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Wittgenstein, Modern Music, and the Myth of Progress

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Georg Henrik von Wright was not only the first interpreter of Wittgenstein, arguing that Spengler's work had reinforced and helped Wittgenstein to articulate his view of life, but he was also the first to consider seriously that Wittgenstein's attitude towards his times makes him unique among the great philosophers, that the philosophical problems that Wittgenstein was struggling with, indeed his view of the very nature of philosophy, were somehow connected with "the way people live", that is, with features of our culture and civilization.

In this essay, I would like to manifest the inspiration and courage which I have drawn from von Wright's insistence that trying to understand Wittgenstein in relation to his times is a philosophical task in its own right, not to be dismissed as either idle or irrelevant, in probing a relatively obscure region in Wittgenstein's thought: his relation to the music of his times. It is a topic on which von Wright, and most other prominent Wittgenstein interpreters, have said very little, but it is also a subject, as Wittgenstein himself attested, "so important to him that he felt without it he was sure to be misunderstood" (Fann 1969, 67–68). The purpose of the present essay is to re-contextualize my recent study of Wittgenstein's remarks on modern music (Guter 2015) in Von Wright's overarching outlook on Wittgenstein's philosophy in relation to its time, thereby suggesting why and how these intriguing remarks are integral and conducive to an overall understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy.

It is very clear that in Wittgenstein's mind music has always been intimately and irrevocably related to "the way people live". It took some time for Wittgenstein to develop to the point where this idea became explicit in his writings. At any rate, it is in full bloom by his middle period, when we find him asking, "Could *one* reason be given at all, why the theory of harmony is the way it is? And, first and foremost, *must* such a reason be given?" and then answering, "*It is*

here and it is part of our entire life" (Wittgenstein, 2000, MS157a, 24–26; my translation, my emphasis). This notion is even more pronounced in his late period, in particular during his final breakthrough years (1946–1951), when he focused intensely on the idea that music is physiognomic, intransitively transparent to human life, drawing closely, as Garry Hagberg puts it, to "the preconditions, and the lived, embodied realities, of musical intelligibility" (Hagberg 2011, 402). Indeed for Wittgenstein, music has always been a "master simile", as it were, for anything which is fluid, non-mechanical, context-laden, incalculable, and indeterminate in language—first and foremost, expression. In Wittgenstein's later writings in particular, thinking about language as music became part and parcel of not only his multifarious considerations of meaning, understanding, and aspects, but also, and importantly so, his treatment of the experience of meaning.

For the later Wittgenstein, a musical gesture is transparent in the sense that it is already given to us with a familiar physiognomy, already internally related to our world of thoughts and feelings. And so we find in Wittgenstein's later writings the need to make sense of the conviction that "understanding music is a manifestation of human life" (1998, 80; compare 1953, 143 par. 527), that it is a measuring rod by which a culture is to be gauged, enabled by our capacity to make increasingly nuanced comparisons between multiform human practices as we chart the unexpected topography of the resemblances that give unity to a culture's ways of life.

It is noteworthy that von Wright's reading of Wittgenstein in relation to his times is emblematic of von Wright's own approach to the idea of culture. Both philosophers approached the idea of culture by way of a critique of Western civilization, its scientific rationality and the latter's repercussions on life—"a diagnosis of our times," as von Wright called it (Wright 1993, 3-4)—whose pessimistic overtones resonate in sympathy with Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* (Spengler 1939). Wittgenstein found many real, significant thoughts in that book. He wrote: "Much, perhaps most of [Spengler's *Decline*], is completely in touch with what I have often thought myself" (Wittgenstein 2003, 25; see Wittgenstein 1998, 16). Von Wright's interest in Spengler's philosophical ideas spanned much of his career. He wrote: "It is […] a great pity that the prophet and quasi-historian Spengler overshadowed the philosopher Spengler that few people seem aware of the fruitfulness and relevance of his philosophic thoughts" (Wright 1989, 844).

