The Oxford History of Western Music: A Canadian Reflection

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The new six-volume *Oxford History of Western Music* by Richard Taruskin may be the largest comprehensive one-author music history in history.[1] I cannot claim to have read its entire 4,154 pages, but have browsed extensively and with great interest in the set recently acquired by the Faculty of Music Library at the University of Toronto—a set welcomed by other users in the first months of 2005, to judge from the fresh sprinkling of pencilled marginalia. Unlike its predecessors, the *Oxford History of Music*, 6 vols., 1901-05, edited by W. H. Hadow, and the *New Oxford History of Music*, 11 vols., 1954-60, edited by a board with J. A. Westrup as chair, this work emerges not from Oxford but from Berkeley, and not from a group of specialist authors under an editor but from a single author (though with a large team of helpers). The division of the subject into volumes also differs notably: where *OHM* treated earlier periods more or less evenly, ending with late Romanticism, and *NOHM* followed suit, bringing the story up to the mid-twentieth century, out of Taruskin's five volumes of text (the sixth consists of a chronology, bibliography, and general index) two, the fourth and fifth, are devoted to music in the twentieth century.

My browse has sparked a re-reading of previous histories, especially those I perused as a student and later with my own students. These range from handy one-volume texts (with sample exam questions at the end of each chapter) to original studies on a vaster scale.

The introductory note to H.G. Bonavia Hunt's *A Concise History of Music*, 20th ed., 1918, includes the following:

> ...[A]ll previous Histories of Music are distinguished from the present effort in the respect that they have no plan at all, beyond the two very general features of chronological order (rarely adhered to) and the grouping of composers and events into a number of "schools." The voluminous works of Burney and Hawkins each form a mass of promiscuous and ill-digested matter...; while, as both works are now a century old, they stop short of the most productive as well as the most interesting period of musical history.

Taruskin finds the past hundred years both more productive and, yes, more interesting than previous musical eras. This emphasis on recent history, while it may distort the global picture, has the advantage of providing the first serious *historical* study of musical modernism and its various repercussions. In my teaching days we constantly awaited a comprehensive and well-reasoned historical view of our own period. When the Norton history series was first issued, just after World War II, all periods except classical and modern were

[1] Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, 6 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

covered. Did anyone ever write the classical volume? An interim solution for the modern one was an interesting monograph previously published in Spanish, Adolfo Salazar's *Music in Our Time* (1944; English translation by Isabel Pope, 1946), which however lacked the comprehensiveness of the other studies in the series. When eventually the gap was filled by William Austin's massive *Music in the Twentieth Century* (1966), it was greeted by several reviewers as a publishing disaster. Its writing style may be judged from a random sentence: (re Roger Quilter) "His songs constituted an irreplaceable monument of Edwardian gentility, by no means devoid of courage for adventure, but understating all that, rather." In a later passage, again just one sentence long, the author gives names and dates of nine of the "many English composers still younger than Britten," characterizing them in journalist's shorthand as "brilliant," "easygoing," "solid," "modest," "graceful," "passionate," and "fabulously versatile." The phone-directory approach is further exemplified in a string of references to four Jugoslavs, two Bulgarians, a Portuguese, an Israeli, and six Latin Americans, all in the same paragraph.

The readings we have had to rely on, then, for an overview of the newer music, were the work of chroniclers rather than historians. Taruskin's generous attention to the music of the century just passed is timely and well justified. "Twentieth century music" is indeed listed as one of his special areas, on the current Berkeley Web site, alongside "Russian music," "Stravinsky," and "nationalism."

He describes the new history as an account of Western music's "literate genres"—the written-down repertoire from the early Middle Ages to today. His introductory essay justifies the implied limitations by noting of this tradition that "its beginnings are known and explicable," adding "...and its end is now foreseeable (and also explicable)." For Taruskin, the classical canon's "dominance...[is] now in irreversible process of decline." Elaborating this view in volume 5, he quotes figures of the downward trend in classical record sales from the 1970s to the present, when at a mere three percent of the market "classical music seemed destined to become the culture industry's 'basket case'." Jumping to the end to find how the story turns out, the reader discovers Western music history ending where it began, in Christian sacred music – that is, in the work of Pärt, Tavener, and their meditative/minimalist ilk: "that sort of work seems to be the most marketable and profitable music the literate tradition can boast at a time when" (again) "its end is foreseeable."

> Most books that call themselves histories of Western music...are in fact surveys, which cover—and celebrate—the relevant repertoire, but make little effort to explain why and how things happened as they did. This set of books is an attempt at a true history.

