

Music and Metaphor: Legacies of Representation in Abstract Instrumental Music  
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E.T.A. Hoffmann, a nineteenth-century music critic, composer, and novelist, famously described an early performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in terms of the sublime. "Radiant beams shoot through the deep night of this region, and we become aware of gigantic shadows which, rocking back and forth, close in on us and destroy all within us except the pain of endless longing," he wrote.<sup>1</sup> The works of an equally revolutionary and pivotal composer, Arnold Schoenberg, being premiered in the early twentieth century, received a very different reception: critics wrote that they were the "reproduction of the sounds of nature in their crudest form;" that one piece "combines the best sound effects of a hen yard at feeding time, a brisk morning in Chinatown, and practice hour at a busy conservatory." In short, Schoenberg's music was the "last word in cacophony and musical anarchy, the most ear-splitting combination of tones that ever desecrated a concert hall."<sup>2</sup>

The critical reactions to Beethoven and to Schoenberg represent the extremes, but they are nonetheless indicative of a radical shift in public reception of new instrumental music. Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt were rock stars in their day; their compositions, for the most part, were eagerly awaited and enthusiastically lauded by contemporary audiences. Twentieth-century composers like Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern and Alban Berg, on the other hand, were ridiculed; critics and audiences alike denounced their music as incomprehensible and—worst of all diatribes—"dissonant."

What changed from the time of Beethoven to the time of Schoenberg? Beethoven, like Schoenberg, was revolutionary; like Schoenberg he introduced audiences to new ways of thinking about music. Both of them pioneered new musical structures, and the music of both

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music, Volume 2: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 706.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Slonimsky, *Slonimsky's Book of Musical Anecdotes* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 190.

relied heavily on those structures. What music *was*, in a fundamental sense, was unchanged between the two: it was highly organized sound, grouped in comprehensible created patterns. Yet Schoenberg's music was considered "musical anarchy" and "hens at feeding time" whereas Beethoven's was hailed as radiant beams through darkness; as the voice of God in art.

Historically, the gulf between Beethoven and Schoenberg was Romanticism: its birth heralded by Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony in 1804 and its demise crystallized by Schoenberg's revolutionary atonality, Romanticism in music used the deconstruction of Classical form as a means of communicating emotion in abstract instrumental works. However, the key to understanding why critics' responses to Beethoven and to Schoenberg were so different lies in recognizing, first, the commonality of the critics' approaches in both instances. Writings about Beethoven's music in the early nineteenth century and those about Schoenberg's in the twentieth reveal a shared interpretative position that is rooted in metaphor: the explanation of an ostensibly abstract art through images of "radiant beams" and "gigantic shadows" and "reproduction of the sounds of nature." The difference between the reception of Beethoven's music in the early nineteenth century and that of Schoenberg in the twentieth stems from the historical development of instrumental music as an art that didn't correspond to a historical development of its audience.

Firstly, romantic ideals about music reveal an art that was communicative through metaphor, and one of the one of the most deliciously compelling—and eternally problematic—Romantic conceptions of music in this way involves its relationship to language. Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow encapsulated this ideal in his famous remark that "music is the universal language of mankind." Romantic composer Robert Schumann agreed; he wrote, "Music speaks the most universal of languages, one by which the soul is freely, but *indefinably* moved; but it is

then at home.”<sup>3</sup>

Assertions of this kind cannot be taken as literal truth, as intriguing as the idea of music as language may be. Clearly music cannot be a language in any traditional sense of the word. Even while, on a superficial level, its organization can resemble language in syntax, grammar and form—notes likened to syllables, chords to words, phrases and phrase groupings to sentences and paragraphs—it cannot be a language in any manner *but* organization and form. Its abstractness prevents it: absent a system of concretely defined representational symbols referring to things outside itself, music cannot hold the semantic content essential to language as a communicative medium. Equally clearly, though, the mantra connecting music to language is not merely a statement on syntax and form: its implications strike deep into the heart of what music is and is supposed to do. From a rational standpoint, these claims appear silly: lacking semantic content, music is not language and cannot be language, and Romantic assertions to the contrary are empty and meaningless.

