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# The Cultural Message of Musical Semiology: Some Thoughts on Music, Language, and Criticism since the Enlightenment

Rose Rosengard Subotnik

The rate at which new critical methods reach the various arts often seems dictated by something like a Marxian law of unequal development; for better or worse, music is almost invariably the last art to be affected. Thus, whereas structuralism is already a bit outmoded in certain literary circles, it is only now beginning to have a noticeable impact on the study of music, thanks mostly to the efforts of French musicologists, who for some time have manifested a particularly strong attraction to systematic, as opposed to historical, forms of music criticism. The recent publication of Jean-Jacques Nattiez's *Fondements d'une sémiologie de la musique*,<sup>1</sup> the first full-scale semiology of music to have appeared, provides an appropriate occasion for reflecting upon certain cultural trends that have led in recent decades to an increased interest, within Western musicology generally, in semiotic aspects of music<sup>2</sup> as well as upon the benefits that musicology can anticipate from an essentially structuralist critical method like Nattiez's.

Perhaps one should hesitate to identify Nattiez with the structuralists. After all, structuralism hardly constitutes a monolithic movement, and Nattiez himself dissociates his method of analysis from structuralism on the somewhat odd grounds that his method goes beyond the limits of the single art work. Nevertheless, the affinity of Nattiez's musical semiology with work by such figures as Barthes, Jakobson, and especially Lévi-Strauss seems clear enough to warrant some generalization

1. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Fondements d'une sémiologie de la musique* (Paris, 1975). All further citations to this work will appear in the text.

2. See, esp., Peter Faltin and Hans-Peter Reinecke, eds., *Musik und Verstehen: Aufsätze zur semiotischen Theorie, Aesthetik und Soziologie der musikalischen Rezeption* (Cologne, 1973).

from Nattiez's work to French structuralism on a larger scale. Nattiez's starting point for example, like that of so many French structuralists, is Saussure's linguistic theory, specifically, its distinctions between sign systems, which are socially based, and utterances within such systems, which are individual, as well as distinctions between synchronic or systematic aspects of language and diachronic or temporal ones. Out of the latter distinction Nattiez derives a model for the analysis of art, the biaxial inventory or taxonomy of component or corresponding units. (Nattiez's "taxonomies" include not only tables of paradigmatic equivalence or transformation, such as Lévi-Strauss uses in his analysis of "homologous" myths, but also "trees" of the sort favored by Chomsky, which permit a limited hierarchical ordering of selected units.) Such inventories in effect grant a priority to the identification of discrete units over the characterization of relationships, much as Barthes gives temporal precedence in "the structuralist activity" to what he calls "dissection" as opposed to "articulation."<sup>3</sup> Thus although such tables are concerned with "a certain relation of affinity and dissimilarity,"<sup>4</sup> their graphic format lends itself to the presentation of "relations" in the sense of static orderings rather than to the investigation of any inner dynamic. What emerges from such tables is a vision of structure which is characterized above all by discontinuity.

Discontinuity is evident in many French structuralist studies, not only in the tabular analyses of particular art works but also in more general conceptions of the structures accessible to analysis, including large bodies of works (Lévi-Strauss' myths) or even whole systems of cultural expression (Foucault's "epistemes"). The lack of integral connection between most formulations of structuralist method and any concept of history is often remarked (Piaget's works are one notable exception). Not unrelated is the dissociation that tends to occur between what Jakobson calls the "message" on the one hand and the "addresser" and

3. Roland Barthes, "The Structuralist Activity," in *The Structuralists from Marx to Lévi-Strauss*, ed. Richard and Fernande De George (Garden City, N.Y., 1972), pp. 151–52. Important also in this connection is Claude Lévi-Strauss' conception of the "gross unit" beneath which relationships can essentially be ignored; see his *Structural Anthropology*, 2 vols., vol. 1 trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke G. Schoepf (New York, 1963), 1:211–12. For a more detailed illustration of this point, the reader is referred to my review of Nattiez in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35 (Winter 1976): 239–42.

4. Barthes, p. 151.

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"addressee" on the other, that is, between human artifact and human subject.<sup>5</sup> For example, Lévi-Strauss, who characterizes myth as a "message that, properly speaking, is coming from nowhere," proposes by "disregarding the thinking subject completely [to] proceed as if the thinking process were taking place in the myths" themselves.<sup>6</sup> In Nattiez's semiology, this particular discontinuity takes the form of a denial that communication is a primary function of music. Nattiez dismisses as "myth" (p. 143) Leonard Meyer's normative assumption that "certainly the listener must respond to the work of art as the artist intended"<sup>7</sup> and argues instead that such a coincidence of meaning is at most a happy accident. The basis of this argument is not, as some have contended, that music cannot signify;<sup>8</sup> quite the contrary, Nattiez justifies the application of semiology to music on the very grounds that music is a symbolic phenomenon, that is, it is possessed of a "referential" capacity which enables it to function in some sense as a sign (pp. 27–28). The basis for Nattiez's argument lies in his assumption that a discontinuity between sender, message, and receiver, and hence between the expression and the communication of meaning, is inherent in the structure of musical symbolism, regardless of its cultural context. In essence he understands music in much the same way as Lévi-Strauss understands myth: as "objectified thought" which "takes on the character of an autonomous object, independent of any subject."<sup>9</sup> For both scholars, the underlying structures of human artifacts (in this case language and music) are imagined as embodying completely within themselves the rationality of the human mind.

The extension of this depersonalized notion of cultural phenomena to the Western art work seems clearly to depend on a confusion, by no means rare in French structuralism, between structures which are essentially social in origin, such as Saussure's sign systems, and those that originate through the conscious enterprise of identifiable individuals. Now, whether or not mythological thought can be expanded into a concept of universal mental structures, there are plausible reasons for Lévi-Strauss to ignore individual creativity in stressing the character of myth as a collective heritage which, as Saussure said of language, "no individual, even if he willed it, could modify in any way at all" and which

5. Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *The Structuralists from Marx to Lévi-Strauss*, p. 89.

6. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York, 1970), pp. 18, 12. See also Peter Caws, "What Is Structuralism?" in *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Anthropologist as Hero*, ed. E. Nelson Hayes and Tanya Hayes (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 205, 207–10.

7. Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago, 1956), p. 41.

8. See, e.g., M. P. T. Leahy, "The Vacuity of Musical Expressionism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 16 (1976): 146.

9. Lévi-Strauss, *Raw and Cooked*, p. 11.

is “fixed, not free with respect to the linguistic community.”<sup>10</sup> The reasons are far less compelling to assume that in the creation of art works, as in the use of language, “the categories which are formed always remain unconscious” or even, as Lévi-Strauss claims about individual speakers and myths, that “although the possibility cannot be excluded that the [artists] who create and transmit [works of art] may become aware of their structure and mode of operation, this cannot occur as a normal thing.”<sup>11</sup> The justification for analyzing Baudelaire’s “Les Chats” or Ravel’s *Boléro* as if art “operate[d] in men’s minds without their being aware of the fact” is by no means self-evident.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Lévi-Strauss asserts without hesitation that “the difference between individual creations and myths recognized as such [i.e., presumably as myths] by a community is not one of nature but of degree.”<sup>13</sup> Nattiez goes still further: he refuses to differentiate between the music of collective non-Western societies and even the most self-conscious and esoteric music of the Western avant-garde. Since Nattiez defines “symbol” in terms of a referentiality that exists for no one, he sees no need to distinguish between the impersonality of social signs and the depersonalization that may occur in private symbols. Rather, he deems it irrelevant that certain Western art music has tended to remain accessible to only a small number of individuals—for example, the “experts” in Adorno’s typology of listeners<sup>14</sup>—who can be considered extensions of the composer rather than genuine “others” drawn from society at large. Nattiez cannot afford to recognize that works which are not socially based cannot strictly, in Saussure’s terms, be considered semiological objects at all; such a recognition would amount to admitting what appears to be a total

10. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York, 1974), p. 71.

11. Franz Boas, as quoted in Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, pp. 19–20; Lévi-Strauss, *Raw and Cooked*, p. 11.

