Chapter 3
A State of Crisis?

A Global Resource

Ideas of the spirit realm, of Nature or Music speaking through the genius composer, seem about as remote as they could be from musical culture at the turn of the twenty-first century. But the ways of thinking about music that accompanied the reception of Beethoven's music were all of a piece, and they are the source of the features of contemporary musical culture which I described in Chapter 1: the emphasis on authenticity and self-expression that underlies much popular music criticism, for instance, or the strangely conflicted ways in which we talk about performers in both the popular and classical traditions. And it was only a year ago, as I write, that Harrison Birtwistle (perhaps Britain's leading modernist composer) condensed the Beethovenian concept of the composer into a dozen words when he announced, 'I can't be responsible for the audience: I'm not running a restaurant.'

In fact, if the nineteenth-century idea of 'pure music' meant understanding it in its own terms, independent of any external meaning or social context, then you could argue that twentieth-century sound reproduction technology has given a massive boost to this kind of thinking. The music of practically all times and places lies no further away than the nearest record store; if that's too far, then internet sites like Rock Around The World will bring it into your living-room via a modem. Chronological and geographical differences evaporate as we

increasingly think of music as an almost infinite pool of resources to be pulled off the shelf or downloaded from the Web. And this might be seen as the ultimate realization of the idea of music that evolved during the early years of the Beethoven cult, the years when the canon of classical masterworks came into being, with major works being laid down as cultural capital instead of going out of fashion a generation after they were composed.

If the availability of music within today's society represents the culmination of nineteenth-century thinking in some ways, however, in others it could hardly be more different. In Beethoven's time, and right through the century, the only music you could hear was live music, whether in a public concert hall or a domestic parlour. (The manufacture of upright pianos, small enough to fit into middle-class homes, was one of the biggest growth industries from the middle of the nineteenth century up to the First World War – as was the publication of sheet music to go with them.) But nowadays it is as if the imaginary museum of music is all around us. We can watch grand opera (or the Balinese 'monkey dance', based on the *Ramayana*) from the comfort of an armchair. We can listen to David Bowie (or a Beethoven symphony) while driving into work. Through personal stereo we can integrate bebop or heavy metal into our experience of the cityscape. And brought like this into the midst of everyday life, music becomes an element in the definition of personal lifestyle, alongside the choice of a new car, clothes, or perfume. Deciding whether to listen to Beethoven, or Bowie, or Balinese music becomes the same kind of choice as deciding whether to eat Italian, Thai, or Cajun tonight. However unpalatable to Birtwistle, the truth is that in today's consumer society we *do* behave rather as if composers were high-class restaurateurs.

We have a paradox. On the one hand, modern technology has given music the autonomy which nineteenth-century musicians and aestheticians claimed for it (but in a sense fraudulently, because in reality 'pure music' was confined to the middle-class ambience of

concert hall and home). On the other hand, it has turned many of the basic assumptions of nineteenth-century musical culture upside down. The more we behave as musical consumers, treating music as some kind of electronically mediated commodity or lifestyle accessory, the less compatible our behaviour becomes with nineteenth-century conceptions of the composer's authority. Indeed, as I suggested, the very idea of authorship has become parlous in relation to contemporary studio production, where techniques of recording and digital sound transformation place as much creative scope in the sound engineer's and producer's hands as the so-called artist's. (Many writers on music badly underestimate the contribution to the final product of sound engineers and producers.)

And the immediate availability of music from all over the world means that it has become as easy and unproblematic to talk about different 'musics' as about different 'cuisines'. For someone like Schenker, talking about 'musics' would have been preposterous: given that it is the voice of Music or Nature that we hear through the genius composers, he might have said, it makes no more sense to talk of 'musics' than it would of 'natures'. What is at issue here is the difference between a nineteenth- or early twentieth-century European mindset, according to which the achievements of Western art and science represented a kind of gold standard against which those of other times and places must be measured, and the circumstances of today's post-colonial, multicultural society. It is like the difference between believing in the advance of Civilization, and accepting that across the world there have been (and will continue to be) any number of different civilizations, each with its own system of values.

But perhaps the most telling contrast between today's musical world and the ways of thinking about it that we have inherited from the nineteeth century concerns high and low art. The very terms seem suspect today, and even if you wanted to use them it would be hard to be confident about what is high and what is low art. (Birtwistle is high

art, obviously, and presumably the Spice Girls are low art, but you only have to read the rock and pop criticism columns of the Sunday papers to see how inadequate it would be simply to identify high art with the classical tradition and low art with popular music.) Writers about music in the academic tradition, however, have traditionally had no such qualms. High art, or 'art' music, meant the notation-based traditions of the leisured classes, and above all the great repertory of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Low art meant everything else, that is to say the limitless variety of popular and mainly non-notated – and hence historically irretrievable – musical traditions. Some low art, according to this view, might have valuable qualities of its own, in particular the rural folksongs that scholars were busily collecting in Europe and America around the turn of the twentieth century, and that composers as various as Dvořák, Vaughan Williams, and Bartók incorporated into their own music; provided they had survived in their original form and avoided contamination by the burgeoning, urban-based music industry, such folksongs were seen as conveying something of the unspoilt national character of the countryside and its inhabitants. But that did not stop them being seen as low art, because they did not spring from the individual vision of an inspired composer. The voice of the people might be heard through them, but hardly the voice of Music.

This confident distinction between high and low art still persists in the standard format of music history or appreciation textbooks. They tell the story of Western 'art' music, focused at first on Europe and expanding in the nineteenth century to North America. And then, after the story is basically finished, they add a chapter or two on popular music (possibly tracing its history before the twentieth century, but concentrating on jazz – which has been transformed since the Second World War into a kind of alternative 'art' tradition – and rock). It is obvious that there is a kind of apartheid at work here; popular music is segregated from the 'art' tradition. What is even more revealing, however, is the treatment of non-Western traditions in such books, or

even in larger multi-volume surveys such as the *New Oxford History of Music*. If such traditions appear at all, they generally come right at the beginning. A common strategy is to begin with a couple of chapters on the elements of music – scales, notation, instruments, and so forth – and bring non-Western musics into that. Or sometimes you begin with the primitive music of traditional hunting and nomadic societies and move quickly on to the sophisticated traditions of Asian music (Indian, Chinese, and Korean or Japanese, perhaps, with a side excursion to take in the gamelan or percussion orchestra music of Indonesia). Either way, around the beginning of Chapter 3 there is a kind of crashing of historical and geographical gears as the scene shifts to the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris, where Léonin and Pérotin – the first known composers of the Western 'polyphonic' or multi-part tradition – flourished towards the end of the twelfth century, and with these preliminaries over the real story of music (that is, Western art music) begins.

