

The Art of Appreciation

It was not without reservations that BBC Television agreed to broadcast Leonard Bernstein's "Young People's Concerts." Sometime around the start of 1967, Columbia Broadcasting System had been in touch with Humphrey Burton, head of Music and Arts Programmes at BBC-TV, to try to persuade the corporation to purchase a few of the programs.¹ The Concerts had, by this time, been airing in the United States for nearly a decade. Initially broadcast live with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra from the nation's most prestigious art music venue, New York's Carnegie Hall, they had from their third season (1959–60) onward been recorded and, from November 1962, taken place in the Lincoln Center, which had opened earlier that year.² The most recent seasons had benefitted from primetime slots, as programmers sought to diversify television's offering in line with Federal Communications Commission chair Newton Minow's exhortation that it should "serve the nation's needs" rather than simply "cater to its whims."³ With their aim of inspiring young people's interests in art music, Bernstein's Concerts seemed well positioned to further this civic agenda. But their popularity quickly began to wane; and soon, CBS would be embroiled in a struggle to find a sponsor for the eleventh season.⁴ From the American point of view, this was an opportune moment to expand the series' international reach.

On the other side of the pond, the desirability of airing the series was less certain. In the Concerts' favor, their mission resonated with a

decades-old concern in Britain to broaden access to art music. Over the preceding decade, the rise of both a British musical avant-garde and teenage pop culture had begun to open new directions in music education. Nevertheless, promoting the Western art music canon—as Bernstein’s concerts largely did, always in laudatory and sometimes even in deifying terms—remained a priority for many music educators.⁵ What’s more, whatever Bernstein’s approach lacked in innovation, it made up for in tried and tested familiarity. Somewhere between an illustrated talk and a symphony concert, each program began with a question about music that Bernstein explored using a combination of verbal explanation, short keyboard illustrations, and long extracts from orchestral works. Almost as old as the American symphony orchestra itself, this kind of event had been a staple of music education on both sides of the Atlantic for over half a century. Able to speak with “genial” clarity, Bernstein was a master of the genre.

However, his expertise did not seem to be matched by the standard of production. When BBC-TV producer Walter Todds reviewed the episode titled “What Is Impressionism?” he perceived a host of deficiencies. For one thing, the sound quality was “abysmal” and lacking in presence.⁶ This not only marred the performance itself but, more concerningly, undermined the program’s pedagogic potential: close-up visual shots that might have helped young viewers to associate instruments with their individual timbres were left devoid of “aural meaning.” Some of the videography was similarly judged to be “very poor.” Todds singled out as evidence a shot of the trumpets that was “virtually nothing but heads and music stands.” No less problematic were the young people in the audience, who, as the reviewer tactfully put it, did not “always look as the producer had hoped (e.g., yawns).” If audience shots could serve as an implicit lesson in concert etiquette, these young listeners’ performance was below par. Finally, although the Concerts had a civic agenda, the negotiation between CBS and BBC-TV was also a commercial one. Michael Peacock, the Controller of BBC1 (for which the programs were being considered), was reluctant to pay the seemingly exorbitant fee that CBS initially proposed for the screenings.⁷

The discussions that must have ensued are undocumented in the BBC archives, but they culminated in the broadcasting of three Concerts. “What Is Melody?,” “What Is Sonata Form?,” and “What Is Impressionism?” aired on BBC1—the less highbrow of BBC-TV’s two channels—on consecutive Sunday afternoons in December 1967.⁸ If the *Musical Times* review is anything to go by, their reception was mixed. On the

one hand, some of the more adventurous repertoire seemed misjudged. After questioning the choice of Hindemith's "massively boring" Concert Music for Strings and Brass when "the whole of Stravinsky [was] there for the playing," author Keith Spence went on to cite his ten-year-old daughter's dismissal of Brahms's Fourth Symphony as "too grown-up for children."⁹ On the other hand, Bernstein's easy-going manner was just what was needed to make the "love of good music . . . an accepted and natural thing." Since British music educators tended to suffer from "prissiness" or a "patronizing attitude," there was a lesson to be learned here. The programs, Spence advised, were "well worth the attention of any adult who is fascinated by . . . fostering the growth of musical knowledge in children."

