The poietic fallacy

URING HIS LIFETIME, and even — astonishingly — in the half-century since his death, the music of Arnold Schoenberg has been influential and controversial out of all proportion to the frequency with which it has ever been performed or otherwise disseminated. His name has been a battle cry, a punching bag, an article of faith, a term of abuse, a finger in the dike, and a symbol for anything and everything: progress, degeneracy, élitism, integrity, disintegration, regeneration, sublimity, ridiculousness. According to some, he is the reason why serious music is dying. According to others, he is the only reason it has even lived this long. Nobody in the history of music has been a more dependable whipping boy; but neither has anyone been a trustier stick to beat with.

The din surrounding the name of this composer, in short, has always threatened to drown his music out. Allen Shawn, a composer on the faculty of Bennington College, wants to rescue the music from the din. In the introduction to his new book, a modest and friendly attempt to help willing music lovers discover a source of pleasure in Schoenberg, he writes that ‘one of the convictions’ that motivated its writing was ‘that, from the very beginning, there were features in Schoenberg’s work, personality, and perhaps even social position that led to his being explained and defended rather than listened to, that the works of Schoenberg have not had a fair chance to be experienced apart from the ideology that surrounds them.’

As one who has spent years investigating, criticising, and participating in the discourse surrounding music, I had better confess at the outset that while I applaud any effort to get people to listen to Schoenberg’s music (or any classical music, come to that), and while I appreciate as well as anyone the already much-quoted quip that comes at the end of Shawn’s introduction (‘Perhaps Schoenberg’s work deserves a more superficial treatment than it has hitherto received’), the way Shawn has formulated his purpose makes me a little uneasy. And unease increased as I read on: ‘Schoenberg’s voice as an artist, the voice that speaks to us through the work, has not been heard in a natural way without interference.’ Is there a ‘natural’ way to listen to music, or to experience any cultural artifact? Whose way is the natural way? What does Shawn mean when he says, about Schoenberg’s 12-note pieces, ‘It is only when one listens to these works as music that one appreciates what he accomplished’?

I further confess that as a professional musician with decades of composing, performing, teaching, and listening experience, I have no idea what that thrice-
familiar tautology – ‘to listen to music as music’ – means; and when I try to
deduce what Shawn means by it from the substance and context of his
argument, I am made uneasiest of all. What, after all, is ‘interference’? Shawn
seems to think it consists in ‘words about’ or ‘ideas about’ the thing rather than
‘the thing itself’. But if his understanding of Schoenberg has ripened over the
years so that he now wants to share it with us, it can only be because he has had
some benefit of interference. And what he offers us now is more interference.

In short, Shawn’s book cannot dispel the din; all any book can do is add
to it. To claim otherwise is to claim a privilege. The author writes with
a gracious smile and sounds like a good guy (and a very effective teacher).
And yet my faith that his discourse will be helpful suffered another little jolt
before I finished the introduction, when he made his first attempt to deal
with, or defuse, the issue of ‘difficulty’, which surrounds Schoenberg as it
does so much modernist art. ‘I in no way mean to play down the difficulties,
depths, or conundrums inherent in this body of work,’ he writes:

But I would suggest that Schoenberg’s music is no more ‘difficult’ than the work of
other early-twentieth-century modernists such as Kandinsky, Eliot, Kafka, or Joyce, for
whom even the general public has a feeling of affection, of receptivity, of the kind of
trust that one accords great art in which there is much that one simply doesn’t grasp –
at first or perhaps even ever.

I do not suppose that the author of Arnold Schoenberg’s journey remem-
bers Lionel Trilling’s great essay ‘On the teaching of modern literature’
(first published in 1961 in Partisan Review and most recently reprinted in
The moral obligation to be intelligent), that once-famous bout of hand-
wringing over that very affection, receptivity, and trust, and the compla-
cency for which they stand. But surely he knows about the difficulty – not
the ‘difficulty’ about which he writes so contentedly – that people have
been having of late with Eliot? And surely he realises that the ‘difficulty’ of
modernist art was as much a social stance as an esthetic one?

But no, it is clear that he does not, or that he thinks all that is just part of
the interference. Those of us who have absorbed Trilling’s lesson that in our
role as teachers we should be adding to – or, as we now say, problematising
– the difficulty of the art that we teach, as a way of engaging with the issues
and (emphatically) as a way of engaging with the artworks, may indeed
wonder at this point about Shawn’s advocacy of ‘natural’ listening. Or do
we think, as he seems to, that music is – by ‘nature’ – exempt from ‘issues’?

Among the epigraphs adorning this book is an extract from the well-
known letter of thanks that Schoenberg sent the distinguished
American composer Roger Sessions in 1944, after Sessions had
published a 70th-birthday tribute entitled ‘Schoenberg in the United States’:
‘And finally I want to mention what I consider the greatest value for a
possible appreciation of my music: that you say, one must listen to it in the same manner as to every other kind of music, forget the theories, the twelve-tone method, the dissonances, etc., and, I would add, if possible the author.'

For the record, here are Sessions's exact words: 'It is not essential or even possible for the listener to apprehend [the 12-note row] in all its various transformations. He must listen to Schoenberg's music in exactly the same spirit as he listens to any music whatever, and bring to it the same kind of response. If he is fortunate he will from the first discover moments of profound and intense beauty which will tempt him further.' This is Shawn's premise, too. His whole book, though far more charmingly written, is in effect a gloss on this passage from Sessions.

The trouble is, Sessions was a composer, not a listener — and a composer who, though never nearly as much in the public eye, faced a dilemma similar to Schoenberg's. In his obituary for Sessions in The New York Times in 1985, Donal Henahan quoted a fellow composer who had remarked that 'everybody loves Roger Sessions except the public', and added, glumly but accurately, that Sessions's 'works gained little acceptance during his lifetime beyond professional and academic circles.' Can such a composer, however well-intentioned, serve as a guide to non-professional listeners, however willing?

My question may seem ill-intentioned, but assume for the moment that I write not in a spirit of contention but in an effort — an honest (and earnest) historian's effort — to understand a situation that everybody acknowledges, and that Shawn's book seeks honestly and earnestly to redress: the evident divergence in interests between those who have created much of the concert music of the 20th century and those who have had to listen to it.

That divergence of interests is apparent from the very first sentence of Sessions's article: 'In any survey of Schoenberg's work one fact must be emphasized above all: that no younger composer writes quite the same music as he would have written had Schoenberg's music not existed.' That certainly is (or was) a fact — and a familiar one, constantly rehearsed in appreciations of Schoenberg. But to give it primary emphasis is to place primary value on an aesthetically neutral aspect of the composer's work, one that is of no direct consequence to listeners (still less to their pleasure).

This gambit embarrassed Sessions a bit when he republished his article 28 years later. He added a cautionary footnote about 'an all too prevalent tendency [...] to confuse questions belonging to the realm of historical development [...] with those of inherent artistic value.' Still, when it came to supplying a positive definition of inherent artistic value to complement the merely negative observation that it was not to be sought in technical methods as such, Sessions again emphatically ignored the listener:
One can not too often insist that in music it is the composer’s inner world of tone and rhythm which matters, and that whatever technical means he chooses in order to give it structure and coherence are subject to no a priori judgment whatever. The essential is that structure and coherence he present; and the demand which art makes on its creator is simply that his technique be sufficiently mastered to become an obedient and flexible instrument in his hands [...] Once more – the significance of music springs solely from the composer’s imagination and not from ideas about technique. The latter are merely tools which he forges for himself, for his own purposes. They gain what validity they possess from the results, in music, to which they make their imponderable contribution.

The all-important results are described entirely in terms of the making of the art object, not its effect. The significance of music inheres in its structure and coherence. These are the fruits of the composer’s imagination, affording those moments of profound and intense beauty that the listener will discover ‘if he is fortunate’. The composer’s task, and the value of the composer’s product, are again unrelated, except fortuitously, to the listener’s pleasure.

This is the way most artists and critics have been talking about art for a very long time. In fact it is often one of the principal ways in which art is defined, especially by composers, or at least distinguished from its poorer cousins. A recent obituary for Ralph Shapey, an American composer far better known for his curmudgeonly attitudes than for his music, gave this as his credo: ‘I believe in something called art. Everyone has a right to it, but they have to go to it. It does not come to them.’ But who was Shapey paraphrasing? None other than the figure Allen Shawn wishes to popularize, who encased the definition in its most memorable nutshell: ‘If it is art it is not for everybody; if it is for everybody it is not art.’

This is not – or not only – mere elitism. Schoenberg was a terrific phrase-maker, and he also claimed that it was not given to Beethoven, Bruckner, or Mahler to write tenth symphonies because they would have revealed more of the ultimate truth than it was given to man to know. There may be more important things than pleasure, just as there may be more important things than beauty; and to define art as a realm of occult or forbidden knowledge, from which the uninitiated may need protection, is an old romantic habit. (Schoenberg’s *Harmonielehre* – the title just means ‘Harmony textbook’ – brims with philosophical and theological asides.)

