

‘Our songs are our laws ...’—Music and the Republic (Part 2)

PATRICK ZUK

*Part one of this article appeared in
issue three of The Republic*

IN THE FINAL sections of this essay, I wish to examine two other tenets of Platonic *paideia*, which are undoubtedly the *fons et origo* of many subsequent aesthetic debates concerning the function of art and the role of the artist in society. Once again, these could form a useful point of departure for civic republican theorists. The first tenet is the notion that music must be subservient to ethical concerns and that an artist’s work is only of interest or value if it serves to promote some morally ennobling creed or presents images conducive to virtue. This doctrine often views purely aesthetic enjoyment as suspect and seeks to repudiate any views that insist on the autonomy of art from ethical considerations. The second tenet holds attempts on the part of the state to control artistic expression to be not only legitimate, but also actively to be desired, in the interest of the general well-being of society.

In Platonic *paideia*, ethical, aesthetic, and political values are inextricably fused. In practical terms, this results in the elaborate plan presented in *The Republic* for the political regulation of musical life in the city-state down to the minutest detail. The principal goals of *paideia*, according to Plato, were to inculcate a sense of right conduct and to ensure that the gods were revered in the proper manner. In speaking of right conduct and virtue, Plato leaves us in little doubt of what he intends to convey by these terms: he is clearly speaking of behaviour that will reflect the values of the ideal state and ensure its stability. We have seen that he subscribed to Damonian doctrines that attributed to music a considerable influence on human behaviour. The choice of music used for educational purposes and for public ceremonies was therefore regarded by Plato as a matter of the utmost political significance.

Plato argued forcibly that poets and composers were not entirely capable of recognising good and evil or of arriving at the correct ethical

valuation of their own work. The results of this failure might potentially be very serious. An inappropriate choice of text or melody for religious rituals could cause the gods to be supplicated in an improper manner. In private life, exposure to bad music might have decidedly adverse effects on the formation of individual character. Plato held that the philosopher's first task, therefore, should be to ascertain which beliefs were most conducive to the well-being of the city-state. Once these were decided, texts and musical settings should be chosen that encouraged the propagation and maintenance of these beliefs. Since the melodic and rhythmic organisation of good music reflects the character traits possessed by noble and good men, he argued that music should be sought that would stimulate the proper development of the personality. Vulgar and cloying music would exercise a detrimental effect and should be avoided, while good music would impart grace of character. Rightness, rather than aesthetic qualities, Plato insisted, should be the decisive criterion. The young, being habituated to virtue by music like this, would find that the practice of appropriate social conduct became as second nature to them. The stability of the city-state would thus be assured by the wholesomeness of its cultural life. It is in this context that Plato made his celebrated pronouncement that 'our songs are our laws'.

In his zeal to secure the political ends he deemed desirable, Plato did not hesitate to advocate stringent controls on musical activities so that the educational efficacy of *paideia* should not be compromised. Plato saw little need for instrumental music and viewed it with thinly concealed contempt.¹ Musical settings for voices were of a greater educational utility, and the presence of a text made ethical criticism of their appropriateness a comparatively easy task for the censor. As far as the poets and composers themselves were concerned, the quality of their poetic and musical talent was a matter of little significance in Plato's eyes; it was more important that they should be citizens of proven virtue.² Their function would be to celebrate the deeds of virtuous citizens in epinician odes*, and they would be constrained to proclaim that virtue was happiness and that evil conduct brought unhappiness. Musical settings would then be composed that provided a fitting embodiment of edifying maxims like this in appropriate melodies and rhythms for choral performance. Compositions that did not occupy themselves with ethical matters were to be banned.

Plato was also deeply conservative in matters of style and saw no need of further innovation.³ In his ideal city-state, poets and composers would

* An ode in celebration of a military or athletic victory.

not be permitted to produce anything that was not in accord with the standards of excellence traditionally sanctified by custom. In artistic matters, the word of the lawgivers would be sacrosanct; and once appropriate songs and dances had been selected for civic ceremonies, no deviation from the regulations would be possible. Neither would these civic poet-composers be allowed to arrange performances of their work unless it had first been submitted to the scrutiny of specially appointed judges for approval. All performances would be strictly regulated, and choirmasters would not be allowed a free choice of music and texts.

