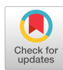

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FORUM

Naivety, Liberalism, and Isaiah Berlin's Musical Thinking

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This article aims to contribute to recent discussions about the status of the "aesthetic" in the history of liberalism, by considering the ways in which ideas about music—specifically a "love of music [that is] both aesthetic and ethical"—has shaped liberal thought. Focusing on the work of the prominent twentieth-century liberal Isaiah Berlin (1909–97), and drawing from unpublished correspondence and neglected published writings, it introduces music as a form through which Berlin approached thinking about the tension between sensation and idea, or feeling and thinking, thereby shaping his approach to intellectual history.

> In and through music, he learned emotional pitch, learned to distinguish between true and false feeling. He always had a vivid sense of the difficulty of knowing what one feels and expressing these emotions without sentimentality. This is why his love of music was both aesthetic and ethical. For it was in the concert hall that he grasped the nature of emotional authenticity.[1]

This article aims to contribute to recent discussions about the status of the aesthetic in the history of liberalism, by considering the ways in which ideas about music—specifically a "love of music [that is] both aesthetic and ethical"—has shaped liberal thought. Focusing on the work of the prominent twentieth-century liberal Isaiah Berlin (1909–97), and drawing from unpublished correspondence and neglected published writings, what follows introduces music as a form through which Berlin approached thinking about the tension between sensation and idea, or feeling and thinking, thereby shaping his approach to intellectual history.

After a discussion of the notion of the aesthetic in the history of liberalism, and a brief survey of Berlin's musical engagements, I turn to considering the artistic temperaments he most valorized and the ethical qualities he attributed to them, charting how these early musings came to be incorporated into his views on the lived commitments of liberalism. I then examine Berlin's conceptualization of the divide between feeling and thinking, through his engagement with the writings of Herder.

[1]Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London, 1998), 56.

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Herder himself had a profound relationship with music, of course, in the sense that his folk song collecting was intimately bound up with his views on language and on the origins and uniqueness of cultures. I argue that music allowed Berlin to draw together his aversion to monism and commitment to pluralism, his sense of the relationship between thought and expression, his sense of the dichotomy between abstract principles and lived realities, and his own sense of belonging and alienation that he attributed to his Jewish identity. These claims are evidenced by highlighting how certain tendencies in Berlin's established writings can already be seen in his early reflections on music in the criticism he penned in the 1930s; through direct comments that he made in his work that draw a line between the way he thought about musical personalities, on the one hand, and his focus on personality in his approach to intellectual-history writing more generally, on the other; and a consideration of the profound importance of music to Berlin's emotional life, which according to his own approach cannot be siloed from his intellectual life. This argument in turn feeds into a broader agenda to think through the special challenges posed by music to discussions of the aesthetic in the history of liberal thought.

The aesthetic in liberal thought

In response to historical characterizations of liberalism that emphasize its commitment to the procedural, the rational, and the impartial, there have been a series of recent attempts to recover the importance of the imagination, aesthetics, and the arts to liberal thinkers, from John Stuart Mill to Lionel Trilling.[2] The recent strand of revision arises from the intersection of literary studies (especially Victorian studies), economic history, and the history of political theory. It recuperates the sense in which liberalism has involved a lived emotional commitment to, and an appreciation for, the variousness of human experience. Rather than viewing liberalism as a set of principles that define a particular political philosophy, it is increasingly being viewed as what Amanda Anderson has described as a "situated response to historical challenges" which has been expressed through an ethos, or a collection of habits and practices. The "aesthetic," in this context, draws attention not only to ideas about art—such as ruminations on the nature of creative "genius," the political responsibility of the artist, the relationship between art and economics, or the conflation of aesthetics and ethics (the beautiful and the good)—but also to aspects of temperament and attitude. Adapting Anderson's approach, we might say that in

[2]See, for example, David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton, 2017); Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago, 2016); Kathleen Blake, *Pleasures of Benthamism: Victorian Literature, Utility, Political Economy* (Oxford, 2009); and David Wayne Thomas, *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic* (Philadelphia, 2004). And in a related vein, though focusing on the emotional and aesthetic affordances of political and economic positions in discourse associated with the liberal tradition, see Jock Macleod and Peter Denney, "Liberalism, Literature, and the Emotions in the Long Nineteenth Century," *Occasion* 11 (2018), 1–20; Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, 2009); Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore, 2003); Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago and London, 2000); and Linda Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* (Charlottesville and London, 1996). See also Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago, 2010).

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the context of the following discussion, the aesthetic denotes "a broad spectrum of values associated with complexity, difficulty, variousness, ambiguity, undecidability, hermeneutic open-endedness, and threshold experiences—experiences that prompt or ease one into an apprehension of the new, the unrealized, or the buried."[3] The sense of open-endedness and incompleteness underpins the progressive quality of liberal thought, as well as the ethic of improvement with which it is associated. It is this notion of liberalism as valuing *incompleteness* that will become particularly important to our discussion below.

