

Middlebrow Modernism

But what, you may ask, is a middlebrow? And that, to tell the truth, is no easy question to answer. They are neither one thing nor the other. They are not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows, whose brows are low. Their brows are betwixt and between . . . The middlebrow is the man, woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige. The middlebrow curries favor with both sides equally.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, “MIDDLEBROW,” 1932¹

On May 5, 1941, in Columbia University’s Brander Matthews Hall Theater, Benjamin Britten’s operatic career got off to an unpromising start. The occasion was the premiere of *Paul Bunyan*, an opera-cum-musical written in collaboration with his friend and fellow expatriate, the poet W. H. Auden. Their setting of the American legend of the giant lumberjack, who sets up a logging camp and guides his workers toward prosperity, left most commentators confused. One critic cast the operetta as the most “bewildering and irritating treatment of the outsize lumberman [that] any two Englishmen could have possibly devised,” while Virgil Thomson dubbed it a “Musico-Theatrical Flop.”² In hindsight, these reactions were no surprise, for Britten and Auden were driven by putatively contradictory aims. Writing self-consciously in the wake of early-twentieth-century modernism, they were on the one hand anxious to preserve their own creative autonomy and integrity—to make an original and challenging contribution to the history of musical theater. On the other hand, they sought to honor long-standing political and educational commitments, even as they hoped to enjoy the fame and fortune of Broadway.

If creating the opera was something of a balancing act, so was its plot. Britten and Auden structured the action around a series of symbolic compromises in America’s progress from untouched frontier to industrial modernity: between revolution and conservation, iconoclasm and conformism, idealism and materialism. Within this context, the eponymous lumberman serves less as an independent

protagonist than as a mediator between extremes, as Auden explained before the premiere.³ Meanwhile Hel Helson, Bunyan's Swedish foreman, and Johnny Inkslinger, an artist-turned-bookkeeper, seem to represent Virginia Woolf's polar opposition of brows. The former is a "man of brawn but no brains."⁴ When goaded into challenging Paul to a duel, Hel learns the hard way the importance of intelligence and compromise. As the highbrow foil, Johnny undergoes a complementary journey from the other side of the cultural divide. When we first encounter him, his pious devotion to art has him spurning the material world, refusing to earn a living. Hunger ultimately forces him to give up his artistic dreams and work as Paul's accountant: "And I dreamed of writing a novel / With which Tolstoy couldn't compete / And of how all the critics would grovel: / But I guess that a guy gotta eat."⁵ This lesson in pragmatism prepares the way for an eventual move to Hollywood, where Johnny is able to strike a balance between artistic impulses and material needs. In casting this character as the opera's "real" protagonist, Auden marked his journey as a central theme, raising questions about the creators' own aesthetic positions and trajectories.⁶

This message of social and aesthetic moderation failed to convince the critics, who understood *Bunyan's* stylistic eclecticism less as compromise between high and low than as canny duplicity—an attempt to have it both ways. While one commentator balked at the disjuncture between Auden's "literary" voices and the "folksy" subject, others noted that the style of the libretto itself shuttled uncomfortably between modernist allegory and vulgar slapstick, with almost nothing in between. "A little of symbolism and uplift, a bit of socialism and of modern satire, and gags and jokes of a Hollywood sort, or of rather cheap musical comedy," was the verdict of Olin Downes.⁷ Eugene Bonner likewise complained that "it refuses to be categorically defined."⁸ "High-flown allegory," he wrote, "gives way to flat-footed realism with disconcerting suddenness, diatonic writing to chromatic, large chunks of Gilbert and Sullivan being thrown in for good measure while folksy ballads jostle operatic arias."

At a time when ideals of aesthetic purity reigned, eclecticism and inconsistency were serious charges. Downes complained that text and music "wander[ed] from one to another idea, without conviction or cohesion," and railed at an "ingenuity" that failed only when "faced with the necessity of saying something genuine."⁹ More damning yet was the suspicion of crass calculation, as if Britten and Auden were planning their stylistic mixtures with an eye on the audience. One commentator accused Auden of selling out modernist symbolism to the highest bidder, his "allegories brush[ing] each other aside in their mad rush for the spotlight."¹⁰ After describing the opera as a "poor sort of bid for success," Downes laid the blame at the composer's feet instead: "Britten," he sniffed, "is a very clever young man, who can provide something [in] any style or taste desired by the patron."¹¹ Thomson sniffed even louder, accusing Britten of a distinctly bureaucratic kind

of duplicity: “[*Bunyan*’s] particular blend of melodic ‘appeal’ with irresponsible counterpoint and semi-aciduous instrumentation is easily recognizable as that considered by the British Broadcasting Corporation to be at once modernistic and safe.”¹² Like the other modernist “eclectics” with whose work *Bunyan* was compared—Hindemith, Weill, Copland, Shostakovich—Britten was charged with playing both sides of the fence, drawing superficially on modernist prestige while simultaneously pandering to vulgarians in the gallery.¹³

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In *Middlebrow Modernism*, I examine the nature of this aesthetic duplicity and excavate its stakes, using operas spanning Britten’s entire career as case studies: *Peter Grimes* (1945), *Albert Herring* (1947), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966), and *Death in Venice* (1973). Where duplicity had led to *Paul Bunyan*’s downfall, it proved altogether more successful in subsequent works. Rather than taking the operas’ aesthetic ambivalence—their uneasy position between high and low, modernism and mass culture—as a problem to be resolved, I use it to explain their broad appeal. Drawing on discussions of cultural hierarchy from Britten’s own time, I demonstrate that his success lay in allowing contemporary audiences to have their modernist cake and eat it: to revel in the pleasures of tonality, melody, sentimentality, melodrama, and spectacle, even while enjoying the prestige that comes from rejecting them. Ultimately, however, this is not a mere study of compositional prowess but a wider investigation of the everyday processes through which cultural boundaries are negotiated. For, as will become clear, the difference between *Bunyan*’s catastrophic failure and subsequent successes depended not simply on Britten’s developing creativity and subtlety but also on his critics, who dissembled and sublimated as resourcefully as he ever composed.

In charting Britten’s rise to operatic acclaim, then, this book recounts a much broader story about aesthetic value in the long shadow of early-twentieth-century modernism. It tells a tale of composers, critics, and audiences torn between seemingly conflicting commitments—on the one hand to uncompromising originality and radical autonomy, and on the other to musical pleasure and communication with a new mass audience. It is a study of aesthetic and cultural ambivalence, and the creatively defensive postures that arose in response. It explores the friction between the mid-century critical impulse to categorize and stratify culture, and the ease with which these hierarchies broke down. In teasing out these historical stresses, *Middlebrow Modernism* ultimately invites us to take heed of our own guilty pleasures and ambivalence—as scholars, critics, and audiences—along with our strategies for assuaging this guilt. This means interrogating the conflicts, between what we think we “ought to like” and what we actually like, between aesthetic ideals and the messy realities of artistic taste.

Highbrows, Lowbrows, and the "Great Divide"

While scholars have tended to put *Bunyan's* failure down to its clumsy negotiation of national divides, it was due as well to anxieties about cultural hierarchy. After all, the twentieth century's early decades witnessed a series of culture wars in which artistic taste was increasingly polarized. The popularity of the terms "highbrow" and "lowbrow" was both testimony to this trend and one of its catalysts. Already by 1915, the American literary critic and historian Van Wyck Brooks complained of a gulf between the lofty highbrow aesthetes, incapable of dealing with ordinary life, and the "catchpenny" lowbrows, thinking of nothing but instant profit and cheap thrills: "between academic pedantry and pavement slang, there is no community, no genial middle ground."¹⁴ "They are both undesirable," Brooks wrote, "but they divide American life between them."¹⁵ By 1953, the terms of discussion had changed slightly, but the categorical division remained the same: "For about a century," the cultural critic Dwight Macdonald explained, "Western culture has really been two cultures: the traditional kind—let us call it 'High Culture'—that is chronicled in the textbooks, and a 'Mass Culture' manufactured wholesale for the market."¹⁶

The situation was no less polarized on the other side of the Atlantic, where Britten and Auden had come of age. Britain had seen antagonisms escalate in the 1930s into a full-scale "battle of the brows." The tipping point appears to have been a BBC radio debate between the novelist and playwright J. B. Priestley and Harold Nicolson, politician, biographer, and husband to the prominent author Vita Sackville-West. This debate spilled over into the local press and national newspapers.¹⁷ In "To a High-Brow," Priestley's initial broadcast, the imaginary interlocutor was charged with an affected interest in works geared exclusively toward a social elite.¹⁸ Nicolson's rebuttal, symmetrically titled "To a Lowbrow"—as if there could only be two sides—complained of philistinism, conformism, and intolerance, and warned that such reverse snobbery would "produc[e] a race which, like the wasps, have no ideas at all."¹⁹

In predicting imminent cultural apocalypse, Nicolson was tapping into a wider sense that once-incidental antagonisms were becoming ever more central even as they resisted mediation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many saw the problem epitomized in modernism's supposed rejection of its potential audience, as though the movement had elevated highbrow snobbery into an aesthetic principle. For modernism's defenders, however, it was the public's philistine hostility that begat modernism's highbrow esotericism, not the other way around. F. R. Leavis insisted, "it would be as true to say that the attitude implicit in [the] 'high-brow' [slur] causes this [esoteric] use of talent as the converse."²⁰ Like most card-carrying highbrows, Leavis blamed mass-produced fiction, newspapers, and film, charging them with lowering public expectations and posing an existential threat to genuine art. Given the stakes, Q. D. Leavis explained, the only recourse was "conscious and directed effort[,] resistance by an armed and conscious minority."²¹ Writers could either

submit to commercial dictates for conventionality, sentimentality, and immediacy or martyr themselves for the modernist cause; unlike previous generations, from Shakespeare to Dickens, they could not have both popularity and prestige.²² Even when modernists imagined themselves responding to purely “aesthetic” rather than social considerations, this very commitment landed them back at the center of the “brow” debate: as the epitome of elite resistance to mass-mediated culture.

