

Absolute Music

And the Construction of Meaning

DANIEL K. L. CHUA



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1

On history

Glass objects have no 'aura' . . . glass is the enemy of the secret.
(Benjamin)¹

Absolute music has 'no history'.² It denies that it was ever born. The fact that it emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century was not a birth, it claims, but an emancipation, a discovery unveiled by the German Romantics, as if absolute music had always been there, eternal and absolute. After all, an absolute by definition cannot have a history; God – the absolute absolute – cannot be historically grounded, and neither can the surrogate absolutes of the secular world such as Reason or the Transcendental Ego; they all claim to start from nothing, as a self-sufficient method or metaphysical entity, without genealogy or narrative. Absolutes only have histories when they self-destruct to reveal their false identity. This means that absolute music can only have a history when it is no longer absolute music.

The emergence of absolute music was muttered rather than announced by the early Romantics.³ In fact, the Romantics were so reticent about the subject that they did not even call absolute music 'absolute music'; that task was left to Wagner, who, ironically, was trying to expose its mendacious claims by negating it in his dialectics of music history.⁴ Absolute music is therefore a murky concept, born without a

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972–9), 2:217.

² Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck, 'Symphonien', *Phantasien über die Kunst für Freunde der Kunst* (Hamburg, 1799), in *Werke und Briefe von Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder* (Berlin: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1938), 255. Tieck added several essays to Wackenroder's *Phantasien über die Kunst*, including the essay entitled 'Symphonien'; this has raised problematic questions concerning authorship. It is for this reason that I have included Tieck's name in the authorship of the publication.

³ I shall use the term 'Romantic' to refer to the *early* Romantics only, which include writers such as the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, Tieck, Wackenroder, early Schelling and, to some extent, E. T. A. Hoffmann.

⁴ See Richard Wagner, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1850) and *Oper und Drama* (1851) in *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen* (Leipzig, 1911–16), 3:42–177 and 222–320; also see Klaus Kropfing, *Wagner and Beethoven: Richard Wagner's Reception of Beethoven* (1974), trans. P. Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 115, Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. R. Lustig (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 18–19, and Thomas S. Grey, *Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–2.

proper name. Indeed, its retrospective baptism calls the legitimacy of its birth into question.⁵ However, the Romantics did call instrumental music 'pure music',⁶ and this can be taken to be almost 'absolute', for its purity was deemed to be the essence of music itself, as if its spirit could be filtered through a symphonic sieve. So for the Romantics music became equated with Spirit,⁷ something too ethereal to have a history and too transcendent to be soiled by the muck of contextualisation. To avoid the possibility of contamination, the Romantics removed music from historical reality altogether and enclosed it in its own 'separate world',⁸ where its signs could reflect each other within an autonomy so pure that its being discovered itself as tautology: music is music. In this equation, music's purity is self-evident truth; it just is; it needs no historical or external validation; there is nothing extraneous. By circling in its own orbit, music finally discovers its identity as 'Music', and so begins to preen itself of all that is not 'Music', discarding such elements as extra-musical appendages.

Absolute music therefore discriminates. Indeed, it defines itself by exclusion. The category of the 'extra-musical' was invented in the nineteenth century as the negative other of the 'purely musical'.⁹ But this binary opposition is only a tactic designed to be mistaken as truth – as if such categories actually existed. What, after all, is an 'extra-musical' object? It is obviously not Music, but neither is it non-music. Would the concept even be possible without the existence of absolute music? Or, to put the question the other way round, would absolute music exist without positing the extra-musical? Perhaps the extra-musical is merely a deflection that diverts one's attention from the dubious nature of the 'purely musical'. Just try interrogating absolute music's purity. What is it? What does it mean? What is this essence that so powerfully discriminates between what is and is not Music? There is no answer; or, at least, when asked to disclose the criteria for musical purity, absolute music deliberately draws a blank. Its signs signify nothing. Indeed it cleverly champions this nothingness as its purity. The sign and referent cancel each other out in such a frictionless economy of exchange that no concept or object is left over. Thus the meaning of absolute music resides

⁵ See Mark Evan Bonds, 'Idealism and the Aesthetic of Instrumental Music at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 50 nos. 2–3 (1997).

⁶ See, for example, Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum Fragments*, no. 444, in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. P. Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1991), 92.

⁷ See, for example, Wackenroder, *Werke und Briefe*, 207 and 255. Also see Johann Gottfried Herder, *Kalligone* (1800) in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. B. Suphan (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877–1913), 22:187. ⁸ Wackenroder, *Werke und Briefe*, 189, 245 and 255.

