

MUSIC SINCE 1900



Ideology in Britten's Operas

J. P. E. HARPER-SCOTT

Ideology in Britten's Operas

This thematic examination of Britten's operas focuses on the way that ideology is presented on stage. To watch or listen is to engage with a vivid artistic testament to the ideological world of mid-twentieth-century Britain. But it is more than that, too, because in many ways Britten's operas continue to proffer a diagnosis of certain unresolved problems in our own time. Only rarely, as in *Peter Grimes*, which shows the violence inherent in all forms of social and psychological identification, does Britten unmistakably call into question fundamental precepts of his contemporary ideology. This has not, however, prevented some writers from romanticizing Britten as a quiet revolutionary. This book argues, in contrast, that his operas, and some interpretations of them, have obscured a greater social and philosophical complicity that it is timely – if at the same time uncomfortable – for his early twenty-first-century audiences to address.

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*For Arnold,
in friendship and admiration*

Hannah Arendt . . . is undoubtedly right in the identification of evil with triviality. But I would put it the other way round; I would not say that evil is trivial but that triviality is evil – triviality, that is, as the form of consciousness and mind which adapts itself to the world as it is, which obeys the principle of inertia. And this principle of inertia truly is what is radically evil.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics*

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Preface

Some Notes on ‘Subjects’, the Universal, and the Particular

Figure 0.1 shows Kazimir Malevich’s 1932 painting, *Red House*, which is reproduced in colour on the cover of this book. It is an image of some indeterminacy. The house could be on the coast, separated from a choppy sea by a white shingle beach. (It could be Aldeburgh. It could be *the* Red House!)¹ Or it could be on the land, separated by a black tarmac road and empty white space from the sky. In the blank wall of the house, looking like a red Suprematist rectangle, there are no windows to allow us to see in or to allow the occupants to see out, at us looking at them. Nor are there any identifying marks that enable us to identify this as a particular house. Neither the landscape nor the weather nor the building itself nor its occupants or observers can be reduced to any particular existence. They are all universal, all caught up in a communal being-in-the-world. Like the faceless peasants or sportsmen whom Malevich painted at the same time, the house shows how the everyday and ordinary may be elevated by collective spirit. Britten’s operas, like this painting, lie elementally open to analytical interpretation; and like this painting, the particularities of each opera quickly become, after a period of reflexion, indeterminate, shifting, and slippery. Ultimately, what appears on the surface to be a particular tale about an individual’s suffering, sinning, or redemption, reveals itself to be more universal, a reflexion not just on an individual but on a social totality: a work, that is, that is shot through with ideology.

With a focus on the operas of Britten, this book is more particular than my last, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism* (which was in essence a general theory), but it addresses the problem of the universalism of music no less directly, and in important ways it builds on the foundations of the earlier book. In choosing to examine the ideological themes that I do in this book, I inevitably have to shine an interrogative light not only on Britten’s representation of ideology but also of our society’s continued embroilment in it.

In this book I shall have frequent recourse to the philosopher Alain Badiou’s theory of the event, and the logically possible ‘subjective responses’ to it, and

¹ Sad to say, it is not. In any case, the Red House that Britten lived in is not on the coast.



Figure 0.1 Kazimir Malevich, *Red House*, 1932. © Lebrecht Music & Arts. Reproduced with permission

for readers who are unfamiliar with the theory – which, though complex and multi-faceted, is not made useless by a fairly simple presentation – I shall give a brief summary of it here, where it may easily be referred to as the need arises. Badiou is a highly political philosopher, and a mathematically inclined one. For both reasons he is feared and loathed, and attempts are frequently made to ridicule his thinking. I shall discuss what he means by an *event* in Chapter 2, but what it occasions is three responses from assemblages that he calls ‘subjects’. Subjects are not individual persons, and so to speak not ‘things’ at all, but of course really, empirically, factually existing people like Beethoven or Galileo do become involved in the process of ‘subjectivization’. They do so by forming a *body*: in science and art, this is a ‘result’ of some kind (a law, theory, set of principles), or a work (symphony, concerto, sonata). The three subjects go by the names *faithful subject*, *reactive subject*, and *obscure subject*.²

² See Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2 (London and New York, NY: Continuum, 2009), 45–89, for the fullest general exposition of the metaphysics of these subjects, and J. P. E. Harper-Scott, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism: Revolution, Reaction, and William Walton* (Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Chapter 4, for my development of the theory in the case of music.

