PART 1

The Garden of Eden
On history

Glass objects have no ‘aura’ . . . glass is the enemy of the secret.  
(Benjamin)\(^1\)

Absolute music has ‘no history’.\(^2\) It denies that it was ever born. The fact that it emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century was not a birth, it claims, but an emancipation, a discovery unveiled by the German Romantics, as if absolute music had always been there, eternal and absolute. After all, an absolute by definition cannot have a history; God – the absolute absolute – cannot be historically grounded, and neither can the surrogate absolutes of the secular world such as Reason or the Transcendental Ego; they all claim to start from nothing, as a self-sufficient method or metaphysical entity, without genealogy or narrative. Absolutes only have histories when they self-destruct to reveal their false identity. This means that absolute music can only have a history when it is no longer absolute music.

The emergence of absolute music was muttered rather than announced by the early Romantics.\(^3\) In fact, the Romantics were so reticent about the subject that they did not even call absolute music ‘absolute music’; that task was left to Wagner, who, ironically, was trying to expose its mendacious claims by negating it in his dialectics of music history.\(^4\) Absolute music is therefore a murky concept, born without a

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2 Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck, ‘Symphonien’, Phantasien über die Kunst für Freunde der Kunst (Hamburg, 1799), in Werke und Briefe von Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder (Berlin: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1938), 255. Tieck added several essays to Wackenroder’s Phantasien über die Kunst, including the essay entitled ‘Symphonien’; this has raised problematic questions concerning authorship. It is for this reason that I have included Tieck’s name in the authorship of the publication.
3 I shall use the term ‘Romantic’ to refer to the early Romantics only, which include writers such as the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, Tieck, Wackenroder, early Schelling and, to some extent, E. T. A. Hoffmann.
proper name. Indeed, its retrospective baptism calls the legitimacy of its birth into question.5 However, the Romantics did call instrumental music ‘pure music’,6 and this can be taken to be almost ‘absolute’, for its purity was deemed to be the essence of music itself, as if its spirit could be filtered through a symphonic sieve. So for the Romantics music became equated with Spirit,7 something too ethereal to have a history and too transcendent to be soiled by the muck of contextualisation. To avoid the possibility of contamination, the Romantics removed music from historical reality altogether and enclosed it in its own ‘separate world’,8 where its signs could reflect each other within an autonomy so pure that its being discovered itself as tautology: music is music. In this equation, music’s purity is self-evident truth; it just is: it needs no historical or external validation; there is nothing extraneous. By circling in its own orbit, music finally discovers its identity as ‘Music’, and so begins to preen itself of all that is not ‘Music’, discarding such elements as extra-musical appendages.

Absolute music therefore discriminates. Indeed, it defines itself by exclusion. The category of the ‘extra-musical’ was invented in the nineteenth century as the negative other of the ‘purely musical’.9 But this binary opposition is only a tactic designed to be mistaken as truth – as if such categories actually existed. What, after all, is an ‘extra-musical’ object? It is obviously not Music, but neither is it non-music. Would the concept even be possible without the existence of absolute music? Or, to put the question the other way round, would absolute music exist without positing the extra-musical? Perhaps the extra-musical is merely a deflection that diverts one’s attention from the dubious nature of the ‘purely musical’. Just try interrogating absolute music’s purity. What is it? What does it mean? What is this essence that so powerfully discriminates between what is and is not Music? There is no answer; or, at least, when asked to disclose the criteria for musical purity, absolute music deliberately draws a blank. Its signs signify nothing. Indeed it cleverly champions this nothingness as its purity. The sign and referent cancel each other out in such a frictionless economy of exchange that no concept or object is left over. Thus the meaning of absolute music resides

