8 Schoenberg, modernism, and metaphysics

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Metaphysics

Herzgewächse, Op. 20 (Heart's Foliage) has to be one of the most extraordinary works in Schoenberg's extraordinary output. Only thirty measures long and lasting little over three minutes in performance, it is the most diminutive of all the works to which Schoenberg gave an individual opus number. Composed in just a few days in 1911 (December 5–9), the score was reproduced in facsimile in the 1912 almanac of *Der Blaue Reiter*, though there is no record of a performance before 1923. Scored for an ensemble of soprano, celesta, harmonium, and harp, its setting of a short poem by Maurice Maeterlinck (translated by Stefan George), requires a voice of extreme agility which is frequently taken above a high c''' and which, four bars before the end, climaxes (*pppp*) on a high f'''.

The poem constructs a melancholic and languorous world through the imagery of tangled plant forms. Only the pale and fragile lily reaches upwards with its "mystical white prayer." Sensuous, erotic, and spiritual at the same time, Maeterlinck's poem recalls Wagner's "Im Treibhaus," the third of the *Wesendonck-lieder* and thus part of the sketching process for *Tristan und Isolde*.[1] Both songs use the claustrophobic imagery of winding foliage as a metaphor for spiritual malaise, but also to express an intense longing for release – a metaphor thematized in Schoenberg's *Das Buch der Hängenden Gärten*, Op. 15 (The Book of the Hanging Gardens), to texts by Stefan George, completed in March 1909.

Herzgewächse is usually described as falling into three parts.[2] A section of freely accompanied recitative (mm. 1–15), gives way to an arioso marked by a clear quarter note pulse (mm. 16–19), and then to a cantilena section deploying the ornamental character and high register of coloratura writing (mm. 20–30). As Wolfgang Ruf observes, this tripartite division creates a "discrepancy of textual and musical structure."[3] But the sudden change that marks the introduction of the image of the lily (m. 16) creates a binary division which *is* congruent with the structure of the poem; decadent melancholy here gives way to fragile ascent. This is clearly marked by the soprano's even quarter notes rising steadily from a low B flat to a high C. The binary division, I suggest, is the most basic, but the

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differentiated four-measure section of mm. 16–19 is also highly significant. It functions as a musical threshold, a transformational axis for the whole piece, from a declamatory style in low register (spiritual malaise) to a lyrical style in the highest register (release through prayer). At the same time, the motivic density of the first half of the song here gives way to coloristic and melismatic proliferation in the second.[4] Ruf refers to this moment (m. 16) as an "expressive ascent towards breakthrough."[5]

The brevity, scoring, and technical difficulties of *Herzgewächse* have discounted it as a central work for either performers or scholars. But this diminutive song not only foregrounds the central compositional category of the threshold, it also represents a threshold in Schoenberg's work. To use a different metaphor, to which I will return later, this piece marks the site of a major fault line and one that runs far deeper and wider than the ambit of Schoenberg's own music. It is, rather, a central feature of the musical geology underlying the shift from Romanticism to Modernism. While *Herzgewächse* alone might seem to be a rather insignificant crack in the surface of musical style, it is one that becomes magnified in Schoenberg's (largely uncompleted) compositional projects over the ensuing twelve years. The most sustained eruption of the subterranean force it registers is undoubtedly the unfinished fragment of *Die Jakobsleiter* (Jacob's Ladder), but the oratorio, like all the works of this period, can itself be viewed as part of a larger, ongoing project.

My focus here is not the purely technical aspects of stylistic change; Schoenberg's "path to the new music," through athematicism, atonality, the dissolution of traditional forms, and so on, has been told plenty of times before. My interest is rather what we might learn of the cultural and historical fault line of which *Herzgewächse* and its related works are audible and visible signs. My contention is that this fault line has to do, above all, with the working out of a definitive metaphysical thread in European thought. Moreover, since metaphysics turns out to be a defining element for one branch of aesthetic Modernism, this in turn might require us to rethink the usual disjunctions between Romanticism and Modernism.