The Faithful Subject

This 'revolutionary' subject:

1. discerns a truth in some kind of trace (e.g. *the emancipation of dissonance*)
2. forms part of a body which is committed to the instantiation of the eventual truth (e.g. some post-tonal musical works)
3. is an operation which produces a new *present* in which the truth will have been manifested (e.g. a world in which tonality is no longer the sole controlling principle in musical composition)

The present is the distinctive creation of the faithful subject. In science it will be a new enlightenment, manifested as a theory that can account for the new truth (heliocentrism, general relativity). In artworks it is a new intensity of expression, an artistic configuration enriched by the inbreaking of new possibilities for mediating expression and form (the emancipation of the dissonance emerging not as a mere artefact of convention but as a subjective necessity unfolding in a newly heightened drama within a body of musical works). The faithful subject is revolutionary because it exhibits a high degree of 'fidelity' to the truth. It subordinates the body entirely to the production of the present, heedless of the cost. The subordination of a body of artworks to the faithful production of a present from the trace of a truth can lead to ridicule or rejection (Beethoven's late quartets, Schoenberg's free atonal music after 1908, Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge*). But more often than not it is met in the situation by a moderate reaction, a realistic response in the form of the second subjective operation.

The Reactive Subject

This 'realistic subject':

1. denies that the truth which it discerns in the trace is realistic
2. distances itself from the faithful subject as a means of denying the reality of the discerned truth
3. is an operation which produces an *extinguished present* in which the truth is accommodated to existing modes of understanding

The reaction does not come as an attempted reinstatement of the old and the abolition of the new; the reaction denies but it does not destroy, and it remains productive. The reactive subject is the majority response to an event. If in music the faithful subject is embodied in works which declare a new world of artistic communication, the reactive subject is embodied in works which adopt some of the new expressive possibilities but accommodate them to existing formal archetypes. The musical reactive subject in the period of modernism might recognize the expressive value of the emancipation of dissonance

as something which can enable a response to a contemporary new subjective necessity; but the extended tonality of the handed-down forms from the romantic period is not (as in the case of the faithful subject) reconstructed from the bottom up, emerging from the nature of the musical material itself. There is a heightened freedom, but not an emancipation, of melody and harmony, so that, for instance, a tonic chord might comfortably accommodate non-tonic elements. The new expressive intensity of the faithful subject is therefore directly referenced, perhaps on the surface of the music, only to be set aside, differentiated from the goals of the piece, so that the body of works does not submit to the same dangerous advocacy of the radical new present, and the reactive subject may enjoy some of the chic of progressiveness without any of the attendant dangers of losing an audience in the concert hall. Although the extinguished present of the reactive subject is still a production of something new (Badiou calls them 'reactive novelties'), its energetic denial of the trace of the truth clears the way for the final subjective response.

The Obscure Subject

This 'ideological subject':

1. affirms and endorses that there is a hegemonic *Body* of supreme, transcendent power
2. flatly denies both that there is any validity at all in the trace and that it is legitimate for any body to affirm such a trace
3. is an operation which examines and destroys the new present brought into being by the faithful subject

The obscure subject conceives the creation of the present as altogether impossible, base, fallacious, and unacceptable for intellectual or moral reasons. Structurally it is recognized by its blank refusal of the present. In order to appeal to an uncontaminated, pre-evental form of appearance, the obscure subject proposes a pure and transcendent Body, that is to say a Body conceived as if it were natural and eternal, morally neutral, obviously 'right', and not a product of history or cultural relations of power (all of which claims are ideological). The assertion of this immaculate Body eradicates both the trace and the body of the faithful subject. So, the seventeenth-century trace of the truth of heliocentrism, and Galileo, the most famous part of the body that bore it, yielded an obscure response from Pope Urban VIII, whose Inquisition extracted a recantation under threat of torture and then placed the scientist under house arrest for the remaining decade of his life. The idea and its spokesperson are thus negated by the assertion of the Body, and the present of a new enlightenment is 'occulted' by the exigencies of the subjective operation. In

modernity, the obscure subject's principal goal has, time and again, in every sphere of human activity, been the maintenance of the influence of capital and the centuries-long process that has led us close to the commodification of everything: this is its fundamental ideological commitment, however much it may vary the means of achieving it. Thus one finds the obscure subject not only in the development from nineteenth-century 'trivial music' to twentieth-century 'popular music', or in the historically parallel shift in focus from sheet music to sound recording as the favoured commodity form, but also in the mechanization of compositional process. To a subject such as this, claims to transcendence and emancipation make absolutely no sense.

