *Carmen* has no “heart of gold”; and she meets a much more violent end.

Bizet's achievement is almost universally regarded as greater than Massenet's. But here is a disquieting thought: does his greater achievement lie in the greater power of his music to subvert? And are there not two subversions: the one by which Don José, a good soldier, is degraded by a sexual obsession set in motion by the Habanera, and the one by which we spectators are finally led to cheer his crime? Both moments in the opera pose old questions—what is the relationship between esthetics and ethics? what should it be?—with new potency.

In all of these effects the music is aided by its colorful popular or “vernacular” base, and, paradoxically, by the comic style, which speeds action and objectifies moments of passion. The most insightful comment on the opera's power, and (implicitly) on the problems it raises, came from Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, who saw in its cleanly articulated forms and dance rhythms a liberation from the Wagnerian spell. It embodied in its pleasant forms a bitterly ironic truth (a “tragic joke”), which Nietzsche located with wonderful precision in the opera's very last line, in which the full horror of the situation is expressed in a beautifully lyrical phrase heavily redolent of popular song (Ex. 12-10):

This music seems perfect to me.... It is precise. It builds, organizes, finishes: thus it constitutes the opposite of

the “infinite melody.” Have more painful tragic accents ever been heard on the stage? How are they achieved? Without grimaces.... Love is translated back into nature. Love as fate, cynical, innocent, cruel, and at bottom the deadly hatred of the sexes! I know no case where the tragic joke that constitutes the essence of love is expressed so strictly, translated with equal terror into a formula, as in Don José’s last cry, which concludes the work—“Yes, *I have killed her/my adored Carmen!*”<sup>12</sup>

Don José

Vous pou - vez m'ar - rê - ter. — C'est moi — qui l'ai tu -

é - el! Ah! Car - men! — ma Car - men — a - do -

(Curtain.)

ré - el!

DON JOSÉ: You can arrest me.  
I'm the one who killed her!  
Ah! Carmen! My adored Carmen!

ex. 12-10 Georges Bizet, *Carmen*, Don José’s last line

## Notes:

(11) Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (rev. ed.; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 226.

(12) Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner* (condensed), trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 157–59.



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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Orphée aux enfers

Johann Strauss II

Waltz

## SATYR PLAYS

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Thus in Wagner's wake, as German opera became ever more apocalyptic (on the way to *Götterdämmerung*), and as grand opera became ever grander (on the way to *Don Carlos* and *Aida*), a contrarian strain began to appear: an opera that cut things down to size in pursuit of human (that is, personal) truth. The inevitable byproduct was a newly farcical and satiric breed of comic opera in which the symbolic butt of humor was opera itself. In a way this was a throwback to the very origins of comic opera, the intermezzi that had functioned as “satyr plays” between the acts of courtly extravaganzas. But the new genre consisted of full-length pieces (albeit modest ones) pitched at a bourgeois public that tended to find opera at once sublime and ridiculous. Giving an outlet to the tendency to mock the genre's ridiculous side—that is, its pretensions—the new genre actually protected the sublimity of the prototype.

The man who crystallized the new genre was Jacques (originally Jacob) Offenbach (1819–80), a German-born Jew whose father, a synagogue cantor, had brought him to Paris at the age of fourteen to perfect his technique as a virtuoso cellist. After some years spent conducting at various Paris theaters he began producing one-act farces, which he first called by the ordinary name *opéras comiques*. Beginning in 1855, he started dubbing them *opérettes*, a term that seems to have been coined by Louis August Joseph Florimond Ronger (1825–92), called Hervé, an organist and singer who in the early 1840s began producing one-act *vaudevilles-opérettes* and *parodies-opérettes* in little boulevard theaters. The term simply means “little opera,” but it stuck to the Hervé-Offenbach genre and came to designate its special brand of frivolous buffoonery.

Offenbach himself reserved the term *opérette* for the one-act type. When he began writing full-evening works he called them *opéra bouffe* (a term that Musorgsky knew, as we have learned from his letter about the “peasants” in *Boris*). As the genre spread to central Europe (particularly Vienna) and England, however, the word operetta served to designate longer works as well. What they all had in common was the compulsion to josh opera, the genre on which operetta was parasitic.





**fig. 12-7** A caricature of Jacques Offenbach surrounded by characters from his three greatest hits: *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858; revised 1874), *Fair Helen* (1864), and *The Grand Duchess of Gérolstein* (1867).

Out of the ninety-eight *opérettes* or *opéras bouffes* that Offenbach churned out in the course of his thirty-three-year career, one stands out as emblematic of the whole genre: *Orphée aux enfers* (“Orpheus in Hades”), his first two-act show, produced in 1858 at Offenbach’s own theater, the *Bouffes-Parisiens*, and later (1874) expanded into a four-act extravaganza. Together with *La belle Hélène* (“Fair Helen of Troy”; 1864), it was his wildest success. The two of them, in their very titles, show to what an extent operetta relied on opera for its basic plots and situations, however twisted in the retelling.

Orpheus was present, we may recall, at the very creation of opera. Several of the earliest *favole in musica*, the “musical tales” that adorned north Italian court festivities in the early seventeenth century, were based on his myth, including Monteverdi’s masterpiece. The Orpheus myth was a myth of music’s ethical power, the supreme article of faith for all serious musicians. Since Monteverdi’s time it had been revived, most famously by Gluck, whenever the need was seen to reassert high musical ideals against frivolous entertainment values.

So there could scarcely have been a more calculated slap at sanctimony (or a more deliberate middle-class slap at aristocratic taste) than an Orpheus opera that was all frivolous excess, asserted in the teeth of high artistic ideals. In Offenbach’s version, Orpheus is a hack violinist whose wife, Eurydice, cannot stand either his music or his dreary personality. She prefers a neighbor, the farmer Aristaeus. To remove his rival from the scene, Orpheus plants snakes in the farmer’s field, but of course it is his wife who gets bitten. Aristaeus reveals himself to be Pluto in disguise. He takes Eurydice, now delighted to be dying, down with him to reign over the underworld. Good riddance, thinks Orpheus, until a character called Public Opinion (standing in for the Greek chorus) comes onstage to persuade him that for the sake of appearances he’d better try and rescue his wife.

In the middle acts there is a subplot involving Jupiter and his attempt, in the guise of a fly, to seduce Eurydice. The traditional story is resumed in the fourth act, which also contains the broadest musical satire. It opens on a Bacchanale, a feast in honor of the god of wine, in the midst of which Orpheus comes to claim Eurydice. Pluto, only too happy to be rid of her (for she has been behaving toward him just as shrewishly as she had toward Orpheus in act 1) lets her go with the standard proviso (the reason for which Pluto says he has forgotten) that Orpheus not look

around at her until they have reached the opposite shore of the river Styx. When it looks as though, egged on by Pluto, Orpheus will succeed, Jupiter hurls a thunderbolt at Orpheus's rear end, causing him involuntarily to turn around. Eurydice is lost to him—and to Pluto as well, as Jupiter transforms her (to her renewed delight) into a Bacchante, a priestess of Bacchus the wine god.

The end of the opera contains the most famous music. At the height of the Bacchanale, Jupiter calls for “a dainty minuet, as in the days of the Sun King.” After a couple of minutes’ minuettling, though, the ballroom explodes spontaneously into what the assembled gods call a “galop infernale,” but which the audience could not help recognizing as a cancan. The fastest of all polka- or quadrille-type ballroom dances, it had come to France from North Africa in the 1830s and had by the 1850s migrated from the ballroom to the dance hall, where lines of girls entertained men with their high kicking and splits, both of them excuses for the display of frilly bloomers and bare legs.

After the cancan, Orpheus approaches, fiddling the familiar strains of Gluck's chaste aria of lament “Che farò senza Euridice,” at the sound of which Eurydice runs for cover. The finale consists of Eurydice's glum submission to Public Opinion, who is heard giving Orpheus his final marching orders, a choral commiseration at the unhappy spouses' reunion, the thunderbolt in the rear (to—what else?—a Meyerbeerian diminished-seventh chord), and Eurydice's song of delight at her new status as Bacchante (and, it goes without saying, novice concubine to Jupiter). This last, preceded by a stunning roulade up to high E, is a reprise of the cancan in which all join in (Ex. 12-11). The curtain, as almost always in an operetta, falls on a general dance. It is that final dance frenzy—the predestined victory of mindless celebration—that validates operetta's claim as the ultimate escapist entertainment of its day. Like the earlier music trances of Schubert they envelop the audience—but in orgiastic exuberance rather than “inward” contemplation. The calculated licentiousness and feigned sacrilege, which successfully baited the stuffer critics, were recognized by all for what they were—a social palliative, the very opposite of social criticism. That is why, in an age when serious art was seriously policed (and nowhere more so than in the France of the despotic if affluent “Second Empire”), the cynical operetta could seemingly get away with anything. The spectacle of the Olympian gods doing the cancan threatened nobody's dignity; all it “said” was that as long as times were good, nobody cared who did what. That is hardly satire, as classically defined. It communicated tolerance, not resentment, of vice.

Eurydice

Ah! ah! ah! Bac -

Tempo I

chas, Mon à - me lé - gi - te, Qui n'a pu se fai - re

rit. a tempo

Au bon-heur sur terre. As-pire à toi, di-vin Bac-chus! Re-çois la pré-

tes-se. Dont la voix sans ces-se Veut chan-ter l'i-vres-se A tes é-lus!

ex. 12-11 Jacques Offenbach, *Orphée aux enfers*, Finale

Even in Russia this was true. The only exception the tsarist autocracy ever made to its monopoly on theaters was for the sake of operetta, deemed a useful public diversion at a time of mounting civic strife. During the 1870s, two private establishments were set up to regale St. Petersburgers with the latest amusements from Paris. The larger of them, the *Teatr-buff* (that is, *Théâtre bouffe*) was able to import productions direct from Paris with the original casts. The protests came only from “thinking realists,” puritanical radicals who were out to change society and did not want it to be diverted. Prince Pyotr Kropotkin, the utopian anarchist, recoiled in horror from what he called the “putrid Offenbachian current” that was “infecting all of Europe” and taking people’s minds off social problems.<sup>13</sup> Musorgsky, surprisingly enough, was an enthusiastic attender—or maybe not so surprisingly: in the Russian context the *Teatr-buff*, as the only theater that was not state-supported, had an antiestablishment cachet that it did not have in Paris.

At any rate, operetta never took hold in Russia as a homegrown thing. Its next great arena was Vienna. And in keeping with its strong association with social dance, it was fitting that its main protagonist there should have been Johann Strauss II (1825–99), the so-called Waltz King, who as the “k.k. Hofballmusikdirektor” (music director of the royal court balls) had long led the city’s foremost dance orchestra.

Just as Offenbach had a forerunner in Hervé, Strauss had one in Franz von Suppé (1819–95), who—in one of those multiethnic tours de force only possible in the polyglot Austro-Hungarian empire—was born in what is now Croatia to a Belgian father and a Czech-Polish mother, and grew up speaking Italian. Suppé was a theatrical professional: that is, he was hired by Vienna’s Theater an der Wien at the age of twenty-five (after ten years of flute-playing in pit orchestras) both to conduct and to furnish overtures and arias on demand for singspiels and farces. (One of the overtures from this period, to a play called *Dichter und Bauer*—in English, *Poet and Peasant*—became a favorite concert curtain-raiser). In the 1850s he began imitating Offenbach’s one-acters, and beginning in 1860 produced “true” Viennese operettas, in the sense that the libretti were not mere adaptations from the French. Again, one—*Leichte Kavallerie* (“Light cavalry”), 1866—bequeathed its overture to the concert repertoire, and a couple of Suppé’s later scores enjoyed good runs—especially *Die schöne Galathee* (“Beautiful Galatea”; 1865), an obvious knock-off from Offenbach’s *La belle Hélène*.

But the Waltz King put him in the shade. Strauss’s third “komische Operette,” *Die Fledermaus* (“The bat”, 1874), composed when he was almost fifty, established him as Offenbach’s only viable rival. Its libretto was adapted from a play by the very team, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, who were responsible for Offenbach’s own *Belle Hélène* (and Bizet’s *Carmen* besides). But *Die Fledermaus* does not even pay lip service to social satire. It is a domestic farce about a rich husband and wife who each try to deceive the other and who find each other out at the end. Minor hypocrisies and lighthearted marital infidelities, it is assumed, are simply the way of the world and the only thing to do is wink

The only real lampoonery is directed, predictably, not at morals but at music. The wife's lover, a tenor, is mistaken for the husband and arrested on an old misdemeanor charge. At the beginning of act III, before all the characters converge on the jail where the plot's tangles are to be sorted out, the tenor's real misdemeanors are committed, when his voice is heard from offstage warbling snatches of his favorite arias (all in Italian, including the one by Wagner). The drunken jailer, overhearing, garbles them all ("La donna è mobile" comes out "Die Donau a Moperle," "The Danube at Moperle," etc.).

The second act, set at a ball given by Orlofsky, a Russian prince, contains more operatic spoofing. Casting the prince, a young rake hopelessly jaded by wealth, as a contralto in trousers was an in-joke for older operagoers who could remember the heroic "musico" roles in Rossini; but the *travesti* role is now more epicene than valiant, in keeping with more modern (that is, "realistic") gender stereotypes. This is the act that reaches its climax in the vertiginous dance without which no operetta was complete. Of course it is a waltz, which screamed "Vienna!" as loudly as the cancan yelled "Paris!" By this time Strauss was no longer writing actual ballroom waltzes, but this one is put together no differently from his famous dance hits such as *An der schönen, blauen Donau* ("The blue Danube"), op. 314 (1867), or *Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald* ("Tales from the Vienna woods"), op. 325 (1868), to name two of the most famous. (Strauss's opus numbers reached almost 500.) As the "Fledermaus Waltz" (arranged by others), the act II finale lived a life of its own in the dance hall, and was also the featured tune in the operetta's overture.

A "Strauss waltz" was actually a string or medley of waltzes (frequently equipped with an evocative slower introduction for concert purposes) in which the first often functions as a refrain. That format ideally suited the structure of the *Fledermaus* finale, in which a flirtation (between husband and disguised wife, it later turns out) is carried on during the episodes, against a background of general festivity represented by the main waltz tune and especially its second strain ("Ha, welch ein Fest"; "Oh, what a party"). The lines with which the guests react when the band strikes up the waltz could serve as the motto of the operetta genre: "Ja, ja, ein wirbelnder Tanz/Erhöht des Festes Glanz!" (Ah yes, a whirling dance, just the thing to bring diversion to its peak). As in Offenbach's infernal dance, the curtain music jacks things up even further with an abrupt transition from waltz to galop.

It is often claimed that operetta was an unimportant genre in music history (as opposed to social history) because it did not contribute to the evolution of musical style. The historicist bias implicit in that view (and the likely impoverishment of a music history that excludes social history) will be apparent to readers of this book, but in any case the work of Johann Strauss refutes it. There is one stylistic idiosyncrasy in particular that went from him into the general idiom of European (or European-style) music, and that is the freedom with which the sixth degree of the scale is harmonized, appearing as a functional consonance both within the dominant (where it adds a ninth to the chord) and against the tonic (where it is usually described simply as an "added sixth"). The familiar opening strain of the "Blue Danube" waltz supplies perhaps the classic illustration, one that many readers will be able to summon to memory without even looking at Ex. 12-12.



ex. 12-12 Johann Strauss, opening strain of the “Blue Danube” Waltz

The “Fledermaus Waltz” also contains many examples. The “V<sub>9</sub>” occurs at the very first chord change (Ex. 12-13a), and the striking second phrase of the big choral refrain (on the highly charged line, “Liebe und Wein gibt uns Seligkeit!”, “Love and wine grant us bliss!”) place dominant after tonic beneath a repeated sixth degree (Ex. 12-13b). That mild “liberated dissonance” gives a sense of the rush the text evokes; it is a musical stimulant. Most graphically of all, and proof of the composer's self-consciousness in its use, when the chiming clock briefly interrupts the festivities with a jolt, it is represented by that very sixth degree (Ex. 12-13c), acting as a modulatory pivot (which of course implies its functional consonance).

ex. 12-13a Johann Strauss, *Die Fledermaus*, Act II Waltz Finale, ritornello

*rit.* *a tempo*

*f* Ha, welch ein Fest, wel - che Nacht voll Freud! Lie - be und

*f* Ha, welch ein Fest, wel - che Nacht voll Freud! Lie - be und

*f* Ha, welch ein Fest, wel - che Nacht voll Freud! Lie - be und

Wein gibt uns Se - lig - keit! Ging's durch das Le - ben so flott, wie

Wein gibt uns Se - lig - keit! Ging's durch das Le - ben so flott, wie

Wein gibt uns Se - lig - keit! Ging's durch das Le - ben so flott, wie

heut', Wär je - de Stun - de der Lust ge - weihet!

heut', Wär je - de Stun - de der Lust ge - weihet!

heut', Wär je - de Stun - de der Lust ge - weihet!

ex. 12-13b Johann Strauss, *Die Fledermaus*, Act II Waltz Finale, "What a party!"



ex. 12-13c Johann Strauss, *Die Fledermaus*, Act II Waltz Finale (the chiming clock is heard)

## Notes:

(13) Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1899), p. 209.

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Operetta

Arthur Sullivan

William S. Gilbert

Patter song

# OPERETTA AND ITS DISCONTENTS

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

It was in order to make up a double bill with *La Périchole*, one of the later operettas of Offenbach, that a London theater manager, Richard D'Oyly Carte, commissioned a tiny one-acter from Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900), a graduate of the Leipzig Conservatory who was then serving as principal of a newly opened music academy called the National Training School (now the Royal College of Music). The libretto was by William S. Gilbert (1836–1911), then a staff writer for *Fun*, the Victorian equivalent of *Mad* magazine, who specialized in skits that burlesqued standard operas of the day.



fig. 12-8 Poster for the New York premiere of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*.

Gilbert and Sullivan had already collaborated several years earlier, quite unmemorably, on an Offenbach-style comedy called *Thespis; or, the Gods Grown Old*, and had given no thought to future collaborations. *Trial by Jury* (1875), the result of their chance commission from D'Oyly Carte, marked the beginning of the most stable and successful operetta team in the history of the genre. Most unusually (and uniquely for Gilbert and Sullivan), this half-hour farce about a jilted bride's lawsuit, an outrageously biased jury, and an incompetent judge was a through-

composed work, with recitatives instead of spoken dialogue, and was conceived frankly as a spoof of Italian opera. The most elaborate number, “A Nice Dilemma,” is a very skillful caricature of a Donizettian *largo concertato*, the sort of showpiece ensemble described in chapter 1.

With *The Sorcerer* (1877) the pair hit their stride, producing the first of eleven two-act operettas (plus one in three) with spoken dialogue, and with *HMS Pinafore; or, The Lass That Loved a Sailor* they achieved an unprecedented hit for an English operetta—indeed for an English work of any kind since Handel's day. So successful was the steady stream of operettas they produced over the next dozen years that D'Oyly Carte built a special theater, the Savoy, to maintain the whole Gilbert and Sullivan canon in repertory. Its patent on the “Savoy operas” lasted until 1961, canonizing not only the repertory but also its traditions of performance in a fashion that Gilbert and Sullivan would no doubt have taken delight in spoofing had they lived to see it.

Both *The Sorcerer* and *HMS Pinafore* continued the manner established in *Trial by Jury* of aiming pointed barbs at specific operatic (and not only operatic) targets. The most conspicuous object of parody in the former, predictably enough, was Weber's *Freischütz*. In the latter, the basic premise—mistaken identity due to an exchange of babies by a befuddled nanny—was borrowed from the much-ridiculed libretto of Verdi's *Il trovatore*. The occasional accompanied recitatives in *Pinafore* exaggerated the mannerisms of Handel's oratorios, and the elopement scene alluded to in its subtitle took off on the one in Rossini's *Barber of Seville*.

*Pinafore's* popularity bridged the Atlantic Ocean, which actually made a problem for Gilbert and Sullivan when American companies began “pirating” it—that is, performing it without authorization from the publisher and without paying royalties. They retaliated by mocking the marauders with an operetta called *The Pirates of Penzance* (the American equivalent might be *The Pirates of Coney Island*), and opened it in New York to establish copyright there. *The Pirates* contains Gilbert and Sullivan's most specifically directed operatic spoofing.

*Il trovatore* comes in for another round of friendly abuse, with a crashing parody of its “Anvil Chorus” sung as the pirates purportedly sneak noiselessly onstage (“With Catlike Tread”). The situation, too, joshes *Trovatore*, which contains an abduction scene in which a chorus of hidden warriors actually sing about their silence. The part of the tune that is actually closest to the Verdian model has become independently popular as “Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here,” a song that has long been propagated in oral tradition throughout the English-speaking world (Ex. 12-14a). In addition, the ingenue soprano, Mabel, sings a lilting waltz song modeled on those found in contemporary French “dramas lyriques” like the famous ones in Gounod's *Faust* (Ex. 12-14b).

Chi del gi-ta - no i gior - ni ab - bel - la?

(transposed)

Come, friends who plow the sea, Truce to na - vi - ga - tion, Take a - no - ther sta - tion!

ex. 12-14a Giuseppe Verdi, “Anvil Chorus” (*Il trovatore*, Act II) / Sir Arthur Sullivan, *The Pirates of Penzance*, “Come, friends who plow the sea”

(Siebel)

Fai-tes-lui mes à - veux, \_\_\_ Por - tez \_\_\_ mes voeux! \_\_\_ Fleurs é - clo - ses près d'el - le,  
Di - tes - lui qu'elle est bel - le, Que mon cœur nuit et jour \_\_\_ Lan - guit \_\_\_ d'a - mour!

(Mabel - rebarred)

Poor wan - d'ring one, \_\_\_ Tho' thou hast sure - ly strayed, \_\_\_  
Take heart of grace, Thy steps re - trace, Poor wan - d'ring one, \_\_\_

**ex. 12-14b Charles Gounod, “Faites lui mes aveux” (*Faust*, Act II) / Sir Arthur Sullivan, *The Pirates of Penzance* “Poor wand'ring one”**

The pièce de résistance, however, is the so-called Chorus of Policemen, summoned by Mabel and her father the Major-General to capture the pirates. It is actually a more complicated number than its title would suggest. Besides sporting solos for three characters, it is the first Sullivanian “double chorus” of a kind that became a standard feature in the Savoy operas. (Its most relevant antecedent was a double aria for the two blind title characters in Offenbach's *Les deux aveugles*, but Offenbach himself had a famous precedent in Berlioz's “dramatic symphony,” *The Damnation of Faust*, which Sullivan certainly knew.) First there is a chorus sung by one sex (in this case the policemen); then there is an ostensibly contrasting chorus sung by the opposite sex (in this case the Major-General's numerous daughters); and finally there is their unexpected (but of course eventually not only expected but eagerly anticipated) contrapuntal montage. The policemen confess their reluctance to expose themselves to danger; the maidens vainly seek to raise their morale with a promise of posthumous fame. The ensuing impasse produces a common operatic situation: the “extended exit” in which the action about which all are singing is impeded by the singing itself. (Again, the classic prototype is found in *Il trovatore*: Manrico's famous cabaletta “Di quella pira,” in which an urgent mission of rescue is delayed for the sake of his high Cs.) The maidens sing, “Go!” The police sing “We go!” The Major-General, somehow standing outside the music and observing its contradiction of the action, sings “Yes, but you don't go!”

Ten years later, at the other end of Europe, César Cui—in an extended, quite humorless essay on the superiority of Russian opera, with its scrupulous realism, to the common run—pointed, among other things, to “choruses that shout *corriam, corriam* [let's run, let's run] but never budge an inch.”<sup>14</sup> The difference was that only Cui seriously thought that such choruses could be dispensed with—or rather, that the distinction between “real” and “musical” time could be erased. Only Cui thought that renouncing the distinction between the “heard” and “unheard” music of an opera—the music the characters hear as music and the music only the audience hears as such—would be progress. By having his Major-General fail to make this distinction, Sullivan parodied not so much the failure of composers as the failure of obtuse listeners who cannot reconcile themselves to the most crucial of all operatic conventions.

Thus there are two ways (at least) to mock a convention. One can do it like Cui, with an eye toward its abolition; or one can do it like Sullivan, as a wry acknowledgement of its value. Cui's implication is that excessive indulgence of musical values can rob opera of its dramatic viability. Sullivan's is that excessively literalistic attention to dramatic values can rob opera of its *raison d'être*, its very reason for existence.

Finally it comes down to one's attitude toward the status quo, “the way things are”—a matter that goes far beyond the esthetic. In a startlingly rancorous critique of Gilbert and Sullivan, the English philosopher Michael Tanner, writing in 1991, protested the continuing popularity of their work after a century's heavy use, accusing them of practicing and perpetuating “that fatally English device of flattering an audience into a sense of complacency by presenting what

they take to be satire but is actually no more than affectionate endorsement of the status quo, shown in all its lovable absurdity.”<sup>15</sup> Their seeming mockery of the British class system, of nepotism, of gender inequality, or whatever else they seemed to oppose, in Tanner's view, was in fact a covert preservative.

There is no denying it. But it is not a peculiarly English vice. It is typical of art in any stable and affluent period of social history, when established authority and power are sufficiently secure to condone, and even encourage as a social steam valve, a certain amount of friendly caricature, which only encourages toleration of the inequities or abuses it exposes. Precisely the same was true of Offenbach and Strauss. In Offenbach's case the matter was a little poignant, in fact. There were always a few critics around who were sufficiently lacking in humor to take his cynicism for serious subversion, or at least for liberalism; he threw on their abuse. But as soon as the society he ostensibly mocked was overthrown (in the aftermath of the disastrous 1870 war with Prussia) and replaced by a more liberal régime, Offenbach's irreverence no longer seemed amusing. He declared bankruptcy in 1875, the very year in which defeated France accepted a republican constitution.

Victorian England underwent no such upheaval. Economically it went from strength to strength; the optimism of its social elite knew no bounds; and the popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan reflected that cheerful mood. Their work can seem, in its combination of surface reformism with underlying conformism, something like a classic expression of “Victorianism.” Perhaps its most telling symbolic manifestation was the way in which Gilbert and Sullivan eventually began burlesquing not only the foibles of the upper classes (and of standard opera), but even their own mannerisms as endearingly absurd institutions to be teased indulgently.

Take the “patter song” for example, which the *New Grove Dictionary* aptly defines as “a comic song in which the humor derives from having the greatest number of words uttered in the shortest possible time.”<sup>16</sup> It is usually sung in Savoy operas by the “comic baritone,” a stereotyped role that is usually marked by pompous ineptitude and/or lechery. In *The Pirates of Penzance* that role is filled by the Major-General, whose patter song, “I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General,” a list of all the superfluous intellectual baggage he carries around in place of military expertise, is the archetype of the genre. Its only rival is “When You're Lying Awake,” the Lord Chancellor's virtuosically ridiculous recitation of a trivial nightmare in *Iolanthe* (1882).

Patter songs were in themselves parodies of a standard *opera buffa* technique that went all the way back to Pergolesi and his contemporaries in the early eighteenth century, and that technique was itself a parody, translating the virtuosity of *opera seria* coloratura into the virtuosity of speedy enunciation, chiefly for bumbling basses at the opposite end of the spectrum, both in range and in moral character, from the male and female sopranos who sang the heroic leads. So when, in *Ruddigore* (1887), Gilbert and Sullivan parodied their own patter songs in a patter ensemble, it was a parody of a parody of a parody.

It takes the form of a trio in which the male lead, Robin Oakapple (or as he is also known, Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd), is encouraged by the comic baritone (Sir Despard Murgatroyd) and his sister the contralto (Mad Margaret, whose first entrance had already parodied the Mad Scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor*) to solve the dilemma on which the plot turns—and which we need not go into here, for reasons expressed by Sir Despard (and then the rest) at the end of the trio: “This particularly rapid unintelligible patter isn't generally heard, and if it is it doesn't matter” (Ex. 12-15).







The nineteenth-century tendency toward specialization was much abetted by the widening gulf that set in between “high” and “low” genres in the twentieth, which increasingly entailed the segregation of performers and audiences as well as composers, and a rigid hierarchy of taste that reinforced social distinctions. That hierarchy is already evident in the case of operetta, not so much in the way in which the genre was valued by audiences as in the way in which it was valued by its own specialist composers. The three with whom we are acquainted—Offenbach, Strauss, and Sullivan—all eventually aspired to the higher status of the very genre they spoofed.

Offenbach almost succeeded. At the tail end of his shortish life he was working feverishly on *Les contes d'Hoffmann* (“Tales of Hoffmann”), an ambitious *opéra fantastique* in five acts based on the fantasy stories of E. T. A. Hoffmann, the German romantic writer and music critic. There is good reason to believe that his overwork on this project—which Offenbach saw as his last chance for rehabilitation after the failure of his own theater, and for recognition as a “contender” in the increasingly rarefied category of art—contributed to his premature death shortly before the opera would have been finished. It had to be given finishing touches by another composer, Ernest Guiraud, for its 1881 premiere, and it has undergone much additional modification over the years by a variety of hands. It has, and can have, no definitive version, but it has steadily gained in popularity owing to its attractive music, in particular the barcarolle (“Belle nuit, ô nuit d'amour”; “Gorgeous Night, O Night of Love”) that suffuses the fourth act, set in Venice.

Sullivan's was a sadder story. As his career progressed he found himself under increasing pressure from many (including Queen Victoria herself) to live up to their expectations as the first great English composer in a hundred years. He chafed at the work that brought him success (and pleasure to a wide public) and doggedly applied himself, far less successfully, to the high prestige genres. The highest prestige in England then attached to oratorio, kept alive there since the time of Handel (and later, Mendelssohn) as a national tradition. For summer festivals at Birmingham, Worcester, and Leeds (the last of which he directed for a time), Sullivan wrote six oratorios, the most successful being *The Golden Legend* (1886), after Longfellow's reworking of a twelfth-century German *Minnelied* glorifying noble self-sacrifice and miraculous cures.

At the Queen's own urging, communicated at his knighting ceremony in 1883, Sullivan composed a clanking grand opera, *Ivanhoe* (1891), after the novel of medieval England by Sir Walter Scott. He declared his ambitions, and (perhaps unwittingly) the way they responded to the post-Wagnerian prejudices of the times, in a letter to a prospective operetta librettist:

I think the whole tendency of stage music now is to get rid as much as possible of songs, duets and other *set pieces* and to become as *dramatic* as possible. In all the series with Gilbert, I found a dainty, pretty song was generally a drag and stopped the interest of the public in the action of the piece. It is on these lines that I am doing a *serious* opera now.

But he was not really thinking of the public. He was thinking of his reputation with “progressive” tastemakers. And they betrayed him. Despite a lavish staging by D'Oyly Carte at a new opera house in which he had invested, and although (unlike most of the operettas) it received performances on the Continent (including a production at the Berlin Court Opera in 1895), Sullivan's serious effort was a failure with the critics. George Bernard Shaw was especially cruel, dismissing *Ivanhoe* as “a good novel which has been turned into the very silliest sort of sham ‘grand opera.’”<sup>17</sup> Having failed to establish himself as a contributor to the elite repertoire, Sullivan became embittered. His resentment at what he perceived to be his unfair banishment to the lighter genres—the result of “typecasting”—poisoned the well of his inspiration, and also soured relations with Gilbert. None of the operettas of his final (post-*Ivanhoe*) decade had any success, and the composer died—of bronchitis, not normally fatal—at the age of fifty-eight, feeling he had been mistreated and unjustly forgotten. In retrospect he might be fairly described as an early victim of historicism.

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## Notes:

(14) César Cui, “Neskol'ko slov o sovremmenīkh opernīkh formakh” (1889), *Izbrannīye stat'i*, p. 408.

(15) Michael Tanner, “Singing the Status Quo,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 April 1991, p. 15.

(16) *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Vol. III (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 719.

(17) G. B. Shaw in *The World*; quoted in Arthur Jacobs, *Arthur Sullivan: A Victorian Musician* (2nd ed., Portland: Amadeus Press, 1992), p. 335.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

Realism (Verismo)

Cavalleria rusticana

I pagliacci

## VERISMO

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

It was probably because his head, like those of most of his musical countrymen, was turned submissively toward Germany that Sullivan wrote an unwieldy historical opera like *Ivanhoe*. The true winds of operatic renewal were blowing again from Italy, and the tendency they furthered remained that of “comedization,” cutting things down to size and making them pungent and “actual” (that is, related to the audience's experience) rather than impressive and remote. The Italian name for it was *verismo*, “truthism.” It was under cover of this rigorously naturalistic idiom that Italian opera crossed into the twentieth century.

Verismo called (at least theoretically) for the eschewal of all traditional virtuosity in the name of forceful simplicity. It was originally a literary movement, led by Giovanni Verga (1840–1922), a writer and dramatist most famous for his short stories of life and strife amongst the peasants and fisher-folk of rural Sicily. Verga perfected a narrative style of blunt plainness and “objectivity,” seemingly without any intrusion of an authorial point of view. But that impression of “letting the facts speak for themselves” was in fact a highly manipulative procedure, since the author gets to choose the facts. An impression of realism was created by the innovative use of local dialect (something akin to the time-honored technique of infusing operatic music with folkish idioms), but the basic tenor of veristic literature, unlike the literature of the *risorgimento* (or of Verdi's “Shakespearean” realism), was pessimistic. People fail in Verga because they are overmatched by implacable natural and social conditions, and the line between the natural and the social is deliberately blurred.

It could be said (with only minor exaggeration) that verismo opera was to Romantic opera as short stories were to novels. There was the same radical reduction in scale, the same lowering of tone and simplification of technique through which intensity took the place (or tried to take the place) of amplitude. All of these features are well displayed by the two most successful specimens of the genre: *Cavalleria rusticana* (“Rustic chivalry;” 1890) by Pietro Mascagni (1863–1945) and *Ipagliacci* (“The clowns;” 1892) by Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857–1919), both of them one-act operas that are now usually performed together on a double bill affectionately known by operagoers as “Cav and Pag.” (To be scrupulously exact, “Pag” is nominally a two-act opera in which the acts are connected by an *intermezzo* and played without an intermission.) “Cav” was based on a famous story by Verga himself, selected for setting in a prize competition by a canny publisher who wanted to capitalize on the new literary vogue. Thus in an unusually direct way, operatic verismo derived from its literary prototype.



**fig. 12-9** Ruggero Leoncavallo.



**fig. 12-10 Enrico Caruso as Canio in Leoncavallo's *I pagliacci* (Metropolitan Opera, New York), one of his most famous roles.**

Both Cav and Pag culminate in brutal crimes of passion—murders committed, in both cases, by jealous husbands. The bloody deeds are portrayed with an eye primarily on sensationalism or “shock value,” and it was of little importance whose side the audience is on. Revealingly enough, the audience is manipulated in “Cav” to sympathize with the lover and in “Pag” to sympathize with the husband. But the main objective in both cases is the same: titillation, the administering of thrills to a comfortable and complacent bourgeois audience, rather than the exposure of social problems and their amelioration (the objective of the realism of an earlier vintage), let alone a call to political action such as the art of the risorgimento had sought to inspire.

For by the 1890s the political goals of the risorgimento had been ostensibly achieved, and popular culture could now revert to a more innocently—or (depending on one's viewpoint) a more irresponsibly—entertaining role, as if confirming by negation Morse Peckham's theory (discussed in the previous chapter) of risorgimento art as stimulus to aggression. Verismo was widely viewed as a catalyst to voyeurism (a state of depraved moral passivity) or even, in view of its exceedingly violent content, as a moral narcotic.

Compounding the irony was the new concept of nationhood that arose in united Italy, a view that verismo both

embodied and stimulated. Because of its preoccupation with the mores of the “southern” lower classes and their naturalistic depiction, often in dialect, verismo led to a new variety of “orientalism.” In the theaters of affluent northern Italy these rustic *scene popolari* (scenes of life among the people) were picturesquely exotic, and nurtured assumptions of cultural as well as economic superiority. This, too, was regressive titillation of a sort, and one that reopened cultural divisions within the nation that the risorgimento had tried to heal, or at least to mask.

But while the late Shakespearean works of Verdi, written not for money but for love and full of snob appeal, are now considered the very cream of the Italian repertoire, and while the shabby little shockers of verismo, exploiting an unsophisticated taste for the sake of mercenary gain and increasingly written to formula by a new generation of hacks or “galley slaves,” were immediately decried by the fastidious (as they still are), they both embodied, at aristocratic and demotic extremes, a common response to the demands of the contemporary theater. They can be viewed, even technically, as superficially contrasting siblings or cousins in a single line of descent from the Verdi of *Traviata*, *Trovatore*, and *Rigoletto*.

In both Cav and Pag, the lyric high points are brief ariosos for the *tenore di forza* (the lover in one, the husband in the other) in the voice's highest register. These powerful explosions of melody emerge out of ongoing dramatic continuities just as the lyric highpoints in Otello's role emerged in the parts of Verdi's penultimate opera that we have examined (or the way that Falstaff's not-yet-written “Quand'ero paggio” would emerge out of dialogue with Mistress Quickly in his last one), with their musical and dramaturgical properties diminished in scale but exaggerated by compression.

The so-called “Addio alla Mamma” (Farewell to Mother; see Ex. 12-16 for its conclusion), sung by Turiddu, the doomed lover, right before the grisly dénouement of Mascagni's opera, could almost be called a parody of *Otello* with its repeated calls for kisses (“un bacio... un altro bacio...,” etc.). It retains a vestige of strophic form, in which the melodic repetition is both set off and “motivated” (as strict realism demanded) by a little recitative exchange between the characters, and followed by a written-out cadenza that brings the singer up to high B ♭ at the very roof of his range. A similarly deliberate crudity—verismo's greatest strength or its most glaring flaw depending on who is judging—marks the aria's harmonic idiom, with its bald juxtapositions of parallel major and minor.



30 Turiddu: Tempo I con anima  
Per - me pre - ga - te Id - di - o, per - me pre - ga - te Id - di - o

34 di - o un ba - cio, un ba - cio mam - ma! un al - tro

37 un poco calando  
ba - cio un al - tro ba - cio ad - di - o!

30 a piacere  
s'io non tor - nas-si fa - te da ma - dre, a San - ta un ba - cio, mam - ma, ad - dio!

Turiddu: Oh pray that God forgive me!  
Oh pray that God forgive me!  
A kiss, one kiss, dear Mamma,  
one more, dear Mamma, one kiss, dear Mamma.  
Good bye!  
Promise me, dear Mamma, you will help my Santuzza.  
Now kiss me, Mamma. Goodbye!

**ex. 12-16 Pietro Mascagni, *Cavalleria rusticana*, Turiddu's arioso**

“Vesti la giubba” (“Put on your costume”), which ends the nominal first act of Leoncavallo’s opera, is possibly the most-parodied little number in all of opera, but the mockery it has attracted is fine testimony to its power. It is sung not by the victim of the crime but by the perpetrator, the enraged husband, who has just found out about his wife’s perfidy, but who has to go out and perform anyway. On the page it looks like a more formal piece than Turiddu’s. It is introduced by a recitative (famous for the “naturalistic” transformation of the tenor’s high A into a bout of crazed laughter), and the arioso itself is formally labeled and accompanied at first by a typical “vamp.” But on closer examination (see Ex. 12-17 for the voice part) the surprising realization dawns that this arioso contains no melodic repetitions at all. That absence of preconceived “form”—a musical “state of nature”—was a high realist cause.

And yet the arioso does not sound at all “formless,” because it takes sly advantage of many conventions that render it fully comprehensible within the “ordinary operagoer’s” experience. Its phrase structure is completely regular: a sixteen-bar period balanced by two of eight bars’ length (the first of the pair extended by a melodic “stall” of a single measure’s duration, a device we first observed as long ago as chapter 1, in Bellini). The modulatory scheme, reaching the relative major in m. 16, and proceeding from there to a harmonic Far Out Point in m. 19, telegraphs the da capo form, one of opera’s most dependable. The expected return of the “A” section is avoided, but very “intelligibly”: it is preempted by the climax, replete with high note, marked “with full voice, heart-rendingly.” That is a sure-fire recipe,

handled with mastery and aplomb: seemingly “free” and innovatory, but in fact giving listeners everything they are led to desire.

*Canto*

Re-ci-tar! Men-tre pre - so dal de-li - rio non so più quel che di - co e quel che  
 fac - cio! Ep-pur è d'uo - po... sfor - za - ti! Bah!

*string, un poco*

sei tu for - se un uom? ——— Tu se' Pa - gliac - cio!

*rit.*

*Adagio* (♩ = 46)  
*delusando con dolor*

Ve - sti la giub - ba e la fac - cia in - fa - ri - na. La gen - te  
 pa - ga e ri - der suo - le qua. ——— E se de - lec - chin t'in  
 vo - la Co - lom - bi - na, ri - di, Pa - gliac - cio... e o - gnun ap - plau - di -  
 rà! Tra - mi - ta in laz - zi lo spa - smo ed il pian - to;  
 in u - na smor - tu il sin - ghioz - zo e'l do - lor... Ah! ———

*portando*

*violento*

*poco rit.* *a tempo*

*affrett.* *cres.* *rit.*

*a piena voce, straziante* *con grande espressione*

Ri - di, Pa - gliac - cio, sul tuo a - mo - re in - fran - to! Ri - di del  
 duol che t'av - ve - le - na il cor! ———

ex. 12-17 Ruggero Leoncavallo, *I pagliacci*, “Vesti la giubba”

Cynical? There were many who thought so, or at least who objected to such transparently manipulative methods. From the traditional Romantic perspective such art could look at once trivially sensational and reprehensibly “safe.” Gabriele D'Annunzio, a romantic poet famous for his lofty transcendentalism, and who naturally detested verismo, published a practically libelous review of *Cavalleria rusticana* in which he dismissed Mascagni as an insignificant *capobanda* (bandmaster) and a “breakneck melodrama manufacturer”<sup>18</sup> whose success was due solely to his publisher's genius for publicity.

One who came quickly, if somewhat unexpectedly, to Mascagni's defense was Chaikovsky, a composer often but perhaps erroneously thought to be a model, even the epitome, of musical Romanticism. His "overture-fantasy" *Romeo and Juliet* (sampled in chapter 7) was nothing if not emotionally direct and "sincere" (a word that always needs to be placed in quotes, since we can only judge the appearance, never the reality, of anyone's sincerity but our own), but *Eugene Onegin*, while relatively restrained, can easily be seen as a forerunner of verismo in its calculated methods and its compression.

At any rate, with ten operas and three ballets to his credit Chaikovsky was the most successful Russian composer for the stage. Perhaps he took a certain pleasure in shocking his interviewer, a St. Petersburg reporter who probably expected a conventional recoil at the mention of the twenty-nine-year-old Italian upstart. Instead, he elicited a ringing endorsement, couched almost as an explicit refutation of D'Annunzio's charges:

People are wrong to think that this young man's colossal, fabulous success is the result of clever publicity.... Mascagni, it's clear, is not only very gifted but also very smart. He realizes that nowadays the spirit of realism, the harmonization of art and the true-to-life, is everywhere in the air, that Wotans, Brünnhildes, and Fafners do not in fact excite any real sympathy on the part of the listener, that human beings with their passions and woes are more intelligible and tangible to us than the gods and demigods of Valhalla.<sup>19</sup>

Playing the Wagner card may have been gratuitous, but Russian composers were even more sensitive than Italians to German claims of universality. Chaikovsky goes on to issue an even more fundamental challenge to romanticism, noting that Mascagni "operates *not by force of instinct* but *by force of an astute perception of the needs of the contemporary listener*" (the italics are his). D'Annunzio could not have put it better, but as the context makes clear, Chaikovsky intended the remark as praise. Was it praise of realism or praise of pandering?

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## Notes:

(18) Gabriele D'Annunzio, "Il capobanda," *Il Mattino* (Naples), 2 September 1892.

(19) "G. B.," "Beseda s Chaikovskim," *Peterburgskaya zhizn'*, no. 2 (1892); in P. I. Chaikovsky, *Muzīkal'no-kriticheskiye stat'i*, (4th ed., Leningrad: Muzīka, 1986), p. 319.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

Giacomo Puccini

Madama Butterfly

Turandot

## TRUTH OR SADISM?

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

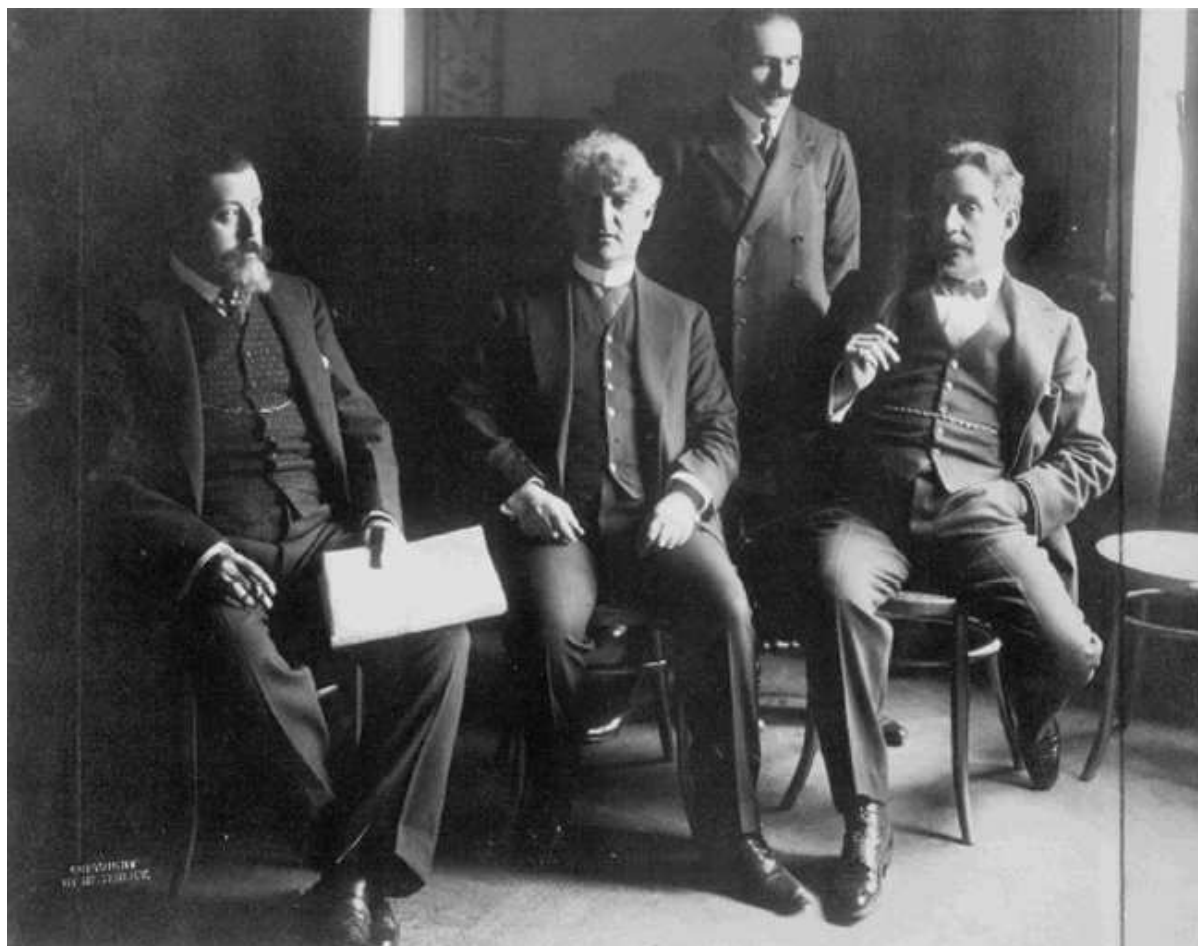
**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

That was the question, all right. What really divided the musical world in the wake of romanticism was the relationship between the artist and “the contemporary listener”—that is, the paying public and its “needs.” It is the issue that more than any other defined the terms within which the history of “art music” would unfold in the twentieth century, the first century that had need of such a category. (A preliminary teaser: What could be the reason for defining some—but only some—musical genres a priori as “art”? What is excluded from the definition? What should the excluded portion be called?)

