

# Editor's Preface

During a radio interview with Hans Keller in 1971, Wystan Auden defined music as, 'in the platonic sense the mimesis of our experience of time as cyclical and as historical'.<sup>1</sup> It is a memorable definition, to be sure, but how did he arrive at it and what exactly does it mean? In his great essay on *Beethoven* of 1870, Wagner, for one, had also defined music platonically; in his case, though, the contrast lies between the 'outer' fine arts that had so attracted Goethe, and the 'inner' arts of music and drama that had so appealed to Schiller.<sup>2</sup> It was Schopenhauer, he argued, who claimed that

the Ideas of the world and its essential phenomena, in the sense of Plato, ... constitute the 'object' of the fine arts; whereas, however, the Poet interprets these Ideas to the visual consciousness through an employment of strictly rationalistic concepts in a manner quite peculiar to his art, [the philosopher] believes he must recognize in *Music itself an Idea of the world*, since he who could entirely translate it into abstract concepts would have found withal a philosophy to explain the world itself.<sup>3</sup>

That is to say, Schopenhauer *splits* the platonic sense between mere 'Ideas inherent in the phenomena of the world' and the comprehensive 'Idea of the World' embodied in music. For our part, Wagner continues, we are to understand the character of things through 'musical' introspection. By paying heed to the 'Will' we gain 'direct consciousness' of self and other: for the invisible, dark 'sound' world of the Will stands outside time and space, and teaches us what the visible, temporal, 'light' world of Representation cannot. We thus react to music's own manifestations, its primordial, defining 'cry' for help, its 'shout of joy', its 'suave play of soothing murmurs', in a spirit unmediated by 'rationalistic concepts'. Indeed, the sacred, 'sublime' spirit of inner music is there to transfigure the outer world of secular rhythmic patterns and 'beautiful' forms. Artistic creation itself is analogous to dream-work, albeit dream-work that needs a secondary, half-awake process to turn private image into communicable allegory; and to write appropriately about music is therefore to convey the primordial images it arouses. So much is clear from his texts for the Prelude to *Lohengrin* and Beethoven's Overture to *Coriolanus*.<sup>4</sup> For

all aesthetes have hitherto rebelled against the notion of deducing a verifiable art from what appears to them a purely pathological element, and have consequently refused to Music any recognition until its products show themselves in a light as cold as that peculiar to the fashionings of plastic [fine] art.<sup>5</sup>

Wagner, indeed, claimed he could not be 'half content' unless he was in the grip of an 'artistic illusion'.<sup>6</sup>

But was Auden saying quite the same thing as Wagner? Well, he might have agreed that, as his two concepts of time invoked two different kinds of experience, they separated an unpredictable 'outer' world delimited historically by time and place from a familiar 'inner one' defined ahistorically by a certain number of Ideas that stand ever ready to return ('cyclically' or, to use Nietzsche's term, 'eternally').<sup>7</sup> But he could hardly have shared Wagner's disdain for the 'mere' poet or fine artist: after all, he was himself a writer. Nor can we ourselves forget how the generations after Wagner embraced a new objectivity in talking about music – aping the rasping 'logic' of, say, Berg's analytical guides to

Schoenberg – and how necessary this was if music was to come to be celebrated as *both* outer and inner, ‘historical’ as well as ‘cyclic’. But in recent years, we have seen the return of what Wagner held in highest esteem – the divination of music’s innermost character –, albeit in the relatively formal guise of rhetoric, genre, hermeneutics, semiotics, aesthetics, psychology, and so forth. So once more we are compelled to think, not just about music criticism, but also about music itself.

