

Glenn C. Arbery

Musical Reason

All Shook Up: Music, Passion, and Politics
by Carson Holloway.
Spence Publishing Company, 2001.

Carson Holloway's new book about music and politics appears, with a certain serendipity, in the same year as the re-release of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. In one of the most unforgettable sequences of that film, Robert Duvall's character Colonel Kilgore is assaulting a Vietnamese village at the mouth of a river. As his helicopters approach their target, Kilgore explains his mode of attack to the California surfer sitting behind him: "We'll come in low out of the rising sun, and about a mile out, we'll put on the music," he shouts above the noise of the beating rotor. "Yeah, use Wagner. Scares the *hell* out of the slopes. My boys love it." The helicopters sweep in from the sea, blasting *The Ride of the Valkyries* from mounted loudspeakers, firing rockets and machine guns at everything that moves.

In a review of this re-released film, Anthony Lane, writing for *The New Yorker*, comments on this scene, "One reason for Kilgore to play Wagner...is to prime his troops for attack.... Another, perhaps, is to remind the audience that we must reach back as far as Wagner himself to find so brazen an instance of that most radical of aesthetic effects: the conservative high." What Lane means by the "high" is unam-

biguous: there is a wild exaltation in the music that the ancients might have associated with the Phrygian mode—a "thrilling barbarism," to use one of Carson Holloway's phrases.

But what "conservative" means in this context is ominous in the extreme, and not altogether clear. Lane fastidiously omits Kilgore's racist use of the word "slopes," but puts the effect of it into that word *conservative*; he neatly nooses into the adjective a host of associations with Wagner and his music that make the term "conservative high" especially ugly. Wagner was a notorious anti-Semite, and Hitler enthusiastically wedded the Nazi regime to his music. The meaning of Coppola's use of Wagner, then, or of Lane's twist on "conservatism," leads us into the kinds of issues about music and passion that Holloway addresses in his appealing new book and underscores the importance of his attempt to recover the musical political theory of the ancients. The question of Wagner makes compelling sense of what Socrates means in

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the *Republic* when he asserts that “never are the ways of music changed without the greatest political laws being moved.”

What makes Holloway’s book different from the usual conservative complaints about contemporary music is that he does not launch into easy denunciations. Far from it, he finds in even the most violent or sexually obscene contemporary music a spiritual hunger that stems from a far older change in “the ways of music”—one that began centuries ago with the early modern abandonment of a musical education that would form the soul for nobler ends than bodily satisfaction. Holloway argues that the conservative understanding of contemporary popular music needs to be deepened and made truly philosophic to deflect this music’s enormous and symptomatic appeal. At present, rock music tends to be criticized simply for its lyrics. But alarming as they are, they are less important, says Holloway, than the form of the music itself—the “modes” that the ancients took very seriously. It is difficult for us to take music, as such, with sufficient gravity because our regime is grounded in the essentially amusical assumptions about politics that stem from such modern philosophers as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu. If political life aims at nothing more than comfort and security in the satisfaction of bodily desires, then rock lyrics merely extend the range of what has already been acknowledged as the crucial concern in life.

What Holloway finds lacking in this modern view is a positive place for music that treats the formation of the young toward higher human ends as a legitimate aim of politics. As a corrective to “the unquestioned conventions of thought that prevail in our own time and place,” therefore, he examines two understandings of politics that do take music seriously—one the ancient teaching to be found in Plato

and Aristotle, the other a late modern one evident in Rousseau and Nietzsche. The ancients, as Holloway shows (largely from Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politics*), understood certain kinds of music as conducive to the virtue of moderation. Even before rational arguments can have their effect, such music moves the soul with rhythm and harmony in a way that predisposes it to the beauty of reason, thus to philosophy as the highest end of man. In Holloway’s reading, the arguments of the ancients have less to do with what the words say than with how the music itself moves the soul—a point to which I shall need to return.

After “An Amusical Interlude” on the early moderns who took the music out of politics and concentrated on man’s preservation and comfort, Holloway turns to the later moderns who found this view of the human things ignoble. In his account, Rousseau and Nietzsche agreed with the ancients about the political importance of music, but like the amusical moderns, they rejected reason and the calm contemplation of a rational universe as the highest end of man. Rather, they objected to modernity because a politics based on securing bodily satisfactions does not recognize the spirited part of human nature. For Rousseau, music appealed precisely to this dimension; in the absence of musical education, citizens are no longer passionately bound to their political communities. Summarizing Rousseau’s critique of the moderns, Holloway writes that “the rationalization and demusicalization of language causes weakness in the citizens, a lack of public-spiritedness, which invites, because it cannot resist, attack and subjection.”