The earliest focal point of twentieth-century controversy about art vs. commerce was the last great figure in the ancient and distinguished Italian operatic line: Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924), whose works remain a constituent of the core repertory at every opera house in the world today. From the very beginning of his career there were some who called him Verdi's legitimate heir and others who refused to take him seriously as a composer at all. What is remarkable is that the dispute remains heated even now, close to a century after his death, despite Puccini's long-since settled place in the active repertoire and in the hearts of opera lovers. Even more strangely, he is usually barely mentioned in books like this (that is, general histories of “art music”), even though his commanding stature within the world of opera has been a historical fact for more than one hundred years and thus would seem to constitute a robust claim to the composer's historical significance.

Since there is absolutely no chance of Puccini's being dislodged from his place in the operatic repertoire, no matter how much critical invective is heaped upon him, and no matter how little attention he receives from general historians, it is clear that something else is at stake. The critical invective identifies him as one of the twentieth century's emblematic figures. (By rights, of course, that should only quicken rather than dampen the interest of historians.) The phrase “shabby little shocker,” applied above to the masterpieces of verismo, was borrowed from a famous harangue against Puccini that first appeared in 1956 in *Opera As Drama*, a widely read critical survey by Joseph Kerman, which was reissued in 1988 with all its invective in place. Kerman applied it to *Tosca* (1900), one of the most popular works in the repertoire, thought by most operagoers to be a masterpiece on a par with Verdi, far above the level of Mascagni or Leoncavallo.





**fig. 12-11 Giacomo Puccini (right) in New York for the premiere of his opera *La Fanciulla del West* (1910). The others are (left to right) Giulio Gatti-Casazza, general manager of the Metropolitan Opera; David Belasco, author of *The Girl of the Golden West*, the play on which the libretto was based; and Arturo Toscanini, the conductor of the premiere.**

Puccini's treatment at the hands of historians is symptomatic of a general trend that merits study in its own right. That trend is the gradual divergence, over the course of the twentieth century, between the repertoire, the musical works actually performed for—and “consumed” by—“the contemporary listener,” and what is often called the “canon,” the body of works (or the pantheon of composers) that are considered worthy of critical respect and academic study. That divergence, in which the history of music becomes not the history of music performed but the history of, well, something else, is the result of “historicism,” the intellectual trend first described in chapter 8, according to which history is conceived in terms not only of events but also of goals. In the case of music these goals have chiefly pertained to the “disinterested” advancement of style, a concept that depends on German esthetic philosophy (for the notion of “disinterestedness”), but also—quite circularly—on the narrative techniques of history itself (for the notion of advancement).

Accordingly, the historiography of music in the twentieth century has been fundamentally skewed, on the one hand, by the failure of actual events to conform to the purposes historicists have envisioned, and on the other, by the loyalty not only of many historians but also of many greatly talented and interesting composers to historicist principles. A great deal of music since the middle of the nineteenth century, much of it the music deemed most interesting and significant by historians, has been written not “for the repertoire” but “for the canon.”

Puccini wrote for the repertoire (for “the needs of the contemporary listener”), as did most of the century's materially successful—that is, popular—composers. So despite his fame and his high historical profile, he has been slighted in the circularly conceived history of the historicist canon. And even though the present account is taking time out to “problematize” this state of affairs, there is no chance of solving it. A narrative history concentrates by nature on change, hence on innovation, and it has been one of the hallmarks of “repertoire” music, at least since the advent of historicism, that it tends to be far less innovative, stylistically, than “canon” music, which is written with

the needs of the narrative in mind.

That does not lessen its value to the audience it serves, but it does lessen its “news value” to historians of style. A description of Puccini's style or technique will not add enormously to what we already know about the style and technique of Italian opera at the end of the nineteenth century. That is admittedly an invidious criterion of selection, and plays into the historicist purposes that more recent historiography (including this book, especially during its “time-outs”) has sought to challenge. But historiographical genres have their limitations—one of the most fundamental being limitations of space—and impose constraints. They are lenses on the past, and inevitably distort even as they illuminate. A narrative history such as this one is not the best venue for assessing the value of twentieth-century “repertoire” music. For that purpose there are genre histories, repertoire surveys, collective biographies, and critical studies.

We shall do best with Puccini, perhaps, to approach him from the standpoint of his popularity (that is, the pertinent “historical fact” as predicated above), considering the reasons for it, and weighing their implications. Puccini's career parallels Verdi's in one interesting regard: his three most famous and permanent works—recalling Verdi's *Rigoletto*, *Trovatore*, and *Traviata*—were written in a clump, one after the other, at the midpoint of his career. All, moreover, were written in collaboration with a single librettist—or rather a pair of librettists who collaborated with Puccini as a team: Luigi Illica (1857–1919) and Giuseppe Giacosa (1847–1906), both well-known playwrights (the former supplying the scenario and a sketch of dialogue, the latter supplying the actual verses).

*La bohème* (1896), the earliest, was based on *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (“Scenes of bohemian life”), a best-selling sentimental novel by the French writer Henri Murger that romanticized, and considerably prettified, the dire life circumstances of the struggling young writers and artists (“bohemians”) inhabiting the garrets of Paris. The central plot line concerns the romance of Rodolfo, a starving poet, and Mimi, a consumptive seamstress: in act I they meet by chance; in act II they are happily in love; in act III they quarrel and are reconciled; in act IV she perishes.

This simple love story is portrayed in counterpoint with a busy backdrop of picturesque street and café life. Act II, with its café waltzes and songs, subsidiary flirtations, and anecdotal hubbub, is almost entirely given over to the “backdrop.” There is no denying the theatrical effectiveness of the recipe. As in the case of verismo opera, however, objections are often raised against the opportunistic manipulateness of the situation, particularly the device of inescapable doom contributed by Mimi's disease, a factor present from the outset and therefore “static.” Is a plot governed by circumstances beyond the protagonists' control a truly dramatic plot? Must an opera have such a plot? Must an opera, in short, be “dramatic”? And if critics so decide, and if audiences go on enjoying the work anyway, then what is the force or value of the critique? Can critics be right and audiences wrong? What does it mean to say so? Who gets to define “quality”? By what criteria? With what consequences?

*Tosca* (1900), was based on a popular play by the French dramatist Victorien Sardou that was created as a star vehicle for the great actress Sarah Bernhardt: the title character is also a great actress, a fictional “diva” living at the time of the French Revolution. At the time Puccini decided to base an opera on it, the play, first staged in 1887, was still in current repertory. That became Puccini's standard procedure: of the seven operas that followed *Tosca*, four were based on current plays the composer happened to see in the theater, often in languages he did not understand. (Half in jest, he once said that his being able to follow a play despite ignorance of its language testified to its operatic potential.) Despite the historical setting, both the play and the opera are cast in the brutally naturalistic mode then fashionable, replete with an onstage murder, an offstage (but audible) scene of torture, an execution, and a concluding suicide.

More than in any other Puccini score (more, perhaps, than in any other standard Italian opera), the musical texture of *Tosca* is suffused with reminiscence motifs, sometimes treated in an abstract (though never “symphonic”) manner that justifies the use of the Wagnerian term leitmotif. Possibly meant as an earnest of “seriousness,” Puccini's appropriation of the device—or perhaps more to the point, the fact that (unlike Verdi) he never suffered accusations of capitulation to “Wagnerism” because of it—testifies to the increasing internationalism of procedures and techniques in turn-of-the-century opera.

*Madama Butterfly*, billed as a *tragedia giapponese*, went through four distinct versions between 1904 and 1906 before achieving lasting success. Its source was a very successful dramatization, by the American theatrical producer David Belasco, of a sob story from a popular magazine (supposedly based on a true incident related to the author by his sister, the wife of a missionary) about a Japanese geisha nicknamed Chô-san (Cio-cio-san in the opera), or Butterfly. She is seduced “temporarily wedded” (according to then-existing Japanese law that cruelly discriminated



against the rights of women), and then abandoned, by an insouciant American naval officer. Puccini followed Belasco in having the opera (unlike the story) end with the title character's suicide.

Like *La bohème*, *Madama Butterfly* relies a great deal upon local color, as operas with exotic settings (especially “oriental” ones) were prone to do. Puccini incorporated the characteristically pentatonic tunes of seven Japanese folk songs into the score. Interestingly, they appear mostly in the first act, which depicts Cio-cio-san's wedding to the officer, Lieutenant Pinkerton, who is also identified by a bit of local color (the opening phrases of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” no less). It is, after all, only in the presence (that is, through the eyes) of the American that the Japanese milieu is exotic. The vastly longer second act, played for the most part in Pinkerton's absence, and concerned mainly with Cio-cio-san's worsening fate, largely dispenses with Japanesery; it is cast, rather, in Puccini's own internationalized operatic style (the “universal language of feeling”).

The disproportion between the lengths of the two acts was prompted by the excruciating silent scene of waiting that quickened Puccini's interest in turning Belasco's play into an opera. Representing the night that passes between Cio-cio-san's spying Pinkerton's ship in the harbor after three years' absence without communication, and her last tragic meeting with him, it consisted in Belasco's version of a theatrical tour de force: fully fifteen minutes of pantomime for the solitary leading actress, accompanied by harbor sounds, lighting effects, and, finally, birdsong to represent the dawn. As Puccini immediately recognized, that was already opera of a sort.

In the libretto, the waiting scene became an orchestral interlude between the two parts of act II. In the first part, Cio-cio-san displays her steadfast faith in her husband's return both by turning down an advantageous match with a rich suitor and by singing what has become probably the most famous aria in all of Puccini: “Un bel dì” (“One fine day”), in which she reproves her protective maidservant Suzuki for doubting, and imagines the joyful scene that awaits her. In the act's second part, Pinkerton does return—but with his American bride, and only to reclaim his son from Cio-cio-san. Puccini felt that the poignancy of the ironic contrast between the imagined outcome and the real one, and the musically enhanced scene of waiting that connected them, would carry the audience through an act of a colossal ninety minutes' duration, a demand that Wagner himself exceeded only once (in *Das Rheingold*).

He was wrong. One of the changes he was compelled to make in the opera after the disastrous opening night was to recast it in three acts so that the waiting scene follows the intermission and loses the suspenseful character that originally attracted Puccini to the subject. The by-product of the revision, however, was a second act that culminated in an orchestral reprise of “Un bel dì,” as Cio-cio-san spies the ship. This provided a surefire curtain and vouchsafed the opera's lasting success. It does seem worth pointing out, however, in view of Puccini's reputation for pandering, that the surefire solution was not his first choice.

Be that as it may, a close-up on “Un bel dì” and its various reminiscences and reprises (Ex. 12-18) will afford us an ideal window on Puccini's style and methods, and the basis of his enduring success. Like the arias and ariosos we have been encountering in late Verdi and the *veristi*, “Un bel dì” is very terse. Its form could be described as da capo, since it begins and ends with a distinctive eight-bar melody that only has to be sung once to be memorable, since it descends gracefully through a slightly varied fourfold sequence of a single two-bar phrase (Ex. 12-18a). In between the two statements comes a disproportionately long middle section that begins with a balancing sequential idea (a four-measure phrase answered by its upwardly transposed repetition), but then devolves into what sounds like recitative, sung in “conversational” note-values with long strings of repeated pitches. Even though this is an aria, we are thus informed, it is being enacted in real time as Cio-cio-san narrates her fantasy of reconciliation to Suzuki.

The reprise of the opening phrase carries more emotional punch than the usual da capo return because it is sung triumphantly, at the opposite end of the dynamic scale from the gently wistful opening, casting the whole aria in retrospect as a single gathering crescendo to a climax. Once past the first phrase, moreover, the voice part again devolves into a recitative-like style, dividing the notes of the melody into short repeated note-values, while it continues to sound forth, intact, in the orchestra (Ex. 12-18b). Looking back at the beginning now, we notice that even there the singer followed the melody somewhat selectively. The tune as such, it turns out, belongs more to the orchestra than to the voice.

This point is driven home at the very end (Ex. 12-18c), where Puccini adopts a device that had been pioneered in *La gioconda* (1876), an opera (to a libretto by Boito) by Amilcare Ponchielli (1834–86), the leading member of the generation between Verdi's and Puccini's. As we find it in “Un bel dì,” the singer's climactic statement of the main theme is immediately followed and trumped by a coda in which, after six measures' headlong ascent to a brilliant high B $\flat$ , the singer falls silent and the theme passes entirely into the orchestra for its peroration as if achieving a

transcendent emotional pitch that can only be represented wordlessly.

Andante molto calmo  $\text{♩} = 42$

Butterfly

Un — bel di, ve — dre — mo le — var — si un fil di fu — mo sull' e —  
 Soon — we'll see at day — break a ti — ny thread of smoke rise where the

*pp* *cote de lousiane*

(\*)

*poco rall.*

stre — mo con-fin del ma — re. E poi — la na-ve ap — po — re —  
 sky — bor-ders on the o — cean. And then — a — ship in mo — tion.

ex. 12-18a Giacomo Puccini, *Madama Butterfly*, “Un bel di,” mm. 1-8

Within the very confines of the aria, in other words, the theme is already being treated as a reminiscence motif, producing at short range the emotional rush that the device of reminiscence had previously held in reserve. The aria's brevity, its climax-driven structure and its pumped-up wordless coda conspire to deliver a sort of accelerated catharsis, an instant emotional gratification for the audience, who get to share Cio-cio-san's fantasy. From this point to the end of the act, the reminiscence theme from “Un bel di” will serve as the emblem of Cio-cio-san's false belief in Pinkerton's return, the belief that sustains her and that, by her own avowal, gives her her only reason to live. Like its Verdian antecedents it has been invested with an ironic double meaning; its every return will not only confirm her faith but also forecast her doom. The first of them accompanies Cio-cio-san's confident request that the American consul inform Pinkerton that he has a son, trusting that that will bring him back. The last (Ex. 12-18d) accompanies the arrival of Pinkerton's gunboat in the harbor, announced first by its cannon, next by the reminiscence motif as Cio-cio-san scans the harbor with her telescope.

Andante come prima  
*con forza*

ti - re al pri - mo in - con - tro, ed e - gli al-quan-to in pe - na chia - me - die in bis - em - brac - es! Then wor - ried by my si - lence he will

rà chia - me - rà Pic - ci - na mo - ghet - ti - na o - lez - zo di ver - call. he will call. "My lit - tle wife, my dar - ling, my fra - grant sweet ver -

he - na, i no - mi che mi da - va al suo ve - ni - re be - na... the names he used to give me when first I met him.

ex. 12-18b Giacomo Puccini, *Madama Butterfly*, "Un bel di," mm. 149-56

She is being cruelly set up for a mortification that will be rubbed in over the whole duration of act III. The reminiscence motif plays its part in heightening the spectators' awareness of the impending catastrophe, and (let's face it) their (no, *our*) enjoyment of it. It can be argued, and of course it has been, that all tragedy is voyeurism; that by definition it contains or implies *Schadenfreude*, the enjoyment of another's misfortune; and that the noble concept of catharsis—tragedy's soul-cleansing function as immortally defined by Aristotle—is an idealizing mask for sentiments far less noble.



*Lentamente* (Butterfly and Suzuki run toward the terrace.)

**BUTTERFLY**  
Bian - ca ... bian - ca ... il ves -

**SUZUKI**  
U - na na - ve da guer - ra ...

*Lentamente*  
*ppp* *poco rit.*

il - lo a - me - ri - ca - no del - le stel - le ...

(takes a telescope from the little table and runs to the terrace to look)

Or go - ver - na per an - co - ra - re.

(Trembling with emotion, she points the telescope towards the harbor and says to Suzuki.)

Reg - gi - ni la ma - no ch'io ne dis - cer - na il no - me, il no - me,

*affrettando*

Suzuki: I believe it's a warship.  
Butterfly: Big ... white ... with a U.S. flag I see the Stars and Stripes.  
I believe they are casting anchor!  
Hold my trembling hand so that I may read the name ... the name.

**ex. 12-18d Giacomo Puccini, *Madama Butterfly*, reminiscence of “Un bel di” at end of Act II**

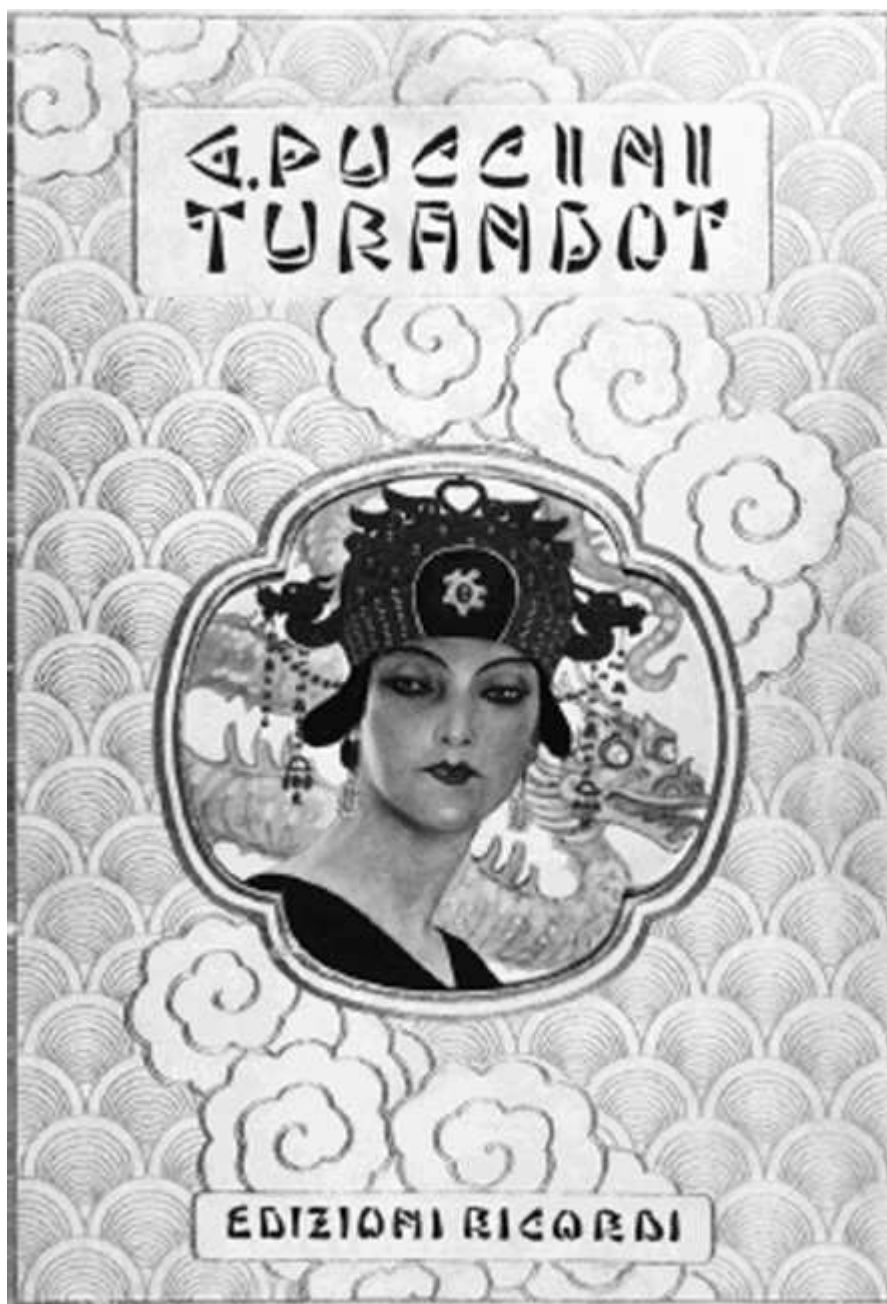
The particular tragicomic formula repeatedly employed by Puccini, in which the emblematic character is neither a robust *tenore di forza* nor an evil bass-baritone but rather a “soft, wilting heroine”<sup>20</sup> (in Julian Budden’s apt phrase) who is victimized by an implacable situation (grinding poverty, fatal disease, the patriarchal order) and slowly tortured to death, brings the inherent hidden sadism of dramatic representation dangerously near the surface of consciousness. It can also be argued (and has been) that watching a strong hero—Oedipus, Othello—brought low by fate in consequence of a moral flaw is edifying. It is harder to make such an argument in the case of a defenseless woman like Mimi or Cio-cio-san—or Manon Lescaut, the equally ill-fated title character of Puccini’s first big hit (1894) on a subject that had already attracted Massenet.

Has Puccini’s enduring popularity been due to his skill in administering sadistic gratification? If so, then shall we place the blame on Puccini, or on the ones who have made him popular, namely ourselves? Is an art that caters to “bad” instinct bad art? Does such catering promote social evil or (by giving our evil fantasies an acceptable outlet) social good? Is the fact that the art of the fin de siècle, or the “turn of the century,” was so full of sadistic representations the result of “decadence” or degeneration, as some have charged, or the result of greater candor in dealing relatively openly with matters that had formerly been more heavily cloaked in hypocritical metaphor? A



related question: Was the precipitate loss of scale in “realistic” or “naturalistic” art the result of lost faith or of greater honesty? And another: Was the habit of representing women in art as sacrificial victims the result of a new male brutality or was it an early reaction to the burgeoning social emancipation of women in “real life”?

These are the heady questions that underlie debate not only about Puccini but also about many popular (or “populist”) artists. Is the postulate that popularity implies or actually requires a debased morality (to say nothing of a debased technique) a courageous refusal to compromise standards or a pusillanimous camouflage for snobbery? Did Puccini’s success at rendering “great sorrows in little souls”<sup>21</sup> (as he put it himself) magnify the souls or mock the sorrows? Budden writes that Puccini’s true subject was *l’Italietta*—“little Italy.”<sup>22</sup> Considering that fewer than half of his operas are actually set in Italy or derive from Italian sources, the remark is more a commentary about values (unheroic ones) than about subject matter. But is the assumption that great or good art necessarily embodies heroic aspirations an ethical improvement? Or is it a just another mask for social elitism? And hadn’t Wagner shown that even heroism could acquire a bad name?



**fig. 12-12** Cover of the first edition of the libretto to Puccini's *Turandot* (Milan: Ricordi, 1924).

“Italietta” rings true in another way, though, because of the much-diminished place of Italy in the operatic scheme of



things by the end of Puccini's life. His last opera, *Turandot*, after a dramatized fairytale by Carlo Gozzi, was first performed (posthumously) in 1926 with its final duet completed by a younger composer named Franco Alfano. Another cruel oriental fantasy of feminine humiliation, it offered up two victims to the audience: the slave girl Liu, who fills the soft and wilting slot, is driven by torture to suicide; the title character, the haughty princess of China, is brought low by love, which compels her reluctant submission to her wooer Calaf, the *tenore di forza*.

*Turandot* was the very last Italian opera to enter the permanent international repertoire. As we shall see, there have since been only a handful of later additions to that repertoire, and they have been the work of French, Austrian, Russian, English, and (even) American composers, not Italians. In part, this drying up of the original fount of opera reflects the fate of opera in general: its status as primary medium of popular spectacular entertainment was usurped in the twentieth century by the movies, especially since the advent of "talkies," only three years after the premiere of *Turandot*.

And yet if films are to be regarded, in effect, as the operas of the twentieth century, then Italy has not ceded its place after all. Puccini's heirs have been the great Italian film directors, especially those like Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, or Federico Fellini, who made up the so-called neorealist school of the 1940s and 1950s, which, arguably, inherited the mantle of *verismo*.

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## Notes:

(20) Julian Budden, "Puccini," in *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Vol. III (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 1171.

(21) *Ibid.*

(22) *Ibid.*

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

# CHAPTER 13 The Return of the Symphony

### Brahms

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 13 The Return of the Symphony

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

## THE DRY DECADES

We have not taken a close look at an old-fashioned “nonprogrammatic” multimovement symphony since the end of chapter 2, when our subject was Schubert's “Unfinished” (1822), nor have we even given the genre a passing glance since chapter 3, when Mendelssohn's subtitled but nonprogrammatic “Reformation” Symphony (1832) briefly served us as a foil to his oratorio *St. Paul*. Had we not been sidetracked by what seemed at the time to be more pressing “historical” concerns, we might have spared a moment for Schumann's four symphonies, composed between 1841 and 1850, all of them now staples of the orchestral repertoire. The fact that we did not take the time is only another illustration of the problem broached in the previous chapter: the ease with which the historian's attention is captured by novelty.

But even if we had been telling the story in the guise of a repertoire survey rather than a narrative, the “classic” symphony would have fallen out of the picture in the second half of the nineteenth century, despite its Beethovenian prestige. For two decades beginning around 1850, it was no longer viewed as a site of potential creative energy. It was seen, rather, as an illustrious but outmoded genre. Its meteoric career had carried it in the course of little more than a century from the status of aristocratic party music to that of momentous public oration, but its place had been decisively preempted by the programmatic genres pioneered by Liszt and the “New Germans.” Wagner, going even further, made bold to declare (in *The Artwork of the Future*) that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony had made all purely instrumental music obsolete.<sup>1</sup>

Not a single symphony composed in the 1850s or 1860s has survived in the repertoire. It became a “conservatory” or “professor's” genre—a graduation exercise to demonstrate formal mastery—and its practitioners were for the most part academics. Perhaps the most prolific symphonist of the period, Anton Rubinstein (1829–94), a fire-breathing piano virtuoso but a conservative composer, was in fact the founder and director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, and its head of composition. His counterparts in Germany—Julius Rietz (1812–77), Carl Reinecke (1824–1910), Salomon Jadassohn (1831–1902), and the Danish-born Niels Gade (1817–90) in Leipzig; the renegade Lisztian Joachim Raff (1822–82) in Frankfurt; Robert Volkmann (1815–83) in Vienna and Budapest; Karl Reinthaler (1822–96) and Schumann's brother-in-law Woldemar Bargiel (1828–97) in Cologne; and Carl Grädener (1812–83) in Hamburg—maintained the genre through its fallow period, but made no lasting contribution to it.

No composer could graduate from the Paris Conservatory at this time without a “classical” symphony under his belt, and that is how the student symphonies by the sixteen-year-old Saint-Saëns (1852) and the seventeen-year-old Bizet (1855) got written. Gounod's two symphonies (1855, 1856) were the by-product of his meeting with Fanny Hensel in Rome (described in chapter 3), as a result of which he met her brother, Felix Mendelssohn, and heard him conduct the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. “On his return to Paris,” the English critic Martin Cooper wryly noted, “Gounod was almost certainly unique among French musicians of his generation in his knowledge and understanding of music, past and present, that had nothing to do with the opera house and no place in the French tradition.”<sup>2</sup>

But by then the symphony was considered an anomaly practically everywhere. Its continued cultivation, except as a didactic genre, was taken as evidence that music had entered “the age of the Epigones,”<sup>3</sup> or lesser descendents, to quote the most popular music history text of the 1880s, the *Illustrated History of Music* by Emil Naumann (1827–88), a Dresden professor who was himself a former pupil and “epigone” of Mendelssohn. Renewed vitality in this or any other “classical” genre was considered a historical (or “dialectical”) impossibility, so ingrained had the historicist viewpoint become.

And yet, as Naumann's textbook illustrates, the inherent optimism of the historicist progress-myth was producing a pessimistic backlash. Wagner and Liszt, the great figures venerated by the "New German School," were at the time of Naumann's writing both recently deceased. It seemed to most observers that they had brought all the historicist prophecies to fulfillment. "Reflecting now on the achievements of the past," Naumann concluded, "we observe in the tonal art an organic whole. It is complete and finished. What is to come one cannot divine."<sup>4</sup> There seemed to be nothing left to do.

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## Notes:

- (1) *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, Vol. I, trans. W. Ashton Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895), p. 126.
- (2) Martin Cooper, *French Music from the Death of Berlioz to the Death of Fauré* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 11.
- (3) Emil Naumann, *The History of Music*, Vol. V, trans. F. Praeger (London: Cassell & Co., n.d.), p. 1193.
- (4) Naumann, *The History of Music*, p. 1194.

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Vienna: 1806–1945

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Concert: The 19th and early 20th centuries

Classical

## MUSEUM CULTURE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 13 The Return of the Symphony

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The last thing Naumann expected was the “symphonic revival” that was by then already well under way, although (like anyone committed to a theory of history) he failed to notice what was going on all around him. The reasons for this massive infusion of new creative energy into what had been considered a moribund genre are notoriously complex. Of course they include the appearance of a new generation of highly capable musicians; but that has to be considered not so much a cause as a contingency. Without “new symphonists,” to be sure, there could never have been a “new symphony.” But the talent and renewed dynamism that went into the symphony beginning in the 1870s could have gone elsewhere. Something had to revive the genre's prestige and renew its prospects in order to attract the talent. That something was a volatile compound of contradictory historical and social factors that transformed concert life, producing the powerful notion of a “classical tradition” in music that is still with us today.

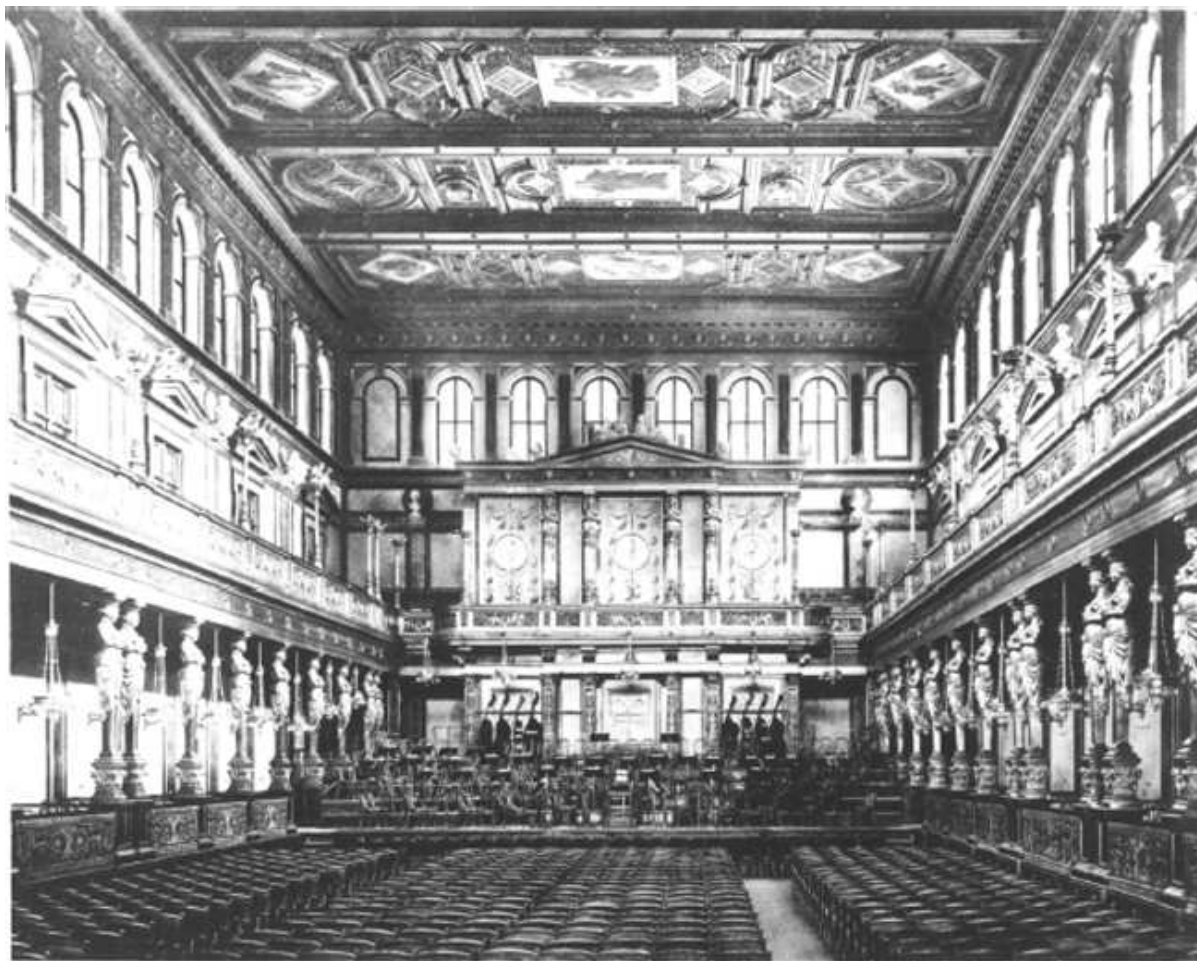
With the swelling of urban populations in the wake of industrialization came a broadening out of the musical audience into what could be truly thought of as a “public”: a cross-section of society—or, at least, a cross-section of “affluent society,” people with “disposable income,” uncommitted money to spend. The concert hall began to rival the opera house as a potential source of profits, and toward the middle of the nineteenth century halls of a size comparable to opera theaters but specifically designed for orchestral concerts—the kind of concert hall familiar to us all—began to proliferate.

The Leipzig Gewandhaus (drapers' hall), built in 1781, was for a long time an isolated badge of commercial prosperity and the appetite for concert music that it stimulated. It had no rival until 1831, a round half-century later, when the Vienna Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (Society of Friends of Music), a “voluntary association” or private club supported by a paying membership, built a hall for the propagation of orchestral music. The “Gesellschaft” or “Society” (as it was known for short) was a very important organization, always at the forefront of public concert life in the Viennese capital. As the city grew in size and wealth, so did the Society, reflecting the city's burgeoning commercial prosperity and channeling it into musical ventures; as the Society grew, so did the concert life it managed. It is to that process that we must look if we want to understand the rebirth of the symphony.

Founded in 1812 as an amateur orchestra, the Society endowed the first Viennese conservatory in 1817, with an enormous library attached containing many autograph manuscripts by the giants of the “classical” repertoire, purchased for the Society by its wealthier members. The concert hall, Vienna's first, was erected three years after Beethoven's death and two years after Schubert's. Their symphonies had been played during their lifetimes in theaters, dance halls, and aristocratic palaces, not in specially designed spaces for which there was as yet no perceived social need.

Once the first public halls were in place, others followed, ever bigger; and as halls grew, so did orchestras. In 1860, public music-making in Vienna was rather belatedly professionalized on the Leipzig model with the establishment of the Künstlerverein (Artists' Club) orchestra, now called the Vienna Philharmonic. A hall was built for it ten years later by the Vienna Musikverein (Music Society); known as the Grosser Saal (Large Hall), and familiarly as the “Goldener Saal” (Golden Hall) because of its lavish appointments and superb acoustics, it had a previously unheard-of seating capacity of almost 2,000, larger than many opera houses. It was joined later the same year, 1870,

by the Gewerbehauseaal (Chamber of Commerce Hall) in Dresden, with comparable dimensions and a fully professional Philharmonic Orchestra. Both the Vienna and the Dresden orchestras began offering full season subscriptions like those of the precocious Gewandhaus, and like all “major” big-city professional orchestras today. From 1870, then, one may say that such subscription series were “normal” in European concert life, and so they have remained, both in Europe and in its cultural colonies.



**fig. 13-1 Interior of the Grosser Saal of the Musikverein (Great Hall of the Musical Society; now the Vienna Philharmonic), built by Theophil Hansen in 1870.**

Shorter orchestral subscriptions had been a fixture of Paris music life since 1828, when the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire was founded by the Opéra concertmaster François Antoine Habeneck. It gave its concerts, as its name suggests, in the conservatory's Grande Salle. In 1853, a rival concert organization, the Société des Jeunes Artistes du Conservatoire, began giving concerts under Jules-Étienne Padeloup (1819–87), who went on, beginning in 1861, to offer a series called Concerts Populaires de Musique Classique in the mammoth Cirque Napoléon. The hall held 5,000, and the orchestra numbered 110. After the war of 1870, the Concerts Padeloup, as they had come to be called, faced competition from a pair of rival organizations, popularly named after their enterprising virtuoso conductors: the Concerts Colonne (after Edouard Colonne, 1838–1910) from 1873, and the Concerts Lamoureux (after Charles Lamoureux, 1834–99) from 1881.

London was the only other European city that, like Leipzig, had boasted a full-fledged concert hall (the Hanover Square Rooms, where Haydn appeared) before the end of the eighteenth century. The postindustrial burgeoning was especially spectacular there, as befitted the city that continued to be the nineteenth century's largest commercial center. St. James's Hall went up in 1858, with a gargantuan seating capacity of 2,127. It was the site of the series known as Popular Concerts, more familiarly as the “Pops.” Nothing could compare, though, with the Royal Albert Hall, still London's premiere concert space, which opened in 1871 with an audience capacity of 6,500 when the parquet seating is removed, as it now is for the summer “Promenade” (or Proms) concerts at which the ground-floor audience stands (and circulates). Those concerts had actually started at the Queen's Hall (capacity 2,492), erected in 1893 but destroyed by a German bombing raid during World War II.



Russia's first professional orchestra was founded at St. Petersburg in 1859 by the aristocratic Russian Musical Society, the same organization that sponsored Rubinstein's conservatory. Its concerts were given in what was formerly known as the *Zal dvoryanskogo sobraniya* (Assembly Hall of the Nobility), built in the 1830s for fashionable balls. As converted to concert use it seats a mere 1,318. Mammoth halls on the order of the ones that went up in Western Europe in the heyday of bourgeois concert life had no real counterparts in imperial Russia, which maintained a quasi-feudal society until the 1860s, and where the growth of an entrepreneurial bourgeoisie was stunted by reactionary laws. Somewhat paradoxically, a burgeoning public concert life in Russia on the bourgeois model had to await the Communist (that is, antibourgeois) revolution of 1917.

The most prestigious nineteenth-century concert hall in America was New York's Music Hall (now known as Carnegie Hall after Andrew Carnegie, the steel magnate who financed it), with a seating capacity of 2,784. It opened its doors in 1891 (with the Russian composer Chaikovsky as the guest star of the inaugural gala) as a home for the orchestra of the New York Philharmonic Society (founded 1842; now the New York Philharmonic Orchestra). Carnegie Hall's only serious rival was Boston's Symphony Hall (capacity 2,645), built for the Boston Symphony Orchestra (founded 1881), in use since 1900.

The audience for "symphony concerts" reached a new plateau, then, around 1870, and only seemed to keep growing for the rest of the century. Up to a point, large halls and large audiences were symbiotic: big capacities meant lower prices, which meant more people, which necessitated bigger capacities. The Leipzig Gewandhaus, the original "symphony hall" had to be completely rebuilt in 1882–84, after about a century of use, at twice its original capacity in order to accommodate the socially diverse ("mass") audiences that now flocked to symphony concerts. Although the new building was never used as a textile trade center, it was still called the "draper's hall," since that name was now ineluctably and honorably associated with the history of orchestral music, now more popular and prestigious than ever before.

But we are facing a potentially grim paradox; for "symphonic" music began growing toward its new plateau of popularity and prestige exactly as its production was falling off. What were all those excellent new professional orchestras playing in their immense new concert halls?

The answer is implied in the statement of aims with which Padeloup launched his Société des Jeunes Artistes du Conservatoire in 1852: "to present recognized masterpieces alongside music by young composers." Padeloup's repertoire consisted of the "Viennese classics"—Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—plus Mendelssohn and Schumann (shortly destined to join the rest in the ranks of dead composers), with the works of "young composers" admitted only insofar as they were composed in "classical" forms. The early symphonies of Saint-Saëns and Gounod, mentioned above as conservatory produce, were all that Padeloup was at first prepared to admit alongside the masterpieces of the Teutonic dead. These were (in the words of David Charlton, a historian of French music) "among the earliest works in 'classical' forms by Frenchmen."<sup>5</sup> Audiences found them delightful, especially Gounod's. But from the historicist standpoint Padeloup was providing a counterhistorical incentive to "epigonism." By historicist lights, "works in 'classical' forms by Frenchmen" had no call or right to exist, at least not at that late date.

Padeloup's proclivities were matched by all the other enterprises that popularized symphonic music. In its first year, 1858, the London "Pops" at St. James's Hall presented (in descending order of frequency) works of Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Weber. The next season the repertoire was broadened to encompass Handel and Bach—even older music!—and a single program of British music that "epigonally" imitated the composers already named. In other words, the symphonic repertoire as purveyed in the latter half of the nineteenth century—with increasing frequency, in ever improving performances, and to an ever widening public—had been frozen at the century's midpoint.

A startling statistic established by William Weber, a social historian who has made a specialty of the sociology of musical taste, reveals that around the turn of the nineteenth century about 80 percent of all the music performed in Vienna, Leipzig, Paris, and London (the cities mainly surveyed above) was the work of living composers, while after 1850, and especially by 1870, the ratio of living to dead authors performed had been almost exactly reversed.<sup>6</sup> Eighty percent of the music offered was by the ancient dead, and the composers of the remaining 20 percent now had a powerful "counterhistorical" incentive to become their elders' epigones. The concert hall had effectively become a museum, and so it has remained to the present day. As the music historian J. Peter Burkholder put it, commenting on Weber's findings, "a young composer [as of the 1850s] had not only living models but also dead and deified ones."<sup>7</sup> The newly professionalized, newly democratized, and newly profitable concert world of the late nineteenth century seemed willy-nilly to be ening and universalizing the aristocratic antiquarian taste of London's quaint old



Concert of Antient Music. That society, founded in 1776 by the earl of Sandwich and some other noblemen, and unique for its time, had stipulated that no work should be performed at its concerts that was less than twenty years old. By the turn of the century it had become something of a laughing stock, owing to the “want of variety” in its programs, as one critic complained, and its “total discouragement of living genius.” But it held on until 1848, and only disbanded when concert programs everywhere began conforming to its strange rule, thus depriving it of a *raison d’être*.

“Historical concerts”—panoramic, canon-solidifying surveys of the musical past—became fashionable everywhere. Anton Rubinstein toured the world with a series of seven historical recitals that established the royal line of keyboard succession (somewhat nationalistically colored at the end) as follows:

*First concert* (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries): Byrd, Bull, Couperin, Rameau, Scarlatti, J. S. Bach, Handel, C. P. E. Bach, Haydn, Mozart

*Second concert*: Beethoven (eight sonatas!)

*Third concert*: Schubert, Weber, Mendelssohn

*Fourth concert*: Schumann

*Fifth concert* (virtuoso composers): Clementi, Field, Hummel, Moscheles, Henselt, Thalberg, Liszt

*Sixth concert*: Chopin

*Seventh concert*: Chopin, Glinka, Balakirev, Cui, Rimsky-Korsakov, Anatoly Lyadov, Chaikovsky, Anton Rubinstein, Nicholas Rubinstein (his brother)

And now the biggest paradox of all: The driving impulse behind this newly universalized, high-minded “classicism” was, perversely, a commercial one. Selling music to a mass public meant guaranteeing its quality by invoking the “test of time.” Veneration of the masters, moreover, conferred a cachet not only on producers and purveyors, but on consumers, too. As Peter Gay, the leading historian of bourgeois mores and foibles, puts it, to attend such a concert was “to document one’s membership in a coterie”—an irresistible blandishment, albeit an ironic one, to an ever enlarging audience of social climbers.

Finally, the very nature of a public concert (especially an orchestral or a choral one) as a social gathering furthered the ossification of the repertoire. Such concerts, in William Weber’s words, satisfied the “desire to celebrate the emerging urban-industrial civilization with a grand thronging together in public places.”<sup>8</sup> And what drew the throngs together was “the need of the new industrial society to manifest its economic and cultural potency through its own grand rites of secular religiosity.” The music of the “classical masters” had become a kind of liturgy.

The newly widespread “discouragement of living genius” was not only demoralizing to composers. It was also in flat contradiction with the historicist esthetic by which most of them had come by then to swear, with its call for perpetual progress and renewal of artistic means. The esthetic of Romanticism, in one of its major late strains, had collided with the realities of musical life as actually lived, even (or especially) in Germany. No wonder, then, that symphonic production had fallen off. On the one hand, it had been declared obsolete by the lofty arbiters of musical “progress,” and on the other it had to vie in the real world (the world of expenses, promotions, and remunerations) with works that had been declared timelessly enduring—hence unsurpassable—achievements.

This untenable situation was already implicit in the contradictions between the romantic cult of original genius and the new concept of the musical “work of art.” Once musical quality had been identified with masterworks, and masterworks with a specified collection of indispensable scores, then curatorship—preservation and display—became the job of performing organizations. As the repertoire was conceived as “complete and finished” (to recall Emil Naumann), the objectives of performers and composers began to diverge. The latter wished to add to the repertoire, but their additions were only welcome insofar as they were seen as compatible with the existing collection, or complementary to it—which is to say, practically never. The symphonies of Rietz or Reinecke or Jadassohn or Gade might be shown once or twice, especially locally, but the need was rarely seen to add them to the permanent collection. And now we have at last defined “classical music” as the term is used today, and pinpointed its origin: “classical music” is the music in the “permanent collection,” first defined around 1850.

Against the “permanent collection” or closed tradition of classicism was pitted in fine paradox the “permanent revolution” celebrated by historicism. The paradox led to the rifts that have yawned ever since between repertoire and canon, on the one hand, and between contemporary composition and the contemporary public, on the other. A strange but durable amalgam of esthetic idealism and crass commercialism had equated repertoire and canon, at least for the present, and thereby frozen both. Music of easy audience appeal was excluded and had to find other outlets, other venues. Thus not only was “classical” or “art” music born at that crucial nineteenth-century midpoint; so was “popular” or “entertainment” music (commercially purveyed music not meant for permanent display but for instantaneous, ephemeral success). The simultaneous origin of both these categories, eternally antithetical though they may appear to us by now, was only inevitable, since each was defined by the other's exclusion.

Composers were now really in a bind. The only way they could at once maintain self-respect in the face of historicism and at the same time have access to the newly defined “classical” repertoire and its prestigious venues was to create “instant classics”—compositions that in their high-minded and compelling seriousness could somehow simultaneously project both novelty and enduring value. They had at once to communicate, first, sufficient freshness and originality to stimulate interest; second, sufficient conformity to traditional values to warrant inclusion in the permanent collection; and third, sufficient intricacy of design to encourage a test of time.

Such a prescription, involving as it did the juggling of so many contradictory criteria, was indeed daunting. But it is the prescription under which composers of “classical music” have been laboring ever since the musical museum was established. Burkholder aptly sums it up in all its paradoxical majesty by observing that

Once the concert hall became a museum, the only works appropriate to be performed there were *museum pieces*—either pieces that were already old and revered or pieces which served exactly the same function, as *musical works of lasting value which proclaimed a distinctive musical personality, which rewarded study, and which became loved as they became familiar*.<sup>9</sup>

It sounds like something that couldn't be done. But someone did it. And in the process, as Burkholder observes, he provided “the model for future generations of what a composer is, what a composer does, why a composer does it, what is of value in music, and how a composer is to succeed.”<sup>10</sup> In this formulation, of course, “a composer” here stands for *modern* composers, namely, in Burkholder's neat definition, “composers obsessed with the musical past and with their place in music history.”<sup>11</sup> The definition is neat because it encapsulates yet another paradox, the ultimate one: modernity in music has come to be chiefly defined by a relationship to the past, rather than (according to the old “Zukunftist” definition) a relationship to the future.

