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LEAVING THE WOLF'S GLEN: MEASURING DECANONIZATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

In his book *Heartland Excursions*, Bruno Nettl describes a curious feature of the academic buildings in which many of us studied and performed during our formative years. Above the entrances to these buildings, or displayed prominently on interior and exterior facades, are the names of the great composers literally carved in stone. The great men of music are enshrined as a pantheon of tutelary deities; reading their names, as Nettl writes, “constitute[s] an act of worship and edification”.¹ It is hard to imagine anything that so clearly embodies the idea of the canon.

Carl Maria von Weber’s place in this lithic pantheon has always been marginal. No one would expect him – perhaps – to join the illustrious quartet whose names appear in the Smith Music Hall of the University of Illinois, although this group does include Palestrina (alongside Bach, Beethoven, and Haydn). In the Paine Music Hall at Harvard, he finds a spot in between Mendelssohn and Berlioz, but at supposedly opera-loving Indiana University he is shouldered aside by the likes of Schubert and Saint-Saëns. The process whereby Weber was included or excluded from the list of names seen fit to adorn these buildings is far beyond the scope of this paper (although it would be fascinating to explore). I cannot address the position of Weber’s works in 20th- and 21st-century concert life, or the frequency with which they are assigned to aspiring singers, pianists or clarinetists. My focus will at least initially be much narrower, namely, the role that his opera *Der Freischütz* has played in the music-historical canon of North American colleges and universities over the past four decades.

As we know, this canon has been the subject of intense scrutiny and contestation during this period: it is enough here to recall books such as Lydia Goehr’s *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, Marcia Citron’s *Gender and the Musical Canon*, and the influential essays collected in *Disciplining Music* and *Rethinking Music*.² Located – so to speak – at the intersection of pedagogy and

¹ B. NETTL, *Heartland Excursions*, Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 1995, p. 18.

² L. GOEHR, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992; M. J. CITRON, *Gender and the Musical Canon*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993; *Rethinking Music*, ed. by N. Cook and M. Everist, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001; *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its*

the new musicology, the canon was interesting to these scholars because of the ways in which it reflected and crystallized cultural values (and not merely aesthetic ones). The men whose names were engraved in stone had many defenders, to be sure (Pieter van den Toorn, for example), but I think it is fair to say that the dominant feeling was that transformations of the music-historical canon were healthy or even liberatory. Something of this spirit is captured by Ellen Koskoff in her contribution to the *Rethinking Music* collection: “The recent explosion of postmodernist critical theory ... has exposed the hegemony of the dead, white, European, heterosexual, male musical canon; as a result, the canons of women, non-Western peoples, gays and lesbians (to name but a few) have finally been resurrected from their purgatory of otherness”.³

Experience suggests, however, that transformations to the music-historical curriculum are largely a zero-sum game, and that as some canons (or canonical works) are resurrected from purgatory, others must be consigned into it. In this calculus, the Wolf’s Glen Scene would seem destined to be cast off into a place of utter darkness. Its composer is marginal in precisely the wrong ways: not a full-fledged member of the pantheon of great composers, yet belonging to none of the marginalized groups whose canons had been exiled. Ever since its premiere, moreover, *Der Freischütz* has been intimately associated with German national identity; its preservation in the canon, at least according to some lights, merely perpetuates the benighted Germanocentrism of an obsolete and oppressive historical narrative. Nor – I should say with realistic self-deprecation – has *Der Freischütz* been the research specialty of an influential group of scholars, who could advocate successfully for its position as part of the canon. Using a horticultural metaphor, we might imagine the Wolf’s Glen Scene as a half-dead branch in an old lilac bush, which needs to be cut out so that new shoots can grow and flower. My own experience suggested that the Wolf’s Glen Scene did indeed provide a perfect example of the decanonization process, and I began this project in order to see if were possible to provide empirical data in support of this intuition.

Many kinds of data could potentially serve in this capacity. Most useful, perhaps, would be detailed surveys such as the one recently conducted by Matthew Baumer (the results of which are published in a recent issue of the *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*).⁴ But although this survey provides us with lots

Canons, ed. by K. Bergeron and Ph. V. Bohlman, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

³ E. KOSKOFF, “What Do We Want to Teach When We Teach Music? One Apology, Two Short Trips, Three Ethical Dilemmas, and Eighty-two Questions”, *Rethinking Music* cit., pp. 545-559: 545.

