

ARNOLD WHITTALL

## Building sites

*History in mighty sounds: musical constructions of German national identity 1848–1914*

Barbara Eichner

The Boydell Press (Woodbridge, 2012); xii, 297pp; £55, \$95.  
ISBN 978 1 84383 754 1.

*Rethinking Hanslick: music, formalism, and expression*

Edited by Nicole Grimes, Siobhán Donovan & Wolfgang Marx

University of Rochester Press (Rochester, NY, 2013);  
xv, 360pp; £60, \$90. ISBN 978 1 58046 432 1.

THE BULKY TITLES of three recent books – *Music and monumentality: commemoration and wonderment in nineteenth-century Germany*; *Music, culture and social reform in the age of Wagner*; *Choral fantasies: music, festivity and nationhood in nineteenth-century Germany* – by Alexander Rehding, James Garrett and Ryan Minor illustrate the eagerness of present-day musicologists to explore the highways and byways of local musical activity as the German states moved towards unification and on into fully industrialised capitalism and militaristic belligerence. Next in line is Barbara Eichner's *History in mighty sounds: musical constructions of German national identity 1848–1914*, whose title derives from comments made in 1844 by Friedrich Theodor Vischer, imagining 'a new world of sounds', and the eventual emergence of German music's Schiller and Shakespeare – Beethoven having been 'a Jean Paul' and Weber 'a Tieck'. But turn to the list of scores and vocal scores that provide Eichner with her primary sources, and – despite the presence of Bruch, Bruckner and Strauss – it is dominated by composers of less than primary quality: Cornelius, Dorn, Kistler, Nicolai, Raff, Reinecke, von Schillings.

This, of course, is the whole point: to argue that musical 'constructions of national identity' are more far-reaching and historically ramified than can be shown in an analysis that concentrates exclusively on such obvious star names from today's perspective as Wagner and Brahms. By the same token, it seems unlikely that any new appreciation of the 'constructive' cultural-historical role performed by Cyrill Kistler's three-act music drama *Baldurs Tod*, or Siegmund von Hausegger's three-movement symphonic poem *Barbarossa* will lead to their regular revival in live performance. Eichner grants such works a brief resurrection with her measured and detailed descriptions but, as her generous music examples tend to confirm, an equally detailed critical comparison with Wagner or Bruckner would be likely to show why that resurrection should indeed be brief. It might even be thought reassuring that such a wide variety of compositions tied so comprehensively to such a non-aesthetic notion as 'national identity' should prove to be relatively ephemeral.

A MORE CONVENTIONAL picture of 19th-century German music that matters today emerges from *Rethinking Hanslick: music, formalism, and expression*, a 14-author symposium that, while originating in conference presentations at University College Dublin in 2009, still manages to traverse a good deal of the work of this long-lived and prolific writer on music, and to highlight – productively – the contrasts and even the ambiguities, with respect to matters of identity, national and otherwise, that the full range of his writings reveals.

Not that Hanslick is likely to have seen Wagner as German music's Shakespeare to Brahms's Schiller. Despite the fact that his literary practice, requiring descriptive prose rather than theory-fuelled technical analysis, regularly subjected his formalist principles (arrived at very early in his career) to severe strain, he remained a fervent believer in the virtues of absolute or abstract

symphonism and a scourge of the apparent vices inherent in those kinds of programme music that used pictorial or verbal flights of fancy as the justification for (by Hanslick's standards) structural indiscipline and expressive decadence. The book's concluding pair of essays, by David Larkin and David Kasunic, are particularly telling in their examination of Hanslick's encounters with Strauss, Dvořák and Mahler, the latter placed in the context of Hanslick's own Jewish inheritance. These are neatly complemented by essays exploring the stylistic and formal features of Hanslick's actual writing, from its basis in an aesthetic treatise that, as Anthony Pryer demonstrates, 'proceeds exactly like a courtroom drama', in keeping with the author's legal training.

Marian Gerards's topic, aiming to show 'how the discourses of gender and music are interconnected in Hanslick's writings' is a characteristic contemporary response to the 19th century's somewhat primitive view of the extent to which the biblical notion that 'male and female created he them' had established what then seemed an inevitable monopoly for the masculine over artistic creativity. The opportunity to work with the richer aspects of this theme explored by Jean-Jacques Nattiez in his *Wagner androgyne* (1993) is not taken, however, and as a result Gerards's treatment risks labouring the obvious where differences between then and now are concerned, rather than looking at the situation and possibilities to do with gender identity and cultural practice *then* in greater depth. Understandably, perhaps, most of the contributors to this book are more confident in handling the proliferating literature, mainly in German, about Hanslick and music criticism than more thorny, and often more technical, discussions of modernism's evolution before and after 1900. National identity, social and psychological conditions, as well as aesthetic predispositions, all played their part in fixing the diverse ways in which composers, critics and musicologists coped with this protracted and still-unravelling upheaval, from whose 19th-century

consequences not even Hanslick was entirely immune.

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## Resounding tinkles

*Thomas Adès: full of noises*

Conversations with Tom Service

Faber & Faber (London, 2012); ix, 188pp; £16.99.

ISBN 978 0 571 27897 8.

THE MOST VIVID IMPRESSION left by this text might well be that of a topsy-turvy musical world in which Berlioz and Liszt outrank Verdi and Wagner, and Walton's *Façade* is to be preferred to Britten's *Peter Grimes*. Some Woody Allen-style banter isn't excluded either: 'being alive is a difficult situation. But it's preferable to the alternative'. There is an air of post-prandial, senior-common-room phrase-making which gives such very personal thoughts a robustly provocative context, and sometimes veers into the simply silly: 'key signatures have been against the law there [in Germany] since the war because they make the Germans feel guilty for some reason'. But such barbs are only a small part of a carefully-projected, though at times enigmatic, discourse on the nature and history of music.

Adès has some mainstream 20th-century enthusiasms – Debussy, Stravinsky, Janáček, Nancarrow, Ligeti and Gerald Barry, among others. And even though it's always possible to identify things not talked about which one would like to have seen covered – Adès's views on his education and the state of contemporary British music, apart from Barry, for example – it makes sense if one reason the book takes the form it does is the belief that preserving, even intensifying a certain degree of mystery about what really matters is no bad thing. Since one of the composer's highlighted stances is that