

Eran Guter

Wittgenstein on Varieties of the Absurd in the Music of Interwar Austria

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. Music was no exception. In an early sketch for a foreword to *Philosophical Remarks*, penned in 1930, Wittgenstein averred that the music of his time expresses the spirit of the prevailing European and American civilization, which he found alien and uncongenial, and that he approaches “what is called modern music with the greatest mistrust (without understanding its language).”¹ In this essay I take the opportunity to recast some insights from my extensive study over the last decade of Wittgenstein’s remarks on music into a coherent and concise portrayal of Wittgenstein’s philosophical underpinning and upshots pertaining to his perception of the modern music scene in interwar Austria.²

That scene was characterized by a volatile admixture of progressive romantics, both the older generation (e.g., Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss) and the younger generation (e.g., Alexander von Zemlinsky, Max Reger, Franz Schreker, and the early Arnold Schoenberg), and avant-gar-

1 Wittgenstein 1998 p. 8.

2 See Guter 2011; 2015; 2017; 2019.

de composers who determinedly crossed the brink of atonality, most notably members of the Second Viennese School (Arnold Schoenberg in his middle and final periods, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern). Such music, in all its variety, often met with a scathing rebuke from the part of Viennese audiences as well as with seething disapproval from conservative music theorists, most notably Heinrich Schenker, who openly despised the music of Mahler, Strauss, Reger, and Schoenberg. Wittgenstein's aversion to such music is well documented. He suggested that Mahler's symphonies might be worthless and offered some particularly abusive remarks about the composer,³ he thought that Berg's music was scandalous,⁴ and he is on record as refusing to enter a concert hall for a performance of selections from Strauss's *Salome*.⁵ David Pinsent noted in his diary vehement arguments between Wittgenstein and his fellow students in Cambridge concerning modern music even before the wars.⁶

Wittgenstein's conservative taste in music is sometimes held against him, as if there must have been some intellectual failure on his part for not developing a taste for the avant-garde worthy of his advanced, revolutionary philosophical ideas. The gist of the present essay is to show that, for better or for worse, Wittgenstein's personal taste in music was powered by philosophical reasoning, which was organic to his philosophical development, and that ultimately

3 Wittgenstein 1998 p. 76.

4 McGuinness 1988 p. 33.

5 McGuinness 1988 p. 124.

6 Monk 1990 p. 78.

his philosophical attitude to the music scene of interwar Austria manifests a deeply probing gradation.

There are three outstanding issues which I would like to point out right at the outset. First, the only contemporary composer whom Wittgenstein truly admired was Josef Labor, who was a protege of the Wittgenstein family and music teacher to some of the Wittgenstein siblings.⁷ Labor was neither progressive nor avant-garde, yet for Wittgenstein he nonetheless encompassed a form of cultural decline, hence a genuine kind of modernism. Second, Mahler was the only truly modern composer who was significant enough in Wittgenstein's eyes to be worthy of attention. Yet Wittgenstein's harshly critical attitude toward Mahler was more philosophically complex than downright negative. He evidently did not like Mahler's music, but he nonetheless attributed philosophical significance to it.⁸ Third, against the backdrop of the quest of the Second Viennese School under Schoenberg to enact a revolution that would ensure that German music would reign supreme for the next hundred years, Wittgenstein's roaring silence on all things Schoenbergian betokens a profound philosophical antithesis to the idea that music could ever be insulated from our form of life.⁹ I will have more to say about these outstanding issues below.

A singular influence on Wittgenstein's philosophical thinking about modern music between the wars was Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. Wittgenstein read the book eagerly in May 1930 and it immediately struck

7 Alber 2000.

8 Guter 2015.

9 Guter 2011.

him as congenial to his own views on the predicament of contemporary civilization.¹⁰ This influence coincided with Wittgenstein's exposure to the music theory of Heinrich Schenker via conversations in the early 1930s with his nephew, the musicologist Felix Salzer, while the latter was studying with Schenker in Vienna.¹¹ Schenker's philosophical outlook on cultural decline, as well as his theoretic diagnosis of the ensuing disintegration of musical sensitivities and creativity, closely aligned with Spengler's view in various ways.¹²

Wittgenstein's 1930 sketch for a foreword to *Philosophical Remarks* resounds with Spenglerian sentiments concerning the breakdown of the cohesive forces formerly embodied both in the observance of a shared tradition and in the attempt to work in a common spirit. For Wittgenstein, culture at its height enables different people at different times and places to pool their cultural efforts and make use of their tasteful and creative powers in a common spiritual bond. The time of civilization, meaning "a time without culture", shows itself in a disintegration of culture into a host of disjointed efforts and non-discriminating judgments. It is the disappearance of concentrated and shared efforts to observe a way of life and contribute to "the same great end" – one that would enable human beings to express and experience something exalted or even sacred.

