

# Twentieth-Century Tonality, or, Breaking Up Is Hard to Do

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In 1910, Thomas Beecham produced Richard Strauss's new opera, *Elektra*, in London. Audiences were impressed and the season was extended; but, as Beecham recalls,

so far as I could ascertain, musicians did not like the piece at all. One eminent British composer on leaving the theater was asked what he thought of it. "Words fail me," he replied, "and I'm going home at once to play the chord of C major twenty times over to satisfy myself that it exists." The curious thing about this little piece of criticism is that *Elektra* actually finishes with the chord in question, thundered out several times in repetition on the full ensemble.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently, Strauss's modernist dislocation of tonal language led to a confusion in the mind of our anonymous listener, who could not recognize the cadence for what it was. But the passion of his reaction suggests that more than cognitive transparency was at stake. His express fear was that C major, the icon of diatonic, centric, functional tonality, might no longer exist. Strauss's expressionistic chromaticism represented a threat to linguistic innocence.

This anecdote, in the style of a compact, ironic fanfare, announces several of the themes I want to develop. First is the array of possible hearings prompted by a given work or idiom, displayed here by the satisfied concertgoers, the outraged expert, and the conductor himself. Second is the idea that musical apprehension is inseparable from deeply rooted ideologies of music's proper function, style, and relation to history. Ideological positions of this sort—casually or passionately embraced, consciously or subconsciously elaborated—condition how music is heard, resulting in the wildly contradictory responses I will be surveying.<sup>2</sup> Finally, at the heart of many of these musical disagreements lies a divergence in conceptions of history itself. This is the argument on which modernism is based: the belief that the conditions of modern life are so radically at odds with past experience that one must speak of a historical crisis, and thus the necessity of

entirely reinventing the forms of cultural expression. It is significant that the reactionary listener quoted above experienced the challenge posed by *Elektra* in historical terms, as the passing away of a paradigm of understanding. To his horrified ears, Strauss had not merely foregone tonality, he had superseded it.

In this paper I will examine the myths and metaphors which have organized people's understanding of both tonal and post-tonal repertoires in the twentieth century. My texts are verbal records of listening experiences or reflections upon music, set down by composers, critics, and music lovers from Austro-German and Anglo-American culture. The common thread is the reception of traditional tonality—to some, an Old World of restricted boundaries, to others a threatened paradise. The cultural symbolism brought to bear on the concept of tonality is extremely telling. As a “common practice” of harmonic conventions, it has the prestige in the minds of many, whether vanguard or conservative, of a repressed, shadow image of modernism. Thus my study of tonality, its so-called decline and rediscovery, will reflect upon the discordant reputations of modernism as well.

We can begin with Arnold Schoenberg, who threw down the gauntlet with his rigorous and dramatic renunciation of tonal syntax. In his writings, he establishes a historical model of inevitable progress:

I am probably the last of the modern composers who has occupied himself with tonal harmony in the sense of the oldest masters. . . . Those who examine in my First String Quartet or in my *Kammersymphonie* the relation of the keys to each other and to the incident harmony, will get from them some conception of the demands that are made, in the modern sense, on the tonal development of a harmonic idea. Perhaps they would also understand why a step must be taken from thence onwards, which the critics in question would gladly reverse.<sup>3</sup>

According to Schoenberg, his music has responded to a historical imperative, a distinctly modern demand made on the tonal material. He heaps scorn on those who have not perceived the full implications of tonal evolution:

When I hear these particular tonal pieces in which are avoided all possible tonal non-relationships, or at least those not developed to the end . . . through an F-sharp or C-major triad—according to the mood, then I always think of those savage potentates who wear only a cravat and a top-hat.<sup>4</sup>

He represents these composers as uncomprehending primitives, who don tonal gestures as totems of civilization (Schoenberg uses the term “shibboleths”) without awareness of the integral set of values they imply.

Yet it turns out Schoenberg is more liberal regarding the onward march of style than many of his disciples. He leaves room for the use of tonality in the realm of “popular art,” and the occasional composition “in the old



style.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, he says, “even standing where I do at the present time, I believe that to use the consonant chords, too, is not out of the question, as soon as someone has found a technical means of either satisfying or paralyzing their formal claims.”<sup>6</sup> Schoenberg’s belief in the need for formal integrity, however, is moralistic and intense. He reserves his strongest language for those whose foreground tonal gestures have no organic relation to the long-range process.

Many modern composers believe they are writing tonally if they occasionally introduce a major or minor triad, or a cadence-like turn of phrase, into a series of harmonies that lack, and must lack, any terms of reference. Others hope the use of ostinati and pedal-points will do the same thing for them. Both are acting like believers who buy an indulgence. They betray their God, but remain on good terms with those who call themselves His attorneys. They use accidentals and key-signatures to fit the key that would like to hold sway, as if putting on a Christian-German mantle for loving their neighbor (something they rarely used to wear), to cloak their secret, sinful converse with dissonances.<sup>7</sup>

One marvels at the ferocity of these Biblical cadences, in which he brands composers as sanctimonious and falsehearted according to standards of adherence to technical consistency at all levels.

