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Hugh Macdonald, *Beethoven's Century: Essays on Composers and Themes*. Eastman Studies in Music. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008. xii + 255 pp. Musical examples, figures, notes, and index. \$80.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 13:978-1-58046-275-4.

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The historical musicologist Hugh Macdonald is best known as a distinguished (and senior) Berlioz scholar—he is the general editor of the New Berlioz Edition—and an expert on French music and musical life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Written over thirty years, the essays in this collection (some appear in print for the first time, some are translations from French or German) include several items on French music, but the book is largely defined, as the author wittily confesses in his preface, by “little of that sense of direction and purpose that ought to guide a writer’s life” and Macdonald declines to explain or apologize for the “miscellaneous nature” and “diverse styles and approaches” of the book. Indeed, there are no unifying thematic elements (Macdonald does not pursue the question of Beethoven’s legacy, as the title might be interpreted to suggest), but there are qualitative ones that provide a corrective to his modest disclaimers: his expertise on a wide variety of composers and topics and the erudition (and wit!), stylistic virtuosity, and mastery of the small form. These are gems in the genre of the literary-musicological essay, eschewing jargon and remaining traditional in their historical methodology.

Essays on composers comprise the first part of the book, and they are of two types. In “Beethoven’s Game of Cat and Mouse,” “Schubert’s Pendulum,” “Massenet’s Craftmanship,” “Skryabin’s Conquest of Time,” and “Janáček’s Narratives,” Macdonald illuminates a salient aspect of a composer’s style with respect to one or several works. In the piece on Janáček, for example, he discusses the composer’s compositional strategies with respect to large-scale form and harmonic structure and their relationship to the representation of events in three symphonic poems based on literary works, and concludes that the music is “better understood if the narrative is ignored and only the most general verbal meaning is attached to them.” The “pendulum” in the essay on Schubert denotes the “unrelenting sense of pulse” in constant rhythms, especially “spondaic pairs” based on two notes of equal length over many measures of music. Macdonald’s interest in this phenomenon is not limited to its formal, technical dimensions; he finds in the pendulum swings a decisive element in the outbursts of “volcanic temper” that occasionally manifests itself in music that presents striking, indeed shocking alternatives to Schubert’s predominantly lyrical style.

Beethoven plays games with his listeners in all kinds of ways; Macdonald focuses on the little-known Fantasy for Piano op. 77, whose “disunity, diversity, illogicality, inconsistencies and contradictions” are the “principal idea of the piece.” The Fantasy is a vehicle for a critique of long prevailing views about the strict logic and organic unity of Beethoven’s music. In other works by Beethoven, as well, Macdonald finds a “deliberate attempt to stress the disruptive elements of music” and he constructs a relationship between Beethoven and his audience in terms of a puppeteer “who makes his puppets sing or cry” or the cat playing with the mouse. Thus emerges an aesthetic-psychological profile of a composer with a

“cruel streak” who takes pleasure in denying pleasure—sometimes after offering tantalizing bits of extraordinarily beautiful lyrical music, as in the severely truncated penultimate movements of the “Waldstein” Sonata for piano or the Sonata for Cello and Piano in A Major (op. 69), both of which raise the expectations of a full-fledged luxurious slow movement only to break off quickly and move into rollicking fast Finales that in the end afford their own pleasure—but of a very different kind.

The other essays on composers are more biographical in nature, in the sense of professional biography. He writes on the contrasting experiences of Paganini (the great violin virtuoso) and Mendelssohn in Scotland, showing how the Italian virtuoso was indifferent to the native culture and the landscape, which greatly inspired Mendelssohn, who followed the route of the painter Joseph Turner, made his own sketches (Mendelssohn was an accomplished amateur drawer and painter) and wrote several pieces based on his stay there, including the concert overture *Fingal’s Cave* and the “Scottish” Symphony. The essays on “Berlioz and Schumann” and “Liszt the Conductor” are related in the sense that they both focus on the delicate nature of professional relationships regarding both composition and performance (including conducting) among some of the leading musicians of the Romantic period. Changes in aesthetic perspective, developing friendships or increasing personal estrangements contributed to shifting alliances that manifested themselves in personal support or rejection and in positive and negative music criticism. The central issue was that which dominated the musical life of “Mittel-Europa” for decades: unbounded personal expression in composition and performance at the expense of classical restraint and order in a romantic context. With good reason Liszt figures prominently in the essay on Berlioz and Schumann, who show up in the article on Liszt. Mendelssohn plays a role in both; Wagner less so, for he had not yet attained the prominence that was his later in the century. Macdonald also devotes short essays to Hugo Wolf’s journalistic advocacy of Wagner and his opposition to Brahms and other conservative composers and to the pianos used by the French virtuoso Charles-Valentin Alkan and how they influenced his pianistic style.

