Musical Temporality: Perspectives from Adorno and de Man

Robert Adlington

This paper focuses upon Adorno’s critique of musical temporality—as found in his musical criticism and as implied by his philosophy as a whole. I shall contend that the two do not necessarily coincide. Adorno presents temporality in a different light in each, and rather than labor over Adorno’s disparate and diverging comments on temporality in an attempt to prove their inner consistency, I dwell on their irreconcilability. This is made a particularly plausible approach by Adorno’s own methods, which I characterize as being driven by the principle of antinomy. It is not for nothing that Adorno refuses to issue coherent, succinct theses, and we misunderstand his rationale by passing over or attempting to explain away the apparent inconsistencies and paradoxes in his writing.

It does not need my intervention for the contradictory element in Adorno’s writing to be made fully apparent. Current reception of Adorno neatly polarizes into those devotees who
discern in his philosophy a resistance to sociohistoric dogma at every turn and less sympathetic commentators for whom Adorno is symbolic of vested, reactionary forces. That there is more than a grain of truth in each of these views is apparent from the most cursory examination of Adorno’s comments on temporality. I take this contradiction to constitute, rather than compromise, Adorno’s stance—and a defense of this position is one of the functions of the following pages. However, while the presence of contradiction may be unmistakable if one takes Adorno’s writings as a whole, it is not evenly distributed throughout them. The musical criticism gives what I perceive to be a misleading picture of Adorno’s wider position. In brief, it presents a framework that interprets the repetitive or non-developmental in music as false, and argues that truth may only be glimpsed in developmental or “dialectical” forms. But it does so without giving full consideration to the possible falsity of the notion of dialectical form—a reflective scrutiny that Adorno’s philosophical method demands in other contexts. The seeds for just such a critique may be found in Adorno’s non-musical writings, but I believe they receive valuable nourishment from Paul de Man’s more sustained effort to articulate a temporality that resists compliance with social ideology. This radical concept of temporality not only distances itself from predominant models of time, but also suggests novel interpretations of musical idioms that Adorno viewed with suspicion.

**Adorno’s Critique of Musical Temporality**

Adorno’s stance on temporality in his writings on music is a product of the philosophical heritage informing his thought, especially Marx’s reading of Hegel’s concept of subjective temporality. Hegel was in turn indebted to Kant, who rescued time from the merely contingent status it had had under his immediate predecessors. For Kant time cannot simply be dismissed as an inexplicable *a priori* about existence, dictating the way in
which objects and events are presented but essentially extraneous to their properties or characteristics. Rather time is "the form of the inner sense"; only for this reason may it be considered a "condition a priori of all appearances":

For time cannot be a determination of outer appearances; it belongs neither to shape nor location, etc., but determines the relation of presentations in our inner state (Kant 1982, 22).

So time may not be understood to exist in itself, or as an extractable attribute of objects in the world, but is an inherent attribute of subjectivity. Although this means it is not possible to talk of the "absolute reality" of time, its intervention (according to Kant) in all subjective appearances grants it the status of an "empirical reality" (Kant 1982, 23). And because the temporality of appearances cannot be suspended, to attempt to view the objects of appearance "atemporally" is to deny a fundamental aspect of our only way of knowing them—which is to say, as appearances. Time is not merely the medium in which spatial objects and events exist, but assists in the very constitution of those objects and events as perceived by an individual.

Hegel similarly emphasizes the temporality of all perceptions and thoughts. However, concerned to transcend the subject-object dichotomy, he prefers not to view time as either subjective or objective. Rather, time is the worldly manifestation of the subject's striving for adequate knowledge of itself and its object. Time denotes the voracious development traced by the human spirit in its quest for truth. Time is being—insofar as being continues to recognize limitations in its grasp upon reality and itself:

Time is the Notion itself that is there and which presents itself to consciousness as empty intuition; for this reason, Spirit necessarily appears in Time, and it appears in Time just so long as it has not grasped its pure Notion, i.e. has not annulled Time.... Time, therefore, appears as the destiny and necessity of Spirit that is not yet complete within itself (Hegel 1977, 487).
Only when Spirit is fully self-aware—when the knowing subject-object achieves its completely contented state—will time cease to exist.

