

REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEWS

Karol Berger, *Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow: An Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). xi + 420pp. \$39.95

In his latest book, Karol Berger attempts to introduce the term 'modernity' – widely used in other disciplines to mark the historical, political and cultural shift that occurred with the demise of feudalism and the onset of the Enlightenment in late eighteenth-century Europe – to the discipline of musicology. According to Berger, musicologists have recognized that 'an important stylistic change' occurred in the music of this period, but they have failed to consider that this change was 'different in kind, more fundamental' than the stylistic shifts that preceded and followed it (p. 5). 'Modernity', as Berger sees that term employed in other disciplines, marks a 'fundamental' (he also uses 'exceptional and epoch-making') break with the past (p. 6); it therefore follows that, if musicology is to have a 'modernity' worthy of the name, it must locate a fundamental shift in the music of the period.

Berger argues that the fundamental shift in compositional practice of the period occurred as 'later eighteenth century European art music began to take seriously the flow of time from past to future' (p. 9). Prior to this point, music was 'simply "in time"'; 'the distinction between past and future, "earlier" and "later," mattered little to the way that music was experienced and understood'. After this point, music 'added the experience of linear time, of time's arrow, to its essential subject matter. Music could no longer be experienced with understanding unless one recognized the temporal ordering of events' (p. 9). This shift in music's temporality, Berger claims, paralleled a 'transformation' in the way Europeans themselves conceived of time: 'from cyclical to linear' (p. 9). This transformation corresponded to the passing of the Christian world-view, with its emphasis on the afterlife and eternity, and the arrival of the modern world-view, with its stress on human life and temporal progress.

Bach is Berger's representative of the pre-modern musical world-view, Mozart that of modernity. In the first half of the book, 'Bach's Cycle', he concentrates on the first fugue of volume 1 of the *Well-Tempered Keyboard* and on the *St Matthew Passion*, especially its opening chorus, 'Kommt ihr Töchter'. In the second half, 'Mozart's Arrow', he focuses on the Allegro of the Piano Concerto in C minor, K. 491 as well as on the Act I Trio of *Figaro* and the Act 2 Finale of *Don Giovanni*.

In Berger's reading of Bach's fugue, what matters most is the invention and working out of its subject in a series of demonstrations, the order of which – the 'tonal plan' – is of 'secondary importance' (p. 97). We listen to a fugue not in terms of beginning, middle and end, but in terms of how the subject is manipulated. As a genre, therefore, the fugue is 'essentially atemporal' (p. 97); time in the fugue is 'neutralized' (p. 13).

In the *St Matthew Passion*, Berger argues, Bach seeks not only to neutralize time, but also to 'abolish' it altogether, to 'attenuate the temporal distance between the world of the story and our world' (p. 13). Bach set almost all of the poems in the *Passion* in the inherently circular da capo or varied da capo aria forms. This choice of formal structure, in conjunction with the dramaturgical structure of the *Passion* in which the events of the story are periodically interrupted for moments

of contemplation, suggests 'timelessness', even in spite of the inevitable temporal nature of music (p. 106). Moreover, this timelessness is meant, in Berger's view, to serve as a representation of the eternity of 'God's time', over and above the mere temporality of human time. Bach's compositional choices, in other words, reveal his 'preference for God's time' (p. 120). In his music, 'normal musical time flow is transfigured into eternity' (p. 110).

In Mozart's music, by contrast, linear time takes precedence and the temporal succession of events is crucial. Cadences punctuate periods, which answer and balance each other; by occasionally disrupting this balance, Mozart creates a forward linear drive to restore order. As in the Act I Trio of *Figaro*, the musical and dramatic disruption of order is pleasurable, because of our expectation that it will be resolved. In *Don Giovanni*, this forward drive to restore order functions on the dramatic level as well, as we await the eventual punishment of the title character.

Berger links the two halves of his book with an 'Interlude', in which he traces the shift from the Christian to the modern era. The key figure in the interlude, and thus in linking the two halves of the book, is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Even the subtitle of Berger's book, *An Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity*, echoes Rousseau's own *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (Essay on the Origin of Language),¹ in which music plays a crucial role.

Rousseau is for Berger the quintessentially modern thinker. Berger's vision of modernity, therefore, is only as convincing as his reading of Rousseau, and that reading – perhaps because Berger relies so single-mindedly on the work of Andrzej Rapaczynski and fails to consider any other influential accounts, among them those by Jacques Derrida and Jean Starobinski² – yields a Rousseau, and hence a modernity, overwhelmingly political in orientation and strangely preoccupied with Christianity.

Berger admits that in Rousseau, 'God has no truly indispensable role to play' (p. 151). But because he nevertheless reads Rousseau's work 'as the attempt to formulate a viable alternative to Christianity', one that will answer questions about the meaning and purpose of existence (p. 149), Berger's Rousseau, and, consequently, his modernity, are still significantly beholden to the Christian tradition (p. 149).

Rousseau, in Berger's account, seeks essentially the same moral certainty and conviction enjoyed by the Christian world-view, even if under different auspices. This account, however, belies Rousseau's own qualms about modernity and overlooks the complex internal conflicts that plague his writings and make them so compelling. If Rousseau is the origin of modernity, it is an origin deeply ambivalent and self-conflicted about its status as such.

The political orientation of Berger's reading – the focus on modernity as the working out of the conflict between individual freedom, autonomy and social responsibility – makes sense given the Mozart operas he addresses and their concern with liberty and equality. But this orientation fits uneasily with Berger's

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues* was published posthumously in 1781. For an English translation, see *On the Origin of Language*, trans. John H. Moran and Alexander Gode (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1986).