This comes from the introduction to volume 1, again. Despite the complexity of the task, Taruskin says he felt "impelled...to subject that impossibly heterogeneous body of music to one more (perhaps the last) comprehensive examination." It was the complexity, not the feeling of Spenglerian doom, that led Friedrich Blume to foresee, forty years ago, that *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* would likely be the last comprehensive music dictionary. But larger and even more complicated

dictionaries continue to appear (including new editions of both *MGG* and *New Grove*), few limiting themselves either to the literate tradition or indeed to Western repertoire.

I started to read music history, I think, around the age of twelve. It was for me, as for many Canadian children at the time, an ancillary to taking music lessons under the Toronto Conservatory of Music exam system. Our text, H. C. Colles's *The Growth of Music*, covered the lives and works of Western European composers from the baroque, classical, and romantic eras (though not using those terms). The book, addressed to young readers, had initially appeared in 1912 in three slim volumes. My copy of the second edition (1939) includes all three under one binding. I dutifully memorized "Eisenach, Mühlhausen, Arnstadt, Weimar...," the towns where J. S. Bach held appointments, and learned to spout Colles's opinions, such as—

> [P]laced alongside [Berlioz or Wagner], Brahms's orchestration seems elementary... The sound of the orchestra was not his main object; sometimes he could be almost careless about it.

(Not until university did I actually study a Brahms orchestral score, and thereby develop a broader view.) The TCM had tried in the early twentieth century to carve an educational path independent of its rivals in Mother Britain, but remained reliant on this English text until the 1960s. Looking at Colles again lately, though struck by its parental tone, I also recognized the timelessness of the following, from the preface to that second edition: "The danger to education today is lest young people should hear too much music and listen to it too little."

Parental, and also self-secure, are the critical pronouncements of the original *OHM*. Entrusted with the volume on seventeenth-century music, Hubert Parry began his preface with this:

> The seventeenth century is, musically, almost a blank, even to those who take more than an average interest in the Art... But...there was fully as much activity in musical production throughout the century as at other times; and lovers of the Art were quite under the impression that the music of their time would compare favourably with that of other times, and impress those that came after as much as it impressed themselves. The event proved it singularly short lived; and intrinsically most of it seems to casual observers little better than an archeological curiosity. Yet to those whose sympathies extend a little further...

This is not exactly appetite-whetting. Parry's detailed perusal of Charpentier's *Médée* hardly even damns the score with faint praise:

> | ...some of the most absurd traditions...are as conspicuous as ever.
>
> | The second act is dramatically more futile still.
>
> | ...the importation of human feeling into the scheme in sincerer moments threw the preposterous artificiality

> of the ballet scenes...into the more grotesque relief.

Parry's description, filtered through his comfortable Edwardian spectacles, at least relates to a specific score, and he illustrates it with a couple of musical quotations; whereas the concise paragraph about Charpentier in the volume of the *NOHM* entitled *Opera and Church Music, 1630-1750,* after stating that "Charpentier was the first French composer to try and shake off the influence of Lully," tells us of *Médée* only that in it the composer shows his "marked interest in Italian music."

Alongside Parry, *OHM* contains some of the earliest extensive critical writings in English on medieval music, in the volumes assigned to H. E. Wooldridge. Comparing the music of the fifteenth century to that of the fourteenth, this author notes "very few points of difference:"

> We observe in both the same incapability to imagine the main subject as apart from a *cantus prius factus*, and the same reliance upon plainsong or popular melody, or something written in imitation of these; ...the same timidity and absence of resource in the methods of opening the composition; we are struck by the same irrational use of discord, which is employed, apparently, sometimes with a view to expression and sometimes from sheer inability to preserve any kind of melody if concordance were always necessary; the same superstitious avoidance of the third in the close; and finally the same insensibility to the need of harmonic propriety in groups of sounds.

(Take that, Dunstable, Dufay, Ockeghem!) Wooldridge's negative summary, first appearing in 1901, remained unchanged in the second edition of 1932. I was reminded of it again just the other day on hearing "the same superstitious avoidance of the third" in the final bars of a Bach cantata.

A Canadian publication of 1931 was a study of a particular era rather than a comprehensive survey. I received Leo Smith's *Music of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* as a prize from my piano teacher when I was ten. Years later, the author was among my professors at the University of Toronto. He always acknowledged that living in Canada had not erased his Englishness, and the book's tone reflects this. After Purcell's death, he tells us, "history records no other great [musical] genius of English birth until perhaps a couple of centuries later." As an afterthought, a delicious footnote adds: "Possibly Arne might be considered a genius."

