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Shall We Change the Subject?

A Music Historian Reflects Part II

Richard Taruskin

Western values like creative freedom and originality (which protected the transgressive esthetic, as described by Anthony Julius¹ and discussed in the first part of this paper) could also be construed as euphemisms—for self-indulgence, immaturity, vainglory—and certainly were so construed at the time. «That,» to quote Stravinsky after a morning spent listening to tapes of recent compositions at the Union of Soviet Composers in 1962, «was the real iron curtain».

A SOVIET LESSON

I was privileged to observe it during my year as an exchange student in Moscow. The biennial congress of the International Music Council, a sub-organization of UNESCO, was held there that year. I managed, by staying close to Soviet friends in the crowd swarming at the door of the Hall of Columns, to crash its meetings. The violinist Yehudi Menuhin, the Council's president, made a keynote address that was widely reported in Western media, because in it he named the then unmentionable Solzhenitsyn, alongside the sanctified Shostakovich, «as present-day illustrations of the vision and profundity of Russian art,» as he reported it in his autobiography. Here is how that retrospective account continued:

At the rejected name, the ice age descended upon the hall, and nothing I said subsequently served to lift it. Normally, I gather, a speech by a foreign dignitary, a guest of the Soviet Union, would have been noticed in the press, but neither *Pravda* nor *Izvestia* nor any other newspaper, nor television, nor radio, carried so much as a word. But the channels of contraband information were in good repair, it seemed, and by that evening and throughout the following days I was enjoying lightning encounters with anonymous Muscovites who knew all about it. In the

street, in theatre cloakrooms after concerts, I would feel a hand touch me, or a gift slipped into my pocket, and hear a whispered congratulation².

Menuhin's recollections strike me as somewhat wishful. I was there, and looked around at the mention of the unmentionable name. I saw many ironic grins. The next day, at a panel, Alan Lomax, the American folklorist, departed from his prepared remarks to observe, rather tritely, that artists such as Solzhenitsyn, who challenge authority, should be neither condemned nor feared, because «they're just doing their job.» I immediately switched on my simultaneous translation receiver to hear whether the remark was conveyed to the Russian speakers in the room, and it was. But it made no obvious impression. The hall, buzzing with an undertone of casual conversation like every Russian scholarly meeting I've ever observed, continued to buzz. Anyone looking for a shocked reaction would have been disappointed. At yet another panel, the American musicologist Barry Brook remarked that «it was best for all concerned» if artists were allowed to experiment, «even though it creates problems,» because «that is what artists do.» This time there were chuckles, and a patronizing reply from the dais by Georg Knepler, the East German musicologist.

I made a point of asking Soviet friends and acquaintances who had heard these remarks what they thought of them. My friends included students like me, no less congenitally irreverent than students everywhere, and my acquaintances included conservatory professors who, like professors everywhere, tended in their politics toward the liberal fringe. I think that by October, three months into my Moscow stay, I had become sufficiently de-exoticized in their eyes so that they were not unduly inhibited in what they told me. The universal reaction that I elicited was respect for Menuhin but a tolerant shrug or an amused shake of the head, as if at a naughty child,

with regard to the other two. Those who bothered to continue invariably spoke of naïveté — both the naïveté of expecting that such words would accomplish anything, and the naïveté of misplaced faith in a discredited esthetic. Most Soviet artists, however they may have chafed — and chafe they certainly did — at bureaucratic meddling and restriction, particularly on travel, sincerely believed that their esthetic views were more evolved and advanced than those of the West. Solzhenitsyn's courage inspired awe, but he was regarded primarily not as an artist — and certainly not as an artistic experimenter — but as a political dissident. The behavior of artistic experimenters was regarded as frivolous. Expressing particular contempt for Lomax, one of my Soviet acquaintances observed that if artistic challenges to authority were merely a matter of role-playing, then the artist was in effect nothing other (hence no more) than the court jester, self-important, self-deluded, and impotent. This was, in essence, Marcuse's notion of «repressive tolerance,» expressed far more convincingly than Marcuse managed to do, because my friend knew how to apportion the blame.

