

Wittgenstein on Mahler

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Abstract

In this paper I explain Wittgenstein's ambivalent remarks on the music of Gustav Mahler in their proper musico-philosophical context. I argue that these remarks are connected to Wittgenstein's hybrid conception of musical decline and to his tripartite scheme of modern music. I also argue that Mahler's conundrum was indicative of Wittgenstein's grappling with his own predicament as a philosopher, and that this gives concrete sense to Wittgenstein's admission that music was so important to him that without it he was sure to be misunderstood.

Ludwig Wittgenstein was a reluctant modernist; intellectually receptive to, and at times even deeply appreciative of the various cultural manifestations of his time, yet never at peace with any of them; highly proficient and fully immersed in philosophical dialogue, yet never at home in what he perceived as its profound abuse of language.

Wittgenstein's rejection of the modern music of his time is one of the many ways in which he voiced his deep concern with the decline of Western culture. He characterized such cultural decline in terms of a breakdown of artistic necessity through skillful, sophisticated yet hollow artistic reproduction and a corresponding deterioration of sensitivity leading to indifference (LC 7)—a mellowing that has been overtaking the high and great culture of the West, "a dissolution of the resemblances which unite [a culture's] ways of life" (Wright 1982, 116-117). Wittgenstein admitted that he approached "what is called modern music with the greatest suspicion (though without understanding its language)" (CV 6).

In this context, Wittgenstein's remarks on the music of Gustav Mahler are unique. Mahler was the only truly modern composer, who apparently was significant enough in Wittgenstein's eyes to be worthy of philosophic attention. Wittgenstein's somewhat abusive remarks on Mahler exemplify a distinct duality toward Mahler's musical persona that was typical among Austrian literati at that time. Carl Schorske described this as a duality in Mahler's functional relation to the classical tradition; an acute tension between Mahler's acceptance as a conductor—a guardian of the abstract, autonomous music so cherished by the educated elite—and his rejection as a composer, who subversively attempted to imbue abstract high-culture music with concrete vernacular substance (Schorske 1999, 172-174). Wittgenstein clearly had a tremendous respect toward Mahler as a conductor. "Mahler's guidance was excellent, when he conducted," he wrote, "the orchestra seemed to fall apart immediately, when he did not conduct himself" (MS 122, 96r). Still Wittgenstein's harshly critical attitude toward Mahler as a composer was more philosophically complex than downright negative. He evidently did not like Mahler's music, but he nonetheless attributed philosophical significance to it.

In this paper I set out to explain Wittgenstein's remarks on Mahler in their appropriate musico-philosophical context, and also to hint at their philosophical significance.

A few preliminary considerations are in order.

It occurs to me that the common dismissive reference to Wittgenstein's conservative musical taste involves some sort of ad hominem fallacy. It seems as if one seriously expects that a great, probing mind like Wittgenstein's

ought to own a more daring musical taste, and so one necessarily recoils with discomfort and a sense of irony in the face of Wittgenstein's 'failure' to develop a taste for the avant-garde. I beg to differ. First, we need to be reminded that some of the greatest philosophers, who also wrote about music, from Kant to Nietzsche, exemplified quite a pedestrian taste in music. The real, indeed much more interesting question, I maintain, is not 'what music Wittgenstein ought to have appreciated given the kind of philosophical ideas which he maintained at this or that stage in his career or his life?' but rather 'what might be his philosophic justification for delineating musical experience in the way he did?' The first question presupposes too much: that there is no point in raising the second. But this is unwarranted as it stands. So the second question deserves a fair shot. Actually, it is far more reasonable to expect that a great, probing mind like Wittgenstein's should afford an interesting justification precisely of that sort. Indeed I have argued elsewhere that what sets Wittgenstein and Schoenberg apart from one another, for instance, is far more interesting philosophically than any contingency—historical or philosophical—which would suggest that we may yoke them together (Guter 2004, 2009 and 2011).

Furthermore, qualms about Wittgenstein's conservative musical taste are commonly connected with his equally questionable taste in leisure reading, namely, with his infamous infatuation with Oswald Spengler's ideas on cultural decline (PPO 25; CV 19). The connection is true, but the conclusion which is often being drawn from it, namely, that Wittgenstein's embracing of the idea of cultural decline is immaterial for understanding the philosophic trajectory of his thinking about music (at least since 1930), is plainly false.

It is by now an established fact that reading Spengler's *Decline of the West* during his middle period had a significant impact on the emergence and formulation of some of the most distinctive methodological aspects of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Furthermore, the equally pertinent Spenglerian shadow on Wittgenstein's own pessimistic attitude toward his times has also been considered to be profoundly important for a proper understanding of Wittgenstein's overarching philosophical thinking. There is good interpretive sense in believing that the kind of philosophical grappling, which is ubiquitous in his later work, exemplifies not only Wittgenstein's preoccupation with the very features of civilization that Spengler thought of as typical of cultural decline, but also an overall commitment to philosophize seriously and sincerely in a time of civilization (Wright 1982; Haller 1988, Cavell 1988 and 1989; DeAngelis 2007; Lurie 2012).