It is hardly possible to miss the implicit associations in such a scheme of non-Western cultures with beginnings, and of Western culture with progress. That such thinking was commonplace at the turn of the twentieth century, the time when the sun never set on the British Empire, is only to be expected. That it is still to be encountered at the turn of the twenty-first is astonishing, for it offers an entirely inadequate basis for understanding music in today's pluralist society. It is hard to think of another field in which quite such uncritically ethnocentric and élitist conceptions have held such sway until so recently – for, as will become clear in the final chapter of this book, since the mid-1980s a sea change has taken hold in the academic discipline of musicology.

Death and Transfiguration

It is often claimed that the tradition of Western classical music is in a state of crisis. But the claim is too sweeping.

It is certainly true that there is a crisis in terms of what is often called 'serious' contemporary music (an unsatisfactory label, obviously, since it implies that music outside the concert-hall tradition cannot be serious), at least if crisis is to be defined in terms of audience statistics. The idea that progressive, new music must by definition be a minority taste – that only an élite will be able to appreciate it – is a historical phenomenon; it goes back to around the beginning of the twentieth century, when there was an explosion of self-consciously 'avant-garde' movements across the arts. The most conspicuous example is painting: reacting against the fossilized conventions of institutionally approved, 'academic' art, young painters developed self-consciously innovative and individualistic styles of work, and published manifestos in which they explained that their work heralded a new artistic movement (Orphism, Vorticism, Futurism, or whatever). And a similar pursuit of innovation spread to the other arts; the Viennese composer Schoenberg, for instance, was extremely self-conscious about the historic significance of his abandonment of tonality (the 'common-practice' system according to which music is organized around a central key or 'tonic'), and his subsequent invention of serialism. He even claimed that it would ensure the dominance of German music for another hundred years (the 'another', of course, is a reference back to Beethoven).

The serial method, which Schoenberg and his followers used from the 1920s, meant constructing music out of the same sequence of notes used over and over again, though it was done in such a way that the results were not as banal or obvious as this makes them sound (so you could use the sequence of notes or 'series' backwards or upside down, you could transpose it up or down so that it began on a different note, and so on). Nevertheless serial music sounded very different from tonal music. Listeners found that many of the familiar musical landmarks had disappeared. And the less the new music sounded like the old, the fewer people listened to it. Those who *did* listen became highly committed to it; modern music became ghettoized as its audiences became

increasingly divorced from those who listened to the mainstream classical repertory. But Schoenberg and many of his contemporaries thought that this was merely a transient, if unavoidable, phase: the history of music, they said, showed that audiences always resisted the unfamiliar, but in time they got used to it and learned to appreciate it. (Had not contemporary audiences rejected Beethoven's 'Hammerklavier' Sonata and Ninth Symphony?) Schoenberg himself looked forward to a time when, as he said, grocers' boys would whistle serial music on their rounds.

If Schoenberg really believed what he said (and it is hard to be quite sure about this), then it represents one of the most poignant moments in the history of music. For serialism did not achieve popularity; the process of familiarization for which he and his contemporaries were waiting never occurred. Instead, the label 'modern music' stayed stubbornly attached to the music of a period that passed further and further into history, giving rise to the absurd situation that concert-promoters today may reject as too 'modern' a composition that goes back to the time when our grandparents were children. Why did this happen? Maybe it was because composers like Schoenberg (like Birtwistle) believed too wholeheartedly in the nineteenth-century concept of authenticity, and so treated listeners with something bordering on contempt. (Nineteenth-century composers, by contrast, frequently gave listeners precisely what they wanted, even as they proclaimed the high-minded principles of 'art for art's sake'. The same might be said of progressive rock bands.) Or maybe it was because they believed that lack of popular acclaim guaranteed the seriousness and integrity of their work, and accordingly directed their music to a tiny audience of committed listeners, rather than to the public in general; certainly this is what is suggested by the Society for Private Musical Performances which Schoenberg set up in Vienna in 1918, to whose concerts only bona fide members were admitted, and then on condition that they neither applauded nor allowed any report of the music to appear in the public press. Or perhaps it is just that 'serious' contemporary music was

elbowed out by a succession of developments in popular music ('light' music, jazz, rhythm 'n' blues, rock, and so on) that brought other types of contemporary music to unprecedented heights of popularity.

There is a sense, though, in which this rather dismal picture of modern music is misleading. I have presented it as a picture of failure, as if the criterion of success was that the music of Schoenberg, Birtwistle, and the rest should come to occupy the same role in our concert halls, record shops, and sitting-rooms as that of Beethoven and Brahms (or Michael Jackson and The Artist Formerly Known As Prince, for that matter). But there is no reason to assume that they *should* occupy the same slot. I spoke in Chapter 1 of the plurality of subcultures that has replaced the monolithic, institutionally approved culture of nineteenth-century thought. Modern music, or rather 'modern music', flourishes mainly on the fringes of State subsidy and academia, and sometimes also of the entertainment industry (as in soundtracks for horror movies), but the point is that in those areas it *does* flourish. It is a niche product, certainly – but then you could say the same about the Beethoven/Brahms tradition. The difference is just in the size of the niche, and the degree of economic leverage associated with it.

In any case, even if the contemporary wing of the classical tradition is challenged in respect of its client base, so to speak, that is no reason for saying that classical music as a whole is in a state of crisis. To be sure, the tradition has become static, in the sense that its centre of gravity does not keep pace with the passing of time; if a few modern masterpieces join the classical repertory each decade, they are counterbalanced by the extension of the repertory backwards into the Renaissance and medieval periods – the field of so-called 'early music'. But this might be more logically presented as a growth than a decline of the tradition. And the development and dissemination of sound reproduction technology means that, on any conceivable statistical measure, classical music reaches an exponentially greater audience across the world than has ever previously been the case. What is more,

it is heard in performances of a quality altogether unattainable by provincial orchestras of the nineteenth century, and perhaps even by those of the capitals; a major reason for such problems as early audiences may have had with such seminal works as the Ninth Symphony, Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* was almost certainly that they were played by under-rehearsed, underpaid, and probably puzzled musicians. Since sound recording had not been invented, however, we shall never know for sure.

