Editorial

MICHAEL BECKERMAN, Guest Editor

When I think back to the Music Department at the University of California—a place where I spent some of the happiest times of my life—I don't immediately recall a rabidly political atmosphere. Yet, on one side of my office was my friend and colleague Scott Marcus, who would intrepidly exclaim from time to time: "All music is political!" On the other side, a few steps across the way, was Pat Hall's enclave. Pat was and is a world expert in sketch studies, not usually given to outbursts of any kind. Yet, it was her initiative and dedication that is responsible for the journal you read today.

Music and Politics is currently in its fifth year and has printed everything from discussions of music in the concentration camps to the iPod lists of soldiers in Iraq, from Polish Hip-Hop to a sonic political anthropology of the Paraguayan Mission. In this issue we offer articles dealing with Job and exile, polyphony and racial identity, Ellington and Strayhorn's Northern sweep, and Jewish music in Nazi Germany. Our bright red cover might suggest that we are a left-wing journal. However, if indeed all music might be political, our own orientation is left, right, center, north, south, east and west, and round and round (and round).

And yet, five years into our mission it may be time to revisit our founding notions. What does it mean for something to be political? Rather than rehashing all the possible viewpoints in an abstract sense, I would like to look briefly at an event I am involved with at the moment. I wonder about its political ramifications.

Last year several members of the Czech Embassy in Washington decided that, in order to celebrate Dvořák's 170th birthday, the manuscript of the "New World" Symphony should make a triumphant return to these shores. An entire festival, titled "Mutual Inspirations" would be organized around this. I was asked to give a talk, along with the Director of the Dvořák Museum in Prague, that engaged with issues and realities related to the manuscript. Obviously, the very fact that the event was conceived by an embassy lent it a considerable political tinge, drawing attention to the longstanding ties between the United States and the Czech Republic (technically those go back to about 1993, but you know what I mean, or do you?). After all, Dvořák arrived in New York in the autumn of 1892 and almost immediately came under the influence of such figures as Jeannette Thurber, Henry Thacker Burleigh and Henry Krehbiel. By the New Year Dvořák decided to write a symphony with references to African American songs, Native American drumming, the tweets of a robin, and possibly even a quote from "Yankee Doodle," not to mention several movements based on Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*. Surely, this work was also a political statement of sorts, at the very least an attempt to demonstrate cultural pluralism to American musicians, composers and audiences many of whom were resistant to the idea. These were exciting times, well worth commemorating. By the spring of 2011 our event to honor Dvořák was ready to go, and everything from air transport to security guards for the manuscript had been planned.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the forum, and this particular funny thing involves the highly unlikely substance of blood plasma. For almost as long as the fictional trial in *The Makropulos Case*

the Czech government has been involved in a nasty spat with a firm called “Diag Human,” which was engaged in blood plasma trade. I will avoid describing the events in extensive detail lest our dear journal get caught on the edges of this whirlpool of litigation (the relevant information is easy to find with a simple internet search). Suffice it to say, things got so out of hand that the lawyer for Diag requested that certain paintings belonging to the Czech government, on display in places like Vienna and Paris, be confiscated in lieu of payment. This was done on the order of the court, and while it may be heartening to imagine that the paintings of Emil Filla, a Czech cubist, actually have considerable value in the art market, the move had a disheartening effect on the international movement of national treasures. The “New World” manuscript was not going anywhere.

While this is a most unfortunate outcome for our Mutual Inspirations Festival, the dispute allows us to raise certain kinds of questions related to music and politics. For one, is Diag Human vs. the Czech Government properly a political matter, or is it really an economic one? Or perhaps all economics is political (our Red cover). Does it follow then that our journal should perhaps be titled “Music and Politics and Economics?” While national treasures themselves certainly involve the political aspect of nation-building and consolidation, their status as holy icons and all the metaphysical fuzziness (and obfuscation) surrounding them suggests that perhaps any study of this subject should be in our renamed journal, “Music and Politics and Economics and Religion” (with a blue cover?). Further, since any serious consideration of Dvořák’s “New World” involves (in addition to economics, religion and politics) questions of race, identity, genocide, musical form, Americanness, ideology, gender, psychology, Wagner, the scientific method, philosophy, humor, acoustics and nostalgia, to name just a few topics, should we have a journal with room for an “and” for each of them?

Yes and no. It seems to me that when someone says that all music is political, they often mean two interrelated things: first, that all music is *always* political no matter what, and second, more subtly, that it is necessary to state this forcefully because dunderheads of the past refused to own up to just how political music really is. Times have changed. Five years down the line we willingly acknowledge the necessity for this counterpunch. But where do we go from here? Is all music always political, or do we acknowledge that all music is *sometimes* political and that only *some* music is always political? Or at least, do we admit, slyly, that anyone who is looking for it can find a political angle to the study of music and sound at any time?

To the extent that editorials have viewpoints—and I am expected to have one as a matter of course—I would proffer that not all music is always political. Otherwise, one would hardly need a journal that seriously considers aspects of music and sound that are.

By the way, a court in Vienna recently overturned the seizure of the Czech paintings, relying on a United Nations statute declaring that a State “enjoys immunity, in respect of itself and its property, from the jurisdiction of the courts of another State subject to the provisions of the present Convention.” Perhaps national treasures, as “State property,” are always political after all or at least embedded in the legal system (“The Journal of Music and Politics and Law”?). And while it is now too late to liberate the manuscript of the “New World” in time for the festival, we scholars take solace in the fact that, after all, it is never too late to write about it.