

DEFINING THE TERM 'ABSOLUTE MUSIC' HISTORICALLY

BY SANNA PEDERSON*

ABSOLUTE MUSIC HAS NO HISTORY. So Daniel Chua announced dramatically at the outset of his 1999 book *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*.¹ Throughout his book he shows how any attempt to grasp absolute music makes it disappear—'absolute music can only have a history when it is no longer absolute music'.² In this sense, he concludes that 'to write a history of absolute music is to write against it'.³ This may, indeed, be true, but who would want to write *for* it today? Although the term 'absolute music' continues to be used frequently in various ways—sometimes to refer to autonomous music, at other times to instrumental music or the canon of orchestral music—it usually appears with scare quotes or the qualification of being 'so-called' absolute music.⁴

The credibility of this 'so-called' absolute music for American musicology started to erode at least fifteen years ago. In a much-cited article from 1993, 'Narrative Agendas in "Absolute" Music: Identity and Difference in Brahms's Third Symphony', Susan McClary announced that 'One of the most important trends in recent musicology has been the demystification of Absolute Music'.⁵ Certainly by the turn of the twenty-first century, absolute music was looking decidedly out of date. In 2001, Jonathan Bellmann called absolute music 'surely one of the most problematic and misleading ideas taught in music history, from introductory courses to doctoral seminars'.⁶ And at the outset of his book from 2002, *Programming the Absolute*, Berthold Hoeckner stated: 'The idea (and ideology) of absolute music has finally lost its privileged position in Western art music and it is no longer a dominating paradigm in the scholarly study thereof.'⁷

*University of Oklahoma. Email: spederson@ou.edu. I would like to thank Thomas Grey and Richard Taruskin for their very helpful comments and suggestions; Carlo Caballero for inviting me to give a version of this article at the University of Colorado and for the sustained feedback following; and Rose Mauro for preparing the diagrams and providing invaluable assistance.

¹ Daniel K. L. Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge and New York, 1999).

² Ibid. 3.

³ Ibid. 7.

⁴ For instance: 'If our mainly formalistic, procedure-oriented analytic methods have improved our understanding of the absolute or concert music repertoire, they have also impoverished the possible contexts for musical analysis and therefore close critical discussion of music in general'; David Neumeier, 'Film Music Analysis and Pedagogy', *Indiana Theory Review*, 11 (1990), 1–27. Another example that uses the term to refer to the canon is 'the heroic mainstream of absolute music that runs from Beethoven to Brahms to Schoenberg', as opposed to 'more marginalized stylistic traditions'; Nicholas Cook, 'The Other Beethoven: Heroism, the Canon, and the Works of 1813–14', *19th-Century Music*, 27 (2003–4), 3–24.

⁵ Susan McClary, 'Narrative Agendas in "Absolute" Music: Identity and Difference in Brahms's Third Symphony', in Ruth Solie (ed.), *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1993), 326–44 at 328.

⁶ Jonathan Bellmann, Review of Thomas Forrest Kelly, *First Nights: Five Musical Premieres*, in *Notes*, 57 (2000–1), 596.

⁷ Berthold Hoeckner, *Programming the Absolute: Nineteenth-Century German Music and the Hermeneutics of the Moment* (Princeton, 2002), 3.

What happened to absolute music? It is not my intention here to try to define the idea of absolute music and determine whether it is a legitimate concept. What I propose to examine is the history of the *term* 'absolute music'. I emphasize the *term* as opposed to the concept, because, as Chua puts it, 'to write about [absolute music] as if it were a single, stable concept would miss the point, for its meaning is situated in an ever-changing constellation of elements'.⁸ The tendency to assume that there is history of a stable concept behind the term is exemplified in Carl Dahlhaus's influential work, *The Idea of Absolute Music*. Dahlhaus claimed to deduce 'a comprehensive concept of "absolute" music which reveals the latent unity of musical aesthetics in the nineteenth century'.⁹ An inquiry into the history of the term, however, disrupts that latent unity in the concept. Whereas Dahlhaus's book on the idea of absolute music addressed the question of what absolute music *means*, as if it were a singular event, I want to trace the history of the term in order to answer what it has *meant* in all its diversity.¹⁰ In this essay, I will reinvestigate some of the ground covered in Dahlhaus's book in order to arrive at different results.

WAGNER AND THE NEGATIVE CONCEPT OF ABSOLUTE MUSIC

The term absolute music is often attributed to Eduard Hanslick's 1854 book *On the Musically Beautiful*. However, it was Hanslick's enemy Richard Wagner who actually coined the term, a fact that gets the history of the term off to an ominously confusing start. The first appearance of the phrase 'absolute music' occurs in Wagner's *Faust*-inspired description of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which he wrote to accompany a performance he conducted in Dresden in 1846. He describes the fourth movement as leaving the borders of absolute music with the introduction of words:

With this beginning of the last movement, Beethoven's music takes on a decisively more speaking character: it leaves the preserved character of pure instrumental music of the first three movements that manifests itself in infinite and indecisive expression; the progress of musical poetry leads to a decision, a decision that can only be pronounced in the human language. Let us admire how the master prepares the appearance of the language and voice of man as a necessity to be expected with this moving recitative, which comes forth, nearly abandoning the confines of *absolute music*, confronts the other instruments as though with powerful, emotional speech, pressing for a decision, and ultimately transforms into a lyrical theme that swells in its powerful heights.¹¹ (emphasis added)

⁸ Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*, p. xi.

⁹ Carl Dahlhaus, '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* (California Studies in 19th-Century Music; Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1980), 19–39 at 38–9.

¹⁰ See Richard Taruskin, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York and Oxford, 2005), i, p. xxv.

¹¹ 'Mit diesem Beginne des letzten Satzes nimmt Beethovens Musik einen entschieden sprechenderen Charakter an: sie verläßt den in den drei ersten Sätzen festgehaltenen Charakter der reinen Instrumentalmusik, der sich im unendlichen und unentschiedenen Ausdrucke kundgibt; der Fortgang der musikalischen Dichtung bringt auf Entscheidung, auf eine Entscheidung, wie sie nur in der menschlichen Sprache ausgesprochen werden kann. Bewundern wir, wie der Meister das Hinzutreten der Sprache und Stimme des Menschen als eine zu erwartende Notwendigkeit mit diesem erschütternden Rezitativ der Instrumentalbässe vorbereitet, welches, die Schranken der absoluten Musik fast schon verlassend, wie mit kräftiger, gefühlvoller Rede den übrigen Instrumenten, auf Entscheidung dringend, entgegentritt und endlich selbst zu einem Gesangsthema übergeht, das in seinem mächtigen Höhe anschwillt.' Richard Wagner, 'Bericht über die Aufführung der neunten Symphonie von Beethoven im Jahre 1846 in Dresden (aus meinen Lebenserinnerungen ausgezogen) nebst Programm dazu', in *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, ed. Wolfgang Golther (Berlin, n.d.), 60–1.

This first occurrence is presumably important, because it should give us the origin of the term. However, because it occurs just once without any explanation, there is little evidence to contradict the impression that Wagner used the phrase without intending to coin a term or to refer to anything beyond the immediate context of the instrumental, as opposed to the vocal, movements of the symphony.¹²

It is three years before the term reappears in Wagner's writings, and it does so with increasing vehemence in the series the composer produced in Zurich. It is thought that at this point Wagner consciously invested the term 'absolute' with philosophical significance taken specifically from Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of Hegel.¹³ Philosophically, absolute indicates the highest and most abstract value. It is central to the idealist philosophy of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and, above all, Hegel and remained in circulation well after the latter's death. However, with the publication in 1839 of *Towards a Critique of Hegelian Philosophy*, Feuerbach argued that errors in Hegel's thought had led to a falsely abstract system. Feuerbach declared that metaphysical speculation focused on the absolute, whether by Kant, Fichte, or Hegel, denied the sensuous materiality of life.¹⁴ As an alternative to absolute spirit as a creation of philosophical thought, Feuerbach proposed a more anthropological approach based on the immediacy of sensory experience. He suggested a radical reordering of being over thinking, the sensuous over the spiritual.

In the wake of Feuerbach's critique, the absolute became an easy target in the second half of the century. Schopenhauer, who considered himself the arch-enemy of Hegel, finally became famous when his attack on the absolute as a metaphysical swindle found resonance. For Schopenhauer, 'the word absolute is in and of itself something completely nonsensical',¹⁵ referring only to 'misty and extravagant phantoms'. 'We shall not need to serve up covered, empty dishes of this sort', he proudly declared.¹⁶ In the 1870s, Nietzsche contributed a few choice remarks in the spirit of Schopenhauer's invective, dismissing the concept of the absolute as a superstition invented by the intellect.¹⁷

When Wagner began using the term, then, it had recently received a bold reassessment, plunging from the unassailable limit of thought to the problematic basis of idealist philosophy. Wagner may have appropriated it in the broadest sense to make the parallel between Feuerbach's radical critique of the venerable Hegelian tradition and his own critique of the Beethovenian heritage. In *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* from 1849, Wagner always uses 'absolute Musik' in relation to Beethoven, 'the hero who explored the broad, shoreless sea of absolute music to its limits; new, unimagined coastlines are thus gained, so that this sea no longer divides continents but rather *connects* them for

¹² See Thomas S. Grey, *Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts* (New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism; Cambridge, 1995), 2.

¹³ See Rainer Franke, *Richard Wagners Zürcher Kunstschriften* (Hamburger Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft, 26; Hamburg, 1983), 190. See also Dahlhaus's ch. 2, 'The History of the Term', in Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig (Chicago, 1989).

¹⁴ See Franke, *Richard Wagners Zürcher Kunstschriften*, 205.

¹⁵ Quoted in Albrecht von Massow, 'Absolute Musik', in *Handwörterbuch der Musikalischen Terminologie*, ed. Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht and Albrecht Riethmüller (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1992), 1–17 at 10.

