

# Introduction

*The patience to ask and to keep asking questions, without the assurance of agreement or the availability of methods apt to elicit it, is the philosopher's gift. It is an expression of intellectual hope, and the repudiation of philosophy is a counsel of despair.*

—KIERAN SETIYA<sup>1</sup>

## I

*Laß die heil'gen Parabolen,  
Laß die frommen Hypothesen—  
Suche die verdammten Fragen  
Ohne Umschweif uns zu lösen.*

—HEINRICH HEINE, ZUM LAZARUS, I (1853)

<i>Брось свои иносказанья</i>	Bros' svoi inoskazan'ya
<i>И гипотезы пустые!</i>	I gipotezi pustīye!
<i>На проклятые вопросы</i>	Na proklyatiye voprosi
<i>Дай ответы нам прямые!</i>	Dai otveti nam pryamiye!

—HEINE, K LAZARYU, AS LOOSELY TRANSLATED BY  
M. L. MIKHAILOV, SOVREMENNİK, 1858, NO. 3: 125

MIKHAILOV'S VERSION IN ENGLISH:

*Give up your allegories  
And empty hypotheses!  
To cursed questions  
Give us straight answers!*

Heine's ironic quatrain, in the instantly famous translation by the poet and underground revolutionary Mikhaíl Larionovich Mikhailov, bequeathed a meme to the Russian language. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the words “cursed

1. Kieran Setiya, “Monk Justice,” *London Review of Books*, 30 August 2018, 42.

questions” (*proklyatiye voprosi*) have stood in Russian for all the relentless imponderables, be they social, political, aesthetic or eschatological, that, as Mikhail Epstein puts it, “baffle the mind and torment the heart.”<sup>2</sup> They are unanswerable, and yet, as Allen Tate once said, they are “perpetually necessary and . . . perpetually impossible;” and their very intolerability “has its own glory.”<sup>3</sup> They are ineluctable. They are vital. They are addictive. This is the book of an addict.

Mikhailov’s translation, you may have noticed, is not quite accurate. Besides the liberties of diction and syntax one will find in any poetic translation, there is an apparent howler in the second line. In place of Heine’s “pious hypotheses” (*frommen Hypothesen*), Mikhailov has “empty” ones (*gipotezi pustiye*), and he also leaves out the adjective *heil’gen* (holy) in the first line without replacing it. That was because, in addition to all the usual necessities and impossibilities, Russian writers faced the most stringent censorship in post-Napoleonic Europe.<sup>4</sup> They had to disguise all discussion of social, moral, or political issues as innocent hypotheses and allegories about historiography or philosophy or the arts. Cursed questions were all they had.

And that is why Russians, and we who study them, are such inveterate readers between the lines and so perpetually conscious of limits to what may be said out loud, and not just in Russia. And that is why, although it touches little on the Russian subject matter I habitually address, I have given this book a title out of Russian intellectual history. When the University of California Press invited me to compile a set of essays to complement those in *The Danger of Music*, the volume they brought out in 2010, I surveyed the titles of my unpublished or uncollected texts and saw, not exactly to my surprise, how many were cast as rhetorical questions, like so many Russian titles of old, such as Alexander Herzen’s *Kto vinovat?* (Who Is to Blame?) of 1846, or Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *Chto delat?* (What Is to Be Done?) of 1863 (both appropriated by Lenin), or Tolstoy’s “Tak chto zhe nam delat?” (roughly, “OK, So What Should We Do Once and for All?”) of 1886, or, in a less enigmatic and riskier vein, Nikolai Nekrasov’s *Komu na Rusi zhit’ khorosho?* (Who Can Live Happily in Russia?) of 1862. Interrogative titles became my principle of selection.

It was more than just a titling conceit. My education, upbringing, and cultural heritage have predisposed me to share in some measure the restless outlook of the

2. Mikhail Epstein (Mikhail Naumovich Epshteyn), *Slovo i molchaniye: Metafizika russkoy literatury* (Moscow: Visshaya shkola, 2006), 9 (“неразрешимы для ума и мучительны для сердца”).

3. Allen Tate, “Is Literary Criticism Possible?” (1950), in Tate, *The Man of Letters in the Modern World* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), 174.