These divisions impacted musical culture too, with Schoenberg and his Second Viennese School proving more polarizing than literature’s “men of 1914.”²³ In music, atonality provided a shibboleth, a boundary with which to sort “genuine” modernists from the rest. Schoenberg himself lashed out at those “who nibble at dissonances, and therefore want to rank as modern, but are too cautious to draw the consequences from it.”²⁴ “Those who compose,” he elsewhere complained, “because they want to please others, and have audiences in mind, are not real artists . . . the kind who are driven to say something whether or not there exists one person who likes it, even if they themselves dislike it.”²⁵ Theodor Adorno elevated this uncompromising vision into an extended polemic in the *Philosophy of Modern Music*. According to Adorno, one could either follow Schoenberg’s “progress” or pander to mass culture; there was no space for compromise or moderation. “The middle road”—as he began, quoting Schoenberg himself—is “the only one which does not lead to Rome.”²⁶ This meant rejecting all aspects of musical convention—tonality, melody, representation, sentimentality, and so on—and courting isolation in order to preserve subjectivity in the face of state capitalism: “The shocks of the incomprehensible,” he explained, “illuminate the meaningless world . . . its beauty lies in denying the illusion of beauty.”²⁷ “Modern Music,” Adorno concluded, “sacrifices itself to this effort, [dying] away unheard, without even an echo.” Adorno outdid the Leavisite prognosis in gloom: “Modern music sees absolute oblivion as its goal. It is the surviving message of despair from the shipwrecked.”

Far from limited to a modernist coterie, these images of polarization circulated widely in newspapers and periodicals. The Anglophone press lost no time casting Schoenberg as the *ne plus ultra* of a highbrow modernism, whose uncompromising radicalism and autonomy had thrown down a gauntlet. He was celebrated and denigrated for his “solitariness and inaccessibility,” shunning popularity through artistic devotion and achieving notoriety despite himself.²⁸ In musical terms too, he was often said to have taken imperatives of autonomy and originality to their ultimate, asocial conclusion with his rejection of tonality, consolidated by the development of serialism. “With the publication of Schönberg’s ‘Klavierstücke,’ Op. 11,” one critic attested in 1933, “any dealings with the old language became acts of inexcusable cowardice.”²⁹ Likewise for Constant Lambert, Schoenberg’s “bomb-throwing” and “guillotining” had had a divisive effect: “Sophisticated composers are either becoming more sophisticated, like Alban Berg, or they are turning their sophistication to deliberately popular account, like Kurt Weill!”³⁰ “Anything between the two,” he elaborated, “is a *terrain vague*—a deserted kitchen garden

littered with rusty rakes and empty birdcages.” Where Adorno saw the great divide as necessary, Lambert understood it as a foolhardy failure to compromise: “Most of the great figures of the past,” he reflected nostalgically, “have been content to leave their personal imprint on the *materia musica* of the day without remodeling it entirely . . . [A composer] cannot demand collaboration from his audience while deliberately turning his back on them.”³¹

AFTER THE NEW MODERNIST STUDIES

It was this apparent antagonism between modernism and mass culture that the literary and cultural critic Andreas Huyssen sought to capture in 1986 when he famously theorized a “great divide”: “modernism,” as he argued, “constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture.”³² Drawing on the criticism of Adorno and Clement Greenberg, among others, Huyssen foregrounded modernism’s ideological commitment to difficulty and autonomy, shunning definitions based on style; in doing so, he sought to unsettle the lingering hold of these values on the academy by exposing their origins in esoteric cultural politics. At around this time, these same premises and objectives began to make a mark on musicology. While Susan McClary was denouncing the great divide as the root of the discipline’s problems—esotericism, formalism, misogyny—Peter Franklin was identifying its pernicious shadow on twentieth-century musical historiography.³³ The problem, Franklin explained, was that standard narratives of the period had started life as propaganda for the Second Viennese School, dividing their histories between a select group of elite modernists and an unholy rabble of reactionaries and populists. In this “mythic picture,” as Franklin described it, modernism was no neutral category but an aesthetic and ethical imperative, a standard of progress and autonomy against which most music was judged and found wanting.

Now that we have all learnt to be suspicious of binaries, few would openly endorse such a black-and-white account. Nevertheless, old habits die hard, and modernism’s divisive legacy lives on in sometimes subtle, sometimes not-so-subtle ways. The most obvious examples come from those scholars who have sought to revive modernist notions of difficulty and autonomy in order to insist on the categorical distinction between high art and popular culture.³⁴ Less flagrant examples can be drawn from those musicological “expansionists” who have responded to Franklin’s critique by redeeming putatively conservative or populist composers as “modernists.”³⁵ In British music studies, this strategy has been charged with national imperatives, as if asserting the relevance of British composers to the history of twentieth-century music more broadly necessarily meant stressing their modernism.³⁶ While such revisionism offers useful rejoinders to long-standing denigrations of Vaughan Williams, Elgar, and Walton—to name but a few—it

continues to invoke modernism as an honorific. More importantly, it keeps faith with the conviction that twentieth-century music can usefully be sorted into modernism vs. everything else. Nor has this dualistic vision been dislodged by the steady invective of anti-modernists who have echoed new musicological critiques of the great divide in recent years.³⁷ Indeed, in continuing to pour scorn over modernist values, modernism's staunchest opponents have helped to reinforce its terms, perhaps even making them seem more unassailable than they actually were. This has also had the unfortunate effect of impeding new perspectives on early- and mid-twentieth-century music. In those instances when modernism's defenders have fought back, musicology has risked restaging a latter-day "battle of the brows" of its own.³⁸

Meanwhile, literary scholars have tended to go the opposite way, denying that the great divide ever existed. In the years since Huyssen's study, a range of "new modernist studies" have set out to prove him wrong, demonstrating that "modernism" was never as monolithic or esoteric as he implied.³⁹ Some have excavated modernisms that threw their lot in with popular forms.⁴⁰ Others have argued that even the highest of modernists were more ambivalent than critics have imagined.⁴¹ Still others—including Huyssen himself—have demonstrated the extent to which modernism's idealistic self-image was undermined in practice: "Much valuable recent work," as Huyssen has recently complained, "misconstrued my earlier definition of a static binary of high modernism vs. the market. My argument was rather that there had been . . . a powerful imaginary insisting on the divide while time and again violating the categorical separation in practice."⁴² In fact, as a number of "materialist" studies of modernist editing, marketing, and distribution have shown, opposition to the mass market was often an effective strategy for entering it.⁴³ Where musicological expansionism has generally sought to add select figures to modernism's hallowed canon, the "new modernists" have attempted to distance modernism from associations with canonicity and exclusivity: "Modernism," as Miriam Hansen insisted, "encompasses a whole range of cultural and artistic practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and modernity."⁴⁴ Aside from striving to resist the kind of prejudices that permeate modernist studies in musicology, such broad definitions have opened the way up for an ever-growing list of putative modernisms: popular, vernacular, slapstick, domestic, global modernisms—to name a few—are now routinely invoked with little sense of contradiction or irony. Drawing on the work of Hansen and others, the musicologist Brigid Cohen has even gone so far as to define modernism *itself* as a kind of cultural ambivalence, which undermines the very oppositions—between autonomous and mass-mediated, high and low—it was previously imagined to have upheld.⁴⁵

While such a redefinition offers an attractive alternative to the old dualisms and hierarchies, it carries with it a number of risks, as Cohen herself admits. The first is that the category of modernism will become so broad as to become meaningless.

After all, what twentieth-century cultural and artistic practices did *not* register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity? The second problem is that of whitewashing history: a history of modernism without ideas of autonomy, difficulty, and hierarchy—one might argue—is like an action movie without violence. It risks, in other words, recasting modernist history in our own pluralistic image.⁴⁶ As Cohen concedes, many of the associations that she and other “new modernists” have been keen to shake off “inflected many modernists’ own interpretations of themselves and their projects.”⁴⁷ Yet, as we have already seen, it was not just modernist self-conceptions that were colored by these ideological prejudices; it was also their immediate reception, and the reception of contemporary culture more broadly. If Huyssen’s great divide was too crude to capture modernist intention and practice in all their complexity, this was precisely its appeal, for it encapsulated polarized understandings of early- and mid-twentieth-century culture. The notion may not have been true but it was real, insofar as it defined how writers, critics, and audiences understood contemporary cultural battle lines.

The historiographical problem facing scholars is thus also a historical one, which we risk obscuring if we dispense altogether with cultural hierarchies. Acknowledging the centrality of rigid boundaries to historical conceptions of modernism, however, need not imply endorsing their implications or reinforcing their hegemony. This study takes up this challenge of striking a balance between erasing the historiography of the great divide on the one hand, and buttressing it on the other. It aims to revisit the issue of cultural hierarchy not through theoretical critique or defense, but by tracing its contours throughout history, surveying its impact on the everyday practice of mid-century composition, mediation, and criticism. Following on the efforts of scholars like Huyssen, Franklin, and Taruskin to historicize the great divide, I want to go further and sketch out a historical alternative. While acknowledging its historical power, in other words, I also want to look beyond—or, perhaps more accurately, *through*—the great divide.