¹⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York, 1969), i. 273, 484.

¹⁷ For discussions of the views of both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, see R. Kuhlen, 'Absolut, das Absolute', in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter (Basel and Stuttgart, 1971), 12–31.

Wagner's definition of absolute music at this point functioned as the opposite of his new concept of music drama, and it seems that later usage of the term follows suit by defining itself against something else. The most enduring of these occurred around 1880, when absolute music came to be defined by its opposite, programme music. A useful way to represent the differences among these definitions is to use the linguist and semiotician A. J. Greimas's 'semiotic square', which is 'designed to diagram the way in which, from any given starting point *S*, a whole complex of meaning possibilities, indeed a complete meaning system, may be derived'.²⁰ Without the boundaries of the square, different kinds of music are, relatively speaking, only raw material to be understood in different ways; once organized into a relationship with each other, they become 'transformed into symbolically signifying elements within the system'.²¹ The four points map out meanings by assertions and negations (see Figs. 1 and 2).

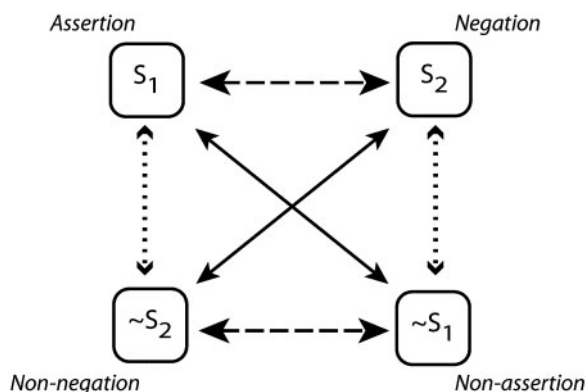


FIG. 1. The semiotic square as defined by Greimas. Adapted from Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 2nd edn. (London and New York, 2007), 106–7; after Algirdas J. Greimas, *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, trans. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins (London, 1987), pp. xiv, 49

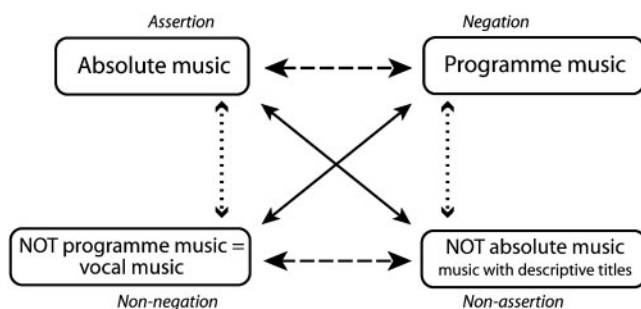


FIG. 2. Absolute music versus programme music, c.1880

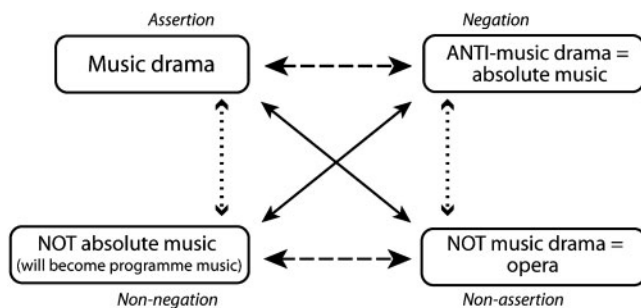


FIG. 3. Wagner, Zurich writings, c.1850

In Wagner's struggle to articulate his new, revolutionary music drama, absolute music came into being as its opposite. Within the square, negation is stronger than non-assertion. Absolute music defines music drama better because it negates music drama more strongly than opera does. Music drama is the opposite of a single art in isolation; it is the coming together of the different arts to form something higher.

Defining music drama as not opera is less clear, since technically opera also brings together the different arts. To complete the universe of meanings contained in this square, the 'S2' position functions as the non-assertion of absolute music. This place will later be filled by programme music, but at the time of *Oper und Drama* remains open. Wagner was not interested in the idea of a music that was neither music drama nor an art isolated unto itself. In his use of the semiotic square, Fredric Jameson has observed that this fourth position 'is always the most critical position and the one that remains open or empty for the longest time, for its identification completes the process and in that sense constitutes the most creative act of the construction'.²³ In Fig. 3, the lack of a designation for 'not absolute music' reminds us that programme music was not conceptualized by Wagner and not yet part of the discussion around 1850.

UHLIG'S VERSION OF ABSOLUTE MUSIC IN THE 'NEUE ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR MUSIK'

Theodor Uhlig's articles on Wagner in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* are crucial to our understanding of how the Wagner debate unfolded journalistically. Furthermore, his summaries are often more cogent than Wagner's complete texts, and had he lived longer, he might have become an important music theorist in his own right.²⁴ Starting in August of 1850, Uhlig began a series of articles on 'Wagner's Writings on Art'. In his overview of *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, he first used the term absolute music in paraphrasing Wagner's complex image, quoted above, of music as an ocean that Beethoven sailed across in order to unite the two continents of dance and poetry.²⁵ But in an instalment from January 1851, Uhlig adopted a less neutral stance, pairing Wagner's use of absolute with 'egotistical': the 'egoistische, absolute, einzelne Mensch' and the 'Geschichte des absoluten Egoismus'.²⁶ He was drawing on Wagner's references to the socialist philosopher Proudhon's distinction between communal relations among people and the selfish individual who does not relate to his fellow man. This intensified the political sense of absolute music being 'incorrect' in its lack of relation to the world. In his next instalment, still in January of 1851, Uhlig came to define what Wagner meant by 'absolute Musik': 'Wagner's general view of *absolute* music must be explicitly and repeatedly emphasized: he finds it inhuman precisely because it is unsatisfying, because it is *necessarily infinite* in expression.'²⁷ This was a typical, anti-Romantic indictment of music: it can never achieve the precision of words and rational thought

²³ Fredric Jameson, 'Introduction', in Algirdas Greimas, *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory* (London, 1987), p. xvi.

²⁴ Klaus Kropfinger has emphasized Uhlig's importance for Wagner's thoughts on the limitations of instrumental music. See *Wagner and Beethoven: Richard Wagner's Reception of Beethoven*, trans. Peter Palmer (Cambridge, 1991), esp. 72–4.

²⁵ 'Der Held aber, der das weite, uferlose Meer der absoluten Musik bis an seine Grenzen durchschiffte und die neuen, ungeahnte Küsten gewann, die dieses Meer von dem Continente nun nicht mehr trennt, sondern *verbindet*, ist kein anderer als—Beethoven: *seine letzte Symphonie* ist die Erlösung der Musik aus ihrem eigensten Elemente heraus zur *allgemeinen Kunst*.' T. U., 'Richard Wagner's Schriften über Kunst. II', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 33, nos. 45, 48 (1850), 241–5, 61–2. (Wagner's exact words are only slightly different, but Uhlig skips twelve pages to get right to the punchline.)

²⁶ T. U., 'Richard Wagner's Schriften über Kunst. III', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 34, nos. 3, 4 (1851), 21–34, 33–6.

²⁷ 'Ausdrücklich und wiederholt muß jedoch Wagner's allgemeine Ansicht von der *absoluten* Musik hervorgehoben werden: er findet es geradezu unmenschlich, weil unbefriedigend, weil *nothwendig unendlich* in Ausdruck'; *ibid.* This is a paraphrase of 'Ist der Ausdruck unermesslichen Herzenssehns in dieser urelementarhaften, absoluten Tonsprache angeregt, so ist nur die Unendlichkeit dieses Ausdruckes, wie die des Sehns selbst, Nothwendigkeit, nicht aber ein endlicher Abschluß als Befriedigung des Sehns, der nur Willkür sein kann'. Wagner, 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft', 63–4.

and can therefore never actually do something or accomplish anything.²⁸ Absolute music is unsatisfactory because all it can do is indicate its need and desire for definite subject matter. In Uhlig's words: 'Absolute music finds its completely defined parameters in such a topic; it is, in its most unending ascent, still only emotion; it accompanies the ethical deed, but is not the deed itself.'²⁹

Not only was Uhlig important in clarifying and disseminating Wagner's idea of absolute music, he was also responsible for expanding the use of the term from designating obsolete instrumental music to naming a whole school of contemporary composition, with Schumann as the leader of the absolute musicians. Unlike Wagner, Uhlig was interested in Schumann's work, albeit in a conflicted way. He described Schumann as the only composer besides Wagner who mattered—however, since he was committed to absolute music he did not really matter after all:

Only one lives who stands equal to Schumann in artistic nature, but in talent outstrips him insofar as he has something more comprehensive to show: this is Wagner. . . . Schumann, as absolute musician, cannot conceive of music as anything except within certain forms that have been cultivated in absolutism [*Absolution*], that is, in instrumental music, which he now transfers to his texts.³⁰

Although Schumann was experimenting with genre and publishing many different kinds of vocal music, Uhlig dismissed him because he still (in Uhlig's opinion) thought in terms of the conventions of symphonic instrumental music. This judgment surely was to some extent determined by the rigid view held by Uhlig and Wagner that there were only two kinds of musicians: the Wagnerian or the absolute musician, with no ground in between.

The following year Uhlig reviewed the publication of Schumann's Third Symphony, which gave him another opportunity to air his views about the lack of a future for the symphony.³¹ He pointed out the innovative aspects of Schumann's work, but then criticized those very innovations for being insufficiently motivated. Uhlig compared the

²⁸ See Sanna Pederson, 'Romantic Music under Siege in 1848', in Ian Bent (ed.), *Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1996), 57–74.

