

In the last analysis, however, the notion that a book of this scope and interpretive subtlety could have been undertaken, and undertaken successfully, without the aid of such scholars is not so much irksome as humbling. And to ask whether a text born largely outside the conversations of the musicological community can still be essential to those conversations is, perhaps, to rehearse the question once so troubling to

rocket scientists: whether rocket propulsion can work in a vacuum, where there is nothing to push against. Needless to say, the rocket scientists, like the scholars of popular music, have long since discovered the answer: of course it can.

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**Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning.** By Daniel K. L. Chua. (New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. [xii, 314 p. ISBN 0-521-63181-5. \$64.95.]

Not so long ago, the idea of absolute music functioned to legitimate music academics who were trained to deal only with "the music itself." Defined as music without any extramusical associations, absolute music required its own professional specialists. That tendency having been pushed to its extreme, it has now emerged as its opposite, so that the study of autonomous art music is currently justified by the way it can be related to extramusical concerns. For example, in 1989, Leo Treitler declared that "At the center [of the idea of absolute music] is the conception of an autonomous instrumental music that is essentially musical because it is not determined by any ideas, contents, or purposes that are not musical" ("Mozart and the Idea of Absolute Music," in *Music and the Historical Imagination* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989], 177). Ten years later, Daniel Chua has set out to show that "absolute music is an extramusical idea" (p. 6). He seems to relish the turmoil of a discipline whose boundaries are uncertain by introducing a potentially limitless number of extramusical ideas, which are tamed into a discourse of absolute music by his masterful rhetorical and intellectual virtuosity.

The short but crucial preface prepares the reader for heavy doses of Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Theodor Adorno and their approaches of constellation, archeology, and dialectic, respectively. Acknowledging these thinkers does not initially give away much, since they have been so influential in recent times as to have become practically brand names. Only in retrospect was I able to appreciate how profoundly Chua has followed through with

their ideas. Chua sets himself apart from most other academics by taking seriously the resistance to coherence, synthesis, and totality taught by these writers, thereby putting himself at risk for being read as confusing and contradictory. As he indicates in the preface, readers will have to work harder and more self-consciously to "interpret" his own text. He provides the material to do this: there are thorough footnotes, a good index and bibliography, plenty of illustrations, and provocative music examples; nevertheless, those with traditional expectations of academic authorial responsibility will probably be unwilling or unable to make the effort.

The book is "arranged as a constellation of tiny, fragmentary chapters that gather around the object, often in an extreme manner to exaggerate the tensions between the concepts" (p. xi). There are thirty-five of these chapters, each "on" something, beginning with "On History" and ending with "On Babel." While the chapters are loosely connected, they do form a recognizably chronological narration of the metaphysics of music from the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries. The chapters are divided into three main parts, "The Garden of Eden," "The Fruit of Knowledge," and "The Tower of Babel"—titles that convey the strikingly religious and apocalyptic version of modernity that frames this history of absolute music. Drawing on Max Weber's writings on modern rationality—so important for both Adorno and Foucault—Chua uses the story of the Garden of Eden to tell how acquiring rational knowledge has cast us out of paradise by disenchanting the world. Knowledge has been gained at

the expense of its meaning; "You forfeit absolute music by gaining access to it" (p. 5). The Tower of Babel illustrates how humanity's attempt to reach God from its own standpoint on earth has resulted in chaos and ruins. The absolute music of God's harmonious monochord has been reduced to the absolute drivel of the self-sufficient subjective ego.

Chua marks the first moment of musical modernity at the end of the sixteenth century. The Florentine Camerata's attempt to recover the cosmic dimension of music was accompanied by the discovery of its mundane basis in laws of physics: Vincenzo Galilei's scientific experiments with sound turned musical values into facts. As a counterpart to the elevation of song and opera, instrumental music was denounced as modern, artificial, and empty. The sequel to this moment came at the end of the eighteenth century, when the evaluation of instrumental music was reversed: its lack was no longer a defect but a virtue. Instrumental music was exalted as an empty sign that, by signifying nothing, could signify everything. This is the romantic definition of absolute music, the discourse that puts music back at the center—but this time of a universe that is a void.

Although Chua claims at the outset that he does not want any particular star to outshine the others in his constellation of absolute music, the romantic definition not only shines brighter but appears to take over the term entirely. Chua emphasizes the radicality of the German early romantics, showing that their claims for absolute music are not compatible with the nineteenth-century music that is usually called romantic or absolute. The romantics used music above all as a transcendental sign of absence that enabled them to reconceptualize a philosophical problem as a solution. Besides explicating the philosophical aspirations of romantic absolute music, Chua contributes greatly to the musicological literature on romanticism in drawing out the distinction between the romantics and the idealists and adding a gendered dimension to the understanding of the so-called emancipation of instrumental music at the end of the eighteenth century.