Wittgenstein's sketch can be fruitfully read in conjunction with his opening lecture for the first Michaelmas Term in 1930 in Cambridge (given just a few weeks before he

10 Wittgenstein 2003 p. 25.

11 Guter 2015.

12 Almén 1996.

wrote the sketch).¹³ Wittgenstein highlights the fact that in an age without culture, philosophy has been reduced to a matter of a complicated skill in the name of progress. It is no longer the lofty cultural project known to us from times past: the “nimbus of philosophy has been lost.” What we call progress is nothing more than a drive to construct more complicated structures. Since progress is said to be the form of civilization, it cannot be the case that making progress is one of civilization’s properties. Hence, the fact that a style of thinking has changed in a way exhibiting the form of progress does not mean that progress has occurred: it is just a case of finding some method. Yet the moment a method has been found, Wittgenstein avers, “one way of expressing personality is lost” – certain means of expressing human value disappear. Thus, it has become characteristic of an age without culture that there is a limiting of possibilities of expression, of possibilities for the manifestation and appreciation of a cultured sense of taste. We witness the curtailing of that which enables and embodies expression in prevailing cultural conditions.

For Wittgenstein, an important aspect of such dissolution of the resemblances that unite a culture’s way of life is the paradoxical obfuscation of the notion of clarity or transparency. Clarity becomes only a means to construct ever more complicated structures. It is no longer an end in itself. This is precisely where Wittgenstein’s sense of alienation arises. “For me”, he wrote, “on the contrary clarity, transparency, is an end in itself. I am not interested in erecting a building but in having the foundations of possible

13 Wittgenstein 2016 p. 67-68.

buildings transparently before me.”¹⁴ Wittgenstein’s sense of clarity and transparency as surveyability is diametrically opposed to what is prescribed by the form of progress: compulsive over-structuring and obfuscation, and with it, a fragmentation into calculable objects that reduce the personal expression of human values to a method and a mechanism.

The idea of surveyability has already been deeply ingrained in Wittgenstein’s aesthetics in his middle period, as we can see clearly in his 1930–1933 lectures in Cambridge.¹⁵ His point is that the comparisons of which aesthetic explanations consist are illuminating insofar as the expressed facts and phenomena are ordered in such a way that we can see them “within a system,” having gained a synoptic view of them. Wittgenstein’s notion of aesthetic ideal, as he used it in his 1930–1933 lectures, is related to Spengler’s notion of the *Urbild* (albeit critically). Aesthetic ideals are used against a specific cultural background of measuring and judging various achievements. They allow us to characterize the topography of culture by yielding an overview that can be rendered in a comprehensible and communicable way, affording us ways to draw meaningful distinctions, and also ways to go on discussing and drawing out – via such characterization – further aspects of what is there to be seen in and by means of it. This sort of “measuring rod” is a value-laden measure, one which will not suit cultural practices and sensitivities entirely different from ours.

This important antithesis, in Wittgenstein’s mind, between transparency as an end in itself, which hinges upon

14 Wittgenstein 1998 p. 9.

15 Wittgenstein 2016.

the givenness of cultural cohesion, and the form of progress, which typifies the age without culture, sets the stage for two extraordinary remarks on modern music which are found in Wittgenstein's 1930-1932/1936-1937 diaries, known as *Denkbewegungen*. The first remark, set down on October 4, 1930, concerns the music of the future (the allusion to Richard Wagner's essay by the same name must have been tongue in cheek).¹⁶ Wittgenstein suggests that the music of the future would be in one voice, in unison (*einstimmig*), not a continuation of the currently predominant, culturally entrenched musical formats which embody a complexity of voices. Rather, it would mark a new cultural epoch by being "simple, transparent. In a certain sense, naked." Once again, Wittgenstein shows an allegiance with Spengler, who maintained that when a culture enters its final phases, artists simply work with the hollow forms of the old culture, without understanding its essence, and that the future always transcends the current epoch by means of a return to the simplest, most basic expressions of life, which are bound to reveal their limitations. Wittgenstein's vision of the music of the future as a transparent, naked music in one voice epitomizes Wittgenstein's sense of attunement, of being in agreement throughout, that constitutes the praxeological grounds for setting up ideals as "measuring rods" for a culture – a new culture, perhaps.

