

# Wittgenstein Reimagines Musical Depth

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## Abstract

I explore and outline Wittgenstein's original response to the Romantic discourse concerning musical depth, from his middle-period on. Schopenhauer and Spengler served as immediate sources for Wittgenstein's reliance on Romantic metaphors of depth concerning music. The onset for his philosophic intervention in the discourse was his critique of Schenker's view of music and his general shift toward the 'anthropological view', which occurred at the same time. In his post-PI period Wittgenstein was able to reimagine musical depth in terms of vertically interrelated language-games which facilitate *Menschenkenntnis*.

One of the most prominent features of German Romantic thinking about music is the evocation of metaphors of depth. Depth is one of two ideal types of the "German" in music, which have reached full maturity and distinctiveness in the writings of philosophers, critics, music analysts and composers around mid-nineteenth-century, and persevered almost without change well into the mid-twentieth-century (Sponheuer 2002). This ideal type gives rise to a chain of binary opposites, all revolving around sensuality versus intellect. For example: melody/harmony, prosaic/poetic, physical/metaphysical, mechanical/organic, civilization/culture, entertainment/ideas etc. The other ideal type, which both contrasts and complements the first, is the conception of the "German" in music as something "universal" that brings the "purely human" to its fullest expression (ibid.).

Metaphors of depth were initially used to articulate an anti-French, anti-rationalist aesthetics of music, but also to expand the listener's sense of inner space beyond the limits prescribed by rationalism or by language, to convey the sense in which music differs from linguistic and visual modes of expression, and ultimately to create and transmit a distinctly Germanic cluster of idealized values pertaining to music, among them spirituality, inwardness, and seriousness (Watkins 2011).

The Romantic writers began to imagine an interiority to music similar in its uncanniness to the interiority of the listening subject. E. T. A. Hoffmann, in his epoch-making Beethoven essays, was the first to attempt to penetrate the 'inner structure' of Beethoven's music by means of analytical language, suggesting the presence of a 'vertical' dimension to music complementing its axis of 'horizontal' or temporal unfolding. Ultimately, Romanticism exhibits what Charles Taylor called 'the expressivist turn', conceiving musical depth in terms of an inexhaustible inner domain whose contents are not reducible, not collectible, not calculable, hence could never be fully articulated (Taylor 1996, 390).

I would like now to explore and outline the philosophical onset in Wittgenstein's original intervention in the Romantic discourse concerning musical depth. The manifestation of this discourse in Wittgenstein's middle-period is quite straightforward. Consider the following passage from 1931:

Some people think music a primitive art because it has only a few notes and rhythms. But it is only simple on the surface; its substance [Körper] on the other hand, which makes it possible to interpret this manifest content, has all the infinite complexity that's suggested in the external forms of other arts and that music con-

ceals. In a certain sense it is the most sophisticated art of all. (Wittgenstein 1998, 11)

This passage elegantly traverses the entire range of opposites pertaining to musical depth, ultimately pointing at the ulterior sophistication of the art of music. Two immediate sources stand out for Wittgenstein's reliance on metaphors of depth. First, Arthur Schopenhauer, for whom "the unutterable depth of all music [...] by which also it is so fully understood and yet so inexplicable, rests on the fact that it restores to us all the emotions of our inmost nature [...]" (Schopenhauer 1964, 341) Wittgenstein's interest in Schopenhauer, which was kindled at an early stage, spanned in one form or other his entire career.

The second immediate source is Oswald Spengler. Wittgenstein read Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* with great enthusiasm in the spring of 1930. It deeply resonated with Wittgenstein's own feeling of alienation from modern life, and it had a significant impact on the emergence and formulation of some of the most distinctive methodological aspects of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

While Schopenhauer framed for Wittgenstein the physical/metaphysical dialectic pertaining to musical depth, Spengler framed the corresponding civilization/culture dialectic. Spengler powerfully pursued the Romantic conception of artistic depth as a cultural characteristic of what he idiosyncratically dubbed 'Impressionism', the mark of the late hours of the 'phase of accomplishment' in Western culture. For Spengler, music is a reflection of the Western soul, its prime symbol, the ideal medium for expressing the Faustian ideal of a striving toward infinite space. In a passage anticipating Wittgenstein's 1931 remark, which I quoted above, Spengler writes: "Be the artist painter or musician, his art consists in creating with a few strokes or spots or tones an image of inexhaustible content, a microcosm meet for the eyes or ears of the Faustian man; that is, in laying the actuality of something objective which, so to say, forces that actuality to become phenomenal." (Spengler 1939, 286)

