Notes from the Editor

Recent Books on Music

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Lawrence Kramer’s contribution to this issue of MQ deals with the character and direction the analysis of music might take, particularly with regard to the understanding of music as a dimension of culture and history. Indeed, this entire issue of MQ puts forward readings of music that connect music with the so-called “extramusical.” The issue starts with a continuation of the long-standing discussion of constructs of democracy and religion in the work of Charles Ives. An essay on the historical context for understanding Native American music follows, and after that a socio-historical analysis of Stockhausen’s role in Darmstadt in 1968. Following Kramer’s piece, we close the issue with a quite novel look at a late-eighteenth-century subculture—journalism in Vienna directed at women—and its relation to Mozart’s comic operas.

Over the years MQ has sought to encourage the disciplined analysis of music as a phenomenon defined not as purely self-referential in meaning, nor as autonomously dynamic in its patterns of historical development. The editors are therefore justly proud of the recent publication by our colleague Michael P. Steinberg, Listening to Reason (Princeton University Press). We congratulate him on this fine and original volume.

Speaking of books, there are several recent volumes that deserve notice. First, there is R. Larry Todd’s magisterial biography of Mendelssohn (Oxford University Press). This long-awaited, massive biography will serve for years as the standard account of Mendelssohn’s life and work. Second, there is the excellent collection by Ruth A. Solie entitled Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations (California University Press); readers will be particularly interested in Solie’s brilliant essay on George Eliot and the novel Daniel Deronda. Third is the welcome publication of a collection of writings by the late Robert Shaw, edited by Robert Blocker. The Robert Shaw Reader (Yale University Press) will prove invaluable to those interested in choral music and choral conducting. And then there are the several volumes about Shostakovich that have appeared: Solomon Volkov’s book on Shostakovich and Stalin (Knopf), Malcolm Brown’s A Shostakovich Casebook (Indiana University Press), and Laurel E. Fay’s Shostakovich and His World (Princeton University Press).
These are all reasonably mainstream books published under prestigious imprints, by leading university and trade publishers. They are written by well-known individuals and, with the notable exception of Volkov, scholars of high repute and standing. Despite all the rhetoric that has been dispensed about the Internet and the decline of print, books still seem to matter. And there is, in addition to this mainstream, a constant flow of books from smaller houses and specialty publishers that rarely get much attention. For example, there is the charming and engaging biography of the violinist and leader of the Curtis Institute, Efrem Zimbalist, by Roy Malan (Amadeus Press). Somewhat in the same vein is Janos Starker’s autobiography with interludes of fiction, *The World of Music According to Starker* (Indiana University Press). Starker’s life story, like Zimbalist’s, is riveting apart from the purely musical aspects, but Starker’s book also includes a good deal of fascinating material about playing the cello and about string playing in general. (Malan’s account of Zimbalist is also of special interest to string players, since the author himself is a fine violinist.) These two books will become part of the record, so to speak, of the history of twentieth-century performance practice.

Indiana University Press, publisher of Starker’s book and of other books mentioned above, is also responsible for one of the sadder events in recent publishing history. In 2002 the Press published an edited version of Ilona von Dohnányi’s biography of Ernst von Dohnányi, entitled *Ernst von Dohnányi: A Song of Life*. Ilona, the composer-pianist-conductor’s third wife, died in 1988. The volume’s editor, James A. Grymes, has published extensively on Dohnányi and established the Dohnányi collection at Florida State University, where Dohnányi held his last post. Grymes is clearly both a Dohnányi enthusiast and a partisan, and understandably so. Dohnányi is greatly underestimated as a composer. I recorded the First Symphony with the London Philharmonic for Telarc and have conducted the piece in Europe and the United States. I have had the pleasure of performing his *Konzertstück* for cello and his Second Symphony (completed in the 1940s) in New York as well. The Second Symphony, like the much earlier Symphony No. 1 (admired by the young Bartók, who made a piano transcription of it), is a powerful work, worthy of a place in the repertory. Together with the harpist Sara Cutler, I recently recorded a very late work, the Concertino for Harp and Orchestra. It will appear on an all-Dohnányi CD that includes piano works, performed by Todd Crow, and the Sextet, played by the principals of the American Symphony Orchestra, that will be issued by Bridge at the end of 2004.

I cite these credentials only to underscore that I share more than a passing enthusiasm for Dohnányi. As Grymes knows, Dohnányi’s posthumous reputation has suffered from the accusation that he was a Nazi
sympathizer. This accusation is wrong, but not as “false” as Grymes would have us believe. The pressures and realities of the late 1930s and the war years in Central Europe make the gradations between collaboration and heroism extensive, rendering difficult any efforts to segregate and judge individuals as good and evil. In the Dohnányi case, the matter is further complicated by the fact that Dohnányi’s son Hans (by a previous wife) was executed by the Nazis for his role in the 1944 German plot to assassinate Hitler. Dohnányi’s daughter Grete was married to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian and anti-Nazi martyr. Furthermore, Dohnányi’s two grandchildren (Hans’s sons), Klaus, the former mayor of Hamburg, and the eminent conductor Christoph von Dohnányi, have both distinguished themselves as progressives in the cultural politics of contemporary life.

