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Memory and Nostalgia as Music-Historical Categories

Leon Botstein

One of the daunting challenges that face those who work in the fields not only of music analysis and history but also of social and cultural history is the question of how the study of music (not only musical culture) can expand our understanding of history. We continue to develop claims and generalizations about the past whose sources are literature and painting as well as film and videotape media. When it comes to theater with music, opera, and musical theater, such sources are used usually with an emphasis on text and plot. Both the run-of-the-mill textbook and the more sophisticated scholarly paper will use the evidence of the musical, if at all, in a supplemental manner to buttress or justify a perception or general assertion whose essential origin derives from linguistic and/or visual sources. Our understanding of the culture and mores of societies in the past as represented by the results of scholarly narration and selection is rarely influenced by the use of music as a primary source.

This is perfectly understandable. In the first instance, there is the long-standing prejudice that a firm distinction is to be made between the so-called musical and the extramusical. In this view, there is a musical logic in all systems of music making, whether notated or not, whose proper description and understanding requires a command of essential self-referential characteristics and the presumed autonomous logic of the way sound passes through time. This is particularly acute for long-form, purely instrumental events of composed music. To understand music as history, one needs to command some plausible knowledge of musical logic and then struggle with describing it in language. Even armed with such skill, the observer may find the realm of correspondences between linguistically expressed musical variables and extramusical meanings suddenly tenuous if not arbitrary except in rare historical moments, such as the late eighteenth century, when one might appeal to a normative system of correspondences between musical rhetoric and sentiments.

In the second instance, in historical terms one clearly needs to distinguish between the script or map of music (e.g., a printable text) and the performed occasion, the actual sound journey. In the age of sound

reproduction by mechanical devices such as digital recordings (with or without video), the historical event identified as music can be sounding music that is or can be repeated in many contexts. It can also be the traditional public or private moment of music performed at a specific moment and place. What are the differences between using a musical text as evidence and regarding the music realized in real time as the legitimate historical residue? The wide variation in the way a musical text can be realized complicates this matter further. But even if we could agree about how something might have sounded and been played in the past, there are further problems. One needs to ask the historical question of who was listening and what they heard (or thought they heard), in the sense of what their experience of listening was about. Here one encounters a problem posed by memory in music. When one reads a book, for example, and then is asked about what one has read, the reader can—through the mere possession of literacy—not only recall but adjust that recall and locate and confirm memory using the text. The reader, just like the beholder of a painting, can return to the text or object and identify sites of recall.

Listeners who are able to do this for music have since the mid-nineteenth century been a decided elite. Even for that elite of amateur musicians who could link what they heard and played to a script, for a long time the reception of music performed by others depended on recollection of events in elapsed time sustained purely by memory. Only in the later nineteenth century would a marginal number of listeners, in terms of the overall percentage, locate in printed texts (if and when they appeared) what they remembered. Even if we could agree on music as it must have sounded and focus on that music as actually listened to or heard, we would have to ask what in particular listeners remembered before asking about the significance, if any, of the music heard. The significance of music as history may be not primarily in the text but rather in the transaction between performer and listener, even if we regard the performer as one category of listener. That transaction involves the ascription of meaning in listening that in turn depends on the function of musical memory in a given culture. The text itself may not be helpful all on its own.

These musings are somewhat akin to the question posed in Walter Frisch's discussion of Schubert in this issue of *MQ* as to who is doing the remembering. His suggestion of an educated listener with cultivated expectations of what was likely to happen when listening to a quartet is perfectly reasonable. But it is only one of many possible answers to the query about which of many listeners in the past one wants to know about. Another hypothetical listener could be the composer who inscribes the opportunity for memory within a work for himself, standing

in as his own ideal listener. One sometimes gets this sense in Richard Strauss (particularly in his later works such as *Die ägyptische Helena*, *Die Liebe der Danae*, and *Metamorphosen*), where recollection, self-quotation, nuanced repetition, and evocative gesture capable of recall—often below the surface—may be directed not so much at any listener at all but at the conversation with oneself.

The group of papers in this issue of MQ on Schubert and memory suggest that one way in which music may be privileged and indispensable as a medium, and therefore as more than a supplemental constituent of history, is as the activity whereby we can discover the ways in which memory and recollection have functioned in the past. For example, it may well be that the phenomenon we identify as nostalgia can be best understood as it is encoded through the medium of music. Nostalgia is of course not memory. One of its social forms is as a facet of and strategy within cultural politics. Since at least the late eighteenth century, and particularly from 1815 on, there has been an ongoing current in European thought and culture of the ideology of nostalgia. The polemical side of this phenomenon has continued unabated to the present day. There is no shortage of prophets of cultural and moral decline whose arguments and works of art are based on a suggestion and presentation of better days long gone whose status is largely mythological. It is common in historical accounts of the mid-eighteenth century in England, and the early nineteenth century on the Continent, to identify in literary and cultural works nostalgia for a preindustrial world. This is often located in evocations of landscape and nature. Aspects of neoclassicism are sometimes, but not always, suffused with implied nostalgia, even when they are, as in Germany in the 1820s or, more widely, in Europe in the 1920s, characterized by reformist aspirations.

