

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Legacy of Genius:
Improvisation, Romantic Imagination,
and the Western Musical Canon

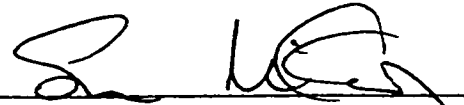
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by

Angeles Sancho-Velázquez

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The dissertation of Angeles Sancho-Velázquez is approved.



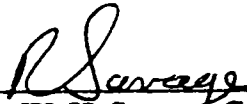
Susan McClary



Ali Jihad Racy



Timothy Rice



Roger W. H. Savage, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2001

This dissertation is dedicated with love and gratitude to
my mother, Agripina Velázquez
my godmother, Eloísa Miranda
and
my grandmother, Angeles Miranda, always remembered.

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VITA

- November 22, 1959 Born, Vitoria, Spain
- 1979 Degree in Piano
Conservatory Superior of Music
Murcia, Spain
- 1981 B. A., Philosophy
University of Murcia
Murcia, Spain
- 1985 Degree in Music Education
Conservatory Superior of Music
Murcia, Spain
- 1985-89 Tenured Solfège and Music Theory Teacher
Royal Conservatory Superior of Music
Professional Conservatory of Music
Madrid, Spain
- 1987-89 Graduate work in Musicology
University Autónoma
Madrid, Spain
- 1992-94 Teaching Assistant
Department of Ethnomusicology
University of California, Los Angeles
- 1996 M. A., Systematic Musicology
Department of Ethnomusicology
University of California, Los Angeles
- 1996-98 Teaching Assistant
Department of Ethnomusicology
University of California, Los Angeles
- 1999 Teaching Fellow
University Collegium of Teaching Fellows
University of California, Los Angeles

PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

- Sancho-Velázquez, Angeles. 1994. "Interpreting Metaphors: Cross-Cultural Aesthetics as Hermeneutic Project." *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 10, *Musical Aesthetics in Los Angeles*. Edited by Steven Loza, 37-50.
- _____. 1994. "Ethnomusicological Discourse and the Other: Beyond Ethnocentric Subjects and Decentered Selves." Paper presented at the National Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Milwaukee.
- _____. 1997. "Trance, Delusion, and Power in the Performances of Diamanda Galás." Paper presented at the Society for Ethnomusicology Southern California Chapter Meeting. California State University, Northridge.
- _____. 1998. "Disonancia y Misoginia: Salomé de Strauss y el Mito de la Mujer Fatal" ("Dissonance and Misogyny: Strauss's Salome and the Myth of the 'Femme Fatale'"). In *Música y Mujeres. Género y Poder*. Edited by Marisa Manchado, 103-129. Madrid: horas y Horas la editorial.
- _____. 1999. "Improvisation After the Baroque: A Case of Historical Amnesia." Paper presented at the Symposium *Improvisation Across Borders*. University of California San Diego, San Diego.
- _____. 2000. "Works, Music, and the Gap Between Them." Paper presented at the joint meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology Southern California Chapter, and the American Musicological Society Pacific Southwest Chapter. University of San Diego, San Diego.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Legacy of Genius
Improvisation, Romantic Imagination
and the Western Musical Canon

by

Angeles Sancho-Velázquez

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Professor Roger W. H. Savage, Chair

This dissertation addresses the question of the decline of improvisation in Western classical music, investigating both its disappearance from performance practice and the scholarly neglect of this phenomenon in music histories and theories. Music historians have traditionally situated the disappearance of improvisation at the end of the Baroque, but improvisation continued to be an important part of Western classical music until well into the nineteenth century. The failure to account for its importance in the Classical and Romantic periods raises questions concerning the methodological limitations of early music scholarship and the scholarly tradition that ensued.

The decline of the practice of improvisation coincides with the period around the

middle of the nineteenth century when this musical tradition underwent a process of formalization and canonization. This process went hand in hand with a post-Romantic recontextualization of historicism, the aesthetics of genius, and music scholarship. The disappearance of improvisation was caused by the confluence of these developments and the impact each had on the others. The Classical musical tradition then became synonymous with the preservation, study, and reproduction of a body of fixed works conceived as the metaphysically-charged legacy of genius.

An underlying goal of this dissertation is to question some central aspects of the received concept of “Western Classical music.” A reflection on the role played by improvisation in the history of this music makes it evident that this is a rich tradition of music-making and musical aesthetics that is not reducible to the narrow, formalist concept of work with which it is largely identified. This reflection opens up theoretical and practical possibilities that might help us to think about and experience Western Classical music from exciting new perspectives that are nevertheless firmly rooted in tradition.

INTRODUCTION

In 1787, a seventeen-year old Beethoven met Mozart in Vienna. Beethoven then had the opportunity to play for the celebrated composer who, after listening to the young man from Bonn, famously pronounced: "Some day he will give the world something to talk about." In the history of Western classical music, this encounter has an extraordinary symbolic significance: Mozart, the great master of the "mature" Classical style had recognized in a very young Beethoven the mark of genius. Beethoven did give the world something to talk about, and he was placed in music histories as the composer who took Mozart's achievements to even greater heights. As the contemporaneous thinkers Goethe and Herder had theorized, only a genius could truly understand another genius. Mozart, in recognizing Beethoven's talent at that early stage, was also providing one more token of his own genius.

What Beethoven chose to play for this exceptional occasion was not one of his own compositions, nor one of any other composer. Rather, what he did to impress the master was to improvise on the piano. If the choice of the aspiring composer might seem surprising today, it is probably just as surprising that Mozart had based his historical judgment on an improvisation session. This exchange between two of the undisputed pillars of the Western classical tradition contains a wealth of information about what this tradition was two centuries ago and also what we have forgotten about it.

Beethoven's choice and Mozart's agreement to pass judgment based on it were, in fact, completely ordinary occurrences at the time. Until then, many other musicians, including Mozart himself, had also been judged on the basis of their improvisatory skills. When, a few decades later, a young Liszt arrived in Vienna eager to demonstrate his talent

to the musically-sophisticated Viennese, and especially to Beethoven, he invited the by-then-famous master to hear his improvisations in an upcoming concert. To improvise and to judge musical talent based on improvisation were time-honored practices in Europe--and constituted a tradition that was unbroken until the nineteenth century.

With this dissertation I have come to terms with what for me, as a former piano student and Conservatory teacher, was a very strange picture. I could not reconcile these stories with what I had learned and what I had taught. Were we passing down the same tradition of Mozart, Beethoven, and Liszt? Were we talking about the same musical world they knew when we referred to "classical music"? How was it possible that the respect instilled in me towards the music of these composers included a rejection of the practice that made them famous? Had my teachers forgotten to tell me something? Or, perhaps they did not tell me for the same reason I later did not tell my own students--they did not know. Or, better, they and I were aware of the discrepancy, but did not know what it meant. As a student, I had some idea that Bach, Mozart, or Chopin had been great improvisors, but it never occurred to me to draw conclusions, to think of it as part of a cultural practice, as something that had anything to do with me and my love for their music. I thought of these composers as geniuses. What they did was part of their extraordinary existences, worlds apart from my daily piano practices, my music lessons, my nervous performances in a small but solemn auditorium. What was left for me, for us, was what they had composed. Their works were their legacy, and since I was a child I had made every effort to try to live up to it--practicing to be able to reproduce as faithfully as possible the notes they had written.

In this dissertation I argue that the legacy of these great musicians included the practice of improvisation, and that this fact was eclipsed in the second half of the

nineteenth century as a result of complex cultural and social circumstances. In the chapters that follow I explore these circumstances, situating them in a historical and philosophical context. I argue that this eclipse of improvisation involves two interrelated phenomena: on the one hand, the disappearance of improvisation from practice around the middle of the nineteenth century; on the other, the absence from music histories of the fact that this practice had until then been an important aspect of the Western tradition. My inquiry into the disappearance of improvisation is, therefore, also an inquiry into the historiography of music disciplines and of the vehicles responsible for transmitting this musical tradition. Finally, the present investigation into the fate of improvisation is also an investigation into the fate of Western classical music itself, and it raises the question of what else in this tradition was lost and forgotten, and why.

CHAPTER ONE

IMPROVISATION IN WESTERN MUSIC AND THE QUESTION OF THE BAROQUE ABYSS

Formal, precious, self-absorbed, pompous, harbouring rigid conventions and carefully preserved hierarchical distinctions; obsessed with its geniuses and their timeless masterpieces, shunning the accidental and the unexpected: the world of classical music provides an unlikely setting for improvisation.

--Derek Bailey

With these words Derek Bailey (1992) begins a chapter devoted to Baroque music in his book on improvisation in various music traditions. His point of departure in the chapter on Baroque music is the observation that despite this "unlikely setting," improvisation did flourish in the early history of the Western tradition. Bailey, a noted improvisational guitarist and the author of one of the few books on improvisation published until very recently, is clearly interested in presenting another face of Western music by highlighting the improvisatory nature of much of its "early" history.

But Bailey's premise about Western improvisation, namely, that it belongs exclusively to the early stages of the tradition, partakes of a commonplace in most published histories of Western music that is in need of revision. This commonplace in music histories is the misleading assumption that improvisation, if it constitutes a significant part of the Western tradition at all, is a phenomenon appertaining to this tradition's "early" stage. In this chapter I argue, first of all, that improvisation continued to be an important musical practice after the Baroque. Secondly, I argue that the incongruity between this phenomenon, on the one hand, and the generalized assumption that improvisation mostly disappeared after the Baroque, on the other, reflects the biases

inherent to conventional music histories. As I am about to discuss, these biases arise both from a linear, teleological conception of music history, and from the reductionist view of music history as made up exclusively of works. A main aim of this chapter, therefore, is to draw attention to this incongruity and to discuss the conceptual bedrock that gave rise to it. Here, as in this dissertation at large, I am interested in raising and answering questions not just about the fate of the practice of improvisation in the Western classical tradition, but also about the treatment--or lack of it--given to this aspect of the tradition in the literature.

The Baroque Abyss

No: I want only one single creation, and I shall be quite satisfied if [the singers] perform simply and exactly what [the composer] has written. The trouble is that they do not confine themselves to what he has written. I deny that either singers or conductors can "create" or work creatively. This, as I have always said, is a conception that leads to the abyss.

--Verdi

Just before this statement, Verdi had given an indication of the kind of abyss he was referring to: "As to conductor's inspiration [sic] and as to creative activity in every performance, that is a principle which inevitably leads to the baroque and untrue" (quoted in Dorian 1942: 7-8).

In conventional histories of Western music, there are few references to improvisation, and these few are almost invariably found in sections devoted to the Baroque and previous periods, that is to say, to the periods usually grouped under the rubric of "early music." The fact that the first seventeen centuries of a history considered to extend back at least twenty centuries are considered its "early stages" calls

for a critical scrutiny of this categorization and of the frame of reference behind it. This same frame of reference is also behind the relegation of improvised music to the infancy of a tradition.

The association between this “early” stage and the ideas of immaturity and imperfection is explicit in the literature. Joseph Machlis, for example, in his widely read *Enjoyment of Music* wrote that “the progress of musical art demanded the victory of careful planning over improvisation” (1955: 338).¹ Christopher Headington, though one of the few music historians who mentions improvisation at all in relation to Mozart and Beethoven, wrote in his *History of Western Music* that when he played organ concertos in public Händel, almost totally blind at the end of his life, “had to do so from memory or simply improvise” (Headington 1974: 122, my emphasis). That Händel was reduced by his blindness to “simply improvising” makes sense within the context of evolutionist views of history according to which Händel’s true musical achievements were his compositions, which could be understood as forerunners of Classical and Romantic works. It is nevertheless striking that until recently this mentality permeated music scholarship so deeply that this author could disregard the fact that Händel was a great improviser *before* he lost his sight, and that in his time improvisation was a fundamental and complex aspect of musical practice.

These and many other music historians assume that with the Classical period improvisation disappeared, and they write about music in the Classical and Romantic eras exclusively in terms of the music that was written down. An example of this is found in Frederick Dorian’s *History of Music in Performance* (1942). This book is significant because it is among the first published histories of performance practice in Western

¹ This statement does not appear in subsequent editions of Machlis’s book.

music. Due to his emphasis on performance, Dorian was able to depart in significant ways from the conventions of work-based and score-based historical and musicological studies. He includes in his book, for example, unusual quotations from the ethnomusicologist Gilbert Chase, and a short section devoted to the tango. He also writes briefly about jazz, noting that its most significant feature is improvisation, and that this American music might signal the return to improvised music, a return which, he speculates, could again have a place in the musical performance of the future. But despite his early interest in performance rather than written works, Dorian reproduces the generalized assumption that Western improvisation died with the advent of Classicism. Thus, he begins part II of his book, which is devoted to the Classical period, with a section entitled "Improvisation Disappears."

According to Dorian, Classicism is characterized by two related developments: the "binding script," and the disappearance of the figured bass. These developments meant a new adherence to the intentions of the composer as indicated in the score, and Dorian concludes that "improvisation, as the art of making music extemporaneously, ceases to be a factor in classical interpretation" (1942: 157). Though this claim is stated as a matter of fact, it is not without an implicit value judgment, since the thrust of the book as a whole is precisely a defense of the ideal of "authenticity of interpretation," which is inseparable from the post-Baroque ideal of the "*objective* realization of the author's wishes" (ibid.: 27, Dorian's emphasis).

Dorian is right in pointing out that the Classical period marked the disappearance of the figured bass and, with it, the development of a much more detailed score. The adherence to a "binding script," however, was not generalized until much later, with the triumph of the *Werktreue* ideal (the ideal of perfect compliance to the score) well into the

nineteenth century. Thus, in 1760, ten years after the date generally given in music histories as the beginning of the Classical period, C. P. E. Bach wrote:

Variation when passages are repeated is indispensable today. It is expected of every performer. The public demands that practically every idea be constantly altered, sometimes without investigating whether the structure of the piece or the skill of the performer permits such alteration. . . One no longer has the patience to play the written notes [even] for the first time (quoted in Solomon 1982: 72).

It is not surprising that accounts of the role of improvisation in the Western tradition are inscribed within a teleological narrative, a story tracing the linear progress of Western music from chaos and immaturity to order and perfection. The pervasiveness of teleological thinking in music histories has been recognized and criticized in recent years, perhaps most thoroughly in Leo Treitler's work (1989). But the case of improvisation presents particular problems within this kind of history, and many of these problems are still present in music histories in which a self-conscious attempt to depart from a teleological narrative is made.

The fact that improvisation continues to be relegated to the Baroque and earlier periods, together with the notion that improvisation was an inferior and immature form of musical practice that disappeared as the tradition became more fully developed, signal the persistence of the idea of linear progress in music history. To be sure, the end of the Baroque period and the emergence of the Classical style were marked by substantial changes in musical language and in attitudes toward musical practice and creativity. But I will argue that at the time of the decline of the Baroque, improvisation was a time-honored practice that embodied important aspects of the Western musical tradition and that continued to thrive in the Classical and Romantic periods.

Improvisation in Western Music: until the End of the Baroque: A Brief Historical Account

Improvised music seems to have been a central aspect of musical practice in the first centuries of the Christian liturgy, considered the earliest stages of the Western musical tradition. Liturgical chants such as the Ambrosian, which flourished in Milan in the fourth century and had a lasting influence in other parts of Europe, combined a body of accepted stylistic traits with a great flexibility and spontaneity in performance. This type of chant, as well as other coexisting stylistic and regional varieties, was threatened by the ninth-century Gregorian reform that aimed at the unification of musical practices throughout the Holy Roman Empire.

The efforts towards the standardization of liturgical chant were an aspect of the politics of unification of Charlemagne and his successors. In order to achieve that goal, a much more systematic musical notation was created, and clear guidelines were established concerning how the music of the liturgy should be sung throughout the vast territories of the Empire. The name of this reform was taken from Gregory I, who was pope until the early seventh century and about whom stories circulated in the time of Charlemagne concerning his having composed under divine inspiration all the melodies of the chant (see for instance Grout and Palisca 1988: 28-52). The development of a notational system that allowed an accurate repetition of a melody was thus reinforced with stories that fostered the belief that such compliance responded to a desire to preserve divine mandates.

Although this political maneuver was in many ways successful, it did not completely eliminate the older chant traditions, many of which were to a great extent

improvisatory. Thus, three centuries after the unifying measure was established there can still be found written complaints about the diversity of the liturgical chants in the empire. Even when melodies were notated, they were by and large considered basic outlines that should be ornamented depending on personal inspiration and the special circumstances of the liturgy (see Ferand 1961: 7).

Perhaps due to the fact that there exists an abundance of musical cultures that cultivate various forms of melodic improvisation, improvisation in general is often associated with the ability to embellish simple melodic lines. In the West, however, there is also a rich tradition of improvised polyphony. As it is evident in the history of Western music, as well as in various musical cultures around the world, the development of a notational system is not necessarily linked to the abandonment of improvisation. In the West, the ability to improvise polyphonically coexisted with the composition of pieces for several voices ever since the appearance around the ninth century of organum—one of the first vocal polyphonic manifestations documented.

Around the beginning of the twelfth century appears the "florid" or melismatic organum, written evidence of which was found in a monastery of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain. This organum consisted of the original plainchant melody sung or played in the lower voice, prolonging the notes in order to allow the upper voice to sing phrases against it. Grout and Palisca write that "Clearly it was a style that could have originated, and probably did, in improvisation" (1988: 103). And they note that the versions found in the manuscripts were probably modeled on improvised performances. Backing his position with extensive research, Ferand is able to assert the improvisatory origin of these musical forms and the development of a continued improvisatory practice beyond those origins. Among other sources he quotes an anonymous author writing in

the mid-thirteenth century about the art of "composing a discant and performing it ex improvise" (quoted in Ferand 1961: 8).

The first treatise establishing a clear distinction between notated and sung polyphony was Prosdocimus de Beldemandis's *Tractatus de contrapuncto* which appeared in 1412 (ibid.). Later in the century Johannes Tinctoris stated that counterpoint could be either written (*scripto*) or improvised (*mente*). "Mental counterpoint" ("contrapunctus ex mente", or "contrappunto alla mente") was also called "harmonia extemporanea," "singing over the book," or, in German theoretical writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "sortisario," and was distinguished from written counterpoint in many other treatises. One of the latest of such treatises is that of Athanasius Kircher published in 1650 (ibid.: 9).

Along with the practice of "singing over the book," a rich tradition of "playing over the book" developed. Precisely due to the fact that these practices consisted of the extemporization over a written cantus firmus, there is scarce documented evidence of them, but, as Ferand has argued, they were probably rooted in a long tradition. Ferand notes that "recent musicological studies have uncovered compositions of Italian origin dating from about 1420 that can only be explained as the written results of a long-practiced art of improvisation over liturgical cantus firmi on keyboard instruments" (ibid.: 9).

Renaissance musicians reached a high level of virtuosity in solo playing, which consisted preeminently of improvisations. Ricercare, fantasias, variations, and other forms of improvisation allowed these instrumentalists, in particular lutenists, to transform well-known melodies into virtuosic flights producing sometimes startling effects. Weiss and Taruskin (1984) have compared extravagant descriptions of these

improvisations to those written in the nineteenth century about the performances of Romantic virtuosos such as Liszt or Paganini. They select a text from 1555 in which a listener gives an account of an extraordinary performance by the celebrated lutenist Francesco da Milano. After a banquet, the musician, "as if tuning his strings, sat on the end of the table seeking out a fantasia." Once he had the attention of all the guests, "he continued with such ravishing skill that little by little, making the strings languish under his fingers in his sublime way, he transported all those who were listening into so pleasurable a melancholy that . . . they remained deprived of all senses save that of hearing." The writer concludes by saying that the guests, including himself, could only return to their senses when da Milano "changing his style of playing with a gentle force, returned the spirit and the sense to the place from which he had stole them, not without leaving as much astonishment in each of us as if we had been elevated by an ecstatic transport of some divine frenzy" (in Weiss and Taruskin 1984: 159-160).

Other documents of the sixteenth century show how widespread the practice of improvising was not only in solos, but also on the contexts of ensembles involving several singers or instrumentalists. Francisco Guerrero, the great Spanish Renaissance composer, felt it necessary to ask the musicians at the Cathedral of Seville not to improvise simultaneously when playing together: "They must carefully observe some order when they improvise passages both as to places and to times. When the one player adds passages to his part, the other must yield to him and play simply the written notes; for when both together embellish at the same time, they produce absurdities that stop one's ears" (ibid.: 160).

The early Baroque period, generally understood as beginning around 1600, introduced a shift from polyphony to accompanied monody. The new emphasis in solo

voice and in clearly differentiated instrumental melodic lines opened new venues for improvisational practices that enriched and complemented the new style. There was then an extraordinary development of improvised melodic embellishments in the Baroque period. The development of opera, which since its origin at this time was associated with the aesthetic goal of "moving the affects," was a major venue for the use (and abuse) of virtuosic embellishments. At the same time, the long-standing tradition of improvised instrumental counterpoint was carried on and developed into the new form of thorough-bass accompaniment. Along with melodic embellishments and thorough-bass realizations, Baroque instrumentalists continued the traditions of improvising over a given bass and of solo improvisation. Frescobaldi's fantasias at the organ and at the harpsichord seem to have constituted impressive examples of the latter. As an improviser, Frescobaldi attracted large crowds in Rome, often producing effects similar to those produced by Francesco da Milano, but now in the context of the spectacular emotivism characteristic of the Baroque and of the Roman Catholic Church of the Counter-Reformation.

In the late Baroque the art of organ improvisation reached a peak with Johann Sebastian Bach. We saw how church music had had from its origins a strong connection with improvisational practices. They allowed musicians to adapt to the needs of the liturgy and served as a medium for the spontaneous expression of religious fervor and spiritual experiences. The tradition of organ improvisation had developed around two main forms, "strict" and "free." Strict improvisation grew out of the variations improvised after a plain chant, and it was structured according to a specific form such as fugue or canon. Free improvisation was more open, not necessarily based on a theme or a predetermined musical form (Bailey 1980: 34). This kind of free improvisation for a solo instrument had been a celebrated musical activity in religious and secular settings for

generations. An example of this is the toccata, an improvisational form that flourished in the sixteenth century. Claudio Merulo, the most accomplished sixteenth-century performer of toccatas, raised this form to the status of a brilliant display of virtuosity. According to Ulrich and Pisk, this "combination of brilliant passage work and improvisation polyphonic writing led to other forms of organ music in the Baroque period" (1963: 203).

The toccata preserved its improvisational character and continued to be an important musical form throughout the Baroque. The same can be said of the prelude, another improvisational form from which the toccata possibly derived. These highly individual virtuoso forms of instrumental improvisation made of Frescobaldi a spectacular musical sensation in Rome and greatly contributed to the spiritual atmosphere in German churches with the art of Buxtehude or J.S. Bach.

Improvisation in the Classical and Romantic Periods: Brief Historical Account

It is common in music histories to find references to the Classical period as "a new era of fully written-out music" (Ulrich and Pisk 1963: 323), or, as Frederick Dorian puts it, in this period the score itself becomes "a masterpiece of elaboration" (Dorian 1942: 157). This change in musical practice has been interpreted as the abandonment of the improvisatory element. Baroque improvisation, however, comprised a rich variety of practices rooted in a long tradition and not limited to the realization of bass lines. The practice of improvisation in the Western tradition is as old as the tradition itself, and thus it predates the so called "thorough-bass period" (1600-1750) for several centuries. The practice of improvisation also continued to thrive long after this Baroque stylistic feature

had been abandoned.

The end of the figured bass and the appearance of scores with thorough indications of how the piece was to be performed was among the most, if not the most, significant of such changes. The new adherence of the performer to the written score has often been considered, as we saw, as signaling the decline of improvisation in the West. The ideal of perfectly finished musical works from the hands of composers and the concomitant dismissal of practices that introduced indeterminacy into performance were deemed a clear sign of the maturity of Western music. With the end of the thorough-bass, improvisation seemed to have moved to the background and become a much less relevant musical phenomenon.

An understanding of the breadth of the improvisational tradition in the West up to the Baroque suggests, however, another view of the break between this period and Classicism. The improvisational practices that flourished around the Baroque accompanied monody in the form of melodic embellishments and the realization of the basso-continuo were just a part of the time-honored practice of improvising music in Europe. This rich tradition encompassed more forms of improvisation than the specifically Baroque practices just mentioned, and many of those forms did not die with the decline of the Baroque.

The assumption that improvisation in the West came to an end with the disappearance of the Baroque thorough-bass suits the idea that the Classical period marked the beginning of the mature stage of the Western tradition, while previous centuries of music making constituted its "early" history, a sort of long prelude to the real thing. The emergence of the "binding script" in the Classical period was an unquestionable sign that significant changes in musical performance were under way, but

it did not affect some of the most important manifestations of a complex improvisatory tradition. There is no contradiction, therefore, in the fact that before the Classical period J. S. Bach carefully notated his pieces and often extemporized brilliantly. And it was not anachronistic that Mozart, Beethoven, or Liszt, long after the emergence of a sophisticated notational system, continued to excel in improvising music, an activity to which all of them owed much of their early fame as exceptional musicians. The profound changes that occurred with the consolidation of the Classical period, therefore, did not include the disappearance or marginalization of improvisation per se. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that with the end of the figured bass there was a much sharper distinction between the execution of a written piece and the art of improvising.

The Rococo, or early Classical period, marked the reaction against the Baroque introducing many of the characteristics that would later be developed in the Classical period. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's written complaints about the improvisatory excesses of performers were among the first written manifestations of this new trend. In the foreword to his *Sechs Sonaten für Clavier mit veränderten Reprisen* (1750) he wrote: "Often these untimely variations, contrary to the setting, contrary to the Affect, and contrary to the relationship between the ideas, are a disagreeable matter for many composers" (quoted in Ferand 1961: 19). He then announces that in this sonata collection, designed for beginners and amateurs, he had written the variations as they should be played so that excesses and mistakes would be avoided, and he adds, "I am happy to be the first, so far as I know, to work in this manner for the use and the pleasure of his patrons and friends . . ." (ibid.).

In his *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, however, C. P. E. Bach also gave instructions on how to improvise, noting that while it is possible that a

person who has studied composition will not have talent for improvisation, “a good future in composition can be assuredly predicted for anyone who can improvise, provided that he writes profusely and does not start too late” (1949 [1753-1759]: 430). In addition to the chapters devoted to the correct realization of the thorough-bass and to the rules of good accompaniments (which, he affirms, should always include the “extemporaneous enhancement” of the soloist part), he devotes a separate chapter to improvisation in itself. In this chapter he discusses extensively the “free fantasia” and preluding.

C. P. E. Bach's attitude, therefore, testifies to a shift towards a greater control of the composer over the performances of their pieces, a shift which will culminate with the disappearance of the thorough-bass and the emergence of a new ideal of musical work in the Classical period. But, at the same time, his continuing interest in free improvisational forms indicates that the new tendency toward the execution of works in which the musician follows as closely as possible the composer's instructions coexisted with the continuation of a long tradition of improvising music.

The continued practice of preluding during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also bears witness to the coexistence of the new ideal of faithfulness to the score with the practice of improvisation. Valerie Woodring Goertzen (1996) has presented impressive documentation on this topic. As she demonstrates, the performance of improvised introductions before a particular piece was a regular practice among pianists well into the nineteenth century. Preluding, Goertzen notes, is one of the most neglected improvisational practices, partly due to the fact that there were no indications identifying them either in a score (as in the case of cadenzas) or in printed concert programs (as in the case of free fantasies). The prelude, instead, was expected to be heard before particular

pieces, as a way of introducing them as well as of drawing the listeners' attention. But, as she also shows, there are numerous documents that indicate for the importance of prelude in European musical life until the nineteenth century. Although less well documented, this practice continued at least until the second half of the nineteenth century, as did the related practice of improvising interludes between pieces to be played in a concert.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, improvisation continued to be taught as part of the education of instrumentalists. After the disappearance of the thorough-bass, improvisation was no longer a basic skill for the keyboardist, but it became so for the new figure of the virtuoso, a specially talented and highly skilled performer. These performers included Beethoven, who established his reputation in Vienna by means of improvisatory piano "duels." Carl Czerny, a pupil of Beethoven and one of the first great piano pedagogues, wrote a *Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte* that illustrates the role improvisation continued to play in his time. The treatise was published in 1836 and, if we are to believe Chopin who called Czerny "the oracle of Vienna" (Czerny 1983 [1836]: viii), his standards of musicianship were far from being isolated or uncommon. This treatise is especially interesting because it constitutes one of the last attempts to offer a systematic approach to the topic.

Robert Wangermee in a 1950 article maintains that the publication of this treatise was a sign of the decline of the improvisatory tradition in Europe. For him, the very fact that Czerny's aim was to systematically theorize on how to improvise meant precisely that improvisation was no longer a vital aspect of music making. But the fact that Czerny studied with Beethoven and was a teacher of Liszt, both brilliant improvisors, evidences that he developed his career as pianist and pedagogue in a moment when improvisation

was still a significant musical practice.

What was clearly in decline when the treatise was published was not the practice of improvisation itself, but its formal teaching. This development can be explained by the increasingly relevant aesthetics of genius and the concomitant belief, following from Kant's aesthetics, that superior musical talent could not be learned, but was a natural endowment. Alice Mitchell in her prologue to the English translation of Czerny's book insightfully notes in this respect that:

Except for Czerny's treatise, it is entirely possible that the conspicuous absence of essays on improvisation during the very period when it reigned, along with *Fingerfertigkeit*, as the sine qua non for the virtuoso performer was born of the notion that improvisation in fantasy style was tied in with a special gift that could perhaps not be taught (in Czerny 1983: x).

In the nineteenth century, improvisation on given themes as a form of entertainment continued to be a favorite salon game, as it had been in Mozart's times. This is evident in the scene recounted by Chopin about a musical soirée in the salon of Prince Clary. On this occasion three young aristocrats tried to come up with a theme for Chopin to improvise; finally someone proposed a theme from Rossini, everybody agreed, and the composer improvised based on it, having "the good fortune of pleasing" (quoted in Wangermee 1950: 250, my translation). This practice was also transferred to the new venue of public, multitudinous concerts, as in the case of Liszt. At a concert given in Lisbon in 1845, Robert Stevenson notes that Liszt "requested six themes from the audience, either sung to him or written out. As reported next day in *O Patriota*, the titillated audience at once broke into wild applause when Liszt with his usual acumen chose from the six the national anthem" (Stevenson 1979: 507). The newspaper also reported that after listening to the anthem Liszt "played an admirable fantasia based on it,

which feat if possible increased the enthusiasm of his multitude of admirers" (quoted in Stevenson 1979: 507).

An argument could be made that improvisation survived in the nineteenth century only as a form of exhibitionism and that it was closer to popular entertainment than to serious music. However, "popular" and "high art" musics were not radically differentiated until the second half of the nineteenth century. It was only around the middle of the century, as William Weber (1975) reports that the gap between "popular" and "serious" music became increasingly noticeable in European concert life. "Popular music" refers in this mid-nineteenth century context to the operatic style created by Giacomo Rossini and the virtuoso style of performers such as Franz Liszt and Eduard Thalberg, while "high art" music was reserved for the German classical style represented by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert (Weber 1975: 19). Until the middle of the nineteenth century, improvisation has been as important to these "serious" composers as it was to virtuosos such as Liszt and Paganini. The famous 1787 encounter between Mozart and Beethoven, the most revered representatives of the "high art" classical style, is a particularly telling example. This encounter, which I described above, is referred to in some standard music histories as the momentous occasion on which "Beethoven had *played* for Mozart" (for instance in Grout and Palisca 1988: 625, my emphasis). From this expression, the twentieth-century reader is likely to assume that Beethoven had performed some of his work, and that Mozart's historic judgment had been made based on those works. The fact that what Mozart judged so favorably was an improvisation (see, for instance, Headington 1974: 158) sheds a different light on the nature of this tradition.

Mozart's way of judging Beethoven's promise as an artist was rooted in a musical tradition in which improvisation had been a celebrated form of entertainment, but that had

also constituted a most distinguished medium through which to judge not just technical abilities, but what in the eighteenth century was called "taste," the single most important aesthetic category of the time. The idea of improvisation as the chief medium to judge musical talent was still current well into the nineteenth century. An anecdote referred to by Mendelssohn concerning a concert he gave in Leipzig in 1836 illustrates this.

In this concert, Mendelssohn performed Mozart's D minor concerto, playing in the first movement a cadenza that caused, in his own words, "tremendous sensation among the Leipzigers" (Mendelssohn 1945: 255). The following day he wrote a letter to his sister Fanny telling her about the concert and mentioning an encounter with an old musician from the orchestra who told him that he had heard the same concerto played by Mozart himself in the same hall. The old musician also told him, Mendelssohn writes, that "since that day he had heard no one introduce such good cadenzas as I did yesterday" (ibid.: 257). This anecdote is interesting because it reflects the Leipzig audience's enthusiasm for the improvised cadenza at as late a date as 1836. But it is especially remarkable because the old musician, who had heard Mozart himself playing the same concerto, chose to praise Mendelssohn for his realization of the cadenzas. A few decades later, the musician's comment would have been an oddity: someone who had heard a genius such as Mozart perform would be primarily concerned with how faithfully the young virtuoso could recreate the master's work and his performance style. Today, it is striking that the conversation between Mendelssohn and a professional musician who knew Mozart evolved around improvisational skills--or, at least, that this is what Mendelssohn deemed most worthy of mention from that conversation.

That Mozart had impressed Clementi with his improvisational skill, and that Beethoven had impressed Mozart in the same manner, was probably not lost on Liszt,

who also sought to prove his musicianship in front of Beethoven by improvising for him. On the occasion of his first concert in Vienna in 1823 the young Liszt, in his characteristic flamboyant style, asked a mutual acquaintance to contact Beethoven on his behalf. The intermediary wrote this note to the celebrated composer:

the young Liszt has asked me with insistence to beg you that you give him a theme upon which he would like to improvise at Sunday's concert. *Orat humilissime dominationem vestram si placeat scribere unum thema* [with humility begs the master if he would like to write a theme]. But he wants that the theme be sealed, so he can see it only then (at the concert) (quoted in Wangermee 1950: 250-251, my translation).

Beethoven, however, refused the petition and did not even attend the concert, in which Liszt exhibited his skill improvising upon themes submitted by others.

As I will argue later, improvisation in the first half of the nineteenth century continued to carry forward and enrich a long tradition while embodying some fundamental tenets of Romantic aesthetics. In view of this, the almost complete disappearance of all forms of improvisation around the middle of the nineteenth century, as well as the scholarly disregard for the continued relevance of this practice up to that moment, presents a perplexing situation. A brief critical review of some accounts of Western music will give us further insight into the nature of the attitudes towards improvisation that originated in the second half of the nineteenth century and that are, to a great extent, still prevalent.

Previous Explanations of the Disappearance of Improvisation

Despite the customary lack of interest in improvisation in traditional musicological and historical studies, scattered comments in the literature shed some light on how this

musical practice and its decline have been regarded. From these mostly incidental remarks it is possible to infer several implicit hypotheses concerning the decline or absence of improvisation. The most obvious and pervasive of these hypotheses is that improvised music flourishes when a notational system is lacking or poorly developed. This suggests that improvisation results from the needs of oral traditions. Accordingly, the practice would disappear with the development of a sophisticated notational system. Gilbert Dalmaso (1977), for example, argues that in Europe improvisation flourished until the Renaissance, after which the development of a notational system made improvisational practices unnecessary until they gradually disappeared. For the same reason, he goes on to say, some music traditions based on improvisation, such as those of Japan and China, abandoned the practice with the development of notation (Dalmaso 1977: 39).

There is evidence of the coincidence of the emergence of a notational system and the abandonment of improvisation in some musical traditions. This coincidence, however, does not by itself prove that the development of notation is the cause of the abandonment of improvisation. Nor can it be inferred from this parallelism that the impulse to improvise is always due to the absence of notation. In fact, this hypothesis renders inexplicable the high status improvisation had in Europe in the time of Mozart and Beethoven, when a notational system was already fully developed. There are also musical traditions, such as Indian classical music, in which a prominently improvisatory musical practice is coupled with a highly sophisticated theoretical body of literature, and thus they refute the idea that improvisation declines or disappears when the tradition evolves to the point of being able to devise a systematic notation.

If the development of a notational system does not necessarily cause the abandonment of improvisation, the absence of such a system does not necessarily imply

the practice of improvisation either. Notation is only one way, among others, of conserving a musical piece. As Jean Düring states, a composition might be transmitted by memory without the intervention of improvisation (1987: 41). In fact, oral traditions do not always foster the practice of improvisation. This is the case, for example, with some musical activities that have a ritualistic character and for which accuracy in the performance is fundamental. Timothy Rice (1994) in his work on Bulgarian music refers to the discouragement of improvisation within a fundamentally oral tradition. In particular, young people and girls were required to play and sing just as they have learned from the older generation, and any individual introduction of novelty was criticized for its "lack of self-control, modesty, and shame" (Rice 1994: 97). Similarly, Thomas Turino (1993) reports that among the Aymara of Peru, individual variations of an orally transmitted tradition are discouraged because they go against an emphasis on collective music-making, a predominant aesthetic and social value within this tradition. Japanese musics also emphasize the oral transmission of traditional forms, while giving little status to improvisation (see Malm 1986).

A second conventional hypothetical condition for a high development of improvisation concerns the predominance of the melodic dimension over the harmonic or polyphonic. According to this interpretation, the musician who is free of harmonic landmarks has unlimited possibilities for embellishing and varying melodic lines. There is in fact, as we saw, an extensive improvisational tradition in Western music consisting of this type of melodic embellishment and variations realized upon a fixed harmonic support. In the Baroque, for instance, there was an extraordinary development of such melodic improvisations. Jacques Chailley and Henry Challan (1964) explain this development by stating that Baroque keyboardists used embellishment as a device to

attain the new "cantabile" style. Alfredo Casella (1936) had held the same opinion when he wrote that Baroque clavecinists had to overcome the expressive limitations of their instruments by embellishing and filling up the melodic lines. According to these views, Baroque improvisation would be the result of a new emphasis on melody after a period predominantly polyphonic, and the need to adapt keyboard instruments to the new melodic style. This latter argument, of course, does not explain why singers improvised embellishments as well, since the human voice, unlike a clavecin, can perform a slow, simple line without the need for connecting tones by means of ornaments in order to preserve its melodic character.

Melodic variations and embellishments in any case, although primordial for many improvisational traditions, are only one form of improvisation. I mentioned earlier that there is abundant evidence that in the Western tradition improvisation played a fundamental role in the development of polyphony and harmony. It could be argued that this was possible only because the harmony and polyphony of these "early" stages were not sophisticated enough. But improvisation is compatible with sophisticated and complex harmonies. Jazz, for instance, has a rich tradition of harmonic improvisation. And organ improvisation, which integrates melodic, harmonic and contrapuntal extemporization has preserved great vitality until the present day (see, for instance, Williams 1980). There are also improvisatory musics around the world that cannot be explained by a lack of either harmony or polyphony. The African Pygmies of the Equatorial forest, for instance, have developed a music based on collective contrapuntal improvisations. Other examples of polyphonic improvisation are the musics of the Mitsogho in Central Gabon and of the Kabiye in North Togo.

These examples prove that improvisation is not limited to musical idioms or

periods that emphasize melody. They also show that the development of a tradition toward a more harmonic language does not justify the abandonment of improvisation. The question of why improvisation has a subordinate position in later Western music cannot be answered, therefore, by stating that its polyphonic and harmonic character is not appropriate for improvisation.

A third implied hypothesis, with obvious links to the others, connects the abandonment of improvisational practices to the increasing complexity of the musical language in general. For Dalmaso (1977) the progressive enrichment of Western music explains the decline of improvisation. Machlis's view (quoted above) that the disappearance of improvisation was a logical consequence of musical progress is a perfect example of this kind of thinking.

A basic idea underlying this view is that musical languages that prioritize, or even allow, improvisation are less complex than the mature Western musical language. At a practical level, familiarity with any of the improvisational styles or traditions we have been discussing may offer enough evidence to ground a rebuttal of this claim. Complexity and extraordinary skill are common in many improvisatory idioms. At the same time, improvisation flourished in almost every stylistic period named in traditional histories of Western music. This means that if one were to maintain the evolutionist view that Classicism represented a higher level of accomplishment with respect to the Baroque, then the stylistic development of improvisation throughout these periods should lead to the conclusion that improvisation itself had evolved along the same path.

Judith Becker (1986), in an article discussing Western biases in judging music, argues that it is a Western prejudice to associate simple music with simple instruments or simple technologies and to posit notated music as more complex. Of course, attempts to

evaluate the complexity of one musical tradition in comparison with another are problematic. But even if we were to accept some spectrum of complexity it would not help to explain the presence or absence of improvisation, for there are musical traditions or styles that are not complex and that do not use improvisation (e.g., some popular musics) and others that are highly complex and improvised (e.g., classical Indian music).

In recent years, improvisation has raised some interest among music scholars and its importance and ubiquity in the Western tradition has begun to be more fully explored (Alperson 1984, Hamilton 1990, Moore 1992, Goertzen 1996). Robin Moore's 1992 article is a rare attempt to offer a more rigorous explanation of its decline. His main thesis is that this decline was a result of new social circumstances in nineteenth-century Europe. One of these circumstances, discussed at length, is the end of musical patronage in Europe. For Moore, the training and subsequent professional lives of musicians under aristocratic patronage was characterized by an immersion from childhood in the musical culture of the time. He states that in the eighteenth century Western art music existed in a "unique, isolated, and 'living' environment in much the same way that blues or flamenco music continues to exist today" (1992: 68). This musical culture, Moore adds, was a ubiquitous element of court life, "transmitted orally, most likely to a greater extent than notationally, from one generation of servant-performers to the next, and functionally integrated to an extent that is now difficult to appreciate" (ibid.). With the democratization of Western music and its transfer from the court to the concert hall, this "living environment" came to an end. Moore suggests, then, that members of the petit-bourgeoisie and working class who were interested in becoming musicians did not grow up in such a musical environment. They were more exposed, on a daily basis, to types of popular music that resembled the court-derived tradition but were stylistically different.

He goes on to say that late nineteenth-century musicians of Western art music often came from poor families and only became familiar with the art music tradition later in life. The conclusion advanced by Moore at this point is that "the sense of community involvement and understanding that one associates with improvisatory music traditions, and that had existed between performer and audience in the courts of Europe, could no longer be associated with art music towards the end of the century" (ibid.: 71).

Another social change Moore discusses concerns the new conservatory-based musical pedagogy that was directed at aspiring middle-class musicians. According to him, the new pedagogical methods more than ever stressed the importance of notation, through which students could become acquainted with aristocratic music that was otherwise far removed from their everyday lives. These young musicians, eager to perform the body of canonical works but unfamiliar with their style, came to depend on the teachings of established musicians "rather than untutored instinct" thus manifesting "a desire to emulate the musical practices of social elites at the expense of individual expression" (ibid.: 73).

Moore's study thus departs from hypotheses that explain the decline or absence of improvisation as the effect of supposedly essential traits of Western music in its "mature" stages (i.e., the existence of a sophisticated notational system, the preeminence of harmony over melody, and the complexity of the language). These hypotheses, I argued, are misleading because they essentialize historically dependent characteristics and infer cause-effect relations from a chronological simultaneity of factors, with no further qualification. This type of explanation, and this is not the least of its shortcomings, often implies the superiority of Western art music from the eighteenth century onward. Stripped down, the reasoning looks something like this: "if complex and sophisticated

music, then no improvisation; therefore, if improvisation, then unsophisticated and simple music."

Moore overcomes the essentialism and cultural biases evident in these assumptions, and his social contextualization of the phenomenon of the decline of improvisation in the West is an important contribution to the understanding of this phenomenon. In my view, however, his interpretation should be complemented with an investigation of the philosophical, aesthetic, and cultural contexts of the decline of this practice. In what follows, I will discuss in particular his main argument concerning a direct link between the end of the patronage system and the end of improvisation.

Moore maintains that improvisation could only thrive in a closed environment in which a given musical style is learned and practiced as an integral part of everyday life. He cites musics such as jazz, blues, or flamenco as improvised styles that originate in such closed cultural environments. The point that traditional forms of improvisation had been practiced and appreciated by groups that shared a familiarity with a particular musical idiom is well taken. But in the case of Western music I would argue that this condition was not restricted to the elitist aristocratic circles Moore refers to. That professional musicians who composed and performed music were supported by the ruling class did not preclude the popularity of this music and of the musicians themselves. In fact, it was only well into the nineteenth century, when aristocratic patronage was no longer the main source of support for musicians, that a sharp distinction between "popular" and "serious" music was drawn. Until then, even when it was possible to distinguish more cultivated musical activities from more popular ones, the interaction between them was substantial and constant.

An example of this interaction is the closeness between court opera and public

opera in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Raynor states, in this period "opera became a universal musical pleasure" and the same works were played in public theaters and in the courts (Raynor 1972: 179). Another, perhaps more telling, example of the interaction between "popular" and aristocratic musics that had great relevance for improvisation is found in European church music. The broad appeal of the music that accompanied the ceremonies of Catholic, and later also Protestant churches in Europe is unquestionable. Church music had to attract the interest of the people, had to be meaningful in a profound sense to large groups of people with a shared faith.

At the same time, this broad appeal did not mean that vocal and instrumental church music had lower standards of musicianship than court music. Tomas Luis de Victoria, Monteverdi, Buxtehude, J. S. Bach, Mozart or César Frank, to name only a few composers from various periods and countries, make the point eloquently. And, as previously noted, improvisation was a vital aspect of religious musical expression from the beginnings of Christianity, a tradition carried on up to the present by church organists. Wilhelm Friedemann Bach's remarks about his father's musical achievements are telling: He says J. S. Bach's organ compositions were "full of the expression of devotion, solemnity, and dignity," and adds, "but his unpremeditated organ-playing, in which nothing was lost in the process of writing down but everything came directly to life out of his imagination, is said to have been still more devout, solemn, dignified, and sublime" (quoted in Ferand 1961: 20).

Conclusion

I have argued that the generalized idea that improvisation in Western music became obsolete at the end of the Baroque period is rooted in a partial account of the

improvisational activity in this period. The fact that the presence of improvisation was only acknowledged as part of musical practice before the Classical period was made possible by focusing on the types of improvisation related to the realization of the Baroque thorough-bass and the embellishment of melodic lines. As opposed to much Baroque music, written works after the Classical period could be analyzed and grasped without having to introduce the variables of improvised parts. In short, the types of improvisation that continued to thrive after the Baroque could be ignored without affecting a body of written works that was becoming canonized.

The disappearance of improvisation coincided neither with the end of the Baroque period, nor with the many changes music and culture underwent at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Rather, it continued to be an important aspect of musical practice well into the Romantic period when much of today's standard repertoire had already been composed. In fact, improvisation not only continued to be practiced in the nineteenth century, but, as I argue in the next chapter, it embodied central aesthetic ideals of Romanticism.

Improvisation in Europe, not to mention around the world, has taken so many diverse forms and has thrived in so many different contexts that any explanation of its absence or decline based on particular characteristics of the musical language or on a specific set of social circumstances is, at best, incomplete. How, then, can we begin to understand the swift disappearance of a time-honored practice carried forward by many of the most influential composers of the Western tradition but ignored by those in charge of preserving that tradition? In the following chapters I propose to answer this question by examining a constellation of aesthetic ideals, epistemological concerns, and social factors unique to the period in which this decline took place.

CHAPTER TWO

IMPROVISATION AND THE ROMANTIC IMAGINATION

Now one and anon the other gave free rein to his glowing fancy; sometimes they would seat themselves at two pianofortes and improvise alternately on themes which they gave each other, and thus created many a four-hand Capriccio which if it could have been put upon paper at the moment would surely have bidden defiance to time.

--Ignaz Ritter von Seyfried about Beethoven and Wölffl

The practice of and the ideas about improvisation in the Western tradition underwent a dramatic change in the course of the nineteenth century. After having held a privileged status both as performance practice and as aesthetic ideal, improvisation became increasingly marginalized until it almost completely disappeared from the practical and theoretical realms in the second half of the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century at large is often characterized in terms of stylistic and aesthetic continuity, despite the use of "early," "neo-", or "late" qualifiers to distinguish several stages within an overarching Romantic era. But the dramatic change in the attitudes towards improvisation points to a more radical break in the transmission of the tradition during this century.

This chapter discusses improvisation in the first half of the nineteenth century as an integral part of the early Romantic movement, highlighting how this type of musical creativity embodied both the ideals and the tensions of the era. Seyfried's comment quoted above sums up the paradoxical significance of Romantic improvisation: on the one hand, its open and fleeting nature was the perfect vehicle for the Romantic ideal of "giv[ing] free rein to [one's] glowing fancy" (quoted in Thayer and Forbes 1967: 206-7). On the other, that very nature made it impossible for these creations to "[bid] defiance to time," another main locus of a Romanticism characterized by the dominance of historical

thinking.

As we saw in chapter one, improvisation not only survived the disappearance of "early" practices such as the realization of thorough-bass and the liberal embellishment of any given written indication; but it also had an extraordinary development in the first half of the nineteenth century, just before its sudden decline. In this chapter I focus on the connection between improvisation and the prevalent aesthetic ideas and musical practices of the Romantic period, thus making the claim that improvisation after the Baroque was not a mere remnant of a style in decline, but an integral part of the Western tradition until around the middle of the nineteenth century.

Improvisation proved to be a vehicle uniquely appropriate for the expression of a body of new aesthetic ideas that began to emerge around the 1790s. Beethoven's music embodied the inception of these ideas in music, and this was manifested not only in his written compositions, but also in his celebrated improvisations. Johann Schenck, a respected musician who became Beethoven's counterpoint teacher, gave the following account of one of them:

After the usual polite phrases were exchanged, [Beethoven] expressed a desire to play a fantasy on the piano and asked me to listen to it. After a few chords and somewhat casual figures which he produced nonchalantly, this creative genius gradually unveiled the profound and sensitive image of his soul. The beauty of the manifold motifs, interwoven so clearly with utter loveliness, compelled my attention and I let myself be carried away by this delightful impression. Surrendering himself completely to his imagination, he gradually departed from the magic of his sounds and, to express violent passion, he threw himself into discordant scales with the flowing fire of youth (quoted in DeNora 1995: 122).

The description of Beethoven's playing in terms of "surrendering himself completely to his imagination," or "[throwing] himself into discordant scales," as well of the listener's experience in terms of "[letting] myself be carried away . . ." is

characteristic of Romantic rhetoric around art in general that was pervasive during the first part of the nineteenth century. In music, such rhetoric addressed improvisation as much as written works. And, as I will argue, it constituted the most appropriate medium to express many of the central tenets of the Romantic movement, such as the emphasis on freedom of imagination and on the unrestrained expression of feelings.

The affinity between musical improvisation and the aesthetic ideas of the Romantic period constitutes the main focus of the first part of the chapter. I will discuss this affinity and concentrate on what I see as four main loci in the aesthetics of this period: the aesthetics of spontaneity, of imperfection, of indeterminacy, and of inwardness. In the second part of the chapter I address the role of improvisation in the emergence of the Romantic virtuosi, arguing that this aspect of the performance practice of the period was not merely entertainment devoid of aesthetic significance, but was an integral part of the Romantic worldview.

By arguing for the affinity between improvisation and Romantic aesthetics I do not imply that improvisation in this period was only the result of the impact on music of the Romantic ideas of philosophers and writers. Improvisation at the beginning of the nineteenth century formed part of an unbroken, centuries-old improvisatory tradition in Europe; it was one of the artistic activities, like the composition of musical works or the writing of poetry, that helped to shape and became a vehicle for a new cultural atmosphere. What I intend to show by arguing for this affinity is that improvisation was not a marginal activity in this period, but constituted an integral part of the complex Romantic world. Ultimately, an awareness of this complexity would put into question received ideas about the character and significance of the Western musical tradition. And in doing so, this awareness would also raise questions concerning the historical inception

and ideological purpose of those received ideas.

Romanticism is probably the period in the history of Western art and culture that has proved the most difficult to define (see for instance Lovejoy 1965 [1941], Beer 1995). The plurality of definitions of Romanticism results from the fact that this term has been applied to stylistic characteristics, themes, and cultural developments that are multifarious and often contradictory. Romantic literature, for example, might include the exaltation of nature in the poetry of Germany's Friedrich Hölderlin, the early science-fiction fantasy of Britain's Mary Shelley, or the acerbic political satires of Spain's José María de Larra. In music, it can refer to the intimacy and evanescence of a Chopin impromptu, the dramatic paroxysm of Wagner's music dramas, or the classically inspired symphonism of Brahms. By "Romanticism" and "Romantic aesthetics" I will refer here more narrowly to ideas and attitudes towards art and towards life in general that originated in Germany in the 1790s, later spread to England, France and other European countries, and soon became pervasive in all spheres of culture until entering a period of decline in the 1840s. More concretely, I will situate the end of Romanticism in 1848, the year when the European revolutions marked the end of an era.

The Aesthetics of Spontaneity (Inspiration and the Organic Model)

William Wordsworth, one of the main figures of English Romanticism, defined good poetry as "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (quoted in Wolfson 1995: 145). Though this definition does not seem to apply to a great deal of Romantic art, much of

which was carefully crafted and painstakingly perfected to the smallest detail, it does nevertheless apply to a prevalent ideal of artistic production in the Romantic period. Good poetry, good music, good art in general, had to appear spontaneous and effortless despite the laboriousness and complexity of the creative processes involved. In general, a Romantic artist was less of an artist if his or her works exhibited the mark of arduous work, of corrected mistakes, or of hesitations. The path to Truth in art was supposed to be clearly envisioned by the Romantic creative artist, who was thought to be a special kind of individual with a natural gift to discern such a path. The rise of the concept of the Romantic genius was, as we will see later, closely related to this ideal of creativity as spontaneous overflow.

The association of artistic "naturalness" and spontaneity with improvisation seems self-evident. In fact, improvisation has often been defined in these terms: "The art of performing music spontaneously, without the aid of manuscript, sketches or memory" (*Harvard Dictionary of Music*). This association between spontaneity and improvisation is at the basis of the traditional distinction between works and improvised music. It implies the idea that improvisation is, as opposed to composition, a "primitive" and unsophisticated practice and, therefore, inferior to composition. The connotation of inferiority of improvisation is implied in this contrast between spontaneity on the one hand, and the compositional process of reflecting on and perfecting musical materials on the other. In the context of his argument against this view, Bruno Nettl has written that, "specifically or implicitly accepted in all the general discussions [on improvisation] is the suddenness of the creative impulse. The improviser makes unpremeditated, spur-of-the-moment decisions, and because they are not thought out, their individual importance, if not of their collective significance, is sometimes denied" (Nettl 1974: 3).

The association between the "suddenness of the creative impulse" and lack of artistic value, however, is not universal. Romantic aesthetics gave a privileged status to spontaneous artistic creations and a secondary value to forms of creativity associated with calculation and laboriousness. Wordsworth's definition of good poetry as "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" was echoed by many other authors who saw sudden inspiration as the mark of true genius.

The Romantic exaltation of spontaneous creativity often referred to an ideal of art rather than to the actual creative process. Anne Mellor, for instance, has argued that intuitive spontaneity had no important part in the production of English women writers of the Romantic period (1995). She points out that these women had a concrete social and political agenda and that their writing was at least in part motivated by their struggle against pressing issues of gender inequality and identity. Engaged in such an emancipatory agenda, these writers were not interested in a categorical reaction against the rationality of the Enlightenment. To them the French Revolution was not a symbol of an abstract ideal of human freedom, but a concrete course of action that needed to be extended to include the emancipation of women. Mellor's proposition is that despite the separation from their male counterparts, these women writers should be considered part of the Romantic movement with which they have in common a revolutionary and utopian impulse, despite their different set of aesthetic, ethical, and social interests.

The writers and critics Mellor cites did, however, also value naturalness in artistic creation, and it could be argued that spontaneity and naturalness as aesthetic ideals were not antithetical to their artistic aims. To be sure, these ideals would not be associated with the belief in a not entirely conscious creative process by means of which the genius reached a realm separated from everyday life. Rather, these artistic ideals would be

rooted in a solid sense of being in the world, in an ethics of care Mellor argues was central to their ethical and aesthetic program. As I will discuss in chapter seven, early Romantic artists in general continued to be interested in giving shape to revolutionary and utopian ideas, but they did so by departing from eighteenth-century conventions and emphasizing ideals such as spontaneity and naturalness.

Since the eighteenth century, the artistic category of originality had required both spontaneity and naturalness. In the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant gave theoretical cohesion to this tenet in the context of his theory of genius. He distinguished creative genius from mere imitators, stating that the genius was an original creative artist and, as such, a breaker of rules, while lesser talents had to limit themselves to following rules. But to break rules was not sufficient to constitute genius. The departure from convention was realized by the genius as "inspired by nature." Originality, therefore, had to be "natural" (i.e., ruled by internal law) in order to be valued as the creation of genius.

Kantian ideas of genius had been inspired by earlier eighteenth-century authors such as Shaftesbury, Burke, and Hutcheson. These authors, in turn, were ultimately drawing many of their central tenets from Plato's conceptions of art and artists. In the Platonic tradition, the concept of "inspiration" referred to the act of creation as spontaneous flow and had its roots in Plato's concept of *manias*, the state of "divine madness" under the influence of which artists create. Plato contrasted the artist who was possessed by *manias* with those who merely had "art" (*techné*). The latter knew the rules, but that was not enough to make good poetry. The Aristotelian tradition was also an influential source for eighteenth-century aesthetic thinking, and it provided an opposition to the Platonic sources. Briefly stated, for eighteenth-century authors the Aristotelian theory of art stood for the importance of rules, intelligibility, and rationality,

while the Platonic theory of art emphasized notions of intuition and inspiration.

A common preoccupation in both Platonic and Aristotelian-inspired views on art was the need to distinguish the artistic from the merely technical. The centrality of the category of "taste" in eighteenth-century discourses on art reflected this preoccupation. Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf, for example, relates that when Emperor Joseph II asked him what he thought of the difference between Clementi and Mozart, Dittersdorf replied that Clementi's playing was "art simply and solely," while Mozart's "combines art and taste." To this, the Emperor replied that he was of the same opinion (quoted in Komlós 1989: 7). Mozart himself had judged Clementi's playing unsatisfactory for similar reasons. In a letter of 1782 Mozart commented on a competition in which he and Clementi matched their improvisatory skills: "Clementi plays well, so far as execution with the right hand goes. His greatest strength lies in his passages in thirds. Apart from this, he has not a kreuzer's worth of taste or feeling--in short he is simply a *mechanicus*" (ibid.: 6).

"Taste" was thus defined as a faculty for discerning between the beautiful and products that resulted from mere mechanical or technical abilities. This distinction, central to eighteenth-century aesthetics, had been difficult to theorize for authors working mostly within the Aristotelian tradition, since this approach stressed the role of rules and rationality in artistic production. If the judgment of artistic value largely concerned questions of regularity, rationality, and correctness, the problem was how to differentiate "taste" from the mere technical application of rules. The answer to this problem began taking shape around a concept of the beautiful in art based on ideas of naturalness and originality. "Organism" became the chief metaphor for the elaboration and understanding of these ideas. Good art, modeled after the "organic," had to be natural, but in the sense of something that is ruled by internal law, in opposition to what is artificial or

mechanical, that is to say, ruled by external laws. Whereas obeying an internal law was the sign of legitimacy and accordance with universal laws, that which depended upon externally imposed rules was deemed illegitimate and arbitrary.

