

The New Criterion

Books

February 2009

Blanning's castle

by [James Penrose](#)

A review of *The Triumph of Music: The Rise of Composers, Musicians and Their Art* by Tim Blanning.

Following Imperial Royal Kapellmeister Mozart's death on December 5, 1791, things moved quickly. Around two o'clock the very next afternoon (on account of the noxious state of the remains), Mozart's corpse was taken over to Vienna's St. Stephen's Cathedral where it received a quick blessing. Then gravediggers coached it down the road to the St. Marxer Friedhof where, in accordance with a city ordinance by Emperor Joseph II, it was uncoffined and placed in a mass grave. Proceedings appear to have been concluded in just ninety minutes, sunset taking place just after four o'clock. No mourners, not even the widow, witnessed the burial. Even today, Mozart's exact whereabouts are a mystery. Although the composer's friend Franz-Joseph Haydn, later said that posterity "would not see such talent again in a hundred years," it is surprising that for many of those years nobody much cared where Mozart was buried.

Two miles away and thirty-six years later saw an entirely different state of affairs: Following Beethoven's death in March 1827, Europe was plunged into mourning. The body lay in state in Beethoven's Schwartzspanierstrasse apartment for three days while a death mask was taken and members of the public helped themselves to locks of his hair. On a specially declared public holiday, the body was taken to the Church of the Holy Trinity, a few hundred yards away. So packed were the streets, however, that the procession took an hour and a half. Schubert (who would be an immediate neighbor of Beethoven's in the Währinger cemetery some months later) was a pallbearer. Obsequies were delivered by the popular playwright Franz Grillparzer. When Beethoven's body was exhumed and reburied in 1888, Anton Bruckner attended as a witness. Today, the burial plot in Group 32 A of Vienna's Zentralfriedhof is one of that cemetery's most popular destinations.

The disparity between the two funerals was not, of course, due to the relative merits of the composers. Rather, as Tim Blanning describes in *The Triumph of Music*, it came about as a result of a self-perpetuating cycle: Historical and cultural forces propelled music from being "aural wallpaper" to its current pinnacle while, in turn, music spawned and accelerated such forces. The author argues that as Europe became progressively wealthier and more secularized, cultural values increased in importance to the point where they equaled and even surpassed religious ones. Along with this cultural elevation of music (a process Blanning terms "sacralization") and increasing wealth came improvements in technology, infrastructure, and musical technique that, in turn, contributed to the pace of, and opportunities for, change.

With the elevation of cultural values came a corresponding elevation of the status of writers, artists and above all musicians. Mozart simply lived at a time when the status of musicians was low. He

was as much a creature of his time as Beethoven was of his. Blanning describes how Haydn's creative life, spanning much of Mozart's and Beethoven's, reflected both worlds:

At the beginning of his career Haydn became famous because he was the *Kapellmeister* for the Esterházy; by the time he died, the Esterházy were famous because their *Kapellmeister* was Haydn.

Music has never looked back, Blanning says, and shows us that musicians enjoy considerably more wealth, influence, and status than practitioners of other creative arts—and that the situation is unlikely to change.

The Triumph of Music succeeds in its goal of describing music as an instrument of cultural and political change; however, it omits much of the story. Although there are hints of an explanation, Blanning does not show how music, alone among the arts, has such extraordinary power to move us—and why, as a result, it was instrumental in changing society and culture. True, the book starts with a discussion of how thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Shakespeare recognized the power of music to form the mind. “When modes of music change,” wrote Plato in *The Republic*, “the fundamental laws of the state always change with them.” But the author seems to have little patience for describing the mechanics of how music stimulated social and cultural change. He treats music as a commodity—classical music, Romantic music, and jazz are all one with the sole criterion for musical greatness being the ability to survive the passage of time. For Blanning, there is no good or bad—music is just music. Richard Wagner once sneered that a certain contemporary's compositions were little more than “effects without causes.” *The Triumph of Music* has something of the same problem.

