

# Critical Perspectives on Canon Formation: A Literature Review

## Introduction

The idea of “the canon” has been at the centre of one of the most prominent debates in the humanities for the past several decades.<sup>1</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines “canon” as “the list of works considered to be permanently established as being of the highest quality.”<sup>2</sup> By this definition, a “canon” could be an all-encompassing list of humanity's greatest achievements in all forms of art, or it could be specific to a particular discipline: “the literary canon,” or “the Western art music canon,” for example.

In the specific case of what is commonly called “classical music,” the canon is of particular importance. The music that is programmed at classical music concerts is largely drawn from such a list of established works – albeit an ephemeral list: one whose specific contents are gradually changing. Nonetheless, the validity of this list has been the recent subject of considerable scrutiny and reassessment. And, in spite of the prevalence of recordings as a key medium by which to hear classical music, hearing live classical music at concert halls remains a central musical experience for many classical music lovers. So, the validity of the classical canon is a matter of legitimate concern.

If we are to take the Oxford definition of “canon” as authoritative, the question of whether to include a work or an artist in a canon is a question of value. In keeping with this, the debate over whether the current model of the canon (in both literature and music) is valid is fundamentally based on how to assess value in a work of art. Very broadly, there are two perspectives on this. One contingent of critics believes that the primary means to assess a work's value is textual evidence: the value assigned to a work arises due to features that are intrinsic to that work. The other contingent argues that value arises due to the intersection of a work with its particular social circumstances. They believe that

---

<sup>1</sup> Lee Morrissey, introduction to *Debating the Canon*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “canon.”

canonicity is conferred on a work at least partially due to extra-textual, social factors.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine these arguments and to take stock of the various critical perspectives on how canons come to be. I will examine the debate in the context of two different scholarly fields. First, I will take a detailed look at the canon debate in literary criticism: possibly the field in which it is the most pronounced. As Lee Morrissey writes, the canon debate “tends to come back to one recurring question: what should college students read?”<sup>3</sup> The thinking of literary theorists will inform my readings of musicological scholarship, which will make up the second half of this literature review. I will conclude by summarizing my findings, posing a few lingering questions, and outlining the ramifications of the literature review for the journalistic portion of this thesis project.

### **The canon debate in literary criticism**

The debate about the literary canon is sometimes seen as highly polarized, prompting Morrissey to dub it “the canon brawl.”<sup>4</sup> Morrissey blames the popular notion of a highly polarized canon debate on the literary critic who offered several of the most impassioned defences (and, Morrissey suggests, a eulogy) of the Western Canon of great books: Harold Bloom.<sup>5</sup> The binary that Bloom set up is, as Morrissey bluntly expresses it, “white men for the canon versus African American women opposed to it.”<sup>6</sup> More broadly, the debate on the literary canon as Bloom characterizes it can be summarized as: pro-canon = conservative, anti-canon = liberal.

The particular variety of conservatism that Bloom stands for does not necessarily oppose the aims of the liberal interests that he places on the other side of the debate: coming largely from scholars with feminist or multiculturalist perspectives. However, unlike feminist and postcolonial critics, Bloom denies the “political responsibilities of the critic” to help secure social change.<sup>7</sup> He denies that poetry,

---

3 Morrissey, introduction to *Debating the Canon*, 2.

4 *Ibid.*, 9.

5 *Ibid.*, 8.

6 *Ibid.*, 9.

7 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (United States: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 15.

for instance, should perform “the work of social catharsis under the banners of the new multiculturalism;” rather it should be read “*as a poem*” and not a social document.<sup>8</sup>

Bloom's ideal literary criticism focuses on aesthetics exclusively. He is opposed to “opening up” the canon, because “nothing is so essential to the Western Canon as its principles of selectivity, which are elitist only to the extent that they are founded upon severely artistic criteria.”<sup>9</sup> *The Western Canon*, Bloom's best-known work, selects a scant 26 authors to represent the entirety of literature. The works he focuses on are simply books that Bloom feels are worthy of reading and re-reading. Bloom sees canon-formation as the result of this kind of individual taste – the individual taste of gifted readers. The process is influenced “by neither critics nor academies, let alone politicians. Writers, artists, composers themselves determine canons, by bridging between strong precursors and strong successors.”<sup>10</sup> Bloom uses the example of Milton to illustrate his point. Milton, he says, was canonized by his friend and fellow poet Andrew Marvell, who published a much-read poem about the high level of accomplishment demonstrated in *Paradise Lost*. Subsequently, Milton's supremacy was confirmed by great poets who displayed his influence or theorized about his work: poets such as Dryden, Pope, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley.<sup>11</sup> Bloom takes a somewhat Darwinian view of the canon. He quotes Nietzsche, saying “only strength can join itself to strength,” meaning that only the intrinsic aesthetic worth of a work can result in its exerting sufficient influence to attain canonicity.<sup>12</sup>

Bloom tiptoes around the irony of a critic producing a purportedly authoritative list of worthwhile books, under the title *The Western Canon*, while claiming that critics have no influence over such canons. Presumably, Bloom's book serves only to *codify* the canon: to document the relationships of influence between artists that resulted in the canon that Bloom perceives. Bloom's

---

8 Ibid, 18.

9 Ibid, 22.

10 Ibid, 522.

11 Ibid, 28.

12 Ibid, 41.

historical investigation of influence produces the list of books that he believes is the most worthwhile for a person to read deeply during a single lifetime. After all, “who reads must choose,” writes Bloom.<sup>13</sup>

Bloom coined a name for the scholarly forces that suggest the canon must be revised or opened up: the “School of Resentment.”<sup>14</sup> He lists six branches of this school of thought: Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, and Semioticians.<sup>15</sup> (It seems to me that resentment is not the primary motivator for these scholars' work, and that Bloom's label is unfair. However, I will continue to use the phrase “School of Resentment” here, because it is a convenient signifier for the anti-canon factions *as Bloom imagines them*.) According to Bloom, these critics all have a common “wish to overthrow the Canon in order to advance their supposed... programs for social change.”<sup>16</sup> This is a ridiculous proposition to Bloom: “Real reading is a lonely activity and does not teach anyone to be a better citizen,” he wrote.<sup>17</sup> The School of Resentment is distinct from Bloom and his ilk, being social scientists, whereas literary criticism is, Bloom insists, an art.<sup>18</sup> The “resenters” endow the critic with political responsibilities that Bloom has never felt bound to. The issue with Bloom's portrayal of this ideological nemesis is that he usually writes about them in very general, hypothetical terms. Aside from a brief citation of Antonio Gramsci, he does not address any scholars from this school of thought directly, but rather paraphrases the broad strokes of their (supposedly collective) argument. However, the nuances of these arguments are somewhat extraneous to the broad point that Bloom is making, which is that literary criticism need not concern itself with any social or political motivations at all.

