Nineteenth-Century Music Review (2025), **22**, 163–169
doi:10.1017/S1479409825000059

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

INTRODUCTION

Playing the Classics in the Nineteenth Century

Marten Noorduin[1] and Annelies Andries[2]

[1]Musikhochschule Lübeck, Lübeck, Germany and [2]Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands

It is a truism that since the eighteenth century the labels *classics* and *classical* have been applied to various musical repertoires, performance styles, and their reception. A witness to the latter term's widening significance and usage is found in its expanding definition in George Grove's original *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. In the first edition (1879), Hubert Parry determined that *classical* is used for 'works which have held their place in general estimation for a considerable time, and of new works which are generally considered of the same type and style'.[1] The current definition in the *New Grove Online* delineates four overlapping possible understandings: '(i) formal discipline; (ii) model of excellence, supplemented by (iii) that which has to do with Greek or Latin antiquity […], and (iv) that which is opposed to "romantic"'.[2] These definitions imply that these terms are tied up in debates that go a long way in defining the underlying aesthetic value in musical cultures. This notion is not new. Already some 40 years ago, in a text defining classics in literature, Italo Calvino emphasized that calling something a *classic* is a means of creating and emphasizing one's own (national) identity.[3]

This special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* interrogates Calvino's point by studying the role of *classics* and the *classical* in processes of musical identity formation. It does so through four contrasting nineteenth-century case studies, covering discourses and their impact on performance practices in tsarist Russia, the German-speaking regions, and Victorian England. The goal of this collection is twofold. First, to show that these 'works that have held their place in general estimation for a considerable time' and have become 'models of excellence' were not just adopted based on their musical qualities, but that they affected and were affected by claims of societal value in different nations. In doing so, this issue underlines *classics* and *classical* as historically and geographically situated terms and entwined with notions of (musical) identity formation, showing how differentiated the conceptions and their aims could be. Second, this issue will show

[1] Hubert Parry, 'Classical', in George Grove, ed., *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1879): 365. See Bruno Bower, 'Creating a "Classic" in the Programme Notes of the Crystal Palace Saturday Concerts", in this issue.

[2] Daniel Heartz and Bruce Alan Brown (rev.), 'Classical', in *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com (accessed 10 March 2024). A handful other entries in *Grove Music Online* also underline the contemporary valence of a 'classic' as a model of excellence. See, for instance, Mickey Vallee, 'Classic Rock', *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com (accessed 10 April 2024); and Paul M. Walker, 'Fugue', *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com (accessed 10 April 2024).

[3] This well-known twentieth-century manifesto considering the value of the literary classics was first as published in 1981 as 'Italiani, vi esorto ai classici', *L'Espresso*, 28 July 1981, 58–68. The essay was reprinted as opening essay in the posthumous collection *Perché leggere i classici* (Milan: Oscar Mondadore, 1991). The text largely seeks to provide salient characteristics for what makes a literary text a 'classic', yet its original title also underlines the (national) educational impetus for its writing. English translation found in Italo Calvino, 'Why Read the Classics?' in *Why Read the Classics?*, trans. Martin McLaughlin (London: Penguin Classics, 2009): 3–9, at 9.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409825000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

how the performance practices associated with these *classics* in the nineteenth century were quite unlike what is currently deemed *classical*, and that the notions of 'romantic' and 'classical' were not in opposition in the nineteenth century, as the above-cited definition of the *New Grove Online* states.

With these case studies, we seek to contribute to recent considerations of the terms *classics* and *classical* that have also stressed their intertwinement with aesthetic values systems. In the *Oxford Handbook of the Operatic Canon*, several authors pointed out a critical difference in nineteenth-century processes of operatic and instrumental canon formation: the rhetoric of a work's musical and (bourgeois) educational value.[4] Opera and its performances in various concert arrangements were often linked to notions of popular taste and the commercial business of 'selling' music to the masses. In instrumental repertoire, the emphasis was more on notions of elevated taste and musical understanding. Since in the latter case, these notions are often encapsulated in the use of words such as *classical* and *classic*, William Weber has recently mapped this distinction as one between a canon as primarily defined by consumerist notions and *classical* music as denoting 'a militant new set of musical values' that sought to raise the societal and aesthetic position of musical culture.[5] Mark Everist has similarly drawn attention to how the term *classique* could denote a work's more universal value in Second Empire Paris. He especially points to its use in the reception of Gluck's operas in the concert hall rather than the opera house, highlighting that a repertoire *classique* (as opposed to *ancienne*) can be appreciated outside of and thus transcending its historical (and generic) context.[6]

