

Appealing to Nature

A History of the Organic in Music

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The MMC thesis at Brown University presents a unique challenge to any doctoral candidate. By allowing an artist to explore their creative capacity in both scholarly and compositional forms, the thesis project is both a stretching and a sublimation of practice, an exploration into the hinterlands of one's artistic and academic understanding with the idea of illuminating, if briefly, the greater machinations that undergird the mysteries of our work.

Bringing a new orchestra piece into the world will never be an easy experience. The balancing of large and dissimilar sonic forces against one another creates an additional dimension by which an otherwise ironclad work could easily falter in its sounding and expression. Likewise, this paper has sought to balance large, if unwieldy scholarly objects such as music and nature, in an attempt to narrate a history. I'm forever thankful to have been guided in this process by a committee of composers and scholars whose skill and insight is only matched by their erudition and care. Working with Dr. Anthony Cheung has helped me to find new pathways through portals I once thought were closed, and understand to a greater degree how it is that a composer puts themselves into their work, not with the goal of finding one's self, but with the intent of ruminating, of speaking one's own words. I'm additionally thankful to Dr. Nathan and Dr. Caplan for their guidance, seeing my thesis through its many guises and re-writings. There are many others, readers, friends, mentors, and influences deserving of acknowledgment for their contributions to this project. My thanks to them extends far beyond the finite reaches of these pages.

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“A problem is a solid, synthetic mass which is broken up by means of the penetrating power of the mind. Thus, conversely, fire is nature’s mental power and each *body* is a *problem*.”

-Novalis

“With music, we can not ever be sure.”

-Slavoj Žižek

INTRODUCTION

One of the most difficult tasks in constructing a work of sonic art is to render meaning and structure out of materials which are wholly incapable of representation. The chief anxiety that both plagues and propels my artistic practice is precisely the matter of meaning in sound. How does the chaining together of tones into gestures, and the further concatenation of gestures into larger forms and processes, allow listeners to derive meaning, both symbolic and emotional, and even truths, however localized, over the course of a sonic work? By what mechanisms do certain orientations of certain sounds induce patchworks of aesthetic satisfaction among an audience? What are the thresholds by which the aural crosses into the realm of art? In approaching this tension underlying my artistic thought, a chief and constituting throughline that has emerged is music’s ability to reflect, if not participate in, the natural world.

Reaching back to the apocryphal wanderings of Pythagoras, the artform of music has been indelibly tied to concepts of nature and the natural, principally that of the organism. Composers, theorists, and philosophers across millennia have sought either to confirm or problematize this linkage. The organism has been turned to time and again in order to provide legitimacy to radically different theoretical constructs undergirding musical composition and analysis, with the approach appearing to ossify

in the American academy by way of its Romantic expression, systematized by Heinrich Schenker and his acolytes in the mid-20th century.

Through discourse, the concept of music as organism, or organicism, has become inculcated as both a foundational aspect of the history of musical analysis and an aspirational bugbear from which to stake out differing views of sonic construction. In the recent period of postmodernity, to say that organicism has gone out of vogue is an understatement, as a critical lens has rightfully brought to light the failings and biases latent in its Romantic theoretical expressions. Mired in controversy, betraying a misplaced universalism, and with an air of anachronism, organicism's application to the wide variety of musics today has been put into serious doubt. But organicism is pesky; it continues to crop up, while the parameters linking music and nature have continued to shift across time. We as music practitioners, analysts, and listeners find ourselves continually haunted by the specter of the sonic organism, a term whose bounds are fuzzy, its definition evading simple capture.

I contend that the Romantic idea of organicism is part of a larger investigation and coordinating of the sonic with the natural. Interrelations between sound and nature have been charted since well before the Romantic era, and resonances between the two have continued to enter musical scholarship and practice amidst the relative domination of Schenker's understanding of musical organization. In other words, the issue at hand lies not with the relating together of sound and organism, but with the reductionist critique of a single *model* of organicism that musical analysis has taken in turn as gospel and apostate. The organicism of Schenker must be seen as part of a wider

and deeper conversation seeking to draw parallels between sonic art and nature. A variety of thinkers and movements whose work has coupled music (consciously or inadvertently) with appeals to the natural will be surveyed, illuminating how the parameters and expectations of the organic in sound have shifted across time. This historical narrative is constructed with an eye to Anne Harrington's suggestion that the academic distrust of organicism "depends in no small part on the reduction of organicist thought to one of its variations," namely its Romantic variant.¹ The inclusion of the theories below is not an endorsement of their validity, or an attempt to rehabilitate them. Rather, these distinct understandings are juxtaposed in order to allow their resonances to appear in starker relief, as reflective fragments of a larger mosaic.

Kant and his fellow German Idealists have served as the point of focus for most discourse on the organic in sound. However, our lineage will begin with a problematizing of this origin story. While organicism in its most-recognizable form is tied to the beginnings of biology and its influence on aesthetics in the late eighteenth century, the *Affektenlehre* is an important forebear to the Romantic sense of the organic. Uniting a disparate group of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century European thinkers in the realms of philosophy and music theory was an attempt to furnish a categorizing of sonic rhetoric, linking aural gestures to affects and passions. In legitimizing their linguistic codifications of sound, the scholars of the *Affektenlehre* sought to connect music, nature, and the mind around gestures of resonance and sonority. The *Affektenlehre*'s insistence on *vibration* as a marker of the natural

¹ Anne Harrington, *Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), xxi.

emblematic of both music and emotion will serve as the point of departure for our history and a potent counterexample to the models of the organic that would come afterward.

We will then proceed to the Romantic idea of organicism. It is easy to look through the highly schematized music theory of Schenker and read onto his ideological progenitors a monolithic understanding of the organism, but these influences, Kant, Hegel, Schelling, and even Schenker himself, held deeply contradictory views on what constituted organic development. At the center of the disagreements that Schenker would attempt to bridge is the organism's relation to *necessity*. The arising of Romantic organicism will be framed through Schenker's synthesizing of different understandings of the organic into a systemic conception of sonic organization via his coordination of necessity and freedom. Despite Schenker's vast influence on musical analysis, new connections between the sonic and the natural would continue to develop, canalizing alternative paths and illuminating different aspects of both sound and the organic.

Integral to our understanding of the continued development of organicism after its earnest instantiation by the German Idealists will be the contextualization of its impact upon composers in the early twentieth century, specifically Anton Webern. Webern, like Schenker, would turn to the German Idealists to rationalize his musical ideas. However, Webern argues for the organic supremacy of post-tonal music, and specifically twelve-tone composition. By utilizing the same philosophical concepts as Schenker to legitimize a starkly non-tonal mode of musical organization, Webern's

organicism showcases the myriad ways in which the ideas of the German Idealists resurfaced and were reflected in musical analysis.

