

8-29-2011

Musical Voyages and Their Baggage: Orientalism in Music and Critical Musicology

Jonathan D. Bellman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/musicfacpub>



Part of the [Musicology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bellman, Jonathan D., "Musical Voyages and Their Baggage: Orientalism in Music and Critical Musicology" (2011). *School of Music Faculty Publications*. 5.
<https://digscholarship.unco.edu/musicfacpub/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Music at Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Music Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. For more information, please contact Jane.Monson@unco.edu.

Musical Voyages and Their Baggage: Orientalism in Music and Critical Musicology

Jonathan D. Bellman

Definitions of Orientalism

The word “orientalism,” largely as a result of Edward Said’s 1978 book, has in recent decades generated a good deal of attention in musicology, music criticism and in critical writing about the other arts.¹ Inconveniently, though, the word has a long history and more than one meaning. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1973) gives the most traditional one, tucking *orientalism* under the word *orient* with the brief, bland definition “oriental character, style, or quality,” with *orientalist* being “one versed in oriental languages and literature.” This is close to the definition that Said famously interrogated and unpacked, documenting and meditating upon the myriad ways in which the study of the languages, literatures, and cultures of the eastern world could amount to the appropriation, control, and ultimately marginalization and trivialization of those cultures and peoples—which might or might not include those of Africa, but certainly would include the Middle East, Far East, and the Indian subcontinent. Said’s exposé study, even given certain flaws and broad-brush oversimplifications, was pathbreaking in that it deconstructed what was often unreflectively considered to be a great constellation of respected academic disciplines, calling attention to their often unacademic—even inhumane—foundational assumptions and (in some measure) imperial goals.

It is in this and related senses that “orientalism” is now most often used, and critical perspectives that occupy themselves with orientalism and its consequences have for some time been called *postcolonial*. Postcolonial criticism, generally speaking, seeks to identify and resistantly read artworks and documents in which an “oriental” flavor or undercurrent is present and thereby working in a subliminal, nonneutral way. Given the relationship of postcolonial music criticism to the broader area of cultural criticism, such “oriental” spice is rarely considered to be benign or beneficial, and this has resulted in a gradual reduction of the complexities and layers of meaning

into a single, damning idea. Said's postcolonial sensibility is reflected in the third definition offered by *Webster's Dictionary* (2009): "a viewpoint, as held by someone in the West, in which Asia or specifically the Arabic Middle East is seen variously as exotic, mysterious, irrational, etc.: [a] term used to impute a patronizing attitude."

A secondary, but also traditional, definition complicates matters even further. Similar to but broader than such terms as "arabesque" (use of geometric patterns based on those of Islamic art) and "chinoiserie" (patterns of decoration derived from Chinese art), "orientalism" can refer to a variety of ornate kinds of decoration, often vividly colored, that evoke the art or architecture of far-off Asian or Middle Eastern lands and peoples. It is because of the perceived tastelessness or triviality of such art that the term was used dismissively in musical circles well before Said's book. Igor Stravinsky, for example, wrote, "Nor could I take César Cui's orientalism seriously. 'Russian music,' or 'Hungarian' or 'Spanish,' or any other of the national nineteenth-century kind is, all of it, as thin as local color, and as boring."² Similarly, in 1952, the critic Joseph Kerman turned an unblinking eye on Puccini's *Turandot*: "there is no organic reason for the bogus orientalism lacquered over every page of the score; it provides local color or exoticism for its own sake, but also, more deeply, a chance for the artist to wriggle out of his irresponsibility."³ This passage is from Kerman's neo-Wagnerian critique *Opera as Drama*, where there is more of the same, and his boldness about making such critical pronouncements influenced generations of younger writers (postcolonialists prominent among them). The current result of this evolving use of the word is that little remains, at least in critical studies, of the earlier and more respectable meanings that referred to academic fields of study and branches of knowledge.

Thus, in 1995, Susan McClary could include orientalism—with no further explanation—among the noxious bigotries: discussing Charles Rosen's treatment of the operas of Bellini and Meyerbeer in his book *The Romantic Generation*, she expresses surprise that he "does not take issue with these operas because he finds in them something ideologically pernicious, such as anti-Semitism, orientalism, or misogyny; rather he grounds his criticism in old-fashioned hierarchies of taste."⁴ George Lipsitz uses the term in a similarly loose way about David Byrne's song "Loco de amor":

When Byrne sings lyrics that describe love as "like a pizza in the rain" and then calls out to "my little wild thing," he has the great Cuban exile singer Celia Cruz answer him in Yoruba as she sings "yen yere cumbe." In traditional Cuban music, Yoruba lyrics resonate with collective

memories of slavery and racism[;] they reinsert distinctly African identity back into collective national culture. But in Byrne's song, Cruz's Yoruba passage signifies only primitivism, exoticism, orientalism; she is an all-purpose "other" summoned up to symbolize Byrne's delight in musical difference on the west side of Manhattan.⁵

Neither McClary's nor Lipsitz's trio of -isms is as neatly equivalent as the authors imply, and it is regrettable, if unsurprising, that Lipsitz in particular would confidently assert that the Yoruba passage "only" signifies those ideas—needlessly limiting the interpretive possibilities of a transcultural musical moment to a forbidding few.

An accurate capsule definition of orientalism is, therefore, problematic. Relying in large part on nonfiction sources (in *Orientalism*, at least; that would change in his subsequent work), Said built the case for the variety of more and less subtle ways that orientalism, as an attitude and belief system, evolved and manifested itself in culture and society. As Ralph P. Locke has pointed out, though, Said was much more careful when addressing creative works, admitting and even welcoming the play of artistic creativity in works that in certain ways reflected the imperial worldview;⁶ a good example of his (relatively infrequent) postcolonial music criticism is the sober treatment of Verdi's *Aida* in his 1993 book *Culture and Imperialism*.⁷ In view of the complexities of both the definition of the word "orientalism" and the way it has been used to designate disciplines or critical frames of reference, then, it is hard to imagine that the responsible discussion of the subject would simply equate it, even in its narrowest critical meaning, with anti-Semitism or misogyny.