It would be easy to go on in this vein. Within the last decade, for instance,

- the studiously unkempt violinist now known as Kennedy (aka The Artist Formerly Known as Nigel) released a video of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, bringing pop promotion techniques to the classical repertory; he should probably be held personally responsible for its ubiquitous use today in telephone systems the world over. (How often have you had to listen to a tinny-sounding rendition of *The Four Seasons* while on hold?)
- the three tenors – Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo, and José Carreras – brought Italian opera into the pop charts following the adoption of their recording of Puccini's aria 'Nessun dorma' as the official anthem of the World Cup.
- the Third Symphony of the hitherto almost unheard-of Polish composer Henryk Górecki nudged Madonna out of the charts after being heavily plugged by Classic FM, the London-based classical music station.
- the pianist David Helfgott shot into public prominence following the release of *Shine*, a film that traced his long fight against mental illness; audiences flocked to his performances of the classics, though the critics panned them.

But it is not really necessary to cite such exceptional cases in order to show how the music industry has successfully repositioned classical

music as a largely profitable niche product – a *major* niche product – in contemporary consumer culture.

And for this reason it seems to me that rumours of the death of classical music have been greatly exaggerated. Lawrence Kramer, for instance, writes that

> It is no secret that, in the United States anyway, this music is in trouble. It barely registers in our schools, it has neither the prestige nor the popularity of literature and visual art, and it squanders its capacities for self-renewal by clinging to an exceptionally static core repertoire. Its audience is shrinking, graying, and overly pale-faced, and the suspicion has been voiced abroad that its claim to occupy a sphere of autonomous artistic greatness is largely a means of veiling, and thus perpetuating, a narrow set of social interests.

And Kramer is by no means the only commentator to express such fears; in 1996 the opera director Peter Sellars even likened classical music to 'a cancer patient or an AIDS patient'. All the same, I think that the diagnosis is not quite accurate. Classical music is not dead, probably not even dying, and certainly not in Europe; GCSE and the National Curriculum have maintained the presence of classical music in British classrooms, and I have already referred to the classical music magazines that have proliferated on news-stand shelves since around the time Classic FM began broadcasting. But what has kept it alive is a dramatic transformation of its social and cultural role – a transformation epitomized by Classic FM, whose practice of excerpting single movements from classical symphonies outraged highbrow critics. The problem is that this transformation has been barely acknowledged in academic (and not-so-academic) writing about music, much of which still attempts to sustain an image of classical music – indeed an image of music in general – that is now beyond resuscitation.

In other words, if there is a crisis in classical music, it is not in the music

And yet, and yet . . . there *are* times when music of the classical symphonic tradition does not quite ring true to me. Isn't there perhaps something a bit forced about Brahms's symphonies, say – at one moment too noisily bombastic with their parade-ground rhythms, and at the next moment too self-indulgently sentimental? I don't notice it so much with piano or chamber music (or opera, for that matter); the problem lies with the public, sometimes tub-thumping, always self-conscious genre of the symphony. I still admire the music as much as ever. But I used to just love it, and that's the difference. Is it that the music is ageing badly, as Kramer fears? Is it because I'm hearing it increasingly critically, in the sense that I describe in later chapters of this book – as something that isn't just 'natural' but brings with it the no longer credible values of a defunct society? (Could this have something to do with the stereotypically gendered construction of the public sphere in the nineteenth century? That would link with the ideas I present in Chapter 7.) Then again, is it because in these days of public-sector stringency the need for all those dinner-jacketed musicians seems too wilfully extravagant, by comparison to the lean efficiency and flexibility of today's pop groups, or early music groups for that matter? (A lot of people find the subsidized extravagance of the opera house offensive.) Or does it come from seeing the music on television, where those intrusive close-ups of the musicians crowd out the music's own values (why else do we speak of 'seeing' it?), reduplicating what is already in the sound and so rendering it banal? Could it even be a result of the shortening attention spans that conservative commentators blame on sound-bite politics and television commercials? As if nobody could really take in anything longer than a four-minute pop single nowadays? (But then, conservative commentators were making the same sort of complaints about the modern world back in Brahms's day.)

itself, but in ways of *thinking* about it – and it is these ways of thinking about music that form the central topic of this book. In particular, there are two habits of thought which are deeply ingrained in Western culture as a whole and which largely determine the way we traditionally think about music. One might be called the tendency to explain away time; it is this that leads us to think of music as a kind of imaginary object, something (and the word 'thing' is significant in this context) which is *in* time but not *of* time. The other is the tendency to think of language and other forms of cultural representation, including music, as if they depicted some kind of external reality. I have mentioned each of these in passing but they need explaining and illustrating at greater length, and so they form the topics of the next two chapters.

Chapter 4
An Imaginary Object

Stopping Time in its Tracks

Ronald Searle's cartoon (Fig. 15), a scene from the apocryphal English girls' school St Trinian's, turns on the curious presence that music has in our lives and our thoughts. It is there, and yet it isn't. Or more precisely signs of it are everywhere – in scores, books, instruments – and yet they aren't the music. You can't point to the music, or grasp hold of it, because as soon as it has come into being it has already disappeared, swallowed up into silence, leaving no trace. Only at St Trinian's do you get to sweep up the debris.

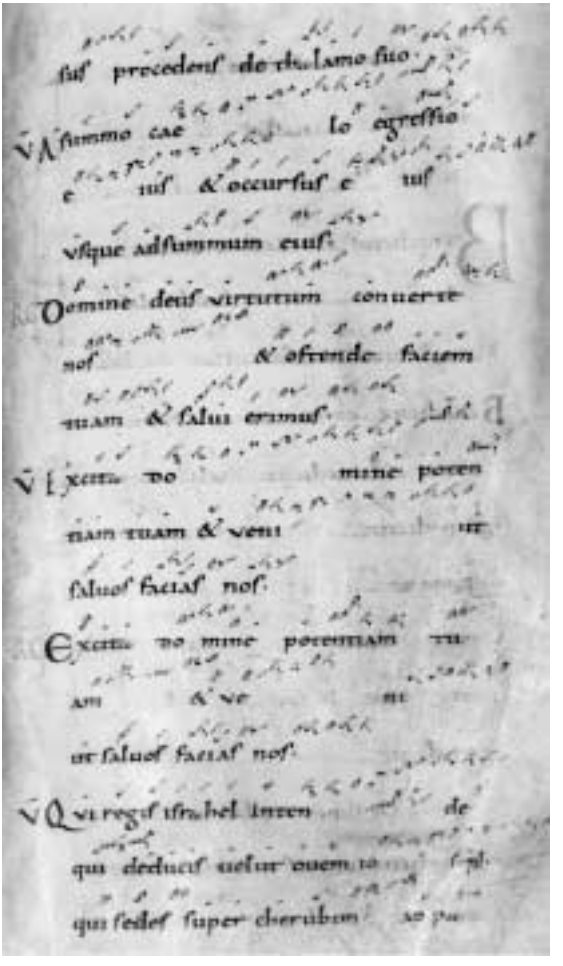
And what are the crotchets and quavers that the cleaning women have to contend with (or quarters and eighth-notes, as they would be if St Trinian's were in America)? What are they for, what work do they do within our musical culture? You might say that they serve three distinct functions. One, the most obvious, is *conservation*: like photographs, they stop time in its tracks and give a stable, visible form to the evanescent. The second is almost equally obvious: they are a means for the *communication* of music from one person to another, for example (but it is only an example) from composer to performer. The third is less obvious but at least as important as the other two: in many traditions, notation is integral to the *conception* of music, to the ways in which composers, performers, and others who work with music, imagine or think about it.