Wolfgang Ruf points to the "experimental character" of *Herzgewächse* that accounts for its solitary and singular nature.[6] I suggest, however, that this piece foregrounds elements that are axiomatic to Schoenberg's work as a whole. Other chapters give an account of the works of the Expressionist period (*c.*1908–23) but I want to draw out both the extent to which the same metaphysical concern underlies all of these works, and how it is manifest in distinct and recurrent technical devices. The eruption of a metaphysical dimension in Schoenberg's work has been much discussed.[7] For decades, largely excised from dominant technical accounts of his music, it has more recently become a familiar topic. For some, it offers

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a counterbalance to the idea of Schoenberg as detached constructor, a way of connecting his music to ideas of the spiritual, intuitive, and mysterious that might give the lie to readings of Modernism as cold, objective, and scientific. One unwelcome consequence, however, is that Schoenberg's turn to metaphysics is sometimes read simply as a colorful phase of his biography and thus reduced merely to an idiosyncratic set of personal beliefs and influences.

Few accounts of Schoenberg's life and work during this period omit to mention the usual catalog of such influences – Richard Dehmel, Stefan George, Maurice Maeterlinck, August Strindberg, Balzac's *Séraphita* (and thereby Emanuel Swedenborg), Rudolf Steiner, and Wassily Kandinsky (to name only the central figures). But to talk of influences is always superficial. The simultaneity of interest in the metaphysical and occult testifies to the manifestation of a cultural, rather than merely personal, idea. My argument is that this "colorful phase" is the personal and individual manifestation of a much broader cultural process that breaks the surface in Schoenberg's music just as, in a related but quite distinct way, it does simultaneously in the work of Kandinsky.[8] In other words, what happens in Schoenberg's music has to do with the working-out of tensions in the modern European mind. Specifically, as we shall see, it represents a critical development of German Idealism in the context of the modern world but, crucially, one performed in the realm of art rather than that of philosophy.

The metaphysical concerns of Schoenberg's music are often signaled outwardly by the texts he chose to set and by those he wrote himself. The text for *Die Jakobsleiter*, written between 1915 and 1917, draws on a diverse range of literary, religious, and philosophical texts, and represents a compendium of current ideas. By the same token, Schoenberg's own libretto for *Die glückliche Hand* (The Lucky Hand), first drafted in 1910, thematizes the nature of his own creative and spiritual journey, expressing at one and the same time the frustration inherent in trying to realize the unattainable and to find worldly form for unworldly thoughts. The presence of a metaphysical topic is also signaled clearly by certain musical devices. The most immediate of these is the use of a distinctive kind of instrumentation that Schoenberg and Webern took directly from Mahler. Ideas of the heavenly, the angelic, and a paradisial landscape are denoted in Mahler by a group that includes harp, celesta, glockenspiel, cowbells, harmonium, mandolin, and triangle. The luminosity of high bell sounds is sometimes enhanced by the use of sustained string harmonics.[9] Webern takes this celestial ensemble of Mahler's and foregrounds it in many of his orchestral works, most famously perhaps in the third of his Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 10.[10] More often than not, both Mahler and Webern

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associate this ensemble with the use of a solo violin, deployed lyrically in its upper register. The number and specificity of examples of this topic make clear its function of denoting an angelic voice. In some cases it is used with an actual soprano voice; at other times it stands in for the voice.[11] In *Herzgewächse*, the high soprano is itself transposed into the "angelic" register; in the closing section of *Die Jakobsleiter* the wordless voice of The Soul (indebted to the vocal part of *Herzgewächse*) is used in conjunction with the high solo violin.

