

‘Labyrinthine Pathways and Bright Rings of Light’: Hoffmann’s Aesthetics of Music in Performance

Peter Johnson

Birmingham Conservatoire, Birmingham City University, UK

Email: Peter.Johnson@bcu.ac.uk

E.T.A. Hoffmann’s discussions of performance, largely ignored in the current literature, proclaim a key aspect of his aesthetics: performance should transport its listeners to that ‘other world’ of the music itself. To underline the point, Hoffmann resorts to elaborate metaphor, most strikingly in the essay on Beethoven’s Piano Trios op. 70.

In seeking to understand this aspect of Hoffmann’s aesthetics, I briefly situate his ideas in the context of early nineteenth-century aesthetics. However, his accounts of transcendent listening correlate with modern theories of absorbed attention and, more generally, inform current debates concerning the relationships between performance, listening, and the secondary discourses of musical exegesis. Does knowledge about music always or necessarily promote deep listening? In considering such questions, I turn to the philosophical accounts of audiencing in Gadamer and Adorno. Adorno in particular is aware of the limits of conceptualisation and the need to acknowledge the power of music to transcend what we can say about it.

There are many problems with Hoffmann’s aesthetics, but I argue that these do not invalidate his central argument, which is also Adorno’s: that the finest music is not a discourse wholly accessible to conceptualization, for the latter may at times detract from the deeper listening experience. I illustrate the point by considering the pre-war recording of Beethoven’s op. 135 quartet by the Busch Quartet, arguing that this recording achieves its longevity not by complying with Beethoven’s score but by adopting strategies that draw its listeners into its own magical arena.

Towards the end of his extended study of Beethoven’s piano trios op. 70, published in 1813, E.T.A. Hoffmann offers what is in effect a manifesto of good performance. I shall quote the passage more extensively later on, but here is a representative statement: ‘The true artist is the one who can realise the effects and images the composer’s magical authority enclosed within his work, so that they encircle us [the listeners] in bright rings of light, inflaming our imaginings, our innermost soul, and bear us speeding on the wing into the far-off spirit-realm of music’.¹ An immediate question is how such elaborate rhetorical language can sustain any meaning, let alone function as a manifesto. What, if anything, is

¹ Hoffmann’s musical writings are collected and edited by David Charlton in *E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism*, trans. Martyn Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). The essay entitled ‘Beethoven’s Piano Trios’ was first published in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung (AMZ)* in March 1813, and is translated, with critical commentary, in Charlton, *Hoffmann’s Musical Writings*, 300–25. The cited passage is on p. 324.

actually being said behind the complex metaphoric allusions? In this article I set out to rescue Hoffmann's views on performance for the contemporary reader. I argue that Hoffmann has much that is of value both to an understanding of the aesthetics and musical practices of his own day and to present-day performers, listeners and the wider community of critics and scholars.

Much of the more recent critical discussion of Hoffmann's essays on music has focused on his study of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, where there is only marginal reference to performance.² Many critics have accordingly read this text as symptomatic of a 'modern' score-based approach to musical exegesis, and Daniel Chua has even attempted to deconstruct Hoffmann's musical aesthetics mainly by reference to this essay.³ Robin Wallace, who warned long ago of the dangers of ignoring what he calls the 'extra-musical allusions' that are scattered through the essay on the Fifth Symphony, himself ignored Hoffmann's elaborate discussions of performance such as can be found in his essay on the piano trios and elsewhere, and which, implicitly at least, colour what Hoffmann has to say about the Fifth Symphony.⁴ Yet it is remarkable that Hoffmann uses the same effusive, metaphorically charged literary style in the essay on the Fifth Symphony to demonstrate the true romanticism of the music, as he does in the essay on the piano trios to describe the experience of a fine performance. He even uses the same metaphors. On the one hand, the Fifth Symphony 'unfolds Beethoven's romanticism, and irresistibly sweeps the listener into the wonderful spirit-realm of the infinite'⁵ whilst, on the other, it is the performance of Beethoven's trios that bears its listeners 'speeding on the wing into the far-off spirit realm of music'. Hoffmann seems to be implying that there is a 'romantic' way of performing and listening, as well as composing.

Across Hoffmann's entire corpus of musical writings, discussions of performance range from objective criticism to unabashed enthusiasm. The one extreme is exemplified by his report on the soprano Auguste Schmalz in the role of Donna Anna:

Mlle. Schmalz performed excellently in the principle pieces [of *Don Giovanni*], particularly the great scene in the first act, with its wildly headlong aria in D major, which she embellished richly enough within the spirit of the composition.⁶

Hoffmann here finds much to commend, yet he shows little enthusiasm for the performance: there is no evidence that the performance moved or deeply

² The essay on the Fifth Symphony, first published in *AMZ* in July 1810, is translated in Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 235–51.

³ Gerhard Allroggen ('Hoffmann, Ernst Theodor Amadeus', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second ed., eds. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrell, London: Macmillan, 2001) assumes that readers of *The New Grove* will not be interested in Hoffmann's texts on performance: 'After 1815, [Hoffmann] reviewed only performances for the Berlin newspapers'. For Daniel Chua's 'deconstruction' based mainly on the essay on the Fifth Symphony, see his *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially p. 178.

⁴ Robin Wallace, *Beethoven's Critics: Aesthetic Dilemmas and Resolutions during the Composer's Lifetime* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986): 23.

⁵ Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 239.

⁶ 'Review of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, 20 September 1815, translated in Charlton *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 399.

engaged him. But in describing the solo cello performances of Bernhard Romberg, Hoffmann turns to the kind of fanciful allusions that he reserves for only the finest performances:

The total freedom of [Romberg's] playing and absolute mastery of his instrument obviate any struggle with the mechanical means of expression and make the instrument an immediate, unfettered organ of the spirit; this is after all the highest goal to which a practising artist aspires, and who has reached this goal more nearly than Romberg!⁷

The effusive style here signals the crossing of the boundary between objective critical appreciation and full engagement. This account is strikingly different from Hoffmann's account of Romberg's compositions which are discussed in a detached, critical style, once again withholding the key element of enthusiasm.⁸ As Abigail Chantler explains, the term 'Begeisterung' (enthusiasm) signified in early romantic aesthetics a strong, even Dionysian commitment or 'divine inspiration', as the well-spring of all artistic activity.⁹ However, the closing section of the essay on Beethoven's piano trios is even more effusive, with a shift of emphasis away from the performance itself towards its relationship with the work and the listener response it induces. In other words, Hoffmann discusses such performances aesthetically.

