

Arnold Schoenberg and the Ideology of Progress in Twentieth-Century Musical Thinking

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As is well known, Schoenberg was not only a prominent composer but also a comprehensive theorist who addressed both aesthetic and philosophical issues. In his writings, one can find unambiguous - yet not always consistent - positions relating to the meaning and purpose of art, as well as definitions for terms such as artistic form, musical logic, unity and more. Closely related to this are Schoenberg's deliberations on the historical development of Western Music and, in this context, the status of several specific composers, including himself. Schoenberg, who began to deal in his earliest writings with the historical evolution of music and its significance for the work of contemporary composers, continued to explore these issues throughout his career, leaving no doubt as to the significance of categories of historical change as a vital part of his musical thinking. This paper deals with Schoenberg's notion of progress in music. The focus is on the intellectual sources of this notion in nineteenth-century discourses and its role as ideological construct in early twentieth-century musical thinking. My concern is not whether Schoenberg was indeed a progressive composer according to some historical-stylistic criteria, but rather the extent to which the notion of progress informs his work and its reception.

Schoenberg's best-known ideas on the development of music are probably those having to do with the expansion of chromaticism during the nineteenth century and the "emancipation of the dissonance" in the twentieth. In his *Harmonielehre* of 1911, he presented the view that consonance and dissonance do not constitute contradictory qualities, as had been thought by many generations of theorists, but rather different gradations on a continuum of "comprehensibility." The dissonances are not essentially different from the consonant intervals, except for being at a further distance in the series of overtones and therefore more difficult to grasp. Consequently, they required special care and were later to evolve as independent sonorities.¹ Though Schoenberg presented this hypothesis during the period of his first experiments with non-traditional harmonies, its implications for his later compositional developments did not elude the eyes of scholars. William Thomson went so far as to propose that Schoenberg's argument in favor of the "emancipation of the dissonance" as an inevitable development was nothing but a strategy of public relations, an act of defense aiming to avoid legitimate judgment of his atonal works on the basis of their aesthetic merit.²

¹ Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony (1911)*, Roy Carter, trans. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), p. 25.

² William Thomson, "Music as Organic Evolution: Schoenberg's Mythic Springboard into the Future." *College Music Symposium* 33/34 (1993/1994): pp. 191-211; William Thomson, *Schoenberg's Error* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

I shall subsequently return to this criticism. In the meantime, it should be noted that Schoenberg's view of the development of harmony does not over-shadow his preoccupation with notions of historical inevitability and progress. A more careful examination of his writings reveals that progress in music is related to additional compositional aspects, and converges with matters that link compositional considerations with moral and even ethical values. Already in *Harmonielehre*, Schoenberg related his view of the dissonance to a more general conception of laws in art. He condemned the idea that artistic principles are universally valid and suggested that these should be considered as historically conditioned.³ In the field of music, this applies not only to the status of consonances and dissonances but, more generally, to the intricate system of tonal organization that many of his contemporary theorists, most notably Heinrich Schenker, considered to be the ultimate "natural law" of music. He maintains that compositional systems are analogous to living organisms, subject by their nature to periodic change.⁴ Yet Schoenberg's organic view should not be mistaken for relativism: he insists that the emancipation of the dissonance was an inevitable historical development consistent with the general progress of musical language.

Schoenberg's belief in progress seems even more pronounced when examined in the light of his later compositional developments and theoretical reflections. In 1921, after a long period of doubts and experimentation, Schoenberg began to compose using his newly invented twelve-tone technique, a fact which he tried to keep secret for some time. Finally, in 1923, he presented the technique to his students and began to discuss its principles openly. In his written comments on the path that led him to its invention or rather its "discovery" as he would put it, Schoenberg's argument is essentially an historical one. Again and again, he claims that tonality lost its grip as an organizing force in music and that the new method is nothing but its natural continuation:

Formerly, the use of the fundamental harmony had been theoretically regulated through recognition of the effects of root progressions. This practice had grown into a subconsciously functioning sense of form which gave a real composer an almost somnambulistic sense of security in creating, with utmost precision, the most delicate distinctions of formal elements.... After many unsuccessful attempts during a period of approximately twelve years, I laid the foundation for a new procedure in musical construction which seemed fitted to replace those structural differentiations provided formerly by tonal harmonies.⁵

As far as Schoenberg is concerned, the twelve-tone technique was aimed at solving a practical problem of composition: how to establish a new musical order in response to the so-called "collapse of tonality." However, the mere perception of the "free" treatment of dissonances in Romantic and early Modern music as an irreversible state of affairs, whether by Schoenberg or others, involves complications that belong properly to the field of the philosophy of history. More specifically, it is informed by controversial theories of determinism and teleological ends in history. Such notions do not only impose historical facts onto preconceived schemes but also imply a patterned continuity that expands into the future. As Maarten Doorman explains in recent study on

³ Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵ Arnold Schoenberg, "Composition with Twelve-Tones (1)" (1941), *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, Leonard Stein, ed., Leo Black, trans. (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 218.

the ideology of progress in modern art: "When someone interprets a recent artistic achievement in terms of progress . . . [he] seems to stare into an ordered past, to see what has been created and to place the new achievement within the context of a historically advancing process."⁶ It is for this reason that Schoenberg's perceptive insights as a theorist become problematic when applied as a basis for compositional work. There is no doubt that many musical works from the nineteenth century on explore the expressive potential of the chromatic scale in a way that, with few exceptions (e.g., Carlo Gesualdo's motets come to mind), would have been incomprehensible in earlier times. There is also no doubt that in certain works from the same period, the use of chromaticism brings about a temporary tonal disorientation. What does seem doubtful is whether these and related harmonic practices legitimize atonality and twelve-tone technique as inevitable future developments.

It is easy to dismiss Schoenberg's claims as self-serving, as did Thomson and other music scholars,⁷ but this by no means explains their strong appeal for the generations of musicians and critics who followed him as a composer and thinker. In fact, despite the recent critique of the theoretical foundations of his work, the general outlines of Schoenberg's narrative on the evolution of harmony remain very much in evidence in conventional wisdom and continue to inform historical surveys until this very day. The reason for this, I believe, is not merely Schoenberg's reputation as composer and theorist; something deeper and more fundamental is at stake here, having to do with the strong and persistent imprint of the ideology of progress in western modes of thinking and sensibility.

The first decades of the twentieth century, which saw the atrocities of World War I, were marked by a growing pessimism regarding the possibility of human progress and improvement. Historians of ideas agree that it was during this time that the idea of general progress lost its credibility.⁸ The process was sharp and sudden. Having originated in the scientific revolution and the French enlightenment, it became a member in the ever growing group of "deplorable myths" of western civilization. Things were different, however, in the sphere of art-making. Avant-garde artists and composers of the twentieth century often invoked the notion of progress in support of their stylistic choices, their historical precedents, and the socio-political significations they often attached to them.⁹ A remarkable aspect of modern musical discourse is the tendency to judge musical works in relation to some historical trend they purported to represent.¹⁰ In

⁶ Maarten Doorman, *Art in Progress: A Philosophical Response to the End of the Avant-Garde*, Sherry Marx, trans. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), p. 63.

⁷ Richard Taruskin's criticism will be discussed later on. Another kind of criticism is the one offered by Fred Lerdahl, which focuses on the perceptual problems involved in atonal music. According to Lerdahl, the ability of twelve-tone technique, or, indeed, any other atonal idiom to produce a sense of musical coherence, is highly questionable. For reasons of permanent cognitive constraints, listeners simply cannot grasp the pitch organization of systematic atonal works. They may, of course, perceive the works as organized and coherent in some sense, but their judgment has nothing to do with the logic of their respective compositional systems. See Fred Lerdahl, "Cognitive Constraints on Compositional Systems", in *Generative Processes in Music*, John A. Sloboda, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 251-259.