In this book I shall often locate Britten, his characters, his critics, and his early twenty-first-century receivers at different points on this theoretical map, so that I can draw out the political effects of certain apparently 'innocent' or 'meaningless' aesthetic and critical particulars.

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As is always the case in the production of a book, many hands other than the author's have helped behind the scenes. I cannot recall every conversation that has spurred on a new thought, or which has enabled me to formulate a useful concrete example to help me to make an abstract point, and can only hope that, if I neglect to mention anyone who ought to have been credited, I will be forgiven. I do not blame them for any shortcomings that it will definitely have. (Blame those on the Tory government, which have been disgusting and outraging me throughout the period of composition.)

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PART I

Mappa Mundi

Britten shows the violent force of ideology at work by intercrossing it with the musical, dramatic, and psychological structures of his operas. Striating these works, which were composed in bursts of activity between 1942 and 1973, are concrete and abstract antagonisms between individuals and society, self and other. The ideological component of Britten's operas is as the warp to the weft of the stories that are sung and acted on stage. Neither the stories nor the ideology alone can account for the full effect of the subtly variegated texture of these works. Without either, an opera's sometimes laddered weave would fray utterly.

To watch or listen to Britten's operas is to engage with a vivid artistic testament to the ideological world of mid twentieth-century Britain. But it is more than that, too, because in many ways Britten's operas proffer to contemporary receivers a diagnosis of certain unresolved problems in our own time. Only rarely, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which reveals the fantasies underlying everyday understanding of sexual relations, and *Peter Grimes*, which shows the violence inherent in all forms of social and psychological identification, does Britten unmistakably call into question fundamental precepts of his contemporary ideology. This has not, however, prevented some writers from romanticizing Britten as a quietly revolutionary fighter for the sexual underdog. This book argues, in contrast, that his operas, and some interpretations of them, have obscured a greater social and philosophical complicity that it is timely – if at the same time uncomfortable – for his early twenty-first-century audiences to address.

Ideology is a gnarled concept, and its meaning varies in political, journalistic, and academic uses. The last is, predictably, the least well known, but all are relevant for an introduction to the issue in the case of Britten's operas. When an Anglophone politician or journalist claims that an individual or a political party cleaves to a policy 'for ideological reasons', they use the word to describe the cardinal dogma of an entire political worldview.¹ In 2016, during her presidential campaign in the United States, Hillary Clinton argued that her

¹ In other languages, notably German, cognates of *ideology* tend to be reserved for the 'academic' sense discussed below.

opponent Donald Trump's frequent pronouncements on Muslim and Mexican immigration, among other things, voiced 'key tenets making up the emerging racist ideology known as the alt-right'.² Trump might be seen as a proto-fascist, but the accusation of 'ideological motivation' need not attach to an extreme pronouncement. For instance, a proposal by the British Conservative Party to increase opportunities for businesses to competitively provide non-clinical services within the National Health Service, or a proposal by the Labour Party for the railways to be re-nationalized, are both likely to be labelled as 'ideological' by journalists and politicians on the other side of the issue. Ideology, in this most familiar sense, is an excessive eruption of a primal, libidinal urge, a swivel-eyed sacrifice of rationality to the gods of sectarianism. That kind of ideology is something only extremist idiots have, while – so we are invited to believe, at any rate – the rest of us occupy an ideology-free zone in the liberal centre ground. That hope is presumably a comforting idea for some people, but it is a more or less textbook case of psychological projection on the part of people who cannot see the ideological beam in their own eye. Ideology is, for such people, always totalitarian, and thank goodness that they, at least, don't have it. We must leave such people to their fantasies – and, in some cases, to their seats of power.

