

**New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea**  
**Arnold Schoenberg**  
**1946**

The first three of these four concepts have been widely used in the last twenty-five years, while not so much ado has been made about the fourth, *idea*.

Unfortunately, methods in music teaching, instead of making students thoroughly acquainted with the music itself, furnish a conglomerate of more or less true historical facts, sugar-coated with a great number of more or less false anecdotes about the composer, his performers, his audiences, and his critics, plus a strong dose of popularized aesthetics. Thus I once read in an examination paper of a sophomore, who had studied only a little harmony and much music appreciation, but who had certainly not heard much “live” music, that “Schumann’s orchestration is gloomy and unclear.” This wisdom was derived directly and verbally from the textbook used in class. Some experts on orchestration might agree upon the condemnation of Schumann as an orchestrator, perhaps even without an argument. However, there might be other experts who would agree that not all of Schumann’s orchestration is poor—that there are gloomy spots as well as brilliant or at least good ones; they would also know that this accusation stems from the fight between the Wagnerian “New-German” School and the Schumann-Brahmsian-Academic-Classicist School, and that the critics had in mind such brilliant parts of Wagner’s music as the “Magic Fire”, the *Meistersinger* Overture, the *Venusberg* music and others. Such brilliancy can but seldom be found in Schumann’s music. But some experts also know that there are very few compositions whose orchestration is perfectly flawless. More than two decades after Wagner’s death, for instance, his orchestral accompaniment covered the singers’ voices so as to make them inaudible. I know that Gustav Mahler had to change his orchestration very much for the sake of transparency. And Strauss himself showed me several cases where he had to make adjustment.

Thus, there is not the same degree of unanimity among experts of orchestration as there is between the sophomore girl and her textbook. But irreparable damage has been done; this girl, and probably all her classmates, will never listen to the orchestra of Schumann naively, sensitively, and open-mindedly. At the end of the term she will have acquired a knowledge of music history, aesthetics, and criticism, plus a number of amusing anecdotes; but unfortunately she may not remember even one of those gloomily orchestrated Schumann themes. In a few years she will take her master’s degree in music, or will have become a teacher, or both, and will disseminate what she has been taught: ready-made judgments, wrong and

superficial ideas about music, musicians, and aesthetics.

In this manner there are educated a great number of pseudo-historians who believe themselves to be experts and, as such, entitled not only to criticize music and musicians, but even to usurp the role of leaders, to gain influence in the development of the art of music and to organize it in advance.

A few years after the first World War, such pseudo-historians acquired a dominant voice, throughout Western Europe, in predicting the future of music. In all music-producing countries, in France, Italy, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland, there suddenly arose the slogan:

“NEW MUSIC”

This battle-cry had evidently been created because one of these pseudo-historians had remembered that several times in the past the same battle-cry, or others like it, had furthered a new direction in the arts. A battle-cry must, perhaps, be superficial and at least partially wrong if it is to gain popularity. Thus we may understand Schopenhauer’s story of the surprise of one ancient Greek orator who, when he was suddenly interrupted by applause and cheers, cried out: “Have I said some nonsense?” The popularity acquired by this slogan, “New Music”, immediately arouses suspicion and forces one to question its meaning.

*What is New Music?*

Evidently it must be music which, though it is still music, differs in all essentials from previously composed music. Evidently it must express something which has not yet been expressed in music. Evidently, in higher art, only that is worth being presented which has never before been presented. There is no great work of art which does not convey a new message to humanity; there is no great artist who fails in this respect. This is the code of honor of all the great in art, and consequently in all great works of the great we will find that newness which never perishes, whether it be of Josquin des Pre’s, of Bach or Haydn, or of any other great master.

*Because: Art means New Art.*

The idea that this slogan “New Music” might change the course of musical production was probably based on the belief that “history repeats itself”. As everybody knows, while Bach still was living a new musical style came into being out of which there later grew the style of the Viennese Classicists, the style of homophonic-melodic composition, or, as I call it, the style of Developing Variation. If, then, history really repeated itself, the assumption that one need only demand the creation of new music would also suffice in our time, and at once the ready-made product would be served.

