

Cinderella; or Music and the Human Sciences. Unfootnoted Musings from the Margins

By Leon Botstein

It has become fashionable among scholars to wax autobiographical with the reader, presumably to shed any remnant of the illusion (suggested implicitly by the conventional apparatus of a scholarly text and footnotes) that one might be speaking with an objective voice, or with an argument whose merits can be considered and even accepted without reference to personal and therefore circumstantial prejudice. Today's penchant for presumed full disclosure of one's subjective standpoint, however, is more likely either a species of authorial vanity masquerading as methodological scrupulousness or evidence of a greater interest in oneself than the subject one is writing about. In this case, the reader who wishes to distill the prejudices of the author and speculate on their origins must begin with the author's notion that one can talk effectively about the character and value of arguments by using procedures of reading and research that hold up under scrutiny and require no subjective apologetics.

We are witnesses to a distortion of the fin-de-siècle's singular contribution to the methodology of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*)—a common term in German scholarship that encompasses what in the United States is called the humanities and the social sciences. Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber, for example, each illuminated in his own way how the perspective of the investigator in the *Geisteswissenschaften* functions in a crucial manner. In the *Methodenstreit* from the early twentieth century involving such distinguished figures as Wilhelm Windelband and Ernst Troeltsch, the task was to define the logic of human sciences, much as John Stuart Mill had sought to do, without sacrificing all claims to truth-telling contained within the acts of scholarship and argument.

For these thinkers it seemed evident that the human sciences were in some decisive sense subjective in a way that the natural sciences were not. The framing of the problem, the choice of evidence, and the mode of argument—the fundamental tasks facing the scholar in the human sciences—were influenced by the person doing the work in a manner far more profound and potentially arbitrary than was the case in the natural sciences. Yet it appeared possible to argue for criteria of validity in explanation and description that could lend scholarship in the human sciences an authority then considered characteristic of, if not self-evident in, scientific research. Indeed, the generation of Dilthey and Weber still clung to the notion that evidence and logic in the human sciences could be devel-

oped and applied, rescuing a useful cross-cultural understanding grounded in a universal sense of objectivity. The delineation of a "value-free" dimension within scholarship, even with respect to the choice of subject, was acknowledged, no matter how complex the achievement of that appropriate scholarly self-discipline might be. One could still speak reasonably, therefore, about whether something was true, plain false, or merely plausible, particularly in terms of the writing of history. Shared ideas regarding the mode of generalization, the nature of causal or descriptive adequacy, and the grounds for reliability in explanation all might be articulated.

This confidence in the possibility of widely accepted methods and language in scholarship has eroded considerably since 1945. Although the utilization of novel methods of analysis (almost exclusively drawn from post-war French thinkers) in literature and in the study of society has been significant among scholars in the United States since 1945, the new methods have maintained their allure and drawn considerable impetus in part from a profound methodological suspicion and skepticism inherent in the approaches themselves.

It should come as no surprise that in the relatively young disciplines of musicology and music history (historically speaking the products of German scholarly traditions from the mid- and late nineteenth century) this skepticism and suspicion have taken a harsh toll. Perhaps in part owing to its relative youth, the study of music has not contributed in an autonomous fashion to the shared methods of the human sciences. Unlike art history, in which the interpretation of visual images, forms, and techniques (e.g. iconography) lends itself easily to verbal translation and therefore generalized use, the integration of methods specific to music, even so-called style analysis, into the methods of history and sociology, for example, has proved singularly elusive. When issues beyond the artificial confines of the musical text come into play, scholars of music have resorted to borrowing methods from others. Given the current methodological crisis, stylized virtuosity, fashion, and quirkiness—perhaps even plain entertainment value—have become marks of recent scholarly success in music. It is as if scholarship has become its own kind of performance art, an act of improvisation on a subject whose definition as recognizable and whose transformation into the unrecognizable are marks of genius otherwise the province of great entertainers.