Politicians and opinion-piece writers in middlebrow newspapers do not own the term *ideology*, even if – to express their power in old-fashioned Marxist terms – they do own the means of producing it. Liberal writers such as Daniel Bell and Francis Fukuyama in the academic segment of the public sphere have developed a more nuanced sense of the term, which begins promisingly with an acknowledgement that it is impossible to eradicate ideology, but follows politicians and journalists by a circuitous route to more or less the same flawed conclusion, namely that 'we' have no ideology, but 'they' do.³ Bell and Fukuyama, as well as the many thinkers in their sway, assume

² Reported in Maria L. La Ganga, 'Clinton Slams Trump's "Racist Ideology" that Ushers Hate Groups into Mainstream', *Guardian*, 25 August 2016, accessed 4 January 2018, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/aug/25/hillary-clinton-alt-right-racism-speech-donald-trump-nevada. In another instance of the same sense, the then British Prime Minister David Cameron attacked the 'Britain-hating ideology' of the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, in an election campaign speech of his own in 2015: see Nicholas Watt, 'Cameron Accuses Corbyn of "Britain-hating Ideology" in Conference Speech', *Guardian*, 7 September 2015, accessed 4 January 2018, www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/oct/07/david-cameron-accuses-jeremy-corbyn-of-britain-hating-ideology. Corbyn's 'hatred' amounted to a desire to change the course of government policy in a moderately Leftist direction. When Cameron wanted to change the course of government policy in a radically Rightist direction, the term he used to describe his own motivation was 'modernization', not 'hatred'.

³ See Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1962), and Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992; repr., New York, NY: Free Press, 2006).

that ideology was the cause of the bloodshed of the twentieth century, which first pitted fascism and communism against each other and then pitted communism against democratic capitalism. Bell thought that the West was moving towards a period when ideological conflict would become irrelevant, and Fukuyama argued that (after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union) the West had finally reached it. Neither writer argues that by the late twentieth century ideology was somehow 'gone'; their claim is rather that one particular, apparently innocuous ideology – Western, liberal, capitalist democracy – had won out and become the universal background pattern for all humanity. It is for many scholars a seductive and, once more, a reassuring historical claim. But as a consequence, from this perspective only thoughts that are discordant with that governing ideology can nowadays be called 'ideological' at all. Since, for both writers, ideological conflict was an immature socio-political skin that could be sloughed off to leave the fully mature *Übermensch* of the twenty-first century in the fortunate position of being able to live in a 'post-ideological age', it follows that only 'fanatics' (a liberal term for people who believe in something, and are willing to make a reasoned case for believing in it) are besmirched by ideology at all. For the liberal theorists whose views sit so comfortably with the neoliberal political economy that has held Western cultural and political power since the 1970s, ideology is what the other guy – the non-normative, illiberal guy – has.

The principal manifestation of post-ideological thinking in musicology is probably to be found in the broad church of anti-canonists, whether they work on peripheral art music or on non-art music. Their principal credo is that the 'Austro-German art music tradition' (a construct that has a rather weak historical justification but is necessary for their argument to follow) exercised hegemonic control over, first, classical music production and dissemination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and second, the study of music history in the twentieth century. An antagonism was established, so the creed tells us, between the 'Austro-German centre' and its 'peripheries' (non-Austro-German, or non-art music), and some redress is urgently required – so that 'peripheral' music should be studied and valorized, and the word 'peripheral' simultaneously be abandoned as offensive. (That the word was generated by this very group of scholars is an irony either lost on the community or folded back into their liberal guilt.) That having been accomplished, the study of music will have entered a post-ideological phase 'after' that centre/periphery antagonism, and all music will be equally valued. Value, in monetary terms, is indeed at the core of this casuistically 'progressive' intellectual tradition, as

Susan McClary makes clear in a highly regarded anti-modernist article.⁴

For the remainder of this book, these two limited senses of *ideology* – that of politicians and commentators, and that of liberal academics – will be dismissed in favour of a richer and more potent one, and one that does not allow anyone, however liberal they may profess themselves to be, to feel that there is a safe space ‘beyond’ or ‘outside’ ideology (or, which is what they really mean, ‘any ideology but our approved one’) which they or anyone else could ever possibly occupy.

1.1 Symbolic and Materialist Conceptions of Ideology

To establish a more propitious starting point for the present enquiry, it would be as well to briefly trace *ideology*’s evolution from its origins. The word was minted by the French Enlightenment thinker Antoine Destutt de Tracy in his five-volume *Eléments d'idéologie* (1817–18), parts of which were translated by Thomas Jefferson after his retirement from the Presidency of the United States.⁵ It was a shorthand term for a science of ideas which would tie together political, economic, and social issues in the service of a critical understanding of human behaviour. Destutt de Tracy’s was in a way a typical Enlightenment conception, which viewed social activity as a behavioural outcrop of humanity’s rational bedrock. Furthermore, this early ideological philosophy was a direct progenitor of French *spiritualism*, a current in nineteenth-century French thought which held the mental, or ‘spiritual’ to be autonomous from the physical or material. That tradition, of which Pierre Jean George Cabanis (1757–1808) was another notable antecedent, continued into the twentieth century in the work of Henri Bergson and, it could be argued, Sartre and Foucault. This lineage is worth bearing in mind, because it goes some way towards explaining an anti-materialist character which unifies the journalistic, political, and liberal–academic uses of the word *ideology* that I have been discussing so far. But while spiritualism took ideology down a track in which ideas could be judged to have priority over physical reality, a parallel line of development can be traced from a decidedly materialist German borrower of the word.

