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Musicology and meaning

‘New’ or ‘ageing’? LAWRENCE KRAMER clears away some misconceptions surrounding postmodern musicology

Notes

1. James R. Ostreich: ‘Beethoven seen as musician, not hero’, in *The New York Times* (Monday, 23 December 2002), section E., p.11, column 1.

‘THE NEW MUSICOLOGY’ SEEMS here to stay. *The New York Times* even says it has ‘swept the field’.¹ Well and good: but what, exactly, is it?

A phantom, for one thing. The term is more an annoyance than a convenience; it sticks like a cobweb with just as little usefulness. What the term refers to, however, is worth clearing away the cobweb to examine.

The label ‘new musicology’ refers to a research programme developed largely in the English-speaking world during the 1990s. Its round-up of usual suspects includes the likes of Philip Brett – whose untimely death last year deprived the musical world of one of its keenest, most humane, and bravest voices – Susan McClary, Richard Leppert, Rose Subotnik, and myself. The aim of these authors, among numerous others on both sides of the Atlantic, is surprisingly modest, given the fuss, bother, and downright venom their work has sometimes elicited. The idea is to combine aesthetic insight into music with a fuller understanding of its cultural, social, historical, and political dimensions than was customary for most of the twentieth century. This is not as easy as it sounds, and working at it has sometimes involved conceptual tools whose complexities are not musical. It has also involved a principled resistance to over-idealising music, which is not to be confused with a resistance to loving it. The hostility this project has sometimes provoked seems to come from resentment of its emphasis on the worldly engagements of music on the one hand and of its resort to critical theory (instead of, or along with, music theory) on the other. It is not always possible to reason with such hostility, but it is at least possible to clear away the misconceptions that the hostility tends to perpetuate.

The name best suited for the fast-ageing ‘new musicology’ is probably ‘cultural musicology’. But the term ‘cultural’ here should not be taken in its traditional sense. Cultural musicology often draws largely on postmodernist models of know-

ledge that take a sceptical (but not dismissive) view of conceptual synthesis and aesthetic autonomy. It treats culture itself more as a fragmentary, quasi-improvisatory process than as a relatively fixed body of values and traditions; more as a proliferation of forking and often crossing paths (between the ‘high’ and ‘low’ in art and society, the Western and the non-Western, the musical and the non-musical) than as a system of boundaries and distinctions; and more as a vehicle for the production of individuals, the bearers of subjectivities in which certain ideals are realised or thwarted, than as a warehouse of common customs. Music bears directly on all of these matters, but especially on subjectivity, and it seems fair to say that cultural musicology is above all a continuing effort to understand musical subjectivity in history. Like ‘culture’, however, the term ‘subjectivity’ here requires some further explanation.

The term does not refer to the condition of the self regarded as a private monad, but to the process whereby a person occupies a series of socially defined positions from which certain forms of action, desire, speech, and understanding become possible. The subject is not a nugget of inner being that extends itself outward to others whom it never quite reaches. The subject is a disposition to incessant and multiple relationship.

For most of the twentieth century, subjectivity, in the sense of the private monad, was regarded as an obstacle to both musical experience and musical knowledge. Too much emphasis on feeling or ascription of meaning could only obscure what was truly musical about music, its articulation of style, form, and structure. Musical knowledge was knowledge of the variety and history of these qualities; musical experience came from following them with rapt attention. These principles, of course, were violated almost as often as they were upheld, even by those who upheld them most strongly, and they were rarely applied to popular (as opposed to high art) music.

Nonetheless, the overall trend in their favour was very dominant, despite the almost universal understanding that music appeals to the emotions, moods, the senses, the whole array of interior states of mind and body, with unmatched immediacy and power. Music's appeal seemed to shimmer like a veil of illusion around musical reality; one had to be heedless of it to grasp the truth.

Cultural musicology tries to pay more heed. It takes that appeal as a sign that music both reflects and helps to produce historically specific forms of subjectivity in the sense of lived positions. Far from being an obstacle, subjectivity is the medium in which music works, and through which it reveals its cultural significance. Music, indeed, because of the immediacy of its appeal, is one of the primary media in which western subjectivity has mirrored and fashioned itself in the long modern era from the sixteenth (or fourteenth?) century until today.

