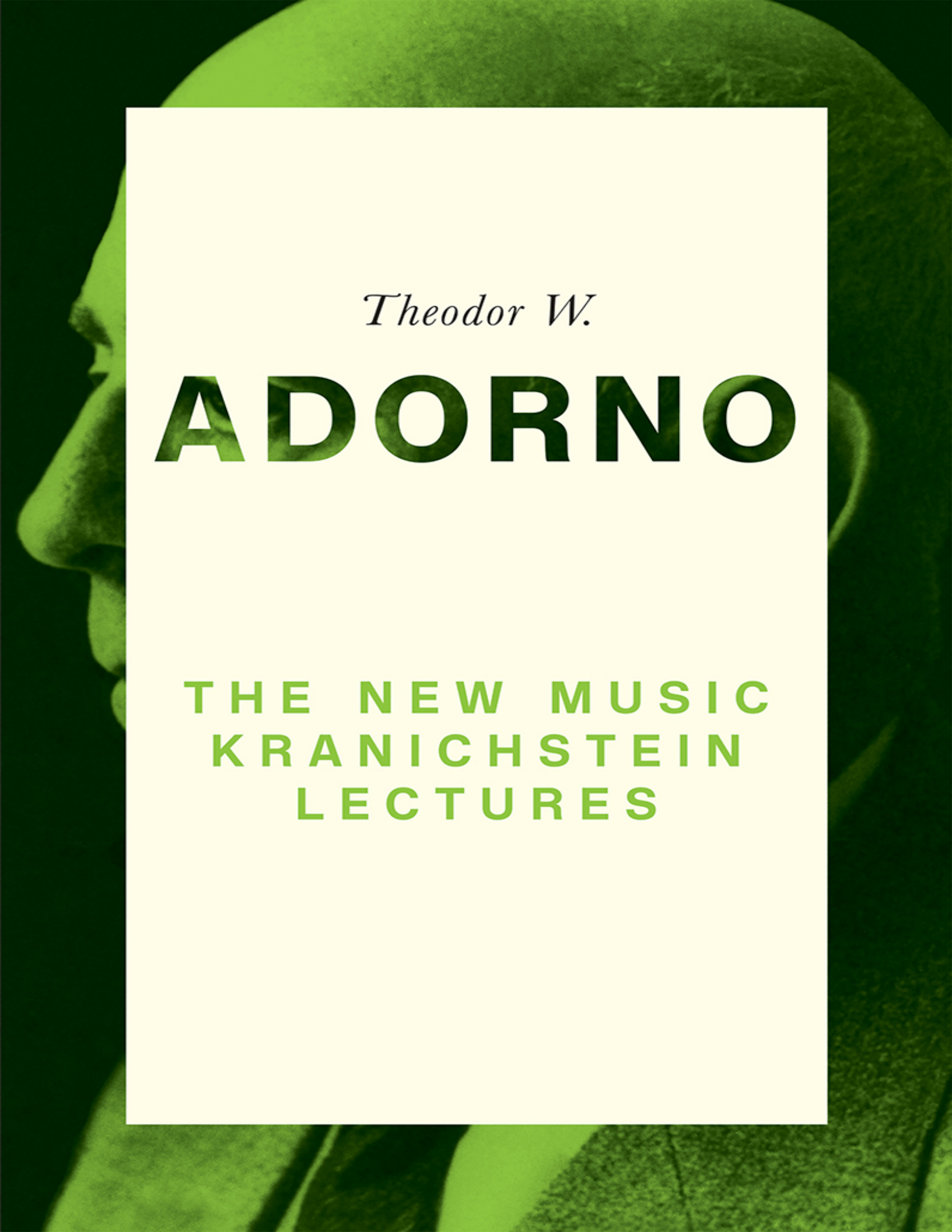

Theodor W.

ADORNO

THE NEW MUSIC KRANICHSTEIN LECTURES

CONTENTS

THE NEW MUSIC: KRANICHSTEIN LECTURES

Theodor W. Adorno

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Translated by Wieland Hoban

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Overview

The Young Schoenberg (1955)

LECTURE 1

Schoenberg's innovations already present in the early works – No *laudatio temporis acti*, but the question of the musical sense of every event – The concept of the young Schoenberg – The musical material – Three periods of the young Schoenberg – op. 1, 'Abschied' – Proximity to Debussy – Op. 2 songs and art nouveau – Richard Dehmel's poem 'Erwartung' and Schoenberg's op. 2, no. 1 – op. 2, no. 2, 'Schenk mir deinen goldenen Kamm – Relationship with tonality – Basic characters – Analysis of op. 2, no. 2; harmony in early Schoenberg – Contrast with Wagner and Strauss – op. 2, no. 3, 'Erhebung'; note-row technique – op. 2, no. 4, 'Waldsonne'

