Introduction

It was very soon after the end of the Second World War that Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* (1947) and Theodor Adorno's *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (1948) appeared, relating Schoenberg's compositional trajectory to its social and political context. For his novel, Mann consulted Adorno and made considerable use of the latter's text (the initial draft of which dates from 1942), but went much further than Adorno in turning the Schoenberg 'case' into nothing less than an allegory of Germany's recent historical fate. The fact that two such prominent German artists and intellectuals should have considered Schoenberg a particularly relevant witness to what it meant to be, ideologically and culturally, a German artist in the first half of the twentieth century (Schoenberg grew up in Vienna, of course) bears scrutiny beyond the often explored homology between totalitarianism in the political sphere and composition with twelve tones. It is above all worth keeping in mind that the period of German history in question had at its heart the Jewish Question, and that Schoenberg was an assimilated Viennese Jew converted to Protestantism and committed to *Deutschtum*; he only began his gradual return to Judaism after an anti-Semitic incident in 1921 famously triggered his realization that assimilation into German culture – 'redemption' or 'release' from Jewishness as he once put it – was no longer possible. By then, negative Jewish stereotyping, which some assimilated Jews had once expressed in connection with their less assimilated fellow Jews, had mutated into racial anti-Semitism.

It seems significant that Adorno's reading of Schoenberg's artistic innovations as a species of social critique, and Mann's as a tragedy parallel to Germany's own, both displace the obvious link between Schoenberg and their interpretative concerns: the composer's early sympathy with Wagner's *Deutschtum* and theories of cultural regeneration. Adorno constructed Schoenberg's social and ideological significance within a broadly Marxist critical framework, whereby Schoenberg was the composer who most clearly reflected the 'truth' of the subject's condition: he realized the historical tendencies inherent in his musical materials, materials which for Adorno always bore the imprint of broader social relations. Although Adorno viewed twelve-tone technique's new regulatory system as a disaster from the point of view of the life of the subject – the reason he preferred Berg's tonally inflected brand

of twelve-tone music – he retained his positive valuation of Schoenberg's earlier renunciation of tonality as a morally essential step in the liberation of music from the domination of tonality. By contrast, Mann viewed the same trajectory (with Schoenberg, of course, only one of several sources for his Leverkühn) as the fruit of demonic intoxication; retreat into the irrational as the solution to a cultural crisis. Someone else apart from these two likewise broached the Schoenberg 'case' as part of the broader social crisis of the era, but did so before the war, and did not displace the Wagner connection so much. In 1926, as Nazi influence and anti-Semitism were rapidly growing in Germany, Heinrich Berl wrote about Schoenberg and other Jewish composers in his own *Das Judentum in der Musik*, with specific reference to the cultural 'problem' that Wagner had laid out in his 1850 essay. Although he presents his Jewish theme somewhat unevenly, Berl is notable for borrowing Wagner's earlier title for his book and for not negatively judging what he identifies as Jewish musical traits, in the way Wagner had. For him the relationship between Jewish and occidental traits in musical materials nevertheless likewise reflects the broader social crisis of the time, and Schoenberg was the most important source of 'resolution'.

Although Berl (to whose book I will return later) was interested in the importance specifically of Schoenberg's Jewish identity, Adorno was not philosophically interested in an artist's personal position in society. I shall be here, because I am interested in Schoenbergian modernism as cultural discourse, even if this means broaching a topic as seemingly straightforward – though actually difficult – as the ideological significance of Schoenberg's position as a Jewish Wagnerian to the path he chose. My questions relate to the impulses attaching to what Carl Dahlhaus described as Schoenberg's moment of 'decisionism' in 1908.[1] Despite recent attempts to minimize the significance of what Schoenberg embarked upon then, I underline the fact that he constructed his step into atonality, in discourse at least, as a significant one, despite retrospectively writing about it in such a way as to minimize its sense of the radical.[2] His close friend Mahler clearly saw it as a genuine leap; he admitted he no longer understood Schoenberg's music, but was willing to credit Schoenberg with a youthful musical insight that he simply couldn't grasp and continued to support his friend; Strauss famously thought that, after moving so far from tonality, he'd be better off shovelling snow.

Through a close reading of Schoenbergian discourse in 1908 and the years immediately thereafter, I argue that Schoenberg was one of the many artists and intellectuals committed to a Wagnerian ideology of cultural regeneration, ideology which had been given a contemporary idealist – indeed, intellectually radical – spin by his Viennese contemporary Otto Weininger. I argue that the 'ethical' agenda attaching to Schoenberg's renunciation of tonality that commentators typically attribute to Karl Kraus and Adolf Loos