As I have argued elsewhere in detail,¹⁷ there can be no sharper contrast than the one between Wittgenstein's organic vision of the music of the future and Arnold Schoenberg's contemporaneous "method for composing

16 Wittgenstein 2003 p. 49.

17 Guter 2011.

with twelve tones which are related only with one another,” which was designed with the very clear purpose of inheriting the future of German music. Again, nimbus is contrasted with technique, and concomitantly, I maintain, surveyability is contrasted with comprehensibility.

The 12-tone system is an extraordinary attempt to derive, through a series of manipulations, a wealth of material, complex and varied, from an initial pitch collection that, in itself, is pre-compositional, hence musically inert and barren. Schoenberg argued that this system represented a necessary step in the evolution of Western music, and he designed it for the sole purpose of replacing the structural differentiations formerly furnished by tonality. Yet for Wittgenstein, the language of tonality is inextricably, internally related to who we are as human beings who partake in a certain culture. “Could any reason be given at all for why the theory of harmony [Harmonielehre] is the way it is?” Wittgenstein asks, “And, first and foremost, must such a reason be given? It is here and it is part of our entire life.”¹⁸

Schoenberg’s hubris drew a vehement response from music theorist Heinrich Schenker, who immediately seized on the opportunity to flesh out the contrived, transgressive nature of Schoenberg’s method for sourcing musical materials:

Schoenberg produces a homunculus in music; it is a machine. Machines are supposed to be substitute for human strength, a surrogate. Now there are of course surrogates, such as the one for traveling, the automobile, but never can

18 Wittgenstein 2019 MS157a p. 24-26 (my translation).

there be a surrogate for the soul. Such a complicated operation is not intelligible for it.¹⁹

From Wittgenstein's point of view, Schoenberg's musical homunculus rests on a plain absurdity: there is simply no reason for the rules of 12-tone composition to be what they are, given the kind of beings we are, the purposes we have, our shared discriminatory capacities, and certain general features of the world we inhabit. The kinds of musical distinction called for by dodecaphonic composition – for instance, identifying a certain passage as based on a certain transposition of the inverted retrograde form of the original 12-tone row used in the given piece – are not only very difficult to make but simply not relevant to our lives, certainly not in the sense that questions and answers, introductions and conclusions are. One is reminded of Bruno Walter's sarcasm as he wrote in his memoirs about his own inability to follow Schoenberg's later music:

I am quite serious when I say that I should be happy if in a future existence, in which I might have the benefit of superior organs of musical perception, I were to be able to ask [Schoenberg's] forgiveness for my primitive mundane lack of understanding.²⁰

It is no wonder, then, that in lieu of cultural conditions for transparency and surveyability, the rules of 12-tone composition aim (by Schoenberg's own admission) at nothing other than creating the conditions of comprehensibility. Here the strict, conscious, technically correct

¹⁹ Quoted in Snarrenberg 1997 p. 80.

²⁰ Quoted in Simms 1996 p. 143.

application of the rules would be crucial. By contrast, according to Wittgenstein, a musical gesture (in the language of tonality) is not transparent by virtue of a mechanism for correct application of some postulated “rules of transparency”. Rather, its transparency resides precisely in their absence, indeed in the vacuity of the very notion of such rules. Transparency in this sense is not an epistemic notion. A musical gesture is transparent because it is already given to us with a familiar physiognomy, which is internally related to the preconditions as well as the lived, embodied realities of musical intelligibility. That is, for Wittgenstein, there is no sense in which we can say that a musical gesture needs to be made comprehensible. Music is physiognomic, intransitively transparent to human life. It betokens our capacity to make increasingly nuanced comparisons between multiform human practices, as we chart the unexpected topography of the resemblances that give unity to the ways of life of a culture. In such a context, self-expression is patently unbounded.

Wittgenstein further explored the philosophical limitations of self-expression in modern music in another singular remark on modern music which he set down in *Denkbelegungen* on January 27, 1931.²¹ An important observation in this remark concerns the characterization of our experience of the disintegration of cultural cohesion in terms of a constraint – an inability to conceptualize the transition to the modern. Wittgenstein’s point is that there is something, for sure, to be grasped and expressed amid cultural decline, but we are not astute enough to conceptualize it. The kind of cleverness which, according to Wittgenstein, we seem to

21 Wittgenstein 2003 p. 67-69.

lack, is not a matter of mental capacity but rather a matter of education and tradition: an acquired ability to comprehend cultural codes. We have become constrained by the incommensurability that obtains between us and the past, and thus we run up against a paradox: even if we knew “the truth”, says Wittgenstein, we probably would not be able to comprehend it.

