

# Schoenberg and Wittgenstein: the Odd Couple

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In a lecture titled "Philosophy and the Unheard" delivered exactly a decade ago at Harvard on the occasion of a conference on Arnold Schoenberg's chamber music, Stanley Cavell suggested that "the Schoenbergian idea of the row with its unforeseen yet pervasive consequences is a serviceable image of the Wittgensteinian idea of grammar and its elaboration of criteria of judgment, which shadow our expressions and which reveal pervasive yet unforeseen conditions of our existence..." (Cavell 2000). What kind of light might Schoenberg's conception of the 12-tone row throw on Wittgenstein's conception of grammar? The real question is actually whether the relentless striving for communicability, or rather for comprehensibility—to use Schoenberg's own technical term (Schoenberg 1975)—which propels Schoenberg's dodecaphonic compositional procedures is on a par with, or might be a serviceable image of Wittgenstein's relentless, genuinely philosophical striving for the surveyability of grammar. Here one cannot hope for a real answer before considering seriously what a truly Wittgensteinian response to Schoenberg's work might consist in.

Yet such a response is not palpably within reach. We shall begin our inquiry with what I consider a glaring omission which is common among those who wish to yoke Schoenberg and Wittgenstein together: Wittgenstein's philosophically entrenched rejection of modern music. His fierce animosity toward modern music is well documented. Yet it is this explicit rejection of modern music that is being patently suppressed when Wittgenstein and Schoenberg are brought together, rather than serving as a major premise in any attempt to spell out the true nature of whatever relation that may obtain between their respective projects. Indeed Cavell gives us a fair disclosure upon inviting us to entertain his suggestion "even knowing that Wittgenstein in person shunned most forms of modernism in the arts and in modern intellectual life generally" (Cavell 2000). Let me simply state that, to my mind, here we actually have no choice but to consider very seriously philosophically what Wittgenstein in person shunned.

So how philosophically entrenched is Wittgenstein's rejection of modern music? Wittgenstein's philosophical conception of music, as seen most fully in his later work, is deeply informed by his sophisticated response to the Romantic conception of musical profundity with its threefold emphasis on the specificity of musical expression, on musical 'aboutness', and on the exalted epistemic status of music. Wittgenstein appropriates the focus on the specificity of musical expression by means of his idea that musical gesture consists in, and moreover actually exemplifies an interrelation between language games. That is, understanding what a musical passage is about logically presupposes a myriad of other language games, and ultimately, "the whole range of our language games" (CV 51-2). Wittgenstein explicates the notion of musical aboutness in terms of an internal relation that conjoins musical gesture and our entire life in practice, whereupon the related concepts cannot be identified independently of the relation which holds them together. Thus he maintains that "understanding music is a manifestation of the life of mankind" (MS 137, 20). Wittgenstein coaches the notion of gesture in terms of the melody and the language being in recipro-

cal action (CV 52). The specificity of the musical expression, implied in the notion of gesture, marks a vertical shift in the language game played. The melody becomes, in Wittgenstein's words, "a new part of our language", which can be understood only against the backdrop of correlate moves in logically-prior games.

Against the backdrop of this peculiar philosophical conception of music, it is easy to see how susceptible Wittgenstein was to Oswald Spengler's cultural pessimism, seeing in progressive modern music an aspect of cultural decline—the dissolution of the resemblances which unite a culture's ways of life. While Wittgenstein's intellectual affinity with Spengler's views has already been widely acknowledged, his curious, little-known engagement with Schenker's theory of music remained by and large under the scholarly radar heretofore (Guter 2009). Schenker was not merely a musical epigone of Spengler. His pessimism concerning the prospects of modern music is intrinsically related to his unique view of musical composition. Schenker theorized that works of music that are tonal and exhibit mastery are temporal projections of a single element: the tonic triad. Hearing music as an exfoliation of this fundamental structure is part of the phenomenology of musical perception. At the heart of his abstract notion of music, one finds the conviction that the masterworks of Western music teach us that hearing music consists in recognizing a structural standard, which is shared by anything that we may rightfully call music. Thus it becomes a matter of analytic truth that all works of music that digress from triadic tonality must patently be rejected as unsuccessful, superficial, or altogether musically nonsensical, depending on how severe the digression is. Schenker's hostility toward modern music was fueled by his conviction that the results of his theory betoken a disintegration of musical culture on all fronts. Irreverence toward the laws of tonal effect, he believed, reflects a loss of musical instinct for the inner complexities of the masterworks of Western music among performers and composers alike, which in turn hinders the musician's almost sacred mission to provide access to the world of human experience contained in such masterworks (Snarrenberg 1997).

Wittgenstein augmented Schenker's view by construing musical meaning as an internal relation. Wittgenstein asked: "Could *one* reason be given at all for why the theory of harmony is the way it is? And, first and foremost, *must* such a reason be given?" And his answer is straightforward: "[The reason] is here and it is part of our entire life". (MS 157a, 24-26) For Wittgenstein, tonality—the way we experience and express certain relationships between musical tones—is effected by the way we recognize and describe things, and ultimately by the kind of beings we are, the purposes we have, our shared discriminatory capacities and certain general features of the world we inhabit. Thus he wrote: "The theory of harmony is at least in part phenomenology and therefore grammar" (PR 4).