At the beginning of the Romantic period the concept of the organic became the dominant model for aesthetic inquiry as well as for other aspects of European culture, acquiring during the nineteenth century the force of an all-encompassing cultural paradigm. Romanticism has indeed been defined as a period dominated by organicist thought: "[Romanticism] is the revolution in the European mind against thinking in terms of static mechanism and the redirection of the mind to thinking in terms of dynamic organicism. Its values are change, imperfection, growth, diversity, the creative imagination, the unconscious" (Peckham 1962 [1951]: 219). As I will discuss later, at the end of the nineteenth century the organic paradigm was reinterpreted in a different context.

Herder, who along with Goethe was the leading author of the *Sturm und Drang* movement in the late eighteenth century, was the first to give philosophical elaboration to the organic paradigm. The Romantics, following Schiller, tried to reconcile opposed positions of the *Sturm und Drang* theories and Kant's aesthetics. The pivotal role given to organicism with its joined notion of Genius, was a central aspect of this Romantic attempt at reconciliation.

Romantic aesthetics, therefore, inherited from eighteenth-century theories of art the privileged status of the natural over the artificial. But they also departed from the concept of nature underlying those earlier theories. In the eighteenth century, and in particular in the context of a mid-eighteenth-century return-to-nature movement, the ideal of "naturalness" was associated with the simple, primitive, and naive. The sentimental

primitivism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in France and of the poet Joseph Warton in England are examples of this movement which exalted the natural as simple and attacked the artificial and sophisticated as sources of error and evil. For Rousseau, the basis for individual and social improvement was to be found in a return to the innocence and freshness of the natural, and the distance from the reified world of social conventions (see Rousseau 1788).

This movement idealizes a return to nature, and Rousseau's ideas in particular, had a great influence on the Romantics. The concept of the natural as artistic ideal, however, experienced a significant change with the emergence of Romanticism. Lovejoy argued that one of the defining characteristics of Romanticism was the departure from the eighteenth-century concept of the natural (Lovejoy 1924). For the Romantics, nature was no longer synonymous with simplicity and naivete, but was revered as complex, profound, and awe-inspiring. The association of spontaneous art with the natural in the Romantic period was therefore not an indication of the simplicity and primitivism of that art. Rather, spontaneous creativity was an indication of the profound value of an art rooted in nature, now understood as a realm suffused with Spirit.

An improvisation in which the musician followed the inspiration and moods of the moment was considered by the Romantics a more unmediated, "pure" kind of creation than the composition of a written work. The improviser was thought to be free to follow his inspiration to express his feelings without yielding to conventionalisms and rational constraints. Romantic improvisation, in this sense, can be said to be the artistic manifestation that is closest to what Susan Wolfson calls the "German and Coleridgean aesthetics of 'organic' form," which consists in "realizing itself as it develops from within, in contrast to the a priori mechanic imposition from without" (Wolfson 1995: 292, n.42).

The ideal of spontaneity embodied by Romantic improvisation, however, was not in sharp opposition to a sense of form and to the conventional rules of composition, as demonstrated by treatises such as Carl Czerny's where, along with his praise for the freedom and spontaneity improvisation affords, he attempts a systematic exposition of the principles of improvisation:

Improvising is also enticing to the listener, for there can prevail therein a sense of freedom and ease in the connection of ideas, a spontaneity of execution that one does not find in works that are composed (even when they are designated as fantasies). If a well-written composition can be compared with a noble architectural edifice in which symmetry is most predominate, then a fantasy well done is akin to a beautiful English garden, seemingly irregular, but full of surprising variety, and executed rationally, meaningfully, and according to plan (Czerny 1983 [1836]: 2).

The Romantic exaltation of spontaneity, then, was not understood as an open door to arbitrariness, but as an aspiration towards "natural" artistic creations. That is to say, artistic creations were supposed to be ruled by their own internal rules, as an organism and more specifically in the early Romantic period as a vegetal organism. Czerny's comparison between improvisation and a garden echoes a common place in the Romantic period already advanced by some eighteenth-century authors, namely, the analogy between aesthetic ideals and vegetable organisms. Edward Young, for example, had in 1759 already made the comparison between the originality of genius and a "vegetable nature: "an Original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of Genius; it grows, it is not made: Imitations are often a sort of Manufacture wrought up by those Mechanics, Art and Labour, out of pre-existent materials not their own (quoted in Beer 1995: 245). While Keats, at the core of the Romantic movement, compared poetry to a tree: "If Poetry comes not as naturally as

the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all" (quoted in Wolfson 1995: 152).

In the practice of improvisation, especially in the Romantic period, conventions were considered to be subordinate to the creative impulse of the moment. The supremacy, but not exclusivity, of the emphasis on feelings over rationality and of spontaneity over rules in improvisation was in fact a fundamental tenet in Romantic aesthetics. Coleridge shed light on the way in which the Romantic ideal of spontaneous creation involved a concern with form. He distinguished between "superficial form," which refers to any construction in rhyme and meter, and "poetic form," which is "an organization of genius, traditional resources, and material constraints, developed by a 'shaping spirit of imagination'" (quoted in Wolfson 1995: 147). The concept of a "shaping spirit of imagination," which refers at once to an active manifestation of internal necessity (shaping spirit) and to freedom (imagination), is a fitting description of the organic ideal of creativity.

Improvised music in the Romantic period embodied this ideal. Spohr's description of an improvisation by Hummel in 1814 provides an example of Coleridge's concept of "poetic form." At a music party in Vienna where Hummel had been asked to play some waltzes, the pianist, noting that Spohr and other musicians had gathered around him,

converted his play into a free phantasia or improvisation, but which constantly preserved the waltz-rhythm, so that the dancers were not disturbed. He then took from me and others who had executed their own compositions during the evening a few easily combined themes and figures, which he interwove into his waltzes and varied them at every recurrence with a constantly increasing richness and piquancy of expression. Indeed, at length, he even made them serve as fugue-themes, and let loose all his science in counterpoint without disturbing the waltzers in their pleasures. Then he returned to the galant style, and in conclusion passed into a bravura, such as from him even has seldom been heard, so that the whole rounded off and terminated in real artistic style (Spohr 1878, vol. 1: 192).

The organic ideal of artistic creation has exerted an enormous influence on later assessments of the achievements of the Romantic composers and, retroactively, of the composers of previous generations. In the early Romantic period organicism abetted the conceptualization of art as belonging to a superior sphere, and of the artist as a special individual with the power to produce creations both original and legitimate, both free from conventional constraints and bound to the laws of nature.

In his article "Beethoven Scholars and Beethoven's Sketches" (1978), Douglas Johnson compiles interesting documents attesting to the influence of this organic model. Johnson discusses how various scholars have dealt with the evidence of Beethoven's sketches. Sketches, corrections, and failed attempts present a challenge to an organic understanding of the creative process. If Beethoven was a genius, and if the creation of genius is considered as organic process, how can the evidence of a laborious method of composition be accounted for? Gustav Nottebohm, writing in the late nineteenth century, offered an interesting solution: for him the sketches were evidence of the struggle between Beethoven's genius and his "demon" (quoted in Johnson 1978: 5). Whereas Beethoven's genius is manifested in his capacity for organic creation, the hindrances that impede the free organic flow that would be expected of his superior talent are a manifestation of his "demon."

In attributing this struggle to the presence of "intractable material," Nottebohm associated the idea of "Beethoven's demon" to something external to the composer's subjectivity. This attempt to safeguard the integrity of Beethoven's genius opens up another set of problems concerning the origin and nature of "intractable material." This material could be understood for example as conventional artifice against which the composer has to struggle until his individual originality shines through. Given the strong

mystical and religious connotations of the concept of genius, however, Nottebohm's comment seems to point to a more complex issue. In fact, his choice of the word "demon" to designate something that stands as the genius' antagonist can be hardly taken as a coincidence. His association of "intractable material" and the genius' demon can be interpreted as carrying ontological significance. According to this interpretation, sketches are the sign of the battle between the divinely inspired, organic creative forces of the genius on the one hand and, on the other, the demonic, anti-organic forces that resist the genius's striving to fulfill his destiny.

The ideological underpinnings of organicism have been sufficiently unmasked in the last decades (see for example, White 1973, Eagleton 1990). To speak of a musical work, a poem, or a political unity as "organic" has been charged with attempting to make believe that they have some kind of natural legitimacy when in reality they are conventional unities associated with particular interests. Organicism has clear connections with the rise of nineteenth-century nationalism, participating both in its positive aspect as formation of identity and in its negative aspect as ideological distortion. The organic paradigm helped to develop an ideal of freedom that implied the compatibility of one's internal law with the laws of the nation to which one belonged. The ideological distortion enabled by this aesthetic and political ideal is evident: it can be used to give the appearance of natural law something that is in reality imposed from the outside. Terry Eagleton, in agreement with Paul De Man's argument, states that "aesthetic ideology, by repressing the contingent, aporetic relation which holds between the spheres of language and the real, naturalizes or phenomenalizes the former, and is thus in danger of converting the accidents of meaning to organic natural process in the characteristic manner of ideological thought" (Eagleton 1990: 10). But, as Eagleton also

suggests, organic ideology also had liberating effects, inspiring people to free themselves from domination felt to be artificially imposed. In this sense, the organic ideal contributed to the construction of national identities as a movement of resistance against Napoleon's attempt to dominate Europe.

To sum up, improvised music was the most accurate expression of the Romantic ideal of spontaneous creation. The pure and unmediated transmission of the musical idea attributed to improvisation was a warranty of its authenticity and originality. And those who listened to Romantic improvisations could feel that they were witnessing the growth of music out of the inspiration of the artist, as a manifestation of true art as opposed to the indignities of manufacture. Spontaneity in art, in the end, meant that the artist surrendered total control of his creations, which in the context of the Romantic metaphysics of beauty was a sign that the genius' creative gifts came from a source higher than himself:

For it is certain for a Romantic that if improvisation is the creation *par excellence*, if it can capture in real time divine revelation, the artist is not himself the master of his own divination; he cannot impose his will on the Spirit; on the contrary, it is him who is possessed and carried away as in a demoniac rapture when it is less expected (Wangermee 1950: 232).

Or as George Sand's heroine Consuelo expresses it when she asks Haydn to improvise singing and playing so she can truly measure his artistic genius: "It is in this way . . . that the soul comes to the lips and fingers. I would [then] know if you have the divine breath or if you are nothing but a student adept at assembling reminiscences" (quoted in Wangermee 1950: 233).

The Aesthetics of Inwardness (Improvisation as Expression of Subjectivity)

The chief task of music consists in making resound, not the objective world itself, but, on the contrary, the manner in which the inmost self is moved to the depths of its personality and conscious soul.

--Hegel

Disenchanted with the Enlightenment exaltation of objectivity and universality, the Romantics turned to the individual's subjectivity and inwardness as the foundations of true knowledge and true art. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries' artistic ideal of the objective representation of reality, which in music took the form of the "doctrine of affections," was superseded in the Romantic period by an interest in the artist's expression of his or her own inner world, as well as in the artist's subjective interpretation of reality. The importance of individuality and originality as aesthetic values increased throughout the nineteenth century, to the point that the appreciation of good art became to a great extent intertwined with a cult of the artist's personality and biographical details. To have "personal style" was an indication of the artist's success in finding and ultimately expressing his or her own true voice. And one's true voice could not be found in the conventionalisms and superficiality of the social world, but in one's own inwardness.

To be sure, what the Romantics looked for in their innermost beings was not Descartes' *res cogitans*, a "thinking thing," but rather a feeling and imagining faculty, an organ that connected the individual with the essence of the world and, ultimately, with the Absolute. Romantic subjectivity, therefore, did not necessarily lead to solipsistic positions, but was considered, on the contrary, a necessary pathway to achieve the essential unity between human beings, nature, and the Universal Spirit. It was only through a return to their inner beings that individuals could find their place in the essential

connectedness of the universe.

The Romantic emphasis on inwardness is connected to the exaltation of spontaneity. The organic paradigm offers a way to understand this association. We saw how the Romantics considered spontaneous creation akin to the organic ideal and distinct from mere mechanistic procedures. Individuality was another expression of the organic ideal in the sense that it indicated the artists' allegiance to their own internal laws, as opposed to those imposed by tradition and convention. Individuality, therefore, did not by its own sake warrant adherence to organic laws, but had to be conquered through a retreat into one's inward being. In other words, the connecting tissue that made the Creation a spiritual whole could not be found by means of a superficial, outward affirmation of one's being, nor could it be found in objective laws and external appearances. The Romantic ideal of universal connectedness was on the contrary a principle for the initiated, those who having embarked on a personal quest of self-discovery could see beyond the chaotic world of material life. Organic laws, as opposed to mechanical laws, could only be rooted inwardly.

Terry Eagleton has remarked that what was at stake in the development of the organic paradigm was not just a new kind of work of art, but a new type of human subject. This subject, he writes,

like the work of art itself, discovers the law in the depths of its own free identity, rather than in some oppressive external power. The liberated subject is the one who has appropriated the law as the very principle of its own autonomy, broken the forbidding tablets of stone on which that law was originally inscribed in order to rewrite it on the heart of flesh. To consent to the law is thus to consent to one's own inward being (Eagleton 1990 : 19).

As opposed to the Enlightenment concept of social freedom, the Romantic quest

for freedom entailed a personal quest, a process of self-discovery. A condition for freedom, therefore, was inwardness: to be free, the individual had first to distinguish the laws that are part of his or her nature from those imposed from the outside, then follow the natural ones while liberating him or herself from the imposed ones.

Nature for the Romantics was no longer something purely exterior and objective, but something intimately connected to the life of the soul, both manifested in the individual and the universal. To be "natural" was synonymous with being oneself, and to find one's own voice implied to be in harmony with nature. But then, if nature was also a mirror or a continuation of the self, what was the exteriority against which Romantic inwardness is defined? The answer to this question takes us back to the organicist paradigm: The outward world opposite to the inner self is the world of the mechanical, the artificial, the inorganic. Thus, Coleridge's verses: "I may not hope from outward forms to win/ The passion and the life, whose fountains are within" (in Gleckner and Enscoe 1962: xi). And Wilhelm Schlegel formulated the same dichotomy as follows:

The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material, as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such is the life, such the form. Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms. Each exterior is the physiognomy of the being within, its true image reflected and thrown out from the concave mirror (quoted in McFarland 1981: 39).

Romantic poets treated nature as a symbol of a greater, cosmic Whole: "To see a world in a grain of sand:/ And a Heaven in a Wild Flower . . ." (Blake). At the same time, nature was also a symbol of the individual: the romantic contemplates nature as an outward image of his or her own feelings and emotions. As Stephen Spender has

remarked, this connection has the effect of spiritualizing nature while at the same time making the Romantic's mind appear to have a kinship with nature (Spender 1962 [1947]: 183). To be spontaneous for the Romantic artist meant to be in harmony with nature. But this focus on the outward world of nature brings the poet, in a typically Romantic tension between opposites, back to an expression of his or her own inwardness.

Expression was the other side of this movement toward inwardness. Departing from the eighteenth-century aesthetic focus on the objective portrayal of both the external and the internal worlds, Romantic aesthetics emphasized the subjective expression of one's inner world. Creating forms that expressed as closely as possible what was felt inwardly was a major challenge for Romantic artists. Friedrich Schelling, in his 1807 lecture "On the Relationship between Art and Nature," wrote that art must not imitate nature in a servile and objective manner. Instead of seeing the external world in its empty and abstract form, "which means nothing to one's inner being," the artist should strive for seeing its essence: "He, for whom nature appears as something dead, would never be able to reach that profound process, similar to a chemical one, by means of which, as forged by fire, the pure gold of Beauty and Truth is born" (Schelling 1968 [1807]: 238, my translation).

That profound, chemical-like or, better, alchemical-like process reached by the artist in the moment of creation was nowhere more manifest than in the practice of improvisation. The increasing faithfulness requested by composers to their written works can also be understood as a manifestation of this emphasis on the artist's expression of inwardness: Every written detail now counted as expression of the artist's inner life. But improvisation offered the listener the added incentive of witnessing the very act of creation, the precise moment when the artist was facing the challenge of

bringing out his or her own inner world. According to Sir John Russel, a British traveler, those listening to Beethoven's improvisations were more enraptured by the experience of witnessing the moment of creation than by the music itself:

The amateurs were transported; for the profanes, it was more interesting to observe how the music passed from the soul of this man, to his face. It seemed to have the feelings more forceful and stormy than calm and languid. The muscles of his face were inflamed and his veins were swollen; the eyes rolled with violence, the mouth moved spasmodically and Beethoven looked like a sorcerer that feels to be the master of the spirits he had invoked (quoted in Wangermee 1950: 232).

Improvising, Beethoven looks like a sorcerer or, closer to Schelling's analogy, as an alchemist caught in the moment of transforming undifferentiated material into artistic gold. And for the Romantic listener it was much more fascinating to see and hear that very transformation than simply to contemplate the end result, the work of art. It is the act of turning feelings into sound that interested and inspired awe. In the end this act meant nothing short of the manifestation of spirit into matter: imagination is transformed into music, and music itself in its passing to the external world inflames muscles, makes the veins swell and, in short, alters the flesh uncontrollably with the force of spirit.

The Romantic fascination for the expression of the artist's inner life therefore translated into both a fascination for solo improvisation and into a new respect and even reverence for the written work. Improvisation, however, besides offering the possibility of witnessing the artist in creation, was also believed to be more purely subjective than composition, in which an artist could combine intuition with the application of objective rules. Thus, Richard Hudson, commenting on a passage dealing with tempo rubato in a treatise on voice by Rodríguez García (first published in Paris in the early 1840s), writes that "in spite of García's precise notation, however, the result, in order to be expressive,

must *sound*, even to a listener who does not have a score to follow, as though the passion of the moment caused the notated rhythm to be uncontrollably altered" (Hudson 1994: 79). The virtuoso "uncontrollable" alteration of score indications at the moment of the performance was valued as the artistic expression of the artist's faithfulness to his or her own feelings, above external rules. The following passage from a 1834 violin method by Pierre Baillot conveys the same idea. Baillot writes that the tempo rubato must be used by the performer,

in spite of himself, as it were, when, carried away by the expression, it apparently forces him to lose all sense of pulse and to be delivered by this means from the trouble that besets him. . . .

This disorder . . . will become an *artistic effect* if it results from effort and inspiration and if the artist can use it without being forced to think of the means he is employing (quoted in Hudson 1994: 100, Baillot's emphasis).

Second to improvisation, the performance of works without the aid of scores also gave listeners the thrill of imagining a direct outpouring of the musician's inner life. E. T. A. Hoffman wrote in 1815 about a concert given by Bernhard Romberg:

Romberg never has music in front of him, but plays everything from memory, sitting clearly visible before the audience. You cannot imagine what a singular impression this made upon me. The solo passages of his concerto seemed like free fantasies, conceived at the moment of highest inspiration. All the wonderful figures, often flashing upward from the darkest depths to the most brilliant heights, seemed to burst forth from his elated spirit, and the notes seemed to be produced purely by the strength of his imagination, matching and following it in every nuance, before resounding from the orchestra. This is why I say that one must not only hear this splendid musician playing, but also see him playing (Hoffmann 1989: 390).

The instrument itself becomes an extension of the virtuoso's body, so that it no longer resembles a mechanism, but it is perceived as part of the organic vessel through which spirit is transformed into sound:

The total freedom of [Romberg's] playing and absolute mastery of his instrument obviate any struggle with the mechanical means of expression and make the instrument an immediate, unfettered organ of the spirit. . . . He is in complete control of his instrument; or rather, with all its strength and grace and its rare abundance of sounds, it has become so much an extension of the artist that it seems by itself to vibrate with all the sensations of the spirit, seemingly with no expenditure of mechanical effort whatsoever (Hoffmann 1989: 390).

There is a great affinity between these Romantic ideas on music and the aesthetic theories of the idealist philosophers. This is especially evident in the section on Music in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Aesthetics*, first published in 1835, but based on lectures from the 1820s. Here, Hegel gave theoretical elaboration to the tenet that music was the most Romantic of all arts for being the most direct expression of the life of the soul. While for Hegel art belonging to earlier periods of art history, the "Symbolic" and the "Classical," depended on "heavy matter," "Romantic" art needed a material easy to shape, so as to be able to express subjective inwardness; a material "which for our apprehension is without stability and even as it arises and exists vanishes once more" (Hegel 1991 [1835], vol. 2: 889). Sound was such a material, for being "object-free" and wholly abstract, it could express the self without external constraints. The power of music to express the inner life of the self stems ultimately from the fact that music is, like the self, fundamentally temporal. Because of its fleeting nature, "music takes as its subject-matter the subjective inner life itself, with the aim of presenting itself, not as an external shape or as an objectively existing work, but as that inner life; consequently its expression must be the direct communication of a living individual who has put into it the entirety of his own inner life" (ibid.: 909).

This ability of music to express the inner life of the soul is also for Hegel essentially related to its liberating powers. Being free from objects, as well as from

subject-matter in general, musicians can retreat more than any other artists into the freedom of their inner lives, only following their own self-enjoyment. If in general, Hegel writes, "we may regard activity in the realm of the beautiful as a liberation of the soul, as freedom from oppression and restrictedness, music carries this liberation to the most extreme heights" (ibid.: 896).

Just as Romantic authors and audiences usually did, Hegel judged that music, as the art of inwardness and freedom, attained its highest expression in improvisation and in performances of works in which the musician has the most room for free interpretation. In these kinds of performances, "the executant artist himself composes in his interpretation, fills in gaps, deepens what is superficial, ensouls what is soulless and in this way appears as downright independent and productive" (ibid.: 956). And when the interpreter has "real genius,"

the resulting work of art has a quite peculiar attraction, because we have *present before us not merely a work of art but the actual production of one*. In this completely living presence of art, all external conditions are forgotten . . . we no longer need or want any text; nothing at all is left beyond the universal note of feeling In that element the self-reposing soul of the executant artist abandons itself to its outpouring and in it he displays his inventive genius, his heart's deep feeling, his mastery in execution and, so long as he proceeds with spirit, skill, and grace, he may even interpret the melody with jokes, caprices, and virtuosity, and surrender to the moods and suggestions of the moment (Hegel 1991 [1835], vol. 2: 956, my emphasis).

The Aesthetics of Imperfection (Fragments, Ruins, and Becoming)

Forever be becoming and never be perfected.

—Friedrich Schlegel

Romanticism is often characterized as the era of great symphonies, monumental novels, grand philosophical systems, and, in short, of grand attempts to offer an image of wholeness that encompasses all complexities and resolves all conflicts. There is, however, a different aspect of Romantic aesthetics that had an enormous impact on the culture of the period. This is the aesthetic of imperfection: An exaltation of fragments, ruins, endless processes of becoming, everything that is not perfect and not complete. The important role played by improvisation in the Romantic period becomes more clear when this fundamental aspect of Romanticism is brought to light.

a) Fragments: the Imagined Whole

One characteristic of the early Romantic worldview was a strong interest in the fragmentary. The use of the fragment as a form was more extended in literature and poetry, but it also had a significant impact in other areas of culture. From the last years of the eighteenth century the fragment as literary form is ubiquitous: There exists a long list of poems published with the word "fragment" in their title, for example, those by Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Novalis.² And August Wilhelm Schlegel proclaimed that fragments were "the real form of universal philosophy" (quoted in Beer 1995: 246).

In music the fragment also became an important vehicle for the expression of the new Romantic aesthetics. In his excellent *The Romantic Generation* (1995), Charles Rosen devotes a section to what he calls "the aesthetics of the Fragment," of which he

² Robert Mayo cites about twenty poems published only in the last years of the eighteenth century, see Beer 1995: 239.

considers Robert Schumann the most representative composer. Particularly interesting in the context of the present discussion is Rosen's argument concerning the paradoxical relationship between fragments and closed wholes:

The Romantic Fragment is, therefore, a closed structure, but its closure is a formality: it may be separated from the rest of the universe, but it implies the existence of what is outside itself not by reference but by its instability. The form is not fixed but is torn apart or exploded by paradox, by ambiguity, just as the opening song of *Dichterliebe* is a closed, circular form in which beginning and end are unstable—implying a past before the song begins and a future after its final chord (Rosen 1995: 51).

The Romantic Fragment is then, as Rosen insightfully notes, in tension with the concept of the Whole. A fragment stands not as a substitution for a whole, as if the ideal of the whole had lost its aesthetic relevance. Rather, fragments function as ironic references to that ideal. The fragmentary and the imperfect seem to be, in fact, inseparable from the Romantic ideal of perfect synthesis achieved in an organic whole: Because their incompleteness is evident, they make the idea of the whole and its absence become more poignant. Thus, the configuration of a fragment as such, as in the works by Schumann or Chopin that Rosen analyzes, presupposes the idea of musical whole but establishes a distance and a tension with it. In the double emphasis Romanticism places in the fragment and the whole there is no contradiction, but complementariness. John Beer has shed light on this duality saying that "a suspicion that fragmentariness might in the end be inseparable from human achievement lurks throughout Romanticism; yet there is also a constant aspiration toward wholeness, usually envisaged as a reconciliation between nature and supernature" (Beer 1995: 257).

The ideal of the Whole, then, manifests itself in Romantic creations not just in the form of unequivocally closed, fixed works but also in works which express some kind of

incompletion. This sense of incompleteness or lack is an expression of the Romantic feeling of "infinite longing," which entails that one desires something that is always absent or impossible. Thus, Rousseau, who advanced many of the central themes of Romanticism, wrote: "If all my dreams had turned into reality, I would still remain unsatisfied: I would have kept on dreaming, imagining, desiring. I myself I found an unexplainable void that nothing could have filled; a longing of the heart toward another kind of fulfillment of which I could not conceive but of which I nevertheless felt the attraction" (quoted in McFarland 1981: 11). Keats stated it succinctly: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter" ("Ode on a Grecian Urn," lines 11-12).

The preference for fragmentary forms can also be interpreted as an ironic comment on human imperfection compared with an ideal of perfection. The Romantic fragment, in any case, appeals to the imagination of the listener. When a piece ends in a dominant chord (and as Rosen shows this is only an example of Romantic fragmentariness in music), the composer leaves an open door for imagining what follows. In this sense, these Romantic pieces imply an unheard ending that can only be imagined, intuited, or longed for.

The absence of an ending or of a beginning does not render a fragment inferior to complete forms. Rather, for the Romantic imagination this absence connects the fragment with an ideal beginning and an ideal ending, thus transforming it into a (sensible) part belonging to a (supersensible) whole. Fragments, in this sense, acutely express many of the tensions between the seen and the unseen, the finite, and the infinite, part and whole that run through the Romantic worldview. As Thomas McFarland has put it, "the logic of incompleteness is thus ultimately the logic of infinity" (1981: 28). In the end, the Romantic fascination with fragments is a manifestation of an acute awareness that all

finite forms are fragmentary and, at the same time, of a belief that all fragments are parts of what Byron called "the great whole" (quoted in McFarland 1981: 43) and Lamartine the "vast ocean of being" ("Flux et reflux divin de vie universelle, / Vaste océan de l'Etre ou tout va s'engloutir!" [divine ebb and flow of universal life, / Vast ocean of Being where everything goes to be engulfed!]" ("L'Occident, " my translation).

Nineteenth-century improvisation participated in the character of the Romantic fragment in important ways. To be sure, improvised music is not necessarily fragmentary. During Romanticism, as well as in earlier periods, some forms of improvisation were highly structured and could have been considered to form perfectly finished wholes. Improvisations, for example, based on a particular musical form, like J. S. Bach's extemporized fugues or Mozart's improvised variations, have from the outset formal guidelines that influence the development and overall form of the improvisation. On other occasions, free fantasias become in the course of the performance perfectly resolved musical pieces, as in the case of many of Beethoven's improvisations according to the testimonies of his contemporaries. A reviewer of the 1799 improvisatory "duel" between Beethoven and Wölffl wrote in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*:

[Beethoven] shows himself to the greatest advantage in improvisation, and here, indeed, it is most extraordinary with what lightness and yet firmness in the succession of ideas Beethoven not only varies a theme given him on the spur of the moment by figuration (with which many a virtuoso makes his fortune-- and wind) but really develops it. Since the death of Mozart, who in this respect is for me still the non plus ultra, I have never enjoyed this kind of pleasure in the degree in which it is provided by Beethoven. (in DeNora 1995: 157).

But even in the case of highly structured and formally complete improvisations, there is always an openness in this kind of music that sets it apart from composed works. Formal or thematic guidelines might be given, but the outcome of an improvisation is by

definition uncertain beforehand. In retrospect, an improvisation might be deemed a musical whole, but the uncertainty of the process confers on it a special openness. It is this openness that makes improvisation akin to a musical fragment.

A composed fragment and an improvisation are open in different ways. The fragment is open insofar as it expresses a lack of that which would make it complete; an improvisation is open in that, regardless of the final outcome, the uncertainty of the process raises a constant tension with an ideal of completeness. For obvious reasons, improvised music might have occasional weak technical moments or uneven artistic value. But if improvisation can be said to be the "imperfect art" (Gioia, quoted in Hamilton 1990: 334), in the Romantic period this was not a sign of inferiority formal or otherwise, but a reference to its intrinsic openness and its capacity to carry the listener to the limit between the known and the unknown.

b) Ruins: The Present of the Past

The fascination with ruins is another expression of the Romantic taste for the imperfect and the indeterminate. Ruins highlight imperfection; they present shapes that are wholly graspable only in terms of their degradation with respect to a former perfection. This sense of imperfection is then closely connected with an acute awareness of the passing of time and the ephemeral character of human life as opposed both to the Eternal and to nature. Romantic melancholy reflections inspired by ruins usually point to a grandiose past, as in Byron's contemplation of decaying Venetian palaces or destroyed Roman temples in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in which the poet ponders the contrast between past perfection and present decay. But sometimes it is the ruins of humble buildings that provokes a meditation on the mutability of human lives and works as in Robert Southey's *The Ruined Cottage*:

I have seen
Many an old convent reverend in decay,
And many a time have trod the castle courts
And grass-green halls, yet never did they strike
Home to the heart such melancholy thoughts
As this poor cottage.

...
So Nature steals on all the works of man,
Sure conqueror she, reclaiming to herself
His perishable piles.

(Southey, *The Ruined Cottage*)³

The interest in ruins in the nineteenth century brings together the Romantic taste for the remote and mysterious, the exaltation of nature above human works, and the new awareness of historicity. Time is the common thread in these Romantic topoi. When Byron writes that time is "the adorer of the ruin" he is offering a clue to understand the Romantic fascination for ruins: the Romantic contemplates ruins as a meditation on time. It is time--its passing, its effects, its memory--that makes a building in ruins attractive:

Oh Time! the beautifier of the dead,
Adorner of the ruin, comforter
And only healer when the heart hath bled;
Time! the corrector where our judgments err,
The test of truth, love--sole philosopher,
For all beside are sophists--from thy thrift,
Which never loses though it doth defer--
Time, the avenger! unto thee I lift
My hands, and eyes, and heart, and crave of thee a gift:

(Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*).

The melancholy beauty the Romantics admired in a landscape with ruins was evidence of the passing of time for humans in striking contrast both with the novel ways of the new generations and with the apparent immutability of nature. Ruins are fascinating because they show the present of a remote past and suggest the future of the present. It is as if

³ For more poems on ruins, see McFarland 1981.

they had Time itself inscribed in them.

The reflection on the mutability of human societies is a characteristic element of early nineteenth-century historicism. Whereas in the Enlightenment the interest in history focused on fixed elements of the past, in the Romantic period the emphasis was on change, on what makes different one epoch from another, and on what is new in spite of being connected to a past. As with fragments, the Romantic fascination for ruins is closely linked to the central role given to imagination in this period. In front of a ruin, the observer can imagine what once was and is no more, or what could have been. However, the Romantic finds beauty in the ruin itself. What moves the Romantic is not the original beauty of the decaying building, but the beauty and mystery of a vestige that opens a space for imagining an ideal of completeness. This imagining does not necessarily mean the mental representation of a picture-like image which fills in the gaps of what is missing in a matter of fact manner. Rather, it consists in a dream-like creative openness towards the remote and the impossible.

c) Becoming: Being as Constant Striving

The aesthetics of imperfection embodied the tension in Romantic culture between the known and the unknown, part and whole, order and chaos. This tension was also manifested in the artist's doubts about the very act of artistic creation. As Byron explained ("To mingle with the Universe, and feel / What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal" *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*), the Romantic artist felt the struggle between the need for expression and the belief that anything worthy of being expressed was ultimately ineffable. The aesthetics of becoming was another Romantic creative response to this struggle.

Along with the fascination for fragments and ruins, the emphasis on processes of

becoming and perpetual flux participated in the aesthetics of imperfection. August Schlegel's dictum about poetry, partially quoted above, describes a central theme of Romantic aesthetics at large: "The Romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected" (*Athenaeum* Fragment No. 116, quoted in Beer 1995: 246). As Schlegel implies here, the ideal of becoming emphasizes not a teleological movement towards perfection but, rather, the very imperfection of that which is perpetually in a state of becoming.

Music was the art that best embodied this ideal of perpetual flux and was, therefore, as Hegel had stated in his *Aesthetics*, the art that could best express the life of spirit. Before him, Herder had written in 1800: "Is there still a question whether music will surpass in inner effect every art that clings to the visible? It *must* surpass them, as spirit does the *body*: for it is spirit, related to great nature's innermost force--motion" (Herder, in Lippman 1988: 40). And the model of pure becoming in music is improvisation. Because improvised music, for its very nature, is never completed in the moment of performance, it affords the listener an experience of witnessing the music as pure unfolding in time. Even when formal completion is expected, what the listener experiences in front of an improvisation is the musical process of becoming. Only when the improvisation has ended can one reconstruct mentally the music as a complete whole. Since one cannot listen more than once to the same improvisation--at least before the advent of recording technology--an actual idea of the finished whole can only be applied in retrospect and is never a part of the actual experience of listening to the improvisation.

Ted Gioia (1988), attempting to distance himself from contemporary views on improvisation as a minor form of expression, but agreeing with the basic premises of

those views, writes:

Improvisation is doomed, it seems, to offer a pale imitation of the perfection attained by composed music. Errors will creep in, not only in form but also in execution; the improviser, if he sincerely attempts to be creative, will push himself into areas of expression which his technique may be unable to handle. Too often the finished product will show moments of rare beauty intermixed with technical mistakes and aimless passages. Why then are we interested in this haphazard art? (quoted in Hamilton 1990: 336).

For the Romantics, the imperfection of improvisation coupled with the interest in this form of expression was not perplexing. The imperfection of improvisation, as well as that of fragments, ruins, or things in a state of becoming was not a negative quality needing correction, but a positive one that provided an opening for the imagination to do its work.

The Aesthetics of Indeterminacy (Improvisation as Expression of the Sublime)

Another aspect of this Romantic opening to imagination is the taste for the vague, the mysterious, the uncertain, and other forms of indeterminacy. The Romantic association between indeterminacy and artistic value offered a sharp contrast with the eighteenth-century ideal of artistic and natural beauty, which entailed ideals of clarity, proportion, formal coherence, and perfection. This concept of beauty in art had been contrasted in eighteenth-century aesthetic theories with the idea of the sublime. Whereas beauty was pleasing and enjoyable, the sublime referred to overwhelming feelings in front of the infinite, the formless, and the absolutely great, and it inspired a combination of pleasure and displeasure. This contrast between the beautiful and the sublime was a cornerstone

of eighteenth-century aesthetics. Kant, for example, devoted the Second Book of his *Critique of Judgment* to the “analytic of the sublime.” During most of the eighteenth century, however, the sublime maintained a secondary role in theories of art, while the beautiful was the main aesthetic category. Around the last quarter of the eighteenth century there was a turn towards an aesthetics of the sublime especially manifested in the tenets of the *Sturm und Drang* movement. This turn was completed with the emergence of Romanticism, when the idea of the sublime became central and displaced the classical ideal of beauty.

The association of the sublime and indeterminacy was already theorized by eighteenth-century authors. Kant contrasted the beautiful and the sublime relating the former to ideas of form, limits, playfulness, and attraction, and the latter to formlessness, limitlessness, solemnity, and a sort of negative pleasure. Burke on his part defined sublimity as a special type of indeterminacy. In his commentary on Milton, Burke wrote, for instance, that “to make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary,” and that in Milton's description of Death, “all is dark, uncertain, terrible, and sublime to the last degree” (quoted in Newlyn 1995: 209-210).

The Romantics adopted the eighteenth-century distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, but took the sublime which until then had been subordinated to the beautiful as defining the artistic ideals of the new era. Thus Coleridge in a note of around 1808 adhered to Kant's basic distinction but, probably following A. W. Schlegel, identified his own generation (“The Moderns”) with the sublime: “Ancients--the Finite, & therefore Grace, Elegance, Proportion, Fancy, Dignity, Majesty,--whatever is capable of being definitely conveyed by defined Forms or Thoughts-- The Moderns, the infinite, & indefinite as the vehicle of the Infinite-- hence more to the passions, the obscure Hopes

and Fears . . . Sublimity" (quoted in Bone 1995: 124).

The feelings of infinitude and transcendence associated with the sublime were now privileged over the mere enjoyment of beautiful forms. That these feelings were inseparable from the unsettling and painful experience of the indeterminate and formless was accepted as a necessary aspect of the sublime breaking through the limits of the material world. As Lucy Newlyn has argued in an article entitled "'Questionable Shape': The Aesthetics of Indeterminacy" (1995), Burke's association between the sublime and indeterminacy can be extended to suggest the Romantic association between powerful ideas and indefinite language. For her, the Romantic fascination for the sublime is connected with a fascination for indeterminacy and death, and links the Romantic sublime with the twentieth-century reemergence of this concept in François Lyotard's work. Lyotard in fact sheds light on the pairing between the sublime and indeterminacy, claiming that what writers, painters, institutions presuppose is that words already heard or pronounced are not the last words. "After a sentence, after a colour, comes another sentence, another colour . . . [and so we forget] the possibility of nothing happening, of words, colours, forms or sounds not coming; of this sentence being the last." Newlyn points out that for Lyotard, what the sublime offers is the terror of privation itself: "what is terrifying is that . . . it stops happening" (quoted in Newlyn 1995: 210). She further notes:

the sublime challenges the subject with the death of meaning. In this respect, sublimity resembles extreme cases of indeterminacy--cases in which the interpreting subject is either baffled by a plethora of potential meanings into a state resembling anxiety, or satisfied to relinquish control over the making of determinate meaning (ibid.).

The Romantics experienced this sense of sublimity in music in various ways. E.

T. A. Hoffmann gave in his ground-breaking review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony an exemplary account of the new aesthetics of the sublime, establishing a direct link between Beethoven's achievement and his music's ability to reach a realm of the indefinite and inexpressible. For Hoffmann, Beethoven's music and, in particular, the Fifth Symphony can sweep the listener "into the wonderful spirit-realm of the infinite" (Hoffmann 1989: 239), because of the ability of purely instrumental music in general to transcend the outer sensual world, it "unveil[s] before us the realm of the mighty and the immeasurable." This music, he says later, "sets in motion the machinery of awe, of fear, of terror, of pain, and awakens that infinite yearning which is the essence of romanticism" (ibid.: 238).

Schumann, for his part, associated the excitement of indeterminacy with a feeling of abundance and inconclusion brought about by unusual length. Referring to Schubert's Symphony in C Major he wrote:

And then the heavenly length of the symphony, like that of a thick novel in four volumes, perhaps by Jean Paul who also was never able to reach conclusion, and for the best reason--to permit the reader to think it out for himself. How this refreshes, this feeling of abundance, so contrary to one's experience with others when one always dreads to be disillusioned at the end and is often saddened through disappointment (quoted in Grout and Palisca 1988: 685).

Mendelssohn associated this excitement with the radically new. In a letter of 1837 he complained about his strenuous activity as conductor: "At the end of the greatest turmoil," he writes referring to his constant conducting, "if I ask myself what I have actually accomplished, it is after all hardly worth mentioning. At least it does not interest me particularly, whether or not all the recognized good works are given once more or given better. I am interested only in the new things, and of these there are few enough" (Mendelssohn 1945: 274). Even the performance of a newly-discovered piece by Bach in

1838 could no longer excite in him that kind of interest:

But even that—to my mind at least—was lacking in the interest one feels in something new and untried; I like it so much when there is that kind of uncertainty which leaves room for me and the public to have an opinion. In Beethoven and Haendel and Bach one knows beforehand what is coming, and always must come, and a great deal more besides (ibid.: 277).

Mendelssohn's attitude symbolizes the Romantic balance between the predilection for novelty and unpredictability, on the one hand, and the reverence for the great composers of the past, on the other.⁴ As I will later argue, this balance was lost in the latter part of the century, when absolute respect for the masterworks became the dominant aesthetic ideal (see chapter six). The Romantics, on the contrary, cherished uncertainty and novelty and, in general, all artistic aspects that allowed for the exercise of imagination. André Grétry, for instance, writing in the first years of the nineteenth century had praised improvisation as a source of pleasure for "lively imaginations":

To improvise on a complete instrument, such as the piano, the harp, etc., is a source of happiness for lively imaginations: I know there is pleasure in executing the music of the good composers; but, it is impossible to be pleased in frequently repeating the best sonate; since, just as one blushes in society for telling twice the same thing in front of the same persons, there is a kind of shame in reproducing the same musical pieces. How many, on the contrary, are the resources in improvising! (quoted in Wangermee 1950: 236).

Nothing, in fact, better embodies the Romantic interest for the "new and untried" than improvised music. Improvisation in general, by its very nature, embodies such an interest even in non-Romantic contexts. Hamilton quotes Steve Lacy, the jazz musician saying:

I'm attracted to improvisation because of something I value. That is a freshness, a

⁴ Mendelssohn had also written to his sister in 1825: "You say, Fanny, that I should become a missionary and convert Onslow and Reicha to a love for Beethoven and Sebastian Bach. That is just what I am endeavouring to do" (Mendelssohn 1945: 32).

certain quality that can only be obtained by improvisation, something you cannot possibly get by writing. It is something to do with the “edge.” Always being on the brink of the unknown and being prepared for the leap. And when you go on out there you have all your years of preparation and all your sensibilities and your prepared means but it is a leap into the unknown (quoted in Hamilton 1990: 324).

Romantic accounts interpreted this “leap into the unknown” as leading the listener to experience the mixture of pleasure and displeasure in front of a type of beauty that contained in itself the possibility of being suddenly truncated or dissolved into nothingness.

As Mendelssohn discovered, after repeated listening or performance, a musical work inevitably loses some of its ability to convey that sense of wonder and excitement that arises from the uncertainty of not knowing what is coming next. The experience of listening to an already well known work is in this sense closer to the eighteenth-century idea of beauty and the pleasure from it derived, than to the Romantic sublime. The Romantics knew that even works that embody an aesthetic of the sublime could not ultimately offer the same experience of pleasure and anxiety in front of uncertainty as that afforded by improvisation.

The centrality in Romantic aesthetics of the category of the sublime with its emphasis on indeterminacy, unpredictability, and the power of imagination, as well as of the themes discussed as part of an aesthetics of imperfection, may seem to contradict the also-central role played in this period by organicism. In fact, the application of the organic metaphor to the study of music has often been associated with ideas of formal unity, finished wholes, and teleological developments. Heinrich Schenker, whose writings present the most thorough elaboration of organicism applied to the analysis of music, interprets the ideal of organism primarily in terms of structural coherence and the ways

in which the various parts of a work are integrated in a whole. But the organic model in the early Romantic period was mainly a metaphor for ideas of growth and process, and only in a secondary sense of wholeness and structure.

Ruth Solie, in her essay "The Living Work: Organicism and Musical Analysis" (1980), noted the difference between these two meanings of the organic metaphor and insightfully stated the greater importance for music, as a temporal art, of the meaning which emphasizes ideas of growth and process. But she considers these two meanings to coexist as two aspects of organicism, so that both of them, for example, could be found in Schenker's writings:

There is no question that the crucial role played by the passage of time in music, and its ineffable sense of motion (whether 'real' or 'imaginary') are better dealt with in terms of growth and development metaphors than additive, static ones. Many commentators have noted that organic theories tend toward a view of music as process, and it is of course precisely this new orientation that is most enthusiastically greeted in Schenker's work (Solie 1980: 156).

But by the time Schenker was working on his theory (the concept of the *Urfinie* was first introduced in 1920) the Romantic worldview had been left behind for over half a century, and Romantic organicism had been reinterpreted in the context of a new intellectual climate. The different interpretations of organicism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from that of the early Romantic period are evidenced in the choice of organic metaphors. Schenker prefers to take as models human organisms. He writes for example: "The hands, legs, and ears of the human body do not begin to grow after birth; they are present at the time of birth. Similarly, in a composition, a limb which was not somehow born with the middle and background cannot grow to be a diminution" (Schenker 1979: 6).

This use of organicism to highlight static structures and biological determinism contrasts with that of the early Romantics who, as we have seen, favored vegetal metaphors in order to emphasize ideas of continuous process and spontaneous growth. As opposed to animal limbs, the leaves of a plant, which Keats compared to poetry, do begin to grow after birth (see quotation on pp. 42-43). Edward Young, we will recall, wrote about original artists as being of "vegetable nature," for they were not "made," but grew spontaneously from "the vital root of genius" (quoted on p. 42).

To be sure, the organic metaphor, vegetal or animal, always implies an idea of unity, organic unity being a special way of organizing the relationship between part and whole that contrasts with the organization characteristic of artificial and mechanical unities. But the Romantics' conception of the relation between parts and whole was inscribed within an aesthetics of longing and a metaphysical idea of whole. It was also closely linked to the Romantic belief in the transcendental role of imagination. There was no contradiction in the perception of the organic art as unpredictable, unstable, and even randomly organized, since the Romantic believed that underneath the fragmentary, disorderly appearances there was a underlying deep unity between the visible parts and an invisible whole. Organic unity was, therefore, more a postulate of imagination than an empirically verifiable structure. The Romantic could take pleasure in front of the terror of the indeterminate, believing--or wishing to believe-- that beyond the appearances there was a natural and metaphysical whole acting as unifying principle.

Virtuosity and the Romantic Imagination

Virtuosity was an important aspect of the musical life of the first half of the nineteenth century. For paying audiences of public concerts and for guests invited to the salons, virtuosity, which generally involved improvisation, was a favorite form of entertainment. These audiences developed a taste for extraordinary musical feats, and rewarded astounding technical dexterity and imaginative risk-taking with an increase in popularity and influence. This in turn, translated into an increase in the number of concerts given and in the price of tickets and artists' fees. Not surprisingly, this form of virtuoso improvisation was exploited to the limit, giving rise to a type of musical spectacle denounced by certain composers and circles of connoisseurs as abusive to art, but that was nevertheless immensely enjoyed by listeners eager to be entertained and dazzled.

Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840) was one of the most popular Romantic virtuosos. His astonishing dexterity at the violin, his gift for showmanship, and his strange personal appearance and demeanor contributed to his capturing the imagination of audiences across Europe to the point of becoming a figure of quasi-mythical proportions. As the opposite counterpart of the holy figure of the Romantic genius, best exemplified by Beethoven, Paganini's public persona was surrounded by a demonic aura, fed by his almost impossible feats at the violin and by legends of a mysterious and criminal past. Improvisation was a fundamental aspect of his performances. Reportedly, the excited anticipation of the audiences before a concert was extraordinary: not only they were about to see and listen to a musician about whom they had heard fantastic things, but also they did not know exactly what he would do or how far he would go this time with his musical and theatrical antics.

Since the emergence of the first generations of Romantic virtuosi, their kind of crowd-pleasing musicianship was met with skepticism and even scorn from the ranks of "artistes" and connoisseurs. These were respectively musicians and initiated listeners who professed admiration for a few "serious" composers (usually Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven), and whose self-appointed mission was to carry on their legacy as purely as possible. Spohr was one of these "artistes," who as a traveling musician in Europe had the opportunity to introduce the compositions of the masters, especially Beethoven's and his own, in an attempt to convert the audiences to what he considered the true musical tradition. In his autobiography he liberally criticizes the musical situation he encountered, especially outside of Germany, characterized by the lack of precision and subtlety of orchestra musicians, the deficiency in compositional technique, and the popular taste for flashy virtuoso displays of dubious artistic value.

In this critical tone he wrote in 1816 about Paganini, whom he was nevertheless excited to meet and whom he called "the wonderful man":

On making nearer enquiry, what it is that he in reality fascinates his auditory with, one hears from the non-musical portion the most exaggerated encomiums--that he is a complete wizard, and brings tones from his violin which were never heard before from that instrument. Connoisseurs, on the other hand, say that it cannot be denied he certainly possesses a great dexterity with the left hand, in double-chords and in passages of every kind, but that the very thing by which he fascinates the crowd debases him to a mere charlatan, and does not compensate for that in which he is utterly wanting--a grand tone, a long bow-stroke, and a tasteful execution (Spohr 1878, vol. 1: 280).

Spohr, also a celebrated violinist, found himself occasionally contrasted with Paganini, so that he was attacked by Paganini's admirers and defended by his detractors. Spohr found this situation unjust, for in his opinion no comparison could be drawn between their very different styles; moreover, such comparison was disadvantageous to

him since it automatically made enemies of Paganini's many admirers. Paganini's music, nevertheless, did inspire young musicians who aspired to be "serious" composers. Schumann, for example, wrote in 1832 that Paganini "represents the turning-point of virtuosity" (quoted in Weiss and Taruskin 1984: 341). He was especially influential on Liszt, whose striking public persona and extraordinary abilities at the piano also brought him great fame in Europe. Also in 1832, Liszt wrote: "What a man, what a violinist, what an artist! God, what sufferings, what misery, what tortures in those four strings! And his expressiveness, his phrasing, his soul!!" (quoted in Weiss and Taruskin 1984: 342).

Like Paganini, Liszt was called a charlatan by "serious" music lovers and, just as Paganini had, he exploited this circumstance. But he was also aware--sometimes painfully so--of the artistic limitations of his public performance style. Both virtuosos were not only technical prodigies, but were also highly accomplished musicians, so that both could play in either a theatrical style or a refined and subtle one. When Spohr finally met Paganini in Italy in 1816, he insistently asked the (in)famous violinist to play for him, a request Paganini refused on grounds that "his style of play was calculated for the great public only, and with them never failed in its effect; and that if he was to play anything to me, he must play in a *different* manner, and for that he was at the moment by no means in the humour; but that we should probably meet in Rome or Naples, and then he would not put me off with a refusal" (Spohr 1878, vol. 1: 283). In Liszt this duality was even more extreme throughout most of his career. Even when he was a young virtuoso who produced astonishing effects with his piano playing, he could also perform the works of composers like Bach and Beethoven with the greatest fidelity. Charles Rosen offers an episode of 1844 that perfectly illustrates this. A French lover of Bach's music accused

Liszt of being a charlatan and "then asked him to play his famous arrangement for the piano of Bach's Prelude and Fugue in A Minor for organ." To this, Liszt replied,

"How do you want me to play it?"

"How? But . . . the way it ought to be played."

"Here it is, to start with, as the author must have understood it, played it himself, or intended it to be played."

And Liszt played. And it was admirable, the perfection itself of the classical style exactly in conformity with the original.

"Here it is a second time, as I feel it, with a slightly more picturesque movement, a more modern style and the effects demanded by an improved instrument." And it was, with these nuances, different . . . but not less admirable.

"Finally, a third time, here it is the way I would play it for the public—to astonish, as a charlatan." And, lighting a cigar which passed at moments from between his lips to his fingers, executing with his ten fingers the part written for the organ pedals, and indulging in other *tours de force* and prestidigitation, he was prodigious, incredible, fabulous, and received gratefully with enthusiasm (quoted in Rosen 1995: 510-511).

The type of improvisations with which Paganini, Liszt, and many other virtuosi astonished the "great public" was very different from the improvised performances in front of reduced and initiated circles such as those delivered by Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt himself, among others. It was in these more intimate performances where improvisation thrived in the Romantic period as a vehicle of the new aesthetic tendencies discussed above. But the flourishing of improvisation as sensationalist entertainment was not a marginal phenomenon in this period. It had significant links with the interests and preoccupations of the time. Long before the Romantic period, improvisation had been a popular medium for performers to exhibit their musical prowess and to compete with their rivals (recall for instance, the displays of virtuosity in Baroque operas or the musical "duels" in the Classical period between Mozart and Haydn). Around the turn of

the nineteenth century, the end of musical patronage and the increasing role played by public concerts had affected the relationship between musicians and audiences, now converted into paying publics on which the musicians' livelihoods depended. While aristocratic circles, along with newly powerful bourgeoisie, still had influence on questions of taste and artistic value, there was a growing middle-class sector of society which, often oblivious to musical subtleties, filled theaters and made their favorite performers famous.

The lack of musical sophistication and the power to buy concert tickets, however, were not the only factors that favored the extraordinary development of virtuoso improvisation in this era. Rather than being an exclusively socioeconomic phenomenon that developed independently from the Romantic culture, virtuosity also channeled important aspects of that culture. The adjectives "prodigious," "incredible," and "fabulous," used in the story just quoted to describe Liszt's brilliantly extravagant rendering of Bach's music, are telling of the ways in which this kind of musical performances were in tune with a Romantic atmosphere. In post-Enlightenment culture, art was indeed the realm of the prodigious, the incredible, and the fabulous; a realm where humans could get back in touch with feelings and aspirations formerly channeled by religious and philosophical tenets now discredited before the tribunal of reason.⁵

The illusionistic tricks of the virtuoso offered listeners a window onto an extraordinary realm where impossible things could happen. The popular associations of virtuosos with demonic, magical, or mystical attributes were an important part of the impact of virtuoso displays in the imagination of large audiences. Paganini was, according to rumors, "in league with the devil," and Liszt, who was often compared to him, was

⁵ See chapter four for a discussion of how it was possible to reformulate these tenets in an aesthetic context without reverting to a pre-enlightenment worldview.

also referred to in terms ranging from the demonic to the saintly. A music critic wrote of Liszt in 1838: "We have now heard him, the strange wonder, whom the superstition of past ages, possessed by the delusion that such things could never be done without the help of the Evil One, would undoubtedly have condemned without mercy to the stake-- we have heard him, and seen him too, which, of course, makes a part of the affair" (quoted in Weiss and Taruskin 1984: 363). And later, describing the end of the concert, the critic adds,

the hearers look at each other in mute astonishment as after a storm from a clear sky, as after thunder and lightning mingled with a shower of blossoms and buds and dazzling rainbows; and he the Prometheus, who creates a form from every note, a magnetizer who conjures the electric fluid from every key, a gnome, an amiable monster, who now treats his beloved, the piano, tenderly, then tyrannically; caresses, pouts, scolds, strikes, drags by the hair, and then, all the more fervently, with all the fire and glow of love, throws his arms around her with a shout, and away with her through all space . . . (ibid.: 365).

The Romantic rhetoric transforms the charlatan into a magnetizer, a gnome, a monster. The audience was not only entertained by the virtuoso feats, but fell under a sort of magical spell, especially the ladies, as documented in writings and caricatures of the time. The virtuoso came to express and to give shape to another aspect of the Romantic imagination, the fascination for the fantastic which could take the forms of the monstrous or the marvelous.

In a suggestive essay, E. T. Kirby (1976) argued that various forms of popular entertainment such as acrobatics, illusionism, puppetry, and different theatrical acts have their origins in shamanistic rituals. In a literal sense, shamans do trick their patients or followers into believing, for instance, that they can make objects appear or disappear. But in a more profound sense, in tricking their senses the shaman induces an extraordinary

state in which reality appears transfigured, and one is susceptible to surrender to a higher force that can ultimately heal, transform a child into an adult, or contact the dead. In Kirby's view, performance acts that play with the limits between the possible and the impossible have their origins in that kind of ritual. As such, they are not mere charlatanry aimed solely to fool naive audiences for a profit; rather, they are meaningful cultural practices which, by confusing the senses, awaken the imagination, transforming and enlarging reality as well as a sense of self. It is in this sense that Romantic virtuosos, prominently Paganini and Liszt, expressed an important aspect of the Romantic imagination. With their mixture of technical dexterity, artistic sensibility, and theatrical exhibitionism, they transfixed audiences, making them believe that the unimaginable was imaginable and hence possible, that known limits could be surpassed.

Improvisation, therefore, was as important a vehicle for spectacular virtuoso displays as for the expression of an aesthetics of inwardness and subjectivity. Spohr, for instance, a stern detractor of the shallowness and excesses of many improvising singers and instrumentalists, was nevertheless an admirer of the improvisatory art of musicians such as Hummel, to the point that he valued the piano more as an instrument for improvisation than for the performance of concerti (Spohr 1878 vol. 2: 19).

Public improvisation began to decline during the 1830s and 1840s. Throughout the 1830s it continued to be included in public performances, but more in the mode of theatrical virtuosity and less as medium for artistic expression. As early as 1831, Mendelssohn wrote in a letter to his father: "My former opinion is now fully confirmed, that it is an absurdity to extemporize in public," and later: ". . . I am resolved never again to extemporize in public--it is both an abuse and an absurdity" (Mendelssohn 1945: 303). Liszt also experienced a change in his attitude towards improvising variations on

the works of other composer in public. In 1837 he wrote about past performances:

I then frequently performed . . . the works of Beethoven, Weber, and Hummel, and I confess to my shame that in order to compel the bravos of an audience always slow to grasp beautiful things in their august simplicity, I had no scruples against changing their tempos and intentions; I even went so far as insolently to add to them a host of passages and cadenzas . . . You wouldn't believe . . . how much I deplore these concessions to bad taste, these sacrilegious violations of the SPIRIT and LETTER, because in me the most absolute respect for the masterpieces of the great masters has replaced the need for novelty and individuality (quoted in Wangermee 1950: 245).

Always ambivalent about his persona as sensationalistic piano player he wrote in a letter of the same period: "Am I sentenced without mercy to this career of buffoon and salon entertainer?" (quoted in Winklhofer 1977: 20). The change in the attitudes of composers towards improvisation was largely directed towards improvisation associated with the theatrical antics of the traveling virtuosos and with the alteration of the works of other composers in public concerts. Mendelssohn continued to improvise occasionally in public concerts but mostly in the form of free fantasies. Liszt also continued to offer public improvisations after 1837, but they became increasingly rare.