12. Lévi-Strauss, *Raw and Cooked*, p. 12. The analysis by Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson of “Les Chats” appears in *The Structuralists from Marx to Lévi-Strauss*, pp. 123–46, and also in *Introduction to Structuralism*, ed. Michael Lane (New York, 1970), pp. 207–21; Lévi-Strauss’ analysis of *Boléro* appears in *L’Homme* 11 (April–June 1971): 5–14, and also in his *L’Homme nu* (Paris, 1971), pp. 589–96. Since the analysis of “Les Chats” appears to be marred by an impassable discontinuity between the treatment of structure and that of meaning, it is not difficult to understand why Lévi-Strauss subsequently became interested in the analysis of music, where presumably “meaning” need not be considered. Lévi-Strauss seems at one point to believe that in analyzing an artistic structure that is self-contained rather than referential, he has moved one step closer to defining the unconscious structure of the mind (see *Raw and Cooked*, pp. 14–18). In actuality, his analysis of *Boléro* is difficult to distinguish from a good deal of positivistic formal analysis, which avoids broad humanistic generalizations.

13. Lévi-Strauss, *L’Homme nu*, p. 560; all translations of quotations from *L’Homme nu* are my own.

14. T. W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York, 1976), p. 4.

discontinuity between the application of his method and its supposed epistemological justification.

The absence of a clear distinction between notions of the individual and the social or general must, in fact, raise particularly strong reservations about any critical method as preoccupied as French structuralism is with comparisons between art and natural language. To be sure, this preoccupation has led to the isolation of many suggestive likenesses and differences between music and language. Among the likenesses, for example, is the assertion that both language and music constitute semiotic media within which the same techniques for verifying competence (in Chomsky's sense) and correctness of usage (related to Chomsky's "performance") can be applied. Lévi-Strauss is insistent that musical as well as linguistic usage must be subject to verification through reference to some sort of "double articulation," or what will more generally be called here "dual structure," that is, through some method whereby, in effect, speakers and listeners can test each other's competence by altering the relationship between a more general and a more particularized level of a system (such as the levels of sound and of meaning, or the underlying level of a code as opposed to the surface level of a message) and observing each other's responses.<sup>15</sup> Nattiez essentially rejects this method of verifying competence, but he proposes two others which have analogues in the linguistic theory, respectively, of Zellig Harris (pp. 231–33) and of Noam Chomsky (pp. 392–93); interestingly these methods, which appear to be more "modern" than Lévi-Strauss', rely far more heavily on faith in fundamentally unexplainable judgments by single individuals, especially by individual "experts."

The differences adduced by structuralists between music and language can be equally provocative. To be expected, of course, are allusions to the absence, or at least the gross imprecision, of musical "signifiés," and that absence is seen to entail the apparent nonreference or at most self-reference of much Western music. Less obvious, perhaps, is Lévi-Strauss' contention that "only a tiny minority of people are capable of formulating a meaning" in music, especially when contrasted with Chomsky's insistence that, in Lyons' words, "the vast majority of the sentences in any representative corpus of recorded utterances would be 'new' sentences, in the sense that they would occur once, and once only."<sup>16</sup> Unquestionably ingenious, however, are the ways Lévi-Strauss has found of

15. Lévi-Strauss' somewhat obscure account of double articulation in *Raw and Cooked* (p. 24) differs from standard accounts such as André Martinet's (summarized by Nattiez, p. 421) and John Lyons' in *Noam Chomsky* (New York, 1970), pp. 19–20. Lévi-Strauss appears to include both phonemes and morphemes in the code level, whereas it is more usual to oppose to the phonemic or sound level a level of meaning which is both semantic and morphemic.

16. Lévi-Strauss, *Raw and Cooked*, p. 18; Lyons, p. 37.

opposing music to various types of linguistic structures: to natural language itself (as two corresponding metalanguages); to myth (as two opposed subcategories of language); and to literature (as two subcategories of myth).<sup>17</sup>

Structuralist inventories of likenesses and differences can suggest discontinuities not only between objects under comparison, such as music and language, but also between elements within those objects, between the likenesses and differences themselves, and at times (not always intentionally) between aspects of the structuralist method itself. It is when structuralism is pushed beyond the mere presentation of discontinuities to the definition of relationships that might explain those discontinuities that its limitations as a method become evident. For when called upon to explain, structuralist method must reach outside of itself for some external principle which, rather than illuminating directly any connection between elements already isolated, seems merely to enlarge the field of discontinuities by adding a new one. In Nattiez's case, the principle is semiology, which ultimately proves irrelevant to the method of analysis it is supposed to justify. For Lévi-Strauss the principle is history. Putting forth a theory of historical disjunctions not fundamentally different from Foucault's antihistorical theory of epistemes, Lévi-Strauss argues not only that myth as a mode of expression gives way to music in the course of history but also that his entire system of polarities (which includes mathematics as well as language, myth, and music) is valid only in one particular historical context, Western civilization from "the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries" until sometime in the twentieth.<sup>18</sup> But history remains extrinsic to Lévi-Strauss' undertaking; his recourse to it enables him neither to explain why music should have supplanted myth nor to characterize the relationship between music and language with any of the particularity implicit in the notion of history.

I do not mean to imply that discontinuities between music and language cannot be explained in terms of history. Quite the contrary is suggested by dialectical criticism, which uses as its point of departure the one discontinuity denied by structuralism, that between individual and general, and defines that discontinuity as historical rather than structural in nature. When limiting itself to recent Western history, dialectical criticism appears able to explain not only the origins of the discontinuities observed by structuralism between music and language but also the impact of those discontinuities on modern critical methods of dealing with the two mediums, including structuralism itself. This assertion cannot be fully tested here, but it seems worthwhile to sketch, even provisionally, the outlines of such a dialectical explanation.

17. See Lévi-Strauss, *Raw and Cooked*, p. 27 (where music is considered prior to myth, a position later rejected in *L'Homme nu*, p. 583, n. 1), and pp. 29, 15–18, 26; *L'Homme nu*, pp. 578–80, 585–86, 599–600, 583–84.

18. Lévi-Strauss, *L'Homme nu*, pp. 583–85.

It has often been noted that in the early nineteenth century, following Kant's failure to demonstrate a necessary coincidence between individual and general interests, a dissociation between the two together with a breach in various senses of community began to emerge clearly in European society. It is less frequently noted that in the same period the separation of Western music from natural language that had been taking shape for some time finally became an overt rupture, or, more precisely, the break which had already occurred between music and language in practice was finally recognized in theory. As far back as the later Middle Ages (when "sounding music" had begun to detach itself from cosmology), and especially after 1600, close connections had begun to develop in musical theory between music and language, above all, between music and rhetoric; not until the decline of baroque aesthetics in the eighteenth century had the bond between music and rhetoric finally weakened, and then only to be supplanted by new analogies between structure and usage in music and in language, especially prose.<sup>19</sup> True, instrumental music began to receive more serious theoretical attention during the eighteenth century, but on the whole the explosion of great instrumental writing that occurred in this period had little impact on contemporary aesthetic theory. Vocal music still enjoyed superior status; and indeed, music itself, on account of its inadequate ability to represent the outside world, was generally considered the lowest of the arts. Only in the early nineteenth century, when the classicism of Haydn and Mozart—that is, the style which had produced the first great paradigms of a wholly autonomous music—was already part of the past, did cultural interpreters begin to exalt "absolute" music as the highest aesthetic, or even human, expression.

