

Excerpts of "Issues in Composition," from Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*. Translated by Mary Whitall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

## Issues in Composition



### 1. The musical idea

Richard Strauss once observed that the melodic ideas which provide the substance of a composition seldom consist of more than two to four bars; the remainder is elaboration, working-out, compositional technique.<sup>1</sup> The aesthetic crux that he touched on here is one which occupied the Greeks and has not lost its teasing character with age: the perennial question of the priority of reflection or inspiration, *ars* or *ingenium*, technique or genius. The aesthetic discussion has to be located in a historical context, however, if it is not to remain on a plane of abstract speculation. Certainly the limited dimensions of the kind of thematic inspiration to which Strauss referred are characteristic not so much of all musical creativity at all times as of composition in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It is no exaggeration to say that the difficulties faced by composers after Beethoven were due in no small part to the brevity of their musical ideas: these difficulties were shared by Wagner, Liszt, Bruckner, and even Brahms, although their solutions differed. Nietzsche's axiom that it was necessary to close one's

1. R. Strauss, "Vom melodischen Einfall," in *Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen*, 2d ed. (Zurich, 1957), p. 165.

eyes to Wagner the "al fresco painter" if one was to discover the true Wagner—"our greatest musical miniaturist"<sup>2</sup>—employs a metaphor to describe something that could be expressed as the contradiction between the brevity of the musical ideas and the monumentality of the formal designs.

It could be argued that brevity of musical ideas was a characteristic not of the later nineteenth century alone but of Beethoven himself, at least in the symphonies, but this was not the case; the *Eroica* and the Fifth Symphony may spring to mind, but Wagner's formal problems are different in kind from Beethoven's. The eight-note theme—or "motto"—of the first movement of the *Eroica* is determined by the overall design and not vice versa: the form is not built up out of the theme. The motto is not so much stated or expounded and then developed as brought forth by the symphonic process in which it has a function to fulfill, and the musical "idea" is the symphonic process itself, not the theme. The opening of the Fifth Symphony is analogous: as Heinrich Schenker demonstrated,<sup>3</sup> the belief that the first four notes constitute the thematic substance of the movement is, however popular, mistaken. The melodic idea is not what is contained in the first two bars, repeated sequentially in the third and fourth (more than that would have to be taken into account, if one wished to define the "idea" in the Beethovenian sense); it is the whole of bars 1–4, the twofold descending third (G–E $\flat$  and F–D) which in the subsidiary theme becomes a descending fifth, also repeated (B $\flat$ –E $\flat$  and F–B $\flat$ ). (The structural similarity of the thematic openings indicates that the sequential working belongs to the thematic idea and not to the elaboration.) But the error as to the structure of the theme—one shared by even Wagner himself<sup>4</sup>—is historically revealing.

2. F. Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner*, in *Werke*, 2:918.

3. H. Schenker, *Beethoven: V. Symphonie* (Vienna, n.d.), pp. 3ff.

4. Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 8:282 (*Über das Dirigieren*).

[snip]

During the course of the nineteenth century, for socio-historical reasons among others, it became virtually obligatory for themes, or their initial ideas, to be original, because form itself fell into a state of one-sided dependence on the musical idea. Schematic forms, of the kind predominating in short character pieces for piano, were sustained exclusively by the quality of the initial idea, the individual character of which compensated for the conventionality of the overall outline. (The fact that the differentiated formulation and development of ideas can be accommodated in conventional ABA formal patterns in the piano music of Schumann or Brahms would be an almost irreconcilable contradiction, were it not that the formal outline serves no other purpose than to present and arrange the musical "content.") Individualized form is the polar opposite of schematic form (the tendency to create it can be observed in some of Liszt's symphonic poems); it represents the consequential unfurling of the initial musical idea (which, for its part, is determined programmatically), and its success in formulating and presenting the musical content can be measured by how well it conceals the fact that it is doing so.<sup>6</sup>

In a form in which every part or detail is supposed to be an original idea or the consequence of an original idea, conventional material is bound to be regarded as superfluous padding, and a work in which platitudes are conspicuous will be condemned aesthetically as derivative hackwork. No phrase in a theme or its continuation should be empty of meaning, the mere formulaic expansion of the essential musical idea to a regular verse-like period (symmetry and rounding-off, the essential premises of a form conceived of as a "poetic"

6. Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:187f (Über Franz Liszts symphonische Dichtungen).

metrical pattern on a large scale, are almost unimaginable without conventional components and interpolations). By contrast, when musical ideas are wholly original, significant at every instant and expressed without padding, as Richard Strauss said, they are apt to be extremely short. Leitmotifs as long as the Siegfried motive are the exception in Wagner, not the rule; the Sword and Spear motives are representative of the norm.

The type of motive represented by the Curse motive in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and the Day motive in *Tristan und Isolde*, a type which was regarded in the later nineteenth century as the paradigm of a musical idea in the emphatic sense of the word, is not subject to the laws governing the distinction between "open" and "closed" syntactic structures; the usual categories do not apply to it. On the one hand these motives come to an end without a perfect or imperfect cadence, harmonically undetermined, they suggest that more is to follow. On the other hand their rhythmic outlines are so clear-cut that continuation is unnecessary as a means of giving them syntactic sense or identity. Thus the motive is neither a complete period in itself, nor will it tolerate the construction of a consequent clause to make it up to a period. The idea that the Yearning motive in *Tristan* needs a motivically analogous and harmonically complementary clause to "complete" it is inexpressibly trivial; the only suitable means of continuing the motive is sequential repetition, which leads it into tonally remote regions.