LECTURE 2

Metric irregularity in Schoenberg: beginning of an analysis of *Verklärte Nacht*, op. 4 – Metric design and thematic progression – Duet idea; Adorno's concept of 'axial rotation' (I) – Sequencing – Problematics of adagio movements – Relationship between development and exposition – Strauss's *Tod und Verklärung* – *Verklärte Nacht*: new themes in the second part – Wagner's leitmotifs – op. 3, no. 3, 'Warnung'; precision – *Verklärte Nacht* as a transfer of the idea of the symphonic poem to chamber music, form and organization – comparison with the Chamber Symphony – Question from the audience about the arrangement for string orchestra – *Gurrelieder* part 1, first song and song of Tove

LECTURE 3

‘The Aging of the New Music’: misunderstandings and questions of musical sense – *Gurrelieder*, ‘So tanzen die Engel vor Gottes Thron nicht’ – Scale degree awareness and individual weight – Experiences from Webern’s op. 5 string quartet movements – Principle of balance in Waldemar’s song; innovations – Valéry’s concept of *refus* – The aspect of consistency in Schoenberg – The idea of the large interval: ‘Du wunderliche Tove’ – ‘Lied der Waldtaube’ – New harmony and counterpoint – End of *Gurrelieder*: chorus – Thematic combination as the origin of Schoenberg’s polyphony – Connection to Mahler – Clarity of musical events, the principle of construction – Thematic combination and note-row technique – Problem of tonality in the op. 6 songs

Schoenberg’s Counterpoint (1956)

LECTURE 1

Artistic idea and technique – The idea of integral composition, the intertwining of contrapuntal thinking and thematic work in Schoenberg – Melody in songs; primacy of counterpoint over polyphony, special status of choruses – The reawakening of the contrapuntal spirit – Counterpoint and harmony – Relation between the voices – Unity through simultaneity of voices; bindingness – Multiple counterpoint and musical space – Relationship of Schoenberg’s counterpoint to harmony – Rhythm – Instrumental texture – Relationship with form

LECTURE 2

Different types of counterpoint – Free counterpoint – Complementary counterpoint – Accompanying counterpoint – Contrapuntal invention of themes – Motivic fragmentation – Thematic combination – The counterpoint of opposing harmonic complexes – Schoenberg’s First String Quartet,

op. 7; organization of large-scale form by contrapuntal means

LECTURE 3

Contrapuntal corner points; the ‘energetic’ idea of counterpoint; op. 7 (continued) – Interpretation and shaping – Relationship of two contrapuntal passages to each other – ‘Axial rotation’ (II) – The unification of relatively independent voices; determinate negation – Form as the result of counterpoint; op. 7 (conclusion) – Shortening and balance – op. 9 Chamber Symphony

LECTURE 4

Pierrot lunaire, transition to the twelve-note technique – The ‘roots’ of counterpoint: the need for polyphony and integration – Dodecaphonic counterpoint as a mediation of these aspects, unity within diversity – Model: ‘Der Mondfleck’ from *Pierrot lunaire*; the transition to the twelve-note technique as an ‘organic necessity’

Criteria of New Music (1957)

LECTURE 1

Method – Fixed values or relativism – The dialectical approach – Immanent critique – The concept of judgements of taste in Kant – The objectivity of aesthetic judgements and the immanent ‘correctness’ of the matter – Against pluralism of aesthetic judgement – The attitude of musical historicism – How can one actually formulate the question of the musical criterion? – Aesthetic questions are technical questions, questions of procedure – Once again: ‘The Aging of the New Music’, the dialectic of the progress of artistic rationality – The relationship between science and art; aesthetic necessity and ‘effect without cause’

LECTURE 2

Critique of definition, the concept of musical sense – The concept of the development – Misunderstandings of the concept of musical sense, the so-called poetic idea – Problematics of categories of sense, Dilthey – Sense and senselessness historically mediated – Discussion with Eduard Steuermann about the *Leonore Overtures*, the stringency of the work of art – Discussion: can there be several solutions to a problem? – Discussion about Hindemith – Discussion about Schoenberg's supposed calculation errors in *Accompanying Music for a Film Scene* – Conversation about it with Gertrud Schoenberg – Spiritual content and subjective reception – The concept of musical material – Discussion with Erich Doflein about the polemic against Hindemith