It will be instructive to compare Schoenberg’s words with those of his disciple, T. W. Adorno. Adorno likewise subscribes to a model of irreversible progress in the evolution of harmonic technique (what he calls the “inherent tendency of musical material”). But where Schoenberg postulates a satisfactory use of triads within the new field of harmonic possibility, Adorno rejects such usage out of hand. The “technically trained ear,” he claims, recognizes the prohibition against “exhausted” procedures, which

today excludes even the medium of tonality—that is to say, the means of all traditional music. It is not simply that these sounds are antiquated and untimely, but that they are false. . . . The most progressive level of technical procedures designs tasks before which traditional sounds reveal themselves as impotent clichés.<sup>8</sup>

In Adorno’s view of the modernist era, more purist than Schoenberg’s, there will never be a syntax to rescue tonality for the present. The material itself is inauthentic. His criteria for the evaluation of music is first of all historical rather than formal. Second, his understanding of tonal usage is complicated by an exactingly materialist critique of culture, as in the following discussion of Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du soldat*:

The melodic nuclei are now totally devaluated. . . . These nuclei now bear traces of commonplace music—the march, the idiotic fiddle, the antiquated waltz, indeed even of the current dances such as tango and ragtime. . . . Such music—degraded by the market—needs, to be sure, only be made transparent by compositional virtuosos and their rattling skeleton is revealed.<sup>9</sup>

In Adorno's critique, the idioms of mass culture are inevitably compromised by their commodity status. But the conventional idioms of art music, tonality included, are just as deeply implicated in bourgeois ideology. "Since the beginning of the bourgeois era, all great music has founded its sufficiency in the illusion that it has achieved an unbroken unity and justified through its own individuation the conventional universal legality to which it is subject." It is the role of modern music to challenge the illusion of the "abstract universality of musical language" which those conventions have upheld.<sup>10</sup>

The arguments offered in the name of formal consistency, historical validity, and social consciousness give some idea of what is at stake in the period of the emergence of atonality. We will return to the same issues toward the end of the chapter, from the perspective of a period more than fifty years later, when numerous composers of art music undertook an energetic reevaluation of tonality. These two chronological poles—the generations of Strauss, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky on the one hand, and George Rochberg, Steve Reich, and John Adams on the other—will serve as bookends for a more synchronic survey of the polemical discourse.

Underlying the many colorful and outrageous pronouncements concerning the value of tonal language, we can discern a handful of guiding metaphors. The metaphoric concepts to which we now turn have provided the raw material for sloganeering, and compelling images to which one could appeal in the arguments over tonal authenticity in the modern world. But their conceptual power was never subsequent to a purely auditory experience; in their unruly interaction, these diverse fancies have helped set the terms for the meaning, value, and enjoyment of music. I have grouped the metaphors according to their use by the different camps, with those under "Point" generally used by the challengers of tonality, those under "Counter Point" by its defenders. The order of my list does not imply any dichotomous relation between specific groups.

### 1. Point: Exhaustion/Death

The first set of metaphors conveys the idea that tonality has expired or run its course. Phrased in inorganic terms, the figure evokes an object or tool that has outlived its use, as in the discussion of new musical systems in Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*, where characters speak of "worn-out," "banal" components such as "consonance, common-chord harmonics, [and] the diminished seventh."<sup>11</sup> Or it evokes a fund of resources which has been used up, as in Copland's consideration of the twelve-tone challenge: "Has the tonal system really been exhausted and should it be abandoned or are there still hidden resources to be tapped?"<sup>12</sup>

In its organic version, the metaphor refers to decay and death. This figure of speech is often so integrated into our thought as to pass unnoticed,



as when Webern speaks of “tonality in its last throes”;<sup>13</sup> but it also affords a host of highly arresting images. Ernst Krenek, for instance, writes: “There is no doubt that the ornate, fat, jellyfishlike, bloated character of the newer Viennese style is a kind of sickly degeneration resulting from repressed atonality.”<sup>14</sup> Aside from the gusto with which Krenek elaborates his conceit here, this passage is remarkable in that it is focused on the sound of the music. His description is both a record of a concrete listening experience, and an interpretive exemplar meant to influence future listening. Of course the concepts of degeneration and decay are perennial darts in the quiver of the righteous. But the theory of cultural decline as a specifically modern pathology had achieved prominence by the end of the nineteenth century through the writings of the physicians Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau; this theory provided underpinning for the notion that tonality, and the cultural achievement it represented, could die.<sup>15</sup> Accusations of degeneracy have vaguely moral connotations, and do not necessarily pertain to strictly musical matters. Typically ambiguous is *Le Figaro*’s review of Debussy’s *La Damoiselle élue* as “a deeply sensual composition, decadent, even a touch rotten.” But the image of decay easily lends itself to a harmonic interpretation, as when Roger Nichols finds in the Parisian reviewer’s accusation a suspicion of “loosening, even a ‘rotteness’ in the stays that held traditional syntax together.”<sup>16</sup> And what, then, is the treatment for the pervasive tonal decay? Calling Dr. Wagner: “Music reacted to [*Tristan*] as a human body to an injected serum,” wrote Hindemith, “which it at first strives to exclude as a poison, and only afterwards learns to accept as necessary and even wholesome.”<sup>17</sup>

A practice as old as tonality becomes vulnerable to charges of wear, exhaustion, and mortality. We have already heard Adorno’s complaint about rattling skeletons. Elsewhere in Adorno’s writing, we find another striking use of the idea of death: “Insofar as surrealist composing makes use of devalued means, it uses these *as* devalued means, and wins its form from the ‘scandal’ produced when the dead suddenly spring up among the living.”<sup>18</sup> Here again, the language suggests a pithy interpretation of concrete musical juxtapositions. A modern listener thinking in such terms will hear tonal forms as archaeological relics, dry bones of the past with no true claim to an animating spirit.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Counter Point: Nature

