The Sources of Schoenberg's "Aesthetic Theology"

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In 1941 Arnold Schoenberg presented a lecture at the University of California at Los Angeles entitled "Composition With Twelve Tones," which has in the fifty years since become quite well known and is often considered Schoenberg's definitive statement (in prose anyway) on his twelve-tone method of musical composition. Discussion of that lecture in American musical scholarship, especially among analysts and theorists, has tended to focus almost exclusively on the many technical "nuts-and-bolts" descriptions provided by Schoenberg. An article from 1988 by Fred Lerdahl, for example, takes Schoenberg's account of his twelve-tone method in that lecture as a point of departure for discussing what Lerdahl calls the "cognitive opacity of serialism." While Martha Hyde finds this same technical account by Schoenberg to be "incomplete and cryptic by design," she nevertheless builds on it in forwarding her own interpretation of Schoenberg's "twelve-tone harmony." I shall here side-step the question of whether or not Schoenberg actually characterizes his twelve-tone manipulations accurately.

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1Arnold Schoenberg, "Composition With Twelve Tones" [1941], in Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg, trans. Leo Black, ed. Leonard Stein (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), pp. 214-44. This essay originated in one that was given at Princeton University in 1933; see Schoenberg, "Vortrag / 12TK / Princeton," trans. and ann. Claudio Spies, Perspectives of New Music 13 (1974), 58-136.


or fully in his lecture and assert only that, whatever position a scholar may take with regard to Schoenberg's description of his twelve-tone method, the supporting argument is likely to hinge on issues of twelve-tone technical validity.

But it is worthwhile to recall how Schoenberg opens this twelve-tone lecture:

To understand the very nature of creation one must acknowledge that there was no light before the Lord said: "Let there be Light." And since there was not yet light, the Lord's omniscience embraced a vision of it which only His omnipotence could call forth.

We poor human beings, when we refer to one of the better minds among us as a creator, should never forget what a creator is in reality.

A creator has a vision of something which has not existed before this vision.

And a creator has the power to bring his vision to life, the power to realize it.4

Later in the lecture, Schoenberg refers to the now well-known secret connection between contrasting themes in the Chamber Symphony, op. 9, as a gift from the Supreme Commander. Immediately after this follows the discussion of the unitary perception of musical time and space, an idea that Schoenberg describes in terms of the mystical theology of Emanuel Swedenborg.

The kind of interlacing of technical analysis with philosophical discussion that occurs in this lecture is not unusual in Schoenberg’s writings generally, and one can find such discussions all across his literary work. It seems clear that for Schoenberg real music—music that he thought was truly great—was concerned with more than projecting musical structures. Music must somehow cut to the heart of things; in short, music is charged with the responsibility of communicating the Truth. But what that Truth is and how music might put it across are issues that are far less clear in Schoenberg’s writings. Certainly musical structure is a crucial element in this musical world view; but how might musical structure serve the purposes of communicating the composer’s vision?

Is the structure the result of a vision that is strictly musical, or does it function more as a musical means of expressing something that is ultimately of a spiritual or religious nature?

In this article, I shall explore and discuss these aesthetic and philosophical issues as they arise in Schoenberg’s writings. I shall begin by discussing Carl Dahlhaus’s notion of Schoenberg’s “aesthetic theology.” Working from Dahlhaus’s interpretation, I shall then present a somewhat different, and I believe complementary, interpretation of the aesthetic theology—one that relies heavily on reading Schoenberg within the intellectual and cultural milieu of early twentieth-century Vienna.

I

In his 1984 essay, “Schönbergs ästhetische Theologie,” Dahlhaus discusses Schoenberg’s tendency to cast many of his aesthetic ideas in religious terms.5 Dahlhaus discusses the Schoenberg remarks quoted above, as well as many others drawn from a number of essays, from early to late. Dahlhaus makes special note of the fact that Schoenberg, in his discussion of the thematic relationship in op. 9, combines a theological category like “miracle,” with a psychoanalytical one like “unconscious.” This brings Dahlhaus around to two key points: first, Schoenberg tends to value thematic relationships that reside beneath the surface of a work and to appreciate these all the more for their “hidden” quality; and second, a process of “secularization” is apparent in Schoenberg’s aesthetics whereby concepts that once belonged exclusively to theology have been appropriated for use in discussions of art.

