have conceived Jesus when she was raped by soldiers, and portraying her as a midwife and member of the resistance against King Herod. *Jezebel* is more akin to *Wicked*—the novel by Gregory Maguire adapted into a hugely successful Broadway musical—which presents the *Wizard of Oz*'s Wicked Witch of the West as a sadly misunderstood character, a feisty young feminist born with green skin.

Jezebel, too, is best read as a fairy tale—one that riffs on lively historical material. That's not to say that Hazleton's reconsideration isn't valuable. For nearly 3,000 years, conceptions of Jezebel have fossilized around the bones of her story in Kings. In filling in the blanks, Hazleton reminds us how little we really know of Jezebel, and of so many other biblical characters who have become mere articles of faith. Perhaps Jezebel was just a misunderstood foreigner. Perhaps, when she was bad, she really was horrid. But to imagine her, as Hazleton does, as a teenage bride homesick for the smell of the sea, is to extend to her, for a moment, the grace that history has not.

Sarah L. Courteau is literary editor of *The Wilson Quarterly.*

Music Recital

Reviewed by Jan Swafford

Over the past decade, *New Yorker* music critic Alex Ross has established himself as one of our most talented practitioners of the art of the feuilleton, the popular journal piece. He thereby carries on a great tradition of musical writers including Hector Berlioz, Claude Debussy, and George Bernard Shaw. Now, for the first time, Ross has turned his feuilletonist's sensibility to a longer form, the book, and he's made a terrific debut on the big stage.

THE REST IS NOISE: Listening to the Twentieth Century.

By Alex Ross. Farrar, Straus. 640 pp. $30

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)

The Rest Is Noise aspires to present "the 20th century heard through its music." The book is a series of sweeping set pieces, held together by recurring characters and themes—such as the promiscuous adventures of a few notes from Richard Strauss's *Salome* that were nicked by several other composers. Each chapter tells the story of a period or train of thought and centers on the main composers of the time. We start with Strauss and the fin de siècle; tour the century's tonalists and atonalists (those who used traditional scales and chords, and those who didn't); are introduced to Americans, from Charles Ives and Aaron Copland through the contemporary music organization Bang on a Can; and observe the fraught careers of composers under Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler. Rather than present composers in biographical blocks, Ross has them come and go in the passing parade, turning up in different chapters and settings: Igor Stravinsky in Paris and later in

America, Arnold Schoenberg in Vienna and America. (So many of the greats came here to die.)

Does the book succeed as a history of the 20th century told through its music? To a degree, though most of the text focuses on classical music and composers rather than social and political matters. There's relatively little on popular music and jazz, but Duke Ellington and crossover types such as Kurt Weill and the minimalists get their due. Ross, however, does something equally worthwhile: He weaves classical music deeply into the fabric of life and culture.

Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, and Béla Bartók wrote powerful and influential music, and also form a spectrum of musical possibilities.

The book tells a compelling, epic, and entirely human story. It's a scholarly work, with a formidable train of endnotes, but it doesn't read that way. Ross is the rare author who knows his stuff technically but can write about it for everybody. His prose is lucid and engaging, and he has a particular gift for conjuring the sound and effect of music. Often, he manages to be analytical and evocative at the same time. In Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring,* for example, "the crawling sextuplet figures in the winds and the ghoulishly bouncing string figures in the Introduction come from Debussy's *Nocturnes.*"

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

For a critic, Ross goes light on judgment. Abstaining from the brilliant snarkery of his *New Yorker* colleague, the movie critic Anthony Lane, Ross is less an enthusiast or finger shaker than a first-rate reporter. Here and there he calls something a "masterpiece" in passing, but he doesn't get too excited about it. All the same, a personal pantheon shows through. The long-standing critical consensus is that the Big Three of Modernist music are Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Béla Bartók, to which we can add the cult figure Anton Webern. These men wrote powerful and influential music, and they also form a spectrum of musical possibilities: Schoenberg, the often dissonant and forbidding atonalist; Stravinsky, who started as a Russian Romantic, turned neoprimitive, turned neoclassicist, and finally took up Schoenberg's technique after that rival was safely dead; Bartók, with his Hungarian folk accent and a style that embraced consonance and dissonance, tonality and atonality; and Webern, who made Schoenberg's 12-tone system more systematic still.

Instead, judging from the space devoted to them and the warmer prose they elicit, the heroes of Ross's book are Dmitri Shostakovich, Jean Sibelius, and Benjamin Britten. These three are more tonal and more backward looking, each in his distinctive style, than the other trinity (except Stravinsky in his neoclassical phase). Ross can wax downright rhapsodic about these composers, as when he writes of Sibelius's *Fifth Symphony,* "The swan hymn transcends the depiction of nature; it is like a spiritual force in animal form." Meanwhile, he repeatedly identifies Schoenberg and his pupils Webern and Alban Berg with the demonic atonalist composer Adrian Leverkühn in Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus,* who proposes to "take back" Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* once and for all. The association is oblique, but

Ross's apparent intention is to paint the traditional trinity with a tincture of the unholy.