²⁹ 'An einem solchen Gegenstande findet jedoch die absolute Musik ihre ganz bestimmten Grenzen; sie ist, in ihrer unendlichsten Steigerung, doch immer nur *Gefühl*, sie tritt im Geleite der sittlichen That, nicht aber als That selbst'. T. U., 'Richard Wagner's Schriften über Kunst. III'. Compare Wagner's words: 'An einem solchen Gegenstande findet jedoch die absolute Musik ihre ganz bestimmten Grenzen; sie kann, ohne die willkürlichsten Annahmen, nun und nimmermehr den sinnlich und sittlich bestimmten Menschen aus sich allein zur genau wahrnehmbaren, deutlich zu unterscheidenden Darstellung bringen; sie ist, in ihrer unendlichsten Steigerung, doch immer nur *Gefühl*; sie tritt im *Geleite* der sittlichen Tat, nicht aber als *Tat selbst* ein; sie kann Gefühle und Stimmungen nebeneinander stellen, nicht aber nach Notwendigkeit eine Stimmung aus der andern entwickeln; —ihr fehlt der *moralische Wille*.' Wagner, 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft', 64. In the following year Uhlig reprinted Wagner's 1846 essay on the Ninth Symphony, giving the piece a chance to be read much more widely and in the context of the Zurich writings. Theodor Uhlig, 'Ueber den dichterischen Gehalt Beethoven'scher Tonwerke. II. Richard Wagner's Programm zur neunten Symphonie von Beethoven', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 37 (1852), 143–6.

³⁰ 'Nur einer lebt, der Schumann an künstlerischen Naturell gleichsteht, an Begabung ihn aber insofern übertrifft, als er eine noch umfassendere aufzuweisen hat: dies ist Wagner. . . . Schumann vermag als absoluter Musiker die Musik nicht anders zu begreifen, als innerhalb der gewissen Formen, die in der Absolution, d.i. Instrumentalmusik sich ausgebildet haben und die er nun auf seine Texte überträgt.' T. U., Review of Robert Schumann, *Lieder, Gesänge und Requiem für Mignon*, in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 35 (1851), 220.

³¹ T. U., 'Concertmusik. Symphonien. Robert Schumann, Op. 97. Dritte Symphonie (Es-Dur) für großes Orchester. Partitur', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 36, nos. 11, 12 (1852), 117–20, 29–33.

addition of a fifth movement in Schumann's symphony to Beethoven's use of six movements in his Septet:

But with Beethoven the symphonies are sharply separated from his other instrumental works, at least when the poetic content of the absolute-musical artwork comes into question. For even if that Septet of Beethoven's had a much later opus number, due to its genre it would still be assumed that the additional movements were not the result of a higher artistic intention, a poetic idea, but rather a voluntary musical choice, or if one will not allow this last expression, let us say: the attempt of an absolute musician to alter *the form in and for itself*, to enlarge it and form it anew.³²

According to Uhlig, Beethoven took on a purely musical challenge in his Septet, which led to the formal innovation of a six-movement work.³³ Because the genre was not the lofty symphony, a poetic idea could not have been the motivation. Spending time on non-symphonic genres and treating composition as a means for working through formal problems were what absolute musicians did. Rather than affirming this image of Beethoven as a composer writing complex music for its own sake, Uhlig criticized it as an outmoded view, no longer relevant to humanity. Uhlig was ready to move beyond autonomy towards something he considered more significant in world-historical terms: music's potential to bring about social and political renewal.

Uhlig also criticized Schumann for being innovative and adding a movement to his symphony. The 'absolute new and strange appearance' of the fourth movement in 'the character of church music' appeared to be unmotivated by a higher purpose than the music itself.³⁴ Making reference to church music in this additional movement shows

that the composer has entered a very dubious realm of aesthetic speculation, that is: special ideas lie at the basis of his recent large instrumental works (in our opinion, already in his Second Symphony), whose artistic representation requires far, far more than the means that absolute music commands.³⁵

In Uhlig's view, Schumann's error was to attempt to bring in special ideas that were incompatible with the old forms of the instrumental symphony. Because he was interested in the future of the symphony and wrote about it, Uhlig spelled out more clearly than Wagner that autonomous instrumental music was to be rejected for the very reasons it would subsequently be valued: for its autonomy and its abstract, formal meaning.

³² 'Man hat bei Beethoven jedoch die Symphonie scharf zu trennen von seinen übrigen Instrumentalwerken, mindestens da, wo der poetische Inhalt des absolut-musikalischen Kunstwerks in Frage kommt. Denn trüge jenes Septett Beethoven's auch eine viel spätere Opuszahl, so wäre doch schon der Gattung wegen, der es angehört, von vorn herein anzunehmen, daß die Mehrsätzigkeit desselben nicht sowohl Resultat einer höheren Kunstabsicht, einer poetischen Idee, sondern willkürlich musikalisches Belieben sei, oder will man diesen letzteren Ausdruck nicht gelten lassen, so sagen wir: Versuch des absoluten Musikers, *die Form an und für sich* zu ändern, zu erweitern, neu zu gestalten.' Ibid. 119.

³³ Uhlig was obviously not aware that six movements for a divertimento-type composition such as the Septet was normal, not innovative.

³⁴ 'Bei Gelegenheit der speciellen Besprechung des vierten Satzes werden wir diese absolut neue und befremdliche Erscheinung einer näheren Erörterung unterziehen.' 'Concertmusik', 132.

³⁵ 'daß nämlich der Componist das sehr bedenkliche Gebiet der ästhetischen Speculation betreten hat, d. h. seinen neueren großen Instrumentalwerken (nach unserer Ansicht schon seiner 2ten Symphonie) liegen specielle Ideen zu Grunde, deren künstlerische Darstellung weit, weit über die Mittel hinausgehen, die der absoluten Musik zu Gebote stehen.' Ibid.

Uhlig's death at the beginning of 1853 was a major loss to the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik's* polemical propaganda machine. Although the slack was taken up by other Wagnerians, no one was as eager to paraphrase and endorse Wagner's writings. Consequently, after Uhlig's, death 'absolute music'—as it related to Beethoven, Schumann, or anything else—seems to have petered out with the Wagnerians.

The last time Wagner used the term was in the 1857 open letter 'On Franz Liszt's Symphonic Poems', published in the *Neue Zeitschrift*. In the six years since *Oper und Drama* Wagner had become acquainted with the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer on the supremacy of music over all the arts. The degree to which Wagner's letter is influenced by Schopenhauer has been disputed.³⁶ There are certainly passages that go out of their way to praise music in a manner that seems to indicate a different attitude from that of *Oper und Drama*, as exemplified in this passage:

For music is so chaste, sincere, and inspiring by nature that everything it touches is transformed. But just as certain is the fact that music can only be perceived in forms which were originally foreign to it, forms derived from external aspects of human experience. Such forms achieve their latent and truest significance when applied to music in this way. Nothing (NB: as it is revealed to human experience) is less absolute than music, and the champions of an absolute music obviously don't realize what they are saying. To point out their confusion it would suffice to have them name, if they could, any music whose form is not derived from corporeal motion or from verse (according to the causal circumstances).³⁷

Here Wagner presents a dualistic understanding of music in which there is music itself, its essence, and the music accessed by humans through form. He seems to be saying that absolute music exists but humans cannot access it; therefore music as we know it is not absolute because all of it comes to us through form-giving dance or poetry. As Thomas Grey points out, this claim that there is no absolute music creates one of the awkward contradictions between the earlier and the later Wagner: if there is no such thing as absolute music, why did he spend so much time denouncing it before?³⁸ One of the reasons Wagner's post-Zurich writings are so difficult to understand is that he tries to avoid renouncing what he has written earlier even though it is not compatible with his new view. Drawing the distinctions in the form of a semiotic square highlights the differences from his Zurich writings, however (see Fig. 4).

Although the essay is ostensibly about Liszt, only about a quarter of the text deals with the composer and his compositions. The beginning and end are comprised of thoughts on the difficulties of being understood, and particularly the difficulties of expressing oneself through words. Wagner contrasts his friends who understand and love him instinctively with his enemies who misunderstand him. This appears to be

³⁶ Thomas Grey is one who does not believe the Schopenhauer influence is very strong at this point. Grey, *Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts*, 3–6.

³⁷ 'denn sie ist eben des ihr eigenthümlichen Ernstes wegen so keuscher, wunderbarer Art, daß Alles, was sie berührt, durch sie verklärt wird. Aber ebenso offenbar als dies, ebenso gewiß ist es, daß die Musik sich nur in Formen vernehmen läßt, die einer Lebensbeziehung oder einer Lebensäußerung entnommen sind, welche, ursprünglich der Musik fremd, durch diese eben nur ihre tiefste Bedeutung erhalten, gleichsam vermöge der Offenbarung der in ihnen latenten Musik. Nichts ist (wohlgemerkt! Für seine Erscheinung im Leben) weniger absolut, als die Musik, und die Verfechter einer absoluten Musik wissen offenbar nicht, was sie meinen; zu ihrer Verwirrung hätte man sie nur aufzufordern, uns eine Musik außerhalb der Form zu zeigen, die sie der körperlichen Bewegung oder dem Sprachverse (dem kausalen Zusammenhange nach) entnahm.' Richard Wagner, 'Ein Brief von Richard Wagner über Franz Liszt', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 46, no. 15 (1857), 157–63. Translation taken from Thomas S. Grey, 'Richard Wagner and the Aesthetics of Musical Form in the Mid-19th Century (1840–1860)' (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1988), 425.

³⁸ Grey, *Wagner's Musical Prose*, 3.

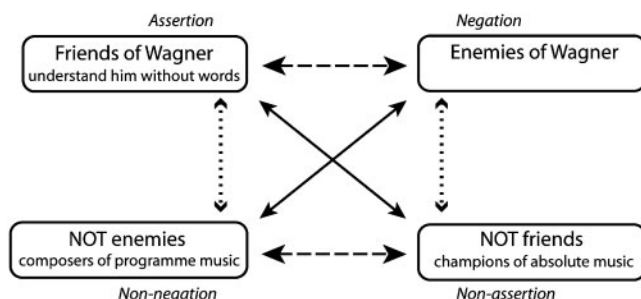


FIG. 4. Wagner, 'On Franz Liszt's Symphonic Poems', 1857

the main structuring opposition. Figure 4 highlights the lesser importance in this essay of his antipathy to the supporters of absolute music (and, by the way, his lukewarm support for programme music).