The reigning assumption behind today's scholarly consensus argues that the construct of perspective—how the scholar defines his or her place in his or her own time—creates the subject and legitimates the resultant analysis. The arrogance hidden in this contemporary procedure is the claim that the investigator-scholar can know his or her own subjectivity in any useful way. The typical categories of subjectivity, including gender,

class, nationality, and race, become all too easily employed (as opposed to being used in a seriously illuminating manner) as explanatory and causal rubrics. They are used in a reductive manner, as simplistic kinds of essentialist signs that manage only to trivialize otherwise potent concepts. To make matters worse, a brittle and harshly moralistic politics lurks on all sides of today's scholarly community in the human sciences. Scholarly decisions and activities, stripped of the veneer of professionalism or objectivity, are translated almost mechanically into fixed and reductive ideological positions within contemporary politics. In such an environment it is difficult to talk well, critically, and searchingly; inquiry, curiosity, and love of subject all seem at risk.

The Delphic admonition to "know thyself" is a daunting, elusive, charge. It sees the conduct of everyday life, including, of course, scholarship, as a dynamic part of one's coming to terms with oneself. "Unpacking" one's own views and prejudices (to use a wicked but fashionable phrase perhaps more applicable to the post office than to research) is the hardest of all enterprises. Yet substituting "from an x perspective" and utilizing reductive assessments of subjectivity with respect to context or method do not fulfill the demand for serious self-examination. Indeed, self-declaration or the overt assertion of allegiance to a particular point of view or methodological procedure may camouflage and mislead more than reveal and illuminate.

The irony is that the skeptic—the critic of inherited procedures—rarely applies the same degree of harsh analysis to the grounds behind the skeptical attack itself. How does the skeptic know he or she is right? Either there is a new hidden or overtly "objective" yardstick in use (that is, the skeptic is telling us something we ought to know that would end the skepticism by introducing a surrogate ideology), or the skeptical critique carries no serious weight and is as much an expression of mere taste as the object of the critique.

It may be that the old-fashioned criterion of scholarly distance and the illusion of critical neutrality, linked to a notion of getting things historical right in a way that transcends opinion, were useful conceits. If nothing else, they might remain helpful routes to coming to terms with the subjective. Far less attractive is an embrace of what some literary scholars have apparently now termed "standpoint epistemology." It is preferable to resist facile theories that not only attempt to justify the equivalence of anything that is said but also eliminate the need to characterize and understand the construct of one's own standpoint. If one concedes that a standpoint is a useful category, is it functionally static and describable in some ideal or typical manner? To assert that all scholarship is ultimately ideological is to assert nothing at all, for it begs the question of what constitutes ideology and its definition, its dynamics, and its functions.

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The above prologue (or perhaps peroration), with its decidedly old-fashioned tone, is a plea for music historians and musicology to seize the opportunity inherent in today's fiery methodological turmoil as a means to resist imitating some of the practices of its sibling disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. The rush away from old habits indeed may be justified, but the embrace of new fashions from other disciplines may not be, and at the very least requires scrutiny. Today's methodological disarray of doubt should signal to students of music that our colleagues possess few answers. Imitation no longer will work. In fact, the history of the discipline of music in the university could turn out to follow the story of Cinderella. Having served in the shadow of our siblings, and been filled with envy and admiration for them, we discover that our time has come: the shoe (so to speak) of the times may fit only our particular subject. For the first time the study of music might lead the way in the human sciences. The other disciplines might learn from us, defer to us, and imitate us, for a change.

Though the study of music now has a chance to contribute to the way culture and society might be understood and studied, it is clear that we are still courting the danger to which the first generations of musicologists fell prey a century ago: the imitative appropriation of methodological conceits from other disciplines. For all their virtues, Guido Adler and Hermann Kretzschmar, for example, were not methodologically innovative. And, ironically, Theodor W. Adorno's writing on music, despite its impressive jargon, ranks among the least self-critical and methodologically powerful aspects of his work. The embrace of Adorno here and in Germany in the 1960s and 1970s was a symptom of the poverty of a differentiated and subtle sociology of knowledge with respect to music and its role in culture. Thus, despite the insights about music that have come from anthropology, history, and literary studies, that impoverishment remains unalleviated.