## 2. Real sequence and developing variation

The technique of real, "literal" sequence, which effects an interruption or an actual change of the initial key, acquires in Wagner and Liszt—and Liszt's symphonic poems seem to have had some influence on Wagner<sup>7</sup>—a formal significance which is different in principle from the "same" procedure as used by Haydn or Beethoven. In classical symphonic or

7. C. Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas* (Regensburg, 1971), pp. 111ff.

sonata movements, "real" (or modulatory, but not tonal) sequence was used primarily as a developmental technique, one part in the process of musical working-out, which had invariably been preceded by an exposition section where the themes had been stated in a form both tonally and syntactically complete. (The fact that sequential models are drawn into expansive modulatory processes in the course of a development section is closely connected with their melodic formation out of fragments of a theme or of several themes: the dissolution of the harmonic and tonal outlines is felt to be the correlative of melodic and syntactical dissolution. The unrest of the modulation, like the thematic instability, corresponds to the transitional stage reached in the formal process.)

In Wagner and Liszt, on the other hand (and sometimes in Bruckner too, e.g. the beginning of the Sixth Symphony), real sequence is an expository procedure, a means of elaborating a musical idea which in itself—like the Yearning motive in *Tristan*—needs no continuation and would not tolerate conventional "rounding-off" in a closed period. In Liszt's symphonic poem *Hamlet*, the principal section\* of which is no less than 159 bars long, the principal theme (bar 105) is the goal and the outcome of an extended development which relies essentially on acceleration of tempo and transformation of themes. The individual musical ideas are spread out in sequences, either real or modulatory, according to a tonal pattern which seems at times excessively schematic. (In bars 9ff. the model, which is repeated, modulates from C minor to A $\flat$  minor, and the sequence modulates from E $\flat$  minor to B minor; the principal theme is stated complete in B minor and D minor, and fragments are then transposed to A $\flat$  minor, E minor and D $\flat$  major.) It might be thought that the sequential structure is determined and justified at the start by the introductory character of the parts, and in the main theme by the merging of exposition and development (the transposition of the theme from B minor to D minor both prepares and starts the evolution).

The form is unusual: an expansive introduction eventually arrives at a principal theme which, after a brief moment of actual "exposition" in the sonata-form sense, moves on into development. Yet it seems as though the sequential structure is not a product of the unusual form but, on the contrary, the form is a consequence of the sequential structure, which is itself motivated by the brevity of the musical ideas. This lends more support to the theory that conceptions of musical form are based, in each era, on the characteristic types of thematic material, of melodic invention, than to the opposing notion, that thematic types are produced by formal ideas.

It would be wrong to dismiss the change in the function of modulatory sequence from a developmental technique to an expositional technique as an event of merely peripheral significance in the history of composition. Changes in the functions of musical techniques are historically of no less (even if less apparent) importance than the substantial, material developments—such as the growing prominence of chromaticism and the exploration of remoter tonal regions—which are normally regarded as the signs of musical progress in the nineteenth century. If the importance of a change is measured in terms of its influence on musical form, understood as the sum of the associations between all the elements in a composition, it is by no means possible to assert *a priori* that the invasion of expositional processes by modulatory sequence had a less profound effect than the chromaticization of harmony.

In Wagner and Liszt the change in the function of real, modulatory sequence is the formal outcome of the kind of thematic writing epitomized by the leitmotiv, which does not permit the formation of regular periods or submit to the regulations of large-scale metrical patterns. Brahms, faced like them with the difficulties caused by the concision of the basic thematic substance under the pressure of the all-pervading insistence on originality, sought a different solution in the procedure that Schoenberg was to call "develop-

ing variation." The latent unity of the music of the age is demonstrated by the fact that essentially the same problem faced Wagner, Liszt and Brahms; it is not reflected in stylistic unity or uniformity, however, since individual stylistic traits, which develop in the course of working out solutions, are not contingent on separate initial problems. The difference between these composers is discovered in the methods which they employed to resolve or annul the discrepancy between the narrow dimensions of thematic ideas and the tendency towards large, expansive, monumental forms: a tendency that Brahms the symphonist—an aspiring symphonist even in the structure of his chamber music—shared with Wagner the composer of music dramas. Real (modulatory) sequence and developing variation are alternatives to each other in practical musical terms, without mutually excluding each other in principle. As expositional procedures they can be said to represent the practices of what Franz Brendel in 1859 dubbed the "New German" school of composition on the one hand and the "conservatives" on the other (although, as the progressive consequences that Schoenberg drew from Brahms's techniques demonstrate, the latter were by no means as backward-looking as may have appeared in 1870 or 1880).

In his own way Brahms was as much a "musical miniaturist" as Wagner and Liszt, nurturing the same ambitions to use large, all-embracing, "Beethovenian" forms. The serenades and the First Piano Concerto are milestones on his way towards the symphony, the monumental demands of which he did not feel himself ready to meet for another two decades. Beginning with thematic substance that was reduced—one might almost say shrunk—to the utmost, he had to evolve a technique of formal elaboration which would carry over wide spans without subsiding into vacuous academic discursiveness.

The use Brahms made of developing variation as an expositional procedure (that is, in a formal function similar to that of modulatory sequence in Wagner and Liszt) is exem-

plified in the first movement of the G minor Piano Quartet op. 25. The material of the principal section (bars 1–27) derives from two motives of the utmost brevity and, in themselves, no great significance: the first consists of four notes, the second of two. The first part of the theme is based on the motivic shape which appears as D–B $\flat$ –F $\sharp$ –G in bar 1, transposed in bar 5, and freely inverted, either as in bars 2–3 and 6–8, or with the two middle notes played simultaneously (bar 4: F $\sharp$ –C $\sharp$ –E–D):



The second part of the theme consists of nothing more than a descending second, which is repeated sequentially and imitatively (bars 11–13) and appears in all manner of rhythmic shapes: in half-notes (bars 11–13, 20) and dotted half-notes (bars 17–18), in eighth-notes (bars 13–15) and in quarters (bars 15–16). Compositional economy, the building of musical interest out of minimal capital, was taken to extremes by Brahms.