For Hegel, art gives an indication of the state of this gathering self-knowledge—an aspect of Hegel's philosophy of particular importance to Adorno. Hegel's essays on aesthetics relate different art forms to various stages of human history. The diminishing externality of predominant artistic practices is viewed as reflecting the growth and development of Spirit toward the proper realization of its own non-corporeality. Within this perspective, form and content in an art work become difficult to separate clearly. Architecture and sculpture, for instance, represent an early stage of Spirit's journey, their symbolic physicality hardly reaching beyond the crude, pre-reflective image-making of the primitive human. Music's material evanescence, on the other hand, clearly commends it for communication of transcendent Spirit. Musical sound satisfies the need for "a material which for our apprehension is without stability and even as it arises and exists vanishes once more" (Hegel 1975, 889). Music's capacity for conveying the movement of Spirit depends upon its ability to penetrate and captivate the subjective consciousness, and this in turn is only possible because of music's basis in sound:

Expression in music has, as its content, the inner life itself, the inner sense of feeling... and, as its form, sound, which, in an art that least of all proceeds to spatial figures, is purely evanescent in its perceptible existence; the result is that music with its movements penetrates the arcanum of all the movements of the soul.... Since the time of the sound is that of the subject too, sound on this principle penetrates the self, grips it in its simplest being, and by means of the temporal movement and its rhythm sets the self in motion (Hegel 1975, 906-08).

In this way, the subject surrenders its freedom of contemplation and submits itself to the sway of music's temporal organization. Hegel gives musical meter as a specific example of how the process of temporal "instruction" through music might
bring the individual subject nearer to the unity after which all consciousness under Spirit strives. When the subject is gripped by metric division, it overcomes the sprawl and fragmentation to which it is prone in undifferentiated, empty time. Meter impresses on the listener the necessity of repeated acts of self-concentration, wherein momentary experiences may be gathered from their random distribution in empty time and secured for the persisting self:

[The] unregulated running riot [in undifferentiated time] contradicts the unity of the self..., and the self can find itself again and be satisfied in this diversified definiteness of duration only if single quanta are brought into one unity.... In [the] uniformity [of the bar] self-consciousness finds itself again as a unity (Hegel 1975, 914-15).

Hegel does not move beyond this analysis to discuss the possible pertinence of larger-scale musical procedures or forms to the self-enlightenment of the subject. Nevertheless, it would seem that the subject stands the best chance of coming face to face with its objective condition through music that approximates most closely the movement of Spiritual consciousness itself. For Hegel, Spirit pursues an evolutionary path which progresses through acts of dialectic reasoning. Correspondingly, the knowing subject is best reflected "by a musical style based upon the same principles of self-contradiction and higher resolution" (Johnson 1991, 160). Hegel’s pessimism about the function of art in an age where philosophical reasoning and religious enlightenment risked reducing it to an anachronism perhaps prevented him from explicitly voicing this conclusion himself. However, it is a line of argument of central importance to Adorno’s musical criticism.

Adorno does not receive Hegel’s philosophy uncritically. Following Marx, Adorno is concerned to de-transcendentalize Hegel’s Spirit. The individual’s situation is now assessed relative to society, rather than Spirit:
For Adorno, [the progress of Spirit] comes to stand for "historical consciousness"...and, at the same time, "rationality" and the historical tendency towards increasing "rationalization"...in Western society (Paddison 1993, 114-15).

Adorno develops the Hegelian idea of the self-conscious subject being inextricably entwined in its objective surroundings. But gone is the confidence in enlightened rationality to guide the subject to perfect self-knowledge. The ultimately harmonious totality toward which the subject strives has, in the modern world, seemingly been irredeemably fractured. Rationality has taken a dominative turn, increasingly wielded to control rather than liberate the subject. The rationalization processes of mass industry and capitalist thought have become the "tempo of the time" (Paddison 1993, 43)—passed off as nature-mythical. This has implications for subjective temporality, summarized by Julian Johnson:

A truly dynamic temporality is the corollary of a truly free, independent subject, which in turn, is the corollary of a free society.... The inability to proceed, to develop through time, is the mark of unfreedom in both the individual and in society as a whole (Johnson 1993, 209).

Reified and rationalized thought increasingly stultifies the progressive consciousness of individuals—the form of consciousness upon which the possibility of a utopian freedom once depended. The dynamic nature of this free subjective temporality must never be lost from sight. But an important claim of Adorno's philosophy is that the subject's embattled situation limits the extent of the freedom that may currently be procured for it. Only in the frank admission of the extent of the objective grip on subjective consciousness can the individual make any claim to truth. This applies as much to temporality as to any other realm of subjective experience.