But though there are many roads to it, the basic position at the root of the ‘divergence of interests’ that bedevils modern art remains the same. I have come to call it the poietic fallacy: the conviction that what matters most (or more strongly yet, that all that matters) in a work of art is the making of it, the maker’s input. The poietic fallacy is what has given rise to the situation that Shawn has made it a mission to counter, in which art criticism has been reduced to artists’ shoptalk.

Just to explain the term: The word ‘poietic’ comes from the field of semiotics, from which a now somewhat old-fashioned tripartite model of
analysis, first proposed by the French linguist Jean Molino, was long fashionable in musicology. Communications have senders and receivers. An analysis that is concerned with the sending of the message, hence with its devising, is a poietic analysis (from the Greek poiein, ‘to make’, but distinguished by the unusual spelling from ‘poetic’ to avoid confusion with more ordinary usages). An analysis that is concerned with the receiving is an esthesic analysis (from the Greek aisthesis, ‘perception’, similarly distinguished from ‘aesthetic’).

There was also in Molino’s original formulation a niveau neutre, a ‘neutral level’, that analysed the structure of the message itself; it has been pretty much discarded once it was realised that analysis itself was an esthesic function. But the philosophy of art that is still sufficiently powerful in musical circles to warrant attempts such as Shawn’s to challenge it is not so subtle as to realise that. It resolutely places esthesic concerns off limits as degrading. (That the Cold War gave the poietic fallacy a boost in the West in the name of creative freedom should be obvious; some artists and critics – Elliott Carter among the former, Paul Griffiths among the latter – still speak of the ‘tyranny of the audience’ and the tyranny of totalitarian regimes in the same breath.)

To return briefly to Sessions: the notion that the listener’s pleasure is not, and must not be, the composer’s primary objective is more than hinted when Sessions explains why, despite the infrequency of his performances in his adopted country, Schoenberg is nevertheless a significant and salutary presence in the United States.

The enthusiasm of many of the most gifted among young musicians [for Schoenberg’s American-published scores] as well as the gradually deepening interest of their elders is one of the striking phenomena of a period in which the prevailing trend seems superficially to be all in the direction of a not entirely genuine ‘mass appeal,’ facile and standardized effect, and a kind of hasty shabbiness of conception and workmanship.

No doubt Sessions had Shostakovich uppermost in mind in 1944; probably his old friend Copland, too. Nowadays one can read the same invective practically word for word when the defenders of Pierre Boulez or Elliott Carter take off after Steve Reich or John Corigliano or Ellen Taaffe Zwilich.

I am somewhat reluctant to adduce one more quotation from Sessions’s article, because it will raise such an invidious resonance in today’s intellectual and ethical climate. But I must, and so I will, for even if I repressed it here the theme it broaches will force its way back into the discussion later. ‘In the last analysis,’ Sessions wrote, his birthday tribute to Schoenberg was ‘an act of gratitude to one who has, so much more than any other individual, been one of the masculine forces that have shaped the music of our time.’ That sentiment, too, is one of the props, as well as one of the ramifications, of the poietic fallacy, along with the ones already noted: the measurement of an artist’s value in terms of influence on other artists, the concomitant
overrating of technical innovation, the delimitation of the purview of criticism to matters of structure and craft, and the derogation of other critical approaches as vulgarian. Schoenberg, and discourse about Schoenberg, has always been among the chief bulwarks of the poietic fallacy in music.

Can this man, or his music, be successfully popularised? Ought they to be? Has Allen Shawn succeeded in doing so? On the face of it, he opposes the poietic fallacy. He constantly emphasises listener response as a measure of Schoenberg's value, and constantly implies that that response should not be mediated by 'theories', Schoenberg's or anyone else's. 'I had one group of students lie down on the floor with their eyes closed while listening to 'Farben' [Colours] from the Five Pieces for Orchestra', he reports. 'The response to the work, unencumbered by proselytizing or prejudice, has belied the prevalent notion that Schoenberg's music is repellent or remote or that it represents a “wrong turn” taken by a master composer. The response, on the contrary, suggests that Schoenberg's art - in and of itself - moves people and speaks to them.'

Shawn ought to read up a bit about speech acts and 'illocution' if he thinks that proselytising and prejudice played no role in the response that he elicited. If I tell you to lie down on the floor with your eyes closed, I am telling you to expect a restful experience; and then if I follow through with Schoenberg's most restful piece (the one he later subtitled 'Morning by a lake') - I trust Shawn did not tell his students that), have I not prejudiced your view of Schoenberg just as much as I would have done had I played you the movement from the Five pieces called 'Peripeteia' while grinding broken glass into your forearm?

But at least Shawn shows some concern about response, with the 'esthesic' side of the ledger. He even comes close to asserting esthesics as a guiding principle when he assures us, near the end of the book, that 'the underlying structure of a work, which is often of an astonishing complexity and the result of considerable contrivance, is not its ultimate meaning.' Rather, 'the meaning is in the experience you have when you listen to the work.' Quite often, and winningly, Shawn reports his own responses. He tells us that he once injured his foot jockeying for a better seat at a screening of the film version of Schoenberg's opera Moses und Aron: 'The sensation of watching this severe and illuminating version of the opera while being in intense - if strangely remote - pain has stayed with me. Somehow feelings of sacrifice, the sense that there is a cost to things, intimations that understanding and beauty do not come easily, have adhered, not inappropriately, to my feelings about this work.'

I suppress the easy impulse to mock this story by turning it into a prescription ('if you want to enjoy Schoenberg, don't forget to bring a whip to
the concert’) or pointing out its likeness, in its glorification of submission, to the ‘slave mentality’ derided more than a hundred years ago by Nietzsche. My problem, rather, is that Shawn again seems to underestimate, or strategically ignore, the performative aspect of such reports, especially when they are couched in terms not of ‘I’ but ‘we’. About Erwartung, Schoenberg’s expressionist ‘monodrama’ of psychological torment, hysteria, and (possibly) psychosis, he writes: ‘Like the protagonist, we often feel lost, but we also periodically find ourselves in very distinct places. Nevertheless, we are continuously captivated, even entranced. We have the dreamlike sensation of having been “here” before, since the intimate, psychic states evoked here – the terror, the confusion, the aloneness – instantly remind us of our own.’

Well, if you say so. And I don’t necessarily say nay. But telling the reader that she is captivated and entranced is a way of captivating and entrancing. Though subtle, it is nevertheless a coercive rhetoric, a hard sell. Sometimes, indeed, the listener is actually ordered to ignore his immediate reaction. Near the end of Erwartung, we are told, ‘the disjointed shards of thought in the text are set to tiny scraps of song, but these nevertheless cohere and connect and carry the listener forward.’ At its most subtle, the technique relies on rhetorical questions, like this one about the second ‘Little piano piece’ from Schoenberg’s op.19: ‘Why does the opening G–B third sound so perfect after the chromaticisms of piece no.1?’ Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a camel?

This is all very good pedagogy, and I cherish its purpose, just as I am delighted to see Shawn humanising a composer so often portrayed as some kind of disembodied historical force or impossibly exigent authority. He shows us family photographs full of cute or chubby little Schoenbergs. We learn that their father made them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in the morning and cut them up in fanciful animal shapes. We learn that Schoenberg loved to play games (tennis with Gershwin, for instance). He designed playing cards, painted at an exhibitable level, and threw himself passionately into Zionist activity in response to Hitler (even vowing at one point to sacrifice his artistic career to the cause of Jewish survival). Shawn seems to think that if he can get us to like the man we will like the music as well.

To an extent, of course, he is right. Many of Schoenberg’s most ‘painful’ works – such as Erwartung, which may be the blindest leap into the musical unknown that he (or any other composer) ever took – make their first appeal on a visceral, humane level. At the time he wrote this piece, Schoenberg was reeling from a marital crisis, and felt that the artist’s highest and perhaps only true calling was to give truly adequate expression to ‘inner experiences’, psychological realities inaccessible to reasoned language or conventional modes of representation. Why, after all, should the inner experiences of a woman discovering her lover’s bloody corpse be anything but blood-
curdling? Why shouldn’t a musical representation of such experiences be horrendously dissonant and ugly? Artists in the realist tradition had been portraying ugly things in an ugly way for decades. Not to be ugly was to be dishonest — no artist at all. All that Schoenberg did, in a sense, was take it further, make it ‘realer’, more true to life, more honest — hence more genuinely artistic. Shawn devotes a chapter to Schoenberg’s assertion that he became a radical reluctantly, under the sway of an ‘inner compulsion’, a human need with which he invites his readers to identify. ‘Indeed’, Shawn writes, ‘he implies that entering this new musical domain has required courage and an overcoming of resistance on his own part.’ If its motivation was human and authentic, and morally commendable, so must be the music.