ORTHODOX TRANSGRESSIONS: RICHARD SERRA, HANS NEUENFELS AND SOME STUDENT COMPOSERS

The Romantic esthetic, both in its relatively benign autonomous phase and in its crueler transgressive one, envisions artist pitted against audience in deadly embrace. It is a self-fulfilling mandate that often produces spectacular collisions, like the one between Richard Serra and the denizens of the Federal office building in lower Manhattan that he «decorated» with his abstract sculpture *Tilted Arc* in 1981. It came about

through a miscalculation on the part of the General Services Administration, which commissioned the work and appointed a selection jury drawn entirely from the art world, which applied transgressive assumptions unanticipated by the commissioners and made the collision inevitable. The matter ended in heated public hearings and a lawsuit in 1985, and a court order to remove the work from view in 1989 amid a din of recriminations, bad feeling and mutual suspicion that still reverberates.

This regrettable episode in the recent history of public art set an equivocal example. Different parties and interest groups drew different lessons from it. On the one hand, it induced the National Park Service, which oversaw the commissioning of the Viet Nam Memorial in the year of *Tilted Arc*'s stormy unveiling, first to solicit blind submissions and then to appoint a selection committee comprising representatives both of the art world and of veterans' organizations, in hopes of a consensus that might avoid the polarization of interests that brought about the Serra fiasco. On the other hand, it provided those eager to exploit that polarization with an equally valuable precedent, as in the case of the Brooklyn Museum's «Sensation» show in the year 2000, in which Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was easily induced to play the part written for him while the museum administrators, in collusion with Charles Saatchi, the advertising tycoon who owned the works on display, and who stood like them to profit from the controversy, cynically insisted that the confrontation was unsought. It is hard to identify a good guy in this tale of mutual exploitation, with the possible exception of the much vilified painter Chris Ofili, whose *Holy Virgin Mary*, ritually decorated with elephant dung, provided the spark to set off the conflagration, and whose involvement in the proceedings was passive. Nor are there any good guys in the



Richard Serra: *Tilted Arc*, Manhattan. © Richard Serra/Pro Litteris

sorry saga of the Danish cartoons lampooning the prophet Muhammad, in which reckless provocation begat bloody reprisal.

A musical counterpart to these spectacles was the temporary cancellation of a revival of Mozart's *Idomeneo* at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin in 2006, in a production by Hans Neuenfels that included a transgression against religious piety, unforeseen by Mozart (namely the decapitation of effigies of Poseidon, Jesus, Buddha and Mohammad), which elicited an anonymous bomb threat on Mohammad's behalf. Upon consultation, the police warned the intendant, Kirsten Harms, that the threat presented an «incalculable risk,» and that they would not be able to guarantee safety. Her consequent decision to call off the production roused the politicians into action. A spokesman for the chancellor, Angela Merkel, accused the Deutsche Oper of «falling on its knees before the terrorists,» and pressured Harms to join the international War on Terror by reinstating the cancelled performances. In the end the threat was not carried out, but suppose for a moment that it had been, and that people had been injured or killed for the sake not even of Mozart but merely of the right of the director, Herr Neuenfels, to perpetrate a gratuitous and, frankly, juvenile provocation. Was it correct to value the right of artistic transgression over public safety? It was this sort of misevaluation, amounting to an ethical lapse, that Anthony Julius had in mind when he wrote that «the unreflective esteeming of the transgressive has had several unhappy consequences,» among them «the impoverishing of our moral consciousness by its contempt for pieties.»

I don't mean to suggest that Mr. Julius regards public safety as a mere piety. He did not have the *Idomeneo* example in mind. But that example poses, perhaps even more pointedly than the ones he does cite, the problem to which he calls attention, namely that «the experience of contemplating taboo-breaking artworks [is] so often the very opposite of exhilarating.» If this is the situation we now face, of mutually disaffected and equally demoralized camps of art producers and art consumers, then scholarship and historiography have as much to answer for as anyone. Thanks to the poetic fallacy, scholarship and historiography have allowed themselves to be co-opted as spokesmen and advocates for art practices that arose concurrently with art scholarship and historiography themselves, and whose results now threaten the fine arts with moral indifference and social irrelevance.

