

AN EARLY CRUSADER FOR MUSIC AS CULTURE: WILHELM HEINRICH RIEHL

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Cultural studies is surely the fastest growing field within the scholarly study of music. This broadly defined area most significantly encompasses popular commercial music and music of non-Western cultures. It differentiates itself from the traditional approach centered on a canon of masterpieces by great composers. It specifically repudiates aesthetic criteria developed by music theory and analysis and looks for values beyond those described in musical terms. As this new cultural approach is integrated, it may be useful to look back historically at the time 150 years ago when musicology was starting to come together as an academic discipline. The case of Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1823–97) shows that musicology helped define itself at that time by specifically excluding the cultural approach he advocated. An unearthing of Riehl’s almost completely forgotten writings and the debates they provoked can help us historicize and evaluate the current emphasis on cultural studies in musicology.¹

Although primarily known for his pioneering work in folklore studies, Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl wrote about music throughout his long career. A musical outsider due to his lack of professional training and credentials, Riehl criticized the way music was taught and written about. He advocated his “cultural” approach by writing extensively about the social significance of music making. Although he argued for the importance of music history, he insisted that music history must be understood more broadly as cultural history. He criticized music histories centered on great composers and instead recounted the overlooked achievements of lesser-known musicians and the vanishing musical traditions in agrarian areas of Germany. Besides his work as a musical cultural historian, Riehl published a collection of lieder entitled *Hausmusik* in 1855. He also played a role in the musical debates of his time, writing against Wagner and almost all other “modern” music over the course of the whole second half of the century.

¹ The only scholarship on Riehl and music in English is Dennis McCort, *Perspectives on music in German fiction: The music-fiction of Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl*. German studies in America 14 (Bern: H. Lang, 1974). The best source for information on Riehl and his musical activities is Viktor von Geramb, *Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1954). There are a few pages on Riehl in the idiosyncratic history of cultural studies by Friedrich Kittler, *Eine Kulturgeschichte der Kulturwissenschaft* (2nd ed., München: Wilhelm Fink, 2001) 127–30; and a section on Riehl in Hans Schleier, *Geschichte der deutschen Kulturgeschichtsschreibung*, 2 vols. (Waltrop: Hartmut Spenner, 2003).

Riehl's career took off in the aftermath of the revolutions of 1848. A university drop-out in his mid-twenties at the beginning of the revolution, Riehl found work in journalism, reporting on the revolution initially with enthusiasm and moderately liberal opinions. After the failure of the revolution he became much more conservative and thoroughly disenchanted with political participation. In his first book of 1851, *Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (The civil society), Riehl made assertions that seemed particularly attractive to those who had just been defeated and disillusioned, politically and intellectually. He argued that the revolutions of 1848 had failed due to insufficient knowledge of the *Volk*—in particular of the peasant class. Rather than addressing the complex problems of a growing proletariat, Riehl focused on the peasants (*Bauern*) as a source for information on what he called the healthy, natural basis of social groups.

Riehl aimed to document the natural simplicity of plain folk with methods that were quite sophisticated.² His approach to fieldwork was ahead of its time in its systematic completeness. He devised extensive questionnaires about people's habits and beliefs and interviewed people from all walks of life. Riehl knew, however, what he was looking for. The insights to be derived from this information, he stated at the outset, "must lead in the last instance to the justification of a conservative social policy."³

With publications like his *Die Naturgeschichte des Volkes als Grundlage einer deutschen Social-Politik* (Natural history of the people as a basis for a German social politics, 1851–69), Riehl founded a kind of applied cultural studies that was meant to have consequences for social planning. His regional research on German topography, climate, and people documented the *Volk* at work on the land and at home with their families. Beyond collecting data, Riehl called for a continued cultivation of this way of life, arguing that the trends of urbanization and capitalism would destroy the social, political and economic strength of the German people established in premodern times.

After Riehl published in 1854 an ambitious field research study of aspects of daily life in different regions of Germany, he attracted the notice of King Maximilian II of Bavaria, who offered Riehl the editorship of the official Bavarian newspaper. At Riehl's own request he was also made an honorary professor at the University of Munich; two years later, in 1859, he was promoted to Ordinarius Professor of Cultural History and Statistics. In 1861 he became a member of the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften; he served as rector to the University twice and was finally made a member of the Bavarian nobility in 1889.