Both Marx and Freud were important influences in Adorno's post-Hegelian formulation of rationalized time and subjective temporality. The Marxian concept of commodified
time, of particular importance to Adorno, itself relates back to Hegel’s belief that subjective temporality and clock time are fundamentally at odds. Hegel argues that science cannot cope with the unrest of temporality, and is therefore forced to use “a paralyzed form, viz., as the numerical unit, ... which ... reduces what is self-moving to mere material, so as to possess in it an indifferent, external, lifeless content” (Hegel 1977, 27). Temporality is drastically constrained in this quantitative rendering (Hegel calls it “lifeless”). For Marx, binding the laborer to “commodified time”—clock time—is in an important respect a denial of subjective freedom. The necessity of conforming to clock time strips the subject of the possibility of a creative temporality—tantamount to making him “timeless, unable to realize himself existentially” (Pattman 1988, 111). Instead, the subject submits to a repetitious, animalistic existence, denied the opportunity of exploring its temporal condition independently of social controls. The machinery of mechanized labor ruthlessly imposes upon the subject a relentless, depersonalized repetitiousness.

In his essay “Free Time” (Adorno 1991, 162-70), Adorno analyzes the infiltration of “rationalized time” (as he frequently refers to it) into all aspects of life. Playing on the irony of the allusion to freedom, he claims that “free time is shackled to its opposite” (Adorno 1991, 162). Adorno sees boredom as a product of this denial of subjective time, but notes:

It need not be so. Whenever behavior in spare time is truly autonomous, determined by free people for themselves, boredom rarely figures.... If people were able to make their own decisions about themselves and their lives, if they were not caught up in the realm of the ever same, they would not have to be bored (Adorno 1991, 166).

Adorno not only documents the malicious spread of rationalized time in various areas of activity, but views time relations themselves as expressive of patterns of domination. Rationalized time comes automatically to have connotations of labor and subjective enslavement; it must be recognized as “the most
profound expression of the relations of domination within the field of consciousness” (Adorno 1991, 65).

Adorno is assisted in this assessment of different types of human temporality by Freudian psychology. While Freud himself said little on the specific subject of time, Freudian principles lead Adorno to identify pathologies in some of the tendencies that the Marxian impulse had already discerned as suspicious. In particular, the diagnostic poles of regression and maturation provide a frame upon which to build a psychoanalytic theory of human temporality. Regression denotes a reversion to infantilistic modes of behavior. It is thus characterized by repetitive urges based on the interminable cycle of need and gratification. Maturation conversely implies, among other things, the ability to cope with, and develop in response to, changing circumstances. The implication of this comparative analysis is that repetition represents an infantile denial of time, and that only development signals proper recognition of the temporal condition.

These perspectives on human temporality—from Hegel, Marx, and Freud—suggest a framework by which to assess and evaluate musical temporality. Repetitive or non-developmental music has connotations of mechanized domination, and additionally signifies worrying infantilistic tendencies. The creative freedom of the individual is properly symbolized only by dialectical musical forms. Music must record the trajectory of historical consciousness, or lapse into falsity. Julian Johnson aptly summarizes the basic thrust of Adorno’s critique of musical temporality:

Temporality in music, as in true thought, Adorno argues, must proceed dialectically if it is to avoid the ideological stasis of reification (Johnson 1993, 209).

For Adorno, Beethoven—or more precisely, certain pieces of middle-period Beethoven—is the exemplar of this vision of musical temporality. In works like Fidelio and the “Eroica”
Symphony, Beethoven achieved an unsurpassed “degree of freedom... through the dialectical mediation of subjective content and objective form” (Williams 1989, 195-96). But since then, composers increasingly have failed to sustain such a temporal ideal. Adorno traces a tradition of deliberate denial of dialectical temporality in music, extending back from Stravinsky through Debussy to Wagner. Wagner’s penchant for foursquare phrases, filled with motives that are stubbornly self-contained (having none of the developmental promise of Beethoven’s motives), allows Adorno to level the charge that Wagner is submitting to “the reified order of time itself” (Adorno 1981, 33). Debussy, in hypostatizing the harmonic ambiguities of Wagner, takes a drastic extra step, so that entire pieces give the impression of “waiting”—the fraudulent creation of an expectation that fosters anticipation in the listener without ever consummating it in a strong subjective act. Adorno is moved to refer to this as a “betrayal of the temporal order” (Adorno 1991, 60).