4. Sure enough, the text Mikhailov had submitted had *svyatiye* (sacred, holy) in place of *pustiye*, unacceptable because of the ironic way Heine linked the words *pious* and *holy*, which must connote truth, with *Umschweif* (mealy-mouthed circumlocution) in the last line. See Vadim Serov, *Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar’ krilatikh slov i virazheniy* (Encyclopedic dictionary of winged words and expressions), s.v. проклятые вопросы: <http://bibliotekar.ru/encSlov/15/230.htm> (accessed 4 April 2018).

old Russian *intelligentsia*—a word that went into Yiddish, too, and thus into my parents' vocabulary so that I have known it since childhood. I am, perhaps as a result, inclined to what may look like a catechistical expository manner. In fact it is anything but that. The difference between a catechism and the tradition of the cursed question is that the answers in a catechism (or in any pseudo-dialogue, whether between Socrates and Glaucon or between Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft) were in place before any questions were asked. The questions in such writings are merely pretexts or eliciting devices, whereas in the realm of the truly accursed the questions come first, the answers never.

Indeed, addicts of the cursed questions have often implied that any question that can be answered is not worth asking. Eternal pondering and wondering were both necessary and sufficient. The greatest virtuoso of the cursed question at its most cosmic, perhaps, was the religious philosopher Nikolai Berdyayev (1874–1948), who, in a famous essay on the parable of the Grand Inquisitor from Dostoyevsky's last novel, wrote that “the ‘cursed questions’ that tormented some nobody named Ivan Karamazov, entailing God, immortality, freedom, suffering, and universal salvation, accord better with the heights and depths of real moral problems than all the commandments and prohibitions of petty, worldly morality, which seek merely to train people for polite society.”<sup>5</sup> “Petty, worldly morality” was Berdyayev's definition of what most of us would call matters of life and death. Dostoyevsky's great achievement was to devise a parable that was as inconclusive as it was compelling.

Is that really a strength? The fear that an endlessly deferred answer is a failure or a weakness was what gave rise to the concept of the cursed question to begin with, and it is still with us, still potent, still doing harm. It is at the root of science envy, that great bane of the humanities. Science makes progress; shouldn't we do the same? The mark of scientific progress, according to a philosopher, David J. Chalmers, who studies it, is “collective convergence to the truth”—something his own field seems never to achieve.<sup>6</sup> The lack of collective convergence, the fact that “philosophical arguments seem not to lead to agreement but to sophisticated disagreement” (15), is the curse to which this introduction, and indeed this whole book, is devoted. It has been known to scare people off. The Harvard logician Harry Sheffer gave Isaiah Berlin a temporary fright at a crossroads in his career, when he was returning to Oxford from his wartime duty as a diplomat in the USA, remarking

5. N. A. Berdyayev, *Sub specie aeternitatis: Opitiĭ filosofskoye, sotsial'niye i literaturniye (1900–1906 g.)* (St. Petersburg: Pirozhkov, 1907), 106 (rearranged for concision).

6. “Why Isn't There More Progress in Philosophy?,” the 2013 Annual Lecture to the Royal Institute of Philosophy, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUfz6oahp2Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUfz6oahp2Q). A revised text is published at <http://consc.net/papers/progress.pdf>. The quoted phrase is on p. 2. Further page references will be made in the main text.

that in philosophy the same old questions kept on being raised. One had no hope of increasing permanent knowledge. All night long, sleepless on the flight back to England, Berlin considered what Sheffer had said and concluded that he was right. He wanted to study something which might change people's understanding of life, to know more at the end of his life than he did at the beginning.<sup>7</sup>

He got over it, realizing that the “hope of increasing permanent knowledge” was a form of utopian thinking. This book is dedicated to that Heinian disillusion. It is a book intent, as Samuel Beckett instructs us, on failing better.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, Chalmers admits, “sophistication is itself a kind of progress,” and yet he confesses that the practice of philosophy leads inevitably to “a lowering of expectations.” But this, I'd say, is also a kind of progress: progress away from utopian thinking. Should that not suffice? Is the kind of solution that drives convergence necessarily the outcome we should seek?

Its superiority may be challenged, I think, on at least two grounds. The first would dispute the notion that collective convergence of opinion is a valid measure of truth. Even the hard sciences abound in counterexamples, discarded theories (phlogiston, geocentrism, bodily humors) that once commanded consensus. We can define knowledge as “justified true belief”<sup>9</sup> and yet acknowledge that justification, hence our notion of truth, can only be provisional. The “fallibilist” principle, part and parcel of what is now considered basic scientific method, asserts as its fundamental premise that we can have certainty not of truth but only of falsehood, and that to hold something true is only to say that it has not yet been proven false. That thesis has made a different sort of progress as it moved from natural science (where it was prominently associated with Karl Popper)<sup>10</sup> into moral philosophy (where it has been associated with names like Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams). Big philosophical problems like my cursed questions may not be soluble, but they can be whittled down, just as objective reality may not be directly or completely known, but it can be approached through the exposure and elimination of error.

The second argument against the assumed superiority of science would question the process through which convergence is obtained. In the three cases just cited (phlogiston, geocentrism, humors), new theories proved persuasive on the basis of experiment, observation, and inference—that is, empirical demonstration.