Riehl explicitly made his data available for use by the government and also stated his aim openly of trying to ensure a stronger nation. His close relations with the Bavarian government alienated some of his academic colleagues.⁴ However, that does not necessarily mean the entwined relationship between academic and state institutions was disputed. The basic justification for expanding the university to include the social sciences and also literary studies was that they were in the national interest, as Peter Hohendahl, Russell Berman, and others have shown. In Berman's words:

² See Uli Linke, "Folklore, anthropology, and the government of social life," *Comparative studies in society and history* 32/1 (1990) 117–48.

³ Quoted in Woodruff D. Smith, *Politics and the sciences of culture in Germany, 1840–1920* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 135.

⁴ See Linke, "Folklore, anthropology, and the government of social life," 123.

Literature became a privileged topic precisely because it was viewed as the vehicle that provided an ideal and cultural unity to the nation. In the absence of a shared political identity and as long as there was no German state unifying the people, at least one could turn to the ideal realm of culture and literature.⁵

Even before 1850, music had long been seen as an important part of the German national identity.⁶ However, it was not until the second half of the 19th century that the study of music started being organized at the university level and could serve as an apparatus of the state in this manner.

In 1853, Riehl devoted a long article to the topic of channeling music into nation building; it turned out to be one of his most important writings on music. This essay in the form of “letters to a statesman”, appeared again in 1859 in revised form in his collection *Kulturstudien aus drei Jahrhunderten* (Cultural studies from three centuries), a book that went through five editions during Riehl’s lifetime. In the essay, Riehl argued that academics rather than performance should be the center of all state-sponsored music education. Training of performers was inevitably only a private matter where individual teachers passed on their technique to their students; academics, in contrast, addressed not the individual but rather the collective. Only from an academically oriented perspective would it be right for the state to “fund a higher school of music, whose effect is not merely on the specialist musicians but rather on the whole educated nation, our entire aesthetic culture.”⁷ Riehl further argued that just as there were professors of literary history and art history, there needed to be professors of music history and aesthetics:

I would like to urgently put the question to you, whether it would not be good, in view of the true emergency situation of our musical education, to call good men to build scientific approaches to the history and aesthetics of music at German higher schools ... A seminar on Bach or Händel works just as well within the confines of a philosophical faculty as a seminar on Dante or Goethe’s Faust.⁸

This idea of studying Bach the way one would study Dante required special pleading at the time; he justified it by the idea that it would strengthen the aesthetic culture of the nation. Riehl himself did give lectures on music history at the Munich conservatory in the 1870s, but his main contribution to strengthening the musical culture of the nation was not academic. He did not take on musical duties at the university or research folk music with the scientific method he applied to other folk customs. Instead, he presented his views on music through essays and novellas aimed at a general audience.

⁵ Russell A. Berman, “Three comments on future perspectives on German cultural history”, *New German critique* 65 (spring–summer 1995) 115–24.

⁶ For a recent study that includes 18th-century sources, see Bernd Sponheuer, “Reconstructing ideal types of the ‘German’ in music”, *Music and German national identity*, ed. by Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 36–58.

⁷ “Eine Hochschule der Musik fundiert, deren Wirkung nicht bloß auf die Fachmusiker, sondern auf die ganze gebildete Nation, auf unsre ganze ästhetische Kultur zielt.” Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, “Unsre musikalische Erziehung: Briefe an einen Staatsmann”, *Kulturstudien aus drei Jahrhunderten* (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta’sche Buchhandlung, 1896) 385–470: 466.

⁸ “Ich möchte Ihnen wohl die Frage dringend ans Herz legen, ob es nicht geboten sei, im Hinblick auf den wahren Notstand unsrer musikalischen Erziehung, tüchtige Männer zum wissenschaftlichen Anbau der Geschichte und Aesthetik der Tonkunst an deutsche Hochschulen zu berufen.... Ein Kollegium über Bach oder Händel paßt so gut in den Rahmen der philosophischen Fakultät wie ein Kollegium über Dante oder Goethes Faust.” *Ibid.*, 467–68.

