



Barbara Eichner. *History in Mighty Sounds: Musical Constructions of German National Identity, 1848 -1914.* Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2012. 310 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-754-1.



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Nineteenth-Century Music, History, and Ideological Critique

In recent years, cultural studies has methodologically benefited from a resurgence of sound studies, almost single-handedly initiated by R. Murray Schafer's magisterial *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977; reissued 1994).[1] This field, broadly interdisciplinary in scope, investigates the historically changing and culturally contingent soundscapes of modernity, focusing on the (re-)production of a wide range of sonic phenomena, their ideological implications, transmission through technological media, effects on the constitution or displacement of the human subject, and contributions to the shaping of collective identities in time and space. Sound studies thus restores the acoustic dimension partially replaced by the hegemony of the visual and the optical media—photography, film, television—that have shaped the emergence of classical modernity since the nineteenth century. Classical and popular music, which may be defined in its most abbreviated sense as aesthetically organized sound, ought to be at the center of sound studies, and even Schafer, as a practicing composer, already devoted a significant

portion of his volume to this issue.[2] But the inclusion poses considerable methodological problems. These stem most notably from the difficulty of translating absolute music (i.e., purely instrumental music without a clearly discernible programmatic message) into the very fields—history, politics, ideology, verbal language, visuality—that form a privileged field of interest in cultural studies. But even genres that project a specific program or contain texts—opera, song, oratorio, etc.—pose hermeneutical problems stemming from the resistance of any type of music to be analyzed in representational terms beyond the purely formal structure of harmony, melody rhythm, instrumentation, or timbre. Nonetheless, as I have shown elsewhere, music is always characterized by a partial transposability into other media, artistic genres, and discursive formations, such as visual imagery and poetic expression.[3]

History would seem to be a predestined site for such intermedial transfers of music. But since historiography is by definition a discipline focusing on the representational or even realist-mimetic strategies of texts, visual

artifacts, or sonic documents, the analysis of the multiple roles that music plays in the shaping of political events and social processes poses formidable methodological questions. Barbara Eichner's meticulously documented study of the shaping of German national identities through the composition and performance of operas, choruses, and symphonic poems addresses these issues in thought-provoking ways. Although she does not explicitly align herself with sound studies, her focus on the intermedial relationship between musical genres and social history provides a methodologically innovative perspective on the question of how to integrate musicological analysis into the historical branches of sound studies and cultural critique generally. As she admits, historians have often been reluctant to include music in their research, "perhaps because engagement with musical notation is seen as too specialised a skill, which resists cursory readings and is not readily 'quotable'" (pp. 3-4). This resistance, as she points out, is all the more surprising "[g]iven the central position of music in nineteenth-century Germany" and the "recent proliferation of investigations of national identity" (p. 3). Seeking to fill this lacuna, Eichner sets out to deconstruct the nineteenth-century self-mystification that hypostatized musical nationalism as a form of "apolitical universalism," which effectively served German political and cultural superiority while asserting a special path of German musical tradition (p. 4). Opposing such ahistorizing tendencies, Eichner "brings history into the equation" (p. 5) by analyzing compositions that evoke mythologized events, dramatic images, and heroic figures from what was presumed to be the German(ic) tradition. The goal of these interactions among "history, myths and music" was "to give sound, image and voice to German national identity" (p. 6). This compensatory need for an aestheticizing arena of political nationalism was all the more urgent given the fact that nineteenth-century Germans "tended to think of their national development as a series of narrowly averted failures," embattlements, and threats from "outside or inner enemies" (p. 11). Given the prevailing heritage of the Romantic idealization of music as a transfiguring and even redemptive art, it is reasonable to argue, as Eichner cautiously does, that "the medium of music is ideally suited to emotionally anchor the floating national concepts" (pp. 14-15). In this way, the spiritual powers of music collaborated with the "religious elements of nationalism" and a view of history that "was not simply an ersatz religion for the secularized intellectual but fully participated in the search for a higher truth" (p. 17). In this context, the events surrounding the imaginary biographies of Hermann/Arminius, the Cher-

uscan resistance-fighter against the Romans, the emperor Friedrich I "Barbarossa," or the Valkyries were deliberately and freely reshaped by composers to represent national myths and histories (p. 32).

Interestingly, Eichner emphasizes the intermedial relation of music with artistic historicism, which seems to have been neglected by previous scholarship. She notes especially the tentative affinities of music with architectural historicism, whose main concern is "historical style—or the multitude of stylistic alternatives provided by the past—rather than the historical narrative" (p. 32). Traditionally, musicology, too, used "historicism" mainly in a "stylistic and restorative sense," even though Eichner seeks to broaden the term to include parallels between music and "historical paintings, novels, or dramas" as well as the narratives underpinning many large-scale compositions (pp. 33-34). Thus, in chapter 1, she discusses two operas, Heinrich Dorn's *Die Nibelungen* (1854) and Carl Amand Mangold's *Gudrun* (1851) as works "transforming epic poetry from the treasure-trove of medieval German literature into glorifications of the national character" (p. 41). Their efforts were aided by the construction of a "continuous national character," reflective of typical middle-class values presumably anticipated by the *Nibelungenlied*, such as hospitality, honesty, fidelity, bravery, and other heroic traits (pp. 46-47). However, despite an enthusiastic reception by critics and audiences, neither the endorsement of German virtues nor the "hybrid musical language" of these operas guaranteed their lasting success, as they were soon displaced by Wagner's monumental treatment of the Nibelungen material in his *Ring* (p. 80).