However, the “music is language” claim may be taken differently, not as literal truth but as metaphor: metaphor to aid in grasping the all-important (to the Romantics, at least) element of communication in music. Communication—the element that appears to be so obviously lacking in abstract instrumental music—is precisely the element that Romanticism would ascribe to it, and not only communication but *universal* communication, free of the mundane necessity of concrete representational symbols employed by ordinary languages to refer to things outside of themselves. The metaphor of language presents an answer to the conundrum of how a supposedly abstract art can be expressive and communicative: music communicates because it is

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Schumann, “Aphorisms,” in *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, ed. Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Group, 1984), 360.

like language.

The question remains, however, what characteristics of music would enable it to communicate in a manner similar to language. The Romantics do not answer this question. Nonetheless, their assertion that music *is* language cannot be examined independent of the historical association of music *with* language in the form of song. This association went so deep into the heart of the development of music as an art form that language and words left an unerasable imprint on musical thought that is largely responsible for its perceived communicative capabilities.

The recurring theme that music is language refers to music on its own, as a language unto itself, in abstract instrumental music, but in the history of Western classical music, the very development of abstract instrumental music was a recent innovation in the Romantic era. From its earliest beginnings, music was paired with words: the voice is the most readily available instrument to human beings, and the oldest musical traditions that can be uncovered by musicologists are vocal traditions. Instruments, when used, were usually accompanimental to the voice; in the Roman Catholic Mass—a crucial institution in the development of Western music—instruments were banned until the sixteenth century.

Furthermore, musical debates until the late eighteenth century invariably focused solely on the relationship of text to music. The Counter-Reformation of the 1500's demanded an end to the intricate polyphony that was obscuring the Latin texts of the Mass (according to legend, Giovanni de Palestrina saved polyphony in the Catholic Church by writing a six-part mass in a new style of polyphony that made the text intelligible). Sixteenth-century Italian madrigals, meanwhile, popularized a means of setting poems that specifically matched the imagery of the

text: dissonances on words that conveyed anguish, gentler intervals for images of sweetness, and rhythmic patterns that imitated the natural declamation of speech. The heated musical debates of the French Enlightenment, addressing the style of recitative in opera, rested on shared assumptions regarding the interconnectedness of music and language.

From a historical perspective, then, abstract instrumental music was a new development in the Western Classical tradition during the Romantic era. Not until the eighteenth century did instrumental music begin to find its own voice, acquiring both a new self-sufficiency and a new prominence in the public sphere. The violin sonatas of Italian Archangelangelo Corelli—the first composer in the Western classical tradition to acquire an international reputation without having ever set a word of text to music—pioneered the use of tonal form, a way in which music could organize itself, without reliance on song or dance forms. As Corelli’s sonatas became popular across Europe, other composers copied his musical devices; large-scale tonal organization in instrumental pieces was now easily accomplished. Additionally, the performance of this music became more popular: in 1725 a popular Paris concert series that mixed instrumental and vocal genres, the *Concerts Spirituels*, began a highly successful run that lasted sixty-five years. By the end of the century, the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart made instrumental music the main attraction at serious concerts.

The arrival of instrumental music onto the musical scene, however, was met with a resistance that indicated the strength of the connection between music and words. Eighteenth-century aesthetic thought was dominated by rising theories of the “fine arts,” unified by Aristotelian mimesis—imitation or representation of nature in art. Only through mimesis, according to eighteenth-century thought, could art—painting, poetry, drama, or music—be “fine art.” Music, which on its own lacked the capacity for representing anything outside of itself,

could only be mimetic through a connection to words; therefore, philosophers of the time explicitly excluded instrumental music from their conceptions of fine art. In his 1768 *Dictionnaire de musique*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, “Who does not sense how far pure *Symphonie*, in which nothing is sought but instrumental brilliance, is from such an effect [of awakening sentiment]? Can all the violinistic fireworks of M. Mondonville evoke in me the tenderness the voice of a great singer produces in two notes? *Symphonie* can enliven song and add to its expressiveness, but it cannot supplant it.”<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant’s 1790 *Critique of Judgment* similarly dismissed instrumental music—including that of Beethoven—as incapable of arousing sentiment in the manner of fine art.<sup>5</sup> In the minds of eighteenth-century philosophers, music needed words to be meaningful, and their assertions are entirely explicable in the context of a music whose history was inextricably bound up in its connection to words.