And yet, though he casts it as pessimistic, Anthony Julius's conclusion seems to me far too rosy a take on things. From my perch, in the music wing of the American academy, I do not see that artists have become demoralized along with audiences in the way that Julius describes, but demoralized in a different way, as described by Julian Bell at the end of *Mirror of the World*, his new single-volume history of world art. «When did the Western avant-garde tradition breathe its last?» he asks. «On the night of 15 March 1989,» he answers, «when contractors tore down Richard Serra's sculpture *Tilted Arc* in Federal Plaza, New York City.» As it was dismantled and carried away

for reassembly at a new site (not destroyed, as Bell seems to think), there was, he writes, «a widespread feeling that the old avant-garde impulse —to deliver a salutary aesthetic shock, to clear a space for critical reflection —was ceding to the free-flow of consumers and information in a world of unchecked capitalism³.» Capitalism? It was not capitalists who removed the sculpture but the national government —the same force that often intervenes in the affairs of art in non-capitalist societies —and only after public hearings and a lengthy lawsuit in which a court decided in favor of the office workers who had found the work oppressive in precisely the manner the artist intended. Bell's invoking what he must have thought the most surefire label of opprobrium seems less an expression of leftist opposition to capitalism than an expression of an older aristocratic disdain for ordinary people (tradesmen!) seeking redress against elites.

As for more informal evidence of smug and unreflective adherence to once-challenging but now outworn ideals, when we interview prospective additions to our composition faculty at the University of California, you may be sure that transgression —the delivery of «a salutary aesthetic shock» —is among the virtues claimed by candidates and their supporters. We have a search going on right now, and of the four candidates interviewed so far, two have actually applied the word transgressive to their work, and a third, while he did not use that word, presented one composition called *Trespass*, and another called *After Serra*, which he introduced by telling what seems the art-world's folktale version of the *Tilted Arc* affair, in which nameless «bureaucrats [...] came in the middle of the night with blow torches and destroyed it, [...] ripped it down without permission.» The story elicited a gasp from the audience, but not the piece. The piece delivered no shock, nor could it have done, since it was expressing an institutional orthodoxy. Artists who now speak of transgression are promising that they know what is expected of them, that they will obediently play their part, and that they will not transgress. The affirmation of transgression insures that their assentingly strident and complaisantly jarring work will be received with equanimity. Thus the art world, at least the part of the art world that shares its lodgings with me, has holed up in its sanctuary, where it is nurturing its young in a spirit of complacency. It may be a misguided position, but it is not a demoralized one. It gives strength to its devotees and for the moment ensures that the moral indifference and social irrelevance of serious art music will continue.

CENSORSHIP IN CONTEXT: THE CASE OF JOHN ADAMS'S «KLINGHOFFER»

I make these judgments in a retrospect colored, inevitably, by the response to «nine-eleven,» which had a most unfortunate musical repercussion. I'm not talking any more about Stockhausen, whose buffoonery was actually something of a comic relief in those scary days. And yet the buffoonery, according to Steve Martin's formula, was a distortion of what

was happening, and what was happening was an alarming replay of the romantic glamour that had attached four years earlier to the Unabomber, identified as Theodore Kaczynski and captured in 1997. The aura of Romanticism attached as always to the transgressor, and, to the helpless rage of his surviving victims, Kaczynski became a sort of folk hero, hailed by many as a «mad genius» and by *People Magazine* as «one of the most fascinating people of the year». The enormously enhanced body count achieved by the terrorists of 2001 inhibited the public expression of such celebrity adulation, except on the part of a fringe of artists and intellectuals, most memorably in an edition of the *London Review of Books*, now prized by collectors, which appeared on October 4. The next month came the cancellation, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, of its scheduled performances of choruses from John Adams's opera *The Death of Klinghoffer* because its portrayal, in a spirit of «tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner», of the murder of an American Jew by Palestinian terrorists, and its implied plea that the cause that drove them to extreme measures be seriously pondered, seemed ill-timed to the national mood of mourning. In announcing the postponement, the orchestra's management explained that it preferred «to err on the side of being sensitive,» and Robert Spano, the scheduled conductor, was quoted as agreeing: «Before you pick the scab,» he told Alex Ross, the *New Yorker's* music critic, «you have to let it heal».

