

Book Reviews

Beate Kutschke and Katherine Butler, eds, *The Heroic in Music* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2022). xii + 290 pp. £70.00.

The heroic figure is pervasive in Western music, and as the contributors to *The Heroic in Music* argue, it also influences the creative approaches of composers. The volume's editors, Beate Kutschke and Katherine Butler, cite four heroic topics common in musicology: the heroic style, operatic heroes, the heroic in instrumental music and performance. A gap the editors seek to fill is a consideration of the heroic in the context of the ethical and political concerns in society. Moving from medieval chants through nineteenth-century symphonies to twenty-first century vocal music, the authors argue that common to each era is the construction of 'heroic emotions, moods, and attitudes' through musical means (p. 5). Music is revealed as a site, and a system, in which the heroic can be 'encoded', both expressing and shaping the ethical and political world of its composer. The book presents cases in which particular societies – with all of their moral and political intricacies – influenced composers' ways of thinking, their work and in turn, their worlds.

The twelve chapters are organized into three sections with chronological and thematic parameters: the heroic topic's early development, political and ethical concerns 'beyond Beethoven' in the nineteenth century, and the moral nature of heroes in differing twentieth-century political systems. However, there is thematic and methodological overlap between sections that lends overall coherence to the diverse topics. The contributors use analytical tools that help readers to think about heroes of the past, as well as those of their own times. Among the themes explored are extra-musical meaning, musical metaphors and analogies, and cultural and historical factors, such as nationalism, religion and gender. *The Heroic in Music* demonstrates that while often associated with large-scale orchestral music, the heroic has been articulated in an ever-shifting variety of genres: songs and symphonies, sacred and secular.

The text is oriented toward music scholars who have some familiarity with the topic. The contributors – music scholars from the US and Europe – represent a range of subfields: musicology, music theory, music and cognition, and media studies. There is a balance between musical analysis (identification of musical genres, themes and topoi) and analysis of the historical political context: any claims about that context are grounded in both cultural context and musical evidence.

Against the grain of the dominant discourse around the heroic, this volume complicates the violent and masculine character so often associated with the topic. Not only have heroes rarely been women, but their qualities seem diametrically opposed to the feminine. Warriors and martyrs are stoic, never swayed by their passions, and unsusceptible to the power of music. In this volume, however, the presentation of gentle heroes, steadfast and nonviolent men, exalted heroines and, in the final chapter, a female composer reveal the often-overlooked complexities of who qualifies as a hero in different times and places.

The first section, 'The Configuration of Heroic Music as a Tool for Shaping Moral and Political Identity', explores the early development of the heroic as a topic. Often the hero's greatest possible deed is realized in their ultimate sacrifice:

death. In these chapters – set in France, Germany, England and Italy – readers are introduced to heroic types that range from warriors to martyrs, and musical genres ranging from songs to liturgy to oratorios. Musical methods include text setting, tying motives to particular heroic images or themes in text, contrasts between characters reinforced through musical oppositions, communicating character traits via musical topoi and the pointed deployment of expressivity. The section opens with Roman Hankeln's chapter about medieval saints represented as faithful heroes and heroines in mass liturgy and Roman *historiae*, especially in the form of the gentle and Christ-like martyr. Hankeln, whose research centers on both the structure and sociopolitical context of medieval vocal liturgical music, argues that musical contrasts and correspondences emphasized earthly struggle and heavenly reward. In these texts, written for the benefit of future leaders, war language was applied to passive actions to characterize them as heroic. And he offers two modes through which heroes were characterized musically: the short, static Epithetic mode and the longer, dynamic Scenic mode.

Katherine Butler's chapter similarly asks how music was used to convey heroic ideals in sixteenth-century English songs. For the Elizabethans, heroes were virtuous and superhuman, and depicted as such through their actions. In the songs Butler analyzes, these traits, rather than specific heroic actions, are communicated through illustrative musical gestures and forms: trumpet calls and marching figures imitate war sounds, rising octaves represent moral and spiritual ascension, and strophic settings link various facets of heroism. Music could inspire battle-ready soldiers, but, like beautiful women, also had the power to emasculate.

Moving forward a century, Berthold Over explores how the Italian ethical concept of *virtù eroica*, a moral aspect of heroism, is expressed in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian vocal music. The masculine figure to whom the concept applied was also superhuman, controlled his passions well, and completed great deeds. Over's analysis connects the genres chosen for heroes to literary trends of the time. The laments of operatic women mirror their epistolary addresses in literature, in which they direct their concerns outward, not to themselves. The epistles are meant to 'produce a moral edification of the reader', a characteristic of the heroes who exemplify *virtù eroica* (p. 55).

In the final chapter of this section, Jonathan Rhodes Lee turns to biblical heroes in two Handel oratorios: *Judas Maccabaeus* (1746) and *Theodora* (1750). Though very different, they both serve as a kind of role model for the drama's other characters, as well as the audience. In Handel's settings, Lee argues, one can hear the composer choosing to highlight certain aspects of his heroes, while de-emphasizing other characteristics present in the libretto. Judas Maccabaeus is valorous and Theodora, after escaping her degrading punishment in a brothel, dies with the fortitude of a martyr. Lee shows how a moralizing genre has been understood and reinterpreted by the composer.