Of course, in the grand scheme of things, abstract instrumental music won and mimesis lost. Haydn and Mozart burst on the scene in the latter half of the eighteenth century, turning instrumental genres, most notably the symphony, the concerto, and the sonata, into respectable concert music. Even more dramatically, the music of Beethoven, beginning with the giant of composition that is the *Eroica* symphony, transformed instrumental music into an art that was about the expression of the artist: Beethoven’s symphonies were long, musically complex, dramatic, and they demanded audience attention in a way that instrumental music hadn’t before. In this context, music did not need words to be expressive. With the advent of Romanticism,

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de Musique: Sonate*, in *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, ed. Weiss and Taruskin, 288.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 16. Kant makes ambiguous claims regarding instrumental music that indicate its growing presence as an art to be taken seriously, but he ultimately refuses it admittance into the exclusive club of the fine arts. In §51 he grants that music on its own can be *like* fine art by virtue of the form of its vibrations; however, in §54 he qualifies the statement by adding that music cannot actually *be* fine art, merely agreeable art, because it lacks the content of fine art.

music was freed from service to text, and mimesis theories of the fine arts disintegrated. In 1819, Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* elevated music not only to the status of fine art, but as the most privileged among the fine arts by virtue of embodying the Will itself, rather than merely copying it.<sup>6</sup> Music's abstractness—formerly the source of its inadequacy—was now exalted, giving music the capacity to express the inexpressible.

This emancipation from text, however, didn't quite sever the ties between music and language. Even once instrumental music became a genre in and of itself, separate from vocal music, in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, references and comparisons to language are omnipresent. Goethe famously described chamber music as a "conversation among equals." In praising instrumental pieces, critics cited "singing" melodies and rhythmic patterns that approximated spoken language.<sup>7</sup> The popularity of the violin was largely due to a perceived "voice-like" quality of its tone.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps more convincingly, the composers themselves ascribed to the existence of speech and song in their music. Felix Mendelssohn wrote pieces for piano that he called "Songs Without Words"—itself a kind of oxymoron, since songs by definition have words. Beethoven's final piano sonata concluded with a movement he called "Arietta"—little aria. Composers frequently used the Italian words *cantabile* ("in a singing style"), *arioso* ("songlike") and *sotto voce* (literally "underneath-voice," indicating a subdued tone) as performance directions on instrumental pieces.

Why the persistence of the connection? The Romantic era gloried in the newly

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<sup>6</sup> Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> For example, a critic writing for the London journal *The Harmonicon* praised a particular figure in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as recitative-like, referring to operatic dialogue (*The Harmonicon* II (1824), in *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, ed. Weiss and Taruskin, 333.)

<sup>8</sup> J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 392.



emancipated genres of instrumental music and yet, at the same time, insisted on revisiting the shackles that had held it in bondage. Romanticism couldn't quite break away—and didn't seem to want to. Language left an imprint on Western music, indelibly etched into its nature and embedded into its melodic structure. Conceived of for so long as a vehicle for words, the melodies had become something reminiscent of language even once the words were taken away. “Abstract” sonatas and symphonies were permeated with the legacy of song.

