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review

<https://10.56693/cr.153>

The Cambridge Companion to Music and Romanticism

Edited by Benedict Taylor

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021

Hardback: pp. xxxi, 370

ISBN: 9781108475433

Price approx. \$99.99

The collection of essays *Music and Romanticism*, edited by Benedict Taylor, is part of the series of Cambridge Companions – guidebooks to the world of culture prepared by experts offering a knowledgeable and at the same time appealing take on the issues addressed. Let us note that the title comprises music and romanticism, and not Romantic music or musical romanticism. Thus is signalled, besides their connection, the autonomy of the two domains of interest to the authors. And indeed, this book provides a solid introduction both to the music of the Romantic era and to romanticism per se.

The title may also be indicative of a degree of cognitive caution. The

contributing authors repeatedly draw attention to problems in precisely defining the seemingly straightforward notion of Romantic music; moreover, a similar problem applies to romanticism itself. This awareness of these difficulties, revealed here and discussed many times, already attests to the high standard of argumentation in this book. Let us note, for example, the observed asynchronicity in the development of Romantic music across the different national romanticisms and also the asynchronicity in the development of romanticism and Romantic music. The contributing scholars avoid any naive attempts at an unequivocal ordering of the phenomena discussed; they do not adopt a simple reduction of Romantic music to a stylistic category or historical period. They endeavour to highlight the complexity of the subject and the contradictions that emerge from it – that which is subtle and indistinct, referring to romanticism itself and to the music associated with it. They dwell on the aesthetics of romanticism and romanticism as a way of understanding the world and humankind. They are also aware of the perspectivism that is an inevitably corollary of interpretation. They show various possibilities (musical romanticism is presented as an academic construct with different variant forms) and invoke various standpoints – for instance, from thinking about romanticism as the heir to the Enlightenment to seeing it as presaging postmodernism. (Both perspectives, I might add, are justified, albeit ostensibly contradictory.) The titular conjunction of music and romanticism seems a particularly capacious formula, which allows us to say a great deal about both phenomena and to show their relations in a particularly multi-faceted way.

Music and Romanticism, like the entire Cambridge Companions series, derives from the encyclopaedic tradition. But it is a specific kind of encyclopaedism, subordinated not so much to a pre-imposed

nexus of notions as to the challenges posed by the issues addressed and to the need to discuss them as deeply as possible. In effect, readers receive a synthesis through which they are gradually introduced into the world of romanticism and music. After surveying their relations (Benedict Taylor), and also showing how Romantic music took shape, with its eighteenth-century origins (Keith Chapin), the authors explore the links between music and literature (Miranda Stanyon), music and the representation of landscape (Thomas Peattie), Romantic folklorism and nationalism in the context of music (Matthew Gelbart), the connections among romanticism, politics and music (Katherine Hambridge), technical contexts relating to instruments (John Tresch), magical and wondrous elements in music (Francesca Brittan), the relations between music and religion (James Garratt), musical strands in German Romantic philosophy (Tomás McAuley), the question of meaning and value in Romantic music aesthetics (Alexander Wilfing), the links between music and the formula of the Romantic subject's inner life (Holly Watkins), the apprehension of art as the expression of authenticity (Karen Leistra-Jones), Romantic styles of composition (Julian Horton) and attitudes to form (Steven Vande Moortele), the question of song (Lisa Feurzeig), and the staging and performance of music (Sarah Hibberd; Dana Gooley). The book ends with two contributions devoted to the methodological strand concerning the construction of the notion of musical romanticism (Nicole Grimes) and to various takes on how it came to an end (Sebastian Wedler).

This list of topics already shows the impressive scale of the project. Romantic music is presented here not just in connection with the spiritual domain (the longing for eternity, religious strands, the depth of the 'I') or the realm of ideas, but also from the materialist and social

perspectives – as a sweeping cultural phenomenon both emerging from the world and shaping that world. The material aspect covers more than just the question of instruments and their technological changes, which developed apace over the nineteenth century, but also the musical body during a concert performance. The authors of the particular chapters invoke the self-knowledge of the era, its programmatic and critical language, and they also interpret Romantic phenomena from our present-day perspective. Shown in a particular way are German romanticism (especially in connection with its programme-generative character) and its English equivalent – treated as centres of Romantic culture.

The global picture that emerges from this book is of a cultural constellation (as a Romantic whole consisting of fragments, in this case illuminating the discussed subject from various angles) with music at its centre. It resembles a reprisal of Romantic attempts to capture the whole and a search for the unity concealed in the world and in its cultural images. Sound corresponds to words, images (as is particularly evident from the example of reflection on music and landscape) and ideas; it refers to the material and the spiritual; it penetrates the existence of individuals and communities; it has the power to affect the listener (including in erotic relations); it leads to transgression. What we have here, therefore, is a vision of the world with the arts – and music in particular – at its centre. Romanticism is shown to be a polyphonic community of various corresponding discourses. Romantic music also comes across as varied – radically so, at times; after all, it is both pure music and also, in various senses, *engagé*, be it only when inscribed in the process of the shaping of a nation or when linked to various content, as with song or opera.