But the growing distaste for public improvisation was separate from the private practice of improvisation. This practice would continue to take place, not on cue and in front of an audience that expected musical feats, but in moments of inspiration, when the composer was alone or in the company of a select group of friends. In 1836, for example, not long before Liszt wrote the letter in which he lamented being a mere buffoon, his improvisation at the organ of Mozart's "Dies Irae" in front of Adolphe Pictet, George Sand, and Countess Marie d' Agoult, his lover at the time, prompted the comments that follow. For Pictet, the improvisation combined "grandeur and richness, thought and passion, power and grace." For George Sand, the organ "thundered like the powerful

voice of God, and the musician's inspiration sent all the hell and purgatory of Dante soaring, from the narrow vaults of the nave to its rose and pearl-grey ribs." And when the improvisation ended, Marie D' Agoult, according to Pictet's account, "rose to offer Liszt a gesture of gratitude, her face bathed with tears and her expression one of profound emotion" (quoted in Winklhofer 1977: 25).

A Counterargument: Wangermee

Robert Wangermee published in 1950 a study of improvisation at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The study constitutes a unique attempt in the literature to discuss-- and come to terms with-- the enormous influence improvisation had in the early Romantic period. Wangermee acknowledges that improvisation as a practice was a pervasive presence in the musical world of the Romantic period and he discusses in detail two forms of improvisation, preludes and cadenzas, as practiced then. But he argues that the flourishing of improvisation at this time was more an invention of Romantic writers than a properly musical phenomenon. He cites, for example, the following account by Carl Czerny:

[Beethoven's] improvisation was among the most brilliant and impressive; in the society where he was, it produced such impression on each of his listeners that often he brought tears to his eyes. There was in his expression something marvelous; independently from the beauty and originality of his ideas and of the ingenious manner in which he rendered them. When he had finished one improvisation of this kind, he would burst in laughs and would make fun of the emotion he had caused in his audience (quoted in Wangermee 1950: 228, my translation).

When Beethoven improvised in salons and public concerts, Wangermee affirms, he was but continuing a long tradition of music as entertainment that goes back to the lutenists

of the Renaissance. What is different in the nineteenth century, he goes on to say, is "the favor that is conferred to improvisation, the preference that is going to mark it vis-a-vis the written work" (ibid.: 229). This preference for him was but a Romantic illusion, a phenomenon unrelated to the true musical achievements of the time. For him, Beethoven's laugh is not a sign of the artist's disdain of mundane success, but it indicates that for him "only his written works should count."

We know from his sketches how much [Beethoven] mistrusted his original creation, how much he corrected, planed, worked his musical ideas before being satisfied. To his eyes, improvisation at the piano could not be but a minor creation--a salon entertainment-- or, perhaps, an exercise for the fingers or the spirit, capable to keep awake the imagination, but unable to produce a creation truly satisfactory (ibid.: 230).

But the response was different for his listeners, Wangermee continues, as they preferred Beethoven as an improviser (ibid.). Wangermee explains this preference as evidence of the influence of Romantic ideas and poetry on the listeners: "the Romantic writers integrated among their favourite ideas, assumed without previous discussion, that improvisation represented a privileged artistic activity; an artist does not truly affirm his value but by the quality of his improvisations" (ibid.: 233). He contends that for the virtuosi/composers improvisation was not more than a game and an easy way to please the public, and that their true creative output was confined to the composition of written works. The prestige improvisation has in this period is, then, "mere appearance":

[composers] want to give the illusion of improvisation--since, theoretically, this continued to be a privileged activity-- but all these improvisations are written out . . . : Without openly avoiding it, it was understood that the most beautiful disorder was not born out of the whims of imagination, but it was an effect of the most worked out, the most composed art (ibid.: 253).

Wangermee makes a distinction between, on the one hand, "the spirit of poets and the general taste" and, on the other, the "reality of things," namely the decline of actual improvisatory practice at this time (*ibid.*: 252). This distinction can be supported on the grounds of the growing gap at the beginning of the nineteenth century between the general public and a reduced circle of connoisseurs. But the implication that Romantic composers were uninfluenced by the ideas of Romantic writers and poets assumes that musical creativity exists in a vacuum, independent from cultural and social contexts.

Wangermee insightfully recognizes the great impact of improvisation on the compositions of the Romantic composers (he mentions in particular fantasies, impromptus, and preludes), and he asserts that what we find in these works is not improvisation *per se*, but a simulation of improvisation. He concludes from this that the relevance of improvisation in this period was also an illusion, an invention of poets blindly followed by an undiscerning public. But, as I have argued, improvisation was simulated in Romantic works because spontaneous music-making was a central aesthetic ideal of the time. In other words, composers did not simulate improvisation in order to comply with a convention of the moment, unrelated to real creative pursuits. They did so because Romantic ideals such as freedom, imagination, inspiration, and spontaneity embodied by improvised music were fundamental to their artistic preoccupations.

Wangermee thus confronts the question of the relevance of improvisation in the Romantic period only to finally conclude that its relevance was illusory. His position, therefore, though much more sophisticated than the mere neglect of this question in the literature, functions in the end as a legitimation of this neglect. But Wangermee does draw attention to an interesting phenomenon: the fact that improvisation in the Western tradition disappeared at the moment of its highest prestige. He writes:

At the same time that [improvisation] enjoys in the spirit of poets and the general taste of an extreme favor that it had never before known, and that made of it the artistic activity par excellence, in reality, it was losing the real importance it had had in past times: one does not prelude anymore, cadences are limited, and the improvising of variations and fantasies is renounced (Wangermee 1950 : 252).

In the next chapter I will discuss the decreasing role of Romantic improvisation by arguing that in this period there was a tension between the aesthetic ideals here discussed and the historicist current of the time. One of the solutions to this tension was the transformation of the practice of improvisation into an ideal for composition.

Conclusion

In tracing the affinity between improvisation and the Romantic imagination in this chapter I have argued that improvisation in the first half of the nineteenth century did not constitute an anachronistic remnant of Baroque practices. Improvisation flourished with the emergence of the Romantic movement, favored by a new cultural climate that emphasized freedom, imagination, transitoriness, spontaneity, and other aspects generally associated with improvised music. I am not suggesting, however, that Romantic improvisation was a consequence of the impact on music of the ideas of poets and philosophers. Rather, improvisation was a firmly established practice in Europe which, as had happened since the earlier stages of the Western tradition, developed along with the general changes in musical style and performance practice.

Improvisation, furthermore, not only embodied Romantic ideas, but it also inspired them, as it also inspired the composition of many Romantic works. The idea that the Romantic period is characterized by the pervasive practice of improvisation, as

well as by the composition and performance of a body of works that later became canonic, suggests the following points. First, it suggests that improvisation in the Western tradition was not an "early," immature musical manifestation, nor a marginal activity. Rather, it had developed across stylistic and social changes, just as the writing of music had. Secondly, it suggests that most of the composers whose works now form the Western musical canon lived and created in a musical world substantially different from what we now understand as the world of Western classical music.

Far from being antithetical or marginal to this world, improvisation was a fundamental part of it until quite recently. An investigation of improvisation in the Western tradition, therefore, would be more illuminating of this tradition if it concentrated not on what makes the periods that allowed for the practice of improvisation exceptional, but rather on what makes the short period that excluded it--roughly from the second half of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century--exceptional.

CHAPTER THREE

RUINS AND DOCUMENTS: FROM HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS TO HISTORICAL METHOD

The fascination of the Romantics with ruins reveals a sensibility with regard to the past that contrasts sharply with the document-based positivistic approach of late nineteenth-century historians. Ruins are open: their incompleteness appeals to the imagination of the Romantic. They suggest continuity between past and present but, at the same time, because they are the result of a process of decay they also point to a gap between past and present. The temporal--not merely chronological--nature of this gap is also suggested by the contemplation of ruins, since the effects of erosion and decay evidence the processes of change through time that link, as well as separate, past and present and, by analogy, present and future. The feeling of longing associated with the Romantic interest in ruins and fragments is not necessarily a sign of pessimism. If the Romantics can lament the decadence of former perfection and even imagine their own present as the ruins of the future, they can also imagine the past as the beginning of the present, and the present as the beginnings of the future. Ruins, in any case, evoke a process of perpetual change and flux, and a concept of history inseparable from the experience of temporality.

Documents, as the basic data for historical research, suggest a different relationship with the past. Documents, taken as objects of scientific study and analytical scrutiny, are fundamentally closed. As object of study, a document stands for a past reality, but it does not by itself suggest a temporal process. It appears as a thing that has survived its own time and is now in the present as if it were one more thing among

present things. Similarly, the idea that a contemporary writing or work will be a historical document in the future suggests a form of static permanence, not of temporal becoming.

To be sure, old documents—not taken as objects of scientific study—can raise the same kind of Romantic temporal awareness as ruins, and ruins can be scientifically studied as archaeological objects. But I propose ruins and documents as symbols, respectively, of two general attitudes towards history in the nineteenth century: the new historical awareness that characterized the early Romantic period, and the later formalization of history as a discipline concerned with the scientific study of the past. The later development cannot be understood absent the earlier interest in history, but, despite a direct connection between them, they stand for sharply contrasting sensibilities and goals.

In this chapter I focus on the Romantic period, a period when historical consciousness had become a major force in European culture but had not yet crystallized into a scientific approach to the past. Historical research in this period already had scientific aspirations, but it was still openly intertwined with the Romantic and idealist worldviews. I argue that early nineteenth-century approaches to history were substantially different from the later formalization of history as a discipline. This discussion will allow me to then make two related claims: First, the central role played by improvisation in the Romantic period was not in conflict with the historical thinking of the era, which is better described as an acute awareness of becoming rather than as a methodological fixation on documents. Second, towards the middle of the century historical research became increasingly formalized and music historians, following the general trend of the period, endeavored to build a discipline based on solid empirical ground by focusing exclusively on written works.

History as the Awareness of Becoming

Emerging in the midst of a time of political and cultural revolutions in Europe, the Romantic generation developed an acute awareness of change in individual lives and in social groups. This awareness was inscribed within the idealist and organicist worldview, and it was thus interpreted in terms of processes of becoming, and not of discontinuity. The Romantic focus on becoming meant a constant mediation between the essential instability of a world in constant flux and the notion of a thread that connected the new with the old and with the yet to come. The contemplation of ruins, the religious and aesthetic Gothic revival and, in general, the fascination with the past of the early Romantic period entailed not just the enshrinement of the past as such, but a new consciousness of the underlying interdependence between past, present and future.

The emphasis on becoming and on the past, both interpreted in light of a unitary conception of the world, provided a fertile ground for the development of historical thinking. The Romantic movement itself has become associated with the idea of "historicism." This term (from the German *Historismus*) was coined later in the century and was applied retrospectively to the early Romantic engagement with history. Historicism has since been used to refer to different concepts, but, as Baumer notes, "correctly used [historicism] means real empathy for the past along with the twin ideas of temporal individuality and development" (Baumer 1977: 295). This original sense is the one I will employ here.

Historicism as a movement influenced every aspect of post-Enlightenment culture in Europe and the United States, to such a degree that it has been called "one of the

greatest revolutions in western thought" (Friedrich Meinecke, quoted in Baumer 1965: 294). To think historically was not just one intellectual orientation among others; it was the fundamental orientation of all disciplines. For Carlyle, "history is not only the fittest study but the only study, and includes all others. It is the true epic poem, the universal divine Scripture" (quoted in Gooch 1959: 302; see also Liebel 1971: 359ff). The historicist outlook was not only a driving force for scholars and art connoisseurs, but it became enormously popular through novels, like those of Walter Scott and Chateaubriand. Walter Scott's cycle of historical novels, in particular, was widely and enthusiastically read in many European countries. These influential novels, which represent an attempt to reconstruct the essence of Scotland by presenting a poetic and heroic image of its past, are good examples of the popularization of the Romantic and historicist outlook that defined an era.

While nearly every discipline and form of art was occupied with historical subjects, Romantic painting departed from the eighteenth-century focus on historical subjects and turned towards landscapes. This apparent paradox, insightfully discussed by Charles Rosen, is but another symptom of the underlying unifying schema that formed the backbone of the Romantic worldview. Romantic painters lost interest in depicting historical figures not because they were not interested in history, but because "their ambitions were much greater and more astonishing. They wished to make pure landscape without figures carry the weight, attain to the heroic and epic significance, of historical painting" (Rosen 1998: 85). History is made up of individuals, facts, events, but in the early nineteenth century it was also much more than that-- it was another expression of the sublime. Eighteenth-century realistic portraits of persons and events were a superficial reference to the historical essence of the meaning of human life and the

universe. "Landscaping" was closer to this essence, just as music, especially absolute music, was.

For Rosen there is no doubt that "the replacement of history painting by landscape had an ideological purpose directly related to the destruction of traditional religious and political values at the end of the eighteenth century" (Rosen 1998: 85). At the same time, landscapes, now regarded as intimately connected to the individual's inwardness and to Absolute Spirit, were a symbol of a more "natural" religion and even of the new political ideals of nationalism, also modeled after the organic paradigm. The contemplation of nature was thought to lead to higher truths beyond the limited significance of concrete persons and events, just as music was thought to reach a higher realm beyond the limited significance of words. History and nature were not opposite realms in Romantic philosophy and art. Nature was subjective, history organic, and both were principal elements of the grand synthesis attempted by the Romantic imagination.

The Romantic interest in history was not radically new. During the eighteenth century, numerous historically oriented works were published. But where earlier works had emphasized universal and static laws governing the individual and society, in the nineteenth century the emphasis shifted towards the particular, the mutable, and the unique of every historical stage. The French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the social and political turmoil in many European countries influenced and reinforced a new awareness of the changing nature of human affairs. In an essay published in 1774 Herder, one of the first authors to conceptualize the new historical sensibility, developed the idea of historical relativism, asserting the individuality of cultures and peoples as opposed to the universal standards of the Enlightenment.

This "historical relativism," however, was conceived by Herder and later by the

Romantics as inscribed within an all-encompassing development towards a goal. The new historical consciousness entailed, then, not just an awareness of change, but also an attempt to discover meaning and a sense of direction in that change. Thus, when the Romantics considered themselves as "modern," they were asserting their differences with respect to former generations, but they were also situating themselves historically in relation to future developments. For Hegel, his generation had already reached the goal, achieving the highest point in historical development. But most Romantics, inspired by Herder, placed their hope in a future age in which the values of a venerated past would have a revival.

If the Romantics saw in classical Antiquity an exemplary past against which they defined themselves as modern, they looked to the Middle Ages as the past with which they could identify. To be in step with the times meant both to establish a contrast with a respected Antiquity, and to assert an identification with the spirit of the Middle Ages. Reacting against the Enlightenment's critique of the Middle Ages, the Romantics rehabilitated the period, seeing it not as a "Dark Age" ridden by superstition, but as a period suffused with the wisdom and moral depth of religious and mystical teachings. The "Gothic revival" synthesized the movement of reaction against a rationalist recent past and of identification with a distant past perceived as mystical and poetic. The idea of the "gothic" expressed a taste for the vague and the mysterious, and a search for a quasi-mythical past in which the organic link between the human world, nature, and God was unbroken.

This Romantic and idealistic sense of constant movement towards perfectibility was different from the Enlightenment idea of progress. For the Romantics and idealist philosophers, progress was fundamentally a spiritual and metaphysical category. In

contrast to the Enlightenment idea, it did not depend on an exclusively rational discovery of the laws governing the world, but concerned an idea of spiritual development unfolded through history. Also, for the Romantics the idea of a goal functioned more as guiding ideal which could perhaps never be attained on earth, than as a fixed goal that will be inexorably reached at some point in history (see Baumer 1977: 297-301).

Ideals of progress and reason, therefore, were not radically abandoned, but reinterpreted against a theological and historical backdrop. History for the Romantics was not a mere chronology of events, but a grand story of humanity with metaphysical significance. The most systematic and influential example of this is the Hegelian system, in which history is considered to be the story of Spirit getting to know itself through the temporal unfolding of humanity in its process of reaching self-consciousness. Similarly, Schelling considered history the story of the return to God of a fallen humanity, while Fichte spoke of history as the movement towards the achievement of an ideal moral order. For these philosophers history became the source of a unitary explanation of the whole. It offered a way to understand the meaning of human life as well as the divine plan at the root of all meaning.

The Romantic view of the history of humanity is inseparable from a focus on individuals, especially those of extraordinary talents or actions such as geniuses and heroes. Carlyle, who found an enthusiastic reception for his course on "Heroes and Hero-worship," declared that heroes, or men of action, "formed the backbone of history" (in Gooch 1959: 307). The idea that especially gifted individuals formed the fundamental steps of a universal plan unfolded through history became a central aesthetic and historical tenet throughout the nineteenth century. Spirit was manifested in history, and history was basically constituted by a succession of great men. These great men,

therefore, constituted through the ages a sort of society of chosen individuals; those who, as representative of the highest levels reached by humanity, made possible the unfolding of a divine universal plan.

And just as Spirit manifested itself in the process of coming to know itself through history, the true essence of a genius was to be found in the story of his life. Carlyle sums up this idea saying that "the History of the world is but the Biography of great men" (quoted in Baumer 1977: 300). Not only was biography a preferred medium to grasp the significance of great men, but, as Morse Peckham has remarked, there was an apparent conviction that all literature worthy of the name was autobiographical (Peckham 1995: 133). This nineteenth-century interest in biographical accounts reflects the Romantic emphasis on the individual's struggle to conquer his or her destiny. The lives of heroes and geniuses were exemplary of this struggle, which was, on a human scale, analogous to the grand drama unfolded by universal History. The creative artist, in particular, became paradigmatic of the idea of great men who carried History on their shoulders. Whereas in the Enlightenment exceptional talent was considered to be the product of specific circumstances and social conditions, in the Romantic period the talented creative artist was regarded as "sent into the world" (Baumer 1977: 300) or, as Schelling had put it, as "the vehicle of a power which acts through him" (Copleston 1994: 120).

The idea of the genius blessed with extraordinary gifts but also burdened with an extraordinary task was first personified in music by Beethoven (see chapter four, pp.155-65). The nineteenth-century cult of genius also reflected the new historical consciousness, with which it was inextricably linked. The genius was admired both as medium and as agent, as enabler as well as maker of history. This nineteenth-century

convergence of the concepts of genius and History constitutes another aspect of the art-religion that originated in this time. The creative activity of the genius was considered something of a sacred task, a duty whose fulfillment constituted the genius's destiny.

Marion Scott (1934) ends her book on Beethoven with the following words:

Closing the pages of this F major Quartet to gaze in retrospect upon Beethoven's whole career, his words take on a new meaning. 'Muss es sein?' ['Must it be?'] Destiny seems to brood over the composer as over his compositions. Beethoven the man had to be; his music had to come into being. Everything is as it should be. 'Es muss sein,' ['it must be'] we say quietly, and that answer is true, for it is not of Death, but of Life (Scott 1974 [1934]: 277).

The "es muss sein" governing the genius's destiny also applied to the continuity between generations. Just as Beethoven's music "had to come into being," so did a new generation of composers that would carry forward his legacy. This was, in fact, a great, if not the greatest artistic problem many composers after Beethoven had to face--how to write music after him, so that they could fulfill their historical role as Beethoven's heirs while at the same time fulfilling their destiny as creative artists finding their own voice.

The Romantic aesthetics of expression is closely related to the notion of the artist as genius in the context of modern historical consciousness. To find their own voices was considered necessary by the Romantics, in order to distinguish themselves as individuals and as members of a new generation. This historical task was fundamental for the fulfillment of their destinies as artists. For their art to be "authentic," Romantic artists had to be themselves, and, as historical beings, in order to be themselves they had to be "modern." One of the reasons behind the Romantic impulse to express one's interiority was the tremendous impact of the new historical consciousness in the artist's self-understanding--the more accurately artists expressed their own voices, the more clear their

distinction from past voices was and, therefore, the more unequivocally they were fulfilling their artistic and historical destiny. As Lovejoy noted, this idea was not absolutely new, but it became especially powerful in the Romantic period. He writes: "a man--especially an artist--ought to be of his own time, to express in his life or art the characteristics, the ideas, the spirit of his age" (Lovejoy 1965 [1941]: 92).

The ideal of artistic expression was also a form of autobiography. Whereas scholars could put together biographical accounts of great men by researching the events of their lives, creative artists could offer through their art an expression of their inner beings or, better, of their inner struggles to become themselves. There was, therefore, no contradiction between the commitment of the genius to be and to express himself, on the one hand, and the historical duty of carrying forward a tradition, on the other. The artistic expression of the artist's subjectivity was, in fact, the nucleus in which the transmission of a tradition as well as the concretization of the genius's legacy to posterity were realized.

The concept of genius in the nineteenth century points, however, to an internal tension between this century's historicism and Romantic aesthetics. In order to express himself the genius had to express the spirit of his own time. At the same time, according to the organicist model, the genius's creativity, though manifested spontaneously, was a reflection of natural laws. The genius, in short, expressed the uniqueness of his historical situation by means of works created according to universal and necessary laws.

The contradiction, once again, is only apparent. This tension inherent in the Romantic concept of becoming is in fact a key aspect of the grand Romantic project of synthesis between spirit and nature, or freedom and determinism. Humanity at large was conceived by idealist philosophers as both free and bound, but its realization through

history was the manifestation of the triumph of freedom over the determinism of natural law. The idea that the process of self-realization itself was not arbitrary, but followed a higher law, was understood not as an external imposition, but as the result of the Spirit's awareness of its own nature. The concept of genius exemplified the Romantic attempt to synthesize freedom and nature, the universal and the individual, the eternal and the temporal. If the tendency to historicize all value and meaning did not in the early nineteenth-century result in aesthetic (or ethic) relativism, it was because this historicism itself rested on absolute metaphysical grounds. Organicism and historicism, ultimately, complemented each other.

A striking musical example of the Romantic confluence of historicism and organicism is Louis Spohr's Historical Symphony (1839), whose four movements are written in four different styles, reflecting different historical periods. They are described by his biographer as follows: "Theme the first: The period of Bach-Händel, 1720. Adagio: Haydn-Mozart 1780. Scherzo: Beethoven period 1810. Finale: The most modern period 1840" (in Spohr 1878, vol. 2: 215). According to this biographer, this was a work "which afforded him not only during its creation, but also upon the occasions of its closely following performances in Cassel, the greatest satisfaction" (ibid.). The symphony had a mixed reception. In general, it was well received by the publics of England and Vienna, and Mendelssohn reported a very favorable reception in Leipzig. But there were also many detractors, Schumann being the most severe of all.

That Spohr, who championed formal unity and consistency to the point of criticizing Beethoven's last works for being "eccentric, unconnected, and incomprehensible" (Spohr 1878, vol 1: 188), enthusiastically composed a symphony in four different styles may seem puzzling. But more than a whimsical patchwork exercise

inspired by a historicist fashion, this work in conception expresses an understanding of the foundations of the historical thinking of the time. In the first place, in conceiving the four movements as a stylistic developing line that included Bach, Händel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and that culminated in "the most modern period," anonymously represented by his own music, Spohr was expressing musically his historical self-definition as modern and as successor of a tradition of "serious" (German) composers. Secondly, the symphonic structure, made up of four distinct movements that form nevertheless a formal unity, was a musical means to express the inscription of historical change in a larger whole. Rather than being a mere "stylistic masquerade" (Einstein 1947: 126) this symphony, though lacking unity by stylistic standards, was consistent in principle with the Romantic concept of historical continuity. Spohr's meta-stylistic musical experiment would seem to reflect an almost postmodern sensibility, were it not composed under the guiding ideal of an organicist concept of history.

The *Historical Symphony* is the most unambiguous and crude manifestation of the influence of historicism on musical creativity, but it is not the only one. Alfred Einstein notes, for example, the existence of a "secret historical compendium" in many of Brahms's piano works, as in the Variation on a Händel's Aria (Einstein 1947: 225). Historicism also had an impact on the theoretical attempts to make sense of the abstractness of absolute music. Charles Rosen quotes a remarkable passage from 1809 in which Coleridge offers a reflection on absolute music as the embodiment of historical processes. I quote at length:

Certainly there is one excellence in good music, to which, without mysticism, we may find or make an analogy in the records of History. I allude to that sense of *recognition*, which accompanies our sense of novelty in the most original passages of a great Composer. If we listen to a symphony of Cimarosa the present strain still seems not only to recall, but almost to *renew*, some past movement, another and yet the same!

Each present movement bringing back as it were, and embodying the Spirit of some melody that had gone before, anticipates and seems trying to overtake something that is to come: and the Musician has reached the summit of his art, when having thus modified the Present by the Past, he at the same time weds the Past *in* the present to some prepared and corresponsive future. The Auditor's thoughts and feelings move under the same influence: retrospection blends with anticipation, and Hope and Memory, a female Janus, become one Power with a double Aspect (quoted in Rosen 1995: 73 -74, emphasis in original).

This effect produced by music in the form of pleasurable sensation is similarly produced at the level of "intellectual complacency." And Coleridge goes on, "The Events and Characters of one Age, like the Strains in Music, recall those of another, and the variety by which each is individualized, not only gives a charm and poignancy to the resemblance, but likewise renders the whole more intelligible" (quoted in Rosen 1995: 74).

Coleridge's quasi-phenomenological language antedates by over a decade Hegel's lectures on the aesthetics of music, in which Hegel more systematically elaborated a similar approach to music. But as Rosen notes, this way of making sense of absolute music was common among cultivated listeners of the time (*ibid.*). In any case, Coleridge's speculations are in step with the intellectual climate at the beginning of the nineteenth century, one dominated by metaphors of organic development and constant flux.

Herder, who had been a major influence on the formation of the Romantic idea of history, compared history to a tree, "which throws out many branches and is forever renewing itself" (from a 1774 essay, quoted in Baumer 1965 [1941]: 395). This idea provides a fitting image of Romantic historicism as a movement concerned with becoming. Also, given that the tree metaphor was often used by the Romantics to illustrate their organic concept of a variety of things, the analogy between history and tree also suggests others, such as that between history and poems or, the one drawn by Coleridge, between

history and music. Romantic historicism entails, in short, a fluid, dialectical, quasi-phenomenological conception of history. It was also, as Hans-Georg Gadamer has noted, an intuitive approach to history, in which the imagination of poets and the idealistic constructs of philosophers had primacy over historical facts. This approach, described by Gadamer as the "Romantic reflective enjoyment of history," was well summarized by Friedrich Schleiermacher, creator of modern hermeneutics and an influential thinker among the early German Romantics: "True historical significance rises above history. Phenomena exists, like miracles, only to direct our attention towards the Spirit that playfully generates them" (quoted in Gadamer 1999 [1960]: 197).

Between Art and Science: Early Nineteenth-Century Historians and the Search for Truth

History is distinguished from all other sciences in that it is also an art.

--Ranke

Leopold von Ranke, considered "the father of historical science," warned his students about attitudes towards history such as that manifested by Schleiermacher. He believed that empirical research was the basis for attaining historical truth, and he criticized idealist conceptions of history for being elaborated a priori and then imposed on facts. But Ranke, who as a student in the 1810s had read Fichte, Schelling, and Goethe extensively, built his historical approach upon a worldview that was fundamentally idealist and organicist. Thus, while he was concerned with developing a critical historical method based on empirical evidence and aimed to reconstruct the past "as it really was" ("wie es eigentlich gewesen," Ranke 1973: xvi), Ranke also held that the historian's task resembled

that of the priest, for it consisted on deciphering the "holy hieroglyph" contained in history (ibid.: xxiii).

During the first half of the century Romantic thinkers and scholars of the emerging historical schools shared fundamental tenets in their conceptions of history. The Romantic attitude towards history was not limited to dream-like contemplations of ruins and poetic reveries about a mysterious past. Romantic authors like Friedrich Schlegel were also concerned with the particularity of historical facts, which they considered in an organic relationship with the whole. In fact, typically Romantic speculations about the whole were inseparable from a new awareness of the importance of the individual parts that made up that whole.

Friedrich Schlegel, whose thought was central to the development of historical consciousness in Germany, combined his metaphysical speculations on history with a love for methodical research of historical facts. In the Introduction to his *Philosophy of History* (1828) he wrote: "History cannot be separated from facts, and depends entirely on reality; and thus the philosophy of History as it is the spirit or idea of History, must be deduced from real historical events, from the faithful record and lively narration of facts" (Schlegel 1847 [1828]: 65). And Herder, whose early-Romantic organic philosophy was a major influence on the historicist current, elaborated the ideal of the "totality" as manifested in specific individuals. For him the idea of individual organic growth was fundamental to understanding culture and, ultimately, the development of universal history. As in the realm of artistic creation, the historical idea of totality was a dynamic one, conceived in terms of a developing whole rather than as static structure. The search for historical truth was, accordingly, directed less towards the discovery of eternal laws than towards the discovery of connecting threads underlying the historical

process.

Ranke, echoing Herder, also believed that the eternal and infinite dwelled in the individual, a belief that for him constituted "the religious foundation on which our [the historians'] efforts rest" (quoted in Nori 1995: 56). Though historians like Ranke sought to establish a purely empirical ground for their research, they were nonetheless working within a common metaphysical and theological background. His fundamental affinity with idealist philosophy is expressed in statements like the following: "In every epoch of mankind a certain great tendency manifests itself, and progress rests on the fact that a certain movement of the human spirit reveals itself in every epoch" (Ranke 1973: 53).

The difference between Ranke's concept and idealistic philosophies of history was for him, therefore, not the metaphysical and religious foundations of reality, but the method of attaining knowledge of them. To *observe*--rather than rationally positing or speculating--the existence of the spiritual forces that give sense and direction to seemingly chaotic phenomena was the paradoxical project underlying the emergence of positivistic methodologies in the nineteenth century.

Ranke considered himself a disciple of Barthold Niebuhr (1776-1831), the only historian from the previous generation whose work he respected. Niebuhr, who declared himself primarily concerned with truth--"I have not knowingly nor without earnest investigation written anything which is not true" (Gooch 1959: 19)--inaugurated a stream of critical revisions of formerly accepted historical sources. Following Niebuhr's project of critical historiography, the novelty of Ranke's method consisted primarily in an inquiry into the personality of the writer whose sources were under critical scrutiny, and an assessment of the origin of the writer's information. For Ranke, in order to distinguish trustworthy sources from false ones, the historian needed to gain an insight into the

particular nature of every act of writing that passes down as historical source: "Some will copy the ancients, some will seek instruction for the future, some will attack or defend, some will only wish to record facts. Each must be separately studied" (quoted in Gooch 1959: 75).

Niebuhr's *History of Rome*, however, was criticized by August Schlegel as making claims that had no evidential support. Others have similarly charged Niebuhr with not distinguishing between proven truths and hypotheses, or with being "incurably subjective" (Gooch 1959: 20). Niebuhr's method of finding the truth seems indeed to have relied heavily on a powerful imagination. His method, which Gooch called "divinatory," consisted in collecting pieces of evidence and filling in the gaps until a coherent picture was achieved. But what Gooch interprets as "boundless self-confidence" can be better understood as Niebuhr's typically Romantic belief in the power of imagination to attain knowledge. Thus, Niebuhr considered this "divinatory" method to be infallible for, according to him, he had "a correct and very rapid judgment, a faculty scarcely capable of deception in discovery of the false and incorrect." Similarly, he declared that he was a historian, "for I can make a complete picture from separate fragments, and I know where the parts are missing and how to fill them up. No one believes how much of what seems to be lost can be restored" (ibid.: 19).

Wilhelm von Humboldt elaborated the most thorough application of German idealism to historiography.⁶ In an essay delivered in 1821 to the Prussian Academy of Sciences, he presented his "Doctrine of Ideas" (*Ideenlehre*), according to which historical truth is attained by following two methods: The first method consists in "the exact, impartial, critical investigation of events," and the second is "the connecting of the events

⁶ Humboldt has been called the "greatest theorist of the *Ideenlehre*, and Ranke its "greatest practitioner" (Karl Lamprecht quoted in Ranke 1973: 3).

explored and the intuitive understanding of them which could not be reached by the first means" (in Ranke 1973: 7). Neither method by itself can result in true historical knowledge. Attention to individual facts and sympathetic understanding of a Whole of which those facts are parts, empirical research and intuitive grasp of the essence of phenomena, study of historical becoming and belief in eternal ideas--the search for a balance between these Romantic polarities is essential to the idealist historiographies of Humboldt, Ranke and many German historians influenced by them.⁷

Like the Romantic movement in general, Romantic historiography also flourished in other European countries in the first decades of the century. I have already mentioned the influence of Carlyle's historical writings and Walter Scott's historical novels in England. In France, historians like Jules Michelet and the brothers Augustin and Amédée Thierry, also influenced by Romantic writers such as Chateaubriand and Walter Scott, conceived history not as a cumulation of facts, but as bringing the past to life by means of imagination as much as of research. A disciple of Augustin Thierry said of him: "I never witnessed without astonishment the promptness with which he seized a document and adopted it for his narrative. The least fragment revealed to him an organic whole which, by a sort of regenerative power, rose complete before his imagination" (in Gooch 1959: 164).

Michelet also used powerful imagination and creative language to interpret the past in the light of an organicist ideal. He professed great admiration for German culture, including the philosophies of Kant and Herder, the music of Beethoven, and the historical studies of Niebuhr. In clear idealistic terms he wrote in 1831, "With the world began a war which will only finish with the end of the world, that of man against nature, mind

⁷ According to Iggers and von Moltke, idealist historiography forms part of the German tradition from Ranke to Gerhardt Ritter, the latter active in the first half of the twentieth century, see Ranke 1973: 3.

against matter, liberty against fatality. History is nothing but the record of this ceaseless struggle" (in Gooch 1959: 170). For him, as well as for many early Romantics, the French Revolution was paradigmatic of this struggle. And his historical project, as well as that of other historians of the time, was inseparable from a nationalistic agenda. Thus, for him, the positive aspects of the Revolution expressed the voice of "the people," and this was nothing but the voice of God. Despite their differences, idealist philosophy, Romantic literature, and the emerging modern historiography of the early nineteenth century shared a basic worldview, and each one of them contributed to the rise of modern historical consciousness.⁸

The all-important role of imagination, the organicist and metaphysical understanding of the world, and the enthusiasm for the past were fundamental tenets early historians shared with philosophers, writers and artists. The particular challenge historians faced was to achieve a balance between imagination and research, that is, between an intuitive grasp of the Whole and an empirical assessment of individual phenomena. Whatever the degree of its success, the attempt to achieve this kind of balance was abandoned towards the middle of the century. In 1843 J. G. Droysen complained about the state of the discipline: "there is, I suppose, no field of knowledge that is so far from being theoretically justified, defined, and articulated as history" (quoted in Gadamer 1999 [1960]: 6).

In the course of the next few decades, the lacunae Droysen perceived in his discipline were increasingly filled, as historical research became more rigorous in the sense

⁸ Despite the Romantic use of imaginative interpretation, historians like Niebuhr and Michelet did strive for achieving historical knowledge, as opposed to other approaches in which historical data had little priority over legends, myths and the inventiveness of the writers. An extreme case is that of the Spaniard Conde, whose *History of the Arabs in Spain* appeared after his death 1819, was translated into other languages and celebrated as an authority in its field. It was not until 1849 that a French historian proved that Conde's knowledge of its subject was close to nonexistent: All his "translations" of Arabic documents were in fact fictitious, for Conde seems to have known little more of Arabic than the alphabet.

of being more focused in the systematic accumulation of facts. The year 1848, a year of revolutions and turmoil throughout Europe, marks a definitive shift away from what was left of a Romantic world. This year marks, for example, a sharp decline in the popularity of Ranke's lectures. Ranke's Romantic relativism seemed out of step with the new intellectual climate, while disciples of his, such as Droysen and Sybel (by then two main figures of the Prussian School), became more prominent both as active participants of the nationalist politics and as proponents of more rigorous historical methodologies. Although he always remained a friend of Ranke's, in 1856 Sybel stated the need for historians to detach themselves from Ranke's relativism and "all-round receptivity" and to strengthen their "ethical severity" (quoted in Gooch 1959: 131).

The link between History and Truth had had since the early nineteenth century not only an epistemological dimension but also an ethical and theological one. Rotteck, for instance, writing at the beginning of the century, used history as an instrument to teach moral behavior and to encourage his students to struggle for freedom. This struggle had also been the common thread in Schiller's lectures on history at the University of Jena and in Goethe's historical writings. The orientation underlying the interest on freedom through history was as much theological as it was political.

Especially around the middle of the nineteenth century in the midst of the European revolutions, historians became instrumental in the building of modern nationalisms. In particular, German historians had a fundamental role in the rise of German nationalism and the movement towards German unity. Droysen stated it clearly in a lecture given in the early 1840's: "my object is to express and justify the love of and belief in the fatherland" (quoted in Gooch 1959: 126). These nationalistic sentiments were in Droysen and many other historians and philosophers of history inseparable from

a theological understanding of history. Droysen, for example, also wrote that "From history we learn to understand God, and we can only understand history in God" (quoted in Gooch 1959: 131). The building of the German nation was thus presented by historians like Droysen as part of a divine plan that was unfolding through history.

Around the same time Droysen was calling for more "ethical severity" among historians, Sybel created the *Historische Zeitschrift*, the main goal of which was to be scientific and independent. In 1857 he wrote: "We want an organ to represent a definite scientific tendency and method. Every year history takes more and more the place of philosophy" (quoted in Gooch 1959: 134). It would have been more accurate to say that every year positivistic history took more and more the place of idealist philosophy. Early nineteenth-century historicism, with its inaccuracies, its exuberant language, and its generous use of imagination to fill in documentary gaps, died out along with the early Romantic movement.⁹

Theoretical speculations on music were also influenced by historicism. The Belgian musicologist Francois-Joseph Fétis in the 1830s elaborated a theory of the evolution of tonality that was, as Thomas Christensen has argued (1996), a clearly Hegelian approach. Fétis's "revelation" of 1831, that "tonality" had a metaphysical nature, and was not a mere result of physical causes (i.e., the overtone series), launched a series of investigations aimed at ascertaining the true nature of tonality as developed through history. For Fétis, the development of tonality in Western music was exemplary of the dialectics between freedom and nature, and of the primacy of the former over the latter. He elaborated a theory according to which the development of harmony and of the

⁹ The exuberance of Romantic language has sometimes been identified with an "Oriental" or "Eastern" language. For example Gooch's assessment of Carlyle: "There is something of the atmosphere of the gorgeous East about his work", and of Heine: "He recalls to me the large flowers and powerful perfumes of the Mahbharata" (Gooch 1959: 172).

tonal system constituted a process of emerging self-consciousness. This process was, in other words, the process by means of which composers and theorists over the generations would gradually reach an ever more complete recognition of historical laws. To Fétis, the self-conscious adherence to historical laws meant the triumph of the free exercise of human faculties, and the liberation from materialistic determinism.

As opposed to Rameau's typically eighteenth-century attempt to understand tonality as a system based on universal, rational laws, Fétis historicized tonality and music theory. But this historization of theory did not mean to Fétis the subsumption of theory under history but, rather, the realization of the true role of theory, a role dialectically related to history. In the words of Christensen, "just as the idealist hoped to show how nature and history were manifestations of the same ideal absolute, Fétis saw the task of his self-proclaimed science of the 'philosophie de la musique' to be to show how tonality was the dialectical synthesis of theory and history; music history was the actualization of tonality, while music theory could be seen as its 'objectification'" (Christensen 1996: 56).

As we have seen, historicism was also an integral aspect of Romantic composers' understanding of music and of their own identities as creative musicians. Early nineteenth-century composers had an unprecedented awareness of being part of a generation that was both connected to and distinct from the previous one. They recognized themselves as heirs of the artistic legacy of the Classical period, but their self-definition as "modern" largely depended on their reaction against the formal conventions received from classical masters (see McClary 2000, especially pp. 109-138). This was not the first time in the course of the Western musical tradition that one composer or a group of them had self-consciously detached themselves from ways of composing

perceived to be old.¹⁰ But the reaction of the Romantic generation with respect to the Classical conventions had for the first time a truly historical dimension: to make music in a "modern" manner meant for the Romantics a search for their own position in a grand process of change that was thought to have ontological significance. The ultimate meaning of individuals and of humanity was now historical and, hence, to strive for attaining one's place in history meant a search for self-identity. And, in accordance with the new awareness of change characteristic of the modern historical thinking, the Romantics' self-definition as a new generation placed a special emphasis on the importance of breaking with old rules. In this sense, the priority given to freedom of imagination above formal conventions was also an expression of historical consciousness.

Romantic Composers and Historical Consciousness

The historical consciousness of Romantic composers was manifested not only in their awareness of being a different generation, but also in their awareness of being the last (or the newest) link in a long tradition of composers. The search for self-identity was also a search for the historical whole of which the modern generation was a part. Romanticism was then both the period of the exaltation of creative freedom over convention and the period of the first historical revival of the masters of the past. In particular, the discovery of the music of J. S. Bach had, as we saw in an earlier chapter, a great impact on the Romantic composers. Around the turn of the century Bach's clavier music began circulating among connoisseurs and amateurs, and in 1802 Johann Nikolaus Forkel

¹⁰ Only one generation earlier, C.P. E. Bach and other composers of the Style Galant created their music as a reaction to the music of the "old wigs" (prominently, J. S. Bach's). And further back, recall for example Monteverdi's innovations with respect to Renaissance musical conventions, or even earlier the proponents of the Ars Nova and their program to break with rules perceived as outmoded.

published his ground-breaking biography of the composer. In subsequent years more works were found, studied, and performed thanks to the enthusiasm of leading Romantic figures such as Mendelssohn.

For Joseph Kerman, the idea of a canon originated in the early Romantic period when the inclusion of new music in the repertoires did not necessarily mean, as before, that the old music stopped being performed. As Kerman has argued, the process of growth of the canon was deeply embedded in the nationalist ideology of the time: "For from Hoffmann's time on, the ideology which nurtured that growth included a strong component of nationalism along with historicism, organicism . . . and what Carl Dahlhaus has aptly called 'the metaphysics of instrumental music'" (1983: 114).¹¹ But despite the existence of an incipient body of canonical works, the "Western canon" as it is known today had not yet crystallized in the early Romantic period. Rather, it was the result of a process that took place throughout the nineteenth century and that reached its apogee around the turn of the twentieth century. This was the period of the emergence of modernism when, according to Kerman, the ideology that sustained that process reached its fullest articulation at the very moment "when the ideology itself came under question" (Kerman 1983: 114). In the early nineteenth century, the idea of the canon was still unstable and fundamentally open. This was, after all, the time when Beethoven's new works were often charged by critics and audiences with being bizarre, chaotic, and obscure, and when improvised music still served as a privileged vehicle for aesthetic judgments.

The early Romantic rise of historical consciousness and the concurrent revival of the past, therefore, should be distinguished from the later culmination of a process of

¹¹ More recently, Lydia Goehr (1992) has discussed at length the formation of the canon around the turn of the nineteenth century (see chapter seven, pp. 259-63 for a discussion of Goehr's arguments).

reification of the musical canon. This process was a phenomenon inseparable from the formalization of the disciplines of music history and musicology. It was also parallel to the dismissal of Romantic historiography and the advent of an era marked by a scientist bent on scholarship and culture in general (see chapter seven).

In the early nineteenth century, as we have seen, the awareness of the essential historicity of every aspect of culture translated into a new perception of the product of musical creativity. The new awareness of the historical dimension of music, combined with the Romantic metaphysics of beauty, gave rise in this period to the association of greatness and immortality in aesthetic judgments. In Romantic aesthetics truth and beauty are inseparable, but truth is also inseparable from History. The idea that great art "makes history" has its origin in this period. For the first time, art belongs to posterity even more than it does to the present. The judgment of posterity is its mark of being great beyond mere fashion.

The awareness of the historical projection of the composers' works into the future was a new dimension added to the activity of creating music, but it did not take over the traditional way of enjoying and judging music as experience that belonged primarily to a fleeting present. Before the invention of recording technology, it was not only improvisations that were perceived as fleeting artistic expressions. Many composed works were performed only a few times in a given city in a listener's life time. Symphonies and operas were premiered and, depending on the public's opinion, they would continue as part of the repertoire or would disappear after just a few days. Scores could be purchased and studied, but the public would often judge a composition by a

single performance.¹²

Hegel's reflections on music are particularly illuminating in this regard. As we saw, Hegel valued above all those performances in which the musicians gave free rein to their fantasy, departing from the written work and offering unique renderings of it. With his praise of spontaneous musical expression Hegel, an eminently historical thinker, shows that the centrality of History in early nineteenth century philosophy did not necessarily mean the dismissal of all aspects of culture that could not be transformed into historical document. It was the increasingly scientific orientation of historical approaches, and not historical consciousness per se, that was incompatible with improvisation.

Around 1800, as Lydia Goehr has argued, there was a strong tendency towards the “binding script” and the ideal of the “work-concept” (Goehr 1992, see chapter seven). This tendency, however, coexisted with a new impetus given to improvisation. Many concerts in which composers performed their own works (and later those of others) included in their programs improvisations by the composers. Improvisations were often the most celebrated part of a concert, and it was not unusual to leave them to the end for greater effect. Here is Tomaschek describing a concert given by Wölffl in March 1799 in Prague :

. . . The concert took place in a theater where a large audience was assembled. Wölffl played a Concerto of his own composition with unparalleled cleanliness and precision [. . .] . Then he played Mozart's Fantasia in F Minor published in Breitkopf's edition for four hands, exactly as it is printed without leaving out a single note As I said, he played this piece of music without any mishaps. Then he improvised, weaving in the theme *Wenns Lieserl macht*, and brought the concert to an end with several very beautiful and brilliant variations. A

¹² Early music criticism, however—and perhaps because the occasions to listen to a work were scarce—often focused on the score more than on the live performance. Kerman has written that “[Hoffmann's] famous Beethoven reviews were not of live performances but of published sheet music, texts dead on the page save for Hoffmann's internalized musical imagination and that of his readers” (1983: 112).

heartily applause was granted to this (in his own way) unique virtuoso (quoted in Landon 1970: 104-5; also quoted in DeNora 1995: 154-55).

This passage is illustrative of the way in which the early Romantic period embraced both the *Werktreue* ideal and the ideal of improvisation. Gradually, the harmonious coexistence of the two practices gave way to a greater tension between them. This tension, and the creative responses to it, constitute one of the defining characteristics of Romantic music. Romanticism, a notoriously multifaceted period, should be characterized musically not only by the birth of the work-concept and of the *Werktreue* ideal, and not only by the aesthetics of ruins and fragments embodied by improvisation, but also by a creative tension between them.

However compatible Romantic improvisation was with the historical consciousness of the beginning of the century, the relationship was a complex one. On the one hand, as argued in the previous chapter, improvisation embodied fundamental aspects of Romantic ideas about art. On the other, because of its fleeting nature and in the absence of recording technology, improvisation simply could not pass the test of time, which became an important aspect of the evaluation of art. Improvisation in this sense was a paradigmatic locus of the tension between the Romantic aesthetics of flux and the new relevance of posterity as judge of artistic value.

But aesthetics and historicism in the early Romantic period were hardly opposite currents. Rather, they were two integral aspects of the same worldview—an awareness of life as becoming and the accompanying belief that becoming was the temporal manifestation of eternal and absolute principles. Improvisation was an artistic practice that was in fact in step with the conception of history of the period, a conception much more phenomenological than formal. Thus, Coleridge's comparison of instrumental music

with history could also be applied to improvised music, for it is based on a essential characteristic of all music whether composed or improvised: its being a process of temporal unfolding. Coleridge's reflection is also applicable to improvisation because it concerns the experience of listening. This experience, which he compares to the awareness of history, consists of a play between memory and expectation that holds together the different temporal moments (see pp. 95-96).

Despite this quasi-phenomenological understanding of history, there was also in this period a growing awareness of the need for historical records to reconstruct the past and to ensure the continuity with the future. The Romantic enthusiasm for recovering pieces of the past was particularly strong in Germany because it was associated to the project of (re)constructing a national identity. The search for old German mythology, medieval romances, folk songs, and legal customs responded ultimately to a search for the German Spirit as developed through history and finally objectified in the German state. The importance of documents as historical data even in this early period, therefore, should not be underestimated.

How, then, could an improvisation contribute to the greatness of Germany? Extemporizations of celebrated composers such as Mozart and Beethoven had undoubtedly high artistic value but they could not be recorded and, hence, they could not form part of the German historical legacy which would constitute the basis of German national identity. The tension between this historical "inadequacy" of improvised creations and their aesthetic value gave rise to various attempts to resolve it or, better, to make it productive while at the same time maintaining the tension.

a) Improvisations with the Spirit of Works

One way to lessen the uneasiness felt in front of valuable artistic creations that would never become sanctioned by posterity was the thought that great improvisations deserved to be written down. An anecdote about Beethoven illustrates this point. After one of Beethoven's improvisations in front of a group of friends, one of them expressed his dissatisfaction that great music had been lost for ever, Beethoven reportedly laughed and immediately repeated the improvisation (Salazar 1984: 299). The fact that this is one of the few stories concerning improvisation given in musicological accounts of the nineteenth century is in itself telling. The story can be read as revealing the true nature of Beethoven's improvised music--well thought out, non-contingent, repeatable--very close, in short, to a written work.

Similarly, Ignaz Ritter von Seyfried remarked on the music resulting from an improvisatory session between Beethoven and Wölffl: "if it could have been put upon paper at the moment would surely have bidden defiance to time" (Thayer and Forbes 1967: 207, see complete quote on p. 32). These comments by Beethoven's contemporaries point to a tendency to legitimize this celebrated aspect of his creativity as worthy of being passed down to posterity. This tendency, nonetheless, was counterbalanced by other contemporary testimonies approvingly attesting to the truly improvisatory nature of these creations. Carl Czerny, Beethoven's friend and pupil, wrote that "Beethoven was unsurpassed in this style of fantasy-like improvisation. He himself could hardly reconstruct in writing the wealth of his ideas and harmonies as well as the nobility and consistency of his most highly artistic development" (Czerny 1836: 52).

Chopin was also known to have an extraordinary ability for creating music by

means of improvisation and to suffer enormous difficulties when trying to write down some of those creations. George Sand gave a vivid account of Chopin's struggle to write down the music he had previously improvised or "heard" as a whole in his imagination:

His creation was spontaneous and miraculous. He found it without seeking it, without foreseeing it. It came on his piano suddenly, complete, sublime, or it sang in his head during a walk, and he was impatient to play it to himself. But then began the most heart-rending labor I ever saw. It was a series of efforts, of irresolutions, and of frettings to seize again certain details of the theme he had heard; what he had conceived as a whole he analyzed too much when wishing to write it, and his regret at not finding it again, in his opinion, clearly defined, threw him into a kind of despair (quoted in Weiss and Taruskin 1984: 370).

On occasion, the writing down of every detail had much more to do with the practical goal of avoiding plagiarism than with a preoccupation with posterity. With the decline of patronage composers depended more and more on the sales of their works, and authorship became a matter of subsistence to composers. Improvisation was necessarily affected by these developments. Beethoven in a letter to Eleonore von Breuning clearly states the case. He tells her not to worry about certain difficult passages in the variations he had sent to her as they were not intended to be played as written. Beethoven had simply written down the passage as he had improvised it in order to avoid someone transcribing it and claiming authorship:

I never would have composed it so, had I not often observed that here and there in V[ariations] there was somebody who, after I had improvised of an evening, noted down many of the peculiarities, and made parade of them the next day as his own. Foreseeing that some of these things would soon appear in print, I resolved to anticipate them (quoted in Thayer and Forbes 1967: 163- 4).

These words reveal that Beethoven improvised upon his written works and did not expect other performers to play them exactly as he had. They also suggest that

authorship was important and was only recognized in written music. In this case at least, passages that were meant to leave a certain freedom to the performer became fixed solely to ensure that their authorship was recognized. The new economic pressures faced by professional musicians after the end of the era of patronage had much to do with this attitude. At the same time, this attitude was inseparable from the new status of the composer as genius and the associated condition of originality.

There were, then social, economic, and aesthetic reasons affecting the role of improvisation at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But this account also shows that at this time, despite the tendency to regard the musical production of a genius such as Beethoven as "immortal," there was still room for the practice of improvisation. It could be speculated that had recording technology existed in this period, Beethoven would have felt no need to write down every note of his piano compositions to ensure recognition of his originality.¹³

b) Works with the Spirit of Improvisation

To consider improvisations as "potentially" eternal was a conceptual response to the tension between Romantic aesthetics and historicism. A practical and more effective response to this tension was the composition of works inspired by improvisation. The Romantic ideals of spontaneity and sudden inspiration gave a high aesthetic value to

¹³ An article about the changes experimented in the musical life of a Greek café around the turn of the twentieth century offers another perspective: The music in the café used to be mostly improvised. The improvisatory skills of singers and musicians was a major attraction for the café customers. When these performers gained access to the recording industry, and began to gain fame as recording artists, improvisation began to decline--the best of their music was only to be heard either in records, or in performances that followed closely the recorded versions. Despite the existence of recordings, and also because of it, the abandonment of improvisation was also due in this case to the need to establish authorship to ensure artistic recognition and economic profit. A comment of the composer Roger Reynolds quoted by Kerman sheds light on the similar status of recorded versions and printed scores: "The singular representation--the existence as sound (though inflexible)--has a tendency to *become* the work, even for the composers. The authority of sound prevails over the abstract prescription in score. The goal (let alone the fact) of multiple realizations fades, and the creative person's aims are inevitably re-directed" (quoted in Kerman 1983: 119).

improvisation, but they also influenced composition. Thus, another vehicle for these ideals was the composition of works that would create the illusion of improvisation. This solution proved to be very productive, and Romantic composers privileged musical forms that allowed them to create or suggest the illusion of spontaneous creation.

Preferred Romantic forms such as impromptu, fantasy, rhapsody, prelude, and caprice have in common their reference to improvisation. *Impromptu* means "without preparation or premeditation," "on the spur of the moment," "an improvisation," or "a musical composition having the character of an improvisation" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).¹⁴ According to the *New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, the term was first used in 1822 and consisted of "a composition, usually for piano, in an offhand or extemporized style or perhaps intended to suggest the result of sudden inspiration."¹⁵ Schubert, Schumann and Chopin gave the name impromptu to short pieces of various forms (although it seems that some of the earliest impromptus of Schubert were thus titled not by the composer but by his publisher).

The term *Fantasy* (*Fantasia*) comes directly from a broadly used form of improvisation, characteristically free in form. In the literature "fantasy" is often synonymous with improvisation. Originally, the term indicated the association between improvisation and the faculty of imagination and also had the connotation of a display of technical mastery. As composition, the term refers generally "to a piece that attempts to give the impression of flowing spontaneously from a *player's* imagination and delight in digital performance" (emphasis in original).¹⁶ The term was used in the sixteenth century to refer both to improvisations and to pieces, often highly technical, that had an improvisatory flavor. In the Baroque period it referred to a composition with great

¹⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, compact edition, s.v. "impromptu."

¹⁵ *New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, edited by Don Michael Randel, s.v. "impromptu".

¹⁶ *New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, edited by Don Michael Randel, s.v. "fantasy."

rhythmic and harmonic flexibility that often served to introduce a more structured piece, as for example Bach's fantasies and fugues. Mozart also wrote fantasias as a preface to sonatas, but it was in the nineteenth century when the fantasy became a ubiquitous form. The *sonata quasi fantasia* (Beethoven's for instance) was a freer interpretation of the Classical sonata. Liszt's choice of the word order in his *fantasia quasi sonata* suggests the culmination of the Romantic transformation of the sonata. Romantic virtuosi also frequently used the term fantasy to refer to performances that were in part based on already existing compositions and in part improvised.

Rhapsody referred originally to the recitation of epic poems in Greek antiquity. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it came to imply, "no particular form, content, or compositional method."¹⁷ It also took on the connotation of exalted, exaggeratedly enthusiastic or extravagant expression. As individual compositions for piano, the first rhapsodies appeared in 1810. Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies* (1846-1886) were among the most popular of these compositions and clearly reflect the defining characteristics of the genre. Brahms's Two Rhapsodies, Op. 79 depart from the traditional meaning of the term, but though their underlying formal design is highly structured, the feeling or the mood evoked by their musical language is best described as "rhapsodic" in the sense of an episodic and passionate "recitation."

Prelude indicates something to be played as an introduction to a piece. Originally, these introductions were improvised, ranging from a few chords to elaborate pieces. Valerie Goertzen (1996) has devoted an essay to this form, arguing that improvised prelude was a fundamental aspect of recitals during the Romantic period and it continued to be practiced sporadically until the end of the nineteenth century. As

¹⁷ *New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, edited by Don Michael Randel, s.v. "rhapsody").

thoroughly composed pieces they often retained the connotation of having an introductory character, but in the Romantic period they also referred to short pieces for piano of an evocative and improvisatory nature, the best examples of which are perhaps those by Chopin.¹⁸

All these forms privileged by the Romantic composers evoke the ideals of freedom, imagination, and sudden inspiration embodied by improvisation. Giving preference to these forms composers like Chopin, Schumann, or Liszt seem to have wanted to capture in fully notated, fixed works, the spirit of improvised, indeterminate creations or, perhaps, to indicate the improvisatory origin of some of these compositions. The influence of improvisation in Romantic composition has not entirely escaped the notice of music historians and musicologists. Ulrich and Pisk, for example, have noted that each of the twelve studies comprising Liszt's *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, "elaborates one or two technical devices, usually in free form in the manner of an improvisation" (Ulrich and Pisk 1963: 495). Charles Rosen has said of Chopin's Barcarolle op. 60 that it is "one of Chopin's most imaginative creations, with a sense of improvised poetry" (Rosen 1995: 456). In sum, much of the Romantic musical production for solo instruments aspired to the status of improvisation. This aspiration indicates, I have argued, an attempt to bring together the Romantic aesthetics of inspiration, indeterminacy, and the sublime on the one hand, and, on the other, the historicist awareness that great art belongs to posterity.

¹⁸ Capriccio, derived from the Italian for "whim," has been frequently associated with fantasias and shared with them their improvisatory, fanciful character. In the eighteenth century, the indication *a capriccio* indicated a passage to be played in free tempo, as in a cadenza. In the nineteenth century they were popularized by violinists like Paganini, Kreutzer and Rode, and later, by transcriptions for piano by Chopin, Schumann, and Liszt among others. Although the illusion of improvisation is also at the origin of this form, in the Romantic period, capriccio seemed to have had mainly the connotation of whimsical, playful, and scherzo-like, characteristics that are not necessarily associated with improvisation.

Improvisation and the History of Music: When Historical Events are not Aesthetic Objects

History cannot be separated from facts, and depends entirely on reality; and thus the philosophy of History as it is the spirit or idea of History, must be deduced from real historical events, from the faithful record and lively narration of facts.

--Friedrich Schlegel

a) History and Music History

The virtual absence of any treatment of improvisation in music histories presents a paradox. Improvisations, after all, constitute historical events. There is abundant documentary proof of its existence, and, thus, it can be considered historical data susceptible to empirical study. Unlike works, these documents on improvisation are not “faithful records” of the actual music, but “lively narrations” that give a clear picture of the relevance of this practice. These narrations have been by and large excluded from music histories.

Music history is a special kind of history. It is not a history of music in the Western world "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist," as Ranke would have wanted it. Empirical methods have been applied, but selectively. This is not to say that music history is the only kind of empirical research that is less than purely "empirical." As Gadamer has argued, the empirical orientation of historical research always has underlying philosophical assumptions (1999 [1960]: 209ff). Historians' perspectives, furthermore, are always limited by their own historical situatedness. As Ricoeur has written, “we belong to history before telling stories or writing history” (Ricoeur 1990 [1981]: 294, see also Gadamer 1999 [1960]). Finally, ideology critique has shed light on the way historians construct particular kinds of stories that serve particular interests, excluding events that do not fit in the picture they are in advance inclined (or determined) to present

(see for instance White 1993 [1973]).

