CHAPTER 11

Historical Musicology: Is It Still Possible?

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In recent years, historical musicology has come close to critiquing itself out of business. Scholars have argued ever more vigorously that the pursuit of music history is driven—and its results contaminated—by the values, creative impulses, dreams, illusions, and neuroses of our time. Historical inquiry, they concur, is fundamentally *creative*, expressive of who we are. Nor could it be otherwise. Without the firm interpretive hand of the music historian, the massive flood of unsorted, undigested, unprocessed material that we euphemistically call "historical evidence" would remain devoid of any apparent sense or meaning. That material is the clay, the raw material, that we are irresistibly driven to cut, shape, and mold in our image. We pick and choose, select and combine, whatever evidence we need to fill out the patterns we wish to perceive. That is why history is so rewarding. It is the creative act of imposing order on chaos.

Of course we do need the illusion that the shape, the pattern, and the order are more than just the products of our imagination—that they have a basis in historical reality. This illusion has traditionally been provided by the ideals of objectivity and authenticity. Yet these ideals have been questioned as well, and with good reason. A historical fact, by itself, may be objective and incontrovertible. But the choice to single it out, from among innumerable other facts, is unavoidably arbitrary, revealing of our interests. Still, it is that choice, and the interpretation that guides it, that

endows a fact with its historical significance. Without interpretation, we are not engaged in history, but in collecting and storing raw data. Positivists might insist that it is possible for interpretations to be objectively valid if they are inductively derived from empirical evidence, somewhat like natural laws or universal principles. Yet the endeavor to prove that induction can yield objective and incontrovertible knowledge defeated epistemologists long ago.

More problematically, perhaps, what is the touchstone of objectivity and authenticity? "Objective" or "authentic" in terms of what? "Historical reality," one might be tempted to answer. Yet historical reality cannot by definition be objective, or at least not objectively knowable. It is a metaphysical entity. It cannot be empirically known by us (otherwise it would not be historical), only postulated—that is, once again, created. This is not to deny that people in the past must have had a sense of their reality. Yet that sense would have been *subjective* even then: it might well have varied enormously depending on whom you asked. If there is such a singular, objective, and transcendent thing as "historical reality," then surely it can be knowable only to God.

Even after the modernist ideals of objectivity and authenticity are abandoned, however, there typically remains a powerful yearning for a past that has a reality of its own, an autonomous existence, transcending the distorting fictions inherent in our modern perspective. This yearning has recently given rise to a new proposal: the idea of a dialogue with the past. Starting, once again, from the premise that history ought to be more than the product of our creative imagination, advocates of this approach insist that the past can be—and indeed should be—an equal partner in a cross-historical dialogue. This so-called ethnographic approach, advocated especially by "new musicologists," has come under criticism as well (Taruskin 1997, xx–xxx). The chief objection is that it succeeds merely in replacing one illusion with another. We can disown the products of our imagination by attempting to show that they correspond to historical truth, and we can disown them by postulating "others" whose "authentic" voice we then hope to hear somehow within our own ventriloquizing. But what's the difference? If the Other is not the product of our historical imagination, then what can it be, except yet another metaphysical postulate?

Whither historical musicology? Is it still possible? That is the critical question. It concerns every historical musicologist, and it affects all our work. In the following essay I outline an introduction to the debate,

clarifying its terms, and, in a polemic conclusion, offering some of my own thoughts.