Ironically, it was Said himself who explicitly did just that, early in *Orientalism*:

By an almost inescapable logic, I have found myself writing the history of a strange, secret sharer of western anti-Semitism. That anti-Semitism and, as I have discussed it in its Islamic branch, Orientalism resemble each other very closely is a historical, cultural, and political truth that needs only to be mentioned to an Arab Palestinian for its irony to be perfectly understood.⁸

To complicate matters still further, the secondary definition of orientalism as a species of decoration suggests a good deal of overlap between some uses of the term and the more general concept of musical exoticism, which I have defined elsewhere as "the borrowing or use of materials that evoke distant locales or exotic frames of reference."⁹ This overlap is due to the apparent parallel between designs or colors that evoke middle- or far-eastern decorative practice and cognate musical effects that suggest

those same distant places and/or cultures. What is more, works that use musical gestures to suggest specific people, places, or cultures are often put in a separate, problematic critical category: separate because of the unstated, unproven, yet (seemingly) widely held assumption that there exists some kind of standard, definable, more normative style that does not evoke identity or place so specifically, and problematic because of the longstanding tradition, already observed in the Stravinsky and Kerman quotes above, that local color automatically implies cheapness, ephemerality, and compositional weakness. A more recent term is *transcultural music*, which preserves the culture- or ethnicity-bridging aspects of a mixed musical style while deemphasizing the power-relation aspects (that it is necessarily A who appropriates—“colonizes”—and exoticizes B). For all the heat generated, though, the vexed question of terminology is probably insoluble. Each term overlaps somewhat with the others, and each carries a certain amount of baggage, and is therefore susceptible to certain predictable patterns of criticism.

Edward Said and Orientalism in Music

The terminological problem means, unavoidably, that there is no consistent and definitive usage establishing whether “orientalism in music” is (1) simply, a specific variety of musical exoticism, or (2) more broadly, a productive critical tool for investigating the wide variety of ways in which music is embedded in and reflects, converses with, or perhaps comments upon its wider culture, or (3) a more limited facet of postcolonial criticism, relevant only as long as the criticism stays on topic and deals with a small segment of the repertoire, whether cultivated, vernacular, or in between. (An overview of the field will bear out that last, harshly framed possibility.) For clarity’s sake, I will use “orientalism” in connection with music that comments upon, “disciplines,” “appropriates” and so forth the cultures of the middle and far east, “postcolonial criticism” to refer to Saidian and post-Saidian critical work that identifies and engages with such musical approaches, and “transcultural music” for music that references more than one culture, of any time and place, whether using musical devices derived from the land or culture in question or wholly imagined ones, and regardless of power relationship.

To begin with Edward Said: it would take a certain lack of fairness—folly even—to expect perfect philosophical and ideological consistency throughout a scholar-critic’s entire life and thought. To Said we owe the idea of orientalism as criticism, indeed in large part the idea of a discipline per se as a form of appropriation and even colonization of its subject (this was the case painstakingly made in *Orientalism*). But while

his eye was focused on the colonialist implications of western ideologies, he also had a deep personal investment in western culture. “For objective reasons that I had no control over,” he wrote in *Culture and Imperialism*, “I grew up as an Arab with a western education. Ever since I can remember, I have felt that I belonged to both worlds, without being completely of either one or the other.”¹⁰ Said’s political activism reflected the one and his lifelong engagement with western art and literature testified to the importance of the other, and the two impulses cross-fertilized each other in interesting ways. His music criticism, though, often did not address issues of east and west, of exile, and of appropriation, which so absorbed him in other areas.¹¹ This should not necessarily surprise us; Said himself observed elsewhere that

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white [*sic*], or Black, or Western, or Oriental.¹²

Yet it is not this simple. Realizing that each of us is more than “purely one thing” is a potentially liberating development, in this era of identity hyper-awareness, reactive politics, and too-credulous discipleship, but blaming imperialism for the idea of pure, undiluted identities seems odd. It is hard to imagine that an inhabitant of (for example) a European village, where everyone he knew shared his nationality, language, locality of origin, and religion, did not register an instantaneous us-and-them reaction when he first encountered a *Landsknecht*, foreign pilgrim, or Jew. Said’s inclination to credit imperialism for an identity awareness that clearly dates back to the ancient world suggests that, in his psyche, the nuanced literary and arts critic and the diasporic Arab activist were probably sympathetic but not intellectually consistent. This makes quoting him, or even characterizing his thought about a subject such as music, a dicey business. Nicholas Cook, for example, noted that while postcolonial writers in other areas criticized the inflexibility of his conception, “in musicology the Saidian model has more often than not been accepted without demur.” Cook describes Said’s outlook (which he archly but tellingly calls the “received Saidian model”) as being characterized by a “suspicion of cross-cultural understanding,” because “music is just one of the means [with which] the west has fortified itself [and he quotes Said here] ‘against change and a supposed contamination

brought forward threateningly by the very existence of the Other. In addition such defensiveness permits a comforting retreat into an essentialized, basically unchanging Self.”¹³

There are, however, plenty of places where Said himself transcends this, his own supposed model. In the conclusion of *Culture and Imperialism*, he acknowledges (ever the pedagogue, to his honor and credit) that students should of course insist on their own identities and the dignities of their individual traditions, but that

we need to go on and to situate these in a geography of other identities, peoples, cultures, and then to study how, despite their differences, they have always overlapped one another, through unhierarchical influence, crossing, incorporation, recollection, deliberate forgetfulness, and, of course, conflict.¹⁴

