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Twenty Years After: A Review Essay of Musicological Identities<sup>1</sup>

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*Musicological Identities: Essays in Honor of Susan McClary*

(Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009)<sup>2</sup>

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It has been nearly twenty years since the publication of Susan McClary's provocative *Feminine Endings*. The appearance of a festschrift, with contributions from her most reliable students and acolytes, presents a suitable occasion to rethink the contribution to musicology of McClary and her school. I believe, first of all, that we can speak straightforwardly of a 'school'. There are a number of important orientations, principles if you will, that unite these authors in their diversity, marking them together ideologically, and apart methodologically from other versions of musicology; they form a major strand of the so-called New Musicology<sup>3</sup>. Historically, perhaps first among these principles were regular and fervent proclamations of ideological distance from (and hence disinterest in) 'traditional' musicology and its outmoded scholarly paradigms; such edicts often took the form of tabular lists of the virtues of 'us' and the flaws of 'them'<sup>4</sup>. Musicology's paradigm—the singular is deliberate—is considered methodologically superseded because it ignored social context in favour of a chimerical abstract called 'the music itself', and morally outdated because it espoused elitist canons of white male privilege, intellectually as well as musically.

At same time, there was a peculiar<sup>5</sup> yet persistent appeal in New Musicology to Joseph Kerman and Theodor Adorno as exemplars. The inspiring commonality of this ill-assorted pair is the putative right, privilege, and duty of musicology to (abandon pretence to objective scholarship and) "speak otherwise", to tell the truth about good and bad in music. This tremendously reassuring concession to engrained consumer mental habit may explain part of the popularity of the school.

Aesthetic relativism is a second operant principle, based loosely in the Birmingham school approach to art of Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige, rather than the "social construction of reality". Although this latter phrase is often invoked, the intellectual history of philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks for help and critical commentary to MvW, MEB, RJ, SRB, and JR.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter "festschrift".

<sup>3</sup> Henceforth the expression used here to describe this loose but distinct ideological coalition.

<sup>4</sup> The New Musicology's sometime affectations of enthusiasm for Frankfurt School Critical Theory have occasional bases in reality; Max Horkheimer's ponderous and schematic tabulation of the differences between Critical and "Traditional" theory traffics in the same intellectually simplistic differentiation between 'us' and 'other' (Horkheimer 1972).

<sup>5</sup> In Kerman's case, because of his blunt acceptance of middle class white male privilege (Kerman 1985: 19-20); in Adorno's because his usage of 'Critical' is a legacy of Kantian idealism, not a warrant to judge music politically; despite the frequency of this very gesture in Adorno, it is a resoundingly secondary element of his conception, a coincidental side-effect rather than a point of intellectual privilege; see the afterword to (Adorno 1986).

(such as Schutz and Husserl) and anthropological (such as Herskovits) work that spawned it is ignored. “The social construction of reality” is shorthand for a perspective that treats old-fashioned, canonically-based value judgment as naively contingent but, confusingly, leaves clear room for apodictic evaluation on the (putatively novel) fault lines of politicized taste. Third, the New Musicology tends to define ‘context’ solely by specific (and categorical) social factors such as gender, so-called ‘race’, and sexual orientation—class makes the list conspicuously less often—rather than, as with Adorno, Marx, or Weber, the broader social totality or its historical elements.

Thus on the one hand non-‘Critical’ versions of sociological or social thought play no constitutive role in New Musicology. This can lead to a somewhat curious, even one-sided perception of social thought in the work of this school; sociologists may have a hard time recognizing their field as it emerges in these hands. On the other hand, a complex or nuanced vision of the social whole (such as Adorno’s) is also absent, and no new paradigm of social relations of society emerges to replace it or other, discarded and dismissed models.

In this sense, New Musicology’s commitments are specifically post-modernist. Many of the feminist literary theorists from whom McClary has borrowed her methods<sup>6</sup> (and especially her particular social concerns) consider general models of society, even Adorno’s negative dialectical conception, to be modernist or, in the jargon’s tonality, “foundationalist”, abstractions, to be rejected axiomatically in favour of a more or less programmatic anti-essentialism. To be sure, the grounds of this grand refusal are rarely argued explicitly or historically by McClary’s feminist exemplars, much less by her directly. A sobering amount of the post-modernist ‘anti-essentialist’ literature blanketly ignores both the subtlety of essentialist argument in thinkers such as Plato and Leibniz and, even more egregiously, the trenchant anti-essentialist strains in classical philosophical and sociological literatures. In this polemically bifurcated world, anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism quickly became self-evident truths, defining parts of the post-modern attitude’s self-consciously contemporary self-image, at once accepted without detailed argument as essential premises for (“genuinely”) contemporary scholarly work, and as such presumed to be created by such work for the first time. The often inchoate howls of protest from ‘traditional’ scholars were sufficient (and sole) proof of post-modern scholarship’s novelty and innovation, and macabre demonstration of the innovative immanence, hence ipso facto valid and valuable, of post-modern ideas. Hence a blanket mistrust of and dismissive hostility to past thought is a fourth characteristic of New Musicology. Here again, the paradox, if not contradiction, embodied in Horkheimer’s coarse distinction between ‘Critical’ and ‘everything else’<sup>7</sup> exacerbates the notion that a key flaw of the outmoded and dismissed schools comprising Old Musicology[®] as “other” is their tendency to irresponsible totalizing generalization!

Distinctly correlated with the previous characteristic, New Musicology cleaves to a programmatic sympathy for most, though emphatically not all, forms of cultural expression allegedly rejected and despised by the mandarin intellectual tradition: black hip-hop and some R&B (but not mainstream jazz); white Heavy Metal (but not Country); Women’s music (but not

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<sup>6</sup> On this, see Sayrs, 1993-94.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Horkheimer, op. cit.

music by non-feminist women such as Carla Bley). Generally, the contemporary is preferred to the traditional, sometimes stridently so.

