

James Hepokoski  
1 February 1990

### Preface to "Structural Tensions"

The main part of my presentation today--the paper on the Sibelius Fifth Symphony--is a fragment of a larger project, and I thought I should begin with at least a sketchy overview of that project, especially since it provides the immediate framework for the more specific paper to follow. This larger study subdivides into two interrelated aspects--the conceptual and the practical. In its first, broader aspect, I am interested in attempting to identify, sort out, and clarify the conceptual premises of traditional music historiography--for the most part the flowering of Germanic paradigms--traditional music historiography when it examines its canonic music from the period of European "Modernity." (Here I follow Jürgen Habermas and several others in considering this period to be essentially that from about 1720 or -30 up to the present.) These fundamental concepts, or Grundbegriffe, of "Modernity" comprise complexes of interrelated axioms often taken for granted and not customarily thematized in traditional musicological work. What I am proposing--on this first, conceptual level--is precisely such a self-critical thematization, but one that neither veers into the excesses of committed, ideological partisanship nor blinds itself to the legitimate empirical and evidential concerns of practical musicology.

My aim today cannot be to expand on these axiom-complexes here. Each is intricate and controversial; each is subject to legitimate challenge; and each merits a full study in its own right. I might at least mention, however, what I believe to be the five most central Grundbegriffe, arranged in order, I think, of their significance.

The **FIRST CONCEPT** is that of "Modernity" itself. (Some more ideologically loaded, doubtless reductive, synonyms, are "The Enlightenment Project," "The Bourgeois Period," and so on.) However we choose to identify it, "Modernity" is the generating concept of the other four, and it involves such related sub-issues as, first, the more or less "new" Enlightenment concerns with individual "self-justification" and "self-expression"; second, "Modern" concerns with time itself, and especially with the growing perception of a somehow insufficient present now urged to "progress" toward an envisioned, superior future; and, a third sub-issue, the increasing "functional differentiation of society" (to use Niklas Luhmann's term), which, on the one hand, generated astonishing material, scientific, and technological advances but, on the other, seems also--especially in its Germanic variants--to have spawned some deep-seated structural discontents. These include, most notably, a sense of aesthetic or spiritual "alienation" from the technical and economic activity of the everyday world; the consequent drive to create a separate, perhaps compensatory "redemptive space" in Art, notwithstanding that "Art's" increasing dependence on the distribution mechanisms of the marketplace; and the formation of a self-conscious, separatist aesthetic elite devoted to the preservation of a musical canon).

The **SECOND CONCEPT** is that of Autonomy. This is the increasing claim, from the late eighteenth century onward (especially--and at first--in instrumental-music rather than vocal-music cultures), that music should exist primarily for its own sake and only secondarily--very secondarily--for everyday-world social functions and purposes. (As is well known, the category of "autonomy," interchangeable with that of the centrality of the

self-standing "Artwork," is one of both Theodor Adorno's and Carl Dahlhaus's most central and most hotly contested axioms. How we decide to assess Dahlhaus's work, for example, may ultimately hinge on our individual comfort or discomfort with his near-absolutizing of the category of "autonomy" and its inseparable twin, the "Artwork." And because the "autonomy" postulate is so pointedly put in Dahlhaus, our assessment there seems destined to reverberate with a perhaps renewed force into our own intersections with current American musicology, which has by and large been content to accept that postulate far more tacitly.)

The THIRD CONCEPT is that of Institution. By this I mean (drawing on the work of Institution Theory in current German literary criticism) the multifaceted social framework (composers, critics, historians, theorists, performers, publishers, educators, and so on) that developed in the period of Modernity not only to serve "Art Music" (capital-A) but also, <sup>more importantly,</sup> to set the conditions for its reception and evaluation. Here we come to grips with the determinants of musical "authority." These are power- and legitimation-concerns that in practice are not infrequently wedded to others--such as the educational self-formation (or Bildung) of an aesthetic elite; or such as a society's group-needs for cultural self-perception, for the articulation of a Volksgeist, or for the expression of a politicized nationalism. The main locus of activity within the "Institution of Art Music" is what I call the "producer-receiver transaction"--the nature of the way a composer's product or presumed "intention" is reciprocally received within other subsections of the institution, and thereupon either validated or invalidated.

The FOURTH CONCEPT is that of Material. By "material" I mean the totality of the historically available technical and conceptual resources with which

an individual "Modern" composer works. With "autonomy," "material" is probably the central music-specific "Modernist" concept, and it carries with it its own complexities, glories, and discomforts. Its most explicit, extreme, and influential formulation--but by no means its first--was in Adorno's widely-read Philosophie der neuen Musik from 1949. Here Adorno argued sternly that musical material itself "progresses" and that, consequently, individual composers are morally obliged to confront that objective material at its current state of development, to give what he called "the single correct answer" to the demands of the material, and thus to push it forward to a more advanced level of objectivity for succeeding generations. Within the field of 1950s avant-garde composition, of course, <sup>especially in Europe</sup> Adorno's influential formulation rapidly became an article of faith. In Dahlhaus's historical work from the 1960s and 1970s this explicitly moralizing position was only slightly tempered to become a key component of what he identified as the nineteenth-century postulate of originality, and in the Germanically informed music historiography of English-speaking cultures throughout our century in general, it has not uncommonly been used as a tacit basis of thumbnail aesthetic evaluation.