LECTURE 3

The question of musical quality, the formal level – Primitivity and complexity; inadequacy of technical categories – Craft and control over material – The danger of entire layers of composition withering away through a fixation on craft – Pierre Boulez, new characters and technical correlates – Originality – Misconceptions about originality – The intensification of the problem: the aim of uniqueness today – Convention and expression; reception of the twelve-note technique – Discussion about the problem of stylistic inconsistency

LECTURE 4

Musical character; danger of rationalization and quantification – Preservation of characters in Boulez and Stockhausen – Two approaches to composition: symphonic type and character-piece type – Schoenberg: the concept of gestalt – Totality – Pointing beyond the gestalt; progression over time – Determination and function – Insistence on the full functional crafting of every detail – The criterion of formal level: abundance of forms – Clarity – The concept of

development, musical time – Irreversibility of time – Simultaneity of memory and expectation; balance and homeostasis in Schoenberg

Vers une musique informelle *(1961)*

LECTURE 1

Personal experiences with the 'Darmstadt school' – *Musique informelle* does not obey outside laws and forms – First tendencies as early as 1910, but not followed up consistently – Critique of 'expression' and subjectivity – Progress in control over the material – Loss of tension – Dodecaphony as a consequence of this development, aversion to repetition – Reason for the current controversy, the pitch material – Webern's demand for as many 'connections' as possible; no guarantee of truth content – Freedom and 'large forms' – Need for order, the semblance of necessity – Schoenberg: the polarity of the thoroughly organized and the free – Serial and motivic-thematic composition

LECTURE 2

Serial and motivic-thematic composition (continued) – The relational concept and critique of the element concept – No hypostasis of relation, danger of automation – Serial music accused of being mechanical – The mechanical in traditional music – The possibility of liberation from the mechanical, the concept of time – Hatred of the subject, John Cage and his school – Abstract negation of domination of nature, positivism in music, critique – The concept of musical material – *Histoire oblige*; the subject of music – Music does not communicate – Reconstruction of aesthetics – Demands on a *musique informelle* – *Musique informelle* as anticipation of freedom

The Function of Colour in Music (1966)

LECTURE 1

Colour is historically the ‘latest’ dimension of music – Excursus: Riegl’s conception of artistic will – Qualitative differences between musical dimensions – The twofold meaning of the ‘technical’ in composition – Instrumental ‘realization’ of earlier music (Bach) – The sound of the Classical orchestra, Viennese Classicism (I) – The idea of the balanced sound surface – Infinitude of the string sound – The spiritual dimension of orchestration (Beethoven) – The art of orchestration and differentiation – The idea of humanity and starkness of sound; poverty and abundance in instrumentation – The primacy of thematic-motivic work over *Klangfarbenmelodie* – Emancipation of the sonic dimension – How does one move beyond tonal instrumentation?

LECTURE 2

The Classical orchestra, Viennese Classicism (II); Webern and Berg – The twofold character of constructive instrumentation – Berlioz: the separation of colour from composition – The compositional concept of the melodic and of rhythm – Study of instruments and instrumentation; the functional nature of instrumentation – Problems of instrumentation; relation to the other dimensions of composition – The critics’ catchphrase of ‘brilliant orchestration’ – Critique of instrumentation – Incorporation of colour into composition: Wagner – Tendencies towards disintegration in Strauss, Mahler, Debussy – Rupture of unity, the disenchantment of the orchestra

LECTURE 3

Refunctioning of sound in the Second Viennese School – The structural change in instrumentation in Schoenberg – Chamber Symphony, op. 9 – *Five Orchestral Pieces*, op. 16 – Mobility of colour, colours are used like thematic shapes – Change in the function of sound – Antagonistic desiderata: clarity and *Klangfarbenmelodie* – *Erwartung*, op. 17 – *Die*

glückliche Hand, op. 18: constructive instrumentation as a technique for large-scale form – *Pierrot lunaire*, op. 21 – Berg's *Wozzeck* – Instrumentational variation – 'Programming from above'; performance instructions in Berg's *Lyric Suite* – Musical interpretation and constructive instrumentation – Colour retains something accidental, it is not absolute – The emancipated sonic dimension and the primacy of imagination – Colour is a function of the other dimensions – Polyphony as a condition for productive instrumentation; voice and sound – Current relevance of the sonic dimension – Unity of construction and colour is unity of something internally differentiated

The Young Schoenberg (1955)

Lecture 1: 31 May 1955

[…][1] that I was not guided by any music-historical interests. Nor do I wish to discuss these matters in order to round out or correct the image of a great composer, though I hope that both aspects will be touched on as a side effect – namely, that I can both show you some music-historically remarkable things and contribute to an overall picture of Schoenberg. But we know, after all, that the idea of this music festival in Kranichstein[2] is really for us to attempt, in very serious and concentrated work, to advance the musical consciousness of the present day and, if I might put it thus, to bring it to a form of self-consciousness, a consciousness of itself. And the reason I have decided to speak about the early Schoenberg – with the explicit approval of Mrs Schoenberg,[3] as it happens – is that the works in question are quite especially relevant to our present situation.