Finally, and perhaps most contentious, New Musicology allows itself considerable license for imputed assumption, raising this practice to something of a methodological postulate. Whether assigning (binary) gender qualities to instrumental themes or contextual insensitivity to traditional musicology, New Musicology has forged what amount to innovative standards of evidence in the field. Much of McClary's own work depends on the largely unargued, even unspoken postulate that unequal gender roles were so pervasive in western culture that they could not help but be audible in so intimate an expressive experience as instrumental music<sup>8</sup>. From this presumption, untrammelled imputation follows, because the de facto purpose of a musicological investigation is documentation of the extant and, again, all-pervasive social circumstance. Precisely because the germane social circumstances are so daunting and substantive—who could deny that 19thc. gender roles or images of the orient are monstrously unjust by our contemporary standard?—it follows that disputing their (alleged) documentation in any guise amounts to disputing the broader fact. Hence the pathologization of dissent to New Musicology's premises and conclusions, and a stance that melds self-pity with self-righteousness<sup>9</sup>.

Of course this summary can be disputed on the same grounds as its own complaint. To impute imputation to a school based on it is ultimately possible only through that self-same gesture, or something that appears indistinguishable from it. Once the ground of evidence and reason in a discourse opens Pandora's Box to a free hermeneutics of ascription (and imputed political motive), proof and even rational demonstration become moot. It took nearly a century for Freudian logic to enter musicology, and it did so in the ironic guise of a devoutly anti-patriarchal espousal of what Carl Dahlhaus called "higher critique", the intrinsically self-congratulatory position that New Musicology's inherent mandate is to redress grave moral insufficiencies in the field's extant practice. What could be more obvious and undeniable than musicology's overwhelming record, twenty years ago, of ignoring and/or dismissing music by women? What could be more reasonable than postulating congruence, at the very least, between such a sexist focus and the music studied, whose primary exemplars included hyper-masculine figures such as Beethoven and Schönberg? Under the circumstances, it would be (and did prove) difficult to resist pathologizing resistance to procedures based on such glaringly obvious premises.

Yet it seems to me a borderline intellectual tragedy that New Musicology's practitioners so readily adapted Freudian logic without more searching critique, even as they rejected and denounced Freud's own substantively sexist conclusions. With a century's worth of hindsight, the most outrageous aspect of Freud's work from a scholarly perspective may be the ruinous

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<sup>8</sup> The dreary sexism of texted music was sufficiently omnipresent that Catherine Clément could argue that the sole purpose of opera was the repression of women; McClary contributed the foreword to the English translation of this exuberantly sweeping perspective (Clément 1988).

<sup>9</sup> This tone is struck immediately in the *festschrift*, when Rose Rosengard Subotnik reminds us (*festschrift*, vii; see also xixff.) of how difficult McClary found it to publish and find work in the early days; the imputation of heroism in the face of unreasonable and even malevolent resistance is plain.

complacency with which he ascribes pathologized meanings to utterances of any and every kind. Ultimately (and unreflexively) convinced of the infallibility of his own premises, Freud awarded himself the privilege of virtually unrestricted imputation<sup>10</sup>. With such quasi-infallibility as a premise, the fractious history of the psychoanalytic movement quickly began to look as if it scripted by the Marx Brothers. The broader damage to the methodological foundations of psychology have yet to be resolved, as Freud's opponents carried the day, but found themselves compelled to take refuge in a coarse positivism scarcely less irrational than the excesses resisted.

As the historical impact of both Freud and McClary show, once the genie of free imputation is released, the disciplinary dilemma it introduces is difficult to shake off. That dilemma is not the causal 'fault' of Freud or McClary, not least because polemical refutation of their premises and conclusions doesn't help, as the early, largely helpless polemics against New Musicology by outrage-driven critics showed<sup>11</sup>. Once a general climate of hermeneutic suspicion establishes itself it becomes extremely difficult to undo through rational discussion, arguably impossible. Bitterly polemical appearances to the contrary, the "hermeneutics of suspicion"<sup>12</sup> generates a methodological impasse not based in the wilfully blind perception on either side. It is better understood as an historical state of a field of inquiry's development, a sustained dilemma poorly suited to ultimate resolution. Such situations develop not so much due to conflicts of individual standpoint or method per se as through less tangible historical shifts in conceptions of relevance, or paradigms, in a word; hence the futility of "one to one" scholarly debate. As with Freudianism, seen in and as an integral moment in the history of its field, the general predicament presented by New Musicology is rooted in a complex balance between discrepant versions of self-evidence, and the broader, alas even less concrete demands of methodological pluralism. It is indisputable to New Musicologists that addressing the—again, quite devastating—historical record of gender imbalance in musicology and music history is of a piece with dealing directly with the broader currents of sexism, just as it is equally indubitable to 'traditional' theorists and historians that considering the 'music itself' (and its conditions) is the requisite focus of study, the proper and ethical version of musicological practice. The self-evident is that which is to be accepted not so much without dissent as without expectation of transcendence, inescapable intellectual and procedural necessities beyond which one cannot go; hence a momentum that results in the standing and reciprocal damage to pluralism presented by New Musicology and its opponents.

In the initial controversies about feminist musicology and its gender-oriented versions of musicological methods, it seems to have been overlooked all around that the discipline already had an extensive history of attempting to prove the immanence of particular social realities. Eastern European musicologists such as János Maróthy<sup>13</sup> were just as certain of the immanence of class in (instrumental) music as the McClary school is of gender. Moreover, because the

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<sup>10</sup> The sole caveat pertains to Freud's chaste and repeated insistence that psychoanalysis should not be practiced on anyone or anything but a live patient; such insistences even accompanied Freud's own versions of this very practice.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Van den Toorn 1995: chapter one.

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur 1970: 19ff.