was equally, if not more securely, rooted in the composer's interlinked ideological Wagnerism and idealistic Weiningerism, as well as inextricably linked to his own cultural position as an assimilated Jew. Previous work on Schoenberg has lacked sufficient curiosity about the roles these two figures might have played in his ideological landscape, and passed over the archival and textual evidence for their significance. Here I explore his engagement with their ideas, including what I perceive to be a certain re-orientation towards them, especially from the beginning of the 1930s. Historical circumstance forced upon Schoenberg the reality that although he identified with Germany, it identified less and less with him, which forced him to confront a profound rupture in his world view: as the century wore on Schoenberg had to re-invent his German identity, not only personally, but also as he expressed it compositionally and accounted for it in his prose writings. His compositional trajectory had been informed by a cultural ideology in which personal identity and national identification were both central and intimately intertwined; by the early 1920s, that ideology had been appropriated by, and by the early 1930s was undergoing radical social application in the hands of, a (soon to be) criminal, genocidal political regime. In the face of such a horrifying mutation, Schoenberg could not avoid undertaking a serious stock-take of this set of ideas. Schoenberg will not have been the only figure who had to do something similar, but he was undoubtedly one of the first to recognize its inevitability.

Although this book is an expansion and refinement of an argument I put in an article as long ago as 1994, it appears at a time when there is renewed interest in the role played by Jewish artists in the emergence of modernism, Schoenbergian musical modernism in particular.[3] As Philip Bohlman and others have pointed out modernism is intimately entwined with discussions of Jewish intellectuals and artists; indeed 'their contributions are inseparable from the very metaphysics of modernism'.[4] Karen Painter has written widely on this period and as part of that has stressed the extent to which, in Vienna, developments in counterpoint were received as somehow aesthetically Jewish, compared with in Germany, and argues that this affected the Viennese reception of Schoenberg.[5] As part of her study of a long history of negative gentile stereotyping of the music of Jews as 'noise', Ruth HaCohen speculatively reads Schoenberg's *Die Jakobsleiter* as a transfiguration of his music.[6] Klára Móricz scrutinizes essentialist assumptions about 'Jewish music', examining both Ernst Bloch and Schoenberg within emerging notions of Jewish nationalism. As Móricz focuses substantially upon the utopian ideas Schoenberg expressed through and alongside his Zionist writings of the early 1930s, in many respects the present study serves as a complement to hers, shifting the emphasis to 1908. But Jewish

musicians were not always advocates of modernism. Nicholas Cook situates the work of Jewish music theorist Heinrich Schenker in the same turn-of-the-century Viennese culture to the one invoked here, arguing that his project too was nurtured by that context, but to conservative ends. Cook contextualizes Schenker's treatment of musical surface against musical depth in relation to wider cultural debates about ornamentation, and reads his efforts to redefine the German in music – by harking back to a pre-Wagnerian musical legacy common to Jew and gentile alike – as Schenker's response to functioning within what was an increasingly tense environment for Jews.[7]

In addition to contributing to this growing bibliography, I, like others who grapple with Schoenberg, try to make sense of a highly diffuse collection of materials: music avowedly bearing 'hidden meanings' and an array of archival materials also playing with multiple levels of meaning. I look twice at the second of four or five key points that appear on Schoenberg's two late sketches for an autobiography: each sketch outline starts with 'Wie ich Musiker wurde' ('How I became a musician') before listing as the second point 'Wie ich Christ wurde' ('How I became Christ/Christian'). I revisit the moment when Schoenberg took his step into atonality and pose a series of questions about the discursive context and symbolic ground within which he effected that important move, a context that seems extremely familiar to us, but a set of works that can seem almost as new and fresh today as in 1909. Among those works, Schoenberg's first major 'atonal' work *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten* will play a particularly important role. I shall not attempt to cover the full range of ideas that the autodidact Schoenberg grappled with. So much has been written about the hotbed of philosophical, literary and artistic activity that was turn-of-the-century Vienna, and so often has this context been revisited over the years in connection with Schoenberg, that it seems as familiar as a Klimt poster on the wall of a student dorm. By now we all appreciate that turn-of-the-century Viennese café culture and the various 'circles' associated with particular cafés fostered a heady (and complex) flow of ideas between intellectuals, writers and artists. We all know that Schoenberg read Karl Kraus enthusiastically and was part of Adolf Loos's circle.[8] By the beginning of the twentieth century Vienna, as the centre of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was also host to a difficult set of political and cultural issues that arose from its own complex make-up (the languages question, for instance), and other matters that had wider currency, such as the so-called Jewish and Woman Questions. It is because of Schoenberg's conviction that his project had social relevance – acted as *Kulturkritik* – as well as a personal, highly subjective, even biographical dimension to it that it is

interesting to me, especially in view of the extent to which he was received by Adorno and Mann – who knew him personally and experienced many similar things – as a type of artistic witness to broader German historical and social forces. To this end, I would argue that the thick description to which he has long been subject has tended to gloss over the significance of two particular historical actors and sets of ideas. I shall therefore focus my attention on making the case for the vital significance in Schoenberg's intellectual world of both Wagnerian *Deutschtum* and the thought of Otto Weininger, a key Viennese mediator of Wagnerism. This will avoid further reiteration of broad cultural description and facilitate greater attention to archival materials by Schoenberg's own hand that have yet to be scrutinized properly.