Significantly, the influence of Spengler oriented both philosophers toward allying the idea of culture with human nature, albeit without reducing cultural modes of existence to natural

ones. This essentially Romantic idea means that the human spirit, unspoiled by an excessively sophisticated, contrived tinkering of the human intellect, can be seen as a natural force of life, which promotes the creation and observance of shared human practices and customs that are deeply meaningful to us. Von Wright saw this idea as the very essence of humanism: "Man has a 'nature', characteristic of man as man, and it is his inalienable right and profoundest destiny to try in life to actualize this nature as fully as possible" (quoted in Tranøy 1989, 495). This is accomplished through the acquisition of skills, habit, tendencies, and preferences, which enable us to observe a way of life, develop an aesthetic taste or a religious attitude. Thus, the vitality of a culture, its cohesion and strength as a spiritual force in our lives, hinges upon the significance of such uncontrived cultural sensibilities and skills to our observance of a way of life. This is a cause for lamentation about the deterioration of culture, the loss of its vitality, for both Wittgenstein and von Wright, but also an occasion for instigating a critical task concerning the idea of progress, which we find explicitly in von Wright's writings, but also, as I suggest below, in Wittgenstein's remarks on modern music, albeit implicitly.

Von Wright pointed out that Wittgenstein cannot be bundled in any straightforward way with what we are in the habit of calling "conservatism": "Wittgenstein was much more anxious to combat and distance himself from a prevailing climate of opinion than to work for the restoration of one which was already fading. He is as little nostalgic in his thinking as are Dostoevsky and Nietzsche" (Wright 1990, 52–53). His attitude is exactly the opposite of that of the man who seeks to preserve what is or even to restore what no longer is. He believed in neither a brilliant future nor the good old days. Yet "the philosopher who wrote 'I destroy, I destroy, I destroy'", said von Wright, "was not alien to the thought that something new could be built once the heap of rubble of a decaying culture had been cleared away" (1990, 53). His is an attitude opposed no less to the conservative outlook than that of the progressives of the usual kind.

I would like to pursue this more nuanced, subtle mode of reading Wittgenstein when considering his remarks on music. That is, I would like to resist the temptation to underscore Wittgenstein's notoriously conservative taste in music, and even to extrapolate theoretically from it (see, for example, Szabados 2014). At the same time, I would like also to resist the temptation to reprimand him for it, thereby suggesting that his philosophy actually calls out modern music (see, for example, Hagberg 2011).

Wittgenstein's impatience with the modern music of his time is well documented. He suggested that Gustav Mahler's symphonies might be worthless and pondered whether the composer should have burned them or else "done himself violence" (Wittgenstein 1998, 76); he thought Alban Berg's music scandalous (McGuinness 1988, 33); and he refused to enter a concert hall to attend a performance of selections from Richard Strauss's *Salome* (McGuinness 1988, 124). David Pinsent, Wittgenstein's friend and companion during his first sojourn in Cambridge in the years 1912–1913, noted in his diary the vehement arguments between Wittgenstein and his fellow students in Cambridge concerning modern music (Monk 1990, 78). Finally, in a sketch for a foreword to a planned book entitled *Philosophical Remarks*, Wittgenstein admitted that he approaches "what is called modern music with the greatest mistrust (without understanding its language)" (1998, 8).

Such an attitude may certainly leave one somewhat frustrated, searching for where and why this great mind could have gone so wrong in this regard. But this response actually borders on some sort of ad hominem fallacy. In the last analysis, the real, indeed much more interesting question before us is not, "What music ought Wittgenstein have appreciated given the kinds of philosophical ideas he maintained at a given stage in his career?" but, rather, "What were his philosophical reasons and purpose for delineating musical experience in the way he did?" The first question presupposes too much: that there is no point in raising the other question. But this is unwarranted as it stands. So the other question deserves a fair shot. Actually, it is far more reasonable to expect that Wittgenstein will offer interesting reasons for taking the stance he did.

