

**THE**

**EVENT  
OF MUSIC  
HISTORY**

**J. P. E. HARPER-SCOTT**

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For Emily



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## Introduction

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MUSIC HISTORY SINCE 1789 is a series of footnotes to Beethoven, and in some respects this book simply adds to their number. The chapters that follow offer a new theory of music historiography, one that builds on antagonistic interpretations of Beethoven, and then instantiate this critically and analytically grounded historical theory in a sequence of essays on Beethoven.

It is a truth universally acknowledged by concertgoers and listeners at home that Beethoven's music was a significant event in the history of human art, comparable to the work of Homer, Dante, or Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> It may surprise such people, whose views must be taken to be overwhelmingly the majority, democratic view on classical music, that many musicologists would consider their Ludwigolatry 'problematic', 'Eurocentric', 'tediously canonical', and 'elitist'. As a member of the band of elite consumers of classical music, there is a considerable irony, as well as an abundant lack of humility, in the fact that so much as one musicologist could hold such jaundiced views of the general population, but this is the world we inhabit. The author of a recent study, *Beethoven: The Relentless Revolutionary*, who has (from one

<sup>1</sup> He has topped the British radio station Classic FM's Hall of Fame – the world's largest public vote on tastes in classical music – since 2016, supplanting Mozart, who had occupied the top position between 1996 and 2015.



musicological perspective) the brazen gall to argue for a political as well as a musical revolutionary quality – i.e. an anti-elitist, progressive quality – to Beethoven’s music writes apologetically, ‘as must surely be evident by now, I am not a musicologist’, and while ‘I hope this study will be of interest to music professionals, I have presented my perspective on Beethoven so as to be accessible to lay readers’ (Clubbe 2019, xviii). Such is the anxiety this discipline of musicology causes among the scholarly population.

I am utterly at ease with calling artists like Beethoven ‘geniuses’, and enjoying with the rest of classical-music-loving humanity the ‘transcendent’ experience that his and other composers’ music can bring. Such reprobate behaviour befits my station as a low-born scion of a family in which only three men (I am the third) who have lived since the premiere of the ‘Eroica’ Symphony were *not* coal or tin miners. It used to bother me that some of my ‘colleagues’ (a word which academics rather grandly apply, in the manner of European aristocrats, to people they have never met, scattered around the world in a similar, elite station to their own) consider the use of those scare-quoted words to be repugnant; now it simply bores me.

This book subscribes to the normal view that the arrival of the genius of Beethoven was an epochal moment in music history. But neither Beethoven nor his music was an *Event* in the sense that I mean the word in this book. The philosopher Alain Badiou, whose theory of the Event I adapt, places Beethoven alongside Haydn and Mozart in a formulation which offers an initial indication of the counterintuitive – and perhaps even outlandish – meaning of what this book will unfold as the Event of music history: ‘in the case of the subject that Charles Rosen has named the “classical style”, the names “Mozart” and “Beethoven” prove with quasi-mathematical rigour that what inaugurally presented itself under the name “Haydn” was an event’ (Badiou 2009a, 83–4). I shall steer clear of Badiou’s mathematics, for the sake of readability, but

his conception of an Event as a moment when a new 'truth' comes into the world, and triggers three distinct 'subjective' responses which aim to advance, accommodate, or to destroy that truth, and so bring about an utterly, moderately, or not at all new world, respectively, will form a major part of the intellectual conception of this study.

Histories of Western music since the French Revolution have tended to take one of two forms. The first eschews linking musical and general history: either it presents a kind of social history that pays little attention to the quiddity of musical objects, or else it focuses on style history and a procession of great works that are only brought into casual relation to a broader historical context. The second form conceives the relation of musical to general history in a Whiggish fashion, imposing a triumphalist narrative on musical developments which traces, according to the predilections of the critic, the ascendancy of modernist musical syntax, or of popular, 'democratic', and in recent times specifically American musical styles and genres. Existing music histories have therefore, in one way or another, always risked tending towards the teleological. Under postmodern pressure to abandon truth claims, and seeing no other obvious way to escape teleology, musicologists have (with a few bold exceptions) more or less got out of the business of doing history in any substantial sense.

