

1

Wagner and the problematics of “absolute music” in the nineteenth century

Ideas of absolute music

“The advocates of an absolute music obviously don’t know what they’re talking about,” Wagner insisted, somewhat petulantly, in 1857 (the open letter “On Franz Liszt’s Symphonic Poems”), three years after the appearance of Eduard Hanslick’s immediately influential brochure on the subject (V, 191).¹ Perhaps Wagner felt justified in issuing such a summary dismissal of Hanslick’s *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (“On the Beautiful in Music”) and its perceived thesis – the advocacy of “absolute music” – on the grounds of intellectual property, since the phrase appears to have its origins in his own writings rather than with Hanslick. Wagner, it seems, coined the phrase “absolute music” in the course of a programmatic commentary he had devised to accompany his performances of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony for the Dresden Palm Sunday concerts of 1846, foreshadowing his famous historical-philosophical reading of this crucial work in the post-revolutionary “Zurich writings” of 1849–51, particularly *The Art-Work of the Future*.² (The seemingly casual reference to “absolute music” in the 1846 commentary would multiply at an alarming rate, like Wagner’s prose itself, and undergo manifold mutations in the works to follow.) In claiming, in the 1846 commentary on the Ninth, that the instrumental recitative of Beethoven’s finale seemed intent on

¹ All citations of Wagner’s published writings within the text refer by volume and page number to the *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen* (SSD), vols. I–XVI (Leipzig, 1911–16). Volumes I–X are equivalent to the *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* (GSD, vols. I–X [2nd edn, Leipzig, 1887]). References to Cosima Wagner’s diaries, where no text is specifically cited (either in German or in translation), are given as “CWD” followed by date of entry.

² Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig (Chicago, 1989), 18–19. Attention was first drawn to Wagner’s use of the phrase in 1846 by Klaus Kropfing; see Kropfing, *Wagner and Beethoven: Richard Wagner’s Reception of Beethoven* (1974), trans. Peter Palmer (Cambridge, 1991), 115.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41738-9 - Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts

Thomas S. Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wagner and the problematics of "absolute music"*

"transgressing the boundaries of absolute music" (II, 61), Wagner was in fact expressing what was already becoming a widespread critical conviction regarding all of Beethoven's later works and the telos of his oeuvre as a whole (see chapter 2). Although it seems unlikely that this relatively obscure Wagnerian text could have had any significant role in the dissemination of the phrase itself ("absolute music"), the context could not have been more apt: the Ninth Symphony was and remained, of course, the gravitational center of debates about the nature and limits of musical form, expression, autonomy, genre, and meaning throughout the century. And when Wagner penned this soon-to-be-famous phrase, in 1846, this already incipient debate over musical form and meaning was about to inundate the critical landscape to an extent that could scarcely have been predicted – the "thirty-years' war of the music of the future," as Wagner jestingly referred to it in retrospect ("On Operatic Poetry and Composition in Particular," 1879: X, 171).

Just how Wagner hit on the phrase "absolute music" in 1846 is not entirely clear, but the ubiquity of the adjective "absolute" throughout the polemical discourse of *The Art-Work of the Future* and especially *Opera and Drama* certainly suggests the example of Ludwig Feuerbach – the principal philosophical spokesperson for the revolutionary youth of the 1840s ("Young Germany") – whose *Grundsätze einer Philosophie der Zukunft* ("Foundations of a Philosophy of the Future") was an obvious inspiration behind the rhetoric of Wagner's tracts.³ In referring, in *Opera and Drama*, not only to "absolute music," but to a large family of related species (from absolute melody and absolute poetry down to such exotic ones as absolute recitative and absolute opera singer), Wagner deemed the word "absolute" itself sufficient demonstration of the nullity of whatever object it modified. Egoistic phenomena that refused to participate in the greater communal spirit of the age would be refused the nourishment of the progressive world-spirit and left to wither and die: the inevitable mediocrity of all those sonatas, trios, quartets, and symphonies that composers might continue to produce was a pre-ordained consequence of their cultural irrelevance (thus spake Wagner). To this extent, perhaps Wagner's annoyance at the appropriation of "his" phrase by his formalist opponents is understandable. For in the Feuerbachian context of his Zurich writings the predicate "absolute" was a consciously pejorative alternative to the positively value-laden