There are also certain styles and genres of literary expression that have come to be seen as constituent forms of liberal political thought, such as novelistic realism and essayism.[4] In what follows, I will be extending these recuperations beyond text-based aesthetic forms, focusing particularly on the formational significance of music and music performance in liberal thought historically, and its implications for how we think about the aesthetic affordances of historical liberalisms. Music presents an interesting case when thinking about the role of the aesthetic within liberalism, because its limited representational capacity seems to run against the grain of liberalism's focus on language and reasoned argument, as we shall see. Mill even worried about the limited communicative function of poetry in his later writings, and indeed broader questions about art's communicative function have almost exclusively focused on the problem of how language (including figurative speech, poetry, and literature) relates to conceptual and rational modes of thought. Musical notation is, of course, itself a symbolic language, and even in oral traditions there are harmonic and structural conventions in music composition that operate within fairly prescribed rules of grammar and syntax. Nevertheless, the absence of explicit representational content, especially in instrumental compositions that do not carry any overt literary, thematic, visual, or programmatic associations—a category of music that came to be known in the late nineteenth century as "absolute music"—did invite questions that were radically different from those usually addressed in discussions of language and conceptual thought.

While this limited capacity was seen as a deficit or a danger before the nineteenth century, it acquired, along with the category of the "absolute" more broadly, a new sense of aesthetic grandeur in the writings of early Romantics such as Heinrich Wackenroder, Ludwig Tieck, Novalis, Friedrich von Schlegel, and E. T. A. Hoffmann.[5] For a cultural movement in which, as Berlin noted in his famous A. W. Mellon lectures on Romanticism, the category of the aesthetic dominated over all other realms of thought, "absolute music" came to be seen as the apotheosis and encapsulation of Romanticism. This discourse shifted in the early twentieth

[3]Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*, 7. Anderson is a Victorianist by training but her claim here extends to liberal traditions of the late twentieth century and beyond, allowing for the notion that liberalism responds to historical changes. See Amanda Anderson, "Character and Ideology: The Case of Cold War Liberalism," *New Literary History* 42/2 (2011), 209–29.

[4]See note 2 above.

[5]For a historical overview of how the notion of "absolute music" developed over time see Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (Oxford and New York, 2014); Sarah Collins, "Absolute Music," in Nanette Nielsen, Tómas McAuley, and Jerrold Levinson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Western Music and Philosophy* (Oxford and New York, 2021), 631–52; and Sanna Pederson, "Defining the Term 'Absolute Music' Historically," *Music and Letters* 90/2 (2009), 240–62.

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century, because artistic abstraction became valorized in ways that were different from its former association with the "absolute," but there lingered well into the latter part of the twentieth century a sense in which the ineffability of music had a philosophical importance, having the capacity to present a different form of knowledge to that communicated through language—a veiled, indistinct, sensuous, intuitive, and, most importantly, incomplete mode of knowing—that belied the Romantic association of the aesthetic with revealing transcendent or hidden truths.[6] It was arguably music's capacity for variousness, and the lingering Romantic sense in which music encapsulates the condition of the aesthetic *as such*, that made it so amenable to some liberal thinkers.[7]

Despite concerns about music's limited ability to express ideas, music's intensive and widespread affective power has presented liberal thinkers with a metaphor for collective moral sentiments, a facilitator of empathy and emotional commitment or for distancing and discipline, and a means for bridging divides in social relations.[8] Yet the ways in which music's special characteristics prompted questions about the nature of ideas, thought, and language were also a conspicuous feature of its role within the liberal tradition.

Berlin's personal appreciation of music and his fascination with a certain type of artistic stage persona—namely his everyday lived experience of music—were not necessarily consistent with his writings on cognate topics such as "Artistic Commitment," "Creative Genius," or Romanticism.[9] Indeed these domains often stand in curious tension for Berlin, as we shall see. More broadly, we must be cautious to distinguish different modes by which the aesthetic becomes an important category in the history of liberalism, variously as (1) an illustrative set of metaphors; (2) a normative claim that an engagement with the arts and the honing of aesthetic judgment has an effect on political and ethical judgment, shaping practices such as distancing or empathy; (3) a philosophical claim that all modes of thought and moral reasoning rely on expression (usually through language), and therefore their aesthetic quality cannot be portioned off from their conceptual reasoning—namely what Berlin called "expressionism"; or (4) an ethical claim regarding the legitimacy of artists who renounce direct engagement in politics (an overt political gesture if there ever was one), or conversely that certain artists allowed their art to be undesirably co-opted to political or commercial ends. In other words, the aesthetic may manifest as a particular view of art's qualities, capabilities, and value,

[6]For more on the conflicted intellectual history of the trope of ineffability as it has attached to music see Michael Gallope, *Deep Refrains: Music, Philosophy, and the Ineffable* (Chicago, 2017).

[7]The relationship of music with the evangelical liberalism of Gladstone and his circle might seem more in line with the transcendental view, though there is evidence to show the link between music and variousness or lived liberalism in Gladstone's sphere through the political salon of his daughter Mary Gladstone. See Phyllis Weliver, *Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon: Music, Literature, Liberalism* (Cambridge, 2017).

[8]For a range of case studies examining music's role within liberal thought and practice see Sarah Collins, ed., *Music and Victorian Liberalism: Composing the Liberal Subject* (Cambridge, 2019); and Collins, "Utility and the Pleasures of Musical Formalism: Edmund Gurney, Liberal Individualism and Musical Beauty as 'Ultimate' Value," *Music and Letters* 100 (2019), 335–54.

[9]Berlin's essays on these topics are contained respectively in Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (London, 1996); Berlin, *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism* (London, 1993); and Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton, 1999).