MUSIKALISCHE CHARAKTERKÖPFE. Riehl's most substantial writing on music took the form of a series of *Musikalische Charakterköpfe* (Musical character portraits); volume one was published in 1853, volume two in 1859, and the final volume in 1878. These essays focused mainly on composers, famous and not so famous. As he rather defensively stated in a preface, he did not do original research, but rather took a new look at the facts in order to show music's relation to cultural life as a whole. For instance, in an essay on Johann Sebastian Bach included in the first volume, Riehl focused almost exclusively on his social character, not mentioning a single musical work.⁹ He openly questioned whether Bach's musical achievements were in fact more important than his social significance. Rather than as a master of counterpoint, Bach was to be celebrated as the ideal of the "bürgerliche" musician. "Bürgerliche", a notoriously difficult term to define and translate, was used by Riehl in this context to refer to premodern society, before the concept of the great composer and the institutions of art music such as publicity, performance venues, reviews, and printed music.¹⁰ Riehl claimed that Bach never had to cater to the whims of an audience, never had any worldly ambitions for his music, and was happiest making music in the home with his family.

This distorted portrait of Bach is an indication of Riehl's cultural approach to great composers: without any citation of sources or reference to musical compositions, he uncovered an idealized German culture where artists exhibited national characteristics of healthy simplicity, pure chastity, cheerfulness, and manliness.

In another "portrait" in this volume, Riehl lavished attention on minor professional musicians such as Gyrowetz, Rosetti, Pleyel, Wranitzky, Hoffmeister and Neubauer, whom he praised as unpretentious, good-hearted, harmless and quite likeable fellows.¹¹ Riehl celebrated these composers as dilettantes who promoted an amateur music making that had more of an impact than the highly specialized, difficult music of later and more respected composers such as Beethoven.

Contemporary responses to Riehl's approach help give us an idea of the attitude toward cultural history among the older and more established music professionals. From the beginning, with the publication of the *Musikalische Charakterköpfe*, music critics expressed admiration for his erudition and writing style, but also voiced strong objections. Eduard Hanslick, for example, scornfully dismissed Riehl's placing the cultural historical value of a work above its aesthetic value.¹² Although Hanslick only addressed Riehl's writings in passing, other critics recognized him as a serious threat and covered many pages with their concerns. Two journals that had been engaged in a critical war over Wagner since 1850, the Leipzig *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* and the *Niederrheinische Musikzeitung*, published in Cologne, united in their opposition to Riehl. One of the first reviews, from 1854 in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, reacted in particular to Riehl's

⁹ "Bach und Mendelssohn aus dem socialen Gesichtspunkten. I: Die Musik und die deutsche Bürgerthum, *Musikalische Charakterköpfe: Ein kunstgeschichtliches Skizzenbuch*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1878) vol. 3, 73–90.

¹⁰ Riehl was an important contributor to the debates about defining the "Bürger" and the "bürgerliche" in the 19th century. See Manfred Riedel, "Bürger", *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. by Werner Conze Otto Brunner and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972).

¹¹ "Persönliche gutmüthige, harmlose, in ihrer Art lebenswürdige Menschen." "Die göttlichen Philister" in *Musikalische Charakterköpfe*, 205.

¹² Eduard Hanslick, "Musik", *Sämtliche Schriften: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. by Dietmar Strauß (Wien; Köln; Weimar: Böhlau, 1994) 322–26. The occasion for Hanslick's mention of Riehl was a review, dated 27 March 1854, of a performance of Spontini's *La Vestale*. One of Riehl's "Musikalische Charakterköpfe" was of Spontini.

essays on *Kleinmeister* in his volume of *Musikalische Charakterköpfe*.¹³ This reviewer, who wrote under the name “Kallimachus”, objected to evaluating the artist on the basis of his social standing and moral qualities rather than his musical abilities. Even though he claimed he fully shared the “conviction that music history is inseparable from cultural history”, he noted that Riehl only really approved of one class of people, the “bürgerliche”, and that he dismissed other composers simply because they were not from that class. Without historical context, Riehl celebrated composers who worked in *bürgerliche* society and condemned especially those who were part of “cultivated society”.

Besides disputing the value placed on social character, this reviewer also objected to studying what even Riehl admitted was mediocre music. It does not help us understand great music, in fact it can damage our ability to appreciate the great masters, he argued. Why should we spend time studying a type of music that is to high art much as the decorative arts are to painting? The reviewer was mystified why anyone would urge us to study music that did not even qualify as art. That it was popular in the past did not seem to be a very good reason.

