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FORM IN THE NEW MUSIC

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*For Pierre Boulez*

As an aesthetic concept, the concept of form relates to everything sensuous through which the content of a work of art, the spiritual element of whatever is written, painted or composed, is realised. Form has to be distinguished from whatever is formed; it is the epitome of what makes art art, of all the elements which organise a work of art as a meaningful thing in itself. In music, by contrast, the meaning of the word 'form' is traditionally narrower, more succinct. It extends to the musical relations which are realised in time. It refers in the first instance to the articulation of larger contexts. As is well known, these reach down into the minutest cells of the events unfolding in time, into theme and motive. The pedagogical use of the expression 'theory of musical forms' [*Formenlehre*], which refers in the first instance to such things as song, variation, sonata, rondo or, at most, fugue, suffices to demonstrate the narrower meaning of form. This linguistic expression has its basis in the thing itself. What was generally thought of as form in music, and not simply for pedagogical purposes – namely, more or less obligatory patterns within which composers could move freely – were in great measure schemes which were temporal in character. Other dimensions, such as melody and harmony, were also defined by general categories. But this had led to the emergence of a supply of what might be thought of as gambling tokens which could be deployed at will. Form could dispose of them as if they were a material. However, the totality of the manifest [music], which is what is meant by the aesthetic concept of form, the work of art in its concrete existence, should not be schematic. The restriction of the concept of form follows from the equation of form and schema, as opposed to what happens musically. To be sure, the traditional forms, the schemes, are more than just schemes. Music possesses no contents borrowed directly from the external world. In exchange, contents have become embedded in the traditional forms. Thus the rondo evokes a spiritualised form of the round dance, with its distinction between couplet and refrain. To grasp it as a form always meant sensing this form, moulding oneself to it, varying it. The contrasts between tutti and solo hidden in the rondo, between the individual and the totality, were made dynamic with the concerto and became essential for the decisive form of the modern age, the sonata. The secret content embedded in the form animates the subtlest nuances of the musical flow, even in forms which have already become very free. Individual

events increasingly turned into content. Not the least part of musicality meant the ability to rediscover the sublimated contents in the form, as well as to respond to the changes in their function, their migration into the specific [musical] instance. However, if even the traditional musical forms were also content, thanks to their implicit meaning, and if every musical content made itself heard uniquely in them or their modifications, then this shows that even in traditional music form and content, and especially what is known as expression, were profoundly mediated by each other. The rank of a work of music was determined by the level of profundity at which this mediation took place, by the degree to which the forms were justified by their specific and spontaneous contents (instead of being merely adopted in a superficial way) and, conversely, by the depth at which the unique musical event adapted itself to the forms in which it manifested itself. This interaction, this conciliatory resolution of the tension between form and content, was the lifeblood of Viennese Classicism, of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. When Arnold Schoenberg called on music to create a homeostasis, a stable equilibrium, the Second Viennese School acknowledged that its ideal retained a commitment to that of the First. To raise the tension between a particular 'content', namely the individual musical shape, and a 'form', namely a process of integration in time, to the level of the principle of composition is to offer a description of the spirit of the sonata as such. It is rooted in tonality, in what has been the self-evident currency of music for the past 350 years. This had priority over individuation, despite the achievements of individual contributions. The simplest tonal relations as concentrated in the cadence were the prototypes of what unfolded in the form which was itself the synthesis of form and content.

In abstract terms, as August Halm was probably the first to recognise, we might define this tension as one between the universal and the particular aspects of composition.<sup>1</sup> It constitutes what Benjamin called the ideal type of the problem. Music lived in the resolution of this tension. Through it music acquired its substantiality, in contrast to both an empty formalism and the blindly fortuitous nature of an isolated occurrence. However, the tension swelled to bursting point, and it did so because of this process of resolution. From the nineteenth century on it confronted composers with the task of stripping away the non-essentials. 'Formalism' became the worst of accusations to be hurled at the concept of form. In its desire to do itself justice, the single idea found itself less and less able to rely on its pre-formation by the universal, by the idiom of tonality. Harmonies drained away inexorably from the available stock of chords and chord progressions. Composers' mounting allergy to the cadential formulas of the theory of harmony is only the most familiar symptom of this; the facts of the matter were universal. By the time of *Tristan* at the latest, under the compulsion to be expressive, that is, to be present undiminished so as to satisfy the needs of the musical subject in every musical detail, the idiom had been explored inch by inch, in search of every last individual chord, until it fell to pieces. From the age of thorough bass on, melody had been functionally dependent on

harmony, the precondition for a gradual coming together of the different dimensions of music. The specifications of harmony contributed to this synthesis. Harmony rid itself of the vestiges of universality that for so long had squeezed it into the formal organisation which had been ordained from above. Harmony came to resemble the free flow of melody. The overwhelming of consonance by dissonance secretly contradicted the idea of homeostasis which had transferred the dissolution and with it the primacy of consonance from individual harmonic events and formulas to the overall form.

