‘Our songs are our laws …’—Music and the Republic (Part 1)

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For Raymond Deane on his fiftieth birthday

I would like to express my gratitude to Séamas de Barra, who read this article several times in draft and made a number of valuable suggestions as well as allowing me to consult a work in progress which deals with historicist evaluations of music by figures such as Adorno and Réné Leibowitz. My work benefited greatly from his incisive criticisms. I would also like to thank Garret Cahill of the Boole Library, UCC.

As of yet, theorists of civic republicanism have paid but scant attention to the fine arts and the question of their general social and cultural importance. This is somewhat puzzling, given the keen interest that many writers who are drawn to republican and communitarian ideals have shown in education—a concern that Adrian Oldfield in his book *Citizenship and Community* justifies succinctly:

> We cannot expect a practice of citizenship to grow merely because politicians and political thinkers wish it, and exhort their populations to effort. It is not, as again the civic-republican tradition makes clear, a natural practice for human beings, or one that they would spontaneously choose. ‘Natural’ human beings, or ‘non-civic’ ones, have to be moulded and shaped for their role as citizens. In part this is the task of education in the broadest sense …[1]

The notion that we must be educated to the practice of citizenship is one of great antiquity. The ancient Greeks and the Chinese both regarded the task of education to consist, at least in part, in the inculcation of certain traditional ideals of conduct that were held to be socially desirable and of fundamental importance for the well-being and preservation of the community as a whole. Both cultures placed considerable emphasis on the valuable role the arts could play in this task of promoting civic virtue. Through the emotional and communicative immediacy of poetry, drama and song, young people could be made familiar with the history and religious beliefs of the community and become aware of their cultural inheritance. The creations of the imagination were also prized on account of their capacity to render vivid and compelling those haunting moral

conflicts that human social life perennially presents and from which all philosophical considerations of citizenship and human social interaction ultimately arise. What better point of departure than, say, a play such as *Antigone* for a discussion of citizenship, duty, and the tragic existential dilemmas that can arise from a clash of loyalties? For thoughtful Greeks, the theatre was an arena for moral education—an education for the practice of living, as it were. The great tragedians taught man to reverence the gods in a fitting manner, to deal fairly with his fellow men and to be on his guard in himself against such evils as hubris by making him witness the tragic and terrifying consequences that could spring from moral dereliction. It is in the context of such an understanding that Aristophanes could describe Aeschylus as a teacher of his people.[2] Central, then, to Greek aesthetics is the notion that the humanities can humanise, can make us humane—a claim that has been reiterated countless times in western culture ever since. A consideration of the role of the arts in society that gives due attention to this guiding idea would therefore appear to arise as a natural progression from the republican concern with education.

Within this tradition, in which aesthetic and ethical concerns are frequently inextricably intertwined, it is perhaps surprising how much emphasis has at times been placed on the social importance of music as an agent of moral education. One might have imagined that a non-verbal artistic medium such as music would have been deemed of little use in the task of imparting a moral vision or a sense of what constituted fitting social conduct. From the outset, however, this does not appear to have been the case. Once again, there are many points of similarity between the Greek and Chinese traditions, both of which ascribe to music an especially potent influence on man's character and moral development, and, on this account, regard music as a matter of the utmost political significance, crucial, in fact, to the well-being of all citizens and to the proper functioning of the state itself. Thereafter, it is interesting to observe how consistently these philosophical and cultural debates about music and its place in society have centred around a comparatively small set of concerns and preoccupations, many of which, as far as we can tell, had already begun to crystallise by 500 BC or thereabouts. The questions raised by such thinkers echo and re-echo down to our own age, when a philosopher such as the Frankfurt Marxist Theodor Adorno can claim to descry behind the facade of western 'culture' the same moral bankruptcy and potential for barbarism that were made manifest in Hitler's death camps, adducing as crucial evidence to support his analysis not only the

musical artefacts of mass culture but also some musical compositions with pretensions to high culture, which, he contends, conspire to perpetuate a state of false consciousness that would seek to deny the sheer horror and ugliness of the world we live in.

Whether one agrees with an analysis such as Adorno's or not, the social significance he ascribes to music is striking, regardless of whether this music is trivial in import or of the utmost seriousness. Indeed, the social significance that this philosophical and educational tradition as a whole ascribes to music is in marked contrast to the distressing trivialisation of the art in our own culture, where, despite its sometimes maddening and inescapable ubiquity in our daily lives, music does not appear to be regarded by many as a medium for the communication of matters of serious import. The 'music industry'—a term that is itself indicative of a sad state of affairs—regards music merely as a commodity to be manufactured and sold for profit, which satisfies, at best, a desire for 'entertainment' or, at worst, provides background noise in elevators and supermarkets. In such a context, the philosophical tradition I have described serves as a poignant reminder of the original dignity of the art, and provides a rich discourse for republican theorists interested in cultural matters to explore. In this article, I propose to present a brief account of the principal issues that have arisen in some important philosophical considerations of the social and political significance of music, emphasising in particular those aspects of this tradition that might be fruitfully reconsidered from the vantage point of republican thought.

