I. WHAT IS THE MANNES INSTITUTE?

Welcome friends and colleagues to the seventh annual Mannes Institute. Those of you gathered here today come from ten different countries and eighteen American states. You all have in your conference packets a list of who you are, a schedule of events, a handy map, and of course, your very own autographed Arnold Schoenberg pencil straight from Vienna. The Institute began back in 2001, and has grown beyond anyone’s expectations, including my own. We’re now planned through 2011, and there are efforts underway to bring the Institute to Europe.

Kicking off this special event each June is a momentous occasion for me. If I may quote Shakespeare, it’s the one time of year I’m dressed in a little, brief authority. For the rest of the time, I have, as Thoreau said of himself, “a real genius for staying at home.” Over the next four days however, you’ll come to know, as Schoenberg just said, who I am. You will also get to know my vision of who we are, or who at least I think we can be as a community of scholars. I hope to bring you all on a journey to a place I suspect you’ve rarely been before, that I’d like to create together.

The Institute has been around now for seven years. Some people, in addition to my wife, tell me it’s special, but I don’t think anyone’s quite put their finger on why. And since most of you are first-timers here, please let me take a stab before our proceedings actually begin. Of course, I’m a little biased, but most of us gave up on objectivity long ago. So, OK, Mr. Director, you say to yourself, I’ve come all this way, studied all this material, and read all your finicky emails. So what’s this thing all about? What is the Mannes Institute?

Well, let’s start with some official policies on our website: 1. The mission of the Institute is to promote collegiality, stimulate discourse, foster inquiry, and disseminate knowledge among professional scholars of achievement and distinction—that’s you—within the academic music community. Sounds pretty good. 2. All participants are expected to do the required reading and advance preparation for the workshops—that’s the work part—to actively contribute to the Institute's proceedings, and to engage in a spirit of cooperation and collegiality in accordance with its mission and participatory methodology. A little harder, but still good. 3. The faculty's function—that’s them—is not exclusively to lecture but to guide communal working sessions and facilitate interactive dialogue. We’ll see how they do.

Now some of you may have noticed that the Institute has a watchword on our website which says, “Deliberate with Coolness, Analyze with Criticism, Reflect with Candor, and Evaluate with Conviction.” I plagiarized most of this phrase from an article published back in 1787 under the pseudonym Cato during the public debate over the adoption of the U.S. Constitution. For some reason, this rare book is in the Mannes Library, next to Colin Sterne’s magisterial treatise, Arnold Schoenberg: The Composer as Numerologist.
Many historians think Cato was secretly New York’s Governor George Clinton—no relationship to Bill or Hillary—but there’s no conclusive evidence of authorship. Against almost unanimous support for constitutional ratification, Mr. Cato urged the colonists to think for themselves, by deliberating with coolness, analyzing with criticism, and reflecting with candor. It was my idea to toss in “evaluate with conviction” a couple of centuries later to create the acronym “dare,” which evidently didn’t occur to Cato. But his challenge of independent thought and reasoned skepticism, even in the face of opposition, articulates the credo of the Mannes Institute. The logo on our website, da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, is also a symbol of the spirit of rational inquiry that guides our deliberations.

The original prototype of the inquiring community of course is classical Athens. We can’t issue togas with the registration materials, but I’ll at least quote the governor of Athens, whose words are worth more than mine. “The great impediment to action is not discussion,” says Pericles, “but the want of knowledge gained by discussion.” So discussion and dialogue, that’s basically what we’re after.

The Mannes Institute is an experiment in collaborative learning. It’s a community in constant flux and realignment, with new people coming and going, all of whom think and care deeply about music and hope to share their insights, doubts, and discoveries. This is a place where we analyze ideas among peers who will appreciate, stimulate, and provoke us in a mutually respectful way. You are each invited to examine your own thinking out loud before others in this safe and receptive environment.

The Institute is designed to air our views, not on mute and tidy pages of journals and books, but in the lively give and take of a real-time interactive gathering, where good spirited haggling, trial balloons, half-baked truths, sudden intuitions, and speculative rebuttals fill the air. Our modality here is one of engagement and even friendly argumentation. We welcome tempered dissent and debate, rather than the uniformity of professional groupthink on one hand, or the pitfalls of cloistered insularity on the other. We affirm a noble tradition of humanistic inquiry premised on the rigorous testing of ideas through collegial interrogation, rooted in venerable disciplines of independent thought, critical examination, and free-ranging discourse. We thrive on what Virginia Woolf calls the stimulus of contradiction.