In Classicism and as late as the early Romantics, the so-called large forms still interacted with musical details. They performed a constitutive role similar to the one played by the categories in Kant's philosophy. Without these forms the Classical ideal would have been doomed to impotence. They justified themselves in the immanent logic of the composition. Gradually, they turned into the very thing that the New German School accused them of being: academic, unauthoritative, an architecture weighed down by the baggage of the past. It is customary to ascribe the process which resulted in the unshackling of the individual to the increased subtlety of reactions that could no longer be accommodated in the old formal canon. Unbeknownst to themselves, they had, as it were, dissolved everything within which the liberated subject had previously – as recently as Beethoven – been able to objectify itself. But this development cannot be explained by analogies to intellectual history or on the basis of the transition from feudalism to the society of bourgeois high capitalism. Valid though such interconnections are, they have their place only in the windowless, material problems of composition. Traditional forms were shattered not by the merely subjective sensibilities of the composers, nor by that modern nervousness which infuriated Nietzsche. The emphasis is rather on the conviction that if the demand that the universal and the particular should each mediate the other is to be more than an empty phrase, then the individual detail which becomes the whole as it perishes should crystallise as something genuinely individual and concrete. Although this desideratum was implicitly postulated in musical form, it proved impossible to combine it with the form which had precipitated it. Measured by the ideal type of the problem, the advancing consciousness reacted, turning into a critique of what had been earlier achieved. Viennese Classicism carried with it an unstable element, something which could be sustained at its zenith only momentarily, something irreconcilable with the idea of a timeless present that nourished it. Gustav Mahler's statement to the effect that his interest in Mozart's quartets was over at the double bar (of the exposition) was quite unjust towards Mozart's art of development, for example, towards the feature very characteristic of Mozart that the development continues to resonate in the recapitulation, and to reverberate in the faintest deviations from the exposition. Even so, Mahler's comment contained a valid insight: that the pattern of the sonata remains static and symmetrical despite everything and this conflicts with its essential nature, that is, its dynamism. Once freed from the sonata, that dynamism could no longer be restrained by it. Transposed to the philosophical plane, we might

remind ourselves that the harmony between the interests of the individual and society in general which was preached by liberalism failed to materialise in reality. Through its consistent reliance on the universal, art tended to behave as if that harmony already existed; it thus became transformed into mere semblance vis-à-vis the society whose truth it was supposed to express. This created an increasingly visible conflict with itself. For the paradox and dilemma [*Not*] of all art is that according to its own definition it must raise itself above what merely exists, above human conditions in their actually restricted nature, but it can achieve this only by internalising those conditions in their unvarnished reality and by giving expression to their antinomies. Looked at from this angle, it may be precisely the inconsistent work of art which can lay claim to the higher substantiality; its inconsistency becomes the motor driving it beyond its fallible form. Once the emancipation of the concrete musical shape finally exploded the forms and ultimately the idiom within which it had grown, the idea of developing musical form purely from the specification of the individual work and the tasks it faces in the here and now emerged with irresistible force. In the initial, enthusiastic phase of the New Music, composers boldly reached out towards that ideal whose unattainability today rightly triggers their feelings of yearning. Large forms extended in time made their task harder and intensified resistance. Webern's short forms are admirable in themselves and rigorously take account of the state of the problem of form in a negative sense, namely by renouncing extension in time. However, they retreat from that problem because in those short forms the objectification of the individual has incomparably better prospects than in forms in which extension in time calls for an objectivity which transcends subjective lyrical impulses. How to satisfy that call for objectivity by dint of pure subjectivity is to give a strict description of the problem of form. For this reason, it may be said that works like the last Piece for Orchestra of Schoenberg's Op. 16, his highly advanced *Erwartung* and Berg's Three Pieces for Orchestra, especially the March, have taken matters much further than Webern, who had appeared at first sight to be the most radical of the Viennese composers.

The weak point of an autonomous form arising purely from the matter itself, stripped of every borrowing, was the recapitulation. With the recapitulation a deeply time-alien, spatially symmetrical, architectonic element enters into the temporal flow of music. There is a latent problem with the recapitulation as early as Beethoven. The fact that he did not abandon it cannot be explained by any respect for the practice which he, the subjectively dynamic critic of all musical ontology, might have felt. He registered its functional connection with tonality, which still maintained its primacy in his works and which he may be said to have composed out. To be sure, there is the report of Beethoven's curious remark that there was no more need to think about thorough bass than to think about the catechism – almost as if he wanted wilfully to repress any doubts about the premises underlying his own work. The fact that he paused at that point is no testimony to an unshaken tradition. He may well have had a premonition that

once the language of music and musical form had diverged, it would be no easy task to force them back into unity. So as to enable individual impulses to be fully realised, he conserved the [prevailing] idiom as a restraint on freedom; in this respect he revealed a profound affinity with Hegel's idealism. As in Hegel's case, so too here the problem left deep scars on his method of composition. Within an emancipated sense of time, one which has become rigorously thematic, Beethoven's use of the recapitulation always stands in need of legitimation. The entry of the same thing following a dynamic which forces its way beyond repetitions must for its part also be driven by its opposite pole, namely a dynamic of its own. This explains why the great developmental sections of what are in spirit symphonic movements in Beethoven are almost always designed with an eye to the turning points, the critical moments where the recapitulations begin. Because the recapitulation is no longer possible, it becomes a tour de force, the point. For all its seemingly rigorous logic, Beethoven's classicism actually conceals a paradox. His greatest achievements are in fact wrested from their own impossibility, and at the same time, thanks to the effects with which those moments are associated, they prophesy that impossibility which in the meantime has turned into a full-blown crisis of musical form.