I suggest that the way back in to music history is to focus on the dialectical mediation of nature by history. The sense of 'nature' I mean here encompasses the musical materials which are accessible to analytical scrutiny by music theory (the styles, techniques, and musical 'language' handed down to generations of composers by the history they have as their inheritance), and also the human beings who are music's manifold historical actors. The focus on dialectical *motion* is essential if a history of music is to capture the dynamic unfolding both of music and of lived, historical human experience, and also if that history is to avoid the trap of

becoming a simple goal-directed narrative which would, in the words of one influential music historian, give music history ‘a completed shape’ (Taruskin 2010, vol. 1, introduction). A renewed historiographical theory is a particularly pressing need when writing about a period of human history, from the French Revolution to the present, that has been largely characterized by continuous conflict between the avowedly teleological ideologies of revolutionary socialism and democratic capitalism.

Some of the best histories of music since 1789 were written before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and responded very strongly to the tensions of a world torn between capital and socialism: Dahlhaus 1974, Dahlhaus 1982, and Dahlhaus 2010 (writing in West Berlin from the capitalist perspective); and Knepler 1961 (writing in East Berlin from the socialist perspective). But all those written since *Mauerfall* have effectively subscribed to Fukuyama’s declaration of ‘the end of history’ (Fukuyama 2006). Ross 2007 and Taruskin 2010 (vols 4–5) tell history as a narrative of progress towards American musical domination, while the contributors to Samson 2001a, and Cook and Pople 2004, effectively declare an end to any concept of ‘truth’, historical or otherwise, on the assumption that we now live in a ‘post-ideological world’. But global financial collapse, a spate of revolutions, and a global pandemic’s effective erasure of previously held expectations about the future, indicate that history is once again on the march (see Badiou 2012 and Berge 2020), and it is time for musicology to get in step.

I began this project several years before the global SARS-CoV-2 lockdown during which I have completed it. Even at that stage a different global contagion, in this case an ideological one, a newly vocal ‘culture of victimhood’ (Campbell and Manning 2018) that uses social media as a vector, was causing pockets of the earth – university campuses, in the main – to restrict free exchange between human beings, either by banning speakers from appearing at all (so-called

‘cancel culture’ or ‘no-platforming’) or by attacking them – or any academic who shares a stage with them – if they somehow break through the *cordon sanitaire*. When I gave a paper at a conference in 2016, parts of which make their way into chapters 4 and 5 of this book, the first question that was yelled at me (I later learnt, following a rehearsal on Twitter) was: ‘What the *hell* were you thinking when you decided to give a paper like *that* at a conference on women and the canon?’ I gave the honest answer: ‘I was hoping to open a discussion.’ It would be tedious to recount the remainder of the assault, which came from two delegates while the rest sat either in inscrutable silence or with their heads behind their hands or buried in their conference programmes. It will persuade no member of this culture that John Stuart Mill considered the silencing of free speech to be an offence against both speaker and hearer, and it probably will not even concern them that ‘nineteenth-century abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass was in agreement. “To suppress free speech is a double wrong”, said Douglass. “It violates the rights of the hearer as well as those of the speaker. It is just as criminal to rob a man of his right to hear and speak as it would be to rob him of his money”’ (Campbell and Manning 2018, 217).

I am too young to remember much of the old dual-superpower world of the US and the USSR, but not so young that I do not pick up on a familiar element of that world: gestures of authoritarianism in public discourse. In Milan Kundera’s 1967 novel *The Joke*, a committed communist, the Czechoslovak student Ludvik Jahn, remembers a joke that ruined his life. Thinking that his girlfriend is a little naive in her enthusiasm for Marxism, after she writes to him that ‘optimistic young people [were] filled through and through with the healthy spirit’ of the official dogma, he inscribes a joke on a postcard: ‘Optimism is the opium of mankind! A healthy spirit stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!’ For this breach of the tight boundaries policing free speech, he

is drummed out of the Party and his university, and is made to serve years of punitive labour in a work brigade in the mines. In summer 2020, there were calls – promulgated on Twitter, inevitably – for the head of the distinguished music theorist, Timothy L. Jackson, on a pike. As the editor of the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*, he was responsible for editing a series of responses, some of them supportive, some of them antagonistic, to a paper given by Philip Ewell, a scholar of music and race, which was given at the 2019 Society for Music Theory conference in Columbus, Ohio, and subsequently published in the journal *Music Theory Online* (Ewell 2020).