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## Notes:

(5) D. Charlton, “Paris,” in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. XIX (2nd ed., New York: Grove, 2001), p. 108.

(6) See Willaim Weber, “Mass Culture and the Reshaping of European Musical Taste, 1770–1870,” *International Journal of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* VIII (1977): 5–21.

(7) J. Peter Burkholder, “Museum Pieces: the Historicist Mainstream in Music of the Last Hundred Years,” *Journal of Musicology* II (1983): 120.

(8) William Weber, “Mass Culture and the Reshaping of Musical Taste,” p. 15.

(9) Burkholder, “Museum Pieces,” p. 119.

(10) J. Peter Burkholder, “Brahms and Twentieth-Century Classical Music,” *19th-Century Music* VIII (1984–5): 81.

(11) *Ibid.*, p. 76.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

Johannes Brahms

Clara Schumann

## NEW PATHS

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 13 The Return of the Symphony

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

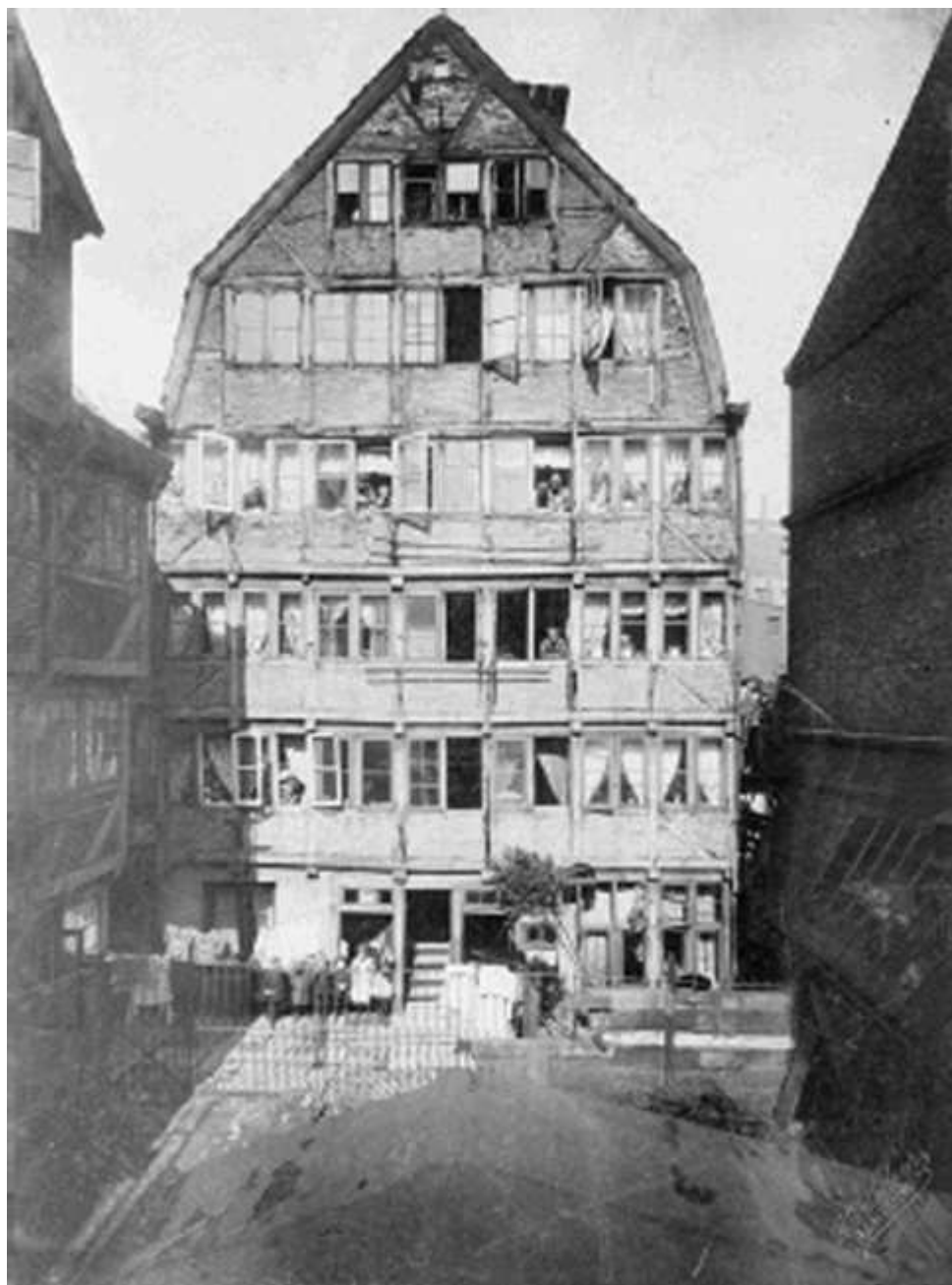
**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The one who did it, who broke the vicious circle or logjam and (among other things, but preeminently) revived the “classical” symphony as a living genre, was Johannes Brahms (1833–97), the first major composer who grew up within, and learned to cope with, our modern conception of “classical music.”

A Hamburger by birth but from 1862 a Viennese by adoption, Brahms was just old enough to have had a personal link to the as-yet-unproclaimed “classical” tradition as a living thing. It could not have been a more distinguished link, in fact, since from the age of twenty he had been identified as a protégé of Schumann, the last representative of what would be later defined as the classical (rather than the “modern”) symphonic line. By 1853, only three years before his catastrophically premature death, Schumann was already seeing himself as an embattled classicist in opposition to the emergent New German School. In view of his earlier distinction as the quintessential Romanticist of the keyboard and the lied (see chapter 6), and his former championship, as critic, of Berlioz and Liszt, this was an ironic outcome. But had he lived longer, Schumann would certainly have continued in his new role as spearhead of the reaction against the historicist party, whose official organ, in compounded irony, was the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, his own journal, now in the hands of Franz Brendel (see chapter 8).



**fig. 13-2 Johannes Brahms as a young man, by Josef Ludwig Novak.**



**fig. 13-3 Brahms's birthplace in Hamburg.**

As a courtesy to his predecessor, Brendel allowed Schumann space in the magazine for what would be his very last article: “Neue Bahnen” (“New paths”), an encomium to the young and as yet practically unknown Brahms, which appeared on the front page in the issue of 28 October 1853. Whether by accident or design, Schumann's valedictory closely paralleled his debut article, the famous welcome to Chopin (“Hats off, gentlemen, a genius”), which also trumpeted the arrival of a new genius on the scene. Readers of the *Neue Zeitschrift* could be forgiven for receiving Schumann's tribute with some skepticism: Brahms was being named as the preeminent worthy among what New Germans by then regarded as an academic crowd of merely local significance—Bargiel, Gade, and the rest (as Schumann listed them in a footnote). Even as he proclaimed his advent in Messianic terms, Schumann described Brahms's virtues in terms that could seem downright bathetic, as if well-schooled respectability were a mark of heroism.

“After such a preparation,” Schumann enthused, alluding once again to the Bargiels and the Gades,

it has seemed to me that there would and must suddenly appear some day one man who would be singled out to make articulate in an ideal way the highest expression of our time, one man who would bring us mastery, not as the result of a gradual development, but as Minerva, springing fully armed from the head of Cronus.



And he is come, a young creature over whose cradle graces and heroes stood guard. His name is *Johannes Brahms*, and he comes from Hamburg where he has been working in silent obscurity, trained in the most difficult theses of his art by an excellent teacher who sends me enthusiastic reports of him, recommended to me recently by a well-known and respected master.<sup>12</sup>

There was a lot of subtext here. The “well-known and respected master” who had put Brahms in touch with Schumann was the violinist Joseph Joachim, formerly the concertmaster of Liszt's orchestra at Weimar, the very crucible of the “music of the future,” who (as we may remember from chapter 8) noisily defected from that position to lead the opposition to “New Germany.” His letter of resignation is a remarkably articulate (and astonishingly frank) statement of principles, indispensable to an understanding of Brahms. “Your music,” wrote Joachim to Liszt,

is entirely antagonistic to me; it contradicts everything with which the spirits of our greats have nourished my mind from my earliest youth. If it were thinkable that I could ever be deprived of, that I should ever have to renounce, all that I learned to love and honor in their creations, all that I feel music to be, your works would not fill one corner of the vast waste of nothingness that I would feel. How, then, can I feel myself to be united in aim with those who, under the banner of your name and in the belief that they must join forces against the artists for the justification of their contemporaries, make it their life task to propagate your works by every means in their power?<sup>13</sup>

This could be read as a manifesto of a different sort of historicism, or rather an “antihistoricism”: one that looked to the past for timeless (hence not—or not merely—historical) values rather than for justification of further progress. Brahms was nurtured in this faith—by his teachers, by Joachim, but above all by Schumann, whom he worshipped, virtually becoming a surrogate son to him. In the last miserable years of Schumann's life, when the composer was confined to a sanatorium for the mentally ill, Brahms actually took his place at the head of the Schumann household, and remained on intimate terms with Clara Schumann to the end of her long life, only a year before the end of his own. (Yes, of course tongues wagged about the relationship between the bachelor composer and the widowed pianist, fourteen years his senior.) His intense personal experiences of and with the Schumanns, and the loyalty it bred, bound Brahms ever more tightly to their position in German musical politics.

Only once did he take direct political action on their behalf, again at Joachim's urging. The violinist had drafted a response to Brendel's remarks at the 1859 conference (described in chapter 8) commemorating the founding of the *Neue Zeitschrift*, in which he lauded the achievements of the “post-Beethoven development” and proposed that it be christened the “New German School,” despite its having been inspired by Berlioz and led by Liszt (both non-Germans), since its achievements had been universally recognized as the sole legitimate bearers of Beethoven's legacy.

Taking umbrage at Brendel's smug tone and his brazen snubbing of Schumann, Joachim's open letter decried the assumption that “seriously striving musicians”<sup>14</sup> were all in accord about the value of Liszt's music, or about the worthiness of the New Germans' historicist program. On the contrary, he wrote, serious musicians “can only deplore or condemn the productions of the leaders and disciples of the so-called ‘New German School’ as contrary to the most fundamental essence of music.” He sent it to Brahms, among others, for further circulation and signatures, particularly among those who would be attending the Lower-Rhine Music Festival, still a bastion of “classical” conservatism, in the summer.

Unfortunately for Brahms and Joachim, somebody (as we now say) “leaked” the document to an unfriendly journalist who printed it prematurely (on 6 May 1860) in a Berlin newspaper, with only four signatures—Brahms's and Joachim's plus those of the assistant conductor at the court of Hanover and an equally obscure conductor from the university town of Göttingen. This feeble gang of four was widely satirized for fancying themselves a new Schumannesque “Davidsbund,” but now a Davidsbund of the right. A parody of the letter appeared in the *Neue Zeitschrift* itself, signed “J. Geiger” (J. Fiddler [Joachim]) and “Hans Neubahn” (Johnny Newpath [Brahms]). Brendel, in a sanctimonious rebuttal, branded it a “pathological” phenomenon. Wounded, Brahms retreated thenceforth from public debate, preferring to follow the advice he received from the venerable Ferdinand Hiller, that “the best means of struggle would be to create good music.”<sup>15</sup> Still and all, his abhorrence of Liszt's works and horror at his influence continued to seethe, and left many lively traces, unprintable in family newspapers, in Brahms's correspondence.

This story would be too trivial to relate, were it not for the fact that Brahms finally managed to draft the first

movement of his First Symphony in its aftermath. Clara Schumann herself gave him a nudge in this direction, in a letter of consolation and encouragement she sent him in June. “*A fine stormy sky can pass into a symphony*,” she wrote, underlining the words suggestively; “who knows,” she added, “perhaps this has already happened.”<sup>16</sup>

As early as the 1853 “Neue Bahnen” piece, Robert Schumann had been after Brahms to write a big symphony—that is, a loud public proclamation of his status as Schumann's (and, it goes without saying, Beethoven's) legatee. Within the article itself he had referred to the young composer's three early piano sonatas as “veiled symphonies” (a phrase that well suits at least the grandiose Third Sonata, opus 5 in F minor—the “Appassionata” key). An actual Brahms symphony, Schumann predicted, would mark the rebirth of Romanticism at its highest and best and least contaminated by the stain of “realism” (by which he meant explicit programmaticism). “If he will wave with his magic wand to where massed forces, in the chorus and orchestra, lend their strength,” Schumann promised, “there lie before us still more wondrous glimpses into the secrets of the spirit world.” They would be a long time in coming. To Joachim, Schumann wrote early the next year, “Now where is Johannes? Is he not yet allowing timpani and drums to resound?”<sup>17</sup> He was not, and it was the very sense of heritage and obligation that Schumann had thrust upon him that seemed to hold him back, as it did increasing numbers of modern musicians—musicians obsessed (to recall Burkholder's formulation) with the past and with their place in history, and with a consequent sense of their own cursed belatedness. After many abortive attempts, exasperated by a sense of failure, Brahms came close to giving up. He declared to one of his friends that he would never compose a symphony, adding, “You have no idea how it feels to one of us when he continually hears behind him such a giant.”<sup>18</sup>

The giant, of course, was Beethoven, the (by definition) unsurpassable model by which Brahms felt he had to be measured. But all the past was stalking him, and the problem was compounded by the situation sketched earlier in this chapter, namely the ineradicable monopolizing presence not only of Beethoven but of all the “classical masters” in the newly standardized and canonized contemporary repertoire. In such a daunting atmosphere, composing an “ordinary” symphony, rather than a Lisztian programmatic work that asked to be measured by another (and, as far as Brahms was concerned, a meretricious) standard, became a well-nigh impossible task. Brahms approached it with extreme circumspection over a period that lasted, all told, more than twenty years.

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## Notes:

(12) Schumann, “Neue Bahnen,” in Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: Norton, 1950), p. 844.

(13) Joseph Joachim to Franz Liszt, 27 August 1857; quoted in Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Weimar Years 1848–1861* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 347.

(14) Quoted in Walter Niemann, *Brahms*, trans. C. A. Phillips (New York: Tudor, 1929), p. 77.

(15) Bernhard Scholz, *Verklungene Weisen* (Mainz, 1911), p. 142; quoted in David Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 96n28.

(16) Clara Schumann to Brahms, 21 June 1860; quoted in Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, p. 9.

(17) Robert Schumann to Joseph Joachim, 6 January 1854; quoted in Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, p. 2.

(18) Remark to Hermann Levi, October 1871, reported in Max Kalbeck, *Brahms*, Vol. I (Berlin, 1915), p. 165; quoted in Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, p. 15.

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Symphony: The crisis of the 1830s

Brahms: Orchestral works and concertos

Robert Schumann

## THREE "FIRSTS"

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 13 The Return of the Symphony

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The first try came shortly after Schumann's call, in response to tragic events. On 27 February 1854, less than eight weeks after Schumann wrote to Joachim asking after the symphony Brahms owed him, the tormented older composer made his famous suicide attempt, jumping headlong into the Rhine, which resulted in his confinement for the rest of his life in a sanatorium. By July 27, Brahms had sketched three movements of a symphony in D minor for piano duet, and had orchestrated the first movement. He sent the score to Joachim, who later told one of Brahms's biographers, Max Kalbeck, that it began with a covert (that is, unannounced as a "program") visualization of Schumann's anguished leap.

Musical score for the beginning of Johannes Brahms' Piano Concerto in D minor, Op. 15. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes staves for Clarinet in B (Cl. in B), Bassoon (Bn.), Oboe (Ob.), Horns (Hrn.), Trumpets (Timp.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Cello (Vcl.), and Double Bass (Cb.). The second system includes staves for Clarinet in B (Cl. (B)), Bassoon (Bn.), Oboe (Ob.), Horns (Hrn.), Trumpets (Timp.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Cello (Vcl.), and Double Bass (Cb.). The score shows the initial chords and melodic lines for these instruments.

**ex. 13-1 Johannes Brahms, Piano Concerto in D minor, Op. 15, beginning**

Whether it was something Brahms had told Joachim or something the latter had imagined on the basis of the state of mind they shared, the story rings true. The stormy opening (Ex. 13-1), which indeed strikes the portentous drum-saturated note Schumann had called for, is surely meant to recall or evoke a state of extreme emotional duress, with its immediate contradiction of the putative tonic by the first chord sounded, by the grotesquely dissonant trills on A $\flat$ , a diabolical tritone away from that same insistently asserted tonic, and by the bizarrely disruptive change of direction that shatters the opening melodic arpeggio with a startling leap(!). (The fact that Brahms disguises his portrayal of Schumann's leap by reversing its direction does not lessen the probability of its reality; veiling the literal depiction so as to keep the originating imagery private and leave only the emotional effect on public display is very much in the spirit of romanticism as opposed to "realism.")

What is perhaps most noteworthy about this nasty, intensely personal music, though, is the surprising fact that it is constructed almost entirely out of "classical" allusions. The most immediate one is to Schumann's own D-minor symphony, composed in 1841 as his Second, but revised in 1851 and published posthumously as his Fourth. It, too, begins by "allowing the timpani and the drums to resound" in a lengthy roll (Ex. 13-2a), and its first Allegro theme (alluded to thereafter in all the other movements) is also marked by a surprising leap that lands on the very same

notes as does Brahms's intensified version (Ex. 13-2b).

But of course Schumann's D-minor symphony had itself been beholden to *the* D-minor Symphony, Beethoven's Ninth, and so is Brahms's. The surprising B  $\flat$  harmony at the outset of Ex. 13-1 is a sort of digest of the whole first section of Beethoven's exposition, in which the submediant (rather than the mediant) emerges unconventionally as the key of the second theme. And Brahms's much more insistent drum roll (on the tonic, instead of Schumann's dominant) is surely a recollection of Beethoven's first-movement recapitulation, one of the noisiest and stormiest (and most commented-on) moments in the literature.

Brahms never finished the D-minor symphony. Its first two movements later went into his first piano concerto (op. 15, published 1861), from which Ex. 13-1 is taken; and the third, even more radically transformed, later found a home in a choral work to which we will return. But the observations we have made about it remained characteristic of Brahms, and crucial to understanding both his eventual success and his historical role. The high level of allusiveness, for one thing, would be a permanent fixture, not merely (as might well have been thought at first) a sign of apprenticeship—which is to say that they were for the most part true allusions, rather than unconscious citations or imitations. Brahms's allusions, often extremely wide-ranging composites, would always be reforged, often with great virtuosity, into new configurations that in their combination made for a heightened intensity.

And for a second (related) thing, despite the eschewal of public programmatic content, Brahms's music was often anything but “abstract” in its conception. It was as laden with symbolism as Beethoven's Ninth itself, but like its famous antecedent (and unlike the work of the “New Germans”) it contained no built-in decoder key, no public aids to interpretation, and hence no single certifiable message. But that, too, was an original and precious attribute of romantic art, given explicit acknowledgement by Schiller when he wrote, as early as 1794, that “the real and express content that the poet puts in his work remains always finite; the possible content that he allows us to contribute is an infinite quality.”<sup>19</sup> Artworks of which that can be said have a greater hold on the imagination (or so a romantic would contend) than artworks with a single, explicit, paraphrasable meaning.



Ziemlich langsam (♩ = 52)

Fl.  
Ob.  
Cl. in B  
Bsn.  
Hn. in F  
Hn. in D  
Trpt. in F  
Tromb. Alto  
Tromb. Ten.  
Tromb. Bass  
Timp. in D, A  
Vln. I  
Vln. II  
Vla.  
Vcl.  
Cb.

Ziemlich langsam

ex. 13-2a Robert Schumann, *Symphony no. 4, I, slow introduction*, mm. 1–7

Lebhaft

Vn. I

6  
Vn. II

ex. 13-2b Robert Schumann, *Symphony no. 4, I, Lebhaft (Allegro) theme*, mm. 1–11

The reasons for Brahms's failure to complete his D-minor symphony, and its eventual withdrawal or transformation

into works in less exacting genres, are unknown. Yet one can surmise them in part, perhaps, from the composer's subsequent behavior. His "neoclassical" bent was powerfully reinforced by the first paying position he secured after receiving his impressive sendoff from Schumann. It amounted to a sort of neoclassical throwback in its own right, for it allowed Brahms to spend four months a year from 1857 to 1859 in virtually "eighteenth-century" conditions, as Kapellmeister to the minor princely court of Detmold, a small city in north-central Germany. Brahms was thus one of the very last composers to enjoy, even briefly and part-time, the security of aristocratic patronage. Occupying as he did a position similar to Haydn's a hundred years before, Brahms was stimulated to imagine himself a Haydn and experiment "serenely" (as he put it) and for his own edification with classical form, in a fashion no composer had lately done with comparable opportunity or seriousness.

With a forty-five-piece orchestra at his disposal, the young Kapellmeister turned out two Serenades in a frankly retrospective style. The very name was retrospective: a throwback to the outdoor party music with which his patrons' eighteenth-century ancestors would have been supplied by their staff musicians for entertaining. As Brahms was more acutely aware than his less historically minded contemporaries, that lightweight environment had been the symphony's crucible. It was almost as if he wanted the ontogeny of his own works to recapitulate the phylogeny of the genre he wished to master. Equally, though, it was a retreat from the task to which his friends were urgently calling him, a temporary (and temporizing) refuge in the nineteenth century's eighteenth century—a fairyland of material comfort and artistic health.

Accordingly, the more frankly retrospective of the two serenades—the First, in D major, op. 11 (1858)—was a riot of "salubrious" and witty allusions, all of a bright and sunny nature as befits its key, the neutralizing reverse mode of Beethoven's Ninth, Schumann's Fourth, and Brahms's own first symphonic attempt. D major was the key of Beethoven's Second Symphony, at the opposite emotional extreme from the tortured opening movement of the Ninth. The fact, probably as well known to Brahms as to any historian, that the Second Symphony was composed at the most woeful juncture of Beethoven's life (the period of his irreversible deafness and the "Heiligenstadt Testament") surely enhanced its attraction to Brahms at this particular juncture of *his* life; for it argued against the popular romantic (but in fact "realist") assumption that artworks directly reflected the creator's biographical circumstances, that art was by nature confessional. Art was something one could, if one wished, actually hide behind (as Beethoven himself—who knows?—might have been doing).

That the D-major Serenade was palpably a retreat from writing a symphony is confirmed by its creative history. It began as a four-movement work with the fence-straddling title *Sinfonie-Serenade*. What turned it into a serenade and only a serenade was the addition to it of two frank *pastiche* movements between the slow movement and the finale: a pair of minuets such as no one had written in decades, and a second scherzo in which Brahms cleverly juxtaposed quotations from the two composers with whom he was temporarily identifying. Whereas in the D-minor Symphony he had looked to Schumann and through Schumann back to late Beethoven, in the D-major Serenade he looked to early Beethoven and through him back to Haydn. Many have noted (as they were surely meant to do) the delightful counterpoint of quotations, the trio from the scherzo of Beethoven's Second in the horn against the finale of Haydn's last ("London") Symphony in the cellos (Ex. 13-3).

Some have tried to see a serious polemic in this gay piece. Brahms is known, after all, to have been spoiling for a fight with the Lisztians, and as Donald Francis Tovey has observed, a work like the D-major Serenade can be read as an implicit refutation of historicism, or at least as a protest against it. Indeed, Tovey saw it for that very reason as "an epoch-making work in a sense that is little realized," for "it sins against the first and most ephemeral canon [rule] of modern criticism, the canon which inculcates the artist's duty to assert his originality in terms so exclusively related to this week's news as to become unintelligible by the week after next."<sup>20</sup>

Allegro

Hn. in D  
Vln. I  
Vln. II  
Vla.  
Vc.  
Cb.

Vln. I  
Vln. II  
Vla.  
Vc.

ex. 13-3a Johannes Brahms, D-major Serenade, V (second scherzo)

*p*

ex. 13-3b Ludwig van Beethoven, Symphony no. 2, Trio of Scherzo

Spiritoso

*p*

ex. 13-3c Joseph Haydn, "London" Symphony, Finale, mm. 1-8

That is well put, but it is a point that could only have been made in retrospect, at a time when the premises of historicism, while by no means vanquished, had long been under strong attack. In 1858, the Serenade would hardly have been thought an effective protest against the militancy of "New Germany," let alone its refutation. Reliance on classical models could only have looked weak compared with Liszt's bold forays, and that is precisely why Brahms could not offer it as a symphony. As Brahms put it himself to a friend who inquired about the change of title, "if one wants to write symphonies after Beethoven, then they will have to look very different!" But one thing that would make Brahms's own symphonies look different is already conspicuous in Ex. 13-3, and that is Brahms's mastery of traditional counterpoint and his fondness for indulging it not only in specially designated fugues or fugatos, but as a

way of habitually loading the texture of his music with significant, often motivic, detail.

It was the combination of this motivically-saturated, highly allusive, polyphonic texture with the high strung, intensely personal expressive tension of the early D-minor attempt that is preserved in the First Piano Concerto, that finally produced the mature Brahmsian symphonic idiom in the aftermath of the failed polemic with the New Germans. In June of 1862 Brahms was able to show his friends the first full-fledged symphonic movement of his to survive into a finished work, eventually (after some further revision) becoming the first movement of his First Symphony. Clara Schumann wrote of it with delight to Joachim, quoting its "rather audacious" opening phrase (an echo of the old polemics?), and commenting, as an insider, on just those features of the work that will best repay our detailed examination:

The movement is full of wonderful beauties, with a mastery in the treatment of the motives that is indeed becoming more and more characteristic of him. Everything is so interestingly interwoven, yet as spirited as the first outburst; one is thrilled by it to the full, without being reminded of the craft. In the transition from the second part back to the first [i.e., in the "retransition" from development to recapitulation] he has once more succeeded splendidly.<sup>21</sup>

ex. 13-4a Motivic interweaving in Johannes Brahms, Symphony no. 1, I, beginning of Allegro

ex. 13-4b Johannes Brahms, Symphony no. 1, I, transition to second theme

ex. 13-4c Johannes Brahms, *Symphony no. 1, I*, slow introduction

ex. 13-4d Johannes Brahms, *Symphony no. 1, I*, closing theme of exposition

Ex. 13-4a shows the beginning of the movement as Clara Schumann knew and quoted it in her letter to Joachim, extended from her four-bar quotation to eight measures in order to emphasize the contrapuntal “interweaving” to which her letter refers. The “soprano” in mm. 1–4 becomes the bass in mm. 5–8 to support a new motif in the soprano (one that will be given an immediate sequential development and extension). The weaving and reweaving, according to time-honored principles of invertible counterpoint, will continue throughout the movement. The transition to the second theme, for example (Ex. 13-4b), begins by inverting the texture of mm. 5–8, and then reinverts it so that the chromatic descent (the “middle voice” at the beginning of Ex. 13-4a) gets its turn to be the bass. In the slow introduction (Ex. 13-4c), which (though heard first) was a derivation made years later from the Allegro rather than its source, the contrapuntal relationship between the rising and falling chromatic lines is skewed to produce even more portentously dissonant harmonies over a pedal bass. Finally, the closing theme from the exposition (Ex. 13-4d) pits an inversion of the leaping motif first heard as the “soprano” in mm. 5–8 against a complex derivation from the soprano of mm. 1–4, in which each of the three chromatically ascending tones alternates in turn with the diatonic descent that follows in m. 3. One could almost say that in place of the traditional thematic content of symphonic discourse Brahms has substituted a mosaic of motifs in an ever shifting contrapuntal design.

And what is more, virtually every “tessera,” every stone in the mosaic, can be plausibly interpreted as an allusion. Of those already shown, perhaps the most obvious is the one labeled “d” in Ex. 13-4a. It belongs to a whole complex of Brahmsian themes that go back to the Schumann phrase shown in Ex. 13-2b; it was, evidently, a repeated tribute to Brahms's mentor that was finally internalized as a “stylistic trait.” Other conspicuous allusions transcend the level of the individual motive. Most conspicuous of all is the one to which Brahms repeatedly made compulsive, nervously jocular references in his correspondence. “The symphony is long and difficult,”<sup>22</sup> he wrote to one. “My symphony is long and not exactly charming,” he wrote to another. Finally, and most revealingly, he wrote to a third: “My symphony is long and in C minor.”

## Notes:

(19) Quoted in Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, p. 93.

(20) Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*, Vol. I (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 123.

(21) Clara Schumann to Joseph Joachim, 1 July 1862; quoted in Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, p. 10.



(22) Quoted in Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, pp. 16, 98n1.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Beethoven: Posthumous influence

Brahms: Orchestral works and concertos

## STRUGGLE (WITH WHOM?)

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 13 The Return of the Symphony

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

*In C minor*. To anyone conversant with the tradition into which Brahms was trying, against the odds, to break, the words were enough to make the blood run cold. It meant that Brahms was taking on the model of models: Beethoven's Fifth. Vying with this symphony meant incurring a host of obligations that ranged far beyond the one with which we have already seen Brahms coping, namely the obligation to achieve a tight motivic construction. There was also the obligation to reenact (yet without merely repeating) Beethoven's archetypal "plot" or moral trajectory, embodied in the rhetoric of *Kampf und Sieg*, "Struggle and Victory"—a rhetoric that Beethoven himself had relinquished in the pessimistic post-Napoleon years, but that Brahms would now have to revive in a new historical and cultural context. Finally, though Brahms would put off reckoning with it for a while, there was the obligation to match Beethoven's signal achievement in the Fifth: the binding of the whole symphony together in a single thematic package through strategic recalls and returns.

The motif that eventually served this binding function is the first and shortest to appear: the three-note chromatic ascent, labeled "a" in Ex. 13-4, that is often presented in tandem with its descending complement ("b"). Its similarity to the unforgettably idiosyncratic opening (or answering) phrase in the Prelude to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, while easily noticed, is often dismissed; Wagner, hero that he was to the New Germans, is an unlikely ally for a Brahms, let alone a mentor. He was a commanding, unignorable presence on the scene by 1862, though, and (although this is often forgotten) a contemporary of Schumann, hence old enough to be Brahms's father. And while *Tristan* would not be performed on stage until 1865, its vocal score had been published in 1860. So Brahms certainly had "access," as one says when adjudicating charges of plagiarism. But did he have "motive"?

Yes indeed, say musicologists aware of recent trends in literary criticism, particularly the theory of "anxiety of influence" put forth in the 1970s by the literary critic Harold Bloom. The very fact that Brahms was allegedly Wagner's antagonist has led some to suppose that the apparent (and pervasive!) allusions to *Tristan* in Brahms's First was an instance of unwitting mimicry and transformation—what Bloom calls "misreading"—caused by Brahms's fear of failure and his unconscious desire to overmaster it, an outcome that could only be achieved in contest with his strongest living elder and rival. In the early 1990s, a psychoanalytically oriented musicologist named Robert Fink even offered a reading of the symphony<sup>23</sup> (likewise predicated on the assumption that Brahms was unconscious of his debt to Wagner) that invested the proverbially erotic *Tristan* quote with the bachelor composer's repressed libido—that is, with sexual energies (and anxieties) that could find an acceptable outlet only in the semantically veiled medium of "absolute music."

One argument in favor of this reading is the fate of the *Tristan* motif in the second movement of the Symphony, the Andante sostenuto. It was not composed until 1876, when not only the first movement but also the finale was complete. Despite the long hiatus, or even because of it, Brahms took care to feature the *Tristan* motif prominently near the beginning of the movement, where it might promote the impression of a spontaneous "organic" continuity that united the whole symphony in a single spiritual journey. That journey was also "microscopically" inscribed within the slow movement itself, thanks to the *Tristan* motif's recapitulation at the end. The two references, encircling the movement, contrast radically in affect: the first is chromatic and leads to an "open-ended" harmony (that is, a harmony in need of resolution), while the second is twofold: a repetition of the chromatic version followed by a diatonic one that leads to harmonic closure, thus replaying the transformation the original *Tristan* motif underwent at the tail end of Wagner's opera and wordlessly reevoking its symbolism (Ex. 13-5).

But there is really no reason to assume that Brahms could not have been conscious of his appropriations from

Wagner. While he made no bones about despising Liszt's symphonic poems and program symphonies and deplored their influence (although he was as much in awe of the Hungarian's piano playing as anyone else), Brahms esteemed Wagner's music highly, and studied it (Fig. 13-4). To his friends he sometimes (half jestingly) called himself a "Wagnerianer," and treasured the autograph score of a scene from *Tannhäuser* among other manuscripts in a personal collection that included works of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, and of course Schumann. (Wagner asked for it back on learning that Brahms was its owner; their letters make amusing reading.)



ex. 13-5a Johannes Brahms, *Symphony no. 1*, II, mm. 1–7

ex. 13-5b Johannes Brahms, *Symphony no. 1*, II, mm. 114–24

At any rate, if Brahms's was among the many imaginations stirred profoundly by the Prelude to *Tristan*, he could fairly claim his appropriation as "fair use," considering the striking reharmonization he gave the phrase in question, and the pointed way he directed it to a cadence on its first appearance, as if forestalling its Wagnerian (not to mention its erotic) consequences. Besides, the fact that Brahms's harmonic language had kept abreast of the latest in Wagner exempted him, to "New German" consternation, from the easy charge of epigonism. Indeed, the impressively "advanced" harmonic progression in which the supposed Wagner quote participates is the very one that gives rise to the movement's most impressive structural feature: the intermeshing of the most distinctive local harmonic progressions with the overall tonal design, as most dramatically illustrated in the retransition passage to which Clara Schumann called attention. This was the pro-foundest lesson Brahms had learned from Beethoven.

Before tracing it, however, we need to trace the equally distinctive debt his harmonic idiom owed to Schubert, whose late symphonies, as we may recall, were posthumously retrieved from oblivion beginning in the 1840s, thus only since that decade available as an "influence" on younger composers. The "Unfinished," perhaps the greatest find of all, only saw the light of day in 1867, which is to say right in the midst of Brahms's lengthy symphonic gestation. He absorbed many lessons from it, as he did from the "Great" C-major symphony, which Schumann had rediscovered in 1840. Of all the composers of the nineteenth century, in fact, the only one whose mature idiom was even more heavily (if differently) indebted to Schubert's harmonic artifices was Liszt, who thus—and what could have been more ironic?—shared with Brahms, his most outspoken antagonist, a crucial common birthright.



**fig. 13-4** Brahms perusing the score of Wagner's *Siegfried*.

These Schubertian “artifices,” first described and illustrated in chapter 2, included, in the first place, the introduction of local progressions and modulations around circles of major and minor thirds alongside the “classical” circle of fifths. Another Schubertian innovation, strongly related to the first, was Schubert’s reliance for purposes of harmonic multivalence (or “ambiguity”) on what might be called “sonic homomorphism”: the similarity in sound that can link chords with radically different structures and functions and allow their functions to be interchanged. The most potent of these homomorphisms—one could call them “puns,” except that puns are jokes and these are not (necessarily)—was the one that obtained between the dominant seventh, the primary propeller of root motion along the circle of fifths, and the “German” augmented-sixth chord, which traditionally resolved by semitones in contrary motion to a dominant. (See the discussion of Schubert’s *Moment musical no. 6*, Ex. 2-6.) These Schubertian devices play a decisive role in both the structure and the expressive rhetoric of Brahms’s *First*.

In chapter 5 we already had occasion to cite Schubert’s “Wanderer” Fantasy as a formative model for Liszt, providing a precedent for the “one-movement form” of Liszt’s *First Piano Concerto*. Its status as a model for Brahms is even more specific: when the *First Symphony* was finally completed in 1876, its four movements exactly followed Schubert’s path-breaking tonal trajectory along the circle of major thirds: C–E–A $\flat$ –C. But even within the first movement, complete (except for the slow introduction) in 1862, Schubertian harmonies and tonal progressions rule.

The harmonization of the “Tristanesque” chromatic ascent, for example, first announced in Ex. 13-4a (and as of 1862 the movement's beginning), almost invariably involved an augmented sixth that functions locally as a “flat submediant,” thus potentially subverting the dominance of fifth relations. The tension between fifths and thirds (in terms of root progressions), or between fifths and semitones (in terms of voice leading), pervades the movement, lending it a sense of taut tonal drama not encountered since ... well, since Beethoven.

The drama is announced right along with the motifs and themes in Ex. 13-4a: the augmented sixth leads away from C minor to a D major that is marked as V of G. But the harmony is immediately forced back to the original tonic by adding a seventh to the G-major chord thus approached, turning D major retrospectively into V/V. The sense of constraint—of an impulse thwarted—is palpable. Clara Schumann's immediate reaction to its violence was keen. Having quoted it to Joachim, she added, “That is rather audacious, perhaps, but I have quickly become used to it.”

At the very least, it is not the sort of comfortable music one associates with epigones. It is not just a pleasing play of tones but a *gesture*. We may interpret the thwarted chromatic impulse however we wish: as repressed libido, as counterthrust against “New Germany,” as anything that may strike us as relevant or illuminating either with respect to Brahms or to ourselves as listeners. All such readings, however, can only be partial. They place limits on a meaning that, in its powerful inchoateness, precedes and subsumes all semantic paraphrases. And that, we may recall, was precisely the essence and purpose of “absolute music,” lately rejected by the New Germans in the name of “union with poetry.” Brahms rejected the union, and by the force of his example restored the viability of presemantic or “absolute” musical meaning, the sort of meaning that is indistinguishable from “structure” (that is, from the particularities of syntax that, by eliciting *affect*, produce a meaningful *effect*).

Tension between thirds and fifths, between fifths and semitones, continues. The whole movement's progress, at the “global” level, can be mapped according to its fluctuations. We can try to sum things up by describing the two main transitions. The first, from the exposition into the development, takes off from a “Schubertian” modal mixture—E ♭ minor following on its parallel major, the normal (“relative”) key of the second theme in a C-minor symphonic movement. A more portentous model for the tonic-relative-parallel relationship, however, is the scherzo of Beethoven's Fifth, the specter evoked by Brahms's very choice of key. (For explicit confirmation that this was the model foremost in Brahms's mind one need only inspect the brass parts in Ex. 13-6.)

At the very moment where exposition gives way to development, however, Brahms takes an explicitly Schubertian plunge (Ex. 13-7a), reinterpreting the reiterated third and root of E ♭ minor, the local tonic, as the third and fifth of C ♭ major, the submediant, enharmonically respelled as B, with a consequent (and initially puzzling) metamorphosis in the key signature at the moment when the development arrives (that is, the downbeat of the exposition's “second ending”). Thus B, the leading tone—or, to use some archaic but suggestive terminology, the “subsemitonium”—is set in opposition to the tonic in place of the dominant: a semitone, in other words, assuming the traditional position (and doing the traditional work) of a fifth.

We may pick up the consequences of this pervading strain at the other end of the development, where the retransition is prepared in the traditional way, with “dominant tension” generated by a pedal point. The pedal on G is itself achieved through a reiteration of the motivically charged three-note chromatic ascent (“a”). Against the dominant pedal, this motive is given its lengthiest sequential development. The same chromatic motif that generated the pedal now threatens it, in a remarkable passage that combines the chromatic ascent in the bass with the equally motivic (Schumann-derived) octave leap, all pitted contrapuntally against the Beethoven-derived horn call in Ex. 13-6 and the motif labeled “c” in Ex. 13-4. The chromatic ascent is extended as far as D, enabling a reapproach, this time through the “classical” fifth relation, to the dominant pedal (now accompanying another sequence derived from “c”).

The full dominant seventh on G is reached in m. 331 (Ex. 13-7b), and reiterated as a four-bar fanfare. There would seem to be nothing left to do but resolve it, with suitable panache, to the tonic. But at this point Brahms pulls off a superb Schubertian feint, resolving the chord not as a dominant seventh but as a German sixth, to the dominant of B, the opposing key. The lines of tonal conflict had not been so clearly or dramatically drawn in decades. And the conflict is played out to the inevitable dénouement through a Schubertian—or even a Lisztian!—circle of minor thirds, with German sixths cropping out of a chromatic sequence in contrary motion (an extension of the “a + b” complex first announced in Ex. 13-4a at the movement's very outset) on B ♭ (m. 337) and D ♭ (m. 339) before linking up with the original a + b complex and at last resolving, as the complex itself had first resolved, through two fifths (D natural and G) to the tonic and the “double return.”

Liszt of course would have done it differently. The sequence of augmented sixths on G, B ♭, and D ♭ would have

mandated, in one of his symphonic poems (say, the “Mountain Symphony” as discussed and illustrated in chapter 8) the completion of the sequence with a similar chord on  $F\flat$  (E). A “New German” would no doubt call Brahms’s modus operandi a pusillanimous retreat to the security of traditional “tonality.” Brahms might well counter that the more radical Lisztian progression sacrifices all sense of conflict and drama to an inert (because functionally undifferentiated) sequence, colorful and superficially “progressive” but devoid of emotional significance. Brahms remained faithful to the German tradition—a tradition (as we have already observed, and as can scarcely be overemphasized) that included the Wagner of *Tristan* and the *Ring*—in staunch opposition to the new harmonic tradition that Liszt had been trying to establish.

The image displays a page of a musical score, numbered 243 at the top left. The score is organized into three systems of staves. The first system includes staves for Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Clarinet in B-flat (Cl. in B $\flat$ ), Bassoon (Ba.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The second system includes staves for Horn in C (Hn. in C), Horn in E-flat (Hn. in E $\flat$ ), Trumpet in C (Tpt. in C), and Timpani (Timp.). The third system includes staves for Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Double Bass (Cb.). The notation is in a key signature of one flat (B-flat major or E-flat minor) and a common time signature. The music features various melodic lines, some with slurs, and harmonic accompaniment. The page is otherwise blank.



**ex. 13-6 Johannes Brahms, Symphony no. 1, I, mm. 243–52**

So the lines were drawn at the end of the century. Each would find ample continuation in the music of the next generation, and beyond. But, to peek briefly at that future, there would be a significant difference in the work of the neo-Lisztians (mainly French and Russian composers) and the Germans who followed Wagner and Brahms. The former would use circles of major and minor thirds or their scalar derivatives (whole-tone and “tone-semitone” or octatonic scales) primarily for the depiction or exploration of nonhuman, subhuman, or superhuman imaginative terrains—natural, primitivistic, fantastic, occult—in which there would be a huge upsurge of interest at century's end. Pitch relations that preempted the forces of functional harmony were suited best to conjure up odd or alien worlds. German composers, meanwhile, would extend and intensify the exploration of the human inner world, that of emotions and desires, for which the dynamism of established tonal relations—the push of fifths, the pull of leading tones—would remain indispensable, as they had been for Wagner and Brahms alike.

The first movement of Brahms's First was a landmark in this extension; and yet the composer shelved it for more than a dozen years before providing it with its companion movements. Surely the demons of heritage and obligation were still plaguing the composer; but an equally important reason for this renewed delay was that in the mid-to-late 1860s Brahms embarked in earnest on his successful public career, a path that at first deflected him from his symphonic tasks.



ex. 13-7a Johannes Brahms, *Symphony no. 1, I*, mm. 185–91

ex. 13-7b Johannes Brahms, *Symphony no. 1, I*, mm. 331–43

## Notes:

(23) See Robert W. Fink, “Desire, Repression, and Brahms’s First Symphony,” *Repercussions* 2 (1993), pp. 75–103.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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## A CHORAL (AND A NATIONALISTIC) INTERLUDE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 13 The Return of the Symphony

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

It is one of the many ironies surrounding his career that Brahms, famous in history for shunning opera, for his faithfulness to the idea of “absolute music,” and for his role in reviving it, should have gained his first real fame as a composer of choral music to romantic, religious, and patriotic texts. It was, however, a time-honored road to success for German composers in the older Romantic and nationalist tradition, with its many supporting institutions in the guise of singing societies and summer festivals. For a while it was the field in which Brahms was seen to specialize.

The first major appointment he was able to secure in Vienna was as director of the Singakademie, one of the city's two main choral societies. In pursuit of the post he unexpectedly embarked in the spring of 1863 on an elaborate cantata—*Rinaldo*, for tenor soloist, chorus, and orchestra—after a narrative poem by Goethe based on Torquato Tasso's epic of the crusades, *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581), which had been a popular source for Italian madrigals and early operas. The part Goethe had paraphrased had already been set as an opera by Lully (1686), Handel (1711), and Gluck (1777) by the time Brahms got a hold of it, and in its dramatic exchanges the work is as close as Brahms would ever come to writing an opera himself. (Indeed, had he found a suitable opera libretto in this ambitious phase of his career Brahms would not have hesitated to set it; his “principled” antioperatic stance was adopted later and was mostly a matter of image-building.)

By the time he had his first rehearsals at the Singakademie in the fall, Brahms realized that the organization's budget would not cover a performance of his work in progress, and it, too, was shelved for a while, not to be completed until 1868. For the time being Brahms concentrated as a conductor on a *cappella* and continuo-accompanied literature, and in the process discovered a wealth of sixteenth- to eighteenth-century music, particularly Heinrich Schütz and other early “German masters” from Henricus (“Heinrich”) Isaac (then thought to be a German) to J. S. Bach, whose choral works were then only beginning to be published.

Brahms's stint with the Singakademie lasted only one year, but the impact of “early music” on his composing was decisive. He became an enthusiast, sought out the leading musical scholars of his generation—Gustav Nottebohm, Friedrich Chrysander, Philipp Spitta—as friends, and actually engaged in some amateur musicological work of his own, making many arrangements of early German choral music and participating in the preparation of “critical editions” (that is, editions faithful to original sources rather than arrangements) of music by Schubert and Schumann, and even a non-German, François Couperin.

“Even” a non-German, because musical antiquarianism, as an aspect of musical Romanticism, was ipso facto an aspect of musical nationalism as well, and it should not be assumed that his eventual stance in favor of “absolute music” put Brahms at odds with either the Romanticism or the nationalism of his time. The manner in which his antiquarian pursuits rubbed off on his composing only intensified its timeliness, so to speak, given the moment in which he lived, and the nation to which he belonged. Brahms's choral music, in fact, gives us an interesting new lens on an old question, namely the question of how the liberal German nationalism of the pre-1848 period metamorphosed into the more aggressive nationalism with which the world is now more familiar, and how music figured in the process.

Brahms's greatest choral work, *Ein deutsches Requiem* (“A German requiem,” 1868), may be viewed as a sort of

culmination of the older nationalist phase. It is not a liturgical work, but rather a setting, inspired by the death of Brahms's mother, of selected passages from the bible, in Luther's translation, that deal with consolation, acceptance of fate, and transcendence of suffering through love. As a work with "Lutheran" words (and a certain amount of chorale-like writing) but meant for performance throughout the German-speaking lands—including Catholic Austria, the composer's adopted home—it continued the ecumenical "Mendelssohnian" tradition of using music as a liberal uniter of the German-speaking peoples.

As hinted earlier, the Requiem contains one remnant salvaged from the aborted symphony in D minor: the second movement, "All of Flesh is Like the Grass," set as a funeral march in B  $\flat$  minor that in its original symphonic context would surely have recalled Beethoven's *Eroica*. But other sections of the Requiem give evidence of Brahms's profound assimilation of his nation's earlier legacy of sacred music. Fugues and fugatos abound, of course, but there are also many passages that bear traces of "musica antiqua" from archeological strata to which no previous composer had ever penetrated creatively.

The Requiem's very opening section, "Selig sind, die da Leid tragen" ("Blessed are those who bear their grief"), is a striking case in point. Its text is put together like the words of an old motet. That is, it is a patchwork of topically related lines from disparate biblical sources, in this case bridging the Old and New Testaments. After the first sentence, from the Gospel According to Matthew, the words come from Psalm 126, "Die mit Tränen säen" ("They who sow with tears"). This was a psalm that many old north-German composers had set. The most famous setting, perhaps, was the one by Johann Hermann Schein (1586–1630) in his collection *Israelis Brünlein* ("Fountain of Israel") of 1623.