Dahlhaus interprets Schoenberg’s aesthetics of music as basically an aesthetics of instrumental music, and this he believes is traced easily to the influence of Schopenhauer’s aesthetics of absolute music, which through the influence of Wagner and the early writings of

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Nietzsche had become common intellectual property in Germany and Austria by 1900. But Dahlhaus also attempts to make Schoenberg’s remarks more comprehensible by tracing Schoenberg’s ideas back to Ludwig Tieck’s *Phantasien über die Kunst* of 1799. For Dahlhaus, the key word used by Schoenberg in reference to the divine creation cited previously is “vision.” This would seem to indicate that the artist, acting in imitation of the divine model, creates in a work of art a world unto itself; the work of art does not imitate the natural world, but rather creates an alternate one. The notion of divine creation is thus secularized by making the artist into a creator of a world of his or her own. Dahlhaus is able to trace this idea from the poetics of Julius Caesar Scaliger, who as early as 1561 proposed that the poet does not imitate the world around us as Aristotle maintained, but rather creates another world. The idea then picks up philosophical support through Leibniz’s notion of “possible worlds” and becomes important to the aesthetics of Johann Jacob Breitinger, author of the *Critische Dichtkunst* of 1740. According to Dahlhaus, the idea that a piece of instrumental music creates its own musical world is subsequently put forward by Tieck, picked up by Schopenhauer, and funneled to Schoenberg through Schopenhauer’s philosophy.

Dahlhaus takes up another angle of the transformation of categories from theology into art by considering Schoenberg’s break with tonality in 1907 and his subsequent adoption of the twelve-tone method in the early 1920s. For Dahlhaus, no substantial historical or music-technical argument can be successfully advanced for Schoenberg’s behavior. He concludes that Schoenberg, in the role of prophet and moral leader, simply decides to turn away from tonality and later decides to adopt the order of the twelve-tone method. In short, Dahlhaus seems to suggest that Schoenberg, sitting in judgement of himself and his contemporaries, simply comes to pronounce “enough of this, now here is the way.”

To conclude his essay, Dahlhaus works through one more theological-aesthetic transformation in Schoenberg’s writing on Classical and Romantic works. In discussing and analyzing earlier music, Schoenberg appears to be unconcerned with issues of historical authenticity or questions of the possibility of understanding the past as it really was. Instead, Schoenberg’s working premise seems to be that if one simply works at understanding the music on its own terms, then the music will eventually yield its meaning. Dahlhaus sees a similarity here to a fundamental principle of Torah exegesis in the Jewish mysticism of the Middle Ages and the early modern age. This mystical exegesis of revelation assumes that a text will have various meanings to various interpreters through the ages and that its semantic instability does not necessarily lead to contradiction. There exists, therefore, the possibility that meaning can be updated in various directions.

For Dahlhaus, a similar attitude on Schoenberg’s part accounts for how Schoenberg can view earlier music as addressing and informing

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8This position with regard to interpretation closely parallels the one put forward by hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer; see esp. his important *Truth and Method* (1960), trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (2nd rev. edn. New York, 1989). James Hepokoski has explored the Gadamerian influence in Dahlhaus’s writing in his “The Dahlhaus Project and Its Extra-musicological Sources,” this journal 14 (1991), 221–46. The debate between the possibility of recovering the past as it was (Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Betti) and historically impacted interpretation (Heidegger, Gadamer) continues to be a central issue within hermeneutic philosophy. See the introductions and selections in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany, N.Y., 1990) and *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, ed. Ormiston and Schrift (Albany, N.Y., 1990).
his present concerns: the music is somehow charged with a kind of energy that must be understood in the terms of the interpreter. A musical text thus becomes similar to a sacred text, and a fundamental attitude in the interpretation of scripture becomes a basic premise in musical analysis.