This decisive break between music and language appears to be inseparable from the dissociation of individual and general already mentioned. As long as the European world view was dominated by the idea of external authorities—if not God, then at least the logical necessity of reason or, in arts other than music, classical models—existing independently of any particular individual and available to all as a common point of reference, natural language was assumed to provide everyman with direct access to what could be generally verified as objective truth. But once the vividness of subjective experience began to undermine belief in external authority—that is, once a certain incommensurability was sensed between individual and general formula-

19. See Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, "Ars musica: Musikanschauung des Mittelalters und ihre Nachwirkungen," *Die Sammlung: Zeitschrift für Kultur und Erziehung* 12 (1957): 317–18; Robert L. Marshall, "Bach the Progressive: Observations on His Later Works," *Musical Quarterly* 62 (1976): 331; and Peter Kivy, "What Mattheson Said," *Music Review* 34 (1973): 139.



tions of the true—a need was felt to supplement the generally serviceable epistemological means of natural language with what could be called a “medium” of expression solid enough to embody and protect the fragile particularity of individual fantasy. In a general sense, then, the concreteness of the aesthetic was called into being to shore up failing confidence in the quality of human access to truth or knowledge; and of all the arts, music, with its lack of clear links to the outside world, seemed least susceptible to widespread debasement and, hence, most easily able to embody individual formulations of truth with precision. Music, in other words, separated itself from natural language in response to a division, now felt with unprecedented sharpness in European society, within the Western conception of man in his relation to the world.

To an extent, after this separation of music from language occurred, the two mediums followed roughly parallel courses in their respective pursuits of truth: music, the aesthetic medium, became recognized as the paradigmatic configuration of subjectively acquired knowledge; language, once Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* had revealed the epistemological indispensability of natural language, became recognized as the paradigmatic medium for the configuration of objectively acquired knowledge. From the start, however, neither medium could be confined within the single category of individual or general. Despite all the new status the Romantics gave to the truth of individual fantasy, for example, the eighteenth-century identification of “real” with “objective” retained a great deal of force. Hence, however much composers turned inward toward irrational sources of truth and took refuge in private circles, they were not happy to relinquish that general recognition of validity associated in the eighteenth century with the products of reason. Quite early in the nineteenth century, therefore, composers began to crave means external to themselves for verifying the validity of their musical ideas and, concomitantly, for guaranteeing the precise communication of those ideas.

In language the problem was somewhat more complicated—even apart from the existence of an aesthetic domain within natural language, poetry, a domain where, as in music, it became vital to find ways of individualizing a social sign system.<sup>20</sup> Even within the realm of epistemology, no simple identity could be made between natural language and objectively valid knowledge, that is, in eighteenth-century terms, knowledge verifiable on a general scale by reference to external authority. For not only had belief in the very existence of external authority been weakened by many political, social, and cultural circumstances;

20. For reasons of space, aesthetic functions of language will not be considered here, nor will communicative functions except to the extent that they become dissociated from epistemological ones. The latter will be taken here to represent the characteristic mediating powers of natural language.

in addition, Kant's critical philosophy had opened up grounds for suspicion that language (and hence, reason) originated and even operated on the same subjective side of experience as music, yet Kant himself could not establish any necessary connections between the subjective and objective realms of truth. Thus, in calling attention to the dependence of objective knowledge on language, Kant had provided a basis for questioning the objectivity of the knowledge obtained through language, that is, for doubting the power of language to reach any such objective truth as did exist.<sup>21</sup> Hence, the impression given by language, with its dual structure of *signifiant-signifié*, that it could mediate reliably between the individual and the world—the very impression which had allowed language to be taken so for granted as a binding force within eighteenth-century society—began to seem in the nineteenth century a liability for a medium concerned with truth. So language in the nineteenth century, not unlike music, found itself in the position of needing to reestablish its own objective validity as an epistemological medium; otherwise it faced the risk that its availability for general use would disintegrate into the formation of numerous private codes not grounded in a common objectivity.

In order, then, to embody any satisfactory conception of truth, language and music were each faced with the need to integrate individual discourse with general verifiability, which meant, in effect, to establish, or reestablish, within itself a "duality of structure." But since the inadequacies of both language and music were in essence a function of the very qualities which had linked one with the principle of generality and the other with individuality, there was a current in each medium which tended to strip it of its own identifying characteristics and to lead it toward a convergence with the other, a convergence which has not yet, however, resulted in any resynthesis of the individual and the general.

Only some rough suggestions can be given here of how this tendency might be traced in the history of natural language. Using Foucault's extremely interesting account as a point of departure, one can imagine language in the eighteenth century as a hierarchy of interconnected, indeed inseparable, binary mediations; these mediations come to an apex in the *signifiant-signifié* relationship, which sums up the neoclassical belief in a necessary correspondence between cultural and natural structures (itself a good example of dual structure).<sup>22</sup> The basic

21. See esp. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York, 1970), pp. 162, 295–97; and Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York, 1973), pp. 120–32, 197. Here lie the roots of Chomsky's assertion that "as for the fact that the rules of language are 'public rules,' this is, indeed, a contingent fact" (*Reflections on Language* [New York, 1975], p. 71).

22. See esp. Foucault's sections on language in chapters 4 and 5 of *The Order of Things*. On the isomorphism of nature and culture in Enlightenment thought, see also Morse

form of language is the proposition; belief in the connective powers of the verb “to be” is unrecognized but—or, perhaps, and therefore—universal. As a “transparent” medium of representation, language mediates without distortion between man and nature and between man and other men; objective knowledge is assumed to be inherently communicable on a social scale through language; and the truths conveyed by language can in theory be evaluated by any member of society in terms of their correctness.

In the nineteenth century, as faith in the mediating power of language is undermined, all of the various binary relationships once characteristic of natural language begin to collapse; to use Foucault’s terms, the binary representative function of language gives way to an essentially severed signifying function, an idea of obvious importance within poetry. In the realm of epistemology, the loss of connective powers shows up in the tendency of language to become “opaque,” to define itself as a concrete entity detached from the subjectivity of any particular speaker and to limit its field of knowledge by turning back on itself as its own object of study. The discipline of philology emerges, calling attention to sounds and internal structural elements within language itself. Thus, language as an epistemological medium in the nineteenth century begins to emphasize characteristics that come to be associated in the same century with the aesthetic medium music: opacity (nonreferentiality), autonomy, sound, and internal coherence—along with a tendency toward self-destruction.

Over the nineteenth century into the twentieth, the same similarities to music are evident in a number of programs to reestablish the objective validity of knowledge obtained through language. The effort, for example, to make language more objectively believable by increasing its scientific character entails emphasizing still further its autonomy and internal coherence, both “musical” qualities. Accordingly, epistemological language is guided ever closer to a purified state of “objective existence outside the consciousness of transmitters and receivers.”<sup>23</sup> At the same time, an attempt is made to replace the truth of correspondence gradually ravaged in language with an increasingly rigorous truth of coherence; in a word, language is to be formalized. Both tendencies are evident in the specialized “metalanguages” of the twentieth-century academic disciplines into which epistemological language is fragmented.

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Peckham, “The Dilemma of a Century: The Four Stages of Romanticism,” in *Romanticism: The Culture of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Peckham (New York, 1965), pp. 17–18. On the breakdown of the *signifiant-signifié* relationship in the nineteenth century, see also Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore, 1976).

23. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966), p. 268.

Likewise, the attempts of scholars to locate universal bases of language below the level of individual consciousness (Jakobson's "distinctive features," Chomsky's universal mental structures, even Lévi-Strauss' abstract "binary oppositions") reveal a continuing tendency on the part of language to turn inward on its own sounds or structure.

In its turns both toward metalanguages and toward structural linguistics, epistemological language has, of course, given way to structures which in eighteenth-century terms could hardly be called recognizably linguistic in any respect. This tendency of language to shed its own traditional identity is even more apparent in such projects as Russell and Whitehead's symbolic logic, Bloomfield's nonsemantic linguistics, Barthes' and Nattiez's semiologies, and Lacan's efforts to systematize prelinguistic features of private symbols. All of these enterprises, which are outgrowths of the scientific or "substructural" orientations of language just mentioned, and which have common similarities to music, would seem, taken together, to constitute a total collapse of the epistemological hopes once invested in natural language.

