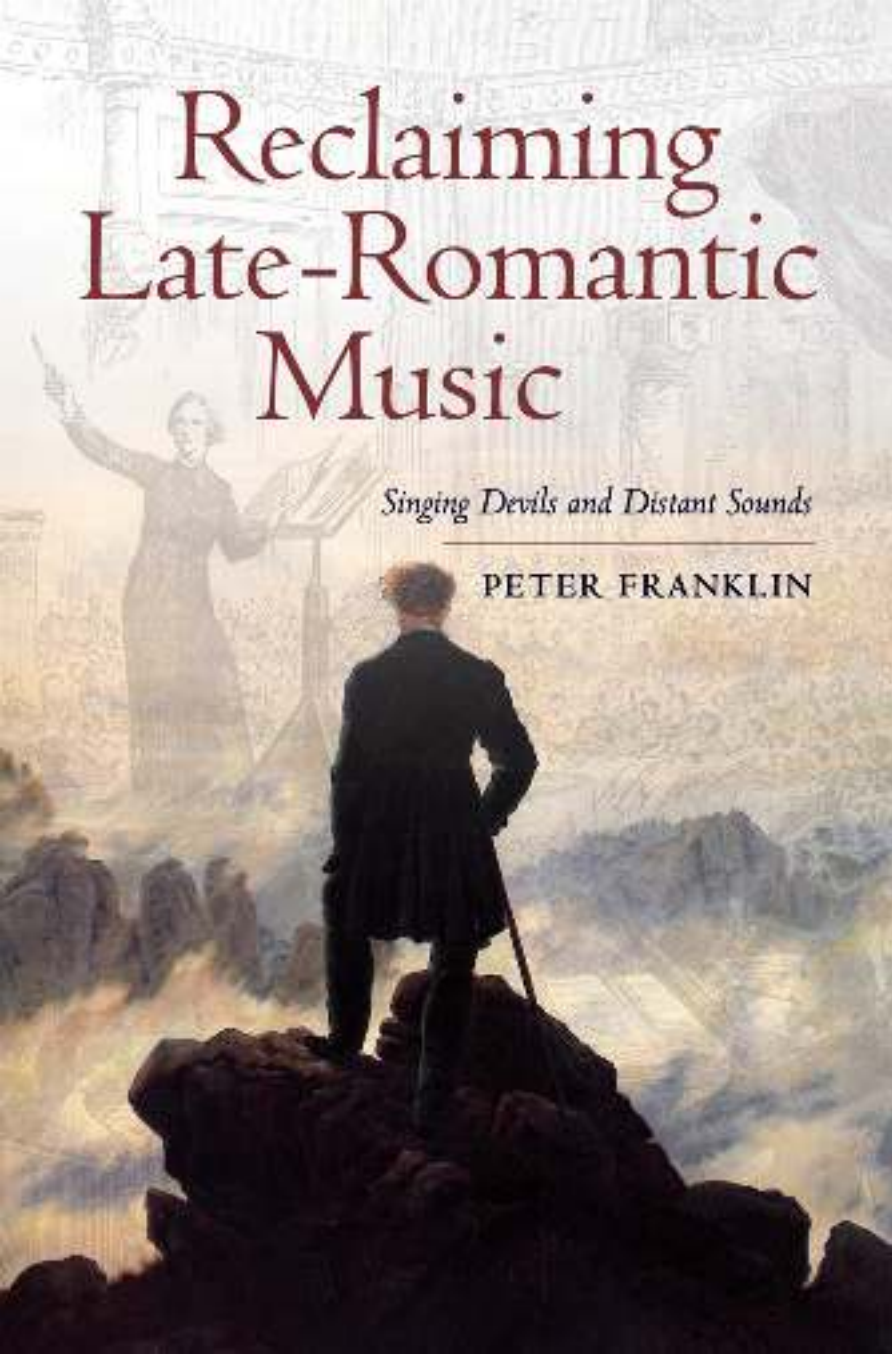


Reclaiming Late-Romantic Music

Singing Devils and Distant Sounds

PETER FRANKLIN



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Reclaiming Late-Romantic Music



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This book is dedicated to my maternal grandmother, Lily Salmons (née Phillips, 1878–1944), whom I never met, but who brought up six children, survived the London Blitz before evacuating to Chesterfield (where she died of cancer), and was, in her youth, a much-loved maidservant.

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Introduction

“Each member of the audience sits alone, listening to the work of the great, dead composer.”