Arnold Schoenberg

*New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea*

This is mistaking symptoms for causes. The real causes of changes in the style of musical composition are others. If in a period of homophonic composition musicians had acquired great skill in creating melodies—that is, main voices which reduced accompanying voices to almost meaningless inferiority in order to concentrate all possible contents in themselves—other composers may well have been annoyed by such a skill, which seemed already to degenerate into a schematic mechanism. They may then have been even more annoyed by the inferiority of the accompaniment than by what seemed to them the sweetness of the melody. While in this period only one direction of the musical space, the horizontal line, had been developed, the composers of the next period might have responded to a tendency that demanded the vitalizing of the accompanying voices also—that is, following the vertical direction of the musical space. Such tendencies might have provoked that richer elaboration of the accompaniment seen, for instance, in Beethoven as compared with Haydn, Brahms as compared with Mozart, or Wagner as compared with Schumann. Though in all these cases the richness of the melody has not suffered in the least, the role of the accompaniment has been intensified, enhancing its contribution to the common effect. No historian need tell a Beethoven, a Brahms, a Wagner to enrich his accompaniment with vitamins. At least these three men, stubborn as they were, would have shown him the door!

And vice versa:

If, in a given period, each participating voice had been elaborated, with respect to its content, its formal balance and its relation to other voices, as part of a contrapuntal combination, its share of melodic eloquence would be less than if it were the main voice. Again, there might then arise in younger composers a longing to get rid of all these complexities. They then might refuse to deal with combinations and elaborations of subordinate voices. Thus the desire to elaborate only one voice and reduce the accompaniment to that minimum required by comprehensibility would again be the ruling fashion.

Such are the causes which produce changes in methods of composition. In a manifold sense, music uses time. It uses my time, it uses your time, it uses its own time. It would be most annoying if it did not aim to say the most important things in the most concentrated manner in every fraction of this time. This is why, when composers have acquired the technique of filling one direction with content to the utmost capacity, they must do the same in the next direction, and finally in all the directions in which music expands. Such progress can occur only step-wise. The necessity of compromising with comprehensibility forbids jumping into a style which is overcrowded with content, a style in which facts are too often juxtaposed without connectives, and which leaps to conclusions before proper maturation.

If music abandoned its former direction and turned towards new goals in this manner, I doubt that the men who produced this change needed the exhortation of pseudo-historians. We know that they—the Telemanns, the Couperins, the Rameaus, the Keisers, the Ph. E. Bachs and others—created something new which led only later to the period of the Viennese Classicists. Yes, a new style in music was created, but did this have the consequence of making the music of the preceding period outmoded?

Curiously, it happened at the beginning of this period that J. S. Bach's music was called outmoded. And, most curiously, one of those who said this was J. S. Bach's own son, Ph. Emanuel Bach, whose greatness one might question if one did not know that Mozart and Beethoven viewed him with great admiration. To them, he still seemed a leader, even after they themselves had added to the first rather negative principles of the New Music such positive principles as that of developing variation, in addition to many hitherto unknown structural devices such as those of transition, liquidation, dramatic recapitulation, manifold elaboration, derivation of subordinate themes, highly differentiated dynamics—*crescendo*, *decrescendo*, *sforzato*, *piano subito*, *marcato*, etc.—and particularly the new technique of *legato* and *staccato* passages, *accelerando* and *ritardando*, and the establishment of tempo and character by specific bywords.

Beethoven's words: "Das ist nicht ein Bach, das ist ein Meer" (This is not a brook, this is an ocean) constitute the correct order. He did not say this about Philipp Emanuel but about Johann Sebastian. Should he not have added: Who is the brook?

In any case:

While until 1750 J. S. Bach was writing countless works whose originality seems the more astonishing to us the more we study his music; while he not only developed but really created a new style of music which was without precedent; while the very nature of this newness still escapes the observation of the experts—

No, excuse me: I feel obliged to prove what I say, and hate to say it as lightly and superficially as if I were to say: New Music!

The newness of Bach's art can only be understood by comparing it with the style of the Netherlands School on the one hand and with Handel's art on the other.

The secrets of the Netherlanders, strictly denied to the uninitiated, were based on a complete recognition of the possible contrapuntal relations between the seven tones of the diatonic scale. This enabled the initiated to produce combinations which admitted many types of vertical and horizontal shifts, and other similar changes. But the remaining five tones were not included in these rules, and, if they appeared

at all, did so apart from the contrapuntal combination and as occasional substitutes.

In contrast, Bach, who knew more secrets than the Netherlanders ever possessed, enlarged these rules to such an extent that they comprised all the twelve tones of the chromatic scale. Bach sometimes operated with the twelve tones in such a manner that one would be inclined to call him the first twelve tone composer.