Certainly, the twentieth-century epistemological languages have not been able to establish their own objective validity by means of any general verifiability. On the contrary, the increased precision of the metalanguages, for example, has assured their incomprehensibility on a social scale precisely because their precision is not referential but merely (imperfectly) self-consistent. In sharp contrast to eighteenth-century language, with its interlocked mediations, epistemological language in the twentieth century has more or less dissociated itself from the communicative functions of language. Despite attempts by Wittgenstein and his followers to demonstrate the logical impossibility of private language, fears of a complete reduction of epistemological language to solipsistic absurdity have not been laid to rest.<sup>24</sup>

Yet the potentiality for solipsism does not lead to the conclusion that language has given way to more aesthetic media in which individuality of expression is preserved. Again, quite the contrary; the self-sacrifice of natural language has come about precisely through attempts to rid language of epistemological uncertainty, and thereby prove its general validity, by purging it of susceptibility to individual variation. The only individuals for whom contemporary epistemological languages still work are the experts who have virtually relinquished individuality of utterance in mastering the rigors of specialized, yet impersonal, usages. Thus, despite the tendency of currents within epistemological language to converge with music, no reintegration of subjective and objective has taken place in language. Instead, the discontinuity which remains between the

24. See esp. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London, 1961), sec. 5.64: "Solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism."

two principles has severely weakened the capacity of language to embody the sort of truth associated with either. Natural language has undermined its own strengths without acquiring those of music.

## 3

Nowhere does Lévi-Strauss' attribution of a dual structure of particular and general levels to tonal music seem more appropriate than in the classical style. True, with the loss of the baroque "affects," music was no longer expected to refer to any external realm of *signifié*; even in Mozart's opera ensembles, where analogies of extraordinary brilliance were drawn between musical and dramatic relationships, the music made "complete sense" in musical terms. Nevertheless, if the *signifiant-signifié* correspondence of natural language can be replaced by a system of what Leonard Meyer calls "embodied meanings," defined by wholly musical relationships, then the model of neoclassical language derived from Foucault, a hierarchy of binary mediations which permits the establishment of general sorts of validity, works surprisingly well for classical music as well. Charles Rosen's diagram of the tonal hierarchy at work in classicism, for example, suggests exactly such a model;<sup>25</sup> even the Roman numeral I which stands at the apex is not, of course, an isolated entity but the quintessence of an embodied relationship because it implies a complete hierarchy of numerals other than I. The very use of Roman numerals is possible because the tonal system is defined by relationships rather than by particular ("absolute") pitches; of all the musical systems developed in Europe, eighteenth-century tonality is almost certainly constituted of the most readily "generalized" relationships.

Furthermore, as Rosen has well demonstrated, classicism was the only tonal style characterized by binary relationships at every level of construction. In contrast to the baroque style, for example, its normative unit was the antecedent-consequent relationship, in a sense the musical analogue of a verbal proposition. In contrast to the Romantic style (as will be seen), the normative structure was one of premise-resolution. And as Rosen himself has more than once implied, it was in the classical style above all that the relationship between unit and structure was essentially one of antecedent-consequent.

Yet, although all of these relationships were embodied, or immanent, in classical music, their implications were never confined to a particular piece. Rather, as has already been suggested, the classical hierarchy of binary relationships continued beyond the limits of the individual work, linking it and the elements within it to more generalized principles or norms of classical style. Thus, in a way, this music was able

25. Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style* (New York, 1972), p. 24.

to use to its advantage the eighteenth-century notion of external authority without suffering the disadvantages of rigid authoritarianism.<sup>26</sup> For on the one hand, the choice and treatment of premises in a classical work could always be referred—indeed, *audibly* referred<sup>27</sup>—to more general classical principles and procedures; similarly, the one hundred-odd symphonies of Haydn, to take but one example, could be related to some normative conception of genre not literally embodied by any one of them. On the other hand, the norms underlying classical music were never derived from nonmusical sources (unless the apparent rationality itself of these norms be considered alien to music); nor were such norms, except perhaps in the sense of defining outer limits, imposed as restraints upon classical music. On the contrary, far from preexisting and even predetermining composition in the manner of ancient generic models, classical models, such as Haydn's symphonic norm, were very largely created by the classicists themselves.

In short, the classical style of Haydn and Mozart seemed to be in possession of something very like an identity (or, at least, an embodied relationship) between the general principles assumed in eighteenth-century natural language and the more particular or embodied principles subsequently associated with music. And scholars appear generally to agree that classicism has come closer than any other Western style to providing the basis for a coincidence between purely musical meanings intended by the individual composer and those understood by society at large. Embodying its own meaning yet retaining in that meaning a basis for generalization (that is, a "second" structure), classical music became a paradigm for later composers hoping to avoid public lack of understanding, or misunderstanding. Certainly the style has lent itself more readily than any other to a mode of criticism that presupposes the eighteenth-century norm of generally verifiable correctness, as when Rosen writes of a Haydn string quartet, "All we need, as here, is one moment *when we are not sure what the meaning of a note is. . . . It is not until the next chord that we understand why the little motif was left without harmonies. . . . Playing the three notes softly each time . . . hides their true significance.*"<sup>28</sup> The assumption in such writing of a single, generally ascertainable musical meaning is clear.

The music of Haydn and Mozart, then, established a firm basis for recognizing an identity between individuality and generality as artistic, social, and even philosophical principles. Yet not until Beethoven was a composer widely and unmistakably acclaimed during his own lifetime for embodying such an identity in his music. By then, to be sure, it was less a question of an identity than of a reconstructed synthesis since by

26. Cf. Edward Cone's discussion of freedom and form in Mozart's operas in *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974), pp. 26–29.

27. See Rosen, p. 94.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 98, italics added.

the time of Beethoven's maturity, the notion of the individual could be clearly distinguished from the general. In important Romantic circles, moreover, there was now open distrust of the generality at work in both society and natural language as a source of truth. Beethoven's music was revered in many such circles because it appeared to shift the traditional balance between individual and general values. Whereas once the general was considered logically and even morally prior to the individual, the impression made by Beethoven's music, especially the second-period music, helped sustain, indeed even create, the Romantic dream that the individual could become the new locus of the universal.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, because most of Beethoven's music was purely instrumental, it awakened hopes among Romantics like E. T. A. Hoffmann that autonomous music, in its wholly aesthetic being, could embody a level of ultimate truth inaccessible to natural language.

And yet, when one looks for the musical sources of this Beethoven mystique, one comes upon the curious probability that his music impressed the Romantics as being individual and autonomous precisely because it gave the sense that these qualities were in peril. An awareness of some such peril seems to have been deeply rooted in Beethoven himself; one can surmise, for example, for the extraordinarily self-critical manner in which he composed and the uncharacteristic care with which he held on to old ideas and sketches, that he attached tremendous importance to the individuality of his work and, moreover, to the clear definition of that individuality. At any rate, what gives the second-period style, in particular, so distinctive a character is its strong suggestion that the very precision with which Beethoven was able to articulate an individualized musical utterance constituted a threat to the precision with which that utterance would be understood by others. This suggestion is raised by the very strenuousness of Beethoven's efforts to avoid just such a dissociation of individual and general in his music, primarily through two techniques, rhetorical emphasis and the concretization of content. Both are fundamental to the second-period style; and ironically, both undermined the autonomy of Beethoven's music by bringing it closer to natural language at the very moment when it gave birth to the concept of absolute music.