—Christopher Small, *Musicking*

Imagine, then, the hushed throng in a large European concert hall, waiting upon the conductor’s signal to an orchestra ranked in glittering array before him, in the nineteenth-century fashion. Perhaps, like Christopher Small, we should be suspicious of this curious social ritual, apparently celebrating power and heroic mastery before a docile mass of habituated admirers.¹ The silence is broken by a music whose solemn processional only gradually begins to be interrupted by rhetorical outbursts of more urgent emotion. These seem to initiate greater animation, as if in preparation for catastrophe, before calming once more. A more sensuous unfolding now quietly takes over; it will shortly embrace us with an impressive new theme that seems to aspire to higher things and grows in self-confidence. It carries our spirits forward, higher and higher, until a dizzying outburst of grandeur confirms the arrival of our heart’s desire—perhaps we visualize a sunburst glory out of the mists of a mountain landscape. Slowly, however, the moment passes and the music quietens with the realization of loss, becomes a nostalgic lament for what was, what might have been. At last we begin to relax our sympathetic involvement as the conclusion approaches and we prepare to join in the expected ritual of applause. We signal our thanks to the conductor and his performers for what they have invoked in us, for the music we may shortly affect to mock as “late romanticism,” as “a bit much,” however well played. Private engagement is replaced by public disavowal (we prefer not to gush). We may nevertheless cherish for later

recall this music more complex and multifaceted than our social disclaimers appear to allow.

The title of this book itself engages such things with enigmatic phrases that deliberately inspire further questions. What *is* “late-romantic music”? How romantic, and how late? And what, exactly, might we seek to reclaim it *from*? The still more or less current umbrella term *late-romantic* is familiar enough, in a colloquial sense, yet has been contested by specialist scholars (the German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus denounced it as a “terminological blunder of the first order”²). For many it will nonetheless evoke a particular sound and style of large-scale European orchestral and operatic music from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the kind of music that would sing its last long song in classical Hollywood film scores. Perhaps its lateness comes from its origins in the “late” nineteenth century, not least in the Germanic musical style and type of listening experience that was developed in the music dramas of Wagner and subsequently carried forward by his successor Richard Strauss. But there is more to say, and other composers and repertoires to refer to: Russian, Italian, French, and Eastern European, for example—also English and American.

In the end we might have to accept that it is difficult to define the term in any more concrete, style-orientated musicological way, for all that it received disciplinary validation from the excellent 1991 “Man and Music” volume, edited by Jim Samson and simply called *The Late Romantic Era: From the mid-19th Century to World War I*.³ We could try to embark upon a list of characteristics. They might include the length of works, the comparatively large instrumental forces involved, tonality (however “expanded” or expressively stressed in post-Wagnerian fashion). Then might come a certain register of earnestness or “seriousness” adopted by the late-romantic, its tendency toward luxuriance and excess, associated with bourgeois experience, and also with decadence. More negative qualities could include the fact that it came to represent what Modernism “was not” after the First World War. But already the descriptive has become evaluative, as it must, as we grasp that the phrase includes both objective and subjective elements that are the product of cultural and historical custom and attitudes. To define late-romanticism in music can perhaps only be to negotiate, with critical intent, the many implications of the phrase on the basis of a clearly established aim of either celebrating it or engaging in its more negative diagnostic evaluation. Dispassionate definition is hardly possible. To celebrate the late romantic must certainly be to question and

challenge the very terms in which existing definitions have been couched.

For example, in art history *late* often denotes the period in an individual artist's, or even a culture's, development that just precedes its end—perhaps in some sort of “Indian summer” like that in which Verdi produced *Otello* and *Falstaff* around the turn of the century. It may be late in the sense that it reflects the glories of earlier achievements or times. Which gives rise to the secondary association of lateness with decline, with decadence (albeit not in Verdi's case). One of the most recent authors to have attempted to confront the wider field of musical production and reception with which I am concerned here, and with ostensibly similar reclamational intent, is Stephen Downes, who opted precisely for the negatively charged term *decadence* in his book *Music and Decadence in European Modernism*.⁴ Where Dahlhaus wanted simply to replace “late romanticism” with “modernism,” Downes seems to problematize the mythic narrative that is implied in his title, where the latter term has a more positive, or at least more neutral charge in comparison with *decadence* to which it is often contrasted as if in a sort of developmental binary (out of the declining glories of decadence Modernism was born, we are told).