In the later phases of musical emancipation, following the demise of tonality, the recapitulation came into open conflict with an uncommonly intensified sensitivity to what was materially appropriate. Those earlier compositions by Schoenberg and Berg were in fact free from recapitulations, despite their relative length. However, in its implications the recapitulation affects not just the so-called larger forms, but also its smaller components, the linking categories – in short, the very fibre of music. This had been constituted by *a priori* tradition in accordance with the postulate of possible repeatability. Genuinely liberated music, music conscious of itself and reconciled with the passage of time, yearns to shake off all repetition. But the facts of the matter justify a dialectical treatment because that yearning suffers almost as much from contradiction as does the method it resists. By whatever methods music succeeded in articulating meaning, its internal logic was tied to open or latent repetitions. It is difficult to conceive of musical form in the absence of resemblance or difference [*Ungleichheit*]. Even the postulate of non-repetitiveness, of absolute difference, calls for an element of sameness without which the different cannot be seen to be different. To borrow the expression coined by Karl Heinz Haag in philosophy,<sup>2</sup> this stifles the absolutely new, the unrepeatable, the utopia of music, the utopia of open-ended and irreversible time. This need for musical articulation – without which incessant change degenerates into monotony, the recurrence of the same – inexorably resists the dream of pure self-renewal that music may nevertheless not forsake if it does not wish to betray that which it is capable of foreseeing. All musical form, regardless of the means at its disposal, involves the use of recapitulation in this extended sense. But even where recapitulation is most thoroughly concealed, it has turned into something almost unbearable. It is this which the New Music has stumbled upon; it is its deepest stratum. From there

it is but a small step to the metaphysical speculation that emphatically good music which is internally consistent with itself is not possible.

This sheds new light on many a product of the formative years of the New Music which otherwise would be hard to explain or which might appear to have reactionary tendencies. It is well known that during his twelve-note period Schoenberg resorted to certain traditional forms, such as the sonata, rondo or variation, which he had banished between 1907 and the First World War. However, he did not continue to make use of such forms simply because he had not yet mastered the new technique, which had developed logically from free atonality, and hence felt unable to proceed radically in every aspect of music. On the contrary, he still made use of them at the period of his greatest maturity, when *Von Heute auf Morgen* and the *Moses und Aron* fragment had already been written and he had already achieved full mastery in his treatment of twelve-note material. Thus the Fourth Quartet and the Violin Concerto approach the familiar patterns of their respective genres. This is not contradicted by the fact that in the Violin Concerto the development of the sonata form merges with the scherzo. It is in the details of his musical diction that the traditional aspect of the forms to be found in the later Schoenberg is unmistakable. In the way his themes are shaped, his frequently imitative use of counterpoint and the varying forms of development, these instrumental works are closer to those he composed before he abandoned tonality, the First Chamber Symphony in particular, than they are to the last of the Three Piano Pieces, Op. 11 or the Six Little Pieces, Op. 19, where his critical hand reshaped even the most minute components as well as the overall tonal orientation. The fact that at the end of the 1930s Schoenberg should have resumed work on the Second Chamber Symphony and brought it to completion is probably connected with his structural regression during that period. Only in his very last works did Schoenberg's attitude to form relax once more. This testifies to the objective crisis in the clash between an entirely autonomous form freed from all regressive features and the compulsion to articulate. Moreover, sonata-like figures can be discerned in the microstructure of even the ascetically pared-down works which Schoenberg wrote shortly before his death, including his very last instrumental piece, the Fantasy for Violin and Piano, Op. 47. Webern was far more ruthless in breaking up the musical surface, and in many of his twelve-note pieces he refused to entrust any instrument with motifs lasting longer than two notes, thus reviving the obsolescent idea of atomistic [*punktuell*] listening. But even in his works there is no lack of subcutaneous, traditional, sonata-like features. So deeply rooted is the intertwining of tradition and innovation in form. It is striking that works of Webern's which have been stripped bare of all architectonic supports should nevertheless reproduce the spirit of the sonata, as it were, from their own inner driving forces. The radical and extremely brief Bagatelles for string quartet, Op. 9, for example, are organised in such a way that they frequently become concentrated in 'knots' or nodes [*Knoten*], minimal developments, whose resolutions, arrived at by a variety of artistic devices, have something recapitulation-like about them, although nothing tangible, and no