Moving back into philosophy, we will explore Alfred North Whitehead's theory of organism. Whitehead's place in the philosophical tradition has undergone a vital reassessment, as many contemporary scholars have found in his ideas fairly untrodden paths through issues badgering vast and disparate fields. Whitehead's speculative metaphysics present a process-based model of reality which would prove influential in the sphere of music theory, finding resonance and kinship in the music theory of Rudolph Reti. An organicism emblematic of *process* will begin to peek through the holism of Schenker, providing an important counter-narrative to the more canonical formations of post-Kantian organicism.

The final chapter of our history will speak to one of the directions organicism may take in the near future. Out of the vestiges of the postmodern, a number of artistic and theoretical sources have sought to move beyond its cultural dominance. Metamodernism has emerged as a "structure of feeling" found in multiple sectors of artistic production, predicated largely on the oscillation between postmodern and pre-postmodern registers of affect.² Jason Storm's metamodernist framing of the objects of theoretical analysis as *process social kinds* presents a new lens by which we can understand the multiplicitous, slippery, and at turns problematic nature of organicism.

² Timothy Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism," in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) 5.

ORGANICISM AND MUSIC

Lotte Thaler, in her seminal analysis of organicism, looks to the rise of ‘absolute’ music in Vienna under Haydn and Mozart as the starting point of the organic in music.³ I present here a model that reaches deeper into the histories of classical music. Appeals to the natural have been used to organize musical material and ascribe it meaning and artistic import at least as far back as the Baroque era, when the codifying of sonic rhetoric first became a project of European aesthetic philosophy. In order for scholars and theorists to cohere musical gestures into a linguistic framework, nature and the vital were deployed as models and resonant structures. Though pre-dating the biological discourse that would see the rise of Romantic organicism, the earlier, Baroque schematizing of the aural in the name of affect, commonly referred to as the *Affektenlehre*, was highly dependent on organic metaphors.

1: AFFEKTENLEHRE

Two major throughlines of artistic analysis buttress the aesthetic understandings of the early Baroque period. First, and with the most historical attention, is art’s imitative capacity, or *mimesis*. Coming from Plato and Aristotle, *mimesis* is the representative ability of art, its power to signify other objects and bring copies of them together in the form of images and words. However, music’s inability to render a readily-perceived object has often led to its being-set-apart from, if not its full demotion among the pantheon of arts. Music has been viewed as a problem child for aesthetic theory through the lens of *mimesis*, and this was no more apparent then at the

³ Lotte Thaler, *Organische Form in der Musiktheorie des 19. und beginnenden 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Katzbichler, 1984), 12, 67f.

beginning of the Baroque era in Western Europe. Music had not yet become its own object of intellectual inquiry, framed in scholarship as leaning on other artforms to create semantic connections.⁴ In order for it to satisfy the call to imitation, music needed the added reinforcement of text, stagecraft, or religious ceremony in order for it to render a meaning capable of being understood.

The second quality of aesthetics, affect, emerges much later than mimesis. The concept of affect as understood by the scholars of the *Affektenlehre* is best traced to Spinoza, who defines it as the “affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections...*a passion*.”⁵ Spinoza posits affect as a preconscious response on the part of the body, a natural and reactive tendency in the face of stimulus. In the beginning of the eighteenth-century, affect and imitation were seen as working hand-in-hand in art. Quoting philosopher Jean-Baptiste Dubos, “painters and poets raise those artificial passions within us, by presenting us with the imitations of objects capable of exciting real passions...the copy of the object ought to stir up within us a copy of the passion which the object itself would have excited.”⁶ In other words, art represents and mimics objects outside of itself, replicating the affective energy of that object and in turn moving us, ‘stirring up’ an additional copy of that passion within us. Despite music’s subordination under the lens of mimesis, it is precisely through music’s

⁴ Gary Tomlinson, “Early Modern Opera,” in *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 34-72.

⁵ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (New York: Penguin, 1994), 70. (*italics original*)

⁶ Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Critical reflections on poetry, painting and music*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas Nugent (London: John Nourse, 1748), 22-23.

relation to other artforms that a sort of discourse, a language of tropes and expectation, would become intelligible, most saliently in the growing genre of opera.

In tying narrative dramaturgy and sonic art together under the veil of one work, composers across Western Europe began allowing certain musical materials and gestures to coalesce around moments of dramatic intensity and import. The deployment of recognizable aural cues would attempt to signal to audiences what and how they were supposed to feel. One of the more ubiquitous sonic moves that comes into practice in the early Baroque period is the lament bass.



fig. 1 - Chromatic lament bass pattern

Consisting of an ostinato in the bottom voice moving repeatedly downward from scale degree 1 to 5, the lament bass was employed in vocal works across the continent, typically underscoring moments of extreme emotion (both ecstatic and tragic), heightened poetic import, or grand moralizing. Its repetitiousness serves as a sonic marker, pricking the ears of its listeners, signaling to them that something of great importance is in the process of happening. Two prime examples of the lament bass occur at pivotal moments in Claudio Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1643) and Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (1689).

In *Dido and Aeneas*, Purcell deploys a chromatic version of the lament bass near the end of the opera as Dido, Queen of Carthage, contemplates her death following the departure of the Trojan prince, Aeneas (fig. 2). She sings an aria to her sister Belinda, "When I am laid in Earth," announcing her intent to die. Purcell's chromatic bass-line –

No. 37. SONG.—“WHEN I AM LAID IN EARTH.”

Larghetto. *Dido.*

When I am laid, . . . am
laid . . . in earth, may my wrongs . . . cre - ate No trou - ble, no

fig. 2 - “When I am laid in Earth,” from Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* (1689)

descending by half-step in g minor from scale degree 1 to 5, leaping down to 3 and ascending stepwise back to 5 before leaping downwards to scale degree 1 to begin the pattern again – repeats in awkward, five-bar rotations, emphasizing the pain of Dido, drawing its listener into a sense of dramatic catharsis. As Dido’s final aria, the lament bass serves to bring the attention of the listener in with its hypnotic repetition, telegraphing to the audience the great profundity of the moment they are witness to, and the imminent expiring of our main character.

POPPEA

NERONE

(Andante, in tre 4)

p

Pur ti mi - ro, pur ti mi - ro,
Pur ti go - do, pur ti

fig. 3 - “Pur ti miro,” from Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (1643)

In Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, the opera concludes with "Pur ti miro," a sensual love duet between the Roman emperor Nero and his new empress Poppea following the forced exile of the former empress Ottavia (fig. 3). Again, the beginning of the song is heralded with a downward moving bass line, this time descending diatonically in G major. While the tonality of the pattern is different, its structure serves a similar purpose to the ostinato in *Dido and Aeneas*. "Pur ti miro," sitting at the *very* end of the opera, is the moment of consummation, for both Poppea and Nero, as well as the audience, reaching a sense of narrative resolution that ties the work together. Despite its incessant repeating, Monteverdi's ground bass here stands not for lament but for the overabundant and elated ecstasies of love. The ostinato's ability to paint antipodal emotions is a consequence of the gesture's refraction through differing tonal and narrative contexts. In other words, the musical gesture and its repeatedness signal the intensity or profundity with which we should read the moment, while the underlying tonality (g minor vs. G major), narrative context (tragedy vs. comedy), and general motion (chromatic and trudging vs. diatonic and lilting) color in, shade, and vectorize its respective emotion. The gradual calcifying of musical materials with rhetorical moves in opera rendered a "new legibility of this system of musical conventions," which in turn "enticed eighteenth-century thinkers to develop an aesthetic language for the art of musical sound itself."⁷

Privy to the fledgling linguistics of the sonic which were developing at the time, d'Alembert wrote the following:

⁷ Roger Mathew Grant, *Peculiar Attunements: How Affect Theory Turned Musical* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 10.