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or it may manifest as an ethos or a method, or indeed a set of tendencies, such as reserve, tact, or many-sidedness. Accordingly, we must take care to perceive the difference between methods that "aestheticize politics" (erecting an edifice of separateness for political ideology that elides moral categories or comparisons between values) and those that exhibit the far more modest, plural, and tentative tendency to simply pay heed to the "distribution of relations to experience, and of the distributions of attention and appreciation."[10] Against George Kateb's claim that Berlin's work exhibited a form of "radical aestheticism," we might profitably look instead at the manner in which aesthetic experience shaped Berlin's intellectual development and permeated his thinking in ways that have yet to be acknowledged, and which were decidedly uneven.[11]

Berlin's "love of music"

Berlin had a lifelong engagement with music in a way that seemed to exceed, both in longevity and perhaps also in intensity, many of his other intellectual activities. Indeed at Berlin's memorial service at the Hampstead Synagogue on 14 January 1998, Noel Annan observed that "to have lived without music would have been to him a nightmare."[12] Berlin attended opera as a boy in the years before the 1917 Revolution, recalling vividly almost sixty years later his youthful experience of hearing renowned Russian bass Fyodor Chaliapin singing what was to become his characteristic title role in Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, an opera known for its innovative musical setting of Russian dialectic in a genre hereto dominated by Italian- and French-language models.[13] In his early years at

[10]Russell, *Tact*, 58.

[11]See George Kateb, "Can Cultures be Judged? Two Defenses of Cultural Pluralism in Isaiah Berlin's Work," in Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (New Haven, 2006), 361–83. Kateb construes a "radical aestheticism" in Berlin's valorization of human creativity as a means of avoiding determinism, at both an individual level of creativity and a whole-culture level. Kateb argues that this view led Berlin to treat cultures as works of art, to be judged aesthetically, such that he would "theoretically countenance injustice and untruth." Ibid., 367. Yet it is important to recall the blurring of the aesthetic with the ethical in Berlin's thinking (and indeed in many forms of aestheticism), and, in addition, that the unpredictability and mysteriousness that Berlin attributes to individuals and cultures rests arguably more on the tension between abstract concepts and lived realities, as identified by Anderson as a shaping condition of liberalism's bleakness (Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago, 2016)). Indeed it might be said that rather than viewing people and groups like works of art, Berlin draws from his experience of the variousness and incompleteness of an art like music to shape his approach to temperament and style in individuals and cultures. The non-distinction between thought and expression in Berlin's thinking means that there would be no such thing as a "nonaesthetic strategy" to defend the claim that cultures cannot be judged against each other, as Kateb claims of Berlin. It is also useful to note that the idea, drawn from Herder, that human creativity is communal even when it is expressed via an individual (such as an artist) was a foundational notion of the folk music–collecting movement that occurred across Britain and Europe in the early twentieth century, as a way to find a putative authentic essence to various national cultures, as well as a new harmonic language that could be set against both an over-ripe musical late Romanticism and a discomforting musical modernism. For further discussion about Kateb's claim see Alicia Steinmetz, "Isaiah Berlin's Liberal Reformation," in this forum.

[12]Quoted in Isaiah Berlin, *The First and the Last* (London, 1998), 81–94, esp. 90.

[13]Isaiah Berlin, "Performances Memorable—And Not So Memorable," *Opera* 26 (1975), 116–20, reprinted in Berlin, *Moments musicaux: Occasional Essays on Opera*, ed. Henry Hardy (The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library), 30–33. Importantly, in a programme note written in 1963, Berlin attributed to the new

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Oxford, Berlin wrote music reviews, alternately under his own name and using the pseudonym Albert Alfred Apricot. He attended the Salzburg Festival religiously from 1929 to 1938, he had personal interactions with a number of musicians (such as Alfred Brendel), and during the interwar years he engaged directly in critical discourse about music through reviews of concerts and books on music history.[14]

Berlin became fascinated by the personal character and temperament of his favorite conductors. These were all men of monumental vision, skill, and ego, and with variable political allegiances, working during a historical moment when maintaining an apolitical position as a public figure was not a viable option. They included Arturo Toscanini (who by the 1930s had become an antifascist icon), Wilhelm Furtwängler (who remained in Germany during the Nazi regime as a leading conductor, though it is contested whether he was a sympathizer), Herbert von Karajan (who held Nazi Party membership), and Sir Thomas Beecham (who took his London Philharmonic on a tour of Nazi Germany in 1936, amidst much controversy). And as we shall see, Berlin's analysis of the temperaments of these conductors, and other performers, exhibited an early tendency to construe the habits and modes of living of exemplary individuals in ethical terms.

Further evidence of Berlin's ongoing and active commitment to musical life can be seen in the fact that he continued to maintain his position on the Board of Trustees of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden (1954–65 and 1974–87) after he had relinquished many other official roles. In this role, Berlin enjoyed his complimentary tickets to the opera and ballet, but he was also an active participant on the board, as the minutes of meetings and associated correspondence show.[15] Berlin contributed, for example, to robust discussions about repertoire choice, lamenting the risk aversion of the opera subcommittee and the conservatism of public taste, and arguing for productions not only of the operatic classics but also of newer and challenging works, such as Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron*, and Kurt Weill's *Die Bürgschaft* and *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. With his experience in policy, Berlin assisted in lobbying on behalf of Covent Garden for government and philanthropic funding. And with his diplomatic experience Berlin no doubt brought knowledge to bear on the maneuverings in international diplomacy that delayed the Bolshoi Ballet Company performing at Covent Garden in late 1956 due to security concerns prompted by a police accusation that a leading Soviet discus thrower, Nina Ponomareva, had stolen five hats

Russian school of the late nineteenth century (including Stasov and Mussorgsky) a desire for art to be historically and socially responsive—in other words, to embody "commitment." Berlin described this commitment as a rejection of both commercialism and aestheticism, and he used terms that could be readily applied to his own portraits of his favorite thinkers and artists—namely as having a "scrupulous fidelity to every nuance of human character and action … to follow every pulsation of the constantly changing human spirit." Isaiah Berlin, "Historical Note," in *Khovanshchina* (Royal Opera House opera programme) ([London], 1963), reprinted in Berlin, *Moments musicaux*, 22–9.

