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“It might well be time to give up on opera's death metaphor”

Interview with RICHARD LEPPERT

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Richard Leppert is Regents Professor and Morse Alumni Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. His Ph.D. is in musicology, with art history as his cognate field. He holds undergraduate degrees in music, English literature, and German literature. Leppert's work is concentrated on the relations of music and imagery to social and cultural construction, principally revolving around issues of gender, class, and race. Most of his work concerns European high culture from early modernity to the present, though he has also published on American music and art and popular culture. He has specific interests in critical theories of the arts and culture from the Frankfurt School to postmodernism, Adorno in particular. The more recent of Leppert's books are *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body*; *Music and Image: Domesticity, Ideology and Socio-Cultural Formation in Eighteenth-Century England*; *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception* (coedited with Susan McClary); an edition of *Essays on Music by Theodor W. Adorno*; *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema* (coedited with Lawrence Kramer and Daniel Goldmark); *Art and the Committed Eye: The Cultural Functions of Imagery*; *The Nude: The Cultural Rhetoric of the Body in the Art of Western Modernity*; and a volume of collected essays, *Sound Judgment*, for the Ashgate Press series, Contemporary Thinkers on Critical Musicology.

Richard Leppert delivered the keynote address at the international conference *Opera and Cinema: The Politics of an Encounter*, held at the Teatro Nacional de São Carlos (Lisbon) in November 2012. In the wake of this meeting, he accepted to answer our questions about film music, new musicology, the relationship between opera and cinema and his own intellectual path.

Looking back to your work, taking books such as The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body into consideration, the interplay of different media seems to have been a crucial issue among your research interests throughout your career. Would you agree that this interest somehow reflects a concern with what is both aesthetically and politically at stake whenever a media (re-)represents, encompasses, or displaces another one?

Yes, precisely. When I was trained as a musicologist nearly all attention was paid to musical sound as such, and to notated music virtually to the exclusion of anything else. North American musicology was more than a little self-conscious of its German musicological ancestry, both as regards the classical music canon and the scholarly paradigms then well-established to study it. What we were taught to study were, so to speak, the notes: just that. The relation of music to what surrounded it, to the societies and cultures from which it emerged, was usually given short shrift. A typical music-history text from the mid decades of the last century began each chapter with two or three pages about what was otherwise going on in the musical world to be discussed and then it was thereafter on to the notes. There was little integration. Sociology of music and social history of music were second cousins twice removed from mainline musicology. The 60s pushed back against such paradigms in music studies, just as happened generally across the humanities and social sciences disciplines. The so-named New Musicology took a long time coming and against very considerable odds; all that seems like ancient history these days. The story is well rehearsed and by now has its own mythology attached. But the truth is that a lot of young scholars paid a heavy price for rocking the boat. And how surprising that young women (McClary, Subotnik) were at the forefront and paid a high bill indeed during the late 70s, early 80s; or that a good deal of change came from scholars working in other disciplines (Kramer). There's a good bit of sociology that could be written about this history before that generation moves off the academic highway. Susan and I were both close friends and colleagues at Minnesota in those days. When she started writing and speaking locally about her scholarship, very nasty accusations (of the "barbarians-at-the-door" sort) were leveled at her from humanists outside music (men, no surprise), largely on the grounds that asking hard questions about musical meaning and meaning that intervened in the public sphere somehow besmirched the glory of Great Music. This sort of reaction seems virtually quaint today, I suppose. But in those days it became something of a blood sport for some full professors to attack untenured scholars pushing some boundaries. As for Rose, well, she was simply told that what she was doing wasn't musicology and so she

was terminated. She worked for a decade as a computer programmer; eventually the discipline “caught up” to her and she resumed her now-distinguished career. So that's a bit of a certain kind of academic politics.

