

## Postmodern thought and the history of music: some intersections

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### Introduction

The intersections between postmodern thought and music history are not very large. The postmodern discourse is not confined to music but goes through all the arts and all culture. It is not a specific theory but a cultural environment. On the other hand, it should be highly significant for music historians that there are philosophical and historical initiatives which commonly pass as 'postmodern' and which do question the traditional narratives of Western cultural historiography, for example with regard to periodisation and canon formation.

The ground was prepared in the 1970s. To Michel Foucault, the formation of historical concepts no longer appeared as a classifying, typological procedure but rather a kind of archaeology, a cataloguing of monuments and a registering of shifts between them.<sup>1</sup> Other historians, such as Hayden White, retained a typological approach but aspired to place the historiographical conceptualisation within the realm of a literary criticism.<sup>2</sup> Yet others, for example Reinhart Koselleck, would 'read' historical concepts not from accumulated evidence which only the present-day onlooker can assemble, but would attempt to develop their conceptualisations from the terminology or 'mentality' of the people of the past. By focusing, for example, on the human experiences of time, place and tradition, this kind of investigation would relativise the traditional issues of

1 M. FOUCAULT, *L'archéologie du savoir*, Paris, 1973.

2 H. WHITE, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, Baltimore/Md, 1973; H. WHITE, «Interpretation in History», *New Literary History*, 4, 1973, pp. 281-314.

developmental priorities, of competing trends and post-trends. It would introduce into the historiographical discourse not only the evidence now gathered but also the intentional and normative fluctuations related to historical terminology. Before identifying anything as an 'innovation' in a past culture it would ask what the connotations of that word might have been for the people of the time, and how they would have suited them.<sup>3</sup>

These and other reflections on history in modern/postmodern theory have tended to change goalposts outside our field although it may be that they already completely encircle it. This may be true, in particular, of the periodisation debate.

### 1. Historical periodisation of 'modern' and 'postmodern'

The terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' are by definition situated in a chronological and historiographical grid of relations. They are given a space in the architecture of historical periodisation, and a functional relationship to each other. The nature of this relationship is perceived in terms of chronology. It is also a normative relationship. The 'postmodern' claims to outclass, overtake or overcome the 'modern'; there is a connotation of human progress. As far as the term implies a historical periodisation, it alleges no less than that an epochal change is taking place right before our eyes (or, behind our backs). In fact we are dealing with a whole group of terms and a discourse of interrelated notions with which people have been advertising their achievements. In English a closely related term is 'sea change': the wonderful, painless transformation allegedly undergone by culture or criticism or science or politics. As in analogous catch-phrases such as 'new criticism', 'new musicology', 'new historicism', 'transavantgardism', there is no allusion to the content of the change; these terms are open-ended, simple, modest even, but they emphasize progress. They tend to suggest a feeling of relief, almost of liberation, from an earlier cultural and political environment which had made us suffer and which we now learn to call 'modernism' and to reject.

The launch of 'postmodernism' has done much to re-define or re-evaluate modernism. For example, the early use of the term for American architectural styles already in the 1930s helped to define 'modernist' architecture; a similar process happened in music where serialism became

3 R. KOSELLECK, «"Neuzeit". Zur Semantik moderner Bewegungsbegriffe», in R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt/M., 1992, pp. 300-348.

more generally known as ‘modernism’ in the very context of being rejected by ‘postmodern’ composers with a more relaxed attitude towards tonality or towards older styles. In literature, Umberto Eco’s postmodern reaction to the culture of the middle ages – by writing a historical novel, *Il nome della rosa* – helped re-define, for some of his readers, the modernist approach as that of a separation not only between ages but between attitudes towards the past. In his postscript to *Il nome della rosa* (1980), Eco offers ‘metahistorical’ descriptions of modernism (‘the avant-garde always wants to settle accounts with the past’) and of postmodernism (like Mannerism, it is a recurring attitude towards the past, which it re-visits but only ironically). Thus the two attitudes are almost cyclic events; they come and go together and are not tied to particular ages.<sup>4</sup> Also Jean-François Lyotard, realizing the challenge of the opinion that postmodernism is really a radical form of modernism (Wolfgang Iser), proposes an intarsia of the two: ‘It (sc. the postmodern) is undoubtedly a part of the modern ... a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.’<sup>5</sup> There is an almost ventriloquist relationship between the terms: by saying ‘postmodern’ we label and evaluate ‘modern’, and when choosing to say ‘modern’, we are today aware that we are implying a large parenthesis around all that is ‘postmodern’.

## 2. Comparison with the ‘middle ages’

What may be called a historiographical function of the conceptual pair ‘modern - postmodern’ – the function by which these concepts define history – has of course had forerunners in history itself. Not surprisingly, it is the Western innovation par excellence, Renaissance humanism and the beginning of the ‘modern age’, that provides us with a direct model for the postmodern terminology – in its creation of the term ‘middle ages’. This is a historiographical term which, like ‘postmodern’, defines not only itself but also other periods by reflection.