The problem outlined above is of course anything but new. What we are reliving in the current debate over historical musicology, arguably, is the same "crisis of historicism" that erupted in German scholarship in the 1920s. That crisis affected musicology no less than it did other disciplines. Its impact can be witnessed, for example, in Heinrich Besseler's well-known textbook on the history of early music *Die Musik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, published in 1931. Besseler opened his book with a separate chapter devoted to the "core problem" of historicism, a problem whose causes he explained as follows (Besseler 1931, 3; my translation):

> In the nineteenth century, early music, as a living tradition, retained an active presence only in isolated vestiges. As a phenomenon in its totality it had to be rediscovered, yet this discovery was guided by the needs and longings of the present. What modernity failed to offer was sought and found in history. It was inevitable that its image [of the past] would conform to its own wishful dreams, that selection and interpretation, evaluation and cognizance, were determined by the ideas of an age which yearned for the past in order to use it for its own fulfilment. No consideration of history may pass over the task of elucidating the motives behind such discoveries, and of raising awareness of the manifold reinterpretations which the legacy of earlier eras undergoes as it passes from one generation to another.

These words were written more than seventy years ago, yet they seem to have lost none of their relevance today. What is perhaps most noteworthy about them, given musicology's traditional aspirations to scientific status, is their emphasis on the *psychological* nature of the problem. The issue was not merely one of methodology. According to Besseler, the rediscovery of early music had been driven by unconscious needs and longings, wishful dreams, and a yearning for fulfillment. At the root of all this, he suggested, was a sense of disillusion with modernity, which had failed to offer what the encounter with history was hoped to provide.

If this was indeed the core problem, then it should not surprise us that its recognition provoked a crisis. The ideals that had captivated nineteenth-century scholars turned out to be contaminated by the very problems from which the past had seemed to offer an escape. The needs, longings, dreams, and yearnings had finally been exposed for what they

were: symptoms of modernity. Even the encounter with history, in short, had ended in disillusion. If musicologists were to draw any lessons from this, Besseler concluded, they should continue to expose those symptoms in all historical inquiry, by engaging in rigorous self-scrutiny and self-criticism.

This injunction is of course still being repeated in current debates over historical musicology. Gary Tomlinson, for instance, has argued that "in broad terms, a postmodern musicology will be characterized most distinctively by its insistent questioning of its own methods and practices" (Tomlinson 1993, 21). If we are to implement genuine renewal in the discipline, he suggested, "we might begin to interrogate our love for the music we study" (p. 24). As these words indicate, the terms of the debate may not have changed all that much since the early twentieth century. Our passion for the music of the past may be as ardent as were the needs, longings, dreams, and yearnings of nineteenth-century musicology. Yet for Tomlinson, no less than for Besseler, they may also be self-serving and self-centered. That is why they need to be interrogated.

It can never hurt to repeat that injunction, perhaps not even after seventy years. At the same time, one wonders if persistent self-interrogation is likely to tell us much that we didn't already know. In essence, after all, the problem we are confronting here is that of the *subjectivity* of human knowledge, the fact that it always bears the imprint of the feelings, thoughts, and concerns of those who produce it. This problem is of course paradigmatic of the Western intellectual tradition, and surely there is no need to remind ourselves of it at every turn. We are fallible human beings, and everything we do will always have its problems: so what else is new? On the other hand, the particular psychological mechanism that Besseler identified—history as the projected fulfillment of modern longings—does seem to invite closer analysis. This mechanism has been studied by a number of writers, and it is commonly understood as exhibiting *narcissistic* impulses (Davies 1989). I suspect that this was Besseler's understanding as well, even if he didn't say it in so many words. For the archetypal myth of Narcissus matches his analysis very closely, and in fact matches the current debate over historical musicology equally well.

Like Narcissus, or so critics remind us, we have gazed into a fountain, and have become enamored of the image reflected in its surface. The fountain, one might say, is the totality of the available historical evidence, and the image it returns is the product of our historical vision. We have wanted that image to be real, objective, autonomous, authentic, other. Like Narcissus, however, we have been frustrated in our attempts to capture the

image—that is, to demonstrate its objective reality. Sooner or later we were bound to make a painful discovery. "Oh, I am he!" Narcissus cried, "now I know for sure the image is my own; it's for myself I burn with love; I fan the flames I feel" (Ovid 1986, 64–65). That was the moment of truth. Historical evidence, by itself, may be as real and tangible as the water in the fountain. Yet the past, as we read it into that evidence, has no objective reality, no independent existence, no autonomy, no otherness. Rather, it is always and necessarily the reflection of the viewing subject, the product of our historical imagination. That is why the Narcissus myth is of enduring relevance: it epitomizes the Western discovery of subjectivity (Kristeva 1987).

