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REVIEWS

BOOKS

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DANIEL CHUA
BEETHOVEN AND FREEDOM
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017
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In his new book, *Beethoven and Freedom*, Daniel Chua proclaims his desire to resist 'an impoverished world where metaphysics is no longer possible', an aim that has led him into 'an unspeakable vortex that most scholars steer clear of in order to keep their reputations intact' (9–10). At the centre of that vortex, it turns out, is theology – a word whose mere mention, Chua continues, 'invokes censorship, irrelevance, and offence' (10). No doubt Chua writes from experience, but many who encounter this plaint in the pages of *Beethoven and Freedom* may glumly reflect that there is more than one way to be irrelevant, and even more ways to feel it. In an age when the stance of the put-upon outsider has been claimed even by the President of the United States, a sense that one is vulnerable to censorship is not necessarily incompatible with a position of privilege. Beethoven, Adorno and God – the main themes of Chua's monograph – have never really been sidelined within musicological thought, and a major statement on all of them by one of the most prominent figures in the field can hardly be called an imperilled subaltern voice. Metaphysics may no longer be possible, but people certainly haven't given up on it.

In many respects, Chua's book is only the latest contribution to a venerable tradition. Beethoven and God have been invoked in the same breath since the German Romantics. More recent history in English-language scholarship takes in such classics as J. W. N. Sullivan's *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development* (Vintage: New York, 1927) and Wilfrid Mellers's marvellously eccentric *Beethoven and the Voice of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). Nicholas Chong's superbly researched studies of Viennese theological contexts have lately added much-needed detail and nuance to our understanding of Beethoven's religious outlook ('Beethoven's Catholicism: A Reconsideration' (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2016)). It would be a pity if Chua's book were received as an unprecedented irruption of theological perspectives into music criticism, if only because these other examples remind us of the range of possible positions from which to write as a Christian and to invoke theology in music scholarship – and that some Christian denominations remain suspicious of theological discourse altogether, as an impediment to plain speech and worldly action. Despite its focus on Adorno, *Beethoven and Freedom* does not mention the work of one of Adorno's earliest mentors, the theologian Paul Tillich. And despite its focus on freedom, it does not mention liberation theology. Chua's greatest theological debts are less to Jon Sobrino than to John Milbank and the proponents of so-called Radical Orthodoxy – the theological perspective hatched mostly inside Oxbridge colleges, whose elaborate detours past all the big guns of Big Theory in the course of polemics against 'secular reason' usually terminate in drably unreconstructed positions on issues such as marriage equality. This is the radicalism of the Senior Common Room, whose theoretical apparatus is by and large more impressive than its record of works.

Chua's abiding concern is still the philosophy of Adorno. It would not be too far from the mark to say that *Beethoven and Freedom* aims to complete Adorno's legendarily unfinished Beethoven study by bringing Christ into the picture. Adorno's thought can only be made whole, the book seems to say, by drawing out and

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expanding upon its partly submerged theological dimensions – a claim that extends the conclusions of recent Adornian exegeses by writers such as Christopher Brittain (*Adorno and Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2010)). Chua knows a colossal amount about Adorno, and his synthesis of a huge range of excerpts and fragments, his nuanced and erudite interpretations, and his relentless pursuit of their implications makes *Beethoven and Freedom* a remarkable summation of musicological thought about Adorno.

The book is structured as three 'movements' prefaced by a 'slow introduction', an arrangement that Chua calls 'musical in a distinctly Beethovenian way' (2). To trace a musical process by which a 'human (someone) emerges from the primordial emptiness of the initial bars (nothing), creating itself from nothing through a process of self-formation (something) to arrive at an autonomous state' (3), Chua calls the three chapters 'Nothing', 'Something' and 'Someone', and each is given a tempo indication and a concluding musical instruction (as in the *attacca* that follows the Introduction). This scheme looks 'distinctly Beethovenian' mostly if one's vision of Beethoven is mediated by the Adornian tradition that takes a handful of the symphonic works, and the 'Beethovenian-Hegelian' visions that were belatedly yoked to them, as representative of Beethoven's oeuvre as a whole. Had Chua considered *An die ferne Geliebte* or the Mass in C major distinctly Beethovenian, he might have organized his book in another way. That said, *Beethoven and Freedom*, when it comes down to it, is made up of an introduction and three substantial chapters, as many academic books are.

