

Christopher Norris

Metamorphosen*

Late on, surprised, he found that he could do
The serious stuff, the whole deep-feeling bit,
With practised skill, but with conviction too,
So that his bombed-out audiences would sit

Moved and immobile when, with those last chords,
The point came through: only in minor keys
Can music say the most that it affords
Of truth, and what surpassed his expertise

At orchestration, or unrivalled share
In all the tricks of his perfected trade.
So far, it meant he didn't have to care
When critics said his compositions made

Their impact through sheer brilliance, although
They lacked the depth, the passion, or the 'heart'
To rise above the virtuosic show
And qualify as 'genuine works of art',

Whatever that might mean. Yet now he felt
That maybe he'd been wrong to buy their line,
Those echt-Mahlerian types ('Ich bin der Welt
Abhanden . . .', und so weiter), who'd assign

His music to some category above
The merely 'popular', yet still far short
Of works that conjured reverence or love,
Since his, they deemed, were of that lesser sort

Where wit, inventiveness, or sheer technique
Might serve for some to compensate the lack
Of depth, sincerity, or that unique
'Authentic voice' which (as they said) no knack

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Of doing it to order could achieve.
 And so of course he learned to play the game,
 Internalised their verdict, made-believe
 That super-talented was all it came

Down to, and so spoke only half in jest
 When, during some rehearsal, hearing what
 Struck him as one notch better, he addressed
 The orchestra: 'Well, gentlemen, I'm not

A first-rate *Komponist*, but still a top-
 Class second-rate one'. Yet the words rang true
 Only as self-doubt-blockers, or to stop
 His ears against the cacophonous crew

Of carping critics, whose malignant hash
 He'd settled in *Don Quixote*. More than that,
 There came this curious unexpected flash
 Of non-self-doubt through which they turned out flat

Tone-deaf. And so the sorts of thing he'd done
 In all those brazen passages of heaven-
 Storming or heaven-defiance like the one
 Midway through *Heldenleben* or the Seven-

Veils dance in *Salome*, were none the less
 Powerful for that, or none the poorer for
 The way they managed somehow to finesse
 The crass imperatives of boor or whore

Into his version of the *echt*-sublime,
 Out-Mahlering Freud's Mahler in the drive
 To sublimate and yet, at the same time,
 Keeping the psychodrama still alive

By shots of dissonance and things that they,
 The jabbering critics, thought to patronise
 Through yet more talk of how his facile way
 With wrong-note harmony just helped disguise

His want of depth, or vulgar taste, or lack
 Of everything that made great music great,
 Or else - the gravamen of their attack -
 Whatever served to differentiate

Productions of a merely brilliant sort
 From products of high culture such as those,
 From Bach to Brahms, that all the experts thought
 Exemplary of how true genius rose

Above the mass of gifted second-class
 Pretenders to that title. Yet he knew
 How fine the line such brilliance had to pass
 To count as genius, and then, once through,

How readily the various knacks acquired,
 The hard-won skills and consummate technique,
 Served not just to elicit some desired
 Stock audience-response or subtly tweak

The listener's emotions but, much more,
 To strike a discord in that swelling theme,
 That arch-Romantic creed that lately bore
 The weight of art's high promise to redeem

A long-lost unity of sense and soul,
 Content and form, necessity and chance,
 Subject and object, all made new and whole.
 'How can we tell the dancer from the dance?'

Wrote Yeats, and left his readers to conclude
 The question was rhetorical, and meant
 Not to be answered in constructive mood –
 'Just looking, thinking clearly should prevent

Confusions on that score' – but to define
 His few choice readers as the ones that came
 To this climactic point (the final line
 Of Yeats's poem) and perceived its aim

As part of the high-symbolist crusade
 To sink such differences and so transcend
 All those false oppositions that once made
 Prosaic virtue of the need to fend

Off any such infraction of the code
 Laid down for keeping art and life apart,
 Or glimpse of what their union bestowed
 On lives transfigured or redeemed by art.