Nietzsche on the other hand, who was a champion of Wagner early in his life, believed that “music does not merely prepare us for philosophy but *is itself* a philosophical experience.” Dionysian music can af-

ford this experience because it is an immediate copy of “the passionate will that is the ultimate ground of all existence.” This truth about the irrationality of existence is devastating, but Greek tragedy combines both the ecstatic truth of meaninglessness and the healing illusion of the Apollonian image. Not only did Nietzsche reject the ancient view of reason’s predominance, Holloway argues, but he found in the Socratic insistence on rationality “the mendacity of the happy ending” that is both “a sign and cause of [man’s] weakness.” For both Rousseau and Nietzsche, music does not calm the passions so much as it emboldens the spirited part of man’s nature and makes possible a *nobler* politics.

In his last two chapters, Holloway makes a convincing case for the universality of music and its profound effect on the passions. Given the discernible influence of Leo Strauss on his thought—and despite some harsh words for the premises of Allan Bloom’s attack on rock in *The Closing of the American Mind*—it comes as no surprise that Holloway explicitly sides with the ancients against both the amusical and the musical moderns. He reserves his strongest attacks, however, for those unphilosophical conservatives who attack rock music as anti-social; they are “sheep condemning wolves. No doubt the sheep’s complaints are understandable, but they certainly do not stem from any more elevated source than the wolves’ appetites.”

Liberal modernity is the real culprit, and Holloway denounces it with bracing energy: in various places he castigates it for addressing “only the animal in man,” for its

“lowness and banality,” for being, withal, unremittingly “base.” Given such unsatisfying fare, “the soul soon begins to hunger for a nourishment that modernity cannot provide,” but “in the absence of proper musical education, [the young] have no idea where to look.” Holloway shows a sympathy for those spirited souls who find in “sexually and violently obscene popular music” at least an alternative to the small-souled consumer culture that makes no gesture toward man’s higher nature. Rock music “appears as an increasingly unwhole-

some but nonetheless understandable reaction on the part of the young to the spiritual poverty of liberal modernity. And as an alternative to its thrilling barbarism the

critics of such music offer nothing but more of the soullessness of liberal modernity’s cautious and calculating hedonism.”

Holloway’s argument comes down to this: rock music, bad as it is, is better than the consumer culture that promotes it, profits from it, and then castigates it for its immorality. Why is it better? Because the rebellion against consumerism comes from a higher part of the soul than consumerism itself. The strength of Holloway’s book lies in his passionate denunciation of a culture sunk in appetite, a culture that refuses to acknowledge the political reality of spiritedness on the one hand, and of the life of the mind on the other. Less satisfactory is his positive account of the ancients’ wisdom about music.

I find myself objecting to Holloway’s repeated assertion that Plato and Aristotle were more concerned with the modes of the



The “thrilling barbarism” of the Phrygian mode in action.

Courtesy of Miramax

music than the with the content, the “lyrics.” A re-reading of the *Republic* reveals extensive passages of Socratic concern about the stories that are told to the young, the words of poems, and only a few lines about musical *modes*. In any case, Holloway’s real concern ought to be with the poets rather than the philosophers. Plato and Aristotle, after all, were commenting on the musical education actually carried out by the ancient city, not (as one might be led to think) thinking about musical education for the first time. In a recent poem, Robert Pinsky observes that the training of citizens in the tragic choruses of Athens was aimed at forming civic unanimity and piety:

*And the chanting male chorus moves to a
military rhythm:
A blind man who desired to join his countrymen
in battle
Was able to fight, because he had learned the
steps and gestures
Of the squad chanting with interlocked shields
braced and flourished,
And the heavy spears with their barbed bronze
points gouging
In blind unison, the rhythm one creature’s
aggregate will, each
Unseeing trusting all to do their part thrusting,
keeping time though
You perish in the Chorus: martial, holy, carnival,
carnal, the civic art.¹*

This vision of an “aggregate will” is both appealing to a certain kind of spiritedness (perhaps the kind that likes a “conservative high”?) and sinister with regard to the life of reason. Socratic philosophy requires that one be turned away from “the civic art” in order to be freed from the “blind unison” of unquestioned opinion, as Holloway well knows. The difficulty lies in separating the music as a paradigm of form, a kind of presentiment of what philosophic truth must be like, from the civic opinions that accompany formation in such music. Al-

though he suggests that there should be continuity between a good musical education and the life of philosophy, it might be more accurate to say that the best musical education can provide a basis from which the apter natures can be effectually turned.