The contributors to *Accenting the Classics: Editing European Music in France 1915–1925* have built on these notions showing how Jacques Durand's *Édition Classique*, grappled with the terms *classics* and *classical* with reference to performance practice as well as national identity.[7] Barbara Kelly has demonstrated how Camille Saint-Saëns, who edited Mozart's piano music for Durand's edition, considered Mozart's music part of *musique ancienne* rather than *classique*, on account of the fact that there was a specific performance practice that needed to be relearned and studied. Saint-Saëns, who himself had risen to the status of *classic* at this point, saw himself as uniquely able to embody this practice on account of his long experience with this repertoire, and through his editorial intervention Mozart this music could become a *classic* once more.[8] Others have pointed to the fact that Durand's collection of Austro-German repertoire was published in France at a time when anti-German sentiment very widespread because of World War I. For instance, Rachel Moore has shown how Durand and his colleagues adopted an editorial style based on ideas of simplicity and clarity and marketed the editions of Beethoven as a bulwark against German excess.[9]

[4] See, for instance, William Gibbons, 'The Uses and Disadvantages of Opera History: Unhistorical Thinking in *fin-de-siècle* Paris', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Operatic Canon*, ed. Cormac Newark and William Weber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 441–54, here 442–4, and Karen Ahlquist, 'International Opera in Nineteenth-Century New York', in ibid. 245–69, here 263–6.

[5] William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics: A Study in Canon, Ritual and Ideology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[6] Mark Everist, *Genealogies of Music and Memory: Gluck in the Nineteenth-Century Parisian Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021): 10–11 and 39–41.

[7] Deborah Mawer, Barbara L. Kelly, Rachel Moore, and Graham Sadler, *Accenting the Classics: Editing European Music in France 1915–1925* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2023).

[8] Barbara L. Kelly, 'Mozart as "Classic" in Early Twentieth-Century France: The Case of Saint-Saëns's Mozart Editions', in *Accenting the Classics*, 97–122.

[9] Rachel Moore, '"De-Germanising" Music Publishing: Dukas's Beethoven in Wartime France' in *Accenting the Classics*, 73–96.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409825000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Even if the terms *classical* and *classic* were clearly emergent in the nineteenth century, it is important to reflect on salient elements in their conceptualization. Only the former term is found as a headword in Grove's 1879 dictionary (as is also the case for any later editions, including the *New Grove Online*). Parry understood the term first and foremost as referring to a repertoire, whether broadly conceived as in the definition cited above or as referring specifically to 'the great master from the latter part of the last [i.e. eighteenth] century'.[10] In light of the exemplary function that these works played, Parry also considered it a style of composing.[11] Besides, as will become clear in the articles gathered in this issue, it was also used to denote a performance style in the nineteenth century, one that is quite distinct from the current use of the term.

While the term *classics* crops up in scholarship on the eighteenth and nineteenth century,[12] it was more often used at that time in connection to literature, a field from which Parry acknowledged to have borrowed the signification of the term *classical*.[13] Two essential prerequisites for something to get the status of a *classic* emerge. First, as Parry emphasized in his first definition, there is the necessity for something to have been present for some time. In music, this is arguably achieved through consecutive performances, which can create performance traditions. At least in the broadest sense, pieces deemed *classics* are today often discussed or considered in terms of previous performances, recordings, or analyses. Second, what makes a *classic* a *classic* is its ability constantly to produce critical discourse, especially geared towards its elevated societal value.[14] Thus, a work that is being performatively and discursively interpreted over a longer stretch of time can become a *classic*, and one that loses these characteristics can stop being one. This understanding highlights the flexibility and temporality of the concept and its grounding in ever-evolving discourses and practices. Yet it does not negate notions of stability and timelessness, which are highlighted in Everist's reference to a *classic*'s ability to transcend history – a characteristic we will discuss further below.

Although not all the articles the articles in this issue perform a discursive analysis of the historical use of the specific terms *classics* and *classical*, all draw attention to how the notions attached to these terms in nineteenth-century European performance cultures were constructed in dialogue with considerations of aesthetic and cultural value. The authors largely deal with a repertoire that today would be categorized as both *classical* and among the *classics* as defined above: symphonies by Schubert and piano sonatas by Mozart and Beethoven. They provide microhistories that dig into the complexity of case studies from German regions, England and Russia. Furthermore, they highlight that these discourses and practices were by no means rigid, but were characterized by fluidity. Together, the authors seek to answer questions like: What did it mean in the nineteenth century to consider a performance as *classical*? When and how did a musical piece or composer become a *classic*? How were these labels applied in different places, and what were the cultural mechanisms underpinning them?

