



Naomi Waltham-Smith

Music and Belonging Between Revolution and Restoration

Oxford University Press, New York, 2017. 280 pp., £46.49 hb

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Daniel K L Chua

Beethoven and Freedom

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About the reviewer

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With prominent exceptions including Theodor Adorno, musicology and leftist discourse have only rarely combined in scholarly writing or criticism. Art history and literary theory have not experienced the same remoteness from leftist or Marxist critical traditions, and what there has been in music studies has tended towards Ethnomusicology and Popular Music scholarship. The two books under review here register

something of a shift in this respect while at the same time highlighting the difficulties involved in relating left-theoretical hermeneutics to the musical canon. Musicologists Naomi Waltham-Smith and Daniel Chua both engage with theoretical and philosophical discourses which may be defined as broadly influenced by Marx or, more accurately, conceived in critical response to Marxism: Waltham-Smith's study finds paradigms of biopolitical logic and deconstruction in the works of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, while Chua's book on Beethoven engages with Adorno's unfinished monograph on the composer. This review will focus on left-theoretical issues rather than musical analysis or

musicological scholarship. For the latter, I recommend a recent review by Craig Comen (2018). Following considerations of each of these books separately, I shall conclude with a brief comparison of the two.

Waltham-Smith's *Music and Belonging Between Revolution and Restoration* is an impressive, thought-provoking interpretation of works of the Austro-German canon as 'paradigmatic' of a politics of belonging and community, focusing on recent and contemporary Continental European philosophy on biopolitics, governmentality, sovereignty and deconstruction, especially in the work of Agamben, Derrida, Deleuze, Badiou, and Virno. The subtlety of her approach makes the book's argument difficult to convey concisely. Waltham-Smith covers large areas of theoretical ground which have only rarely been explored by musicology. Foremost among these is her attempt to theorise the 'listener' in relation to the musical text. '[L]istening', she proposes, 'is the way in which belonging takes place in and around music, as a relation to music' (3). If music of the late eighteenth century was listener-oriented – sociable, affective, communicative – Waltham-Smith probes this already familiar idea by considering how a 'community of listeners' might be inscribed within the text of the works themselves. Who is included, and who excluded, from these works? Conversely, is it the composer who wields authorial control and ownership over the material, or does the material somehow elude any such attempts at appropriation?

According to much of the study, especially chapter 2 ('Haydn's Revolution'), the answer lies in notions of conventionality. Musical convention, such as a stereotypical cadential formula, is not 'proper' to the work, nor to the composer, but rather a gesture towards the 'improper'. It does not seem to belong to anyone in particular. Waltham-Smith suggests that traces of listening and the multiplicity of voice are inherent in musical works themselves, rather than outsourced to reception theory, cultural history, or sociological studies. Musical convention equally escapes the mastery by the (sovereign) composer. With Derrida, Waltham-Smith shows how authorial control can be relinquished not only through the agency of listening but also through features of musical discourse such as 'voice', meaning a quasi-vocal style and the identifiable authorial 'voice' of the composer rather than voice in a literal sense of the word. In general, Waltham-Smith eschews operatic and vocal music in preference for instrumental works.

The book's preposition 'between revolution and restoration' is carefully explicated: 'This does not refer to a temporal interval', but rather to twin paradigms of freedom and resistance, emancipation and defiance (31). The historical dimension is not entirely absent – the book opens with a detailed case

study – but soon gives way to analyses of musical scores using fairly traditional, if cleverly utilised, techniques. Despite Waltham-Smith's penchant for 'threshold figures as a means to think beyond the dialectic' (the eardrum, the skin, the halo, etc.) (31), there is a lack of mediation between the theoretical model that dominates the book – a model that depends on the physicality of sound and listening – and formalist music theory. The seamlessness of Waltham-Smith's prose disguises the difficulties of bringing two distinct fields together, as vocabularies in music theory and in philosophy bleed into one another: 'convention', 'refrain', 'ritornello', 'voice', 'material', 'virtuosity', 'play'. The gap between the various scholarly areas is foregrounded throughout the book, but that gap is wider than a mere threshold.

Waltham-Smith develops a sophisticated theory of the listener and the community, but by the end it remains ambiguous just how historical these categories might be. The listener and the act of listening are for the most part abstracted and de-socialised, with only a few references to actual historical cases or experiences. If the 'lists' and 'categories' (such as 'the Classical style' and 'late Beethoven') are themselves the object of analysis precisely in their virtual potentiality and contingency, they are also petrified conventions (e.g. 'natural history' in Walter Benjamin's sense). When Waltham-Smith describes a 'community of listeners, performers and musicians' in relation to a work, what does – what *might* – that consist of? Is the category itself a potentiality or a normative ideal? Can this 'community' be described in terms of any social class? It is to the credit of Waltham-Smith's study that it provokes such questions which are probably beyond even the immense theoretical scope of what it attempts.

Chua's *Beethoven and Freedom* consists largely of already published research in revised form. It is a summation of his musicological project to date and in many ways an extension of his brilliant, unsurpassed monograph *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (1999). If the latter was structured in a series of aphorisms, poised somewhere between dialectical constellations and a Foucaultian genealogy, his latest book throws caution to the winds and casts the whole thing in a musical form to resemble a Beethovenian Sonata, the mimesis by turns playfully witty and earnestly self-conscious. The argument progresses dialectically through four 'movements': an Introduction (Slow Introduction), Movement I (Nothing), Movement II (Something) and Movement III (Someone), a trajectory that mirrors certain of Beethoven's works (although arguably no one single work). The book not only sums up Chua's own work but stands for an entire body of dialectical, Romantic Beethoven criticism in which 'freedom' has played a central role. In erudite and philosophically literate ways, Chua's work

elaborates on this critical tradition and the image of Beethoven it has propagated, canonises and codifies it rather than refuting it wholesale.