In this light, language is not so much a metaphor for music, as Longfellow and Schumann suggested, as music is a metaphor for language. Music itself—not the concept of music but its actual sound, in the air—derives its force of expression through its ever-present likeness to song and, thus, to speech; melody on a violin or a flute or a piano has poignancy because it recalls the melodies of the voice. The words, pinning down a meaning and context, are absent, and so the specificity of situation is lost. However, the general associations of text setting remained—associations of dissonance and consonance, stepwise motion in contrast to large leaps. More significantly, the very idea that melody expresses emotion in a vocal setting, that melody has an emotional capacity which it contributes to any words it might set, is by the Romantic era utterly entrenched in the idea of music itself. The emotional capacity remained even when the words were removed, but it nonetheless originated in its association to song. Expression ultimately goes back to the voice, and music communicates through metaphor of instrumental melody to vocal song. Music communicates precisely because it is a metaphor for language.

Language, then, is crucial to understanding musical expression. The metaphor of language, however, is not the only Romantic metaphor to explain musical expression. Images of movement are perhaps equally embedded in musical thought, invoked as descriptors of musical

ideas. Short motifs and motives are frequently referred to as “gestures”—falling gestures, rising gestures, sighing gestures. A review of the first performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony which appeared in the London journal *Harmonicon* praised the opening theme of the symphony as “full of rich invention and of athletic power;” the scherzo, the author wrote, is “full of playful gaiety, in which all the instruments seem to contend with each other in the whim and sportiveness of the passage . . .”<sup>9</sup> In 1831 a London critic wrote of the virtuoso violinist Niccolò Paganini that he played an “*Allegro Maestoso* movement with singular force and precision. Precision is not the proper word; it was a sort of peremptoriness and dash. . . the highest notes sometimes leaping off.”<sup>10</sup> As composers used words like *cantabile* and *arioso* for instrumental pieces, they also used words like *grazioso* (“graceful”), *leggiero* (“light, agile”), *pesante* (“heavily”) and *più mosso* or *meno mosso* (more motion or less motion). Like language, movement is a prominent aspect of Romantic musical thought.

Also like language, movement has an easily traceable and explicit link to the history of Western music: dance. Long before the development of abstract instrumental music as a genre and art in itself, music without words was used to accompany dance. From the tambourines and flutes accompanying the medieval English *carole*—an energetic outdoor circle dance—to the proto-orchestras that accompanied formal social dances of the French court at Versailles under Louis XIV, instrumental music was a necessary part of the activity. Dance forms and rhythms became a template for the composition of instrumental music even after it was removed from the dance floor: these embellished versions of dances, known as stylized dance suites, became a standard in the composition of baroque keyboard music and include the well-known minuet,

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<sup>9</sup> *The Harmonicon*, II (1824), in *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, ed. Weiss and Taruskin, 333.

<sup>10</sup> Leigh Hunt, *The Tatler* (June 23, 1831) in *Music in the Western World*, ed. Weiss and Taruskin, 343.

sarabande, courante, and gigue, among others. Later, the waltz would become another popular dance form adopted in a “stylized” manner by instrumental composers.

Like song, dance made a lasting imprint on instrumental music. In order to fulfill its purpose, dance music must demonstrate regularity of meter and a discernible beat—characteristics that are inseparable from instrumental music from the classical and romantic periods. Moreover, the form of dance music was crucial to the development of form in instrumental music. To coordinate the movements of the dancers, the music needed to have predictable phrasing that organized the dance into clearly defined sections, almost always relying heavily on repetition as a means of delineating form. This phenomenon is easily discernible in the sonatas and symphonies of the classical and romantic eras, which also exhibit the division of musical ideas into predominantly regular phrasing—even when phrasing is irregular, its irregularity stems from a deviance from the regular form rather than an entirely free conception independent of form—and the repetition of musical ideas as a means of creating form.