Dahlhaus's discussion of Schoenberg's aesthetic theology can be reduced to three general statements. First, by the time Schoenberg came into contact with many of the ideas that he adopted in his thinking, they already had a history of secularization that continued in the nineteenth century's religion of art. Second, Schoenberg positioned himself in the role of prophet, changing the course of twentieth-century music by proclamation. Third, the texts in Schoenberg's aesthetic theology are musical works from the Western art-music tradition that somehow contain an inextinguishable energy that connects across the ages in the language of the interpreter.

As much as one may value Dahlhaus's essay, however, it must be acknowledged that it has some problems. Dahlhaus convincingly situates certain of Schoenberg's aesthetic attitudes within a variety of historical contexts, but he tells us very little about how the traditions he identifies might be situated within the fin-de-siècle Viennese culture in which Schoenberg came to intellectual maturity. While one can agree generally with many of Dahlhaus's observations, there are other—and I would argue better—solutions to the philosophical-aesthetic questions with which Dahlhaus grapples in his essay. In the following discussion, I would like to suggest an alternate reading of Schoenberg's aesthetic theology—one that I believe nonetheless builds on and complements Dahlhaus's interpretation.

II

The key to interpreting Schoenberg's aesthetic theology is his notion of the musikalische Gedanke [musical idea]. While this notion holds a central position within Schoenberg's thought world, he had tremendous difficulty bringing it to verbal expression. Two kinds of problems arise in Schoenberg's writing on the Gedanke. First, he sometimes uses different terms when he seems to have a single concept in mind. Second, he sometimes uses the same term to indicate different concepts. Thus, any one-to-one comparison of various remarks about the Gedanke are likely to lead, if not to contradiction, then at best to ambiguity. One way to resolve this difficulty and retrieve Schoenberg's meaning is to read each remark in its own intellectual and cultural context; in many instances Schoenberg addresses aesthetic, philosophical, and music-technical issues that were important in his intellectual and cultural environment of the time. If in each instance we mark Schoenberg's position with regard to those issues, it is possible to see him continually returning to a particular point of view. Although the terms may change from instance to instance, his positions may be seen, in relation to the general intellectual context, as relatively consistent, or at least as less ambiguous or contradictory. This approach then tends to read Schoenberg's remarks not as parts of some systematic theory, philosophy, or aesthetics, but rather as individual commentaries on musical, philosophical, and aesthetic issues.

Elsewhere I have outlined a position on the influence of occult sources on Schoenberg's musikalische Gedanke. To summarize briefly, I maintain that Schoenberg's notion of the musikalische Gedanke is ultimately a mystical one. Schoenberg could never bring the Gedanke to precise verbal formulation because the Gedanke is a product of intuitive contemplation and as such is at root the result of

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9 For a discussion of the various ways in which Schoenberg used the terms Gedanke, Idee, and Einfall, see Charlotte M. Cross, "Three Levels of 'Idea' in Schoenberg's Thought and Writings," Current Musicology 30 (1980), 24–36. See also the concordance of terms provided in Schoenberg, The Musical Idea and the Logic, Technique, and Art of Its Presentation, ed. and trans. Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff (New York, 1995), pp. 369–77. While the publication of The Musical Idea will provide scholars with a more in-depth treatment of some of the key components in Schoenberg's thought, this unfinished manuscript is focused primarily on the technical aspects that constitute the presentation of the musical idea, thus the more abstract and philosophical—and I will argue, mystical—aspects of the idea are barely expanded from writings we already have from the composer.

10 See my "Schoenberg and the Occult: Some Reflections on the 'Musical Idea'," Theory and Practice 17 (1992), 103–18. The reader is referred to that article for more thorough considerations of the material summarized in the next several paragraphs.
nonverbal and superrational perception. As early as 1912, in his essay "The Relationship to the Text," Schoenberg can be found extolling the virtues of intuitive and irrational, or aboverational perception. We may recall that this essay appeared in Kandinsky's and Marc's *Blauer Reiter Almanac*, and that Kandinsky's interest in the occult around that time, and especially in Rudolf Steiner's writings and lectures on Goethe, has been well documented.