These aspects of Platonic *paideia* have attracted much hostile comment, and rightly so. It is undeniable that the views on art expressed by Plato are profoundly unattractive in the draconian and rather sinister restrictions on artistic freedom that are proposed. Plato's writings on *paideia* must, of course, be understood within the context of the political views he developed in later life, which are frankly and unashamedly totalitarian. As is now widely accepted, he was anxious to resist certain new schools of thought that advocated the introduction of far-reaching social reforms of a nature that caused him the utmost concern. In particular, he wished to discredit democratic and egalitarian philosophies that threatened the existing social hierarchy. The political programme outlined in *The Republic* and *The Laws* aimed to arrest all further change and ensure by means of stringent legislation the continued preservation of a social order based on a traditional system of caste and privilege. And while Plato may have been passionately sincere about the purported benefits to society at large of the system of education he proposed, he was also aware of the possibilities it presented as a powerful means of social control and was anxious to make education subordinate to a political end.⁴

It is difficult to tell at this remove just how literally educated Greeks would have believed that music had the power to shape character, as Plato appears to do. This doctrine could well have originated as an attempted codification of magical, pre-rational beliefs. Nor does it appear to have compelled universal assent: one tantalising fragment of a text has come down to us that appears to treat this doctrine in a satirical vein.⁵ The surviving documentary evidence is, unfortunately, so sparse that it is difficult to say with certainty whether or not this scepticism was more widely shared. Perhaps some Greeks understood this doctrine in a more metaphorical manner simply as an expression of the benefits accruing from an education in the fine arts. These questions notwithstanding, Plato's views on music exerted a very considerable influence and many later writers subscribe to them at least in part.

Certain aspects of his thought in particular continued to inform

important debates about music, especially the notion that art had an important didactic function and that artists should not give expression to trivial or indecent things. In the Baroque era, for example, when many of the most heated controversies concerned music for the theatre, opera was attacked on the grounds that it was a frivolous and immoral entertainment. There were, admittedly, reasonable grounds for such attacks, given the fact that the all too prevalent exhibitionism of star singers, aided and abetted by composers and impresarios anxious to please the crowds and ensure a financial success, resulted in a sacrifice of dramatic and artistic integrity in order to provide suitable opportunities for vocal display and cheap theatrical effects.⁶ Criticisms of this nature were not without effect, and some composers and theorists were anxious to rebut charges that opera was intrinsically immoral and of little artistic value. Johann Mattheson, a German contemporary of Handel, insisted that opera could provide edification as well as pleasure. Opera, he asserts, could constitute a 'musical university', which would be of educational and moral benefit and deserved to be ranked highest amongst the arts on this account. Similarly, the *Sturm und Drang* writer Wilhelm Heinse contended that opera could serve to foment a love of virtue.⁷

Arguments about the allegedly deleterious effect of certain kinds of music on morality have continued to rage right up to the present.⁸ All of Adorno's writings on music take an assumption comparable to Plato's as their starting point. It is easy to understand how opera and vocal music in particular have attracted moral censure on account of their texts. It is obviously far less easy to level charges of immorality at abstract instrumental music, but that is not to say that it has not been attempted.⁹ A number of modern schools of musicology (influenced decisively by Adorno) claim to be able to detect the influence of ideological stances in various types of music or musical works, which they then often proceed to condemn. In doing so, they continue a tradition that originates with Damon and Plato, except that the vocabulary of disapproval is now couched in sociological and political terms.¹⁰

Criticism of this kind tends to attribute covert intentions and motivations to composers in a kind of musicological deconstructionism. Its claims to authority, however, are decidedly dubious, since it is impossible to offer convincing proofs of what music supposedly means or of the worldview it is alleged to embody. It is surprising that this question has yet to receive an adequate philosophical treatment, because the assumption that one can in fact discern ideological standpoints in a medium such as music, which is non-verbal, non-conceptual, and completely abstract in its representations, seems an unquestioned premise

of modern musicology and has engendered a large body of academic work that is intellectually undisciplined and of questionable value.¹¹ This is another fascinating question with which a republican theory of culture could usefully engage in the attempt to evolve a critical and rational musical hermeneutics: at what point does discourse about music of this nature become of questionable value?

This is a matter of no small importance, when one remembers the consequences such judgements have had in the past. At their least harmful, moral condemnations of works of art have simply been occasions for the display of an ignorant and unimaginative philistinism. The opprobrium attached to Verdi's opera *La traviata* by contemporary critics on the grounds that the title character was a courtesan is a good instance in point. However, incidents such as these, while unpleasant, are trivial in comparison with the consequences of trumped-up accusations of immorality levelled at composers living under totalitarian regimes. In Soviet Russia, criticism from party hacks or denunciation by a vindictive colleague could result in deportation to a labour camp or death.¹²

Critics like these may also couch their disapproval in another guise, adopting the vocabulary of Hegelian historicism. In the view of a commentator like Adorno, our present cultural circumstances demand responses of a particular nature from composers.¹³ He claimed that the historical events that culminated in the unspeakable horrors of Hitler's death camps constituted a crucial turning point in European history, one that forced a change in response from all creative artists. In one famous pronouncement, he even questioned the possibility of any lyric poetry at all being written after Auschwitz.¹⁴ In music, also, he came to regard traditional modes of expression as no longer viable and perhaps even morally suspect. For Adorno, the anguished, tortured music of the modernist composer Arnold Schoenberg seems to have represented a touchstone of artistic and moral integrity, since it refused any easy access for listeners. The work of composers that he regarded as falling short of this ideal he rejected decisively, in terms that are often more reminiscent of oracular theological pronouncement than genuinely argued criticism.