<sup>13</sup> Maróthy 1974.

creators of “bourgeois” music were not necessarily members of this class themselves (but merely its servitors), Maróthy was forced to abstract a kind of consciousness from music history, a second-level cultural expression of class attitude and sympathy that is unavoidably distinct from the direct manifestations of (Marxian) class consciousness in social and political action. Indirection perforce leads to circular argument, and to imputation: we know this was music for a bourgeois audience, so it must be suffused with the (class) consciousness of the bourgeoisie. The tricky part is of course that Maróthy must assign a state (or content) of consciousness to people who not only were unaware that they had it, but who characteristically and vehemently deny that such a thing is possible in the first place. The process of political ascription requires uneasy divisions between consciousness and conscious awareness, gaps filled with the theory of ideology and the right of imputation.

The resolution of the tension still lies along the axis of pluralism, it seems to me. That axis is constituted not by the assertion of (axiomatic) difference, but by the ever-renewed re-investigation and self-questioning of the axiomatic and self-evident. Just as traditional musicology should continue to ask if access to “the music itself” is possible, so New Musicology should ask how access to gendered music is possible. In practical terms, the upshot of a development like New Musicology is a stark and distinctly uneasy subjectivity in scholarly intellectual commitment. What kinds of paradox are an acceptable cost of the business of inquiry? With which distortions will we live in order—eventually?—to see clearly? The (now historical) record of Freudianism suggests that internal disciplinary schisms so intrinsically committed morally to blanket opposition toward traditional versions of a field and, through the pathologizing of dissent, to everyday ad hominem, will never entirely assimilate, nor reach pluralist accommodation. If the Freudian lion has at last lain down with the lambs of positivism and empiricist psychology—I take no further responsibility for the discursive consequences of this imagery—then the reconciliation has not occurred in the field of psychology itself, but in semiotics and (phenomenological) philosophy; disciplines notably less intransigently committed to unself-critical absolutism<sup>14</sup>.

The situation is slightly more awkward for New Musicology, at least professionally, because the rejection of past-looking musicology has not entailed looking for new lines of scholarly work. New Musicology’s goal from the start was to supplant traditional visions of the field with paradigms from literature, film, and elsewhere, and take over the hidebound departments, not close them. Withal, New Musicology discourses sport rebarbative redundancies, moments of ostensibly inadvertent recreation of the ostensibly despised and rejected features of traditional musicology. Inspired by Joseph Kerman most directly, perhaps, New Musicology rejected the discipline’s pretences to objective or non-judgmental music study as specious self-deception, based moreover in the wilful disregard of cultural context. Yet Susan McClary’s famous attempt to praise her friend Monika Vander Velde’s music at the expense of Beethoven’s<sup>15</sup> seeks more-than-subjective grounds for the superiority of her music in the gendered unfolding of musical time, even as it defiantly purports to reject traditionally objective criteria for such an assessment. The presumably calculated impudence of praising an

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<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur 1970.

<sup>15</sup> McClary 1991.

obscure Minnesota academic over the most revered figure in the (male?) canon caused a predictable upset that obscured the methodological continuities with Old Musicology, which also attempted to furnish more than personal reasons for accepting the judgments of a particular canon of musical taste. McClary's commendation of Vander Velde depends on gender considerations which may or may not be audible and *culturally* imminent in the music, however; hence her encomium, perhaps intentionally, divides believers and non-believers, staking out a distinctive place for itself through controversy. Does this plainly advocacy-based juxtaposition take account of the historical and cultural context of these two composers, however?

Alleged New Musicology role model Theodor Adorno's work both recommends and supersedes a traumatized relation to past thought and experience. The distinction is especially evident in the contrast between his treatment of Wagner and the attitude to Beethoven of a contemporary critical musicologist such as McClary. As McClary's critics, especially Kofi Agawu (1996), make clear, McClary's analytical propositions rest on a bed of misperception and error. McClary simply does not have the musical and philosophical experience needed to make a coherent case for her 'gendered' analyses of instrumental music. Hence her attempt to read contemporary feminist values into genuinely past music fails not so much on the empirical problem of inaccurate representation of the course of musical events—though this exists a-plenty—but on a fundamentally misconceived interpretation of the past. The objection that Brahms and Tchaikovsky would (and could) not have conceived of their themes in the gendered manner of McClary is straightforward and reasonable—but naive. At the least, a century's depth hermeneutics have desensitized us to the contest of interpretive opinion, placing the views of past human beings in the shadow of a priori naiveté. The unself-critical willingness to blindly and arbitrarily read plainly contemporary concepts of (e.g.) gender into a discourse infinitely too subtle for such coarse binary oppositions betokens not only high-handedness, but a new version of naiveté, scarred by disingenuity.

The ever-traumatized past is purported to be represented by a discipline, historical musicology, that is systematically insensitive to context. Yet if we understand the terms to comprise social circumstances beyond the canonic quartet of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, the notion that musicology was insensitive to culture and context is demonstrably, even radically false. It is simply wrong to pretend that Old Musicology ignored culture and context. New Musicology tends to justify the blanket charge with tendentious and one-sided definitions, exclusively but arbitrarily based in its chosen categories of historical political injustice. Without claiming this excerpt as typical of traditional musicology, I think it would be difficult to find a more contextually and culturally nuanced music discussion than these comments about early Christian music by Jacques Handschin:

Only by addressing music in the framework of the Christian church can we begin to differentiate musically between orient and occident. We need to recall that the early missionary zeal in the Mediterranean world was not the work of Jewish/Christian congregation of Jerusalem, but the heathen/Christians of Antioch, including the greatest missionaries, such as Saint Paul. It should not be presumed that these earliest Christian missionaries proceeded with the same tasteless insensitivity as certain 19thc. missionaries who simply inflicted Catholic or Protestant church melodies on [African] black populations. They would certainly have transmitted a rough church ceremonial, in addition of course to

the central message of divine revelation and belief; but they would not have prescribed the actual melodies and melody sequences to be sung to the “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” recommended by Saint Paul. Consider Christian catacomb art, for example: it derives its motives from secular, i.e., heathen art, inwardly spiritualizing them and outwardly cloaking them with a certain frivolity. What transpired musically could not have been fundamentally different; they were obliged to create on the basis of what was available, shaping it to recognizable standards of nobility, seriousness, and non-frivolity; perforce, these operative distinctions must have been those known to the heathens<sup>16</sup>.

