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Book Review: Noteworthy

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Noteworthy

Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, ©2007

Charles Angell

Alex Ross, music critic for *The New Yorker* magazine, has published an exhaustively researched, beautifully written, and eminently readable history of twentieth century music. “*The Rest Is Noise*,” he informs the reader in his preface, “chronicles not only the artists themselves, but also the politicians, dictators, millionaire patrons, and CEOs who have tried to control what music was written; the intellectuals who attempted to adjudicate style...” and the audiences, technologies, and social transformations that shaped and changed the musical landscape. In effect, Ross has constructed a cultural history of the twentieth century employing music, especially though not exclusively serious music, as his foundation. While the lay reader may find the more technical discussions of music a bit daunting, though Ross keeps such discussions to a minimum, Ross rewards the reader with a thoughtful argument about the difficulties—artistic, social, economic, and political—composers confronted in what many have called a century of unprecedented violence and suffering.

The roots of Ross’ argument appear in his brief summary of Richard Wagner’s influence “not only in music, but in literature, theater, and painting...Anti-Semites and ultranationalists considered Wagner their private prophet, but he gave impetus to almost every political and aesthetic movement of the age” including liberalism, bohemianism, African-American activism, feminism, and Zionism. The strands of Wagner’s legacy unraveled in often conflicting ways. Some saw Wagner’s operatic heroes—Parsifal, Wotan—as representing “an allegory of the diseased West” which “fed the fantasies of the



far right” and its desire to recapture and restore the mythic past of the Germanic heroes. Others saw Wagner’s music as a break with the past where, in Wagner’s own words, “we shall live only in the present, in the here and now and create works for the present age alone.” Thomas Mann’s novel *Dr. Faustus*, to which Ross frequently alludes, pits the “bloody barbarism” of the ultranationalists against the “bloodless intellectualism” of the humanists who, in reacting to the Wagnerian program, removed art from its historical and cultural context and consequently drained themselves of any energy to counter the forces arrayed against the values they professed to represent. In my perhaps overly simple terms, Ross explores whether the early twentieth century music—and the intellectual movements that engulfed it—was an outgrowth of or a reaction to Wagner’s influence.

Ross begins with the friendship between Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler, the two giants of early twentieth century German music. Strauss began his composing career under Wagner's spell but around the turn of the century wondered whether Wagner's efforts "to unify religion and art" was "a utopian scheme that contained 'the seeds of death in itself.'" Strauss' operatic heroes, Guntram for example, decide to opt out of their messianic roles and forgo any attempt to save humanity. "Anarchist individualism"—think Salomé—became Strauss' "way of removing himself from the stylistic squabbles of the time." The still popular Till Eulenspiegel's *Merry Pranks*—the tone poem made famous in Disney's *Fantasia*—orchestrates this spirit with its "deliciously insolent sounds." Strauss courted the vox populi; his work became—remains—enormously popular and regularly scheduled on orchestral programs.

Like Strauss, Gustav Mahler began his composing career writing tone poems and program music, providing titles and detailed program notes for his early symphonies. However, he began to envision himself as "a 'pure musician,' one who moved in a 'realm outside time, space, and the forms of individual appearances.'" Later Mahler referred to himself as the "untimely one" whose music would receive acclaim in some future time. Mahler, whose friendship with Strauss gradually cooled, thought his rival "already enjoys immortality here on earth." Mahler worried about Strauss's popularity and felt that popular acclaim and fame corrupted the true artist. Mahler, Ross tells us, was obsessed "with suffering and redemption." Mahler's death in New York stunned Strauss who referred to Mahler as a worthy adversary. But, Ross observes, "each man misunderstood the other to the end; Strauss suspected Mahler of surrendering to antiquated Christian morality, while Mahler accused Strauss of selling out to plebeian taste. The split between them forecast a larger division in twentieth-century music to come, between modernist and populist conceptions of the composer's role."

This modernist and populist polarity placed the rational and intellectual against the irrational and emotional, the avant-garde against bourgeois middle-class, the anarchic spirit against the utopian spirit. Yet, for Ross, these seeming antitheses exist in an uneasy embrace with one another. "As in prior periods of cultural and social upheaval, revolutionary gestures betray a

reactionary mind-set. Many members of the modernist vanguard would tack away from a fashionable solidarity with social outcasts and towards various forms of ultra-nationalism, authoritarianism, even Nazism. Moreover, only in a prosperous, liberal, art-infatuated society could such a determinedly anti-social class of artists survive, or find an audience. The bourgeois worship of art had implanted in the artists' minds an attitude of infallibility, according to which imagination made its own laws. That mentality made possible the extremes of modern art." It hardly needs asserting that this symbiotic relationship between apparently antithetical stances spills over into the other arts, politics, and human psychology itself.