The Institute presents myriad opportunities for spontaneous conversations and collaborations in the workshops and the social spaces in between. Within our team of 45, there are innumerable subsets and combinations for collegial interaction. I urge you to drop any shyness or inhibition, to relax and take your intellectual shoes off, get to know one another as friends, and above all, reach out to others, particularly those you don’t yet know, in a warm and receptive way. Be available and inclusive. Branch out and make everyone feel at home. There is no hierarchy here, and no one who doesn’t belong, and doesn’t have something valuable to contribute. Over the next four days, in a posture of monastic retreat in the middle of Manhattan, we can hold up a mirror to ourselves as an international community, a united nations of scholars with a single mission. The people in this room embody the current global state of Schoenberg scholarship as we approach the centennial of Op. 11. This is a momentous event not only in the reception of Arnold Schoenberg, but in the history of our discipline.

The Institute is an entirely different animal than our normal academic conferences. We’re more participatory and less formal, more candid and less staged. We’re cozier, more personal, more challenging, and frankly, more fun. We consider things in depth, with attention to detail. We’re public broadcasting next to network news, an art film next to the Hollywood blockbuster, an intimate coffee house next to the suburban mall. This is a safe haven where we can drop our titles and pretenses, roll up our sleeves, let down our hair, and become students once again.

Our job as scholars is to think, but the actual business of thinking, our intuitions and embryonic conceptions, have no place in our professional conduct. The rich shadows of speculation are never cast in our finished products. We can’t hover on the borderland of truth, or wander in the maze of a probable argument. Our traditional scholarly modalities are orthodox—there’s little room for doubt. The Institute cuts a different path. We create a site for the construction and deconstruction of paradigms, a locus for
active self-critique. In our circular workshops, polished arguments and nascent hypotheses confront and cross-fertilize each another. We hope to plant seeds that will bear the fruit of further research. Ours is not a solitary endeavor. It’s too easy, as someone said of Emerson, to be a sage in one’s own study. We gather not just to learn, but also to teach, not just to take but also to give.

The task before us, I warn you, is rigorous. This Institute is not a stroll in the park. You are all welcome here, but there’s a price of admission. Something is asked of you while you’re here. There’s work to be done. The success of this experience depends upon you. And so unless necessary, you’re expected to stay with us in mind and body for each step of the journey, at all events including our workshops, these morning meetings, our daily meals, and our social gatherings. The relentless pace and intensity of the program, for which in some quarters I’ve earned a masochistic reputation, is deliberately designed to induce fatigue, the sort of dizziness Derrida calls “intellectual vertigo.” By wearing down our resistance and perhaps even certitude in our own habits of thought, we become both exhausted and exhilarated, and experience a kind of conceptual brainwashing, wiping the slate clean, at least temporarily, as a predicate for private evaluation and reconstruction in the recovery room at home.

So what then is the Mannes Institute? It’s both a physical place and a conceptual space. It’s a nursery of reflections where we think aloud and build camaraderie in a deeper way. It’s a process, a mode of noncompetitive and egalitarian interaction. It’s our Athenian symposium, guided by the spirit of Pericles and Leonardo. As patient scholars secluded in our studies, chained to our committees, and entrenched in our teaching, what opportunities do these four summer days present? Now, I would say is our time for ourselves; our time to read and think together and learn side by side. Now is our time to drop our ranks and resumes not just our students, but each other as well. This is our time to take stock of our collective knowledge, to compare notes, and assess where we are, and where we might go. Now is our time to ask questions without answers, to celebrate multiple perspectives, and appreciate who we are as people who like to think in an unthinking world. That for me is what makes this Institute special, why I’m here, and what I at least hope to accomplish. I invite you to our floating think tank, the Mannes Institute, this “discursive democracy” in Habermas’ words, where all of you matter, and each of you has an important role to play.