Holloway’s call for a return to the musical politics of the ancients is, by his own acknowledgment, confronted at the outset with the enormous task of overturning liberal modernity: “music’s ability to harmonize the soul is intelligible and plausible only in light of the classical assertion of the centrality of reason in human nature, the rational order of the cosmos, and reason’s natural attraction to that order and desire to make it present in our thought and action.” The philosophy of liberal modernity does not answer to what is best in human nature, and if the hungry soul is to be satisfied, Holloway writes in conclusion, it will require that we undertake “a radical transformation in our understanding of what we are, what the universe is, and how we are related to it. The necessity of such a transformation is clear. Whether we are capable of it, or even willing to try, remains to be seen.”

This ending is disconcerting. Granted, Holloway’s book is about fundamental philosophical alternatives in thinking about the place of music in politics, not about the specifics of a new program of musical education. Still, examples would help enormously. It is not clear from the book whether Holloway believes that the shift away from effectual music is a recent development. What does he think, for example, of all the hymns that Americans for many generations grew up singing in church? Did this kind of Christian, patriotic formation do anything to counter the effects of liberal modernity or not? Was there a moment—say, with Wagner—when a significant shift in the political effects of music really took place? Or does he mean

that nothing has gone well since the early moderns turned Western culture away from the ancients?

Holloway does not take up the kind of particular examination of contemporary music for which he whets his readers' appetites. Neither, unfortunately, does the book suggest what an appropriate musical education might concretely entail. We might assume, for example, that children should be educated in "classical music," rather than rock. But perhaps the so-called "classical music" of the past few centuries actually embodies the liberal modernity with which it is contemporary. I do not come away from the book being certain that this music could or should form the basis of the new musical education. Again, particular analyses would help.

Most of all, I find myself wishing for more vivid explorations of the relations between politics and music. More than once, reading his book, I was reminded of an incident during my freshman year in college at the height of the war in Vietnam. It was, as I recall, a Saturday afternoon. Some of us in the dormitory were apparently making too much noise to suit an older student—a fellow with a neatly trimmed mustache who played some significant role in the extremely unpopular campus R.O.T.C. and who was trying to study in his room. Suddenly, over our random Dionysian clamor came the huge sounds of his stereo, which he had turned up to full blast in a fit of edifying revenge—classical music with a certain, yes, thrilling barbarism. We wandered into the hall, holding our hands over our ears. I remember being fascinated, insulted, exalted. Later, when he had calmed down, I asked him what that music was.

"Wagner," he said. "*The Ride of the Valkyries*."

That was early in 1970, just before Kent State, almost ten years before Coppola's film. What I would want from Carson Holloway is an explanation. What was it in *that* music that could give the complexities of politics an entirely different cast? Lane's description of a "conservative high" does not begin to say what the revelation of that young man's soul was like—the discipline, the glory, the haughty contempt. It does not begin to say how much his punitive music was like the flyover of awful winged intelligences, sublime and utterly alien. Holloway's chastisement of liberal modernity does not quite convince me that he could tempt those angels into any civil service.

The biographical note to this book situates Holloway as one of the "new generation of cultural critics"—that is, intelligent young conservatives who have a sense of the ancient tradition, a fire for noble things, and the courage to reject modernity's low surrogates. I sense that what moves Holloway to write is happy relief that there is a noble alternative to what Nietzsche called the "wretched contentment" of those satisfied by material comforts. The tone of the book reminds me of the beginning of Dante's *Inferno*, when the pilgrim has escaped from the dark wood only to be confronted by the three beasts before he finds the ancient, noble Virgil there to guide him. It seems to me that, as Virgil tells Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, the way ahead for this new generation is going to be difficult, starting with a descent into hell—the progress *through* our own cultural inversions, with enough detail to make the necessary recognitions memorable. Ultimately, for all that there is to admire in Holloway's book, I find myself wanting a little more music.

¹ Robert Pinsky, "The Tragic Chorus" in *Jersey Rain* (2000).