

Book review: *Music, politics, and the academy* by Pieter C. van den Toom

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BOOK REVIEW

Pieter C. van den Toorn. *Music, Politics, and the Academy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. x, 238 pp. ISBN0-520-20116-7.

In his latest book, *Music, Politics, and the Academy*, noted theorist and Stravinsky scholar Pieter C. van den Toorn engages in a colourful discussion of current trends in musicology and analysis. New Musicologists, humanists, multiculturalists, social critics, feminists, and postmodernists take note, as van den Toorn staunchly defends Beethoven's Ninth, Schenker, and pitch-class set theory from the encroachment of cultural criticism into the musicological arena. Although musicology and music theory are separate but not necessarily mutually exclusive domains, the ideological rift between the two spheres has assumed mammoth proportions. From the music theorist's perspective, van den Toorn provides insights into some of the causes of this divergence, and offers a few intriguing solutions.

In the introduction, van den Toorn states that *Music, Politics, and the Academy* was written in response to complaints—particularly from New Musicologists—that music theory has become overly specialized, technical, and formalistic. This formalism has insulated theorists from matters of expression, representation, emotion, and meaning in music. Van den Toorn argues that "much established procedure has been misrepresented by that group [New Musicology], who often confuse the aims of analysis with those of the institutions in which it is taught, practiced, and debated."¹ The author counter-charges that while New Musicology is quasi-technical, the critical approach rapidly deteriorates when pressed further into the music itself.

The first chapter, "Feminism, Politics, and the Ninth," is a reworking of an earlier paper, "Politics, Feminism, and Contemporary Music Theory,"² in which van den Toorn clearly outlined the ongoing polemic between musicology and music theory. On one side of this conflict stands New Musicology, particularly the "capital F" style of Feminism embodied in the work of Susan McClary. The "city under siege" is Beethoven's Ninth, while the "heroic defenders" are van den Toorn and his faithful aid, Schenker. Semiotics, cultural hermeneutics, feminist theory, narrative theory, and deconstructive methodologies comprise New Musicology's "heavy artillery," ready to engage music as cultural practice rather than as an autonomous entity.

Van den Toorn approves of this new openness in music scholarship, and advocates a reconciliation of the two separate spheres. However, the success of such a reconciliation, in van den Toorn's view, would be dependent on one key issue. Models of gender, sexuality, and male hegemony can no longer be considered as appropriate critical topoi.

¹Pieter C. van den Toorn, *Music, Politics, and the Academy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 7; hereafter: Van den Toorn, *Music, Politics, and the Academy*.

²Pieter C. van den Toorn, "Politics, Feminism, and Contemporary Music Theory," *Journal of Musicology* 9 (no. 3, 1991): 275-99.

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Although the rationale behind van den Toorn's call for censorship is implicit rather than explicit, further inquiry into this phenomenon requires a detailed analysis that I can discuss only briefly here. Censorship revolves around three major issues that van den Toorn either politely negotiates or avoids altogether. Amid the charges of "cold formalism" and counter-charges of "quasi-technical" stands a noticeable difference in language. The rhetoric of music theory and analysis is, according to the late Wallace Berry, at best lexical, sophisticated, and often problematic, bound by strict notions of scholarly convention and propriety.³ Musicology, on the other hand, has been taken over by what van den Toorn calls the "rhetoric of liberation," preached variously by feminists, humanists, and postmodernists.⁴ This "rhetoric of liberation," freed from the constraints of propriety and scholarly convention in dealing with controversial subject matter, is often vulgar and offensive in its frank depictions of gender, sex and sexuality. Van den Toorn voices his objection to such vulgarity in a dignified, subtle manner. Although *Music, Politics, and the Academy* is liberally sprinkled with several "choice" offensive words, all are carefully framed within quotation marks and attributed to their rightful owners. If this language is indeed offensive, van den Toorn should have omitted it altogether.

Secondly, musicology and music theory are polarized by divergent aims and ideals. The theorist breaks music down to its smallest components, examining structures, functions, and processes. This breakdown, however, is a positive exercise that reifies and reconfirms the historical composers and their position in the canon. Idiosyncratic and innovative compositional techniques are regarded as genius rather than aberrations. Van den Toorn views the cultural criticism of New Musicology as a negative enterprise, one fueled by personal animosity and an aversion to male sexuality. Susan McClary perhaps best articulated what lays at the very core of van den Toorn's objections:

The ideal form of feminist critique [or cultural criticism, for that matter] would appear to be one that did not challenge received conceptions and judgements. The great composers and traditional notions of what makes them great would remain securely in place, but we would have another reason to pay homage to them...⁵

Had feminist or cultural criticism remained a marginal, affirmative enterprise, there would be no controversy and, in my opinion, no need for van den Toorn's book. The wide acceptance of New Musicology, the success of books such as McClary's *Feminine Endings*,⁶

³See, for example, the introduction to *Structural Functions in Tonal Music* by Wallace Berry (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976, reprint, New York: Dover, 1987), 1-26.

⁴Van den Toorn, *Music, Politics, and the Academy*, 19.

⁵Susan McClary, "Towards a Feminist Criticism of Music," *Canadian University Music Review* 10 (no.2, 1990): 9.

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Lawrence Kramer's *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900*,⁷ and the volume *Musicology and Difference*,⁸ as well as the proliferation of journal articles dealing with gender, sexuality, and cultural criticism threaten to subvert the privilege of the canon.

Finally, in the chapters "Neoclassicism Revisited" and "A Case in Point: Stravinsky," van den Toorn fails in his own attempt to "broaden" the critical approach. Van den Toorn's theoretical expertise is evident in his thorough and thought-provoking analysis. However, he is confined within the parameters of set-class theory. These two chapters provide the most promising material in the book, an expansion of which could readily fill future volumes.

Is there a need for this book? The answer is yes. As a woman, a feminist, and a musicologist interested in women composers and gender issues, my first reaction to *Music, Politics, and the Academy* was one of shock, followed by my own outraged response. On closer reading, I realized van den Toorn has articulated, if in a somewhat misguided manner, the crisis faced by musicology and music theory. What is now an ideological rift over language, formalism, and the canon, threatens to become an insurmountable abyss. Van den Toorn's book is a reminder of the delicate system of checks and balances that is required to maintain a realistic perspective on the *music*, without that perspective disintegrating into triviality.

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⁶Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁷Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

⁸Ruth Solie, ed., *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).