In her chapter on the adaptation of the mythologized lives of Germanic heroes, exemplified by Heinrich Hofmann's *Armin* (1877) and Carl Grammann's *Thusnelda* (1881), Eichner shows that these constructions of national identity were inextricably intertwined with gender stereotypes: military strength and sacrificial readiness for the men and virtue and chastity for the women. Even during their time, these overdetermined images were seen as being too heavy-handed and became an easy target for popular parody. The male-voice choral movements of the nineteenth century fulfilled a different ideological agenda of "social improvement, aesthetic education and national unification" (p. 163), while mixed choirs mediated between the professional performance of great masterworks and a wider audience of musically educated citizens. Finally, the case of the symphony, widely regarded as the prototypical example of German musical universalism, poses special problems for the por-

trayal of programmatic content, even though the equation of the genre with the autonomy of absolute instrumental music was not self-evident, as the majority of Austro-German composers embraced “poetic evocations of history, literature and nature in their instrumental works” (p. 232). The *Hakon Jarl* Symphony (1875) by Carl Reinecke and the symphonic poem *Barbarossa* by Siegmund von Hausegger (1901) represent two different trajectories of this genre: while Reinecke remained loyal to the conservative tradition of Viennese Classicism and the early Romantic school, Hausegger’s piece is an almost “aggressively modernist” manifestation of the “*fin-de-siècle* maximalism” promoted by Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, and Alexander Skryabin (p. 272).

The fates of largely forgotten works like these raise crucial questions of musical strategy, aesthetic value, and canonicity. Eichner’s goal is not to ask *whether* certain musical pieces are national or even nationalist but “*how* they both mirror and shape ideas about German national identity” (p. 35). This, however, creates a methodological problem since such “strategic and technical” questions are posed without querying the composition’s “aesthetic worth or lack thereof” (p. 35). Certainly it true that nineteenth-century musical historicism should be judged by its self-professed capability of “embodying or promoting a sense of national belonging,” rather than by today’s expectations of a “successful and ‘autonomous’ work of art,” which have often resulted in eliminating works “obviously endorsing a contemporary concern” from the great canon of time-transcending music (p. 35). It is also useful, as Eichner does, to trace such “multiple strategies” of constructing German national identities by resurrecting composers marginalized or half-forgotten in standard music histories (p. 37). The partial deconstruction of established canons, ideological fixations, and scholarly pre-occupations is a necessary task of cultural critics lest they simply replicate or perpetuate historically constructed processes as timeless truths. It is problematic, however, to separate the “strategic and technical” from the “aesthetic,” since in a work of art, whatever its composer’s intention, its musical material, structure, and presumed effects upon the audience may have been, strategies and techniques are always necessarily realized in aesthetic terms that in turn need to be evaluated in political, moral, or intellectual contexts. Against her own initial rejection of aesthetic value judgments, Eichner herself is rather harsh on Mangold’s opera, which, as she believes, does not simply live up to a then nonexistent “Wagnerian gold-standard,” but “falls short of Mangold’s own musical and dramatic ideals of (German) grand opera, while pro-

jecting an at best ambivalent message about the German national character” (p. 73). Similarly, Eichner concedes that the “limitations of the [choral] genre, such as a narrow overall range and a uniform sound, were admitted even by the earliest advocates of the male choirs, especially in comparison with the musically superior mixed choirs” (p. 204). Finally, even in Hausegger’s ambitiously innovative symphonic poem “the transfer of thematic material from one movement to the other intervenes with the musical cohesion and sense of unity and obscures the actually quite simple narrative programme” (p. 270).

A similar contradiction seems to haunt Eichner’s almost polemical stance toward canonical figures. She stresses that “a compensatory history that surrounds prominent figures with some new supporting characters is not intended. Richard Wagner will, of course, continue to play the role of the ‘elephant in the room’, ... but his unavoidable presence provides a context for his less well-known colleagues, not *vice versa*” (p. 38). However, the relation of canonical figures and half-forgotten or marginalized ones does not necessarily have to be conceptualized in such hierarchical terms of center and context; rather, this relation is always one of supplementarity, mutual illumination or critique, influence, and creative appropriation. As Eichner’s fascinating chapter on *fin-de-siècle* redemption operas shows, Wagner provided a “tangle of different and sometimes conflicting redemption models” that were reshaped in widely diverse ways by the “mythological operas” of other composers, such as Peter Cornelius’s *GunlÅ¶d*, Heinrich Vogl’s *Der Fremdling*, and Cyrill Kistler’s *Baldurs Tod* (p. 119). As her detailed analysis of all four composers show, their relationship is one of affinity and difference, rather than centrality and context, and in this sense her interpretive practice fortunately refuses to adhere to her earlier theoretical propositions.

Despite these methodological issues, Eichner’s study is to be commended for her bold and decisive advocacy of integrating musicological analysis, sociohistorical research, and ideological critique. The volume makes a convincing case for situating musical genres in a wide and historically shifting context of mythological self-fashioning and historical nostalgia, nation-building and collective identities, performance practices and audience expectations. Executing this difficult interpretive task in exemplarily nuanced and detailed fashion, Eichner sets a high bar for subsequent studies, but it is one that will hopefully inspire further interdisciplinary scholarship in the field of musical historiography and sound studies.

Notes

[1]. R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, NY: Destiny, 1994). For a useful documentation of the wide range of sound studies, see *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed.

Jonathan Sterne (London, New York: Routledge, 2012).

[2]. Schafer, *Soundscape*, 103-119.

[3]. See Rolf J. Goebel, "Transposing Music: An Intermedial Perspective on German Modernist Poetry," *The German Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (2013): 294-310.

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