It is here that the mid-century category of the “middlebrow” offers a powerful stimulus to the study of twentieth-century culture—the chance to deconstruct modernism from the “inside.” Coined as a casual insult in the 1920s, it became the target of extended critique by modernist critics and polemicists for the decades that followed: from Virginia Woolf and Q. D. Leavis in interwar Britain to Clement Greenberg and Dwight Macdonald in the postwar United States. As the epigraph from Woolf makes clear, it was often invoked to shore up the great divide by discrediting those who fell “in between.” Yet, evidently, it also had the opposite effect, calling attention to those institutions, artists, critics, and audiences that—more or less consciously—sought to mediate its supposedly irreconcilable oppositions. As cultural hierarchies began to lose force in the last third of the century, the term dropped out of common parlance. And given its imbrication in now-unfashionable modernist prejudices, one might be tempted to proclaim good riddance and leave

the condescending category to the trash-heap of history. To do so, however, would be to overlook the historical practices, values, and tensions to which it pointed, along with the useful challenges that it poses to modernist historiography.

LOCATING THE MIDDLEBROW

In one of the earliest documented uses of “middlebrow,” in 1925, the term christened a new type of aspirational cultural consumer: “The B.B.C. claim to have discovered a new type, the ‘middlebrow,’” *Punch* magazine reported: “It consists of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to stuff they ought to like.”⁴⁸ Aside from the implications of conformism, which ran throughout critiques, the epithet carried seemingly paradoxical charges of philistinism and pretentiousness: “The highbrow sees as his real enemy the middlebrow,” Russell Lynes—editor of *Harper’s Magazine*—pointed out, “whom he regards as a pretentious and frivolous man or woman who uses culture to satisfy social or business ambitions.”⁴⁹ If the “battle of the brows” threatened to implicate even the loftiest modernists in a vulgar form of social snobbery, the middlebrows provided convenient scapegoats: “we highbrows,” Woolf insisted, “may be smart or we may be shabby but we never have the right thing to wear . . . [or] the right book to praise.”⁵⁰ Where Woolf emphasized the desire to be *au courant*, others saw middlebrows in terms of stolid mediocrity: the “men and women, fairly civilized, fairly literate,” as Margaret Widdemer put it, “who support the critics and lecturers and publishers by purchasing their wares.”⁵¹

In regarding middlebrow consumers as symbiotic with those who mediated their cultural access, Widdemer echoed wider opinion. When Lynes published his pseudo-anthropological “brow” survey in 1949, this reciprocity was so central that he sub-divided the middlebrow in order to account for it: the upper middlebrows were the cultural mediators—the publishers, radio programmers, film producers, educators, and newspaper critics—who balanced artistic concerns with courting wide appeal; the lower middlebrows were their consumers—the course-takers, book-club members, record collectors, and newspaper readers—“hell bent on improving their minds as well as their fortunes.”⁵² Q. D. Leavis even went so far as to cast “middlebrow” as a synonym for “middlemen,” those pesky bureaucrats who intervened in the relationship between artist and audience.⁵³ Her frustration was unsurprising, for the interwar period witnessed the birth of powerful new institutions charged with overcoming cultural divisions using mass media technology. Perhaps the most famous example on her side of the Atlantic was the BBC, dubbed the “Betwixt and Between Company” by Woolf.⁵⁴ As John Reith, its first director general, explained: “our responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement.”⁵⁵ By making high culture more accessible, these intermediaries sought to elevate the average person’s tastes: “It is of necessity a

slow process as for years the man in the street has been content to be pleased with music which is easily and quickly assimilated, and therefore not always the best—the sort which can be heard at night and whistled in the morning.”⁵⁶

For detractors, however, the effect of such initiatives was less to raise audiences up than to drag high culture down, simplifying it beyond recognition and reducing it to the status of commodity: “The differences in the reception of official ‘classical’ music and light music no longer have any real significance,” Adorno complained.⁵⁷ Where Reith advocated mixing edifying and entertaining works, Adorno regarded this as eroding a crucial distinction: “the climaxes of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony are placed on the same level as the unspeakable horn melody from Tchaikovsky’s Fifth. Melody comes to mean eight-beat symmetrical treble melody . . . which one thinks he can put in his pocket and take home.”⁵⁸ Even Lambert, on the lookout for a cultural middle ground, insisted that mass mediation was not the solution. “The more people use the wireless, the less they listen to it,” he lamented: “Classical music is vulgarized and diffused through every highway and by-way, and both highbrow and lowbrow are the losers.”⁵⁹ Before comparing mass-mediated music to a cheap prostitute, readily available on every street corner, Lambert complained: “you can rarely escape from a B.B.C. gramophone hour by going to the next public house because they are bound to be presenting the same entertainment.”⁶⁰

The problem, evidently, was not just one of debasement but also of conformism imposed from above: “the whole of London,” Lambert complained, “is made to listen to the choice of a privileged few or even a privileged one.”⁶¹ These “middlemen” were not limited to the most obvious pedagogical or commercial initiatives, but were apparently taking over the entire cultural domain. This meant controlling not just the art people accessed but also how they received it, framing it with a wealth of explanatory paratexts. For Q. D. Leavis, this dubious honor was often held by the contemporary journalist whose “power as middleman in forming popular taste,” she complained, “c[ould] hardly be overestimated.”⁶² According to her, in other words, critics were the middlebrow mediators par excellence, able to determine the success or failure of individual works with their ill-informed and hasty judgments. This was an assessment with which Lambert concurred, invoking the term to describe the stultifying consensus pervading music criticism: “one felt the awful weight of middlebrow opinion against the whole thing,” Lambert explained about the ballet *Apparitions* (1936) even before it was unveiled.⁶³

Although this close relationship between cultural mediator and public risked nudging the contemporary writer or artist out, an even greater threat came from him or her being drawn in to these calculations. While most commentators agreed that the middlebrow had its origins in the social sphere, they took for granted its spread to the aesthetic realm, in ways that eroded this very distinction. In the term’s early history, commentators slipped between modes of mediation, reception, and creation, as if to heighten the nature of the threat. Woolf evidently enjoyed

mocking consumers most of all, but she also complained that middlebrow novels, lectures, and reviews were replicating their anxieties and prejudices, in ways that even threatened to corrupt the lowbrows. Q. D. Leavis went further, tracing concrete connections between middlebrow institutions, critics, audiences, and the novels themselves.⁶⁴ By the time Greenberg and Macdonald penned their post-war “mid-cult” critiques, the dissolution of these boundaries between art and its mediation had become a prominent—even definitive—feature of the middlebrow epidemic.

COMPROMISE AND SYNTHESIS

While detractors insisted that middlebrow values were infecting all areas of cultural life, there remained little agreement as to what they were. Perhaps the most obvious marker was a commitment to compromise—bridging the great divide by avoiding extremes. For defenders, this was less a mark of mediocrity than a means of restoring moderation to a divided cultural field. For instance, although Reith took seriously his Arnoldian mission to bring the “best” culture to everyone, he recognized that this required compromise. In programming, he urged balance between entertaining and edifying works before championing a happy medium instead: “While admitting the desirability or even necessity of catering for extreme tastes, the endeavour has been to transmit as much music as possible which, while perfectly good, should also be quite popular, easily understood and assimilated.”⁶⁵ J. B. Priestley was reportedly even more enthusiastic, embracing this middle ground as his natural home: “Between the raucous lowbrows and the lisping highbrows is a fine gap, meant for the middle or broadbrows . . . We can be cosy together in it. We can talk about bilberry pie.”⁶⁶

If Reith saw this as the common ground that could gradually broaden the public’s cultural horizons, detractors insisted it had the opposite effect, snuffing out aspiration and squeezing everything into a narrow, unadventurous middle: “even the dance music . . . has a quality of sickening and genteel refinement,” Lambert complained; “we are fast losing even the minor stimulus of genuine healthy vulgarity.”⁶⁷ Just as anxieties about the great divide persisted into the postwar era, so too did concerns about the middlebrow: “Hollywood movies aren’t as terrible as they once were,” Dwight Macdonald conceded in 1960, “but they aren’t as good either.”⁶⁸ “The question,” he elaborated, “is whether all this is merely growing pains . . . an expression of social mobility. The danger is that the values of Midcult, instead of being transitional—‘the price of progress’—may now become themselves a debased, permanent standard.” For Macdonald, this standard was not just one of mediocrity but one of a sentimental nostalgia that excluded anything genuinely new. Woolf similarly insisted that middlebrow mediocrity and fetishization of antiques were intertwined: “Queen Anne furniture (faked, but none the less expensive); first editions of dead writers, always the worst, . . . houses in what

is called 'the Georgian style'—but never anything new, never a picture by a living painter, or a chair by a living carpenter, or books by living writers, for to buy living art requires living taste."⁶⁹

In music, this nostalgia was said to have taken hold with particular force, solidifying the concert repertory around a narrow set of nineteenth-century stalwarts. Adorno, for example, complained of "a pantheon of bestsellers," built on familiarity instead of quality.⁷⁰ But perhaps even more disturbing to detractors than this veneration of dusty "masterworks" was the worship of new works in old styles, as though such a compromise were still aesthetically viable. One particularly divisive figure in this respect was Jean Sibelius, whose symphonies became lightning rods for debates about the relationship between musical modernism and middlebrow culture. Thomson saw their popularity as a testament to the stodgy self-indulgence, provincialism, and nostalgia of the Anglo-American middlebrow.⁷¹ Adorno was even more insistent: "That it is possible to compose in a way that is fundamentally old-fashioned, yet completely new: this is the triumph that conformism, looking to Sibelius, begins to celebrate."⁷² "His success," he concluded, "is equivalent to longing for the world to be healed of its sufferings and contradictions, for a 'renewal' that lets us keep what we possess."

