

Preface | Surviving Absolute Music

I began this book project with a fundamental intuition, that the specific kind of pleasure I derive from Haydn has something basic in common with many of the pleasures I find in musicals, and that those shared pleasures are not the same as those I find in most music of the nineteenth century and its extended traditions. With both Haydn and many musicals, fun and seriousness coexist easily, and are even superimposed on each other, in a way that I find particularly appealing. Often (especially in Haydn) this is the result of a sophisticated play with generic expectations that, however humorous or lighthearted, does not detract from the music's expressive potential. But with serious nineteenth-century music, encompassing the notion of absolute music and what historian William Weber has dubbed "musical idealism," gratification generally comes from a kind of immersion of the self into something larger, releasing a capacity to feel deeply. While Haydn and musicals seem to be more aware of the individual operating interactively with other individuals within a larger social environment, and to encourage a similar awareness in the listener, most concert, chamber, and operatic music from the nineteenth century seems designed to help one forget both self and others in favor of inwardness, contemplation, and submission to a deep, even overwhelming experience of the music.

Behind this intuition stand several aspects of my own progress as a scholar. Early on, I was much interested in eighteenth-century music, especially Haydn, who was the subject of four of my conference talks between

the mid-1980s and early 2000s. But I held back from publishing any of this work because I was not ready to address the critical issues that Haydn advocacy must confront in our generation, which come down to the fact that very little of what attracts people to Haydn in the first place emerges in the now fairly copious literature on Haydn, where it is obscured by the august tone that such work so often assumes. (This was especially true in the early 1980s, if less true today.)

Meanwhile, I published much on the symphonic work of Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, and others from the nineteenth century and its extended concert and operatic traditions, before being pulled into the quite different world of the American musical, which has been the main focus of my work for more than a decade. While I was fascinated in a self-reflective way by the obvious differences between these quite disparate traditions, I was also eager to apprehend the one in terms of the other, and to understand better why both attracted me as a scholar. It was not hard to find common ground; after all, both the nineteenth-century symphony and musicals are large-scale public works centrally concerned with issues of identity, often national identity. And the American musical, although primarily a creature of the twentieth century, also had deep roots in the nineteenth. But there was no getting around the fact that they went about their business quite differently, however related their aims and background.

As I was privately wrestling with these issues, having to do, I supposed, with my own divided self, I also took up the problematics of American musicals within the larger field of popular music studies, where (as it seemed to me) its fate was, like Haydn's, to be the square peg that none of the cool kids could be bothered to care much about, especially when you tried, a trifle too earnestly, to explain why they should care (which was, indeed, a lot like trying to fit those pegs into round holes). Several things started to seem especially relevant to me in this context:

1. US American popular music grew up primarily in theatrical contexts, including minstrelsy, variety, and operetta, all of which largely opposed the strictures of an emergent "classical music" culture that was based in German Idealism.
2. These origins and their significance for the emergence of popular music in the twentieth century have not been joined well by popular-music scholarship; indeed, advocacy for twentieth-century popular

- music seems most often based on rationales borrowed from the very musical culture its forebears had rebelled against.
3. Camp—a hallmark of popular musical theater—has been particularly ill served by popular music’s advocates. While this may be due in part to camp’s association with gay subcultures, it probably stems more fundamentally from camp’s fascination with the artificial, the contrived, and the theatrical—preoccupations anathematic to the cult of authenticity that has taken over popular music studies.
 4. Camp itself has not been properly understood within historical contexts, perhaps because of a widespread insistence on understanding it as essentially gay, even though that association took hold relatively late and has been steadily eroded since Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” in 1964.

It was considering the tenacity of camp’s appeal as it has since become mainstreamed, along with aspects of camp’s mostly unexamined prehistory, that led me both to the intuition that what made Haydn matter for me was actually quite close to the mix of elements I have found so appealing in musicals, especially in the genre’s camp dimension, and to the realization that therein lay a fundamental difference between “serious” music and the square pegs of Haydn and musicals. Both consistently make light of serious art even when taking that art seriously. And both do not “belong” within the round holes of German Idealist musical paradigms, the one owing to historical circumstance, and the other to its persistent undercurrent of resistance to idealist seriousness.