³ The context of the 1846 Beethoven commentary, on the other hand, has nothing particular to do with Feuerbachian ideas or vocabulary, although Wagner may have already been familiar with these. The subsequent impact of Feuerbach on Wagner's ideas and writings is discussed at some length by Rainer Franke in *Richard Wagners Zürcher Kunstschriften* (Hamburg, 1983), 189–254.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41738-9 - Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts

Thomas S. Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Ideas of absolute music*

predicate “pure” that might otherwise serve here, in the formulation “pure instrumental music” – a phrase that had, in fact, been in circulation since at least the beginning of the century. (Hanslick, incidentally, combined both – as “die reine, absolute Tonkunst” – in the unique instance of that term within his book.)⁴

But in 1857 (“On Franz Liszt’s Symphonic Poems”) Wagner found himself in the awkward position of trying to deny the very existence of a phenomenon he had carried on about at such length in *Opera and Drama*. (Hence, perhaps, the curtness of the riposte.) “Absolute music” is an epistemological chimera, he now insists. And all those sonatas, quartets, and symphonies, we might ask – were they not just mediocre, but altogether illusory? Here, of course, Wagner has recourse to another argument from the Zurich writings, his thesis that all instrumental and operatic forms are elaborations of simple, pre-artistic song and dance. According to Wagner’s rather generalized intuitions, everything that we are tempted to consider as “purely musical form” is ultimately dependent on the external shaping forces that dictate music’s tempos, rhythms, and phrasing – and, by extension, the “large-scale rhythm” (*Rhythmus im Großen*) which even Hanslick understood as the foundation of music’s perceptible forms.⁵ Supposedly abstract, autonomous musical form, Wagner argued (rather presciently), is in fact a function of the body, its instinctive binary gestural rhythms and symmetries, or else it inscribes patterns of social behavior: ritualized courtship, as dialogic interaction of gendered principles, for example. Wagner was thus speaking from the lofty perspective of his own, privately intuited musical-anthropological *Geschichtsphilosophie*, an imagined historical genesis of musical forms, where Hanslick (or other “formalists”) were taking a more pragmatic view of music in its present condition – that for all practical purposes, music had become fundamentally abstract and autonomous.

Wagner’s testy response to Hanslick (or the “advocates of an absolute music”) in the 1857 open letter is not so much evidence of irreconcilable premises as it is of his fundamentally problematic relationship to the very concept of absolute music, a persistent cognitive dissonance in Wagner’s thought that Dahlhaus has referred to as the “twofold truth” of his aesthetic credo.⁶ A traditional view of Wagner’s aesthetics, as revealed in the prose writings, has posited a kind of conversion to a metaphysics of

⁴ Eduard Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (Leipzig, 1854), 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32. Cf. Carl Dahlhaus, “Eduard Hanslick und der musikalische Formbegriff,” *Die Musikforschung* 20 (1967), 145–53.

⁶ “The Twofold Truth in Wagner’s Aesthetics: Nietzsche’s Fragment ‘On Music and Words,’” in *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall and Arnold Whittall (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), 19–39.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41738-9 - Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts

Thomas S. Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wagner and the problematics of "absolute music"*

absolute music under the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* ("The World as Will and Representation"), which Wagner first discovered in 1854, the same year in which Hanslick's book appeared. It is sometimes supposed that this forceful encounter with Schopenhauer's ideas had an immediate impact on Wagner's view of the metaphysical and essentially autonomous dignity of music, although there is scarcely any evidence of such a sudden and conscious aesthetic conversion.⁷ (The unexceptional rhetorical paean to music as "the highest, most redeeming art" in the letter "On Liszt's Symphonic Poems" [V, 191], sometimes cited as evidence, is not especially convincing.) According to another, fairly traditional view, the conversion was a more gradual one, which was only completed by the time of the 1870 Beethoven essay (the only public context in which Wagner makes any direct reference to Schopenhauer's ideas on music). This view is more amply corroborated by changing emphases in Wagner's writings between 1850 and the 1870s. The idea of a more gradual aesthetic conversion reasonably couples Schopenhauer's purported influence with that of Wagner's internal experiences as composer, the drastic stylistic upheavals of the first decade in exile that produced *Tristan und Isolde* and the first part of the *Ring*. Nietzsche, who is supposed to have become increasingly committed to an ideal of absolute music the more he distanced himself from Wagner, was not above satirizing Wagner's apparent "conversion" to this Romantic ideology. "[Wagner] grasped at once," Nietzsche writes in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), "that with the Schopenhauerian theory . . . more could be done *in majorem musicae gloriam* – namely, with the theory of the sovereignty of music as Schopenhauer conceived it . . . With this extraordinary rise in the value of music . . . the value of *the musician* himself all at once went up in an unheard-of manner, too: from now on he became an oracle, a priest, indeed more than a priest, a kind of mouthpiece of the 'in itself' [*An-Sich*] of things, a telephone from the beyond – henceforth he uttered not only music, the ventriloquist of God – he uttered metaphysics."⁸

