

PAUL BERTAGNOLLI, *PROMETHEUS IN MUSIC: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MYTH IN THE ROMANTIC ERA* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2007). ISBN 13–9780754654681, xv + 369pp, £65

One of the most celebrated mythological figures of the nineteenth century, Prometheus, son of the Titan Lapetus, brother of Epimetheus, symbolizes man's creativity and daring; the artist's compulsion to raise himself to a new plane and a new power. First mentioned by name in Hesiod's *Theogony* (c700 BC),<sup>1</sup> the eponymous hero was made famous by Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, a play in which the protagonist liberates mortals from their ignorance, teaching them the arts and granting them the gift of fire. In doing so, his hubris incurs the wrath of Zeus. Punished and made to suffer for his actions, Prometheus is chained to a rocky crag in the Scythian mountains.

The ancient Greek myth of Prometheus is a philosophical narrative of how man first acquired the power to shape his world. By inventing his own world, Prometheus symbolizes the creation of art, which transmutes the order of nature into culture. He also hands down the civilizing influence of knowledge. Both maverick and messiah, Prometheus unites the ideals of enlightenment with a radical rejection of tradition, symbolizing the search for new and alternative possibilities. Even the fire he brings is inherently ambiguous, standing for the principles of both creativity and destructiveness.

Raymond Trousson's *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne*<sup>2</sup> and Gerard Gillespie's seminal article 'Prometheus in the Romantic Age'<sup>3</sup> are important historical studies of the Promethean myth in literature, but it is only with the publication of Paul Bertagnolli's *Prometheus in Music* that the musical engagement of the myth can be fully appreciated. For more than a century we have been accustomed to reading the myth as literary and philosophical tropes: the portrayal of Prometheus as both rebel and liberator, an attractive double identity during the age of Napoleon, while the Titan's exile, imprisonment and torture are commonly read as metaphors of the nineteenth century's notion of the genius or artist as an outcast who endured an uncomprehending public's criticism. These images have been explored in the visual arts from Peter Paul Rubens's *Chained Prometheus* (1611–12) to Dirck van Baburen's *Prometheus*

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<sup>1</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*: epic poem in ancient Greek *Εργα καὶ Ημέραι* / *Erga kai Hemera*, sometimes called by the Latin name *Opera et Dies*, ll. 507–616.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne*, 2 vols (Geneva: Libraire E. Droz, 1964).

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Gillespie, 'Prometheus in the Romantic Age', in Gerard Hoffmeister (ed.), *European Romanticism: Literary Cross-Currents, Modes and Models* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 197–210.

being chained by Vulcan (1623); from Gustave Moreau's *Prometheus* (1868) to Nicolas-Sébastien Adam's *Prométhée enchaîné* (Prometheus Bound, 1762); from Scott Eaton's *Prometheus Bound* (2006) to Vladimer Shioshvili's *Amirani—Georgian Prometheus* (2007). With the publication of Bertagnolli's new book on *Prometheus in Music*, matters undergo a singular metamorphosis. Scholars have known for years about this discrepancy between literary, visual and musical exegesis<sup>4</sup> but now Bertagnolli and his publisher, Ashgate, have given us a wide-ranging musical exploration of the creation myth in music of the long nineteenth century: not only canonical works by Beethoven, Schubert, Liszt, and Wolf, but also lesser-known contributions by Johann Friedrich Reichardt, Augusta Holmès, Hubert Parry, Wolfram Bargiel, Karl Goldmark and much else besides. This timely study is not simply an ambitious account of these composers' engagement with the Promethean figure, but enforces a new way of reading the myth as a whole. The book is, to borrow Heaney's words, 'a critical fantasia, a carnival of utterance' about the Promethean myth in nineteenth-century European musical culture.

The author, who is Associate Professor of Musicology at the Moores School of Music, University of Houston, USA, has done prodigious work. Not only has he provided us with the first serious study of the musical realization of the Prometheus myth, but in the same volume he has created a chronicle of the Hellenic fable, offered a comprehensive critique of it, and written a musical apologia for his discourse on many familiar settings. That said, a definitive book on the subject must remain a phantom possibility for Scriabin's *Prométhée—Le Poème du Feu*, Op. 60 (1910), Carl Orff's Aescylean opera *Prometheus* (1968), Ted Hughes's anthology, *Prometheus on his Crag* (1973) and Luigi Nono's *Prometeo* (1984) are excluded from any exploration of the myth confined to the nineteenth century. Yet for most readers Bertagnolli's preoccupation with the old Promethean question of how a nineteenth-century composer might still properly define himself will make this book a scholarly landmark.

