



## Redirecting Power

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## BOOKS

### Redirecting Power

**Pianos and Politics in China: Middle Class Ambitions and the Struggle over Western Music** by Richard Curt Kraus.

Oxford UP (New York, Oxford, 1989); 288pp; \$36. ISBN 0 19 505836 4.

When it comes to 'serious' music, most of us in the Western nations are idealists. We regard such music as a sublime respite from the pressures of career and family, an elevated release from the tensions of urban existence or the monotony of suburban life. We like to believe that serious music is a pure and autonomous art, a product of the human spirit unsullied by grubby, everyday concerns. During the past few years, a small but determined group of theorists has set out to undermine these comforting surties. Following the lead of the much earlier, but heroically isolated work of Theodor Adorno, such contemporary musicologists as Joseph Kerman, Susan McClary, and Rose Rosengard Subotnik have insisted that, whether serious or popular, music can be fully understood only when situated in its concrete social and political context. By employing methods of historical research, semiotic analysis, and sociological inquiry, they have tried to uncover the unbreakable connections that tie even the most sophisticated and rarified music to the untidy outside world.

Richard Kraus' *Pianos and Politics in China* deserves to become a classic in this newly emerging school of thought. In his masterful and engrossing book, Kraus subjects to a devastating critique one of the most important versions of the autonomist interpretation of music, namely the view that it constitutes an 'international language'. We all know how shamelessly that metaphor is trotted out by statesmen who offer something called 'cultural understanding' as a substitute for the hard compromises and institutional rearrangements that peace between nations demands. Kraus recognises, but does not dwell upon, this pervasive diplomatic shell game. He focuses instead upon a more fundamental ideological deception embodied in the international language metaphor. What is called the international language of music is not really international at all; it represents the promotion of a local musical tradition - that of the West - to un-

questioned universal status. Kraus points out that, if music were a genuinely international medium, then Europeans would be as conversant with traditional Chinese music, for example, as the Chinese are with the music of Europe. Now this is clearly not the case. In order to provide evidence of international musical competence, Chinese musicians must be able to perform, say, a Beethoven string quartet. However, Western musicians are under no similar compulsion to demonstrate their mastery of international idiom by performing 'Three Variations on the Plum Blossom'. The international music scene involves, not the equal and reciprocal interaction of different musical cultures, but the imposition of one of those cultures upon all the rest. The international language metaphor is an ideological construction masking a power claim; it is an instrument of Western imperial domination of the non-Western world.

Kraus' entire book is an extended illustration of this thesis. He begins by demonstrating that the earliest introduction of Western music into China was a vehicle of the assertion of power, whether in the form of the military music that accompanied martial expeditions, the harpsichord concerts that were intended to win the Chinese emperor to Christianity, or the performances of the exclusive all-white Shanghai Orchestra established by that city's merchant community. The strength of Kraus' treatment, however, lies in his refusal to cast the Chinese people as passive victims in a drama written by Europeans. The heart of his story lies in an intricate account of what the Chinese did with the music that had originally been foisted upon them, of how they acted on and shaped the very cultural forces originally deployed to subjugate them. Kraus shows how Western music was adopted by a native but cosmopolitan middle class that was by no means a puppet in the control of imperialist masters, a class that had its own agenda and set of aspirations. That class used Western music - and the quintessentially Western instrument, the piano - in a manner similar to the early European bourgeoisie, which is to say, as a symbol challenging the cultural supremacy of the older feudal aristocracy, and a status maker indicating distance from the peasantry and proletariat. But China's middle class also attempted to

reshape Western music into a tool of national self-assertion. Its key representatives believed that China would be able to shed semi-colonial status only by modernising its culture by ridding itself of the dead weight of its feudal past. Its adoption of the technically sophisticated, 'scientific' music of the West was in part an attempt to destroy the conditions responsible for Chinese national humiliation.

The revolutionary process led by the Chinese Communist Party was bound to have an ambivalent relation to Western music. On the one hand, that music has been used to support native middle class aspirations for power by lending them the lustre of the supposedly advanced culture of the West. As such, it has been opposed by the worker-and-peasant populism as well as the anti-imperialism of the Chinese revolution. On the other hand, Western music has been used by the middle class to combat the backwardness of China's tenacious feudal tradition. In this respect, it has been embraced by a revolutionary movement engaged in its own battle for modernisation. Through absorbing portraits of the composer, Xian Xinghai and the pianists, Fou Ts'ong, Yin Chengzong, and Liu Shikun, Kraus explores this fundamental and often violent ambivalence. Oscillations in cultural policy during the Civil War, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the post-Maoist period have sometimes elevated middle class practitioners of Western music to an exalted celebrity and status, and sometimes cast them down into utter abjection. But whatever direction these oscillations may take, they underscore just how charged with social and political energy Western music remains almost four centuries after its introduction into the Middle Kingdom. Kraus shows the different ways in which middle class and revolutionary forces have canalised this energy. With varying degrees of success, both have redirected the power of Western music in the service of independent Chinese ends.

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