Chartres is made of stone and glass. But it is not just stone and glass; it is a cathedral, and not only a cathedral, but a particular cathedral built at a particular time by certain members of a particular society. To understand what it means, to perceive it for what it is, you need to know rather more than the generic properties of stone and glass and rather more than what is common to all cathedrals. You need to understand also—and, in my opinion, most critically—the specific concepts of the relations among God, man, and architecture that, since they have governed its creation, it consequently embodies.

The author of these lines is no art historian, but the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. He wrote them not to prescribe what approach art historians ought to take, but to describe the approach that, he assumed, they naturally and sensibly would take. Only by this implied universality could his lines exert on other anthropologists the exemplary, hortative force that he desired. “It is no different with men,” Geertz continues: “they, too, every last one of them, are cultural artifacts.”

But of course Geertz’s conception of art history is anything but unexceptionable common coin among those who think and write about art. We might isolate some of its problematic features, and at once bring the discussion around to music, by substituting a symphony for his cathedral. No one would question the as-

1 Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures [New York, 1973], pp. 50–51. Further references are included in the text.
sension that Mozart’s G-Minor Symphony is something more than the musical materials of which it is built, or that it is a particular symphony composed by a particular member of a particular society at a certain time. But here agreement would end. One party would challenge the notion that the symphony “means” something, refers to and in some manner inscribes sensations and thoughts outside itself. Another would question the idea that to understand it we must understand more than the generic properties of its musical language and of symphonies [or, more broadly, musical art works] in general. The suggestion that it embodies values and suppositions and ideas of Mozart’s culture—that it is an artifact of that culture—would be widely accepted, but deemed by many a purely historical truth, irrelevant to our apprehension of the work in the present day. And so there would be little consensus about Geertz’s assertion [or rather mine, since I have substituted the symphony for the cathedral] that an appreciation of these cultural values and suppositions is a most critical facet of our understanding of the work.

Although Geertz did not offer it as such, I should like here to take his sketch of the art historian’s approach as the basis of a prescription for the modern musicologist, to explore a few of its implications, and to uphold some of its more problematic corollaries. Behind it lies a central tenet of Geertz’s work: that in order to understand individual human actions we need to interpret the cultural context from which they arise. And in applying it to musicology, I reveal a central tenet of my own: that musical art works are the codifications or inscribed reflections of human creative actions, and hence should be understood through a similar interpretation of cultural context. So it is with the central terms of Geertz’s anthropology, culture and interpretation, that we must begin.

I

Geertz’s conception of culture, following tendencies in his field pioneered by Claude Lévi-Strauss, is a semiotic one; it deals in signs. Geertz begins with Max Weber’s aphorism “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” and takes culture to be those webs, “interworked systems of construable signs” [pp. 5, 14]. Through their participation in such systems man’s actions take on meaning, that is, they become intelligible to others around him. To illustrate the point Geertz borrows a conceit by Gilbert Ryle of three boys, one who has a twitch of his eyelid, another who winks, and a third who parodies the wink of the second [pp. 6–7]. Their physical movements are the same, and what Ryle would call a “thin” description of them—that the boys rapidly shut the lids of their right eyes—would not distinguish them. But the meanings of the three gestures differ strikingly, and arise from their relation to the larger context of signs in which they occur. A “thick” description of them, then, would aim to comprehend [in Geertz’s words] “a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not . . . in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn’t do with his eyelids.” Meanings arise from the connections of one sign to others in its context; without such a cultural context there is no meaning, no communication.

This conception of culture suggests some important corollaries. First, culture itself is not a cause of human actions, only a context of which they form a part, in which they take on significance and “can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described” [p. 14]. Second, in order to understand the actions of people of other cultures [whether distant from us in space—the anthropologist’s dilemma—or time—the historian’s] we must in some way attempt to comprehend, to construct for ourselves, their context. The failure to understand other people arises from “a lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs” [p. 13]; the more comprehensively we understand these other universes, the more significant their constituent parts—individual signs or related clusters of signs—will become. Finally, judgement, guesswork, and intuition are seen by Geertz to be involved in every act of human discourse, across cultures as well as within them. Every attempt at understanding involves an act of translation, the entangling, so to speak, of slightly or greatly differing webs, one man enriching his web of significant signs with the
novelties that he perceives in another’s. For the anthropologist (or historian) such discourse is painfully indirect. “What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to. . . . Right down at the factual base, the hard rock, insofar as there is any, of the whole enterprise, we are already explicating: and worse, explicating explications. Winks upon winks upon winks” [p. 9].