You may know that I have, on various occasions, developed the argument that all of Schoenberg's decisive innovations can already be found in his early works, extending roughly until op. 10; and that, if one understands those works correctly, the later works will almost be self-explanatory, they will no longer present any difficulties. Now, in our present context it is not a matter of promoting an understanding, for I think I can assume that almost all of you know and understand the later works of Schoenberg quite well. Rather, the problem is a different one. This claim that the decisive innovations by Schoenberg are already evident in the early works – what does it actually mean? It means that the experiences, the basic experiences that later found their own, very pure style, that were later

developed with the utmost rigour, these basic experiences were already garnered here, where they were formulated in varying degrees with the traditional material of music. Now, I see the current relevance of those youthful works precisely in those basic experiences. For it seems to me that New Music, in its current phase and in the way people operate today with the twelve-note technique in particular, like a recipe, something ready-made and given, has forgotten those basic experiences – or, as I put it in my essay 'The Aging of the New Music', referring to a passage from Kierkegaard, that in the place where the Wolf's Glen once yawned terribly there is now a railway bridge from which travellers can look down into the abyss safely and comfortably.[4] In other words, the material developed by Schoenberg has now to a large extent become common property and, crudely put, is now available too cheaply, at least among those younger composers who can be taken seriously, but this comes at the price of losing the experiences for which it was once made; these methods, then, have mostly lost the significance they had when they originated.

At this point, let me avert a misunderstanding. Unfortunately, especially in recent times, I have discovered that anyone who tries to go beyond a mere factual survey and to develop artistic matters further, to approach them in a thinking way, exposes themselves to such manifold misunderstandings that one really cannot be careful enough, so I have genuinely found myself somewhat in the situation of the burnt child who dreads the fire. So please do not misunderstand me as taking any restorative approach or presenting a *laudatio temporis acti*, as if I were saying, 'Yes, those were the good old days fifty years ago, when the likes of us were booed and there was really something happening, whereas now no one gets worked up anymore and everything has become so non-committal.' I

do indeed believe that even this very external aspect, the fact that it was a scandal at the time and no longer is today,[5] that it reveals something quite central. But I will not develop that any further here. And let me also avoid a further misunderstanding and pre-empt an objection that I would normally expect particularly from the young composers among you. Because you could say to me, 'Why are you getting so worked up? That's really all terribly sentimental. It is the fate of all new achievements in art that the new discoveries find expression in the material and the treatment of the material, and that the original inner tensions that once spawned this material will pass, that the material will then stand on its own; and now that the twelve-note technique has been established, it would be a nonsense to expect every chord and every counterpoint to have the same tension that such a chord would have had in the early works of Schoenberg or Anton von Webern before the invention of dodecaphony.' Well, there is certainly something in that. And far be it from me to say that the same shudder [*Schauer*] once caused by certain sounds, like the one I will demonstrate to you in a moment, that this same shudder should be conserved or sought anew. The concept of a 'conserved shudder' is comical in itself, and I hope you will not think me so foolish as to advocate such a conserved shudder. But I nonetheless think that one should not make things too easy for oneself with this idea of conservation. For as true as it may be – and I am going somewhat against traditional logic here in favour of dialectic logic, as I simply happen to be an adherent of the latter – as true as it may be that these chords, these musical constructs, fundamentally change in their form, it is equally true that something of this element must be preserved; and that, if musical elements once filled with inner tension genuinely change into mere material, then this material itself loses the sense it formerly had. So I do