⁹ The issues here are developed from a lecture by Lydia Goehr entitled 'Wagner and the Quest for the Autonomous Musical Voice', given at the Institute of Advanced Musical Studies at King's College, London (14 January 1998).

in the fact that it has no meaning; the inchoate and the ineffable become synonymous. Consequently, there is no way of teasing out an explanation from absolute music for its utterances are ineffable. This is why its purity is not a fact that is open to investigation, but a secret whose power resides in the inaccessibility of its sign. No wonder the early Romantics venerated instrumental music as a mystery that wraps 'mysterious things in a mysterious language'.¹⁰ As 'the ultimate mystery of faith', absolute music was not something to be examined but believed in.¹¹ Its purity is entirely opaque.

In this ideology of the pure, history is something that is outside music. It is an added 'extra', if not an optional 'extra'. And as proof, absolute music bedazzles the historian with its opaque and mysterious purity where no history is possible. But, of course, this purity is not a condition of truth; it is simply a method whereby absolute music renders its own history unreadable. It is a strategy designed to silence the historian. After all, the only response that befits an ineffable music is speechlessness. This is why the social phenomenon that accompanied the ideology of absolute music was the eradication of audience chatter. The hushed expectancy that descended upon the concert halls of Europe by the 1840s was an acknowledgement of music's ineffability.¹² Absolute music therefore stifles critique – there is no way of talking about it. Or, to borrow Theodor Adorno's metaphor, there is no direct way into these 'windowless monads'.¹³ Writing a critical history of absolute music becomes a moral dilemma, for to break in to steal the meaning of these monadic objects would constitute a breach of music's aesthetic autonomy. Any attempt to pry open these self-adhering signs to unlock what Lawrence Kramer calls 'hermeneutic windows',¹⁴ will involve a defenestration of absolute music's purity. You forfeit absolute music by gaining access to it. By unlatching such windows, one reduces the ineffable sign to concrete objects that can never live up to the purity and totality of absolute music. The sign must remain a secret if music is to remain absolute. To give it away is seemingly to fail. So absolute music does not only make its history unreadable but the decipherment of its history undesirable.

This is not to say that histories of absolute music do not exist, but that

¹⁰ Wackenroder, *Werke und Briefe*, 255. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹² See James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 257–80.

¹³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie*, ed. G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 15. There are two English translations of *Aesthetic Theory*, one by C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), the other by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Hullot-Kentor's is the more accurate translation, but I have used Lenhardt's where it seems more appropriate.

¹⁴ Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice: 1800–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1–20.

they are often written under its spell. But why should absolute music set the conditions for its critique? Must musicology always perpetuate its ideological claims? This book attempts to answer these questions by writing a history of absolute music without absolute music. It asks: what would happen if the concept of absolute music were removed as the epistemological ground of Western music? What would it be like?

First, absolute music would not be 'Music'. After all, the Romantics did not compose; they merely talked. They fabricated from the symphony the *discourse* of absolute music.¹⁵ So far from standing speechless before its ineffable utterances, the Romantics spoke absolute music into existence. It is a music emancipated from language *by language*; 'were it not for the poetic conceit of unspeakability', writes Carl Dahlhaus, 'there would have been no words available for reinterpreting the musically confusing or empty into the sublime or wonderful'.¹⁶ This is not to say that the symphony does not exist, but that the process of naming changes the meaning of the symphony. This is why a history of absolute music cannot be a history of *music*. Rather, it is a history of a discourse. Or, to turn absolute music against itself, absolute music is an extra-musical idea. As such, absolute music does not have a fixed meaning, but is subject to the mutations of those who speak about it. And since its dialogue was played out as a heated argument in the nineteenth century, the history of absolute music is not the elaboration of a *single* idea, but a clamour of contradictory discourses, each vying for power in the construction of its meaning. Thus absolute music has a decentred and fragmented identity that can only be elucidated as a constellation of discursive ideas. Its history does not add up to the totality that it claims for itself.

Secondly, absolute music would not be absolute. Without its purity, absolute music would no longer be able to transcend history as an immutable sign and orbit in that ethereal, autoletic world of essences where it can discriminate against everything that does not aspire to its uncontaminated condition. If music is no longer absolute, then it can no longer constitute the unconditional ground of knowledge. Instead, it would find its being embedded within various epistemological structures that shape its existence. In other words, the unconditional (the absolute) becomes conditioned. Its history would therefore resemble the archaeology of knowledge pioneered by Michel Foucault,¹⁷ which will be a grubby operation that will not leave absolute music pure. Its pristine features will be sedimented within the formations of theology,

¹⁵ On discourse see Diane MacDonell, *Theories of Discourse: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

¹⁶ Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, 63.

¹⁷ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1974).

On history

cosmology, cartography, philosophy, zoology, anthropology, physiology, biology, chemistry, physics, mechanics, mathematics, politics, linguistics, aesthetics, economics, magic, agriculture and sex. Admittedly, such excavations may not resemble a history of music at all, since they dig up the extra-musical debris against which absolute music purifies itself. To the 'purist' it may not even look like musicology. But this may be the only way of writing a meaningful history of a music that claims to have no history.

To write a history of absolute music is to write against it.