Maestro Spano's diplomatic remark was understandable, torn as he must have been between professional and personal loyalties. One of the members of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, which was to have participated in the performance, had lost her husband on September 11, and several members of the chorus expressed their misgivings about singing Adams's «Chorus of Exiled Palestinians,» with its violent expressions of hatred, so soon after singing in the memorial service for their colleague's loved one. The reaction to the orchestra's decision from the art world at large, however, uncomplicated by personal involvement, was nearly unanimous in its outrage, which bordered at times on hysteria. David Wiegand, the arts editor of *The San Francisco Chronicle*, enraged at what he perceived as a slight to Mr. Adams (who is, after all, a Bay Area luminary), wrote, «There is something deeply wrong when a nation galvanizes its forces, its men and women, its determination and its resolve, to preserve the right of the yahoos at the Boston Symphony Orchestra to decide to spare its listeners something that might challenge them or make them think.»

It was Wiegand's rant that moved me to intervene. What nation, after all, had done what he described? A government ban would indeed have been an intolerable intervention, but it was a decision by a private or corporate gatekeeper that Wiegand was protesting—one, moreover, that seemed motivated not by politics or ideology (the sort of «determination and resolve» at which Wiegand seemed to be railing) but by what seemed to me ordinary human sympathy for victims, something that had been so conspicuously missing from many of the reactions to the event, including the reaction of

Mark Swed, the music critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, who boasted, in a column titled «Seeking Answers in an Opera,» that

On September 12, preferring answers and understanding to comfort, I put on the CD of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, John Adams's opera about terrorists and their victims [...] Opera is often called the most irrational art form. It places us directly inside its characters' minds and hearts through compelling music, often causing us to enjoy the company of characters we might normally dislike. Adams's opera requires that we think the unthinkable.

Mark Swed's decision to look for answers in what he himself described as an irrational source left me speechless at its misdirected sentimentality, and particularly the implication that the opera's most praiseworthy property was its capacity to make us «enjoy the company of characters we might normally dislike.» The assumption that the opera had lessons to teach rather than goosebumps and tears to impart was a comment both on the state of criticism and on the opera's qualities as a work of art. (No one, so far as I am aware, thinks of *The Death of Klinghoffer* as one of John Adams's better works; its reputation seems to be founded primarily, if not entirely, on its usefulness in political debate.) Mark Swed's eagerness to embrace the opera sounded to me like the old Romantic worship of the transgressor once again escaping the bounds of art and invading real-world morality; and so did its echo in *The New York Times*, where Anthony Tommasini, Mark Swed's counterpart, wrote that *The Death of Klinghoffer* offered mourners «the sad solace of truth.» What these critics saw as truth was just an old habit, the habit of idealizing transgressors, so ingrained as to have become transparent to them. The same habit seemed to me to be guiding both Daniel Barenboim in his persistent efforts to breach the taboo on Wagner performances in Israel, and the reliable support he was given in the press. Those who defended Maestro Barenboim's provocations, I thought, often failed to distinguish between voluntary abstinence out of consideration for people's feelings and a mandated imposition on people's rights. It was only a social contract that Barenboim defied, but he seemed to want credit for defying a ban. His acts seemed to regard transgression as an intrinsic value, implying that the feelings of Holocaust survivors had been coddled long enough and that continuing to honor them was both an intolerable infringement on his career and an insult to Wagner's artistic greatness. To agree with him, one had to stretch the definition of censorship into moral terrain usually associated with forbearance or discretion or mutual respect.

Now the issue had been joined again, even more pointedly and painfully, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, and I felt a compelling impulse to register my dissent from the habitual responses of my cohort, because I felt so strongly that the automatic privileging of the autonomy of the artist over the claims of the larger community (as if artists did not belong to it), which was in the nineteenth century a moral

investment that enabled art to thrive, was by the twenty-first century fatally degrading art in the eyes not only of the community, but in the eyes of many artists as well. To prejudge collisions between the interests of producers and those of consumers as collisions between right and wrong rather than as collisions of rights was destructive of moral as well as esthetic discrimination. I was in the somewhat ticklish position of the philosopher Arthur Danto, another academic who like me moonlighted as a critic, who found himself on the unpopular—that is, populist—side of the controversy engendered by Serra's *Tilted Arc*. It was, he reminded his readers,

a rusted slope of curved steel, twelve feet high and 112 feet long. It sticks up out of Federal Plaza in lower Manhattan like a sullen blade, and its presence there has divided the art world into philistines like myself, who think it should be removed, and esthetes, who want it to remain forever. The controversy is not over taste, since many philistines, myself included, admire it as sculpture, but over the relevance of the hostility it has aroused on the part of office workers, whose use of the plaza it severely curtails.