In a sense, Adorno was—from his perspective—right to fret, for defenders often championed Sibelius's music as a way out of the great divide: a middlebrow synthesis of originality and progress, high and low, dissolving the extremism that modernism had engendered. By 1916, Ernest Newman was already contrasting Schoenberg's self-defeating radicalism unfavorably with Sibelius's more moderate approach.⁷³ Gray and Lambert each elevated this idea into book-length theses, with their popular modern music surveys culminating with the Finnish symphonist. After championing Sibelius as Beethoven's twentieth-century heir, capable of combining formal concentration with musical immediacy, Gray explained: "if the value of Bartok's best works consists in the extent to which it seems to reveal old and familiar beauty in the novel procedures . . . that of Sibelius, on the contrary, seems rather to reveal a fresh and unsuspected beauty in the old, a wholly new mode of thought and expression embodied in the idioms of the past."⁷⁴ "Sibelius," as Gray went on to insist, "has conclusively shown, what most people had legitimately begun to doubt, that it is still just as possible as it ever was to say something absolutely new, vital, and original, without having to invent a new syntax, a new vocabulary, a new language."⁷⁵ Lambert was just as emphatic, casting Sibelius as the *deus ex machina* to salvage the "disappearing middlebrow," a beacon of compromise lighting a way out of modernism's dead end: "those who sit in the middle of a joy wheel may seem to move slowly but their permanence is more assured than those who for the sake of momentary exhilaration try to pin themselves to its periphery."⁷⁶ "The music of the future," he explained, "must inevitably be directed towards a new angle of vision rather than to the exploitation of a new vocabulary."⁷⁷

As literary and film scholars have sought to revive the middlebrow category in recent years, these visions of a socially driven commitment to compromise or synthesis have offered a powerful means of marking its boundaries. While Joan Rubin's groundbreaking *Making of Middlebrow Culture* contrasted the middlebrow mediator's genteel roots with twentieth-century literary experimentalism, Janice Radway has imagined book-club readers' penchant for uplifting plots and sympathetic characters as a self-conscious reaction against modernist alienation, cynicism, and despair.⁷⁸ For more recent scholars, conceiving of the category in aesthetic terms, these principles have remained central: "middlebrow novels," as Tom Perrin has explained, "reject [modernist radicalism], opting to adapt the conventions of realism in order to represent modernity."⁷⁹ Nicola Humble has even cast the middlebrow novel as a solid middle ground, "offering narrative excitement without guilt, and intellectual stimulation without undue effort."⁸⁰

Such visions of a kind of confident and stable center, with clearly defined boundaries, values, and goals, have helped to illuminate important facets of the middlebrow and redeem it as a coherent—even positive—category in its own right. However, limiting it to these attributes risks whitewashing its history, obscuring its contested and always-ambivalent status. The middlebrow was, after all, something of a moving target, charged with undermining hierarchies in contradictory ways. More problematic still, such scholarly defenses and apologetics have risked reifying a category marked above all by its ontological slipperiness. The middlebrow was not conceived in simple opposition to another category, as high was to low. It was a relational category that struggled to reconcile contradictory ideals, always looking in opposite directions. From this vantage, it would appear problematic to theorize it as a stable movement in and of itself. Anxiety and ambivalence were among its fundamental premises, making it inseparable from the aesthetic oppositions on which it depended. It is perhaps telling that even its advocates—including Priestley and Lambert, as we will see—wavered in their definitions and support, foregrounding the difficulty of occupying the "space between" in an age of conceptual extremes. For every commentator who lauded the middlebrow as a noble and sure-footed compromise, there were several who denigrated it as an altogether contingent terrain.

AMBIVALENCE AND DUPLICITY

Alongside historical accusations of "compromise," modernists often worried that middlebrows were mediating the great divide in less-than-forthright ways. Their detractors accused middlebrows of duplicity, of paying lip service to modernist ideals while undermining them in practice. This sense that middlebrows wavered between genuine and feigned tastes was already implicit in the early *Punch* definition. In Woolf's account, they had graduated to full-scale fraudsters, "curr[ying]

favor with both sides.”⁸¹ This apparently meant saying one thing and doing the opposite, indulging base desires while laying claim to aesthetic purity. It also meant professing mutually exclusive positions without shame or irony. By the time Greenberg and Macdonald launched their polemics, the term was even more closely associated with a counterfeit vanguard, consuming modernism in ways that silently violated its core principles.

This dubious behavior was supposedly rife in the mediation process through which modernist works were packaged for middlebrow consumption. Despite Reith’s avowed rejection of the extremes, the BBC often stoked the flames of middlebrow anxiety, encouraging audiences to “get used to stuff they ought to like.” This involved incorporating the latest and most challenging voices—especially Schoenberg’s—into its radio broadcasts and print media.⁸² One correspondent to the *Musical Times* took issue with listeners being “treated like naughty children,” expected to swallow whatever the BBC’s “Extremist [music] Department” shoved down their throats.⁸³ For Lambert, however, the problem was less the public’s opposition than its passivity. “One might have thought,” he sighed, “that the sturdy British working man . . . would have requested the [pub] proprietor to ‘put a sock in it’—but he just sits there, drinking his synthetic bitter to sounds of synthetic sweetness, not caring whether the speaker is tuned to jazz, a talk on wildflowers, or a Schoenberg opera.”⁸⁴ Meanwhile, magazines like *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker* were apparently setting middlebrow duplicity in even sharper relief, sometimes disavowing their modernist credentials, sometimes touting them as an aggressive form of marketing.⁸⁵ What is more, they were tacitly diluting hard modernism by setting work by Pablo Picasso, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce alongside more palatable styles.⁸⁶

Those sympathetic to the middlebrow naturally imagined this eclecticism as open-mindedness and even cosmopolitanism. After deflecting charges of herd mentality onto both high and low, Priestley suggested rebranding the middlebrow as “broadbrow” in order to emphasize this strength: “[The broadbrows are those who] do not give a fig whether it is popular or unpopular, born in Blackburn or Baku, who do not denounce a piece of art because it belongs to a certain category.”⁸⁷ Looking beyond the provincial world of bilberry pie, he explained: “If you can carry . . . your critical faculty [with you] to Russian dramas, variety shows, football matches, epic poems, grand opera [and so on] . . . [then] you are the salt of the earth, and, of course, one of us.”⁸⁸ According to detractors, however, the kind of middlebrow eclecticism associated with the BBC and smart magazines was motivated less by open-mindedness than the fraudulent desire to have it both ways, as though its modernist costume were covering up baser instincts, interests, and desires. In the minds of die-hard modernists, this was an aberration; for modernism was not the latest “style” or fashion but, rather, an aesthetic imperative that transcended fashion: “A magazine like *The New Yorker*,” Greenberg explained, “is fundamentally high-class Kitsch for the luxury trade[: it] converts and waters down a great deal of avant-garde material for its own uses.”⁸⁹

According to detractors, this eclectic appropriation quickly became an aesthetic problem too, as writers and artists began to reproduce the fashionable variety of middlebrow broadcasts and magazines on the level of technique. As if retracting his positive invocation of the category—as indicative of Sibelian synthesis and compromise—Lambert gave the middlebrow an altogether negative spin when it came to Hindemith: “Paul Hindemith is the journalist of modern music, the supreme middlebrow of our times,” “reflect[ing] the tempo and colour of modern life in the brisk unpolished manner of a newspaper reporter.”⁹⁰ For Lambert, this meant reducing modern music to a set of “styles.” After diagnosing *Life* magazine’s “vulgarized modern art derived from impressionism and its immediate aftermath,” Greenberg went even further, accusing middlebrows of transmuting the already-transmuted modernist “style” into mere subject matter.⁹¹ He cited the complaint of the conductor, record producer, and music critic Kurt List to show that the same was true of music.⁹² List had decried the use of Schoenbergian “mannerisms” to lend “contemporaneity” to an otherwise regressive jumble of musical styles—an assessment with which Adorno agreed.⁹³ Indeed, while the *Philosophy of Modern Music* opposes Stravinskian reaction to Schoenbergian progress, Adorno’s real villains were the postwar eclectics—Britten, Shostakovich, Copland, among others—who wanted it both ways: “feigning unabashed pretensions of ‘modernity’ and ‘seriousness’—[they have] adjusted to mass culture by means of calculated feeble-mindedness”⁹⁴

For various reasons, these commentators saw this middlebrow version of modernism as the direst of all threats. It undermined modernist investments in aesthetic hierarchy and purity even as it stole audiences from modernism proper: “It has many levels,” Greenberg complained, “and some of them are high enough to be dangerous to the naive seeker of true light.”⁹⁵ Even the fiercest detractors admitted that these eclectic forgeries required considerable skill. After commending their capacity to reduce the most avant-garde works into middlebrow forgeries, Macdonald grumbled that “midcult is a more dangerous opponent since it incorporates so much of the avant-garde . . . [It is the product] of lapsed avant-gardists who know how to use the modern idiom in the service of the banal.”⁹⁶ The overall effect, as Greenberg explained, made it almost impossible to distinguish the genuine article from the fake: “the demand now is that the distinctions be blurred if not entirely obliterated [and] the vulgarization be more subtle and more general.”⁹⁷