In more recent decades, musicology has continued to yield the lead to its sister disciplines in the adoption of the latest intellectual fashions. Musicologists are now acting the way scholars in literary studies, history, and anthropology acted two decades ago, and what looks new to us is already under siege elsewhere. Those who write about music as historians, instead of continuing to defer methodologically to the older disciplines for an adequate theory, might find greater reward in fashioning not only their own theory, but a general theory from within musical culture itself. The time has come to make a jump in front of the other disciplines, whose modes of operating, despite their greater degree of historical and institutional advancement, are in shambles. As the Viennese satirist

Friedrich Kürnberger put it more than a century ago, in order to become literate one must first learn to read music.

One way that musicology might achieve this new status is through embracing one of Max Weber's most compelling ideas: that any agenda or scholarship laying claim to significance must be tied to and therefore derived from some profound commitment to a contemporary predicament. The affective intensity of scholarly pursuits that drives curiosity must be strong and rooted in the present. It comes as no surprise, then, that the contemporary interest in the status of women and the significance of gender has opened many of the most powerful new avenues of inquiry. Antiquarianism, no matter how brilliant, is rarely just fanatical professionalism rooted in a biographically explicable fastidiousness. It, too, is a resolution of an individual's engagement with his or her own time.

Some of the most serious of these predicaments facing culture and society today are located within the realm of music. In the musical world in European and American contexts they pertain to the divergent evolutions of popular and concert music and the role music plays in new media and the formation of norms, particularly within modes of sound reproduction and within visual formats such as film and video. The relationships among sound, sight, and speech—and therefore the significances attached to them—may be changing dramatically. Furthermore, within and without the university, the canonic center with which traditional musical studies have been occupied is under siege. The distinctions between musicology and ethnomusicology are eroding as the aesthetic and socio-cultural priority of one kind of music against another is challenged. It is likely that in both practical training and theoretical or historical analysis, the category of music in the university and among so-called consumers (those who consciously partake of musical culture at a given time and place) will be far more catholic, encompassing a range of times, places, and categories well outside the ones reflected in the current distribution of resources within the university. Even in comparison to the study of literature or art, the shock of change in the content of what is studied under the heading of music within the university is going to be striking.

We should neither lament these circumstances—themselves the result of a political evolution in Europe and the Americas—nor exploit them. Rather, we might profit by using the intellectual opportunity offered by the cultural politics of the moment. This opportunity has two critical components. First, we could now consider music as a generic category of existence—a form of life, as Wittgenstein suggested, much like the way we might view language or fundamental economic or social habits and activities. This opens up the possibility that music might be treated as a species of fundamental social action. It is not a subsidiary anthropological ritual.

Music is instead more akin to a poorly understood nexus of communication (perhaps reaching beyond the sphere of language) in the sense suggested by the work of Jürgen Habermas. Following the footsteps of Weber, Adorno, and Karl Mannheim, Habermas (along with others in his generation in Germany and France) has sought to carve out the process of transaction and exchange through language among human beings as a category of social action. Habermas's ambition was to make it susceptible to structural and historical analysis as well as to a normative critique with regard to ethics and politics.

The second compelling circumstance that ought to drive the study of music is the continuing decline in traditional musical literacy and culture. We participate, through scholarship, in the effort to preserve, if not rescue, the significance of the canon as it is now understood, as well as the repertoire to which the discipline of music has been until recently committed. However much one wishes to embrace new, esoteric developments, the academic study of music cannot remain oblivious to the decline in audiences and the erosion of appreciation for the canon and tradition.