It is to Greek culture that we owe one of the most moving expressions of the power of music over the psyche of man, the tale of the mythical musician and poet Orpheus, on whom Apollo and the muses had bestowed gifts of an exceptional order. Such was the ravishing beauty of his playing on the lyre and his singing that he was not only able to tame wild beasts, but even had dominion over inanimate nature, making rocks move from their places and causing rivers to be diverted from their courses to follow the sound of his song. Nor was he without influence as a civilising force in human affairs: as priest of Apollo, the god of reason and order, Orpheus denounced the practice of sacrificial murder carried out as part of the rites honouring Dionysus. In vexation, Dionysus finally set the Maenads on him, and they attacked him inside Apollo's temple at Deium in Macedonia, rending him limb from limb.

Some of the principal themes that are to occupy us in this essay are sounded in this ancient myth. First of all, we note that Orpheus' powers are said to be of divine origin: a recognition of the strange fascination

exerted by music and its wholly mysterious emotive power, for which it seems scarcely possible to provide a satisfactory explanation in rational terms. Second, we note the belief that music has the power to subdue animality and to render it—at least for a while—innocuous. If we read the myth on a metaphorical rather than a literal level, it suggests that civilisation, and those bonds of friendly association between men that Aristotle described as 'concord' become possible as wild, untamed impulse gives way to culture and civilised conduct. Third, the artist has a special role as an agent of this civilising force, as a transmitter of culture. By encountering beauty and acquiring knowledge of it, the grosser animality of our nature can be transcended as order and restraint are imposed on unbridled instinctual impulse.

Finally, the fragility of this culture and its vulnerability to the forces of unreason are also underlined poignantly, as the dark instinctual energies that were vanquished at the opening of the myth return symmetrically at the tale's close to exact their terrible vengeance.[3] The confrontation has an elemental quality, as the representative of law and social order engages in tragic combat with the representatives of amoral instinct, which recognises no law. Dionysus and the Maenads too were associated with a characteristic type of music, which forms a sharp contrast to Orpheus' Apollonian music. This wild and frenzied music was performed on flutes and drums, and, rather than assisting in the sublimation of chaotic instinctual impulse, served, on the contrary, to induce a state in which these drives could be given untrammelled expression. It was particularly associated with the nocturnal orgiastic rites performed in honour of Dionysus, graphically described by Euripides in the *Bacchae*. These rituals seemed to have involved frenzied dancing and sometimes culminated in the acts of tearing a live animal to pieces and devouring it raw.[4] Whatever other magical or religious ends the participants may have believed such rites served, it also seems probable that they provided a ritual channel for the release of pent-up tensions engendered by the necessary repression of such impulses in regular social contexts. Individuals who experienced these tensions as unendurable could cast restraint aside and regress, at least for a while, to a pre-civilised state of mind after the manner of the Maenads in the Orpheus myth, who similarly rebel against the Orphic demands for continence and self-control that they have come to find intolerable. E. R. Dodds suggests that these rites probably had a valuable social utility, since they purged individuals of what he describes as 'infectious irrational impulses' which became dangerous if dammed up for too long.[5]

The Greeks therefore drew a sharp distinction between two genera of music, one of which was of enormous significance in the subsequent development of western art music. On the one hand, there was a Dionysian music associated with the rites and festivals of a superstitious peasant religion, through which erotic and aggressive energies could be discharged. The unrestrained expression of such instincts in everyday life would of course prove profoundly disruptive to social order, since a regressed conscious is unconcerned with moral responsibility and seeks only the immediate gratification of instinctual impulse. Certainly many Greeks would have regarded such behaviour with abhorrence and alarm, though Greek society evidently seems to have recognised that it was wiser and safer to tolerate these rites up to a point in the interests of general social stability rather than seek to outlaw them.

From the point of view of a musical culture that appealed to the educated, this music can scarcely have been valued on account of its intrinsic artistic merit, since the participants at such rituals would, to put it mildly, hardly have been in a frame of mind to engage in detached aesthetic appreciation of the music for its own sake. Indeed, it is probably not fanciful to compare it in function to much modern popular music, which is mostly formulaic, has little intrinsic musical or intellectual interest, and is largely intended as an adjunct to ritualised dancing in night-clubs and discotheques, which can facilitate a comparable regression in our own culture.

The control of instinctual impulse was a problem that confronted Greek societies just as much as ours. One of the most powerful and effective means of dealing with this problem was seen to lie in education, or to use their term, *paideia*, and it is precisely here that art music—music in its other, Apollonian manifestation—had a central, indeed, crucial role to play as a civilising force. But, it is important to emphasise here that 'education' is a rather unsatisfactory rendering of the Greek term *paideia*, which by the fifth century BC was generally understood to mean the harmonious development of mind and personality brought about through *gymnastikç* (physical training) and *mousikç* (the study of song, poetic recitation and the art of accompaniment on the lyre). The German '*Bildung*' perhaps translates the word more closely, suggesting a process not only involving the transmission of culture but also fostering personal cultivation of character. The acquisition of technical competence or the assimilation of factual information, while not unimportant, constituted only part of what had to be accomplished.

The overriding aim of *paideia* was to develop the mind and character

of young people and assist them to become good citizens. The inculcation of a sense of social responsibility must inevitably have involved discussion of the value of personal discipline and self-control. In the course of their literary and musical studies—which were one and the same thing—students would have been made acquainted with ideals of exemplary conduct evinced by gods, heroes and ordinary mortals. They would have been taught the proper means of reverencing their gods and have come to acquire a sense of their place in a long cultural tradition. They would have been taught to view certain types of behaviour as unbecoming for educated men. And while republicans might undoubtedly find themselves in sharp disagreement with Greek educators concerning what was considered virtuous conduct, since much emphasis was placed on character traits that would prove subsequently useful in the army,[6] this Greek concept of the function of education has much to commend it. Evidently, the Greeks did not trust that the transmission of cultural values could safely be left to occur spontaneously and automatically.