⁸ Morris Ginsberg, "Progress in the Modern Era" in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Philip P. Wiener, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), vol. 3, p. 634.

⁹ See Maarten Doorman, *Art in Progress*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

his *Analysis and Value Judgment* (1970), Carl Dahlhaus refers to this critical practice using the term "historical criticism":

[Following the "functional" and "aesthetic" criticism of earlier centuries], [h]istorical criticism characteristic of the twentieth century, without being predominant, conceives a musical piece not as an isolated work complete in itself, but as a document of a step in the process of composition, as a partial ingredient of a work in progress. The crucial matter is not the work as such in its present but rather the extent that it functions as influential factor in the development of musical thinking and compositional methods.¹¹

Among twentieth-century critics and theorists, it was undoubtedly Theodor W. Adorno whose essays were the most significant and influential in articulating the idea that the development of musical language follows a linear process of advancement. In Adorno's socio-philosophical analysis, from Beethoven on, the development of music functions as the mirror image of modern society: not as a "reflection" of its prevalent values and ideals but as a critical and even antagonistic engagement with them through intra-musical means. In the *Philosophie der Neuen Musik* from 1949 (translated as *Philosophy of Modern Music*), he explains the compositional developments that culminated in Schoenberg's twelve-tone method as stemming from the attempt to grant music an autonomous status and structural self-sufficiency in response to the omnipresent domination of capitalistic ideology. Adorno opposes the view that modern music represents a rupture in music history and is incomprehensible the way, for instance, Beethoven's is; rather, he claims that the negative reaction of listeners to its harsh qualities is, in fact, a reaction to the social truth communicated by it: "The dissonances which horrify [the public] testify to their own condition and it is for this reason alone that they are unbearable for them."¹² Adorno's philosophy of music history thus rejects the naïve and optimistic idea of progress as a global and steady improvement in all realms of life, in favor of a more complex and dialectical conception.¹³ As a historical phenomenon, music relates to the progress of knowledge and technology through its symbolization and criticism of the conditions of society as a whole. Although Adorno's interpretation goes beyond Schoenberg's intellectual concerns, the philosophical support it provided in defense of the composer contributed significantly to the nature of his reception by younger composers and critics. The *Philosophie der Neuen Musik* casts

¹¹ Carl Dahlhaus, *Analysis and Value Judgment* (1970), Sigmund Levarie, trans. (New York: Pendragon, 1983), p. 14.

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, "Philosophie der Neuen Musik" [1949], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Rolf Tiedemann, ed., in collaboration with Gretel Adorno, Susan Buck-Morss and Klaus Schultz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), vol. 12, p. 18. For the English translation, see: Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), p. 9. For an introduction to Adorno's philosophy of music history, see: Max Paddison, "The Historical Dialectic of Musical Material", in *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 218-262.

¹³ In to Adorno's own words, the *Philosophy of Modern Music* should be read as an "extended excursus" to his and Max Horkheimer's joint essay *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. "Philosophie der Neuen Musik", p. 11. *Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. xviii. The essay presents a comprehensive criticism of the Enlightenment ideals of progress and rationality. See: Max Horkheimer, "Dialektik der Aufklärung" [1947], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, ed. (Fischer, Frankfurt am Main 1987), vol. 5. For the English version, see: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Edmund Jephcott, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

Schoenberg as the quintessential exponent of modernism in music, an image that was (and to some extent still) widely-shared by musicians and historians alike. The other central musical figure in Adorno's essay is Stravinsky, whose stylistic eclecticism stands for the regressive and even barbaric forces in twentieth-century culture.

