

Scott Messing. *Marching to the Canon: The Life of Schubert's Marche Militaire.*

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In 1826, Austrian composer Franz Schubert (1797-1828) published a set of three *Marches militaires* for piano four hands with the Viennese firm of Diabelli. The first of these became a hit and is now the subject of musicologist Scott Messing's newest book on Schubert. Messing writes that *Marching to the Canon* "was born as a poor orphan to the hefty manuscript that ultimately became the two volumes of my *Schubert in the European Imagination*" (2006) (p. xi). Messing had intended his study of the *Marche militaire* to result in several scholarly articles, but he found so much information that he decided it was worthy of a full-length book. This origin is on prominent display in the book. It is divided into eight chapters, each one an individual study on the *Marche militaire* and some aspect of its history or use: in arrangement and transcription for other instruments and ensembles; during the Franco-Prussian and world wars; in dance, literature, and film; and its musical afterlife as a reference in pieces by other composers. While some of the book's chapters do not require the ability to read music,

those wishing to understand the book as a whole will need at least basic music-reading skills and a grasp of music history and musicological approaches.

Throughout the book, Messing works to combine the techniques of so-called Old Musicology, with its primary interest in evidentiary details with the New Musicology and its focus on interpretation in the context of social, economical, and other environments. Indeed, the book can be divided into three sections based on the author's approach. Chapters 1-3 process numbers of performances, records of publications, and reviews of such. This is where Messing appears to feel the most comfortable with his subject, although his confidence in his statistical samples is sadly misplaced due to their extremely limited scope. In chapters 4-7, Messing tries to take on the life of the march in the frameworks of war, dance, literature, and film. Unable or uncomfortable with the kind of analysis these environments demand, he too often defaults to descriptions and long, unpacked quotes of material written by others. In

chapter 8, Messing brings together solid musical analysis and good historical research with what feels like a queasy sense of duty to interpretative analysis to investigate three pieces that pay homage to Schubert's march. In the conclusion, at long last, Messing folds all of the elements of the old and new methodologies of the discipline into a strong and cohesive summation of the life of the *Marche militaire*.

Messing opens the first chapter with a discourse on the dating of the *Marche militaire*, carefully examining evidence from newspapers and publishers' records as well as the catalogues and journals of Schubert scholars and biographers. He then delves into the march's publication history and analyzes the piece's style, offering comparisons with other works from the composer's oeuvre. He concludes this introduction with a history of the piece's reception—the reviews it received from critics, its spread among performers and other countries, and its popularity in performances. The march's popularity is the topic of chapter 2, which discusses the many arrangements of the original duet for a single pianist. While not a technically difficult work for two pianists sitting at the same keyboard, as it was originally written, the *Marche militaire* becomes a showpiece for advanced and virtuosic pianists when reworked for just ten fingers rather than twenty. Messing catalogues hundreds of performances of the piece's first and best-known arrangement for solo piano, made by Carl Tausig in 1869. In addition to tracing changes made to the work and how it compared with other flashy pieces of the same period, he also follows the *Marche militaire*'s path in the ear of the public as it moved from being a work appropriate only for men to one used by female performers to establish their equal place on the stage and a piece of classical fluff to a more significant and serious representative of "classical music," especially in the United States, where even the smallest city could boast of a "discerning local audience" if the *Marche* had recently appeared in a recital there

(p. 31). Over time, however, the popularity of Schubert's famous piece slowly shifted again: by the end of the nineteenth century, the march as a piano piece had become "a little hackneyed," according to New York critics (p. 41). During the First World War, the *Marche militaire* became a questionable work in terms of programming: it could be performed in noncombatant countries for a time, and then only in noncombatant countries very far removed geographically from the conflict. Messing notes that Artur Rubenstein would only perform it in Spain and South America during the war. Following the war, pianists still relied on the piece to bring in audiences, but some rudimentary statistics by Messing suggest that it never regained the popularity it had enjoyed previously.

In chapter 3, Messing charts the similar life of the *Marche militaire* in arrangements for instruments other than the piano, duly documenting performances by orchestras and bands on the Continent and in England, Canada, and the United States. This chapter primarily engages with the changing tastes of audiences from Schubert's death until about 1920, and shows how the piece made its way from a dignified work for all classes of audience to a pro-war song in Germany to a "popular classic" appropriate for us in accompanying silent motion pictures (p. 83). These first three chapters are solid outlines of the piece's history to 1920, although Messing is happy to rely on very small samples of data for his statistical claims: he relies on single magazine and journal titles to provide accounts of "documented performances," and in doing so both passes over entire libraries of periodicals that could offer additional data and also ignores the fact that many of these publications deliberately ignored or downplayed performances by women. Indeed, there are several problematic issues with gender in Messing's account; while he notes that some reviews of female performers were highly gendered, he himself cites long passages that focus on performers' dresses rather than their musical talents, and has

the bad habit of using “young women” and “girls” interchangeably. Despite his claims of employing non-gendered techniques, these unfortunate examples undermine Messing’s position as an unbiased author.