Hoffmann's aesthetics of performance and listening, as revealed in the essay on Beethoven's piano trios, is the focus of this paper. Analysis of the 'manifesto' will bring to light four interrelated points underpinning Hoffmann's aesthetics. None is unproblematic, but I shall argue that each will inform an understanding of the complex aesthetic world of Hoffmann's own time, and also have something to say about performing and listening to Western art music. The first point to note is that Hoffmann does not consider performance in isolation but regards it as the bridge between composer and listener: in one sentence he takes his readers from the 'composer's magical authority' to the listener response of 'speeding into the far-off spirit realm of music'. Performance needs to be judged in relation to listening as well as to the composer's assumed intentions. To this extent Hoffmann offers an aesthetic of performance: the finest performances are those that *both* enter into the spirit of the work and utterly engage or entrance the listener. As we shall see later in the article, Hoffmann also maintains a healthy curiosity as to how performances may so utterly engage their listeners, and behind his words are some clues about listening itself.

The second point that will emerge regarding Hoffmann's aesthetics is that the finest 'romantic' music is not about representation of the non-musical: allusions to the 'far-off spirit world' speak of a world of music, 'pure' but not abstract in the modern sense. It is a world that is experienced every time we read, play or hear music but is most richly configured in a suitably imaginative performance. The listener's experiences of such music need not be simulacra of other human experiences, or of objects or processes in the physical world, for unlike the visual

⁷ Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 390. Romberg is apparently playing one of his own concertos.

⁸ Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 390–91.

⁹ Abigail Chantler, *E.T.A. Hoffmann's Musical Aesthetics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006): 8 and 16. See also Carl Dahlhaus, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to his Music*, trans. Mary Whittall (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991): 69 for discussion of Hoffmann's 'dithyrambic' style in the essay on the Fifth Symphony.

arts music does not readily configure the natural world. Associations (with the emotions, for example) can, of course, be made, but as Eduard Hanslick was more formally to argue, this is not the purpose of the finest music.¹⁰ Whereas Hanslick has no answer to the question why the 'moving sonic forms' of serious music should be of such importance to the human spirit, Hoffmann offers a plausible explanation: music opens a 'world' of imaginative experience that is not accessible by any other means, yet to which people continue to attribute deep significance. What emerges most strongly from Hoffmann's essay on Beethoven's piano trios is the overwhelming, all-powerful presence of the performed music, a music that emanates from the composer's score yet is constituted in physical terms by the performer. Such music submits to 'no determinate rule' and is thus sublime in Kant's precise terms.¹¹ For Hoffmann, the elusiveness, the sense of music occupying its own unique world, such as he experienced in Beethoven's major works, was a signature of true romanticism. Romanticism for Hoffmann did not signify a style of music but the highest achievements of serious instrumental music and, from the evidence of the essay on the piano trios, this includes its finest performances. It is not implausible, therefore, that his aesthetics of romanticism should continue to be relevant today, or might usefully relate to music of styles other than the symphonic tradition from Haydn to Beethoven, which he chiefly celebrates as romantic.¹²

The third aspect to emerge from Hoffmann's descriptions of engaging performances is that the finest musical works create musical worlds that are interpretatively open: they are fantastic places, stimulating the listener's imagination with 'labyrinthine pathways and bright rings of light'.¹³ This explains why Hoffmann avoids allusions to music as a kind of language: he wants to avoid any suggestion that music-making is simply an informational chain, from composer to performer to listener. The metaphor of a musical 'spirit world' allows Hoffmann to oppose the notion of music as a mirror or representation of the physical world with that of music as its own domain. Robin Wallace has argued that through Hoffmann's metaphors 'music was freed from the obligation to refer to anything outside itself' on grounds that his metaphoric language provides a 'verbal point of reference' that does not compromise the autonomy of the music.¹⁴ Crucially, by referring to the 'spirit world' of music rather than 'the music itself', Hoffmann acknowledges the role of the human imagination in contributing such a world and avoids the danger of reifying 'the music' in terms of the notated work. There is therefore little room in

¹⁰ Eduard Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen: Ein Beitrag zur Revision der Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (Leipzig: Rudolph Weigel, 1854). English trans. Geoffrey Payzant from the eighth edition (1891) as *On the Musically Beautiful* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986): 28.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1952 [1790]): 175, ¶46. For further discussion see Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 21.

¹² Hoffmann argues that the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart are already 'romantic' (Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 237–8). For more extended discussion and historical context see Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music [Die Idee der absolute Musik]*, 1978, translated Roger Lustig (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989), especially chapter 3.

¹³ Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 100.

¹⁴ Robin Wallace, *Beethoven's Critics*, 23.

Hoffmann's aesthetic for structuralism, even though he sustains the idea of a coherent 'thread' through the 'twists and turns' in his analytical discussions.¹⁵

The fourth and final point emerging from a reading of Hoffmann's essay on Beethoven's piano trios is the key relationship between performance and listening, such as provides criteria of quality for the performers themselves, for listeners, for critics and, one might assume, for composers. But Hoffmann proposes a very specific approach to listening which he claims is dependent upon certain qualities of the performance itself. The finest performances, he claims, are those that can draw the listener into the 'magic circle' of the music itself, the 'music itself' signifying the 'magical' sound-world modelled by the composer, created by the performer and experienced by the listener. This implicates total commitment from the listener and is therefore oppositional to day-dreaming: when the performance is of high quality the listener should yield self-consciousness to the 'world' of the music itself, a mode I shall refer to as 'deep listening'. Hoffmann is not, therefore, describing an 'oceanic' listening experience, such as David Schwartz associates with sleeping and having sex, but something diametrically opposed to it.¹⁶ In search of clarification of this key point in Hoffmann's aesthetics, I shall turn to more recent accounts of the musical experience of 'magical' performances, including a moving testimony from Richard Wagner and philosophical dispositions by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Theodor Adorno. From this it emerges that transcendent listening experiences are not merely a consequence of adopting 'romantic' attitudes to music (at least in the modern derogatory sense), far less is it invented to sustain a 'romantic' aesthetic: there is a case to be made that this is a category of experience that defines Western art music at its best, including the 'difficult' music of modernism. I consider what these reflections have to tell us about the contemporary musical practices of performing and listening.

