

## On the Task of the Music Historian: The Myth of the Symphony after Beethoven

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This inquiry was prompted by my encounter with the recently translated history of nineteenth-century music by Carl Dahlhaus. While Dahlhaus has been undoubtedly the single most influential figure in American and German musicology in recent years, his work must necessarily take on different kinds of significance within different national and academic communities. By asking what Dahlhaus had to lose or gain in perpetuating the myth of Beethoven, and by comparing this to our own interests, we can understand more clearly the value this book has for us.

### *1. Psychological Warfare*

The myth of the symphony after Beethoven is so compelling that it is told with relish by almost every historian of nineteenth-century music. What seems to impress the tellers of this tale most is that almost no composer proves strong enough to meet the challenge of producing a symphony worthy of the

name. Paul Henry Lang's *Music in Western Civilization* (1941) describes the struggle to write a symphony as a battle in which Romantic composers clash with the enemy. The heroes are tested in combat and prove to be either dauntless and brave, or else cowardly and unable to function:

While Schubert was still able to sail lustily into symphonic struggles, not shying from the consequences of their vastness, Chopin and Schumann were unable to cope with them, and Mendelssohn was virtually afraid to face them. This inability was almost tragic in Schumann, always so gallant and full of hope.<sup>1</sup>

Lang evaluates composers by their courage in taking on the symphony. In his *Music in the Romantic Era*, published in 1947, Alfred Einstein adopts a similar basis for judgment. Einstein starts out by objectively depicting two abstract "paths," which represent the two possible developments issuing from the "main line" of Beethoven's symphonies:

Beethoven had brought his work to such perfection that his successors had no other alternative than to imitate him or to deviate from him. Naturally, the deviations led farther and farther away from the main line. One might justifiably ask, with Wagner—but in another sense than the one in which he meant it—why the Romantic musicians after Beethoven still wrote symphonies at all....[He goes on to generalize about the Romantics' tendency to succumb to mannerism.] Fortunate was the man who, like Wagner, Verdi, or Brahms, was equal to this effort [of not descending into mannerism], and in his own work increased in stature. Schumann was not such a person. One may say that his real tragedy lay in the fact that he disintegrated in the attempt to do as the "great ones" had done—to become universal. The attacks of insanity are but an inward symbol of this tragedy, a typically romantic fate. Schumann is a representative of eternal adolescence, of enthusiastic intimacy; the task of becoming a man, in the creative sense, weighed too heavily upon him.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (New York, 1941), 747.

2. Alfred Einstein, *Music in the Romantic Era* (New York, 1947), 124-32.

Einstein elaborates at length on Schumann's problem in his *Greatness in Music* (1941). There he argues obscurely that

it is the weight of the towering heritage that weighed on Schumann's creativeness—his consciousness, his critical intelligence. Schumann was forty-four years old (a dangerous age even for men—with feminine natures), when his mind, long overstrained, could no longer carry the load.<sup>3</sup>

In his recent *Romantic Music: A Concise History from Schubert to Sibelius*, Arnold Whittall also attributes the decline of the symphony after Beethoven to composers' psychological problems. After observing that "there is something heroic in Schumann's persistent tussle with larger forms in his later years," he then considers the ill-fated quality of Schumann's undertaking:

It was with a singlemindedness perhaps born in part of his own ultimate instability that Schumann strove to further what he judged to be the most vital aspects of the German tradition stemming from Bach and culminating in Beethoven.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, while wondering why Mendelssohn failed "to fulfill his exceptional early promise," Whittall remarks that "a little knowledge of psychology might prompt the reflection that it was all too good to be true." He then concludes that perhaps "from fear of failure, Mendelssohn dissipated—or dammed—his energies; alternatively, he never matured emotionally to a sufficient extent to sustain, still less to consolidate, his adolescent genius."<sup>5</sup>

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3. Alfred Einstein, *Greatness in Music*, trans. César Saerchinger (New York, 1941), 68.

4. Arnold Whittall, *Romantic Music: A Concise History from Schubert to Sibelius* (London, 1987), 42.

5. *Ibid.*, 35-36.

Lang's, Einstein's, and Whittall's contentions that the generation after Beethoven was too neurotic, weak, immature, cowardly, and feminine to write successful symphonies is elaborated on in Nicholas Temperley's *New Grove Dictionary* article on the nineteenth-century symphony. Here we find that Beethoven's symphonies, from the *Eroica* on, all depict a "moral" struggle from which Beethoven, "the real hero," emerges victorious. This victory is due to "personal force of character," and the "sheer force of personality." Temperley evasively leaves the questions of what the battle is over and who is fighting to be answered "on a symbolic, a personal or a technical level."<sup>6</sup> However, Temperley's own response centers on Beethoven's struggle with psychic forces at war within himself. With his discussion of Beethoven, Temperley prepares the unfolding of his story of the symphony: successful composers such as Beethoven overcome their troubles and compose triumphant symphonies; unsuccessful composers remain trapped in their problems and produce works revealing weakness and lack of control.

The conservative Romantics, Temperley observes, harbored an "ill-concealed preference for melody" and found it hard to hide their "lack of genuine interest in the 'symphonic' aspect of [their] work."<sup>7</sup> Apparently it is the "symphonic" aspect that involves struggle, strife, and battle, for we are told that in the symphonies of Mendelssohn and Schumann no battles are fought at all. Since these composers were not able to "discipline the lyrical urge," and their development sections sounded "cold and perfunctory," "generally their symphonic art relied to a great degree on the attractiveness of [the] tunes themselves, and on their decoration and elongation."<sup>8</sup> We realize how devastating this criticism is meant to be when we arrive

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6. Nicholas Temperley, "Symphony," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London, 1980), vol. 18, 454.