In the work of Karl Marx, ideology is the name given to the shape of those

⁴ Susan McClary, ‘Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition’, *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989): 57–81, particularly at 77–8.

⁵ See Antoine Louis Claude Count Destutt de Tracy, *A Treatise on Political Economy; To Which Is Prefixed a Supplement to a Preceding Work on the Understanding, or Elements of Ideology; With an Analytical Table, and an Introduction on the Faculty of the Will* (Georgetown, DC: Joseph Milligan, 1817).

ideas which structure the material existence of human beings.⁶ This brings us close to the meaning of ideology in the criticism of the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin: the Russian *ideologiya* is ‘not necessarily a consciously held political belief system; rather it can refer in a more general sense to the way in which members of a given social group view the world . . . For Bakhtin, any utterance is shot through with “*ideologiya*”, any speaker is automatically an “*ideolog*”.’⁷ Specifically, since the birth of capitalism, ideology in this sense has become an enormous web of legal, economic, moral, cultural, and political ideas, all acting to the furtherance of capitalist interests. These ideas are policed both through verbal discourse – the focus of the spiritualist school stretching to Foucault and the current vanguard of ‘identity politics’ – and also, crucially, through brutal material force. It is this essential violent correlate of ideology that the post-Freudian French thinker Louis Althusser developed in his concept of the ‘Repressive State Apparatus’ (RSA).⁸ This admittedly eye-splitting term denotes the legal, political, and armed elements (military and police) of a state, which violently maintain the hegemonic control of capitalism. Operating alongside the RSAs are the ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ (ISAs) of family, church, school, and so on. The ISAs’ ideological power derives not – as with the RSAs – from the individual’s fear of imprisonment or execution but from the threat that the individual will be ridiculed or made a pariah by their society. (Peter Grimes’s progression in his opera is, broadly speaking, from oppression by the ISAs to obliteration by the RSAs.) Linking the two, I would suggest, are the administrators of Adorno’s ‘administered world.’⁹ These functionary spectres of public and business life drift freely between the mutually supporting realms of violent and discursive control, blurring the distinction that should hold between the interests of the ruling classes and the majority, and technocratically pursuing an anti-egalitarian totality.¹⁰

⁶ The classic texts are, of course, Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990), Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 2 (London: Penguin, 1992), and Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1991). For excellent and accessible modern primers based on postgraduate seminars in New York, see David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx’s Capital* (London: Verso, 2010), and David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx’s Capital*, vol. 2 (London: Verso, 2013). Video recordings of the lectures which provide the basis of these can be found at <http://davidharvey.org/reading-capital/>.

⁷ Pam Morris, ed., *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994).

⁸ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

⁹ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Dissonanzen. Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 14, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980).

¹⁰ For readers who are concerned about such distinctions, I should perhaps clarify that the book which follows is written by a Hegelian Marxist, not an Althusserian one. Some of Althusser’s

One of the reasons why Marx, who did not mince words, called Destutt de Tracy a ‘fish-blooded bourgeois doctrinaire’¹¹ was precisely that his conception of ideology ignored the material consequences, for the great mass of the people, of capitalist ideology in our administered world. Although he might have appreciated Foucault’s greater sensitivity to the psychological torture made possible by internalized oppression, Marx would probably have been inspired to comparable invective by the cosy bourgeois limitations of Foucauldian thought-policing. In the McClary article cited above, which is in some ways typical of this Foucauldian attitude in musicology, the goal of progressive politics so far as music is concerned seems to be to allow people ‘in lives almost overwhelmed by poverty and racism’ to dance to popular music.¹² Dance, as a signifier of bodily ‘freedom’, is a favourite image in contemporary musicology, where it is sometimes employed in prose of cloying lyricism. The same is true of ‘embodiment’ or ‘the somatic’, or anything about music which casts attention onto the bodies of the people creating, reproducing, or receiving it. It appears to be genuinely believed by a number of consciously or unconsciously Foucauldian scholars that the *symbolic* freedom of dancing is an *actual* freedom – that a person who is able to dance is, if not perhaps entirely free from material suffering, at least able to bear it – and that so long as we attend to the body of an individual we are making a sufficient moral response to the material reality of human lives. Britten’s presentation of Tadzio – a dancing boy whose dance on one level appears to ensnare him as an object of Aschenbach’s lust in *Death in Venice* – suggests that for the composer at least the equation of dance with freedom cannot be assumed.