One of the many virtues of Bertagnolli's magisterial book is the wealth of material he uncovers on the Promethean myth, from Hesiod to Aeschylus; from Lucian of Samosata to Latin or vernacular literature of the early Middle Ages; from Italian mythographers to the Dutch scholar, Desiderius Erasmus; from the northern French humanist, Charles de Bouelles, to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In the compelling opening chapter, 'Promethean Legacies', our knowledge is greatly advanced and yet as I read I regretted that the engaging analogies he presents so admirably were not developed

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Hugo Riemann, 'Beethovens Prometheus Musik: Ein Variationenwerk', *Die Musik*, 9/13–14 (1909–10): 19–34, 107–25; and Léopold Dauphin, 'Gabriel Fauré et la Prométhée', *La Vogue*, 15 (October 1900), 59–65.

further. Bertagnolli's biblical exegesis where he compares Prometheus to a pagan Moses (11), for example, could easily have been expanded with a comparable enlightening portrayal of Adam in Genesis. Like Adam, Prometheus is separate from God, he addresses the Olympian Deities as gods, refers to himself as man, yet, unlike Adam, his ascendancy from the Titans links him to the Divinity. Such lineage is central to understanding the central truth of this myth: Prometheus's conflict between the claims of human freedom and a higher order is in defiance of God, yet his genesis and his role as creator is in accordance with the Divine. While Genesis presents Adam's rebellion as an impure act, Prometheus's opposition to a malign deity, Zeus, exemplifies the belief that evil is somehow part of the cosmic fate to which man is condemned. Unlike the biblical fable, where evil is not inherited from an existing cosmic order, in the Promethean myth evil is part of a pre-existing cosmic destiny to which man and the gods are victims. Prometheus does not cause evil, but is subject to it. The myth is, therefore, a sedition against the rigidly austere conception of metaphysical good and evil; a rejection of a distorted conception of God who cannot be other than good. At the core of the nineteenth-century appropriation of the myth is a fundamental rejection of a Christian conception of God, upon whose grace men depend and whose favour they seek through prayer; and in its place there appears the notion of the universal Divine, in which man has a portion by reason of his creative force.

While religion may be considered as a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man, in 'Prometheus', Goethe shows a recognition of this power in man. Bertagnolli's belief that Goethe was the first to grant Prometheus genuine autonomy is jejune (17): though Goethe's depiction is unorthodox, it is not a denial of a higher order.<sup>5</sup> In this ode, Goethe characterizes Prometheus's creativity by an act of rebellion: an offence against the divine order of things. However, Prometheus's iconoclasm both dismantles and acknowledges the harmony of nature as pre-established by a higher order. As art sets him up as an original creator in his own right, because creativity is expressed in art, it implies the imitation of an original act. This mimetic role is shown in Goethe's verse, for Prometheus's art is not presented in terms of some internal subjective power alone, but is evaluated in terms of his relation to the Divine. His creativity is *alio-relative* and not *ipso-relative*.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to Bertagnolli's reading, the imagi-

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<sup>5</sup> Other errors in Bertagnolli's knowledge of Goethean literature include the repeated statement (100 and 104) that Mignon's famous song is taken from Goethe's novel, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774); like the songs of Goethe's harper, it owes its origins to Goethe's later novel, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795/96).

<sup>6</sup> By *alio-relative* I mean the explication of creativity in relation to something else, whereas *ipso relative* is defined exclusively in relation to itself.

nation of Goethe's rebellious hero receives its identity from a higher order of original meaning, which it flouts but is ultimately compelled to acknowledge.