This discussion documents (a case of) musical hegemony; instead of presupposing either its meaning or practice, however, Handschin demonstrates its roots in a religious ideology (a united community of believers), historical trajectories in pre-medieval Europe, and complex interactions with local cultural practices across the domain of Christendom. Handschin does not *presume* the meaning of cultural experience, nor does he (attempt to) “speak for” the peoples whose experience he represents. Instead, he describes, weaving a narrative that could always be otherwise, even quite radically, yet remain comprehensible and agreeable, subject to reader assent and (rational) consensus, on the basis of generally acceptable, non-partisan narrative technique.

The quintessence of the New Musicology has been to deny that such a thing (as Handschin’s manifest, even extraordinary contextual sympathy) can be. A generation of scholars quickly came along who accepted this proposition in the absence of their own experience to the contrary. The cultural momentum of the time, the last two decades of the last century, entailed the rapid generation of a myth of Old [Historical] Musicology as a preoccupation entirely devoid of cultural sensitivity and awareness. That New Musicology’s polemical opposition to the purported sins of Old Musicology is a defining moment is clear both from its otherwise puzzling unacknowledgement of intensely culturally- and contextually sensitive earlier musicological practice, such as the work of ethnomusicologists and musical folklorists—Charles Seeger, Stephen Blum, D.K. Wilgus, Dena Epstein, Harold Courlander, and Judith McCulloh are only the names that come most quickly to mind—but even more from the effect of leaving such names out of the canon of “traditional” musicology. Such omissions are only possible by dogmatically restricting the purview of context to explicit discussions of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation—at best, a grotesquely and artificially limited version of social reality and interest.

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<sup>16</sup> Erst indem wir uns mit der Musik im Rahmen der christlichen Kirche befassen, kommen wir allmählich in greifbar Nähe einer Unterscheidung zwischen musikalischem »Morgenland« und »Abendland«. Zunächst müssen wir uns erinnern, daß die Missionierung der mittelmeerischen Welt nicht von der judenchristlichen Gemeinde in Jerusalem, sondern von der heidenchristlichen in Antiochien aus erfolgte, wo auch der größte der Missionare, der hl. Paulus, seine Basis hatte. Es ist nicht anzunehmen, daß die ersten christlichen Missionare ebenso geschmacklos verfahren wie gewisse Missionare des 19. Jh., welche den Negern prot. oder kath. Kirchenmelodien aufpfropften. Sie werden außer dem Glauben, d.h. dem Bericht über die ihnen gewordene Offenbarung, ein gewisses gottesdienstliches Muster, aber gewiß nicht eine Melodienordnung mitgebracht, sie werden zu den »Psalmen, Hymnen und geistlichen Liedern«, die zu singen der hl. Paulus empfahl, die Melodien nicht vorgeschrieben haben. Denken wir an die christliche Katakombenkunst: sie entlehnt Motive der weltlichen, also heidnischen Kunst, indem sie sie innerlich vergeistigt und äußerlich einer gewissen Üppigkeit entkleidet. Was sich musikalisch abspielte, wird grundsätzlich nichts anderes gewesen sein: man mußte aus dem Vorhandenen schöpfen, indem man es aber einer Sichtung im Sinne des Edleren, Ernsteren, weniger Üppigen unterwarf, und diese Aussonderung mußte notwendigerweise mit Maßstäben operieren, wie sie auch die Heiden kannten (Handschin 2004: 27-28).

Legitimation is a more or less explicit point of the exercise here. As the author of the prefacing ‘Tribute’<sup>17</sup> Rose Rosengard Subotnik acknowledges, the gesture of a *festschrift* is now distinctly old-fashioned; under the circumstances, it would be hard to imagine a plainer proclamation that the New Musicology is now fully established; whether as a supplement, alternative, or replacement for Old Musicology is less clear. That latter question in turn raises how this crop of articles and analyses fit with other work in the field these days. Is New Musicology (still) a counter-musicology, now comfortably entrenched within the field? Or was it only a temporarily controversial disturbance, now contentedly assimilated? These questions are left largely in abeyance, in favour of a cloudless, question-free celebration of the creator of a new paradigm, and the lambent though tacit proposal that the days of struggle are over, the new paradigm accepted once and for all.

Evaluating this proposition throws us onto the evidence of the volume’s content. What are the prospects and, now, longer term consequences of a truncated social and sociological vision for musicology? Of a concept of context likewise similarly narrow in its purview? Of a conception for an historical and analytic discipline that abjures both in favour of a frenzied contemporaneity? The smiling attitude of relaxed (self-)congratulation, often tangible *passim*, seems to entail abandoning the stance of revolutionary opposition, perforce through the exhaustion of twenty years’ worth of (putatively resolved) controversy. Yet this erosion of defiance robs New Musicology of a crucial element of its (‘foundational’) self-definition: its pretence to ‘speaking otherwise’, to presenting an ‘oppositional discourse’ to ‘the establishment’ and, er, ‘sticking it to the man’. The change of itself raises the question of contemporaneity: how, and how well, do the radicals of the 80s and 90s address the (presumably) new realities of 2008<sup>18</sup>?

The version of society presented in the *festschrift*, of “the social” in sociological jargon, has changed little. Lawrence Kramer’s inaugurates the collection by suggesting<sup>19</sup> that New Musicology had to struggle so hard to raise cultural context as a problem that excesses may have occurred, excesses happily now corrected. These included a “prosecutorial edge” that generated “a desire to avoid crude pro and con judgment [of musical works]”, and “a reluctance to apply ideological tests to works of art”<sup>20</sup>. The claim is somewhat disingenuous on its face, as New Musicology’s practitioners could hardly have had or want to “avoid” these reductionist tendencies if they weren’t there in the first place. Much of the general opposition to this “hectic and heroic”<sup>21</sup> work and its “either/or logic”<sup>22</sup> centred on just these propensities, indulged rather than resisted. Reductionism of various kinds was a common face of this tendency, both

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<sup>17</sup> *Festschrift*, n.p.

