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## Five proposals

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### NOT FORWARDS, NOT BACKWARDS

Much attention is lavished on the reluctance of concert audiences to move chronologically forwards from a repertoire that extends from Vivaldi to Debussy, with selective extensions to Bartók, Stravinsky and Berg. Much less is attached to their equal reluctance to go back a century or so. There is an age-old rhetoric against the new that “protects” them from knowing Boulez, Carter or Xenakis. But where, in an age that supposedly no longer believes in a meta-narrative of progress, is the alibi that validates ignorance of Dufay, Josquin and Lassus? Isn't there something deeply paradoxical and disturbing about a situation where admiration for such admittedly supreme examples of Western intelligence and sensibility as Bach, Beethoven and Brahms effects a virtual auto-lobotomy in relation to analogous products of other eras, whether earlier or later? One could be forgiven for wondering if tonality isn't addictive in a manner comparable to nicotine or alcohol, and whether it doesn't merit the development of a pathology as well as an aesthetics. “New Music” has long been accused of operating in an ivory tower. Yet new music constantly changes, constantly shifts its ground, whereas the alleged taste of the “general public” scarcely changes. Might it not, therefore, make more sense to regard the concert audience as imprisoned in a tower (perhaps of a rather less exquisite material than ivory)?

### DEFENDING CANONS

There is one very good reason for hanging on to “canons”, and it's this: unless there is an agreed central repertoire of some sort, then almost no one knows what you are talking about. The latter situation might, of course, be a basis for establishing spurious “authority”. Back in the 1930s, Constant Lambert's *Music Ho* operated on the assumption that very few readers would know more than a smattering of the music referred to, and would therefore obediently swallow the author's opinions. Perhaps there are more than a few “decentering” discourses that follow this strategy too.

Every musical interest group has its “canons” — in popular music forms they are often concretised as a “Hall of Fame”. These canons are not necessarily repressive entities, representing the covert interests of some sinister, manipulative elite; in most cases, they are simply a focus for the discourse of “fans”. Nor are they necessarily an emblem of conformity. The cults of “resistance” in rock music (“alternative” radio stations, magazines and retailers, “indie” labels etc.) are in many respects just as devoted to canonic thinking, even if the processes of fashion means that different saints come marching in every now and then.

What has been different about the classical canon, perhaps, is the sense of cultural superiority that underlies it, and this not something that one can put in the past tense. There is an underlying assumption among its proponents that if you really love music, then this is the music you love. Hence the appropriation of the term “music-lover” to denote devotees of a “classical” repertoire. In historical terms, it’s understandable; until the 20th century, only the aristocracy and the middle classes had the leisure to consider what music, if any, they loved. But those days are long since past, and today, all kinds of other loves are conceivable.

#### COMPOSER’S VOICE

Among other things, the 20th Century was the century of the verbalising composer. Perhaps it began in earnest with Schoenberg’s *Harmonielehre*; in the twenties and thirties it was continued by Stravinsky’s *Chronique* and *Poetics*, Hindemith’s *Unterweisung im Tonsatz*, by Messiaen’s *Technique*, and then, in the 2nd half of the century, by a deluge of writings. If only Stockhausen has managed to rival Wagner for sheer volume, in verbal as well as operatic terms, the fact remains that most of the prominent members of the post-war avant-garde were, at very least, assiduous essayists, interviewees and/or theoreticians. Babbitt, Boulez, Cage, Donatoni, Feldman, Ferneyhough, Henze, Kagel, Lachenmann — these are just few alphabetical examples. Indeed, choosing *not* to contribute to the verbal production line risked being interpreted as morose withdrawal from the world (as has sometimes been asserted in relation to Birtwistle).

Now these words were not, for the most part, about shopping sprees, or summer holidays, or even dangerous liaisons. They were words about music; and if some of them were essentially technical and specialist in character, then many of them also dealt with aesthetic matters. This makes it all the more startling that writers on music in the English-speaking world are generally so reluctant to pay any attention to these words when giving a broad account of the last half-century of music. It’s as if the composers were unlawfully infringing on *their* territory. But it may also be because, in the view of many, the composers are saying the wrong sort of things. They are talking about aesthetic and social agendas which, in the eyes of positivism, art is not meant to have. They have the temerity to cite philosophers such as Adorno who, in the view of the Oxbridge analytic school that seems to have a stranglehold

on Anglo-aesthetics (the same gentlemen who spend hundreds of pages pondering on whether or not one can describe music as sad), are not really philosophers at all.

May one be forgiven for regarding this situation as little short of farcical? The current analytic philosophers with pretensions to musical illuminations are, evidently, incurable; they will go on till they drop, using their particular "investigative" methods to prove to themselves that their conservative taste in music is infallible, and should be adopted by any right-thinking person (which of course rules out any left-thinking person). Historians, however, might be well advised to consider a broader perspective. Even if they have to learn a language other than English to do so.