Until fairly recently, the cultural, financial, political, and social influences on music have not received much attention. That has begun to change. The social and cultural aspects of music history (as epitomized in hundreds of books since the 1970s) have given music history a refreshing depth and liveliness. Approaches taken by this new strain of works include analyzing contemporaneous cultural and social influences and shifting the emphasis away from the composer or the piece in favor of performance. The approach taken by these works often focuses less on composers and their works than on the circumstances of how individual works came to be performed, how performances were received, what factors contributed to success (or failure), inside influences brought to bear, the personal perceptions of performer and composer, and the influence of criticism and the press.

The Triumph of Music lies somewhat in this tradition. It is divided into five sections that focus on the musician's evolving status from little more than chattel to cultural icon; Romanticism and its aftereffects; how music changed from primarily a private entertainment for the few to a politically charged public force; how technological improvements enhanced possibilities of creative expression and how inventions like the gramophone, the jukebox, radio, and television propagated music's reach even further; on how over the years music has been used for overtly political purposes.

Ten years before his death, Mozart made a break with the patronage system of one of music's great villains, Archbishop Colloredo. Mozart had various complaints with his employer. One involved his annoyance at being treated as a servant. A second was his wish to profit from concerts given during his free time. The Archbishop repeatedly ignored both complaints. After numerous heated meetings, Colloredo's chamberlain, Count Arco, ejected Mozart with, literally, a kick in the pants. At this point, Mozart decided to go freelance—a decision that stimulated his period of greatest creativity. Blanning tells us how Mozart supported himself so successfully through teaching, royalties, new commissions, and performances that when the composer Muzio Clementi first met him, he thought Mozart was a courtier. Blanning describes the dire state of musicians up until that time—Bach was imprisoned for protesting the terms of his employment while Monteverdi was dismissed from service with about \$7 in his pocket. Blanning shows how Mozart and Haydn made massive

contributions to the status of music and composers by showing what could be achieved in the political and cultural ferment of the late eighteenth century. It was Beethoven, Haydn's pupil, who achieved an eminence that surpassed even theirs. (So publicly revered was Beethoven that after innumerable confrontations with the starchy Viennese nobility, Archduke Rudolph suspended the application of court etiquette as far as the composer was concerned.)

Blanning tells us that, for economic reasons, the private orchestras for which Haydn and Mozart wrote began to disappear in the early nineteenth century. The musicians, however, did not, and they found work giving public concerts to paying audiences. The public refused to pay for the high-protein musical diet that these musicians were accustomed to providing and demanded something a little lighter: medleys, potpourris, and even re-orchestrations of sacred music into 3/4 time, resulting in delightful monstrosities like the *Stabat Mater* Quadrille. (Later in the century, after the sacralization of music became complete, the favor was returned when an adaptation of Figaro's opening aria in *The Barber of Seville* accompanied the Elevation of the Host.)

Predictably, a wedge appeared between the audiences of serious fare and those who wanted music for simple entertainment—a division that has only grown wider over time. "To the hour came the man," Blanning says, "and the man was Rossini," who amassed a huge fortune by writing thirty-nine operas that gratified European tastes for a generation. Such was Rossini's charisma with his audiences that crowds did not wait before he died to steal locks of his hair—they snipped them off as he walked down in the street. "Napoleon is dead, but a new conqueror has shown himself to the world," wrote Stendhal. (Compare the popular Rossini with our sniffy contemporary Harrison Birtwistle: "I can't be responsible for the audience. I'm not running a restaurant.")

Rossini's personal charm sparked a line of charismatic performers and composers starting with the violinist Niccolò Paganini, whose stupefying technique captivated Europe. Virtuosity aside, Paganini's dark good looks and public chilliness, combined with the emotional warmth of his playing, won him a reputation for satanic inspiration—and his own enormous fortune. After Paganini, Franz Liszt became the reigning European *virtuoso di virtuosi* and more besides. Blanning describes Liszt's spectacular love life and his extraordinary interpretive abilities that reduced Mendelssohn, Chopin, and the notoriously petty Schumanns to stupefied silence.

