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REVIEW ARTICLE

All the Feels

Nicholas Mathew

University of California at Berkeley
Email: nicholas.mathew@berkeley.edu

Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Tenderness of Silent Minds: Benjamin Britten and His War Requiem*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 285 pp.

Peter Franklin, *Britten Experienced: Modernism, Musicology and Sentiment*. London: Routledge, 2024. x + 115 pp.

The latest books by Martha Nussbaum and Peter Franklin, on the music and life of Benjamin Britten, both come from positions notionally outside music studies. Nussbaum – the liberal philosopher, as close to an academic celebrity as one can find nowadays – writes about the *War Requiem* (1962) as a (mostly) appreciative visitor to the discipline. Franklin, by contrast, is well known in nineteenth- and twentieth-century music studies. *Britten Experienced* nevertheless adopts the institutionally detached, less inhibited perspective of the emeritus. It would not be too far from the truth to call Franklin's book a career retrospective. Crucially, though, it takes in not only the things that he has taught and published over the years, but also the personal encounters and enthusiasms that have (often invisibly) shaped this teaching and scholarship – the very things, in other words, that typically lie outside the professional purview of music studies.

You would not necessarily expect a couple of books on Britten to open up existential questions about the future of a discipline, but these do – one by implication, the other directly. *The Tenderness of Silent Minds* sees the author dropping in on the musicological world, only to attempt the kind of thing that Joseph Kerman, glancing enviously at the texture and range of Leavisite literary criticism, once wished all musicologists would aspire to: it evaluates the successes and failures of works of art, tries to establish what the authors in question were aiming at, and explains what lessons it all might hold.[1] These days, perhaps you need the chutzpah and musicologically unburdened disciplinary identity of a philosophical A-lister to take on this task (although, to be sure, Nussbaum joins a centuries-long line of musically inspired philosophers). She unpacks, with a handful of more obviously 'philosophical' excurses, a series of themes in Britten's world and works: embodiment, love, peace, reconciliation. These themes accumulate into an extended reading of the *War Requiem.* All the while, Nussbaum stays with the philosophical preoccupations for which she is best known: emotion, bodily desire and fellow-feeling. Freely adapting Schopenhauerian metaphysics, she argues that music is the inevitable partner of such preoccupations and so can meaningfully shape our ethical lives.

[1] Joseph Kerman, 'How We Got Into Analysis, and How to Get Out', *Critical Inquiry* 7/2 (1980), 311–31.

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Such a book reminds us that, to the extent that certain parts of music studies have pushed evaluative criticism of this kind out of the disciplinary mainstream, other disciplines or institutions will be more than happy to fill the gap. University administrators might eventually channel 'Music' into composite schools of arts and dance and media, or they might turn it into an appendage to glee clubs and marching bands. But the 'constitutive outside' of academic music studies – the usually unspoken, unsystematic impulses that inaugurate and sustain our scholarly enterprises – will remain. People comprising Nussbaum's circle of Chicago concert-goers (who crop up occasionally in her text) will continue to seek their musical pleasures, and will still be able to discuss them with detail and sophistication. Others will make playlists, go to nightclubs and analyse the structure of top forty hits on YouTube or Substack. All of them will be just fine without musicologists to tell them that music is intermaterial vibration, to parse their favourite tunes into lists of nonhuman 'actors', or to refer to their music-making as 'musicking' with a straight face. They won't even notice, let alone miss us, when we're gone.

The full title of *Britten Experienced: Modernism, Musicology and Sentiment* indicates that Franklin is no less concerned than Nussbaum with bodily feeling and intimate experience. Franklin, formerly Professor of Music at the University of Oxford, appeals to the sentimental constitutive outside of his discipline with more polemical intent. He starts from the premise that modernism and musicologists – and, worst of all, modernist musicologists – have a longstanding problem with experience and sentiment. Where postwar modernists once sneered at, banished or repressed 'deeply troubling matters of feeling' (7), so musicologists (we'll get on to which ones presently) have failed, with their rubrics of analysis and reception, to capture how Britten's music was (and perhaps is – or should be) experienced. The politics, or at least the ethical implications, of Franklin's project are located here, in the very texture of experience and feeling: 'It was all just so much more complicated' (80). We should be sceptical, he warns, of any music history that does not reckon with the nature and intensity of our continuing musical pleasures, and that treats past pleasures as mere symptoms of intellectual tendencies or social hierarchies.

It is significant, I think, that Franklin chooses not to elaborate this view in dialogue with scholarly concepts or methods that are disciplinarily at hand. Affect theory and the history of the emotions have been lively subfields for a while, not least as they have intersected with queer studies (which, of course, has particular relevance to Britten and his life partner Peter Pears). But none of that features here. Franklin describes 'what I will call the "erotics" of the process of getting to know' Britten's music (78) without appearing to recall the closing line of Susan Sontag's 'Against Interpretation', with its notorious call for an erotics of art.[2] Likewise, when it comes to 'experience', Franklin opts not to remedy the schematism he diagnoses in the musicological study of modernism with, say, a newly curated oral history, an institutional microhistory, or a ground-level retracing of the period's scattered social relations – a picture of an 'actually existing' postwar modernism to place beside the 'actually existing experimentalism' of Benjamin Piekut's *Experimentalism Otherwise*, perhaps.[3] Instead, he draws on the constitutive outside that is 'autobiographical narrative' (ix). Alongside what he calls 'sanctioned modes of musicological discourse and enquiry' (viii–ix) – that is, short critical essays on episodes from works by Britten – he provides a chronological account of his personal encounters with this music, and revisits the brushes he had with The Man Himself.