7. *Ibid.*, 456.

8. *Ibid.*, 457.

at the section on Brahms, a composer with “sterner self-discipline”:

In somewhat the same way as Beethoven himself, he tamed and channeled the lyrical and romantic impulses that pervaded the musical world in which he grew up and lived, and forced them into the methods of another era—‘symphonic’ methods, which were barely compatible with the style of mid-nineteenth-century German music. The resulting conflict, which at his best Brahms resolved by strength of personality, makes him in a sense the only true symphonic heir of Beethoven.<sup>9</sup>

For Temperley, then, the Romantics failed where Beethoven succeeded because they did not recognize that the “symphonic” is essentially opposed to the “melodic.” Melody, linked here with “decoration” and “attractiveness,” is incompatible with the “intense intellectual and emotional effort” expected of the composer and listener of great symphonies. Unlike Beethoven, who “seized the listener’s attention and compelled him [sic] to follow,” the Romantics catered to their audience through the attractive charms of melody. According to this account, the Romantics failed symphonically because they could not overcome their lyrical tendencies. They lacked the self-discipline that gave Beethoven and Brahms the right to be called symphonic composers.

The symphonic/melodic opposition described here barely masks the masculine/feminine opposition that underlies it. This story of the symphony measures the efforts of composers against a traditional standard of masculinity: only “real” men can write “real” symphonies. The process of becoming a real man, of maturing from the state of an adolescent weakling, shows one how to become a compelling, forceful composer of symphonies free of femininity. But why is it so important that the symphony secure its masculine character? Why would it be so terrible for the symphony to succumb to the beauty of

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9. Ibid.

melody? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that these accounts consistently subject only German composers to internal struggle. It is only in Germany that the symphony is at stake, and only German identity will disintegrate if the symphony dies out.<sup>10</sup> The symphony struggles to embody both German nationalism and masculinity, which are themselves intertwined. Klaus Theweleit has concluded from a psychoanalytic point of view that for German nationalism “the battle for the nation resembles the men’s own battle to become men: it takes place on the ‘most monstrous settings’ in the body: a battle between life and death, masculinity and femininity, fulfillment and void, sense and insanity.”<sup>11</sup> The masculine mastery over warring psychic forces within symphony writers is so crucial, then, because femininity spells death, void, and insanity.

This explanation—that the symphony must insist on its masculinity because it must uphold its purely German character, that it must hold on to the two qualities secured for it by Beethoven—lurks consistently behind accounts of the Romantic symphony. This explanation is my starting point, therefore, for examining Carl Dahlhaus’s account in his *Nineteenth-Century Music*.<sup>12</sup> Although his version stands apart from the others in emphatically excluding biographical, psychological, or other extramusical explanations, he projects the same stupendous struggle. For Dahlhaus, the dilemma posed by Beethoven is a technical one that belongs to the history of

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10. George L. Mosse’s book *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York, 1985) gives a descriptive overview of this connection, especially in Germany. For a more pointed view on the analogy between becoming a man and becoming a nation in twentieth-century Germany, see the section on “The Nation” in Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 2, trans. Erica Carter, Chris Turner, and Stephen Conway, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 23 (Minneapolis, 1989), 77-94.

11. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 2, 82.

12. Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), 152. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

composition. More precisely, the problem is a question of genre, and can even be pinpointed to the formal difficulty of synthesizing monumental form and subtle manipulation of theme. Nevertheless, despite this demystification of the predicament, the "shadow of Beethoven" still looms large, and the succession of heroic attempts in "the will to large-scale form" is no less doomed.

In Dahlhaus's view, the post-Beethovenian symphony could not succeed through imitation, because "to prove himself a worthy heir to Beethoven, a composer of a symphony had to avoid copying Beethoven's style" (p. 153), yet Dahlhaus also implies that it was not possible for a symphony to succeed completely without grappling with the issues set forth by Beethoven. That is, even if a work such as Mendelssohn's Scottish Symphony manages to succeed "on its own terms" (to "step outside Beethoven's shadow"), any such endeavor signifies an inability to address Beethoven's aesthetics. Even the qualified successes of Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony and Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* are attributed to their use of "Beethoven's devices to solve a problem that Beethoven himself never confronted" (pp. 154, 156).

The authority of Beethoven extends to every possible situation in Dahlhaus's book. In the section on Smetana and the symphonic poem, for instance, we learn that

it was Beethoven's principle that the outline of a form must accord with the thematic process at work within it, and this principle remained a determining factor not merely in the late nineteenth-century symphony but also in the symphonic poem, or at least in its few outstanding examples. (p. 244)

A view of nineteenth-century music history organized around Beethoven's symphonies is too pervasive to be dismissed as a Dahlhausian fantasy. Going back to earlier myth-makers may provide the key to understanding why this particular story of the symphony, in this particular version emphasizing its decline after Beethoven, has had such significance;

why the story of the successive attempts has taken on such mythic dimensions; and why the symphonies of Beethoven still function as the transcendent principle organizing some of the most recent music histories, including that of Dahlhaus. My hypothesis is that the fate of the symphony was perceived as bound to the future of German identity. The symphony thus became a problem, just as 'What is German' always has been and will be a problem—as we shall see.