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In their aims and methods, Bernstein's "Young People's Concerts" were designed to promote what an earlier generation of educators would have called "music appreciation." This entailed far more than simply enjoying music. Rooted in the idea of listening as an "art," "appreciation" described a process of acquiring specialist theoretical, historical, and biographical knowledge that would supposedly lead to enhanced musical understanding.¹⁰ In the words of the dictionary definition written by one of its pioneers, Percy Scholes, for his *Oxford Companion to Music*, it was "a form of educational training designed to cultivate in the pupil an ability to listen to seriously conceived music without bewilderment, and to hear with pleasure music of different periods and schools and varying degrees of complexity."¹¹ As Scholes's words imply, it was first and foremost envisaged as a method of studying art music. Indeed, for its pioneers, music appreciation was a means both of sharing their love of music, and of justifying and promoting the system of cultural hierarchies to which they generally subscribed. This system measured artistic worth based on "highbrow" ideals of transcendence, autonomy, complexity, and timelessness, which were typically defined in opposition to "lowbrow" ephemerality, commercialism, and superficial, visceral appeal. Meanwhile, for its audiences, music appreciation was occasionally an unwelcome imposition and more often a sought-after leisure pastime variously pursued for enjoyment, self-improvement, or intellectual stimulation. Many encountered its methods for the first time as children, either within the context of school music teaching, or as an extracurricular activity. Because of its investments in old-fashioned ideas about "seriously conceived music," its status as an educational (rather

than an artistic) project, and its historical proximity to the discipline of musicology, which many contemporary scholars would find uncomfortable, music appreciation has featured at best peripherally in histories of twentieth-century music.¹² Yet Bernstein's celebrated "Young People's Concerts" are a powerful testament to its pervasive and persistent presence in twentieth-century musical life—not just in the United States, but also in Britain and beyond.

This book explores why and how music appreciation came to have such a far-reaching and defining impact—well beyond its origins as a late-Victorian liberal initiative in music education. In so doing, it tells a much bigger story than that of a particularly influential educational undertaking. For inasmuch as the appreciation movement was an attempt to negotiate art music's place in a modernizing world, its concerns stretched far beyond music pedagogy. Efforts to nurture public interest in the arts inevitably intersected with questions about the commercialization of leisure. Discussions about how to manage the new forms of musical consumption facilitated by sound reproduction technologies were frequently bound up in debates about what "good" citizenship entailed. Disputes over the parameters of the Western art music canon reproduced wider tensions around the value of expert opinion. Educational initiatives were embedded in international cultural politics, as artists, educators, philanthropists, and policy makers (to name a few) worked within a transatlantic context and against the backdrop of a globalizing leisure industry. In short, music appreciation was entangled in a nexus of modern problems around leisure, education, and citizenship. Its history thus offers a powerful lens onto the central debates of twentieth-century musical culture.

I want to be clear at the outset: this is not intended as a story of social progress and national enlightenment; nor is it a critique of an embattled elite caught in an increasingly futile struggle to protect high art from the modern threats of extinction on the one hand, or commodification on the other. The tension between sympathetic and censorious readings runs through the expanding body of scholarship on the creation and evolution of cultural hierarchies. The networks of individuals who promoted high art—whether ideologically, in practice, or both—have at one time or another been painted in both roles. Sometimes they have been defended as benevolent social reformers: an "intellectual aristocracy" (to borrow Noël Annan's famous coinage) whose commitment to democratic ideals was expressed through a well-meaning paternalism that ran the risk of leveling artistic standards.¹³ At other times they have

