

The Recording Angel

Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa
Second Edition

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Chapter Two

Music becomes a thing

I give you wings. You'll soon be lifted up
Across the land, across the boundless crests
Of ocean; where men dine and pass the cup,
You'll light there, on the lips of all the guests,
Where lithe, appealing lads will praise you, swelling
Their song to match the piper's sweet, shrill tone.
At length, my boy, you'll enter Hades' dwelling,
That black hole where departed spirits moan,
But even there your glory will not cease,
Your well-loved name will stay alive, unworn;
You'll skim across the mainland, over Greece,
Over the islands and the sea, not borne
By horses, Kurmos; you'll be whirled along
By violet-crowned maids, the Muses; yours
Will be each practised singer's finest song
As long as light exists and earth endures.

When Theognis made this claim, all of Greek tradition backed him up. It was no secret in the sixth century BC that the poet could grant immortality. He kept the file on heroes, on sages, on beautiful women and boys, and so gave excellence a great incentive. But although the poet had always controlled immortality, it was only recently that he had got a share in it. The work of the oral bard had been anonymous, a thread in tradition's embroidery. Writing corrected this, since it could preserve not only the actors and argument of a tale but the teller's special arrangement of words. Now the poet's words really were winged and would fly, in strict formation, indefinitely.

The irony is that writing, even as it perfected poetry's wings,

clipped them. It tied poetry down to paper. It turned poetry into a thing. Poetry listeners became poetry owners, who could hoard scrolls or keep them as talismans. A good example might be Alexander the Great, whose armies gave wings to Greek culture and who (legend has it) kept the *Iliad* under his pillow wherever he encamped. Later, in the eponymous city he founded on the Nile delta, there arose a stupendous library and museum. Timon of Phlius, the Sceptic philosopher, called it the birdcage of the muses.

The irony is in the facts, the contradiction only in the metaphor. Wings mean giving the slip to earthly conditions, one of which is mortality. That is why we picture our angels with wings and why the Greeks saw their gods, including the Muses, airborne. In reality, though, winged creatures are not known for longevity. The really durable things (tortoises, stones) are precisely the most earthbound and inert, the most thingy. So in reality, the best way to set something intangible safely beyond time is to reify it.

The Greeks did not manage to preserve the musical ingredient of their poetry. Their pitch accents and rude alphabetic notation tell us little, and anyway the scores, except for a fistful of fragments, are lost. But in the European Middle Ages a system of musical notation arose of which ours is a refinement, and to which an unbroken tradition connects us. So it would seem that the music on the extant staves of the past seven or eight centuries has been preserved; but we should not be too sure. Average pitch has risen about a semitone since Mozart's day. As to tempo, for music that antedates the metronome, we have only some vague Italian phrases to guide us. And matters of expression and style – ornamentation, double-dotted, rubato and so on – are sometimes anybody's guess.

Isn't this nipping? By these standards, is our literary heritage any better preserved? After all, we can only guess how Milton spoke his verse (except for *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* he doesn't even indicate tempo). Somehow, though, it doesn't seem to matter. Holding my *Odyssey* Press edition, first published in 1935, I hold *Paradise Lost* itself. As long as I have a good idea of what the words meant in the author's day and a rough idea of how they sounded, I can appropriate the poem. This is *our* conception of poetry, anyway; a culture that connected verse and song might conceive otherwise. For us, the book is the work.

Perfect preservation is a matter not simply of technology, but of ontology as well. A defect of preservation is a defect of reification, and this is the trouble with clefs and quavers. They aren't music; they just represent it. The music itself is sound.

'I've just bought Beethoven's Seventh.' Hearing this, you don't expect to be shown the Eulenburg score, not unless you're a musician or you think I am; for in our passably literate society only musicians can read music. And even for a musician, silently reading a score does not provide the full aesthetic experience of a work, the way silently reading a novel does for litterateur and layman both. A musical score is a set of instructions, useful to those who can carry them out. So scores have been collected by musicians, by the patrons who retained them, and sometimes by investors. For the listening public at large, in every century but this one, there was no such thing as collecting music. The enthusiast might collect art and literature – even, in a weak way, drama – but not music. This circumstance could be seen as good or bad; from the point of view of the philistine it was very bad.