But, the importance of art music was not merely ancillary to the study of texts in which these examples of personal and civic virtue were to be found. It would appear that many Greeks believed that music could exercise a power to promote the good and assist the sublimation of the lower instincts in the manner suggested by the Orpheus myth. (This belief is perhaps not quite as unlikely or extravagant as it sounds, if one remembers the widely attested value of the role that music can play in certain forms of psychological therapy.[7]) In part, this appears to have arisen from the fact that Greek *paideia* was intimately bound up with a long metaphysical tradition which envisioned music as a manifestation of an underlying divine order. The Pythagorean tradition held that the organisation of the cosmos itself was a musical one, the celestial bodies moving to the 'music of the spheres'—an image memorably invoked by Plato in the celebrated passage describing the vision of Er in *The Republic*. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Plato, who wrote extensively on the subject of *paideia*, should have come to believe that music also provided a model for the order of the soul, a crucial tenet of his philosophy of education. It seems wholly natural that educators in such a cultural context should view the importance of a musical education to lie in its power to form character. This view seems to have been fairly widespread in Greece and was also endorsed by subsequent generations of theorists and writers on music.[8] Certainly, music would appear to have occupied an important place in the curriculum long before Alexandrine scholars assigned it a place in the classical *quadrivium*

together with geometry, arithmetic and astronomy.

In his discussions of *paideia*, Plato is principally interested in the wider social and political significance of education in art music, rather than in the specifics of technical training or the derivation of aesthetic satisfaction regarded as a sufficient end in itself. In formulating his views on *paideia* and on music generally, Plato appears to have been influenced to a considerable extent by the teachings of a pre-Socratic thinker named Damon, to whose opinions he attached a considerable importance judging from the respectful tone of the references to him in *Laches* and *The Republic*. Damon's principal philosophical contribution seems to lie in the development of a doctrine that posited the most intimate linkage between music and personal morality. Beautiful songs and dances, Damon claimed, create a beautiful soul, while ugly music exercises baneful and morally deleterious effects. Damon proceeded to theorise about the comparative ethical value of various types of music, analysing their melodic and rhythmic organisation to ascertain which of them, in his view, could be suitably employed and which were best avoided. In a celebrated passage in *The Republic*, Damon is attributed with the statement that musical styles cannot be changed without changes also occurring in the laws of the state.

Plato makes the real or fictitious Pythagorean scholar Timaeus express Damonian views in the dialogue that bears his name. Harmony, Timaeus explains, can help restore the soul to a state of inner concord on account of the fact that its motions are of a like nature. Similarly, rhythm is conducive to a state of inner grace. However, only certain types of music could produce these beneficial effects, and Plato is at pains to expose as erroneous the contention that 'rightness is not in any degree whatsoever a characteristic of music'. Music that makes men succumb to frenzy—such as the Dionysian music described earlier—he expressly condemns. He also looks askance at the derivation of a voluptuous or immoderate pleasure in music.

For Plato, the main purpose of *paideia*, then, was the promotion of civic virtue, achieved by educating citizens to love the good and abhor evil. In one passage in *The Laws*, Plato describes it as the process whereby youth is led towards what he calls 'right reason' as it is embodied in the law and approved by the best leaders of the community. Since a child's mind cannot be expected to grapple with serious things, the process of *paideia* can gradually acquaint him with the precepts of the law in terms that he can understand by means of play and song. In such a way, he will learn naturally to discriminate between good and evil, even

before he attains to a state of sufficient intellectual maturity in which he can make use of his reason to assist him in making moral choices. And the employment of reason will come easily, he avers, to one who has already received this training, in which consistent habits of mind have already been formed.[9]

It is of interest here to compare Platonic *paideia* with the contemporary Chinese conception of music education. Here too, we find that music was considered to constitute one of the principal manifestations of an underlying cosmic order, a point on which the two cultures were in striking agreement. According to the *Yüeh Chi* ('Record of Music'), a work included in the compilation of Confucian writings known as the *Li Chi*, music 'appeared in the Great Beginning' when heaven and earth were created.[10] The function of music, according to the philosopher Hsün Tzu, one of the most important figures in ancient Chinese philosophy, was to regulate human emotions and cause them to find appropriate expression in accordance with what the Chinese call *li*, a word meaning rules of proper conduct or mores. Hsün Tzu maintained that the nature of man was evil and that goodness was only acquired by training. The study of *li* served to limit men's desires and appetites, and to refine their behaviour, as he makes clear in the following passage:

> Man's emotions, purposes and ideas, when proceeding according to the *li*, will be orderly. If they do not proceed according to the *li*, they will become wrong and confused, careless and negligent. Food and drink, clothing, dwelling places and movements, if in accordance with the *li*, will be proper and harmonious. If not in accordance with the *li*, they will meet with ruin and calamity. A person's appearance, his bearing, his advancing and retiring when he hastens or walks slowly, if according to the *li*, are refined. If not according to the *li*, he will be haughty, intractable, prejudiced, and rude. Hence man without the *li* cannot exist; affairs without the *li* cannot be completed; government without the *li* cannot be peaceful.[11]