Which brings us to the analysis or interpretation of cultures, to Ryle’s thick description. This will not be “an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” [p. 5]. It cannot hope to be verified by reference to a background of raw data, “radically thinned descriptions,” for these, divorced from the context that gives them meaning, are unintelligible. Hence it cannot claim the authority of physical experimentation. Its validity must be judged instead by “the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers” [p. 16]. But the lives of strangers are just what we seek to understand, so cultural analyses are necessarily self-validating.

This is not to succumb entirely to relativism. The internal validity of a cultural interpretation answers to demands—our own demands—of completeness, of fullness. Through increasing completeness of vision of the context we achieve deeper insight into individual meanings. But the methods and pathways by which such fullness is achieved are not predictable and cannot be productively generalized; they are defined anew by the events and meanings of each context we construct. Also, since we can never become members of the cultures we study, that is, natives—since the foreignness of cultures distant from our own always remains—our interpretations will always strive for greater completeness. “Cultural analysis,”

Geertz writes, “is intrinsically incomplete” [p. 29].

There is no purely objective stage, devoid of interpretation, in the process of cultural analysis. “Analysis penetrates into the very body of the object—that is, we begin with our own interpretations of what our informants are up to, and then systematize those” [p. 15]. Therefore the anthropologist’s traditional temporal division of his activities—observation, recording, finally analysis—is overly schematic and in practice not possible. Geertz rightly judges “the view of anthropological analysis as the conceptual manipulation of [previously] discovered facts” to be “rather lame” [p. 20]. Cultural interpretations will have a fictive quality, “in the sense that they are ‘something made,’ ‘something fashioned’”—the original meaning of fictio—not that they are false, unfactual, or merely ‘as if’ thought experiments” [p. 15]. We shall return to all of these ideas and explore their anti-positivist bases below.

Theory plays a narrowly delimited role in Geertz’s cultural analysis. The notion of thick description as a means of understanding individual actions in particular cultures stresses the local features of the description, and is not conducive to theoretical generalization. All-embracing theories of culture, language, or thought would not build on single analyses so much as dissolve them, or sap them of their substance and interpretive vigor. So “the essential task of theory building here is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them.” And there, therefore, tends to resolve into interpretation, or more precisely into the evolving assumptions that rule an interpretation from the start. [More on these below.] “Theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don’t make much sense or hold much interest apart from them. This is so, not because they are not general [if they are not general, they are not theoretical], but because, stated independently of their applications, they seem either commonplace or vacant” [pp. 25–26].

This suspicion of encompassing generalization sets Geertz’s approach to cultural interpretation apart from that of Lévi-Strauss. The structuralism of Lévi-Strauss starts with the as-
umption that all cultures, however diverse, manifest at bottom patterns basic to human thought in general. His study of signs aims to penetrate beneath their conscious significance to the psychological constants, cutting across all humanity, that they unconsciously express. Geertz espouses the more modest goal of expanding our understanding through meaningful discourse with other peoples and their cultures. He takes pains to differentiate his non-reductionist semiotics, his study of the local contextual significance of signs, from structuralism (which he dismisses as “a sort of high-tech rationalism”). His efforts ideally end not in theorizing but in conversation.3

It is therefore in the presentation itself, the thick description, the doing of specific cultural analyses, and not in universal theories or laws induced from particular cases, that Geertz’s interpretation of culture seeks its justification and yields its reward. And Geertz eloquently sums up the nature of this reward:

We are not . . . seeking either to become natives . . . or to mimic them . . . . We are seeking, in a widened sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with them, a matter a great deal more difficult, and not only with strangers, than is commonly recognized. . . . Looked at in this way, the aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse (pp. 13–14).

II

In the last decade Geertz’s view of cultural interpretation has exerted a strong attraction on historians of various stripes (least so, perhaps, on those of art and music). And it is no wonder: it is developed with eloquence, verve, and common sense, and applied with a lightly worn virtuosity [sprezzatura, the Renaissance historian would call it]. But it has appealed for a more fundamental reason as well. It builds upon the conceptions of a historiographical tradition extending well back into the nineteenth century, one which has advanced in numerous guises an anti-positivist, non-scientific view of history. Thus ideas and assumptions about history similar to Geertz’s about anthropology may be found in writers as temporally and temperamentally diverse as Wilhelm Dilthey, Michael Oakeshott, R. G. Collingwood, Isaiah Berlin, E. H. Carr, Hayden White, and in the history of science, Thomas S. Kuhn—to name but a few. In history, then, the ground was well prepared for the seeds of Geertz’s cultural interpretation. His approach to anthropology offered historians a model for a study of cultures and meanings freed from the pseudo-scientific encumbrances of late nineteenth-century positivism and its more recent outgrowths, at a time when anthropologists and historians alike were growing more aware of the profound affinities of their disciplines.