To the early-nineteenth-century German writers who gave him that nickname, the philistine was an enemy of the spirit. He was someone, usually someone with money, who took the assumptions of capitalism with him into the realm of culture. One assumption was that anything of value could be understood as a commodity to be bought and sold. The fact that most art took the form of objects was convenient. It implied that culture, too, could be had for a price. A rigorous liberal-arts education was not really necessary, and neither was any application of mind to works of art; all you needed were the objects. If there were paintings in the parlour no one would ask whether you'd looked at them – you weren't blind; some bumpkin might ask if you'd read all your books, but you had only to reply, as Anatole France (for subtler reasons) once did, 'Not one tenth of them. I suppose you use your Sèvres china every day?'

Music was inconvenient. The piano, because it cost a small fortune, became the prime status symbol of the bourgeois home. Scores could be collected; but they had to be piano music, or piano and voice, or four-hand reductions of orchestral music, and they had to be playable by the daughters of the house. A stack of difficult

scores would fool nobody, since the ladies were expected to exhibit their skills after dinner. Some rich men's daughters played so well that their teachers fell in love with them, but that was not what the rich men had in mind. They would rather have bought the music in bulk and kept the musicians away.

It was partly this resistance of music to philistine appropriation that made it the darling of the romantics – especially the early German romantics, who ranged themselves as *Davidbündler*, in Schumann's phrase, against the philistines of all the world. 'How melancholy a thing it is,' wrote Friedrich von Schlegel, 'to see a collection of the most interesting works of art heaped together merely as an assemblage of costly treasures! The void then stretches before us comfortless, hopeless, unfathomable. Man is beggared – art and life are rent asunder!' Repelled by commerce and commodities, the romantics became wary of things in general. Repelled by what we have come to call materialism, they lashed out at materialist science, at the analysis of the lived world into objects and more objects. Music seemed to resist that analysis.

Hegel, who without quite being part of romanticism came to dominate it, put music near the top of the hierarchy of arts erected in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Music was superior to architecture, sculpture and painting because it was not embodied, but ideal and subjective. It took second place to poetry, though, for where music was essentially sensual, poetry was a product of reason. Here Hegel shows his unromantic side. For the true romantic, music's apparent ability to bypass reason and go straight to the soul was as great a merit as its incorporeality. Writers like Tieck, Hoffmann and Jean Paul considered instrumental music the supreme art, to whose condition their own aspired. For the first time since the Renaissance, poets called themselves singers; they called their books *Lyrical Ballads*, *Hebrew Melodies*, *Buch der Lieder*. They were eager to have their words set to music – a humble attitude that encouraged a humble hybrid, the art song. 'I can neither play nor sing,' wrote Wilhelm Müller, 'yet when I write verses I sing and play after all. If I could produce the tunes, my songs would please me better than they do now. But courage. A kindred soul may be found who will hear the tunes behind the words, and give them back to me' – as

Schubert did when he set Müller's *Die Winterreise* and *Die schöne Müllerin*. It's hard to imagine Alexander Pope talking that way.

There was no hostility to literature among the romantics, only melancholy about its necessary form. 'Books,' said Emerson, 'are the death of literature.' 'True art is never fixed, but always flowing.' Here was another motive for the romantic suspicion of reified art: if life is flux, fixity is death. By this logic improvised music and folk music were the ideal; but composed music, as its playing allowed of spontaneous expression, also passed muster.

In 1877 music began to become a thing. The process took several decades, because the early phonograph allowed only a thumbnail impression of timbre and because Edison, who was partly deaf, turned his device to nonmusical and painfully unmusical uses. He meant it mainly for the business and family voice-recording chores that cassettes now handle, and when the public demanded music he gave them vaudeville ditties. In America the critical moment, the moment at which one might pinpoint the reification of music, was 1906. In that year the Victor company introduced the Victrola, the first phonograph designed as furniture, a console in 'piano-finished' mahogany that retailed at \$200. In the same year Victor's Red Seal line had its first real flowering, with Caruso and Patti heading the list. These one-sided records cost as much as seven dollars, which in 1906 could get you a full suit of clothes. Victor told its dealers: 'Not all your customers can afford to purchase a seven-dollar record, but the mere announcement of it will bring them to your store as a magnet attracts steel.' Even the less expensive Red Seals, being operatic, did not sell nearly as well as Victor's brass-band and vaudeville releases. But in Victor's advertising (and Victor was one of the first big advertisers in any industry) opera singers were glitteringly featured. As the firm explained to the trade, 'there is good advertising in Grand Opera'. The outcome of this strategy was that, to quote Roland Gelatt's *The Fabulous Phonograph*, 'a collection of Red Seal records established one as a person of both taste and property. Along with the leather-bound sets of Dickens, Thackeray and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Victor Red Seals became the customary adjunct of the refined American parlour, to

be displayed with becoming pride to impressionable guests and relations.'