It is Adorno's unfinished monograph on Beethoven that provides the most recurring reference point for Chua's argument. While Chua denies any attempt to 'explain let alone complete' Adorno's philosophy of Beethoven (9), he points out where that project failed: in confronting the theological dimension in Beethoven's late works. To supplement Adorno's project, Chua refers to radical liberation theology and theology of hope (writers such as John Milbank, Jürgen Moltmann, John Zizioulas and Terry Eagleton) as well as Christopher Brittain's *Adorno and Theology*. Chua seeks to redeem precisely the theological element in Beethoven criticism to reveal a Beethovenian idea of freedom at odds with secular humanism.

Chua's model of listening is grounded in the modern subject, whose abstract freedom is mirrored in a sublime, nihilistic experience of 'absolute music'. For Chua, reception history itself – Beethoven's especially – performs a kind of methodological blankness: 'The historical context bleaches the object in order to interpret its meaning with the ever-changing hues of time. Music is forced to turn white as though it has no political meaning of its own' (28). Chua still refers to moments in Beethoven's reception to reflect not so much on the receiving culture but rather on the author's own philosophical exegesis, including many drawn from unlikely sources of popular culture. The more familiar moments of Beethoven reception, such as the concert performance at the Theater-an-der-Wien in December 1808, are interpreted in ways that only further underline their exemplary, almost legendary status.

To my mind, the middle movement ('Something') is the best part of the book, especially the sections on Beethoven's only opera *Fidelio* and section V ('Child's Play') which makes the connection between Adorno's listening and Benjamin's philosophy of childhood memory and experience. (Incidentally, there are typographical errors in two of the musical examples, including the excerpt of the 'Waldstein' Sonata [147].) The discussion of 'play' here is similar to Waltham-Smith (see the opening of chapter 3) as both are informed by Marxian notions of use-value and exchange-value: 'it takes delight in a qualitative difference instead of a quantitative sameness' (147). Yet, as Comen noted in his review of *Beethoven and Freedom*, Marx is not cited once, a strange omission given the importance of Marxist thought to Adorno among many others discussed.

Chua's study represents a body of dialectical criticism that Waltham-Smith seeks to supplant with the biopolitical alternative, especially Agamben's critical stance towards Marxist dialectics. Waltham-Smith claims to eschew the Hegelian

tradition of musical analysis and criticism, prevalent in Beethoven studies led by Adorno and others since, Chua amongst them. Yet there are productive considerations of Benjamin, an important influence on Agamben, and the study relies heavily on Marxian theorizations of private property, the commodity and consumption. One of these is a fascinating discussion of 'natural history' as a philosophical paradigm for Adorno's critique of late Beethoven (144-45), which turns out to avoid the 'exclusionary logic' that is allegedly a feature of both the Adornian dialectic of musical convention and of biopolitics (21). Ironically, Chua's thoroughly dialectical study makes liberal use of Derrida-like wordplay and hyphenation ('*real-ized*', '*dis-places*', '*space-Kraft*'), whereas Waltham-Smith employs nuanced, aphoristic formulations with hints of paradox. Waltham-Smith gives good reasons for 'not address[ing] the question of why *these* examples, why *these* names [...] and why *these* moments in their oeuvre' (19), while Chua's work on Beethoven could not conceivably be about any other figure.

For all that, both books attempt a revisionism of the Adornian critical tradition, as well as radical defences of the canon as an object of philosophical reflection. Predictably some of the same works are subject to musical analyses in each study. Both devote space to the last movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in C minor, Op. 111: for Waltham-Smith, the galaxy of trills (likened to Agamben's notion of the 'halo') suggests the emancipation of the ornament from the structural functionality of anticipating a cadence. Chua, on the other hand, is more interested in the traces of utopian recollection (Adorno's 'I was happy'), although similarly these gestures tend to be banal details of the score ('*nichtig* particulars') rather than elements of structural significance. And in their respective analyses of the 'Cavatina' from Beethoven's String Quartet in B flat, Op. 130, both home in on vulnerability and vocal 'weakness'. Waltham-Smith remarks of Chua's 2009 article 'Beethoven's Other Humanism', some of which is reproduced in his book, that 'his Beethoven is not vulnerable enough' (142), meaning partly that it maintains a too-strong commitment to presence and embodiment.

As radical appropriations and re-evaluations of the Classical canon, these studies are of course politically timely, perhaps too obviously so. Waltham-Smith notes that in the era of Brexit, Trump and neoliberal governmentality, a politics of listening and belonging is once again strikingly urgent (ix). In the dedication to his book, Chua refers to the legacy of the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. 'Freedom is on trial', he declares, adding 'may [it] find its purpose in hope' (v). Music's lateness (an idea proposed by Adorno) renders it open to appropriation and equally liable to escape any straightforward interpretation.

For that reason, it may also be better disposed than many forms of cultural production to providing a reflection of the present predicament.

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