



# Elaboraciones musicales: Ensayos sobre la música clásica

*Edward W. Said*

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## Lobstergirl says

Edward Said's insights on music are always interesting, but sometimes a little fuzzy, with that tendency of academics to produce, if not a word salad, at least a sentence salad. This is a collection of three lectures given at the University of California, Irvine (the Welles Library Lectures) and as with most of Said's music writings they are interdisciplinary, dipping into the ideas of Theodor Adorno, Paul de Man, Thomas Mann, Michel Foucault, Richard Poirier, Proust, and others. In the first lecture, "Performance as an Extreme Occasion," he laments the distance between the amateur and the professional musician; up until some point in the early 20th century lots of people played instruments, and played music at home at a high level for their own enjoyment, but few people do so today and thus audiences at classical music concerts feel alienated from the absurd levels of proficiency and spectacle they see and hear onstage. When he describes Maurizio Pollini's rendition of the Chopin Etude Op. 10 No. 1, perfect both technically and aesthetically, it almost sounds like a complaint. ("...the grandeur of Pollini's technique, its scale, and its dominating display and reach completely dispatch any remnant of Chopin's original intention for the music, which was to afford the pianist, any pianist, an entry into the relative seclusion and reflectiveness of problems of technique.") The "extreme" concert performance is "a cultural occasion staked upon specialized eccentric skills, upon the performer's interpretive and histrionic personality fenced in by his or her obligatory muteness, upon the audience's receptivity, subordination, and paying patience." As another example of the prototypical extreme occasion he gives Arturo Toscanini's 1938 presentation of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony – "so highly wrought...that it feels like a clear aesthetic alternative to the travails of ordinary human experience." In contrast, a Furtwängler performance of "the Bruckner or Schubert Ninth symphonies was felt to derive from his private, intuitive interpretation brought out and displayed, as if by the sheerest coincidence, on a public concert platform."

In a denser chapter, "On the Transgressive Elements in Music," Said explores the "nomadic" (transgressive) quality of music: how it can cross boundaries within society, between institutions and audiences, and sustain a variety of interpretations. (I know I sound like I'm bullshitting here, but trust me, I'm dumbing this way down just so I can understand what I'm talking about.) As examples he uses Bach, Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Mozart, and many others. He doesn't bring up the composer who first pops into my head when I think about this transgressive quality, Shostakovich, who, from what I know, was pretty much forced to write with at least two audiences in mind: the Soviet power structure, which was always sniffing for betrayals and crimes, and the true music lovers. Or Prokofiev, whose works elicit labels of toady or dissident depending on the listener or the agenda.

Here's a mysterious thought: "Some of the excesses of romantic music are clear attempts to play with this astringent pattern [the sonata form], although quite often (in Liszt, Chopin, Schumann, and Mendelssohn) the pattern seems either to ensnare or to haunt the incautious and unconsciously programmed romantic explorer who has internalized the sonata script as part of his musical literacy," Said writes in the final essay, "Melody, Solitude, and Affirmation." (Said really loved words like astringent and exfoliative. I think deep inside him was a skincare consultant, yearning to be free.) In passages like this I can't help thinking Said is trying too hard to be a wordsmith, and possibly misdescribing the aesthetic truths of the works he's referring to. It's hard to imagine a really good musicologist, for instance Joseph Kerman or Richard Taruskin, writing that sentence.

Said's Glenn Gould fetish continues unabated here, although I was relieved to learn that as a writer, the

polymathic Gould "was neither intellectually disciplined nor a fully cultivated man, and his learning, for all the exuberance with which he deployed it, often reveals the trying awkwardness of the naive village philosopher." Gould's writings are "often overwritten and underargued. There are garrulous displays of wit and parody that are...both forced and insufferably tedious." When someone comes as close to perfection as Gould did in nearly all of his piano playing, it's refreshing to hear that he blunders in other areas.

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### **Morabito Diego says**

I like the way Said thinks, I like the way he writes. I mean, this a really good book if you know some Adorno and quite a lot of classical music. But for people trying to get into this kind of music I find the language he uses quite sterile. Either he just enters the realm of affirmation by the means of poetic language which in the end doesn't explain much but his subjective point of view, or he enters the realm of theoretical musical concepts which, for non musicians, is quite hard to understand. I mean, I repeat myself, it's a really good book if you already have much knowledge. But what I'm still looking for is someone who can write about music in just a way everyone can understand it without being superficial.

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### **Bar?? Y?ld?r?m says**

Maalesef çeviri ak?c? bir okumaya izin vermiyor, yine de Said'in derin dü?ünme biçimine eri?mek mümkün oluyor. En az?ndan ele ald??? müzik eserlerini dinlemek bile iyi geliyor. ?u an Rzewski'nin El Pueblo Unido... üzerine yazd??? dört el piyano çe?itlemelerini dinliyorum misal  
<https://open.spotify.com/album/3ZtMlc...>

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### **Abby Ang says**

This is a neat little book, if I didn't find it as satisfying as some of the musical essays in On Late Style or in Exile. I admire Said's musical mind while expecting his thought to be densely constructed and rather hard to understand.

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