4 U. ECO, «Postilla», in *Il nome della rosa*, 14th ed., Milan, 1980, pp. 529-530; U. ECO, *Documenti su il nuovo medioevo*, Milan, 1973; on both of them, see Wolfgang Iser, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, Weinheim, 1987, pp. 57-59.

5 J. - F. LYOTARD, «Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?» (1982), tr. by R. Durand, in J. - F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi, foreword by Fredric Jameson, Minneapolis, U. of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 79.

The term was created by Renaissance humanists who proudly believed to have outdated and overcome another era. Although they did not invent a name for their own post-medieval period (this is a difference from the 'postmodern' discourse), they invented the designation of 'middle age' for the previous age. Now such a term, when defining a stretch of time, is chronologically effective enough to identify everything else as either 'pre-' or 'post-'. With one new term, the humanists created three periods.<sup>6</sup> The new period they believed to have reached, was later called the 'modern age'.<sup>7</sup>

Although we know today that the term 'middle ages' is an arbitrary invention, we do not seem to be able to discard it, despite many serious objections against its connotations. Perhaps the reason is exactly the historical bias and showmanship that has been packed into the term: we apparently cannot get away from historical norms and biases as easily as from critical judgments. Even the most perfectly balanced and scientific historiographical term for the pre-Columbian era could not have replaced the receptional success of the discourse of the 'dark ages' or 'middle ages' - because this discourse is a founding ideology of our historical retrospection that has helped us to live through the modern era.

### 3. Divided retrospection

The modern era began around 1500 with the conscious detachment of humanists from their immediate past, with the rejection of that past, and with a nostalgic re-evaluation or re-creation of an earlier past, antiquity. Antiquity was not very well known at that time yet, although it was being eagerly researched. Thus the re-evocation of that age was to a large extent conjectural, speculative. It was a nostalgia. When looking back at antiquity, people felt that this had been a culturally more dignified era, which had ended with a 'fall from grace', so to speak, at the end of the Roman Empire, which was followed by decline and darkness. For this contrasted attitude towards two separate pasts, I propose the term

6 Jürgen VOSS, *Das Mittelalter im historischen Denken Frankreichs. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalter-Begriffes*, Munich, 1972, pp. 40-42; Nathan EDELMANN, «The Early Uses of "Medium Aevum, Moyen Age, Middle Ages"», *Romanic Review*, 29, 1938, pp. 3-25; R. STROHM, «Das Ende des Mittelalters», paper delivered at the Medieval and Renaissance Studies Symposium Novacella 1998, Annegrit Laubenthal, ed., Hildesheim, Olms, forthcoming.

7 The acceptance of living in a «modern era» took some time to settle: see the contribution of Reinhart Koselleck (n. 3 above).

‘divided retrospection’, and am inclined to compare it with the anthropological phenomenon of hating your father but loving your grandfather.<sup>8</sup>

If we were to adopt this kind of retrospection in our own age, we would have to call the last few centuries a ‘middle age’, and develop a nostalgia for an earlier past, perhaps the present middle ages and early modern period together, the time of the *ancien régime*. In fact, that the middle ages can no longer be separated from the subsequent early modern period until c. 1789 is today claimed by several historians, for example Jacques Le Goff who uses the term ‘the long middle ages’.<sup>9</sup> Many people today re-appreciate those pre-industrial times and their culture, seeing it nostalgically as the Renaissance humanists saw antiquity, and have a much more critical view of the last 200–250 years – which may be called the period of ‘modernism’<sup>10</sup> – the hated period of our conflicts with Nature, with the non-industrialised world, and with the Metaphysical. Many contemporaries speak about this period from the standpoint of anti-rationalism, anti-modernism and anti-universalism. And, they tend to interpret the European enlightenment and the bourgeois revolution as a ‘fall from grace’.<sup>11</sup>

Now this is exactly what, since the early twentieth century, the tendency of the so-called ‘mediaevalism’ has been encouraging, and which is today proclaimed by a postmodern philosophy of history, for which the period between c. 1780 and c. 1980 has taken over the negative role of the dark middle ages.<sup>12</sup>

However, to distinguish historical periods from each other according to a normative view of their major characteristics or canons implies a grand teleology of progress and decline, and generally an ordering of time on a

8 For some further points, see R. STROHM, «The Humanist Idea of a Common Revival of the Arts, and its Implications for Music History», in M. Jablonski and J. Steszewski, ed., *Interdisciplinary Studies in Musicology. Report from the Third Interdisciplinary Conference Poznan 1996*, Poznan, 1997, pp. 7–25.

9 Jacques LE GOFF, *L’imaginaire médiéval. Essais*, Paris, 1985.

10 A convincing argument how «modernism» – often located between c. 1890 and c. 1960 – really has its roots in the mid-eighteenth century, is presented in Hans Robert JAUSS, «Der literarische Prozess des Modernismus von Rousseau bis Adorno», in R. Herzog and R. Koselleck, ed., *Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewußtsein*, Munich, 1987, pp. 243–268.

11 Generally on this tendency, see R. STROHM, «Collapsing the Dialectic. The enlightenment tradition in music and its critics», in Tim Carter, ed., *IMS Tenth International Congress Report London/Oxford/Cambridge 1977, round table ‘Historiography’* (chair: Manuel Carlos de Brito), Oxford, 2000, forthcoming.