Brahms surely knew it, and fashioned his own setting to reflect that knowledge, appropriating the contrapuntal and expressive techniques of Schein's day (or even those of Schein's actual setting) in order to achieve a similar marriage of "motet" style with "madrigalian" trappings (Ex. 13-8). Motet style means that successive lines are given individual musical treatment (or, to use the language of the nineteenth century, set to separate motifs), usually in imitative texture. The madrigalian element is the use of highly contrasting musical figures to point up the figures of speech employed in the text. The most sought-after figures were antitheses, the contrast of opposites, here "sowing with tears" and "reaping with joy."



Die mit Trä nen sä

Die mit Trä

This system contains the first two staves of a musical score. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics "Die mit Trä nen sä". The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment line with lyrics "Die mit Trä".



en,

nen,

Die mit Trä nen sä

Die mit Trä

This system contains the next two staves. The top staff has lyrics "en,". The second staff has lyrics "nen,". The third staff has lyrics "Die mit Trä nen sä". The bottom staff has lyrics "Die mit Trä".



12

die mit

Die mit Trä

mit Trä nen, mit Trä nen,

nen sä

This system contains the final two staves. The top staff has lyrics "12" and "die mit". The second staff has lyrics "Die mit Trä". The third staff has lyrics "mit Trä nen, mit Trä nen,". The bottom staff has lyrics "nen sä".

7  
Trä nen  
nen sä  
mit Trä nen  
en, mit Trä, mit Trä, mit Trä, mit Trä - nen  
en, mit Trä nen sä

22  
sä - er, wer - den mit Freu - des, mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den, mit  
en, wer - den mit  
sä en, Freu - den  
sä en, wer - den mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den, mit  
en, wer - den mit Freu - den, mit

25  
Freu - den em - ten.  
Freu - den em - ten, wer - den mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den  
wer - den mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den em - ten  
Freu - den em - ten.  
Freu - den em - ten, wer - den mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den



28

wer - den mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den ern -  
 ten, ten, wer - den mit Freu - den em -  
 ten, wer - den mit Freu - den,  
 wer - den mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den em -  
 em - ten, wer - den mit

31

ten, wer - den mit Freu - den em - ten,  
 ten, wer - den mit Freu - den ern - ten,  
 wer - den mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den ern - ten,  
 ten, wer - den mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den ern - ten,  
 Freu - den, mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den em - ten.

**ex. 13-8a Johann Hermann Schein, *Die mit Tränen säen*, the two opening points**

Schein had set the former to a tortuous chromatic line in long note-values, the latter to an octave leap in short ones. Brahms does something similar, in nineteenth-century terms. The first phrase is set to drooping sigh-figures, with the quarter note as the shortest value. Except for the soprano, all the voices sing the same musical idea either in parallel harmony or in imitation. The soprano part intensifies expression through syncopation, chromaticism, and a final leap to a suspension at the top of its range. The second phrase is set disjunctly, in halved note-values and (in seemingly direct reference to Schein's setting) in dancing dactylic rhythms that cover almost an octave's span in a single direction.

The harmony is fully up-to-date and highly expressive in Romantic terms, the orchestration likewise—and highly sophisticated, the violins being omitted for the sake of a “darker” sonority as Brahms had previously done in his second orchestral Serenade. The archaism is not so much stylistic (or “epigonal”) as “procedural”—not an imitation or even an emulation (since there is no sense that Brahms was competing with Schein) but rather a reference or allusion, the rhetorical device of which Brahms is emerging as the supreme nineteenth-century musical master.

**B**

Die mit  
Mit Thrä - nen sä - en, die mit  
Die mit Thrä - nen, die mit Thrä - nen, die mit  
Die mit Thrä - nen, die mit Thrä - nen, die mit

*p* *cresc.* *f* *cresc.*

**B**

*p* *opres.* *f* *cresc.*

Thrä - nen, mit Thrä - nen  
Thrä - nen, die mit Thrä - nen  
Thrä - nen, mit Thrä - nen sä - en,  
Thrä - nen sä - en, mit Thrä - nen sä -

*f*

sa - en, wer - den mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den, er - ten, wer -  
sä - en, wer - den mit Freu - den, mit Freu -  
wer - den mit Freu - den, er - ten, wer - den mit  
er, wer - den mit Freu - den, er - ten.

The first system of the musical score consists of five staves. The top four staves are for vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass), and the bottom two are for piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in German, with hyphens indicating syllables across notes. The piano part features a rhythmic accompaniment with triplets and a 'trio.' marking.

- den mit Freu - den  
- den er - ten, mit Freu - den  
Freu - den, mit Freu - den, er - ten, mit  
wer - den mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den er - ten, mit

The second system of the musical score continues the vocal and piano parts. The lyrics are: "- den mit Freu - den", "- den er - ten, mit Freu - den", "Freu - den, mit Freu - den, er - ten, mit", and "wer - den mit Freu - den, mit Freu - den er - ten, mit". The piano accompaniment includes a 'piano' (*p*) dynamic marking and a 'Lento' tempo marking. The piano part features a steady accompaniment with chords and moving lines.

The image shows a musical score for Johannes Brahms' 'Ein deutsches Requiem, I'. It consists of four vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are 'ern - ten. Freu - den ern - ten.' The score includes dynamic markings such as 'p' and 'pp', and a 'C' time signature. The piano part features a prominent bass line with a 'pp' marking in the final measure.

**ex. 13-8b Johannes Brahms, *Ein deutsches Requiem*, I (“Die mit Tränen säen...”)**

Allusion to early music also makes a significant contribution to the impact of the *Triumphlied* (“Song of victory”; 1871), Brahms's most grandiose choral work and during his lifetime his most popular one. (As in the case of Beethoven's *Der glorreiche Augenblick*, the reasons for its present near-total neglect have more to do with its tainted political content than its musical qualities.) It was composed in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, in expectation of the elevation of the king of Prussia to the exalted rank of *Kaiser*, emperor of the united German *Reich*.

Like the vast majority of his countrymen (including those who, like Brahms, lived under the rule of the other kaiser, Franz Josef of Austria) the composer enthusiastically supported the policies of Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian “Iron Chancellor,” who engineered the long-awaited unification of Germany, and whose portrait, in the form of a bronze relief surrounded by a wreath, occupied a place of honor in Brahms's music room. The *Triumphlied*, a three-movement cantata for antiphonal mixed choirs (eight voice parts in all) in D major, accompanied by the largest orchestra Brahms ever employed, was published with a decorative flyleaf proclaiming it to be *Seiner Majestät dem Deutschen Kaiser Wilhelm I ehrfurchtsvoll zugeeignet vom Componisten*: “Reverently dedicated by the composer to his Majesty the German Emperor Wilhelm I.”



**fig. 13-5 Brahms's music room in Vienna; the bas-relief portrait of Bismarck (with ribbon attached) is located between a reproduction of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* and the huge bust of Beethoven at the upper right.**

Opportunistic? To be sure, but it was nevertheless an authentic expression of the German nationalism of its day, and this in two ways. In the first place it renders adoration to *Reich* and kaiser in explicitly religious terms, such as until then (within modern times) had been the exclusive province—and notoriously so—of the “backward” Russian Empire (as in Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar*, discussed in chapter 4). It is not just that the empire is declared to be the fulfillment of God's will. (That much had already been claimed, by Beethoven among others, for the post-Napoleonic imperial restorations.) In the *Triumphlied* the German *Reich* is implicitly compared, in a text drawn by Brahms himself from the biblical Book of Revelation, with the heavenly dominion (also a *Reich* in Luther's German), and the kaiser (blasphemously, as it might have seemed were it stated outright) with “the King of Kings and Lord of Lords”—that is, with God himself.

Brahms's musical antiquarianism was especially germane to this religious veneration of state and ruler, for the *Triumphlied* takes the form of a “polychoral motet,” the most exalted form of early ritual music, pioneered in Venice by the Gabriellis but known to Brahms primarily through the work of Schütz, Giovanni Gabrieli's pupil. And the edge the *Triumphlied* orchestra has over all other Brahmsian ensembles consists in the use of three trumpets instead of two, which, in conjunction with the timpani, play fanfares antiphonally with the choruses' Hallelujahs in a manner that specifically apes the Baroque “festival” orchestra with its “Stadt-pfeifer” (town piper) contingent, known best to Brahms and his contemporaries from Bach's D-major orchestral suite, some of the large cantatas recently published in the *Bachgesellschaft* (Bach Society) edition of J. S. Bach's complete works, which began appearing in 1850—and especially from Bach's exuberant D-major setting of the *Magnificat* (“Mary's song of praise”), the most immediate model, which echoes and reechoes through the first movement of the *Triumphlied*.

The trumpet fanfares inevitably lend a military cast to the proceedings; and this is the second way in which the nationalism expressed by the *Triumphlied* is of the newer, hawkish type. The work celebrates not only a political event but (as its title proclaims) a military triumph as well, and the latter is asserted aggressively, with *Schadenfreude*—roughly “gloating,” more exactly “malicious pleasure in another's misfortune,” something for which, only the German language possesses a word.

The “other” in this case, of course, was France, and fallen Paris in particular. Brahms shared the general German contempt for Offenbach's city and found an ingenious way of expressing it in the *Triumphlied*, literally “between the lines.” The text of the cantata's first movement consists of a portion of the heavenly shout transcribed in Revelations, 19:1 – 2: “Hallelujah! Victory and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments!” The rest of the verse runs as follows: “He has condemned the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and has avenged upon her the blood of his servants.”

Brahms never set these abusive words. But at one point, immediately following the last line that he did set, he inserted an orchestral theme, blared *all'unisono* by almost the full orchestra, that never returns in the voice parts, and that exactly fits the rhythm of the next line in German: *daß er die große Hure verurteilt hat* (Ex. 13-9). No one who remembered the bible could miss it; and just in case anyone did, Brahms “painted” the unsung word *Hure* (whore) with an outlandish diminished third. There can be no mistaking his intention, however reluctant we may be to acknowledge it: Brahms penciled the offensive lines into his own copy of the full score.

And another bit of “painting” depicts, for all with ears to hear, the Prussian advance upon the French capital. At what ought to be the climax of the first movement, Brahms inexplicably (as it seems) scales the dynamics down to pianissimo right where the choirs enter with “Victory and glory and power” for the last time. Over the next twelve bars, a crescendo carries the words through to fortissimo, while the brass instruments and drums begin beating a tattoo, and finally an imitation of hoof beats. At the crescendo's peak, a German sixth on B  $\flat$  is harrowingly suspended over a pedal A for two full measures. Bloodier battle music would have to await the twentieth century.

So with the *Triumphlied* we encounter a nationalism that projects itself with the force of religious dogma, and that not only loves but also hates. It would be an impertinence to credit Brahms with the innovation. He did give it an unusually vivid musical expression, however, and one that links up interestingly with other aspects of his musical profile. Particularly telling is the use of “Bach” trumpets in such a context. The canonization of Bach had been linked with German nationalism since the appearance of Forkel's biography at the beginning of the century. Associated since Mendelssohn's time with choral genres, a tradition that Brahms brought to its peak in the *Triumphlied*, the Bachian style (and related “baroque” devices) would soon be carried by Brahms into the “symphonic mainstream”—the domain of absolute music—as well. It was Brahms, in other words, whose music forged the link between Bach and the “Viennese classics” that has since been spuriously read back into the historical narrative, at first by German (“insider”) scholars, and that has quite recently come under intense skeptical scrutiny, chiefly by Americans, the quintessential musicological outsiders.



ge - recht sind sei - ne, sind sei - ne Ge - rich - te,  
 ge - recht sind sei - ne, sind sei - ne Ge - rich - te,  
 ge - recht, sind sei - ne, sind sei - ne Ge - rich - te,  
 ge - recht sind sei - ne, sind sei - ne Ge - rich - te,

denn wahr - haf - tig,  
 denn wahr - haf - tig,  
 denn wahr - haf - tig,  
 denn wahr - haf - tig,

For in righteousness and truth,  
 for in righteousness and truth,  
 the Lord, yea, the Lord giveth judgment,  
 for He judgeth, He judgeth  
 in righteousness and truth, in truth.

### ex. 13-9 Johannes Brahms, *Triumphlied*, I

As we redirect our own narrative now toward the “absolute” genres with which Brahms is now chiefly, and with every good reason, associated, one more work from his “choral period” will repay a sidelong glance: the *Schicksalslied* (“Song of fate”), completed in 1871, the same year as the *Triumphlied*, but of very different character. It is a setting of a poem by Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), one of the great German romantic visionary poets, whose romantically unlucky fate (ending with his confinement in an insane asylum for the last thirty-four years of his life) paralleled Schumann's, quickening Brahms's interest in him.

The poem, originally titled “Hyperion's Song of Fate” after the Titan of Greek mythology, angrily contrasts the perfect, timeless bliss of the gods’ abode, whose “fateless” denizens exist in utter serenity and obliviousness to pain, with the miserable lot of “suffering humanity,” buffeted by the flux of time, “falling haphazardly from hour to hour like water dashed from crag to crag.” Like any poem based on an antithesis, it is made to order for musical treatment. The first section of Brahms's setting, comprising the opening stanzas of the poem, is a soft and gentle “Elysian” song in E ♭ major, in a leisurely common time, set off by gleaming flutes and by pizzicato strings doing their best to imitate harps. Bachian resonances abound. The first choral tutti, for example, is accompanied by a quotation from the pizzicato bass in the famously idyllic *Aria* from Bach's orchestral Suite in D major (the louder movements of which had already found echo in the *Triumphlied*). The tempo marking, *Langsam und sehnsuchtsvoll* (slowly and

longingly), shows that heavenly bliss is being described from the earthly point of view, as an object of desire.

The image displays a page of handwritten musical notation, identified as an autograph score. It consists of approximately 12 staves. The top staves appear to be vocal lines, while the lower staves are for piano accompaniment. The notation is intricate, with many notes, rests, and dynamic markings. There are some handwritten annotations and corrections visible throughout the score.

fig. 13-6 Autograph score page from the middle section of Brahms's *Schicksalslied* (1871).

And then comes the last stanza of the poem, set in stark and sudden contrast as a stormy Allegro in C minor, the dark “relative” of the original tonic, moving in an agitated triple time, accompanied by tremolando strings and baleful rolls of the kettledrum.

But afterward, Brahms does something no one following the chorus from Hölderlin's text could have anticipated. He allows the storm and stress gradually to die away, and then appends a return to the opening section, but in the key of C major, the parallel rather than relative key of the stormy middle. Thus the *Schicksalslied*, uniquely in the work of Brahms (and with scant precedent anywhere but in opera), ends in a key other than the one in which it began. Brahms explained the anomaly, in a letter to a prospective conductor of the piece, as a deliberate critique of the poem, asserting that “I am saying something that the poet does not say,” and adding that “it would have certainly been better if what is missing had been the most important thing for him,” that is for Hölderlin.<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere, he complained that Hölderlin “doesn't say the most important thing.”



**fig. 13-7 Friedrich Hölderlin, the poet of the *Schicksalslied*, in a pastel portrait by F. K. Hiemer (1792).**

Yet, however we interpret Brahms's beatific coda, whether as a consoling foretaste of immortality or a Christian rebuke to pagan heartlessness or a contrasting portrayal of heaven “from the inside,” or more simply as supreme emotional exaltation, the fact remains that neither Hölderlin nor any other poet could have said this “most important thing,” since it is said without words. In one of the most pointed affirmations that the idea of “absolute music” ever received, the final consolation, or insiders’ view of heaven, or what you will, is reserved for the instruments to disclose. It is the very removal of the verbal element that allows the sense of transcendence—what Hanslick, in an ecstatic review, called the “transfiguring power of music”—to supervene over what might otherwise appear a merely dutiful “rounding” of the musical form.

Absorbed in the act of composing the *Schicksalslied*, Brahms may or may not have been aware that he was precisely reversing and thus negating the trajectory, and the implicit “argument,” of Beethoven's Ninth. Having finished the piece he experienced doubts. “A silly idea,” he called it in another letter, “perhaps a failed experiment.”<sup>25</sup> Audiences found the piece moving, however; its success gave Brahms courage. Eventually the reversal and its implications must have dawned on him and shown him a way out of the bind that had been paralyzing his work on the First Symphony.

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## Notes:

(24) Brahms to Karl Reinthaler, October 1871; quoted in John Daverio, "The *Wechsel der Töne* in Brahms's *Shicksalslied*," *JAMS* XLVI (1993): 90.

(25) Brahms to Reinthaler, quoted in Daverio, "*Wechsel der Töne*," p. 86.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

Brahms: Orchestral works and concertos

Variations

## INVENTING TRADITION

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 13 The Return of the Symphony

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Still, he went on postponing it. He made his return to “absolute” orchestral music via a shorter work, a set of Variations for Orchestra on a Theme by Joseph Haydn, composed in the summer of 1873, just after turning forty. The theme may not in fact have been Haydn's. Its source is a very obscure composition indeed: the second movement in the last of a set of six wind octets or “Feldparthien”—suites to be played by *Feldmusiker* or military musicians (wind players)—that Haydn wrote, presumably for members of Prince Eszterházy's retinue, at some undetermined point during his employment at Eisenstadt. It cannot be dated because it exists only in late copies, one of which happened to belong to the library of Vienna's Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (Society of Friends of Music), one of Brahms's favorite haunts. (It would remain unpublished until 1932, the bicentennial of Haydn's birth.) In the manuscript the theme Brahms chose is headed “Chorale St. Antoni” (“St. Anthony's Hymn”). It was probably a religious folk song for which Haydn merely provided a harmonization. Brahms's “theme” is actually Haydn's whole movement, first presented in Haydn's original scoring for oboes, horns, and bassoons (Ex. 13-10a). What probably attracted Brahms's ear to the piece was the unusual five-bar phrase structure (the result, very likely, of the now-forgotten words), but its reconditeness was surely another factor, testifying to the antiquarian, “musicological” tastes that distinguished him from most of his composing contemporaries. The Haydn Variations, in fact, was the first purely instrumental work by Brahms in which resonances not only from the “classical” but also the “preclassical” repertoire are conspicuous. The way in which Brahms combined them, thus forging a link that is now assumed to be a “historical” fact, was his signal achievement.

And rarely was the scholarly side of the equation more obvious. As a fortieth birthday present, the pioneer music historian Philipp Spitta gave Brahms the first volume of his landmark biography of J. S. Bach, then hot off the press. It included a long preliminary study of German keyboard and choral music in the century leading up to Bach's birth, in which Brahms found the discussion of ground-bass forms (chaconne, passacaglia, etc.) particularly interesting—and inspiring. He corresponded with Spitta about them, asked for more examples, and finished off the Haydn Variations with a giant set of ostinato variations based on a five-bar ground bass derived from a combination of melody and bass notes from the St. Anthony tune's first phrase (Ex. 13-10b). From the way in which the ground bass is suddenly transposed to the highest voice after thirteen variations, it is clear that the model Brahms had chiefly in mind was Bach's famous organ Passacaglia in C minor.

By making Haydn shake hands with Bach, by treating Haydn's theme in a manner no longer practiced in Haydn's time but of even more ancient and honorable pedigree, by giving a “classic” theme a “preclassic” development, Brahms consciously sought an ecumenical synthesis that connected the German present to a generalized German past, a synthesis that identified him in the eyes of many as the preeminent German master of the present. Over the five-year period between the premieres of the German Requiem and the Haydn Variations, Brahms achieved real celebrity, not to mention a secure income from royalties that made him financially independent.

Both his fame and his finances were helped by a couple of frankly popular opuses that he issued during the same period for domestic consumption: two books of Hungarian Dances for piano duet (1869) and a set of sentimental waltzes, also published in 1869 under the title *Liebeslieder* (“Love songs”) for piano duet with optional vocal quartet singing words by a fashionable poet, Georg Friedrich Daumer, who wrote under the pen name “Eusebius Emmeran.” Like his eighteenth-century forebears, he was trying for an ecumenical social reach, writing both “classical works” for the concert hall (the “temple of art”) and “popular works” for the home.

Andante

Fl.

Ob.

Cl. in B

Bsn.

Contrabsn.

Hrn. in B

Hrn. in E

Tromb. in B

Timp. in E

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

Andante

*p*

*tr.*

*ten.*

*pizz.*

*p*



Musical score for orchestra, measures 1-10 of Johannes Brahms' "Haydn Variations." The score is in 6/8 time and B-flat major. The instruments and their parts are:

- Ob. (Oboe): Starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Bsn. (Bassoon): Also starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic, playing a similar rhythmic pattern.
- Contrabsn. (Contrabassoon): Starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic, playing a similar rhythmic pattern.
- Hn. in Bb (Horn in B-flat): Starts with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic, playing a similar rhythmic pattern.
- Hn. in Eb (Horn in E-flat): Starts with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic, playing a similar rhythmic pattern.
- Tromb. in Bb (Trumpet in B-flat): Starts with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic, playing a similar rhythmic pattern.
- Vc. (Violoncello): Starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic, playing a similar rhythmic pattern.
- Cb. (Cello): Starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic, playing a similar rhythmic pattern.

ex. 13-10a Johannes Brahms, "Haydn Variations," mm. 1-10

Musical score for piano, measures 1-10 of Johannes Brahms' "Haydn Variations." The score is in 6/8 time and B-flat major. The piano part is marked *p* *leggero*. The score is written for the left and right hands, with the right hand playing a melodic line and the left hand playing a rhythmic accompaniment. The right hand features several triplet figures and a final cadence.

**ex. 13-10b Johannes Brahms, “Haydn Variations,” beginning of Finale (“St. Anthony's Hymn”)**

By the time of his fortieth birthday, then, Brahms had become a big success, with a following that bridged all the strata of the music-loving and music-buying public from scholars to household pianists. It was a success that roundly contradicted the dogmas of the New Germans, refuting their claims much more effectively than that lame polemical fizzle, the open letter of 1860. They did not like it, or him. Remarkably, Wagner came to regard Brahms—young enough to be his son, and an admirer to boot—as a threat. The mudslinging began anew.

In an essay of 1869, *Über das Dirigieren* (“About conducting”), Wagner took note of what he called Brahms's “wooden, prim”<sup>26</sup> performance style as an excuse to lash out at “Saint Johannes,” the “Musical Temperance Union” he represented and its various hypocrisies, the chief one being a secret yearning to write (what else?) an opera. The only thing that united the Brahms faction, Wagner hinted, was their constant failure to satisfy this wish, “and Opera, never happily wooed and won, can figure again and again as mere symbol of a lure to be resisted finally; so that the authors of operatic failures may rank as Saints par excellence.”

From the New Germans’ or at least the Wagnerian point of view, with opera (or “music drama”) the uncontested and incontestable peak of musical achievement, this persiflage made a sort of sense. But Brahms really turned the tables on it when he finally came forth with the First Symphony in 1876, at least fifteen and perhaps as many as twenty years after making his first sketches for it. The year may be significant; 1876 was also the year in which the completed *Ring des Nibelungen* finally had its Bayreuth premiere. Raymond Knapp, the author of a study of Brahms's symphonies, has suggested that the “final push to complete his First Symphony”<sup>27</sup> in the year of the *Ring*, “which finally allowed him to overcome whatever dissatisfactions had beleaguered the project, was motivated in part by his desire to offer an alternative monument to the spirit of German nationalism recently revitalized by the Franco-Prussian War.” The way in which the Symphony's finale picked up the thread of the development—as much an ideological as a musical development—that we have been tracing, not only in the Symphony's first movement but also in the *Schicksalslied* and the Haydn Variations, lends credence to Knapp's conjecture.

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## Notes:

(26) *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, Vol. IV (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895), pp. 348–50.

(27) Raymond Knapp, review of Johannes Brahms, *Symphonie Nr. 1, C-moll, opus 68*, ed. Robert Pascall, *MLA Notes* LIV (1997–98): 554.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

**See also from Grove Music Online**

New German School

Pastoral

Sonata form: The 19th century

## VICTORY THROUGH CRITIQUE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 13 The Return of the Symphony

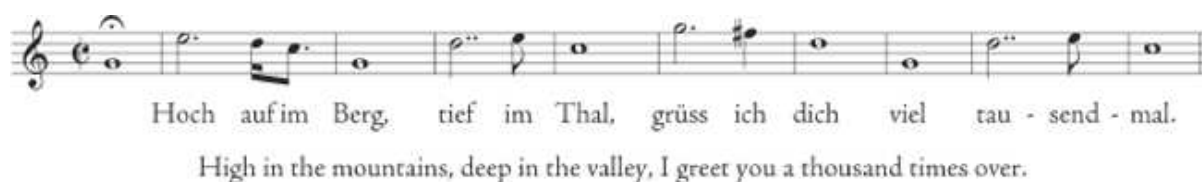
**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

One of the most contentious points at issue between the New Germans and their opponents was the historical status of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Wagner had notoriously cast it, in suitably religious terms, as the “redemption of Music from out of her own peculiar element into the realm of *universal art*,” and “the human evangel of the art of the future.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, the mixture of vocal and symphonic media in the last movement closed the door on the further development of abstract instrumental music, making Lisztian programmatics and Wagnerian “synthesis” (or *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as it was misnamed) not only necessary but inevitable. To “revoke” the Ninth Symphony and its supposed mandate would be to revoke the New German charter, or so their opponents imagined, and with it the whole historicist creed. It would be a victory for Germany as well, paradoxical as that may sound, for it would rescue German art from its Wagnerian preoccupation with German “thematics” and return Germany to its place at the forefront (to borrow Wagner's own arrogant term) of “universal art.” Brahms realized that the only way to accomplish the necessary reinterpretation would be to recompose the finale of the Ninth as a nonprogrammatic instrumental work. Encouraged by the response to the Haydn Variations, he finally returned to the First Symphony in the summer of 1874, resuming work not with the next movement in order of performance, but with the finale. It was only when the outer movements were in place—the dynamic C-minor “allegro” transfiguring Beethoven's Fifth and the monumental finale transfiguring the Ninth—that Brahms saw the work's trajectory whole, and was able quickly to fill in the middle movements.

Like the finale of the Ninth, Brahms's finale is in a hybrid form, the “true” identity of which has long been a subject of pointless debate. Rather than trying to decide whether it is a sonata, a rondo, a set of variations, a rondo-sonata, or what, it would be better (as in the case of Beethoven) to take stock at the outset of its highly diverse and even disparate ingredients and then trace their interaction.

Prominent among them, just as in Beethoven, are pastoral and religious emblems. The pastoral emblem is an “Alphorn theme” that first appears among Brahms's papers in the form of a birthday card he sent from Switzerland to Clara Schumann in 1868. It is replete with archaic rhythms (a “Lombard” snap in the second measure, a “double dot” in the fourth), a rustic “raised” fourth degree (the F# in m. 6), and words that parody old German folk songs: “High in the mountains, deep in the valley, I greet you a thousandfold!”<sup>29</sup> (Ex. 13-11a). There is little doubt that this is no transcription from life but an “ersatz”—an imitation folk song, more folky than the folk. The religious emblem is another ersatz: a chorale-like passage intoned on its first appearance by a choir of trombones, horns, and bassoons (Ex. 13-11b).



Hoch auf im Berg, tief im Thal, grüss ich dich viel tau - send - mal.  
High in the mountains, deep in the valley, I greet you a thousand times over.

**ex. 13-11a Johannes Brahms, Symphony No. 1, IV, alphorn theme**



**ex. 13-11b Johannes Brahms, Symphony No. 1, IV, chorale theme**

These two emblematic items serve to introduce what appears to be the movement's main theme. As in Beethoven's Ninth it takes the form of a great, though wordless, hymn. The resemblance to the choral theme from the Ninth is so pronounced and was so widely noted as to have become a standing joke, the best known version of which had Brahms answering someone who had pointed it out to him by saying, "Yes indeed, and what is really remarkable is that every jackass notices it at once."<sup>30</sup> Sometimes the squelch is interpreted to mean that Brahms found the suggestion that he lacked originality irritating. More likely, if he actually said it, he meant that the mere resemblance is uninteresting. The implications were what counted.



**ex. 13-12a Johannes Brahms, Symphony No. 1, IV, main theme**



**ex. 13-12b Ludwig van Beethoven, Symphony No. 9, IV, choral theme (transposed)**

For there can hardly be a doubt that Brahms intended his theme as a paraphrase of Beethoven's. If the two are written out in the same key, they even have a measure in common, and Brahms, by developing the phrase in which that measure occurs, all but insists that we notice (Ex. 13-12). Far less immediately noticeable is the equally strong resemblance of the opening phrase of the melody (which, in the parallel minor, had already served as the portentous opening phrase of the Finale's slow introduction) to a C-minor ground bass by Bach (Ex. 12-19). As the Brahms

scholar David Brodbeck has plausibly suggested, if one of the references is a deliberate allusion, then in all likelihood both of them are.<sup>31</sup> And if so, then we have another attempt at forging a factitious link between Bach and the Viennese classics.

The fact that Brahms chose to make so obvious a reference to Beethoven's choral theme, and also the fact that his own theme actually makes a double allusion (first to Bach and only then to Beethoven), both take on increasing significance as the movement progresses. The most obviously significant aspect of the Beethoven reference was the simple fact that it was entirely—and pointedly—instrumental. By alluding to the choral theme but withholding (or suppressing) the chorus, Brahms seemed to be correcting the wrong turn Beethoven had—with laudable intentions but dire results—taken half a century before.

His friend, the musicologist Chrysander, got the point and publicized it. Far from the “weak and impotent imitation”<sup>32</sup> the New Germans were calling it, Brahms had created “a counterpart to the last sections of the Ninth Symphony that achieve the same effect in nature and intensity without calling on the assistance of song.” This alone was enough to show that Brahms's attitude toward tradition was not merely reverential or epigonal, but active, participatory, and anything but uncritical. By not merely attaching himself to the Beethoven tradition but critiquing it, Brahms had brought about (or hoped to bring about) a change of course. In Chrysander's words, he had “led the way back from the symphony that mixes playing and singing to the purely instrumental symphony,” ending the eclipse of the latter genre and restoring its historical validity. As we shall see (and go on seeing, far into the twentieth century), the subsequent history of the genre confirmed his success.



ex. 13-13a J. S. Bach, ground bass from Cantata no. 106, “Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit”



ex. 13-13b Johannes Brahms, Symphony no. 1, IV, beginning of main finale theme

ex. 13-13c Johannes Brahms, Symphony no. 1, slow introduction of finale, mm. 1–15

But there was even more than that to Brahms's critique of “Wagner's Beethoven.” The difficulty critics and analysts have had in identifying the form of Brahms's finale arises from the unexpected behavior—or, perhaps, the



unexpected fate—of the main theme. The manner in which it is introduced, establishing a new and faster tempo after a slow introduction that had ended on the dominant, identifies it as a symphonic “first theme”—that is, a theme that will be contrasted with another (in the dominant), will experience tonal vagaries and motivic development, and finally achieve a decisive or even triumphant restatement in the tonic to signal the movement's impending closure.

Up to a point that is just what happens. After its initial statement by the strings, the theme is repeated by the winds, as if replaying the strategy whereby Beethoven's choral theme had spread its brotherly contagion. A third repetition gives way to a preliminary motivic development of the opening Bach-derived phrase, opening onto a modulatory bridge that leads to the expected “second theme” (Ex. 13-14). It arrives at m. 118, and turns out to be another “typically Brahmsian” backward glance—a set of tiny variations over a four-note “descending tetrachord” ground that had a particularly distinguished historical pedigree.

The image shows a musical score for strings from Johannes Brahms's Symphony no. 1, IV, mm. 118-124. The score is for five parts: Violin I (Vn. I), Violin II (Vn. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabasso (Cb.). The music is written in a common time signature and features a descending tetrachord ground. The score includes various articulations such as accents, slurs, and staccato markings, as well as dynamic markings like *mf* and *rit.*. The strings play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with the Viola and Violoncello parts often playing a more melodic line. The Contrabasso part is marked *arco* and *rit.* at the end.

**ex. 13-14 Johannes Brahms, Symphony no. 1, IV, mm. 118–124 (strings only)**

But the dialectics of “sonata form” (unknown, of course, in the actual era of the ground bass) lends a delicious ambiguity to Brahms's revival of the ancient ground. Such grounds normally descended from the tonic to the dominant—and so does this one, except that at this point in the movement's tonal progress, the dominant has been “tonicized” (that is, made to function locally as tonic). The actual impression conveyed, therefore, is of a descent from subdominant to tonic. Thus Brahms again manages to have it both ways: a deliberate allusion to an outmoded style becomes the vehicle for an ingenious novelty.

To use one's knowledge of the past to create something fresh and original is more than an evasion of “epigonism.” It is in its way a political statement about the nature of tradition. Tradition, in this view, is not a brake on innovation. On the contrary, tradition is the sole enabler of innovation that is meaningful rather than destructive, because it is mediated by social agreement (in this case, the recognition of a convention, permitting its intelligible transformation). That is classic “liberalism,” anathema to radicals and reactionaries alike.





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**ex. 13-15 Johannes Brahms, Symphony no. 1, IV, mm. 156–159**

Brahms's sonata "exposition" continues to satisfy expectations with a rousing "closing theme" (Ex. 13-15), its move into exuberant triplets multiplying the Beethovenian resonances by alluding to the analogous moment in the finale of Beethoven's Fifth. The development, too, arrives right on time, although it begins with a feint that would long remain a Brahmsian trademark (compare, for example the first movement of his Fourth Symphony): an apparent "premature recapitulation" of the main theme in the tonic key, which unexpectedly modulates to a distant one before it is through. The modulation takes place at the last moment, as an extension of the final cadence, landing the music in E  $\flat$  major, from which (as anyone listening must surely expect) a circuitous path back to the tonic will be traced for the recapitulation.

But that recapitulation never comes. Instead, the theme is "liquidated," to use a term coined many years later by a later Viennese, Arnold Schoenberg, who claimed to have learned the technique it denotes from Brahms. That is, it never recurs as a whole, but only in its various motifs, which gradually recede into the music's general motivic play and eventually lose their identity. So thorough is its receding that the dramatic moment of "retransition" comes and goes without any reference to the main theme. Instead the "Alphorn theme" from the Introduction, also in C major, is recalled to stand in for it. That this is in fact the "official" tonal return but without a thematic recapitulation (or, at any rate, without the expected one) is clear from the way in which the "second theme" follows the Alphorn theme in the tonic, with closing theme in tow. So there is recapitulation after all: it is just that the main theme has been

deliberately, if enigmatically excluded from it.

It returns to initiate a Beethovenesque “development-coda,” in a passage that alludes to the ascending chromatic sequence that begins the development section in the first movement of Beethoven's Third (*Eroica*) as clearly as previous allusions had invoked the Fifth and the Ninth. But once again, it is only the Bach-derived head-motif that gets to make an appearance. The part of Brahms's theme that so strikingly recalled Beethoven's choral Ode to Joy remains in eclipse—along with the whole idea of a choral symphony. It is as if Brahms had anticipated the argument made by the New Germans, and revived more recently by German critics and musicologists, that any reference to Beethoven's choral theme, even without a chorus, is in effect a submission to its authority. The act of “alluding to the vocal collectivity,”<sup>33</sup> as the musicologist Reinhold Brinkmann has put it, honors its necessity all the more strongly (as Hamlet might have said) in the breach than in the observance. But Brahms's methodical liquidation of the choral theme suggests otherwise. Beethoven's vocal collectivity had been conjured up only to be dispelled.

Yet not every vocal collectivity is dispelled. The fanfare-like last coda or *stretta* (*Più allegro*) begins (Ex. 13-16a) with one last motivic allusion to the head-motif (pared down by now to three notes) and makes what is obviously a headlong dash to peroration or rhetorical climax. When the climax comes, however, the main theme is once again preempted, this time (most unexpectedly) by the “chorale” unheard since the slow Introduction (Ex. 13-16b). That, too, evokes a vocal collectivity, but an older one than Beethoven's. Beethoven is not dethroned, merely subsumed along with the other Viennese classics into a larger view of German musical tradition that begins with Bach—or not even with Bach, perhaps, but with Luther.

And so the newness of the renewed symphony, as proclaimed and practiced by Brahms, was confirmed by reference to what was unexpectedly old. It was not a return to the past, which is always impossible, but a synthesis. Brahms's view of the symphony was classically “dialectical” and his achievement, in Chrysander's words, “signaled an expansion of those effects that can be created through instrumental means alone.”<sup>34</sup> Brahms had encompassed within his symphonic purview much that had formerly been foreign to the symphonic tradition. Besides the evocation of “vocal collectivities,” the new elements included the contrapuntal practices of ancient organists and the overarching thematic reminiscences and mutations of the most modern opera composers. All of it, however, was as thoroughly transformed by its inclusion in the symphony as the symphony, by including it, had been transformed.

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## Notes:

(28) Richard Wagner's *Prose Works*, Vol. I, p. 126.

(29) The postcard is reproduced in facsimile in Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, p. 15.

(30) Quoted in Kalbeck, *Brahms*, Vol. III (rpt. Tutzing, 1976), p. 109n.

(31) David Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, pp. 67–68.

(32) Friedrich Chrysander, performance review, *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, Vol. XIII (1878), col. 94; quoted in Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, p. 86.

(33) Reinhold Brinkmann, *Late Idyll: The Second Symphony of Johannes Brahms*, trans. Peter Palmer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 41.

(34) Chrysander, quoted in Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, p. 86.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Hans von Bülow

Symphony: 19th century

## RECONCILIATION AND BACKLASH

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 13 The Return of the Symphony

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The image shows a page of a musical score for Johannes Brahms' Symphony No. 1, IV, measures 391-395. The score is for a full orchestra and includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Bs.), Trombone (Tbn.), Trumpet (Tr.), Timpani (Timp.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vcl.), and Double Bass (Cb.). The tempo is marked "Più allegro" and the dynamics are "ff" (fortissimo). The score is in 4/4 time and features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The music is in a key with one flat (F major or D minor). The score is arranged in a standard orchestral layout with woodwinds and strings in the upper staves, and percussion and lower strings in the lower staves.

ex. 13-16a Johannes Brahms, *Symphony no. 1*, IV, mm. 391–395

That is the meaning of dialectics: mutual transformation through mutual accommodation. And that, for liberals, is the meaning of tradition: a past that enables the present, but that in the process is itself transformed. Yet whatever is

transformed also maintains recognizable (and legitimating) ties with its former guise. Ultimately, going against the New German insistence on historical progress and directed evolution, Brahms believed in the “timelessness” of artistic problems and artistic greatness. That is what Bach symbolized (and has continued ever since to symbolize within the post-Brahms tradition of “classical music”). And beyond Bach, that is what nature (the Alhorn theme) and religion (the chorale theme) have always symbolized: everything that is “beyond history, unchanging, constant, essentially at rest,”<sup>35</sup> in Brinkmann’s apt summary, and yet ever adaptable to new conditions and needs. That, too, is classic liberalism (“We hold these truths to be self-evident...”).

**ex. 13-16b Johannes Brahms, Symphony no. 1, IV, mm. 407–416**

The signal moment in the early history of Brahms’s First was its ecstatic acceptance by the pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow, likened by some to a religious conversion. Bülow, we may remember from chapter 8, was a charter member of the New German School. The personal disciple of Liszt at Weimar and a close associate of Wagner, Bülow had married the former’s daughter and lost her to the latter, in the meantime conducting the premieres of both *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*. He made a specialty of Beethoven’s Ninth, which he conducted twice on one occasion to demonstrate his faith in its peerlessness, that is, the unworthiness of any other work to share billing with it.



But after hearing Brahms's First, played to him in advance of publication by the composer at a summer resort in 1877, Bülow rushed into print with an article hailing it as “the Tenth Symphony.” The article ended with an avowal —“Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms do not alliterate with one another by chance”<sup>36</sup>—that has lived on ever since in the catchphrase “the Three B's,” proclaiming a new holy trinity and granting lasting victory to Brahms's (and the musicologists’) campaign to locate the true spiritual beginnings of the German “universal” tradition of “absolute” music not in the older Viennese trinity of Haydn-Mozart-Beethoven but in the resurrected Leipzig cantor.

This was too much for Wagner. After Brahms was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1879 by the University of Breslau with a diploma proclaiming him “the leader in the art of serious music in Germany today,” the dread mage of Bayreuth struck back. In “Über das Dichten und Komponieren” (“On Poetry and Composition”), an essay composed in fury amid the publicity surrounding Brahms's degree, Wagner let his pen run wild. “I know of some famous composers,” he wrote, “who in their concert masquerades don the disguise of a street singer one day, the hallelujah periwig of Handel the next, the dress of a Jewish Csardas-fiddler another time, and then again the guise of a highly respectable symphony dressed up as Number Ten.”<sup>37</sup>

What brought on this enraged response was Wagner's evident realization that the New German School could no longer assert exclusive rights to the interpretation of German musical history. Wagner's claim to Beethoven's mantle, implicit in his works and explicit in his writings, was now irrevocably in dispute. There would henceforth be two interpretations of the great tradition: the radical historicist one, which cast it as a kind of permanent revolution, and the liberal evolutionist one, which cast it as an incremental and consensual growth.

At the very least, Brahms had made the “classical”-style symphony a viable option once again, one that could be freely chosen without the stigma of epigonism. The chances of inclusion in the “permanent collection” were as slim as ever, but the effort to make room for oneself was newly respectable and attractive. Brahms himself, once he had broken the logjam, followed up his first symphony with three more in less than a decade. The Fourth and last, in E minor, first performed under Bülow in 1885, ends (symbolically, it could seem) with a monumental chaconne over a ground bass adapted directly from the concluding chorus (marked *ciaccona*) in Bach's Cantata *Nach dich, Herr, verlanget mich* (“Lord, I long for thee”; BWV 150), one of Bach's earliest and most traditional works. To base the latest link in the tradition on the earliest of models was a token of the timelessness of values.

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## Notes:

(35) Brinkmann, *Late Idyll*, p. 45.

(36) Quoted in Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, p. 85.

(37) *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, Vol. VI (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1897), p. 148.

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Brahms: Influence and reception

Absolute music

### BRAHMINISM

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 13 The Return of the Symphony

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

But the symphony was only the most public arena in which Brahms forged a revitalizing link with the tradition of “absolute” instrumental music. It was an arena that could not be evaded if one wished to refute the premises of “New Germany,” which by virtue of the genres it promoted and its highly active press, had claimed the public sphere as its exclusive preserve. And yet the very publicness of symphonic music, increasing exponentially with the growth of urban (“mass”) culture and the proliferation of orchestras, inspired a backlash among connoisseurs, who (out of disinterested artistic commitment, nostalgia for preindustrial ways, or social snobbery, depending on one's vantage point) placed a new premium on chamber music, the “aristocratic” genre par excellence.

By the late nineteenth century, of course, the nature of aristocracy and its relationship to music had changed. Rather than a noble aristocracy of birth and breeding, we are dealing now with a middle-class aristocracy of *Bildung* or education, of taste and “culture”—breeding of another sort. Like the older aristocracy, the newer one sought from music patronage a way of experiencing and expressing their elite status, and valued music whose performance would create elite occasions. They preferred music of a subtlety and reconditeness that would exclude listeners beneath their cultural station.

One of Brahms's best friends, the famous surgeon (and amateur violist) Theodor Billroth, gave a superb illustration of this attitude in a letter congratulating the composer after a performance of the First Symphony. Its music, he implied, was possibly too good for its genre:

I wished I could hear it all by myself, in the dark, and began to understand [the Bavarian] King Ludwig's private concerts. All the silly, everyday people who surround you in the concert hall and of whom in the best case maybe fifty have enough intellect and artistic feeling to grasp the essence of such a work at the first hearing—not to speak of understanding; all that upsets me in advance. I hope, however, that the musical masses here have enough musical instinct to understand that something great is happening there in the orchestra.<sup>38</sup>



**fig. 13-8 Brahms in his graybearded maturity, seated with friends at Der Rote Igel (“The Red Hedgehog”) in Vienna.**

Chamber music, still often performed before invited audiences in well-to-do homes like Billroth's rather than in concert halls (but, in the case of difficult contemporary works and especially those of Brahms, usually by hired professionals rather than convivial amateurs) fit the bill. This was the audience, an audience of professed idealists who worshipped the same “timeless” values as did Brahms, that made up his most enthusiastic constituency, and so it will not surprise us to learn that Brahms wrote far more chamber music than symphonic: three string quartets, five piano trios (including one with horn in place of cello and one with clarinet in place of violin), three piano quartets, one piano quintet, two string quintets, two string sextets, a quintet for clarinet and strings, three sonatas for violin and piano, two sonatas for cello and piano, and two sonatas for clarinet (or viola) and piano—twenty-four works in all, more than any other major composer since Beethoven. And he produced them over the entire length of his career, from op. 8 (the first piano trio) in 1854 to op. 120 (the clarinet sonatas), forty years later.

Here too, though, there had been a hiatus. Just as in the case of the symphony, the last important composer of “classical” chamber music had been Schumann, with about twenty works composed over an eleven-year span. The “New German” attitude toward chamber music, frankly disdainful, was tactlessly enunciated by Liszt one evening when, as Schumann's house guest, he heard a performance of his host's Piano Quintet and mortified the composer by calling it “Leipziger Musik”—Leipzig music—that is, provincial and academic.

The only really prolific composer of chamber music whose birth date fell between those of Schumann and Brahms was Joachim Raff, described earlier in this chapter as a “renegade Lisztian.” Raff was still Lisztian enough to try his hand at programmatic chamber works, however, including *Volker* (1876), a big “cyclic tone poem” for violin and piano. Another “Lisztian” chamber work was the First Quartet (1876) by Smetana, subtitled “From My Life,” one of only four chamber works in the output of this prolific composer of operas, symphonic poems, and piano music. It concludes with an emotionally wrenching portrayal (via a long-sustained natural harmonic stridently attacked by the first violin) of the onset of the composer's deafness. It has survived in the repertoire, but its autobiographical program identifies it as an anomalous work in a genre widely perceived to be out of joint with the times.

Brahms made no effort to adapt chamber genres to the taste—that is, the “mass” taste—of the times. Instead, he deliberately cultivated an esoteric style founded on Viennese domestic traditions, particularly that of the “Schubertiade,” the legendary gatherings of Schubert's friends who alone during the composer's lifetime were privileged to hear his most advanced chamber works and songs. Another powerful precedent, of course, was Beethoven—the deaf Beethoven of the late quartets, long a symbol of consummate genius, of artistic idealism and social alienation, and of cultural exclusivity.

The one chamber genre, then, that gave Brahms as much pause as the symphony was—inevitably—the string quartet. Again he felt the presence of the giant dogging his footsteps. Again there were many false starts—Brahms claimed as many as twenty—and there was another endlessly protracted gestation, that of the First Quartet, in the key of (what else?) C minor. Brahms is known to have worked on it off and on for at least eight years; and when it was finally published, in 1873, as the first of a pair given the opus number 51, it bore a dedication to Billroth. It was in every way an emblematic work.

Especially in the outer movements, it wears its difficulty on its sleeve, self-consciously cultivating what the unimpressed French called “le style chef-d'oeuvre” (masterpiece style). The aristocracy of *Bildung* differed from the aristocracy of birth in its appreciation of (to quote Nietzsche) “music that sweats.” The taste on the part of “lay” listeners for complexity and elaboration of texture may have been a reflection of the bourgeois work ethic, or it may have been another way of confirming their status as educated connoisseurs. Musicians themselves, of course, are drawn to such music by their intensive “ear training.” The intense fascination Brahms's chamber music exercised on other composers would be a powerful stimulus to stylistic innovation in the twentieth century. The novelty was the “lay” liking, however much a minority taste (and however short-lived in the case of new works), for the sort of “musicians’ music” the superbly equipped and resourceful Brahms could best purvey.