There had been musical snobbery before this. But whereas dances, recitals and soirées remained slippery ground for the bourgeois, records brought music to his home turf, which was acquisition.

The collecting of cultural objects can satisfy any number of needs, among which snobbery may not be the most important. Here is a tentative list.

1 The need to make beauty and pleasure permanent. As beautiful sights and sounds go by one tries to grab them rather than trust them, or others as beautiful, to come around again. This indicates a mistrust of the world, a mistrust that goes back to the Greeks (at least) and helps explain why they made and preserved so much art. What is the sense of mimesis, after all? There will be other springs, other heroes, other *hetairai*. Why pin and press these specimens when others, alive and just as lovely, will surely flutter by? The Greeks might have answered, in part, that the latter will not be as excellent as the former. Hesiod saw things going downhill, the standards slipping, from gold to any old alloy. The Greeks had no faith in nature's abundance, or the Muses'. The market-place might teem with poets, but when would there be another Homer?

Arguably this mistrust is as old as man, and was Adam's true motive for seizing the apple. But in modern times it has become narrower, so that the concern is less for posterity than for one's own next few weeks. The paradox was seen most clearly by Blake:

He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sun rise.

2 The need to comprehend beauty. Beauty has its intellectual side, which is the more beautiful the better it's understood. When the mind exercises its prehensibility, it is natural for the fingers to take part, if only to keep the object in striking distance of the mind. Certainly owning a book or record permits one to study the work

repeatedly and at one's convenience. The danger lies in mistaking ownership for mastery.

3 The need to distinguish oneself as a consumer. In capitalism there are first heroes of production and then (as Riesman has shown) heroes of consumption. These are people who spend on an heroic scale, perhaps, or with heroic discrimination. The collector may be heroic in either of these ways, but the true collector's heroism is closer to the ancient model. It is exploit, the dauntless and cunning overcoming of obstacles in pursuit of the prize. The prize itself is secondary to the pursuit (if this is true of men generally, as Pascal thought, it is truer of heroes). Clarence's collecting is of this heroic type. His eagerness to share his collection, which at first seems to contradict the whole idea of acquisition, is just the openhandedness of the hero who, having pulled off his exploit, is free with the proceeds. Clarence will lend records out or give them away, but never sell one – imagine Menelaus selling the spoils of Troy! Clarence loves to talk about his collection, and how he came by this disc or that autograph. Every item is a trophy.

There is a paradox here, too. The true hero of consumption is a rebel against consumption. By taking acquisition to an ascetic extreme he repudiates it, and so transplants himself to an older and nobler world. (In the same way the true hero of production, the chivalrous captain of industry or reckless entrepreneur, rebels against production.) To write such behaviour off as conspicuous consumption is to miss its point. The prodigal son is not just a show-off.

4 The need to belong. Considered as a feeling, this need might be called nostalgia. When one feels nostalgia for a time one has lived in or wishes one had lived in, cultural objects are a fairly dignified tonic. What is really a wallowing in atavism can pass for the appreciation of timeless beauty. (In the same way, the art lover with bad taste can justify it as an interest in bygone fashions.) Each object connects its owner with two eras, that of its creation and that of its acquisition. Clarence, who was a full-fledged nostalgic even as a boy, learned in middle age a nostalgia much closer to the bone, a nostalgia for his 'heyday'. His records soothe both. They let him talk, too, both about the decades they were made in, which he may

or may not have lived through, and about the adventurous years when he got them.

In this, if in little else, Clarence is blessed. He has a past to mourn. He has been spared the most common and most pernicious nostalgia, nostalgia for the here and now. For most of us feel that we are at home, and yet we don't feel *at home*. We think: I was born for an age like this, so why don't I belong? And in the frantic effort to belong we enlist our belongings. David Riesman, who interviewed Chicago teenagers in 1947, wrote:

Like the 'trading cards' which symbolize competitive consumption for the eight- to eleven-year-olds, the collection of records seemed to be one way of establishing one's relatedness to the group. . . . Tunes meant people: roads to people, remembrances of them. At the same time the teenagers showed great anxiety about having the 'right' preferences. . . . The cultural objects, whatever their nature, are mementos that somehow remain unhumanized by the force of a genuinely fetishistic attachment.

