

William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England: A Study in Canon, Ritual and Ideology*. Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1992. 174 pp.

The subtitle of William Weber's pathbreaking new book indicates its true field of research. The "canon" is that of "ancient music" which solidified as a certain body of vocal and instrumental works, generally no later than Handel. "Ritual" refers to various human contexts that were devised for the discussion and performance of "ancient" music. "Ideology" in this case refers to the social and political groupings of men and women who partook of these various rituals, including their affiliations to party, nobility, and religion. Weber's work is an ambitious, richly textured analysis that cuts a revealing wedge into the cliff-face of history, exposing strata of praxis, assumption and definition (among other facets) which have never before been clearly perceptible.

Ranging in time from about 1688 (the Glorious Revolution) to about 1790, the book's backdrop is the corrupt, bitterly fought world of power-politics in a country on the make, confident in its wealth and (until America stopped the process) successful in its wars. Weber's guiding concern is with music as a function of patronage, but patronage at this time hung on many social groupings. A few phrases from Leonard Krieger's *Kings and Philosophers, 1689-1789* may suffice as orientation to this egregiously complex period: "The King exercised both his exclusive prerogative and joint parliamentary powers" yet he was "dependent upon the houses of parliament"; at the same time the cabinet "had no recognition—or even mention—in the law, no definite membership, collective tenure responsibility, [or] formal connection with political parties," so the "overlapping opinions and interests were a party lineup [Whig/Tory] that formed, dissolved and re-formed from issue to issue and from ministry to ministry."¹ Under everything was the grumbling volcano of Catholic interests which, following 1688, erupted briefly in 1715 and 1745; but the allegiances of High-church (Anglican) Tories were never sufficiently committed to the Stuart succession. Then, in mid-century, came the Seven Years' War and the accessions of Pitt and of George III, together with a different uniting of common interests, whether against the French, the American colonies or indeed the radical libertarian John Wilkes.

¹ Leonard Krieger, *Kings and Philosophers, 1689-1789* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971).

These are merely the *grandes lignes* of the map. Weber's concerns focus right down to the individual and his/her connections with music: the enthusiast and collector dean of Christ Church (Henry Aldrich); John Perceval (earl of Egmont), diarist and member of the Academy of Ancient Music (and also part of a religious-missionary network of patrons of music); writers; organizers; philanthropists; religious dissenters and bourgeois; and at last the royal house itself, which was involved in the 1784 Handel Commemoration festival and subsequently patronized the Concert of Antient [*sic*] Music. Weber offers an extraordinarily substantial tapestry of these sections of society, and a level of learning supported safely by the endeavors of previous historians.

Weber's secondary sources range over political, social, economic, and cultural history. In addition, the extensive pile of musicological stones has not been left unturned—including British and American academics and doctoral students who over the years have explored the background of Handel performance (e.g. Donald Burrows), collectors of music (Alexander Hyatt King), festivals (Brian Pritchard), the musical societies themselves (Alyson McLamore), and various musicians such as Greene, Boyce, Burney (Kerry Grant) and Roger North.² Yet it is difficult to form a comprehensive idea of this material, since Weber (or Oxford University Press) decided not to include a general bibliography of secondary sources, but only a three-page annotated 'Bibliographical suggestions' section.

More curious still is the omission of a list of manuscript sources consulted, for these comprise all manner of musical and literary papers in Britain and France. The list of abbreviations names two sets of MSS (and some published state papers) but otherwise the reader must rely on footnote references to sort out the myriad archival documents which obviously make this book uniquely valuable.

Weber's style as a historian is measured and cautious, though his opening statements sound a little more resonant than does the bulk of his text:

The English invented the idea of musical classics. Eighteenth-century England was the first place where old musical works were per-

² Donald Burrows, *Handel and the English Chapel Royal during the Reigns of Queen Anne and King George I* (Ph.D. diss., 2 vols., The Open University, Milton Keynes [U.K.], 1981); Alexander Hyatt King, *Some British Collectors of Music, c1600–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963); Brian W. Pritchard, *The Musical Festival and the Choral Society in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: A Social History* (Ph.D. diss., University of Birmingham [U.K.], 1968); Alyson McLamore, *Symphonic Conventions in London's Concert Rooms, circa 1755–90* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1991); Kerry Grant, *Dr Burney as Critic and Historian of Music* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press, 1983), 221–81.

formed regularly and reverentially, where a collective notion of such works—"ancient music"—first appeared.[. . .] [B]y the 1780s we can speak of a musical canon in England, a corpus of great works from Tallis to Handel that was studied, performed systematically, and revered by the public at large (p. vii).

Yet if that sounds a grand claim (the final phrase especially), it is a thesis that is for the most part proven by the facts that Weber lays before us.

