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Review of Music in the Nineteenth Century, by Walter Frisch

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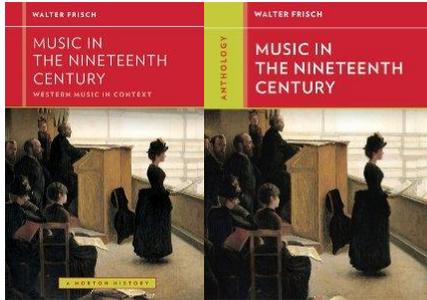
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***Music in the Nineteenth Century*, by Walter Frisch**

Written by Marie Sumner-Lott



Music in the Nineteenth Century, Walter Frisch. (Western Music in Context, vol. 5). New York: W. W. Norton, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-393-92919-5.

Anthology for Music in the Nineteenth Century, Walter Frisch. (Western Music in Context: A Norton History) New York: W. W. Norton, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-393920-178.

Editor's Note

In this volume, we present the first of six projected reviews of Norton's new music history series "Western Music in Context." Each book, accompanied by an annotated anthology, features current, updated research in each historical period of Western music written by leading musicologists. These books may be of particular interest to our readers, as they are designed to be concise yet highly informative, as well as pedagogically flexible for various types of undergraduate and graduate courses.

The fifth volume in the Norton series "Western Music in Context" deals with the decades between the Congress of Vienna, which concluded in 1815, and the advent of Modernism in the 1890s. That focus is not readily apparent from the title *Music in the Nineteenth Century*, which might prompt expectations of a narrative that extends from the late 1790s through World War I. But the use of a simple numerical century marker (common to the three books in the second half of the series, as opposed to the first three volumes that use the more common artistic designations "Medieval," "Renaissance," and "Baroque") allows author Walter Frisch to fulfill the series goal of placing music in its many contexts. By sidestepping the artistic-philosophical moniker common in previous treatments of this era's music, such as *Romantic Music* (Plantinga) or *The Romantic Generation* (Rosen), Frisch is able to explore Romanticism as one of many important trends within nineteenth-century culture, and to discuss the concurrence of Romantic ideology with other philosophies, which sometimes contradict and other times complement it. That thoughtful approach to terminology is evident throughout this book, which goes a long way towards correcting latent historiographical problems stemming from the very period under consideration.

Frisch will require no introduction to most students and scholars of nineteenth-century musical culture. Over the past thirty years, his contributions to musicology have included groundbreaking work on Brahms and Schoenberg, on German Modernism, and on Schubert. This new text brings his considerable expertise to bear on the period as a whole, and the volume's many strengths are consistent with the quality of his scholarly writing, here aimed at a more introductory reader or student.

The book is organized into thirteen chapters that emphasize specific themes of musical culture and practice. Although reading through the book gives a clear chronological outline of the nineteenth century, a welcome attempt to avoid merely articulating compositional points on a timeline is evident. The first chapter sets the tone with an engaging

introduction (Chapter 1, “Nineteenth-Century Music and Its Contexts”) that explains the reasoning for the book’s focus on 1815 through the 1890s and ends with a brief discussion of the different contexts in which we might hear the infamous “Tristan” chord to show the radical changes in musical style and understanding that occur in these seven or so decades. Noting this sonority’s similarity to the half-diminished seventh chords used by Beethoven in the early decades of the period, Frisch then compares Wagner’s approach to harmony in *Tristan und Isolde* with Debussy’s quotation of the “Tristan” chord in his song “En sourdine” (this song is included in the Anthology, and it resurfaces at the end of the text). I appreciated this introductory exercise in connecting musical phenomena to the stylistic developments that the book will explore, and I think it would resonate well with students reading the text as an example of how the book (and a course that employs it) will proceed.

The remainder of the book divides into two equal halves, plus a final chapter on “The Sound of Nineteenth-Century Music” that concerns historical performance practices as well as relevant changes in instrument-building technologies and vocal production. The first hundred pages of the main text deal with musical life in the first half of the century in the context of Romanticism, as explained in Chapter 2. That chapter provides a thorough and cogent discussion of important philosophical, artistic, and poetic figures commonly associated with Romanticism. By focusing on the various methods of consumption as well as production—hearing music at concerts of both “serious” and “sensational” natures, playing chamber music at home, singing songs around the parlor piano—Chapter 2 sets up the music-business orientation of the subsequent chapter (“The Opera Industry”) without overtly relying on an outmoded Beethoven-Rossini Dichotomy. In this way, Frisch fulfills his goal of reflecting current scholarship on historiography in a text appropriate for twenty-first-century classrooms.

