

Music and Victorian England: A Tale of Two Myths*

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On the 30th of April 1859 a new periodical combining entertainment with social purpose appeared in London. It was called *All the Year Round*, and it contained the first instalment of an engrossing story set in Paris and London some eighty years earlier, during the French Revolution. These are the opening words, now famous:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.¹

The story is, of course, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, and the opening string of superlatives was meant as much to capture the reader's attention as to set up the novel's central dichotomy, a dramatic contrast between individual love and mob violence. Yet before finishing the first paragraph, the reader learns that this description of the scene refers not only to the past. The same epithets are meant to apply equally to the 'present age', Victorian Britain, with her economic superiority and scientific progress, her social deprivation and moral injustice. Dickens's source for his novel was literary – Thomas Carlyle's history of the French Revolution – but his concern was social. He was an outspoken critic of contemporary abuses at home, the sort of misery that had characterized his own childhood and that still threatened, in the 1850s, to erupt into English revolutionary violence. Always a didactic novelist, Dickens here chose a historical backdrop to convey his modern message about reform.²

I have enlisted him to launch my own tale of music in Victorian England – or more accurately, of how music in that time and place has been seen – for two reasons. The first is methodological. Dickens's dual perspective is a cogent reminder that our views about the past are inevitably conditioned by our experience of the present – even if, I would add to this audience, we

*This paper originated in a search of sound archives for the voices of period witnesses. I would like to thank Timothy Day of the National Sound Archive (British Library) and Norma Jones of the BBC Sound Archive for their valuable assistance. The two recorded excerpts played in Madrid are reproduced here *verbatim*.

¹ Charles Dickens, 'A Tale of Two Cities', *All the Year Round* (30 April 1859), 1. Dickens was also the magazine's founding editor. The story unfolded in weekly numbers to 26 November, and was then immediately issued in book form by Chapman & Hall, publishers of the magazine.

² See George Woodcock, Introduction to the Penguin Classics edition (London, 1985), 12-22.

consult stacks of nineteenth-century periodicals, page by page, for fresh and authoritative information. Ultimately we select and interpret that information at a distance, with a bias both personal and modern. My second reason is more specific. The novelist's words reflect two opposing views of the Victorian era that were already held at the time and still characterize thinking about the period today: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times'. On music and musical life in particular, both points of view may be found in the contemporary press and both are supported by events. It was, after all, a paradoxical age of increasing musical literacy and impressive institutional growth, but elusive musical audiences and lacklustre composition.³ In subsequent musical writing, however, down to our own day, the negative view has almost totally predominated.

Indeed, it may surprise you that anything good, let alone a description like 'the best of times', should ever have applied to music in nineteenth-century England, so thorough was the hatchet job performed on Victorian taste and practice by a few later writers, notably George Bernard Shaw, Frank Howes and Winton Dean (to name only the most articulate). Now rest assured I am not about to defend their special targets – Victorian hypocrisy and philistinism, dreary sentimentality, the cult of the oratorio. But I believe we should note the object or method of each of these critics before swallowing everything they say. Shaw, known and admired for his wit, was frequently given to wild (but memorable) overstatement to make a point, usually deprecating; Howes was intent on describing the new English school of the early twentieth century as a 'renaissance' (and so needed a preceding Dark Age for it to progress beyond); Dean, keen to demonstrate the theatricality of Handel's oratorios, found it useful to debunk puritanical Victorians for not appreciating the composer's full achievement correctly.⁴ The basic stance may have been justified in each case, but the language is loaded and the treatment dismissive.

Here is a brief reminder of the power of Shaw's wit and his effectiveness as a critic, even late in life. This excerpt comes from a speech he gave in London in 1938 to celebrate the belated founding of the National Theatre. On this occasion his target was not the Victorians *per se* but the English:

Do the English people *want* a National Theatre? Well, of course, they don't. They never want anything. What happens is: they've got a British Museum, but they never wanted it; they've got Westminster Abbey, but they never wanted it. But now that they've got it, now that it stands there as a mysterious phenomenon that came to them in some sort of fashion, they quite approve of it, and they feel that the place would be incomplete without it.⁵

³ For the gap between 'increasing' musical literacy and the failure rate of new music periodicals, see Leanne Langley, 'The Life and Death of *The Harmonicon*: An Analysis', *RMA Research Chronicle* 22 (1989), 137-63. The notion of paradox in the political and social history of early Victorian England generally is explored by John Dodds, in *The Age of Paradox: A Biography of England, 1841-1851* (London, 1953).