For musicologists the measure of the positivist approach to history had been taken, and its limitations confirmed, in a series of essays by Leo Treitler.4 By reference to the anti-positivist epistemology he has offered in one of these essays, “On Historical Criticism,”5 we may briefly review his critique and along the way point up some connections of Geertz’s anthropology to post-positivist historical thought.

“Knowing,” says Treitler, “is an active process of assimilation that incorporates an act of appraisal.” This strikes at the heart of positivism: the belief in an absolute, objective apprehension of reality. It asserts that facts are not those things that we see around us with an “innocent eye.” Instead they are always contingent on interpretation, an act of assimilation into a cultural web (to use Geertz’s terms) whereby they are tangled in interrelations with other strands and thus take on meaning. Torn loose from its cultural web, a single strand is literally insignificant—it ceases to be a sign.

Without the notion of an innocent eye objectively collecting facts from an external reality, Leopold von Ranke’s famous injunction to tell it “as it really was” [wie es eigentlich gewesen], the rallying-cry of positivist historians, loses its meaning.6 The positivist historical program,

3Local Knowledge, p. 12. For Geertz’s assessment of Lévi-Strauss, see The Interpretation of Cultures, chap. 13.


5Page 191n.

6And just as well: Treitler has argued that the positivists’ cooptation of the phrase distorts Ranke’s meaning. See “History, Criticism, and Beethoven’s Ninth,” p. 205n.
summed up in 1898 as "After the collection of facts comes the search for causes,\(^7\) cannot function, for no facts exist prior to their assimilation into a cultural context [prior, that is, to their interpretation]. "The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy," writes E. H. Carr, "but one which it is very hard to eradicate."\(^8\)

"Theory—seen as interpretive patterns or structures—is in effect a screen between the knower and the things known," Treitler continues. "Particulars are meaningless if we lose sight of the pattern they jointly constitute. Observation and theory are related in an interplay, not a hierarchy or a strictly ordered time-sequence." Here, as in Geertz's later formulation, theory is viewed as "interpretive patterns." It tends, in other words, to be indistinguishable from the evolving assumptions that govern an interpretation—any interpretation—from the start. Data are meaningful only in their context, by virtue of their relation to other data.

Observation (that is, the apprehension of data impinging on us) and theory (the postulates or assumptions that govern our interpretations of data) do not exist in the rigorous positivist ordering, but rather in a reciprocal, evolving relation. Historical and anthropological thought thus advance along paths reminiscent of Dilthey's hermeneutic circle. A datum continually gains in meaning as our assumptions guide us to more and more of its interrelations with the other data comprising, in our interpretation, its cultural web; and these new relations in turn alter our perceptions of the interrelations of other data, hence altering the web as a whole and gradually modifying the assumptions by which we apprehend it. This is the process of "systematizing" our interpretations to which Geertz refers, and elsewhere he specifically calls attention to the similarities of his cultural interpretation to Dilthey's hermeneutic thought.\(^9\) There can be no stage in any cognition of objective fact-gathering prior to interpretation. Our historical interpretations move toward greater completeness (and hence deeper meaning) only if we cast ourselves adrift in the intellectual vortex that Michael Oakeshott has described: "A new discovery cannot be appeared by being fitted into an old world, but only by being allowed to transform the whole of that world; and . . . the character of a new discovery is not given and fixed, but is determined by its place in the world of history as a whole."\(^10\)

This brings us to a third principle of Treitler's epistemology: "Verifiability as the measure of lawfulness yields ground to intelligibility, coherence, potential explanatory power." (By "verifiability" Treitler means factual correctness; by "lawfulness," orderliness or, I take it, validity in general.) Cultural interpretations are not susceptible of verification through the procedures of formal logic; indeed, as Treitler later adds, such logic is not synonymous with meaningful discourse, but is only "one—highly specialized and selective—among several varieties thereof." Formal logic holds especially when it can define general models applicable to reality (for example Carl Hempel's "covering law model," in which general laws dictate that under certain conditions certain events are logically predictable).\(^11\) And such models necessarily exemplify Geertz's "radically thinned descriptions." They isolate a few strands from a complex perceived reality, and can be useful only when these strands suffer a minimum loss of meaning through their isolation, as is true of phenomena in the exact sciences. But in cultural analysis the application of models, with its isolation of single strands from their contexts, entails a debilitating loss of meaning, a rent in the web of thick description. The human actions that we attempt to understand through such means are rendered insignificant by the logical process itself. This is not to deny the utility of scientific models in answering some types of historical questions. But Isaiah Berlin, using Ryle's terminology, has noted their limitations:


\(^9\)Local Knowledge, pp. 69–70.