This one tricky reference by Wagner in 1857 is the last to use 'absolute music' as a term of abuse. Tracing the origin and the development of the term in a positive sense is much more difficult. For instance, in the quotation above, Wagner refers to the 'champions of absolute music', presumably Hanslick and supporters of Hanslick, especially in the *Niederrheinische Musikzeitung*.³⁹ However, this phrase was Wagner's. Neither Hanslick nor the critics of the *Niederrheinische Musikzeitung* called themselves 'champions of absolute music'. After the early part of the 1850s, the term is scarcely to be found in either a positive or negative sense.

In the 1850s in the *Neue Zeitschrift*, topics having to do with Wagner and Liszt are predominant. Hanslick's book received attention as part of the debate about musical aesthetics. However, 'absolute music' was not an issue. Neither Franz Brendel nor Ludwig Bischoff made use of the term in their long reviews of Hanslick's *Vom Musikalisch Schönen* in 1855.⁴⁰ Further lengthy discussions in the *Neue Zeitschrift* of Hanslick and other writings on aesthetics by Adolf Kullak and Theodor Vischer towards the end of the 1850s also avoided the term.⁴¹

Venturing beyond the main music journals does not reveal a different picture. It is found neither in August Wilhelm Ambros's *Die Grenzen der Musik und Poesie* from 1855 nor in Friedrich Theodor Vischer's volume on music from his *Asthetik, oder Wissenschaft des Schönen* (1857), nor in Adolf Kullak's *Das Musikalisch-Schöne* (1858). Otto Jahn's writings from the 1850s, including his Mozart biography, do not include the term; it is likewise missing from the books of A. B. Marx on Beethoven and nineteenth-century music. A few sporadic references to the term occur in the 1860s and 1870s, as I will explain, but it is only around 1880 that the term appears frequently and is used mostly to contrast with programme music, another term that only becomes common around 1880.

³⁹ This journal was founded in 1850 by Ludwig Bischoff in Cologne. Its early years were dominated by extended debates with the *Neue Zeitschrift*, especially with Uhlig, and with articles disputing Wagner's claims.

⁴⁰ Franz Brendel, 'Vom Musikalisch Schönen', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 42 (1855), 77–82, 89–91, 97–100. Ludwig Bischoff, 'Eduard Hanslick', *Niederrheinische Musik-Zeitung*, 3 (1855), 49–53, 57–60, 65–6, 73–5.

⁴¹ See Julius Schäffer, 'Das Musikalisch-Schöne von Adolph Kullak', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 50 (1859), 217–19; 51 (1859), 29–31, 56, 73; Dr Adolph Kullak, 'Aesthetik, über musikalische', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 51 (1859), 45, 53, 61; Julius Schäffer, 'Kullak's Schrift: "Das Musikalisch-Schöne". Erwiderung von Julius Schäffer', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 51 (1859), 116.

Eduard Hanslick, who is said to be the main champion of absolute music, used the term only once in his book *Vom Musikalisch Schönen* of 1854.⁴² In the article on absolute music in the recently revised edition of *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Wilhelm Seidel cites this one occurrence:

Hanslick declares it the essence of music: 'It can never be said that music can do what instrumental music cannot, because only instrumental music is pure, absolute music.' The meaning which he gives to the term proves to be long-lived. Even today, one understands it as a composition whose means, form, and content are 'purely' musical, which therefore requires no extra-musical assistance in order to establish its being and its meaning.⁴³

Seidel quotes one sentence from Hanslick, then leaps to a generalization about our present understanding of the term. He implies that once Hanslick established his definition in 1854, it became law. However, Seidel's next reference in his historical overview is to a publication in 1925. He does not provide any documentation for the use of the term in Hanslick's sense during the intervening sixty-nine years.

Roger Scruton's article on absolute music for the Sixth and Seventh editions of the *Grove Dictionary* is even more misleading in its claims:

The expression is of German origin, first appearing in the writings of Romantic philosophers and critics such as J. L. Tieck, J. G. Herder, W. H. Wackenroder, Jean Paul Richter and E. T. A. Hoffmann. It features in the controversies of the 19th century—for example, in Hanslick's spirited defence of *absolute Tonkunst* against the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Wagner—and also in the abstractions of 20th-century musical aesthetics.⁴⁴

None of the German writers Scruton lists in his first sentence used the term. As mentioned earlier, the Absolute was a key concept for the early Romantics and Idealism. Some of these thinkers also had a high regard for instrumental music. But it is too facile to conclude that they advocated 'absolute music'. Scruton is alone in explicitly, if erroneously, attributing the origin of the term to these writers.

Nor is it correct to conflate the *general* understanding of music of these Romantic philosophers and critics with the aesthetics of absolute music as it became current in the second half of the century. Scruton's source for his assertions may be Rudolf Schäfke's 1934 *Geschichte der Musikästhetik in Umrissen*, an early example of the tendency to connect

⁴² Cf. Klaus Kropfinger: 'The term "absolute music" is generally associated with the "autonomy of art" in Hanslick's sense, for it was Hanslick who proclaimed "form animated by sounds" [*tönend bewegte Form*] to be the essence of music. In fact, however, he wrote only of "pure, absolute musical art" [*Tonkunst*]; his book on *The Beautiful in Music* never actually uses the phrase "absolute music".' Kropfinger, *Wagner and Beethoven*, 114. There is one other place where he uses 'absolute' but not 'absolute Musik': 'Die Ideen, welche der Komponist darstellt, sind vor allem und zuerst rein musikalische. Seiner Phantasie erscheint eine bestimmte schöne Melodie. Sie soll nichts anderes sein als sie selbst. Wie aber jede konkrete Erscheinung auf ihren höheren Gattungsbegriff, auf die sie zunächst erfüllende Idee hinweist, und so fort immer höher und höher bis zur absoluten Idee, so geschieht es auch mit den musikalischen Ideen.' Eduard Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen: Ein Beitrag zur Revision der Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (1896; Wiesbaden, 1989), 25.

⁴³ 'Hanslick erklärt sie dagegen zum Inbegriff der Musik. "Was die Instrumentalmusik nicht kann, von dem darf nie gesagt werden, die Musik könne es; denn nur sie ist die reine absolute Tonkunst" (Ausg. 1990, S. 52). Die Bedeutung, die er dem Terminus gibt, erweist sich als langlebig. Im allgemeinen versteht man bis heute darunter eine Komposition, deren Mittel, deren Form und Gehalt "rein" musikalisch sind, die also, um ihr Dasein und ihren Sinn zu begründen, keiner außermusikalischen Stütze bedarf.' Wilhelm Seidel, 'Absolute Musik', in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Kassel, 1994), i. 22.

⁴⁴ Roger Scruton, 'Absolute Music', in *New Grove II*, i. 36–7.

the Romantics with absolute music.⁴⁵ But Schäfke has been strongly criticized for attributing such later views to the Romantics. In 1965 Walter Wiora, probably the main authority of his time on the concept of absolute music, judged that Schäfke had gone too far in equating the Romantic idea of instrumental music with Hanslick's insistence on the purely musical character of instrumental music.⁴⁶ Wiora pointed out how Wackenroder and others of the time went out of their way to criticize music that was nothing more than a pleasingly constructed sequence of sounds, and how they considered instrumental music, while not traditionally representational, still to have meaningful content. Despite these criticisms that had been published many years before he submitted the article for the first *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (published in 1980), Scruton followed Schäfke in equating the Romantic idea of music with Hanslick's. Since then, Ulrich Tadday has energetically disputed the interpretation of Wackenroder, Tieck, Karl Philipp Moritz, and E. T. A. Hoffmann as forerunners of Hanslick.⁴⁷ Tadday argues that Hanslick's focus on the musical work and on the object rather than the subject is not compatible with these writers' views on music. One last problem in Scruton's article appears at the end, where he links all this to 'the abstractions of 20th-century musical aesthetics', passing over its important differences from both German Idealism and Hanslick's theory, as Richard Taruskin and Karol Berger have noted.⁴⁸

Carl Dahlhaus performs a sleight-of-hand similar to Seidel's in the chapter on the history of the term in his book *The Idea of Absolute Music*.⁴⁹ After a careful treatment of Wagner's original use of the term, Dahlhaus proceeds to Hanslick, whereupon the chronological account of the history of the term is swallowed up into Dahlhaus's own idea of absolute music. For instance, he comments:

Hanslick's concept of 'absolute musical art' also hides a metaphysical implication that was later made explicit: that music, specifically by 'dissolving' itself from functions, texts, and programs as pure instrumental music, can appear as an image of the 'absolute'. Half a century later, August Halm took up and further defined the emphatic concept of form that represented Hanslick's decisive step beyond the romantic metaphysics of instrumental music; following Halm, Ernst Kurth combined the idea with a concept of 'absolute music' that was exalted into the realm of the immeasurable.⁵⁰

In his book as a whole, Dahlhaus repeatedly refers to Hanslick's concept of 'absolute musical art' and 'pure, absolute music' as if Hanslick himself regularly bandied about these words. He attributes a 'hidden' implication that, he acknowledges, only first

⁴⁵ For instance, in the following passage, Schäfke connects the Romantics with absolute music but does not quite attribute the term to them: 'Die höchste Art der Musik, die instrumentale, ist unabhängig und frei von allen, selbst den psychisch-menschlichen Darstellungs-objekten, ist in der Terminologie des 19. Jahrhunderts gesprochen, absolut.' Rudolf Schäfke, *Geschichte der Musikästhetik in Umrissen* (Berlin, 1934), 348.