Perhaps the most serious challenge, however, was to aesthetic autonomy. Indeed, for many, the problem was less eclecticism per se than the duplicity it seemed to invite, as though creator, critic, and audience were involved in a conspiracy. By now, most scholars accept that artistic value and meaning are produced by these complex social relations. Yet even Pierre Bourdieu—one of aesthetic autonomy’s most effective critics—resorted to conspiracy theorizing in the case of the middlebrow: “The imposture it presupposes would necessarily fail if it could not rely on the complicity of the consumers.”⁹⁸ “This complicity,” he explained, “is guaranteed in advance since, in culture as elsewhere, the consumption of ‘imitations’ is an

unconscious bluff which chiefly deceives the bluffer, who has most interest in taking the copy for the original, like the purchaser of ‘seconds,’ ‘rejects,’ cut-price or second-hand goods, who need to convince themselves that ‘it’s cheaper and creates the same effect.’” While Greenberg saw middlebrow duplicity inscribed within the artwork, Bourdieu imagined it as an implicit pact between composer, critic, and audience, all of whom stood to gain from the aesthetic counterfeits: “The producers and consumers of middlebrow culture share the same fundamental relationship to legitimate culture and to its exclusive possessors, so that their interests are attuned to each other as if by a pre-established harmony.”

It is these aspects of “middlebrow” ambivalence, duplicity, and complicity—the characteristics that mid-century modernists most loved to hate—that *Middlebrow Modernism* sets out to illuminate. My aim in so doing is not to reinforce modernist oppositions and prejudices, but rather to lay bare the processes through which they were undermined. By excavating those aspects of middlebrow culture that more defensive studies have overlooked, I want to sketch a fuller picture of the challenges that they posed to the modernist critical tradition. In order to delve into the strategies that allowed middlebrows to “curry favor with both sides,” I focus not only on Britten’s music but also on the mainstream press, who demonstrated a matchless aesthetic duplicity, in ways that responded to and fed Britten’s compositional practice. In adding historical flesh to mid-century complaints about the complicity between middlebrow artists, critics, and audiences, I attempt to steer my own middle course within a methodological divide that has, ironically, opened up within middlebrow scholarship—between studies of mediation and reception on the one hand, and those of creation on the other, as if the category need necessarily be confined to either domain. By examining dialectically the relationship between criticism and Britten’s musical style, I demonstrate that the “problem” of middlebrow culture lay not just in its ability to mediate between high and low, modernism and mass culture, but also in the distinctive challenges it posed to modernist fantasies of aesthetic autonomy.

BRITTEN AND THE MIDDLEBROW

Britten offers an ideal case study for exploring this ambivalence and duplicity, for he was nothing if not a paradoxical figure, staking out space on both sides of the great divide simultaneously. Born in 1913 into a “very ordinary middle class family,” he was one of the earliest products of the interwar middlebrow. His professional career stretched across its mid-century heyday. In his childhood home, music was apparently one of the ways that the Brittens sought to maintain and elevate their social standing.⁹⁹ His musical education benefited from relatively easy access not only to the newly formed BBC Symphony Orchestra, but also to a wireless, a gramophone, and music magazines, from *The Radio Times* and *The*

Listener to Gramophone.¹⁰⁰ Like many in the aspirational audience, he had the BBC to thank for his expansive knowledge of musical repertoire. His enthusiasm for radio, in particular, broadened his horizons beyond the largely romantic tastes of his childhood to include the latest and most challenging examples of continental modernism. If he had “half-decided on Schoenberg” by 1929, a wireless concert the following year elicited a more unequivocal response: “I go to a marvelous Schoenberg concert on the Billison’s wireless . . . I liked [*Pierrot Lunaire*] the most.”¹⁰¹ Elsewhere he responded with the feelings of ambivalence and inadequacy that were the middlebrow stock-in-trade: “Listen to the Wireless—especially to a concert of contemporary music—Schoenberg—Heaven only knows!! I enjoyed his Bach ‘St. Anne’; & quite liked his ‘Peace on earth’ for Chorus—but his ‘Erwartung’—! I could not make head or tail of it—even less than the ‘Peace on earth.’”¹⁰² In good middlebrow fashion, however, Britten resolved to get used to the stuff he ought to like: “I am getting very fond of Schoenberg, especially with study,” he reported after yet another contemporary music program.¹⁰³ By the time of Schoenberg’s death, Britten was apparently confident—doubtless owing much to these early broadcasts—that “[e]very serious composer today has felt the effect of his courage, single-mindedness and determination.”¹⁰⁴

Given Britten’s own experience as a consumer of middlebrow goods, he was predictably adept at catering to this market. As Paul Kildea has documented, Britten’s correspondence with publishers, broadcasters, and recording companies demonstrated extreme sensitivity to the modern music industry.¹⁰⁵ The effects of canny behind-the-scenes negotiations were amplified by a powerful public presence, not only as an establishment composer—recipient of major national commissions, prizes, and honors—but also as performer, pedagogue, recording artist, festival organizer, and arts advocate, among other things. He was the subject of articles in such fashionable publications as *Vogue* and *The Saturday Review*.¹⁰⁶ And while the Metropolitan Opera premiere of *Grimes* in 1948 did not earn him a feature in his beloved *New Yorker*, his *Time* cover spot rehearsed all the usual middlebrow duplicities and ironies.¹⁰⁷ Even as the magazine sought to amplify Britten’s celebrity, the accompanying photo represented him—as Paul Kildea has noted—“earnestly gazing into the distance, his mind on Higher Things.”¹⁰⁸ By the following year, even some BBC administrators were worried about overplaying Britten’s operas.¹⁰⁹ His unrivaled exposure generated resentment among contemporaries. Reporting that one elderly composer had complained that “Britten has only to blow his nose and they record it,” Stephen Williams remarked contemptuously: “He is indubitably the Golden Boy of contemporary music, immensely successful and immensely fashionable.”¹¹⁰ Whether in the spirit of defiance or defense, Britten elevated this reputation into an aesthetic principle: “I want my music to be of use to people, to please them, to ‘enhance their lives’ . . . I do not write for posterity.”¹¹¹ He went on to offer even more pointedly defensive jabs at

modernist esotericism: “it is insulting to address someone in a language which they do not understand.”¹¹²

These public repudiations of modernist difficulty and autonomy notwithstanding, Britten remained ambivalent. Immediately after outlining his utilitarian aesthetic, his Schoenbergian superego reared its head in a critique of mass-technological “popularization.”¹¹³ Earlier, he had denounced the BBC for not trying hard enough to get the public to engage with modernism’s challenges, while simultaneously criticizing American programmers for trying too hard: incorporating it piecemeal into their eclectic programs.¹¹⁴ After lauding the latter’s success, he let out a positively Greenbergian appraisal of this middlebrow fashion: “How much this interest in [modern] music is founded on genuine taste and knowledge, and how much on the desire to be *au courant*, to hear the latest thing, is hard to say.”¹¹⁵ “One of the most serious dangers,” he explained, “lies in the crop of interpreters, commentators, explainers and synthesizers, who make such comfortable livings telling the public that music is really very simple and easy to understand.”¹¹⁶ This snobbery affected his taste in music too: on one occasion he declared himself “sickened” by the “cheapness,” “obviousness,” and “emptiness” of Puccini’s square tunes.¹¹⁷ In more revealing moments, Britten even turned his esotericism and anxiety on himself. “I am a bit worried about my local success at the moment,” he wrote to Elizabeth Mayer in 1943: “It is all a little embarrassing, & I hope it doesn’t mean that there’s too much superficial charm about my pieces.”¹¹⁸ “Perhaps I’d be a better composer,” he worried elsewhere, “if I were more avant-garde.”¹¹⁹ Like the middlebrow audiences that modernists loved to mock, Britten was evidently divided against himself, at once craving popularity and embarrassed by it.