We can make use of the techniques of the natural sciences to establish dates, order events in time and space, exclude untenable hypotheses and suggest new explanatory factors, ... but the function of all these techniques, indispensable as they are today, can be no more than ancillary, for they are determined by their specific models, and are consequently "thin," whereas what the great historians sought to describe and analyze and explain is necessarily "thick."12

Cultural history, like cultural anthropology, searches for meaning, not proof. And meaning, once again, arises as a function of context, deepened as that context is made richer, fuller, more complete. A hypothetical fully conceived context would be absolutely coherent and completely intelligible, since the relations of every strand to every other would be perceived and the significance of each strand thereby entirely clarified. As Treitler puts it in his discussion of Collingwood, "The claim of certainty [in historical knowledge] is no more than a claim that one will have provided the most coherent context of thought that is consistent with all of the evidence."13 To which need only be added a reminder that coherence and consistency will be judged according to the rich, reciprocal evolution of assumptions and growth in meaning of each individual interpretation.

Returning once more to Treitler: "The knower finds himself within a continuous matrix that connects the world of 'objective' reality, directly given through experience and activity, with consciousness." In Geertz's conception this matrix is, of course, culture itself. It is a web of our own making, of each individual's own making in interaction with other individuals around him and the world at large. And the nature of these interactions, it seems clear, is determined fundamentally by language. "Through language," the historian William J. Bouwsma has written,

"What he makes of it": not only the anthropologist's interpretations of a foreign culture, but every person's apprehension of the reality around him are fictive in Geertz's constructive sense. The notion that this fictive quality should be avoided or minimized in historical writing15 seems, therefore, naive.

Bouwsma's linguistic view of knowledge suggests that historians would do well not to dismiss the idea of rhetoric (understood in the positive sense that Bouwsma, a historian of the Renaissance, has discussed on several occasions) from their consideration of their methods, and to ponder more deeply than has been customary the natures and capabilities of the narrative modes they employ. In their notions of "explanatory power" and "the power of the scientific imagination" Treitler and Geertz seem to verge on rhetorical formulations; and elsewhere Treitler links the importance of rhetorical persuasion explicitly to the non-objectivist view of knowledge we have been elaborating here:

If I were merely reporting "objectively" on what is "out there," plucking flowers, the suggestion that I had brought in the wrong flower would send me back to the garden for another one. But if what we call facts are made by us, products of the activities of ordering and assimilating, I will not give up mine so readily, for I am committed to them by the investment of the activity. ... The word that characterizes the process

underlying a change of commitment far better than "proof" is "persuasion."16

Similar notions are involved in Thomas Kuhn's description of paradigm shifts in the history of science. Their tinge of anti-rationalism has aroused the ire of more than a few latter-day positivists in that field.17

III

We have noted that in Geertz's contextual approach culture is not a cause, and explanation is an interpretation of the meaning of individual events that consists in a description of their relations to the other events around them. Geertz's anthropology turns "from trying to explain social phenomena by weaving them into grand textures of cause and effect to trying to explain them by placing them in local frames of awareness."18 A contextual historiography, likewise, entails a deemphasis of causation as a means of explanation. It stresses a relationship of part to whole rather than one of antecedent to consequent.19

This is not to dismiss ideas of influence, modelling, and imitation—ideas crucial to the art historian—and adopt a narrowly conceived synchronic approach to history, only to clarify the way we formulate them and the nature of their significance. Our ideas of influence arise (or should arise) from a sophisticated sense of the musical and more general context in which the composer wrote. They entail wide-ranging assumptions on our part about that context and the composer's place in it: assumptions of what sorts of works the composer might have looked to for inspiration, what level of competence and communicative effect he perceived in the works of his colleagues and predecessors, what kinds of musical processes might have especially struck him, what sorts of musical expression he might have found most significant, and so on. And all of these assumptions seem more or less right to us, and our case of influence more or less compelling, according to the fullness and coherence of the context we have imaginatively constructed for the composer to write in.

The problem for us with the positivist idea that a knowledge of causes is tantamount to historical explanation is that it brings us immediately face to face with the most mysterious of cognitive faculties, the artist's mind or creative imagination; it confronts us with unanswerable questions of the artist's intent. If I say, for example, that a poetic phrase in the text of a madrigal led a composer to respond with the particular musical gesture setting it (which is only a pedigreed circumlocution to evade the bald assertion that the text "caused" the composer to write as he did), the limited usefulness of the statement is apparent. It focuses our attention on the ineffable workings of the composer's psyche, demanding that we specify the cognitive processes through which a phrase of poetry elicits a particular musical response.