The “absolute transitoriness” of Debussy in turn signals the “liquidation of the individual that is celebrated by Stravinsky’s music” (Adorno 1973b, 190), which is dissected in the Philosophy of Modern Music. Stravinsky insists that the falsity of qualitative temporality, bound up as it is with anachronistic and unsustainable notions of subjectivity, must be overcome by completely abandoning the whole edifice and returning to the originary authenticity of simple quantitative time. Adorno acknowledges the putative logic of the move on several occasions (Adorno 1977, 180; 1984, 193; 1992, 149), and yet resists it for all his worth. Stravinsky’s music manifests a technique of permanent beginnings.... His music is devoid of recollection and consequently lacking in any time continuum of permanence.... Stravinsky’s music remains a peripheral phenomenon... because it avoids the dialectical confrontation with the musical progress of time. This, in turn, is the basis of all great music since Bach (Adorno 1973b, 164, 187).
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Stravinsky's musical time is a dehumanized process of measuring and counting (Adorno, 1973b, 193). In some respects, admittedly, Stravinsky more faithfully records social actuality than his Viennese contemporaries, for “the dying out of subjective time in music seems totally unavoidable in the midst of a humanity which has made itself into a thing—into an object of its own organization” (Adorno 1973b, 194). But in offering no fragmentary trace of the progressive subjectivity of free selves, faithful critique becomes indistinguishable from complicity.

Adorno acknowledges that all music in rationalized society risks succumbing to one side or other of this dilemma. But while the serial music of Schoenberg effects “a change in time consciousness in the inner organization of music,” replacing the dialectical temporality of the free subject (Adorno 1973b, 194), it does not yet go to the terrible extreme—the total “pseudomorphism”—of Stravinsky. The temporality of Schoenbergian serialism retains a moment of subjectivity, though admittedly it lags “far behind the historical destiny of temporal-consciousness.” Stravinsky’s music, on the other hand, “establishes itself as an arbiter of time, causing the listener to forget the subjective and psychological experience of time in music and to abandon himself to its spatialized dimension” (Adorno 1973b, 195). In practice, Stravinsky’s music, in encouraging the forgetting of traditional subjectivity, is little different from the music of the culture industry (film music, for example). There, traditional subjectivity is invoked, but falsely—through pastiches of disembodied stylistic clichés that deny any temporal continuity. In fact, Stravinsky himself, in his neoclassical works, quickly progresses from the forgetting implied by “originary” quantitativity to the blatant lie of commercial music’s corruption of old styles.
Negative Dialectics, Antinomy, and the Concept of Dialectic

In broad terms it is this framework, with its opposition of rationalized time and subjective temporality, played out in repetitive and dialectical forms respectively, that informs and shapes Adorno's musical criticism. Selective readings of Adorno, particularly those that focus on the musical writings alone, have reinforced the notion that this framework is definitive of the Adornian project. However, I believe that one can grasp the full significance of Adorno's position only by assessing his more general philosophical comments on temporality. Important in this respect is a short but rewarding passage in Negative Dialectics, wherein Adorno positions himself in relation to his philosophical forebears on the specific issue of time. His comments reveal a profound skepticism, rather at odds with the position suggested in the music criticism, about the possibility of grasping or encapsulating human temporality.

Previous philosophical approaches to time may differ in their details, but they share, in Adorno's estimation, a decisive failing which he labels the "detemporalization of time" (Adorno 1973a, 331). Here Adorno inverts, and thus issues an implicit rejoinder to, a slogan from Heidegger's Being and Time. Heidegger's phrase, the "temporalization of time," announces the possibility of an authentic human temporality (Heidegger 1962, 352); Adorno, by contrast, is concerned with the difficulty of identifying such a thing. No explicit reference is made to Heidegger in this passage in Negative Dialectics, but it is clear that he is charged with reproducing the errors that Adorno analyzes in earlier thinkers. Hegel, for instance, in ontologizing time, renders a particular temporality eternal and therefore (for Adorno) "detemporalized." Hegel treats time as a hypothesized absolute that is assumed to exist independently of the interpretive subjective view of the individual and beyond the manipulative sway of society. For Adorno, this contravenes
Hegel's own principle that no concept can be supposed to fall outside the grip of historical consciousness. Adorno's criticism finds an echo in a comment of Paul de Man's, which points to the paradox that Hegelian dialectic "does not include time itself as one of its terms," and thus fails to inject it with the conceptual movement that is the liberating *raison d'être* of dialectical thought (de Man 1983, 242).