<sup>18</sup> We note that traditional musicology and analysis may not face such a question quite so intrinsically, constituted as they were, wisely or otherwise, on backward-looking premises; they may not escape questions of relevance, but define and address them perhaps less obtrusively.

<sup>19</sup> *Festschrift*, 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Festschrift*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Festschrift*, 5.



musically, as works were unmasked in their true ideological guise—McClary’s pasting of gender and political labels onto the musical action of the *Fifth Brandenburg* is an apt instance<sup>23</sup>—and musicologically, as “traditional” musicology was similarly excoriated<sup>24</sup>. In both cases, “the social construction of reality” amounted to the construction of reality by an external force, society, counterpoised to musical and scholarly practice, and ignored by the ideologically blinkered.

This kind of practice instates a reified, static concept of the social because it virtually never involves any constituent or analytic concepts than the standard quartet of gender, race, sexual orientation, and class<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, these concepts are narrowly construed sociologically. They are rarely or never understood as dilemmas for social actors and social action, but rather as relatively fixed axes of historical injustice, only too relentlessly and consistently patterned as history itself. Discussion of musical examples and cases becomes thereby an alarmingly straightforward, even simple proposition: a method for connecting the particulars of symbolic action to the power imbalances of the invariant quartet of social elements. The transparency of the procedures involved explains some of the school’s intellectual appeal. Virtually any analytic system and vocabulary can be retooled for this kind of social demonstration, since the connections are so unashamedly ascriptive<sup>26</sup>. A further appeal of this analytic approach or use of analysis is ethical. Where other uses can hope at best to validate an aesthetic canon or metaphysic, and so indirectly an ideology and way of life as well, New Musicology’s politicized analyses reveal (evidence of) the structures of historical injustices at work. From its own point of view, the action is moral of itself, and does not require the corroboration of positive political effects in the broader world. To unmask historical injustice in hitherto unsuspected forms of discourse brings a plainly and unexpectedly heroic dimension to the conduct of musical analysis. Where traditional analysis procedures could only hope to establish artistic merit (and hierarchy) by ‘unmasking’ skill in details, New Musicology directs the same procedures to establishing power relations, social attitudes, and other forms of hidden social wrong. More intoxicating still, such analyses can never be wrong, even if the musical details are seriously misrepresented<sup>27</sup>, because the social realities they are purported to illustrate obtain on such an overwhelming broad scale that mere musical detail can hardly affect their weight and moment.

The readings of specific works tended to be long on musical detail—to prove, defiantly, that the music “itself” was not being neglected—but, like much feminist literary and film criticism of the period, both coarse and sociologically naive. The evident presumption was that, once the blinders of hidden (gendered) cultural meaning had fallen, even instrumental music spoke *en clair*, unmediated, even unproblematically. This was the typical hermeneutic approach of a newly exuberant, polemical negativity: once the essential flaw in (all) traditional interpretation had been uncovered, the problem of mediation itself was solved, and fell away from consideration. The common logic at the basis of New Musicology became a self-grounding in corrective assertion: *because* Old Musicology did not discuss the definitive quartet of gender/race/sexual orientation/class, it (must have) ignored society and cultural context

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<sup>23</sup> McClary 1987.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> When it does, as in Ruth Solie’s alluring essay on Beethoven and trains (*festschrift*, 149-62), it can feel like liberation from discursive oppression.

<sup>26</sup> The ostensible exception is Schenkerian analysis, perhaps because the pantheistic whole that underscores the *Ursatz* usurps even an indirect social totality.

<sup>27</sup> Agawu CITE.

altogether. That meant in turn that considerations of musical works that did engage these (rapidly sacrosanct) themes could discuss them directly and unqualified, reading off their hitherto ignored and hidden meanings without equivocation of any kind. Such argumentation is difficult to engage because it entails a gigantic circle. The gender roles in (e.g.) Beethoven's Vienna were pervasively repressive. That means that gender inequity tangibly pervades the culture in all of its manifestations, and all of its modes of expression, including instrumental music. The weak link in this near-irresistible tempest is the notion of pervasion. To assert that any social universal (such as imbalanced gender roles and dispositions) is equally or even substantially tangible in every symbolic dimension of the society and culture is to make formidable assumptions about the notion of social totality.

Generally speaking, postmodernism's antipathy to foundationalist generalities greatly complicated that process, since by definition the pervasion concept is nothing if not an exceptionless universal. The core question of pervasion as a concept, however, is not 'whether' or 'if', but 'how'. Despite Adorno's truly reckless overgeneralizations, for example, the sophistication of his argumentation for the tangibility of social fact in the very structure of popular song is without parallel in New Musicology<sup>28</sup>. For Adorno, 'the whole' is not a shadowy totality that somehow pervades its parts, but the dialectical (and 'untrue') ground of all parts. In short, there is no separate moment of pervasion for Adorno, least of all any such that could lead to unmediated (access to) meaning. Adorno conceives a vision of social totality that does not merely presume the identity of symbols and society, nor attempt to prove this identity empirically, but rejects or undermines every one of the common sense categories that establish heterogeneity: (musical) genre<sup>29</sup>, social function<sup>30</sup>, and, not least, the individual or subject<sup>31</sup>. For Adorno, accepting the reality and immanence of these given social categories is the *proton pseudos*, the fatal intellectual and methodological mistake that leads to social self-misunderstanding. (Ironically, years before she said it, Adorno took seriously Audre Lorde's oft-cited injunction that the master's tools will never unbuild the master's house.) In particular, presuming the active and tangible existence of a concrete, *external* totality called "society" cannot help but generate illusion. Adorno's merit was to show that denying the existence of such a totality was one of the worst ways to try to escape it.