[14]For a list of Berlin's writings on music see the bibliography provided at https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/bibliography.

[15]The papers are largely held at "Correspondence and Papers Relating to Music and the Arts, 1955–1991," GB-Ob, MSS, Berlin, 388–91.

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from a London clothing store. In the international political tensions of the moment, Moscow viewed this accusation as a targeted affront, and faced with this historic visit from the Bolshoi being potentially cancelled, a press conference was arranged at Covent Garden to try to bring the press on side, as cancelation of the event would have significant financial consequences for the organization (not to mention the artistic disappointment of cancelation).[16] Berlin also made representations to the board regarding the choice of musical director (he had particular views about the suitability of Benjamin Britten for the role, as he regarded opera as "an essentially heterosexual art"),[17] and he weighed in to the hotly debated question whether foreign-language opera should be performed in English translation for London audiences, and also whether native singers should be preferred over international stars, in order to foster a national pool of talent.[18] As he neared eighty years old, Berlin could reputedly still recall details of concerts, performers, conductors, and repertoire from performances that he had attended in the 1930s in astounding detail. In sum, music (especially opera) was a constant part of his life to the very end, and he clearly harbored a profound emotional connection to his musical experiences.

While an appeal to the aesthetic in nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourse has often been associated with the valorization of fixed and eternal values, of abstract thought and a sense of organic unity, Berlin construed in music—almost uniquely among the arts—quite the opposite; music was a mirror for his burgeoning interest in flow, change, mutually opposing truths, and the forceful reality of sensuous experience. In a short essay from 1930, for example, Berlin charged the firebrand artist and writer Wyndham Lewis with falling into the trap of uncritically transposing aesthetic categories into categories for living and thinking in just the way that Kateb accuses Berlin. He noted of Lewis,

> Experience comes to him primarily through the *eye* … [He] conceives of all created matter as something clearly and sharply outlined, all reality as something fixed, firm, certain, and static, as a design or a building is static. Music, e.g., to him is typical of an undifferentiated mass drifting and flowing, vague, shapeless, untranslatable into visual language and therefore automatically repellent. He is personally revolted by what he sees as a spectacle of flow, change and process … Unlike Professor Le Roy, he was not dissolved in the

[16]Letter to Lord Waverley from an unknown correspondent (likely David Webster, then director of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden), n.d. (late Sept. 1956), GB-Ob, MSS, Berlin, 388, 44. The correspondent remarked upon the effect of the press conference: "we had on Friday evening and Saturday a unanimous press on our side, from *The Times* to *The Daily Worker*; a record we shall probably not achieve again."

[17]Isaiah Berlin, letter to Sir Oliver Franks, 11 July 1958, GB-Ob, MSS, Berlin, 388, 80.

[18]Ever the pragmatist, while Berlin urged others to be vocal in support of the cause of retaining opera in the original language, and he himself noted the indissoluble link between words and music in opera (which would be potentially marred by translation), yet in public he acknowledged the importance of translation for increasing equity of access to the artform. In later decades, the potential of televised performances and the possibility of using surtitles displayed in English on-screen while retaining the original language as sung made him lean toward the latter position. See Isaiah Berlin, letter to Hamon, 23 Oct. 1959, GB-Ob, MSS, Berlin, 388, 254; and Berlin, "A Personal View of Super-titles," in Glyndebourne Touring Opera 1986 programme, 8–9, reprinted in Berlin, *Moments musicaux*, 34–7.

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> joy of becoming. The thought of being an ever-streaming reality in a mass-grown grotto nauseated him.[19]

In practice, Berlin himself regularly pivoted between aesthetic and ethical categories. Berlin also undoubtedly made the slippage between different registers of value—aesthetic, ethical, political—in his own work, and the idea of imputing ethos on the basis of psychological tendencies became a hallmark of his style of intellectual history. Yet outwardly Berlin rejected the application of standards of ethics to art, or vice versa.

Although references to music and musicians are scattered throughout Berlin's writings, the bulk of his published work on music appeared in the 1930s. These early writings on music, and the degree to which music shaped his thinking more generally, should be seen in the context of the highly charged atmosphere of politicization throughout Europe at the time (including the internal shifts within the liberal tradition itself after the crushing electoral defeats of the Liberal Party in the UK in the early 1920s), as well as the fact that Berlin was at this time still closely involved with Oxford philosophy, though being drawn gradually toward the history of ideas. Intensifying political tensions made the matter of an artist's commitment and responsibility impossible to ignore, even in aesthetic discussions. Yet Berlin was also increasingly interested in historical manifestations of exemplary characters, leading him to equate "genius" with a type of "virtue," as we shall see. In this sense, Berlin's writings on music show him grappling with his own conflicting intellectual tendencies.