This multifaceted presentation of the romantics is likely to cause controversy, especially for the way Chua plays out its implica-

tions. Most prominently, in relating actual musical works to the romantic theory of absolute music, he argues that practice precedes theory: the "classical style" is a misnomer and should be renamed the "romantic style." This is because romantic irony and the romantic fascination with pure play of empty signs make a good fit with the instrumental music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. In fact, "Haydn's instrumental forms perhaps prepared the path for a Romantic philosophy of music" (p. 212). Chua dismisses as "musicological myth" the notion of the classical style as one of purity or clarity: rather, for Chua it is a "confused style" marked by a willfulness that pushed the "Baroque aesthetic to an extreme logic" (pp. 71–72).

On the other hand, romanticism does not apply to later nineteenth-century music because the romantic philosophers could not sustain their project; within a decade it had crumbled like the Tower of Babel. Chua locates this collapse in music in Beethoven's late quartets, where the pure play of signs shrivelled into consciously meaningless chatter. This leaves all subsequent music in a conceptual no-man's-land. Nineteenth-century romantic music and thought are discussed only as a confused mess that has hindered our understanding of absolute music. Modernity cannot get beyond Babel.

The problem that this book leaves us with, then, is what to do with all the meaningful music that continues to be made in the disenchanted modern world. The final chapters, "On the End," "On Suicide," "On Absolute Drivel," and "On Babel" describe the history of absolute music after the romantics as a long, drawn-out deathbed scene. The narrative of modernity and of absolute music is overwhelmed with the sense of an ending, but cannot find final closure. One consequence of being caught in this narrative is that it is difficult to come to a conclusion even when writing about it. An historical account self-consciously accepting and reflecting the modern condition is practically forced to end with a whimper. But in his last chapter, Chua moves to critique modernity from a position outside it. Commenting, "After all, Eden to Babel is only the beginning of Genesis; history has hardly got going" (p. 290), he indicates that the Bible could

serve as an alternative to the narrative he has just portrayed.

While Chua ends on a note of hope, his book as a whole conveys the full import of the dark side of modernity that has now become part of our understanding of the highest achievements in Western music. There is much here to leave the reader feeling confused, overwhelmed, and

trapped. But Chua's intelligence, energy, engagement, and flamboyantly exaggerated rhetoric work against feelings of despair. This is a book that should inspire enthusiasm for extramusical approaches to absolute music.

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**Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music: Fragments and Texts.** By Theodor W. Adorno. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. [xii, 268 p. ISBN 0-8047-3515-8. \$39.50.]

Although Theodor W. Adorno published monographs on Richard Wagner, Gustav Mahler, and Alban Berg and wrote extensively on Arnold Schoenberg in *The Philosophy of Modern Music* (trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster [New York: Seabury Press, 1973; reprint, New York: Continuum, 1994]; originally published as *Philosophie der neuen Musik* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1949]), it is fair to say that Beethoven preoccupied him more than any other single composer. He published an important article on Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* and wrote extensively on his music in numerous essays and collected short remarks. After arriving as a refugee from Nazi Germany in New York in 1938, he began to make notes for a "philosophical work on Beethoven" (p. vii). The present volume, a translation of the original German edition of 1993 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp), contains work on the project spanning thirty years, for Adorno clung to the hope of completing a book he planned to call "Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music" (the title chosen by Rolf Tiedemann, the editor, for this volume), but he never came close to achieving that goal. In a letter to Tiedemann, Adorno described the notes as "a diary of his experiences of Beethoven's music" (p. ix), and this is an accurate assessment, for, as Tiedemann explains in his preface, this book "lacks the closed, integrated structure of a completed work; it has remained a fragment" (pp. ix-x). Not only is it a fragment, it is a highly fragmentary fragment, and this explains an important aspect of its interest. Many of the entries are very brief,

but even the more substantial ones possess an intimacy ("Reconstruct how I heard Beethoven as a child" [pp. 3-4]) and spontaneity that a finished book would undoubtedly lack. Moreover, because many of the entries are aphoristic, ideas are expressed with a crystalline quality that might become obscured within an extended discussion. Two good examples of this are found in Adorno's notes on tonality in Beethoven's music: "tonality and its representation circumscribe the social content of Beethoven's music," and "the tonal dynamic corresponds to social production" (pp. 49-50).

While any piece of scholarship reveals much about its author, fragments seem to do this with a particular vividness; the author, not the subject matter of the study, becomes the focus. Just as Beethoven's sketches reveal aspects of his compositional thinking, Adorno's notes take us into the process of a mind at work. We see memos to himself; for example, after the notes on tonality cited above, he writes, "All this needs to be pursued in detail." We admire his deep knowledge of German music from Bach to the twentieth century. We learn about his reading habits, or at least about the authors whose work moved him to make notes. Most striking is that he mentions very few writers on music: he takes issue several times with Paul Bekker and refers several times to Wagner, once to Hugo Riemann, and once to Friedrich Rochlitz (the founding editor of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in 1798 and an important early Beethoven critic). The total number of references to Kant, Hegel,