The question of the historical nature of Romantic music comes across here in an

interesting way. It turns out to be stretched between tradition and modernity. The authors cover musical phenomena ranging from the eighteenth century, sometimes reaching even further back into the past, to the twentieth century. Contrary to popular opinion, including views they formulated themselves, the Romantics did not renounce their links to the past. Yet they approached it creatively, reshaping its conventions, playing with them, as is shown to brilliant effect in this book in the expert considerations of particular compositions. They replaced – or perhaps rather complemented – the eighteenth-century category of taste and the perception of music in relation to emotions with a highlighting of the moral character of music, its openness to metaphysics, and also the realisation of a Romantic formula of the idea. Romantic music, like the art of that era, proves to be open to infinity; it develops as history itself develops. It is also open to the cultural multiplicity that was shaped and inspired in romanticism after the demise of the shared world of Mediterranean culture.

Particularly noteworthy are those parts of the book featuring postcolonial and gender topics, essentially passed over in Polish musicology. They are not especially expansive; in the latter case, barely hinted at. The colonial, quasi-oriental character of the representation of the exotic among the Romantics, for instance in opera, is evidence of the Eurocentrism – branded also by the stigma of politics – characteristic of the epoch, despite its openness to cultural otherness. In the approaches to Romantic music, we also find a vision of centres – especially the German hub – and peripheries, to which hegemonic models drift out and from which, in turn, traditional folk models arise. (I would add, however, that their popularity is also projected in the centres).

The romanticism that emerges on the pages of this book is a movement both

revolutionary, with its origins in the French Revolution, and post-revolutionary, shaping a new bourgeois world, as well as being specifically conservative – particularly in German lands. And the political differentiation of romanticism already shows the problems with which a scholar specialising in this epoch has to wrestle. It is worth pointing out the caution shown by the contributors, who warn that politics cannot be directly translated into Romantic art. Hence a revolution in form is not necessarily accompanied by a revolution in worldviews. Besides, Romantic music helped to shape nineteenth-century nationalisms, in connection with the discovery of the traditional and national origins of art. It is inscribed in the order of history between two ideals: the lost past and the desired future.

Manifest in this book is a vision of romanticism adhering to the modern expressivist trend described by Charles Taylor. At the centre of the Romantic world, we find a sensitive, feeling subjectivity – endowed with imagination, experiencing, realising its own freedom and creativity, expressing itself in art (it is significant in this respect that in romanticism such a perspective can be linked both to the category of genius and to a turn towards primitivism), discovering the existence of the subconscious.

That subjectivity can enchant a world disenchanted by science, restore to it a spiritual dimension, as is effectuated in a particular way in the dimension of art, and especially music. In connection with the question of the relationship between music and metaphysics in romanticism, it is worth drawing attention to the considerations devoted in this book to the links between music and religion, to the various ways in which their relationship can be perceived: from the religious sources of Romantic music, through art treated as a path to religious truth, to art perceived as religion. Convincing in this respect is the

posited thesis that these phenomena do not lead towards a post-Christian (or post-religious) formula, but rather help to forge a syncretic heterodoxy.

The contributors adopt an organic vision of romanticism (they invoke Arthur Lovejoy and René Wellek, and there are traces of M. H. Abrams – so pre-deconstructive thinking, although there do occasionally appear motifs that could be linked to deconstruction, such as reflection on the clash between reality and the Romantic aspiration to an ideal), as a result of which the various fragments of the Romantic universe are mutually complementary, not at odds with one another – as emerges in the nineteenth-century concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. That, of course, was a project of the Romantics, reconstructed in this book particularly taking German romanticism – the model in this regard – as an example. Yet cracks do appear in that project – in connection not just with the work of the deconstructive *pharmakon*, but also with the intentional thinking of the Romantics. I have in mind here the juxtaposing of sight and sound – the eye and the ear – that emerges in connection with the particular appreciation of music during this epoch. In this book, attention is focussed on their complementarity. As I see it, however, among the Romantics, one can discern – precisely in this conviction of the particular value of music – motifs related to a criticism of the sight-centred perspective; a criticism that peaks around the turn of the twentieth century.

If I were to ask for some other topic to be covered (and that is difficult given the comprehensive nature of this book), then I would add a discussion of how musical metaphor was used in Romantic literature in connection with the anthropological question. The Romantics' reference to cosmic music also contains this aspect – frequently revealing a deficiency of man, who cannot bring himself to emit a full and clean sound.

Single-author books sometimes appear to display greater distinctness than collective works, but in this instance there is such a great number of issues and contexts to cover that it would be difficult to leave them to just one author. Most importantly, the editor and authors have produced a book that is decidedly cohesive (partly through recurring references to the editor's text), although several repetitions do occur, particularly in connection with the context of German romanticism. Any discussion of such a rich work will be an unjust simplification, just like any failure to distinguish between the individual authors. Alas, the richness of the publication under discussion would require a lengthy essay to accommodate it. This book displays one more asset (characteristic of the whole Cambridge Companions series): each chapter ends by indicating literature for further study, expanding and enhancing knowledge of the problem discussed. The book as a whole is also furnished with a bibliography.

And we should undoubtedly concur with the thesis appearing at the end of the book that musical romanticism (Romantic music) lives on within us, that it is an open fragment of history leaning towards the future, developing, still alive and listened to.