The dance constructs of beat, meter, and rhythmic organization create a framework for musical expression through metaphor to movement. For example, the association of quickness of musical meter with quickness of motion results in a vast array of potentialities for musical expression, from slow, dirge-like funeral marches to sprightly scherzos. Fast music conveys breathlessness, excitement, tension, and rushing headlong; slow music is reflective, calm, deliberate. Other ways of creating expression through metaphor to movement include the division of the beat—a solid and stately simple meter, in which the beat is divided in two, in contrast to the lighter triple meters that divide the beat in three—and how the music is sectioned into phrases. Thus, descriptions of music as “leaping” or “soaring” or “stumbling” give a false

impression of movement as a metaphor for music, much as descriptions of “songlike” melodies give a false impression of language and speech as metaphor for music. A more apt characterization of the situation is the reverse: that music metaphorically depicts movement, through historical association to dance.

The associations of song and dance are so fundamental to Western music that pulling them out for examination seems unnecessary and perhaps vaguely absurd. Music *is* song, and music *is* dance; it should be no surprise that Brahms instructs a violinist to play *cantabile* or that Beethoven marks a movement of a piano sonata to be played “Andante grazioso.” However, evocations of language and movement are by no means necessary to the musical organization of sound. Music does not have to have a singable melody, nor does it need to follow patterns of regular meter. These characteristics of Western instrumental music in the Romantic era resulted from the way in which this music developed, growing out of song and dance traditions, not reacting against those traditions or attempting to discard them.

Thus instrumental music in the Romantic era couldn't help but be largely defined by the twin legacies of song and dance. As long as instrumental music retained these legacies, moreover, it could not be truly “abstract.” They reveal an art that was enmeshed in human expression through metaphor to human speech and human movement. The communicative aspect of instrumental music came from this metaphor: it evoked song and dance in ways that listeners knew how to interpret, and thus instrumental music carried the capacity for communication as a result of the song and dance traditions that preceded it. Indeed, lacking the specificity of spoken language music could not communicate *except* through metaphor.

At the same time, instrumental music, through its necessary use of metaphor, moved

beyond what song and dance music, as the objects of the metaphor, were capable of doing. Vocal music and song were necessarily limited by the specificity of the text they accompanied; in a similar way, dance music was tied to particular dances and specific gestures and movements. Instrumental music was freed from such limits. Even while its ties to song and dance prevented it from being truly abstract, its removal from the specificity of song and dance gave it the capacity for an expressiveness that transcended such specificity. This was the expressiveness that the Romantics so admired.

The question becomes, then: What happened between Beethoven and Schoenberg to change this balance of abstractness and metaphor in instrumental music? It worked so well for Beethoven and the Romantics who came after him—Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms—and yet, by the twentieth century the communicative element was lost. As instrumental music developed, it moved farther and farther from the song and dance traditions that it grew out of. Composers experimented with tonality and form: “melodies” became more chromatic, less songlike; rhythmic structure became more irregular and less dancelike; the metaphor became harder and harder to discern. Listeners to Schoenberg’s music could grab hold of no remnants of songlike melodies or dancelike rhythmic forms. Without the metaphor, the music was incapable of expressiveness and communication; audiences did not understand it.

Romanticism was a turning point; indeed, Beethoven’s *Eroica* was a turning point. After the death of Franz Schubert, a close friend, Josef von Spaun, related an encounter he remembered with the composer. “Secretly, in my heart of hearts,” Schubert told his friend, according to von Spaun’s account, “I still hope to be able to make something out of myself; but

who can do anything after Beethoven?”<sup>11</sup> It is a question with surprising relevance to the composition of new music to the present day: What is there to do after Beethoven? Before Romanticism, instrumental music was about the construction of form and expectation; Beethoven began the process of taking those forms apart. After Beethoven, all that was left was the deconstruction of classical form. It was through this deconstruction of established form and expectation that Romanticism found expression—but because the expression depended on the presence of form to deconstruct, Romanticism was, in a sense, inherently self-destructing. It inevitably led to its own antithesis: abstract music in its true sense, devoid of metaphor and communicative expression, and Schoenberg. Romanticism, Schoenberg wrote, became “outmoded:” “Evidently, in higher art, only that is worth being presented which has never before been presented. . . . *Because: Art means New Art.*”<sup>12</sup>

Thus, critical reception to Schoenberg reveals a conflict between an art that changed, in a very fundamental way, and an audience that did not. Schoenberg’s critics insisted in interpreting his music in metaphorical ways that were anachronistic to the music itself, and audiences expecting expressiveness and communication were inevitably disappointed by music that was incapable of both. In the midst of this disconnectedness between art and audience, Schoenberg became a symbol of “cacophony and musical anarchy.” Faced with new music that they neither understood nor liked, concert music in the twentieth century looked to the past: audiences much preferred to listen to Beethoven.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Schubert: Memoirs by his Friends in Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, ed. Weiss and Taruskin, 340.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, “New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea,” in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 113-114.