[snip]

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### 3. "Musical prose" and "endless melody"

The shrinking of thematic ideas created problems for composers all the greater because it coincided with the later nineteenth century's obsession with ever larger forms. This was a tendency for which it is hard to find inherent historical musical reasons, so an explanation must be sought in social

and cultural history. (That is not to say that interpretation on socio-historical lines should, as a matter of principle, take over where the history of compositional procedures breaks off: in one sense each offers an alternative to the other, but there is also a stage at which one approach is transformed into the other.) The fact that thematic material was reduced during the course of the nineteenth century from the period to the motive was the result, as has been said, of the principle that a musical idea, to be worthy of the name, had to be original and meaningful throughout; a platitude lost the aesthetic right to exist that it was still allowed to enjoy as a component in a larger figure in Beethoven (in spite of the dominance of the doctrine of originality). Particles that lacked any special melodic character or content, but met a functional need insofar as they rounded off a musical idea to bring a phrase or a period to a formal conclusion, could no longer be tolerated. Such aesthetic rigor was linked with the emphasis that the age of romanticism, with its cult of genius, laid on inspiration, but it threatened to undermine traditional musical syntax and the regular periodic structure which provided the framework of musical form—that is, of form conceived of as a large-scale metrical pattern. "Quadratic compositional construction," as Wagner scornfully called it—in a failure to appreciate the architectural nature of a formal principle based on the idea of balance, a principle which Alfred Lorenz wrongly asserted to be the "secret" of Wagnerian form—is scarcely imaginable without some melodic filling-out.

In an essay with the provocative title "Brahms the Progressive," Arnold Schoenberg, whose initiation of the atonal techniques of the New Music in 1908 signified not only a break with the past but also, and simultaneously, one of the ultimate consequences of the compositional trends of the nineteenth century, spoke of "musical prose."<sup>8</sup> The term

8. A. Schoenberg, *Style and Idea* (New York, 1950), p. 72 [2d ed., 1976, p. 415]; cf. also Dahlhaus, "Musikalische Prosa," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, vol. 125 (1964): 176 ff.

should make it plain that the rhythmic and metrical irregularity of which the New Music was accused—and which was as great a hindrance to its acceptance as atonal harmony<sup>9</sup>—was not a sign of wanton destructiveness but the necessary outcome when composers undertook to express a musical idea directly, without circumlocution or ornament. (Schoenberg shared Adolf Loos's hostility towards ornamentation.) Periodic structure, the musical equivalent of "verse" form, is open to the charge of creating opportunities for empty rhetoric and interpolations which express little or nothing. Melody, as popularly conceived, is characterized above all by rhythmic regularity, by the use of symmetry and repetition: this was a "formula," in opposition to which Schoenberg set up the musical "idea," which is expressed "like prose" (*prosaisch*). "This is what musical prose should be—a direct and straightforward presentation of ideas, without any patchwork, without mere padding and empty repetitions."<sup>10</sup> The traditions of which Schoenberg was the continuer and which he took to their ultimate consequences were those of the nineteenth century; this is his justification for applying to earlier works the categories that doubtless originated in his own compositional experiences although he developed them in analysing Brahms and Mozart. These categories represent an extreme statement of their case and therefore should not always be taken literally, but some of the essential facts and associations in nineteenth-century music cannot be revealed or explained by any other means.

The rejection of what were felt to be empty melodic formulas and the consequent tendency towards rhythmic and metric irregularity (that is, the recoil from both symmetrical periods and the filling-out necessary if symmetry was to be achieved) are closely connected with the conception of melody for which, in the essay *Music of the Future*, Wagner invented the term "endless melody."<sup>11</sup> The concept's sub-

9. A. Berg, "Warum ist Schönbergs Musik so schwer verständlich," in W. Reich, *Alban Berg* (Vienna, 1937), pp. 142ff.

10. Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, p. 72 [p. 415].

11. Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:130.

sequent terminological career obviously owes less to a precise understanding of its original meaning than to the vague associations that have attached themselves to it.<sup>12</sup> Bemused by the word "endless," people have forgotten to enquire what Wagner understood by "melody."

In Wagner's vocabulary "melody" is primarily an aesthetic category, not a technical compositional one: what is musically eloquent and meaningful is "melodic" in this positive sense, what is formulaic and inexpressive is "unmelodic." Schoenberg's reputedly "unmelodic" musical language is consistently "melodic" by Wagner's criteria. A melody is "narrow" (to use the terminology of *Music of the Future* again) if the truly melodic is forever breaking off, as in Italian opera, to be replaced by "unmelodic" filling-out. In Wagner's historico-aesthetic scheme of things, Italian opera, as exemplified by Rossini, is at the opposite pole to the symphonic writing of Beethoven. (In a context where Italian opera is not the subject under discussion it is permissible to ignore the stylistic dualism of the nineteenth century, that is, to overlook the fact that it makes no sense historically to judge the tradition of Rossini by the criteria of the Beethovenian tradition, or vice versa.) Wagner was convinced that any listener whose musical sensibilities had not been blunted by too much "narrow" operatic melody of the kind that amateur enthusiasts took for the quintessence of melody was bound to "acknowledge that every note in the harmony, yea, every pause in the rhythm [in a symphony by Beethoven] has melodic significance."<sup>13</sup> The principle of expression, of eloquence (*das redende Prinzip*) is what determines Wagner's concept of melody.<sup>14</sup> He once demonstrated this concept to Felix Draeseke by singing as much as he could of the first movement of the *Eroica* before he ran out

12. F. Reckow, "Unendliche Melodie," in *Handwörterbuch der musikalischen Terminologie* (Wiesbaden, 1973).

13. Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:127 (*Zukunftsmusik*).

14. A. Schering, "Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach und das 'redende Prinzip' in der Musik," in *Vom musikalischen Kunstwerk*, 2d ed. (Leipzig, 1951), pp. 213ff.

of breath, and judged by that criterion the movement, since not a note of it is superfluous or inexpressive, is indeed "nothing other than a single, perfectly coherent melody."<sup>15</sup>

The single, uninterrupted melody that Wagner found embodied in Beethoven's symphonies is a forerunner, even the prototype, of the "endless melody" that he himself realized in music drama. (The essential difference between Beethoven's works and his own, as Wagner saw it, lies in the transition from the indeterminate "meaning" of the melody in Beethoven to the meaning it derives from the drama in Wagner.) Thus the primary meaning of the term "endless melody," which is often misused and should by no means be treated exclusively as a technical expression, is not that the parts of a work flow into each other without caesuras but that every note has meaning, that the melody is language and not empty sound. The technical characteristic, the absence of formal cadences, is merely a consequence of the aesthetic factor: cadences are regarded as formulas, syntactic but not semantic components—in short, they express nothing and are therefore to be avoided or concealed.