Naivety, sentimentality, and Jewishness

In Berlin's shift from philosophy to the history of ideas in the late 1930s, his interest in temperament—both in the sense of modes of living and in the sense in which he later described Herder as an "undivided man," as we shall see—had become an abiding preoccupation. In his writing on music we see early glimpses of his mode of considering temperament essential to the formulation of values—the way in which to learn, live with, and create values in an everyday way. This is significant for the question of liberalism's aesthetic affordances, because critiques of both liberalism and aesthetics have often targeted their advocacy of autonomy for being blind to the impact of social and economic conditions upon thought, rather than taking account of the practices associated with the aspiration toward autonomy (rather than its realization), and the historical function and affective formations brought into being through these practices. Berlin has been viewed as a significant proponent of this strand of liberal thought in the twentieth century. Indeed, Alan Ryan summarized this tendency in Berlin's work as the sense in which "we should stop hankering after utopia but we should not stop fighting to the best of our abilities for freedom and happiness."[20] This tendency acquires not only a

[19]Isaiah Berlin, "Some Procrustations," *Oxford Outlook* 10/52 (1930), 491–502, at 494–5, original emphasis.

[20]Alan Ryan, "Isaiah Berlin: The History of Ideas as Psychodrama," *European Journal of Political Theory* 12/1 (2012), 61–73, at 68.

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political significance but also a methodological one, in the sense that it was both a feature of the liberal temperament and a feature of Berlin's approach to the history of ideas. It was a practice of living and a practice of history writing, and, as we shall see, in both of these spheres of practice the influence of music played an early foundational role for Berlin.

The first examples come from Berlin's critical engagement with certain performers whose aesthetic outlook he viewed as having certain ethical qualities. In a move which presages his later exploration of the distinction between the "sentimental" and "naïve" artist, Berlin made two sets of comparisons between musicians, embracing the self-effacing qualities of performers who "forget themselves" in the music and allow themselves to become mere vehicles for the composers' expression, rather than asserting their own ego as an interpreter. In this vein he compared two female virtuosi, violinist Jelly D'Arányi and pianist Myra Hess. Of D'Arányi, Berlin wrote,

> she loves the instrument more deeply than the composer, and looks at everything with its eyes; her hand must feel definite physical pleasure when it embarks upon long adventures in the slender and intricate cadenzas and finally emerges on to the broad, smooth surface of the slow theme … she is a willing slave to her instrument … but this attitude is sometimes fatal; the *Kreutzer Sonata* … [was] played by her with such a fire and brilliance that *its depth, its complexity, its shadows, the part played in it by uneasy thought was obliterated*, and the whole made altogether too physical and too obvious.[21]

While, for Berlin, D'Arányi pursues pleasure at the expense of real understanding of the complexity and "uneasy thought" of the *Kreutzer Sonata*, asserting herself through the too overt presence of her artistic personality and her performing body, by contrast, Myra Hess

> has achieved a kind of freedom; she can afford to forget her piano, and totally immerse herself in what she is playing; she never, under any circumstances, consciously interprets herself, only the composer. With a singular lack of egoism she succeeds in forgetting herself, and allowing us to forget her too, which Mlle D'Arányi never does, and indeed cannot do; with the latter, one is continually made aware of difficulties triumphantly surmounted, of favourite patches in the texture of her music to which she eagerly hastens, and communicates to you the vast thrill which it gives her to linger over them with open, enthusiastic partiality.[22]

Hess's "freedom," for Berlin, comes from a particular ethical attitude that is set against the pursuit of mere pleasure—the bodily enthusiasm, the partiality—exhibited by D'Arányi, yet her attitude is also not quite what thinkers such as Mill would have equated with "character," given that Hess allows herself to be taken over by impulses that are not her own. In essence, Hess's attitude embodied for Berlin

[21] A.A.A., "Music Chronicle," *Oxford Outlook* 10/53 (1930), 616–27, at 622, added emphasis.
[22] Ibid., 623.

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the capacity of the aesthetic to draw out what, in his later essay "The Sense of Reality," he described as the "unique and unrepeated," the "fleeting properties," "what is specific, unique, in a given character or series of events."[23] So while Hess is clearly instrumentalized to the will of another (i.e. the composer), it is not in service of an abstract idea, doctrine, or theory that she willingly gives herself; rather she gives voice to an individual creative mind, drawing out the unique, the specific, the fleeting, and the uneasy in its expression.

These distinctions were forerunners to Berlin's later thinking about the categories of the naive and the sentimental. In a now classic essay published in the New York journal *Hudson Review* in 1968, Berlin invoked Friedrich Schiller's notion of naivety from his 1795–6 essay "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" to describe Verdi as the last of the naive artists.[24] Berlin described naivety as the quality of an artist who is "not conscious of any rift between themselves and their milieu, or within themselves,"[25] and who has no "ulterior purpose, however sublime" for the creation of their art. Berlin grouped Verdi together with other figures such as Cervantes, Bach, Handel, Rubens, and Hayden as ideally naive artists, as opposed to the "sentimental" thinkers such as Rousseau, Byron, Schopenhauer, Carlyle, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Wagner, Marx, and Nietzsche, whom he considered too self-consciously contemplative, and too much in the grip of insatiable craving—in other words, too decadent. For Berlin, Verdi was naive in the sense that he did not see music as the "messianic rebirth of the spirit," like other Romantics, leading his work to be criticized by some for being inauthentic and artificial—a characterization based on much the same features that led Berlin to describe Verdi as "the last great voice of humanism not at war with itself."[26]