Morton Feldman once told me you’re lucky if you have one original idea in your whole life. Schoenberg had a big Gedanke, and we’re still talking about it a hundred years later. Feldman in his own way had a quieter one too. And this, I suspect, is probably mine. I’m not so egocentric as to call it Wayne’s World, because to make it happen, it must become your world too, at least for these next four days. And that’s now what I’m asking you to do: help me make this happen, and help all of us make it good. You’ve done all this work, and come all this way. I’m asking you now to seize the time, and maximize the incredible potential in this room, by bonding together as a collective enterprise, yoking yourselves more closely to one another in a fraternity of scholars, so we may come to think and grow as one, and emerge revitalized though a genuine meeting of the minds.

II. CONCERT SPEECH

Welcome to our musical extravaganza. For those of you who don’t know, I’m Wayne Alpern, founder and director of the Mannes Institute for Advanced Studies in Music Theory. Each year at the Institute, we try to incorporate some live music into what for the most part are purely intellectual proceedings. Before we begin though, let me acknowledge the guests in our audience and welcome them to our Institute. While our workshops are closed affairs—secret skull and bones sessions for serial disciples—our plenary meetings and particularly our concert are more graciously open to close friends of the family.

The Institute represents an important side of Mannes I’m not sure everyone knows about. And despite my moments in the sunshine this week, once it’s over, I resume a rather inconspicuous rank within its walls. I began our proceedings yesterday with an introduction called “What is the Mannes Institute?” and I won’t repeat that here. But I’d like to take just a few minutes to explain to this slightly
wider audience what this is all about and why it’s so special—not only within the music profession, but within Mannes, and within the New School at large.

In this room are forty-five of the leading Schoenberg scholars from ten countries and eighteen states, representing prominent colleges and universities around the world. And ironically they have all come to Mannes—not a prestigious academic institution of higher learning, but a quaint and intimate conservatory, what our Dean once called “a precious jewel” in the heart of Manhattan. Although we certainly produce some of the finest performers on the planet, and notwithstanding its international reputation as ground zero for Schenkerian analysis, for the most part Mannes lives outside of the academic mainstream. So why are these prominent scholars here, with about an equal number having been turned away?

Joseph Addison noted in the *Spectator* back in 1711 that the larger the group, the shallower the conversation. The depth of discourse is inversely proportional to the number of participants. When a multitude gathers, he says, the discussion is formal and general. Only in smaller groups, and ultimately in dialogue, do we descend into particulars and grow freely communicative. The Mannes Institute implements Addison’s insight among scholars of music. Each year we convene a different group to address a different topic, but we always retain the intimacy and informality necessary for candid interpersonal exchange. Unlike conventional conferences in this or any other field, there are just a few speeches and presentations. For the most part, we engage in participatory discussion and spontaneous dialogue among our peers. We drop our professional titles, affiliations, and even our last names. We sit in circles and ask each other questions and think out loud. Our mottoes are those of Dante, who says “it pleases me as much to doubt as to know,” of John Donne, who urges us to “doubt wisely,” and of Montaigne, who warns that “only the fool is certain.”

From what everyone tells me, there’s no other place quite like this in the world. Although Mannes is well known as an outstanding conservatory, it has not been considered an intellectual center. Over the past 7 years, however, largely because of this Institute, Mannes has achieved international recognition as a Mecca for scholars seeking intellectual sustenance and professional camaraderie. As an important part of the New School University, we are also putting into practice that institution’s historic reputation for open-minded discourse at the cutting edge of inquiry. Finally, everyone here should know that the Institute is supported entirely by generous private individuals, who have benefited each of you, this school, and our entire profession by making this imaginative vision a reality.

Now you probably all think Schoenberg is the cat’s meow, or else you wouldn’t be here. But I can at least tell you during my preparation for this Institute, around 16.5 seconds into the recording of his *Variations for Orchestra* I played in my apartment, everyone in my entire family made it clear they hated him, it—and me. When I told my kids this is what the Institute is about, they were rolling on the floor giggling. Even my neighbor started pounding on the wall—and she’s ninety. When I took out the score of the *Piano Concerto* from the Mannes library, the girl behind the desk snickered that it hadn’t been checked out in twelve years. She assured me I didn’t have to bring it back till December—2010.