Like Prof. Danto, I was on the side of the yahoos. I approved of the Boston Symphony's decision, which seemed to resist the romanticizing impulse in the name of ordinary unheroic civility. I felt the need to protest the protest at the orchestra's unglamorously decent behavior. Fortunately, like Prof. Danto I had an outlet in which to express my unrespectable minority opinion, and a powerful one. In a long and fairly strongly worded front-page, above-the-fold article in the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday *New York Times*, where thanks to fortunate friendships I had been a fairly regular stringer for more than a decade, I asked, simply, even simple-mindedly, why people shouldn't be spared reminders of recent personal pain when they attend a concert. I asked why Mark Swed so despised comfort, and why he sought answers and understanding in an opera peopled by wholly fictional terrorists and semifictionalized victims, rather than in more relevant sources of information. I ventured the thought that acts of random slaughter needed to be deterred before they needed to be understood, and cautioned against the impulse to romanticize them. In conclusion, I quoted Jonathan Dollimore, a British literary critic and queer theorist, who wrote, in a brilliant article titled «Those Who Love Art the Most Also Censor It the Most», that «to take art seriously—to recognize its potential—must be to recognize that there might be reasonable grounds for wanting to control it». That control, I argued, must in a liberal democratic society be exercised from within, as self-control, and that the Boston Symphony Orchestra, though it acted publicly and though its actions affected many who might have disagreed, had displayed some admirable courage in its voluntary decision—one that brought it plenty of adverse publicity and, so far as I know, sold no extra tickets—not to perform the choruses from *The Death of Klinghoffer*.

Need I add that this article brought me more disparagement than any other piece I have ever published? In interviews with British journalists John Adams compared me with Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, and (seemingly worse) with John Ashcroft, then the United States Attorney General. Because I had questioned the wisdom of seeking answers to the dilemmas posed by this particular act of terrorism in this particular opera, I was accused by a fellow musicologist, Peter Tregear, of denying that «we should ever seek understanding in a work of art.» The very worst comment came from a British music critic named Tom Sutcliffe, who claimed that I had called for a general legal ban on the opera, as if such a thing could simply be declared, and asked «whether some forms of terrorism may not be a necessary and inevitable response to aspects of historic injustice (and not only in the Israel-Palestine context).» This was chilling: it recalled Orwell's and Auden's altercation over the idea of «necessary murder» in what Auden called the «low dishonest decade» of the 1930s. Were we in for another one? In any case, I had clearly transgressed—and I promise this will be the last time I rehearse this easy and tedious irony. But the disproportionate level of hysteria that followed the Boston Symphony Orchestra's decision to cancel a single scheduled set of performances seemed to redouble when a voice from within the academic community was raised in its defense, and that deserves, as we say, some interrogation.

The composer's distress was clearly self-interested; nothing much to investigate there. That he was provoked by journalists into reckless statements was also understandable; as Bill Clinton likes to say, that's what they live for. Ditto the irresponsible interventions by the journalists themselves. But what not only troubles me but also attracts my academic interest, and leads us back into the main matter of this paper, is the sort of interventions that have come from my academic colleagues, especially the musicologists among them. These have been of two kinds. The first, and less significant in my view, were the attempts to show that the work that had caused the Boston Symphony Orchestra's squeamish act was in fact blameless and innocuous, or else actually virtuous. This is a kneejerk reaction that follows on the idealizing assumption that what is aesthetically good is also morally good. If a work considered to have aesthetic merit is charged with moral defect, there are on this view only two alternatives: to deny either the aesthetic merit or the moral defect and thus preserve the idealization. A relatively well known example is the philosopher Curtis Brown's argument, in response to feminist attacks on the principle of esthetic autonomy, that «some moral views are not just false but ugly,» and constitute an esthetic blemish as well as a moral one; hence a work of art subjected to a convincing feminist critique must be no work of art. Almost as fatuous was the defense of *The Death of Klinghoffer* by Robert Fink, a musicologist at UCLA⁶, which tried to show that the opera was actually philo-Semitic, hence not only without moral blemish but actually just the opposite of what those who feared it imagined it to be. His case depends on a highly selective reading of the libretto, based on supposi-



tions as to the authors' intentions. It was a typical by-product of the poietic fallacy, and it nicely exposed the relationship between that fallacy and the venerable intentional fallacy. For that reason it may be worth discussing in methodology seminars, but it seems to me in the end as innocuous as it would have us think the opera.