motivic-thematic elements are repeated. After all, the function of the recapitulation can be taken over by other parameters, even that of colour. For example, in the first of the Bagatelles, to create a sense of symmetry, a recurrence of sameness, it suffices that both at the start and at the end four-part chords are sounded in the lower register on the viola and cello. The relation of similarity and difference proves to be an indispensable formal category. It would be easy to interpret this as a musical constant, whether with enthusiasm, as if an entire ontology might be inferred from the mere passage of time, or polemically, detecting in that persistence the inertia of the sterile past and desiring to repudiate even these last traces of immutability. However, any thinking which were to reach such conclusions, whatever its emphasis, would mistake the relationship between permanence and change in music. It is futile to deny that the aspects of music which are inexorably imposed by the nature of time are part of its structure; but it is no less false to abstract these structural features from their concrete musical context, to turn them into free-standing elements on which to construct an aesthetic or, more modestly, to craft a theory of form. Whatever its constant elements may be – namely the fact that the passage of time has to be articulated, indeed, that it becomes the passage of time only by virtue of the memory of what has already transpired and what resists its actual flow – have no meaning in themselves. Such constant elements acquire force and status only within the configurations of the specific composition. Just as there can be no change without them, so too they are nothing without change, and it is change which provides them with their function. It is one thing to talk of pre-existing forms, a defence of which the doctrine of constant elements always amounts to; it is quite another where, as in Webern, such forms arise from the specific nature of a composition and where past forms recur without being mere superficial borrowings. Constant formal features are a residue, not an ideal. Today, their universality has no basis other than in the absolute particularity in which they are conceived.

In the context of the difficulties of formal construction in the here and now, the highly legitimate resistance to abstract formal constants has led to the tendency of form to disintegrate. Dieter Schnebel has recently drawn attention to this with great force.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is by no means the product of the latest developments in music, but can undoubtedly be traced back to Gustav Mahler's late works. Indeed, it can be thought of as an idiosyncratic feature in the late style of many important composers. Beethoven's last works, for example, are intentionally fractured, something which is even more striking in the sets of Bagatelles for piano than in the quartets. The consciousness of the illusory nature of rounded, self-contained forms as opposed to the impulses which attempt to organise them harmonically might well be the source of that sense of *dégout* with one's own success. It has long since been asserted that important late styles tend towards the fragmentary, the documentary – as if death, the boundary of the artefact, were foreshadowed in the latter, and had therefore destroyed it. The most susceptible aspect of the New Music was what Valéry described as an ancient need.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the tendency to disintegrate was built into the

problem of form. It corresponds to the necessary displacement of the authentic interest of the composer from the abstract totality, which was no longer sustainable in any traditional form, to the detail. The more thoroughly the totality was wrested from its traditional scheme and became something posited by itself, the greater the violence it wreaked upon everything subordinate to itself. The urge felt by the details to escape from this violence is expressed as disintegration. This disintegration, admittedly no more than an abstract negation, aspires to correct the blind domination of form, which is transcended by the blind will of the details. Disintegration is already implicit in the primacy of the totality. Whatever is forced together in a purely artificial fashion inevitably flies apart. Disintegration is intrinsic to integration, as the unity of the disparate. The analogy of the totalitarian state suggests itself in which, as Franz Neumann showed in *Behemoth*,<sup>5</sup> the formal synthesis of all the sectors of society both conceals and fosters an irrational centrifugal trend on the part of the powers united by a formula. This does not entitle the conservative heirs of fascism to dismiss this aesthetic disintegration with their pontificating about subversive tendencies. Disintegration has become radicalised in the crisis of the last traditional forms and has even infected apparently remote derivative features, such as coherence, the clarity of the compositional elements and the unambiguous nature of the details within the economy of the whole. The boundary of the constitution of musical form purely from within itself, however, is also in a state of disintegration, however legitimate it may be for this disintegration to oppose the illusion of a totality in which all contradictions are resolved. The concept [of form] is not to be taken literally. Every piece of music with a beginning and end in time has a minimum of form and unity by virtue of that fact, and ultimately by virtue of the reality of a musical time which has burst free of empirical time. Whatever deludes itself into believing that it can escape this fate succumbs to a fiction. Art succumbs to illusion all the more inexorably, the more it allows the fact of its manifestation to deny the illusion within itself. Despite its non-representational, non-metaphorical nature, music has become historically imbricated with the character all art possesses of semblance. Only by virtue of that semblance has it become art music at all. It cannot simply shake it off. Without this centrifugal tendency, composing today would be barely thinkable, but its disintegration itself calls for a synthesising element. Thus the question of form which faces composers today must be: Is disintegration possible as a result of integration? The state of compositional consciousness is such that the synthesising, meaning-creating elements of composition can assert themselves only through the critical dissolving of those compositional elements in which meaning is supposed to exist as a positive fact. Integration and disintegration are wholly intertwined.