This ambivalence made its presence felt in Britten’s music, which shuttled toward and away from a distinctly modernist musical voice, both between works and at different phases of his career. There was no Straussian volte-face, but a consistent inconstancy—shuttling back and forth between the Schoenbergian *Sinfonietta* (1933) and the populist *Simple Symphony* (1934), with most music falling somewhere in between. Attempting to make sense of Britten’s stylistic “contradictions,” critics appealed to classic middlebrow tropes. Sometimes this meant reaching for the Sibelian model of synthesis, often appropriated as a marker of Englishness: “Is it beyond the bounds of possibility,” one commentator pondered in 1933, “that composers will sooner or later try to discover what modern skill and resources can do with the fundamentals of music?”¹²⁰ Having praised Vaughan Williams for using common chords in a “new-old” way, the same writer nominated a successor: “See for example what Benjamin Britten does with the chord of C major in his *Te Deum*, and with a modern use of primitive devices and material in ‘A Boy [was] Born.’” Like the defenses of Sibelius at roughly the same time, Britten was lauded for renovating traditional musical language instead of inventing it anew. At the time of his death, these images were still going strong, with

Robin Holloway lauding Britten's music for its "power to connect the avant-garde with the lost paradise of tonality": "it shows how old usages can be refreshed and remade, and how the new can be saved from mere rootlessness, etiolation, lack of connexion and communication."¹²¹

From the beginning, however, these images of synthesis rubbed up against the identification of fracture: disparate styles pitted against one another in ways that heightened their incompatibility. Just as with Priestley's "broadbrow" defense, some gave this a positive spin. Charles Stuart championed Britten's omnivorous tastes over Schoenbergian "subjectivism," while Massimo Mila lauded him as an "encyclopedic" model for the "civilized," a "man of culture": "Purcell and Monteverdi, Verdi and Wagner, Mahler and Alban Berg, Stravinsky and Schönberg—these and others were the springs from which the musician drank with eager impartiality."¹²² For Denis ApIvor, Britten's eclecticism was both fruit and seed of middlebrow attempts to educate the British public in the latest musical styles, and required an audience as "cosmopolitan" as Britten himself to appreciate it.¹²³ For most commentators, however, such eclecticism signaled superficial and passive skill—a virtuosic ability to mimic the language of others without saying anything new. Lambert predictably criticized Britten for emphasizing texture over content, style over substance—the opposite of his beloved Sibelius—just as he had done with Hindemith's middlebrow journalism.¹²⁴ William Glock's complaints were even more telling, associating Britten's eclectic assimilation of disparate musical styles with the literal passivity of middlebrow consumers at large: "We should ask whether English music (of which Britten is not the sole phenomenon) is so defunct that we must continue to be a nation of consumers, or to be placed in that state by business men to whom concert-going is an industry and nothing more."¹²⁵ Many years later, Elizabeth Lutyens returned to Lambert's metaphor, impugning Britten as "a brilliant journalist able to produce an instant effect at first hearing, understandable to all."¹²⁶ "Each repeated hearing," she went on to explain—as if imagining the tabloids—"yields less—or so I find."

MIDDLEBROW MUSIC AND CRITICISM

These critical strictures assigned Britten's music firmly to the middlebrow orbit. Yet, if modernists associated his eclecticism with fraudulence and forgery, this open discussion of it also bespoke failure to keep the middlebrow mask in place. The stories recounted throughout this book are, on the surface, accounts of more positive reception. Explicit accusations of cleverness, insincerity, superficiality, and even eclecticism are rare. However, far from representing a move away from middlebrow ambivalence and duplicity, they exemplify a more successful form of it, almost as if critics were in on the act. While Britten scholars have tended to play up negative critical reactions to Britten's cleverness and eclecticism, ostensibly in order to confirm his "outsider" image, we will see that a more common response

among mid-century reviewers was to defend and prevaricate. They praised the works on terms they thought most respectable, while ignoring, erasing, or sublimating aesthetic elephants in the room: sentimentality, romanticism, tonality, lyricism, spectacle, and the list goes on. Middlebrow ambivalence and duplicity are, in other words, a constant “absent presence” in the chapters that follow, rarely admitted but easily detected in critical exaggerations, defenses, obfuscations, subtractions, and apologies.

These creative critical strategies are as much the subject of this book as Britten’s music. In taking journalistic criticism seriously enough to read between its lines, *Middlebrow Modernism* aims to challenge modernist modes of analysis even as it complicates modernist historiographical models. For, as Richard Taruskin has pointed out, traditional musicological indifference to matters of mediation and reception has often been bound up with the cultural politics of modernism—that is, with the very divide that this study sets out to complicate.¹²⁷ In recent years, this oversight has been remedied by a wave of reception histories, many of which have sought to demonstrate the contingency and mutability of musical meaning.¹²⁸ But while press responses serve as starting points for the chapters that follow, this is not a *Rezeptionsgeschichte* in the traditional sense. It treats reception not as a separate activity, as if to grant it the same autonomy traditionally accorded musical works. Rather, it seeks to understand criticism as an inextricable part both of the creative history of Britten’s operas and of the landscape from which they hailed—the hinge upon which the mid-century middlebrow turned.

Despite modernist attempts to distance journalists from the “ordinary” public, critics endeavored to mediate between artists and the audience. This meant charging themselves with gauging and representing public opinion, even relaying it back to artists in a kind of feedback loop: “The ‘essay in dissonance’ by Arnold Schoenberg,” one critic reported, “moved [the public] beyond to laughter, hisses, and applause.”¹²⁹ But when it came to modernism, critics were often just as confused as the audience they were supposed to guide. After recounting Schoenberg’s fiasco the commentator complained of the “new problem” facing the press: “Past generations of critics unhesitatingly condemned the new and strange and unintelligible, and are now held up to pity and ridicule.” “If we pour scorn on our ‘Futurist’ school,” he asked anxiously, “are we preparing the same fate for ourselves? On the other hand, the movement may be ephemeral and its supporters become known as victims of a passing craze.” Critics, in other words, were not just enforcers of middlebrow anxiety about what people ought to like, but also subject to it. This often meant tropes passing quickly from previewers to reviewers, as if to demonstrate the conformist force of opinion. Indeed, it is noteworthy that, despite the notorious hermeneutic and stylistic ambiguity of Britten’s operas, there was often relative consensus among critics even across traditional cultural, aesthetic, and political divides.

These critical orthodoxies were not confined to a narrow circle of critical elites. While scholars have rightly been cautious about conflating journalistic responses

with those of contemporary audiences, the middlebrow music press often had the will and the power to frame the terms of discussion and shape contemporary experience. Many of the reviews that appear in this study—from local newspapers to specialist music periodicals—combined analytical detail and specificity with a didactic style. Some were even put out before the premieres in order to maximize their power and reach. Indeed, Britten was apparently worried enough about the power of critics to complain of “the people who *won't* judge for themselves,” casting Leavisite aspersions of his own: “I heard recently, of a woman who learned a certain critic’s phrases off by heart in order to appear knowledgeable and witty herself.”¹³⁰ Elsewhere, he was even more explicit, anxiously denying the influence of critics except on “those dreary middlebrows who don’t know what to think until they read the *New Statesman*!”¹³¹

In turning his nose up at those who took criticism seriously, Britten was as disingenuous as the next middlebrow. For someone who claimed never to read press reviews—reportedly on doctor’s orders—he was often painfully aware of what had been written about each of his works.¹³² His letters and diaries reveal extreme sensitivity to criticism and he was bothered enough to hit back publicly, not just at individual critics but also at the profession of criticism itself.¹³³ Like Q. D. Leavis, Britten was annoyed by the rashness and incompetence of these parasitic meddlers, coupled with their enormous power: “We are admittedly not quite as far gone as New York where, I gather, bad notices can kill a play or opera stone dead; here they can at least wriggle a little,” he sighed morbidly.¹³⁴ It is perhaps for this reason that, as Paul Kildea has shown, Britten occasionally took to currying favor with particular critics, twisting their arms behind the scenes.¹³⁵ Indeed, despite his complaints about negative treatment, most composers were envious of his relationship with the press, not excepting Stravinsky, who insisted that the adulatory reception accorded the *War Requiem* “was a phenomenon as remarkable as the music itself.”¹³⁶ Elsewhere, Stravinsky shook off the tepid reception of his own *Abraham and Isaac* with a jealous shrug: “Well, what can you do, it’s not for everybody to have Benjamin Britten’s success with the critics.”¹³⁷

Although Stravinsky emphasized the critical creativity involved in sublimating Britten’s works, he also implied that the music—with its fake counterpoint, cinematic grandeur, and counterfeit modernism—invited the press dissimulation it eventually received. Nor is this surprising, for Britten’s self-consciousness about his critical reception underpinned his anxious play between disparate “styles.” After warning young composers of journalists trying “to find the correct pigeon-hole definition,” he explained: “These people are dangerous . . . because they make the composer, especially the young composer, self-conscious, and instead of writing his own music, music which springs naturally from his gift and personality, he may be frightened into writing pretentious nonsense or deliberate obscurity.”¹³⁸ As with most of Britten’s warnings, it is hard not to read this as a confession. This makes him a compelling case study not just of complicity between composition,

criticism, and consumption, but of broader historical fears about the erosion of these very distinctions. In denouncing music by the likes of Hindemith and Britten as a form of middlebrow “journalism,” in other words, critics may have been shrewder than they imagined. For Britten’s music not only worked in tandem with criticism but—insofar as it attempted to guide its own reception—was a form of criticism itself: at once a part of and commentator upon the latest musical fashions. If criticism involved a creative shaping of music into stylistic categories, the process could just as easily work the other way around, with music serving as a quasi-journalistic chronicle of styles. Indeed, it is doubtless telling that Britten’s image of music critics as parasites—living off the musical creativity of others, digesting it, and spewing it out into easily recognizable “styles”—is one that, ironically, attached itself to his music.

REHEARING BRITTEN

Just as this reciprocity between Britten’s music and its criticism can help to flesh out hitherto unexplored facets of the middlebrow, so making space for this precarious category promises fresh perspectives on the composer. Britten scholars have often sought defensively to minimize the composer’s ambivalence.¹³⁹ On a biographical level, this has meant touting Britten’s rejection of modernist esotericism and painting him as an unashamed populist, despite his lifelong anxieties about pandering.¹⁴⁰ Yet this tendency has gone hand in hand with the opposite approach to the music, with many of the same scholars focusing on and exaggerating aspects that accord with modernist aesthetics: attenuated or extended tonality; motivic unity and coherence; transgressive plots or themes. By 1953, Peter Tranchell was already complaining about the canny selectiveness of Britten studies as an emerging field, citing a volume that would go on to set the defensive tone for subsequent scholarship.¹⁴¹ Even one as recent as Kildea, whose painstaking research has illuminated Britten’s shrewd market calculations, has striven to insulate the major works from these processes, as if to protect their originality and autonomy.¹⁴² In most scholarly accounts, then, Britten still emerges somehow as both a man of the masses and an uncompromising modernist, with very little acknowledgment of the contradictions involved.