In my own work on Wittgenstein's philosophy of music, I followed this line of thinking by arguing that Wittgenstein

actually maintained a unique hybrid conception of musical decline, which was a result of a rebounding his methodological critique of Spengler's idea of a morphological comparison of cultures back onto the music theory Heinrich Schenker, with which, I discovered, Wittgenstein gradually became familiar between the years 1926-1933 (Guter 2004, 2011 and 2013).

Wittgenstein's hybrid conception of musical decline is premised upon the idea that triadic tonality is the focal point for comparing musical instances. He maintained that various musical instances may bear more or less family resemblance to one another, to the extent of the exclusion of certain instances. Yet Wittgenstein denied that the general validity of the concept of tonality depends on the claim that everything which is true only of the abstract Schenkerian *Ursatz* (the prototype) holds for all the musical instances under consideration. For Wittgenstein, tonality—the way we experience and express certain relationships between musical tones—is effected by the way we recognize and describe things, and ultimately by the kind of beings we are, the purposes we have, our shared discriminatory capacities and certain general features of the world we inhabit. Tonality cannot be vindicated by reference to putative facts about the world or about the mind, as Schenker believed. The conditions of musical meaningfulness are found in grammar.

Wittgenstein maintained that when the prototype is clearly presented for what it really is, namely, grammar, and thus becomes the focal point of the observation, the general validity of that concept of tonality will depend on the fact that it characterizes the whole of the observation and determines its form. In this anti-essentialist vein, the Schenkerian *Ursatz* became for Wittgenstein a mere methodic device that can be laid alongside the musical instances under consideration as a measure. Importantly, Wittgenstein's hybrid conception of musical decline unleashed some genuine Spenglerian pessimism on whatever hope, which Schenker may have retained, to reverse musical decline by setting forth his theories as a guide to composers and performers (Guter 2013).

Wittgenstein brought his hybrid conception of musical decline to bear on what he conceived as the music of his time in a curious diary entry from January 27, 1931 (*PPO* 66-69) (Guter 2004, 2009, 2011 and 2013). In this text Wittgenstein makes a distinction between three categories of modern music. 'Bad modern music', presumably exemplified by Richard Strauss and Max Reger (Wittgenstein had some familiarity with their music either by acquaintance or by description), presents itself as non-musical clutter for reasons eminently shown by means of Schenker's music theory. 'Vacuous (*Nichtssagend*) modern music', exemplified by Josef Labor according to Wittgenstein, is the kind of art we get when a culture enters its final phases (civilization), when artists work with the hollow, lifeless forms of the old culture. Wittgenstein saw that as an 'unattractive absurd'.

Wittgenstein clearly followed Schenker by rejecting both the noble yet vacuous rehash of classicism of the conservative composer, and the base contrapuntal tinkering with harmony of the progressive composer as symptomatic of musical decline (Guter 2004 and 2011). Yet Wittgenstein entertained also the striking possibility of 'good modern music', that is, modern music which is genuinely adequate to its times, the time of civilization. This is the peculiar possibility of an artistic afterimage of a wholesale rejection of the internal relations which hold together musical gesture and the life of humankind. Wittgenstein saw that as an 'attractive absurd'. Thus Wittgenstein's hybrid conception of

musical decline markedly transgressed not only Schenker's sense of cultural rejuvenation by means of recoil from contemporary practices of composition, but also Spengler's sense of historical inevitability. The category of 'good modern music' secures the independence of Wittgenstein's hybrid conception of musical decline from its intellectual parents (Guter 2013). It also shows, *pace* common wisdom, that Wittgenstein's philosophic thinking about music was not hindered by his conservative musical taste.

With these caveats in place, I turn to tackle Wittgenstein's remarks on Mahler head on. We have four self-standing passages on Mahler in the *Nachlass*. They can be neatly divided, chronologically and thematically, into two groups. The first group, consisting of the first two earlier passages (*PPO*, 93 and *CV*, 20; both written in 1931), concerns Wittgenstein's puzzlement over Mahler's veering away from the cultural conditions of musical meaningfulness. They also exemplify Wittgenstein's hybrid conception of musical decline. Wittgenstein's emulation of Schenker's way of looking at the masterworks of Western music as extended commentaries on the tonic triad music is evident here despite of the former's non-technical and rather idiosyncratic choice of words (*Stammutter*). From this theoretical perspective, it is indeed true that a Bruckner symphony is much closer to a Beethoven symphony than a Mahler symphony.

Wittgenstein's critique of Mahler voices a train of thoughts, which is familiar in musicology, regarding Mahler's compositional strategies. Mahler's mature works (for example, his fourth symphony) display significant ambivalence in the area of harmony and tonal relationships. While his music often appears deceptively conservative, employing undisguised dominant relationships that still play an essential structural role, his compositional procedures pushes tonality to the brink of dissolution. In this sense, Mahler's "simple harmonic progressions" are indeed contrived and disjointed; the product of an incredibly sophisticated, refined and titillating, yet ultimately abstract design.

