Introduction

> while we hunger
> for a clear and beaming truth to settle our
> perspectives down (a foundation upon which to
> base a way of life, religion, or musical theory)
> we need even more the muddled doubts of our
> seeking: for to know is to be at an end . . .
>   A. R. Ammons, *Glare*, number 103

No composer was more responsible for changes in the landscape of twentieth-century music than Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), and no other composer's music inspired a commensurate quantity and quality of technical description in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet the correlations between Schoenberg's musical thought and larger questions of cultural significance in and since his time have not been well addressed by musical scholarship: formalistic descriptions of music theory do not generally engage larger questions in the history of ideas, while scholars without an understanding of the formidable musical technique are ill-equipped to understand the music with any profundity of thought. To cite a case in point, the authors of *Wittgenstein's Vienna* claim "Schönberg, unlike Hanslick, considered the question, how a composition sounds, as having no importance."[1] The reader's ability to hear Schoenberg's music with any comprehension correlates directly to the perceived absurdity of that claim. I cannot imagine anything parallel being said about a major philosopher – X discovered that ideas have no importance.

Music is part of how we make sense of the world and how we place ourselves within it. *Schoenberg's Musical Imagination* intends to place Schoenberg's music and critical writings into larger contexts of human creativity, with the aim to better connect compositional techniques and their expressive ends (i.e. the way the music *sounds*) to more encompassing human concerns.

A second aspect of the book is its range over most of Schoenberg's long career. Technical studies of Schoenberg's music have tended to an extraordinary degree to be circumscribed by his various periods: the chromatic tonality of his earliest works up until 1908, the so-called "atonal" works from 1908 until after World War I, and then the twelve-tone works, from the mid 1920s until his death. Theorists with expertise in one area, say

twelve-tone music, rarely have insights into the other periods.[2] Correlating with this division of scholarly labor is a division along lines of reception: more than any other composer that I can bring to mind, those interested in Schoenberg's music tend to be interested in one period above the others. My own position is that Schoenberg composed great works in each period, and moreover that we understand his music most comprehensively when we do not place his compositional periods in isolation.

To frame one of the central issues of the book, we need to take a very long view of the development of Western concepts of harmony. The classical Greek concept of *harmonia* included but was not limited to musical relationships. It applied to the order of the cosmos, and to the "soul" as well.[3] The two most foundational (and conflicting) concepts of harmony can be traced respectively to the Pythagorean school and to Heraclitus of Ephesus.[4] The Pythagoreans emphasized the alternation of concord and discord and held that concord was the more fundamental of the two: discord resolves into concord. In contrast, Heraclitus understood harmony as necessarily entailing opposition or conflict, where conflict is an eternal force (more properly, an eternal aspect of *Logos*), fundamental to the nature of the world, and never to be overcome or transcended. The Pythagorean model has dominated throughout most of the history of Western music. From the "perfections" of medieval music theory to the "perfect cadences" of common-practice tonality, resolution in concord was the expected, and only possible end for all musical compositions.[5] For nearly two thousand years, musical discord was necessarily subordinate to and concluded by musical concord, and it wasn't only "music" that worked that way. Hannah Arendt cites a striking example using the imagery of historian Jacob Burckhardt.[6]

> The beginning, in Jacob Burckhardt's words, is like a "fundamental chord" which sounds in its endless modulations through the whole history of Western thought. Only beginning and end are, so to speak, pure or unmodulated; and the fundamental chord therefore never strikes its listeners more forcefully and more beautifully than when it first sends its harmonizing sound into the world and never more irritatingly and jarringly than when it still continues to be heard in a world whose sounds – and thought – it can no longer bring into harmony.

In the early twentieth century, Arnold Schoenberg begins to imagine music where internal conflict is not resolved, and where closure in "perfection" instead of being the only possibility becomes an impossibility. The implications of this departure have proved to be immense. Schoenberg had arguably abandoned one of the most fundamental "master narratives" of Western civilization: conclusion in perfection is assumed by the entire

Judeo-Christian (and Islamic) tradition. Schoenberg himself could only be vaguely aware of the implications for music. He couldn't even begin to imagine the correlations between his musical thought and developments that had occurred and would yet develop in literature, philosophy and science.