Let us pause briefly to review the key issues in this analogy. First of all, what have we lost with the discovery? What we have lost is "the past," as a realm that has an autonomous existence independent from our historical vision—just as Narcissus lost the object of his love when he discovered it to be his own reflection. Second, what do we think we have gained? Like Narcissus, we may have gained self-knowledge. The past "as it really was" may be a delusion, yet at least we can try to understand how we have fashioned it in our image. That, as noted before, is what Besseler urged historians to do, and that is what we are still being urged to do today. Finally, why was the discovery a painful one? Because historical musicology, like Narcissus, had invested its deepest needs, longings, dreams, and yearnings in the image it perceived. Its love for the past was staked precisely on the objective reality of that image. Yet this love affair ended in the 1920s, and the aspirations of historical musicology have remained unfulfilled ever since.

The syndrome is a recognizable one: what causes the pain is, in effect, a narcissistic injury. We have loved the past, in all its apparent authenticity and objectivity, but we have been duped. We have made fools of ourselves. There is no past that could have asked us to love it, and like Narcissus, we feel shame and embarrassment at having imagined one. For Narcissus, the initial response was one of despair. Grieving over the lost image that had fueled his love, he cried out: "What now? Woo or be wooed? Why woo at all?" (Ovid 1986, 466). The response in our time is not dissimilar. What now, we wonder? Why pursue historical musicology at all? Is it still possible? Why aspire to authenticity in performance, to objectivity in historical knowledge? Why converse with imagined others, as if they actually had the power to speak to us? It has all been exposed as a fruitless pathological delusion.

Another response, however, is indignation. The past that we knew and loved has let us down, and so it must be repudiated as the delusion it was. Such repudiation has become a popular pastime in present-day scholarship. When scholars dismiss every image that was ever constructed of the past, preferably by previous generations of musicologists, they are not merely expressing a difference of historical interpretation. There is more at stake. We cannot forgive traditional musicology for having indulged and gratified its infatuation with the past, for this is a pleasure that we must deny ourselves. We are only too aware of, after all, how deeply satisfying it can be to identify with the past, to imagine it to be real, to love it with a passion. As we all know, there is an irresistible attraction to exercising the historical imagination: its very subjectivity confirms how much it is a part of who we are.

To indict and interrogate that subjectivity may be conscientious, but it does involve us in inner conflict. We settle that conflict at a high price. When an archival scholar is thrilled about the discovery of a new document, and when a critic dismisses such work as positivistic fact-gathering, it is the latter who is the poorer, not the former. For the archival scholar is capable of perceiving historical meaning and significance in the document, whereas the critic cannot acknowledge it as more than a "mere" fact. The latter may be right, of course. The fountain is just a body of still water. And where we perceived an image of a living past, there is in fact just a mountain of inert evidence. It will always be tempting to be carried away by the historical imagination, yet we must remind ourselves that this faculty is, in the end, subjective. For that very reason, however, it is painful, exceedingly painful, not to be able to allow it free rein, to deny ourselves the sheer exhilaration of exercising it without inhibition.

The chief reward for this self-restraint, this self-abnegation, is the knowledge that we are at least more conscientious than others have been. That knowledge may do little to ease our pain, yet it does bring a further reward. For we have also earned ourselves the right to cast judgment on those who have been less conscientious than we. It is here that we can give free rein at least to our indignation, and allow ourselves the *ersatz* exhilaration of exercising it without inhibition. Targets are easy to find. For there are many things for which we cannot forgive traditional musicology—Western hegemony, positivism, objectivism, modernism, metaphysics, essentialism, reification, whatnot. It is not that those paradigms are merely unsatisfactory or inadequate. That, after all, would be true of every paradigm we might adopt in their place. The problem is that they have offered

us a past that we must forsake. The more we have loved that past, or envy others for their love of it, the more we resent the paradigms for having accommodated that love.

