




REVIEW: BOOK

## The Musical Discourse of Servitude: Authority, Autonomy, and the Work-Concept in Fux, Bach, and Handel

Harry White

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Harry White's *The Musical Discourse of Servitude: Authority, Autonomy, and the Work-Concept in Fux, Bach, and Handel* proceeds from an innovative premise, though not one without precedent: the linkage of two composers frequently paired in earlier musicological literature with a third who nowadays scarcely garners attention as a composer, though his oeuvre is of comparable size. The precedent is Charles Burney's, but the intervening two centuries seem to have produced no further instances of such a conjunction, at least not with the degree of absorbing attention devoted to it by White. Yet this stimulating new study manifestly demonstrates the fruits of closely examining Fux's music and its Viennese imperial milieu in order to illuminate what its author terms the European musical imagination of the eighteenth century, as it was diversely realized by three exemplary figures.

White's view is that an intimate relation of servitude and autonomy centrally defines this imagination, with the choice of conformity to stylistic, generic and institutional norms in fact lying precariously close to that of subversion. In many cases, it may have taken little to tip the balance in favour of one over the other. To elaborate such an argument, White draws upon John Milton's *Paradise Lost* as his main interpretative resource, and specifically applies the metaphor of a Satanic rejection of service in Heaven to the musical examples. According to this reading, Fux elected not to join Lucifer's band of mutinous angels, so to speak, but remained entirely loyal to the authority of his reigning deity, Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI, while his two contemporaries undertook rebellion, at least during the latter stages of their careers. Fux's 'engagement with the stylistic agencies of North Italian church music, mediated through the complex and often stultifying liturgical demands of Habsburg Vienna[,] allows us a perspective on the same agencies of style in Bach and Handel. It is this perspective which legitimates servitude as a status quo from which the late works of Bach and Handel decisively dissent' (284). In other words, Bach's and Handel's imaginative freedom stands out against a prevalent culture of servitude which counted Fux among its most talented practitioners. And White contends that a concept of the musical work undergirds this freedom, as epitomized by Bach's late cycles (such as *Art of Fugue* and the Mass in B minor) and Handel's English oratorios. He thus disputes Lydia Goehr's thesis that 'Bach did not intend to compose musical works' (*The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 8). Rather, the work concept already enjoyed a substantive existence during the eighteenth century and did not need to await the advent of Romanticism to be born.

The use of a Miltonian analytical framework throughout *The Musical Discourse of Servitude* might spark the criticism that its author does not consider the reception of *Paradise Lost* (or relative lack thereof) in Fux's Vienna and Bach's Leipzig, but this criticism cannot stand as a persuasive one,

unless one subscribes to the notion that historical research should and can generate exact copies of the past. If history is understood rather as dialectical, then the choice of Milton must be evaluated on the basis of the insights it produces, and not of its objective verisimilitude. What a continuity of servitude and autonomy affords White is a broad perspective on the range of eighteenth-century compositional attitudes which sets individual composers at different points of a spectrum and avoids an either–or fallacy (either reducing composers to their political, social and cultural contexts, or deifying them as sovereign artists). Fux thus leans decidedly towards servitude and Bach towards autonomy, with Handel rather closer to the latter than the former. A fourth significant figure in White's discussion, Antonio Caldara, who was also active at the court of Charles VI, evinces a Fuxian orientation yet diverges notably from his colleague in the direction of freedom. Such a conceptualization makes possible a principal argument of the book, that Bach's and Handel's compositional activities from around 1740 are mostly inexplicable without the autonomy provided by the work concept, which – while highly atypical during this period in its far tilt towards one end of the spectrum – nevertheless exerted an unmistakable impact in exceptional instances.