WHAT FOLLOWS is a series of reflections on the assumptions and purposes of cultural musicology, which are meant to modulate into reflections on music and musical experience more broadly. The numbered form in which the individual segments appear is a tribute to a group of thinkers whom I like to take as models of rigour without system: Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Barthes. The form seems especially appropriate because rigour without system is the main theme of these remarks.

I

CULTURAL musicology is first and foremost about musical meaning. This concern fosters two kinds of scepticism, the second of which tends to fan the flames of the first. There is, to begin with, an intellectual objection that regards the proposal of complex 'extra-musical' meanings – anything beyond generic expressiveness or fuzzy allusiveness – as arbitrary or 'subjective'. And there is a defensive objection that seems to come from a feeling that if music has complex meaning, if it means too much or too loudly, one's subjective freedom in listening to it will be compromised. The two objections coalesce when we are told, say, that 'music [is] part of a larger world that situates but can never explain its particular distinction: [...] the music ultimately speaks for itself.'² The underlying impulse seems to be to preserve the subjective dimension of music by confining it to the sphere of personal experience and intuition, while demanding that public discussion of music stick to objectifiable topics.

The intellectual side of this impulse has a broad commonsensical appeal that is very successful at hiding its underlying incoherence.

This is a subject to be addressed a bit at a time. But the defensive side can be dealt with at once.

I see no reason to reject or resist the habits of listening that make music available for enjoyment without reference to its meaning. There are many such habits, all of them part of the history of listening, some of them basic to learning to listen. At their best, they have enriched the lives of a great many people, not least by providing a temporary safe haven from meaning itself, with all its sometimes harassing uncertainties and demands. And yet: those same habits are based on historically specific sets of values, not on the intrinsic nature of music. Although it appeals to concepts, the rationale for just listening to the music, letting it 'speak for itself', is fundamentally a set of instructions and prohibitions. There is something to be lost as well as gained by following them. Not following them, of course, may also incur a loss – but this need not be the loss of musical enjoyment, or of something uniquely musical, to the interloping rule of language, thought, 'theory', or mere whimsy.

II

INFORMAL interpretations of music, phrases just blurted out, unsystematic, freely metaphorical or epithetical, not especially articulate, are important far in excess of their apparent lack of substantive weight. They activate shared assumptions about subjectivity and foster feelings of alliance and identification. Such informal ascriptions, bearers of the hermeneutics of everyday life, carry with them our intuitive, precritical sense of the world. Sharing in them is a form of world-making. And it is also a form of music-making, a portion of the music of that sphere. These ascriptions, these semantic improvisations, are not only habitual, they are inevitable; it is hard to imagine music itself without them. The strange thing is why we've so often tried. (Imagine, à la Wittgenstein, a people that had music but was unable to speak about it, either aloud or in thought. In what sense would such people really 'have' music? And how many other things would the lack of musical speech take away?)

Critical interpretations, which cultural musicology aims to foster (and of course did not invent), are continuous with informal ones; there can be no clear-cut separation between them. Nor would that be desirable. Critical ventures should not be bound by received wisdom or apparent common sense. But they should retain or establish close ties with common experience and its urgencies and energies. Critical interpretations of music extend the meanings grasped intuitively by informal ascriptions into the sphere of reflection and historical understanding where our intuitions may be continued, elaborated, revised, or revoked.

2. Michael Kimmelman: 'The first modern', review of Lewis Lockwood: *Beethoven: the music and the man*, in *The New York Times Book Review* (Sunday, 19 January 2003), p.11.

3. 'Connoisseur of Chaos', l.17, in *Collected poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p.215.

4. *Musical meaning: toward a critical history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp.1–10.

III

SHOULD our approaches to understanding expressive behaviour, say that of music, favour such qualities as system and structure, objectivity, detached observation, hard evidence, and literal description, or should they favour process and practice, subjectivity, participant observation, suggestive evidence, and metaphor? Are we more interested in understanding as science or as art? The distinction, like most, is untenable in the long run; in particular the systematic terms tend to collapse into subjectivity when historical changes erode their authority to regulate and contain subjectivity. Yet the distinction, again like most, is constantly rearing from the ashes of its collapses. It is always full of consequence.