A contextual approach would not avoid the question of the relation of text and music in this particular madrigal, but would re-formulate it in a more accessible guise. It would simply begin with the artistic artifacts—a poem, and the same poem set to music—the particular nexus in the cultural web that we chose as the object of our study. It would work out from this nexus along strands leading to nearby entanglements with other strands [say, the poem's relation to other poems, or the madrigal's to other madrigals], directed to these by our assumptions as to which artifacts outside the poem and its setting might illuminate them most brightly. As the immediate context of poem and madrigal grew more familiar, both would take on increased significance, new and to some degree unexpected meanings, which in turn would force us to shift—possibly only slightly, possibly more fundamentally—the assumptions governing our exploration of the context [perhaps the relative positions of poet and composer in some courtly social structure would now take on special significance, or the poet's role in a literary academy at court]. And this would lead us along new strands of the web to new connections, all of them likewise altering our assumptions and deepening the meaning of poem and madrigal

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18Local Knowledge, p. 6.
alike. (Lectures read in the academy might change our conception of the poem’s place in its literary context, revealing to us facets of its style hitherto unnoticed; these might in turn reshape our conception of the composer’s understanding of his text, leading us to new views of the musical means he chose to set it.)

The process is an endless one in which the art work and its culture take on ever-deeper significance. It is a reciprocal one, in which the art work illumines the context even as the context illumines the art work. It is also a disordered one, in which our exploration of the context is determined by assumptions which themselves are in flux; we have no way of predicting the course of this exploration beforehand; it does not proceed neatly from specific events to more general concerns. And finally, the process requires no recourse to questions of cause and effect; the notion of antecedent leading to consequent gives way to one of antecedent as a constitutive element of the context in which the consequent is meaningful. So the contextual approach, which it might at first be tempting to call a “synchronic” view in opposition to a more causal “diachronic” view, in reality comprehends both. Change across time is understood as the different meanings that actions take on in altered contexts; and contexts are continually in flux, altered in great or subtle ways by the actions and events that make them up.

In this description I have invoked some prosodic license, and written as if the cultural web existed all along, waiting for the historian to explore it in his thick, haphazard fashion. This is not accurate, as we have seen above. The web is a construction of the historian, taking shape and gaining coherence from the reciprocal (and rich and haphazard) interaction of his evolving assumptions with his increasingly meaningful data, the events he selects for inclusion in the context. In this the cultural anthropologist and historian are exactly alike: just as there is no culture of Bali except for the anthropologist’s construal of it, so there is no culture of sixteenth-century Mantua apart from our interpretations. We may return to Bouwsma: it is not that present-day Bali does not exist, or that sixteenth-century Mantua didn’t, only that we cannot know either directly, apodictically, but only in what we make of them. Or, as Collingwood, speaking only of history, put it: “There is no past, except for a person involved in the historical mode of experience; and for him the past is what he carefully and critically thinks it to be.”

It is clear as well that the artifacts of cultures exist for us only insofar as we perceive meaning in them by tangling them in a cultural web of our own construction. And this holds true for Balinese shadow-plays, the puppets used in them, the poem that Monteverdi set to music, and Mozart’s G-Minor Symphony.

About shadow-plays and Marino sonnets this assertion might seem benign enough; but applied to Mozart’s symphony it touches more closely the central tradition of works we cherish most. The quick objection on behalf at least of the symphony will be that it is one thing to study an art work as a historical document, quite another to study it as a purveyor of present-day aesthetic experience. Here is the way the art historian James S. Ackerman has phrased it:

As long as the work of art is studied as a historical document it differs from the archival document only in form, not in kind. The art historian should be interested in the difference in kind, which is immanent in the capacity of art to awaken in us complex responses that are at once intellectual, emotional, and physical, so that he needs, in addition to the tools of other historians, principles and methods specifically designed to deal with this unique mode of experience.

He needs, in short, as Ackerman adds elsewhere, to be a critic as well as a historian.

But the distinction of art-as-art from art-as-document, of critical and historical approaches

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20My example of a madrigal is of course not haphazard. I have attempted to construct along similar lines a relatively thick description of Monteverdi’s secular works in Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance, to be published in 1985.