## 2. *Creating a National Identity without a Nation*

In his work on what he called "The Civilizing Process," the sociologist Norbert Elias provided a large-scale background for the constitutive significance of culture for Germany's identity.<sup>13</sup> He begins by distinguishing between the concept of civilization and the idea of *Kultur*; the latter term is left untranslated to emphasize its peculiarly German meaning. Tracing the dichotomy back to the eighteenth century, he shows that "civilized" society and "civilized" behavior were presented in Germany as superficial, immoral, deceptive, and above all, imported from France. *Kultur*, in contrast, came to signify those qualities supposedly native to the German folk: honesty, seriousness, simplicity, true-heartedness, diligence, a talent for teaching, and so on. While civilization stood for the latest fashion, and most modern developments in politics, economics, and technology, *Kultur* came to signify what were seen as more timeless qualities and achievements, especially in artistic and scholarly areas. Advanced mostly by writers and intellectuals rather than by politicians or tradesmen, the concept emphasized *das rein Geistige*, or the purely spiritual, and the sphere of inner enrichment and intellectual formation, or *Bildung*. Elias

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13. Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners* [*Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*], vol. I, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1978).

attributes the rise of this concept to Germany's painful awareness of its backwardness in politics and economics. Not yet united geographically or politically, and hopelessly behind in industry and trade, it seized upon its culture as the means for establishing its national identity:

The concept of *Kultur* mirrors the self-consciousness of a nation which had constantly to seek out and constitute its boundaries anew, in a political as well as a spiritual sense, and again and again had to ask itself: "What really is our identity?" The orientation of the German concept of culture, with its tendency toward demarcation and the emphasis on and detailing of differences between groups, corresponds to this historical process. The questions "What really is French? What is really English?" have long since ceased to be a matter of much discussion for the French and English. But for centuries the question "What is really German?" has not been laid to rest. One answer to this question—one among others—lies in a particular aspect of the concept of *Kultur*.<sup>14</sup>

The relation between a nation's artistic achievements and its identity emerged as an enduring theme in the decades after the Wars of Liberation in 1809 and 1813.<sup>15</sup> The specific relation of the arts to politics was developed in the argument that although Germany was not yet unified politically, the German nation could be prepared for unification by concentrating on the cultural nation. Cultural unity would advance the eventuality of a nation-state unity.<sup>16</sup>

Music emerged as part of the German's purely spiritual sphere and as integral to the German's identity at about this time. Music was claimed as the special property of the Germans; but, since it could hardly be maintained that the most prestigious and profitable genre, opera, was anything other than overwhelmingly Italian, this claim was narrowed to in-

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14. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

15. See, for example, Hagen Schulze, "The Revolution of the European Order and the Rise of German Nationalism," in *Nation-Building in Central Europe*, ed. Hagen Schulze, German Historical Perspectives, vol. 3 (New York, 1987), 12.

strumental music. Music without text, still regarded by some as unworthy of aesthetic appreciation, was perhaps initially perceived as a minor acquisition for the German national heritage.<sup>17</sup> However, as a part of the early Romantic movement, the aesthetics of autonomous art exalted instrumental music as cut off from external reality, as a world unto itself. As E. T. A. Hoffmann wrote in 1810, “when music is spoken of as an independent art the term can properly apply only to instrumental music, which scorns all aid, all admixture of other arts, and gives pure expression to its own peculiar artistic nature.” Hoffmann was speaking of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, and it became increasingly acknowledged that this composer above all made good the claim for music as “the most romantic of all arts—one might almost say the only one that is *purely* romantic.”<sup>18</sup>

After Hoffmann’s death in 1822, the critic and theorist A. B. Marx assumed the task of establishing the symphonies of Beethoven as a touchstone of German identity. Marx’s aim was to solidify Beethoven’s preeminent position before the general public. One of the most concrete achievements of his *Berliner*

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16. The *locus classicus* for the German distinction between the *Kultur* nation and the *Staats* nation is Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* [*Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat*, 1907], trans. Robert B. Kimber (Princeton, 1970). Hans Mayer also discusses the concepts in “The Rituals of Political Associations in Germany of the Romantic Period,” in *The College of Sociology* (1937-39), ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 41 (Minneapolis, 1988), 262-78. For the role of music in the building of the German cultural nation, see Jörg Theilacker, *Der erzählende Musiker: Untersuchung von Musikerzählungen des 19. Jahrhunderts und ihrer Bezüge zur Entstehung der deutschen Nationalmusik*, Münchener Studien zur literarischen Kultur in Deutschland (Frankfurt am Main, 1988).

17. Bernd Sponheuer’s work on musical aesthetics argues that music’s aesthetic legitimacy as art on the level of literature and the plastic arts was still contested well into the nineteenth century. See his *Musik als Kunst und Nicht-Kunst: Untersuchungen zur Dichotomie von ‘hoher’ und ‘niederer’ Musik im musikästhetischen Denken zwischen Kant und Hanslick*, Kieler Schriften zur Musikwissenschaft, vol. 30 (Kassel, 1987).

*allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, which ran from 1824 to 1830, was to influence the reform of Berlin's concert life towards regular performances of complete symphonies by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven without interpolations of other pieces.<sup>19</sup> During Beethoven's lifetime, concerts in Berlin typically mixed vocal and instrumental numbers and focused on soloists. The appearance of a symphony on the program usually meant only its first movement, although occasionally additional movements were performed at other points of the concert.<sup>20</sup> While Marx was not the first critic to censure this practice, he certainly mounted the most sustained effort, filling the first year of his journal with articles and reviews valorizing the symphony as a genre deserving pride of place in the concert repertoire. Four years later he was able to observe with satisfaction that

the unceasing reproaches of the paper have called the concertgiver and the public of Berlin out from the poverty and shallowness of earlier concert life to the more noble path, and have encouraged them to make the great instrumental works in particular indigenous among us; so that now one can hardly give and see attended a concert without a symphony; whereas earlier there were hardly any with a symphony.<sup>21</sup>

In an 1824 review of a concert that featured Beethoven's Second, Marx explained why the symphony was superior to other

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18. "Wenn von der Musik als einer selbständigen Kunst die Rede ist, sollte immer nur die Instrumental-Musik gemeint seyn, welche, jede Hülfe, jede Beymischung einer andern Kunst verschmähend, das eigenthümliche, nur in ihr zu erkennende Wesen der Kunst rein ausspricht. Sie ist die romantische aller Künste,—fast möchte man sagen, allein *rein* romantisch"; E. T. A. Hoffmann, review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 12 (1810): 630.