The result is an idiosyncratic and enjoyable scholarly experiment. It would have been more interesting and more sympathetic, though, had Franklin directed its guiding polemic

[2] Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, 1990), 14.

[3] Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and its Limits* (Berkeley, CA, 2011), 8, 13, 23 et passim.

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at a wider range of targets. The study that receives the lion's share of Franklin's opprobrium is *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide* by Christopher Chowrimootoo.[4] *Ideology in Britten's Operas* by J.P.E. Harper-Scott is turned over, too, but mostly in the concluding essay.[5] Chowrimootoo's name appears on fairly half of the pages of *Britten Experienced*, and is even promoted into the title of the introduction, 'The Roots of my Musical Taste and Chowrimootoo's Worry'. It is obvious – and Franklin more or less spells this out in the foreword (viii) – that the principal motivation behind *Britten Experienced* was to put his younger colleague right. And to be sure, I can't think of a book in music studies – even from the dark days of bar brawls over cut circle and musica ficta, or when people fled in terror from the Shostakovich Wars – that has ever been so unswerving in its focus on a single antagonist. Given that we're in the world of twenty-first-century Britten studies, it's curious.

Curious, too, because Chowrimootoo's *Middlebrow Modernism* may well have struck many of its readers as more or less in tune with Franklin's intellectual sensibilities. From his earliest work, Franklin aimed to challenge postwar stories about art peddled by arch-modernists such as Pierre Boulez.[6] In these stories, only a handful of austere Schoenbergian heirs produced the kind of true music that bravely forestalled the easy consumption habits of encroaching mass culture – and they did so by rejecting predigested conventions, corny appeals to feeling, and in the most extreme cases any concern with listener experience at all. It was Franklin and a few others who insisted that we recognise and value what was right in front of our noses: a heterogeneous modernism that many people liked – a modernism no less profound, but with soaring melodies and grand symphonic utterances, Korngold and movie scores.[7] Boulez et al. were the outliers. More than this, Franklin showed that even the most professedly austere modernists drew upon – sometimes in rhetorically concealed or underhand ways, other times in plain sight – the very artistic devices and registers that they elsewhere decried.[8] Without Franklin's scholarly contributions, you would be far less likely to have Chowrimootoo arguing – and this is just one example from his book – that 1950s critics heard in Britten's *Turn of the Screw* (1954) the sober quasi-formalism of tone rows as well as the hackneyed gestural language of Gothic theatre, so revealing that 'the archetypes of high modernism and Gothic melodrama could often sound remarkably alike'.[9] It is the sort of thing that the late Richard Taruskin never tired of exposing: abstemious modernists with their pants down.

But Franklin doesn't trust *Middlebrow Modernism.* He doesn't trust the concept of the 'middlebrow' for a start, with its snobbish joke-phrenological origins in 1920s Bloomsbury and questionable relevance to the actual 'creative strategies' (6) of a musician such as Britten, or postwar British music in general: 'I confess that I never recall hearing that term used in the 1960s' (5). Franklin is surely right to be suspicious: the concept of the middlebrow becomes meaningful only when plotted on the axis of an abstracted high modernism. But what of musical experiences – or lived experiences – that elude or ignore such bleak hierarchies? Scholars like Chowrimootoo, even when they use the middlebrow as a tool of subversion, risk reproducing the values of a niche modernist music criticism (106).[10]

[4] Christopher Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide* (Oakland, CA, 2018).

[5] J.P.E. Harper-Scott, *Ideology in Britten's Operas* (Cambridge, 2018).

[6] See especially Peter Franklin, *The Idea of Music: Schoenberg and Others* (London, 1985); and *Reclaiming Late-Romantic Music: Singing Devils and Distant Sounds* (Oakland, CA, 2014).

[7] See also Peter Franklin, *Seeing Through Music: Gender and Modernism in Classic Hollywood Film Scores* (New York, 2011).

[8] See, for instance, Franklin, *The Idea of Music*, chapter 6.

[9] Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 115.

[10] Similar criticisms have been aired with real nuance by Laura Tunbridge in 'Thoroughly Modern Middles', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 31/1 (2019), 118–28, esp. 124–5, 127.

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But Franklin goes further, intimating that Chowrimootoo has a 'personal problem' (6) with feeling as such, and possibly with Britten too. Franklin doesn't derive his primary evidence for this diagnosis from the main text of *Middlebrow Modernism*, which is largely a history and analysis of Britten's critical reception, but from the book's constitutive outside – the Acknowledgements, which begin with a wedding-speech-like reference to the author's austere modernist exterior and sentimental interior, as 'sickly', writes Chowrimootoo, as anything in *Peter Grimes*.[11] It's the word 'sickly' that really grinds Franklin's gears, although it's the only time it appears near to the text of Chowrimootoo's book. Franklin can't leave it alone, invoking it at least a dozen times in *Britten Experienced.*

This is all evidence, it seems to me, that revisiting intense personal attachments to music does not necessarily produce the optimal mindset in which to evaluate other people's musicological arguments. The parasocial character of Franklin's relationship with Britten – 'a composer I came to *feel* I knew' (1) – creeps into his relationship with his scholarly interlocutors. Anyone who has ever written Acknowledgements knows that such paratexts are as likely to contain hasty boilerplate, forced parallels or plain sheepish gratitude as any more profound kind of self-disclosure. The absence of disciplinary protocols does not equate to liberated authenticity, any more than 'sanctioned' disciplinary modes equate to inhibition or falsity. It should hardly need saying that basing any kind of scholarly argument on a passage raided from a book's Acknowledgements isn't fair. Franklin deepens the injustice, though, by repeatedly deploying the passage in forced and fanciful ways. He uses it to imagine how Chowrimootoo might have described things that he hasn't described, repeatedly gesturing to 'what Chowrimootoo would no doubt call' and 'things that Chowrimootoo would likely just call' (72, 103). He conjures up and then dissents from entire critical interpretations: 'Chowrimootoo', writes Franklin, 'spares us' his reading of *Billy Budd* (1951) as merely sentimental – which is another way of saying that such a reading doesn't exist (49). And on more than one occasion (64, 106) he veers into silly and elaborate fantasies about Chowrimootoo's emotional world, at moments when simply disagreeing with his interpretations of *Death in Venice* (1973) or *Peter Grimes* (1945) would have been enough.