One cannot help thinking that materially comfortable writers are mistaking the freedom they personally feel while dancing or otherwise feeling in touch with their bodies, in their extensive moments of leisure, with the freedom the materially underprivileged need, at work and in the travails of their everyday home lives, not just at play. The provision to the masses of (limited) opportunities for dance and other forms of entertainment (bodily or otherwise) is, it is clear from even the most rudimentary critical perspective, a means by which that population is kept sufficiently refreshed and comfortable that it is happy to submit to its lot in the economic order of society.¹³ Any supposed

ideas are very useful, but I do not follow him, Lenin, Zhdanov, and Stalin in believing that Marxism is a science and a reversal of Hegel’s dialectics.

¹¹ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, at 802.

¹² McClary, ‘Terminal Prestige’, at 78.

¹³ The provision of somatic entertainment by capitalist musical forms here parallels the role of food in Marx’s analysis of the capitalist control of the working day. *Capital*, he observes, incorporates the feeding of workers ‘into the production process itself, so that food is added to the worker as to a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, and grease and

'transgression' in the act of disdaining or disregarding the established order is already anticipated by that order, which after all has provided this opportunity in the first place. It is therefore offered as a false token of the 'freedom' that subjects of capital believe themselves to enjoy. The 'freedom' of a Western subject of capital to dance or to sing a protest song is politically equivalent to the same subject's 'freedom' to march in protest against an invasion of Iraq or Libya in a democratic polity whose military will decimate the country regardless. It is the symbolic overvaluing of an empty gesture, a fake but beguiling fantasy of freedom which makes possible, because acceptable, a real impotence. As a claim for a moral utility to popular music, and as an argument used against classical music to which one cannot dance, this entire trend of thought is therefore both weak and concerning.

1.2 Discerning Ideology in Britten's Operas

Although it carries a material residue in the form of the people who collaborate on its creation and reproduction (and those who receive it), an opera seems at a first approximation to be more of a symbolic than a material quantity, and readers might fairly wonder how a materialist ideology critique could possibly engage with opera. To put it bluntly, the Foucauldian approach to music that I have criticized rather than the Marxist one that I have approved might seem a more plausible methodological approach for me to take. But my proposition is not that ideology is materialist through and through: I claim only that the material qualities go along with the ideology. Material reality both feeds and manifests ideology; material things translate and carry ideology into the lived experience of human beings; and material forces shape human activity in the service of an ideology whose final productive output is the enlarging of private profit for a vanishingly small proportion of the species. In short, *ideology mediates material reality*; consequently, the ideological and the material are joined by an indissoluble bond. As part of this fusion, ideology itself remains, as the word suggests, a construct of immaterial *ideas*, the signifiers of an ideally fulfilled material reality. And those ideas can be as perspicuously manifested in an opera like *The Turn of the Screw* or *Albert Herring* as they

oil to the machinery.' Anybody who has had a 'working lunch' or attended a board meeting at which 'lunch will be provided' understands this. But he goes on: 'it reduces the sound sleep needed for the restoration, renewal and refreshment of the vital forces to the exact amount of torpor essential to the revival of an absolutely exhausted organism' (Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, at 376). Substitute *entertainment* for *sleep*, and *relaxation* for *torpor*, and the usefulness to modern capitalist production of mass entertainment becomes obvious.

can be in a society as a whole.