been fashioned as an arrogant, insecure elite whose primary concern was to preserve their self-appointed role as cultural guardians of the nation, even when doing so proved socially and culturally divisive.¹⁴ More often than not, the voices of the proverbial masses appear only in the margins, if at all. While such tensions are an inevitable undercurrent in what follows, it is not my concern to arbitrate. Narratives of progress and decline have been a recurrent trope in Western modernity, and they must above all be understood as historically contingent: they reveal perceptions of societal change, but not of any objective measure of value. Instead, drawing inspiration from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's observation that the past was made up of multiple simultaneous, conflicting presents, my interest lies in the myriad cultural negotiations: in the slippery terms in which musical hierarchies were framed; and in what appeared to be at stake in the fraught discussions that surrounded music appreciation.¹⁵

To chart the shifting contours of these debates, I focus on the decades from the 1920s, when rapid advances in sound reproduction technologies fueled new patterns of musical dissemination and consumption, to the early 1960s, when a burgeoning popular youth culture presented a new and powerful challenge to the highbrow/lowbrow dichotomy, at the same time as the heightened interest in the postwar avant-garde started to make its mark on music pedagogy. While remaining attuned to the international dimensions of the music appreciation movement, I center my account on Britain, grounding transnational debates in a specific set of historical concerns and historiographical trends. The remarkable accumulation of initiatives to create a larger and more diverse audience for art music in mid-twentieth-century Britain—and their enduring presence today—makes it a rich context for this study.

Against this backdrop, each chapter reanimates the aspirations and anxieties of cultural entrepreneurs and, where possible, their audiences by providing a thick history of one initiative to broaden access to art music. I ask why these enterprises were born at their particular moments; explore the melee of utopian hopes and dystopian fears—of democratic intentions and illiberal attitudes—that underpinned them; and unpick the means through which they sought to mediate cultural access from distribution to consumption. The case studies have been chosen because they were at once atypical and representative: each, in its own way, was pioneering at its moment of conception; and yet, in part because of the powerful social and artistic connections of the progenitors, each quickly secured a place within what, for want of a less problematic term, we

might call public culture. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, in confronting an acutely topical concern, these initiatives articulated ideas and practices that were already in the air. Any claim to innovation, then, was in the particular ways they adapted old cultural practices to emerging contexts.¹⁶

Together, these microhistories build a bigger picture. Indeed, by writing across the interwar, wartime, and immediate postwar years, I seek to disrupt scholarly narratives that have taken a strongly periodized perspective on culture at this time. This trend has been common across histories of the arts, even as the contours vary between disciplines. Perhaps the most pronounced example can be found in literary studies, where the influence of new historicism helped to consolidate the midcentury's division into rough decades: the high modernism of the 1920s gave way to the politically oriented 1930s; then, following five years of war, a period of cultural stasis ensued before a generation of "angry young men" began to rejuvenate British culture.¹⁷ Meanwhile musicologists have often viewed the 1920s and 1930s as the heyday of the English Musical Renaissance; World War Two as a cultural hiatus; and the postwar decades as the era of the British musical avant-garde.¹⁸

There is, of course, some good historical justification for such an approach. Not least, it reflects the heightened temporal consciousness of a period studded with era-defining events: the end of World War One in 1918, the Wall Street Crash of 1929, or the advent of World War Two. Indeed, the fashioning of this historical view was begun by midcentury writers. To offer just one example, already in 1941, George Orwell observed that "Hitler's attack on Poland in 1939 ended one epoch as surely as the great slump of 1931 ended another."¹⁹ In addition, insisting on generational distinction was a common means by which young artists sought to carve out a distinctive identity from their forebears, a project pursued with particular conviction by the postwar avant-garde and their advocates. This way of writing history has also complemented prevailing scholarly sensibilities. For one thing, its emphasis on rupture and paradigm shifts broadly fits with the academy's long-standing commitment to radical modernist ideals.²⁰ For another, its associated methodologies, most notably close reading and thick history, are in keeping with the reaction against grand narratives, in particular their problematic tendency to overwrite localized experiences, that characterized much historical scholarship during the final decades of the last century.²¹

