

Alexander Rehding. 2009. *Music and Monumentality: Commemoration and Wonderment in Nineteenth-Century Germany*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

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The summer of 1995 saw three cultural events that prompted the Germanist Andreas Huyssen to reflect on the monumental as an aesthetic category: the 84th Bayreuth Festival with its motto “redemption through love,” the unveiling of an ambitious plan for a Holocaust memorial in Berlin, and the artist duo Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s *Wrapped Reichstag*. In Huyssen’s view, these events were symptomatic of Germany’s obsessive grappling with its past and a desire for redemption that manifested itself largely in the form of monuments. The project of Christo and Jeanne-Claude was a highly publicized affair that added yet another layer of meaning to the Reichstag as a monument and to the German collective memory. Ever since its construction during the Wilhelmine era, the Reichstag had been at the center of political upheaval: it was the site of the proclamation of the Weimar Republic as well as the German reunification ceremony in 1990. Christo and Jeanne-Claude veiled the Reichstag with fabric for two weeks before restoration of the building began. Noteworthy for Huyssen was the anti-monumentalist streak in the veiling gesture. In line with postwar sentiment, the project muffled a loaded national symbol, temporarily suspending its political function by creating instead a space for contemplation. And yet, Huyssen observed that the project recast the Reichstag as a monument albeit in a different light: “The new layer of public memory is now that of a genuinely popular event, of thousands of people milling around the building day after day, celebrating a symbol of German democracy in all its fragility and transitoriness. The wrapped Reichstag thus stood as a monument to democratic culture rather than a demonstration of state power” (Huyssen 1996:187).

Huyssen’s reflections were published the following year under the title “Monumental Seduction” in a special issue of *New German Critique* devoted to Richard Wagner. There he asked: “Why is it that the reproach ‘monumental’ functions like a death sentence to any further discussion?” (1996:189). This lingering, piercing question is a driving force behind Alexander Rehding’s *Music and Monumentality*, a timely book that seeks to initiate discussion about a phenomenon that has eluded musicological scrutiny. Though Rehding’s book appeared over a decade after Huyssen’s article, it is evident that the experience of German reunification informed both: the wrapped Reichstag reappears in Rehding’s introduction, and the

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epilogue considers Leonard Bernstein's performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at the Berlin Wall, where musicians from the former East and West Germanies joined forces to celebrate the recent unification. The book's chapters offer snapshots from the nineteenth century rather than comprehensive coverage, and they culminate with Anton Bruckner's enshrinement in the cultural pantheon of National Socialism.

At the outset, Rehding posits monumentality as "a stylistic property, which we might describe informally as an uplifting, awe-inspiring, overwhelming, or sublime quality—or, negatively, as effects whose immediacy seems slightly distasteful, which can seem bombastic, gothic, pompous, or over the top" (2009:3). He complicates this simple definition incrementally over the course of the following pages. First, he underscores his historically contingent and thoroughly contextual understanding of the concept: "Rather than any kind of 'bigness' in its own right, monumentality is better understood, for now, as the imaginary link between musical bigness and greatness, and this link, in order to appear natural and self-evident, needs to be forever forged anew" (9). He then invokes Huyssen, who remarked that "monumentalism of built space or monumental tendencies in any other medium continue to be much maligned, but the notion of the monument as memorial or commemorative public event has witnessed a triumphal return" (10). An understanding of this commemorative aspect is a chief contribution of Rehding's book and a move that allows him to cast a much wider net when considering historical phenomena. But whereas Huyssen's concern was the relation between monumentality and collective memory in contemporary culture, the place of commemoration in Rehding's conception of monumentality remains unclear here and elsewhere in the book. The question "whose collective memory?" becomes exponentially more difficult to address when interrogating the past. As a final blow to his initial definition of musical monumentality, Rehding proposes that "we should drop the notion, dictated by common sense, that all monumental music necessarily needs to be big or loud at all times . . . once we place the commemorative function of musical monumentality in the limelight this inevitably alters the musical characteristics of what constitutes monumentality" (14). Thus, "big" and "loud" turn out not to be necessary conditions for musical monumentality; however, the reader is ultimately left uncertain as to whether commemorative function fulfills such a condition. In the first chapter, Rehding makes a crucial distinction between the historical and the physical (or aesthetic) components of the monument. This is later restated as the distinction between the "monument," which refers to "collective memory and identity formation," versus "monumentality," which refers to "dramatic proportions (or even lack of any proportionality)" (27). At the

same time, Rehding stops short of separating the two components entirely: “Nonetheless, it would mean to throw out the baby with the bathwater to cut the connection between monumentality in the sounding structure and the monumental, commemorative contents that are communicated in them” (35–36). But this connection is mostly left at the level of assertion. By this point the reader might reasonably wonder: Where does this leave the notion of musical monumentality as an aesthetic category with descriptive power?