15. Cartoon by Ronald Searle

Many ancient civilizations, most notoriously that of Egypt, seem to have been haunted by a dread of decay and forgetfulness, and so attempted almost obsessively to give a permanent form to everything that their civilization embraced, to fix it for eternity; hence the existence of such time capsules as Tutankhamun's tomb. Many cultures have been possessed by a similar desire to give music a tangible, enduring presence, and so the music of vanished societies survives to this day in the precarious form of fragile manuscripts in Japanese temples, European monastic archives, and American libraries ('precarious' because much of this music survives in only a single exemplar. It is a striking fact that all the extant sources for the polyphonic music of the medieval period – the kind of music that is played by 'early music' groups – could if brought together be piled up on a single, fairly large dining-table.)

But 'survive' is perhaps too strong a word, for the music of the past exists in a kind of half-life. Even if you understand how a notation works (and it took years of patient scholarly work to decode some of the notations used for early medieval music, while the interpretation of others remains contentious), there are aspects of the music about which the notation is silent. Medieval chant, for instance, survives in a variety of 'neumatic' notations, essentially consisting of symbols showing whether groups of notes go up, or down, or up a bit and then down, and so on (Fig. 16). But how fast are you meant to sing the music, and what sort of vocal production did the monks who sang it employ? Did they project their voices loudly, or sing softly, or nasally, or gutturally? With or without vibrato? The notation does not say and nobody knows.

The same problems apply to far more recent music, too. You might assume that we would know how a nineteenth-century composition like Gounod's *Ave Maria*, say, was performed in its own time; after all, it has enjoyed a continuous performance tradition, unlike earlier music that has had to be laboriously reconstructed from the original sources. But



16. Cantatorium of St Gall (Stiftsbibliothek St Gallen, Cod. 359), p. 31. Early neumes, written above the words and looking more or less like an *aide-mémoire*, summarize the shape of the melody but do not specify the exact intervals; it is impossible to transcribe them into modern notation without guesswork. This manuscript dates from the late ninth century.

there is a very early recording, dating from 1904, which casts doubt on this. It was made by Alessandro Moreschi, the last castrato, who was in his time called 'the angel of Rome'. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries boys with especially promising voices were sometimes castrated to prevent their voices breaking, and the resulting male sopranos took the lead roles in opera as well as singing in choirs, such as that of the Sistine Chapel; Moreschi was himself a member, and from 1898 the conductor, of the Sistine Chapel Choir. But the practice was increasingly seen as barbaric and died out in the nineteenth century, so that Moreschi (born as late as 1858) represents the very end of the tradition.

And behind the hiss and crackle you can hear a rendition of the *Ave Maria* that sounds extraordinary to modern ears. There are specific features you might pick out; for instance, Moreschi glides rapidly on to some of the notes from an octave or more below, in a way that no modern singer would. But it is the *sound* of his voice, what you might call the tonal ideal embodied in it, that seems most bizarre: it has an acute, almost painful focus, as if it were a kind of sublimated primal scream. Of course we don't know whether the recording exemplified Moreschi at his best; he may well have been nervous, for early recording processes were very intrusive. And we don't know how far the way Moreschi sung the *Ave Maria* is typical of how it was sung elsewhere. Maybe the recording sounded as strange to Moreschi's contemporaries as it does to us. But then again, maybe it did not. And that is the point: we don't know, and what is more there is no way we ever can know. The conclusion is obvious: if we don't really know what music sounded like at the turn of the twentieth century, how can we possibly know what medieval music sounded like? The honest answer is that we can't.

Notation conserves music, then, but it conceals as much as it reveals. At the same time, and largely through its particular pattern of concealment and revelation, notation plays a central role in the maintenance and even the definition of musical culture. To see how this

may be, however, we need to go into a little more detail about what musical notations are and how they work. And right at the beginning we need to distinguish two different types of notation, or more precisely two ways in which notations can work: by representing sounds, and by representing things that performers have to do in order to make sounds. Although musical notations often combine them, these are quite different principles.

The standard Western staff notation – to which the crotchets and quavers of Ronald Searle's cartoon belong – basically works by representing sounds, just like the neumatic notation for medieval chant which I mentioned above. (That is not surprising, since the one evolved from the other.) So each notehead represents a separate note, and how high or low the note is depends on how high or low on the page the notehead is. The horizontal lines that make up the staff, against which the noteheads are placed, are there to provide easy reference; they evolved by stages, reaching their modern form by around 1250. And of course the passage of time is represented by the left–right axis of the page. In principle, then, modern Western notation is a kind of two-dimensional picture of the music, letting you see how it goes at a glance.

I say 'in principle' because in practice it isn't so simple. For one thing, there are various symbolic elements in the notation – elements whose meaning is fixed by convention, and that you couldn't guess if you didn't know the convention. (Examples include the different types of notehead and beam used to represent the duration of a note, and the arbitrarily shaped signs that indicate rests.) Then again, there are elements that don't represent the sound in any direct way, but that represent something you should do to make the sound – in other words, that correspond to the second notational principle I mentioned. An example is when you see 'una corda' in a piece of piano music: it means that you should press the left-hand pedal, which shifts the hammers sideways so that they only strike one string (in Italian, *una corda*) instead

of the usual two or three, resulting in a thinner, more translucent sound. As I said, then, 'una corda' doesn't describe the sound but what you do to make the sound, and this is the principle that defines the type of notation known as 'tablature'.