The following four chapters function as two pairs. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with early figures such as Beethoven, Rossini, Schubert, Paganini, and Donizetti who redirected Classical genres to incorporate Romantic elements in a new social and cultural climate (“Music and the Age of Metternich” and “The Opera Industry”). Chapters 5 and 6 explore the innovations of the younger Romantic generation that came of age in the 1830s; more clearly than the previous chapters, these depart from the models of earlier textbooks and offer a fresh approach to the material. Chapter 5 (“Making Music Matter”) brings together music journalism and what we would call public outreach today by explaining how and why musicians of the nineteenth century felt compelled to justify and explain their art and how they made it accessible to a larger, mostly middle-class public. Especially innovative is the discussion of Felix Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* and his activities as music director in Dusseldorf and the separate discussion of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel’s Sunday salon concerts in Berlin. These activities contributed in different ways to the education of a literate middle class, and they reflect the practices and mores of the period, including the gendered expectations of upper middle-class men and women, without diminishing the importance of either party. The music of both Mendelssohn siblings is treated with genuine interest and insightful commentary, though only Felix’s work is included in the anthology.

The second portion of the book deals with musical culture “Beyond Romanticism,” or during and after the revolutions of 1848. The music of this period is often described as “late Romanticism,” because most textbooks and instructors teach the nineteenth century as “The Romantic Era.” Frisch instead focuses on the splintering of artistic aims and influences in the second half of the century and the ways in which they intersect with musical life, which helps to clarify the relationships between the earlier and the later developments. The introductory Chapter 7 provides much new and beneficial coverage of cultural history that is usually omitted in survey texts, discussing anti-Romanticism, Pessimism, Realism, and Historicism. Here as elsewhere, the use of primary sources and readings from the period enriches the text with diverse points of view drawn from musicians and non-musicians alike.

Richard Wagner’s shadow looms throughout the earlier part of the book, where references such as “as we shall see in Chapter 8” and “we will return to Wagner’s music in Chapter 8” appear, it seems, on every other page. Wagner is the only composer in this text to anchor an entire chapter on his own—an honor usually given to Beethoven. The

chapter includes a short discussion of “Wagnerism” and its legacy in the works of later French composers. In this context, Frisch mentions the 1860 concert performance of Wagner’s music in Paris that preceded the disastrous 1861 performance of the Paris version of *Tannhäuser*, but I would have appreciated an earlier discussion of the role of concert performances in Wagner’s career. After all, it was really the concert performances of orchestral excerpts in cities throughout Europe that solidified the composer’s fame in the 1860s and ‘70s; these were much more influential than theatrical performances of complete operas. A paragraph about this phenomenon would have foreshadowed Chapter 10 on “Concert Culture and the ‘Great’ Symphony” particularly well. This chapter on the culture surrounding the composition and performance of works by Brahms, Bruckner, Saint-Saëns, Franck, and Tchaikovsky is a highlight of the book.

Whereas Wagner receives an entire twenty-page chapter, the non-German operas and operettas of these decades find themselves grouped into Chapter 9, which focuses on musical theater works that made a more direct appeal to popular audiences. This chapter packs a lot of material into a short space, and some connections that might make the common characteristics and cultural context clearer are lost. The operetta discussion would have benefitted from a tighter focus on satire as an important element of this genre; it comes up in each work discussed (Offenbach’s *La belle Hélène*, Johann Strauss Jr.’s *Die Fledermaus*, and Gilbert and Sullivan’s *HMS Pinafore*) but is never highlighted as an important feature of “light” opera—a term that is not used, but that might help clarify the discussion of different audiences and popularity here.

As I read Chapters 8 and 9, especially, I found myself asking for whom this text is written and how I might structure a course using it. Certain aspects of the text are too detailed and intellectually “meaty” for the two-semester undergraduate survey that I currently teach, in which we attempt to “cover” music from Pergolesi and Gluck through Steve Reich in fourteen weeks¹. For example, I applaud the in-depth discussion of both *Rigoletto* and *Aida* in Chapter 9’s Verdi section, but given the importance of Exoticism in the period generally and to the works discussed just a few pages later specifically, the two paragraphs on Orientalism (pp. 159-60) feel too brief. Rather than discussing Exoticism in more general terms, the author points to Edward Said’s writings on Orientalism in *Aida* and poses the question of whether the work is, in fact, “Orientalist” in Said’s pejorative sense of the term. This sort of musing would enrich an upper-level course on music in the nineteenth century or on opera and serve as an appropriate starting point for a consideration of issues surrounding Imperialism, Nationalism, and the critical tradition based on supplemental reading and listening assignments. But is it sufficient for an entry-level text or survey course, given the chapter’s later emphasis on depictions of “Others” in works by Offenbach, Johann Strauss, Jr., and Bizet? Chapter 8’s singular focus on Wagner seems excessive in the context of a four or five-week unit on nineteenth-century music, though not in a course devoted solely to this century, such as a mixed graduate and undergraduate class or a graduate pro-seminar. The smooth and logical progression of topics and Frisch’s lively, engaging prose make this an excellent choice for an upper-level survey of the period. In a three-semester survey that treats music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries together in a semester, this text would be eminently manageable for students, and the focus on contextual sources such as letters, memoirs, and critical essays from the period is sure to launch lively classroom discussions.