The rise of the idea of progress as a mode of musical understanding and discourse was the result of a complex process in which various intellectual traditions were combined with social and political developments. These include Hegel's philosophy of history, Karl Marx's historical materialism, social Darwinism, and the undeniable and visible progress of science and technology. Though Schoenberg did not seem to follow or affiliate himself consciously with any of these, his historical deliberations on music were clearly based on two premises commonly associated with Hegelian philosophy: first, that the history of culture and art embodies a rational process of progress, and second, that art reflects the general cultural and spiritual trends of its time.¹⁴ These two ideas, which were sometimes intermingled with other organicist intellectual traditions, served as conceptual pillars of the historiography of culture and art criticism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Ernst H. Gombrich explains: "Those who accepted Hegel's logic...had the proof of what had before been a mere matter of intuition, the feeling that each art and each culture exists in its own right and could not be judged by other standards; and yet this proof did not invalidate the equally intuitive conviction that the history of civilization was and remained a history of growing value, a history of progress."¹⁵

By the nineteenth century, writers on music had many sources on which to draw in applying the concept of progress to music, but Hegel's philosophy of history seemed to be the preferred model in the German speaking-world. Adolf Bernhard Marx, best known for his definition of the sonata form, formulated his theory of forms as a "phenomenology" in the Hegelian sense, that is, as a description of forms of the spirit that realizes itself throughout history. As Dahlhaus observed, the individual work in Marx's theory represents a formal type that functions as a partial realization of an idea that is fulfilled in its entirety by the whole history of musical forms.¹⁶ At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Hegelian dialectics was adopted by the composer and theorist August Halm. His *Von Zwei Kulturen der Musik* of 1913 describes the history of music in earlier generations as a dialectic between musical and cultural oppositions that progress

¹⁴ Hegel's view of art is extremely abstract (as is his philosophy as a whole) and nowhere in his writings does he present it in a way that is directly applicable to the problems of art criticism and history proper. Suffice it here to say that by "art" Hegel does not exactly mean artistic activity or the products of such an activity as an empirical fact but rather as a stage (alongside religion and philosophy) in the progressive development of the "absolute spirit" towards self-consciousness (*Selbstbewusstsein*). In this trajectory, art functions as a cultural symbol when the Truth or the Absolute is represented through intuition (*Anschauung*). See Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert, *Einführung in Hegels Ästhetik* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005), pp. 39, 103-11. In his lectures on aesthetics (G. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, T.M. Knox, trans., 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975]), Hegel sketches his scheme of symbolic, Classical, and Romantic art, but is difficult to correlate these precisely with the historical reality of artistic developments. Nonetheless, the idea of art as an expression of the "spirit" of an historical age or culture (the infamous concept of *Zeitgeist*) is commonly associated with him. Another Hegelian thesis concerns "the death of art" (Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert, *Einführung*, p. 11).

¹⁵ Ernst H. Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 13 and: Ernst H. Gombrich, *Kunst und Fortschritt* (Köln: Dumont, 2002), p. 93.

¹⁶ Dahlhaus, *Analysis and Value Judgment*, pp. 45-6.

towards synthesis: Bach's "Fugue Culture" and Beethoven's "Sonata Culture."¹⁷ Finally, Hegelian ideas infiltrated early musicological theory and methodology through concepts originally developed in relation to the visual arts. Invoking Alois Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen*,¹⁸ Guido Adler, founder of the Department of Musicology at the University of Vienna and the first to define the scope and the objectives of the science of music (*Musikwissenschaft*), proposed that stylistic changes correspond to the life-cycle of an organic entity: "The style of an epoch, a school, an artist, or work," he says in *Der Stil in der Musik* (1911), "is not emerged by chance, as a mere arbitrary expression of some self-generating *Kunstwollen*, but rather based on laws of being, namely, the rise and decline of organic development."¹⁹