Grafted on the impact of Spengler, we find also Wittgenstein's critical engagement with the music theory of Heinrich Schenker, which was facilitated by conversations with Felix Salzer, in particular between the years 1930-1933 (Guter 2004, 2011 and 2015). Schenker, who was by and large aligned with Spengler's cultural pessimism (Almén 1996), framed for Wittgenstein also the melody/harmony dialectic pertaining to musical depth. According to Schenker all great masterworks possess a deep structure, or background, which lends them not only their coherence but also their cultural identity and value. As Watkins points out, "for all its apparent formalization,

Schenker's notion of the background is emphatically not just a musical concept. Instead, the background delineates an imaginary space with abundant figurative overtones, including those of nature, God, origin, genius, the soul and Germanness – all by this point conventional associations of depth." (Watkins 2011, 25)

I would like to argue that at this particular nexus of the impact of Spengler and Schenker, at that particular phase in Wittgenstein's middle-period, as he was putting together the *Big Typescript*, we begin to see the contour of his unique, subtle intervention in the Romantic discourse concerning musical depth.

I have shown elsewhere (Guter 2015) that Wittgenstein's explicit dissatisfaction with Schenker's view of music was grafted on his critique in the *Big Typescript* of Spengler's philosophical dogmatism concerning the notion of prototype (*Urbild*). For Wittgenstein, the Schenkerian *Ursatz*, the representation of the primal musical phenomenon which has been conceived to encapsulate the essence of tonality, is yet another example of an ill-conceived, dogmatic use of the idea of *Urbild*. Schenker's mistake was to extend the scope of statements true of tonality (in its pre-articulated form) to particular instances of tonal music. In this sense, the Schenkerian *Ursatz* becomes a useful heuristic device that can be laid alongside the musical instances under consideration as a measure, "not as a preconception to which everything must conform" (Wittgenstein 1998, 30). It has a mere regulative use as a focal point of our observation of the musical field. I maintain that this is the reason why Wittgenstein told Salzer that Schenker's theory needs to be "boiled down."

Yet "boiling down" Schenker's theory in this way created, for Wittgenstein, a specific difficulty in rendering musical depth: in what sense could he say that music "is the most sophisticated art of all"? Hence it comes as no surprise that his middle-period texts in particular include quite a few tentative passages concerning the theory of harmony (*Harmonielehre*). Strikingly, Wittgenstein worked out his solution to this problem concerning musical depth in the context of the major philosophic shift, which characterizes his middle-period: his gradual moving away from the conception of language as a system of fixed rules (a calculus), which is prominent in the *Big Typescript*, and toward the "anthropological view," which characterizes his later work, from the *Philosophical Investigations* on. The shift toward the *Philosophical Investigations* is attributed to the stimulus of Piero Sraffa's criticism on Wittgenstein's ideas during this middle-period (Engelmann 2013).

Sraffa's criticism prompted Wittgenstein to reconsider the philosophical import of gestures, that is, signs, which (when taken in isolation) we could not give a grammar for them. Wittgenstein realized that the use of words meshes with life. As Mauro Engelmann put it, "we have to look at the environment, the surroundings, where the language functions (the form of life). The understanding of a gesture in our language may come before the capacity to explain according to a calculus with fixed rules of 'grammar'" (Engelmann 2013, 166). Wittgenstein's new idea was to consider the purpose and the point of languages and language-games as part of a form of life.

Wittgenstein's reworking of his notion of *Harmonielehre* followed suit. While most of his references in the middle-period to *Harmonielehre* render it as a standard example for 'grammar' in the constitutive sense, that is, as a kind of structure of language that determines the conditions of sense and understanding, a necessary condition for language, Wittgenstein came to realize, upon criticizing the

music theory of Heinrich Schenker, that this was not a good example. By 1936 his thinking about *Harmonielehre* has already been fully entrenched in his newly developed anthropological view:

Could one reason be given at all, why *Harmonielehre* is the way it is? And, first and foremost, must such a reason be given? It is here and it is part of our entire life. (MS157a, 24-26; my translation, my emphasis)

The notion of *Harmonielehre* has now become circumscribed within the grand idea of language as a universal medium (see Hintikka 1986). It has been "boiled down" to a merely technical notion, hence drops out of consideration for Wittgenstein. Indeed, the term disappears from his writings hereafter. Wittgenstein now needs to reimagine musical depth while realizing that tonality—the way we experience and express certain relationships between musical tones—is affected 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.