“In its origin music perhaps was intended only to represent noise. Little by little it has become a kind of discourse, or even language, through which the different sentiments of the soul, or rather its different passions, are expressed.”⁸

Music’s very weakness of representation caused scholars to reorient the artform’s organizing principle towards the communicating or imbuing of affect and emotion, the key move uniting the thinkers of the Affektenlehre. In abandoning straightforward imitation, music becomes “the first of the arts to be severed from the mimetic principle by a critical nexus.”⁹ As the Affektenlehre theorists sought out models by which to explain music’s affective capabilities, analogues in nature abounded. A common theme of *vibration* arises as a marker tying together sound and the organic.

The Affektenlehre viewed music as bypassing the mimetic principle of aesthetics, instead transmitting copies of affect to its listeners directly via its reverberative character, moving the soul in multifarious ways. The capacity of affectation was seen as a core principle of humanity’s connection to the natural. Later in his text, Dubos narrativizes our ability to be affected in terms of the organic: “Nature has thought proper to implant [affectation,] this quick and easy sensibility in man as the very basis of society.”¹⁰ Affectivity here is viewed as a quality, if not a gift that nature has bestowed upon us.

The resonant capacity of music became a model by which thinkers began constructing models of the affected subject, and in some cases, affectation itself. We see this comparison being made across Europe as scholars began re-evaluating sound,

⁸ Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert, “Preliminary Discourse,” in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. Richard N. Schwab and Walter E. Rex (Ann Arbor: Michigan University of Michigan Publishing, 2009) <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0001.083>.

⁹ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 94.

¹⁰ Dubos, *Critical reflections*, vol. 1, 32.

finding in it fertile soil in which to ground their conclusions. Friedrich Grimm understands music as pure affect, “immediately hit[ting] our senses and our imagination...by its very nature the language of feeling and the passions.”¹¹ Denis Diderot would find in sonic vibration a handy analogue for the sensorial capacities of the body, utilizing metaphors of string instruments to explain affectation:

“I have sometimes been led to compare the fibers that make up our sense organs with sensitive, vibrating strings. The string vibrates and makes a sound for a long time after it has been plucked. It is a vibration of this sort, it is this kind of necessary resonance, that keeps an object present to our minds while our understandings deal with whichever of its qualities we please to study.”¹²

In aligning our sense apparatuses with vibrating cords, Diderot posits resonance as a key component of perception and integral to understanding our connection to the outside world as sensing beings.

David Hume would similarly latch onto the metaphor of the sonic in order to explain our affective faculties:

“with regard to the passions...[the human mind] resembles a string-instrument, where, after each stroke, the vibrations still retain some sound that gradually and insensibly decays...each stroke will not produce a clear and distinct note of passion, but the one passion will always be mixed and confounded with the other.”¹³

Hume’s statement carries a good deal of similarity with Diderot’s assessment. However, he makes a notable augmentation by speaking to the admixture of sensations, their constant ‘confounding’ of each other. In this way, Hume tacks even more closely to the physicality of sound in explaining affectation, appropriating the continuous stream of

¹¹ Friedrich Melchior Grimm, “Lyric poem,” in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. Katharina Clausius (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Publishing, 2016), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0002.817>.

¹² Denis Diderot, *Rameau’s Nephew and Other Works*, trans. Jacques Barzun and Ralph H. Bowen (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001) 100.

¹³ David Hume, *A Dissertation on the Passions*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

information contained in the peaks and troughs of sound waves for his model of sensation. Music's relation to affect is seen through sound's ability to interact with and vibrate within the interiority of the subject.

Caspar Ruetz goes even further, saying that music "is not simply an imitation of nature, but nature itself, since it is just as grounded in nature to speak through singing and harmonic tones as it is through words, rhetorical speeches, and gestures."¹⁴ Tying music directly to nature, Ruetz posits music as affect in and of itself, an organic vessel that transmits sensation into an audience. The haptic and penetrative physicality of sound caused the scholars of the *Affektenlehre* to view music in a place of privilege among the arts; their understanding was rooted in numerous appeals to the organic, centralized around music and affect's mutual quality of *vibration*.

2: ROMANTIC ORGANICISM AND SCHENKER

The understanding of organicism and sound as it is approached in American music scholarship from the mid-twentieth century forward is predicated almost wholly on the ideals of the organic that were developed and elaborated in the Romantic era, and then synthesized into a singular theoretical framework for music analysis in the first half of the twentieth century by Heinrich Schenker. While there are many qualities of the organic that Schenker would glean from the Romantics in honing his practice, we will pay special consideration to his idea of *necessity*. Looking through Schenker's

¹⁴ Caspar Ruetz, "Sendschreiben eines Freundes an den andern über einige Ausdrücke des Herrn Batteux von der Musik," in *Historisch-kritische Beyträge zur Aufnahme der Musik*, vol. 1, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg (Berlin: Johann Jacob Schutzens, 1754), 292, quoted and translated in Grant, *Peculiar Attunements*, 105.

corpus, we find that the German Idealists held an outsized sway on his conceptions of musical logic and form. It is precisely the philosophical influence of the German Idealists and their various understandings of necessity that would inform Schenker's analytical project.

2.1: A SHORT DIGRESSION ON THE EMERGENCE OF BIOLOGY

The Romantic expounding of organicism is innately tied to the coeval emergence of biology as a scientific discipline. Organicism arises out of a need to move beyond the mechanistic ideals that girded the thought of the Enlightenment, which had become increasingly destabilized by the growing body of scientific knowledge. Kant would go as far as stating that "it would be absurd to regard the initial generation of a plant or an animal as a mechanical effect incidentally arising from the universal laws of nature."¹⁵ Kant saw in nature that organic beings had the ability "to actually generate their own kind in accordance with a regular law of nature, and not merely to unfold them."¹⁶ The co-existence of sameness and individual difference within an underlying, rigid set of natural laws sparked debates about how organic development arose, with thinkers contending between two ideas: *preformation* and *epigenesis*.

Preformation held that "organisms are generated out of preformed germs, the development of which is merely a matter of growing and unpacking."¹⁷ By this theory, origins are predeterminating (in a vacuum), and each individual holds within them the entirety of their organic advancement, which is unfurled from birth to death. The

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, trans. David Walford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 114.

