

Reviews

Sandra McColl, *Critically Moving Forms: Music Criticism in Vienna 1896-1897*

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The study of music criticism has long been on the margins of mainstream musicology. Now emerging as a subsection of the discipline, its value is recognised as a source of information for the details of musical life, cultural politics and aesthetics. Music criticism has most often been used as an adjunct to biographical studies, providing a key to the reception of a particular work, or as one source for reception histories of an individual composer's output. With this book, McColl develops another approach altogether: she has chosen a place and time of great musical interest and 'shift[ed] the focus — to the critic' (p. vii). While the conventional view of Viennese music criticism in the late nineteenth-century focuses on its elder statesman Eduard Hanslick, McColl introduces the reader to 'the wider community of his colleagues' (p. viii). Her synchronic approach takes a fifteenth-month "slice" of Viennese musical life, from October 1896 to December 1897, which she examines through the music journalism published in over twenty-five daily and weekly papers and periodicals of the specialised performing arts.

Music Criticism in Vienna 1896-1897 describes this season and how the press responded to its main events, but it does much more than this. By giving voice and history to the critics, McColl has illuminated a section of music history previously left in the shadow of one great critical figure. Her examination of music journalism, both in *feuilletons* and in shorter reviews, reveals the main issues and opinions of the season in all their complexity, and this detail contributes to more general knowledge of the period, and of its cultural processes. The material collected here forms a resource of inestimable value: a guide to *fin-de-siècle* Viennese music criticism, aesthetic debates and cultural politics.

In the introduction, McColl defines her main source, the *feuilleton*; its usual position on the front page of the papers indicates the prominence of musical debate in Vienna at the time. Although the *feuilleton* has been given a bad name by such writers as Max Graf and Carl Schorske, McColl suggests that these authors give the critics too much blame for negative attitudes to new musical developments, when the audiences of the day were equally implicated in negative reaction, but have left no record. The scholar should never accept the content of music journalism at face value; McColl affirms this principle and ably interprets what lies beneath the elegant surface of the *feuilleton* text. She does, however, venture to make two 'cautious and

qualified' assumptions that are basic to her study. First, that if a critic approves of a work he will praise it and will do the opposite to a work of which he disapproves; second, that the degree of approval or disapproval may well be exaggerated for a literary effect or reasons of artistic politics which are themselves interesting historical phenomena (pp. 7-8). With this passage, McColl declares her belief in the integrity of the critics she takes as her subject and her desire to interpret their writings in context.

Part I, 'Papers, Critics, and Events', sets the scene, and Chapter One includes a large body of information about the journals and critics. Much of this material has not been presented in English before and by bringing it together McColl has created an invaluable resource for English language scholarship. A paragraph is devoted to each paper, providing dates of publication, circulation figures, editors and associated critics, its general content (where applicable), and its political position. The section devoted to daily and weekly newspapers divides them into broad political groupings, while specialist music journals and literary journals are each listed separately.

McColl then provides a biographical summary for each identifiable critic. This list of twenty-eight is presented in a database format, including basic information such as places and dates of birth and death, age in 1896, journals for which each wrote, other significant activities, and a citation of references in the *Deutsches Biographisches Archiv* and music dictionaries. In the final section McColl divides the critics into generation groups, each spanning ten years, and categorises them by profession. She returns to the generational divisions as the book progresses and analyses the distribution of certain opinions among them, revealing interesting and sometimes unexpected patterns.

The wealth of material presented in this first chapter serves as a good introduction and vital reference for the reader trying to keep track of the age and allegiance of the various critics. The structure of the content and even its layout, however, suggest that the material might have equally well been included as an appendix. Nevertheless, the placing of this reference information in Chapter One clearly reflects the author's opinion of its importance and her wish that the rest of the book be read in the light of the information it contains.

After introducing the reader to the papers and critics, McColl devotes Chapter Two to a survey of a year in Viennese musical life. Besides describing the main types of concerts and opera reviewed, she also gives information about the venues and 'concert-giving organisations'. The focus on 1896-1897 is maintained by description of repertoire and visiting performers. The chapter opens with the season's extraordinary events: commemorations of the centenaries of Schubert's birth and the composition of the Austrian national anthem, and the critical response to the death of Bruckner and Brahms.

'The Richness of Everyday Life' gathers together much more important information about Viennese musical life of the mid-1890s, and constitutes as valuable a resource as does Chapter One. The facts and figures about venues and institutions are brought to life by the detail of the 1896-1897 season which is provided under each heading, with a taste of the reviews and critical debate adding further spice. At times the text verges on narration of 'who played what, where and when,' as the events of the season are minutely detailed, but the sectional structure of the chapter provides the needed punctuation. This season produced a plethora of musical activity in Vienna, and Chapter Two is the only place in the book where McColl is able to discuss the role of performers in concert life, as the rest of the study focuses on assessments of compositions.

With Part II, 'Politics, Civil and Artistic,' the reader is thrown into the rough-and-tumble of the criticism itself. Chapter Three concentrates on the reflection of current political debate in musical criticism, Chapter Four on the specifically artistic controversies of the season.