The “radical” limb of the academy that does not agree with that assessment believes that the literary canon formed because of “successful advertising and propaganda campaigns” run by

---

13 Ibid, 15.

14 Ibid, 4.

15 Ibid, 527.

16 Ibid, 4.

17 Ibid, 519.

18 Ibid, 17.

predominantly white, male academic institutions.<sup>19</sup> The Marxist contingent of the School of Resentment takes issue with Bloom's notion that aesthetic value is the only element that a literary theorist should consider when assessing a book, because a reader's "aesthetic value emanates from class struggle." Bloom gives some ground to this notion: "All my passionate proclamations of the isolate selfhood's aesthetic value are necessarily qualified by the reminder that the leisure for meditation must be purchased from the community." Put more simply: Bloom's family's economic station, though modest, was sufficient to give Bloom the opportunity to cultivate a personal aesthetic without concern for his basic wellbeing.<sup>20</sup>

However, Bloom denies that canon formation must be ideological. He turns again to Milton to demonstrate the singular lack of politics in his concept of canon formation. Milton "overwhelmed the tradition [of poetry] and subsumed it," and this is how canonization happens, not because of social structures or propaganda.<sup>21</sup> He argues that the "resenters" would reverse the perfectly natural process by which great writers like Milton have risen to cultural preeminence. Shakespeare, to take an even more firmly entrenched example, has been dubbed aesthetically superior, and Bloom believes this to be true. But, the School of Resentment would choose to "'historicize' [Shakespeare] into pragmatic diminishment, precisely because his uncanny aesthetic power is a scandal to any ideologue" who proclaims equality to be a value at the centre of their thinking.<sup>22</sup>

Bloom's primary criterion for including an author in his book is the value that a text provides *specifically to him* (but presumably also to the writers who were influenced by it) on second, third and subsequent readings. He bemoans that the School of Resentment's ideal texts do not encourage rereading, because they effectively agitate for social change in one go. That is their purpose and

---

19 Ibid, 20.

20 Ibid, 23.

21 Ibid, 28.

22 Ibid, 23.

therefore, to Bloom, they are not literary. He cites Alice Walker's *Meridian* as a specific example.<sup>23</sup>

Bloom suggests that art at this allegedly low aesthetic level is tempting when produced by a politically disadvantaged individual: in this case, an African-American female. But, when a scholar resists this impulse and subjects the work to more rigid aesthetic criteria, he is indicted as racist or sexist.<sup>24</sup>

Morrissey has noticed this tendency as well. But, ironically, he believes that the popularity of Bloom's book, with its binary construction of the canon debate, is at least partly to blame for the accusations that have sometimes unfairly befallen professors who choose to teach the canon.<sup>25</sup>

The debate over how to respond to the current model of the canon is animated by disagreement over where the canon comes from in the first place. Morrissey outlines three perspectives on canon formation: "Some say the Great Books [are able to attain Greatness] in themselves, on account of some quality of how they are written. Some argue the Great Books are great on account of the extraordinary influence they have exerted. Others might combine the two positions and argue that the quality of the writing leads to the influence."<sup>26</sup> This last one seems closest to Bloom's perspective.

The classicist Bernard Knox asserts that the "menacing canon that looms so large in the imaginative rhetoric of the academic radicals" dates back to ancient Greece.<sup>27</sup> He notes how the scholars of the Alexandrian library in the third and second centuries B.C. selected Homer and Hesiod as the key masters of early epic poetry, chose nine figures from lyric poetry for immortality, and crowned Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides as the three great tragedians. They also collected lists of great comedians, philosophers, historians and orators. The ancient Greek word for these authors translates to "the admitted."<sup>28</sup>

So, our canon of antiquity was selected more than twenty centuries ago. Morrissey suggests that

---

23 Ibid, 30.

24 Ibid, 16.

25 Morrissey, introduction to *Debating the Canon*, 9.

26 Ibid, 2.

27 Bernard Knox, *The Oldest White Dead European Males* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 13.

28 Ibid, 14.

the literary canon as we know it today dates back to the eighteenth century, when early literary critics made lists of books and “readings of their importance,” perhaps to make reading less threatening in a world that had seen civil unrest caused by printing. Morrissey points specifically to the social upheaval of the Protestant Reformation as an “unfortunate consequence” of printing books.<sup>29</sup>

The eighteenth century marks the origin of some of the arguments that are still posed in the canon debate today. Bloom's argument that longevity is the only foolproof indicator of merit dates back to Samuel Johnson's preface to his edition of Shakespeare's plays.<sup>30</sup> David Hume concurs with this notion, claiming that bad poets may be temporarily fashionable, but their works will never endure like Homer's, for example.<sup>31</sup> However, Dr. Johnson also suggests that “time sometimes cooperate[s] with chance” in selecting what works are preserved.<sup>32</sup> If by “chance,” he meant “circumstance,” perhaps not too drastic a logical leap, he is making an argument not unlike those of modern feminist critics. Dr. Johnson's preface also calls into question Bloom's notion that critics don't make canons. Johnson is acting here as an advocate for Shakespeare, who was then less exalted than the writers of antiquity. Johnson's critical interpretation certainly helped Shakespeare into the canon, as Morrissey attests to.<sup>33</sup>

Joseph Addison, the early eighteenth-century essayist, disagrees with Bloom that reading cannot have a social impact. “In short,” he wrote, “it is impossible to read a page in Plato, Tully, and a thousand other ancient moralists, without being a greater and better man for it.”<sup>34</sup> So, while he advocates for a pantheon of great, “improving” books, the sort of books he would elect to that pantheon might be more in line with the kind that Bloom's imagined archenemy, the “School of Resentment”

---

29 Morrissey, introduction to *Debating the Canon*, 3.

30 Samuel Johnson, “Preface to the Plays of William Shakespeare,” in *Debating the Canon*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 21.

31 David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Debating the Canon*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 18.

32 Samuel Johnson, “Preface to the Plays of William Shakespeare,” in *Debating the Canon*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 21.

33 Morrissey, introduction to *Debating the Canon*, 6.

34 Joseph Addison, “Pleasures of the Imagination,” in *Debating the Canon*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 15.

would choose.

Among modern opponents of Bloom's style of Eurocentric criticism, the novelist Chinua Achebe is one of the most forceful in his argument. Achebe takes issue with the notion that the literary canon is "universal." In Achebe's experience, European critics believe their own literary tradition so superior that they judge other traditions by their similarity to their own.<sup>35</sup> When an African novelist fails to write within a frame that is accessible to European readers, he may have little hope of canonization. On the other hand, Achebe claims that the novels of Philip Roth or John Updike are assumed to be universal by Western critics, simply because they come from within that comfortable framework.<sup>36</sup> Achebe does not believe that the quality of universality, which Bloom assigns to Shakespeare and Milton, is important to produce literature:

"Every literature must seek the things that belong unto its place, must, in other words, speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current, and the aspirations and destiny of its people... I should like to see the world 'universal' banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe."<sup>37</sup>

Frantz Fanon also notes the tendency of the colonial critic to value other cultures only in comparison with their own.<sup>38</sup> He observes the unfortunate phenomenon of the "native intellectual" becoming disenchanted with his own culture, having honed his intellectual craft in the institutions of the colonizer, where he takes up the colonizer's standards for value judgement.<sup>39</sup> This phenomenon

---

35 Chinua Achebe, "Colonialist Criticism," in *Debating the Canon*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 73.