not wish to use these things in order to encourage you to create similar configurations, to turn the music towards the representation of a similar expressive or constructive sense as the young Schoenberg did. That is out of the question, and I would once again ask you emphatically not to understand my words in this way. But I do think that the question of the sense of every musical event, which arises in an extraordinarily powerful way in Schoenberg's early music, must equally be posed in New Music. So this means that mere consistency, in the sense that every note is determined by some mathematical or other principles, is not enough, that every note must rather have meaning within the purely musical functional context in which it appears. And I think that one can direct this question as to the sense of each individual musical element at the young Schoenberg, and that one can better understand this demand through his music; but it goes without saying that the relevant characters today, and generally the question of the musical sense that must be organized and created, is something entirely changed, something entirely different from what Schoenberg, the young Schoenberg, was dealing with. By examining the early works, or touching on a few aspects of early Schoenberg in a highly fragmentary fashion, I hope simply to help you rediscover this dimension, the idea that all musical elements must have a musical sense and not simply fit, much as Kolisch[6] and I, in our joint lecture last year, tried to elaborate the representation of musical sense in traditional music from the perspective of modern music, or roughly in the same way that Křenek set up his composition course last year.[7] But you must not take that literally; you should simply learn these things in a comprehensible and concrete way that has been so widely forgotten today; for the situation in which we now find ourselves is really that composition has, in a sense, become too easy, and this becoming-too-easy of

composition holds an indescribable danger precisely because the demands placed by this material in order to identify itself at all are those of musical sense, whereas, if one applies this newly won material to compositions – if they are senseless or primitive – the application of this material is not at all justified. So I will certainly try to make the young composers in particular, the twelve-note composers, be more self-critical in their own methods by measuring what they do against the indescribable wealth and indescribable substance that can be found precisely in the young Schoenberg, and which is the template or the precondition for the asceticism, for all the refusals Schoenberg later undertook.

Now, let me begin by saying something about the concept of the young Schoenberg: unlike in many other cases of youthful composers, one cannot claim that he had not yet found his style, that these are imperfect juvenilia or the like. Rather, I think that, from an extremely early point – I am inclined to date it to *Gurrelieder* at the latest – not only was Schoenberg in possession of complete technical mastery but his style too was already absolutely explicit as a personal style. And let me add that, in my view, some of the most important works that Schoenberg wrote in his entire life come from this time in his young years. I am thinking especially of the Second String Quartet, which we would scarcely be analysing here, but which you surely all know. One would equally have to mention the Chamber Symphony, which was of indescribable consequence for the history of music, or also the first movement of the Second Chamber Symphony, as well as the First String Quartet and the op. 6 songs. So, I think that comprehending what an incredible amount of the later Schoenberg's finds are already present in the early works, it also means comprehending the maturity and immense quality of Schoenberg's youthful works, because only if one has

sacrificed what is found here, or has already been given this foundation, only then can the carriage that begins its journey hold the weight that justifies this whole journey in the first place.

I cannot help adding another thought to this. And here, if you will allow it, I would also like to modify certain views for whose genesis I am not entirely without responsibility. What I am referring to is the entire complex of the innate movement of the musical material. I scarcely need to tell you what I mean by this, or how important this question is, and how much the musical material pushes of its own accord towards certain consequences – that is, how it is really the case in music that, if one has said A, one must also say B, and how much the whole development of music in each individual work and in historical terms follows precisely this innate movement. But art is, after all, always a relationship between subject and object. And, once and for all, one should not think that one can enter the realm of objectivity by simply crossing out the subject. The objectivity of art is not a remainder, not a residual concept; it is not something that is left over when the subject withdraws and instead surrenders to a demand that supposedly lies purely in the material, or in the so-called primal elements of art; rather, this demand is naturally mediated time and again by the artistic spirit and the artistic consciousness, and thus always assumes the work and effort of the concept, which means the work and effort of subjectivity. And if I am not mistaken, then music history has reached a stage today in which the concept of the material's innate movement threatens to be fetishized somewhat – that is, to be separated from this relationship with the subject that intervenes in and transforms the material, and without which there can really be no such movement of the musical material. But if that is the case, it is probably true that, from the most central perspective,

