

Review: Into the Daylight

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Review-article

Into the daylight

IVAN HEWETT revisits a 'normative and exemplary' study of a 'normative and exemplary' body of music

The classical style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven (new edition with CD) Charles Rosen Faber & Faber (London, 1997); xxi, 533pp; £25 pbk. ISBN 0 571 19287 4.

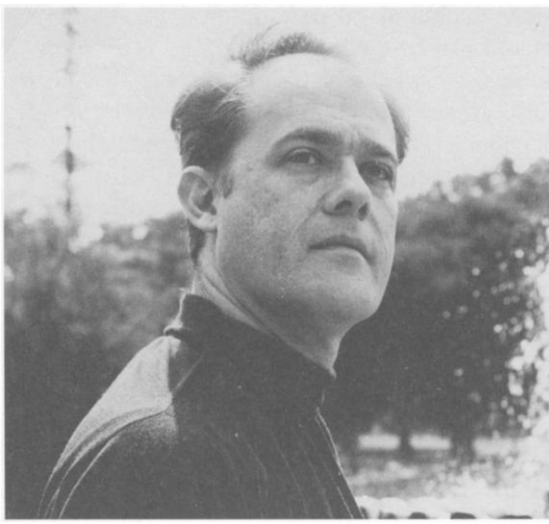
The frontiers of meaning: three informal lectures on music Charles Rosen Kahn & Averill (London, 1998); xii, 146pp; £9.95 pbk. ISBN 1 871082 65 X.

IN THE PREFACE to the first edition of the *The classical style*, which appeared over a quarter of a century ago, Charles Rosen asserted that the word 'classical' implies a style that is both 'exemplary and normative'. It is the central thesis of the book – one much attacked – that we understand the classical style best not through the figures who are typical of the age – the Wagen-seils and Monns – but the ones who exemplify it, above all Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. If one were looking for a description of Rosen's achievement, as exemplified in these two wonderful books, the words exemplary and normative spring to mind, suggesting as they do something that is both a touchstone – and therefore extraordinary – and something that is in a sense normal. The normative work distinguishes itself by its inspired ordinariness. It is simply common sense writ large, and only attracts universal praise because it raises 'what everybody knows' from unconscious assumption to the bright daylight of critical insight.

That tension between an ideal of excellence as something egregious, a peak that towers over the landscape, and an ideal which sees it as the distilled essence of the landscape itself, is one that is resolved, or embodied, in the traditional notion of the masterpiece, that work which is both perfect of its kind and uniquely itself. When people describe *The classical style* as a masterpiece – and many have – this is really what they mean. And it is that very quality of exemplifying *le bon sens*, of teasing out what we all felt, at some dim level, about Haydn string quartets and Mozart operas, that has made Rosen's work so enduringly popular with the music-loving public, and so much an object of deep suspicion with the 'New Musicology'. The whole project of the New Musicology is to refute Rosen's assertion, made in *The frontiers of meaning*, that 'the most cogent analysis deals less with the esoteric than with the commonplace. It helps us to find out what we have not yet realised that we knew, brings to the surface that part of experience of listening of which we were only partially aware.' He goes on to say that 'we should be suspicious of the critic who claims to hear what no-one else has heard, finds significances invisible or inaudible to less perceptive eyes and ears.' And

yet the finding of esoteria is what the New Musicology is all about. It finds 'pelvic thrusts' in the closing bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, unmasks the patriarchal body in Brahms, sees Mendelssohn's *A calm sea and a prosperous voyage* as the image of a rapacious, colonialisng capitalism. It is doubtful whether any of these interpretations ever germinated in the mind of an innocent listener. But of course we none of us are innocent in the eyes of the New Criticism; our ears are fogged to the true meaning of these works by the ideology of the 'pure work', which it is the duty of the New Musicologist zealously to unmask.

IT IS HARDLY SURPRISING that Rosen has become something of a hate-figure among the new critical fraternity (and even more so, of course, among the sorority). What makes Rosen so especially annoying is his delicious combination of civility and malice. The deadliest thrusts to an opponent are always preceded by a bow. There's a definite feel of rationalist man, not just in Rosen's prose, but in his person. His amused smile, capped by that magnificent domed brow, reminds one of Voltaire or Bertrand Russell. Not that Rosen is hostile to the New Musicology, in fact he has welcomed it for bringing a breath of fresh air into criticism. In any case, the criticisms of *The classical style* come from the traditional wing of musicology; the more radical, ideologically-driven reinterpretations of the classical language show their contempt for Rosen by an ostentatious refusal even to refer to him (just as any self-respecting deconstructionist literary critic must show that humanist critics like Eliot or Lionel Trilling have been banished from his mental universe). It is to answer these critics that Rosen has added a new preface to the book. Naturally enough, those that tax Rosen with faults which leave the central thesis of the book unimpaired are the ones he is prepared to acknowledge. So, for example, James Webster's point that he has a prejudice against the earlier works of Haydn is graciously conceded. But he is bound to rebut Kerman's charge that he ignores the importance of formulas in the work of the great classical triumvirate, because that would threaten to reduce them to the level of their contemporaries.