Adorno was plainly traumatized by the universal imprint of the unspontaneous moment and its expression in the oppressive non-uniqueness of cliché<sup>32</sup>. The contemporary in art and discourse achieves its (moral) primacy and significance through abjuring not so much past as present paradigms, through distancing itself from (e.g.) misguided, miscalculated, or nihilistic appropriations of the past<sup>33</sup>. Although New Musicology affects to adopt an apparently similar stance, its downright fetishistic validation of the present both intellectually and artistically

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<sup>28</sup> Adorno and Simpson 2002.

<sup>29</sup> "Fetish Character," (Adorno 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Adorno 1976: chapter III.

<sup>31</sup> This contention is difficult to sustain with an individual quotation, since most of what Adorno worked on throughout his career addresses it one way or another; the late essay on subject and object is a succinct statement of the dimensions and importance of the issue for him, however (GS 10.2, 741-758; the volume which contains this piece has been translated recently by Rodney Livingstone as *Catchwords*).

<sup>32</sup> For aspects of this complex and many-sided attitude of Adorno's, see *Minima Moralia*, GS 4, and "The Aging of New Music", in GS 14, *Dissonanzen*.

<sup>33</sup> Musical examples for Adorno could be, respectively, Hindemith and neo-classicism, Stravinsky, and the National Socialist attitude to Wagner.

depends on a contrast to the past that eclipses it from present-day immanence, memory, and understanding. Content so often to view the past solely through the lens of gender and racial injustice, New Musicology lacks Adorno's profound dialectical sense of historical mediation, of history as the ultimate mediator of all human experience, very much including the contemporary "as such"<sup>34</sup>. For New Musicology, a past dismembered or reconstructed strictly along the fantasy lines of political desire suffices to build a present nurtured on vigilance, exuberantly but uneasily free of its sundry ideological encumbrances.

Like so many of her literary and film studies exemplars, McClary solved these problems with stereotypical categories. 'Masculine' and 'feminine' virtually never signify anything other than their common sense, unscholarly meanings. The pervasiveness of sexist attitudes and stereotypes means that critique of these attitudes has no choice but to operate with them as given, even unquestionable definitions. From this perspective, "the social" becomes the indefinable (non-)totality that secrets negative bias (along the quartet of axes) into every fibre of social utterance and experience. The task of scholarship becomes unmasking the pervasion of such notions, and its ultimate virtue vigilance in tracking down stereotype into its most hidden intellectual and symbolic refuges.

This conception accounts, I believe, for the sometimes puzzling version of subjectivity in New Musicology. If the initial phases of the movement trumpeted a defiant self-congratulation for resisting the universal (though largely imaginary) contextual insensitivity of Old Musicology, it also absorbed from contemporary currents the notion that personal commitment was undeniable and inescapable in every utterance. Pretences to disinterest and objectivity were exactly that, and no more. Again the contrast to Adorno, the supposed exemplar, is instructive. Lumping any entire past together as pseudo-objective was impossible for Adorno, who saw subjectivity as inherent but not necessarily given. Subjectivity was for him an achievement, perilously won and massively encumbered by the immanent forms of social relation legibly at work even in the smallest details of musical construction. The notion that the meaning of subjectivity could be assigned to objectively, i.e., externally-assigned "subject positions" would have struck Adorno as ludicrous, an egregious misunderstanding of subjectivity and objectivity<sup>35</sup>.

### iii

The urgent need for contemporaneity is a strong element of the theory and practice of New Musicology. Unlike Adorno, for example, New Musicology grounds this necessity in the dismissal of the intellectual (and, sometimes, musical) past as outmoded *in se*, because of its presumed, trans-contextual ensnarement in a world of racist and sexist stereotyping. Yet, just as New Musicology bluntly classes itself as the otherwise-speaker, so it classes other conceptions as the other-than-otherwise speaker—whatever that might entail, a decidedly external conception of discursive history. The gesture of categorical separation is abrupt and totalizing, an airy and dogmatic insistence on standing apart and outside of musicology's politically compromised,

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<sup>34</sup> Susan Buck-Morss brings this out in her magisterial introduction to Adorno and Benjamin (Buck-Morss 1977).

<sup>35</sup> Again, single citations for so broad a claim are difficult; the superb expositions of Susan Buck-Morss and Max Paddison speak to this point, however (Buck-Morss 1977; Paddison 1993).

humdrum, 'regular' history. This stance is the logical counterpart to New Musicology's common usage of 'subject position' to account for subjectivity. This usage is post-modernism wide, and determines the possibility of subjective experience through the indices of 'social constructions' such as race, class, and gender. Without arguing for the objectivity of these categories, 'subject position' neatly presumes it from their evident and only too regularly awful undeniability in our social experience.

Unlike the metaphysically complex subjectivity of phenomenology—a sociological offshoot of this movement gave birth to the expression<sup>36</sup>—"the social construction of reality" entailed by the term 'subject position' is anything but subjectively defined. In effect, the usage means 'reality as constructed [and therefore experienced] by society', enshrining that hoariest of common sense notions, universally despised and rejected by sociologists, that 'society' is an external, hence substantive agent capable of acting on individuals. Bluntly, however, the New Musicology, in a sociological naiveté at once arrogant and innocent, completely misses the concord of figures such as Weber and Adorno on this point. I mention these two because, occasional swipes of the 'ideal type' concept aside, Weber is dismissed as an old school reactionary, and ostensibly not read, while Adorno is an explicitly cited exemplar and presumed honourable progenitor.

*Philosophy of New Music* doesn't praise Schoenberg as relevant because he is contemporary; exactly the opposite. Adorno believes that Schoenberg's music is *actuelle*—why the hell don't we have a term for this in English!?!—because it is relevant, because it is a uniquely cogent response to palpably contemporary dilemmas, extra- as well as intra-musical. Just as Adorno is most at pains<sup>37</sup> to argue that the defects of popular music are not a matter of taste but of a structure and function intimately connected (because so deeply homologous) to the defects of the society as a whole, so the argument for Schoenberg is only comprehensible, on Adorno's terms, as an equally subjective and social critique—in a word, as dialectic. To be fair, the tendency by musicologists to read only Adorno's directly music-addressed work, and leave the rest untouched, is as understandable as it is regrettable. But the New Musicology's pretence to a social or even sociological understanding of music—insistence on "context" is the codeword for this attitude—makes the apparent decision to ignore Adorno's admittedly complex but lavish explications of the concept of 'society' something of a reprehensible mystery.