The previous group of examples embodies a sense of historical transience and irreversibility. In contrast there operates a set of metaphors appealing to notions of constancy and endurance. The classic form here is an evocation of the immutable laws of nature. Hindemith, in his theoretical writing, treats this metaphor as his most basic axiom, and spins myriad variations on the pattern: “Tonality is a natural force, like gravity.” “The feeling for

the purity, the harmonic completeness, and the satisfying effect of the triad . . . is accordingly just as natural to us as the body's sense of space." "The carpenter would not think of disregarding the natural properties of his wood and putting it together any old way without regard to its grain."<sup>20</sup> The unadorned elegance of the concept of natural law was powerful enough that the proponents of non-tonal music felt the need to counter it. A few years before Hindemith's pronouncement, Schoenberg wrote, "Since tonality is no condition imposed by nature, it is meaningless to insist on preserving it because of natural law."<sup>21</sup> Webern also confronted the metaphor, choosing not to refute it but to apply it to his own purpose. In a lecture series in 1933, he based his entire argument on Goethe's organicist thesis concerning "hidden natural laws" of development. In this way he was able to claim that serial music was the "wholly natural outcome of the ages."<sup>22</sup> Judged as rhetoric, however, these verbal sallies are lackluster, and it fell to Pierre Boulez to discover a countermetaphor which could trump the elegance of the original: "Classic tonal thought was founded on a universe defined by gravitation and attraction; serial thought is founded on a universe in perpetual expansion."<sup>23</sup> Boulez's reference to the paradigm shift from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics appeals to a nature whose laws are no longer immutable, but subject to cognitive upheavals. At the same time, he melds the nature metaphor with the metaphor of expansion, which we will take up in a moment.

But my favorite example of this line of rhetoric is a recent embellishment by Austrian composer Kurt Schwertsik. He begins by relating the gravity concept to auditory experience—the "dangerous magic" that the earliest atonal pieces can work on the listener. "For Schoenberg, atonality . . . meant overcoming the force of gravity, a considerable intellectual feat. Atonality: a state of weightlessness! This is how I experienced it very clearly as a young man." What begins as a tribute to Schoenberg's visionary thought, however, is quickly switched for a practical maxim from an age well-versed in space travel.

Today we know that long periods of weightlessness lead to loss of muscle tone and to intestinal sluggishness. Therefore, anyone wishing to experience weightlessness in body as well as in mind has to train intensively, for sooner or later he must return to earth, even if he has experienced the "air of other planets."<sup>24</sup>

The mundanity of Schwertsik's image wittily deflates the opening rhetoric. Without sacrificing a sense of modernity, his language reminds us that the age-old processes of nature are still in effect.

### 3. Point: Expansion/Liberation

The next group of metaphors take their form from movements and changes in the geopolitical realm. Stylistic experimentation is compared to a broad-



ening of spatial horizons, or the arrival of pioneers into new territory. In this vein, Schoenberg spoke of the “music of today” as “developing a field which must first appear entirely new to us. . . . The field must first be cultivated. It is virgin soil.”<sup>25</sup> A similar figure (mixed with one or two others) occurs in Krenek’s writings:

Though creating in the golden age of tonality, when no signs of the imminent decay were visible, Beethoven was the first to anticipate the new era. His last quartets presaged the discovery of a coast where the vessel of European music would seek a haven a century later.<sup>26</sup>

But by far the most famous metaphor in this group is the explicitly revolutionary concept of “emancipation.” Aside from Schoenberg’s ringing phrase, the idea appears in a multitude of stock descriptions of freedom from the shackles or fetters of tradition, tonal syntax, or what have you. Again, Schoenberg has provided one of the most memorable versions of the political metaphor in the well-known passage from *Theory of Harmony* where he compares the sovereignty of the tonic to “Napoleon, who installs his relatives and friends on the European thrones”—thus an implicitly outdated and threatened regime.<sup>27</sup> The same political image is employed in the following riff from the felicitous prose of Paul Rosenfeld, music critic for *The Dial* in the 1920s:

With Wagner the monarchy of the C-major scale is at an end. . . . The old [scale] has had to lose its privilege, to resign itself to becoming simply one of a constantly growing many. . . . And today there are no longer musical rules, forbidden harmonies, dissonances. Siegfried has broken them along with Wotan’s spear.<sup>28</sup>

This line of thinking has not gone without riposte. Hindemith, in an ironic hyperbole, combines both the expansionist and the revolutionary version of the metaphor: “Doubtless these composers see in their freedom from tonality a liberty that will lift their art to the infinity of time and space.” However, what the non-tonal composers see as healthy rebellion, he sees as “a lapse into complete absence of plan and rule, and finally pure anarchy.”<sup>29</sup> The imputation of the threat of anarchy is a common rejoinder to the fervent liberationist rhetoric. Schoenberg, the “musical anarchist from Vienna,” was a frequent target of such charges.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the composer Kamran Ince has recently turned the emancipation metaphor unexpectedly back upon itself, in the context of a new anti-tonal dogma:

As far as atonal sonorities are concerned how can we say that they are completely freed since in the aesthetics of most composers they cannot be freely preceded or followed by tonal sonorities? . . . What excites me most as a composer living today is that all materials at my disposal are emancipated from any prejudice. . . . Tonal sonorities in my music are emancipated as I use them for

their own resonance and beauty, and do not subject them to the hierarchies of functional tonality.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. Counter Point: Communication/Currency

The metaphor of language is used by both the proponents and detractors of tonality, to very different purposes. One point of contention: how important is it to understand the languages of modern music? Very important to many listeners, judging from the countless outraged accusations of unintelligibility. Here is one English reviewer:

*Five Orchestral Pieces* by Arnold Schoenberg . . . was like a poem in Tibetan; not one single soul could possibly have understood it. . . . The listener was like a dweller in Flatland straining his mind to understand the ways of that mysterious occupant of three dimensions, man.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, as Robert Morgan explains, many modernist composers gauged the thrust of their aesthetic rebellion precisely by a turn to hermetic or “secret languages.”