If, after observing that the contrapuntal flexibility of Bach's themes is based in all probability on his instinctive thinking in terms of multiple counterpoint which gives scope to additional voices, one compares his counterpoint with Handel's, the latter's seems bare and simple, and his subordinate voices are really inferior.

Also in other respects Bach's art is higher than Handel's. As a composer for the theater Handel always had the power of beginning with a characteristic and often excellent theme. But, thereafter, with the exception of the repetitions of the theme, there follows a decline, bringing only what the editor of *Grove's Dictionary* would call "trash"—empty, meaningless, étude-like broken chord figures. In contrast, even Bach's transitional and subordinate sections are always full of character, inventiveness, imagination and expression. Though his subordinate voices never degenerate into inferiority, he is able to write fluent and well balanced melodies of more beauty, richness and expressiveness than can be found in the music of all those Keisers, Telemanns, and Philipp Emanuel Bachs who called him outmoded. They, of course, were not capable of seeing that he was also the first to introduce just that technique so necessary for the progress of their New Music: the technique of "developing variation", which made possible the style of the great Viennese Classicists.

While Bach thus—as beforementioned—produced work after work in a new style, his contemporaries knew no better than to ignore him. It can be said that not much of their New Music remained alive, though one must not deny that it was the beginning of a new art. But there are two points in which they were wrong. First, it was not musical ideas which their New Music wanted to establish, but only a new style for the presentation of musical ideas, whether old or new; it was a new wave in the progress of music, one which, as described before, tried to develop the other direction of musical space, the horizontal line. Second, they were wrong when they called Bach's music outmoded. At least it was not outmoded for ever, as history shows; today their New Music is outmoded while Bach's has become eternal.

But now one should also examine the concept "outmoded".

One can find illustrations of this concept in our daily life rather than in the intellectual sphere. Long hair, for instance, was considered an important contribution to a woman's beauty thirty years ago. Who knows how soon the fashion of short

hair will be outmoded? Pathos was one of the most admired merits of poetry about a hundred years ago; today it seems ridiculous, and it is used only for satirical purposes. Electric light has outmoded candle-light; but snobs still use the latter because they saw it in the castles of the aristocracy where artistically decorated walls would have been damaged by electric wiring.

Does this indicate why things become outmoded?

Long hair became outmoded because working women considered it a handicap. Pathos became outmoded when naturalism portrayed real life and the way in which people talked when they wanted to finish business. Candle-light became outmoded when people realized how senseless it is to make unnecessary work for one's servants—if one can get them at all.

The common factor in all these examples was a change in the forms of our life.

Can one contend the same about music?

Which form of life makes Romantic music inadequate? Is there no more romanticism in our time? Are we not more enthusiastic about being killed by our automobiles than the ancient Romans were about being killed by their chariots? Are there not still to be found young people who engage in adventure for which they may have to pay with their lives, though the glory they earn will pale with the next day's front page? Would it not be easy to find numerous youths to fly to the moon in a rocket plane if the opportunity were offered? Is not the admiration of people of all ages for our Tarzans, Supermen, Lone Rangers and indestructible detectives the result of a love for romanticism? The Indian stories of our youth were no more romantic; only the names of the subjects have been changed.

One reproach against romanticism concerns its complications. True, if one were to look at scores of Strauss, Debussy, Mahler, Ravel, Reger, or my own, it might be difficult to decide whether all this complication is necessary. But the decision of one successful young composer: "Today's younger generation does not like music which they do not understand," does not conform to the feelings of the heroes who engage in adventures. One might expect that this kind of youth, attracted by the difficult, the dangerous, the mysterious, would rather say: "Am I an idiot that one dares offer me poor trash which I understand before I am half-way through?" Or even: "This music is complicated, but I, will not give up until I understand it." Of course this kind of man will be enthused rather by profundity, profuseness of ideas, difficult problems. Intelligent people have always been offended if one bothered them with matters which any idiot could understand at once.

The reader has certainly become aware that it is not merely my intention to attack

long deceased pseudo-historians and the composers who started the movement of New Music. Though I have used with pleasure the opportunity to write about some of the lesser known merits of Bach's art, and though I have enjoyed the opportunity to list some of the contributions of the Viennese Classicists to the development of compositional technique, I do not hesitate to admit that the attack upon the propagandists of the New Music is aimed against similar movements in our own time. Except for one difference—that I am no Bach—there is a great similarity between the two epochs.

A superficial judgment might consider composition with twelve tones as an end to the period in which chromaticism evolved, and thus compare it to the climaxing end of the period of contrapuntal composition which Bach set by his unsurpassable mastery. That only lesser values could follow this climax is a kind of justification of his younger contemporaries' turn towards New Music.