Advanced composers experience their own devotion to their work as a relaxation of ego control in composition. They do so free from the intervention of pre-established forms and through their emancipation from the rotting residues of conventions which have degenerated into heteronomy. Their wish is to liberate themselves from the otherwise almost unbearable demands of composition as



absolute spontaneity. That was already discernible in the formulation of twelve-note technique; and, at the same time, its detachment from the ego made it look something like a process alien to composition. Schoenberg's entire development from the middle of the 1920s was one sustained effort to compensate the rights of composition for the alienness of twelve-note technique. Those composers fascinated by the relaxation of ego control and of action composing of every kind can appeal to the fact that the integrative, synthesising aspects of traditional music at its Beethovenesque heights were nothing more or less than the liberated self-assertive energies of the human subject.<sup>6</sup> But the subjective share of musical autonomy cannot simply be dismissed by criticising its deluded nature. For if it could, that would simply blur the boundary between works of art and empirical existence; it would imply a regression to the pre-aesthetic. The raw material would either be a matter of indifference or else endowed by superstition with an objective meaning beyond all subjectivity, whereas the reduction of music to any supposedly raw material in fact stands in need of subjective legitimation. Whatever disintegration is called for in art in the service of demystifying its affirmative claims is the achievement of the spontaneous ego and its resistance. In the work of art, the negation of meaning is justified only if it is itself meaningful. The human subject must remain in possession of himself even at the moment when he abandons himself to involuntary spontaneity. Scientifically dubious transpositions of scientific procedures into art fail to redeem the work of art from the self. They surrender it to philistinism. Authentic works of disintegration would be works in which disintegration creates a meaning, a second-order synthesis. The last movement of *Das Lied von der Erde* is one of the earliest and most insistent musical models for this. The fact that the elimination of abstract, reifying rationality is a task to be carried out through the efforts of the subject of that rationality is something which in the long run cannot be concealed from a collective understanding. After his desertion from the surrealist movement, whose most creative exponent he had been, Louis Aragon criticised it by arguing that the nonsense produced by automatic writing was as fatuous as the superficial meaning of the approved products of academe.<sup>7</sup> This criticism can be applied with even greater validity to the cult of the fortuitous, the systematised and utterly ego-alien, resurrection of surrealist automatism. Art is the dialectic between the form-creating principle of rationality and the mimetic impulse. Art assists the latter to fulfil itself by means of techniques and rational procedures. It represents suppressed nature solely by virtue of everything it has developed in the course of the domination of nature. If, instead of carrying through the logic of dialectic, art opts programmatically for one side or the other, it becomes null and void.

For the problem of musical form at its present stage, therefore, the principle of the ordering of notes, the abstract juxtaposition of notes which predominates in the complementary aleatory and serial methods, no longer suffices. The time relation in the musical process is ignored in the modest reduction of composition to an internally unconnected 'first this and then that' approach. The process of

composition fails to render the dual character of time, *viz.* its irreversibility, something which can be grasped only by a recurrence of the same, in other words, by something in conflict with itself. Instead of a dogged succession of complexes, which can currently be recognised by the monotonous symptom of clearly marked caesuras between successive passages, musical complexes would have to be given a temporal shape from within. The fact that part B follows from part A would have to be intrinsic to the music, and not just a spatial, tectonic relationship. The necessity for *this* succession of notes and no other, a necessity earlier prescribed for good or ill by the traditional schemes, would have to be justified in terms of the specific composition; material factors external to the composition will not. This, then, is the problem of form in its strict sense. As long as it is not tackled, proposed structures are no more than belated borrowings from painting. The question of musical form can be put more pointedly by framing it as the link between temporal elements over and above that of mere succession. That calls for categories which are at present withering away, in particular those concerning line and linear progression. Since the demise of functional harmony, line and linear progression remain the only elements of musical structure which are extended in time and last beyond their own moment. They constitute presentness through their anticipation of what follows and brings fulfilment. In a kind of aesthetic sublimation of an extra-aesthetic causality, what follows is, as it were, caused by what precedes. In connection with the relation of line to form, this situation has its parallel in Bach. In Bach's works, formal schemes were not fixed to the same degree as in Viennese classicism. In the case of fugue, we may be uncertain whether to describe it strictly as a kind of form or as a model of polyphonic construction in the realm of thorough bass. The form, which had not become completely established in Bach, acquired its authority from the vigour of its linear progression, the interaction between the lines, their compression and loosening once they had expended themselves. Bach's techniques are probably not capable of being resurrected now, as was fondly imagined fifty years ago, at the beginning of the New Music. They presupposed the security of the tonal realm, just as Bach himself stood for a consciousness which could only be asserted nowadays as a utopian image, one that would in any case be quite undesirable. But the form-creating power of line deserves to be rediscovered anew. The exposition of the first complex of themes in the first movement of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto provides a paradigm here which has largely gone unrecognised. Starting from unpretentious Beethoven-like motives, the line involuntarily gathers itself to form an entire structure in which each element is the inexorable consequence of the preceding one. The complex radiates something of the authenticity which the New Music was forced to renounce after its emancipation. In any type of musical style, wherever particular dimensions atrophy, as has been the case recently with line and interconnection, the suspicion arises of a narrowing, oppressive tendency; integral composition could not simply destroy what might be salvaged by integration if it were reconciled with other strata.