to art, is faulty on two counts. First, it smacks of
the positivist belief that there exists a history of
the art work, objectively standing “out there,”
logically distinct from the historian’s personal
aesthetic involvement with the work. Or at the
very least it suggests that the historian some-
how shuts out his historical experience of the
work when he turns to experience it as art; the
historian comes to know “facts” about the
work, while its “fundamental values” remain
“inaccessible to historical method.”23 Second,
and more important, the notion (common
enough, after all) that the historian regards
the work essentially as an archival document for-
gets things that anyone interested in art should
never forget: that the art work enjoyed a privi-
leged status already among those (including
the artist himself) who first experienced it; that
an audience of Viennese aristocrats or Mantuan
noblemen was quite sure of the difference be-
tween a Mozart symphony or a Marino sonnet
on the one hand and a bill of lading, diplomatic
dispatch, or commercial balance-sheet on the
other; and that they had their own ways of un-
derstanding the intellectual, emotional, and
physical responses to their art works that mani-
fested this difference. It is precisely this unique-
ness of art works, as judged by the artist and cul-
ture that produced them, that the historian
attempts to understand. And he does so only by
constructing a cultural context that endows
with meaning the unique modes of experience
that the work might have offered its first audi-
ence. The notion that such understanding does
not reshape his own variegated responses to the
works he studies, that it is not always and nec-
essarily a part of those responses, seems to me a
sad and limiting one.

Of course it is also possible to experience and
study Mozart’s G-Minor Symphony with mini-
mal historical understanding, with no effort to
construct the context in which the work arose.
[That is why I spoke above of tangling our arti-
facts in a cultural web, not specifically our con-
ception of their original cultural webs; what is
never possible is to understand Mozart’s work
in no context at all.] In this case the symphony
takes on meaning as part of a context little con-
ditioned by knowledge of the circumstances in

which it was created. This is a “presentist” (or
perhaps “ethnocentric” would serve as well)
understanding of the work. And there is no
doubt that the meaning thus achieved is for us
genuine meaning. But if we believe with Geertz,
as I think we must, that art works inscribe in
one fashion or another cultural concepts, as-
sumptions, aspirations, etc., that govern their
creation, we should resist this approach. The art
works we experience are signs (or rather com-
plexes of signs), communications to our culture
from the more or less foreign cultures we im-
agine to have given them rise. To forfeit the at-
tempt to understand them as such is to run the
risk, greater or less according to the distance of
their original context from ours, of arbitrarily
assigning them meanings derived from our own
culture but not necessarily imaginable in theirs.

The historian, Collingwood writes, “makes no
mistake qua historian: the only mistake he
makes is the philosophical mistake of arranging
in the past what is actually all present experi-
ence.”24 The presentist view of art works as
transcendent entities fully comprehensible
without reference to the conditions of their cre-
ation sacrifices Geertz’s expansion of human
discourse for a solipsistic and ultimately narcis-
sistic aestheticism.

The discrimination of two different aims of
our study implied in the art-as-art and art-as-
document distinction, then, draws artificial and
arbitrary boundaries in our experience of his-
tory and art work alike. Our allegiance is, si-
multaneously and indistinguishably, to Mo-
zart’s music and to Mozart as well: to the
culture he represents to us through his music.
Our understandings of that culture and of his
music embodying it, to whatever degree we
achieve them, should be one and the same un-
derstanding. We celebrate Mozart’s creative act
with each experience of his symphony; the
symphony opens for us a window on the culture
within which such an act could take place, and
our construal of that culture grants us a less dim
view back in through the window at the sym-
phony itself. The ethnocentric approach can tell
us much about our own culture, but it has no ac-
cess to Mozart’s. It is bound to garble his musi-
cal signs.

23Ibid.

IV

The specifically musicological implications of all this may be clear enough by now, but by way of conclusion I should like to make some of them explicit.

First, to Berlin’s “ancillary” endeavors, which allow us “to establish dates, order events in time and space, exclude untenable hypotheses and suggest new explanatory factors.” In musicology these commonly include paleography and transcription, edition-making, bibliography, and source studies and biography narrowly conceived. I am not about to doubt the importance of these activities—they seem to me considerably more crucial to our intellectual needs than indoor plumbing is to our biological ones (the comparison is Howard Mayer Brown’s, in a review of one of the more impressive musicological-bibliographical achievements of recent years). Nor could anyone quibble with Edward E. Lowinsky’s insistence that we must distinguish between good and bad examples in each of these areas.25

But on what grounds are we to make such distinctions? If on purely scientific grounds, if we judge these pursuits only on the basis of the positivistic analysis of objective evidence that Lowinsky has recently reaffirmed as the “acid test of scholarship,” then they will necessarily remain ancillary ones. For insofar as they aspire to the old-fashioned methodology of scientific history they will be thin descriptions, isolating the events they treat from the context that is the source of their significance. Their positivist aspirations, in other words, will automatically tend to close off these types of inquiry from the fundamental questions, accessible only to thick explication, that we should (I think) be asking: questions of the changing nature of musical expression and communication as it has been realized in past art works, and of the larger human concerns embedded in these art works. Strictly scientific inquiry into the arts will only marginally enlarge our “universe of human discourse.”