Under the influence of Swedenborg's mysticism, which Schoenberg drew from Balzac's philosophical novels like *Séraphita*, *Louis Lambert*, and others, and very likely under the influence of Rudolf Steiner's interpretation of Goethe's scientific writings, which could have reached him any number of ways in early twentieth-century Vienna, Schoenberg became fascinated with the possibility of music's ability to provide a glimpse into some higher spiritual realm. For Schoenberg, the *musikalische Gedanke* resides in a realm where time and space are unified; the composer, once granted a glimpse of this spiritual phenomenon, proceeds to compose the musical work. The musical artwork, of course, must reside in, or at least utilize, the physical realm; but because the composer's vision is of something essentially nonphysical, the composition of an artwork becomes the process of unfolding in time and space something that is fundamentally atemporal and nonspatial. Or, as Schoenberg describes it in the lecture quoted above,

Alas, it is one thing to envision in a creative instant of inspiration and it is another thing to materialize one's vision by painstakingly connecting details until they fuse into a kind of organism.

Alas, suppose it becomes an organism, a homunculus or a robot, and possesses some of the spontaneity of a vision; it remains yet another thing to organize this form so that it becomes a comprehensible message "to whom it may concern."

Compare as well Schoenberg's discussion of the divine creation and the vision of the creator with the following remarks about the *musikalische Gedanke*: "I myself consider the totality of a piece as the idea: the idea which its creator wanted to present." Here, as in other places in Schoenberg's writing, it appears that vision and idea are identical. If the use of the term *vision* creates a theological context, in Dahlhaus's terms, then it may turn out that the theology is more like Theosophy.

But if one accepts the notion that Schoenberg's concept of the *musikalische Gedanke* was influenced by the mystical world views of Swedenborg and Steiner, the responsibility still remains to square such occult influences with Schoenberg's acknowledged and well-documented admiration for Schopenhauer. In fact, Schoenberg provides a list of people he considers to be great men in his essay of 1911 on Franz Liszt; this list includes Plato, Christ, Kant, Swedenborg, Schopenhauer, and Balzac. Perhaps we should add Goethe to this list, for, as Severine Neff has demonstrated, Goethe's science played a key role in Schoenberg's formulation of his own theories about music. The list then would seem to divide into two groups, with Swedenborg, Balzac, and Steiner on the occult side, and Plato, Kant, and Scho-

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11Schoenberg, "The Relationship to the Text" [1912], in *Style and Idea*, pp. 141–45.
13Schoenberg, "Composition with Twelve Tones," in *Style and Idea*, p. 215.
15Schoenberg, "Franz Liszt's Work and Being" [1911], in *Style and Idea*, p. 446.
penhauer on the side of legitimate philosophy. Goethe may be seen as occupying the middle ground between these two camps. Although it is difficult to decide how Christ could be placed in such a hypothetical continuum, his very inclusion on Schoenberg’s list already signals the high regard Schoenberg holds for the others and perhaps is an indicator of the high value he places in his perception of spiritual integrity in each figure he designates as great. But the question still lingers: What do these figures have in common for Schoenberg?

III

I shall address that question by turning to an anecdote of Goethe that captures the crucial issue in a nutshell. It is the well-known conversation of 1794 between Goethe and Schiller concerning Goethe’s Urpflanze. Goethe reports:

I explained to him with great vivacity the Metamorphosis of Plants and, with a few characteristic strokes of the pen, conjured up before his eyes a symbolic plant. He listened, and looked at it all with great interest and intelligence; but when I had ended, he shook his head saying: This has nothing to do with experience, it is an idea [Idee]. I raised my eyebrows, somewhat annoyed. For he had put his finger on precisely the point which separated us. His argument from Anmut und Würde came to my mind; the old anger began to stir, but I constrained myself and replied: Well so much the better; it means that I have ideas without knowing it, and can even see them with my eyes.\(^7\)

The issue here is an epistemological one. Goethe believes that he can see the idea—for him it really exists “out there.” For Schiller, influenced by Kant’s transcendental idealism, Goethe has projected the idea onto experience; the idea resides in the mind of the perceiver and the “thing-in-itself” remains unknowable.