But—also in this respect I am no Bach—I believe that composition with twelve tones and what many erroneously call “atonal music” is not the end of an old period, but the beginning of a new one. Again, as two centuries ago, something is called outmoded; and again it is not one particular work, or several works of one composer; again it is not the greater or lesser ability of one composer in particular; but again it is a style which has become ostracized. Again it calls itself New Music, and this time even more nations participate in the struggle. Aside from nationalistic aims for an exportable music with which even smaller nations hope to conquer the market, there is one common trait observable in all these movements; none of them are occupied with presenting new ideas, but only with presenting a new style. And, again, the principles on which this New Music is to be based present themselves even more negatively than the strictest rules of the strictest old counterpoint. There should be avoided: chromaticism, expressive melodies, Wagnerian harmonies, romanticism, private biographical hints, subjectivity, functional harmonic progressions, illustrations, leitmotifs, concurrence with the mood or action of the scene and characteristic declamation of the text in opera, songs and choruses. In other words, all that was good in the preceding period should not occur now.

Besides these officially authorized “Verbote”, I have observed numerous negative merits, such as: pedal points (instead of elaborate bass voices and moving harmony), ostinatos, sequences (instead of developing variation), fugatos (for similar purposes), dissonances (disguising the vulgarity of the thematic material), objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), and a kind polyphony, substituting for counterpoint, which, because of its inexact imitations, in former times would have been held in contempt as “Kapellmeistennusik”, or what I called “Rhabarber counterpoint”. The

word “Rhabarber”, spoken behind the scenes by only five or six people, sounded to the audience in a theatre like a rioting mob. Thus the counterpoint, thematically meaningless, like the word “rhubarb”, sounded as if it had a real meaning.

In my youth, living in the proximity of Brahms, it was customary that a musician, when he heard a composition for the first time, observed its construction, was able to follow the elaboration and derivation of its themes and its modulations, and could recognize the number of voices in canons and the presence of the theme in a variation; and there were even laymen who after one hearing could take a melody home in their memory. But I am sure there was not much talk about style. And if a music historian had ventured to participate in an argument, it could only have been one who was able to observe similar qualities by ear alone. That is what music critics like Hanslick, Kalbeck, Heuberger and Speidel and amateurs like the renowned physician Billroth were able to do.

The positive and negative rules may be deduced from a finished work as constituents of its style. Every man has fingerprints of his own, and every craftsman’s hand has its personality; out of such subjectivity grow the traits which comprise the style of the finished product. Every craftsman is limited by the shortcomings of his hands but is furthered by their particular abilities. On his natural conditions depends the style of everything he does, and so it would be wrong to expect a plum tree to bear plums of glass or pears or felt hats. Among all trees it is only the Christmas tree which bears fruits not natural to it, and among animals it is only the Easter rabbit which lays eggs, and even colored ones at that.

Style is the quality of a work and is based on natural conditions, expressing him who produced it. In fact, one who knows his capacities may be able to tell in advance exactly how the finished work will look which he still sees only in his imagination. But he will never start from a preconceived image of a style; he will be ceaselessly occupied with doing justice to the idea. He is sure that, everything done which the idea demands, the external appearance will be adequate.

If I have been fortunate enough to show some views different from those of my adversaries about New Music, Outmoded Music, and Style, I would like to proceed now to my self-appointed task of discussing what seems to me most important in a work of art—the Idea.

I am conscious that entering into this sphere involves some danger. Adversaries have called me a constructor, an engineer, an architect, even a mathematician—not to flatter me—because of my method of composing with twelve tones. In spite of knowing my *Verkürzte Nacht* and *Gurrelieder*, though some people like these works because of the emotionality, they called my music dry and denied me spontaneity.

They pretended that I offered the products of a brain, not of a heart.

I have often wondered whether people who possess a brain would prefer to hide this fact. I have been supported in my own attitude by the example of Beethoven who, having received a letter from his brother Johann signed “land owner”, signed his reply “brain owner”. One might question why Beethoven just stressed the point of owning a brain. He had so many other merits to be proud of, for instance, being able to compose music which some people considered outstanding, being an accomplished pianist—and, as such, even recognized by the nobility—and being able to satisfy his publishers by giving them something of value for their money. Why did he call himself just “brain owner”, when the possession of a brain is considered a danger to the naiveté of an artist by many pseudo-historians?