The reason for preferring the 'subjective' is that complex communicative acts have a powerful tendency to change the structures that regulate them. They often do, and always may, exceed their appointed boundaries, both formal and semiotic. In regard to form, complex communicative acts cannot be fit into a typology or system of conventions without being rendered too rigid. There is no formal schema that can fully contain their metamorphic impetus. In regard to meaning, complex communicative acts cannot be decoded without being rendered too simple, even in their contradictions. No semiotic system can contain their semantic energies; signifying practices always run ahead of signifying systems. In sum, to quote one of my favourite lines from Wallace Stevens, 'The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind'.³ Both the forms and the meanings in any complex utterance are slippery, incessantly slithering across all the scaly, armour-like borders that may be set for them. In a sense, an empirical theory of communication is a set of prior constraints on communication. The typologies and taxonomies, the semiotic grids and diagrams, may have their fascinations, but they have about as much to do with music as the Sunday crossword puzzle with the world news.

IV

MUSIC has an *a priori*: so runs one of the theses of my book *Musical meaning*: an *a priori* ambiguity.⁴ On the one hand: music as organised sound independent of textual and circumstantial involvements. On the other: music as inter-relationship, something readily intermixed with other media and with social occasions both public and private. On the one hand, music as aesthetic, disinterested, beyond good and evil; on the other, music – that is, the *same* music – as social, conditioned by human interests, a medium of ethical responsibility and recognition. Music does not simply present both these faces at

all times; this Janus-faced presentation is what constitutes it as music. 'Music' is the name figuratively given to anything that produces the irresolvable ambiguity of sense and non-sense (which is not nonsense), as well the name literally given to the acoustic phenomenon that embodies this ambiguity in something like its primal form.

V

ON 'relative autonomy'. Contrary to anxious critiques of reductionism, none of those who have rejected the idea of musical autonomy ever proposed to take music as a mere symptom of something else. What they did – do – propose is that music is inclusive of the social, conceptual, and cultural categories and forces that it has commonly been supposed to exclude. It is therefore not autonomous. But because it is still, nonetheless, music and not something else, it is not merely a transparent medium for those categories and forces. Rather it is a substantial means of negotiating and interacting with them. In other words, the non-autonomy of music just is its relative autonomy. Once music is even relatively autonomous, there is no nonmusical reality from which it can, in principle, be protected, though at the same time there is no musical reality to which, in every instance, it must be in principle exposed. But the defensive ideal of 'relative autonomy', the relative autonomy that somewhere preserves pure music, music in itself, music uninvolved by the world – that relative autonomy is a chimera. Like the stuffed parrot in Flaubert's tale 'A simple heart', it is a dummy masquerading as the holy ghost.

VI

MEANING, whether in music, image, or text, is a product of action rather than structure. It is more like a gesture than like a body. The criterion for viability or credibility in interpretation (it's better not to speak of validity, much less of truth) is response in kind. Meaning is not produced via a linear derivation from a core of certainty, whether semiotic or hermeneutic. Nor is it produced via a one-to-one matching of less certain interpretive claims with more certain evidential ones. Meaning comes from negotiation over certain nodal points that mobilise the energies of both text (image, dramatic action, musical unfolding) and context. I once called these points hermeneutic windows – partly to counter the idea of music as purely self-sufficient and self-reflective, a windowless monad – and the term seems to have had some currency.

These 'windows' or switching points are what make it neither necessary nor possible for

meaning to be built up in a strict inductive or organic fashion from lower to higher levels of significance. Meaning is always irruptive, always the product of a short-circuit. Meaning arises where interpretation does. It thrives, or not, on what might be termed the *contexture* of interpretation, the capacity to draw together a variety of semantic sources – tropes, tones, phrases, images, ideas – into a sustainable discourse that resembles the way sense is made within a certain social, cultural, or intellectual milieu. The best justification for the critical interpretation of music is that music simply does make sense in this way as a practical fact, and that it is widely felt as integrated with, not remote from, the general atmosphere of meaning in which daily life is lived. The only plausible limit to the interpretive process is the requirement that the interpretation not assume that it works on behalf of a fixed esoteric order – that it not make the structurally dogmatic assumption that there is a hidden, wholly organised meaning to which it (alone) holds the key. That does not require the articulation of meaning to be timid or tepid rather than lively and forceful. It just requires that we leave a few windows open.