Dense but high-octane, the book is given to euphoric aphorism, poetic abstraction and lapel-grabbing italics, and rarely passes up the chance to signpost wordplays and other signs of verbal virtuosity – '*real*-ized', 'con-*fuses*', 'em-*body*', '*counter*point', 'con-*form*', '*will*-fully', 'dis-*enchant*-ment', 'an-Other', 're-*formation*', 'dis-*places*', 're-*present*', '*in*-sight', '*moment*-ous', 'no-*thing*', 'some-*body*', 'space-*Kraft*' and so on. Chua explains that he has adopted this style as a symptom of his unsuccessful pursuit of a moving target, evidence of the 'strains and pressures inherent' in a fraught dialectical enterprise (8). But this turns into something of a humblebrag when Chua compares this kind of 'writing veering close to failure' to the *Große Fuge*: 'This book is not designed to be *agree*-able', he winks (9).

The argumentation and tone of *Beethoven and Freedom* can only be fully explained by the book's extraordinary culmination. The last chapter ('Someone') aims to restore the human and spiritual elements that, argues Chua, are paradoxically expunged from Beethoven's works by the very procedures that seem triumphantly to generate new musical realms of freedom. With the help of the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas, Chua reads the Cavatina from the String Quartet Op. 130, and its famously strangled *empfindsam* register, as the sonic embodiment of a radical musical Other, holding the listener in an unwavering 'gaze'. Moreover, this gaze is not only figurative, but may be the actual glance of 'God in Christ' (237): 'The very sign whose blankness had all but deified the subject becomes the condition for the disclosure of an inaccessible Other made in the image of Christ' (243).

The theological telos of *Beethoven and Freedom* is striking, and the outcome of formidable hermeneutic labour. Yet it stands in stark contrast to the more conventional philosophical and music-analytical frameworks that Chua uses to achieve this outcome, as well as the choice of passages upon which Chua expends his hermeneutic energies. The initial chapter, with its emphasis on the 'zero point' (59) from which Beethoven's forms supposedly burst forth, notes the endlessly discussed thematic simplicity of the openings of Symphonies Nos 3, 5 and 9, and its subsequent exegesis of the musical accelerations that mark the presence of human Will dips in and out of the *Eroica* at all the usual points (confining itself, unsurprisingly, to the first movement): the opening C♯ and its 'working out', the pre-emptive horn entry at the recapitulation and the gargantuan coda. The analysis of the Choral Fantasy seeks to demonstrate a comparable pattern of Beethovenian musical progress at work, but the conclusion – that this piece 'can only speak of an organic totality but can never deliver that aesthetic in the same way as the *Eroica* Symphony or the Fifth Symphony' (52) – has a familiar ring to it. The book's second chapter seeks out musical episodes of suspension and fracture that both recall and promise – but only as in some sense always already lost – moments of grace that might ground the music's assertions of self-determination. Here, the analyses revisit the E minor 'new theme' in the development of the *Eroica* and its catastrophic musical context, a handful of characteristically Adornian

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silences and caesuras in the later music, the much-contemplated moments of ravishing beauty in *Fidelio*, and the recursive, non-developmental and submerged thematic procedures of the Piano Sonata Op. 110. Amid these fairly orthodox accounts of well-known Beethovenian moments, the way into the chapter – a nimble appropriation of Carolyn Abbate's interpretation of the 'noumenal echoes' (118) that haunt Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* – is a welcome departure.

Chua's readings of Beethoven's music tend to diverge from received analytical wisdom mostly in their rhetorical intensity. Thus Chua describes the distinctively linear temporality of some moments in the symphonies as 'an implosion of the space-time continuum into a noumenal dimension' (87). Even when contributing to the long history of breathless descriptions of the E minor theme in the *Eroica*, Chua manages to turn up the heat: 'In this symphonic time-warp, the subject hovers out of its structural body, out of time with itself – like an echo – to confront the disintegration of its own totality in its quest for freedom' (126). As in Adorno, there is a good deal of strategic hyperbole here. But one senses that hyperbole might be in some respects necessary to the argumentation, given the weight of the book's theological conclusions. When discussing the formal fractures that characterize some of Beethoven's music (especially the late works), Chua ponders whether they should be understood as absent presences – traces of 'freedom's farewell' – or as the 'abstraction of death', which 'would realize its goals in the gas chambers of Auschwitz' (133). Those are the options. As in many Adorno-inspired studies, Auschwitz is everywhere – not the actual human atrocity, but the Adornian trope that makes arcane academic close readings of piano sonatas briefly glow with world-historical significance. To be sure, any doubts about the ethics of borrowing other people's horrors in order to zhoosh up Schoenberg-tinged musical analysis may be assuaged by Chua's climactic vision of Beethoven's music as a redemptive encounter with the gaze of Christ. The stakes really are this high.