Wittgenstein's sustained response to this challenge shows once again how closely related his thinking about music was to the cutting edge of his philosophical advancement. In much of Wittgenstein's later writing on music, the bulk of which belonging to his final, post-*Philosophical-Investigations* period, he grappled with the need to explicate the 'infinite complexity' of musical gesture—what and how it speaks to us; why and how it is so meaningful—while probing (in his various writings on philosophical psychology) into the constitutive indefiniteness of our concepts of the 'inner'. In effect, his response to the quintessentially Romantic characterization of musical depth in terms of the listener's inner space (exemplified vividly in the writings of Schopenhauer) was framed by means of his overarching philosophical thrust to move beyond the pervasive inner/outer divide.

Two major late-vintage ideas shape the way Wittgenstein finally reimagines musical depth. First, the idea of vertical interrelations between language-games. Not all language-games function on the same logical level: some language-games logically presuppose other language-games, and so they tend to lend themselves to enormous complexity as each move in such vertically-complex language-game may presuppose sometimes countless other corresponding moves in myriad other logically prior games. This idea comes across most clearly when Wittgenstein writes:

Doesn't the theme point to anything beyond itself? Oh yes! But this means: the impression it makes on me is connected with things in its environment – for example, with the existence of the German language and its intonation, but that means with the whole range of our language games. If I say for instance: here it's as though a conclusion were being drawn, here as though someone were expressing agreement, or as though *this* were a reply to what came before, – my understanding of it presupposes my familiarity with conclusions, expressions of agreement, replies. (Wittgenstein 1998, 59)

Wittgenstein is retaining here the essential metaphor of verticality pertaining to musical depth, yet his point is that when we have a sense of musical depth it is not because understanding sends us further inwards into a determinate mental state. Rather, musical depth is folded across the unexpected topography of our actual language and patterns of life, the similarities that give unity to the ways of life of a culture.

Second, the notion of *Menschenkenntnis*—our acquaintance with, and knowledge of human nature. For Wittgenstein, *Menschenkenntnis* is not a body of theoretical knowledge like psychology. Rather, it is more like a skill, or a highly diverse cluster of skills, which some people have a more intuitive grasp of than others, and it can be improved by experience on the basis of 'imponderable evidence', that is, "evidence which can make us certain about someone's psychological state, without our being able to specify what it is in their behavior that makes us so sure" (Ter Hark 2004, 140).

Wittgenstein's account of *Menschenkenntnis* is fundamental to his discussion of musical expression and musical understanding. It lends a rich conceptual framework, also cohesion, to many of Wittgenstein's late-vintage passages in which he tracks and explores how musical meaning (which he takes in an intransitive sense) is grounded in an indefinite edifice of interrelated language-games which admit imponderable evidence—evidence that cannot be recognized or fully explained by mere reference to rules, yet is accepted by those who are acquainted with the infinite variation of human physiognomy. This idea captures the essential dialectic of mechanical versus organic (irreducible; not calculable) pertaining to musical depth. This comes across clearly when Wittgenstein writes:

This musical phrase is a gesture for me. It creeps into my life. I make it my own. Life's infinite variations are an essential part of our life. And so precisely of the habitual character of life. Expression consists for us <in> in-calculability. (Wittgenstein 1998, 72)

Wittgenstein's final answer to the question concerning the ulterior sophistication of music is this: "Appreciating music is a manifestation of human life." (ibid., 80) Read in context, it encapsulates his comprehensive, forward thinking about the philosophic entanglements of language and the mind. It also renders music as a facilitator of *Menschenkenntnis*, thereby complementing the ideal type of depth with the second ideal type of universality, as having a sense of musical depth opens up possibilities for the "purely human" to attain its fullest expression.

## Acknowledgment

Research for this essay has been generously supported by a Joint Excellence in Science and Humanities (JESH) award from the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

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