In some instances, negative assessment of new music may have more to do with the environment in which the work is first heard than with the music itself. Meaningful interpretations

of such reviews establishes the links, both obvious and hidden, between specific criticism and current debates or events, thus referring to the broader context. In Chapter Three, 'Civil Politics and Musical Opinion,' McColl acquaints the reader with two issues in contemporary Viennese political life, knowledge of which enables her to interpret both tone and content of the debate among the minority of critics who allowed political and nationalist sentiment to colour their writings.

In 1896-1897, the season's novelties included a number of works by so-called "Slavic" composers such as Dvořák, Smetana, and Tchaikovsky, among others, which raised the hackles of those critics concerned by the "low" German content in the repertory. Their disquiet was aggravated by the programming of Smetana operas for two successive celebrations of the Emperor's name day and of Tchaikovsky's *Yevgeny Onegin* for the Empress' name day. But the Viennese critics had other reasons for their extreme anti-Slavic sentiment. They saw a further threat to German culture in the language ordinances of 1897, which declared Czech, in addition to German, the 'language of government business' (p. 88) in Bohemia and Moravia. This effectively barred the German-speaking minorities from the civil service, as they did not speak Czech. The parliamentary debate caused civil unrest in Vienna, and McColl finds evidence in the reviews that critics afraid of the Slavic encroachment into all areas of life—cultural, political, administrative—used criticism of Czech music as an opportunity to air their broader concerns. McColl traces the parallel progress of the language ordinances debate and of critical response to performances of works by "Slavic" composers, mapping variations in intensity.

The second section, 'Mahler and the Jewish Question,' examines critical responses to Mahler's appointment to the Vienna Court Opera, first as conductor then as director. The announcements and Mahler's early performances provoked a range of reactions; the unfortunate Mahler was not only criticised for being Jewish, but also for not being his colleague Hans Richter. This discussion is briefer than the preceding one on the Slavic question, but both successfully present and illustrate the issues; the former elucidates the criticism by reference to the political debate while the latter exposes the debate about Jews through the criticism itself.

The longest chapter is the fourth, 'The Politics of Art in the Aftermath of Wagner.' This extensive survey situates critical opinion in the debates which can be traced back to the controversy between adherents of Brahms and of Wagner. Each section is devoted to critical treatment of the works of one composer, namely Wagner, Liszt, Bruckner, Wolf, Richard Strauss, and Brahms. McColl gauges attitudes to Wagner by examining the reviews of Smetana's *Dalibor*. This proves an excellent device for uncovering critics' positions, for one frequently finds that critics reveal more about themselves than about the subject of their scrutiny, especially when they are attributing influence. Critical opinion of Bruckner and Brahms is distilled from obituaries and commemorative articles. In the section on Brahms, McColl undertakes a detailed comparison of the extent of the coverage following each man's demise, focusing on the varying assessments of their significance.

The most substantial section of this chapter is devoted to Richard Strauss and reception of *Also sprach Zarathustra*. This was 'probably the most radical "modern" work to have been performed in Vienna in 1897' (p. 138), and it provoked some extraordinary and lively critical responses. Although McColl admits that most of the discussion is related to aesthetics rather than specifically to 'Wagnerian artistic politics,' she maintains her focus on the latter area which reveals interesting complexities. Some critics were shaken from their wonted allegiances, for example, the Wagnerian critic identified only as Hagen, who felt he should praise the work but was too discomfited by it to do so (p. 138). The text allowed critics to give free reign to their talents for wit and satire, as they quoted, misquoted and parodied Nietzsche's writings in their reviews.

The centrepiece of the discussion is a *feuilleton* by Max Kalbeck, entitled 'Zarathustra and Struthiocamelus.' McColl declares it 'quite the most extraordinary example of the music critic's

craft, demonstrating the awesome power of a skillfully wielded pen' (p. 142). It takes the form of a 'sustained parody of Nietzsche', although Kalbeck does not limit his argument by close adherence to the original text; he adopts 'a style homogenous with the semi-poetic parody' (p. 143) and successfully imitates Nietzsche's tone. McColl quotes the piece in full, but breaks it up with elucidatory paragraphs in which she identifies the Nietzschean sources of imagery and subject matter, and briefly analyses and interprets the text. This *feuilleton* by Kalbeck is one of the rare gems that rewards the scholar's patient search through seemingly endless columns of music criticism.

There is no simple conclusion to the critical survey made in this chapter, and that is its main message. It is too easy for history to simplify, to draw solid lines between opposing "camps" and ignore the complexity of the debate that actually took place. McColl demonstrates, for example, that Bruckner's support was not confined to the Wagnerians, and describes how the younger generation was adopting new versions both of Wagnerism and conservatism which were not direct continuations of old divisions.