⁴ M. BAUMER, “A Snapshot of Music History Teaching to Undergraduate Music Majors, 2011-2012: Curricula, Methods, Assessment, and Objectives”, *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*, V, n. 2, 2015, pp. 23-47.

of interesting information about the current state of the music-historical canon, it does not track changes over time.

An ideal data set, perhaps, would consist of the syllabi from all music history courses taught at the university or college level over the past forty years, together with statistics about enrollment and the frequency with which these courses were offered. Needless to say, such a data set does not exist. In lieu of this, we might turn to a readily available and readily quantifiable source, namely textbook anthologies. Of course, using anthologies as a measure of decanonization presents a legion of methodological problems. Anthologies are used much more widely in the United States than they are in other countries, and even in this country, many of us rebel against them. The presence or absence of a particular work in an anthology may have more to do with peripheral issues such as copyright clearance and/or the existence of a particular scholarly edition than with its canonical status. Many canonical works (such as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony) might be excluded simply because they are too long, while others (such as Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* or the "O fortuna" movement from Orff's *Carmina Burana*) might be excluded because they are too familiar, or because they carry too much contextual baggage. Anthologies, after all, are pedagogical tools and not measurements of canonicity.

Despite all of these problems, however, textbook anthologies do seem to respond to at least certain changes in the music-historical canon. We can find evidence, for example, for the so-called "Mahler renaissance" of the 1960s and '70s. More striking is a clear effort on the part of editors – beginning in the 1980s – to include more music by women composers. Unfortunately, however, my admittedly superficial survey of textbook anthologies provided little support for my intuitions about the progressive decanonization of *Der Freischütz*. The first problem is that textbook anthologies are very thin on the ground before the 1970s. Books such as Deems Taylor's *Of Men and Music* (1937) or Hans Tischler's *The Perceptive Music Listener* (1955) are not really comparable to music history textbook anthologies.⁵ Curiously, they make little or no mention of *Der Freischütz*. The big moment for Weber's opera (at least in terms of North American music history pedagogy) seems to have come with decision to include it as part of the first edition of the *Norton Anthology of Western Music*, which – together with the Grout-Palisca-Burkholder *History of Western Music* – was surely the most widely used textbook/anthology combination in North American colleges and universities throughout the eighties and nineties. Now in its seventh edition, the *NAWM* provides the kind of longitudinal distribution that is essential for a study of decanonization.

⁵ D. TAYLOR, *Of Men and Music*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1937; H. TISCHLER, *The Perceptive Music Listener*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1955.

A quick look at the position of *Der Freischütz* in the *NAWM*, however, provides little support for the idea that Weber's opera is losing its place in the canon (Fig. 1):

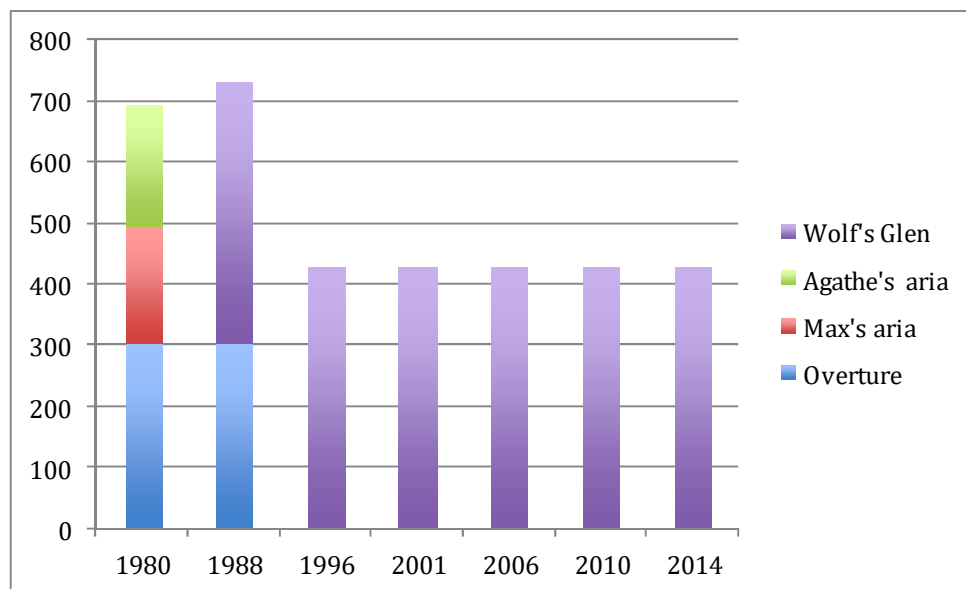


Fig. 1 – *Der Freischütz* in the *Norton Anthology of Western Music*. The height of the bars represents the number of measures in each selection.