quiet. The eminent ethnographer Clifford Geertz remarks that most of his colleagues are

harassed by grave inner uncertainties, amounting almost to a sort of hypochondria, concerning how one can know that anything one says about other forms of life is a matter of fact so. This loss of confidence, and the crisis in ethnographic writing that goes with it, is a contemporary phenomenon and is due to contemporary developments. It is how things stand with us these days.²

It is how things stand in musicology too: so whence comes Rosen's exasperating serenity?

The answer Rosen's critics would give is that he's simply refused to move with the times. It is true that being up-to-date has never been high on Rosen's list of priorities. 'Today's critical climate will be yesterday's very soon', he observes, *à propos* James Webster's lament that the unaltered reissue of Joseph Kerman's *Opera as drama* 'only emphasises its dated qualities'. The wry scepticism of that remark points to a deeper reason why Rosen might be unmoved by the epistemological doubts now creeping through musicology. These doubts spring from the 'post-modern' conviction that traditional 'hard' epistemology 'promotes the rhetoric of impersonality into an epistemological first principle.'³ It aims at universal truths, pronounced by a voice which claims to be the voice of any rational person. Postmodernism wants to put an end to 'grand narratives' of this sort, by asserting that knowledge is always partial, provisional and incorrigibly subjective.

ONE MIGHT OBJECT that the postmodern project is a 'grand narrative' if there ever was one; but in any case one wonders how Rosen's writings could ever have been construed as an example of this wicked patriarchal orthodoxy. Where, in either of these two books, is this alleged impersonal voice uttering hard-edged, universal quasi-scientific truths? What strikes one more and more on rereading *The classical style* is its refusal of authority, its wonderfully personal tone, its distrust of the claims of analysis to unseat the essential subjectivity of criticism. There is a kind of magnificent, stately impersonality of style in Rosen's work, but only someone wedded to the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' could see this as evidence of a kind of epistemological Jacobinism. It is partly good manners, a desire not to interpose himself too overtly between the subject matter and the reader. (Rosen's good manners are another 18th-century trait that nowadays arouses suspicion.) But more importantly it is a convention which, like all conventions, allows the essential subjectivity of the text to shine through all the more clearly. Moreover, that inimitable Rosen tone – amused, serene, waspish – arises from a philosophical scepticism which

1. Carolyn Abbate & Roger Parker: 'Dismembering Mozart', in *Cambridge Opera Journal* vol.2 no.2, p.195.

2. Clifford Geertz: *Works and lives: the anthropologist as author* (Polity Press, 1988), pp.71–72.

3. Lawrence Kramer: *Classical music and post-modern knowledge* (University of California Press, 1995), p.6.

In a Haydn quartet, according to Rosen 'the stereotypes are not either used passively or rejected only to produce a surprise: they demand rejustification.'

The really significant portion of this new preface, however, is that dealing with Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker's attack on Rosen's view that Mozart's operas, especially the finales, call on the tonal architecture and dynamic of sonata form. Rosen first of all remarks on the curious tone of resentment that informs the debate. Resentment is an emotion that seems to follow Rosen around; he notices it, for example, in the response to his championship of the avant-garde in recent issues of the *New York Review of Books*. It's easy to see why Rosen's serene good-humour would arouse resentment. It shows that he is somehow immune to the crisis afflicting musicology, which is now racked by agonies of doubt about its values, and its claims to deliver any kind of knowledge whatsoever. Typical of the self-lacerating tone is the page in Nicholas Cook's new book *A very short introduction to music*, where he confesses that Brahms doesn't move him quite as it used to; an observation accompanied by a hint that to enjoy this kind of music is now ideologically suspect. We find it too in Abbate and Parker's thesis, that Mozart's opera finales work, not by co-ordinating the musical and theatrical elements (as Rosen and Kerman assert), but by making them work against each other. The trouble is that disjunction can happen in an infinite number of ways, whereas the number of meaningful forms of conjunction is necessarily limited. It follows that only the latter sort of relation is amenable to critical elucidation; which explains why, as Abbate and Parker ruefully acknowledge, 'clarion calls for ambiguity and disjunction have a way of falling flat'.¹ (Rosen, as one would expect, declines the clarion call, and quietly insists that in Mozart's finales, the dynamics of sonata form do indeed proceed hand-in-hand with the dynamics of the drama.) Musicology is not alone in its self-questioning dis-