7. As recounted in Noel Annan, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics, and Geniuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 216.

8. “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” Samuel Beckett, “Worstward Ho,” in *Nohow On* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 77.

9. That is the definition given in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “The Analysis of Knowledge” (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-analysis/#KnowJustTrueBeli>; accessed 11 April 2018). I agree that “true” is superfluous and misleading.

10. See his “Truth, Rationality, and the Growth of Scientific Knowledge,” in Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 215–50.

According to Chalmers (13), this method has a power “to compel agreement” that has not been, and perhaps cannot be, matched in philosophy. Philosophical arguments, unlike scientific demonstrations, rely, he says, on “premises that opponents can deny without too much cost.” Can we increase the cost? Stalin had ways, of course. And the fact that Stalin can be (and certainly used to be) located on a time line with the old Russian intelligentsia, whose quasi-catechetical manner his own writing style took to the point of caricature, only shows yet again the ease with which the tradition of the question, shading into the tradition of the answer, is perverted by power. It is only when one insists both on posing questions and on keeping them open that one can avoid slippage into dogma and authoritarian coercion, the *bêtes noires* with which the essays in this book constantly engage. As William James in his wisdom once put it, the object of inquiries such as the ones found here ought not to be that “of forcing a conclusion or of coercing assent, but of deepening our sense of what the issue . . . really is.”<sup>11</sup>

## II

The cursed questions addressed in this book are of both types as inherited from the nineteenth-century Russian tradition—the existential on the one hand, and the practical-programmatic or action-oriented on the other. The usually forlorn hope is to find ways of resolving the former into the latter—that is, to find ways of doing that improve being. Both types of question have been posed in the musicological literature from the very beginning—or at least from the beginning of my exposure to it. When deciding on the contents of this volume, I recalled an exemplary cursed question from the past: an article that appeared in the maiden issue of *Current Musicology*, the graduate-student-run journal produced at the Columbia University music department since the spring of 1965. I entered the Columbia graduate program in the fall of that very year, so I very nearly witnessed the journal’s birth (indeed, did witness it from afar as a senior undergraduate), and received my copy of the first and (then) only issue as part of a pitch (by Gordana Lazarevich, a member of the first editorial staff, who visited our “Bibliography and Methodology” class at its first meeting) to join the team. (I did join, as the first “corresponding editor” from the home institution—an absurd position that did not last long on the masthead.)

The article’s title was paradigmatic to the point of parody: “What Should Musicology Be?” Its author was Prof. Edward A. Lippman, who was both our Bibliography and Methodology teacher and the “Faculty Advisor” on the journal’s

11. William James, “The Dilemma of Determinism” (1884), in James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, ed. F.H. Burkhardt, F. Bowers, and I.K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 55.

masthead. It belies the common assumption that musicology only became self-reflective in the 1980s, following the publication of Joseph Kerman's purposely provocative *Contemplating Music*, which (according to legend) single-handedly spawned the "new musicology" of the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the connection between Kerman's book and its presumed progeny is a canard. The book actually gives little premonition of the dramatic turn within the discipline that was just around the corner. Reading it now, one is struck by the conventionality and obsolescence of its positions, which even at the time of writing represented no more than a *gemäßigte Moderne* for all that it was advertised and widely taken as *le dernier cri*, and also by its obliviousness to what was imminent: namely, the "post-structuralism, deconstruction and serious feminism" which, Kerman wrote in 1985, "have yet to make their debuts in musicology or music theory."<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, Lippman's article, way back in the antediluvian sixties, was already broaching what, as I write in 2018, is among the hot-button issues in today's musicology: the social turn (explicitly rejected by Kerman, it should be recalled) whereby the practices and assumptions of ethnomusicology and its older, unprefix sibling have been converging—a turn which the older "new musicology," with its "low hermeneutics," only served to postpone.<sup>14</sup> Lippman's precocious consideration of that possibility was a response to a provocation that was then regarded, as Kerman's would be two decades later, as the strongest challenge to date to the musicological status quo: the designated volume *Musicology* in the series "Humanistic Scholarship in America," commissioned by the Council of Humanities at Princeton. It was authored by a team of three, consisting of Claude Palisca (1921–2001), an unprefix musicologist who asserted that "musicologist" meant "music historian" *tout court*; an ethnomusicologist, Mantle Hood (1918–2005), who asserted that a music scholar must also be a performer; and a rare hybrid, Frank Ll. Harrison (1905–87), an Irish scholar whose work was located on the cusp between the two subdisciplines, and who made a strong pitch for the

12. Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). The book had first been issued in Great Britain, in a series of "masterguides," under the general editorship of Frank Kermode, to the various humanistic disciplines. Its original title, quite simply, was *Musicology* (London: Fontana, 1985). For the acrid flavor of early "new musicology" one may sample the exchange between Lawrence Kramer and Gary Tomlinson, each vying for recognition as Kerman's truest votary: Kramer, "The Musicology of the Future," *repercussions* 1, no. 1 (1992): 5–18; Tomlinson, "Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer," *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 18–24; Kramer, "Music Criticism and the Postmodernist Turn: In Contrary Motion with Gary Tomlinson," *ibid.*, 25–35; Tomlinson, "Tomlinson Responds," *ibid.*, 36–40.