None of these aspects of Hoffmann's musical aesthetics is unique to Hoffmann, neither can they be unconditionally accepted today. Yet I shall argue that there is much to value in Hoffmann's particular 'take' on issues that were widely debated in his own time, especially for performers and listeners who are perhaps too often encouraged to think about the music they play or hear in conceptual terms rather than thinking in and through the music. If there is still wonder and magic in the experience of listening to fine music, perhaps our own contemporary discourses and educational programmes should attend to its cultivation alongside the cultivation of understanding. At issue is the human value of the deep musical experiences afforded in particular (in the present context) by 'absolute' music as a modality of non-conceptual thinking; or – for those who prefer to constrain the notion of 'thinking' to conceptualization – a mode of significant mental activity that transcends the conceptual.¹⁷ In relation to a complex work such as a Beethoven or Mahler

¹⁵ Annette Richards, *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001): 208–09.

¹⁶ David Schwartz, *Listening Subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 7.

¹⁷ Carl Dahlhaus, *Absolute Music*, 85–6 and Chapter 2 *passim*. The term usefully signifies music that has no non-musical function beyond the strictly artistic, i.e. it is accompanying neither text, dance nor any other activity other than listening, neither is its purpose primarily to represent the extra-musical. Dahlhaus shows how the emergence of what we nowadays identify as the classical symphony exposed the shortcomings of representational aesthetics and pressed the question of how a music that could not be conceptually reduced to function or meaning might nonetheless be perceived as profound.

symphony, this mode of engagement surely demands sophisticated musical understanding such as must rest upon a substrate of conceptual knowledge. Yet for Hoffmann this is not enough: the finest music allows the transcendence of conceptual thinking. Hoffmann's point is not that a deep experience of music is possible without a secure ground of knowledge and prior experience but that, as he proclaims in his analyses, such knowledge is a means to an end and not the end itself.

In developing these four aspects, I shall draw briefly on ideas of Hoffmann's contemporaries and consider more recent attempts, not necessarily with direct reference to Hoffmann, to explain or critique them. My point here will be that whereas Hoffmann's own texts merely allude to the deeper questions of musical aesthetics, recent scholars such as Theodor Adorno and Hans-Georg Gadamer have more formally analyzed key aspects I have identified as underpinning Hoffmann's own discussions. Hoffmann was no philosopher, but the perspective he brings of the professional musician (he was a recognised composer as well as critic and polemicist) lend his texts a certain pragmatic verisimilitude.

After considering each of the four aspects in some detail, I shall test their relevance to a famous recording of Beethoven's last string quartet, op. 135, by the Busch Quartet. I have selected this example because, whilst throughout the twentieth century it remained one of the most influential recordings of Beethoven's last quartet, it is also one of the most problematic in relation to Beethoven's score. First, it brings into question Hoffmann's highly problematic contention that the performer must 'understand' the composer – that one 'penetrates his inner nature'. Because so much of what happens in this recording is simply not what Beethoven asks for in the score, the value of the recording cannot be measured against criteria of conformity to the composer's intentions and may thus bring into question a key aspect of Hoffmann's aesthetics. However, if the success of the recording rests in its power to engage its listener in its own terms, then it strongly reinforces another of Hoffmann's principal arguments. By analyzing the recording, specific performance techniques can be identified as promoting deep engagement, for example by avoiding the trivial or predictable. Finally, I shall touch briefly on the several ethical questions that arise from the Busch recording but which, I argue, are oversimplified in Hoffmann's aesthetics, and consider the implications of Hoffmann's 'manifesto' in the performance and reception of New Music. Romanticism, in Hoffmann's ahistorical sense, turns out to be still very much alive.

The performer as creator and mediator

I begin with Hoffmann's understanding of the relationship between composer, performer and listener. The passage I have briefly cited as an example of his 'effusive' style of discussing performance traverses the three stages of musical production in an extended paragraph that is worth citing more extensively:

The proper performance of Beethoven's works demands nothing less than that one understands him, that one penetrates his inner nature, and that in the knowledge

This point is further developed by Andrew Bowie, who more systematically reviews the ways the 'early romantic' philosophers attempted to theorize the fundamental epistemological problem posed by instrumental music. See Andrew Bowie, *Music, Philosophy and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 159–60; also Chantler, *Hoffmann's Musical Aesthetics*, 21.

of the performer's own state of grace one ventures boldly into the circle of magical beings that his irresistible spell summons forth ... The true artist lives only in the work that he conceives and then performs as the composer intended it. He disdains to let his own personality intervene in any way; all his endeavours are spent in quickening to vivid life, in a thousand shining colours, all the sublime effects and images the composer's magical authority enclosed within his works; so that they encircle us [the listeners] in bright rings of light, inflaming our imaginings, our innermost soul, and bear us speeding on the wing into the far-off spirit realm of music.¹⁸

Here, Hoffmann is in fact celebrating a specific performance, for in the parallel, expanded version of this passage in *Kreisleriana*, he specifically acknowledges the 'gifted lady pianist' who played the trios to him.¹⁹ The passage demonstrates Hoffmann's notion of performance as standing at the intersection of the composer's work and the listener's musical experience. It begins with the statement that the performer must 'understand' the composer, 'in a state of grace'. What Hoffmann means by a 'state of grace' is unclear but can perhaps be clarified by reference to an analysis of reading given by one of Hoffmann's contemporaries, the German romantic philosopher Novalis: 'I have understood a writer only when I can act in his spirit, when, without constricting his individuality, I can translate him and change him in diverse ways'.²⁰ Another contemporary of Hoffmann, the philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher more formally argues that hermeneutics is essentially performative: 'utterance can only arise as the action of an individual, and, as such, ... bears free synthesis within itself. The reconciliation (*Ausgleichung*) of both moments [the linguistic and the performative] makes understanding and explication into an art.'²¹ Hoffmann's 'state of grace' seems to capture that reconciliation. More recently, the philosopher Lydia Goehr discusses the performer's task of reconciliation in terms of the ideals ('perfections') that the performer needs simultaneously to pursue: 'the perfect performance of the work' and 'the perfect musical performance'.²² These map onto Schleiermacher's 'moments', but Goehr shows that in musical performance they cannot be wholly synthesized, that there is a productive tension between them in the emergent performance. This, she claims, is why performances are creative and hence interesting in their own right. Hoffmann's notion of 'venturing forth' similarly hints of a quest, at a journey *from* a literal reading rather than its mere reproduction, although he is less aware of the open properties of any interpretation than his contemporary Schleiermacher.