12 I am not the first to suggest this analogy: see Peter VON MOOS, «Gefahren des Mittelalterbegriffs. Diagnostische und präventive Aspekte», in Joachim Heinzle, ed., *Modernes Mittelalter. Neue Bilder einer populären Epoche*, Frankfurt/M., 1994, pp. 33–63.

spatial grid – perspectives which postmodernists are fighting, since their attitude cultivates irony and embraces diversity. Leading writers say that postmodernism is not trying to create new periodisations, is not trying to advance a ‘grand narrative’ of progress, of emancipation, of universal truths<sup>13</sup>. The very idea, however, that we have now reached the end of the modernist period in which such narratives blossomed, implies a kind of historiography which postmodernism, with its attitude of irony and diversity, should reject. In other words, the anti-modernism of postmodern historiography harbours a self-contradiction.

#### 4. Anti-modernism in the twentieth century

Let us try to assemble a more concrete picture of anti-modernism, its characteristics, history and modes of operation. Postmodern theorists describe their anti-modernism also with the terms of anti-rationalism or anti-universalism.<sup>14</sup> Lyotard, for example, calls postmodernism the ‘incredulity towards meta-narratives’, by which he implies the great historical and philosophical narratives of humanity and society that have been told in the last 200-250 years. Names such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Adorno come to mind: the trail of a predominantly idealist and predominantly German philosophy.

By no means, however, are anti-universalism and anti-rationalism postmodern innovations. Opposition to the type of philosophy just mentioned is part of the same European tradition; critical but also nostalgic images of Western modernity have typified our intellectual traditions since at least Rousseau and the eighteenth-century enlightenment. This situation has been diagnosed by Max Weber who saw the essence of modernity in the concept of ‘rationalisation’, and the definition of ideology in the legitimation of power. This critical view of modernity as a whole – it rationalises, it is ideological – then typifies Adorno, Habermas and the postmodern writers who posed the legitimation question on a more comprehensive scale. The antinomy between reason and ideology, or between civilisation and myth, was elaborated in Theodor W. Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung* – a work reflecting the despair

13 J. - F. LYOTARD, «Answering the question: What is Postmodernism?» (n. 5 above); especially sections 9 and 10.

14 Anti-universalism is significant, as it opposes the historiographical, not only philosophical judgment that cultural, scientific and social developments are in continuous expansion.

of the 1940s which right-wing critics quickly interpreted as an admission of defeat by the modernists themselves.<sup>15</sup> But already in the aftermath of the First World War serious opposition had arisen, for example in Germany, to what was felt to be a decline of progress and rationality into chaos and destruction. Some of the remedies advocated even by liberal writers such as Alfred Döblin and Thomas Mann, for example a re-mythologization of everyday life, were uncannily similar to some of the phantasmagorias of the chauvinists.<sup>16</sup> It was this experience of the futility of progress, and of the failure of a legitimising, forward-looking 'meta-narrative' of universal significance, which has accompanied the whole of the 'modernist age' however defined, and was passed on to its radical component, postmodernism. Two of the leading discutants of the 1970s, Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard, sought new legitimations for sorting true statements from false, and for social order. Habermas concentrated on consensus and authority,<sup>17</sup> Lyotard on language and language games; the latter proposed to employ history as counter-example against the meta-narrative about the growth of knowledge and culture. The meta-narrative Lyotard objects to is, of course, the modernist one; I therefore suggest that the historical point at which the meta-narrative had originally been established may now be revisited to see whether it leads us to alternative interpretations. In other words, we should revisit the past in order to re-discover what alternatives had been rejected in the establishment of the modernist narrative. Modernity and its legend of progress would have to be defeated with the evidence of a history outside its jurisdiction. Now, the historical point at which the meta-narrative had established itself was the European enlightenment; the history outside its jurisdiction which may be held against it is the *ancien régime* or, in Jacques Le Goff's term, the 'long middle ages'.

## 5. The alternative playground: Baroque and Early Music

For many anti-modernists, the history just outside modern jurisdiction would be called the 'Baroque', as the keyword for a culture in which

15 T. W. ADORNO and M. HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), tr. J. Cumming, London, 1979.

16 Helmut KIESEL, «Aufklärung und neuer Irrationalismus in der Weimarer Republik», in J. Schmidt, ed., *Aufklärung und Gegenklärung in der europäischen Literatur, Philosophie und Politik von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Darmstadt, 1989, pp. 497-521.