For Adorno, Kant's notion of time as a subjective form is an equal failure. In this case the falsity of supposing a supra-historical existential absolute is evident even within Kant's own terms. This is because the "flow" that Kant believes to characterize time necessitates precisely the conceptual intervention, in the form of a visual image, that time as a pure form of intuition was supposed to short-circuit (Adorno 1973a, 332). Ultimately, Adorno attributes the failure of both subjective and objective idealism to their hypostatized treatment of the subject as a concept. Both Kant and Hegel fail to see that their notions of the subject are themselves historical, and thus, inevitably, so are the conditions that they assume operate upon the subject (Adorno 1973b, 332).

It is not only grand philosophical systems such as Kant's and Hegel's that fail in Adorno's view. Approaches that resist the totalizing impulse may equally succumb to false conceptualizations of temporality. Henri Bergson sought to define absolute, "lived" time, but in picturing it as a refuge from the fallen states of everyday social life, he fell into the trap that awaited later phenomenologists, namely a reinscription of particular historical agendas: "The idea of duration [i.e. Bergson's *durée*] is patterned after the concept of property in bourgeois society" (Adorno 1984, 254). Adorno suspected that, outwardly conceived as an authentic response to the nugatory transience of contemporary fashions and trends, *durée* was thereby allied to the "ideology of inwardness or interiority, which has long since been exposed politically and aesthetically" (Adorno 1984, 255). Quietism and complacency find tacit sanction under this supposedly "authentic" mode of consciousness. The danger in
claiming *durée* as a “particular and privileged mode of cognition” is that it is turned “into a line of business” (Adorno 1973a, 333-34), socialized because so baldly articulated. Once again Adorno’s choice of words here emphasizes the appearance of bourgeois principles and ideals in “absolutized” form.

Adorno proceeds to comment upon the wider implications of Bergson’s approach—and that of anyone who attempts an abstract view of temporality as a definable, autonomous concept. By seeking a wholly subjective understanding of time, it is impossible to transcend the partiality and contingency of the subject itself:

In isolation, the time of subjective experience along with its content comes to be as accidental and mediated as its subject, and therefore, compared with chronometric time, is always “false” also (Adorno 1973a, 334).

For, as mentioned earlier, the subject can only claim a measure of “true” self-knowledge by a candid assessment of the extent to which it is formed and determined by objective pressures. Adorno “rejects every form of philosophical or aesthetic ideology that claims in itself to transcend the bad antinomy of subject and object, individual experience *versus* the power of objective dialectical thought” (Norris 1988, 151). This necessary, irresolvable antinomy applies to human temporality as much as any area of subjective life. Consequently Bergson succeeds only in alerting us to “the historic dichotomy between living experience and the objectified and repetitive labor process; his brittle little doctrine of time is an early precipitation of the objective social crisis in the sense of time” (Adorno 1973a, 334). Here, then, is the rider to Adorno’s acceptance of Hegel’s notion of progressive temporality. In the modern capitalist world, the appearance of liberated consciousness is never sufficient. All subjective life, however seemingly independent of social trends and ideologies, is tainted with reified thought and categories. So the progressive or the developmental can never
be treated as guilt-free or blameless. Truth claims—such as that of the dialectical nature of free subjective temporality—are meaningful only in so far as their ingrained falsity is opened out for all to see.