I do not wish to call into question the sincerity of his views, for there can be no doubt that Adorno was passionately concerned about the role of the artist in society and regarded this matter with the utmost seriousness. His writings on music, however, raise a great number of problematic issues, many of which arise from his underlying historicist premises and his assumption that musical artefacts can support the kind of ideological analysis he attempts. His manner of expressing himself also tends towards the authoritarian. Similar tendencies pervade much writing

on music after the Second World War, however. Many figures associated with the post-World War II avant-garde were much given to condemnation of music and musicians on ideological grounds. Some of these polemics are as aggressive and authoritarian in tone as to make decidedly unpleasant reading.

The famous French theoretician and composition teacher René Leibowitz, an early partisan of the Schoenberg school, speaks of the compositions of Schoenberg and his students in terms that are explicitly reminiscent of theology. In a passage at the very end of his book *Schoenberg et son école*, he expresses a pious hope that the younger generation of composers will be saved from error if they meditate on the Truth—the capitalisation is his—embodied in the work produced by the Schoenberg school.¹⁵ Compositional study thus becomes a quest for artistic salvation understood in quasi-religious terms. The French composer Pierre Boulez expressed himself in even more extreme manner. In a celebrated dismissal of those who did not adopt the compositional methods of the avant-garde, he described them in print as ‘USELESS’. Boulez also subscribes to an explicit historicism; in a recent interview, he delivered himself of the opinion: ‘History is much like the guillotine. If a composer is not moving in the right direction he will be killed, historically speaking’. One can only hope that Boulez has intuited the demands of history with sufficient accuracy to escape such a fate himself. Views such as these were widely influential, and it has been argued with some cogency that musicians such as Boulez were responsible for creating a climate of doctrinaire and dogmatic intolerance, in which the work of composers who did not compose in the manner of the prevailing orthodoxy was unlikely to be granted a sympathetic hearing by critics and would often be passed over for performances.¹⁶

Historicism now enjoys little philosophical credibility as a doctrine, largely on account of Karl Popper’s *The Poverty of Historicism* and Isaiah Berlin’s celebrated critique of philosophies of historical inevitability. Sub-Hegelian doctrines like these have dominated twentieth-century aesthetics and criticism. They have also had a profound impact on the writing of histories of twentieth-century music, which typically emphasise the work of composers who are considered to have been ‘progressive’, ‘experimental’, or ‘innovative’, while music by composers who have been content to work within more traditional modes of musical expression is usually passed over quickly and often discussed with thinly concealed condescension.¹⁷ This prevailing critical orthodoxy has resulted in a superficial and facile appraisal of many musical works.¹⁸ A thorough reappraisal of this doctrine would therefore be particularly welcome on

several counts, along with a reasoned reconsideration of the problematic confluence of music and morality.

These issues should also be of paramount concern to any civic republican general theory of culture. Like all political philosophies, republicanism offers a vision of the manner in which human beings should live together and of the responsibilities they should assume. It is also a political philosophy that attempts to rehabilitate that much maligned word 'virtue' and restore it to a place of respect in our political vocabulary. Obviously, republican theories of culture might see the arts as potential vehicles for social or political thought. If so, the question arises whether or not artists should be encouraged to promote a particular vision of the common good, especially if their work is funded by the state. In the last section of this essay, I hope to show that this question should be answered decisively in the negative.

Even the most perfunctory study of music history shows that attempts on the part of creative artists to propagate a particular ideology through their work are seldom successful from an artistic point of view. That is not to say that artists cannot make such a powerful contribution to the general intellectual climate of a culture and that their art cannot act as a catalyst for social change, for it is undeniable that artistic creations can affect us in a way that permanently alters our view of ourselves and of the society in which we live. In reading Dostoyevski or Balzac, for example, one becomes sensitised to the intensely destructive and brutalising effects of social injustice and of certain exploitative modes of human interaction. The lithographs of an artist such as Käthe Kollwitz are almost unbearable in their intensely distressing representation of the dehumanising effects of poverty. But must art be considered unworthy if it does not seek to promulgate any social or political message? Are not purely aesthetic values also important? The philosopher R. G. Collingwood makes the point forcefully that much politicised art fails completely as art, no matter how earnestly the political beliefs in question are held. An achieved work of art is, after all, something of a different order to a political tract. In a passage in his book *The Principles of Art*, he draws a contrast between certain modern artworks, where the ideological subject matter is all important, and art of the past, where the subject matter, while obviously not unimportant in itself, was chosen principally for the opportunities it afforded as raw material for an imaginative creation in which technical address and beauty of form were the principal considerations. Any doctrine that elevates the ideological content of a work of art into the decisive criterion that determines its value he regards as impoverishing and sterile:

To the aesthete trained in a nineteenth-century school, these are words of horror. To take them seriously would mean looking forward to an age of artistic decadence and barbarism: an age when the infinitely difficult quest of artistic perfection will be shelved in favour of an easy propaganda; when artists will be judged not on their artistic merits but on their conformity with the political and economic and moral dogmas accepted by the society to which they belong; when the hard-won freedoms of modern art will be thrown away and obscurantism will reign supreme.¹⁹

These words apply with particular force to the various attempts to press music into the service of a particular ideology. Music can communicate emotional states, but is completely inappropriate as a vehicle for ideas or concepts. The composer who wishes to make an explicitly political statement must therefore resort to employing texts or else rely on an extra-musical element of some other kind, such as dance. (Instrumental compositions generally are of interest to the ideologue only when they provide an atmospheric adjunct to public events: marches written for military displays on grandiose state occasions, for example.) In the last analysis, works like these are of questionable value, not least because they seek the attainment of a political end by emotional manipulation rather than by reasoned argument.

When composers have applied themselves to the promulgation of a political ideology through their work, the results have invariably been disappointing. The 1960s saw a spate of earnest Marxist and Maoist compositions, many of which are grotesque examples of creative and imaginative nullity. I am thinking particularly of works such as those composed by Christian Wolff (b. 1934), one of whose compositions is for a singing pianist who is to personate a veterinary surgeon and a midwife discussing the application of Maoist thought to everyday life.²⁰ The musical element of works like these was often simplified to the point of utter banality in the hope of enhancing their populist appeal.²¹ And even when a composer resists such a simplification of his idiom, his work can still manifest signs of strain in his attempts to make it serve an extra-musical end. The operas of the English composer Michael Tippett are a good case in point. While Tippett's music could not by any stretch of the imagination be described as simplistic, the libretti for these operas, which were written by Tippett himself and reflect his social views (many of them wholly admirable), are certainly problematic, and Tippett's attempts to set them often seem unconvincing. Britten's opera *Owen Wingrave*, self-consciously a vehicle for his own pacifist convictions, is arguably his least interesting work for the stage.

Of course, it is one thing for composers to appoint themselves the spokesmen for one ideology or another, of their own free choice and in the absence of any political compulsion. It is quite another matter when such a role is thrust on them forcibly by the state. The circumstances of musical life in the USSR, as mentioned earlier, demanded precisely that.²² Under Stalin, composers were expected to write music that would be readily accessible to the proletariat. Much music of the past was dismissed as irrelevant and ideologically suspect. Songs were deemed the most appropriate means of communication with the masses, and thousands of them were duly composed, most of them by hack musicians. Since all publishing houses, recording companies and performing groups were state controlled, it was impossible for work that met with official disapproval to gain a hearing. Composers were further subject to the ordinances of a variety of unions and other bodies concerned with cultural activities. When official suspicion of instrumental composition relaxed in the 1930s, composers were still expected to produce work that celebrated the achievements of communism. Ballets, operas and symphonies were penned that presented idealised portraits of life on a collective farm or in a factory. The composer Kastalsky wrote an 'Agricultural' symphony, while Myaskovsky wrote one subtitled 'The Collective Farm'. Shostakovich produced hackwork such as the oratorio *The Song of the Forests*, written in praise of Stalin's reforestation programme. Needless to say, composers often accepted commissions of this nature simply for the money or because they feared the consequences of turning them down, rather than because of any internal creative impulse.

Such efforts on the part of a state to foster an official art were not without precedent. The republican governments of post-revolutionary France attempted for a period to enlist artists to the cause of promoting civic virtue and glorifying the new state that had come into being.²³ Several of the Enlightenment *philosophes* had influenced such a development. Diderot contended that, by the very nature of his enterprise, the artist was committed to moral comment and that the function of his work was a didactic one. Art should educate the masses to virtue and should not be used to depict vice and moral degeneracy, lest they corrupt society. He expressed revulsion for the open eroticism and what he saw as the triviality of visual artists such as Boucher, who enjoyed royal favour. In an argument reminiscent of Adorno, Diderot claimed that the decadence of contemporary art mirrored a morally corrupt environment, and he was led to suggest a variety of themes of a more suitably edifying nature for artistic treatment. These included representations of patriotism and of the blessings of peace, as well as celebrations of bourgeois values

and family life. ‘When it cost no sacrifice to art’, he asked rhetorically, ‘is it not worthier to represent virtue rather than vice?’²⁴