VII

I'VE often pondered over Roger Scruton's pungent claim that 'The meaning of a piece of music is what we understand when we understand it as music.'⁵ This seems to enunciate an article of faith for many people involved with music, or at least with classical music. The claim is tantamount to saying that any meaning not expressible in the jargon of musical technique is limited, secondary, superficial, or less than musical. That little 'as' packs a wallop. It makes music mean just about nothing as 'meaning' is usually conceived.

This claim must serve some deep-seated need to be so resilient, because its conceptual legs are spindly at best. The notion, overt or covert, that music *per se* means nothing (or nothing one can say, what one can say being always too little or too much) rests on two fallacies that I have elsewhere sought to dismantle. The first, encountered here already, is that meaning-claims about music are unwarrantably subjective. The second is that the lack of musical semantics renders meaning-claims fatally moot, since they cannot be grounded in the semantics of utterance.⁶ The first fallacy misconstrues subjectivity, defining it as an unregulated private fantasy-machine rather than as a disposition to engage in specific social and historical practices. The second misconstrues the relationship between semantics at the level of utterance and semantics at the level of discourse, failing to recognise that

the intelligibility of local propositions is both independent of the intelligibility of a larger discourse and no guarantee of it.

The latter point is the one I want to stress here. Put concretely, it doesn't matter that *Hamlet* has an extensive substrate of propositions and Chopin's G minor Ballade does not. The fact that I can paraphrase the words 'To be or not to be, that is the question' does not mean that I can say unequivocally what the whole soliloquy is about, much less the whole play. The fact that I cannot say that the Ballade's shifting between incongruous themes in third-related keys is 'about' a specific narrative does not mean that it lacks narrative import.

The Ballade has enough narrative import, narrative impact, for scenes of its performance, featuring lengthy extracts, to play pivotal roles in two recent films of utterly contrary genre. James Lapine's *Impromptu* (1990) enlists the Ballade to help portray the romance between Chopin and George Sand as a breakthrough to authentic identity in the face of social pretense and personal anxiety; it emphasises the difference between the numbing repetitions of the first theme (in G minor) and the self-transfiguring restatements of the second (in E \flat). Roman Polanski's *The pianist* (2003) details the unheroic, purely arbitrary chain of events that allows one lone Jew to survive the Holocaust; it omits any reference to the second theme and concentrates on the combination of the first theme and the furious pounding of the coda. One film binds the music's narrative drive to hope and human aspiration; the other exposes that drive in its rawest state, but also clings to it, as what remains when hope and human aspiration have been systematically annihilated. The Ballade may equally well be 'about' both possibilities – historical possibilities, recognised as such by the films – and about others besides.

The quality of 'aboutness' is not necessarily dependent on propositions. It comes from the way a discourse – a succession of communicative actions – goes 'about' its business. Similarly, my knowledge of what a picture depicts does not guarantee or even necessarily determine my sense of what the picture does. Even to articulate that sense I have to interpolate a description of the picture that implicitly or explicitly acts as an intermediate form, partly that which is interpreted and partly that which interprets. In the era before slide photography, such descriptions were the primary tool of art history. Unless I want to restrict meaning artificially to the more or less explicit content of propositions and depictions, meaning is relatively underdetermined everywhere that words or images express it. It is therefore subjective everywhere, and in no invidious sense.

5. Roger Scruton: *Aesthetics of music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p.344.

6. 'Subjectivity rampant! Music, hermeneutics, and history', in *The cultural study of music*, edd. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert & Richard Middleton (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp.124–35; *Musical Meaning*, pp.11–20.

The relationship between music and meaning is far different from what is commonly supposed. All meaning is uncertain once one moves beyond its most explicit and literal grounds, but this is not a movement away from meaning but towards it. Meaning expands and enriches more the more it departs from its point of origin. Music's seemingly non-referential character brings this paradox to the fore, but the paradox is not musical *per se*; it is hermeneutic. Although music stands – is stationed – outside the sphere jointly occupied by texts and pictures, its interpretative situation forms a model of theirs, not a contrast to it. I say as much in *Musical meaning*. What I want to emphasise here is the sheer ordinariness and everydayness of this model, which is experienced, perhaps, through music above all, as our freedom to interpret, speculate, dream, think for ourselves.