The study is hermeneutic in two senses: in the historiographical sense, inasmuch as I read historical texts closely with the aim of discovering Schoenberg's conscious or subconscious meanings, and in a music-critical sense, in that in Chapter 5 I interpret his symbolic ground, and above all *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten*, as part of the same overall picture. I shall also argue for the usefulness of some of the lessons emerging from Holocaust studies for writing about this period, even though the focus is not literally a historical subject or body of art that had survived a death camp; for the latter reason, I also discuss the limits of its usefulness. In Chapter 1, in which I tackle the very difficulty of reading Schoenberg at all, I point to the relevance of such an approach overall, but return to the topic again at the end of the book in order to complicate its relevance to Schoenberg's particular case. Through Chapters 2 to 8 I trace a general trajectory from Schoenberg's first major compositional innovations (*c.*1908–11) through to the later nodal point of 1933, and certain of its after-shocks, but do so without a strictly chronological structure. With the aim of drawing out the extent to which the late 1920s and above all the early 1930s help to shed light back onto 1908–11, I move repeatedly between these two key periods; if this inevitably produces some repetition, it is done with the intention of throwing different light onto the matter immediately at hand, and of presenting more effectively new perspectives on a composer whose story is already quite familiar. When Schoenberg returns to ideas that he engaged earlier, the nature of his revisitation can sometimes shed new light on the far less well-documented earlier period. In Chapter 2 I use the strangeness of the sacerdotal language that Schoenberg's circle applied to him as a way of opening up the argument that Schoenberg's step into atonality was at least embedded in a discourse with redemptive implications. In Chapter 3 I draw detailed attention to the musical significance of Otto Weininger, not only to an analysis of Schoenberg, but to turn-of-the-century Viennese musical culture more generally. In Chapter 4 I go on to argue

for the relevance of the Weiningerian intellectual apparatus, in tandem with Wagnerian *Deutschtum* itself, to Schoenberg's thinking. In Chapter 5 I begin to make the case that this ideological apparatus underpins the way in which Schoenberg's compositional approach developed around 1908, with specific close attention to the *Harmonielehre*. Chapter 6 explores the symbolic territory that Schoenberg claimed in the texts he chose to set, often highly gendered symbols, and reads his works from 1908 and the period immediately thereafter as outlining a type of progressive allegory of Wagnerian redemption. In the final two chapters I revisit Schoenberg's multiple attempts to theorize the 'musical idea', reading it as a discourse by means of which he ultimately sought to reintegrate some of the fragments of his shattered world view. As I see it, the musical idea project of the 1930s was not just about compositional unity, but was part of an effort to create a unified view of his output. It was less a serious music-theoretical concept than a figure to which composer-philosopher Schoenberg returned again and again throughout his life, and through which he constructed and reconstructed his compositional project.

The book rereads a key moment in music history, reinterpreting, and in many cases interpreting for the first time, a range of slippery documents in an attempt to reorient our understanding of Schoenberg's evolving project. Schoenberg presented his creative work as a solution to a cultural problem, but also as a matter of truthful self-expression. For Cook, Schenker's theoretical work was the product of the social and political circumstances in which Schenker found himself, though not 'in any direct, cause-and-effect manner', which would 'misconstrue the relationship between theory and context'.[9] I shall take a slightly different approach here. For unlike Schenker's, Schoenberg's work has often been contextualized within that broader Viennese context, which is why I narrow my focus to Wagner and his Viennese philosophical interpreter, Otto Weininger. I argue that a coherent explanation for Schoenberg's various creative and theoretical innovations, as well as his responses to the changing politics in Germany, emerges when one reads certain key artistic moves alongside Wagner's theories concerning the 'Jew's' position in German culture. This is not to say that such a reading accounts for everything, nor that Schoenberg did not explore many ideas. He clearly did. The focus here is on the relationship between 1908 and the early 1930s.

As we reflect on European art in general, and Schoenberg's creative legacy in particular, after a century bifurcated by the Holocaust, it is more of a comfort than usual that art's significance is not constrained by the conditions – expressive, ideological or otherwise – of its conception. Given what we know about Schoenberg's early recognition of Hitler's violent capabilities and his own persecution at the hands of the Nazis, the idea that the Schoenberg 'case' might

stand as an allegory for the fate of Germany ought perhaps lead us to celebrate the essential arbitrariness of allegory and, above all, to celebrate music's own resistance to political 'decoding'. Non-identity is a cornerstone of Adornian aesthetics; and while some of us find that position a little too convenient when it comes to talking about music's social meanings, we must equally acknowledge that musical hermeneutics are intrinsically hazardous and can never exhaust art's dialogically self-renewing cultural meanings. My own project here is committed to such a position, though I do hold that a hermeneutic approach to musical texts can sometimes enhance new historical perspectives. The book is therefore both a cultural history and a celebration of some extraordinary musical works and the fertile mind of a pivotal composer who, politically, around 1908 was very much a man of his time, and in the 1920s and 30s was one way ahead of his time.