Yet our anger is directed at musicology as well, and this anger is of a particularly bitter and unforgiving kind. To the extent that we have only ourselves to blame, the narcissistic injury calls for punishment. "Then in his grief he tore his robe," as Ovid wrote of Narcissus (Ovid 1986, 3: 480–81), "and beat his pale cold fists upon his naked breast." We, too, must engage in merciless self-criticism, perpetually reminding ourselves of our failings, and finding even a perverse pleasure in exposing them. "The narcissistic self," as historian Martin L. Davies noted, "evinces a depressive, destructive aggressivity, repudiating the unworthy Other [that is, our image of the past] with an intensity matched only by its own internal self-castigation [that is, our self-criticism]" (Davies 1989, 266).

These, needless to say, are not the signs of healthy critical debate. They are symptoms, rather, of a profound and despairing sense of melancholia. In recent years, historical musicology has developed a moral conscience, a superego, of unprecedented righteousness and severity. Under the guise of critical reflection, it keeps reminding the discipline of its unworthiness. Everything you do, it says, everything you have ever done, has been self-serving, self-centered, and self-indulgent. Or, to put it in more familiar terms, everything has been hegemonic, positivist, objectivist, modernist, essentialist, totalizing. We indulge and placate that superego not just by accepting its accusations, but also by seeking to satisfy its demands. We cannot simply throw ourselves into an encounter with the past, or so the reasoning goes, for we have no idea how base our hidden motives may be, and how badly we may need to expiate them. That is why, over the last decade or so, musicologists have become engaged in a desperate search for legitimation—a predicament summed up by the question, is it still possible? This search has typically led away from historical inquiry as such into the realm of critical theory. By now, we are close to reaching the stage where we cannot make any step, no matter how small, without theorizing it first. Without such legitimation, we feel, historical musicology may not be possible at all.

This search for legitimation is doomed to failure, however. As I said before, the problem comes down, at bottom, to the subjectivity of human knowledge. If this problem is paradigmatic of the Western intellectual tradition, then of course we cannot theorize ourselves out of it, no matter how hard we might try. Why then do we persist? Chiefly, I suspect,

because we feel *incriminated* by our subjectivity. And we cannot see any legitimation for the pursuit of history if everything we do is bound to incriminate us further. We are fallible human beings, true, but we ought not to be. That is why we have lost the confidence to look into the fountain. Every image we see reminds us of our subjectivity, and confirms our unworthiness to engage in historical inquiry. If only we could prove ourselves worthy again, if only we could discover some legitimation for what we do, that confidence might be restored.

And yet: worthy of whom, worthy of what? Surely our subjectivity cannot make us unworthy of ourselves. For to be subjective is to indulge oneself—and self-indulgence typically fosters a sense of self-worth. That is why the pursuit of history is so rewarding, and yet so problematic. We distrust our subjectivity precisely because it has made us too self-indulgent, too pleased with ourselves. If this makes us unworthy, then surely we must be unworthy of the Other—that is, the past, which we readily confess to having stifled under our mastery pose, our "hegemonizing" gestures. That is what our moral conscience tells us. Go theorize, it says, and then look again: you will see that there really is an objective past where you used to see your own image, that there really are others where you used to hear your own voice. Your work so far has been unworthy of that past, unworthy of those others. But you can redeem yourself, and renew the discipline, if you can manage to see them now, in all their reality, through the corrective lens of critical theory.