VIII

NICHOLAS Cook has proposed that there are two distinct modes of musical meaning, one potential, the other actualised, one sensory, the other verbal.⁷ What I value most about this model is its recognition of the experience of pure potentiality, of meaning on but not yet across the threshold of recognition, that music so often seems to convey. I've often recorded this experience with the wry self-observation that I can't say what the music I'm listening to means, even though I know what it means very well. At the same time the potential meaning always leaves something of itself behind as a remainder whenever an actual meaning is specified. For me this remainder registers as an incitement to interpret further without either hope of or desire for an exhaustive discovery. I want something to keep on eluding me in way that texts or pictures can never quite do, and not half so pleasurably.

Of course this distinction of modes can't be maintained rigidly; it virtually deconstructs itself at first peep. And it's doubtful that the potential meaning is as pre-verbal as Cook would like to have it. Of course there's an impulse to escape from language and of course (some) music serves it, but escaping from language is very hard to do. The same holds true in the world of objects, a world soaked and saturated with language, a world on whose objects words are often literally inscribed, and whose field of action is a field of language games. Objects always appear to us in the halo of the ways we can, may, or must talk about them. But these reservations only tend to enrich the model, which exemplifies the *a priori* ambiguity of music also theorised in *Musical meaning*. Both models lead directly to the recognition that, where music is concerned, potential meaning has traditionally been mistaken for the

absence of meaning. The very condition of possibility for actual meaning has been mistaken for proof of its non-existence.

IX

RECENT analytical writing has sometimes tended to compartmentalise musical understanding into semantic, formal, stylistic, and analytical niches, as if to acknowledge a plurality of understandings, a polity of equals. But the plurality is actually a hierarchy, lightly veiled if veiled at all. It goes without saying that analytic knowledge is first, the basis of the rest. What probably would be said, if the inquiry were pressed, is that only analysis can tell us to what, exactly, meaning or its production is being ascribed.

My position here is exactly the opposite. Without ascriptions of meaning, formal and analytical knowledge is inert, unactualised, imperceptible. This is not to create a hierarchy of meaning over form; without form, meaning is at best a hunch, at worst sheer vapourising. Both terms are necessary, and one can start the process of understanding anywhere from within either. But there are consequences to this alliance, and they do diminish the cognitive power and authority traditionally claimed by analysis. Although the loop between them is or should be continuous, in the last instance analysis is the means and meaning the end. And although some readings achieve the status of something like knowledge, in the last instance the effect of a reading is to produce others, not to produce closure around a set of determinations that are granted the status of something like fact.

X

WHY is Chopin so invulnerable to critical deflation? And why is Mendelssohn so vulnerable to it? The choice of composers in these questions is neither casual nor arbitrary. Even in his own lifetime, Chopin was 'classical' music's exhibit A of the combination of artistic refinement and emotional sincerity, while Mendelssohn became, soon after his death, the converse persona whose example proved that emotional sincerity could not guarantee full artistic success. So the question is not just about the history of classical music, but about the way this music acquires a history that gives it its very identity.

Part of the answer lies with the historical accident of Mendelssohn's Jewishness, which the anti-Semitic Chopin would have understood as a problem, small 'p', and which the far more anti-Semitic Wagner turned into a Problem, capital 'P', that has covertly shaped the reception of Mendelssohn ever since. But Chopin, too, fits certain pariah stereotypes: of effeminacy, sickness, even

degeneracy. It's just that he routinely shrugs them off like snakeskins.

A larger part of the answer, most listeners not being historians, lies in the music itself: not in its form but in its demeanour. Chopin's musical manner is always aristocratic, Mendelssohn's bourgeois. The one is refined, full of implication, averse to excess of means but at times extreme in feeling; the other is direct, always explicit, more comfortable with energy than with emotion but abundant, even to excess, in technique. These traits play into the legends through which the music is heard, the informal personifications that associate a certain sound with the composers' bodies and personalities and even encompass their early deaths, Chopin's a fate, Mendelssohn's a misfortune.