Overlap, unhierarchical influence, crossing, incorporation, deliberate forgetfulness. This is hardly the doctrine of a rigid binarist. His description of his chosen literary subject-works is likewise critically contrapuntal, to use one of his most felicitous concepts; as would befit artworks by complex, imperfect humans produced and grounded in infinitely more complex and imperfect human cultures, they are “estimable and admirable works of art and learning, in which I and many other readers take pleasure and from which we derive profit . . . the challenge is to connect them not only with that pleasure and profit but also with the imperial process of which they were manifestly and unconcealedly a part.”¹⁵

There is no question that the musical works about which Said wrote would fall into the same categories of the estimable and admirable as did his beloved works of literature. A pianist himself who studied in Cairo under Ignace Tiegeman (a legendary and reclusive student of the even more legendary Ignace Friedman), he remained a devotee of the western concert repertoire his entire life. Said certainly had more to say about music than a rigidly postcolonial approach could accommodate, and so in musical discussions he did not limit himself to polarities of self and other, east and west, colonizer and colonized. He did not necessarily avoid the subject—the aforementioned study of *Aida* is one example of principled postcolonial music criticism, and his bicultural outlook certainly informs his perspective on John Adams’s opera *The Death of Klinghoffer*.¹⁶ Taken as a whole, though, his writing affirms music’s cultural multivalence by venturing far beyond postcolonial criticism’s essentially binary framework.

Said's Followers: Narrowing the Critical Vista

This was not the case with many of Said's followers, who—in musical critiques, at least—have focused on the aspects of his thought that pertained to oppositional relationships and uneven power differentials rather than those (as found in the examples quoted above) highlighting the myriad different kinds of relationships between humans and human cultures, including overlap, sharing, and transformation as much as conquest and appropriation. For example, one early development in postcolonial criticism was the awareness and subsequent critical interrogation of the special position held by women in the great imagined realm of the Orient. This position had numerous aspects: artwork-like embodiment of exotic beauty, figure of mystery and royal intrigue, object of desire, creature of unimaginable pleasures—to your undetected eye (otherwise known as the “male gaze”), to you as tourist or adventurer, to her sisters in the harem, to the sultan, to anyone and everyone in every way that the supposedly familiar and predictable western woman might be imagined to disappoint . . . and this is but a partial list. Of course, imagining Oriental Woman this way had a long literary history already, stretching back to the Crusades probably; musical examples include the Suleika of Schubert's unfinished opera *Der Graf von Gleichen* (1826–28) and the Sulima of Brahms's *Die schöne Magelone* cycle of romances (1861–69), which sets poems interspersed in a Ludwig Tieck novella of 1796. (The stereotype of Muslim woman as object of pleasure was kept campily alive even into the late twentieth century in the Cadfael murder mysteries of Ellis Peters [Edith Pargeter].)

So the relationship between Oriental and Woman was recognized and developed by a variety of people, including Ralph P. Locke and Linda Phyllis Austern¹⁷ among others, and Oriental Woman, Oriental-topos-as-Woman,¹⁸ and Woman-as-de-facto-Oriental have all received substantial critical attention. From the more aggressive and sometimes methodologically casual earlier writings on the subject (much-discussed books by Catherine Clément and Susan McClary come to mind here¹⁹) to more measured later studies, the greater Oriental/Woman trope has become one of the dominant strains in postcolonial criticism.²⁰ This reflects the tenor of the wider postcolonial literature that does not deal with music, a substantial share of which has been devoted to the larger gender issues associated with orientalism.

Another persistent issue, this one dating back to well before postcolonial critique of transcultural music, has to do with the choice of musical materials for the transculturation process. It has long been acknowledged in the literature on musical exoticism that musical

verisimilitude is not necessarily relevant in transcultural music, and that in musical evocations of distant places there is often little attempt to use actual musical materials from those specific “strange lands and people” (to borrow Robert Schumann’s evocative phrase). A token gesture or two might be brought into service, but most often composers were seen to adopt the generalized wrong-note and contrary-to-normative exoticizing practices (e.g., drones, simplistic or awkward melodies, shocking and ungrammatical harmonic gestures) that date back to the eighteenth-century pastoral and before. This pattern has migrated from the various Indian and other “savage” characters in baroque opera to imaginary Janissaries of “Turkish” music to the enlightened Bedouins of Félicien David’s pseudo-Arabic ode-symphony *Le Désert*. Jann Pasler reports on an episode in the early twentieth century where Vincent d’Indy explicitly advised Albert Roussel to compose his “Hindu Symphony” (the orchestral work *Evocations*, which has a chorus in its final movement) with his own poetic impressions in mind and not to pay much heed to musical exactitude. Roussel himself wanted to keep the actual location vague: “Even though these *Evocations* were inspired by India, I am anxious that the country remain vague. India, Tibet, Indochina, China, Persia, it doesn’t matter.”²¹

Postcolonial criticism tends to see this as one-size-fits-all exoticism, the orientalist’s musical reduction of the Other to a childish, simplistic music no different from that of other Others. That such a reduction reflected a profound disrespect for the culture being evoked would be, of course, a predictable and easy accusation to make. It is worth remembering, though, that the opposite approach tends to garner equally bitter criticism. Compositional attempts at ethnographic exactitude, or at least some effort to approximate or draw upon the sound of the Other, can easily be interpreted as composers’ appropriations of subaltern discourse for their own colonializing projects—criticism that composers today still routinely feel it necessary to forestall. Composer Michael Tenzer has acknowledged the complexities of such musico-cultural encounters, observing that we must seek to “distinguish between hybrid musics that are exploitive and those that are genuine, those that are slapdash and those designed with care, those that are experimental novelties and those with the potential to endure.”²² George Crumb openly celebrates globality and transculturation in the wider musical world:

One very important aspect of our contemporary musical culture—some might say the supremely important aspect—is its extension in the historical and geographical senses to a degree unknown in the past. . . . The geographical extension means, of course, that the total musical culture

of Planet Earth is “coming together,” as it were. An American or European composer, for example, now has access to the music of various Asian, African, and South American cultures. . . . Unquestionably our contemporary world of music is far richer, in a sense, than earlier periods, due to the historical and geographical extensions of culture to which I have referred.²³

The passion with which the case is argued demonstrates how fraught an area it still is. Many critics interested in orientalism in music have planted their flags on the postcolonial side of the critical divide, with the result that in a surprisingly large number of writings, musical transculturation itself is treated as an ethical breach, with musicians placed in a curious double-bind: it is wrong if one abstracts the Other’s musical gestures for purposes of evoking him or her or their culture, and also wrong if one uses gestures created out of whole cloth or borrowed from standard exotic (so to speak) vocabularies for the same purpose. Given that western lack of interest in and (worse) disdain for nonwestern cultures has long been a prominent trope in cultural criticism, especially in discussions of educational curricula, it seems particularly unjust to limit musicians in a way that poets, prose authors, and other artists would never be.

One clear demonstration of this rush to judgment is John Richardson’s earnest assurance, in his 1999 study of Philip Glass’s *Akhmaten*, that there *are*, actually, appropriate uses of musical representation, as defined by political agenda, but that they are hard to find. He deemphasizes that aspect of Glass’s opera, observing that it did indeed have “some moments when the music does seem to connote ‘ancient Egyptian-ness’ in a relatively indirect way (in the use of reed and percussion instruments; in the use of ‘lowered’ second and third degrees of the scale; etc.).”²⁴ Richardson then addresses the broader problem of cultural representation in music:

It is possible . . . to treat non-Euro-American subject matter in a manner that does not simply reinscribe orientalist prejudice but that actively challenges it. Admittedly, there have been very few representations of this kind in classical music, but to acknowledge them when they do occur would arguably strengthen rather than undermine the very important, indeed crucial, project of postcolonial criticism.

Philip Brett’s discussion of the influence of gamelan music on Benjamin Britten makes a valuable contribution in this respect. For Britten, “oriental” music offered an idealized imaginary space (in the Lacanian sense)

where the oppressive constraints of his own culture regarding gender did not apply.²⁵

The florid phrase “an idealized imaginary free space where the oppressive constraints of his own culture regarding gender did not apply” likely refers to gay male sexuality, given what is known about Benjamin Britten and the critical perspective of Philip Brett. A skeptic might note, however, that the euphemism “oppressive constraints of his own culture” could as well be applied to, say, the much-celebrated pleasures of the harem—for the male and perhaps some of the females—and polygamy in general, which western culture also frowns upon and openly legislates against. Would that “idealized imaginary space” fall into the same category? Hardly; the seraglio is precisely the kind of gender colonization that provokes harsh scrutiny when it is identified in “Turkish” operas. So to the postcolonial critic, the validity or worth of transcultural music does not have to do with its compositional craft, artistic strategies, or quality of material; to use a hoary phrase, it depends on whose ox is being gored.

Orientalism in music, in this light, is less about the music than it is about orientalism, which—in its post-Saidian sense—means the critical imperative to confront, interrogate, and resist the ideologically imperial and colonial. So the use of any kind of musical exoticism is by definition ideologically suspect, unless mitigating circumstances rehabilitate it. Of course, to make sure the reader does not get the wrong idea, Richardson—presumably seriously—clarifies:

But this does not imply that we should let Glass off the orientalist hook altogether; it is possible that *Akhmaten*, like other representations of the non-Euro-North American world in recent opera (Adams’s *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer* and Reich’s *The Cave* are obvious examples) in some way “reflects the unequal distribution of power among the nations of the world.” Simply by dint of the massive production and distribution machinery that backs them up, these composers are arguably complicit in some way in the orientalist/capitalist-imperialist project.²⁶

And so Richardson arrives at a kind of Original Sin: that such operas exist at all is proof of their involvement with “the orientalist/capitalist-imperialist project” and the attendant complicity (= guilt) of their composers. Clearly, the kind of cartoonish postcolonialism suggested by such a locution is untethered from the music it purports to be engaging, and the preemptive disavowal of transcultural musics that don’t pass ideological litmus tests is more draconian even than the aesthetic snobbery of

criticism past (McClary's "old-fashioned hierarchies of taste"). Common sense dictates that it is impossible to proscribe, limit, or in any way regulate the cultural conversations that transcultural musics by definition embody and provide; attempts to do so reduce criticism, postcolonial, or any other kind, to ideological gate-keeping, which is neither its proper function nor its right.

Not all authors have taken this extreme position. Derek Scott's "Orientalism and Musical Style" offers a survey of both musical exotica and the ways in which such music both essentializes its subjects and also, paradoxically, refers to other exotic musics rather than that of the people in question.²⁷ (This is the natural result of the evocation of Others via nonspecific but widely understood "exotic" gestures like drones and jingling ornaments.) Ralph P. Locke, perhaps our most careful writer and thinker on exoticism, orientalism, and postcolonialism in music, has repeatedly wrestled with the issues attendant on representation in music, starting with his aforementioned *Samson et Dalila* study and, more recently, teasing out the various sub-issues in "Exoticism and Orientalism in Music: Problems for the Worldly Critic," his contribution to the Said Festschrift edited by Paul A. Bové.²⁸ Two very significant contributions, to my mind, are Locke's articles on Verdi's *Aida*, which both answer, in a sense, Said's treatment of that opera in *Culture and Imperialism* and demonstrate the ways in which a truly contrapuntal critic can use the conceptual framework of orientalist awareness and postcolonial critique to illuminate a celebrated, problematic work without assuming a stance that amounts to proscription.²⁹ "Aida and Nine Readings of Empire" is particularly helpful in that it posits not one but nine different orientalist readings, from the most literal (Egypt is Ancient Egypt; Ethiopia is Nubia, and "orientalism" is relevant in its decorative sense) to the most symbolic ("Ancient Egypt" represents any abusive power, and the opera functions as commentary upon "any situation in which an overwhelming power structure comes into conflict with basic principles of human rights"³⁰). On the way, there are interpretations involving the ancient world and modern Egypt (or the "timeless middle east"), Risorgimento Italy, any imperial power within Europe, and any European imperial power operating outside Europe. The concerns are present, in other words, but so is the gloriously maddening counterpoint of thick cultural context in which the opera grew. The self-and-other possibilities are undeniably present but are also varied and shifting, as is to be expected from a work of musical theater that has clearly transcended its immediate environment and context. I believe that there is a relative paucity of such studies in the area of postcolonial music criticism; many writers seem to be more comfortable with forceful

single interpretations than with positing a variety of persuasive possibilities, orientalism-informed or not.