Actually, I doubt that these teenagers had reached the point of genuine fetishism, where objects are not roads to people but substitutes for them; but no doubt some of them would reach it, given time. When relating to the group becomes too difficult – because its standards are unjust, because it is unfaithful, or because it cannot be found – fetishism is the sensible alternative. This is where Clarence seems to have arrived, by a fairly circuitous route.

5 The need to impress others, or oneself. This can be simple philistine snobbery or something subtler, to which even a *Davidbinder* is sometimes liable. Hillel the Elder warned against using scripture as a worldly crown. I think this was directed not only at show-offs, but at all intellectuals who like to feel the sweet weight of culture on their heads. The Aramaic word for crown, *taga*, also describes the calligraphic filigree with which scribes adorn certain letters in a biblical scroll. How many book collectors really go for the words and ideas and not rather the typeface, the odour of fresh ink or ageing paper, the satisfying shape of a name – 'Hillel the Elder', for example? The point is that one can have a sincere love of culture without having any interest in it. That kind of love is almost as well satisfied by owning records as by listening to them.

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In a traditional culture whose tradition is intact there are certain vessels of unquestioned worth – scriptures, the canon, the basic repertoire – around which all other things are trained like capillaries around an artery. That is what distinguishes tradition from mere preservation; that is what permits discrimination. (A traditional culture in this sense may be literate or preliterate, but it can never be perfectly 'organic' or 'harmonious'. If a society without dissonance ever existed, it would have no need of active tradition. In any case, 'traditional' must be understood as a relative term.) When those main arteries rupture, value diffuses. Since nothing is sacred, everything is sacred. And anyone who wants to preserve the culture is faced with the choice of keeping nothing or keeping everything.

This dilemma involves the arts and the sciences alike. Facts are collected indiscriminately by the naïve empiricist, who lives in fear of missing the one fact that will give meaning to the rest. His fear is justified; that fact will never be found. Meanwhile, classification gives a semblance of order to things. And meaning is left at the mercy of the last hidden mollusc on the last uncharted reef.

Though the master himself was innocent of it, one might trace this tendency back to Aristotle's school. His successor Theophrastus was a manic collector and classifier, and that habit of the Peripatetics came to dominate the science of late antiquity. The Alexandrians were the first scholars in the modern sense and had the first great library (the birdcage of the Muses). These philosophers were epistemic bag people. Our own bag people, lugging arcane cargoes through the inner city, sometimes seem like unschooled Peripatetics. The idea of hoarders on the move makes perfect sense: if you stay put you miss all the things that are where you are not. Of course, most bag people are people who have been driven from their homes by speculators, can't get welfare because they have no address, don't want to be shaken down in a city shelter, and are acting pragmatically under the circumstances. Some, however, have homes and incomes and behave in ways that are hard to understand from an economic point of view. I am thinking of the kind described by Bellow in *Mr Sammler's Planet* in the person of Shula, Sammler's daughter, who 'went to sermons and free lectures everywhere . . . the shopping bag with salvage, loot coupons and throwaway literature between her knees. Afterwards she was the first to ask ques-

tions.' (Sammler too is a collector – that is the literal meaning of his name – a collector of ideas. But he fights this tendency in himself, sensing that the time has come to *select*.)

Clarence is a bag person. He is as peripatetic as his arthritis permits and he is unquestionably an intellectual, as perhaps many bag people are. (Momma: *Don't take all that junk*. Peggen Fitzgerald: *He has a very inquiring mind*.) He collects facts as well as things. The facts are mostly trivia and the things, including his records, mostly junk, but that only proves he's a scholar. To be a first-rate scholar you must have a taste for all that is second rate, third rate, *nth* rate. For a scholar's collection is always comprehensive. Where practicalities limit comprehensiveness, the other great scholastic principle, whimsy, comes into play (according to Walter Benjamin, 'everything said from the angle of a true collector is whimsical'). Once seized upon, however arbitrarily, a tangent must be followed to the end (*I collect anything with Clarence on it*). Note that neither principle – comprehensiveness or whimsy – has anything to do with what is good, or even with what you really like.

True scholars, true collectors and true bag people are caricatures of us all. We moderns have no safe principle of selection, so we collect. In a sense we collect *because* we're peripatetic; rootless, we pick up the forest and take it along.

Before records came along nobody talked about the music 'industry'. What the music industry makes is 'product', a mass term referring to some number of 'units'. What the industry people do with product brings to mind the ancient discobolus: in the words of a Warner Bros. marketing executive, they 'throw it against the wall to see what sticks'.