A problem with Downes's *decadence* is that precisely by wanting to reinsert it *into* a more broadly defined modernism, he is forced to work with and through the negative associations of the term that are somehow “given” in the modernist narrative. He adopts it as a musical-stylistic label that he must first establish as a meaningful designation for music marked by post-*Tristan* chromaticism and often tainted, philosophically and spiritually, by pessimism and a degree of perversity (down this road lay Strauss's *Salome*, of course). This he must then intellectually reconstrue in terms of Nietzsche's criticism of Wagner and the philosopher's notion of a kind of recuperative *necessity* to decadence as the only route to a specifically “dionysian” form of pessimism that holds the seeds of cultural and spiritual regeneration. It is an interesting approach, but as a musical analyst—albeit one of distinction and originality—Downes becomes prematurely locked into his categories and strategies for describing and appreciating specific musical works, just as he relies on rich comparisons with contemporary literary texts, while ignoring both the performative aspect of “decadence” and the material nature of the kind of musical-cultural experiences with which he is dealing. Above all he ignores the audiences for such music and how they used and valued the powerful experiences it offered them.

Were they all inevitably “decadent”? Would this not be to reinscribe the very construction of late romantic music as both “late” and “romantic” in colloquial ways that echo historical criticism of it as variously “bourgeois” (from the perspective of interwar modernists of bohemian sympathies) and also self-indulgent, feminine, and—yes—“decadent” from the perspective of bourgeois conservatives themselves?

The cultural character and politics of such awkwardly circular arguments are too complex to be resolved by adding further layers of definitional constraint. Which is why I shall retain the umbrella term *late romanticism* without any prejudgmental qualification, and why my task of reclamation will involve a critique of the way the term has been understood: not least as a critical category, rather like decadence itself. As such, *late romanticism* carries connotations of hyperexpressivity, quasi-commodified emotional experiences (perhaps of a nostalgically utopian hue), and of “programmaticism”—all things linked to popular ways of understanding music as narrative, as allegory, as inwardly visualized scenarios and dramas or outwardly dramatized musical plots in the opera house (and opera itself, of course, was once regarded as a dubious object of serious musical scholarship). Here I shall take late-romanticism to suggest a music marked by implicitly communicated meaning, mediated as private subjective experience prompted in public among the “unmusical.” The music responsible is seen to be complicit in ways that render it (as we have seen), a normatively dubious, decadent, feminized, and thus *minor* status in the sense nevertheless boldly challenged by Lawrence Kramer, with the assistance of Deleuze and Guattari: “Separated from the mainstream (‘deterritorialized’), it is explicitly political, and it speaks in a voice more collective than individual. But it is exemplary just for those reasons. ‘We might as well say,’ write Deleuze and Guattari, ‘that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great.’”⁵

The politics of late romantic musical passion will nevertheless be approached cautiously and in piecemeal fashion in the following chapters. To invoke politics at all, other than purely negatively, might sound unlikely as applied to a musical style positioned as the lamentable relic of their forebears by the modernist and avant-garde composers who defined themselves *against* it. They contested late romanticism’s claims to any of the “greatness” of truly Great Music by virtue of its character as a prototypical form of mass entertainment. Such things were to be rejected on grounds that are metaphorically alluded to in the paired

phrases of the second section of my title. The opposition of distant sounds and singing devils could simply figure late romantic music as on the one hand something past, partly forgotten and historically distanced: the residue of an old, late-nineteenth-century bourgeois world. Its distance might be a way of figuring and protecting ourselves from that pastness, as something superseded, just as the image of “singing devils” links it with the diabolical, with the manipulative voice of dubious power and authority of Small’s “great, dead composers,” and reinvokes the trope of decadence—what Modernism, the Weimar period, the “roaring twenties” were believed to have “overcome” (even in spite of the Great Depression and all the subsequent woes of the 1930s).

The actual source of these phrases is two operas by a sporadically remembered composer of that era, Franz Schreker (1878–1934): *The Distant Sound* (*Der ferne Klang*, 1912) and *The Singing Devil* (*Der singende Teufel*, 1928)—the one about the ramifications of a deluded composer’s search for genial inspiration out there in the *au delà*, the other an opera about the confrontation between a colonizing church and a pagan tribe. Set in the partly mythical “dark ages,” Schreker’s *Der singende Teufel* imagined an ancient folk whose Dionysian, nature-worshipping ways come into conflict with the terrifying voice and devilishly gaping keyboard “mouth” of the mighty organ of an early Christian monastery that has been built in their forest, with whatever saintly intent. Romantic delusion confronts the violent exercise of power.