As to the identifiable parts of this corpus recorded in the repertory of the Concert of Antient Music in 1776–90, no fewer than twelve appendices are assembled, giving the clearest possible analysis of genres, composers, number of works, and number of performances. Weber identifies this repertory as the first "unified canon" (p. 13). Perhaps constraints of space precluded Weber's inclusion of the details of the 1784 Handel festival programmes, which I would have found useful.

Great care is taken to define such vital interrelated concepts as "classical," "canon," "repertory," "ancient," etc., and no one is more alive than Weber to the cultural dimensions necessary in this procedure, his own distinguished record of books and articles being too well-known, at least in the U.K., to need rehearsal here. For example, one distinction is drawn between a work revived regularly as a court or ecclesiastical social custom, and a work perceived within "a common repertory and . . . a canon" near the close of the eighteenth century (p. 2). Another distinction is drawn between mere *performance* in a repertory on the one hand, and intellectual valuation of that musical work on the other (p. 21). And a crucial distinction requires that a musical canon contain a "moral ideology" propounding "the authority of the classics" in relation to wider society (p. 22).

The task in hand, then, was large: (1) to analyze social organizations relating to "ancient music" in such a way as to expose underlying, transitory social allegiances of individuals who influenced the formation of such canonic thinking; and (2) to locate relevant civil groupings and identify their ideas as invested in the choice of pieces preferred for performance.

A mark of this study is its refusal to pound dogmatically away at a pre-ordained agenda. Rather, it allows new links to suggest themselves. For example in a discussion of John Hawkins's *General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (1776), which benefits wonderfully from contextual treatment, we infer that music history may powerfully articulate criticism of wider society. Or, to take another example, Hawkins's insistence on music as "source of the higher moral and intellectual pleasures," even beyond poetry, stands out unexpectedly as an anticipation of Romantic theory. Indeed, Hawkins's proto-Romantic elitism is prefigured in his feelings of disgust when faced with "the gaping crowd," "the many," "the promiscu-

ous auditory" (p. 213). Kerry Grant's insight concerning Burney's "covert conservatism"³ allows Weber to link him and Hawkins through their desire to "strengthen proper authority over taste in a time of rapid change." Weber explains, "They shared the conviction that musical commentary must be independent from the literary world if it was to have any integrity in shaping public taste." This strategy "endowed the musical canon with a social versatility that has been responsible for its long history" (pp. 221–22). If that be taken to mean "created the conditions which made possible the nineteenth-century conception of the 'classic' and of music education," then we can begin to appreciate the considerable significance of the results of his method.

The introduction and seven following chapters organize the material around socio-musical subjects. This leaves readers to knit together their own picture of the general social political context from data pertaining to musical enthusiasts or patrons. Sometimes it becomes frustrating when such diversity of data isn't matched by one's own competence in British history—*vide* Henry Sacheverell, who was "High-church ideologist" (p. 30), "wildman" (p. 34), subject of impeachment around the time of Tory riots in "1711" (p. 51), "militant Tory" (p. 96) and subject of support by rioting Tories in "1710" (p. 207)—I longed for more background every time I encountered him.

In chapter 2, "The Learned Tradition of Ancient Music," we trace the beginnings of the taste for veneration of an "ancient" repertory, connected with the Chapel Royal. Such veneration was consequent upon "the decline of the court and the growth of the state" (p. 6). Appeals for national unity via old, "solid" values became linked with sobriety of religious worship and rejection of newer styles of music. Older music, then as later, was to be used as a tool in an upper-class ritual. Reprehensible "foreign" music (e. g. Italian opera) and jingoistic sentiments existed side by side with acceptable non-British music (whether by Corelli, Palestrina or whomever) and intellectualizing sentiments.

I should have liked to know how far a canonic British concept of "ancient music" overlapped with that of a supposed "national music." There is a brief discussion of nationalism and music (pp. 188–89), but the evidence regarding the amount of British music performed or circulated seems not to be significant. Part of the concept of "ancient music," early in the century, was defined by contrasting musical luxury (showy new scores) with material temperance (wholesome older scores). Such tastes led to "the first organization to perform old works regularly and deliberately" (p.

³ Grant, *Dr Burney*, 221–81.

56), namely, the Academy of Ancient Music (1726). Weber provides valuable analyses of its ethos, members, and activities. It was a kind of learned society, based on a professional (not mercantile) membership, which finally ceased in the 1790s.

In "The Modern Classics: Corelli and Purcell," the cult of these masters is described together with an account of Roger North's writings. North (1651–1734) "lamented the passing of the old society focused upon serious domestic music-making" (p. 84). This inspired design exposes the contradictions in how "Britishness" was constructed, how the "modern" and the "classic" were perceived, and so on. In the difficult task of relating taste for these "modern-ancients" (Joseph Warton's term) to the kind of society that produced it, Weber decides that the former satisfied "a search for norms" through a process of reaction "against commercialism" (p. 77) and toward the "serious" (p. 87). The result is an extremely well-handled and satisfying chapter.