As with questions about "perfection," questions about the nature of time, as ancient as human imagination itself, reach a particularly high pitch in the literature and science of the early twentieth century. Given that music is the temporal art *par excellence* it should come as no surprise that music's ability to shape our experience of time would be central to the musical thought of Schoenberg's generation. And yet relatively little has been written about temporality in Schoenberg's music.[7] One extraordinarily important aspect of time in music is in how music can express our three basic temporal orientations: retrospection, anticipation, as well as a sense of "now." The chapters on the First String Quartet and on *Pelleas und Melisande* in particular focus on how Schoenberg integrates these temporal orientations into a more encompassing concept of musical unfoldings ("form" is too static to capture what is at stake). In Schoenberg's most successful works, these elements combine to form what Elliott Carter, punning on Schoenberg's harmonic concept of "emancipated dissonance," has named "emancipated discourse."[8]

Another aspect of Schoenberg's treatment of temporal flow is studied in Chapter Five. There we develop a theory of uncanny time and its correlate: the *time shard*. Schoenberg's expressions of uncanny time develop out of common practice tonality where the flow of time is regulated by an underlying pulse-stream that remains more or less regular as the work unfolds. Tonal works can create a sense of uncanny time by a number of means that we discuss in the chapter. These include interrupting the pulse-stream itself, or disrupting the sequence of narrative events to create uncanny flashbacks or uncanny foreshadowings. Another development is traced to Schubert's practice where he brings attention to the pulse stream, so that it becomes the signifier of meaning rather than the underlying conveyor of meaning. Schoenberg's develops all of these techniques, but they undergo extraordinary change and take on unforeseeable significance in his post-tonal compositions. In Schoenberg's practice, the regular yet *unheimlich* pulse-streams are shards of time, reminiscent of but alien to the way that time used to go.

Most technical studies of Schoenberg's music have emphasized its radical discontinuities with the past. Developments in set theory and twelve-tone theory over the past forty years and more make the disjunction vivid.[9] Set theory and twelve-tone theory have developed ways of modeling combinations of notes and their intervallic contents that wipe the slate

clean, severing all or almost all connections to tonal practice. For many composers and scholars the new ways of modeling music have been liberating. Set theory and twelve-tone theory have directly and indirectly inspired an extraordinary body of compositions and scholarship. In contrast to the ways that set theory and twelve-tone theory have tended to sever the music from its past, Schoenberg's critical writings emphasize connections to his tonal precursors. His compositional pedagogy as well is fully grounded in tonal practice, albeit an idiosyncratic representation of that practice. It is the conflict between holding on to the past while forging a new musical language adequate to the needs of a fleeting present that is essential to Schoenberg's creativity as a composer. There is an ever-present tension between Schoenberg the conservative and Schoenberg the radical, and this dialectic is essential to Schoenberg's genius as a composer. Points of contact with the past are simultaneously points of departure, and I try to capture this interpretive spirit throughout the book.

Set theory and twelve-tone theory, as they have evolved over the past half century, have developed a formidable mathematical apparatus and the ability to generate inexhaustible numerical data about pitch and rhythmic relationships within a musical composition, or within collections of notes that might form the resources for musical composition. Most of this has remained, and will remain in the domain of music theorists and the relatively small number of composers who have the imaginative capacity to transform such data into music. The intellectual and imaginative content of the best of this work speaks for itself, and I intend no critique of that work, explicit or implicit, in abandoning most of the apparatus of set theory in *Schoenberg's Musical Imagination*. On the other hand, set theory has produced a self-engendering body of arcana that too often gets in the way, blocking vivid perception rather than facilitating it. Moreover, its concerns generally do not intersect with those of performance, where the shaping of phrases, balancing of contrapuntal voices, subtle shadings of color, and the like are most essential. For some scholars the solution to this problem is to disparage theory and abandon deep analysis altogether. This too would be antithetical to my own approach.

The foundation of my Schoenberg studies was my 1983 dissertation on Schoenberg's twelve-tone opera *Moses und Aron*, work done under the tutelage of David Lewin.[10] In preparing the dissertation I began to have an understanding of how Schoenberg uses the conflict among mutually exclusive row partitions (e.g. $6 + 6$ vs. $4 + 4 + 4$) to portray the dramatic conflicts that are at the crux of the opera. I had no idea at the time how important the role of conflict would become in my understanding of Schoenberg's music. In returning to a serious study of the opera after more than two

decades of subsequent work on Schoenberg's music, I found my hearing radically transformed. My study of uncanny time altered the ways I understood once familiar passages, and a deeper understanding of cultural context and musical lineage had profoundly changed my orientation to the music. The chapter on *Moses und Aron* draws upon my earlier work, but brings those formal characteristics of the music into larger contexts of meaning by relating Schoenberg's twelve-tone techniques to the concerns that span his entire career, and to a wider world of ideas that they engage.