In Berlin's account, the naive artist is joyous, even in the face of contradiction and hardship, because they accept their world at face value; the sentimental artist is constantly in search of an unachievable unity, a reconciliation of contradiction, or a form of redemption. The naive artist lives "firsthand" and is not self-reflective, whereas the sentimental artist lives as a spectator, never able to apprehend an object directly. Berlin writes that the conditions of modernity (from the Enlightenment onwards) have increasingly precluded the possibility that artists can be naive in this way. Yet it is clear that, at one time, he thought of certain performers in similar terms, as we saw above in his valorization of Hess over D'Arányi, where he attempts to reverse the Romantic emphasis on depth, yearning, and transcendence, in favor of an absence of self-consciousness.[27]

Verdi's credentials in this respect are telling. As Berlin pointed out, Verdi supported both the revolutionary democrats and the king in the creation of the Italian nation, and he was responsive to popular feeling in his depictions of overcoming of "oppression, inequality, fanaticism and human degradation,"[28] but Berlin held that

[23]Isaiah Berlin, "The Sense of Reality," in Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, 1–39, at 23–4.

[24]Isaiah Berlin, "The Naiveté of Verdi," *Hudson Review* 21/1 (1968), 138–47.

[25]Ibid., 138.

[26]Ibid., 145.

[27]See also Berlin's discussion of pianist Dinu Lipatti's style of performance, which he described as being inflected with a "mood of sharp lyrical sadness, as opposed to the flow of German self-pity." Isaiah Berlin, "Lament for Lipatti," *House and Garden* 7 (1952), 91, 98.

[28]Berlin, "The Naiveté of Verdi," 141.

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these attributes were not essential to the appreciation of his music, as opposed to "sentimental artists":

> No one who does not realize what Beethoven felt about tyranny can fully understand the *Eroica*, or *Fidelio*, the first great political opera; no one who is ignorant of the relevant social movements in Russia can understand the significance of *Boris Godunov*, or *Khovanshchina*. Schumann's aesthetic outlook, Wagner's mythology, the romantic theories that dominated Berlioz, are indispensable to the understanding of their masterpieces; but it is not necessary to know Shakespeare's political views to understand his historical plays; it might help, but it is not required. It is so with Verdi … Knowledge of basic human emotions is virtually all the extramusical equipment that is needed to understand Verdi's works, early or late, great or small.[29]

In its self-sufficiency, Verdi's art achieves a natural alignment with its time, according to Berlin—it is not nostalgic or utopian; it does not attempt to be transformative (though it may have become that way later for political reasons). Verdi did not see music as the "messianic rebirth of the spirit," like other Romantics, and his art was the "most triumphant obstacle to the new aesthetic religion."[30]

While Berlin himself appreciated naive art, he, like Schiller, viewed the sentimental as essential to undertaking analysis and criticism. The sentimental also freed the subject from determinism, because it offered the *freedom to choose between competing values*. Berlin raised this matter in a review in which he compared the two different forms of genius he attributed to the musicians Adolf Busch (violinist) and Artur Schnabel (pianist):

> whereas, in the case of Busch, as in the parallel case of Toscanini, the music is, as it were, allowed to play itself, there is no sense of *deliberate choice between alternatives*, of doctrine pressed home against encircling and eliminated possibilities, in the case of the Schnabel the opposite occurs, the actuality which he develops moves forward in conscious opposition to the unrealized potentialities. In the first case there is no sense of conflict; the musical process of [*sic*] one of harmonious, natural, unquestioning self-revelation. What one admires is the nobility, the divine ingeniousness of treatment. With Schnabel, conflict arises at every stage. What one admires is the genius disclosed in each decision, each selected and asseverated element. The intellectual strain is much greater, the tension much severer, *problems are presented and some are resolved, some not*, but the urgency of all of them gives the whole process an aspect at once more tragic and more personal.[31]

We might say that according to Berlin's later categorization of the sentimental and naive artist, Schnabel's struggle with competing alternatives means that he is sentimental. Yet it is this very struggle—this aspiration toward resolving the problems

[29]Ibid., 141–2.
[30]Ibid., 145.
[31]I.B., "Music Chronicle," *Oxford Outlook* 12 (1932), 133–8, at 137, added emphasis.

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presented as well as his failure to resolve them all—that makes him exemplary of a type of moral disposition that Berlin prized. The incompleteness of the task of resolving the struggle, and the tension created between the aspiration and the fact of manifest incommensurability, is the central feature of this disposition, just as it was for Schiller's sentimental artist, whose greatest works issued from the tension between an aspiration toward nature and the realities of one's modern, fractured self-consciousness.[32]

As Berlin's biographer Michael Ignatieff has noted, Berlin was himself highly self-conscious, a point which Berlin ascribed to his Jewish identity.[33] Berlin attributed the same condition to Disraeli and Marx for a similar reason, observing that both of these figures were driven by the desire for a naive unity precisely because they were attempting to address their own internal sense of incompleteness. The panacea was to be found, for Disraeli (seeking to mitigate a Jewish sense of alienation) in the identification with the British aristocracy, and for Marx it was to be found in the proletariat. Both classes, according to Berlin, seemed to offer these thinkers the possibility of overcoming their sentimental state, becoming "free of middle-class snobbery and self-consciousness."[34] Ignatieff read a similar motivation into Berlin's own agenda:

> There is something of Disraeli in Berlin's lifelong affection for aristocrats like David Cecil. The quality he admired in the well-born was the indifference to convention that went with the sense of being at ease. But how was a Jew ever to be fully at ease? Zionism, Berlin always argued, offered Jews one avenue of escape from self-consciousness. It promised them a land where they could be themselves, safe among their own, no longer required to "fit in", to "pass", to accommodate and please anyone but their own. He made the case for Zionism, but he knew that he could never be fully at home in Israel.[35]

Berlin's attitude toward his own Jewish identity was simultaneously detached and sympathetic—he rejected "sentimental" expressions of Jewishness, derided what he saw as a Jewish desire to please and assimilate, and was a supporter of non-violent Zionist causes throughout his life. He believed that establishing a homeland would allow the Jewish population finally to be itself, though when he was confronted by Arthur Koestler's suggestion that the creation of the state of Israel meant that Jews now had to choose either to assimilate or to emigrate, Berlin rejected this binary formulation. This reaction, and his personal feeling of being divided between his Russian, British, and Jewish identities, shaped his appreciation of "plural forms of life." Berlin thought that each culture's values should be understood only according to its own contextual logic, and that, crucially, some values are inherently incommensurable—such as the desire for freedom and the desire for belonging. He recognized from his own experience that emphasizing one of these

[32]Bernard Williams has extended these categories beyond the composer to the opera lover, or the listening audience, in "Naïve and Sentimental Opera Lovers," in Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Avishai Margalit, eds., *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (Chicago, 1991), 180–92.

[33]Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 223.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid.

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values would always result in a loss of the other, and that there was no higher plane of reconciliation. The task, then, was to gain an empathetic understanding of the expression of others (including intellectual and political expressions) while at once pursuing an authentic expression of one's own.

Berlin struggled with this determination through his experience of music, attributing to music and certain performers the kind of unity that he himself, in his self-consciousness, could not achieve. Indeed on one occasion he even praised the sense in which music could be rendered a "concrete actualization of a preconceived ideal plan," much in the manner that he negatively attributes to Rousseau and the conception of positive liberty.[36] The extent to which Berlin's awareness of an unattainable naivety shaped a broader current in his thinking is further revealed by his immediate source for this distinction. Schiller's essay outlines the way in which the human pleasure in observing nature is derived from our ethical attraction toward its naivety—its absence of self-consciousness—which we recognize as our own lost natural condition, prior to the modern division between sensation and intellect. Our awareness of our inability to fuse sensation and intellect and achieve the pre-reflective innocence of nature gives us both a sublime sense of possibility and a tragic awareness that wholeness is unattainable.[37]

In describing the mixture of melancholy and aspiration in our confrontation with the naive in nature, Schiller was marking out his own skeptical post-revolutionary political consciousness of tempered optimism, or bleak hope. He adjures us to both celebrate the fact that humans are self-determining beings in a way that nature is not, yet to nevertheless hold nature's unity firmly in view in devising a personal ethics:

> We are *free* and what [objects of nature] are is *necessary*; we alter, they remain one. Yet only if both are combined with one another—only if the will freely adheres to the law of necessity and reason maintains its rule in the face of every change in the imagination, only then does the divine or the ideal emerge. Hence in them we forever see what eludes us, something we must struggle for and can hope to approach in an endless progress, even though we never attain it … they afford us the sweetest sort of delight in the idea of our humanity, although they necessarily humble us as far as any *specific state* of our humanity is concerned.[38]

[36]I.B., "Music Chronicle," *Oxford Outlook* 12 (1932), 61–5, at 64–5.

[37]Schiller sees evidence of this feeling of lost innocence not only when we contemplate nature, but also when we observe the actions of a child. The example he gives is when a child, upon seeing a homeless person, hands them their parents' wallet, at which point we admire the child because they have shown the inadequacies of our modern divided state: "We are moved with such emotion, not because we look down on the child from the heights of our power and perfection, but rather because we *look up* from our own limitedness, inseparable as it is from the *determination* we acquired at some point in time, to the boundless *determinability* in the child and to its pure innocence, and our feelings at such a moment are too visibly mixed with a certain melancholy for this source to be mistaken." Friedrich Schiller, *Essays*, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York, 1993), 182, original emphasis.

[38]Ibid., 181, original emphasis.

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The point here, as in Berlin's thinking, is not so much that naivety is impossible, but that it can serve as an ethical cue. Indeed Schiller concludes that "the goal for which the human being *strives* through culture is infinitely superior to the goal that he *attains* through nature."[39] In the final formulation, it is the activity of aspiring to unity rather than achieving it that fuels historical change.

Expressionism, Herder, and the undivided self

This type of emphasis on the processual was extrapolated further a few years later in Berlin's extended essay on Herder, where he described Herder's revelation that language is not simply a way of communicating ideas, but is itself constitutive of ideas. Herder and Berlin had a connection with Riga, and both had a profound interest in Jewish history and culture—Herder from an intellectual perspective in his search for the conditions of cultural belonging in the uncanny cohesion of the Jewish diaspora, and Berlin for his personal engagement with his Jewish identity, his work informing the British government on American Zionists during the war, and his post-World War II support for the creation of a state of Israel (albeit without detracting from the rights of the Arab Palestinians).

Herder's "linguistic constitutivism" saw language being intimately bound to ideas in a way that in part reflects Herder's interaction with his teacher Kant, whom he critiqued for believing in a priori "pure reason" rather than seeing reason being based in sensation. Herder wrote, "In naming everything and ordering it in relation to himself and his sensitivity, [man] becomes the imitator of divinity, the second creator, thus also poiesis, a poet."[40] The upshot of this is that in order to fully understand the concepts created by another mind, we must acquaint ourselves with the person's language and process of sensation in order to reconstruct their view of the world.