Wittgenstein maps Schenker's music-theoretical perspective onto Spengler's scheme of cultural decline by invoking the comparative image of the apple tree, the daisy and the picture of the tree in order to intimate not only the abstract nature of the digression embodied in Mahler's art, but also its cultural extent. Yuval Lurie captured this nicely by saying that "to affiliate Mahler's music with the musical tradition of the West is like putting pictures of apple trees in an orchid, believing they too can yield real apples" (Lurie 2012, 137). The idea that a Mahler symphony might be a work of art of a *totally* different sort is Spenglerian in an important sense: Wittgenstein entertains here the possibility that Mahler's music belongs to an entirely different kind of spiritual enterprise that embodies civilization in the modern period. Schenker similarly felt that "the quest for a new form of music is a quest for a homunculus" (Schenker 1979, 6). The metaphor, which Schenker employed, that of an artificial living being, which embodies the outward semblance of humanity but not the spirit, captures not only the sense of the totality of this new enterprise, but also its uncanny nature.

The very possibility—unlikely as it may have been for Wittgenstein—that Mahler's music might be adequate to its time (the time of civilization), that it might belong to the attractively absurd category of 'good modern music,' does not negate Wittgenstein's justification (from the idealized perspective of what he called "the high and great culture") for saying that Mahler's music is inauthentic and abstract.

Nonetheless, it seriously qualifies the normative force of such a lament.

The second group of passages on Mahler were written later, and more than a decade apart from one another (MS 120, 72v was written in 1937; CV, 67 was written in 1948). These passages continue the thought that Mahler's art is inauthentic, and relate it to the Weiningerian distinction between talent and genius, which is familiar from other passages in *Culture and Value*. Yet they also forcefully bring to the surface the highly personal theme of 'vanity,' which relates the conceptual difficulty involved in determining the value of such purported new kind of art to Wittgenstein's own misgivings about his predicament as a philosophical writer in the time of civilization. This theme already appeared, albeit by implication only, in the first group of passages (PPO, 93).

This theme now takes center stage, allowing us a rare immediate glimpse into the reason why Wittgenstein's considered music to be "so important to him that he felt without it he was sure to be misunderstood," as he told Maurice O'C. Drury (Fann 1969, 67-68). In both passages Wittgenstein clearly acknowledged his own reservations regarding Mahler's music. There is no doubt that he would have liked to reject this kind of art *tout court*. Yet Wittgenstein's argument is ultimately more nuanced. In both passages we see that the main charge against Mahler himself was that he was not courageous enough to know himself (hence he merely shows talent, albeit great talent), settling for the surrogate of a good thing. Interestingly, if we bear in mind that Wittgenstein did not adhere to Schenker's call for an actual U-turn in composition practice, then we can see that his frustration with Mahler's weakness was actually a disappointment with the prodigious composer who ultimately fell short of creating 'good modern music'. In this sense, Mahler serves as a perfect example to justify Wittgenstein's worry in the diary entry from January 27, 1931 (PPO 66-69) concerning the prospect of good modern music: "no one is clever enough to formulate today the right thing" (PPO 66-69), that is, to create great art at a time when that might no longer be possible. In Wittgenstein's view, it seems, the chances that others might succeed where Mahler has failed are slim.

In the 1937 passage we get another idea about the kind of transgression, which Mahler's purportedly inauthentic music embodies: it presents itself as authentic, that is, as if it were a genuine manifestation of its time. The immediate charge of self-deception makes way to a pronouncement of an acute problem: the inability to distinguish what is genuine ('valuable') and 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. As Wittgenstein clearly describes in the 1948 passage, this is a problem of incommensurability: "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" (CV, 67). Ultimately, the problem regarding the category of 'good modern music' arises due to our inability to tell, as Lurie 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)" (Lurie 2012, 150).

In sum, Mahler was a genuine problem for Wittgenstein. From a musical perspective, with regards to Wittgenstein's tripartite scheme of modern music, Mahler's music clearly did not belong to the category of 'vacuous modern music'.

It also did not simply belong to the category of 'bad modern music' together with Richard Strauss and his ilk. For Wittgenstein, Mahler was a limiting case in the history of Western music. "You would need to know a good deal about music, its history and development, to understand him," admitted Wittgenstein at one point (Rhees 1984, 71). From the perspective of philosophical autobiography, Mahler's conundrum was indicative of Wittgenstein's grappling with his own predicament as a philosopher. In fact, the problem of 'good modern music' and the problem of philosophizing in the time of civilization were one and the same in Wittgenstein's mind. This shows the philosophical depth, importance and relevance of Wittgenstein's musical thinking.

Literature

References to Wittgenstein's writings follow the standard print editions where available. I use the following abbreviations:

CV *Culture and Value*

LC *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious*

PPO *Public and Private Occasions*

References to the *Nachlass* are by MS number according to G. H. von Wright's catalogue followed by page number. The source for the *Nachlass* is Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Nachlass: The Bergen Electronic Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Translations from the *Nachlass* are my own.

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