But the authenticity of the impulse costs little to concede. Schoenberg’s foes were as ready to recognise it as his friends. (When your opponent pays tribute to your sincerity you know that he is not taking you seriously.) A hostile reviewer of the first performance of the Five pieces for orchestra, a work that rivals the tormented idiom of Erwartung but without a text or programme to give the painful sounds a specific reference, ended his notice on a note of commiseration: ‘We must be content with the composer’s own assertion that he has depicted his own experiences, for which he has our heartfelt sympathy.’ A mean joke, yes; but it is not unrelated to Shawn’s claim that the music gives an unprecedentedly true representation not only of Schoenberg’s feelings, but of ours as well. In his music as well as his paintings, Shawn tells us, ‘Schoenberg uses his own face to depict and confront our common humanity.’ He steers perilously close to what Theodor Adorno called the ‘jargon of authenticity’ when he endorses Paul Rosenfeld’s claim that Schoenberg’s career represents ‘the development of a man according to the law of life which compels us, if we would live and grow, to become ever more fully and nakedly what we essentially are.’

To say that all of this is not ‘interference’ or proselytising is silly, and to that pretence I must righteously object, especially when the ground of the argument shifts, as it so often does, from the esthesic to the poietic. Like Roger Sessions, Allen Shawn is after all an academically trained composer; and although his tone and his demeanour are worlds away from Sessions’s frosty detachment, he listens and thinks like any other member of the guild. And that means that beneath the surface of his argument the poietic fallacy remains in place.

Shawn’s very last plea on Schoenberg’s behalf fairly duplicates Sessions’s first claim as quoted above. ‘As we close this book,’ the author writes,

let us imagine the last century without Schoenberg: without the String Trio, A Survivor from Warsaw, the Violin Concerto, the Variations for Orchestra, Moses und Aron, Pierrot Lunaire, the Five Pieces for Orchestra, Erwartung, the opus 11 Piano Pieces, the Book of the Hanging Gardens, the Gurre-Lieder, Verklärte Nacht ... without film music as it has been,
or Carter or Boulez as they have been, or Stravinsky’s works after 1951, or Webern or Berg as they were. Doing this one begins to see in this difficult life something indispensable. Without Schoenberg, the music of an astonishing number of other composers would have been much the poorer and the time in which we live would have lacked one of its most eloquent and characteristic musical voices. Without him, our era would have made a different sound.

So it’s influence — still an aesthetically neutral category, no matter how historically significant — that counts, after all. And alas, all the other aesthetically irrelevant planks in the poieticist platform figure just as prominently in Shawn’s apologia as they did in Sessions’s. There is abundant overrating of innovation. The Chamber Symphony op.9 is praised as ‘forward-looking’. Schoenberg’s songs to texts by Richard Dehmel ‘pointed a way forward’. Even his little cabaret songs, composed at the age of 26, are touted for having ‘anticipated by 25 years the sophisticated music theater style of Weill and Eisler’.

The gigantic cantata Gurrelieder gets a particularly hard progressivist sell. ‘Here we are at the pivot of the century and arguably at one of the most fateful turning points in the thousand-year evolution of Western music,’ Shawn writes of its harmonious ending. ‘We now know that Schoenberg and much of twentieth-century music was progressing in exactly the opposite direction of this sequence of musical events: away from the tonal center and into a new way of hearing tones.’ This sort of thing was too much even for Stravinsky, master of modernist posturing though he was: in conversation with Robert Craft he ridiculed the critical standpoint that ‘evaluates solely in terms of where a thing comes from and where it is going’.

Finally, from Shawn: ‘The Gurre-Lieder was one final, almost orgiastically beautiful evening-length work, for staggeringy large forces, on mythic subject matter. For a long time after it, anyone composing such a piece would seem to belong to a bygone age.’ Compare Boulez’s most notorious utterance: ‘Since the Viennese discoveries, any musician who has not experienced — I do not say understood, but truly experienced — the necessity of the dodecaphonic language is USELESS. For his entire work brings him up short of the needs of his time.’ These apothegms are, all of them, the stuff of professional politics. They have nothing to do with listeners, except in so far as they may be intimidated.

And there is far more ‘immanent criticism’ in Shawn’s discussion, the sort of criticism that delimits its purview to matters of structure and craft, than the author lets on. There had to be. If the greatness of Erwartung is merely its hysteria, or that of Moses und Aron merely its moral severity, then we may as well regard them the way old Agesilaus of Sparta, in Plutarch’s hoary anecdote, regarded the actor who could perfectly imitate the nightingale. Invited to hear him, the king declined, saying he had heard the nightingale
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itself. Why go to Erwartung to hear a crazy lady, when all you have to do is open up a window on Broadway?

There has to be some talk, in short, about what Susanne Langer called ‘significant form’. There has to be some accounting of the way music communicates experience through its particular medium.

But Shawn (and he is hardly alone in this) often settles for something easier. He shows us instead how well composed the music is, according to a definition of good composing to which academically trained composers are indoctrinated, but which means little to listeners. The proof of this is that the demonstration is almost always illustrated visually – that is, by musical examples, of which this book is surprisingly and inappropriately full, unless its intended audience is confined after all to the musically literate, by now a tiny coterie. (There are other ways; a number of authors of serious books on music for ‘generally educated’ audiences have lately been experimenting with minutely correlated CDs.)

The sentence quoted earlier, for instance, about the ‘perfect’ sounding G–B third is actually not quite as rhetorical a question as I made it out to be. It is followed by a sort of answer. Why does the G–B third sound so perfect? ‘At least in part because the same sound in the same register is contained in [bars 8–12] in piece no. 1. It is also contained in the very first gesture of that piece as well.’

This is a familiar sort of casuistry. Shawn has ferreted the precedents he cites out of larger contexts in which the ‘G–B third’ is not always aurally conspicuous. At the beginning of piece no. 1, the ‘first gesture’ as Shawn calls it, the B is a sustained note, against which the G is set in counterpoint as the third in a very quick group of four, none of which gets to register as a distinct harmony with the B. It is the kind of relationship that music theory students are taught to render visually by drawing what they often laughingly call ‘amoebas’ – oddly shaped closed curves – around the pitches being grouped. The oddness of the shapes corresponds to the remoteness and the arbitrariness of the relationships that are being corralled and promoted as ‘structural’ for the purpose of demonstrating the harmonic (or ‘motivic’) unity of the composition. A whole analytic theory called pitch-class set analysis has grown up around this amoebic practice, the paradoxical purpose of which is to show that the early 20th-century music that elicited riots when first performed is really very well behaved and orderly.

Forgive the descent into shoptalk; but Shawn uses the amoeba method again and again to convince us of the quality and the power of the music he describes. About the constituent numbers in Pierrot Lunaire, he asserts that ‘to some extent, all the pieces in this set emerge’ from the first seven notes in the first piece (which sounds very potent, considering the significance of the number seven in this collection of what Schoenberg called ‘thrice seven’ little
speech-songs). But the nine music examples that follow are far too approximate to justify the claim, and in every case they are arbitrarily ‘segmented’ (to use the amoeba-drawer’s term) out of larger contexts from which they are not aurally set off. Shawn even uses the method on Schoenberg’s cabaret songs, to show why they are better than any others and really belong in the concert hall.

When it comes to analysing 12-note music, the claim (and the ‘segmentation’) may be less arbitrary: but only because the claim has become tautological. The 12-note method was invented precisely to produce the sort of maximalised motivic consistency and saturated texture that analysts look for. Clearly Schoenberg was motivated by the ideal that Shawn invokes to tout his work. But that does not make it any more pertinent or available to the listener’s experience. And promoting it into a primary musical value is the ultimate poietic fallacy, the one that led modern music into the cul-de-sac where absurdly overcomposed monstrosities by Elliott Carter or Milton Babbitt have been reverently praised by critics and turned into obligatory models for emulation by teachers of composition.

So what are these seemingly misguided values pertinent to? That is a question very much worth investigating historically, for there is simply no point in maintaining the pretence that Schoenberg’s music is music like any other music. More than any other body of music that I know, it represented a crux in the history of ideas. That does indeed make it (and him) supremely important. But that history has been largely forgotten, and (as Santayana might have warned us) its repercussions linger even into our shiny new postmodern millennium. We must do a better job of comprehending the sources of Schoenberg’s ‘inner compulsion’ – and of the poietic fallacy, too – if we want to escape from them, or even accept them in full, free consciousness.

