SPEAKING OF MUSIC

Leon Plantinga

Constant use of the pronoun "I" is not very good manners, and a little embarrassing. But the alternative apparently is to use a lot of passive verbs, and my wife tells me you shouldn't do that. So, I'm in something of a quandary here – but I'll do my best.

On both sides of my family, I'm a child of Dutch Calvinists who came to this country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As a boy the language I heard among members of my mother's family was something they called Gelders because they were from Gelderland. This language is somewhat similar to Platdeutsch. I remember that my grandfather could easily speak with the German fellow across the street, as they spoke essentially the same language. Now this part of Flanders is also where Ludwig van Beethoven's family came from. You may have wondered why he is Ludwig van and not Ludwig von and that's the reason.

My father's family came from Friesland and the language they spoke they called Fries, which is not a dialect of Dutch but a separate language, similar, I'm told, to present day Icelandic. I used to think that it was also similar to the Anglo-Saxon of Beowulf , but I've been advised by my linguistic experts that that's not really true. (I know Alex Schenker might have something to say about this.) My father's family also spoke Dutch, which is the language that he learned when he first went to school. As I was growing up, my parents spoke Dutch with each other when they didn't want the children to understand, so that's something we very quickly learned to do. My father was the first in his family to attend college.

My mother was the first in her family to attend high school. My grandfathers on both sides, one a carpenter in Holland, Michigan, the other a farmer in Wisconsin, were both avid readers in Dutch and in English. The things they read were mainly church publications and theological tracts.

My father, who exerted the most important influence on my intellectual formation, pursued graduate study in philosophy, briefly also in theology, and moved his young family successively from Ann Arbor, Michigan, where my older brother, Al, and I were born, to Princeton, and then to Durham, North Carolina, to attend the Universities in these places. Academic jobs were extremely scarce in the early years of World War II, so he stayed on at Duke for a second PhD in psychology. In 1942 he finally found employment and moved his family first to Huron, South Dakota, then to Jamestown, North Dakota, where he taught in the small colleges there. Finally, we moved back to Grand Rapids, Michigan where my father taught psychology at Calvin College, his alma mater, for the remainder of his career. He had the privilege of teaching only one subject there. While he was at Huron he taught philosophy, psychology, religion and Greek. During my boyhood in the 1940s, my brother and I benefitted

greatly from long walks with our father which included the discussion of many subjects. These talks I remember as being full of irony and word plays, and an insistence upon accurate logical inference. We did Latin declensions and conjugations at the breakfast table, and we learned that Latin nonsense-syllable mnemonic device, dating from the 13th century, for remembering the valid modes of the categorical syllogism that I still can't get out of my head. The first two figures go, Barbara, Celarent, Darii, Ferioque prioris, Cesare, Camestres, Festino, Baroco, secondi. (My mother always put up with all of this with very good cheer, and ran a very tight household.)

Now you may want to know what those non-words refer to. The first one is Barbara, that is, AAA, with the form: All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal. Well, the last of them that I mentioned, Baroco, is: All crows are black, some birds are not black, therefore some birds are not crows. Also, that term, Baroco, is suggested as one of the etymological ancestors of the word Baroque, as in Baroque music, Baroque art—though this, a notion proposed by Benedetto Croce, is much disputied. In later centuries these terms have been remembered mainly because ridiculous pedants in Moliere's plays tend to spout them.

In my early boyhood, it was my father, too, who interested me in music—though he himself never learned to read a note. On Sunday afternoons he insisted on quiet as we all listened to the New York Philharmonic broadcasts. When we visited my grandparents' farm in Wisconsin when I was about five years old, I loved to pick out tunes on the parlor piano. I remember managing a pretty good likeness of the chorale tune from the finale of Braham's First Symphony which I had heard on a Philharmonic broadcast. Then at the age of seven, living in Huron, South Dakota, in a house that luckily had a piano, I began to take lessons at the little college where my father taught. In adolescent years, I worked eagerly at playing this instrument and gave many recitals. On a couple of occasions I played concertos with orchestras, and frequently participated in piano contests, which I hated and usually did not win. I then attended Calvin College, which in our family was more or less de rigueur, where I majored in philosophy and English. I didn't think too much of the music department there, so I didn't take many of their courses.

While yet in high school in Michigan, I had been invited to travel back to Jamestown, North Dakota, to play a concert. There, at this little college, I met a piano teacher named Robert Laudon who impressed me. So for my sophomore year I transferred to Jamestown, where I studied fruitfully with Laudon and continued with concerts and contests. At the national finals in Florida for one of them, I competed with van Cliburn; neither of us won. What I particularly admired in Laudon was a rare combination of musicianship and scholarship. Last week, this man, now about 90 and long retired from the University of Minnesota, sent me the prospectus for yet another book.