There would seem to be no way of accommodating the idea of "endless melody" to the precarious concision that we have seen to be characteristic of melodic ideas in the music of the later nineteenth century, but if we ignore terminological externals, we can recognize that the former is the correlative of the latter. Their all-important common premise is a rejection of ornament and filling-out. In an age in which musical form had ceased to be regarded primarily as a matter of large-scale metrical patterns, the formal function carried out previously by ornamentation and filling-out was almost forgotten.

If, in the words of Wagner's dictum, "an endless melody" has to be "perfectly coherent," it means that the individual musical events and shapes ought to proceed out of each other, instead of being arrayed side by side, linked by mean-

15. Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:127 (*Zukunftsmusik*).

ingless padding and with no inner relationships. Brahms, sharing Wagner's concern to "justify" musical processes, would certainly have endorsed his postulate. Freedom from inconsequentiality can either be a matter of formal logic, as in Brahms's chamber music, or, as in Wagner's music dramas, it can obey a logic transmitted primarily (though not solely) by "content." (The invention of a polarity between "formalism" on the one hand and "the aesthetic theory of content" on the other was a typical piece of nineteenth-century silliness and created a spurious dogmatic conflict between parties, both of which shared a concern with the whole nature of music. The dialectics of form and content and the historical shifts in the definitions of the two terms mean that the conflict could at best be a matter of altering the emphasis on one or the other. Nevertheless, the polarity has its uses in furnishing a provisional means of identifying tendencies in formal creative processes which are bound up with differences between genres.)

An inherent postulate of the idea of "endless melody" is that throughout the course of a piece of music each instant will possess a "significance" equal to that of every other instant. This resulted in the shrinking of the thematic period—part of which was necessarily formulaic in composition—to the short, as it were "prose-like," shape of the individual musical idea. And the apparently mutually contradictory factors, brevity and endlessness, can be reconciled—on the basis of their common aesthetic premise—so long as the composer succeeds in mediating between the individual parts and the whole, between the original idea and the wide span of his form. But in the later nineteenth century opinions about the methods of mediation—the structural principles—adopted by composers were colored by aesthetic prejudices and partiality, which blinded the adherents of both sides to the fact that the composers' problems were fundamentally the same. The primarily "formal" elaboration of musical ideas in Brahms was regarded by those Wagnerians hostile to him not as a process in which

one could acknowledge the "melodic significance" of every note but as inexpressive musical academicism. Similarly, the "formalists" in the anti-Wagner camp would not acknowledge that the role played by "content" in linking a series of leitmotifs constituted melodic continuity. With their restricted concept of music as something to which "drama" or a "program" could only be an external, non-musical addition, they regarded the concatenation of motives which sometimes diverged abruptly from each other as mere cobbling.

But if the historian keeps aloof from the partisan squabbles of the later nineteenth century and, in obedience to the maxim that every musical phenomenon must be interpreted in the light of its own premises, recognizes that formal development in Brahms is the development of ideas (not the mechanical spinning of formulas) and, conversely, that the developments in Wagner which are transmitted by content are developing ideas (and not mere cobbling), he will perceive that the compositional issue that lies beyond the aesthetic, stylistic and formal cruxes is the same. Wagner and Liszt, no less than Brahms, conceived of music as discourse in sound, in which every detail should be an original idea (or the outcome of one) and the whole a logically constructed chain, every link justified by what has preceded it.

As he wrote with polemical emphasis in *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, Nietzsche saw "endless melody" as something which threatened to dissolve rhythm, by which he understood the perceptible ordering of musical motion, not merely durational structure. While earlier music walked or danced the new music tried to "float" or "hover." "'Endless melody' sets out to disrupt all regularity of duration and accent, and in doing so it makes mock of them."<sup>16</sup>

Musical verse-form, the regular period composed symmetrically of antecedent and consequent clauses, was dissolved in Wagner's music dramas from *Das Rheingold* on, if

16. Nietzsche, *Werke*, 2:1043.

not into prose then into a kind of *vers libre* (the upsurge of which in French poetry cannot be wholly unconnected with the Symbolists' enthusiasm for Wagner). The decline of traditional musical syntax did endanger that classical or classico-romantic concept of musical form to which periodic structure—the relation of "proposition" (*Aufstellung*) and "response" (*Beantwortung*), to use Hugo Riemann's terms—was fundamental. The balance of complementary parts—from the relationship between upbeats and downbeats to the answering of an antecedent clause by a consequent, from the relationship between exposition and development within one subject group to the contrasts between subject groups as a whole—was the fundamental principle of musical form in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The transition to "logical" form, form determined by the development of musical ideas, is half accomplished in Beethoven; he did not, however, jettison architectural form altogether but held the divergent principles poised in a precarious balance. Even in Wagner's *Lohengrin*, which the composer was terminologically and historically quite correct to call a "romantic opera" and not a music drama, the music consists for long stretches at a time of periods, the regularity of which ensures formal coherence.<sup>17</sup>

With the dissolution of regular periodic structure, music drama from *Das Rheingold* onwards used in its place a much more fully developed leitmotivic technique. Leitmotifs had already been used in *Lohengrin* to emphasize and comment musically on isolated elements in the drama, but now they were spread over entire works in a dense network of motivic relationships: that is, the technique assumed the function of creating the musical form. It took a long time for anyone to acknowledge that musical form can be a polythematic network, a "web" or "woven fabric" (*Gewebe*) as Wagner called it himself, instead of having to be either architectural or the extended elaboration of a few thematic ideas. For didactic

17. Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas*, pp. 50ff.



reasons, theorists of form tended always to favor simpler kinds of schematicism, and even in the 1920s Alfred Lorenz,<sup>18</sup> intending to refute the incessantly repeated charge that Wagner's music was amorphous, expounded what he regarded as the "architectural" principles underlying Wagner's form: for the most part these "principles" are figments of Lorenz's own imagination, conjured up in apologetic zeal.<sup>19</sup> There is as much aesthetic virtue in "reticulation" as in "grouping" and "elaboration" as means of creating musical form.