There are many different examples of tablature notation. Some are found in the West, for instance the tablatures used during the Renaissance for guitar and lute music, or the modern guitar-symbol notation found in popular sheet music. The point about guitar-symbol notation is that it is much easier to learn than staff notation; instead of showing you how the music is meant to sound and leaving you to translate that into whatever you have to do to make the sound on your particular instrument, it simply tells you where to put your fingers on the guitar fingerboard. In a sense, you don't have to understand what the notation is saying, you just *do* it. Of course, guitar-symbol notation is much more limited than staff notation; you can't use it to notate tunes, only chords (but that is not a problem since it is generally used alongside staff notation for the tune), and even then it doesn't tell you whether to play the chord once, or strum it regularly, or in a particular rhythm. That is up to you.

But the real limitation of tablatures, if it is fair to call it a limitation, is a different one. Unlike Western staff notation, whose generality makes it more or less applicable to any instrument, each tablature only works for one instrument, because the things you have to do to play a particular tune, say, vary from one instrument to another. And in cultures where every instrument has its own tablature, the result is that there is little sense of an overall, unified musical tradition that embraces them all; in this sense it makes less sense to talk of 'traditional Chinese music' than to talk of *qin* music, *yangqin* music, *pipa* music, and so on (all of these are different types of plucked or hammered string instruments). In the West, by contrast, we have far more of a sense that there is a coherent tradition called 'Western music' which reaches both back in time and, nowadays, across the globe, and this sense is rooted in our almost

universal acceptance of the system of staff notation. (For us, tablatures are mainly associated with instruments designed for amateurs, such as the now more or less obsolete autoharp, which you strummed with one hand while pressing down a bar with the other. The bar automatically selected the correct strings for the chord you wanted to play.) Small wonder, then, that when children start having piano or clarinet or violin lessons they find themselves – sometimes to their chagrin – spending a lot of time away from their instruments, studying what, in an extremely odd use of the term, is known as 'theory'. What they are basically acquiring is a knowledge of notation, and through it an initiation into the culture of Western music.

And it is this, far more than any aesthetic considerations of 'high' or 'low' art, that makes it hard to be sure whether we should think of jazz, rock, and pop as all part of the same tradition as 'classical' music, or whether they should really be thought of as separate traditions; after all, many jazz, rock, and pop musicians don't read music. On the other hand plenty do, and sheet-music sales of popular music show how readily this music can be accommodated within the framework of staff notation. And more and more there are musicians who move effortlessly between one tradition and another. It seems both that there is and there isn't such a thing as 'Western music'.

Music between the Notes

DAT recorders and samplers are entirely unselective, in the sense that within global limits of fidelity they will record *anything*. In this they are quite unlike musical notations and, more generally, any of the systems that different cultures employ for representing musical sounds (including, for instance, the spoken syllables used by Indian tabla players to memorize complex rhythmic patterns and the conventionalized gestures of Western conductors, as well as the graphic notations with which this chapter is primarily concerned). For musical notations are highly specific about what they will or will not record; they

are more like filters or prisms than DAT recorders or samplers. And ethnomusicologists, who use essentially Western techniques to study non-Western music, are more aware of this than anyone.

Some ethnomusicologists are prepared to use staff notation to transcribe the music they study, as a means both of understanding it and of communicating that understanding to their readers. But they are painfully conscious that in doing this they are shoehorning Indian or Chinese music, or whatever it might be, into a system that was never designed for it. For instance, staff notation treats all music as if it were made up of separate notes each a set distance apart; in effect it assumes that all instruments work on the same principle as the piano, which has a separate sound-producing mechanism for each of the eighty-eight notes it can play. But many instruments are not like this; on the violin you can play any number of pitches between a B and a C, say, or you can slide continuously from the one note to the other so that there is no way in which you can say exactly where the B ended and the C started. The same applies to the human voice, or the electric guitar if you bend the note. And the point is that in Indian and Chinese music it is often the notes between the notes, so to speak, that are responsible for the effect of the music. Similarly in florid singing (and again Indian music is a good example) trying to say where one note starts and another stops, as 'note' would be defined in terms of staff notation, becomes a completely arbitrary exercise; the music just doesn't work that way. There is a collision between music and notation.

Predictably, this situation has resulted in endless controversies between those ethnomusicologists who see staff notation as a blunt but necessary instrument for conveying something of the music to readers unfamiliar with the notational system (if any) of the musical culture in question, and those who regard its use as a kind of neo-colonial exercise in which Western notation is set up as a universal standard. But to put it like this makes it sound as if there is a choice between black and white, whereas it is really a matter of shades of grey. For if staff notation

distorts non-Western music, you might just as well argue that it distorts the music of the Western tradition too. You only have to listen to a synthesized performance of Chopin's E minor Prelude, in which every note is equally long and equally loud, to realize how much of the music's effect lies in the shaping of time and dynamics that any pianist brings to the music, quite possibly without even thinking about it (though some pianists do it better than others, of course, and that is a major part of what being a good pianist means). It's not that the synthesizer's performance is wrong, in the sense of contradicting the score; the temporal and dynamic shaping isn't in the score. And that says something about what scores are and how they are used.

If we treated notation the way some Christian fundamentalists treat the Bible – if we said that anything that isn't in the score shouldn't be in the performance – then computer-controlled synthesizers would by now have put performers out of a job: it takes a machine to perform the music literally, mindlessly, without expression. But we don't treat notation this way. The fact that the notation doesn't care about subtleties of temporal or dynamic shaping doesn't mean *we* don't care about them. And if our notation simplifies the music by eliminating these things, that is because it is in the nature of notations to simplify. A notation that tried to put *everything* in would end up being far too complicated to read. (Again ethnomusicologists have experience of this; Charles Seeger, the pioneer of North American ethnomusicology, invented the melograph, a device that transcribed every smallest nuance of timing, dynamics, and pitch, but the resulting graphs are so complex that nobody has ever really figured out what to do with them.) All notations miss things out, then, only different things. You can see this from the history of Western 'art' music. Eighteenth-century composers sometimes wrote down just the skeleton of what they intended, leaving the performer to flesh it out through figuration and ornamentation; twentieth-century composers, by contrast, generally try to specify what they want in far more detail. But even in the most extreme cases, such as the piano music of Pierre Boulez or Karlheinz

Stockhausen, there is still room for variation – as you can tell from the fact that their music sounds different when different pianists play it (not that very many do).