6 See, for example, Friedrich Schlegel, Athenaeum Fragments, no. 444, in Philosophical Fragments, trans. P. Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 92.
7 See, for example, Wackenroder, Werke und Briefe, 207 and 255. Also see Johann Gottfried Herder, Kalligone (1800) in Sämtliche Werke, ed. B. Suphan (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877–1913), 22:187.
8 Wackenroder, Werke und Briefe, 189, 245 and 255.
9 The issues here are developed from a lecture by Lydia Goehr entitled ‘Wagner and the Quest for the Autonomous Musical Voice’, given at the Institute of Advanced Musical Studies at King’s College, London (14 January 1998).
in the fact that it has no meaning; the inchoate and the ineffable become synonymous. Consequently, there is no way of teasing out an explanation from absolute music for its utterances are ineffable. This is why its purity is not a fact that is open to investigation, but a secret whose power resides in the inaccessibility of its sign. No wonder the early Romantics venerated instrumental music as a mystery that wraps ‘mysterious things in a mysterious language’.10 As ‘the ultimate mystery of faith’, absolute music was not something to be examined but believed in.11 Its purity is entirely opaque.

In this ideology of the pure, history is something that is outside music. It is an added ‘extra’, if not an optional ‘extra’. And as proof, absolute music bedazzles the historian with its opaque and mysterious purity where no history is possible. But, of course, this purity is not a condition of truth; it is simply a method whereby absolute music renders its own history unreadable. It is a strategy designed to silence the historian. After all, the only response that befits an ineffable music is speechlessness. This is why the social phenomenon that accompanied the ideology of absolute music was the eradication of audience chatter. The hushed expectancy that descended upon the concert halls of Europe by the 1840s was an acknowledgement of music’s ineffability.12 Absolute music therefore stifles critique – there is no way of talking about it. Or, to borrow Theodor Adorno’s metaphor, there is no direct way into these ‘windowless monads’.13 Writing a critical history of absolute music becomes a moral dilemma, for to break in to steal the meaning of these monadic objects would constitute a breach of music’s aesthetic autonomy. Any attempt to pry open these self-adhering signs to unlock what Lawrence Kramer calls ‘hermeneutic windows’,14 will involve a defenestration of absolute music’s purity. You forfeit absolute music by gaining access to it. By unlatching such windows, one reduces the ineffable sign to concrete objects that can never live up to the purity and totality of absolute music. The sign must remain a secret if music is to remain absolute. To give it away is seemingly to fail. So absolute music does not only make its history unreadable but the decipherment of its history undesirable.

This is not to say that histories of absolute music do not exist, but that

10 Wackenroder, Werke und Briefe, 255. 11 Ibid., 251.
13 Theodor W. Adorno, Aesthetische Theorie, ed. G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 15. There are two English translations of Aesthetic Theory, one by C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), the other by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Hullot-Kentor’s is the more accurate translation, but I have used Lenhardt’s where it seems more appropriate.
they are often written under its spell. But why should absolute music set the conditions for its critique? Must musicology always perpetuate its ideological claims? This book attempts to answer these questions by writing a history of absolute music without absolute music. It asks: what would happen if the concept of absolute music were removed as the epistemological ground of Western music? What would it be like?

First, absolute music would not be ‘Music’. After all, the Romantics did not compose; they merely talked. They fabricated from the symphony the discourse of absolute music. So far from standing speechless before its ineffable utterances, the Romantics spoke absolute music into existence. It is a music emancipated from language by language; ‘were it not for the poetic conceit of unspeakability’, writes Carl Dahlhaus, ‘there would have been no words available for reinterpreting the musically confusing or empty into the sublime or wonderful’. This is not to say that the symphony does not exist, but that the process of naming changes the meaning of the symphony. This is why a history of absolute music cannot be a history of music. Rather, it is a history of a discourse. Or, to turn absolute music against itself, absolute music is an extramusical idea. As such, absolute music does not have a fixed meaning, but is subject to the mutations of those who speak about it. And since its dialogue was played out as a heated argument in the nineteenth century, the history of absolute music is not the elaboration of a single idea, but a clamour of contradictory discourses, each vying for power in the construction of its meaning. Thus absolute music has a decentred and fragmented identity that can only be elucidated as a constellation of discursive ideas. Its history does not add up to the totality that it claims for itself.