But it is around this very question of the possibility of perceiving the “thing-in-itself” that Schoenberg and his cast of great men assemble. Let us consider the theological writings of Swedenborg. Swedenborg contended that there exist other worlds than the physical one we all know. These worlds are finer than the physical one and exist behind it or, one might say, between its atoms. Spirits reside in these finer worlds, or heavens, and Swedenborg refers to these entities as angels. These angels are the souls of the departed, who have now passed on to a higher existence. Through a kind of spiritual vision, Swedenborg claimed to be able to enter this finer realm and engage in discussion with these angels, and it was these discussions that he claimed provided him with his spiritual knowledge. Swedenborg also believed that he had been granted this gift of seeing by God in order that he might bring a new and fuller interpretation of the Bible to mankind.\(^18\)

The literary critic Anna Balakian contends that Swedenborg’s doctrine of correspondences exercised considerable influence on nineteenth-century literature, and especially on the Symbolist poets.\(^19\) But Swedenborg’s ideas most likely came to Schoenberg indirectly through Honoré de Balzac’s philosophical novels; as he admits in the twelve-tone lecture, his unitary perception of musical time and space is indebted to Balzac’s portrayal of Swedenborg’s ideas in Séraphita. As the art historian Dore Ashton has shown, Schoenberg was no exception in his fascination with Swedenborgian themes in Balzac’s novels; she notes the influence of Balzac’s philosophical stories on such figures as Cézanne, Rilke, and Picasso.\(^20\) What is different about Schoenberg, however, is his interest in the actual possibility of viewing the higher realms that Swedenborg describes. The idea of catching a glimpse of these higher realms and the overwhelming effect such a perception can have on a physical being are the central themes in both Séraphita and Louis Lambert,


\(^{20}\)Dore Ashton, A Fable of Modern Art [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991].
novels that Schoenberg held in very high esteem.21

Schoenberg's claim that he could see into the higher realms drew the attention of Immanuel Kant. Although it is not clear exactly how seriously Kant took Schoenberg's ideas when he first encountered them, he ultimately came down against Swedenborg and his claims to supersensory perception. Kant's refutation of Swedenborg can be found in his Dreams of a Spirit- Seer.22 Since this essay was written in 1766, well before the Critique of Pure Reason of 1781, followers of Swedenborg have sometimes made the surprising claim that Kant's understanding of time and space as a priori is indebted to Swedenborg's assertion that time and space do not exist in the higher realms.23 While Kant believes that we can never know the world of the thing-in-itself, Swedenborg believes that we can, or at least that he can. For some followers of Swedenborg, the fact that both Kant's thing-in-itself and Swedenborg's heaven are atemporal and nonspatial in any conventional sense may be considered proof of Kant's intellectual indebtedness.

For purposes of the present discussion it is not really important whether or not this assertion about Kant's thought can be proved false; it is enough that we can see Kant and Swedenborg taking positions about the possibility of viewing some other world than the most apparent one. In fact, although he is an important figure in Schoenberg's intellectual pantheon, Kant is the only one who denies the possibility of seeing into the beyond. And this denial also accounts for the disagreement between Schiller and Goethe that arises in the story quoted above. In fact, as Walter Kaufmann has pointed out, much early nineteenth-century German philosophy can be seen as an attempt to reconcile the views of Kant and Goethe, both Hegel and Schopenhauer considered themselves to be the "philosophers of the Goethean world view," and both were fundamentally indebted to Kantian philosophy. Both Hegel and Schopenhauer had personal and relatively close contact with Goethe, with discussions centering on Goethe's neglected but important Farbenlehre.25 But Hegel does not figure into Schoenberg's consideration of the Gedanke at all, and it will take Schopenhauer's revision of Kant's epistemology to transform Kant's denial into something that addresses Schoenberg's aesthetic concerns.26