Thus leitmotivic technique plays a formal, structural role in Wagner equivalent to that of regular periodic structure in other music: the leitmotifs create the framework of the form instead of being interpolated, for dramaturgical reasons, into a structure that rests on other foundations. The replacement of the one formal principle by the other marks the transition from "romantic opera" to "music drama." (In a brief historiographic outline it is hardly necessary to say that an "ideal type" is here being constructed to describe a process which was far more complex in musico-historical reality; that is, it is not being claimed that leitmotivic technique plays no structural part at all in *Lohengrin*, nor that there is not one regular period in *Das Rheingold*. Groups of four and eight bars are not, of course, banished from the *Ring*: they are not even particularly infrequent, but they no longer provide the framework of the musical form as they did in *Lohengrin*.) Differentiation between regular and irregular syntax almost ceases to be of any formal importance or to exert any formal influence in the *Ring*; one could very well make an analogy with the "emancipation of dissonance" and speak of the emancipation of the metrically irregular phrase—which hereupon ceases to be irregular:

18. A. Lorenz, *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner*, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1924–33).

19. Dahlhaus, "Formprinzipien in Wagners 'Ring des Nibelungen'," in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Oper*, ed. H. Becker (Regensburg, 1969), pp. 95ff.

whereas irregularity was previously an exception to a norm of regularity, a license, the purpose of which was understandable only by reference to that norm, emancipated irregularity exists in its own right. The "emancipation" does not mean that there is no longer any difference to be discerned between consonance and dissonance, or between "quadratic" and "non-quadratic" syntax, only that the difference is no longer an integral part of the musical structure: it exists, but it is no longer an element in the construction of the form. When there is continual alternation of "quadratic" and "non-quadratic" phrases—and the latter are not such as can be reduced to fit into quadratic structure—they do not add up to make periodic groups conforming to a large-scale metrical pattern; the effect of the "quadratic" phrases remains locked in the moment.

It is mistaken to suggest that the periodic framework of classical form was preserved intact by the "classicist" Brahms. Although his conservative tendencies can scarcely be denied, they do not mean that he revered the fundamentals of tradition while making modifications in some of the details, but rather that he radically rethought the traditional principles in the altered circumstances of the second half of the nineteenth century. Sonata form takes on a different meaning from the one it originally had when motivic development, the elaboration of thematic ideas, becomes the primary structural principle, in place of the pattern of key relationships and the construction of symmetrical groups. The form is "conserved," but by means which eventually made possible Schoenberg's development of atonal sonata form.

The principle of originality which was the reason for the brevity of musical ideas resulted, in the music of Brahms, in the technique of developing variation, used as a means not only of development but also of exposition. The opening of the B major Trio op. 8 is paradigmatic. The essential thematic idea is given in bars 1–2; bars 3–4 are instantly recognizable as being related by inversion to bars 1–2; bars 5–8

transpose the melody of bars 1–4 up a third with a modification in bar 8; and in bars 9–10 material derived from bars 6 and 7 is placed at the beginning of a phrase, so that what were originally the second and third bars in the metrical structure are transformed into the first and second—this is variation achieved by metrical means. Those who, in the heat of musico-aesthetic battle, decried Brahms's "formal" motivic development as "empty" or "poverty-stricken" in content were quite wrong, however. It is precisely the consequences, the events to which it leads, that first give color and character to the modest little motive that opens op. 8 and, far from being overstretched in the process of development, it expands accordingly. The emphasis given by the transposition in bars 5–8 and the intervention of the metrical variation in bars 9–10 are expressive traits which are the result of the motivic evolution, that is, of a "formal" procedure. (See example below.)

Allegro con brio

The spinning of broad melodic paragraphs out of one small motive can become monotonous, however, no matter how variously the material is presented, unless it is alleviated and balanced by constant harmonic variety. The enrichment of the fundamental bass is the correlative, both technically and aesthetically, of developing variation. (In op. 8 Brahms begins with a persistent pedal point and does not begin to enrich the harmony until bars 17–20, when the effect is explosive; this is a special form of differentiation, not simplicity. The pedal point does not represent further simplification of harmonies that are poor in themselves but complication—like a kind of additional dissonance.) However, the enrichment of harmony by increasing the number of degrees in regular use endangers periodic structure as it was understood in about 1800, when its harmonic foundations were simple cadential models such as I–V–V–I or I–(V)II–V–I. (Whether auxiliary degrees and secondary dominants and subdominants are integrated into the model or not, whether they differentiate the pattern or disrupt it and finally destroy it, depends to no small degree on the metrical position of the chord; harmonic analysis is an abstract procedure if no reference is made to the metrical function of the chord.) It is not impossible to encase enriched harmony in a regular periodic structure; as some works by Reger demonstrate, it can be done with violent imperfect and perfect cadences, but the procedure is self-defeating as long as the technical and aesthetic criterion is the rule that development of all the elements of the composition should be analogous.<sup>20</sup> In order to avoid discrepancies between harmony and syntax, Brahms often followed the example of Bach and constructed tripartite groups which owe their form not to the correspondence (motivic analogy and harmonic contrast) of antecedent and consequent clauses but to the evolution of an initial phrase by means of a harmonically enriched developmental passage, not tied down to a quadratic structure, which concludes with a cadential

20. Dahlhaus, *Analyse und Werturteil* (Mainz, 1970), pp. 59ff.

epilogue.<sup>21</sup> (The principal theme of op. 25 is tripartite: the initial phrase comprises bars 1–10, the evolution bars 11–20, and the epilogue, which refers back to the initial phrase without there being any question of ternary form, bars 21–27; but the evolution differs from the typical Bachian procedure of a series of sequences and comes about, as has been shown [p. 49], through the uncommonly differentiated development of a two-note motive, the descending second.) This is not the restoration of something that belongs to the past; it is a derivation or an analogy made under fundamentally different historical conditions.