Richard Wagner's writings provide another and probably more immediate source for Schoenberg's view of the composer as an agent of historical progress. In *The Art Work of the Future* (1849), Wagner describes the synthesis of word and music in his operatic dramas as the final stage of a developmental path that began with Greek drama, continuing through Christian polyphony and German classical music.²⁰ Despite the difference in their respective artistic goals, both composers alluded to the evolution of music in an attempt to provide a rational basis for their compositional innovations. In this sense, the relationship they established between theory and practice resonates with Karl Popper's characterization of historicist thought: "Historical prophecy and the interpretation of history must thus become the basis of any thought-out and realistic social action. Consequently, interpretation of history must be the central job of historicist thought; and in fact it has become so. All the thoughts and all the activities of historicists aim at interpreting the past, in order to predict the future."²¹ In the historicist world view, past, present, and future are connected, constituting different stages of a plan that operates according to fixed laws. Thus, future acts and deeds could and should be carried out in accordance with the logic or structure exemplified by past events.

The connection between Wagner, Schoenberg and historicism in this sense was pointed out briefly by Popper himself in his intellectual autobiography.²² Although Popper does not elaborate on the significance of historicism to Schoenberg's thought, his observation is strongly supported by a reading of Schoenberg's theoretical and analytical

¹⁷ For discussion of Halm's debt to Hegel's theory of the state, see Alexander Rehding, "August Halm's Two Cultures as Nature", in *Music Theory and Natural Order from the Renaissance to the Early Twentieth-Century*, Suzannah Clark and Alexander Rehding, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 142-60.

¹⁸ Alois Riegl (1858-1905), one of the founders of art history as a discipline, claimed that works of art are an expression of *Kunstwollen*, a term referring to the desire of societies to create art in a particular way with the attendant overcoming of technical constraints. Riegl introduced the term *Kunstwollen* in the introduction to his *The Late Roman Art Industry* of 1901, trans. Rolf Winkes (Roma: G. Bretschneider, 1985), pp. 5-17.

¹⁹ "Der Stil einer Epoche, einer Schule, eines Künstlers, eines Werkes entsteht nicht zufällig, als bloße Zufallsäußerung des darin zutage tretenden Kunstwollens, sondern basiert auf Gesetzen des Werdens, des Auf- und Abstieges organischer Entwicklung." Guido Adler, *Der Stil in der Musik* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1911), p. 13. [Author's translation.]

²⁰ For a concise discussion of the developmental genealogies in the writings of Wagner, Schoenberg, Webern, Boulez, Debussy and others, see Jeffrey Perry, "Music, Evolution, and the Ladder of Progress," *Music Theory Online* 6.5 (2000). <http://www.societymusictheory.org/mto/issues/mto.00.6.5/mto00.6.5.perry.htm>.

²¹ Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge), pp. 44-5.

²² Karl R. Popper, *Ausgangspunkte: Meine intellektuelle Entwicklung* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1979), pp. 73, 94-5.

writings. In Chapter 4 of his *Theory of Harmony*, Schoenberg makes clear his historicist conviction. He states that one of the principal tasks of the music teacher is to "awaken in the pupil a sense of the past and at the same time to open up to him prospects for the future."²³ To achieve this objective, he suggests that the instruction should proceed historically "by making the connections between what was, what is, and what is likely to be." An accomplished pedagogue and theorist, Schoenberg's interest in the music of the past was profound and sincere, but it was affected by his desire as a composer to find through it the key to future progress.

The type of historicist hermeneutics in which musical facts are interpreted within a preconceived scheme of progress, and the seamless integration of historiosophical notions and historical facts that go along with it, is clearly evident in Schoenberg's article "Brahms the Progressive" (1947).²⁴ In this famous and much-discussed article, Schoenberg demonstrates two related techniques that he particularly identified with the music of Brahms: "musical prose" and "developing variation," both have been discussed extensively in the professional literature.²⁵ As striking as Schoenberg's insights into Brahms' music might be, his reading is closely linked with his own compositional concerns and the assumption of progress. Having demonstrated the thematic integrity of Brahms' themes, he argues that Brahms' "musical prose" attests to his aspiration for complex and economical musical expression, an expression that seeks to avoid unnecessary passages and undeveloped repetitions: "This is what musical prose should be—a direct and straightforward presentation of ideas, without any patchwork, without mere padding and empty repetitions."²⁶ It is this formal quality, in Schoenberg's view, which places Brahms on a level with Wagner and the rest of the progressive composers of his generation. If the critics thought differently on this matter, Brahms's contribution to the development of music did not evade the notice of composers who followed him. Mahler, Max Reger, and Schoenberg himself all adopted Brahms's innovations and continued to develop them. "It seems," Schoenberg concludes, "that some progress has already been made in this direction, the direction toward an unrestricted musical language which was inaugurated by Brahms the Progressive."²⁷