One criticism that was to become common over the years concerned Riehl’s views of contemporary music. “According to the author’s peculiar way of looking at things”, Kallimachus remarked, “music is an art that no longer exists in the present, contemporary music is no longer real music, and consequently, in his eyes, the only remaining means of getting to know music is to study it historically.”¹⁴ Indeed, Riehl had declared in no uncertain terms that:

Modern music (*Moderne Tonkunst*) has gone downhill more than any other art except dance and become the willing servant of all modern, blasé, frivolous, sentimental, foppish licentiousness. It has become in fact a curse on the house. Nothing has such a powerful effect on the dumbing down (*Verdummung*) of the race as all the aimless music making of today.¹⁵

This indictment, one of a series over the years, came from 1855, a year in which Wagner and Liszt were dominating the German music scene. Although Riehl did in fact consider himself one of Wagner’s earliest and most dedicated opponents, he denounced almost every other contemporary composer just as vigorously. Riehl was too conservative in this area even for the other conservative music critics. Although they spent most of their time immersed in the past as Riehl did, they were outraged by Riehl’s intolerance for recent music.

HAUSMUSIK. Despite his constant insistence that modern life rendered composition virtually impossible, Riehl set himself up as a composer with his publication in 1855 of *Hausmusik*, “50 settings of German poets”. He claimed that he was filling a demand for

¹³ Kallimachus, “Zur Beantwortung einer ästhetischer Fragen bei Gelegenheit von Riehl’s ‘musikalischen Charakterköpfen’”, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 40/16 (1854) 165–68, 179–82, 192–96. Callimachus was a librarian and cataloguer at the Alexandrian library in the third century B.C.E.

¹⁴ “Nach des Verfassers eigenthümlicher Anschauungsweise die Musik eine Kunst ist, die nicht mehr in der Gegenwart existirt, die Musik der Gegenwart keine eigentliche Musik mehr ist und folglich in seinen Augen als einziges Mittel, Musik kennen zu lernen, das historische Studium derselben übrig bleibt.” *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁵ “Erniedrigte sich die moderne Tonkunst mehr denn jede andere Kunst (die Tanzkunst ausgenommen) zur dienstwilligen Magd aller modernen Blasirtheit, Frivolität, Sentimentalität, Geckerei und Zügellosigkeit. Sie ward namentlich zum Fluch des Hauses. Nichts wirkt so kräftig zur Verdummung des Geschlechts, wie gegenwärtig das viele, planlose Musikmachen.” Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Hausmusik* (Stuttgart; Augsburg: J.G. Cotta’scher Verlag) xv.

lieder that could be played in the home that were bright, cheerful, and simple settings of true and healthy poems. It was not at all unusual and was perhaps expected for music critics and scholars to publish a few modest lieder or piano pieces. However, Riehl seems to have aimed for a wide audience (and it did go into a second edition after a few years) and also took the opportunity to press his agenda in a long preface. This 14-page, whimsically entitled *Tonsetzers Geleitsbrief* (Music setter's letter of safe-conduct) provided ample evidence of Riehl's reactionary attitude toward composition. He pointed out four things that he was expressly trying to do in his lieder: (1) use strophic forms (because these days through-composed settings were used too much); (2) have simple piano accompaniments (because piano parts were getting too elaborate); (3) use the major mode (because minor was used too often these days); and finally, (4) keep tempo and performance markings at a minimum (because these kind of markings were overused these days).¹⁶

The appearance of *Hausmusik* gave music critics the opportunity to pounce on Riehl and expose him as an outsider. He was mercilessly attacked for not having professional training. In one exaggeratedly long review, close attention was lavished on evidence of Riehl's compositional incompetence: parallel fifths, incorrectly resolved sevenths, awkward text setting, and incorrect orthography were all given in musical examples designed to humiliate.¹⁷ Although the tone of most of the review was one of malicious fun in pointing out errors and contradictions, it ended with an annoyed comment that indicates that critics were worried about Riehl's popularity and encroachment on their musical territory:

It is quite troubling that even in 1855 something like this could be published—that there are still so many lazy-thinking and weak-thinking people that hold what Riehl says and composes to be good and true; and for this reason criticism must take on the thankless task of bringing his errors to light.¹⁸

Another critic, Eduard Krüger, repeated his view that the present age was a critical one, and that it was questionable whether a critic could also be an artist.¹⁹ He commented that critical knowledge certainly did not engender folk music. Krüger expressed most effectively what also bothered other critics: that Riehl published both his music and an explanatory overview of his own work (in the *Geleitsbrief*) together. How could the author of naïve lieder and self-conscious critical exegesis be one and the same person?

This point brings up one of many paradoxes about Riehl and his work that can be instructive to us today. Beyond trying to be naïve *and* sentimental in the same

¹⁶ "Zum ersten setzte ich durchweg Stophenlieder, obgleich man dieselben in Leipzig mit Bann und Interdikt belegt." viii.