This, needless to add, is merely another lapse into narcissism. And yet, it is this perpetual relapse, alternated by the perpetual rediscovery of our subjectivity, that keeps the debate going round in circles. For every image that is exposed as subjective, a new one is theorized as real. If we are to follow Gary Tomlinson, for example, "the primary stimulus for musicology, instead of our love for this or that music, might more luminously be our love of, concern for, belief in, alienating distance from—choose your words—the others who have made this or that music in the process of making their world" (Tomlinson 1993, 24). That is to say, if narcissistic identification with music is self-serving, narcissistic identification with others might be selfless. One would like to believe Tomlinson, but the premise does strain credulity. No amount of theorizing can endow historical others with an objective existence. They are dead and gone, and can only be revived in the historical imagination. Surely one cannot blame that imagination for being unworthy of the others it calls into being. Yet for Tomlinson, its inherent subjectivity is detrimental to the *real* others

who (he imagines) exist beyond its ken. If only we could prove worthy of those others, by escaping from the prison of our subjectivity, historical musicology might be redeemed at last. This aspiration does indeed seem to motivate his call for disciplinary renewal. Several critics have drawn attention to the "aversion to old-fashioned subjectivity," "distrust of subjectivity," indeed "antisubjectivity" that appears to underwrite his harsh indictments of traditional musicology, and his desire to break away from it (Kramer 1993, 32, 33; Taruskin 1997, xxv). As Charles Rosen concluded, "he ends up by asking, in short, for a value-free history, although he knows that this ideal of objectivity is impossible" (Rosen 1994b, 62).

Can we break away from this vicious circle? If we want to, I suspect, we probably can. As far as narcissism is concerned, the solution seems deceptively simple. Throughout Western history, at least until the modern period, it has been taken as self-evident that the past has no objective reality or existence (Ligota 1982, 3–6; cf. also Schott 1968, 192–93). "When a true narrative of the past is related," as St. Augustine observed in his *Confessions* (XI. xviii. 23), "the memory produces not the actual events, which have passed away, but words conceived from images of them" (St. Augustine 1991, 233–43). For St. Augustine this was not a painful discovery at all; on the contrary, it was a matter of common sense. After all, "who can measure the past which does not now exist, or the future which does not yet exist, unless perhaps someone dares to assert that he can measure what has no existence?" (XI. xvi. 21). To the extent that the past has any reality, it dwells only in the memory of those who narrate history. There is no Other to fall in love with, only a self that may choose to dwell in "the fields and vast palaces of memory" (X. viii. 12).

Still, I doubt that narcissism is necessarily the problem here. Nor, for that matter, are Western hegemony, positivism, objectivism, modernism, metaphysics, essentialism, reification, and all the rest. The real issue probably lies elsewhere. Let me put it quite bluntly: if we cannot accept that we are fallible human beings, that everything we do will always have its problems, then historical musicology will indeed be possible no longer. To put it even more bluntly: There is a certain arrogance in depreciating a worthwhile endeavor, in this case historical musicology, merely because we cannot attain perfection in it. Narcissism may be a human weakness, but instead of excoriating it for that reason, we might learn to live with it. True, narcissistic history may potentially trap us in delusion. Yet the fiction of a "real" past has undeniable heuristic value, and may well bring out the best in us—our historical imagination, for instance, or our subjectivity, or excitement, or yes, our love.

What, exactly, have we become afraid of? We know that there is no real past, that there are no real others of whom we could be unworthy. The only world that is real is the one we live in today. History adds a rich dimension to that world. If we are in danger of being unworthy of anything or anyone, it is probably our readers—*real* others, whom we may perplex with our scholarly angst, annoy with our narcissistic self-torment, and exasperate with our defensive theorizing. It is only the paralyzing fear to take human risks that might render historical musicology impossible. Or rather, perhaps, it is the fear that we may not be forgiven for our failings. Yet we cannot ask anyone's forgiveness if we are unable to forgive ourselves, and the scholars who worked before us. That, I suspect, may be the hardest thing of all: to find it in our hearts to understand and accept those failings—before we blame them on the discipline, and critique it out of business altogether.

Further Reading

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