17 J. HABERMAS, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, Frankfurt/M., 1973.

modern rationalisation had not yet grown up, was only just appearing. Michel Foucault was one of those historians who believed that a distinct conceptual framework holds the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries together and distinguishes them from modernity, for example by the different lines that were drawn between reality and imagination, between reason and madness.<sup>18</sup> In the arts, the various postmodern re-actualisations of the Baroque aesthetic are protests against modern rationality and progress-slavery; they have a critical bend in their evocation of the Baroque pastoral, of a seemingly power-free and institution-less utopia; there is also a geographic differentiation in that mediterranean or Latin-American art and literature has long begun to revive Baroque aesthetics expressing a clear distance from a Germanic and Northern practice and ideology.<sup>19</sup>

Baroque art, music and theatre have become a haven for dissidents of modernity, a playground for the mistreated children of the over-rationalised and technicised civilisations. These observations lead, of course, to many possible contradictions. Take, for example, Walter Benjamin's re-valuation of Baroque tragedy and its specific, pre-modern tragicity;<sup>20</sup> or take Roland Barthes's fascination with ceremony in Baroque drama, or Benjamin's and Foucault's rejection of Aristotelian mimesis in favour of emblematics and allegory. Clearly, these re-valuations have their own dialectically modernist pre-histories as well: for example, the interest in emblems and allegory or pre-classical tragedy has already started with the Romantics.

The paradigm of 'Early Music' comes into its appropriate place here, although it harbours its own contradiction as well. We all know it as a musical playground of dissent from the commercialised and technicised sphere of twentieth-century concert music and, for many, from commercial popular music. To reject this attitude as escapism was the inevitable reaction of leading modernists such as Theodor W. Adorno, who accused the 'Early Music' movement of aesthetic regression and

18 M. FOUCAULT, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris, 1966; *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris, 1967.

19 See, for example, Arabella PAULY, *Neobarrocco*, New York - Berlin, 1993; Gertraud STROHM-KATZER, «José de Sigüenza und Carlos Fuentes. Die Erfindung des Escorial und seine poetische Transformation», in M. Bosse and A. Stoll, ed., *Theatrum Mundi. Figuren der Barockästhetik in Spanien und Hispano-Amerika*, Bielefeld, 1997, pp. 43-72; Volker ROLOFF, «Labyrinth der Lektüre. Figuren der Intermedialität bei Borges, Cortázar und Carpentier», *ibid.*, pp. 253-274.

20 W. BENJAMIN, *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), tr. as *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London, 1977.

political agnosticism; he pronounced remarkably similarly on 'Jazz'.<sup>21</sup> Adorno was then unaware of the postmodern discourse; when this discourse reached 'Early Music', it was 'unmasked' as a modernist tendency, a deviant obsession with plump sonority and regressive technicisation.<sup>22</sup> There is in fact a parallel between practices of 'Early Music' and those of modernist avant-garde composition in the ever-increasing attention to sound quality and sonority, involving not only the make-up and use of instruments but also the technical modelling of specific sound spectra. That the 'Early Music' aesthetic can be associated with mainstream modernism is hardly surprising, but the case provides evidence that the jurisdiction of modernism may extend much, much further than was conventionally believed.

But is it not true that the 'Early Music' tendency is particularly concerned with the three issues of 'revival', 'performance' and 'non-authorial art', and that these three issues intersect with postmodern interests? The revival of old music from beyond the enlightenment period, the re-valuation or re-visitation (to use Eco's term) may well be nostalgic, it may be ironic, but it certainly reaches out to a culture not within our modern path of progress. In addition to the parallels between 'Early Music' production and avant-garde composition, it is also true that the 'Early Music' tendency aims at a much more comprehensive re-vivification, a human experience within a re-vitalised environment. Such an aim reminds me very much of the humanist efforts not only to recover the ancient texts but also to use their precepts in transforming contemporary life. In the same sense that I have compared humanist historiography (the divided retrospection) with postmodern historical theory, I might now say that there are parallels between the nostalgia of 'Early Music' and that of humanism.

The issue of performance is very important for musicians of our time as an antidote to 'work-concept' and authorship. Again, potentially postmodern types of music, whether popular, 'early' or perhaps 'world

21 For Adorno's essay «Bach gegen seine Liebhaber verteidigt» (in T. W. ADORNO, *Prismen. Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt/M., 1955), see Laurence DREYFUS, «Early Music Defended Against its Devotees: A Theory of Historical Performance in the Twentieth Century», *Musical Quarterly*, 69, 1983, pp. 297-322. For Adorno on jazz and popular music, see Max PADDISON, *Adorno, Modernism and Mass Culture. Essays on Critical Theory and Culture*, London, 1996, pp. 81-105.

22 Richard TARUSKIN, «The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past», in Nicholas Kenyon, ed., *Authenticity and Early Music. A Symposium*, Oxford, 1988, pp. 137-207.

music', are heard as particularly performance-orientated in contrast to the classic-romantic concert repertoire which seems all hierarchically dominated by author and text. The great twentieth-century innovation of the mechanical reproduction of music, the reification of the musical product including its performative aspect, has surely played a role in the rise of performance theory and performance-philosophy of our time. The latter seems to have a compensatory or remedial function: when we experience the deafening of live performance on the record and its commercialisation through the entertainment industry, we seem to discover how much live performance, and its concomitant features of spontaneity and interaction, matter to us after all. But paradoxically, the more we praise performative spontaneity, the more we wipe it out through the various forms of 'mechanical reproduction', which seems a typically contradictory, postmodern condition of our lives.

## 6. The example of opera seria

Thus the 'Early Music' revival and various anti-modernist tendencies also converge in postmodern musical discourses, despite the evidence to the contrary assembled by Taruskin. A reason for this double association may well be that modern and postmodern discourses are closely connected anyway, at least in music. The example of the Italian opera seria repertoire and its historiography demonstrates how little the reception of pre-classical music has changed since the 1920s.

