Ten Absolute Music

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Is there any phrase that encapsulates the whole of German aesthetics better than "absolute music"? The Absolute invokes the grand tradition of German Idealist philosophy, above all that of Kant and Hegel; "music" encompasses the great flowering of German/Austrian instrumental music in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Together, the phrase "absolute music" conveys the impressively abstract and metaphysical foundation of German aesthetics, while music, the most immaterial of the arts, triumphantly realizes its theoretically ineffable formulations. It would probably be best to leave it at that, because any closer examination exposes too many contradictions and paradoxes. But those unsatisfied with something so abstract and perfect can find a more substantial story by trying to unravel the difficult conceptual knots and chronological tangles that make up the history of absolute music.

Wagner/Beethoven

The first paradox is that Richard Wagner, who coined and disseminated the term "absolute music," did not use it with reference to his own music, but rather to Beethoven's. In his Zürich writings (1849–51), Wagner's reference point was always Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which he characterized as signaling the end of absolute music. He interpreted the entrance of words and voices in the final "Ode to Joy" movement as acting out the historical transition from the instrumental symphonic tradition that culminated in Beethoven's music to Wagner's artwork (i.e., opera) of the future.

Hanslick

The most respected music reference works (*New Grove Dictionary of Music, Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart, New Harvard Dictionary of Music*) acknowledge that Wagner coined the term, but they all associate

it predominantly with the nineteenth-century music critic, Eduard Hanslick. They overlook the fact that Hanslick used the term only once in the book that made him famous, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* from 1854: "It can never be said that music can do what instrumental music cannot, because only instrumental music is pure, absolute music."[1] This closely reasoned work, a product of Hanslick's training in philosophy and legal argumentation, remains to this day the most frequently cited text that advocates a formalist understanding of music, often summed up by using his definition of music as *tönend bewegte Formen* ("sounding forms in motion"). But Hanslick did not pursue the analysis of form with any further theoretical writings. Instead, he became Vienna's most important music critic with reviews and essays for the *Neue freie Presse* almost up until his death in 1904. In these writings the phrase "absolute music" is extremely scarce, even after he had become associated with it around 1880. He used it only once (in 1900) with regard to Johannes Brahms, the composer he championed in opposition to Wagner and Liszt. As the 1854 quotation indicates, he seems to have equated absolute music with instrumental music, which is compatible up to a point with Wagner's definition. These two enemies did not disagree so much about the concept, but rather how to evaluate it. For Wagner, instrumental music unto itself was nothing much, but for Hanslick, it was music itself in all its glory.

Terminology

Is this a simple matter of terminology? It is a matter of terminology, but there is not a simple solution. The use of the term has always been marked by uneasiness. From the beginning, absolute music has been used with quotation marks, with the qualifier "so-called," and prefaced by the apology "for lack of a better term." Absolute music, because of its elusiveness, can mean "abstract," "autonomous," "detached," "independent," "pure," "for its own sake," and many other non-equivalent things, such as instrumental music or concert music. Hanslick preferred the term "reine" or "pure" music. Like "absolute," it can be used as an adverb to indicate "only" or "one hundred percent": something is *absolutely* correct or *purely* a matter of semantics. To speak of the purity of music and music that is purified brings up moral, ethical, and religious values that can be different from absolute values, which connotatively shade more into philosophy and science.

1 Quoted in Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 27. Original: Carl Dahlhaus, *Die Idee der absoluten Musik* (Munich and Kassel: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag and Barenreiter Verlag, 1978).

Dahlhaus

Terminology was not an issue for the pre-eminent German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus, who finessed the problem by calling his book from 1978 *Die Idee der absoluten Musik* (translated in 1989 as *The Idea of Absolute Music*). According to Dahlhaus's influential, frequently referenced, account, the "idea" of absolute music originated with the early Romantics and became so widespread that it formed the basis of a general aesthetic stance toward art music up to the present. Dahlhaus begins by defining the idea of absolute music as the assumption that music does not need to be supplemented by any kind of paratext, such as a program, a libretto, or the words of a song. Music is best understood on its own terms without reference to anything else. Here, absolute music appears to be equivalent to the autonomous musical artwork. Dahlhaus cites, far more frequently than Wagner or Hanslick, the early Romantic writings of W. H. Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck from around 1800, despite the fact that none of the early Romantics used the phrase "absolute music." References to the Absolute in a philosophical sense can be found, but to elide it with absolute music as Dahlhaus and others (most egregiously Roger Scruton[2]) does cause difficulties.

Romanticism

The temptation to make absolute music an invention of the early Romantics is understandable. Though he did not use the term, E. T. A. Hoffmann began his review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony from 1810 by asking: "when we speak of music as an independent art, should we not always restrict our meaning to instrumental music, which ... gives pure expression to music's specific nature, recognizable in this form alone? It is the most romantic of the arts—one might almost say, the only genuinely romantic one—for its sole subject is the infinite."[3] While that declaration is clear enough, the review as a whole, with its combination of bizarre imagery and detailed technical musical analysis, cannot be made to represent a general Romantic understanding of music.