Still, there were reasons to reject that creed,
 Among them reasons of the sort that his
Unheldenleben gave him cause to heed
 With special care. On this the record is

At best ambiguous, and at worst a case
 Of shrewd self-interest plus a Nietzschean way
 Of willing his self-image to efface
 What those Berlin performances might say

About his staying on while all around
 Life gave the lie to art, and the remains
 Of all its monuments now strewn the ground
 Of a high culture whose exultant strains

He'd once hit off so splendidly. And yet,
 All this (and more) placed on the debit side,
 There's more to say: for one thing, that he set
 No store by that Wagnerian cult that vied

With Nietzsche's in the *Kulturkampf* to win
 The ear of *Volk* and *Fuehrer*. Even less
 Was he much taken, or much taken in,
 By high-toned summonses to acquiesce

In paradoxes of the Yeatsian kind,
 Or such seductive stratagems as tempt
 Even those readers/listeners of a mind
 Well-fortified against them, to exempt

Some favoured masterwork, and let it sweep
 All their defences down. This might suffice
 To sort one goat from all the *echt-Deutsch* sheep:
 That not a note of his had helped entice

More *Uebermenschen* down the Bayreuth road
 From warring Siegfried as the dumb-blond beast
 To that last metamorphosis that showed,
 Looming beyond, Nietzsche's ascetic priest,

Re-christened Parsifal and charged to bring
 Redemption to the catastrophic scene,
 To cast his sickly gaze on everything,
 And so transvalue all that had once been

Vital and strong to its pale counterpart
 By dint of the symbolic wound so placed,
 Like poor Sir Clifford's, as to need small art
 In the deciphering. No mere lapse of taste,

That pious fakery, but just what spurred
 His ex-disciple now turned Anti-Christ
 To damn the very works that once he heard
 As blessings; no mere shift in the *Zeitgeist*

From old heroic to new meek and mild,
 But rather everything he diagnosed
 As rotten in the creed that reconciled
 What now, post-*Parsifal*, for Nietzsche posed

A flat-out war of contraries that brooked
 No kind of holy synthesis achieved
 By symbol-mongering techniques that looked
 Suspiciously like those he now perceived

At work across the whole slave-moralist
 And decadent regime of values turned
 Against themselves by a malignant twist
 Of crass slave-logic. Whence the lesson learned

By Wagner's literary heirs like Yeats
 And fellow modernists to whom it seemed
 That image, symbol, and their correlates
 Like metaphor (which Aristotle deemed

The one true mark of genius) might afford
 A wisdom higher than could be attained
 Through plain-prose reason or the poet's word
 When hobbled, hemmed, its energies constrained

By logic, syntax, or the dull behest
 That they make sense according to the rules
 For good sense-making laid down as a test
 Of formal rectitude by all the schools

Of inkhorn classicists whose feeble line
 Ran out with the Edwardians. Still there's
 A counter-narrative that would assign
 The main roles in reverse with all their shares

Of praise and blame. In which case he comes out,
 Our self-professed top-class though second-rate
 Composer, still with cause enough for doubt
 And room for endless scholarly debate

Concerning what he did or didn't do,
 In evil times, to help himself along,
 To get his works performed and listened to,
 Or – charitably – show that they were wrong,

Those *Kulturkaempfer* of the Nazi stripe
 And perfect Wagnerites who claimed to speak
 For Germany, or represent the type
 In which all German art must henceforth seek

Its model as the heir-elect of those
 Who went before, the first-rate top-class ones
 From Bach to Wagner (at which point they chose
 Conveniently to halt), and as true sons

Of *Volk* and *Vaterland* whose life and art
 Grew seamlessly from that pure native root.
 Yet listen to his music and you start
 To think at any rate the question's moot

Whether he cocked an ear or cocked a snook
 When savvy music theorists saw their chance
 To take a leaf from Heinrich Schenker's book,
 And use their geared-up methods to advance

