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# PRESENTISM, EMPIRE, AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY MUSIC

Twenty-one years ago, in a blog posting unambiguously titled "Against Presentism", Lynn Hunt identified what she considered to be two troubling trends among historians and in historical research in the US at that time. The first was "the tendency to interpret the past in presentist terms".[1] That is, for example, judging the actions of individuals from the past based on ethical norms of our time, rather than theirs. The second was a general shift then taking place away from topics set in the more distant past in favour of the contemporary period. Hunt was then president of the American Historical Association (AHA) and her views on presentism resonated through and beyond academia.[2]

In a recent effort to "provoke", or "to draw attention to methodological flaws in teleological presentism", the current president of the AHA, James H. Sweet, cited Hunt's 2002 posting and the changes that had taken place since its publication.[3] He notes, for example, that between 2003 and 2013 the discipline had declined in just the ways that Hunt had anticipated: an 18% increase in the number of PhD students working on the modern era (after 1800) and a decline (4%) of those working on periods prior to 1800. And since 2013 the discipline has become increasingly focused on the 20th and 21st centuries, with the "entire discipline…lurching" towards presentism, in which we "read the past through the prism of contemporary social justice issues – race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, capitalism". He continues:

[1] L. HUNT, "From the President: Against Presentism", *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, 1 May 2002.

[2] A thorough review of the literature on presentism is beyond the scope of this brief article. However, among the significant publications related to historiography and education that have appeared since the publication of Hunt's 2002 essay, we might include G. S. WOOD, *The Purpose of Our Past: Reflections on the Uses of History*, New York, Penguin, 2008; J. W. LOEWEN, *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyrany of Textbooks and Get Students Excited About Doing History*, New York, Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 2010; and N. R. WILSON, *History in Crisis? Recent Directions in Historiography*, New York, Pearson, 2014.

[3] J. H. SWEET, "From the President: Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present", *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, September 2022.

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> This new history often ignores the values and mores of people in their own times, as well as change over time, neutralizing the expertise that separates historians from those in other disciplines. The allure of political relevance, facilitated by social and other media, encourages a predictable sameness of the present in the past. This sameness is ahistorical, a proposition that might be acceptable if it produced positive political results but it doesn't.

Much of his argument centred on the *New York Times's The 1619 Project*, which he described as "powerful and effective" journalism, but not history. He pointed to the ways it was used by the right and left as part of a "zero-sum game of heroes and villains" in US racial politics, while the right-leaning members of the US Supreme Court mis-used (the word) 'history'. Sweet writes, "History is not a heuristic tool for the articulation of an ideal imagined future. Rather, it is a way to study the messy, uneven process of change over time. When we foreshorten or shape history to justify rather than inform contemporary political positions, we not only undermine the discipline but threaten its very integrity".

Sweet's column and, in particular, his attention to *The 1619 Project* and its influence, provoked an immediate backlash that he had not anticipated and that he quickly responded to. Just two days after his column appeared he added a preamble that *New York Times* columnist Brett Stephens termed a "groveling apology".[4] Stephens' term for Sweet's conciliatory preface gives some indication of the depth of feeling on the issue amongst historians and the apprehension felt by many members of the AHA as the annual conference began in January 2023.[5]

In the leadup to that meeting, Harvard professor and history department chair David Armitage had been among the proponents of presentism. In his essay, "In Defense of Presentism", Armitage characterised historians' primary purpose – "to reconstruct the past without the distracting effects of the present" – as being a goal that puts them at odds with the present-centred pursuit of human flourishing.[6] After presenting a sampling of historians' opposition to presentism, including Hunt's, Armitage identifies five types of presentism, or meanings that scholars have attached to the word: the teleological (and ideological), the idealist, the analytical, the perspectival, and the omnipresent. He concludes, "I submit that historians should not reject all these tendencies, especially if we can learn from adjacent disciplines

[4] B. STEPHENS, "This Is the Other Way that History Ends", *New York Times*, 30 August 2022.

[5] At best, members avoided the heated exchanges many anticipated. See J. SCHUESSLER, "As Historians Gather, No Truce in the History Wars", *New York Times*, 10 January 2023.

[6] D. ARMITAGE, "In Defence of Presentism", in *History and Human Flourishing*, ed. by D. M. McMahon, New York, Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 44-69: 45.

where presentism has more positive connotations and where it is more closely connected to human flourishing than to the identity of an academic discipline".[7] He then goes on discuss meanings employed in other disciplines – philosophy, psychology, and the history of science – where there is often an openness to the term, however it may be defined.