As stated above, already early twentieth-century writers worried about legitimation and the failure of the 'meta-narratives' of universality and change. Like a gift from heaven, an alternative space was discovered in the field of opera, particularly Italian opera, whose development allegedly contradicted or even deconstructed the progressive and rationalising tendencies of modernity. This historical view of opera had the added advantage of allegedly explaining the notorious ability of the genre to renew itself when pronounced defunct. Admittedly, the resurrections of opera happened in this view on condition that its antiprogressive and antirational undercurrents be regularly punished with the imposition of new rationalisations, the so-called opera reforms, of which the history of the genre seemed entirely constructed.

What distinguishes modern and postmodern opera historiography is not the diagnosis of that anti-rationalist undercurrent but its valuation. Modernism rejects it and gives credit to opera only as far as it reforms

itself; postmodernism pushes opera into an irrationalist corner, praises it for its inability to reform itself. The reception of Italian opera seria in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows these contrasting biases particularly well, because this genre was itself a touchstone of beginning modernism in the mid-eighteenth century, when its critics experienced the opening of the cultural gap between rationality and nature. Thus the attitudes towards eighteenth-century opera seria and its successors can be considered symptomatic for the crisis of modernity.

Since the nineteenth century, historians have been used to divide the traditions of opera into a courtly, international and mediterranean thread and a central-European, bourgeois and national thread. Eighteenth-century opera seria has itself been divided: Hasse and Metastasio represent the former, Gluck and Mozart the latter tendency. In parallel to this, the Wagnerian narrative in *Oper und Drama* (1851) of the folkloristic roots of the operatic forms, especially the aria, and of a subsequent misuse and decline of this heritage, has deepened the dialectic between the southern/sensual operatic aura and the northern/protestant rationality and efficiency. The Romantics were fond of the idea that these traditions could be reconciled in classicism (or, for Wagnerists, in the music drama).

The strong position of Gluck with the Romantics was based on his alleged discovery of sublimity and of the tragic in opera, making his reform almost appear as an anti-rationalist initiative. Still Carl Dahlhaus grouped classicism against enlightenment in eighteenth-century music, and thus Gluck against Hasse, Ethos against Pathos, although within a developmental synthesis.<sup>23</sup> The question of realism is raised in the interpretation of Mozart: again the romantic discourse assumes a division between the alleged aesthetic one-dimensionality of opera seria, and the full-blooded human perspective of Mozart and his followers.

Other aspects of opera seria caught the eye of early twentieth-century modernism. They included an alleged mechanical typology, an order of the game which was still untouched by the individualistic psychologies of drama developed later. Thus the otherness of a pre-modern tradition was asserted, although the historical necessity of its absorption in the classical synthesis was still maintained. This is the point of the opera criticism of

23 C. DAHLHAUS, «Ethos und Pathos in Glucks "Iphigenie auf Tauris"», *Die Musikforschung*, 27, 1974, pp. 289-300.

Hermann Abert and Rudolf Gerber, and of the Göttingen revivals of Handel's opera seria in the 1920s.<sup>24</sup> The divisions of musical culture are being rationalised, using dialectic or antithetic structural models. Abert and Gerber say many times over how stereotyped the *da capo* aria-form was, but emphasize how the greatest composers of opera seria (Handel, Hasse, Jommelli, Mozart) have endeavoured to overcome this primitive scheme. Similar narratives apply to questions of performance styles and dramaturgy. Traditional opera seria, and with it most Baroque opera, is accepted to the extent that it could outgrow its own most peculiar characteristics.

Continuing this self-contradictory, structuralist narrative of early opera, a number of slightly more diverse and eclectic interpretations have since emerged. In the 1960s, when the crisis of the concepts of work and author reached music historiography, early opera was being re-discovered as relatively innocent of these concepts, a state of the art before its fall from grace. These readings of Baroque opera influenced directions of research. For example, instead of composer biographies and analyses of outstanding works, we find extensive libretto studies, research on singers, on theatrical procedure and business, on cultural connotations. In the area of performance practice and revival, the reputedly pre-classical aesthetic of a statuesque, monochrome or epic theatre was promoted. These tendencies of research and revival practice were, however, still anchored within the modernist tradition. There was an interesting ambivalence about the author and work-concepts: scholars such as Dahlhaus and, after him, Lorenzo Bianconi, would emphasize the non-work aspects of opera before the nineteenth century, the relatively ancillary status of the written musical score, the intertextuality of opera versions. At the same time, these characteristics would be said to be pertinent to all opera, at least its 'mediterranean' tradition; this point was recently picked up by American scholars such as Harold S. Powers, who berated music historians for having 'germanised' opera studies with progressistic and analytical meta-narratives.<sup>25</sup> But this postmodern respect for otherness in opera, which curiously contrasts with the performance practices of ironic and eclectic

<sup>24</sup> H. ABERT, *Grundprobleme der Operngeschichte*, Leipzig, 1926; R. GERBER, *Der Operntypus Johann Adolf Hasses und seine textlichen Grundlagen*, Leipzig, 1925; for the early Handel «Renaissance», see U. ETSCHKEIT, *Händels «Rodelinda»: Libretto, Komposition, Rezeption*, Kassel (etc.), 1998, pp. 239-306.