A version of analysis that makes
 Those same works set the analytic norm,
 Or token all the qualities it takes –
 Coherence, unity, 'organic form',

Voice-leading, theme-and-variation style,
 Motivic contrast, long-range tonal links –
 To gain admission to the canon, while
 By showing this the sharp-eared critic thinks

On the one hand to burnish up the work
 And on the other certify his own
 Guild membership. Along with that large perk
 There came the virtuous sense of having shown,

In true Schenkerian style, how the deep bond
 That held the work together not despite
 But on account of striking out beyond
 All extant formal schemas, therefore might

Be taken, diachronically construed,
 As analogue or metaphor for what
 Those aesthetes and ideologues pursued
 Through fabulation of a master-plot

Transcending all coordinates of space
 And time since fixing its delusive sights
 On a domain whose landmarks found no place
 In any habitus save the far heights

Of a *locus imaginarius*
 Whose dwelling was the twilight of the gods,
 And in whose glare crepuscular those various
 Mere circumstantial details made no odds.

And so he had good cause, our *Komponist*
 Of altogether less exalted strain,
 To give himself some credit as the least
 Siegfriedian of heroes, and explain

That even *Heldenleben* had its share
 Of mock heroics to offset the more
Heldenhaft passages. And just compare
 The Zarathustra imaged in his score

With Nietzsche's prototype, and then you'll hear –
 After the opening bars that Stanley Kubrick
 So tellingly deployed – the message clear:
 That with such heady stuff the safest rubric

Is 'Make the most of this, but do still show
 A decent sense of everything that counts
 Against the Overman, and let us know
 That *Untermenschlich* sanity amounts,

Sometimes, to more than its brave opposites.
 Besides which, it was Bizet and his French
Esprit that later on saved Nietzsche's wits,
 Though briefly, not the *Geist* of *Ueberschlich*.

Think too, when you reflect on those twice-born
 Serene works of the Straussian afterglow –
 The *Duett-Concertino*, Second Horn
 Concerto, Sextet from *Capriccio*,

Or, strangely kin, the searing threnody
 Of his *Metamorphosen* – that he'd earned
 The right to sound new depths that previously,
 Instructed by the jabberers, he'd learned

To sublimate or simply keep at bay
 By all those tricks at his expert command,
 From firework orchestration to the way
 His compositions give the upper hand

To *dramatis personae* of the most
 Diverse or Ionesco-scripted sorts,
 With their attentive dramaturge as host
 And counsellor. Ignore, then, the reports

And wry self-estimates and hear him find,
 Like the Tin Man, not that he'd suddenly,
 In those last works, acquired another kind
 Of depth, compassion, shared humanity,

In short, by some new magic gained 'a heart',
 But rather – to his own unfeigned surprise –
 That they were wrong, those critics of his art,
 Who praised his orchestration to the skies,

Along with his inventiveness, his fine
 Ear for sonorities, melodic flair,
 Harmonic daring, strength of vocal line,
 Consummate stagecraft, faultless sense of where

To place his master-strokes, etc., yet
 Praised only with faint damns since they went on,
 Those certified depth-plumbers, to regret
 That his achievements were too quickly won,

That sheer technique had triumphed over soul,
 The 'rootless cosmopolitan' betrayed
 His native roots, and so – in short – the whole
 Bad litany that, after Dresden, made

Him thankful he'd done nothing in the style
Of those late-blooming fervent Wagnerites
Who gained high approbation for a while,
Then obloquy; or those who raised their sights

Yet further, and wrote chalice-boilers like
Pfitzner's *Von Deutscher Seele* to declare
This *Reich* sole portal to that *Himmelreich*
Conjured in every true believer's prayer.

And so it seemed to him that he'd done well,
Or not done badly, to resist all such
High-minded soul-corrupting stuff, and tell
Some low domestic truths that just might touch

The mind and heart (not soul) of some half-fledged
Wagnerian neophyte, and let them learn
Something of what he'd learned as twilight edged
Its way toward darkness, with no day's return.