The flagship of the Norton music-history fleet was Paul Henry Lang's *Music in Western Civilization* (1941). As the title implied, in its basic premises it differed radically from its English-language predecessors: it acknowledged a limitation to Western music, and viewed it in a cultural and social context. It contained no musical examples, and indeed nothing that could be called musical analysis. Instead, it placed musical developments against a backdrop of literature, philosophy, and art. Against the English scholars' insularity we now recognized a humanistic and international outlook—international but heavily Eurocentric, "America" being grudgingly included on the "peripheries" of the main story. The twenty-page bibliography, in eight-point type, floored us with its range of

languages. Lang, Hungarian by birth, wrote with both authority and conviction, in showy English sentences bursting with idioms. He depicts the music of C. P. E. Bach as "a beacon in the eighteenth century, the rays of which illuminated the road for everyone:"

> This great musician has become known to posterity as a "forerunner," which in our modern practice of art criticism relegates him to dutiful citation among the yeomen who cleared the underbrush for the oaks. Thus he is always mentioned but never performed or appreciated in his own right... When his works are better known we shall recognize [him] as the outstanding master of the late rococo, of preclassical times, a master who triumphed over the weaknesses of the art and atmosphere of his own period.

Lang evidently regarded the advent of modern musicology as a happening second in importance only to *the* Advent. In his generation, he had wide influence; Taruskin acknowledges him among his early teachers.

The contributors of specialized volumes to the Norton series were Gustave Reese on medieval and renaissance music (1940, 1954), Manfred Bukofzer on the baroque, and Alfred Einstein on romanticism (both 1947); the last two were, like Lang, European refugee musicologists. These were works that I read from cover to cover as they appeared and that influenced my thinking about music as an undergraduate and as a young teacher assigned to music-history courses. After the laconic Parry and Smith, Bukofzer's clear and knowledgeable presentation of baroque style, and his pointed choice of musical examples, had a strong impact; this is a study I still greatly admire.

As noted already, as late as the mid-1960s Canadian teenagers were still studying old Colles. The book seemed to me not only too opinionated and too English but by this time badly out of date: aside from a one-sentence allusion to Debussy and Ravel, there is no mention of music composed later than 1900 (take that, Mahler, Strauss!). In response to criticisms from teachers like me, the Conservatory administration proposed the adoption of a new text. John Russell's *A History of Music for Young People* turned out to be a strained attempt at reaching young readers, and its style employed an even more foreign vocabulary than either Colles's or Smith's:

> | [re polyphony:] If the tunes are built for each other so that they will fit together like the cogwheels in a gearbox they are said to *harmonize*.
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> | [re the young Handel's emigration to Italy:] One might as well expect a brilliant young fast bowler to stay with his village team when the county was wanting him.
>
> | This unhappy ending to Mozart's only settled job...meant that Mozart, from that time, had to make a living by writing and performing music, just as a confectioner does by selling sweets.
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> | Bartók...is still thought of by many present-day music-lovers as the man who "brought wrong notes into music!"... We can't understand his language; it sounds perfectly

> horrible to us, like a thousand goods-trains shunting in the middle of the night. But we can't stop listening, because...

When I protested the proposal, not just for the book's style but also for a few really offensive passages which bordered on racism, the Conservatory suggested I should write a history text from a Canadian standpoint, and, with this encouragement, I spent several months designing one and starting to write it. But it was never finished, and I soon learned that the recommended new text would be Joseph Machlis's popular *The Enjoyment of Music* (1955). As in so many areas of Canadian education in the 60s, a long-established English guide was discarded in favor of an American one.

Cecil Forsyth's chapter on then-new musical developments, in the (decidedly English) work he co-authored with C. V. Stanford (*A History of Music*, 1916) includes this:

> Finnish music is in a healthy condition... [I]n spite of the remoteness and comparative poverty of the country it has made good progress. All friends of the little nations must wish well to Finland.