Much more serious is the critique of my position by Martin Scherzinger, a musicologist on the faculty of the Eastman School of Music. He engages with the moral issues head-on, and shows, better than any other writer I could cite, just what is at stake in the matter of the poietic fallacy. Purporting to defend what he calls «the pure liberal position,» namely «the unqualified embrace of free speech,» he challenges me to «show, first, that the Boston Symphony Orchestra acted in the real interests of the community [in accordance with their claim] and, second, that the harms flowing from a performance of *Klinghoffer* outweigh whatever benefits may be claimed for it.» Purporting to undermine what he (I think) rather invidiously calls my «act of moral vigilance» (meaning, as I take it, my act of vigilante-ism), he accuses me of inventing in the guise of identifying «both the interests promoted by the removal of the work and the community that is deemed too vulnerable to experience the opera.»

I am reminded of a delightful passage in one of the old viola da gamba tutors from which I studied during the period in my life when my main interest was in performing early music. It concerned stringing the instrument, and the first step was to tune the top string as high as it would go before breaking. How, I wondered, could that point be determined? Scherzinger is making a similarly unreasonable demand. The only way to show what he wants shown is actually to administer the harm. I assume he is similarly skeptical of preventive medicine. I am perfectly willing to admit that had the Boston Symphony not

cancelled the performances, they might well have made no news at all. Some might have grumbled, a reviewer might have chided, a subscriber or two might have stayed home. The harm, if any, would likely have been small. But that, too, is only a guess; and that is precisely why the Boston Symphony management spoke of *erring* on the side of being sensitive. To presume on the side of protecting the author's rights against the claims of the community is, in that sense, also to err. Adopting the kind of experimental approach Scherzinger seems to endorse is in fact exactly what the jury of art experts did who selected Serra's *Tilted Arc* for installation in Federal Plaza. According to the work's eventual defenders, its purpose was precisely to raise consciousness of oppression. When it succeeded all too well, that success was touted as evidence of the value that mandated its retention. Scherzinger's point is similar: what he is really saying, and pretty flatly at that, is that the interests of the author outweigh the interests of the community, and the truest evidence of the value of his work, hence of the need to protect it, is precisely its potential for social harm.

I base this assessment on another, far more critical, moral objection Scherzinger makes against my defense of the Boston Symphony. He quotes a paragraph from my article that I have already paraphrased, in which I rejected the condoning of terrorism out of sympathy for its goals:

If terrorism —specifically, the commission or advocacy of deliberate acts of deadly violence directed randomly at the innocent —is to be defeated, world public opinion must turn decisively against it. The only way to achieve that is to focus resolutely on the acts rather than their claimed (or conjectured) motivations, and to characterize all such acts, whatever their motivation, as crimes. This means no longer romanticizing terrorists as Robin Hoods

and no longer idealizing their deeds as rough poetic justice. If we indulge such notions when we happen to agree or sympathize with the aims, then we have forfeited the moral ground from which any such acts can be convincingly condemned.

This passage had been singled out for hostile critique before. George Kateb, a liberal political philosopher for whom I have a very high regard, put me in perhaps even more flattering company than John Adams did, lumping me with William Kristol and Dick Cheney in my «refusal to try to understand the adversary,» and he exclaimed, «How bizarre for a scholar, of all people, to disown an interest in causes, even the causes of crime.» But that is hardly a fair characterization of what I wrote. I am as interested in causes as the next shocked liberal, and for the same reason, I should think: understanding the causes of terrorism can help reduce the incidence of its occurrences. But I do not see that understanding the cause is tantamount to justifying the act, and the refusal to justify the act is also, in my view, a way of reducing the incidence of occurrences. Martin Scherzinger's objection is different, and, I think, more pernicious. He accuses me of a moral inconsistency amounting to cowardice:

The advantage of this moral mindset lies in not doubting itself; the disadvantage lies in not being able to afford to doubt itself. Thus Taruskin must freeze the dichotomy between act and *motivation* when it comes to terrorism (the defeat of which can be achieved only via resolute focus on the former and absolute negation of the latter). When it comes to acts of self-imposed censorship, in contrast, Taruskin's frozen dichotomy reverses itself; here the focus is resolutely on the motivations of the censoring community and concomitantly all consideration of the resulting acts is suspended. [...] It is noteworthy, for an argument that is doubtlessly confident that certain acts transcend all possible motivating ideas (as in the case of terrorism), that certain motivating ideas (such as sensitivity and forbearance) can sufficiently transcend their resulting acts. As a result, Taruskin cannot register complexity in either case; he can neither afford to entertain a motivation, however appalling and misguided, behind the terrorist attacks in New York City, nor can he afford to register an affront, however slight, on another fundamental value held by liberal Western democracy as a result of the Boston Symphony Orchestra's censorious act.

But just look at the equations Scherzinger is making. Has he no sense of proportion? Must the same moral standards be applied to an act that results in the death of thousands as to an act that results in the cancellation of four musical performances? If one of the acts is evaluated casuistically (in the true meaning of the term), that is, according to the merits of the case, wherein (pace Scherzinger) both act *and* motivation are taken into account, does that mean that both must be so evaluated?

CONTEXTUAL CENSORSHIP AND THE PROJECT OF THE HISTORIAN

In a more extended talk on censorship that I have given in recent years, I take note of a seeming paradox. Out of sensitivity toward Jewish performers as well as members of their audiences, some conductors of Bach's *St. John Passion* have removed references to «die Juden» from the Biblical text that accuses them of responsibility for the murder of Christ, replacing the phrase, for example, with «die Leute» («the people»). I juxtapose this occasional alteration with a recording of Mozart's *Requiem* made in Germany in 1941, in which all references to the Jewish heritage of Christianity (in particular, the words «Zion», «Jerusalem», and «Abraham») are replaced so that, in the words of a reviewer, the work «should not be allowed to languish in obscurity simply because a handful of passages in the text are unsuited to our time.» Can one approve of the one substitution and condemn the other, given that the motivation in both cases is similar: making the piece performable within a given cultural (or social, or political) environment?

My answer, of course, is yes, and I submit my reasoning, as I have put it in my other talk, for your consideration now:

In both cases, the proposed modification is equally interpretable as a constraint on performance («bad») or an enabler of performance («good»). The act itself—call it censorship or discretion, call it bowdlerization or sanitation, call it expurgation or rescue—is morally and ethically neutral. Its valuation depends entirely upon our reading of historical conditions and motives—that is, on the values and purposes the act is seen to embody or serve, and these cannot be inferred from the simple act alone.

My question, if you think my position reasonable, is whether it is equally reasonable to regard an act of terrorism as being morally and ethically neutral, its evaluation depending entirely on our reading of the historical context. I think not, which means I consider the applicability of situational ethics to be itself a matter of situational ethics.

But my real reason for bringing all of this up in the context of the present paper, and my more urgent objection to Martin Scherzinger's critique, is the other implicit moral equivalency he is proposing: namely, that between the perpetrators of 9/11 and the perpetrators of an opera called *The Death of Klinghoffer*, to be judged by identical standards or not at all. This is monstrous. Seen from one angle, it is a monstrous trivialization of 9/11. Seen from another, it is an equally monstrous, Stockhausenesque hyperbole with respect to the social and moral value of art. And the fundamental misjudgment behind it is the same slippage between artistic and criminal transgressions, and the tendency to conflate them imaginatively, that morbidly infests academic esthetics. As I have already suggested, we music historians bear our share of guilt for this mindless magnification of the individual over

the mass —here John Adams over those whose sufferings he might have reinforced—even on the part of self-describing Marxists who, following Adorno, continue to celebrate the antisocial behavior of artists as if it were resistance to a worse peril, such as the hegemony of global capitalism and its threat to human agency.