19. See Arno Forchert, "Adolf Bernhard Marx und seine *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*," in *Studien zur Musikgeschichte Berlins im frühen 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus (Regensburg, 1980), 381-404, especially 394-95.

20. See Klaus Kropfinger, "Klassik-Rezeption in Berlin (1800-1830)," in *Studien zur Musikgeschichte Berlins im frühen 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus (Regensburg, 1980), 301-79, especially 328-35.

musical genres. He began by describing the extramusical “distractions” of genres that relied on individual performers:

Not merely the actions of the principals, but also the extras, the dancers, the decorations, and the finery of the singers, capture [the audience’s] attention and interest, while they imagine themselves to be occupied with the music. The content of the composition does not enthrall the greatest part of the listeners, rather this or that run or trill; the visual aspect [*das Auge*]<sup>21</sup>—or more precisely, the singer’s plumes and cloak trimmings.... —In the performance of a symphony nothing external takes part, not even an alluring personality or a conspicuous virtuosity. He who does not follow the course of the composition has nothing at all, and so symphonies teach music without distraction, and require one to listen on its own account.<sup>22</sup>

For Marx, symphonies, unlike other kinds of music, were made up entirely of inner qualities that could not be seen, only heard. The symphony was a world apart from “spectacular” music, or music for spectators, with its performers who pleased through flashy costumes and conspicuous mannerisms. Performers must subordinate themselves to the work itself, he insisted, and

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21. “die unabläßigen Mahnungen der Zeitung die Konzertgeber und das Publikum von Berlin von der Armuth und Seichtigkeit des frühern Konzertswesens auf die edlere Bahn zurückgerufen, zu ihr ermunthigt, namentlich die größten Instrumentalwerke unter uns einheimisch gemacht haben; so daß man jetzt kaum ein Konzert ohne Symphonie gegeben und besucht sieht; wie früher kaum eines mit einer Symphonie”; A. B. Marx, “Standpunkt der Zeitung,” *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 5 (1828): 494.

22. “Nicht blos die Handlung der Hauptpersonen, auch die Statisten, die Tänzer, die Dekorationen, der Putz der Sängerinnen, nehmen ihre Aufmerksamkeit und ihr Interesse gefangen, während sie sich einbilden, mit der Musik beschäftigt zu sein. Nicht der Inhalt der Komposition, sondern dieser, jener Laufer oder Triller, das Auge—oder auch die Reiherfeder und der Kleiderbesatz der Sängerin im Konzerte, fesseln den größten Theil der Hörer....—Bei der Aufführung einer Symphonie wirkt nichts Aeußerliches, nicht einmal eine anlockende Persönlichkeit oder vorstechende Virtuosität mit. Wer nicht der Komposition in ihrem Gange folgt, hat gar nichts, und so lehren Symphonien, Musik ohne Zerstreung und um ihrer selbst willen hören”; A. B. Marx, “Korrespondenz” from Berlin, 13 December 1824, *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 1 (1824): 444.

attribute their success to the genius of the composer rather than to their own artistry, in order to escape the negative charges of pleasing the audience and detracting from the music. Audiences, for their part, must learn to pay attention, perhaps by closing their eyes to appearances that could lead them astray.

In this article Marx immediately went on to claim the profoundly invisible world of sound for the German nation alone, and to relegate the more superficial, visually oriented genres to other countries:

The more light-minded nations, for example, the French and the Italians, have never produced anything substantial in the entire genre [of the symphony]—they could never understand and grow to like it; therefore among other things they have fallen far behind the Germans, for whom the symphony is characteristic.<sup>23</sup>

The polemic against the French and Italians was, of course, a polemic against opera, a genre in which Germany had fallen lamentably behind. Marx's response to the dominance of Italian opera in Germany was to raise an "indigenous" alternative, the symphony, which was held up as being profound, inward, and having other qualities said to constitute Germanness. If the German public at large were taught to know and understand the symphonies of Beethoven, he explained, the public would learn to comprehend and be aware of itself as a nation. This objective called for treating certain musical works with a new, almost religious reverence. By following the inner unfolding of the work one would shut out the distractions of the outer world, largely tainted by foreign influences, and cultivate the qualities that made one a German.

The new approach to musical works reduced the size of the repertoire. Marx did not press for new symphonies in his criti-

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23. "Darum haben leichtsinnigere Nationen, z.B., die Franzosen und Italiener, in der ganzen Gattung nie Erhebliches geleistet, nie sie verstehen und lieb gewinnen können; darum unter andern sind sie aber weit hinter den Deutschen zurückgeblieben, denen die Symphonie eigen ist"; *ibid.*, 444.

cism, and instead prescribed a deeper attention to a few pieces that would have to be frequently performed. Even German composers of symphonies would have to be neglected for the sake of the cultivation of the masters. In 1828 he acknowledged that other composers had legitimate claims on the public, but insisted that their symphonies should not be included on concerts merely for the sake of diversity. If new works reached new heights according to “the inner principles of value and meaning,” they would certainly find a place, but unfortunately Marx could not find a single new symphony that met his standard. The symphonies of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven were of the utmost importance to the German people, and “no more recent composer has made works known that compensate for the exclusion of any of these.”<sup>24</sup>

Marx’s reaction to music outside his “canon” was to ignore it, his justification being that there was simply not enough time for including more music. The literary theorist Friedrich Kittler has described this double strategy—focusing on a small number of works and ignoring the others—as a typical response of Enlightenment thinkers to the dramatic increase in popular entertainment.<sup>25</sup> This prescription for spending large amounts of time delving into the ideas of a few masterpieces was specifically positioned against listening to and playing music for mere amusement and enjoyment.