The articles' answers to these questions not only show that multiple understandings of *classics* and *classical* are present at any one time, but simultaneously touch on the identity formation of nations and empires. It has long been established that, in the nineteenth century, constructing a body of *classics* was a powerful means of seeding the roots of a

[10] Parry, 'Classical', 365.

[11] Parry, 'Classical', 366.

[12] See for instance, Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[13] Parry, 'Classical', 366.

[14] Calvino, 'Why Read the Classics?': 6. Calvino gave 14 definitions of the term classics, most importantly the notion that a classic 'is a work which constantly generates a pulviscular [dusty] cloud of critical discourse around it, but which always shakes the particles off'. ('è un'opera che provoca incessantemente un pulviscolo di discorsi critici su di sé, ma continuamente se li scrolla di dosso'.).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409825000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nation's culture.[15] Music was no exception to this rule, and it gained a prominent role in soft-power politics. The German-speaking regions had a longstanding music tradition that produced the overwhelming majority of classical repertoire, but it also had a more fractured national identity. As a result, the term *classics* (or *Klassiker*) was prominently used by the publishers of collected editions, which in turn helped to strengthen a national identity over a regional one.[16] The articles in this volume, however, also reveal the role these *classics* played outside of their regions of origin. In Russia and England, for example, imperialist ideologies facilitated a protectors' attitude towards musical *classics*, largely coming from the German regions. Simultaneously, the success of the music's importation attested to its ability to transcend the boundaries of a nation-state or empire and even those of time. Thus, they confirmed the status of a *classic* or the *classical*, whether pertaining to a work, a composer, or a performance style, as something 'universally' acclaimed.[17]

The resulting tension between nationalism, imperialism and universalism uncovered in the articles also implicates considerations about monumentality. Whether in a national, imperial or universal context, the *classics* and the *classical* tend to be held up as an expression of 'greatness'; they become monuments and commemorations. The concept is often associated with large-scale works and their performances – something many nineteenth-century composers as well as patrons invested in, but which not immediately guaranteed a place among the *classics*, let alone a permanent status as such.[18] Still, aside from Schubert's symphonies, most of the *classics* examined in this issue are not of monumental physical scale nor were they generally performed in large halls. As sonatas for piano and other instruments they belong to the solo or chamber music repertory, performed in more intimate salon or domestic environments. Yet the concept of monumentality is not only related to physical scale, but arguably more strongly dependent on the status a work or composer received in the cultural discourse.[19] Musical works using a small number of instruments are not exempt from being experienced as immediate, overwhelming or transcendent – characteristics associated with the monumental.

This monumentality of the *classics* can and has led to tensions between the expectations attached to the status and the reality of the cultural moment. As Alexander Rehding has shown, Wagner's experience of Gluck's operas did not match his expectation based on the latter's *classical* status, which eventually led him to abandon these works altogether.[20] Wagner was hardly the last to experience this missed connection, but the response to this dissonance does not have to be silence, particularly in contexts with opportunities for continuous adaptation and re-contextualization, as the articles in this volume show. As performance practices and traditions changed, so did discursive

[15] In the realm of literature, see for instance Stéphan Zékian, *L'invention des classiques: Le "siècle de Louis XIV" existe-t-il?* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2012).

[16] Annette Oppermann, *Musikalische Klassiker-Ausgaben des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000): 40ff. The precise status of the classics within German culture (as an apex followed by decline or as the start of a continuous tradition) remained a topic of debate.

[17] In narratives of empire, nationalism and universalism often stood in tension with one another. For a discussion of this tension in early-nineteenth-century French opera, see Annelies Andries, 'Uniting the Arts to Stage the Nation: Le Sueur's Ossian (1804) in Napoleonic Paris', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 32/2–3 (2019): 153–87.

[18] This in turn emphasizes the inherent instability of the classics: a composer such as Louis Spohr – often associated with large-scale works that clearly played with historical themes (such as 'Historical' Symphony no. 6 op. 116) and whose works were widely recognized as part of the classics by the time of his death in 1859 – was all but forgotten by the end of the long nineteenth century. See Clive Brown, *Louis Spohr: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 340–44.