Once Dahlhaus goes into any kind of detail regarding the views of Wackenroder, Tieck, Herder, Karl Philipp Moritz, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Hoffmann, he acknowledges that their Romantic exaltation of instrumental music usually occurred within the context of religion. Dahlhaus proceeds to explain that according to the Romantics, absolute music as opposed to other kinds of music is not determined by the music itself but by what the listener hears; music initiates a religious or quasi-religious experience. Therefore the status "absolute" is not inherent in any particular music; any music could potentially act as the catalyst. When a musical work is named— a symphony by Reichardt or Beethoven, a mass by Palestrina—it complicates the definition rather than clarifying it. Dahlhaus never admits that defining absolute music as a type of attitude of the listener contradicts his earlier equivalence of absolute music with the autonomous artwork. Furthermore, there is a chronological issue: if absolute music was an invention of the early Romantics, it was short-lived, unsustainable, and ultimately self-destructive, as Daniel Chua argues in his Adorno-influenced book *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*.[4] It would have ended with late Beethoven, twenty years before the term was coined.

2 Roger Scruton. "Absolute Music," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, revised ed., Vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 2001), 36–7.

3 E. T. A. Hoffmann, *E. T. A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 96.

Feuerbach

It is thought that Wagner borrowed the term "absolute" specifically from Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of Hegel. Feuerbach focused on breaking down the logic of the Absolute as absolute identity. As an alternative to absolute spirit (*Geist*) as a creation of philosophical thought, Feuerbach proposed a more anthropological approach based on the immediacy of sensuous experience. Instead of taking thought (*Geist*) as the point of departure, he suggested starting with the materiality of being. When Wagner began using the term, then, it was going through a re-evaluation, falling 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. Wagner argued that the dialectic of history had made absolute music a thing of the past, and that now the time had come to envision an "artwork of the future," a phrase that echoes Feuerbach's call for a "philosophy of the future."

Absolute versus Program Music

In the time period in which absolute versus program music eventually became the prevailing debate in musical aesthetics and musical politics (c. 1880–1914), the antagonism was clear, but what was meant by both terms was not. Some, following Wagner, considered absolute music the opposite of Wagner's operas. But after Franz Liszt, Wagner's closest ally at the time, entered the debate advocating the genre of program

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

music (as exemplified by his own symphonic poems), absolute music also came to be understood as instrumental music without a program. Furthermore, absolute and program music may have been seen as opposites in the abstract, but in practice they had a more accommodating relationship: individual musical works could be called absolute music by one critic and program music by another. As program music became predominant towards the end of the century, even Hanslick conceded that a descriptive title to an instrumental work was desirable so that the composer could steer the listener's imagination in the intended direction.

Wagner, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche

More famously, Wagner also changed his mind. As is well known, Wagner came under the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer's metaphysics of music just a few years after his bout of enthusiasm for Feuerbach. Whereas before he insisted that absolute music was useless on its own and could only have an effect by underscoring the drama, he now reversed his own formulation: the drama was now merely to realize externally the profoundly immaterial and inner truth of music. In sum, Wagner abandoned a short but very public period of anti-romanticism and took up the kind of romanticism that considered music the highest of the arts. Of course it is ironic that Schopenhauer, who went metaphysically further than anyone in claiming that music would exist even if the world did not, never used the term absolute music, first because it had not yet been coined, and second because he categorically rejected the concept of the Absolute as formulated by his archenemy Hegel.

No one was more influenced by the Schopenhauerian Wagner than Friedrich Nietzsche, at least in the beginning. But over the course of his subsequent writings, he furiously renounced romanticism, metaphysics, and above all Wagner. Nietzsche used the term absolute music mostly during his pro-Wagner period that culminated in *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1871, when he understood absolute music in Wagner's sense as an insufficient thing, a separate art unto itself. But this was also the time in which he was most intoxicated by the idea of a romantic, metaphysical, "absolute" music. In any case, by the time of *Human, All-Too-Human* in 1878 (see especially Aphorism 215), Nietzsche had rejected both the positive and negative senses of absolute music in favor of a "genealogy" (i.e., more historical and materialist account) of music.