But the selective empiricism of music history presents an additional kind of problem arising from the conceptualization of its object of study as aesthetic phenomena. As history, music history is based on documents, but as history of aesthetic phenomena, it needs to focus on autonomous objects, susceptible to being studied as belonging to a special sphere independent from concerns of everyday life. Music history, therefore, developed its methods responding to the assumptions of late nineteenth-century concepts of both History and Aesthetics.

The most basic result of this conjunction of theoretical frameworks was the application of historical methods (mainly the collection and classification of documents) and historical philosophical assumptions (mainly the interpretation of these documents as part of a continuum through time) to aesthetic artifacts, i. e., musical works. The fact that music history is a history of works was identified by Carl Dahlhaus. For him, work "is the central category of music, and hence of music historiography as well." Dahlhaus's insight is asserted uncritically and in the context, as Leo Treitler has noted, of the double defense of the concepts of history and work in the face of what he perceives as a problematic weakening of this concept (Treitler 1989: 170).

Treitler perceived the narrowness of Dahlhaus's (that is to say the traditional) view of music history. For him, "The 'work' concept has a history that is at least a thread in one of the central plot-lines of Western music history; it cannot sensibly be taken as a premise for that history" (Treitler 1989: 171). Not surprisingly, this kind of insight first came from medievalists such as Treitler himself or Richard Crocker, who face the theoretical problems of studying a musical tradition that, because of its eminently oral nature, does not easily lend itself to traditional methodologies and, hence, to the musical

canon. Some of these problems are common to the study of improvisation at large. But improvisation is perhaps a more extreme case because of the general absence of a written basis. At the same time, Romantic improvisation in particular raises numerous questions about the Western tradition, since it was practiced at the same time the canon began to be formed.¹⁹

Why then was improvisation radically excluded from the Western canon? In the first place, because an improvisation could not be treated as an aesthetic autonomous object, which was the basis for a concept of art as autonomous sphere of absolute value. But the extraordinary aesthetic value given to improvisation in the Romantic era complicates the point. Improvised music was in fact an important form of musical expression at the time when music was considered as having an autonomous, metaphysical value. Reportedly, Romantic audiences listening to Beethoven or Chopin improvise were transported into a higher realm of beauty, separated from the world of everyday concerns and expressed in sound by means of the imagination of a genius. Improvisation and the Romantic metaphysics of beauty were not, therefore, incompatible. At the same time, as I have noted, the practice of improvisation was sufficiently documented and was not incompatible with a historically-informed canonization of music.

How then could this form of musical expression, with metaphysical and historical credentials, be excluded from the formation of the Western musical canon? Because this music, however metaphysical and historical, could not be studied scientifically. By "scientifically" I mean the formal musicological approaches that were developed in the

¹⁹ Specific theoretical problems raised by the gap between the musical score—the historical document—and the actual work, have been addressed by musicologists and philosophers of music (for instance, Ingarden 1986). But the acknowledgement of this gap does not by itself challenge the assumption that the history of music is constituted exclusively by musical works. A consideration of the importance of improvisation in the Western tradition has the potential to carry out this challenge. See more on this on chapter six.

nineteenth century--with the other human sciences-- following the methodological model of the natural sciences (Gadamer 1999 [1960]: 3ff, see discussion on chapter six).

b) History and Tradition

The exclusion from music history of Schlegel's "lively narrations" in favor of music dutifully recorded raises the question of the relationship between the notions of "history" and "tradition." The disappearance and lack of historical memory of Western improvisation suggests the limitations of music history insofar as it is a history of aesthetic objects. But it also suggests discontinuities in the tradition of performance practice that seem to have been overlooked. Ultimately, it raises the question of whether the disappearance of improvisation was itself related to the extraordinary influence exerted by historical methodologies in all areas of culture in nineteenth-century Europe. The hypothesis would question whether the predominance of History as the basic orientation of all Romantic disciplines did not influence a movement in favor of those aspects of the performance tradition that could also be associated with historical facts, thus excluding traditional aspects, such as improvisation, which did not enter that category.

The difference between the Romantic approaches to history and the later formalization of history as a prominently scientific discipline, may seem to lie fundamentally in the progressive refinement of methodologies that provided increasing accuracy and systematicity to the investigation of the past. But between those two attitudes there is, I believe, a significant discrepancy that concerns the nature of the relationship between past and present. This discrepancy can be perceived by focusing on the absence of complete correspondence between the notions of history and tradition. Whereas history depends fundamentally upon the research, classification, and

interpretation of documents, tradition refers more generally to the totality of artifacts, beliefs, and practices passed down from generation to generation.

In the Romantic period the interest in history was closely connected to an interest in tradition. The German revival of the past was effected through archival investigation of historical records, but also through the study of language as embodiment of the "folk-soul" (Herder); the recollection of fairy-tales (Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm) and folk songs (Arnim and Brentano); the publication of medieval romances and old German poetry (Fouque and von der Hage); the investigation of legal customs and uses (Jakob Grimm), and so on. With the post-Romantic formalization of historical research myths, legends, customs, and other aspects of tradition were marginalized in favor of "hard" historical facts, such as chronologies, and political events. History could be made scientific, but not tradition.

To be sure, the distinction between history and tradition is not clear-cut and presents significant overlapping. It is important, however, as Gadamer has stressed, to maintain a theoretical distance between the two concepts, especially when dealing with a period in which historical research was fundamentally positivistic. When positivistic history becomes the vehicle for tradition, then fundamental aspects of tradition must be left out (see Gadamer 1999). The case of improvisation in Western music is paradigmatic of the problems raised when the two concepts are conflated. Improvisation was, in essence, musical creation that was not written down and, hence, an aspect of musical creativity that could not constitute the object of historical research. This kind of music, however, belonged to a long tradition passed down from generation to generation of musicians. As with many other practices and customs--modes of living and of doing things that have been not recorded but continue to be transmitted, improvisation could

have possibly continued to be practiced despite its exclusion from music histories. For instance, a great wealth of folk songs has been transmitted in Europe for centuries until the present. These songs did not make the pages of standard music history books, yet continue to be sung and treasured as an important aspect of the creativity of a people. In this sense, it would seem far-fetched to establish a simplistic cause and effect relationship between the disappearance of improvisation around the middle of the nineteenth century and the emergence of positivistic-oriented music histories. But the case of Western improvisation presents a special case, for this kind of "oral tradition" had been an aspect of a high culture canonized by means, among other things, of historiographical accounts.

The conclusion can be drawn that even if improvisation had continued to be practiced in the second half of the nineteenth century, it still would not have formed part of the music histories written in this period--and hence, of what came to be regarded as the Western "tradition." In fact, this is hardly a mere hypothesis: there exists evidence that composers and performers did continue to improvise in public as well as in private until at least the end of the century (see, for instance, Goertzen 1996). But this activity, as well as the long tradition to which it belonged, was absent from the historical and analytical studies that became the formal vehicle of the tradition.

Conclusion

The Romantic period cannot be understood without the pervasive current of historical thinking that marks the rise of modern historical consciousness and that influenced the development of history as a modern discipline. In this chapter I have discussed the differences between Romantic historical consciousness and the later historiographical

methods in order to shed light on the changing role of improvisation through the nineteenth century. I argued that what could be seen as a mere contradiction between the Romantic aesthetics of flux and the emphasis on historical permanence, created a productive tension that influenced to a great extent the development of Romantic music. But the rapid decline of improvisation after flourishing in the Romantic period raises a number of questions about the process of transmission and formalization of the Western musical tradition. Among them, the fate of Western improvisation suggests that when tradition is subordinated to historical knowledge, tradition is reduced to those aspects that can pass through the bottleneck of scientific methodology.

I have also argued that the absence of improvisation from music histories was directly associated with the conflict between history and aesthetics, and the concurrent reduction of music history to a history of works. But the disappearance of the *practice*--public and private--of improvisation cannot be sufficiently explained by the role played by music historiography in the formation of the Western canon. There is a tradition of performance practice that has been passed down from teachers to students and that can be traced back to the Romantic composers themselves. In fact, as Kingsbury noted, it is not uncommon among advanced conservatory students to trace a "genealogy" of their musical instruction, in an attempt to establish a direct line between oneself and, say, Liszt or Chopin (Kingsbury 1988). If Liszt's pupils, like Alexander Siloti and Arthur Friedheim, taught their own students Liszt's touch and interpretive subtleties, why they did not pass down the composer's preference and skills for improvisation? In my view, one of the central factors upon which the answer to this question depends is the role of the idea of genius in the musical aesthetics of the nineteenth century. In the next chapter I explore the philosophical and cultural import of this idea and the impact it had in the

formation of the Western musical canon.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AESTHETICS OF GENIUS: A ROMANTIC RESPONSE TO THE POST-ENLIGHTENMENT EUROPEAN CRISIS

It is, as it were, a fragment of Divinity.

--Schelling

Since the nineteenth century, the Western musical tradition has been concerned with the preservation and study of the legacy of its most influential composers. The fate of improvisation proves, however, that there is a side to the legacy of the great composers that has been disregarded and almost completely obliterated. This forgotten legacy concerns not only the music they made that was never written down, but also the practice of improvisation itself. Why is it that the musical heirs of Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin have chosen to dismiss this aspect of their musical practice? When we speak of the ideal of fidelity to these composers we narrowly refer to fidelity to their works, forgetting the larger scope of their musical creativity, practices, and skills. In general, the special kind of engagement with music characteristic of cultures and styles that include improvisation within their musical practices has been lost to the Western classical tradition.

Aside from the historiographical problem discussed in the previous chapter, the fate of improvisation and its relation to the figure of the genius raises a series of questions concerning a significant break in the tradition that occurred in the nineteenth century. If the fact that Beethoven's fame in Vienna grew out of his exceptional talent as an improviser may strike concert-goers of our own time as highly surprising it is because,

under the appearance of undisturbed continuity, the world of Western classical music has undergone dramatic changes since the Romantic era.

The question raised at the end of chapter four was why improvisation ceased to be transmitted as an aspect of performance practice after mid-nineteenth century. The answer to this question depends to a great extent on the all-important role played by the aesthetics of genius in nineteenth-century Europe. The concept of genius has been central to the development of aesthetic ideas since the late eighteenth century. When Schelling compares genius to "a fragment of Divinity," he summarizes a new view of artistic creation as a privileged way of reaching a higher sphere of Truth and Beauty through the faculty of imagination. The nineteenth-century "divinization" of the creative artist reached its most complete and influential expression in the figure of the composer.

The Romantic preoccupation with historicity is also present in the concept of genius. Documents in general acquired a privileged status as historical data in the nineteenth century, but those resulting from the inspiration of a genius had the added value of being a record of the highest achievements of humankind. Fully notated musical works came to be regarded as a means to transmitting to following generations metaphysical and spiritual messages of the highest significance.

There exists, therefore, a connection between the disappearance of improvised music in the nineteenth century and this new focus on the work of the genius as the locus of historical and metaphysical value. The relationship between genius and improvisation, however, is a complex one. As I argued, in the early nineteenth century there was no conflict between the new status of the composer of talent as genius, and his cultivation of improvisation. Both written works and improvised music continued to be the object of aesthetic judgments. How did we get from the Romantic musical aesthetics that

associated genius and improvisation to the idea that the Western tradition revolves exclusively around the composition and performance of masterworks? The answer lies primarily in the changing philosophical and cultural frameworks within which the concept of genius was interpreted throughout the Romantic and post-Romantic periods. Around the middle of the nineteenth century there occurred a fundamental shift in the way of conceiving the figure of the genius and his works. This shift coincides with the decline of the Romantic worldview in Europe and, as I will argue in chapter seven, with the beginning of an era marked by a positivism pervasive in all forms of scholarship, as well as in culture at large.

In this chapter I explore some central philosophical and cultural aspects of the concept of genius, focusing on the way this concept was recontextualized in musical aesthetics and musical practice over the course of the nineteenth century. With this, my aim is to shed light on transformations in the ideas on and practice of improvisation in this period, from Romantic exaltation to post-Romantic dismissal, which were, in turn, symptoms of deep changes in the Western musical tradition.

The Enlightened Roots of the Romantic Concept of Genius

At the time of the emergence of the Romantic cult of genius the "Age of Reason" had passed, leaving behind a contradictory heritage. Kant was being studied by young theologians and poets in Jena, while Napoleon had been hailed as a Romantic hero until his final defeat. After the Enlightenment critique and the French Revolution, the old metaphysics and the old social order seemed to have fallen apart. But soon, a new worldview began to take shape in Europe that in some ways seemed a look back to a pre-

Enlightenment and pre-revolutionary world. This new worldview which marks the beginning of the Romantic era, was articulated around new ideas of art, artists, and the aesthetic experience. The Romantic emphasis on the metaphysical relevance of the composer as genius and of his artistic production was closely related to these changing worldviews. After the Enlightenment critique of traditional metaphysics—and, in important ways, drawing from it—the Romantics found a new space for metaphysical speculation in the philosophy of art with the key-concept of the creative artist as genius.

Eighteenth-century writing on aesthetics already exhibited a tension between the constraints set by rationalistic and empiricist currents and an idea of art as a realm of freedom whose only limits were those imposed by the artist's imagination. Denis Diderot, in *Le neveu de Rameau* eloquently expressed the contradictions inherent to the Enlightenment, that in so many ways inspired the Romantic response.²⁰ It consists of a dialogue between a slightly fictionalized Diderot and a nephew of Jean-Philippe Rameau, the composer and theoretician. In the dialogue “Diderot” represents the voice of reason, while Rameau's nephew, Jean-François Rameau, embodies artistic excess as well as the primacy of feeling and instinct over rationality and social convention. It is telling that Rameau's nephew is not only a talented musician, but also a madman notorious in Parisian social circles for his erratic behavior. Jean-François Rameau's madness is expressed both in his disregard for reason in favor of artistic feeling and in his scorn for all social virtues. This un-enlightened behavior is coupled with a passion for Italian music and all that this music represented in the context of a heated polemic in Paris between Italian and French musics. This polemic, called the “querelle des buffons,” had divided Paris into two factions, and had clear political and social undertones. One group, which identified itself

²⁰ Diderot began to write *Le neveu de Rameau* in 1761, and completed it in 1779. Goethe was his first translator into German.

in the theater as the "queen's corner," defended Italian music and was in favor of political reforms and the introduction of new and more liberal ideas. The other, known as the "king's corner" in the theater, defended the French musical tradition against new and foreign influences and was politically conservative. Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions* summarized the controversy as follows:

Paris was divided into two camps, whose passions ran higher than if some affair of state or of religion had been at stake. The more powerful and numerous of them, composed of the great, the wealthy, and the women, supported French music; the other, more spirited, more proud, more enthusiastic, was composed of true connoisseurs, people of talent, and men of genius (2000 [1778]: 374-5).²¹

In Diderot's dialogue, Rameau gives voice to those grouped in the "queen's corner." He is characterized as an accomplished musician who performed Italian-style music with exceptional talent and exquisite taste. His exalted praise of Italian music as music that privileged the unrestrained expression of emotions is presented by the dialogue's author, however, as the ramblings of a mad person. "Diderot," the other character of the dialogue, observes Rameau's exalted behavior as if from the very tribunal of reason: musical excess, disregard for social virtue, and irrational discourse are met by "Diderot," posing as a pillar of the French Enlightenment, with objections or resigned silence.

This social satire, however, is not a clear-cut confrontation between the opposites of reason/madness, reason/amorality, or beauty/excess. Rather, "Diderot's" position in this confrontation is utterly ambiguous since Rameau's musical taste and aesthetic ideas are precisely those which Diderot, one of the most prominent figures in the "queen's

²¹ The fact that women were a prominent group in the "king's corner," and the "men of genius" were grouped under the "queen's corner" illustrates the ambiguities in the gendering of Genius in Western thought discussed by Christine Battersby (1989). These ambiguities, however, do not challenge the basic opposition women/genius. In the *Querelle des bouffons*, the grouping of women and men without talent under the figure of the king seems to point to the association between the lack of talent (exemplified by women) and established conventions (the king, the old regime, French music). "Men of genius," on the contrary, are grouped under the figure of the queen who, although a woman, symbolizes here opposition to the king and his un-Enlightened tastes and political conservatism.

corner," vehemently defended in real life. In this enigmatic short work, "Diderot" (reason) often opts for silence, while the infamous Rameau, a kind of mad, free alter-ego, abandons himself to the excesses of artistic outpourings of feeling. Diderot's ambivalence points to a decided shift in the second half of the eighteenth century toward ideas of genius and creativity that broke away from previous rationalistic constraints. According to the prevalent aesthetic ideas of the eighteenth century, artistic creation was an activity circumscribed by the limits of already existing realities. By the end of the century, artistic creativity was increasingly seen as an activity with the potential to break through limits imposed by reason.

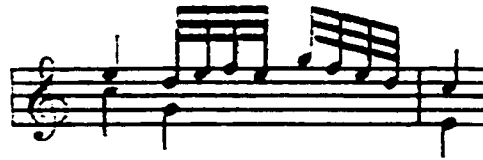
Jean-Jacques Rousseau was also on the side of Italian music in the "querelle." But his position was less ambiguous since it suited well his emotivist philosophy, which anticipated the Romantic movement in significant ways. In an essay on "genius" in his *Dictionnaire de la musique*, Rousseau defined the term, clearly rooted in the ancient tradition of creativity, as related to divine inspiration. Rousseau speaks of genius as a talent belonging to a higher sphere that expresses itself by means of a language of feelings, unfettered by rational constraints:

Would you like to know then whether any spark of this devouring flame inspires you? Run, fly to Naples! Listen to masterpieces of Leo, Durante, Jomelli, and Pergolesi. If your eyes brim with tears, if your heart pounds, if you are seized with trembling, if in the middle of your rapture oppressive feelings weigh you down, then take Metastasio and set to work. His genius will warm yours But if the charms of this great art leave you unmoved, if you are neither delighted nor ravished, if that which carries you away seems to you to be merely beautiful, dare you ask what *genius* is? Vulgar mortal! Do not profane that sublime word! What point would there be in you knowing it mean to you to know it? You would never feel it (Rousseau 1988 [1767]: 86).

Italian music was also characterized by a great freedom for improvised ornamentation, even after the Baroque period was left behind. During the Romantic period, though still far from a strict ideal of *Werktreue*, the respect for the written indications of the classical masters, eminently Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, grew stronger, and alterations of their works in the form of ornaments were increasingly met with disapproval by (mostly German) connoisseurs. In Italy, however, the taste for embellishing any melody did not lose its prominent status until later in the century, in the time of Verdi. In his autobiography Louis Spohr notes disapprovingly the pervasiveness of this practice in Italy at the time of his visit there (1816). Of the musicians of Rome he says: "Ornamentation has become so much a second nature to them, that they cannot desist from it. The first hornist, for instance, blew once in the Tutti, instead of the simple cadence,



the following:



The Clarinets blew perhaps at the same time:



instead of:



Spohr adds, "and now if one imagines the figured passages for the violins, which the composer has prescribed, some conception may be formed of the bewildering noise which such an orchestra gives you for music" (Spohr 1878, vol. 1: 309).

such an orchestra gives you for music" (Spohr 1878, vol. 1: 309).

The French encyclopedists used the term "genius" to refer to the special talent of certain individuals (as in the expression "men of genius"). This connotation never disappeared completely, but in the nineteenth century the generalized use of the term referred to individuals with an extraordinary creative talent. The shift in the use of the term genius points to a profound transformation in the conceptualization of art and artists, and in the role they played in society and culture.

In the expression "a man of genius" this term refers to a property, a characteristic that people might or might not have. Here the difference between an artist of genius and an artist lacking genius is a matter of degree, and it is to the category "artist" that qualities like genius, talent, or taste can be attributed. Contrarily, the difference between "a genius" and someone who is not a genius is not a question of degree, but of substance. Whereas the distance separating the concepts "good artist" and "bad artist," for example, is conceivably bridgeable, that between "genius" and "bad artist" (or good artist, for that matter) seems insurmountable. The shift in expression from "a man of genius" to "a genius" points to transformations in aesthetic thought that culminated in the Romantic conception of the genius as a human being set apart from others, a chosen individual whose special talents made him the agent of a special destiny.

The Romantic belief in the power of music to transcend the world of our everyday lives and to reach a realm of essences was a reaction against the limits to knowledge imposed by Enlightenment critique. But it was also heir to that critique in that imposing limits on knowledge also opened a space for the belief that the highest knowledge was not to be reached by means of reason, but by means of the faculty of imagination. The figure of the Romantic genius was a cornerstone of this post-enlightenment development.

The Romantics proclaimed not only the inability of reason to give answers to the most important questions and concerns, but also the possibility of attaining those answers by other means--the creative imagination of the genius. Henry Raynor has written that in the Romantic period "[t]he world came to believe itself to be too stupidly and insensitively blind to appreciate living greatness.... It is interesting to try to trace the reasons why the world accepted the idea that genius be too great for it" (Raynor 1972: 351). I think, however, that a more accurate reading is that the Romantics sought to elevate the cognitive prowess of humankind as a whole by conferring a privileged status to individuals of exceptional talents.

When Raynor speaks of the (European Romantic) world as coming to believe in its stupidity and blindness in comparison to the genius, he seems to imply a sort of fall suffered by people who until then had believed in their own abilities, a relapse into yet another obscurantist period following a briefly enlightened one. But the blindness Raynor speaks of had already been imposed by the Enlightenment critique itself. This critique encouraged people to trust their own rational abilities, but it also established rigid limits for those abilities, so that many significant problems and questions were pushed out of the realm of knowledge while, at the same time, tradition and religion were discredited as trustworthy sources of knowledge.

In this context, a belief in the extraordinary talents of the genius was not a fall into blindness, but a way out of it that left in place the critical limits imposed on reason. The Kantian critique in particular had already asserted the limitations of knowledge with respect to the noumenal world. With the belief in the powers of the genius, post-Enlightenment culture found a way to escape that blindness by seeing through the imaginative eyes of a few chosen individuals. If the visions were sometimes enigmatic and

difficult to understand this was also proof of the superior abilities of the genius to see beyond convention and appearance.

The figure of the Romantic genius is inseparable from the emergence of a concept of art as autonomous. The conceptualization of art as inhabiting a separate sphere unaffected by everyday concerns was the other side of the belief in the transcendental significance of the creative powers of the genius. Genius and autonomous art thus came to fill a philosophical void left by the Enlightenment critique.

The Kantian Genius and the Limits of Reason

A central task undertaken by Kant in his Third Critique was the transcendental deduction of the judgment of taste. For Kant, the judgment of taste is a type of aesthetic judgment whose object is the beautiful. Taste, Kant states, is not based on conceptual knowledge and, therefore, is not objective. In other words, beauty is not related to the concept of the object, but only to the judging subject. Taste, however, is not simply a matter of individual like or dislike of something, as when we say "I like this wine" or "I don't like that color." For Kant this kind of individual preference applies only to the merely agreeable. Whereas one does not expect that everyone agrees with a choice of color or wine, concerning the beautiful one expects to find agreement. At the same time, however, the judgment of the beautiful, like the judgment of the agreeable, is also subjective since it cannot be demonstrated rationally by means of concepts. The problem Kant faced in the Third Critique was then the following: How is it possible that the judgment of taste is subjective and, at the same time, universal? How can we maintain that the beautiful gives pleasure universally without asserting the existence of objective rules of taste?

This problem is summarized in what Kant calls the antinomy of taste: on the one hand, the judgment of taste is not based on concepts (this is why it is open to dispute); on the other, the judgment of taste is based on concepts (this is why it can claim universality). Another way of putting the problem is to say that the predicate of beauty does not join the concept of the object, in which case it would constitute a logical judgment and not an aesthetic one, but that the judgment of beauty refers to the subject. If the judgment of taste was subsumed under the concept of an object it would be possible to enforce universal agreement by presenting logical proofs. But taste cannot be proved in such a way. The problem, however, is that a judgment of taste claims universality. Even if we cannot logically prove that something is beautiful, Kant says, we expect that others would agree on what is beautiful and what is not. In the context of Kantian philosophy this is not a trivial matter: it concerns a fundamental problem of transcendental philosophy, namely, how are synthetic a priori judgments--judgments that are not analytic but "intuitive" (synthetic), and that are previous to sensible experience (a priori)--possible? Kant's transcendental idealism is based on the possibility of such judgments. Mathematical propositions, for example, are synthetic and a priori. This kind of judgment solved for Kant the limitations of empiricism, which could not justify the validity of such knowledge. At the same time, it overcame the problems of rationalism, which was exclusively based on conceptual analyses.

The riddle of taste, therefore, concerns the possibility of claiming universality for subjective judgments, as opposed to the object-based logical judgments. The answer Kant gives to this problem is that judgments of taste are based on concepts, but indeterminate ones. And indeterminate concepts, Kant goes on to claim, are possible because they are grounded on the idea of a "supersensible substratum" of humanity. "The subjective

principle—that is to say, the indeterminate idea of the supersensible within us—can only be indicated as the unique key to the riddle of [the faculty of aesthetic judgment], itself concealed from us in its sources, and there is no means of making it any more intelligible" (Kant 1969 [1790]: 209).

The "supersensible" is a universal substratum rooted in nature, intelligible, but ultimately unknowable. Unlike the objects of cognition, the concept of the supersensible, substrata of all phenomena, is indemonstrable. Despite its unknowability and indemonstrability, the assertion of this substratum is necessary within the Kantian system, for it alone solves the antinomies this very system uncovers, such as the antinomy of taste. And, as Kant recognized, the existence of these antinomies or contradictions leads us to look beyond the horizon of the sensible.

The idea of a supersensible substratum is, therefore, what introduces the possibility that aesthetic judgments, though lacking the objectivity of logical judgments, are nevertheless expected to be universal. The importance of this deduction in Kantian philosophy transcends the realm of aesthetics since for Kant the solution of the mystery of taste is ultimately what grounds the harmonization of reason with itself. In the final analysis, it is the recourse to the supersensible substratum that grounds Kant's transcendental idealism, overcoming what he considered the limitations of empiricist and rationalist positions. Kant departs from empiricist theories when he solves the problem of the judgments of taste by appealing to the idea of the supersensible. With this, Kant sought to overcome the problem of not allowing for a differentiation between the agreeable and the beautiful that he identified in the empiricist position. Locke, in particular, although admitting of the existence of a standard of taste, considered beauty to be exclusively in the subject's mind and judgments of taste were therefore merely

subjective. Kant agreed with this tenet, but with the idea of a supersensible substratum he sought a way to sustain the aprioristic nature of such judgments, as against the merely subjective and a posteriori characterization affirmed by empirical philosophers. At the same time, Kant agreed with previous rationalist systems in accepting that the beautiful is judged a priori, but he also wanted to escape the problem this position entails concerning the lack of differentiation between the good and the beautiful. By asserting that judgments of beauty are a priori but cannot be grasped by definite concepts, Kant also departed from this rationalist position.

The problem addressed by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* is in the end the problem of the underlying consistency of his overall philosophical system. Kant makes explicit how critical this problem is to his overall project when he writes that in the supersensible he seeks "the point of union of all our faculties a priori: for we are left with no other expedient to bring reason into harmony with itself" (Kant 1969 [1790]: 209). If the problem of taste led Kant to posit the existence of a supersensible substratum, and if this substratum is what ultimately brings reason into harmony with itself, aesthetic reflection has a central position in Kantian philosophy. And whereas taste is the critical faculty that judges beautiful art, genius is the productive faculty that creates beautiful art. The concept of genius, therefore, has a central role in transcendental philosophy.

A fundamental aspect of Kant's theory of genius is the association between genius and the concepts of freedom and originality. In this, Kant was influenced by the tradition of the artist as free creator met through the works of eighteenth century writers such as Pope, Burke, Hutcheson, and Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury, in particular, preceded Kant in an attempt to bring together two main traditional currents in the approach to art: the

Aristotelian, which emphasized rules and technical explanations, and the Platonic, which emphasized inspiration and originality (see Nahm 1956: 135ff).

Through his theory of genius, Kant gave a rigorous treatment to the theme of freedom in art. And in so doing, he systematically rekindled a tradition of aesthetic speculation that has continued to influence thinkers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For Kant, there can be no genius without freedom of imagination (Kant 1969 [1790]: 226). Although to certain extent bound by rules, artistic genius can and must break with received rules and propose new ones that will be followed by others with lesser artistic talents. For Kant the artist of genius has academic training but breaks with the constraints of tradition. Genius is "a talent for producing that for which no definitive rule can be given . . . originality must be its first property" (ibid.: 168). Breaking with the rules, however, is not enough, and Kant considers "shallow minds" those who try to imitate genius by merely emancipating themselves from academic constraints. Authentic genius cannot be learned or acquired by sheer will to be original but is, rather, inspired by nature. With his theory of genius, then, Kant added an interesting perspective to the problem of the relationship between freedom and nature.

Imagination was for Kant a productive faculty that through the laws of association could bring about a sense of freedom. He goes so far as to say that the creative genius can through the faculty of imagination transgress the limits of experience and expand thought itself. Aesthetic ideas, Kant states, can substitute logical representations, but since they are open, they stretch the mind beyond concepts. The way metaphorical statements work is an example given of the capacity of the productive imagination to surpass and expand the limits of thought.²²

²² Kant's reflections on the productive imagination and on the schematism at its basis have a continuation in contemporary philosophy in the hermeneutic work of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur develops these ideas in the context of his theories of metaphoricity and narrative, see discussion on Ricoeur on pp. 292-6.

Whereas in the First Critique (the *Critique of Pure Reason*), Kant explored the way Pure Reason gains knowledge of the laws that rule the phenomenal world, in the Third Critique (the *Critique of Judgment*), he elaborated a theory of imagination that established the ascendancy of freedom over the necessity of the natural world, and that did not contradict but rather completed his previous work. In the section entitled "The Faculties of the Mind which Constitute Genius" Kant affirms that by means of the creative activity of imagination conceptual knowledge is expanded and the limits of experience themselves are transgressed: "the imagination (as a productive faculty of cognition) is a powerful agent for creating, as it were, a second nature out of the material supplied to it by actual nature . . . we even use it to remodel experience, always following . . . laws that are based on analogy" (Kant 1969 [1790]: 176).

Later he adds that "we get a sense of our freedom from the law of association." It is by means of the play of imagination that "we work up the material borrowed from nature and transform it into something else that surpasses nature" (ibid.: 176). This concept of productive imagination characteristic of genius, therefore, ensures that the struggle between freedom and nature is weighted on the side of freedom. The power of the aesthetic ideas created by genius is such that they give the imagination "an incentive to spread its flight over a whole host of kindred representations that provoke more thought than admits of expression in a concept determined by words" (ibid.: 177).

Productive imagination was for Kant what differentiated original, exemplary productions of genius from the products of mechanical reproduction. This idea would have a great impact in Romantic aesthetics, which were based on the distinction between organic art, on the one hand, and industrial production on the other. In general, Kant's treatment of the ideas of originality, freedom, and imagination as part of his conception of

genius, became a fundamental tenet of the Romantic approach to art. In the nineteenth century a neo-Kantian current of thought concentrated exclusively on the First Critique, working under the assumption that the only legitimate search for truth consisted in expanding the conceptual knowledge of sensible phenomena. But Kantian philosophy had had perhaps a stronger impact on nineteenth-century thought by way of the Romantics' reception of the Third Critique. The capacity Kant recognized in aesthetic ideas to stretch the mind beyond conceptual boundaries became central to idealist philosophers and Romantic authors. The Romantic appraisal of Kant recognized that his aesthetic theories held together his whole philosophical system by harmonizing theoretical reason with aesthetic judgment, as well as making the latter a bridge to moral speculation. Kant's aesthetic reflections opened a way to conceive of a form of cognition beyond the constraints of rational knowledge, and this had a great impact in the development of German idealist philosophy and the Romantic movement as a whole.

The Supersensible Becomes Audible: The Romantic Metaphysics of Beauty

The new intellectual atmosphere of the nineteenth-century was in some ways a reaction against the Enlightenment, but it also had roots in that movement. Kant's statement that the purpose of his critique of metaphysics was to "make room for faith" can be seen as rather ironic given that it was his philosophical system, under the Enlightenment motto of "sapere aude," that encouraged people to dare to use their capacity for reason, rather than relying on the teachings of tradition. Nonetheless, as I have been arguing, Kant's philosophy attempted to overcome the limitations of previous rationalistic and empiricist approaches, and, in doing so, it did make room, if not for faith, at least for something

other than pure reason.

In this sense, there is between Kant and the Romantics more a continuity of thought than a break. In fact, as John Zammito writes, the work of authors like Schiller, Hölderling, Schelling, Fichte and Hegel "took form under the aegis of the Kantianism of the Third Critique" (Zammito 1992: 14). But this author also notes that the contextual origins of the Third Critique include Kant's desire to establish the hegemony of the German Enlightenment over the *Sturm und Drang* movement, of which Herder and Goethe, also forerunners of the Romantic movement, were the most celebrated leaders. Schiller tried to bridge the gap between the *Aufklärung* and the *Sturm und Drang* by attempting a reconciliation between the works of Kant and Goethe, especially through the study of the Third Critique which coincidentally was the only aspect of Kant's work that Goethe accepted.

The Romantics, however, did not appropriate Kant's philosophical work as a whole, pointing out, as Hegel did, that Kant had not succeeded in his attempt to harmonize his overall system by means of the Third Critique. Accordingly, early nineteenth-century philosophers and poets departed from the Kantian project, although they followed the path towards a metaphysics of beauty that Kant's very critique of dogmatic metaphysics, as well as his theory of genius, had opened. Kant had posited that a higher realm of essences existed but could not be known; the Romantics claimed that the creative genius could reach the higher realm and communicate its truths to the rest of humanity. In this sense, the Romantic genius reclaimed the human capabilities of transcendence that had been denied to philosophers and religious authorities.

The Romantics developed their aesthetic theories based on the shift towards originality and the open possibilities of imagination exemplified by the Kantian aesthetics

of genius. With their emphasis on the power of imagination, their aesthetic attitude departed from the eighteenth-century position exemplified by Charles Batteux, who in 1746 wrote that the function of the genius consisted "not in imagining the impossible, but in seeking out what exists" (in Le Huray and Day 1988: 36). But the Romantics did not merely reverse this eighteenth-century idea: they attempted to both imagine the impossible and to seek out what exists. They strove to reach a concept of reality that would bring together the seen and the unseen, the natural and the ideal. The attempt was, then, not to break with reality but to expand its limits beyond the constraints of the merely empirical and the merely rational. This was the function of the genius, to imagine what lay beyond the boundaries of the world of appearances, thus reaching the most real of all realities, a superior realm of Truth and Beauty.

Nature and reality were now thought of as an organic unity. The tendency towards the ideal of synthesis and reconciliation of formerly opposed realms was in fact one of the basic themes underlying Romantic thought. Schiller, for example, worked on a continuation and reexamination of Kant's transcendental idealism, establishing an intermediate realm between the Kantian notions of nature and freedom, the sensuous and the rational. Schiller's third realm, comprising the spheres of art and beauty, was grounded in what he called "the play impulse" (see p. 280). As part of this intermediary sphere, beauty was for Schiller "an infinity in finite shape" (Behler 1987: xix). Schiller's reworking of Kant's Third Critique had a strong influence on younger thinkers such as Schelling and Hegel.

The new metaphysics of beauty in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can be seen as a kind of secularized continuation of the traditional association of the creative and the religious. But whereas before the eighteenth century art was at the

service of Truth as rendered by religion and tradition, the Romantics considered art and beauty to be the chief media through which Truth was apprehended by humanity.

Whereas the creative artist was before an attendant to the priest, now he was something of a priest himself. Keats's dictum exemplifies the new Romantic doctrine: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (*Odes*).

Among the German idealist philosophers Schelling in particular placed great emphasis on the metaphysical significance of art and the artistic genius. This aspect of Schelling's philosophy, as well as his organic conception of nature and the universe, link post-Kantian idealism, of which Schelling is representative, to the Romantic movement.²³ The metaphysical significance of art for Schelling lies first of all in its being "grounded on the power of productive intuition, which is the indispensable organ or instrument of transcendental idealism" (Copleston 1994 [1962]: 119).

The philosopher and the creative genius are thus akin, but clearly differentiated. Where the former apprehends eternal ideas in conceptual form, the creative genius does so through a symbolic medium. This distinction, however, should not be understood as that between consciousness and unconsciousness. Rather, for Schelling an unconscious force acts *through* the consciousness of the genius in the process of artistic creation. The work of art that results is then an objectification of the union of the conscious and unconscious, the real and the ideal. The product of the genius is for Schelling, in other words, the finite manifestation of the infinite Absolute. At the same time, the work of art is different from organic nature (which also presents the identity of the real and the ideal) in that the work of art is an expression of freedom: "it is the free ego's manifestation of itself to itself"

(Copleston 1994 [1962]: 121). Following Kant's steps concerning the idea of a

²³ Although they influenced each other and present significant overlappings, German idealist philosophy and the Romantic movement are two distinct developments and should not be confused (see Copleston 1994 [1962]: 13-14).

supersensible substratum, Schelling states that Absolute, which is unknown, "contains the universal ground of the preestablished harmony between the conscious and the unconscious" (quoted in Behler 1987: 206).

The power of art was for the Romantics nowhere seen so clearly than in music. The non-representational nature of instrumental music with its capacity to suggest without being bound to a particular meaning lent itself well to the Romantic inclination for feelings of infinite longing and love for the mysterious and fantastic. This Romantic approach to music sharply contrasted with the prevalent ideas on music in the eighteenth century. According to the rationalistic orientation of the time, instrumental music did not fare well among the other arts because it was regarded as appealing exclusively to the senses. Only when accompanied by words did music have a higher meaning and could carry cognitive value. Kant did not consider music as an especially valuable art, being for him largely a form of entertainment that could be particularly annoying and disruptive. The same characteristics of instrumental music that made it rank low among the arts in the eighteenth century, raised it to the highest position in the Romantic era.

Vague and suggestive, music was now a privileged medium to express both the depths of individual inwardness and the vastness of the infinite, two aspects that the romantics attempted to harmonize. The abstractness of instrumental sounds, instead of being an obstacle to the understanding and enjoyment of music, was now its most valuable characteristic, for it was only beyond words that the higher spheres reached by the creative act could be conveyed. In this respect Wackenroder's Berglinger exclaims: "But why do I, foolish one, strive to melt words into tones? It is never as I feel it. Come, Thou musical strains, draw near and rescue me from this painful earthly striving for words, envelop me in Thy shining clouds with Thy thousandfold beams, and raise me

up into the old embrace of all-loving heaven” (quoted in Lippman 1988: 27)²⁴. Music was the art that most perfectly embodied this metaphysics of beauty. It was the medium that could most vividly express the inexpressible, and make the unknowable known. In E. T. A. Hoffmann’s words, “music discloses to man an unknown realm, a world that has nothing in common with the external sensual world that surrounds him, a world in which he leaves behind him all definite feelings to surrender himself to an inexpressible longing” (Hoffmann 1989: 236).

In 1813 Hoffmann had summarized the new attitude towards music writing that instrumental music was "the most romantic of all the arts--one might almost say, the only genuinely romantic one--for its sole subject is the infinite" (Hoffmann 1989: 96). Music, in fact, was regarded as the quintessential Romantic art also outside musical circles. Madame de Staël, who first applied the term "Romantic" to the new artistic and literary movement, wrote that music was the art that more directly influenced the spirit, since it made listeners feel that they are capturing the secrets of the Creator and the mystery of life (see Fubini 1976: 285-6). A related idea shared by many at the time was that the other arts were the more accomplished the closer they were to the status of music. Novalis, for example, one of the most representative German Romantic poets, considered music to exemplify the ideal to which poetry should strive. And later in the century, Walter Pater famously stated that "all art continually aspires towards the condition of music" (see Goehr 1992: 253).

In his writings on music, Wilhelm Wackenroder gave expression to many of the themes that ran through the Romantic exaltation of music. Referring to a special realm that can be reached only through music he wrote: "O, then I close my eyes to all the strife of

²⁴ See chapter six, pp. 206-216, for a comparison between this Romantic, quasi-mystical language, and the language characteristic of the art-religion of the latter part of the century.

the world--and withdraw quietly into the land of music, as into the land of belief"

(Wackenroder 1971: 179). Ludwig Tieck, an intimate friend of Wackenroder's and also an influential author in German Romanticism expressed the same idea when he wrote:

But what can be more astonishing than that through human art and effort, suddenly in the silence invisible spirits arise which storm our heart with rapture and bliss, and conquer it? That when we gladly close our eyes on the arid present, which often oppresses us and hems us in like the walls of a prison, --then a new land stretches out over our heads, a paradisiac region of flowers and glorious trees and golden fountains? (in Lippman 1992: 206).

In view of Romantic exaltations of music exemplified by the writings of Wackenroder and Tieck, it has been common to associate the Romantic conception of music with dream-like irrational states. Ronald Taylor, for example, commenting on a writing by Wackenroder, states: "This is the tone of reverence, this the mood of self-abandonment to irrational forces of unknown and unquestioned provenance that characterize Romantic utterances on music" (Taylor 1970: 285). Wackenroder's utterances, however, cannot be understood apart from the backdrop of the aesthetics of genius. His ideas about music were inseparable from a theory of art based on the superior capabilities of certain individuals. Behind the music that affected Wackenroder so deeply was the genius's imagination, a powerful faculty in which conscious and unconscious were united. The Romantic abandonment to the power of music, therefore, was not a blind surrender to irrational forces, but a surrender to the superior vision of the Genius. Music, then, did not stand for an irrational world, but for a superrational one in which nature, divine law, and human beings formed a living unity. It is the concept of genius that gave the Romantics' utterances on music a metaphysical and spiritual resonance and that grounded them in a long tradition of philosophical and theological speculation.

“Holy Secrets”: Mystical and Theological Foundations of the Aesthetics of Genius

[For the Romantics] the tones seem to come not from the instruments, but from the supernatural world of spirits, and the listener's attitude is one of religious reverence. Music is a kind of revelation, religious or metaphysical, in which we temporarily leave the everyday world

--Edward Lippman

The association between creative genius and the divine was not a Romantic invention.

The origins of this association can be traced back through what has been characterized as the history of Western thought at least back to Plato. In the eighteenth century there had been a reaction against former explanations of "genius" associated with mystical powers rooted in the Platonic tradition. The concept of genius continued to be central to reflections on creativity, but it was then explained within the limits of the "natural," as the ability to bring together already existing ideas or objects by means of observation of reality.

In the nineteenth century the concept of reality was expanded to include the world of nature, the human world, and the divine world of essences; the genius's creative imagination was the link between them. The language used to refer to a genius, and in particular to a musical genius, reflected the metaphysical and religious connotations of this concept. A contemporary of Beethoven referred to him in the following terms:

Beethoven, a musical genius, has chosen Vienna as his residence for the past two years He seems already to have entered into the inner sanctuary of music, distinguishing himself for his precision, feeling and taste: consequently his fame has risen considerably. A living proof of his true love of art lies in the fact that he has put himself in the hands of our immortal Haydn in order to be initiated into the holy secrets of the art of music. The latter great Master during his absence, has turned him over to our great Albrechtsberger. What cannot be expected when such a great

genius places himself under the guidance of such excellent masters! (quoted in Landon 1970: 59).

The view of the Romantic genius and of art as holy, popularized by poets and writers, was directly connected with philosophical idealism, and especially with Schelling's philosophy, which had made explicit the link between the aesthetic and the religious. Schelling considered artistic creativity as grounded in a symbolic medium and for him the source of this medium was mythology, which consisted in turn in expressions of the divine. For Schelling, then, the symbolic world of art created by the genius was rooted in traditional expressions of the divine. This line of thought was also pursued by other idealist German philosophers and Romantic authors. Following Schelling's lead, Friedrich Schlegel, who has been called "one of the first apostles of romanticism" (Ritter 1891: 54), considered art as religious because through it the creative artist could see the infinite in the finite in the form of beauty (see Copleston 1994 [1963]: 18).

The ideas on art of philosophers such as Schelling and of Romantic poets such as Hölderlin or Novalis were not detached, then, from the conceptions of art and music held by larger groups participating in the cultural life of the time. As Le Huray and Day have noted, professional musicians were also interested in and aware of the aesthetic theories of contemporary thinkers. Beethoven, for one, is known to have been familiar with the works of Goethe, Schiller, Lessing and Kant, among others (Le Huray and Day 1988: xii).

The Romantic movement was obviously influenced by the philosophical currents of the time, as the philosophers were also influenced by the general cultural atmosphere. But the movement was also an expression of the creative practices of composers and artists and the aesthetic attitudes of listeners. Similarly, the figure of the genius was constructed socially, but it was also rooted in contemporary aesthetic ideals. For

example, the Viennese reception of Beethoven as a genius was influenced by the social circumstances described by Tia DeNora (1995), and was also informed by larger philosophical and cultural currents.

As I argued earlier, nineteenth-century Romantic and idealist ideas constituted a reaction against the Enlightenment, but, at the same time, they had significant roots in Kant's Third Critique. This does not imply, however, that nineteenth-century German philosophy is a logical consequence of the Kantian Critique. The concepts of the Romantic genius and of art and their metaphysical significance were also informed by other currents of thought. A major source for such ideas was a nineteenth-century current of mystical and esoteric thought that profoundly affected the philosophy and culture of the Romantic period.

The influence of theological speculation in German idealism was pervasive. Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, the most important exponents of idealism, had studied theology before turning to philosophy. The impact that theological themes had on their development as philosophers is evident in their philosophical works. An example of this is the relationship between the finite and the infinite and between God and the creation which underlies Hegel's overall system. This and many of the main themes of idealist philosophy were problems brought to the philosophical field from a theological framework. But it would be misleading to interpret this connection between idealist metaphysics and theology as a mere return of philosophy to religion after the critical break introduced by the Enlightenment. In reality, the idealists' approach to metaphysics was clearly a post-Kantian development, and, as such, it had no room in it for a mere revisiting of a philosophy inspired by theological orthodoxy and traditional religious conventions.

There was, however, a renewed interest in various heterodox forms of spiritual reflection, such as the thoughts of Christian and Catholic mystics or esoteric traditions like Jewish Kabbala. These mystical and esoteric currents acquired great relevance in the Europe of the early nineteenth century and played an important role in the metaphysical speculations of post-Enlightenment Europe, particularly in the development of German idealism and the Romantic movement in general. In *The Mystical Sources of German Romantic Philosophy* (1983), Ernst Benz explores this connection arguing for the pervasiveness of mystical and esoteric thinking in the German intellectual atmosphere at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As he documents, the great interest in the first half of the nineteenth century for this kind of speculation included revivals of German medieval mysticism (mainly through the writings of Master Eckhart) and of eighteenth-century mysticism (through Jacob Boehme), the flourishing of new forms of theosophy, a new interest in the old cabalistic tradition, the discovery of Indian mysticism, and the influence of authors such as Emmanuel Swedenborg, the great Swedish visionary and contemporary of Kant.

The impact of these mystical sources on contemporary philosophy were not a secret at the beginning of the nineteenth century. To help make this point, Benz quotes among others F. T. Vischer, a well-known disciple of Hegel whose main interest was aesthetics: "Have you forgotten" Vischer writes, " that the new philosophy came forth from the school of the old mystics, especially from Jacob Boehme?" (quoted in Benz 1983: 2). And indeed these mystical sources were soon forgotten until the end of the nineteenth century when thinkers like Wilhelm Dilthey rediscovered the connections between them and German idealism.

It was Franz von Baader, a friend of Hegel and Schelling, who in 1813 published

an edition of the works of the great mystic Jacob Boehme with a philosophical introduction. Baader's mystical interests greatly influenced both Hegel and Schelling. In a conversation with Hoffmann in the early 1840's, Baader recalled:

In Berlin, I was very often in Hegel's company. One day, in 1824, I read to him some of the writings of Master Eckhart, whom he knew only by name until then. He was so enthused that I heard him give a whole lecture on Master Eckhart the other day, and he finished with these words: 'Da haben wir es ja, was wir wollen' (That is exactly what we want, that is the whole of our ideas, of our intentions) (quoted in Benz 1983: 6).

Baader also introduced Schelling to the writings of Boehme, which would have a profound impact on Schelling's philosophy, especially in its later stages. If in the earlier years of his career Schelling usually did not refer to his mystical sources, in his later philosophy the turn towards theosophy and mysticism was so overt that it made Kierkegaard exclaim after hearing one of his lectures in Berlin in the early 1840's: "I have completely given up on Schelling," while others had renounced calling him a philosopher any longer (in Bowie 1993: 3).

Baader's orientation also encountered embittered opposition from, on the one hand, those still holding onto the tenets of eighteenth-century rationalism and who saw in the new currents a threat to enlightened progress and, on the other, those defending traditional theology who also saw in this mystical revival a disturbing threat to established teachings. If we consider the affinity between metaphysical idealism and the revival of mysticism, it is clear that the new philosophy was as much at odds with enlightened rationalism prior to the Third Critique as it was with the tenets of Christian and Catholic orthodox theology.

The concept of artistic genius signals a significant point of convergence between

philosophical idealism and nineteenth-century mystical currents. In the nineteenth century the metaphysical component of the concept of Romantic genius was often understood and expressed with rhetoric characteristic of an interest in mysticism that was decisive in the emergence of the Romantic movement. Arthur Friedheim, a distinguished pupil of Liszt, summarizes this point:

All through life Liszt sensed the spiritual, could see and hear things and sounds beyond ordinary ken. He had the intuitions, the mystic power to penetrate beyond the empyrean. To me, mysticism and genius have always appeared indissolubly united. Spiritual ecstasy or rapture glows in the soul of the genius and stimulates him to extraordinary expression. So Liszt functioned as a medium in the most immaterial of all arts which, in its highest revelations, can rightly be regarded as the language of mysticism. The keys and wires of a piano were the media to voice his mystical-spiritual ecstasy (Friedheim 1986: 159).

Liszt himself in a letter to George Sand wrote about the holy destiny of the artist: "mournful and yet grand is the destiny of the artist. A holy election by grace places its imprint upon him at his birth"; and later, "[the artist's] will stands firm and keeps unvaryingly turned toward the pole; and for him this pole is Art, the sensuous reproduction of the mysterious and the divine in man and in nature" (ibid.: 283).

A fundamental theme in Romanticism was the significance of the Self and the individual, which in some important ways contrasted with the Enlightenment emphasis on universality and humanity as a whole. Rousseau's self-discovery in the countryside, away from Parisian society and the company of the other *philosophes*, though somewhat naive and lacking in philosophical rigor, is a forerunner of the Romantic and idealist turn towards the individual Self (see Rousseau 2000 [1788]).

In idealist philosophy the Self became the ground of consciousness and the means to reach the absolute. In previous attempts to ground philosophy in the ego,

consciousness had been understood as separate from being; the idealists on the contrary attempted to bridge consciousness and being. Fichte, in particular, undertook this task by elaborating a post-Kantian, "transcendental" approach to the Self. He argued that individuals come in contact with being only through consciousness. He also maintained that the objects of knowledge are only given in the act of knowing them. For Fichte, the object of philosophy "can be neither being, as in all pre-Kantian philosophy, nor consciousness . . . but only the absolute unity of the two beyond their separateness" (in Behler 1987: x). On this view, the foundations of ideality and reality reside within the ego (ibid.: xi), a conception that had great influence on the Romantic understanding of reality. In fact, the exaltation of the individual Self as the seat of reality and ideality, finitude and the absolute, in idealist philosophy was a major influence for the Romantic emphasis on individual personality.

The creative genius was for the Romantics the highest expression of the individual, a person whose creative power, originality, freedom, and talent to reach the infinite were developed to their full potential. It is worth noting that in the early Romantic period, for authors such as Novalis or F. Schlegel, as well as for philosophers like Schelling, the genius was not an exception in human nature but was its highest expression. Through the Romantic exaltation of the genius was exalted all of human nature and its unlimited possibilities.

Ernst Benz holds that the concept of the Self in Fichte was directly influenced by German mystic writings of the Middle Ages. This direct connection is also found, he argues, in Baader, who took the mystic principle of the "spark of the soul" as the basis for his speculations of the Self. For Benz, the notion of genius in idealism participates in the philosophical and secular transformation of the mystic experience of union with God.

He writes that even if by then the concept of Genius had already been detached from the Christian context, "genius in the true idealistic sense is the heir of the mystical and the 'central vision' of idealistic philosophy in the direct reflection of the mystical experience" (Benz 1983: 25).

Milton Nahm (1956) has argued that the main theme underlying the long-standing idea of the divine character of artistic creation is human freedom. He maintains that this theme has been articulated for centuries around the idea of what he calls "the great analogy," meaning the analogy of the creative artist to God. For Nahm, the concept of Genius in the Western speculative tradition on art developed from the idea of this "great analogy" and underwent a progressive humanization and naturalization (Nahm 1956: 177). Despite this development, Nahm also states, this ground of Genius on "the religious notion of the inspiration, of the seer, and the prophet" was never completely lost, and he finds a "religious sub-flavor" in all writings concerning the genius (ibid.: 129). At the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries Romantic authors and idealist philosophers, especially Schelling, recovered the sense of the divine character of the genius, making that "religious sub-flavor" an explicit and fundamental aspect of it. This recovery was brought about by the German authors by way of the interest in mystical and esoteric traditions, more than by the teachings of Protestant orthodoxy.

The great revival of Catholicism among the Romantics is also related to this mystical undercurrent. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Catholic church had lost much of its previous influence. Rationalist thinkers had strongly attacked it, while the Jansenist controversy had also affected its popularity. Perhaps the perception of Catholicism as antagonistic to eighteenth-century rationalism influenced the strong revival

it had in the Romantic period. Catholicism was in fact reminiscent of medieval times and, in general, of a more remote and suggestive world that gave rise to great mystics and elaborate ritualistic ceremonies. For German Romantics a return to the Catholic church meant a return to a more symbolic and artistic spiritual world, and it offered a means of escape from contemporary religious orthodoxy. Accounts of Romantic conversions to Catholicism are usually made in the language of mystic awakening and frequently related to intense aesthetic experiences. Baader, who introduced Hegel and Schelling to the writings of the great German mystics Eckhardt and Boehme, made the connection between genius and the divine explicit: "Your efforts to be assimilated into the divine will be vain for all eternity, if you have not first appropriated the divine into yourself, that is to say, if the source of creative genius does not spring in you yourself" (Benz 1983: 25).

The Romantic Genius as Solution to the Post-Enlightenment Crisis

The figure of the Romantic genius arose as the source of light and freedom in the midst of the post-enlightenment disenchantment with the explanatory powers of metaphysics, religion, and reason itself. Artistic creativity was no longer one activity among others, and because it was all that was left for the Romantics to believe in, art commanded a new respect. Wackenroder has his character Joseph Berglinger meditate in the following terms:

O! this constant, monotonous succession of thousands of days and nights,--so that the whole life of the human being and the whole life of the entire world is nothing but an endless, strange game on a board of black and white fields, whereby in the end no one wins but cursed Death,--this could drive one crazy at many an hour.-- But one must reach with a courageous arm through the heap of debris upon which our life has crumbled and cling tenaciously to art, which reaches beyond everything into eternity,-- which offers us its radiant hand from heaven, so that we float above the desolate abyss in a bold position, between Heaven and Earth! (in Lippman 1988:

20).

Against eighteenth-century ideals of universality and objectivity, the focus was now on the individual personality, considered the locus of authentic freedom, with an associated emphasis on subjectivity and the power of imagination. The figure of the Romantic hero who withdrew from society to find within himself true inspiration and to fulfill his destiny symbolized this shift towards inwardness. Rather than as a retreat into solipsism, the Romantic Self was conceived as the basis for a synthesis between individual, nature, and God. And the creative imagination was the faculty through which the Self could fully develop this potential: "No flame of the human heart rises up higher and straighter toward heaven than art! No substance so concentrates in itself the intellectual and spiritual power of the human being and makes him to such a degree an autonomous, human god!" (Wackenroder, in Lippman 1988: 28).

Raymond Williams has written that it is tempting to consider the special status conferred on the genius in this period as a direct response of resistance to the process of commodification of art: while the laws of the market were making of the artist just one more producer of commodities, aesthetic theories asserted the superior power of art and artist to bring truth to humanity. Williams, however, notes that to assert such a direct link would be to oversimplify matters, for that response "is also (and this has been of the greatest subsequent importance) an emphasis on the embodiment in art of certain human values, capacities, energies, which the development of society towards an industrial civilization was felt to be threatening or even destroying" (Williams 1983: 36).

If art was for the Romantics a realm of freedom that could reach "beyond everything into eternity," it was in part due to the nineteenth-century translation of a

body of mystical sources into the secularized language of aesthetics. It is this background that made possible the emergence of the nineteenth-century art-religion, perhaps best exemplified by the cult that grew around the figure of Beethoven. Especially after his death, Beethoven became an obligatory point of reference for subsequent generations of composers and connoisseurs, and the reverence for his works and his persona acquired mythical proportions.

A conjunction of new aesthetic ideals, personal circumstances, and social factors contributed to the swift rise of Beethoven to the status of exemplary Romantic genius. In the 1790s new aesthetic ideas consisting in part in a rejection of classical conventions and an emphasis on the freedom of imagination were becoming increasingly influential in artistic and literary circles. Beethoven's style, though criticized by many in the early years of his career for being incomprehensible, became paradigmatic of the new aesthetic ideals. E. T. A. Hoffmann's writings on music, and in particular his reviews of Beethoven's works published in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* between 1810 and 1813, helped considerably to shape the reception of Beethoven as the prototype of the Romantic genius.

Beethoven was the first composer to engage in no musical function other than composition. As Raynor notes, this was not something Beethoven willingly sought, but was a result of his withdrawal from public concerts and musical parties due to the deafness he suffered (Raynor 1972: 352). The "ivory-tower" effect pervasive in Western classical music since the Romantic period would seem, therefore, to have been accelerated by something as contingent as an illness. Beethoven's deafness is a good metaphor for the Western composer as portrayed since the nineteenth century--someone who creates music following only the dictates of his own inward voice. His creative

originality and unconventional public persona, combined with his tragic isolation, became the perfect symbol of the emergent aesthetics of genius and acquired the force of a myth.

Tia DeNora (1995) has explored the social aspects of the elevation of Beethoven to the level of genius. She argues that Beethoven's myth was orchestrated in Vienna by a small but highly influential group of people, and she shows how the intricate social nets of power and influence were manifested as well as negotiated through the music of particular composers. These composers, chosen and supported by a small group, were, in her terms, imposed on the rest of society as a symbol of its power. DeNora notes that the reverence for Beethoven's music was not universal and that large numbers of people, influential individuals among them, did not receive well many of Beethoven's compositions. What his supporters considered to be the originality that characterizes a genius was for his detractors proof of his deviation from great music.