Some eight out of ten releases lose money for the manufacturer. His compensation comes from the monster hits, the records that really stick. The discobolus image is an admission that the company cannot determine which records will be hits – that the millions of dollars spent on market research and promotion cannot psych out the buyer. True, there are artists who almost always make money. And since hype does have some effect, a company's prophecy of success for a record can be self-fulfilling. But such assumptions are dangerous. That was one of the lessons of the slump of 1979, when

a new Kiss album was, with much fanfare, shipped platinum – that is, a first run of more than a million units was sent out to the stores – and came back almost untouched.

If anyone can be said to control the record-buying public it is the radio deejay, or rather the programme director. But the programme director's job is to please a lot of the people a lot of the time. He plays the records that are selling or likely to sell, and the ones his listeners request. Although record companies can apply great pressure, they are somewhat hampered by laws against payola and against the control of radio stations and record companies by the same corporations.

Despite these plain facts, conspiracy theories flourish. According to a patrician Marxism that began with Marx and William Morris and was cultivated by the Frankfurt School (in particular by Marcuse and Adorno) the masses really do have bad taste, but not naturally. It is capitalism that stunts their palates, force-feeding them its swill until they like it, or imagine they do. Adorno made the application to music. He argued that classical music, because it reminds the dehumanized masses of their humanity, threatens the system and so is discouraged. But popular music, an opiate that dispels all realistic thought and reinforces the mechanized rhythms of the production process, is encouraged. By 'popular music' Adorno meant everything from polkas to Charlie Parker.

American followers of the Frankfurt School, including almost all rock critics whether they know it or not, stop short of this. But they agree that popular taste has been corrupted; that is how they explain its divergences from their own. And they agree that it has been corrupted through the open conspiracy of record executives, marketers, promoters, retailers, programme directors and hack musicians. If this conspiracy is too inept to fix the chart standings of specific records, it is at least able to sell styles and start trends.

In fact, the cabal cannot manage even that. Rock and roll was scorned at first by the major record companies. They paid for their priggishness while basement labels like Chess and Sun made fortunes. Disco was discovered by alert independents like Casa-blanca. Once a bandwagon is under way the majors are happy to climb aboard – and elbow their way to the front – but they are rarely in the driver's seat. So it's silly to say of the listening public,

as Adorno does, that 'in this insistence on the fashionable standards it fancies itself in possession of a remnant of free choice.' It is free – at least, its strait-jacket is custom cut.

Before capitalism, the musician sang for his supper. He did his work in the presence of his patrons – noblemen, clerics, festive clumps of peasantry – and, as he satisfied, had his own needs met in return. Between this state and the present were many stages: subscription concerts, commissioned scores, subscription scores, paid public concerts, published scores, piano rolls. With the advent of records music's backward metamorphosis, from butterfly to chrysalis, was complete. Music is now fully a commodity, exchangeable for the universal commodity, money. The musician need never see the working man behind the money; the listener need never see the working musician behind the vinyl. Each is, in a modified Marxist sense, a fetishist.

When I buy a record, the musician is eclipsed by the disc. And I am eclipsed by my money – not only from the musician's view but from my own. When a ten-dollar bill leaves my right hand and a bagged record enters my left, it is the climax. The shudder and ring of the register is the true music; later I will play the record, but that will be redundant. My money has already heard it.

What I am caricaturing here is, I think, a fairly common mode of record buying. The buying is what counts, which is one reason why the record buyer is insatiable. The desire to buy does not always coincide with the desire to hear music. If I want to hear music, surely there is something on my shelf or on the radio that can satisfy me; if I want to hear a certain record I don't have, perhaps I can borrow it from a friend or a library. The desire to buy, on the other hand, explodes when my wallet reaches a certain critical mass, or when I'm anxious, or when I've worked hard at something idiotic and want a reward. Then money wants to be spent, and if I fancy myself a music lover it seems natural to spend it on a record. I could spend it on a concert, I suppose – but a record is tangible, like money.

For music to become so fully a commodity, having its most intense intercourse with money, seems odd. In our fond antithesis of God

and Mammon, music belongs with God. This is partly because music has seemed so incorporeal, and partly because it has played a central role in religion and ritual. (A thumbnail definition of ritual: an action or set of actions, repeated at regular intervals or on recurring occasions, and following a set pattern that is seen as obligatory but is not justified, point for point, in pragmatic or scientific terms.) In traditional societies, music – often coupled with words, drama, dance – figures in all kinds of ritual. Like the sizzle of hecatombs, music soothes the gods. It is good for people also, harmonizing and uniting them. The young Nietzsche, writing of ancient Greek ritual, interpreted music as the voice of oneness; where Apollo's visual art teaches the principle of individuation, Dionysian music lets us melt into the one will.