the musical material is not actually so decisive on its own. You all know that Schoenberg, in his later days, repeatedly fell back especially on the material from the period around the Second String Quartet and the Chamber Symphony, that he completed a major conception such as the Second Chamber Symphony as a mature or old man, and he operated with this earlier material in a number of such excellent works as the *Kol nidre*.[8] Moreover, he kept saying – and I think he was very serious when he did so – that he felt as close to the works of his youth as to those of his mature years, and that he by no means disavowed something like *Gurrelieder*. He was not as modern as those of his critics who, when they heard a bar from *Gurrelieder*, automatically reacted with the gesture of 'Aha, Wagner' and considered the matter closed. And if I could help you to leave behind some of these clichés, for example that of 'exaggerated late Romanticism', which really only conceal what was actually going on in the music, then I would expressly welcome that as a by-product, as a further by-product. At any rate, I wanted to say that, if Schoenberg kept returning to this material, then this means that he was actually more interested – and I mean that not in a psychological and private sense but in the objective sense that it is more objectively interesting – in the procedures, the forms of control, the kind of possibility for shaping a musical sense that played out in the engagement with the material, and not so much the material as such. This means that the older Schoenberg, in such works as the Second Chamber Symphony, in the second movement, worked with this material from the younger Schoenberg from the perspective of all his experiences with dodecaphony. And we could show you in detail – the specialists among us who are here, such as Kolisch and Leibowitz[9] and myself, as well as a few others – that this tonal piece did indeed profit from all the achievements of the twelve-note technique.

And, by the same token, one might say that the real principles of construction, which are far more important for dodecaphonic music than the objectified and reified rules, that these can really all be found in the early works. In a moment I will give you an example, one that I hope will be slightly surprising for you, to illustrate this. So, in other words, I think that, if we examine these works, we should concern ourselves more with what was composed and with the manner of composition than with the mere question of what was used to compose. For if one can compose properly and has something that must be composed, then the modernity, that is, the right material, will come of its own accord, as it were; there is no need to worry a great deal about that. But one should, for heaven's sake, no longer consider it an achievement today, or a matter of great boldness or sophistication, to operate with a certain material that means nothing in itself before something genuinely convincing has emerged from this material, and thus has a very primitive sense.

Now, I already hinted that the notion of the young Schoenberg, that this is not, as the cliché would have it, a pre-Schoenbergian Schoenberg but actually already the whole Schoenberg, just under a seed leaf of sorts; it is the Schoenberg in whom all the substantial elements of mature composition are already present but still wrapped in a husk of traditional material, which is at last burst open by the forces already active within it, so that it simply falls off like a seed leaf, as Hegel describes in his *Phenomenology*,[10] allowing the new to emerge in a pure form. Now, in this understanding of the young Schoenberg, we can say that this part of his output, which encompasses no more than ten or eleven works, is already divided very clearly into a number of periods, and that the young Schoenberg himself already exhibits a very clear arc of development. For purposes of orientation – I hope you will forgive my

pedantry – I would speak of three basic periods and first describe these to you in brief. I am not familiar with the works that predate the publication of op. 1.[11] I once had the opportunity to take a glance at a string quartet and a piano work at Mrs Schoenberg's home, but I was certainly not able to examine these closely enough to venture an assessment of any kind. At any rate, the Schoenberg we know – from op. 2 onwards, at least – is already not only an absolutely distinctive composer but also very much the real Schoenberg. Now, this 'first period' would include the first three books of songs and *Verklärte Nacht*, and these are works in which one can truly see him stretching himself and expanding and gradually attaining full control of the material; and precisely because everything is very much in flux here, very much *in statu nascendi*, these first works, especially the op. 2 and op. 3 songs and *Verklärte Nacht*, are eminently instructive. These are followed by a period that one might consider a period of fully-fledged mastery and is characterized by *Gurrelieder* and the symphonic poem *Pelléas et Mélisande*. If I am not mistaken, these two works are among the greatest and most significant masterpieces within the framework of the style generally known as the 'New German School'. They are absolute equals of the most mature works by Strauss and Mahler, both in their technical sophistication and in their originality, and one really has to see everything that is contained in these works to understand, to understand fully what he then left behind. And the third period of the young Schoenberg, that would be the period that begins with the First String Quartet and the op. 6 songs. I think that the production of these works actually overlapped, or that maybe the quartet is even earlier than the songs. Some of the op. 8 songs also seem to be earlier, so the chronology is not accurately reflected by the opus numbers. This is the period in which Schoenberg's principles of construction

first emerge in their pure form, in which he takes up the problem of sonata form, in which he addresses the problem of thematic work in the sense of an extreme compression and motivic economy and in which, finally, Schoenberg's polyphony is also taken to an advanced level. So they are the works in which his peculiar way of working with chromatic scale degrees, and treating them as degrees in their own right, is consistently employed, though today I will give you an example of this that already appears in one of the early songs. So that would be the approximate chronology. And you know that the op. 10 quartet, the second quartet, in a sense summarizes this entire process of development by having a first movement with the highest degree of tonal construction and a second whose expression goes to the utmost extremes in a certain visionary manner, then the third relates the preceding movements to each other through variative development before the last movement truly breaks with tonality and truly enters the realm of freedom.