By "rhetorical emphasis" I mean an intensification in the manner of utterance. This term would include increased reliance on techniques

29. On the Romantic definition of genius as individuality capable of embodying universality, see Wulf Arlt, "Einleitung: Aspekte des Gattungsbegriffs," *Gattungen der Musik in Einzeldarstellungen*, 1st series, ed. Arlt, Ernst Lichtenhahn, and Hans Oesch (Bern and Munich, 1973), p. 39. For an interpretation of Beethoven's third-period style, which will receive little attention here, the reader is referred to my earlier article "Adorno's Diagnosis of Beethoven's Late Style: Early Symptom of a Fatal Condition," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 29 (1976): 242-75.

which direct more attention to their own force of expression than to implicitly intelligible relations (such as antecedent-consequent).<sup>30</sup> Among such techniques in that quintessentially second-period work, the Fifth Symphony, are fermatas, numerous dynamic indications, accelerations of tempo (the closing "Presto"), and special instrumental effects such as solos. Requiring as they so often do some written indication beyond what could be inferred from the notes themselves, such techniques suggest even in their notation a certain loss of musical autonomy. Extended reiteration of one or two elements, such as the V-I cadences at the close of the work—prefiguring what Rosen calls the "cumulative rather than syntactical" effects of the Romantics<sup>31</sup>—likewise constitutes rhetorical emphasis. Still another sort of rhetorical emphasis is provided by a deviation from expectation so forceful that it calls attention to its singularity as a gesture and may even evoke a sense, however unwarranted, of the arbitrary; an example might be the solo oboe passage which surfaces at the beginning of the recapitulation of the first movement in the Fifth Symphony (meas. 268) although it has no counterpart in the exposition. (Interestingly, this particular passage anticipates the opening of the third movement [meas. 6–8] with such explicitness that one might almost say, as Tovey does of an analogous passage in the opus 131 quartet, that here Beethoven "goes out of his way to accentuate his point." Yet the very distinctness of this gesture draws attention away from the relationship it embodies, though, to be sure, it could be argued that the relationship therein embodied is no longer one of implied necessity but rather only an arbitrarily imposed likeness.) Manner of delivery likewise becomes the primary focus in the instrumental recitative so characteristic of the late style; the recitative is interesting more because it seems to be straining toward natural language than for anything it might be trying to say.

Wagner once characterized Beethoven as the artist who "places [the] transparency [of his predecessors] in the silence of night . . . out from which he throws the light of the clairvoyant against the back of the picture."<sup>32</sup> This image suggests that Beethoven's music, in comparison with that of eighteenth-century classicism, had become opaque, a suggestion to which Wagner further contributed with his somewhat bizarre observation that Beethoven's was "a skull of unusual thickness and

30. Cf. Cone, pp. 163–64, on gestural aspects of utterance; for a somewhat different division of musical elements into logical or rhetorical categories, see Charles Seeger, "On the Moods of a Music-Logic," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 13 (1960): 230, 237.

31. Rosen, p. 455.

32. Richard Wagner, *Beethoven* (1870), trans. Albert R. Parsons (Indianapolis, Ind., 1872), p. 67. Wagner's imagery recalls some of the poetic criticism studied by M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York, 1953).



firmness" which "guard[ed] in him a brain of extreme tenderness, in order that it might look towards the interior only."<sup>33</sup> In a sense, this opacity marked an increase in the purely musical or aesthetic character of music, just as it did in contemporary natural language. But musical opacity was not the same as musical autonomy, a quality at least as essential as opacity to the definition of pure music. For if Beethoven worked almost entirely within the medium of music, he nevertheless used it in a way that turned it back toward the outside world; in seeming to apply heavy rhetorical emphasis on his music "from without," Beethoven gave the impression of a messenger behind a barrier, who, no longer able to rely on the self-evident clarity of his message, found it necessary to shout.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the primary effect of his rhetorical emphasis was a projection of the sense that he was manipulating his own music, that he had moved into his music in order to make sure that it conveyed his meaning in an unmistakable manner. Such an intrusion of Beethoven's personal presence, of course, undermined the autonomy of his music.

Somewhat paradoxically, perhaps, this very emphasis on manner of delivery was largely indistinguishable from the other device which undercut the autonomy of Beethoven's music, the concretization of content. In general, this technique seems to have arisen in the nineteenth century out of a sense of need to replace the lost eighteenth-century principles of external authority with a new point of reference from which all men could derive a common meaning. In Beethoven's music the concretization of content at times manifested itself quite explicitly: his occasional titles and superscriptions and particularly his use of a text in the Ninth Symphony all contributed to the notion of a rather literal reunification of music with natural language. Even more threatening to the autonomy of Beethoven's music, however, was the degree to which his very presentation of self became palpable as the essential content of his music. As a valuable study by Hans Eggebrecht has demonstrated, criticism of Beethoven's music from the very beginning was unable to dispense with verbal characterizations of musical qualities which were almost invariably associated with Beethoven himself.<sup>35</sup> By managing in this way to embody discrete, even nonmusical, content in the very sounds of instrumental music, Beethoven probably did more than any composer has since to destroy autonomous music as a socially viable concept, that is, to destroy the possibility that a precise coincidence between individu-

33. Wagner, p. 73.

34. Cf. Arnold Salop, "Intensity as a Distinction between Classical and Romantic Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 23 (1965): 365; also Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg* (New York, 1975), p. 32; and Abrams, p. 151.

35. Eggebrecht, *Zur Geschichte der Beethoven-Rezeption*, Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz, Abhandlung der geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse, no. 3 (Mainz, 1972). For a good, early example see E. T. A. Hoffmann's review (1810) of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, trans. and reprinted in the Norton Critical Score of that work, ed. Elliot Forbes (New York, 1973), p. 153.

ally intended and generally perceived meanings would ever be established through the medium of music alone.

Yet the heteronomy toward which Beethoven's music tended so forcefully was not that of music before 1750. Rather than reestablishing any straightforward and widely acknowledged identity in society between musical sound and philosophical value or rhetorical convention, Beethoven instead began the process which would eventually collapse the dual structure of classicism into an essentially private code or organization of symbols, thereby depriving music not only of the autonomy through which it had come to crystallize the uniqueness of art but also of the social viability it had once shared with eighteenth-century language. For in making the content of his work indistinguishable from the individuality of his style, Beethoven began to remove from pure instrumental music that discrete general level of socially defined norms which had made the correctness of classical usage, at least in theory, generally verifiable. And this loss of generality was further reinforced by Beethoven's rhetorical emphasis which, by calling attention to gestures in themselves and to their identifying particulars, such as timbre or range, also limited opportunities for "generalization," for example through reinstrumentation or transposition. In short, Beethoven's heteronomy began to suggest that art might not provide a way after all for individuality to subsume and articulate the generally valid and, as a corollary, that impotence on a social scale might render the exercise of free will meaningless.

Still, the actual collapse of dual structure did not occur in Beethoven's own music; throughout the second-period works, at least, Beethoven was able to preserve intact a genuine dual structure by retaining the total relationality of classicism, thereby permitting a momentary synthesis of individual and general principles within one style. True, the synthesis was uneasy because it manifested the manner of its own decomposition in the very act of constituting itself. And true, the Romantics' sharp sense of Beethoven's work as autonomous music almost surely arose from the very threat to such autonomy posed by the thrust of the second-period style toward heteronomy. Nevertheless, however powerful Beethoven's rhetoric and self-evocation, the continued binding force of classical relationships still allowed his music to embody all of its own meaning in a socially decipherable way, that is, to maintain its autonomy.

It was Beethoven's successors who first experienced the complete loss of musical autonomy as the manifold connections implicit in classical dual structure began to collapse and a clear dissociation emerged between increasingly individualized musical expression, on the one hand, and general apprehension of pure musical meaning, on the other. Since the mediations of classicism were all interconnected, the collapse of classical duality was, of course, evident not only in the social situation of nineteenth-century music but also within the structure of the music it-

self. Thus, once the eighteenth-century ideal of external models began to collapse into what Adorno has called “the genre of the masterpiece,” in which each individual work was to constitute its own universe, the classical derivation of compositional premises from conventional tonal relationships began to give way to compositional premises so highly individualized that they tended to call attention to themselves rather than implying relationships to other musical constructs.<sup>36</sup> Whereas the premises of a high classical composition were inseparable from a generally accessible sense of the infinitely variable sign system underlying them, the premises of a work by Schubert in his later years or by Berlioz might shrink to a combination of intervals and progressions implicitly evoking little more generalizable than a sense of the peculiarity, or indeed, the arbitrariness of free choice.<sup>37</sup>

In effect, this weakening of dual structure in Romantic music undercut not only the quasi-referential “correspondences” between classical levels of articulation but also the coherence of relationships within a composition between premise and resolution. Thus where, for example, it was at least conceivable that large-scale tonal relationships of tension and release could be generally inferred from the opening definition of E-flat in Beethoven’s *Eroica*, the vast E-flat pedal which began Wagner’s *Rheingold*, and indeed the whole *Ring*, no longer functioned in any sense as a proposition. The fact that this implicitly nonrelational, self-contained passage, going well beyond the wholly immanent implications of classicism, drew upon extreme rhetorical exaggeration as well as upon a detailed plot to establish connections between itself and anything beyond itself only emphasized the contingency of such connections as Wagner embodied them in his music. The weakening of the relationship between premise and conclusion in nineteenth-century works was equally evident in the difficulties which were often attendant upon ending those works, as if the composers themselves were no longer certain at times just what the implications of their own premises were or when they had been successfully realized. Even in a piece as seemingly well defined as the *Symphonie fantastique*, every movement gave evidence of the uncertainty or self-conscious manipulation that became characteristic of musical conclusions very early in the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup>

36. On the collapse of external models for genre in the nineteenth century see Carl Dahlhaus, “Zur Problematik der musikalischen Gattungen im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Gattungen der Musik*, pp. 840–95.