This realignment of the usual 20th-century pantheon, tacit though it is, may raise some eyebrows. But it's a fresh and interesting way to examine the era while highlighting great composers who bucked the historical trends. Besides, if Ross presents some of the traditional big guns in a cloud of sulfur, he is still informative and astute when he discusses them. The Schoenbergian 12-tone row (a pattern of the 12 notes of the chromatic scale used as the basis for the harmony and melody of a whole piece) is central to much atonal music, and Ross efficiently shows us how it works.

And in his biographies, he brings to the job a fine-tuned skepticism toward the kind of propaganda that artists are apt to dispense about themselves. For example, he's not snookered by Schoenberg's protests that he's simply a good old Beethoven/Brahms traditionalist, whose music you should whistle in the shower. The book presents Schoenberg as the revolutionist he was, and provides horse's-mouth quotes to support the characterization. For instance, the composer once wrote in a letter that he strove for "complete liberation from all forms, from all symbols of cohesion and of logic."

Ross shows less interest in *why* Schoenberg obfuscated his agenda in public. He was indeed steeped in tradition, more so as he aged, and he had no intention of overthrowing the past—though he did intend to overthrow the tonal system, and in private said so. Still, his career confirms the truth of the old quip, "Even paranoids have enemies." I suspect that Schoenberg portrayed himself as a traditionalist partly to dodge the blows of his enemies—and who can blame him?

In his treatment of the composers who seem to move him most, Ross looks beyond the surface of their music to examine influences, inspirations, and mortal threats. Shostakovich is a case in point. Of all the musicians who witnessed the twin holocausts of the midcentury, Hitler's and Stalin's, Shostakovich was the composer with the most talent and the most passion, and he had an abiding empathy with Jewish suffering. He bears an irreplaceable musical witness to the horrors of his time. The man who went through the war in Russia, who in the Stalin era watched so many friends disappear, who endured decades waiting for the knock on his own door, understood in his guts what he was talking about. Listening to the final Shostakovich string quartet is like stumbling on a pile of bones in a forest.

Béla Bartók (1881–1945)

Most of the time, though, Ross confines himself to evoking the experience of hearing pieces rather than, say, the voluptuous malaise of the fin de siècle, or the social and spiritual ideals behind atonal music. He attaches the usual label "visionary" to Ives but doesn't quite explain what the vision was. Nor does he present a grand unified theory of Modernism. (Given the labyrinth of crosscurrents in all the arts of the century, that may be wise.) Fortunately, Ross is a deft painter of musical surfaces, and a fine turner of phrase. On the American composer who first used the element of the unpredictable in his pieces, "It was [Morton]

Feldman who set loose the imp of chance." Only once in a while does a phrase run off the tracks, as when, in a Bartók finale, "Brass play secular chorales, as if seated on the dented steps of a tilting little church."

Even in the riveting chapter dealing with Soviet music under Stalin, Ross's prose and point of view remain at a certain remove, though he aptly portrays an era when writing funny chords or obscure sonnets could earn you a bullet in the head, and the humiliation of artists was a state concern at the highest level. Ross lets Shostakovich get exercised in his own words, recounting the composer's anguish when in 1948 he was forced to recite a public apologia for "decadent formalism" or one of the other aesthetic capital crimes: "I read like the most paltry wretch, a parasite, a puppet, a cut-out paper doll on a string!"

Ross has keen antennae for ironies: the Central Intelligence Agency secretly funded an avant-garde music series; Broadway show-tune writer Stephen Sondheim studied with 12-tone high priest Milton Babbitt (who himself wrote a musical comedy—unproduced); in Hollywood, Schoenberg was friends with George Gershwin and Harpo Marx. Recalling a more deadly irony, Ross reminds us that Stalin and Hitler were unusual politicians in that they were passionate and knowledgeable about the arts. This is the reason they felt obliged to murder so many artists. The weary conclusion to draw, I suppose, is that when modern rulers seriously turn their attention to the arts, artists better run.

The Rest Is Noise commits some sins of omission and commission, but this is a book concerned with the big picture. In that it's a splendid success, thorough and well researched, eminently readable, with a sense of storytelling hard to find in books of music history. Seven years into a new century, it's time to start toting up the last one, and Alex Ross has proved himself the right person to provide some perspective on this "abundant, benighted" era. He consistently connects classical music to the life of creators and of cultures, and so conveys as few writers do the human reality of the music. As Charles Ives put it, "Music is life."

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IN BRIEF

ARTS & LETTERS

Drawing an Audience

Comics lost most boyish readers to video games and MTV decades ago. Since then, the audience for comics has consisted primarily of college-to-middle-aged males interested in tales about grown men punching each other. But that readership is broadening to include women, children, and other Johnny-come-lately fans, thanks to a wave of movie adaptations (*Sin City, Ghost World*) and award-winning books (*Persepolis, Fun Home*). These readers are less interested in Snoopy than in psychologically realistic stories, and are less captivated by episodic superhero yarns than by book-length literary comics—graphic novels.

To find its bearings, this new audience may seek a critic's handholding and a greatest-hits anthology, available, respectively, in Douglas

READING COMICS: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean.

Douglas Wolk. Da Capo Press. 405 pp. $22.95

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Edited by Ivan Brunetti. Yale Univ. Press. 400 pp. $28