

# AMERICAN MUSIC AND THE “NEW ROMANTICISM”



KYLE ROTHWEILER

 **Libertarian  
Alliance**

Modern music criticism has engaged in a Herculean endeavor to misunderstand Romanticism, both as a historic and as a modern phenomenon. The nineteenth century Romantics are relegated to the status of antiques. Their musical language is declared suitable for the musical museums of formal concerts but not worth taking seriously by modern composers. Above all, the modern critic attempts to reduce Romanticism to a mere conglomeration of techniques, some effective and some excessive, but all nothing more than techniques, and those obsolete.

The main complaint the critics make against Romantic music is its subjectivity; it is too personal, too obsessively focused on the emotions of the composer. Subjectivity is equated with solipsism and *ipso facto*,

irrationality. Leaving aside the emotional qualities of most music, what is to prevent a composer from treating his subjective states “objectively”? The very fact that Romantic music conveys so vividly an enormous range of emotional states should indicate that the artists capable of expressing such affective variety cannot be helpless victims of their own feelings. A man chained by the subjective states of, say, *Tristan und Isolde* would be incapable of writing them down; as Richard Strauss said, only a man made of ice could have composed that opera.

One clue to the Romantics’ objectivity is provided by their famous predilection for extramusical associations, for program symphonies and tone poems, for operas and other vocal works, for theoretical dis-

## Cultural Notes No. 16

ISSN 0267 677X ISBN 1 870614 21 6

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,  
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN  
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1989, Kyle Rothweiler; *Chronicles of Culture*; Libertarian Alliance.

This article was first published in *Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 11 No. 6, June 1987.  
Kyle Rothweiler is a freelance writer and composer.

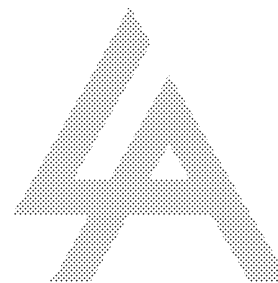
The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Executive Editor: Brian Micklethwait

Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**



cussion of the moral and philosophical implications of their work — all attempts to give concrete, palpable form to their nebulous inner states. Complete subjectivists would not have bothered; they probably would not have composed at all.

The effort on the part of modern critics to dismiss Romanticism is not purely malicious nihilism; it is also intended to clear the way for the “music of the future”, “atonal” serialism. Twelve-tone music and the other Rube Golbergian systems of modernism are, incredibly, still believed to be scientific and rational approaches to the problem of tonal art. In fact, such music is often more hysterical than that of the most extreme Romantics, although the range of emotions is practically confined to a gamut between confusion and panic (with occasional hints of lethargy and blind rage).

The modern critic lives in constant terror of having posterity heap abuse on him as it has on the contemporary foes of Beethoven, Wagner, and other musical innovators. He dreads the verdict of the yet unborn, who will pronounce him a boor for opposing the latest auditory gimcrackery. The critic praises everything, and the more incomprehensible it is the more loudly he praises it, hoping to shine as a prophet in future editions of *Grove's*. The only new music he ignores or disparages is that which living people might actually want to listen to — especially modern Romanticism, which he considers reactionary (read Andrew Porter in *The New Yorker* if you think this is hyperbole).

The simplest and most effective way to dismiss twentieth century Romanticism, or any new music that does not conform to the serialist dogma, is to pretend it doesn't exist. In this light it is easy to understand the *Harvard Dictionary of Music* declaration that “new music is, briefly stated, anti-Romanticism” or William H. Youngren's offhand remark in *The Atlantic* of December 1983 that “the rejection of tonality by virtually all of this century's serious composers has brought with it unforeseen difficulties.”

It is only a critic hewing to the anti-Romantic, prose-rial line who could have come up with a catch-phrase as silly and superfluous as “the New Romanticism”, which one hears applied to the work of certain recent American composers. The expression has some value as a means of distinguishing their music from what is churned out by serialist academia, but the “New” is superfluous because Romanticism, particularly in this country, has never grown old.

American Romanticism is, paradoxically, an entirely modern phenomenon. During the great age of Romanticism in Germany, France, Italy, and Russia, American music lay dormant or toddled around uncertainly, unable to inspire any powerful individual

voices. It was only around the turn of the century that Charles Ives produced his splendid Second and Third Symphonies (written before his descent into eccentricity) and became the first American composer to combine a uniquely personal style and a powerful moral urgency with musical nationalism — three vital Romantic principles.

Ives's music was, of course, practically unknown during his lifetime, but he was hardly singular. Twentieth-century American composers like John Alden Carpenter, Charles Griffes, Walter Piston, Howard Hanson, Roy Harris, Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, David Diamond — all of them are, in one way or another, Romantic in their fundamental approach to composition.

Of course, few if any of these composers would have admitted to being Romantics. The very word has become debased and cheapened, suggesting syrupy strings, bombastic brasses, and pretty piano-playing. No hardheaded modern composer would think of allowing the insult of being branded “Romantic” to go unchallenged.