The consecration of instrumental music, the symphony, and above all, Beethoven’s symphonies was accompanied by hopes and dreams for a more glorious future for German music. Marx even claimed that because of its exemplary character, German music could contribute to the *Bildung* of Europe as a whole. Announcing that “an alliance proceeding from Germa-

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24. “Kein neuerer Komponist hat Werke bekannt werden lassen, die für die Ausschliessung jener entschädigten”; A. B. Marx, “Bekanntmachung: Mössers Akademien,” *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 5 (1828): 444.

25. Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford, 1990), 142-45.

ny as its midpoint. . . is forming itself in all of higher educated Europe in the realm of music," Marx predicted that, if properly cultivated, German music would become universal.<sup>26</sup>

German music, then, to use the Hegelian terminology of the time, was presented as always growing more at home with itself, that is, with its German identity, which itself was progressing towards universality. However, these sentiments were colored by the sense around 1830 (or after the deaths of Goethe and Hegel, and, in music, of Beethoven and Schubert) of having arrived at "the end of an age." Quickly reified into a Golden Age, this period was perceived in closed terms, as finished. The present, as an age of transition, was caught between the idealized past and the anticipated future.

The consequences of this historical conceptualization emerge in Robert Schumann's writings as an increasingly exacerbated double bind. Schumann's criticism made manifest the tension between venerating past masters and realizing the tremendous expectations for the glorious future. Now that Beethoven's symphonies were established, their greatness had to be maintained in two ways, Schumann repeated over and over. First, their tradition had to be preserved and honored, and second, composers had to realize this tradition further by composing works that were new and progressive. The task of writing symphonies was weighed down with enormous significance: Germany's future as a world leader was implicated in it.

Schumann's 1839 review of Franz Lachner's Sixth Symphony, for instance, began by admiring the "manly seriousness with which he took up the task of bringing forth a great symphonic idea," but continued by advising that composer to study Beethoven more closely.<sup>27</sup> He ended the article by stating flatly:

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26. "So bildet sich im ganzen höher gebildeten Europa eine Verbindung im Fache der Tonkunst, wie früher von Italien, jetzt von Deutschland, als dem Mittelpunkte, ausgehend"; A. B. Marx, "Andeutung des Standpunktes der Zeitung. (Als Epilog)" *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 1 (1824): 448.

Everything as in Beethoven. So we always return to this divinity and can think of nothing more to say today other than that we hope that Lachner may progress on this path toward the ideal of a modern symphony, which since Beethoven's passing, we are ordained to advance according to new standards. Long live the German symphony, and may it blossom and prosper anew.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike Marx, Schumann expressed considerable anxiety about the future of the symphony. His constant fear was that "the applause of the vulgar crowd and the fixed look of sentimental women" would divert composers from their higher task.<sup>29</sup> In describing the first five years of his journal, Schumann recalled that, "it was the ideal of a great brotherhood of artists for the glorification of a more German, more profound art, that everyone wanted to advance as the most magnificent goal of our struggle."<sup>30</sup>

A well-founded anxiety over the difficulty in progressing back to Beethoven clearly preyed upon the young Richard Wagner as well. While eking out a living in Paris in 1840 he published short stories and articles, all concerned with the nature of German music. In "A Pilgrimage to Beethoven," Wagner portrayed a destitute composer called "R.," who makes his

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27. "... der männliche Ernst, mit dem er der Aufgabe, ein großes symphonisches Bild darzustellen"; Robert Schumann, "Neue Symphonien für Orchester," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 11 (1839): 18.

28. "Alles wie bei Beethoven. So kommen wir denn immer auf diesen Göttlichen zurück und wüßten heute nichts weiter zu sagen, als daß Lachner auf dem Pfad fortschreiten möge nach dem Ideal einer modernen Symphonie, die uns nach Beethoven's Hinscheiden in neuer Norm aufzustellen beschieden ist. Es lebe die deutsche Symphonie und blüh' und gedeihe von Neuem"; *ibid.*

29. "Die giftigen Blumen sind hier der Beifall des gewöhnlichen Haufens, gewisse Blicke sentimentaler Frauen"; Robert Schumann, Review of Alexander Fesca, Trio op. 12, no. 2 and Trio op. 23, no. 3, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, ed. Heinrich Simon (Leipzig, n.d.), 115.

30. "Es war das Ideal, einer großen Künstlerbrüderschaft zur Verherrlichung deutscher tief sinniger Kunst, das wohl Jedem als das herrlichste Ziel seines Strebens vorleuchten mochte"; Robert Schumann, "Zum neuen Jahr," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 10 (1839): 1.

way on foot to Vienna and, after overcoming many obstacles, finally meets Beethoven, who confides to him the ideas behind his Ninth Symphony. The fantasy that Beethoven would literally tell one what to do must have seemed on some level the only solution to the problem of progressing without departing from the Beethovenian ideal.