It is this doctrinaire postcolonialism that is most unblinkingly put forward by Matthew Head. Initially developed in his book *Orientalism, Masquerade, and Mozart's Turkish Music* in 2000, Head's postcolonial position was crystallized in a 2003 piece in *Music Analysis*, which is in some measure a review (so stated) of my own work on musical exoticism: *The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe* (1993) and the edited volume *The Exotic in Western Music* (1998). It is the oppositional model that seems to govern Head's view, primarily: "Music's affiliation with Orientalism is made poignant by Western culture's habit of Othering its own musical practices," he writes (though acknowledging in an endnote that the concept of a Western culture is "a hugely problematic field saturated with assumptions of an enclosed, purified, homogeneous, and developmentally as well as historically autonomous realm").³¹ The obvious ironies here are that the nonexistence of a monolithic "western" culture (1) does not stop him from using such a construct (though he does so "blushingly"), and (2) in doing so he—apparently wittingly—steps into precisely the critical bear-traps that the postcolonial subdiscipline purportedly seeks to avoid. Most crucially, the perspective that demands more nuanced and polyphonic views of the Other and his or her culture, religion, appearance and so on effectively forbids, owing to the convenience of the binaristic paradigm, such conceptions from ever being formulated.

This particular strain of postcolonialist criticism recognizes no neutral observation or inquiry or even the possibility of learning about something unfamiliar; even naming and categorizing are acts of appropriation and hegemony. For Head, then, Michael V. Pisani's study of representations of American Indians³² falls short because the author "prefers to address the politics of representation at the level of what representations have to 'say' about their subjects." Pisani did proceed outward from the music—many would consider this a wise approach for a musicologist to take—but his entire chapter is devoted to the conversation between a particular repertoire and the cultural currents it engages, not "the music itself." Still, Head explains, if Pisani's piece "is to be seen to be responsibly self-aware,"

then any focus on the "content" or representations needs to be augmented by some questioning of the politics of representation itself as an act of identification and/or mastery. Hence if, as Pisani states, representations of Native American Indians are "cultural artifacts," then surely their "cultural" character inheres in their textuality and modes of

performance as much as in their face-value messages. Can we really distinguish so clearly between how white America has organized its indigenous population textually and how it has organized them politically and militarily?³³

That Pisani's piece was the first systematic treatment of the music of the American Indianist school, both the musical gestures themselves and their cultural resonances, therefore mattered not at all. Unless his research into a musical style encompassed a thoroughgoing critique of U.S. government policies toward American Indians, it is—*explicitly*—not “to be seen to be responsibly self-aware.” No matter how unfamiliar and in need of review such musical dialects have become, identifying and explaining them for the modern reader merely constitute more orientalism on the part of the writer, and complicity in the colonizing process: “The taxonomic approach to orientalism's already taxonomic knowledge goes hand in hand with a reductive and essentializing treatment of music's already reductive and essentializing signs for the Other.”³⁴ Pisani and I (and, for that matter, Franz Liszt) are criticized for this,³⁵ though the need for actual language competency in order for informed critique to be practicable—our stated goal, since these are, after all, historical musical dialects—is never really acknowledged.

The very forcefulness and the narrowness of the task Head sets himself and the forcefulness of the way he goes about begin, ultimately, to weaken his effect. For example, it is with a certain forced flair that he engages in the rhetorical sleight-of-hand that makes Susan McClary—among the steeliest cultural critics, and as we have seen one very sensitive to Orientalist stereotypes—an orientalist herself (i.e., the oppositional model again). Head is speaking of McClary's 1992 Cambridge Opera Guide to Bizet's *Carmen*:

Resisting the tendency of orientalizing to disempower and stigmatize its subjects, McClary figured the Otherness of Bizet's *Carmen* as empowering, *Carmen*'s transgression of moral and musical-aesthetic norms as proto-feminist. This celebratory approach recuperated *Carmen*'s ethnic, sexual, and musical difference as modes of resistance to a regime of bourgeois female normativity. Through this argument's reverse discourse in which the abject is reclaimed and championed—McClary recuperated the opera for those modern audiences who find its fear of female sexuality objectionable and/or banal. Yet this shift notwithstanding, McClary, in fine orientalist fashion, still “used” *Carmen* as a figure of desire—her account of *Carmen* as a fantasy of bourgeois male heterosexual patriarchy is flipped over into a feminist desire for an ancestral female figure, for an icon of the liberated and self-determining woman. *Carmen*'s identity as

a Spanish “gypsy” [sic] begins to appear as a mask for another: the twentieth-century American feminist as represented by McClary herself, or her narrative voice. McClary colonized Carmen in a meta-orientalist reading that marshals one of the fundamental orientalist figures: the acceptance of the culture of the Other as a utopian form of existence free from the repression and restraints of one’s own society. In short, even reappropriations and re-readings of orientalist texts do not necessarily escape orientalist predispositions.³⁶

Positioning McClary as an orientalist herself is hard to take seriously. Head seems, here, to have given the game away: whenever there is an oppositional point of view, one’s opponent can always be put in the rhetorical position of “Othering” something, of “colonizing” something, and thereby of committing the very sins s/he seeks to identify and excoriate. The person making such an identification, of course, wins by identifying the opponent as a de facto orientalist and/or colonizing entity.