In her investigation of the social construction of genius, DeNora succeeds in showing that aesthetic judgments are affected by social factors and cannot be taken as originating in a separate sphere detached from all other conditions. To know that Beethoven was not universally acknowledged as an infallible creative genius makes us direct our attention to the people that claimed universality for that judgment, to notice the circumstances and ideas that allowed this claim to prevail over other conflicting ones. An array of complex issues can be explored following this realization, which is fundamental to a rethinking of the role of classical Western music in culture and society.

But a reflection on the influence of the social on the aesthetic, such as DeNora presents, needs to be complemented by a reflection on the influence of the aesthetic on the social if we want to escape the reduction of art--its production and its reception--to a matter of the will to power of a hegemonic group of people. In other words, if

Beethoven's symbolic status in Western culture is merely the result of his having been chosen by a few powerful people, then culture as a whole is suspect of ideological manipulation. And when culture as a whole is suspect of being an instrument of hegemonic domination it no longer provides the Archimedean point that opens the possibility for criticism of and resistance to that very domination.

The solution to this problem depends on finding a mediation between an investigation of the social construction of the cultural and an investigation of the cultural shaping of the social. To put it in the context of our discussion, the claim to universality of Beethoven's greatness was, to be sure, propagated by a group of people, and this claim served their particular agendas as a socially powerful group. But there was also something in Beethoven's music that distinguished him from other proteges of the nobility and that made possible the enthusiasm that grew around him and his music. Even when this enthusiastic reception was most assuredly reinforced by the rhetorical apparatus of a social group that took Beethoven as their symbol, it was nevertheless provoked by a series of characteristics that made this music meaningful. Beethoven's music gave Vienna, and later the rest of Europe, an image of itself and of its dreams. This image was no doubt ideologically informed, but, as I will argue in chapter seven, there is in every creative work a surplus of meaning that escapes a total ideological appropriation.

The quasi-religious rhetoric supporting Beethoven's rise to the status of genius did serve the purpose of a dominant class to gain universal respect for its political ideals. However, the fact that this religious tone was efficacious was due not only to the trendsetting power of this group, but it also had much to do with a history of ideas and of cultural practices that coalesced at a particular point in the figure of the genius, and that gave what the genius produced a significance that extended beyond any political agenda.

The separation between the sphere of artistic production--the products of which were now qualified with the adjective "fine" in English or "beautiful" in other languages--and the sphere of mechanic production served the purpose of situating art in a separate, higher realm. As I will discuss in chapter seven, the fine arts were constituted by original and unique acts of creation that expressed their creators' inwardness, while mechanical production belonged to the functional and prosaic world of everyday life in a society increasingly industrialized.

The genius's ability to express his inner voice, independently from the sphere of industrial production, was a proof of the possibilities of human freedom and transcendence. The new aesthetics of genius also was also linked to a series of social developments stemming from the Industrial Revolution. Raymond Williams (1983) argues that the new concept of the artist as autonomous genius, the theory of art as the realm of a "superior reality," and the tendency to regard the production of art as a specialized kind of production largely subject to the same conditions of general production, are closely interrelated (see also Woodmansee 1994). Williams cautions that some of these interrelated ideas might be named as causes and others as effects, "were not the historical process so complex as to render a clear division impossible" (Williams 1983: 32). He also notes, referring especially to literature, that by the beginning of the nineteenth century the patronage system had been for the most part substituted by the conditions of a market. Success in the literary market became synonymous with selling the largest possible number of copies. In these conditions, Williams argues, a concept of "culture" related to the idea of a few "cultivated" readers emerged, in sharp contrast to an uncultivated, non-discerning general public. Williams quotes comments on this situation such as the following by Egerton Brydges in the 1820s,

It is a vile evil that literature is become so much a trade all over Europe. Nothing has gone so far to nurture a corrupt taste, and to give the unintellectual power over the intellectual. Merit is now universally esteemed by the multitude of readers that an author can attract. . . . Will the uncultivated mind admire what delights the cultivated? (quoted in Williams 1983: 35).

As we saw earlier, in the early nineteenth century the spirit of Romanticism was embodied as much by the artistic creations favored by a “cultivated” minority as by popularly acclaimed manifestations such as spectacular displays of virtuosity. Similarly, the figure of the Romantic genius crossed over this incipient divide between “serious” and popular art. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the idea of high culture became more sharply differentiated from popular forms of entertainment, and the concept of genius was increasingly associated with the former, and dissociated from the latter. Richard Wagner's short stories about a fictional unknown German musician who worships Beethoven illustrate the interrelated phenomena of the cult of genius and the art-religion that, although rooted in early Romantic aesthetics, were fully developed during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The first of these stories, "A Pilgrimage to Beethoven," published in 1840, is a first-person narrative recounting the difficulties this musician had to overcome to meet his hero and, finally, the life-changing encounter with Beethoven. This fabricated encounter takes place around the time of the completion of the Ninth Symphony, that is to say, no later than 1823. Only a few decades earlier, the idea of a musical pilgrimage would have sounded absurd. There are earlier instances of musical “pilgrimages,” such as J. S. Bach's 250-mile journey on foot to hear Buxtehude play. But this kind of journey, even when they were extraordinarily important for the visitor, as in Bach's case, did not have the overtly religious connotations portrayed in Wagner's story. Wagner's character,

Robert, describes as follows his wish to see the great composer: "No Mohammedan more devoutly longed to journey to the grave of his Prophet, than I to go to the house where Beethoven lived" (Wagner 1991 [1840a]: 58). And on his experience in attending a performance of *Fidelio* in Vienna he states: "For my own part, the heavens were opened to me; I was transported, and adored the genius who had led me--just as, in his opera, Florestan was led--from night and fetters into light and freedom" (ibid.: 71).

Beethoven's musical production has been considered as a peak of the Western tradition, to the point that composers of later generations had to grapple with the task of reaching his status while at the same time carrying forward his legacy. Wagner was well aware of the difficulties of this task. His little story about Robert, the humble and sincere devotee, can be read as part of Wagner's self-legitimation as Beethoven's heir. When Robert finally gets to see Beethoven in his own house (he calls it a sanctuary), Beethoven recognizes in him a true connoisseur and confides to him the meaning of his last symphony--that it is nothing less than his testament containing the direction to be followed by music in the future: the union of instrumental and vocal music, the music-drama!²⁵

The distinction between true appreciation of music and dilettantism constitutes the connecting thread of Wagner's narration. In his quest to see Beethoven, Robert is mortified by the presence of an Englishman who also seeks to be introduced to the great composer and who insists on combining efforts with the German musician. The two travelers meet on the road in their way to Vienna, but while the Englishman rides in a carriage, Robert is walking and refuses an invitation to continue the journey in the carriage. He says: "To me it seemed as though my weary pilgrimage on foot were holier

²⁵ I address Wagner's interpretation of Beethoven's legacy in contrast to that of the Romantics in chapter five.

and more devout, and must render me more blessed than this proud gentleman who drove there in full state" (Wagner 1991 [1840a] : 62).

The German is thus involved in a true pilgrimage, where by the long, arduous way allows pilgrims to undergo a progressive process of purification and of detachment from their everyday lives. When they reach their goal, pilgrims are already transformed: the overcoming of hardship and the mental fixation on the final goal have already made them more holy. To finally see the relic, the grave, or the venerated image is but the catalyst for that transformation to reach its climax. Robert's unwelcome fellow traveler, on the contrary, wants to get to Vienna as soon and as comfortably as possible. He does not understand the German's stubborn insistence on continuing the journey on foot.

Robert's distaste for the Englishman soon takes on a paranoid and ominous character, and he speaks of being afraid of becoming "polluted," feeling a "secret terror," and believing that the false pilgrim "was determined to thrust himself upon me in order to destroy me" (Wagner 1991 [1840a]: 63). For the German connoisseur, what is at stake in this journey is nothing less than his "soul's salvation." The forced company of the dilettante Englishman represents to him not only one more obstacle to overcome, but also a threat of contamination, of being swallowed up by the vulgar and uncultivated mass. Robert is desperate to present himself to the master as a genuine German music lover, a discriminating connoisseur, a true believer. At the end of the story, everything is cleared up: Beethoven recognizes who is who in the odd couple and treats them accordingly. He confides to the connoisseur the meaning of his last symphony, while dismissing the dilettante with scorn, of which the latter in his ignorance is not even aware.

The story ends with the two travelers preparing to part ways. The Englishman's next destination is Italy; he wants to visit Rossini, who is for him "another famous

composer." Robert, now certain that the difference between them is unmistakable before everybody's eyes, answers jovially: "Good luck! . . . I know Beethoven, and that's enough for a lifetime!" (Wagner 1991 [1840a]: 79). Wagner's contrast between Rossini and Beethoven constitutes a reference to the growing gap between serious and popular music, Rossini being a clear example of the latter (see Pederson 1994: 89-91). Louis Spohr, for example, said of Rossini that even though he was "not wanting in invention and genius" (note that "genius" is here used as an attribute, not as a noun), he had not been "scientifically educated, and led to the only right way by Mozart's classical masterpieces" (Spohr 1878, vol. 1: 319).

The nationalistic subtext in Wagner's story is difficult to miss. To be initiated in the art of Beethoven, to be a superior soul, and to be German are sharply contrasted with lacking a true knowledge of music, of being a wretch, and being English. After hearing that Beethoven despised the many Englishmen who came to Vienna to see him, Robert is more terrified than ever about sharing his quest with the "cursed Englishman." In a ludicrous episode when both German connoisseur and British dilettante see Beethoven in a beer-garden, the German is tortured by the way Beethoven had looked at him and exclaims in horror, "I knew what that glance had meant: he had taken me for an Englishman!" He goes on: "What was to be done to allay the master's suspicion? Everything depended on my letting him know that I was a simple German soul, poor in earthly goods but rich in heavenly enthusiasm for his genius" (Wagner 1991 [1840a]: 69). The simple German soul is more precisely from Northern Germany, the only place where Beethoven's music seemed to be truly appreciated. The narration thus ends with the foolish Englishman heading south to look for false greatness while Robert says: "We parted. I cast one longing glance at Beethoven's house, and turned to the north, uplifted in heart, and

ennobled" (ibid.: 79).

Conclusion

A painting by Albert Graefle (1807-1889), "Ludwig van Beethoven und die Intimen, dem Spiel desselben lauschend," shows Beethoven at the piano surrounded by a small group of listeners. One of them exhibits an expression of deep concentration, another leans against a window in a gesture of dreamlike abandonment. Two other listeners present attitudes of rapture and overwhelming emotion, one of them reclines his head backwards in an ecstatic expression, while the other covers his face with his hand. Beethoven may be playing his own works or he may be improvising (he stares away from the score on the stand, as if drawing his inspiration from his own fantasy).

Another painting by Joseph Danhauser (1805-1845) depicting Liszt's artistic salon in Paris in the 1830's shows a similar musical scene. This time Liszt is at the piano, as in one of his typical improvised performances, while a few listeners dressed in characteristically Romantic attire sit or stand around him in attitudes very much like those of Graefle's painting.²⁶ On the piano there is a white, larger-than-life bust of Beethoven, towards which Liszt looks as he plays. On the piano stand, closed, is a score on whose cover the title "Phantasy" can be barely distinguished; next to it, in characteristic Romantic disorder, another paper seems to show Beethoven's signature.

It is not accidental that these two geniuses are portrayed in the act of improvising. The Romantic cult of genius had emphasized the act of creation, the moment in which "transfixed by the sacred fire . . . he would utter the suprahuman revelations that

²⁶ The listeners portrayed include Marie d'Agoult, George Sand, Paganini, and Rossini. According to the description of the painting in a novel published in 1869 by Moritz Bermann Liszt's was in fact improvising in this particular occasion portrayed by Danhauser.

humanity expected of him” (Wangermee 1950: 230, my translation). But the relationship between the concept of genius and the practice of improvisation underwent significant changes in the course of the nineteenth century. The inclusion of improvisations in public performances continued throughout the 1830s, but a gap was growing wider between displays of virtuosity intended to please the audiences of the new public concerts, and the practice of improvisation as a form of musical creativity not inferior in artistic quality to composition.

At the time of the decline of the Romantic movement the fascination for the artist in creation had lost momentum, and the cult of genius revolved more and more around his finished works. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century musical instruction and public concerts were dominated by the new ideal of fidelity to the written work. In the next chapter I interpret this shift in musical ideals in the context of the Neoromantic reaction against the Romantic world. The notion of Genius continued to be central to ideas of musical greatness, but this was no longer best embodied by the improvising genius, but by the genius’s works. The eventual disappearance of improvisation in this period can be largely understood as the convergence on the one hand, of the metaphysical and religious baggage of the concept of genius discussed in this chapter, and, on the other, the positivistic worldview that superseded Romanticism in the second half of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER FIVE

A CURE FOR ROMANTICISM: NEOROMANTICISM, POSITIVISM, AND THE REDEMPTION OF CULTURE

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, the Romantic movement constituted the core of most, if not all, aspects of European culture. Romanticism was not just an artistic style or a philosophical orientation only meaningful for an intellectual elite. It was a worldview that had an impact on all spheres of society, all cultural manifestations, and all forms of knowledge. Romanticism had channeled new self-understandings that filled the void left in Western culture after the Enlightenment project was put into question. But by the 1830s, this powerful movement began to lose vitality and in the following decades numerous voices denounced its decadence and proclaimed the need for a cultural renovation. These voices denounced not only the decadent state of Romanticism, but often attacked Romanticism itself as an inherently decadent movement. By mid-century, the idea of Romanticism as disease had become commonplace, and new artistic and intellectual currents took up the task of curing culture of any lingering aspects of the Romantic malady.

Within the musical world, Wagner's was the most prominent of those critical voices. A main impulse for his artistic project--the single most influential musical development in the second half of the nineteenth century--was a wish to redeem culture from its fall into the decadent world of the Romantics. Improvisation was mostly seen in this period as an aspect of this decadence, and one which did not offer any possibility for redemption. In this chapter I address what this post-Romantic "redemption" of

Romanticism entailed, and why improvisation could not be reconciled with the new aesthetic ideals.

Music in the Era of Positivism

The disappearance of the practice of improvisation and its theoretical discrediting around the middle of the nineteenth century was a symptom of a larger rupture with the Romantic world. This rupture has been generally obscured in the literature by the broadly accepted idea that the nineteenth century at large was the era of Romanticism.²⁷ Carl Dahlhaus has introduced an interesting twist to this idea, arguing that the latter part of the nineteenth century was characterized by a split between music and culture, as opposed to an earlier period in which both music and culture were Romantic (Dahlhaus 1980, see also Deathridge and Dahlhaus 1984).²⁸ Early nineteenth-century music, he writes, “could be said to be romantic in an age of romanticism, which produced romantic poetry and painting and even romantic physics and chemistry, whereas the neo-Romanticism of the later part of the century was romantic in an unromantic age, dominated by positivism and realism” (Dahlhaus 1980: 5).

While Dahlhaus takes into account the profound changes European culture underwent around mid-century, his argument still supports the continuity between

²⁷ Leon Plantinga's *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1984) is an example of this periodization. Plantinga acknowledges that the term “Romanticism” is ambiguous to the point of being useless. However, as Dahlhaus noted in his review of Plantinga's book, “it is exactly in view of the impossibility of maintaining a scientifically precise concept of Romanticism that Plantinga feels justified in retaining the colloquial custom that regards Romantic music and nineteenth-century music as identical” (Dahlhaus 1987b: 194).

²⁸ Dahlhaus contrasts two main different periodizations concerning the music of the nineteenth century. One of them situates a caesura around 1830, which marks the end of Viennese classicism and early Romanticism, and the beginning of a properly Romantic period. Another view, favored by Dahlhaus himself, situates the caesura around 1850, marking the end of Romanticism and the beginning of Neoromanticism (Dahlhaus 1980: 14ff). My own argument also assumes the latter.

Romantic and Neoromantic music. His view of the persistence of the Romantic spirit in Neoromantic music is, to be sure, not simplistic. Because music was still Romantic in the midst of a positivistic and industrial age, he suggests, it was able to provide a redeeming alternative to an otherwise prosaic culture: “Music, *the* romantic art, had become “untimely” in general terms, though by no means unimportant; on the contrary, its very dissociation from the prevailing spirit of the age enabled it to fulfill a spiritual, cultural, and ideological function of a magnitude which can hardly be exaggerated: it stood for an alternative world” (Dahlhaus 1980: 5, Dahlhaus’s emphasis). I want to argue, however, that Neoromanticism moved away from and even contradicted central aspects of Romanticism (the aesthetic value given to improvisation among them) and was therefore in fundamental ways no longer Romantic. Neoromantic music, I further argue, was not as “untimely” as Dahlhaus suggests, for the particular way in which the Neoromantics attempted to recast Romanticism shows a deep affinity with the positivistic culture of their time.

Despite his overall argument concerning the uninterrupted Romantic character of nineteenth-century music, Dahlhaus, as well as other musicologists, noted that around 1850 there was a significant shift in music that marked a departure from Romanticism. Dahlhaus states, for example, that the early Romantic composers were part of a “different era” : “The composers who died within a few years of 1850—Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin—represent a different era from that of Wagner and Liszt, although they belong to the same generation” (Dahlhaus 1980: 16-17). Even within the careers of Wagner and Liszt a change in style and aesthetic goals occurred around the middle of the century. Charles Rosen speaks of Liszt’s 1852 Sonata in B Minor as “a pivotal work between Liszt’s early and late style [sic]” (Rosen 1995: 480). Dahlhaus establishes 1850 as the

turning point of Wagner's shift from Romantic operas to his later style. In fact, he remarks that not only the historico-philosophical climates of the two periods present profound differences, but also that the music itself had an "altered tone" after 1850 (Dahlhaus 1980: 16).²⁹

Although Dahlhaus is aware of a change in the music itself, he chooses to emphasize the continuity of the Romantic spirit in music in the midst of a general cultural and social shift. He was of course correct to assert that in the second half of the nineteenth century European culture was no longer Romantic. As I will discuss in chapter six, scientific standards and methodologies became paradigmatic of truth in all fields of knowledge, and their influence was also felt in artistic developments. In the plastic arts, for instance, naturalist and realist currents gained prominence in the 1850s, marking a move away from Romanticism and an affinity with the new positivistic ideals. Was Neoromantic music then the sole redoubt of lofty Romantic ideals in a culture fascinated by positive knowledge, as Dahlhaus claims? In my view, Neoromantic aesthetics and Neoromantic music itself participated in an anti-Romantic current that was particularly felt after 1848 (see Sanna Pederson 1996). And although Neoromantic aesthetics were grounded on ideas about music originating in the Romantic period--in particular the autonomy of music and its metaphysical significance--the Neoromantics reinterpreted those ideas in ways akin to the general cultural atmosphere of the time, which was no longer Romantic.

If in the plastic arts the Naturalist or Realist currents of mid-century are relatively

²⁹ For Dahlhaus, Liszt presents a different case, for even though the compositional techniques of his symphonic poems written in the 1850s are "undoubtedly representative of the 'new music' of their time . . . their spiritual and intellectual structures were essentially informed by the French Romanticism of the 1830s, to whose ideas and attitudes Liszt remained unshakably loyal" (Dahlhaus 1980: 17). In my view, however, these "spiritual and intellectual structures" were obviously put to the service of the Neoromantic aesthetic project which, as I am arguing, was antithetical to the Romantic movement in some basic aspects.

easy to identify, the non-representational nature of music to a large extent impedes such categorizations (a characteristic implied in Dahlhaus's emphasis when he writes that music is "*the romantic art*"). But Neoromanticism, whose main genres are program music and the Wagnerian music-drama, also reveals an affinity with those currents in its interest in the musical expression of concrete and definite feelings, images, and ideas. This characteristic of Neoromanticism has led Edward Lippman to define Neoromantic aesthetics as "emotional realism," and to contrast them with those of the Romantic period. After the efflorescence of Romanticism in music, Lippman writes, "a new and more vivid kind of music became prominent in the decades from 1840 to 1860 in which the veiled and suggestive feelings of Romanticism, nostalgic and unfulfilled, gave way before specific and clearly defined feelings along with representation of external scenes and events" (1992: 239).

The tendency to express "clearly defined feelings" formed part of the Neoromantic reaction against Romanticism and its emphasis on indefinite and ambiguous meanings. This reaction affected the status of improvisation since, as I argued earlier, improvisation as aesthetic ideal was a fundamental aspect of the Romantic exaltation of indeterminacy, vagueness, and freedom. In general, whereas the Romantics conceived of musical greatness as directly related to the power of music to give free rein to imagination, the Neoromantics sought to concretize the meanings of their music.

Wagner's music-dramas and Liszt's program music embodied this new emphasis on concreteness. The synthesis between music and drama in the former and between music and extra-musical meanings in the latter were considered by these composers and their followers as superior musical forms because they resolved the indeterminacy and vagueness of absolute music. Liszt, for example, in his 1855 review of Berlioz's "Harold

Symphony” considered it praiseworthy that the program attached to this symphony was “guarding the listener from arbitrary poetic interpretations of his work” (quoted in Micznik 1999: 215). Liszt then characterizes the task of the composer (“the painter-symphonist”) as that of “reproducing with equal clarity a picture clearly present in his mind, of developing a series of emotional states which are unequivocally and definitely latent in his consciousness” and given that this is his task, he concludes, “why may he not, through a programme, strive to make himself fully intelligible?” (ibid.: 211).

The Neoromantic reinterpretation of the significance of Beethoven’s music is paradigmatic of this new preoccupation with concrete meanings and of the departure of Neoromanticism from essential Romantic ideals. As we saw, these ideals had been summarized by E. T. A. Hoffmann in his 1811 groundbreaking essay *Beethovens Instrumentalmusik*. For Hoffman it was precisely the flight from the concrete that makes Beethoven’s music Romantic, and so he concludes, “[Beethoven] is accordingly a completely Romantic composer, and is not this perhaps the reason why he has less success with vocal music, which excludes the character of indefinite longing, merely representing emotions defined by words as emotions experienced in the realm of the infinite?” (in Lippman 1988: 211).

In sharp contrast to the Romantic view represented by Hoffmann, Liszt and Wagner believed that Beethoven’s music heralded their own aesthetic ideals of determinacy and concreteness. Wagner claimed that the Ninth symphony was the direct predecessor of his music-drama. For him, Beethoven’s last work had shown composers of new generations the path to follow, that is, the “anchoring” of absolute music in language (see quote on pp. 214-215). Liszt also maintained that a direct link existed between some of Beethoven’s works (for instance, the “Pastoral” Symphony and the

“Moonlight” Piano Sonata) and program music. For him, these works “banished” the “fleeting spirit of instrumental music in itself” and led the “streams of tones in a bed of consistent definite thought” (quoted in Micznik 1999: 210).

Liszt’s reinterpretation of the Romantic notion of poetics is another example of the gap between the aesthetic ideas of the two periods. In a recent essay, Vera Micznik (1999) has pointed out how Liszt appealed to the notion of ‘musical poetics’ characteristic of the first half of the nineteenth century, only to distort its meaning. According to the earlier notion, “music was ‘purely poetic’ precisely because it lacked a definite subject, object and purpose, an absence that let the music speak out by itself, pure and unclouded” (Micznik 1999: 210). Liszt, according to Micznik, took advantage of the ambiguities contained in this concept and conflated the Romantic notion with a new one at the service of program music: “in his argument Liszt fused the old meaning (instrumental music that expresses ideas on its own) with the new meaning he was about to promote: music that needs a ‘poetic’ idea in order to communicate the composer’s thoughts more precisely” (ibid.). Liszt thus claimed that the presence of a program was the “poetic solution of instrumental music,” because it would confer on this music the possibility of expressing determinate feelings (ibid.: 211). Liszt uses the term ‘poetic’ to signify what literally belongs to poetry. In this sense, “musical poetics” would refer to the union of music and poetry, something quite removed from the Romantic notion of the “poetic” in art as opposed to the “prosaic.”³⁰

That Dahlhaus, who was certainly aware of all these changes in music style and aesthetic ideas, maintained that Neoromantic music was still Romantic in spirit is mostly due to his emphasis on an underlying thread between these otherwise distinct moments--a

³⁰ For the Romantic distinction between art as poetry and craft as prose, see Dahlhaus 1967: 4.

concept of music grounded on a metaphysics of beauty. In the Neoromantic period music was still believed to have a metaphysical significance. But the relationship between Neoromantic aesthetics and the Romantic metaphysics of beauty was a complex one. On the one hand, Wagner and Liszt defended music as a language of emotion with a transcendental significance value, on the other, their aesthetic ideas had a clear anti-Hegelian, anti-idealist flavor.³¹ Lippman has even interpreted Wagner's anti-Romantic stance as a departure from metaphysics: "While Romantic aesthetics had entailed a metaphysical outlook, Wagner's realistic aesthetics entailed a social one: art is conceived as a manifestation of society" (Lippman 1992: 244).³²

Neoromantic aesthetics, however, show a will to carry forward the Romantic metaphysics of beauty, although this implied the task of "purifying" Romantic music of vagueness and ambiguity. In this sense, the Neoromantic project meant not so much an attempt to redeem positivistic culture by means of metaphysics, as Dahlhaus would have it, but rather, an attempt to redeem metaphysics by means of positivism. The goal of the Neoromantics was then not a mere reversal of the emphasis on the infinite and the ineffable into an emphasis on the finite and concrete, but an attempt to reduce the infinite to the finite and to convey the inexpressible in concrete meanings.

It could be said, perhaps, that this was also the goal of the Romantics. After all, Romantic music attempted to give shape to the infinite, ineffable, and sublime. But as I argued in chapter two, a central characteristic of Romantic music was the productive, if precarious, balance between those two poles, finite/infinite, presence/absence, ineffability/expression, fleetingness/permanence, and so on. The notion of "shadow"

seems to me an appropriate symbol of this Romantic balance. This notion refers to what

³¹ Wagner's conception of history, however, remained fundamentally Hegelian.

³² The social significance of Liszt's aesthetics can also be argued in the context of Liszt's involvement with earlier French political movements.

is seen under a light that is only suggestive, that does not provide complete definition. In the Romantic context this middle point between light and darkness does not mean an imperfect kind of vision, but rather a superior kind of vision that allows us to see not only with our eyes, but also with our imagination. Neoromantic aesthetics collapsed this balance by attempting to ensure that clearly defined messages get across.

Liszt defended this program not only as a means to avoid arbitrariness in interpretation, but also as the solution to the limitations of absolute music, which he equated with mere technical treatment of the musical material: “In so-called Classical music, the recurrence and thematic development of themes are determined by formal rules that are looked upon as irrevocable, even though its composers never had other guidelines than their own imagination and themselves hit upon those formal patterns which are now propounded as law. In program music, on the other hand, the recurrence, alternation, transformation, and modulation of motifs are determined by their relationship to a poetic conception” (in Weiss and Taruskin 1984: 383). For Liszt, “the artist who favors this type of artwork enjoys the advantage of being able to link all the affections (which the orchestra can express so powerfully) to a poetic model” (ibid.).

Liszt thus makes the claim that absolute music is less valuable because its composition is merely rule-oriented as opposed to the meaning-oriented composition of program music. This claim participates in the association originating in this period between program music and the nineteenth-century hermeneutics of music on the one hand and, on the other, absolute music and formalism. In other words, this claim participates in the conflation of the notion of musical meaning with literal meaning while agreeing with the formalist tenet that absolute music is only about sound structures.

Liszt, in any case, contradicts this claim both in his writings and his methods of

composition. He felt occasionally compelled, for example, to defend the pure musical value of his program music by asserting the secondary role of the program. Rather than being the principle determining musical structures the program is now a mere “‘acknowledgement’ of the composer’s intention to share the precise definition with his listeners” (Micznik 1999: 212, see also Dahlhaus 1980). As for his own methods of composition, studies have shown that some of the music in Liszt’s programmatic works had been originally composed for different occasions.³³ “Such situations justifiably raised suspicions about the integrity of Liszt’s claims that the music was composed according to, and therefore follows, a particular programme, and thus enabled critics of the idea of programme music to consider the whole enterprise as dubious” (Micznik 1999: 214n). Programs were sometimes conceived in advance and later attached to music composed without program or previously attached to another text. This is problematic with regard to the metaphysical value the Neoromantics wanted to preserve for their music and sheds a different light on their claims to have redeemed absolute music of its abstractness.

To say this differently, if Liszt composed some of his pieces in “purely musical” terms and later attached a program to them, the abstractness of absolute music had not been “redeemed,” but only masked. Listeners were not led to hear music as if it could mean almost anything (Romantic aesthetics) or nothing at all (formalist aesthetics), but were now led to believe that the meanings embodied in musical structures coincided precisely with those the composer had intended. The exaltation of authorial intention was thus in Neoromantic aesthetics the perfect complement to the performance ideal of perfect compliance to the score (*Werktreue*) that was becoming the only correct approach

³³ For example, the Lamartine poem that accompanies *Les Préludes* “was attached later to music composed as an overture to a choral work, *Les quatre éléments*, on poems by Joseph Autran” (Micznik 1999: 214).

to performance practice. The fact that throughout his life Liszt remained an avid improviser compounds this complex scenario. Liszt's unwillingness to improvise in public in his later years is consistent with his aesthetic ideal of providing listeners with a "poetic" guide to determinate feelings. Indeed, due to the difficulties of offering listeners a program prior to an improvised performance, improvisation shared the same problematic indeterminacy and vagueness of absolute music but, unlike absolute music, it did not offer any possibility for redemption.³⁴

Redeeming Culture: the Neoromantic Technology of the Sublime

The year 1848 marked a turning point in many aspects of European culture and society. The tensions accumulated under the new social and economic circumstances created by the spread of industrialization, together with powerful new currents of thought giving shape to ideals of democracy, constitutional rights, and class equality crystallized that year in a series of revolutions that affected most European countries. Arguably, it might be possible to show the influence cultural and philosophical developments had on the materialization of such social upheavals, just as it is possible to show the impact of these revolutions on the culture of the time. But the nature of socio-political revolutions-- sudden, radical, and historically and geographically localized -- makes it easier to argue the impact they had on culture in more concrete terms.

Concerning musical developments at this time, the swift turn Wagner's and Liszt's compositional projects took right after the revolution, along with biographical

³⁴ It is of course possible for an improviser to offer some guidelines about what he or she is about to play. But to give in advance a guide to determinate events or feelings seems to contradict the unique kind of experience improvisation can provide to performers and listeners, and which was so highly valued in the Romantic period.

details and theoretical writings, leaves little doubt as to the direct influence of revolution on the materialization of these projects. Dahlhaus notes that the revolution of 1848, “had an immense influence on Wagner’s conception of the Ring, the paradigm of music drama; not only the subject of the drama was affected but the character of the music as well” (Dahlhaus 1980: 17).³⁵ Wagner began work on the music dramas that constitute *The Ring of the Nibelung* in 1848 after leaving Germany in the aftermath of the revolution. This same year also counted as a turning point for Liszt, marking the end of his career as a touring concert virtuoso and the beginning of his period as composer of program music. This transition was enabled by his appointment in 1848 as music director at the Weimar court. During his Weimar period, which lasted until 1861, Liszt began to compose his tone poems and program symphonies and to conduct the works of other composers, prominently Wagner, and he became a major force of the group that defended the “music of the future,” later called “New German School.”³⁶

It was not by chance that the year of the revolution, in which Wagner began composing music-dramas and Liszt program music, the two main Neoromantic genres, was also the year in which the first article “to embrace fully the new anti-Romantic attitude towards music” (Pederson 1996: 67) was published. This was C. Kretschmar’s article “Romanticism in Music,” where he echoed and applied to music an idea that had kept resurfacing in Germany ever since the beginning of the Romantic movement: the idea of Romanticism as disease. Goethe, who considered himself a Classicist, put it simply:

³⁵ For Deathridge and Dahlhaus, this influence does not translate into real interest in politics or in any extra-musical matter on the part of Wagner: “Political convictions meant nothing to Wagner except in relation to the idea of musical drama, the measure of all things for him. He became a revolutionary at a time when he saw social upheaval as the only means of bringing art to the forefront in the theater, in place of the priority given to entertainment and prestige” (Deathridge and Dahlhaus 1984: 95).

³⁶ Liszt resigned his Weimar post in 1858, but stayed there for three more years. His support of Wagner, whose political stance had created him enemies, was one of the major factors contributing to Liszt’s difficulties in the court during his last years there. See more on Wagner’s and Liszt’s “New German School” later in this chapter (pp. 187-8), and in chapter six (pp. 240ff).

“Romanticism is disease, Classicism is health” (quoted in Bernbaum 1962 [1930]: 88).³⁷ Discussing the idea of Romanticism as disease, Ernest Bernbaum also quotes among others Brunetière: “Classicism is the regularity of good sense--perfection in moderation; Romanticism is disorder in the imagination--the rage of incorrectness. A blind wave of literary egotism” (ibid.: 88).

Kretschmar elaborated on this general idea, expanding it with the association between all that was wrong with Romanticism and the feminine. Thus his succinct definition of this movement: “we call Romanticism the art of womanly pathos” (quoted in Pederson 1996: 68). Liszt’s “conversion” to the *Werktreue* ideal in the late forties is also expressed in similar terms, as when he laments still being a “salon entertainer” and a “buffoon”: “Will the hour of virtue and virile action never come?” (see quote on p. 78). For Liszt, virile action in this context meant taking a resolute turn in his career by abandoning public improvisation and flamboyant renderings of other composers’ works and devoting his creative energies to the composition of works and to the faithful renditions of those of other masters. In other words, the “hour of virile action” Liszt so fervently hoped for implied leaving behind the feminine, decadent world of Romanticism and embracing the new aesthetic ideals of “the music of the future.” And these ideals were to be expressed exclusively through works that left no room for improvisation or for any other form of indeterminacy.³⁸

For the Neoromantics the idea of Romanticism as disease also had the

³⁷ Goethe's admiration for Mendelssohn's music and his friendship with the young musician indicate, however, that his critical position about Romanticism was not a rigid one (see Mendelssohn 1945). Goethe himself, as the most influential writer of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, participated in important ways in the Romantic worldview. Works like *Faustus* and *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* can be considered quintessentially Romantic.

³⁸ The relationship between the idea of the “feminine” and art has a long and complex history, as Christine Battersby has shown (1989). For the role of the idea of femininity in discourses on music see McClary 1991.

connotation of moral error, of a fall from grace. This explains in part the importance Wagner gave to the notion of “redemption,” the most recurring theme in his music-dramas (Deathridge and Dahlhaus 1984).³⁹ The also-recurrent theme of the search for a “Holy Grail” is another expression of this need for redeeming culture from its fall into decay. The first production of *Lohengrin* in 1850 in Weimar under Liszt’s direction has a symbolic significance in this regard. *Lohengrin*, whose libretto, as in the rest of his music-dramas, was written by Wagner himself, is considered the last of Wagner’s Romantic operas and the work that heralds the stylistic changes after 1850. The story is based on a medieval legend and has been interpreted as symbolizing, among other things, the Holy Grail descending to Earth.⁴⁰ Also in 1850 Wagner published in Germany his essay “The Virtuoso and the Artist,” where in the form of an allegorical tale he decries the decline of German music after Beethoven and the need to again find the “magic stone” that was lost after Beethoven’s disappearance.

The magic stone, Wagner writes in this essay, was first found by a “miner from Salzburg,” and later by a “miner from Bonn.” After the disappearance of the first miner, the story goes on, the second miner followed in his steps and “soon found traces of him, and so suddenly did the splendor of the magic jewel smite his eye, that it struck him blind” (Wagner 1991 [1840]: 137). From this point Wagner continues the rather awkward allegory--according to him “a German legend”--in the present tense, recounting how after the disappearance of the miner from Bonn and until Wagner’s own time, the excavation

³⁹ Nietzsche was also interested in the redemption of culture, and this in fact can be seen as a main concern that he and Wagner share during the time of their friendship. However, whereas a main target of Wagner’s redeeming project was the early Romantic movement, Nietzsche-- born in 1844, 31 years later than Wagner--was directing his attacks to the positivistic, bourgeois culture of the latter half of the century.

⁴⁰ It has also been interpreted as the coming to earth of human love. The ambiguity between religious and erotic imagery in Wagner is indeed pervasive. He even envisioned at some point a “revision” of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, substituting the philosopher’s redemption of the “Will” through aesthetic contemplation, by a redemption through sexual love (see Deathridge and Dahlhaus 1984: 73).

site has attracted the curious who try their luck without much effort or success. Some take with them fragments of rock as souvenirs, others have even found some prolific veins of gold, but the magic stone and the two true miners are more and more forgotten.

Mozart and Beethoven are, of course, the lucky miners who found the magic stone of musical genius. After their discovery both the rare jewel and the miners themselves are buried under an ever higher pile of debris, despite some Romantic veins of pure gold found among the rubble. In this story, as well as in others written by Wagner, it is evident that in his mind he is the third miner who will once again unearth musical genius. And he would bring it even more to the surface by resuming Beethoven's task at the exact point where he had left off. The rhetoric surrounding this Neoromantic impulse to rescue the Holy Grail of genius was often that of a sacred mission to recover the German Spirit. And, regardless of Wagner's ambiguous or non-existent political convictions, this rhetoric served well the nationalistic movement that had gained momentum at this point in Germany and elsewhere in Europe.

Wagner began to publish short stories such as this one in the 1840s, at a moment when he perceived German culture and society, and in particular music, to be in serious decline. But what Wagner decried was not the decline of Romanticism, a movement he had rejected since the 1830s, but the decline of German music since the disappearance of Beethoven. Since for Wagner Beethoven had been "the last of our musical geniuses," he was judging the composers of the early Romantic period--especially those who, like Schubert, Mendelssohn and Chopin, had already died by 1850-- as short of the talent of true genius (Wagner 1991 [1850]: 36). The organic life of musical art, Wagner declared,

had died after Mozart and Beethoven, leaving behind only a corpse.⁴¹

Wagner's infamous remarks about the participation of Jews in the development of Romantic music form part of his prognosis for Germany's ills and the cultural need for its aesthetic redemption. In "Judaism in Music" (1850), probably one of the most offensive essays on music ever written, Wagner related the decadence of German music after Beethoven to the intrusion of "Jewishness in music." Wagner does not establish a clear causal relationship between this "intrusion" and musical decadence, but claims that the participation of Jews in German music was possible only because music was already in a state of decay after Beethoven. Giving a racist spin to the organicist model, he states: "The Jews could never have taken over this art until they had proved, as they have, the insufficiency of its inner life. As long as the separate art of music possessed a really organic need for life, up until the time of Mozart and Beethoven, there were no Jewish composers to be found: it was impossible for an element completely foreign to this living organism to take any part in its growth." Once the Jews have found an entrance in this inwardly dead body, he goes on, they can only consummate its destruction, transforming it into "swarming colony of worms" (1991 [1850]: 38-39).

Even Mendelssohn, the only Jewish composer that Wagner considers especially gifted, cannot escape an essential artistic incapacity. Unlike Beethoven, who gave "clear and certain expression to the inexpressible by the sharply defined form of his music," Mendelssohn "reduces these achievements to fantastic, fleeting and shadowy forms,

⁴¹ The dismissal of the achievements of the Romantic composers was not widespread. Rather, it was a characteristic position defended by those grouped around Wagner and Liszt. Schumann for example--whose endorsement of the young Brahms signaled his siding against Wagner's proponents in the absolute/program music controversy--had introduced Chopin to German connoisseurs making his fictitious character Eusebius exclaim, "Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!" After listening to one of Chopin's works, without still knowing the composer's name, Florestan (Schumann's other fictional character) established the artistic connection between the young Polish composer and Beethoven and Schubert. After learning his name he concluded: "Well, here's something worthwhile again--Chopin--I've never heard of him--in any case a genius" (in Weiss and Taruskin 1984: 359).

whose indefinite, shimmering colors excite our capricious powers of imagination but which hardly disturb our purely human inner feelings, and certainly cannot hope to fulfill them” (Wagner 1991 [1850]: 36). These “fantastic, fleeting and shadowy forms” that Wagner attributes to Mendelssohn’s Jewishness were of course characteristics of the Romantic movement at large, which Wagner had also attacked elsewhere. Here he compares these “Jewish” traits of vagueness and indeterminacy to the “sharply defined form” of Beethoven’s music. The internally contradictory project of giving “clear and certain expression to the inexpressible,” which according to Wagner Beethoven had heralded, became an urgent creative task for the Neoromantics. Romanticism, virtuoso improvisation, Jewishness, and femininity were all different faces of the cultural malady of the time. The Wagnerian music-drama and, to a lesser extent, Liszt’s program music were the path to redemption of all these cultural ills.

One of the main legitimating arguments Wagner gave in favor of his aesthetic redemption of culture concerned the intrinsic “Germanness” of his project, as opposed to the purportedly foreign origin of the problems affecting German culture. In his essay “What is German?,” written in 1865, Wagner stated: “I have no hesitation in calling the subsequent revolutions in Germany entirely un-German. Democracy in Germany is purely a translated thing. It exists merely in the Press; and what this German Press is, one must find out for oneself” (Wagner 1991 [1878]: 54). In the context of Wagner’s essay it seems evident that in his mind the press is dominated by the Jews and is, therefore, another infiltration of an alien element in the organic life of the German people. By the middle of the century nationalist ideology had indeed penetrated German culture with such force that “Germanness” had become synonymous with universal values, while other nations were seen as limited by their narrowly national agendas.

This was particularly true in music, where the German tradition had come to embody universal greatness. Hence, the paradox arose that a type of music and of musical aesthetics such as Wagner's, so self-consciously rooted in the German tradition, was never labeled "nationalistic." The rubric "Nationalism" was instead employed in music history to distinguish national characteristics "in the music of composers from what were regarded as peripheral countries," that is to say, countries such as Russia, Czechoslovakia, Spain, or Norway (in Randel 1986: s.v. "Nationalism"). As the *New Harvard* contributor points out, the cause for this "rests in the main on a view that the music of German-speaking countries, and to a lesser extent Italy and France, constitutes the central tradition of Western art music" (ibid.). This situation was also due to the fact that it was German (and again to a lesser extent French and Italian) music scholars who periodized, classified and, in short, wrote the histories of Western music that had the most influence in the process of canonization of this tradition. But the conceptual bedrock of these developments was the myth of the "purely musical." As Susan McClary defines it, "the myth that German music did, in fact and as the result of 'natural' emancipatory impulses, transcend social influences to take up residence in the realm of the 'purely musical'" (2000: 111). German scholars assumed and propagated without much challenge the premise that German music embodied the "purely musical" and hence universal significance, while the music exhibiting clear non-German stylistic traits, like that of the Russian Glinka or the Spaniard Albéniz, had not reached the highest degree of purity and abstraction and, therefore, had primarily a "Russian" or "Spanish" significance.

Alfred Einstein provides a good example of this conception in his *Music in the Romantic Era*. Einstein devotes a chapter to "Nationalism," including the musics from

Bohemia, Russia, Scandinavia, Holland, Belgium, Hungary, Poland, Spain and Portugal, and North America (Einstein 1947: 293ff), while discussion of nineteenth-century piano literature and opera by German composers, plus Liszt and Chopin, is entitled “Universalism within the National.” A second chapter with the same title deals with German, French, and Italian opera. The “Germanness” of Liszt, who was Hungarian, had earlier been established by means of his spiritual connection with Beethoven. Furthermore, his artistic affiliation with Wagner was also a strong indication of his true German essence and, hence, of his universality. As for Chopin, even though Einstein recognizes that “the spirit of Poland is embodied in his music” (Einstein 1947: 217), the second sentence of his section on Chopin reads: “It is a strange and certainly not insignificant fact that the greatest Polish national composer was half-French” (ibid.: 213). And he later adds: “It is always Chopin who speaks, never the people” (ibid.: 217). Finally, Einstein still feels compelled to further explain how Chopin came to be counted among the greatest composers beyond Poland and even beyond France: “We must give a certain amount of consideration to the surprising fact that the influence exerted by Chopin was so international” (ibid.: 218).

There is of course no such surprise when Einstein addresses Wagner’s international recognition, despite Wagner’s obvious focus on German literary themes and music. Einstein was a rigorous and knowledgeable scholar who did seem to notice this inconsistency but avoided the core problem, reasoning, for example, that apart from plot and argument there is nothing German in Wagner’s operas after *Tannhäuser*, they are simply “Wagnerian” (ibid.: 64). This appeal to the individuality and originality of the genius is coupled with an appeal to the universality of the classical culture of ancient Greece. In commenting on the *Ring’s* mythology he writes that “this development had

nothing to do with nationalism, and was not, as it were, the artistic manifestation of a purpose which Wagner professed in a pamphlet of about the same time (late summer, 1850), “Jewry in Music” No, it was the model of Greek tragedy that hovered about the creation of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* . . . “ (Einstein 1947: 235).⁴²

The myth of the purely musical--argued on the basis of an aesthetics of genius and further legitimized by a connection with the idealized culture of the classical world, or by scientifically-inspired formal analyses--was then the basis for postulating the universality of German music. But this myth was also the basis for postulating the Germanness of universal music. In a remarkable metaphysical gambit, the more abstract and pure music was, the more it embodied the “German spirit.” For instance, if Beethoven’s music had universal import it was not because he had transcended the particularities of being a *German* composer but because, in transcending the realm of the particular, he had been able to embody the German spirit in its highest expression. In short, transcendence itself was primarily a German capability. Contrary to what happened in other countries, to be truly German was not to be narrowly nationalistic, but to be human.

This idea is also expressed in Wagner’s “What is German?” (written in 1865, and first published in an 1878 issue of the *Bayreuther Blätter*). The destiny of the German Spirit, he wrote, was to understand and assimilate the essential human values of Antiquity. While other nations approached the classical world with utilitarian and nationalistic views, the Germans knew how to understand this world “in the utmost purity and objectivity of intuition.”⁴³ For Wagner,

⁴² Einstein devotes an entire chapter to an elucidation of the question of nationalism. In this chapter, “Universal and National Music,” however, he does not go beyond reaffirming the main ideas already commented upon. Thus for example, his affirmation that “The music of the greatest 18th-century composers, Haydn and Mozart--and, still more, of the master who stood at the turn of the century, Beethoven--is universal” (Einstein 1947: 54).

⁴³ This idea of objective intuition was also based on Schopenhauer’s concept of the intuitive knowledge of understanding as different from abstract rational knowledge (see Schopenhauer 1966 vol 2: 71ff).

One may aver, without exaggeration, that the antique world, now universally known and understood, would have stayed unknown had the German spirit not recognized and expounded it. The Italians made as much of the antique their own as they could copy and remodel; the French, in turn, borrowed from this remodeling whatever appealed to their national feeling for elegance of form: the Germans were the first to apprehend its essentially human originality, to seize therein a meaning quite remote from usefulness, and therefore of use only for rendering the essentially human (Wagner 1991 [1878]: 44).⁴⁴

It was this universalist sense of the German, not a “narrow” nationalism, that was implied in Franz Brendel’s 1859 proposal to change “Music of the Future,” the denomination that referred to the group of Wagner and Liszt, to “New (or Neo-) German School.” Beethoven, a great German Genius whose music embodied universal greatness in music, was the major source of inspiration for this group. Brendel, who had replaced Schumann in the publication of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, defended the Hungarian Liszt’s and the French Berlioz’s leadership of this New German School by tracing their artistic genealogy back to Beethoven: “it is common knowledge that they, too, took Beethoven as their point of departure and so are German as to their origins” (in Weiss and Taruskin 1984: 384).⁴⁵

The investment of the “New German School” in the German nationalistic movement of the latter part of the nineteenth century is unmistakable. Despite the aestheticist attitude of “art for art’s sake” characteristic of this period (and perhaps in a deeper sense because of it), Neoromantic music became a powerful cultural force in the struggle for German unity. That this musical movement and the larger nationalist project

⁴⁴ The idea that the useful was impure was a fundamental tenet of nineteenth-century aesthetics. The division between the aesthetic significance of the fine arts as opposed to the merely utilitarian industrial arts is already found in eighteenth-century aesthetics, most prominently in Kant’s *Third Critique*. But, as I will argue in chapter seven, the separation between the useful and the artistic was not a radical one until the development of late nineteenth-century aestheticism.

⁴⁵ However, a scholar such as Thayer, author of the monumental biography of Beethoven, was excluded by Nohl—an ardent defender of the Beethoven-Wagner lineage of German music—from the “rank of the initiated” for being a foreigner (Johnson 1978: 6).

were rooted in the Romantic world and, at the same time, were reacting against it points to the complexities of the Romantic legacy. Romanticism exalted the ideals of organic unity and the metaphysical significance of music as much as the concept of nation, but these Romantic ideals were too complex, too saturated with apparent paradoxes to be productive in a time of scientism and aggressive nationalism.

The notion of the Romantic sublime discussed in chapter three is key to understanding the inadequacies Romantic aesthetics presented for post-1848 European culture. The Romantic sublime was too ambiguous and too chaotic for the Neoromantic aesthetic ideals and, in particular, for Wagner's dream of making his music-dramas the official music of a unified Germany. Yet, the Romantic sublime seemed indispensable to maintaining a belief in the transcendental value of music. The sublime, then, was to be retained; but in order to be a productive aesthetic principle in a positivistic era it had to be somewhat contained. Wagner's response to this challenge took shape in an emphasis on concrete meanings on the side of reception, and in the development of a "technology of the sublime" on the side of production. Wagner himself had hinted at the idea of a technology of the sublime when he compared Berlioz's orchestral technique to "industrial machinery," both admiring and disparaging it (quoted in Dahlhaus 1980: 13). And it was Dahlhaus who noted that Wagner's comment on Berlioz also applied to Wagner's own music, and indeed to all Neoromantic music, "giving it its particular characteristics of a Romantic art that employed the means of a positivist, industrial age" (Dahlhaus 1980: 13).

In this sense, though Dahlhaus still wants to hold to his claim that Neoromantic music was Romantic, he offers insightful material for an argument to the contrary. Thus when he tries to distinguish Neoromantic music from the musical *kitsch* (simplistic,

sentimental music with pretensions of profundity), he reasons that the Neoromantics had to employ a sophisticated musical technology in order to separate themselves from mere *kitsch*. And even though for Dahlhaus this does not deny the Neoromantic “poetic intention,” he goes on to make the following perceptive remarks: “[Neoromantic music] is dogged by the awareness, or at the very least by an obscure presentiment, that the Romanticism to which it holds fast--or of which it is the fulfillment, as Wagner’s champions claim for the founder of Bayreuth--is no longer ‘substantial’” (Dahlhaus 1980: 13). Dahlhaus adds that this thought does not put into question the “sincerity” of this music, only its “historical authenticity.”⁴⁶ He concludes this argument by stating that in the Neoromantic era music could no longer be expressed in a straightforward musical language, as in Romanticism when simplicity was in step with the Romantic *Zeitgeist*. Neoromantic music, on the contrary, had to use complex compositional techniques in order not to be confused with mere *kitsch*.

That this somewhat convoluted argument still leads Dahlhaus to assert the Romantic and hence redemptive role of Neoromantic music in the culture of the second half of the nineteenth century is perhaps but an indication of Dahlhaus’s own deeply ingrained Wagnerianism. This “lack of (romantic) substance” and the musical technique that constitutes “a document of the spirit of the industrial, positivist age” (ibid.: 14) are in any case important insights that support the idea that Neoromantic music was in tune with the spirit of its own--positivistic--time and, by the same token, that it was no longer Romantic in any fundamental way. The sublime, produced with technical means analogous to industrial processes, had lost its substance. The concept of the sublime had since Kant’s aesthetics referred to the human experience of the incommensurable and

⁴⁶ The “sincerity” of Wagner as a composer has indeed been put into question. Debussy, for instance, call Wagner’s music a “high-flown charlatanism” (Debussy 1962: 17).

overwhelming, an experience pleasurable and painful at the same time. The Neoromantics, and especially Wagner, attempted to somehow measure incommensurability and to make its overabundance of meaning more manageable by passing it through the filter of concrete Germanic myths and precise authorial intentions.

To contrast the Neoromantic engineering of the sublime with a “natural” Romantic production of it is certainly overly simplistic and would imply an uncritical acceptance of the Romantics own self-understanding (or at least their ideal self-image). To be sure, the Romantic composer was also working with calculated techniques and the “simplicity” Dahlhaus mentions was, more than a compositional fact, an aesthetic ideal that often translated into particular stylistic solutions aimed at giving an illusion of effortlessness. This was, however, still different from the Neoromantic technology of the sublime. The Romantic exaltation of improvisation is a telling indicator of this: no matter how much it relied on conventions a (real) improvisation could not be completely “engineered” since there was always a sense of indeterminacy and of risk involved that escaped the instrumental precision of mechanical processes.⁴⁷ In this sense, improvisation stood closer than works to Romantic ideals of creative production. The case of Romantic works that imitate the spirit of improvisation is still different in several ways from the technology Dahlhaus speaks of. For Dahlhaus, Romantic composition was based on a “craft” that Wagner and Liszt, according to some respected critics, did not master

(Dahlhaus 1980: 14).⁴⁸ Even when the Romantic aesthetics of imperfection works was

⁴⁷ It can be argued that all artistic creations, including Neoromantic music, escape to a certain extent from the precision of mechanical processes. But particular styles and particular creations present various degrees of distance from mechanical processes, and I am arguing that these differences are highly significant from the perspectives of aesthetic and poetic reflection.

⁴⁸ It is significant, for instance, that Alfred Einstein entitles his section on Liszt “Liszt, the Creative Technician.” In the body of the text, however, he includes a disclaimer saying that “it would not be quite right to say that in his work the technical aspect stands in the foreground, much less that it was in any sense its own excuse for being. It is inseparable from the creative--from the creative in the service of Romantic ideas and feelings” (Einstein 1947: 210). Einstein’s choice of such a title for Liszt as well as its disclaimer points to the same ambiguity and tension that marks Dahlhaus’s argument.

expressed in perfectly crafted works there was in Romantic music, as we saw earlier and as Rosen has noted, a permanent tension between perfection and imperfection. The balance reached by Romantic composers in this sense defies a description of their otherwise careful craft as “technology.” Finally, the idea that the composition of Romantic works was not just an imitation of an improvisatory “feel,” but was often directly influenced or inspired by the composers’s actual experiences as improvisors, supports at the level of poetics the idea that Romantic composition was not yet the “industrial machinery” suggested by Wagner’s music.

The Empirical Ambition of Post-Romantic Metaphysics

A crucial key to the musical aesthetics of Neoromanticism, with its double ideal of metaphysical transcendence and of realistic grounding, is the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. It was mainly through Schopenhauer’s ideas on music, and not through those of Hegel and the other German idealists—that Wagner and many of his contemporaries supported their belief in the metaphysical significance of music in a post-Romantic, positivistic age.⁴⁹ A younger contemporary of Hegel, Schopenhauer defended a brand of metaphysics that was in clear opposition to Hegelian philosophy.

Schopenhauer’s disdain for Hegelianism was such that it was sometimes expressed not in the form of philosophical arguments but of coarse personal attacks: “If I were to call to mind the way in which Hegel and his companions have misused such wide and empty abstractions, I should necessarily be afraid that both the reader and I would be ill, for the

⁴⁹ Before the 1848 revolution Wagner, like many of his contemporaries, was still influenced by Hegelianism. In fact, during the Vormartz period he had been involved with the Young Hegelians movement. This influence was never completely erased, even when Schopenhauer’s philosophy had become the major source for his aesthetic ideas. Hegelianism, for example, was always a component of Wagner’s concept of history and a major inspiration for his idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

most sickening and loathsome tediousness hangs over the empty bombast of this repulsive philosophaster" (Schopenhauer 1966 [1818, 1844], vol. 2: 84).

Schopenhauer elsewhere explained his contempt for Hegel and his followers on the grounds that they had dangerously retreated into abstract thought, forgetting the concreteness of empirical reality. He compares the idealists to the Greek philosopher Proclus who, forgetting the perceptual origins of the concepts he used, arrived at "an entirely different world from the one that supplied the building material, and on this very account to a world of chimeras and phantasms" (ibid.: 84). Schopenhauer's project consists in liberating idealist philosophy from this world of chimeras by rooting his own version of idealism in the perception of empirical reality. Truth, Schopenhauer writes, can only derive from perception: "Perception is not only the source of all knowledge, but is itself knowledge *kat' exojen* [Greek for 'par excellence']; it alone is the unconditionally true genuine knowledge, fully worthy of the name" (ibid.: 77). By "true genuine knowledge," he means all kinds of knowledge, including its highest forms: ". . . wisdom also, the true view of life, correct insight, and clear judgment result from the way in which man apprehends the world of perception, not from his mere abstract knowledge, not from abstract concepts" (ibid.: 77).

To be sure, Schopenhauer, a brilliant student of Kantian philosophy, did not fall back into a pre-Kantian empiricism. Perception for him was not reduced to sensual perception but was essentially a matter of intellect. In fact, his idea of the world as Representation meant for him a continuation of Kant's transcendental idealism and of its critique of crude empiricism. But Schopenhauer, like the post-Kantian idealists, also concluded that Kantian philosophy led to a metaphysical, and in a broader sense idealist, conception of the world in its totality. "German idealism" or "metaphysical idealism"

refers mainly to the philosophies of Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Hegel that constitute a philosophical development which, as we saw, strongly influenced the Romantic movement. Schopenhauer criticized these philosophers for having misunderstood idealism and considered his own philosophy to be the only "true idealism," and the true successor of Kantianism (see in particular chapter one of *The World as Will and Representation*, vol 2).

An important difference from the Romantics' interpretation of Kant is Schopenhauer's refusal of the turn towards the elimination of the thing-in-itself as carried out by Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, and his maintenance of the distinction between "noumenon" (or thing-in-itself) and "phenomenon," building upon this distinction his own theory of the world as "will" and "representation."⁵⁰ Schopenhauer's claim to be Kant's successor while denouncing idealism as an erroneous offspring certainly contributed to the great deal of attention his philosophy received after 1850, decades after he first published the first version of his major work. The mainstream intellectual atmosphere was then openly anti-idealist and anti-Romantic, and neo-Kantianism was one of the main currents supporting this new world view. Although Schopenhauer continued to hold to an ultimately metaphysical explanation of the world, his brand of un-Romantic metaphysics allegedly springing directly from the Kantian source was received with some degree of sympathy even by some of those who had rejected metaphysics altogether.

The strong antipathy Schopenhauer felt for Hegel and his philosophy extended to many of his contemporaries and, to a great extent, to contemporary culture at large. With his defiant scheduling conflict with Hegel (he purposely scheduled his lectures at the

⁵⁰ I elaborate on the significance of this distinction in Schopenhauer's philosophy of music on pp. 197-9.

University of Berlin to conflict with Hegel's lectures), Schopenhauer forced students to choose between him and the renowned older philosopher and, as a result, mostly lectured to an empty room and soon had to cancel his lectures. Several decades later, however, coinciding with the decline of Romanticism, his philosophy became extremely influential. His *World as Will and Representation*, which had passed mostly unnoticed when it was first published in 1819, was widely read when a second volume was published in 1844. In particular, Schopenhauer's ideas on music had an enormous impact in the musical aesthetics of the second half of the nineteenth century. According to Edward Lippman, "The fascination of Schopenhauer's conception of music was such that not only did he himself return to it after a lapse of 25 years, but it was also taken up again, after another lapse of 25 years, by Wagner (1870) and Nietzsche (1871), to become what is doubtless the major tradition of musical aesthetics in the century" (Lippman 1992: 233).