As an element of ritual, music can unify the group either abstractly or for a specific purpose. One such purpose is war; the Hollywood image of warpath tom-toms is largely correct. Another purpose is work, or whatever brings sustenance. There are musical ceremonies before the hunt and after, at the feast; there are rain dances and harvest festivals; there are work songs and field hollers. Another purpose is procreation. 'Social organization,' writes the ethnomusicologist Alan P. Merriam, 'is marked at almost every point by song: the life cycle includes birth songs, with special subdivisions for multiple births; lullabies; naming songs; toilet-training songs; puberty songs; greeting songs; love and marriage songs; family, lineage and clan songs; songs of social associational groups; funeral songs. . . .' Some of these songs may be customary, not obligatory, but still it is hard to get by without them. The gamut is summed up in the remark of a Sia Indian: 'My friend, without songs you cannot do anything'.

In the West music kept close to the knees of ritual well into the eighteenth century. Processionals, marches, wedding cantatas, funeral odes, passions, oratorios, sarabandes, serenades, requiems, coronation masses, anthems, battle hymns, chorales, masses *in tempore belli*: all functioned in specific, more or less ritualized situations. But it was a tendency of both Protestant and Enlightenment thinking to disparage ritual. Social life was to be streamlined, and ritual looked like useless baggage. As various activities were stripped of their rituals, music was often allowed to remain because it was

soothing, or arousing, or otherwise useful. But music used in this way lost much of its magic. Played at a meal, a dance, a wedding or a war it seemed mere background – or worse, a crude attempt at strumming up a mood. It seemed vulgar. Thackeray gives a good idea of this in the instalment of his *Book of Snobs* (a series that ran in *Punch* in 1846) dealing with parties.

All this while, amidst the crowd and the scuffle, and a perpetual buzz and chatter, and the flare of the wax candles, and an intolerable smell of musk – what the poor Snobs who write fashionable romances call ‘the gleam of gems, the odour of perfumes and the blaze of countless lamps’ – a scrubby-looking, yellow-faced foreigner, with cleaned gloves, is warbling inaudibly in a corner, to the accompaniment of another.

Clearly music was uncomfortable with blunt function. It needed ritual, even if it had to generate its own.

The public concert, invented in London in 1672, infiltrated Europe slowly in the eighteenth century and rapidly in the nineteenth. Gradually the concert acquired its own rituals (applause, encores, respectful dress) and taboos (no humming, no talking, no eating). It was like a religious service, and the religion it served was music. Private recitals followed suit. Formerly the servant of the salon crowd, the musician (Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt) was now its cynosure. Music nearly replaced conversation as the reason for people to gather; soirées and their etiquette revolved around the piano.

Even where music still seemed to serve extrinsic pomp, the tables had often been turned. Mozart’s *Requiem*, commissioned by a shady stranger, never performed its intended office. Mozart came to think of it as his own requiem, and so do we; and we think of it as a monument to the musician, not the man. The *Missa Solemnis*, too, was supposed to grace a ceremony – the installation of an archbishop – but Beethoven sabotaged that plan by chipping away in the name of art long past his deadline. Brahms wrote an *Academic Festival Overture*, but the festival in question honoured Brahms with a doctorate, and the overture he wrote in thanks was first performed the following year, at a concert.

Music lives in time, unfolds in time. So does ritual. Both impose a common time on those present. Visual art does not; it lets the eye

and mind set their own pace. Literature does not, certainly not when read silently, and even when read aloud it grants a certain latitude.

In Nara there is a temple with roofs so rhythmically arranged that they are called *kōren ongaku*, ‘frozen music’. Goethe called all architecture frozen music, and Schopenhauer agreed, saying rhythm does for time what symmetry does for space. Another way of putting this would be to say that music is the architecture of time.

Two different orders of time, a greater and a lesser, are embraced in music’s architecture. The lesser order is the time that a given piece of music actually encloses and that, by means of sound and silence, it divides and designs. Whenever any number of people hear any piece of music played in any way, they share, in this sense, a common time. The greater order is a continuum that cycles through days, years, and lifetimes. Music of various kinds played at various points in this continuum helps to give it structure.

Ideally, the greater and lesser motions of time should mesh, like the cogs and flywheel of an escapement. And in traditional cultures this was often the case. But when music began to develop as pure art – when, obeying an inner logic, it burst out in the sublime hypertrophy that was Bach, Mozart, Beethoven – then it lost its place. Just when music was achieving the perfect mimesis of life’s rhythm, it lost its place in life’s rhythm.