Thresholds

While instrumentation is a signifier of metaphysical presence or vision, often underwritten by Schoenberg's choice of texts, it is through the structural function of the threshold that metaphysics has its most powerful effect on Schoenberg's music at this time, because in this way it becomes internalized as musical form. The arresting transformation midway through *Herzgewächse* functions like a hyper-condensed version of the Mahlerian threshold (consider the "Grosse Appell" in the finale of the Second Symphony, for example). Adorno discusses the Mahlerian threshold under the idea of *Suspension* – in other words, a holding-up of the surrounding narrative process by an episode that composes out the idea of a *senza tempo*.[12] In Mahler, as in Webern and Schoenberg, the threshold denotes the suspension of a linear progress of musical time and its displacement by an exploration of musical space. The metaphysical aspect of this is frequently underlined by text and/or use of clear musical topics that reference ideas of celestial landscape or angelic presence. The idea is famously thematized in Act 1 of Wagner's *Parsifal*, in Gurnemanz's line "You see, my son, here time becomes space," these being the last words heard before the beginning of the Transformation Music during which the scene changes from the external world of nature to the interior of the Castle of the Grail, a representation of the spiritualization of nature that anticipates the move toward abstraction a generation later.

This concern with the threshold between two worlds explains the recurrent fascination, of Schoenberg and others, with Balzac's mystical novel *Séraphita*, which is in turn indebted to the thought of Emanuel Swedenborg. *Séraphita* is concerned not simply with the idea of the angelic (itself a threshold between man and God), but rather with the liminal state between a mortal and an angelic being. The novel explores the relationship between the angelic Séraphita-Séraphitus (whose gender shifts in response to the person he/she is with, an androgynous element that resurfaces elsewhere in Schoenberg)[13] and two humans, Minna and Wilfred. Its

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final chapter, "The Assumption," foregrounds the tension between the two worlds as Séraphita, unable to live any longer in the mortal world, gives up her earthly form. This moment is explicitly also a threshold to a new language:

> The last hymn was not uttered in words, nor expressed by gestures, nor by any of the signs which serve men as a means of communicating their thoughts, but as the soul speaks to itself; for at the moment when Séraphita was revealed in her true nature, her ideas were no longer enslaved to human language.[14]

Metaphysics is defined by a basic duality. In the Kantian system, the existence of a world known through our senses (the world of phenomena) implies a world that is *not* known in such a way, but is transcendent to empirical knowledge (the noumenal world). In other words, the basis of a philosophical metaphysics is precisely the non-congruence of aspects of reality to our systems of knowledge. The noumenal is defined negatively, as that which lies outside the empirically verifiable. The proposition of metaphysics is thus a critical one: it asserts the limits of knowledge. This self-critique of philosophy becomes, in Romanticism and Modernism, a self-critique of representation. Similarly, Schoenberg's self-critique of musical language is powerfully shaped by an awareness of the inadequacy of language – specifically, of the inadequacy of a musical language modeled on the representation of human emotions when challenged at the threshold of a fully spiritual reality.

It is for this reason that *Séraphita* assumed such importance for Schoenberg in the years between 1911 and 1914.[15] Both *Die glückliche Hand* and *Die Jakobsleiter* underline Schoenberg's view that the artist was also a kind of threshold, an intermediary in touch with two worlds at once, an idea with its roots in Wagner's reading of Schopenhauer by which the composer is understood as a "clairvoyant." This view is thematized in Schoenberg's "Vorgefühl," Op. 22, No. 4, and by the character of "The Chosen One" in *Die Jakobsleiter*. Such an idea brings us closer to how Schoenberg's Modernism is bound up with metaphysics. It makes sense (as has often been observed) of why *Die Jakobsleiter* was left unfinished at the very point that the soul flies from the body towards God, of why *Moses und Aron* is left unscored after the close of Act 2 with Moses's cry of despair, "Oh word, thou word that I lack!," and why the late choral work, *Moderner Psalm*, Op. 50c, breaks off at the line "And yet we pray."[16] It fulfills what Hegel predicted in his notorious "death of art" thesis – not that art would literally come to an end, but that its material would become inadequate to its content.[17] Schoenberg's entire career might be understood as a wrestling with this idea.[18]