The high-water mark for *Der Freischütz* came with the second edition of the *Anthology*, which included both the Overture and the Wolf's Glen Scene. The Overture was dropped in the third edition, but the Wolf's Glen Scene has retained its position. What my statistics fail to reflect, of course, is the fact that the size of the *NAWM* has increased with each successive edition. The sixth edition already split into three volumes, and with the seventh the anthology has been expanded to contain 220 works. If I were to trace the Wolf's Glen Scene as a percentage of the total length of the anthology, then I would indeed generate a declining slope. This declining support, however, would not provide the kind of clear evidence of decanonization for which I was searching. Nor did a quick glance at some of the more common anthologies in use today show that *Der Freischütz* had fallen into oblivion. Weber's opera, it is true, does not appear in either the Kerman-Tomlinson *Listen* or in the anthology that accompanies Mark Evan Bonds' *A History of Music in Western Culture*. But the anthology for Walter Frisch's recently-published *Music in the Nineteenth Century* includes Agathe's aria, and the *Oxford Anthology of Western Music* outdoes the recent editions of *NAWM* by including both the Overture and the Wolf's Glen Scene. Insofar as textbook anthologies reflect the canon (and this is very much open to debate), *Der Freischütz* seems to be holding its own.

Dabbling in these empirical methodologies caused me to question my initial assumptions about *Der Freischütz*, but it also led my thoughts in a different direction. While compiling my bibliography, I began to realize that nearly all of my sources came from the period 1985-2010. Scholarship about canons and canon formation was rich and abundant during this time. But in recent years, scholars seem to have been losing interest in this topic. I began, in short, to rethink the title of my project. I became less interested in the decanonization of *Der Freischütz* than in a broader and more abstract process of decanonization within our whole field.

In order to explore this idea, I decided to do a keyword search for ‘canon’ in RILM, and then plot the number of hits by year. Obviously, such a search was going to call up a large number of unwanted matches, in which the word ‘canon’ was used to refer to a musical device (e.g. “Canon in D”) or as an ecclesiastical term (e.g. “canon law”; or “a canon at the cathedral of Chartres”). It was necessary, therefore, to scan each title individually in order to make sure that the entries referenced the idea of ‘canon’ as a particular body of exemplary musical works. With these restrictions in place, I generated the following chart (Fig. 2):

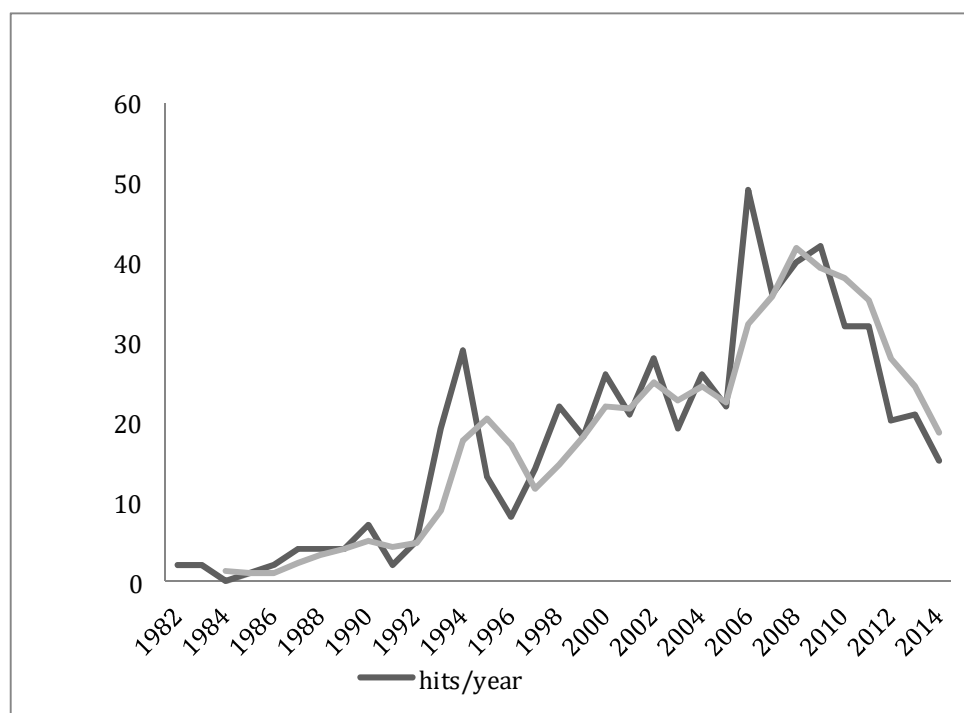


Fig. 2 – Keyword search for ‘canon’ (with restrictions): Number of hits per year. The grey line represents a running three-year average.