Secondly, absolute music would not be absolute. Without its purity, absolute music would no longer be able to transcend history as an immutable sign and orbit in that ethereal, autoletic world of essences where it can discriminate against everything that does not aspire to its uncontaminated condition. If music is no longer absolute, then it can no longer constitute the unconditional ground of knowledge. Instead, it would find its being embedded within various epistemological structures that shape its existence. In other words, the unconditioned (the absolute) becomes conditioned. Its history would therefore resemble the archaeology of knowledge pioneered by Michel Foucault, which will be a grubby operation that will not leave absolute music pure. Its pristine features will be sedimented within the formations of theology.

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cosmology, cartography, philosophy, zoology, anthropology, physiology, biology, chemistry, physics, mechanics, mathematics, politics, linguistics, aesthetics, economics, magic, agriculture and sex. Admittedly, such excavations may not resemble a history of music at all, since they dig up the extra-musical debris against which absolute music purifies itself. To the ‘purist’ it may not even look like musicology. But this may be the only way of writing a meaningful history of a music that claims to have no history.

To write a history of absolute music is to write against it.
On modernity

Why should absolute music claim to have no history? Surely such a radical denial already betrays a historical consciousness. Its ahistorical stance is therefore a symptom of history, an allergic reaction for which the only cure is denial. This is not simply the truism that absolute music, like any other object, is governed by the fluctuations of time. Rather, absolute music embodies history itself. It is modern. Indeed, it was called ‘modern music’ at the very time when the French Revolution brought history into crisis and initiated a historical consciousness within German philosophy. Absolute music was therefore born at the time when time itself was under critical scrutiny. If this music is shaped by its context, then its history is about history. But why should it conceal this fact, claiming to transcend history when it lives off the very progress of modernity?

Because human history failed. Or rather, humanity failed to make the future it hoped for. Seventeen eighty-nine turned out to be the catastrophe of history as the ideals of the Revolution collapsed into the barbarity of the Terror. By the end of the eighteenth century, modernity had lost faith in itself; the promises of the Revolution, the progress of technology, the Utopian visions of the Enlightenment were no longer inevitable truths that time would unfold. Rather, history became more contingent and the future less attainable. Under such uncertain circumstances, the teleology of history risked degenerating into the ephemeral fluctuations of time, where modernity would merely be a matter of passing fashions. Without direction, modernity is only modish. Something from within modernity needed to legitimise history, to become its absolute and stand as an eternal emblem that could mark the progress of humanity and stabilise the vision of the future; the elevation of ‘Art’ as some kind of divine utterance, purged of all function and fashion, seemed to provide modernity with the meaning it needed; ‘Art’ became a religion of modernity, and absolute music, as the condition to which all art should aspire, was its god. And so, like God, this music exists outside history to make history; it transcends fashion to endorse

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progress. This is why many German critics of the nineteenth century, such as A. B. Marx, Wilhelm von Lenz and Richard Wagner, considered Beethoven’s *Eroica Symphony* a monument of modernity – a contradictory object that is simultaneously eternal (monumental) and progressive (modern). The celebrated C♯ in the seventh bar, for example, was regarded by Wagner as an epoch-making event: it is the very first note of modernity, he was reported to have said. But the modernity he speaks of here is not the superficial and fashionable modernity that he denounced as ‘Jewish’, for this C♯ is no mere passing-note of fashion; it is the fundamental structure of modernity – the paradox of the ‘modern classic’. The *Eroica* will always be in vogue, a heroic deed that transcends history in the very act of making it. So although absolute music claims to have no history, what it validates is modernity itself, creating a timeless norm out of the fashions of time.