² Berger references Andrzej Rapaczynski's *Nature and Politics: Liberalism in the Philosophies of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY, 1989). For Jacques Derrida's most extensive discussion of Rousseau, see *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). See also Jean Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

focus on temporality as the defining feature in the shift to modernity. As a result, the connection between the two halves of the book is forced. What separates Bach from Mozart seems to have less to do with their compositional treatment of temporality, as Berger claims, and more to do with the social, cultural and religious context in which they composed.

From a purely musical analytical perspective, Berger's Mozart, with his concern for the restoration of musical order and balance, seems not so far from Berger's Bach, with his use of cyclical forms. That the two composers have different attitudes toward the temporal nature of musical form is clear; that this treatment of temporality is of the 'epochal' nature Berger claims, is not.

Berger's argument about temporality also suffers from imprecision, especially in linking musical features with temporal concepts. Take, for instance, his discussion of Bach's fugue. Does a lack of emphasis on succession or the temporal order of events actually make a piece of music 'atemporal'? Is 'atemporal' the same as 'timeless'? Is 'timelessness' the same as 'eternity'? What about the effect of actual performance on the temporality of a piece of music? This last question is especially relevant to Berger's discussion of the opening chorus from the *St Matthew Passion*. Theologian and Bach scholar Albert Schweitzer, for instance, hears this piece not as an idealized expression of emotion but as an excited crowd scene; Schweitzer suggests that in order to reflect the agitation of the crowd, the chorus should be performed not 'slowly and delicately,' but with 'heavy accents and a certain inward unrest'.³ A performance of the chorus according to this interpretation would emphasize precisely the temporal urgency that Berger dismisses.

Thus, although Berger insists upon a clear distinction between the Christian and modern world-views (or, perhaps, precisely because he insists upon such a clear-cut distinction), the concerns of the former repeatedly encroach upon the latter, calling the very distinction on which he bases his argument into question. In this respect, his decision to focus on Bach and Mozart is telling. He anticipates objections to his choice of Bach as a representative of the Christian world-view, but not to Mozart as the representative of the modern one (p. 10). But Mozart, not Bach, is the problematic figure here. For, in moving from Bach to Mozart, Berger moves not so much from Christianity to a post-Christian modernity, but from a Protestant to a Catholic world-view. Mozart's music, in particular his operas, may address modern concerns, but they remain, like much of Mozart's *œuvre*, beholden in significant ways to a Christian world-view.

At stake in the move from Bach to Mozart, then, are perhaps not so much differing concepts of time but differing notions of the function of art or representation, especially *vis-à-vis* the divine or supernatural. In Bach's Protestant context, divinity is to be experienced as directly or immediately as possible by each listener. In Mozart's Catholic world, the experience of divinity or of the supernatural is mediated through various forms of representation, visual and auricular. Take, for instance, the representation of superhuman justice in the figure of the statue in *Don Giovanni*, or the symbolism of light and dark in *The Magic Flute* to highlight the epic battle between the higher forces competing for Tamino's soul. When Berger, in reading *Don Giovanni*, suggests that 'it is a mistake' to read too much into the supernatural intervention of the statue (p. 256); or, when, in reading *The Magic Flute*, he laments that the 'spectacular and auricular overwhelm the verbal' and undermine its claims (pp. 287–8), he

³ Albert Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967): 211.

betrays not only his own preference for a Protestant aesthetic of representation, but also, perhaps, the inherently Protestant character of his notion of modernity

This does not mean that there is no 'musical modernity', only that as a narrative of 'musical modernity' Berger's is unconvincing. His book would have profited from taking into account two prior attempts to wrestle with the question of music's contribution to modernity: Rose Subotnik's *Developing Variations* (1991) and Michael Steinberg's *Listening to Reason* (2004).⁴ Berger explicitly avoids any discussion of the causal relationship between music and *Zeitgeist*; he is content simply to 'register the structural homology between the shapes of the historical and musical times, and note its consequences' (p. 9). Subotnik and Steinberg, by contrast, insist on a sophisticated critical intertwining of music, philosophy and history. They challenge the reader to imagine music not simply as corresponding to a philosophical, political or historical era, but as providing the terms that define that era in the first place. They present the compelling possibility that modernity must look for its origins in music – or, to incorporate Berger's concern with temporality, that it is only via music that an understanding of the time of modernity becomes possible.

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Barbara Owen, *The Organ Music of Johannes Brahms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). xii + 184pp. £21.99

Brahms's organ works have not received the type of scholarly scrutiny accorded his other compositions, and Barbara Owen's *The Organ Music of Johannes Brahms* is the first monograph dedicated to them. Owen is the librarian of the American Guild of Organists' Organ Library at Boston University and has twice served as the President of the Organ Historical Society; her experiences as a performer inform almost every page of this fine introduction to the many issues surrounding Brahms and the organ. Brahms's compositions for solo organ stem from two distinct periods in his career. The first occurred during his early years as a professional musician, and it is linked to his study of counterpoint with Joseph Joachim and his relationships with Robert and Clara Schumann; it includes the Fugue in A-flat minor (WoO 8) and the Preludes and Fugues in A minor and G minor (WoO 9 and 10). He also composed the chorale prelude on *O Taurigkeit, O Herzeleid* in 1858, but did not finish the related fugue until 1873 (WoO 7). The second period occurred towards the end of his life, around the time of Clara Schumann's death, and it resulted in the Eleven Chorale Preludes op. 122, which were published posthumously. In her preface, Owen acknowledges she will not make profound contributions in terms of original research, but rather she aims to compile the existing knowledge of Brahms's organ works and their place in the composer's life so as to form 'as complete a picture of this music and its background as possible' (p. viii).

The book is divided into two parts, each comprising three chapters. Part I describes the biographical circumstances surrounding Brahms's interest in the organ.

⁴ Rose Subotnik, *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Michael Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).