Adorno’s writings on art and aesthetics attain their widest scope when adhering to this antinomy of subject and object. The subject can make its claim to individuality only by recognizing the extent of its social constitution. Art has its role in this process of critical self-scrutiny. Instead of giving voice to a cunningly progressive metaphysical truth, art carries historical consciousness as a “dynamic totality” (Adorno 1977, 211). Precisely because it is produced under the illusion that it is autonomous, formalist art presents a vivid social image. The art work becomes a site for the negotiation of the ultimately irreconcilable claims of the individual and collective. In music the composer, conceived of as the subject rubbing up against the objective edifice of socially posited musical material, must seek mediation, not domination. Any attempt to subvert the inherent tendencies of musical material has domineering implications which would upset the impossibly delicate balance that must be sought by a truthful art. True subjectivity can only manifest itself in the face of the “freeplay of forces” (Adorno 1973b, 84) of objective material—those elements of music that lie beyond the direct manipulative control of the composer. Beethoven’s music shows an almost ideal relationship between the material and the composer’s creativity, allowing the emergence of a genuinely dialectical musical organization. The tragedy for modern music is that the excessively rationalized state of historically posited musical material has left the subject vulnerable to domination, making the balanced relationship of material and composer practically impossible to maintain. Up to a point, therefore, the failure of composers to sustain a genuinely dialectical temporality in music (noted earlier) lies beyond their control. And while Adorno’s musical criticism gives the impression that within these confines there is still room for greater and lesser adequacy to the plight of the subject, his wider
framework does not allow this. Composition becomes split between those who seek to remain sensitive to the demands of musical material but in so doing risk domination by rationalized processes (as in serial music), and those who imagine they are breaking away from the demands of history but whose efforts are therefore doubly ineffectual in the face of all-pervasive historical forces. This is an unavoidable consequence of the antinomy of subjective and objective forces in rationalized society.

The apparent hopelessness of this situation—where both the responsibility to and the refusal of historical consciousness succumb to ever greater rationalization—can be discerned in Adorno's musical polemics. But it would not be true to say that hopelessness is a predominating tone or theme. The privileging of certain compositional idioms over others is more prominent. Why this should be so is suggested later in this paper. However, it is possible to find passages in Adorno's writing on music that more fully recognize the intertwined, co-implicated status of subjective and objective temporalities. The most striking example is Adorno's essay “The Schema of Mass Culture” (Adorno 1991, 53-84). This essay is unusual for the complexity of the relationship that it perceives between subjective temporality and rationalized time in music and literature. Rather than identify in individual works the presence of either one or the other (the strategy in much of the musical criticism), Adorno discerns in them the incorporation of both temporalities. Music and literature may each be understood to possess contradictory temporal characteristics.

Adorno begins by reflecting on the consequences of the traditional preoccupation in literature and music with pacing and temporal structure:

The empty passage of time, the meaningless transience of life was to be seized upon through form and brought into participation with the “idea” by virtue of the totality of this form (Adorno 1991, 63).
Adorno notes that it is this very thematicization of time, the fact that empty duration is determinedly converted into meaningful qualitative succession, that encourages such seemingly paradoxical but popular clichés as the “timelessness” of music. This impression of timelessness is achieved, Adorno believes, through the principle of conflict, because “conflict concentrates past and future in the present,” resulting in a “dialectical arrest of time” (Adorno 1991, 64). This possibility is denied in commercial music, which eschews conflict for the musical palliatives of repetition and sequence, and is therefore unable to transcend empty, anxiety-producing time (Paddison 1993, 42). High art, on the other hand, resists surrender to empty duration, substituting it with a genuine subjective temporality.

Up to this point Adorno’s argument resembles the approach taken in the musical criticism. Subjective temporality is bodied forth only in dialectical musical forms; repetitive or non-developmental music abandons the subjective and presents instead the objectified time of rationalized society. Yet in “The Schema of Mass Culture,” Adorno moves beyond this position to acknowledge the ingrained falsity that, in rationalized society, necessarily attends any notion of the genuinely subjective. No such concept can be presumed free of prevailing ideological forces. In annulling quantitative time and thereby presuming an emboldened subjectivity, art at the same time becomes dangerously indifferent to and distanced from predominating relations in society. It risks mere commemoration of an idealized and mythical past existence. The fetishization of the subjective only brings about a strengthening of the objective. In an effort to avoid this danger and maintain its committed negativity, modern art therefore sometimes reincorporates rationalized time (Adorno 1991, 64). This is most clearly apparent in literature and theater, where time can be treated almost as a “character,” one of the dramatis personae. Adorno mentions the works of Proust and Joyce in this respect, and later would certainly have added Beckett. In music he could perhaps have pointed to Schoenberg’s Erwartung, the scenario of
which concerns a grotesque distension of clock time—a distorted quantitativity. Such a re-injection of rationalized time is also conceivable in purely instrumental music, where there is no explicit dramatic content. The strange scherzo of Mahler's Sixth Symphony, with its stuttering, repetitive interludes, might be interpreted in this way. Mahler's continually shifting meter frustrates the possibility of dance, leaving only a futile counting in its place. The listener is thereby confronted with a problematic quantitative time-structure that is also crucially mediated by the dialectical symphonic context in which it appears. The peculiar poignancy of Mahler's movement may be partly due to the embattled qualitative subjectivity that, in this way, it appears to portray.