But the best way to make this point is by comparing the different notations in use across the world. The tablature used for the Chinese long zither or *qin*, traditionally the instrument of choice for scholars and gentlemen (Fig. 17), is a good example. It states in some detail how each note is to be produced (with the fleshy part of the finger or the nail, with an inward or outward motion, and so on), all of which adds up to a precise specification of the note's tone-quality, or timbre. By contrast, and despite its unparalleled overall complexity and comprehensiveness, staff notation has difficulty saying anything about timbre, other than specifying what instrument the music is for. But there are other respects in which *qin* notation is far less specific than staff notation. In particular, it doesn't specify rhythm; it just represents the music as a chain of notes (or more precisely, a sequence of gestures), leaving it up to the

17. Za Fuxi (1895–1976), scholar and performer on the *qin*

performer to decide what notes to play faster and slower, whether and how to group them together into phrases, and so forth. That doesn't mean the Chinese don't care about these things, any more than Western listeners don't care about violin timbre. On the contrary, there are whole schools of *qin* performance based on different ways of performing the *qin* repertory. It is just like the different traditions of piano playing that bring different qualities to the performance of the repertory, even though each of them involves playing the same notes. It would not be that much of an exaggeration to say that the whole art of performance lies in the interstices of notation, in those parts of the music that the score cannot reach.

I said that the most obvious function of notation was conservation. If that were its only function, then the development of digital sound recording would have rendered traditional notation obsolete; in terms of comprehensiveness and fidelity, no other means of representing music can possibly compare with a CD (except a vinyl record, according to some audio buffs, but I am not going to enter into that controversy). The fact that we go on using traditional notation, then, demonstrates the importance to us of its other functions. For through the process of communicating information from composer to performer, or more generally from one musician to another, notations at the same time do something much more complex: they transmit a whole way of thinking about music. A score sets up a framework that identifies certain attributes of the music as essential, in the sense that if your performance doesn't have those attributes then you can't really claim to have been performing that music at all. If you play the E minor Prelude and get one note wrong, then nobody (except one or two philosophers) will claim that what you played wasn't the E minor Prelude. But heaven knows what they will say if you get 95 per cent of the notes wrong. Somewhere between these limits lies the essential note-to-note structure that identifies the E minor Prelude.

But the essential note-to-note structure is only part of the music. For

between and around these notes, so to speak, lies a vast domain of interpretive possibility, in which you can choose to play faster or slower, louder or softer, to phrase or articulate one way or another. None of this impinges on whether or not you can claim to be playing the E minor Prelude. Rather, it is what makes your performance individualistic, drab, eccentric, emotionally self-indulgent, or just plain brilliant.

Master of the Smallest Link

The pattern of what is determined by notation and what isn't, what is to be taken as given and what is a matter of performance interpretation, is one of the things that defines a musical culture; it defines not only how music is transmitted but also how the various individuals whose activities together make up a musical culture relate to one another. It also largely determines how people imagine music within a given culture – most obviously how composers conceive their music, though you could say that it is shared patterns of imagination that bind *all* the members of a musical community together. To compose within any given tradition, then, is to imagine sounds in terms of the particular configurations of determinacy and indeterminacy appropriate to that tradition, and this in turn means that notation is much more profoundly implicated in the act of composition than many accounts of the compositional process might lead you to believe.

There are two famous sources relating to the ways in which Mozart and Beethoven respectively conceived their music. In a letter that only came to light at the beginning of the nineteenth century (it was first published in 1815), Mozart explained how musical ideas would come to him unbidden, and enlarge themselves in his mind until

> the whole, though it be long, stands almost finished and complete in my mind, so that I can survey it, like a fine picture or a beautiful statue, at a glance. . . . [T]he committing to paper is done quickly enough, for every

> thing is . . . already finished; and it rarely differs on paper, from what it was in my imagination.

And corroboration of this account of the compositional process comes from the composer Louis Schlösser, who at the age of 85 published an account of a meeting he had with Beethoven more than sixty years before, in 1822. Schlösser paraphrased Beethoven's words:

> I carry my thoughts about me for a long time, often a very long time, before I write them down. . . . I change many things, discard and try again until I am satisfied. . . . [I]n so much as I know exactly what I want, the fundamental idea never deserts me – it arises before me, grows – I see and hear the picture in all its extent and dimensions stand before my mind like a cast and there remains for me nothing but the labor of writing it down, which is quickly accomplished.

The degree of consensus between these accounts is remarkable. Both Mozart and Beethoven emphasize how they can 'see' or 'survey' the music at a glance, and compare it to a picture (even Beethoven's reference to it as a cast chimes in with Mozart's 'statue'). And both insist that the real work of composition is done in the mind, with writing it down being a trivial matter. Notation, as they describe it, is not something integral to the creative process at all; it comes strictly after the event.

Both these accounts harmonize perfectly with the way of thinking about music which I described in Chapter 2. Mozart and Beethoven are telling us that the conception of music is a purely ideal process, an achievement of the imagination untrammelled by the mechanical process of setting pen to paper. They give us a perfect image of the inspired composer, the 'master of the smallest link' (to borrow a phrase from Theodor Adorno) whose vision – a term whose biblical resonances are entirely pertinent – encompasses every detail of the music's unfolding. This is an image of authorship that borders on the divine;

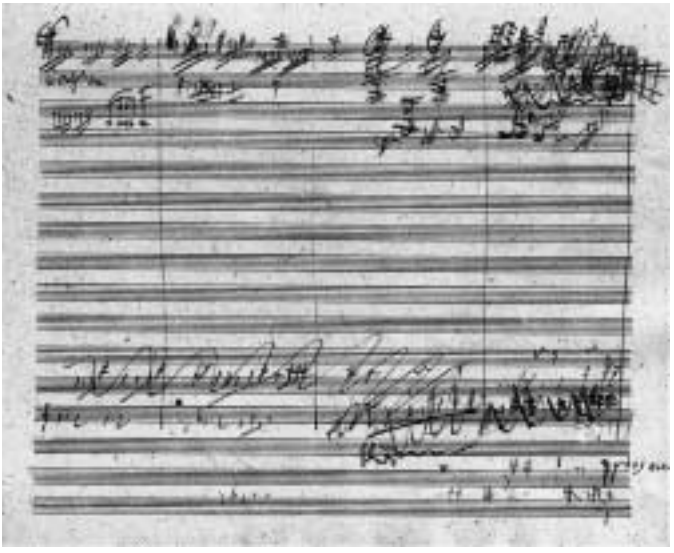
indeed it echoes theological accounts of the moment of Creation, in which God envisages every tiniest ramification of what He has created. For Mozart and Beethoven, as for God, creation is focused on what might be called a moment of truth into which all temporal unfolding is compressed, and it is this moment of truth that editors, performers, musicologists, and critics all try in their different ways to recapture. It is hardly surprising, then, that these stirring accounts of the compositional process were quoted and requoted by countless musicians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (for example, they feature prominently in Schenker's final book, *Der freie Satz*). And what makes all this doubly remarkable is the striking contrast between what Beethoven said, as transmitted by Schlösser, and what we know of the externals of his compositional process.