In reality, however, none of these areas has ever been pursued in a completely objective fashion (nor has science itself, as Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Stephen Toulmin, and others make increasingly clear).26 Even in the most straightforward examples of them, as in any other cognitive acts, interpretation is bound in from the first. Brown’s review lays bare some of the complex interpretive choices posed by an ostensibly simple (conceptually if not practically) bibliographic project. And the source studies we value most are those, like Lowinsky’s Medici Codex, that reveal the deepest, most comprehensive interpretive fervor of their authors. Why then do we cling to the myth of objectivity of such scholarly activities, snaring ourselves and our students in the pitfalls of positivist history? Only as we conceive more sophisticated approaches to these ancillary fields, approaches that recognize and build upon their non-objective, interpretive sides, will they yield up the deep understanding that is their potential reward. And as we do so, I think, each of them will come to resemble more and more the contextual cultural history described above.

Second: the comprehensive contextual approach militates against internalist histories of music, those that view musical development as a chronology of styles acting to determine the nature of new styles with little reference to external (non-musical) factors. The premises and shortcomings of this approach have been rehearsed many times.27 It starts from positivist, causal notions of explanation, teleological notions originating in nineteenth-century ideas of organicism, and often manifests them in their particularly virulent form, determinism: a composer realizes through his works his necessary place in the developmental process that is music history; this process, and hence the composer’s place in it, is spelled out, in outline at least,

by preceding styles; and a composer’s stature
depends largely on the clarity with which he per-
ceives and the competence with which he fulfills
the injunctions of history. Such debased Hegeli-
anism tends to manifest itself in an exclusively
internalist approach, probably for reasons of ex-
pediency. The schematic definition of the teleo-
logical constraints, the conditions causing a
composer to write the way he did, would encoun-
ter insuperable difficulties if it attempted to in-
clude the infinite array of non-musical data im-
pinging on the composer in addition to the music
of his forebears.

We have already seen that the contextual ap-
proach does not ignore the composer’s awareness
of and reaction to earlier music. But it views this
music as a part of his cultural environment,
more or less important in his development ac-
cording to our specific interpretations of individ-
ual works and composers. Beethoven’s music
was not a “cause” of Brahms’s symphonies. But
it formed an immediately relevant part of the
world of musical and non-musical signs within
which Brahms’s creative acts could result in
significant utterance. Beethoven’s Ninth Sym-
phony did not cause Brahms’s First, but rather
helps us, through choices of our own that we be-
lieve to reflect those of Brahms, to gauge its
meaning. It is the same with Monteverdi’s mad-
rigal and Marino’s sonnet, and the same with any
other factors outside an art work that we judge
to have come to bear on its creation.

A different sort of internalism is evident in
most modern musical analysis, which aims to
describe the process by which a given musical
work unfolds (usually with an attempt along the
way to establish the integrated nature of this
process). Analysts either identify [perhaps tac-
itly] the process with the meaning of the work,
attempting to circumscribe that meaning within
the boundaries of the work and limit it to an
internal play of musical syntactic patterns; 28
or they frankly admit that meaning is “beyond
analysis.” 29 In either case they do not attempt to
invoke the original context of the work or de-
scribe the work within this context. This, ap-
parently, is left to the historians.

From the contextual viewpoint such analysis
is at best paper-thin description. Analysts per-
ceive processes within the work, much as inter-
nal style-chronologists perceive processes
among works [though with a good deal more
philosophical legitimacy], but they can assign
them no meaning. For, in Geertz’s words, “the
means of an art and the feeling for life that ani-
mates it are inseparable, and one can no more un-
derstand aesthetic objects as concatenations
of pure form than one can understand speech as
a parade of syntactic variations, or myth as a set
of structural transformations.” 30 Or, worse, ana-
lysts tacitly and arbitrarily assign to the works
they study the meanings that arise from their
own analytic ideologies. These are mostly rooted
in Romantic ideas of genius, organicism, and ab-
solute expression, 31 so in an ultimate analytic
auto-tautology we find Monteverdi madrigals, Bach
fugues, Schumann songs, and Mahler symphonic
movements all embodying Schenker’s [and their
analyst’s more or less conscious] watered-down
Hegelianism. This is ethnocentrism with a
vengeance. And it is not a trap that analysts can
hope to avoid without reference beyond the work
itself, indeed beyond musical works in general.
Without, that is, some effort at cultural inter-
pretation.