13. Kerman, *Contemplating Music*, 17.

14. For "low hermeneutics," see Carolyn Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 505–36.

purview that his own work exemplified long ahead of schedule, the convergence that is only now, more than half a century later, becoming prevalent.<sup>15</sup>

Lippman recognized Harrison's "great discernment" in diagnosing "our dilemma," as he called it, thanks to "the objectivity naturally possessed by an outsider," more a reference to Harrison's nationality than to the type of musicology he practiced. As testament to Harrison's discernment, Lippman noted that he

finds that we have erred in neglecting the less pretentious varieties of music such as jazz and folk music, and indeed in neglecting the history of American music in general. Most of all have we overlooked the larger social connections of music. We must broaden our concern, he counsels, and turn from style, taken as an autonomous phenomenon, to man and culture.<sup>16</sup>

If only! But no, Lippman did not endorse Harrison's prescription any more than Kerman did in the almost exactly contemporaneous manifesto from which *Contemplating Music* eventually grew, and which was also a response to the Palisca-Hood-Harrison book.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Lippman endorsed no prescription and offered no proposals. He passed the buck, complaining that "any course that may be advocated by theoretical considerations must depend for its implementation upon capable and talented students," and yet

we cannot expect to attract undergraduates to a field neither they nor their teachers have any knowledge of, especially if its values and achievements are in fact not worth

15. Frank Ll. Harrison, Mantle Hood, and Claude V. Palisca, *Musicology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963). For an example of Harrison's ahead-of-the-game convergent practice, see Frank Llewellyn Harrison, *Music in Medieval Britain* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1959). His evident model was Ernst Hermann Meyer's Marxist study *Early English Chamber Music: The History of a Great Art from the Middle Ages to Purcell* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1946). Meyer, a refugee from Nazi Germany with two strikes against him as a Jewish Communist, was primarily a composer. After the war he went home from Britain to what had become the Soviet zone of occupation, later the German Democratic Republic.

16. Edward A. Lippman, "What Should Musicology Be?," *Current Musicology*, no. 1 (Spring 1965): 55. Further page references will be made in the main text.

17. Joseph Kerman, "A Profile for American Musicology" (delivered as a plenary address at the national meeting of the American Musicological Society in December 1964), *JAMS* 18 (1965): 61–69. When reprinting this piece a third of a century later, Kerman explicitly recanted and apologized for having categorically dismissed Harrison's prescriptions ("European observers have a very simple recipe for national integrity: study your own American music, they say, as we have built our musicology around *Stamm* and *Liederbuch*, *Risorgimento* opera and Elizabethan madrigal, Bulgar folksong, and the like. The critically-inclined scholar has a very simple answer: unfortunately, American music has not been interesting enough, artistically, to merit from us that commitment") and for waffling the question of genres fit for research ("About jazz, Harrison has a real point, but such an extremely complex one that I ask leave to pass over it in the present discussion"); "A Profile for American Musicology," 67–68, and Joseph Kerman, *Write All These Down: Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 11n6.

their attention. If musicology cannot enhance musical experience and understanding, it can hardly call for notice either from musicians or from scholars, but only from those of routine intelligence and little imagination, and we should not be surprised if students of superior mentality seem to wander into the field more by accident than design, or in default of any other pursuit more appropriate for them. (58)

I wonder now that, as a new graduate student in the field, I did not feel demeaned or insulted on reading these words. But Lippman was quick to point out, Herzen-like, that I was not to blame. Rather,

Our major complaint must then be addressed, as it so often turns out, to earlier education, and even more correctly, to the whole temper and attitude of the society in which this education has its place. . . . The average American is peculiarly unable to grasp music as a cultural-historical expression in the way in which he understands painting and literature. As a result, while these latter arts take on a certain measure of significance and dignity, musical works are essentially gross stimuli without specific stylistic quality. In the response to music, historical awareness is absent, and the listener takes the indulgence of his feelings as the sole source of meaning. (58–59)

An argument so limitlessly opened out is an argument of despair. One watches, fascinated, as fatalism overtakes it:

We can make natural science part of musicology or exclude it. We can undertake interpretive studies or confine ourselves to the cataloguing of facts. We can produce more and more editions of music and even secure a wider influence through the medium of newspapers and record companies, or radio and television. Whatever course we adopt will be of relatively little effect on the ultimate place of musicology in the United States; it will not in itself provide respect or jobs or an audience for musicologists, nor will it make possible the publication and sale of serious books on music. Even the enlightened revision of the curricula of primary and secondary schools and of colleges, and the encouragement of actual playing and singing will not make us experience music as a significant expression of culture in the face of public attitudes and educational ideals that are deaf or hostile to musical values. The underlying social determinants of the place of music and musicology resist change with a discouraging stubbornness; we can guess only that music and musicology have a common fate. (59–60)

And finally, “what musicology should be is less important than what American culture should be if musicology is to exist” (60). Not even Nikolai Berdyayev at his most pessimistic was ever quite that passive—and this was the (supposedly) tumultuous sixties! Not for scholars, though. It was because the academy was the proverbial refuge from the world’s turbulence—and was the literal refuge of many (including me) who found protection there from the threat of conscription into an unpopular war—that when, so soon thereafter, political upheavals reached America’s campuses they created such a sense of disorientation and disruption, quickly followed by the relief of a resumed complacency. No wonder musicology remained



as stagnant as it did until the disciplinary turmoil of the 1980s. By then many of us were indeed restless and impatient. And that is when cursed questions began invading our literature with a vengeance.

I never expected to take so active a part in advancing them, but circumstances I have recounted in the introductions to some previous books gave me access to much wider audiences than musicologists usually address.<sup>18</sup> The need for topical hooks when writing for general readerships was a large inducement to attach musical discussions to much broader social and cultural issues such as have traditionally invited cursed questions. By the time I retired from classroom teaching at the end of 2014, I had become used to hearing myself referred to as “America’s public musicologist.” With that reputation came invitations, many to keynote disciplinary conferences of various kinds, and once I’d published *The Oxford History of Western Music*, I found I had become a “generalist,” liable to be invited to the most unpredictable venues. That accounts in part for the range of issues these essays address. The retirement, moreover, of the editors with whom I worked closely during my stint as a public intellectual—Leon Wieseltier at the *New Republic* and James Oestreich at the *New York Times*—has delivered me back, so to speak, to less public, more insularly disciplinary turf, and most of the pieces here were prepared for audiences of professional listeners and, now, readers.

My present and recurrent questions are now the cursed questions of the discipline; but this a welcome development for me, since throughout my career, first at Columbia and later at Berkeley, I taught the introductory seminar required of all incoming students, where we did nothing at all but pose and luxuriate in the cursed questions this book addresses. The book is in this sense the product of that long and, for me, formative pedagogical experience. It is a fair indication of the steep rise in our disciplinary self-consciousness and self-reflection over the many years of my career that when I took over the teaching of these proseminars (at Columbia from 1977, at Berkeley from 1988), they were, at both institutions, the courses no one else wanted to teach, whereas the assignment is in most departments now regarded as a plum.

So these are essays that collectively pose the question Ed Lippman raised half a century ago—“What Should Musicology Be?”—though I hope to avoid his fatalism and passivity as emphatically as I reject both of the Russian “classical” relationships to cursed questions, whether Berdyayev’s eschatological snobbery or Chernyshevsky’s dogmatic prescriptions (to say nothing of Lenin’s). My aim in posing and worrying the questions after which my essays are named is the same as

18. See in particular the introduction (“Last Thoughts First”) to R. Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3–47; and the preface (“Against Utopia”) to R. Taruskin, *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), ix–xvi.

when I taught my novices: to encourage the regulation of practice in accordance with ethics, seeing such regulation in terms of what in mathematics is called an asymptote: a line that a curve perpetually approaches but never reaches as it heads toward infinity. The asymptote symbolizes the perfect practice that we will never achieve. The curve of our actual practice must nevertheless be seen in relation to the unreachable goal, and must be seen to approach it.

### III

A few words in advance about each of the essays and how they assay this task will serve, I hope, to furnish this disparate assortment, if not with a common theme, then at least with a common objective. I offer them up front, rather than in the form of postscripts to the individual chapters as in some of my other books, because of this overriding purpose. The exception is “Nicht blutbefleckt?” (chapter 7), which elicited a retort from the late Charles Rosen that demanded a sustained and content-specific response from me. My belated rejoinder has taken the form of a postscript because there can, alas, be no further exchanges between us.