To fully understand Wittgenstein's critical attitude towards the modern music of his time, we need to consider as a starting point a relatively obscure episode: Wittgenstein's brief encounter with the music theory of Heinrich Schenker, Spengler's comrade-in-arms in musicology (Almén 1996). It occurred approximately between 1930 and 1933, in parallel with his encounter with Spengler's work (Guter 2004, 2011, and 2015). Schenker's theory was introduced to Wittgenstein in conversations with his nephew, the musicologist Felix Salzer, and there are a number of references to his ideas in the writings and lectures of Wittgenstein's middle period.

Schenker provided a formidable theory of musical decline. According to Schenker, all works of music (in particular all masterworks) are, in a sense, extended commentaries on the major triad, which Schenker dubbed "the chord of nature". Schenker's theory embodies an

attempt to describe musical thinking itself: it describes how we keep this "privileged formation" in mind over a period of time and how we interpret configurations of notes as contributing to the continuity of that cognition. Any musical work that digresses from the common practice of harmony (hence failing to demonstrate the kind of hierarchy sought out by Schenkerian analysis) is patently rejected by Schenker as unsuccessful, superficial, or altogether musically nonsensical depending on the severity of the digression. Irreverence towards the laws of tonal effect, among performers and composers alike, reflected, so he believed, a loss of musical instinct for the inner complexities of the masterworks of Western music, which in turn hindered the musician's almost sacred mission to provide access to the world of human experience contained in such masterworks (Snarrenberg 1997, 145–150).

In the most important reference to Schenker, which occurs in the *Big Typescript*, Wittgenstein actually fuses his critique of Spengler's dogmatic use of the idea of an *Urbild* with Schenker's analogous theoretical dogmatism concerning the idea of an *Ursatz* (Wittgenstein 2005, 204; 2000, TS 213, 259v). The upshot of this twofold critique is a willingness by Wittgenstein to entertain Schenker's view of music as a useful heuristic device that can be laid alongside the musical instances under consideration as a measure, rendering them surveyable, "not as a preconception to which everything must conform" (Wittgenstein 1998, 30).

It is worthwhile to say a few words in this context about the relation between Schenker's theory and the conservative views of an older Viennese music critic, Eduard Hanslick. A connection between Hanslick's musical formalism and Wittgenstein's remarks on music—in particular those penned earlier in his philosophical development—has been suggested by Hanne Appelqvist (née Ahonen) and subsequently also by Béla Szabados (Ahonen 2005; Appelqvist 2008, 2010; Szabados 2006, 2014). Hanslick's point in *On the Musically Beautiful* is that the objective properties of music, rather than people's subjective responses to it, constitute the proper concern of musical aesthetics, which Hanslick rendered as a science (1986, 33). Appelqvist maintains that Hanslick's musical formalism should be seen as a view that treats the mastery of musical rules as a criterion of musical understanding—a view which accords with Wittgenstein's position, both early and late. Szabados maintains that Hanslick actually put forth an essentialist theory about the properties and value of music, which renders the early Wittgenstein, but not the late (post-*Tractatus*), as a musical formalist of sorts. As things stand, the exact nature of Hanslick's formalism remains a matter of some scholarly controversy. As

Nicholas Cook admits, it is "one of the ubiquitously misunderstood concepts in the literature of music" (2007, 50). This impinges on the status of the Hanslick-Wittgenstein conjecture, which as a matter of fact enjoys no direct, unequivocal textual support in Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* or letters.