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Outwardly, Schoenberg progressed no further with a setting of Balzac's *Séraphita* than a single-page, thirteen-bar sketch that sets the first sentence of the final chapter ("The Assumption").[19] Dated December 27, 1912, this sketch appeared just three weeks after the composition of *Herzgewächse*, with its similarly angelic concerns and sound-world.[20] The final chapter of *Séraphita* foregrounds many of the ideas that were key to Schoenberg at this time, that he shared with Kandinsky, and which found their way into his creative work as theosophical themes. In Séraphita's parting speech she refers to the series of levels by which the soul attains purity by a specific reference to Jacob's ladder.[21] Evident also is the doctrine of reincarnation that figures prominently in Schoenberg's libretto, the notion that one must live countless times in order to gradually ascend the stages of this mystical ladder.[22] Séraphita sets out the progression of levels by which one moves to God, the last of which is prayer. "To pray," she says, "you must be refined in the furnace to the purity of a diamond."[23] Unsurprisingly, there are a number of similarities between Schoenberg's sketch for *Séraphita* and parts of *Die Jakobsleiter* by which it was later subsumed.[24]

But there are also important points of contact between Balzac's text and Schoenberg's thinking on musical and theatrical techniques, as is clear in the following extract:

> Light gave birth to melody, and melody to light; colors were both light and melody; motion was number endowed by the Word; in short, everything was at once sonorous, diaphanous, and mobile; so that, everything existing in everything else, extension knew no limits, and the angels could traverse it everywhere to the utmost depths of the infinite.[25]

The interrelation of light and melody, the subject of an intense exchange with Kandinsky, was explored most obviously in Schoenberg's work in the orchestral movement "Farben" (Op. 16, No. 3) and in the detailed lighting directions for *Die glückliche Hand*. The idea of motion as number shaped by the Idea might be said to underlie the thinking behind the twelve-tone method, a means by which Schoenberg and his pupils sought to realize musically the "equivalence of musical space," and a state of "everything existing in everything else." The exceeding of limits (an "angelic" state of being) is at first explored in a literal way in Schoenberg's music – the crossing of boundaries of harmonic grammar, pushing registral extremes, exceeding the received vocabulary of instrumental combinations and sonorities; *Herzgewächse* might serve, in miniature, to illustrate all three. But this exceeding of literal limits is later transmuted into the abstractions of twelve-tone music. For Schoenberg, as for Webern, the change from free atonality to twelve-tone composition was itself a threshold moment, as if, after working intuitively in the dark, they had suddenly broken

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through to the abstract order that had been sought all along. For them, this was not just a technical breakthrough but a spiritual one; its abstract objectivity represented the transcendence of a merely subjective desire, the release, one might argue, longed for equally by Tristan and Amfortas.

Die Jakobsleiter, despite remaining an incomplete fragment, is Schoenberg's most sustained and single-minded exploration of the idea of the threshold.[26] As its title suggests, it thematizes the notion of a liminal space by means of the reference to Jacob's dream-vision of a staircase joining heaven to earth, which the angels ascend and descend between the two (Genesis 28: 10–17). That this work, more than any other, anticipates Schoenberg's development of the twelve-tone method underlines the inseparability of his technical and metaphysical projects.[27] The opening lines of the oratorio, sung by Gabriel, announce the radically different nature of the new musical space ("Whether to the right or the left, forwards or backwards") and the opening bars deploy Schoenberg's basic hexachord both linearly (as a marching figure in the bass and cello part) and vertically (as a chord in the wind). But it is in the closing section of the fragment, written sometime between 1917 and 1922, in which this new musical space is most radically explored, as The Dying One gives up his soul. This final section is characterized by several features anticipated in *Herzgewächse* (the high, wordless coloratura soprano of The Soul, the *senza misura* writing, the static effect of repeated ostinato arpeggiations of celesta, harmonium, and harps, the "angelic" voice of the high solo violin), but also by a radically new element. Placed at a distance from the main orchestra are no less than four separate groups of instrumentalists and singers, two of them placed at different heights above the orchestra and two at different horizontal distances. This is far more than music theatre; it makes literal the spatialization of different orchestral sonorities that had, until then, been more conceptual, defined by distinct timbres and material rather than the actual direction of the sound source. Its debt to Mahler is twofold: first, it builds on Mahler's use of off-stage effects, and second, it seeks to realize the levels of ascent to heaven depicted by Goethe in Part II of *Faust* which forms the basis of Part II of Mahler's Eighth Symphony.