Such views were by no means considered eccentric: they typified an enlightenment concern that art should promote rational ends for the betterment of society. As one of the contributors to the *Encyclopédie* put it: ‘Of all works of art, the most important and useful are undoubtedly those that seek to fix indelibly in our minds appropriate knowledge, truths, maxims and sentiments that will make us more perfect, and that form our characters in such a way that we could not conceive of ourselves as true men or citizens without believing in their worth’.²⁵ D’Alembert expresses disdain for art that seemed to serve no practical social purpose—such as much rococo art, for example. Above all, he contended, art should not encourage vice and luxury. Hence his opposition to too much artistic freedom of expression for musicians: such freedom presupposed freedom of feeling and action, which he claimed would lead the state to ruin if not checked. Thus, many of the *philosophes* advocated bringing art under state control and redeeming its apparent lack of serious social purpose by making it the handmaiden of philosophy.²⁶ Art, they argued, could embody eternal moral truths in a form that could be easily assimilated by the masses. Artists should be recalled to their proper task through the introduction of suitable legislation. This new art would make men more humane and benevolent, and it could present idealised images of civic virtue, such as self-sacrifice, patriotism, and respect for the law.

In post-revolutionary France, various attempts were made to put these ideas into practice. The art critic Quatremère de Quincy, a prominent figure in the early years of the new regime, wrote extensively about the possibility of using art for propagandistic ends. Purified by the new government, the arts would stimulate a love of liberty and virtue. The politician Pierre Verneaux assured the Assembly that this art would embolden the people to undertake great deeds and contribute to the happiness of the human race. Proposals were made for commemorating heroes of the revolution, who would provide lofty images of virtue that would incite emulation. One of the most potent influences on these discussions of virtue was, of course, Rousseau, whose writings on education discuss how the individual may be best raised to a state of virtue and whose political writings provide a description of how this virtue could in turn animate social intercourse in his ideal state.²⁷ Hence Robespierre, in an explicit echo of these writings, could recommend not alone the glorification of political and civic virtues but also such personal virtues as conjugal fidelity, frugality, concern for the well-being of one’s kin, and even agricultural labour.²⁸ Bienaimé urged that the arts be used to

help restore man to a state of dignity by teaching moral lessons to the people. A republican people, he proclaimed, should ‘find instruction even in activities carried out for pleasure’ (*trouver des leçons jusque dans ses plaisirs*). Accordingly, he suggested that virtuous and heroic actions should be on display everywhere in all public places, so that the people would be exposed constantly to moral instruction.

Without doubt, many of these discussions were conducted in a highly idealistic spirit. Attempts were made to hold festivals with tableaux, pageants, and music all around the country, in the hope of fostering a general public love of such virtues as the republican regime sought to promote.²⁹ Many eminent composers of the period, Cherubini, Lesueur, Gossec, and Méhul amongst them, wrote works for these public events.³⁰ These pieces fall into two categories: the smaller of these comprises instrumental music designed to accompany military displays or provide an appropriate atmosphere of solemnity at crucial points during the ceremonies; the other consists of works for orchestra, vocal soloists and choirs—sometimes very large choirs indeed—that are settings of texts celebrating the revolution, the republic, republican heroes, recent historical events, and the various virtues. The commissioned composers penned Hymns to Liberty, Hymns to Reason, Hymns in Honour of Old Age, and even Hymns to Agriculture. If ever there was a forceful argument to demonstrate the sterilising effect on artistic creativity of views that would place art in thrall to political ideology or that conceive its primary function to be the promotion of morality, these compositions furnish it in their tedious assemblages of pretentious banalities and bombastic clichés.³¹

These examples should cause theorists of civic republicanism to pause for thought. Certainly, if creative artists are to contribute to the common good, it will not be by producing work such as this. One shudders to think what contemporary virtues might be deemed possible subjects for artistic embodiment: choral works promoting fair trade practices in the Third World, perhaps, or song cycles about nuclear disarmament. No matter how worthy the causes may be, from an artistic point of view the results are likely to be grotesque and probably risibly so. Is there any contribution, then, that a republican theory of culture could make to an understanding of the composer’s role in society? In my opinion, this lies in a critical examination of the state of contemporary composition, which would, in turn, involve a dispassionate reconsideration of the various received opinions and dogmas concerning the act of composition that we have inherited, some of which I have attempted to explore in this essay.

I have already indicated how fraught the climate of criticism in which

composers worked became after the Second World War, when certain styles of composition were anathematised in a sweepingly dismissive fashion. There were further crises, the effects of which have still not been fully assimilated: I am thinking in particular of the impact of John Cage, who refused to make any distinction between music (in the general understanding of the word) and random noise. In much of Cage's work, traditional notions of technique, craft and expression are completely nullified. It is not an exaggeration to say that no technical knowledge of music whatsoever would be required to write—and indeed to perform—some of this music. Cage is, in fact, largely responsible for the chaotic relativism that paralysed attempts at a measured and critical evaluation of much contemporary music. Where does genuine creativity end and charlatanism begin? How do we judge artistic incompetence or ineptitude? This impasse also renders the teaching of composition virtually impossible in the absence of any generally agreed criteria of excellence.³²

Meanwhile, the gulf that separates audiences from most contemporary music is as wide as ever. Many music lovers, even educated ones, simply find the music too difficult to access, too unrewarding, or simply too boring. It would be arrogant to attempt to discredit such reactions as wholesale philistinism.³³ There is no reason whatsoever to assume that every contemporary composer who puts pen to paper is writing immortal masterpieces. Such assumptions are part of the legacy of the romantics: the cliché of the beleaguered artist who must present his work to a hostile and uncomprehending world that has no use for it. Of course, this is not to say that creative artists cannot meet with hostile dismissal or ignorant criticism, though this does not explain the failure of work to find an audience in every case.