Nevertheless, despite these compelling historical and historiographical justifications, this approach is not without its limits. Most notably,

the emphasis on disjuncture obscures the gradual currents of cultural change that were equally part of contemporary experience. The initiatives to create a broader audience for art music under consideration here shine a powerful light on this other side of twentieth-century modernity: they invite us to attend to what literary scholar Benjamin Kohlmann has called the “slow politics of reform,” which lack the glamour of speed and the provocative appeal of rupture.²² The sociopolitical developments that precipitated and underpinned reform agendas—the awkward transition to democracy, and the resulting paradox of a system that was justified by “projecting . . . aristocratic sensibilities outward onto humanity as a whole”—have often been viewed as defining traits of Western modernity.²³ But if this is a story that could be told about any number of Western countries, creating space for “slow” histories is especially pertinent to Britain on account of its particular experience of modernity. As Richard Sheppard has observed, in Britain the sense of impending “apocalypse” was less intense than elsewhere for a variety of reasons, including the earlier impact of industrialization and urbanization, as well as the enduring commitment to liberal humanist values.²⁴ It is also especially pertinent to the country’s midcentury musical culture, on which this slower modernity made a defining mark. As we will now see, this legacy has been a long-standing thorn in the flesh of British music histories—one that, as I will ultimately suggest, a longer perspective might help to redress.

BRITISH MUSIC AND MODERNISM

It has become something of a truism to remark upon the mid-twentieth-century British musical establishment’s uneasy relationship with modernism. The problem, simply put, is that the foremost composers of the day were less innovative than their continental counterparts; or, to frame the issue in the terms of the current discussion, that Britain’s slower modernity was blatantly manifested on the level of musical style. In an academy that has struggled to move beyond its commitment to what literary scholar Amanda Anderson describes as “the formally and conceptually challenging modes associated with radicalism,” scholars have persistently treated this belatedness as a problem demanding explanation, if not resolution.²⁵ The ongoing prevalence of composer-work studies in the field has only exacerbated the situation, in part because such studies tend to foreground matters of compositional style, and in part because of the particular composers who have dominated

scholarly enquiry (Edward Elgar and Ralph Vaughan Williams are prime examples).²⁶

The most recent attempts to extricate Britain's midcentury musical culture from its dubious reputation have fallen broadly into two camps. On the one hand, revisionist historians have sought to restore a more multifaceted picture of Britain's cultural landscape by challenging accepted ideas about the absence of the European modernist tradition, as well as about the terms on which composers in Britain engaged with it.²⁷ Useful correctives, such accounts have begun to recover the matrix of conflicting beliefs and practices that made up midcentury Britain's art music world. On the other hand, scholars have embraced the widespread movement within the academy advocating a broader understanding of modernism and have argued for a reassessment of a host of composers, compositions, and institutions traditionally labeled conservative. In the wake of Miriam Hansen's much-cited (and widely misappropriated) article on "vernacular modernism," some have proposed that modernism should be understood not simply in terms of aesthetics, but also as a response to modernizing tendencies.²⁸ Others have appealed to early critical invocations of the word *modern*, suggesting that a leap of the historical imagination might create the necessary distance for us to perceive what was once radically new about music that is now comfortably familiar.²⁹

