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Mario Baroni

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In praise of *Musikwissenschaft*: laudatio scientiæ musicæ

MARIO BARONI
University of Bologna, Italy

A book becomes a truly provocative tool when it is able to stimulate reactions, whether they be positive or negative. Normally, however, these are neither shouts of praise, nor utter indignation (both of which would not be of much use to anyone) but rather critical reactions. I have many thanks to give to this splendid, provocative book and to its author: it produced a great deal of “critical reactions” in me while I was reading it. I will now try to express some of them.

There are many kinds of music today, but one of these has a particular status that makes it different from the others, that makes it worth conserving, much as we conserve the masterworks of a painter in a museum: it is **the great music of the concert tradition**. A few decades ago this kind of music could only be listened to in the solemn concert rituals of theatres or concert halls. Now, thanks to music technology, it has spread into many aspects of our daily life. So we can listen to a symphony by Mozart in our lounge, and we can also listen to fragments of Mozart on television or in a shop, just as we can recognise the face of the Monna Lisa on a box of biscuits. This has greatly transformed our music experience. One of the major themes discussed in the book concerns this very phenomenon. Nowadays it has become much more difficult to conceive music as an object to be conserved in our imaginary museum: music (even the great music of the past) is becoming more and more a daily experience just as folk music or street music was in past epochs. **From this point of view any distinction between high and low music, between a musical masterpiece and its performance, between a concert and an occasional listening, has gradually become less important.** All this has deeply changed our experience of music: a piece of music (even the same music) is now understood differently from a few decades ago. But the discourses about music — asserts Nicholas Cook — have not changed: “The way of thinking about music that is built into schools and universities — and most of books about music, for that matter — reflects the way music was in nineteenth century Europe rather than the way it is today, anywhere. The result is a kind of credibility gap between music and how we think about it” (*cf.* foreword, v-vi). In other words, in his book the author continues his stimulating polemic against Anglo-Saxon musicology that he started a few years ago.

My first reaction to these ideas was twofold. Initially I perfectly agreed with this kind of proposal: it is true that when I was young the idea of music I formed in my mind, by reading books and articles, by speaking with my teachers and friends, by being in contact with young composers, listening to the radio, and so on, was totally different from that of all young people whose musical experience was formed after the “technological revolution”. But if I were Mr. Cook I would have been more prudent. I am not at all sure that today’s tendencies can be accepted as a sort of Copernician revolution able to radically change the history of our civilisation. I will explain what I mean, with an example. In a part of the book entitled *The spirit realm*, he quotes and interprets a phrase of Schenker: “For Schenker, the authority of the composer [...] is itself ultimately a reflection of a higher Author, for the value of music lies... in the ‘elevation of the spirit [...] an uplifting... to God and to the geniuses through whom he works’.” The quoted phrase has its roots in aspects of the German ideology at the beginning of the twentieth century, in an idea of genius that nowadays may sound ridiculous. But another aspect is not at all ridiculous: the connection between religion and music (or art in general). On the contrary, it is quite an important theme that ought to be studied and known much better than is normally the case in musicology. No one would consider it improper to conceive the Bible as a book collocated in the “spirit realm”. But is there a substantial difference between the Bible and, for example, *St. Mathews Passion*, or the *Ninth Symphony*? For a believer there certainly is, but for a non-believer (for example for a Muslim or a Buddhist) the difference may not be so great: the Bible could be considered nothing more than high poetry. In our culture we are accustomed to considering a Greek tragedy as a work of art, but this was not the case in the 5th century before Christ. But every kind of music does not possess the same “spiritual” status as the two cited works, and this is true also for non-musical examples: if we consider the Bible as a work of art and not as a sacred book, this does not mean that one of the many adaptations of the Bible presented on television has the same psychological richness, and deepness of meaning. Certain distinctions are still important.