But the critical obfuscations on this subject have filled it with turmoil. There is no longer even any clear consensus on who was or wasn't a Romantic. Beethoven, to the nineteenth century the Father of Romanticism, is now often cleared of this charge by musicians and critics, who insist that he was really classical. But if Beethoven was no Romantic, then what about Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Brahms, whose music is just as much, if not more, classical? What about Wagner, whose harmonic innovations actually mark him as the first modern composer? What about the hyper-Romantic Berlioz, who didn't like the term and avoided it?

It is always possible to redistribute labels and rearrange periods, but Romanticism is neither a musical style nor a set of slogans, but a musical philosophy, a way of artistic life. It involves a conception of music that takes full cognizance of its philosophical, ethical, psychological, and political implications. It is music specifically created to transcend the classical concept of music as mere sounds, even if greatly enjoyable and pleasurable ones. As J. W. N. Sullivan says in his book *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, the composer “was altogether too much convinced of the overwhelming importance of good and evil to take up an ‘art for art's sake’ attitude”, and the same applies, to one degree or another, to every important Romantic composer, each of whom took Beethoven as his chief point of reference. In truth, with his conception of music as a moral enterprise, Beethoven invented Romanticism in music, and it is as futile to try to divorce him from it as it is to try to divorce Einstein from the Theory of Relativity.

The moral intentions of Beethoven's compositions are often specific and concrete. The *Eroica* symphony gives unqualified support to the morality of heroism. *Fidelio* affirms the morality of political freedom; the Ninth Symphony, the morality of joy; in the *Missa Solemnis*, the morality of belief in God. Obviously, Beethoven's morality is no traditional morality — it is the morality of liberation, not the morality of suppression. It is this conception of morality which the subsequent Romantics embraced and on which they rang their changes.

The Romantic period was notable for its unprecedented range and variety of styles. How much did Chopin sound like Bruckner, or Brahms like Berlioz, or Schubert like Liszt? Not much. Similarly, modern American composers cannot escape the epithet of "Romantics" on the grounds of stylistic heterogeneity; on the contrary, Romantic music is identifiable by the number of idioms it is capable of supporting. Copland and Harris don't sound like Schumann or Dvorak because, like all good Romantics, they sound like themselves.

Modern critics to the contrary, Romanticism goes much deeper than surface mannerisms; it is a matter of essential spirit. Listen to Copland's Third Symphony, observe its expansive melodies, its epic proportions, its cumulative energy, its power and heroism, its highly nationalistic character, which brings with it so many concrete extramusical associations, so intense a realization of the moral and political greatness of the American experiment — how to describe this, if not as "Romantic"? Or Harris' Third, with, again, its nationalism and nobility, and also its astonishingly original architecture, its sense of being hewn in a single piece from the composer's brain?

Harris' music is still a vast mystery. Copland described his colleague as "the American Mussorgsky", and the comparison is apt; both men seemed to come from nowhere esthetically, were ignorant of or indifferent to rigid formal procedures, and produced, seemingly by sheer effort of will, almost crudely powerful and original music. As Glenn Gould said of the Russian, "He is like a person who ceases to talk the moment he has nothing further to say"; likewise Harris, whose works gestate out of their basic materials: there is no structural padding. Each Harris work strikes out into new, uncharted territory, sometimes uncertainly but always full of confidence. His works all have their own maps, and if one is guided by the conventional maps of musical geography, one may miss the unusual beauty of many of his landscapes.

A composer engaged in such risky undertakings is due for more than his share of failures, and to many, much of his music is less than completely successful.

To such listeners, Harris is often awkward and unsophisticated; he is certainly the reverse of slick and facile. But to those who can see beneath the often clumsy surface, Harris' music, even at its worst, retains a raw emotional appeal. His music lacks subtlety — an overrated artistic virtue — but Harris' rich polyphony, vigorous rhythms, simple melodiousness, and dramatic sense of form have a deeply moving directness which makes the overrefined preciousness of less committed composers seem trivial.

Harris' most important works, his thirteen symphonies, are seldom performed. Harris sank into near obscurity after World War II, and his work has been quite shamefully neglected for the past thirty years. Not coincidentally, Harris' reputation plummeted just as "atonality" was coming into fashion. Atonality was supposed to be the only sensible replacement for the theoretically worn-out clichés of traditional harmony. But the modern American romantics have either ignored atonality completely or have used it only infrequently, as a change of pace or to stretch their technical facility. Serialism became, in effect, a new form of classicism in the second half of this century (replacing, to a large extent, "neo-classicism"); it became a new set of formulae for uninspired academic hacks to plug into.

Composers of serial music like to posture as fiery-eyed individualists launching their art into the glorious future, but the ridiculous truth is that they are typically specimens of bureaucratic Modern Man, clinging desperately to the foundering hulk of our cultural institutions and unable to create anything. Safely ensconced in universities and music schools, they are only capable of imitating the cheesy compositional gimmicks of Schoenberg and Webern. In any art, in any period of history, there is always a vast underbelly of mediocrities who, like it or not, constitute the overwhelming majority — and it is here, and only here that serialism has triumphed. In a way, the twelve-tone method provides a useful public service. It is an efficient means of eliminating mediocrities and consigning them to oblivion.