Franklin devalues his overall tone and approach in these places, and mars what is often a beautiful book by confusing the enthusiastically de-professionalised with the more ordinarily unprofessional. Certainly, he is passionate about Britten, and his treatment of Chowrimootoo is perhaps best considered a crime of passion. But that's why, in my view, someone at or employed by Routledge should have stepped in: that these aspects of the text survived all the way to publication reflects badly on the process that brought the book before us.

Missteps like these become more likely when a scholar challenges a richly sourced music history armed chiefly with his own intimate recollections. Franklin's musicological arguments frequently adopt the structure of phenomenological reduction, whereby other people's critical commentaries are not so much disagreed with as stripped away – as so many contingent and distorting obstructions, which obscure the unarguable ground of authentic feeling. Toward the end of the book, he bridles when Chowrimootoo talks of the 'sumptuous lyricism' of the Act II women's quartet from *Peter Grimes*, which audibly references older traditions of female operatic sentiment – an uncontroversial observation, worth making here because of Britten's recorded loathing of the equally soprano-heavy *Der Rosenkavalier* (1910).[12] Even to observe that this style of operatic female sentiment has a history is, Franklin assumes, to denigrate the 'transcendent love' that he experiences in the music (108).

[11] Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, ix.
[12] Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 51.

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Likewise, Franklin's autobiographical conception of the past generally prompts him to repel rather than adjust or supplement histories that contradict his own experience. The critical history presented in *Middlebrow Modernism*, which Franklin acknowledges is 'carefully researched', is also, he points out, 'a cultural past in which I participated' – and, to him, simply 'feels wrong' (viii). And so he appears: the authoritative returned traveller whom Stephen Potter warned against in his one-upmanship books – 'the man, always dangerous, who has actually been there'.[13] Franklin knows that his experiences need not grant him 'undue authority' (8), and admits that his recollections are fallible, especially with respect to the order of events. Still, the critical spade turns when it hits experience and feelings – and the capacity to foreclose criticism is authority, of a kind. No matter how many postwar commentators Chowrimootoo and others might assemble, all listening and thinking in their own ways and with their own agendas, Franklin can always counter with experiences and feelings – and with locutions that aren't open to straightforward contradiction: 'as the possessor of a perhaps more nearly period ear … I am bound to come clean and confess that I have always cherished …' (8); 'Having been around in that period, I am bound to suggest …' (57).

Franklin is more convincing when he describes experiences and feelings not typically represented in musicological literature. A vignette in the opening chapter, which recalls a school performance of *Noye's Fludde* (1958), sweetly captures the uncertain blend of duty and pleasure, happy conformity and mild sense of rebellion, that came with his participation in this solemn, occasionally raucous church drama. His musicological target, however, is Chowrimootoo's passing reference to the opening 'with timpani roaring and congregation bellowing', and an accompanying footnote to W. Anthony Sheppard's view that congregational singing is 'coercive' (in the sense that it enforces joining in).[14] Franklin gently asserts the contrary view:

> Comforting were the hymns. They were what I was used to hearing when participating in those Sunday church services; and the first was rather a good one: the familiar, slightly grudging (rather than 'coerced'?) *mezza voce* sound of the congregation drifting in slightly late and trailing behind the choir … (10)

This point lands: we often forget the pleasure and mystery even of the ill-fitting bits of culture that we have to wear. The ways in which culture sticks to people – especially children – will always be unpredictable, always more complicated than ideas of coercion or manipulation can explain. Franklin's chapter concludes with a poignant evocation of Joseph Addison's 'arcane and antiquated words' – the words of the last of Britten's hymns – stuck 'perplexingly' in the minds of children and their parents as they go about their business the next day (12). It's lovely.

But there are anomalies in this story, not least the way in which Franklin wraps up his description of the *Noye's Fludde* performance: 'all were caught up in the magic of the returned light and the peaceful redemption' (12). Were they? That's the risk with feelings: one minute you're describing your own, and the next you're attributing them to everyone else. Feelings spread around, propelled by desire and narrative convention, especially when pressed into the genre of reminiscence. 'Memory collaborates with forces separate from actual past events', warn Barbara and Karen Fields, both serious curators of oral histories.[15] This is surely why the critical spade shouldn't turn when it hits feelings and experience. The great

[13] Stephen Potter, *Some Notes on Lifemanship, with a Summary of Recent Researches in Gamesmanship* (London, 1950), 46.

[14] Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 124, 205n40.

[15] Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London, 2012), 171.