Music was an indispensable adjunct in helping men live their lives in accordance with the precepts of *li*. The author of the *Yüeh Chi* comments in this connection:

> [T]he early kings, when they instituted *li* and music, did not do so to gain full satisfaction for the desires of the mouth, stomach, ears and eyes. But they intended to teach the people to regulate their likes and dislikes, and to turn back to the normal course of humanity … When man is acted upon by external things without end, and no regulation is set to his likes and dislikes, he becomes changed through the encounter with any external object. To be so changed is to

> have the natural principle (*t'ien li*) within him extinguished, and to give the utmost indulgence to his human desires. With this there comes the rebellious and deceitful heart, with its licentious and wild disorder … This is the way to great disorder. Therefore the early kings instituted *li* and music to regulate human conduct.[12]

It is important to emphasise at this juncture that such an austere conception of the function of music did not constitute the whole story as far as Greek society was concerned, the cultural and educational significance of art music notwithstanding. Aristotle, for example, is considerably more tolerant of other, less exalted, views of the function of music. In *Politics*, he seems readily prepared to allow that music might simply provide diversion and amusement. He seems less troubled by the tastelessness of popular musical entertainments than Plato, provided such activities remain within reasonably seemly bounds. He does inveigh, however, against certain types of abuses in performance that he regards as vulgar or tasteless. As far as music education was concerned, though, Aristotle, too, acknowledged its central importance and appreciated the contribution made by musical activities to general intellectual culture.[13]

On the whole, this view of music education had an enormous influence on subsequent writers, well into the last century. And, although we can no longer lend credence in a literal manner to the metaphysical basis of *paideia*, its beauty as a poetic conception is impressive.[14] These Greek insights concerning the social importance of art music (and its sister arts of dance and poetry) could form a useful starting point for civic republicans who might wish either to evolve a general theory of culture or to arrive at a considered justification of the continuing importance of these disciplines within our educational systems. It would be of particular interest for educational theorists to explore whether this Greek vision of art music education, which emphasises a holistic development of the personality and our rounded development as citizens, may not offer a richer and more imaginative view of what education could involve, even if we must now discard those aspects of *paideia* which are no longer of relevance to us. Amongst these can be included those negative and authoritarian aspects of Platonic *paideia* that I shall discuss later.

The European tradition of education in art music stands in a direct line of descent from the ancient Greeks. In its modern form, it still offers unique opportunities for a holistic education that could be of immense benefit to all students whether or not they become professional musicians. Apart from whatever technical skills and proficiencies they may acquire, students also come to engage with music on intellectual,

emotional and imaginative levels. Moreover, since most music-making must take place in groups, music education can provide many opportunities for children and young people from different backgrounds to learn to work together on shared projects, as well as providing them with valuable social outlets as adults. In the course of their studies, a number of valuable traits of character can be encouraged to develop in a completely unforced manner. Gifted teachers can bring their students to an appreciation of the personal and social value of discipline, thoroughness, intellectual humility and a capacity for truthfulness towards self. They can also awaken ethical and emotional insights and encourage the development of artistic sensitivity and intellectual independence.

Some of our most important formative experiences take place during the long hours we spend in the classroom. Education, therefore, has an ethical dimension that is inescapable. This should not be forgotten as education comes under increasing pressure to function as a profit-making venture, an utterly impoverished view that threatens to reduce it to a dismal and impersonal affair, in which tedious rote learning for the sake of examination results appears to be all that is considered important or valuable. The experiences of young people in institutions of learning can have a lasting effect for good or ill on the course of their future development. Information that has been forgotten may be easily re-assimilated by consulting a work of reference, but ultimately far more valuable for a young person's future personal and intellectual development is a stimulus which encourages the acquisition of certain habits of mind and a healthy curiosity that might lead students to broaden their understanding of the cultural context in which they find themselves and sensitise them to the problems of social coexistence. This I consider to be an education for citizenship in the best possible sense.[15] Music, when well taught, can provide just such a stimulus and is a particularly interesting example of a discipline that makes quite a number of simultaneous demands on the student's capacities, apart from furnishing a good starting point for other intellectual and artistic pursuits.

Certainly, as William Galston points out, there is no need for such an education for citizenship to assume sinister forms that suggest mass indoctrination on the part of what he calls a 'tutelary state'[16]—neither need teachers engage in anything so blatant as overt moralising or preaching. This would not only be unnecessary but also intolerable. Such social skills and sense of personal responsibility and discipline as a musical education can impart are likely to find widespread acceptance

amongst all members of the community. Greek *paideia* should serve as a salutary reminder of what all education worthy of the name is (or should be): a process that stimulates the whole of the personality to further growth and development. The acquisition of information and the systematic mastery of certain skills are, of course, important, but they only constitute a part of this process; and a disproportionate emphasis on them to the exclusion of other concerns, equally important, if perhaps less justifiable in purely utilitarian terms, leads to the impoverishment of a noble ideal.