My 1993 article "Schoenberg and *das Unheimliche*," draws on Freud's celebrated article on the uncanny to interpret repressed tonal structures in Schoenberg's post-tonal music.[11] I have continued to be interested in cross-reading Schoenberg and Freud; we will return to this topic in the final section of this Introduction. The "*Unheimliche*" article also marks the beginnings of my attempts toward interpreting Schoenberg's music in light of other thought within his cultural context. My current approach reaches its first maturity with my 1998 article, "Memory and Rhetorical Trope in Schoenberg's String Trio," which has been adapted to become the final chapter in this book.[12] The study of the Trio engages ideas derived from Nietzsche and Freud to describe the avoidance of closure in that work, Schoenberg's musical depiction of a near-death experience. The chapter also explores the ways that the String Trio engages and remembers a musical past that reaches back to the Classicism of Haydn and Mozart, and continues through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The simultaneous encoding of memory and memorial has profound implications for understanding the creation of musical space within the work. My understanding of these aspects of Schoenbergian composition was subsequently augmented by ideas derived from the writings of Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. I was able to begin to employ these ideas in my essay "Motive and Memory in Schoenberg's First String Quartet," which has been adapted to form Chapter Four.[13] Particularly open to further development are ideas concerning musical space that I developed out of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of *agrarian space* versus *nomadic space*.[14] My article "Dialectical Opposition in Schoenberg's Music and Thought" is adapted to form Chapter Two.[15] It studies the crucial role of conflict in Schoenberg's critical and theoretical writings, placing those writings into larger historical and cultural contexts.

Rhetorical tropes: conflict, flux, and imperfection

While performing musicians interpret musical compositions through sounds prompted by musical notation, scholars and critics use words that

provide context and meaning, or describe the structures and processes embodied by the sounds produced in performance or the sounds implied by the score. The performer, using the score as the principal text, reads it against the background of a tradition of musical works in the context of a tradition of performances. In studying a musical composition, the scholar too uses the score as a principal text; like the performer, the scholar reads the composition against a tradition of musical works, but the scholar substitutes a body of scholarly and creative writing for the performer's tradition of musical performances. Substitution runs deep in musical scholarship where one symbol-making system substitutes for another: words for music, creative and scholarly literature for performance practice.

Composers can think directly in sounds, and it would be a gross falsification of the compositional process to reduce it to a conversion from words to sounds. And yet, composers do transform verbal thought, physical gesture and other spatial and temporal orientations (mathematical, painterly, dancerly) into musical sound. Substitution is at the very heart of all of our symbol making. While our different modes of symbolic thought and action fulfill different human potentials as they respond to different human needs, words about music matter because the interactions of our symbolic modes (languages, practices) have the potential to augment one another.

The study of substitution in rhetoric and poetics is the study of tropes, figurative language that constitutes our most basic strategies for knowing or shaping our worlds. In Kenneth Burke's words, to study tropes is to study "their rôle in the discovery and description of 'the truth.'"[16] "The truth," placed in scare quotes, points to a paradox: while "truth" may be imagined to be at the bottom of things, substitution through tropes, like asymptotic freedom, is boundless and without limit. Its play of energies, like the Heraclitean universe, is open ended.

Burke names "four master tropes" that comprise the most fundamental ways that language uses substitution to create meaning: metaphor (perspective), metonymy (reduction), synecdoche (representation), and irony (dialectic). As conceptualized by Burke, metaphoric understanding knows one thing through the perspective of another. Metonymy's basic strategy is to understand something incorporeal or intangible in terms corporeal or tangible. Synecdochic thought represents some whole through a part, or vice versa. And the dialectic of irony results from juxtaposing different perspectives that are not reducible to one another. All of these linguistic strategies have analogues in musical thought. When we recall the first theme of a sonata form through the perspective of the second theme, our process mimics metaphoric thought. Notation itself might be considered a

metonymic strategy, reducing the evanescence of sound to a tangible symbol. When we hear a motivic fragment and recall its larger context, our thought is synecdochic. And when we expect one thing and then hear another the juxtaposition of expectation and realization mimics verbal irony. These parallels apply not necessarily because music mimics linguistic thought; the strategies of understanding through substitution are arguably antecedent to language itself.