Goehr's language of quests and contradictions may suggest that the performer's task is mainly cognitive, based on knowing what the two perfections entail and how to negotiate between them. Hoffmann's images, on the

¹⁸ Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 324.

¹⁹ Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 100. Hoffmann does not give the name of the pianist nor is there evidence of a violinist or cellist at the unidentified event.

²⁰ Margaret Mahoney Stoljar, ed. and trans., *Novalis: Philosophical Writings* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997): 28.

²¹ Cited in Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997): 112. Bowie is translating from Schleiermacher's *Ethik*, 1990 [1812–13]: 116.

²² Lydia Goehr, *The Quest for Voice: On Music, Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998): 149–52.

other hand, suggest that the process occurs at a non-self-conscious level. By sinking him- or herself into the composer's world and score, and by selflessly allowing – through a state of 'grace' – the music to emerge as performance the performer can make something happen that may be heard as 'magical' in that it invokes a listening experience of enchantment. There is in fact nothing mystifying in the proposition that listening to music may be a wondrous and enchanting experience or that it is one of the performer's main tasks to foster such an experience.

It cannot therefore be assumed that when he demands that the performer 'understands' the composer Hoffmann is promoting the rule of *Werktreue* as applied in so many mid-twentieth-century performances. To perform the work 'as the composer intended' begs many questions as to how much license even the composer was prepared to allow for performer interpretation, and later twentieth-century principles of authentic performance founder on the same question. As Hoffmann develops his elaborate paragraph, however, it becomes clear that only through an intense imaginative engagement with the 'world' of the work (as distinct from a merely literal reading of the score) will the performer succeed in 'bringing to vivid life' the magic and wonder 'enclosed within the work'. For Hoffmann, this 'world' is not the external context of the work's poiesis or the composer's vicissitudes, but the unique world of *the music itself*, which is to say the sounding music that emerges through performance.

I shall pursue the question of fantasy and imagination in the next section, but the other basic point to emerge from the above extract is that Hoffmann judged the success of the performance not against some rule of good practice but by its impact on the listener. Hoffmann here follows Kant's classic formulation of the aesthetic as a category of judgment that is distinct from both Reason and Ethics, since it cannot be rule bound. Kant's assumption that it rests instead on a category of 'universal' taste has long been discredited, but his analysis does not collapse on the acknowledgement that aesthetic judgment is trans-subjective in the sense of resting on a learned cultural practice.²³ Hoffmann's remarks imply a cultural practice in his day of hearing music with an intense, focused imaginative engagement, in sharp contrast to the tendency in scholarly and journalistic texts today exclusively to promote 'musical understanding', and hence a cognitive, concept-bound mode of listening.

In the case of the op. 70 trios, Hoffmann finds a rich world indeed, of 'sublime effects and images' and peopled by 'magical spirits'. This world is, he claims, the composer's creation, which the performer must selflessly seek to vivify 'in a thousand shining colours' and 'bright rings of light', thus transporting the listener to the 'far-off spirit realm of music'. Expressed in more mundane terms, there is something magical about the (truly romantic) composer's work, which the skilful and imaginative performer needs to bring to life in the potent medium of sound. To achieve this, the performer requires selfless dedication, a denial of one's personal inclinations in bringing to life the magical spirit realm of the music; and the listener too must selflessly give him- or herself to the experience. Later on, I shall examine what might be entailed in achieving the degree of committed and selfless, absorbed attention Hoffmann demands.

²³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 53 (Book 1, ¶8). Kant also emphasizes the freedom of the subject in arriving at aesthetic judgements. For discussion in the light of Kant's theorising of genius, see Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 21.

First, however, we shall need a clearer understanding of Hoffmann's fanciful metaphors, and why he required them.

Twists and turns: the music of fantasy

In this section, I consider Hoffmann's understanding of performance as creating fantastic worlds of sound, worlds into which listeners may immerse themselves as intelligent, engaged participators in the wonder and magic of music. This most clearly emerges in Hoffmann's revised account of his encounter with Beethoven's op. 70 trios, from *Kreisleriana*:

Like someone wandering along the labyrinthine pathways of some fantastic park, hedged in by all kinds of rare trees, shrubs and exotic flowers, and becoming more and more deeply absorbed, I am still unable to extricate myself from the extraordinary twists and turns of [Beethoven's] trios. The enchanted siren voices of your [i.e. Beethoven's] music, sparkling with colour and variety, draw me deeper and deeper into its spell.²⁴

Several important points are made here. First, Beethoven's trios involve some fascinating 'twists and turns', as Hoffmann has demonstrated in the preceding analytic sections of his essay. Second, the analogy of the 'fantastic park' with its 'labyrinthine pathways' and all kinds of wondrous objects (or, as we might prefer, 'events') imply an element of freedom and choice in the process of listening. It suggests that at each performance the listener will find different musical 'objects' to wonder at, not only because performances are different but because the listener's musical imagination is free to explore in different ways the sounds and ideas contained in the music presented to it.

Hoffmann's language of allusion and metaphor can now be better understood. Because the finest instrumental music is abstract, dependent neither upon representation nor on expression of human emotion, the only way to address it is through metaphors such as 'other worlds' or 'fantastic parks'. There is no representational intention here, merely an attempt to capture the imaginative engagement that good performance and good listening entail. Hoffmann's world of music includes wonderful musical ideas (such as he exemplifies in his analytical discussions), but the performer's task is not merely to present them, and the listener's not only to recognize them. Carolyn Abbate has elegantly written of the 'terrible and unsafe leap between object and exegesis, from sound that seems to signify nothing (and is nonetheless splendid) to words that claim discursive sense but are, by comparison, modest and often unlovely'.²⁵ Hoffmann's metaphoric excursions can be read as an attempt to circumvent the epistemological problem of discussing music that has no verbal or conceptual correlate except in strictly musical terms.

In her book, *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque* (2001), Annette Richards argues that the specific image of the 'fantastic park' with its 'labyrinthine pathways' has a history in eighteenth-century aesthetic discourses. She identifies a category of aesthetic object that she calls 'picturesque', and

²⁴ Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 100.