Part III, 'Beneath the Rhetoric,' examines critical criteria in the concert hall and in the theatre. McColl delves beneath the surface to reveal the underlying notions of value, the aesthetic foundation from which the critics formed their opinions, finding a common belief in the importance of structure, an unspoken requirement of "beauty" and a desire to hear in new music an enlivening spark of originality. The standard had clearly been set by the 'largely Germanic classical tradition' which gives the fifth chapter its title, 'The "Canon" in the Concert Hall.' This exposition of critical values forms an ideal backdrop for the discussion of symphonic programme music which follows. In McColl's own words, 'Programme music was a hot issue in Vienna in the second half of the nineteenth century. The question whether music should be harnessed to the expression of extramusical ideas was the most significant theoretical issue dividing the Wagnerians from their opponents' (p. 185). Here again McColl canvasses the range of critical opinion, interpreting it at both the textual and broader contextual levels.

The theme of critical values continues in Chapter Six, 'Opera, Drama, and the Artwork of the Future.' McColl focuses on the critics' preoccupation with the literary value of the libretto, and the debates over classification of libretti and the operas based on them; were they symbolic fairy-tales or examples of naturalism, epic or drama, verist or Wagnerian? Aptly, the last section looks forward to the musical future through the critics' eyes. Many were afraid that the new developments they so disliked would indeed form the music to come, while others saw positive ways forward. 'In 1897, most predictions of the future...possess an uncanny accuracy when viewed from a perspective from which their future is already past' (p. 218) and one cannot help wondering, as McColl suggests we should, how the critics did respond to the musical challenges of the next ten years.

McColl's witty and individual style suits the spirit of her source material, and her approach reveals its hidden riches time and again. It is always difficult to achieve a good balance between quotations and paraphrase when writing about music criticism, but McColl's generosity with the original texts ensures lively and often entertaining reading. The proportions of direct quotation, paraphrase, and commentary are eminently satisfactory. She herself is responsible for the translations, and has arrived at English versions which read well, flow, and evoke the tone and elegance of the originals. It is at times frustrating not being able to refer to the German texts, especially in the few instances where poetry is quoted, but the sheer quantity of quotation renders impracticable a comprehensively bilingual approach, while any further selection would be awkward.

Late nineteenth-century Vienna is further evoked by the inclusion of thirteen black-and-white plates. McColl has found portraits of eight critics, supplements her descriptions of the venues with pictures of the Bösendorfer-Saal and the Imperial and Royal Court Opera, and adds a visual dimension to the critics' verbal satire with a cartoon and several silhouettes.

Music Criticism in Vienna 1897–1897 offers the reader a rich slice of musical life, adding detail to, and dispelling misconceptions found in, existing scholarship. McColl has succeeded in re-creating the critical community in which Hanslick worked. In doing so, she has made a wealth of material accessible to English-speaking readers, and demonstrated the possibilities of an approach which focuses on the critics. In conclusion, McColl herself best describes her project and its importance; a project to which this book makes a valuable contribution:

In general, the sheer quantity and high (if variable) quality of music criticism suggests a vast resource of source material for musicologists engaged in research into history, reception, and aesthetics...Ultimately, the more scholarly attention is paid to all aspects of Viennese music journalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the better it will be for our knowledge of the intellectual and political climate in which music was created, performed and received. (p. 225)

Elizabeth Kertesz

Glenn Watkins. *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists*.

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In *Pyramids at the Louvre*, Glenn Watkins has produced a fresh and vibrant text that offers a plethora of information and numerous perspectives on aspects of artistic production and the culture of the twentieth century. Its principal novelty is that for once music is the protagonist in a coverage of the cultural panorama, whereas it has all too often received cursory treatment in such surveys, when compared to the plastic arts and literature.

Despite the fact that the title of Watkins' book may lead the reader to expect an approach to the material steeped in postmodernist theory, the author selects a completely different, if somewhat more "traditional," mode of discourse for the presentation of his ideas. Watkins describes his approach in the following terms:

Regardless of what objectives may be defined as proper to a responsible history of the future, the music historian has always been, and continues to be, seduced by his role as a story teller and at the same time tamed by a sense of obligation to the musical object which ought not become buried in a sea of theory—critical, aesthetic or formalistic. As a purely practical and defensive act, then, the music historian is obliged to sidestep the invitation to confect a unified world theory, to colour his story with only a touch of philosophy, and, like the artists about whom he writes, to construct a narrative that is seasoned as much by intuition and affection as by methodology (p.9).

A kaleidoscope of facts and sources inform his revealing insights, which are structured in five parts: 'The Orient,' 'The Primitive,' 'Clockworks,' 'Masquerades,' 'Cut and Paste,' each of which covers a broad range of themes. The nexus and correlation between the parts is not always immediately apparent, although the concept of *collage* is continuously evoked. The author's definition of this technique is a broad one: 'the term *collage* is used here as a metaphor; that citation typically refers less to thematic recall of familiar tunes than to the assemblage and rearrangement of a rich parade of cultural loans involving textures, timbres, temperaments, and generative procedures ranging from the banal to the esoteric' (p.3).