Now, let me say a few things about op. 1, though I only have the song 'Abschied'; I do not know the other song, 'Dank', so I cannot say anything about it. First of all, I noticed something which I feel a little proud to have detected. I have, on various occasions, developed the idea that Schoenberg's approach can largely be understood as a synthesis – forgive the rudimentary term – as a synthesis of Brahms and Wagner. I mean this in the sense that the chromatic, expressive and highly sophisticated material of Wagner's harmonic language has merged with Brahmsian compositional principles, namely his completely seamless and consistent thematic work. This is not a synthesis in the sense of simply adding together these two elements, of course; one has to imagine a consummate interpenetration of these two principles in the inner constitution of this music. Now, the op. 1 songs are certainly very little known.

But the amazing thing I discovered is that these songs – that is, the one song I know – could genuinely be said to contain the Brahmsian and Wagnerian elements alongside each other, meaning that this aspect of a confrontation between these two separate and opposing schools that Schoenberg discovered in his youth, this confrontation can be traced back to very concrete things, namely stylistic elements that were found in his own work. First I will play you the beginning, where you will immediately see the connection to the *Serious Songs* by Brahms.[12] I will then play you a further extremely Brahmsian passage, and after that one in which the Wagnerian influence – almost like a piano reduction from the *Ring* – displays itself in an almost touching manner. So it begins like this, and is incidentally in the same D minor as the first of the *Four Serious Songs* by Brahms [plays 'Abschied' [Farewell], Two Songs, op. 1, no. 2], and so on. And then the entire Brahmsian passage […] [plays], and so forth. […] And the Wagnerian passage that follows it goes like this [plays], and so on. So, you can see from this how these elements truly stand alongside each other in an exceedingly honest way. I would like to point out how little Schoenberg – and I think this is very characteristic – how little Schoenberg concealed this. After all, any normal New German composer would have been clever enough, shall we say, to hide such things. But this peculiar Schoenbergian sincerity or naïveté, whatever you wish to call it – and Schoenberg was essentially a very naïve composer; the concept of naïveté is a crucial part of him – simply registered these things the way they initially appeared in his own musical conception. Incidentally, Schoenberg always held the view that a younger composer could certainly refer to models if he were truly original, which went completely against the mindset of those who want to throw *Wozzeck* on the scrap heap as soon as they discover that the long interlude in the third act[13] is similar

in its overall idea to Siegfried's funeral music from *Götterdämmerung*,[14] yet have no trouble whatsoever if some so-called modern composer imitates composers of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries in a laughable and paltry fashion. I have never been able to understand why there should be such oversensitivity on the one side and this indescribably low standard on the other, but perhaps that is because I am one of these evil intellectuals.

But I would like to draw your attention to another matter concerning these very first songs by Schoenberg. These songs are unusually long – the one I have, at least, and I assume the other is similarly long – much like the *Proses lyriques* by Claude Debussy,[15] and indeed their whole fabric, including the somewhat luxuriant piano reduction-like treatment of the accompaniment, is highly reminiscent of Debussy's *Proses lyriques*, even if they are not yet as specific in their character, not yet as original as this work by Debussy. Evidently both masters made, around the same time, an attempt of sorts for music to move from a more narrowly lyrical character to prose, for lyricism itself to gain a greater breadth, both inwardly and outwardly, than it had previously possessed, and it is very interesting for Schoenberg's sense of form that he somehow notices that this kind of breadth, of almost oratorical breadth, that this cannot really be reconciled with the piano Lied genre. These things are very difficult to explain, but I think that you will immediately have a sense of what I mean. Very long, elaborated songs cannot really be written as songs with a piano, only as songs with an orchestra. An overlong piano Lied is of a similarly impossible nature as an excessively long piece for a single string instrument, for example. And Debussy, much like Schoenberg, sensed that in those early 1890s, with the result that both crafted these works in, I would almost say, in the character of opera fragments. But I wanted to touch on that only in order to

point out a problem that I think it would be highly productive to consider systematically, namely the connection that actually exists between musical dimensions, between musical scale and the respective sonic material used in the music. It would be misguided to believe that these aspects – that, crudely speaking, the form is independent from the disposition of sonorities, the disposition of colours and the entire volume of the sound; rather, these elements, like everything in a work of art, all relate to one another, and one should really examine this interrelatedness in a very precise manner. But that is just an aside.