Wagner had discovered Schopenhauer's philosophy back in 1854, and it soon became a main inspiration for the reshaping of his aesthetic ideas after the 1848 crisis.⁵¹ But it was in the 1870s when Wagner wholeheartedly embraced Schopenhauer's philosophy of music to the point that it made him rethink many of his aesthetic ideas. According to Nietzsche, Wagner's turn to Schopenhauer's philosophy was so complete that it resulted in a "complete theoretical contradiction between his former and his latter aesthetic faiths,—the former expressed for example in *Opera und Drama*, and the latter in the writings published from the 1870s on." (Nietzsche 1989 [1887]: 119). For Nietzsche, Wagner did not have any qualms in contradicting his former ideas about the secondary value of music with respect to drama. In Nietzsche's words,

⁵¹ It was the poet George Herwegh (1817-1875) who in 1854 introduced Wagner to *The World as Will and Representation*, which, as Wagner recounts in *My Life*, he had read enthusiastically (1983:508ff). Herwegh, a close friend of Wagner's during his stay in Zurich, was the author of *Mann der Arbeit, aufgewacht!*, which became the anthem of the socialist movement.

he grasped all at once that with the Schopenhauerian theory and innovation more could be done *in majorem musicae gloriam*, namely, with the theory of the *sovereignty* of music as Schopenhauer conceived it: music set apart from all the other arts, the independent art as such, *not* offering images of phenomenality, as the other arts did, but speaking rather the language of the will itself, directly out of the “abyss” as its most authentic, elemental, nonderivative revelation (1989 [1887]: 103).

The adherence of Wagner and Liszt to Schopenhauer’s philosophy, which was in sharp opposition to idealism--the school of thought with the most affinity with the Romantic movement--constitutes a fundamental aspect of the shift between Romantic and Neoromantic aesthetics. This adherence is made explicit in Wagner’s writings, especially in *Music and Drama*, where he sets himself the task of expounding on Schopenhauer’s theory of music. It is also evident in Arthur Friedheim’s book on his teacher Liszt, which includes an appendix addressing Schopenhauer’s ideas on music as well as Wagner’s comments on it (Friedheim 1986: 289). Schopenhauer’s philosophy has a complex relationship with respect to the Romantic movement. On the one hand, it aimed to retain and perfect some central Romantic ideas and on the other constituted a critique of idealism and Romanticism at large. An important aspect of Schopenhauer’s critique of idealist metaphysics was an attack on the ideological purposes concealed in idealist philosophy:

The driving forces of this movement are, contrary to all these solemn airs and assertions, not ideas; they are very real purposes indeed, namely personal, official, clerical, political, in short, material interests. . . . Party interests are vehemently agitating the pens of so many pure lovers of wisdom. . . . Philosophy is misused, from the side of the state as a tool, from the other side as a means of gain Who can really believe that truth also will come to light, just as a by-product? (quoted in Aiken 1957: 99).

Schopenhauer considered his own philosophy, because it was anchored in empirical

evidence, to be free of such misuse. To be sure, his thought was no more free of ideological underpinnings than that of his contemporaries. His critical remarks nevertheless sounded a sobering tone in the midst of a period in which Hegel's claim to Absolute Knowledge was mostly unchallenged.⁵²

Interestingly, Schopenhauer's critique of idealism did not have the impact that the rest of his philosophy had in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In particular, the Neoromantics' adherence to his philosophy did not translate into a critical attitude towards the possible ideological implications of the metaphysics of beauty, a point that the philosopher himself had missed. There is, however, an analogy between Schopenhauer's critique of idealism and the attitudes of the Neoromantics regarding musical Romanticism. This analogy helps to explain the impact that his work had on the musical aesthetics of the late nineteenth century.

First of all, Schopenhauer's project to ground metaphysics on perceptual knowledge is analogous with the Neoromantic project of grounding music's metaphysics of beauty in an aesthetics of concrete meanings. Schopenhauer, though proposing a theory of the world thoroughly metaphysical, still affirms that his philosophy "sticks to the actual facts of outward and inward experience as they are accessible to everyone, and shows their true and deepest connection, yet without really going beyond them to any extra mundane things, and the relations of these to the world" (Schopenhauer 1966 [1818, 1844], vol. 2 : 640). His philosophy of music exhibits the same double claim to empirical rootedness and metaphysical import. He argues, for example, that there is a direct connection between the metaphysical aspects of music and its physical and arithmetical

⁵² Schopenhauer's critique constitutes in this sense a predecessor of ideology critique. Henry Ayken states: "If Karl Marx, instead of trying to stand Hegel's dialectic on its head, had fully understood the drift of Schopenhauer's criticism, the history of mankind in the past hundred years might well have been very different" (Ayken 1957: 99).

basis (see *ibid.*: 450-451). He also claims that there exists a “distinct *parallelism*” between musical language and the empirically demonstrable world of phenomena. He explains this parallelism by affirming among other things that, “the four voices or parts of all harmony, that is, bass, tenor, alto, and soprano, or fundamental note, third, fifth, and octave, correspond to the four grades in the series of existences, hence to the mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms, and to man” (*ibid.*: 447). In general, Schopenhauer’s claim to have given an empirical ground to metaphysics well suited the anti-Romantic, yet metaphysical, musical aesthetics of the Neoromantics.

Finally, the late nineteenth-century fascination with Schopenhauer’s philosophy of music had much to do with the fact that Schopenhauer had given music the privileged place Hegel had denied to it and to art in general. The important role music plays in Schopenhauer’s philosophy is better understood by recalling Schopenhauer’s distinction between our knowledge of the world as Will (things in themselves) and as Representation (phenomena): a scheme that maintained the basic Kantian differentiation between *noumenon* and *phenomenon*. But while Schopenhauer’s concept of phenomena was very close to Kant’s, his concept of *Will* had introduced a quite different interpretation of the thing-in-itself.⁵³ As a blind force that restlessly moves humans and the world as a whole, the Will in Schopenhauer’s pessimist philosophy is a tyrannical power that needs to be resisted. Aesthetic contemplation is one of the two ways humans have to resist this universal force and to rest from being continuously carried away by it (the other and more perfect form of resistance is total asceticism). The role of art is therefore of great importance. It gives some measure of freedom and of peace to individuals who, though not so wise as to become ascetics, are nevertheless aware of the Will and of the need to

⁵³ Though Schopenhauer’s “representation” comes directly from Kant’s notion of “phenomenon,” it also draws from the Indian doctrine of *Maya*. For Schopenhauer, as for Kant, the distinction is epistemological: the world is not divided, it is our intellectual faculties that establish the distinction.

resist it.

Among the arts, music is the highest manifestation of this sanctuary against the Will. In order to understand the role music plays in Schopenhauer's philosophy it is necessary to recall that this philosopher's version of idealism depends on an attempt to reconcile Kant's transcendental philosophy with a Platonic explanation of the world. The individual who recognizes the perceptual ground of all knowledge, Schopenhauer writes, also recognizes by implication "the (Platonic) Ideas of the world and of life; every case he has seen represents for him innumerable cases; he always apprehends every being according to its true nature, and his action, like his judgment, corresponds to his insight" (Schopenhauer 1966 [1818, 1844], vol. 2: 77). Schopenhauer's philosophy of art is based on his complicated attempt to bring together his notion of Will with Plato's doctrine of Ideas.⁵⁴ The Will, he claims, is objectified in (Platonic) Ideas or Forms, which is to say in universal prototypes for the various kinds of objects in the phenomenal world. The arts "copy" these Ideas, allowing us to contemplate them and to be able to recognize the universal within the particular.

But music is for Schopenhauer the most powerful of the arts, "because music does not, like all the other arts, exhibit the *Ideas* or grades of the will's objectification, but directly the *will itself*" (ibid.: 448). And, in revealing the Will itself, it seems to follow, music offers among the arts the most perfect opportunity to temporarily free oneself from being its slave. In listening to music Copleston writes, in his commentary on Schopenhauer's theory, "a man receives a direct revelation, though not in conceptual

form, of the reality which underlies phenomena. And he intuits this reality, revealed in

⁵⁴ Frederick Copleston, whose *A History of Philosophy* is arguably one of the best accounts of Western thought published in English, gives up at this point of his exegesis of Schopenhauer's philosophy, and exclaims: "How a blind Will of endless striving can reasonably be said to objectify itself immediately in Platonic Ideas, is something which I do not profess to understand" (Copleston 1994: 278).

the form of art, in an objective and disinterested manner, not as one caught in the grip of the Will's tyranny" (Copleston 1994 [1962]: 281).

This argument concerning the superiority of music, however, is not always consistent in Schopenhauer's writings. Thus, in volume 1 of *The World . . .* he ascribes the significance of music to its ability to express universal Ideas:

Therefore music does not express this or that particular and definite pleasure, this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, or peace of mind, but joy, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, peace of mind themselves, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without any accessories, and so also without the motives for them. Nevertheless we understand them perfectly in this extracted quintessence (Schopenhauer 1966 [1818, 1844], vol. 2: 261).

The belief in the ability of music to express universal ideas that we can nonetheless "understand . . . perfectly in this extracted quintessence" was also of capital importance in Wagner's aesthetic project. In this sense, his concept of music was closer to Schopenhauer's theory of music as copy of Platonic Ideas. In his *Music and Drama*, for example, Wagner supports his discussion of the relevance of music by referring to Schopenhauer's description of the fine arts in general, without making a distinction between the arts as copies of the Ideas and music as copy of the Will itself: "according to this philosopher's so luminous definition, it is the ideas of the world and of its essential phenomena, in the sense of Plato, that constitute the 'object' of the fine arts" (Schopenhauer 1966 [1818, 1844], vol. 2: 179). Regardless of whether or not this passage reveals a misunderstanding or an incomplete understanding of Schopenhauer's theory, the notion of music as copy of the Ideas had a resonance among the Wagner and Liszt circles. The Wagner passage just quoted is in fact one of the composer's comments on Schopenhauer that Friedheim quotes in his book on Liszt. (Friedheim 1986: 289).

Wagner's story "A Happy Evening," written years before Wagner's reported encounter with Schopenhauer's philosophy, sheds light on the great affinity between Wagner's and Schopenhauer's ideas on music.⁵⁵ In this story, Wagner criticizes tone-painting as practiced by some of his contemporaries, comparing it unfavorably to Beethoven's great achievements in absolute music. Robert, the same fictional character of the "Pilgrimage to Beethoven" (see chapter five), argues the superiority of absolute music over tone-painting and offers as an example Beethoven's *Sinfonia Eroica*. He asks the other character of the story (ostensibly Wagner himself),

Tell me, where, in what part of this composition do you find one positive hint that the composer had his eye on a specific event in the heroic career of the young commander? What do the Funeral March, the Scherzo with the hunting-horns, the Finale with the soft emotional Andante mean? Where is the Bridge of Lodi, where is the Battle of Arcole . . . ? Are these not incidents which no composer of our day would have allowed to escape him, if he wanted to write a biographical symphony on Bonaparte? Here, however, this was not the case" (Wagner 1991 [1841a]: 89).

Wagner's critique of the realism of tone-painting and his defense of "absolute" music may seem to contradict the Neoromantic aesthetics of concrete meanings I have contrasted with Romantic ideals of indeterminacy and ineffability. But the contradiction is only on the surface. In this story Wagner is contrasting great absolute music (Beethoven's) of which he considers himself heir, with mere tone-painting. While Beethoven's symphonies have a metaphysical significance, tone-painting is a short-sighted and culturally irrelevant form of crude materialism. For Wagner, his own musical project was a continuation of absolute music. His call for a greater concretization of meaning signified for him not a rejection of Beethoven's absolute music but a carrying

⁵⁵ Wagner wrote the story in 1841, thirteen years before his reported discovery of Schopenhauer's philosophy in Zurich. The first edition of *The World* . . . , however, had appeared back in 1819 and, though it did not have a wide circulation then, it is possible that the young Wagner had been exposed to his ideas prior to 1854.

forward of it, a task reminiscent of Schopenhauer's project of taking Western metaphysics to a higher level by grounding them in perceptual knowledge.

"A Happy Evening" further illustrates the affinity between Schopenhauer's and Wagner's projects by ultimately justifying the value of music by means of positing the existence of a metaphysical realm of universal Ideas. Once the protagonist of the story has finished his argument concerning the superiority of Beethoven's symphony over crude tone-painting, his friend expresses his agreement by declaring that "what music expresses is eternal, infinite, and ideal. She expresses not the passion, love, desire of this or that individual in this or that condition, but Passion, Love, Desire itself, and in such infinitely varied phases as belong uniquely to music and which are foreign and unknown to any other tongue" (Wagner 1991 [1841a]: 90). By adhering to this concept of music as expression of universal ideas, Wagner accomplishes two things. First, he implicitly draws a distinction between the prosaic realism of simplistic tone-painting that imitates things in their empirical individuality and a metaphysical realism that imitates eternal Ideas (clearly, his understanding of his own music). Second, he implies a distinction between the Neoromantic project of capturing concrete but universal essences and the Romantic fog of bad metaphysics, a "world of chimeras and phantasms," that ultimately expresses nothing.

Schopenhauer's (and Wagner's) invocation of Platonic Ideas is one more indicator of this philosophy's distance from Romantic and idealist approaches to art, and it is a particularly significant one in the context of our investigation on improvisation. Whereas Schopenhauer's metaphysics ultimately presupposes a world of fixed Forms that are the models for the Fine Arts, idealist aesthetics do not posit such models. For Hegel, attention to form is not fundamental. Music presents itself not as an external shape or an

objectively existing work but as the subjective inner life itself. "Consequently, its expression must be the direct communication of a living individual who has put into it the entirety of his own inner life" (Hegel 1991 [1835], vol. 2: 909). This idea is at the core of Hegel's praise of the freedom of musicians to alter a piece or to momentarily depart from it to freely express their inner lives. Schopenhauer, on the contrary, equates improvised passages within a work with a temporary negation of rhythm. Expanding on the then-commonplace analogy between music and architecture, which Schopenhauer finds mostly useless and superficial, he offers the following reflection:

when music, in a sudden urge for independence, so to speak, seizes the opportunity of a pause, in order to free itself from the control of rhythm, to launch out into the free fancy of an ornate cadenza, such a piece of music, divested of rhythm, is analogous to the ruin divested of symmetry. Accordingly, in the daring language of that witticism, such a ruin may be called a frozen cadenza (Schopenhauer 1966 [1818, 1844], vol. 2: 454).

Though it cannot be inferred from this passage that Schopenhauer is drawing an analogy between improvisation per se and a "ruin divested of symmetry," the comparison points to the low status of improvisation within his theory of music, especially since he considers an improvised cadenza to be a "negation of rhythm," rhythm for him being the most essential element of melody (ibid.: 452).

For Hegel becoming was not an imperfect manifestation of Being but was its true essence, since it was through the temporal process of becoming that the Absolute actualized itself. Becoming for Hegel is constituted by a dialectical movement between being and non-being. And it is only through this movement that the Absolute comes to know itself as Absolute. In the context of Hegelian dialectics this does not mean that the essence of the Absolute is a contradiction. The focus, rather, is on the dialectical sublation of being and non-being. It is this movement between contraries (and not a mere

contradiction) that for Hegel constitutes the essence of the Absolute.

Schopenhauer's critique of Hegelian dialectics focuses on the movement from a contrary to the other, and not in the synthesis that for him Hegel had failed to establish. Thus for Schopenhauer, Hegel's philosophy corrupts the ultimate truth, that is, the fundamental unity and immutability of the essence of the world. Both art and science, Schopenhauer states, are occupied "with that which always exists at all times in the same way, but not with something which now is and then is not, which now is thus and then otherwise" (ibid.: 442). It is the Hegelian elevation of History to a fundamental category of philosophy that in Schopenhauer's mind is at the core of the perniciousness of Hegelian idealism. The material of history, Schopenhauer writes, is individuality and contingency,

the transient complexities of a human world moving like clouds in the wind, which are often entirely transformed by the most trifling accident. From this point of view, the material of history appears to us as scarcely an object worthy of the serious and arduous consideration of the human mind. Just because it is so transitory, the human mind should select for its consideration that which is destined never to pass away (Schopenhauer 1966 [1818, 1844], vol. 2: 442).

Schopenhauer's thought marks, therefore, a radical shift in attitudes towards the contingent and transient. Hegelian idealism--in basic agreement with the more influential philosophers and authors of the early nineteenth century--celebrated contingency and transitoriness while at the same time inscribing them within an overall harmony. Schopenhauer, on the contrary, considered them unworthy of serious consideration. The different attitudes towards improvisation in the Romantic and Neoromantic periods reflect this fundamental disagreement.

Schopenhauer's philosophy of music provided the Neoromantics not only with

fuel against Hegelian idealism and the Romanticism associated with it, but also with the prestige of a Platonic and Kantian lineage. Schopenhauer had explicitly claimed this lineage for his project: "The Hegelians, who regard the philosophy of history as even the main purpose of all philosophy, should be referred to Plato, who untiringly repeats that the object of philosophy is the unchangeable and ever permanent, not that which now is thus and then otherwise. . . . This is what Plato means, this is what Kant means" (ibid.: 443). This Platonic connection helps us to understand the latter nineteenth-century reinterpretation of the metaphysics of beauty and of the aesthetics of genius. This reinterpretation was realized through a new emphasis on formal perfection whose genealogy can be traced back to Plato. Indeed, the aesthetic ideal of the perfect Whole in works of art has Platonic roots. In the *Symposium*, for instance, Plato defines beauty as "eternal oneness" and "inviolable whole." This Platonic idea of inviolable wholeness, therefore, had contributed, along with the Romantic aesthetics of genius, to the philosophical justification of the *Werktreue* ideal: The work of genius should be reproduced as faithfully as possible for it was a sensible expression of transcendental Ideas and eternal Truths. The emphasis on formal perfection and closedness was therefore not just the result of the emergence of scholarly disciplines devoted to formal analysis, but also of new aesthetic ideas that shared a neo-Platonic and anti-Hegelian conceptual backdrop.

It is possible to defend, with Dahlhaus, the continuity between the musical aesthetics of the early Romantic period and that of the latter part of the nineteenth century on the ground that in both eras musical aesthetics was based on a metaphysics of beauty. As a matter of fact, Schopenhauer's ideas on music have been often considered the culmination of the Romantic exaltation of music (for instance, Taylor 1970: 285).

They might even be interpreted as taking Hegel's appraisal of music as "the first and more ideal breath of the soul" (Hegel 1991 [1835], vol. 2: 890) to a higher level, asserting its unique power among the arts to capture the essence of the world. However, the radical points of separation I have noted between the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Hegel support the argument that the distance between them is more significant than what they have in common, i.e., a metaphysical understanding of the world in the context of post-Kantian philosophy.

The continuity between Romantic and Neoromantic aesthetics can be supported if the emphasis is placed exclusively on the fact that both are based on a metaphysics of beauty and of genius, regardless of the particularities of the different (post-Kantian) metaphysical approaches. But Romanticism, though an admittedly complex and multifarious movement, relied on a specific metaphysics of art that other metaphysical theories, such as Schopenhauer's, contradict in fundamental aspects. The departure of Schopenhauer's philosophy with respect to previous Romantic and idealist approaches is comparable to the departure of Wagner's aesthetic and creative projects with respect to the early Romantic period in music. Schopenhauer's rejection of the idealist and Romantic interpretation of Kant, and his claim to be Kant's legitimate successor, suggests a parallel with Wagner's claims with respect to Beethoven. Wagner also criticized the Romantics as having misinterpreted the true meaning of Beethoven's legacy and maintained that his music-drama was the next necessary step following Beethoven's final compositions. Just as Schopenhauer sought to redeem philosophy from the chimeric world of idealism by taking it up where Kant had left it, Wagner sought to redeem music from the chimeric world of Romanticism by taking up where Beethoven had left off with the inclusion of poetry in his last symphony.

The Genius “Reads In”: From Romantic Mystics to Neoromantic Priests

From now on, he became an oracle, a priest, and even more than a priest, a sort of spokesman for the things-in-themselves.

--Nietzsche

With these words Nietzsche describes the late nineteenth-century status of the composer that had, along with the status of music itself, reached heights unheard of until then. For Nietzsche, this increase in the value of music “seems to stem from Schopenhauer’s philosophy” (1989 [1887]: 120). The composer--Nietzsche goes on to say with his characteristic keen wit-- became a “telephone for the other world,” “a ventriloquist of God”, who “not only recited music, but also metaphysics” (ibid.).

Since Beethoven’s time, the composer had also been a sort of spokesman for things-in-themselves, but he had not been attributed the priestly status Nietzsche speaks of until later in the century. “Reading in,” the British expression for “canonization” or “ordination,” highlights a fundamental aspect of the act of taking ecclesiastic vows: priesthood in the Judeo-Christian tradition is closely associated with reading. A sacred body of scriptures is necessary for the formation of a church and for the ordination of priests devoted to its service. In the latter part of the nineteenth century the canonization of a body of musical works considered to represent the Western tradition, and the contemporaneous phenomenon of the “art-religion,” exhibits an analogous emphasis on inscription and on a select group of chosen individuals who interpret what is inscribed to the rest of society.

The concept “art-religion” has been used to describe the aestheticist approach to

art of the late nineteenth century, best embodied by Wagnerian music and the cultural phenomenon to which it gave rise.⁵⁶ Comparisons between art and religion abound in writings on music of the second half of the century, as had happened since the early stages of Romanticism. But whereas the comparison persists, the tone has changed. The increasing professionalization of performers and of venues for public concerts, the institutionalization of musical education, and the publication of scholarly editions of the masterworks created a new sense of stability and formality concerning “classical music.” The rise of “art-religion” at this point was a phenomenon intimately associated with this new cultural and social status. And, I want to argue, it was a phenomenon noticeably different from the early Romantic exaltation of spirituality in music.

As I argued in chapter five, the early Romantic movement had been greatly influenced by mystical and esoteric currents. This influence is discernible in Romantic writings on music, like those of Wackenroder or Tieck, whose ecstatic, rapturous quality makes them comparable to the mystical writings widely read at the time. It is a kind of visionary and poetic spirituality expressed in a language that is exalted, permeated with longing, and often ambiguous. Typical of this language is Tieck’s 1797 description of the conversion to Catholicism of a fictional “young German artist” enabled by a musical experience:

The almighty music . . . drew my soul completely out of my body . . . and I felt a might yearning for something Great and Lofty that I could embrace. The sonorous Latin hymns . . . lifted my soul higher and higher. And as the music had thus imbued my whole being and run through all my veins . . . and made me drunken . . . , a pater . . . raised the Host in full view of the people—and all the people fell to their knees, and trumpets blared and roared a sublime devotion through all my bones . . . I could not leave the temple at the end of the ceremony; I threw myself down in a corner and wept . . . I could not resist the Power within me (quoted in Hellerich

⁵⁶ For the aestheticist turn the art-religion took with Wagner see Deathridge and Dahlhaus 1984: 95.

1995: 5).

The importance of Catholicism at this time was itself an expression of this type of spirituality, since, as we saw in chapter three, the Catholic church symbolized for many early Romantics the mystical and mysterious world of the Middle Ages (see Hellerich 1995). Even philosophers such as Herder sometimes used a rhapsodic tone to describe the effects of music, as when he exclaims: “On fleet tones come and fly away, you wandering spirits of the air; stir my heart and leave behind in me, through you, for you, an endless longing” (quoted in Lippman 1992: 209).

Later in the century, the language used to link music and spirituality became more sober, further from ecstatic utterances and closer to the indoctrinations of a sermon. In the essays where Wagner writes about art as religion we do not find the ambiguous but powerful images characteristic of the expression of mystical experiences often captured or imitated in Romantic writings. Rather, Wagner usually employs religious images in the context of exhortations, admonitions, or expositions of concrete beliefs. Instead of mystical exaltation we now have moral imperatives, and instead of the ambiguities characteristic of expressions of mystic rapture there is the certainty of dogma. A recurrent dogma-like premise in these writings is, for example, the universal value of Mozart’s and Beethoven’s musics and, derived from this premise, the need to follow the artistic steps of the two composers is often posited as a moral imperative. Thus Wagner exhorts musicians to follow Mozart and Beethoven in the repudiation of virtuosity in these terms: “So falter not, true disciples of art, upon the path of virtue. If a magic power drew you to dig for the silted shaft, be not misguided by those veins of gold; but delve deeper, ever deeper towards the magic stone” (Wagner 1991[1840]: 141). The symbolic language Wagner uses here and in other similar passages is not necessarily a sign of

symbolic mystical expression. In mystical and Romantic writings, symbols are a way to express the paradoxical union of opposites, logical absurdities, heightened--or altered--states of consciousness, and so on. Thus St. Teresa de Jesús (de Avila): “vivo sin vivir en mí/ y tan alta vida espero/ que muero porque no muero” (“I live without living in myself, and I hope for such a high life, that I die because I don’t die”) (“Muero porque no muero,” my translation).

The use of symbols in the Wagner passage just quoted has a different function: it is much closer to the allegories and extensive similes characteristic of parables, which in the Christian tradition (and other religions) have been a way to make doctrinary points or moral precepts more comprehensible. The allegorical language of parables offers a narrative in key, so as to guide the listener or reader into unfamiliar territory by means of a familiar code. The goal of the allegories is to communicate an idea as clearly as possible. Mystical symbolic language, on the contrary, is often an expression of the mysterious and ineffable and is, therefore, “more than mere diagram or mere allegory” as Evelyn Underhill put it in speaking of good mystical symbolism (1990 [1911]: 126).

Wagner’s priestly voice also occasionally admonishes those in danger of losing their souls. Not surprisingly, he warns his “disciples” against the seductions of virtuosity, a practice dangerously close to true art but leading to the wrong path. To indulge in virtuosic displays, something until then inseparable from improvisation, is in Wagner’s pontifical language, “to play with the Devil.” So he sounds his admonition, imitating the alarmist rhetoric so often used in an old style of Christian and Catholic preaching: “The human heart is so evil, and hebetude so very sweet! Take care how you play with the Devil! He’ll come at last when you least expect him” (Wagner 1991[1840]: 149). The ironic undertones in the idea that “virtuosity” can make a believer lose his or

her virtue attests not only to the difficulties of making a direct parallelism between art and religion, but also to how much ideas on music had changed in a short period of time. Until the Romantic period to be a virtuoso meant to have reached the highest degree of musical skill and talent. In Wagner's time the connotation of the term had come to contradict its root in "virtue." It was now a suspicious activity that lured artists to abandon the path to Truth, Beauty, and --Wagner's most pressing task--redemption.

Against this temptation Wagner recommends strict observance to the canonic legacy of the masters, primarily Mozart and Beethoven. Schelling had some decades earlier referred to the divinity of genius in a nuanced manner that captured the metaphorical nature of his thought, stating that the genius "is *as it were* a fragment of divinity" (quoted in Nahm 1956: 125, my emphasis). Wagner, in the voice of his fictional composer, places Mozart and Beethoven right next to God in an aestheticist version of the Holy Trinity: "I believe in God, Mozart and Beethoven . . . ". This declaration of aestheticist faith is part of a passage in Wagner's story *An End in Paris*, possibly the most straightforward exposition of the idea of art-religion. In this passage, Wagner's character Robert spells out the Credo of this art-religion:

I believe in God, Mozart and Beethoven, and likewise their disciples and apostles. I believe in the Holy Spirit and the truth of the one, indivisible Art. I believe that this Art proceeds from God, and lives within the hearts of all artists. I believe that he who once has bathed in the sublime delights of this high Art, is consecrated to Her for ever, and never can deny Her. I believe that through this Art all men are saved, and therefore each may die of hunger for Her. . . . I believe in a last judgment, which will condemn to fearful pains all those who in this world have dared to play the huckster with chaste Art, have violated and dishonored Her through the evilness of their hearts and the ribald lust of their senses. I believe that these will be condemned through all eternity to hear their own vile music. . . (Wagner 1991 [1841b]: 111).

This is no longer the voice of the mystic trying to convey an extraordinary and elusive experience in words, but that of a priest involved in the spreading of a fixed set of beliefs, or of a believer who confirms his adherence to them. The esoteric insights, lyrical effusions, and ambiguous spirituality characteristic of Romantic authors have in Wagner's writings been substituted by allegedly clear messages with moral and dogmatic undertones.

But if as an author Wagner imitated the language of a preacher, as a composer he intended to go beyond traditional religions by means of the symbolic language of art, while at the same time preserving the core of a religiosity perceived as decaying. Art for Wagner, therefore, would substitute for and improve religion: "It could be said that at the point where religion becomes artificial, it is reserved to art to salvage the kernel of religion, inasmuch as the mythical images which religion would wish to be believed as true are apprehended in art for their symbolic value, and through ideal representation of those symbols art reveals the concealed deep truth within them" (quoted in Deathridge and Dahlhaus 1984 : 85). Similarly, for Wagner the high-priest of art-religion was not a mere priest devoted to repeating received dogmas; but, as a genius, he also had the historical task of bringing forth new revelations and new truths. The genius is not a mere attendant to a god as in traditional religions, nor even a participant in divinity as in Romantic aesthetics. The genius was a god of art-religion because he had the faculty not only to interpret but also to create sacred texts. Wagner says in this regard: "While the priest bends every effort to get the allegories of religion regarded as literal truths, the artist has no interest in anything of the kind, for he frankly and freely makes his work known as his own invention" (ibid.).

As would be expected, Wagner's thoughts on art-religion do not constitute any

coherent (aesthetic) theology or theodicy. They are rather scattered thoughts whose understanding is complicated by the fact that they are aimed at two conflicting goals: to preserve the spiritual core of traditional religion while establishing the distance (and superiority) of Wagner's project with respect to that religion. Just as with his project of both retaining the metaphysical legacy of Romantic aesthetics and replacing them with a quite different aesthetics, the question arises as to how much the Wagnerian "redemption" of both Romanticism and religion was accomplished at the expense of altering the essence of the two.

The same contrast applies to the performance practices of the Romantic and Neoromantic periods. If earlier in the century transfixed listeners cherished fleeting moments of inspiration in which the genius would improvise or offer a subjective interpretation of a work, around mid-century the concert became closer to a structured ritual in which the performer or conductor reenacted masterworks as faithfully as possible. From the subjective experiences of the mystic we have gone to the objective doctrines of the priest. Not unlike most organized religions, "faith" in this art-religion was less a Romantic feeling of being part of the Absolute than a sense of compliance with guidelines proposed by church authorities. Notice for example the tone of the comments written by Cosima (Wagner's second wife, and Liszt's daughter) in a letter of 1867: "You know that I always refrain from expressing any opinion as against the Master." And in the same letter, "[Wagner's] ideas about art have become our faith" (quoted in Deathridge and Dahlhaus 1984: 56).

Liszt's public persona through the years exemplifies the transition from the

mystical halo of the early Romantics to the priestly authority of the Neoromantics.⁵⁷

From the beginning of his career as a virtuoso and hand in hand with his gift for the theatrical, Liszt's musical talent was experienced by himself as well as by his best listeners as intimately connected to his mystical inclinations. Arthur Friedheim makes the connection between musical genius and mystical power as epitomized by Liszt:

All through life Liszt sensed the spiritual, could see and hear things and sounds beyond ordinary ken. He had the intuition, the mystic power to penetrate beyond the empyrean. To me, mysticism and genius have always appeared indissolubly united. Spiritual ecstasy or rapture glows in the soul of the genius and stimulates him to extraordinary expression (Friedheim 1986: 289).

In the latter part of his life this mystical image was both tempered and invested with the authority of official religion when Liszt became an abbé in 1865.

The consolidation of the Western musical canon at this time had, therefore, the connotations of both the establishment of a secular body of works of exemplary aesthetic value and of a set of beliefs and practices sanctioned as sacred. This is perhaps not surprising given the metaphysical and theological baggage of nineteenth-century aesthetics (see chapter four). However, the transformation of these ideas into a sort of “religion,” with its exoteric, social, and normative implications, cannot be explained as a necessary development stemming from Romantic aesthetics. Rather, this development should be understood in the context of the Neoromantic reinterpretation of that baggage under the new social and cultural conditions in Europe after 1848. The Wagnerian art-religion summarizes, as well as takes to a more formalized level, the general attitudes towards music in the post-Romantic period. Music still symbolized metaphysical truth, but this

⁵⁷ It would difficult to ascertain how unique Liszt was in this respect, for most of the great Romantic virtuosi/composers had died by mid-century. Hummel died in 1837, Paganini in 1840, Mendelssohn in 1847 at 38, Chopin in 1849 at 39. See also discussion on the changes in the attitudes towards improvisation in the 1830s in chapter three, pp. 78-9.

truth was now more clearly defined and was worshipped in a more formalized context. “Spirit” was still the message but that message was now transmitted by means of concrete dogma.

Fundamental to this transformation of the diffuse mystical feelings characteristic of Romanticism into the Neoromantic art-religion was the importance of the “Word” for the Neoromantics. In *Art and Revolution*, Wagner addressed the significance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, again with a parable-like allegory:

Thus the master forced his way through the most unheard of possibilities of absolute tonal language . . . until he reached that point at which the navigator begins to sound the sea’s depths with his lead; at which he touches solid bottom at ever increasing heights as the strands of the new continent reach toward him from afar; at which he must decide whether to turn about into the fathomless ocean or whether to drop anchor in the new banks. . . . Resolutely he threw out his anchor, and this anchor was the *word* (in Lippman 1988: 249).

The new world discovered by Beethoven was, according to Wagner, the synthesis between music and word in the Ninth Symphony. For Wagner this meant the first step towards the redemption of absolute music, which he believed he accomplished with his own music-drama. The anchor that saves music from groundless chimeras is the *word*, a clear invocation of the pillar of the Judeo-Christian religions--the organization of beliefs and practices around a body of sacred texts. Wagner makes the association explicit when he writes that Beethoven’s last symphony “is the *human* gospel of the art of the future” (in Lippman 1988: 895, Wagner’s emphasis).

Wagner had the *Word* and the Ceremony--the staging of the total artwork. He himself had become a “high priest” of this art-religion (Wagner uses this term repeatedly

to refer to a few chosen creative artists among whom he undoubtedly counted himself).⁵⁸ The construction of the Bayreuth theater, probably the only theater in the world built to perform the music of just one composer, completed this scenario by giving Wagnerian music a temple, a shrine. Bayreuth embodied Wagner's ideal setting for performing his music-dramas and was therefore the culmination of his *Werktreue* aspirations. There was now not only a right way of performing his music, but also a right place to do it. With Bayreuth Wagner added a new dimension to the project of anchoring and fixing music.

The first production of the *Ring* in its entirety under Wagner's direction in the Bayreuth theater in 1876 must have been considered as nothing short of the definitive and "authentic" *Ring*. Wagner also dreamt of making Bayreuth the nucleus of a *Werktreue*-oriented performance practice, not only of his works but also of the other German masters. In 1877 he announced his plan "for a music school in Bayreuth that would train musicians in the true "German style" of performing German music and make possible a performance of all his works from *Der fliegende Holländer* to *Parsifal* in the Festspielhaus between 1878 and 1883" (Deathridge and Dahlhaus 1984: 63). This plan was never carried out, but Bayreuth did become the heart of a cultural phenomenon so powerful that it encountered either ardent enthusiasm or furious opposition (sometimes in the same person, as in the famous case of Nietzsche), but seldom indifference.

Wagner created a modern myth by means of a grandiose musical project with the metaphysical prestige of Romantic art, but covertly compatible, as we saw, with the positivistic currents of the time. This was a project that exalted the freedom of the human spirit and universal ideas but that was also closely associated with particular

⁵⁸ See for example references to the "high priests" of music in Wagner's "A Happy Evening" (1991 [1841a]) and "An End in Paris" (1991 [1841b]).

politics and social institutions.⁵⁹ The interwoven layers of symbolic meanings-- mythical-religious, political, and historical-- surrounding the Wagnerian movement contributed greatly to the mark this movement left on the culture of the time. Thus, for example, when Wagner laid the foundation stone of the Bayreuth theater on 22 May 1872 (his 59th birthday), he celebrated the occasion by conducting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Nothing could be more appropriate to accompany the laying of the cornerstone of the Wagnerian temple than the reenactment, under Wagner's direction, of the "human gospel of the art of the future." The canonization of Western music had reached its zenith.

Conclusion

There is a drawing that shows Liszt conducting an orchestra and a large choir. No longer a young man, his long hair is white and he wears a black habit corresponding to his ordination as abbé. The ecclesiastic clothing confers an uncanny finish to the solemn occasion. No doubt this and other similar concerts must have had the aura of a religious occasion, and in the context of late nineteenth-century sensibilities they were probably even more meaningful than a religious ceremony. For the initiated in Wagner's and Liszt's circles these concerts were nothing less than rituals where redemption was attained or at least faithfully invoked. This redemption involved the purification of music from the Romantic disease by means of, among other things, fidelity to the "Word" and to the Work. In achieving this "purification," music could bring about the redemption of culture from the prosaic values of a materialistic society.

Neoromantic aesthetics contributed to the marginalization or disappearance of all

⁵⁹ See for example Deathridge and Dahlhaus (1984) for an account of Wagner's struggle to gain financial and institutional support for Bayreuth.

elements of Romanticism that could not be "redeemed" by an aesthetics of emotional realism and the *Werktreue* ideal of performance. Improvisation was the most extreme case among these unruly elements. As we will see in the next chapter, for Hanslick and the other proponents of formalism, an aesthetic theory could not be based on the effects produced by music because these effects are variable and theories must be based on what is permanent, i.e., the musical structures themselves. For Wagner and his supporters, following Schopenhauer's critique of Hegelian Historical reason, Truth was also to be found in eternal Forms that art was supposed to reveal. Ephemeral, indeterminate, strongly associated with the Romantic aesthetics of subjectivity and unfit for objective study, improvisation was after mid-century everything that composers, critics, and music scholars wanted to leave behind.

CHAPTER SIX

OBJECTIVE, NECESSARY, AND DEFINITIVE: MASTERWORKS BECOME CANONIC

In me the most absolute respect for the masterpieces of the great masters has replaced the need for novelty and individuality.

--Liszt

The only cure of Romanticism is to analyze it.

--T. S. Eliot

It was the early Romantics who, in the midst of the emergence of the new historical consciousness, began to define themselves as a new generation with the double imperative of being original and being true to their tradition. Among German-speaking music connoisseurs Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, three composers of the recent past, were soon declared the undisputable masters of the Romantic tradition, and their masterpieces became a necessary reference for any serious musical endeavor.⁶⁰ But it was in the second half of the century that these exemplary composers and their works became the core of a highly formalized musical canon around which the institutionalization of the Western classical tradition was organized.

The penchant for novelty and individuality that had characterized the Romantic period, which had coexisted with the veneration of an exemplary past, was superseded by “an absolute respect for the masterpieces of the great masters” (Liszt, quoted in Wangermee 1950: 245). This statement expresses not only a shift in Liszt’s aesthetic ideals, but also a generalized attitude characteristic of the later part of the nineteenth century, when the process of canonization of Western music reached a high level of

⁶⁰ See for instance exchange between Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn quoted on p. 67.

formalization. By “formalization” I am referring to the late nineteenth-century confluence of institutional and epistemological developments that transformed what was until then an exemplary body of musical works into a fixed standard endowed with objective value.

In chapter four I addressed the nineteenth-century transformation of the Romantic historical consciousness into a systematic approach to the study of history. I argued that the formalization of history as a discipline influenced by positivistic methodology resulted in a focus on the accumulation and classification of documented data. I also argued that positivistic history became a privileged vehicle for the transmission and study of tradition, which contributed to the neglect of aspects of the tradition that could not become the object of positivistic methods.

In this chapter my main goal is to highlight how the predominantly scientist worldview of the second half of the nineteenth century affected the process of canon formation and, hence, the Western concept of musical greatness we have inherited. The canonization of a group of musical works and their composers was not simply the inescapable culmination of a historical trend, but it depended largely on decisions made at this time by individuals and groups with specific interests and allegiances who were responding to their own historical, political, and social circumstances. Most of these responses were strongly influenced by the belief in the superiority of scientific knowledge above all other forms of knowledge. The formation of the canon, therefore, took place under the requirements of scientific study, the single most important contemporary source of cultural legitimacy. Under the auspices of scientific legitimation, classical music’s “symbolic capital” achieved its highest worth by embodying the primary cultural values of the time, particularly objectivity, necessity, and definitiveness. The other side

of this symbolic gain was the loss of important aspects of musical life that were antithetical to these values and, therefore, could not be legitimized.

Canonicity and the Written Tradition

Music is process, action, activity; but once it is written down it yields up an object (a score) and is itself on the way to becoming objectified.

—Joseph Kerman

In the last decades the phenomenon of canonicity has been undergone considerable critical scrutiny from within various disciplines in the humanities. By identifying the ideological make up of the canon and putting into question its mechanisms of legitimation and self-perpetuation scholars have also put into question the very foundations of their disciplines. Literary criticism has been one of the pioneer fields undertaking the task of reassessing individual works and groups of authors previously excluded from the canon. Special attention has been given to works written by authors belonging to historically marginalized groups, such as Blacks in America and women. Strategies to correct the discriminatory patterns reinforced and perpetuated by the canon include adding formerly marginalized works to the already established canon and proposing alternative standards for the judgment and classification of canonic works (see for instance Showalter 1986).

With respect to the musical canon, during the last two decades efforts have primarily been directed at expanding the canon by bringing in works of previously neglected historical periods, such as the Medieval or early Baroque periods (Treitler), or by including works by women composers (Koskoff). Other scholars have put into question the set of values set forth by canonic works, as well as the very idea of canon itself. This project has been variously undertaken by approaching canonic works with

deconstructive strategies (Clément, McClary); reassessing works previously excluded from the canon (Newcomb, McCreless); conducting ethnographic investigations of institutions devoted to the study and transmission of the canon (Kingsbury); devoting study and a place in the curriculum to popular musics that seem to contradict basic canonic standards (Walser, Frith); including in the study of canonic music the discussion of formerly taboo topics such as gender and sexuality (McClary, Solie, Brett); investigating the double-sided mechanism of self-perpetuation and exclusiveness of the canon, while suggesting alternative standards for making and judging music (Citron); and investigating the interdependence between the canon and music disciplines (Bohlman, Bergeron, Randel).

The dependence of the canon on a written tradition and its aesthetic and historical implications, however, remains largely to be explored. As Joseph Kerman noted, the concept of a musical work, and especially of a canon, depends to certain extent on the process of objectification music undergoes when is written down (1983: 108, partially quoted above). With this, he raised the concern that musical canonicity depends on a process extraneous to the fundamental nature of music. In the words of Philip Bohlman, “the fundamentally oral nature of music notwithstanding, musicology’s canons arise from the field’s penchant for working with texts We think of pieces of music as discrete texts, rendered so by the notation with which we study and represent music” (Bohlman 1992: 202). In this sense, musical canonicity presents a unique problem for, unlike the literary canon—the paradigm of canon in Western culture—a musical canon—demands the translation of music into a medium which is not its own. Music canon formation, therefore, involved not just a process of selection of the most exemplary and valuable music of the tradition, but also a process of selection of music and musical aspects that

could be represented textually. Whereas it is generally assumed that canon-formation involves a mechanism of marginalization of works that do not measure up to a set of standards, in the case of music, it also marginalizes creations that cannot be judged according to those standards. Improvised music was not judged to be flawed or below established criteria of excellence, rather it was ignored because it was incommensurable with those criteria.

It could be argued that the fleeting art of improvisation was excluded from the canon simply because permanence is a necessary canonic requirement. To be sure, the concept of a canon involves a body of exemplary works that will be transmitted to future generations. But, though a necessary requirement of canonicity, the preservation of exemplarity by itself is not a sufficient canonic criterion: not all modes of permanence for exemplary cultural models are suitable to form a canon. All traditions, oral and written, comprise a set of conventions passed down from generation to generation and with it a sense of what is valuable and appropriate within a given tradition. The written basis of the Western musical canon, on the contrary, has constituted the vehicle for the preservation of exemplary creations considered to be finished products.⁶¹

The degree of freedom for innovation within a context of continuity, as well as the borders between adequate and inadequate, authentic and unauthentic, permitted and proscribed, and so on, are flexible and varies greatly across music cultures and historical periods. In musical cultures like the classical traditions of India, a core of traditional conventions--such as those constituting the raga system--are passed down from generation to generation. These conventions are preserved not in the form of finished,

⁶¹ In the Western tradition it is possible to find musical aspects that are not part of the canon and that have survived as models for performance, as for example nuances in interpretation perpetuated through generational chains of teachers and students. But these elements do not form part of the canon per se and their claims to exemplarity are open to challenge.

fixed products but as the basis for improvised and individual variations. The dynamics of enforcement and preservation of these conventions also vary. Usually, they are developed in the context of a dialectic between tradition and innovation, and between communities and individuals. In a recent article, Ali Jihad Racy has written about how improvisation is the medium for such a dialectical process in Arab music. In particular, the taqasim genre both expresses cherished conventional aspects of Arab culture and introduces individual innovations in the context of the interaction between musicians and public:

As a tradition bearer, the taqasim performer must also be innovative. In order to make representational sense, he must include the less ordinary components of the shared musical legacy. That renders his performance artistically engaging, as well as technically correct. In actual performances, innovation within the bounds of tradition can impress the diehard listeners and prompt them to indulge in judicious listening that in turn inspires the performer and shapes his or her improvised rendition (Racy 2000: 310).

Enforcement of a set of conventions is sometimes a thoroughly communal affair, as in the case of the Aymara musicians of Peru studied by Thomas Turino (1993). In other cases only a particular group within a society is entitled to alter conventions, while enforcing the compliance of other groups with the decisions made. An example of this is described by Timothy Rice in his study of traditional Bulgarian music, where women were expected to sing the traditional songs exactly as they had learnt them and were discouraged from introducing variations, which were the prerogative of men (Rice 1994 : 97). But, as Marcia Citron has pointed out, there is a fundamental difference between bodies of cherished pieces, which could be called “folk repertoires,” and the idea of a canon. The folk repertoire, being mostly oral, does not emphasize the idea of a “definitive version.” Even when there exists a written record of a song, Citron notes that this version “would not be *the* definitive version--there would not be one. Instead it

would be one of many possibilities and takes on a multiplicity that strips away the veneer of moral authority vested in the ontology of the definitive version” (Citron 1993: 39).⁶²

The first historical attempt to establish a musical canon in the Western world illustrates the canonic requirements of finished, fixed products and morally-invested definitive versions. As was earlier mentioned, this first instance of canon formation relied on a concerted effort to eradicate improvised elements in the liturgical chants of the Roman church, while enforcing the singers' compliance with a set of written models (see chapter one, pp. 9-10). For Charlemagne, the instigator of this ninth-century Gregorian reformation, the standardization of liturgical chants was a political tool serving his plans for European unification. Medieval political unity was inextricably bound to religious unity and the latter demanded a homogeneous musical practice. The promulgation of a written canon promoted the idea that there was only one correct usage of the chants throughout Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire, and, hence, it aimed at either the elimination or the absorption of a rich variety of local versions that had previously coexisted. The improvisational character of the chants had formerly contributed to the manifestation of these regional identities within the vast and diverse territories of Western Christendom.

The political efficacy of this canonization was strengthened by conferring a transcendental import to a set of written models. According to accounts that circulated at the time of the reform, the chants that had become canonic were precisely those composed under divine inspiration by Pope Gregory I a few centuries earlier. But despite the holy prestige carried by these documents, regional versions continued to resurface.

⁶² Citron also distinguishes between repertorial and disciplinary canons, although she notes that in practice they constantly “interact in flexible and fluid ways” (1993: 23). The concept of canon I am employing includes these two forms of canonicity and their interaction.

These deviations from the canon were labeled "corrupt" and "savage," and attracted Charlemagne's corrective measures time and again (see Kerman 1983; for historical documents see Weiss and Taruskin 1984: 44).

While ascertaining whether or not all processes of canonization are directly motivated by particular political or religious agendas is not the goal of the present chapter, it is noteworthy that the formation of the Western musical canon in the nineteenth century presents significant parallels with the Gregorian reform of ten centuries earlier: a) It involved the canonization of a body of written texts and excluded an existing improvisational tradition; b) the rhetoric surrounding the canonization of a body of exemplary music had explicit ties with a project of political unification;⁶³ c) the aesthetic judgments that supported the elevation of these works to canonic status were imbued with metaphysical and religious connotations; and, d) criticisms of deviations from these models were based on both aesthetic and moral judgments.⁶⁴

Comparison of these two historical instances of canon-formation also highlights the large number of cultural variables involved in the phenomenon of canon-formation, as Citron has argued, and helps to identify the unique circumstances of the nineteenth-century process. In the first place, Charlemagne's program failed to completely eradicate the oral tradition and improvisation continued to flourish after the enforcement of compliance to a standard written repertoire. Nineteenth-century improvisation, on the

⁶³ In a recent article, Celia Applegate (1998) maintains that there is much exaggeration in current musicological discussion of the influence of nationalism in music. She mostly directs her criticism to recently published articles dealing with German nationalism in the early nineteenth century, especially those by Sanna Pederson (1994) and Stephen Rumph (1995). While I agree that in this period German nationalism was still a diffuse concept that can be applied to an array of heterogeneous phenomena, in my view Applegate downplays the importance that nationalism had in German culture from the latter part of the century onward. It is possible that Applegate, as well as the authors she criticizes are misled by the same problematic homogeneous view of the nineteenth century: Applegate extrapolates her assessment of the early nineteenth century onto later views, while Pederson and Rumph extrapolate their assessment of late nineteenth-century nationalism onto an earlier period.

⁶⁴ The last two points have been argued in chapters four and five.

contrary, disappeared almost completely from public performance at the time the Western musical canon became firmly established.⁶⁵ Secondly, unlike the Gregorian reform the decline of improvisational elements and the adherence to a body of written works in the nineteenth century was not the result of a specific command coming from political authorities. The nineteenth century process was a much more complex one that involved not only a strong nationalistic impulse, but also changing social and economic contexts for public music-making, a shift in intellectual and philosophical climates, and--in tension with these developments but not reducible to them--changes in aesthetic ideas. Also, the transcendental value accorded to the canon in the nineteenth century was established in a much more sophisticated manner than the medieval legends of Gregory taking dictation from the Holy Spirit. Ten centuries later, the metaphysical import of music was argued on the basis of complicated philosophical and aesthetic theories according to which the imagination of the genius could reach realms beyond the materialistic world of everyday life. Music, furthermore, was no longer at the service of religion, but was a kind of religion in itself.

Finally, the element that had a decisive role in the unique process of canon-formation in the nineteenth century was the ideal of scientific knowledge as arbiter of truth. Science had at this moment the incontestable authority that religion had had in Charlemagne's times, and music studies inspired by scientific approaches became a major source of legitimacy of the musical canon. This does not mean, however, that there was a mere substitution of one source of authority by the other. The scientific ideals of the culture of the time did not challenge the belief in the metaphysical relevance of music. Rather, scientifically-inspired music scholarship reinforced this belief by giving it

⁶⁵ There were instances of sporadic public improvisation until the late nineteenth century. For documentation on this see Goertzen 1996.

objective support. The formation of a musical canon in the nineteenth century counted, therefore, on both the prestige of an aesthetics rooted in a theological heritage and on its validation by science.

Musikwissenschaft: The Scientific Gates of Critical Heaven

Arbitrating tastes; performing evaluation *qua* valuation; specifying favorites—
what's good and what isn't; excluding and evading the noncanonic.

—Philip Bohlman

These activities, Bohlman states, are implicit in the general musicological endeavors, though they are “considerably less neutral and objective in their communicative function” than what musicology as a discipline has claimed to be (Bohlman 1992: 199). The modern process of canon-formation has been inextricably linked to the emergence and development of music disciplines (see Bergeron and Bohlman 1992). To be sure, canon-formation is a complex phenomenon that exceeds the confines of scholarly activities. In Marcia Citron’s words, “canon formation is not controlled by any one individual or organization, nor does it take place at any one historical moment. Rather, the process of the formation of a canon, whether a repertoire or a disciplinary paradigm, involves a lengthy historical process that engages many cultural variables” (1993: 19). But as Citron, and Bohlman acknowledge, this complexity should not obscure the fact that canon formation ultimately depends on agents. In other words, it is individuals and groups of individuals with particular interests, ideological allegiances, and circumstances, who make the judgments that underlie a canon. Susan McClary (1991, 2000), Lydia Goehr (1992), and Sanna Pederson (1994), among others, have shed light on the ideological underpinnings of the nineteenth-century musical canon, identifying specific

interests and allegiances involved in its formation.

Here, I want to focus on the impact of scientism on this process, a factor that pervaded all spheres of culture and was both the major source of legitimation for particular ideological agendas and also a sort of ideology in itself.⁶⁶ The birth of modern music disciplines was mainly an outcome of this scientist current. Inspired by scientific standards of truth, music scholars not only evaluated musical greatness, but aimed at demonstrating its objective and lasting value in a positivistic manner. Bohlman has written that “the concept of canon as commonly understood in musicology suggests both an object and the act of determining what that object is” (1992: 201). The fact that this object was determined to be a scientific one says much about both traditional musicology and the canonic standards it promulgated.

The positivistic and scientist currents that fostered the emergence of musicology had not introduce wholly new ways of thinking to Western culture, since they were directly connected to old rationalist and empirical tendencies that had never completely disappeared during the Romantic period. Around the 1820s these currents began to take the shape of a scientist movement that by mid-century had acquired the force of a new worldview. Scientism entailed a strong reaction against idealist metaphysics, as well as a critique of the vague and fantastic world of the Romantics. Franklin Baumer has referred to this confluence of intellectual and cultural trends characterized by the belief in the centrality of science to all other forms of knowledge as “the New Enlightenment.” Among its adherents Baumer counts groups as various as the English Utilitarians and Radicals of the 1820s, the French Positivists, the German “Young Hegelians,” and a variety of “realists,” scientists, liberals and socialists everywhere in Europe” (Baumer 1965: 302).

⁶⁶ Joseph Kerman was one of the first musicologists to call attention to the impact of positivism on American musicology, especially with his influential *Contemplating Music* (1985).

It was August Comte who first categorized the post-Romantic period as the “age of positivism” and contrasted it to previous ages of metaphysics and theology (Baumer 1965: 153). After these eras of imperfect forms of thought, Comte maintained, rather than focusing exclusively on the “causes” of phenomena, positivism finally focused on the sole productive knowledge: the “laws” that ruled phenomena. Comte’s positivist philosophy contributed in great measure to the intellectual frame of reference of the scientist worldview. Two other major philosophical developments that supported scientism were the return of the Marburg Neo-Kantians to transcendental apriorism, and the emergence of other currents of logical empiricism, especially that of John Stuart Mill. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, these two positions corresponded completely to Comte’s ideal of positivist knowledge (Gadamer 1992 [1976]: 153).

The coalescence of these currents in the second half of the nineteenth century gave rise to a generalized belief that scientific method was the only acceptable path to true knowledge. Equated with metaphysics, philosophy came to be regarded as a field radically separated from, and in conflict with, science. Thus, adherence to a scientific position often implied the dismissal of philosophy at large. As we will see later, even Schopenhauer’s brand of metaphysics, which became enormously popular in the late nineteenth century, had pretensions of empirical rootedness. Hermann von Helmholtz, whose scientific studies on sound contributed to the emerging *Musikwissenschaften*, was well aware of the problematic split between philosophy and science. In a lecture given in 1862 Helmholtz offered this reflection:

The philosophers accused the scientific men of narrowness; the scientific men retorted that the philosophers were crazy. And so it came about that men of science began to lay some stress on the banishment of all philosophic influences from their work while some of them, including men

of the greatest acuteness, went so far as to condemn philosophy altogether, not merely as useless, but as mischievous dreaming (quoted in Baumer 1965: 307).⁶⁷

In order to better understand this radical separation between science and philosophy, we will recall that scientism meant “not merely the growth of science itself, but the attempt, in marked contrast to the romantic disposition, to answer all questions scientifically, to turn everything possible into a science, including in some respects even the humanities, and to apply the principles of science to the world of action” (Baumer 1965: 306). More specifically, the model for scientific knowledge was the natural sciences, particularly physics. All other “sciences,” including the *Geisteswissenschaften* (“sciences of the spirit”), were supposed to follow the natural sciences model as closely as possible.

This particular methodological orientation not only shaped the kind of knowledge the humanities aimed at, but to a large extent also shaped the kind of “object” these disciplines studied.⁶⁸ In this regard, Michael Holly writes that “the positivistic models provided by the natural sciences allowed others . . . to produce analyses of works exclusively in terms of their material constituents” (Holly 1984: 25). The synthesis between material and spiritual concerns invoked by the very denomination “sciences of the spirit” (the original German term for “humanities”) was therefore never attempted in practice. Whereas the “scientific” element in this expression needed no further justification and promised virtually unlimited possibilities for improvement, the

“spiritual” element had been reduced to its material constituents so as to become apt for

⁶⁷ This separation constitutes according to Gadamer the origin of the split between philosophy and science of the twentieth century.

⁶⁸ The modeling of the humanities after the natural sciences was not always obvious or direct. Hanslick for example discusses at some length the limitations of physiology for the knowledge of music, and he warns: “let everyone take care not to seek from a science explanations which it cannot give” (Hanslick 1957: 55). His formalist aesthetics, however, shared with the sciences the goal of objective knowledge, whose paradigm was the natural sciences.

scientific study.

Musicology, *Musikwissenschaft*, was one such “science of the spirit.” Created in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century, the new discipline—like the other modern humanities—had the goal of reaching objective truth about music. To achieve this goal, the “science of music” used fundamentally positivistic methodologies. Archival research, compilations, preparation of editions, and similar historiographical projects had been the backbone of musicological research from the beginnings of the discipline, and they remained so until recently. An example of the achievements of the early *Musikwissenschaft* was the publication, beginning in 1850, of the first complete edition of Bach’s works. This project inaugurated a tradition of Bach research that, as Kerman noted in 1985, “has for some time been poised on the brink of the classic positivistic dilemma: more and more facts, and less and less confidence in interpreting them” (Kerman 1985: 54).

Thus, as I argued in chapter three, the historical revival of the early nineteenth century, Romantic in its outlook, became a few decades later a much more systematic, fundamentally positivistic project. Concerning this increasing positivistic bent in nineteenth-century research R. G. Collingwood wrote:

Historians set to work to ascertain all the facts they could. The result was a vast increase of detailed historical knowledge, based to an unprecedented degree on accurate and critical examination of evidence. This was the age which enriched history by the compilation of vast masses of carefully sifted material . . . But all through this period there was a certain uneasiness about the ultimate purpose of this detailed research. It had been undertaken in obedience to the spirit of positivism according to which the ascertaining of facts was only the first stage of a process whose second stage was the discovery of laws . . . But philosophers who understood the positivist programme looked on at this enthusiasm with misgiving. When, they asked, were the historians going to embark on the second stage? (quoted in Kerman 1985: 43-44).