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scholar of Jewish history Yosef Yerushalmi put it like this: 'the historian does not simply come in to replenish the gaps of memory. He constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact'.[16] Franklin certainly shows the value of individual experience as a counterpoint to big-picture musicological theorising, which so often fails to capture the qualia of actually being there. But I don't think the unspoken premise that 'concrete' experience is the opposite of airy intellectual abstraction should pass by unchallenged. It was Hegel, after all, who once argued, counterintuitively, that the given-ness of feeling could be the ultimate abstraction, because it removes perception from all the generalisable contexts and dialectical relationships that give it meaning.[17]

Martha Nussbaum's *The Tenderness of Silent Minds* is of course a different book, driven by different aims; but its conception of bodily feeling is susceptible to a similar critique. She turns to the subject of music and poetry because 'law and policy need to retain at all times a vivid sense of the human body, its beauty and vulnerability, as the seat of human striving' (5). Here, then, the body is where the critical spade turns: the ultimate, ground-level protest against detached, administrative abstraction – the very subject of war making and love making. Even so, it is sometimes hard to separate the fleshly business of individual bodies (Peter Pears's or Wilfred Owen's, say) from The Body as a kind of authenticity jargon. The book is written in an accessible, chatty way, at times almost like a dictation, but the rhetoric of The Body gives it away as a product of academic discourse. Outside the university, you'll often hear everyday concerns about (say) police violence against people; inside, you're more likely to hear about violence against bodies. And, to be sure, in *The Tenderness of Silent Minds*, bodies and The Body now and again appear tendentiously in places where the word 'people' would have done the job, arguably with greater accuracy. 'The makers of policy and the makers of war have tended not to devote intense or specific thought to the body, the seat of war's suffering', says Nussbaum early on (3) – a peculiar translation, it seems to me, of the more ordinary (and no less important) observation that the politicians who prosecute wars often do so with little care for the experience of the people who fight them and the civilians who suffer. While discussing Owen's philosophical outlook, Nussbaum reports that his early visits to wartime hospitals in France 'stimulated the concrete interest in what war does to the body' (125); his poetry, she adds, aroused 'compassion for the sufferings of bodies in war' (127). Bodies appear to guarantee a concreteness in excess of the usual concern for people, but rapidly turn into their own abstraction. Such body-rhetoric is especially problematic given that, these days, scholarly discourse on The Body owes so much to theorists of race, especially of Blackness. The work of thinkers as different as Frantz Fanon and Hortense Spillers teaches particular sensitivity to bodies as locations not only of intimate feeling but of contested social signification, not to mention objectification.[18] Few in this intellectual tradition would endorse a vision of The Body as an unarguable universal, or a viscerally realist synonym for personhood.

Body-rhetoric contributes the least, I think, to the sections of musical close reading. Nussbaum's appealing premise is that the unusual 'bodily immediacy' of music (and poetry) can 'assist the work for future peace' (5). But the ensuing readings deploy only the most conventional tools of musical-technical description, even though musicologists of diverse specialisms have long tried to develop forms of analysis that do justice to music's

[16] Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, 1982), 94.

[17] He makes the distinction in the course of the *Science of Logic*. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge, 2010).

[18] See especially Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York, 1967); and Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', reprinted in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, 2003), 203–29.

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bodiliness.[19] Nussbaum's account of the *Spring Symphony* (1949), during a broader discussion of Britten's pacificism, is representative of her tone and procedure. The work, she explains, is 'in the traditional four movements, but it also has a tonal arc leading from the B of the opening to the C major of the triumphant climax' (134) (a footnote directs the reader to the sleeve notes of the 1961 Britten–Pears recording). W.H. Auden's poem 'Out on the Lawn' (1933) is the basis of the second movement, 'set as a contralto solo with wordless choral accompaniment. We are reminded that the body is not an abstraction but a daily reality and delight' (135). It is not clear how we should connect these not-obviously corporeal musical parameters and readerly interpretations to such strong claims about The Body.

It doesn't help that Nussbaum has the analytic philosopher's habit of dealing with all utterances as if they were propositions. Granted, this is often refreshing and even salutary, since she evaluates the things that Britten, Owen and others have said with an unsparing and impartial eye. She is doubtful about Britten's species of pacificism, for instance, and his ethical position as a wartime conscientious objector: 'I love Britten and Pears, but I do feel that Britten behaved in a self-serving way' (123). In the case of art works, though, judgements like these start to look more like category errors. In the culminating reading of the *War Requiem*, Nussbaum takes exception to Britten's prominent setting of the opening line of Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' – 'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?' – which is juxtaposed with the opening 'Requiem aeternum' and 'Kyrie'. Her reason is that, whereas one might have cause to regard the casualties of Owen's Great War as victims of heartless and foolish states, World War II was a just war, and those who were called up to fight knew this: 'Britten's blind spot about just war is exactly here, in his willingness to use these lines without critical thought' (201). There is a certain debate-team banality about invoking World War II as the archetypical 'just war', which surely is not adequate to the historical complexities of the people and cultural practices under discussion here: soldiers in World War II, she writes, 'thought, correctly, that they were being sent off to fight for freedom and democracy against one of the most evil autocrats in history' (201). As problematic as sweeping assertions like this, though, is the starting assumption that produces them – that a musical setting or a poem can or should be understood primarily as a statement of principle. There is little appreciation of the condition that musical performers face every time they pick up a score: that a resonant poetic phrase like 'die as cattle', no less than the musical phrase that sets it, belongs to a multivalent and expressively open art work, which, by design, presents multiple, unpredictable and often inscrutable opportunities to create new meanings, even at various points during the same performance.

This stance leads to otherwise avoidable uncertainty over the status of the concluding reading of the *War Requiem*, which, despite initially calling itself a 'reconstruction' of the 'journey of one imagined listener' (185), unfolds as though it were exposing discoverable content. On a couple of occasions, Nussbaum even explicitly charges musicologists with mishearing and misunderstanding (206, 239). Such equivocation could have been avoided were Nussbaum to have acknowledged what most music critics know: that any close reading is as much an exercise in persuasion – an ethical prescription for how people ought to listen – as a formal explication of a musical proposition. Nussbaum shows us how we can use the *War Requiem* to learn ethical lessons – and her analysis is no less rewarding for that. (For instance, I don't think I will be able to un-hear her take on Britten's choral 'Dies Irae' setting as a 'persecutory character' (206) in an opera – as a theatrical indictment of traditional religion.)