Other figures amongst the generation of composers who came to prominence after the Second World War made a fetish of 'originality' at all costs. In accordance with their historicist premises and their ideology of 'progress', they felt compelled to eliminate any elements from their work that might remind a listener of the music of the past. This attitude had never existed before in the history of music, since composers in past ages were quite happy to work within a received set of conventions and traditions, modifying them as they needed to. These conventions and traditions, moreover, provided criteria for judgement of craft and competence, as well as ensuring comprehensibility. The rejection of tradition and of the musical heritage of the past by twentieth-century composers is so strange a phenomenon that I am persuaded it can only be accounted for in psychological rather than logical terms. The act of composing became surrounded by an extraordinary number of anxieties

that rendered unselfconscious creation almost impossible and that, one suspects, inhibited spontaneous creativity in many cases. Some composers were obviously concerned at all costs to be perceived as keeping abreast of the latest fashions. Others seemed anxious to project an artistic persona that was self-consciously intellectual and produced works of a forbidding complexity accompanied by extensive programme notes, which were often more obscure than the works they had supposedly been written to explain. In a climate like this, there seemed no place for music which simply sought to enchant or delight, or even to offer a simple and uncomplicated pleasure.

Republican cultural theorists could perform a valuable service by subjecting all of these positions to critical scrutiny. They could seek to bridge the gap between the contemporary composers and their audiences, not only by seeking to educate the audiences but also by reminding composers that there are other ideas concerning the role of the composer in society that have tended to receive scant emphasis in histories of modern music. Composers such as Kodály, Hindemith, and Vaughan Williams were deeply concerned to make a valuable social contribution. They would have felt little sympathy for dismissive or contemptuous attitudes towards the general listening public. All of them were deeply concerned with music education and were anxious to make good music as widely accessible as possible to the public, and all of them tried to write rewarding and interesting music for children and amateurs. But it is important to note that they would have regarded the transmission of certain formal skills as vital to the maintenance of a healthy musical culture. Lack of knowledge and lack of skill can only perpetuate low standards, doom generations of students to incompetence, and sentence audiences to dissatisfaction and boredom. None of these composers encumbered their art with ideological concerns: they simply composed as it came naturally to compose and did not strive for a self-conscious profundity. As teachers, performers, and polemicists, they fought passionately for the recognition of the importance of music in the cultural life of their respective countries and to maintain artistic standards. The work of these composers, and of others like them, surely provides a rich paradigm for civic republican theorists who wish to promote a realistic vision of how creative artists can contribute to the common good and enrich the lives of the members of the community of which they are a part.

Notes

¹ For example, Plato thought that solo instrumental playing on the *kithara* and the *aulos* aimed merely at providing pleasure and was thus unsuitable for young people.

² He was of the opinion that freedom of expression should only be permitted to those who had attained maturity of years and, ideally, were elderly.

³ In the *Gorgias*, Plato surveyed the state of contemporary music as it was known to him and arrived at a distinctly negative evaluation of it.

⁴ This led Karl Popper to write of Platonic *paideia* with sweeping derision in his famous book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, where it is dismissed as little more than a cynical attempt at wholesale indoctrination. See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge 1999), vol. I, pp. 52–54, 126–132, and 228–230. However, Popper's hostile account of Platonic *paideia* is rather superficial and crude. For a far more sensitive and sophisticated appraisal, it is worth consulting Werner Jaeger's magnificent three volume study *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* (trans. Gilbert Highet), (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1944). As far as Plato's proposed restrictions on artist freedom are concerned, Jaeger points out (in the context of a discussion on Greek drama) that 'the men of the age never felt that the nature and influence of tragedy were purely and simply aesthetic. Its power over them was so vast that they held it responsible for the spirit of the whole state; ... the Athenians held [poets] to be their spiritual leaders, with a responsibility far greater and graver than the constitutional authority of successive political leaders. Only by keeping that in mind can we understand the attacks made on the freedom of poetry in Plato's *Republic*—attacks which seem so inexplicable and repulsive to a liberal mind', (vol. I, p. 247).

⁵ The so-called Hibeh papyrus, which was probably composed around 390 BC.