Back at Calvin for the last two years of college, I continued to study English, philosophy, and Greek, while travelling to East Lansing, Michigan, to Michigan State

University to study piano with the distinguished and scholarly immigrant German pianist and harpsichordist, Ernst Viktor Wolff. In our family, which now included four male offspring, there seemed to be an assumption that what one did after college was to go to graduate school; what one did after that was to get a job teaching. I entered the masters' program at Michigan State to continue piano studies with Wolff, supporting myself by teaching piano to (often-recalcitrant) voice majors. But I knew that teaching and playing that instrument was not what I expected ultimately to do with my life.

While yet an undergraduate at Calvin College, I had taken some music history courses. But they seemed to me at an intellectual level far inferior to my classes in English and philosophy. I had, for example, an intense semester-long course in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, taught by a man of great local fame who stood before the class with the German original in his hands while we followed in our copies of the Norman Kemp Smith's translation.

Later in years in my college years, and during my time studying piano at Michigan State, I gradually came to feel that the history of music would be a good fit for my interests and training, so I began thinking about graduate schools where I might pursue this subject. By the spring of 1959 when I finished my masters degree in piano, was married, had a new baby girl named Amy (now Professor of theology at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary) I decided to come to Yale. My older brother, Alvin, by this time a budding analytical philosopher, tried to discourage me. He was not much impressed with the Yale Philosophy Department from which he had just earned a PhD. If a university has gone off the track in philosophy, he thought, who knows how far the damage may have spread.

Nonetheless, in August 1959 we set out for the east coast in our 1953 Buick pulling a trailer with all our earthly possessions, with Amy on a blanket in the back seat. We moved into a Quonsett Hut behind the old armory on Central Avenue across from Yale Bowl. One aspect of the Yale Music Department that attracted me at the time was that it was not part of the music school. It belonged instead to Faculty of Fine Arts, operating in both Yale College and the Graduate School, which was unusual in American Universities at that time--but much more usual, in fact it's the rule, in Europe. From what I had seen at Michigan State, scholars tended to be looked down upon in schools of music mainly as failed musicians. It seemed to me an advantage at Yale that the clarinet teacher didn't vote on the appointment of a new medievalist, and vice versa. Perhaps partly because of this, when I arrived at Yale the music department was populated mainly by medievalists. Just before I came, the department had been shaped largely by the au- gust Leo Schrade, a formidible German scholar noted for epic struggles with another famous German across the street in the Music School namely, Paul Hindemith. There was a room on the second floor of Sprague Hall that was to be fitted out as a classroom. A blackboard covered the entire front wall. The question was: are there to be staff lines on the blackboard or not. Now Hindemith

said the board should be entirely covered with them, because here we deal with music; Schrade said there should be none at all, because here we deal with words and ideas. So what they had to do was install another board; now one could be entirely covered with lines and the other entirely free of them. In later years when I taught in that room things were unchanged: if you wanted to write music you did it in the front. If you wanted to write words, you did it off to the left.

So I studied with Schrade's successors and students, mainly medievalists. My first publication, in 1961, was a translation with commentary of the Latin treatise, Ars nova, by Phillipe de Vitri, who was a composer and music theorist in Paris in the early 14th century. Much more recently, unfortunately, it has been shown that this treatise is almost surely not by de Vitri. But my medievalist friends have reassured me that this unwelcome information does not affect the quality of my translation or my commentary.

When I was in graduate school, the field of music history or "musicology," as it was often called in this `country, was assumed to be about Western music. The study of music from other parts of the world was usually called "ethnomusicology," betraying an assumption that it was of interest mainly as an anthropological phenomenon. Musicology proper at that time in this country was largely dominated by Renaissance studies. Attention to other chronological periods was directly proportionate to their temporal proximity to the Renaissance. The kind of work music historians typically did was textual and bibliographical. The idea was to put a certain body of music, the contents of a manuscript, the output of a single composer, the examples of a single genre from a particular time, in order—to make sure when, where, by whom the music was written and to establish a clean text. That was about it. Any talk of artistic excellence or, a fortiori, expressive qualities in music, was thought suspiciously subjective and probably unworthy of a scientific undertaking.