[19] See, inter alia, Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley, CA, 2004); Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley, CA, 2006); James Q. Davies, *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* (Oakland, CA, 2014); Ellen Lockhart, *Animation, Plasticity, and Music in Italy, 1770–1830* (Oakland, CA, 2017); and Bettina Varwig, *Music in the Flesh: An Early Modern Musical Physiology* (Chicago, 2023).

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For all its body-rhetoric, then, *The Tenderness of Silent Minds* is mostly a study of texts and what positions they adopt. This is particularly the case in the philosophical digressions on pacificism, which develop Nussbaum's earlier work on the politics of anger and retribution, contrasting the stances of Martin Luther King Jr, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.[20] The clarity of thought, as Nussbaum probes and categorises what these men said, is admirable. She ultimately endorses what she calls, partly via Richard B. Gregg's popular Gandhian theories of non-violence, 'emotional pacifism' (102): the idea that our primary ethical duty is to reject retributive anger and 'inner' violence – even if 'outer' violence is occasionally necessary in self-defence or to advance justice.

But, to achieve this clarity, Nussbaum must also reduce complicated and ethically confounding political lives to a series of avowed stances-on-things. She confers a great deal of agency on philosophical views that are accessible via texts: what Gregg learned from reading Gandhi, what King learned from reading Gregg – and so on. At one point we even hear, in the style of a TED-talk bullet point, that, for Owen, 'Jesus was a key ethical model' (123). I kept wondering what historians of post-apartheid South Africa would make of the sections on Mandela's 'emotional pacificism'. The challenge presented by wider historical contexts in this case is not that the African National Congress, via uMkhonto weSizwe, was, more or less by necessity, dedicated to armed resistance, but that Mandela's path to its leadership, and the position from which he could subsequently articulate his anti-retributive views, also required violent internal purges of the ANC itself, often prosecuted by his friends and allies.[21] You can know all this and still admire Mandela as a leader – although it might (and probably should) dent his orthodox status as a secular saint. In *The Tenderness of Silent Minds*, however, historical complexities like these simply count for less than the things that Mandela said and felt – partly because what matters most to Nussbaum (following Gregg) is the 'inner world', and how we 'change the emotions with which people confront one another' (107).

A similarly reduced conception of historical context at times guides Nussbaum's descriptions of Britten and Pears. The fourth chapter, which explores their loving partnership as an ethical ideal, is a lucid account of the changing legal and social contexts of male same-sex relationships in twentieth-century England. And yet the chapter passes from events such as the Oscar Wilde prosecutions directly to intimate Britten–Pears correspondence without giving a textured impression of what it was like to exist as a gay person throughout this period. *Britten Experienced* – to cite a nearby example – is explicitly told from the perspective of a gay man who lived through radical changes in the law and social mores, so is inevitably more nuanced on this topic. Franklin's touching essay on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960) – in large part about the 1995 Robert Carsen production at the ENO, which Franklin attended with a beloved school mentor – is sensitively attuned to the period's subtle open secrets, insider–outsider tensions and hidden erotic pleasures, which shaped Britten's operas in ways both obvious and obscure (85–96). Franklin invokes personal experience here with some purpose, even to sound notes of caution about Philip Brett's now canonical essays about Britten and gay male desire.[22]

Especially noticeable is how *The Tenderness of Silent Minds* soft-pedals the role of class privilege in the reception of the Britten–Pears relationship, and in the wider cultural politics

[20] See especially, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York, 2016).

[21] The African National Congress (ANC), founded in 1912, was one of the main liberation organisations in the struggle against apartheid, and is currently the ruling political party in South Africa. uMkhonto weSizwe ('the spear of the nation'), also known as MK, was the armed wing of the ANC. Its founding leaders in 1961 were Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Joe Slovo.

[22] Philip Brett's Britten essays have been collected as *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays*, ed. George E. Haggerty (Berkeley, CA, 2006). See especially 'Britten's Dream', 106–28.

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of Britten's music. It is too easy nowadays to dismiss the kind of establishment protection that aided Britten and Pears: the royal endorsements, the peerage. They doubtless advanced the public acceptance of gay relationships in Britain. Even so, such class protections were not available to most gay people, and, crucially, many others did not consider what the activist Peter Tatchell criticised as 'equality within the status quo' to be a politically desirable goal.[23] Nussbaum knows that Britten was 'an outsider in some ways but a privileged insider in others' (193). Yet she comes across as a little oblivious when she praises Britten and Pears, who, in later, prosperous years, retained staff and housekeepers, for appearing to 'share the burdens of household management' (81) or when she lauds Britten and Pears's contribution to 'advancing the careers of women in the arts' (163) because they eventually installed the supremely well-connected Imogen Holst as sole director of the Aldeburgh Festival. And while everyone will know what Nussbaum means when she observes that, in *Albert Herring* (1947) and *Peter Grimes*, Britten 'finds dignity and grace in simple working people' (130), neither the tone nor the content of this sentence are quite right.

Nuances like these matter less when how people feel is ethically more important than what they do, or the wider material conditions within which they speak and act. 'Britten's aesthetic was fully inclusive' (5), announces Nussbaum at the start of her book, in one of several passages that contrasts his views with Owen's elitism. As in the case of 'emotional pacificism', the main thing is how he felt, and how we feel in turn. Nussbaum is dealing with art works, after all; 'the *War Requiem*', she writes towards the end of her book, 'is about emotions, not acts' (227). How could you possibly measure the political effects of the *War Requiem* as though it were a policy action? The point is how it reshapes our 'inner worlds'.