⁷ Dahlhaus repeatedly resorts to this formulation (possibly as a convenience). See, for example, the *Wagner Handbook*, ed. U. Müller and P. Wapnewski, trans. and ed. John Deathridge (Cambridge MA, 1992), 303: "Wagner adopted Schopenhauer's philosophy of absolute music after 1854" or "The Twofold Truth," where he states that "absolute music" signified "everything Wagner wanted to separate from musical drama, as the idea of it shaped itself in his mind around 1850 . . . , [but] once he began to read Schopenhauer in 1854 his certainty started to waver" (33). Jean-Jacques Nattiez has identified three "plots" into which the vagaries of Wagner's aesthetic thought have been configured, of which the "conversion" theory (more commonly seen as a gradual process, completed by about 1870) figures as the first. See Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne*, "La querelle des intrigues," 99–101, and 173–8.

⁸ *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1969), 103.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41738-9 - Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts

Thomas S. Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Ideas of absolute music*

Whatever the precise biographical chronology (or psychology) behind it, some ideological shift of this kind is the basis of that "twofold truth" diagnosed by Dahlhaus: Wagner's evident need to sustain his earlier critique of absolute music in *Opera and Drama* while embracing a broader aesthetic of music as a "noumenal" language above words and mere reflected phenomena, in the spirit of Schopenhauer and the Romantic critical tradition (Wackenroder, Tieck, Hoffmann). "At the same time as Wagner pronounced the doctrine that music is, or ought to be, a means to a dramatic end," Dahlhaus writes, "he also espoused other, contradictory aesthetic principles which reveal that he, hardly less than the 'formalists' who were his opponents in the day-to-day cut and thrust of musical debate, took for granted the truth of the idea of an 'absolute' music which was characteristic of the nineteenth century as a whole."

Opera and Drama, officially his principal theoretical work, propagates an "exoteric" aesthetic, but there is another, "esoteric," Wagnerian theory of aesthetics, the components of which are to be found scattered throughout the later writings. It was a theory for initiates which Nietzsche took as his starting point but then carried to an extreme where it was converted into a critique of Wagner and finally into an outright polemic against him.⁹

In other words, the case of Nietzsche *contra* Wagner could be argued on the evidence of Wagner's own texts. And not only the post-*Beethoven* texts. The Romantic metaphysics of "pure music" – which Wagner grew up with, along with the German instrumental canon that nourished it – is never really absent from Wagner's aesthetic thought, as Dahlhaus also notes,¹⁰ even in such contexts as *The Art-Work of the Future* and *Opera and Drama*, where such metaphysics would seem incompatible with the gospel of music's redemption by the holy trinity of word, drama, and "poetic intent."

The fragmentary text of Nietzsche that occasioned Dahlhaus's reflections on Wagner's aesthetic schizophrenia (a pendant to those musical passages from *The Birth of Tragedy* clearly indebted to Wagner's own *Beethoven* essay) is said to reveal "the latent unity of musical aesthetics in the nineteenth century": a fundamental conviction in the idea of absolute music, "one of the central aesthetic tenets of a century in which art music . . . rose to aesthetic 'autonomy,' that is, no longer had a manifest function to fulfill, but was intended to be listened to for its own sake."¹¹ Having chosen opera as a professional specialization,

⁹ Dahlhaus, "The Twofold Truth," 32.

¹⁰ "... the apologetic construct by which Wagner sought to elevate his own work to the goal of music history, and the romantic inheritance that secretly nourished his concept of music – the contradictions seem like a gaping abyss" (*The Idea of Absolute Music*, 25–6).