These were the days of the New Criticism in literary scholarship, and I remember often encountering the lank form of William Wimsatt, one of it denizens, having coffee and holding forth in George & Harry's (now Naples). The New Criticism insisted on the primacy of internal evidence: a poem consists of its text; anything external to this—influences to which the author may have been subject, the author's own sensibility or inclinations—were mainly irrelevant. An iconic statement of this notion of literature is the article of Wimsatt and Monroe Bearsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" of 1946 (reprinted in 1964). Here they maintained that whatever the author may have intended should play no part in our understanding of a piece of literature. (Now the name "intentional fallacy," incidentally, seems unfortunate. The root meaning of "fallacy" is some sort of trickery or deception, or, by extension, simply a mistake. And here "intentional" seems to modify "fallacy," so it appears that we speak of a deception or a mistake that somebody did on purpose. That, of course, isn't what they meant—but you'd think they would get the title right. It means that we deceive ourselves if we believe that an author's intention is directly pertinent to his work.)

In the early 1960's musical scholarship operated in a similar spirit. The scholars confrontation with a musical text consisted in determining the facts about it, which may include its formal shape and stylistic qualities, this to be determined by technical analysis. Biographical data on composers, speculation about influences on their work, and, most particularly, any talk about meaning or emotion in music or its relation to other human activities, was not a legitimate part of the scholarly enterprise. So, when I proposed to write a dissertation on Schuman's music criticism, my teachers told me quite rightly that I would be swimming upstream. Schuman's writings on music—there are more than a thousand pages of them—are sometimes extravagantly poetic. His early essays, imitative of writers like E. T. A. Hoffmann and Schuman's favorite novelist, Jean Paul, indulge in flights of fancy no respectable scientific scholar, most thought, would devote her time to.

But there was more. Schuman was a German romantic. In the earlier 1960s some still associated German romanticism with a burgeoning German nationalism in the 19th century and with the horrors of the following century. In those days nobody would touch Wagner except for a couple of unregenerate Germans. Schuman wasn't quite that bad, but thought hardly free of taint.

And his cause was not helped by the voluminous writings of one Wolfgang Boetticher, a young German musical scholar in the 1940s. The Nazi government had given him exclusive access to the Schuman archives in Zwickau, the Saxon town on the Czech border where Schuman was born. They published his dissertation, Robert Schumann, Einführung in Persönlichkeit und Werk in a deluxe editions with leather binding and gold gilt pages. These gold gilt pages, about 900 of them, are filled with information and distortion. Boetticher did not, for example, hesitate to doctor quotations from Schuman to make him appear properly anti-Semitic. But I persisted.

The library had all the volumes of the musical periodical Schuman edited (and often largely wrote) for the decade from 1834 to 1844, the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik. In those days you could check these things out of the library. As far as I could tell, nobody had done so before me, but soon I had all 20 volumes on my carrel, and in the summer when my family and I went to Michigan to visit my parents, some of them—that is, books that Schumann had at one time very likely held in his own hands—went with us. In my dissertation I was interested in understanding Schumann's writing within its own intellectual surroundings. How did his music criticism relate to the current German literary scene? To what degree do they reflect the philosophical climate of the time? How did Schumann construe the place of music in the larger intellectual and artistic currents of his day?

But the majority of his essays are reviews of new musical compositions: symphonies, oratorios, chamber works, piano pieces, and so on. What he reviewed was not performances, for the most part, but published scores; I sometimes wondered how well our current music critics would do if confronted with scores instead of listening to performances. Furthermore, a lot of these things were not even scored, but existed

only in parts. String quartets, for example, were not normally published in score. So Schuman would get a set of parts, four sets for a quartet, would line them up on chairs and go from one to the next to the next, to figure out what the texture and sound of this music is. You have to be pretty good to do that. In most cases the music he reviewed has now sunk into utter oblivion. So, to understand what he was talking about, I traveled to various libraries to make copies of these pieces, and collected hundreds of microfilms from abroad.

When my dissertation was finished, I began teaching at Yale in the fall of 1963, that is, three courses per semester, including classes early on Saturday mornings. In addition to finding this schedule exhausting, I rather disliked the classroom atmosphere here in those days. It seemed to me that many of these young men before me—and, of course, they were only men—their futures largely assured, were in college mainly to have a good time. Faculty were regarded as something like hired entertainers. All this seemed to me to change very quickly and drastically when women were first admitted—almost entirely on the basis of their academic qualifications. By about 1970 teaching at Yale College became the pleasure that it has been for me ever since.