The truly dynamic category of interconnection, however, is the concept of the node or knot [*Knoten*]. Webern assigned it a central position even in the most highly condensed of his compositions. The brief forms of Op. 7 to Op. 11 are almost reductions of the entire trajectory, of form as such, to the node. This was something he explored fully. Its prototype, however, descends from the vastly expanded symphonic movements of Viennese classicism, such as the first movement of the *Eroica*, just before the entry of the new theme of the development. It is scarcely possible to conceive of any authoritative New Music which would have resisted the experience stored up in the dissonances that had become constituents of form. Without nodes, without the painfully negating concentration of what had gone before and the coercion it brought to bear in order to advance into something qualitatively different, we would be scarcely able to conceive of music which is highly focused and of historical significance in itself. On the other hand, today this nodality is a source of irritation because it appears staged, like a manipulated tension – above all, because of its claim that as it is discharged, a meaning flares up, a metaphysical content of which no music can be assured anymore. The factors which inspired Brecht to conceive of the idea of Epic Theatre can no more be ignored by music than the realisation that the form of his epic dramas is not without its slack, regressive side. We find this in particular in Epic Theatre's inability to provide convincing denouements. Music ought doubtless to follow Webern in his efforts to seek out nodal points without dramaturgy. These nodal points would have to emerge from the flow of the music, without any high-handed interventions on the part of the will and the composer's hand. Such music would no longer be organised exclusively from one caesura to the next, in compensation for set schemata now lost; that technique is now blunted. It would instead prefer compositions which proliferated of themselves, devoured themselves and articulated themselves organically, rather than in response to dispensations from above. The possibilities of this were explored by Schoenberg and Berg at an earlier technical stage. They settled for a pluralism of forms, the combination of a number of structures which contrasted with or complemented each other, parted company and overlapped. The famous 'Mondfleck' from *Pierrot lunaire* took this form, in a succession of very brief episodes, while Berg proceeded more expansively in the finale of the Chamber Concerto, in which the idea was that the first two movements should be played simultaneously. Both were concerned with something like a unity of the static and the dynamic. Schoenberg composed an open-ended dynamic piano fugue as the principal event over an accompaniment consisting of a retrograde, self-reversing, i.e. static, double canon. Its unity was to be taken care of by the serial identity of the principal motive of the two complexes. Berg's substantial rondo took this up. The previous adagio, one of its layers, was itself a retrograde – though admittedly not note faithful, unlike Schoenberg's double canon. The second simultaneous stratum, in contrast, was a sequence of variations in unison. The sturdy rationalism of the additive process can no more be denied than can that of other formal innovations from the early years of the New Music. In both cases, the impression

is created of a new form arrived at by juggling with traditional ones. The striking result, however, is a structure which has grown together so densely as to be impenetrable, and from which something like an aura of coercion emanates, albeit from somewhat mechanical techniques. The articulation of time by means of repetition, a static technique and the utopia of things which cannot be repeated are all virtually fused together.

In both works we can discern a new impulse, one which springs into life only following the critique of traditional forms. This is the imaginative sense of form [*Formphantasie*]. In Berg's case, this imagination is hampered by a somewhat cautious and tentative experimenting with innovation, which is hard to separate from his almost anxious need to cover himself. At any rate, he and Schoenberg were probably the first to think of such highly organised forms in the way that earlier composers thought up melodies, themes, counterpoint and harmonies. Berg was indefatigable in his inventiveness. For example, he constructed the *Lyric Suite* in a fan shape, from the central movements outwards. Later on, starting from a comparatively primitive model in *Wozzeck*, he wrote the *monoritmica* in *Lulu*, a kind of many-layered sequence of variations over a basic rhythm [*Grundrhythmus*]. Except at dramatic turning points, this does not become visible, as it would in ostinato passages; its articulation takes place behind the scenes, and the music which makes its appearance is quite free. It too is given a stratified construction; once again the variations of the *monoritmica* take a retrograded form. The fact that Berg was pursued by the idea of an *ars combinatoria* to be accomplished by the living ear suggests objective compulsion. The composer must, in obedience to his own work, labour to give shape to the dual nature of time which had previously seemed to be guaranteed by the traditional forms. In the orchestral works of Stockhausen and Boulez – and the large orchestra is the appropriate medium for such experiments – this idea may be seen to live on. Book II of Boulez's *Structures* for two pianos explicitly takes up the idea of the combination of several different forms, on the literary model of Hoffmann's *Kater Murr*.<sup>8</sup> If I may be so immodest as to venture a piece of advice to composers, it would be for them to develop their own imaginative sense of form [*Formphantasie*], and to become as adept in deploying it as tradition allowed in the case of other parameters. Furthermore, they should learn to devise specific individual characteristics from the structures that occurred to them, which would in their turn ensure that those structures were not arbitrary. The task facing composers would be to liberate the concept of form from certain mechanical procedures on which the Second Viennese School still relied in their early works. In those works, the ideas of structure are too abstract, in other words, too unconnected with the concrete musical events. Complexity arises from the way different blueprints are combined rather than from the events themselves. A more authoritative concept of form should rather be generated from the fibre, the texture, of the composition. So far the greatest success has been achieved where large-scale structural experiments have been avoided. Thus, the first movement of Schoenberg's Fourth Quartet can easily be projected onto the traditional