In the last of his many assurances that music, even Schoenberg’s music, can be fully appreciated in an intellectual and cultural vacuum, Shawn writes: ‘Until the twentieth century the purpose of music was probably only discussed, when it was, by philosophers and clerics, and the methods used to create it were in the background of the minds of its hearers. There was a minimum of conceptual or analytical self-consciousness to the act of listening. Music made the eardrums vibrate and entered the mind, and the psyche/body/spirit responded according to its mysterious laws.’

Like most nostalgic pronouncements, this one is unbelievably off-base. Conceptual and analytical self-consciousness among artists and art lovers, and speculation about artistic ends and means, are as old as romanticism (that is how Schiller defined a ‘sentimental poet’), and its musical history goes much further back, at least to the humanistic ferment that midwifed the birth
of opera at the end of the 16th century, and even before that to the late Middle Ages, when a great composer was usually (as was said of John Dunstable in one of his epitaphs) ‘an astrologian, a mathematician, a musician and what not’.

In the 19th century, particularly, precious little innocent listening went on, since the newly public sphere of music now made room for two new professions – critics and historians – that bathed all listening in buzz (or ‘discourse’, if you are an academic). Shawn’s ideal of ‘uninterfered-with’ listening is simply inadequate to deal with the music produced under these conditions. Compared, say, with Schoenberg’s idea of listening, it is woefully impoverished. At the very least it is a poor prescription.

To find the source of the Schoenbergian crux we do not have to go back to John Dunstable. The middle of the 19th century will do for a starting point; and the seminal figure is neither a philosopher nor a cleric, but a pianist, a critic, and a music historian named Franz Brendel, a man whose name has been forgotten but whose ideas bore copious and lasting fruit.

Brendel’s great achievement was to write his century’s most widely disseminated ‘universal’ and ‘scientific’ history of music: Geschichte der Musik in Italien, Deutschland und Frankreich von den ersten christlichen Zeiten an bis auf die Gegenwart (History of Music in Italy, Germany and France from the Earliest Christian Times to the Present). First published in 1852, it had gone through nine editions by 1906. The words put in quotation marks in this paragraph’s first sentence constitute the book’s inheritance from the Enlightenment. It aspired to say everything that was important, and to say it in a way that put all facts into an overriding system that gave them meaning. The reasons for putting the words in quotation marks constitute the book’s inheritance from romanticism. The limitation, despite the claim of universality, to the richest and most powerful countries of Western Europe are already evidence of the author’s commitment to a view of history cast in terms of the progressive realisation of an essential European spirit of which those countries were collectively the protagonist. The science that gave Brendel’s work system was Hegel’s ‘dialectic’. Brendel’s was its first systematic application to the history of music.

What set the Hegelian dialectic apart from other interpretations of the great chain of being (such as Darwin’s theory of biological evolution, which was almost immediately misinterpreted, to Darwin’s disgust, in light of the dialectic) is that it purported to show not merely that things change, or under what conditions they change, but also the purpose of change. The stipulation that change has purpose turned random process into law. The basic law of history, as Hegel postulated it in the Lectures on the philosophy of history was this: ‘The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom.’ That is the first sentence of the book, and the
axiom from which the entire subsequent argument and demonstration is
drawn. According to it, all meaningfully or significantly ‘historical’ change—
all change, in other words, that is worthy of representation in the dialectic—has contributed to progress in the realisation of human freedom, which
Hegel called the progress of the ‘world soul’. If it has not contributed to this
progress, change has not been, in Hegelian terms, ‘historical’.

As the first self-consciously Hegelian historian of music, Brendel cast his
narrative in terms of successive emancipations, both of musicians and of the
art itself. Before the 16th century, everything was primitive, mere ‘pre-
history’, because in Brendel’s ears (and here he did not differ from his con-
temporaries) such music did not intelligibly express the ideas or the feelings
of individual creators. All musicians were slaves to the mechanical rules of
counterpoint, as people generally were enslaved by the dogmas of the
medieval Church.

The first great composer, in Brendel’s reckoning, was Palestrina, who,
reflecting the romantic interpretation of the Renaissance, broke through to
ture spiritual expressivity. What he expressed, however, was not yet a
personal sensibility, but rather the collectively held beliefs of his religious
community. His art was ‘sublime’ rather than ‘beautiful’, because it con-
tinued to address a higher-than-human plane. It still fulfilled prescribed
ecclesiastical functions, but its euphony and its expressive power showed the
way toward artistic autonomy.

The phase of ‘beauty’ was reached, in Brendel’s scheme, when the spiritual,
freed from its ecclesiastical bonds, could be expressed in fully human
(that is, secular) terms. The rise of opera bore witness to it. And the next
stage – the fully-fledged ‘aesthetic’ – came with the emancipation of music
from words in the instrumental masterpieces of the German Classical
masters. Their music, now able to realise its own essential spirit, able at last
to evolve spontaneously and autonomously (that is, according to its own
laws), was effectively a metaphor for the advancement of humanity toward
ultimate self-realisation. The very autonomy of the new instrumental music
(implying freedom from all ‘extramusical’ association or constraint), made
it a political symbol – hence re-enmeshing it in extramusical ideas (a small
example of the dialectic at work).

The value of music could be measured best, on the Hegelian view, in terms
of the degree to which it embodied its own epoch’s evolutionary synthesis
and pointed the way to the next. Composers were valuable to the degree that
their actions advanced the tendencies inherent in the musical materials
toward further autonomous evolution. Unsurprisingly, the most advanced
composers, and hence the most valuable ones, were Germans: in Brendel’s
view, they were Bach and Handel (the latter viewed bizarrely as a church
musician), who were the last and most consummate representatives of the
sublime epoch, and Gluck, Haydn, and Mozart, who brought to its first full fruition the epoch of the aesthetic. Beethoven’s popular image as music’s emancipator supreme received a resounding confirmation.

But the most provocative chapter of Brendel’s history was the last, because of the way the author maintained his account of progressive emancipation beyond Beethoven, into what was then the present. This was at the time a very unconventional and risky move, since it threatened the status of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven as ‘classics’ – that is, as having set a timeless (and therefore unimprovable) standard. For a German historian, nothing short of the nation’s honour was at stake in this historical ‘fact’. Denying it was unthinkable. Brendel got around the problem in two ways. First, he posited that every age (or stage) had its perfect representatives. Hence Bach was not invalidated by Mozart, nor Mozart by Beethoven, and so Beethoven would never be invalidated either. Second, Brendel obediently gave the chapter concerning the present the title Verfall, ‘decline’, in keeping with what was by then an art historian’s inescapable obligation.

And yet the chapter’s contents roundly belied its title. The music of the man Brendel singled out as the greatest composer then living (let his identification wait) carried on the torch, advancing both the progressive consciousness of freedom and the progressive attainment of aesthetic unity. This was the purpose that informed the history of music, and ever since Brendel formulated it there has been abroad the idea that the primary obligation of musicians is not to their audience but to that purpose – namely, the furthering of the ‘evolutionary’ progress of the art toward autonomy and unity, for the sake of which any sacrifice is justified, including (or even especially) the sacrifice of the audience. Ever since the middle of the 19th century, the idea that one is honour-bound to serve the impersonal aims of history and the need for art to evolve has been one of the most powerful motivating forces, and one of the most exigent criteria of value, among composers and critics. As recently as 1993, Paul Griffiths, writing in The New Yorker, sought to discredit a new work (Ellen Taaffe Zwilich’s Second Symphony) that had enjoyed audience acclaim by declaring that it did not ‘add anything to the universe of musical possibility’.

Brendel’s own way of putting it was to say that ‘the essence of today’s art’ can no longer be realised in ‘the old naturalistic way’ – that is, instinctively or intuitively by musicians out to please their patrons or their listeners – but only with ‘the intervention of theory and criticism’, and by ‘art’s presupposing theory and criticism within itself’. The age of creative innocence was over; self-conscious theory, based on a high consciousness of purpose and of history, was the only true path to the future. Moreover, that consciousness of purpose, being the road to self-realisation, made the future graspable in the present. The path of destiny was marked out to those in
the know. The others did not matter. The self-conscious few, history’s self-appointed ‘advance guard’, now saw themselves (following Shelley’s famous definition of his own calling) as ‘the unacknowledged legislators of the world’.

These contentions marked the beginnings of the modern — or ‘modernist’ — age of music, which has also been the age of revolutionary politics. Both in art and in politics, it has been the age in which (to quote Richard Kostelanetz, a contemporary American theorist of the avant-garde) ‘an innovative minority makes the leaps that will be adopted by the many’ — or that, according to the theory, ought by rights to be adopted. The invidious comparison implicit in this idea — or rather the elitism, to give it its contemporary nomme de guerre — has understandably given rise to angry backlashes and counter-revolutions. Since the middle of the 19th century, the world of ‘classical music’ has been a world riven with political factions and contentious publicity.