For the year 1966-67 I had a Morse Fellowship supplemented with a grant from the German Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung. What I had in mind was to study keyboard music from the last three decades of the 18th century, other than the works of Haydn and Mozart, that may have contributed to the radical changes in piano style that we see during the time of Beethoven. So my family and I—there were now three children—moved to Berlin for the year. The idea was to take advantage of the 19th-century proclivities of the Prussian State Library for collecting things. Most of what I wanted to see was in the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek on the Unter-den-Lindenstrasse in East Berlin. So most days I took the UBahn from Charlottenburg, the area in Berlin where we lived, to the Kochstrasse, passed through Check Point Charlie, walked up Friedrichstrasse to Unter-den-Linden and the library. Every day I was required to change five marks West for five marks East. The official rate would have been about one to 25, but things were so depressed in East Berlin, it was always a challenge to spend even those 5 marks for lunch. And of course they wouldn't let you change them back on the way out.

It seems to me now that my research at that time was rather unfocused. I studied many, many compositions by people like Johan Franz Sterkel, J. G. Naumann, and Johann Baptist Vanhall. Only toward the end did I began to focus on the piano style of Muzio Clementi, the composer whose Sonatinas Opus 36 have delighted or bored almost every beginner piano student in the Western world for the past century and a half. But Clementi was much more than a composer of instructional materials. He was one of the first of the traveling keyboard virtuosi, and he wrote a good bit of technically advanced music of startling stylistic precocity in the 1780s. This music sometimes bears a striking resemblance to Beethoven's piano writing 10 to 15 years later. I didn't really get very far with Clementi during the Berlin year but I spent a

good bit of time with final corrections and proofs for my book, Schuman as Critic, which appeared the following fall at Yale University Press.

That year was rewarding in other ways. We did a good bit of traveling in Europe and my German improved a lot. I would try very hard to focus on things like vowel quality: Qual, Knall, wollen, sollen, and so forth. For my daughter, Amy, this was child's play. These things would just roll off the end of her tongue, no problem at all.

Back in New Haven in the fall of 1967 I became increasingly involved in teaching graduate students, while also participating in the interdisciplinary undergraduate major HAL, History, the Arts, and Letters, something of an ancestor of the present-day Directed Studies and the Humanities major. About a half dozen faculty were involved, and junior and senior majors would in theory take only this seminar for their last two years. The program featured a series of topics that would be approached from various vantage points. The Court of Charlemagne, for example: it's historical and political aspects, its literature, art, and music – all interesting stuff. Another topic we approached this way, I remember, was the French Revolution. Sometimes it seemed to work, but at other times I thought it sank into dilettantism, especially when the senior seminar would begin with Sherry.

In 1971-72 I was on leave again. I got a Guggenheim and carted my family off to Oxford where I pursued my work with Clementi. This made sense because Clementi, though born in Rome, was taken to England at the age of 13 by one Sir Peter Beckford, a cousin of the Gothic novelist, William Beckford. Clementi essentially spent the rest of his life in England, and that is where most of the relevant documents are. So during that year I worked at the Bodlean, and frequently worked in the British Museum (now the British Library and in a different place in London). I was a visiting fellow at University College, Oxford, where I often ate lunch. We lived in a flat in North Oxford that belonged to that college, sent the two boys to a State school where they learned little but soccer. But Amy attended Cheney Girl's School on Headington Hill in Oxford where she got good Latin, good French, good maths (in the plural as the British would have it). She was once reported to school authorities for removing the hat of her school uniform while riding home on the city bus, which she didn't appreciate at all.

That year I nearly finished my life and works of Clementi. And during my time at Oxford I often saw my friend, Alan Tyson, a brilliant psychiatrist turned Beethoven scholar who was a fellow at All Souls. One advantage of this was that I was invited to all their celebratory banquets. For example, the Feast of Saint Simon and Saint Jude in the fall. At All Souls these were movable feasts. Guests would process from one splendid room to another for the various courses. I remember once feeling rather inadequate when I found myself surrounded by classicists making puns in Greek on quotation from Thucydides.

Alan also interested me in his kind of documentary work with Beethoven. He was the leading expert in Beethoven manuscripts. He knew all about handwriting

and about the paper that Beethoven used, which mostly came from Northern Italy; he kept track of watermarks, patterns of musical ledger lines. After the paper was made somebody would inscribe it with ledger lines. There were distinct differences in the way they happened to make them: just how even they were and so forth. Together with watermarks these lines allowed present-day researchers to keep track of just which paper composers were using—an important aid in dating manuscripts. Paper in the early 19th century was rather expensive, and composers usually bought only a little at a time—as Alan once said, they bought paper about the way we tend to buy postage. Beethoven and Schubert, it turns out, were often using exactly the same papers at the same times, bought in the same shop in Vienna. So, Tyson had managed to assign new dates to a good many of Beethoven's compositions, and later did the same with Mozart. This kind of scientific study now had some interest for me, at least as a sideline, and the progression from Clementi to Beethoven seemed a natural one.