An experience of mine might illustrate the way in which people think a brain might be dangerous. I have never found it necessary to hide that I am able to think logically, that I distinguish sharply between right and wrong terms, and that I have very exact ideas about what art should be. Thus, in a number of discussions, I may have shown a little too much brain to one of my tennis partners, a writer of lyric poetry. He did not reciprocate in kind, but maliciously told me the story about the toad who asked the centipede whether he was always conscious which of his hundred feet was just about to move, whereupon the centipede, in becoming conscious of the necessary decision, lost his instinctive ability to walk at all.

Indeed, a great danger to a composer! And even hiding his brain might not help; only having none would suffice. But I think this need not discourage anyone who has a brain; because I have observed that if one has not worked hard enough and has not done one’s best, the Lord will refuse to add His blessing. He has given us a brain in order to use it. Of course an idea is not always the product of brain-work. Ideas may invade the mind as unprovoked and perhaps even as undesired as a musical sound reaches the ear or an odor the nose.

Ideas can only be honored by one who has some of his own; but only he can do honor who deserves honor himself.

The difference between style and idea in music has perhaps been clarified by the preceding discussion. This may not be the place to discuss in detail what idea in itself means in music, because almost all musical terminology is vague and most of its terms are used in various meanings. In its most common meaning, the term idea is used as a synonym for theme, melody, phrase or motive. I myself consider the totality of a piece as the idea: the idea which its creator wanted to present. But because of the lack of better terms I am forced to define the term idea in the following manner:

Arnold Schoenberg

*New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea*

Every tone which is added to a beginning tone makes the meaning of that tone doubtful. If, for instance, G follows after C, the ear may not be sure whether this expresses C major or G major, or even F major or E minor; and the addition of other tones may or may not clarify this problem. In this manner there is produced a state of unrest, of imbalance which grows throughout most of the piece, and is enforced further by similar functions of the rhythm. The method by which balance is restored seems to me the real idea of the composition. Perhaps the frequent repetitions of themes, groups, and even larger sections might be considered as attempts towards an early balance of the inherent tension.

In comparison with all our developments in mechanics, a tool like a pair of pliers might seem simple. I always admired the mind which invented it. In order to understand the problem which this inventor had to overcome one must imagine the state of mechanics before its invention. The idea of fixing the crosspoint of the two crooked arms so that the two smaller segments in front would move in the opposite direction to the larger segments at the back, thus multiplying the power of the man who squeezed them to such an extent that he could cut wire—this idea can only have been conceived by a genius. Certainly more complicated and better tools exist today, and there may come a time when the use of the pliers and other similar tools may become superfluous. The tool itself may fall into disuse, but the idea behind it can never become obsolete. And therein lies the difference between a mere style and a real idea.

An idea can never perish.

It is very regrettable that so many contemporary composers care so much about style and so little about idea. From this came such notions as the attempt to compose in ancient styles, using their mannerisms, limiting oneself to the little that one can thus express and to the insignificance of the musical configurations which can be produced with such equipment.

No one should give in to limitations other than those which are due to the limits of his talent. No violinist would play, even occasionally, with the wrong intonation to please lower musical tastes, no tight-rope walker would take steps in the wrong direction only for pleasure or for popular appeal, no chess master would make moves everyone could anticipate just to be agreeable (and thus allow his opponent to win), no mathematician would invent something new in mathematics just to flatter the masses who do not possess the specific mathematical way of thinking, and in the same manner, no artist, no poet, no philosopher and no musician whose thinking occurs in the highest sphere would degenerate into vulgarity in order to comply with a slogan such as “Art for All”. Because if it is art, it is not for all, and if it is for all, it is not art.

Arnold Schoenberg

*New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea*

Most deplorable is the acting of some artists who arrogantly wish to make believe that they descend from their heights in order to give some of their riches to the masses. This is hypocrisy. But there are a few composers, like Offenbach, Johann Strauss and Gershwin, whose feelings actually coincide with those of the “average man in the street”. To them it is no masquerade to express popular feelings in popular terms. They are natural when they talk thus and about that.

He who really uses his brain for thinking can only be possessed of one desire: to resolve his task. He cannot let external conditions exert influence upon the results of his thinking. Two times two is four—whether one likes it or not.

One thinks only for the sake of one’s idea.

And thus art can only be created for its own sake. An idea is born; it must be molded, formulated, developed, elaborated, carried through and pursued to its very end.

Because there is only “l’art pour l’art”, art for the sake of art alone.