By 2005 we have recovered from expectations of "good progress," but Richard Taruskin proves no friend to the "little nations." The absence in volumes 4 and 5 of the composers Nielsen, McCunn, Villa-Lobos, Sculthorpe, Blomdahl, Takemitsu, Tubin, and Somers indicates that compositional activities in Denmark, Scotland, Brazil, Australia, Sweden, Japan, and Estonia—not to mention Canada—are not to be mentioned alongside, say, a mid-career talent such as Aaron Jay Kernis (U. S.). Taruskin excuses other more glaring omissions (Vaughan Williams, for example) by insisting his work is a history and not a survey. It is, however, a history with a distinctly imperialist viewpoint. Russian, German, English, and French repertoires are virtually the only ones discussed until the arrival of the *États-unisiens.*

The new history not only establishes written-down musics in their social context (a scene-setter on the post-World War II era extends to six paragraphs, accompanied by photos of Albert Einstein and the atomic bomb, before referring to music at all) but also analyzes them—Josquin, Mozart, Scriabin, Ligeti—with commendable thoroughness. The introduction makes a rapid-fire comment on current thinking in this regard: it is the influence of the "preposterously overrated" Theodor Adorno that "has caused the work of the 'new musicologists' of the 1980s and 1990s...to age with such stunning rapidity." I found this opinion refreshing, having been increasingly frustrated by recent music periodicals in which music seems to be the one subject never discussed. (Take that, McClary, Kramer! But I note Taruskin several times quotes both these adherents of the New Musicology, and not always critically; nor is his text quite free from their jargon's "mediating" and "privileging.") Another musicological sacred cow, Carl Dalhaus, becomes a sitting duck for the author's critical judgment: Dalhaus's *Foundations of Music History* "consists, throughout, of a veritable salad of empty binarisms," says Taruskin, citing the "forced dichotomy" of such questions as: Is art history the *history* of art or the history of *art*?

Taruskin sees the division of historical narrative into successive periods as "necessary, but also risky." He rejects the term "Renaissance music," for example: The fifteenth century's "stylistic watershed" was an "internationalization of musical practices - what might be called the musical unification of Europe. But it was not a 'Renaissance,' and there is no point in calling it that," aside from certain parallels to the other arts.

A current periodical article about the origins of *Music in the United States of America* speaks of "the humanities' quickening interest in race, class, and gender" in the 1990s, as the context in which that publication series developed its pluralistic scope.[2] Pluralism and U. S. democracy are indeed the watchwords of the *OHWM*. We have traveled far since the jocular critical asides of, for example, Forsyth:

> Mrs Beach is the American counterpart of the English Miss Smyth... Both ladies show that terrific masculine earnestness that in real life seldom belongs to mere man.

Taruskin's coverage of women practitioners (Hildegard, Francesca Caccini, especially Lili Boulanger) is generous and makes original points. His analysis of *Peter Grimes* (twenty pages, nine musical examples) is one of the few in the bulk of literature on that opera to explore its sexual meaning. He detects anti-Semitism both in Debussy's comments on Dukas and in Stravinsky's adoption of a text (in his 1952 *Cantata*) blaming the Jews for the Crucifixion - but does not cite the possibly racist aspects of the *St. John Passion* and Mendelssohn's *Paulus* noted by other scholars. As a scholar of musical nationalism, he frequently finds political and economic causes for musical events and trends. He explores Copland's leftist works of the 1930s more thoroughly than the composer did himself in the autobiography he co-authored with Vivian Perlis. Contrasting Copland's success with the prominence (at the time anyway) of his rival Roy Harris, Taruskin characterizes the Harris symphonies as "boilerplate romanticism," and finds, in Copland's efforts towards an American national voice,

> ...the only authenticity that counts... The national is a socially negotiated discourse rather than a natural essence. Popular acceptance...is what determines the authenticity of musical nationalism.

In effect this applies to "the literate tradition" the *Billboard*-chart approach used by Charles Hamm for American popular musics. What Taruskin describes as "the transformation of the *avant-garde* into an *arrière-garde* " in the late twentieth century is illustrated by a politico-economic interpretation of Boulez's battles with IRCAM. Of Tom Wolfe's essay on "radical chic" he comments that "many acknowledged its grain of truth." The formula "many thought..." appears recurrently, attached to otherwise unattributed views.

All in all, *OHWM*-browsing is a pleasure. In his coverage of Wagner and Brahms, Taruskin takes the fresh approach

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[2]Richard Crawford: "MUSA's Early Years: The Life and Times of a National Editing Project," *American Music*, 23, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 1-38.

of examining the personal contacts between them, and sees a possible reflection of the *Tristan* Prelude in the opening chromatic rise of Brahms's First Symphony. Again, the opposing late-twentieth-century positions of Carter and Britten (especially their outlooks on modern society) find a late-nineteenth-century parallel in Brahms and Chaikovsky.[3] John Cage's influence is compared to that of Liszt in his time. Ciconia's complicated motets were commissioned by Italian political figures as, in Taruskin's view, "symbols of power:"

> ...the three stanzas [form] a virtual set of strophic variations that in their fascinating interplay of sameness and difference symbolize the ideal of a harmoniously integrated society of free individuals—the ideal to which every modern Italian city-state (or *res publica*, whence "republic") nominally aspired.