But first I needed to finish my Clementi book, which I managed during the next year or so back in New Haven. The Oxford University Press of London, with a very leisurely air, then took four more years to get the thing into print. For quite a while they claimed they were out of paper.

Next, Beethoven was put on the back burner when I accepted an invitation from W.W. Norton to write the 19th-century volume of their New History of Western Music, and a grant from the NEH provided some time for me to get this underway. Following my old inclinations, I saw my task as basically two-fold: to show the part that music played in social and intellectual history, and to assess musical styles of composers and genres and repertories, this last through somewhat detailed analytical description of representative musical examples. This approach now seemed to meet with some approval in the profession, and after 25 years some apparently still think the book and its translations into various European languages useful.

The years around 1980, when I was working on this book, were for me a period of emotional upheaval as I went through a painful divorce; but 1984, the year of my remarriage to Ellen (who is sitting right there), marked the beginning of a new and happier chapter. The years following, I did a good bit of traveling and lecturing: England, Italy, Spain, and Greece, for example, and lots of places in this country. Sometimes the things I did resembled lecture concerts, so that I could still have some excuse for playing the piano.

In 1991 I began a six-year stent as Divisional Director in the humanities, the most satisfying committee assignment I've ever had. This Divisional committee had to pass on the proposed senior appointments in all humanities departments. This meant a great deal of reading in unfamiliar and unlikely areas, and being prepared for discussions of the candidate's scholarship. I found myself reading detailed military history of the 16th century Spanish Empire, or about the poetry of Paul Celon. We developed a system in which some one member of the committee was supposed to read all of the candidate's work, and everybody had to read some of it. I found that about 90 pages

seemed the optimum amount. If you assign more, people read less. This job prodded me into doing a great deal of reading that I would otherwise never have considered, and for that I'm grateful.

In the 90s I finally got back to Beethoven, and wrote some articles, particularly on the concertos. One made use of some of the documentary tricks I had learned from Alan Tyson, allowing me to adjust the date of the Third Piano Concerto by about three years, from 1800 to 1803. Now this might seem negligible, but those were years of rapid change for Beethoven. This was a difference in effect between the First Symphony and the Eroica. My book on the concertos came out in 1999. Here again I was interested in the concerto's place in European musical culture, the institutions that supported it, the role it played in Beethoven's career as a performer and composer; about the tension between the notion of a "performance piece," of which no two renditions may be the same, and that of a finished work with a settled text, something that, for the 19th century mind, one bequeathed to posterity—things like that. I also tried to give a fairly full stylistic appraisal of each of the concertos and its constituent parts.

By now I was operating in a completely transformed climate within my discipline. The fashion in musicology had sailed from one extreme of fact-finding and scientific exactness straight past me to that other extreme of daring speculation about musical meaning and function. By far the most popular of assigned meanings now had to do with politics or sex, or preferably both. Some of the new musicology from the 80s and 90s I thought was embarrassing. Take tonality, which is the quality of being in a key. Virtually all the music of the 18th and 19th centuries and most of the popular music you listen to is in a key. It's usually identifiable where the piece begins, and, particularly, where it ends. So tonality became a tool of the Bourgeoisie to suppress the working classes. It had arisen in the 17th century with the first stirrings of the middle class, and it seemed to expire in the 20th century, just as capitalism, we were assured, was about to breathe its last.

Or take sonata form, that is, the shape that first movements of sonatas of all sorts—which includes string quartets and symphonies, and virtually any of those multi-movement sorts of pieces. Sonata form, we learned, is a rehearsal of a male quest narrative, in which the protagonist ventures forth from his home base to a new key; here he seizes a protesting female—that's the contrasting second theme. After a struggle (the development section), he drags her back to the patriarchal tonic, or home key. In another account, the moment of recapitulation in the first movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony is a horrifying depiction of a sexual assault. In the new millennium this sort of writing seems to be mercifully on the decline, and many of us older folk in the field go on doing more or less what we've done all along.

After retiring in 2005, I spent a year at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study getting going on a book about music in 19th-century intellectual history: the entan-

glements of music and science, the place of music in philosophical system-making, questions of historiography. For example, a consideration of how the eccentric and partisan borrowing of terms from literary criticism in the 1830s led to the extremely problematic "classic-romantic" dichotomy that still dominates our view of European music in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. I admit it, I haven't yet progressed very far with this book. Shorter term satisfactions: articles and reviews, lecturing and teaching—this supported by the Koerner Center—has proven too strong an attraction,. But perhaps the time has come to get back to it in a serious way. Thank you.