Be that as it may, it is clear that Schenker's theorizing owes much to the basic conceptual framework of Hanslick's *On the Musically Beautiful.* While Schenker gradually distanced himself from Hanslick's positivist agenda, he shared Hanslick's view of the compositional process and its importance for the understanding of music, and also Hanslick's approach to emotional expression in music—that it must be understood in terms of the music's objective properties. Schenker's assertion that "the theory of harmony presents itself to me as a purely spiritual universe, a system of ideally moving forces, born of Nature or of art" (1954, xxv) distinctly echoes Hanslick's formalism (compare Hanslick 1986, 151). According to Cook, "Schenker's theories as a whole can be seen as attempting to supply the explanations and demonstrations that Hanslick had called for in [*On the Musically Beautiful*], and to make visible the connections between musical elements to which Hanslick referred" (1989, 420; see 2007, 48-62).

Yet how should we relate Wittgenstein's direct, even if succinct responses to Schenker's theory to the proposed Hanslick-Wittgenstein conjecture? While I cannot do justice here to the complexity of this issue, I would like to make the following suggestions. First, regarding the historical facts. Felix Salzer reported that Wittgenstein's judgment of Schenker's view of music "was not entirely negative" (Guter 2004, 194). That in itself would make a rather bland reaction from one who is presumed to be a Hanslickian musical formalist. It is more probable that Wittgenstein's susceptibility to Schenker's theory had much more to do with Wittgenstein's pronounced, well-documented interest in Spengler's mode of thinking, as I pointed out above, than with some earlier exposure to Hanslick's view of music.

Second, regarding Wittgenstein's actual remarks on Schenker. Wittgenstein's implied critique of Schenker's theory in the *Big Typescript* is clearly directed against its presumed essentialism. This is in line with Wittgenstein's general approach to the very idea of 'prototype' (*Urbild*), which he found in Goethe's morphological method. Wittgenstein denied the status of primal phenomena as common ancestors to all species (in any developmental, historical, or genetic sense) and restricted the notion of *Urbild* to a mere regulative idea, the primacy of which

is due to its heuristic use in providing the "logical space" for all possible relevant instances (Guter 2015). This made Wittgenstein highly critical of dogmatic (namely, essentialist, metaphysical, and illusory, in Wittgenstein's eyes) uses of 'prototypes', such as Schenker's *Ursatz*. Jettisoning the notion of formalism as essentialism, Wittgenstein's preference to render Schenker's view of music as a useful heuristic device that can be laid alongside the musical instances under consideration as a measure seems to preserve Appelqvist's overarching emphasis on the mastery of musical rules as a criterion for musical understanding. Yet for Wittgenstein, "considering the piece in Schenker's way" is only one possible criterion for musical understanding alongside other natural reactions which enable one to distinguish between someone who hears with understanding and someone who merely hears (2000, MS 153b, 60v-61r). This very inclusion actually goes against Schenker's formalist conviction that structural hearing of the sort promoted by his theory is the prime—if not the sole proper—manifestation of musical understanding.

In the remainder of this essay I suggest that Wittgenstein's criteria for musical understanding are significantly broader, heterogenous and dynamic than this, and furthermore, that Wittgenstein actually transcended Schenker's formalist framework by critically entertaining the striking philosophical possibility of good modern music. It is precisely in these philosophically decisive moments that I see connections between Wittgenstein and von Wright.

Wittgenstein's most direct expression of his view of modern music occurs in a curious diary entry from January 27, 1931. It discloses the complexity of Wittgenstein's attitude towards what von Wright later dubbed "the myth of progress". I will use some of von Wright's ideas in order to elucidate and amplify my interpretation of Wittgenstein's view. In this diary entry Wittgenstein wrote:

> The music of all periods [the music of the past] always appropriates certain maxims of the good and the right of its own time. In this way we recognize the principles of Keller in Brahms etc etc. And for that reason [good] music, which is being conceived today or that has been conceived recently, which is therefore modern, seems absurd; for if it corresponds to any of the maxims that are articulated today, then it must be rubbish. This sentence is not easy to understand but it is so: no one is astute enough to formulate today what is correct, and *all*