While Hegel and Schopenhauer, inspired by Goethe's notion of the Urphänomen, each attempted to discover ways of coming to know the thing-in-itself, neither of these philosophers can be accused of passing beyond the bounds of what might be thought of as "legitimate" philosophy. Rudolf Steiner, on the other hand, offers an interpretation of Goethean science that ultimately leads into the world of the occult. In the period between 1884 and 1897, Steiner edited Goethe's scientific writings for two separate Goethe editions, one of which was the prestigious Weimar edition. Steiner wrote ex-

23For early twentieth-century discussions of this issue, see Ernst Cassirer, Kant's Life and Thought [1918], trans. James Haden [New Haven, 1981], and Paul Carus' 1902 commentary in Immanuel Kant, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics that Can Qualify as a Science [La Salle, Illinois, 1902].
24Walter Kaufmann, Discovering the Mind: Goethe, Kant, and Hegel [New York, 1980].
26While Hegel's philosophy played no role in Schoenberg's thinking about the Gedanke, his notions about the dialectical forward progress of history made their way—however tacitly—into almost every justification Schoenberg ever offered for his turns to atonality and the twelve-tone method.
tensive commentaries for the other edition and, in addition, wrote three monographs on Goethe’s science and world view. In the years before 1900, Steiner was viewed as a leading authority on Goethe’s scientific writings.27

Steiner interpreted Goethe as believing that the *Urphänomen*, the *Urtier*, and the *Urplante* actually exist in the object itself. The Goethe-Schiller story is therefore a crucial point of reference for Steiner. Steiner offers a complicated epistemological argument for how we can know the thing-in-itself, and since space does not permit a detailed unfolding of that argument, I shall summarize the main points. Steiner believes that the physical object and its idea exist in a unified state “out there”; it is we who, through a weakness in our perceptual apparatus, separate the two aspects from one another in the act of perceiving. We see only the physically perceptible aspect of the object, and the idea is lost in the process. But our minds are the microcosm of the larger physical universe in the sense that we can see inside a reflection of what really exists outside. There is one outside world and one inside world, one physical universe, and one unified thought world. The correspondence between these two worlds allows us to recover the idea of an object that is lost in sense perception. Every human has access to the same thought world; there are not many thought worlds but a single one into which we all find our way. For Steiner then, we must, through something he terms “active thinking,” work to re-create the idea within ourselves and view it together with the sensory perception. But, because of the nature of the unified thought world, when we actually recombine the idea and the object, we view them as they really are in the outside world.28

Thus, for the pre-1900 Rudolf Steiner, we do have access to the thing-in-itself. When Steiner turned to Theosophy after 1900, and later, when he established his own Anthroposophical Society in 1913, he maintained that one can see into other worlds beyond the coarse physical one; one can learn to view the astral and causal planes of existence. Despite this pronounced turn to an occult world view, Steiner always maintained that these later views were founded on his understanding of Goethean science. It should also be pointed out that it was the occult Steiner who held a deep fascination for Kandinsky, and it was probably also the occult Steiner who Schoenberg came to know.

With this discussion of Steiner I have added another of Schoenberg’s great men, Goethe, to the voices on the question of viewing the thing-in-itself. There is a passage in one of Schoenberg’s brief essays on Josef Matthias Hauer from 1923 that suggests that Schoenberg may have known Steiner’s epistemological argument. Schoenberg is discussing Hauer’s aesthetic position that the twelve-tone system is in fact a universe of its own that operates according to eternal cosmic principles. In response to that position Schoenberg writes:

Hauer looks for laws. Good. But he looks for them where he will not find them. I say that we are obviously as nature around us is, as the cosmos is. So that is also how our music is. But then our music must also be as we are (if two magnitudes both equal a third . . .). But then from our nature alone I can deduce how our music is (bolder men than I would say, “how the cosmos is!”).29

Schoenberg clearly believes, in this passage at least, that we are as the cosmos is, and that our music is as we and the cosmos are. Now such an idea could easily be descended from Leibniz, but Schoenberg’s use of the microcosm/macrocosm argument sheds some light on his use of the more modern term unconscious in his discussion of viewing the idea. Schoenberg’s us-

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28This argument is especially central in Steiner, *The Science of Knowing*.