The true force and significance of [Schoenberg’s prewar] music lies . . . precisely in its determination to speak in an unknown and enigmatic tongue that largely defies rational comprehension. [Schoenberg] attempted to transform musical language from an essentially “public” vehicle, susceptible to comprehension by ordinary people . . . to an essentially “private” one capable of speaking the unspeakable.<sup>33</sup>

The gap between these two premises has led to disagreements over the continuing validity of “common practice”—i.e., whether there still exists a widely shared (tonal) grammar, or whether such common ground is no longer possible. The opposing viewpoints could not be more sharply drawn. For examples, I turn to two recent essays of cultural criticism focusing on the twentieth-century musical situation. The first is by Richard Norton, who is speaking of the “sonic collectivity” of popular music:

Largely predictable in horizontal progression through time and symmetrical in phrase structure, this harmony . . . creates and preserves a universally understood harmonic object that amateurs everywhere can rapidly acquire for themselves. . . . There is no spoken language on the planet which even begins to compete with the accessibility provided by common-practice tonality as a means of human communication.<sup>34</sup>

In stark opposition are the views of Robert Morgan. The following quotation is preceded by an assertion of the “ultimate demise” of tonality:

Of course in some sense tonality remained. . . . But once its possibilities were widely perceived as *exhausted*, incapable of further *expansion*, tonality lost the



traditional basis for its expressive force. And without general acceptance, it surrendered . . . its “universality,” its status as a common language. . . . The inevitable consequence of the loss of a central musical language is that music speaks in many different tongues. . . . The more of them we know, the less fluently we speak and understand them. More importantly, we no longer have the ability to speak any musical language as natives.<sup>35</sup>

Morgan’s alarming conclusion resounds like a knell, but it rests on an unspoken segregation of art music from vernacular experience. Admittedly, tonality may function quite differently within those different realms, but such an exclusion from his musical philology reflects back to the detriment of his premise concerning the “wide,” “general” abandonment of tonality.<sup>36</sup> The allure of his position, however, is just as strong as Norton’s, in their contrary promotion of music as icon of the century’s predicament. For Norton, music represents the matrix of a global *lingua franca*; for Morgan, it stutters the legacy of a Babel-like deracination.

While Norton is sanguine about the socially integrating power of “popular” tonality, he characterizes that power in terms of aesthetic debasement, about which he is curiously unapologetic: “Tonal limitations [in rock music] became quickly fixed at the level of, perhaps, the ten-year-old Chopin, and there they remain.” “‘Popular’ tonality is . . . numbingly collective, and makes no pretense of going anywhere at all. It cannot change as long as it gives a good return for its investors in the market.” In this instance we see the metaphor of linguistic exchange slipping into one of monetary exchange. Cultural interaction is made possible by a common exchange rate: “World tonality is economic tonality.” Norton acknowledges the regressive effects of imperialist market forces, yet insists that mass tonality is not thereby “contaminated.”<sup>37</sup> Such a critical invocation of the economic metaphor seems out of place in the pro-tonal camp; it is more likely to figure in the arsenal of non-tonal composers for whom “selling” is understood as “selling out.”<sup>38</sup> As noted earlier, this critique was forcefully mounted by Adorno. He too makes explicit the metaphorical connection between the economies of language and financial interaction: “The idiom of tonality, . . . which circumscribes the traditional stock of music consumed today, is identical with the worldwide musical consumers’ language.”<sup>39</sup>

## 5. Point: Devastation

The next set of metaphors thematizes the modernist myth of historical schism. This is most forcefully conveyed through images of violent physical catastrophe, as in Krenek’s account: “It cannot be denied that atonality is founded on a decidedly destructive tendency. The first atonal compositions often give one the impression of watching a cataclysm through reversed opera glasses.”<sup>40</sup> The aggressive dismantling of technical struc-

tures and stylistic frameworks is conceived as the obliteration of physical structures in the blasts of war. “Atonality . . . is the denial of harmony as a structural means. The problem of a composer in a musical world in this state is to supply another structural means, just as in a bombed-out city the opportunity to build again exists.”<sup>41</sup> While in this quotation John Cage envisions the promise of renewal, there are many more who use the metaphor pessimistically, looking for a way out from the “field of wreckage” (Krenek), or reduced to patching together a “montage of the debris of that which once was” (Adorno).<sup>42</sup> The whole point of the metaphor of cataclysm is to convey the belief that the ground plan of the past is beyond recuperation, that whole swaths of its edifices lie in ruins. Some, such as Rudolph Reti, prefer to generalize the destructive tendency into a condition of our modern age: “There was never a time so full of promise yet so threatening. Of course . . . the world was always torn by confusion and catastrophes of all kinds. But today this whole state has reached such a peak that our human species is now literally threatened with extinction.”<sup>43</sup> Others, however, see it as a localized problem, situated in a particular tradition whose claim to dominance has faded. Consider Steve Reich:

Stockhausen, Berio, and Boulez were portraying in very honest terms what it was like to pick up the pieces of a bombed-out continent after World War II. But for some Americans in 1948 or 1958 or 1968—in the real context of tailfins [on cars], Chuck Berry, and millions of burgers sold—to pretend that instead we’re really going to have the dark-brown angst of Vienna is a lie, a musical lie.<sup>44</sup>

The aftermath of such violent disruption is marked by agonizing uncertainty over how to move forward. “In the musical iconoclasm of our time,” writes Reti, “everything which seemed firm and unassailable in the universe of sound appears shaken to the ground.”<sup>45</sup> Thus a variation of this metaphor dramatizes not the violence, but the epistemological disorientation. Donald Mitchell writes: “How to go on after *Tristan und Isolde*, that great destabilizing event . . . which permanently modified the musical landscape, whether it was viewed from Paris or Vienna.”<sup>46</sup> Or this from George Rochberg: “The period [after] the denouement of the old world . . . was a descent into the maelstrom, a wandering in the desert.”<sup>47</sup> Once again there is fierce disagreement over whether the unraveling of cognitive and cultural frameworks is a proper object of musical enterprise. The destructive metaphor is used with great opprobrium in the following wartime review of a Webern quartet, by Olin Downes: “This music . . . is the ultimate of orderly and deliberate disintegration. . . . Is it any wonder that the culture from which it emanates is even now going up in flames?”<sup>48</sup>



## 6. Counter Point: Vitality

Finally, there are those who champion the continued use of tonality through images of burgeoning life, as we see in the Steve Reich quotation above, with its finger on the pulse of American popular culture. To these listeners, it is the avoidance of tonality which has proven sterile and lifeless. Downes speaks of “Dead Sea fruit, and Dead End music”; Schwertsik of “dingy, grey boredom.”<sup>49</sup> Rosenfeld’s perspective is similarly desolate: “With [Schoenberg], we seem to be entering the arctic zone of musical art. None of the old beacons, none of the old stars, can guide us longer in these frozen wastes. Strange, menacing forms surround us, and the light is bleak and chill and faint.”<sup>50</sup>

Some point to the unimpeded flourishing of tonal idioms in the musical vernacular. Charles Seeger, for instance, discusses how the “jazz boys had hit upon something the academic or fine-art composer had missed,” namely by tapping into the fertile roots of folk art:

This art of music, the folk music of America, had embodied for well over a hundred years the tonal and rhythmic expression of untold millions of rural and even urban Americans. Contrary to our professional beliefs, the American people at large have had plenty to say and ability to say it, so that a rich repertory has been built up.<sup>51</sup>

Or, as composer Paul Moravec puts it: “When some people announced the death of tonality earlier in the century, they apparently forgot to tell the billions of people who have continued to speak it as a living tongue.”<sup>52</sup> There is a wry paradox plaguing my project at this very juncture. Should anyone search for memoranda from the reception of popular music in the early century, commenting specifically on the life and health of tonality, there will be little to find. In the context of that living tongue, “tonality” was not a recognizable sub-idiom to be pooh-poohed or enthused over, but the entire range of harmonic possibility. Reflections on the merits of tonality only awaken with the appearance of a rival.

For that reason, I have found the observations clustering thickest around two temporal horizons, as discussed earlier. The first remarks throng like leukocytes around the atonal hemorrhage. The second cluster, beginning in the 1970s, chronicles the overturning of a latter-day dogma within the academic musical world. “We all learned in college that tonality died, somewhere around the same time that Nietzsche’s God died. And I believed it. When you make a dogmatic decision like that early in your life, it takes some kind of powerful experience to undo it.” This is the composer John Adams speaking of what he calls his “diatonic conversion.”<sup>53</sup> One of the earliest such testimonials of struggle against the metaphor-become-dogma

of tonality's demise stems from composer George Rochberg. His writings provide thoughtful, succinct formulations of the experience of a "return" to tonality; I will refer to them in order to review the shifting grounds of musical authenticity. Corroborating testimonials, slogans, and affirmations can be found in a special issue of the *Contemporary Music Review*, entitled "New Tonality." Appearing in 1992, this issue brings together fifteen composers associated with neotonal practice.<sup>54</sup>

### Beyond Dualities?

As we have seen, in the aesthetic horizon of the atonal challenge as represented by Schoenberg and Adorno, the claim to an authentic musical voice rested on the pursuit of formal integrity, uncompromising modernity, and radical critique of convention. Such ideals engendered the supportive network of images featuring decay, revolution, and catastrophe. In the neotonal horizon as represented by Rochberg and others, these fundamentals are traded for a different hand. For these composers, an authentic formal sense responds to the contradictions and inconsistencies of our time: "Like every other time, ours is a vast mix which refuses to be reduced to neatly packaged verbal categories," writes Rochberg. "To insist on either verbal or aesthetic consistency is to limit the world." The music of today can equally embrace the "narrow, attenuated gestures" of modernism and the "vast continuities, the grander and more serene gestures of tonal music."<sup>55</sup> History, therefore, is not a line of supersession for Rochberg, but "an emergent procession of varieties of parallel, simultaneous patterns," which include the cyclic pattern of "cosmic return" and "remembering our source." "Even if we grant the emergence of new perceptions and sensibilities, it does not follow that authentic values must be cast aside."<sup>56</sup> Finally, music is not a matter of austere, scarifying introspection, appreciated by the few. "There can be no justification for music, ultimately, if it does not convey eloquently and elegantly the passions of the human heart." Mass culture is not dismissed as degraded, but upheld as a model of vitality and involvement. "To be vital, a new work has to have a satisfying connection with one's own time and sense of place. The desire to create more participatory music, I believe, distinguishes the new tonal composer from the modernist."<sup>57</sup>