²⁵ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrativity in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991): xv. For further discussion see Peter Johnson, 'Performance and the Listening Experience: Bach's "Erbarme Dich"', in *Theory into Practice: Composition, Performance and the Listening Experience*, eds. Nicholas Cook, Peter Johnson and Hans Zender (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999): 55–102.

defines it as 'a complex aesthetic category which encompasses and encourages fragmentation and disruption, contrast and variety, and problematifies the limits of form and conventional expectation.'²⁶ The title she gives this aesthetic category is perhaps unfortunate in that it specifically invokes the visual domain of the natural world, thus implying an aesthetics of representation. However, Richards is at pains to point out that in music it manifests itself chiefly in the form of the free fantasia which, being 'fragmentary, subjective, open-ended, ... simultaneously resists interpretation and offers itself promiscuously to multiple readings.'²⁷ Standing between composition and improvisation, it strongly implicates performance; and Richards understands 'fantasia' not only as a specific genre of composition or improvisation but as 'a musical aesthetic that enters into, destabilises and complexifies other genres of instrumental music.'²⁸ Richards shows that Hoffmann's allusions to 'some fantastic park' invoke an 'aesthetic of the picturesque', which she traces back to the eighteenth century. Under this aesthetic, music is theorized not as wholly coherent structures but as complexes of images that threaten to disorientate the listener. And in Hoffmann's own time, Amadeus Wendt, another active contributor to the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, borrowed Hoffmann's reference to the fantastic park in an essay on 'the new musical art'. However, whereas Wendt confesses that for him the 'fundamental idea' sometimes vanishes completely, Hoffmann is at pains to stress that the thread of coherence through Beethoven's major works is evident and demonstrable.²⁹ Hoffmann thus allows the duality of a complex, 'labyrinthine' succession of musical images held together by a thread of coherent musical argument.

One question this raises for the performer is the extent to which either of these aspects of the work should be brought out: is the performance to emphasize the fantastic or the structural? Hoffmann's views are clearly expressed in the AMZ article on Beethoven's piano trios: it was the performance of the 'gifted lady pianist' that brought out for him the 'extraordinary twists and turns' of Beethoven's work, that quickened 'to vivid life all the sublime effects and images' the composer has 'enclosed' in his work. In addition, the 'gifted lady' was also a performer who could draw Hoffmann, the demanding and informed critic, composer and polemicist, into the magical world of Beethoven's works, and it is time to consider this recurring metaphor in terms both of the psychology of listening and the practice of performing. For if absorbed listening is an ideal way of engaging with Beethoven's works – and if Beethoven's, why not also those of Gustav Mahler, J.S. Bach, or Harrison Birtwistle? – perhaps there are strategies the performer can adopt to promote such listening. This will open a wider discussion, too extensive to cover adequately in this article, as to whether today's most celebrated performers do in fact adopt such strategies, even in the absence of serious discussion about them in the didactic and critical literature about performance.

Absorbed listening and implications for performance

In this and the final section I turn away from Hoffmann's world, to consider how his ideas might relate to practices today, and how they have been more systematically

²⁶ Annette Richards, *The Free Fantasia*, 5.

²⁷ Richards, *The Free Fantasia*, 15.

²⁸ Richards, *The Free Fantasia*, 18.

²⁹ Richards, *The Free Fantasia*, 207–9.

explored in more recent times. I begin by asking why Hoffmann's metaphor of the magical 'other world' seems so suggestive of the experiences music can stimulate through performance and listening. If the otherness of music implies a temporary loss of contact with the real world, a yielding, in the imagination, to the music itself, it also tells us something about the psychological value of fostering the free imagination and the importance of transcending the merely cognitive. We need not only to know about things but also to know how to experience. Metaphors of 'worlds' and of being 'lifted up' are suggestive of attitudes towards listening that focus on experience rather than the acquisition of knowledge.

The phenomenon I shall describe as 'deep listening', implicit in Hoffmann's metaphor of transportation to 'other worlds', has been variously described since at least the eighteenth century. For example, Karl Philipp Moritz, writing in the 1780s, has this to say about absorbed attention to the 'beautiful':

As long as the beautiful draws our attention completely to itself, it shifts it [our attention] away from ourselves for a while, and makes us seem to lose ourselves in the beautiful object; just this losing, this forgetting of the self, is the highest degree of the pure and unselfish pleasure that beauty grants us. At that moment we give up our individual, limited existence in favour of a kind of higher existence.³⁰

An important measure of the relevance of Hoffmann's aesthetics far beyond his own time is that such experience has been noticed by later nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers. For example, in relation to a general aesthetics of reception, Theodor Adorno notes that

prior to total administration [meaning the modern world dominated by commerce], the subject who viewed, heard, or read an artwork was to lose himself (*sic*), forget himself, extinguish himself in the art work. The identification carried out by the subject was not that of making the art-work like himself, but rather that of making himself like the artwork. This identification constituted aesthetic sublimation.³¹

According to Adorno the 'culture industry' inverted the process, so that the artwork has now become 'a psychological vehicle for the spectator'.³² But Adorno's bleak caricature of the modern world is challenged by the still-surviving practices of serious art production in which aesthetic sublimation, which in music entails absorbed listening, is still possible. It will emerge that this does not imply an anti-cognitive approach; neither is it to be associated with passive or merely sentimental listening: Adorno opposes aesthetic sublimation with the sentimentality foisted upon us by the culture industry, such as the 'this-is-our-tune' syndrome which involves a reification of the music and a consequent failure to engage closely with it. Likewise, all extra-musical references may signal a step 'away from', rather than 'into', the music: 'Art expression', declares Adorno, 'is the antithesis of expressing something.'³³

A moving example of loss of self-awareness, as implied by Hoffmann's metaphor of being 'carried away', and defined by Adorno in terms of aesthetic

³⁰ Karl Philipp Moritz, *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Poetik*, ed. Hans-Joachim Schrimpf, 1962: 3, translated by Roger Lustig in Dahlhaus, *Absolute Music*, 5.

³¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentnor (London: The Athlone Press, 1997): 17.

³² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 17.