In turning now to how presentism may relate to music, we might briefly consider two concerns raised by Hunt and by Sweet – the increasing emphasis on recent history and the influence of present-day politics on our interpretations of the past. We see the first issue most clearly in the increasing emphasis on the popular musics of our time – to the exclusion of other and older musics. We need only look to any of the programs of major academic conferences in recent years, or to the number of academic conferences centred around popular musics, to appreciate the extent to which academics now focus their attention on the popular of our time. The influence of presentism is perhaps even greater in the repertoire being taught and performed. In the area of classical music and opera performance, there has been increased pressure to program and produce more works by under-represented groups – a development that many readers will, I expect, considered long overdue. Still on the issue of repertoire, but relating also to the second issue, there is the question of removing from the canon works of composers whose lives or beliefs are at odds with values of our time, and removing from our playlists the recordings of discredited musician.[8]

In the section that follows, I will explore how presentism might influence a music historian's work – both the topics chosen and how they are analysed – using a research project I am currently engaged in as a case study. Through this study of an Italian family of musicians, I have been seeking to better understand practical aspects of the lives of working musicians as well as the even more complex issues related to the transmission of culture in a trans-national and trans-Atlantic context.

Gaetano De Angelis and several of his daughters were prominent members of the musical community in Montreal, Canada, in the 1860s. I began investigating the family's origins for practical reasons: while working on another project, I needed to provide at least basic information on their origins. As there was nothing in the secondary literature, I retraced their journey – working backwards from the mid-

[7] *Ivi*, p. 54.

[8] On the issue of disgraced conductors, see, for example, J. GOETZ, "I'm Not Playing Levine or Dutoit – And Neither Should You", *Scanning the Dial*, 30 January 2018. *https://insidethearts.com/scanningthedial/im-not-playing-levine-or-dutoit-and-neither-should-you/* (last access to this link and to the others in this contribution 27.08.2024).

1860s to the 1830s and then traveling forward through the early decades of the twentieth century.

The timeline begins in Sicily in the early years of the nineteenth century, where Gaetano De Angelis and Veneranda Cafiero were born. By the late 1830s, they had married and were living in Corfu, which was then a British protectorate and home to a large number of Italian émigrés. The island had a lively musical life. At its centre was Nikolaos Mantzaros, with whom De Angelis claimed to have studied. In about 1840, De Angelis became a band leader with the 53rd Regiment, beginning what would be a twenty-five-year career in which the British military would be his chief employer. Between 1840 and 1853, he and his growing family moved frequently, living in Corfu, Gibraltar, and throughout the British Isles. De Angelis was never exclusively a military musician. We find him performing as a freelance cornetist and band leader and offering his services as a teacher, notably in Edinburgh, where he ran a music academy in the early 1850s. In 1853, the family crossed the Atlantic with the 76th Regiment and resided for several years in the British colony of New Brunswick, then briefly in the US state of Rhode Island, and finally in Montreal (still British North America), where De Angelis would die in 1874.

Over the course of his career, Gaetano De Angelis had led five regimental bands, and Veneranda gave birth to at least twice that number of children. Understanding the logistics of how they maintained such a large household and constantly wheeled it about is part of my fascination with this family, as is the way in which the music was transferred to the next generation. By 1860, several of the daughters were performing in public and teaching. Two would maintain professional careers after marrying.

This presentation of the family's trajectory, as I've presented it, is purely factual, drawn from civil records, city directories, advertisements, concert reviews, and other primary sources. It is, at this point, a family history in search of interpretation. And yet, it should be evident that this nineteenth-century story has considerable relevance to the concerns of our time.

Perhaps the obvious link to the present is in migration studies. In the middle of 2022, there were, according to the UNHCR, an estimated one hundred and three million refugees (forcibly displaced people), the highest number ever reported, and a number that continues to rise.[9] Beyond the more pressing humanitarian side of their stories, and yet not unrelated to it, are the cultural issues – and the continuous transmission of culture, including music. The current crisis is extreme but the

[9] "Refugee Data Finder", *UNHCR: The Refugee Agency*, https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/. D. TAYLOR, "Number of displaced people passes 100m for the first time, says UN", *The Guardian*, 23 May 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/23/total-displaced-people-now-at-staggering-milestone-of-100m-says-un

movement of people has been a constant in modern history. And over time, migration changes the world, which is why many people fear it. We do not know why Gaetano and Veneranda De Angelis left Sicily. Their reasons may have political, economic, or both. We only know for certain that they found a degree of financial security by seizing the opportunities available to them.