> formulations, maxims, which are articulated are nonsense [*Unsinn*]. The truth would sound *entirely* paradoxical to all people. And the composer who feels this within him must confront with this feeling everything that is [now] articulated and therefore [his music] must appear by the present standards absurd, timid [*blödsinnig*]. But not absurd in a dressed-up sense (for after all, this is basically what corresponds to the present attitude) but *vacuous* [*Nichtssagend*]. Labor is an example of this where he created something really significant as in some few pieces. (Wittgenstein 1999, 38; translated by Eran Guter and Nimrod Reitman)

Wittgenstein begins his diary entry with a certain idea of cultural cohesion: music shows an affinity with other human practices and cultural artifacts of its period. The recognition, for example, of the principles of the Swiss author Gottfried Keller in the music of Johannes Brahms is familiar from Wittgenstein's various lectures on aesthetics in the 1930s. The example clearly pertains to the cultural conditions for musical understanding and intelligibility, but also to the deepening of Wittgenstein's philosophical use of as- and aspect-phrasing —his careful attention to the activity of characterization and to the varieties of techniques of making illuminating comparisons to draw in significance, to become acquainted with something (see Floyd, forthcoming).

According to Wittgenstein, we draw such similarities between the style of composer and the style of a poet or a painter who lived at the same time so that we can hear the composer's music with understanding (Wittgenstein 2016, 6a 9:31). The point of drawing such similarities for such a purpose is precisely that the two artists belonged to and shared the same culture (Wittgenstein 1966, 32 n.). For Wittgenstein, the hidden connection, which is suggested by the pairing of Brahms and Keller, cannot be asserted independently of the actual hearing or playing of Brahms's music with the understanding that such a pairing brings about (Wittgenstein 1967, 166). Understanding the music of Brahms may consist in finding a form of verbal expression which we conceive as the verbal counterpoint of the music (for example, "Brahms is like Keller" or "find Keller in Brahms!"). However, Wittgenstein's point is that "what happened when the understanding came was that I found the word which seemed to sum it up" (1967, 167; compare 1998, 59–60).

It is instructive to see that Wittgenstein actually had a notion of an ideal of progress in the arts, which goes beyond the classic idea, which von Wright pointed out in his essay on "The Myth of Progress" (Wright 1993, 202–228), that progress in the arts amounts to liberation from the constraints imposed by serving the purpose either of entertaining the public or glorifying the powerful. Wittgenstein conceded this conventional notion, of course, but he evidently also thought that progress in the arts consists in a movement towards the perfection of man, an ideal which von Wright attributes chiefly to the sphere of morality. For the later Wittgenstein, ethics and aesthetics may not be one and the same, yet nonetheless each exhibits a distinct quest for that "reaction in which people are in touch with one another [*sich finden*]" (Wittgenstein 1980, 154 par. 874), for being "mutually attuned top to bottom", to use Stanley Cavell's phrase (Cavell 1982, 32).

Crucially, Wittgenstein's notion of progress in the arts exhibits a unique stance transcending the progressive/conservative divide, which von Wright observed in general. It is clearly not merely nostalgic, pessimistic, and conservative, as we can see in a related passage on the music of the future, again drawn from a diary entry, which Wittgenstein penned just a few months earlier. There we see Wittgenstein reiterating the ideal of human perfection in music in terms of simplicity, transparency, and nakedness:

> I shouldn't be surprised if the music of the future were in unison [*einstimmig*]. Or is that only because I cannot clearly imagine several voices? Anyway, I can't imagine that the old *large* forms (string quartet, symphony, oratorio, etc.) will be able to play any role at all. If something comes it will have to be—I think—simple, *transparent*. In a certain sense, naked. Or will this apply only to a certain race, only to *one* kind of music (?) (2003, 49)

However, for Wittgenstein, the music of the future is patently not modern music, not music of the present day, and his idea strongly envisions the beginning of a new cultural epoch (compare Wittgenstein 1998, 73). The influence of Spengler's *Decline of the West* is unmistakable. For Spengler, the future always transcends the current epoch and it is always marked by a return to the simplest, most basic expression of life. Wittgenstein's suggestion that the music of the future might not be a continuation of the currently predominant, culturally entrenched musical formats,

which embody a complexity of voices, can be related to various passages in Spengler. As Jacques Bouveresse pointed out, it would be "a gross exaggeration to say that Wittgenstein did not believe in the possibility of improving things. What is true is simply that he did not believe in the possibility of improving through continuing development in the current direction" (Bouveresse 2011, 310).