"The Schema of Mass Culture" thus suggests how subjective and objective traits may intermingle in a work, faithfully reflecting the irresoluble antinomy that they form in reality. Subjective time is compromised as well as redeemed by its confrontation with its object, forming an irreducible and unanswerable paradox. However, Adorno's sympathetic tone works to disguise this profoundly problematic aspect of the works of Proust and Joyce (and maybe also Beckett, Schoenberg, and Mahler). Contradiction is portrayed as synthesis, and in this respect "The Schema of Mass Culture" is also ultimately marked by the bias characterizing the musical criticism. Nevertheless, its assessment of contrasting temporalities acknowledges the opposed yet equally necessary perspectives characteristic of antinomial thought. By itself, the concept of subjective temporality always falls short.

A passage in the Philosophy of Modern Music would appear to announce the same agenda, but once again the full impact of the paradox contained in Adorno's formula is withheld. Adorno identifies two "modes of listening" as characteristic of the contemporary era:

They are the expressive-dynamic and rhythmic-spatial modes of listening. The former has its origin in singing; it is directed towards the
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fulfilling domination of time and, in its highest manifestations, transforms the heterogeneous course of time into the force of the musical process. The latter obeys the beat of the drum. It is intent upon the articulation of time through the division into equal measures which time virtually abrogates and spatializes. The two types are separated by force of that social alienation which separates subject and object.... The idea of great music lay in a mutual penetration of both modes of listening... in the sonata (Adorno 1973b, 197-98).

Here Adorno explicitly connects his dynamic and repetitive temporalities to the subject and object respectively, and hints at the essential importance of their interpenetration. Neither one nor the other is sufficient by itself, and to think otherwise is to be deluded by ideology. But the profound ambiguity of the antinomy contained in this succinct formula is seemingly deflated at the last moment. Adorno proposes sonata as an adequate response to the problems described. Once again it appears that the developmental and progressive in music is being privileged in Adorno’s critique. Music’s contradictory condition finds a measure of synthesis and resolution in the exemplar of dialectical forms (at least as conventionally viewed), the sonata. Yet this argument contravenes the principle that true antinomies may never be resolved or neutralized—that they are by definition insurmountable paradoxes. And, on close inspection it can be seen that no real resolution is in fact being offered here. Instead the teleological dialectic of Hegelian subjective temporality is implausibly claimed to represent an adequate response to the antinomy formed between temporalities. In other words, the fetishization of subjective temporality that Adorno warns against in *Negative Dialectics* has sneaked in under the guise of an illusory higher reconciliation.

If this is a fair assessment of the failings of the dominant reception of Adorno’s stance on musical temporality, it should be noted that, at least in the quote above, such a false resolution is not directly implied by Adorno’s remarks themselves. The dialectical status of sonata—even middle-period Beethovenian sonata—is more often assumed than proven, and Adorno avoids
making the connection explicitly. And then there is the ques-
tion of what dialectic itself is taken to mean. Adorno's reference
in this passage to the “mutual penetration” of opposing con-
cepts signals a dialectical strategy that may be felt to be mir-
rored in the supposedly dialectical processes of sonata. If so,
Adorno's argument seems unproblematic: he may be construed
as offering a dialectical response (namely, dialectical musical
form) to a dialectical problem (the opposition of subjective and
rationalized times), a seemingly valid proposal. But this as-
sumes that “dialectic” means the same thing in each case. I am
not sure that this is so. On the one hand, the setting up of an
irresolvable paradox—an antinomy—may be understood as a
dialectical strategy. More precisely, however, we must follow
Adorno and talk of negative dialectics, for antinomy allows of
no synthesis or transcendent resolution. Susan Buck-Morss re-
fers to this central aspect of Adorno’s thought as “non-reconcili-
atory thinking,” and describes how it crucially differs from the
Hegelian dialectic to which it is indebted:

As with Hegel, contradiction, with negation as its logical principle,
gave this thinking its dynamic structure and provided the motor force
for critical reflection. But whereas Hegel saw negativity, the movement
of the concept toward its “other,” as merely a moment in a larger pro-
cess towards systematic completion, Adorno saw no possibility of an
argument coming to rest in unequivocal synthesis. He made negativity
the hallmark of his dialectical thought precisely because he believed
Hegel had been wrong: reason and reality did not coincide.... Adorno's
antinomies remained antinomial (Buck-Morss 1977, 63).