<sup>25</sup> H. S. POWERS, «"La solita forma" and "The uses of convention"», in *Nuove prospettive della ricerca verdiana. Atti del convegno internazionale in occasione della prima del «Rigoletto» in edizione critica*, 1983, Vienna - Milan, 1987, pp. 75-109 at p. 76.

staging, is at its centre still convinced of the great historical tension between pre-classical, pre-reform and classical, reformed opera, between the southern and the northern type. These self-styled postmodern approaches to Baroque opera continue the modernist meta-narratives.

## 7. Autonomy, author and work-concept

If we roughly distinguish between music as autonomous poetic material and as social cultural practice, it is clear that the former interested modernists, the latter postmodernists. This has been stated frequently, often polemically. In the 1970s, Konrad Boehmer claimed that Adorno's concept of the tendencies of the musical material itself – a concept endorsing music's autonomy and sheltering it from the interference of social context – was only the last bastion of an idealist strategy defending its exclusive control over 'art' and 'history'.<sup>26</sup> Postmodern criticism today is in many ways less radical than that; but its alternative strategy of hermeneutic contextualisation has grown to more serious proportions.

After Adorno, the endeavour of the autonomy discussion of the 1970s was a genuine attempt to account for music as part of social structures. Modernist writers such as Carl Dahlhaus and Leonard B. Meyer paid tribute to the interaction of autonomy and context, always on the lookout for universal or at least connecting 'social structures' and 'ideologies'.<sup>27</sup> The search for 'structures' in history was indeed the aspect of modernism which survived the most challenges.

To account for the interaction between autonomy and context has remained the goal of writers such as Leo Treitler, Gary Tomlinson or Lawrence Kramer, for whom the interpretation of music is a cultural reading at the same time. To say it in Kramer's words: 'the music, as a cultural activity, must be acknowledged to help produce the discourses and representations of which it is also the product'.<sup>28</sup> In Kramer's terminology, we note the replacement of Meyer's 'ideologies' or Dahlhaus's 'social structures' with 'discourses and representations', but otherwise the desire to mediate between the particular and the general,

<sup>26</sup> M. PADDISON, *Adorno, Modernism and Mass Culture* (n. 21 above), p. 121.

<sup>27</sup> L. B. MEYER, *Style and Music*, Philadelphia, U. of Pennsylvania Press, 1989; C. DAHLHAUS, *Grundlagen der Musikgeschichte*, Cologne, 1967; tr. as *Foundations of Music History*, Cambridge, 1983.

<sup>28</sup> L. KRAMER, *Music as Cultural Practice 1800-1900*, U. of California Press, 1990, p. 17.

and the identification of the former with musical works, the latter with social norms or structures, is as prominent as ever. If a difference must be spotted it is rather in the shift towards greater self-consciousness: 'context', the goal of the investigation, is no longer a pattern of social laws but the ensemble of the hermeneutic discourses themselves. The critical discussion – the language game, Lyotard would say – tries to establish itself as the context in which art functions.

We also find a new urgency of contextualisation; a new 'relevance' spotted in contextuality itself. The discovery of the voice of the historian is a very different matter from Meyer's gentlemanly acknowledgment to be influenced by ideologies, too. It is a starting shot for change, resuscitating the 'crisis' and 'breakthrough' agendas of the modernist and enlightenment school. Janet Wolff, in denouncing an 'ideology of autonomous art', presents a volume on music and society with the words: 'The papers in this volume represent an important breakthrough in the study of music by challenging the notion of music as autonomous.'<sup>29</sup> In one of his remarkable essays on music and politics, Edward W. Said traces the 'transgressions from the purely musical to the social in Bach and Handel'.<sup>30</sup> His comments on Bach's b minor Mass, for example, are splendid attempts to 'read' something about 'the historical nature of works from their internal constitution'.<sup>31</sup> Said's language, in its strongly rhetorical narrativity ('a dramatically new way', 'unprecedented before 1733', 'an astonishing demonstration', and so forth), does not much resemble the materialist and structuralist autonomy debates. It is closely connected only with their political ingredient, the advocacy of political change on the basis of interpretations of the past (as distinct from the call for an 'understanding the past', for example). Said is campaigning against the windmills of an idealist, 'apolitical' historiography of music which, in my opinion at least, has lost credit some time ago, although Susan McClary, Said's advisor in matters of Baroque music, claimed to have detected the ideology still alive and well in 'Bach year', 1985.<sup>32</sup> As far as Said, McClary and Wolff measure the 'transgressive' or 'socially connected' relevance of music against their own

29 J. WOLFF, «Foreword. The Ideology of Autonomous Art», in R. Leppert and S. McClary, ed., *Music and Society. The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 1-12 at p. 1.