I told my parents this was about serialism—they thought I was planning the breakfast menu. My mom thinks Schoenberg looks just like uncle Bertram, and wondered whether he belongs to their synagogue in Detroit. I told them he was a grumpy old Jewish man—my dad just glared at me. When I said his name was Arnold, he played tennis and supported Israel, they wanted to invite him for brunch. I explained he lived in Los Angeles near O.J. Simpson. They got up and said, “oy vey, another meshugganah.”

Anyway, I feel the hook coming on here, so let’s get on with the show. I hope you’ve all enjoyed some good food and drink, and are ready now for some music and discussion. You should all have a program and see we have two fine performances tonight. In between we’re going to conduct the first dodecaphonic raffle in the history of music. I’ve asked two of my Mannes colleagues, Carl Schachter and Joel Lester, to handle the introductions, because I’ve temporarily run out of things to say. Neither of *them*
of course needs an introduction. As Schoenberg said, “I think you know you who they are by now.” So without further ado, please welcome my friend and favorite teacher, Carl Schachter.

III. INSTITUTE ESSAY AWARD

One of the key ingredients of a good essay is wit, or at least as John Locke defines it. Wit for Locke is the opposite of judgment. Judgment consists of the analytic separation or differentiation of things or ideas, drawing distinctions and clarifying ambiguities. It’s pulling things apart, like petals from a flower, breaking them down into constituent parts and components. Judgment is basically what we exercise when we analyze a piece of music. Wit, on the other hand, is the opposite process of putting things together. It’s the perception of incongruous connections between things that are different. Wit is the novel assembly of ideas, conjoining things not apparently so, finding unsuspected confluences, and drawing unlikely inferences to elicit a sense of surprise and delight. Judgment is analytic, wit is synthetic. The first is an act of differentiation, the second an act of conjunction.

Drawing upon Locke’s distinction in the Spectator, Joseph Addison found wit not merely in novel association, but the radical juxtaposition of ideas, putting things together that intrinsically have little or nothing in common at all. When Merce Cunningham was asked how his choreography fit with Cage’s music, he replied, “they go together, because I put them together.”

As an eighteenth century man, Addison wondered whether the qualities of wit were universal. Does that which is intriguing to one person appear so to others, or most others? Moliere, he says, read all his comedies to his housekeeper in order to gauge their success on the stage. The audience always followed the old woman, and laughed in the exact same places. Judgment is not always good, but wit, it seems, is always witty.

The winning submission for this year’s Mannes Institute Essay Award is an exemplar of this kind of wit. It draws an imaginative and unsuspected connection, creatively juxtaposing and interweaving two wildly different ideas that go together because the author, like Cunningham, had the wit and audacity to put them together. The intersection is refreshing, illuminating, and provocative. The essay is elegantly composed, thoroughly entertaining, and ably crafted with a sophistication deserving our praise and admiration. Capturing the distinctive bellettristic aesthetics this particular competition invokes—it’s not supposed to be a scholarly recitation, but a contemplative rumination—there’s little wonder its author has received wide recognition for his considerable literary skills.

The winner of the 2007 Mannes Institute Essay Award, unanimously chosen by this year’s selection committee among five highly qualified entries, is James Wierzbicki, for his compelling essay, “Schoenberg as Werewolf.” On behalf of the Institute, I’m honored to present this prestigious award, and turn the floor over to Jim. He’s flown all the way from Ann Arbor this morning just for this exclusive presentation to all of you, so please let’s give him a warm and appreciative round of applause.

IV. WHY IS SCHOENBERG GREAT?

Each year I urge the members of the Institute to raise controversial questions, engage in debate, and kindle disagreement. And each year I fail. The Institute invariably attracts supporters rather than detractors of a particular persuasion. The Schenkerians came to the Schenker Institute, the Lewinians to the Transformation Institute, and the Chromaticists came to the Chromaticism Institute. They all agreed with each other. And everyone here is a card-carrying Schoenbergian, which I presume is why you came. So if I asked whether Schoenberg is great, instead of why he is, it would to many be blasphemy.

The goal of the Institute for me, however, is not to preach to the choir, but to provoke it. I’d rather question Schoenberg’s legacy than defend it. Socrates once said, “The difficulty is not to praise an
Athenian at Athens, but at Sparta.” And the converse holds equally true. We’ve sung Schoenberg’s praise in consonant chords for four days now. Where’s the voice of dissonant dissent?

