Chapter 22: Musical Politics at Mid-Century: Historicism and the New German School

I. Introduction
A. Much music history is cast in the tale of the composers, but the people who actually do the writing are also significant contributors to how the story is told.
B. “Historicism” defines social and cultural situations by their history.
   1. It was promoted by Karl Heinz Brendel.
   2. He wrote the most popular music history of the nineteenth century, Geschichte der Musik.

II. Historicism and the Hegelian Dialectic
A. The Hegelian dialectic has become somewhat a cliché. History is always in a state of flux.
B. The Hegelian dialectic aims to show why things change. Historical change is to realize human freedom—the progress of the world soul.
C. Brendel adopted these values.
   1. He saw the history of music as a series of emancipations.
   2. Musical value was best measured in how it embodied its own era’s evolutionary synthesis and pointed forward.
   3. Brendel placed the highest value on German composers.

III. The New German School
A. Brendel became editor of the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik after Schumann, and his aesthetic preferences differed substantially from those of his predecessor.
B. He formed a new organization to promote his agenda for progressive music and gave the keynote address at its formation.
   1. Brendel named a group of composers who comprised the “New German School.”
   2. Liszt was the honorary president.
C. The “New German School” came to be identified with Liszt, Berlioz, and Wagner.
D. Liszt began writing symphonic poems, which follow the Hegelian ideal of “unity of the poetic and the musical.”
   1. The symphonic poems differ from earlier program pieces in that their poetic content was philosophical, not narrative.
   2. Liszt felt that the audience did not have to be entertained, but subjected to higher demands.

IV. “The Music of the Future”
A. The composers of the New German School adopted the slogan “Music of the Future,” coined by one of Liszt’s lovers.
B. The phrase was easily turned into joke, and Brendel advocated not using it.

V. Absolute Music
A. While many non-German composers decried the “universalist pretensions” of the “New German School” to be at heart nationalistic, the most famous opposition came from the Viennese critic and historian Eduard Hanslick.
B. His tract “On the Musically Beautiful” argued for a different aesthetic than the “New German School.”
C. He valued music for its absolute and abstract character.
D. He blended form and feeling together, instead of opposing each other.
E. Hanslick favored timeless musical values over the intentions of the composer or reception of the listener, and this was an entirely new concept.

VI. Liszt’s Symphonic Poems
A. Liszt’s symphonic poem *Les préludes* (1856 publication) is based on poetry by Lamartine.
B. It consists of four episodes that function like movements.
C. The harmony, structure, and even some of the thematic material derives in part from Beethoven.
D. The opening motive is transformed throughout the work, to the point where the listener may not recognize it.
   1. Liszt called this technique “thematic transformation.”
   2. This seemingly justifies the claim that content creates its own form.

VII. But What Does It Really Mean?
A. On the other hand, *Les préludes* existed in another guise before its association with Lamartine’s poetry.
B. This might seem to negate the New German School’s claims.
C. However, it is not a single idea that was promised, but emotional impact. Who is to judge?
D. Does it matter if the listener does not get the correct meaning?

VIII. The Concerto Transformed
A. The New German School’s agenda had implications for genre definitions.
B. Chamber music was not a part of their world. They wrote symphonic music and operas.
C. Those in opposition to the New German School generally eschewed opera.
D. Both sides, however, composed concertos: Beethoven wrote them, after all.
E. The New Germans saw his progressive innovations; the opposition to the seriousness of his concertos.
F. During the Romantic period, the balance of forces was weighted in favor of the soloist.
G. The relationship between the soloist and orchestra became an important issue.
H. Form was compressed.
I. Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto exemplifies many of the new changes in the concerto.
J. Schumann’s Piano Concerto in A Minor also points the way for innovations in form and the interplay between orchestra and soloist.
K. Liszt wrote two concertos. The first, in E-flat, is structurally substantial but with colorful orchestration.

IX. Genre Trouble: Berlioz Again
A. Paganini commissioned a viola concerto from Berlioz in 1832.
B. Berlioz rejected the concerto idea in favor of “a solo for viola, but a solo combined with orchestral accompaniment in such a way as to leave the orchestra full freedom of action.”
C. He initially advertised the work as *The Last Moments of Mary Stuart* and called it a dramatic fantasy for orchestra, chorus, and solo viola. By the time it was finished, it was called *Harold en Italie*, there was no program, and Paganini was not involved.

D. *Harold en Italie* is literary (based on Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimmage*), picturesque, programmatic, and thematically unified (again with an *idée fixe*, but one that behaves differently from the *Symphony fantastique*).