

American Musicology and “The Archives of Eden”

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I

In his T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures delivered at the University of Kent in March, 1971, and subsequently published as *In Bluebeard's Castle or Some Notes Towards A Re-definition of Culture*, George Steiner apostrophized the condition of American culture in the following way:

America is the representative and premonitory example [of the democratization of high culture]. Nowhere has the debilitation of genuine literacy gone further (consider the recent surveys of reading-comprehension and recognition in American high schools). But nowhere, also, have the conservation and learned scrutiny of the art or literature of the past been pursued with more generous authority. American libraries, universities, archives, museums, centres for advanced study, are now the indispensable record and treasure-house of civilization. It is here that the European artist and scholar must come to see the cherished after-glow of his culture. Though often obsessed with the future, the United States is now, certainly in regard to the humanities, the active watchman of the classic past.¹

So far, so good. But Steiner's encomium (notwithstanding that second sentence) carried with it a conditional scrutiny which was less attractive in its implications:

It may be that this custodianship relates to a deeply puzzling fact. Creation of absolutely the first rank – in philosophy, in music, in much of literature, in mathematics – continues to occur outside the American milieu. It is at once taken up and intelligently exploited there, but the “motion of spirit” has taken place elsewhere, amid the enervation of Europe, in the oppressive climate of Russia. There is, in a good deal of American intellectual, artistic production (recent painting may be the challenging exception) a characteristic near-greatness, a strength just below the best. Could it be that the United States is destined to be the “museum culture”? There is no more fascinating question in the sociology of knowledge, none that may touch more intensely on our future. But it lies outside the scope of this essay.²

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¹ George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle or Some Notes Towards a Re-definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 86.

² *Ibid.*, 86.

As everyone with an interest in the matter knows by now, Steiner returned to these mandarin assessments in another essay, which appeared in the magazine *Salmagundi* in 1981. “The Archives of Eden” tests with uncanny deliberation precisely those preoccupations which lay beyond the remit of *In Bluebeard’s Castle*. “Of all my work,” Steiner wrote in 1996, “‘The Archives of Eden’ provoked the bitterest rebuke and dismissal.” He went on to republish it nevertheless in the collection *No Passion Spent, Essays 1978–1996*, if only because “it may be that this essay retains some use as an instance of ‘mistranslation.’”³ “The Archives of Eden” is a myopic performance, and, one suspects, deliberately so. In it, Steiner contrasts the custodial panache of American culture with a failure of creative intelligence, in terms which seem intended to provoke angry rejection. The essay summons a vision of massive recuperation in the arts, in mathematics, and in philosophy which is undermined or impoverished by the small purchase of original endeavour in each of these fields of thought. We are asked to contemplate a drastic distinction between European and American culture as one which may be defined almost wholly to the disadvantage of the United States. Which is to say: those “motions of the spirit” which give to European culture its distinctive genius and regenerative impact are located in a historical continuum and in a social matrix which are foreign to the American Eden. America preserves the canon with incomparable brilliance, but it does not add significantly to it. For Steiner, this is as true of music as it is of the other arts:

Up to this point in its history, American music has been of an essential provincial character. The great symphony of “the new world” is by Dvořák... it is obvious that there are in American music no names to set beside those of Stravinsky, of Schoenberg, of Bartók, of Alban Berg and Anton von Webern, that the *oeuvre* of a Prokofiev, of a Shostakovich, perhaps even of a Benjamin Britten represents an executive “density” and imaginative continuity strikingly absent from the work of American composers.⁴

To this Steiner rather lamely adds: “But there is the glory and utterly American genius of Jazz.” But his reading of comparative American impoverishment in music is scarcely less abashed for that.

³ George Steiner, *No Passion Spent. Essays 1978–1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), x. For an account of the publication of and reaction to “The Archives of Eden” in *Salmagundi*, see Robert Boyers, “Steiner as Cultural Critic: Confronting America,” in N. A. Scott and R. A. Sharp, eds. *Reading George Steiner* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 23 ff. “The Archives of Eden” appears in *No Passion Spent*, 266–303. All further citations of the essay are from this source.

⁴ Steiner, “The Archives of Eden,” 273.

“What dialectic,” asks Steiner, “will relate the frontier and the archive, the Adamic and the antiquarian?”⁵ Although he proposes that the trope of rejuvenation provides an answer to this question, he just as rapidly disavows it. “Think away the arrival of the Jewish intelligentsia, think away the genius of Leningrad–Prague–Budapest–Vienna and Frankfurt in American culture of the past decades and what have you left?”⁶ In response to his own question, Steiner invokes Adorno’s conception of *Kulturproduktion*, a remorseless dissemination of high art, shorn of its necessary condition of feeling. The institutionalization of museum culture disguises, as it were, the wasteland of Eliot’s “Shakespeherian rag.”