One way to carve out a stable place for Western concert music in a successful manner within the university and in the outside world of entertainment (whether in truly popular ways or more museumlike formats) may be to reconsider how we understand music-making and its significance from the Middle Ages to the present. If we interpret and study music in ways that effectively recast the general historical and cultural analysis of the past, the interest in the performance of music from the past might increase. In order to attract audiences without substantial musical literacy, a so-called extramusical dimension has begun to play a larger role, as, for example, in the program notes to concerts, or in concert formats that decorate musical performances by asserting linkages to history and art. But here again, one is confronted with mere parallelism and surface comparisons. Music and its function and culture are still not considered indispensable primary sources of historical generalizations of interest to the wider public.

Indeed, even the most *au courant* general analyses and specific interpretations of Western culture and society have been distilled with music considered as, at best, a peripheral or illustrative phenomenon. Perhaps if we start with music, a range of new insights beyond the realm of music might emerge. The call for "interdisciplinary study" in the case of music, therefore, should not be considered another species of tendentiousness. Rather, it is a call to reject the implicit parochial separation and segmentation that set music apart, with its own interior history and significance, from life and therefore history in general.

Take, for example, the continuing interest in Schubert. Are we using

research into his private life, career, and development as a composer as starting points to reconsider the notions of Biedermeier Vienna, romanticism, or social change, or are we still trying to adapt analytical frameworks from other disciplines, thereby reducing the musical phenomena to illustrative roles? The question is not simply a matter of integrating the immense volume of research about social history, economic history, and literary and theatrical activity into the consideration of music. Rather, we might use music to recast the way these other facets are understood and thereby accomplish the creation of a different historical context in a way that ultimately can shed more light on both music and its historical and social framework.

In taking on this grander task, which is to use music to guide the wider cultural and historical analysis, much more than biography, textual analysis, and reception history would be required. Music history and musicology can be directed at the task of trying to extract from musical culture and activity in human society something that defines and reveals the human condition in a fundamental manner, as opposed to merely in a manner that adds to or fills out our grasp of the past and present. What we as scholars should seek is that which otherwise would be inaccessible without music.

This goal is not contingent on a simple philosophical notion that music, in some neo-Hanslick-like or neo-Schopenhauerian sense, is autonomous, deeper, and structurally distant (and therefore implicitly irrelevant) from other activities. Rather, it holds that within any given context, however defined, the complex dynamics around musical activity—including the way music is thought about and responded to—can yield insights that recast what we can learn from ordinary language, visual creations, religious rituals, and so on.

Consider a case in the history of philosophy. Increasingly, writers on music have sought to utilize Wittgenstein's insights about music as a way of understanding how music functions. This is happening much the way it occurred with Adorno's work. From the *Tractatus* on, Wittgenstein used music as example, analogy, and metaphor; he employed what he later termed the family resemblance between language and music as a way of probing the nature of language. Yet what Wittgenstein had in mind when he talked of music is hardly clear. Furthermore, how did he hear it? Why, for example, was he profoundly conservative and hostile to modernism? Why was Brahms for him the last of the greats? What function did music play (and in what manner) in anthropological terms, in the day-to-day course of his childhood and adult life? It is difficult to assemble a coherent, comprehensive picture of his view of music from the texts alone, for the bits and pieces of his explicit claims, including commentary on composers and on music, are strewn throughout his writings.

What might be suggested is that getting to the heart of what Wittgenstein meant when he spoke about music constitutes a complex and comprehensive quasi-anthropological and socio-historical task with music at its center. Understanding how Wittgenstein thought about music could yield clues about the core of his thoughts otherwise unexplored by philosophers and historians, who have generally paid scant attention to the issue of music in Wittgenstein. Instead of using language as a metaphor for how music works, then, we could reverse the inquiry and study music as a route to clarifying the nature and function of language not only in Wittgenstein's thought but in history in general. Such a procedure might yield powerful results for socio-linguistics, social history, and psychology.