37. The semitone, for example, can be seen as seminal both in Schubert’s String Quintet in C and in Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*. For a somewhat different interpretation of repeated intervallic patterns in the works of Berlioz, see Edward C. Bass, “Musical Time and Space in Berlioz,” *Music Review* 30 (1969): 220–24.

38. According to Cone, in “Schumann Amplified: An Analysis,” in his Norton Critical Score of the *Symphonie fantastique* (New York, 1974), pp. 249–77, the endings of movement 1 (meas. 494–527) and movement 3 (meas. 175–99) were later additions to Berlioz’s original version, as was, in all probability, the closing reference to the *idée fixe* in movement 4

But in failing for the most part to establish palpably "necessary" connections between the premises and conclusions of their works, Beethoven's successors obscured the precision with which any musical meanings immanent in those works could be perceived and verified by society at large. Therefore they undermined the autonomy within society of the one structure through which it was possible to realize highly individualized premises with integrity, the individual composition itself. For the more self-contained and singular a work appeared to be, the more explanations of it were sought in principles essentially extrinsic to it; and because such principles of explanation, unlike the embodied norms of classicism, *were* extrinsic, they helped stimulate a redefinition of musical meaning in a way that excluded the autonomy of musical structure. Indeed, even among the most educated listeners, attention was frequently diverted away from the particularity of the work at hand, if not to "atmospheric," nonmusical associations (for illustration one need only consult the first section in Schumann's criticism of the *Symphonie fantastique* or Hans von Bülow's exegesis of the Chopin Preludes), then at least to the identity of the personal style exemplified in the work (a situation normally adverse for unknown composers). Schumann's criticism of Chopin's music, for example, came to center about a fascination with the unmistakability of Chopin's style, just as more than a century later Edward Cone's exceptionally thoughtful analysis of the *Symphonie fantastique* was to arrive at the conclusion "that the symphony is really by Berlioz."<sup>39</sup> But paradoxically, although the identity of the nineteenth-century composer's style generally defined a realm extrinsic to the particularity of a single musical structure, that style was not sufficiently more general than the structure of a particular work to serve as a socially decipherable basis for defining the individuality of a work. Hence, whereas Beethoven had seemed able to render autonomy of style identical with autonomy of structure in his music, the stylistic autonomy of his successors tended to vitiate the autonomy of their works, and acceptance of a particular Romantic work often became essentially a means of validating the composer's stylistic personality.

The result was that more and more over the course of the nineteenth century, music, especially pure instrumental and nonfunctional music, began to depend for its acceptance outside the composer's own circles on an irrational and uninformed faith in the importance (and, conceivably, also the sincerity) of the composer's manner of utter-

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(meas. 164-69); note also the progressive accelerations at the end of movement 2 and the inherently premeditated "counterpoint of themes" in the last movement beginning at meas. 414. See also Rosen, *Schoenberg*, pp. 25-27, on the breakdown of the harmonic function of the cadence.

39. Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, ed. Konrad Wolff, trans. Paul Rosenfeld (New York, 1946), pp. 138-42; and Cone, "Schumann Amplified," p. 277. See also Cone's remarks on Wagner's persona in his operas, *Composer's Voice*, pp. 27-29.

ance. Thus, not surprisingly, as force of stylistic personality became essential to the public survival of individualized music, nineteenth-century art music manifested an increasing capacity for rhetorical emphasis, a category of technique which had already threatened the autonomy of Beethoven's music and brought it closer to natural language.

Moreover, just as the collapse of dual structure made correctness of usage increasingly irrelevant to artistic creation (despite Wagner's faculty for egregious violation of self-proclaimed "rules") so, too, this collapse tended to destroy purely musical methods for verifying whether a particular interpretation of a given piece was the correct one. Even rhetorical emphasis, no matter how exaggerated, was seldom able to guarantee uniform understanding of a work in wholly musical terms; and hence, faced with loss of control over reactions to their music outside their own circles (and after their own lifetimes), many nineteenth-century composers also followed Beethoven's second lead and supplied their works with explanatory titles, texts, programs, or critical commentary, often hoping thereby to crystallize the intrinsically musical essence of their works but in fact replacing the internal coherence once definitive of music with the correspondences more characteristic of language. In this way too, then, music after Beethoven was brought ever closer to natural language, and the chances were further reduced that autonomous musical utterance could ever be assured general yet precise comprehension. Indeed, however much the Romantics themselves idealized autonomous music, their own compositions as well as their criticism gave numerous indications that such a medium had virtually ceased to exist by mid-century.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, awareness grew among composers and critics that individual utterance had not established itself as a new universal and that the discontinuity between individual intention and general apprehension was threatening complete destruction of the very autonomy which had made music so promising a medium for the embodiment of individually perceived truth. As early as 1854, for example, in *The Beautiful in Music*, Hanslick criticized the inability of music, as then constituted by Romantic individualism, to mediate between either man and nature or man and other men and thus to provide a basis for objective certainty in the understanding and judging of music. In fact, music was failing in much the same ways as natural language to certify the objectivity of its own truth content; and Hanslick, acutely sensitive to the ongoing convergence of music and language, stressed the natural enmity of these two media as the cause of contemporary musical insufficiency. Significantly, however, in this, his most famous work, Hanslick himself found it impossible to discuss music outside the framework of natural language; in retrospect his differences with Wagner seem far less striking than the degree to which both men were obsessed with the relationship between music and language.

Sooner or later in their critical writings, Hanslick and Wagner, like Brahms in his composition, both tried to establish a new universal basis for absolute music which would in effect replace the lost embodied relationships of classicism: Wagner, by trying to identify music with a universal psychological substructure (e.g., in the late monograph on Beethoven, where the influence of Schopenhauer is particularly evident);<sup>40</sup> Hanslick, along with Brahms, by emphasizing the need to increase the rigor with which internal musical relationships cohered. Brahms probably came closer than any composer after Beethoven to restoring the autonomy of music by approximating a resynthesis of individual and general values in his works, but even Brahms could not ultimately assure an objective mode of musical perception. Those of his instrumental works which achieved popularity allowed the majority of listeners to perceive nothing in them beyond the individuality of Brahms' themes, gestures, and instrumental colors; within his works the classical identity of subjectively designed gesture and objectively rigorous structure was no longer generally audible. Even Brahms could not remove from his abstract music the concreteness of his own presence as an extrinsic content.

The strategies suggested respectively by Brahms and Wagner bore a strong resemblance to the quasi-scientific formalization and the investigation of underlying structures characteristic of epistemological language in the latter nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and neither that formalization nor that investigation encouraged the hope that music in the twentieth century would prove any more successful than natural language in eluding solipsism by reintegrating subjective and objective values. On the contrary, both approaches provided a strong basis for denying that the individual subject had any means of establishing a common link between himself and others which would be either comprehensible or verifiable in general terms. For in the twentieth century, each of these techniques (like total serialism and chance music somewhat later) essentially removed the subject from ostensibly objective methods of construction: formalism by rejecting individuality of expression more or less outright; investigations of underlying structures, such as expressionism and primitivism—and there are obvious analogues here with the influential analytical methods of Heinrich Schenker—by moving toward a level of psychological reality below any recognizably individual mode of expression.<sup>41</sup>

40. On Schopenhauer's role in objectifying music as a symbol of the irrational, see Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p. 219.