It is, finally, the imperatives of the polarized postcolonialist view of power relations that lead Head to deemphasize the music itself in this critical effort. Writing about my 1998 anthology *The Exotic in Western Music*, he observes that

while several of the essays . . . preserve an urgent sense of the potential magnitude of the field, the majority appear content to retreat from the forthright arguments of the early 1990s in which orientalism was read as a cultural branch of imperialism (imperialism at home in the relations between the sexes and abroad in the form of overseas intervention, domination, and empire). A tone of defensiveness, a lack of explicitness about critical framework and a recourse to “the musical” as apparently furnishing some realm free of culture and ideology, amount to an unscholarly resistance to, rather than explicit engagement with, postcolonial and, more broadly, cultural theory. There is no *scholarly* [emphasis in original] escape route from this theory because the existing literature, within and beyond musicology, has already made it relevant.³⁷

So recourse to “the musical” (in writing about music, remember) is now but a defensive strategy enabling writers to avoid “culture and ideology,” which can only be addressed, it seems, on his own terms. These terms include lumping feminist and gender concerns (“imperialism at home in the relations between the sexes”) together with cultural and geopolitical ones (“and abroad in the form of overseas intervention, domination, and empire”). Engagement on terms other than these amounts to “unscholarly resistance,” because “there is no *scholarly* escape route from this theory” and its imperatives. After quoting the second half of the

passage above in his opening editorial in the journal, editor Jonathan Cross—apparently of the opinion that Head did not quite state the case strongly enough—glossed it this way: “In other words, like it or not, even die-hard formalists have been shown that they have no choice but to sit up and attend what has been going on in the world around them.”³⁸

One has to wonder who these nefarious die-hard formalists are—they certainly make a more convenient abstraction than identifiable reality, and none are addressed in Head’s article. It is not “formalists” to whom Head directs, as a *révérence*, a closing wag of the finger:

Indeed, orientalism receives its own academic currency as a topic as a result of colonial and postcolonial realities, however distant scholars feel these to be from their own career paths, publication pressures, and musical experiences. Thus to raise the question of orientalism in respect of musical practices and beliefs today, only to don one’s pith hat against theory, is actually to close down the adventure of interpretation and sign up for a musicological safari.³⁹

It would be too easy to point out, with tongue in cheek, that Head seems to have become quite the colonialist himself, Othering those with a different critical perspective and colonizing the entire landscape for his own project. The use of a pith-helmeted caricature for those not on board with him is the most obvious example of Othering via stereotype, but he goes into more detail: they are “scholars” in the paragraph above but (as we saw before) they are “unscholarly” and they have “no scholarly escape route” from cultural theory. The real master-stroke consisted of de-legitimizing Susan McClary’s feminist criticism of Bizet’s *Carmen*, dismissing her as an orientalist herself (the context borders on name-calling), then appropriating the entire area of gender studies, especially her feminist concerns, by subsuming it under the postcolonialist project (“imperialism at home in the relations between the sexes”). Thus, Head’s own postcolonial project—the Greater Good, in other words, with its historical inevitability—must take precedence over the particular, the local, the personal, and even the musical, because of its “academic currency,” because “the existing literature . . . has already made it relevant.” Because there is a lot of talk about something, in other words, it must be the only conversation to have.

Head’s strident rhetoric here requires me to observe that he seems to have confused his own critical perspective with hard science or higher mathematics. Criticism offers ideas and interpretations that may

or may not enlighten those who reflect upon them, but they do not offer hard facts that must be included in a growing body of basic knowledge. The fact that particular critical works exist does *not* mean that all future writing on related subjects has to acknowledge and engage them or be adjudged incomplete. That much is written about a perspective, however forcefully, does not by definition legitimize or canonize it. This abstract principle is as true for binary postcolonialism as it is for, say, Creation Science or a geocentric view of our solar system. Head seems to feel that his imperatives should perforce trump other scholars' (though he clearly considers them to be unscholarly) "career paths, publication pressures, and musical experiences," which is a strangely self-centered approach for a critic to take. No critical perspective, obviously, merits this kind of exceptional status.

To return to musical concerns: musical realities and experiences have long been transcultural, much as Said pointed out in the passage about identities quoted above, because human beings and cultures at their most narrow cannot come close to the zero-dimensional identities necessary for a second-wave postcolonialist argument. It is one of the primary roles of the responsible music scholar to address and explain *how music works*—to borrow an apposite phrase from Ian Bent's article under the subject entry "Analysis" in the *New Grove II* (1:528)—though my working definition would also encompass cultural confluences, cross-currents, juxtapositions, and so forth. The challenge is that music is certainly not less complex than any other art, and a wide variety of musical works, culturally comfortable and culturally uncomfortable, continue to speak to us. *What* and *how* and *why* are at the heart of what we need to be addressing. Of course, this does not mean that we hunker behind "the music itself" and imagine that we are properly limiting ourselves to our own rightful purview. Quite the contrary: addressing the multiplicity of identities and cultural conversations in transcultural music is a scholarly and critical necessity. But because the stylistic elements of transcultural works are precisely those that tend to be avoided by analysts, warnings such as Cross's about "strict formalism" ring hollow. (The real questions would be 1) why such perennially popular works are avoided by analysts, and 2) how a stylistically inclusive analysis of transcultural music might work, but these must be pursued elsewhere.)