Richard Taruskin addresses Schoenberg's analysis of Brahms in his recent *Oxford History of Western Music*. Schoenberg's focus on thematic structure in Brahms's music, he argues, was not a neutral methodological choice, but rather a sophisticated way to legitimize his own compositional practice by presenting Brahms as his predecessor. The concern for thematic unity that stems from Schoenberg's own aesthetics was projected by him onto the past in order to establish his twelve-tone technique as the result of an inevitable progress. "Brahms the Progressive" is therefore about Schoenberg no less than it is about Brahms. And yet, as Taruskin himself points out, Schoenberg's interpretation was convincing enough to prompt a "widespread revision of music history," one in which Schoenberg's narrative was generalized so that "it became not the story of two composers or of a specific musical technique called developing variation, but the story of 'Western

²³ Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, p. 29.

²⁴ Schoenberg's essay "Brahms the Progressive" first delivered as a radio lecture in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1933.

²⁵ For a discussion of these techniques, see Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, Mary Whittall, trans. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 45-63.

²⁶ Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, p. 415.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 441.

Music' itself."²⁸ In responding to Taruskin's criticism, it is important to bear in mind that Schoenberg's historical narrative found ardent followers and supporters long before serialism was proclaimed as the order of the day by the radical avant-garde during the 1950s. It is also important to recognize that the resonance of his ideas reached far beyond the writings and compositional work of isolated people within his narrow cultural milieu or personal students. There is also no doubt that Adorno's writings on modern music did much to promote and support Schoenberg's work and the underlying theoretical and historical assumptions, but this too, by itself, could hardly explain its appropriation by people of different cultural and musical backgrounds.

A case in point is the French composer and theorist René Leibowitz, who was the first to write about Schoenberg and his pupils as a school. His *Schoenberg and his School*, published the same year as Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music*, not only adopts Schoenberg's narrative, but also extends it to include Alban Berg and Anton Webern. Each of these two composers, he maintains, developed in his musical works an aspect that exists, or is at least implied, in Schoenberg's style: "While the genius of Berg always strove to establish a connection between the discoveries of Schoenberg and the past—thus profiting by the 'retroactive' elements in Schoenberg's work—the genius of Webern is concerned with the *possibilities for the future* [emphasis in the original] inherent in this work, and thus succeeds in projecting its particularly novel and radical elements."²⁹ The developmental path sketched by Leibowitz follows that of Schoenberg in tracing the dodecaphony to the tonality itself, and leads from Schoenberg himself to Webern. Schoenberg's thesis of the historically inevitable character of atonality and dodecaphony was no less convincing even to Charles Rosen in 1975:

The style of Schoenberg...and, indeed, of most of the avant-garde movements of the first decades of this [the twentieth] century—was not created solely with an intent to shock. The artists, Schoenberg as much as any, were above all aware of taking *the next reasonable and logical step*, of doing work that was already to hand and that *had to be done*. To a certain extent, the stylistic revolutions of those years were merely the exploitation of already existent possibilities within the artistic languages, *the drawing of unavoidable conclusions* [my emphasis].³⁰

The complete list of musician-authors who adopted Schoenberg's historical explanations or some variant thereof, aside from Leibowitz and Rosen, includes not only the historians Egon Wellesz, Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, and Willi Reich, but also the theorist Rudolph Reti, who elaborated Schoenberg's method of thematic analysis as demonstrated in "Brahms the Progressive."³¹ By applying this method, Reti tried to prove

²⁸ Richard Taruskin, *Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), vol. 4, pp. 358-9.