[19] See for instance Alexander Rehding's discussion of Pierre Nora's *lieu de mémoire* and Andreas Huyssens's concept of monumentality in Rehding, *Music and Monumentality: Commemoration and Wonderment in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 10–16.

[20] Rehding, *Music and Monumentality*, 109–40.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409825000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

understandings of *classics* and the *classical*. Musicians discussed in this issue such as Friedrich Grützmacher and Agathe Backer-Grøndahl found themselves falling in and out of favour as their interpretations clashed with changing critical expectations.

All this points to the need for a flexible approach that destabilizes any discourse of ossified *classics*, the formation of which depends at least in part on some of the extra-musical factors outlined above. As attitudes towards imperialism and conceptions of nationalism have undergone significant reconsiderations, it stands to reason that what is considered *classical* has to change along with these attitudes.[21]

The authors in this special issue interrogate this changeability to highlight two specific themes.[22] First, they investigate how notions of the *classics* and *classical* are critically informed by the interaction between performance practices and different forms of cultural discourse. In the latter, the grounding of different kinds of identity (national, imperial, universal, or other) through the adoption of particular (foreign) musical practices plays an important part. Second, they underline the continuous tension between stability and instability in the actual performance practices and repertoires denoted by these concepts. This is particularly so in music, where performance traditions and underlying musical values are transmitted and changed between generations through educational practices and institutions.

Yet these traditions and values in themselves can gain the aura of becoming the stable 'core' of these classics. Notably, Scott Burnham argued that over the course of the nineteenth century, music theorists created institutional values based on Beethoven's so-called heroic style, which created a circular relationship where music education is reinforcing the position of music abiding to these values.[23] Similar issues will be addressed on the level of discourse and performance practices as well as their interaction in these articles. By thus showing the historical malleability of these concepts (and the repertoire, discourse and performance practices they denote), this issue questions any kind of totalizing approach to the *classics* and the *classical*, championing a localized and historicized perspective for looking at their use in musical cultures of the past – a perspective that can be extended to today as well.

The first two articles concentrate on the cultural concerns that underlie nineteenth-century English conceptualizations of what classics are. The opening article, by Bruno Bower, focuses on one particular kind of cultural discourse: the programme notes written by the abovementioned George Grove for the Crystal Palace Saturday concerts from the 1860s to the 1880s. In this discussion of one of the earliest collections of this type of cultural discourse, Bower interrogates how Grove helped construct the classic status of Schubert's music in London. He shows how Grove interweaved selected aspects of the composer's biography (such as his personal struggles and his perceived imperial identity)

[21] Notable examples of this already happening include the sustained interest in the history of female composers and the renewed interest in the artistic contributions of African Americans such as those associated with the Chicago Black Renaissance.

[22] Relevant literature in almost every article includes amongst others William Weber, *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Weber, "The History of Musical Canons", in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Mark Everist and Nicholas Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 340–59; Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics: A Study in Canon, Ritual and Ideology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Tia DeNora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna 1792–1803* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Some of these titles have attracted strident criticism.

[23] These values include 'thematic/motivic development, end-orientation and unequivocal closure, form as process, and the inexorable presence of line', which came to be considered hallmarks of a good composition. This did not only influence compositional practice but also what aspects should be paid attention to in performing this repertoire. Burnham, *Beethoven Hero*, 110–11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409825000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with observations on the music that appealed to a variety of Victorian cultural values. Bower suggests that nineteenth-century hermeneutic strategies for listening to and appreciating music were more complex than Bonds' 'Beethoven Syndrome', which focuses on an emotional, autobiographical hearing practices.[24] The fact that such careful cultural appeals to the complex value systems of the audience were necessary is also explored by William Drummond's discussion of the reception of two performances in London in 1890 of arrangements of Mozart by Edward Grieg. In a careful examination of the cultural anxieties underpinning these critically panned performances, Drummond shows that they were problematic precisely because they resisted easy categorization in the way that Grove had done with Schubert and arguably Parry did in the 1879 definition of *classical*. Mozart's sonatas were seen as *classics* with an imperial and international status, a comfortable state of affairs for the English critics, since they helped create it. Grieg's added second piano parts therefore changed these sonatas from classics to works with a highly specific and therefore much more problematic Nordic inflection. The cultural project by Norwegian musicians to give a more rounded impression of their own culture's music as well as their engagement with the classics thus fell afoul of the place and function of *classics* in critical circles in London. Both Bower and Drummond detail how, in England – a country at the heart of an empire that spanned most of the globe but one which also prided itself as 'the land without music'[25] – the adoption and subsequent enthusiastic endorsement of foreign musical *classics* cast the English as collectors and protectors of the best that global culture had to offer.[26]