⁴⁶ Walter Wiora, 'Die Musik im Weltbild der Deutschen Romantik', in Hellmut Kühn and Christoph-Hellmut Mahling (eds.), *Historische und Systematische Musikwissenschaft: Ausgewählte Aufsätze* (Tutzing, 1972), 268–322, esp. 290–1 and 294–5. A more recent account also cautions against equating Idealism with Hanslick's formalism. See Mark Evan Bonds, 'Idealism and the Aesthetics of Instrumental Music at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 50 (1997), 387–420.

⁴⁷ Ulrich Tadday, 'Musik im metaphysischen Vakuum: Wackenroders Kritik der Metaphysik der Instrumentalmusik', *Musik Theorie*, 23/1 (2008), 71–6.

⁴⁸ Richard Taruskin, 'A Myth of the Twentieth Century: The *Rite of Spring*, the Tradition of the New, and "The Music Itself"', *Modernism/Modernity*, 2 (1995), 1–26, esp. 5. Karol Berger, *A Theory of Art* (New York and Oxford, 2000), ch. 3, esp. p. 139.

⁴⁹ Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 29–30.

appears in the twentieth-century writings of Halm and Kurth. The first edition of *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* did end with a last-minute possibility of a metaphysical definition of music that contains the word absolute:

He does not experience music merely as bare and absolute through its own beauty, but simultaneously as a sounding image of the great movements in the universe. . . . Just as the elements of music-sound, tone, rhythm, strength, weakness are found in the entire universe, so man rediscovers in music the entire universe.⁵¹

However, as Dahlhaus acknowledges, Hanslick omitted this passage from all subsequent editions. Hanslick's mentor, Robert Zimmermann, had criticized the passage in his review:

It seems to us superfluous that, as Hanslick continues, these pure tonal relationships actualize something else than themselves, for instance, ascending to the intimation of the Absolute. The Absolute is not a tonal relationship and therefore, it seems to us, not musical. If it is to be represented musically, then it can only happen with difficulty by association of ideas through the use of tones, rhythms that awaken the concept of the sublime and so that of the absolute, therefore indirectly, not directly through tones.⁵²

Dahlhaus implies Hanslick 'hid' the metaphysical implication of absolute music, but the evidence suggests that he omitted it because, as Zimmermann pointed out, it contradicted his own argument that the beautiful in music was purely musical.⁵³

One adjective that Hanslick *did* use frequently, indeed almost compulsively, was 'reine', or pure. Like 'absolute', it can be used as an adverb to indicate 'only' or 'one hundred per cent': something is *absolutely* correct or *purely* a matter of semantics. 'Absolute' and 'pure' have been used as synonyms in music aesthetics from the early nineteenth century to the present.⁵⁴ Beyond that, as Albrecht Riethmüller has pointed out, 'pure' music has its own connotations.⁵⁵ To speak of the purity of music and music that is purified brings up moral, ethical, and religious values that can differ from absolute values, which connotatively shade more into philosophy and science. The emphasis on music's purity is a topic in its own right.

⁵¹ 'Ihm wirkt die Musik nicht bloß und absolut durch ihre eigenste Schönheit, sondern zugleich als tönendes Abbild der großen Bewegungen im Weltall. . . . Da die Elemente der Musik: Schall, Ton, Rhythmus, Stärke, Schwäche im ganzen Universum sich finden, so findet der Mensch wieder in der Musik das ganze Universum.' Eduard Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, ed. Dietmar Strauß, 2 vols. (Schott, 1990), i, 171.

⁵² 'Überflüssig erscheint uns, daß, wie Hanslick fortfährt, diese reinen Tonverhältnisse noch etwas anderes als sich selbst zur Erscheinung bringen, z. B. bis zur Ahnung des Absoluten steigen. Das Absolute ist kein Tonverhältnis und also dünkt uns, auch nicht musikalisch. Soll es musikalisch dargestellt werden, so kann dies schwer und nur dadurch geschehen, daß Töne, Rhythmen gebraucht werden, die durch Ideenassoziation den Begriff des Erhabenen und so des Absoluten erwecken, also mittelbar, nicht unmittelbar durch Töne.' Robert Zimmermann, review of *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, in *Österreichische Blätter für Literatur und Kunst* (1854), repr. in Felix M. Gatz, *Musik-Ästhetik in ihren Hauptrichtungen: Ein Quellenbuch der deutschen Musik-Ästhetik von Kant und der Frühromantik bis zur Gegenwart mit Einführung und Erläuterungen*, 4 vols. (Stuttgart, 1929), ii, 429.

⁵³ Mark Evan Bonds has discussed how Hanslick's revisions to his book progressively eliminate passages that are influenced by Idealism. See Bonds, 'Idealism and the Aesthetics of Instrumental Music'.

⁵⁴ 'Im Rahmen dieser Begriffstradition wird absolut teilweise synonym mit dem Wort rein gebraucht; dabei scheinen im Ital. und Franz. Die Wendung musica pura bzw. Musique pure als Äquivalente zum Begriff absolute Musik bis heute gebräuchlich zu sein'. Massow, 'Absolute Musik', 9.

⁵⁵ Albrecht Riethmüller, "Reine Musik" im Widerstreit: Zur Wandelbarkeit eines Begriffs', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 149/5 (1988), 12–18.

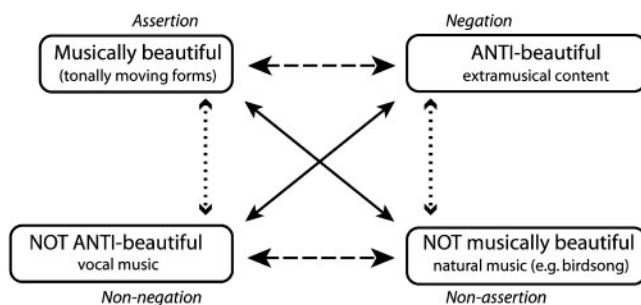


FIG. 5. Hanslick, *Vom musikalisch-Schönen*, 1854

Hanslick's use of 'reine, absolute Tonkunst' in his book seems incidental, because as far as I have been able to determine, he did not use this exact term again over the course of almost fifty years of criticism. Organizing Hanslick's understanding of the 'beautiful' in music within the semiotic square reveals the following features. First, his assertion that 'the content of music is tonally moving forms' is opposed to the belief that the content of music is extramusical (see Fig. 5). This is played out in the book, however, mostly as a beautiful object versus pathological feelings in the subject. Further, Hanslick takes a whole chapter to argue against the notion that music could be a naturally occurring phenomenon. And in chapter 2 he makes some rather confusing assertions about vocal music, declaring on the one hand that 'only instrumental music is pure, absolute music' but also that in Mozart's operas the 'total effect will be beautiful music'.⁵⁶ All in all, the semiotic square shows how removed Hanslick's interests are from Wagner's in his Zurich writings, as well as from later definitions of absolute music.

The term absolute music only came to be firmly attributed to Hanslick around 1880. The Wagnerian C. R. Hennig, a sceptic of absolute music, repeatedly misquoted Hanslick as saying 'the content of absolute music is tonally moving forms' in 1896.⁵⁷ But eight years earlier, in his *Beethoven's Neunte Symphonie: Eine Analyse*, Hennig had more accurately (but still not exactly) quoted Hanslick as declaring that 'the content of instrumental music' [*not* absolute music] is 'tonally moving forms, a kind of arabesque set in motion'.⁵⁸

There is further proof that the term was not associated with Hanslick in the 1870s. In 1877, the Czech professor Ottokar Hostinsky published a book about the theories of both Wagner and Hanslick with the aim of finding points of compatibility, which he called *Das Musikalisch-Schöne und das Gesamtkunstwerk vom Standpunkte der Formalen Aesthetik*.⁵⁹ As his title indicates, Hostinsky first considered the many aesthetic arguments that had accumulated against Hanslick's definition of the musically beautiful.

⁵⁶ Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1986), 23.

⁵⁷ 'Der Inhalt der absoluten Musik sind tönend bewegte Formen.' C. R. Hennig, *Die Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (Leipzig 1896), 97.

⁵⁸ 'Der Inhalt der Instrumentalmusik' is 'tönend bewegte Formen, eine Art in Bewegung gesetzter Arabesken'. C. R. Hennig, *Beethoven's Neunte Symphonie: Eine Analyse* (Leipzig, 1888), 19. Hanslick's exact words are: 'Der Inhalt der Musik sind tönend bewegte Formen'. Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen: Ein Beitrag zur Revision der Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (1990), 59.

⁵⁹ Ottokar Hostinsky, *Das Musikalisch-Schöne und das Gesamtkunstwerk vom Standpunkte der Formalen Aesthetik* (Leipzig, 1877).

He concluded that Hanslick was correct to claim there is music that is ‘absolute, purely formal, and without object, i.e., it represents nothing through its form that is to be found outside its own artistic sphere, in nature or in life’.⁶⁰ However, Hostinsky could not concur that instrumental music was music’s highest form. Instead, he argued in favour of Wagner’s concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a union of the arts, as more valuable than any one art in all its purity. It is at this point that Hostinsky brought up precisely the issue at hand, Hanslick’s use of the term ‘absolute music’:

That music in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* cannot function in the end as absolute music is self-evident and even its most enthusiastic admirers will not make a fuss about it. It is all the more strange that Hanslick makes this an accusation of opera in Wagner’s sense, when he repeats, with emphasis, that instrumental music is ‘pure, absolute musical art’, that one will always have to concede ‘that the concept of music [*Tonkunst*] in a piece of music that is composed to words does not prove to be pure’, etc. It is completely in the order of things if vocal music does not function as ‘pure art’ but rather as a union of arts, and is treated in theory accordingly.⁶¹

Hostinsky found it strange that Hanslick kept repeating what Wagner had said, that absolute music was only music and nothing else, and that when it was joined with text it was no longer only music, no longer pure and absolute. This has significance regarding the term ‘absolute music’: for Hostinsky in 1877 there was only one definition of absolute music, and that was Wagner’s, which Hanslick also used. The only difference was in how the two viewed it: what for Wagner was limited in a negative sense was for Hanslick limited in a good sense. But Hostinsky found this strange because he could not see anything positive about music remaining limited to itself.