For Rochberg and his fellow travelers, then, authenticity is based on formal inclusivity, a transitive, continuous sense of history, and bounteous provision of "personal pleasure and satisfaction" (Moravec).<sup>58</sup> Such ideals are supported by metaphors of communication, vitality, and the steadfast cycles of nature. Of course, these metaphors did not spring into being in 1970. All six of the groups surveyed have been in use throughout the century. The ideological positions of Schoenberg and Rochberg I have lightly



sketched in by no means represent the full spectrum of aesthetic aims for which the metaphors have been pressed into service. They do, however, represent stylistic junctures of particular urgency and critical mass, whose issues become sharply incised against their immediate background.

Throughout this article I have been less concerned with establishing the facts of tonality's status in the twentieth century than with analyzing the fractious rhetorical energies unleashed in the accompanying discourse. My point is an epistemological one regarding the reception of the music under discussion. I would like to conclude by briefly addressing a few nagging questions in order to clarify my position. The first question has to do with our own historical perspective. Are we still too close to these repertoires—the anti-tonal and the über-tonal—to truly hear them? As the years pass and the polemics recede, will it be possible to listen to these works without bias? My answer is that I hardly know what a true, unbiased hearing would be. The fraught ideologies of modernism might fade, but any future hearing of the music will still take place through ideological filters—probably combining a sedimentation of the original polemics with new unforeseen aesthetic ramifications. One aim of my discourse analysis is to make it harder to swallow sedimented metaphors (like the death of tonality) when we encounter them, and to make it easier to recognize persuasion disguised as neutral historical accounts. I could conceptualize my position by saying that music always comes with words: our musical listening is accompanied by a kind of ghostly dialogue track which, just as in the case of the music track in cinema, is often most influential when we barely notice it.

Given this situation, where bias is natural and inevitable, can we say anything objective about tonality's place in the modern period? For “tonality,” we now find, seems to have lost its objecthood. I am not referring to the fact of diverse tonal practices among composers as different as Rachmaninov, Britten, and del Tredici. I mean rather that any one of their tonalities can be multiply and contradictorily described according to the added value of its ideological framing: Rachmaninov plus morbidity-value, Rachmaninov plus human-connection-value, Rachmaninov plus commodity-value, etc. This relativizing premise does not prevent us from making statements about tonality, but it does force us to articulate them from some particular perspective: *tonality for whom? tonality as so understood.*

By making these claims, I am clearly revealing my own ideological context of late-twentieth-century North American pluralism. From this perspective, the sharply drawn battle lines of the early modernists, over matters of authenticity and fundamental categories of understanding, have managed to resolve themselves into a new array of alternative choices, equally meaningful and accessible. Where does this leave us? Is it possible to achieve a reconciliation of once fierce aesthetic dichotomies? Or should the question be: has tonality won after all? If I have presented the neotonal aesthetic as a refutation of Schoenbergian modernism, that is because it

has been so conceived by its promoters: as an answer to the existential, esotericist challenge of atonality and serialism. Their appeal to the vaguely euphoric, participatory properties of tonality will not sit well with everyone; other listeners could relate the very potent “personal pleasures” and enchantments they have wrung from non-tonal repertoires. Furthermore, the aesthetics of stylistic pluralism involves a paradox in its epistemological foundations which still provokes theoretical crossfire. This can be seen in the contrasting formulations of Morgan and Rochberg already presented. Both agree that in the postmodern condition, “music speaks in many tongues.” But for Morgan, this situation rather precipitously entails the loss of native stylistic competence. In his decentered linguistic universe, it would seem no authentic perspective is possible. Rochberg, however, is still able to relate without distress to a stylistic “source.” The emergence of “new sensibilities” does not displace previously “authentic values.” For him, it would seem renewed authenticity rests on the acquisition of multilingual competence. The paradox in Rochberg’s liberal inclusion of styles, one might argue, is that a modernist substyle that does not make historical demands, an atonal idiom that does not undercut tonality, has become something different altogether. An atonality and tonality equal in authentic value have lost the arrogance and sting that made them authentic in the first place.

In other words, the concept of authenticity has itself been caught in the tug of shifting premises. Rochberg’s pluralist authenticity is a different creature from Schoenberg’s agonistic authenticity. The neotonal polemicists do not so much oppose the modernist terms of debate as defuse them by resituating them within a different field of meaning, free of moral imperatives. There is something admittedly irresistible in the apparent promise of reconciliation. As long ago as 1929, Charles Seeger made this prediction:

The tendency for the last thirty years has been toward avoidance of tonality; the effect is good when it is well done. But just as one can weary of too much tonality, so one can weary of too little. It is possible that the time has come when a composer can employ a tonal center or not employ it, as he [or she] wishes.<sup>59</sup>

Such a peaceable kingdom: The Second Viennese lion lying down with the New Romantic lamb. Perhaps from the present perspective, with our opera glasses turned back upon the century’s cataclysmic parade, it might be possible to banish tooth and claw from our mongrel panorama. But given the nature of musical meaning as a dialogic practice, and given the historical impermanence of agreement upon terms, we ought to be skeptical of any detente. The storms and fires of verbal contention are part of the very thrill of music, part of its livelihood. The sheltering hush of the concert hall is merely a respite from those campaigns, whose rumors still attend us, like sharp-tongued spirits bending our ear.