³³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 112.

sublimation, is offered by Wagner in his memorial essay on his favourite tenor, Ludwig Schnorr. Wagner remembers Schnorr in his first entry in *Lohengrin* which, as he writes, 'placed me under the quite specific spell of the God-sent legendary hero in whose regard one asks not: How he is, but tells oneself: Thus he is! And indeed this instantaneous effect, piercing the very soul, can be compared with nothing but magic.'³⁴ The singer appears in his full 'thus-ness' to cast his magical spell even over Wagner, the composer and creator of the entire drama. Recounting Schnorr's Tristan, Wagner notes how, 'with the commencement of Act III I instinctively quite turned from sight of the death-wounded hero lying stretched upon his bed in anguish, and sat motionless upon my chair with half-closed eyes, to plunge myself within.'³⁵ Wagner is 'entirely at loss to furnish as much as an approximate idea' of the achievements of Schnorr as Tristan, that 'terribly fleeting miracle of musico-mimetic art'.³⁶ Yet his choice of metaphor, of the 'magic' of *Lohengrin* and the 'plunging within' in the case of *Tristan*, are strikingly close to Hoffmann's. Wagner is making a direct association between excellent performance and a condition of self-abandonment, which even he, the composer, experienced in its presence.

This condition seems to correspond to the feeling Hoffmann describes – and highly values – of being swept up 'into the whole heavens of sound', or of being drawn into the 'far-off realm' of the music in performance. This mental condition rests on the power of the mind to become sufficiently absorbed in some activity that it loses awareness of its own self – a phenomenon so widespread as to be effectively universal: the small child 'lost' in some game, menial activities such as digging the garden, 'passive' activities such as watching television, or complex cognitive tasks such as mathematical reasoning, reading a carefully reasoned text and performing complex music, are all examples of the kind of absorbed attention sometimes identified as 'flow'. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the higher tasks, such as demand very rapid physical responses or complex powers of reasoning, are only effectively realised under three conditions: first, the mind is sharply focused on the task in hand; second, the mind is free of the potentially destructive intrusions of self-consciousness, including self-doubt; and third, the mind is free to engage in the direct experience rather than standing aloof as observer or critic.³⁷ This is why the transcendence of knowledge is important – for performing as well as listening. In performance, cognitive activities might include thinking how to finger, bow or phrase a particular passage, applying historically stylistic techniques, or conveying to the audience what the music is supposed to signify. All this, necessary in the process of developing an interpretation in the studio, gets in the way of fluent performance. Performance entails a shift of register, comparable to the shifts of register in Hoffman's literary style, from 'thinking about' the performance in rehearsal, to a 'thinking in' music in performance. Hoffmann's rhetorical accounts of successful performances are evidently of occasions in which musicians have succeeded in

³⁴ Richard Wagner, 'Ludwig Schnorr of Carolsfeld', in *Art and Politics: Collected Writings*, vol. 4, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, NE: Nebraska University Press, 1995): 228.

³⁵ Wagner, 'Ludwig Schnorr', 234.

³⁶ Wagner, 'Ludwig Schnorr', 235.

³⁷ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experiences* (New York: Harper, 1990): 64. This text is not uncontroversial among psychologists but is grounded on extensive empirical studies.

crossing the barrier, just as Ludwig Schnorr, for Wagner, crossed the bar between representation and full embodiment in performing *Lohengrin* and *Tristan*. It is not that performers must stop thinking, but that their thinking needs to be channelled *into* the music rather than towards concepts *about* the music.

An additional metaphor that further clarifies Hoffmann's 'other world' can be found in Gadamer's discussion of 'truth and method'.³⁸ He contrasts two modes of engagement – the cognitive, in the sense of self-consciously thinking about the object, and the trans-cognitive or absorbed mode; the first is represented by the critic standing outside the arena of the event and judging events according to predetermined criteria (as when Hoffmann considers the singing of Auguste Schmalz), and the second as an imagined conjoining with the activity itself, where the participant becomes 'one' with the activity. That the latter depends on the ongoing vigilance of cognition is demonstrated by the rapid response when something goes wrong (such as when the musical performer catches a wrong note or where intonation momentarily slips), when the listener is, as it were, summarily returned to the critic's seat on the touchline. In other words, absorbed attention rests on the 'approval' of the higher critical faculties even though they may have slipped from consciousness.

It now becomes clear why Hoffmann describes his 'other world' in terms of the magical. If the finest music does not purposively signify anything extra-musical, then the worlds it evokes will resemble neither the everyday world nor some fantastic world that may be portrayed verbally or graphically. The novel, by contrast, relates in some way to the real world, but music need not, and – as the early romantic philosophers repeatedly asserted – at its best will not. Music, Hoffmann is arguing, is its own world, and it is in this sense 'absolute'. But if, viewed from the perspective of the real, it can also appear full of contradiction and anomaly, this only underlines a key point of early romantic musical aesthetics: insofar as it does not represent or mean anything extra-musical, music is itself sublime.

What is a 'magical' performance?

I now turn to the pragmatics of performance to ask whether strategies are available to foster the illusion of absorption into an entrancing 'other world' of music. The real world of performance is always a situated world, so the Kantian problem of universality is not a concern: performers are working within a given set of cultural and procedural norms against which their own performance acquires both individuality and coherence. Anthony Rooley sums this up by applying Baldassare Castiglione's attributes of the perfect courtier to the ideal performance, namely decorum, wit and grace. The second of these, '*sprezzatura*', implies a certain transgression that on the one hand signifies the individual's freedom to flout or challenge the rules of decorum, and on the other ensures content that is interesting in being either amusing or provocative.³⁹ Yet decorum is needed as well, since otherwise there would be no anchor, no conceptual ground from which the *sprezzatura* may be articulated. Moments of *sprezzatura* thus provide 'hooks' for the listener's imagination, and are of particular importance in the performance of familiar works.

³⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum International Publishing, 1975): 101ff.

³⁹ Anthony Rooley, *Performance: Revealing the Orpheus Within* (Dorset: Element, 1990).

Ex. 1 Beethoven, String Quartet in F major, op. 135, mvt. iii, bars 1–6

Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo

The musical score shows the first six bars of the movement. The key signature is one flat (F major) and the time signature is 6/8. The first violin part is marked 'sotto voce' and begins with a half note G4. The other parts enter with half notes: Violin II (F4), Viola (C4), and Cello/Double Bass (F3). Dynamics include 'p' and 'cresc.' markings.