The essays on “Themes” have a somewhat broader focus. “Comic Opera” provides a short (and useful) sketch of the various forms of musical comedy that originated in the eighteenth century; “Repeats” traces the gradual elimination of conventional repetitions of large-scale elements of form (e.g. the exposition in a sonata-form movement) in the later music of Mozart, and in Beethoven and later nineteenth-century composers. Non-professional musician readers of this essay who remember their sonata-rules from piano lessons or courses in music appreciation might be surprised to learn that “Sonata” and other forms were never as monolithic as they might have appeared in their instruction. Macdonald’s wit emerges frequently in this volume and it is nowhere more evident than in his title of an essay that deals with music composed in the extreme key G-Flat Major (six flats) and in the meter 9/8: the title reproduces the key and meter signature that would stand at the beginning of a piece in this mode and time.

Key and meter are, of course, separate issues, and Macdonald gives them each their proper due. One of his interests is why composers choose F-Sharp Major instead of G-Flat Major—they are what is called “enharmonic” equivalents, meaning that on modern instruments in modern tuning they essentially sound the same. But, paradoxically, most musicians will agree that their “character” is very different—F-Sharp Major is a “bright” key often reserved for sprightly or cheerful contexts, while G-Flat Major is dark, lustrous and serious (the Rembrandt of keys). Macdonald’s discussion of the key, the meter, and their combination as a musical topic ranges chronologically from J.S. Bach into the twentieth century and it draws on music from diverse instrumental and vocal genres. The final essay surveys some of the more adventurous experiments by late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century composers that the author concludes are “Modernisms that Failed.” (The negative view inherent in the title was pre-ordained. Macdonald tells the reader that this research was motivated by his interest in a broader question: “What went wrong with music after 1950?”) One might disagree with Macdonald’s conclusions, but we owe him thanks for this fascinating account of some familiar and some very unfamiliar examples of such experiments: Skryabin’s attempts to blend music and color effects in live

performance, comparable attempts with aromas, the use of quarter tones (half the size of the half-step, the smallest interval in our tonal system) and even smaller microtones (Pierre Boulez), the English composer Harry Partch's division of the octave of forty-three notes, the use of machines to generate real-world noises in concert music with acoustic incidents by Artur Honneger and other composers, notably French and Soviet musicians, particularly in the 1920s. This makes for fascinating reading.

Macdonald does not neglect France and devotes several essays to opera. "Dr. Mephistopheles" investigates the work of the nineteenth-century opera librettists Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, who collaborated on a number of important texts, including *Faust* for Gounod. "The Prose Libretto" reminds us that the verbal text is the point of departure for a composer, but does not necessarily define the musical language. As operatic styles and forms increasingly tended towards "through-composition" (sacrificing traditional closed aria and ensemble forms), the usefulness of librettos with regular meters and rhyme schemes diminished, yet relatively few truly prose librettos were written until the twentieth century. Italian, German, and Russian opera and contemporary theory are also brought into the discussion of this neglected and important topic. "Les Anglais" is a very entertaining sketch about the French penchant for English (and occasionally Scottish) themes in nineteenth-century French operas by Boldieu, Auber, Halevy and others. Common and bourgeois folk are represented as well as aristocrats including members of the royal family such as Henry VIII, the subject of an opera by Saint-Saëns in 1883. Historical characters also include Shakespeare (in Ambrois Thomas's *Songé d'une nuit d'été*, 1850), in which the bard is made into a drinker and philanderer who is given doggerel verse to celebrate a night of drinking and debauchery!

Despite the plethora of English characters, Macdonald finds only scattered cases of the incorporation of English music in the repertory, among them in *Jenny Bell* (libretto by Scribe and music by Auber), which cites "God Save the Queen" and "Rule Britannia" in the overture and in the opera itself. In "The Musicians' Arrondissement" Macdonald provides a historical travel guide to a small area in the current IX arrondissement just north of the Boulevard Des Italiens (currently in the IX arrondissement) that for several decades c. 1830, became a musicians' enclave like none other of its (and perhaps any other) time. The recent construction of the new conservatory and the new Opera in the area encouraged French musicians to settle close to their work, and their presence attracted short- and long-term foreign guests such as Liszt, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Bellini, Meyerbeer, Wagner, and Verdi, whose lodging places and their addresses are dutifully given for potential visitors. This unparalleled concentration of talent and energy in a small geographical area began to dissipate during the Second Empire with the construction of new boulevards under Haussmann's redevelopment plan. But in its heyday, "the musical results of the proximity were astounding."