What is often questioned is how many of the details we are about to examine—especially the extraordinarily fine-grained motivic structure—were “heard” (that is, noticed and actively followed as relationships, the way a musician might) by the audience that patronized this music. At what point, to quote Carl Dahlhaus's version of the question, is such attention to detail perceived as a distraction, to be “repressed so as not to endanger the ‘esthetic

mood”?<sup>39</sup> The question may be unnecessarily condescending, and it may posit a needless or groundless opposition. It must have been just this quality of attention, though, that Billroth had in mind when he wrote of having “enough intellect and artistic feeling to grasp the essence of such a work” as a Brahms symphony or, *a fortiori*, a Brahms quartet. While one cannot listen today with the ears of a nineteenth-century connoisseur, one can certainly detect efforts on the part of the composer to make the details of his *thematische Arbeit* or “thematic process” salient.

For a foretaste, compare the first ten measures of the quartet's first movement (Ex. 13-17a) with the last five measures of the last movement (Ex. 13-17b). The melodic and harmonic near-identity is hardly arcane; but what is most remarkable is the way the finale's concluding chords provide a closure to the first phrase that is very conspicuously withheld at the beginning. The whole quartet (like the whole of *Tristan und Isolde*, one can scarcely resist pointing out) is somehow subsumed within that contrasting parallelism, a phrase presented first open then shut. If one looks now at the beginning of the fourth movement (Ex. 13-17c), with its unharmonized, truncated, transposed, and therefore slightly ambiguous reference to the quartet's beginning, one will view the movement's end in a new light, as the explicit realization of an implication. Such implicit references and parallels are prevalent throughout the quartet: the end of the last movement discharges an account that had been accumulating over the course of all four movements.

For the rest, we had better limit the present account of the quartet's motivic structure to just the first movement's exposition and a few of its repercussions later on. (A full accounting would require a book, and a tedious one at that: better to compile one's own book through repeated, attentive, “Billrothian” listening.) For a last preliminary, however, compare the first movement's opening “period” as given in Ex. 13-17a with the beginning of the development—or starting, for an even fuller effect, with the “second ending” (Ex. 13-17d). Never have we seen a development as melodically indistinct from the exposition as this one.

Allegro

ex. 13-17a Johannes Brahms, Quartet no. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1, I, mm. 1–10



ex. 13-17b Johannes Brahms, Quartet no. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1, IV, end

*Allegro*

A musical score for the beginning of the fourth movement of Johannes Brahms' Quartet no. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1. The tempo is marked 'Allegro'. The score is written for four staves (two treble clefs and two bass clefs) in C minor. It features a complex texture with various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The music begins with a strong rhythmic motif.

ex. 13-17c Johannes Brahms, Quartet no. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1, IV beginning



ex. 13-17d Johannes Brahms, Quartet no. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1, I, beginning of development section

Not that it will come as news to us at this stage of the game that the hard-and-fast textbook opposition of an exposition that “presents” material and a development that “breaks it down” had long been contrary to actual practice. By the late nineteenth century, sophisticated motivic elaborations and transformations no longer await the “official” development section but are present from the outset. Larger and larger musical entities are constructed out of smaller and smaller particles. But wait— isn't that just what, three chapters back, we identified as the great “revolution” of Wagner's *Ring* with its kaleidoscopic texture of leitmotifs?

## Notes:

(38) Theodor Billroth to Brahms, 10 December 1876; *Johannes Brahms and Theodor Billroth: Letters from a Musical Friendship*, trans. Hans Barkan (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), p. 41.

(39) Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 260.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Brahms: Chamber music

Motif

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## DEVELOPING VARIATION

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 13 The Return of the Symphony

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Indeed it is. One of Dahlhaus's most fertile insights was the observation that by the late nineteenth century all “serious” composers (as he put it; perhaps we'd better say all German composers) had become “miniaturists.” That is, all did their thematic thinking-in-music in terms of motifs rather than full-blown melodies—whether their field was opera or chamber music—and the crucial composerly problem of the latter part of the century became the fundamental tension between “the brevity of the musical ideas and the monumentality of the formal designs.”<sup>40</sup> To drive the point home, Dahlhaus proclaimed the two seminal practitioners of the new motivic “miniaturism” to have been the Wagner of the *Ring* and the Brahms of the chamber music. And while there was surely an element of calculated shock in the unexpected coupling, it is very liberating so to view them: it frees us from the polemics of contemporaneous musical politicking and allows us to view the supposed adversaries from a historical vantage point that subsumes (or as Hegel would have said, “sublates”) their differences.

In any case, the real functional distinction between Brahms's exposition and his development is what it had always been in the works of sonata composers: a harmonic (“tonal”) rather than a thematic distinction. The music in Ex. 13-17d is appropriately “far out” from the tonic. But melodically it is if anything more regular than the exposition. The process of motivic “breakdown” begins at the very beginning of Ex. 13-17a, and it is truly pulverizing. The opening idea, an old-fashioned “rocket” such as Mozart or even Stamitz, the Mannheim composer, might have started with, is stated only once at its full eight-note, five-beat length and is then progressively truncated. First the last five notes (three beats) are extracted and subjected to a chromatically rising sequence. Then the first three notes of the foreshortened motif are extracted and augmented by a fourth to extend the arpeggio—or are they notes 3–6 of the original phrase?—and put through a fourfold sequence to the peak of the phrase.

Phrases and motifs are primarily identifiable through contour—their rise and fall—and rhythm. In terms of contour, the downbeats of mm. 2, 3, and 4 of Ex. 13-17a are all motivically equivalent, even though the intervals are different: a diminished seventh, a perfect fifth, and a minor sixth respectively. And thus by contour and placement at the end of the longest upward sweep of all, the descending semitone in m. 7 can also be construed as “motivic,” even though it introduces an interval as yet practically unused. Needless to say, once marked in this way as thematically significant, the semitone will now perform its many important harmonic tasks with vastly enhanced significance.

And yet, however important the transformation of intervals may be to Brahms's technique of “developing variation” (as Arnold Schoenberg, its most zealous emulator in the Vienna of the future, would call it), intervallic constancy plays a role of equal if not greater importance. It, too, gives rise to characteristic devices. The second violin part in mm. 1–3, for example, is entirely confined to reinforcing at the octave the C – E ♭ third in the first-violin arpeggios and linking it up with the filled-in third in the same register with which the first violin part begins. This, too, is a technique of motivic “extraction,” amply confirmed by the role that the interval of a third—both as a skip and as a “filled-in” scale segment—will play throughout the quartet. Call the first three notes in the first violin “a” and the first two notes in the second violin “a” and we are prepared to trace an astounding number of connections, some obvious, others arcane (but where to draw the line between the two? and who shall draw it?).

**ex. 13-18 Johannes Brahms, Quartet no. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1, II, beginning**

The introductory phrase in the second violin at the beginning of the second movement, to take one example, is clearly an “a” in a sort of stuttering variant (Ex. 13-18); and the main melody in the first violin, having been thus prefigured, is just as clearly built up out of an inverted “a” preceded by an upbeat, and followed by an “a’.” And if the first two beats of the melody in the second movement’s second measure are described as an inverted “a,” then the first two beats of m. 3 can be similarly described. And if so, then the last beat of m. 3 consists of an extension of the inverted “a” to encompass a fourth rather than a third. And if the last beat of m. 3 is part of “a,” then so are the last beat of m. 4, the last beat of m. 5, and the second and third notes of m. 6, preceded by an overlapping inverted “a’.” Having taken note of this much, we are now prepared to find that almost every note in the accompanying parts up to the point that we have traced is similarly derived (or at least derivable) from “a” or “a’.”

Admittedly, at some point arguments like this can begin to seem farfetched. But at what point, exactly? Nor have we even broached the question of “intentions,” or distinguished between varieties of intention: Did Brahms consciously calculate these things? Did he have to? Did he want us to hear them? Did he want us to trace them? What do we accomplish by tracing them? To what purpose? The head swims. And perhaps in saying this we have at last found a means of distinguishing “serious” music (the kind of which his Breslau diploma declared Brahms the preeminent master) from ... what?

Leaving the answers to these questions to the “Brahmins” (to use the joshing term that quickly attached itself to the self-declared Brahms enthusiasts who regarded themselves as an elite “caste”), let us press on to the third movement (Ex. 13-19a). Like the second, it is a relatively lightweight, entertaining, divertimento-like affair (the way middle movements in Brahms usually tend to be), but still “serious” enough to set our heads spinning again if we like the way that feels. Identifying “a” in at the beginning of the viola part is child’s play, and so is noticing the way the melody (or should we call it the countermelody?) in the first violin, and again in the viola at mm. 9 ff., is constructed out of a sequence based on “a”

But having accounted for the falling seconds in the second movement as an extension of “a,” we are justified (or are we?) in similarly deriving the first violin’s opening tune in its entirety. And if we can keep ourselves from becoming entranced by the harmony in Ex. 13-19b, where a sudden circle of fifths unexpectedly plunges us deep into the realm of flats, we will notice that the “charming” (*lusingando*) melody (as Brahms quietly boasts) played in playful canon by the same first violin and viola is entirely made up of repetitions of “a” and its inversion. When the two melodies are combined in counterpoint (Ex. 13-19c), we have what amounts to two variations of a single motif pitted one against the other.

Now that the matter of harmony has been broached, it is worth noting the elusiveness of the F-minor tonic in that seemingly lightweight third movement, so coyly marked *comodo* (cozy) and *semplice* (simple) by the composer. True enough, the very first harmony in Ex. 13-19a seems to be a tonic triad—that is, if we are willing to call the first violin’s D  $\flat$  an (unprepared) appoggiatura. But the second harmony, with its B and D naturals, flatly contradicts the first. The only “tonal” way of hearing their relationship is to interpret the harmony on the upbeat not as a tonic triad at all, but as a D  $\flat$ -major triad in first inversion, cast as a Neapolitan to the dominant of C. Sure enough, C arrives “on schedule” in m. 8, sounding very much like the result of an authentic cadence, even if according to the signature it is only a half-cadence.

Will m. 16 deliver the tonic at last? Don't bet on it. Measure 16 finds us on C once again, and as far as the phrase structure is concerned, quite in the midst of things. Looking for an F in the bass and finding one at the end of m. 22, we note with dismay that the harmony has not rid itself of that pesky D  $\flat$ , nor has the continuation changed. We are still dealing, so far as aural effect is concerned, with functions of C, not F.

Allegretto molto moderato e comodo

Vln. I *sempre*

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

*div.*

ex. 13-19a Johannes Brahms, Quartet no. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1, III, beginning

**ex. 13-19b Johannes Brahms, Quartet no. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1, III, “charming” melody**

Where does the cadence on F finally happen? Only at the very end, of course. (But wasn't that supposed to happen only in Wagner?) On the way to that cadence, there are some stunning feints. One, again, is that “charming” interlude (Ex. 13-19b)—and it reminds us that another possible translation of *lusingando* is “teasing.” The reason why it is such a tease is that the harmonic digression it embodies is a “composing-out” of the already teasingly reiterated Neapolitan progression with which the movement opened (further reinforced at mm. 22–23). Its jumping-off point is the D $\flat$ -major harmony of the opening, this time expressed as a dominant seventh and pushed further flatward.

And when the whole teasing passage is repeated, at m. 46 ff, the jumping-off point is the G-major harmony to which the original Neapolitan was applied, again treated as the dominant of C, but this time pushed beyond C to the long-awaited F, which arrives in m. 48, only dressed up (and this is the biggest tease of all) as another dominant-seventh chord on the way to B $\flat$ . That B $\flat$  triad, while it frustrates our immediate expectation of a tonic cadence, nevertheless has its own strategic purpose. It manages at last, by providing a subdominant, to identify the C-major harmony at m. 51 as a dominant rather than a tonic, thus pointing in the long range to the long-deferred goal. (It is in fact the first such unambiguous pointer in the movement.) This little glimpse at the third movement already conveys



something of the manner in which the quartet's motivic and harmonic contents interact. A final glance at the first movement's exposition will give us a close-up view of the process. Ex. 13-20 picks up right where Ex. 13-17a broke off.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a contrapuntal montage. Each system consists of four staves: two treble clefs (Violin I and Violin II) and two bass clefs (Viola and Cello/Double Bass). The music is in C minor, 3/4 time, and features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth-note runs. The first system shows the initial four measures, and the second system continues with the next four measures. The notation is dense and intricate, illustrating the interplay of different voices.

ex. 13-19c Johannes Brahms, Quartet no. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1, III, contrapuntal montage



Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello staves, measures 11-14. The first violin part begins with a descending third interval (F4 to D4) in measure 11, which is the motif 'a'. The other instruments provide harmonic support with various rhythmic patterns.

Violin I and Violin II staves, measures 15-18. The motif 'a' is passed to the second violin in measure 15. The first violin part continues with a rhythmic accompaniment.

Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello staves, measures 19-22. The motif 'a' is passed to the viola and cello in measure 22. The first violin part continues with a rhythmic accompaniment.

Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello staves, measures 23-27. The motif 'a' is passed to the first violin in measure 23, where it ends on F#4. The other instruments provide harmonic support.

**ex. 13-20 Johannes Brahms, Quartet no. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1, I, mm. 11–27**

A new motif appears at the outset (m. 11) in the first violin—or rather appears to appear, because we know by now that nothing past the first measure of a movement like this is going to be totally “new.” Accordingly, the first interval, the descending third, takes its place among the many inversions of “a” that we have already noted. The further descent by a second also has precedent, indeed a very conspicuous one: namely, the climax of the first phrase in m. 7 (which also links up conspicuously, both melodically and harmonically, with the opening of the third movement). If precedent is sought for a direct progression of descending third and descending second, it can be found (inverted) in the second violin, as the original version of motif “a” progresses across the third bar line to F. And if a direct link with the motif in m. 11 is sought, it can be found in mm. 15 and 17, when the one motif (in the second violin) is accompanied by the other (in the viola, echoed by the cello).

Having established its legitimacy, so to speak, let us now trace the new motif’s progress, from first violin in m. 11 (descending from F) to second violin in m. 15 (descending from C, a fourth lower), to viola and cello in m. 22, descending from G, another fourth lower, to link up with the tonic in m. 23. Of course we have omitted from this neat sequential account the altogether anomalous transposition of the motif in mm. 19–20 (second violin followed by viola at the octave), which pitches the motif on B natural, the leading tone, so that it ends on F#.

The note is not unprecedented. Preceded by E  $\flat$  in the second measure of Ex. 13-17a, F  $\sharp$  had played the role of dramatic appoggiatura, “dissonating” against a tonic pedal and crying out for resolution. This time, however, the note is harmonized consonantly on both of its occurrences, against a rising scale in the cello, whose rhythm identifies it as a sequential expansion of the original “a” motif. These consonant intervals in support of the F  $\sharp$ —perfect fifth against B in m. 19 and an altogether disorienting unison in m. 20—are tonally disruptive, to say the least. They neutralize the need to resolve, and as such imply an impasse. Has the music in effect modulated through a process of motivic transposition to the key of B minor? Is that any proper place to go, or have we in effect lost our way?

Brahms implies that we have done exactly that by breaking off the two lines in m. 20 after their improbable unison closure, and in the next measure rubs it in by repeating the wayward note (arrived at with perfect thematic logic and total harmonic lunacy) with rests on either side. The music has come to an eerie standstill. Walter Frisch, in a detailed study of Brahms's “developing variation” technique, captures well the uncanny feeling it inspires: “In bars 19–21,” he writes, “Brahms leads us to the edge of an abyss, and, indeed, makes us lean far over.”<sup>41</sup> It is a moment to make one shudder; and the more attentive and “Billrothian” our listening has been, the keener our sense of vertigo will be.

But then, Frisch continues, Brahms “pulls us suddenly back onto the *terra firma* of C minor,” and restarts the main theme (in the bass) as if nothing had happened. We are relieved, if somewhat bewildered. But something has happened, and it will have consequences. Compare m. 9 in Ex. 13-17a with the analogous spot in the recapitulation (Ex. 13-21). In the former, the F  $\sharp$  (disguised as a G  $\flat$ ) appears as a chromatic passing tone (with an associated “Neapolitan-style” harmonization), inflecting G toward F. In Ex. 13-21, the F  $\sharp$  is the goal of the progression, approached directly from the uninflected G, and finally resolved as the dominant it had always seemed to be. The chickens have come home to roost, or, as Frisch puts it, “in the recapitulation Brahms actually does plunge us briefly into the chasm” from which he had previously pulled us back. But having faced up to the threat of B minor, Brahms (and we) are empowered at last to defeat it.

**ex. 13-21 Johannes Brahms, Quartet no. 1 in C minor, Op. 51, no. 1, I, mm. 143–50**

As Frisch explains, the B-minor triad in Ex. 13-21 “leads logically back to the tonic through D major and G $\flat$ ; thus the ‘sore’ F  $\sharp$  and the B minor that once seemed so frighteningly remote are reintegrated into the familiar context of C minor.” Brahms did not invent this ploy. It has a famous precedent in Beethoven, in the way the notorious C  $\sharp$  in m. 7 of the Symphony in E  $\flat$  (the “Eroica”) returned at the other end of the movement (disguised as D  $\flat$ ) as unfinished business that required an extra development section to work through. And there is an earlier one in Mozart, in the slow movement of another Symphony in E  $\flat$  (no. 39, K. 543), where a troublingly persistent chromatic note (B natural, come to think of it!) finally forced a radically disruptive modulation to its home key as if in an act of exorcism.

Brahms knew these precedents, of course. The difference between them and his own tonal psychodrama lay in the difference of media. Beethoven's and Mozart's, being symphonic, were dramatic manifestations, bordering indeed on the melodramatic. And so was Brahms's own public skirmish with B minor in the opening movement of his First Symphony, described earlier in this very chapter. In the quartet movement the effect turns on tincy craft, on minute motivic relations. Its far greater concentration requires far more in the way of active engagement and response from

the listener. Active engagement, the ability to respond to subtle signals, requires the possession of actual skills—aural discrimination, aural memory, mental agility. The rewards and satisfactions are commensurate with the exertion: the exhilaration that follows exercise; the gratification that comes with understanding; the fellow-feeling that successful receipt of an urgent communication inspires.

But there is also the self-satisfaction of belonging to a self-defined elite—an emotion that is gratified through exclusion. And that is where esoteric, “difficult” art inevitably becomes controversial in a postaristocratic, “democratic” age. The question is generally posed in terms of means and ends. Is the difficulty inherent in the message and essential to it—the price, so to speak, of full communication? Or is it, rather, a difficulty that is mandated for the sake of the exclusions that it affords, or what might be termed “elite solidarity”? If the latter, does it foster social division? Is that social division a threat to social harmony? Is the protection of social harmony something societies, and their institutions of enforcement and control (from critics all the way, in extreme cases, to censors and police), have an obligation to promote?

These questions became explosive in the twentieth century. Their origin goes back to the great fissure that opened up between the “mass” culture made possible by the demographics and technologies of the late nineteenth century and the traditional notion of “high” culture. The division bred conflicts and backlashes. And while Brahms himself was not much implicated in the social debates, we may be tempted to judge his attitudes by those of his “Brahmin” friends, like Billroth. As we shall see, those who led the debates to their explosive stage in the early twentieth century often sought their legitimacy, and their authority, in Brahms's example, just as some of the worst politics of the twentieth century sought its legitimacy in Wagner's.

So there is a “Brahms problem” as well as a “Wagner problem.” From this perspective, too, these perceived antipodes were equally—and similarly—representative of their time and its social problematics. And that is yet another reason why “Brahms and Wagner” have remained a dynamic duo. The problems, however we choose to define their relationship to the figures whose names they bear, are stubborn historical facts.

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## Notes:

(40) Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), p. 41.

(41) Walter Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 114.

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

# CHAPTER 14 The Symphony Goes (Inter)National

## Bruckner, Dvořák, Beach, Franck, Saint-Saëns, Borodin, Chaikovsky

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 14 The Symphony Goes (Inter)National

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

## GERMANY RECEDES

Reviewing Brahms's Fourth Symphony at its Vienna premiere in 1886, Eduard Hanslick marveled that the city had witnessed nineteen symphonic premieres by as many composers over the previous twelve-month period. "It looks as though Brahms's successes have stimulated production, following the long silence which set in after Mendelssohn and Schumann,"<sup>1</sup> he concluded. Hanslick exaggerated Brahms's personal responsibility for the phenomenon—little things like wars also played a part, as we shall see—but he was certainly right to marvel. By the mid-1880s "symphonists" were no longer quite as rare as hens' teeth, nor were they all professors and pupils.

The revival's most impressive aspect, however, was its geographical reach. Of the seven composers surveyed in this chapter, only one was a native speaker of German. The others hailed from France, Russia, Bohemia (now called "the Czech lands"), and the United States. If we were aiming at a complete survey, we would surely have included some Scandinavian composers as well, who by the end of the century had established an important symphonic "school." (Its most important representatives, however, would produce their chief works after the turn of the twentieth century.)

We might even have dropped the names of some Italian symphonists (since the eighteenth century a veritable contradiction in terms)—for example, Giovanni Sgambati (1841–1914) or Giuseppe Martucci (1856–1909), whom one later Italian composer gratefully dubbed "the starting point of the renaissance of non-operatic Italian music."<sup>2</sup> Their work stimulated national pride by declining to conform to what high-minded Italians considered a demeaning national stereotype—in other words, they advanced their nation's musical cause precisely by not "sounding Italian." At the same time, however, increasing cosmopolitanism brought out a compensatory "nationalist" or regionalist strain in the work of some other contributors to the newly refurbished symphonic genre.

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## Notes:

(1) Eduard Hanslick, *Music Criticisms 1846–99*, trans. Henry Pleasants (Baltimore: Peregrine Books, 1963), p. 243.

(2) Gian Francesco Malipiero, quoted in John C. G. Waterhouse, "Martucci," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. XVI (2nd ed., New York: Grove, 2001), p. 10.

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Symphony: 19th century

Anton Bruckner

Bruckner: Symphonies

# SYMPHONY AS SACRAMENT

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 14 The Symphony Goes (Inter)National

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Brahms's main Viennese rival as a symphonist was Anton Bruckner (1824–96), a slightly older composer who had an even later start than Brahms as a composer of symphonies. He was trained as an organist and church choirmaster, and quietly plied that trade at St. Florian's, a seventeenth-century monastery near the Austrian port city of Linz, where he became kapellmeister in 1858. Ten years later he moved to Vienna to take a post as professor of harmony and counterpoint, and also worked as “provisional organist” in the Imperial Chapel until his spreading fame as a virtuoso and improviser procured his elevation to the post of court organist in 1878.

By that time he had had three symphonies performed (out of six composed). His switch from church to concert hall as main theater of operations had come about in the wake of his belated exposure to Wagner's music, unplayed in provincial Linz until 1863. It was Wagner's musical style, pure and simple, with its luxuriant orchestra, its harmonic daring and its complex motivic textures, that captivated Bruckner, who had no inclination at all for dramatic composition and paid no attention to Wagner's theories. (Or to the actual content of the operas, if a famous anecdote is to be believed: After listening enraptured to most of *Die Walküre* during the first Bayreuth *Ring*, Bruckner opened his eyes at last during the “Magic Fire” music and asked his companions, “But why are they burning that girl?”)





**fig. 14-1 Anton Bruckner, painted in 1888.**

And yet he proclaimed himself Wagner's disciple and became known as the “Wagnerian symphonist,” another seeming contradiction in terms that brought him a degree of ridicule at first, and also the enmity of Hanslick, Vienna's most powerful critic, which considerably retarded his progress as a concert composer. It was in an effort to secure easier access to performance that some of his pupils began making simplified versions of his works and publishing them with their teacher's reluctant approval, thereby creating a nightmare of “versions” through which performers today have to chart their course.

Bruckner's work was often compared invidiously with Brahms's, especially by Hanslick, and the two composers regarded one another with suspicion and disparagement, Brahms referring to him as “that bumpkin” who wrote “symphonic boa constrictors”<sup>3</sup> and Bruckner declaring for his part that he'd rather hear a Strauss waltz any day than a Brahms symphony.<sup>4</sup> But Bruckner's music shares with Brahms's the crucial element of synthesis. The antithesis transcended in Bruckner's case was that between Wagner on the one hand, and on the other, the ancient sacred styles in which Bruckner had been trained to a point past mastery.

Thus Bruckner's music, too, resounds with evocations of “vocal collectivities.” It, too, employs preclassical structural devices. And it bears unmistakable traces of organ improvisation: extremely slow, sustained adagios, and a heavy

reliance on sequences and rhythmic ostinatos in the allegros that brought listeners either to a state of ecstasy or one of utter exasperation. Bruckner's lengthy rhythmic processes made for monumental—yes, Wagnerian; but also Schubertian—length. One of his ostinato patterns, a pair of quarter notes either followed or preceded by a quarter-note triplet ( or ), was so characteristic and so frequently employed as to become a trademark: musicians know it informally as the “Bruckner rhythm.”

Bruckner, too, instrumentally rewrote Beethoven's Ninth, not once but repeatedly—and, it could be alleged, uncritically, or at least far less ironically than Brahms—in a fashion that, especially at first, invited the dreaded charge of epigonism. As Deryck Cooke, one of Bruckner's main twentieth-century advocates, has pointed out, Beethoven's last symphony provided Bruckner with “his four main movement types—the far-ranging first movement, the big adagio built from the varied alternation of two themes, the sonata-form scherzo, and the huge cumulative finale—as well as the tendency to begin a symphony with a faint background sound, emerging almost imperceptibly out of silence.”<sup>5</sup> Bruckner's Third Symphony in D minor (the key of the Ninth), of which the first performance, on 16 December 1877 (Beethoven's birthday), was a legendary disaster, is the most heavily charged of all with specific appropriations from Beethoven's last symphony. Its beginning quite obviously replays Beethoven's opening gambit: preparatory arpeggios prolonging the tonic, a theme formed out of a root-fifth-root descent, a climactic unison. And the resemblances do not end there: a chromatically descending basso ostinato haunts its coda just as it did Beethoven's. And yet the Third Symphony was also the symphony that most demonstratively declared its composer's fealty to Wagner through its effusive dedication—a dedication that Wagner just as demonstratively accepted as a mark of his esteem. And well he might: in its ceremonious linkage of Beethoven and Wagner, Bruckner's symphony was telling Wagner's story, ratifying precisely the view of German musical history that Brahms had challenged.

Bruckner did not break into repertoire status alongside Brahms or achieve real public impact until he was sixty. The turning point was the triumphant Leipzig premiere (under Arthur Nikisch, one of the earliest “virtuoso conductors”) of Bruckner's Seventh Symphony at a Wagner memorial concert on 30 December 1884. The symphony had become a Wagner memorial in its own right halfway through the process of its composition. Bruckner had written two movements, the first and the third (scherzo), when he had a dark presentiment. “One day I returned home feeling very sad,”<sup>6</sup> he wrote to Felix Mottl, a conductor and fellow Wagnerian. “The thought had crossed my mind that the Master would not live much longer, and then the C#-minor theme of the Adagio came to me.” He began writing the Adagio on 22 January 1883, only nineteen days before his forebodings were confirmed, and finished it in April.

Thus, because of its slow movement, the Seventh Symphony can also be considered a specially designated “Wagner Symphony,” but a more mature and representative one than the Third, making this virtually unprecedented twenty-minute Adagio (probably Bruckner's most widely played single movement despite its length, owing to its frequent ceremonial use) an ideal vantage point for surveying his achievement. The very fact that the slow movement is the symphony's center of gravity is an aspect of that achievement: it salvages and develops an aspect of the Beethoven legacy to which other nineteenth-century composers did not respond. (In Brahms, most conspicuously, slow movements tend to have the character of intermezzi, considerably lighter in tone than the outer ones.)



ex. 14-1 Anton Bruckner, *Symphony no. 7, II (Adagio)*, mm. 1–9

Except for the absence of harps (which would be abundantly present in his next and longest symphony, the Eighth), Bruckner's orchestra for the Adagio (and the finale, which he composed afterward) is a somewhat more compact version of the *Götterdämmerung* orchestra, without piccolo, English horn, or bass clarinet, but replete with “Wagner tubas” plus contrabass tuba to furnish the burnished or “cushioned” Wagnerian sonority, and cymbals and triangle to accentuate the shattering C-major climax. The Wagnerian orchestra is deployed in a manner strikingly different from Wagner's, however. Bruckner's use of the instrumental sections (strings, winds, brass) as separately functioning, often antiphonal choirs is widely thought to be a transfer from his organ technique, in which a “registration” is set so that the different keyboards will activate contrasting ranks of pipes that can be played off one against another or combined by “octave coupling” for *tutti*s. Bruckner's frequent homorhythmic textures of course evoke choirs of actual voices in the manner of chorales, or (within Bruckner's Catholic world) of antiphonal psalmody.

In form, the movement derives, as usual, from the slow movement of Beethoven's Ninth, with its alternation of two sections: A-B-A-B-A, with the As growing progressively more ornate (or, in Bruckner's case, more heavily laden with counterpoints and further extended through modulations and motivic development) and the Bs having the character of serene interludes, moving at a more measured pace and a slightly faster tempo (*andante* for Beethoven, *moderato* for Bruckner). In this movement the resemblance of the B section to its counterpart in the Ninth is too close to be anything other than a deliberate allusion

The opening section begins with a striking contrast between two ideas that will each be given broad development. The first, a lyrical lament or threnody sung by the choir of tubas (the “C#-minor theme” as Bruckner called it in his letter), will bring the movement to a close in a coda that Bruckner called his “funeral music for the Master.” The other is the forceful chorale for the strings that answers the tubas, a melody later incorporated into an actual choral Te Deum to set the final words, *non confundar in aeternum* (let me never be confounded).

In the Adagio's opening section these ideas take four and six measures respectively (standing in a proportion of 2:3); the rest is given over to a concluding hymn that is developed sequentially to a climax. In the first return of “A,” the two ideas are expanded by sequences into massive formal blocks in roughly the opposite proportion: about thirty and twenty measures respectively in a proportion of 3:2. The tonal progression between the sequence repetitions most frequently ascends by semitones, so that each seems to function as the leading tone to the next (or alternatively, so that each progression consists of a deceptive cadence to  $\flat$  VI).

In the passage shown in Ex. 14-2, for instance, the chorale motif is heard first in E  $\flat$  (a semitone higher than the root of the immediately preceding dominant-seventh chord on D) and then proceeds once by authentic cadence to A  $\flat$ , next by a “Lisztian” descent down a major third to E (= F  $\flat$ , also understandable as  $\flat$  VI, approached from the tonic rather than the dominant), and thence—in a manner that “Brahmins” thought unspeakably crude, though certainly effective—through four ascending half steps until the A  $\flat$  is regained at m. 133 to begin the second *moderato* section.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a symphony. Each system consists of two staves. The first system shows a string part (strings) and a tuba part (MCB). The second system shows a string part (strings) and a brass part (brass). The third system shows a string part (strings) and a brass part (brass). The music is in a minor key and shows a sequence of chords and melodic lines.

**ex. 14-2 Anton Bruckner, Symphony no. 7, II, mm. 114–33**

In the last and longest “A” section, the texture is augmented by a constant sextolet in the violins, borrowed directly from Beethoven’s figuration at the analogous spot in the Ninth Symphony. Once past the opening gambit, the order of presentation is reversed. The chorale is put through a variety of extensions and sequential repetitions on the way to the climax, pitched on C natural so that the return to the tonic C# can sound like another deceptive  $\flat$  VI resolution; at which point the tubas return for the last extended reference to their opening threnody.

Both the dynamic, climax-driven shaping of the movement’s vast expanse and its consistent saturation with  $\flat$  VI relationships testify to the composer’s concern with “organic form,” in which everything (following Wagner’s conception of “endless melody”) is thematic. It could go without saying that the main themes of the symphony’s outer movements will likewise be variants of a single idea, an upward-sweeping tonic arpeggio following an initial descent from first degree to fifth (Ex. 14-3). It was a rare late-century symphony that did not display the sort of thematic interconnections and reminiscences taken for granted in the symphonic poem, suggestive not only of organic form but also of dramaturgy. This, too, has to be regarded as a dialectical synthesis in which formal principles initially thought incompatible gradually converged.

## Notes:

(3) Quoted in Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 271.

(4) Hans-Hubert Schönzeler, *Bruckner* (New York: Vienna House, 1978), p. 65.

(5) Deryck Cooke, “Bruckner,” in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. III (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 364.

(6) Quoted in Schönzeler, *Bruckner*, p. 80.



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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Cyclic form

Antonín Dvorák

Dvorák: Orchestral works

Dvorák: The American period, 1892–5

Spiritual

## A BOHEMIAN PRESCRIPTION FOR AMERICA

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 14 The Symphony Goes (Inter)National

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

*Allegro moderato*

Vln. I, II

*pp*

Vc., Hn I

*mf*

ex. 14-3a Anton Bruckner, *Symphony no. 7, I*, mm. 1–5

*Bewegt, doch nicht schnell*

Vln. II

*pp*

*p*

ex. 14-3b Anton Bruckner, *Symphony no. 7, IV* mm. 1–2

Unsurprisingly, “cyclic” form (as it came to be called in the case of multimovement works) is most prevalent and systematically applied in the work of composers whose output contained both symphonies and symphonic poems or even operas, a versatility as unthinkable for a Liszt as it was for a Brahms. Brahms’s own single-movement symphonic pieces, both composed in 1880, retained the old-fashioned designation “overture” and like Beethoven’s overtures adhered to standard “first movement” form. While sporting “characteristic” titles—“Academic Festival” (composed on the themes of student songs as a thank-you for his Breslau degree) and “Tragic”—they were neither overtly programmatic nor conceived as narratives.

Far less fastidious about such distinctions was Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904), often regarded as a Brahms protégé. His first big break came in 1874 when, as a country-born Bohemian provincial working as an orchestral violist and church organist (and who unlike his older countryman Smetana spoke Czech as his native language), Dvořák submitted several of his compositions to a committee that included Hanslick in hopes of winning a stipend from the Austrian government. He won not only that year but in 1876 and 1877 as well, when Brahms had joined the committee, and through the good offices of Hanslick and Brahms found a publisher.



**fig. 14-2a Antonín Dvořák, painting (1893) by A. Studnikow, after a portrait photo ca. 1879.**

His first publications were of popular “national” fare, the exotic route being the easiest way for a young composer from the non-German provinces to promote himself. It is, however, a fair measure of the double standard that informs a lot of musical historiography to note that these early publications of Dvořák’s—two books of “Moravian Duets” for mixed voices and piano, and a book of “Slavonic Dances” for piano four-hands—typecast him as a nationalist in a way that Brahms’s almost exactly analogous early publications—the *Liebeslieder-Walzer* and the “Hungarian Dances”—did not.

Moreover, while no one ever thought of Brahms’s Hungarian Dances as the expression of the composer’s essential

personality (because he was not a Hungarian), the opposite assumption was made in the case of Dvořák—even though, as scholars have demonstrated many times over, he did not use authentic melodies even when he could have, and the “Czech” style he presented to the world at large was altogether unlike the Czech style that Czechs recognize as Czech. To revive some terminology first applied to Chopin in chapter 7, Dvořák’s early nationalism was almost entirely an opportunistic “tourist nationalism.” Nevertheless, he found himself trapped in it at times, as if in a ghetto. It led inevitably to biased expectations and, in some cases, to invidious reviews when he failed to conform to German (or French, or American) listeners’ ideas of properly Czech behavior.



**fig. 14-2b Dvořák's house in New York City, during his time as director of the National Conservatory, 1892–1895.**

Meanwhile, despite his location in Prague (not exactly a small town, but provincial in Viennese eyes), Dvořák was a musician of wide and eclectic background. As a teenager he had played in the Prague conservatory orchestra when it needed to be augmented for big works like *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, and he began his musical career a fervent Wagnerian. (In 1863 he played under Wagner himself in a concert that, among other things, introduced the preludes to *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger* to Prague.) By 1871, his thirtieth year, he had two operas of his own to his credit.

The first, *Alfred*, was a grand historical opera in German that portrayed Anglo-Saxon resistance to the conquering

Danes in the ninth century. The second, *The King and the Charcoal Burner*, was a comedy in Czech to a libretto reminiscent of Albert Lortzing's *Zar und Zimmermann* ("The Tsar and the carpenter," 1837), a folksy singspiel about mistaken identity and benevolent friendship across class lines that was very popular all over Europe. Dvořák's opera was no folksy singspiel, however; it was so full of Wagnerian adventurousness and ambition that it had to be sent back for radical surgery by the Prague Provisional Theater, the Czech-language house to which he had submitted it. (The simplified version was performed in the same year that Dvořák won his stipend.) Clearly, the composer of these works was no "Brahmin"; but neither was he a down-on-the-farm "nationalist."

Very much in contrast to such pigeonholes, Dvořák was arguably the most versatile ("universal"?) composer of his time. His output eventually included eight more operas, including one (*Dmitrij*, 1882; revised 1894–95) that updated the plot of Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, and another (*Rusalka*, 1900) that treated the famous legend of the water nymph who loves a mortal, widespread in the folklore of many European nations, in an unregenerately Wagnerian fashion. (The first act, for example, replays the opening scene of *Das Rheingold*, with Alberich and the Rhine Maidens dressed in Czech folk costume.) *Rusalka* alone has become an international repertoire item, but Dvořák's operas, with Smetana's, are the foundation of the operatic repertoire in his homeland.

Yet alongside this steady production of operas, and almost uniquely, Dvořák produced an equally steady stream of symphonic and chamber works. Here his indebtedness to Brahms as a model was as apparent as was his indebtedness to Wagner in the realm of opera. But in certain ways Dvořák managed to outstrip Brahms. He was, for one thing, far more prolific. His series of fourteen string quartets (composed between 1862 and 1895) was the most impressive such achievement since Beethoven. And he cultivated the other main chamber genres of his time with almost equal assiduity: five piano trios, two piano quintets, a piano quartet, two string quintets, a string sextet, and many more, including an octet (never published and now lost) for mixed strings and winds comparable to Schubert's except that it included a part for piano.

During their lifetimes, Dvořák's chamber music was (and probably would be found to remain, if statistics were available) more frequently performed than Brahms's. It owed its greater popularity (if not quite the same level of esteem from critics and connoisseurs) to its broader, more lyrical melodic content. Thus Dvořák could be viewed as standing in a line with Schubert as a chamber composer where Brahms, the "motivic miniaturist," claimed direct descent from Beethoven. It is a cliché born of biased expectations to describe Dvořák's greater lyricism in terms of his national origin. Only in the "scherzo" slot, formerly occupied by the minuet, did Dvořák habitually write in a folkish style, substituting characteristic Czech dances like the polka and the *furiant* (an exuberant dance full of hemiola—rhythms) for what had often been in Haydn's day the "peasant" movement.

Dvořák's nine symphonies, though they came to a Beethovenian number in the aggregate, are individually quite motley in style. Again, the model that most frequently comes to mind is Schubert. There was one great difference between Dvořák's symphonic procedures and Schubert's, however, and that was his predilection for "cyclic" form, strictly a late-nineteenth-century phenomenon (though with a single colossal precedent in Beethoven). Both in his symphonies and in his concertos—especially late ones like the Ninth Symphony, op. 95 (1893), and the Cello Concerto, op. 104 (1895)—Dvořák occasionally recycled themes from movement to movement to a degree that lent his works a tinge of secret "programmaticism."

Not that that suspicion would faze a symphonist who (unlike Brahms) had no qualms about composing symphonic poems as well. In fact, Dvořák's last orchestral works (composed 1896–97) were a cycle of symphonic poems comparable to Smetana's *Má vlast*, based on the ballads of Karel Jaromír Erben (1811–70), famous as a folklore collector ("the Czech Grimm") but also a poet in his own right, who collected folk tales and worked them into narrative poems. Also Lisztian, both in title and content, were Dvořák's three Slavonic Rhapsodies for orchestra (1878). And yet Dvořák also wrote his share of fastidiously formed and titled concert overtures on the Mendelssohnian-Brahmsian model: *My Home* (1882), *Carnival* (1891), *Othello* (1892). And he even turned out a set of *Symphonic Variations*, a genre for which Brahms provided practically the only model, in 1877.

Dvořák's cyclic forms in symphonies and concertos are evidence not only of latent "poetic content" but also of virtuosically developed traditional skills, quite belying his cliché image as a "primitive." It was not as a folksy primitive but as a world-class master of European music in the broadest sense that Jeannette M. Thurber, an American philanthropist, invited Dvořák to New York to become the director of the National Conservatory of Music, an institution she was endowing (very much in the same spirit that had motivated Anton Rubinstein in Russia thirty years before) to allow the spread of European art music to new shores, and its cultivation there—or, to put it another way, to further the musical colonization of the New World by the Old.

Dvořák's last symphony was composed during his American sojourn, which lasted from 1892 to 1895. Subtitled “Z nového světa” (“From the new world”), it received its first performance in Carnegie Hall on Beethoven's birthday, 16 December 1893, under the baton of the Hungarian-born Anton Seidl (1850–98), an eminent Wagnerian conductor who was then at the helm of both the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic. While immediately successful, and an enduring repertoire item ever since, the symphony has occasioned much debate. Its subtitle could be read in various ways. Did it simply mean a symphony written in the New World—“Impressions and Greetings”<sup>7</sup> (as the composer once put it) to those back home? Or did it imply that the thematic content—or perhaps even the “poetic” content—was in some sense (but what sense?) inherently American?

We will return to these questions, but only after taking a look at the music that gave rise to them. As in the case of Bruckner's Seventh, the slow second movement, which has become independently famous, is the obvious choice for a representative sample. Compared with its counterparts in Brahms, it is a curiously sectional, episodic piece, and in this, too, it seems to hark back to Schubert. Its thematic content is given out in fully rounded periods that later yield up motifs for development and recall, rather than proceeding the other way around (as Dahlhaus describes the Brahmsian manner) by starting with “an inconspicuous motive, which does not even appear as a theme at first, but only attains the function of a theme gradually, by virtue of the consequences drawn from it.”<sup>8</sup> The following description can (and should) be matched up with the score for full comprehensibility.

The movement begins on a patently “Lisztian” note, with a sort of prefatory chorale in which the root progressions (except for the final plagal one) are entirely by thirds and “multiple thirds” (e.g., the initial tritone, representing two stages along the circle of minor thirds). The main theme, given out as a famous solo for the English horn (always an “exotic” timbre), could hardly be a more “finished” melody: twelve bars arranged by fours, ABA'. Following another invocation of the chromatic “chorale,” the opening section continues with another contrasting phrase and another “A'.”

At 2 a “middle section” in the parallel minor, at a slightly faster tempo, and in contrasting triplet rhythms ensues. It too consists of an alternation of rounded tunes (more obviously contrasting this time) in a format that can be summarized ABABA. The “B” section has a walking bass that (it is fair to say) inescapably evokes a procession. At 4 the mode shifts back to major for a much faster tune, notated in short note-values within a single bar but obviously a “four-measure” construction. Presented ostinato-fashion, it serves as the medium of a crescendo to a surging climax, after which (at 5) a return is made to the opening music, presented haltingly, with fermatas that interrupt the “singing” in a manner that recalls the muted end of the *Marcia funebre* in Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony. The coda, almost needless to add, is based on the introductory chorale. If the material at 4 is regarded as transitional, the whole movement recapitulates (or amplifies) the ABA' structure of the opening section.

Not even the simplest formal description of the movement like the one just attempted can omit the “extroverted semiotics,” the signs pointing beyond its boundaries to other pieces and images, in this case funereal. But there is a large component of “introverted” signing as well. The climax at 5 measures before 5 (Ex. 14-4), throughout which the harmony remains frozen on the fraught—Schubertianly fraught!—chord of the flat submediant (  $\flat$  VI), is shot through with reminiscences of the first movement. As comparison with Ex. 14-5 will corroborate, the trombones refer to the arpeggiating main theme of the earlier movement; the horns, violins, and woodwinds divide up motifs from the same movement's second theme; and the trumpets play reverberations (employing rustic “horn fifths”) of the opening phrase from the second movement's English horn solo. The whole passage reverberates and repercusses over a diminuendo: a very apt way of representing the onset and fading of a sudden memory.

Even more evocative (and even more contrapuntally resourceful) is the coda of the finale—that is, the coda to the entire symphony (Ex. 14-6). It “montages” motifs from all four movements (motifs that have already been sounding at various points throughout the finale) into new and striking configurations. (For corroboration, Ex. 14-7 displays the main theme of the scherzo.) Immediately before the start of Ex. 14-6, the Largo's introductory chorale had returned in glory at the peak of a crescendo. At its subsidence the opening phrase of the English horn solo is played against a reminiscence of the scherzo that passes dramatically down by octaves from the piccolo through the string section and into the timpani, where its reverberations accompany the softly-beginning last recall of the finale's main theme. Last is immediately juxtaposed with first at the climax, where the trumpets blare the finale theme, very dissonantly harmonized against the first movement's arpeggio theme.



ex. 14-4 Antonín Dvořák, “New World” Symphony, II, 5 measures before fig. [5]

We have previously encountered a concatenation of motifs like this only once, and that was in the Norns’ scene from *Götterdämmerung* (see chapter 10). There, of course, the motifs had extroversive as well as introversive significance: they referred not only to other parts of the *Ring*, but to events, characters, and feelings. But as we have already had occasion to note in the case of the funereal slow movement, the “New World” Symphony abounds in extroversive reference (albeit of a conventional and generalized kind) and “intertextual” reference as well, as where Dvořák evokes Beethoven’s Third Symphony, known presumably (or at least potentially) to most members of his original audience. Even without a program, moreover, thematic reminiscences, especially at such a level of concentration and climactic display, ineluctably suggest what the New Germans called “poetic content.” A symphony that appropriates so many devices of signification, not only from the symphonic poem but even from opera, becomes something of an opera for orchestra. But an opera about what?

**Allegro molto**

*mf* *f*

Hns III, IV

ex. 14-5a Antonín Dvořák, “New World” Symphony, I, first theme

Fl. *p*

ex. 14-5b Antonín Dvořák, “New World” Symphony, I, second theme

Fl. *pp*

Cl. in A solo *p*

Vln. I *p*

Vln. II *p*

Vla. *p*

Vc. *p*

Cb. *p*

*legato dim.*

*ppp*

*ppp*

*ppp*

*ppp*

Cl. in A *poco a poco rit.*

Hn. in E *ppp* solo *p* *pp*

Tpt. *pp*

Tba. *pp*

Timp. *pp*

Vln. I *poco a poco rit.*

Vln. II

Vla. *ppp*

Vc. *ppp*

Cb. *ppp*

The musical score is arranged in systems. The first system includes Cl. in A, Hn. in E, Tpt., Tba., and Timp. The second system includes Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., Vc., and Cb. The Cl. in A part begins with a melodic line in the first two measures, followed by rests and then a sustained note. The Hn. in E part has a solo entry in the third measure. The Tpt. and Tba. parts have sustained notes in the final two measures. The Timp. part has a rhythmic pattern starting in the third measure. The Vln. I and Vln. II parts are mostly rests. The Vla. and Vc. parts have melodic lines in the first two measures. The Cb. part has a melodic line in the first two measures. Dynamic markings include *ppp* (pianississimo) and *pp* (pianissimo). Tempo markings include *poco a poco rit.* (poco a poco ritardando).