Likewise, apart from using the suggestive insights Adorno had about particular works and composers, unraveling his fierce rhetoric about music in relation to the musical culture and world he inhabited tells us unique things about him and his colleagues in the Frankfurt School during the 1920s and 1930s. This might lead to new perspectives on the way social dynamics were constructed by Adorno and his colleagues, which in turn might trigger a revisionist view of the way historians and critics deal with the traditions of critical theory. The task in these cases remains in the widest sense a historical one.

This approach, however, does not involve the transfer of insights about an extramusical "context" into the discourse of music; it cannot be an enterprise of the appropriation of clichés and generalizations. Rather, the development of a subtly textured, comprehensive analysis of musical culture and activity (including musical texts and the modes of their consumption, along with their acoustic realization)—within any given cultural and historical moment—helps to shape and define the meaning of context right at the outset. Using music as a primary source can test and perhaps profoundly revise our sense of the past. And if this is true, why relegate music, in relationship to the linguistic or the visual, to a peripheral status? Why explain mental habits in the past primarily through other modes of thought? Why not instead assume the centrality of music?

Such a path has not been taken because our sense of the past—whether within the European framework or elsewhere—invariably has been constructed without reference to music. Take, for example, the Central European *fin de siècle*. For all that has been written about the art, architecture, literature, philosophy, and politics of the time (except for some passing efforts to integrate benign and glib references to Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg that quote usually from the latter's prose writings), works of music and the musical world are cited and discussed with considerable ease, at best to confirm and complement a prior general picture and interpretation. The texts of music (without any subtle or complex analy-

sis), musical life, or the character and function of hearing, performance, and other modes of reception (e.g. reading about music or reading music) are all described in terms borrowed from literary or visual analyses. Within the field of music, the works of music are still cast by theorists and scholars of musical texts generally within a framework, however modified, of an autonomous historical logic specific to music itself. It is as if the artisan-craftsmanship tradition (in terms of who musicians are and how they work) and the nineteenth-century ideology of music's independent formal essence still hold a sort of collaborative sway.

Equally unexplored is the character of daily music life, from the home, to the street, to the concert hall. Within the nineteenth century, for example, even a look at composers of secondary rank—not in a search of neglected aesthetic values but for historical insights—has not begun. Research on music education, musical institutions, music in the private and public arenas, and the interrelationship of the many forms and rituals of music-making to one another and to other aspects of culture and society, particularly within the *fin de siècle*, still has not taken hold.

The ultimate goal is to gain an understanding of musical culture that accounts for issues of place, gender, and class and that probes the dynamics of significance with respect to music, but which does not operate on the basis of a restrictive definition of music or its role in society and culture. This, in turn, necessitates the development of methods of analysis—whether of the acoustical environment, the use of time, or the ways music was encountered and talked about—that require skills uniquely held by the musicological and music-historical profession. No other branch of the human sciences, not even those that deal with experiences of the visual and the spatial, such as art, architecture, and design, has unique access to so vital and unexplored an area of human experience, whose decoding requires special skills apart from a command of ordinary language. If one accepts the idea that musical culture is not subordinate, then the study of music gains a significance accorded only the archaeological discovery that changes the understanding of lost civilizations.

The reason discussions of the *fin de siècle* are impoverished by the virtual absence of the contribution that music might make (even a Schenker-Wittgenstein comparison, an obvious, albeit limited, subject, has yet to be undertaken) is that by training and predilection most professionals outside of music cannot deal with music. Not only do they lack the skills to talk about a musical text, they are unable to ask and answer questions even about the significance of how music was understood through speech. To answer, for example, questions about reception and, in the cases of Wittgenstein, Freud, Schnitzler, the role of music, their connection to a musical culture and their apparent absence of engagement need to be

outlined and described. The crucial cultural exchange with music can illuminate a wide range of issues well beyond the confines of music. Freud's relationship to music—indeed, the minor place it seemed to occupy—constitutes as powerful a choice as his overt interest in antiquity. The two, in fact, may be related. Within Freud's framework resistance, like silence, needs to be understood. Otto Weininger's suicide in 1903 in Beethoven's last residence in Vienna represents merely the surface of this unexcavated historical territory in the Viennese *fin de siècle*. But beginning this work requires the skills of musicologists and music historians.