He wonders "whether the élite arts that we treasure [in Restoration English music] can truly flourish in a political climate that we would approve"—without defining "we." He invents "maximalism" to cover inflated scores, especially those of the early 1900s with their "rush-to-the-patent-office modernism," illustrating this with chords containing all twelve pitch-classes of the tempered scale by four composers of the period. But, poor Robert Schumann: the historian's offbeat choice for quotation here is *The Bride of Messina* with its "long wet noodle of a love theme."

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[3]Taruskin and Oxford deserve thanks for championing this logical transliteration, rescuing the composer from the T's. May it finally catch on.

Whether by sheer habit or out of masochism, this reviewer always checks comprehensive writings on music for their CanCon. In this work, browsing reveals four Canadian names: Glenn Gould, for his ground-breaking 1957 introduction of the music of the Second Viennese School to the Soviets; Barry Truax, with an electro-acoustic specialist's comments on Ferneyhough; John Oswald ("Of course the stir thus created [threats of litigation over Oswald's *Plunderphonics*] was good for business..."); and James Tenney, for his pioneering efforts in computer music, not for his twenty-year sojourn in Canada. (En passant, there is one non-musical citation: the poem, "In Flanders Fields," by the Canadian John McCrae.) That's it: no Nattiez, no Schafer, no Vivier. By comparison, in Austin, Canada rated a listing of four composers; but Taruskin discerns no Canadian pathways of interest in his journey through music history, no Canadian exemplifications of its many changing trends. Joseph Kerman once defended his lack of attention to U. S. music by saying bluntly there wasn't enough of it that was any good. How would Taruskin justify his lack of attention to that of the U. S.'s northern neighbour? There isn't enough of it that is marketable and profitable?

The one-volume *A History of Western Music* (1960) by Donald Jay Grout (parodied by students as *A History of [Country and] Western Music*), remains in print in the revision by Claude Palisca (6th ed., 2001). Strikingly well organized as a study text, it was never an enjoyable read, and the later editions make it even less so, with their interrupting sidebars and cross-references to audio sources and Web sites. The new Oxford volumes assign such supplements and reader-aids to volume 6 's back-matter.

Though the *OHWM* text seems remarkably free of typos, I ran across a number of careless errors in the musical examples. But none of these is so major as to create confusion; moreover the examples greatly enhance the text, and for this one is admiringly grateful.

A forthcoming publication is Joseph Horowitz's *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall*.[4] Taruskin too, as noted, regards the illness as terminal, and not just in "America." But is it? Concert and opera attendees and CD buyers may be a minority of the population, but that minority, small though it is, outnumbers several times over the audiences of our great-grandparents' day. Indeed, television opera reaches millions. Artists still enjoy international careers, recording firms still release new CDs, and composers still organize Web sites, give interviews, scramble for commissions, and—by God—write new music. Yes, there is too much music, and the structure of musical life is too lopsided and too commercial. But there may be more vital signs in the air than the operas of Adams and the choral lamentations of Pärt.

The "fall" is based on an account of what has happened in later twentieth-century popular music. This is not Taruskin's theme, but is so germane to it that he allots it a fair amount of space. "The popular music associated with the youth culture of the 60s," he says, "became a transforming force affecting all other musics." Rock and roll was "often marketed expressly as a means of widening the generation gap," and, "unlike virtually all previous popular music, it was the opposite of family entertainment." I remember in the early 70s my teenage son asked if I had ever heard of a composer called Stockhausen, and there it was on the cover of *Jazz and Pop*: a promo for an article headed "Karlheinz Stockhausen talks to teens" – about music? no – "about love and sex." Taruskin records Henze's discovery of the Rolling Stones and Stockhausen's appearance as one of the photo icons on the cover of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* album. "Rock did seem to be swallowing up everybody's audience, and appeared to traditionalists of all stripes as the common enemy." But the strategy "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" seems to have had little enduring success. Perhaps the immense pop audience and the various modest classical enclaves have just decided to coexist in peace? The opera buffs are certainly numerous, and by no means all members of a well-heeled élite. The early-music and new-music devotees exhibit enthusiasm and devotion too, in my observation. At a Sunday afternoon concert recently I thought the audience was unexpectedly small, but, checking the local concert guide, *WholeNote*, afterwards, I found there were eighteen other classical events going on in Toronto at the same hour. Western music may be on its last legs, but it's still kicking.

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[4]*Editor's note:* This article was submitted in the summer, shortly before the book was published.

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