And yet, while Nussbaum recognises the limitations of a politics somehow enacted by pieces of music, she does not consider that musically aroused emotion, a 'fully inclusive' aesthetic, or an ethics of individual feeling could be politically counterproductive. Herbert Marcuse believed that art could be an obstacle to revolutionary political change – especially moving and monumental art like the *War Requiem*.[24] Hence what he called 'affirmative culture': art works don't just spur us to further thought and action – they also give us the pleasurable impression that the work has been done, that it is enough to feel a particular way about the world rather than to suffer having to change it. To Marcuse, art often obscures the contradictions between the things we say, the things we feel, the realities we know, and the ways in which we are compelled to act. 'I went to a performance of Beethoven's Ninth on the day Russia's armies first invaded Kyiv', recalls Nussbaum. 'The world around me gave me plentiful reasons for thinking human projects doomed to frustration and failure. What was in the music, however, was a powerful representation of the beauty and worth of human striving and hope – even when striving does not succeed' (23). Maybe that is enough. Certainly, we should not disdain music's capacity to comfort us. But I cannot avoid the suspicion, more than three years into the renewed Russia–Ukraine war, that Nussbaum's story demonstrates another point: that the political consequences of a select group of people listening to Beethoven in a distant Chicago concert hall are, at the very least, unclear.

The question of what counts as real political action is ubiquitous these days – is even a constant source of anxiety. And no wonder, given how long the workaday institutions that once consolidated political action in Britain and America have been in retreat. For many people, politics is mostly porch flags and yard signs, Saint George's crosses and Remembrance Day poppies, black squares and earnest Reply Alls, twitterstorms and anonymous

[23] See Peter Tatchell, 'Equality Is Not Enough' (2001): https://www.petertatchell.net/lgbt_rights/equality_not_enough/equality_is_not_enough/.

[24] Herbert Marcuse, 'The Affirmative Character of Culture', in *The Essential Marcuse*, ed. Andrew Feenberg and William Leiss (Boston, 2007), 201–32.

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Google Docs – a whole repertoire of feeling and expression. From one point of view – as Franklin's book shows – music studies is at home in this deregulated political landscape: feeling and expression are in its wheelhouse; critics have tried for centuries to square the intensity of music's expressiveness, and its fabled ability to reshape our feelings, with its often opaque relation to political action. And it makes sense that Nussbaum, a distinguished philosopher of the emotions, would turn to music criticism at this time. In a period when the very idea of liberal higher education is under threat but feelings are everywhere, why not restart the project of aesthetic education – a project as old as the Humboldtian university? Why not turn to cultural practices that, as in the Schillerian ideal, could help to govern people's most intimate bodily feelings before the administrative business of governance even gets off the ground? Inculcate 'emotional pacifism' via music and perhaps people will be better placed to enact real peace. That's the idea, anyway.

Leaving aside the dangerous comforts of affirmative culture, there are two main problems here, which most people in music studies know well. One has to do with evidence. Anyone who has seen footage of Wilhelm Furtwängler's 1942 performance of Beethoven's Ninth with the Berlin Philharmonic to mark Adolf Hitler's birthday may justly worry that if music can bind itself so effectively into our moral fibre then there is every chance that it might actually make us worse. Perhaps we need an authoritative exegete such as Nussbaum to make sure that we're hearing it right, and so behaving right once the performance ends. The other problem is the old one of tradition and hierarchy. Why should it have to be elite music such as the *War Requiem* or the Ninth that morally guides us? Nussbaum endorses the usual culturally inclusive ideals, commenting that people can pursue 'personal and social change' through all varieties of art, 'including jazz and popular music' (249). But she does not also acknowledge that her book is entangled in a performative contradiction that so many of us know – between the exclusive values you perpetuate and the inclusive values you feel. Strong feelings – as Marcuse saw – may even at times shelter us from a more salutary reckoning with what is happening around us. And right there – thinking again of the people profoundly touched by the Ninth in a hall in Chicago while tanks roll over the border on the other side of the world – is a class politics of musical appreciation and access that *The Tenderness of Silent Minds* never addresses.

By contrast, Peter Franklin's book – a book fundamentally about feelings – is almost entirely about class. More than this, the scenes that Franklin recalls from his own life – and this is unintended, perhaps – trace one of the distinctive ways in which, in the twentieth century, class was gradually untethered from material conditions and converted into identity. His generation experienced unprecedented social mobility. In the 1960s, places like the University of York, where Franklin studied music, accepted cohorts of students who simply wouldn't have experienced higher education in previous decades, and whose eventual class privilege would not, for many, erase a lifelong sense of 'cultural' class loyalty. The subject matter and methods of the postwar New Left arguably charted this process intellectually, producing a scholarship shaped by Gramscian theories of culture, equally incredulous of conservative taste hierarchies and vulgar-Marxist reductionism. You can see it in Richard Hoggart's tender descriptions of the net curtains and decorative teapots of interwar working class households or E.P. Thompson's richly detailed historical accounts of how the productive relations of the working class were 'handled in cultural terms'.[25] Franklin studied with Wilfrid Mellers, a musicologist who followed the path of the most prominent of New Left critics, Raymond Williams – starting out in the orbit of F.R. Leavis and

[25] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (London, 1958); E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1966), 10.

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Scrutiny and ending up as a wide-ranging theorist of elite and popular culture.[26] Williams is cited appreciatively in *Britten Experienced* to defend the 'ordinary response' to art, and to dispute the snobbery explicit in the concept of the middlebrow (35–7).