36 *Ibid.*, 77.

37 *Ibid.*, 76-77.

38 Frantz Fanon, "National Culture," in *Debating the Canon*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 67.

39 *Ibid.*, 70.



demonstrates the potential damage that can result from a canonic structure that prioritizes the contributions of a single, powerful culture.

Annette Kolodny's response to Bloom's book *A Map of Misreading* offers a cogent repudiation of his literary theory, without displaying the resentment with which Bloom characterizes feminist critics. Kolodny interprets Bloom's theory as saying that critics should not engage with a particular poem based solely on its own merit. Rather, one should read it as a link in a chain of influence: a willful misreading of a prior poet's influencing work.<sup>40</sup> Kolodny uses Bloom's theory against him. If it is true that a poem's value (and canonicity) owes anything to that poet's reading of another writer's work, then a critic cannot ignore either poet's social milieu, because the act of interpretation is “learned, historically determined, and thereby gender-inflected.” She notes that Bloom is able to trace influence through a long lineage of poets, but “must remain silent... where carrying over takes place among readers and writers who in fact have been... cut off and alien from that dominant tradition” of Dead White European Males, to use Knox's phrase.<sup>41</sup>

Kolodny provides a useful example of canonical non-entry with Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who found it difficult to publish her short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper.” The story bears a resemblance to the gothic fiction pioneered by the very popular Edgar Allan Poe. However, it had more to do with the individual perception of an oppressed woman than with any “universal” experience. Its gendered subject matter failed to resonate with the white, male editors of the publications to which Gilman submitted it.<sup>42</sup> Because “The Yellow Wallpaper” failed to connect with the Poe-loving audience that might have otherwise embraced it, it exerted no influence on the writers of its generation, becoming a “literary dead-end” in Bloom's model of canon formation.<sup>43</sup>

---

40 Annette Kolodny, “A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts,” in *Debating the Canon*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 93.

41 *Ibid.*, 94.

42 *Ibid.*, 95.

43 *Ibid.*, 96.

To combat this phenomenon, which Kolodny suggests has been common to all American female writers, she believes that “all readers, male and female alike, must be taught first to recognize the existence of a significant body of writing by women in America, and second, they must be encouraged to learn how to read it within its own unique and informing contexts of meaning and symbol.” She says that if this skill set were to become commonplace, it would offer a significant challenge to the “authority who has traditionally wielded the power to determine what may be written and how it shall be read,” which in this case is a network of influential, predominantly white male writers that stretches throughout history.<sup>44</sup>

Kolodny's suggestion is important, because it reveals the shortcomings of an influence-based canon of “Great Works.” If critics wish to consider a truly authoritative canon of the best literature, they must realize that some writers, like Gilman, were held back from exerting influence not by lack of genius, but because of social considerations. Seen in this light, a model of canon formation that ignores all social context seems completely untenable.

Elaine Showalter joins Kolodny and Achebe in noting the role of cultural contexts in canonization: “The woman's novel has always had to struggle against the cultural and historical forces that relegated women's experience to the second rank.”<sup>45</sup> She also notes that literary history has reduced the diversity and range of female writers to “a tiny band of the 'great,' and derived all theories from them.”<sup>46</sup> Perhaps Jane Austen, George Eliot and the Brontës are as central to the women's canon as Shakespeare, Dante and Milton are to Bloom's, but that leaves room for twenty-one more writers to fill even a volume as limited as Bloom's *The Western Canon*.

So, the case of the woman's novel is a grossly exaggerated version of the entire problem that liberal scholars have with the canon: it excludes huge chunks of history's literature, in accordance with

---

44 Ibid, 99.

45 Elaine Showalter, “The Female Tradition,” in *Debating the Canon*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2005), 90.

46 Ibid, 88.

the tastes and ideals of a prevailing social group. Perhaps the fact that very few women are considered important by the edifice that purportedly doles out canonicity is indicative of the fact that pure, “universal” aesthetic value, observed from an ostensibly objective standpoint is *not* the primary factor in canonization.

Elizabeth Meese agrees: “Control by such a relatively homogeneous group of critics has resulted in extremely narrow views of what great literature is and what criticism does, not so much because critics enjoy seeing reflections of themselves and their values in what they praise (though this is partially true), but because they pretend to equality, objectivity, and universality.”<sup>47</sup>

So does Jane Tompkins: “The choice between Stedman and Dickinson, Stowe and Hawthorne, is never made in a vacuum, but from within a particular perspective that determines in advance which literary works will seem 'good.’” She also notes that the canon can be self-perpetuating. When a reader picks up an anthology, their “conviction that [the editors'] choice [of authors] was correct does not prove anything about the intrinsic superiority of the texts he chose; it proves only that we were introduced to American literature through the medium of anthologies similar to his.”<sup>48</sup>

For a decisively pro-canon argument that is more willing to engage with these critical perspectives than Bloom's, one might turn to the scholar that Bloom calls the greatest living literary critic, Frank Kermode.<sup>49</sup> In his *History and Value*, Kermode addresses those critics who feel that the connections that historians make between canonical works are spurious, or that special, non-literary interests are in play.<sup>50</sup> He quotes from a journal article that relates how the literary criticism of the near future will “undermine the half-truths that white males have established as constituting American

---

47 Elizabeth Meese, “Sexual Politics and Critical Judgement,” in *Debating the Canon*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 119.

48 Jane Tompkins, “But is it Any Good?: The Institutionalization of Literary Value,” in *Debating the Canon*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 126.

49 Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 3.

50 Frank Kermode, “From *History and Value*,” in *Debating the Canon*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 147.

culture as a whole.” Kermode characterizes this writer as assuming “that the literary canon is a load-bearing element of the existing power structure, and believes that by imposing radical change on the canon you can help to dismantle the power structure.” However, he notes that the ideologies that oppose the canon appear to oppose its contents while tacitly approving the notion of canon itself. He argues that rather than completely abolishing the canon and the power structure that it supposedly represents and was built by, feminist and multiculturalist scholars aim to capture the canon for their own aims.<sup>51</sup> This, Kermode suggests, would amount to “a reign of literary terror.”<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately, though, Kermode believes canons to be both important and inevitable to the study of literary history:

“Whether one thinks of canons as objectionable because formed at random or to serve some interests at the expense of others, or whether one supposes that the contents of canons are providentially chosen, there can be no doubt that we have not found ways of ordering our thoughts about the history of literature and art without recourse to them.”<sup>53</sup>

Kermode acknowledges that “the tradition of value” that has resulted in the literary canon that we are familiar with today is flawed and prejudiced. However, he argues that canons are necessary nonetheless, because they offer us a sense of perspective on the value of past art. He believes that the methods by which canons are selected by critics should be “constantly scrutinized, so that the past, already diminished by our necessary selective manipulations, is not reduced even further by unnecessary compliance with fashion or prejudice.”<sup>54</sup>

Morrissey feels that the debate over the canon, and the perspectives of those opposed to its alleged parochialism, can lead to more interesting readings of the texts that have become canonized.