What cannot be suffered is for scholars of any kind, musical or otherwise, to subvert all conversations about a particular repertoire to the imperatives of a single critical agenda, be it the "crucial project of postcolonial criticism" (Richardson) or any other. That approach produces propaganda, not scholarship, and the dismissals of differing approaches (whether with subtle implications of racism, as with the pith-helmet

remark, or with accusations of abdicated responsibilities) hardly strengthen the case. Scholarly integrity requires more than staking out one's own piece of the imaginary intellectual high ground. One suspects that the monothematic sonata-without-development that postcolonial music criticism seems to have become would have made even Edward Said wince.

“To Review and Recalibrate”

The primary failing of postcolonial criticism in music is that if it is not focusing on unequal power relations, hegemonies (physical and cultural), and the ensuing colonizations, then it seems not to address its purpose. Musical references to other peoples or places are treated with suspicion, as various writers (including some cited here) demonstrate. What postcolonial criticism is not equipped to do is address transcultural music where there is no perceived power differential, or at least none of interest. Chopin's apotheoses of Italian operatic *bel canto*, for example, or Liszt's virtuosic evocations of vernacular Italian songs and dances are clearly transcultural, but since a case cannot be persuasively made that these lionized composer-virtuosi were reducing or essentializing Italians via the stylistic markers of their music, such works are ignored. Spain offers an even more problematic example; Spanish exoticism via musical markers is an old, old tradition, but the power differential kept changing. “Spain” might evoke the glories of Moorish Al-Andalus, the Spanish imperial cruelty in the new world, the rigidity of Most Catholic Spain in the Counter-Reformation, Enlightenment condescension about the decrepitude of a long-vanquished and formerly feared power, a colorful but harmless tourist spot of later decades, or (going full circle) the remnant of an ancient and glorious golden age of power, civilization, and even *convivencia*. The cultural complexities are forbidding, so aside from James Parakilas's definitive study “How Spain Got a Soul,”⁴⁰ people tend to stay away from the subject, despite the obvious cultural and musical richness. Unless the relationship between the cultures being musically juxtaposed is of an exploitative kind, postcolonial criticism has little to offer, and is thus of marginal relevance—shrill denials to the contrary—for the vast majority of transcultural music. And it is precisely this point which enables a sage voice to talk us back from the critical ledge.

Glenn Watkins has recently reminded the entire critical community that what he calls the “old Orientalism question”—“Who is colonizing who?”—seems almost quaintly out of date if one considers the omnidirectional globalism of musical dissemination.⁴¹ Asian orchestras

throw themselves at western classical repertoire with an urgent abandon that is too often lacking here, numerous composers use both the gestural vocabularies and musical processes of differing musics for cultural and artistic explorations, and a variety of east–west projects (Yo-Yo Ma’s *Silk Road* endeavors, compositions of Tan Dun and Michael Tenzer, and so on) illustrate that the less freighted concepts of cultural transfer, borrowing, encounter, and even gift exchange have more to offer the wide world of transcultural music criticism than hegemony and appropriation. Watkins quotes some pertinent words of Karlheinz Stockhausen:

If a European is moved by a piece of Indian music, he discovers the Indian within himself. If a Japanese is touched by some European music, he finds within himself a European from the period when this music was born out of the inner pressures of an absolutely specific historical moment. . . . The great shock occurs when someone who approached an unfamiliar culture with harmless curiosity is so moved by this experience that he or she falls head over heels in love with it.⁴²

I consider the experience of falling head over heels in love with an unfamiliar kind of music to be a universal experience among musicians. Yet read from a postcolonial perspective, Stockhausen’s thoughts would provoke harsh criticism: can there be an “Indian within” myself, if I am not an Indian? (Can it be aught but appropriative masquerade, in other words?) Colonization of the Other’s very identity aside, is it even possible to “approach an unfamiliar culture with harmless curiosity” when the very act of naming, as we have been told, is already a kind of appropriation? Surely such curiosity can never be harmless because exposure to an unfamiliar culture will require translation and explanation—themselves acts of colonization—and individuals’ “musical experiences” are only of marginal relevance to current critical imperatives . . .

No need to belabor the point further. Watkins wisely observes that current postcolonial perspectives suggest that “there is a need to review and recalibrate the cultural assets that have accrued to the West through [the] extended two-way interface with the Orient,”⁴³ and I would agree, though I tend to think that it is postcolonialism itself that needs review and recalibration, given the demonstrable post-Saidian flattening of perspective on Occidental–Oriental interaction. Music criticism based on Orientalist currents is not necessarily wrong, but its applicability is too limited, methodologically and culturally, to be broadly useful. Musical transculturation itself probably dates back to the first intentional sounding of vocal or instrumental pitches for pleasure or art,

to the first time a primitive human found another's music interesting or alluring, and it goes in all directions: master to slave (and vice versa), colonizer and colonized (and vice versa), north–south and east–west (and vice versa), majority–minority (and vice versa). The real imperative, to my mind, is to fashion some critical approaches and vocabularies that do not disfigure their musical–cultural subjects by engaging them only in the context of a particular nonmusical agenda.

Notes

Jonathan D. Bellman is the area head of Academic Studies in Music and a professor of Music History and Literature at the University of Northern Colorado. He earned piano performance degrees from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the University of Illinois, and a Doctor of Musical Arts in Piano Performance Practices at Stanford University in 1990. His latest book, *Chopin's Polish Ballade: Op. 38 as Narrative of National Martyrdom*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2010; he has also published books with Northeastern University Press (*The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe*, 1993, and *The Exotic in Western Music*, 1998) and one with Longman, *A Short Guide to Writing about Music* (2000; 2nd ed. 2007). Email: jonathan.bellman@unco.edu.