Of course I have employed some sleight-of-
hand above in describing analysts who admit
that meaning is beyond the reach of traditional
modes of analysis, for most such scholars are not
content with the name of “analyst.” Usually
they prefer instead to style themselves as “crit-
cis”; and this returns us, finally, to a subject we
have already touched upon. Critics, like ana-
lysts, have had little to say about history [and
that, often, not very flattering]. But unlike ana-
lysts, they are always ready to acknowledge the
need for it. “Criticism cannot proceed as though
history did not exist,” announces Joseph Ker-
man. And Edward T. Cone puts it this way: “Certainly many critics ... consider it their job to project a perception of a given work that is as consonant as possible with the composer’s conception, insofar as it can be ascertained. ... Here the role of the historical scholar is crucial.” But how is the composer’s conception to be ascertained? And what range of extra-musical understanding does that conception comprehend? “Music engages,” Treitler writes, “multiple realms of order,” realms that are not all musical. “But what other realms are engaged, and how will the critic set his perceptual framework to catch them?” Here, on a subject “crucial” to their activities, critics tend to fall silent.

The silence, is, to be sure, partly politesse. Critics would rather not belabor the activities of music historians, which they usually to some degree disdain. It is noteworthy, however, that their disdain is not for history in general, but for the limited positivist approach to it that they find in much musicological writing. Rose Rosengard Subotnik opposes to the critic a “traditional Newtonian musicologist” whose aim is “the empirical establishment of facts”; while Kerman insists that, “as intellectual stimulus, positivistic history is always at a disadvantage beside criticism.” [And one would like to say that Kerman is flogging a dead horse, except that examples of music-historical writing that break more than modestly with the premises, modes, and appurtenances of positivism remain few and far between.] Nevertheless, there seems to be at least a serious failure of nerve among critics who at once see history to be vital to their endeavor, find little reward in its traditional assumptions and methods, and stop short of adumbrating new ones.

Or is there? In his partial exegesis of Schumann’s Aus meinen Thänen, Kerman gradually enlarges his range of vision from narrowly analytic issues to broader ones: “One may ask what the real subject of the critic’s attention should be—that G-natural which Komar calls the ‘major analytic issue’ of the song, or the total music of the song, or its music taken together with its words, or the full sixteen-song Dichterliebe cycle, or perhaps the entire output of Schumann’s so-called song-year, 1840.” Nor does Kerman stop here. He moves on to consider quickly the bitter irony with which Schumann must have viewed the empty virtuosity of Clara’s piano-repertoire, Schumann’s own private musical symbols, and the generic implications to Schumann of the German Lied as a whole. In short, he begins to construct a context for Schumann’s song, and indicates clearly that there is no end in sight to such a project: “If what we value in an artist is his individual vision, rather than the evidence he brings in support of some general analytical system, we shall certainly want to enter as far as possible into his idiosyncratic world of personal association and imagery.” Into, in other words, what Geertz calls an interworked system of construable signs; into Schumann’s culture.

Kerman ends his article by gently chiding Robert Morgan for “clinging to the term ‘analysis,’” even as he describes a broader, more humane understanding than analysts have usually pursued. I can only repeat the gesture, chiding (as gently I hope) Kerman himself for clinging to the term criticism, when what he describes is a unified understanding of individual art works and their contexts achieved by a historical process of cultural interpretation. In this I follow Treitler’s assertion that “criticism is an exercise of the historical understanding,” and “that the music historian can be, by virtue of training, intellectual temper, and the needs of his discipline, the preeminent practitioner of musical criticism.” But I would go one step further, and maintain that a meaningful criticism of art works can only arise when the critic assumes his responsibility to interpret the cultures that produced them. There are no valid grounds for a distinction between critic and cultural historian.

My thesis, then, is simple. We can continue to treat history as a ramshackle science, laboring over radically thinned descriptions that cannot

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32“How We Got into Analysis,” p. 329.
34“History, Criticism, and Beethoven’s Ninth,” p. 203.
36Ibid., pp. 328-30.
invest the particular creative acts we study with the unique significance that is their (and our) due. We can continue to analyze musical process in ways that give little access to musical meaning, or reduce all past musical processes to purveyors of the meanings dear to our own culture, uninformed by a serious attempt to conceive of those of others. And we can continue to search for meaning and evaluative criteria relevant to the individual works we cherish (perhaps, again, supplying them from our own more or less irrelevant ideologies), all the while raging at the shopworn assumptions of the only mode of understanding that, in a new guise, could provide them: history.

Or we might instead realize that our endeavors, from whatever particular subjects and emphases they take their start, eventually are united in the effort to converse with other cultures and other times by achieving a deeper understanding of the creative acts of their most eloquent representatives, their artists. We cannot comprehend art works (or anything else) outside of a cultural context. It is only a question of whether we opt for a limited and limiting discourse, a solipsistic conversation with ourselves, investing art works with meanings that come to us all too automatically, or choose instead to try to conceive of other meanings, other assumptions, other aspirations and fears. The reward would be not only a more profound knowledge of the works we value, but a fuller comprehension of the humanity we embody.