My self-imposed filters by no means solved all of my methodological problems. My data set is conditioned, of course, by the ways in which RILM records metadata, and the number of items that it catalogs. It's likely that I am "underreporting" keyword hits for the 1980s, and that the upward curve on the graph should be less steep. Another problem comes from the distinction between 'canon' and 'repertory'. In his famous article *A Few Canonic Variations* (the 1983 essay that in so many ways jump-started discussion of the subject), Joseph Kerman is at pains to distinguish clearly between these two terms.⁶ But scholars do not always follow his admonitions. In later scholarship especially, we find plenty of references to "the canon of Josquin works" (for example), by which the author means "all of the music written by Josquin". I tried to eliminate all of these sources from my data set, but some surely slipped through. Likewise, some authors probably used the terms 'repertory' or 'repertoire' to mean something like 'exemplary group of high-status works'. My RILM search did not catch these sources. But even if my project cannot definitively prove anything about what I have just called the 'decanonization' of historical musicology, the data set does suggest some interesting developments in our field. In what follows, I wish to present some possible (and by no means mutually exclusive) explanations for what appears to be the rise and fall of scholarly interest in canons and canon formation.

Although it would be difficult to provide hard data on the extent to which music history pedagogy depended on anthologies, my guess is that this dependence probably reached its peak at some point during the 1990s. Anthologies like the *NAWM* became popular largely because they were directly linked to recordings; recordings that were (and often still are) typically bundled together with textbooks in comprehensive packages. By the late 1970s, editors and publishers had a critical mass of recordings from all historical periods from which to choose. By the early 1980s, they could distribute these recordings on easily-trackable compact discs. Sales of these bundled anthologies (like sales of textbooks more generally) have collapsed over the past decade, however, as more and more information is digitized. It's easier and cheaper now for instructors to compile their own playlists – using various subscription services available from any number of different sources. IMSLP has made an enormous number of scores instantly accessible as well. Indeed, future scholars investigating the history of music history pedagogy may refer to the period c. 1975-2005 as the "era of the anthology", superseded by an "omni-digital age". It could be that scholarship about canons and canon formation has been – at least in part – a response to the anthologization and de-anthologization of our field.

⁶ J. KERMAN, "A Few Canonic Variations", *Critical Inquiry*, X, n. 1, 1983 ("Canons"), pp. 107-125.

Such a deterministic explanation, however, can be at most only a part of the story, for it ignores the *content* of so much of the scholarship on canons and canon-formation during this period. Generalizations are always hazardous, but a key concern was certainly to investigate the ways in which a music-historical canon perpetuated hegemonic cultural values. We all know that scholarship is shaped by fashion, and it could be that interest in these subjects has simply run its course. The universalist paradigms that were so important to our field during the twentieth century seem to have lost their power: they no longer need to be argued about.

In one sense, the effects of this deeper decanonization on music history pedagogy have been very clear. There is no doubt that our curricula have expanded to include more courses about previously non-canonic traditions. Few of us – to return to the image with which I began this talk – imagine music history as a simple march through the names that decorate the façade of the Music Building. The *content* of our curriculum – the list of musical works that we present to our students – has certainly changed. It is less easy, however, to see how (or if) this deeper decanonization has affected our goals and methods. We are willing, I think, to swap out the Wolf's Glen Scene for “Liebst du um Schönheit” or a scene from *Porgy and Bess* or any number of works even farther removed from the traditional music-historical canon. But are we willing to abandon altogether the idea of music history as a tour through a list of musical works? Are we willing to challenge the idea of the musical work itself – which, as Lydia Goehr pointed out, is the concept upon which the idea of a canon is predicated?

Some of us, thankfully, are mustering the courage to descend into this Wolf's Glen of unpredictable change. I want to hear their stories.

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