

The Mapping of Musical Classicism, A Little-known and Dangerous Period

Jan LaRue

It is always tempting to consider one's own period as *terra incognita*. As we know from the astronauts, it is dramatic to know the unknown—or even to seem to know it. Possibly this feeling has accounted for some of the magnetic attraction of the Renaissance that by count in Professor Hewitt's fourth cumulation has produced more than twice as many American dissertations for that period as we find for Classicism. Perhaps it is time now, however, to share in this heady mystery by showing that Classicism, by neglect and default, may now claim to be the least-known period, particularly in proportion to the wealth of surviving sources.

No doubt the seeming familiarity of the Classical Period has provided a central reason for its neglect as a field of research. Familiarity has bred disinterest, if not active contempt, for its problems; and as a corollary, imagine the insecurity of working to find something of genuinely new interest in a field that all one's colleagues know to some extent—or think they know. Finally, and most distressing, the more familiar an area of music is, the more confident our musical judgments become: while we are likely to find a *virginal* of almost any unknown 14th century composer at least of considerable historical interest, we know enough fine symphonies by Haydn and Mozart to be able to say with some conviction that the work of many minor symphonists is dull or even actively bad. Despite these hazards, however, there are tangible rewards, somewhat heightened by rarity, in discovering occasional fine works by *Kleinmeister*; and in a broader view, there is genuine fascination in attempting to understand the morphology of procedures that led to the masterpieces of the Classical Period.

Yet pursuing the roots of Haydn and Mozart we strike a second problem in Classical research: the sheer volume of the sources. It is common for a doctoral student taking up an 18th-century topic to discover two or three times as much material as any reference work had led him to expect. My own Union Thematic Catalogue of 18th-century Symphonies must certainly now exceed 10,000 incipits (we are waiting

for a computer to do an accurate count), a total much higher than most authorities have expected. This tendency for topics to expand unmanageably has slowed and discouraged Classical research. Even more sharply dangerous is the two-thorned problem of authenticity: (1) Who wrote the piece? (2) Which version should be considered *the* authentic piece? Speaking merely of symphonies, I have shown elsewhere that sources for a single symphony may be attributed in different archives to as many as five different composers. An often trickier assignment than attribution, however, is the mere establishment of the work itself. Some years ago a small experience with a problem in 18th-century opera frightened me so badly I have hardly touched an opera since. In tracking down a supposed aria in a supposed opera supposedly by Galuppi, while making the usual cross-check I discovered that in a second source the aria had moved to a different act; in a third source it was transposed a fifth; in a fourth source it had been remodeled into a duet; in a fifth source it was attributed to Jommelli as part of a chamber pastorella; in a sixth source a new text had been adapted to the music; in a seventh source the text had been set to new music; and in an eighth source the aria had disappeared entirely. It is with some justification that one regards Classicism as a dangerous musical continent, wildly crisscrossed with confusing tracks.

The familiarities and unfamiliarities of Classicism, areas of knowledge and abysmal ignorance existing paradoxically side by side, have produced a serious and increasingly noticeable gap: we have no reliable general survey of this important era. Pressed by colleagues and publishers, a number of Classical scholars have carefully considered attacking the problem, only to withdraw until more ammunition can be accumulated. We simply do not yet have a sufficient depth of bibliographical control—not to mention analytical control—of the enormous output of Classical composers to make possible even a relatively satisfactory survey. Hence, if an interim report is all that can be made, it behooves us to plan this attack on the dangerous continent of Classicism with great care.

As guidelines in making a new plan we can study two approaches in the past, neither of which has produced satisfactory results. First, the attempt by any single author is doomed to failure because the volume of music is just too great to review without the assistance of numerous primary investigations. Yet in

many areas there exist no primary investigations, even on central topics. For the symphony, *mes es/ps*: I am not yet quite ready to do my part for the symphonic background, despite many years of preparatory investigation. Typical of many problems in Classicism, the material grows and grows; still worse, some of it changes like a chameleon: scarcely a week passes that does not produce a fresh problem in attribution. The final total of conflicting attributions may reach as high as 7 per cent, and until most of these confusions can be resolved, the background will remain bewildering. With one work in fifteen in doubt, the non-specialist choosing a "characteristic" illustration or venturing a fresh conclusion can make some bad mistakes.

To circumvent the presently insurmountable problems of the single generalist, some publishers have attempted an opposite but almost equally unsatisfactory plan: the collective volume of chapters by specialists in various subfields. This approach raises all sorts of administrative difficulties at the outset: discrepancies in originality, accuracy, length, and prose style. Then come more specifically musicological difficulties: disparities in approach, method of presentation and nomenclature, number of examples, and bibliographical depth. Finally and most serious: publishers often experience a negative correlation between the eminence of a scholar and his adherence to assignments, with the sad result that collective volumes inevitably contain both gaps and overlapping. The worst overlaps, of course, must be excised by someone. But by whom? Alas, by a generalist at best, and all too often much worse, by a more or less capable subeditor untroubled by scholarly scruples, who can be trusted to wield his cleaver decisively and eliminate all problems—except quality. Unfortunately this murderer of research will characteristically eliminate the more original material, since it tends to run counter to conventional, superficial interpretations that he may know; and in condensing paragraphs into sentences he will unerringly suppress the refined distinctions of the specialist, enforcing conformity in the name of consistency, his whole gray influence a levelling mediocrity.

With such methods, how can we advance beyond the efforts of the past? First we must begin by recognizing that nothing more than a temporary solution will be possible for many years. Without the foundations of research the generalists cannot design their broader hypotheses. Second, we must discover some

way of attaining a part of the consistent and revealing perspective of the generalist without losing the meaningful details of interpretation produced by painstaking evaluations of specialists. While these opposed goals can never be wholly reconciled, a considerable improvement could be achieved by a new approach that attempts to combine the best of both generalist and collective specialist methods in the following four-phase plan:

1. The survey should be written by a single generalist with specialist experience (or, only as a second choice, by a specialist with generalist experience). He should begin by producing a cogent theory of what musical Classicism means and how this central idea pervades the various forms of musical expression in the later 18th century.

2. He next prepares a general outline of the book and a detailed outline of each chapter.

3. Selecting in each subfield the specialist most likely to be critical of other efforts in that subfield, the writer sends him the general theory, the full outline, and the detailed chapter outline, soliciting his criticism in return for a definite (if predictably inadequate) fee. The specialists will be listed as consultants at the head of each chapter to which they contribute, giving them at least a minimal acknowledgment as well as supplying some immunity for the generalist from unprincipled sniping. Notice that it is much more effective to present material for criticism than to ask a specialist to produce an outline himself. An appeal for reaction rather than action calls into play all of the specialist's most refined abilities without forcing him to commit himself directly. Compared to actions, therefore, reactions produce nearly equivalent information quicker and more easily, with none of the problems attendant on chapters individually devised.

4. With reactions in hand, the writer completes the book and sends the semifinal draft of each chapter to the appropriate specialist for final reactions, which he incorporates (if genuinely appropriate) into the final typescript.

No one could guarantee that this procedure will be fully successful, but it offers several plausible improvements over the single and collective attempts of the past. In view of the desperate need for a workable survey of Classicism, one can hardly suggest a repetition of unsuccessful methods. To illuminate the Enlightenment we must try something new.