White's decision to draw upon Milton, though valid, raises the question of what alternative, complementary interpretations might arise out of a different framework: for instance, one informed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea of the social contract. *Paradise Lost* joins servitude and autonomy in discomfiting closeness, yet maintains their ultimate separation, and does not foreground their near-identity under certain circumstances (at least from the standpoint of Satan, if not necessarily of Milton himself), as did Rousseau or indeed Fux, who emphasized in the *Gradus ad Parnassum* that the constraints of training according to the precepts of strict counterpoint would finally result in the freedom and skilful fluency of a mature composer. The flip side of this near-identity is the authority and even subjugation sometimes imposed through autonomy, particularly the autonomy of selected 'outstanding' individuals vis-à-vis 'ordinary' humanity (a theme perhaps most disturbingly depicted in the eighteenth century by Mozart and Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni*, and in the nineteenth century by Dostoyevsky's *Raskolnikov*). The language of *The Musical Discourse of Servitude* sometimes touches upon the virtual equivalence of its two reigning concepts, as when White writes of Bach's 'imaginative authority' (146), 'the imperium of Handel's musical requirements' (197) and Fux's 'expressive versatility under the jurisdiction of the *Da capo*' (284). More concretely, he demonstrates Fux's comfortable mastery of the *stile antico* and the *da capo* aria, despite their markedly regulated nature, while the same composer's response to the court-prescribed requirements of the concerted mass produced much less convincing music – nervous, short-breathed and evidently resistant to extended thematic development. Caldara, by contrast, seems to have found this genre congenial to his compositional proclivities, to judge from the evidence of two examples, the *Missa Dolorosa* and the *Missa Sanctorum Cosmae et Damiani*. Hence authority, governance and restriction sometimes align readily with imaginative freedom and do not necessarily stand in opposition to it.

Usually, though, the dialectical intertwining of servitude and autonomy gives way in White's book to a Miltonian antithesis whereby the author repeatedly invokes the idea of emancipation, particularly from the hegemony of Italian music. This is clearest in chapter 4, devoted to a discussion of Fux's and Handel's engagement with the genre of oratorio. According to White, Handel broke free of 'the lockjaw of Italian oratorio and opera . . . and the Popish servilities of Italian musical drama' (199), 'the prison-house of . . . Italian prototypes [of the oratorio]' (214), 'operatic ensnarements' (217) and the like, as illustrated especially by *Samson* (first version completed in 1741). Fux, on the other hand, did not, despite the skilful dramaturgy demonstrated by *La fede sacrilega nella morte del precursor S. Giovanni* (1714). Yet it seems indisputable that Italian musical style did not generally constrict Handel and Bach, but often catalysed their creative powers, as in the fluid melodiousness of the former's arias and the indebtedness of the latter to the compelling instrumental language of a composer such as Vivaldi. Thus oratorio and opera suggest not only a continuity

between servitude and autonomy but also their effective oneness in practice, whereas the logic of emancipation necessarily entails their binaristic separation.

The problem with continuity as an explanatory strategy is that it seems to exclude the possibility of *simultaneous placement at different points* along a spectrum (if I correctly understand the customary use of the spectrum as an analytical device). Thus even an ‘apostle’ of freedom such as Bach submitted to the governance of pitch determined by five-line Western staff notation, as well as the limitations of the size of the typical human hand (in *Art of Fugue*, its open score notwithstanding). Submitting in this way freed the composer to communicate with and gain the appreciation of players and listeners of his music. Conversely, the concept of the work is not always emancipatory, unless one finds a performance culture that endlessly and even mindlessly repeats a few canonical classics to be liberating (as practitioners of the historical performance movement, not to speak of improvisatory traditions such as jazz and Indian classical music, where exact repetition of content is a horrifying anathema, do not).

In light of the foregoing points, and under the stimulus of White’s wide-ranging, richly provocative discussions, I would advance my own view that for Fux, Bach, Handel and Caldara alike, whatever servitude they laboured under paled next to the empowerment arising from their associations with institutions and practices of authority – certainly in comparison with contemporary European individuals who likewise possessed copious musical talent but were not Christian and male and therefore experienced authentic suppression as a consequence of their alterity (though the question of Handel’s sexual identity complicates the argument). This modest dissent from White’s own line of thought is not intended to express an equivocating appreciation of his book, work on which commenced about a decade ago yet whose topical relevance to the global situation of the past two years is remarkable. Reading *The Musical Discourse of Servitude* and its astute deliberations on freedom in 2022, one unavoidably thinks of the Covid-19 pandemic and the autonomy from public health mandates claimed by some persons, arguably against the interest of entire communities and societies. The difficult question is how to balance the rugged individualism of the few with a notion of freedom more akin in spirit to the social contract, whether from a music(ologic)al, political or medical standpoint. That an ‘academic’ study so brilliantly inspires further investigation of and debate on this matter is something to be grateful for.

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