Britten Experienced is, in other words, a distant echo of the Cultural Studies that the New Left critics helped to create, insofar as the book wages its class battle on the territory of what people say they feel when they listen to operas.[27] Early on in *Britten Experienced*, readers are presented with a lot of careful class self-positioning – mostly about Franklin's family and his schooling. His father was a 'partly self-taught accountant'; Franklin failed his 11-plus exam so went to a private school; hearing Britten's accent on the radio confirmed to a young Franklin that the composer was posher than him (7); and so on. It's the kind of narcissism of small differences that, in my experience, people from outside England find pretty tedious – and politically bewildering when it comes from someone who attended a private school, earned all the available degrees at university and ended up teaching at Oxford. These biographical details have the potential to be illuminating and colourful. But in this context it is hard to get past the fact that cultural politics like this – the politics of feelings and signs – mystifies a more drearily proximate kind of institutional politics, the arena in which Franklin still wields some power. On the most parochial level, it licenses Franklin, a senior scholar, to treat Chowrimootoo, a junior colleague, with unaccountable ferocity, largely because he does not always appear credibly moved by Britten in the ways that Franklin wishes he did. Absorbed in the world of his own experience and feelings, Franklin becomes the vulnerable outsider, spurned by emotionally repressed crypto-Modernists.

The politics of Franklin's rhetorical status-reversal with respect to Chowrimootoo is even more dubious given that a generation of scholars has lately called on comparable disciplinary approaches – the 'lived experience' centred by standpoint theory, a heightened awareness of 'positionality', and a subversively expanded view of the historical archive – to advance people and practices that our disciplines have historically excluded. That these perspectives shape *Britten Experienced* looks like a bizarre inversion of Audre Lorde's dictum, in which the subaltern's tools are now appropriated to refurbish the master's house.[28] At the least, it is further evidence that the scholarly concern with feelings doesn't always produce insight into the feelings of marginalised others. Franklin displays a surprising failure of imagination. The feeling of being an outsider or imposter is widespread; a scholar like Chowrimootoo, writing about Britten, might have every reason to feel that way too. And if he has never said so in his scholarship? Well, self-disclosure isn't for everyone. Nor should it be: as Wendy Brown observes, when we compel self-disclosure from those have previously been silent, it can easily produce still more perniciously disciplined forms of speech.[29]

It's a timely reminder that fragile and deregulated disciplines – disciplines whose established practices and standards are beginning to dissolve into their constitutive outsides – don't inevitably set scholars free. Deregulation almost always liberates the already powerful – in this case, the ones with job security, publishers and professional profiles. It is no accident, I think, that both books under discussion in this review are by scholars of

[26] The literary periodical, *Scrutiny*, was founded in 1932 by Leavis and L.C. Knights. It was for a while an influential organ of high-minded practical criticism. See Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'* (London, 1979). On the British New Left, see the essays in the *New Left Review* 1/1 (1960).

[27] On the New Left and Cultural Studies, see Stuart Hall, 'Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, and the Cultural Turn [2007]' and 'Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies [1992]' reprinted in *Essential Essays*, vol. 1 (Durham, NC, 2019), 35–46 and 71–100.

[28] Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (London, 2018). It might also be a case of Olúfémi Táíwò's 'elite capture'; see *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (Chicago, 2022).

[29] Brown calls this 'compulsory discursivity'; see Wendy Brown, 'Freedom's Silences' in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), 83–97.

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stature. The creative, freewheeling repudiation of discipline and disciplinarity may well be the prerogative of a scholarly late style. But not everyone has that option. Can a doctoral student, a precariously employed departmental lecturer or a junior professor on the tenure track flout disciplinary norms with such bravado? This is all very well for the more powerful, but the more vulnerable have always known that shared rules protect people.

Besides, scholars, whether junior or senior, do not necessarily experience disciplinary norms as constraints. You don't need to have read Foucault or Schiller to know that discipline can just as well be conceived as freedom's enabling condition. From this point of view, I think Nussbaum's foray into music criticism should be appreciated, since it requires not only late-style self-confidence but also late-style humility. *The Tenderness of Silent Minds* is a recognisable contribution to traditional art criticism, supplemented by a career's worth of expertise in an adjacent field. Nussbaum enters into a conversation on the basis of shared standards – standards that people can learn, transmit and challenge. So she opens herself up to thoughtful criticism. Franklin's approach, by contrast, tends to foreclose it.

According to what criteria are we to judge the success of a disciplinary contribution that Franklin calls 'novelistic' (ix)? There are university departments and MFA programs that specialise in evaluating such work, and there are trade presses and magazines who specialise in publishing it. But the professional training of musicologists does not necessarily equip them to produce or assess writing like this. A handful of talented music historians are able to switch genres with enviable ease, and have successfully submitted their work to the robust scrutiny of the competitive sphere of popular publishing. I think of the music historian Emily MacGregor, who has published academic studies of twentieth-century symphonies alongside the superb memoir *While the Music Lasts*.[30] Senior scholars who can persuade an academic press to release their novelistic musicological polemics (or free-verse music histories or collections of autobiographical Schenker graphs) have not sought out or endured this bracing environment. Neither have they generously 'opened the door' or 'cleared the path' (as people say) for junior scholars who might wish to follow suit. Rather, in the absence of shared standards or radically amended systems of institutional evaluation, seniority and a deregulated disciplinary moment have allowed these scholars to circumvent the usual mechanisms of quality control.

