

Music and Politics

BY LEON BOTSTEIN

Music is part of our construct of mythic pasts and allegiances. The closer we can come to unraveling the complex fabric of the culture and norms from the past, the clearer we can be about negotiating competing normative ambitions about the present and future. Music can illuminate the tension between ideals of the cosmopolitan and definitions of heritage and legacies that distinguish communities and nations.



Eduard Hanslick and Richard Wagner, silhouette by Otto Böhrer

The perspective from which the following reflections are written is rooted in the performance of music on the concert stage. As a practicing musician, a conductor, I have noticed three disturbing patterns.

First, there is little affection for music that shares characteristics we might readily identify as “modern.” The resistance to modernism in music has been far more persistent than that encountered by comparable developments in art, literature and architecture.

Second, the performance of music on the concert stage, particularly instrumental music, has remained cut off from any connection to other facets of life, whether these be political, social, philosophical or aesthetic. Music appears to be either divorced or stand apart from history when encountered in the concert hall or, for that matter, in the curriculum of the conservatory or the music lesson.

Third and perhaps most significantly, the repertoire of concert life today represents a distorted mirror of history. The active repertoire is a mere fragment of what was actually played and heard during the past 250 years. At stake is not the revival of the obscure. Rather, music has been eliminated that once was thought of as having consid-

erable merit. This circumstance is particularly acute in the field of opera. No other art form suffers from a comparable obsessive focus on a very few works by a select group of composers. It is as if all but a few rooms in the metaphorical museum of musical history were closed.

What in art history passes for significant and great works from the past in music has been effectively silenced and forgotten.

Therefore the questions “Why write music history?” and “What might be learned from music history that is unique?” are not merely rhetorical. These are being asked as a necessary means to an effort to rejuvenate concert life and restore the scope, beauty and power of our musical heritage. An understanding of the musical past beyond the biographical and the recovering of the depth and variety of this past can and should propel a transformation of what we perform, how we perform and how we plan and realize a vibrant concert life.

The writing of music history has flourished since the mid-18th century in tandem with the expansion of interest in the making of music itself. By the mid-19th century a sufficient literate public emerged with enough interest in reading about something they enjoyed doing—much as to-

ic of the character of music culture in the urban centers of Europe and North America. Hanslick’s achievement represents the most celebrated and influential synthesis between the normative and descriptive traditions of writing about music. He also perfected the most admirable and re-

tures on Wagner represented an effort at synthesis, an attempt to render Wagner more an object of history than an object of heated polemic. Adler founded what he regarded as a scientific school in the systematic study of music and sought, with success, to elevate it to a respected status within the university, within the *Geisteswissenschaften*.

But like Hanslick, Adler was never in doubt about the cultural and political power of music as part of an historical legacy crucial to contemporary culture. Adler came to the defense of Mahler and Schoenberg, commented on the cultural crisis of modernity, and even sought to engage Karl Lueger on the matter of anti-Semitism. Hanslick, for his part, sought to defend aesthetic norms on the basis of a linkage between ethics and aesthetics reminiscent of the 18th century, of Schiller and Shaftesbury.

It is significant that neither Hanslick nor Adler placed any emphasis on how music might be understood in connection with parallel phenomena in history apart from the strictly musical. At the same time, for Hanslick, what was wrong with the so-called New German school—Liszt and Wagner—could not be contained within the rubric of the aesthetic. The subordination of the listening experience, of music, to im-

Music became a powerful art form with the capacity to shape the attitudes of a community.

day sports journalism does—in direct proportion to the numbers of those playing as amateurs. The shift of music from a domestic art form to a public one dependent on spectators during the 19th century was a function of the expansion and transformation of music amateurism and music education.

Writing about Music: Hanslick and Adler

The late 19th century became the heyday for music journalism and history. Two of the most widely influential and read practitioners, Eduard Hanslick and Guido Adler, were based in Vienna. Indeed Vienna can be considered emblematic

of the character of music culture in the urban centers of Europe and North America. Hanslick’s achievement represents the most celebrated and influential synthesis between the normative and descriptive traditions of writing about music. He also perfected the most admirable and re-