Wittgenstein brought his philosophical conception of music to bear on modern music in a curious diary entry from 1931, where he made a distinction between three categories of modern music: the good, the bad, and the vacuous (PPO 67-9). At least two of them—the first and the third—are of genuine philosophical interest. According

to Wittgenstein, bad modern music is conceived in accordance with prevailing contemporary principles, which are equally ill conceived. Most probably, Wittgenstein refers here to the predominant maxim of progress for which he had the deepest mistrust. Such was indeed the case with the emancipators of the dissonance in the name of progress during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and Wittgenstein clearly had no patience with their senseless musical gesticulation, which Schenker has shown to be a result of inability to bind their empty sonorities together as elaborations of a single chord. For both Schenker and Wittgenstein, such music was plain rubbish, to wit, something which insofar as it presents itself as non-musical clatter from a mere technical perspective, it is not even an interesting problem. It is noteworthy that Schoenberg's pre-1923 compositions, certainly those from his so-called "atonal period", fall squarely in this category.

The category of "the vacuous", or "the unattractive absurd" is exemplified by the music of Josef Labor, a rather minor turn-of-the-century conservative composer, who was a protégé of the Wittgenstein family. It denotes the problematic, somewhat tragic situation of a composer who shuns the illusion and peril of progress and yet is patently barred from artistic greatness. It is noteworthy that this idea expresses a familiar train of thought which is ultimately traceable back to Schenker, who felt that the great tradition of Austro-German music had come to an end with Brahms. Here, as elsewhere, Wittgenstein decisively transcends the Brahms-Wagner controversy by rejecting the noble yet vacuous rehash of classicism of the conservative composer and the base, contrapuntal tinkering with harmony of the progressive composer as being both symptomatic of cultural decline (Guter 2009). This leaves us with the last alternative—good modern music—which, according to Wittgenstein, is actually no alternative at all. Incommensurability entailed by cultural decline renders the very idea of good modern music as an absurd, albeit, as Wittgenstein admits, an *attractive* absurd. One cannot, or at least one is not clever enough to formulate the right maxim or principle for our times—for what principle could be coherently pronounced amidst a dissolution of the resemblances which unite a culture's ways of life?—so *ipso facto* one cannot conceive of music that would correspond to the unpronounced. Thus, the precious little that Wittgenstein has to say about the category of good modern music is that it is conceptually paradoxical.

We are now in a suitable position to inquire about the place of Schoenberg's 12-tone music within Wittgenstein's scheme of modern music. And the answer is pretty straightforward: it has no place at all. In Wittgenstein's scheme, Schoenberg's 12-tone music is neither good, nor bad, nor vacuous. It is an empty set. Discouraging as this may seem, this null-result is of significant philosophical importance, as we shall see.

We should first observe that Schoenberg conceived the 12-tone method as a device to regain conscious control over his own unruly compositional procedures as he felt that he had exhausted the resources of his earlier free atonal style. Schoenberg's conception of the 12-tone row is steeped in his theoretical and practical emphasis on logic, which has taken the form of a relentless quest for musical coherence; coherence that was lost when tonality was dissolved (Schoenberg 1975). Schoenberg used the term "coherence" to designate relationships that justify connections or meaningful interactions between the components of a sonic object. His attempt to emulate language is most explicit in his focus on finding and devising musical connectives akin to connectives in logic, which, so he believed, regulate the element of fluency in music and clarify

the logic of its formal progression. He maintained that musical material should be both coherent and varied and the 12-tone method was designed expressly to provide both coherence and variation in the musical material. At the heart of the system there is the 12-tone row, which is an abstract structure, a set of potential relationships without any motivic content that is logically prior to the actual composition. Schoenberg conceived the 12-tone row as a pre-compositional fund for motivic possibilities, whereupon springs its sense of musical omnipresence.

In Schoenberg's philosophy of composition, the notion of coherence is complemented by the notion of comprehensibility, which denotes the conditions that allow the listener to grasp something as a whole, to bind impressions together into a form. The contrived nature of 12-tone composition, in contradistinction to tonal composition, gives this notion of comprehensibility primary importance. Schoenberg pointed out that while compositions executed tonally proceed so as to bring every occurring tone into a direct or indirect relationship to the tonic, 12-tone composition presupposes knowledge of these relationships and does not render them as a problem still to be worked out (Schoenberg 1995). In this sense, 12-tone composition works with whole complexes akin to "a language that works with comprehensive concepts [umfassenden Begriffen], whose scope and meaning as generally known are presupposed" (ibid). In the last analysis, comprehensibility is the ability to grasp and retain such fixed concept-complexes, whose meaning is semantically rigid like labels or name tags, and to follow their implications and consequences.