Nostalgia as ideology became particularly intense in the late nineteenth century in the decades that brought us Matthew Arnold and Max Nordau. The musical strategy utilized by Max Bruch in his popular oratorio *Odysseus* from 1872 was a conscious periodic triggering of reminiscence within the work through the suggestion of Handel, Bach, Mendelssohn, and Schubert. These points of recollection were designed to evoke through musical memory in the amateur choral participants and in the audience a constructed sense of a shared cultural heritage and definition (explicitly anti-Wagner, despite uses of Wagnerian gestures), an alternative notion of German cultural identity. The two composers of the fin de siècle whose overt manipulations of the possibilities for nostalgia through music within the listener's experience through the multiple application of the encounter with memory in a musical work are most adventuresome and complex are of course Gustav Mahler and Charles Ives.

But in the twentieth century matters became even more complicated. Music increasingly was written to evoke a sensibility of loss for a past that neither listener nor composer could have experienced or known. Bartók and Szymanowski express aspects of musical nationalism by evoking folk traditions and the exotic, whose connection to the listener is discontinuous. These traditions are themselves at best reconstructions. Their function is to underscore not memory but quite distant loss and contrast with contemporary life, as well as to define distinctiveness. The effectiveness is dependent on an experience through music that is plausible only by the act of musical hearing in which memory and association are realized through recollection within the framework of the musical event. A comparable manipulation of memory embedded in music can be found in the 1970s, as is evident in the music of Alfred Schnittke and the quite distinct neoromantic volte-face of Krzysztof Penderecki.

As the historian Martin Jay has argued, one can trace, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the history of the notion of a nonrational category known as experience, or *Erlebnis*. A version of this is Friedrich Schleiermacher's belief (echoed by Mendelssohn in his sacred music and secular oratorios) that by listening to music an experience of God and the divine unmediated by language and image (and therefore more powerful and communal) could be generated, both in the individual and in an assembly of listeners and participants. This trajectory of thought finds its apogee in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*.

Debussy, writing to Raoul Bardac, his sometime pupil and later stepson, compared music favorably to painting in its capacity to collect impressions and "centralize" detail in terms of variations of color and light.¹ Although Debussy used visual analogies to specify the superiority of music, he conceived of a work of music as "rhythmicized time." It could capture and therefore evoke the emotion linked to a human experience inaccessible to both the poet and the painter. Experience, as in the German tradition of *Erlebnis*, becomes understood more in the manner of Henri Bergson. Consequently it is Debussy who realizes that through music silence can be framed as one of its elements; this is powerfully exploited (as contemporary critics recognized) in *Pelléas et Mélisande*.²

We recognize that within the context of family life we all have a tendency to use photography to help us to recollect. We also know intuitively that listening to music, precisely because it is a medium in time functioning in some manner apart from verbal signifiers or even visual correspondences, seems to evoke in a Proustian manner the sensibility of past experience. Music is particularly noted, therefore, for its capacity

(in contrast to a photograph's) to generate an intensity in the unanticipated recollection. Freud's modest musicality, if not extreme unmusicality, may be one source of his failure to utilize music as a means to justify and illuminate his psychological geography of the unconscious.

What all this points to is the need to press further in the direction that Frisch and his colleagues have done in their discussions of Schubert. If the remembering agent is the hypothetical ideal listener intentionally posited by the composer, then it is useful to contrast Frisch's hypothesis regarding memory in a Schubert quartet with Debussy's tirades against the barriers erected to experiencing the unique power of music. The anticipation of narrative meanings replete with the possibility of cross-referential recall—the attributes of the listener that permitted memory to work in Schubert—were in Debussy's view responsible for the parlous state of the listening audience. Debussy once complained to Paul Dukas that although music was the finest means of human expression, in his own day it had become “devoid of emotional impact.” The purpose of music for Debussy was clearly derived from but beyond the Wagnerian: to emancipate the listener from the mundane and the everyday. The barrier to achieving this experience, uniquely communicable by music, was actually the well-schooled listener who approached music with an anticipation of form, structure, and procedures and, as Debussy derisively put it, subjected music to a “symphonic treatment.”³ Schubert's listener becomes Debussy's *bête-noire*. Memory in music had become reduced to narrative and form. Debussy succeeded. His music in particular evokes in some listeners specific memories of place, light, and feeling of past experiences unintentionally linked to any presumed logic of the composition.

One can see from this comparison that neither listening nor the historical function of music is a normative analytic or descriptive category. But in exploring both intentionality on the part of the composer and the documented historical experience of listening, the consideration of music as the medium by which individuals and groups experienced and dealt with memory and recollection should be a priority. The texts of music left to us are archeological fragments from which we can reconstruct the historical experience of music, the patterns and objects of presumed memory, and the essential content of cultural nostalgia. Music, in its particular links to the faculty of memory, becomes an oblique route to finding out how cultures dealt with entropy as reflected in the passage of time; for humans, that is nothing less than the presence and inevitability of death. The neurobiology and psychology of memory, as well as recent research in the uncanny links between the physiological function of eye and ear, may help us focus further research. As historians we would do well to look more closely at comparisons between listening, musical

time, musical form, and thinking in words and images, particularly as they are connected to the uses of personal and collective habits of memory. This line of investigation may permit students of music not only to revise the standard narrative of the past, but, further, to illuminate the continuities between past and present. The historical inquiry into music's function may help us refine the ongoing presumption that the purpose of historical research is the disaggregation of the narrative of human experience and the reconstruction and assertion of ever-expanding differentiations.

Notes

1. See François Lesure and Roger Nichols, eds., *Debussy Letters*, transl. Roger Nichols (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 166.
2. See Lesure and Nichols, 56.
3. See Lesure and Nichols, 117–18.