41. Cf. Philip Barford, *Mahler Symphonies and Songs* (Seattle, 1971), p. 42, and esp., Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York, 1973), p. 49, on Schoenberg's music as "case study." See also Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1968), pp. 186–92, on attempts at binding musical notation, another way of dispensing with the individual subject.

The “substructural” approach to composition, it might be added, not only attempted to realize on a large scale the Romantic suggestion that irrationality provided a basis for universality; it also went far beyond the Romantics in giving evidence that any such universality of the irrational could not be proven objectively valid in a generally verifiable way. Thus, Schoenberg and Stravinsky both turned to relatively extreme kinds of formalism to give their music at least a semblance of verifiable “objective” validity; and in Schoenberg’s case, at least, the formal principle (the twelve-tone system) was even derived quite logically from expressionistic materials. Nevertheless, Schoenberg and Stravinsky were unable, respectively, to synthesize expressionism or primitivism with formalism, least of all in any audible manner. In the end, only traces of individual expression and of a generally comprehensible principle of structure managed merely to coexist at any perceptible level in the music of these composers, and at least as often the same traces appeared to be completely polarized. Far more conspicuously than in Brahms’ music, the principles of individuality and generality failed to coalesce into an identity in the music of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, and consequently, each principle remained unmistakably less than complete, even within itself.

Without such a synthesis, nor much prospect of one, most twentieth-century art music headed toward a condition of solipsism which was no longer mitigated by that generally recognizable individuality of style which had once lain at the very heart of the concept of autonomous music. Whereas musical judgments in the nineteenth century could still be based on direct personal intuitions about a composer, judgments about the value of twentieth-century music had to rely for the most part on faith in the expertise of one or another critic. And thus, the dream of general verifiability in music faded away as the understanding of music became an academic specialty. During the course of the twentieth century, music gradually abandoned the aesthetic realm, which it had once virtually defined, for another realm which had once been the preserve of natural language, epistemology. Hence as a bearer of truth, the aesthetic, at least in music, no longer seemed capable of the autonomy needed to function as an alternative to the epistemological, much less to subsume it. Moreover, just as epistemological language had severed itself from general communicability, so, too, the aesthetic was now explicitly distinguished from the communicative.<sup>42</sup> Music and language were both yielding to a conception of truth which was discontinuous with communication.

To be sure, efforts to avoid solipsism in music continued, but the most important of these merely hastened the process by which music

42. See Jakobson, pp. 93–95, and esp. Nattiez’s commentary, p. 424; also Abrams, p. 150.

divested itself of its own distinctive features to take on the characteristics of natural language. Most pervasive, perhaps, was the tendency to make verbal criticism so “internal to the experience” of art music that “Often one [did] not know whether interest [was] elicited and sustained primarily by the object or by what [could] be said about the object.”<sup>43</sup> Many such critical explanations, moreover, themselves required mastery of a complex metalanguage, especially those that consisted in nothing more than the further elaboration of some closed (autonomous) system of musical construction.<sup>44</sup> Far more explicitly than in the nineteenth century, music in the twentieth century seemed to concede that the more autonomous its principle of construction, the more it stood in need of an explanation—even though the explanation it offered was likely to be that much more irrelevant to the musical experience than its nineteenth-century counterpart had been.

At the same time, the loss of generally audible connections within music itself reinforced another means, pointed out by Adorno, whereby music shed its own identity: a certain renunciation of sound, that is, of the very physicality which had rendered music an aesthetic medium as distinct from the epistemological medium of language (or, for that matter, from the medium of myth as defined by Lévi-Strauss). The pointillism of Webern, for example, represents not only the end of Schoenberg’s efforts to retain the propositional relationships of classicism but also the marked incursion of silence into precisely the musical style which is most often said to initiate modernism. Here, too, as George Steiner’s work in particular suggests, one can find analogies with natural language—in the extent, for instance, to which musical silence constitutes a sealing off of the means to communication—and especially, analogies with modern linguistics. Certainly there is a striking resemblance between Webern’s systematization of musical discontinuities and structuralist analyses of language. Even more than Stravinsky’s neoclassicism, which by making music its own subject suggests the transformation of music into a metalanguage, Webern’s music evokes a sense that music and language, once defined as truth-bearers through their capacity to embody connections, are finally converging on some common metalanguage which reveals the obsolescence of both. It is not impossible to conceive of that metalanguage as the semiology of music.

#### 4

The parallel yet convergent courses of music and natural language since the Enlightenment have not only failed to synthesize the truth-

43. Stanley Cavell, “Music Discomposed,” *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 207.

44. See Adorno, “Modern Music Is Growing Old,” *The Score*, no. 18 (December 1956), p. 25; and Meyer, *Music, the Arts, and Ideas* (Chicago, 1967), pp. 292–93.



bearing capacities characteristic of each at the time of their separation but have also left each medium largely bereft of its own capacities to convey truth: both objective knowledge and self-expression appear to be dwindling as sources of truth in the twentieth century. In the largest terms this situation seems to be the outgrowth of historical changes of focus in Western conceptions of truth, of shifts from a predialectical belief in God as the transcendent locus of all meaning, to a belief in reason, still capable of existing as an absolute value beyond the limits of the individual, as the higher faculty in a divided conception of man, then finally to a collapse of firm belief in the objective status of reason and a growing sense that irrationality may be the basis of truth. Within this progress Western man himself has moved, again in very general terms, from existence in an undifferentiated state of cosmic unity, to a state of duality between his consciousness and anything outside of it (together with the invocation of, or at least the search for, various kinds of mediations between the two), and finally to a state of isolation in which the discovery of means to reconnect self and other is no longer seriously expected. From the beginning of Western man's assumption of his own duality, principles of universality have been sought as a means for verifying the truth of the individual's experience of the world and thereby for establishing the right of man as a conscious being to survive. Irrationality, however, has not proven itself in history to be a workable principle of universality, at least not in any way that benefits the survival of man in the world. Despite the great hopes for the synthesizing power of the imagination in the early nineteenth century, when optimism about the nature and potency of subjective perception was still apparently possible, irrationality has not supplied connections between man and nature or between man and men. Rather, it has been confined to suggesting analogies between one state of being and another.

The historical inhumanity of irrationally based notions of truth has, of course, been recognized for some time, as have the epistemological inadequacies of such notions. An awareness of such inadequacies has, indeed, propelled the structuralists' search for rational structures as a basis for epistemology and, in some cases, as in that of Lévi-Strauss, as a basis for ontology as well. What a project such as the semiology of music essentially proposes to do is to find a rational structure "deeper" than language, which by virtue of its greater generality allows the acquisition of precise, objectively verifiable knowledge from nonlinguistic media, which in turn have seemed even less capable than language of yielding such knowledge. The semiology of music thus offers not merely through one but through both of its constituents to circumvent the discredited objectivity of knowledge obtained through natural language. Hence its apparently exceptional epistemological promise.

But hence, also, the unlikelihood of realizing that promise. For on the one hand, Western music has never seemed less likely to convey

generally accessible knowledge without some dependence on natural language; the apparent increase of objectivity in the character of so much contemporary music signifies not a return of generally verifiable truth or genuine autonomy to music but rather the continuing reduction of musical expression to a socially nonviable state of nonindividual solipsism. And on the other hand, no less a semiologist than Barthes himself has emphasized the continuing dependence of objective knowledge on language by suggesting the methodological priority of linguistics to semiology.<sup>45</sup> Lévi-Strauss has turned from music back to language as the paradigm of an epistemological medium, with only a passing reference to semiology.<sup>46</sup> Certainly, Nattiez has yet to dispense with either linguistic models or the explanatory capacities of natural language. His most ambitious quasi-wordless taxonomy (pp. 346–54) is not more explanatory in nature or effect than is the undifferentiated work, Debussy's *Syrinx*, which it purports to analyze; arguably, the taxonomy is less explanatory.

Without question, notions such as identity and difference, taxonomy, paradigm, model, and structure have a value for musical analysis, even for a dialectician like Adorno, whose historical explanations invoke social and artistic structures which are never adequately described. The foregoing discussion, which is based on Adorno's dialectical method, has found such notions particularly useful in summarizing essential aspects of musical classicism.