“The History of What?” (chapter 1) is the introduction to *The Oxford History of Western Music*, printed as part of the front matter to the first volume of the original hardcover sequence of six, and reprinted in each volume of the paperback edition, which was slightly revised so as to permit issuance in the form of five *separata*. There have been many reviews of The Ox (as I habitually call it), and I do not mean to answer them; but one sentence has been so consistently (and, I will venture to add, disingenuously) pounced upon that I do see a need for amplification. That sentence is this one:

*This set of books is an attempt at a true history.*

In context, I would insist, the meaning of this sentence, hence the character of my claim, is clear enough. I had been discussing the difference between a history and a survey; I had observed that most books that call themselves general histories of music were actually surveys; and I promised the reader a history, in the true sense of the word as just defined, *viz.*, as an “effort truly to explain why and how things happened as they did.” Reviewers pretended that I was claiming a monopoly on truth, implying that other historians wrote falsehoods. (Charles Rosen went so far as to accuse me of “maintain[ing] that this is the first history of music which not only relates what was done but how and why,”<sup>19</sup> which misses the point altogether: mine is hardly the first book to do what any history does, but surveys, as opposed

19. Charles Rosen, “From the Troubadours to Frank Sinatra” (review of *The Oxford History of Western Music*), part 1, *New York Review of Books*, 23 February 2006 ([www.nybooks.com/articles/2006/02/23/from-the-troubadours-to-frank-sinatra](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2006/02/23/from-the-troubadours-to-frank-sinatra)).

to histories, do not even relate what was done, let alone how or why, contenting themselves with the description of what was produced.) I doubt whether any reader unmotivated by whatever it was that motivated reviewers to misread me had so misread me, but I want to call renewed attention to the point in the new context that the present discussion provides.

One of the main explanatory features distinguishing “a true history” from a survey, I emphasized in my introduction, was attention to *discourse*, a word that has had a vastly enhanced currency and range of application in the humanistic disciplines in the wake of Michel Foucault and his theories of knowledge and power. In *The Ox* I define discourse as “social contention as embodied in words and deeds.” That contest is what establishes the ground rules within which people think—that is, establishes the limits of the thinkable. Cursed questions, as I think of them, are the levers with which one tries to destabilize the discourse (or what Foucault called the episteme). That is one of the things that the essays in this book attempt. It is one of the things that *The Ox* itself has been credited with doing, as when one sympathetic reader—in an essay that, as it happens, had a question for a title—described the last two volumes as having “overturned the master narrative of twentieth-century music history as a story of inexorable innovation, instead placing their emphasis on political and social matters.”<sup>20</sup>

That is a gratifying, indeed a fortifying, thought. Would that it were true. Yet there is an important difference between the place cursed questions occupy in polemics, on the one hand, and in historiography on the other, and I work hard to respect that difference in my work. Polemics work the levers directly, while all that historiography can properly do is show how they have been worked. If showing achieves something it is because the thing shown had been hidden. That is what the chapters in the fifth volume of *The Ox* that have become controversial sought to accomplish, above all the chapter on Elliott Carter’s reception, which emphasized patronage and vocational strategizing, for discussing which I was accused of maliciously exposing, or even fabricating, dirty secrets.<sup>21</sup> The destabilizing effect came about not through an explicit negation of the composer’s autonomous agency but by giving an elaborate illustration of interaction between the agent in question and the enabling and constraining environment within which the agent acted—an exemplification, in other words, of the theory of affordances broached in several of the chapters that follow, most broadly in “What Else?” (chapter 8). In polemics you can render your value judgments directly; in historiography you

20. Marina Frolova-Walker, “An Inclusive History for a Divided World?,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 143 (2018): 1–20, at 3.

21. Many have been carrying on in this now quite normal endeavor in the wake of *The Ox*; particularly pertinent to the instance at hand is Rachel S. Vandagriff, “An Old Story in a New World: Paul Fromm, the Fromm Music Foundation, and Elliott Carter,” *Journal of Musicology* 35 (2018): 535–66.

submit pertinent examples for the reader to judge. As I say again and again in *The Ox*, it is no business of mine as a historian to take sides; my business is to show the sides (and measures) taken, by whom, and with what result.

This proviso is not unrelated to the old writer's-workshop bromide "Show it, don't say it," and points yet again to the stylistic and methodological parallels between historiography and imaginative fiction that Hayden White expounded some forty years ago.<sup>22</sup> But though at times a fine one, the line between the genres remains real—realer than White wished his readers to believe—and still worthy of respect. Between the covers of a book like this one I can take sides, and just watch me. But doing so in a work of historiography turns historiography into propaganda.