Media displacement plays its part as well, to be sure. But I'd like to suggest something that's related but not the same: disciplinary boundary crossing. At mid-century and into the 60s, interdisciplinary research and teaching were not long suits in the American academy. The humanistic disciplines were at that time extremely self-conscious about being scientific (which essentially translated into positivistic); the humanities were regarded as a “softest” part of the soft sciences and were very uneasy about that. (The social sciences were often referred to as the soft sciences, distinct from the so-named “hard” sciences, that is, the physical sciences.) As a result, disciplines became self-reflexively very, so to speak, disciplined, and to a considerable extent this resulted in intellectual self-enclosure. Leonard Meyer once characterized the result to me as follows: “Musicology went in search of rigor and achieved rigor mortis.” We spoke about only what we could positivistically quantify; the rest was mere “interpretation.” Nonetheless, musicology changed in part on account of qualitative research going emerging in other humanistic disciplines starting in the 60s.

In the last decades, some musicologists have developed a great interest in film music. What do you think are the main reasons for this? How did your personal research trajectory lead you to film music studies? What have film music studies and media studies changed in the panorama of music studies in general?

Perhaps the only surprising thing here is that it took this long to get to film music. In North America, for example, annual meetings of the American Musicological Society twenty-five years ago rarely paid film the slightest heed. Today, and for a decade or more, every meeting has film music panels, discussion groups, and the like. That said, for a long time I don't think many musicologists thought that film music was aesthetically worth studying; I would guess this was in part informed by attitudes regarding the culture industry more generally: after all, the same holds for the study of popular music. When I was a graduate student in the 60s the only music of a quasi-popular sort admitted into the curriculum, at least in the USA, was jazz, and that music was just barely considered. Today, the study of rock music and other popular musics are largely what keep music departments afloat, at least in the public universities that are increasingly funded by tuition income. When I began my career at Minnesota in 1973 a small group of us discussed with our dean the possibility of mounting a film studies curriculum; he'd have

none of it. He loved opera, and was well informed in that regard (he was a political scientist); but film he regarded as a kind of popular entertainment that had no place in the university. His attitude, I think, was hardly unique, and was distinctly well established in musicology departments. The advent of popular music research across the humanities that emerged in the late 60s and early 70s initiated changes. Like it or not, popular culture is a powerful agent of social and cultural formation. Scholars figured out that on that account alone it was worth knowing about. It took a bit longer to also figure out that a very considerable body of this vast trove of cultural practice had a great deal of worth, aesthetic and otherwise (however that gets variously defined). Put another way, we came down off our high horse of high art.

My own history, not that interesting, can be simply stated. As both an undergraduate and graduate student I studied both music history and art history; and as an undergraduate I also studied literature (English, German mostly). For a few decades I wrote about intersections shared by visual and music arts. A bit late to the game, I started reading cinema scholarship and got hooked. And there's also the fact that I was always a lover of movies.

Change? Think about the now-established place of sound studies in musicology; ten years ago few people would have had the slightest idea what the phrase meant. Today, pretty much every major publisher with a music list is after new work in this media-enhanced arena. I've just finished reading a marvelous new book by William Cheng called *Sound Play* (Oxford has just published it); its subject is video-game music. This sort of scholarship is heavily impacted by media and communications studies. Maybe another way of getting at these changes is simply to remark that the wall separating musicology and ethnomusicology has been bridged. The wall is still there, to be sure, but a lot of ladders are positioned on both sides.

In the introduction of Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema, which you co-edited with Lawrence Kramer and Daniel Goldmark, you stated that we should not only “conceptualize the use of music in film”, but also “understand the ways in which film conceptualizes music”. What kind of new methodologies does this approach demand? And what lines of research do you find more appealing in today's film music studies?

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind about film music is that it's part of a much larger whole. Early on in film music studies, I think, there was insufficient heed paid to this obvious fact. But this cuts more than one way. To this day, very few cinema

scholars discuss the presence of music at all, and not too many more have anything to say about sound design. One quite striking thing about film music scholarship today is that it's usually discussed within the context of the larger whole. This requires patient (self)training in cinema and image theory, sound studies, narrative, etc., but the dividends for this labor can be considerable. In brief, what I'm suggesting is that what for me is the best film music writing is work deeply enmeshed in film and film theory as such. For my part, I tend to learn most from work that considers musico-visual details, small bits, if you like, that sediment a semantics for the larger whole, but that's just a personal preference. There are many ways, after all, to produce responsible scholarship.