## Notes

1. Thomas Beecham, *A Mingled Chime* (New York: Da Capo, 1976), 147.
2. Compare Beecham's horrified listener with T. W. Adorno's ostensibly blasé and condescending response to the same opera: "In the entire final section of *Electra* banality is dominant. But . . . in *Electra*'s monologue and in her scene with Klytemnestra, [Strauss's] compositional material declares—as it were—its independence and advances, against its will, to the very boundary of the tonal realm." Adorno, "On The Social Situation of Music" [1932], trans. Wesley Blomster, *Telos* 35 (1978): 128–64; see especially 156–57.
3. Schoenberg, "Tonality and Form" (1925), in his *Style and Idea: Selected Writings*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 256–57.
4. *Ibid.*, 257.
5. Schoenberg, "Problems of Harmony" (1934; original lecture 1927), in his *Style and Idea*, 286.
6. Schoenberg, "Opinion or Insight?" (1926), in his *Style and Idea*, 263.
7. *Ibid.*, 258–59.
8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music* (1941, 1948), trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Continuum, 1985), 34. Thomas Mann, a friend of Adorno's, mirrors this entire passage very closely in his novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947), trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Vintage, 1992), 239.
9. "Thus began the renaissance of tonality." Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 180.
10. *Ibid.*, 39.
11. Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 193.
12. Aaron Copland, "Schönberg and His School" (1949), in *Copland on Music* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), 244. See Richard Crocker's discussion of a similar metaphor ("musical materials have to be 'used up,' . . . shredded down to [their] constituent fibers") in *A History of Musical Style* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 525; as cited in Leo Treitler, "On Historical Criticism," *Musical Quarterly* 53 (1967): 200; and Richard Norton, *Tonality in Western Culture: A Critical and Historical Perspective* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1984), 15–16.
13. "I want to prove to you that it's really dead. Once that's proved, there's no point in going on dealing with something dead." Anton Webern, *The Path to the New Music* (1933), ed. Willi Reich, trans. Leo Black (Bryn Mawr, Penn.: Theodore Presser, 1963), 47.
14. Krenek, *Music Here and Now* (1939), trans. Barthold Fles (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 83. "Those [in Vienna] who did not want to take part in Schoenberg's innovations—and they, under the pressure of public condemnation, were just about everybody—experienced something like a pathological repression."
15. See Michael von der Linn, "Degeneration, Neoclassicism, and the Weimar-Era Music of Hindemith, Krenek, and Weill" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1998).
16. Henry Fouquier, in *Le Figaro* (1893), quoted in Roger Nichols, *The Life of Debussy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 72.
17. Paul Hindemith, *The Craft of Musical Composition* (1937), trans. Arthur Mendel (London: Schott, 1945), 1:50.

18. Adorno, "Reaktion und Fortschritt" (1930), quoted in Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 90. Paddison glosses the term "surrealist music" as music which "juxtaposes its historically devalued fragments in a montage-like manner which enables them to yield up new meanings within a new aesthetic unity."

19. Along similar lines, Michael Cherlin claims: "The sonorities of tonality have not fully disappeared [in Schoenberg's music], they have become estranged, evanescent spectres" ("Schoenberg and *Das Unheimliche*: Spectres of Tonality," *Journal of Musicology* 11 [1993]: 357–73; see p. 362).

20. Hindemith, *Craft of Composition*, 1:152, 23, 55. William Thomson's recent book *Schoenberg's Error* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) is an extreme version of the claim of tonality-as-nature. Thomson also inverts the tonality-as-moribund metaphor, claiming that atonality was a "localized illness . . . that never quite infected the total population, and whose Viennese virulence had pretty well run its course by the end of our sixth decade" ("Communications," *Music Theory Spectrum* 13, no. 1 [1991]: 118).

21. Schoenberg, "Problems of Harmony," 284.

22. Webern, *The Path to the New Music*, 12, 41. "Readers of the English edition of the lectures should note that editor Willi Reich has reversed the [chronological] presentation of the two lecture series in order to point up the assumed 'natural' foundations that the new music sought as a way in which to rationalize its path to social legitimacy" (Norton, *Tonality in Western Culture*, 275).

23. Boulez, "Series" (1961), in *Notes of an Apprenticeship*, trans. Herbert Weinstock (New York: Knopf, 1968), 304. See also Joan Peyser, *Boulez* (New York: Schirmer, 1976), 26.

24. Kurt Schwertsik, "Long Live Tonality!" trans. Margaret Robinson and Paul Moravec, *Contemporary Music Review* 6, no. 2 (1992): 54. Compare the following passage by Schoenberg: "Can one understand sound-combinations if they hang for ever in the air and never settle down; if they never gain a firm footing? I read somewhere of a device by which aeroplanes refuel over the sea without standing firm anywhere. . . . If that is possible, should one not do it?" ("New Music: My Music" [c. 1930], in *Style and Idea*, 101).

25. Schoenberg, "Problems of Harmony," 286.

26. Krenek, *Music Here and Now*, 133.

27. Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony* (1911), trans. Roy E. Carter (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 128.

28. Paul Rosenfeld, "Wagner" (1920), in *Musical Impressions: Selections from Paul Rosenfeld's Criticism*, ed. Herbert A. Leibowitz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 10–11.