²⁹ René Leibowitz, *Schoenberg and his School* [1949], Dika Newlin, trans. (New York: De Capo Press, 1975), p. 190.

³⁰ Charles Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 16.

³¹ The musicologist and composer Egon Wellesz was Schoenberg's student and a classmate of Anton Webern in the Musicology Department of the University of Vienna. In his lecture "The Origins of Schoenberg's Twelve-Tone System," Wellesz cites in particular Brahms's technique of thematic development as an influential factor in Schoenberg's work. See Egon Wellesz, "The Origins of Schoenberg's Twelve-Tone System." Lecture delivered in The Whittall Pavilion of the Library of Congress, January 10, 1957. Willi Reich's biography of Schoenberg and Stuckenschmidt's book on modern music are among the first historical books to deal with their respective subjects. See Willi Reich, *Arnold Schönberg, oder der konservative Revolutionär* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974) and Hans Heinz

that thematic patterns in tonal music have a unifying function not dissimilar to that of rows in serial music.³²

The influence of Schoenberg on the historiography of music is an interesting topic that deserves a separate study. By now, however, it should be clear that considering Schoenberg's narrative of the progress of music and its reception as a symptom of a broad cultural trend might be a promising alternative to viewing it as a successful case of public relations. And yet the fundamental question remains: what made Schoenberg's narrative so compelling? An important factor to be taken into account in answering this question is the way Schoenberg construed musical progress as having formal as well as moral or ethical aspects. Schoenberg's aesthetics of musical progress, as formulated in relation to Brahms, are distinguished not only by a specific compositional technique, but also by a certain relationship between composer and audience. In "Criteria for Evaluation of Music," he claims that Brahms's development technique is more worthy of esteem than that of Wagner. He explains that following a theme based on the technique of developing variation is more challenging than following a theme developed according to the "primitive" model of the sequence that is typical of Wagner. The same point emerges from his discussion of the transition period between the late Baroque and early Classicism. Schoenberg explains that the apparent regression from the complex polyphonic style of J.S. Bach to the simple homophonic-melodic style of composers such as Keiser, Telemann, and Matheson derived from a compromise with popular taste, a taste that demands immediate comprehension. He establishes that this "was not a natural development . . . but man-made revolution."³³

The reference to the perceptual challenge presented by a musical work attests to Schoenberg's view that compositional choices involve ethical or moral implications. While structural complexity in music derives from an autonomous artistic desire to develop and elaborate the means of expression, regression is the product of bending art to extraneous considerations of fame and popular success. This interesting suggestion, which clearly resonates with Adorno's social criticism, indicates that for Schoenberg, progress expresses itself not only in certain formal properties, but also in certain values that are conveyed through the composer's work ethic. Schoenberg makes this point clear when he argues elsewhere that "in the sphere of art-music, the author respects his audience. He is afraid to offend by repeating over and over what can be understood at one single hearing."³⁴ Schoenberg's firm belief that the truly progressive composer is one whose artistic and moral standards compel him to write music that is not easily accessible goes back to the romantic concept of the creative genius. And yet, based on what has

Stuckenschmidt, *Neue Musik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1951). Rudolf Reti introduced his analytical method in *The Thematic Process in Music* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961).

³² For a discussion of Reti's method and the principles of serial music, see Robert Sherlaw-Johnson, "Analysis and the Composer," in *Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought*, Vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 719-726.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 409. By "natural development," Schoenberg seems to mean that under optimal conditions, music would have developed in a linear fashion, from simple to complex. Such a claim can be found in a passage from "New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea" (1946): "Music uses time. It uses my time, it uses your time, it uses its own time. It would be most annoying if it did not aim to say the most important things in the same concentrated manner in every fraction of this time. This is why, when composers have acquired the technique of filling one direction with content to the utmost capacity, they must do the same in the next direction, and finally in all the directions in which music expands." *Style and Idea*, p. 116.