Music education engages the student's capacities on a number of levels simultaneously to an extent that few other disciplines can do. Most students begin by learning to play an instrument or to sing. Little by little, they must surmount progressively more difficult challenges to their sense of physical co-ordination. They must develop a refined tactile sense which can control the most subtle discriminations of sound production. Considerable sophistication of aural perception is necessary in order to play properly in tune. There is also a substantial quantity of technical knowledge that must be acquired if the student is to read musical notation fluently. The secure mastery of these skills requires a great deal of patience and sustained effort, as well as a daily commitment of time spent in practising one's instrument. As students become older, a variety of more advanced studies become necessary: the study of harmony, counterpoint, and musical forms assists students to deepen their understanding of musical structures from a technical point of view, while historical and aesthetic studies can lead students to an appreciation of the relationship between musical artefacts and the cultural and social matrices from which they emerge. Finally, one hopes that students will come to acquire those elusive gifts of emotional insight and imaginative empathy essential to any mature engagement with a work of art. These studies are potentially endless. And even if a student decides not to pursue a career as a professional musician, the knowledge and skill they have acquired are valuable and enriching.

One hopes that when young adults leave school, music will continue to play an important role in their lives. At the very least, they might continue to attend concerts or to enjoy recorded performances at home. It is undeniable that contact with great music can provide an emotional and aesthetic satisfaction that, for some people, constitutes some of the most important experiences of their internal lives. Even if not consciously articulated, this significance lies perhaps in the fact that art can provide us with images of order and beauty in the midst of a world that seems

ever more menacing, ugly and uncertain. Orpheus, in Rilke's cycle of sonnets, raises his lyre amongst the shadows to offer consolation for those aspects of our existence that are the occasion of sorrow and anguish:

Über dem Wandel und Gang,	Transcending change and motion,
weiter und freier,	further and freer
währt noch dein Vor-Gesang,	resounds yet your primal song,
Gott mit dem Leier.	God with the lyre.
Nicht sind die Leiden erkannt,	We cannot fathom the cause of sorrow,
nicht ist die Liebe gelernt,	nor learn aught of love,
und was im Tod uns entfernt,	and what is taken from us in death
ist nicht entschleiert.	is not revealed to us.
Einzig das Lied überm Land	Song alone, over the land,
heiligt und feiert.[17]	can heal and celebrate.

For some, their encounters with music take place in a jealously guarded solitude and are of a deeply private nature. Others derive pleasure from the fact that such experiences can be shared or that they can participate in music making together with friends and acquaintances. Such people might join a choir, a local light operatic society, or an amateur orchestra or chamber group. The social value of such activities is immense. Apart from providing an outlet for talent that would not otherwise have the opportunity for expression, these activities bring members of a community together for pleasurable recreation of a particularly worthwhile kind.

Choral singing, in particular, is unique in the extent of the opportunities it affords for participation: provided one has a sense of rhythm and can sing in tune—and for the vast majority of people neither of these requirements presents a problem—one can become a serviceable chorister. The quality of the individual voices in a choir does not have to be exceptional; and very few voices are so objectionable in timbre as to present an insurmountable difficulty. No purchase of instruments is necessary, and the financial cost of participating in almost all amateur choirs is well within the reach of most. Choral singing can also forge common bonds of mutual obligation and reliance—choristers must attend regular rehearsals and take individual responsibility for learning their parts, so as not to slow up the progress of the entire group in rehearsal or adversely affect the artistic standard of excellence that the group can reasonably expect to achieve. Membership of a choir can also provide a

spur to further personal development. Many conductors of choirs encourage their members to improve their competence at reading musical notation, for example, or to take private vocal tuition. Finally, the choral literature is so vast that members of choirs can enjoy singing fine music dating from any period since the middle ages up to the present. Similar benefits accrue from participation in amateur theatrical or instrumental groups, and these activities should surely be of interest to those civic republicans and communitarians who lament the increasing atomisation of communities into isolated individuals who pursue their aims without relation to one another and without any shared sense of purpose or sense of responsibility to their fellow citizens that might transcend narrow personal interests.

In our present social and cultural climate, there is a very real danger that the benefits accruing from both a musical education and the activities it makes possible will be lost sight of. The western art music tradition is particularly vulnerable to the slur of elitism—an incoherent and misguided attack, which, in its crudest form, denigrates classical music as a costly recreational activity that is of marginal interest. The value of a musical education is also overlooked by those who hold extremely utilitarian views on education and regard the study of the fine arts with scepticism or impatience. Politicians and educators holding attitudes of this kind, especially if allied to populist sympathies, will naturally be slow to acknowledge the intrinsic value of art music as a cultural pursuit, let alone support the provision of public funding for it. A careful reconsideration of the cultural importance of art music from a civic republican standpoint along the lines I have suggested might be both timely and pertinent.

The value of the western art tradition has implicitly been called into question by certain modern trends in musicology that could also fruitfully be subjected to critical scrutiny by republican theorists. Readers who have followed the course of recent debates in literary criticism concerning the hegemonic claims traditionally made for the canon of western literature will recognise ideas that are essentially similar. As far as music is concerned, these revisionist critiques typically advocate a thoroughgoing relativism that emphatically denies any privileged place in our musical culture for western art music above folk music, jazz, and all the various types of popular music. Proponents of this view point would have us redirect our attention to music that has occupied a place outside the margins of what was considered ‘high culture’ and that did not receive attention from musicologists until comparatively recently—

amongst these are ethnic musics from Africa and Asia and the various genera of jazz and popular music (in the broadest meaning of that term).