An attractive feature of the book is that it collates and explores a rich array of materials. The first chapter documents the historical underpinnings of musical monumentality as recorded in the pages of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* around 1800. The second chapter offers a fascinating account of the circumstances surrounding the first Beethoven monument in Bonn of 1845—its position within the political climate of the *Vormärz* period, the arguments presented for and against the enterprise, the parties invested in laying a claim on Beethoven’s legacy, and Liszt’s successful navigation of the entire affair. The third chapter examines the visual and musical symbolism in an illustrated publication of one of Liszt’s compositions for the Goethe centenary in 1849. It also considers Liszt’s engagement with Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* and the two composers’ conflicting attitudes towards the monumental. The fourth chapter gives a glimpse into Wagner’s ambivalence towards musical monumentality through a different lens—his complicated relationship with Gluck—that sheds new light on his aesthetics, his views on the operatic overture and issues of conducting practice. The fifth chapter investigates nineteenth-century historicism through the ambitious editorial projects of the time and the role of music scholarship in overcoming a perceived impasse in contemporary composition. Rehding probes the concerns and positions of those who embraced the modernization of older music and those who preached philological purism. Romantic aesthetics of absolute music and the cultural agenda of National Socialism come together in the sixth and final chapter, which analyzes the highly choreographed event that marked the induction of Bruckner’s bust into the Regensburg Walhalla in 1937.

This brief summary gives a sense of the diverse phenomena and complicated issues that are broached by *Music and Monumentality*. In spite of elegant connections forged between the chapters, however, the unruliness of Rehding’s materials threatens the book’s coherence; even within a single chapter the narrative trajectory can prove difficult to follow. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the third chapter, “Sounding Souvenirs,” which takes the reader on a dizzying journey from Liszt’s engagement with the Goethe centenary and Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*, to Franz Brendel’s diagnosis of the dilemma faced by modern music, to a much later exchange between Liszt and Wagner on musical monumentality, before finally turning to piano ar-

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rangements of *Tannhäuser* by Liszt and others. Rehding arranges the chapter into subsections titled after dualities like public and private, old and new, big and small, and virtuosity and dilettantism, but the content proves too unwieldy to allow for a neat presentation. The red thread running through the chapter is the concept of the souvenir, which takes the form of objects that Rehding provocatively conceives as “monuments that transcend spatial limitations” (105). Yet the precise sense of monumentality invoked is not sufficiently elucidated to make the connection between the particular case and the overarching concept convincing. With its sprawling contents but tenuous interconnections, this chapter epitomizes problems that crop up throughout.

To his credit, Rehding recognizes this difficulty, dubbing it the “Midas touch” of monumentality, that is, the concept’s “uncanny ability to attach itself to various elements” (8). This chameleonic trait raises a critical question: How can monumentality be deployed for both democratic and totalitarian ends? Why do the aesthetics of freedom and fascism so often coincide? Why is a monumental work equally amenable to two political ideologies that seem so different from each other? Though Rehding does not tackle these questions head-on, partial responses might be pieced together from the book. As noted above, an integral aspect of his project is to stress that the relation between bigness and greatness is not given but negotiable. Other factors emerge that also contribute to musical monumentality’s lack of a moral center. Compositional techniques like Liszt’s thematic transformation present compelling narrative archetypes that can be effectively appropriated for political purposes. Furthermore, the ideology of absolute music implies a truth that lies beyond language and is thereby readily available for construction. Drawing on Thomas Mann, Rehding observes that “monumental music seems to exude moral authority without specifying the carrier of this authority, or indeed the nature of such morality” (8). And yet, in spite of this awareness, “we remain in thrall to it—on one level, it simply remains enticing to believe in it” (5). While Rehding does not investigate the psychological basis for such an inclination, the other factors mentioned—the relation between bigness and greatness, the ideology of absolute music, and the semblance of morality—appear in his discussion of Bruckner in the sixth chapter. In the service of their cultural agenda, National Socialists turned the monumental scale of Bruckner’s music into an emblem of Germanness and hence of greatness. Rehding additionally points out that the ostensible functionlessness of absolute music was instrumentalized by National Socialists and incorporated into their cultic practices. The grand ceremony for Bruckner’s induction into the Walhalla hall of fame represented such an instance.