---

51 Ibid, 148.

52 Ibid, 150.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid, 151.

“What I am interested in,” he writes, “is a reading of the canon that takes into account the critiques of it.”<sup>55</sup>

Many of the sources I have cited in this section are over two decades old. However, Morrissey's anthology that collects essays from Addison through Azar Nafisi, and his opening essay, were published in 2005. In addition, Harold Bloom indicated in a New York Times interview in 2011 that his discontent with the direction of educational institutions with respect to the canon had persisted, suggesting that the debate over the canon in literary criticism has not abated.<sup>56</sup>

### **The canon debate in musicology**

Joseph Kerman points out that the word “canon,” used as it is in literary criticism, is problematic for musicologists, because “canon” has another meaning in music: a particular compositional technique, as in Pachelbel's canon, for instance. So, musicologists speak of “the repertory” instead.<sup>57</sup> However, Kerman also specifies that the repertory is a set of works that is *performed*, and thus selected by performers. He maintains the use of the word “canon” when he discusses works that are widely written about by critics.<sup>58</sup> The terms are related but not congruent, and I will use them in this section according to Kerman's definitions.

While criticism dealing with the literary canon dates back at least to Addison, criticism about the canon of Western art music has a significantly shorter history. Peter Burkholder points out one key reason for this: the canon of “classical” music began to take form much later than the literary canon, at least if we consider the choices of Alexandrian librarians as a canon. Burkholder notes that until the nineteenth century, the music in the repertory was largely the music of the time in question.<sup>59</sup>

---

55 Morrissey, introduction to *Debating the Canon*, 9.

56 Brent McDonald and Sam Tanenhaus, “Harold Bloom's Influence” *New York Times* video, 6:40, May 20, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/video/review/100000000828027/harold-blooms-influence.html>

57 Joseph Kerman, “A Few Canonic Variations,” in *Canons*, ed. Robert von Hallberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 177.

58 *Ibid.*, 182.

59 Peter Burkholder, “Museum Pieces: The Historicist Mainstream of Music of the Last Hundred Years,” *The Journal of Musicology* 2, no. 2 (1983): 117.

Monteverdi was seldom performed in Mozart's time. But in the nineteenth century, audiences developed a taste for much older "classics." And while these changes were occurring in the repertory, the critic and novelist E.T.A. Hoffmann selected himself as a sort of Alexandrian librarian for music. To Hoffmann, "Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven constituted the canon," and he borrowed a model from literature to apply to these composers: "He wanted to erect pedestals for them like those supporting the three great Greek tragedians."<sup>60</sup> The net result of all of these changes in music performance and criticism, as both Burkholder and Kerman note, was that Brahms's generation of composers did not simply succeed their predecessors, as had been the case in the past, they *joined* them in the repertory, and had to compete with them for their place.<sup>61</sup> Burkholder suggests a reason for this sudden interest in old music. The nineteenth century saw composers writing music intended for mass-marketing to amateur musicians on an unprecedented scale. Burkholder sees the nineteenth-century obsession with the old masters as a reaction to this commercialism.<sup>62</sup>

In the twentieth century, this phenomenon went a step farther: the concert hall became a place primarily for old music – the exact opposite of what it had been prior to the nineteenth century.<sup>63</sup> The repertory became "a very specific, restricted list of symphonies, string quartets [and] sonatas preserved long after origin in a kind of Meistersinger environment," wrote Richard L. Crocker, referring to the conservatory approach to music taken by the characters in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.<sup>64</sup> Music appears to have resisted canonization (by which I mean the implementation of a historicist repertory) for much longer than literature.

Kerman offers a compelling justification for this phenomenon. He posits that music is resistant to canonization because of its ephemeral nature. Composition does not produce an end result that is a

---

60 Kerman, "A Few Canonic Variations," 182.

61 Ibid, 181.

62 Burkholder, "Museum Pieces," 117.

63 Ibid, 116.

64 Kerman, "A Few Canonic Variations," 183.

tangible product, like a novel or a painting: it facilitates the *process* that is a musical performance. The act of criticism, Kerman argues, is dependent on having a definitive “text:” the thing that must stand to be judged. In Western art music of the common practice period, notated scores are taken to be such texts, but they have severe limitations. Kerman points out that in order for a score to become music (through the medium of performance), a musician or ensemble must engage with a vast performance tradition that they have been imbued with through training.<sup>65</sup> These interpretational traditions are essentially oral traditions, and as such they change over time, leaving some uncertainty as to how to definitively realize the vision that a (presumably deceased) composer hinted at through a notated score. Kerman details Crocker's argument that writing music down does not change a tradition in any meaningful way, because musicians always operate with more attention paid to a performance tradition that they have inherited than to the “external authority of composers' ideal texts.”<sup>66</sup> In literature, the person reading the text is the intended audience for the work. In music, on the other hand, the text must be mediated: the “reader” (the performer) and the audience are two independent entities. So, to Don Michael Randel, the question of whether to consider a work based on aesthetic alone (as Bloom would) or in context (as Kolodny would) is more obvious in the realm of music than in literature, because music “lays bare the respect in which the work of art is a function of the reader/listener.”<sup>67</sup>

Kerman locates the seeds of the Western art music canon in the very origin of musical notation, the medium for the all-important musical text. He asserts that the earliest Gregorian chant notation was intended to standardize the music to the words of the Roman Mass, which were already “canonical” in the strictest, religious sense. This was perhaps the first act of musical canonization. However, the imprecision of this early notation leaves serious uncertainty about how to realize the music. The internalized music tradition employed by the original singers of this music has been essentially lost,

---

65 Ibid, 178.

66 Ibid, 180.

67 Don Michael Randel, “The Canons in the Musicological Toolbox,” in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons*, ed. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 18.