¹⁶ Kant, *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, 114.

¹⁷ Janina Wellmann, *The Form of Becoming: Embryology and the Epistemology of Rhythm, 1760-1830*, trans. Kate Sturge (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 14.

epigenesists challenged the more traditional preformationist viewpoint, contending that “the developmental force was not predetermined, but rather innate to each organic being.”¹⁸ The crux of the issue lies precisely at the interfacing between freedom and constriction: how do the laws that bind organic development to certain guiding tracks allow for the great diversity present in the natural world, while still retaining a stringent capacity for self-replication? While the content and shape of the preformation/epigenesis debates is beyond the scope of this paper, Kant’s gradual, if tendentious acceptance of epigenesis over strict preformation would be part of a larger sea change in European thought at the time, which saw the latter view largely fading from relevance. The Romantic privileging of epigenesist models leads to both confirmations and problematizations of Schenker’s synthesizing of Romantic organicism.

2.2: SCHENKERIAN ORGANICISM

In analyzing tonal music, Schenker makes numerous appeals to the natural in order to ground his system. He maintained that “tonal forms...have to be grasped as almost as though they were animate creatures.”¹⁹ From his readings of the German Idealists, he would extract a necessitarianism reserved for constructions of the subject in order to encapsulate the expression of musical organicism he found in the works of Beethoven, Brahms, and other, largely Austro-German symphonists, transferring German Idealist metaphysical frameworks of identity and subjecthood into an explanation of tonal schema. Schenker’s understanding of necessity would inform and

¹⁸ John Neubauer, “Organicism and Music Theory,” in *New Paths: Aspects of Music Theory and Aesthetics in the Age of Romanticism*, ed. Darla Crispin (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), 13.

¹⁹ Heinrich Schenker, *Counterpoint I*, trans. John Rothgeb and Jürgen Thym (New York: Schirmer, 1987), xix.

color the analytical concepts of his system, namely the *ursatz*, *urlinie*, and their relationship to the chord of nature (*klang*).

For Schenker, musical structures elaborate upon and are underpinned by the naturally occurring harmonic overtone series (fig. 4), which when sounded simultaneously, Schenker regards as the chord of nature.

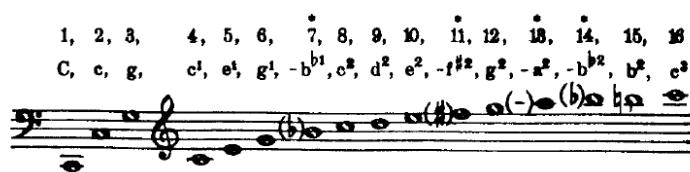


fig. 4 - the harmonic overtone series²⁰

Here, Schenker derives *klang* directly from the physicality of sound. As sound is organized into music, it “manifests the principle of the harmonic series in a special way, one which still lets the chord of nature shine through.”²¹ When encountered in music, *klang* is rendered as “an image in reduced proportions of the over-life-sized phenomenon of Nature...instinctively guided by the vocal principle” out of practicality.²² The sonic expression of the chord of nature is most-often found in the major triad (fig. 5), which “[follows] the most potent overtones 3 and 5 to obtain a consonance whose character is obviously determined by them.”²³



fig. 5 - *Klang*, reduced to a C major triad [containing the fundamental and overtones 3 and 5]²⁴

²⁰ Heinrich Schenker, *Harmony*, ed. Oswalt Jonas, trans. Elisabeth Mann Borgese (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 21.

²¹ Heinrich Schenker, *Free Composition (Der freie Satz)*, trans. Ernst Oster (New York: Longman, 1979), 10.

²² Heinrich Schenker, *Harmony*, 28.

²³ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

The combination of *urlinie* and the bass arpeggiation of *klang* (“[serving] as a constant reminder of the chord of nature”²⁷) beget the *ursatz*, which Schenker sees as “a *unity*” which “alone makes it possible for voiceleading transformations to take place in the middleground and enables the forms of the fundamental structure to be transferred to individual harmonies.”²⁸ In other words, the sonic diversity that populates tonal music lies downstream to an overarching fundamental structure, which orients its motion and from which all its material flows. Most notable for our purposes here is how Schenker’s system predicates the organic as necessary, or bound by immutable physical laws. Schenker would inherit from the German Idealists a specific coordinating of the necessary with the spontaneous in order to frame the musical products of the Austro-German tradition as organic.

2.3: SCHENKER AND NECESSITY

Schenker’s organicism articulates a careful, if not paradoxical dance between freedom and restriction in structuring the sonic. His writings are full of appeals to predetermination and inevitability in clarifying the necessity of organic form. From the beginning of *Free Composition*: “The origin of every life, whether of a nation, clan, or individual...becomes its destiny...The inner law of origin accompanies all development and is ultimately part of the present.”²⁹ Even the Schenkerian genius is at the whim of Nature, encountering “the limit which nature itself draws with its chord and which humankind draws with tone-space and the *Urlinie*. Thankfully, the genius perceives this

²⁷ Schenker, *Free Composition*, 11.

²⁸ Ibid. (*italics original*).

²⁹ Schenker, *Free Composition*, 3.

limit as the necessary guardian and regulator of freedom.”³⁰ Schenker’s belief in overbearing structural determination places him closer to the preformationists than the epigenesists, as he attempted to find an exhaustive principle that could explain the vast potentialities both present in tonality and in the artistic products trafficking in it. By imagining musical compositions to be ultimately expressive of a larger structure, Schenker would coordinate the composer themselves as ventriloquizing of a deeper, fundamental force.

The Romantic model of art construction, reaching its highest form under the guise of ‘genius,’ is often predicated on an ephemeral, inextricable, and transcendental connection to some larger power.³¹ The artist is viewed as a vessel operating at the behest of inspiration, a membrane through which material arises and is constructed, always in the way that it could only ever be. It is through the enacting of art that one could transcend the finite, human characteristics of existence, a tact that Hegel would take in placing art, along with religion and philosophy, at the apex of human achievement. Hegel views art as “an individual configuration of reality whose express function it is to make manifest the Idea in its appearance.”³² The Idea is primordially rendered in nature, providing the artist with the notions of beauty:

“We must...conceive Nature as herself containing in potency the absolute Idea. She is that Idea in *apparent shape*, which mind, in its synthetic power, posits as the object opposed to itself.”³³

³⁰ Heinrich Schenker, *The Masterwork in Music: A Yearbook*, Vol. 1, ed. William Drabkin, trans. Various (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 113. (*italics original*)

³¹ Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 176.

³² G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F.P.B. Osmaston (London: G. Bell, 1920), 100.