The first substantial essay that I have found that extols the virtues of absolute music appeared, surprisingly, in 1875 in the American periodical *The Galaxy*.⁶² The author, Richard Grant White (1822–85), has been described by Vera Brodsky Lawrence as ‘the vitriolic New York music critic, amateur composer, Shakespeare scholar, and fashion plate’.⁶³ White was a conservative cultural pessimist with extreme musical views. Although his article took as its point of departure the performance of ‘one of Liszt’s orchestral compositions’, he did not define absolute music in opposition to programme music. Rather, he characterized absolute music as music with beautiful melody and harmony. Any music that is not beautiful does not qualify as music. Therefore, he concluded in his final sentence, ‘Absolute music is simply—music; and music not absolute is absolutely not music’. For White, absolute music was a value judgement based only on his perception of the beautiful, which he claimed could not be defined, only experienced. This approach avoided any of the usual issues concerning representation and expression, or even vocal music versus instrumental music. His two main examples of

⁶⁰ Ibid. 141.

⁶¹ ‘Dass schliesslich die Tonkunst im Gesamtkunstwerk nicht als absolute Musik wirken kann, ist selbstverständlich und wird auch ihren begeistertsten Verehrer nicht zu grämen brauchen. Es ist um so befremdlicher, dass Hanslick dies der Oper im Sinne Wagner’s zum Vorwurf macht, als er ja selbst wiederholt mit Nachdruck betont, nur die Instrumentalmusik sei “die reine, absolute Tonkunst”, man werde stets einräumen müssen, “das der Begriff ‘Tonkunst’ in einem auf Textworte componirten Musikstück nicht rein aufgeht”, u.s.w. Es ist also ganz in der Ordnung, wenn die Vocalmusik nicht als “reine Kunst”, sondern vielmehr als “Kunstverein” wirkt und demgemäss auch theoretisch behandelt wird.’ Ibid. 146–7.

⁶² Richard Grant White, ‘Absolute Music’, *The Galaxy: A Magazine of Entertaining Reading*, 19/3 (1875), 391–9.

⁶³ Vera Brodsky Lawrence, *Strong on Music: The New York Music Scene in the Days of George Templeton Strong, 1836–1875*, i: *Resonances, 1836–1850* (New York and Oxford, 1988), 178.

absolute music, defined as beautiful in its melody and harmony, were taken from opera: Leporello's Catalogue Aria from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and 'Lascia ch'io pianga' from Handel's *Rinaldo*. White allowed that even programme music could be considered absolute music if it were intrinsically beautiful, although his dismissive tone indicates he did not think this would ever happen. The year before he had described the 'music of the future' as 'an alms-house for poverty-stricken musicians, who in their barrenness of musical ideas are compelled in self-defense to set up this charity hospital, into which those only are admitted who are not possessed of a single musical inspiration'.⁶⁴ Indeed, in other writings, White rejected not only the music of Wagner and Liszt, but *all* music after Beethoven, naming in particular Schubert, Schumann, and Mendelssohn as unsatisfactory.⁶⁵ The only composer White could fully approve of was Handel. Even Beethoven could be faulted for his occasional lapses into 'morbidity'.

White's essay is significant because it is an early example of absolute music being used positively. It does not refer to or rely on Hanslick's *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* even though he defines absolute music as beautiful music. His definition and explication, however, are idiosyncratic, and do not seem to have been adopted by others in the United States or elsewhere.⁶⁶

WAGNER, SCHOPENHAUER, AND NIETZSCHE

The period around 1880, when absolute and programme music became slogans, was also a time when Wagner's views were being discussed extensively. There was and still is today much to ponder, because understanding Wagner's confusingly shifting views, and how they related to the philosophers Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, remains an especially complicated topic. Dahlhaus's belief that all three shared 'the idea of absolute music' leads him to label their ideas with the term 'absolute music', which makes a complex subject even more confusing and contorted. For instance, Dahlhaus begins: 'Wagner, having converted to Schopenhauer's metaphysics of music, which was a theory of absolute music. . .'; he then qualifies this theory as 'an example of absolute-music esthetics: not of the phenomenon that Hanslick meant, but of the idea at which Schopenhauer aimed'.⁶⁷ If this is so, why did Wagner, who was the only one of the three writers mentioned who actually used the term, drop it once he 'converted'?

Dahlhaus devotes a good deal of his chapter on the history of the term to Nietzsche, who did use the term several times in his unpublished fragments and lectures, mostly from the early 1870s. Nietzsche used the term in Wagner's negative sense.⁶⁸ As early as 1871 Nietzsche had questioned Wagner's view of Beethoven's Ninth (in an unpublished fragment, much discussed in recent years):

What are we to think of that enormous esthetic superstition: that Beethoven himself, with that fourth movement of the Ninth, made a solemn statement about the limits of absolute music,

⁶⁴ Richard Grant White, 'Franz Liszt and the Music of the Future', *The Galaxy: A Magazine of Entertaining Reading* 18 (1874), 389–400 at 396.

⁶⁵ Richard Grant White, 'Three Periods of Modern Music', *The Galaxy: A Magazine of Entertaining Reading*, 23/6 (1877), 832–41 at 832.

⁶⁶ For instance, the American critic J. S. Dwight defended White from those who questioned his musical competency in his own *Dwight's Journal of Music*. Dwight seems to have shared White's views to some extent; however, he did not adopt the term 'absolute music'. See J. S. Dwight, 'Richard Wagner and his Theory of Music', *Dwight's Journal of Music*, 34/6 (1874–5), 254–5.

⁶⁷ Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, 121–2.

⁶⁸ Five occurrences of the term in the unpublished work are listed in Klaus Kropfinger, 'Wagners Musikbegriff und Nietzsches "Geist der Musik"', *Nietzsche-Studien*, 14 (1985), 1–12 at 6 n. 22.

yea, unlocked the portals of a new art in which music could even represent images and concepts, and thus became accessible to the ‘conscious spirit’?⁶⁹

Dahlhaus uses this scepticism concerning Wagner’s interpretation of the Ninth to make the mind-bending statement that ‘when stated affirmatively, the polemical statement that it is an “esthetic superstition” that the “boundaries of absolute music” were shown in the Ninth Symphony means that there are no boundaries to absolute music’.⁷⁰ Dahlhaus argues that because Nietzsche was critical of Wagner’s Zurich writings with their denunciation of absolute music, he was therefore an advocate of absolute music. A negative of a negative is supposed to yield a positive here, but such statements are not convincingly illuminated by such reductive logic.

In fact, when Wagner’s notoriously changing understanding of music is put in play with Nietzsche’s equally unstable views, it seems possible to come up with different results every time the relation between the musical aesthetics of the two is considered. That said, most accounts describe how Wagner moved from his position of the early 1850s, in which he insisted music must serve the drama, to a belief in the primacy of music: he moved from Feuerbach to Schopenhauer, from anti-romanticism to romanticism. There are also two basic positions for Nietzsche: he had a Romantic, pro-Schopenhauer, pro-Wagner phase; then, over the course of the rest of his writings, he critiqued this phase, renouncing romanticism, metaphysics, and Wagner. Nietzsche’s early phase seems to overlap only with Wagner’s late phase. Dahlhaus however implies that, once past the Zurich writings, the idea of absolute music was continuous and unwavering throughout for both Wagner and Nietzsche.

Nietzsche did not use the term ‘absolute music’ in his two published works that are representative of his early, pro-Wagner, pro-Schopenhauer phase: *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 1871) and ‘Richard Wagner in Bayreuth’ (1876). Dahlhaus notes this, but still emphasizes these writings for the ‘idea of absolute music’.⁷¹ If he had used another term, such as the idea of Romantic or metaphysical music, his claim would be more straightforward in arguing for the unity of thought about music in the cases of Wagner and Nietzsche—straightforward, but still debatable. Klaus Kropfinger, for instance, has questioned whether the term ‘absolute music’ was a common denominator for the musical thought of both Wagner and Nietzsche around 1871.⁷² He has investigated the differences between Wagner and Nietzsche at this time, when they seemed to be in complete accord, particularly in their understanding of Schopenhauer. His complex investigation indicates that Dahlhaus goes too far in reducing their ideas down to the same ‘idea of absolute music’, and that this ‘idea’ has been only arbitrarily identified with the actual term.

Furthermore, Dahlhaus avoids discussion of Nietzsche’s later rejection of Wagner, Schopenhauer, metaphysics, and romanticism, misleadingly implying that Nietzsche stayed true to the idea of absolute music. As early as 1878 Nietzsche addressed the term ‘absolute music’ head-on in Aphorism 215 of *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (*Human, All Too Human*). This aphorism rejects Schopenhauer’s view of music: ‘In itself, no music is

⁶⁹ Quoted by Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, 30. Dahlhaus discusses it in Carl Dahlhaus, ‘The Twofold Truth in Wagner’s Aesthetics: Nietzsche’s Fragment “On Music and Words”’, in *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, 19–39. Nietzsche’s fragment is given in translation as an appendix to this book.

⁷⁰ Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, 33–4.

⁷¹ Ibid. 30.