sonata scheme. In it, however, as in the mature Berg as well, everything is development-like. Every bar is equally close to the centre. In truth, a distinction between exposition and intensification [*Verdichtung*] is no longer made. That is why the form functions subcutaneously in quite a different way from the traditional scheme. The space for development has lost its old function and becomes one part among others, standing on the same plane as other aspects; this is comparable to *Erwartung*, in which everything radiates the same intensity. The lightly sketched-in form is designed simply to clarify the whole; it is not so much a substantial structure as a technique of representing the music, of immanent presentation. Such changes in the hidden cells of the concept of form have to be listened for if the formal structure is to be anything more than a substitute clapped onto the outside, and if the reification which repels us in the traditional forms is to be prevented from simply recurring. That would also be the position with respect to the translation of the particular concept of musical form into an aesthetic concept, into the idea of an integral form which is no longer independent of other dimensions, but one with them. Such a concept would provide something more than just an agglomeration of parameters which might readily substitute for each other on occasion. The different dimensions should rather interact with one another in the living musical process instead of being reduced to a common *Ur-material*. Integral form would emerge from the specific tendencies of all musical details. With the liquidation of musical types, integral form can arise henceforth only from bottom to top, not the other way round. *Form in its current sense is the totality of the musical events*. It explodes the narrower temporal meaning of the customary concept of form: an emancipated music contains nothing which is not the bearer of form. This unreserved enlargement of the concept of form may perhaps act as recompense for what it loses in prescribed universality. Because no forms exist any longer, everything must become form. In the world of tonality which prevented its full realisation, the music of the mature Mahler was the dream of this [consummation], the very opposite of merely systematic integration.

Its accelerating development over the last twenty years has brought music to the brink of self-immolation, and the stage it has reached demands that we emphasise the question of form. The tensions inherent in musical form are by no means to be identified with an individual composer but involve a relationship between some social subject or other which underpins the music and an objectivity which likewise does not exhaust itself in that subject. That objectivity shattered under the impact of the autonomous subject. Today the hackneyed term 'problem' is attached to all and sundry. The problem of form must signify something more definite if we are to discuss it without resorting to cliché: namely, the fact that the emancipated subject evidently cannot bring forth an objectivity of form purely from within itself. This explains why it is not so astonishing, despite what we yearn to believe, that the happiness of freedom has had no greater success in realising itself in music than anywhere else, that music has not really been able to enjoy its freedom. To reduce the problem of form to

the composing subject would be to take an altogether too harmless view of it; the subjective difficulties of composition today reflect the difficulty which always lurks there but has now become acute. Their true cause is doubtless that, coupled with the idiom of tonality, the traditional primacy forms have held over music was linguistic and hence collective in nature. If we break open the shell of artistic technique, the problem of form can be decoded as the question of whether it is possible to conceive of an authentic art which is not grounded in society as it actually exists and which is forced by the critical impulse inherent in itself to serve notice to the forms bequeathed to it by existing society. If art no longer agrees with society about anything, however, the possibility of objectification remains absolutely uncertain. Viewed from outside, the antinomy of musical form is revealed to be social. It is just as necessary to dissolve the form into the concrete particularity of an object as to realise that this necessity is in conflict with the concept of form as an objectifying process which must subsume each individual work beneath itself in order that each individual work may succeed. The actual irreconcilability of the universal and the particular appears disguised in the problem of musical form. For as far as composition is concerned, recourse may no longer be had to an objectivity, of whatever kind, which is conceived as an objectivity in itself. The deepest reason for the difficulty musical objectivity has in arising from the emancipated subject lies in the destruction of the resemblance of music to language. Music was objective in so far as it spoke the language of music, and no such language exists any longer. For this reason, almost the entire modern school was compelled to borrow its objectivity from elsewhere. In the Viennese School of Schoenberg, who was born in 1874, the idiomatic elements were nevertheless present – albeit utterly transformed. Schoenberg obstinately made Brahms his reference point. Neoclassicism, which as a movement belonging to the past can be more easily understood now than at a time when the problem was how to resist its attractions, has faked the outward aspect of form, the element which eludes the human subject and his autonomous will. The cracks and fissures in Stravinsky were not defects or stimuli, but attempts to import this fiction into the work of art as a formal element. So as not to succumb to the fiction, he wished to make it audible to the reflective mind; all undiluted Neoclassicism was distorted idiom. After 1945, young composers hoped to create objectivity as something antithetical to the subject by avoiding both the subject and the tradition. Such objectivity, however, retained a trace of the will to the very subjectivity which it excluded, a trace of the adventitious and unauthoritative. This explains the *prestissimo* succession of techniques. Because of this, form can no longer be generated out of autonomy or planned by the sovereign mind, any more than it can be read from the material which set itself up as an idol once the gods had been exiled from music. The only path which remains open is the possibility of the ear's self-immersion in the idiomatic, all-embracing moments which lie buried in the reservoir of the human subject. It must both hold fast to them and change them through critique. Art is not short of concepts which, however vague or trivial they may seem, nevertheless contain