These persuasions are admittedly tentative. But Steiner’s indictments are versed in terms of astonishing aggression. At one level, his enduring theme in “The Archives of Eden” is the difference between the tragic greatness of Europe and the bland largesse of the American paradise. One paragraph in particular touches on this theme with notorious severity:

The return to Israel is a willed re-entry into tragic history. The march to New Canaan or Mount Zion in Utah is a negation of history. In this sense, it may well be that the ethnic-demographic elements in the successive waves of American settlement are “Darwinian negative,” that they embody the brilliant survival of an anti-historical species, where “anti-historicism” would entail an abdication from those adaptive mechanisms of tragic intellectuality, of ideological “caring”... which are indispensable to creation of the first rank. Those who abandoned the various infernos of social discrimination and tyrannical rule in Europe were not, perhaps, the bold and shaping spirits, but very ordinary human beings who could “no longer take it.”⁷

This is not racial prejudice, but even the archivist may raise his head in surprise at so wilful a (mis-)reading of American history. The “wretched refuse”⁸ of Europe ennobled by Puritan intellect and the Jewish immigration of the 1930s and 40s is a formula which few will tolerate. Nevertheless, certain truths lurk amidst these deliberate provocations:

Intellectual and art history, the classics, musicology, *Gestalt* psychology and social theory, jurisprudence and econometrics, as they flourish in American colleges, universities and research institutes, during and after World War II, are the immediate product of the central European and Slavic diaspora. As is the *floruit* of art galleries and of symphonic orchestras, of intellectual journalism and of quality publishing in that nerve-centre of the mid-century we call Manhattan.⁹

American culture is thereby “organized” rather than “organic,” and its central energies at once affirm the debt to Europe and the inherent

⁵ Ibid., 283.

⁶ Ibid., 285.

⁷ Ibid., 284.

⁸ See Ibid., 284: “Send me ‘The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,’ urges the Statue of Liberty. Could it be that Europe did just that?”

⁹ Ibid., 285.

inability to emulate Europe's problematic cross-fertilization of repressive circumstance and the flowers of creation. It is not that Steiner damns with faint praise the institutions of American culture. It is that he would set these scrupulously apart from the creative attainments which they scrutinize, enact, and preserve. In so far as American culture rehous the products of European civilization (*Kulturproduktion*, once again), it also proclaims the distinction between classic and modern-egalitarian modes of creation. This is a distinction which is given meaning in the difference between the crucible of European sensibility (vulnerable at every turn to "man's inhumanity to man") and the "scope, generosity, technical brilliance and public prestige of the American cultural enterprise." But, deprived of European history, the latter lapses into barren preservation. Steiner's metaphor for this condition, the Stradivarius instruments which hang lifeless in the Coolidge Room of the Library of Congress, speaks not of a young culture hopelessly misunderstood, but of a post culture, incapable of fertile regeneration. And, from that image, other indictments follow.

Chief among these is Steiner's profoundly anti-American conviction that "the 'touchstones' of human genius are the products of the very few," and that, moreover, the "number of those truly equipped to recognize, experience existentially and then transmit these 'touchstones' is also limited."¹⁰ It follows from this belief that the whole enterprise of American higher education is misdirected in so far as it axiomatically endeavours to widen the base of human perception. A "truly superficial and mendacious populist ideal of general education"¹¹ divorces the barbarous circumstances of high culture from the attainments which it delivers. Yeats's "monuments of unaging intellect" are not raised in Paradise. They flourish, they are born of the vital pressure which political injustice and authoritarian control bring to bear on conceptual intelligence. Even if "the flowering of the humanities is not worth the circumstances of the inhuman,"¹² such circumstances would seem to be the price which history exacts. The American repudiation of this insight, Steiner explicitly insists, entails a repudiation in turn of those conditions by which creative genius "of the first rank" continues to flourish. As it does, Steiner adds, in the Russia of Stalin, and even of 1981.

I leave it to others to respond comprehensively to this reading of American culture. American cultural historians, first and foremost perhaps, will come to decide, if they have not already done so, whether

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹² *Ibid.*, 300.

or not these provocations merit serious consideration.¹³ The history of racial prejudice in the United States, the bewildering multiculturalism which is espoused there, the tragic interventions of American foreign policy in Asia and South America, are questions which bear on the reanimation of European culture just as surely as do the vast project of American higher education and the global dominance of American English. But these questions are obviously not my concern. Even the more localized (and more immediately germane) comparisons of American and European literature, philosophy, and mathematics voiced by Steiner thankfully fall beyond my brief. Nevertheless, I would add in passing that anyone with a moment's intelligent interest in American culture will be troubled and dismayed by Steiner's decisive (if not strategic) neglect of cinema. If any art form gives the lie to Steiner's diagnosis of creative failure it is self-evidently the American contribution to film. The sheer aesthetic force of American cinema – its formal and expressive range of original achievement – seems to me sufficient to redress the long *ŷaccuse* of creative barrenness and incapacity which is sounded in "The Archives of Eden." Simply, and by itself, American cinema redresses the central indictments of Steiner's reading.¹⁴