Ideology *structures* disparate ideas, relating every element back to a central point that creates a totality, and compels the whole to make sense. This ideological structuring permits an interruption to the potentially endless motion of signification, where, as the linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure observed, signifiers point only to other signifiers. Think of the way that a dictionary definition of a particular word simply points to other words. Abstractly, the multiplicity of individual signifiers – concepts such as freedom, democracy, society, and so on – could float freely, unmoored, without a finalized and definite meaning, until the moment when a special kind of signifier, which the psychoanalyst Jacques calls the *master signifier*, sews or ‘quilts’ all other signifiers in place as a function of a single ideological fabric. So, in early twenty-first-century Western society, the concept that the signifier *freedom* points to would be taken to indicate the range of behaviours and rights that are codified – in accordance with laws of property, representation, speech, assembly, and so on – in the legislative structures of the democratic-capitalist nation state. Those floating signifiers of freedom gain their ultimate meaning when placed in the context of the totalizing background of the modern nation state. They would not signify ‘freedom’ in that sense if they could not be brought into congruent relation with the dictates of the master signifier. This is why we experience tensions when our society meets concepts of freedom – say, of a religious or cultural sort – that sit uneasily with the Western master signifier. One ideology’s freedom is another ideology’s unfreedom.

The key to understanding the referent of signifiers of any discourse is for this reason the master signifier, the element which quilts the patchwork together. Because it is attentive to this symbolic keystone which holds the ideological edifice in place as a structural unity, the critique of ideology is at bottom a *structuralist* enterprise. Indeed, the denial of the reality of a structuring principle in human culture and society marks out the ideologue as readily as a preoccupation with structure in society and discourse sets apart the Leftist. This is the kind of person who insists that things simply are as they are and that it is an over-interpretation to argue that any particular explanation – a racially uniform conception of a society, say, or a view that men are ‘naturally’ better equipped for the workplace than women – lies behind the heterogeneity of facts and events in the world. Such an attitude is readily comprehensible, for it is often not a pleasant experience to acknowledge that there is a bad core to a state of affairs that one lives agreeably within. But the desire to avoid discomfort is a poor argument against the pursuit of truth. And unlike postmodernists who fling their reflexive allegation of totalitarianism at concepts such as *truth* which are ‘ideological’ fingerprints of ‘the other guy’, the pursuit of

truth is something which all responsible progressive thinkers, in musicology no less than in any other sphere of activity, should make the guiding light of their intellectual, political, and interpersonal activity.¹⁴

Sceptics on the matter of paying attention to the structure of music follow a similar logic to people who deny the totalizing economic structure of society, and tend unsurprisingly to imply or even directly claim that non-Austro-German or non-art music is more virtuous than the demonized 'centre' of the canon – the point of suture which they believe holds the despised totality together. But what is left when one does not pay attention to the structure of music, by means of musical analysis, is at best a failure to take the first elementary step out from a suffocating ideology, and at worst comes uncomfortably close to misunderstanding the nature of the art form as well. In his reading of Adorno in *Marxism and Form*, Fredric Jameson articulates the difference between musical listening which is wholly ideological and musical listening which reads against the grain of ideology in the following way. In the ideological space of late capitalism,

we now hear not the notes themselves, but only their atmosphere, which becomes itself symbolic for us: the soothing or piquant character of the music, its blueness or sweetness, is felt as a signal for the release of the appropriate conventionalized reactions. The musical composition becomes mere psychological stimulus or conditioning, as in those airports or supermarkets where the customer is aurally tranquilized. The musical accompaniment has moreover become intimately linked in our minds with the advertising of products, and continues, in both 'popular' and 'classical' music alike, to function as such long after the advertisement is over: at this point the sounds *advertise* composer or performer and stand as *signs* for the pleasure about to be derived from the product, so that the work of art sinks to the level of consumers' goods in general. Compare in this regard the subliminal role of music in the movies, as a means of guiding our 'consumption' of the plot, with the relationship of score to narrative in opera as an art form.¹⁵

¹⁴ I should say immediately that I do not mean *truth* in the sense that a religious person might mean it, that is to say that a god is the truth of reality. I mean it in the sense that the later Heidegger has in mind when he argues that truth is a form of disclosure, perpetually as much hidden as it is unhidden, or that Badiou means when he writes that truth is essentially unknown and inexpressible; truth, for both, and for me, is infinite and universal. (See, for instance, Martin Heidegger, 'Plato's Doctrine of Truth', in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, trans. Thomas Sheehan (Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155–82, and Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*.) The notion of a god, of a little man hiding behind the curtain as in *The Wizard of Oz*, cannot be accommodated in these definitions, because reducing the infinite Being of truth to a single, named being (in Heidegger's terms), or reducing the generic multiplicity of the truth to the particularity of an individual (to 'count-as-one'), in Badiou's terms, is to confuse the universal and particular, the generic and the singular.

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1971), 23.