30 E. W. SAID, «On the Transgressive Element in Music», in E. W. Said, *Musical Elaborations*, London, 1991, pp. 35-72.

31 The formula is from Leo TREITLER, «What Kind of Story is History?», in L. Treitler, *Music and the Historical Imagination*, Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 157-175 at p. 173.

32 S. MCCLARY, «The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during Bach Year», in R. Leppert and S. McClary, ed., *Music and Society* (n. 29 above), pp. 13-62.

image of an old-fashioned idealist historiography, their results are sadly predictable. They only prove the superiority of a more or less casual 'politicisation' or 'genderisation' of music history over early modernist, autonomist discourses. To some extent, these floggings of a discredited tradition may be interesting insofar as they attempt to re-ignite a debate which was abandoned at the point when structuralism began to obscure the need for change in Western humanistic studies – roughly in the 1950s.<sup>33</sup>

The concepts of author and work are the most critically targeted 'ideologies' in musical historiography today. Opinions about the history of the musical work-concept, reaching as far back as the German musicology around Walter Wiora, Hans-Heinrich Eggebrecht and Carl Dahlhaus, have been reiterated and greatly extended by Lydia Goehr in her claim that the musical work-concept arose as a regulative idea only as late as c. 1800 and that it formed the dominating, even 'imperialist' ideology of the romantic and early modern musicians. As a remedy to such narrowness, she significantly proposes the alternative of 'Early Music' with its non-authorial and pre-worklike status.<sup>34</sup> But just as in the case of the autonomy criticism, the polemics against the centrality of the musical work-concept, and the author-centredness of the classic-romantic repertory and its historiography, have been very much alive already in the musical avant-garde already in the 1950s and 1960s. They are thunders of the past. The literary avant-garde, as far as its own orbit was concerned, utterly demolished the reputation of the autonomous art-work in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>35</sup> Literary theories of the significance of reception and reading became influential after that. The deconstructionists challenged aesthetic principles based on unity and intentionality also of musical statements; it became possible to deconstruct

33 S. MCCLARY, «The Blasphemy», p. 14: «Thus the time seems ripe to take up Adorno's enterprise, to re-examine the ways in which Bach's music can be said to bear the imprint of its social origins, to reconsider the place of Bach's music in present-day culture.» An enterprise promoted not only by Adorno but also, for example, by Heinrich Bessler and Friedrich Blume whom McClary surely has not in mind.

34 L. GOEHR, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works. An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford, 1992. On the work-concept past and present, see Michael Talbot, ed., *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?*, Liverpool University Press, 2000; forthcoming; in the same volume my reply to Goehr: R. S., «Looking Back at Ourselves: The Problem With the Musical Work-Concept».

35 Carl Dahlhaus and others saw its decline in the 1960s; see C. DAHLHAUS, «Plädoyer für eine romantische Kategorie. Der Begriff des Kunstwerks in der neuesten Musik», *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 130/1, 1969, repr. in C. DAHLHAUS, *Schönberg und andere*, Mainz, 1978, pp. 270-279; C. DAHLHAUS, «Über den Zerfall des musikalischen Werkbegriffs», *Beiträge 1970/71 der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Musik*, Kassel (etc.), 1971, repr. *ibid.*, pp. 279-290; Roman INGARDEN, *Untersuchungen zur Ontologie der Kunst*, Tübingen, 1962; tr.as *Ontology of the Work of Art*, Ohio University Press, 1989, preface (probably written in 1957).

classical works of music, for example by showing how much of their message or sense was the recipient's own sense. It was possible to argue how the music may be dysfunctional, precisely when an idealist tradition of hearing considered them as functioning on a higher level of signification, for example on the level of a meta-narrative linking all classic-romantic symphonies. Such challenges were raised by the modernist composer generation of Cage, Stockhausen, Berio, Kagel, etc., and were already reflected in the criticism of Adorno and other modernists.<sup>36</sup>

What postmodern theory may add to them is nevertheless distinct. I believe that music historians up to and including the generation of Dahlhaus or Meyer were welcoming the questioning of the authorial tradition because it still focussed on the Western musical canon, a repertoire '*sui generis*' (Walter Wiora) which even in its deconstructed state carried a mark of otherness vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Adorno's vitriolic review of the 'Early Music' movement and of Jazz, however, pinpointed the postmodern threat: it arose from non-distinct, un-authorial art, from performative art in the humble sense of the word, from a 'Baroque' that could even be concocted in the Mogg synthesizer of Walter or Wendy Carlos, in *Concierto Barrocco* or in the unforgettable 'works' of P. D. Q. Bach as 're-valorised' by Peter Schickele. Whether in those earlier alternatives to the *sui generis* tradition, or in the later ones such as *Tranquillitude* and *Organum* (concoctions of pseudo-medieval music on CD), the postmodern alternative consisted of commercialised, ironic, clever performance music that revisited and plagiarised the past. The intersection of this sphere of music-making with musical historiography could be called a 'disastrous' one; once my students of music history have gone through this kind of aural exposure, I am certain that the middle ages, the Renaissance, the Baroque repertoires will never be the same again.

This may be exactly the effect which the modernists foresaw: whilst they had dialectically challenged the meta-narratives of musical work-concept, authorship, text character and intentionality, this lot was simply starting from a platform of incredulity.