What remains is a durable mode of criticism which has much to say about the American comprehension and cultivation of the humanities. In this essay, I want to test those evaluations in so far as they concern musicology. I want to argue that Steiner's conception of musicology as a central pursuit of American culture has historical force and precedent, but that it is inadequate to the development of the discipline in one central respect. Steiner's reading of musicology as a species of art history reinforces his own understanding of the "museum culture" of the American humanities, but the models of literary criticism, sociology, and philosophy which have exerted paradigmatic influence on the development of American musicology undermine precisely the perceived dysfunction between creation and re-creation which is central to Steiner's argument. In this respect, it is useful to look beyond "The Archives of Eden" to other writings by Steiner in which musicology implicitly or explicitly is addressed. These include "The Uncommon Reader" (1978) and the opening chapter of *Real Presences* (1989), "A Secondary City." If

¹³ Cf. the responses by Cynthia Ozick, Susan Sontag, Leslie Fiedler, Dwight Macdonald, and Christopher Lasch mentioned by Robert Boyers in his essay "Steiner as Cultural Critic," 24–25.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Boyers, "Steiner as Cultural Critic" does not respond to this omission; neither does he have anything to say about Steiner's relation of American music to that level which is "just below the best."

American musicology has sought to emancipate itself from the “museum culture” which Steiner so vigorously disdains – as in the writings of Joseph Kerman, Susan McClary, and Lydia Goehr – it is by means of the paradigms nominated here. The “anti-canonic” strain in recent musical scholarship for example, no more cogently expressed than in Lydia Goehr’s memorable thesis that “Bach did not intend to compose musical works” (*The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, Oxford University Press, 1992), signifies a democratization of European culture in American musicology, especially since 1985. This process may well lend support to Steiner’s disenchantment with the state of the humanities generally in America; it also betrays a fundamental critique of the older models and value judgments of musical scholarship in Europe. It is unquestionably true that such models clearly obtain in the “custodial” focus of much American musicology in the 1990s. Does the plural condition of this musicology offer a decisive repudiation to Steiner’s diagnosis, or does it signify a larger crisis of bearing and purpose?

In his afterword or “responsion” to *Reading George Steiner*, Steiner expresses the wish that a working musician or composer had been heard in this collection of essays devoted to his work.¹⁵ For our purposes, a musicologist will have to do instead.

II

Steiner’s references to musicology in “The Archives of Eden” are rarely explicit, but here, as elsewhere in his work, they are consistent. We have already seen that he groups American musicology alongside art history and mathematics as disciplines which were transformed in the United States by the “Jewish–Slavic diaspora,” and, indeed, it is virtually a commonplace of the history of musicology that its American manifestation since the Second World War was, in large measure, defined by that crucial interaction between European expertise and the expansion of the American academy in the 1940s and 50s.¹⁶ Oliver Strunk, Gustave Reese,

¹⁵ See George Steiner, “A Responion,” in Scott and Sharp, eds., *Reading George Steiner*, 283.

¹⁶ I follow here Joseph Kerman, *Musicology* (London: Collins, 1985), 31–60. See also Frank Ll. Harrison, Mantle Hood, and Claude V. Palisca, *Musicology*, The Princeton Studies: Humanistic Scholarship in America, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963); Barry S. Brooks, Edward O. D. Downes, and Sherman Van Solkema, eds., *Perspectives in Musicology* (New York: Norton, 1972; repr. New York: Pendragon Press, 1986); and D. Kern Holoman and Claude V. Palisca, eds., *Musicology in the 1980s* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982).

and Paul Henry Lang, however, were all trained as musicologists in the United States, even if Lang was not born there, and they as much as anyone determined the profile of American musicology both before and after the war. But the essential modification of Steiner's perception of musicological scholarship in America has nothing to do with birthplace. Instead, it concerns the conventional association which he draws between musicology as a species or outgrowth of art history and its status as a discipline which neighbours the exact sciences. In his 1980 essay "The Cleric of Treason" for example, the musicologist consorts with the numismatologist and the philologist as the very embodiment of antiquarian exactitude: his or her province is the Dufay canon and the arcana of medieval notation.¹⁷ Indeed, the characterization of the musicologist in that essay stands for the classical (but not disinterested) poise of the humanist who "lurches indifferently into tomorrow." As with the art historian (in this case, Anthony Blunt), the musicologist's constant focus is antiquarian. He or she takes the sovereign status of the art work for granted.

In "A Secondary City," too, musicology sits alongside "textual philology and iconography." But, in this case, Steiner's parable envisages a domain from which all secondary literature, save for the most rigorous explications of textual criticism, has been summarily expelled. Consider the following on musicology:

Thus there would... be a prodigality of musical scores, of guides to performance and audition. There would be no overnight or weekly verdicts on new works, no verbal descriptions of the daemonic in Beethoven or of death wishes in Schubert. Where analysis is required, it would be of a pragmatic, anonymous sort. Once more, the enabling format would be that which I will seek to define and characterize as "philological."¹⁸

This projected banishment would seem to be set obstinately against the development of recent American musicology in particular. It is precisely the emancipation of musicological discourse from the travails of positivism, from the long labours in the archive, which distinguishes the

¹⁷ See George Steiner, "The Cleric of Treason" [1980] in *George Steiner. A Reader* (Middlesex: Harmondsworth, 1984), 198–99.