The threshold at the center of *Herzgewächse* connects to its massive expansion in *Die Jakobsleiter* a decade later, but it is also a transformation, both technically and expressively, of what takes place much earlier in the groundbreaking Second String Quartet, Op. 10 (1907–08), truly a threshold work itself. This points to a continuity of metaphysical concerns in Schoenberg's work that runs from at least 1907 to 1922 and the inseparable link between those metaphysical concerns and Schoenberg's search for a new musical language. Just as *Herzgewächse* evokes the world of Wagner's "Im Treibhaus," so the Second Quartet makes a similar elision of

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the erotic and spiritual, in its alliance of an attenuated tonal language and a post-Brahmsian motivic process. The result is music that is powerfully directed by an intense sense of searching or longing, but towards an unfulfilled goal (just as Schoenberg had explored in his *Verklärte Nacht* of 1899). Adding a soprano to the quartet for the final two movements, Schoenberg sets two texts by Stefan George expressing a spiritual, disembodied kind of longing, but the tone of both the poetry and the music once again look back to Wagner's *Tristan*. In the setting of "Litanei" that forms the third movement there is also more than an echo of Wagner's *Parsifal* – of the spiritual pain and longing of Amfortas, imprisoned by an erotically charged stasis. The variation structure creates a sense of being stuck in the same place, while the music nevertheless attempts to reach beyond itself. The overall character is one of lament, a prelude to the threshold moment constituted by the opening of the fourth movement.

What is the character of the world to which the threshold here gives access? It is new, strange, light, ungraspable, weightless, self-contained. All these qualities are underlined by George's text, which begins with the emblematic line "I feel the air of other planets." The musical world Schoenberg presents at this most famous of musical thresholds is one stripped of its hitherto subjective elements – the searching, lyrical lines of the forgoing music give way to the proposition of some supra-subjective state. At a parallel moment in *Die Jakobsleiter* (mm. 600–1), Gabriel delivers the line, "Then is your 'I' extinguished," as The Dying One expires and The Soul flies heavenwards. In this way, the Second Quartet makes an essentially metaphysical proposition – that subjective yearning breaks through to a radically new, more expansive state, and thus anticipates both *Herzgewächse* and *Die Jakobsleiter*. All three works contrast a disembodied, weightless music of arrival in a new, spatialized musical landscape, with the sense of longing evoked by the residual chromatic tensions of an enervated tonal harmony. In *Die Jakobsleiter* this is most audible in the *espressivo* counterpoint associated with the One who is Called, whose lyrical string accompaniment recalls not just Mahler but also Schoenberg's own earlier style in *Gurrelieder*. In other words, the Second Quartet anticipates the later oratorio fragment in aspects of character, plot, and structural narrative, of which *Herzgewächse* might be seen as a miniature version.

The Four Orchestral Songs, Op. 22 (1913–16) are similarly located in the gap between longing and fulfillment. The first sets a poem entitled "Seraphita," loosely inspired by Balzac's novel, by the English Decadent poet Ernest Dowson.[28] Its opposition of the storms of life and the anticipation of an otherworldly state read like a microcosmic version of Schoenberg's text for *Die Jakobsleiter*. Musically, it juxtaposes a chromatic,

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searching melodic line with moments of angelic vision (note the use of the solo violin in mm. 32 and 37ff.). The remaining three songs, all to texts by Rilke, draw out related topics – the ineffability of what is sought, the necessity of watching and waiting (the use of the cor anglais in the third song echoes the third act of *Tristan* in this respect), and the premonition of things to come.