These new avenues have proved expedient for British music studies, allowing scholars to contest the long-derided conservatism of their historical subjects. However, they have done so on grounds that limit both our understanding of modernism and—more pressingly for my study—of other cultural traditions, as well as the often fractious interactions between them. As far as modernism is concerned, our understanding of its role within twentieth-century culture more broadly risks losing its historical specificity, as "modernism" becomes a catch-all for any cultural product that can persuasively be presented as somehow responding to modernity.³⁰ At the same time, scholars have continued to accept modernism as an arbiter of value, invoking it as an honorific. This perspective has not only perpetuated old anxieties about Britain's relationship to a continental other that is consistently imagined as more innovative, more progressive, and timelier; it has also left scholars embroiled in wrangling over aesthetic worth, as they have struggled to accommodate ill-fitting repertory within a narrative that privileges radical responses to modernization above all else. By continuing to approach Britain's musical culture through the polarizing terms set by a coterie of

midcentury continental composers and propagated by the postwar academic establishment, academics have displaced its midcentury cultural ideologies with a later set of scholarly priorities. In so doing, they have left little space for mapping in-between cultural spaces on their own, often contradictory terms.

This account takes an altogether different starting point. Its driving contention is this: If musical culture in Britain was undoubtedly less stylistically experimental than on the Continent, this was because throughout this period, composers', critics', and policy-makers' desires for stylistic innovation remained in tension with their commitment to broadening access to high culture. Indeed, while the British musical establishment professed many of the "highbrow" values that came to define high modernism—such as an uneasiness with mass cultural forms and a belief in art music as transcendent, autonomous, and above commercialism—it simultaneously played a central role in mediating the distribution of high culture on an unprecedented scale: through nationwide programs of concerts; through radio and cinema; and through formal channels of music education. The music appreciation movement with which this book is centrally concerned cut across all of these spheres. While not responsible for every initiative to broaden access, its advocates were key players in the field.

The widespread commitment to broadening access was not only articulated in critical discourse and cultural policies; in musical terms, it also found expression in cultural products. It shaped both how old repertoires were appropriated and the aesthetics of new compositions. Its impact was most obvious where music with an educational or social agenda was concerned. Even more than repertoire for the professional stage, the stories of these musical works have been downplayed in scholarship. The accessible compositional styles arising from the blend of artistic and social impulses have proved particularly difficult to accommodate within the academy's historic commitment to the ideals of autonomous art works and aesthetic innovation.³¹ As we will see, however, for contemporary composers and critics, stylistic accessibility was in such instances not just necessary but also desirable.

Far from simply chronicling institutional reforms, then, I seek to document an emergent cultural milieu—one that provided the fertile ground in which music appreciation would flourish and that this far-reaching pedagogic movement in turn helped to configure. Already by the early 1920s, this milieu's impact was becoming so pervasive that a new term entered the vernacular to describe it: the *middlebrow*. Closely intertwined with

technological innovations, engaged with the democratic idealism underpinning recent constitutional reforms, but paradoxically committed to highbrow ideals of art as autonomous and transcendent, the middlebrow was situated at the crux of Britain's experience of mid-twentieth-century modernity. This cultural category invites us to explore how the period's musical culture was necessarily inextricably intertwined with modernizing processes, but without obscuring its conflicted relationship with modernism.³² The middlebrow allows us, in other words, to reassess those aspects of Britain's musical culture that have encouraged its image as insular and regressive on more historically sensitive terms: to reconsider its imagined relationship with European and American culture; to make sense of aesthetic modernism's status as both an increasingly influential and contested cultural presence; and to take a less anachronistic approach to exploring the connections between repertoires and styles that scholars traditionally viewed as disparate.

Invoking this midcentury category is a gesture that risks causing contention, not least with those who have sought to elevate British music's status through appeals to modernism. Despite—or perhaps because of—the centrality of middlebrow culture, the term has, since its instantiation, more often been the subject of derision than respect. Responding to this, musicologists have been slow to follow in the footsteps of the literary and film scholars who pioneered the field of middlebrow studies.³³ There are to date only a handful of studies that concern the musical middlebrow. The first explicit engagement came from popular music scholars, who used the middlebrow to explain the processes through which popular musicians sought cultural elevation.³⁴ This is an alternative perspective from that offered here in relation to midcentury Britain's art music world, in which the term captured a tension between broadening access and guarding highbrow status.