For Bertagnolli, 'Goethe established directly Romantic perspectives on Prometheus. His ode replaced the Enlightenment's benefactor of an Arcadian mankind with a modern rebel who endured unjust persecution in the solitude of creative genius' (93). Yet through the figure of Prometheus, Goethe raises various ontological and theological concerns regarding man's individuality. How can man, an independent, individual being, be nevertheless connected to an infinite whole? How can he be connected to the infinity of the cosmos and yet maintain a separate existence? How can he belong to the great order of nature and yet work according to his own fashion? In 'Prometheus', Goethe answers these problems by insinuating a theory of self-determination, which is inherently part of the Divine. When Goethe wrote, 'Nature fashions man, he transforms himself, and this transformation is in turn natural; he who sees himself placed in the great wide world, encloses, walls in within this world, a small world which he organizes in his own image'<sup>7</sup> he alluded to a doctrine that man is a living, creative, reflecting mirror who fashions the world in his own manner. Contrary to Bertagnolli's belief, Goethe's achievement in 'Prometheus' was not that he was the first to represent Prometheus's autonomy but rather that through this figure the poet's theory of creative receptivity reached its culmination.

When the eighteenth century sought to comprehend the nature of the creative artist in its highest significance, it likened him to Prometheus, whose creation of culture is celebrated as a free and independent contribution of mankind. Beethoven's attraction to the legend remained within this realm. He depicts Prometheus not as an enchained sufferer but as a great creator, who, like God, fashions men in his own image, introduces them to life and leads them to Mount Parnassus where the Muses bestow upon Prometheus's mortals reason and feeling. What the Greeks called *hubris* and extreme presumption, the striving to equal the gods, was for Beethoven the only real possibility of fulfilling oneself and at the same time advancing humanity. The greatness of such a willing and the fearful sacrifices its realization demand are codified in *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus* (The Creatures of Prometheus) Op. 43, a work generally believed to have 'inaugurated Beethoven's all-important middle period' (27). Bertagnolli challenges not only the reception of Beethoven's ballet as being too learned but also the Riemannian

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<sup>7</sup> 'Die Natur bildet den Menschen, er bildet sich um, und diese Umbildung ist doch wieder natürlich; er, der sich in die große, weite Welt gesetzt sieht, umzäunt, ummauert sich eine kleine drein, und staffiert sie aus nach seinem Bilde', *Von der Physiognomik überhaupt*, in Hermann Böhlau (ed.), *Goethes Werke* (Weimar: Weimarer Ausgabe, 1887–1919), i, 37, 329.

recognition that its fundamental compositional impulse was rooted variation technique, thereby affirming its status as non-representational, absolute music (28). It is this ability to challenge an accepted position that is one of the greatest attributes of *Prometheus in Music*. This book is not an arbitrary gathering of new musical readings; it seeks to unveil rather than to record. And in this chapter Bertagnolli convincingly unveils Beethoven as a dramaturgical composer who realizes the Promethean myth through dance in accordance with the emergence of the *ballet d'action*. Drawing on passages from Beethoven's sketchbook, Bertagnolli argues how stage action and gesture closely correlate with musical events throughout the score, from the creatures' first halting steps to the anger Prometheus directs at them when they misunderstand him, from their animation by four lyricists through to Melpomene's tragic scene (90). The author's portrayal of Beethoven chimes in nicely with contemporary accounts of the composer as a stricken outsider. The merit of Bertagnolli's provocative interpretation is that it observes the irreconcilable domains of man contra artist. It declares Beethoven's ability to hold a popular myth in his vision and reflect it in the light of his music, while permitting him to mark out new territory.

Bertagnolli is resolved on creating a resource as well as a reading and, in his detailed discussion of three settings of Goethe's transgressive ode, his method is to let the myriad musical facts speak for themselves—although it must be said that when he allows himself to indulge in the odd light-hearted comment the narrative is greatly enlivened, as when he identifies Promethean parallels in Reichardt's liberal politics and literary tendencies. More of this literary *élan* could find its way into the melting pot but the author in the main directs his energies to rigorous musical exegesis. Bertagnolli's shrewd recognition of Reichardt's setting as one of his best *Deklamationsstücke* which scrupulously observe the text's structure, temporal scheme and rhetoric provides a long-awaited acknowledgment of Reichardt's contribution to German song. Bertagnolli's reading of Reichardt's 'Prometheus' is unprecedented: he not only uncovers generic bonds between Reichardt's and Schubert's declamatory settings but argues that 'Reichardt's exacting performance standards and preference for lyrics of highest literary quality helped transform the eighteenth-century domestic lied into the Romantic art song, as his Prometheus clearly illustrates' (105–6). While it would be wrong to deny Reichardt his light touch, in 'Prometheus' his note is, undoubtedly, weightier and his carrying power far stronger. It was, after all, in his 1809 edition of *Goethe-Lieder* that Reichardt's total strength was revealed.<sup>8</sup> These were essentially