¹⁸ George Steiner, *Real Presences* ["A Secondary City"], 6. Steiner's projection of the musicologist as art historian also obtains in this book, as it does in his 1963 essay "The Retreat from the Word" and in *In Bluebeard's Castle*. In each of these instances, the prevailing conception is that of archival or quasi-philological inquiry. I have examined Steiner's understanding of musical scholarship in "The Retreat from the Word" in my essay "The Holy Commandments of Tonality," *The Journal of Musicology*, 9: 2 (1991), 254–69.

American model of musical research in the 1970s and 1980s, to look no further back than that.¹⁹ If American musicology *par excellence* defines the customary rigour and editorial finesse of the European tradition – particularly in the transmission and recension of musical texts and that body of theoretical speculation which accompanies them – it has not halted at the frontier of cultural and textual interpretation.

Steiner's fantasy is born of his willingness to dispense with the mountainous obstacle of secondary reading ("like sleepwalkers, we are guarded by the numbing drone of the journalistic, of the theoretical, from the often harsh, imperious radiance of sheer presence").²⁰ He would advance a primary encounter with the text, the musical masterwork, the painting, which is attenuated by the endless spiral of secondary discourse. Clearly, this indignation is fuelled by the unnerving deconstructions of postmodernist criticism in which the text becomes a "pretext" for semantic deliberations without end. We are driven further and further, Steiner argues, from the central gravity of the text itself. The "Byzantine acrobatics" of the postmodernist academy banish in turn what Steiner would restore, namely, the autonomy and sovereignty of the canonic in European art, literature, and music.²¹

The musicologist, American or otherwise, will wonder at Steiner's disenchantment. He or she may even be tempted to the conclusion that in so far as music is concerned, Steiner would banish what is not there in the first place. "We do not have musical Arnolds or Eliots, Blackmurs or Kermodes, Ruskins or Schapiros," Joseph Kerman wrote in 1985. "In the circumstances it is idle to complain or lament that critical thought in music lags conceptually far behind that in the other parts. In fact, nearly all musical thinkers travel at a respectful distance behind the latest chariots (or bandwagons) of intellectual life in general."²²

Twelve years on, it seems unlikely that Kerman would still adhere to this bleak reading.²³ In any case, the difference in perception from within

¹⁹ See Kerman, *Musicology*, 113–54 for an account of this development. Kerman draws a distinction between the leadership of American musicology in this regard and the enduring positivism of British musical scholarship into the 1970s.

²⁰ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 49.

²¹ Although this is the burden of Steiner's argument in the opening section of *Real Presences*, it is a recurring theme in many of his writings, including *No Passion Spent* and many of the essays in *Language and Silence* (1965; repr. London: Faber and Faber, 1989). The term "Byzantine acrobatics" is taken from the introduction to *George Steiner. A Reader*, 9.

²² Kerman, 17.

²³ See Joseph Kerman, "Musicology in the 1990s," *The Journal of Musicology*, 9: 2 (1991), 131–44, and "Musicology in Transition" in Patrick F. Devine and Harry White, eds., *The Maynooth International Musicological Conference: Selected Proceedings, Part One* (Dublin:

the discipline of musicology (Kerman) and without (Steiner) is indeed striking: “A Secondary City” assumes a critical surfeit in musical scholarship which is notably contradicted by Joseph Kerman’s incisive survey of the discipline, published in the United States as *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (1985).²⁴ Indeed, the principal challenge espoused by Kerman in this book is “a musicology oriented towards criticism,” and it is this espousal which most clearly modifies Steiner’s prevailing conception of American musicology as a custodial pursuit oriented towards philology and art history.

Kerman’s own work, of course, has been pivotal in this regard. His “Profile for American Musicology,” published in 1965, earned a degree of notoriety comparable in some respects to the reaction which greeted “The Archives of Eden.”²⁵ Edward Lowinsky’s famous riposte in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* to Kerman’s insistence on the central but unattained focus of critical discourse in musicology was a sharp reminder to many people that the positivism (for want of a better word) of traditional musicological enterprises (archival research, editorial techniques, notation, paper studies, and the like) would not easily concede the mode of pliant criticism advocated by Kerman, to say nothing of the pre-eminence which Kerman himself attached to it.²⁶ In 1965, in 1983, and again in 1995 (to cite but three instances), Kerman formulated and then reiterated his conception of musical criticism in these terms:

[criticism] is the way of looking at art that tries to take into account the meaning it conveys, the pleasure it initiates, and the value it assumes, for us today. Criticism deals with pieces of music and men listening, with fact and feeling, with the life of the past in the present, with the composer’s private image in the public mirror of an audience. At worst, criticism is one man’s impressionism – like bad art – and at best it is an uneasy dialectic. Allen Tate says that criticism is a perpetual impossibility and a perpetual necessity; and he adds stonily that in this it resembles all our other pursuits.²⁷

It is perhaps Allen Tate (“now nearly forgotten,” Kerman remarked in 1995), who underwrites this formulation. The close reading of American

Four Courts Press, 1996), 19–33. In the first of these essays, Kerman draws attention to the impact of ideological critique and certain norms of postmodernist criticism (notably the writings of Michel Foucault) on recent American musicology.

