

ery trend that Dionne and Ehrenhalt have described—and this would mean a change as large as any in American history. There are also, of course, possibilities for a non-democratic political future: Watergate and Irangate have supplied the most spectacular trial runs so far. Certainly Dionne and Ehrenhalt have sounded the alarm that

our democracy is not just undergoing reconstitution, but is, rather, in danger of moving into ever-deepening eclipse.

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But What Does Music Mean?

MUSIC SOUNDED OUT. By Alfred Brendel. Farrar, Straus. 258 pp. \$25

MUSIC AS CULTURAL PRACTICE 1800-1900. By Lawrence Kramer. Univ. of Calif. 241 pp. \$24.95

MUSIC AND THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION. By Leo Treitler. Harvard. 352 pp. \$35

MUSIC AND DISCOURSE: Toward a Semiology of Music. By Jean-Jacques Nattiez. Trans. by Carolyn Abbate. Princeton. 272 pp. \$45

Many years ago I did a stint as music critic for the *Irish Times* and, under a pseudonym, for the *Leader*, a small magazine in Dublin. In the *Irish Times* I reviewed concerts, two or three a week; in the *Leader* I filled a page with talk about the social and political considerations loosely related to music. Loosely, because my sense of the relations between music and society was rudimentary; I wrote the column without knowing what I was doing. Music was much in the air, however. I was a student of *lieder* at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, and it didn't seem more dubious to talk about music than about anything else. Besides, there were readable masters: Ernest Newman in the *Sunday Times*, Eric Blom in the *Observer*, Hans Keller in the *Listener*. If they could write music criticism, it didn't follow that I could, but that there was no principle against my writing it. Now I'm not so sure.

The analysis of music is a recent activity. The elucidation of a work of music

used to be merely offered as a model for composition, an inventory of correct practice. But in the late 18th century, philosophers like Kant began attempting to establish a moral basis for values other than that of self-interest. To find such a basis, they turned to the example furnished by aesthetics. The analysis of music, as Leo Treitler remarks in *Music and the Historical Imagination*, thus began with "the contemplation of beauty for its own sake and without self-interest." The art of symphonic music, free of the distraction of words and references, made discussing the disinterestedness of aesthetic experience easier or at least more pointed. Words are always in a hurry to be completed by their meanings. Notes in sequences have nothing, or nothing very urgent, to say. Furthermore, if you emphasize the unity of a work of art, you find this unity more evident in music than, say, in literature. Whatever we mean by content, in music we never find it separable from form. That is why all art, as Walter Pater said in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), "constantly aspires toward the condition of music."

But, beyond that grand aspiration, what can one say about music? Clearly, a technical description of a piece of music is possible, if not necessarily widely appealing. In *Music Sounded Out*, Alfred Brendel has collected his technical studies of Schubert's last sonatas, Liszt's B minor sonata, Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, and many other works. About the opening of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 57 he asks us to note:

(1) A (broken) triad, (2) An octave (as octave leap or area or transposition of a phrase), (3) A second as appoggiatura or trill, most frequently in its simplest form of three notes, and in the degree of the dominant; (4) The area of a third, filled in by the combination of the simple trill (C-D-C) with the fast trill (D-E-D), and (5) note repetition.

“Formalism”—approaching a musical work as a technical whole—assumes “the beauty of a musical work is specifically musical: i.e. it inheres in the combinations of musical sounds and is independent of all alien, extramusical notions.” The assertion comes from a famous essay by E. Hanslick on the beauty of music, published in 1854; it is quoted in Jean-Jacques Nattiez’s *Music and Discourse* to illustrate a Formalist axiom also practiced by Varèse, Stravinsky, and other composers. According to this emphasis, a work of music is an embodiment of formal and sequential possibilities discovered by a composer within the resources of music itself; in other words, a series of acoustic relations.

So much—or so little—is clear enough. But those who write music and those who listen to music often want to go further than Formalism allows and to evade what appears to be the aridity of a strictly formal analysis. They want to share meaning with the literary arts. Some composers attach titles to their works: Modest Petrovich Moussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874), Robert Schumann’s *Kinderszenen* (1838), Edward Elgar’s *Enigma Variations* (1899). Even when composers don’t give their works such referential names, they move the works into the discourse of general experience by telling performers how to play them: not just indications of tempo (*andante*, *allegretto*, and so forth) but indications of mood, tone and style (*con amore*; *maestoso*). Harmless instructions, perhaps, but they show that composers aren’t always content to reside in the solitude of forms and relation. Performers and listeners often express the same desire, as if they insisted on having music as a discursive art, not merely an intrinsic one. Reading these several books,

I found myself wondering what justification a scholar of music has for correlating certain sequences of sounds with certain states or movements of soul. In *Human All-Too-Human* (1878), Nietzsche meditated on Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony:

The thinker feels himself floating above the earth in an astral dome, with the dream of immortality in his heart: All the stars seem to glimmer about him and the earth seems to sink ever further downward.