For Beethoven took scraps of paper, and later pocket-sized sketchbooks, with him on his frequent walks in the countryside near Vienna, instantly jotting down his musical ideas in case he forgot them; at home, he kept larger sketchbooks on his desk into which he might copy the results or enter new ideas, fashioning and refashioning the music, developing it bit by bit, correcting or adding to it, crossing it out and starting again. After Beethoven's death these sketchbooks were dispersed and in many cases broken up, but one of the most sustained research programmes in postwar musicology has succeeded in reconstructing their original sequence. As a result, you can work through them and trace the laborious and sometimes almost painful process by which Beethoven edged (sometimes directly and sometimes via enormous detours) towards the music that we know. For instance, while the first section of the 'Ode to Joy' seems to have come to him with little difficulty, the middle section gave him enormous trouble; there is sketch upon sketch in which Beethoven tries one idea, then another, sometimes working out different options systematically and sometimes apparently taking pot-shots at random. And again and again you find that the most characteristic and expressive features of the music come together only during the final stages of the compositional process; as Gustav

Nottebohm (the first serious scholar of Beethoven's sketchbooks) put it, 'in most humans the creative faculty grows slack with work, but with Beethoven it was otherwise, for in him it worked on unimpaired: indeed it often rose to its greatest heights only at the last moment'.

The explanation for the striking disparity between what Beethoven said and what he did is in fact depressingly simple, and the story has been told by Maynard Solomon. The letter attributed to Mozart was almost certainly an invention of Friedrich Rochlitz, the journalist and critic who edited the magazine in which it first appeared. And Schlösser's account of his conversation with Beethoven was almost certainly copied consciously or unconsciously from Rochlitz's letter; the two are just too similar for any other interpretation to be plausible. Contemporaries believed these accounts were authentic not because they corresponded to how Mozart or Beethoven composed (this is obvious at least in the case of Beethoven), nor even probably because they corresponded to what Mozart or Beethoven said (remember each account appeared long after the composer's death), but because they represented what, in nineteenth-century eyes, the composers *ought* to have said. In short, they tell us a great deal about the thinking of the Romantic period, but little about Mozart, Beethoven, or the compositional process.

If we put these exercises in myth-making to one side, we can see just how far the way in which Beethoven conceived music was tied up with the way in which he notated it. The frenzies of writing, rewriting, crossing-out, and redrafting to which sketches like Fig. 18 bear evidence do not record Beethoven's advance towards the preordained 'fundamental idea' that, in Schlösser's words, never deserted him. On the contrary, they show the music being forged, hammered so to speak on the anvil of pen and paper. This is no disembodied process; sometimes, as you pore over the sketchbooks, you have an almost visceral sense of Beethoven's pen digging into the fibrous, handmade paper as he struggled to give expression to some recalcitrant, half-formed idea. At other times you can sense the music emerging from the



18. Autograph of Beethoven's unfinished piano concerto, Hess 15 (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, MS Artaria 184), p. 18. This half-completed score uses an old-fashioned layout in which the top three staves show the violins and violas, while the fourth stave from the bottom shows the cellos and basses.

page as Beethoven literally *saw* what he meant. When we talk about Beethoven 'writing' a symphony, then, there is nothing metaphorical about such language; we are talking about a physical engagement of pen and paper, and about a creative act that was inseparable from the imperatives and resistances of Western staff notation.

We know so much about Beethoven's compositional process because of the peculiar way he composed (sketched, doodled, calculated, improvised) on paper, and this is a personal trait that started long before he became deaf; if he had not worked this way, it seems unlikely that he could have gone on composing as he did after his deafness had become profound. But most classical composers did not compose like this; that means we know less about how they composed, and it also

means that it is dangerous to generalize from what Beethoven did to what other composers did. But it seems unlikely that any composers just sat there until they were full of music, and then poured it all on to the page. (According to contemporary accounts Mozart and Schubert came closest to this, but even they sketched, corrected, and recorrected their music on paper.) For classical composers had another device for grappling with the representation of music, trying things out, shaping them against empirical resistance – and this was a device that did not leave visible traces like Beethoven's sketches (or the St Trinian's music lessons). This device was the piano.

You will sometimes hear the view expressed that real composers compose at their desks, not at the keyboard. (The practice of public examinations in harmony and counterpoint seems to be based on this idea, since otherwise it would hardly make sense to lock students away in examination rooms and expect them to come out with music.) And there have been composers who could do this. There is a story of the French composer Maurice Ravel coming into Vaughan Williams's study one day, and finding the Englishman working away at his desk. Ravel was horror-stricken; 'how can you find new chords without a piano?', he asked. And the incensed, hugely frustrated letters in which composers like Chopin and Mahler railed against inefficient piano-dealers who failed to deliver instruments on time and so prevented them from getting on with their work show that there were other composers, too, who would have sided with Ravel. (It is fortunate that Chopin, Mahler, and Ravel did not have to compose in an examination room.) The idea that there is something wrong with composing at the keyboard is just another example of the nineteenth-century myth that music is something pure and disembodied, coming unbidden from the spirit realm. Composers know that music is not something that just happens, like the weather. It is something you make.