¹¹ "The Twofold Truth," 39, 37.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41738-9 - Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts

Thomas S. Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wagner and the problematics of "absolute music"*

but unwilling to relinquish hereditary claims to a recently canonized culture of German instrumental classics, Wagner thus found himself in an anomalous position. The anomaly was partly of his own creation, in that he was committed to overcoming the tendential autonomy even of operatic music (which perfectly well satisfied Schopenhauer). For, aside from the social functions of opera as an institution, it was hardly the case, of course, that its music was always "functionally" subservient to the text. Indeed, music's tendency to resist functional subservience was always and again the starting point for theories of reform, for Wagner as for his predecessors. And, as I will argue here, the difficulties resulting from Wagner's need to sustain a traditional discourse of operatic reform, on one hand, and an allegiance to newer Romantic ideologies of musical autonomy, on the other hand, can be understood to crystallize a broader division afflicting nineteenth-century critical attitudes to music as a whole: a similar schismatic allegiance to organicist notions of the autonomous musical work and to a developing discourse of "ideal" or "poetic" content, the desire to claim for music, too, the determinate objects, tangible meanings, and representational status of the other fine arts.

Questions of autonomy

The story of music's unexpected access to metaphysical dignity in the context of emergent Romantic ideologies of aesthetic autonomy around 1800 is well known.¹² The abstract, non-representational condition of music had traditionally rendered suspect the position of any music that did not set a text or serve some other purposeful function. Gradually,

¹² The now standard account is Carl Dahlhaus's *The Idea of Absolute Music* (see n. 2). The first chapter sets out the case for the "paradigmatic" value of absolute music in the Classic-Romantic era in general, and the more or less traditional view of a distinct paradigm-shift (p. 7) as documented in a new critical consciousness of music around 1800. Dahlhaus characteristically avoids presenting the story as a single-stranded, diachronic history, attempting to do justice to the co-existence of opposing musical traditions and aesthetic philosophies. Nonetheless, the figures in his story, and the texts that represent them, are largely the same ones that populate earlier traditional accounts of Romantic aesthetics and the emergence of an idea (and ideal) of musical autonomy, such as Rudolf Schäfke's *Geschichte der Musikästhetik in Umrissen* (Berlin, 1934) and Felix Gatz's *Musikästhetik in ihren Hauptrichtungen* (Stuttgart, 1929). A different approach is represented in John Daverio's recent book, *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology* (New York, 1993), which, rather than focusing on Romantic views of (absolute) music, considers broader affinities between Romantic poetics in general (Friedrich Schlegel's in particular) and representative composers and works across the century; these examples are interpreted as carrying out, consciously or not, Schlegel's programmatically "unfinished," evolving aesthetic project of Romantic art.

Questions of autonomy

in the wake of certain European instrumental repertoires (paradigmatically represented by a north-German *empfindsamer Stil* and a Viennese “classical” style), the traditional construction of musical forms as an ingenious but ingenuous, quasi-mechanical play of tones regulated according to a code of affects came to be re-constructed in terms of a language of “pure,” self-referential signs. Such an instrumental language might now be understood to mean anything, or nothing in particular. It might be read as an infinite flux of possible meanings, generated in the wordless dialogue between work and listener. The link between the former abject state of music and this present exaltation was a continuing notion of music as a direct, unmediated language of pure, abstracted feelings – a notion shared (with varying emphases) by an eighteenth-century aesthetic of sensibility and Romantic metaphysics alike. But a persistent, rationalistically biased Enlightenment view of instrumental music as a “deficient mode” (song without words) gave way, by the end of the eighteenth century, to the idea of a language “above” speech, a language that transcended the vulgar world of empirical reality and fixed signs.

This Cinderella story of absolute music, grounded in the canonic scriptures of a few central figures of German Romanticism (the essays of Tieck and Wackenroder, E. T. A. Hoffmann’s music criticism, passages from Jean Paul and Novalis, and a few aphorisms by Friedrich Schlegel) is, if not strictly a fairy tale, probably an overly “romanticized” narrative. While the aesthetic status of music, as represented by its more ambitious genres, certainly underwent a significant transformation by the early nineteenth century, its abstract, non-referential character remained as problematic as ever. Many composers, critics, and listeners shared something of Wagner’s ambivalent, “twofold” perspective on musical autonomy: a desire to reconcile this Romantic idea of a “higher” language of absolute music (with its privileged access to the philosophical Absolute, as essence or “Idea”) with a new valorization of music’s ability to convey “meaning” of a more concrete (determinate) kind by means of new characteristic, representational, dramatic or narrative capacities (it is scarcely possible to distinguish clearly between these). In traditional historiography of the textbook variety these “un”-Romantic impulses to locate concrete, determinate meaning have often been conflated with Romantic ideologies of musical autonomy. Dahlhaus, on the other hand, tended to distinguish between a “genuine” Romantic tradition (founded in those few canonic texts) and a popular tradition – the legacy of an older “aesthetics of feeling” – eager to relate music to the experiences of life, history, and literature. The two co-exist in the “dialectic” of Wagner’s aesthetic ambivalences, as described by Dahlhaus. But I believe that they co-existed much more widely, as well. Even aside from the misgivings a dichotomy of genuine (“pure”) and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41738-9 - Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts

Thomas S. Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wagner and the problematics of "absolute music"*

popular traditions is likely to engender today, it seems to me that Dahlhaus's habit of ideal-typing for methodological convenience, as criticized by Philip Gossett, does tend to distort this particular historical picture.¹³ Literary figures like Wackenroder, Hoffmann, or Jean Paul might apostrophize the inscrutable mysteries of a hieroglyphic language of tones, but the Romantic yearnings of most musicians and audiences – and not only the benighted dilettantes among them – seemed to be more and more oriented to "content," a category construed in predominantly literary or "material" terms. This yearning was all the stronger for the fact that such "content" had for so long seemed unavailable to music, except through the contorted applications of an increasingly stale theory of imitation. Music's autonomous tendencies were seen more and more as a liability to be overcome than as a unique asset, and not only by philosophical skeptics like Kant or Hegel, but by musical enthusiasts of every stripe. Wagner may have been an extreme example of this divided resistance to musical autonomy, in his role as operatic reform-theorist, but (as in so many ways) he was also an epitome of the culture at large.

The question of art's autonomy in general embraces a host of issues – epistemological, cultural, political – that have been the subject of critical concern throughout the twentieth century, much of it converging in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).¹⁴ These issues can hardly be given a thorough airing here, nor do they need it. It should be enough to acknowledge their scope simply as a preface to some remarks on a fundamental issue for music (and Wagner): the relative autonomy of music from

¹³ Philip Gossett, "Carl Dahlhaus and the 'Ideal Type,'" *19th-Century Music* 13 (1989), 49–56. See also James Hepokoski's review/critique of the theoretical underpinnings of Dahlhaus's work, "The Dahlhaus Project and its Extra-Musicological Sources," *19th-Century Music* 14:3 (1991), 221–46.

¹⁴ Issues of art and autonomy have tended (particularly among Marxists, of course) to concern the relation of art-works to contexts of society, culture, and politics, while the autonomy from a represented content understandably tends to presuppose the more limited areas of certain modernist art and literature, and the peculiar case of music. While the old "New" criticism experimented with treating representational works from this modernist/musical perspective of absolute formal autonomy, most recent music criticism has been occupied with an opposite strategy (following Adorno's lead), asking how even "abstract" music might manifest the same social contingencies as representational art. Some pioneering efforts in this area are represented in the collection *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge, 1987). The burgeoning literature on issues of gender and sexuality in music could also be cited here, of course (see, for example, the positions outlined in the introduction to Susan McClary's volume of essays, *Feminine Endings* [Minneapolis, 1991], 3–34). While probably no composer in history is more thoroughly implicated in issues of society, politics, and culture than Wagner, my immediate concern here is with questions of autonomy "within" the work (regarding the relative independence of its textual levels), although the broader question of music's motivations and meanings inevitably leads toward that of social and cultural significations.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41738-9 - Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts

Thomas S. Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Questions of autonomy*

language, or, conversely, its relative contingency on language, culture, and extra-musical “ideas.” Is the putative autonomy of absolute music manifested in the individual work, or does it derive from the apparently self-contained, non-referential musical “language” or system? If we accept the practical autonomy of either of these – the work or the system – as an apparently self-generating, internally coherent set of behavioral protocols, syntactic procedures, hierarchical relations and such, do we nonetheless accept the epistemological contingency of the “system” on culturally determined habits of perception, consensual codes of hearing and interpreting, the institutional transmission of the skills of production and of reception, and so on? To what extent is an emphatic concept of autonomy compatible with notions of cultural or historical change at all? Or how compatible is the idea of musical autonomy with any notions of musical signification, expression, or meaning? Is it therefore more useful to think in terms of a relative autonomy, one that accepts (if not simply ignores) historical and geographical parameters as premises requiring no further comment? Music, like language, may convey an impression of an autonomy to those who produce and receive it, while contingencies are revealed with historical, cultural, and critical distance. Production and reception then open up another slew of questions about function, patronage, economic forces, authorial control, and so on (the contingencies are self-perpetuating). Can an intended autonomy be subverted by the practices of listeners who reserve a right to the self-determination of their own experience? This last question is important: just as the text and context of an operatic piece automatically subvert the potential autonomy of its musical structure, the dominating cultural role of opera, drama, poetry, and novels by the early nineteenth century increasingly led consumers of absolute music to listen against the grain of its autonomous appearance, so to speak, to listen for cultural, literary, or otherwise fictive meanings. In this way, the development of a “programmatically” aesthetic by the mid-nineteenth century, like the whole critical discourse of “poetic ideas” feeding into it, was (as Arno Forchert has argued) the result of a dialogic process between composers, critics, and listeners rather than something dictated by the imagination of a few Romantic individuals.¹⁵ The rhetoric of Wagner’s aesthetic theory is directly engaged in this dialogue – as I will further argue in chapters 2 and 6 – although the volume of his voice (as of his writings)