There is also another point to be mentioned here. Nicholas Cook is probably right when he says that some of today’s current ideas have their roots in 19th century ideologies: for example “the emphasis on authenticity and self expression that underlies much popular music criticism”, directly derives from the way of thinking that accompanied the reception of Beethoven’s music (p. 40/37). I agree: also some heroes of mass media (from Elvis to Madonna) may have inherited their “mythological” identity, from the idea of Genius of the romantic tradition. But this observation is not sufficient to explain the actual reasons for the conservation of such thinking schemes from one epoch to another. **The aim of good musicology should be to gain a better understanding of the ways ideologies can arise, spread, change or be improved, to analyse which social groups believe in which ideas, and on the basis of what reasoning, to study adequately the transformations undergone by musical ideologies in 20th century and the strategies of the cultural industry**

underlying this process. The aim of musicology cannot simply be to pass from a traditional way of thinking to a more “modern” or “post-modern” one.

I have already observed that the book was conceived in the context of a process of transformation of Anglo-Saxon musicology. From this point of view *Music and the Academy* is the most significant chapter. In it, Cook mentions (as its predecessors) the book written in 1985 by Joseph Kerman, as well as the struggle against the mathematical obsessions of the Society for Music Theory, the gender theories, “gay” musicology and so on. It is now important for musicologists to open their eyes, venture outside the walls of their ancient protective palace and observe what is happening in the world. They must try to understand what ways of thinking exist outside those walls, but it is not so important for them to adopt these ways of thinking as if they were scientifically grounded. Musicology can be rebuilt with new contents of knowledge, not simply with more “popular” ideas. It is much more important to distinguish between ideological and scientific musicology, than between academic and post-modern tendencies.

Three other examples can explain better what I mean. The first is taken from the pages of the book where Cook speaks of high and low music. While discussing the English educational curricula he says (p. 108/100): “Bach and Beethoven remain on the syllabus, to be sure, but they share it with the Beatles (maybe not the Stones) and Balinese music”. Good! The multiplicity of musical experience is fundamental to good teaching: it is exactly what has happened in Italian schools for many years. But just for the opposite reasons. Not because of the narrowness of the academic tradition, but because of the effects of the mass media: adolescents love their own music exclusively, as if were the only music to think about. On the other hand, I too agree that some songs of the Beatles can be considered as masterpieces, but I make a distinction between my personal tastes and the credibility of my assertions. It is rather easy to defend “low” music, but it is just as ideological as fighting against it. The real and more serious problem is that in our academic knowledge (and also outside the walls of Academy) we do not possess a consistent theory of aesthetic value. Unfortunately we can only manifest our tastes, not explain why they are better than others; so it is important, from a musicological point of view not to manifest them as though they were “true” assertions. And it should be even more important to work hard in order to improve our understanding of the phenomenon of taste.

The second example is taken from the many pages where Cook speaks of the strict relationships between music and ideology. Yes, I too agree that music is connected with social values, with ideologies, with human believes. I too am convinced that in order to understand where today’s music is going, to judge the consequences of its possible developments, to intervene efficiently in teaching it in schools, it is important to have a good knowledge of these kinds of relationships. But I am also convinced of another thing: that at the moment musicology does not know enough, or knows nothing at all, about what ideology is, what the relationships

are between ideology and human values, what values themselves are, what ways there are of manifesting values and ideologies through music, and so on. I repeat: musicology, a musicology that tends to observe and interpret today's musical reality, has to actively work, in order to solve new problems.

The last question is similar to the previous one: what is the so called meaning of music that musicologists often speak about? Music cannot be reduced to sounds; it consists of the interpretations that sounds produce in those who listen to them. But how can it produce interpretations? Are some of them legitimate and others arbitrary? Is each interpretation inevitably linked to subjectivity or can we speak of intersubjective validations? It is not possible to answer these questions without a better understanding of the question of meaning, without a particularly careful study of the complex relationships between musical structures and musical interpretations. And this is an open semiological and psychological question that traditional musicology has underestimated for years. Cook in his passionate pages on optimistic vs. pessimistic musicology, defends a positive idea of the role of today's musicology. I am convinced that this role can be linked exclusively to its scientific nature. The ancient *Wissenschaft* of music is probably not post-modern enough, but in my opinion it is not only a phenomenon of the positivistic epoch. It is simply what distinguishes musicology from journalism.¹

(1) Address for correspondence:

Mario Baroni

Università degli Studi

Dipartimento di Musica e Spettacolo

Via Barberia, 4

I - 40123 BOLOGNA

e-mail: baroni@muspe.unibo.it