When real events (such as Auschwitz) are turned metaphysical, the physical world and its tangled relationships tend to become tidy schemas. A prominent feature of *Beethoven and Freedom* is its numerous diagrams – boxes and bubbles and arrows and parentheses, depicting processes such as 'How Freedom Became Music', the ways the Kantian noumenon was made sensible, or the parallel between 'absolute freedom' and 'absolute music'. The wit and clarity of these diagrams – and they do help to articulate Chua's points – come at the price of a certain dematerialization: Chua never explains precisely where and among whom these trends and tendencies inhered. The occasions when people and histories do appear in the book are the least convincing moments, improbable and lacking in human texture. Chua speculates that 'early commentators' on the *Eroica* may have 'heard within its horn call a hero charging forth like a horseman of the apocalypse with a blast that signals the end of history and the beginning of an eternal reign: the *Kunstepoch* of freedom' (85). Describing Beethoven's 1808 *Akademie* in the Theater an der Wien, he concludes that 'the audience left the concert, speeding internally through the prosthetic experience of the Beethovenian *Augenblick*' (103). The actual relation of Beethoven's music to its history is occasionally expressed in clumsy formulations such as 'the *Eroica* captures the *Zeitgeist* of its time' (71).

The concept that is perhaps hampered most by these schematic tendencies is that of 'secularization'. Chua's understanding, mediated by Adorno, is a simple Weberian story of disenchantment, in which the essence of sacred experience and ritual is gradually displaced by the imperialism of instrumental reason, but lives on in other domains, including – and this is a more obviously Hegelian view – the aesthetic. In Beethoven's time, 'a religious art [becomes] an art religion' (15), making Beethoven's music fundamentally 'Eucharistic' (23). Although such interpretations may clash with now largely discredited conceptions of Beethoven as a secular humanist, this displacement of the religious impulse is one of the main dynamics described by the Weberian model of secularization, and not a contradiction of it, as Chua seems to say at one point. Chua's arguments might have been sharpened by acknowledging the work of Jonathan Sheehan and others, who have nuanced Weber's story with careful studies of the changing media forms and institutions of the period, showing that the religious transformations of Enlightenment Europe are perhaps best described as a reorganization and redistribution of ritual practices (Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization", *American Historical Review* 108/4 (2003), 1061–1080). And although Chua enlists Bruno Latour in support of his turn to theological language (10), he does not engage with

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Latour's view that 'we have never been modern' – that fact and value were never cleanly sundered, that 'magic' was not simply displaced into anti-rational enclaves such as aesthetics or the spooky psychic backrooms whence the repressed now and again returns. In Chua's intellectual framework, the story of modernity's supposed purging of religious thought through a new regime of immaterial reason remains believable.

But a schematic version of the secularization story also serves Chua's purposes. Recent historical and sociological work on secularization tends to adopt a moderate and anti-catastrophic tone; metaphysics does not blast its way back into discourse with the kind of Adornian-Beethovenian 'jolts' that Chua continually lionizes (9), but has simply been there all along. Even though I have a great deal of sympathy with the present turn within the humanities against the interpretative strategies and paranoid atmosphere of critique – not least its constant recourse to the myth-puncturing repertoires of disenchantment – I see no reason to suppose that mystery must always return in the guise of sublime magic or the brow-beating of sudden revelation, rather than those still small voices that imbue the everyday. But Chua is always on the side of jolts, and his jolt only registers if it can bump up against a monolithically conceived secular reason. Part of the problem is Chua's heavy reliance on one of Adorno's most schematic books, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which tells of the inevitable march of Enlightenment rationality towards the gas chambers – a book that continues to give disproportionate intellectual weight to the otherwise impossibly glib assessment that Auschwitz was 'engineered by modern humanity in the name of reason and freedom' (137). To repeat this line of argument without nuance is, I think, to have excessive trust in Adorno; and, as Stephen Crisp once gently admonished, 'whatever a man trusts in, that he makes his God'.

It might appear something of a paradox that, in Chua's hands, Adorno – surely the quintessential purveyor of a high-end hermeneutics of suspicion – should have become the restorer of music's depleted mystery. This is partly because of the ways in which Chua seeks to reverse the negativity of Adorno's thought with the introduction of Christ – and thus, in a sense, to turn Adorno back into Hegel. The tensions in this project become most apparent at the end of the second chapter, in a section on Op. 110 called 'Redeeming Adorno' (173), where the piano sonata's narrative arc of resurrection – a concept that surely spells the end of any negative dialectic – is used to draw out Adorno's hidden philosophy of grace, though he 'would probably not approve' (186). But was Adorno ever much of a threat to the world of enchanted Beethoven advocacy? As soon as a generation of Anglo-American music scholars had come to terms with Adorno's forbidding and magisterial tone, they found that they could use his work to say the things that people had always been saying – the same compositions and genres were vaunted, the same formal procedures privileged, the same epigrammatic examples revisited, the same aesthetic values celebrated. No wonder that, against this background, scholarship that focused on a greater variety of historical actors, whose opinions and behaviours have invariably fallen into less predictable and schematic patterns than Adornian metaphysics, has tended to provide the more surprising jolts. The conclusion of *Beethoven and Freedom* is distinctive in part because it aims to do more than replay Adornian arguments with the volume turned up – and the strain shows in its contorted and exultant language. 'Who, then, is the Other in the Cavatina?' asks Chua. 'The human is both some-*body* and no-*thing*: a disclosure and erasure; Christ incognito' (241).