I’d like to cross-examine Schoenberg today and debate his legacy. I’ve saved this somewhat cowardly to the end, so no one can refute me. Forgive me. But if he’s so great, surely he can sustain it, and you can disregard it. May I at least ask then, what’s Schoenberg’s case for greatness? Surely his reputation alone isn’t sufficient to rob us of our liberty to interrogate him. Montaigne reports that once the ancient Mexicans anointed their king, they no longer dared to look him in the face. But Schoenberg isn’t king and we’re not Mexicans. After all, how can we be sure, by the intensity of our admiration, that we’ve not imputed a stature that may be exaggerated or misplaced?

We’re not comparing Schoenberg to the rest of us, but to the elite society of musical geniuses. We’re beyond the stage where his music was just a promise or noble experiment, to one where it must now be weighed on the scales of greater artistic achievement. The question is not what is Schoenberg next to me or you, but next to Mozart and Bach. Is he ever that passionate, that exalted, or profound? We might ask the question posed by Coleridge: what’s the difference between a great mind and a merely strong one?

If we were to genuinely debate Schoenberg’s stature, and to put our collective premise into issue, what would the case against greatness look like? What would one allege? Here’s a quote from an acclaimed contemporary composer that sounds like nothing we’ve heard over the past four days: “Schoenberg,” he says, “represented something twisted and contorted. He was the first composer to assume the role of high priest, a creative mind whose entire life ran unfailingly against the grain of society, almost as if he had chosen the role of irritant. Despite my respect for and even intimidation by the persona of Schoenberg, I profoundly dislike the sound of twelve-tone music. His aesthetic is to me an over-ripening of nineteenth-century individualism, one in which the composer was a god of sorts, to which the listener would come as if to a sacramental altar. It was with Schoenberg that the ‘agony of modern music’ was born. Audiences were rapidly shrinking, in no small part because of the aural ugliness of his music.” The author is the talented and successful composer John Adams.

Can we ask, as one critic did of Henry James, whether Schoenberg was “merely excessively ingeniousness?” Is his music too self-conscious, extravagant, and pretentious? To what extent was he motivated by vanity and consciousness of himself as a composer? To what degree are his theories about him rather than about music itself? Like Stravinsky, Schoenberg had the immensely valuable gift of charisma, which makes up for, or masks, more than a thousand faults. But are we attracted by his charisma more than his music?

Like the poet Yeats, Schoenberg may have been haunted more by the idea of the great artist rather than the great work of art. Music for him wasn’t just about notes, but a mode of identity and self-proclamation. Its function was not simply music per se, but autobiography, to defend and define himself. Schoenberg wanted to be a great composer, and be remembered as such. His goal was not just to “clear some creative space” in the great garden of music history, as Straus’a’Bloom so innocently puts it, to set up a shrine in the path along the way.

In some respects, Schoenberg was never able to get past himself. The force of character was so powerful that even he fell under its spell. The music became a personal statement, a manifesto giving expression to a concept, and that, rather than the music, became the core of the enterprise. He was possessed by what Santayana calls an “intellectual ambition,” not just to hear his work performed, but to make himself revered and historically significant.

Schoenberg’s identity, in short, merged with and even dominated his art. This is a man who wrapped himself up in his own flag at night. There was nothing obscure or hesitant about him. He had a copious and muscular mind hungry for engagement. Possessing a brawny logic, he was possessed by the fiercest attachment to an idea, which in his words, he “defended, fought, and stood for.” There’s a sacerdotal
quality to Schoenberg’s music, as though its purpose is to illuminate and instruct, and above all, convert. “This,” you seem to hear him saying, “is the way to do it.” The pieces reflect hermetically back upon the composer himself as a kind of musical ayatollah, speaking in an esoteric tongue whose technical barriers insure that it’s meaningful only to disciples and exegetes like us.