Like "post-colonialism", "speaking otherwise" attempts a form of negative self-definition—"what I am (or what I say) is not-that". In both cases, as many of even the most sympathetic critics of the former concept in particular have been very well aware, the gesture perforce ends up swallowing "that" intact and whole, and so brings compromising participatory acknowledgement to the very act of a self-definition ostensibly founded in comprehensive rejection. The minute we lose sight of colonialism's defining features, therefore, the experience and conception of a perspective that in turn defines itself in their repudiation, in their inversion, automatically blurs itself correspondingly, tending to lose the animating principles of its own formation. Negation, it turns out, is not the same as rejection, least of all in its more

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<sup>36</sup> Berger and Luckmann 1967.

<sup>37</sup> In "On Popular Music" and elsewhere (Adorno and Simpson 2002).

schematic, point-for-point forms. It doesn't take a Hegel to see how the process leads to preservation of the conceptions ostensibly rejected; in fact, 'leads to' is already inaccurate, since the despised "that"—more often, it is a "they", a "them"—directs every moment of the self-defining process, because no part of it transpires outside or beyond that shadow. But "that" which has been swallowed had better not be digested, made indistinguishable, or else it may take the avid diner's soul with it, effacing the negative-image features that etch its purpose.

Likewise, the grammar of "speaking otherwise" cannot be anything but "speaking otherwise than [x]", or else it would lose its principle of self-distinction, dissolving in a menacing pluralism of equal but uncommitted voices. The pretence to independence of mind through the vehemence of rejection of an extant paradigm either entails a chain of inverse definition—" [we are/we think/we do] ~p/~q/~r/~j/..."—or some even more indistinct admixture of inversion with conceptualizing afresh. Speaking otherwise cannot do other than acknowledge in perpetuity its oedipally-despised progenitors, which makes its intellectual independence permanently compromised. (Hence the pronounced flavour of intellectual cargo cult to intra-academic attempts at speaking otherwise. Their lambent yearning for 'keeping it real'—an ache as old as Rousseau and, let's face it, Aristotle—ineluctably directs its gaze to those emphatically non-academic souls who lead authentic lives; lives that may or may not exist, alas, but whose contrast to the existences of traditional academics is only too vivid, not say virulent. Needless to add, no doubt, that the reality of academics' lives is equally as purported, imputed, and mythic as the celebrated authenticity of the enviably downtrodden.) From this pronouncedly, even calamitously enfeebled version of dialectic flows a blanket dismissal of the dismal academic past: consciously, self-congratulatorily defiant in the first generation of otherwise-speakers (that includes McClary herself), but only timidly, even politely smug in the successors, who have encountered the paradigms of their of demonized predecessors so little from first hand that sustaining the old animus is scarcely viable. Under the circumstances, once animated by such programmatic anamnesis, and given the absence of real or substantial engagement with the exemplars, against whom the 'speaking otherwise' of New Musicology negatively defined itself, the process of polemical imputation cannot help but dissolve into 'orders of simulacra'<sup>38</sup>.

As one might expect from so bleak a diagnosis, the role of traditional musicology as bogeyman and punching bag continues unabated in this anthology; as perhaps it must. But the betimes painfully obvious lack of sympathetic or comprehending intellectual engagement with anything written (in words or music) before 1970 continues to mark out the school's besetting provincialism, if anything even more egregiously now that a new generation, securely and solely educated in this school, will never feel the need to examine any other paradigm, much less engage it. The resultant complacency among the younger scholars' work here is correspondingly depressing, and the shackled imagination is among the loudest vocal registers. Thus Nasser al-Tae'e's "Whirling Fanatics: Orientalism, Politics, and Religious Rivalry in Western Operatic Representation of the Orient"<sup>39</sup> goes through the motions of reproducing Edward Said's decades-old animadversions against Orientalism, now literally trying to present

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<sup>38</sup> To borrow a phrase of French social theorist, semiotician, and commentator Jean Baudrillard (1926-2001).

<sup>39</sup> Festschrift, 17-31.

this dated and partial perspective as if it were fresh and whole, now faintly trying to find a me-too place for itself by the hallowed scholarly practice of adding ‘data’ from yet another regional ontology. It could hardly occur to the unfortunate author that merely offering a new set of facts—if this is indeed what they are—in support of his teachers’ ideological dispositions isn’t *supposed* to avail in the first place, because adding “another territory reported from” is among the quintessentially *traditional* gestures of scholarly drudgework. However, ideological agreement in principle is more than enough to eclipse any and all discrepancies of the ideology in practice, so this essay passes muster here.

Similarly, Jacqueline Warwick’s history of the postwar backup singing trio the Blossoms several times makes the appropriate ideological obeisances almost in passing, en route to telling the quite interesting story of the Blossoms. The sole problem is that there is nothing in the entire article, save for these virtually desultory political gestures, that couldn’t have been told equally well by a writer for *Rolling Stone*. To be sure, a large part of the point of New Musicology is to deconstruct the opposition between High and Low Cultures, so-called. And I think even the stodgiest practitioner of Old Musicology would have to concede that an equally factually-rich, analytically- and critically-anaemic article about, say, the backup singers at the premiere of Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* would easily pass for scholarship. What that says to me, however, is not that Old Musicology is enriched by including the popular music practices it despises, in sometime fact as well as in relentless imputation, but that a dearth of contextual insight will offer the same intellectual paucity, regardless of the subject matter. Despite the keenly interesting material, to me at least, the triviality of the discussion is disturbing. Little attempt is made to discuss the musicality or music of the Blossoms, save again in the kinds of adjective-laden (hence largely arbitrary) terms of popular journalism.