The facts are sad and quite simple. Ernst von Dohnányi, a man in his mid-sixties, remained behind in Budapest throughout the war. In contrast, Bartók emigrated before the war, in large part out of disgust with the increasingly harsh right-wing Hungarian dictatorship. Dohnányi continued to perform during the Nazi era and the war years, not only in Hungary but also in Nazi Germany. Here was no case of “inner emigration.” In 1941 Hungary became an Axis ally, and eventually, toward the end of the war, was governed directly by the Germans. In 1944 the Nazis installed a “puppet” whom Ilona wrongly describes as “helpless”: Ferenc Szálasi of the Arrow Cross Party, the Hungarian Fascists. It was under Szálasi that the Hungarian Jews were liquidated by Adolf Eichmann, and the Hungarian opposition suppressed. Szálasi was a quisling, and Dohnányi, perhaps out of a Furtwängler-like (or Strauss-like) mixture of patriotism, vanity, habit, the desire to keep working, and naïveté, met with Szálasi and had himself photographed with the dictator. Dohnányi permitted himself to be used. In truth, the composer was neither a fascist nor an anti-Semite. In fact, his entire career was marked by generosity to colleagues, particularly to Bartók and Kodaly. Ironically, all three were commissars for music in the short-lived communist regime of Béla Kun after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1918.

Dohnányi eventually found himself in Vienna at the very end of the war, and then in Austria’s American zone in 1945. There he began to perform, was discovered (so to speak), and was accused of collaboration. He was ultimately cleared, but a stigma remained. His career was damaged until the very end in the 1950s, when he made a stunning return to Carnegie Hall and made a spectacular recording of late Beethoven sonatas. After a sojourn in South America, he ended up teaching in Ohio and then in Florida, where he died in 1960. Dohnányi’s role and achievements, like those of the fine composer and teacher Leo Weiner, were overshadowed
as figures in the great age of early-twentieth-century Hungarian musical
life by the fame accorded Bartók and Kodaly.

The book that Ilona wrote before the composer’s death (it seems to
have been completed in 1960) was finally published in 2002, supposedly
with the careful and complete scholarly oversight of Grymes. He claims to
have confirmed the “chronicle” of the composer’s life and “verified” much
of the information. The impression one gets from the editor’s preface is
that the understandably partisan and autobiographical account has been
supplemented by a critical apparatus, rendering it a useful contribution to
scholarship and justifying its publication by a distinguished university
press. In fact, although dates and concert programs may have been
verified, Ilona’s text is left without the bare minimum of commentary.
Instead, in an appendix, Grymes includes selected press clippings from the
composer’s lifetime. Some of the later entries are from anti-Dohnányi arti-
cles (often from Jewish publications) that repeat some hyperbolic accusa-
tions, as if to justify Ilona’s outrage and underscore the existence of an
unscrupulous postwar campaign against Dohnányi. Grymes also provides a
selection of eloquent pro-Dohnányi testimonies, notably those by Imre
Waldbauer (who immigrated to Iowa) and Leo Weiner, both Jews. In all
this, however, Ilona’s version of political events is left to stand without
comment, leaving the reader the impression that all of what she says is in
fact true. What she writes, however, is a usefully enthusiastic, unabashedly
tendentious, and horrifying mixture of right-wing Hungarian nationalism,
thinly veiled anti-Semitism, and outright lies about the Nazis, wartime
Hungary, and the immediate postwar years. For example, she laments the
arrest of Austrians who collaborated with the Nazis and casts doubt on
the moral character of those incarcerated in concentration camps.

The issue here is not Ilona or her views. There is every reason to
want her book to be published, precisely in a well-annotated, entirely
unexpurgated edition. Hers is an important historical document. The
issue is that a polemic has been published in 2002 by an American univer-
sity press as a reliable biography, even though its account of political
events is little more than self-justifying right-wing propaganda. In short,
Grymes’s edition is a travesty, not only of history but also of the overdue
effort to broaden an appreciation of Dohnányi’s achievements as a com-
poser and performer. The cause for this may be the blindness of Grymes’s
own devotion to the cause of Dohnányi. It may also, however, be the
ignorance among editors about history, particularly Hungarian history and
the history of Central Europe during the Second World War. All that was
needed was a critical apparatus—footnotes to alert the reader that what
Ilona wrote is either false or an opinion masquerading as fact, as well as
citations pointing to the extensive historical literature in English that
offers an accurate and balanced account of the events surrounding Dohnányi’s life. In any event, Indiana University Press is to be blamed, not for the decision to publish Ilona’s book, but for issuing it as a modern scholarly edition and as an authoritative, “full” English-language biography. Ernst von Dohnányi was not, strictly speaking, a Nazi sympathizer, but he was also not a hero. As a man and an artist, however, he deserves, nearly a half-century after his death, much better.