So much of Schoenberg is involved in method. At some point one must ask, does excessive concern with methodology inhibit creative power, or unlock it? When we assess Beethoven and Bach, let alone Shakespeare or Rembrandt, does an emphasis laid almost didactically on technique contribute to or detract from the artistic output? Does method elevate music to a higher plane, or degrade it to fetish and learned conceit? Does art become better when sheltered under the authority of a system? Is what Max Weber identified as the progressive rationalization of music, if not its mathematization, a good thing—or not so much? We approach Schoenberg as much through his mind as his music, through his notions as much as his notes. The thought endures when the sound is gone, and what we take away is not a theme or melody, but a question about the nature of music itself. The idea of it, to borrow Hazlitt’s observation about Beau Brummell, is everything, or maybe just too much so.

These issues aren’t new in the history of music, but no one before Schoenberg brought them into such relief. There is, as Dahlhaus diagnoses, an element of compulsion in his method. Instead of being in a language, the music seems to be about language. It has its own invented vocabulary that recalls a familiar one, but with its own syntax. It’s a self-constituted lingo of tonal discourse, a sort of “musical Esperanto” to borrow Botstein’s metaphor, “gratuitously ugly,” he says, “but justifiable on technical grounds.” And as Philip Larkin claimed of Auden, the result is sometimes too complex to be memorable, and too intellectual to be moving. As one scholar said, at times there’s something almost priggish about it. For the majority of listeners, it sounds like musical spinach: it tastes awful but we’re told it builds stronger ear muscles. We need to listen dutifully and differently, and that makes a lot of folks squirm.

The music is quintessentially modern, as a self-conscious attempt to rupture conventionality. But as modernism matured—Adorno refers paradoxically to the “Aging of New Music”—the shock of the new wore off. Falling into contradiction with its own idea, it forfeited its claim not only to greatness, but to newness itself. When we hear one atonal piece after another in the same no longer shocking style, generated by increasingly elaborate schemes and mimicking the radicalism of a century ago, what we too often hear is just a language, a syntax, and a style, and a dated one at that, rather than anything that might be considered a fresh and newly inspired individual musical utterance.

Many composers schooled on Schoenberg have come to the conclusion that we’re past the point where any further development along these lines is fruitful. It seems too narrow, too personal, too unique, and too self-conscious to be capable of sustaining other voices, so that those writing in Schoenberg’s style somehow forfeit their own voices and produce faint echoes of the one who defined it as his own. We detect a return to tonality as an older, but perhaps richer and more viable medium of musical expression. Nearly a century after Op. 11, our goal is not so much to convert disbelievers, but simply retain our ranks. Even 50 years ago, only four years after Schoenberg’s death, Adorno wrote, “Today, artists like Berg and Webern would hardly be able to make it through the winter.”

Schoenberg is modern as well in his consciousness of the past. Yet at times, his historical references seem defensively grafted on, in an attempt to sanitize his rupture with all that has come before. In the end, his work may reject as much, perhaps more than it discovers. The abolition of tonality was an emancipation, but one which also incurred a loss. Lacking appeal to a larger audience, the music risks becoming a snobbish and cultish code for a cabal of specialists at an Institute like this, justified by our own self-serving rhetoric and exculpatory paradigms. Is this a good thing because the music’s so great that the common masses, unlike the case of Mozart, can’t possibly understand it, or is it because it is somehow removed from the lived world of ordinary people, cut off from the lifeblood of music, of what music has always been, and in some sense will always be, in short, from the human experience?
Schoenberg may be safe in our theory departments and well-bound journals, as what Jonathan Dunsby calls “the central architect of present day theory and practice,” but how do we then explain John Adams’ not atypical sense outside the ivory tower, and even among our own students within, that atonality and serialism have become oppressive and stodgy rather than relevant and liberating? Time has not been a friendly witness to Mr. Schoenberg, and the verdict of history has largely run against him. His polemics ring hollow, their promise unfilled. Pieces remain unrecorded and rarely performed. The piety of serialism now feels conventional and its once radical results somewhat prosaic, musical relics of a bygone era. In the twenty-first century, Schoenberg’s modernist crisis seems excessive and remote. Even his own capitulation to tonality was for some an apostasy. He discovered tools that did their business for their time, but now once more, with one thing after another, the world and its conditions have changed yet again. Schoenberg’s tools can’t be our tools, because his business is not our business, and his time and place are certainly not our own.

