
Oren Cantor
Third-Year Student (Bachelor of Arts, Honours Music)
School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, CANADA

Richard Taruskin’s The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays is a four hundred and eighty eight page collection of articles that Taruskin wrote over the past two decades for various public and scholarly publications. Taruskin is a leading musicologist, and has been very influential in many of the field’s major debates. The majority of the articles in the present volume were written for the New York Times and the New Republic, both of which have a mainly non-academic readership. This does not, however, stop Taruskin from diving head first into some very heavy and controversial topics. In fact, many of the articles in his book take the form of direct attacks on other musicologists in which he uses his obviously vast knowledge and very clear writing style to convey his point. Topics covered vary from CD releases of newly recorded early-music, performances of yet unheard modern music, and commentary on the stylistic aspects of composing. As well, Taruskin adds postscripts to the majority of the articles in his book, postscripts that usually discuss how the article was received and most often counter any criticism elicited by the article. The stated goal of the collection is “a spirit of protest against the utopian ideas [...] that have isolated classical music from audiences and contributed to its precipitate decline as a
The anti-utopianism suggested by the title mainly reflects on two broad categories: performance practice and the relevance of extra-musical content.

Roughly a third of the chapters in *The Danger of Music* discuss the way that early music is performed in today’s society. Taruskin makes it abundantly clear that he has issues with the way many people approach this music. His main point of contention with early music groups is that very often they are not true to the performance practices of the time in which the pieces they play were written. Even if they are playing these pieces on period instruments and with an informed view of the practices in use at the time, they usually are still influenced by having been trained in contemporary society. In a chapter entitled “Making a Stand against Sterility,” Taruskin discusses a trend in early music performance that he calls “militant sterility.” This trend is one in which performers avoid harsh or “hideous” sounds and only play repertoire that can be considered pretty. He then directs our attention to a group of performers called the Smithsonian Chamber Players who attempt to revive a style that was apparently popular in the mid-nineteenth century and was forgotten sometime between the two world wars. Earmarks of this practice include portamento playing, which involves slow expressive slides between notes that would be considered sloppy in modern practice, and employing tempi that can be changed as necessary according to the feel of the piece. All this is well and good in Taruskin’s opinion, however, at the end of the article he says that the group is still influenced by today’s expectations of early music and that they could have gone even further. This is just one of many examples in the book where Taruskin presents a positive initiative only to tear it down again, leaving one wondering if maybe he judges things a little too harshly.

Another topic that comes up quite often is that of the relevance of extra-musical content and how it affects the way we think of the music itself. Taruskin outlines his views on this topic in the chapter called “The Poietic Fallacy.” This fallacy, according to Taruskin, is that what matters most about a work of art is its creation. In other words, in order to fully understand a piece, you must understand the context in which it was created, as well as numerous other factors that affect our understanding of the piece. This can be seen in the title chapter of the collection: “The Danger of Music and the Case for Control.” The article discusses the decision of the Boston Symphony Orchestra to cancel their production of scenes from the opera “The Death of Klinghoffer” in December of

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2001. The opera tells the story of Palestinian terrorists who hijack a boat and kill a Jewish hostage. The reason the orchestra decided to cancel the production: the opera romanticized terrorism and the American public would likely not appreciate those themes so recently after 9/11. Though the writers of the opera did not intend to offend the general American public, the context of the times made the opera particularly offensive—one can see how the creation of the work had little to do with its reception or its cultural standing. In the postscript to this article Taruskin mentions composer John Adams’ response. Taruskin quickly dismisses any of Adams’ points as a personal attack and a rant, however, he does not seem to realize the irony that the entire postscript, which is longer than the article, is in fact a personal attack on and a rant against John Adams.

Taruskin raises the issue again in the article “Of Kings and Divas,” which discusses the relationship between politics and music. The article introduces a quote by the American politician Henry Hyde who says that art should be “evocative rather than provocative.” Taruskin goes on to describe art that has been extremely provocative, especially opera. He looks at opera in France that reinforced the dogmatic control and fashions of Versailles, and the opera houses in Tsarist Russia that provided a safe medium for dissemination of Bolshevik ideals, and even operas which have sparked rebellions after their premieres. His argument: much art can be both evocative and provocative.

Taruskin describes the articles in his book as being anti-utopian. This is a fairly vague term as the concept of utopia is a difficult one to pin down. Utopianism has been applied in many areas of research, and often these applications approach the theory from contrasting viewpoints. The term utopia was coined by Thomas More’s 1516 novel Utopia, in which More tells a narrative of a paradise island community in the Pacific. The word itself comes from the Greek ouk for “no”, topas for place, and ia which is a suffix denoting a place name, together they mean “no place.” Also within More’s novel is the concept of “eutopia,” which literally means “good place.” This gave rise to the modern understanding of utopia as being a conceptual model that should act as a catalyst for change to create a perfect society. The most common quality of utopianism that can be found in various sources is to describe it through how it is delivered,
in a narrative for example, or through its functionality.\textsuperscript{5} Almost all utopian writing shares an expression of discomfort at the present situation, and describes a place that is better. Thus it serves as a means of critiquing contemporary society both as a way of compensation and also to show how things could be different. Originally, in More’s example, the utopia was located geographically elsewhere, but over the years the concept has evolved to represent an else-when. An else-when utopia can also be described as a “euchronia,” which replaces the aspect of \textit{topas} with the Greek “\textit{chronos}” for time.\textsuperscript{6} By placing the utopia in the future it changes the idea of the ideal society from something which needs to be found to something that is achievable in the future through the actions of human kind. According to Ernst Bloch, the possibility of realizing a utopia represents one of the key aspects of utopianism: hope.\textsuperscript{7}

The genre of anti-utopia is, like dystopia, an offspring of the original literary genre of utopia. \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature} says anti-utopian literature, as the name suggests, is the opposite of utopian literature.\textsuperscript{8} That is to say, an anti-utopian book tells the story of a society that is flawed, with the purpose of highlighting the positive qualities of the author’s own society. The Cambridge Companion cites Gulliver’s Travels as an example of this kind of literature, in which the ridiculous societies that Gulliver encounters show the reader how much worse things could be in his/her own.\textsuperscript{9} It is unclear whether Taruskin is aware of this definition of anti-utopia, as his book is expressly negative and critical of contemporary musicology. There are, however, several articles which praise ideas or performances that Taruskin has encountered. As well, in several of the postscripts Taruskin notes that things have improved since the writing of a particular article. If one is to consider these brief mentions of a positive change as hope, then the collection can still be said to be in line with the literary genre of anti-utopianism. That is, the articles illustrate some negative aspects of society with a view towards inspiring a positive view of society as a whole.

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\item \textsuperscript{5} Ibid, 28.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Vieira, “The Concept of Utopia,” 9.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Vieira, “The Concept of Utopia,” 16.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 16
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Overall, *The Danger of Music* does a good job of illustrating many of the issues that Taruskin’s extensive career has covered. Many of the topics covered are highly contentious, however, Taruskin acknowledges this in his postscripts. The postscripts themselves paint a very one-sided picture in favour of Taruskin and many of the articles want for a more unbiased view of the facts, but given Taruskin’s influence, and sometimes even the creation of these debates, it is fair to say that the collection represents how Taruskin views the contemporary music world. Moreover, it is also fair to say that after reading this book one’s perception of modern music and musicology will be in some way altered.

**For Further Reading:**


Redhead, Lauren. “Relational Aesthetics and the Western Canon of Increasingly Historical Work.” (PhD, diss., University of Leeds, 2010.)