Many are those who have challenged this distinction, declaring that observing it is impossible: to which I answer that calling a task impossible is too often just a way out of attempting one that is difficult. Those who wish to avoid the difficulty of respecting the fine line in question often claim that the discourse itself has taken sides before the historian has even sat down to write. One can only choose which side to take—or in blunter language, one's choice is only between harder and softer propaganda. The proof of that, reviewer after reviewer observed but none more emphatically than Rosen, was how easy it was to deduce my convictions and preferences—in one word, my prejudices—from my performance. "He claims not to have followed his own taste on what to include," Rosen wrote, and quoted my "hope [that] readers will agree that I have sought neither to advocate nor to denigrate what I did include." And then, triumphantly: "His hope has been thwarted. In writing about art, a pretense of objectivity never succeeds: clearly, Taruskin writes much better about music he likes than about music to which he is indifferent. His prejudices loom large throughout the volumes."<sup>23</sup>

All I can say to that, and I am happy to say it, is that his surmises as to my likes and my indifference were as often as not wildly incorrect, as were those of all the other reviewers who amused themselves identifying my goats and sheep. Such attempts were not serious critiques but rather defensive endeavors to reduce my arguments to matters proverbially beyond dispute, whereas I had worked hard to insure that any sentence that went into *The Ox* was, as we say in the lab, falsifiable—that being one criterion that distinguishes what J.L. Austin called "constative" utterances from "performative" ones; or, as I put it to my pupils, the difference between a responsible scholarly hypothesis and a loose and therefore negligible assertion.<sup>24</sup> That, I believe, is the distinction that counts between

22. See his *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) and *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

23. Rosen, "From the Troubadours to Frank Sinatra," part 1.

24. On constative vs. performative "speech acts" (or illocution) see J(ohn) L(angshaw) Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); compare Popper on hypotheses and falsification in the essay referenced in n. 10.

scholarly writing in the strong or narrow sense and the other sorts of writing that a scholar may do, and I have struggled to put that belief into practice.

Marina Frolova-Walker, whose words I quoted a few paragraphs back, made an analogous distinction in the course of correcting what she took to be a small misstatement in “Nicht blutbefleckt?” (chapter 7). Comparing the careers of Elliott Carter and Tikhon Khrennikov, I wrote that both were placed *hors de concours* by their respective musical establishments, with the result that “both enjoyed major careers and achieved true historical significance . . . without having any real audience for their work.” “We could make one small correction to this comparison,” Prof. Frolova-Walker noted,

because Khrennikov’s light music, such as his popular songs and operettas, actually did enjoy a large audience, which is only somewhat reduced in present-day Russia. Taruskin is no doubt aware of this, but preferred not to blunt his rhetorical purpose in what was not, after all, a scholarly article. Still, if we restrict the comparison to Khrennikov’s more earnest works, the parallel does indeed hold.<sup>25</sup>

To answer quibble with quibble, that restriction was, I thought, implied (as did my reader, evidently). But, no longer quibbling, I courteously reject the cover my critic is offering me. Any constative assertion must be falsifiable, wherever it is made, even in polemics. No rhetorical purpose justifies a lie. The difference between the scholarly and the nonscholarly that I try to heed, and have exhorted my pupils to observe, is that polemics do admit, alongside the falsifiable and constative, categories of utterance that are not subject to empirical or logical falsification. Advocacy (or praise) and denigration are examples of such utterances. Having been vigilant in weeding such things out of *The Ox*, I am left sensitive to reading a statement such as Frolova-Walker’s that “Taruskin praises *The Love for Three Oranges* for breaking down the fourth wall and drawing its alienating devices from the eighteenth century, declaring that it thus becomes ‘an indispensable link in the history of twentieth-century opera.’”<sup>26</sup>

I am sure that last-quoted phrase would have pleased Prokofieff, but does that reduce it to “praise”? I reached anxiously for volume 4 of *The Ox* to find the paragraph from which it came. Here it is, part of a discussion of Prokofieff’s opera in relation to its literary antecedents, among which the most proximate was a treatment by the Russian theatrical director Vsevolod Meyerhold of a *fiaba* or theatricalized fable by Carlo Gozzi:

Meyerhold’s *Love for Three Oranges*, then, was perhaps the earliest application, at least in such an overwhelming dose, of the illusion-destroying “art as art” gimmickry that would within a couple of decades become a modernist cliché. What makes it

25. Frolova-Walker, “An Inclusive History for a Divided World?” 4.

26. *Ibid.*

historically so significant is the clarity of its descent from an eighteenth-century aristocratic model, thus connecting two important strands in what would become the heritage of postwar “neoclassicism.” Even if Prokofieff had never set it, Meyerhold’s response to Gozzi would have been a prime document of the nascent modernist manner and its sources. But since Prokofieff did set it, it becomes an indispensable link in the history of twentieth-century opera as well.<sup>27</sup>