The sole question this article raised for me is one I genuinely wish I didn’t have to pose: must embracing popular music in scholarly fashion entail embracing popular journalism’s style and standard, too? (*Rolling Stone* is also unabashedly advocacy-driven music writing, albeit for commercial rather than abstractly political causes...) It is hard to suppress the suspicion that having chosen a clearly politically-marked subject, by the lights of her school, (the careers of) a trio of black women, the author feels largely relieved of further narrative burdens. The political valence of the story of a group of economically-exploited black women is so patent, in other words, that the narrative value of the exercise is supposed to be self-evident. As a good story, it is; as a (scholarly) meaningful story, if one may draw that distinction, it is not.

New Musicology’s days of shock and forceful rethinking of the field of musicology are largely over, and few of the essays make more than token efforts to find the grail of the cutting edge. A striking exception is the essay by Mitchell Morris, who, working with a new psychoanalytic paradigm, strikes out in a fresh direction, with a salutary reminder that taking subjectivity seriously still opens many unexplored avenues to understanding. The rest stay within the stale dichotomies of New Musicology itself, or revert to traditional musicology (if unadmittedly and unconsciously), or to a form of general music journalism, spiced with largely desultory ideological protestations of difference, or speaking otherwise.

A perhaps notable commonality of the essays here is (apparent) formal incompleteness. “Perhaps”, because some of post-modernism’s most hallowed obiter dicta concerned the

impossibility, hence undesirability, of systematic or complete thought. It is difficult for me to be sure of the provenance of the unfinished state of many of these pieces. Ruth A. Solie's impressive and genuinely fascinating "Of Railroads, Beethoven, and Victorian Modernity"<sup>40</sup> starts out with some notable social historical documentation of the cultural impact of early railroads, begins to tie this in to the (contemporary) social image of Beethoven, but suddenly turns to speculation about Wagner, never returning to Beethoven or railroads. If Wagner is our narrative destination, why isn't he in the title? Is Solie once again making the point that narrative closure is futile? Robert Walser's concluding essay<sup>41</sup> is more disturbing, and may be more exemplary, too. In eight scant pages, Walser goes from learned (but adjective-rich) comments about the (purportedly disturbing) harmonic aspects of an Alanis Morissette tune to claiming that these symbolize violence against women, to Morissette's own concerns with this issue, to a page's worth of information on violence against women generally, to women's ambivalence about their social image ("schizophrenia", in Walser's usage) to impressions of Morissette's meanings by a few fans, to some cryptic comments on how meaning in music is to be established. Walser explains his purpose at the end:

The brief but multi-faceted analysis I have presented here bears on recently revived debates between analysts who are concerned above all with 'meaning' and those who focus on 'structure' without acknowledging that structure is a kind of meaning, one that signals the desire to find order by using a spatial metaphor to describe certain aspects of temporal experience. And this is often a useful thing to do. But by denying its own social and even analytical ground, by aspiring to the Platonic loftiness of forms, formalist work ends up deceiving itself and trivializing its object. All musical analysis ultimately proceeds under the sign of a silent appeal to and confirmation of the analyst's values, which include a relationship, and an attitude toward, the music's audience [singular, sic]. Too often, a concern with structure displaces the biggest, most ambitious and useful questions we could ask: where can this song take you? What can you learn about the good and evil of the world from it?<sup>42</sup>

The excerpt is worth quotation at length, because it underlines the aspirant continuities of present-day New Musicology to its earlier phases. The polemical target remains traditional musicology, with its supposed formalist biases. The expression of that animus seems especially unfortunate here, as Walser chooses a formulation, the "silent appeal to... the analyst's values", that was discussed at great length and with exemplary balance by the arch-conservative *bête noir* of traditional musicology, Carl Dahlhaus. *Analysis and Value Judgment* was published in 1970, well before the first gleamings of New Musicological thought and, as the very title proclaims, discusses in detail the very issues and contentions Walser is still claiming are ignored and misunderstood. Certainly Dahlhaus is a figure of sufficient stature that any broad polemical claim about the musicological topics he addressed so carefully that leaves out his example must count as hyperbole or falsehood.

Just as Adorno's sweeping and ill-considered generalizations about the formulaic triviality of jazz were (and are) difficult to reconcile with the audible evidence of Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and John Coltrane (who, like Parker, died several years before Adorno himself), so it is impossible here for the unconverted to accept this level of irresponsible

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<sup>40</sup> Festschrift, 149-62.

<sup>41</sup> "Uninvited: Gender, Schizophrenia, and Alanis Morissette," festschrift, 235-42.

<sup>42</sup> Festschrift, 242.

overgeneralization. In the context, Walser's decision to propose this conclusion at the end of a hasty, nearly incoherent skimming of a single pop tune speaks to the still-ongoing difficulty of accepting New Musicology as a dominant or even satisfactory paradigm for musicology. The intellectually fashionable socio-cultural presuppositions of twenty years ago, never satisfactorily argued or established for the more sociologically and intellectually literate and sober in the music-scholarly community, are now even more dogmatically presumed. Coming as it does after a slapdash series of jargon-rich generalities about the Morissette tune, it would be hard to imagine any more considered impulse behind this gratuitous slap at Old Musicology than force of habit, and the continuing presumption that such gestures continue to suffice to define scholarly and moral virtue.

Walser's reconciliation of form and content is a promise undercut by the reality of his practice. Despite the initial attention to modal detail in the tune, and the fervent assurances of the political and social realities it symbolizes, Walser cannot connect the musical behaviour to the social behaviour because the operant conception is still disjunct in his own narrative. Form and content cannot be viewed under a joint aegis through mere assertion; a far more radical rethinking of the categories of perception and experience is required, precisely of the sort proffered by Dahlhaus, for all his aesthetic and sociological limitations. Several decades on, New Musicology still owes us the introspection and intellectual heavy lifting to ground its blithe imputations and smug self-congratulation. To that debt, this collection is sober testament.

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