Nevertheless, some scholars have sought to temper this view by arguing that Herder's conception of the constitutive nature of language was still mimetic or designative to a degree, in the sense that people's thoughts are conditioned by their immediate cultural environment, with language being a product of our ability to reflect upon and to achieve distance from our immediate sensations received from that environment, making language an aspect of creativity (i.e. ordering our sense data), regardless of a desire to communicate our thoughts to others. In other words, thought is a way of managing experience or sensation, and language is coterminous with thought as a process of reflection on experience—the naming is the ordering. As Sikka points out, the word Herder uses for experience in this sense is *Empfindung*—"meaning 'sensation,' but of a form that cannot be separated from feeling and sensitivity, from affect."[41]

This closely resonates with Berlin's method, with his broader aversion to systematic philosophy, and his position against monism. Language, for Herder as for Berlin, is poetic (and musical, in Herder's case) because it is not simply a means to an end. It is more connected to an expressive need to reflect on and order experience than to a need to communicate. Perspective, position, and stance are therefore inbuilt in thought and language itself. This also means, *pace* Herder and Berlin, that

[39] Ibid., 202, added emphasis.

[40] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Vom Geist der ebräischen Poesie* (1781–2), quoted in Sonia Sikka, "Herder on the Relation between Language and World," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 21/2 (2004), 183–200, at 183.

[41] Sikka, "Herder on the Relation between Language and World," 187.

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there are no a priori ideas, and therefore there is no utopian possibility of freedom. The freedom comes in the ability to reflect and name (i.e. to exercise choice between existing alternatives, and manifest agency, as with Schnabel), free from an a priori concept to which that name attaches.

This has two important implications. First, it underpins the notion that ideas are by their nature bound up with forms of expression and therefore have affective properties, and that ideas cannot be separated from the sensibility that created them (which is why Berlin's approach to the history of ideas is always through the personalities of thinkers). And second, it implies the notion that communication is integral to the human subject and that we can only comprehend ourselves in relation to others (which is why Berlin's own ideas were shaped in personal conversation with others to an extraordinary degree). Berlin wrote that, for Herder, "mere contemplation yields no truth; it is only life, that is, action with or against others, that does this. For Herder man is shaped by, and must be defined in terms of, his association with others."[42]

Explorations of the aesthetic investments of liberalism are predominately based on its characterization as an essentially "expressivist" tradition of thought—one that is forged through and inseparable from particular modes of living and expression.[43] This is an attribute that Berlin ascribed to Herder's own method and outlook, using the term "expressionism"—which he described as claiming that

> all the works of men are above all voices speaking, are not objects detached from their makers, are part of a living process of communication between persons and not independently existing entities … this is connected with the further notions that *every form of human self-expression is in some sense artistic, and that self-expression is part of the essence of human beings as such*; which in turn entail such distinctions as those between integral and divided, or committed and uncommitted (that is, unfulfilled), lives; and thence lead to the concept of various hindrances, human and non-human, to the self-realization which is the richest and most harmonious form of self-expression that all creatures, whether or not they are aware of it, live for.[44]

This idea of self-realization through expression—as a type of art, developed in communication with others—clearly has a direct relevance to our topic of music's bearing on liberal thought. For both Berlin and Herder, values, culture, and language were shaped in and through living experience. Worlds were created by moments of encounter, quite literally sung into existence, just as the Laplandic youth composed their song as they glided over the snow behind their reindeer, in Berlin's description of Herder. For Herder, who invented the idea of "folk song" at a moment that Philip Bohlman has called the "global moment of world music history" in the late eighteenth century, songs and actions are one—the vitality of

[42]Isaiah Berlin, "Herder and the Enlightenment," in Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London, 1976), 143–216, at 168. See also Johann Gottfried Herder and Philip V. Bohlman, *Song Loves the Masses: Herder on Music and Nationalism* (Berkeley, 2017).

[43]The "expressivist" tradition has also been attributed to Wittgenstein, Hegel and Spinoza. Thomas, *Cultivating Victorians*, 45–6.

[44]Berlin, "Herder and the Enlightenment," 153, added emphasis.

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songs is bound up with the vitality of the mode of living.[45] Herder's idea of collective self-becoming through language and myth (embodied in folk song) was in essence an ontological claim about the existence of the nation as a "performative principle."[46]

Towards the end of Berlin's life he was asked to write an account of his work for a Chinese guide to Anglo-American philosophy, and in this text he quoted Herzen in a way that Ignatieff describes as coming "as close as [Berlin] ever did to spelling out a personal credo": "'Where is the song before it is sung?' Where indeed? 'Nowhere' is the answer—one creates the song by singing it, by composing it. So, too, life is created by those who live it, step by step."[47] For Berlin, composing one's own life and thought through its expression meant adopting what might be described as a *musical* way of living, which in Berlin's terms involved a moral disposition of wholeheartedness that left one open to the "spectacle of flow, change and process"—to the spontaneous, the affective, and the incomplete.

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[45]Philip V. Bohlman, "Johann Gottfried Herder and the Global Moment of World-Music History," in Bohlman, ed., *The Cambridge History of World Music* (Cambridge, 2013), 255–76.

[46]Frederick M. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (Montreal, 2003).

[47]Quoted in Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, at 295.

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