It is true that we have to endure the bubble reputations (in the critic's mouth) of people like Eliot Carter. Carter is full of the usual expressionistic tricks: an spasmodic rhythms, aimless "harmony", impenetrable "counterpoint", and creepy modernistic "melodies" that were stale fifty years ago.

There may be those who would claim that Carter's music reveals his soul — which, if true, is a more biting condemnation of him and his music than the claim that it doesn't. But of course Carter would hotly deny that his compositions reveal anything about anything. Modern academic atonalists subscribe to the theory of music as "just sound", i.e., the

theory that tonal art is an exercise in acoustics with no significance beyond the noises produced. Modern musical esthetics, in effect, rejects Beethoven and the entire Romantic concept of art as a philosophical, moral, and psychological enterprise. The moral aspects of tonality being denied, tonality itself is considered expendable.

It should hardly be necessary to point out that moral import in music can only be communicated in the context of a tonal system — a system that utilizes structural harmony and in which chromatic extravagances are made with reference to a firm diatonic base. There can be no atonal moral music, no atonal Romanticism. “Atonal music” is an oxymoron, anyway — all music is made up of tones. But the chaotically chromatic, harmonically unstructured music that is loosely called atonal is in fact amoral — it abandons the realm of ethical choice in art that was so crucial to Beethoven and leaps blindly into academic formulae. It is significant that in Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck*, one of the more successful atonal works, when the composer, towards the end, wishes to draw a musical moral from the operatic proceedings, he drops the serial style completely and writes in powerful, tragic D minor.

In a way, the achievement of the modern American Romantics is even more impressive than that of their European predecessors. During the nineteenth century, ethics was only in a state of turmoil — in the present century, it is practically extinct. For a composer to stick by the idea of music as a moral force is in these times an act of heroism. Roy Harris was much ridiculed for the high-flown descriptions he attached to some of his works. Of his Seventh Symphony of 1955 he said: “In this work I have hoped to communicate the spirit of affirmation as a declaration of faith in Mankind.” If may sound silly, but in an amoral age, the attachment of such ideas to a musical work may indicate nothing more than a composer’s attempts to keep his artistic bearings — to keep in focus his responsibility to prevent the disintegration of the “art of arts” into mere formulaic note-spinning.

It is to their credit that the major American composers have upheld that responsibility despite the enormous pressure of critics and theorists to abandon it; the best makers of modern music have had the brains to ignore modern musical esthetics. This has been the case from Ives to the present, which is why I consider the phrase “New Romanticism” as superfluous. The music of George Rochberg, David Del Tredici and John Adams is in the mainstream of our best modern composers, owing as much to Barber and Hanson as to the “Old Romantics”. The thread of modern American Romanticism has never really been broken. The very term “New Romanticism” is

in fact only a gimmick, an arthritic gesture on the part of critics to attempt to convince listeners that some new-old stuff has temporarily supplanted the more historically important music of the serial school.

Actually, Romanticism’s coming out of the closet is one of the healthiest signs in American culture in years. In the end, the public will have the music it wants, and what it wants is Romanticism. The devotees of serious music, strangely enough, have never abandoned their need of Romantic music as a moral guide in the modern world, which is why Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, and Verdi retain their central places in the standard repertoire.

I make no claims that the “New Romantics” are fully conscious of the moral meaning of music. The collapse of ethics and esthetics has probably advanced too far for any immediate recognition of the vital philosophical potency of music. The impulse towards Romanticism seems to be largely a subconscious one at present.

Del Tredici, while intentionally grounding his music in the Romantic century (specifically in Victorian England), has been preoccupied with the oddly modern — in their irrationality and amorality — Lewis Carroll *Alice* stories. Yet Del Tredici seems to be wanting to grow away from the surrealistic *Alice* material. *In Memory of a Summer Day*, composed in 1980, has little to do with Carroll’s weird alternate universes and more with his touching love for the real Alice. The central episode, “Triumphant Alice”, is supposed to be an unwritten “Wonderland” story, but is in fact a grand heroic march worthy of Raff or Richard Strauss. Del Tredici is on the right track, but he is still groping: his obsession with *Alice* is a little ridiculous in a man approaching fifty.

On the other hand, John Adams, not yet forty, seems much more sure of his ethical position. Adams can say with perfect forthrightness and conviction (on the album cover of the recording of his 1985 orchestral work *Harmonielehre*): “I find composing to be a journey through the underworld. And the reason I often have heroic endings in my pieces ... is that I’m totally amazed to have emerged from the tunnel into the light. The act of composing is the *creation* of the light for me — it really is like a biblical trial.” This is a strange thing for a modern composer to say. And what is even stranger is that this impassioned description of the creation of his music is matched by the remarkable score itself; *Harmonielehre* is a direct and unabashedly moving musical achievement. To those who understand the relation of Romantic music to human life, the “New Romanticism” is neither new nor unexpected. Its existence simply proves that our species is not quite ready to call it quits.