This happened gradually, and for a while there were still forms that clung to their place on the great wheel: think of Monteverdi’s *Vespers*, Telemann’s *Tafelmusik*, Bach’s cantata for (say) the fourteenth Sunday after Trinity, Mozart’s serenades, Schumann’s *Spring Symphony* (just barely clinging, now), Chopin’s nocturnes. And some Eastern classical musics kept an intricate connection with larger time – Indian music, for example, prescribing specific ragas, or modes, for specific seasons and times of day. But in the West, by the early nineteenth century, traditional contexts had mostly given way to artificial ones. Just as visual art lost much of its connection with living space, coming down off ceilings and altars and settling into frames and museums, so music moved into explicitly musical time periods, like that of the salon soirée or the Tuesday-night opera. Meanwhile, popular music (ballads, sentimental and bawdy airs) fell into periods deemed appropriate for

'entertainment' – a concept that had grown up right alongside 'art for art's sake'.

This was better than nothing. However ersatz, however stratified, a musical architecture of time did exist in the nineteenth century. It was shattered by the phonograph. Before the phonograph any playing of music (with the single exception of a musician's playing for himself) was perforce a social event. People had to get together – Prince Leopold of Cöthen with his court orchestra. Count Rasumovsky with the rest of his amateur quartet, young Bernard Shaw with a thousand other Wagnerites, a hundred instrumentalists, a dozen singers, a conductor and sundry stagehands. So people got together, and to simplify matters they got together at regular intervals. Such practicalities had always supported music's link with ritual. When the phonograph arrived, much of that scaffolding collapsed.

For music was now an object that could be owned by the individual and used at his own convenience. There was no need to cooperate, coordinate or share with anyone else. Technically the musicians were still necessary; given the economics of production, so was the rest of the audience. But only technically. Once the record was owned they disappeared.

Now the *Symphony of a Thousand* could play to an audience of one. Now a man could hear nocturnes at breakfast, vespers at noon and the Easter Oratorio on Chanukah. He could do his morning crossword to the 'One O'Clock Jump' and make love right through the *St Matthew Passion*. Anything was possible; nothing was sacred; freedom was (barring complaints from the neighbours and occasional desperate holding actions such as the Russian synod's 1912 ban on the recording of prayers) absolute. It was the freedom, once the cathedral of culture had been wrecked, to take home the bits you liked and arrange them as you pleased. Once again a mechanical invention had met capitalism's need to recreate all of life in its image. The cathedral of culture was now a supermarket.

But this is freedom, after all: liberal freedom really is freedom when you compare it to the various 'higher' freedoms, whether fascist, communist or theocratic. In this century, nostalgia for cathedrals has led to the building of prisons – totalitarian states where music, which has a reputation as political dynamite, has

been carefully controlled. The Soviets announced in 1928 that the importing or playing of American jazz was punishable by a fine of one hundred roubles and six months in jail; jazz became fully acceptable only when it lost its dangerous appeal and rock and roll acquired it. The Ayatollah Khomeini imposed similar strictures. So records have become, almost as much as books, a symbol of freedom. Before there was *samizdat* there was *Roengenzizdat* – underground recordings of jazz and rock on X-ray plates.

In Fellini's *Amarcord*, the narrator's inflexible leftist uncle is chased all over the village by Fascist police. Just when they seem to have lost him they hear, coming from the church steeple, a voice singing the 'Internationale'. They barrage the little steeple with gunfire, the voice stops, the old man's wife starts up a stricken wailing. But something has fallen to the ground. It is the fragment of a phonograph. The uncle has escaped. Isaac Babel's story *Gedali*, on the other hand, finds the 'Internationale' in power – and requisitioning the phonograph of a poor Zhitomir shopkeeper. "Hand over your phonograph to the State, Gedali. . . ." "I am fond of music, Pani," I say to the Revolution. "You don't know what you're fond of, Gedali. I'll shoot you and then you'll know."