The poietic fallacy is the direct outgrowth of this Hegelianisation of music history, especially in its vulgar Darwinised variant that did see each synthesis as invalidating all previous stages, at least in so far as the rights and duties of composers were concerned. Musicians and critics after Brendel did indeed conceptualise musical history in terms resembling Rudolf Zallinger’s much-parodied depiction of the ‘Ascent of Man’ from the lower simians to the sapient homos of today. Bernard Shaw, hoping to stir things up in a piece commissioned to honour Mozart’s death centenary in 1891, wrote that Wagner, whom he called ‘The Liberator’, was ‘greater than Beethoven by as much as Mozart was greater than Haydn’. Having written that, Shaw immediately added, ‘And now I hope I have saved my reputation by saying something at which everybody will exclaim, “Bless me! what nonsense!” Nevertheless, it is true.’ There is the poietic fallacy in action. (Mark Twain’s immortal jape, ‘Wagner’s music is better than it sounds’, was already the perfect spoof of it.)

Here is an even better example, partly because it is older, and because it was entirely serious. Writing in 1859 in the journal Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, the radically Romantic forum founded by Robert Schumann, the Russian critic and composer Alexander Serov massacred a biography of Mozart written in French by his countryman Alexander Ulybyshev, which upheld the era of Mozart as a ‘classical’ golden age. In two dogmatic assertions — or ‘laws,’ as he made bold to call them — Serov summed up the neo-Hegelian position with breathtaking succinctness:

1. Wenn eine Theorie nicht mit der Praxis eines Weltgenies stimmt, da wird sie nie bestehen, denn die Kunst lebt ihr Leben nicht in Büchern, sondern im Kunstwerk. (If theory [that is, classroom ‘music theory’] does not accord with the practice of a world-genius, then it must always give way, for art lives its life not in books but in artworks.)
The poetic fallacy

2. Das Criterium des musikalischen Gesetzes liegt nicht in den Ohren des Consumenten, es liegt in der Kunstidee des Producenten. (The basis of musical law lies not in the ear of the consumer but in the artistic inspiration [literally, the ‘art-idea’] of the producer.)

Add economics to the preserves on which art-theorists were now prepared to poach in support of the new value system that equated innovation with liberation, and that took as its objective the freeing of the artwork and its producers from dependence on social norms defined by consumers. Boring or annoying their contemporaries was not only considered by neo-Hegelians a fair price to pay, it was often taken in itself to be a mark of progress. (‘Before, music strove to delight people,’ Serov’s countryman Tchaikovsky grumbled after the first Bayreuth Ring, ‘now they are tormented and exhausted.’) But this was serious politics. The Hegelian notion of the Weltgenie, the ‘world-genius’ – on the one hand free to abrogate the laws of ordinary mortals and, on the other, charged with the making of new and ever more binding laws – was nothing if not a site of political power.

The role of the world-genius was precisely the role that Schoenberg claimed to have inherited, in endless pronouncements and anecdotes. ‘I knew I had to develop my ideas for the sake of progress in music,’ he wrote in later life, ‘whether I liked it or not.’ (That you did not like it he took for granted.) He loved to recall the answer that he gave an officer who asked him, when he reported for duty in World War I, whether he was the Arnold Schoenberg: ‘Somebody had to be, nobody else volunteered, so I answered the call.’ And of course there was the chilling way he announced to his pupil and assistant Josef Rufer that he had come up with the 12-note method: ‘Today I have made a discovery that will ensure the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years.’ But the surest sign of all that Schoenberg saw himself as the protagonist of the latest evolutionary stage was the way he cast his own development as a dialectical synthesis.

Up to Schoenberg, dialectical history was the exclusive method or propaganda tool of one side in the great debate to which Alexander Serov so zealously contributed, pitting the believers in unbounded progress – the ‘Zukunftists’, or ‘futurists’, as their opponents called them, after the title of Wagner’s tract Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft, or ‘The artwork of the future’ – against the ‘classicists’ who saw the period leading up to Beethoven as an unsurpassable (but, given sufficient talent and luck, maintainable) golden age. The editor and publisher of Schumann’s journal at the time Serov contributed to it was none other than Franz Brendel, not only a critic and not only a historian, but also a very active intervener in history, a musical politician who played hard at the game of kingmaking.

In 1859, the same year as Serov’s contribution, the indefatigable editor organised at Weimar, Goethe’s hometown, and in Leipzig, the journal’s
birthplace, a great convocation of musicians from all parts of Germany, out of which emerged an organisation called the Allgemeiner deutscher Musikverein, or the All-German Musical Society, for the purpose of agitation and propaganda on behalf of the musical tendency to which Brendel had devoted the culminating chapter of his book seven years earlier. In his widely publicised keynote address, Brendel christened that faction the ‘New German School’ (a term that, he vainly hoped, would replace ‘Zukunftist’ once and for all). The guest of honour at the convocation, the honorary president of the society, and the figurehead of the New German School was the same man whose music Brendel had held aloft in his History as the beacon of ‘progress to a new consciousness’ of music’s historical obligation. He was Franz Liszt.

Sure enough, the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy nor Roman. The New German School had a Hungarian, albeit living in Weimar, for a figurehead. (Brendel’s other envisioned figurehead was Hector Berlioz, a Frenchman.) For this Brendel had a ready Hegelian explanation. Just as the ‘world-genius’ fulfilled a ‘world spirit’, anyone who took music further along the liberatory dialectical line established by Beethoven realised a German spirit regardless of his birthplace. As of 1859, Liszt’s symphonic poems were the most advanced embodiments (as Berlioz’s programmatic and dramatic symphonies had earlier been) of Brendel’s cardinal principle that in truly significant or ‘historical’ art, ‘content must create its own form’. Soon afterward the Wagnerian music drama assumed this role and status, and became the New German rallying point.

And the rallying point of the opposition? Brahms, of course, who as a young kapellmeister had rashly signed a letter of protest at Brendel’s inaugural address, and who in the period of his eminence had a public advocate in Eduard Hanslick (author of ‘On the musically beautiful’, with its caustic plea for timeless, ‘purely musical’ values) to play the Franz Brendel role on his behalf.

Schoenberg’s affinity for the New German line is obvious, not only musically but also in its nationalistic and political overtones. The big step that others called the leap into ‘atonality’, a term that he deplored for its negativity, Schoenberg called the ‘emancipation of dissonance’, a term that owes its seductive political vibes to the liberatory rhetoric of the dialectic. Obviously it was not dissonance itself that had been emancipated; it was the composer, the protagonist of the audience-mocking poietic fallacy. That is, the composer was liberated from the constraints of ‘voice leading rules’ whereby dissonance was subordinated to consonance in traditional harmony and counterpoint.

But why was this necessary? Just because constraints existed? That is the usual vulgar Hegelian answer, but it is quite incorrect. The emancipation of dissonance was the result of a surprising synthesis between the New...
German ideology and its Brahmsian, ‘purely musical’ antithesis. But even that is not quite right, because ‘purely musical’ value was, at least for Schoenberg if not for Brahms, a metaphorical value with roots in the so-called ‘extramusical’ world, the world of ideas.

The reference to ‘roots’ is a clue to the metaphor. Here is another clue: after devising the note row that would serve as the basis for the third movement of his Woodwind Quintet op.26, one of the milestones in the development of his 12-note technique, Schoenberg wrote in his sketchbook that ‘I think Goethe would be very pleased with me’. Goethe, who in addition to his artistic pursuits was trained in – and contributed to – botany, optics and other scientific disciplines, was the apostle of organicism, one of the main branches (and once a metaphor gets going, it’s hard to stop it) of romantic art theory. And Schoenberg was one of his most conscientious and enthusiastic heirs.

Goethe’s science was a highly Platonised sort of science, devoted to the ‘discovery’ (that is, the assertion) of archetypes. It may even have been Plato who inspired Goethe’s scientific inquiries, with his remark in Phaedrus that an artistic composition ‘should be like a living being, with a body of its own, as it were, and neither headless nor feetless, with a middle and with members adapted to each other and to the whole.’ This location of formal harmony in a theory of functional differentiation and mutual adaptation found corroboration in Goethe’s elaboration of the Urpflanze, the archetypal plant. After making countless drawings of actual plants, Goethe tried (in his Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu erklären, or ‘Attempt to explain the metamorphosis of plants’) to abstract or to synthesise the functional principles of plant life in a master drawing that could be proposed as a primeval or universal model to which actual phenomena had to conform in order successfully, or validly, to exemplify planthood. It proposed the hidden organic unity that underlay the blooming, buzzing diversity of nature.