But that’s not Schoenberg’s problem, it’s ours. He existed, as do we, in historical context. He was undeniably a man of his age. Yet even within that context, what would compel a composer to make such a radical break with the past and engage in what so many consider to be an idealistic and even arrogant pursuit? What correlation is there between that historical moment and the man himself? Did Schoenberg choose atonality, or did atonality choose him? “No one wanted to be” the notorious Schoenberg, he teases, but “someone had to be, so I let it be me.” But if he hadn’t done it, would someone else with equal vision, daring, and skill? To what extent is Schoenberg’s art and historical position an expression of his own ego and personal ambition rather than of his ethos and his age? Is atonality the historically determined outcome of larger forces accumulating in nineteenth-century chromaticism, or of a single man’s psychological need to assert and defend himself, to become famous and influential? Is Schoenberg so egotistical and autodidactically unencumbered that he thinks he can alter the nature of music and the course of its history?

The man seemed compelled to stamp his own individuality on just about everything, insisting on being unique, yet always linking himself in some way to the past. There’s an ambivalent desire to be different, but also to belong—to be oneself, but part of something larger. He sought to engage tradition, yet redefine it. Schoenberg was enmeshed in the dialectic Virginia Woolf describes when she wrote, “It is the past that solidifies the present, yet in order for the present to unfold creatively, the grip of the past cannot be rock solid.”

Peter Burkholder points out how Schoenberg’s self-imposed challenge of giving birth to the new from the womb of the old actually mirrors his pragmatic compositional technique. The reinterpretation of the motive through developing variation encodes a larger reinterpretation of tradition itself, each invoking the past through what Martha Hyde calls “creative memory.” The music is literally constructed out of the same transformative process as the aesthetic that fostered it, extending what comes before to generate yet ground something new.

Perhaps it’s in pursuing this synthesis more intrepidly than anyone else, rather than in any sense Schoenberg himself may have envisioned, that his artistic path approaches greatness. His is the model of the modern artist’s plight: pitting the weight of an overwhelming tradition, the allure of the masterpieces, against the artist’s obligation to define his own voice and create something authentically one’s own. Among his contemporaries, Schoenberg alone could boast a truly original style, owing to the perfect correspondence between his aims, his character, and their musical expression. His internal unanimity was overwhelming and powerful. Serialism reconciles the tension between Schoenberg’s polar impulses of radical deconstruction and cohesive reconstruction by fusing them together into a single principle of musical organization.

Yet the sense in which his music might be said to succeed, by being so original and uniquely constructed, is also the sense in which it perhaps fails, by its inability to achieve universality. It succeeds and fails at the same time, because it is personal, too personal, too individual, and too much a mirror of
one man’s own mind. Building on Schorske, Reinhold Brinkmann construes Schoenberg’s impulse to create so autonomously as a subjective turning away from musical convention toward a private inner world of abstract relationships in the face of an external world disintegrating around him. By this often-accepted view, recently challenged by historian Steven Beller, atonality was the psycho-acoustic fallout of social and political changes in the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy. The fracture of the tonal hierarchy mirrored deeper fissures in Viennese society.

The argument has a Marxist flavor, casting music history as an epiphenomenon of material conditions below. The composer is merely an expressive pawn caught in the subterranean collision of greater historical forces. Without implicating ethnic stereotypes, we may further inquire whether Schoenberg’s art was the cerebral, legalistic product of a marginalized Jewish mind, divorced from the mainstream of European musical culture. Alternatively, however, if we place Schoenberg himself behind the wheel, rather than Marx, the Emperor, or God, his failure to drive within proper musical limits was because the fervor of his own genius goaded him across the tonal frontier. And as for excessive abstraction, one can certainly argue, and history bears out the opposite: that as a matter of listening, it’s the music’s concreteness, its physical thing-like objectivity, rather than any perceived intellectual construct, that makes it so radically different.

In any event, at the midnight hour of modernism, in the vortex of disintegration and rebirth, Schoenberg struggles to define and recreate his own musical identity. And to do this, he must pay homage to, yet at the same time, exorcise the ghosts of music past. He wrestles with his demons like Jacob with the angel. Yet, lacking their popular appeal and canonic certification, and obsessed with his destiny, he chisels his own image on the Mt. Rushmore of musical giants. To Schoenberg, his music was just like that of the masters, nothing less. The point, however, is not which explanatory scheme we adopt to explain why it was composed, or even whether we like this music or think it’s great. The point is that it was composed at all, that it exists, the simple fact of its phenomenological reality, that someone dared to write such audacious scores that challenge what music had always been, and may well always be, and that he convinced us of its inherent necessity.