In those instances where these paradoxes have been addressed, it has only served the better to defuse them. Negative critical reactions have been adduced in implicit defense, a way of associating Britten with modernist alterity despite himself.¹⁴³ Another common tactic has been to invoke Britten’s supposedly counter-cultural politics—whether pacifism, socialism, or queerness—as a counterweight to his success: “For anyone inclined to explore beyond [the] deceptively ‘conservative’ and desperately ‘inviting’ surface [of Britten’s music],” Philip Brett explained, “it offers not only a rigorous critique of the past but also a vision of a differently

organized future.”¹⁴⁴ Brett’s interpretations of course broke new ground in queer musicology, opening up the way for a wave of scholarship exploring the relationship between Britten’s operas and his homosexuality—a topic that up until that point had been actively suppressed.¹⁴⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, this outpouring has—with a few notable exceptions—tended to focus on reading between lines, in ways that draw on a much older, value-laden differentiation between a superficial level of perception and a deeper one.¹⁴⁶ In this respect, Brett exemplified the continuing legacy of modernism in even ostensibly postmodern interpretations of Britten’s operas. After all, it was this same metaphor of surface and depth that had allowed Keller to explain away Britten’s popularity as a mass misunderstanding: “[Britten’s] music is approachable on various levels . . . so that the superficial listener, moving on the most superficial level, may yet be strongly impressed and may think he knows all about what he hears.”¹⁴⁷ This strategy has also been deployed by more recent scholars from Claire Seymour to Paul Kildea, who pay lip service to the notorious “ambiguity” of Britten’s textual and musical surface only to resolve it by excavating the “real” meaning buried below.¹⁴⁸

These critical strategies have evidently outlasted their roots in the mid-century middlebrow. Indeed, one of this book’s central arguments is that Britten’s operas invite the selective reception they have enjoyed, in ways that still encourage listeners to defend and to dissimilate. Yet scholarship can and should try to see through the terms that the works themselves appear to propose. This is particularly important in the case of Britten. For in papering over the cracks in his operatic aesthetic, scholars have masked key aspects of his musical language. More importantly, they have evaded the broader challenges that he poses to modernist aesthetics. As a corrective, this study seeks to recover the more compromising features of Britten’s operas, which have lain hidden so long in plain sight, overlooked by scholarship and criticism that value depth, difficulty, and complexity above all else.¹⁴⁹ In this respect, it adopts a musical version of “surface reading,” a term coined by recent literary scholars to advance alternatives to the deep reading practices that have hitherto dominated literary and cultural criticism.¹⁵⁰ Rather than merely reversing black and white by turning Britten into an unashamed populist, however, I will show how conventional features were combined with and set against explicitly modernist traits. Instead of attempting to defuse ambivalence, my aim is to take it seriously as an aesthetic stance in its own right, central to middlebrow negotiations of the great divide.

OPERA AND THE MIDDLEBROW

If Britten offers a vivid portrait of these tensions, so too does the operatic medium through which he made his name. As one of the most expensive, elaborate, and spectacular of artistic genres, it naturally drew the most critical comment, both in

relation to individual works and within broader discussions of cultural policy. For some, it was a symbol of high culture at its most extravagant. According to modernists like Pierre Boulez, it was this high cultural performativity that made opera a lightning rod for middlebrow duplicity, those “who go to the opera because one must go to the opera, because that is what society likes to see, because it is a cultural duty.”¹⁵¹ It was for this reason that the opera house was—for Boulez—a hot-bed of middlebrow conservatism, a “musty old wardrobe,” a “relic, a well-cared for museum . . . full of dust and crap.”¹⁵²

It was not just social and institutional factors but also aesthetic considerations that marked opera as irredeemably middlebrow. Indeed, at a time when composers like Boulez were imagining musical formalism as the apogee of modernist autonomy, opera’s concrete scenarios and dramatic spectacles struck them as all too compromising, making musical artworks superficially accessible.¹⁵³ According to Adorno, this tension was compounded by opera’s investment in duplicity, mirroring its middlebrow audience even more acutely: “that aura of disguise, of miming, which attracts the child to the theater—not because the child wants to see a work of art, but because it wants to confirm its own pleasure in dissimulation.”¹⁵⁴ “The closer opera gets to a parody of itself,” Adorno elaborated, “the closer it gets to its own particular element.”¹⁵⁵ In the case of “modern” opera—viewed by both Adorno and Boulez as a contradiction in terms—attempts to resist the genre’s illusionism compounded, rather than remedied, operatic duplicity: “Opera has reached the state of crisis because the genre cannot dispense with illusion without surrendering itself, and yet it must want to do so.”¹⁵⁶ After describing a swan-less *Lohengrin* or *Freischiütz* without the Wolf’s Glen, Adorno complained: “Demystified opera inevitably threatens to degenerate into an arts and crafts affair, where stylization threatens to substitute for disintegrating style. Modernity, which does not really intervene in the matter, becomes mere packaging, becomes modernism.”¹⁵⁷

Britten’s operas provide a revealing lens through which to explore the kind of middlebrow tensions that mid-century modernists associated with the genre. Britten was, after all, both an advocate for and a beneficiary of postwar attempts to promote opera to a wider audience.¹⁵⁸ Yet, if his operas were conceived with this end in mind, they did not always wear their compromises proudly on their sleeves, especially when compared with overtly pedagogical pieces like *The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra* (1945) and *Noye’s Fludde* (1958).¹⁵⁹ At the same time, Britten was uncomfortably aware of opera’s troublesome reputation among modernists, describing the modern opera composer—himself especially—as an “anachronism.”¹⁶⁰ This self-consciousness manifested itself in the operas themselves and their reception, in ways that aggravated his already ambivalent musical style in distinctly operatic ways. Indeed, throughout this study, we will see the kind of struggles that Boulez and Adorno identified: between theatrical illusionism and abstract symbolism, extravagant spectacle and modernist austerity. Yet, we will also see that these tensions were not limited to the visual sphere, as

anti-operatic detractors tended to imply. For one thing, Britten's librettos often drew self-consciously on the allegorical mode—as we have already seen in *Paul Bunyan*—marked as it was by a similar disjuncture between real world referents and “higher” significance.¹⁶¹ Perhaps even more provocative, however, was Britten's musical eclecticism, which combined the putatively “cheap” and immediate conventions of nineteenth-century opera with the formalist markers of contemporary modernism. In doing so, Britten's operas not only raised questions about modernism's aesthetic oppositions but also threatened to knock music itself off its pedestal of autonomy.

. . .

The eclectic variety of Britten's operas was such that each work offers an opportunity to explore a different middlebrow challenge to modernist critical categories. Chapter 2 examines how *Peter Grimes* (1945) undermined oppositions between realism and difficulty on the one hand, and “easy” sentimentality on the other. After describing attempts of early critics to stylize *Grimes* as an authentic modernist opera that shocked audiences, I uncover the more sentimental charms that commentators struggled to erase: its idealized vision of love, its melodrama, its manipulation of sympathy, and its compelling musical lyricism. Beyond pointing out previous omissions, I seek to explain how Britten's opera encouraged the subtractive reactions it received. I argue that by pitting “romantic” tropes against “modernist” ones, sumptuous lyricism against its erasure, *Grimes* was able to stage its own difficulty, translating modernism's supposed rejection of nineteenth-century sentimentality into a rhetorical style for easy consumption. As sketched here, the story offers two challenges to modernist criticism. It suggests that modernism's aesthetic of difficulty was actually quite fashionable among middlebrow critics and audiences. More provocatively, it raises the possibility that the infamous difficulty of modernism was itself like that of *Grimes*: a stylistic affectation that depended on the very sentimentality it seemed to reject.

This idea of modernism as a performative style or rhetorical mode is explored further in the third chapter, on *Albert Herring* (1947). If *Grimes* muddled the waters between difficulty and sentimentality, *Herring* caused trouble for the equally strict opposition between tradition and innovation. After detailing the ways in which the text and music of Britten's operatic comedy of manners simultaneously undermine and embrace tradition, I discuss the various strategies that early commentators used to finesse this ambivalence. Critical selection and subtraction will come in for some analysis, along with journalistic appeals to modernist irony, in an effort to unsettle long-standing assumptions about musical modernism's relationship with the past. The reception of *Albert Herring* demonstrates that modernist voices were indeed heard in even the most eclectic patchwork of past traditions, and that this was necessarily the case. Drawing on middlebrow criticism from Priestley to Lambert, I argue that modernist oppositions are most profitably understood

in dialectical terms, according to which old and new, tradition and innovation, depend on one another for definition.

Ever since its premiere in 1954, commentators have tried to steer *The Turn of the Screw* away from the traditions of gothic melodrama. Fearing that it might be dismissed as a “cheap” ghost story, commentators maintained that Britten’s opera was a paradigm of modernist restraint: an up-to-date ghost story, whose phantoms were supposedly more psychological than real. In chapter 4, I discuss the ways in which Britten’s operatic adaptation of Henry James’s novella, published in 1898, simultaneously summons and confounds such defenses. I draw attention to willfully ignored gothicisms in the libretto, stage designs, and music, revealing the influence of popular literature, radio, and film. I also trace the critical anxiety and reticence about these elements to early- and mid-century rejections of the gothic tradition. Rather than attempting to resolve the interpretive question that has preoccupied critics and scholars—whether the opera’s ghosts are real or imaginary—my chapter excavates its stakes. In mediating between gothic melodrama and modernist psychodrama, Britten’s *Screw* showed how much these alleged aesthetic opposites had in common.