Meanwhile, historians researching art music in the American context have tended to view the middlebrow as predominantly a social phenomenon, focusing on processes of cultural mediation.³⁵ The most recent contribution to the study of cultural hierarchies in Britain, Alexandra Wilson's *Opera in the Jazz Age*, reproduces this trend, choosing reception studies as a primary methodology.³⁶ While this scholarship has provided foundational insights into the workings of middlebrow institutions and the discourse surrounding them, it has also overlooked aesthetic and stylistic questions relating to the production of musical culture. If the oversight is simply a matter of individual scholarly preferences, it arguably implicates historic hierarchies in subtle ways, as

middlebrow cultural products are consigned to the realm of social rather than aesthetic interest. The case for a more multifaceted approach is put forward in another recent publication, Christopher Chowrimootoo's *Middlebrow Modernism*, which uses Benjamin Britten's postwar operas to illuminate the aesthetic, stylistic, and critical ambivalences that shaped modernism.³⁷ Taking the middlebrow compromises in Britten's music on their own terms, this account uncovers how critical practices fed into compositional process and vice versa.

The present study builds on this scholarship in two ways. First, it takes a longer historical perspective, exploring the middlebrow's evolution from its late-Victorian roots, through its midcentury heyday, to the early 1960s, when the accumulating status of popular music reached a tipping point, catalyzing a reconfiguration of the prevailing system of cultural hierarchies.³⁸ Second, by putting musical works into dialogue with the institutions that played an increasingly powerful role in mediating cultural access throughout this period, it brings to light the cultural mechanisms through which middlebrow values became pervasive in Britain, as well as suggesting how they found expression in particular stylistic trends.

MUSIC APPRECIATION AND THE "MIDDLEBROW"

From its conception, the term *middlebrow* was as contested as the cultural milieu that it attempted to describe. Its precise origin is hard to pin down: scholarly conjectures have ranged from an unspecified "reported appearance" in 1906 to the infamous *Punch* cartoon published in 1925 satirizing BBC audiences.³⁹ Moreover, as we will later see, many of the cultural practices and values with which the word was associated can be traced back to the nineteenth century. What is certain, however, is that, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, changes in Britain's social, technological, and political landscapes accumulated in a way that gave old cultural trends a new urgency. Their heightened significance was reflected in the new label: the idea of "middlebrow" culture encapsulated a constellation of concerns that had become acutely timely. Once the term entered common parlance, it quickly stuck. Already by 1927, the writer and public intellectual J. B. Priestley judged that there was no point refuting the language of the brows, for it was here to stay.⁴⁰ The middlebrow's earliest appearances occurred in discussions about the pursuit of cultural elevation, which was usually understood as being part of a broader agenda of social mobility. Like

its counterparts “highbrow” and “lowbrow,” “middlebrow” was soon being applied to multiple aspects of the cultural field. In the hands of diverse writers, it was used to denote particular audiences; to explain modes of reception; to characterize institutions and cultural mediators; or to delineate artistic styles—literary, musical, and visual.⁴¹ Again like its counterparts, it was invoked with an array of contradictory connotations, from the disparaging to the defiant.