The sort of cultural cohesion, exemplified by our intransitive understanding of Keller in Brahms, wherein music interacts with "the rhythm of our language, of our thinking and feeling" (Wittgenstein 1998, 59–60), is precisely what seems to have been lost, in Wittgenstein's view, in the transition to the modern. For Wittgenstein, understanding is intransitive, if what I understand (in a picture or in a melody) cannot be translated into a different expression. In that sense, it is autonomous. For Wittgenstein, understanding a melody is a prime example of intransitive understanding (1974, 79). Modern music, that is, music which is being conceived amid "a dissolution of the resemblances which unite a [culture's] ways of life" (Wright 1982, 116–117), is bound to seem deficient or absurd, according to Wittgenstein.

It is crucial to carefully delineate the absurdity, or rather absurdities, involved here. At the heart of this diary entry we find Wittgenstein's conviction that the transition to the modern shows itself in some sort of constraint—the inability to conceptualize a transition away from the kind of cultural cohesion epitomized by the "Keller-in-Brahms" example. There is something to be grasped, for sure, but, Wittgenstein maintains, we are not astute enough to conceptualize it. The kind of cleverness which we seem to lack, according to Wittgenstein, is a matter not of mental capacity but rather of education and tradition—an acquired ability to comprehend cultural codes (compare Wittgenstein 1966, 25–26). We have become constrained by an incommensurability between ourselves and the past, hence we arrive at a paradox: even if we knew the "truth", we probably would be unable to comprehend it. Wittgenstein's irony is glaring when he writes that "the truth would sound *entirely* paradoxical to all people".

For Wittgenstein, this condition produces a bifurcation and a conceptual tension in modern music, and results in two sorts of music which correspond to two sorts of cultural absurdity. There is music which consists in a constraint on seeing that we do not comprehend (and is hence *unsinnig*, or nonsensical), and there is another sort of music which consists in a constraint on seeing what we do not comprehend, on seeing through (and hence is *blödsinnig*, or timid, diffident).

The first sort of modern music corresponds, according to Wittgenstein, to the nonsensical maxims and formulations which are actually articulated in contemporary (Western) life. Most probably, Wittgenstein refers here to the predominant maxims of scientific-technological progress, for which he had the deepest mistrust, and not just because of its impact on the disappearance of the arts (Wittgenstein 1998, 8, 64). As von Wright pointed out, the hallmark of the great confusion about the nature of progress is "a tendency to transform questions of the value of ends into questions of the value of means (to those ends)" (Wright 1993, 217). Such was indeed the case with those who, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, claimed to emancipate dissonance in the name of progress, as if there were absolute, natural, necessary value in a relentless tinkering with harmony. Wittgenstein clearly had no patience for their senseless musical gesticulations, which Schenker's theory explains as being symptomatic of these composers' inability to bind their empty sonorities together as elaborations of a single chord. Thus, for example, Schenker accused Richard Strauss of trying to mask the primitive design of his music with heavy orchestration, with noise and polyphonic clatter, and of resorting to vulgar, extramusical narratives in order to solve problems of musical continuity. For both Schenker and Wittgenstein, such progressive music was plain "rubbish," that is, something which, insofar as it presents itself as nonmusical clatter, is not interesting even from a merely technical perspective—indeed an "attractive absurdity" for all the wrong reasons.