JOHN COVACH
Schoenberg’s “Aesthetic Theology”

259
age can be distinguished from that of psycho-
analysis in that Schoenberg's unconscious does
not so much consist of past experiences and
innate drives as it provides a vision of reality
reflected on the inner consciousness. The com-
poser, Schoenberg might be understood to say,
perceives the vision on the reflective screen of
his or her own inner consciousness.

But whatever Schoenberg's epistemology
might be—and I hasten to remind the reader
that I do not view Schoenberg's thought as
constituting a systematic philosophy that would
be required to address issues of epistemology—
still is not clear how music fits into the
question of viewing the thing-in-itself; and this
is where Schopenhauer enters the picture.
Schopenhauer believed that the Kantian thing-
in-itself was something he called the Will. The
Will is a kind of omnipresent force that mani-

fests itself as physical reality. The Will knows
no distinctions in space or time and is abso-
lutely unified. It is only our perception of things,
our Representation, that creates separateness
and diversity in the world as we come to know
it. Thus Schopenhauer builds his philosophical
system on the foundation laid by Kant's tran-
scendental idealism. Schopenhauer revises
Kant's epistemology in many significant ways,
dispensing with the twelve categories and bring-
ing all ways of knowing down to something he
calls the "fourfold root of the principle of suffi-
cient reason." In accounting for our ways of
picturing things to ourselves, Schopenhauer in-
vokes Plato's theory of forms (sometimes called
Ideas). He claims, for example, that the arts
operate by re-creating an object according to its
ideal form, thus making the artwork somehow
truer to the real nature of an object than our
raw perception of it would be.

Music is different: music refers to no Pla-
tonic forms and instead offers a direct window
onto the Will itself. Schopenhauer speaks of
music as being an alternate reality created from

30 See Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Repre-
Music is discussed in detail in the third book of vol. I, bk.
3, par. 52 (pp. 255–67), and in vol. II, chap. 39, "On the
Metaphysics of Music" (pp. 447–57). For a careful treat-
ment of Schopenhauer's philosophy, see Magee, The Phi-
losophy of Schopenhauer and Safranski, Schopenhauer and
the Wild Years of Philosophy.

31 Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation,
vol. I, p. 260. Schoenberg comments to this passage in
141–42.
such an in-depth study of any of these figures except Schopenhauer, and it is perhaps sufficient for this study to note that these figures assemble around a shared philosophical concern that was clearly a concern of Schoenberg.33

IV

Having outlined a context for Schoenberg's musikalische Gedanke, I would like to return to Dahlhaus's essay and suggest some revisions to the basic points that Dahlhaus makes. First, Dahlhaus traces a history of secularization that extends, for music at least, back to Tieck's writing of 1799. While I do not dispute that such a line can be drawn—although I would perhaps argue with Dahlhaus's interpretation of Schopenhauer's aesthetics of absolute music—it is not clear how Schoenberg might have come to these ideas except through his study of Schopenhauer. I suggest that Schoenberg came not only to the ideas of Schopenhauer, but that he also became aware of very similar ones in the thinking of Swedenborg and Steiner. Schoenberg's interest in Balzac's philosophical novels and the Swedenborgian ideas that arise in them is well known; Steiner's interpretations of Goethe's science were also well known within the well-developed occult community in Vienna after 1900, and Schoenberg could have become familiar with them any number of ways.34 If Schoenberg seems to appropriate theological terms to discuss music, this may have less to do with a transformation of theological to artistic vocabulary than with the fact that for people like Steiner and Swedenborg viewing the higher spiritual realms was religion. Thus, Dahlhaus does not go far enough in tracing the theological-artistic transformation into the early twentieth century. For Schoenberg, it is not so much that music becomes


34For an account of the occult scene in Vienna as well as in Europe generally at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, see William J. McGrath, Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria [New Haven, 1974]; James Webb, The Occult Establishment [La Salle, Ill., 1985] and The Occult Underground [La Salle, Ill., 1988].

religion, as that music participates in the spiritual quest. Ultimately, Schoenberg has his vision fixed on something far more eternal than well-wrought cultural artifacts.