This sort of talk may not be quite as 'hazardous' (7) as Chua excitedly worries that it is, but he may be right to expect that it will have some music scholars edging towards the door. Now that the theological element in Chua's work – long perceptible to attentive readers – has moved centre stage, some may indeed be less comfortable with it, even though its methodological and evidentiary basis is surely no less secure than that of many other kinds of musical depth-hermeneutics: as ever, there are musical examples and a lot of philosophizing about them, and it is hard to conjure a scenario in which the argument could be unseated by something as prosaic as a counterexample. In the end, however, there may be enough people in the Beethoven world and beyond who will consume most of the musical exegeses offered in *Beethoven and Freedom* without discomfort, reassured by the ways it buttresses an orthodox image of Beethoven's music, even as they discreetly leave the religion on the side of the plate. Like Reagan-era Republicans throwing in their lot with the Evangelicals, some may tolerate a few runic theological utterances as the price of

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maintaining the status quo. This would be a real loss, I think, since a Godless version of Chua's arguments would be empty indeed.

In some respects, *Beethoven and Freedom* is a timely reminder of the moral ambiguity of our discipline's post-critical moment. It demonstrates that full-throated enthusiasms, no less than dark conspiracy theories, are not the property of any particular disciplinary position or political agenda. There could be every reason to bring love – so frequently the silent 'constitutive outside' of our scholarly projects – back into the interior of our scholarship. And, to be sure, the love of Beethoven pervades every paragraph of Chua's new book. But my instinct is that we best cherish and protect the music that we love by acknowledging how inscrutable and un-claimable it remains – in part by bearing in mind the simple yet profound fact that this music once meant, and will mean, a great many things to a great many people other than ourselves. 'Beethoven is music's freedom fighter', declares Chua (25). Maybe *Beethoven and Freedom* knows the object of its love too well.

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MASSIMILIANO GUIDO, ED.
STUDIES IN HISTORICAL IMPROVISATION: FROM CANTARE SUPER LIBRUM *TO* PARTIMENTI
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Edited by Massimiliano Guido, Senior Researcher at the Musicology and Cultural Heritage Department of the Università di Pavia, this volume assembles papers presented at the conference *Con la mente e con le mani*, which took place in Venice in 2013. It connected the efforts of two research projects, one initiated by the Istituto per la Musica of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice, the other funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the topic 'Improvisation in Classical Music Education: Rethinking our Future by Learning our Past'. Though not all papers dealt with the eighteenth century explicitly, I have provided an overview of all of the essays in this book, since the art of improvisation in that period is to a large extent based on the composition techniques of the preceding centuries.

The first part of the book, 'Music and the Art of Memory', opens with a *tour d'horizon* of the current reception and discussion of improvisatory practices in music history from counterpoint singing in medieval times to jazz, invoking the findings of cognitive psychology and ethnomusicology. Who better to serve as our tour guide than the widely read Thomas Christensen? In his introductory essay, Christensen points to the fact that improvisation has 'never before . . . been more actively studied in both musical scholarship and practice covering so many differing historical periods, genres and styles' (9). He shows how 'the improvisatory moment' (also the title of his chapter) will fundamentally change the teaching of music history and the pedagogies of music theory. These latter focus nowadays more on written exercises than on practical skills, and generally follow an abstract curriculum detached from sixteenth-century counterpoint (species counterpoint à la Fux), and concentrating too much on the 'Bach' chorale, a single (minor) compositional technique out of the multitude of musical styles in eighteenth-century Europe.

Relying on his detailed knowledge of the literature, Christensen points out that one common feature to all improvisational activities in music is the use of (procedural) memory: the store of all the elements and characteristics of the 'language' (in other words, the style) in which an improviser is speaking. In the following chapter, Stefano Lorenzetti utilizes the tools of traditional rhetoric to understand the processes that undergird knowledge of such stylistic commonplaces. But his article goes far beyond the 'productive misunderstanding' of a musical rhetoric as outlined in Janina Klassen's 'Musica poetica und musikalische Figurenlehre – ein produktives Missverständnis' (*Jahrbuch des Staatlichen Instituts für Musikforschung* (2001),

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