A related trend in contemporary musicology concerns itself with questions of ideology in relation to music, assuming that ideological positions can somehow be discerned even from abstract musical compositions without texts. For example, practitioners of feminist or so-called gay and lesbian musicology claim to be able to uncover the attitudes of a composer towards sexuality and gender from a musical composition. The methodological premises on which such work is based, as well the manner in which its putative 'findings' are obtained, may be open to severe criticism, but, nonetheless, these branches of musicology seek to alter traditional notions concerning the sort of music that should receive attention both within the university and outside it. Part of this writing is highly provocative and confrontational in tone, eager, so it seems, to denigrate the achievement of central figures in the western canon in a manner similar to some deconstructionist criticism.[18]

In part, these tendencies originate in an emotional reaction to some of the more questionable aspects of Europe's past, which is typically accompanied by a vehement rejection of a complacent, culturally insular eurocentrism and a pronounced distaste for the arrogant assumption of cultural superiority that all too frequently accompanied such an attitude when Europe's colonial and imperial ambitions were at their zenith. A second aspect of the 'new musicology' is connected to topical political issues surrounding sexuality, race, gender and socio-economic disadvantage, all too familiar to need rehearsal here. Once again, this is indubitably bound up with what Hegel described as a desire for *Anerkennung*—a need for recognition, respect and acceptance on the part of certain groups within our society who have until comparatively recently been treated unjustly.

Though the positions adopted might appear attractive to many at a first glance, they are in fact highly problematic when one subjects them to more considered scrutiny. One wonders if there is any meaningful sense in which one can compare a highly complex cultural artefact such as a Beethoven symphony with a typically ephemeral product of mass culture such as a formulaic and banal pop song with trite lyrics, let alone assert that they are of equal cultural significance. And is the pop song of comparable cultural significance to, for example, a chant employed in the course of a religious ritual by an Asian ethnic group? Given that many western music students learn about African or Asian musics with only the most superficial knowledge of the language of the community they study,

if any, or its social structure, religious beliefs and culture, one wonders whether many courses in ethnomusicology are not, ironically, further manifestations of a western cultural arrogance that really panders to a superficial vogue for the artefacts of these cultures marketed as 'world music', while attempting to conceal its superficiality of engagement under the cloak of academic respectability.

The practical implications of this relativist stance are of great moment for music education. The very choice of music to be studied in school music programmes and in university courses is now frequently a controversial matter. Academics and educators who design such courses are understandably anxious to avoid incurring ideological opprobrium through charges of eurocentrism, anti-populism or elitism. One wonders if these changes to the curriculum sometimes come about not only because of a desire for greater inclusiveness but also from an ideological hostility to our western musical heritage. As a consequence, in many curricula the study of western art music is now supplemented with courses devoted to a variety of ethnic musics, jazz, and popular music. This creates many practical problems, however. It is difficult enough to provide a thorough training in the various technical disciplines and historical studies that make up most traditionally-structured music programmes—if provision of time must also be made for the study of other types of music, the situation becomes impossible. There is, after all, a thousand years or so of western art music for students to get to grips with. To bring students to the point where they can appreciate a complex artefact such as a Mahler symphony or a Wagner opera in all its multifarious subtleties of construction and expression requires a thorough training and a considerable provision of time. Inevitably, sacrifices have to be made if the students are not to be overburdened. What tends to happen in practice is that courses in traditional core subjects are either abandoned or else much diluted in order to allow time for the study of ethnic or popular musics. But, inevitably, these will also be taught in a superficial fashion, since teachers or lecturers must contend with the difficulties presented by constraints of time and budgetary expenditure in these subject areas too. Courses that involve progressive technical work often tend to be dropped from the curriculum, and, in practical terms, students cease to acquire a really solid foundation in any subject. The integrity of the educational vision I have described above is thus greatly compromised and its potential benefits to the student reduced.

Needless to say, problems such as I have described are not unique to music education. The distinguished scholar and art critic Ernst Gombrich

gave a lecture in 1985 in which he expressed deep concern about the effects of proposed financial cutbacks on both the quality of courses offered at undergraduate level and on academic standards generally. He emphasises that it is unrealistic to expect that students who have not acquired a thorough foundation in their subject will produce work of any real significance. Furthermore, some of the most valuable aspects of university education have increasingly come under threat because they are perceived to cost too much money. Gombrich strongly criticises moves to reduce the provision of time for tutorials, for example, where students have the opportunity to receive helpful suggestions and commentary relating to their work. He emphasises that while historical facts can, of course, be learnt from a book, stimulating discussion with a fine teacher can be invaluable in furthering a student's intellectual development and helping to release innate talent. There is no substitute for personal contact of this nature. If university education degenerates into mere rote learning, and unsystematic rote learning at that, without any provision being made for students to receive detailed criticism, standards suffer. Ultimately, this decline in standards means that the subject stagnates. As Gombrich rightly points out:

> The advancement of the subject depends to no small extent on the respect it gains amongst colleagues and ultimately also in the wider world. Writing books, giving lectures, reviewing, even people joining in public discussions, should not be seen as self-promotion; they can serve the paramount duty I have outlined, they can enlist interest and make people see that the subject must not be perverted nor sacrificed to other considerations … Over the centuries our institutions of higher education have developed into finely tuned instruments in which all the conflicting demands made on them appear to be so carefully balanced that nothing can be omitted or even added without serious harm to the whole. Hence the outcry that invariably goes up when any part of the system is threatened. We have seen those who are anxious to spare the taxpayer money eyeing that magnificent edifice from all sides with axe or shears in hand, bridling at the cost of the ground rates in a desirable part of the city, at the expense of a low student-to-staff ratio, at the needs of research, at the tenure system, and of course at the expenditure on students' grants, making our flesh creep about the *per capita* cost of every student who sits in a classroom.[19]

He continues:

> There is much talk nowadays about [the] added opportunities that a university education confers on graduates. I am not sure that this applies to the present as it undoubtedly did in the past, but if there are such advantages they can only derive

> from the confidence that the awarding university still widely enjoys. There are plenty of institutions that confer quite worthless degrees; if others are far from worthless on the market place their value must be due to the academic excellence that only the teachers themselves can judge and preserve … [R]eading an arts subject under an inspiring teacher can and should be an enriching experience even for those who do not want to advance the subject. Life is often sad, and it is barbarous cruelty to want to cut off our young people from this source of strength, from the inspiration they can derive throughout their lives from this vitalising contact with the masterpieces of art, literature, philosophy and music, whatever their future employment or unemployment will demand of them.[20]

Gombrich is also highly sceptical about certain fashionable relativist attitudes now prevalent in criticism and sees their influence on scholarship as calamitous. 'Cultural relativism', he claims, 'has led to the jettisoning of the most precious heritage of all scholarly work, the claim of being engaged in a quest for truth.'[21] If one accepts the claims of such relativist theorists concerning music, all musical artefacts, no matter how trivial, must be considered to have an equal claim to be seen as significant. As a consequence, any attempts at intellectually responsible criticism that raise questions of standard, technical accomplishment or the intrinsic interest of the artistic conception are rendered impossible, because all such judgements mean making comparisons with other art works. At its most absurd, this leads to a sort of wishy-washy aesthetic positivism that views all musical artefacts as good, since there can be no standards outside that defined by these works themselves, which, we are told, must be taken on their own terms. As we shall see later, this is precisely the impasse confronting those wishing to come to terms with much contemporary music. Apart from being paradoxical and self-defeating—since, in the end, all relativists are forced to recognise the validity of every counterclaim—relativism results in a shallowness of intellectual and imaginative critical response. Civic republican theorists could therefore make a valuable contribution to the theory of criticism as well as to discussions of music education by subjecting such relativism to a searching critique and addressing the many undesirable practical consequences that arise from attempts to implement such a stance in practice.

It is important to emphasise here that the western art music tradition in Ireland is particularly vulnerable to the practical consequences of such elitist and relativist criticisms. For reasons intimately bound up with our colonial past, musical infrastructures remain significantly under-developed here in comparison with other European countries, and the

work of Irish composers occupies at best a peripheral place in the awareness of most Irish people. We have little in our musical heritage that can compare with the rich art music traditions to be found on the continent, some of which go back to the middle ages and were largely fostered by native aristocracies. As a result of their patronage and practical support, orchestras could be founded and companies formed for theatre, ballet and opera. Many of these institutions still exist, some of them three or four hundred years old and prized in their native countries for their history of distinguished artistic achievement.

In Ireland, matters are very different, and art music could only begin to develop more fully in the latter part of the twentieth century. For a start, our native aristocracy, who might have supported artistic ventures in a manner similar to their European counterparts, were forced into exile after 1600, as the systematic colonial subjugation of the country began in earnest. This was a disaster of the first magnitude for Irish cultural life, and in the centuries that followed circumstances were hardly propitious for the development of a vibrant native culture of art music. In the eighteenth century, such musical activity as there was in Ireland took place mostly in Dublin, supported predominantly by the ruling Anglo-Irish class. In 1800, however, a further blow was dealt to Irish cultural life with the passing of the Act for the Union of Great Britain and Ireland. Within a decade or two, Dublin ceased to be a cultural centre of any importance, and, as sources of financial support for local artistic ventures dried up, musical life in Ireland went into rapid decline.[22]

Throughout the nineteenth century, the circumstances of musical life here—our rich tradition of folk music notwithstanding—were impoverished to a degree unimaginable in central Europe. Ireland had no professional orchestras or other performing groups; neither was there a professional national opera or ballet company. The country was beset by so many social and economic problems—not least of which were those caused by the general level of poverty and by disasters such as the potato famines—that cultural enterprises of this nature were quite simply not a priority. Most talented musicians had to go abroad for further training and frequently stayed there to live, since Ireland offered so few opportunities for remunerative and artistically rewarding employment. This situation lasted well into the twentieth century. The dispiriting circumstances of Irish musical life are therefore quite unique amongst European countries.

When Ireland gained its independence, circumstances at last began to change, largely thanks to the efforts of a pioneering generation of prominent Irish musicians such as Aloys Fleischmann and Brian Boydell.