Next, Messing ostensibly examines the use of the *Marche militaire* during the Franco-Prussian War, World War I, and World War II. But specific references to the piece are few and far between in the resources he consults, and so we are left knowing only that in all three conflicts, the piece was used both by the French to mock the German armies and by the German armies as a triumphant signal of having taken Paris. The French, who had previously been enamored of Schubert, now naturally rejected the march, and in the United States, directors from orchestras to school bands were forced to remove the piece from their concert programs. Oddly, just what makes the march “military” goes unexamined here, where a discussion of just how military music signifies martial actions, persons, or events would have been most appropriate.

In the next three chapters, Messing examines the place of the *Marche militaire* in collaboration with three other art forms. Chapter 5 spotlights Isadora Duncan’s and Loie Fuller’s use of the piece in dance. Here Messing is either reluctant or unable to dig into the topic with the same detail and depth of the earlier chapters: he compiles a number of anecdotes, reviews, and facts about Duncan’s dancing to the *Marche*, and repeatedly suggests that hers was a radical interpretation of the music, but only connects it to social causes through reviews of Duncan that appeared in socialist journals. Messing quotes a long description of the actual choreography, recorded from a performance late in Duncan’s life, but does not offer any contextualization in terms of either politics or artistry; after a later description of a painting of Duncan dancing, Messing can only comment that the painting’s colors confirm other descriptions of what Duncan wore. The second part of the chap-

ter on dance attempts to pin down whether Duncan or Fuller used the *Marche militaire* first as a dance score, and provides quotes of reviews of Fuller’s performances that suggest that the sense of the piece as a nationalistic one heightened by the war as discussed in chapter 4 was not exactly the case. Messing’s argument that the dances Duncan and Fuller performed to the piece were somehow revolutionary is weak and further brought down by conspicuous guesswork on the part of the author’s reading of his sources.

Unfortunately, the chapter on literature that follows is marred by even weaker connections between the music and the art and Messing’s tendency to describe rather than analyze. The short stories and novels included here often mention the *Marche militaire* just once and in contexts that are straightforward: in Elizabeth Cuming’s *The Story of an Artist* (1892), the protagonist refers to the piece as “heroic” (p. 136); in Jules Ricard’s novel *Hugette* (1891), the naïve title character loves the piece, which makes her “see a Turkish army in the distance” (p. 137); in another novel, a student plays the piece at the piano and collapses, dead from nervous strain (p. 140). Even in a story by the author Messing calls the “most significant,” Willa Cather, the piece is mentioned in passing and as part of a description of clashing sounds in a tenement (p. 144). And although Messing notes that “Schubert’s compositions are often mentioned, their titles manipulated to serve as resonant symbols” in literature, he can only argue that the same kind of people who read Cather probably also knew a little about classical music, including the *Marche* (p. 145). He concludes that literary references to the piece are “eclectic,” which does little to illuminate the march’s place as any kind of signifier apart from its familiarity across social strata and geographical locations (p. 161).

The chapter on film is likewise thin. Messing notes that the *Marche militaire* was commonly used in silent cinemas and was then used in

sound films, and he then connects its use in the movies with its popularity as a piece for young students to learn and its inclusion in books of pieces for beginning pianists. Messing could have made a very compelling argument here for the ways in which classical music is subjected to simplification and reassigned to the realm of the child, but passes over any true scholarly enquiry, instead providing a short list of films in which the march appeared before 1950. He also notes the march's use in establishing the setting of an Austrian film in Vienna; its use as dramatic background music in several movies; and its brief appearance in *The Red Pony*, where a character plays it by herself and another remarks that she used to play it with her husband, who has abandoned the family. Messing analyzes this last use as having come from a need for a score that was available in solo and four-hands versions and was familiar to audiences, ignoring the obvious signifiers the music holds for the film's narrative.

The final chapter of the book is clearly written for musicologists and addresses works by Francis Poulenc and Igor Stravinsky that allude to or quote the *Marche* outright. Messing spends considerable ink speculating about exactly what the Poulenc piece hints at the march and why, and points out the ways in which Stravinsky used the march in his *Circus Polka*. He also touches on a concerto by the little-known French composer Jean Wiéner that quotes the march. All three of these examples indicate a humorous approach to using the famous march, but Messing sidesteps the question of whether these allusions and quotations are really parodies by stating that Stravinsky and his fellow composers could have made the choice to use the Schubert tune "by canniness or coincidence" and that either way, it proves the original march's important place in the musical canon (p. 203). In short: a shrug and a smile.

A strong conclusion at the end of the book provides a good overview of the *Marche militaire*'s interesting history, and for the first time, Mess-

ing engages in truly useful and illuminating discussion of the piece. However, the mix of chapters that actually work with the notes and other elements of the music and those that take on a less technical (and sometimes very unfocused, as in the dance chapter) approach ultimately make the book an uneven collection of topics and materials. While I am certain that Schubert aficionados and some scholars will want to read this study, I wonder if Messing might not have been able to create more compelling and richer studies of the *Marche militaire* in the various contexts presented here if he had, after all, written about them for specific journals in those areas.

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