A suggestive analogy to the task faced by musicology and music history can be made by reference to the history of science and technology. One might have thought that art history would provide the greatest resemblance. (It is indeed striking how little attention is paid to music in the training of art historians, and to art among musicologists.) Although scholars outside of science have looked to Thomas Kuhn and the dynamics of shifts in paradigms within science as a helpful model for the process of historical change (e.g. style shifts in music), the vital link lies elsewhere. The history of science has revealed dimensions of what, for lack of a better term, can be described as mental structures. The theory of explanation, patterns of observation, and the dissemination of ideas—the dialectical tension between theory and practice—in science, as in music, provide further useful hints as to how the history of music, like the history of science, can be placed at the center of the historical narrative. The consequences of science—in technology, for example, in the intersection between the various types of science and their institutionalization and economic and social activity—all have suggestive parallels in the world of music. For the history of science to make its contribution to our grasp of culture and society, scholars with the capacity to deal with the scientific, mathematical, and technical material are crucial. The same would be true for music.

Two more arenas offer hints as to what music historians and musicologists might accomplish. Both economic and social history and the history of theater (as another arena with shared issues of text and performance practice) possess issues and approaches that merit attention, not necessarily imitation. All this points to the need to train future scholars of music in new ways and to encourage them to ask the sorts of sweeping questions of historical interpretation, description, and analysis that music historians traditionally have ceded to their peers from other disciplines.

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No matter how new much of today's work in musicology and music history seems, it appears still to concede a fundamental marginality to

musical phenomena. Music has yet to produce—from within itself, so to speak—the kind of contribution to our understanding of the past, in terms of culture and society, achieved by the great historians and interpreters of religion, science, art, and literature.

If this claim is correct, then the questions raised by scholars in music demand reconsideration. Even though the core of training should be the capacity to use the materials of music passively and practically, the context in which those skills are placed must change. For example, the vestiges of a snobbishness against performance must be set aside simply because the scholarly study of music *per se* is a study of performance in time and space. As is the case for all scholars in the human sciences, it is impossible not to carry forward our instincts about the nature of reading and how we read when we interpret texts, and it is also imperative to attempt critically to understand reading as a differentiated social-historical phenomenon (its link to speech, writing, religious ritual, daily discourse, use of memory, and so forth). For these reasons, a scholar of music must also have the contemporary experience of performance—contact with acoustic sound made by oneself and an audience, private or public—in order to be equipped to guard against the assumption of facile comparisons or continuities. The use of performance experience is indirect but essential.

Beyond these active musical skills, the scholar of music would benefit from more thorough training in the general research methods of history. Training in the task of interpretation in non-musical issues and materials within each particular segment of time is needed if music is to be used as a fundamental constituent of the historical narrative. The musical scholar, therefore, requires a much more extensive education in art history, in social, cultural, and economic history, in anthropology, and in the philosophical critique of methods than heretofore considered.

The definition of future methods of analysis, including the setting of the research agenda, cannot be undertaken from within the current traditions of music history or musicology. If one laments the fact that one is asking for more and not less, then so be it. Otherwise, the study of music will remain of interest primarily to those who accept and embrace a philosophical prejudice about music and therefore a familiar social and historical segmentation of the musical from the extramusical. Music will remain merely illustrative of historical claims, still rooted in a secondary and subsidiary place. This would be a shame, since the opportunity—in part as a result of the methodological travails and exhaustion in other fields of the human sciences—presents itself for us to use the study of music as a primary vehicle for the reinterpretation of culture and society.