Metaphysics

Wagner did not make use of the term in his later writings because he had already used it in his earlier publications as a negative concept. It fell to

his disciples to recast absolute music in a positive light. In the extraordinary period of Wagnerism after the composer's death and before the First World War, Wagnerians produced endless glosses on his writings that smoothed over contradictions and reinterpreted Wagner's life and works with spectacular hindsight. In 1893, for instance, Friederich von Hausegger's "Richard Wagner und Schopenhauer" claimed to find Schopenhauer's theories manifesting themselves in all of Wagner's works, including those that came before Wagner had even heard of Schopenhauer. These writers fashioned a new, positive definition for absolute music rather than inventing a new term—surely because the term had exactly the kind of grand metaphysical resonance that these writers were looking to confer on Wagner and the Wagnerian composer of symphonies, Anton Bruckner. The term was too valuable to be left to the enemies Hanslick and Brahms. (It should be noted that this philosophical connotation did not transfer completely to another language and culture; English-language publications have always used the term absolute music more casually than the German ones.)

The term came to be defined in a much more esoteric way by the next generation. The music theorists August Halm (1869–1929) and Ernst Kurth (1886–1946) developed ideas that are not to be found in any previous writers on absolute music. These figures are also much more obscure than any of the other writers cited here. However, they are crucial to Dahlhaus and others who have assembled "the idea of absolute music." Halm was strongly influenced by the education reformer Gustav Wyneken and taught at his school at Wickersdorf. His writings on music blend German theology and philosophy, selectively combining parts of the Bible, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Halm's younger friend Ernst Kurth brought together psychology, romanticism, and religious feeling inspired by the devoutly Catholic Bruckner to form the basis of his books on Wagner and Bruckner. Halm and Kurt made three striking changes to the definition of absolute music. First, they made a radical break with the listening subject. Absolute music exists whether or not there are listeners, or even humans in general. Halm compared absolute music to a remote star in the universe, indifferent to humanity on earth. Kurth made the pithy assertion: "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."[5] The second change was just as drastic: absolute music is not, strictly speaking, sounding music. It is pre-music, pre-materiality, that which exists throughout the universe, and in the mind of the genius composer. For Kurth, "absolute music does not have any concrete aspect (*Gegenständlichkeit*); rather, its only

5 Quoted in Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, 40.

law, on which it rests, is that it is only force (*Kraft*) and the radiating out of that force in sound material."[6] The third contention of Halm and Kurth alienates them even more from others: the only sounding music that exists that can give an intimation of absolute music is to be found in the symphonies of Anton Bruckner.

These theories were shaped by the growing popularization of art music at the beginning of the twentieth century. They carved out absolute music as a space for something truly precious that was not accessible to the masses. This version of absolute music expresses a deep anti-modernism and cultural pessimism that cannot be found in the early Romantics, Hanslick, or anyone else in the nineteenth century. Finally, this early twentieth-century understanding is not compatible with more recent, late twentieth-century uses of the term, which do not find absolute music in the echoes of the universe but rather in the rationally interpretable choices of the composer in creating an autonomous musical work.

Conclusion

In his 1997 book *Die Musik und das Schöne*, the German musicologist Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht made the distinction between absolute and autonomous music sound simple: the first is an aesthetic category while the second is a sociological concept.[7] Eggebrecht and Dahlhaus adhered to the traditional understanding of aesthetics as being strictly about music itself. They took on the big aesthetic questions posed by the great philosophers and answered them in a generalized and speculative way. In this information age, we inevitably look at things differently. Now that we have increasing access to a greater range of materials, both aesthetics and music can be seen as categories shaped by ever-changing forces that make the generalizations of the past seem too easy. Absolute music has been understood to mean many different things for many different reasons—and that makes it all the more interesting and important for the history of German aesthetics.

SEE ALSO: Listening

6 Ibid.

7 Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, *Die Musik und das Schöne* (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 1997).

Eleven The End of Art

Eva Geulen

Speculating about an end of art is a profoundly modern obsession that appears to have survived even the presumed end of "grand narratives" (J. F. Lyotard). Rumors about an end of art persist even today, in the era variously designated as postmodern, post-historical, and post-ideological. The particular purposes motivating the rhetoric of the end of art can be just as diverse as occasions for its enunciation. However, every enunciation of an end of art rests on two minimal and interrelated presuppositions, a sense of historicity and a non-normative conception of art. Both conditions are met only in modernity as it began to emerge in Germany in the second half of the eighteenth century, which also saw the rise of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline. While artists from earlier époques may well have complained about the declining quality of artistic production, they never conceived of this as an end of art. By contrast, moderns do and they have done so frequently with considerable pathos and in many different ways.

Two recent examples suffice to indicate the remarkable range of interpretive options available to the end of art. In 2004, art historian Donald Kuspit published a scathing attack (not the first, to be sure) on contemporary art, identifying Marcel Duchamp as the main culprit responsible for initiating the ongoing transition from art to post-art.[1] Post-art in Kuspit's sense may be compared to postmodernism in that all options are open to the artist but such freedom is indeed just another word for nothing left to lose. Accordingly Kuspit's diagnosis is accompanied by nostalgic longing for a past whose unattainable glow indirectly depends on the very shadow cast by the supposed demise of art. In a very different vein, philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto had reached a similar conclusion, though he maintained

1 Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).