³³ Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, 127. (*italics original*)

It is through the artist's interactions with Nature (in the uppercase) that one absorbs and recreates the Idea in a new form, through their own lens. However, Schenker takes this interaction to the extreme, positing it as entirely asymmetrical, if not irrational: the composer is at the mercy of Nature, passively rendering the notes in the only way they could have ever been (derivative of the *ursatz*).³⁴ Schenker compares the faculty of genius to the unconscious when he states the following:

"It is often characteristic of great talents and geniuses that they, like sleepwalkers, go the right way even when something or other - in the present case, the full intention of doing the wrong thing - prevents them from listening to their instincts. It is as if a vastly superior force of truth, of nature, was doing the composing behind their consciousness and in their name, without it mattering at all whether the individual artist himself wanted to do the right thing or not. If things proceeded fully in accordance with his conscious intention, his works would often fail miserably, were it not for the mysterious power providentially arranging things for the best."³⁵

Schenker views the artist as acting outside of their own consciousness, somnambulating, accessing a higher register of being as their material coalesces into shape, their hand guided by an unseen and ineffable force. The notes can come only as they can, only as fate allows. Schenker's sense of necessity is borne of what he sees as the artist's passivity in relation to the overbearing physical structure of sound present in the chord of nature, and arising pragmatically as the *ursatz*; the composer can only get in the way: "the order of the tones, apart from the dictates of a human intellect, wills itself to be thus rather than any other way."³⁶ The harmonic series, "Nature's only source for music to draw upon, is much more familiar to the instinct of the artist than to

³⁴ Schenker's understanding of Nature is closely related to Hegel's concept of the Idea.

³⁵ Schenker, *Harmony*, 60.

³⁶ Heinrich Schenker, *Heinrich Schenker als Essayist und Kritiker*, ed. Helmut Federhofer (Hildesheim: Olms, 1990), 342, quoted and translated in Bryan J. Parkhurst, "Making a Virtue of Necessity: Schenker and Kantian Teleology," *Journal of Music Theory* 61, no. 1 (2017): 66.

his consciousness."³⁷ Schenker's formulation of the artist acting outside of consciousness, under the influence of a larger, inextricable power, is extremely similar to Schelling's coordinating of necessity and freedom in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*:

"Freedom is to be necessity, and necessity freedom... To say that necessity is again to be present in freedom, amounts, therefore, to saying that through freedom itself, and in that I believe myself to act freely, something I do not intend is to come about unconsciously, i.e., without my consent; or, to put it otherwise, the conscious, or that freely determining activity which we deduced earlier on, is to be confronted with an unconscious, whereby *out of the most uninhibited expression of freedom there arises unawares something wholly involuntary, and perhaps even contrary to the agent's will, which he himself could never have realized through his willing.*"³⁸

Schelling's negotiation of freedom and restraint (in the name of necessity) hinges on a vision of the self that is partially yet inescapably under the thrall of unconscious action, inadvertently affected, if not directed, by the ineffable. To have freedom is to be subject to a degree of inevitability, to be caught in an unavoidable undertow. Schenker sees music composition as a further elaboration (if not the prime exemplar) of the self's relation to an inescapable superstructure, à la Schelling. The composer is subject to the machinations of their instinct's receptivity to a pre-existing, natural foundation that (for Schenker) binds tonality together, drawn to the *urlinie* "as though to the primordial mothers."³⁹

Kant would also mediate the concepts of freedom and necessity in the Second Analogy from his First Critique: "Everything that happens (begins to be) presupposes

³⁷ Schenker, *Harmony*, 20.

³⁸ F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 204. (italics for emphasis)

³⁹ Heinrich Schenker, *Der Tonwille: Pamphlets in Witness of the Immutable Laws of Music*, Vol. 1, ed. William Drabkin, trans. Various (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 22.

something which it follows in accordance with a rule.”⁴⁰ By this formulation, every spontaneous particle of existence, no matter how novel, can be traced to an a priori, an orienting lodestar. Schenker would reiterate Kant almost verbatim in his book on counterpoint, where he states that “every necessity bears its own specific rule in itself.”⁴¹ Schenker’s search for an a priori organizing principle of sound mirrors the belief in and philosophical excavation for an inextricable guiding element that typifies the German Idealists. Schelling perhaps comes closest to Schenker, by seeking to provide a “metaphysical system for all reality that was grounded in an unassailable first principle, a principle both self-evident and absolute.”⁴² Schenker found what he considered to be a first principle for the sonic in the *klang*, positing the *ursatz* as the ultimate expression of the organic from which all tonal music is derived.

3: POST-TONAL ORGANICISM: WEBERN

While Schenker postulated his own organicist model of music, the organicism of the German Idealists would evolve into distinct shapes among the composers of the early twentieth-century. Composer Anton Webern is known for his spartan approach to twelve-tone composition, writing music largely severed from the tonal apparatus. Despite Webern’s turn away from common practice, and even extended tonality, his musical philosophy is deeply organicist, and very much indebted to its Romantic expression. Going through his lectures in *The Path to the New Music*, we find that Webern held many of the same organicist tenets as Schenker, primarily around the harmonic

⁴⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 606.

⁴¹ Schenker, *Counterpoint I*, 51.

⁴² Douglas W. Scott, “Translator’s Introduction,” in F.W.J. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), xxix.

series and organic unity, but saw them from different angles, applying similar concepts in order to explain the necessity of post-tonal forms of musical construction. By contrasting Webern and Schenker's utilizations of Romantic organicism to privilege wildly different methods of sonic construction,⁴³ this section will decalcify and decenter the dominant historical vector drawn between the Romantics and Schenker.

3.1: TWELVE-TONE COMPOSITION AND NATURE

Webern is straightforward about art's relation to nature, evoking Goethe when he says that "there is no essential contrast between a product of nature and a product of art...what we regard as and call a work of art is basically nothing but a product of nature."⁴⁴ Webern sees the likeness of art and nature as emerging from their mutual subservience to "rules of order," going as far as to say that the material of art is not "'aesthetic,' but that it is a matter of natural laws...all discussion of music can only take place along these lines."⁴⁵

The linkage between nature and art occurs at the level of the sensorial, with music operating according to "natural law as related to the sense of hearing."⁴⁶ Webern here tacks closer to the Affektenlehre by placing the listening subject at the center of his conclusion, albeit a universalized one. The natural law is expressed, as it is for Schenker, in the harmonic overtone series, which Webern sees as "infinite" in scope.⁴⁷ A key difference between the theorist and the composer emerges here. Where Schenker reads an implicit hierarchy of pitch, Webern sees a path of sonic potentiality, extending

⁴³ Namely twelve-tone composition and tonality, respectively.

⁴⁴ Anton Webern, *The Path to the New Music*, ed. Willi Reich, trans. Leo Black (New Jersey: Universal Edition, 1975), 10.