²⁴ Published in London as *Musicology*. See note 16 above.

²⁵ Joseph Kerman, “A Profile for American Musicology,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 18 (Spring, 1965), 61–69.

²⁶ See Edward E. Lowinsky, “Character and Purposes of American Musicology: A Reply to Joseph Kerman” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 18 (Summer, 1965), 222–34.

²⁷ Kerman, “A Profile for American Musicology,” 63.

practical criticism stands behind Kerman's preoccupation with musicology as an encounter with the aesthetic experience of music. We might even say that, for Kerman, the musical text is the "well-wrought urn" of Cleanth Brooks and the new critics of the 1950s. It would be an oversimplification of Kerman's achievement to suggest that he introduced into American musicology the systematic scrutiny of the new critics, but there can be little doubt that much of his work depends not on the paradigm of art history, but on the precedent of close engagement which these critics establish. In truth, Kerman has it both ways: his musicology is made of sterner stuff than the term "close reading" or even his own critical definition connotes, but it also allows the idiom, style, and technique of critical scrutiny to pass into the region of scholarly discourse on music. It is perfectly valid to maintain that Kerman has given to American academe the kind of musicology which he himself prescribes: having identified the lacuna that existed as between archival and editorial techniques, on one side, and the hermetic preoccupations of analysis, on the other, he promptly filled this lacuna himself. The close readings, the self-contained practical criticisms which attend his studies of Beethoven, of William Byrd, and of Robert Schumann, for instance, exemplify a musicological discourse in which the aesthetic autonomy of the (musical) text is paramount.²⁸

Cultural history, analysis, and the apparatus of textual criticism most certainly inform these readings. But the critical decorum, the *cortesia* (to invoke a favourite term of Steiner's), with which they are imbued call to mind not the parasitic indulgence deplored by the author of *Real Presences* but the primary disclosure of textual meaning which Steiner advances in his own work. Were we to compare, for example, the rich seam of lexical and rhetorical reference which underpins Steiner's bravura reading of *Cymbeline* – I refer here to his analysis of the Act II monologue which opens *After Babel* – with Kerman's account of the Beethoven song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* (published respectively in 1975 and 1973),²⁹ we might recognize afresh the inadequacy of "philology and numismatics" as adequate bedfellows for American musicology over the past two decades. And Kerman, of course, is not alone (or no longer alone) in his advocacy of criticism as a central preoccupation of American musicology. To

²⁸ The breadth of Kerman's critical engagement with these and other composers is available in his *Write All These Down: Essays on Music* (California: University of California Press, 1994).

²⁹ See George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1–8; and Joseph Kerman, *An die ferne Geliebte*, in *Write All These Down*, 173–206.

mention even in passing the work of Leo Treitler, Edward Cone, Rose Rosengard Subotnik, Richard Taruskin, and Gary Tomlinson, is simply to advert to the fact that criticism, and, by implication, the precedent of literary criticism, is no longer a vestigial presence amongst American musical scholars. If musicologists pursue criticism with a good deal more circumspection than their literary counterparts, that may be all to the good, to judge by the gloomy disavowals of George Steiner. "When it speaks of music, language is lame," he pronounces in "A Secondary City." One wonders whether he can have had in mind Joseph Kerman or Charles Rosen on Beethoven and Mozart. It seems unlikely. One *knows*, however, that he has been reading Hans Keller, because he cites him: "One of the best qualified teachers of music and music analysts in our time, Hans Keller, dismissed all musicology and music criticism as phoney."³⁰ This is a condemnation lightly born, and even more easily refuted. It speaks only of the extreme repudiations of an (idiosyncratic) enthusiast for "wordless analysis." Moreover, what Keller discounted was not "all musicology" but the tautologous condition of descriptive prose "masquerading as musicological discourse."³¹

In sum, two issues emerge from Steiner's placement of American musicology against the background of his own disenchantment with criticism and with American culture in general. The first is that musicology itself has moved beyond the paradigm of art history which Steiner conventionally assigns to it; the second is that the model of literary criticism which usurps the function of art history in American musicology does not *of itself* produce a corresponding deviation from the "primary encounter" with the text which Steiner would restore to literary studies.

III

A canon, a syllabus sifts and winnows so as to direct our time and resources of sensibility towards certified, plainly-lit excellence. The denier, the one who, out of bizarre iconoclasm or marginality, decries the high vintages in our culture, is a waster: of our limited receptive means, of the tested and accredited assets of grace.³²

In what sense does Steiner's reading of European culture and its custody in the American museum bear on the development of American musicology since 1945? This, surely, is the question which is most germane to the context which I am sketching here. Steiner's preoccupation with the canon in *Real Presences* allows us to formulate a tentative answer,

³⁰ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 19.