Chronologically, the new disciplines of music history and musicology lagged behind the developments in historiographical research described by Collingwood. In fact, Kerman quotes Collingwood to point out how similar the state of historical research in the nineteenth century was to that of twentieth-century musicological research, which until recently exhibited the same kinds of achievements and limitations of positivist scholarship. Positivistic-inspired music scholarship developed greatly after 1860. A variety of areas emerged to study music from different perspectives, and new terminologies and taxonomies were devised in order to have an overall conceptualization of the new field (see for instance McCredie 1971: 4ff). Music history, acoustics, aesthetics, theory, as well as other areas, underwent increasing systematization through the latter part of the nineteenth century. Along with the historical and analytical approaches to music developed at this time, there was a flourishing of scientific investigations of the acoustic basis of music. For instance, Helmholtz's studies of the harmonic series, which continued those conducted by Rameau in the light of the new scientific advances, were connected to the attempt to prove that tonal music was based on scientific laws (see Helmholtz 1948 [1877])⁶⁹.

It was not accidental that this booming of music scholarship occurred when Romanticism was in decline. As was mentioned earlier, the rise of scientism was in part a reaction against the Romantic worldview. T. S. Eliot summarized a widespread sentiment that reached its full articulation in the twentieth century when he wrote that “the only cure of Romanticism is to analyze it” (quoted in Fogle 1962 [1945]: 153). If in the

⁶⁹ It should be noted however that Helmholtz, though primarily a scientist and a highly accomplished one, did not completely accept the claims of scientism, and he maintained a cautionary attitude in front of the limits of scientific method and knowledge. For example, he considered that studies like his own were limited and believed that they needed to be complemented by aesthetic investigations not restricted by “natural philosophy.” Helmholtz also made the perceptive remarks concerning the relations between philosophy and science quoted on pp. 232-3.

Romantic period analysis was thought to destroy the life of artistic creations, some decades later analysis became not only an appropriate way to judge great music, but also a way to explain away what was perceived as chaotic or vague. The changing views on analysis were coupled, therefore, with a shift in aesthetic values. Whereas formal traits suggesting imperfection, ambiguity and fluidity had been associated with great art by the Romantics, these very traits became later in the century symptoms of a diseased and unmanageable artistic style. Analysis, considered as an objective, scientific-like tool, became a preferred means to ascertain formal perfection on music generally accepted as exemplary, such as that of Mozart and Beethoven or, extrapolating from Eliot's perceptive remark, a means to elicit some sense of order from Romantic music, thus curing it of its chaotic and imperfect aura.

In sum, in order to measure up to the requirements of scientific knowledge, music had to become an appropriate object of scientific study. As pure sound music could be studied from perspectives of acoustic and physics; as historical document scores could be treated with the methods of positivistic historiography; and as fixed musical structures works could be analyzed in terms of their formal constructions. Hence, the study of music as acoustic phenomenon, historical document, or formal structure, undertaken by the emerging fields of musical studies had the common basis of treating music as an object of scientific study. Questions about music which could not be answered by applying scientific-like methods were deemed irrelevant.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Although the ideal of scientific objectivity was pervasive in the scholarship of the latter half of the nineteenth century, it should be noted that not every music scholar adhered to this ideal. August Ambros, for instance, developed his work on music history and aesthetics within the framework of Hegelian dialectics, and his book *Die Grenzen der Musik und Poesie*, published in 1856, contested Hanslick's formalist aesthetics. But Ambros's, as well as other approaches such as the Romantic hermeneutics of H. Kretzschmar (1848-1924), had far less influence than Hanslick's in the development of musicology. For the relationship between the disciplines of music theory and musicology see Kerman (1985) and McCreless (1997a). Although separated in the twentieth century as two distinct disciplines with different scope, methodologies and goals, musicology and music theory continued to share the positivistic ideal of the latter part of the nineteenth century.

But, embodying another paradoxical aspect of late nineteenth-century culture, this positivistic scholarship still participated in the construction of systems that explained the overall meaning of phenomena. Acoustic investigations, for example, not only shed light on the physical nature of sound, but they also served as an objective basis from which to explain the excellence of the tonal language. The study of harmonics in particular not only provided such a scientific confirmation of tonality, but also an explanation of the historical evolution of music: the intervals of the series forming a sound explained the successive historical appropriation of those intervals (Fétis, see Christensen 1996).

Music historians also strove to systematically establish the historical development of Western music through a succession of necessary steps. This project was philosophically supported not only by Hegel's metaphysics of History--which, unlike his aesthetics, had a lasting impact throughout the nineteenth century--but also by the evolutionary theories of thinkers such as Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. Spencer in particular had a more direct impact on musical historiography with his 1857 publication of an *Essay on the Origin of Music*, where he adapted biological evolutionary ideas to music. Many histories of music influenced by evolutionist theories were written in the second half of the nineteenth century. These histories traced the development of music from simple to complex, from primitive to cultivated, and from homogeneous to heterogeneous. An example is the work of the English historian Charles Parry, who tried to reconcile evolutionist approaches to music history with Hegelian dialectics. In *The Art of Music* (1893) Parry proposed the existence of three stages in the development of music, one characterized by "unconsciousness" and "spontaneity," a second by "self-criticism," "analysis," and "consciousness," and a third and final one characterized by

the synthesis of the two previous stages and exemplified by great masterworks .

The impossibility of studying improvisation formally or historiographically and the consequent dismissal of its value was reinforced by this kind of evolutionary thinking. Improvisation was regarded as part of an “unconscious” and “spontaneous” early period that, unlike the Romantic exaltation of these characteristics, was considered in the latter part of the century unsophisticated and immature. Machlis’s statement quoted in chapter two, “the progress of music demanded the victory over improvisation,” is a clear example of the persistence of this evolutionary scheme well into the twentieth century.

Evolutionary views, however, could not by themselves explain the dismissal of improvisation, for improvised music had undergone similar stylistic changes as the written compositions of a given period. Also, Beethoven’s improvisatory feats at the piano only a few decades earlier could not have been completely erased from memory at this point, and they alone would have refuted the idea that improvised music was a remnant of primitive and simple musical forms. But by providing a general theory that explained the inferiority of improvised music, evolutionary schemes also contributed to the dismissal of the practice.⁷¹ Finally, the ideal of *Werktreue* in performance was another aspect of the primacy of objectivity in this period. It was believed that the more a performer could avoid his or her own subjective interpretation of the work, the more truthful to the work he or she was. At the same time, the less subjective a performance of a work was, the fewer the chances of opening the door to contingency.

In the end, the scientific aspiration of modern music scholarship meant an impulse to rescue music from subjectivism, legitimizing it by demonstrating its objective value.

Under the dictates of all these calls for objectivity not only did improvisation nearly

⁷¹ Evolutionary theories also brought to the fore a renewed interest in the origins of music. This interest was closely linked to the search for the essence of music, an important matter in positivistic approaches to music.

vanish from music histories, but the influence of improvisation on works was also downplayed or ignored. This attitude has remained firmly ingrained in musicological literature up to the present. In the *Harvard Brief Dictionary of Music*, for example, the entry "Impromptu" reads: "Properly, an improvisation, or a composition suggestive of improvisation."⁷² This element, however, is hardly present in the impromptus of Schubert, Chopin, and other Romantic composers who obviously used the title in order to indicate the somewhat casual origin of the composition." But as we have seen, for the Romantic composers in general improvisation was an important source of inspiration, and for many it was a significant aspect of their careers as composers and performers.

Another aspect of the discrediting of improvisation is manifested in cases where works are not considered as candidates for the canon because their improvisational character is too prominent. Marion Scott exemplifies this attitude in a monograph on Beethoven first published in 1934. As part of her periodization of Beethoven's works she writes:

In 1809 came another period of sonata writing--the Sonata in F sharp major, Op. 78, the Sonata in G major, Op. 79, and in 1809-10 the Sonata in E flat major With these it is convenient to bracket the Fantasia, Op.77, also composed in 1809, my reasons being that Czerny considered it a typical example of a Beethoven extemporization, and that Beethoven seems to have regarded it as a companion piece to the Sonata, Op. 78 (1974 [1934]: 143).

Scott does not elaborate on her reasons for the bracketing, nor on its implications, and she limits her comments on the Fantasia to noting that it is "curious, but interesting" (ibid.). It is clear, however, that in the context of her discussion of Beethoven's works the Fantasia does not quite hit the mark of the other works of the same period. Not only,

⁷² *The Harvard Brief Dictionary of Music*, edited by Willi Apel and Ralph T. Daniel, s.v., "impromptu."

then, is there a clear-cut separation between improvisation and works in the literature, but compositions that met the notational requirements of works were also set apart if there was evidence that at their core lurked the spirit of improvisation—a spirit of freedom, spontaneity, and subjectivity that at this point in history was regarded with suspicion and no little anxiety.

Traditionally, the *Fantasia* genre had embodied this spirit, especially until the early nineteenth-century.⁷³ It is not then surprising that other fantasies have also failed to satisfy scholars and critics. In his study of Schubert's *Fantasia in C Major for Violin and Piano*, Patrick McCreless (1997b) offers valuable insights concerning a work that has never enjoyed canonic status. Though much of the *Fantasia*'s unpopularity among performers is due to its enormous technical difficulty, critics have based their negative assessments of the work on its formal flaws. For McCreless, various features of this work singled out by critics as formal incongruities are associated with the instability of the *Fantasia* as a genre in the late 1820s. He notes that

in the social and expressive sphere, what ties these various features together is the notion of Romantic subjectivity itself. If Romanticism marks the birth of the modern subject, as is so often claimed, then the *Fantasia* is a central locus in which that subjectivity becomes conscious (McCreless 1997b: 216).

The ambiguous and eccentric form of this work—composed in 1827, nine months after Beethoven's death and three months before the triumph of Paganini in Vienna as McCreless points out—embodies important aspects of the Romantic aesthetics of imperfection that were strongly criticized a few decades later. McCreless sums up the problem: “We might speculate that much of what has been found wanting in the Violin

⁷³ Patrick McCreless cites a study by Peter Schleuning (1973) in which the author “notes the gradual disappearance, in pieces entitled *Fantasia*, of the unique, improvisatory forms of the eighteenth century in favor of formal plans that took more and more uniformly like sonata cycles” (McCreless 1997b: 214).

Fantasie is the result of a collision between a commission for a virtuoso piece and Schubert's own generically conditioned expectations for subjective utterance in a Fantasie" (ibid.). Even when captured in a composed work, subjectivity and virtuosity did not draw much interest from music scholars. Neither the brilliance and excitement of virtuosity in performance, nor the introversion and nuances of subjective expression translate well into formal categories. To be sure, works regarded as canonical also present these aspects in various degrees, but they exhibit other features that fare well formally and can therefore be "redeemed" through analysis.

As McCreless demonstrates, Schubert's Fantasie is in fact a well-crafted and original work that fully belongs to the great tradition of the genre. Does this mean, McCreless asks, that the work can be saved from "critical purgatory" or at least from "critical hell"? Rather than simply answering yes, thus offering an up-to-date version of the redemptive zeal of early music scholars, he concludes his essay by raising a much more interesting question :

Does there *need* to be a critical purgatory, or a critical hell—or a critical heaven, for that matter? The Violin Fantasie offers us moments of artistic pleasure, and its odd position in Schubert's mature instrumental works stimulates useful and productive inquiry about form and genre, about virtuosity and subjectivity, about analysis and criticism. Need it to do more? (McCreless 1997b: 230).

These questions and the implied negative responses constitute a forceful critique of formalism. It is not clear, however, what this means in relation to the question raised in the title of McCreless's essay: "A Candidate for the Canon? A New Look at Schubert's Fantasie in C Major for Violin and Piano." With his conclusion, does McCreless mean that because this work does all the things listed in the last paragraph it deserves to be part of the canon? Or, does he mean that because a canon implies the existence of both critical

heaven and critical hell, his critique also targets the very idea of canon? I think that in the context of this essay both answers are plausible. In my view, however, only the last one would be fully convincing, for the concept of musical canon in itself demands a set of objective standards that works like Schubert's Violin Fantasie, not to mention improvised music, overtly defy.

Hanslick: On the Objective in Music

Autonomous musical concepts (i.e., themes) have the trustworthiness of a quotation and the vividness of a painting: They are individual, personal, everlasting.

--Hanslick

In 1854 the Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick published *On the Beautiful in Music*, the first treatise laying out the principles for a formalist aesthetics. His proposal of an aesthetics of music based on the ideal of objectivity was well received, and two years after the publication of his book he was appointed to a position at Vienna University, making him "the first professor of music in the modern liberal-arts sense" (Weiss and Taruskin 1984: 403). For Hanslick, the solution to the subjectivist aesthetics of the Romantics was to render irrelevant the sources of subjectivism in music--the composer and the listener. What was left for aesthetic investigation was the musically beautiful, that is to say, the musical forms themselves. Hanslick justified the focus on musical form by asserting the very *objective nature* of the beautiful in music and indeed of the very essence of music. Hanslick was still concerned with the Romantic coupling of Truth and Beauty, but for him this was to be found only in music's formal structures. The musical work was an objective product of the artist's mind, and the attitude of the listener was described in terms of the contemplation of objective beauty.

Hanslick's work did much to foster the idea that the musical canon could be justified not only as a body of exemplary works sanctioned by tradition and studied with historiographical methods, but also as works proven to have objective and universal value. This process of legitimation by means of formal analysis, which later constituted the discipline of music theory, culminated in the twentieth century when it achieved a high degree of systematicity and rigor. Schenker's theory is probably the most far-reaching attempt of this kind in both thoroughness and influence.⁷⁴

Hanslick's work was eminently critical, for, as he notes in the prologue of his book, "the circumstances of the time" had forced him to emphasize the negative elements of his theory (Hanslick 1957 [1854]: 5). The musical circumstances he was responding to were on the one hand the disintegrating world of Romanticism with its aesthetics of feelings and the dilettantism fostered by it. On the other hand, he was also reacting to Neoromantic aesthetics and its claim that program music and the Wagnerian music-drama were the proper correctives for Romanticism and the only way to carry forward Beethoven's legacy. Hanslick became the most prominent defender of the "absolute music" group in the absolute/program music controversy that divided the German musical world into two camps in the latter part of the century.

The controversy arose between the supporters of Wagner and Liszt (who called themselves "the New German School") and those who, against them, defended the superiority of absolute music. Each group criticized the other as having misunderstood the significance of the legacy of the great masters and of Beethoven in particular. For Hanslick's group, the idea that the Wagnerian music-drama and program music were the

⁷⁴ Even if the scientific justification of the canon reached its full articulation in the twentieth century, this was a nineteenth-century ideal. In fact, as Kerman (1983) has noted, Schenker undertook his theoretical justification of the objective value of tonal music came when this music was already perceived as being under attack.

true heirs of the symphonic tradition was nothing short of offensive. In the words of Weiss and Taruskin, “the assumption by Liszt, Wagner, and their adherents that theirs was the only true way, that the mantle of Beethoven had fallen on their shoulders, and so forth, understandably provoked considerable indignation on the part of those who were not prepared to become converts to the new religion” (Weiss and Taruskin 1984: 380).

Hanslick opposed the Neoromantic idea that instrumental music should be taken to a higher level of accomplishment by attaching to it concrete meanings through words or images. He criticized the lack of independence of Liszt’s music, as well as Wagner’s insistence on expressing definite feelings through music. Music, Hanslick maintained, does not express definite feelings, for the only aspect of feeling music can represent is motion. His celebrated example of this is Gluck’s aria “J’ai perdu ma Euridice” (“I have lost my Euridice”), which words, he argued, fit the music as well as they could fit an aria entitled “J’ai trouvé ma Euridice” (“I have found my Euridice”) (Hanslick 1957 [1854]: 32). In sum, the only thing music expresses is musical ideas and the only subject of a musical work is its musical theme or themes, autonomous entities that are as objective as a painting (see quote above, *ibid.*: 83). That the only musical “content” worth of critical attention is that which conforms to objective standards is evident in the following assessment of improvisational preluding:

we will perhaps call “contentless” that most spontaneous kind of preluding in which the player, relaxing more than working, launches forth into chords, arpeggios, and rosalias, without allowing an autonomous tonal configuration to come distinctly to the fore. Such free preludes are neither recognizable nor distinguishable as individuals; we might say that they have (in the wider sense) no content because they have no theme. The theme or, rather, the themes of a piece of music are therefore its essential content (*ibid.*: 82).

For Hanslick, musical greatness was to be found in pure sounds and formal analysis provided the means to prove it. For Wagner, on the contrary, pure sounds dissociated from poetry and concrete imagery, were vague to the point of being meaningless. The philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach had been decisive in Wagner's formulation of this stance against absolute music. Feuerbach, the philosopher better known for influencing Marx's thought, had attacked the Hegelian system proposing instead a sort of philosophical naturalism. The term "absolute music" was coined by Wagner inspired by Feuerbach's concept of "absolute philosophy." Feuerbach had used this term to refer in a negative sense to metaphysical discourses which had forgotten their roots in human consciousness and were now somewhat freely and aimlessly floating. Analogously, for Wagner "absolute music" was music that had forgotten its origins in poetry and dance and had grown rootless and meaningless. Also, just as Feuerbach had proposed a "philosophy of the future" Wagner proposed his "artwork of the future," which, analogous to the philosophical rootedness Feuerbach had called for, was supposed to recover the roots of music in poetry, myth, dance, and plastic elements (see Deathridge and Dahlhaus 1984). For Hanslick instrumental music devoid of programs or words was not "rootless" but was, on the contrary, "pure" music that could stand on its own, without external aids.

But this controversy should not obscure the coherence of the musical culture of the latter part of the nineteenth century. Even though these two groups apparently held radically separated views of music, they exemplified two ways of departing the Romantic world that had in common a strong positivistic influence. If Wagner's and Liszt's "music of the future" had departed from important aspects of the musical practice of the recent past such as improvisation, their adversaries in the absolute camp were not more

traditional than them in this respect and by invoking the verdict of science they contributed to this departure in decisive ways.

The influence of Kantian philosophy on Hanslick's theory is unmistakable. Lippman has stated that, "the *Critique of Judgment* provides a substantial foundation for the development of aesthetic formalism, and Kant's influence is often quite conspicuous in the authors who followed [Hanslick]" (Lippman 1992: 292).⁷⁵ It should be noted, however, that there is a stretch from Hanslick's interpretation of Kant's aesthetics and the idealist and Romantic interpretations of it. The role of subjectivity is a case in point. Hanslick, for example, in his zeal to attack subjectivism in aesthetics went so far as to state that "the beautiful is and remains beautiful though it arouse no emotion whatever, and though there be no one to look at it" (Hanslick 1957 [1854]: 10). This radical elimination of the subject is typical of the polemic tone Hanslick used in his treatise, and it is an instance of a style of argumentation that prompts Lippman to comment on Hanslick's being "seduced by the attractiveness of a negative argument and the easy opportunity it offers for a display of cleverness" (Lippman 1992: 300). But in eliminating the subjective from aesthetic judgment Hanslick was also contradicting fundamental tenets of Kantian aesthetics, the most important philosophical source of his formalist project. Thus, even though Hanslick draws heavily from Kant's aesthetics of form, his emphasis on the objectivity of beauty at the expense of the judging subject (fundamental in Kantian transcendental idealism) makes his formalism closer to mid-century neo-Kantian formulations than to the Kantian source. Hanslick therefore participated in the neo-

Kantian misinterpretation of Kant's overall philosophy since neo-Kantianism had

⁷⁵ Other formalist approaches to music had appeared since the early nineteenth century, stemming directly from Kant's aesthetics of formal beauty. Lippman cites as the first proponent of formalism in the nineteenth century Johann Friedrich Herbart (1813, 1831) and Hans-Georg Nägeli (1826) (Lippman 1992: 298). Nägeli's formalism, however, as I will discuss in chapter eight, has certain affinity with some aspects of Romanticism and is quite different from the approach that developed after Hanslick.

focused almost exclusively on the First Critique, ignoring the fact that it was the aesthetics of the Third Critique that gave coherence to the Kantian system.⁷⁶

This neo-Kantian influence distinguishes the formalist tradition launched by Hanslick's book from idealist aesthetics, which owed much to the Kant of the Third Critique. The distance between Hanslick's and the idealists' interpretations of Kant also helps to explain the "family resemblance" between Hanslick's aesthetics and Schopenhauer's. As with Hanslick, Schopenhauer's enthusiasm for Kantian philosophy had nothing to do with the Romantic reinterpretation of Kant.⁷⁷ Hanslick and Schopenhauer had drawn conclusions quite distant from those drawn by idealists and Romantics, such as the abstract nature of musical feelings defended by both Hanslick and Schopenhauer (see for instance Lippman 1992: 299).

There is therefore a certain conceptual affinity underlying the opposition between the defenders of program music and the defenders of absolute music. This affinity consists basically in a reinterpretation of Kantian aesthetics quite different from that of the Romantics, one openly opposed to idealist and Romantic ideas on art. Schopenhauer's and Hanslick's aesthetics of music shared the mid-century movement back to Kant aimed at correcting the supposedly Romantic misunderstandings of Kant's philosophy by means of approaches based on empirical and objective grounds. If Schopenhauer's philosophy was still metaphysical and if Hanslick's formalist aesthetics still presupposed an aesthetics of genius and a metaphysics of formal beauty, this attests to the cultural complexities of the latter part of the nineteenth century. The post-Romantic generation tried to bring together positivist knowledge and metaphysics,

⁷⁶ I am referring here in particular to the Marburg Neo-Kantians. Other neo-Kantian schools have been criticized precisely for their subjectivistic aesthetics.

⁷⁷ According to Jerry Clegg, philosophers such as Jung, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Freud "share a source in the post-Kantian revival of Neo-Platonism that Schopenhauer's writings represent" (Clegg 1994: 199).

empirical accuracy and universal Ideas, definite expression of feelings and overflowing expressions of the sublime. This project did not involve an attempt at dialectical synthesis but, rather, the transformation of the notions of metaphysics, universal ideas, and the sublime into concepts compatible with the prevalent ideals of positivism.

The Anxiety of Contingency

What we experience as surprising, or, as we call it, original in music in none the less *necessary*.

--Constantinus Julius Becker

Treitler has remarked that Hanslick's concept of form is one of "inner form" which involves a sense of "musical idea worked out in notes" (Treitler 1991: 289). It is the appropriation of early formalist approaches such as Hanslick's by generations of music scholars that has given rise to a highly static formal conception of music. This conception, according to Treitler, "embodies a value-gradient according to the principles of closure, symmetry, unity, and the idea that every note is necessary to the whole and no note is superfluous to it. This is the sense of form on which the identification of the essential traits of Western music has rested . . ." (ibid). Here, Treitler is pointing to a significant aspect of the consolidation of the Western musical canon, manifested in the ideal of objectivity in both scholarship and performance practice: the impulse to obliterate any traces of contingency in music.

As Constantin Julius Becker suggests, even what was experienced as surprising had to be proved "necessary."⁷⁸ Judging by the contexts of this and similar statements,

⁷⁸ Becker collaborated with Schumann in the editorship of the *Neue Zeitschrift* from 1835 to 1843. But his musical sensibilities seem to have been more in step with the orientation the *NZ* took later under Brendel. Among Becker's literary output are a novel entitled *Die Neuromantiker* and translations of writings by Berlioz.

what Becker and others meant by “necessary” in music referred at least to one, but usually to all, of the following meanings: a) musical elements that could not formally be otherwise; b) musical masterworks that constituted an essential link in the historical development of music; and, c) music that was not the product of whim or chance but of the superior design of the genius’s creative mind. The characteristic post-Romantic anxiety in front of chance and disorder underlies the new preoccupations with respect to music. These preoccupations translated into the need to prove its structural coherence, its belonging to a necessary historical development, its having been willfully created by a superior mind, and, as the sum of these three traits, its objective and universal value.

Improvised music, once again, did not fare well with any of these safeguards against contingency in music, and it became a paradigm of musical shortcomings.

Consider for example Hanslick’s contrast between composition and improvisation:

“Since the composition follows formal laws of beauty, it does not improvise itself in haphazard ramblings but develops itself in organically distinct gradations, like sumptuous blossoming from a bud” (Hanslick 1957 [1854]: 81). The most generalized attitude of music critics towards these “haphazard ramblings” was to simply avoid them and, ultimately, forget them. But mere oblivion was not always possible given the important role improvisation had played in the not-too-distant past. Liszt only gave up his career as piano virtuoso in 1848 when, in the wake of his “conversion” to the *Werktreue* ideal and his appointment at the Weimar court, he gave a new turn to his career, becoming mainly a conductor and composer. After this point Liszt, who never lost his skill and love for improvising, continued to do so privately. Liszt’s student Arthur Friedheim wrote: “By nature, Liszt was a rhapsodist and improviser, and this lends a singular charm to his music, quite aside from all its other qualities” (Friedheim 1986: 189). But the

qualification of this activity comes right after this assertion: "But he was a rhapsodist in his own way; he never improvised without design. And he was always conformed to his own strict discipline, so that he was protected against errors in composition, as he was at the piano" (Friedheim 1986: 189). "Protected against errors" through discipline and superior musical genius, Liszt's private indulgence in the art of improvising was thus forgivable. But if Liszt allowed himself this relapse into subjectivity and contingency only in private, in the public sphere he played an active part in the eradication of these remnants of Romantic disorder and Baroque immaturity.⁷⁹

The increasing importance of the orchestra, considered as a plural instrument unified under the direction of the conductor, was a major factor in the new outlook of musical performances. Wagner wrote that the orchestra was the organ that ensured the unity of expression adding, "let us not forget, however, that the orchestra's equalizing moments of expression are never to be determined by *the caprice of the musician*, as random tricking out of sound, but *only by the poet's aim*" (Wagner 1964: 228, Wagner's emphasis). Wagner's statement cannot be sufficiently explained as responding to the needs of homogeneity in orchestral playing as opposed to solo playing. For Wagner individual caprice was just as inappropriate for solo players, since also in this case the single most important rule of interpretation was strict adherence to the composer's intentions: "The highest merit of the executant artist, the virtuoso, would accordingly consist in a pure and perfect reproduction of the composer's thought: a reproduction only

⁷⁹ If as a performer Liszt found a refuge for improvisation in the private sphere, as a writer he found this refuge in the music of the Roma people of Hungary. In his book *The Gypsies and their Music in Hungary* Liszt wrote about the fundamental role of improvisation in their music, describing their techniques of ornamentation, paraphrase, and interpretation in a way, as Friedheim remarks, reminiscent of his own improvisatory style (Friedheim 1986: 169-70). Hungarian folk music, of which Roma music was an important component, remained an important cultural reference for Liszt. His way of dealing with the demise of improvisation both in practice and in theory was, therefore, more than a mere marginalization. It was a way of preserving improvisation at a personal level while presenting in public a perfect picture of the German priest of the art-religion.

to be ensured by genuine fathering of his intentions, and consequently by total abstinence from all inventions of one's own" (Wagner 1991 [1840]: 139).

The "caprice of the musician," so valuable in Hegel's aesthetics of music and in Romantic musical practice, acquired the negative connotation of randomness. As opposed to this, the "poet's aim" came to signify the necessary designs of the genius. Wagner, despite his firm position on the performer's fidelity to the work, took great liberties when conducting the works of other composers and occasionally expressed the opinion that an interpreter needed to add fantasy and imagination to the interpretation, lest it be lifeless.⁸⁰

Werktreue, therefore, seemed to mean different things for different people, according to their musical talent. A merely talented performer or conductor had to strive for reproducing the works of the masters as faithfully as possible; a genius, on the other hand, could take the liberty to *interpret* another genius's intentions. After all, the late nineteenth-century genius was considered both the heir to previous masters and someone positioned at a more evolved historical stage. And as Goethe and Herder had declared, only a genius could truly understand another genius: "only soul can discover soul; only genius can understand, stimulate, and censure another genius" (Herder, quoted in Nori 1995: 8). In some cases, a genius could even understand another genius better than himself, as seems to be the case of Wagner when he re-scored as well as "corrected" the works of other composers.⁸¹ For all others involved in the art, the business, and the study of Western classical music at this time, total respect to the masterworks was the main rule.

⁸⁰ This was one of Wagner's criticisms of Brahms's musicianship. It could be speculated that in this context, the contradiction with a strict ideal of *Werktreue* might respond to Wagner's interest in demonstrating Brahms's lack of true genius and ability to open new paths for music, a task Wagner thought was his own mission.

⁸¹ Wagner, for example, arranged Beethoven's Ninth symphony for piano at four hands (never performed in concert), Palestrina's *Stabat Mater* (first performed in 1848), and Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (first performed in 1850). See Deathridge and Dahlhaus 1984: 186-187; Dorian 1942: 284).

This contradiction in performance practice also constituted for Wagner an aesthetic problem of crucial significance for his theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Whereas in some writings, as we just saw, he gave priority to “the poet’s aim,” in others he gave priority to the actors, stating that in his “self-sacrifice” for the actor, “the poet fulfills himself” (quoted in Deathridge and Dahlhaus 1984: 77). This is so because, in enacting the musical and scenic present moment, actors embody a decisive aspect of the opera—the “mimetic-cum-improvisatory ‘liveliness’” (ibid: 75). In 1871 Cosima Wagner recorded in her diary Wagner’s idea that “an improviser such as an actor must belong entirely to the present moment, and never think of what is to come, indeed not even know it, as it were” (ibid.: 78). Improvisation for Wagner, therefore, had not only a negative connotation (he associated it with the problem of “German formlessness”), but also a positive one: it was the guaranty of ‘liveliness.’ Wagner tried to reconcile this artistic need for freedom and spontaneity with his ideal of closely-knit large dramatic forms. The solution he found, according to Deathridge and Dahlhaus, was no other than the technique of the leitmotif: “On the one hand a leitmotif (singular) operates in isolation, and often is linked only loosely with what has already happened and what is to come: . . . it accentuates the scenic and musical present moment. On the other hand, the leitmotifs (plural), as a system of musical dramaturgy, constitute a form which embraces the entire work” (ibid.: 79). It follows from this argument, therefore, that the leitmotif meant for Wagner—at least at a given moment of his theoretical development--the new reincarnation of the spirit of improvisation, the last redoubt of spontaneity. That the alleged dialectics between freedom and design, improvisation and composition, results in a technique such as the leitmotif is perhaps an appropriate symbol of the Neoromantic masquerading of the Romantic spirit.

If Wagner still valued the spontaneity of the present moment at least in theory, most music critics of this period set themselves to the task of certifying its absence from the masterworks while ascertaining the necessity of their formal design. Consider for example the following 1864 passage by Kahlert:

The primeval form that underlies all musical structure was constantly in Beethoven's heaven-storming, Titanic mind. Even when the composer appeared to be acting in an arbitrary manner, he was none the less honoring the eternal law that must be observed if a musical work is to be as comprehensible and enjoyable to others as it is to its creator (in Le Huray and Day 1988: 561).

Here, as opposed to Romantic assessments of genius, spontaneity is not a value in itself, but stands as only a deceptive appearance. I argued earlier that in Romantic aesthetics the genius' spontaneity was also considered a surface phenomenon that covered a deeper sense of agreement with eternal laws. But the Romantics *believed* that this was the case--they did not need to prove it. The chaotic appearance of an artistic creation was valuable in itself and needed no further justification. In the post-Romantic period, on the contrary, comprehensibility and enjoyment of a work depended on a clear sense of its conformity with allegedly eternal and objective laws. Works or passages that did not clearly express this conformity had to be explained in order to be considered exemplary.

Becker's writings in the late 1830s had already articulated this view which would become prevalent after 1850. He compares music to architecture claiming that, just as happens in good architecture, there is no room for error or contingency in good music. Like most of his contemporaries who wanted to leave Romanticism behind, Becker's concept of music was nonetheless grounded in a Romantic metaphysics of beauty. Music symbolized for him "the spiritual idea of truth in the form of beauty" (quoted in Le

Hurray and Day 1981: 331). But Becker's "spiritual idea of truth" differed from Hegelian metaphysics, according to which the ideality of the "soul-life" was best expressed by the temporal, fluid, and open character of music. For Becker, on the contrary, the truth symbolized by music and the other arts, "necessarily excluded chance and coincidence, be the work of art simply the idealization of a model or its complete physical or moral representation." And from this it follows "that what we experience as surprising, or, as we call it, original in music is none the less *necessary*; anything that is contrived or irrelevant to the idea either makes no impression on us or causes disquiet" (quoted in Le Hurray and Day 1981: 331).

Becker's exclusion of the arbitrary is coupled with his fundamentally static and atemporal concept of music. Drawing again from the comparison between music and architecture he affirms that a musical theme is "exactly like the basic motif that governs the design of a work of architecture" (ibid.: 333), and that "the architectural development of the sketch is equivalent to the musical development of a theme" (ibid.: 333). This comparison was for him not just an abstract conceptualization, but it also referred to his way of experiencing both arts, or so he describes it when he writes of his experience of "seeing" Bach's music "in stone" when contemplating the Strasburg Minster (ibid.: 332).

Hegel's comparison between music and architecture led him to quite different conclusions. For Hegel music is fundamentally a temporal and fluid art and is, therefore, quite different from a spatial art such as architecture. Music, he writes, "annihilates not merely one form of spatial dimension, but the conditions of Space entirely, which is completely withdrawn into the ideality of the soul-life, both in its aspect of conscious life and in that of its external expression" (Hegel 1991 [1835], vol. 1: 87). Becker's opposite emphasis on the static structures of music represents another aspect of the move away

from idealism and Romantic aesthetics that triumphed in the second half of the century and which was a basis for the emergence of modern music scholarship. Not surprisingly, Becker invokes “rigorous analysis” as the way to comprehend the affinity between music and architecture. Likewise, rigorous analysis was also a privileged means to ascertain the “necessary” formal aspects of a given work.

Anthony Newcomb, in a 1983 essay dealing with the changing critical assessments of Schumann’s Second Symphony, has shed light on the alliance of analysis and the task of eradicating uncertain elements from the musical canon. He documents how early critics generally considered this symphony to be a masterwork and one of Schumann’s best compositions, while later evaluations put into question its canonic status on the basis of its formal weaknesses. Most early reviewers of the symphony, the first performances of which took place in 1846, noted the difficulties of this work but nonetheless referred to it as “most interesting” (Moscheles, 1849), “one of the best instrumental works that we possess” (anonymous author, late 1850), “my favorite of the five [Schumann’s symphonies]” (Brahms, 1855), the “boldest and most passionate of his works” and “the most masterful of Robert’s orchestral works” (Clara Schumann 1847, 1859). By the end of the nineteenth century, critics began to offer more negative evaluations of the symphony. One of the first and most influential adverse critiques was that of Kretzschmar in 1887. After this, Newcomb reports, good and bad critiques of the work appeared, but by 1903 most critics and musicologists had reached a consensus regarding its weaknesses. Throughout the twentieth century, critics have insisted on the “formal problems” and “formal incoherence” of the work, even considering it to be “deeply flawed” (Carner 1952).

Newcomb argues that this shift in critical evaluation was the result of a shift in

critical methods. He points out that early (and positive) reviews of the work focused more on the interpretation of “content,” understood in terms of “ideas” or “thoughts” carried by, among other things, the “succession and evolution of thematic character.” For Newcomb, “here the crucial matter is not only the succession of thematic sections and movements as a formal diagram would present them, but also the manner in which one theme is generated by and interacts with another, which manner is laden with metaphorical meaning” (1983: 236). The essay thus highlights the shift of musical criticism towards formalism and how this shift influenced the standards of musical greatness. In order to situate this shift Newcomb contrasts nineteenth-century and twentieth-century views, the former being more concerned with questions of “content” and the latter with questions of form. To be sure, twentieth-century musical analysis and criticism developed ever more rigorous and sophisticated formal approaches to music that contrast with much of nineteenth-century criticism. But this formalist development had its aesthetic and cultural roots in the later part of the nineteenth century, when it originated as a manifestation of the pervasive positivistic cultural atmosphere of the period. When formalism reached a peak in the twentieth century, the cultural and ideological bedrock that made this development possible was already facing serious challenges (Kerman 1983: 114, see p. 107).

Particularly interesting for the present discussion is Newcomb’s argument that a major cause of the dissatisfaction of later reviewers with Schumann’s Second Symphony is the formal design of its last movement. Dahlhaus, for instance, is puzzled by the movement and finally declares it “formally incoherent” (Newcomb 1983 : 240). Armin Gebhardt (1968) considers the movement too sectional and patchy and recommends “cutting nearly half in performance” (Newcomb 1983: 239-240). For Newcomb, the

problem with these and similar evaluations stems from the critics “wanting to claim that the finale is in any *single* form” (Newcomb 1983: 240). For him, instead, the movement “starts as one thing and becomes another, and this formal transformation is part of its meaning” (ibid.). Newcomb expands on this thought in a footnote referring to the German writer Jean Paul’s ideal of character and plot. Newcomb quotes the following passage by E. Blackall:

[Jean Paul] downplays the importance of motivation as tending to produce a rather mechanical effect, and, secondly, he places therefore more emphasis on open characters, those who can act this way or that. Fixed characters he thinks are not good in a novel because their actions are far too easily predictable. . . . This throws light on . . . the contrast we often feel in his novels between inner development and external action, a contrast which is close to ironic (quoted in Newcomb 1983: 240, n. 17).

Newcomb’s reference to Jean Paul is highly pertinent since this Romantic writer, who was enormously popular in Germany during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, had strongly influenced Schumann. In fact, critical assessments of the work of Jean Paul (whose real name was Johann Paul Friedrich Richter) are reminiscent of the critiques of the symphony discussed here, as well as to other works by Schumann and other Romantic composers. According to a contributor to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Jean Paul’s novels are peculiar combinations of sentiment, irony, and humour expressed in a highly subjective and involuted prose style that is marked by rapid transitions of mood. His books are formless, lacking in action, and studded with whimsical digressions, but to some extent they are redeemed by the author’s profuse imagination and equal capacity for realistic detail and dreamlike fantasy.” And the *Encyclopaedia’s* writer adds that “after the mid-19th century the unevenness and undisciplined form of his novels began to detract rather than add to his reputation, but the deep humanity of his finest

works has preserved them from oblivion” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Britannica.com, s.v., “Jean Paul”).

The formal aspects in Jean Paul’s and Schumann’s works that were objects of negative critiques in the second half of the nineteenth century had been considered positive traits not long before. The same features denounced by later critics as uneven, undisciplined, formless, or formally incoherent were regarded until around mid-century as a manifestation of their highest artistic values: imagination, creative freedom and originality. As Newcomb argues, analytical methods changed and, with them, so did the outcome of their critical evaluations. What I want to emphasize here is that the change in methods was largely due to the influence of scientism and positivism. If since the late nineteenth century the last movement of Schumann’s Second Symphony has been considered to fall short of canonic status, this is because its aesthetic value was dependent on its adherence to formal standards: standards defined by scholars strongly driven by the aspiration to treat music as scientifically as possible.

Blackall’s passage about Jean Paul quoted above also draws attention towards the particular aspect of attacks on contingency discussed here. Blackall refers to Jean Paul’s dislike of a mechanical development of plot and characters and his interest in developing instead unpredictable, open ones. The same interest is manifested in early Romantic music and art at large or at least in the aesthetic ideals they aspired to. But if in the early Romantic period predictability was inimical to creative freedom and originality, after mid-century this concept acquired a positive connotation stemming from the prestige of scientific knowledge, and the concurrent new interest in the control and predictability of phenomena. The formal study of music was also influenced by this fundamental goal of scientific knowledge and, in consequence, issues of definition and predictability became

important aspects of music evaluation. Since formal analyses were considered an appropriate tool to reach musical knowledge, all musical elements that did not bend themselves to analytical study were deemed marginal and even detrimental to good art. Contingency, chance, and indeterminacy were such elements, the same ones that had made improvisation a preferred means of musical expression earlier in the century.

Conclusion

Freedom becomes whim. Spontaneity becomes lack of design. What is missing now is the grand Romantic synthesis within which ideas of freedom, spontaneity, and even chaos were conceived as part of the Whole. With the collapse of the Romantic project, belief in a grand-scale metaphysical synthesis was replaced with a belief in the progressive achievement of knowledge by means of applying scientific methodologies. But by the end of the century, there were clear signs in European culture that this belief in the omnipotence of science was unfounded. Underneath the optimism generated by the seemingly unlimited possibilities of scientific progress, there lurked in this culture, as Nietzsche denounced, a deeply ingrained insecurity.

Because the optimism of the positivist era is superficial, nothing can be left to chance; because instability and insecurity are at the heart of this culture of scientific progress, freedom and spontaneity become suspect. And it is only then, when the metaphysical ground of the infallibility of genius is suspect, that the genius's intentions and visions become dogmas. If the Romantics had a place for randomness in culture, it is because they believed that randomness was only a superficial phenomenon whose real meaning was to be a part of the organic universal Whole. In the late nineteenth century

randomness was no longer a superficial phenomenon but a real threat to the painstaking construction of a European self-identity on the pillars of scientism and art-religion. The fragility of this construction was paired with the urgency of its legitimation: aggressive nationalism, positivistic-friendly metaphysics, and an enshrined and untouchable form of musical art were all manifestations of the anxiety of randomness in a culture that mistrusted itself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WORK AS PLAY, PLAY AS WORK: A DIFFERENT CONCEPT OF AUTONOMY

The aesthetic relevance of improvisation in the early Romantic period coincided with the emergence of a new concept of music as autonomous. The simultaneity of these two aspects of musical Romanticism can be a perplexing phenomenon if autonomous music is understood as indissolubly linked to a reified concept of the musical work. Given that improvisation is a practice that defies reification, it would be necessary to deny either the importance of improvisation in the early Romantic period, or to redefine the concept of autonomous art in this period. In this chapter I argue that the early Romantic concept of autonomous music did not rest on a concept of music as object, but was in fact compatible with improvisation as practice and as aesthetic ideal.

In this sense, it is possible to establish a connection between the ongoing critique of the formalist concept of work (Kerman, Treitler, Goehr, Small) with the Western aesthetics and musical practices of the first half of the nineteenth century. With this I am not suggesting that these critiques advocate a return to Romantic, pre-formalist approaches to music. To be sure, Hanslick's warning that the meaning of music is to be found in musical structures was reductionist, as was the formalist aesthetic tradition that ensued. But his attack against baseless aesthetic speculations was a response to a real problem and cannot be dismissed without ensuring that those problems do not return. To say it differently, there is no need or justification for a return to Romantic aesthetics in order to envision new approaches to music beyond formalism. But there is something to

be retrieved from the philosophical aesthetics and musical performance practice of the early Romantic period: a concept of work as play, and of play as work. The concept of work as play is manifested in performance practice by the flexibility and freedom with which performers approached the interpretation of composed pieces, and in aesthetic ideas in the quasi-phenomenological concept of music of the idealist philosophers.⁸² The concept of play as work is manifested in performance practice by the inclusion of improvised music in concert programs, and in aesthetic ideas by the fact that these improvisations were the object of aesthetic judgments.

In the interrelated ideas of work as play and play as work there lies the possibility of extricating the concept of aesthetic autonomy from its connotations of formalism, of aestheticism, and, in sum, of its cultural irrelevance. And if music can be said to be “autonomous” and, at the same time, a phenomenon firmly rooted in and relevant to culture, the argument could also be made that music—and creativity in general—offers the possibility to challenge the very conditions from within which it emerged.

PART I : WORK AS PLAY

Music After 1800: More than Objects

Lydia Goehr (1992) has argued that around 1800 there was a shift in the Western tradition from a performance-oriented to a work-oriented musical practice. She situates this shift in the context of the separation between fine arts and crafts in Romantic

⁸² This open attitude towards musical works was not completely lost in performance practice during the later part of the nineteenth century, even when the *Werktreue* ideal was prevalent. For example, on an occasion long after Liszt had renounced his public improvisations and free renderings of other composers' works, his student Siloti played for him Liszt's Fourteenth Rhapsody. Siloti recalls that he played the piece “altering some passages and omitting others. Liszt approved of it and gave him permission for in the future introduce any alterations to his music” (in Siloti 1986: 359).

aesthetics. Music, regarded now as a fine art, was increasingly understood in terms of finished compositions whose significance was exclusively aesthetic and not attached to function. Musical works, she argues, aspired to the status of artifacts produced in the other fine arts, which were beginning to be displayed in museums for the purpose of aesthetic contemplation. In music, this meant the emergence of fixed compositions and the performance ideal of *Werktreue*, or perfect compliance with the score.

As Goehr shows, the nineteenth-century's emphasis on the "work-concept" was inseparable from the process of formation of the Western canon and the idea of "serious" or classical music. She also notes the connection between the work-concept as belonging to a separate sphere of transcendental significance, as well as its connection with the rise of nineteenth-century art-religion. Goehr has thus identified an important phenomenon brought about by the process of formalization of Western music: the nineteenth-century reduction of the broad category of "music" to the narrow formalist category of "works." Goehr's contribution is a breakthrough in contemporary musicology because it has revealed some significant aspects of the problem of formalist reductionism. But in situating this shift around 1800, she downplays the differences in theory and practice between the early and late nineteenth century; and in doing so, she overlooks the implications of a period in which many of what are considered today the masterworks of the tradition had already been written but had not yet been reduced to pieces in an imaginary museum.

Rather than establishing a radical opposition between composition and extemporization after 1800, the Romantics envisioned a much more fluid relationship between them. As we saw earlier, performers continued to improvise free fantasies as well as embellishments and paraphrases based on notated compositions. Romantic

composers were, moreover, greatly influenced by the spirit of improvisation, and many Romantic compositions attempted to capture that free spirit in a form that could be passed down to posterity. As Hegel's and other idealist philosophers' remarks on music indicate, there was also a philosophical justification for the seamless integration of a more open kind of music-making and the reproduction of notated works. There was, in short, a deep affinity between improvisation and the Romantic musical ideal: the narrow formalist concept of musical work we have inherited was not prevalent in this period, if it was present at all.

The distinction between pre-1800 "performance-oriented" and post-1800 "work-oriented" practices implies that improvisation after 1800 was a mere remnant of the past, a disappearing phenomenon belonging to a pre-work musical world. According to this view, the decline of improvisation in Europe can be interpreted as an outcome of the shift towards a work-oriented musical practice. We know, however, that improvisation continued to flourish after 1800 and that it was a significant aspect of musical Romanticism. What happened around the turn of the nineteenth century that allowed Romantic improvisation to flourish, and yet it can be interpreted as a shift towards the concept of work?

The significant change that Goehr identifies consists fundamentally in a shift towards the concept of autonomous art. Now understood as exemplary and original works of fine art created by a genius, musical works acquired an unprecedented historical and metaphysical relevance. Whereas before the early nineteenth century music's significance was inseparable from its social function, now a new concept of music as valuable in and of itself began to emerge along with the new aesthetics of genius. The influence of historicism, organicism, and the importance of authorship in a post-patronage

era were all decisive factors contributing to a new focus on the autonomy of music.

Goehr, however, identifies the shift towards aesthetic autonomy with a shift towards a reified concept of musical work and the concomitant ideal of *Werktreue* in performance. This leads her to interpret improvisation in the Romantic period as a by-product of the tensions generated by the *Werktreue* ideal: “Performing under the ideal of *Werktreue* generated its own tensions. Just as derivative forms of compositions had emerged to satisfy the desire to use preexisting musical materials, an alternative concept of performance emerged to satisfy the performer’s need to perform without restrictions imposed by composers” (Goehr 1992: 233). Later she adds:

given the restraints of the *Werktreue* ideal, the only opportunity performers had to show their performing talents lay within the limited confines of the new cadenzas. For many performers . . . it seemed that this brief moment of “show” was too brief and that premeditated performance was unduly restrictive. So they developed a practice to contrast with that of performing pre-composed, pre-meditated, or pre-concerted works (ibid.).

But the practice Goehr refers to was already firmly rooted in the tradition when the *Werktreue* ideal arose. Nineteenth-century improvisation exhibited its own unique characteristics with respect to earlier periods, as it changed in accordance with the new aesthetic ideals and the new social and economic organization of music-making. But it was nonetheless an integral part of the tradition that the Romantics had inherited from Beethoven and other prominent composers and musicians, just as they had inherited from them the works whose performance came to be regulated by the *Werktreue* ideal. Contrary to what Goehr suggests, nineteenth-century improvisation was not derivative of the *Werktreue* ideal, but had its own history and embodied another set of aesthetic ideals in their own right.

The fact that this tradition was very much alive at the time the concept of autonomous art emerged is an indication not of the marginal status of improvisation, but of a non-formalistic concept of music's autonomy that emerged at this time. In agreement with the break she identifies around 1800, Goehr associates the emancipation of instrumental music with the rise of formalism. She quotes Hegel and Schelling to illustrate the formalist move according to which music, now independent from social function, is "intelligible not because it refers to something outside of itself, but because it has an internal structural coherence" (Goehr 1992: 155). Hegel's idea of form, however, as well as that of Schelling and the other idealist philosophers, was far removed from the formalism, exemplified in its early stages by Hanslick, that developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. For Hanslick, "form" referred to a static structure that is permanent in music.⁸³ For Hegel, on the contrary, "form" is closer to the idea of a dynamic and developing force whose relevance lies not in its permanence, but rather in its giving shape to the fleeting life of spirit.

The idealist conception of aesthetic autonomy was therefore more phenomenological than formal and emphasized the character of music as *play*. For Hegel, the fluidity and evanescence of an improvised performance highlighted the most important role of music, which was to express the inner free life of the soul.⁸⁴ "Music," Hegel wrote in the *Aesthetics*, "takes as its subject-matter the subjective inner life itself, with the aim of presenting itself, not as an external shape or as an objectively existing

⁸³ Hanslick's idea of form is nonetheless still influenced by the idealist conception. But his emphasis on the permanence and fixity of structure marks the turn towards the formalist approaches that developed later in the nineteenth century and reached a peak during the twentieth.

⁸⁴ Hegel's emphasis on transitoriness was not at odds with the centrality of History in his philosophical system. It could possibly be argued that this is related to his overall dismissal of the importance of art in his own time. And indeed this dismissal is a fundamental aspect of the separation between his idealist philosophy and the Romantic movement, which elevated art and music in particular to the highest status. But, regardless of the rank of music in his system, Hegel's conception of the nature of music is consistent with his conception of human subjectivity and freedom and had therefore ontological significance.

work, but as that inner life” (Hegel 1991 [1835], vol. 2: 909). Hegel’s definition of the aim of music as the expression of inner life in its freedom, something clearly distinct from the presentation of “an objectively existing work,” illustrates the difference between the concept of aesthetic autonomy underlying early nineteenth-century aesthetics and the later emphasis on the work as object and on the *Werktreue* ideal of performance associated with it.

In the section on music in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, we also find an indication of the recontextualization that the aesthetics of genius had undergone throughout the nineteenth century. Whereas in the second half of the century Genius became increasingly associated with the *Werktreue* ideal and with a fixed body of canonic works, Hegel’s concept of Genius is inseparable from his idea of music as expression of subjectivity and freedom. For him a musical work has no artistic value unless the performer brings it to life with originality and imagination, and Genius consists in the capacity to do this: “genius is not restricted to the mere execution of what is given but has a wider scope so that the executant artist himself composes in his interpretation, fills in gaps, deepens what is superficial, ensouls what is soulless and in this way appears as downright independent and productive” (Hegel 1991 [1835], vol. 2: 909).

For Hegel, the correct aesthetic attitude toward music is quite different from the detached contemplation of a beautiful object-like piece. When the interpreter has true genius “the resulting work of art has a quite peculiar attraction, because we have present before us not merely a work of art but the actual production of one” (ibid.: 957). Hegel, therefore, emphasizes the poetic side of music over the finished product. This emphasis, along with his claim that the relevance of music lies in its power to articulate temporal experiences and hence consciousness itself, situates his musical aesthetics as exemplary of

a quasi-phenomenological approach to music.

This theoretical outlook was the counterpart of a performance practice in which both works and improvisation were integrated. With his emphasis on the poetic, operational, and experiential aspects of musical creativity and reception, Hegel offers a philosophical reflection on the fluidity between notated works and improvisation in the Romantic period. Thus, for example, in discussing what he calls “the living presence of art” in a musical performance he states: “the self-reposing soul of the executant artist abandons itself to its outpouring and in it he displays his inventive genius, his heart’s deep feeling, his mastery in execution and, so long as he proceeds with spirit, skill, and grace, he may even interrupt the melody with jokes, caprices, and virtuosity, and surrender to the modes and suggestions of the moment” (Hegel 1991 [1835], vol. 2: 957).

It is symptomatic of the orientation taken by musicological studies that whereas Hegel’s philosophy at large had an enormous impact on so many Western thinkers, his ideas on music exerted a very limited influence on the emerging tradition of music scholarship. Hegel’s musical aesthetics, however, did not constitute an isolated or uncharacteristic position in the early nineteenth century. His phenomenological orientation was in step with fundamental tenets of the Romantic movement at large. In this respect, Tilottama Rajan has written that “Romantic theory is broadly phenomenological in approaching genres as modes of consciousness rather than analyzing their mechanical features. It is also phenomenological in being concerned with processes rather than products: both the process (individual or cultural) from which the artwork emerges and the process it stimulates in the reader” (Rajan 1995: 161).

There is therefore a gap between the Romantic concept of music’s autonomy based on a phenomenological understanding, and that which is associated with an object-

like concept of musical work. The collapse of these two ideas of aesthetic autonomy is in part responsible for an unproductive dichotomy between the autonomy and the social significance of art. This conflation has also obscured the relationship existing between early Romantic aesthetics and the formation of the Western canon. Marcia Citron has stated that “the emphasis on music-as-physical-object that arose in the early nineteenth century was instrumental in paving the way for the notion of canon” (Citron 1993: 38). But, although the concept of aesthetic autonomy that became fundamental to Romantic ideals of freedom and transcendence made possible the formation of a canon, it was the notion of canon itself, and not that of autonomy, that paved the way for an emphasis on music “as-physical-object.” To put this differently, while a concept of aesthetic autonomy can exist without a reified concept of music (as Hegel’s approach demonstrates), the process of canon formation demands the reification of the music it enshrines as canonic.

Rather than taking a swift turn towards a work-oriented aesthetics and practice around 1800, the early nineteenth century Western tradition still revolved around a general category of “music” that encompassed free improvisation and notated composition, as well as all the intermediate possibilities in between (i.e., improvised variations on a previously composed piece, paraphrases, concerti, including improvised cadenzas, and other popular forms that combined notated works with certain degree of freedom for the performer). Dahlhaus’s affirmation that “the concept ‘work’ is the “central category of music,” (quoted in Treitler 1989: 170) exemplifies the reductivist view of music that formed the basis of music scholarship since the middle of the

nineteenth century.⁸⁵

Both improvisation and works embodied the prevalent organicist aesthetics, according to which great art was supposed to spring from the imagination of a true artist naturally and spontaneously. Goehr expands Pater's remark concerning the aspiration of the other arts to the condition of music by saying that, "since 1800 . . . many disparate types of music have aspired to the condition of musical works" (Goehr 1992: 253). But, in the light of the preceding arguments, it would be more accurate to say that at the beginning of the nineteenth century all art aspired to the condition of *improvised* music.

Organisms, Machines, and Monsters: The Romantic Politics of Good Art

The sense of aesthetic autonomy that developed in the early nineteenth century was grounded on the organic paradigm. The autonomy of biological organisms was the preferred metaphor for conceptualizing the independence of artistic creations from mechanical and artificial means, as well as from instrumental considerations.⁸⁶ It also provided a means to conceive of artistic creations as unities that embodied the creative freedom of the genius without being chaotic. We saw earlier that freedom according to the organicist paradigm was equal to the subjection to organic laws, i.e., laws considered to be inherent to one's own nature, and not those imposed from the outside. The emergent

⁸⁵ Even an approach to the early Romantic period as nuanced as John Daverio's (1993) fails to challenge Dahlhaus's (and most traditional musicology's) assumption that "Western music" is reducible to a body of works. Daverio's indistinct use of the terms "music" and "works" is evident for example when he variously defines his project as answering the questions, "How did Romanticism manifest itself in music?" (1993: 1), and "How were the crucial strands of the Romantic program realized in musical works?" (ibid.: 2).

⁸⁶ "Instrumental" here does not refer to musical instruments, but is used in the sense of Adorno's critique of "instrumental reason," a notion that refers to a form of thought that operates in analogous manner to the capitalist form of production, that is to say, a form of thought exclusively guided by self-interest that translates into domination of nature and of other human beings. By using Adorno's terminology in this context I am purposefully drawing attention towards the connection of Adorno and other Frankfurt School thinkers to the critique of the rise of industrialization mounted by the early Romantics.

concept of aesthetic autonomy modeled after the organic meant, therefore, natural self-regulation and independence from external function.

This Romantic idea of organic autonomy was not identical to the aestheticist positions that, associated with a reified concept of work, became dominant in the latter part of the century. The retreat of composers into the “ivory tower” can be said to begin with Beethoven, the first composer who embodied the Romantic ideal of following only one's own inner voice, and who had the financial need to defend his authorship in a post-patronage era. But in the early nineteenth century the composer's retreat to find his inner voice meant not detachment from all other human concerns, but a way to rejoin them at a more essential level. Take for example the following passage: “What artist has ever troubled himself with the political events of the day anyway? He lived only for his art, and advanced through life serving it alone. But a dark and unhappy age has seized men with its iron fist, and the pain squeezes from them sounds that were formerly alien to them” (Hoffmann 1989: 111). This is not a poetic version of Adorno's assessment of early twentieth-century musical developments, but a fragment of E. T. A. Hoffmann's “Extremely Random Thoughts,” probably written in 1812, the year Beethoven composed his Seventh and Eighth symphonies.⁸⁷

Nor did the early Romantic concept of autonomous art imply the aestheticist tenet that the work of art is a self-enclosed and self-serving whole. The organicist thinking that influenced the Romantic movement rested on the belief of a metaphysical unity of the whole universe. If the work of art could be said by analogy to be an organism, it was because the universe was considered a supra-organism that encompassed and connected

all its constitutive parts. The autonomy of the work of art was thus a sign of its vital

⁸⁷ “Extremely Random Thoughts” was first published in *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* in 1814, and later published as part of Hoffmann's first book, *Kreiskleriana*. David Charlton mentions circumstantial evidence that Hoffmann was working on it in 1812 (Hoffmann 1989: 53).

connection with the Whole and, at the same time, of its independence from non-organic forces. And it was this organic connectedness and independence from the non-organic that guaranteed the sacredness of art.

Mary Shelley's literary fantasy about the pursuit of the dream of creating human life gone astray can be read as part of the Romantic preoccupation with the sanctity and inviolability of organic form. In her famous novel (1818), Dr. Frankenstein assembles his creature like a mechanical toy, and then infuses him with life. But whereas the mad scientist claims to have found "the secret of life," his method is in reality a mere mock imitation of life, and the end result is a monster, an aberration that brings about only tragic consequences. Shelley's fable thus expresses a fundamental axiom of the organicist paradigm: a mechanical assembling of parts does not result in the creation of a living organism.