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<sup>8</sup> Marjorie Hirsch, *Schubert's Dramatic Lieder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2; Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, *Schubert's Songs: A Biographical Study*, trans. Kenneth S. Whitton (New

transfusions of power, a unique grafting of the Lied tradition and personal sensibility that happened in 1789 when he first encountered the poet. At that moment, something in Reichardt suddenly stood up and girded itself for action in earnest. And the resulting confidence, metrical stride and musical force of Reichardt's 'Prometheus' is epoch-making.

Schubert's choice of classical legend always depicted figures who were well known so that the listener could recognize the episode and imagine the full dramatic context. In the opening lines of Goethe's poem, it is clear that the figure who flaunts his creative power in the face of Zeus is Prometheus. Schubert's identification with Goethe's protagonist is evident in the opening lines of this setting as in his letters where it is clear that he identified the Promethean complex within himself.<sup>9</sup> In a poem written by the composer in September 1820, Schubert echoes Prometheus's individuality and recognizes the Divine within himself: 'Göttlich bin ich's mir bewußt'. So too do the lines set by Schubert in the *Winterreise*—'Will kein Gott auf Erden sein, / Sind wir selber Götter'<sup>10</sup>—reiterate this theme, while the self-portrait Schubert composed in his short prose extract, *Mein Traum*, written on 3 July 1822, codifies a Promethean revolt against his father.<sup>11</sup> Bertagnolli overlooks such confessional analogies in favour of an analysis of the text setting and episodic structure of Schubert's *Prometheus* (D 674) which matches Schubert's daring harmonies with Goethe's linguistic audacities. Equally engaging is the author's comparative reading of Reichardt's and Schubert's settings. For Bertagnolli, Reichardt's setting of Prometheus's lament (stanza 3) 'genuinely reflects the Titan's sorrowful childhood', while Schubert's chorale 'seethes with irony, intensifying the protagonist's mockery of his Olympian oppressors'. While such identification of musical irony is widely acknowledged in Schumannian Lieder and brilliantly uncovered in Schubert's late Lieder by Susan Youens in *Heinrich Heine and the Lied* (Cambridge, 2007), Bertagnolli's identification of irony in Schubert's early Lieder is unprecedented.

Hutchings's deliberation that Schubert's 'Prometheus' 'is a dignified setting, Wolf's a tortured utterance of despair'<sup>12</sup> points to the difference in the composers' inter-

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York: Knopf, 1978), 130–31; and Elizabeth Norman McKay, *Franz Schubert: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 50.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Schubert's letter to his friends from Zseliz dated 3 August 1818, in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Franz Schubert: Die Dokumente seines Lebens* (Munich and Leipzig: Georg Müller, 1914), 62–3.

<sup>10</sup> *Winterreise*, 'Mut', v. 3, ll. 11–12.

<sup>11</sup> *Die schönsten Schubertbriefe* (Munich and Vienna: Langen-Müller, 1975), 55–6.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Hutchings, *Schubert* (London: Dent, 1977), 166.