⁷² Kropfinger, ‘Wagners Musikbegriff und Nietzsches “Geist der Musik”’ 10–11.

profound or significant, it does not speak of the “will” or of the “thing in itself”; the intellect could suppose such a thing only in an age which had conquered for musical symbolism the entire compass of the inner life.’⁷³ He then defines the term:

‘Absolute music’ is either form in itself, at a primitive stage of music in which sounds made in tempo and at varying volume gave pleasure as such, or symbolism of form speaking to the understanding without poetry after both arts had been united over a long course of evolution and the musical form had finally become entirely enmeshed in threads of feeling and concepts.⁷⁴

Thomas Nelson has described this aphorism as indicating Nietzsche’s move away from a ‘mystifying metaphysical polemics’ to ‘a materialist *musica practica*, defined as a historically dynamic, culturally constructed discursive language of allegorical correlations based on imagined relationships that will vary in reception according to the fantasy and acculturation of its listeners’.⁷⁵ Max Paddison has similarly written that this aphorism ‘argues for a recognition of the historical process through which musical figurations, conventions, gestures acquire their apparently immanent musical meanings’.⁷⁶

Nietzsche’s use of absolute music, then, occurred mostly during his pro-Wagner period that culminated in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, when he understood absolute music in Wagner’s sense as an insufficient thing, a separate art unto itself. This was also the time in which he advocated ‘the idea of absolute music’ in Dahlhaus’s sense—the Schopenhauerian belief of Wagner’s in the primacy of music. By the time of *Human, All Too Human*, however, Nietzsche had rejected both positive and negative evaluations of absolute music in favor of a ‘genealogy’ (i.e. more historical and materialist account) of music. Dahlhaus paints a misleading picture of Nietzsche by omitting any discussion of this subsequent critique.⁷⁷

⁷³ ‘An sich ist keine Musik tief und bedeutungsvoll, sie spricht nicht vom “Willen”, vom “Dinge an sich”; das konnte der Intellekt erst in einem Zeitalter wähen, welches den ganzen Umfang des inneren Lebens für die musikalische Symbolik erobert hatte.’ Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘Menschliches, Allzumenschliches. Erster Band’, in *Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Rolf Toman (Cologne, 1994), 245–607 at 409.

⁷⁴ ‘Die “absolute Musik” ist entweder Form an sich, im rohen Zustand der Musik, wo das Erklängen in Zeitmaß und verschiedener Stärke überhaupt Freude macht, oder die ohne Poesie schon zum Verständnis redende Symbolik der Formen, nachdem in langer Entwicklung beide Künste verbunden waren und endlich die musikalische Form ganz mit Begriffs- und Gefühlsfäden durchspinnen ist.’ Nietzsche, ‘Menschliches, Allzumenschliches’, 409 (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge, 1996), 99).

⁷⁵ Thomas Keith Nelson, ‘The Fantasy of Absolute Music’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1998), 692–3.

⁷⁶ Max Paddison, ‘Authenticity and Failure in Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music’, in Thomas Huhn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge, 2004), 198–221 at 209. Paddison also notes that this aphorism was important to Adorno, who quoted it in its entirety in a footnote in *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley Bloomster (New York, 1973), 138–9 n. 3). Albrecht von Mossoff presents a similar view of this aphorism in his dictionary article on absolute music: ‘Im Unterschied zu solchen Gegenüberstellungen bezeichnet Fr. Nietzsche mit “absoluter” Musik allein eine durch Rezeptionsgewohnheiten entstandene Konsequenz der “dramatischen” Musik. Die Entwicklung einer spezifisch mus. Semantik erklärt er damit, daß sich in Analogie zum “Nebeneinander von Musik und Bewegung” die assoziative Repräsentation dieser “Gebärden” durch klangliche Gesten und Symbole herausgebildet habe, die im Zuge ihrer zunehmenden Differenzierung auch ohne ausdrücklichen Bezug zu ihrem außermus. Ursprung in sich verständlich geworden sei.’ Mossoff, ‘Absolute Musik’, 15.

⁷⁷ Dahlhaus does in fact cite Aphorism 215 in a footnote, but glosses it quite differently as saying ‘Absolute music, historically the later form, is metaphysically the original one’. Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, 33.

So far, I have shown that Hanslick, Wagner, and Nietzsche cannot be associated with the term absolute music in a positive sense. The two remaining sources that Dahlhaus cites are the twentieth-century writings of August Halm and Ernst Kurth. Halm is virtually unknown to non-German language readers because his voluminous writings remain untranslated, but also because his thought is steeped in perhaps too strong a blend of German theology and philosophy where parts of the Bible, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche are selectively combined to form the basis of a radically reordered musical world.⁷⁸ On the other hand, in some ways Halm cuts quite a familiar figure as what we would think of today as the quintessential formalist theorist. He polemicized tirelessly against subjective, emotional impressions of music and rejected all historical information because it was not 'in the notes'. For Halm, style, form, and genre did not have a historical dimension; they dealt with solutions to problems through musical function. Thus freed from history, Halm narrowed down the music that he considered important for its problem solving to certain instrumental works by Bach, Beethoven, and Bruckner. In his most famous book, published in 1912, *Von Zwei Kulturen der Musik* (*On Two Cultures in Music*), Halm presented his thesis that Bach and Beethoven stood for two completely different mentalities or cultures, manifested in the difference between fugue and sonata form. While this sounds potentially compatible with mainstream music history and theory, the conclusion on the last page of the book does not:

A third culture, the synthesis of the two of which we have attempted to give an illustration in this book, is to be expected, a synthesis that will first be the complete culture of music, no longer just a culture, and I believe it is already established, perhaps already achieved. I see it germinating and living in Anton Bruckner's symphonies. . . . The first movement of his Ninth Symphony is for me the best music that has ever been created.⁷⁹

Halm did not use the term 'absolute music' in the book *On Two Cultures*; in fact, the term is quite scarce throughout his writings. It appears only once in his 1914 book on Bruckner's symphonies.⁸⁰ It is rare even in his 1928 essay called 'Programmusik und Absolute Musik'. Here his definition of the term varies between a straightforward equation with instrumental music and something much more subjectively defined. This latter formulation is indicated through the distinction between the preacher and the priest: he who is directed mainly towards people versus he who is focused on God.⁸¹ For Halm, Bruckner was the only musical example of the latter. Beethoven was the example of

⁷⁸ Practically the only English-language source for information on Halm is the work of Lee Rothfarb. He has illuminated many unorthodox aspects of Halm's writing. His most recent article is Lee Rothfarb, 'August Halm on Body and Spirit in Music', *19th-Century Music*, 29 (2005–6), 121–41. See also id., 'Music Analysis, Cultural Morality, and Sociology in the Writings of August Halm', *Indiana Theory Review*, 16 (1995), 171–96. For a discussion of the religious dimension to Halm's writing, see id., 'Musik und Theologie: August Halm am Kreuzungspunkt seines beruflichen und schöpferischen Weges', *Musik in Baden-Württemberg*, 3 (1996), 115–34. Other than Rothfarb's work, there is a stimulating essay by Alexander Rehding, 'August Halm's Two Cultures as Nature', in id. and Suzannah Clark (eds.), *Musical Theory and Natural Order from the Renaissance to the Early Twentieth Century* (Cambridge and New York, 2001), 142–60.

⁷⁹ 'Ein dritte Kultur, die Synthese der beiden, von denen wir in diesem Buch ein Bild zu geben versucht haben, ist zu erwarten, die erst die volle Kultur der Musik, nicht mehr nur eine Kultur sein wird, und ich glaube, sie ist schon begründet, vielleicht schon erreicht. Ich sehe sie in Anton Bruckners Symphonien keimen und leben . . . der erste Satz seiner Neunten Symphonie ist mir die beste Musik, die je geschaffen worden ist.' August Halm, *Von Zwei Kulturen der Musik*, 3rd edn. (Stuttgart, 1947), 253–4.

⁸⁰ August Halm, *Die Symphonie Anton Bruckners* (Munich, 1914), 122.

⁸¹ Halm had first introduced his characterization of Bruckner as priest in his 1917 article 'Anton Bruckner'. See August Halm, *Von Form und Sinn der Musik: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Siegfried Schmalzriedt (Wiesbaden, 1978), 176–81.

the former: his nature was 'was mainly directed outwards; Beethoven's music wants to have listeners'.⁸² Bruckner had other goals. He would say, Halm claimed, 'My music has to do with the cosmos, not the world in which we humans find ourselves. I consecrate my music to the absolute spirit. . . . My music is more than knowledge, more than philosophy.'⁸³ Halm continued that 'such absolute music' as Bruckner's 'doesn't need human listeners. They are not in the picture at its beginning; although they are welcome as guests afterwards. . . . Music of this kind is like the sun and stars, which shine according to their nature, whether or not they shine on people, animals, and plants or on a desert sand and empty space.'⁸⁴ Halm dedicated himself to the composer he saw as a fellow religious outcast. He declared that only Bruckner's symphonies could be considered a realization of the ultimate ideal of absolute music. In *The Idea of Absolute Music*, Dahlhaus fails to mention the esoteric aspects of Halm's theories. They are, however, an important part of the 'idea' that his book is devoted to explicating.

ERNST KURTH

To return to the problem at hand: although the term 'absolute music' appears in Halm's writings, its focus on Bruckner is not compatible with earlier writers and does not form a latent aesthetic unity going back to Hanslick. The fact that Hanslick was no friend to Bruckner's music and the additional fact that Bruckner allied himself with programme music require some very convoluted reasoning to arrive at Dahlhaus's latent unity in this area. Dahlhaus never acknowledges that, in the sources he cites as using the term in a positive sense in the twentieth century, absolute music is associated with Bruckner.

This is also the case with Dahlhaus's final witness for the idea of absolute music, Ernst Kurth, a friend of Halm's and fellow Bruckner apostle.⁸⁵ Halm and Kurth were similar in that they both took themselves off the beaten track of traditional academic scholarship, which they perceived as lacking a meaningful connection to music and the study of music. Kurth, however, had the more conventional musicological career, studying with Guido Adler at the University of Vienna and completing a dissertation on Gluck's early operas in 1908. His subsequent scholarship was not so much historical as theoretical, dealing with Romantic harmony, music psychology, and Bruckner.