⁴ See Dan H. Laurence, ed., *Shaw's Music: The Complete Musical Criticism*, 3 vols. (London, 1981); Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance* (London, 1966); and Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London, 1959).

⁵ From a speech recorded at the site of the proposed National Theatre on 22 April 1938 (BBC, LP 1783). I am grateful to Roma Woodnutt and the Society of Authors on behalf of the Bernard Shaw Estate for permission to use this extract.

The tone is satiric yet affectionate, the jibe well directed. And as you can hear, the listening audience are made to laugh out loud at their own history of cultural complacency. It is a familiar Shavian device and one he applied ruthlessly to Victorian cant on music too, including oratorio culture, notably in the weekly journals *The Hornet* (1876-7) and *The Star* (1888-90, signing Corno di Bassetto). The pity is that his endless gift for the quippy remark, employed to make people think, may have coloured our total view of a whole epoch too darkly and a little too easily.⁶

Surely the generation of each of these writers played a part in their perspective. Shaw was a Victorian who lived until 1950. Frank Howes was born in 1891 and Winton Dean in 1916, but they too are both close enough to the high Victorian age to make one wonder whether there was not a reactionary, even an angry, element in their judgements about the period, reflecting their need to escape out from under its weight and make a fresh, original start, either in their own creative work or in revisionist history.⁷ Fair enough, but we had all better be careful in that case. Since each generation believes it is better than the previous one, and closer to the truth, we ourselves may disparage unduly what has gone before.

As you may be thinking, though, the heavy atmosphere, hypocrisy and bad taste associated with 'Victorianism' – dreaded word, I wish we could ban it! – were not the only musical evidences of 'the worst of times'. What matters most, perhaps, is the actual music that was produced, or not produced. The country's lack of a monumental composer between Purcell and Elgar is still the chief reason for the neglect of nineteenth-century England by musicologists. (This lack bothered some Victorians too, so at least it's an 'authentic' worry.) Yet not only have several tenable explanations been put forward for the problem both in the contemporary press and by modern historians;⁸ recent thinking in our discipline has also begun to question whether it should be seen as a problem at all. Pathology seems to be giving way to anatomy, as new studies appear of how whole musical cultures worked, layer by layer, and of the relationships between music and other occupations, music and commerce, music and society, and so on. In all places and periods, studies of the 'great art work', while not

⁶ Shaw's readability, but also his blindspots and some of his misjudgements, have been noted by Robert Anderson in 'Shaw, (George) Bernard', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 20 vols. (London, 1980), xvii, 232-33; and by Stephen Banfield, in 'Aesthetics and Criticism', *Music in Britain: The Romantic Age, 1800-1914*, ed. Nicholas Temperley (London, 1981), 469-73.

⁷ Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford, 1973), speaks of the tendency of creative artists to misinterpret their predecessors in an attempt to exorcise unwanted influence. The process involves eccentric 'reinterpretation' of the past for a predetermined (present) purpose. Both Schenker and Schoenberg were capable of such thought, according to Milton Babbitt ('A Composer's View', *Music Librarianship in America*, ed. Michael Ochs, in *Harvard Library Bulletin*, n.s. ii/1 [1991], 123-32). Writers and critics seem no less prone.

⁸ Among the reasons mentioned in the musical press are insufficient patronage for indigenous composers and a frank lack of genius. Music historians have identified other causes, such as insufficient training and encouragement (Nicholas Temperley, 'The Lost Chord', *Victorian Studies* 30 [1986-7], 7-23), the role music played in society and the lack of a nationalist political movement that would have helped define English musical identity (Stephen Banfield, 'The Artist and Society', *Music in Britain: The Romantic Age, 1800-1914*, 11-28).

exactly receding, now have to take their place alongside broader contextual studies. For music and Victorian England, no scholarly trend could be more apt, and as far as periodicals research goes, more timely.

We are perhaps too ready to assume, by the way, that making links between music and the world that gives rise to it is something new, or something that only professional music historians (or students of the press) have thought about. Consider this extract from a talk given by Sir Thomas Beecham in 1953. Neither musicologist nor historian, he was a practising musician who did as much as anyone for English musical life in the twentieth century. His subject on this occasion was the music of Frederick Delius, still neglected in the 1950s. For Beecham, Delius's work represented beauty and grace at a time when most modern music was something to be wary of. Clearly the horrors of war in the first half of the century have become inseparable in Beecham's mind from an aesthetic view of the period, including most of its music, while previous centuries by contrast have acquired both a moral and a cultural rosy glow. He begins his talk with some historical time-travelling:

I sometimes think that it might be worth living long enough to read what the historians of the future will have to say about our twentieth century. What I mean is, how will they describe its main characteristics in comparison with those of the nineteenth, the eighteenth, the seventeenth and so on backwards? For my part, I have little doubt that they will dub it, or at the least the greater part of it, the silly, the senseless and the savage century. Almost from its beginning we have lived in a state of world warfare perhaps unprecedented in the previous history of the world. And we are still haunted by the fear of a continuation of this saturnian epidemic of misfortune. We have also been the horrified spectators of revolutions and outbreaks of violence in several parts of the world, in which millions of innocent human beings have been massacred in cold blood by their fellow creatures. Compared with the terrible happenings of our own era, all previous public crimes, during the three centuries preceding our own, pale into insignificance.⁹

This brings me back to the 'best of times', a view that took hold in the early years of the nineteenth century after the English victory of 1815 had brought political superiority, and the Industrial Revolution, economic hegemony. A spirit of optimism and a belief in the possibility of unlimited intellectual progress were already present, and steps towards social reform had already been taken, when Victoria came to the throne in 1837. The mood intensified until, later, virtually the whole century was seen in mythic terms as a glorious time of liberalism and reason, material growth, universal education, scientific achievement and social development. Families were cozy, warm and happy, and the enjoyment of music was spread throughout the land.

Now some of this is clearly image-making of a kind the Victorians invented and many believed in. But to judge from the growth and diversity of the musical press, the positive image of music is not wholly an

⁹ From an introduction to a performance of Delius's *Irmelin*, recorded on 17 November 1953 (BBC, T 19924). For permission to play this extract I must thank Lady Beecham and the Sir Thomas Beecham Archive.

exaggeration; a boom in new periodical titles began in the 1870s, and genuine enthusiasm about music and musical activity filled many pages.¹⁰ In professional circles, too, tangible advances were made. The Philharmonic Society and two conservatories were founded, public chamber concerts and sonata recitals were given for the first time, the Bach revival spread from a few devotees to whole choral societies, major editions of Purcell and Byrd were undertaken, printed music and domestic pianos became affordable for almost everyone, the structure for an English national opera was put in place, and a serious forum for composers and scholars was permanently established. By all accounts, musical Victorians were active and enterprising indeed.

Ultimately the *practice* of music among all social groups and in more centres than London will be seen as the signal musical achievement in the period. Some fine scholarly work has already been done in the social history of popular music-making – brass bands, choral societies, subscription and popular concerts (in Bradford for example) – and the evidence suggests that this activity was both more far-reaching and more closely linked with ‘art music’ than has been supposed; much of this research depends on the contemporary press, general newspapers as well as music periodicals.¹¹ Plenty of other lines remain to be investigated. Did the early music revival so prominent in London today really begin with Arnold Dolmetsch and his recorders, or can it be traced earlier, perhaps to the popular education movement of the 1820s and 30s? Were serious orchestral concerts truly open to the public for most of the era, or did music-lovers of all classes normally hear their first orchestra in an opera house, theatre, music hall or seaside pavilion? In the early years of the twentieth century, was Elgar (so German-sounding, so Brahmsian) really considered the great white hope of English music, or was it someone else, say, Granville Bantock or a young Ralph Vaughan Williams? Journals may reveal some surprising and variegated answers.

‘Variegated’ is the key word – one that describes both the musical culture of Victorian England and its press. For the researcher, variegation presents danger as well as opportunity. We all know you can find almost anything you want in press sources, fact or opinion; you can ‘prove’ or support almost any thesis (or myth) from the ‘best of times’ to the ‘worst’. Now with RIPM Indexes,¹² you can do it even faster. No, in the end my plea for trying to find a middle ground between the best and the worst in England is really a call for scholarly responsibility in using the press – reading, tracing, comparing, interpreting. Then like Dickens’s historical novel, the real tale of music and Victorian England will unfold against a background that is both believable and true.

¹⁰ See Leanne Langley, ‘The Musical Press in Nineteenth-Century England’, *Notes* 46 (1990), 583-92.

¹¹ See David Russell, *Popular Music in England, 1840-1914: A Social History* (Manchester, 1987), reviewed by James Obelkevich in *Music and Letters* 71 (1990), 582-4. See also Russell’s ‘Provincial Concerts in England, 1865-1914: A Case Study of Bradford’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 114 (1989), 43-55.

¹² Répertoire international de la presse musicale, a retrospective periodicals indexing project begun in the early 1980s.