But none of this was inevitable. It could all have been the other way around with no change in musical manners. The meanings that accrue to Mendelssohn and Chopin and that play about their most famous or characteristic pieces are contingent on the details of musical style and structure but not determined by them. This is so because such meaning is contingent in its essence. All meaning is. Music alone does not suffice to interpret the music itself.

So try an exercise in what-if. What if Chopin's demeanour were, had been, read as a symptom of bourgeois aspiration to refinement, as a denial of the material basis of class comfort and privilege, as a parade of finicky elegance meant to signify the dominance of spirit? The what-if is not all that outlandish, at least by the standards of TS Eliot's 'Portrait of a lady':

We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole
Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and
finger-tips.
'So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul
Should be resurrected only among friends
Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom
That is rubbed and questioned in the concert-
room.'
(ll.9–13)⁸

And what if Mendelssohn's demeanour had been read as an understated aristocratic collecting of rich material and good workmanship, combined with a casual refusal to be ostentatious in refinement? What if we'd been hearing the waltzes and mazurkas as china figurines in a glass cabinet, and the songs without words as lavish furnishings without vulgar display?

It could have happened; it just didn't. Either way, the music of either man is permeated by social, cultural, and historical meanings that are inextricable from its specifically musical qualities. And either way, as the metaphor of permeation suggests, these meanings are both definite and indeterminate, equally hard to describe and to deny, however much the difficulty of description has historically been allowed to make denial easier.

XI

IT'S worth pursuing this issue further. It so happens I heard Mendelssohn's 'Spring song' the other day and had to wonder: how did this sonorically inventive, skillfully wrought piece become a cliché of simpering bourgeois sentimentality – and worse yet a dead cliché, detached even from the context that gave it a semblance of life? One thing for sure: the answer cannot be based on the formal features of the music, and in particular of the infamous melody. I could supply as much such evidence as I liked, either *pro* or *contra* the music's standard identity, and if some other listeners came along who wanted to hear the music as, say, ironically self-subverting or, again, as a display of narcissistic aggressiveness, I could do nothing to stop them – and they, too, would have plenty of evidence from the notes.

As I've said elsewhere, and often, the absolutely wrong conclusion to draw from this is that the music is independent of any such meaning or description. The problem is not something to be solved, but something to be recognised as the medium of both listening and understanding: something to work with, not work against.

Some additional perspective can be gained by posing the 'Spring song' question of another work, and in the negative: how did the opening of Beethoven's 'Spring' Sonata for violin and piano *escape* the bourgeois fatality that overtook the Mendelssohn? Again, nothing in the formal features of the music could produce either immunity for Beethoven or susceptibility for Mendelssohn. But it is possible to locate something in the music that nonetheless accommodates the meanings ascribed to these pieces once those meanings have been put in circulation, for whatever reason – from the canonical images of their composers, to habits and contexts of performance, to reasonable descriptions, of any kind, in any number, of the mood and texture of the pieces. It does not matter that no single description is necessary or inevitable; that's true of any such description, musical or not. What matters is that the description be coherent with and within a certain cultural context, a context introduced into the situation of understanding by means of the description itself.

In the case at hand: Mendelssohn's melody forms a self-contained, cadentially closed unit, a little garden of its own. Its spring-like innocence seems blind (or deaf) to external circumstances. Beethoven's melody, which is similar in design – calmly moving longer notes linked by iridescent bursts of shorter ones – begins in the same way, when the melody is in the violin. But the complementary statement with the melody in the piano explicitly breaks down the closure and introduces a series of contrasts and tensions that get worked out

8. From *Prufrock and other observations* (1917), in TS Eliot: *Collected poems, 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p.8.

through the ensuing sonata form. Beethoven's melody reflects on, and thus distances, its own innocence, and hence its precariousness, in a way that suggests the working of a critical intelligence. The suspension of that intelligence, perhaps with a certain disingenuousness, may, on the other hand, seem what Mendelssohn's piece seeks to accomplish. And this contrast of criticality with something like complacency fits readily into nineteenth-century models (with their many later replicas) of the antagonism between art and intellect on the one hand and bourgeois values on the other.