Dahlhaus also views Schoenberg as abandoning tonality by decree; Schoenberg casts himself in the role of prophet. But it is entirely possible that Schoenberg wanted, through music, to explore the possibilities of unfolding the vision presented to him through intuition. The vision is of something otherworldly; but references to tonality or to traditional forms draw the mind back to culture, to the world of man. Thus it is desirable to transport the listener to a sound world that seems to be cut off from all references to everyday life: music must be reinvented with every new piece. This interpretation has the advantage of complementing Dahlhaus's interpretation as well as reinforcing the spiritual aspect of Schoenberg's aesthetics. The turn to the twelve-tone method came at a time when Schoenberg felt that a musical context must be established that allows for the projection of the musical idea over long stretches of music without the support of a text. But, as he does in his free atonal period, Schoenberg reinvents his twelve-tone method with each new piece. The all-important musical idea is always set in a fresh musical context in each new work. This is not the position of a prophet, but rather that of a musician searching in each instance for a fresh angle on his compositional materials.

Finally, I would suggest that the "inextinguishable energy" posited by Dahlhaus is the musikalische Gedanke itself. For, as Schoenberg states in his essay "New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea" of 1946, musical style may pass with time, but "an idea can never perish."34 The task of unfolding the idea in an ever-fresh musical context and the task of recovering the idea in an old style are in effect following the same path in opposite directions. Composition leads from the idea into the physical realm of real pitches and rhythms; analysis leads from the physical realm into the spiritual realm of the idea itself.

For Schoenberg, then, music offers a path to a higher level of spiritual awareness; the object of contemplation in this heightened state of consciousness is the *musikalische Gedanke*. Although Schoenberg’s notion of the *Gedanke* is unique to his thought, the concerns that he addresses in his writings are common to many other German and Austrian musicians and artists of the time.35 Josef Matthias Hauer’s aesthetic and theoretical writings address many of the same issues as Schoenberg’s writings.36 Kandinsky’s writings have already been mentioned, and to them one might add the writings of the Swiss painter Johannes Itten, who was a founding instructor at the Bauhaus and with whom Hauer was in close contact.37 Thomas de Hartmann, composer of the music to Kandinsky’s *Der gelbe Klang* and contributor to the *Blauer Reiter Almanac*, went on to write music for the circle around the spiritual leader G. I. Gurdjieff and also composed music influenced by Ouspensky’s philosophical account of the fourth dimension.38 One could even point to the Schenker student Victor Zuckerkandl and note many of the same concerns.39 All these figures are united by the belief that art can ultimately transport the human consciousness to another, higher level. While Schoenberg’s solutions to these philosophical and aesthetic problems are certainly his own, the fact that he was concerned with such issues is not in the least exceptional. Thus Schoenberg’s aesthetic theology must be seen as his contribution to a much broader discourse in early twentieth-century German and Austrian culture—a discourse that, to borrow a title from Kandinsky, was very much “concerning the spiritual in art.”

35While I have opted for an interpretation of Schoenberg’s mysticism that situates with regard to trends in turn-of-the-century Vienna, Alexander L. Ringer has interpreted Schoenberg’s mysticism in terms of the Jewish tradition. See his Arnold Schoenberg: The Composer as Jew (Oxford, 1990).


39In his *Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World* (trans. Willard R. Trask [New York, 1956], pp. 145–48), Victor Zuckerkandl outlines his notion of the “third stage” on which music occurs, and much of this discussion could be mistaken for Hauer’s or Kandinsky’s writing. Consider, as an example, the following passage: “Those who believe that music provides a source of knowledge of the inner world are certainly not wrong. But the deeper teaching of music concerns the nature not of ‘psyche’ but of ‘cosmos.’ The teachers of antiquity, who spoke of the music of the spheres, of the cosmos as a musical order, knew this” (p. 147).

262