Two cases in point: the Russian Dmitri Shostakovich and the African-American William Grant Still each faced in their own ways political and social impositions that influenced their compositions. Shostakovich spent most of his composing life in Stalinist Russia. Initially, he hoped for acceptance from the regime but Stalin, who Ross says had taken an interest in Soviet opera, expressed displeasure with the composer's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District* by leaving the theatre before its conclusion. Shostakovich who had hoped for an invitation to the leader's box grew "sick at heart" upon hearing of Stalin's departure. "Pravda," the official Communist newspaper, printed an editorial with the headline "Muddle Instead of Music" and in an additional 600 words condemned the opera "as an artistically obscure and morally obscene work." Knowing what had happened to other writers, poets, and composers considered enemies of the regime, Shostakovich lived in fear. "For anyone," Ross writes, "who cherishes the notion that there is some inherent spiritual goodness in artists of great talent, the era of Stalin and Hitler is disillusioning. Not only did composers fail to rise up en masse against totalitarianism, but many actually welcomed it.... Having long depended on the largesse of the Church, the upper classes, and the high bourgeoisie, composers found themselves, in the Jazz Age, without obvious means of support. Some fell to dreaming of a political knight in shining armor who would come to their aid." The regime elected to censure Shostakovich for failure to promote and advance the artistic ideals of socialist realism. The composer responded—and I'm oversimplifying and compressing a complex series of events—by writing symphonies like his Fifth that left hearers wondering whether the finale's crescendo of trumpets and timpani intended to glorify the regime's

power or condemn its artistic barbarity. Ross observes that critics wondered whether Shostakovich served as the regime's "official composer" or its closet "dissident." Some confessed to hearing in the composer's pronouncements and in his compositions sophisticated ironies. "To talk about musical irony," Ross says, "we first have to agree on what the music appears to be saying, and then we have to agree on what the music is really saying. This is invariably difficult to do." Shostakovich remained—and his music remains—a divided self, in his words "a cut-out paper doll on a string."

Though different in nature, cultural and political influences played as great a role in twentieth century American musical life as they played in Europe. William Grant Still, an African American composer and musician, faced enormous difficulties having his music played and heard. When the Rochester Philharmonic under Howard Hansen played his *Afro-American Symphony* in 1931, "a black composer finally found a place of respect in classical America." (Let me note here that I managed to find a Naxos CD of Still's symphony and recommend it.) Still fared better than most classically trained African-American composers who, confronting racial stigmas against having their works performed, were forced to find work as jazz composers and popular musicians. Curiously, American Jewish composers, themselves a stigmatized group, borrowed freely and frequently from the African-American musical tradition, incorporating rhythms and melodies into their popular songs. "Still accused Gershwin of plagiarism," Ross notes, and listening carefully to the opening theme of the *Afro-American Symphony's* second movement, the hearer encounters the familiar theme of Gershwin's "I've Got Rhythm." African-American and Jewish composers listened to and borrowed from each other. Their melodic and rhythmic innovations worked their way into much of the music we hear today.

Nonetheless, American music has been described as championing democratic ideals in such pieces as Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* or questioning those ideals as in John Adams' more recent *Nixon in China*. This last opera, Ross tells us, "coalesce[s] into an epic poem of recent history, a dream narrative in half-rhyming couplets" . . . where at the end "the assembled potentates [Nixon, Mao, Kissinger, Chou-en-Lai] cease to be distinct historical characters and instead become vessels of one sadly remembering mind, perhaps the soul of the century itself." As the century began with Strauss's *Salomé* dancing with John the Baptist's head in what Ross calls "necrophiliac bliss," it ends with Nixon and Mao "standing on a mythical island in a pitch black river while the swan of death glides serenely around them."

But . . . that was last century, violent, tormented and troubled. In this new century, no less troubled I suppose, I've found myself taking colleagues' children to Boston Symphony concerts. While I have formed particular musical tastes, the young ears respond to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Prokofiev's first *Violin Concerto* or Oliver Knussen's *The Way to Castle Yonder* with "Wow!" Sitting in Symphony Hall with the youngsters, with the noisy and noisome just outside on Huntington and Mass Avenues, I take infinite pleasure in listening anew and offer thanks to Ross' *The Rest Is Noise* for some help in understanding why silence itself is not always golden.

—Charles Angell is Professor of English and Book Review Editor of the *Bridgewater Review*.