³⁴ Taken from "Brahms the Progressive," *ibid.*, pp. 400-1.

been said so far, it is clear that he conceived creativity as at least partially predicated upon a historically determined process.³⁵

The fate of Schoenberg's idea of progress was decided to a large extent by its ability to effectively address what seemed to be a fundamental problem of the early twentieth-century musical scene: the sense of confusion and uncertainty imparted by the absence of a broadly accepted compositional practice. At that time, pluralism had not yet been accepted as a possibly permanent state of affairs, and the world of art music was characterized by a variety of stylistic "-isms" and competing ideologies of "the music of the future." Accentuating this cultural anxiety were the upheavals surrounding World War I and the traumatic experiences they provoked. It is against this background that Schoenberg's innovations and their underlying assumptions found fertile ground. Writing in 1928, Kurt Westphal interpreted Schoenberg's atonal music as a response to Debussy's nonfunctional harmony and the "stressful crisis in which music was found at the turn of the century."³⁶ Schoenberg's solution to the problem of tonality—which, when seen for what it is, was in fact the problem of stylistic pluralism—met with widespread interest, not least because it was conceived as effectively leading back to the safe track of a unified and homogenous compositional tradition. Moreover, by stressing the moral and ethical values behind a composer's work, Schoenberg linked the notion of progress as the elaboration of musical means with the Romantic trend that afforded the artist a special status in society. For Schoenberg, this status was defined by the efforts made on the part of the audience to come to terms with the composers' musical vision. The idea that new music is, by definition, not easily accessible was assumed by Adorno as a prerequisite for its critical role. Whether Schoenberg would have approved of the philosopher's interpretation or not, the fact remains that it was through such a prism that those exponents of avant-garde music who were influenced by Adorno understood and justified its social isolation.

As the present article has sought to demonstrate, Schoenberg's reputation as the quintessential modern composer is grounded in the history of ideas no less than in that of compositional technique. Significant as his compositional innovations might be, their reception was highly affected by the intellectual atmosphere prevalent in Schoenberg's time and cultural milieu. The belief in progress was a major factor in twentieth-century musical thinking and one which dictated Schoenberg's compositional developments and affected their reception. In retrospect, it is not so much the *forces* of inevitable progress that expressed themselves in Schoenberg's work, but rather the *ideology* of progress; a small conceptual distinction perhaps, but one which offers an intriguing perspective on twentieth-century musical culture. To be sure, Schoenberg was not the only composer to view his art in terms of "progress"; but he, more than any other composer, supported it with rational arguments that drew upon conceptions current at that time regarding the role of the artist in relation to history and society. It is for this reason that Schoenberg's compositional methods were conceived by many as the true path to new music. From the perspective of intellectual history, Schoenberg's main achievement was to endow the

³⁵ Supporting this is a statement by Schoenberg in his autobiographical article "How One Becomes Lonely" (1937): "I knew I had to fulfill a task, I had to express what was necessary to be expressed and I knew I had the duty of developing my ideas for the sake of progress in music, whether I liked it or not." *Style and Idea*, p. 53.

³⁶ Kurt Westphal, *Die moderne Musik* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1928), p. 39. Cited in: Bryan Simms, *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg, 1908-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 4.

abstract idea of progress with musical content and make it a central category of musical thinking. In so doing, he presented a new orientation for the understanding and discourse of music, one that rendered historical considerations, as opposed to aesthetic considerations, a primary source of artistic values. This, in turn, had an impact on the way musicians and critics conceptualized their musical pasts, as well as the prospects they sought for the future. If, from a present-day perspective, Schoenberg's work seems to rest on unfounded and dated premises, this is not only because music history did not take the course he predicted, but also because of our current skepticism towards the idea of progress.