In the essay "On German Music," written about the same time, Wagner explained the nature of his country's music to his French audience, and in so doing presented a full-blown version of the idea that German music tended more towards the universal than did the music of other nations. After graciously acknowledging France's enthusiasm for Beethoven and praising it as a sign that national differences were breaking down, Wagner proceeded with a rather astonishing aggressiveness, considering his bleak situation at that time, to declare that "it is possible for the German more than any other to go to another country, develop the aims of a nation's artistic epoch to the highest peak and raise it to universal validity."<sup>31</sup>

Much of the same essay is devoted to elevating instrumental works to the highest level of purely autonomous music. Wagner advanced the idea of absolute music as clearly and eloquently as if his sole ambition were to write quartets and symphonies:

In instrumental works music attains its highest significance and is brought to its most perfect development. It is here, in the realm of instrumental music, that the artist, free from every foreign and oppressive influence, is capable of presenting most directly the ideal of art; here, where he must use the means most peculiar to his art, he is indeed obliged to remain within its sphere.<sup>32</sup>

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31. "Dafür ist es aber dem Deutschen eher als jedem andern möglich, auf fremdem Boden die Richtung einer nationalen Kunstpoche auf die höchste Spitze und zur universellen Gültigkeit zu bringen"; Richard Wagner, "Über deutsches Musikwesen," *Dichtungen und Schriften*, vol. 5, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer (Frankfurt am Main, 1983), 170. This essay originally appeared in *Revue et Gazette Musicale* as "De la musique allemande" on 12 July 1840.

It is no surprise to learn on the next page that “instrumental music is the exclusive property of the German—it is his life, his creation!”<sup>33</sup>

As Wagner put it so clearly, autonomous music embodied the German spirit more perfectly than did any other form of art. Later he defined autonomy more generally (so that his own music dramas could qualify) as “the thing one does for its own sake and for the very joy of doing it.”<sup>34</sup> Art that is free from worldly interest is German art, he explained, going on to compare this disinterestedness to the commercialization of art in other countries, especially England. In another essay (1865) entitled “What is German?”, he reiterated the idea:

These deeds [Bach's and Goethe's] the German spirit brought forth of itself, from its inmost longing to grow conscious of itself. And this consciousness told it—what it was the first to publish to the world—that the Beautiful and Noble came not into the world for the sake of profit, not even for the sake of fame and recognition. And everything done in the sense of this teaching is ‘German’; and therefore is the German great; and only what is done in that sense, can lead Germany to greatness.<sup>35</sup>

By fusing the national ideal with the artistic ideal, so that “Germanness” and “autonomy” became indistinguishable from each other, Wagner gave license to anything that led Germany to greatness, because it must be by definition beautiful and noble.

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32. “in diesem ihre höchste Bedeutung, ihre vollkommenste Ausbildung erreicht.—Hier, im Gebiete der Instrumentalmusik, ist es, wo der Künstler, frei von jedem fremden und beengenden Einflusse, imstande ist, am unmittelbarsten an das Ideal der Kunst zu reichen; hier, wo er die seiner Kunst eigentümlichst angehörenden Mittel in Anwendung zu bringen hat, ist er sogar gebunden, im Gebiete seiner Kunst selbst zu verbleiben”; *ibid.*, 159.

33. “Die Instrumentalmusik ist somit das ausschließliche Eigentum des Deutschen, —sie ist sein Leben, sie ist seine Schöpfung!”; *ibid.*, 160.

34. Richard Wagner, “German Art and German Policy,” *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 4, trans. William Ashton Ellis, (New York, 1895/1966), 149-69 [“Deutsche Kunst und deutsche Politik,” *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, vol. 8, ed. Wolfgang Golther (Leipzig, n.d.), 96-97].

The implications of this claim were addressed in another essay called "On the Question: 'What is German?'" but this time written in 1965 and in a very different spirit by Theodor Adorno. Recasting dialectically Wagner's claim that the true essence or identity of the Germans is autonomy, Adorno affirmed that because Germany lagged behind others economically in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was still possible to do something for its own sake, and that this environment enabled the great achievements in German philosophy and music to take place. However, in light of what Wagner could not know, what Adorno called "the most heinous deeds [*Unheil*] that were perpetrated under National Socialism," he continued:

the doing-something for-its-own sake is not as pure as it claims to be. Rather, there was also a For-something-other hiding behind it, also an interest that went beyond the thing itself. However, this ulterior interest was not the individual but the state to which thoughts and actions were subordinated; only through the expansion of the state was this temporarily restrained egoism of the individual then afforded satisfaction.<sup>36</sup>

By positing a never-absent interest linked to every act of disinterestedness, Adorno accounted for the extreme national-

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35. "Diese Taten vollbrachte der deutsche Geist aus sich, aus seinem innersten Verlangen, sich seiner bewußt zu werden. Und dieses Bewußtsein sagte ihm, was er zum ersten Male der Welt verkünden konnte, daß das Schöne und Edle nicht um des Vorteils, ja selbst nicht um des Ruhmes und der Anerkennung willen in die Welt tritt: und alles, was im Sinne dieser Lehre gewirkt wird, ist 'deutsch,' und deshalb ist der Deutsche groß; und nur, was in diesem Sinne gewirkt wird, kann zur Größe Deutschlands führen"; Richard Wagner, "What is German?" *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 4, trans. William Ashton Ellis, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1895), 163 ["Was ist Deutsch?" *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, vol. 10, ed. Wolfgang Golther (Leipzig, n.d.), 48].

36. Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Question: 'What is German?'" trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 36 (1985): 124 ["Auf die Frage: 'Was ist deutsch?'" *Stichworte: Kritische Modelle 2* (Frankfurt am Main, 1969), 102-12].

ism of artists such as Wagner as a kind of compensation for writing autonomous works. The enormous claims one could make on behalf of one's country opened up the potential to produce art that made no claims on the real world at all. Adorno speculated further on how the most selfless humanity could come from the same source as the most monstrously boundless inhumanity, and concluded that one cannot be had without the other, and that there can never be an unequivocal answer to the eternal question of what "German" is.

### *3. Rebuilding a Cultural Nation*

The danger of confusing aesthetics and politics was, as for Adorno, a lifelong concern of Carl Dahlhaus. His book *Foundations of Music History* returns repeatedly to this point. Scorning the guiding principle of "national spirit" as something for "political histories," he instead insists on "autonomy" as the only transcendent principle that will yield "an art *history* that is a history of *art*."<sup>37</sup> Despite these preliminary clarifications, however, one is left wondering after reading *Nineteenth-Century Music* what the difference is between the principle of autonomy and the German national ideal. Dahlhaus might have claimed that he was writing a history of autonomous works, in which pieces react to each other, not merely in a mechanical, chronological way, but rather as a series of attempts to solve a problem. But it appears instead that he ended up writing yet another history of the national spirit, in which one nation above all others is universal.

Dahlhaus *has* acknowledged that the two concepts of the German nation and autonomy were carefully intertwined by German historians up until the last fifty years. In describing the

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37. Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J. B. Robinson (Cambridge, 1983), 129.

“three-part scheme of history” characteristic of nineteenth-century German music historians (glorious past—lowly present—even more glorious future), he commented:

However varied the three-part schemata that people designed in their historical-philosophical exuberance...the idea of a German epoch in music was always latent in the background, and it was always in the name of the idea of “pure, absolute music” that one created an array of composers that was intended to justify nothing less than a philosophy of music history.<sup>38</sup>

What Dahlhaus did *not* seem to recognize is that this passage provides a fairly good characterization of his own work. While he might have claimed, perfectly reasonably, that he must start from the axioms of the age, he cannot have claimed to be a historian from the nineteenth century: he knew how the glorious future played itself out and where the fused claims of autonomy and Germanness led; he could not go back to the nineteenth century without taking into account the twentieth.

Norbert Elias, whom I quoted earlier on the importance of culture for German national identity, has characterized this attitude towards one's history as part of a revival of the idea of a cultural nation. Writing in 1968, he noted that the idea of the cultural nation has continued to appeal to Germany because of its power to draw one's attention away from the constant changes in the nation's political and economic situation, towards what “appears—emotionally and ideologically—as eternal, immutable in its essential features. Historical changes affect only externals; the people, the nation, so it appears, do not change.”<sup>39</sup>

Finished with the issue of “coming to terms with the past,” an inescapable German theme since 1945, Dahlhaus's book instead takes refuge in an old dream, German inner autonomy.

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38. Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig (Chicago, 1989), 119 [*Die Idee der absoluten Musik* (Kassel, 1978), 120].

39. Elias, *The History of Manners*, 238-39.

In replacing Ernst Bücken's history, part of the ten-volume *Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft* series that appeared between 1927 and 1934, Dahlhaus rewrote the earlier book in many respects not by updating but rather by backdating. Bücken, a professor at Cologne from 1925 to 1945, published actively during the Third Reich.<sup>40</sup> The decision to replace Bücken's history, which finds Wagner's racial theories "interesting," by a history that does not find a place for Wagner's racial theories at all must have been motivated by a desire to allow Germans to identify with their past rather than to "come to terms" with it.<sup>41</sup> When Dahlhaus remarks in *Foundations* that "the subject does not simply 'have' a history; it must produce one, and only in so doing does it become a subject at all,"<sup>42</sup> he is perhaps revealing his primary motivation in writing *Nineteenth-Century Music*. In taking on the task, he produces a subject with which any German would want to identify.

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40. Ernst Bücken, *Die Musik des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zur Moderne* (Wildpark-Potsdam, 1935). In a section on Mendelssohn added for the 1935 edition, Bücken attributes that composer's inability to grapple with the main issues of the age to his Jewishness, and quotes a long passage from Wagner's "Das Judentum in der Musik" (104-05). Bücken edited the whole *Handbuch* series and contributed the volumes *Die Musik des Rokokos und der Klassik* (1927) and *Geist und Form im musikalischen Kunstwerk* (1929-32), as well as the nineteenth-century volume. He also edited the monograph series *Die Großen Meister der Musik* from 1932 to 1939; he went on to write *Musik der Nationen* in 1937, and published *Musik der Deutschen: eine Kulturgeschichte der deutschen Musik* (Cologne, 1941) during the war. After the war he wrote biographical novels about Beethoven and Mozart. See Willi Kahl's article on Bücken in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 2 (Kassel & Basel, 1952), 430-31; Warren Dwight Allen's *Philosophies of Music History* (New York, 1939); and Leon Stein, *The Racial Thinking of Richard Wagner* (New York, 1950), 128.

41. There is no mention of Wagner's politics and anti-Semitism in *Nineteenth-Century Music* because Dahlhaus had stated earlier in his 1971 book on Wagner that "the controversy over Wagner is far too tangled ever to be resolved—it can only be dismantled and forgotten." *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1979), 1.