In the fifth chapter, I consider *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966), the second of Britten’s parables for church performance. After setting the work against the backdrop of modernist repudiations of religious kitsch and the reception of Britten’s own *War Requiem* (1962) and *Curlew River* (1964) more specifically, I discuss the fine line it trod amid contemporary critical oppositions: between sacred asceticism and aestheticism, mystical transcendence and authoritarian sublime. I explore how the *Furnace*’s appeal to musical exoticism and minimalism freed its sublimity from associations with High Anglican demagoguery, fashioning a spirituality more compatible with the modernity, rationalism, and secularism of the mid-century middlebrow. I also suggest that the work managed to smuggle back religious registers of a more explicitly sensuous and monumental nature, often in association with Babylonian rituals. Ultimately, however, I argue that the trouble critics had separating religious aestheticism and asceticism—or even deciding which they found more compelling—raises much broader boundary questions about twentieth-century sacred music.

My sixth and final chapter considers the ways in which *Death in Venice* (1973) responded to the fraught discourse surrounding opera in the second half of the twentieth century. If the genre as a whole often threatened to fall on the wrong side of contemporaneous oppositions—between abstraction and immediacy, intellectual and visceral—the opera’s early critics still tended to cast its visual spectacles and musical rhetoric into rarefied terms. As an opera that is essentially “about” translating base pleasures into abstract intellectual reflection, *Death in Venice* offers an opportunity to explore middlebrow critical apologetics in detail. After identifying an “aesthetic of sublimation” in contemporaneous criticism, I explore how Britten’s operatic swansong resists the suppressions that it incites. Drawing on

Adorno's ambivalent diatribe about opera from 1955, I argue that *Death in Venice* may be fruitfully regarded as a "bourgeois opera," a postwar operatic version of the middlebrow. In simultaneously staging and confounding oppositions at the heart of anti-operatic discourse, the work illuminates the wider ways in which composers, directors, critics, and audiences sought to overcome twentieth-century opera's supposedly terminal illness.

MODERNISM BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Ultimately, this study attempts to recapture the heated contention in which Britten's operas were unveiled. At the same time, it holds back from issuing value judgments of its own. My aim is neither to champion the middlebrow as a grand synthesis nor to denigrate it as a duplicitous compromise, the way its mid-century defenders or detractors did. One of the main pitfalls in scholarly accounts of modernism especially has been a tendency to continue the mudslinging of twentieth-century polemicists. Rather than replacing a modernist canon of works or values with a middlebrow one—as literary scholars have often attempted to do—I want to formulate an "archaeology" of value in the Foucauldian sense.¹⁶² This means demonstrating how the everyday practice of music composition and criticism implicated broader debates about the relationship between modernism and middlebrow culture. More importantly, it means excavating the underlying stakes. For, as will become clear, the anxieties and strategies detailed throughout this study were about much more than Britten's operas or even a discrete set of "middlebrow" products or practices. Rather they spoke to much broader concerns about the relationship between aesthetic ideals and the everyday exigencies of market society.

The point at issue was, after all, the middlebrow's notorious inconsistency. Middlebrow stylistic eclecticism was viewed as a proxy for vacillations with respect to audiences, not to mention the audience's own inconsistencies and ambivalence. This flew in the face of modernist commitments to purity and autonomy—to following aesthetic ideals through to the bitter end. For all their denigration, in other words, commentators like Adorno and Stravinsky were not wrong to bring out the duplicity and ambivalence of Britten and his devotees. The operatic case studies that follow are steeped in contradictory aims and objectives. Creators said one thing and did another. There was a pervasive mismatch between works and their critical reception and manifest contradictions within criticism itself. The middlebrow, then, becomes a useful category for unsettling modernist expectations of consistency, carving out space for examining the mechanics—even aesthetics—of duplicity. In foregrounding these aspects, my perspective approaches that of the theater scholar David Savran, who understands the category in terms of an underhanded selling out of its own principles.¹⁶³ Yet while Savran replicates the snobbery he rails against—denouncing middlebrow inauthenticity and imagining a more "authentic" form—my account avoids such utopian fantasies of aesthetic

purity. In reality, “middlebrow” calculations were never the aberrant conspiracies that modernist commentators made them out to be. They were, rather, the routine processes by which aesthetic, political, and social ideals were negotiated in everyday practice. Britten and other middlebrows, in other words, were not special cases but pressure points. They typified the broader paradoxes of twentieth-century art, torn between originality and autonomy, and the desire to communicate with mass audiences.

This expansiveness was for good or ill fundamental to historical conceptions of the category. Where modernism was seen as an investment in rigid boundaries and hierarchies, not to mention purity, the middlebrow was marked by a capacity to overstep its bounds, drawing everything up into its orbit: “Unlike [mass culture], which has its social limits marked out for it,” Greenberg complained, “middlebrow culture attacks distinctions as such and insinuates itself everywhere . . . Insidiousness of its essence, and in recent years its avenues of penetration have become increasingly difficult to detect and block.”¹⁶⁴ In part, these fears were inspired by the popularization of modernism in middlebrow media, which recent scholars like Daniel Tracey and Lise Jalliant have begun to explore.¹⁶⁵ Modernists regarded the middlebrow as even more pernicious than mass culture because it threatened to turn the great divide into a slippery slope, on which they might lose their footing. On a deeper level, though, the middlebrow aroused fears that modernists had already slipped, serving less as an outside threat than as a mirror and scapegoat for modernism’s own duplicity: “we are all of us becoming guilty in one way or another,” Greenberg sighed.¹⁶⁶ It is this sense of modernist abjection that underlies many of the tensions detailed throughout the present study, making it as much a story of modernism as of its middlebrow other.

At roughly the same time that Woolf was voicing her rejection of those “betwixt and between,” she was working on some middlebrow projects of her own.¹⁶⁷ As Joseph Auner has shown, Schoenberg was likewise rejecting “concessions” to audiences and performers even as he worked to make his work more accessible.¹⁶⁸ Much like Britten, he simultaneously courted public attention and was repulsed by it.¹⁶⁹ Schoenberg’s relationship to critics was equally paradoxical.¹⁷⁰ According to Lambert, Schoenberg relied upon—even colluded with—critics to advertise his fabled radicalism and autonomy, masking an ambivalence plainly audible on the musical surface: “the spiritual conflict in his works is obvious, even though he may cry *À la lanterne*’ with more fervor than the most bloodthirsty of *sans-culottes*.”¹⁷¹ “Behind his most revolutionary passages,” Lambert observed, “lurks the highly respectable shade of Mendelssohn”—a music torn between abstract formalism and a much older romanticism.¹⁷² Similarly, even as Adorno championed Schoenberg’s categorical radicalism over the halfhearted innovations of Britten, Shostakovich, and others, he admitted that even Schoenberg’s position fell short of his hopes. At the end of his meditation on “progress,” Adorno conceded—echoing Lambert, Priestley, and other card-carrying middlebrows—that any attempt to eradicate

convention led into an infinite regress. If the only way to avoid compromise was to fall silent, it followed that even Schoenberg was implicated in middlebrow duplicity and ambivalence.

Perhaps the problem with Britten's "middlebrow" operas, then, was not that they reconciled irreconcilable binaries so much as that they undermined them, suggesting that modernism itself was irredeemably middlebrow. In theorizing the deliberately paradoxical concept of "middlebrow modernism," this study seeks to harness the concept's deconstructive potential. When seen through this lens, twentieth-century music may begin to resemble the visions sketched by the new modernist studies: a space in which ambivalence and variety reign, and boundaries disappear—adding yet another modernism to the growing list. Indeed, this study even seems to support definitions of modernism itself as a kind of ambivalence, destabilizing the oppositions it was imagined to uphold. And yet the stories recounted throughout this book also support the opposite conclusion: that the great divide ran deeper than even Huyssen supposed. It shows that its mythical oppositions were not limited to polemics but left an impression on the everyday practice of composition, mediation, and reception even when they were not explicitly invoked. It was, after all, the contours of the great divide that made for the musical and critical strategies to be traced herein, even if these strategies ended up undermining the great divide in turn.

If the new modernist studies have risked broadening out modernism into a flat, limitless terrain, with values and hierarchies erased, my study seeks to recover the aesthetic prejudices and battles that were fundamental to early- and mid-twentieth-century conceptions. Hierarchical categories like high, middle, and low were real enough to have social and aesthetic consequences and thus retain their historical significance, subject to ideological critique. Replicating middlebrow doubleness on the level of historiographical technique, this study shows how even the crudest oppositions and hierarchies affected the everyday practice of composition, mediation, and reception, while simultaneously laying bare the process through which they were undermined. Ultimately it was this tension between theory and practice, aesthetic ideals and their everyday articulation, that made the mid-century debate such a fraught one. By focusing on this agonistic tension, my study permits a new understanding of musical modernism without losing a sense of its narrowness. It seeks to challenge modernist historiography without writing over its history. Rather than replacing modernism's unequivocal ideals with its messy, ambivalent practice, *Middlebrow Modernism* foregrounds the tension—between the erection and erosion of hierarchy, mythic rhetoric and pragmatic realities—as a central, even definitive, part of the story of twentieth-century musical culture.