pretation of the lyric. While Schubert highlights Prometheus's ribald defiance of Zeus, Wolf portrays him as a tortured hero—a reading which is closer to Shelley's 'Prometheus Unbound' than to Goethe's poem. In Bertagnolli's reading Wolf's style here is a fusion of the highly chromatic style of late-Romantic composers of German song and contemporary Viennese theatrical technique. And the interesting thing is the influence of Vienna's leading actors, Josef Kainz and Alexander Moissi, who based their stylized yet highly expressive form of recitation on exaggerated pitch inflections. Early recordings of Kainz and Moissi performing Goethe's 'Prometheus' suggest that Wolf adopted theatrical mannerisms in his song. But even more interesting and symptomatic of Wolf's imagination is the ways he draws together such disparate influences, observing theatrical practices throughout the Lied, setting keywords with higher pitches and distinguishing successive phrases with pitch stratification and post-Wagnerian tonal practice. While acknowledging Wolf's avid Wagnerianism, Bertagnolli turns Wolf's traditional sobriquet, 'the Wagner of the Lied', on its head by his identification of two features of Wolf's declamatory style which jar with his idol's text setting. Firstly, Bertagnolli argues, the ubiquitous repeated notes of Wolf's 'Prometheus' are foreign to Wagner's *Verse-melodie* which derives from the imitation of speech but is ultimately grounded in melodic contours shaped by the internal rhyme scheme known as *Stabreim* (root rhyme). Secondly, the author illustrates how the widespread syncopation in Wolf's setting is not typical of vocal lines in Wagner's music dramas, where the infamously long tones that require stentorian voices dramatically contrast with Wolf's text setting in 'Prometheus' where very few pitches last several beats (129–30). Bertagnolli's focus on the formal design of the three settings by Reichardt, Schubert and Wolf is also new and yields aesthetic decisions and facets of the Promethean myth realized by these three song composers.

Liszt's *Prometheus Unbound*, originally a choral work written as incidental music for the 1850 unveiling in Weimar of a statue dedicated to Johann Gottfried Herder, was reworked by Liszt in 1856 as a symphonic poem. Not only does Bertagnolli understand the creative element in Liszt's *Prometheus*, he also convinces us that the central tenet of Herder's philosophy of history, *Humanität*, is reflected in the music Liszt wrote for Herder's mythological scenes. In the opening lines of chapter four, 'Towards a Philosophy of Music: Liszt's Prometheus Music', Bertagnolli informs us that the appointment of the 'Kapellmeister in extraordinary service' at the Weimar court in 1848 was commissioned by Grand Duke Carl Alexander, who charged Liszt with restoring the city's status during the German Enlightenment. While Liszt's first compositions in Weimar herald this goal—an overture to the play, *Torquato Tasso*, to mark the centennial of Goethe's birth in 1849 followed by incidental music for Herder's *Der entfesselte Prometheus* in 1850—Liszt's musical intelligence and a recognition of archetypal affinities are what constitute Liszt's real link with his cultural heritage in

Weimar. His *Prometheus* and musical realization of Herder's mythological scenes are not a mere matter of Classical distinction; one recognizes that within this psychic and cultural ground the artist has been able to assuage his primal hunger for a new musical vocabulary of forms—an enumerative form through which an energy flows that is every bit as contemporary as it is classical. Bertagnolli's analysis of the arch form Liszt imposed on Herder's lyrics is masterly and offers new terms of appreciation. We value Liszt's realization because we know from listening to it that it springs from a preverbal identification with Herder's humanitarianism and universalism which found its release and equivalent in the music of Liszt's symphonic poem.

It is often through contact with a foreign culture that new possibilities suggest themselves. This is exactly what happened in the French appropriation of the Promethean myth where it became a vehicle for the expression of nationalistic sentiment in art. It is Bertagnolli's exposition of Holmès's *Prométhée*, an unfinished, unpublished manuscript at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, which concerns us most in chapter five, 'The French Prometheus', for it is a fine example of the author's meticulous research. Such pairing of Holmès's treatment of the myth with the literary tendencies of the Parnassian poets and personal reactions to the Franco-Prussian War is mirrored in the ensuing chapter on Hubert Parry's *Scenes from Shelley's Prometheus Unbound*, which twins an engaging discussion of the historical and cultural contexts for atheism in nineteenth-century England with Parry's atheist tendencies expressed in the composer's diaries and letters held in a private archive in Sussex.

Admirably in possession of much that has been written about this mythological figure, Bertagnolli offers a rich harvesting of the history of the Prometheus legend in Western literature and music from Hesiod through the long nineteenth century. The world of Prometheus is given voice amid a pageantry of musical masters: in effect, a slowly paced procession of musicological distinction. What I admire about this book is the author's natural sympathy not only for his subject but for its transformation in different cultural contexts: an ability to highlight each composer's combination of historical echo and original forthrightness. This book will be a musicological landmark since it garners both old and new research. But Bertagnolli's main achievement is to give us a precise sense of Prometheus in nineteenth-century musical culture and it is the aesthetic weight of the ancient Promethean theme that makes it such an interesting and viable musicological study.

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