One such 'hook' occurs in what is perhaps the most famous recording of Beethoven's final string quartet op. 135, that of the Busch Quartet.⁴⁰ I have elsewhere shown that modern traditions of performing the slow movement of Beethoven's op. 135 string quartet are problematic, in that they seem at odds with the composer's directions. In summary, Beethoven writes '*Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo*' over the score and twice writes '*semplice*' in the first violin part; it is probable, by comparison with other Beethoven scores, that by '*Lento assai*' Beethoven simply means 'somewhat slow' and probably faster than Adagio; and since through the entire movement there is no note value shorter than the semiquaver, there is no technical reason to take the quavers of the opening theme too slowly. Finally, in a sketchbook Beethoven describes this movement as a 'sweet song of peace or joy'⁴¹ (see example 1).

Against this weight of musicological and score-based evidence, the Busch Quartet, recording in 1933, adopt an average tempo a shade over of M.M. 32 for the quaver beat, so that each bar lasts for some eleven seconds. At this tempo, where each quaver is almost two seconds long, there can be no quality of singing (*cantante*) or, due to the difficulty and virtuosity of sustaining the legato line over such long periods of time, a sense of tranquillity in the performance. Instead, the music acquires a different quality, of what Robert Simpson describes as 'an iron self-control' (see below). There is no evidence that the music was played at such a slow tempo prior to the Busch's recording,⁴² and their performance therefore represents an extreme form of *sprezzatura*. There is high tension in the way the

⁴⁰ Recording of Beethoven's String Quartet op. 135, The Busch Quartet, first released by HMV (1933), reissued by Iron Needle on IN 1413.

⁴¹ 'Süsser Ruhegesang oder Friedengesang', see Joseph Kerman, *The Beethoven Quartets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967): 221. For Beethoven's suggestive plans to use the *Lento assai* as an eighth movement to op. 131, see Robert Winter, 'Plans for the Structure of the String Quartet in C Sharp Minor, op. 131' in *Beethoven Studies 2*, ed. Alan Tyson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 106.

⁴² For further discussion of this and other examples, see Peter Johnson, 'The Legacy of Recordings', in *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding*, ed. John Rink (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002): 197–211, and "'Expressive Intonation'

quavers of the theme are sustained in pianissimo, stretching to the limit the capacity of the violin bow to sustain; and that tension translates into a 'sublime' music that speaks, not of 'cantante' or even 'tranquillo' but of a dark, lowering atmosphere redolent of impending tragedy. Robert Simpson, writing in 1971, is evidently hearing the Busch Quartet's recording, or a performance in the tradition established by the Busch's recording, when he writes of the movement:

The utter quiet of the *Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo* is so extreme as to breed another kind of tension [from that of the Scherzo], equally great ... There is nothing relaxed here, nothing decorative – only an iron self-control; the contrast with the Scherzo is too enormous for anything else to be possible. The key of D flat is heavily subdued.⁴³

Neither the Busch recording nor Simpson's description are musically illogical, for the second variation of this four-variation movement, marked *più lento* and in the *minore* key, begins with dragging funeral-march rhythms and a sequence of low chords in C sharp minor (bars 22–26) before erupting into jagged *sforzando* gestures that could hardly be performed *tranquillo*. The Busch Quartet is therefore thinking structurally, executing the opening theme with a view to integrating the 'tragic' second variation into its expressive world. The Busch's intention appears to be to produce a profound and sublime musical experience by creating a music that does not flow in the manner of a 'sweet song of peace', nor does it ingratiate its listeners, but offers instead a severe musical landscape that at first is differentiated neither by phrasing nor any variation to the pianissimo dynamics. If its listeners can 'lose' themselves in its bleak world, the performance will have succeeded; if not, it will fail. The success of this recording over many generations indicates that for many listeners the performance was indeed sublime.

That there is, nonetheless, magic in the Busch's recording is suggested by the enthusiastic response of other performers who have directly imitated their performance strategies. Evidently, the Busch Quartet – idiosyncratic and clearly wrong from an authenticist's perspective – can excite and enthuse its listeners just as the gifted lady pianist enthused Hoffmann. The Lindsay Quartet, in their first recording from 1986, acknowledge their debt to the Busch by adopting a tempo and style closely similar to theirs – the Lindsay's tempo is one of the slowest in the history of recording.⁴⁴ Toscanini's famous broadcasts with the full strings of the NBC orchestra also adopt a tempo close to the Busch's, although with the string orchestra and (I guess) variable bowing within each section, he creates a luscious, indulgent texture, loosening the 'iron self-control' that is so evident in the Busch's recording.⁴⁵ Joseph Kerman records how as a youth he was enthused by Toscanini's broadcasts of this movement: 'The impression is unforgettable, and while such memories remain, one can never be sure about the freshness of

in String Performance: Problems of Analysis and Interpretation', in *The Music Practitioner: Research for the Music Performer, Teacher and Listener*, ed. Jane W. Davidson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004): 79–90.

⁴³ Robert Simpson, 'Chamber Music for Strings', in *The Beethoven Companion*, ed. Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune (London: Faber & Faber, 1971): 277.

⁴⁴ *Beethoven: The Late String Quartets*, Lindsay String Quartet, ASV CD DCS 403, Disc 4.

⁴⁵ A recording of a 1938 Toscanini broadcast of the *Lento assai* from op. 135 is reproduced on 'Toscanini: Beethoven's Ninth Symphony', Music and Arts CD-1136 (1).

one's critical response.⁴⁶ Kerman nonetheless attributes Beethoven with touching 'a true note of sublimity', finding in the Theme a 'fundamental hovering, almost mystical quality' and in the final, fourth variation, a 'combination of severity and ineffable tenderness'.⁴⁷ He, too, it seems, is reading the score in terms of performances that have deeply affected him.

Kerman's and Simpson's accounts both speak of a commitment and enthusiasm for Beethoven's work, even though they are in fact describing a particular performance tradition. There are, however, recordings that set out to recapture the magic of the Busch's recording but produce merely a dull, distinctly un-magical dirge. In the 1990s there was a fashion for playing the theme as a prominent melody, with clear vibrato and sharp tuning to detach it perceptually from the accompanying harmony. This interpretation might plausibly be magical at a faster tempo, but when the tempo is still below M.M. 50 the prominent, vibrato-laden tone becomes a distraction, militating against an absorbed, focused listening, and returning its listeners – in Gadamer's terms – to the externality of critique.