The Goethean Urpflanze lies behind all the many attempts by Schoenberg and his adepts (including Allen Shawn, as in his analysis of Pierrot Lunaire) to demonstrate the quality of a musical composition by relating its surface complexity to a simple and functionally unifying motif – or, to go further into specifically Schoenbergian territory, to a Grundgestalt, or ‘basic shape’. Not even the most expert commentators on Schoenberg (and here I am thinking of Severine Neff, the co-translator and co-editor of his most extended theoretical treatment of the subject) can give a concise and consistent definition of this most fundamental Schoenbergian concept, in part because Schoenberg never gave one; but we do know that it was a conscious adaptation of Goethe’s terminology for the components of the Urpflanze (especially ‘der innere Kern’, the inner nucleus).

Schoenberg was sure that the permeation of a composition in all its dimensions by a unifying kernel was an objective measure of its value – a
properly poietic criterion rather than an esthetic one. Of all the composers in the German tradition, Brahms had been the supreme master of the ‘basic shape’. For many self-styled progressives, it was the reason for regarding Brahms as academic. For Schoenberg, as the title of one of his most famous essays proclaims, it made Brahms himself a ‘progressive’—far more of one, indeed, than Wagner.

Schoenberg showed his inheritance from Wagner and the other New Germans in works such as Gurre-Lieder, the mega-oratorio that so obviously contended with Wagner on the mythic site of The ring (but in a ‘decadent’ erotic manner reminiscent of Tristan und Isolde), and in Verklärte Nacht, or Transfigured Night, a programmatic tone poem scored for a string sextet, in which Schoenberg conspicuously brought the principle of ‘content-determined form’ into the quintessentially classical domain of chamber music. His inheritance from Brahms could be seen on what Schoenberg liked to call the ‘subcutaneous’ level—the level of microstructure and micro-texture—where he sought, through what he called the principle of ‘developing variation,’ to exceed both the outer diversity and the inner unity that earlier composers had attained and achieve the perfection, at a much more basic musical level, of content-determined form.

What had set limits on earlier accomplishment? Those very rules that subordinated dissonance to consonance. Under traditional constraints, not every melodic idea can also function as a harmonic idea. Under the regime of ‘emancipated dissonance’, it can. Emancipating the dissonance made it possible to integrate the musical texture beyond all previous imagining. It also became the site of greatest tension between esthetic and poietic criteria. Harmonic syntax, in particular, became incomprehensible to most listeners (including composers, when they were listening). To reorient one’s thinking so that harmony could be conceptualised as verticalised melody (or melody as horizontalised harmony) opened a notional trapdoor that avoided the problem. Never resolved, and perhaps never to be resolved, is the question that gives rise to all the battles: the extent to which esthetic perception can be validly sacrificed to (or subsumed within) poietic conception. (‘But can you hear it?’)

These questions became all the more urgent as the ‘freely atonal’ music that Schoenberg composed from about 1908 to 1917 gave way to the ‘serialised’ music that he wrote after inventing the 12-note technique around 1921. (The period in between was fallow, giving a nicely articulated shape to Schoenberg’s career.) The beauty of a 12-note row, from the poietic standpoint, was that by furnishing a sort of quarry from which all the musical events in a composition—melodic, harmonic, contrapuntal, textural—would be hewn, it served as a sort of automatic Grundgestalt, absolutely insuring the sort of demonstrable organic unity on which Goethean—that is, Schoenbergian—notions of artistic quality depended. It was not for nothing that
Schoenberg imagined Goethe patting his head after coming up with a row (which was part of the precompositional or sketching process) rather than a piece. The row was the promise of perfected organicism. And yet the organicism of 12-note music, regarded by the composer as a given and often not particularly foregrounded at the sounding surface, can for that reason be even more esoteric to listeners than that of free atonal music, where the motivic saturation tended to be more actively demonstrated in traditional ‘thematic’ terms.

Schoenberg was very much aware of these aesthetic issues and took them seriously. He was well aware of the price that his creative decisions exacted. Sometimes he slyly mocked the emancipation of dissonance. A wonderful case in point is ‘Der Mondfleck’ (The moon-spot), no.18 in Pierrot Lunaire, the cycle for speaking voice and chamber quintet. Here is the text, translated into English from the text that Schoenberg set, namely Otto Erich Hartleben’s German translation of Albert Giraud’s French original. Like all the poems in the cycle, it is cast as a rondel, with an ironic (here italicised) refrain:

A snowy fleck of shining moonlight
on the back side of his smart new frock coat,
so sets forth Pierrot one balmy evening,
in pursuit of fortune and adventure.
Sudden – something’s wrong with his appearance,
he locks round and round and then he finds it –
a snowy fleck of shining moonlight
on the back side of his smart new frock coat.
Hang it! thinks he: a speck of plaster!
Wipes and wipes, but it won’t vanish!
On he goes, his pleasure poisoned,
rubs and rubs till almost morning at
a snowy fleck of shining moonlight.

Schoenberg’s setting is an analyst’s delight: a strict canon at the octave between the violin and the cello, a freer canon (or perhaps a sort of fugue) at the 12th between the clarinet and the piccolo, and in the piano part a harmonised version of the clarinet-piccolo canon, in doubled note-values (that is, at half the tempo), with the parts inverted, and with a third voice entering in the middle of the texture an octave below the first entry of the subject, so that the orthodox tonal relations of a fugue are seemingly maintained. Not only that, but in the middle of the tenth bar the string and wind parts reverse direction, producing a perfect melodic and rhythmic palindrome, while the piano continues to develop its fugue.

It is enough to boggle the mind, and it has elicited a lot of awestruck hyperbole, such as Charles Rosen’s announcement that ‘Der Mondfleck’ ‘is
one of the most elaborately worked out canons since the end of the fifteenth
century’. Allen Shawn calls it ‘the apex of complexity and virtuosity’, and
compares its effect to vertigo: ‘it can only be compared to some primal and
animal experience, such as suddenly finding oneself outside under a vast
black sky filled with stars or unexpectedly looking over the edge of a cliff.’

But how elaborately ‘worked out’ is a canon or a fugue that is written in a
style that recognises no distinction between consonance and dissonance, so
that harmonically speaking, literally anything goes? The essence of counter-
point has always been its ‘dissonance treatment’. That, and that alone, is
where skill is required and displayed. What makes Bach’s *Musical offering or
Art of fugue* such astonishing *tours de force* is not just the complexity of the
texture, but the fact that that complexity is achieved within such exacting
harmonic constraints. Take away the constraints and you have rendered the
*tour de force* entirely pointless.

But of course Schoenberg knew this perfectly well – much better than his
humourless admirers. Look again at the text: it is all about frenzied but
pointless activity. That is a perfect description of an elaborate contrapuntal
texture with ‘emancipated dissonance’. Or to put it the other way around, an
elaborate contrapuntal texture with emancipated dissonance is a perfect
metaphor for the urgent but ineffectual efforts that Pierrot is making. So
from a bogus masterpiece of counterpoint, ‘Der Mondfleck’ suddenly be-
comes a genuine masterpiece of self-mocking irony. Schoenberg once
cried to a pupil that ‘now that I’ve emancipated dissonance, anybody can
be a composer.’

But although he could laugh at it, which is perhaps the most endearing and
humanising of his traits, Schoenberg regarded the emancipation of disso-
nance as something of the utmost necessity and gravity. In fact, it was holy.
Its relationship to Goethe’s *Urpflanze* does not explain its motivation fully.
Breathtakingly overdetermined, it owed just as much in Schoenberg’s think-
ing to the occult spiritual ideas that obsessed him at least up to the time of the
First World War, forming the basis for his brief but intense association with
the Russian expatriate painter Wassily Kandinsky.

Alongside Schoenberg’s fascination with ‘inner [that is, psychic] occurrences’ was an equally strong interest in spiritual transcendence and the possibilities of representing it in art. From a rationalist perspective, the two impulses – psychological realism and occult revelation – can seem to be in
contradiction, and both can seem to contradict the organicist basis of
Schoenberg’s very calculated musical technique. From a more accommo-
dating perspective that regards psychic phenomena as emanations from a
spiritual source, they can be viewed as complementary. It is when we adopt
this complementary perspective that Schoenberg’s musical innovations (or
rather, his motivations toward them) form a coherent pattern.
In a letter to Kandinsky in 1912, Schoenberg proclaimed ‘a unity of musical space demanding an absolute and unitary perception’ (the italics were his own) to be his creative ideal. He associated this aim with a book that both he and Kandinsky worshipped at the time, Honoré de Balzac’s philosophical novel Séraphîta (1835), ‘perhaps the most glorious work in existence’, as the composer gushed to the artist. The long central chapter in Séraphîta is an exposition (fanciful rather than wholly accurate) of the teachings of the occult philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg, as related to Wilfrid, a man of 30, and Minna, a girl of 17, by an androgynous ethereal being with whom both are in love and who in the last chapter ascends to an angelic state. The two lovers, who are left to share the love they bore for the angel, are privileged to witness the assumption and are vouchsafed a vision of heaven:

Wilfrid and Minna now understood some of the mysterious words of the being who on earth had appeared to them under the form which was intelligible to each – Séraphîthus to one, Séraphîta to the other – seeing that here all was homogeneous. Light gave birth to melody, and melody to light; colours were both light and melody; motion was number endowed by the Word; in short, everything was at once sonorous, diaphanous, and mobile; so that, everything existing in everything else, extension knew no limits, and the angels could traverse it everywhere to the utmost depths of the infinite.