Kerman argues. He notes that this emphasizes the evanescence of music, as well as the importance of texts to canon-formation.<sup>68</sup>

Even when set down on paper, music is subject to interpretation, and therefore ephemeral. Kerman expands this notion into a historical view of music where, as Burkholder also noted, composers become fashionable for a while and then drop out of the repertory just as suddenly. “Under such conditions of evanescence,” Kerman wrote, “the idea of a canon is scarcely thinkable.”<sup>69</sup>

But, in the nineteenth century, all of this changed. Scores took on a new importance for the concert-going public, who began taking scores with them to concerts. Just as the canonicity of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides depended on texts and not performances, Hoffmann's musical idols were now judged on the basis of their scores: the closest a critic could get to assessing “the work itself.” Under the baton of the first generation of great conductors, the concert hall took on the character of a lecture theatre. Rather than simply enjoying Mozart, the audience sought to understand him. The popular music of the time was no longer at home in the concert hall, so it found its way to nightclubs and casual music halls.<sup>70</sup> With the music of exalted old masters being performed in concert halls, and revered not as mere entertainment but as sublime art, nineteenth-century composers of “serious” music faced a challenging new paradigm: rather than simply entertaining the audiences of their time, they were obliged to win a place in a newly-minted pantheon.<sup>71</sup>

Burkholder notes how this phenomenon turned the whole tradition of music on its head: suddenly, the composer's intent to appeal to a contemporary audience became secondary to his intent to create something of lasting value.<sup>72</sup> This is how, as Burkholder sees it, the modern concert hall transformed from the one-time venue of fashionable entertainment to the museum-like edifice of its

---

68 Kerman, “A Few Canonic Variations,” 179.

69 Ibid, 181.

70 Burkholder, “Museum Pieces,” 117.

71 Ibid, 118.

72 Ibid, 120.



modern incarnation – with the famous works of Beethoven, Mozart, Bach, Tchaikovsky and the other “masters” as its permanent collection.<sup>73</sup> Burkholder also uses this argument to account for some of the purportedly difficult music written by early twentieth-century modernist composers: their priority was to create something of lasting value, at least for study. But, unlike Bach or Haydn, their music served no immediate social function, and thus it maintains obscurity, appreciated only by a few fervent devotees. They were writing “museum pieces.”<sup>74</sup>

Burkholder clarifies that he does not see this historicism as a malignant influence on music. In fact, he argues that the canon (as distinct from the repertory) is a place where a modernist composer like Schoenberg can be appreciated not as a wrecking ball for the whole musical tradition, but as part of a lineage of inherited models. He thus ties his argument in with Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, which he cites.<sup>75</sup>

After Hoffmann, the idea of a musical canon took a firm hold in criticism. The influential early twentieth-century critic Heinrich Schenker's concept of the canon was particularly limited: “J.S. and C.P.E Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Chopin, [and] Brahms.” According to Kerman, early twentieth-century critics did not agree on what should be in the canon, but they agreed that “Western music should be viewed in terms of a canon and that some form of analysis of the scores was the means of determining what music belonged in.”<sup>76</sup> However, opposition to the specific limitations of the canon (being primarily German, for instance) inevitably began to surface in music criticism just as in literary criticism.

The most focused opposition to the canon today comes from the field of ethnomusicology, which Bruno Nettl defines as “the study of music in or as culture.”<sup>77</sup> As Kerman puts it: “Scholars who

---

73 Ibid, 116.

74 Ibid, 127.

75 Ibid, 134.

76 Kerman, “A Few Canonic Variations,” 184.

77 Bruno Nettl, “Mozart and the Ethnomusicological Study of Western Culture: An Essay in Four Movements,” in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons*, ed. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of

see the reality of a musical tradition in its social function within a supporting culture can only regard the activity of poring over revered scores 'in a kind of Meistersinger environment' as not only elitist and compulsive but myopic (and possibly chauvinistic)."<sup>78</sup> This act of "poring over revered scores" is Kerman's slightly facetious way of describing analysis, the particular musicological tool that allows scholars to examine "the work itself," as a text. Kerman notes that analysis strives for rigour and objectivity above all: a nearly scientific approach. It refuses to openly indulge in the sort of aesthetic judgement that literary criticism enjoys. It simply seeks to locate "cohesiveness" or "organic purity" in the score, or at least this is the overwhelming tendency.<sup>79</sup> Thus, any power that analysis has over the conferral or affirmation of canonicity is thought to stem from the value of the score itself, as assessed by objective, scientific methods.<sup>80</sup> So, the same tension that exists between Bloom and his "School of Resentment" also exists between the practitioners of musical analysis and those of ethnomusicology. Once again, the fundamental difference of opinion lies in the notion of judging a work of art independent of its social context.

Richard Cohn and Douglas Dempster deconstruct music analysis's obsession with coherence. They posit that the goal of defining a canon is to tame the bewildering diversity of existing works by finding a unifying principal that the "great works" will be forced to conform to: a law that may find the signal in the noise.<sup>81</sup> In analysis, cohesiveness is often taken as that unifying principal. Cohn and Dempster see a parallel between the methods that analysts use to interpret a piece of music and the way that canons form around such interpretations, particularly those who follow Schenker's methods. Schenker's model of music analysis attempts to locate a hierarchy of elements within a single piece.

---

Chicago Press, 1992), 137.

78 Kerman, "A Few Canonic Variations," 187.

79 Richard Cohn and Douglas Dempster, "Hierarchical Unity, Plural Unities: Towards a Reconciliation" in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons*, ed. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 156.

80 Joseph Kerman, "How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get out," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Winter 1980): 313.

81 Cohn and Dempster, "Hierarchical Unity," 156.

Then, based on the findings, it situates that piece within a hierarchy of great music.<sup>82</sup> Variations on Schenkerian analysis have been a primary musicological tool for the last century.

However, just as in the literary debate, there are critics of the canon who proclaim that all conclusions based solely on textual evidence are enclosed within a social framework that is worth taking note of. Kerman notes that the techniques of analysis were developed to account for the alleged superiority of eighteenth and nineteenth-century German masterpieces.<sup>83</sup> The importance of musical coherence to analysts can be traced back, in part to J.N. Forkel, Bach's biographer, who wrote of Bach: "He thought the whole could not be perfect if anything were wanting to the perfect precision of the single parts... And this man, the greatest musical poet and the greatest musical orator that ever existed, and probably ever will exist, was a German."<sup>84</sup>

So, while analysis is ostensibly able to withhold aesthetic judgement in its appraisal of a work, the aesthetic judgement is tacitly employed at the outset, at which point the "masterpiece" status of the work is simply taken for granted, on aesthetic grounds that owe at least something to nineteenth-century Teutonic nationalism.<sup>85</sup> At this point we might usefully think back to Achebe. If all music is to be judged by the "objective" methods of musical analysis – a system designed for a very specific style of Austro-German music from a very specific period of time – then a great deal of it is going to come up short. As Randel observed: "Even the highest art music of France and Italy, to say nothing of England and Spain, might very well prove resistant to analytical methods developed with a view to demonstrating the tonal coherence of the masterpieces of certain German composers."<sup>86</sup> He notes that perceived shortcomings of music that falls outside of this tradition may be the fault of the "musicological toolbox" with which it is analyzed, and not necessarily the music itself. This serves as a

---

82 Ibid, 162.

83 Kerman, "A Few Canonic Variations," 194.

84 Kerman, "How We Got into Analysis," 315.

85 Ibid, 313.

86 Randel, "The Canons in the Musicological Toolbox," 13.

reminder of Achebe's notion that works of art can only be considered “universal” within a certain cultural framework – and they are therefore not universal at all.