Where Bower and Drummond discuss how cultural discourse frames the choice and performances of certain repertoire, the articles by Maria Razumovskaya and Kate Bennett Wadsworth focus on the importance of discursive practices in giving performance traditions the credentials of being *classical*. Starting from the state of music in the Russian empire in the early to mid-nineteenth century, Razumovskaya shows how Anton Rubinstein filled a perceived cultural vacuum by adopting Beethoven's musical personality so completely that he came to be seen as a Russian embodiment of the composer. Thereby, Beethoven's music played an important part in creating a national musical identity. This in turn created a performance tradition not so much focused on the passing on of particular techniques directly – as Razumovskaya shows, Rubinstein's followers played quite differently from each other in terms of tempo and dynamics – but of discursive notions of what it means to perform (and embody) a *classic*. While resulting in diverse practices, they nonetheless share an almost stable approach to ideas about what it means to be a Russian artist in the Russian Empire in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

In the final article, Kate Bennett Wadsworth veers away from the focus on a single composer adopting the wider perspective of what it means to play in a 'classical style', by examining editions of the German cellist Friedrich Grützmacher. In much recent

[24] Mark Evan Bonds, *The Beethoven Syndrome: Hearing Music as Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): 1

[25] This attitude had been very prominent in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, resulting in myriad publications and satirical prints. See Amy Dunagin, 'The Land Without Music: Satirizing Music in Eighteenth-Century England: an Exhibition at the Lewis Walpole Library', Yale University, March 1 to September 29, 2017. See also Annelies Andries, 'Looking at and Listening to "The Land Without Music"', in *Criticks, British Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies Online Reviews* (2017), ed. Emrys Jones, www.bsecs.org.uk/criticks-reviews/looking-at-and-listening-to-the-land-without-music/.

[26] A similar attitude was taken to physical artifacts from other cultures, although here the acquisition was on the whole far less consensual and generally accompanied by extreme force. For an extensive discussion of the harmful real-world effects of this attitude at the end of the (long) nineteenth century, see Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Cultural Violence and Colonial Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409825000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

scholarship, Grützmacher has been caricaturized as a musical vandal who misrepresented *classical* composers in his annotated editions. As Wadsworth shows, however, Grützmacher's annotations fell well within what was acceptable in terms of editorial practices in the latter half of the nineteenth century – notions that only started to be challenged towards the end of the century with new performance and editorial trends that emerged under the auspices of figures like Joseph Joachim and others. Grützmacher's indications therefore are a helpful means of challenging the somewhat stifling assumptions behind historical and current-day notions of *classical* edition and performance practices.

What does looking this closely at the performance of these *classics* in this issue bring us? It highlights the instability and the constructed nature of the approaches that to most performers will feel entirely natural and unchanging, but which have undergone significant transformations throughout history. Hence this issue further builds on the work from the historical performance movements that has started to flourish with regard to late eighteenth and nineteenth-century repertoire.[27] It also points to the possibility of alternative historically grounded interpretations of the same repertoire, both conceptually and in terms of performance practices. And we hope they may not only generate discourse on scholarly pages, but may also offer new approaches to performers interested in historical practice.[28] Furthermore, it gives greater insight into the mechanisms that shaped the adoption of these repertoires. In this way it provides not only a means of understanding what this music meant to nineteenth-century musicians and their audiences, but also the tantalizing possibility to select our own *classics* and the *classical*. After all, as Italo Calvino stated, 'classics help us understand who we are and the point we have reached'.[29]

[27] For a recent example of this in late Beethoven, see Marten Noorduin, 'Transcending Slowness in Beethoven's Late Style', in *Manchester Beethoven Studies*, ed. Barry Cooper and Matthew Pilcher (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023): 214–43.

[28] Since the 1980s, a consensus has formed that the historically informed performance movement is not only interested in the historical, but is also in a practice that is indicative of contemporary culture. See for instance Richard Taruskin, 'The Modern Sound of Early Music', in *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 164–72.

[29] Calvino, 'Why Read the Classics?': 9.

Cite this article: Noorduin M, Andries A, Playing the Classics in the Nineteenth Century. *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 22/2 (August. 2025): 163–169. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409825000059

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409825000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press