In the specific case of the use of pre-existing music, cinema seems to have abundantly contributed to a re-bearing of music, changing meanings and placing the music in unexpected places, sometimes desacralizing it. Does this mean that Beethoven is not the same after Clockwork Orange?

A few years ago in a class of advanced undergraduates (not music students per se, though there were a few formally trained music students present) I played a piece of late-romantic orchestral music (I don't remember what it was); to get a discussion underway I asked the class what they thought they had heard. One student immediately raised her hand and suggested, with agreement from others, that it sounded like film music. And of course, fundamentally, she hit the nail on its head. This is to say that a lot of film music sounds to people today like what they think is or might be classical music, and this without regard to whether the music preexists the film or is purpose-composed (John Williams, say). But as for—your example—Beethoven and *Clockwork Orange*—I imagine there's no hard and fast rule. We hear Beethoven so often as part of the sound environment that any particular extra-musical association might have a hard time holding sway. That said, you're likely correct as regards the desacralization issue. I'm of two minds on this score. First, the religiosity glued-on to common perceptions of classical music mystifies what people hear; and today it seems both inappropriate and fake. On the other hand, too much of desacralization comes about by means of the instrumentalization of art, just so much fodder for the market. There's little societal gain on either score. At the same time, there are endless ways to reuse classical music in film that do honor to both the film and its music alike. A lot depends on the director and music editor and composer working together and each in his/her own way being sensitive to music—re directors, think of Kubrick or Malick, for example.

Would it be fair to claim that film music in the "classical" Hollywood provided a kind of refuge for composers who were less keen to embrace the radicalism of musical avant-garde?

In the end, that's pretty much what happened; that is, classical Hollywood fare mostly eschewed high modernism. And I suppose that it's the case that Hollywood attracted composers not especially interested in the avant-garde. But to the extent this is true, it's a small part of the story. Bernard Herrmann, for example, found myriad ways to expand our sense of film music and by employing techniques of composition and orchestration that are well aware of modernism. It's also the fact, of course, that Hollywood was hardly open to being dictated to by composers (Schoenberg being the quintessential example of a miss-match in this regard). The most successful and, I think, the aesthetically most insightful Hollywood composers understood the medium and the ways that music was—and was not—part of making a whole. On the lower end of film music composition, to be sure, there is a lot of uninteresting and unimaginative scores; but by itself that says little: there's a lot of music as such that fits that reality.

*What about opera? How would you characterize the way in which cinema contributed to renew and displace our vision of opera in the light of its arguable survival or death in the twentieth century? Films so radically different such as Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) – on which you wrote an essay – and Fellini's *E la nave va* (1983) suggest that this survival is, at least partially, a matter of nostalgia for the operatic genre, in the threshold of megalomania and grotesque... How would you position yourself with regard to this debate?*

An awful lot of people keep pronouncing opera's death, second or otherwise. It might well be time to give up on that metaphor. As for the cinema-opera intersection, the crossroad is heavily trafficked these days. Herzog, of course, since you bring him up, has had a solid second career as an opera director. But think about Met productions under Peter Gelb: Anthony Minghella's fantastic *Butterfly*, or Woody Allen's LA Opera production of *Gianni Schicchi*; and there's the by-now almost expected cinematic/video incorporations into opera mise-en-scène with productions like Robert Lepage's *Ring*. And so it goes. Opera lives, perhaps, because it keeps reinventing itself. Think about the fantastic *Eerik XIV* by Mikko Heinlö, commissioned by the city of Turku. For me everything about this work is aesthetically brilliant. It's also operatically cinematic—please permit me to use that phrase without precisely defining it. My point mentioning this sort of opera and *Regieoper* (I really dislike this term: vastly too pat, but

never mind) is simply to remark that opera (re)invention accomplishes at least two things. For one, it rethinks existing (old, not so old) works setting them in conjunction with modern experience—not the least useful way that Shakespeare, for example, continues to shape consciousness; and for a second, these moves help support a more general rethinking about what new opera—newly composed—might be. *Eerik XIV* is an excellent example of the latter, but a list of such new works would be very long indeed. A new book (to be published in 2015)—and a very good one—by Jelena Novak called *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* gets at this admirably.