⁴⁵ Webern, *The Path to the New Music*, 12, 11.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 15.

forever. It is because of the infinite nature of the harmonic series that “ever subtler differentiations [in pitch] can be imagined,” differentiations which encompass ever-newer ways of conceiving of and structuring tone.⁴⁸ Webern presciently reads out of the overtone series the possibility of “quarter-tone music and the like,” an argument that would be adopted by spectral composers nearly half a century later.^{49 50} In this way, the organic in music (at the level of pitch) is not a static entity (a la Schenker), but a time-dependent, ever-expanding window of sonic possibility. It is not whether musical expression is natural or not, but “whether the present time is yet ripe” for it.⁵¹ Music becomes “the natural product of the human mind’s changing activity.”⁵² Webern would likewise use the Romantic organicist presumption of unity in order to prove the naturalness (and thereby the supremacy) of twelve-tone composition.

One of the defining features of organicism as theorized by the German Idealists is the individual organism’s discrete wholeness. Webern sees unity as integral in music composition: “comprehensibility is the highest law of all. Unity must be there. There must be means of ensuring it.”⁵³ He narrativizes the development of polyphony out of single lines in the medieval era as an important step in the continual evolution of musical ideas in their complexity (note the organicist presumption of musical evolution). The layering of voices, producing counterpoint, shifts the register at which

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See Gérard Grisey, “Did you say spectral?,” trans. Joshua Fineberg, *Contemporary Music Review* 19, no. 3 (2000): 1-3; James O’Callaghan, “Spectral Music and the Appeal to Nature,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 15, no. 1 (2018): 57-73

⁵¹ Webern, *The Path to the New Music*, 15.

⁵² Judit Frygesi, “Organicism as a Theory of Modernism in the Writings of Schoenberg, Webern and Bartók,” *International Journal of Musicology* 6 (1997), 342.

⁵³ Webern, *The Path to the New Music*, 43.

aesthetic unity can be achieved as ideas become larger than can be conveyed in one line. Polyphony causes “the idea” to be “distributed in space...one part can’t express the idea any longer, only the union of parts can completely express the idea.”⁵⁴

Webern sees the pursuit of unity under evermore complex artistic schema to be a throughline of composition and guiding principle of musical evolution. Throughout history “most great artists have striven to make this unity ever clearer.”⁵⁵ It is the pursuit of clarity that allows Webern to posit the twelve-tone technique as the most unified of compositional schema, “achiev[ing] a degree of complete unity that was not even approximately there before.”⁵⁶ Webern orients the whole of music history around the creation of “ever higher levels of structural unity,” seeing twelve-tone composition as perfectly suited to its historical moment, and an organic extension baked into the harmonic overtone series.⁵⁷ Anton Webern’s deliberate usage of Romantic organicism in order to validate post-tonal modes of music construction brings attention to the wide aesthetic application of the models of the German Idealists.

4: ORGANISM AS PROCESS: WHITEHEAD AND RETI

The philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead represents an inflection point whose ripples have taken decades to be ascertained. Whitehead’s philosophy circulates and expounds upon a theory of organism, a speculative cosmology and metaphysical system he proposed during the first half of the twentieth century. While there has been a decided ‘Whiteheadian’ turn in multiple sectors of theory in recent years, for many

⁵⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Frygesi, “Organicism as a Theory of Modernism,” 342.

years after his passing in 1947, his advocates lamented over the fact that Whitehead was not “being read by people in fields other than philosophy.”⁵⁸ However, the music theory of his contemporary, Rudolph Reti, holds many stark parallels with Whitehead’s theory of organism, particularly in their understandings of process. We will first explore key factors of Whitehead’s metaphysics before finding their resonances in Reti’s theory of thematic process, extending the sonic organic metaphor beyond its Romantic framework.

4.1: WHITEHEADIAN METAPHYSICS

For Whitehead, “the world is made up” of *actual entities*. These are the “real things” that inhabit existence.⁵⁹ Everything, to the most inconsequential scintilla of matter in the farthest-flung corner of the universe, despite differences in register and function, occupies the same level “in the principles which actuality exemplifies.”⁶⁰ Actual entities are both “complex and interdependent.”⁶¹ They are near-instantaneous, event-like,⁶² emerging for a brief flicker of existence before perishing in their very actualization, becoming a *datum* for the arising of further actual entities at later temporal junctures. In this way, the world constantly undergoes processual creation as actual entities become into existence, and then pass into reference to an ever-newer crop of actual entities.

⁵⁸ Donald W. Sherburne, introduction to *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 1.

⁵⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1985), 18.

⁶⁰ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 18.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶² Whitehead interchangeably uses the term *actual occasions* for actual entities.

The actual entity becomes by “absorbing influences from other entities in its environment.”⁶³ This process of emergence-by-assimilation is called *prehension*. The atoms inside of the chair I sit in prehend the data of their surroundings, the chair-atoms in their immediate vicinity, the weight of my body, the wavelengths of light they either collect or reflect outward. I prehend the seat of the chair, the glow of the lamp, and my past self from “between a tenth of a second and half a second ago.”⁶⁴ For Whitehead, prehension is how the self and identity are ultimately constructed:

“the present occasion, while claiming self-identity, while sharing the very nature of the bygone occasion in all its living activities, nevertheless is engaged in modifying it, in adjusting it to *other* influences, in completing it with *other* values, in deflecting it to *other* purposes. The present moment is constituted by the influx of *the other* into that self-identity which is the continued life of the immediate past within the immediacy of the present.”⁶⁵

Through prehension, actual entities inherit “data” from the past in constructing the present, in turn setting about the conditions by which the immediate future comes into being, and in perishing, becoming an object by which a new subject can inform itself in its emerging.⁶⁶

As actual entities cycle and pass, the relations arising between their instantiations canalize paths and engender patterns. Recursion renders “routes of inheritance” that are more likely to be re-enacted overtime.⁶⁷ In this way, duration and the illusion of stasis are constructed. The data that actual entities prehend come in the form of *eternal objects*. Eternal objects are “pure potentials for the specific determination of fact,” the attributes

⁶³ Richard Elfyn Jones, “AN Whitehead and music: Real time,” *Musical Times* 141, no. 1873 (2000): 47.

⁶⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 181.

⁶⁵ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 181 (*italics original*).

⁶⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 232.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

that actual entities inherit and exude in their becoming.⁶⁸ The actual entity “acquires a definite character (to the exclusion of other possible characters) by selecting some eternal objects (rather than others) to conceptuallyprehend.”⁶⁹ By inhering into an actual entity (through prehension), eternal objects provide the former with each potential quality that they could betray.⁷⁰ The process of prehension is done largely outside of the conscience. In assessing and collecting eternal objects toprehend, actual entities become actualized.

The climax of an actual entity’s existence is its *concrescence*, whereby it enacts the qualities of the eternal objects it has selected, and then perishes into a datum to be prehended by other actual entities, becoming a reference point for future moments. A feedback loop emerges in the interpenetration of eternity and time, as the present moment remains irrevocably hinged upon the eternal data it sits upon, whilst folding itself into permanence, affecting eternity ever so slightly with its own, unique fingerprint of data. The process of prehension is reliant upon the constant crosspollination between time and eternity, as the two continually reinterpret and mutually construct each other. Whitehead saw the eternal and the everchanging as interdependent: “permanence can be snatched only out of flux; and the passing moment can find its adequate intensity only by its submission to permanence.”⁷¹ It is because of the perpetual interaction of the two that the transitory becomes the site of the present,

⁶⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁹ Jones, “AN Whitehead and Music,” 48.