This is why Kerman suggests that analysis is in a bind: for some time now, we have been living in a society that appreciates a plurality of musics rather than just the old German stuff.<sup>87</sup> So, ethnomusicological methods that consider music within the context of culture are a necessary addition to analytical methods.<sup>88</sup> Randel proposes that “Musicology and ethnomusicology begin to look a great deal more alike when we recognize that there is no such thing as a work without a context.”<sup>89</sup>

The critics discussed up to this point have generally considered the “work” to be the primary unit of the Western art music canon: that is to say that the canon is composed of “works.” However, Nettl's observations suggest that rather than canonizing works, critics have primarily been engaged in canonizing composers. One might almost read this in the religious sense. Nettl argues that musicologists, musicians and other “denizens of the Music Building” on any given university campus find it important to think of their great composers as “great souls,” and not merely great technicians.<sup>90</sup> He considers the role of myths in our concept of music history. Mozart and Beethoven, to take two examples, both have convenient myths affixed to them. Mozart is commonly seen as spectacularly gifted: not having to work or even think to produce masterpieces. Beethoven is seen as the opposite: an intelligent man who found composing extremely difficult. Both of these are facile simplifications, but Nettl argues that they serve to package Mozart and Beethoven into comprehensible cultural products for European and American society, respectively, and that this may be part of why they are so primary.<sup>91</sup> Nettl suggests that the hierarchy of works that he argues is very important to musicologists is not based so much on analytical findings as it is based on the perceived greatness of the works' composers. He

---

87 Kerman, “How We Got into Analysis,” 319.

88 Kerman, “A Few Canonic Variations,” 194.

89 Randel, “The Canons in the Musicological Toolbox,” 12.

90 Nettl, “Mozart and the Ethnomusicological Study of Western Culture,” 141.

91 *Ibid*, 145.

notes that if a piece “by” Beethoven were discovered to be by the little-known composer Friedrich Witt, it would somehow no longer be the same piece, because we understand pieces in relation to the person who wrote them and the other pieces that they wrote.<sup>92</sup>

This may seem like a stretch, and indeed Nettl suggests it in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner, but Randel agrees with Nettl's assessment that the status of the composer has an outsized importance in musicology. By way of demonstration, he notes that works by anonymous composers never succeed in attaining canonic status.<sup>93</sup> This illustrates the extent to which critics (and also audiences) feel the need to fit the music they come across into a narrative. This is a primary function of the canon and of the repertory.

Robert P. Morgan argues that composers throughout history have tended to see themselves in the light of this narrative. He suggests that despite the lack of a history of canonizing in music, there is an enduring notion of a pure, perfect, natural aesthetic: “Western music has been characterized by... an idea... that music constitutes a well-formed and coherent 'language' based upon commonly shared formal and expressive assumptions.”<sup>94</sup> He suggests that composers are aware that all of the good music of the past has been based around such an idea, and in asserting this, he echoes Bloom's *A Map of Misreading*. The agonistic relationships between composers of different generations forms a continuing historical narrative, and the works of the composers within that narrative form the canon. Morgan demonstrates his thesis by noting how composers of ostensibly radical music have usually portrayed their innovations as essentially superficial (he gives the example of the *seconda pratica* as justified in the mid-seventeenth century by Christoph Bernhard) or as corrections of an art form that had strayed from the natural path (he cites Wagner's justification for his music dramas).<sup>95</sup>

---

92 Ibid, 142.

93 Randel, “The Canons in the Musicological Toolbox,” 12.

94 Robert P. Morgan, “Rethinking Musical Culture: Canonic Reformulations in a Post-Tonal Age,” in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons*, ed. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 44.

95 Ibid, 45.

However, Morgan posits that this narrative has fallen apart in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly in the light of John Cage's music. Cage's chance music and conceptual pieces brought about uncertainty as to what even constitutes music.<sup>96</sup> Because of the degree of chance and variability involved in pieces like the *Imaginary Landscapes*, and the intentional lack of authorial intent behind them, Cage's compositions are almost impossible to regard as “texts,” making analysis and thus canonization virtually impossible. Morgan argues that Cage's innovations urge composers to reinvent music from scratch every time they compose. They thus disassociate themselves with any historical tradition or narrative, making canons not only impossible but useless.<sup>97</sup> In such a world, which embraces a plurality of musics from many different periods of time, it can be tempting to abandon the notion of canon altogether, but Morgan cautions against this: “When all music becomes equally acceptable, then all standards become equally irrelevant. We are left in a world where, since everything is valued, nothing has particular value.”<sup>98</sup> As a solution to this tension, Morgan proposes a system of multiple canons, where “art music” is not necessarily taken to be a single, all-encompassing category, and is not assumed to be the music by which all other music is measured. Morgan does not attempt to outline the boundaries between these multiple canons, but he specifies that his ideal system would produce “a culture of tolerance and broad understanding, but one in which differences still mattered and standards of excellence still applied... One must not give up entirely the concept of 'good,' simply because it has lost its aura of universality. In any event, the aura was always only that.”<sup>99</sup>

Kerman suggests that recorded music has brought about a useful new paradigm in canonization. Where previously the canon was selected by critics, Kerman suggests, and the repertory by performers, based on practical factors such as ease of performance, the new canonicity is doled out by listeners.<sup>100</sup>

---

96 Ibid, 49.

97 Ibid, 54.

98 Ibid, 60.

99 Ibid, 61-62.

100 Kerman, “A Few Canonic Variations,” 194.

Sound recordings allowed for the canonization of performances, rather than simply of “the work itself.” For the first time in history, a performance can now become a text. So, even if a piece of music is virtually impossible to play, has only been recorded once, and is never played in concert, that piece could conceivably join the canon without ever joining the repertory, and without significant critical attention. Here, we have yet another entirely new notion of how canons could conceivably form.

Morgan also notes how the availability of the entire musical tradition on records has influenced the plurality of musical life, even in the concert hall:

“The volume and variety of music presented to the public today is unprecedented. The repertories of even such traditionally oriented institutions as symphony orchestras and opera houses are much more diverse than they were even a quarter of a century ago, and they encompass not only what we still somewhat anachronistically call the 'classics,' but also recent music, older music and an ever broader sampling of secondary composers of the common-practice period.”<sup>101</sup>

It is worth noting that Morgan wrote this in 1992, and that this trend perhaps continues today. Given this new pluralism, it may not be surprising that critics like Randel and Morgan, who argue in favour of a more open canon model, can provoke skepticism from some of their fellow critics.<sup>102</sup> In a review of *Disciplining Music*, the book that collects essays by Randel, Morgan, Nettl, Cohn and Dempster and others, Leon Botstein argues that the book's editors and some of its contributing essayists take it for granted that the canon is arbitrary, inflexible, and indeed “evil,” and that it therefore must be “opened up.”<sup>103</sup> As discussed above, Morgan displays a more nuanced understanding than this and, to various extents, so do some of the other contributors. Botstein also condemns the editors of the book