#### ONLY IN AMERICA?

The idea that new music has retreated into the universities, seeking refuge from its failure in the outside world, may hold good in the parochial Anglo-Saxon communities that generated it, but is a myth elsewhere. No major European composers of the past half-century have depended on universities (let alone "faculty concerts") for performance of significant works, unless they happened to be working in the US. If they teach, it's normally at conservatoires, which are not locked away on an academic campus, but are a natural part of the town or city. But even these conservatoires are not a principal forum for the composers' performances, which take place at festivals, through radio stations, and the tours undertaken by established soloists and ensembles. One may be dealing with a heavily subsidised market place (à la Renaissance), but it's a market place none the less, and the consumers are certainly not just academics (perhaps hardly so at all).

It is the failure to understand this that makes US commentaries (in particular) on the supposed "global" situation of new music look a little bizarre, viewed from elsewhere. Not knowing the US situation at first hand, I am in no position to assess the factors that create such views. But seen from outside, it's hard to ascribe them to anything except misguided cultural monomania. That is, that the US is assumed to be the way the civilised world ought to be, and that if certain things aren't quite right in the US, they must be even worse everywhere else. It ain't necessarily so.

#### GAY ABANDON

At first sight, it may seem curious that in comparison to other artistic milieus, the musical world has been so coy about gay issues for so long. The homoerotic qualities of classical sculpture have never really been in doubt, contemporary literature has exulted in Burroughs and Genet, and the multi-dimensional sexual circus around Andy Warhol never even dreamed of closeting itself. So why is music different? Actually, there's no real problem in rock and pop either; Lou Reed was an

icon in his “Walk on the Wild Side” days, crossing-dressing still flourishes, and even Thatcherite Britain warmed to Freddie Mercury. It’s the “classical” world that seems to have a problem.

A picture, so they say, is worth a thousand words. Nicholas Cook certainly knows how to make telling use of them in his *Very Short Introduction*. If there was just one that I could add to his modest but effective gallery, it would be a drawing from Georg Grosz’s *Ecce Homo* (1923), entitled *Schönheitsabend in der Motzstraße* (“Nice Evening in Motzstraße”). It’s a far cry from the other drawings in the collection: there are no vamps and prostitutes, no brutish, strutting industrialists with fat phallic cigars, no beggars and amputees — just three middle-aged men with walking-sticks going their various ways, and a demurely dressed young woman. Even these relatively idyllic circumstances seem to disconcert her; she walks with eyes lowered, and with what looks like a slight blush of embarrassment. She’s carrying a bag, and the bag is labelled “Music” (to be precise, “Musik”). This apparent representation of music as the Anaemic Art — and it’s hard *not* to read the picture this way — may seem a little exaggerated, but it’s not without foundation. And this naturally impacts on gay issues in relation to music. Gays may be motivated to come out of the closet, but art music, and its whole surrounding industry, seems resolutely determined to stay inside it (rather like Dudley Moore in a once-famous comedy sketch).

The role of all musics (art music being just one) within gay cultures seems inordinately complex, and is still far from being adequately outlined. But I find myself wondering why it is that art music in particular is considered, in recent academic discourse, to be such a site of latent gay empowerment, and yet, in many instances, the discourse of empowerment has a mawkishly self-pitying character that I don’t recollect encountering in relation to other arts. Very possibly, the answer would say more about music than about being gay. But if so, it would be no less instructive for that.

Another thing that intrigues me is the characteristic depiction of the gifted gay composer, living or dead, as an isolated social monad (on account of being gay, rather than being a composer). I don’t discount the depiction — it squares pretty well with what some of my gay composer-friends tell me. But does music really lack the distinctive, intense lines of intellectual and aesthetic transmission that arise from predominantly gay artistic and intellectual milieus such as, for example, those found in Paris and New York in the early fifties (which also involved Barraqué and Cage, respectively)?

In the traditional musicology that seemingly asserted, whether through ignorance, timidity or sheer duplicity that all composing subjects were heterosexual, there was at least some attempt at differentiation within the species. There was virtue and vice, integrity and exploitative monomania (sometimes both at once). In gay musicology, on the other hand, almost everyone is presented as a combination of victim and saint. Officially, at least, art music is not allowed to have Genets, Warhols and

Fassbinders: on this, both “straight” and gay musicologies appear to agree. To me, this seems not only to be blinkered, but to profoundly trivialise the circumstances in which gay creative artists work. Until gendered musicology manages to discard an almost Orwellian division between the fiendish (male) heterosexual, and the saintly gay, and finds much the same basic panorama of human behaviour in both, though perhaps with distinguishing traits, it will bear little relation to human reality, and have little to contribute except ideology. As a social corrective, the latter may well be highly desirable; as an insight into art, it risks mumbling through its self-imposed muzzle<sup>1</sup>.

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