⁶ Charles de Saint-Evremond, a seventeenth-century French critic, rated opera as morally and intellectually inferior to tragedy. The Arcadian literary historian Lodovico Antonio Muratori, in his treatise *Della perfetta poesia italiana* (1706), goes even further: in his view, opera has had a calamitous effect on the Italian theatre. Not only does he consider it an absurdity as an art form, but he alleges that, as music, it is effeminate and unwholesome, serving to corrupt the minds of the spectators rather than improve and purge them as ancient drama did. Some composers for the stage during this period, important figures such as Gluck amongst them, viewed contemporary opera with dismay and were anxious for reform. The Italian composer Benedetto Marcello penned a blistering satire, *Il teatro alla moda* (1720), that one suspects was born out of a deep sense of frustration with the genre, and in which he ridicules the antics of singers, composers, and theatre mangers alike.

⁷ The charges of immorality that were frequently levelled against opera were undoubtedly coloured by the common prejudice that the mores of singers and theatre folk tended to be rather questionable. In his memoirs, the nineteenth-century composer Hector Berlioz described the moral opprobrium that surrounded the theatre. To embark on a career connected with the theatre was in the eyes of many, he says, to tread 'the broad road that leads to disgrace in this world and damnation in the next'. A concern with the allegedly deleterious effects of opera on general mores was, of course, an important factor in the rise of the sacred oratorio during the Counter-Reformation. See his account in: Hector Berlioz, *The memoirs of Hector Berlioz: member of the French Institute, including his travels in Italy, Germany, Russia and England 1803–1865* (3rd ed.) (London: Cardinal 1990).

⁸ As I write, a number of court cases are in progress in the United States, taken by parents against rock groups whose music they claim influenced their children to commit anti-social or violent acts.

⁹ Interestingly, Plato was aware of this very difficulty and expressed himself with considerable circumspection and caution on the possibility of passing ethical judgements on pieces of instrumental music, despite the fact that he regarded instrumental music with suspicion. Plato acknowledged that it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain what such music 'meant' or to determine whether or not it imitated any 'worthy object'. Tolstoy is an interesting example of a modern writer

who seems to attribute morally deleterious powers to instrumental music—a violin sonata by Beethoven, nicknamed the ‘Kreutzer’ Sonata, seems to precipitate the violent crime of passion that forms the climax to Tolstoy’s tale of murderous jealousy of the same name.

¹⁰ For a provocative and stimulating discussion of criticisms of art works on ideological grounds, see Nick Zangwill, ‘Against the Sociology of Art’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 32, no. 2, (June 2002).

¹¹ This problem has been with us since musicology came into being as a discipline. The nineteenth-century musicologist Hermann Kretzschmar attempted to ‘explain’ musical compositions by means of biographical data from composers’ lives. In the early part of the twentieth century, Arnold Schering offered similar interpretations of works by Beethoven, drawing on literary texts that he claimed must have been the source of Beethoven’s inspiration.

¹² One of the most infamous examples is, of course, Stalin’s condemnation of Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District*. For a succinct account of this affair, see Ian MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich* (London: Fourth Estate 1990).

¹³ Adorno’s views are often couched in explicitly Hegelian terms. In Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York & London: Continuum Publishing Group 1970), for example, he compares the work of contemporary composers unfavourably with the work of Schoenberg, whose creative talent, he asserts, ‘was one with the World Spirit’.

¹⁴ This notorious pronouncement caused considerable distress to Paul Celan: see John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1995), pp. 139, 188–9, 225, 232. Adorno later partially retracted it, however.

¹⁵ See René Leibowitz, *Schoenberg and His School: The Contemporary Stage of the Language of Music* (trans. Dika Newlin), (New York: Da Capo Press 1985), p. 290.

¹⁶ See, for example, the autobiography of the Polish composer Andrzej Panufnik, *Composing Myself* (London: Methuen 1987), in which he discusses how the work of many composers was ignored by the BBC during the period when William Glock was Controller of Music, because of his partisanship of the Schoenbergian school.

¹⁷ The English writer Paul Griffith’s book *Modern Music* (Thames and Hudson 1994), which is a standard university textbook, is a good case in point. Ample space is devoted to the work of Stockhausen, Boulez and Cage, while composers such as Britten, Shostakovich and Tippett receive perfunctory treatment. The very word ‘modern’ is evidently not a neutral temporal description—some ‘modern’ composers are evidently more ‘modern’ than others. A similar situation has arisen concerning the use of the word ‘contemporary’ in the description ‘contemporary music’.