Many details in Balzac’s heavenly depiction found echo in Schoenberg’s musical theorising. Where in Balzac’s heaven ‘colours were both light and melody’, Schoenberg’s Harmonielehre contained a famous speculation on the possibility of composing ‘tone-colour melodies’ that would add another dimension of integration to his utopian musical universe, with timbre playing a role normally assigned to pitch. (The closest he came to realising it was in the third of the Five pieces for orchestra, Shawn’s lie-on-the-floor-and-close-your-eyes piece, where very slowly changing harmonies shimmer with dovetailed instrumental voicings that cause the timbres of sustained tones to shift subtly before one’s ears.)

But it was not just a vision that Schoenberg wanted to transmit. He also wanted to convey an experience: Wilfrid and Minna’s experience in ascending to Séraphîta’s abode, where ‘everything existed in everything else’. That is why he much preferred the term ‘pantonality’ to ‘atonality’ as a description of the ‘rootless’ music that followed from the emancipation of dissonance. He viewed pantonality very much the way Balzac had presented Séraphîthus/Séraphîta. Surmounting the major/minor dichotomy, voiding all distinctions between particular keys, was for him an achievement comparable to embodying androgyne or double gender. Pantonal music, like Balzac’s angel, was a perfected being. To his pupil Anton Webern he confided that pantonality, like androgyne, ‘has given rise to a higher race’!

Such a music embodied a spiritual worldview, a universal existential revelation. And it was this in addition to being a music of primal unconscious
emotional expression and a music of unprecedented organic integrity. Once again we face the fact that the most important thing that the emancipation of dissonance vouchsafed was not the expression of catastrophic emotions, though that was a spectacular byproduct, but the achievement of a fully integrated musical space, in which the ‘horizontal’ and the ‘vertical’ dimensions were made equivalent and everything musical could exist in everything else. Only by emancipating the dissonance, Schoenberg argued, could musical practice become fully adequate to the musical imagination. ‘Every musical configuration,’ he wrote,

every movement of tones has to be comprehended primarily as a mutual relation of sounds, of oscillatory vibrations, appearing at different places and times. To the imaginative and creative faculty, relations in the material sphere are as independent from directions or planes as material objects are, in their sphere, to our perceptive faculties. Just as our mind always recognizes, for instance, a knife, a bottle, or a watch, regardless of its position, and can reproduce it in the imagination in every possible position, even so a musical creator’s mind can operate subconsciously with a row of tones, regardless of their direction, regardless of the way in which a mirror might show the mutual relations, which remain a given quality.

Here we have another reason why the old ‘tonal’ constraints had to go: they impeded these ‘mutual relations.’ As long as they were in force, a harmonic progression would no longer mean the same thing (whether ‘syntactically’ or ‘semantically’) if it were played in reverse, or if all or some of its intervals were inverted.

Consider a G major triad followed by a C major triad. In the context of the key of C major, this progression can mean ‘the end’, as Beethoven thunderously insisted in the last coda to his Fifth Symphony. If reversed, however, it can mean anything but that. And if inverted, so that the G major triad becomes a C minor triad, and the C major triad an F minor triad, it would all of a sudden (in the same tonal context) lose its syntactical significance altogether and pick up instead a terrific freight of emotion. These trivial examples suffice to show that in ‘tonal’ music, musical space is neither reversible nor invertible without fundamental change of meaning (and it is precisely such distinctions, many are beginning to readmit, that make musical meaning esthesically available at all).

But thanks to the emancipation of dissonance, the horizontal and the vertical do indeed become interchangeable, and retrogressions or inversions are functionally (or rather functionlessly) equivalent. Musical space has been unified, or equalised in every dimension, so that musical objects and ideas (that is, basic shapes and their motivic derivatives) can now be ‘reproduced’, just as the mind can imagine them, ‘in every possible position, regardless of their direction’. The ‘basic operations’ of the twelve-note technique — inversion, retrogression, retrograde inversion — can now be seen in their true spiritual light as vouchsafing to mortal man a glimpse of Swedenborgian
heaven. Indeed, Schoenberg revealed in a letter to Nicolas Slonimsky that it was in the course of planning a symphony based on a grandiose unrealized project for an opera or oratorio on the subject of *Séraphita*, that in 1914 the first glimmer of the 12-note technique occurred to him.

At several points in his book Allen Shawn falls back on organicist metaphors (‘in his tonal phase he carried the basic seeds of each work in his mind just as he would later carry his twelve-tone row forms, allowing relationships and combinations to germinate in his unconscious’), these being second nature to academically trained composers in Schoenberg’s wake. At one point he even mentions *Séraphita*, but only, rather strangely, in connection with being short of stature (a characteristic, we learn, that Balzac’s Wilfred shared with Arnold Schoenberg and Allen Shawn). Nowhere does he show any real awareness of the roles that organicism and spiritualism played in the Schoenberghian evolution that he defends, preferring to base his advocacy on traits with which today’s listeners are more likely to sympathise.

There is nothing new – and nothing necessarily displeasing – about rethinking a historical figure in contemporary terms. ‘Deproblematising’ problematical figures, however, comes at a price. Reducing Schoenberg to an administrator of emotional shocks and a stimulator of esthetic reverie runs the risk of reducing his significance (and that of his music), eliminating what is most interesting about him, and most worthy of attention.

What is most interesting and most worthy of attention is also at times the most unpleasant, and I am not at all persuaded that Schoenberg’s cause is best served by averting our eyes or ears from the unpleasantness. Shawn exposes the sanitising nature of his project most when he attempts, at the end of his discussion of the opera *Die glückliche Hand*, to explain ‘why this and so many other works by Schoenberg repelled a good part of its audience’:

We need first to remind ourselves that music itself has a unique power to disturb, that the wellsprings of its power to delight are also the source of its power to appall. The evanescent character of its substance, the mystery of its internal laws to nonmusicians, the potentially disturbing metaphorical nature of sound production – which mimics speech, breathing, the beating of our hearts – and the incomprehensibility of the connection between the physical principles involved and the emotions aroused, all make for a situation in which the listener feels vulnerable and seeks familiarity and what he or she takes to be signposts of order.

This paragraph, and indeed the whole discussion of *Die glückliche Hand*, strikes me as a colossal evasion – one prefigured in Shawn’s discussion of *Verklärte Nacht*, Schoenberg’s most popular composition (perhaps his only popular composition). The Richard Dehmel poem on which Schoenberg based it deals with what the composer, in a programme note he wrote near the end of his life to accompany the first LP recording of the piece, called...
‘a staggeringly difficult human problem’. An unhappily-married woman confesses to her lover that she is carrying her unloved husband’s child. She fears that this will prevent their blissful if illicit union; but at the poem’s (and the music’s) turning point, ‘the voice of a man speaks’, as Schoenberg put it, ‘a man whose generosity is as sublime as his love’, and who promises to love her child as his own. That is what ‘transfigures’ the night; the music, formerly agitated and dissonant, dissolves in radiant, consonant warmth.

The poem, Schoenberg admitted in 1950, was one that ‘many a person today might call repellive’. He probably had in mind its bizarrely inverted (or perverted) theme of guilt over a legitimate but ‘inauthentic’ pregnancy. Today it would more likely be the poem’s misogyny (an immanently sinful modern Eve forgiven and redeemed by a godlike magnanimous man) that offends. In any event, Schoenberg claimed that his music performed a redemptive function similar to the man’s. ‘Because it does not illustrate any action or drama, but was restricted to portray nature and to express human emotions,’ he wrote, ‘it seems that, due to this attitude, my composition has gained qualities which can also satisfy even if one does not know what it illustrates; or in other words, it offers the possibility to be appreciated as “pure” music. Thus, perhaps, it can make you forget the poem.’

This was one of Schoenberg’s worst ideas, but like all of his ideas it has been hugely influential. He even wrote an odd essay called ‘On the relationship with the text’, in which he recalled once realising with a shock that he didn’t have any idea what the texts of some of his favourite Schubert songs were about. But then, having satisfied his curiosity, he concluded that he hadn’t been missing anything. ‘On the contrary, it appeared that, without knowing the poem, I had grasped the content, the real content, perhaps even more profoundly than if I had clung to the surface of the mere thoughts expressed in words.’ Predictably enough, he related this discovery to the Urpfante, finding in it further proof that ‘the work of art is like every other complete organism. It is so homogeneous in its composition that in every little detail it reveals its truest, inmost essence.’