---

101 Morgan, “Rethinking Musical Culture,” 56.

102 W.E. Grim, “Review of *Disciplining Music*,” *Choice Reviews Online* 30, no. 6 (1993): 30.

103 Leon Botstein, “Review of *Disciplining Music*,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 47, no. 2 (1994): 340.

for embracing the “fashions” of other social sciences: fashions like embracing pluralism, or acknowledging gender and racial biases in scholarly methodologies. However, he fails to articulate why these “fashions” are not potentially beneficial for musicology. Some of his doubts appear to come from a similar place to Bloom's doubts about Alice Walker: “Do we praise a piece of music... because it adds to a pluralistic universe?”<sup>104</sup> Like Morrissey, he bemoans the fact that when a critic expresses opposition to the pluralistic ideals put forth by the authors, he/she is often met with accusations of a political or moral failing.<sup>105</sup>

Botstein seems to fundamentally believe in the possibility that a hierarchy of music can be established through essentially objective means, and that not all value judgements are mere whims informed by social criteria that have nothing to do with music. “Music... thrives and exists as a result of people liking and not liking what they play and what they hear,” Botstein wrote. “Any student... who denies that there are valid grounds for making a distinction... between *Figaro* and *The Phantom of the Opera*... is a fool.”<sup>106</sup> Botstein, like Morgan, believes in the necessity of hierarchies. He argues that composers can and should compete with each other for a rung on the ladder if it will inspire them to greater heights of achievement. However, he suggests that music produced in such an environment has the potential to be “valid cross-culturally:” this last assertion contains a ring of “universality,” that presumptuous quality that Achebe powerfully assures us does not exist.<sup>107</sup> Presumably, this is where Morgan's multi-canon system would be useful. Composers could still be allowed to thrive in a competitive environment, but their music would not be put in a position to eclipse music written by and/or for people in other social frameworks, who would compete for canonicity in a different context.

I will consider the work of one more critic before drawing my conclusions. David Dubal works in a different sphere from any of the critics discussed so far. He is a prominent concert and recording

---

104 Ibid, 346.

105 Ibid, 341.

106 Ibid, 345.

107 Ibid.



pianist, and the author of several books on classical music intended for lay readers. He is also well-known as a classical music broadcaster. Dubal's 2001 book *The Essential Canon of Classical Music* is perhaps the most direct attempt to codify the Western art music canon for a wide readership. The book appears as a musical counterpart to Bloom's *The Western Canon*, although the two books have different stated aims. Dubal's book "suggests a lifetime listening plan," and is aimed at readers who are seeking a definitive classical music experience for themselves, or perhaps their children: an experience that, as Dubal proclaims with Bloomian mournfulness, "public education can no longer be counted on to provide."<sup>108</sup> Bloom explicitly states that he is "not presenting a 'lifetime reading plan,'" although his dictum that "who reads must choose" carries with it the implicit suggestion that you choose *these* books.<sup>109</sup> Bloom pares literature down to 26 writers; Dubal selects 236 composers, electing to focus primarily on the 60 that he sees as the most essential. The justification for Bloom's comparative selectivity could lie in the fact that the sort of detailed critique that he is interested in takes up many more pages than the fairly cursory summaries that Dubal provides. Or, it could reflect the fact that reading a book, especially as closely as Bloom counsels, tends to take far longer than listening to even the lengthiest works of Wagner or Mahler. Perhaps "who reads must choose," but who listens need not choose quite so judiciously. The spirit of Dubal's book is drastically different from the "severely artistic criteria" of Bloom's. Ironically, although Dubal organizes and codifies a canon of a finite number of composers, the vastness of his selection may serve to do the opposite of what Bloom attempted: it may in fact *expand* the number of composers and works that the reader is interested in hearing. By including such little-known composers as Pietro Nardini and Karl Goldmark, Dubal is combating the phenomenon that he calls the "masterpiece syndrome," which blinds audiences to the interest of works that are regarded as less-than-perfect.<sup>110</sup> Conversely, non-masterpieces are not admissible to Bloom's

---

108 David Dubal, *The Essential Canon of Classical Music* (New York: North Point Press, 2001), e-book.

109 Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 517.

110 Dubal, *The Essential Canon of Classical Music*, e-book.

*Western Canon.*

Dubal's book reflects the fact that audiences for classical music feel the need for an organizational scheme to apply to the major figures of music's increasingly lengthy history: a hierarchy, as Nettl would swiftly point out. However, the book also draws attention to the notion that although a canon is exclusive by definition, there are clearly different degrees of exclusivity. If the boundaries of the canon are set well outside the best-known works and composers, perhaps that canon can serve to contextualize the works of the major composers and also to expand (rather than limit) the horizons of the public's concept of music history.

I am not suggesting that Dubal's book be held up as a critical model for codifying canons. In fact, the book very obviously falls prey to the social factors that feminist critics suggest have shaped the canon: it is overwhelmingly dominated by male composers, even in its section on the twentieth century. Dubal's canon might have benefitted from a modicum of the self-reflexivity counselled by Kolodny. Still, Dubal's book is the one source I have come across that suggests how a canon may be used as a tool for broadening the history of music, rather than shrinking it.

## **Conclusion**

The literature review revealed a few key tensions in the canon debate, with respect to how canons form. By and large, these tensions are common to literary criticism and musicology, despite some historical differences in the formation of the literary and musical canons. The central tension is over the impact of social factors on the canon. I will outline the opposing perspectives in broad terms: One contingent of scholars posits that canons form organically, as the result of an essentially just historical process that assesses the intrinsic value of a work over an extended period of time. As Morrissey notes, some would have it that the intrinsic greatness of a work is the sole factor in its canonicity.<sup>111</sup> To Knox, for instance: "The primacy of the Greeks in the canon of Western literature is

---

<sup>111</sup> Morrissey, introduction to *Debating the Canon*, 2.

neither an accident nor the result of a decision imposed by a higher authority; it is simply a reflection of the intrinsic worth of the material, its sheer originality and brilliance.”<sup>112</sup> Others would have it that a work becomes canonical due to its extraordinary influence – an influence perhaps attained because of the work's intrinsic greatness.<sup>113</sup> Bloom is the outstanding exponent of this notion. An opposing contingent of scholars believes that canons form in accordance with social frameworks that favour dominant groups in the power structure, causing certain worthy works to be passed over. This argument comes most strongly from feminist scholars like Kolodny, Tompkins, and Meese.