The threshold divides two quite different spaces. It is less a mediation of opposites, which implies interaction and transformation, than a statement of mutual exclusivity. The threshold, by definition, implies leaving one space behind in order to enter into another. While the oppositions of these works are often between *Tristan*-esque longing and a fleeting vision of the longed-for completion, in Schoenberg, as in Mahler, spiritual thirst and malaise often turns to disgust at the distance between the two. Irony and negativity are often the outward signs of this. This Mahlerian triangulation is taken up prominently in some of Schoenberg's works.[29] In *Die glückliche Hand* the juxtaposition of longing, desire, and parodic irony is externalized in the mocking laughter of the chorus and the use of popular musical styles to undermine the claims of an autonomous "authentic" expression (as so often in the scherzos of Mahler symphonies or in Berg's *Wozzeck*). This explains the close proximity in Schoenberg's output of a luminous piece like *Herzgewächse* and the parodic grotesquerie of *Pierrot lunaire*.

Schoenberg wrote to Kandinsky, on August 19, 1912, to say that *Pierrot* was "a preparatory study for another work, which I now wish to begin: Balzac's Séraphita."[30] That might seem an odd connection to make, but *Pierrot* makes explicit that ironic negativity and grotesque parody are the direct result of a spiritual longing. This is clear not just from the text, which draws on similar topics of longing and waiting, but in the way that Schoenberg's skeletal ensemble and use of *Sprechstimme* produce a photographic negative of Wagnerian tone and delivery. Desire turns to poison as, for example, in the "Valse de Chopin." *Pierrot lunaire*, with its recurrent themes of sickness, despair, drunkenness, and madness, may be extreme in its unrelenting negativity and parody, but it is not alone in Schoenberg's works of this period. The Scherzo movement of the Second Quartet, parodic elements of the Serenade, Op. 24, and the sketch for a *moto perpetuo* scherzo (the "Totentanz der Prinzipien") from Schoenberg's unrealized Symphony, all express this negative "other" of metaphysical aspiration.[31]

While the significance of the threshold as both structural and expressive device comes to the fore in Schoenberg's atonal period, it is by no means lost with the move to twelve-tone composition. The central division of *Herzgewächse* anticipates what was to become the center of both

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horizontal and vertical symmetries in the later music of the Schoenberg school. That palindromes and mirror inversions were conceived of as more than merely technical devices is made explicit in Webern's settings of the poetry of Hildegard Jone, where the recurrent metaphysical relation of inner and outer worlds is explored through the structural inversions of Webern's music.

Modernism

Herzgewächse, I have argued, is emblematic of the technical and expressive concerns that define Schoenberg's work in the Expressionist years, *c.*1908–23. But what erupts in this music is not confined to Schoenberg, as is clearly evidenced by the commonality of interests he shared with Webern, Berg, Kandinsky, Steiner, Dehmel, George, Rilke – and many others. My broader suggestion is that the metaphysical and theosophical turn of the *fin-de-siècle* must be seen within a larger context and that, in its reactivation of central ideas in Western thought, it marks a moment of seismic change in the geology of Modernism. It mounted an aesthetic critique not only of the idea of representation, but of the philosophy and culture of materialism that, in the aesthetic sphere, was reinforced by representational art. The diminutive form of *Herzgewächse*, no more than a fissure when viewed in isolation, is the surface manifestation of forces that run down through the sedimented layers of social and cultural history, back through the poetry of the Symbolists to Wagner, Schopenhauer, and thus to German Romanticism and philosophical Idealism.

It is easy to be so engrossed by individual phenomena (Schoenberg's own biography, his religious beliefs or artistic credo) that one fails to see them as part of a wider and largely subterranean system. Of course, philosophical metaphysics is by no means the same thing as the theosophy to which Kandinsky and others responded and on which Schoenberg drew in various ways (as in the libretto to *Die Jakobsleiter*). Neither is it equivalent to what I have called the metaphysical proposition of Schoenberg's music, with its division of "earthly" and "unearthly" marked by threshold moments and distinctive oppositions of musical materials.[32] But all three have in common their critical stance towards a prevailing social materialism and philosophical positivism. In short, all three assert that the structures of rational knowledge, representation, and language are inadequate in the face of the totality of the world and our experience of it. Moreover, the music we have examined proposes such an idea by means of its own materials and forms, irrespective of any text-setting.