Totalitarianism has rarely found technology stacked against it, however. If, in the realm of sound, one gadget was a horsefly to the Behemoth, another quickly became its ally. 'We could not have conquered Germany,' said Adolf Hitler, 'without the loudspeaker' – not only the public-address loudspeaker that wafted his words through the Kurfürstendamm but the radio loudspeaker that carried them into remote homes and beer halls. And it was not only words they carried, for the Nazis were great lovers and exploiters of music. It had to be Aryan, of course: 'Judeo-Negroid' music was swept from the airwaves, which was no mean feat in an age of global swing. (Hitler was incensed to learn that 'Ja, wir haben keinen Bananen heute', the smash hit of 1923 and a personal favourite, had been written by Jews.) The principle was simple. Radio puts its dispersed listeners under the spell of a shared event. The ritual aura of live performance – rhetorical, musical, what have you – is broadcast. This has nothing to do with radio waves or brain waves; it is a simple matter of simultaneity. The consciousness that at this very moment the band is playing, the Leader is ascending the

platform, the crowd is bristling with jackknife salutes, and millions of your compatriots are poised as you are before the radio – this consciousness is enough to make the whole nation an arena. And the effect is roughly the same if the band is the Berlin radio orchestra playing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (destiny knocking on every German door). Either way you have an architecture of time, or rather a cynical engineering of it.

It is noteworthy that radio rose to prominence and records went into decline during a worldwide economic depression. Those were the years when fascism became attractive, in part because it offered a kind of ritualistic solidarity. In America fascism did not become greatly attractive but radio did. The usual explanation is that people couldn't afford records, and of course that had a lot to do with it. But we know that before the Depression black workers would line up on Friday evenings, when the eagle had flown, outside record shops, and that they managed to support a flourishing 'race records' industry. Poor people do buy records. After the Crash, though, poor and rich alike felt shattered, splintered, isolated. What they found in radio, I think, was the solace of solidarity and of predictable, structured time. When, in the mid-thirties, the shock had passed, records came back.

Both the good and bad effects of radio are reduced, in today's democracies, by the number and diversity of stations. Musically the only tyrant is democratic taste, which may be less oppressive to listeners than to offbeat musicians who want airplay. Elvis Costello's anti-anthem 'Radio Radio' (*Radio is the sound salvation/Radio is cleaning up the nation . . . Either shut up or get cut up, they don't want to hear about it, it's only inches on the reel-to-reel/And the radio is in the hands of such a lot of fools trying to anaesthetize the way that you feel*) is much more totalitarian in spirit than the policies it protests. On a dance floor, the effect of its hook is galvanic in a knee-jerk way though this way may be part of the satire. In any case, the song had a good deal of airplay.

Where radio unites, records fracture. They are well suited to a society where everyone is off pursuing his own dream. If some of us are content, like after-dinner nappers, to dream the same dreams as our neighbours, others are hidden rebels; in the latter category

is the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Structurally the book is a sequence of dreamlike memories spun off from a single Louis Armstrong disc. The framing chapters find the narrator living rent-free and utility-fee-free in a forgotten basement that is 'warm and full of light'.

Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing 'What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue' – all at the same time. . . . Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. . . . Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. . . . Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around.

Invisibility, a condition of blacks especially but also of others out of whack with society, is here seen to have its points. The narrator has tried to live in mainstream American time, with its 'swift and imperceptible flowing', but has found it a mindless torrent. The only relief is to 'slip into the breaks and look around'. Invisibility lets you do that. Private music, music no one else hears, reinforces your invisibility by giving you a private structure of time to set against public time.

Ellison's hero wants to end his hibernation and make another stab at fitting into society's time, perhaps by changing it – by giving it some of the structure his own dreams have devised. The book ends with a thrilling reference to the medium of solidarity, radio: 'Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?'

On some frequency, I think, he speaks for Clarence, who is in a way a white invisible man (*people . . . avoid me now . . . they just throw back their heads and cross to the other side of the street*). Clarence's history of suffering, however swollen by paranoia, has given him something of a hounded-race mentality (he told me that his name, in full Clarence Abram Browne, has been taken for that of a black or a Jew). In fact, many of the lines in the Armstrong song Ellison speaks of, lines (he does not quote them) like *Even a mouse/Ran from my house*, could have come right out of Clarence's mouth. This

embittered hermit's life is not what he wants; it feels like exile. (He cannot afford a phone or a train ride. In answer to an exploratory letter, he wrote, *I am longing to see you. Please don't disappoint me. I get so lonely here.*) Both men rebel against time, using records as weapons; while Ellison's man uses the music itself to slip inside time and undermine it, Clarence is engaged in a massive holding action.

There is something of Clarence in each of us. If there were not, records would not be the prevalent form of music in our world. Music would not be a thing. We have let it become a thing because we all know that things are more dependable than musicians, or social life, or the Muses. Clarence puts it well: *Records are intimate until you put the needle in the groove, and then they come to life.*