Slowly, musical education became more widely accessible, a variety of professional ensembles were set up, and performance infrastructures slowly developed. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, then, the conditions of musical life in Ireland are healthier than they ever were. But, we still have only one symphony orchestra; we do not have either a national opera company or a ballet company that operates on a full-time basis; music education in primary and secondary schools is in crisis; and musicology in Ireland is still in its infancy. Despite the fact that Ireland has produced a significant number of composers whose work merits attention, their music remains largely in manuscript, unpublished and largely unperformed, so it is difficult at times for a specialist scholar to form any evaluation of it, let alone the general music-lover. There is, moreover, scarcely a book in print to which one could refer readers wishing to acquaint themselves with the details of an Irish composer's career. The last general history of music in Ireland was written in 1905. If one point emerges clearly from this sketch, it is that the beleaguered tradition of western art music is particularly fragile here and occupies anything but a privileged position in Irish cultural life: it needs to be carefully fostered if we are to consolidate and build upon the achievements of the last eighty years.

Part two of this article will appear in issue four of The Republic

Notes

[1] Adrian Oldfield, *Citizenship and Community: Civic Republicanism and the Modern World* (London: Routledge 1990), p. 8.

[2] See Warren D. Anderson, *Ethos and Education in Greek Music* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1966), p. 114.

[3] Elizabeth Sewell's book *The Orphic Voice: Poetry and Natural History* (Harper Row 1971) gives a fascinating account of the subsequent elaborations of the Orpheus myth in western culture.

[4] For a discussion of these rites, see E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkley: University of California Press 1973), appendix I, pp. 270–282. The reader will also recall the chilling evocation of them in the description of Aschenbach's nightmare in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.

[5] See the discussion in Dodds, op. cit., p. 76f.

[6] That is, unless these civic republicans find themselves sympathetic to Machiavelli and other thinkers in the republican tradition who urge the value of universal military training.

[7] Fascinatingly, the Greeks also believed music to be effective in curing mental disturbance—a striking adumbration of the modern discipline of music therapy. See the discussion in Dodds, op. cit., pp. 78–80.

[8] The Romans adopted many features of this Greek aesthetic tradition. In the *Ars Poetica*, a text much invoked by eighteenth-century music theorists writing on opera, Horace espouses a belief that contemporary drama should have an instructive and moral

aim in the manner of Greek models. Writing in the first century BC, the polymath scholar Varro explicitly subscribes to a belief in the power of music to form character and makes the ethical content of a piece of music the crucial criterion for assessing its value. The geographer Strabo, who lived around the beginning of the Christian era, refers to the ancient notion that poetry taught virtue and tells us that many music teachers in his day claimed to assist in the moral development of their students by imparting culture. The writer Quintillian, who produced a famous treatise on rhetoric, seems also to have held such views, as did Philo Judaeus and a variety of later neo-Platonists. Boethius, whose treatises on music were by far the most influential and widely cited theoretical texts on music before the Renaissance, held that the importance of music in the curriculum lay in its relation to morality and to the realm of pure knowledge. He emphasised the importance of understanding and controlling the elements of music, since it had such a potent influence on human behaviour, particularly as a means of strengthening our rational capacities. A Platonic influence is similarly in evidence in the writings of Basil the Great, in which he stresses the role of music education within the curriculum. Augustine, too, wrote extensively on music and was deeply appreciative of the art, though in a celebrated passage of *The Confessions* he expresses his suspicion of chants that were too overtly sensuous in appeal.

[9] See the discussion of Platonic *paideia* in Warren D. Anderson, op. cit., p. 91ff.

[10] See Fung Yu-Lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (trans. Derk Bodde), (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1983), vol. i, p. 344.

[11] Ibid., p. 298.

[12] Ibid., pp. 342–343.

[13] For a concise account of Aristotle's views on music, see Warren D. Anderson, op. cit., pp. 111–146.

[14] It is striking that a culture that could attach so much importance to music, not only as an agent of social order but also as a manifestation of a divine cosmic order, should have been responsible for conducting the first researches of which we have record into acoustics and discovering the hidden mathematical order underlying the harmonic series (those notes that can be obtained from a string or pipe when it vibrates in simple fractions of its length).

[15] Richard Dagger, *Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship and Republican Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), p. 117; Dagger emphasises that for republican liberals 'part of the point of education is to help people live autonomously' and to enable them 'to live as autonomous individuals in community with other autonomous individuals'.

[16] Richard Dagger, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991), p. 216–217.

[17] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus* (Manchester: Carcanet 2000), Sonnet I. Translation by author.

[18] The musicologist Susan McClary hears some of the music of Beethoven as the embodiment of a violently aggressive sexuality, and she speaks of pounding, pelvic thrusts and rape. In one particularly purple passage, she claims that the end of the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is an 'unparalleled fusion of murderous rage and pleasure in its fulfillment'. According to McClary, Beethoven finally 'forces closure by bludgeoning the movement to death'. See her *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minnesota University Press 1991). For a general discussion of these branches of musicology, see Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998).

[19] 'The Embattled Humanities: The Universities in Crisis', in E. H. Gombrich, *Topics of Our Time: Twentieth Century Issues in Learning and Art* (London: Phaidon Press 1991), pp. 25–26 and 28–29.

[20] Ibid. p. 30–31.

[21] 'Relativism in the Humanities', in E. H. Gombrich, op. cit., p. 38.

[22] For an account of music in Ireland from the end of the eighteenth century into the first decades of the nineteenth, see Ita Hogan, *Anglo-Irish Music 1780–1830* (Cork: Cork University Press 1966). For developments after the Act of Union, see the article by Aloys Fleischmann, 'Music and Society', in W. E. Vaughan (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, volume vi: Ireland under the Union II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1996), pp. 500–522.

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