Perhaps the idea of geological movement might allow us to preserve both the obvious moment of disjunction marked by aesthetic Modernism

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while at the same time understanding it as the product of far larger forces. The familiar idea that modernist music represents a rejection of classical values (much to the detriment of the modern age) is superficial; classical music of the late eighteenth century is marked by the same kinds of tensions that later erupt more violently through the musical surface in Schoenberg.[33] Scratch the surface of late eighteenth-century art and disorder abounds (Sterne, Gozzi, Coleridge, Schlegel, Beethoven, Turner, Hoffmann); scratch the surface of Modernism and order is everywhere (Schoenberg, Webern, Stravinsky, Klee, Mondrian, Le Corbusier). What happens in the early twentieth century (and this is why the role of metaphysics has a valuable explicative power) is that some art and music moves away from the teleology of human desire (as encoded by tonal music) and reaches out for a more objective, all-encompassing order – the difference between the first three movements and the finale of Schoenberg's Second Quartet. As precursors to both are the paradisial elaborations of Mahler's landscape music, presented as the site of spiritual encounter and of liberation from subjective desire.

In the same year that Schoenberg completed his Second Quartet, the art historian Wilhelm Worringer published his seminal book *Abstraction and Empathy*.[34] Here he set out the two principal modes by which art constructs itself in relation to the world – empathy, an attempt to represent the external world through mimesis, and abstraction, an attempt to render principles of order in material form. Schoenberg's exploration of the threshold between the two, announced definitively in the Second Quartet but which shapes his entire output, thus wrestles with two attitudes toward the world whose mutual tension defines Western thought. Hegel announced a thoroughly modern conception of art in his Lectures on Aesthetics, first given in the 1820s, with the idea that art necessarily outgrew itself, that a modern art (he called it "romantic") was self-critical in respect to its own material and its inadequacy for the expression of a spiritual content.[35] His contemporary, Beethoven, in foregrounding that element of self-critique, thus stands at the beginning of a process of musical Modernism which Schoenberg may have intensified but by no means initiated.

But music is not philosophy, nor does it merely embody some philosophical zeitgeist; on the contrary, it stands in a critical relation to philosophy.[36] It does so first and foremost because, unlike philosophy, music has necessarily to mediate between its particular materials (the sensuous physicality of timbre, rhythm, intensity) and their abstract, intellectual ordering (as phrase, section, form). Whereas philosophy is thought in the abstract medium of language, music is thought through the concrete medium of its sonic materials. For Hegel and German Idealism,

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this was precisely what subordinated art to philosophy. Music, however, critiques this central idea of modernity (the primacy of rational abstraction) by engaging with its aspiration yet without quitting the realm of the sensuous. Schoenberg inherited this tension as both an artistic and metaphysical problem which shaped an essentially self-critical activity, the defining aim of which was to point beyond itself, to mediate between a human, lyrical, and subjective component, and the urge towards some trans-subjective order. Schoenberg's metaphysics may indeed have led him into the quite different domains of psychology, philosophy, and religion, but at its heart was a tension that not only shaped his own music, but which defines the musical modernism of which his music remains emblematic. Schoenberg's enthusiastic letter to Kandinsky (August 19, 1912) about his plans to set *Séraphita* is instructive in this regard:

> Balzac's "Seraphita." Do you know it? Perhaps the most glorious work in existence. I want to do it scenically. Not so much as theater, at least not in the old sense. In any case, not "dramatic." But rather: oratorio that becomes visible and audible. Philosophy, religion, that are perceived with the artistic senses.[37]

For that reason, not only is Schoenberg's music itself better understood as the outward eruption of much larger and older forces, but it in turn offers insight into the wider geology of musical Modernism.

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