⁷⁰ Examples of eternal objects include greenness, hope, hardness, and terror.

⁷¹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 335.

and thereby of life itself: "life is a characteristic of 'empty space,' ...Life lurks in the interstices of each cell, and in the interstices of the brain."⁷²

4.2: RETI'S THEORY OF THEMATIC PROCESS

Rudolph Reti's formulation of thematic process in music holds a deep connection with organicism, but as we will see, he focuses on different aspects of nature and music as the salient connections uniting the two. Reti saw music as

"created from sound as *life is created from matter*...the act of creation is centered on this very process by which a musical idea emerges as a consequence of another, as a thing which is a part of the given world, yet which has never existed before."⁷³

The process Reti mentions is rooted in the development of musical gestures over the course of a work, what he terms a thematic process. Through Reti's theoretical lens, a musical piece is constructed via the thematic connections drawn between the various instantiations of singular, often cellular musical gestures, which recur across the work with various shadings and degrees of difference. In this way the interrelations between materials "account not only for the structural detail of a work but also for its larger shaping and gradually even for its wider architectural plan."⁷⁴ We can see this process unfolding in Reti's analysis of the first movement of Brahms's Second Symphony (fig. 8).

⁷² Ibid., 105-6.

⁷³ Rudolph Reti, *The Thematic Process in Music* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 359.

⁷⁴ Rudolph Reti, *Thematic Patterns in the Sonatas of Beethoven* (New York: MacMillan, 1967), 45.

First theme

Ex. 118

Second half of new theme

Second theme

Ex. 119

First half of new theme

(fig. 8 - Reti's analysis of the themes in Brahms's Second Symphony)

In the above example, Reti pinpoints the first theme of the movement and finds within it three cellular subunits (*a*, *b*, and *c*). The smaller divisions of material are what Reti defines as motifs, or “any musical element...which, by being constantly repeated and varied through a work...assumes a role in the compositional design.”⁷⁵ The sequencing of the cells generates the theme, which is a “fuller group or ‘period’ which acquires a ‘motivic’ function in a composition’s course.”⁷⁶ Despite the confusing overlap in Reti’s terminology, the thematic process can be uncovered in the theme’s reshaping with each additional iteration. In fig. 8, Reti delineates how the cells in Brahms’s theme recur in separate instantiations, using normal-sized noteheads to depict the original material, with smaller noteheads to indicate the differences that have arisen in the cells’ later manifestation. With each iteration, novel permutations occur around and within the structure of the repeated gesture, possibly obscuring and distorting its prime form, and yet, these separate articulations of musical material are united by the motivic kernel of the cell. A narrative emerges in the way that the cell both reappears and transforms

⁷⁵ Reti, *Thematic Process*, 11-12, n. 1.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

itself, each instance serving as a waystation on the path of its development. It is in this way that Reti sees the thematic process within a sonic work as contributing to, if not entirely orienting its “wider architectural plan.” It is through the interplay of difference and sameness, emergent from the restatement of pre-established sonic material, that a piece achieves a sense of “*homogeneity in the inner essence, but at the same time... variety in the outer appearance.*”⁷⁷

Reti, like Schenker, posits that musical works betray a sense of wholeness and oneness, ultimately becoming “*one great expression of its basic motiv.*”⁷⁸ However, Reti departs from Schenker by seeing the ‘basic motiv’ of a work as contextually derived from piece-to-piece, rather than an overarching and unavoidable natural phenomena (like the *ursatz*). It is not the chord of nature but the recursion of cellular material which generates the ‘homogeneity’ that Reti reads into the superstructure of the work, while the difference and novelty evolving out of each sounding of the cell lead to an outward sense of ‘variety’ on the surface of the work.

4.3: MUSICAL MATERIAL AS PREHENDING

In the course of Reti’s theoretical writings, Whitehead is a thinker who is referenced at key moments. Reti quotes him directly in the epigraph to *The Thematic Process in Music*, evoking him in a place of prominence, allowing Whitehead’s idea of the organic to frame the pages that follow: “In the organic theory a pattern need not endure in undifferentiated sameness...A tune is such a pattern. Thus the endurance of a pattern means the reiteration of the succession of its contrasts.”⁷⁹ Whitehead

⁷⁷ Ibid., 13 (italics original).

⁷⁸ Ibid., 223 (italics original).

⁷⁹ Ibid., v.

additionally appears toward the end of the text, as well as at the beginning of Reti's *Tonality in Modern Music*, from 1958. His affinity for Whitehead can also be seen in the theory of thematic process.

For Reti, music is predicated on “metaphors of growth, development, and evolution.”⁸⁰ The development of a work, and the narrative it renders, is tied to how its salient material undergoes a thematic process. The recursion of material combined with the differences sprouting from each individual restatement shape the work's form. It is the notion of difference occurring through sameness that is central to the comparison between Reti and Whitehead. We can view the reiteration of material as the reifying of past data, the ginning up and revisitation of past in present, a Whiteheadian ‘datum,’ “largely composed of the remnants of immediately past experiences.”⁸¹ When pertinent material sounds again, the present moment of the piece is inflected with data gathered from an earlier temporal juncture, impressing this slight derivation into the work's unfurling.

Reti, like Whitehead, sees an interplay between the eternal and the temporal. These poles are occupied by Reti's unifying (and contextually-dependent) ‘basic motiv’ and the ephemeral, individual soundings of its permutations. Each sounding emerges as a singular event within the piece, what we can read as an *actual occasion* in the verbiage of Whitehead. Despite the presentness of each discrete instance, it is in reference to, and inevitably affected by the basic motiv. Like an actual occasion, it

⁸⁰ Ruth Solie, “The Living Work: Organicism and Musical Analysis,” *19th-Century Music* 4, no. 2 (1980): 152.

⁸¹ Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 12.

cannot “[come] into being *ex nihilo*; rather, it inherits its ‘data’ from past occasions.”⁸² But it is also “self-creating...by virtue of the way in which it treats these preexisting data or prior occasions.”⁸³ Out of sameness, difference.

Taking such similarities into account with Reti’s own references to Whitehead, we can see how the theory of thematic process bears relation to Whitehead’s theory of organism. And to our larger project, Reti’s affinity for Whitehead is reflective of an organicism that is largely removed from German Idealist, or even post-Kantian thought. Just as Schenker and Webern translate (to varying degrees of success) the metaphysics of Kant, Schelling, and Hegel into musical schema, Reti likewise mines from the cosmological speculations of Whitehead to develop an additional way of formulating musical structure.