Different—even contradictory—as the solutions worked out by Brahms on the one hand and by Wagner and Liszt on the other were, it is surely beyond question that their initial problem was the same, arising from the difficulty of reconciling constricted melodic ideas with the desire to work in large forms and from the undermining of classical form by the technical consequences of the brevity of the thematic substance. It is the sameness of the problem which marks the second half of the nineteenth century as an essentially unified epoch in musical history, in spite of the stylistic contrasts it embraced.

[snip]

21. W. Fischer, "Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Wiener klassischen Stils," *Studien zur Musikwissenschaft* 3 (1915): 24–84.

remote degrees and regions in one secure tonic to which modulations can always be related, but a "wandering" or "floating" tonality.<sup>26</sup> The fragmentation of classical tonality, with its ability to delineate form across wide spans, into brief tonal particles which follow each other in line, connected like links in a chain rather than assembled round a common center, by no means represents aesthetic weakness, the relinquishment of harmonic function; it is rather the precise correlative of a sense of form which is concerned less with the clearly perceptible grouping of separate parts than with the weaving of an ever denser network of motivic relationships. Wagner envisaged musical form as resembling a woven fabric, as he described it in *Music of the Future*,<sup>27</sup> not an architectural structure. One could refer to it as a dynamic form, which draws the listener into it during its course, whereas one observes an architectural form from the outside. When the listener is sufficiently aware of classical form, all the musical events of a movement can ultimately be perceived in an imaginary simultaneity.

In contrast the tonal centrality created by the enrichment of the fundamental bass and regional connections in the music of Brahms, the complementarity of differentiation and correspondence, express an idea of form that strives for complete and absolute integration—not the integration that comes as a matter of course from following a plan prepared in advance, but integration that must be won, often by force, from recalcitrant material. The structural role of harmony in Brahms is never so much in evidence as where he appears to be adopting Wagnerian and Lisztian expositional procedures but then transmutes them to serve his own idea of form.

The opening of the G minor Rhapsody for piano op. 79, no. 2, appears at first to be a paradigmatic example of the kind of "wandering" or "floating" tonality that is more characteristic of Wagner or Liszt than of Brahms. The first period is tonally unstable, containing fragmentary allusions

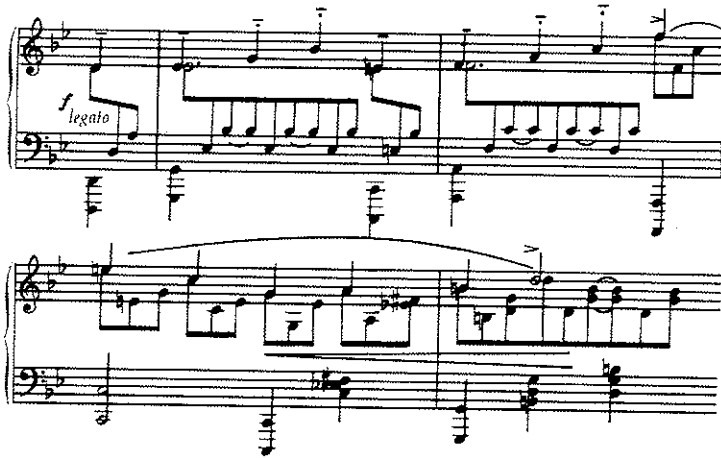
26. Schoenberg, *Harmonielehre*, p. 430 [*Theory of Harmony*, p. 383].

27. Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:131f.

[snip]

The tonality characteristic of Wagner, unlike that of Brahms, is not an "expanded," centripetal one, integrating

to D minor: I–IIIN (I merely an upbeat); to F major: V–I, and to G major: IV–VII–I.



It is not imperative but it is possible to relate all these tonal fragments to G minor: for one thing G minor is, so to speak, their common denominator, and for another the chromatic motion through the fourth, D–E $\flat$ –E–F–F $\sharp$ –G, pointing towards G minor, provides the melodic framework (Heinrich Schenker would have called it an *Urlinie*, if he had permitted an ascending *Urlinie*) of the chordal succession. However, the fact that it continues in bars 5–8 as a real sequence transposed a major third upwards disturbs the listener's consciousness of the tonality: centrality has been replaced by linearity. At the end of the principal thematic group (the rhapsody is in sonata form) there is a faint suggestion of G minor (bars 11–12) as a chromatic variant of the G major of bars 9–10; the second subject group is in the key of the dominant, D minor. If the principal key is merely hinted at in the exposition section, it is fully expounded, contrary to convention, in the development section (bars 61–85).

The sequential construction and the tonal instability of the opening spring from the paradoxical formal concept of a sonata-form rhapsody. To begin with, the tonality is allowed

to float in a rhapsodic fashion, later it is pinned down by the conventions of sonata form.

Although the principal subject group recalls the expositional procedures of Wagner and Liszt in its syntax and tonality—and in the correlation of sequential structure and “wandering” tonality—it must bear a different interpretation from what would be appropriate in a music drama or a symphonic poem. The fact that G minor can be taken for the common denominator of the tonal fragments in bars 1–4 of the rhapsody is of essential importance for considerations of musical form. (Schoenberg's analogous interpretation of the eight-bar passage from Act I of *Tristan*—the B minor that Schoenberg posited as the underlying tonic is also a common tonal denominator—was wrong, as has been shown, insofar as it mistook the formal nature of the period.) The opening of the rhapsody, at first sight “roving”—to use Schoenberg's alternative to “wandering”—in obedience to no laws, demands to be interpreted tonally because the work is in sonata form (in the nineteenth century sonata form became virtually second nature to listeners with any sense of form). After the advent of the second subject group, which is in the dominant (to be more precise: the key of which is unambiguous and is recognized as the dominant because experience has taught that second subjects are normally in the dominant), it is possible to look back and recognize the opening as the principal subject group, and the scattered suggestions of G minor coalesce, under the influence of formal awareness, to form a tonic. The listener's understanding and recognition of formal conventions intervene in his grasp of the harmony; “rhapsody” is made subject to “sonata form.”