This image displays a page of a musical score, likely for a symphony, featuring woodwind, string, and brass sections. The score is organized into three systems. The first system includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Clarinet in A (Cl. in A), Bassoon (Ba.), Horn in E-flat (Ho. in E♭), Horn in F (Ho.), Trumpet (Trp.), Trombone (Tbn.), and Tuba (Tbu.). The second system features the Trombone (Tbn.) and Tuba (Tbu.) parts. The third system includes parts for Trumpet (Trp.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vcllo.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The score includes various musical notations such as clefs, time signatures, dynamics (e.g., *f*, *ff*, *mf*), and performance instructions like *ritard.* and *ritard.* The woodwind and brass parts show complex rhythmic patterns and articulation, while the string parts provide a steady accompaniment.

ex. 14-6 Antonín Dvořák, “New World” Symphony, IV, coda (motivic montage)

As Michael Beckerman, the leading American specialist in Czech music, has pointed out most recently (and in greatest detail), an answer to this question can be deduced by juxtaposing a comment Dvořák made to a New York reporter on the day of the premiere with the contents of a letter to Dvořák from Mrs. Thurber, his American employer. Dvořák himself pointed out that the symphony's Largo (then designated Adagio) was unusual in content and structure, “different from the classic works in this form.”<sup>9</sup> As he felt he had to explain, “it is in reality a study or a sketch for a longer work, whether a cantata or an opera which I propose writing, and which will be based upon Longfellow's *Hiawatha*.” Anything can be said for the sake of publicity, of course, but in this case Dvořák's correspondence corroborates his avowal. One of Mrs. Thurber's provisos in hiring Dvořák to head the National Conservatory was that he foster an American national opera by providing an example for native-born composers. She even specified *The Song of Hiawatha* as the basis for the libretto.



**ex. 14-7 Antonín Dvořák, “New World” Symphony, III, mm. 13–21 (woodwinds)**

It was an almost inevitable choice. Operas on national myths had played an important role in establishing many national “schools,” and (as detailed in chapter 4) in some countries—Germany with its *Freischütz*, Russia with its *Life for the Tsar*—the opera in question served not only as a musical cornerstone but as a cornerstone of the nation's sense of nationhood. From the first, Longfellow's poem (published in 1855) had sought to serve this purpose, providing the United States with an ersatz national epic, something of which the nation's youth and modernity had deprived it.

The poem's heavy, frequently parodied trochaic meter (“BY the SHORES of GItchee GUmee...”) was copied from the *Kalevala*, the national epic of the Finns, first published in 1835 and given its definitive literary form by Elias Lönnrot in 1849, only half a dozen years before Longfellow imitated it. It, too, was something of an ersatz: Originally assumed to date as a unit from around the first millennium b.c.e., it was later shown to be a patchwork of oral poetry of which parts had originated as comparatively recently as the sixteenth century, and of which other parts had actually been created by Lönnrot in the process of its literary adaptation. The trochaic meter, however, was endemic to Finnish, one of the European languages (Hungarian and Dvořák's own Czech being others) in which all words are stressed on their first syllables.



**fig. 14-3 *Hiawatha's Departure*, after Longfellow.**

In the case of *Hiawatha*, of course, the trochaic meter achieved its atmospheric purpose precisely because it was not endemic to English, but rather conjured up an air of nonspecific mythical exoticism and pseudoantiquity. The poem's protagonist, the legendary Mohawk or Onondaga chief Haionhwat'ha, actually lived in what is now upstate New York in the sixteenth century. He was credited in oral tradition with the founding, around 1570, of the Iroquois League, a mutual-defense confederation of five nations under an unwritten constitution, which became (with the assistance of Dutch arms) the foremost indigenous military power north of Mexico.

Except for one member nation, the League backed the British rather than the colonists in the American Revolutionary War; the ensuing hostility between the new United States government and the tribes was disastrous for the League's autonomy and led eventually to its destruction. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that the structure of the Iroquois League was among the models considered by the Continental Congress in drafting the



Articles of Confederation, the provisional American constitution that was drawn up in 1776 and in force from 1781 to 1789, and that defined the United States of America as a “league of friendship” for common defense.

Thus despite the actual hostility of the United States to its Indian population, a policy that in its late-nineteenth-century excesses went as far as genocide, the Iroquois League, and the figure of its legendary founder, could play the role of indigenous progenitor in romantic national mythology. The musicalization of that mythology is what Mrs. Thurber had asked of Dvořák. He never completed the opera for want of an actual libretto; but the music he sketched for it suffuses at least two of the movements of the “New World” Symphony, and probably all four.

The scherzo, by Dvořák's specific acknowledgment, “was suggested by the scene at the feast in *Hiawatha* where the Indians dance.”<sup>10</sup> Beckerman has suggested that it was a representation of the Dance of Pau-Puk-Keewis, the great athlete, described by Longfellow at the beginning of chapter 11 of the poem, “Hiawatha's Wedding Feast.” Dvořák was less specific about the Largo, but to the critic Henry Krehbiel he confided that it was based on chapter 10, “Hiawatha's Wooing.” Because of its pastoral tone, Beckerman has suggested that the opening section, featuring the famous English horn solo, depicts Hiawatha's journey homeward with his bride Minnehaha (“Laughing Water”): “Short it seemed to Hiawatha,/Though they journeyed very slowly,/Though his pace he checked and slackened/To the steps of Laughing Water.”

The middle section, with all its funereal imagery (evident even without knowledge of a literary source), must correspond with the death and burial of Minnehaha in “Music in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” chapter 1. The grand concatenations of themes and motifs from all the movements in the finale are surely an indication that Dvořák envisioned his American mythic opera much along the lines of Wagner's German mythos in the *Ring*, with each of its acts (or movements in the corresponding symphony) drawing ever more extensively on a preexisting musical cosmos or past-in-music that gives ever increasing resonance to the unfolding narrative's events and reflections.

The remaining question, especially relevant in the case of a composer who often gave his music a national tinge, is whether the themes and motifs conceived originally in connection with *Hiawatha* or the “New World” Symphony were intended to be indicatively “American”; and if so, then on what stylistic basis? The only direct testimony is Dvořák's deliberate teaser: “the influence of America can be felt by anyone who has a ‘nose.’”<sup>11</sup> Beyond that we must fall back on educated (which may mean biased) sniffing.

Dvořák is known to have been very much drawn to Negro spirituals and their professional arrangements called “plantation songs.” In an article published in *Harper's Magazine* (February 1895), he called them “the most striking and appealing melodies that have yet been found on this side of the water.” One of the students at the National Conservatory during Dvořák's tenure (though never his composition pupil, as has occasionally been claimed) was Harry T. Burleigh (1866–1949), an African-American singer and choral conductor, who over the course of his career made almost two hundred arrangements of spirituals for chorus, and who recalled singing dozens of them to Dvořák during the period of the “New World” Symphony's gestation.

There are numerous pentatonic melodies in the symphony that seem to resonate stylistically with spirituals. The Largo's English horn theme (or rather its “A” section) is one. Another, the second theme from the first movement (quoted in Ex. 14-5b), can be interpreted as incorporating a brief quotation from the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”: its opening phrases correspond to the note sequence and (roughly) the rhythm to which the words “chariot,/comin’ for to carry me home” are set in the spiritual (compare Ex. 14-8).

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cf. Ex. 14-5b

Swing low, sweet cha - ri - ot, — co - min' for to car - ry me home.

**ex. 14-8 Spiritual, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot***

But of course many Bohemian folk tunes share the pentatonic structure of spirituals and plantation songs, as do the folk songs of many nations. And given the front-stressed accent patterns of the Czech language, many Bohemian folk tunes also exhibit the “lombard” short-long rhythm that Dvořák's theme and “Swing Low” have in common. Both

traits can be found, for example, in themes from Dvořák's Eighth Symphony (1889), composed before he ever had a thought of setting foot in the New World (Ex. 14-9).



ex. 14-9a Antonín Dvořák, *Symphony no. 8 in G, I, flute solo, mm. 18–22 (pentatonic)*

ex. 14-9b Antonín Dvořák, *Symphony no. 8 in G, II, eight measures after fig. [F] (woodwinds)*

And yet Dvořák did not hesitate to give fatherly advice to American composers to do as the Bohemians had done, and (in Krehbiel's paraphrase) submit the indigenous musics of their country, namely Indian melodies and Negro spirituals, "to beautiful treatment in the higher forms of art."<sup>12</sup> There is every reason to suppose that in his *Hiawatha* opera, and in the symphony that had spun off from it, he intended to provide them with an object lesson. Whether or not this can ever be proved, the fact remains that his melodies were taken as "American"—particularly the Largo's English horn theme, which may not have been a spiritual to begin with, but which *became* one. Many who do not know its source in Dvořák know it as "Goin' Home"—and in view of Michael Beckerman's explanation of its basis in Longfellow, it seems possible that the "back-transfer" of this composed theme into the oral tradition may have been facilitated by someone who knew of Dvořák's original intentions.

But still, what are "plantation songs" doing in a work that sought America's mythic past in Indian lore? Not that the symphony lacks conventional Indian lore. Dvořák called the scherzo "an essay I made in the direction of imparting the local color of Indian character to music,"<sup>13</sup> though no one has ever identified that character with quoted artifacts, or even with the style of the music except trivially—for example, in the use of insistent pedal basses (or "open fifths") expressed in pulses like drumbeats or tom-toms. A similarly accompanied themelet in the first movement, from which the bridge to the second theme is then constructed, has also been suppositionally identified as "Indian" (Ex. 14-10).

ex. 14-10 Antonín Dvořák, "New World" Symphony, I, "Indian" theme

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## Notes:

(7) Josef Jan Kovařík to Otakar Šourek; quoted in Michael Beckerman, "The Master's Little Joke: Antonín Dvořák and the Mask of Nation," in *Dvořák and His World*, ed. Michael Beckerman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 135.

(8) Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, p. 154.

(9) *New York Herald*, 15 December 1893; quoted in Michael Beckerman, "Dvořák's 'New World' Largo and *The Song of Hiawatha*," *19th-Century Music* XVI (1992–93): 36.

(10) *Ibid.*

(11) Dvořák to Emil Kozanek, 12 April 1893; Otakar Šourek, *Dvorak in Letters and Reminiscences* (Prague: Artia, 1954), p. 158.

(12) *New York Daily Tribune*, 17 December 1893, p. 7; quoted in Michael Beckerman, "Henry Krehbiel, Antonín Dvořák, and the Symphony 'From the New World,'" *MLA Notes* XLIX (1992–93): 471.

(13) *New York Herald*, 15 December 1893; quoted in Beckerman, "Dvořák's 'New World' Largo and *The Song of Hiawatha*," p. 36.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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## AN AMERICAN RESPONSE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 14 The Symphony Goes (Inter)National

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

But the question regarding the appropriateness of “plantation songs” remains. His use of them implies that for Dvořák, coming as he did from the outside, Native-American and African-American folklore were interchangeably “American” in connotation. For Americans, the great majority of whom were by then of European immigrant stock, it was not so. For Americans interested in cultivating the European art music tradition—meaning, in the first instance, German immigrants, in the second, cultivated Anglo-Saxons—it was even less so, for such an interest marked one off as even more “Eurocentric” than the average.

For such musicians, the unmarked native tongue for music was (like it or not) the same as it was for Dvořák—that is, German. That Dvořák never paused to consider that the national identities he was encouraging Americans to adopt belonged to separate, distinguishable (and, often, stigmatized) minority cultures, and that he never expected that this circumstance would bother Americans, shows to what an extent he remained an outsider to American history and culture. And it also shows that he valued his own Bohemianness (that is, valued it musically) as an element of exoticism—a manner of presenting the self as other. His fundamental loyalty—as a musician no less than as a citizen—was to the multinational empire in which he lived.

So while Dvořák could give his music an authentic “national” (that is, local or regional) coloring that represented within the multinational context an ethnically homogeneous, single, and separate “other,” there was no such coloring available to Euro-Americans. For them, “American” described not an ethnic but a geographical and political identity. To put it in Dvořákian terms, “American” connoted something far closer to “Austro-Hungarian” than to “Czech.” To claim to be “ethnically Austro-Hungarian” was an absurd contradiction in terms—but so was any claim by a white person to be “ethnically American.”

So Dvořák's advice to his American pupils, while well meant, was unworkable—and deeply resented by his native-born peers, that is those few American composers, chiefly white Anglo-Saxons from affluent families, who had received their professional training in the conservatories of Europe and shared Dvořák's basic loyalty to the unmarked, “universal” Germanic style. His object lesson, though emulated for a while by a short-lived school of “Indianists,” did not have a lasting impact on American composition. For most composers trained in “the higher forms of art,” an African-American or Native-American style could only be adopted in whiteface—hardly a condition calculated to impart a sense of cultural authenticity.



**fig. 14-4 Edward MacDowell.**

That is easily enough seen even without taking racial prejudice into account. But of course prejudice, too, played a part in dismantling Dvořák's naive prescription. Edward MacDowell (1860–1908), a New York–born composer who had learned his trade from Joachim Raff in Frankfurt, and who was living in Boston during Dvořák's tenure in New York, felt the pressure to conform to the prestigious Bohemian master's ideas on musical Americanism, completing an “Indian Suite” (based on published field transcriptions) for orchestra, rather against his will, in 1895.

Embarrassed by this concession to the vogue for vulgar “national trademarks,” as he put it, he nevertheless managed to justify his choice of trademark by insisting that “the stern but at least manly and free rudeness of the North American Indian” was in any case preferable to “the badge of whilom [i.e., former] slavery” worn by blacks.<sup>14</sup>

His temporary residence in Boston made MacDowell the most eminent representative for a while of the first self-styled and recognized “school” of American composers in the European art-music tradition. Besides being the first American composer since Gottschalk to establish a strong European reputation (partly through the efforts of Liszt, his mentor's mentor), MacDowell was like Gottschalk a virtuoso pianist who toured the cities of Europe with his own concertos and concert transcriptions as his vehicles, and he produced four monumental “characteristic” sonatas—“Tragica,” op. 45 (1892), “Eroica,” op. 50 (1895), “Norse,” op. 57 (1899), “Keltic,” op. 59 (1900)—in the Lisztian mold. His many character-pieces for piano, issued in sets with evocative titles like *Woodland Sketches*



(which opened with the once very popular “To a Wild Rose”), *Sea Pieces*, *Fireside Tales*, and *New England Idyls*, maintained the Schumannesque line past the turn of the century.

MacDowell had actually been Mrs. Thurber's first choice to lead the National Conservatory, a job that she felt by rights should have gone to a native-born composer, but he shunned the administrative duties that the job would have entailed, and there was no other American at the time who could have matched his prestige. Yet shortly after Dvořák's departure from New York, in 1896, MacDowell took his place there as a leading cultural figure in the nation's biggest city when he accepted appointment as head of the newly founded music department at Columbia University. Just as he had feared, the heavy pressures of his job, made more difficult by quarrels with the university administration, took a severe toll on his creative energies and his mental health. The last seven years of his life were barren, and he eventually became a “charity case” before dying of the combined effects of injuries sustained in a traffic accident and what was then diagnosed as “paresis” or general paralysis, a euphemism for the terminal effects of venereal disease.

Just what you'd expect from New York, his former Boston colleagues may well have muttered. Boston, the great museum and university city, defined itself in the nineteenth century (as to a degree it still does) in opposition to New York. New York, the commercial capital of the nation and perhaps the world, was in the eyes of Bostonians, and for that very reason, the capital of baseness and vulgarity. Boston was the capital of culture. Where New York symbolized the teeming immigrant “melting pot” to which Dvořák could appeal in urging an American style drawn from an amalgam of minority cultures, Boston was then the Anglo-Saxon stronghold. Despite the presence of a growing Irish immigrant minority, affluent Bostonians considered theirs to be a purebred city, the birthplace of the United States and the hub of “real” America. Its genteel mores nurtured the cultivation of the European fine arts, in contrast to the low mercenary culture of the big city to the southwest. These conditions made Boston the place where one might have expected the first school of professional Euro-American composers to appear, and also determined to a large extent the values that their music would embody.

The “Boston School”—sometimes called the “Second Yankee School” to distinguish it from the New England hymn writers of the colonial period—was a proudly academic establishment. Its first major representative, John Knowles Paine (1839–1906), was also the first professor of music at Harvard, which made him the first professor of music at any American university. Having composers teach at universities rather than conservatories was the British rather than the German tradition; the early music professors at German universities (of whom Hanslick was the first) lectured on music history and esthetics as adjuncts to philosophy departments. But Paine's training was solidly German, obtained at the Berlin conservatory (known as the *Hochschule für Musik*, the “High School of Music”) between 1858 and 1861. He spent the rest of his life imparting a similar training to his pupils at Harvard.

The other major figures in the first Boston generation—that is, the generation trained in Europe rather than Boston—were George Whitefield Chadwick (1854–1931), who studied in Leipzig and Munich (with Josef Rheinberger, a famous organist and prestigious composer) and taught at Boston's New England Conservatory, where he became the director in 1897; and Horatio Parker (1863–1919), who after preliminary studies in Boston was sent by Chadwick to Rheinberger, and who taught at Yale, where he was dean of the School of Music from 1904 until his death.

The “Boston School's” second and third generations consisted of pupils of Paine, Chadwick, and Parker: Arthur William Foote (1853–1937), Frederick Shepherd Converse (1871–1940), Edward Burlingame Hill (1872–1960), Daniel Gregory Mason (1873–1953), John Alden Carpenter (1876–1951), David Stanley Smith (1877–1949). Like their teachers, they were all New Englanders by birth or education, were uniformly of Anglo-Saxon stock, and (with the exception of Carpenter, who went into business) earned their living as academics or organists.





**fig. 14-5 Amy Marcy Cheney Beach.**

The group had one other important member, however, who studied neither in Europe nor with any of the founders, but whose achievements realized the Boston School's aspirations in a particularly distinguished way: Amy Marcy Beach (née Cheney, 1867–1944), perhaps the nineteenth century's most successful woman composer of “large-scale art music” (to quote her biographer, Adrienne Fried Block). In keeping with a pattern we have noted at several earlier points in this book, her gender kept her, despite evidence of highly precocious talent, from the pursuit of a professional career.

Her wealthy parents thought it unsuitable for a well-bred girl to study at a European conservatory. Instead they engaged private teachers for her, but mainly in piano-playing, a proper social grace. Her training in composition was confined to some informal study of scores with Wilhelm Gericke, an Austrian conductor then leading the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and a single year of harmony and counterpoint with a local instructor, Junius W. Hill. Orchestration and fugue she taught herself by translating and working through the Paris conservatory textbooks in those subjects.

As a pianist, meanwhile, she flourished, making her first appearance with orchestra at the age of sixteen, and a formal, highly successful, Boston Symphony debut in 1885 with Chopin's F-minor Concerto. Later that year, she

married Henry Harris Aubrey Beach, a socially prominent Boston surgeon, twenty-four years her senior, who lectured on anatomy at Harvard. Her married state precluded any more concertizing, and it appeared that her talent would go the way of Clara Wieck's and Fanny Mendelssohn's—that is, wither on the vine.

But the childless marriage between the eighteen-year-old musical prodigy and the forty-two-year-old society doctor turned out to be fortunate for her work. Her husband's wealth gave her unlimited leisure, indeed forced it upon her, and he had no objection either to her avocational composing or to her publishing her work. She was free to compose in the larger forms, and she had a ready and admiring public in Boston society. Whatever drawback her sex might have afforded under less ideal conditions were offset by her social prominence, by her conformity with social convention, and (in apparent—but only apparent—paradox) by the marginalism, in those days, of American composers generally. Indulged at first as a local favorite, “Mrs. H. H. A. Beach” (as, in accordance with domestic custom, she always signed her work) eventually acquired a national reputation. Anton Seidl, the New York conductor, is reported to have considered her music superior to Brahms's. (But he said it of Chadwick's music, too, and as a card-carrying Wagnerian may have had his reasons.) Beach embarked on her first and only symphony almost immediately after hearing the Boston premiere of Dvořák's “New World” in January 1894. It was obviously her model. The two symphonies are in the same key, the relatively rarely used E minor. While her symphony does not employ cyclic returns, at least not to anything like the extent that Dvořák's does, its complex and broadly constructed outer movements, as was increasingly the fashion, were developed out of a single fund of motifs. To compound the tour de force, they came from one of her many art songs, “Dark Is the Night,” first published in 1890. Beach did not reveal this fact, but she fairly trumpeted the information that the middle movements (and the “closing theme” in the first) were based on the melodies of what she called “Irish-Gaelic” folk songs, for which reason the whole symphony bears the title, “Gaelic.”

Thus Beach's symphony was an ambitious and advanced work not only from the standpoint of its proportions and its craftsmanship—though these were impressive enough to earn an accolade from Chadwick, who wrote the composer that her work was “full of fine things, melodically, harmonically, and orchestrally, and mighty well built besides,” and that from now on she was, as far as he was concerned, “one of the boys.”<sup>15</sup> Beyond this, the symphony sought to engage directly in the esthetic debates of the day as they intersected with social ones.

Her use of Irish folklore was a response to Dvořák comparable to Brahms's response to Beethoven in the last movement of his First Symphony. It was both a declaration of affiliation and a corrective—in Beach's case, a characteristically Bostonian corrective. Like Dvořák, she sought a melodic content that advertised a specific national origin, in large part owing (as did his) to the use of pentatonic scales. But that national origin was “American” in a sense that only Boston, perhaps, would have fully endorsed or understood. “We of the north,” Beach wrote in a letter to the *Boston Herald* in which she took explicit issue with Dvořák's prescriptions, “should be far more likely to be influenced by old English, Scotch or Irish songs, inherited with our literature from our ancestors.”<sup>16</sup> Like the composers of Europe, then, Beach defined the national not merely in terms of soil (as the Bohemian Dvořák had benignly, but condescendingly, urged Americans to do) but in terms of blood as well. She identified herself musically, as did most Bostonians (or Bohemians, for that matter), not with the country of which she happened to be a citizen, which had neither a uniform ethnicity nor a long history, but with the country from which she descended ethnically, assuming that that “Celtic” blood descent identified her as a sort of Ur-American, an American aristocrat.

For just back of the notion of the “Boston American” lay that of the “Mayflower American” or, in Mrs. Beach's case, the notion of nationality upheld by the Daughters of the American Revolution, to recall by name a politically conservative and, it must be added, a socially intolerant organization of which Mrs. Beach was not only a member but a leader. (The D.A.R.'s closest brush with music history came in 1939, when it denied the use of Constitution Hall, its public auditorium in Washington, D.C., to Marian Anderson, a famous black American contralto, for a recital that would have included a group of songs of the kind on which Dvořák naively proposed the founding of an authentically American art music.)

These socially divisive and hierarchical assumptions are among the subtexts that underlie Amy Beach's “Gaelic” Symphony, alongside more progressive ones like the artistic emancipation of women (of which, after her death, her career became a symbol for a new generation of feminist musicians and musicologists). Its finale, the most impressive testimony to her mastery of “the higher forms of art” and a most decisive rebuke to those who look for stereotyped expressions of “femininity” in music by women, contained “only themes of my own devising,” Beach wrote. But, she went on, she intended it to convey the same impression as the movements drawn from actual folk artifacts. Just as the tunes in the middle movements, “like the folk music of every race, sprang from the common

joys, sorrows, adventures and struggles of a primitive people,” so the finale expressed “the rough, primitive character of the Celtic people, their sturdy daily life, their passions and battles, and the elemental nature of their processes of thought and its resulting action.”

The emphasis on archaism was significant. It distinguished the ancient Celts, with whom the composer and her audience identified in solidarity, from the contemporary Irish—the newly arrived, working-class immigrant minority that was then just beginning to threaten Yankee hegemony in Boston—with whom they certainly did not. The same distinction was drawn in the case of Jews, between the contemporary diaspora “yids” encountered in daily life and the manly race of biblical “Hebrews” or “Israelites,” another heroic warrior race celebrated musically since the days of Handel, who continued to be the object of much admiring attention from European and Euro-American composers who were otherwise conventionally, if not enthusiastically, anti-Semitic: both Chadwick in Boston and Alexander Serov in St. Petersburg, for example, wrote operas based on the Apocryphal book of Judith, which celebrates the Hebrew victory over the Assyrians.

Beach's finale is cast in “three-part sonata form” as taught in late-nineteenth-century textbooks and conservatory curricula. The composer's own analysis breaks it down into an exposition and recapitulation, linked by a “free fantasia” (that is, development) section. The thematic material consists of two themes, of which the first is drawn from a *alla breve* phrase that conspicuously intrudes (in a manner probably recollected from the scherzo in Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony) on the first movement's coda, otherwise cast like the rest of the movement in time. (The first three movements of the symphony are all written in compound meters; that was evidently a part of the “Gaelic” characterization.) The lyrical second theme, while not derived from a folk tune, is nevertheless pentatonic in the folk manner.

Both themes are “fully worked out,” as the composer put it, in the exposition, so that “the free fantasia is comparatively short, owing to the extensive development of the themes when first presented.” That, as we have seen, was a characteristic of Brahmsian construction: a demonstratively advanced style of composing. In the development section (Ex. 14-11a), the initial motif of the first theme is extended into a syncopation that transforms it into a near twin of the very first phrase played (by the cellos) at the outset of Dvořák's “New World” Symphony (Ex. 14-11b)—too close and conspicuous to be anything but a deliberate reference—and given a chromatically ascending sequential treatment over the next forty bars that again evokes memories of Beethoven's *Eroica*. The coda, in which the lyrical second theme is finally recapitulated amid huzzahs from the heavy brass, in the tonic major and in augmented note-values, is the very essence of valiant affirmation.

These resonances were not lost on critics. Reviews of the Boston Symphony premiere repeatedly resorted to the epithet “heroic” to describe the symphony, or else (to quote one) conjured up images of “Ossianic heroes ... gathering in spite of whirlwind and storm.”<sup>17</sup> (Ossian was the legendary Celtic bard whose poems, published in 1762, were subsequently exposed as a forgery.) The ethical quality the image evoked was itself an expression of the Puritan ideals espoused by the composers of the Boston School, and dependably found by like-minded critics in their work.

Their collusion in what modern critics call “redemptive culture” represented (in the words of Macdonald Smith Moore, a historian of the Boston School) “a dual mission”:<sup>18</sup> on the one hand, “an errand into the wilderness of the impending twentieth century to manifest New England's right to speak for America”; and on the other, a campaign for what the English poet and critic Matthew Arnold (another enthusiastic student of Celtic lore) famously dubbed the culture of Sweetness and Light—“a secular religious force capable of formulating principles of individual and social value.” Mrs. H. H. A. Beach's “Gaelic” Symphony was a monument to these once-powerful ideals.

ex. 14-11a Mrs. H. H. A. Beach, “Gaelic” Symphony IV one measure before [F]

ex. 14-11b Antonín Dvořák, “New World” Symphony, I, mm. 1–4

## Notes:

(14) Quoted in Lawrence Gilman, *Edward Mac Dowell* (New York: John Lane, 1908), p. 84.

(15) Quoted in Adrienne Fried Block, *Amy Beach: Passionate Victorian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 103.

(16) *Boston Herald*, 28 May 1893; quoted in Block, *Amy Beach*, p. 87.

(17) *The Boston Courier*; quoted in Walter S. Jenkins, *The Remarkable Mrs. Beach, American Composer* (Warren, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press, 1994), p. 38.

(18) Macdonald Smith Moore, *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 3.

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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César Franck

Franz Liszt

# WAR BRINGS IT TO FRANCE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 14 The Symphony Goes (Inter)National

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

For composers of the Boston School, an even more influential symphonic model than Dvořák's "New World" Symphony, because it preached less a national than a spiritual sensibility, was the Symphony in D minor by César Franck (1822–90). Despite his Germanic surname, Franck was a Walloon (French-speaking Belgian) composer who plied his trade in Paris, and whose career paralleled Bruckner's in many ways.

Like Bruckner, he hailed from the cultural provinces; he was born in Liège, a medium-sized Belgian town, and received his early education there before coming to Paris with his family. Like Bruckner he earned his living for the greater part of his career as a church organist. (Unlike Bruckner, however, Franck composed some important music for his instrument that exploited the resources of the huge organs built by the French firm of Cavallé-Coll, whose paid "artistic representative" he became.) Like Bruckner, Franck was an outsider to the musical establishment who eventually secured a teaching post at a prestigious institution (in his case, the Paris Conservatory), but not in composition (in his case, it was in organ playing). Finally, like Bruckner's, Franck's class quickly became an unofficial composition seminar that attracted a circle of eventually eminent composers who venerated him despite (or perhaps in part because of) his maverick status.

Franck composed his single symphony, one of his last works, in 1886–88, when he was already in his middle sixties. Its first performance (17 February 1889), by the Paris Conservatory orchestra, had an equivocal success, but its American premiere by the Boston Symphony under Gericke less than two months later was a triumph. The work long remained a beacon for the English-speaking music world, which was looking for "ideas," as Matthew Arnold put it, "that criticize life." This was the "aspirational" or affirmational view of art that more modern writers (like Bryan Magee, quoted near the end of chapter 10) have declared bankrupt in the wake of Wagner. But it outlasted Wagner, and (as we shall see) even saw itself, rightly or wrongly, as continuing the Wagnerian tradition.





fig. 14-6 César Franck at the organ, ca. 1890, portrait by Jeanne Rongier.

Edward Burlingame Hill, John Knowles Paine's star pupil and one of his successors as head of the Harvard music department, pronounced Franck a musician "unique in the selflessness of his life, and the concentration of his efforts to reveal the luminous truth of Art."<sup>19</sup> As for the Symphony, it was the "ripest expression" of a "new creed of instrumental music."<sup>20</sup> In a remarkable passage, the Bostonian composer-critic extolled Franck's ascetic virtues in the unmistakable terms of Matthew Arnold's Anglo-Saxon artistic evangelism:

Franck's outlook upon Art may be accurately summarized as a *gospel* instead of a *métier* [profession]. Franck's ascendancy over his pupils springs from the spiritual reaction exercised upon them through his character. He taught the moral obligations of the artist, the need for elevated standards, the consideration of quality rather than quantity in the students' tasks, emotional sincerity as an absolute prerequisite in all artistic expression, and above all faith as a primary ingredient. Moreover, Franck steadily inculcated a disdain for immediate success, and a disregard of the public as a prerequisite for attaining durability in a work of art. But vital and constructive as were Franck's maxims for guidance in the artists' career, the fact that he bore out these principles in his own life made them the more compelling.<sup>21</sup>

And yet the most noteworthy aspect of Franck's status as preceptor and example remains the simple fact that he

made his mark primarily as a composer—and inculcator—of “absolute” instrumental music. This was virtually unprecedented in a French composer. We have not associated the name of any French composer with instrumental music at all since the time of Berlioz. But a glance at the complete list of even Berlioz's works reveals a preponderance of vocal music, as it does for all French composers save the court instrumentalists (violinists, lutenists, gambists, harpsichord specialists) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Indeed, Berlioz's instrumental music, as we encountered it in chapter 6, was among the most powerful stimuli leading instrumental music into a *rapprochement* (as the French say) or reconciliation with opera, which from the time of the transplanted Parisian Rossini had been practically the sole focus of French composers. Even Hill agreed that Franck “showed an intellectual fervor and a sense of artistic responsibility as a rule uncharacteristic of the Gallic musician of the period.”<sup>22</sup>

And yet his wide circle of pupils and disciples, who remained active and influential well into the twentieth century, put Franck forward as the spiritual guide of a new and resurgent French spirit in music, which they summed up in the always-capitalized slogan ARS GALLICA. All that the Latin phrase means is “French art.” But when capitalized and applied to a certain school of composers, it meant a French art that arose in nationalistic response—a highly paradoxical nationalistic response—to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71.

On 25 February 1871, “a few days,” as Carl Dahlhaus once tartly reminded his readers, “before the Prussian army marched down the Champs Elysées”<sup>23</sup> (the broad avenue that runs through the heart of Paris), a group of youngish French musicians headed by Camille Saint-Saëns founded an organization they called the Société Nationale de Musique: the National Musical Society. It was to be a concert-sponsoring association that would exclusively promote the work of living French composers, and that sought to assert through music the unique essence or spirit of France in a manner that would elevate and educate public taste. The preamble to the group's by-laws read:

The proposed purpose of the Society is to aid the production and popularization of all serious works, whether published or not, by French composers. To encourage and bring to light, as far as lies within its power, all musical attempts, whatever their form, on condition that they give evidence of lofty artistic aspirations on the part of their author. Fraternaly, with entire forgetfulness of self, with the firm resolve to aid each other with all their capacity, the members will unite their efforts, each in his own sphere of action, to the study and performance of their countrymen's works which they shall be called upon to select and interpret.<sup>24</sup>

Yet despite these avowedly nationalistic aims, the Société Nationale, through its declared emphasis on “serious” music of “lofty artistic aspiration” and its practical emphasis on the larger instrumental forms, became in effect the vehicle for the unprecedented Germanization of French music. In retrospect it is clear that the motivation behind the founding of the Société Nationale was an aspect of the sense of national shame brought about by the outcome of the war with Prussia, and that the Society's aims implied a dual objective of repudiation and emulation: first, to restore high and respectable purpose to art after the Offenbachian bacchanale of the Second Empire; and second, to overtake and surpass the achievements of German “absolute” instrumental music, the highest and most respectable sphere of musical endeavor. Never was the music of any country so thoroughly transformed by an inferiority complex.

Franck served on the board of directors of the Society from the time of its founding. From 1886 to his death four years later at the age of sixty-eight he was its figurehead, during which time he composed, in addition to the Symphony, a violin sonata, a string quartet, and a neo-Bachian “Prelude, aria, et final” for piano. Other works he had composed since the founding of the Society included a Piano Quintet in F minor, the same key as Brahms's essay in the genre (1879), a set of “Symphonic Variations” for piano and orchestra (1885), and an even more neo-Bachian “Prelude, chorale, and fugue” for piano (1884). This was an output unprecedented for a French composer, even if Franck's four symphonic poems (including one, *Psyché*, with chorus) and vocal works from the period (one opera and two biblical oratorios) are reckoned in. The programmatic pieces and the oratorios were less successful than the essays in “absolute” music, and have fallen into relative neglect. The reception of Franck's music, no less than its production, was thus a sign of the times.

Not only in its general esthetic and stylistic orientation, but in all manner of specific details, Franck's Symphony announces its allegiance to Germanic rather than French tradition. To write a symphony in D minor was in itself such an announcement, and Beethoven's Ninth haunts the work no less pervasively than it had haunted Bruckner's Third Symphony, or the symphony that eventually became Brahms's First Piano Concerto. But Franck's invocation of Beethoven's reputedly hermetic and rarefied spiritual domain went beyond the Ninth to encompass the most

emblematic and aura-surrounded works of all, the “late quartets.” The symphony's thematic kernel was none other than the highly fraught *échappée* figure from the last movement of the last quartet (F major, op. 135; see Ex. 8-2), the movement jestingly titled “The Difficult Decision,” in which a slow chromatic three-note motif mock-portentously labeled “Muss es sein?” (Must it be?) is hilariously answered by a quick diatonic inversion, “Es muss sein! Es muss sein!” (It must! It must!). Taken ultraseriously, as everything in late Beethoven was eventually taken, the phrase had haunted the whole nineteenth century. Among its progeny already familiar to us are the generative phrase in Liszt's *Les préludes* and the “Fate motif” that haunts Wagner's *Ring*, beginning with *Die Walküre* (see Ex. 10-2d).

Having suffused a quartet movement, a symphonic poem, and a trilogy of operas, with Franck the motif entered the domain of the traditional symphony. Not only did it furnish the first movement with its thematic mainspring; it was also incorporated into the main themes of the succeeding movements and returned in its original form in the coda to the finale (Ex. 14-12).

The image displays musical notation for César Franck's Symphony in D minor, illustrating thematic material across movements and a coda. The score is organized into five systems:

- System 1:** Labeled "Lento", it shows a bass clef staff with a chromatic three-note motif (F, G, A) and its diatonic inversion (A, G, F).
- System 2:** Labeled "Allegretto", it shows a treble clef staff with a more complex melodic line.
- System 3:** Shows two bass clef staves with a chromatic descending line.
- System 4:** Labeled "(Coda)", it shows a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a complex texture.
- System 5:** Shows a grand staff with a complex texture, including a chromatic line in the bass.

**ex. 14-12 César Franck, Symphony in D minor, thematic conspectus**

It was Franck (or rather his pupil Vincent d'Indy, in his biography of the master that came out in 1906) who officially dubbed this process of multimovement motivic unification “cyclic form.”<sup>25</sup> No one ever claimed that Franck was its inventor—it all too obviously goes back through Liszt to Berlioz and beyond—but the dogmatic insistence on its spiritual necessity was distinctively Franck-school. To those who claimed that Franck derived his procedures from Liszt's “thematic transformations,” the Franckists retorted (1) that their master had already recycled the themes of his Piano Trio in F-sharp Minor, op. 1, no. 1, composed in 1841 at the age of eighteen; (2) that Franck played the Trio for Liszt in 1842 and presented him with a copy; and (3) that therefore it was Franck who had influenced Liszt.

Both parties to the argument conveniently forgot that Schubert had recycled the slow movement theme in the finale of his Trio in E-flat major, op. 100, completed and published in 1828. But even Schubert had Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth as models. As usual Beethoven was the common progenitor; the heirs were merely squabbling in probate court, so to speak, over his estate. But though the point at issue may seem trivial in retrospect, the quarrel was not. Under the influence of historicist thinking matters of priority were becoming heavily fraught. In the twentieth century they would become obsessive and disastrous.

But we have only begun to explore the extent to which Franck's Symphony mined the legacy of the late Beethoven quartets. The unusual form of the first movement, in which the initial slow section (or Introduction, as it must at first appear) alternates with the ensuing allegro throughout the movement, emulates the opening movements of two of the late quartets: op. 127 in E-flat and op. 130 in B-flat. But where in Beethoven the alternation of tempos also involved an alternation of themes, in Franck both the portentous slow music and its frantic sequel are equally derived from the opening "Muss es sein" motto, differently continued.

Patently Lisztian after all is the key sequence, measured by the reappearances of the opening Lento. From D minor the first important modulation is to F minor. The F minor switches soon enough to F major to make way for a traditional "second theme" in the relative key. But the initial juxtaposition of minor keys pitched a third apart would commit a confirmed Lisztian to a complementary swing from D to B, and possibly an antipodal move to A $\flat$ /G $\sharp$  to complete the circle. These are supplied, in short order and not at all by coincidence, at the outset of the "free fantasia" or development section: A $\flat$  minor (approached through a "classic" Lisztian sequence) at m. 199 and C $\flat$ /B major/minor at m. 206. At the recapitulation, moreover, which takes the form of a climactic, canonic Lento at m. 331, B minor is approached directly from D minor to mirror the opening ascent to F.

But if key relations tend toward the Lisztian (circles of thirds alongside traditional circles of fifths), the local harmonizations and progressions tend toward the Wagnerian—and not only the generally Wagnerian but the specifically Tristanesque. Franck and his generation (e.g., Brahms) were haunted by echoes of Wagner's Prelude as much as their fathers (e.g., Wagner) had been haunted by echoes of Beethoven—and of course they went on being haunted by Beethoven as well: the more "belated" a member of any tradition, the more haunted; and the more haunted, the more difficult it becomes to contribute. (Hence Franck's lone symphony as compared with Brahms's four, Beethoven's nine, Mozart's forty-one, and Haydn's hundred-plus.) To catch Franck in the act of being spooked, one can look for four-note chromatic ascents that come directly out of *Tristan*: a whole sequence of them goes from the first violin in mm. 17–21 into the viola at mm. 21–25 and back into the violins at mm. 25–28 (Ex. 14-13). Or one can look for the chromatically descending basses that combine resonances of the Tristan motif with those of the coda to the Ninth. They are pervasive. A short one accompanies the ascending sequence just described in contrary motion. Sometimes they are amazingly ample. At mm. 8–11 (repeated at mm. 55–59) the chromatic descent goes through eight degrees (ever so slightly disguised by octave transfers).

This image displays a page of a musical score, likely from a symphony, featuring various instruments. The score is organized into three main systems of staves. The first system includes the Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Bsn.), and Trombone (Tbn.). The second system includes the Trumpet (Trp.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), and Viola (Vla.). The third system includes the Violoncello (Vcllo) and Double Bass (Cb.). The notation includes notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and *mf* (mezzo-forte). The score is written in a common time signature and a key signature with one flat.

**ex. 14-13 César Franck, Symphony in D minor, I, mm. 17–28**

The mother of them all occurs, as one would expect, in the development: it begins in m. 249 with the bass on  $A \flat$ , makes an immediate descent through five chromatic degrees to E, where it is interrupted by a theme; it is resumed at 259 for another five degrees (through m. 261) where it stalls as a pedal before proceeding down one more degree to make eleven. Were it not for the whole step in the bass between m. 269 and 270, there would have been a full unfolding of the chromatic scale, the functional equivalent in this modulatory context of a full circle of fifths. For its ascending near-equal, nine progressions, see the bassoon in Ex. 14-14. The coda embeds an eight-degree progression within a motivic sequence: start tracking the bass at m. 485 to see  $E \flat$  descend to  $C \sharp$ ; the next segment, C to  $B \flat$ , follows in mm. 489–490, A to G in mm. 490–491.



**ex. 14-14 Césair Franck, *Symphony in D minor*, I, mm. 298–304**

These slithery harmonies, directing myriad recombinations of charged motivic particles on their trajectory through musical space, produce an effect even more like that of a Wagnerian music drama than do Dvořák's contrapuntal montages. To compare the mumbled opening statement of the germinating motif with the ecstatic shout that closes the first movement, extending the same motif with an upward thrust to the third degree in the major, is to experience a rhetoric that vies in persuasion—but wordlessly—with Wagner's own. In their heavily fraught but semantically undefined character, Franck's chromatically and motivically saturated textures make metaphorical, metaphysical interpretation as irresistible as it is finally impossible, thus supremely realizing the objective of “absolute” music: to say what is unsayable, to speak the unspeakable, and make it seem (to quote Brahms's comment on his *Schicksalslied*) “the most important thing.” All the more is this true since the germinating motif had been defined by longstanding “intertextual” tradition as a metaphysical question. Program annotations for the Franck Symphony, accordingly, assumed the character of religious commentary. Here is a sample, from an old handbook for American record collectors called the *Victor Book of the Symphony*. The author, an organist and conductor named Charles O'Connell (1900–62), had studied in Paris with Charles-Marie Widor (1844–1937), Franck's disciple and successor at the Conservatory, before becoming the head of “artists and repertoire” for the Victor Talking Machine Company, America's largest manufacturer of phonographs and records. O'Connell assures the reader that Franck, a “great and simple soul, is able to lead us to glimpses of a light beyond the world.” The most “mystic” of all, according to this writer, comes in the second movement:

There are flights toward that light as the movement progresses—flights of swift muted notes, like the beatings of thousands of invisible wings, coursing the misty upper airs in clouds of vibrant color and life. Incredibly we find that even this will-o'-the-wisp figure is remotely derived from the eternal question of the first movement—notwithstanding its soaring hopefulness. The meaning seems clear: out of eternal questioning, someday comes an answer; out of living, life.<sup>26</sup>

So was a piece of textless, “abstract” symphonic music promoted as moral instruction, as initiation into the ineffable, as indoctrination in faith. That was indeed the point of absolute music, as the tradition defined itself post-Beethoven. It was superbly ironic that it reached its zenith in the work of a French composer, a representative of the culture against which absolute music had traditionally defined itself. But it was dimly ironic that so lofty an esthetic so easily lent itself to commercial packaging, which is what O'Connell's book (primarily meant to sell records) amounted to.

Advocacy of “good music” as Arnoldian “criticism of life,” and its promotion as an exercise in middle-class self-improvement, grew directly out of the ideology of the Société Nationale, and it is no coincidence that Matthew Arnold himself based his ideas about culture and society on the art and literature of chastened, post-1870 (“Third Republic”) France. But of course it reached its commercial zenith in America, where recording companies, concert organizations, and schools all cooperated in a minor industry called “music appreciation”: instruction in the passive

consumption of “classical music” (with a nearly exclusive emphasis on the symphonic repertoire) as a part of liberal education.

Although it was a twentieth-century phenomenon, receiving its main commercial impetus in the mid-1920s when the market for phonograph recordings (thanks to hugely improved recording technology) expanded exponentially, music appreciation deserves mention here because it continued to reflect the values of the nineteenth-century symphony, and, as it were, to “freeze” the repertoire in its late-nineteenth-century tracks. It thus participated in the process of “reification”—turning artworks into things (most obviously in the case of physically tangible phonograph records) and treating the things thus created as marketable commodities.

And that made music appreciation, in its propagation of a frozen and reified repertoire, one of the factors contributing to the disastrous twentieth-century rift, within the literate or “art” tradition, between the interests of musical producers and those of consumers (a rift complicated, as we shall see, by the creation of two potentially competing or even antagonistic groups—composers on the one hand and manufacturers of records and sheet music on the other, each claiming the role of “producer”). Musical modernism, as we shall also see, threatened the equation of “serious” music with moral uplift; and so the marketing of classical music, which depended (or thought it depended) on that equation, turned all the more resolutely against the new. Only music that encouraged its listeners to identify themselves as a cultured (“Brahmin”) and spiritual (“Franckist”) elite was eligible for promotion under the banner of music appreciation.

Eventually the operation backfired, with dire consequences for the popularity of the music it purveyed. Even in its heyday, music appreciation received warnings from its own practitioners. Deems Taylor (1885–1966), a composer who was hired in the late 1930s to give inspirational intermission lectures during broadcasts by the New York Philharmonic, cautioned that “many a potential music lover is frightened away by the solemnity of music’s devotees.”<sup>27</sup> Association with self-defined elites put “good music” at risk, especially in America, of association with various kinds of social snobbery (and in the case of Mrs. H. H. A. Beach, we have seen that the concern was not unfounded).

Finally, to cast our eye ahead for a moment, when after World War II the esthetics of modernism finally gained the upper hand in American institutions of higher education, music appreciation was altered to accord with a new ideology—not of uplift but of “formalism” (the study of structure rather than meaning), reflecting the interests of composers rather than marketers. The older version of music appreciation had represented the survival of the older notion of absolute music (music as ineffable expression) into the twentieth century. By midcentury that notion had been done in by its votaries and exploiters, and it now inspires more suspicion than sympathy.

The grim history of the twentieth century—something Brahms or Franck could never have foreseen, to say nothing of Matthew Arnold or Charles O’Connell—played its part as well both in discrediting the idea of redemptive culture and in undermining the authority of its adherents. The literary critic George Steiner, one such adherent, after a lifetime devoted (in his words) to “the worship—the word is hardly exaggerated—of the classic,”<sup>28</sup> and to the propagation of the faith, found himself baffled by the example of the culture-loving Germans of the mid-twentieth century, “who sang Schubert in the evening and tortured in the morning.” “I’m going to the end of my life,” he confessed unhappily, “haunted more and more by the question, ‘Why did the humanities not humanize?’ I don’t have an answer.” But that is because the question—being the product of Arnoldian art religion—turned out to be wrong. It is all too obvious by now that teaching people that their love of Schubert makes them better people teaches them little more than self-regard. There are better reasons to cherish art.

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## Notes:

(19) Edward Burlingame Hill, *Modern French Music* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), p. 35.

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 38.

(21) *Ibid.*, p. 36.

(22) *Ibid.*, p. 35.

(23) Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, p. 283.