With its expansive reach, the middlebrow implicated a broad range of musical styles (along with their respective audiences). At the lower end were the “light classics,” a term that broadly described the most accessible repertoire within the Western art tradition: Strauss waltzes, Hungarian rhapsodies, famous operetta numbers, and so on.⁴² Performed by everything from salon orchestras to dance bands and in original form or arrangement, this genre was epitomized by “pops” concerts and the last night of the Proms.⁴³ “Middlebrow” was also commonly associated with the music of more “serious” contemporary composers who had shunned the atonal revolution in favor of tonality. In Constant Lambert’s 1934 polemic *Music Ho!*, Edward Elgar and Sibelius were held up as exemplary: at once “great” and “popular,” in Lambert’s eyes they represented the last generation of composers who had managed to stay “in touch with the public” while also composing music of “spiritual and technical” distinction.⁴⁴ Meanwhile later in the century, critic Andrew Porter implicitly extended the category to include members of Britain’s musical avant-garde. The likes of Alexander Goehr, Peter Maxwell Davies, Harrison Birtwistle, and Malcolm Williamson, he posited, were authors of “an extraordinarily healthy and vital corpus of ‘central’ music, neither reactionary nor avant-garde.”⁴⁵ If there appears to be little stylistic consistency across this middlebrow spectrum, what this repertoire had in common was that it trod the line between being accessible and prestigious in a way that prevented it from straightforwardly fitting into either the “highbrow” or “lowbrow” camp. While the cited critics presented middlebrow attributes positively, such traits were just as often a source of anxiety or downright repudiation.

The in-betweenness of the cultural middle was at once a boon and a bane to those pursuing uplift. While the finer details of the boundary lines between musical styles and genres were often uncomfortably ambiguous, the various levels broadly mapped out a path for progression. Over and above the imagined distinction between art and popular music, the subdivisions within the art music world could prove useful here. If lighter repertory typically attracted larger audiences, it promised

a way to overcome the initial hurdle of drawing new faces into the concert hall. One of the most famous advocates of this approach was impresario Robert Newman. His oft-cited vision for the London Promenade Concerts was to “train the public by easy stages. . . . Popular at first, gradually raising the standard until I have *created* a public for classical and modern music.”⁴⁶ Whereas the lighter repertory’s commercial value prompted some to dismiss it as second-rate, Newman and his cofounder Henry Wood showed few qualms in programming it: confident that the public would quickly progress onto “higher” things, they embraced the light classics as a stepping-stone.

Where initiatives like the Proms sought to elevate taste largely through exposure, music appreciation proposed a more academic approach: one premised on enhancing musical understanding through education. The notion that acquiring taste was an incremental process held an equally foundational place within this system. While an early appreciation manual advised that “the power of assimilating music . . . may be gradually developed,” students often talked about “graduating” to “good” music.⁴⁷ In this instance, however, it was not just the music presented for study that created avenues for uplift. Appreciation teachers also used a range of methods to explain music; the kinds of knowledge that they variously promoted were thought about in similarly hierarchical terms. Although written from a detractor’s point of view, Adorno’s posthumously published “Analytical Study of the NBC ‘Music Appreciation Hour’” verily described one path along which many educators sought to guide young listeners: from “seeing a flute,” to conjuring up visual associations such as “a thunder storm,” before finally learning “to listen to music as music.”⁴⁸ In this scheme, facts about music were superseded by more creative responses, which in turn paved the way for “musical” understanding. Another method rejected the use of visual images (which were especially contentious where abstract music was concerned), focusing instead on music’s constituent features. Novice listeners would begin their studies with “the more superficial phases of the art”—that is, “the ‘tune’”—before progressing to more advanced matters such as harmony and form.⁴⁹ In every case, the ultimate goal was to promote a critical approach that supposedly enabled “active” or “intelligent” listening.

This hierarchy in modes of reception reflected a conviction that how the public listened was perhaps even more significant than what they listened to. In a roundabout way, this belief was a response to the mistrust in public taste fueled by changing patterns of cultural distribution.