³² Steiner, *Real Presences*, 64.

³¹ Kerman, *Musicology*, 67.

if only because it is the canon which enjoys the attention of American musicologists as a binding force in the emergence of new models of musical comprehension in the 1980s and 1990s.

The distinction which Joseph Kerman offers between “canon” and “repertory” in his paper “A Few Canonic Variations” is, in essence, a discrimination between the development of a critical idea and the reception of music in public or private performance.³³ This discrimination allows us to distinguish between the commonplace understanding of the canonic in music (as it is voiced, for example, in *Real Presences*) which usually concerns the concert repertory and its perpetuation in recordings, and the establishment of a *musicological* canon, in which a historical-critical perception exists independently of the classical CD catalogue. Thus we can distinguish between the poor reception of Schoenberg’s music into the concert repertory (as recently as 1983, Oliver Neighbour remarked that his music was assured of “at least an occasional hearing”)³⁴ and the central status which Schoenberg enjoys as an avatar of modernism and much else besides among musicologists. Kerman is quick to point out that the musicologist is not necessarily aloof from the current state of the repertory: he concedes, for example, that the rage for antiquities which is the Early Music business is at least indebted in part to scholarly comprehension – but he does tender a vital distinction nevertheless between the concert repertory (with its roots in the accumulation of canonic status gained by Beethoven through the nineteenth century) and the *critical* canon (which is an invention of postwar musicology).³⁵ Of course, there are fruitful intersections between these two, but they are not in any useful sense synonymous.

Steiner would suppose that they are:

Given a free vote, the bulk of humankind will choose football, the soap opera or bingo over Aeschylus. To pretend otherwise, to edify programmes of high humane civilization as arising from improvements in mass education... is cant. Those who, in actual fact, generate the syllabus, who recognize, elucidate and transmit the legacy of literacy in regard to textual, artistic and musical creation, have always been, are a handful.³⁶

In other words: “the canon is forged and perpetuated by the few.” But this may not be so, at least in so far as music is concerned. On the contrary,

³³ See Joseph Kerman “A Few Canonic Variations” [1983] in *Write All These Down*, 33–50.

³⁴ Oliver Neighbour, “Arnold Schoenberg,” *The New Grove Second Viennese School* [Oliver Neighbour, Paul Griffiths, George Perle] (London: Macmillan, 1983), 67.

³⁵ Kerman, “A Few Canonic Variations,” 46–49.

³⁶ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 67–68.

it is the tension between a limited repertory, entrapped by the demands of public taste, and a musicological canon, enabled by the critical comprehensions of scholarship, which is at issue in the whole crisis of "classical music culture" in America, as elsewhere.³⁷

Steiner's own canonic convictions are voiced with rhetorical force in "The Archives of Eden," where the American model of cultural transmission signifies more than a failure of critical decorum. In essence, both in *Real Presences* and in this essay, Steiner's argument is that the critical mode writ large is an attenuation, even a debasement of those "assets of grace" by which the canon is sustained and validated.

But American musicology proposes a different argument. It first rehouses European musical culture (as in the massive documentation which the Norton series of medieval, renaissance, baroque, classical, romantic, and modern music histories both symbolise and definitively represent);³⁸ it then widens and undermines the understanding of canonic choice which gives coherence and substance to the whole enterprise of scholarly discourse in music. Put plainly, the function of recent American musicology is not to perpetuate the transmission of high culture; nor is it simply to decompose (a predestined pun) those masterworks by which Steiner ordinarily understands the musical canon. If either were the case (perpetuation or decomposition), then Steiner might press home his argument without much fear of contradiction. The progression which he discerns in American culture from unprecedented custody and rehabilitation to wasteful mass education, on one side, and the "Byzantine acrobatics" of esoteric deconstruction, on the other, might be transferred without demur to music and musicology.

I have already suggested that certain precedents in literary criticism impede this headlong disaster: in Joseph Kerman's work, certainly the central gravity of the musical text remains intact. I would also argue that, in its engagement with cultural history, American musicology is redeemed from the stasis of museum culture which lies at the heart of Steiner's disenchantment in "The Archives of Eden." Certain paradigms beyond literary criticism, including philosophy and sociology, require at least passing mention if this argument is to succeed. It is not that musicology

³⁷ Steiner touches at least indirectly on this point in *Real Presences* when he remarks that "Latest estimates tell us that of all 'classical music' performed publicly, recorded and broadcast in the West, nearly ninety per cent predates 1900." (66).

³⁸ See Kerman, *Musicology*, 44: "It was mainly from the Reese books [*Music in the Middle Ages*; *Music in the Renaissance*], I believe, that we obtained our image of music history as an unbroken patchwork quilt extending back evenly into the dim reaches of the past."

somehow abstains from the larger crisis diagnosed by Steiner: it is rather that the crisis is not one of canonic sovereignty debased by the inertia and misdirection of mass education. Instead, the crisis produced by American musicology bears on the deconstruction of the canon itself.