Now, the first work by Schoenberg that truly shows its claws openly is the op. 2 songs. And, to explain these songs to you, I think I should take a moment to mention something extra-musical: the concept of art nouveau. In their choice of texts, but also the way they themselves are crafted, these songs are very much products of art nouveau, and one can see elements of art nouveau running through Schoenberg's entire oeuvre, both in his selection of texts and in other aspects, just as one can find similar elements among the great revolutionary painters of his generation, which in a certain sense is, after all, the pre-Picasso generation. Think of van Gogh, where this is very strong, and think also of Munch. So, in this sense, Schoenberg unquestionably has his roots in art nouveau. Now, I cannot embark on a genuine philosophical theory of art nouveau, although it would be extremely important. I will only say that art nouveau rests – and this is one of its formal characteristics – on the attempt to break out of the realm of conventionalized bourgeois forms but still stay within the circle of forms predetermined by the bourgeois world. And that element in art nouveau which is viewed today as so complacently laughable by the gaze that finds anything strange if it contains a contradiction – this is

precisely the element of contradiction between breaking out and respecting the conventions after all, this decision to stay within the established world of the nineteenth century. Now, if you will permit this somewhat formal definition, which barely gives you any actual taste of art nouveau, you will see that the works from this phase, which could very much be termed Schoenberg's art nouveau phase, have exactly this character of wanting to break out and at the same time stay inside. That, incidentally – and I would just like to touch on it in advance – is exceedingly characteristic of Schoenberg in general, namely the fact that his way of breaking out is not like that of Richard Strauss, namely a somewhat non-committal step into new territory; rather, he takes the traditional elements extremely seriously, but so seriously that the very seriousness with which he handles them transforms them into something else. Or, conversely: the breaking out itself occurs with a kind of fear and trembling; it occurs in such a way that he continually tries to keep whatever he feels compelled to include somehow within the framework of the traditional means. And the tension between these two elements, this is really what gave Schoenberg a revolutionary force that goes far beyond what was possessed by the impressionist musicians, who did not have this force of resistance in themselves at all, who did not have these two conflicting elements working away at each other, and whose solutions consequently remained far less radical and much more comfortable. That applies to Debussy in France and to Ravel, in exactly the same way it applied to Richard Strauss in Germany, or indeed Max Reger.

But first, regarding this whole problem of art nouveau, I must read you a poem to give you an idea of what it really means. Let me say at once that if you take this poem in a naïve literary way – it is a poem by Dehmel[16] – then you will

all chuckle about it. In order to avoid a false idea of how fruitful it is, just try not to chuckle, and try to feel what lies in the complementary colours juxtaposed in the poem, for example, and then you will immediately understand how Schoenberg arrived at certain harmonic colours that would later become incredibly significant. So, the poem is called ‘Erwartung’ [Expectation], the composition is op. 2, no. 1. It reads as follows:

From the sea-green pond
near the red villa
beneath the dead oak
the moon is shining.

Where her dark image
gleams through the water,
a man stands, and draws
a ring from his hand.

Three opals glimmer;
among the pale stones
float red and green sparks
and sink.

And he kisses her,
and his eyes gleam
like the sea-green depths:
a window opens.

From the red villa

near the dead oak,

a woman’s pale hand

waves to him.[17]

Now, this contrasting of unrelated complementary colours – ‘sea-green’, ‘red villa’, ‘moon’ – first of all demands of Schoenberg an entirely new harmonic colour, and this harmonic colour is a particular chord. It is this chord that will now concern us, and not only the chord itself but also its relationship to the whole. I will give you an idea of the song; you must excuse my squawking, but we are among musicians, and musicians generally – thank God – tend not to place great value on the beauty of the voice [plays ‘Erwartung’ [Expectation], Four Songs, op. 2, no. 1]. So, let me first show you the chord that appears here. It is this passing chord [plays]. The strange thing is that it is not this one [plays], but rather that it gains a much harder edge because the D, this dissonance [plays], appears instead of the expected E flat. And this chord runs through the song at every critical point – later in a lower register, like this [plays]. Now, you would all say that this chord comes primarily from Wagner. And Wagner very often uses similar passing chords as a form of harmonic seal, for example in the *Ring*. And I think this is probably the immediate model: the warning cry of the Rhinemaidens to Siegfried – which goes like this [plays] – which is just as sharply dissonant. Nonetheless, I would say that the character of this chord [plays] is quite different from this chord [plays]. This is for the following reason – and this brings us into contact with a purely harmonic and an expressive element: the Wagnerian chord is a ninth chord, a special kind of ninth chord that, if you want to express it harmonically, not simply as a suspension – but Schoenberg himself avoided the concept