As for megalomania and the grotesque, of course it's part of the story. But I'm somewhat less convinced than I used to be that these cultural phenomena/designators go terribly far to explain what's going on. Not least, both terms are so commonly part of modern productions that their force upon opera is diminished. Whatever one thinks about the Lepage *Ring*, it seems to me that audiences pretty comfortably take in—maybe even expect—productions of this sort. I remember when I was twenty seeing an *Aida* in Rome staged at the Baths of Caracalla. Now to be sure, at twenty, my sense of cultural irony was running in high gear. But I also really liked the opera. The production looked like a kind of *Ben Hur* parody in which Charleton Heston is played by Oliver Hardy. The Grand March, replete with a good sized stable of ill-inclined horses, got entirely out of hand. God knows what they had been fed, but whatever it was resulted in loose bowels: shit flying, elaborately costumed chorus members dodging the results; the horses were also very nervous (all that music and ill innards maybe?) and some of them reared up, which set the singers into flight for the wings. Of course, it was delicious but there was no recovering from it. Marx Brothers stuff. Larry Kramer's wonderful essay on *A Night at the Opera* comes to mind; in this instance, for my youngish self, it brought home the dialectics of opera: a bit of cheap thrill, lamentably bad acting and staging (certainly in those days) but music that moved me against all odds. But we should perhaps also mention a contrary phenomenon: Who twenty years ago would have imagined a new ending to *Turandot*, one that moved in a very different direction from Alfano's (and Toscanini's) over-the-top celebratory pronouncement—or Franco Zeffirelli's Met-sort of production, for that matter.

You mention nostalgia; I imagine that's part of the business as well. We learn that from the movies, if less so opera—opera just follows along comfortably. Could Lepage and his production team have imagined his Met *Ring* if they'd not been watching sci-fi special film effects all their lives? Maybe, who knows. But the resonance is there, however it came to me.

Let us specifically focus on film-operas. How do you assess their artistic relevance—in the period of silent film (1), later in the 1970s and 80s (2), and today (3)? They admittedly make operas available to a broader audience than that to which the usual operagoer belongs. Is this the crucial point? Or do film-operas pose a qualitative challenge as well, in which case we might even hazard that the task they amount to represents a matter of translation—in Benjamin's sense (i.e. in the sense that the very “afterlife” of those operas would be at stake in their being translated into films)?

It's clear that early in the silent cinema era opera-subject borrowings were common enough. But at least the ones I know were more story loans, with some musical accompaniment (opera without words) taken from the original operas, if desired. In the 70s-80s and for that matter today, opera more commonly than not is employed to get to issues beyond opera; I'm thinking about films like *Godfather*, and *Moonstruck*, for example. *Fitzcarraldo* is a quite different matter, to be sure, though I'll not rehearse the points made in my essay on that film. Then there are the still-smaller number of films that are of operas. For what you've asked me about here, I'll leave aside DVD releases of staged productions (Sellers' Mozart series), and for that matter the *Live from the Met* HD screenings. The cinematic practices of the DVD and HD releases are evident enough as regards camera work. But Joseph Losey's *Don Giovanni*, say, or Ingmar Bergman's *Magic Flute*, are different matters, aren't they? Or the Frédéric Mitterand's *Butterfly*, or Robert Dornhelm's *La bohème*? Think about Baz Luhrman's Australian National Opera production of *La bohème*, released on DVD and also broadcast in Australia and on PBS in the United States, and I assume elsewhere besides. It later moved to Broadway for a while; and bits of the set design ended up in *Moulin Rouge*. I mention this *Bohème* in particular precisely because Luhrman's conception moved so freely between being an opera and being a film, each practice deeply informing its other. It is a kind of translation, of course, but by itself that doesn't tell us so much. What these days isn't a translation with reference to anything from a past? What interests me more is the way that it reinvigorates an opera that arguably is otherwise played too often. One sees something new in it, not just repetition. That said, to mention *Regieoper*, there's always the danger of directorial narcissism, but that suit has a long history vastly antedating what we tend to think about nowadays when employing the term.