This observation gives rise to a distinction between two kinds of absurdities in modern music. There is music that reflects a constraint on seeing that we do not comprehend, and there is another sort of music that reflects a constraint on seeing what we do not comprehend – on seeing through. The first sort of modern music corresponds to the various nonsensical maxims which derive from the form of progress. For Wittgenstein, such music is absurd in a superficially attractive sense and, he says, is rubbish. The other kind consists in denouncing such nonsensical maxims and formulations, but it ends up being vacuous or vacant (*nichtssagend*) – absurd, for sure, but only because it cannot pass as absurd in the other, “dressed-up” sense, which enjoys some sort of social recognition. Such vacuous modern music bespeaks short-sightedness. It gropes for something which it cannot express.

Wittgenstein’s distinction between nonsensical modern music and vacuous modern music corresponds to the distinction made by Schenker (and also by Spengler) between progressive romantics, on the one hand, and classicist epigones, on the other. According to Schenker, the artificial noisiness that characterizes the music of progressive romantic composers (Richard Strauss, in particular) is symptomatic of their inability to bind their empty sonorities together as elaborations of a single chord. Hence, Schenker

maintained, they try to mask the primitive design of their music with heavy orchestration, with noise and polyphonic clatter, and often they also resort to vulgar, extra-musical narratives in order to solve problems of musical continuity. On the other hand, contemporary classicist epigones resort to a reproductive reworking of old forms – they quite simply come up with worn-out imitations of Brahms.

Interestingly, Wittgenstein portrays the “vacuous modern composer” as a sort of tragic figure who, in good conscience, shuns the illusions and perils of progress and yet is patently barred from artistic greatness. The opposition of vacuous modern composers to the predominant form of progress was commendable, to be sure, but their inability to express what they themselves could no longer understand exacted a heavy social price: as modern, such music was bound to appear foolish. For Wittgenstein, such composers patently lack genius, character, and courage. Yet at the end of the diary entry he wrote, “Labor is an example of this where he created something really significant as in some few pieces.”²² This is quite a striking assertion about a composer whom Wittgenstein otherwise considered representative of “good Austrian work” alongside Grillparzer, Lenau, and Bruckner.²³ In general, Labor’s musical style is heavily indebted to Brahms, Mendelssohn, and Schumann, albeit lacking their charm and melodic inventiveness. He was clearly a classicist epigone, although his chamber music, for instance, nonetheless shows sophisticated handling of intricate textures, a panache for deft rhythmic interplay, and a good ear for harmonic detours. His compositions for the

22 Wittgenstein 2003 p. 69.

23 Wittgenstein 1998 p. 5.

organ (Labor's main instrument as a performer, in addition to the piano) show an academic rigor and a strong grasp of traditional structures, yet they significantly attest to an attraction to Gregorian chant, which happened to also hold special interest for Wittgenstein's emerging philosophical thinking on aspect perception in the 1930s.²⁴

Labor's more intimate piano music makes a particularly powerful case for Wittgenstein's further elaboration on Labor's dialectic significance as a contemporary composer: "Labor, when he writes good music, is absolutely unromantic. That is a very remarkable & significant indication."²⁵ His piano music may come across surprisingly non-idiomatic for the instrument (again, the piano was one of Labor's main instruments as a performer), featuring dense patterns, whose textures are often interrupted abruptly. There is also uncanny syntactic ambiguity in the structuring of his musical sentences. Labor's use of cadences as punctuation points is quite loose, hence his motivic material often seems structurally unhinged. Additionally, his harmonic syntax utilizes unorthodox connections along the functional cycle. The combination of the Labor's idiosyncratic writing for the piano and these syntactic anomalies results in the attenuation of harmonically goal-oriented motion. The perceived otherness of Labor's music gives a concrete sense to Wittgenstein's belief that, like in other instances of good Austrian art, there something in it which is particularly hard to understand: "There is a sense in which it is subtler than