So absolute music is modern – indeed, it is the monument of modernity itself. But is this such a radical concept? After all, musical instruments are necessarily products of technology; although instrumental sound has not always been absolute by nature, it has always been modern in the sense that it is inextricably bound to technological progress. Compared to the eternal voice of nature, its mechanised utterances seem to articulate the advance of modern culture. Instrumental music was already modern before the early Romantics discovered ‘absolute’ music; the idea was not something new to the nineteenth century. Many commentators would like to think that absolute music burst into history on Teutonic soil, as though its birth was some revolutionary rupture, late in coming but strong in securing the hegemony of German culture, but absolute music was not born under a Beethovenian star. Rather, like the C♯ of the *Eroica*, it is only a dissonance within the harmonic progression of modernity, marking a critical juncture of modern self-consciousness. To grasp the meaning of this moment one has to understand the modernity of instrumental music prior to Romanticism, for the Romantics merely gave a twist to an existing discourse to turn instrumental music into absolute music.

Exactly when the world became modern is difficult to gauge. This is...
partly because the modern condition is one that perpetually sees itself as the culmination of history, leaving a trail of epochs that posit themselves as new. The Reformation, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Romantic era, are all ‘modern ages’. Modernity is therefore driven by a need to overcome the past in the name of progress, so that the ‘new’ is constantly consigned to be ‘old’ by history. Its only point of reference is an idealised ‘ancient world’ against which it defines itself by an endless process of self-mutation. Unlike the ancient cosmos, the modern world is no longer grounded in a static, hierarchical structure in which one is simply born with pre-assigned duties, but is fashioned by a historical pressure that turns the world into a mass of potential waiting to be transformed by the assertion of the human will. The endeavours of man and the exercise of reason seemed to promise a Utopian future in an open and infinite universe. The globe seemingly expanded with the ‘discovery’ of ‘new worlds’ in the fifteenth century; the Reformation brought orthodox Christianity into theological flux; modern science interrogated a formerly immutable nature through the powers of reason and technology. And, similarly, the music of modernity, from Ars Nova to the avant-garde, is driven by the same process of human control and assertion over space, time and matter.

Within this history of human progress, the concept of instrumental music plays a negative, antagonistic role. The newness of its sounds only came into prominence when modernity came into crisis. Its empty signs were made to articulate moments of negation when the transformative potential of the new fizzled out into a kind of historical inertia. Thus instrumental music only figures in the modern discourse when modernity needs to overcome its own failure. In such instances, the immutable nature of the ancient world is seen in a different light; no longer is the past a superstitious dead-end for the thrust of scientific progress, but an Arcadian world of static perfection which modernity yearns for, believing that its future perfection lies in the revival of some ancient practice; ancient becomes modern. It is this narrative that my book will try to trace as it sifts out the meanings of instrumental music. There are two stages to the story.

First, at the turn of the seventeenth century instrumental music was

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denounced as modern; it was perceived as detrimental to the future, for its mechanised sounds seemed to echo the emptiness of the present. As early as the 1580s, Vincenzo Galilei blamed instrumental music for the impotence of modern composition, claiming that its polyphonic sounds had depleted the ancient power of monodic song. By denouncing instrumental music, modernity actually affirmed its belief that the present could be surpassed and that a new society would emerge from the historical momentum of music; if instrumental sounds were removed then Utopia would follow as Arcadia.

However, by the turn of the nineteenth century, with the aftermath of the French Revolution, the same emptiness was embraced as the reality of the modern condition. This is the second stage, where the future could no longer be secured by a simple faith in human progress. The early Romantics idealised the ancient world to such a point of unattainability that future perfection was rendered impossible. So instead of denouncing instrumental music, the Romantics yearned for Utopia negatively in the figure of the vacant sign, as if a double negative could somehow make a positive. At the point when the future seemed to meander aimlessly, instrumental music was made absolute in the hope that the present, like the C⁵ of the Eroica, would resolve within a teleological structure yet to be articulated. Although in both these stages of its history instrumental music signals a loss, its emptiness took on different meanings as modernity came to terms with its own emptiness. In other words, the optimism of modern progress is inversely proportional to the prestige of instrumental music. Or to put it another way: the rise of instrumental music is dependent on the fall of modernity.

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12 See Vincenzo Galilei, Dialogo della musica antica e della moderna (1581) in Oliver Strunk, Source Readings in Music History (New York: Norton, 1950), and the chapter ‘On Opera’ in this volume.