The second section, 'Music, Its Ethics and Politics – Beyond "Beethoven Hero"', builds on the discourse around Beethoven's heroic period, expanding the discussion to include non-symphonic works and spiritual, national and ethnic contexts of each segment of nineteenth-century society. The heroic nature of Beethoven's music is longstanding but was sparked in particular by Scott Burnham's 1995 monograph *Beethoven Hero*, in which he explored the persistence of Beethoven's heroic style, why it is so valued and how it influenced subsequent composers.¹

¹ Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

At the center of this framing is Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony, whose hero – due to the very political and moral motivations examined in this volume – was named and subsequently erased. The emerging individualism of Romantic art and philosophy changed the popular understanding of an ideal hero, and this is reflected in the era's music. For the contributors to this section, analogies between musical representation and human character are a primary means of communicating heroic themes and ideals. In each context, musical mimesis (representing natural events and human characters), the opposition of musical domains and allusions to battle populate the aural landscapes. Challenges to established historiography complicate popular, gendered and Beethoven-focused perceptions of the heroic and demonstrate for readers a history of the heroic that is interconnected.

Lawrence M. Zbikowski situates Beethoven in a long historical trajectory of the heroic as he explores how the musical means of depicting the topic was adapted to three composers' eras: Lully, Handel and Beethoven. These three figures, and their corresponding points in history, are connected by the human capacity to create and understand second-order relations through analogies. In Zbikowski's analyses, war sounds accompany the hero's return, sudden changes obliterate the sonic space like a storm and Handel's David (*Saul*, 1739) leads the melody, seeming to control the strings. What is remarkable in this chapter are the continuities across time in the musical means of expressing a heroic nature. Olga Sánchez-Kisielewska similarly questions the place of Beethoven in music history in her re-estimation of the composer's late style. Amidst the propagation of the figure of Beethoven and his music as evidence of an 'active' heroism, she argues that readers should not ignore the more spiritual, passive side. In the late string quartets, Sánchez-Kisielewska highlights tonal structures that create the opposition of spaces that are analogous to material and spiritual worlds.

Csilla Pethő-Vernet listens 'beyond Beethoven' to nineteenth-century Hungarian music that was assigned – by critics, composers and audiences – an inherently heroic character. Her question is two-fold: what specific musical elements were considered heroic and how did they come to be thus associated? Turn motifs and dotted patterns, markers of Hungarian folk music, became markers of the heroic on stage and in the press. In the same vein, Beate Kutschke explores the role of the heroic in the nationalist discourse around Austro-German music from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s, that is from unification in Germany to the end of the Weimar Republic. Nationalistic discourse after 1870 was rampant, appearing in publications, educational curriculums and in the nebulous talk of a 'German spirit.' At the same time, composers reached back to the eighteenth-century concept of musical characters to depict particularly German heroes. Musical discourse, like compositional techniques, Kutschke argues, develops from what came before. Looking backward to understand the present is a method that appears again in the third and final section of *The Heroic in Music*.

'Heroic Music and its Moralities in Dictatorships and Post-Heroic Democracies' puts in conversation the heroes born of differing political systems in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Two chapters about the forced, propagandistic implementation of the heroic in Germany and the Soviet Union are followed by two chapters about democratized ideas about who gets to be a hero and why. Each historical-national context is how musical meaning is co-opted and reframed to fit a certain agenda.

Juliane Riepe's chapter about the use of Handel during the Third Reich and Nathan Seinen's about Soviet war symphonies both examine musical movements that turned to history for heroic ideas and forms. Riepe's chapter shows how music

can be heard to fit new political agendas. Handel, having appeared three times in this volume, has now been elevated to a kind of historical hero himself. Seinen argues that the Soviet concept of the New Person – a self-sacrificing, persevering hero – was promoted by officials seeking to build modern infrastructure and military in the USSR. He shows how the heroic style associated with Beethoven, absorbed by Russian composers, was critical to this construction: composers were implored to adopt a more Russian epic symphony as an alternative to Beethoven's heroic style. The imposition of an ideal present on an imaginary past powered the propaganda machine.

Two more chapters bring readers to the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In his chapter about popular music heroes, Dietrich Helms turns his focus first to lyrics, singers, and recordings of pop, metal and country songs, before exploring the heroic role of each genre's listeners. The acknowledgement of everyday heroes makes room for the inclusion of differently abled and differently empowered heroes, in society, music and scholarship. Judith Lochhead, in her chapter about Kaija Saariaho's heroic narrative in *Émilie Suite* (2011), asks who qualifies as a hero in the twenty-first century and what a current heroic style might be. As has been demonstrated throughout the volume, musical oppositions aurally separate two worlds – here the protagonist's worlds of thought and of everyday life – and the slow transformation from the loud, accented heroic state to a dreamy one complicates the heroic actions of a new kind of hero: the other-regarding, Socratic heroine. This final chapter demonstrates the potential of studies of the heroic to embrace a female gaze: listening to women composers listening to female subjects.

In his expert afterword, Scott Burnham, like several of the volume's contributors, looks back to Homer as he builds a foundation upon which to understand the prevalence of the hero in Western culture. Notably, he acknowledges the way that this volume might help readers, including himself, to reexamine previous notions of the hero: 'it is good for those of us whose primary sense of the musical heroic stems from Beethoven to be reminded that Beethoven and his generation neither invented nor consummated modern heroism and its musical expression' (p. 240). Of equal interest for Burnham, and doubtless for readers as well, are the myriad geographic, cultural and stylistic directions in which future research might go.

The notion of heroic at any particular time and place is often contradictory, shifting to suit the needs and culture of society or political regimes. And the social and moral context is key to understanding how the heroic topic is at work. While the topic of the heroic might seem outmoded, the continuing presence of the hero, as well as the breadth of genres and eras presented in the volume, re-invigorate it. The omnipresent figure, malleable and culturally conditioned, remains powerful in all corners of Western society, and it seems music will always respond to and participate in telling their stories. Indeed, heroism is a living concern: humans continue to understand their lives and glean their meaning through these stories, as they strive toward and emulate their heroes.

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