To be sure, in historical terms this contrast is problematical, if not false. Mendelssohn's bourgeois program is precisely to support art and intellect, no less so than Beethoven's, and far

more so than Chopin's. But the contrast itself does circulate as a trope, and even just as a convention that requires no particular credulity to be accepted as a momentary premise. And this circulation installs these pieces firmly, and even rightly, in a field of meaning to which each may have contributed in a small way, but from which they receive far more than it would have been possible for them to give.

Once again: the absolutely wrong conclusion to draw from this is that the music doesn't really have these meanings, or that its real meanings are just musical, and impervious to, beyond or above, all this semantic jockeying. On the contrary: this is the way meaning happens, and not just to music. And to this process, nothing is impervious.

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From The Musical Times 100 years ago

The Dream of Gerontius in London (MT July 1903)

AFTER waiting for an undue time, during which it has been heard in many parts of the world, Dr. Elgar's 'The Dream of Gerontius' has at last found its way to London. The circumstances of its introduction to the Metropolis – at Westminster Cathedral on the 6th ult. – were, it must be admitted, appropriate enough, if from a practical point of view they left something to be desired. The setting of Cardinal Newman's poem by one who in religion and temperament is in perfect sympathy with it should naturally come under the special protection of the Roman Catholic community, and it was fitting, if only from the point of view of sentiment, that it should be given in the great building which, when completed, is to be the cathedral church of their Archbishop. Even in its gaunt incompleteness, destitute of the wealth of colour which is meant to adorn it, the interior of Bentley's spacious building is immensely impressive, and seems a fitting place for the 'Solemn Musick' of which Milton wrote. Unhappily its acoustic properties are, at least in its present condition, of a somewhat capricious kind, and one has to be very favourably placed to form a clear judgment of the music performed. From some positions the details were fairly distinct, but I doubt whether in any portion of the church the weight of tone was sufficiently felt to be as impressive as it should be. Delicacy and

distance certainly lent charm to much of the music, but on the other hand the more massive choral effects lost something. The choral and orchestral forces, though thoroughly efficient, were not numerous enough for so large an auditorium. The chorus numbered only about 200 voices, but insufficient numbers proved the only fault chargeable to the exceedingly well-drilled singers of the North Staffordshire District Choral Society. The finish and precision of their performance and their excellent intonation deserve high praise, and these virtues were intensified in the semi-chorus, though for the reason already mentioned the refined singing of these twenty-three picked members was, at least for the majority of the audience, refined away to an almost imperceptible point. The Society's conductor is Mr. James Whewall, and to him is due a share of the honour belonging to this very practised chorus. The band consisted of well-known London musicians, and was thoroughly up to its work.

The novel feature of the performance was the appearance of Dr. Ludwig Wullner in the title-rôle, for the first time in this country. Dr. Wullner was obviously handicapped by the English words, but his reading was characterized by an intensity of feeling which atoned for this, and also went far to atone for the marked absence of purely vocal charm. His two colleagues, Miss Muriel Foster and Mr. Ffrangcon-Davies, combine to a remarkable degree

sensuous beauty of voice with dramatic insight, and it would be difficult to imagine more completely satisfying renderings of their respective parts than they, who are now familiar in the work, are able to give. As for the work itself, repeated hearings help to convince one of its power and of the absolute greatness of its not infrequent moments of real inspiration. One who heard it for the first time on this occasion would hardly realize its full impressiveness, and to this extent it may be said that less than full justice has even now been done to 'The Dream of Gerontius' in London. With this reservation, however, the performance, which was conducted by the composer, was one of exceptional sympathy and finish in all its details.

DR. Edward Elgar has been the recipient of a very remarkable gift which well represents the esteem in which he is held in North Staffordshire. It consists of a splendid specimen of the potter's art executed by Mr. C. J. Noke, a resident of Stoke-on-Trent, an artist and designer well known in the district. The gift, a loving cup over twelve inches in height, was executed at the Doulton Works as a remembrance of the performance of the 'Dream of Gerontius' given at Hanley. The cup is enriched with a portrait of Dr. Elgar in his academic robes, surrounded with symbolic bays. The prevailing tint is a rich brown, and the whole design is well thought-out and suggestive to a high degree.

[unattributed]