The second key tension identified here is the role of the critic in canon formation. Bloom, in particular, is adamant that critics do not form canons: artists form canons through a series of relationships defined by influence.<sup>114</sup> Kolodny implicitly accepts this notion, although she qualifies it by arguing that an influence-based model of canon formation is only adequate for delineating the canon of the most dominant group in the power structure.<sup>115</sup> Others, like Meese, dispute this idea, positing that a predominantly white, male critical edifice is responsible for the canon as we know it, and perpetuates it through higher education.<sup>116</sup> This tension is less relevant to musicology, because of the semantic difference in the way that they write about “canon.” There is little question in musicology that critics determine the Western art music canon, but the influence of critics on the repertory that is familiar to the public is less widely written about. There should be no doubt that, however canons arise, critics are consistently engaged in codifying them, as demonstrated by Dubal, Bloom, and Johnson. In the case of E.T.A. Hoffmann, his criticism may indeed have influenced the repertory that was fashionable in the nineteenth century, and therefore the repertory that performers draw from now.<sup>117</sup>

Finally, there is a pronounced tension over whether the works in long-standing canons may be

---

112 Knox, *The Oldest White Dead European Males*, 21.

113 Morrissey, introduction to *Debating the Canon*, 2.

114 Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 522.

115 Kolodny, “A Map for Rereading,” 94.

116 Meese, “Sexual Politics and Critical Judgement,” 117.

117 Kerman, “A Few Canonic Variations,” 182.

dubbed “universal.” Bloom, certainly, believes this to be a key factor in why and how a book ends up in the canon, and he has a musicological ally in Botstein.<sup>118</sup> However, they both have a powerful opponent in Achebe, who finds such a label presumptuous and, more often than not, parochial.<sup>119</sup> Perhaps a beneficial way to look at a canon is as a representation of a particular tradition and not, as has often been the case, as the sole pinnacle of human artistic accomplishment. The orchestral repertory, for example, is necessarily Eurocentric, given the origins of the classical tradition. But, the existence of a canon for that tradition does not imply the tradition's supremacy over other traditions. This is the idea at the heart of Morgan's model of multiple canons.<sup>120</sup>

A couple of other key points came to light through the literature review. Firstly, recordings may change, and have probably already changed, the way that musical canons form. In the new model, the onus is on listeners to collectively canonize great performances of great works. This would mean that for the first time, there would be a musical canon of works familiar to the public (and not just critics) that is distinct from the performance repertory.<sup>121</sup>

Secondly, although critics are generally considered responsible for the musical canon and *not* the repertory, there is an intersection between the two. Both the canon and the historicist repertory depend on the notion of a work's “timelessness,” which is to say, its ability to exist outside of time, as a classic, ever-contemporary work of art.<sup>122</sup> The idea that music can be timeless, rather than ephemeral and fixed to a particular social milieu, this having been its natural state for most of human history, comes from the critical obsession with texts, the reliable representation of “the work itself.”

With all of this in mind, this review left me with some questions. The ubiquity of recorded music would seem to further enable music's timelessness, given that any number of performances of

---

118 Leon Botstein, “Review of *Disciplining Music*,” 345.

119 Achebe, “Colonialist Criticism,” 77.

120 Morgan, “Rethinking Musical Culture,” 61.

121 Kerman, “A Few Canonic Variations,” 190.

122 Burkholder, “Museum Pieces,” 133.

any number of works from any era are available to anyone, at any time. However, with our media becoming increasingly immediate, and with the ever-increasing premium that we put on timeliness, is the concept of timelessness even tenable anymore? Can a work of art from a distant period of time be relevant in the twenty-first century? If not, can this account for the falling audiences for classical music?<sup>123</sup> And, what does this mean for the future of the repertory: specifically, how much contemporary music will soon find its way in? This, after all, is timely music – music with social relevance – the kind that was performed in concert halls before historicism set in during the nineteenth century.

In the journalistic portion of this thesis project, I have attempted to address these questions, specifically with respect to the repertory, rather than the canon, as Kerman would have it. In Vancouver, there are several organizations that seek to expand the repertory past the most familiar works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Turning Point Ensemble is in one sense the most museum-like musical organization in the city, in that they endeavour to curate and contextualize the music they perform in themed concerts. However, their programming is unconventional, and generally drawn from contemporary music and the music of the twentieth century. A previous Turning Point concert, consisting of music that was dubbed “degenerate” by the Nazi party, exemplifies both of these tendencies. Music on Main is an organization that emphasizes the social element to live music. Rather than presenting “timeless” masterpieces in the lecture-hall environment identified by Burkholder, they focus on the music of our social milieu, in a variety of performance contexts, including bars. When they do program music from the common-practice period, they tend to show it in an unconventional light, as demonstrated by a concert program that paired the music of Bach and Schumann with folk song settings and music written by the performers themselves. Even the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, an organization that is by necessity somewhat devoted to the music of the “masters,”

---

<sup>123</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *How a Nation Engages with Art* (Washington, 2013), 12.

inaugurated their annual New Music Festival in January, 2014. VSO Music Director Bramwell Tovey is a composer himself, so he presumably has an interest in promoting the music of our time.

I spoke to the directors of all of these organizations about how they grapple with the issues of canonicity and repertory inclusion outlined in this literature review. These interviews introduced a new dimension to the project: the fact that the act of choosing works of great aesthetic value is not the same as the act of choosing works that will fill concert halls. The economic realities of running a musical organization are the primary factor that distinguishes the concert programmers who directly influence the repertory from the critics and academics who codify canons.

I gathered a number of informed opinions on whether music can or should ever be considered truly “timeless,” or “universal.” Underlying my preparation for each interview, there was a set of ideas derived from this literature review. Firstly, I drove at the notion that, in elevating the works of certain long-deceased composers, organizations like symphony orchestras and opera companies are hampering the ability of today's “serious” music to fulfill the social function that music has long been seen to perform. I also brought up the possibility that the repertory these organizations draw from, although constantly expanding, is as much the result of long-standing social prejudices and maladies than of the intrinsic value of the music. Although these ideas do not make up the primary thematic material of the radio documentary itself, they served as an invaluable framework for my reporting process.

## Bibliography

- Bergeron, Katherine, and Philip V. Bohlman, eds. *Disciplining Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon*. United States: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.
- Botstein, Leon. "Review of *Disciplining Music*." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 47, no. 2 (1994): 340-47.
- Burkholder, Peter. "Museum Pieces: The Historicist Mainstream in Music of the Last Hundred Years." *The Journal of Musicology* 2, no. 2 (1983): 115-34.
- Dubal, David. *The Essential Canon of Classical Music*. New York: North Point Press, 2001. Kindle edition.
- Grim, W. E. "Review of *Disciplining Music*." *Choice Reviews Online* 30, no. 6 (February 1, 1993): 30.
- Kerman, Joseph. "A Few Canonic Variations." In *Canons*, edited by Robert von Hallberg, 107-125. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Kerman, Joseph. "How we got into analysis, and how to get out." *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Winter 1980): 311-331.
- Knox, Bernard. *The Oldest Dead White European Males*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1993.
- McDonald, Brent and Tanenhaus, Sam. "Harold Bloom's Influence" *New York Times* video, 6:40. May 20, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/video/review/100000000828027/harold-blooms-influence.html>
- Morrissey, Lee, ed. *Debating the Canon*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- National Endowment for the Arts, *How a Nation Engages with Art*. Washington, 2013.