¹⁵ Arno Forchert, “‘Ästhetischer’ Eindruck und kompositionstechnische Analyse. Zwei Ebenen musikalischer Rezeption in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts,” in *Rezeptionsästhetik und Rezeptionsgeschichte in der Musikwissenschaft*, ed. H. Danuser and F. Krummacher (Laaber, 1991), 193–203. Some examples of the phenomenon Forchert describes are discussed in my essay “Metaphorical Modes in Nineteenth-Century Music Criticism: Image, Narrative, and ‘Idea’,” in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. S. P. Scher (Cambridge, 1992), 93–117.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41738-9 - Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts

Thomas S. Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wagner and the problematics of "absolute music"*

has tended to obscure the other voices and to give instead the impression of a vast Wagnerian monologue.

If the cultural and historical contingency of an intelligible musical "language" as such was hardly an issue in 1800, it was gradually becoming one by the middle of the century, with the rapid increase of historical (and even geographical) awareness, as well as the rapid disintegration of stable stylistic, formal, and generic norms that precipitated Wagner's "thirty-years' war of the music of the future." Already by the 1850s Hanslick – perhaps more so than Wagner – acknowledged the essential contingency of most musical experience. One was more than ever aware of the historical contingencies of musical taste and evaluation. "There is no other art that so rapidly exhausts so many of its forms," Hanslick declared. "Modulation, cadence patterns, intervallic and harmonic progressions become obsolete after thirty to fifty years, such that the sensitive and intelligent composer can no longer employ them, and is continually compelled to discover new, purely musical gestures."¹⁶ (The longevity of taste had apparently not changed much since the time of Tinctoris.) Earlier Hanslick remarked that one need not inconvenience Indians or Caribes, the "usual auxiliary troops" enlisted to demonstrate the "variability of taste." It is enough to look at the European concert audience, one half of which finds its deepest, strongest responses elicited by Beethoven's symphonies, while the rest hear nothing in them but "difficult, intellectual stuff," totally lacking in "feeling."¹⁷ Hanslick's growing conviction in the historical and cultural contingency of musical "beauty" (and even of its expressive value) is evident from accretions to later editions of the book expressing his awareness of the ultimate mortality of so many aesthetic judgements. This was apparently one of the factors that led him to renounce further aesthetic speculation altogether, despite the immediate success (or notoriety) of *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, 41. Note, though, how the phrase "purely musical features" (Züge) re-inscribes the illusion of autonomy even as Hanslick tries to discredit the idea on a historical level.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8. In the fourth and fifth editions of the book (1874, 1876) Hanslick substituted the "late quartets and Bach's cantatas" as exemplars of the more demanding component of the canon and proof of the contingency of appreciation or taste on *Bildung* (see Dietmar Strauß, ed., *Eduard Hanslick: Vom Musikalisch-Schönen. Teil I: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe* [Mainz, 1990], 35).

¹⁸ See, for instance, the lengthy footnote added to chapter 3 in the sixth edition (1881), introduced by the assertion that "all music [*Tondichtung*] is human artifact, the product of a particular individual, of a time, a culture and therefore shot through with elements of a mortality that will be visited on it sooner or later." The case in question is that of opera, which has the highest mortality rate, as it were, precisely because it is the most socially contingent of musical genres, as regards both its creation and its evaluation. The once exemplary "classicism" of Hasse and Jomelli is cited as case in point. (Strauß/Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, vol. I, 95–6.)