Building upon Burke's scholarship, Harold Bloom adds two fundamental terms, hyperbole (restitution/repression) and metalepsis or transumption (the trope of a trope).[17] The latter is particularly interesting in our study. To trope a trope is to put a new spin on an old idea, but to do that successfully is to challenge the priority or at least the hegemony of the earlier idea. Schoenberg's reception of tradition is metaleptic through and through.

In addition to its foundational terms, the study of tropes also includes more specific kinds of substitution, images or ideas that take on a life of their own, for example, the complementary tropes of darkness and light as substitutes for ignorance and knowing, bad and good, melancholy and levity, death and life. The three tropes that most fundamentally inform this study are conflict, flux-as-change, and what we will call "imperfection." Conflict or opposition is at the heart of the creative moment – something new opposes something that came before. It is also at the heart of drama, comedic and tragic, and so is therefore at the heart of music conceived along dramatic lines. Flux, in the sense of constant change, like conflict as a constant, is a Heraclitean term, a genealogy that we will consider in Chapter Two. Flux asserts the impermanence of things, and so perpetual gain pitted against perpetual loss. All music is composed of evanescent, fleeting sounds: Schoenberg's music, or so our study will claim, makes evanescence thematic. Imperfection, as we will use it, is the impossibility of reaching a final state of being, which is to say that imperfection asserts the impossibility of perfection.

We can think of conflict and flux-as-change as co-determinants with imperfection as their resultant. Or, we can think of imperfection as the fundamental ontological category, with conflict and flux as its resultants. Or we can think of any of the three terms as a substitute for the others in that any of the three terms suggests the other two.

The familiar terminology of tonal music brings a technical meaning to perfect intervals and perfect cadences, but underlying the technical jargon is an assumption, or so I will claim, about a world that ends in perfection. In this world-view, conflict and flux are subordinated to ultimate perfection. The assumption of perfectibility has deep religious and cultural roots, and I

find nothing in Schoenberg's theoretical and critical writings that recognizes the "master narrative" that is challenged by his musical intuitions. On the contrary, in many ways Schoenberg's critical writings cling to a teleological world-view. Yet, Schoenberg's abandonment or repression of tonality was concomitant with the development of a musical syntax that did not, and could not, end in perfection. Despite Schoenberg's formidable contributions to theory and criticism, his intuitions and vision as a composer outstripped his capacity as a theorist and critic. We will argue that perfection is not redefined by Schoenberg's music, it is abandoned.

Canonical Schoenberg and the process of *Bildung*

In contrast to music, a literary canon, reaching as far back as the Hebrew Torah and the Greek Homer, has been in place since antiquity. Literary works have long spoken to and through one another across vast spans of time, and across sea changes in natural language. A competent seventeenth-century English reader of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* would hear echoes and arguments reaching back through Dante to Virgil, to Homer, and from Protestant thought through Catholic scripture back to the Torah. In a similar way, a competent nineteenth-century German reader of Goethe's *Faust* might include all the above in an extended lineage, argument and counter-argument. The depth and complexity of the literary canon has profound implications for the ways we read.

The idea of a musical canon is a surprisingly late invention of the nineteenth century – for the first time in the history of music, musicologists and performers began the process of reviving works, indeed entire musical periods that had fallen out of performance practice. Prior to that, the living presence of musical works might last a generation or two (as students remember the works of their teachers), but generally no longer. It is no small irony that Brahms at the end of the nineteenth century was able to study works that were antecedent to any available to J. S. Bach at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The invention of a musical canon had profound implications for the ways we listen.

The canonical works of literature, both sacred and secular (if one makes the distinction), were not just literary objects of study. They were shaping forces in the ways human beings understood themselves and their place in the world. Canonical works are world-shaping arguments, while the canon itself shapes worlds into galaxies, the forces and counterforces that comprise our imaginative universes.