Part of Ewell's argument was that the racism of the theorist Heinrich Schenker was a constituent of a racist frame to music theory in general, and this was variously interrogated by fifteen contributors, one anonymous, in the 2019 volume of the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*. The journal's call for papers was an open one, and (according to the editor) Ewell did not submit a paper, but in the swiftly formed partisan battle, Ewell's side insisted that he was denied the right to respond. In his own contribution, Jackson argued that Schenker, as a Galician Jew in a racist Vienna, was himself marked by race, and that attempts to place him simplistically on the 'white' side of a binary of power were fallacious. This point was echoed by Nicholas Cook, who argued that Schenker's own remarks on the greatness of Beethoven ran counter to biological racism: 'Schenker [says] that true Germanness cannot be established by a blood test, because it is not a matter of biology but one of culture: the proof of Beethoven's Germanness lies in his music. ... It would be very peculiar if Schenker *was* a biological racist, because that would negate the legitimacy of his own position in relation to the German musical culture of which he saw himself as the only true guardian' (Cook 2019, 154). Jackson, though, went much further. Referencing social sciences research, he attempted to place the argument in a darker context: 'Ewell's

scapegoating of Schenker, Schenkerians, and Schenkerian analysis, occurs in the much larger context of Black-on-Jew attacks in the United States' (Jackson 2019, 162). The counter-attack was swift and brutal.

Could Jackson, who of course was not joking about such serious matters, ever find himself, in our world, in the position of Ludvik Jahn? Surely what differentiates places like Soviet Czechoslovakia from the 'free' modern West is that this policing of free speech had then, and still does in many countries today, the authority of the state behind it: that is what makes it authoritarian. When Soviet citizens were denounced, they were not merely pilloried on Twitter: their denunciation could lead to imprisonment, torture, or even execution. When citizens of the Western academy are denounced by the culture of victimhood, surely their accusers' lack of access to third-party support from a position of greater power prevents 'cancel culture' from being effectively authoritarian? Perhaps not. Campbell and Manning document some of the ways in which the discourse accrues material power to bolster its discursive decibels, noting that 'on college and university campuses ... administrators often handle conflicts among students and faculty' (Campbell and Manning 2018, 46) and that sympathetic academic faculty more often than not add the weight of their voices to those of their students. They argue – *pace* the claims of the victimhood culture itself – that because senior university administrators, many professors, much of the centre-left media, and strong voices on social media lead successful drives to restrict speech, it is actually the supposedly 'powerful' who lack power to defend themselves, and the 'victims' who hold all the power. This is particularly so in cases of 'moral panic', in which 'an accusation is often enough to convict' and the panics themselves 'usually inspire efforts to weaken due process protections for the accused' (Campbell and Manning 2018, 132, 131). What pressured Jackson in summer 2020 looks very much like a moral panic of

this sort, a panic in which an entire academic discourse is straightforwardly labelled racist. An open letter from graduate students in Jackson's department called on the university to dissolve the journal and 'hold accountable every person responsible for the direction of the publication', and noted: 'Specifically, the actions of Dr. Jackson – both past and present – are particularly racist and unacceptable' ('MHTE JSS Public Statement' 2020).

However the Jackson case plays out, it will not be the last site in what already looks like an internecine culture war. Freedom of academic expression is largely in a healthy state, but only the most fanatical would deny that it is exhibiting signs of malaise. The moment therefore seems right to address fundamental questions about how musicologists should go about writing music history. The book which follows is intended as an intervention in a debate that, I suggest, is not in reality as active as many musicologists believe it has been. For many, the essential questions seem to have the same settled quality as questions about the future of the world's ideological struggles appeared to Fukuyama in 1992. This book will speak oftener than is usual about *truth*, *emancipation*, and other words which are not only out of fashion but, in dispatches from the current 'war', considered code words for 'whiteness', 'Eurocentricity', and the like. Part of my purpose is to argue that, while any concept can potentially be appropriated for foul usage, such appropriation can be undone. Indeed the truth of a concept and its emancipation from bondage to a vile ideology work together in this respect. But despite using such words, I have no wild imagining that this book will emancipate any person, musical work, or scholarly discourse from anything in particular, nor do I anticipate that many readers will accept the idea that there can be such a thing as truth, let alone that I am right in what I say about it. But my contribution to the debate comes from my own perspective. It is a perspective of a very broadly Marxist bent, and as such is one which sees class

as a fundamental force in human society, with subjugation of people on grounds of gender, race, sexuality, and so on all a result, however greatly they vary in their details, in particular times and places, of power relations which are class-centred. It is a perspective which holds identity thinking to be not only profoundly problematic in itself, but also more of a support than a form of resistance to the ideology of late capitalism. Those are my commitments, and this is the book, which will strike some occasionally as polemical, that results from them. I will not defend to the death my critics' right to issue one – I am not so preciously a punctilio for rationality as was Voltaire, who in any case never said it – but I would heartily welcome a critique of my arguments, from people who want to present one, in a proper academic forum and mode. This book is testament to the fact that I earnestly hope such a world can return.





Part 1

TOWARDS A  
HISTORICAL METHOD