The other kind of modern music consists in denouncing such nonsensical maxims and formulations, but it ends up being vacuous, or vacant—absurd, for sure, but only because it cannot pass as absurd in the other, "dressed-up" sense which enjoys some sort of social acceptance. Such vacuous modern music bespeaks shortsightedness. It gropes for something that it cannot express. This is the genuine, albeit limited—in a sense, myopic—significance which Wittgenstein attached in this diary entry to some of the works of the blind organist Josef Labor, who was a protégé of the Wittgenstein family.

The example of Labor—whose modest bust still stands quite unnoticed across the street from the Konzerthaus Wien, a solemn witness to fame long since passed—portrays the problematic, somewhat tragic situation of a composer who shuns the illusion and perils of progress and yet is patently barred from artistic greatness. Wittgenstein's conception of vacuous modern music corresponds both to Spengler's worry that when a culture enters its final phases (civilization), artists simply work with the hollow forms of the old culture without understanding

its essence, and to Schenker's analogous worry concerning the compositional practice of classicist epigones. For Wittgenstein, ideas, including musical ideas, can get worn out and be no longer usable. In fact, he heard this from Labor himself (Wittgenstein 1998, 24).

For Wittgenstein, vacuous modern music is the product of reproductive artists; it is first and foremost evidence of a lack of genius, hence a lack of character and of courage (43–44). The adjective "timid" (*blödsinnig*), which Wittgenstein used to characterize such music-making, captures this precisely. "In these times", Wittgenstein wrote, "strong characters simply turn away from the field of the arts & towards other things" (8). The opposition of such a composer to the predominant contemporary maxims is commendable, but it is ultimately flaccid; it lacks "connection with life & death" (44; compare 43). And it exacts a heavy social price: as modern, it is bound to appear stupid.

In the final analysis, Wittgenstein rejected both the conservative composer's noble yet vacuous rehash of old forms and the progressive composer's base contrapuntal tinkering with harmony, considering each to be symptomatic of musical decline. In this, his stance resonates with Schenker's analogous distinction between the compositional fallacies accepted by the progressive and the reactionary composers of his time.

Yet Wittgenstein's text, significantly, does not give in to a false dichotomy between the merely bad and the vacuous. As we have seen, the 1931 diary entry begins by asserting what "good music" means in the present context: good music is good by virtue of its being emblematic of its time, as demonstrated in its affinity with other human practices and cultural artifacts of its period, and the intransitive understanding which ensues from it. It ends by pointing out the significance of at least certain forms of vacuous modern music: such music may embody an awareness of our built-in contemporary inability to conceive modern music that is good in that particular sense.

Thus there is yet another kind of modern music to be entertained—good modern music—and a corresponding absurdity of a very different sort. For Wittgenstein, good modern music is, paradoxically, the philosophical afterimage, as it were, of what would perhaps forever remain as that which has not yet been gained: a modern music which is courageous (rather than being merely outrageous or timorous) in its striving to penetrate through what appears to be the dissolution of the resemblances which unite this culture's ways of life, by rendering this condition expressible and intransitively understandable.

Wittgenstein's genuine worry that "no one is astute enough to formulate today what is correct" resounds strongly with Spengler's similar worry that the philosophers of his day did not have any real standing in actual life, that they had not acquired the necessary reflective understanding of the time or its many built-in limitations, which philosophizing in a time of civilization requires (Spengler 1939, 42, vol. 1). Wittgenstein's point about composers of his day is that given that no principle can coherently be articulated amid the dissolution of the resemblances that give unity to a culture's ways of life, music that could express the inarticulate would be patently incomprehensible.

The idea of good modern music, that is, music which is truly adequate to its time, the time of civilization in Spengler's sense, is thus patently problematic for Wittgenstein. As an artistic project, such music needs to consist in an artistic afterimage of a wholesale rejection of the internal relations which hold together musical gesture and human life. Yet from Wittgenstein's philosophical view, from his view of life, one can neither permit nor deny such an afterimage. And indeed we find Wittgenstein uneasily steering between Scylla and Charybdis in his complex remarks on the music of Gustav Mahler, the only quintessentially modern composer who was apparently significant enough in Wittgenstein's eyes to be worthy of attention.