To conceive music as canonical is to grant it a different aspect of this same shaping force and function. Musical works are not just musical objects

of study. They too are world-making arguments; like literature, they help shape the ways we understand ourselves and our place in the world. Music conceived of as canonical enters into the play of symbolic world-making that is so distinctive of being human.

For German-speaking persons of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the significance of a living, evolving canon is inseparable from the concept of *Bildung*. Hans-Georg Gadamer credits the German philosopher and social critic Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) with conceptualizing *Bildung*.

> More than anyone, Herder transcended the perfectionism of the Enlightenment with his new ideal of "cultivating the human" (Bildung zum Menschen) thus prepared the ground for the growth of the historical sciences in the nineteenth century. The *concept of self-formation, education, or cultivation* (Bildung), which became supremely important at the time, was perhaps the greatest idea of the eighteenth century, and it is this concept which is the atmosphere breathed by the human sciences of the nineteenth century, even if they are unable to offer any epistemological justification for it.[18]

The concept of *Bildung* is developed and refined in Kant and Hegel, and becomes programmatic in the writings and progressive politics of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). The term has its origins in medieval mysticism, and Humboldt develops this aspect of the concept in distinguishing *Bildung* from *Kultur*.

> Bildung here no longer means "culture" – i.e. developing one's capacities or talents. Rather, the rise of the word Bildung evokes the ancient mystical tradition according to which man carries in his soul the image of God, after whom he is fashioned, and which man must cultivate in himself.[19]

Humboldt envisioned *Bildung* as the road to social progress, and his initiatives as Prussian Minister of Education were instrumental in the nineteenth-century "emancipation" of German-speaking Jews.[20] For many German-speaking Jews, *Bildung* became a kind of secular religion, the process of self-formation that would allow them to fully participate in European culture and education.[21]

The process of *Bildung* was internalized and open-ended. Whereas "canonical" might be thought of as comprising a closed set, the canon seen in light of *Bildung* was ongoing. Paul Mendes-Flohr emphasizes this idea in *German Jews: A Dual Identity*. He writes of "the innate contradiction of the very ideas of a [closed] canon to the character of Bildung as a plastic, dynamic

conception of culture and learning. Clearly, Bildung *eo ipso* is antagonistic to a closed, authoritative conception of canon."[22]

Schoenberg's understanding of the role of music is not separable from its place as a constituent of *Bildung*.[23] By the time of his generation, the idea had become so fundamental that in a sense it was no longer noticed as being there. Serious music was simply not an "entertainment"; it was an extraordinarily important constituent in the ongoing process of self-formation.

In the world of German literature in the nineteenth century on into the early twentieth century, no one instantiated or depicted the ideal of *Bildung* more quintessentially than Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Amos Elon, writing specifically about the Jews of Germany emphasizes this connection, one that evidently resonated deeply for Schoenberg.[24]

> Their true home, we now know, was not "Germany" but German culture and language. Their true religion was the bourgeois, Goethean ideal of *Bildung* . . .

Paul Mendes-Flohr also emphasizes the significance of Goethe:[25]

> . . . the poet was honored in virtually every Jewish household. It is said only somewhat hyperbolically that a set of his writings graced every Jewish home and was the standard bar mitzvah and confirmation present. Many a rabbi wove citations from Goethe into his sermons.

In a sketch dated 1 June 1923, for a passage in the Wind Quintet, Schoenberg notes an important breakthrough in his evolving twelve-tone technique by appending a diagram which represents the row partition. Schoenberg writes a note beside the diagram: *Ich glaube Goethe müsste ganz zufrieden mit mir sein* (I believe Goethe would be quite satisfied with me).[26]

Schoenberg, Freud, and Kafka

We do not need to posit a *Zeitgeist* to recognize that the terms, conflict, flux, and imperfection, resonate deeply with the creative thought of others in Schoenberg's generation. Two contemporaries fascinate me most in this regard: Sigmund Freud and Franz Kafka. We will use the remainder of this introduction to explore relationships among the three, so that they might function as a subtext to all that follows.

Freud shared Schoenberg's Vienna, yet I find no evidence that indicates that either had but a passing knowledge of the other's work. Freud evidently had a tin ear, and Schoenberg's understanding of Freud was likely limited to coffee-house conversations.[27] The inclusion of Kafka is even more extreme in this regard. It is a safe bet that neither Freud nor Schoenberg knew of his existence. Kafka was evidently familiar with some of Freud's writings,