42. Dahlhaus, *Foundations*, 45.

Dahlhaus was certainly not alone in his return to the idea of a cultural nation. During the time he planned and completed his *Foundations of Music History* and *Nineteenth-Century Music*, in the late 1970s, the so-called "German Autumn" or *Tendenzwende* took hold. Traditional values in West Germany came back into their own as a haven from the volatile events and issues of the late sixties and early seventies. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas denounced the trend as a neo-nationalist "new conservatism" that took refuge in facile solutions to social, political, and cultural issues. For Habermas and other left-oriented critics, cultural problems, such as the loss of traditional values, had to be accounted for as the inevitable by-product of capitalist modernization. The conservatives, however, claimed the opposite: that the problem with society lay in the cultural realm, and that a return to traditional values and an affirmative view of the past would remedy the crisis. In the context of apparently unresolvable political and economic obstacles, the time-honored idea that a people could be united through a common culture garnered renewed interest. Music must have seemed especially appropriate for the task, since ostensibly it could strengthen German solidarity without antagonizing outsiders worried about a reunified Germany. As Dahlhaus insisted in *Foundations*, "No-one had a burden to bear because Beethoven wielded authority in music."<sup>43</sup>

Besieged by the problems of reunification, economic recession and a flood of refugees, Germany has more recently experienced another wave of nationalistic fervor. Habermas's response to the rise of extreme right-wing nationalism has been to plead for a "post-traditional identity." National traditions were able to serve as the basis for collective identity in the nineteenth century, he acknowledges. Historical writing functioned as a medium for the self-reassurance of a nation. However, Habermas believes today's Western industrial societies must regard their historical legacy differently. After the Holocaust the

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43. *Ibid.*, 9.

West must have "insight into the deep ambivalence of every tradition, into the concatenation of things for which amends cannot be made, into the barbaric dark side of all cultural achievements to the present day."<sup>44</sup> Instead of clinging to the cultural nation, Western societies must affirm their stance as political nation-states, and identify with the political ideals of democracy. This way the Western nations would identify more with each other than with their own particular country. Habermas's "cosmopolitan" response to Germany's chauvinism is consistent with his other theoretical and philosophical writings and derives from his neo-Kantian commitment to furthering Enlightenment aims.

Scholarship can promote a post-traditional understanding of identity. In the histories being written today, Habermas notes, "The fallibility of knowledge and the conflict of interpretations promote the problematization of historical consciousness rather than identity formation and the creation of meaning."<sup>45</sup> Historians can refuse to let their histories perform their former function in relation to identity and instead make us recognize how complex our idea of history has become. From the first pages of *Foundations*, Dahlhaus recognizes this very point: "History...is apparently no longer the primary authority that we turn to for guidance or support when trying to understand ourselves or the world we live in."<sup>46</sup> However, he immediately goes on to distinguish among different kinds of history and to exempt music history from this type of destabilization. He insists that philosophical problems with history have nothing to do with the practical necessity of writing music history.<sup>47</sup> And indeed, this overriding practical necessity is

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44. Jürgen Habermas, "Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity: The Federal Republic's Orientation to the West," in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, ed. and trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 257.

45. *Ibid.*, 259.

46. Dahlhaus, *Foundations*, 3.

47. *Ibid.*, 2.

what should be examined more closely in order to understand the function of Dahlhaus's history.

We can view Dahlhaus's *Nineteenth-Century Music*, then, as part of an effort to return to a history with which Germany could unequivocally identify. Why else would he have written this book? His *Foundations* is full of qualms and misgivings about the problems with writing a large-scale narrative history. Only an impulse stronger than scholarly conviction could have led him to ignore his own trepidation. This perspective also sheds light on the puzzle of the book's intended audience. Although it is designated a "Handbuch" or reference guide, it disdains the biographical information and work-lists that would make it useful to the layperson.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, almost all of its contents are condensed from earlier articles and monographs, so that it hardly could be considered a major contribution to the scholarly field already acquainted with Dahlhaus's work. As part of an effort to bring together and contain an affirmative view of the role of nineteenth-century music in the story of Germany, however, it functions very well.

Habermas has written recently about what he calls the "Lebenslüge" of reunified Germany.<sup>49</sup> "Lebenslüge," or "life-fictions," are "pathologies that stabilize because of their usefulness to life."<sup>50</sup> He describes the German life-fiction after 1989 as the sentiment, "Finally we are again a normal national

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48. Georg Knepler, for example, comments: "...der Anspruch des Buches—es ist *Handbuch* bennant—nicht erfüllt wird. Ein Buch, das in einer Handbibliothek steht, in dem handlich zusammengefaßt ist, was man an Lebensdaten, Werkverzeichnissen, an Angaben zu historischem Umfeld und geschichtlichem Zusammenhang zu finden hoffen darf, hat Dahlhaus nicht geschrieben"; "Über die Nützlichkeit marxistischer Kategorien für die Musikhistoriographie: Reflexionen anlässlich des Erscheinens von Carl Dahlhaus' *Die Musik des 19. Jahrhunderts*," *Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft* 24 (1982): 41.

49. Jürgen Habermas, "The Second Life-Fiction of the Federal Republic: We Have Become 'Normal' Again," *New Left Review* no. 197 (January/February 1993): 58-66.

50. *Ibid.*, 63.

state,” a sigh of relief that signals the “restoration of a temporal continuity that has from time to time been interrupted in the past.”<sup>51</sup> It is useful and stabilizing for Germans to believe that now that Germany is reunified, its history makes sense again, and the past fifty years were a temporary, anomalous situation. The acceptance without debate of Dahlhaus’s book would contribute to this current life-fiction. By contesting Dahlhaus’s book, we can confront the proportion of continuity and discontinuity, inclusion and exclusion, in the traditions he passed on. And finally, we can reflect on our task as historians, and consider what aspects of our traditions we want to continue.

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51. *Ibid.*, 63-64.