- (24) Quoted in Brian Rees, *Camille Saint-Saëns: A Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1999), p. 161.
- (25) See Vincent D'Indy, *César Franck*, trans. Rosa Newmarch (London: John Lane, 1910), pp. 91, 171.
- (26) Charles O'Connell, *The Victor Book of the Symphony* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1941), p. 235.
- (27) Deems Taylor, *Of Men and Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1937), p. xviii.
- (28) Peter Applebome, "A Humanist and Elitist? Perhaps," *New York Times*, 18 April 1998, p. A15.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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[Camille Saint-Saëns](#)

[Liszt: Symphonic poems](#)

## SYMPHONIST AS VIRTUOSO

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 14 The Symphony Goes (Inter)National

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

One time-honored, far less sentimental way of cherishing art is as an exercise of ingenuity and artifice that aims not at self-improvement but at euphoria. The late-nineteenth-century French symphonic repertoire boasts a work of that kind, too. Besides the high-minded symphonies of Franck and his pupils—they include Vincent d'Indy (1851–1931), who wrote five between 1870 and 1918, and the short-lived Ernest Chausson (1855–99), who completed one in 1890—there was also the flamboyantly virtuosic Third Symphony (1886) in C minor (but of course ending in a triumphant C major) by Camille Saint-Saëns, the original architect of the Société Nationale.

Its Beethovenian key and tonal trajectory notwithstanding, the symphony was an homage to Liszt—indeed, a veritable portrait of the “New German” icon, which became a memorial when its dedicatee died at Bayreuth, during the Wagner Festival there, while the symphony awaited its premiere. Its form is wholly indebted to Liszt's example: the main theme in each of its four movements, like the themes in a Liszt symphonic poem, is a different transformation of a single pitch sequence (Ex. 14-15). (Although obviously related to the Franckian “cyclic” idea, Saint-Saëns's method did not involve any recyclings of actual themes between movements.)

Another obvious Lisztianism, second nature to a composer who had already composed four symphonic poems, was the idea of consolidating the four movements into two by linking the ends of the first and third, by means of smooth transitions, into the beginnings of the second and fourth. Saint-Saëns claimed that the purpose of this dovetailing was to cut down on the need for recapitulations—“the interminable reprises and repetitions,” as he put it in a note in the score, “that are leading to the disappearance of instrumental music”—but in fact the first movement's recapitulation is virtually complete. The transitions, like the thematic transformations (and the many third-related harmonic progressions and modulations), seem more a flourish of up-to-date composing technique than a formal innovation.



**fig. 14-7 Camille Saint-Saëns.**

That display of composerly virtuosity evoked a Lisztian resonance of another sort, and the symphony follows through by including in its very ample orchestration two keyboard instruments associated with Liszt at different stages of his life (and with Saint-Saëns as well). The scherzo/finale pair features a scintillating part for the piano (solo in the scherzo, four-hands in the finale), and the slow movement (the second part of the first pair) features a very churchy sounding organ (representative of Liszt's last period, when he had taken minor clerical orders and had begun composing for the instrument).

The organ returns in the last movement, coinciding with the transformation of the symphony's theme into a hymn that alternates with elaborate cantus firmus textures and a full-blown fugue. This is a remarkable contrast with the Franck Symphony, which deployed only traditional symphonic (and, it could be argued, operatic) materials to produce an aura widely interpreted as profoundly, and sincerely, spiritual. Saint-Saëns deploys very concrete evocations of specific sacred genres and timbres to produce an aura of exhilarating virtuosity that no one seems ever to have taken seriously as religious expression. Nor has anyone ever been tempted, it seems, even to find a program in the work, despite the fact that it so conspicuously appropriated a constructive device (“thematic transformation”) that had originally been developed in the context, and for the exclusive purposes, of program music.

In the heyday of music appreciation Saint-Saëns was given a rather indifferent reception. The *Victor Book of the Symphony* does not mention his Third Symphony at all (mainly, of course, because there was no Victor recording of it to sell—but that in itself is an eloquent comment in view of the symphony's one-time currency, initially far greater than Franck's). Its sophisticated play of genres and styles was ascribed to a fatal “eclecticism” by German writers who liked (and still like) to cite Saint-Saëns as evidence that despite everything the French were *au fond* (at bottom) irredeemable (or, as the familiar joke would have it, that deep down they were superficial).

Two years after the “Organ Symphony's” premiere, Emil Naumann wrote that “Saint-Saëns shows more intellectuality in his compositions than poetical inspiration, and more self-criticism in art-form than richness of invention.”<sup>29</sup> Nearly a century later, Carl Dahlhaus was still mocking the “orchestral pomp that Saint-Saëns flaunts as a decorative façade,” but that cannot conceal “the failure to which any eclecticism is condemned that seeks to unite the decorative monumentality of grand opera with a classicistic formal design and a transformation technique abstracted from program music.”<sup>30</sup>

The image shows a musical score for Camille Saint-Saëns' Symphony no. 3, titled "thematic resume". It consists of seven staves of music, each with a label and dynamic marking:

- Ia**: *Allegro moderato*, *p*. Treble clef, 6/8 time signature. Features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Ib**: *pp*. Treble clef. Features a melodic line with a long slur.
- Ic**: *pp*. Treble clef. Features a melodic line with a long slur.
- IIa**: *f*. Treble clef, 6/8 time signature. Features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- IIb**: *p*. Treble clef. Features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- IIc**: *p*. Treble clef. Features a melodic line with a long slur.
- IId**: *Allegro. Fugue*, *f*. Treble clef, common time signature. Features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

#### ex. 14-15 Camille Saint-Saëns, *Symphony no. 3*, thematic resume

In place of moral uplift, ran the nationalistic nineteenth-century cliché that music appreciation did its best to universalize in the twentieth, French music offered sensuous and intellectual gratification; in place of a redemptive scenario (German-surnamed Franck alone excepted), it offered a tempting menu. No wonder that for German artists and their disciples, “culinary”<sup>31</sup> became the squelch of all squelches. It stood for mindless—or worse, soulless—sensual gratification, the reputed house specialty of the French, chefs to the world. In the twentieth century, especially after the French had their chance to avenge themselves on the Germans in battle, this ordering of priorities was for a while decisively reversed.

## Notes:



(29) Emil Naumann, *The History of Music*, Vol. V, trans. F. Praeger (London: Cassell & Co., n.d.), p. 1245.

(30) Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, p. 290.

(31) Bertolt Brecht, "On the Use of Music in an Epic Theater," in *Brecht on Theater*, ed. J. Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 89.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

The Mighty Five

Alexander Borodin

## THE EPIC STYLE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 14 The Symphony Goes (Inter)National

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Russian symphonies in the nineteenth century came under two brand names. One was provided by the conservatories, founded in the 1860s by Anton Rubinstein in St. Petersburg and his brother Nikolai in Moscow. The other was provided by the last generation of aristocratic autodidacts, gathered around Miliy Balakirev in St. Petersburg beginning in the 1850s. Best known today as the *moguchaya kuchka*, the “Mighty Little Heap” (a sobriquet bestowed on them in 1867 by Vladimir Stasov, their publicist, but then monopolized for a while by their enemies), the Balakirev Circle preferred to call itself the New Russian School as a way of declaring solidarity with Liszt and the New Germans, as against the “old Germans” who manned the conservatories.

Each group produced one outstanding symphonist in the 1870s: from the Mighty Kuchka there was Alexander Borodin (1833–87), the remarkable chemist-composer whom we met in chapter 7 as an “orientalist;” and from the Conservatory side there was Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky (1840–93), an alumnus of the St. Petersburg institution's first graduating class (1866), who did his basic training with Anton Rubinstein. The surprising thing is that of the two, it was Chaikovsky, the conservatory product, who provided the most pointed challenge anywhere in Europe to German symphonic hegemony.

Because of their outsider, nonprofessional status, members of the Balakirev circle had no choice but to claim legitimacy on the strength of their ethnicity. They promoted a myth of Russian authenticity from which the conservatory was by definition excluded. The myth was exported to France by César Cui, a member of the circle who (like Schumann before him), wrote reams of press propaganda on behalf of the group, including a series of articles in French that appeared in 1878–79 in the *Revue et gazette musicale*, the leading Paris music magazine, and was published in book form a year later as *La musique en Russie*, the most influential tract of its kind ever to appear.



**fig. 14-8** Fyodor Vasilyev, *Illumination of St. Petersburg at Night*. The large dome in the background is that of St. Isaac's Cathedral.

On its fairytale of radical opposition between a heroic school of honest nationalists (the *kuchka*) fighting the good ethnic fight against an entrenched band of aristocratically supported foreigners (the conservatory), practically the whole subsequent historiography of Russian music in “the West” has been based. In the early twentieth century, Sergei Diaghilev, the great impresario, exploited the French taste for exoticism in promoting his organization, the Ballets Russes, as purveyors of the authentic Russian soul. Their programs, brimming with folklore and orientalia, solidified the notion in the West that the authenticity of Russian music depended on its Russianness, which in turn depended on a heavily “Asiatic” component. Ever since, “how Russian is it?” has been the main critical question asked of Russian music by Western audiences and critics. And it had to be answered plainly enough for non-Russian ears to hear. As a result, Russian composers, more than any other comparable group, have been confined to an exotic ghetto that bears little resemblance to the country they actually inhabited.

Meanwhile, here is how the same César Cui described the early meetings of the Balakirev circle, in a memoir written not as foreign propaganda but for consumption at home:

We formed a close-knit circle of young composers. And since there was nowhere to study (the conservatory didn't exist) our *self-education* began. It consisted of playing through everything that had been written by all the greatest composers, and all works were subjected to criticism and analysis in all their technical and creative aspects. We were young and our judgments were harsh. We were very disrespectful in our attitude toward Mozart and Mendelssohn; to the latter we opposed Schumann, who was then ignored by everyone. We were very enthusiastic about Liszt and Berlioz. We worshiped Chopin and Glinka. We carried on heated

debates (in the course of which we would down as many as four or five glasses of tea with jam), we discussed musical form, program music, vocal music, and especially operatic form.<sup>32</sup>

All the same issues, in other words, as were then being debated in the rest of Europe. For this was no band of narrow nationalists. What Cui was describing was a “Davidsbund,” to borrow an appropriately Schumannesque word for it, a cabal of idealistic “progressives” opposing institutional authority on the one hand and “philistinism” on the other. Except for Glinka, all the objects of their veneration were located to the west of Russia—and how could it be otherwise? Glinka was at this point (the mid-to-late 1850s) the only Russian to venerate, precisely because he alone, among Russians, was then on a level with the Europeans. The autochthonous music of Russia, the tonal products of the soil and its peasant denizens, were not admired and not discussed.

And that is because Russian musicians in the European literate fine-art tradition, however alienated by temperament or by force of circumstance from the “mainstream” of local fashion or success, however dependent for their promotion upon their exotic appeal, and however inferior or superior they have felt in consequence, have always measured themselves by the only terms available—that is, the terms of the tradition within which they have chosen to pursue their careers. They have always construed their identities in a larger European context and drawn their “sentiment of being”<sup>33</sup> (to cite Rousseau's romantic definition of authenticity) from that sense of relatedness to cultivated Europe, not peasant Russia.

When Balakirev himself, the one Russian composer (as we learned in chapter 9) who might fit anyone's narrowest definition of a “nationalist,” was introduced in 1901 to the English writer Rosa Newmarch, who would become the Mighty Kuchka's most ardent propagandist in the West, he sat down at the piano to play her a kind of musical credo: Beethoven's F-minor sonata (“Appassionata”), Chopin's B-minor, and Schumann's G-minor.<sup>34</sup> Not a Russian note in the lot, but it characterizes Balakirev and his “kuchka” far better than their usual chauvinist label.

It was within the incubator described verbally by Cui and at the keyboard by Balakirev that Borodin received his “symphonic education.” His First Symphony, laboriously composed over a five-year period (1862–67) with Balakirev at his elbow, was cast in the key of E-flat major. Knowing this, and knowing how Balakirev and his fellow-kuchkists worked, we would be far better advised to expect allusions or (perhaps unconscious) quotations from past symphonic masterpieces in the same key by Beethoven (no. 3, “Eroica”) and Schumann (no. 3, “The Rhenish”) than from Russian folk songs. There are also obvious references in the Symphony's scherzo to a scherzo by Berlioz (“Queen Mab” from his Dramatic Symphony *Romeo and Juliet*) and in the finale to a finale by Glinka (from *A Life for the Tsar*), practically exhausting the list, in Cui's description, of the “kuchka's” admired models.

Only in the slow movement, the last to be composed, did Borodin venture into terrain now identified as stylistically (because exotically) “Russian” (Ex. 14-16). Its highly embellished, repetitive lyricism, backed up by chromatically inflected harmony, may have evoked “Russia” to listeners in France and Germany, but to Russians it evoked “the East.” There was no real contradiction: the Western view of Russia, like the Russian view of the Caucasian and Central Asian nations their empire was in the process of conquering, was an “Orientalist” view, at once fascinated and condescending.

The image shows a musical score for the cello theme from Alexander Borodin's Symphony no. 1, III. The score is written on two staves in treble clef. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo and mood are indicated as "Cantabile ed espressivo". The first staff begins with a piano (p) dynamic. The second staff shows a dynamic shift to mezzo-forte (mf) and then forte (f). The music consists of a melodic line with chromatic inflections and a steady accompaniment.

**ex. 14-16 Alexander Borodin, Symphony no. 1, III, cello theme**

In Borodin's Second Symphony (1869–76, revised 1878), the national colorings are far more pronounced, for which reason the symphony was an instant international hit. It arose in the euphoric wake of the First Symphony's premiere, alongside the earliest sketches for *Prince Igor*, the orientalist opera supreme, sampled in chapter 7. When Borodin temporarily decided to abandon work on his operatic epic in the early 1870s, he transferred to the symphony music originally conceived to illustrate scenes of Russian heroic antiquity, on the one hand, and oriental

voluptuousness on the other. Rather than segregate these images by movements, as the opera would have segregated them by scenes and acts, Borodin mixed them according to a traditional symphonic recipe, reserving the lionhearted warrior material for the assertive “first themes” in the outer movements and the main body of the Scherzo, and the yielding, serpentine, feminine tunes for the recessive “second themes” in the outer movements—and in the Scherzo, for a Trio section replete with belly-dancer's percussion (the triangle standing in for her finger cymbals).

This Scherzo—marked *Prestissimo*, in time, with the whole notes racing at 108 to the minute—is a tour de force of orchestration, and (when well played) of orchestral virtuosity, in which the heavy brass, negotiating the tricky syncopations and the difficult staccatos, are made to move with all the speed and precision of the smaller, less unwieldy instruments of the orchestra, just as the ancient Russian heroes or *bogatīry*, for all their legendary girth, performed their limber feats of derring-do (Ex. 14-17). Still, this was a symphony, and so the initial characterization of primeval Russian boldness and fortitude comes by way of Beethoven's Fifth, whose unisons and fermatas had made an inescapable impression on all European composers, however Asiatic their immediate intent (Ex. 14-18).

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## Notes:

(32) César Cui, “Pervīye kompozitorskiye shagi Ts. A. Kyui,” in Cui, *Izbranniye stat'i* (Leningrad: Muzgiz, 1952), p. 544.

(33) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, quoted in Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 62.

(34) Rosa Newmarch, *The Russian Opera* (New York: E. P. Dutton, n.d. [1914]), p. 200.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky

Symphony: 19th century

Programme music

# SYMPHONIES OF SUFFERING

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 14 The Symphony Goes (Inter)National

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The image displays a page of a musical score for Alexander Borodin's Symphony no. 2, II (Scherzo), measures 370-77. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves. The instruments shown include Flutes (Fl.), Oboes (Ob.), Clarinets (Cl.), Bassoons (Bsn.), Horns (Hr.), Trumpets (Tpt.), Trombones (Tbn.), Tuba (Tuba), Timpani (Timp.), Violins I (Vln I), Violins II (Vln II), Violas (Vla), Cellos (Vcl), and Double Basses (Cb). The score features various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *ff* (fortissimo) and *f* (forte). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor), and the time signature is 3/4. The music is characterized by a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some measures containing triplets. The overall texture is dense and rhythmic, typical of a scherzo movement.

ex. 14-17 Alexander Borodin, Symphony no. 2, II (Scherzo), mm.

370-77







**fig. 14-9** Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, photographed in 1890.

Chaikovsky wrote the letter while he was at work on his Fourth Symphony (secretly dedicated to Mme von Meck as “my best friend”), a work that seemed to break with the whole symphonic tradition as it was viewed in the nineteenth century. What it lacks almost completely is the highly atomized motivic texture that Brahms had educed out of Beethoven, or even the “thematic transformative” technique that “Lisztian” symphonists like Saint-Saëns or Borodin employed. Instead there was something approaching a suite of giant character pieces: a “symphonic waltz” for a first movement, explicitly marked *in movimento di valse*, “in waltz tempo”; an Andantino, marked *in modo di canzone* (“in the manner of a ballad”), with a very Italianate middle section, reminding us that the symphony was composed during a stay in Venice; an orchestral tour de force of a scherzo, marked *pizzicato ostinato*, in which each orchestral choir has a distinctive theme, and then trades off fragments in breathtaking hockets; and a finale consisting of variations on a famous Russian folk song. The genres themselves, while somewhat unusual for a symphony, were not unprecedented. Although not explicitly marked as such, the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony could be fairly described as being in waltz time (albeit with lots of Schumannesque hemiolas), and plenty of orthodox German finales (including those to several of Brahms's concertos) sported folk-like themes. What did seem unprecedented was Chaikovsky's use of expansive melodies in place of tight motivic designs, and the constant conspicuous reference to song and dance.

The first movement's main waltz theme, for example, is twenty-five broad measures in length, consisting of a regular eight-bar phrase to a dominant half-cadence, and an expertly extended answering phrase that leads back, seemingly against all symphonic precedent, to a full cadence on the tonic. Even afterward the theme continues, in expansive phrases, toward a climactic restatement in the tonic that reaches another full close before embarking on a modulatory transition that finally reveals the movement to be a symphonic binary or “sonata-form” movement after all—but only, it seems, in a very broad sense.

As a result of these unusual or eccentric features, the German-dominated literatures of music history and music appreciation have tended to treat Chaikovsky's symphonies as debased specimens, appealing (perhaps unhealthily) to audiences but nevertheless revealing some innate deficiency in the composer. One recent English biographer has even claimed that Chaikovsky was biologically doomed to failure as a symphonist since “his was a Russian mind forced to find its expression through techniques and forms that had been evolved by generations of alien Western creators.”<sup>36</sup> The best that could be said of him from this essentialist viewpoint was that “a composer who could show so much resourcefulness in modifying sonata structure so as to make it more compatible with the type of music *nature had decreed he would write* was no helpless bungler”<sup>37</sup> (italics added).

But symphonic styles are not racial endowments, and it unsurprisingly turns out that Chaikovsky chose his methods quite deliberately, with full knowledge of what he was rejecting. What he was rejecting, in a word, was Brahms, whose music (as Chaikovsky put it to Mme von Meck) was “made up of little fragments of something or other, artfully glued together,”<sup>38</sup> with the result that he “never expresses anything, or if he does, he fails to do it fully.” Chaikovsky was painfully aware of a deficiency (as he saw it) in Brahms, one that came about in direct consequence of what is now generally considered his most valuable contribution.

For the Russian composer, the German's virtuosity in constructing large musical entities out of atomic particles represented no dialectical triumph but merely an unresolved, and therefore fatal, contradiction. “Aren't his pretensions to profundity, strength and power detestable,”<sup>39</sup> Chaikovsky wrote of Brahms to another correspondent, “when the content he pours into those Beethovenian forms of his is so pitiful and insignificant?” These comments strongly suggest that Chaikovsky's deviations from the Beethovenian, or at least the Brahmsian, straight-and-narrow were conditioned less by a lack of symphonic aptitude than by the wish to “express something fully.”

But what? And how? The first movement of the Fourth Symphony contains two impressive clues. The first is its sheer stridency and violence, quite belying (or, at the very least, investing with heavy irony) the implications of its “waltz tempo.” The stridency is proclaimed before the waltz even makes an appearance, in the earsplitting brass fanfares with which the symphony begins, and out of which the whole slow introduction is fashioned. The violence intrudes almost as early, in the peremptory diminished seventh chord that cuts the fanfares off—virtually decapitates them—in unlucky m. 13 (Ex. 14-19).

Andante sostenuto

ex. 14-19 Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky Symphony no. 4, I, beginning

That is operatic behavior; and the operatic impression is confirmed when the fanfares begin acting like a Berliozian *idée fixe*. The peak of violence, a real catastrophe, occurs in the development section, when the fanfares suddenly

return and make three collisions with the waltz theme (Ex. 14-20), each more terrible than the last. (They also return in the fourth movement to disrupt the folksy festivities.) This is not merely “structure”: this is dramaturgy. It bespeaks an encoding of events, a narrative—in short, a program. So, at any rate, Mme von Meck assumed, and wrote to Chaikovsky to inquire about it.

His answering letter has become a famous document. It is now often taken as the symphony’s actual, explicit, or “official” program by those who have forgotten that Chaikovsky never published it or publicly alluded to it during his lifetime; who have not noticed (or have chosen to ignore) its obvious (convenient?) borrowings from the famous programs of Beethoven’s Fifth and the *Symphonie fantastique*; and who have not weighed into the balance the fact that the composer furnished the symphony with its program at the specific request of the woman who paid his bills.

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A musical score for three staves (treble, middle, and bass clefs) showing measures 251 through 254. The score is in 3/4 time and features a waltz-like melody in the upper staves and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the lower staves. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings such as *mf*. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of measure 254.

**ex. 14-20 Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky Symphony no. 4, I, the three collisions**

But even if we regard the “program” as a hasty verbal paraphrase of ideas best wordlessly expressed in “absolute” music, its congruence with the shape of the musical argument (at least of the first movement) is obvious, and makes its possible relevance to the movement’s conception worth considering. The entire document is given in Weiss and Taruskin, *Music in the Western World*, 2nd ed., no. 118; what follows is, as Chaikovsky put it, “roughly the program of the first movement”:<sup>40</sup>

The Introduction is the *kernel* of the whole symphony, without question its main idea: [here the fanfares are quoted]. This is Fate, the force of destiny, which ever prevents our pursuit of happiness from reaching its goal, which jealously stands watch lest our peace and well-being be full and cloudless, which hangs like the sword of Damocles over our heads and constantly, ceaselessly poisons our souls. It is invincible, inescapable. One can only resign oneself and lament fruitlessly: [Here the waltz theme is quoted].

This disconsolate and despairing feeling grows ever stronger and more intense. Would it not be better to turn away from reality and immerse oneself in dreams? [Here the second theme is quoted.] O joy! A sweet tender dream has appeared. A bright, beneficent human form flits by and beckons us on: [Here the end of the exposition passage is quoted]. How wonderful! How distant now is the sound of the implacable introductory theme! Dreams little by little have taken over the soul. All that is dark and bleak is forgotten. There it is, there

it is—happiness!

But no! These are only dreams, and *Fate* awakens us from them: [Here the fanfares are quoted again as they appear at the beginning of the development section]. And thus, all life is the ceaseless alternation of bitter reality with evanescent visions and dreams of happiness. There is no refuge. We are buffeted about by this sea until it seizes us and pulls us down to the bottom.

Is it fair or relevant to *our* experience of the music to note that this deeply pessimistic document, and the symphony it describes, were written at what was arguably the low point of Chaikovsky's personal life, and in the aftermath of what was surely the most dramatic single episode in his biography? Despite the fact that he was homosexual (or rather, *because* of that fact, and his fear of exposure), Chaikovsky had impulsively accepted a proposal of marriage from Antonina Milyukova, a former pupil of his at the Moscow conservatory, who had developed a schoolgirl crush on her harmony professor.

What followed was a great fiasco of anguish, revulsion, flight, histrionic attempted suicide, legal separation, and moral convalescence abroad (which is how Chaikovsky happened to be writing the Fourth Symphony in Venice). Was the symphony, as Chaikovsky described his music in general to Mme von Meck, a “cleansing of the soul, which boils over with an accumulation that naturally seeks its outlet in tones, just as a lyric poet will express himself in verse”?<sup>41</sup> Should that matter to us? Does regarding the music as confessional enhance understanding of it? Must we know an artist's biography in order fully to appreciate the artist's output? Or is the meaning of the symphony sufficiently conveyed by the wordless sounds alone?

The alternatives suggested by these questions are neither exhaustive nor necessarily incompatible, but the existence of the letter to Mme von Meck has led to the reading of not just the Fourth Symphony but a great deal of Chaikovsky's music as autobiography—and reading it, inevitably, in light of that one great biographical event and the conditions that precipitated it. But what if we did not know that letter? What if all we had was the wordless sounds? What do (or can) they intrinsically express?

As soon as we are dealing with expression in any artistic medium, we are necessarily dealing with conventions of representation. Representation necessarily relies on similarities and associations. Where other arts can make reference directly to nature, music must work through mediating codes. We already know that one of the codes on which Chaikovsky relied in the Fourth Symphony was that of dance genres, since he expressly labeled one of his themes as a waltz. Recalling that a great deal of eighteenth-century music, particularly Mozart's, also relied on dance genres and their associations as mediators of musical representation, and knowing that of all composers Chaikovsky loved Mozart best (and expressly ranked him higher than Beethoven), we are equipped with some clues to interpret Chaikovsky's expressive strategies, and in the process to understand better his deliberate deviation from the structural principles that otherwise reigned in the world of the late-nineteenth-century symphony.

Although not explicitly marked, the fanfares that Chaikovsky interpreted as the Fate theme in his letter to Mme von Meck are cast just as recognizably in a dance meter as the expressly designated waltz theme. They are in the meter of a polonaise, a dance that had its origin in Polish court processions, and that remained the most socially elevated of all the ballroom dances of the nineteenth century. By extension, the polonaise was often associated with military parades, that is with martial rhythms and brass bands, as a snatch from Chopin's “Military” Polonaise, op. 40, no. 1 (1838) will remind us (Ex. 14-21a). The stylistic giveaway is the triplet on the second half of the second beat, also found at the beginning of the Polonaise that opens the third act of Chaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin*—composed, as it happens, concurrently with the Fourth Symphony (Ex. 14-21b).



Allegro con brio

ex. 14-21a Frédéric Chopin, beginning of Polonaise, Op. 40, no. 1

Allegro moderato. Tempo di Polacca ♩ = 104

ex. 14-21b Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *Eugene Onegin*, Act III, scene 1, Polonaise

Just as in the Fourth Symphony, the Polonaise in *Eugene Onegin* is paired conceptually with a waltz that occupies the analogous position at the beginning of act 2. Between the two of them they define a social trajectory. The waltz is played at a name-day party for Tatyana, the country girl who (as recounted in chapter 12) has rashly declared her love

for the title character, and to whom he feels disdainfully superior. The polonaise is played at a high society ball in St. Petersburg, where Onegin reencounters Tatyana six years later, and is smitten in his turn; she, however, now socially outranks him and turns him down. The moral: a polonaise will always trump a waltz!

And so it is in the Fourth Symphony. It is easy to see how the attributes of a polonaise could have attached themselves metonymically to Chaikovsky's Fate theme: first of all, the military associations, connoting bellicosity, hostility, implacability. Then, too, the idea of grandiosity and invincible power, derived from political or social awe. And finally, perhaps, the idea of impersonality, dwarfing individual concerns, as the unwritten laws of society frustrated Onegin's amorous designs, or as the idea of Fate frustrates the subject-persona of the Fourth Symphony (symbolized by the waltz theme) in pursuit of happiness. The submission of waltz to polonaise—of subject to fate—is palpably denoted in the coda (Ex. 14-22), when the waltz is reprised for the last time in triple augmentation: that is, at the speed of the polonaise, each beat of the waltz theme now stretched out to the length of one full measure, and therefore no longer a waltz at all. A moment like this expresses—*fully expresses*—a sublime “operatic” terror that was altogether outside Brahms's purposes to express, although Berlioz would surely have sympathized.

And so might Mozart, who, to an extent only recently revealed by the work Wye J. Allanbrook,<sup>42</sup> used dance meters and “characters” as mediators of human representation in his instrumental music as well as his operas; and whose symphonies exhibit a sheer tunefulness akin to Chaikovsky's and alien to the later motivic preoccupations of Beethoven and his many nineteenth-century heirs, from Wagner to Brahms (both of whom, antipodes though they appeared to many, repelled Chaikovsky equally).

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano score. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The first system shows a waltz theme with a 3/4 time signature. The second system, labeled 'cf.' (compare), shows the same theme in triple augmentation, with a 9/4 time signature. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings such as 'ff' (fortissimo). The music is written in a key with two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor).

**ex. 14-22 Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, Symphony no. 4, I, m. 404**

The main theme of the pathos-filled first movement in Mozart's G-minor Symphony (no. 40), for example, is a fully expressed melody of a kind not reencountered in symphonic works (at least not in first themes) until now. One begins to suspect the existence of a parallel tradition of the symphony that passed from Mozart to Chaikovsky without passing through Beethoven. Or perhaps it would be fairer to say that Chaikovsky was the recipient of, and participant in, a tradition that goes back to or passes through Mozart in a way that the nineteenth-century Germanic tradition, however reverently its aggressive claim of descent from the “classical masters” has been ratified in conventional historiography, does not.

It is the Franco-Italianate line, which passed from Mozart to Rossini, thence to Auber, Gounod, and Bizet. These were the composers whom Chaikovsky admired, particularly his French contemporaries, and especially the opera and ballet composer Léo Delibes (1836–91), who is no longer thought of as an important figure, but whom Chaikovsky venerated as the Mozart of his day. Today it is Chaikovsky himself, with Verdi, who seems the preeminent late-nineteenth-century representative of this tradition, especially since (like Mozart) he was equally drawn to the operatic and symphonic domains and made equally significant contributions to both. But his Mozartean symphonic style had become so alien to the accepted practices of the late-nineteenth-century symphony that even one of his own former pupils, the composer Sergey Ivanovich Taneyev (1856–1915), reproached Chaikovsky in a famous letter for allowing his symphony occasionally to descend to the level of “ballet music.”<sup>43</sup>

Not that Chaikovsky was unaware of the New Germans, or that he shut himself off from acquiring their most novel techniques. The first movement of the Fourth Symphony follows a thoroughly Lisztian tonal plan, governed (like the one in César Franck's Symphony) by a full circle of minor thirds: introduction and first theme in F minor (0); second theme in A  $\flat$  minor (3); close of exposition in B major (6); reprise of both main themes (beginning at m. 283) in D minor (9); coda in F minor (0 regained). (And now we know why the "recapitulation" does not begin in the tonic.) Nevertheless, Chaikovsky belonged to the line whose prime "theater of operation" remained literally the theater, and which therefore drew its musical imagery not from visions of transcendence but from the stock of daily life, human emotion and its vicissitudes.

But we are still left with our question: were the emotions Chaikovsky portrayed his own, and should that matter to us? In the case of the Fourth Symphony, his biography tends to confirm the idea. But beware: once the idea is accepted as a general rule, biographical fallacies are bound to follow. Consider the case of Chaikovsky's last symphony, the Sixth in B minor, op. 74, subtitled *Pathétique* ("A symphony of suffering"). The subtitle and its implications are mainly due to the last movement, which (like the last movement of Brahms's last symphony) is extremely unusual, perhaps unique, in form and character.

Chaikovsky's *Pathétique* was (apart from a few then-unknown early eccentricities by Haydn) the first complete four-movement symphony ever to put the slow movement last. Not only that, but the movement, suggestively marked "Adagio lamentoso," ends with a long, drawn-out decrescendo, unmistakably figuring "the dying of the light." The symphony ends, in other words, as if in polemical defiance of the Beethovenian prescription that symphonies enact and perpetually reenact narratives of triumph and transcendence. What to make of it? For the audience who heard Chaikovsky conduct it at its St. Petersburg premiere in October 1893, it was indeed a puzzle. The symphony was "not disliked,"<sup>44</sup> Chaikovsky wrote to his publisher in some bemusement, "but it has caused some bewilderment." The idea of adding the subtitle, to give the audience a clue to interpreting the piece, came from the composer's younger brother Modest, a playwright (later his elder brother's biographer). It was added the morning after the premiere.

Eight days later, Chaikovsky died suddenly, and most unexpectedly, of cholera, a disease that (because it was transmitted chiefly where sanitation was inadequate) mostly attacked the poor. The symphony was played again, *in memoriam*, subtitle in place. This time the audience was an audience of mourners, listening hard for portents. And that is how the symphony became a suicide note. Depression was the first diagnosis. "Homosexual tragedy" came later, in the aftermath of the trial of Oscar Wilde, the Irish writer and celebrated "aesthete," who in 1895 was convicted of "committing acts of gross indecency with other male persons" and sentenced to two years at hard labor.

Rumors about Chaikovsky's death that had been flying ever since it happened now coalesced on a story patently modeled on the Wilde affair. According to this account, which is still affirmed by many (even by some gullible scholars) although no evidence supports it, Chaikovsky had been discovered in a pederastic liaison with the scion of a noble family, had been denounced to the tsar (Alexander III, his personal friend), and had been sentenced by an honor court of fellow alumni from the Imperial School of Jurisprudence to commit suicide by drinking a poison (never identified) that would simulate the symptoms of cholera.

The story appeals chiefly to two constituencies: to homophobes, who like stories in which gay men meet bad ends in consequence of their vice; and to gay activists, who are glad to have a martyr to display. The lack of evidence is compensated by what is taken to be the transparent testimony of the "Pathetic Symphony's" finale. Even those who realize that the work was composed too early to have been the direct expression of Chaikovsky's "final tragedy" cite it as evidence of his generally miserable state of mind, which, they conclude, made him vulnerable to the honor court's decree. "I find it very difficult to believe that a man who produced something like the Sixth Symphony was totally at ease,"<sup>45</sup> one scholarly defender of the suicide rumor has written. "You have only to listen to the Sixth Symphony to hear a man in torment," writes another. "The finality of the testament of the Sixth Symphony almost makes it superfluous to indulge in any sort of speculation," writes a third.

Meanwhile, what documentary evidence there is as to Chaikovsky's state of mind near the end of his life flatly contradicts the "evidence" of the music. By the time in question, Chaikovsky had made a successful adjustment to his condition; with the help of loving family and friends, he had come to terms with his sexuality, found an acceptable *modus vivendi* within the moral constraints of the society in which he lived, and seems to have been a reasonably happy man. Indeed, the act of producing the Sixth Symphony filled his last summer with bliss. "I have never felt such self-satisfaction, such pride, such happiness," he wrote to his publisher, "as in the consciousness that I am really the creator of this beautiful work."<sup>46</sup>

After the first performance, he spent a cheerful week, his last, in St. Petersburg with Modest. During intermission at the theater one evening he went backstage to greet one of the leading actors, a friend of his brother's. Conversation turned to spiritualism, thence to death itself. The composer of the "Pathetic Symphony" waved the subject aside. "There is plenty of time before we need reckon with this horror; it will not come to snatch us off just yet!" he remarked to Modest, who entered it in his diary that very evening. Then he added, "I feel I shall live a long time."<sup>47</sup> In other words, the finale of Chaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, like the finale of Beethoven's Second, should stand as a warning, rather than an encouragement, to those who under the influence of "pop romanticism" would assume that art is by nature autobiographical. The cases are complementary: Beethoven's Second, one of his most cheerful (and in the finale, downright hilarious) works, was composed concurrently with the composer's despairing realization, attended by thoughts of suicide and expressed in his heartrending "Heiligenstadt Testament", that his deafness was irrevocable. The agonizing, heart-rending finale of Chaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, by contrast, was composed during as happy a period as the composer ever knew.

What does all of this prove? Only that art is ... well, artful. And of no art is that truer than the romantic art of confession, of which Chaikovsky's "Pathétique" is an outstanding example. "Always be sincere," the comedy team of Flanders and Swann used to say, "whether you mean it or not." That might have been Chaikovsky's motto. His matchless ability to live up to it, to "do" sincerity with utter conviction, brought the romantic tradition in music—a thing of artifice, illusion, and manipulated codes—to its very climax.

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## Notes:

(35) Chaikovsky to Nadezhda von Meck, 27 November 1877, P. I. Chaikovsky, *Perepiska s N. F. fon-Mekk*, Vol. I (Moscow: Academia, 1934), pp. 100–101.

(36) David Brown, *Tchaikovsky*, Vol. IV (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 10.

(37) Brown, *Tchaikovsky*, Vol. I (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 108.

(38) Chaikovsky to Nadezhda von Meck, 18 February 1880; Chaikovsky, *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy: Literaturniye proizvedeniya i perepiska*, Vol. IX (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1962), p. 56.

(39) Chaikovsky to Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich, 21 September 1888; Chaikovsky, *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy: Literaturniye proizvedeniya i perepiska*, Vol. XIV (Moscow: Muzika, 1974), p. 542.

(40) Chaikovsky to Nadezhda von Meck, 17 February 1878; Chaikovsky, *Polnoye sobran-iye sochineniy: Literaturniye proizvedeniya i perepiska*, Vol. VII (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1962), pp. 126–27.

(41) *Ibid.*, p. 124.

(42) See W. J. Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

(43) Sergey Taneyev to P. I. Chaikovsky, 18 March 1878; quoted in Modest Chaikovsky, *Life and Letters of Tchaikovsky*, Vol. I (New York: Vienna House, 1973), p. 292.

(44) Chaikovsky to P. I. Jurgenson, 18 October 1893; *Life and Letters of Tchaikovsky*, Vol. II, p. 722.

(45) David Brown, John Purdie, Alan Kendall, all quoted in R. Taruskin, "Pathetic Symphonist: Chaikovsky, Russia, Sexuality and the Study of Music," *The New Republic*, 6 February 1995, p. 40.

(46) Chaikovsky to P. I. Jurgenson, 12 August 1893; *Life and Letters of Tchaikovsky*, Vol. II, p. 715.

(47) *Life and Letters of Tchaikovsky*, Vol. II, p. 722.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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## NATIONAL MONUMENTS

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 14 The Symphony Goes (Inter)National

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

In 1866 Carl Engel (1818–82), a German organist and music scholar who had been living in England since 1844, published a monograph called *An Introduction to the Study of National Music*. It consisted mainly of a comprehensive, if loosely organized, survey of folk songs from around the world, accompanied by obiter dicta culled from such scholarly literature as then existed on the subject. The author's own contribution was the comparative framework and the myriad observations he allowed himself to draw from it. “Although no people has been found without music of its own,” he announced on the first page, “the degree of susceptibility and fondness for music, as well as the form and spirit of popular musical compositions, vary greatly in different nations.”

The nadir of susceptibility, it turns out, had been reached by the author's host country, England, whose music, he lost no opportunity in reminding the reader, was faceless, and whose inhabitants were peerlessly unmusical. The English, he asserted, had borrowed their most characteristic folk songs from the lore of other countries, and with good reason: “Such adoptions...occur oftenest in a nation whose music has a less marked national character;...thus, the English will more easily adopt a foreign tune than the Germans.” The English countryside, Herr Engel assured his readers, was mute, for “the rural population of England appear to sing less than those of most other European countries.” Even the English ethnological literature failed to meet the author's needs, for “travellers (especially the English) are seldom experienced musicians.” Perhaps the most delectable sally came in a discussion of the *almost* universal spontaneous musical expression of religious feeling. “Ecclesiastics,” the author notes, have “always and almost everywhere been adepts in the art of music. Instances where this is not the case—as, for example, with the clergy of the Church of England at the present day—are exceptional.”<sup>48</sup>

By the time of Engel's writing, the unmusicality of the English was already a cultural cliché, especially among the Germans. Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), who visited England in 1827, recalled what he heard there in a report from Paris to a German newspaper in 1840: “These people have no ear, neither for the beat nor indeed for music in any form, and their unnatural passion for piano-playing and singing is all the more disgusting. There is verily nothing on earth so terrible as English musical composition, except English painting.” Another German traveler, the poet Georg Weerth (1822–1856), took great pleasure in mocking “the immense efforts the Englishman will make only to appear just a tiny bit musical” and “how the English, incapable of singing as they are, always maintain in the most ridiculous way that they lead all other nations in this as in other things.” Their proof? “Carl Maria von Weber is buried there.”<sup>49</sup>

This view of the English found its ultimate expression in a treatise published in 1904 by the German philosopher Oscar Adolf Hermann Schmitz (1873–1931). Its title, *Das Land ohne Musik* (The Land without Music), became—or,



more likely, already was—a catchphrase. Although the subtitle immediately established *englische Gesellschaftsprobleme* (English social problems) as the actual subject of his book, the alleged unmusicality of the English had become for Schmitz a useful metaphor for more basic deficiencies—their prosaic, unimaginative character; their *selfishness* (a word Schmitz retained in the original); their lack of empathy (which made them such successful imperialists). Schmitz's critique of the English character was a variation on Napoleon's old cackle about the “nation of shopkeepers.” One might have expected a scholarly author to seek explanations on economic or political terrain, but the time of writing favored essentialist explanations. Engel, whose book Schmitz listed as a source, had immediately assured his readers on page 1 that the musical characteristics he would identify as national “are innate, and, so to say, of indigenous growth” and therefore required no further explanation. So it was enough for Schmitz, as an explanation for England's social problems, to cite, as “something that distinguishes the English from all other cultures to an absolutely astounding degree,” this “lack, which everybody acknowledges, and is therefore no new discovery, but whose import has not been sufficiently emphasized: *The English are the only cultured people without their own music* (street songs excepted).”<sup>50</sup>

How did the English acquire this dismal reputation? For that, there are convincing historical explanations, and Weerth had actually alluded to them. Its highly developed commercial resources and freedom of enterprise made England—just London, really—the greatest magnet in Europe for the international freelance trade. The city became the preferred residence or touring venue for international stars of the highest standing, and that imported prestige had a crushing impact on domestic talent. The star system, which in the first place meant great performers such as castrati and instrumental virtuosi, eventually encompassed composers as well: a stellar succession of continental masters who provided—or saddled—native talents with inescapable models. In the early eighteenth century there were Handel and the violinist-composer Francesco Geminiani. In the later eighteenth century there were “John” Christian Bach and Carl Friedrich Abel (1723–1727), who not only composed the music of highest British prestige but also purveyed it at their own elite concert series, becoming British musical shopkeepers extraordinaire—only to be eclipsed as businessmen by Muzio Clementi (1752–1832), an Italian composer (and Mozart's only rival as a keyboard virtuoso) who set up an internationally dominant music publishing and piano manufacturing firm in London in 1785. And then there was the grand *pléiade* of visitors—Haydn, Weber, Mendelssohn—who appeared before the British public, treating them to a series of brilliant premieres, from Haydn's “London” symphonies to Weber's *Oberon* to Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. No other country could equal Britain as an international showcase for the best in musical production of all kinds.

Small wonder then that the local talent found themselves fairly dwarfed by the magnitude of such goings-on. Britain never lacked for native talent, but the locals worked in genres dominated by the visitors, and—with the fairly marginal and insular exception of music for the Anglican liturgy, doomed by definition never to be exported—they had little opportunity to emerge as anything other than “epigones,” lesser imitators. There was Charles Avison (1709–1770), a pupil of Geminiani and an expert imitator of Handel's imitations of Corelli. There were Thomas Arne (1710–1778) and William Boyce (1711–1779), whose careers encompassed the end of Handel's reign and the coming of J. C. Bach and who expertly emulated both. (Arne has won a meed of immortality for his settings of Shakespeare's songs and for the final chorus—“Rule, Britannia!”—from a masque, or historical pageant, called *Alfred*, first performed in 1740.) There was the Irish-born John Field (1782–1837), a pupil of Clementi, admired (as we have seen) by Liszt and a pianist of international distinction as well as an original composer (the nocturne being his invention), but who spent his mature years in Russia, then even more on the European periphery than insular Britain. In the wake of Haydn there were John Marsh (1752–1828), a composer of more than forty symphonies; William Crotch (1775–1847); and Cipriani Potter (1792–1871), who studied with Thomas Attwood, a pupil of Mozart (and also, briefly, with Beethoven in Vienna). And in the early Victorian era there was Sir William Sterndale Bennett (1816–1875), a pupil of Crotch and Potter and a protégé of Mendelssohn, hailed by Schumann as a major talent. The most eminent Victorian, Sullivan, was (as we have seen) compromised in the eyes of “serious” musicians by his association with operetta.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the chief influences on British composers were Brahms and, even more directly, Dvořák. Wagner and Liszt, though as popular with audiences in Britain as anywhere else, were less approved as compositional models because the composing profession had become thoroughly academicized over the century's course. Crotch, Potter, and Bennett had all been principals of the Royal Academy of Music, the main British conservatory (chartered in 1830), and the leading “serious” composers of the 1880s and 1890s, Sir Hubert Parry (1848–1918) and Sir Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924), were both professors at the newer rival institution, the Royal College of Music (with Parry serving from 1895 as director). Their educational responsibilities and their class status as “gentlemen” seem to have curbed their originality, or at least their adventurousness, as is especially

apparent in the case of Parry, who as a young composer was an ardent Wagnerian but who as a teacher preached the gospel of Brahms. Meanwhile, Dvořák (already identified in this book as the most generically versatile of all contemporary European composers) had shown himself to be exceptionally well positioned to earn a following in Britain, where the oratorio tradition had persisted unbroken since Handel's time and where choral composition rivaled symphonic in prestige.

Dvořák's first big success in Britain was his *Stabat Mater*, a setting of the latter-day Gregorian sequence composed in 1876–1877 and first performed in Prague in 1880. Its London première in 1883 led to an invitation to the composer from the London Philharmonic Society to appear in person and conduct his works the next season and from the publishing firm of Novello to compose an oratorio for the Birmingham Festival, one of the many summer choral conclaves that particularly distinguished English musical life. The tour was the first of nine, and the commission was the first of five. Dvořák's British premieres, in London and at the Birmingham and Leeds festivals, included a requiem, two oratorios (*The Spectre's Bride* and *Saint Ludmilla*), his Seventh Symphony, and his Cello Concerto. The last two are among his most important works, but the first three were responsible for his particular relevance to the British scene, in which he assumed the mantle of mentor formerly worn by Handel and Mendelssohn—and this at a time when his Slavic ethnicity was still an impediment to his acceptance at home in Austria-Hungary. The honor given him in Britain did much to enhance his image at home, but it only reinforced the impression on the continent that the British, like the Bohemians, were musical provincials.

And that is how the rumor took root that the British—unlike the Bohemians!—were “unmusical.” The British, so the assumption went, not only did not produce a native musical genius but also could not. Their unmusicality, as Carl Engel would say, was “innate” and “of indigenous growth.” What contemporary musicians (eventually including the British themselves) saw fit to register as a fact was not that Britain had been, since the advent of Handel, the most glittering of all international musical showcases and the place where the musical profession was on the firmest economic footing, but rather that, since the death of Purcell in 1695, the English had been without a native-born composer of wide international repute. That widely-accepted “fact” was in fact a non-fact. Purcell, too, had been a composer of insular reputation in his day, as had William Byrd before him. The international concert scene had, in fact, only existed since the time of apparent British decline. The changing structure of musical life, not the “nature” of British musical talent, had produced the impression of musical decline.