## 5. The “individualization” of harmony

In the sonata, harmony and rhythm are the pre-eminent structural forces, the themes are the material and in the classical sonata they are of less value. There is a real distinction to be made here between an active and a passive role for thematic

material, dominant and active in fugue, subservient and suffering—even to the point of suffering deprivation—in the sonata, while harmony and rhythm have priority.<sup>28</sup>

The kind of musical form outlined here by August Halm is the "architectural" variety based on the equilibrium of the parts—which is all that Halm means in this passage by "rhythm"; the equilibrium is observed in all stages of construction, from single bars to the outline of entire movements. (Whether the thesis is valid for the "sonata" in general—for the type, divorced from any particular historical manifestation, whether it applies equally to Beethoven's sonata form, of which Halm was thinking in the passage quoted, and to Mozart's, of which Halm held a low opinion; and whether the release of the themes from structural obligations in Mozartian sonata form did not actually enhance the melodic growth rather than cause it "deprivation"—these are questions that need not be answered here: by his equivocal use of the word "value" Halm equates the function fulfilled by an element of musical form with its aesthetic rank.)

The decline of "quadratic" syntax, the trend towards "musical prose" in the later nineteenth century, was the reverse face, or correlative, of a change in the function of musical thematic writing, which now took the place of "harmony and rhythm" as the primary structural principle (and in the twentieth century, in the music of Schoenberg, became the only structural principle). In order to do justice to the changed musico-historical circumstances, Halm's formula has to be reversed. The loss of structural significance suffered by rhythm (syntax) and harmony did not mean, however, that they became weaker or poorer in themselves but quite the contrary, they became richer. The breakdown or dissolution of quadratic rhythmic (syntactic) structure introduces greater subtlety (not in function but in substance—in respect of the isolated musical event and its

28. A. Halm, *Von zwei Kulturen der Musik*, 3d ed. (Stuttgart, 1947), p. 117.

momentary effect): since the musical structure is no longer determined primarily by the equilibrium of complementary (whether analogous or contrasting) elements, symmetry is no longer obligatory. (It must be admitted that aesthetic quality can suffer if irregular phrases are regarded as self-sufficient, irreducible entities rather than as modifications and transitional forms within a "quadratic" framework: subtlety in one direction is purchased by the loss of refinement in another.) And just as the tendency towards the "direct," prose-like formulation of musical ideas, untrammelled by the need for symmetry, enabled syntax to break free of regular, strophic structures, so harmony, too, was liberated from the traditional formulas and conventions, reused incessantly with occasional minor modifications, which could hardly be avoided so long as harmony had an important structural function to fulfill, as defined by Halm.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century simple patterns of key relationships, constructed on cadential models and with a recurrent generic similarity, provided the basis of all musical forms. But in the second half of the century, in the music of Wagner and Liszt—and in that of Brahms too in some respects—the role of harmony was almost completely reversed. In Wagnerian harmony, with its reliance on chromatic alteration and its consequent tendency towards "wandering" or "floating" tonality (that is, a linear succession of fragmentary allusions to keys), the accent falls on harmonic details—on single chords or unusual progressions—and there is such a degree of differentiation in the compositional technique (the interrelationship of harmony and instrumentation) that it is no exaggeration to speak of an individualization of harmony, which is hardly less important than that of thematic and motivic material. Some harmonic progressions and even some individual chords in Wagner have the same significance as a leitmotiv: the "mystic chord" in *Parsifal*, the expressive and allegorical functions of which were described by Alfred Lorenz,<sup>29</sup> or the

29. Lorenz, *Der musikalische Aufbau von Richard Wagners "Parsifal"* [*Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner*, vol. 4], pp. 29ff.

major seventh chord which provides the greater part of the substance of the Day motive in *Tristan*. Relieved of the responsibility for the large-scale formal structures, the harmony serves instead to establish the unique identity of one instant in the music.

The structural function and the individualization of harmony represent alternatives which can, in particular cases, be reconciled. It is characteristic of Brahms—"the conservative" whom Schoenberg nevertheless hailed as "the progressive"—that on the one hand, as the contemporary of Wagner and Liszt, he strove to give harmonic details "unique identity," while on the other hand, as a composer who had made the tradition of Beethoven his own by exploring it from within, he did not wish to sacrifice the structural function that tonal harmony could perform over a wide expanse. There are times when Brahms succeeds not merely in preserving a precarious balance between the two contradictory tendencies but in actually making one of them the natural outcome of the other.

The D minor Piano Concerto op. 15 begins with an expansive and harmonically exploratory sequential passage (bars 1–24), at first sight analogous to the openings of Wagner's *Tristan* prelude and Liszt's *Hamlet*. But the purpose of sequential writing is different in Brahms from what it is in Wagner or Liszt. The opening of *Tristan* is harmonically "centrifugal": it is true that, in spite of the modulation of the sequences into tonally remote regions, one senses a relation to an A minor which nonetheless remains unheard, but all the time the movement is away from any center. But although the Brahms op. 15 begins on the tonal periphery the music's sole ambition is to reach its center (it does so in bar 25, but the tonality is established tentatively rather than triumphantly): the harmony is "centripetal."

