

# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## CHAPTER 2 The Music Trance

### Romantic Characterstücke; Schubert's Career

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 2 The Music Trance

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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## THE I AND THE WE

One of the great questions stirred—or restirred—by romanticism was the question of where truth lay. Older concepts of truth had depended on revelation (as in religion) or on authority and the power of enforcement (as in social hierarchies). The Enlightenment as defined by Kant depended for its notion of truth on the assumption of an indwelling endowment (as in his categorical imperative, the “moral law within”).<sup>1</sup> The Enlightenment as defined by the Encyclopedists held truth to be external but universal, deducible through the disciplined (or “scientific”) exercise of reason—thus available to all and consequently “objective.”

Whether revealed, enforced, innate, or rationally deduced, all of these concepts of truth had one thing in common: they could be formulated as “the” truth (or, to recall Michel Foucault's phrase, “the uniform truth”). For this reason, the distinctions between them have proved unstable. If by the ostensible exercise of reason, for example, two equally enlightened persons reach opposite “objective” conclusions, the one with the greater power is likely to prevail, instituting one version of “the” truth by force and collapsing the difference between science and authority. Powerful churchmen, for example during the Inquisition, collapsed the difference between revelation and authority. And the only way of accepting the notion of an innate law is to rely on faith, thus collapsing the difference between the innate and the revealed. Might, ultimately, could still make right.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, history had provided sobering examples of the way the best-intentioned Enlightenment could degenerate into intolerance and dogmatism, culminating in the naked exercise of power. The most recent and chilling was the speed with which the French Revolution, which had billed itself as the triumph of enlightenment over authority, had produced the Terror. The contradiction had been prefigured in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's strange notion (expressed in his *Social Contract*) of imposing freedom by force;<sup>2</sup> and it would have an even bloodier echo in the twentieth century in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Enlightenment and the sense of universal mission with which it endowed (or infected) its adherents would also be perverted, later in the nineteenth century, into a justification for imperialism, the forcible imposition of Western institutions on other cultures and societies in the name of reason and altruism (“the white man's burden”<sup>3</sup>), but also in the name of economic exploitation.

Romanticism provided an alternative to these notions of truth by removing the definite article. Truth (not “the” truth) is found in individual consciousness (or conscience), not decreed by public power. What was rejected was not the notion of truth but the notion of universalism. Instead, romanticism prized the particular and the unique (as proclaimed in the preamble to the same Rousseau's *Confessions*). Truth is therefore relative, at least to a degree, to the individual vantage point and therefore to some degree subjective.

The ideal became one not of uniform correct belief but one of sincerity—or, more strongly put, authenticity—of belief and utterance. Perhaps needless to say, relativism can degenerate into the law of the jungle even more easily than universalism can, since it requires little or no rationalization. If there is nothing to support my belief beyond the strength with which I hold or assert it, that strength will all too predictably translate into force if it meets with opposition. Such a view offers little prospect of community or social cooperation.

In its purest or most radical form, then, romantic individualism turned inward from public life, espousing the pessimistic social and civic passivity exemplified in the deaf and isolated late Beethoven, and finding refuge in “aestheticism” (Keats: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”<sup>4</sup>). Its political impact, then, was negligible; but its impact on art—and music above all—was decisive.

Romantic estheticism is the source of the still potent belief that art and politics are mutually indifferent if not mutually hostile terrains.

Far from politically passive, however, was another strain of romanticism—one that substituted collective consciousness for individual consciousness as the arbiter of truth claims. The human collectivity most commonly invoked for this purpose was the “nation”—a new concept and a notoriously protean (not to say a slippery) one. One thing was certain, however: a nation, unlike a state, was not necessarily a political entity. It was not primarily defined by dynasties or by territorial boundaries. Rather, a nation was defined by a collective consciousness (or “culture”), comprising language, customs, religion, and “historical experience.”

Not surprisingly, the romantic concept of nation—and its even more slippery corollaries like “national character,” “national spirit,” or “national pride”—gained maximum currency where nations were most obviously distinct from states, whether because many small states (like the principalities and dukedoms then occupying the territory of modern Germany and Italy) divided peoples who had language, etc., in common, or because a large state (like the Austrian Empire) comprised regional populations that differed in these same regards.

And not surprisingly, the various ideal or hypothetical components of national character did not necessarily work together in reality: German speakers were divided by religion, Italian coreligionists by language. (What we now call “Italian” was spoken in the early nineteenth century by only a tiny fraction—some five percent—of the population of the Italian peninsula). Nor could anyone really say for sure what constituted a shared history, or precisely what that had to do with nationhood, since the linguistically and religiously diverse subjects of the Austrian emperor or the Russian czar certainly had a history in common. There were also the related but distinguishable concepts of ethnicity (shared “blood” or biological endowment) and of race, which played roles of varying significance and volatility in conceptualizing nationhood in various parts of Europe.

Vagueness of this kind is a great stimulus to theorizing, and there have been countless theories of nationhood. So-called “modernization” theories emphasize the importance of literacy to the spread of “imagined community” over areas larger than individual cities, and identify the middle class, in its struggle for political equality with the hereditary aristocracy, as the primary historical agent of national consciousness, rather than the peasantry or the still small urban working class.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the definition, the politically active phase of national consciousness arose when for political or economic reasons—that is, reasons having to do with various sorts of worldly power—it seemed desirable to redraw the map so as to make nations (“blood”) and states (“soil”) coincide. That wish and the actions to which it gave rise are commonly denoted by the word *nationalism*. Like every other human idea or program of action, it too could turn ugly. Preoccupation with “I” and “we” all too easily turned into preoccupation with “us and them”—self and other, often with dire consequences for the latter.

The ugliness, though, came later. In its early phases, romantic individualism (idealizing the “I”) and romantic nationalism (idealizing the “we”) had benign cultural effects that transformed the arts. In this chapter we will explore the musical effects of the big I; in the next, of the big We.

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## Notes:

(1) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788); in *The Philosophy of Kant* (New York: Modern Library, 1949), p. 261.



(2) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Henry J. Tozer (New York: Pocket Books, 1967), p. 22.



(3) Title of a poem (1899) by Rudyard Kipling, which begins, “Take up the White Man's burden—/Send forth the best ye breed—/Go bind your sons to exile/To serve your captives' need.”

(4) From the concluding couplet in John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1820): “Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

(5) See in particular Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

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