Yet all it ever takes to defeat an essentialist argument is a counterexample, and that counterexample appeared in 1899 in the person of Edward Elgar (1857–1934). The breakthrough composition was his *Variations on an Original Theme*, op. 36, for orchestra (popularly known, with the composer's approval, as the *Enigma Variations*). The idea for it very likely came from Dvořák, whose *Symphonic Variations*, op. 78 (1877), had been a popular concert item in England since its London premiere (under the German conductor Hans Richter) in 1887; and even more immediately, perhaps, from Chaikovsky, whose Third Suite for Orchestra, op. 55 (1884), ends with a big set of character variations that culminate in a brilliant and extended polonaise. Chaikovsky's variations were often programmed as an independent entity, and Elgar heard them that way at a concert that included his own cantata, *Caractacus*, in October 1898, just a few weeks before he began work on the *Enigma* set.<sup>51</sup> Except for Brahms's *Haydn Variations* (see Ex. 13-10) there were virtually no other precedents for such a composition as Elgar's, save sets by Parry (1897) and Stanford (1898) that were probably also responses to Dvořák and Brahms. Elgar's theme (Ex. 14-23a), though often compared with the opening theme in Brahms's Fourth Symphony (1885), with its short phrases separated by rests and its conspicuous falling thirds, actually resembles Dvořák's variation theme—not an original tune, but a Czech folk song called “I'm a Fiddler”—at the more basic level of ternary design (Ex. 14-23b). Elgar's colorful and varied orchestration owed a confessed debt to Dvořák as well.

(A) Andante  
Vn. I

(B)

(A) *sostenuto*

ex. 14-23a Elgar, *Enigma Variations*, theme

(A) Lento e molto tranquillo

(B)

(A)

ex. 14-23b Dvořák, *Symphonic Variations*, op. 78, theme

Indeed, Elgar's affinity for his older Czech counterpart ran very deep, nurtured both by similar upbringings and by personal contact. Like Dvořák, Elgar was a provincial violinist and church organist who had to overcome considerable obstacles to win recognition even in the national centers, to say nothing of the wider world. He was the son of a Worcester music-shopkeeper and piano tuner who had converted to Roman Catholicism. (Dvořák's father had had been a small-town butcher.) The younger Elgar earned his living during the earlier part of his career doing musical odd jobs: giving violin lessons, playing in ad hoc orchestras and other ensembles, accompanying Sunday Masses at St. George's Catholic Church, conducting bands (one at a local insane asylum). One of his more memorable orchestra "gigs" had been at the Worcester choral festival in 1884, at which Dvořák, on his first British tour, conducted his *Stabat Mater*. Elgar's early composing ambitions, in common with many provincial British worthies, were bound up with that peculiarly British choir-festival tradition, in which Dvořák's impact was especially keen. The early phases of Elgar's serious composing career were centered around that same local "Three Choirs" festival, for which he produced his first three choral-orchestral compositions. These, and especially the next one (*Scenes from the Saga of King Olaf*, 1896), are full of resonances from Dvořák's oratorios, especially *The Specter's Bride* (1885), the first British commission.

But Elgar, unlike the many worthies from whose ranks he emerged, was not content to imitate. His *Enigma Variations* was an ambitious emulation, an attempt to surpass his models. The work ends with a long and eminently "symphonic" (i.e., climactic and developing) finale—revised and further elaborated after the first performance—that transcends the genre of variation and also surpasses in amplitude and complexity the corresponding concluding sections of Dvořák's, and even Chaikovsky's, variations sets. Elgar's variations are both virtuosically orchestrated and vividly contrasted, covering an exceptionally, even ostentatiously, diverse range of moods. This range is justified by a sort of secret program, whereby the variations represent various "friends pictured within," identified in the score by initials or pseudonyms. (The big finale, according to this scheme, is a self-portrait.) That is one of the "enigmas" responsible for the composition's nickname—the "easy" one, long since solved with the composer's blessing. The

other enigma, impossible of solution, was set forth by the composer in a program note at the first performance, in the form of a gratuitous refusal to divulge it:

Its “dark saying” must be left unguessed, and I warn you that the connexion between the Variations and the Theme is often of the slightest texture; further, through and over the whole set another and larger theme “goes,” but is not played...So the principal Theme never appears, even as in some late dramas—e.g. Maeterlinck’s *L’Intruse* and *Les sept Princesses*—the chief character is never on the stage.<sup>52</sup>

The assumption has always been—though without any direct evidence—that the “Theme” to which the composer thus darkly alludes must be a counterpoint to the actual played theme, as given in Ex. 14-23a. (In fact, nothing in Elgar’s note requires the “Theme” even to be a musical theme.) Countless candidates have been advanced, from “Rule Britannia” and “Auld Lang Syne” to themes from Bach’s organ music to the standard symphonic repertoire. The game continues: in 1991 the British pianist Joseph Cooper proposed the theme of the slow movement in Mozart’s *Prague* Symphony (yet another link to Dvořák?), and in 2007 Clive McClelland, a musicologist at the University of Leeds, added the Anglican hymn “Now the Day Is Over” to the pile of potential solutions.<sup>53</sup>

With all these layers of meaning and potential meaning overlaying the impressive music, Elgar’s *Enigma Variations* attracted great attention when it was played for the first time, shortly after the composer’s forty-second birthday. But the decisive factor allowing the composer from Worcester to burst into fame and explode the myth of *Das Land ohne Musik* was the prestige of the occasion, lent not by the composer’s reputation, but by that of the conductor. He was Hans Richter (1843–1916), one of Wagner’s foremost disciples. Richter had conducted the premier *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth in 1876, but he also gave the first performances of Brahms’s Second and Third symphonies (and the *Tragic Overture*), Bruckner’s Eighth (and biggest) Symphony, and Chaikovsky’s Violin Concerto. He was, in short, the great conductor of the day.

Since 1879 Richter had been conducting an annual concert series in London (the “Richter concerts”) that was the supreme attraction of the London concert season. He performed other English composers—mainly Parry and Stanford—besides Elgar, yet the others were already lions of the London establishment when Richter played their works, whereas Elgar was plucked from relative obscurity. Richter became Elgar’s champion, giving many subsequent premieres, including that of *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900), Elgar’s most famous oratorio, which secured his position at the very forefront of the English musical world. In 1904 Richter elevated Elgar’s reputation further still, by conducting a festival of his music in London (“an unprecedented tribute to a living composer,” according to the *New Grove Dictionary*). Most important, Richter propagated Elgar’s music in the main European centers, giving him an international profile out of all proportion with those of his fellow countrymen. Without in any way detracting from the inherent qualities of Elgar’s music, it is fair to say that Richter’s enthusiastic espousal made the crucial difference, allowing not only Europeans but also English listeners to believe that “here was music the like of which had not appeared in this country since Purcell’s death.”<sup>54</sup> Exactly as in the case of Glinka sixty years before, and Dvořák himself a quarter of a century before, recognition abroad—“mainstream” recognition, according to prevailing current opinion—sanctioned preeminence at home. But Elgar’s emergence into the mainstream and the resultant rise in his status, as a viable British musical representative to the world, were necessary preconditions for his country’s emergence (or reemergence) as a significant producer, not just the paramount consumer, of concert music. Greatness, in short, was still Germany’s to bestow.

So important were Elgar’s achievement and reputation to his country’s musical self-esteem that he instantly became a national institution, accompanied—perhaps awkwardly, because he was by no means a typical Englishman, being Roman Catholic, not a member of the Church of England—by new essentialist myths. His music was alleged to embody the national character, which was found to inhabit its sound and structure at every level. In particular, the *Enigma* theme (i.e., the “heard melody” in Ex. 14-23a) was alleged to mimic, in its falling sevenths, the cadence of English speech; and the first four notes—this was advanced in earnest!—were heard to speak the composer’s name (“Ed-ward El-gar”), as if mystically tying the composer’s person to the national collectivity.<sup>55</sup> Such an investment inevitably begets anxiety, and Elgar has been ever since equally a touchstone of British pride and British shame. The shame came out as recently as 2008, when an English composer could still write of Elgar that “he rules as a monarch over our national inferiority complex, the not quite hidden belief that nobody English could be quite that good a musician, not compared with abroad.”<sup>56</sup>

The pride can be viewed at its least troubled height in the third edition of *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, first printed in 1927, when Elgar was still alive. The lengthy, unsigned entry on the composer was the

work of the dictionary's editor, Henry Cope Colles (1879–1943), a professor of music history at the Royal College of Music and the chairman of the School of English Church Music. The article identifies Elgar, simply and (within the dictionary) singularly, as “a great composer,” and, after a detailed and by no means entirely uncritical survey of his output, reaches an eloquent peroration:

Elgar's works hold the attention of his countrymen more decisively than do those of any other native composer. No English festival is complete without him; every choral society and orchestra, from the smallest to the greatest, gives his music a large place in its repertory; and it will be no surprise if further works should come from his pen bearing the stamp of that personality which is so recognizable that from his name the adjective “Elgarian” has been coined, yet so elusive that the adjective has been necessary in default of any adequate description.<sup>57</sup>

**ex. 14-24 Elgar, *Enigma Variations*, no. 9 (“Nimrod”)**

The “Elgarian” tone, by now familiar, is no longer so elusive. It is well known to all who have (perhaps unwittingly) marched at graduation time to the trio section from Elgar's first *Pomp and Circumstance* march (op. 39, no. 1; 1901), composed two years after the *Enigma Variations*. (The title alludes to Shakespeare's *Othello*: “The royal banner, and all quality, /Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!” [Act III, scene 3, ll. 353–354].) It is a tone that is itself frequently described as eloquent, implying public oratory. Although composed as an instrumental melody, the march tune so obviously had the character of a hymn that it was quickly outfitted, by the poet A. C. Benson (1862–1925), with a patriotic text beginning “Land of Hope and Glory,” in which form it became, in 1902, the finale to Elgar's *Coronation Ode*, written for a gala performance at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, in honor of the investiture of King Edward VII—a commission, that, in the words of Colles, “was tantamount to the acknowledgement of Elgar as the musical laureate of the Edwardian era.” (In 1924 Elgar was the inevitable choice to succeed the long-serving Sir Walter Parratt as the actual musical laureate of the United Kingdom, occupying an honorific post known as Master of the King's Music.) That hymnic manner, compounded of exaltation and serenity, was indeed characteristic and individual, Elgarian and Edwardian in equal measure. It is already intimated in the ninth of the *Enigma Variations* (Ex. 14-24), titled “Nimrod” after the Bible's mighty hunter and designating one of Elgar's closest musical confidants, his editor August Jaeger (“hunter” in German) at Novello, the main British publisher of choral festival fare.

Adante. Nobilmente e semplice

ex. 14-25a Elgar, *Symphony no. 1*, op. 55, beginning

Grandioso. Poco largamente

ex. 14-25b Elgar, *Symphony no. 1*, op. 55, end

The same hymnic tone is struck at the beginning of Elgar's First Symphony (op. 55; 1908), which opens with an andante melody (Ex. 14-25a) that precedes the allegro movement, like a standard symphonic introduction. But by the turn of the century it was more or less a foregone conclusion that a big symphony would have a motto theme, and so this melody is quoted in the scherzo, the main theme of the adagio is a variation on it, and the entire finale builds to its blazing recapitulation at a pitch of ecstasy far removed from—and yet, as demonstrated, implicit within—the opening mood of expressly indicated “noble simplicity” and confident reserve (Ex. 14-25b). It is not hard to see how a nation that valued the “stiff upper lip” would find in this composer a spokesman. Elgar actively cultivated that mood. The marking “nobilmente,” a great rarity in the music of other composers (unless, like Ralph Vaughan Williams, in one famous instance, they were deliberately, and possibly ironically, striking an “Elgarian” attitude), recurs with great regularity in his work. (Its first appearance, as a matter of fact, was in the composer's piano reduction of “Nimrod.”) Elgar dedicated the First Symphony in gratitude to Hans Richter, “true artist and true friend.” Richter reciprocated not only by giving the first performance but also by pronouncing it “the greatest symphony of modern times, written by the greatest modern composer—and not only in this country.”<sup>58</sup>

Elgar's Second Symphony (op. 63; 1911) was, according to its title page, “Dedicated to the Memory of His Late Majesty King Edward VII,” and, a footnote adds, “This Symphony, designed early in 1910 to be a loyal tribute, bears its present dedication with the gracious approval of His Majesty the King,” meaning George V, Edward's son and



successor. The second movement (largo) is a funeral march, the king's death having taken place while Elgar was at work on the opening movement. The influence of the sad occasion may perhaps be felt in the ending of the symphony as well, which replays but inverts the First Symphony's trajectory, in which a motto theme of noble simplicity is recapitulated in jubilation. In the Second Symphony the opening theme is exuberant, in unambiguous response to the epigraph from Shelley's "Invocation" that sits atop the score: "Rarely, rarely comest thou,/Spirit of Delight!" The theme's hushed and spacious recapitulation at the symphony's end, in counterpoint against receding reverberations of the antic finale, is persuasive testimony to the composer's rare combination of conventionality and originality, his ability to ring unexpected and telling changes on accepted practice or (in less complimentary terms) to invest time-honored sentiments with apparent freshness and eloquence.

Elgar's ability to move with apparent freedom and inventiveness within an orthodox or even conformist posture; his sincere and devoted professions of loyalty to his country's values and institutions, beginning with that of monarchy, at a time when Britain was at—or, perhaps more accurately, just past—the height of imperial potency (memorialized by, among other things, Elgar's music to accompany a 1911 masque called *The Crown of India*); and even the sheer opulence of his scores, redolent of prosperity and optimism, have made Elgar's reputation a bellwether of changing social and political attitudes. His country's plummeting fortunes after World War I, and even more the loss of its empire after World War II, caused the corpulent, walrus-mustachioed composer's output to sound embarrassingly "blimpish"—pompously self-satisfied or reactionary—to many and brought about a trough in his reputation from which a full comeback was possible, it seemed, only in the 1980s, coinciding with a resurgence of British nationalism associated with Margaret Thatcher's tenure as prime minister. Even at the zenith of Elgar's prestige, Colles saw fit to twit the composer just a little for the excessively snug, square-cut construction of his larger scores—"a tendency," he called it, "to write long movements in multiples of two-bar phrases." By 1954, when Colles's article, now signed, was revised by another editor for (posthumous) republication in the fifth edition of *Grove's*, with the "great" now deleted from Elgar's identification as a composer, it had to end on a defensive note. "It is by the direct and constant appeal of Elgar's music to his own countrymen that the English character of his art is abundantly proved," the author now felt it necessary to insist. "He was never much impressed by the doctrine that national music can be synthetically developed from national sources of folksong and other traditions of the past." The point is immediately reiterated at a higher temperature: "He knew no nationalistic inhibitions," and "he believed it was the composer's business to invent tunes, not to quote them, and to make history rather than to study it."<sup>59</sup>

If it was now required to assert these negative facts, it was obviously because a later generation of British musicians and audiences had in the meantime decided that a national music could and perhaps ought to be developed from national sources of folksong and other traditions of the past.

The main creative representative of this generation was Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), who followed a trail blazed by Cecil Sharp (1859–1924), the leader of the folklore revival in England, and such scholarly figures as Rev. Edmund Horace Fellowes (1870–1951), an Anglican clergyman who pioneered the revival of "Tudor" church music (i.e., the sacred polyphony of the "long sixteenth century," named after the English dynasty that reigned from 1485 to 1603). Vaughan Williams's scholarly bent was nurtured by a distinguished intellectual lineage. The son of a vicar, he was the grandnephew of Charles Darwin and the great-great-grandson of the illustrious potter Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795).

Vaughan Williams had a traditional and cosmopolitan musical education, unusual only in its slow progress. He studied with Stanford and Parry at home; more briefly (1897) in Berlin with Max Bruch (1838–1920), a member of Brahms's generation, best remembered for a violin concerto and other concerted works, including a *Scottish Fantasy* for violin and orchestra; and finally even more briefly (1907–8) in Paris with Maurice Ravel, Vaughan Williams's junior by three years, mostly for orchestration. From 1903 Vaughan Williams made folksong collecting expeditions to the English and Welsh countryside, and beginning in 1905 he conducted choral music at a festival (Leith Hill) founded by his sister.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. Each system consists of a treble staff and a bass staff. The music is written in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. The first system shows the initial theme. The second system features a change in meter to 6/8 and then back to 3/4. The third system continues with further metrical changes, including 6/8 and 4/4, and concludes with a final note.

**ex. 14-26 Vaughan Williams, *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, theme**

Almost none of the music Vaughan Williams composed before the turn of century is published, and what little has been appeared only posthumously, as a matter of historical interest. His two early masterpieces, the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* for double string orchestra and solo string quartet (1910) and *A London Symphony* (1913, rev. 1918), exemplify the two sides of the nativist tendency he embodied: belatedly embodied, it is fair to say, for it meant the arrival in Britain of a current that had spread on the continent—in Russia, the Czech lands, Hungary, Iberia, Scandinavia, and so on—considerably earlier. The *Tallis Fantasia* is based on a psalm-tune harmonization that Thomas Tallis (ca. 1505–85), one of the great Tudor musicians, had furnished for *The Whole Psalter Translated into English Metre*, edited by Matthew Parker, the first Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, around 1567 (Ex. 14-26 shows Vaughan Williams's version). The antiphonal deployment of the two groups of strings and their responsorial interplay with the soloists evoke a sort of mythical wordless liturgy, and the magnificently rich textures that Vaughan Williams, trained as a violinist, was able to elicit from the chosen medium evokes another set of cultural memories—the abounding repertoire of fantasias for “chests” of viols that date mainly from the Jacobean period, the era of the early Stuart kings that followed the Tudors.

The *London Symphony* is a response to the other revival, that of traditional, orally transmitted lore. The published score carries as an epigraph a passage from an article Vaughan Williams had contributed in 1912 to the *R. C. M. Magazine*, the official organ of the Royal College of Music, titled “Who Wants the British Composer?” This text almost exactly paraphrases the prescription Dvořák had made to his American readers a generation earlier:

Is it not possible that the English composer has something to say to his own countrymen that no one of any other age and any other country can say? Have we not all about us forms of musical expression which we can purify and raise to the level of great art?

Musical score for Vaughan Williams' *A London Symphony*, II, mm. 1–8. The score is in 4/4 time and marked "Lento". It features a Cor anglais part starting with a "p" dynamic and "misterioso" marking, and a string part marked "ppp" and "Strings con sordini".

ex. 14-27a Vaughan Williams, *A London Symphony*, II, mm. 1–8

Vaughan Williams's process of elevation and "purification" led him, altogether unlike Dvořák, to adopt a manner of writing that could only strike many academic musicians at the time as uncouth. Among other things, long passages of parallel triads abound, their fifths and octaves uncorrected (Ex. 14-27a). Contrary to Colles's insinuation in defense of Elgar in the fifth edition of Grove's Dictionary (quoted above), and with only a couple of exceptions—one of them the famous chimes of Big Ben, the Westminster clock tower atop the houses of Parliament, sounding through the mists at the beginning of the first movement and the end of the fourth, in very Ravellian harp harmonics—the symphony's thematic material consisted of invented rather than quoted tunes. But it also made intermittent references to transcribed street cries ("Sweet Lavender!") and the jingles that announced the approach of a London hansom cab (duly listed among the percussion instruments), and it imitated the sounds of mouth organs and concertinas. (Much later, Vaughan Williams, commissioned by the virtuoso Larry Adler, would compose one of the very few twentieth-century concerted works for mouth organ, or "harmonica," *Romance in D-flat*, actually a two-movement concerto with string orchestra.)

Musical score for Vaughan Williams' *A London Symphony*, I, letter M. The score is in 4/4 time and marked "pp". It features a Woodwinds part in three octaves and a Harp part marked "pp".

ex. 14-27b Vaughan Williams, *A London Symphony*, I, letter M

Allegro vivace

Vln. I

*pp consord.*

*pp*

ex. 14-27c Vaughan Williams, *A London Symphony*, III, mm. 5–12

The symphony's melodic and harmonic idiom is modeled throughout on the somewhat archaic “modal” and pentatonic dialect of the folk songs Vaughan Williams and other collectors had been culling from rural and working-class informants. From one end of the symphony to the other, leading tones are as rare as hen's teeth. Sometimes, as in the case of the theme that closes the first movement's exposition (Ex. 4-27b), the tonality is straightforward—indeed, in a post-Wagnerian age, crudely—diatonic. At others, especially in the third movement, a ghostly “Scherzo (Nocturne)” based on Cockney jig rhythms, the tonality is quite elusive (Ex. 14-27c), pointing toward the “neonationalist” alliance of folklorism and modernism that would attract many twentieth-century composers. The practically ubiquitous harp is another deliberately applied element of archaic local color, England and particularly Wales having been recognized since the Middle Ages as a nation of harpers. (Exx. 14-27b and c extract from the full score the main melodic part and the harp part, which condenses all the accompanying lines in the manner of a basso continuo.)

The *London Symphony* was Vaughan Williams's second symphony. (The first, *A Sea Symphony*, was actually a cantata for soloists, chorus and orchestra on poems by Walt Whitman.) After the war he resumed his symphonic activity with *A Pastoral Symphony*, whose title was taken as emblematic of the whole British “pastoral” school, the tendency his music was seen as exemplifying. This was not entirely accurate or fair. Vaughan Williams possessed a considerable expressive range and continued to write prolifically to the end of his long life, eventually logging, despite his late start as a symphonist, a full Beethovenian nine (bearing traditional numbers beginning with the Fourth). His example stimulated several other members of his generation to write whole series of numbered symphonies: Arnold Bax (1883–1953), among Elgar's successors as Master of the King's (and, at the end, the Queen's) Music, also wrote nine (although only seven were performed and published); Edmund Rubbra (1901–1986) composed and published eleven; Havergal Brian (1876–1972), even longer-lived than Vaughan Williams or Rubbra, produced no fewer than thirty-two symphonies, of which nineteen were composed past the age of eighty.

The belatedness of this output—it was one of the longest-reverberating echoes of the late nineteenth century—made it fairly easy to write off as anachronistic by adherents of the neo-Hegelian historiography familiar to readers of this book since chapter 8. That view continued to gain strength in the early twentieth century. Not all English composers of Vaughan Williams's generation shared his preference for “classical” forms. Gustav Holst (1874–1934), second only to Vaughan Williams in reputation, and a close personal friend, never composed a traditional symphony, and his interest in folk song found its chief expression in songs and choral settings. Holst's most famous composition—by orders of magnitude—is a seven-movement orchestral suite called *The Planets* (op. 32; 1914–1916), each movement of which depicts one of the bodies that orbit the sun (excepting Earth and sans the as yet undiscovered and now

demoted Pluto) in terms of the mythological or astrological associations of its name. Two movements have won independent fame: “Mars, the Bringer of War,” which begins the suite, is a bravura display of bellicosity, with snarling tritones in the brass and a pounding five-beat rhythmic ostinato. “Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity” is the most English-sounding movement (the composer evidently equating “Jovian” with Old King Cole); its melodies are constructed on gapped diatonic scales that lend the music an ersatz folk modality. The cantabile middle section has had a fate similar to that of Elgar's first *Pomp and Circumstance* march. Adapted by Holst to fit “I Vow to Thee, My Country,” a poem composed by Cecil Spring-Rice, the British ambassador to the United States, in the early days of American intervention into World War I, it became the number one rival to “Land of Hope and Glory” as a British patriotic hymn. At first used mostly as a memorial to fallen soldiers, it surged in popularity after it was sung in 1981 at the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana and, sixteen years later, at Diana's funeral.

But of course such appropriations offered little comfort to British musicians anxious as ever about the old charge of parochialism. The pastoral school always had vociferous opponents. Philip Heseltine (1894–1930), a composer-critic who signed his musical works with the pseudonym “Peter Warlock,” greeted Vaughan Williams's *Pastoral Symphony* by comparing it to “a cow looking over a gate,”<sup>60</sup> and bovine imagery was thenceforth the weapon of choice for cosmopolitan skeptics. Elisabeth Lutyens (1906–1983), one of the most committed British cosmopolitans of a younger generation, dealt the composers of Vaughan Williams's generation a temporarily decisive *coup de massue* by lumping them all together, in a widely reported lecture delivered in the early 1950s, as “the cow-pat school,” with their “folky-wolky modal melodies on the *cor anglais* [English horn].”<sup>61</sup> Vaughan Williams himself fought back by casting aspersions on those who “thought that their own country was not good enough for them and went off in the early stages to become little Germans or little Frenchmen,” apparently forgetting his own studies with Bruch and Ravel.<sup>62</sup>

A note of class resentment is detectable here, and it was reciprocated with aristocratic derision that could still find expression in official patronage. The first director-general of the British Broadcasting Corporation was John Reith, a.k.a. Lord Reith of Stonehaven (1889–1971), a Scottish peer who was loyal to the cosmopolitan attitudes of his class with regard to culture consumption—the old “Handel” model—and hired a music staff committed to the promotion of high-prestige continental repertoire, often in the teeth of public rejection. (Reith's most famous utterance: “We know precisely what the public wants, and by Heaven they're not going to get it!”) A later BBC executive, Sir William Glock (1908–2000), controller of music from 1959 to 1973, installed the French composer and conductor Pierre Boulez—exactly comparable, as a charismatic continental figure of high international prestige, to Handel, Haydn, or Mendelssohn—at the helm of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. During his three years' tenure (1971–1974), Boulez never programmed a single British composition.

This controversy, too, was a belated (anachronistic?) replay of battles already waged in nineteenth-century Europe, most conspicuously in Russia (see chapter 9), between cosmopolitan aristocrats and nationalistic insurgents, each side arguing that it was the truly patriotic position, in that it did the most to advance the nation's standing in the world. Therefore, Vaughan Williams's attempt to shift the terms of the debate onto more overtly political terrain could be seen, in the context of the 1930s, as ominous. The cultivation of a national style, he argued, was a matter of “musical citizenship,” and he urged further that the musician should “be the servant of the state and build national monuments like the painter, the writer or the architect.”<sup>63</sup> This was a prescription many of the foremost nationalist musicians of the nineteenth century could never have fulfilled, for it implied an equation of nation and state that only certain countries exemplified (Vaughan Williams's Britain, of course, among them). Neither Chopin nor Dvořák had a state to serve during his lifetime; their later adoption as official “founders” of Polish and Czechoslovak music, respectively, could be seen in retrospect equally as a triumph or a co-option. Moreover, the implied obligation imposed by Vaughan Williams's call to action had been made an explicit demand by the time he asserted it, in now infamous twentieth-century totalitarian states: Soviet Russia and Fascist Italy, with Nazi Germany about to join them. The building of national monuments has remained a controversial goal for artists, and no less contentious has been the project of turning artists themselves into national monuments.

The latter project, which again has Russia to thank for its earliest nineteenth-century precedent (Glinka; see chapters 4 and 9), but which applies as well to the way Handel was treated by the British,<sup>64</sup> may be most conveniently observed in its latter-day phases in Scandinavia, where there were fewer traditions of high-prestige public consumption of “world” talent to uphold and a later-developing “mass” public to demand a reflection of its identity in music. Just as in the case of Glinka, it was always the national composer who first broke through to high international recognition who was likeliest to be touted as the most essentially and autochthonously national. But whereas Glinka made his primary mark as a composer of opera, the Scandinavians, in keeping with the

establishment of the international “classical” canon, won respect chiefly for their instrumental works.

The now best remembered Scandinavian musicians of the mid-nineteenth century, country by country, were the Swedish composer Franz Berwald (1796–1868), the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull (1810–1880), and the Danish composer Niels Gade (1817–1890). None was by any stretch a musical nationalist, although Bull at least was a committed patriot. He was also by far the most famous of the three, keeping up a brilliant international concert career for more than three decades as a second Paganini, renowned as much for his spectacular showmanship as for his musicianly attainments. Some of the stunts attributed in popular legend to Paganini were actually Bull's, like deliberately nicking the E-string so that it would break during the performance and the violinist could nonchalantly continue despite the “mishap,” compensating by shifting to higher positions on lower strings. Whereas Paganini was famous for his one-man “duet” playing, accompanying a cantabile melody in thirds and sixths or with drones and left-hand pizzicatos on adjacent strings, Bull rigged up a violin with a low, flat bridge and a hacksaw-shaped bow and wowed audiences with a “Quartet” for solo violin. He spent three decades on the road, actually settling for a while during the 1850s and '60s in the United States, where he married the daughter of a Wisconsin senator. He billed himself as an “artiste norvégien,” identifying with a nationality of which many members of his public had never heard, since Norway, during Bull's active career, was politically part of Sweden (as it had formerly been part of Denmark). The exotic persona was part of the act, as was the use, for encores and improvisations, of a Norwegian peasant “Hardanger” fiddle (perhaps the source of Bull's flat-bridge technique), which featured *scordatura*, or unusual tunings, and had sympathetic strings. Later in life he endowed a collection of Scandinavian literature at the University of Wisconsin.

If Bull was the Scandinavian Paganini, Gade was the Scandinavian Mendelssohn. A close friend and associate, Gade deputized for Mendelssohn as conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and taught at Mendelssohn's Leipzig Conservatory. Once back in Copenhagen (as a result of the political disturbances of 1848, which included military hostilities between Prussia and Denmark), he even emulated Mendelssohn's revival of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Gade's main achievement as a composer was his series of eight symphonies, composed between 1842 and 1871, most of which were first performed, and all published, in Leipzig. Gade, along with fellow conservatory professor Anton Rubinstein, in Russia, was among the most faithful and prolific composers of symphonies during the fallow period between the death of Schumann and the premiere of Brahms's First, when the classical symphony was widely regarded as a moribund and academic genre. Gade's reputation, therefore, was as the very antithesis of an insurgent or a nationalist. He wrote his share of folkish *Hausmusik*, especially for piano duet (e.g., *Nordiske Tonebilleder* [Nordic Tone-Pictures] for piano four-hands), but his primary mission in life, by his own avowal, was that of upholding the most conservative, “classical” strain of German music at a time when it was under siege by the New German School. That his music and even his name are now largely forgotten is testimony to the New Germans' pre-Brahmsian triumph.

As for Berwald, he was the epitome of personal idiosyncrasy and paid for his stylistic extravagances with a stunted career. His historical significance is almost entirely posthumous. Not counting a now lost youthful essay, he wrote four rather remarkable symphonies, each with a characteristic title—*Sérieuse* (1842), *Capricieuse* (1842), *Singulière* (1845), and *Naïve* (1845)—within a period of three years, when he was in his late forties. Full of formal, harmonic, and orchestrational oddities, these works are often compared with those of Berlioz, but no one knew them at the time. Only the *Sinfonie sérieuse* was performed during the composer's lifetime, to merciless reviews. Of the others, the *Sinfonie naïve* was presented ten years after the composer's death, and the rest had to await discovery in the early twentieth century, by which time the composer's unusual style looked “prophetic” and he could be hailed in characteristic romantic fashion as a composer ahead of his time. Berwald had a period of vogue during the 1960s and '70s, thanks to the dissemination of his works on stereophonic long-playing records. Now, he is routinely described as (to quote the *New Grove Dictionary*) “the leading Scandinavian composer of the early 19th century,” but if so, he was a leader wholly without followers. At various times during his life he was forced to give up music altogether and seek his living as, among other things, a factory manager and an orthopedic surgeon. Indeed, like Borodin, Berwald was far better known for his medical accomplishments than for his musical ones. Likewise, the obvious biographical parallels linking Berwald with Charles Ives (1874–1954), the American insurance executive and Sunday composer with an eccentric (and similarly “prophetic”) style whose reputation also boomed in the heyday of classical recording, no doubt contributed to the flurry of interest. But neither Berwald nor Bull nor Gade could serve as a musical embodiment of his nation in the eyes of the world.

The first to play this role was Edvard Grieg (1843–1907), a Norwegian composer who, like Chopin and Dvořák before him, represented, until two years before his death, a nation that was not a state. That made him a heroic nationalist



in European eyes, to recall Schumann's remark (quoted in chapter 7) that Chopin's nationalism, being a nationalism "in deep mourning,...attracts us all the more firmly." Grieg's paternal lineage was actually Scottish (his father being the British consul at Bergen, Norway, the composer's birthplace; the original form of the name was Greig), and his mother was a well-known local concert pianist who had studied at the Hamburg Conservatory. A piano prodigy himself, Grieg was shipped off to the Leipzig Conservatory in 1858, when he was fifteen years old. One of his teachers there, Ernst Ferdinand Wenzel (1808–1880), had been a close friend of Schumann's, and ever after, according to Grieg's own much later avowal, he "remained in style and form a German romanticist of the Schumann school," all the more fervently after hearing Clara Schumann perform her husband's Piano Concerto in A Minor at a Leipzig Gewandhaus concert.<sup>65</sup>

ex. 14-28a Grieg, Piano Concerto in A Minor, op. 16, I (Allegro molto moderato), mm. 2–4 (piano only)

ex. 14-28b Grieg, Piano Concerto in A Minor, I, mm. 37–38 (piano only)

ex. 14-28c Grieg, "Solvejg's Song" (incidental music to *Peer Gynt*, op. 23, no. 19)

Grieg's breakthrough composition was his own Piano Concerto in A Minor (1868), which announces its fealty to Schumann's not only in the choice of key but in the opening gesture as well, a descending flourish on the keyboard

that leads to a first theme, in which the orchestra and soloist interact similarly. However indebted the rhetoric to Schumann, the Concerto's thematic material is inflected, conspicuously enough for international audiences to discern them, by turns of phrase appropriated from folklore. (See Ex. 14-28, in which a couple of passages from the Concerto, including the opening flourish, are juxtaposed with "Solvejg's Song" from Grieg's incidental music to Henrik Ibsen's famous play *Peer Gynt*, composed several years later and nearly as popular as the Concerto as a concert staple.) That combination, of familiar "style and form" and exotic color, was a winner for Grieg, and his concerto has been a mainstay of the virtuoso repertoire since the early 1870s, when it was performed in Germany and England and published by the Leipzig house of Peters. Henceforth, Grieg was *the* Norwegian composer in the eyes of Europe and America; and, as always, it was reception, not immanent content or character—consumption, not production—that proved decisive in making him so. He was not the only Leipzig-trained Norwegian composer of his generation: there was also Johan Svendsen (1840–1911), a composer of reputable symphonies and concertos. Nor was he the composer of his generation most profoundly steeped in Norwegian lore: that would be the unfortunately short-lived, Berlin-trained Rikard Nordraak (1842–1866), who served as an early mentor to Grieg. But Grieg was the one who got to break through.

Except for a set of three *Symphonic Dances* (1898), the concerto is Grieg's only multi-movement work for orchestra. (Virtually all his other orchestral music is adapted from theatrical scores or arranged from piano pieces.) He was by preference a miniaturist, most prolific as a composer of songs (often written for his wife, Nina, a concert soprano) and *Characterstücke* for piano (he called them *Lyriske stykker* [Lyric Pieces]), of which he published ten books, comprising sixty-six individual items, between 1867 and 1901. These pieces, as well as the more or less obligatory *Norwegian Dances* for piano duet (following the ineluctable examples of Brahms and Dvořák), made Grieg very much a household composer—an artist, as he put it of himself, who wanted "to build dwellings for men in which they might feel happy and at home" rather than Beethovenian "temples and cathedrals."<sup>66</sup> Though modest, Grieg's *Lyric Pieces* attracted wide international attention by virtue of their originality. What foreign musicians found most interesting in them was less their folkloristic content than their piquant and ingenious harmonizations—"my dream world," as Grieg once put it, only indirectly related, if at all, to the external reality of national style. One especially apt example, because it conjures up an actual domestic scene, is "Bryllupsdag på Trolldhaugen" (Wedding Day at Trolldhaugen), the concluding item in the sixth book of *Lyric Pieces*, op. 65 (1896). A jaunty march with a wistful mid-section, it is a souvenir of the composer's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary celebration, held at his home, Trolldhaugen (Troll Hill), in Bergen, Norway, the town where he was born. Now the burial site of Edvard and Nina Grieg, it is maintained by the Norwegian government as a museum (Ex. 14-29).

ex. 14-29 Grieg, "Wedding Day at Trolldhaugen," op. 65, no. 6, mm. 1–8

Grieg's harmonic explorations set provocative examples—contradictory examples, perhaps—to younger British and French composers. To Percy Grainger (1882–1961), an English pianist and composer of Australian birth and eventual American citizenship, they presented the possibility of a pure Nordic idiom, untainted by Romance influences. Grainger, who made pilgrimages to Grieg and went on walking tours with him, and who championed Grieg's concerto, was so fanatical about this anti-Latinate project that he excluded from his own scores not only the traditional Italian musical vocabulary but any English word of Latinate etymology as well. For him *molto crescendo*

had to be “louden lots,” a movement of a symphony or a sonata was an “art-sunderment,” and an orchestra was a “big-blent-band.” The epitome of this crackpot “Blue-Eyed English” (Grainger's own regrettable term for it) came in a sketch for a composition to be known as *Random Round*, a “join-in-when-you-like Round for a few voices & tone-tools [instruments] tone-backgrounded [accompanied] by a gut-strung guitar...tone-wrought around 1912–1914.” In a footnote, Grainger stipulated that “if many part-take in the Round it may be well to tame-lightning-ly sound-boost the gut-strung guitar.” He meant it could be electrically amplified.<sup>67</sup>

By contrast, Frederick Delius (1862–1934), another British composer, who met and was befriended by Grieg in 1888 but who *by* 1897 was living permanently in France, teased Ravel, Vaughan Williams's eventual mentor, by insisting that modern French music descended not from Rameau, Couperin, and Lully, the masters of the *grand siècle* (as Ravel had been conventionally claiming), but was “simply Grieg, plus the third act of *Tristan*.”<sup>68</sup> Ravel assented (“Yes, we are always unjust to Grieg”) and added on his own that the String Quartet in G Minor (1894) by Claude Debussy, the most highly touted French composer of his generation, was as heavily influenced by Grieg's quartet in the same key (1878) as Grieg's Piano Concerto had been by Schumann's.

Whether Grieg's true significance as a musician is fairly or fully accounted for by characterizing him as a nationalist depends, as always, on the vantage point from which the characterization is made. For Norwegians there has never been a question. In 1874 the local government awarded Grieg a life annuity to guarantee his freedom to compose and thus enhance his nation's musical standing, and ever since he has been as crucial to his country's musical self-esteem as Elgar once was for the English (minus the contention that has always swirled at home around Elgar and his rivals). There have been occasional challenges to Grieg's status within Norway—for example, from Harald Saeverud (1897–1992), who composed his own incidental music to *Peer Gynt* as a “correction” to Grieg's. But no other Norwegian composer has ever made an international reputation to rival his or been nearly as influential on composers outside Norway. Those two factors are of course mutually implicated; they are what make a composer not only national but also exemplary. The final say as to which composer is the greatest nationalist, as we have had ample opportunity to observe, rests as much with audiences abroad and their critical spokespersons as it does with the composer's compatriots. And to compound the irony, such a reputation, once achieved, will likely stand as a barrier to the composer's compatriots for reasons having to do with what is often designated in American politics as “tokenism.” Once a minority has gained representation in the “mainstream” (or, in music, the “canon”) by virtue of a single, exceptionally successful member, its continued marginalization is considered redeemed and justified. Grieg's status as *the* Norwegian composer has not been without invidious consequences.

Even more has this been true of Jean (*né* Johan) Sibelius (1865–1957), *the* Finnish composer, who made a far more copious contribution than Grieg to the standard performing repertoire, at least in certain countries. His ten symphonic poems, composed between 1892 (*En Saga*) and 1926 (*Tapiola*), and, even more decisively, his seven symphonies, composed between 1899 and 1924, gained him widespread recognition at home, in the rest of Scandinavia, and in the English-speaking countries (though significantly less so in Germany and hardly at all in the Romance-speaking world) as the greatest symphonist after Brahms. His reputation has endured vicissitudes and challenges (especially since the 1960s, when Gustav Mahler began to emerge as a repertory composer), and Sibelius has never been without contentious detractors, but the long controversy is in itself testimony to Sibelius's potency.

His early fame was most conventionally that of a nationalist. Until 1917, Finland was a grand duchy within the Russian empire, and the early tone poems—especially the cycle *Four Legends from the Kalevala* (op. 22; 1893–1895), on subjects drawn from the Finnish national epic, and *Finlandia* (originally *Finland Awakes*, op. 26; 1899, rev.1900), a noisy festivity culminating in a cantabile hymn that, like Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* and Holst's “Jupiter,” has been given words and joined the oral tradition—could be variously read as celebratory or seditious. The Russian authorities cooperated in canonizing *Finlandia* by banning it. Before 1917 it was usually performed in Finland and Russia under the neutral title *Impromptu*, but the evidently intentional similarity between Sibelius's anthem tune and an existing patriotic song by a local composer named Emil Genetz, bearing the title *Herää, Suomi!* (Finland, Awake!), made the political message plain enough to Finnish ears.

Sibelius's first two symphonies (1899, 1902) were large, impressive compositions in the tradition of Chaikovsky. The kinship with the Russian composer is particularly apparent in the flamboyant polonaise finale of the Second; Sibelius's Violin Concerto, composed in 1903–1904, also sports a polonaise finale. Over the next few years, however, Sibelius's music took an unexpectedly ascetic turn. The symphonies beginning with the Third (1907) became increasingly tight-lipped and compressed—shorter, highly concentrated, motivically saturated, and antirhetorical. Although he was still capable of grand statements (like the finale of the Fifth Symphony), Sibelius's preferred

manner was at times downright anticlimactic (the end of the Fourth). His new works were often accompanied by polemical statements of disaffection from the modern musical world and its distractions. To Mahler's enthusiastic claim that a symphony must be an all-embracing statement ("Like the world!"), Sibelius countered in 1907 (shortly after completing the Third) that, on the contrary, what counted most in a symphony was "severity and style and the profound logic that created an inner connection between all the motifs."<sup>69</sup> Four years later, on completing the Fourth, he wrote to Rosa Newmarch, an English admirer, that it "stands as a protest against present-day music, having nothing, absolutely nothing of the circus about it."<sup>70</sup> Indeed, it was a cryptic, even gnomic utterance, seething with stark tritones, augmented seconds, and diminished fourths from start to finish (Ex. 14-30). The Sixth Symphony (1923) was, he said, "pure spring water" in contrast to the "cocktails of various hues" served up by younger composers.<sup>71</sup> Finally, in the Seventh Symphony, Sibelius reached what was for him the limit of compression—a twenty-minute single movement of highly complex but tautly unified content whose actual form has been for generations of analysts and commentators an enduring riddle.

I *Tempo molto moderato, quasi adagio*

II *Allegro molto vivace*

Ob. Vln. I Ob. Vln. I

Doppio più lento

Vln. I

III *Il tempo largo*

Vcl. p Cb. pizz. pp arco

IV *Allegro*

ex. 14-30 Sibelius, *Symphony no. 4, op. 39*: I, beginning and end; II, mm. 29–34, 263–67; III, end; IV 22 mm. after letter I

Sibelius lived another thirty-three years after completing the Seventh—to the age of ninety-one, an amazing span considering his lifelong abuse of alcohol and tobacco. But there were no more symphonies, and, after the last symphonic poem in 1926, no more major works at all. (After his death his widow revealed that he had burned the

nearly completed, eagerly anticipated Eighth Symphony in a slough of despondency around 1943.) The sphinx-like silence seemed like the outcome of an inexorable trajectory. Sibelius now loomed not merely as a Finnish national monument but as the very embodiment of the North—harsh, frosty, inscrutable, chastening. His authority, especially in the 1920s and '30s, was enormous. His birthday was a national holiday. On the occasion of his seventieth, in 1935 (several years after he had fallen silent as a composer), he was feted at a banquet to which all the past presidents of Finland were invited, along with the prime ministers of Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. There was hardly a composer of symphonies during this time, especially in Britain and America, who was not profoundly—and often openly, even reverently—beholden to his example. The First Symphony (1931–1935) by the English composer William Walton (1902–1983), could easily have passed for Sibelius's Eighth.

Having been touted by the Nazis during World War II as a result of his country's alliance with Germany (motivated by a well-grounded fear of Soviet Russia, which had waged a war of aggression against Finland from 1939 to 1940), Sibelius fell into a trough of disdain for a couple of decades, written off as a reactionary during a time of avant-garde ascendancy, and only regained full respectability in the 1970s. It took that temporary eclipse in Sibelius's fortunes to allow the work of other Scandinavian symphonists—particularly the Dane Carl Nielsen (1865–1931), who wrote six remarkable symphonies between 1891 and 1925, to emerge from out of his shadow, into the international performing repertory. And after Nielsen's output had been assimilated, the work of two younger Scandinavians—the Swede Alan Pettersson (1911–1980), who produced seventeen symphonies between 1950 and 1980, and another Dane, Vagn Holmboe (1909–1996), who logged thirteen between 1935 and 1994, attracted wider attention, again largely through the medium of recordings. With the death of Holmboe, and, the next year, that of Robert Simpson (1921–1997), a Briton who had composed eleven symphonies, the traditional numbered symphony seems to have become a thing of the past—along, perhaps with the notion of national, or regional, schools.

These vagaries of reception prompted Aaron Copland (1900–1990), an American composer who was also very much a “nationalist” by reputation, to observe ruefully, if condescendingly, in a book first published in 1960,

It takes a long time for a small country to get over a great man—witness Finland and Sibelius. Norway has taken fifty years to get over Grieg, and it looks as if Denmark would need as long a time to get beyond Carl Nielsen. If I were any of these men, it would not make me happy to know that my own work engendered sterility in my progeny.<sup>72</sup>

But Copland seems to have grasped the wrong end of the stick. The sterility he deplored seems rather to have been an illusion created by distance from the scene. There was never a dearth of talent or creative energy in the countries to which he refers. (Names? Halfdan Kjerulf, Johan Peter Selmer, Agathe Grøndahl, Christian Sinding in Norway; Oskar Merikanto, Armas Järnefelt, Selim Palmgren, Leevi Madetoja, Yrjö Kilpinen in Finland; Victor Bendix, Peter Erasmus Lange-Müller, Peter Heise, Johan Peter Hartmann in Denmark; plus, in Sweden, Bernhard Henrik Crusell, Adolf Fredrik Lindblad, Wilhelm Peterson-Berger, Hugo Alfvén, and Wilhelm Stenhammar among others, in addition to those already mentioned.) It was the wider world, Copland's world and ours, that found it hard, owing to the historiographical assumptions of mainstream versus periphery and the persistence of tokenism, to let go of the great men.

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## Notes:

(48) Carl Engel, *An Introduction to the Study of National Music: Comprising Researches into Popular Songs, Traditions, and Customs* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1866), 1, 3, 173, 199, 313–314.

(49) Heinrich Heine, *Pariser Berichte 1840–1848* (Berlin: Akademie; Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1979): 29 July 1840; Georg Weerth, “England, eine Reise ins Innere des Landes,” in *Skizzen aus dem sozialen und politischen Leben der Briten* (Potsdam: Rütten and Loening, 1954), 63.

(50) Oscar A. H. Schmitz, *Das Land ohne Musik: Englische Gesellschaftsprobleme* (3d ed., Munich: Georg Müller, 1914), 30. Italics original.

(51) Information kindly provided by Byron Adams.

(52) Quoted in Julian Rushton, *Elgar: “Enigma” Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 65.



- (53) Craig R. Whitney, "A New Answer to Elgar's 'Enigma,'" *New York Times*, November 7, 1991; Clive McClelland, "Shadows of the Evening: New Light on Elgar's 'Dark Saying,'" *The Musical Times* 148 (2007), 49–62.
- (54) Gustav Holst, "England and Her Music," in Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst, *Heirs and Rebels: Letters Written to Each Other and Occasional Writings on Music*, ed. Ursula Vaughan Williams and Imogen Holst (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 50; quoted in Rushton, *Elgar: "Enigma" Variations*, 1.
- (55) Michael Kennedy, *Elgar Orchestral Music*, BBC Music Guides 18 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971), 22.
- (56) Hugh Wood, "Serenade in B," *Times Literary Supplement*, March 21, 2008, 3.
- (57) *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 3d ed., ed. H. C. Colles, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 149, 156.
- (58) Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 547
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