Acknowledging, like those operas (to which I will return), while also seeking to reinterpret and revalue the supposed failings of musical late-romanticism might be another way of defining my project of reclamation here—one that has close affiliations not only with Downes’s study of decadence, but also, among other recent work, with Laurence Dreyfus’s *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse* and even the cavils of his demanding critic J.P.E. Harper-Scott. The latter’s catty review of Dreyfus’s book in *The Wagner Journal* in its turn proposed an alternative way of reevaluating Wagner’s works as presenting us with something still more challenging than the directness and eloquence (if once shocking) of Wagner’s music of erotic desire that is variously “expressed,” rewarded, or more frequently *frustrated* in Dreyfus’s own account.⁶ Perhaps Wagner remains a presiding source of the late-romantic manner as I will characterize it: counter-intuitively possessed of a critical, even a precisely *self-critical* awareness of its own character. Adorno’s and Nietzsche’s later criticism notwithstanding, such art might be interpreted as both celebrated and dramatized within the developing and implicitly

“programmatic” narrative matrix in which Wagner, as Romantic Artist, symbolically divided his subjective self-image between fantasy “redeeming” heroes like Siegfried, Tristan, and Parsifal and more worldly, fallen and fated older men like Wotan, King Mark, Hans Sachs, and Amfortas. The last of these ostensibly allegorized the agony of the late artist’s perilous facility for self-benediction and visionary utopianism—agonizing because of what we know about the dangerous psychological power and rational falseness of those aesthetic balms and balsams.

The relevant issues and implied musical field, in terms of both style and repertoire, are broad and complex: much more so than any single term perhaps encompasses; such a term would also have to reflect the social character of the kind of concert experience that I evoked at the outset—one which some have regarded as little more than the anachronistic prop of an outmoded bourgeois culture—perhaps to be scorned as a form of kitsch. My aim here will be to probe and challenge that estimation of the music I shall be concerned with. In order to do justice to it with some degree of honesty, I will periodically adopt an active, autobiographical, and participatory mode, like that of an ethnographer for whom understanding and participating are not easily separated. I do not speak of the participation of a musical performer here, but precisely that of a participating member of the outwardly passive, yet emotionally active, mass of the compliant audience and subject to all the critical questions that might be asked of it. They are, I believe, worth asking in like measure as the music in question is worth listening to and experiencing as something richly and problematically meaningful in both conceptual and bodily ways. Its meaning is translatable in linguistic and visual terms that are as culturally and historically determined, perhaps, as its apparently immediate (unmediated?) bodiliness and physicality that can feel intimately, even shockingly pleasurable and private. In this respect, what follows is perhaps as much a personal journey of exploration as it is a critical history of cultural practice.

• • •

My audience for the six lectures out of which this book grew was a generously welcoming one at the University of California in Berkeley, where I was Visiting Bloch Professor in the fall of 2010. My thanks are due to many colleagues in the music department there: to its then chairman Ben Brinner and to Bonnie Wade and Davitt Moroney, to Mary Ann Smart and her family (who showed me some of the great sights of the Bay Area), and to my kind self-appointed mentors and guides Nick

Mathew and James Davies. I am grateful, too, to the other staff members who eased me through the mysteries of both domestic and scholarly acclimatization to life in California and the local ways of the university. Here I must mention John Shepard and Cheryl Griffith-Peel in the wonderful Hargrove Music Library, Babs Winbigler and Nanette Hara in the upstairs department office, whose administrator Roia Ferrazares and her husband, David, also became valued friends. Sound technician Jay Clويدt and operations manager Jim Coates provided endless support, as did Kathleen Karn, communications manager at Herz Hall in Berkeley, who created the double image used in figure 1. No less valued were the students with whom I had regular dealings, including Nel Cloutier, Sean Curran, Jonathan Rhodes Lee, Tiffany Ng, and Mark Rogers. Will Coleman also played a part. Presiding over it all, of course, was the inspiring figure of Richard Taruskin, whose supportive comments and sometimes irreverent suggestions were as welcome and memorable as his kindly attempt to explain baseball to me.

Other friends and colleagues have assisted in various, often quite specific ways. Charlotte Purkis found some of my quotations; Christopher Hailey generously assisted with images for chapter 6; Emanuele Senici offered invaluable advice on chapter 4; Philip White has been a long-standing guide to Bayreuth and gatekeeper of my Wagnerian experiences there. James D'Arc, curator of the Brigham Young University Film Music Archive, generously assisted me in obtaining images from its collection of Max Steiner manuscripts and Jamie Keates in Oxford was once again indispensable for his technical way with digital images. I am also grateful to the Music Faculty at Oxford for generously supporting my leave in the fall of 2012 to complete this book, and to Mary Francis, Kim Hogeland, and my editors Mary Ray Worley and Jessica Moll at the University of California Press for their forbearance, for their support, and for making this book happen.