Dissent on behalf of the audience amounts in the eyes of such writers to treason. Because I oppose the extent to which the score-fetishizing impulse grounded in esthetic autonomy has invaded and impoverished the field of musical performance, I am denounced as one who trusts «the ‘logic’ of the market» to ensure «a functioning social plurality.» (My denouncer, James Robert Currie, prescribes «two minutes spent scanning the pages of Naomi Klein [or] Noam Chomsky» so that I may learn the «deeply irresponsible» error of my ways.) Given the worry I expressed at the beginning of this talk about the self-censorship I feared I was imposing on myself when composing the *Oxford History*, finding myself willy-nilly soft-pedaling some of the ideas I have advanced more boldly this evening, I was actually consoled to read an even less temperate condemnation—a real calumny—of my «pathological xenophobia, arrogance and neo-conservatism,» as well as my «aggressive advocacy of the free market,» in a blog maintained by Ian Pace, a British pianist and writer who specializes, both as researcher and as advocate, in the especially transgressive discourse of the mid-twentieth-century avant-garde. So something is getting through after all, at least to those who feel their interests threatened by the changes I would like to encourage. Their opposition is billed as leftist, but if so it is an echo of a very, very old left indeed, one that no longer engages with either musical or political realities.

And so my prescription for the historiography of music turns out to be very close to that of one of my severest critics, Gary Tomlinson. The difference is that I see this prescription as implicit in my existing work, and he sees it as contradicting my existing work. That is unimportant. Our agreement is what counts. It is epitomized in Tomlinson’s call for «a kind of history that escapes the control and even the cognizance of those who have enacted it, that eludes their plotting of its networks and tracing of its transformations.» If Tomlinson, following Foucault, is unrealistically sanguine about the prospects of actually realizing such a thing (for he, too, like me, like you, and like everyone else, is among the enactors, plotters and tracers), he nevertheless identifies the direction in which I think we need to go, away from the poietic fallacy and toward a fuller social analysis. I have indeed been trying.

At a Seattle conference on contemporary Baltic music four years ago, I called attention to what I assumed no one could have missed: namely, that virtually without exception, the music of every Baltic composer in attendance—young or old, Slavic or Scandinavian, male or female, left or right, post-Soviet or pre-NATO—followed the same trajectory: the more recent the work, the more consonant (or to put it more contentiously, the less dissonant and transgressive). That response to an evident but rarely acknowledged need, and not the hoary binaries (national vs. cosmopolitan, progressive vs.

reactionary) that continued to dominate discussion in Seattle, was what I thought demanded acknowledgment and attention. And yet when I brought it up, the fact was acknowledged but not the trend. Everybody claimed to be following a spontaneous creative mandate and seemed to resent the implied insult to their creative autonomy. But when everybody’s spontaneous creative mandate mandates the same spontaneous creative act, you know that larger forces must be at work. It will be the task of tomorrow’s historians to improve on the efforts of today’s historians, like me, to identify them.

As long as the poietic fallacy holds sway, they will never be identified—and neither will the reasons for the earlier, «historical» style changes in which traditional music history has always dealt. At the very least we are back to my goosebumps and tears, and the challenge of finding a place for them in the historical account—a place prefigured in blurry but stirring fashion by Carolyn Abbate, one of your recent lecturers, in her manifesto, «Music—Drastic or Gnostic?», a plea that we replace what she calls hermeneutics, the study of musical meaning as contained in scores, with the study of actual musical experience as encountered in live performance. Since that, too, seems to me to be a hermeneutic project insofar as it is verbalized and transmitted, and since I cannot conceive of useful knowledge of human artifacts that is not historical knowledge, I would like to see this project historicized as well, along lines I proposed in the introduction to the *Oxford History*, where I recommended turning the question «What does it mean?» into the question «What has it meant?» Studying the way in which not only composers but performers, listeners, and all who come between them have sought their goosebumps and tears—or their dollars and cents—will mean dealing dialectically with the relationship between producers and consumers, and identifying the mediating factors that control that dialectic—a dialectic with which those who now proclaim their allegiance to the old dialectic of hegemony and resistance seem unable or at least unwilling to cope. If the music historians of tomorrow turn out to be a little less impressed by claims of autonomy, and a little less in awe of transgression, and if my work will have contributed to that change, I will die a happy man. And who knows? It might rub off on social attitudes as well. That will be a blow against some of the evils we now face.

- 1 Julius Anthony, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- 2 Yehudi Menuhin, *Unfinished Journey*, New York, Random House, 1977, p. 279.
- 3 Julian Bell, *Mirror of the World*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2007, p. 451-2.
- 4 Republished as the seventh chapter of *Sex, Literature, and Censorship*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001.
- 5 Jonathan Dollimore, *Sex, Literature, and Censorship*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001, p. 95.
- 6 University of California, Los Angeles