Let us note that "Raise Your Glass to French Music!" originated as a talk for a festival of French music at the San Francisco Symphony in 1994. With Rousseau's withering critique of French music (*Lettre sur la musique française*, 1753) as a point of departure, Macdonald surveys historical and contemporary prejudices that favored Italian and German music, but only to argue for the "incredible richness" and distinctive nature of French music. It has, "like French painting, a distinctive colour and character that many other nations might envy." What exactly comprises this color and character we are never told; instead we are treated to a whirlwind explanation for its distinct attributes that might alarm the methodologically cautious: "The answer lies in the soil and the climate, which combine to produce the miracle of fine wine."

The only fitting partner to the noble grape is the "greatest cuisine in the world," hence the "sanctity of eating and drinking well is central all activities"; from this "stems the Frenchman's unrivalled capacity for talk," which makes the French "a nation of critics" and "from criticism to politics is but a short step" so that everything, including music, is reduced to politics and to literature ("all that talk requires an immense reading"). The closest he gets to music is the brief mention of the movement after the humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War that sought to regenerate French music according to French

traditions and aesthetic principles, whereby he simply asserts the undeniable importance of literary influences (a vast topic). What are we to make of this? Wine and food and talk determine more about a national musical style than national religious institutions, court and salon life, the opera? What about the French landscape, which inspired not only French painters but Debussy and other impressionist composers? Or should we just take it as entertaining fluff? It's a good read and the author and publisher certainly must have intended it precisely that and nothing more—a canapé to be had with a glass of rosé!

On a related theme, “*Un pays où tous sont musiciens*” treats (seriously) the subject of musical nationalism in France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in light of the complex political and cultural relationships between France and Germany. The title comes from Romain Rolland’s novel *Jean Christophe* in which a young German composer, modeled after Beethoven, embodies the greatness of German music culture, but ultimately finds his home and his spiritual salvation in Paris. The novel was written in that same time period, between the wars of 1870–71 and 1914, in which French musicians took decisive steps to revitalize their musical life, in part by creating new musical institutions, in part by self-consciously asserting inherently French musical values, in opposition to German (which of course includes Austrian) music hegemony. Key figures in the effort include Vincent D’Indy and Claude Debussy (*Pelléas et Mélisande* as an alternative to Wagner); one central concern was to fashion a perspectives on great German musicians of the past, notably Bach and Beethoven, and of the present, in particular Wagner. Roland accepted Beethoven as a German composer, others emphasized his Flemish (and therefore French!) ancestry; Bach was admired despite his Protestant-German roots; one journalist in 1902 did not shrink from portraying him as “probably Protestant by mistake, since in his immortal Credo [in the B-Minor Mass] he confesses his faith in the one holy, catholic and apostolic church”! Macdonald skillfully interweaves these and other relevant issues (among them the unifying element of anti-Semitism) while pointing out the fallacies of many assertions and exploding myths, notably that of *Pelléas* being a “watercolour” of understatement that was in any way truly representative of French music c. 1900.

This is a remarkable essay in part because it accomplishes so much so efficiently (this is true throughout the collection). Hundreds and thousands of pages have been written on the issues he addresses; a recent collection of essays on *French Music, Culture, and National Identity, 1870-1939* (edited by Barbara L. Kelly, also published by the University of Rochester Press, 2008) contains contributions such as “D’Indy’s Beethoven,” “Debussy and the Making of a musician français,” and “*À bas Wagner!*: The French Press Campaign against Wagner during World War I.” All of them are much more detailed and heavily documented than Macdonald’s essay; as the author admits in his preface, here and elsewhere he offers “only a glimpse of something that ought to be put under much closer scrutiny.” In many of the essays, Macdonald addresses interesting and important issues that are off the beaten track and he offers something truly new. But in the piece on France and Germany (and in several others) this is not the case, for which reason, and because the author did not update his sources and documentation, their “usefulness” is limited, at least to the professional scholar. But I enclose usefulness in citation remarks, because I wish to distance myself from the critique even as I make it. Academic musicologists would do well to pay close attention to Macdonald’s skills as a thinker and writer; academics in other disciplines and general readers are very well served by this book precisely because of its essayistic form; when embarking on a new research area (or just seeking information) less is often more, preparing the reader, if she wishes, to probe more deeply.

I learned a great deal, and my attention and interest never wavered: A must read for anyone interested in modern French music and musical life.

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