But having this intuition and testing it through argument and against the backdrop of history are quite different things. The latter requires some understanding of why German Idealism’s impact on musical practices was so powerful and immediate, how music approached the absolute as it became idealized, and of why the vibrant receptive environment that originally awaited Haydn’s music wilted under the new musical paradigms (chapter 1, “Idealizing Music”). It requires better understanding of Haydn’s difference, of how Haydn’s music played to its original audiences (chapter 2, “Entertaining Possibilities in Haydn’s Symphonies”), and of how changes in musical culture altered the expectations that governed that environment, even if those changes were in some cases subtle and occurring only over time (chapter 3, “Haydn, the String Quartet, and the [D]evolution of the Chamber Ideal”). It requires a reconsideration of the

origins and development of New World musical dualities, especially of how nineteenth-century theatrical music, particularly in the United States, originally opposed German Idealism's new musical paradigms, leading to the development of camp tastes (chapter 4, "Popular Music contra German Idealism: Anglo-American Rebellions from Minstrelsy to Camp"), and of how that opposition was eventually tempered by the desire of popular music's advocates to be taken seriously (chapter 5, "'Popular Music' qua German Idealism: Authenticity and Its Outliers"). And it requires that the kinship I intuited between camp tastes and Haydn's potential pleasures be carefully parsed, accompanied by an explanation for why that kinship has (so far) not left much of a scholarly or critical footprint (chapter 6, "Musical Virtues and Vices in the Latter-Day New World").

Each step in making this extended argument presents its own complex problems, all eminently worthy of extensive treatment. In chapter 1, the conditions that allowed music to emerge as the "highest of the arts," the intertwining of nationalism with music's new and still shifting paradigms, and a wide variance in the capacity for mutual accommodation between those paradigms and past composers, are all at issue. Crucial to chapter 2 is the question of tone, and the philosophical understandings that grounded Haydn's ability to entertain within Aristotelian virtues based on notions of human flourishing. Chapter 3 explores, within the historical development of the string quartet, how Haydn's approach to the genre, to draw auditors into a quasisocial space, was gradually displaced with a quartet dynamic that imitated and fostered the demanding intensity of German Idealism's inwardness, a process well under way with Beethoven and carried further by such figures as Brahms and Bartók. Particularly complex are the problems addressed in chapter 4, in which extended discussions of both minstrelsy and camp are obliged both to confront fully the intersections of each with disenfranchised groups—African Americans and homosexual men, respectively—and to probe, more centrally, their related but distinct engagements with idealism's aesthetic pretensions. Chapter 5 takes on "authenticity," a central category and criterion of value within popular music criticism both within and outside the academy, a category that forms alliances not only with German Idealism but also with Existentialism and various political issues, and which is itself highly problematic in its disregard both for the actual

historical roots of US American popular music and for whole categories of music that are not only quite popular but also deeply valued. Chapter 6 probes the aesthetics of high camp through a modern case study (“Springtime for Hitler” in Mel Brooks’s film *The Producers*), and by taking up the model of musical flourishing proposed by Mitchell Morris in his bracing essay “Musical Virtues,” all in order to establish common ground—and common cause—between Haydn and musical camp.

But these and many other important strands have had to be worked out in some kind of balance against the more slowly unfolding larger argument of the book, which emerges fully only in the final chapter. Maintaining such a balance between the parts and the whole has seemed essential, since each provides necessary context for making sense of the other, and since only together might they adequately explain how we have reached our particularly problematic moment in music history. Of the various historical strands that I consider—each newly illuminated by the larger argument—minstrelsy was particularly hard to keep in balance. Because of minstrelsy’s deplorable racial practices and their persistent afterlife, I hesitated before giving it as much emphasis as I do, but soon determined it to be crucial to the larger argument. Similarly considered, if somewhat less fraught, are the emphases I give to the philosophical underpinnings of Haydn, the prehistory of camp and the persistence of heterosexual camp even during camp’s gay golden age, and the actually complex understandings that inform the category of “authenticity” in popular music studies.

In organizing the larger argument of the book into three parts, each successive part longer by a chapter than the previous, I provide space in the final chapter to revisit, and to some extent synthesize, key elements of the preceding chapters. Critically important to the larger argument is the final chapter’s reengagement with the book’s originary insight, particularly in detailing important philosophical differences between and among German Idealism, Haydn, and high camp. But the book’s personal history has also led me to indulge an impulse to speculate in the final section of that chapter (“Bridging Persistent Dualities”) about how a new musical culture might evolve to accommodate some of those differences. Such speculation is scarcely the main point of the book, which is not to decry those persistent dualities but rather to describe them more clearly, in order to understand better their nature, how they evolved, and how they have

endured and even proven themselves useful. Nevertheless, such speculation seems to me necessary here, as an expression of the basic optimism that has long sustained musicology and related disciplines. After all, it is not just Haydn who may eventually be counted among the true survivors of absolute music, but us, as well.