24 Guter 2020.

25 Wittgenstein 1998 p. 21. I am indebted to Dr. Inbal Guter for the following insights concerning Labor's piano music.

anything else and its truth never leans toward plausibility.”²⁶ In Wittgenstein’s view, such subtlety, in Labor’s case, affords a genuine, albeit limited significance and even nobility to the composer’s otherwise dislocated artistic stance vis-à-vis modernism, that is, to Labor’s vacuously absurd “very late seriousness.”²⁷

The case of Gustav Mahler, who is invariably considered as a romantic progressive composer, is yet another outstanding issue in Wittgenstein’s thinking about modern music. By Wittgenstein’s own admission, Mahler fits neither the mold of the straightforwardly nonsensical absurd in modern music (like Richard Strauss), nor the mold of the vacuously absurd (like Josef Labor). For Wittgenstein, Mahler is a limiting case, a *sui generis* philosophical absurd. As I have argued in detail elsewhere,²⁸ Wittgenstein’s remarks on Mahler (written in 1931 and 1948, yet with remarkable consistency in content and tone), blatantly negative as they are, nonetheless admit to Wittgenstein’s admiration of Mahler’s artistic prowess. Wittgenstein portrayed Mahler’s musical deviancy by suggesting the metaphor of the picture of an apple tree and a little daisy.²⁹ Mahler’s music is like a *trompe l’oeil* picture: it invites us to engage in a completely different set of games of participation. Wittgenstein voices a Spenglerian observation that a Mahler symphony might be a work of art of a totally different sort, embodying an entirely different kind of spiritual enterprise for which our aesthetic measuring rods are inadequate. Thus,

26 Wittgenstein 1998 p. 5.

27 Wittgenstein 1998 p. 20.

28 Guter 2015.

29 Wittgenstein 1998 p. 17.

for Wittgenstein, it was not inconceivable that Mahler's music might belong to the kind of spiritual enterprise that embodies civilization in the modern period. His great frustration with Mahler was that the prodigious composer was inauthentic and not courageous enough to fulfil his mission:

Whoever is unwilling to know himself is writing a kind of deceit. Whoever is unwilling to plunge into himself, because it is too painful, naturally remains with his writing on the surface. (Whoever wants only the next best thing, can achieve only the surrogate of a good thing.)³⁰

Mahler ought to have been capable of ushering in a new kind of absurd: modern music which is truly appropriate for the age without culture. From Wittgenstein's perspective, this would have been the strikingly absurd possibility of an artistic afterimage of a wholesale rejection of the internal relations which hold together musical gesture and human life.

In conclusion, I can now spell out concisely the varieties of the absurd in the music of interwar Austria that we can glean from Wittgenstein's texts from around that time. We observe a fourfold distinction, according to Wittgenstein. First is the nonsensical absurd of the incapability of seeing that the nonsensicality of the form of progress is incomprehensible. This category pertains to music which straightforwardly tries to emulate the various maxims and formulations derived from the form of progress. Such nonsensically absurd music typifies progressive Romantic composers such as Richard Strauss, Max Reger, and the early

30 Wittgenstein 2019 MS 120 p. 72v (my translation).

Arnold Schoenberg. Second is the vacuous absurd of the incapability of seeing what the form of progress renders incomprehensible. This category pertains to music which denounces the predominantly nonsensical maxims and formulations of modernity, thus destining itself to keeping on groping for something which it cannot express. Such vacuously absurd music is best exemplified, in Wittgenstein's mind, by Josef Labor. Third is the philosophical absurd of rendering what is incomprehensible (from the perspective of a cultured person) comprehensible within the same purview. For Wittgenstein, Mahler's music betokens such incommensurability, evoking a relativist philosophical puzzle: whether cultural progress is real, and it is us who have been left behind, or whether culture has really been vanquished, and we are the only ones left to notice it. The very thought of an artwork of "a totally different sort" remains invariably hypothetical. Fourth is the praxeological absurd of giving rise to an auxiliary, praxeologically dislodged musical language, replacing the transparency of human gesture with exact rules of comprehensibility. By analogy, this was precisely the source of Wittgenstein's aversion to L. L. Zamenhof's constructed language Esperanto of around the same time. As Rudolf Carnap averred, "A language which had not 'grown organically' seemed to [Wittgenstein] not only useless but despicable."³¹ From Wittgenstein's perspective, the shunning of the expanse of lived experience in a musical language fit for the meaning-blind would be the inglorious spot assigned to Arnold Schoenberg's vision of the music of the future.

31 Carnap 1963 p. 26.

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