For while technological advances made high art more widely accessible, they also facilitated the expansion of commercial mass culture. Music educators and critics frequently cited the increasingly hegemonic presence of the latter as evidence that the public were not naturally inclined to exercise sufficient levels of judgment. What's more, they insisted that mass culture stoked the problem it had created by offering "cheap and easy pleasures" that supposedly encouraged "passive" engagement.⁵⁰ Anxieties about public complacency (which was probably more imagined than real) were compounded by the rise of extremist politics and the unprecedented expansion of the electorate brought about by recent constitutional reforms.⁵¹

Imagining the shape of future society to be at stake, middlebrow educators sought to intervene, equipping listeners with the necessary tools for discernment. There was not always agreement about what the application of these tools might look like in practice. Some maintained that a love of mass culture and good taste were mutually exclusive. Others acknowledged the tendency to equate indiscriminate taste and mass culture for what it was—an intellectual conceit.⁵² This was the stance that Priestley took in his famous "High, Low, Broad" essay, in which he charged lowbrows and highbrows alike with being "equally and hopelessly uncritical." In contrast, he styled those "broadbrows" who occupied the space between as having "real taste," evidenced by their capability "of exercising independent judgment."⁵³ Ultimately, however, there were few who questioned the privileged status attached to intellectual modes of reception. Even among those who accepted that the public would make its own cultural judgments (whether because it was a right, or because societal trends made it inevitable), there was a general assumption that, to be valid, opinions must be rooted in critical engagement.

In promoting a "proper" way to listen, music appreciation's function within the multifaceted middlebrow landscape went beyond offering a route to cultural uplift. It also cultivated a language and a method through which its practitioners could account for, and so preserve, the alleged superiority of "good" music. Its narrative of music history was framed as a series of groundbreaking "great" composers writing timeless works. More significantly, the analytical tools that it promoted were ultimately designed to tease out "highbrow" qualities of autonomy, transcendence, and innovation—at an elementary level, simply by foregrounding the "music itself," and as students progressed, by revealing the depths of meaning that supposedly resided in the music's form. While

the appreciation movement was conceived to diversify the audience for art music, then, it was paradoxically invested in many of the elitist ideals that were simultaneously being peddled by high modernists. What's more, where practice and ideology diverged, appreciation advocates frequently resorted to acts of disavowal that several studies have shown to be central tools in modernists' rhetorical apparatus.⁵⁴

For all the things it had in common with modernism, however, there was a crucial difference: music appreciation's success as a pedagogic enterprise made its investments in the marketplace irrevocably transparent. As such, it seemed—from another perspective—to embody the deepest threat that the capitalist forces of marketization posed to the arts: the prioritization of commercial considerations over artistic ones. Viewed through this lens, music appreciation became an obvious target for anti-middlebrow critique. Indeed, it was precisely this kind of pedagogic initiative that Virginia Woolf had in mind when, in her now-famous diatribe against the middlebrow—a letter written to, but never published in, the *New Statesman*—she insisted that such efforts to “teach” culture were motivated not by a real interest in art, but rather by a desire to make money. Treating culture primarily as a status symbol, middlebrow educators supposedly prospered by promoting their misplaced belief that a “cultured” cachet was something one could buy.⁵⁵ Indeed, as Adorno's NBC critique made clearer, what detractors found so problematic about such initiatives was the way in which they seemed to standardize the process of music education, as they disseminated knowledge about art under the veil of a “real” artistic encounter. Or, in his damning words, they promoted “some vague and largely erroneous information about music and the recognition of stiffly conventional musical values, instead of . . . a living relationship with music.”⁵⁶ By distilling music history into a sequence of clearly defined stylistic periods and advertising a set of analytical tools that enabled the average listener to dissect their “standardized” forms, music appreciation, Adorno alleged, created a “pseudo-culture”: a “fictitious musical world” brewed from a toxic mix of “personalities, stylistic labels, and pre-digested values” and “conventional, stereotyped”: audience reception.⁵⁷

Adorno's uncompromising dismissal of middlebrow pedagogy is remarkably like his critiques of mass culture. With its polemical tone, it betrayed the same “anxiety of contamination”—the evocative phrase coined by Andreas Huyssen to describe the deep-seated fear that high-brow culture would be tarnished by its associations with mass cultural forms and practices.⁵⁸ It was a fear that Woolf, along with other