But the above focuses exclusively on the political and cultural extremism of National Socialism. A more nuanced example would have been especially telling in that it could provide a case study of how the same music is construed from opposing political perspectives. Rehding comes closest to offering such an example in the epilogue, where he presents three irreconcilable views of Beethoven's Ninth—through Bernstein, Schiller, and Adorno—probing them from the vantage point of post-German reunification. It is here, notably, that he engages in the most substantial musical analysis in the book. The purpose of the analysis is to illustrate how the sublime, understood as “at once formed and formless” (204), is instantiated in the last movement of the Ninth Symphony. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller stressed the urgency of aesthetic cultivation for the realization of political freedom, arguing that only by appreciating beauty may humanity experience a semblance of freedom. Characteristic of the beautiful is a harmonious relationship between what he called “form” and “content”; and yet the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth, with its oft-noted complexity and seeming formlessness, would appear to conjure up the sublime rather than the beautiful. For Rehding, these circumstances severely complicate the status of “Ode to Joy” as a monument to freedom and humanity. Bernstein availed himself of this status to justify his substitution of the word “Freude” with “Freiheit” in the historic performance of 1989, while at the same time inadvertently pointing out the uneasy relationship between freedom and the sublime as understood by Schiller.

Some comment on Rehding's musical discussion here is in order. He and many others have observed that moments in B major bear special significance throughout the Ninth Symphony. He notes that “in all occurrences, these B major moments open up an immeasurable tonal space. From the home key of D minor—seven [sic] accidentals and a change of mode away—this would present an impossibly remote tonal relation” (206). However, the formulation and placement of this statement may be confusing given that the excerpt just considered is the *poco adagio* passage of the finale, where B major is experienced not through its relation to D minor but to the considerably closer D major (only two Riemannian transformations away). A similarly confusing description crops up regarding the fugal passage following the *Alla marcia* section: “The fugue takes us in a variety of confounding harmonic maneuvers gradually from B-flat major to the inconceivably remote regions of G-flat major, across the page, and finally to our B major for a brief touchdown.—The fugue is really a centrifug(u)e, and it appears to catapult us into the outer orbits of the tonal universe” (206). As written, this description suggests that G-flat major is approached through B-flat major rather than B-flat minor, a sonority that shares more common tones and from which G-flat

major emerges and to which it very soon returns. Rehding does not specify here the perspective from which G-flat major appears as an “inconceivably remote region.” Judging from his description and the musical example alone, the progression appears to be not so inconceivable after all. Perhaps he maximizes the tonal distance in order to underline how “the return to the more familiar D major is achieved by the same baffling, almost mockingly simple strategy” (210). He provides a reduction that demonstrates the simple voice leading entailed to transition from B major, through B minor, and to D major. This progression corresponds to the end of the *poco adagio* solo vocal quartet and the transition from the fugal passage to the “Ode to Joy” tutti. But, while the transitions themselves may enact simple voice-leading, they only go so far in illustrating Rehding’s point that “the ineffable, seemingly chaotic form of the movement that seems to eschew straightforward formal understanding is in fact carefully controlled” (204). An account that elucidates broader sections of the movement might have been more persuasive. The strength of the epilogue derives not so much from Rehding’s musical discussion or from defining aesthetic categories as from honing in on what sort of ideological work a cultural object was made to perform.

All that said, *Music and Monumentality* remains a thought-provoking book that traverses familiar territory with a fresh perspective. Rehding’s project is at once modest and ambitious: modest in that it makes no claims to comprehensiveness, ambitious in the scope and gravity of the questions raised. The result is that its treatment of the material is not always commensurate to the magnitude of the issues at stake. Nevertheless, the book stands as a laudable attempt to capture the contingency of historical phenomena. Both the concept of monumentality and the objects that sustain it are embedded in an intricate web of relationships that cannot be easily disentangled. Put another way, *Music and Monumentality* stands as an eloquent symptom of the early twenty-first-century condition: a disturbed, fragmented collective memory that may only apprehend the nineteenth century as a collection of souvenirs.

References

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