No Passion Spent, the volume of essays to which “The Archives of Eden” now belongs, seeks to define “an act of reading in the classical mould and to elicit the theological–metaphysical presuppositions in such an act (the implicit ‘real presences’).”³⁹ Steiner would restore to textual comprehension that attendant resource of referential awareness and canonic allusion which stabilizes meaning against the tide of a postmodern discourse which puts in doubt the very relations between word and world. In this respect, his reading of Chardin’s painting *Le Philosophe lisant* (1734) offers an exemplar of that mode of comprehension which precedes the institution of criticism as a professional discourse.⁴⁰ “I carry within me a vision of ‘schools of creative reading’,” Steiner concludes.⁴¹ He means by this “a quiet room and a table”: the decorum of patient, educative inquiry. The text, in this projection, regains its central authority. It is no longer a pretext for deconstruction, for the vivid exercise of plural, semantic excess. And Steiner has always favoured Borges’s dictum that “Great readers are rarer than great writers.” Steiner is, in this sense, a great reader.

So also is Joseph Kerman, whose own work represents to my mind precisely that concern with “the act of reading” that presses down so insistently on Steiner’s polemical address. It is Kerman who repudiates the “either/or” condition of American musicology (as between art history and structural analysis) in favour of a critical comprehension of individual repertoires and (musical) texts. His own readings carry forward this point of view, so that the autonomy of the art work remains pre-eminent. But the “new musicology” which partly derives from Kerman’s liberating mode of critical inquiry orders things differently. Within the past decade, in fact, a radical reinterpretation of the musical canon (in the repertorial sense) has plainly usurped what was in any case a fragile encounter between critic and the musical text. Two prominent instances of this reinterpretation must stand here for a more widespread development of considerable momentum and lustre.⁴²

³⁹ Steiner, *No Passion Spent*, x.

⁴⁰ See George Steiner, “The Uncommon Reader” [1978] in: *No Passion Spent*, 1–19.

⁴¹ Steiner, “The Uncommon Reader,” 18.

⁴² It is impossible here to give a bibliography which might comprehensively represent the “new musicology.” Such works as Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, eds., *Cecilia Reclaimed. Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,

In Susan McClary’s work, the musical canon is identified as an oppressive system of hierarchical values which must be rigorously denuded of its prestige: “Bach’s music is indelibly marked with the concerns and conventional social constructs of his time and place. It is not universal, nor does it represent pure order. Like any product of human social discourse, it is subject to critique – even feminist critique.”⁴³ Not only is Bach’s music subject in this way, but Bizet’s, Beethoven’s, and all the “B”s of the male-dominated canon, or at least most of them. McClary’s techniques are not always subtle, but they are effective. Her reading of the Bach cantata *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, for example, prefers a brilliant theory of feminism, in which the rhetoric of Bach’s counterpoint is read as a patronizing, masculine oppression, over a textual comprehension in which aesthetic and technical questions are paramount: “In actively reclaiming Bach and the canon *in order to put them to our own uses*, we can also reclaim ourselves”⁴⁴ [present author’s emphasis].

This reading would not much matter were it not for the persuasive appeal which McClary makes to a musicological community impatient of hermetic analysis and the *catalogue raisonné*.⁴⁵ McClary’s essays are part sociology, part gender analysis (as in her reading of tonality), and part cultural rhetoric. But the pursuit of feminist musicology which she represents is not simply a matter of rewriting the canon as an agent of repression, systematic preference, and social hierarchy: it is also an instrument of critical perception. Although McClary sometimes misreads Bach and Beethoven (in so far as she deliberately eclipses the musical in favour of the ideological), she nevertheless forces afresh a dynamic consideration of the relationship between the language and decorum of

1994); Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (California: University of California Press, 1995); and Katharine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlmann, eds., *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), in addition to the references cited in Kerman, “American Musicology in the 1990s” typify the concerns of American musicology of the past seven years or so. These references include books and articles by Susan McClary, Gary Tomlinson, Ruth Solie, and Richard Taruskin. For a usefully polemical indictment of American musical culture, see Joseph Horowitz, *The Post-Classical Predicament* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995).

⁴³ Susan McClary, “The Blasphemy of Talking Politics During the Bach Year,” in Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, eds., *Music and Society. The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 13–62; p. 55.

⁴⁴ McClary, “The Blasphemy of Talking Politics,” 62.

⁴⁵ See in particular Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

the canon (the masterwork is her stamping ground) and the historical context which produced it. Her early narratives may strike one as provocative and even overheated, but they propose a cultural intelligibility which has often been absent from musicology, American or otherwise. The presence and absence of women from the European canon – their vitally symbolic status in early opera; their paradigmatic venality and rebellion in the nineteenth-century cultivation of the genre; their emergence and disappearance as composers during the same period (Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn): these themes do not sit comfortably with the serene deportments and occasions of grace envisaged by Steiner. But nor do they speak of narcissistic wordplay and the loss of meaning in a deconstructive world. On the contrary: feminist musicology would restore meaning to the canon, even if the masterwork lost its (male-dominated) status in the process.