Rather than praise, the paragraph offers justification for inclusion. I insist upon this distinction, and insist that it is not a quibble, because the besetting sin of the modernist master narrative, the very thing I sought most deliberately to overturn in my own work, was the casual equation of historical significance with aesthetic value. What I sought to convey in the paragraph just quoted was not my admiration for the opera but the reason why I was including it in my narrative, rather than others that I might admire more. I have written repeatedly, both in *The Ox* itself and in its defense, that my principle of selection was at all times pragmatic rather than aesthetic. I included what my story needed rather than what I liked. That is why it was beside the point for Rosen to complain of the “curious misjudgment” whereby I chose “to give more space to Lili Boulanger than to Ruth Crawford Seeger: of the latter, one of the most interesting composers of the twentieth century, he treats only very minor pieces, neglecting the important string quartet and violin sonata for which she is most admired.”<sup>28</sup> I agree with Rosen’s high evaluation of Ruth Crawford Seeger and her two excellent chamber works. But what my story needed, in the second chapter of volume 4, was an account of the misogynist prejudice that kept Nadia Boulanger out of the running for the Prix de Rome and enabled Lili Boulanger, by virtue of a superior understanding of the stakes, to compete successfully.<sup>29</sup> Once again, as so often, it was not “the music itself” but the affordance that, in my judgment, needed to be remarked. And when I did write about Crawford Seeger, what seemed in context to be of moment was the renunciation of her composing career, not its highlights.

Perhaps needless to say, the misascription of value judgment works more commonly the other way. I have become well used to being charged with denigrating what I have neglected to praise—or more accurately, what I have neglected to instruct my readers to praise. Thus David Blake has read me as “castigating Princeton—and academic music departments by extension—as ‘a closed enclave, a hothouse growth, [the] cultivators [of academic composition] standing with backs resolutely turned to their counterparts in other walks of American musical

27. R. Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 499.

28. Rosen, “From the Troubadours to Frank Sinatra,” part 1.

29. Here, of course, I was following Annegret Fauser’s splendid article “*La Guerre en dentelles*: Women and the *Prix de Rome* in French Cultural Politics,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51 (1998): 83–129.

life.” Hostile and misleading accounts like mine, he adds, “imagine a locked, ivied, and gothic-arched gate dividing art music written by dead white men—and studied by old white men—from the diverse musical forms and composers outside.”<sup>30</sup>

I had not remembered castigating Princeton—or anything else—that way, so once again I reached anxiously for *The Ox*, and found to my renewed relief that the pronoun *it*, standing as the subject of the partially quoted sentence, had stood not for Princeton or any other university, but for “postwar serialism in America,” and that my description—enclave, hothouse, turned backs, and all—was a paraphrase of Milton Babbitt’s famous call, in that immortally mistitled Tanglewood address of 1957, for a “total, resolute and voluntary withdrawal from this public world to one of private performance and electronic media,” whereby American composers would do themselves “an immediate and eventual service” and thus ensure (according to the even more famous jeremiad at the end of the screed) that “music” would *not* “cease to evolve, and, in that important sense, . . . cease to live.”<sup>31</sup>

It has long been Babbitt’s fate to serve as synecdoche—whether for postwar American serialism (*chez moi*) or, far less accurately, for Princeton (*chez Blake*)—but unless it was Babbitt’s intent to castigate the thing for which he stood, neither was it mine in paraphrasing him. As written, rather than as quoted, my description of midcentury attitudes among academic composers of serial music seems accurate enough. To point out that it mischaracterizes “twenty-first-century musicological inclusivity” is an impertinence; and to complain that it endangers the discipline of musicology in the face of “neoliberalist logics assailing the contemporary university” is to engage in precisely the sort of “paranoid reading” against which the author fancies himself a crusader.<sup>32</sup>

#### IV

As I used to enjoy telling audiences who heard it as a copiously illustrated talk, “Did Somebody Say Censorship?” (chapter 2) was written by someone who had actually been accused of practicing censorship (“and can anyone else in the room make that statement?”). Thus the question it embodies was for me actual, not hypothetical—and one especially cursed. And to the exasperation of those who expected to hear an unqualified condemnation of censorship, it is precisely as a

30. David Blake, “Musicological Omnivory in the Neoliberal University,” *Journal of Musicology* 34 (2017): 321, purporting to quote *The Oxford History of Western Music* 5:164 (the square brackets and the words they enclose are Blake’s). Later (p. 324), the author misquotes his own misquotation, attributing to me the phrase “hothouse oven,” which, had I used it, would indeed have been a “polemical caricature” of the American university, about which I was not writing.

31. Milton Babbitt, “The Composer as Specialist,” better known, after its first publication (*High Fidelity*, February 1958), as “Who Cares If You Listen?”

32. Blake, “Musicological Omnivory,” 321, 350.