the crucial element, if we are only capable of grasping it. One such is the concept of the sense of form [*Formgefühl*], a term which trips all too readily off the tongue. Schoenberg defended his innovations in harmony, the most palpable phenomena of atonality, with the statement ‘I always decide in accordance with my sense of form’. With this dictum he gave expression to the coercive consciousness of an objectivity whose norms nevertheless remain hidden from itself and opaque. In the same way, the world no longer grants us truth without risk, and everything secure is condemned as a lie from the outset. A sense of form means: listening for the music and following it to where it wants to go; staying as far away from an imposed will, an imposed architecture, as an alien necessity in which for the most part an arbitrary subjectivity that has gone blind has become entrenched – an unswerving determination in the dark, of the kind we see in the authentic writings of modernity. All this calls for the very utmost subjective effort. The speculative ear is the only organ of unguaranteed objectivity, one which resists its falsification in a spirit of negativity.<sup>9</sup> The oeuvre of the late Eduard Steuermann is dedicated to the idea of reinstating that sense of form.<sup>10</sup> The mismatch between the emancipation from forms which calls for a sense of form and the stunting of that same sense, itself a function of the decline of traditional forms, is what has brought about the crisis of form. All seemingly objective techniques are, as it were, pathetic substitutes for organs which have withered away. They are not up to the task facing them; this is why their lives are so brief. Once, in the early days of the New Music, the sense of form steeled itself in composition to resist the traditional forms which had become conventional, and derived strength from that resistance. Now that the unconventional forms that have replaced them have become as much a hindrance as tonality was then, we are in greater need of a sense of form than of any other compositional quality. If anything, this need, which will not stand for any easy solutions, will activate our sense of form.

## NOTES

The present translation follows the text in Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Form in der neuen Musik’ (1966), *Musikalische Schriften* I–III, vol. 16 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, © 1978 Suhrkamp Verlag Frankfurt am Main, pp. 607–27.

Notes are by Alastair Williams unless otherwise indicated.

1. August Halm (1869–1929), German composer and musicologist, known for his work on form in music.
2. Karl Heinz Haag (1924– ), German philosopher who studied at the University of Frankfurt am Main with Max Horkheimer.
3. It is possible that Adorno is referring to Dieter Schnebel, ‘Brouillards: Tendencies in Debussy’, trans. Margaret Shenfield, *Die Reihe*, 6 (1964), pp. 33–9.

4. Paul Valéry (1871–1945), French poet, essayist and critic, associated with the symbolist movement. He is referred to regularly in Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997).
5. Franz Neumann (1900–54), German political scientist and member of the Frankfurt School during its residence in New York. Adorno is referring to *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944*, revised edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944).
6. Adorno's text has the phrase 'action composing' in English (*Translator*). The phrase is probably derived from 'action painting'; in *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 221, Adorno writes: 'Action painting, *l'art informelle*, and aleatorical works may have carried the element of resignation to its extreme'.
7. Louis Aragon (1897–1982), French poet, essayist and journalist. An important member of the surrealist movement during the 1920s, he became a committed communist in the 1930s.
8. E. T. A. Hoffmann's unfinished novel *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr* (1819–21) interweaves two contrasting narrative strands. The first is the satirical and grotesque story of the life of Murr, a literate tom-cat, as told by himself. The second is the complicated and potentially tragic life story of the tormented musical genius Kreisler, who also figures elsewhere in Hoffmann and who inspired such works as Schumann's 'Kreisleriana'. Murr has written his own story on the back of the galleys of the Kreisler narrative, which had been thrown away as rubbish. The effect is that every dozen pages or so of Murr's complacent and philistine musings are followed by lengthier sections on the events of Kreisler's life (*Translator*).
9. Adorno often mentions the 'speculative ear'. The term comes from Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 122n: 'Just as the speculative eye sees things together, so the speculative ear hears things together'. By way of explanation, Kierkegaard argues that in order to understand Donna Elvira's aria 'Ah, chi mi dice mai' in Act 1 of *Don Giovanni*, we must be aware that Giovanni's 'unparalleled irony' lurks inside Elvira's 'substantial passion'. In other words, to appreciate her love-hate we must hear Giovanni's mockery, which inflames it, as part of her passion (*Translator*). This quotation is also used as the epigraph to Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Function of Counterpoint in New Music', in *Sound Figures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 123–44.
10. Eduard Steuermann (1892–1964), Polish-born pianist and composer who immigrated to the United States in 1938. He was the pianist for Schoenberg's Society for Private Musical Performances, founded in 1918, and taught piano to Adorno and Alfred Brendel.