The Paradox of Music

In 1973–4 the avant-garde composer György Ligeti, who was born in Hungary but came over to the West after the Russian invasion in 1956, composed an orchestral piece called *San Francisco Polyphony*. Like much of Ligeti's music around that time, it is a densely written piece, a jungle of sinuous, creeper-like melodic lines. But Ligeti used a different metaphor to explain how he had tried to contain the sometimes impenetrable note-to-note patterning of the music within orderly bounds: 'One can imagine various objects in a state of total disarray in a drawer,' he wrote. 'The drawer too has a definite form. Inside it chaos reigns, but it is clearly defined itself.' A metaphor like this captures certain salient aspects of the music, while saying nothing about others; for this reason there are other pieces of music it might apply to just as well, and equally there are other metaphors that might apply just as well to *San Francisco Polyphony*. If the music strikes you as just an impenetrable tangle of sound, then listening to it with Ligeti's drawer image in mind may provide a way into it. Or to use my alternative metaphor, once you know the extent of the forest, you may find it easier to discern faint paths through the undergrowth.

We don't usually think of music in the form of drawers or forests and so these metaphors stand out as imaginative representations of it – imaginative representations that, at best, can in some way add to or empower our experience of the music. (A good deal of critical writing about music consists in essence of developing illuminating metaphors to describe individual compositions; in the nineteenth century this approach acquired the biblically inspired term 'hermeneutics', implying that it sought out the meaning behind the music.) But all descriptions of music involve metaphor; it is just that the metaphor is not always so obvious. To see that this is so, just try to talk about music without falling into metaphor. One of the most basic things you might want to say is that one note is higher and lower than another. But that doesn't mean that high notes literally come from the sky and low ones from abysmal,

subterranean depths (though it might seem that way if you listen respectively to Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending* and Wagner's *Rheingold Prelude*). It is just a metaphor: somehow high notes are more compact, brighter, lighter, higher . . . and of course in staff notation they appear higher on the page. Then again, you might talk about the texture of a piece of music. Texture? Bark, moss, velvet, sacking: these things have texture, but how can music have texture when you can't touch it? And what did you mean when you referred to a 'piece' of music? Do you tear strips of music off a roll, like cloth, or chip them off a block? A block of what?

Metaphor is built into our language, and so deeply that we usually don't even notice it is there. And along with the metaphors of music being a drawer or a forest, these embedded metaphors all illustrate what might be called the underlying, root metaphor of Western musical culture: that music is some kind of object. Mozart and Beethoven, or rather Rochlitz and Schlösser, expressed this very clearly when they spoke of it as a painting or statue. But the metaphor of music as object goes much deeper than the myth-making process of nineteenth-century musical aesthetics; you simply can't get away from it, unless you are prepared to stop talking about music altogether (and people will never stop talking about something they care about as much as music). The whole idea of writing music depends on it: Western staff notation shows music 'moving' up and down and from left to right on the page. But what is it that actually does the moving? Literally, nothing; as Roger Scruton has made clear, when we say the music moves, we are treating it as an imaginary object. The same applies when you flick back in a score, comparing two passages of the music side by side. After all, you can't fold time like paper; when you compare the earlier passage with the later one, you are in effect peeling the music away from the passage of time and so transforming a temporal experience into an imaginary object. That is one of the things that scores are for.

And here is the basic paradox of music. We experience it in time but in

order to manipulate it, even to understand it, we pull it out of time and in that sense falsify it. But it isn't a falsification we can do without; it is a basic part of what music *is* (and not just Western art music, I would claim, since *all* musical cultures are built on representation, whether notational, gestural, or otherwise. However, I won't argue the point). The important thing is to recognize the falsification for what it is, and not to confuse the imaginary objects of music with the temporal experiences for which they stand. There is a widespread, and perhaps partly justified, view that this is one of the problems that beset new music after the Second World War, when 'serious' composition became the preserve of university music departments; certain composers intellectualized more and more about what went into the score, almost as if they were constructing mathematical proofs in sound, apparently oblivious to the fact that none of this was conveyed to their diminishing audiences. But the confusion of imaginary object and experience is ineradicable. When you go to a shop and say 'Have you got any music by Sorabji?' you are asking whether they have the score or CD that you want; as I said at the beginning of this chapter, the *music* is something else. (And remember how Piginini, who could only play with 'the music' in front of him, had to be taught how to play *music*.) As is so often the case when we talk about music, we don't quite say what we mean, or mean what we say. Or to put it another way, whenever we try to talk about music, we seem to end up changing the subject.

So where does that leave the imaginary museum that I described in Chapter 2, that Tutankhamun's tomb of the most complex and considered of imaginary objects, musical works? Isn't the whole idea of the imaginary museum built on a confusion of imaginary objects and temporal experiences? I can think of two answers to this, one radical, and one less so. The less radical answer is to say that if musical works are not experiences but merely their surrogates, so to speak, then the same might be said of the contents of any other museum: paintings, for instance, are bought and sold (and insured and stolen) as physical objects, but we go to the gallery to look at them not for themselves, but

for the experiences we can derive from them – and there are as many ways in which they can be experienced as there are people experiencing them. I shall explore some of the ramifications of that idea in the next chapter.

The more radical answer (or perhaps it is just the same answer expressed more radically) is suggested by the biologist Richard Dawkins's profoundly unsettling image of the 'river of genes'. We think of human history, and the prehistoric development of our species, as made up of a vast succession of individual people; as they have bred and interbred, so genes have passed between them, flowing from generation to generation and determining the ethnic, physical, and mental make-up of the human race today. But Dawkins turns this upside down. He makes the genes the protagonists of the story, the true creators of history, with their only motive (if so anthropomorphic a word can properly be used of genes) being one of replication. In this version of the story, humans are reduced to temporary constellations of genes, mere eddies in the river of life. And maybe we should see the contents of the musical museum the same way. For music history has traditionally been presented rather in the manner of a series of stepping-stones, a journey from one masterwork to another, leading from the remote past to the present and beyond. (Old-fashioned music appreciation texts are full of terms like the 'course' of history or the 'procession' of great composers.) Or to use a more appropriate metaphor, perhaps, it is presented as a kind of museum tour, in which you pause to admire each imaginary object before moving on to the next.

On the Dawkins model, it would all be the other way round. The historical process would reside not in musical works – the stepping-stones – but in what lies between them: the continuously changing (as well as geographically variable) patterns of conception and perception which brought those works into being. We would see musical works as the mere traces of historical processes, empty shells into which life can

be breathed only through an imaginative reconstruction of the musical experiences that once gave them meaning. And the imagination that is involved in this is our own; you might almost say that we would see the history of music as, in essence, an account of our own journey through the imaginary museum of musical works. Again, then, we come back to the idea that when we study music, we aren't just studying something separate from us, something 'out there': there is a sense in which we are studying ourselves, too.

It could hardly be otherwise, if music is an imaginary object.