The FIFTH AND FINAL CONCEPT is that of Genre. At this outline-level, the category of "Genre" is probably self explanatory, and it is closely intertwined with the concepts of "Institution" and "Material." I should add, though, that the potential arises here for a musical "narrativity" of moment-to-moment choices with or against the defaults of the existing state of the genre. And I should add that certain frequently encountered "master-tropes" of meaning--semiotic codes, gender-markings, topoi, allusion and influence, and so on--probably also belong here.

This is an overview, then, of the broad theoretical-critical categories of the project (MODERNITY--AUTONOMY--INSTITUTION--MATERIAL--GENRE), but my more specific focus (or more musically practical sphere of interest) is a study of the central figures of the self-consciously "new" wave of Western European composers born between about 1855 and 1865--the first to come of age in the context of Bayreuth and the now-firmly established challenges of the symphonic Liszt. Dahlhaus has referred to this group as the "Generation of the 1860s" and to their results, beginning around 1889 with Strauss's Don Juan and Mahler's First Symphony, as a self-standing "period of musical modernism." (See the individual handout: this is, of course, a differing, more restricted use of the term, "modernism," the narrow definition, not the broad one.) I am particularly interested in these composers' attempts to confront a massively "reified" generic tradition and to discover in it directions--often extreme directions--for further development. For the present I am focussing on the problem of large-scale symphonic form in the period of the collapsing--and then the collapse--of tonality as commonly understood.

Within the format of symphonic composition, this generation's major figures are three: two "insiders" (more or less) Mahler and Strauss, and one clear "outsider," Sibelius. All three, I think--along with perhaps a few others as well, some on Dahlhaus's list, some not--should be considered as a group that faced essentially the same kinds of compositional problems, however their individual solutions might have differed.

By and large, the compositional careers of this "generation of the 1860s" may be divided into two phases. I refer to the first as the positive phase, "integration" or ascent (I do not use the term evaluatively, merely

descriptively)--ascent, the forging of differently accented individualized languages, from about 1889 through, roughly, the first decade of the twentieth century. The second is the negative phase, "disintegration" or descent, initiated by each composer's confrontation with the more radical musical challenges of the years 1907-1914 (led mostly by two younger figures, one from the 1870s, Schoenberg, the other from the 1880s, Stravinsky). To a person, each composer of this 1855-1865 generation declined to endorse--much less to embrace, in any personal sense--the musical revolution of Schoenberg, even though each, quite accurately, perceived it as a watershed event that brought the ascent phase of his own "modernist project" to an end. This "generational crisis" is a pivotal historical problem of considerable interest. Dahlhaus writes, for instance, of "Strauss's and Reger's [ultimate] rejection of modernism . . . [a rejection] that was "influenced if not directly occasioned by the shock of Schoenberg's earliest compositions." (NCM, p. 336). Sibelius had precisely the same experience, and we would doubtless be obliged to think of Mahler in similar terms had he lived a decade or two longer: it hardly seems likely that he would have followed the Schoenberg School's lead into full atonality.

In the case of Sibelius the Outsider, especially from the "proto-Neoclassical" Third Symphony onward (that is, from 1907 to the mid-1920s, after which he was no longer able to bring any works to completion), one of the most curious features is a pronounced gap between his emphatically "modernist" production aesthetic (roughly, his compositional "intention") and virtually all of his de facto reception: the "production-reception transaction," that is, was consistently skewed in unforeseen, damaging directions. Both his advocates and his detractors seemed to adopt their positions for reasons that the composer could only have found puzzling and deeply discouraging.

Finally, for the Germanic-oriented "modernists" (the symphonic-poem and symphony composers, Mahler, Strauss, Sibelius, and so on), in particular, I am analytically interested in exploring models of what I call sonata-deformation (mostly to get away from the term "sonata form," which is connotatively too rigid for what actually occurs in these <sup>modernist</sup> pieces). The varying types of sonata-deformation--for they may be grouped into recognizable families--are more or less standard ways in which default sonata procedures are consistently overridden (that is, favored methods of overriding the by-now-crystallized--and hence aesthetically delegitimized--classical and textbook procedures, well known to these "modernists," who had all been dutifully drilled in them). Wagner and Liszt are obviously important deformational models, and the "modernists" themselves would also play off the innovations in each others' works.

*the term deformation (with no negative connotations) is adapted from the Russian Formalists, and I use the term "sonata deformation"*