It is also in the relationship between cultural history (of which feminist musicology is a part) and the philosophy of music that the canon looms largest. In Lydia Goehr's *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, we can observe that relationship at its most productive.⁴⁶ Although Goehr is not herself a musicologist, her “essay in the philosophy of music” powerfully addresses those issues of canonic thought which preoccupy the new musicology, above all in the United States, where she herself teaches. The central claim in this book is a philosophical one versed in the formula that “Bach did not intend to compose musical works.” This is not the same as stating that you cannot prove that there is no hippopotamus in the room, although it sounds like it at first. Goehr really means what she says, and she goes back to the documents of European musical history to prove her case. Whether or not she is right, her evolution of a “work concept” in music entails a radically persuasive reappraisal of the condition and status of composition before and after the French Revolution.⁴⁷ Although the concept of an “imaginary museum of musical works” does not originate with Goehr (it is already formulated by Carl Dahlhaus, who presumably found it in Liszt),⁴⁸ the impact of her book, which is at once philosophical and documentary, has been considerable. In an amazingly

⁴⁶ Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works. An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁴⁷ See Harry White, “‘If It’s Baroque, Don’t Fix it’: Reflections on Lydia Goehr’s ‘Work-Concept’ and the Historical Integrity of Musical Composition,” forthcoming in *Acta Musicologica* (1997).

⁴⁸ See Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History* (trans. J. B. Robinson) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), originally published as *Grundlagen der Musikgeschichte* (1967), Chs. 7 and 8, esp. pp. 92–107.

short span of time, the implications of this assessment for American musicology have been taken up by many. In brief, the narrative of music history, by which a continuum of masterworks entered the museum, now accommodates a host of meta-narratives which gradually deprive the musical work of its time-honoured autonomy.⁴⁹ These meta-narratives (of social organization, of tonal language and hierarchy, of symbolic and sexual signification), reorganize the way in which the art music of Europe is read. And, predictably enough, they have also begun to excite stringent opposition.⁵⁰ Anyone with the smallest interest in such matters will recognize therein the strategies of postmodernist discourse. “Why not let classical music die,” asks Kofi Agawu, “and with it the oppressive culture that has sustained it for centuries?”⁵¹ Given Kerman’s distinction between repertory and (musicological) canon, we may conclude that a musicology which seriously poses such a question is ready to abandon its hitherto unchallenged obligations to art history and the scholarly transmission of musical texts. A musicology that concedes the same status to John Cage’s 4’33” and Bach’s *Musical Offering* is ready to dispense with the formidable weight of tradition (and technique) which underwrites our aesthetic comprehension of the canonic (or repertorial) masterpiece. This re-orientation is clearly not of a piece with the practical criticism envisaged and enacted by Joseph Kerman. Indeed, it pre-empted a crisis of musicological meaning which is in some measure akin to the contingent wordplay and loss of final intelligibility which Steiner diagnoses in the preface to *No Passion Spent*.

This congruence returns us to the arguments advanced in “The Archives of Eden.” If American musicology now refuses the hitherto privileged condition of the masterwork, it may be that Steiner’s

⁴⁹ It is only fair to add that Goehr’s preoccupation with the canon is widely shared, although from different perspectives, by the authors cited and referenced in note 42 above.

⁵⁰ A fundamental dispute with the methodology and preoccupations of the new musicology can be found in Pieter Van den Toorn, *Music, Politics, and the Academy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). See my review of this book in *Music and Letters* 78: 1 (February, 1997), 129–32.

⁵¹ Kofi Agawu, review of Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (1995) in *Music and Letters* 78: 1 (February, 1997), 127–29; p. 129. Although Agawu and Gary Tomlinson might reasonably be taken to represent a strain of American musicology which is in some respects resistant to the deconstructive impulses of the “New Musicology,” both authors emphatically declare a preference for the comprehension of musical works in the “thick context” of a history of ideas. Cf. Tomlinson’s introduction to his *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance* (California: University of California Press, 1987), in which paradigms of cultural anthropology are proposed as models for musicological discourse.

contrastive reading of the politics and creation of high culture in Europe as against its archival perpetuation in the United States can extend to music and musicology. But I doubt it. The plural condition of American musicology does not force us to choose between those “classical” and “modern-egalitarian” modes of comprehension by which Steiner sustains this either/or contrast. Even as the narrative conception of music history is radically redefined in American musicology, individual repertoires and works continue to be read in ways which at least approximate the prescriptions of “The Uncommon Reader.” I would concede that these latter are under stress, but they are not wholly disavowed. In either case, the static accumulation of material from the archive finds new meaning and significance. This surely cannot be a cause for disdain, even if it is most certainly a cause for concern.