A final acknowledgment must take the form of an apology to Alex Rehding, whose 2009 book, *Music and Monumentality: Commemoration and Wonderment in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, sadly reached my desk too late for me to engage fruitfully with its arguments here. I am sorry to repay his acknowledgment of my own “background” presence there by citing that book in a similar way; it might relevantly have played a more foregrounded role here.

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Setting the Scene

Grandiose Symphonics and the Trouble with Art

Within the period 1890–1914, and especially in the German-speaking lands, modernism chiefly manifested itself . . . as a radical intensification of means toward accepted or traditional ends (or at least toward ends that could be so described). That is why modernism of this early vintage is perhaps best characterized as *maximalism*. The cultural phase . . . was called the *fin de siècle* not only because it happened to coincide with the end of a century, but also because it reflected apocalyptic presentiments. . . . The acceleration of stylistic innovation, so marked as to seem not just a matter of degree but one of actual kind, requiring a new “periodization,” looks now, from the vantage-point of the next *fin de siècle*, to have been perhaps more a matter of inflated rhetoric than of having new things to say.

—Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*

Having invoked the autobiographical mode as a tool in my introduction, I should confess at once that this book is one in which I intend to indulge my passion for this period of Western musical history that I love and which, I suspect, many secretly cherish even as they avow that they probably shouldn't. As we have seen, it has accordingly been labelled transitional, decadent, over-inflated, and characterized by a desire always to be satisfying what Richard Taruskin has described as its apparently obsessive drive toward “maximalism.”¹ In putting it this way—by confessing a more than modestly scholarly interest in a period so weighted with the concrete boots of critical put-downs—I inevitably invoke the politics of

my subject even as I nervously prepare my apologetics for an era that is additionally awkward in that it fits no neat chronological box. Too many “periods” overlap here, across stretches of two adjacent centuries.

When these thoughts were originally presented as a series of public lectures, I perhaps eccentrically, but deliberately, described the era from which my examples were drawn as “the age of Leverkühn.” The reference is to the fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn, whom Thomas Mann offered up in his 1946 novel *Doktor Faustus* as a sacrificial victim to the inexorable rise of high musical modernism of the “difficult,” Schoenbergian kind. Since it is also a difficult novel that is as much admired as read, I should explain that Leverkühn was born in 1885 and died in 1940. The “difficulty” of the high modernist works that crown his tragic career, and which were meticulously imagined by Thomas Mann, was closely related to that of music by real-life composers like Schoenberg and Stravinsky; indeed, Leverkühn develops a synthetic compositional technique so like Schoenberg’s technique of “composition with twelve tones” that the novel’s publication led to rancorous exchanges between Mann and Schoenberg which resulted in the former eventually agreeing to include at the back of all subsequent copies an explicit acknowledgment that the technique apparently alluded to was “in truth the intellectual property” of Schoenberg.²

The difficulty of such music stemmed directly from its avoidance of the more conventional harmonic and melodic manners employed in late-romantic works that were being positioned by Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt School Marxist philosopher and critic who was Mann’s adviser on *Doctor Faustus*, as exemplifying the troublingly manipulative and ideologically compromised excesses of Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian symphonic and operatic music. Modernist and left-wing critics like Adorno considered such music to be commodified false consciousness, designed for easy consumption; what was being consumed they associated directly with the problems and ideology of an imperial, culturally bourgeois Europe rolling toward and through the revelatory disaster of the First World War. We “know where it all led,” as commentators have been prone to put it, with darkly knowing emphasis. Late-romantic musical manners, as I shall call them, were thus critically consigned to guilty historical irrelevancy, and perhaps worse things still in the decades of fascism. Interwar modernists and avant-garde artists seemed advisedly to be seeking a different direction and different goals. They too nevertheless owed much to Romanticism, whose contradictory character I invoked in the double image that appeared on posters



FIGURE 1. Caspar David Friedrich, *The Wanderer above the Mists*, c. 1818 (Kunsthalle, Hamburg), overlaid with an artist's impression, from the *London Illustrated News*, 9 September 1865, of "Franz Liszt conducting the performance of his new oratorio in Pesth." (It was the premiere of his *Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth*.) Composite image created by Kathleen Karn.

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