But Liszt did more: He was a hugely intelligent and expressive writer who articulated an artistic philosophy that counseled the superiority of art—*génie oblige!*—that influenced our perception of artists as divinely inspired. It was left to Richard Wagner to effect the greatest change to European music since Beethoven with his creation of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and the founding of Bayreuth. While performances and personalities are different, the deification of musicians continues today.

Technology, Blanning explains, also played a part. Perhaps the best-known example is the evolution of the harpsichord into the modern piano. The author also describes how improvements of instruments like the flute and horn made them easier to play while the invention of new instruments widened composers' tonal palettes. By the nineteenth century, music was omnipresent, and the advent of recording made it more so. Recording changed the emphasis from music as it appeared in the score to how it was actually interpreted, spreading it throughout the world and making it permanent. Its beneficiaries were the styles of music that had little cultural foothold: jazz and rock. Through recording and, later, broadcasting, the term "overnight sensation" became a musical reality.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter of *The Triumph of Music* is the one concerning music's mobilizing and liberating power in politics and culture. Blanning elegantly describes music's influential role in the rise of nationalism. For much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, France was the most powerful nation in Europe—an attitude that its ruling classes enthusiastically tried to impose on their European neighbors. Cultural dominance was the continuation of war by

other means. “Spain sobs, Italy wails, Germany bellows, Flanders howls, only France sings,” wrote Saint-Evrémond in 1684 of his beloved French singers, while a century later Robespierre proclaimed that the French had advanced beyond the rest of civilization by two millennia and were “a race apart.”

The “us versus them” school of nationalism after the Congress of Vienna in 1815 developed in reaction to French excess, and it spawned musical nationalism in Germany (exemplified by the works of Weber), Russia (Glinka), and Bohemia (Smetana). The fair-haired mutton-eating citizens of wealthy England, “Das Lande ohne Musik,” could afford to buy it elsewhere. Over the nineteenth century, as French power waned, Czechs and Slovaks viewed Germany and Austria as the “wicked them” while, in the seminal work of Russian nationalism, Mikhail Glinka’s *A Life for the Tsar* (these days *Ivan Susanin*), poor Poland was cast as the cultural bully.

Not only did nations find their identities through music, Blanning tells us, ethnic groups did as well, evidenced by the astonishing productivity and success of European Jews such as Mendelssohn and Moscheles, and a slew of others who came after them. One story has the famous piano pedagogue Theodor Leschitzky preferring students who were—in ascending order of importance—child prodigies, Slavs, and Jews.

The Triumph of Music is, at times, repetitive in its examples, a condition explained by its apparent origin as a series of lectures. And while the author makes no claim for the book’s being a musicological history, various solecisms still intrude: grand opera is not quite the same as *opera seria*; Lully was not the only person to have run the Paris Opéra at a profit (Louis Véron, patent medicine inventor and publisher, shared that honor in the 1830s); Liszt likely did not invent the solo recital (though he certainly popularized it) nor did he write “versions” of Wagner’s operas, but rather transcriptions or paraphrases of overtures, arias or interludes, and the illustration of Wagner meeting Kaiser Wilhelm appears to show not Hans Richter behind Wagner, but Hans von Bülow (the one with the goatee). Aside from these small points—as well as the larger issue of the book being insufficiently inquisitive about the emotive power of music—*The Triumph of Music* is certainly topical—in both senses of the word. It succeeds as cultural history and has the added attraction of being full of good stories told in an amusingly irreverent style.

James Penrose is **James F. Penrose** writes about music for *The New Criterion*.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 27 February 2009, on page 71

Copyright © 2009 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Blanning-s-castle-4020>