¹⁷ "Zum Andern habe ich gewagt, Lieder mit Klavierbegleitung zu setzen und nicht Klavierbegleitung mit Liedern." x.

¹⁸ "Zum Dritten bekenne ich mich zu der Ketzerei, dass bei deutscher Musik die Mollweisen möglichst sparsam zu gebrauchen seyen, dagegen ein männlicher, frischer, bestimmter Durcharacter vorherrschen müsse, desgleichen, dass man mit grellen, überraschenden, schnell wechselnden Modulationen vorsichtig seyn solle." xi.

¹⁹ "Zum Vierten habe ich mir bei den Tempo- und Vortragsbezeichnungen allerlei barbarische Dinge erlaubt, die nicht zufällig sind, sondern hervorquellend aus meiner ganzen Art Musik zu machen und zu beurtheilen." xii.

¹⁷ F.G. Frank, "W.H. Riehl, Hausmusik: Fünfzig Lieder deutscher Dichter", *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 44 (1856) 125–27; 136–39; 147–50; 160–61.

¹⁸ "Es ist in der That recht betrübend, wenn man erwägt, daß noch im Jahre 1855 so etwas gedruckt werden konnte, daß es noch so viele denkfaule und denkschwache Menschen giebt, die das von R. Gesagte und Componirte für wahr und gut halten, und daß eben deshalb die Kritik sich der saueren Arbeit unterziehen muß, derlei zu Tage liegende Irrthümer zu berichtigen." *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁹ E.K., "Kritische Präliminarien zu W.H. Riehl's 'Hausmusik'", *Niederrheinische Musik-Zeitung* 4/10 (1856) 76–78.

publication, there was a broader contradiction between his theory and practice: He critiqued modern life and institutions while at the same time embracing them. Looking at the course of his career as a whole, one sees that he used his stance as an advocate of the people and their simple way of life to work his way up into a powerful position in academia and the government. From his position as an (appointed) professor, he criticized the professionalization and specialization of academic disciplines even as he helped establish new disciplines, such as folklore studies.

While this stance was effective with some, threatened academics tried to reject him as an outsider without credentials. His arguments for music as culture were made outside of the institutions of music itself. He did not write about music from the position of a composer or even as a contributor to a music journal. Instead he bypassed the gatekeepers and published popular criticism, fiction, and went on lecture tours.

Although they were motivated by the need to guard their territory, Riehl's critics brought up legitimate problems with his approach. They disputed his judging composers on the basis of their cultural values rather than their music. They also raised questions as to the value of studying mediocre composers. It is interesting to note, however, that no one questioned the goal of putting cultural studies in the service of the nation. This is one major point of difference between early cultural studies and the versions we have today. Nationalism, while often still a powerful force, is no longer the self-evident purpose.



Riehl initially appears as a heroic pioneer in cultural studies who was ahead of his time in his interest in music not so much as high art, but rather as a practice embedded in the traditions of a national culture. However, the contradictions and inconsistencies in Riehl's approach make him a more ambiguous figure. For instance, we tend to assume that the kind of cultural studies that advocates for the humble folk and their every day lives as being politically liberal. However, Riehl was a political conservative who wanted to preserve the old authoritarian structures. Although he located the basis of the nation in its folk, he was anti-democratic, speaking out in particular against rights for workers and women.²⁰ Similarly, while Riehl valued music as part of everyday life, he hated the increased manufacturing of pianos and printed music that made music more accessible to more people.²¹ It is true that Riehl cast his eye on all kinds of music and music-making that was ignored by others; however, he infused his observations with an overpowering golden glow of an idealized past. In sum, the story of Riehl as an early crusader for music as culture is a conflicted one that can help clarify our own aims in cultural studies today.

²⁰ At the outset of *Die Familie* Riehl declares his basic presupposition that social inequality is rooted in nature and therefore is to be maintained. ("In dem Gegensatz von Mann und Weib ist die Ungleichartigkeit der menschlichen Berufe und damit auch die sociale Ungleichheit und Abhängigkeit als ein Naturgesetz aufgestellt.") Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Die Familie* (Stuttgart; Augsburg: J. G. Cotta'sche Verlag, 1855) 5.

²¹ Riehl, "Unsre musikalische Erziehung. Briefe an einen Staatsmann," 417.