By the standards of 'novelistic' writing, I would say that Franklin's book is patchy. Attractively written in parts, its narrative style is occasionally blemished by awkward 'literary' flourishes – 'Fate had evident designs upon me' (68) etc. The best autobiographical writing is able to draw out, explicitly or by implication, generalisable feelings and ideas from the minutiae of individual experience. Franklin doesn't always do that. And, honestly, I think you have to be the calibre of a Simon Callow or a Shirley Williams before readers will tolerate your quoting at length from your own diaries. But Franklin extensively cites himself saying things about Britten's music like 'It's a fine piece, wonderfully worked as a whole' (60) or 'Great fun, particularly the first act' (81): the Real Ale enthusiast reads out his tasting notes.

In citing these excerpts, though, he reveals a feature of the sentimental register that he does not otherwise discuss: its self-consciousness. Franklin tends to focus on the negative association of the sentimental with emotional excess (35). But, as any scholar of the media revolutions of the eighteenth century will tell you, sentiment has always had more to do with sociable genres of inner feeling (not least the personal diary).[31] Sentiment, explains the

[30] See Emily MacGregor, *Interwar Symphonies and the Imagination: Politics, Identity, and the Sound of 1933* (Cambridge, 2023); and Emily MacGregor, *While the Music Lasts: A Memoir of Music, Grief, and Joy* (London, 2025).

[31] See, for instance, Deidre Lynch, 'Personal Effects and Sentimental Fictions', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 12/2–3 (2000), 345–68; and Amanda Vickery, 'A Self off the Shelf: The Rise of the Pocket Diary in Eighteenth-Century England', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 54/3 (2021), 667–86.

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literary scholar James Chandler, is 'passion that has been mediated by a sympathetic passage through a virtual point of view'.[32] Franklin almost always represents the sentiments provoked by Britten's music as unselfconscious, spontaneous and overwhelming, as in his rapturous description of the so-called 'interview chords' from *Billy Budd* (89). Yet, as several writers on emotion have pointed out, feelings are not only or even usually a matter of high intensity.[33] Our feelings, perhaps especially when we are seated in an opera house, are typically milder than that, and always more mixed. Given that even erotic pleasures are so often equivocal, we should hardly expect the pleasure aroused by a challenging twentieth-century Euro-American art form to be any less complex. Do I like this? Should I like it? Should I say that I like it? Such ambivalence is rife when our pleasures are so conspicuously bound up with things like education, status and taste, or when we suspect that more is at stake than our own enjoyment. It is this very ambivalence within Britten's critical reception – an ambivalence arguably present in Britten and his music – that Chowrimootoo's *Middlebrow Modernism* tries to locate. And Nussbaum, precisely because she loves and wants to learn from Britten's music, is also sensitive to its mixed messages, and brusquely honest when she has mixed feelings about it. People should be allowed their ambivalence about Britten's music, or any music, without having their noses bitten off.

Against such ambivalence, Franklin's concluding tribute to the women's quartet from *Peter Grimes* is a valiant assertion of the purity and intensity of a musical experience 'beyond all irony and dissembling' (108). The poetry of his closing invocation of authentic musical feeling is delightful – but, in Hegelian terms, impossibly abstract. It is achieved by rejecting all the shared contexts and relationships that give musical experience meaning – the very things that Chowrimootoo and others are interested in. Franklin's impulse to banish irony or deceit is actually as old as the sentimental ideal: anxieties over authenticity and 'false sentiment' once proliferated in the virtual spaces of eighteenth-century print, as they have in the virtual spaces of our digital culture. The sentimental has long been about the tension between realness and constructed-ness, spontaneity and self-awareness, feeling as inner life and feeling as socially sanctioned expression. That critics can trace this tension in the production and reception of twentieth-century opera should be no surprise.

Anyone will be able to understand Franklin's impatience with what looks to him like the needless picking of holes in the music he loves. In this respect, his book shares the outlook of the now well-established post-critical trend in the humanities: an exhaustion with the relentless unearthing of hidden meanings in texts – and in particular with a professionalised hermeneutics of suspicion, which invariably places the critic in a superior position to the objects she studies.[34] Love and the 'ordinary response' are back.[35] The irony is that the 'ordinary response' these days is closer to a hermeneutics of suspicion: viral conspiracy theories flourish; schoolkids know to attend to unconscious bias; unintended meanings extracted from social media posts prompt tearful apologies; armies of superfans pore over BTS videos or *Game of Thrones* episodes in search of Easter eggs. Outside the academy, pure feeling is certainly not where the critical spade turns. It arguably takes a lot more specialist education to be enthralled by an opera by Britten than it does to notice that it might be a bit snobby. No wonder that the elite intellectuals whose critical gaze once penetrated the mystifications of the culture industry have gone back to being aesthetes.

[32] James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago, 2013), 12.
[33] See, for example, Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).
[34] See Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, 2015).
[35] On love and pleasure in music studies from broadly post-critical perspectives, see, inter alia, William Cheng, 'Pleasure's Discontents', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66/3 (2013), 840–4; and Vivian Luong, 'Rethinking Music Loving', *Music Theory Online* (2017), https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.17.23.2/mto.17.23.2.luong.html.

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Like Franklin, the polemicists of the post-critical turn have a particular dislike of the smart-assed air of 'critique' – the knowing and detached mien of the theoretical sleuth, catching texts red-handed.[36] And who could blame them? Still, I would be cautious about reducing critical thought to feelings. Being critical isn't only a vibe. It's also a procedure: a technique, a habit of mind, a stance toward the world, which people can acquire and improve on. While critical thought is no more immune than anything else to the distortions of institutional authority and prejudice, it still provides criteria by which even the most powerful can be found wanting. Unlike awe or thrill or disgust, people can execute critical thought well or not so well. I think we have every reason to fear the deregulated post-critical world in which all carefully articulated values are just feelings in disguise – and in which the people who win arguments are merely those with the political clout to make their feelings count the most.

[36] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, chapter 3.

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