Musicologists who do not pay attention to the notes themselves, but only to their atmosphere, the signs for a conventional emotional release, are writing in line with the ideology of capitalism. This failing becomes even more marked in the case of opera, where – as Jameson's reading of Adorno makes clear – not to be attentive to the notes is actually to mistake opera for a different art form, film, and to miss the prodigious distance between the subordinate role of music in film – where the music functions as an alienated part of the production process, applying the frilly edge that prettifies the garment and delights the audience but does not distract them too much from the action on screen – to the dialectical relationship between music and drama in opera. Two responses to the music of Schoenberg very clearly delimit the ideological gulf I am referring to. On the side of atmosphere and emotion are Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, whose tolerance of modernist composition is minimal. 'One way to understand Berg's genius, and his operatic accomplishment, is to say that while he embraced compositional techniques and sound worlds acquired from Schoenberg, he never used them to exclude or banish listeners.'¹⁶ On the side of ideological critique, Jameson again: in late capitalism,

art no longer has to do with a change in taste resulting from the succession of the generations alone, but with one intensified and raised to the second power by a new commercial exploitation of artistic techniques in every facet of our culture. The new music must come to terms not only with our hearing, as did the old, but with our non-hearing as well. Hence concrete music, which seeks to transform the unconscious contents of our daily perceptual life, the unheard aural stress of the industrial city, into a conscious object of perception. Hence the willed 'ugliness' of modern music in general, as if, in this state of pathological hebetude and insensibility, only the painful remained as a spur to perception.¹⁷

Two principles may be now extracted from the foregoing as a summary of how a study of ideology in opera should proceed. The first principle is to focus on the ideas expressed within the opera, their origin, and their nature. A second, related principle is to focus on the structure of those ideas. Attention to the structure of linguistic or musical ideas is a crucial means of spotting the links between social and musical manifestations of ideology. In the case of Britten's operas, these include ideas about children, love, women, violence, and society. As well as providing a link to the wider context of historical experience in the middle of the twentieth century in Britain, and some of the forces that still shape experience at the beginning of the twenty-first, the use

¹⁶ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 475.

¹⁷ Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 23–4.

of ideology as a methodological lens also connects a number of central themes in Britten's operas, and so casts a light on the way that non-musical ideas shape operatic composition, performance, and reception more generally. It enables the enquiry to delve into a many-faceted topic with a unifying and clarifying structure in mind.

My concern with ideology sets my book apart from various existing strands in Britten research. Perhaps one of my most striking departures from other studies is that, rather than focusing on homosexual love, I will argue for a new emphasis on heterosexual and non-sexual forms of love in Britten's operas. My aim is not to supplant the many superb critical and analytical Britten scholars on whose shoulders I stand, but to supplement them by focusing on different themes, and by unifying the entire conception as a focus on ideology. Britten is an especially interesting composer to think about from this vantage point since he has an important historical position, his works remain culturally prominent and relevant (not only in the United Kingdom), and the ideas whose ideology I will examine in his operas are of enormous contemporary interest. As many other scholars have shown, studying ideology in music by other composers or in other traditions is extremely profitable intellectually, but the particular themes of Britten's work are different from, say, his contemporary Shostakovich's, where the politics of the state and the geopolitics of cultural output, for example, are more pressing issues.¹⁸ For this reason Britten sheds a different light on the same broad context, and so fills out our understanding of twentieth-century ideology and its cultural representations.

I will devote much space to what in Jameson's terms could be called the 'willed "ugliness"' of Britten's operas: the musical and dramatic details which, as the comestible antipode to the easy digestibility of a Donizetti or a Verdi (as, from the postmodern perspective, it appears to be), stick like fish bones in the gullet and prove impossible to swallow. And yet, it would be a misreading of my intention to conclude that my aim in this book is to demonstrate that Britten was a complaisant or even a wicked man, not only incapable of resisting the prejudices of his society but perhaps taking pleasure in spreading its ideological messages as compellingly as he could through his art. That is extremely remote from my purpose, and would in any case be to vilify him as 'ideological' in the first, political/journalistic sense that I value little. In truth, I do

¹⁸ A diverse selection of examples, not all persuasive, but all nevertheless intellectually fecund, includes Arved Mark Ashby, *The Pleasure of Modernist Music: Listening, Meaning, Intention, Ideology* (Rochester, NY, and Woodbridge: University of Rochester Press, 2004), Mark Carroll, *Music and Ideology in Cold War Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), and essays in Adam Krims, ed., *Music/Ideology: Resisting the Aesthetic* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1998).