At this point, two immediate observations suggest themselves from Wittgenstein's perspective. First, Schoenberg's "truth-functional" conception of music is clearly in the grip of the "Augustinian picture of language". Second, Schoenberg and Wittgenstein have taken the analogy between music and language in opposite directions. Whereas Wittgenstein maintained that "understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think" (PI 527), Schoenberg sought to transfix the musical material by means of logic. But these are merely symptoms of the deep chasm, which is now before us. Having drawn varied, complex and coherent material from an initial pitch collection by means of logical manipulation, Schoenberg proceeds to compose music using this material in the good old traditional way. He vehemently rejected the idea that the 12-tone method is a different method of composing. In Schoenberg's view of the music of future, the 12-tone system is a necessary step in the evolution of Western music, and he designed it for the sole purpose of replacing the structural differentiations formerly furnished by tonality. Schoenberg firmly believed that this phantom return to the old Western tradition of composing would insure the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years.

Schoenberg's 12-tone compositional practice, in particular its pretense to inherit music, enraged Schenker. He wrote: "The great proof against Schoenberg is the people... There are not two summits in an art. Schoenberg has already experienced the one, a second, like the one now being cultivated, cannot blossom. Schoenberg produces a homunculus in music; it is a machine... but never can there be a surrogate for the soul" (quoted in Snarrenberg 1997). This passage captures precisely why Schoenberg's 12-tone music is virtually off Wittgenstein's chart of modern music. Let us consider Wittgenstein's own vision of the music of the future: "I should not be surprised if the music of the future were in unison [einstimmig]... If something comes it will have to be—I think—simple, *transpar-*

ent. In a certain sense, naked" (*PPO* 49). Wittgenstein's own formulation of the music of the future is informed by Spengler's notion of epochal rejuvenation, hence it also transcends the aforementioned scheme of modern music. Yet it encapsulates precisely that which sets Wittgenstein's philosophical conception of music apart from Schoenberg's musical evolution: that music is physiognomic, intransitively transparent to human beings. There is simply no reason for the rules of 12-tone composition to be what they are, given the kind of beings we are, the purposes we have, our shared discriminatory capacities and so forth. The kind of musical distinctions called for by dodecaphonic composition—for instance, identifying a certain passage as based on a certain transposition of the inverted retrograde form of the original 12-tone row used in the given piece—are not just very difficult to make; they are simply not important in our lives, certainly not in the sense that questions and answers, introductions and conclusions are.

There is no wonder, then, that the rules of 12-tone composition aim at nothing other than creating the conditions of comprehensibility. A comparison between Schoenberg's standard of comprehensibility and Wittgenstein's standard of transparency or "nakedness" points at their crucial difference. According to Wittgenstein, a musical gesture is not transparent by virtue of the correct applications of "rules of transparency"; rather, its transparency resides precisely in their absence, indeed in the vacuity of the very notion of such rules. Transparency in this sense is not an epistemic notion. A musical gesture is transparent because it is already given to us with a familiar physiognomy, already vertically related to our world of thoughts and feelings, whereupon there is no sense in which we can say that it needs to be *made* comprehensible. Only a surrogate for the soul would be in need of being made comprehensible.

Perhaps the most adequate Wittgensteinian response to Schoenberg's idea of 12-tone music would be akin to his response to Zamenhof's Esperanto (*CV* 52): the 12-tone row is cold, lacking in associations and yet it plays at being music. "A system of purely written signs would not disgust us so much", said Wittgenstein, and yet Schoenberg's compositions were made to be played. The analogy between Esperanto and Schoenberg's 12-tone system yields a conclusive answer to the question how far removed Schoenberg's 12-tone music is from Wittgenstein's vision of the music of the future. From Wittgenstein's perspective, Schoenberg's 12-tone music would be music for

the meaning-blind, modeled on a conception of language as an artificial edifice, whose conditions of meaningfulness primarily consist in deriving a wealth of forms from musically barren sonic material by means of rules of coherence and comprehensibility; a kind of music, whose very essence shuns the familiar expanse of our *Menschenkenntnis*, where tonal music naturally roams. If understanding music is a manifestation of the life of mankind, then an actual performance of such music for the meaning-blind, enfolded by the gestural bravado of classically trained musicians, would be genuinely abominable from Wittgenstein's point of view.

We may conclude now that in light of Wittgenstein's own well-founded philosophy of music, there is nothing in Schoenberg's 12-tone row, the pre-compositional repository of musical thoughts, and in our presumed ability to comprehend these thoughts, that could compare to the power of grammar—as Cavell so aptly put it—to reveal pervasive yet unforeseen conditions of our existence. If the image of Schoenberg's row is serviceable at all for our understanding of Wittgenstein's idea of grammar, it would be merely as a foil for showing precisely what is philosophically outstanding about Wittgenstein's suggestion that understanding a sentence is akin to understanding a melody; that is, by way of a philosophically acute contrast, and this would actually be very much like Wittgenstein's own manner of handling such matters.

#### Literature

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