is really far more unsettling than anything in the pages of Kramer or Subotnick. It's his scepticism (plus of course his good sense) which protects Rosen from the dire effects of postmodernism, which likes to think it's sceptical, but in fact is an impossible marriage of scepticism-plus-ideology (impossible because ideology implies belief, and belief and scepticism are by definition incompatible). In *The romantic generation* he remarks on the way a theme in Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust* sounds awkward on its first appearance, sounds much less odd on the second, and by the third has become 'convincing, beautiful without any reservation, completely normal'. Rosen says it reminds one (that's to say it reminds *him*) of the Bellman in 'The hunting of the snark': anything said three times is true. This suggests that the methods of art and those of the demagogue can sometimes be akin in being, not merely devoid of intelligence, but actually subversive of it. And many pages of *The frontiers of meaning* are given over to showing how even the most ludicrous misapprehension of musical meaning will be believed by the brightest people, and endlessly repeated, just because they've seen it in some supposedly authoritative source. (One especially telling example is the recapitulation in the first movement of Chopin's Bb minor Sonata, which pianists persist in beginning from the double bar at bar 5, despite the harmonic nonsense that results.) Analysis, with its claims to explain things with mechanical certainty, also draws his scorn. He points out with glee how, in the classical language, any motive can be 'derived' from almost any other, given that the basic building blocks are always triadic or scalic, and says that motivic analysis 'can be taught in five minutes to any student, and he can produce term papers on motivic analysis while watching television or doing anything else that engages his mind while leaving his hands free.'

Misapplied analyses, misreadings thoughtlessly repeated, are all ways in which 'music threatens to spill over easily into nonsense'. Music can become meaningful or nonsensical through time; but a piece of music of any originality tends to begin its life as nonsense, as its listeners cannot grasp its language on a first hearing. Rosen insists that simply getting used to music is an essential precondition of understanding it. But then how do we escape from the thorough-going scepticism of Hume, who said that knowledge of any kind was simply habit? Is music finally nothing more than high-class demagoguery? Rosen would say no – 'In the long run, wrong meanings are finally found out.' And not just wrong meanings, but also misapplied values: Rosen notices with satisfaction that the efforts to instate minor composers like Telemann as great ones eventually fail. This, for him, is evidence that there is an objective aspect to the 'greatness' of great works, some-

thing which forces their canonic status on listeners and players (who may begin by actively disliking these works). This isn't to say that great works are *sui generis* and 'set the criteria by which they themselves are to be judged' – the Romantic view of criticism. It is more that criticism seeks for the mysterious qualities that make the Haydn quartet and Mozart opera both self-sufficient (they 'set their own terms') and ideal examples of the classical language. They are, in short, exemplary and normative – which brings us back to where we started.

DEMONSTRATING that marvellous paradox is the positive aspect of Rosen's writing, and it is for that we should treasure it, however enjoyable the witty demolition of rival views might be. These two books give us fresh examples of Rosen's wonderful critical insight. In *The frontiers of meaning* he finds illuminating new things to say about the relation between Beethoven and Schubert. And in the new edition of *The classical style* he adds a new chapter on Beethoven, in which he shows how aspects of the tradition Beethoven absorbed in his youth reappear, magically transfigured, in his last works. These can be extraordinarily humble, as in the trill that appears over a dominant harmony at the end of a cadenza. This hackneyed device becomes the scene of some of Beethoven's boldest strokes. The return to the past takes on an idealising character in the last of the 'Diabelli' Variations, whose amiable civility evokes a civilisation that had already vanished. The tone of this chapter is subtly different to the rest of the book. It is more relaxed, more affectionate, and at the same time bolder. It is not bolder in the sense of being more original; indeed the central observation, that Beethoven is trying 'not so much to achieve a form of expression as to allow the musical language to speak for itself', sounds almost hackneyed. It's more that Rosen's insights become startling in their very simplicity. He remarks of a passage in the second movement of the Piano Sonata op.111 that it is 'banal', in a way analogous to the 18th-century model on which this passage draws. It's a shocking thought, yet when one sees the passage quoted one cannot but agree. Later on he remarks 'we tend to forget the lyrical Beethoven', an observation that itself flirts with banality. As one reads, one becomes aware of a marvellous parallel between the style and the subject matter: in both, the most ordinary materials are made to yield a profundity. This is a kind of criticism granted to very few writers, one which bestows a sense of self-revelation by pointing to the profound congruence between music's nature and our own. It is a peculiarly moving experience, and it confirms Rosen as one of the greatest among writers on music.