Julian Littlewood’s *The Variations of Johannes Brahms* confronts these issues at a stroke. (That he is writing on Brahms rather than Wagner is neither here nor there: Tovey rightly found in Brahms’s chamber music an intensity of feeling unmatched by anything in music drama.) ‘Variation’, of course, is a central Idea in Western music, and Brahms one of its greatest exponents. But it is an Idea that enshrines a paradox: for behind the outward diversity of variations lies the unchanging identity of thematic material, and the demands of form and constantly evolving musical experience insist that the paradox is somehow addressed if the music is not to be shackled. To approach ‘Variation’, Littlewood draws up a host of categories relating to theme, free and assimilated forms, harmony and voice leading, instrumental style and virtuosity, homophony and polyphony, rhythm and duration, dynamics and articulation; he places each set of variations within its ‘historical’ context, constructs a background of forms and genres (notably out of Schumann), probes compositional choices, and analyses the composer as a private and social being. All of this belongs to the ‘outer’ aspect of music. He then shows how Brahms, like Wagner, treated this ‘outer’ side as a manifestation of the ‘inner’ one. He pays careful heed to Brahms’s extraordinary gamut of expression, which embraces primordial ‘cry’ and tenderly amorous *dolce* alike, and invokes two styles to define it – the lyric, represented by Lied and Minnelied, and the dramatic, conveyed by an arresting scenario for the Op. 67 string quartet. It is a mimesis that might have pleased *both* Wagner and Auden.

*The Variations of Johannes Brahms* inaugurates a new series in the Poetics of Music, a series intended for composers and players as much as scholars. Of course, there is no responsible theory of composition that is not *a posteriori*, and no scholarly discussion of ‘examples’ that eschews ‘history’. We learn only from the past. But, since ‘in the platonic sense’ the Ideas of music are not just ‘eternal’ but form the gateway to ‘immediate’ comprehension, a Poetics of Music can only give them pride of place and allow them to suggest for the future what they will. From this point of view, the keyword in the title is *Variations*. But the confluence of Idea, historical figure (*Johannes Brahms*) and creative type opens yet another perspective: for Brahms’s ‘devouring’ personality (the term is Keller’s) has itself proved a model for progressive, synthetic composers. For example, Bayan Northcott wrote recently that

[the forms that] have preoccupied [Alexander] Goehr throughout his creative life [have been] theme and variations, and the fantasia like synthesis of contrasting musics[.]<sup>8</sup>

and Milton Babbitt praised Goehr’s works for appearing

profoundly and delightfully mindful of what music has been and – therefore – can be, looking forward as did the music of that composer whom he (and I) so admire: Brahms.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, when this book begins by surveying variations prior to Brahms, it exposes a background that, symbolically if not actually, may fire all those who ‘follow’ him.

Indeed, we might go further and say that, the synthesizing tendency that creates a present out of the past with an eye for the future provides the context for any musical poetics worthy of its name. It is this tendency, indeed, that is so ably and forcefully represented here.

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## Notes

- 1 According to Alison Garnham, author of *Hans Keller and the BBC* (London: Ashgate, 2003), Hans Keller's interview with W. H. Auden was recorded on 10 July, 1971 and broadcast on 20 November the same year.
- 2 Richard Wagner, 'Beethoven', in *Actors and Singers* (1896), trans. by W. Ashton Ellis (London and Nebraska: University of Indiana Press, 1995), pp. 57-126, and especially p. 65.
- 3 Wagner's 'Explanatory Programmes' form part of Richard Wagner, *Judaism in Music* (1894), trans. by W. Ashton Ellis (London and Nebraska: University of Indiana Press, 1995), pp. 219-34.
- 4 Richard Wagner, 'Gluck's Overture to *Iphigenia in Aulis*', in *Judaism in Music*, p. 156.
- 5 Richard Wagner, 'Beethoven', in *Actors and Singers*, p. 71.
- 6 Richard Wagner, 'On Musical Criticism', in *Judaism in Music*, p. 63.
- 7 R. J. Hollingdale describes 'eternal recurrence' in *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 120-25.
- 8 Bayan Northcott, 'A Not-so-little Music: Goehr's Op. 16 as Paradigm', in *Sing Ariel: Essays and Thoughts for Alexander Goehr's Seventieth Birthday* (London: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 160.
- 9 'A Message from Milton Babbitt', *Sing Ariel*, p. 325.