29. Hindemith, *Craft of Composition*, 1:154, 50.

30. Cincinnati *Enquirer*, October 12, 1913, quoted in Nicolas Slonimsky, *Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven's Time* (New York: Coleman-Ross, 1953), 155; see 149, 153, 165. Boulez describes Schoenberg's free atonal period as "very rich, but also very anarchic" ("Arnold Schoenberg" [1961], in *Notes of an Apprenticeship*, 362).

31. Kamran Ince, "Emancipation of Tonal Sonorities," *Contemporary Music Review* 6, no. 2 (1992): 49. On the other side of this debate, however, one may cite James Boros: "Much recent minimalist and 'new romantic' music strikes me as



monolithic, simply because, despite the careful application (via spray can) of ‘evanescently flashy timbral patinas,’ it’s essentially *transparent* with regard to the purposefully ‘inflexible and authoritarian’ qualities that lie at its core.” The role of tonality here is not explicit, but certainly implied (“Why Complexity? [Part Two],” *Perspectives of New Music* 32 [1994]: 91–92).

32. London *Times*, September 4, 1912, quoted in Slonimsky, *Lexicon of Musical Invective*, 151.

33. Robert Morgan, “Secret Languages: The Roots of Musical Modernism,” *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1984): 458.

34. Norton, *Tonality in Western Culture*, 229–30.

35. Robert Morgan, “Rethinking Musical Culture: Canonic Reformulations in a Post-Tonal Age,” in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons*, ed. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 47, 57; my italics.

36. In fact he admits as much soon after, when he recognizes the “hegemony of a relatively small and limited body of music” (p. 59), though the realization is never integrated into his earlier argument. This points up a split personality in the essay, which expounds a modernist/hierarchic/linear view of history in its opening pages, and a postmodern/relativist/pluralist perspective in its final pages.

37. Norton, *Tonality in Western Culture*, 230, 271.

38. “Composers such as Glass and Adams [have] acquiesced to the culture industry’s demand for consumable objects” (Boros, “Why Complexity?” 97).

39. He continues, “People may fail to grasp what was said in that language, the specific content of the musical works, but they are familiar with the works’ superficial connections insofar as the traditional idiom links them automatically . . . [in] a sort of analogy with the relationship between communicative speech and the obligatory one of literary works of art and *minted* texts.” Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (1962), trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1989), 39–40; my italics.

40. Krenek, *Music Here and Now*, 158.

41. John Cage, “Forerunners of Modern Music” (1949), in his *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 63–64.

42. Krenek, *Music Here and Now*, 86; Adorno, “Reaktion und Fortschritt,” 91.

43. Rudolph Reti, *Tonality—Atonality—Pantonality: A Study of Some Trends in Twentieth Century Music* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1958), 127.

44. Steve Reich, interview with Edward Strickland (1987), quoted in K. Robert Schwarz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 56–57. Note the implicitly affirmative use of the economic metaphor.

45. Reti, *Tonality—Atonality—Pantonality*, 129.

46. Donald Mitchell, “Cradles of the New: Paris and Vienna at the Turn of the Century” (1988), in his *Cradles of the New: Writings on Music 1951–1991*, sel. Christopher Palmer, ed. Mervyn Cooke (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 139.

47. George Rochberg, “Reflections on Schoenberg” (1972), in his *The Aesthetics of Survival: A Composer’s View of Twentieth-Century Music*, ed. William Bolcom (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 53. Or this, in highly ironic mode: “Tonality, . . . burdened with the sheer weight of its chromatic excesses, fell headlong into the dizzying abyss of atonal consciousness where it remained paralyzed, impotent, and incapable of further human expression” (Norton, *Tonality in Western Culture*, 225).

48. Olin Downes, *New York Times*, May 22, 1941, quoted in Slonimsky, *Lexicon of Musical Invective*, 251.
49. Slonimsky, *Lexicon of Musical Invective*, 251; Schwertsik, "Long Live Tonality!" 55.
50. Rosenfeld, "Schoenberg" (1920), in *Musical Impressions*, 64.
51. Charles Seeger, "Grass Roots for American Composers" (1939), in *Studies in Musicology II, 1929–1979*, ed. Ann M. Pescatello (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 384.
52. Paul Moravec, "Tonality and Transcendence," *Contemporary Music Review* 6, no. 2 (1992): 41.
53. Quoted in Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 176.
54. On the dogma of the "exhaustion" and "death" of tonality, see Rochberg, *Aesthetics of Survival*, 235, 240; and "New Tonality," ed. Paul Moravec and Robert Beaser, *Contemporary Music Review* 6, no. 2 (1992): 3, 41, 53, 55.
55. Rochberg, "Reflections on the Renewal of Music" (1972), in his *Aesthetics of Survival*, 234, 238.
56. *Ibid.*, 234–35. Regarding the "cosmic return" see Rochberg, "The Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Survival" (1969), in his *Aesthetics of Survival*, 216; regarding "remembering our source" see Rochberg, "Can the Arts Survive Modernism? (A Discussion of the Characteristics, History, and Legacy of Modernism)," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 339; with the phrase "remembering our source," Rochberg is quoting Owen Barfield, "Modern Idolatry," in *History, Guilt and Habit* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 61–62.
57. Rochberg, "Reflections," 236; Larry Bell, "Some Remarks on the New Tonality," *Contemporary Music Review* 6, no. 2 (1992): 44.
58. Moravec, "Tonality," 40.
59. Seeger, "Tradition and Experiment in (the New) Music" (1929), in *Studies in Musicology*, 125.