5: STORM AND ORGANICISM AS PROCESS SOCIAL KIND

The preceding history has given evidence to the fact that terms such as “organic” and “organicism” in relation to music have had a slippery definition at best. The markers for what allows a piece of music to be framed as organic or natural has shifted across thinkers, let alone across eras and regions, as different cultural contexts have allowed different similarities between nature and music to come to light. It is because of organicism’s fuzziness in definition that Jason Storm’s idea of process social kinds serves as an alluring model for how we can conceive of the intellectual object of organicism. Storm contrasts process social kinds against the natural kinds that typify

⁸² Shaviro, *Without Criteria*, 19 (italics original).

⁸³ Ibid.

the intellectual categorization of hard sciences like chemistry. Where natural kinds are essentialist and defining, seeking to categorize discrete stages, process social kinds take change as a baseline, attempting to explain “relative *stability* or *similarity*.”⁸⁴ It is helpful first to define what is meant by ‘social’ and ‘process.’

Organicism is a social object. It is constructed out of the interactions of people with each other and the world, a linkage drawn from experience and cogitation as the sonic became an object of philosophical inquiry. As a social object, it serves as a “placeholder for patterns of *activities*,” here the general interconnection that we have continued to read between music and nature.⁸⁵ The activities englobed by the term organicism are socially-derived, and as such, under the sway of culture. The ever-changing nature of culture causes the representations within it to “undergo mutation, recombination, and selection,” leading to a form of transmission “guaranteed to create an extraordinary profusion of baroque variations.”⁸⁶ From the shifting surface of the social, it becomes necessary to view its objects not as essential, but processual.

Storm contrasts the “distinct” and “relatively stable” logic of substance against the logic of process, “one of components, contexts, stages, cycles, phases, and conditions.”⁸⁷ Taking change as given, and seeking to understand local similarities, processes are “conditioned and relational, rather than autonomous and essential. It makes no sense to look only for the pure process, as if it existed on its own or in an uncontaminated form.”⁸⁸ Where Heraclitus, one of the first process philosophers, says

⁸⁴ Storm, *Metamodernism*, 90 (italics original).

⁸⁵ John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 57 (italics original).

⁸⁶ Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 38-39.

⁸⁷ Storm, *Metamodernism*, 98.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

that one never enters the same river twice, Storm's formulation here can be viewed as its extension, where "we never have the 'same' process at all."⁸⁹ Storm lists eight qualities of process social kinds in his exploration of the concept, but two are especially worth mentioning with regard to organicism: high-entropy and undefinability.⁹⁰

Storm contrasts the high-entropic capacity of process social kinds against the essential nature of natural kinds. Natural kinds are manufactured around the supposition of a determinative essence, some aspect or attribute that is universally translatable across all individuals of the same kind. The search for essence among kinds in order to determine an individual's membership in certain categories is reliant on a belief that "a generalization about one individual member of a natural kind in view of their kind-ness is said to hold for all members of the kind."⁹¹ High-entropy, by contrast, implies a multifariousness to the application and expression of a process social kind. We are dealing here with objects whose essence (if it exists) is highly unstable and consistently changing, because of its own mind-dependentness. While Storm links high-entropic qualities to "disciplinary master categories" such as religion and art, we can use this configuration to understand better the shiftingness of organicism, rendering a frame adaptable enough to better weather the philosophical and definitional changes that shape its history.⁹² Organicism has never, and most likely will never reach a point of equilibrium in its discourse, and because of this, we must reassess the attributes by

⁸⁹ Ibid., 99.

⁹⁰ The other qualities of social process kinds Storm lists are cross-cutting, *niḥsvabhāva*, abstract/reflective, historically/culturally contingent, normative, and mind-dependent. See Storm, 94-96.

⁹¹ Ibid., 91.

⁹² Ibid., 94.

which its objecthood is pondered instead of chasing a singular trait that is evidenced in each and every instantiation.

Working hand-in-hand with the multiplanar implications of high-entropy is undefinability. Undefinability is a core tenet of all social process kinds, chiefly due to their evershifting and contextual nature. To make a definition is to draw a line in the sand at low tide, to place a marker in fragile yet constantly replenishing soil. The definition will inevitably fail to exhaust the object it attempts to encompass, as novel happenings and permutations of the process undergirding the object will continue to elaborate aspects that were previously unviewable. As Whitehead put it, “in its turn every philosophy will suffer a deposition.”⁹³ Likewise, every version of organicism faces its deposition. Each thinker who attempts to systematize and encapsulate such large and unwieldy concepts as music and nature encodes the expiration date of their formulations as scholarship and discourse continue to move, ceaselessly. With organicism we are dealing with an object whose existence is intangible, unseeable, and thereby forever skirting the realm of definitive description. Storm’s idea of process social kinds provides us with a scholarly frame wide enough to engender dialogue across diverse interpretations and readings of the intersections of sound and nature, and a new baseline upon which a dialogue regarding the organic can take root.

6: CONCLUSION

The impenetrability of musical representation has led many philosophers to take drastic action regarding the sonic. Thinkers have at times been content to accept the lack

⁹³ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 7.

of readily transmissible import in music, taking this observation as confirmation for either the demotion or the supremacy of music among its fellow mediums. However, many more have looked to the lack of representation as a golden opportunity for analysis, for reading meaning into the ephemeral structures of the aural, to derive narratives and logic out of tone. I would argue that no lens of analysis has pervaded musical scholarship more so than organicism. With an exegetic history bridging the Romantic era to today, and its close association to many of the composers of the classical canon, organicism, in its many guises, has been evoked with consistency over centuries to explain vast and disparate regions of musical expression.

Because of its evergreen recurrence in discourse, organicism has continued to evolve since its initial positing in the late eighteenth-century, and itself emerges out of a far-reaching and persistent drive to find interconnections and resonances between the natural and the sonic. Its objecthood has become (or perhaps always was) ephemeral, its conclusions transitory. Rather than a singular thing, we are dealing here with a set of questions and concerns whose resultant inferences are filtered through the sociocultural lenses in which they are gestated. Organicism is a chapter of a wider history in the complicated and indecipherable dance between philosophy, music theory, nature, and sound; a messy and unbounded instantiation among an ever-growing cavalcade of linkages drawn between art and the organic. The history above was rendered with the intent to gain a greater knowledge of the impact of organicism on music. It should also allow us as music practitioners, creators, and listeners, to appreciate the medium's Rorschach-like quality which allays adequate, let alone universally transferable

conclusions about the meaning of tone and music composition. The qualities binding such amorphous yet megalithic entities as nature and sound together are prevaricating, evasive, and ever-changing. As such, we must be wary of those who would reduce this grand and messy dialogue to a discrete point, organically (and thereby ironically) attempting to paint a holistic and complete picture of what organicism is in order to cast it aside wholesale. While these efforts are pursued with virtuous ends, to point out stark issues and problematic biases, organicism at large is not an object worthy of nor capable of being extirpated from our scholarly toolkit. It is part of a deeper chronicle of philosophical and musical rumination, an expression of a greater, encapsulating discussion between humanity and the world in which music takes place.

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