Needless to say, Wittgenstein did not like Mahler's music, yet he nonetheless attached deep philosophical significance to his art. Taste had nothing to do with this. "If [a symphony by Mahler] is a work of art", Wittgenstein wrote, "it is one of a *totally* different sort. (But this observation itself is actually Spenglerian.)" (Wittgenstein 1998, 17). Mahler's music clearly did not belong to the category of "vacuous modern music", as did Josef Labor's. Nor did it simply belong to the category of "bad modern music", together with the compositions of Richard Strauss and Max Reger. Strikingly, Mahler's music also did not belong to "the music of the future" in Wittgenstein's sense.

In a diary entry, which bears Schenker's influence, Wittgenstein wrote:

> When for a change the later ones of the great composers write in simple [variant: clear] harmonic progressions [variant: relations], they show allegiance to their ancestral mother. Especially in these moments (where the others are most moving) Mahler seems especially unbearable to me & I always want to say then: but you have only heard this from the others, that isn't (really) yours. (2003, 93)

For Wittgenstein, there is no genuine transparency or nakedness even in Mahler's simple modes of expression. Rather, for Wittgenstein, Mahler was a riddle, a limit case in the history of Western music. "You would need to know a good deal about music, its history and development, to understand him," he said (Rhees 1984, 71). Mahler exemplifies in Wittgenstein's eyes a grand failure to produce music which is adequate to the time of civilization. He reprimanded Mahler for his lack of courage to become what he could and perhaps should have been. With regard to Mahler's ultimate fault, Wittgenstein wrote:

> Whoever is unwilling to know himself is writing a kind of deceit. Whoever is unwilling to plunge into himself, because it is too painful, naturally remains with his writing on the surface. (Whoever wants only the next best thing, can achieve only the surrogate of a good thing.) (2000, MS 120, 72v [1937]; my translation)

Yet here Wittgenstein faced, precisely, the problem of the incommensurability of values, which he had already introduced in the 1931 diary entry on modern music. The immediate charge of self-deception leads to a pronouncement of an acute problem: the inability to distinguish what is genuine ("valuable") from what is false ("worthless"). This problem, which (Wittgenstein fears) afflicts his own thinking and writing as well, pertains to the cultural presuppositions for making such a distinction in the first place.

In a passage written only three years before he died, Wittgenstein linked his own predicament with that of Mahler. He wrote: "If today's circumstances are really so different, from what they once were, that you cannot compare your work with earlier works in respect of its genre, then you equally cannot compare its value with that of the other work. I myself am constantly making the mistake under discussion" (1998, 77). Ultimately, the specter of good modern music arises due to our inability to tell, as Yuval Lurie has aptly put it, "whether the spiritual progression of our culture is still continuing (and it is us who are being left behind), or whether the culture has disappeared (and we are the only ones left to notice it)" (2012, 150).

Von Wright reminds us that "Wittgenstein is much more deeply 'history-conscious' than is commonly recognized and understood. His way of seeing philosophy was not an attempt to tell us what philosophy, once and for all, *is* but expressed what for him, in the setting of his times, it

had to be" (Wright 1982, 119). Music had an ulterior importance for Wittgenstein's philosophical thinking. His own admission concerning this behooves one to attend carefully to his remarks on music in their philosophically appropriate context—to look and see. In this essay, I have offered one possible way to understand this ulterior importance of music for Wittgenstein as a key to his attempt to come to terms with what philosophy, in the setting of his times, had to be for him—that in Wittgenstein's mind, the problem of creating good modern music and the problem of philosophizing in the time of modernity were one and the same. And so are the respective struggles with the contemporary obfuscation of the nature of progress—the critical task, which von Wright pitched so powerfully in his own philosophy.

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