Brendel, strict in his Formalism as he generally is, permits himself to say of “*Kind im Einschlummern*,” one of the *Kinderszenen*, that “it stops on a wonderful, true romantic A minor chord that opens like a mouth opened by sleep.” *Opens? Like?* And he writes of Schubert’s last sonatas:

Besides the gentle and solemn, there is a disturbing and menacing side to Schubert’s last music. Its classical poise is sometimes undermined by anxiety, exploded by nightmares or shaken by despair. . . . the episodes of the Adagios in the C minor Sonata and the String Quintet are darkly affected by fever; the middle section of A major II almost destroys itself in a frenzy of anguish. I shall refrain from connecting such states of mind with the reality of Schubert’s illness, something Fritz Lehner, in his fictional Schubert film of 1986, unfortunately did not avoid. Is it not sufficient to feel that, at certain moments in this music, demons descend to strangle or mercilessly to chase?

In *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900* Lawrence Kramer says that Beethoven’s Sonata F#, Op. 78 “has the sound and movement of an idyll,” but then he moves without misgiving from a technical commentary on the two movements of the Sonata to a discursive account of the idyll of Romanticism:

. . . the sound and movement of an idyll, the very idyll that Schiller had demanded from the Romantic artist. As Mikhail Bakhtin has suggested, the idyll as a narrative form became increasingly important after the mid-18th century, when Rousseau and others found that its ele-

ments could "provide material for constituting an isolated individual consciousness . . . According to Bakhtin, idyllic narrative is marked by . . . continuity, cyclical movement, and the absence of rigid boundaries: precisely the major features of the movement before us.

It is difficult to take the force of "very" and "precisely" when the relation between the idyllic situation and Beethoven's notes is precisely what Kramer doesn't show us.

What am I saying? Only this: that there is no merit in treating a symphony as if it had a meaning or meanings. Symphonies do not mean anything, they can't mean anything, because notes are not signs; they do not participate in a code of signs. If in a furniture store I speak the word *chair*, the language being English, the word is a sign; it participates in a code of signs by referring to the class of objects upon which one sits. Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata has sense, but not meaning. Nattiez quotes Mikel Dufrenne saying that "one can engender sense with notes, if by sense we understand the expression proper to melody." True; except that there is more than melody in a piece of music, and "expression" encourages one to ask: "What, in the case of the 'Waldstein' Sonata, is expressed?" Water in a river makes sense, but it means nothing and therefore has nothing to say. If I claim that a piece of music means a lot to me, I may be telling the truth but only if I mean that I associate it with certain experiences which are or have been crucial to me. The only meaning the piece has is the meaning I have given it, an entirely personal attribution.

The problem is that we have a poor vocabulary for dealing with events. It is good enough for describing events if they can be thought of as objects but not if they must be construed as processes or actions. A performance of a symphony is an act, an event; it commands time by beginning with the present moment and, while it lasts, taking possession of the near future. It may, in addition, provoke and eventually appease my senses: my senses of hearing, movement, suspense, fulfillment, and so forth. A symphony does not live by meaning but by taking possession of time, of our attention during this duration of time. Its instruments of possession are sounds, rhythms, cadences, suspensions.

It may be asked: "Aren't the characteristics you have ascribed to music much the same as those we find in abstract ballets, abstract paintings, many of Barbara Hepworth's sculptures? And, if so, haven't critics found ways of describing these?" I'm not sure that they have. In all of these cases we need "language as gesture," not the language of denotation and reference. We need a discourse responsive to feelings which have not settled for the destiny of being named; feelings still amorphous, nomadic. The name is what kills. When Brendel tells me that Schubert's C minor Sonata is the most neurotic sonata Schubert ever wrote, I'm inclined to say: "Thanks a lot, I suppose."

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1001 Arabian Years

A HISTORY OF THE ARAB PEOPLES. By Albert Hourani. Harvard. 551 pp. \$24.95

In his *Prolegomena to the History of the World*, the philosopher-historian 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) developed a theory of the relation of cyclic so-

cial renewal to state formation that still intrigues scholars and analysts. According to Ibn Khaldun, the earliest human societies were those of the hardy people of the desert and mountains, characterized by 'asabiya, their strong ties of kinship and group cohesion. The dynasties that those