Confronting performances that create a music very different from the listener's expectations – as the Busch Quartet evidently did with their 1933 recording of op. 135 – underlines the value of knowledge as a grounding for a mode of listening that does not simply take the performance as 'the music'. The knowledge base of the listener may thus include an awareness of performance traditions. But beyond this is the Hoffmannesque question of imaginative listening. Beethoven's *Lento assai* from op. 135, in almost all contemporary performances, appears as a series of dark, sombre images that offer the listener much to contemplate: the 'twists and turns' within each variation and between them, the rapidly changing textures and tessituras, the range of sonorities, emphasized by divergent approaches to intonation and melodic projection, the tension between its neat, concise layout and the intensity of expression, all speak of romantically sublime expression. For the listener with no knowledge of performance traditions, these 'fantastic images' might be read as merely constituent of the work, as evidently Simpson and Kerman read them; but Kerman illustrates how it is possible to listen both critically and imaginatively, to wonder at the mystery, the darkness and light, in short the 'magic' in what he hears.

Conclusion

I have argued that Hoffmann's metaphorical language usefully serves to promote freely developed imaginative encounters between work and performance and between performance and the experience of listening. The performer is required to engage with the composer's work imaginatively, and hence with a degree of interpretative freedom. The performance, in turn, becomes for the listener a sonic 'world' that again has no single correct modality of reception but should be suggestive of a range of imaginative engagements triggered and sustained by the richness of the musical content of the performed music.

The educational psychologist Jerome Bruner has written that we know ourselves and our world in terms of 'possible worlds', by which he means 'in different ways, from different stances', each of which produces different

⁴⁶ Kerman, *Beethoven Quartets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967): 222.

⁴⁷ Kerman, *Beethoven Quartets*, 220–21.

structures or representations, or, indeed, 'realities'.⁴⁸ One task of the educator is to enable the student to mediate between these worlds, to make connections and to develop the skills of synthesis. Gadamer's concern for continuity between the worlds of art and the everyday is similarly motivated, as is Adorno's when he argues for a contemporary art that is immanently critical of the modern world.⁴⁹ Is a 'sublime' work such as a Beethoven symphony still relevant today? What connections might it make, or how might it be construed, on reflection, as critical of the modern world? These questions take us well beyond the scope of this article, but they might be answered by inverting Adorno's formula: as well as creating art that is directly critical of the modern world (such as Picasso's *Guernica*), perhaps the artist may usefully create work that suggests other ways of being, other positive values and qualities of relationship.⁵⁰ The 'ecstatic' religious music of John Tavener seems intentionally to achieve this, but a distinction needs to be drawn between artworks that set out to *represent* an ecstatic experience and those (religious or otherwise) that may be experienced in some equivalently deep way. Representation does not guarantee deep involvement. More generally, the modern concert hall, resonating to nightly performances of mainly nineteenth-century instrumental works, offers an implicit challenge to the more facile media and pop-music of our everyday world: it proclaims, sometimes loudly and sometimes in tones that are barely a whisper, that there are other values and other ways of being human.

But playing old music may not be enough. Roland Barthes notes that, for him, the literature of the past is his 'pleasure' but not his bliss; confronting ideology, 'the new is bliss ... The opposition (the knife of value) ... is *always and throughout* between *the exception and the rule*'.⁵¹ Philip Fisher proposes 'a discipline of wonder and a training that requires every critic to spend a large fraction of her or his time with as yet undescribed works, unplaced works'.⁵² Historical works of music and drama may fare rather better than historical literature, in that their latest performances are new and as yet 'undescribed'; but Barthes may be right that we can best learn to experience the sublime through the new and stylistically challenging, for which modernist music affords many examples. Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, Birtwistle's *Earth Dances* and Boulez's *Le Marteau sans Maître* are examples of 'modern' works (not literally new, but still difficult for many aficionados of classical music) that I hear as sublime, provided only that the performances are both competent and imaginative; and there are, of course, many other examples. Perhaps some listeners find such works difficult because they know that they do not *understand* the music; but if they understand that such works afford a 'sublime' experience

⁴⁸ Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986): 109.

⁴⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Sound Figures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999): 10.

⁵⁰ For further discussion of the contemporary value of traditional 'high' art, see Peter Johnson, 'Illusion and Aura in the Classical Audio Recording', in *Recorded Music: Performance, Culture and Technology*, ed. Amanda Bayley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 37–51.

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994): 40; the italics are his.

⁵² Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998): 142.

and cannot therefore be understood in the manner, say, of the 'Blue Danube' Waltz, perhaps they may more readily open their ears and minds to the peculiar magical worlds discovered and explored in the New Music, and thus, at times, lose themselves in the music. Interestingly, Hoffmann was aware of this very modern problem:

Beethoven's mighty genius intimidates the musical rabble; they try in vain to resist it. But wise judges, gazing about them with a superior air, assure us that we can take their word for it as men of great intellect and profound insight: the good Beethoven is by no means lacking in wealth and vigour of imagination, but he doesn't know how to control it!⁵³

In other words, we need to allow the music to work its magic upon us, and whilst a foundation of knowledge is usually needed to support such experience – Hoffmann calls this 'rational awareness'⁵⁴ – we should not expect this knowledge to explain why we value the music so highly. The near-ubiquitous calls today for comprehension, such as is promoted through the didactic aspirations of concert promoters and broadcasters, may in fact contribute to the difficulties people admit to in their encounters with the new or unfamiliar.

To close, I will summarise the three prerequisites I have identified for a listener's lively and 'absorbed' encounter with music in performance: a musical work of sufficient interest and quality to engage the informed listener; a performance that is not only technically competent but, again, sufficiently interesting to engage the listener; and listeners who are able to respond with a deep level of 'absorbed listening', through which the unconstrained imagination may respond with a sense of wonder and magic where the work and the performance invite this aesthetic approach. The listener's response is a function of predisposition, experience and knowledge and also, therefore, reflective of current culture: wondering signifies both a particularly focused cognitive engagement, a freely exercised but focused imagination, and a cultural environment in which it is acceptable to wonder as well as to pursue knowledge. Hoffmann's elaborate metaphors and, perhaps above all, his unbridled enthusiasm for the finest works and performances he encountered, offer a lesson to us all, not to rely only on accumulating knowledge but also to cultivate the art of deep experience and to learn how to foster, celebrate and share our enthusiasms.

⁵³ Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 98.

⁵⁴ Charlton, *Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 98.