Schoenberg’s is the emblematic musical achievement of our time. It is defiant, yet lofty, flawed but perfectly so. Its very shortcomings, as Ruskin might say, prove he was a man of unparalleled courage and conviction. In it, we hear moments of great beauty and of ugliness, moments of wit and of boredom, moments of delicacy and of terror. Schoenberg’s music has this characteristic of greatness: it exists by itself. By the end, everything seems to be there. We enter a world he created, like Einstein or Freud, and marvel how it differs from all others we’ve ever imagined. Like the man himself, it is charming and incomprehensible, exhilarating and exasperating. Its presence is overwhelming and undeniable, and through it, Schoenberg becomes overwhelming and undeniable, whether we like it or not.

Now I won’t stand here at the end of this Institute, perhaps with some of you, arms aloft, and proclaim this music to be great. I don’t know yet that it is. I reserve that accolade for the monuments of our art. But I will be among the first to proclaim that the composer, the artist, this man himself, is unmistakably great, indeed heroic, in a way that I would only reserve for Beethoven, the man.

And even then, as Cowley said of Pindar, Schoenberg may be “a species alone”—in a class by himself. Our Institute, the first devoted to a single person, is charged with the peculiar passion that among 20th-century composers he alone can excite. Of all our musicians there is none quite so controversial or bewildering. As Szymanowski said, Schoenberg crossed the Rubicon, and that alone may be great. If I am questioning him harshly today, even as devil’s advocate, this is characteristically his homage. For Schoenberg himself is music’s Great Questioner. He questions tonality out of love for tones, history out of reverence for the past, and convention out of allegiance to a higher authority. He interrogates music, and above all, he interrogates us. He just won’t leave us alone.
Irascible, relentless, maligned yet unwilling to yield an inch, this was a man who was insistently and unflinchingly himself. Everything he touched has this integrity ingrained in it. Whatever else we can say about him, Schoenberg’s music, to invoke Hazlitt’s term, is full of *gusto*. Despite its rigor, there’s a feeling that something much greater than technical prowess, pastiche, and polemics is at stake. The result is brimming with character and emotion, and profoundly artistic. It is the robust reflection of a tireless mind, and the purest emanation of a powerful personality. We always sense its honesty and authenticity. This is the real McCoy.

Along with Stravinsky, his alter ego, Schoenberg is the first composer we truly feel to be one of ourselves. Yet we scarcely know whether he is the last of an older race of men, or the first of one that is to come. Like an oracle even before the age itself had fully bloomed, Schoenberg confronted the creative turmoil of his time. Only great artists, giving themselves to nothing else, truly represent their age. To this we can give no lesser name than genius. Yet we today may neither be near enough to still be under Schoenberg’s spell, nor far enough to reach a finished estimate that his place is with the great masters, rather than the great eccentrics. To those who understand his music, and like it, it is one of the great achievements in the entire history of art. To those who understand it, but dislike it, it is laboriously irrelevant. To those who don’t understand it, but still like it, it is fascinating precisely because of its intriguing lack of intelligibility. And to those who don’t understand it, and don’t like it, the emperor has no clothes.

Schoenberg is the classic composer of the twentieth century, the great protagonist of modern music. He is, for me, our Captain Ahab, brooding, possessed, hubristic, and monomaniacal in his confrontation, if I may, with the white whale of atonality. He implores and rallies us, the members of his crew, to conquer chromaticism, defy the safe shore of the diatonic, and engage the musical unknown. And like Ishmael, we find ourselves transfixed by the glint of his eye—that eye in the photo in your conference packet. We get caught up in the magnitude of his quest, like Weberns and Bergs, and it becomes by contagion our own.

This alone may be why Schoenberg is great, even if he is ultimately swallowed by the sea, and we’re left clinging to his coffin. For through him, because of him, we too have encountered the leviathan. And if we can imagine the great soul of music, to borrow my end from Mrs. Woolf, if we can imagine music’s spirit “come alive and standing in our midst, she would undoubtedly bid us to break her and bully her, as well as honor and love her—for so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured.”