One may doubt this. (Would Schoenberg have allowed that just by knowing the poem one could grasp ‘the truest, inmost essence’? It is, by his own claim, just as organic a part of the whole.) And one may deplore the consequences of the idea as well. Take Die glückliche Hand, which I do indeed find appalling, and not for any of the reasons that Shawn allows. Its text, by Schoenberg, so bellows its misogyny as almost to seem intended as an illustration of Otto Weininger’s twisted treatise Sex and character, which carried essentialised notions of destructive female hysteria and creative male rationality (the types represented in the two halves of Verklärte Nacht) to their furthest extreme. Women, Weininger wrote, were ‘logically insane’; their often admired ‘intuition’ he attributed to ‘a lack of definiteness in their
thinking capacity’, which ‘gives the widest scope to vague associations’. Only submission to an anchoring man can curb their destructive force by symbolically killing them. The most obvious musical offshoot from Weininger was Hindemith’s early opera, Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen, or Mörder, Hope of Women, to a text by Oskar Kokoschka, the title of which marked out the road – the only road – to female redemption.

Schoenberg actually referred to Weininger in his Harmonielehre as a deep thinker, without making any specific reference to his crackpot ideas. But as David Schiff pointed out in a thought-provoking article in The New York Times on Schoenberg and sex, Schoenberg’s two expressionistic operas furnish, between them, another representation of Weininger’s dichotomy of gender, and a lurid one.

Though often represented (by Shawn, among many others) as a meditation on the universal human condition, the musical content of Erwartung, effortlessly composed in a matter of weeks in the late summer of 1909, is (in Schiff’s words) ‘appropriately feminine in the Weiningerian sense: tingling and spasmodic, sensual, without structure or direction’. In Die glückliche Hand, costively composed over a three-year period from 1910 to 1913, Schoenberg set out to fashion the masculine counterpart, the epitome of the strong silent type (called, simply, The Man in the libretto), shabbily betrayed by his Woman, who runs off with her effete, decadent (that is, feminised, possibly Judaised) friend the Gentleman (both silent, mimed roles) and draws The Man, in futile pursuit, from his natural medium, the realm of unfettered ideas. She insults him, even hurls boulders at him. At the very beginning we see The Man suffering in a more metaphorical way from her grip, beset by a catlike fantastic monster that has sunk its teeth into his neck to paralyse him.

The Man is infinitely and instinctively creative: without the benefit of training, he fashions an exquisite diadem at a single magnificent stroke. He speaks in lurchy, barely articulate ejaculations, set to curiously clunky music that in its effort to avoid fluid femininity slips at times into rather conventional patterns like imitative counterpoint and ostinatos. Schoenberg’s effort to fashion a representation of the eternal male, with his superior mental and ethical equipage, has to be counted a failure if for no other reason than, compared with the fantastically imaginative (if suspiciously ‘intuitive’) music of Erwartung, it sounds like a stylistic backslide. And its bathos is unendurable. If the work were better known, the line that Schoenberg wrote to accompany The Man’s forging of the diadem would be a classic of unintended humour among English-speaking (well, Yinglish-speaking) connoisseurs: So schafft man Schmuck, ‘That’s how you create jewels’. Serves him right.

Can one attend to this self-pitying farrago with a straight face? Shawn writes with unironic reverence about its ‘breathtaking newness and “visionary” character’ and its ‘peaks of intense complexity and dissonance,’ admires
its ‘unflinching’ idealism, and enthusiastically describes Schoenberg’s detailed lighting scenario, the opera’s most obviously innovative aspect. He again lavishes praise on the ‘disturbing’ qualities of the music – ‘the density of thinking of a Bach, Beethoven, or Mozart was being revived and the listener was at the mercy of music as demanding and therefore threatening as the work of those masters, but now employing hitherto transitional, marginal, or outlawed combinations of rhythms and tones’ – but never once confronts the disturbing aspects of the text. Instead there are some murky lucubrations on the essential Jewishness of Schoenberg’s music (to ‘help account for the hostility and incomprehension engendered by his work’) that would have surprised me less in a 60-year-old publication from Joseph Goebbels’s Reichsmusikkammer. And even here, let it be noted, Shawn is willing to speak only about style, not meaning.

I am tempted to say that only a composer could be this blind. But not only composers have their eyes wide shut. That most musicians and music lovers are inclined, or feel constrained, to turn a blind eye on the morally or politically dubious aspects of serious music – and thus imply that the only legitimate object of praise or censure in art is the quality of its making – represents the ultimate triumph of the poietic fallacy, and the best measure of the counterproductive mischief that it can make.

Looking at Schoenberg through the prism of the poietic fallacy makes it possible, even at this incredibly late date, to contend (and even believe) that the only thing militating against the widespread acceptance of his art is its novelty. On the contrary: its greatest obstacle is the exceedingly old-fashioned, even outmoded, esthetic – compounded of historical determinism, organicism, occultism, solipsism – that so obviously informs it, along with a host of hoary elitist and sexist clichés, and a megadose of the jargon of authenticity.

Schoenberg’s advocates, especially the college teachers among them, love to point to their students’ responses (“unprejudiced”, they always claim, but no such claim by a figure of authority can be believed) as evidence of Schoenberg’s perennial contemporaneity. Shawn claims that ‘Schoenberg particularly moves, excites, and amazes young listeners’, while Susan McClary, a professor at UCLA, reports (according to Marc Swed, the music critic of The Los Angeles Times) that ‘among her students, the idealistic fans at the radical edges of pop music’ – she specifically mentions kids in Nine Inch Nails T-shirts – ‘are most readily drawn to his uncompromising music and revolutionary spirit as soon as they are exposed to it’.

I have seen that reaction, too. But just as often I have seen my students wrinkle their noses and say ‘ick’ when forced to listen to Verklärte Nacht, and I owe my sensitivity to the sexist message being purveyed under cover of universalism in Schoenberg’s expressionist works in considerable measure to
my students – and not only to the women among them. That rebellious adolescents feel a kinship with Schoenbergian heroics, in any event, does not seem to me to be the most persuasive case one could be making on his behalf. That sort of appreciation testifies reliably to a shopworn romanticism.

Rather than the ones that smell like teen spirit, the Schoenberg works that seem to me destined to survive (or maybe just the ones I would like to see survive) are the ones in which he showed his ironic, playfully inventive side: *Pierrot Lunaire*, first of all, and (from the early period) the First String Quartet and the Chamber Symphony; but also a number of the early 12-note works like the Suite for Piano op.25 or the Septet Suite op.29 (the piece that knocked Stravinsky’s socks off and sent him down the serial road). Some of the late ‘American’ works – the Fourth Quartet, the String Trio – produce such euphoria in the analysing mind as to carry over into aural experience forever after; but I am not at all certain, Shawn’s strenuous assurances notwithstanding, that the aural joy would come about without the earlier mental exertions. For me, though, they are definitely keepers.

The unbearably self-important operas, even *Moses und Aron*, belong one and all in the rapidly growing museum of rotten 20th-century ideas. There they can be inspected, and even admired for their ‘fierce integrity’ and their ‘transcendent mastery’, without all the baggage of Heritage and Obligation that oppresses listeners today, thanks to well-meaning but misguided advocates, even Allen Shawn. And let the kitsch component be recognised as such, especially the pretentious Variations for orchestra op.31, with its screaming references to the musical cipher B–A–C–H proclaiming Germanic hegemony, and the abominably banal *Survivor from Warsaw*, with its Erich von Stroheim Nazi and its trumped up Triumph of the Human Spirit.

Above all, let us drop the pretence that the history of Schoenberg’s stylistic evolution represented in nuce that of the whole 20th century, recently voiced by Anthony Tommasini in *The New York Times*, when he described the ending of the *Gurrelieder* as ‘a nostalgic but unavoidable farewell to the tonal era, one last embrace before the door is shut’. The embrace was real enough, but of course the door was never shut. All that was shut were the minds of musicians still in thrall to the 19th-century musical politics of the New German School, of which Schoenberg was the 20th century’s outstanding representative.

When all of that is done; when Schoenberg is placed in proper perspective as one of the 20th century’s most powerful musical minds, but also one of its most eccentric; and when the poietic fallacy at last gives way to a view of ‘serious’ music that takes adequate account of its function as a communicative medium, then such music (Schoenberg’s, to be sure, but far more importantly, our own contemporary concert music) may once again – perhaps, eventually – become one of the arts that matter.