Inevitably less unified, though no less judicious, is "The Music Festival and the Oratorio Tradition," a survey of nodal points of activity: the Festival of the Sons of the Clergy; the Three Choirs Festival (both honoring Purcell's *Te Deum* and *Jubilate*); the Lenten oratorio season in London; and the waxing provincial music festivals, together with their use of Handel's music; their consolidation of gentry with bourgeoisie; and—not least—necessary utilization of advanced transportation systems.

A detailed examination of the early Norwich festivals forms a strikingly original coda. Here and elsewhere Weber propounds the view that such festivals were musical rituals which had religious meaning (p. 141) outside the liturgy. I am personally unconvinced of this conclusion, for festivals had the directly charitable purpose of raising money for the disadvantaged, and were probably more a public show intended to reinforce the moral authority of ruling classes at a time of civil unrest and fear of the French Revolution. On the common assumption that music could not but have a beneficial moral effect, the great and good would seem to have appropriated it as demonstration of their fitness in office. "Moral meaning" might be nearer the mark, therefore. At the same time, Weber's comprehensive research now enables us to go beyond speculation in understanding why Handel in particular was found to be an appropriate composer for the ritual of the English music festival in general (pp. 136–37).

Political perspectives surface almost immediately in the succeeding chapters on the Concert of Antient Music, including its leaders, subscribers, and repertory. Founded in 1776, it was a concert foundation for members of the highest classes, perhaps formed in a conscious reaction of solidarity to democratic social movements. Musicians may find it shocking that, in his capacity as a magistrate, the music historian Hawkins helped put John

Wilkes (the popular politician and supporter of the American colonists) behind bars (p. 145). In passing, Weber muses that many leading figures of "the movement for ancient music" (p. 151) had been through professional failures. The ostentatious ceremonial attached to the concerts, and the kudos of being a director, certainly conferred dignity. Another area of support lay in the network of religious Evangelicals subscribing to the concerts, and Weber speculates about their influence upon programming.

Fundamental to the concerts was the way that music was advertised on programs, defining "the integrity of individual works of art" in a way far in advance of any other concert series in the world (p. 180). At the same juncture, the word *classical* began to be applied to the same (i.e. exemplary) sort of music (p. 194). Weber's conclusion is that this music formed "a corpus of great works that were revered," but the data given seem also to stress the exploratory, antiquarian aspect by which a large range of music was systematically presented, giving the effect of an educative and learned attitude to favored composers. We are not in the presence of a small canon that was ritualistically repeated. Rather, it comprised a large variety of Italian instrumental works and even opera, though not reform opera or opera buffa. No Haydn was heard until 1829. Weber also discusses other societies, because the Ancient Music influenced their repertoires, even that of the Philharmonic Society (1813).

These accounts are followed by "The Ideology of Ancient Music," in which the politicized thought underlying writing about music is brought into focus: this is where Hawkins and Burney are discussed. Hawkins emerges with new clarity as a characteristic product of contemporary taste for ancient music. However, the high price of his publication must have limited its circulation. The gregarious Burney, for all his 857 learned, noble and other subscribers, emerges as "the modern musical parliamentarian" bringing compromise in an age of diversity of taste (p. 218).

All major thinkers of the time, insists Weber, "viewed musical life in political terms, but in different ways" (p. 205). Both Hawkins and Burney wanted "proper authority over taste" (p. 221). The 1784 Commemoration (chapter eight) went on to confer royal authority upon the taste for Handel (and Corelli, four of whose concertos were heard on the second day). Various patrons were at the same time affected by the cult of the genius (a Shakespeare Jubilee had occurred in 1783). Perhaps surprisingly, nowhere (I believe) is Handel's "canonic" identity as a German/English symbol considered, in the light of the aims of the House of Hanover. Let us not forget that neither George I nor his son spoke English as his first language.

Weber's book is partially about Britain's persistent failure to cast off "the thrall of this social [ruling] class" (p. 247). But it is concerned gener-

ally about the manipulation of culture and modern communication by the elite, so it has its wider warnings. The privileged everywhere will appropriate religion, charity, music, or what you will, in order to exert "proper authority." Others will be influenced without realizing the significance of that influence. In the face of the nontraditional, the elite become allied in their struggle for survival. Eighteenth-century Britain was in the ascendant, but the same laws apply to communities in decline. What does it mean when, with this in mind, we musicians consider that "the classics" are still central to our preservation? Weber's text is profoundly nonpartisan and undogmatic, strict in its adherence to its particular field. But it will prove all the more valuable for this in time, since it is a book of rare distinction in music history.

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