Yet, of all Western musical styles, classicism may well be the most resistant to understanding by means of structuralist methods. For it is not so much the identity of its related elements in themselves that distinguishes classicism, nor is it the discontinuities which are implicit in any hierarchical sort of organization; rather, it is the successful resolution of those discontinuities that constitutes the uniqueness of classicism, the very quality of classical relatedness itself. This is a quality to which no amount of taxonomic inventory gives access just as the inventory has no means of preserving within itself the essence of that individuality which above all characterizes nineteenth-century European art music. In fact, a theory of symbols which is capable of removing the concept of relationship from the term "signification" and enclosing the words "understand" and "communication" in quotation marks seems at most an appropriate model for the study of the marked discontinuities of avant-garde Western music. True, the redundancy which structuralist analysis requires to construct tables of paradigmatic equivalences tends to be, in Leonard Meyer's words, "unnecessary and irrelevant" in much avant-garde music.<sup>47</sup> Still, even the epistemological limits of such a model are

45. See Nattiez, p. 32.

46. Lévi-Strauss, *L'Homme nu*, p. 581.

47. Meyer, *Music, the Arts, and Ideas*, p. 296.

suggestive in a culture where the static structure has replaced the synthetic proposition as the paradigm of explanation.

But suggestive only, for removed from its historical context, such a model offers no more demonstration than does any irrational principle of a connection between its own and analogous discontinuities and, hence, of its right to be considered paradigmatic of its own culture. If it is, indeed, a true model, the very nature of the truth it embodies precludes precisely the verifiability of that truth; and a model which can do no more than parallel the discontinuities of contemporary language and music offers no epistemological advantage over the enervated media it proposes to replace.

It might, perhaps, be argued that by putting the discontinuities of language and music in a structural rather than an historical perspective, the structuralist has simply assigned the principle of discontinuity an ontological status which justifies the discontinuities of all his epistemological models. And, indeed, Lévi-Strauss does explicitly define the first principle of reality as a discontinuity, and at times even as a dialectical contradiction.<sup>48</sup> But Lévi-Strauss also explicitly denies that discontinuity characterizes art in all societies while at the same time he admits the historical limitations of such a condition in the West, thereby casting strong doubt on the structural status of discontinuity;<sup>49</sup> and he is unwilling to give dialectical relationships any priority in his epistemology. No matter how close an identity he posits between cultural and natural structures, then, Lévi-Strauss remains no more able than Nattiez to establish connections between his general ontology and his particular cultural “homologues.”

And yet, it appears that no model for obtaining truth developed in Western history since the Enlightenment—not music, not language, indeed, not even natural science—has come close to maintaining credibility without offering some mediating principle between levels of particularity and generality, including, ultimately, between self and other. Reason itself lost its universal status in the West because it could not protect both individual and society, two coeval constructs of history.<sup>50</sup> Thus, historical evidence suggests that by ignoring the historical nature of the discontinuity between individual and general in the West and trying simply to exclude the notion of the individual subject from its pursuit of truth, French structuralism perpetuates the inaccessibility of objective knowledge which it is trying to overcome.

Seen in this light, it is not really surprising that structuralism has proven no more successful than irrationally based philosophies in restor-

48. Lévi-Strauss, *L'Homme nu*, p. 621; see also *Structural Anthropology*, pp. 224, 229.

49. See Georges Charbonnier, *Conversations with Lévi-Strauss*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (London, 1969), pp. 66–67.

50. On the historical connection between the concepts of individual and society, see esp. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), pp. 19–25.

ing the lost universality of absolute reason. Indeed, it is difficult to understand why any undertaking which is indifferent to the historical fate of individual consciousness and free will should be considered a fundamentally rational undertaking; nor is it by any means clear why structures located far beneath the surface of human consciousness, for example, in the molecular structure of the brain, should be considered rational structures. No matter how serious the problems entailed in the historical reduction of reason to a component of the individual mind, rationality cannot be reinstated as a universal principle through mere fiat, through some arbitrary declaration that rationality need have no connection to the individual subject or that individual subjectivity and the historical mode of consciousness out of which it derives are nothing more than insubstantial accretions to be removed from rational structures by philosophy.

To be sure, all contemporary Western critics, dialectical or structuralist, must at some point consider discontinuities as well as relationships; nevertheless, differences in the order of their priorities will produce substantial differences in the power of their criticism. Thus, Adorno, no less than Lévi-Strauss, bases his work on what is, in effect, an ontology of discontinuity. Likewise, Adorno is also preoccupied with the relationship between music and language; and both men consider Western avant-garde music to be essentially a dead language.<sup>51</sup> But Adorno *begins* by defining discontinuity as part of an historical process—the dialectical process—through which he can define, connect, and explain historical phenomena; whereas for structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss and Nattiez, dialectics (like relationships in general) are somehow to be grafted onto predefined, autonomous things, as a kind of “bridge,” to use Lévi-Strauss’ own words, “which analytical reason throws out over an abyss.”<sup>52</sup> A method constructed in the latter manner will not ordinarily achieve the binding force of an explanation. Certainly it leaves a structuralist semiology of music unable to explain how two logically opposed approaches to critical inquiry, the systematic and the historical, converge on a single image: Western avant-garde music as an extinct language. And this inability points to a grave structural weakness in the methodological foundation of musical semiology since the social extinction of modern music is almost certainly the principal burden of contemporary music theory. For as the dialectical exegesis of musical semiology itself appears to demonstrate, the same historical conditions that have made autonomous music—music capable of sustaining itself in society—obsolete also account for the limitations of most music theory today. In failing to provide any means for understanding those lim-

51. For Adorno’s views, see “Modern Music Is Growing Old,” pp. 21–26. For those of Lévi-Strauss, see *Raw and Cooked*, pp. 25–26, and in *Conversations*, pp. 120–23; also, *L’Homme nu*, pp. 582–83 (on the dissociation of sound and form).

52. Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, p. 246.

itations, a structuralist semiology of music has in effect renounced the possibility of overcoming them.

It is true that Adorno's dialectics, too, lead eventually to an abyss, contemplation of the historical end of the individual and of humanity. It is a vision with analogues in the work of Foucault and Lévi-Strauss,<sup>53</sup> though it appears to be a source of anguish only for Adorno. But since Adorno's destination is reached only as the result of a long historical process through which it can be explained, he need not confront an abyss every time he wishes to establish a relationship. As a result, by preserving at least the possibility of a synthesizing principle, Adorno, despite his overwhelming pessimism, offers far more hope than the French structuralists that the objective values of an older rational order may one day be attainable in a form not incompatible with the integrity of subjective experience.

But no doubt some structuralists will continue to argue that the dialectic itself, along with history, relationships, and comprehension, is only a detail of one particular and obsolete "episteme," enclosed in an infinite taxonomy of unconnected (and, essentially, nonrational) categories. Clearly this viewpoint has the advantage of putting the end of both musical and linguistic mediations "into perspective," whereas the dialectician may have only the melancholy satisfaction of wielding a synthesizing tool which, once consciously grasped, renders him impotent to change the history it defines. And probably only some radically anti-historical history such as Foucault's can provide even the semblance of an epistemological justification for a musical semiology that forces us to abandon the "anachronistic illusion of community or intersubjective accessibility"<sup>54</sup> once embodied in Western language and music, only to seal us off in a new musical metalanguage that lacks even the imperfect connective powers of those two mediums. If, on the other hand, structuralism considers itself a more honest appraisal than dialectics of the modern Western capacity for truth because it recognizes the Western discontinuity of individual and general as absolute and unbridgeable, the same honesty should require an admission that structuralism bases its entire critical enterprise on an assumption of its own futility.

53. Foucault, esp. pp. 386–87; Lévi-Strauss, *L'Homme nu*, pp. 620–21.

54. Quoted from a private communication with Lawrence J. Fuchsberg, of the New School for Social Research, whose commentary on earlier drafts of this paper was of extraordinary value.