Indeed, Frisch’s extensive knowledge of and facility with the literary, philosophical, and historical documents of the era is one of the book’s greatest strengths. If for no other reason, instructors of nineteenth-century music surveys ought to read this text for the breadth and freshness of its approach to primary documents of the period. Each chapter contains copious quotations from relevant sources, many of which have rarely been included in such surveys before. The material presented in the middle of the volume, in Chapters 5 through 7, stands out as especially valuable for its combination of familiar documents—such as Robert Schumann’s review of Chopin’s Op. 2 with the memorable phrase “Hats Off, Gentlemen, a genius!”—and less common resources that offer opposing points of view or that extend an idea and offer a new interpretive alternative. For example, the excerpts in Chapter 5 (“Making Music Matter”) from Hector Berlioz’s critical writings and autobiography provide a lively and engaging description of musical life in Paris and of journalism’s role in making new music known to the literate populace. These excerpts bring Berlioz and his peers to life in a way that regular prose descriptions seldom do, and they establish relevant context for the composer’s music encountered in the next chapter. They also establish the tradition of chatty, imaginative writing

about music before introducing Schumann's writings in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* a few pages later, and this connects the composers to each other as comrades in criticism and to a wider milieu of readers and musical consumers. Likewise, in Chapter 7's discussion of diverse trends after the mid-century, the usual philosophers and musicians are discussed (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wagner) alongside quotations from a host of less famous critics responding to specific musical works or experiences.

A second, though no less noteworthy, strength is Frisch's discussion of musical features. As in his scholarship for professional readers, his student-oriented writing here is detailed and engaging, balancing imaginative listening and an infectious enthusiasm for the music with clear, articulate analytical observations. His description of the finale of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, for instance, as "one of the most psychologically devastating movements in the entire Western concert repertory" (p. 192) propels readers to the anthology for more information and the score, where we find a concise restatement of the compositional history already presented in the text, in addition to a thoughtful formal analysis of the symphony and this movement. In the author's preface, Frisch notes that the text intends to be "sparing in its use of musical examples and analytical remarks," and directs readers to the accompanying anthology, where detailed analytical commentaries are available. I found many typos and minor continuity errors in these commentaries, which appear not to have received the same editorial care that the text did. Nonetheless, they are insightful, and the discussion there and in the main text supports the overriding narrative in a complementary (rather than purely supplementary) way.

If at times the text seems a bit Austro-German-centric, this is both a natural outcome of the author's own scholarly interests and a reflection of the field's ongoing preoccupation with that tradition. On the other hand, much of the discussion of both Austro-German music and non-German music incorporates recent developments in thinking about the relationships between "high" and "low" art traditions, between "central" and "peripheral" traditions with Europe's culture, and about the listening public's experience of music and their role in its creation and preservation. Chapter 11 deserves special mention here for being probably the best introduction to musical life in the United States that I have read in a textbook or period-based survey. It begins with three engaging "snapshots," or accounts of different North American musical traditions: concerts given by Boston's Handel and Haydn Society, Native American performances of sacred music in Spanish Colonial California, and Louis Moreau Gottschalk's tours of the continent as a traveling virtuoso pianist. After this introduction to the diversity of musical life in America, Frisch introduces the reader to several influential genres, though without a clear explanation for this change in approach. Sections on Stephen Foster's contributions to minstrelsy and to popular song culture and on "Americans at the Opera," are followed by a discussion of "Classical Music" in U.S. cities. Here we find a discussion of American nationalism and Amy Cheney Beach's violin sonata—the only work in the accompanying anthology composed by a woman.

In *Music in the Nineteenth Century*, Walter Frisch succinctly and clearly explains many of the main musical trends at the heart of what is usually called the "Romantic Era" and provides an excellent resource for students and instructors. This text directly addresses many of the difficulties inherent in creating a narrative for a diverse and turbulent era in Europe's musical history, and it does so with concision and panache.

Notes

¹I note, however, that the author did "test drive" the material in his own undergraduate survey at Columbia University, which appears to be a similar fourteen-week semester for "Classical to the 20th Century."