Whatever their reason for becoming migrants, they had the good fortune of being Italian musicians at a time when, in the British empire, Italian music carried considerable value. De Angelis was far from unique in that Italian musicians have long found employment abroad, benefitting from the popularity of Italian music and Italy's reputation for the standard of its musicians and musical training. Numerous studies have documented the place of Italian musicians abroad and particularly in Britain, where knowledge and appreciation of Italian music – and opera in particular – was to the British elite a sign of distinction.[10] For middle-class Britons seeking to secure their place in society, having one's daughter learn to sing in the Italian style, or at least take lessons from an Italian teacher, reflected well on the family position and taste. In catering to the British demand for instruction in Italian music, the De Angelis family also rose socially, as each of daughters of this band musician married into the professional or middle classes. But, returning to our focus, the presentist might ask, at what cost did he achieve this success?

The bandleader played an important role in British social life within and beyond the military. As such, De Angelis's attachment to the British military was both a source of financial security and prestige. A few examples: As leader of the band of 53rd Regiment, he performed for Queen Victoria during her first visit to Scotland in 1842, both on her arrival in the city and during dinner one evening at Dalkeith Palace.[11] She demonstrated her fondness for this regimental and its band by having it proceed her carriage in the November 1852 state funeral procession through the streets of London of the Duke of Wellington. Eight years later, De Angelis had moved his family to Montreal just ahead of an official visit by Victoria's son, Edward, the Prince of Wales and future king. On 27 August 1860, he led the band at a ball held in the prince's honour and, in the years that followed, he found opportunities to perform at events attended or organized by the governor general, the queen's representative in Canada.

[10] For a recent publication, see, for example, N. Palazzetti, A. Holden, and M. Zicari, eds. Special issue of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 2021, XXVI, n. 1, pp. 1-87.

[11] The correspondent of the *London Illustrated News* reported on who attended the dinner on queen's return to Dalkeith Palace, noting that, "as usual, the fine band of the 53rd regiment performed during dinner." "The Queen's Tour", *London Illustrated News*, 24 September 1842, p. 314.

Each of these events raised De Angelis's profile as a musician, but to take a presentist point of view, we have to ask did he not know what he was aligning himself with? Yes, Britain had abolished the slave trade and then the practice of slavery throughout the Empire before De Angelis joined his first regimental band (3 years before).[12] But Britain continued to benefit from slavery as it traded in goods produced through slave labour. And while the slave trade is the most heinous legacy of Britain's imperial adventures, it was not inconsistent with their approach to colonial administration and trade. Wherever British capitalists and armies went, atrocities took place, especially in Asia and the Americas.

Looking back to Lynn Hunt's warning about judging the past by the standards of the present, should a study of the De Angelis family argue that they were living off the proceeds of imperialism? And in considering the music that they were performing and teaching, could one argue, with perhaps even greater force, that they were engaged in a form of colonialism? Even the scholar opposed to many of the views and practices associated with presentism may now find it difficult not to address these and related questions. And even if after raising these issues one ultimately dismisses them, it seems reasonable to believe that something is gained through the process of examining them.

As David Armitage recently noted, there is no consensus among historians on why they pursue their academic goals or for whom they are pursuing them.[13] In being compelled to grapple with concerns associated with presentism one might argue that as scholars and educators we have an opportunity to find greater insights into the subjects we chose to explore, and achieve a clearer understanding of for whom we are exploring them. As Lynn Hunt concluded in 2002, "It is possible to remind ourselves of the virtues of maintaining a fruitful tension between present concerns and respect for the past. Both are essential ingredients in good history".[14]

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[12] The passage by Parliament of The Slave Trade Act, in 1807, prohibited the sale of enslaved people in the British Empire and the passage of The Slavery Abolition Act, in 1833, finally made it illegal to enslave people. "Between 1662 and 1807 British and British colonial ships purchased an estimated 3,415,500 Africans. Of this number, 2,964,800 survived the 'middle passage' and were sold into slavery in the Americas". See "How did the slave trade end in Britain?", Greenwich, Royal Museums, *https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/how-did-slave-trade-end-britain*.

[13] D. ARMITAGE, "In Defence of Presentism" cit., p. 44.

[14] L. HUNT, "From the President" cit.