A precedent for this procedure of establishing the tonic by approaching it from the outside inwards is to be found in the first subject of Beethoven's Piano Sonata op. 53, the "Waldstein." But in Brahms the harmonic details go far beyond the

simple cadential schema followed by Beethoven. The first chord, prolonged over no fewer than ten bars, seems at first to be the inversion of a foreign dominant seventh chord (D–F–A<sub>b</sub>–B<sub>b</sub>), but the context, its position before the first inversion of the true dominant seventh (C<sub>#</sub>–E–G–A), makes it quite clear (even if only retrospectively) that it is the inversion of the augmented sixth chord (i.e. D–F–G<sub>#</sub>–B<sub>b</sub>): this is a chord which, according to the letter of convention, cannot be inverted, so its inversion signifies an individualization of the harmony. Understood as D–F–G<sub>#</sub>–B<sub>b</sub>, the first chord acquires a "unique identity," which it owes to its function in the gradual presentation or establishment of the tonic.

The dominance of the idea of originality before all else affected even the use of harmony, which underwent a radical alteration in its formal significance during the later nineteenth century. The emphasis shifted from the general and structural to the particular and instantaneous, from providing a framework, which was its principal function in Mozart and, still, in Beethoven, to the individual characterization of detail, the harmonic "idea." That Brahms nonetheless achieved integration of tonality and syntax—partly, it must be admitted, through the construction of tripartite groups, remotely analogous to Bach's typical continuation procedure, that is, not always derived from the classical model of symmetrical periodic structure—is the outcome of "conservative" resistance to the "tendency of the material," as Adorno would call it. Brahms must surely have felt that tendency and he was sometimes able to do it justice, as at the beginning of his op. 15, where he individualized the harmony by working with (rather than against) formal harmonic functions.

## 6. Conclusion

So long as one is not afraid of making broad generalizations, fastening on the salient points in tendencies and constructing "ideal types"—and the writing of any kind of history

would be severely impeded if methods which have a footing in the empirical but venture beyond its frontiers are to be condemned on principle—it becomes clear that the music of the middle and later nineteenth century is conditioned by the close and intricate relationship between the aesthetic principles and the technical compositional issues that have been examined in the foregoing. These are the pre-eminence of originality, the shrinking of thematic material in inverse proportion to the ambition to create larger forms, the recession of classical periodic structures and of architectural methods of construction based on the principle of equilibrium and exemplified in large-scale metrical patterns, the conversion of developmental techniques like developing variation and real, modulatory sequence to expositional uses, and finally the "individualization" of harmony, which was now liable to produce either superabundant chromaticism resulting in "floating" or "wandering" tonality or else tonal integrity achieved by means of centripetal harmony and enriched fundamental basses. These factors amount to a problem nexus which provides a single, unified background to the music of the whole epoch, far outweighing the significance of stylistic differences and the partisanship of composers and their adherents.

This is not to deny the existence of "external" factors, or to detract from the significance of the effect they had on the development of music. As has already been said, there is no intrinsic technical explanation in the history of composition for the general trend of the music of the second half of the nineteenth century towards ever larger, monumental forms; and there can be no doubt that a sociological study of the audiences which lent their support variously to the musical and musico-political institution established in Bayreuth<sup>30</sup> and to Brahms's chamber music<sup>31</sup> would be not merely per-

30. W. Schüler, *Der Bayreuther Kreis* (Münster, 1971).

31. K. Stahmer, *Musikalische Formung in soziologischem Bezug: Dargestellt an der instrumentalen Kammermusik von Johannes Brahms* (diss., Kiel University, 1968).

continent: it is urgently needed. That there are social implications in the works themselves, in the very conception of the *Ring* and in the idea of absolute music embodied in the string quartet,<sup>32</sup> cannot seriously be denied, although the prospect of deciphering them is one to daunt any scholar whose ambitions go beyond facile categorizations (such as "bourgeois culture") on the one hand and the construction, on the other, of merely verbal analogies, analogies which rest exclusively on the words and not on the matters that they are supposed to represent.

It is accepted that a history of music which examines the subject primarily from the standpoint of compositional issues is one-sided and requires augmentation. The aesthetic and technical terms of reference are inadequate in their exclusiveness but they are equally essential, as a first stage that must on no account be skipped over. However, while it has always been asserted that the fragmentary nature of such description results in an intolerable distortion of the reality it is intended to describe, because one should encompass the whole in order to grasp the individual detail, there has never been any really illuminating substantiation of the claim. (The fundamental rule of hermeneutics, the platitude that the context must always be taken into consideration, remains a shadowy ideal so long as there is a shortage of suitable criteria to help one to decide in any individual case just how large the context is that one needs to consider if one is to come up with a meaningful explanation or interpretation of one particular phenomenon; in any event, the assumption that the context of musical works is always society as a whole is an exaggeration, dogmatic in origin.) The nexus of aesthetic and technical issues that has been outlined here is only part of the history of music in the later nineteenth century, a subject which cannot adequately be reduced to the history of compositional technique in the period. However, the "totality" invoked by methodologists, sitting in judg-

32. Dahlhaus, "Brahms und die Idee der Kammermusik," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 134/9 (1973): 559ff.



ment on studies that are confined to only one, or some, of the aspects of a historical period, is a demand that has not yet been met, and all its attractions do not amount to a guarantee that it ever can be met to a degree consistent with scholarly requirements.

On the other hand the attempt to discover the common ground underlying the contradictions and differences in the music of the later nineteenth century is by no means an endorsement of the dogmatic claim that what unites, what is common to things is *a priori* more important and has a more general significance than what separates and distinguishes them, that foundations amount to more than the building that rises on them. When trying to comprehend a period in the history of ideas, one must resist the temptation to award the homogeneity of the problems posed priority over the multiplicity of the solutions that were explored, if the only reason for doing so is the powerful tradition that encourages historians to reveal the inner coherence behind the contradictions that rend an epoch. Tracing divergent trends back to their common root is not the only way of relating them to each other comprehensibly: like a primary unity, a polarity can also be understood and explained as an ultimate instance, fundamental, irreducible, and meaningful in itself. So far as the history of music in the later nineteenth century is concerned, however, any eventual need to progress beyond the reconstruction of a fundamental unity of compositional issues underlying the stylistic polarities—in the full expectation of discovering new contradictions in a lower stratum—is not yet in sight.