But what Shelley presents is more than a confirmation of the impossibility of creating life by mechanical means, it is also a moral tale that reminds the reader of the dangers of even attempting it. Frankenstein's creature is "living" proof that this sort of project is an assault on the sanctity of life, and can only bring about aberration and ultimately destruction. In the context of organicist aesthetics the story also reads as an allegory of bad art. The attempt to create art by mere mechanical means can only result in a farcical imitation of true art. But in the early Romantic period this meant more than a practical reminder about bad artistic methods: it was a warning about the fatal effects of offering as true art something that comes from the lower spheres of industrial production. To imitate true art by mechanical means is dangerous because it seeks to offer as divine truth something that is not. Only genius can create true art, as only God can create life.

The sacrilegious project of assembling pieces to make a human being goes hand in

hand with another forbidden task --the dissection of human corpses in order to find the secret of life. This was a fundamental aspect of Dr. Frankenstein's research, a clandestine digging up of corpses which in the novel sets up from the outset the macabre and heretical undertones of his scientific experiments. In continuing with our analogy, the fable would have a related teaching: dissection--that is, analysis-- can never yield the secret of life, that is, the secret of (organic) great art. This aspect of organicist aesthetics was spelled out by Schumann in his review of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*: "Berlioz, who studied medicine in his youth, would hardly have dissected the head of a beautiful corpse more reluctantly than I dissect his first movement. And has my dissection achieved anything useful for my readers?" (in Dahlhaus 1967: 2).

The organic paradigm in Romantic aesthetics was not only a metaphysical reaction against Enlightenment rationalism, but it also embodied a cultural reaction against the traumatic effects of the industrial revolution on the social fabric. Coleridge's and Carlyle's readings of Herder's organicist theories, or of Novalis' distinction between "mechanical" and "dynamic" thinking, had the urgency of finding an intellectual and artistic form of resistance to the fragmentation, and hence dehumanization, imposed by the new division of labor. In the midst of a bleak reality denounced by numerous authors as stripping human beings of their humanity, good art constituted a realm of freedom and resistance against the new economic order.⁸⁸

An important impulse in English art and culture of the turn of the nineteenth

⁸⁸ This idea of art was first articulated in England, where the so-called Industrial Revolution first took hold. In Germany, as well as in other European countries and the United States, industrialization not only began later than in England, but it developed at a much slower pace. Around 1840 Continental countries were still slowly adopting and adapting to the revolution in the modes of production launched by England (see for example Lerner, Meacham, Burns 1993: 709f). Whereas the Romantic movement first flourished in Germany and then influenced England and other countries, English Romanticism and its reinterpretation of this movement in the light of a reaction against industrialization had in turn an impact on the German Romantics, who were increasingly aware of the changes gradually imposed in society by the new forms of production.

century, and later in many other European countries, was the defense of a special realm uncontaminated by the mechanization affecting negatively the lives of large sectors of the population. From the early years of the century English writers such as Robert Southey (1774-1843) and Robert Owen (1771-1858) denounced the brutal conditions and devastating effects of the "manufacturing system," criticism that became widespread some years later. Southey contrasted the old commerce-based economy to the new manufacturing system which, according to him, reduced human beings to machines and turned everything related to the workmen, such as their living quarters, into things of "unqualified deformity" which is "as offensive to the eye as to the mind" (quoted in Williams 1983: 24). For Southey, the physical and moral evil generated by this system affected not only the workers, but also their capitalist employers: "he who, at the beginning of his career, uses his fellow-creatures as bodily machines for producing wealth, ends not infrequently in becoming an intellectual one himself, employed in continually increasing what it is impossible for him to enjoy" (quoted in Williams 1983: 23). Owen, for his part, also compared the "happy simplicity of the agricultural peasant" to the evils raised by industrialization. In 1815 he wrote: "The general diffusion of manufactures throughout a country generates a new character in its inhabitants; and as this character is formed upon a principle quite unfavourable to individual or general happiness, it will produce the most lamentable and permanent evils, unless its tendency be counteracted by legislative interference and direction" (quoted in Williams 1983: 26).

Carlyle also complained about the pervasiveness of the mechanical mode:

Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also. . . . The same habit regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in

individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions--for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character (quoted in Williams 1983: 73).

Art became the paradigm of internal perfection and individual endeavor, and an expression of freedom in a world perceived as dominated by mechanical forces. In order for art to constitute a special realm uncontaminated by the laws of supply and demand, its production had to be as different as possible from industrial processes. In this sense, the claim that artistic products ought to be "natural," "organic," "spontaneous," and had to "grow" rather than being "made," participated in a movement of reaction against an oppressive and exploitative socio-economic order. Organic production was considered non-exploitative, since it resulted from putting into play the creative energies with which human beings were naturally endowed. What the work of art expressed did not depend on the logic of mass production, but on a higher realm above all human practical dealings. Autonomous art in this context was not conceived as a form of escapism, but as a form of resistance. John Daverio has stated in this regard: "The heady mixture of escapism and ecstasy that is still too often taken as a defining feature of the Romantic endeavor was in fact a surface phenomenon, an artful camouflage for a penetrating and carefully circumscribed societal critique that attempted to come to grips with the disquieting moments in an emerging modern world, thereby wresting from them a measure of value and hopefulness" (Daverio 1993: 2).⁸⁹

The idea of Romantic art as response to social problems generated by the

⁸⁹ By "Romantic" Daverio refers to the period usually defined as "early Romanticism." More concretely, he adapts the dates 1772-1829 proposed by Friedrich Schlegel (Daverio 1993: 3).

industrial revolution helps to understand the Romantic distinction between "high" and "low" art. In the first decades of the century, the idea of high art signified not an aestheticist detachment from all other human concerns, but a detachment from the sphere of industrial production and the social ills associated with it. In this sense, "high art," had a hidden affinity with the preindustrial artisanal world. Carlyle's complaints about the mechanical age did not prompt him to retreat into an intangible realm of essences, but led him to reflect on the lost world of the artisan, not as nostalgic escapism, but as means to criticize the present. For example, in an essay called *Signs of the Times* published in 1829, Carlyle denounced his epoch as being "not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age Nothing is now done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop, to make room for a speedier, inanimate one. The shuttle drops from the fingers of the weaver, and falls into iron fingers that ply it faster" (quoted in Williams 1983: 72).

This kind of invocation of a preindustrial artisanal world constitutes another aspect of the Romantic fascination with the Middle Ages.⁹⁰ The interest in Medieval times entailed more than a search for an Age of faith and mystery—it was also a look back to a preindustrial age idealized as a lost world in which artisans and peasants lived and worked in harmony with their own natures. Even an author like Southey, more interested in social reforms than in poetic images and little prone to idealize the past, commented: "Bad as the feudal times were, they were less injurious than these commercial ones to the

⁹⁰The Romantic appreciation of the preindustrial artisan differs from later Marxian formulations. Marx, whose first studies were written in the early 1840s, based his distinction of the artisan from the laborer in that the artisan was "master of his labor." But as Baudrillard noted, this distinction obscures the real difference between the two modes of production: "To define 'work' as a process of concrete labor, in opposition to industrial labor, is not enough. It is something other than labor" (Baudrillard 1975: 98). Hannah Arendt's distinction of labor, work, and action further clarifies this problem (Arendt 1998 [1958]).

kindly and generous feelings of human nature" (quoted in Williams 1983: 24). The Romantic Genius, as creator of organic art and hence as artifice of freedom, takes on the task of liberating humankind not only from post-Enlightenment epistemological limitations, but also from the dehumanization of industrial society. And in a typical Romantic reversal, in escaping the sphere of industrial production the heroic figure of the Genius was connected to the humble Medieval artisan, whose creations were also believed to be natural, organic, and pure.⁹¹

The Romantics were nevertheless particularly aware of the historical gap between the Middle Ages and their own times, and, in the light of the new historical consciousness, they saw themselves as a generation that had reached the highest level of self-consciousness in the course of history. Thus, the creativity of the romantic Genius partook of the organic nature of Medieval artisanship, but at the same time, it expressed a much more developed, historically conscious Self. And, in the context of the post-Enlightenment crisis discussed in chapter four, the Genius was not merely a "natural" talent, but also a seer, a spiritual guide in contact with and participating in the divine. It is as if being a pure and natural creator in the era of industrialization required a super-natural talent. With the harmony between Nature, Spirit, and Society broken, only someone born with superior creative faculties could escape from contemporaneous conditions and reestablish the original harmony through the product of his imagination.

The emergence of the concept of aesthetic autonomy in the early Romantic period had therefore a social role, albeit an indirect one. It was only later in the century that the

⁹¹ . As I will discuss later in more detail, we still find in Heidegger, writing well into the twentieth century, a nostalgic look to a preindustrial world of healthy and virtuous peasants reminiscent of the early nineteenth-century English writers we are discussing. Heidegger's reflections give also a glimpse into the connection existing between Romantic ideas and the triumph of national-socialism in Germany. Nazi appropriation of old German peasantry as nationalist symbol was at once an affirmation of the historical roots of the nation, and an expression of a populist ideal of agrarian resistance to industrialization and technology (see Cooper 1999: 240).

autonomy of the fine arts was conceived as completely detached from extra-artistic concerns. As Terry Eagleton remarked, the aesthetic became in the Romantic period the language of human solidarity. Referring to Schiller's concept of the aesthetic he writes, "Taste, with its autonomy, universality, equality and fellow-feeling, is a whole alternative politics, suspending social hierarchy and reconstituting relations between individuals in the image of disinterested fraternity" (Eagleton 1990: 111).

The link between art and politics was also manifested through the analogy between them provided by the organic metaphor, a central concept not only in aesthetics and philosophy but also in political theory. As Lovejoy put it, in the Romantic period "the 'idea of the Whole' came increasingly to mean, in its practical application, the idea of the political state" (Lovejoy 1965 [1941]: 98). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the predominant aesthetic and political notions of "whole" were based in the aggregation of parts, but in the nineteenth century the "whole" became an ideal of natural unity, necessary and unfettered by external rules. If in art this meant that greatness could not be the product of a mechanical putting together of parts, in the political realm this translated into an idea of nation distinguished from a mere adding of territories and peoples to a political state. The seamlessness, naturalness, and sanctity of the organic unity, seen in nature as well as in art, became a perfect metaphor to theorize the resistance to Napoleonic advances once his image of Romantic hero faded and was substituted by that of a foreign tyrant.⁹² The organic metaphor also symbolized the kind of national identity and political unity that many Europeans, and especially those

⁹² Beethoven's well-known change of mind with respect to the dedication of his Third Symphony bears witness of this shift in the perception of the French revolutionary turned into emperor. The *Eroica* was written in 1803 intended as a homage to Napoleon, but the following year when the news of Napoleon's self-proclamation as emperor of the French arrived, Beethoven torn the original dedication and replaced it with another one that reads ". . . to celebrate the memory of a great man."

belonging to the German-speaking world, aspired to at that time.⁹³

Yet, the development of nationalistic ideas, especially in the latter part of the century, departed in important ways from the organicism that inspired much of the artistic production of the early Romantic period. The development of the idea of nation as organic whole, for example, had little to do with the Romantic sublime and the aesthetic ideas of imperfection and fragmentation associated with it. As I have argued, the apparent incongruity between the emphasis on the idea of wholeness and, at the same time, on the fragmentary and imperfect, points to a deeper level at which contradictions are sublated in the context of the Romantic project of reaching a large-scale synthesis. The Romantic "Whole" was, in fact, a key concept in the Romantic attempt to harmonize opposite poles. For Schelling, the impulse to create art had its origin in the experience of contradiction: "It can only be the contradiction between the conscious and the unconscious in free action that sets the artistic impulse into motion, just as, once more, it can only be given to art to satisfy our infinite striving as well as to resolve the ultimate and most extreme contradiction in us" (quoted in Behler 1987: 207).

Artistic form was a medium through which the tension between fragment and whole, as well as between other related pairs of opposites, was explored. The concept of form did not necessarily collapse the tension but it often contained within itself a semblance of openness and ambiguity. In this sense, Charles Rosen writes concerning the Romantic musical Fragments that the most successful of them, "preserve the clearly defined symmetry and the balance of the traditional forms but allow suggestively for the possibility of chaos, for the eruption of the disorder of life" (Rosen 1995: 96). This

⁹³ An expression of the application of the organic metaphor to national identity was the importance given to language as natural demarcation of a nation's boundaries. Another, was the claim that natural frontiers such as rivers or mountains were an expression of a nation's organic unity and were opposed to artificially imposed ones.

tension is summarized in the following definition of Romantic style by Novalis: "to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar" (quoted in Rosen 1995: 98). The application of the organic metaphor to nationalist ideals yielded a model for a kind of unity that was "natural," self-regulated, and untouchable. But later in the century, and as part of the general abandonment of the Romantic project, this political model did not retain the balance between whole and fragment that had been central to Romantic organicism, and hardly allowed for the "possibility of chaos and the eruption of the disorder of life."⁹⁴

Works Are Not Things

If it is possible at all to speak of artworks as having social significance, it is because works are not things. For the early Romantics to make such a claim would have been unnecessary. It would have amounted to saying "organisms are not things," a redundant statement without explanatory force. But after several generations of formalist scholarship in music and the other arts, the claim is no longer self-evident and requires further elaboration. In fact, to draw attention to the non-thingness of artwork still has something of a revelatory tone in musical studies. This is the case, for instance, in Christopher Small's recent book *Musicking* (1998), in which the very title constitutes a forceful appeal to reckon with the true character of music.

Small points to a fundamental two-sided problem affecting contemporary discourses and practices within the Western classical tradition: the reduction of music to works, and the presumed 'thingness' of these works. He writes that, "What is valued is

⁹⁴ After 1848 when an intense process of nation-building began in the German-speaking territories as well as in many other parts of Europe. It was also after this date that the relationship between nationalism and liberal ideas switched considerably in Germany. The catalyst for this shift was the 1848 Frankfurt Assembly where the unification of Germany was debated.

not the action of art, not the act of creating, and even less that of perceiving and responding, but the created art object itself" (1998: 4). Small goes beyond a critique of this situation and proposes to think of Western music, and all musics, not as objects, but as the act of making music, as "musicking." By substituting the noun "music" with a verb, Small underscores the operational and processual nature of this art. The term "musicking" is also meant to encompass the act of listening, as well as other activities related to public music-making that make possible such events, thus emphasizing the vital connectedness of music to a larger spectrum of social and cultural practices.

Small's proposal resonates with the critique of the reification of art developed in late twentieth-century Continental philosophy. In his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1971) Martin Heidegger examined the mode of being of artworks, distinguishing it from that of things and equipment. In accordance with his philosophical move towards a fundamental ontology, he asks what are the *thingly* character of things, the *equipmental* character of equipment, and the *workly* character of works. Since it is possible to approach musical works, poems or a paintings as if they were objects--i.e., things that can be formally studied, stored, displayed, bought and sold--there is a risk of mistakenly taking this thingness for the mode of being of the work. Heidegger illustrates this by making the following comparison: "Beethoven's quartets lie in the storerooms of the publishing house like potatoes in a cellar" (1971: 19). But despite this "thingliness" artworks share with things, their artistic nature is something beyond this thingly substructure. And this artistic nature depends on the origin of a work of art which is, as Heidegger says, to have been created by an artist. At the same time, forming what he admits is an unavoidable circle, the work is the origin of the artist--an artist makes works of art, and works of art make the artist.

Heidegger's aesthetic reflections offer some important insights into the nature of works of art and constitute an effective critique of the formalist reification of works. On the one hand, he suggests that the creative process involved in the making of a work of art is a basic aspect of its true nature, and with this he draws attention to the importance of poetics (from "poiesis," to make) in the being of art. This realization shifts the emphasis of interpretation towards the process by which the work was shaped, and away from the final product. On the other hand, Heidegger's tenet that the workly character of works is manifested in their ability to "set up a world" (Heidegger 1971: 44) entails a refutation that the right attitude in front of artworks is contemplation. The ability of a work to "set up a world" means that every work of art effects an "unconcealedness of being," which in music would require the active participation of the listener in the act of understanding and interpreting this world. Heidegger, furthermore, underlines that this unconcealedness "is never a merely existent state, but a happening" (ibid.: 54).⁹⁵

This turn in contemporary philosophy--from the nominal to the verbal, and from object to event, and in short, its critique of formalism--invites a reevaluation of certain Romantics' ideas and attitudes about art that were lost during the latter part of the nineteenth century. With respect to improvisation this means that there is again a philosophical and aesthetic ground upon which this musical practice can be included along

⁹⁵ Terry Eagleton has argued that Heidegger's nostalgic look at a rapidly vanishing German peasantry around the turn of the century--evident for example in Heidegger's description of the peasants' shoes in Van Gogh's famous painting--is related to a strong critique of Enlightenment rationality, as well as to his reaction against the traumatic emergence of industrial capitalism (Eagleton 1990: 307 ff). In this context, and in relation to this particular painting, Heidegger's assertion that "art is truth setting itself to work" (Heidegger 1971: 39), has a concrete and clear meaning. But Heidegger's ontological claims concerning "truth" and "unconcealedness" in art leave the door open to a number of conflicting and conflictive interpretations. It is not surprising, for instance, that Adorno was deeply suspicious of Heidegger's ontological turn and refused to follow him in this development. Heidegger's brief association with Nazism is not proof that this ontological orientation was necessarily compliant with this ideology, but it does prove that his thought was at best ambiguous enough so as not to prevent him from that association. His ontological turn, however, has influenced important developments in contemporary philosophy, such as the hermeneutic aesthetics of Gadamer and Ricoeur (discussed in this chapter), and Derrida's deconstruction which entails a radicalization of Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics.

with works in theoretical approaches to music. In fact, once the formalist assumption that a work is a thing has been challenged, there is no longer a basis on which to maintain a sharp difference between improvisation and works. From the point of view of poetics and aesthetics of reception improvisation and works are just two aspects of musical creativity.⁹⁶ It is not by accident that Gadamer, like Hegel, chose the example of improvised music to illustrate some basic points of his reflections on the nature of art (see p. 291).

Gadamer's reflections on the nature of art continue Heidegger's ontological and phenomenological approach. For Gadamer the fundamental character of art is *play*. This idea allows Gadamer to overcome the traditional subject/object dichotomy in aesthetics. For Gadamer, aesthetic experience cannot be adequately defined as a subject contemplating an object, but rather, it is like a game in which the "player" submits to the structuring proposed by the game itself. In this sense, Gadamer says, the game is the proper subject of the activity, and not an object that is passively contemplated. Similarly, the player is not the contemplative subject anymore. By playing the game proposed by the work, it is he or she who is being "played."

To be sure, the application of the concept of "play" to reflection on art had already had an important role in Western aesthetics before Gadamer. The concept of play was particularly relevant in Schiller's philosophy, which had an enormous influence in German idealism and Romanticism and in nineteenth-century German culture in general. For Schiller, the "play impulse" constituted a third realm between freedom and nature, a realm where the mediation between the other two could be attained. The cultivation of

⁹⁶ Poetics and aesthetics of reception are not the only common grounds for improvisation and works. Both can also be approached from a common formal perspective, insofar "formal" and "form" are redefined phenomenologically. I will come back to this point in part II of this chapter.

this play impulse was the key for his proposal of an aesthetic education. It was “play” and its mediating capabilities which for Schiller ensured a realm of freedom against “mechanistic” society. The importance of this concept in the emergence of an idea of aesthetic autonomy, therefore, supports the dissociation between the early concept of aesthetic autonomy and a reified concept of work.

Gadamer’s concept of work as play connects, therefore, with Schiller’s aesthetics in important ways, especially with regard to the idea of art as locus of the mediation of reality and the idea of the aesthetic as a realm that has certain autonomy. But Gadamer’s elaboration of the concept of play departs from the subjective meaning this concept had in Schiller’s (and Kant’s) aesthetics: “When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself” (Gadamer 1999: 101). And the mode of being of the work, independently of the consciousness of the “subjects,” is not an objective one, but a “medial” one, a to-and-fro movement, a process that takes place “in between.” In this sense, the being of the game is not in the player’s consciousness or attitude. Rather, the “player” experiences the game as something that surpasses him or her and, at the same time, the player complements the nature of the game. In other terms, the spectator does not merely contemplate a play, but in engaging it he or she makes the play complete (Gadamer 1999: 109).

Gadamer, thus, reintroduces the concept of “play” in aesthetic theory by means of a hermeneutical reflection of its mode of being, not an idealistic one.⁹⁷ This move beyond Romantic subjectivism exemplifies the ways in which contemporary hermeneutic

⁹⁷ Gadamer draws here from Johann Huizinga’s anthropological investigation of play across cultures (see Gadamer 1999: 104).

and phenomenological discourse can retrieve important aspects of Romantic aesthetic theory without reproducing some of its problems. Work-as-play is a sound starting point to theorize the cultural relevance of art in general because it solves the problem of the false dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity in aesthetics. As for musical discourse itself, it provides a productive ground from which to reflect on music taking into consideration its basic nature as activity and performance. One such project is that of Christopher Small, who knows what is at stake when discourse on music gets trapped in the false objective/subjective dilemma: “There is a broad gap between ‘purely objective’ and ‘purely subjective,’ and it is in that gap that human freedom and creativity live” (Small 1998: 55).

PART II: PLAY AS WORK

The Riddle of the Unpredictable Whole

According to the concept of work as play, the concert life of the beginning of the nineteenth century allowed for the possibility of disorder and chaos that Rosen recognized in Romantic musical fragments (see quote on p. 276). Musical pieces were beginning to be considered then as works of art valuable in themselves. But in practice, as well as in theory, this new sense of autonomy did not translate into an idea of the work as an object-like fixed structure, and works were treated with far more flexibility and openness than the practice that became customary a few decades later. Improvisation was often an integral part of a work, conferring an immediacy and unpredictability on musical performances; this spontaneity/unpredictability, as we saw earlier, became a main target of the criticisms of later critics and musicologists. In the early nineteenth

century, the public cherished the unpredictable character of improvised performances and, in general, of public concerts which often were staged in less than formal venues. The experiences elicited by the element of unpredictability in public concerts ranged from the quasi-mystical states reached by listeners of improvisations by Beethoven or Chopin, to the excitement of witnessing the musical risks taken by Paganini or Liszt, to the sheer merriment caused by unexpected events occurring in the course of a performance.

I have referred to the first two kinds of Romantic experiences in previous chapters. As for the third, consider for example the following narration by Louis Spohr of a public concert given by the then-famous violinist Boucher, whose artistic persona can be described just by mentioning that he used to advertise himself as "le Napoléon des violons."⁹⁸ Boucher was a colorful character who did not hesitate in exercising his self-appointed imperial prerogatives, and for example would stop the orchestra in the middle of a performance so as to repeat a passage that he had not played well. On one occasion, Boucher was playing a rondo of his own composition that ended with an improvised cadenza, the concert was running late and the musicians grew tired and impatient. Then,

when the cadence in which Boucher as usual exhibited all his artistic tours de force seemed never likely to end, some of the gentlemen put their instruments into their cases and slipped out. This was so infectious, that in a few minutes the whole orchestra had disappeared. Boucher, who in the enthusiasm of his play had observed nothing of this, lifted his foot already at the commencement of his concluding shake, in order to draw the attention of the orchestra and the burst of applause it was to bring down from the enraptured audience. His astonishment may therefore be imagined when all that fell upon his ear was the loud stamp of his own foot. Horrified he stared aghast around him, and beheld all the music desks abandoned. But the public, who had already prepared themselves to see this moment arrive, burst out into an uproarious laughter, in which Boucher, with the best stomach he could, was obliged to join (Spohr 1878,

⁹⁸ Reportedly, Boucher bore a striking resemblance to Napoleon, which he exploited in his public appearances, but, in any case, he would also refer to himself as "le *Alexander* des violons." The concert Spohr mentions took probably place in Lille, France, ca. 1820.

To be sure, the concert just described was less than ideal for more “serious” musicians like Spohr himself, who by then had begun a sort of crusade in favor of the music of the three masters, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. The performances of Beethoven’s string quartets by Spohr and other like-minded musicians, for example, were intended as dignified occasions whose high aesthetic significance demanded an attitude of respect and concentration.⁹⁹ The anecdote narrated by Spohr and similar ones could be simply attributed to the eccentricity of certain individuals, and to the amateurism of the orchestra musicians. But both eccentricity and amateurism constituted integral parts of the musical life of the early nineteenth century, not just sporadic occurrences at the margins of more “serious” music-making. When this state of affairs is understood not as disorderly early stages of a necessary evolution, but as a music culture in its own right, it yields important information about forgotten aspects of the Western musical tradition.

That the public concert life of the time accommodated eccentricity and amateurism indicates a social practice congruent with the Romantic aesthetics of infinite possibilities and endless states of flux. Both the practice and the aesthetic ideas, disorderly and formless according to later standards, rested on a clear concept of musical whole. But what kind of whole was this? What concept of wholeness would allow for the unpredictable? The answer to these questions was given in the first half of the nineteenth century by philosophers as well as by music theoreticians: The Romantic musical whole

⁹⁹ In his autobiography Spohr is much more interested in highlighting the “serious” occasions such as the performances of works of the composers just mentioned and of his own works, than on less solemn musical events. Without taking anything from the fact that it was at this time when the separation between “serious” and “popular” music was emerging, we should not underestimate the fact that when Spohr (1784-1859) writes his memories at the end of his career the musical world was undergoing dramatic changes, and it is highly probably that--consciously or unconsciously--he was reading his own life and his role in the history of music under the new high-art ideal.

was a temporal whole.

The propensity to equate the concept of whole with spatial forms is understandable given that the sense of completeness signified by this concept is much more easily grasped when it refers to spatial forms. Spatial categories are thus a common departure point for discussions on wholeness and unity because it provides a clear mental picture of the topic at hand. Hegel himself, despite his emphasis on temporality, wrote: “we may compare melody, as an essentially self-contained and self-supported whole, to plastic sculpture; in the more detailed characterization of painting we shall find an analogous type to that of musical declamation” (in Lippmann 1988: 154). But he soon restricted the import of his comparison by adding that “what constitutes the essential principle of music is the ideality of the soul-life” (ibid.), and this is the characteristic that for him enables the musical art to “annihilate the conditions of Space entirely” (Hegel 1991 [1835], vol. 1: 87, see complete quote on p. 251).

It is because the Romantic musical whole is conceived as temporal, that Carl Czerny can define an improvisation as a “magnificent whole.” In his treatise on improvisation, at the beginning of the chapter on “Freer improvisation on several themes” he writes that with this improvisatory form, the musician,

can give free rein to his flights of fancy (albeit in rational form); and unexpected, interesting motives that are both arresting as well as useful frequently enter the fingers while playing. Moreover, in this realm of improvisation the performer’s momentary mood . . . can be expressed in the most abandoned manner; and *there is perhaps no form more capable of placing together and expanding the image of the inner life and the esthetic disposition into a magnificent whole.* For here, both the fully whimsical caprice as well as the discipline of a regular composition must be avoided (Czerny 1983 [1836]: 74, my emphasis).

The fact that Czerny calls a “magnificent whole” to a type of musical creation that defies

the “discipline of a regular composition” makes also evident that in his time musical form could be conceived without resorting to the kind of fixed structure on which later formalist approaches were based.¹⁰⁰

Hans-Georg Nägeli a music theoretician considered by Lippmann to be an early formalist, also defined musical form in ways akin to those of Czerny. Nägeli emphasized the temporal experience of listening to music and criticized the application of visual principles to explain music for this “results in overlooking its specific nature” (in Lippmann 1992: 297). And music’s nature is also for him essentially play, “a play of anticipation, transition, and deception” (ibid.). But when form is conceived in such temporal terms, the approach that can be said to derive from this concept is of a very different kind than that which is usually associated with Hanslick and the formalist musicological tradition that he helped to launch.¹⁰¹

The basic difference is that the concept of “whole” implied in Nägeli, as well as in Czerny, Hegel, and other philosophers and music theorists of the time, is a temporal whole. And this is why it is compatible with a sense of unpredictability. Spatiality is in fact what eliminates the unpredictable from the idea of wholeness. All the elements that constitute a spatial whole are at once integrated into the final unity. All the integrant parts are foreseen because all of them are seen. But strictly speaking, to “foresee” an aspect of a spatial whole is meaningless precisely because the prefix “fore” implies a temporal dimension that is absent from the spatial whole. Equally meaningless is to speak of predictability or unpredictability with respect to the parts of a spatial whole: to

¹⁰⁰ Czerny’s ideas on this matter are particularly relevant in the context of the musical practice in the German-speaking countries of the early nineteenth century. As we would recall, Czerny (1791-1859) was a pupil of Beethoven and Liszt’s teacher, and had been called by Chopin “the oracle of Vienna” for his influence on musical matters. His treatise on improvisation was published in 1836.

¹⁰¹ Lippman rightfully notes that Nägeli’s formalism is not rigorously anti-Romantic. I would take this observation farther and affirm that Nägeli’s approach is not rigorously “formalist,” not in the prevalent sense of formalism, which is identified with later post-Hanslick developments as discussed in chapter six.

predict means to say something about something before it happens, and in a spatial whole all its parts “happen” at the same time.

Organicism has often been associated with teleological processes. From the seed to the full development of the plant, or from the birth of an animal to the end of its life, organisms have a finite and in some fundamental ways predictable life. It is inherent to organic forms to be subject to a predetermined development that becomes the form. How is it possible, then, that the organic, bound by immutable natural laws, was an aesthetic paradigm for the Romantics, given their exaltation of freedom and spirit? How could an improvisation be like an organism, if it was unpredictable? How could the dialectic between spirit and nature be weighted on the side of spirit, if even the most free of human endeavors--art--was also subjected to the natural realm of necessity? The Romantic response to these problems was not a simple equation of freedom and eternal law, i.e., the tenet that good art is free because it reproduces eternal forms, as later formalist positions rooted in a Platonic tradition would have it. Rather, the Romantic response was itself dialectical, providing an understanding of spirit as part of nature, but also of nature as ultimately spiritual. This way, to be organic meant to participate in the life of spirit and, therefore, to be free from the mechanical world artificially created by humans, as well as from the mechanical aspects of nature itself.¹⁰²

Herder's thoughts on music epitomize the Romantic dialectics between eternal laws and transitoriness:

Transient, therefore, is every moment of this art and must be so: for precisely the briefer and longer, stronger and weaker, higher and lower,

¹⁰² Not even this key opposition between the organic and the mechanical was left by without an attempt to reconcile them. Schelling in his theory of Nature established a sort of continuum between them--mechanic laws are necessary for Nature to realize its work, i.e., the production of the organic. This way, the opposition the mechanic and the organic disappears. Schelling's theory, however, is still thoroughly organicist, for what makes possible the continuum between those two spheres is the idea that Nature at large constitutes an organic whole (see for instance Copleston 1994: 110ff).

more and less is its meaning, its impression. In arrival and flight, in becoming and having been, lies the conquering force of tone and of sensation. Just as the one and the other fuse with many, rise, sink, and are submerged, and on the taut line of harmony, in accordance with eternal, indissoluble laws, again rise up and act anew, so my heart, my courage, my love and hope (quoted in Lippman 1992: 209).

Transient and eternal, music was for the Romantics the most perfect representation of the essence of human lives. And as human lives, music constituted wholes which were nevertheless graced and burdened by an intrinsic sense of the unpredictable.

Does Art Need Works?

The idea that the character of play is the common anthropological foundation of improvisation and works renders baseless a radical separation of the two.

Ethnomusicologists have in general been more aware of this phenomenon than musicologists. Mantle Hood found it inappropriate to establish such a radical separation while studying several musical traditions of southeast Asia. He cites for instance the high degree of fixidity of the improvised musical practice known as "filling in," the importance of memory in this creative process, and its susceptibility to being documented and described. His conclusion is that "the fine line between improvisation and composition may be difficult to establish and that possibly, in some instances, such a line may not even exist" (Hood 1975: 26).

Bruno Nettl has also reached a similar conclusion when investigating the difference between composition and improvisation from the point of view of the creative process. He notes that from the perspective of notation, these are not two well differentiated activities: in oral music cultures there can also be a distinction between improvised and

composed music, the only difference being the suddenness of inspiration. Similarly, he observes that in Western art, music composers can write either meticulously and slowly, or following a sudden inspiration. As a consequence, he asks: "Should we not then speak perhaps of rapid and slow composition rather than of composition juxtaposed to improvisation?" (Nettl 1974: 6). Among many other insightful views on the topic of improvisation, Nettl suggests that works and improvisations are part of a continuum in musical activity ranging from high determinacy to high indeterminacy (ibid.). In this sense, improvised music would tend toward the pole of high indeterminacy-- not total indeterminacy, since traditional improvisational practices were always based on a certain musical idiom. Furthermore, the performance of a thoroughly notated work would tend towards the pole of low indeterminacy--not total determinacy since, despite what is fixed in the score, every performance and every listening experience is different.

The idea of a continuum between compositions and improvisation is in accordance with the concept of work as play. But this continuum also suggests the possibility of regarding improvisations--and all kinds of musics outside the Western art tradition-- as works. This argument could not be made if "work" is conceived in narrowly formalist terms, but only if musical coherence and unity are considered as fundamentally temporal. On the basis of this understanding it is possible to speak of all kinds of music as "works" *qua* configured temporal wholes.

But why would we want to take such theoretical step? Why would we want to retain the notion of "work," once "play" has been identified as the basic category to which both compositions and improvisations belong? Would it not be better to approach music just from the perspective of the broad category of play, thus avoiding the problems attached to the strong association of the concept "work" with narrow formalist

assumptions? If the concept of “work” can still be a productive one it is because it designates a creative activity that produces determinate meanings through music, and it provides a basis for the identification, interpretation, and judgment of music.¹⁰³ When such a basis is missing, it is difficult to account for the richness of individual and collective meanings embodied by and negotiated through music. Without that basis of identification it is also difficult to theorize the independence that (to a certain extent) music has with respect to the contexts within which it is created.

Gadamer's concept of work as play frees works of art from the reification common to formal and positivistic approaches. But, at the same time, it also escapes a radical subjectivistic stance by virtue of which the "thingness" of the work would disappear at the expense of losing all sight of the work's unity and identity. The sense of art's autonomy defended by Gadamer is grounded in the concept of the representation of play as "the transformation into structure" (1999: 110). It is only as such transformation that "the play--even the unforeseen elements of improvisation-- is fundamentally repeatable and hence permanent. It has the character of a work, of an *ergon* and not only of *energeia*" (Gadamer 1999: 110). With the term "*ergon*," Gadamer refers to its classic meaning, which for Aristotle is the element in the Greek tragedy that brings about catharsis. "Work," understood as "*ergon*," is a meaningful self-representing structure. This concept includes not only the works of art of traditional aesthetics such as a painting or a symphony, but also a ritual, a theatrical performance, or a musical improvisation.

In order to be useful in contemporary non-formalist approaches, therefore, the

¹⁰³ Of course, to retain the term “work” is not essential. The same concept could perhaps be expressed by a term such as “creation.” Gadamer: "In order therefore to avoid all false connotations, we should replace the word "work" by the word "creation." This means, for example, that the transitory process in which the flow of speech rushes past comes to stand within the poem in a mysterious fashion and becomes a creation" (1986: 33).

concept of work must be differentiated from the reification and isolation with which it has been associated since the late nineteenth century. It also needs to be accredited with a true anthropological significance by considering it as process and action rooted in culture. It is on the basis of this anthropological significance of art as play that Gadamer has defined work as "the focal point of recognition and understanding" in the aesthetic experience (1986 [1967]: 26). He employs improvisation again to exemplify this:

Let us take the case of an organ improvisation. This unique improvisation will never be heard again. The organist himself hardly knows afterwards just how he played, and no one transcribed it. Nevertheless, everyone says, 'That was a brilliant interpretation or improvisation,' or on another occasion, 'That was rather dull today.' What do we mean when we say such things? Obviously we are referring back to the improvisation. Something 'stands' in front of us; it is *like* a work and not just an organist's finger exercise. otherwise we should never pass judgment on its quality or lack of it (1986 [1967]: 25, my emphasis).

Gadamer calls the identity of this kind of work a "hermeneutic identity," and it is this identity that constitutes the unity and the meaning of the work: "to understand something, I must be able to identify it I identify something as it was or as it is, and this identity alone constitutes the meaning of the work" (ibid.).

In sum, a main reason for maintaining the idea of "musical work" is that this notion refers to the property of music to be identifiable and understandable as a unity created by an individual or individuals in a particular context. The idea of the work as an identifiable unity, therefore, need not be antithetical to openness or to the fleeting character of an improvisation. In this sense Gadamer states that "the identity of the work is not guaranteed by any classical or formalist criteria, but is secured by the way in which we take the construction of the work upon ourselves as a task" (Gadamer 1986: 28). The idea of unity in a musical improvisation or a work cannot be separated from

their representation (“the play of the playing”), since it is in its representation that the unity and identity of a structure emerge (Gadamer 1999: 110ff). Form, therefore, does not depend on a static structure, but on a “structuring” achieved through representation. This is the reason why for Gadamer the idea of work of art is inseparable from the contingent conditions within which it exists: “The work of art cannot simply be isolated from the ‘contingency’ of the chance conditions in which it appears, and where this kind of isolation occurs, the result is an abstraction that reduces the actual being of the work. It itself belongs to the world to which it represents itself” (ibid.: 116).

Paul Ricoeur’s investigation into the nature of the “whole” constitutive of literary texts and, by extension, of works in general is an important contribution to a redefinition of form beyond formalism. The notion of emplotment is key for his approach to literary works. Emplotment is for him the operation of eliciting a configuration from a mere succession of discreet events. At this level, to configure means to make the succession of events into significant wholes, so that these events can be grasped together. For Ricoeur, a whole constitutes a synthetic unity, so that, though it contains diversity, it has a recognizable single identity. This identity cannot be translated into an abstract schema. In other words, “identity” does not entail here the reduction of the heterogeneous events within the whole to a homogeneous, static, ultimately atemporal unity. The identity of the whole, on the contrary, is temporal itself. And it is the configuration of the diverse events into a meaningful unity that makes the whole followable. “Followability” is, of course, a temporal category, and differs radically from the kind of instant grasp of a static musical structure that formal analyses have usually postulated.

Since the end of a story is essential to the understanding of the story as a whole, the type of ending is in itself central to the configurational operation. The relevance of

the ending is so preeminent that according to Ricoeur, ". . . the paradigms of composition in Western tradition are at the same time paradigms of endings . . ." (Ricoeur 1985: 20). Accordingly, the crisis of the ways of ending is parallel to the crisis of narration itself. This is why the question of the possibility of configuring different types of wholes is inseparable from the question about the possibility of different types of endings. For Ricoeur the question of the typology of plots (which is at the heart of questions about different types of narratives and of endings) is most important. A reflection on the typology of plots, in turn, is inseparable from a reflection on the "mutability of emplotment," that is to say, on the extent to which emplotment can be altered without losing its identity. For Ricoeur this reflection is "an urgent task" because it would help to disentangle the problematic identification between certain specific types of plot and the notion of plot itself (Ricoeur 1985: 4).

If the temporal whole is governed by its ending, does this mean that all temporal wholes imply a teleological sense of time? Or, if a teleological sense is not implied, can we still have temporal wholes governed by an ending? In sum, is it possible to configure temporal wholes without relying on a teleological concept of time? Dogmatic interpretations of Aristotle's poetic rules, Ricoeur observes, have resulted in narrow views of plot. According to this views, plot "could only be conceived of as an easily readable form, closed in on itself, symmetrically arranged in terms of an ending, and based on an easily identifiable causal connection between the initial complication and its denouement; in short, as a form where the episodes would clearly be held together by the configuration" (Ricoeur 1985: 9). This teleological concept of plot is reminiscent of formalistic approaches to musical unity. But for Ricoeur, this simplistic view of plot is not required in order to have a temporal whole.

The central requirement for the conclusion of a story is for Ricoeur not its being predictable, but its being acceptable (Ricoeur 1981: 277). He recognizes that the conclusion is the pole of attraction that guides us through reading and, therefore, the movement of our expectations through the story is somewhat teleologically guided.

These expectations are essential to follow the story:

What seems unsurpassable in the last analysis is the reader's expectation that some form of consonance will finally prevail. This expectation implies that not everything will be a peripeteia, otherwise peripeteia itself becomes meaningless, and our expectation of order would be totally frustrated. . . . We have to expect some form of order if we are to be deceived when we do not find it (Ricoeur 1985: 25).

There is, therefore, some sense of *telos* implied insofar as the sense of an implicit ending is what guides us through a story meaningfully. What sense can we make of a book we haven't finished?

The model of plot set forth by Homer's *Odyssey* seems to me to shed light on the difference between an implicit sense of *telos* that gives meaning to a story, and the idea of teleology as the necessary outcome of a series of necessary steps. Ulysses's peripeteia is teleological in the sense that it is always oriented towards the arrival in Ithaca. However, the final arrival is only meaningful if the difficulties, delays, temptations to abandon, and the overcoming of all those obstacles are considered. The story is not the story of being in Ithaca but the story of the journey towards Ithaca. In one sense the journey is what is important, but, at the same time, the journey would be meaningless without the constant orientation towards, and anticipation of reaching a goal. It is significant that the final arrival and reunion of Ulysses with Penelope are not essential to the story. Had Ulysses never reached the final coast his story would still hold as a meaningful whole, for the expectation of an ending was always there, illuminating with meaning every step of the

journey. The reader would have probably been frustrated, but this would not take anything from the meaningfulness of the story, because it was read with some expectations in mind.

In sum, it is not a predictable end that makes the story a temporal whole, but the immanent sense of possible endings that are confirmed or denied in the conclusion of the story. The idea of *telos* refers to the orientation towards the end, but this does not necessarily mean that the only important part of a story is its ending towards which all the episodes are directed. The ending renders meaningful the events of a story as much as those events make meaningful the ending. Without some kind of closure, the work would not be intelligible as a whole. But closure does not "enclose" meaning, rather, by making us understand the events we have followed as a whole, it opens the possibility to reflect on and interpret such a whole. Understood this way, closure fixes the meaning of the text only in the sense that not every interpretation of a text is possible. At the same time, closure opens the space of the possible meanings without imposing one among them. Closure in Ricoeur's theory is not the same as concordance. Closure is one element of emplotment, and emplotment, Ricoeur states, "is never the simple triumph of 'order'" (Ricoeur 1984: 73).¹⁰⁴

What does this mean in the context of our discussion of improvisation as an example of play-as-work? Two main things: First, it means that if we can consider an improvisation or a performance as a work, it is because they constitute temporal wholes. Secondly, it means that to be able to follow an improvisation is compatible with its unpredictability. Expectation gives meaning to the unfolding of a performance, but to anticipate is not the same as to predict. In other words, it is possible to have a sense of

¹⁰⁴ See Ricoeur's concept of "concordant discordance" (1984: 43ff).

temporal unity without conceiving of form as a closed and fixed whole.

Autonomy and Ideology

Many of the arguments presented so far have, from various perspectives, highlighted the break that took place in the Western tradition from a musical world that included improvisation to a musical world that excluded it. An underlying theme running through all these arguments is the loss not only of that particular practice, but also of a non-formalist, quasi-phenomenological way of approaching music. In particular, the present chapter has addressed the question of autonomy, and I have argued that in the early nineteenth century there functioned some sense of autonomy that was compatible with both the practice of improvisation and a non-reified concept of musical whole.

But in suggesting that there was a different concept of aesthetic autonomy in the early Romantic period I am not proposing a clear-cut scheme: a “good,” phenomenological, non-ideological Romantic autonomy, and a “bad,” formalistic, ideological post-Romantic autonomy. In the context of my overall argument, this scheme could be understood as implying the association between a “Romantic autonomy” and improvisation on the one hand, and, on the other, the association between a “formalist autonomy” and works. But such a simplistic reading would be a mere inversion of former problems and would therefore reproduce them in disguise. Despite the dramatic changes music and culture underwent around 1850, a symphony by Brahms is not more freighted with ideological implications than a symphony by Beethoven, or for that matter, than a Beethoven improvisation. Similarly, a Brahms symphony is no less autonomous (in a hermeneutical sense) than a Beethoven improvisation or, for that matter, than a

Beethoven symphony.

To be sure, not all was the same on the two sides of the divide I have traced, and shedding some light on the distinction in theory and practice between the earlier and latter parts of the nineteenth century remains one of the main objectives of this dissertation. I have argued that after 1850, the drive towards canonization and institutionalization, the impact of scientific ideology, and the strong nationalistic currents affected in significant ways the creation, performance, reception, and theorization of Western music. To miss the uniqueness of these circumstances is to collapse the meaning of the whole Western tradition with these historically-dependent and, in many ways, exceptional developments. But at the same time, to draw attention to the ideological makeup of the reaction against improvisation and Romantic aesthetics in general should not obscure the fact that the latter are not free either from ideological implications.

To propose an inversion of the prevalent emphasis on works, suggesting instead that improvisation is for the musician the realm of true expression and true freedom while works are ideological constructs imposed from above (i.e., from an institutionalized mainstream), would mean perhaps a refreshing change, but it would not get to the core of the problems at stake. In fact, such a Romantic praise of improvisation would be reminiscent of Rousseau's privileging of speech over writing, famously deconstructed by Derrida (1967). Derrida shows how Rousseau's arguments are organized around a series of oppositions (presence/absence, speech/writing, liberty/servitude), and that Rousseau always gives priority to the pole of presence, which is often the pole of speech and liberty.

For Derrida, the oppositions found in Rousseau, as well as the consistent privileging of one of their two terms on the side of "presence," has been a constant in

Western philosophy. As Michel Haar states in his discussion of the Derridean reading of Nietzsche,

Nietzsche, just like Plato and Rousseau--in an entirely metaphysical manner--theoretically conceives of writing qua style as a pale imitation, an attenuated replica or copy (*Abbild*) of the aesthetic state, of *Stimmung* and of gestures, of the live voice and of the present 'passion', which is to say, of the deployment of energy of someone speaking. Writing, in a word, would only be the *image* of a force (Haar 1992: 58).

This emphasis on speech and the concurrent conception of writing as its "pale imitation" embodies what Derrida denounced as the illusion of the metaphysics of presence.¹⁰⁵ In *Of Grammatology* Derrida made the claim that the philosophical privileging of speech over writing ("phonocentrism") resulted in creating the illusion that speech, unlike writing, was unmediated and put forth a meaning that is "present" and springs directly from the speaker's inwardness. If in spoken language meaning is present, the lack of presence in writing is nothing but a sign of its distance from speech. This creates, consequently, another illusion--that of believing that the more perfectly writing imitates spoken language, the more it is able to represent presence.

A basic analogy can be established between the opposition speech/writing and improvised music/fully notated works.¹⁰⁶ This in fact has been a common reference in approaches to improvisation. Carl Czerny, for one, in his treatise on improvisation elaborated in detail on the comparison, which he justified as follows:

As soon as the performer sits down before a larger gathering and generally to improvise in front of an audience, he can be compared with an orator who strives to develop a subject as clearly and exhaustively as possible on the spur of the moment. In point of fact, so many principles of oratory

¹⁰⁵ Haar argues, however, that Derrida's deconstruction of Nietzsche is particularly nuanced and generous and, in the end, that Derrida spares Nietzsche from the painstaking deconstruction of the 'metaphysics of presence' he undertakes in other philosophers such as Heidegger (see Haar 1992: 53).

¹⁰⁶ To be sure, the comparison between music and language in general is not without problems. Arguably, the analogy between improvisation and spoken language participates of the same theoretical limitations.

correspond with those of musical improvisation that it is not inappropriate to venture the comparison (Czerny 1983 [1836]: 42).

In light of this analogy, Hegel's praise of improvisation would constitute a claim associated with the phonocentric illusion denounced by Derrida: a claim thoroughly consistent with the Western metaphysical tradition. And, in light of the Romantic theory of music as the most valuable art because of its ineffability, improvisation can be regarded as the most perfect expression of the illusion of immediacy.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, the Romantic attempt to create the appearance of improvisation in written works could be interpreted as an example of Derrida's "phonetic writing," that is to say, writing that imitates speech. According to Derrida, "phonetic writing" was the solution given by philosophers such as Rousseau to the problem of writing to argue the superiority of speech. If many Romantic musical works can be understood as what Haar calls "the image of a force" (quoted above) because they imitate improvisation, they would be, following a Derridean approach, but the image of an *illusory* force--the image of the illusion of immediacy. Romantic works, therefore, insofar as they are imitations of improvisation, are doubly illusory. If in the Platonic myth art is the shadow of a shadow, in Romantic aesthetics musical works are also the shadow of a shadow. But, drawing from Derrida, this last shadow (improvisation) would not be a real shadow in the sense of an image cast by a real presence, but a mere ghost or--in less Romantic terms--a hologram.

Would such deconstructive reading of Romantic improvisation alter in any way the assessment of the post-Romantic critiques of Romanticism delineated in previous

chapters? In my view, no, because the various anti-Romantic stances we discussed

¹⁰⁷ The philosophical praise for speech over writing, as in Rousseau, is of course made *in writing*. Likewise, the praise of improvisation in Romantic authors is made by means of writing. But with the latter case, the irony is double: it not only functions at the level of writing to say that speech is higher than writing, but also at the level of making philosophical arguments to demonstrate the superiority of art. In Hegel, however, the irony does not hold on this second level since he makes abundantly clear that philosophy is much more relevant than art to the culture of his time.

targeted other aspects of Romantic aesthetics, not their illusion of immediacy. Just as the import of Schopenhauer's critique of Hegelianism was greatly reduced by Schopenhauer's own metaphysical allegiances, the Neoromantics' and formalists' critiques of Romantic aesthetics were limited by their own investment in transcendence. The departure from Romanticism, therefore, implied the loss of the practice of improvisation and of an incipient phenomenological understanding of music, but left untouched the metaphysical fog through which the Romantics had mediated their aesthetic and political aspirations

Furthermore, the Neoromantic reaction against Romanticism could also be interpreted in the light of Derrida's argument, since the substitution of a (Romantic) "phonocentric" ideal by a (Neoromantic) "logocentric" one did not challenge in any way the illusion of immediacy of phonocentrism. As Madan Sarup remarks, "Derrida cautions us that when we learn to reject the notion of the primacy of the signified (of meaning over word) we should not satisfy our longing for transcendence by giving primacy to the signifier (word over meaning)" (Sarup 1989: 48).¹⁰⁸ The Neoromantic and formalist critiques of Romanticism seem to have done just that: these critiques constituted a reaction against ambiguity and vagueness of the Romantic language and the ideal of improvisation, but the longing for transcendence was still very much in place, and the primacy given to notation and concrete meanings did not challenge the illusion of immediacy in any way.¹⁰⁹

Is it just holograms all the way down then?¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ This is what constitutes the core of Derrida's critique of Lacan.

¹⁰⁹ As we saw throughout chapters six and seven, formalists and Neoromantics dealt differently with this longing for transcendence. Formalists emphasized the signifier over the signified, defending that music structure was the only real "substance" of music (Hanslick). The Neoromantics did something analogous in a different way: rather than structure, they proposed concrete meaning as the solution to Romantic vagueness.

¹¹⁰ I am making a reference to Susan McClary's "turtles-all-the-way-down," a very interesting application of the Zen story to the cultural significance of music in her recent *Conventional Wisdom* (2000). But I am not conflating these holograms with her turtles: As far as I know, her turtles have some real weight even if they go all the way down.

What happens if we deconstruct the idea of Romantic improvisation from the point of view of its phonocentrism and the metaphysics of presence associated with it? What is left? This is the problem raised by Derrida and other contemporary philosophers concerning a “representative illusion,” that is to say, the pretension that the interiority of a mental image corresponds to the exteriority of something real, and that interiority and exteriority are present to each other. The alleged adequation between them—mental image and external reality—is then considered the truth of representation, which for Derrida is nothing but an illusion. Ricoeur has given a response to this problem by arguing that it is possible “to extricate representation from the impasse to which it has been relegated, to return it to its field of play, without, however, in any way weakening the critique [of the representative illusion]” (Ricoeur 1991: 137). Ricoeur’s return of representation to “its field of play” is elaborated via his theory of *mimesis* which, in short, refers to the power of artistic creations to imitate reality productively. With this, Ricoeur affirms the ability of the creative imagination to redescribe or reshape reality.

Works and improvisations, understood as loci of this productive imitation of reality, would not be autonomous in the sense of being self-enclosed entities detached from reality. They would be autonomous in the sense that they can effect the (re)shaping of reality, instead of merely imitating it. If by autonomy we mean a certain degree of independence of music with respect to its social conditions--and not detachment from them--the quandary of having to choose between autonomy and social implications is a false one. This quandary is evident, for example, when Celia Applegate, complaining about the excessive importance given to nationalism in current musicological work on nineteenth-century German music and aesthetics, states: “not all nationalisms are state-seeking, not all forms of nation-building are state-building or state-centered, and therefore,

sometimes a symphony is just a symphony” (1998: 280). But we must remember this: even if not all nationalisms are state-seeking, a symphony is never just a symphony. The problem in Applegate’s statement is not a problem of logic (she is obviously using this surprising reasoning as a rhetorical device to make her point forcefully). The problem is the implication that we have to choose between thinking of music as either being nothing but ideology (e.g., influenced not just by the idea of nationalism, but by “state-seeking”) or purely musical (if music is associated not with “state-seeking” but with other kinds of nationalistic movements, then, sometimes, “a symphony is just a symphony”).

But Applegate and other musicologists who, like her, would like to see less ideology critique in musicological studies, are not the only ones faced with this problem. Christopher Small finishes *Musicking* with a confession that he still loves to play and listen to some works he finds objectionable from the point of view of the values they embody. If “even Mozart was wrong,” and Small likes to listen to his music, does this mean that Small is “wrong” too? (1998: 220). Or does it mean that he is contradicting himself when he writes: “If I am right about the values . . . that are articulated by the rituals of performing and listening to these works, then I have to admit to a contradiction between those values . . . which I consciously hold . . . and those that I hold at a deep level, those which resonate with those articulated when these pieces are performed” (Small 1998: 221).

Without trying to rescue anybody from his or her own lot of cherished contradictions (Small cites Walt Whitman’s “Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself!”), I believe that there is more to a Mozart symphony than the predictable sequence “order is established, order is disturbed, order is reestablished,” and the problematic values encoded in this “master narrative” (ibid.: 160). And it is that

something more, that surplus of meaning, that continues to make it worthwhile to listen to this and other musics, and to think about them.

But, regardless of the meanings it took in the Romantic period, improvisation in the nineteenth century was the last reincarnation of an old tradition of creating music on the course of its performance. Before the concept of musical work came into being, people were making music in ways that now--in contrast to the ideas of composition and work--we would define as improvisatory. This impulse to make new music on the spur of the moment is found in many cultures around the world, and in Europe it developed along with the general stylistic transformations of the musical language. By the time we get to the Romantic period, improvisation is once again a vehicle for the stylistic traits and aesthetic ideals of the time, and after the fall of Romanticism and its metaphysics of art, improvisation might have continued to flourish had it not been for the mid-nineteenth century turn towards the canonization and formalization of the tradition. Regardless of the meanings and functions that it has taken through history, improvisation was a powerful form of artistic expression in the Western world that has been lost.

CONCLUSION

RECOVERING A WESTERN TRADITION

In this dissertation I have investigated two phenomena concerning the practice of improvisation in the Western tradition: its disappearance from musical public practice around mid-nineteenth century, and its relegation in music histories to an aspect of “early” music. Though interrelated, these were two distinct developments. The decline of improvisation in performance practice coincided with the decline of the Romantic movement. Improvisation was rejected by Neoromantics and formalists as a symbol of the Romantic world they wanted to leave behind. For their part, musicologists focused on musical works understood as fixed musical structures that could be studied according to scientifically-inspired standards, thus excluding all musical elements considered subjective or ephemeral. This exclusion was reinforced by music historians, who, working from the assumption of a necessary historical evolution of music from its early and spontaneous beginnings to a stage of formal perfection, relegated improvisation to the former, dismissing it as an aspect of the immature stages of the tradition.

This double demise of improvisation--its disappearance from practice in the nineteenth century and its relegation to pre-Classical periods in music histories--suggests the complexity of what was lost. In the first place, the practice itself was mostly lost and, with it, a long and rich tradition of Western music-making. Secondly, important aspects of the aesthetics and the musical world of the Classical and Romantic periods were ignored. The historical accounts of the music life of these periods was for the most part reduced to the biographies of the great composers and to the works they wrote

down. This reduction was neither a necessary historical development or a historical accident: it was part of the process of building a European cultural self-identity during the second half of the nineteenth century. Much was at stake then, for the new forms of production, social organization, and knowledge were felt to be incompatible with many of the traditional worldviews and practices. Yet, it was this tradition that still provided much of the meaning and identity of an industrialized and scientific culture.

The canonization of musical masterworks was a response to this dilemma. It was believed that in them there was distilled a heritage of metaphysical and religious meanings but that, at the same time, these works--considered now as objects--could be scientifically studied, and revered as relics. The advantages of this canonization were significant: the legacy was preserved, the meanings retained, and all of this was accomplished with the blessings of science. Around this legacy music schools and concert halls were built, specialized journals and university positions created, and a faithful public, mostly drawn from the ranks of the high bourgeoisie, was born. Classical music thus became a special realm legitimized by all standards that mattered at that time: social prestige, transcendental import, and objective value.

But much was lost in this process: historical insights into the lively musical practices of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, aesthetic conceptions that fit such practices, the freedom of professional musicians to play *with* music, and the pleasures of witnessing the risks and unexpected findings brought about by that freedom. As a result of all that was lost or forgotten, the received concept of "Western classical music" refers properly only to the last century and half of this tradition. When great contemporary improvisors such as Terry Riley and Pauline Oliveros are labeled as experimental musicians somewhat at the margins of today's mainstream concert-life, we

forget that these and other excellent musicians are, in the context of performance practice, the true heirs of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, and so many others.

Improvisation was a quintessential expression of the Romantic ideals of freedom and of the power of imagination. But the significance of these ideals goes beyond the particulars of a given period. Just because Romanticism exalted freedom does not mean that freedom is exclusively a Romantic ideal. Similarly, because the Romantics emphasized imagination does not mean that other historical periods were unimaginative.

The fact that ideas of freedom and imagination were elaborated in the Romantic period in the context of idealist metaphysics does not imply that these ideas can only be invoked on the basis of a metaphysical worldview. If improvisation--like works--was embedded in the ideological fabric of the early nineteenth century, it was also embedded--perhaps more than works--in the utopian aspirations of the time. And if it can be said that improvisation expressed the utopian side of creativity more forcefully than works, it is because the very nature of improvisation emphasizes the aspect of music, and of art, that offers the possibility of contesting the status quo: namely, its non-thingness, its playfulness.

If play is work then we can--we should--interpret it and deconstruct it, and we should reflect on who made it and how and why, so that we can understand what that human activity has to say to us, including the various distortions arising from particular interests and limited visions. But if work is play, we can and should acknowledge its power to experiment with reality and, therefore, to question reality and to shape it anew. By recovering the role played by improvisation in the history of Western music, it is also possible to redefine what the terms "Western" and "classical" mean when applied to music, thus making them more inclusive of the past, and more open to the future.

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