## 8. The meta-narrative of 'watershed' and 'sea change'

Thus my last question is whether we have a new era in Western music history now, and whether we can now see the outlines of the previous era

<sup>36</sup> A survey of the avantgarde's challenges to the musical work-concept is found in L. GOEHR, *The Imaginary Museum* (n. 34 above), pp. 257-284.

as well, just as the Renaissance humanists believed they saw the outlines of the dark ages. Or, what is the real historical condition of our time and its historical retrospection?

In his paper for a recent conference on the concept of the musical work,<sup>37</sup> Michael Talbot sums up the historiographical tradition, running from at least the 1950s until today, which tends to cumulate the most relevant changes in musical life in the West in a few decades around 1800. This period is seen as 'a watershed' in the evolution of music; other important historical changes in Western culture affecting music are said to concur with this verdict. The greatest assuredness about this hypothesis is found in Goehr's book on the musical work-concept: '... given certain changes in the late eighteenth century, persons ... were able for the first time to comprehend and treat the activity of producing music as one primarily involving the composition and performance of works. The work-concept at this point found its regulative rôle'.<sup>38</sup> I recently heard a famous eighteenth-century specialist claim that it was in that century when people 'for the first time got together and sat down just in order to listen to music'.<sup>39</sup> And, Michael Talbot notes 'the formation, for the first time, of a universal musical "canon" around 1800'.<sup>40</sup> The credibility of assertions such as 'for the first time' and 'at this point' would depend, it seems to me, on a demonstration that these things had never happened before which is manifestly unfeasible – although this does not necessarily devaluate the assertion itself, which does remain a language game of sorts.

But why are contemporaries so keen to place ever higher barriers between segments of the past? And why, correspondingly, must we believe that it is 'only recently' that the dark age of the classic-romantic-modern work-concept (etc.) has finally expired, that critical breakthroughs have been achieved, that a 'sea change' in history and culture has taken place? As I have tried to show, the debates about autonomy, work-concept and other 'ideologies' belong to a previous generation and would usefully be considered in the context of the whole criticism of idealist and romantic aesthetics.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, prophecies of their imminent demise are getting

37 M. TALBOT, «The Work-Concept and Composer-Centredness», in M. Talbot, ed., *The Musical Work-Concept* (n. 34 above).

38 L. GOEHR, *The Imaginary Museum* (n. 34 above), p. 113.

39 William WEBER, in his keynote address to the conference *Concert Life in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (of the 250th anniversary of the Holywell Music Room, Oxford), held in Oxford, 3-5 July, 1998 (quoted from memory).

40 M. TALBOT, «The Work-Concept» (n. 37 above).

41 See also Peter BÜRGER, «Die Negation der Autonomie der Kunst durch die Avantgarde», in P. Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt/M., 1974, pp. 63-75.

louder as the demise is behind us. Perhaps we have to see this with Peter Bürger who distinguishes between 'the discourse of the end of the idealist aesthetic' and the real achievement of that end.<sup>42</sup> This might point to some sort of dialectic relationship between the continuation of the discourse and the continuation of its subject which is still regarded with anxiety.

A legitimately postmodern worry, in fact, may be about power – not only of the old narratives over alternative practices, but concretely over our lives. I fear that this concern has not yet found an efficient outlet, let alone remedy. We are insecure as to what the new ritualisations of our lives predict: difference and participation, or constraint and hopelessness. To defuse this perceived power of the old meta-narratives of work-concept, autonomy, composer-centredness (etc.) over our lives, the narratives of watershed and sea change have been formed. They are meant to demonstrate the contingency – and therefore limited jurisdiction – of these 'ideologies' by consolidating a period paradigm for the two centuries from the eighteenth-century enlightenment to the 1980s, with a 'watershed' in music history around 1800, which corresponds to the cultural 'sea change' of the 1980s. The impatience with which we are talking ourselves away from two-hundred years of our past seems to imply anxieties about unsettled relationships with it: far from being able to live with the idea that the romantic and modern Western culture has run its course, we resent its persistence and attempt to domesticate it into a circumscribed historical meta-narrative.

This seems a historical operation which I cannot identify with the postmodern attitudes to history enunciated in Foucault, Eco or Lyotard. It is a modernist operation in the backward sense of the term: it creates just another big meta-narrative within our traditional historiography, the narrative of the modern dark ages and their recent overcoming through 'post-something' attitudes and 'sea changes'.

The effect of relief, which the postmodern attitude vis-à-vis the thunders of the past may have for humanists of any period, should not be sacrificed to another meta-narrative, the oppressive force of which many scholars are already experiencing day by day when told that they have (yet again) missed the 'recent' breakthroughs in their fields. Of course, such oldfashioned discourses are taking the name of 'postmodern' in vain, and should be treated with due incredulity.

On the other hand, as far as there is fear of real new power, and of deeper-grinding divisions of humankind through market-fixing and technocratic ritualisation, the emancipatory and universalist aspirations of modernism would better be kept alive as well, as they, too, may play their role of difference in 'a postmodern world'.

<sup>42</sup> P. BÜRGER, «Die Negation», p. 88.