¹⁸ Boulez and Adorno are by no means alone in subscribing to a belief in the existence of historical laws of stylistic ‘progress’ and ‘development’ that enable the critic to make judgements of a universal and objective character. The French composer André Hodeir in his book *Since Debussy: A View of Contemporary Music* (trans. Noel Burch), (New York: Grove Press Inc. 1961), claims that ‘there is an ill-defined yet implacable law governing the relationships between art and history: it is always possible to determine the date, exact to within a few years, of any given work, provided it is truly representative of its period, because the work holds a unique position in a process of historical connections’ (p. 10). This process is described as ‘immutable’. The question of how we are to determine what is ‘truly representative of a period’ is, of course, never explored. Hodier’s book is a perfect example of the dogmatic and oracular style of criticism I have described above, being full of sweeping dismissals of composers’ work on the basis of historicist doctrines of this kind. In a similar vein, the distinguished English critic Donald Mitchell, in his book *The Language of Modern Music* (London: Faber, 1993), writes of the ‘morality’ of the stand that modernist composers such as Stravinsky and Schoenberg took in repudiating certain stylistic

traits of nineteenth-century music. He tells us that this stance ‘rested in the realisation that *the language into which they were born no longer held ‘true’*; and indeed, if we survey the musical scene at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, we may be astonished to discover how many talents, even quite substantial talents, still hopefully and even authoritatively created in styles and forms that seemed to have life only because life had so long inhabited them ... To reject [works] of this kind, which may well seem to be beautiful in the old style, can be a painful experience for the critic, conscious as he is of the past. But he must, in his own small way, *make his stand and say No to the lie that is implicit in the use, however masterful, of a language that has lost the power of meaningful speech*’, (p. 66–67). [Emphases added].

¹⁹ R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994), p. 71.

²⁰ For a general discussion of the work of composers influenced by Maoist thought, see Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (London 1974).

²¹ The work of Cornelius Cardew, for example, exemplifies this trend.

²² For an informative general discussion of the circumstances of musical life in the Soviet Union in the period, see Boris Schwartz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 1917–1970*, (London: Barrie and Jenkins 1972).

²³ Louis XIV had also attempted to control artistic activity by eliminating private patronage and seeking to make all artists dependent on the state for employment and the awarding of prestigious commissions.

²⁴ ‘*Quand il n’en coûte aucun sacrifice à l’art, ne vaut-il pas mieux mettre la vertu que le vice en scène?*’: Assézat and Tourneux (eds.), *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot* (Paris 1875–77), vol. x, p. 336.

²⁵ ‘*De tous les ouvrages de l’art, ceux-là ont, sans contredit, l’utilité la plus importante, qui gravent dans notre esprit des notions, des vérités, des maximes, des sentimens propres à nous rendre plus parfaits, et à former en nous les caractères dont nous ne saurions manquer sans perdre de notre prix soit en qualité d’hommes, soit en qualité de citoyens*’. *Encyclopédie*, vol. III, p. 500.

²⁶ For a fascinating discussion of this, see James A. Leith, *The Idea of Art as Propaganda in France 1750–1799* (University of Toronto Press 1965).

²⁷ See Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1986).

²⁸ As his English biographer J. C. Carr has pointed out, Robespierre’s identification with Rousseau was remarkable. We find him apostrophising Rousseau as ‘divine’, and indeed, so marked and so much in evidence was Rousseau’s influence on him generally that the German poet Heinrich Heine, in his *Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, was led to describe Robespierre as ‘merely the hand of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’.

²⁹ For an account of these, see Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1991).

³⁰ Almost all of the music for these festivals and ceremonies is collected in C. Pierre, *Musique des fêtes et des cérémonies de la Révolution* (Paris: Imp. nat. 1899).

³¹ The texts of these pieces are, if anything, worse than the music. I quote at random from *Hymne à la Victoire* by one Lacombe, which gives a good flavour of the work of the many poetasters who are represented in Pierre’s collection, op. cit.:

*O Français, dans tous nos concerts
Entends les chants de la victoire;
Oui, du vengeur de l’univers,*

*Chantons les faits, chantons la gloire.
 Les monts renversés par ton bras,
 Le globe étonné sous tes pas,
 En trouvant ses voûtes brisées,
 Et l'Anglais trouvant le trépas
 Au sein des mers ensanglantées!*

O people of France, in all our concerts
 Let us hear songs of victory;
 Yes, let us sing of the deeds and the glory
 Of the avenger of the universe.
 The mountains overtopped by your arm,
 The globe lying stunned under your tread
 On finding its vaults shattered,
 And the English meeting death
 On the bosom of the blood-drenched seas!

³² One of the few writers to tackle these questions honestly is, in my opinion, Hans Keller, who was evidently deeply troubled by them. See the long essay on contemporary music in his *Music, Closed Societies and Football* (London: Toccata Press 1986) and the essay on composition teaching, 'Principles of Composition', in Peter Wintle (ed.), *Essays on Music* (Cambridge University Press 1994). See also Robin Holloway, 'Modernism and After', in Peter Davison (ed.), *Reviving the Muse: Essays on Music After Modernism* (Claridge Press 2001).

³³ For an interesting and provocative discussion of a parallel situation in the visual arts, see Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (London: Thames and Hudson 1984). See also Julian Spalding, *The Eclipse of Art: Tackling the Crisis of Today*, (Munich & London: Prestel Verlag 2003).