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978; New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
2. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Memories and Commentaries* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1960), 59.
3. Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* [1952], 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 206.
4. Susan McClary, review of Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, *Notes* 96, no. 52 (June 1996): 1142.
5. George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Post-modernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 60–61.
6. Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 34–35. His entire second chapter, “Questions of Value” (23–42), is especially helpful in situating Said's book in the context of his later work on the subject and that of other critics.
7. Edward Said, “The Empire at Work: Verdi's *Aida*,” in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993; New York: Knopf, 1994), 111–32.
8. Said, *Orientalism*, 27–28. Said is sober but not blind about *Aida* and what he considers to be its imperial undercurrents.
9. Jonathan Bellman, “Introduction,” in *The Exotic in Western Music* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), ix.
10. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxvi.
11. See Said, *Music at the Limits* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), an anthology of his music criticism.
12. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 336.

13. Nicholas Cook, "Encountering the Other, Redefining the Self: Hindostannie Aires, Haydn's Folksong Settings, and the 'Common Practice' Style," in *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s–1940s*, ed. Martin Clayton and Bennett Zon (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 15. The Said passage Cook quotes is from *Musical Elaborations* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991), 52.
14. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 330–31.
15. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiv.
16. Said, *Music at the Limits*, 134–39.
17. Ralph P. Locke, "Constructing the Oriental 'Other': Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3 (1991): 261–302, is a definitive early treatment, and he has written a great deal on the subject since that piece; Linda Phyllis Austern, "'Forreine Conceites and Wandring Devises': The Exotic, the Erotic, and the Feminine," in Bellman, ed., *The Exotic in Western Music*.
18. Orient itself as Woman received substantial attention from Said's *Orientalism* onward; Jann Pasler identifies this pattern in the music of Maurice Delage in "Race, Orientalism, and Distinction in the Wake of the 'Yellow Peril,'" in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hedsmondhalgh (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).
19. Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet: "Carmen"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
20. See also Joep Bor, "Mamia, Ammani, and Other Bayadères: Europe's Portrayal of India's Temple Dancers," in *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s–1940s: Portrayal of the East*, and Claire Mabilat, *Orientalism and Representations of Music in the Nineteenth-Century British Popular Arts* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), especially Chapter 2, "Sexualizing the Other."
21. Pasler, "Race, Orientalism, and Distinction," 94. Pasler's analysis of Roussel's travel sketchbook from this time (1909–10) suggests that he seemed consistently more interested in material that could be developed compositionally than in the faithful transcription of the music he encountered.
22. Michael Tenzer, "Orientalism, Western Music, and Crosscultural Contact," published in the program book for the festival weekend *East Meets West* (Chicago Symphony Orchestra, 8–11 February 1996), and *Orientalism* (Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, 16–18 February 1996), 13.
23. George Crumb, "Music: Does It Have a Future?" [*The Kenyon Review*, Summer 1980], *The Official George Crumb Home Page*, <http://www.georgecrumb.net/future.html> (accessed 30 November 2009).
24. John Richardson, *Singing Archaeology: Philip Glass's "Akhnaten"* (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 195.
25. Richardson, *Singing Archaeology*, 196.

26. Richardson, *Singing Archaeology*, 195. The quoted words in the middle of the passage are from Ralph P. Locke, "Constructing the Oriental 'Other': Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*," 285.
27. "Orientalism and Musical Style" [1997] is Chapter 7 of Derek B. Scott, *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
28. Paul A. Bové, ed., *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power* (Durham: Durham University Press, 2000).
29. Ralph P. Locke, "Beyond the Exotic: How 'Eastern' Is *Aida*?," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 17, no. 2 (July 2005): 105–39; and Locke, "*Aida* and Nine Readings of Empire," *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 3, no. 1 (March 2006): 45–72. Much of Locke's thought is to be found in revised form in his recent *Musical Exoticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
30. Locke, "*Aida* and Nine Readings," 49.
31. Matthew Head, "Musicology on Safari: Orientalism and the Spectre of Postcolonial Theory," *Music Analysis* 22, nos. 1–2 (2003): 216 and 227n8.
32. The study in question is Michael V. Pisani, "'I'm an Indian Too': Creating Native American Identities in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Music," in Bellman, ed., *The Exotic in Western Music*, 218–57. Pisani subsequently published a book devoted to the subject, *Imagining Native America in Music* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).
33. Head, "Musicology on Safari," 222.
34. Head, "Musicology on Safari," 223.
35. Head, "Musicology on Safari," 223, and *Orientalism, Masquerade, and Mozart's Turkish Music* (London: Royal Musical Association, 2000), 16. Thomas Bauman, curiously, is not criticized, although his 1987 Cambridge Opera Guide to Mozart's *Entführung aus dem Serail* provides just such a taxonomy of "Turkish" Style gestures in order to fulfill its analytical task.
36. Head, "Musicology on Safari," 217.
37. Head, "Musicology on Safari," 218.
38. Jonathan Cross, Editorial, *Music Analysis* 22, nos. 1–2 (2003): 2.
39. Head, "Musicology on Safari," 227. Head is not the only such stridently prescriptive voice; Grant Olwage, reviewing a recent anthology of studies on Orientalism in British music, opined that many of the essays were "for the most part too literal in their interpretations and somewhat naïve in their nod to cultural theory, with which scholarship tackling the weighty issues of race and power must by force engage." Grant Olwage, review of *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s–1940s: Portrayal of the East*, ed. Martin Clayton and Bennett Zon, in *Victorian Studies* 51, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 540–42.
40. James Parakilas, "How Spain Got a Soul," in Bellman, ed., *The Exotic in Western Music*, 137–93.

41. Glenn Watkins, "Beyond Orientalism?," in *On Bunker's Hill: Essays in Honor of J. Bunker Clark*, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Sterling Heights, MI: Harmonic Park Press, 2007), 299–308.
42. Karlheinz Stockhausen, "Beyond Global Village Polyphony," in *Towards a Cosmic Music: Texts by Karlheinz Stockhausen*, trans. Tim Nevill (Longmead, UK: Element, 1989), 24–25, 30–31; quoted in Watkins, "Beyond Orientalism?," 301.
43. Watkins, "Beyond Orientalism?," 302.