⁸² Beethoven's nature is 'ganz vorwiegend nach außen gewandt; Beethovens Musik will den Zuhörer haben'. Ibid. 71. Originally in August Halm, 'Programmusik und absolute Musik', *Der Kunstwart*, 42/1 (1928/9), 147–52.

⁸³ 'Meine Musik gilt dem Kosmos; und zwar nicht der Welt, die wir Menschen vorfinden, und die wir selber sind, sondern der Weltordnung gilt sie; ich weihe sie dem absoluten Geist. . . . Meine Musik ist mehr als Erkenntnis, mehr als Philosophie.' Halm, *Von Form und Sinn der Musik*, 67–8.

⁸⁴ 'Gleich der kultischen Handlung hat solche absolute Musik den Zeugen und namentlich eine Gemeinde als Zeugen zwar gern, bedarf aber nicht des menschlichen Zuhörers; dieser ist bei ihrem Entstehen nicht mit im Bild, wenn er auch als Gast nachher willkommen ist. Von dem Akt des Schaffens absehend, könnten wir solche Erscheinungen von Musik gerade auch wir Naturerscheinungen, Vorgänge einer Musik-Natur ansehen. Musik dieser Art wäre dann sie Sonne und Sterne, die eben ihrer Natur nach strahlen, ob sie nun auf Menschen, Tiere und Pflanzen, oder auf Wüstensand und leeren Weltraum scheinen.' Ibid. 68. This cosmological imagery recalls medieval notions of the music of the spheres; however, Halm does not seem to have intended it that way. He strenuously rejected mystical tendencies in favour of Western rationality. In Schmalzriedt's extensive survey of Halm's thought, there is no mention of any interest in the music of the spheres. See Siegfried Schmalzriedt, 'August Halms Musikalische Ästhetik: Versuch einer Darstellung', in *Von Form und Sinn der Musik: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Siegfried Schmalzriedt (Wiesbaden, 1978), 3–56.

⁸⁵ See, besides Dahlhaus, Seidel's *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* article and Walter Wiora's entry for absolute music in the original *MGG*. Two other important but less obvious advocates from this time period are Gatz and Schäfke, with their scholarly books on music aesthetics.

Despite mostly uncomprehending responses to his work, he attained a chair in musicology at the University of Berne, where he remained from 1927 until his death in 1946.

Dahlhaus and others assume that because they believed in Bruckner as the quintessential composer of absolute music, Halm's and Kurth's views were basically the same. However, Kurth's understanding is incompatible with Halm's in several ways. Kurth's theory is a combination of psychology, mysticism, and religious feeling inspired by Bruckner. In comparison to Halm, he also took a fairly conventional approach to music history, assuming that the high point of absolute music had already been attained in the great vocal music of Bach and Handel, and had its final gasp with Wagner and Bruckner.⁸⁶

That is not to say that Kurth was more traditional than Halm. For Kurth, absolute music is not sounding music precisely, but rather psychic emanations from the unconscious made manifest in sound.⁸⁷ For instance: 'Absolute music does not have any concrete aspect (*Gegenständlichkeit*); rather, its only law, on which it rests, is that it is only force (*Kraft*) and the radiating out of that force in sound material.'⁸⁸ Kurth's most pithy comment, cited by Dahlhaus, states: 'We can see clearly that the word "absolute" has a double meaning. In a technical sense, it means dissolved from song; in a spiritual sense, dissolved from man.'⁸⁹ The 'dissolved from man' sense seems to indicate that Kurth, like Halm, placed absolute music beyond humanity.

If anything, Kurth is even more esoteric than Halm to be considered the spokesman for the latent unity of the idea of absolute music. Once the writings of Hanslick, Halm, and Kurth are examined, Dahlhaus's claim falls apart. The final question, then, must address the reasons why Dahlhaus constructed this idea. This necessarily requires some speculation about the way musicology has developed over the last thirty years.

CONCLUSION

It is significant, I think, that in Dahlhaus's *Aesthetics of Music* from 1967, absolute music is treated only in passing. It only emerges as 'the true musical aesthetic' of the nineteenth century in 'The Twofold Truth in Wagner's Aesthetics' from the collection published in English as *Between Romanticism and Modernism* from 1974 and in *The Idea of Absolute Music* from 1978.⁹⁰ James Hepokoski's discussion of the development of Dahlhaus's thought has highlighted this period of the 1970s for Dahlhaus as a professor of music

⁸⁶ Ernst Kurth, *Bruckner* (Berlin, 1925), repr. in Gatz, *Musik-Ästhetik in ihren Hauptrichtungen*, 540.

⁸⁷ 'In order to establish a theory of music, it is not enough merely to "hear" and to inquire time and again about sonic phenomena, but rather [it is necessary] to plumb deeper into the primal processes within ourselves. All sonic activity lies on the uppermost surface of musical growth. The tremendous striving, the tensions of the infinitely rich interwoven play of forces which we call the musical substance in sound . . . lies beneath the sound . . . and springs out of the undercurrents of melodic growth, out of psychic energies and dynamic tensions. Musical events merely manifest themselves in tones, but they do not reside in them.' From Kurth's 'Voraussetzungen' of 1912, trans. in Lee Rothfarb, *Ernst Kurth as Theorist and Analyst* (Philadelphia, 1988), 12.

⁸⁸ 'Die absolute Musik hat keine Gegenständlichkeit, sondern ihre Eigengesetze, die darin beruhen, daß sie nur Kraft und deren Ausstrahlung in Klangstoff ist.' Kurth, *Bruckner* i. 256, repr. in Gatz, *Musik-Ästhetik in ihren Hauptrichtungen*, 537–8.

⁸⁹ Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, 40. Originally in Halm, *Bruckner*, i. 258.

⁹⁰ Carl Dahlhaus, *Aesthetics of Music*, trans. William Austin (Cambridge, 1987) originally published as *Musikästhetik* (Cologne, 1967).

in West Berlin, waging ideological battle against Marxist musicology and his East Berlin counterpart Georg Knepler in particular.⁹¹ According to Hepokoski,

Dahlhaus's main writings of the 1974–82 period are bathed in this politically charged light. . . . His concern for establishing autonomy, the work, and the separateness from everyday life of the category of 'neo-romanticism', especially in *Between Romanticism and Modernism* (1974) and *The Idea of Absolute Music* (1978) upheld categories that orthodox Marxists (and some neo-Marxists) have viewed with suspicion.⁹²

It seems that Dahlhaus's historical view needs to be understood within its own historical context. For Dahlhaus, it was more important to see similarities rather than differences in the idea of absolute music so that he could construct a history of a stable concept that offered a compelling alternative to Marxist theories. In turn, the end of communism also seems to be a factor in the writing against absolute music in recent musicology. Once the Cold War ended, it seems that musicologists (especially American ones) were able to take positions on the relation of art to society that previously were off-limits because of their proximity to Marxist theory. As Anne Shreffler has recently noted, manifestos of the 'New Musicology' declaring a commitment to examining the social and political forces that shape music's meaning bear more than a passing resemblance to the stated aims of the official Marxist musicology of the DDR.⁹³ To say this might have caused consternation before 1989. But once communism was no longer a threat to the world order, it was no longer so important to pledge allegiance to absolute music.

In 1989, Dahlhaus's death and the fall of the Berlin Wall spelled the end of his view of music and the world. Those who attacked absolute music were no longer regarded as left-wing political radicals; they were able to capitalize on their critique with articles that were widely read and cited. However, as I hope I have shown, what they were attacking was in some ways a straw man, an 'idea' of absolute music that was the product of the era that had only just ended.

We are now ready to learn from a historical account that tells a more complex story. Hanslick did not use the term; it only came into use in a positive sense around 1880 as the opposite of programme music. The two writers who are more associated with the term than any other in the twentieth century, Halm and Kurth, focused their metaphysical definition of absolute music on the music of Bruckner. Cold war politics gave meaning to an absolutely abstract autonomous art music, but no longer: by the twenty-first century the telling transformations of a controversial term have become history.

ABSTRACT

In his influential book *The Idea of Absolute Music*, Carl Dahlhaus claimed there was 'a comprehensive concept of "absolute" music which reveals the latent unity of musical aesthetics in the nineteenth century'. However, a history of the *term* 'absolute music',

⁹¹ James Hepokoski, 'The Dahlhaus Project and its Extra-musicological Sources', *19th-Century Music*, 14 (1990–1), 221–46.

⁹² *Ibid.* 228.

⁹³ Anne Shreffler, 'Berlin Walls: Dahlhaus, Knepler, and Ideologies of Music History', *Journal of Musicology*, 20 (2003), 498–525. See especially her 'Conclusion: Dahlhaus, Knepler, and the New Musicology', 520–5. See also Taruskin's remarks in his Introduction to his *History of Western Music*, p. xxviii.

as opposed to the concept, leads in different directions that disrupt that latent unity. A reinvestigation of some of the ground covered in Dahlhaus's book shows, first, that it is a myth that Hanslick championed the term. Absolute music emerged as a positive concept associated with Hanslick only around 1880, which is when it started being used to designate the opposite of programme music. I also present evidence that Wagner and Nietzsche did not use the term 'absolute music' in a positive sense. A meta-physical 'absolute music' is found primarily in the writings of August Halm and Ernst Kurth. These theorists developed esoteric theories centred on Bruckner's music as the most perfect embodiment of absolute music. Dahlhaus's account of the idea of absolute music as the key aesthetic concept of the nineteenth century relies heavily on the twentieth-century writings of Halm and Kurth; it was only at this point that the term began to be used in combination with the concept. The conclusion addresses the question of why Dahlhaus constructed a unified idea of absolute music. The development of Dahlhaus's thought is considered in the context of his position as a professor of music in West Berlin, waging an ideological battle against Marxist musicology and his East Berlin counterpart Georg Knepler.