Turning to your current research, we are quite curious about your work on Terrence Malick. We would like to know a bit more about your view on his use of music. The repertoire he draws on is immense.

Smetana, Berlioz, Wagner, just to name a few, are extensively heard in his last two films, The Tree of Life and To the Wonder. Would you agree that this systematic recourse to quotation – not the least because it seems to provide a kind of incantatory and pervasive background to the narrative – amounts to a quite instrumental, not to say ideological, device?

I suppose I'd say that it's hard to think in the absence of ideological frameworks, so in that respect Malick is nothing special; rather—and I imagine this is the point of your question—he's seemingly pretty self-reflexive in this regard. I'd be hard put to sort out, parlor-game-wise, what are his motivations for the choice of any particular musical quotation. The same might be said for his borrowings from art history, such as the seconds-long shot of migrant workers walking on the plains huddled against a snowstorm, a direct appropriation from a Goya four-seasons series, *Winter* (in *Days of Heaven*). For him there's a resonance, presumably; it helps him think what he's doing. But more, it also shares with us or at least potentially directs us to larger issues in excess of the specifics of the narrative at hand. Music works that way, after all, and with an efficiency (if I can use such an instrumental word) matched by few other forms of human discourse. In a film like *Tree of Life* the musical citations are so many as to be sonically dizzying; I've really not sorted out what I think of or about the music in that film. But I have thought a lot about the music of *Days of Heaven* (1978) and am writing about it right now, and also the music in *The Thin Red Line* (1978). The former has an Ennio Morricone score, the latter one by Hans Zimmer. But both also borrow from classical music. *Days of Heaven*, you'll remember, opens with the “Aquarium” section of *Carnival of the Animals*. It fits the film. Morricone's score thereafter repeatedly employs the confined/confining minor second thematic movement that form a kind of leitmotiv in the Saint-Saëns, a solid musical way to think about the confinement of living in a fish tank, and strengthened by the circularity of the formal design of “Aquarium” as a whole. Morricone picks up on this and makes extraordinarily good use of it in a film very much about confinement.

None of this sort of film music strikes me as instrumental in the sense you ask about. Quotation, borrowing, re-use, whatever one might name it, constitutes for me a transformation or maybe a sublation. That's a different matter, isn't it? Such music acknowledges a past alike for its pastness and its insistent presence—if you will, it's agency.

Film seems to be now seen and heard quite differently than thirty years ago, and stands as one product among others in today's huge audiovisual production. Is it necessary to develop a new conceptual

framework in order to critically analyze both the commodification inherent in new cultural phenomena (for instance, the consumption of audiovisual products on platforms like youtube) and the artistic production with previously unavailable technology?

It seems to me that you hit on quite an important question, though it's one that I've not thought about much. We're caught in a swirling maelstrom of technological change and discursive practices that emerge in relation thereto. Some will have longer half-lives than others, of course. Think back a decade to the hoopla around ring tones. So far as I can tell, pretty much the only people who care about that phenomenon anymore are scholars (and good for them)—here I'm thinking about the insightful new book by Sumanth Gopinath, *The Ringtone Dialectic* (MIT Press). You mention that film today seems to be heard and seen quite differently from three decades ago; I imagine that might well be true, but I'm less certain what audience(s) we might be referring to when remarking this; I'm also wondering how we've come to know that this difference is indeed the case. As for developing new critical-theoretical frameworks, two short comments. First, simply, of course; culture is a process; it morphs continuously; the ways we think about it must change as well. Second, new frameworks build from and transform what we already knew. So we need the new, so to speak, just like we require the old. The conversation is a shared one, right?