<sup>13</sup> The development of the “standard repertoire” in classical music is a nineteenth-century phenomenon in which the works of a relatively small number of past composers became part of a revered collection of ostensibly “great” pieces. This shift had wide-reaching implications, one of which was that these old pieces became privileged over new ones in concert halls—in the fifty years between 1820 and 1870, the percentage of new works on concert

Unfortunately, a twentieth-century choice between Beethoven and Schoenberg entails a loss either way. On the one hand, old music, with its understandable form and structure, could communicate meaningfully to its audience in a way that Schoenberg's music apparently could not. However, expression was not the only feature of Beethoven's music that so resonated with its audience; Beethoven's music was, like Schoenberg's, shocking and challenging to its contemporary listeners, pioneering new ways of thinking about music. A twentieth-century listener to Beethoven's *Eroica* could not hear it as its 1804 audience did; while the expression remains, Beethoven's musical ideas inevitably lost their newness as they became the foundation for a new compositional idiom. To choose Schoenberg entails a loss of emotional meaning; to choose Beethoven, an acquiescence to established modes of thought at the expense of new ones.

Ideally, art can manage both accessibility to its audience and artistic progress. While the two may exist in tension with one another, they are not mutually exclusive: even in the wake of Romanticism, music that is new can still retain aspects of the tradition from which it arose. Schoenberg was an immensely influential force in twentieth-century music, but he did not hold a monopoly on musical composition. To say that song and dance forms were dead in twentieth century instrumental music is inaccurate: Igor Stravinsky wrote ballet suites; Sergei Rachmaninov was notorious for his songlike melodies; Béla Bartók used traditional Hungarian folk tunes and dances in his works. Romanticism's experimentation with form did not, once and for all, kill song and dance. Rather, instrumental music in the twentieth century is a story of diverging musical styles as the way forward out of Romanticism became uncertain: one path

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programs fell from approximately 75% to 25%, and the number continued to fall (Burkholder, *A History of Western Music*, 634); the composition of concert programs in the twentieth century was dominated by past composers like Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms rather than new composers like Schoenberg. Some of the effects of this development on musical thought are discussed in Lydia Goehr's *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

following ever greater abstraction of instrumental music, and others attempting to find ways of maintaining aspects of the tradition within new harmonic languages and forms of musical organization.

Following the former path, avant garde composer John Cage defined the extreme limit of abstract music. He insisted that sound be “just sound:” criticizing a student, he wrote,

He was attached to sounds and because of his attachment could not let sounds be just sounds. He needed to attach himself to the emptiness, to the silence. Then things—sounds, that is—would come into being of themselves.”<sup>14</sup>

Cage’s position, in its extremity, identifies precisely the problem in abstracting sound out of its tradition. If his student found the concept of “just sound” difficult to grasp, modern-day audiences find it nearly impossible. As illustrated by contemporary reviews of Schoenberg, sound is not “just sound” in the ears of an audience; musical sound is steeped in legacies of humanness, in song and dance traditions, and these legacies largely define the ways in which listeners perceive music. It is through metaphor that audiences interpret even “abstract” instrumental music; it is through this metaphor that they can find meaning in patterns of sound. To take seriously the profound reality of art as a medium that has an audience necessitates the mediation of progress in form and structure with the preexisting forms and structures of tradition.

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<sup>14</sup> John Cage, “History of Experimental Music in the United States,” in *Silence* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1966), 69.