Yet it is the Hegelian concept of dialectic, with its possibility of
developmental synthesis that is typically used to describe musi-
cal forms. The sonata principle, for instance, is described as di-
alectical because of its supposed purposeful synthesis or
resolution of musical oppositions—its “self-contradiction and
higher resolution,” as Julian Johnson put it in a passage quoted
earlier. As such, it differs crucially from negative dialectics. The
suggestion that dialectical musical form is an apt manifestation of the subject-object antinomy cannot be accepted.

These different possible meanings of dialectic were highlighted in order to problematize an unthinking interpretation of Adorno's argument. But they also offer an alternative way of understanding Adorno's suggestion that a musical presentation of dialectic properly reflects the subject-object antinomy. By making such a proposal, he is not, as many commentators assume, claiming that developmental and progressive idioms constitute an adequate response, but that music that presents a non-reconciliatory dialectic might. In setting store by "dialectical musical form" Adorno is not necessarily thereby resorting to the image of developmental subjectivity that he himself so devastatingly analyzed as compromised. On the contrary: the value of non-reconciliatory thinking (and its particular relevance in the context of this discussion) is that it implies no necessary subscription to socially dominant conceptions of time and the ideologies about the "nature" of existence that they sustain. These conceptions have to be recognized as underlying the view of subjective temporality as essentially progressive or developmental, its claim to represent an alternative to rationalized time notwithstanding. Ultimately the quantitative and qualitative aspects of time—crudely put, its numerical and motional properties—present no real opposition but rather go hand in hand, part and parcel of the same flawed spatializing of existence. The "ingrained falsity" of the post-Hegelian understanding of subjective temporality comprises this continued dependence upon prevalent spatio-linear conceptions of time.

This argument is clearly seen if we treat the two concepts of dialectic as contrasting types of organization. Hegelian dialectic supposes the availability of resolution to a conflict or apparent contradiction. It thereby inscribes a linear temporal progression: opposing theses are followed by their synthesis. Hegelian dialectic organizes sequentially, in conformity with (and thereby implicitly bolstering) predominant social concepts of time. Negative dialectic however, in offering no
resolution, presents no sequential form. The irreducible confrontation of two opposed theses presumes no sequence, no temporal "shape." It is a way of counterpoising ideas that is not dependent for its validity upon the existence of a linear time.

Music sits interestingly in relation to these two types of organization. The tonal classical tradition has typically fostered an emphasis upon its linear, sequential aspects, a view of music emboldened by the centrality of notation to this tradition. It is no surprise, then, to find Hegelian dialectic used as an analogy for musical organization: certain types of music appear to present a sequence of contrasting or opposed ideas that works toward some eventual resolution. However, this linear property of music is arguably less ambiguously apparent in a musical score than it is in musical sound. Too seldom do we question the degree to which the score, and forms of discussion focused on the score, constrain the sorts of organization we attribute to heard musical experience.¹ From a rigorously Adornian perspective this uncritical confidence reflects only upon the hegemonic grip that spatio-linear concepts of time, with their reassuring materiality, have upon the modern mind. Music as sound is in fact uncommonly well-placed to alert us to other possible forms of organization, ones less obviously spatio-linear in inclination. It is an important part of my argument in the remainder of this paper that Adorno was alert both to the possibility and the dissenting potential of forms of temporal organization resistant to spatial representation, and that for him this constituted a large part of both music's and negative dialectic's importance. The fact that this is not generally recognized as such partly reflects upon our reluctance to think (or incomprehension of the possibility) that music, and other forms of experience, might be organized "non-spatially."

So the presentation of negative dialectic in music is unlikely to be a simple matter of the bald, sequential juxtaposition of

¹. These are issues I confront in greater detail in my doctoral thesis (Adlington 1997).
two unrelated ideas. Rather its very significance rests in its residing in aspects of musical content other than those revealed by a linear or spatial purview. There is something to be gained, however, in treating the description of music in terms of negative dialectic as a stop-gap device, rather than a literal imputation of two identifiable components in contradictory opposition. From Adorno’s perspective, viewing temporality through the lens of negative dialectic arguably has a metaphorical rather than a literal purpose. It serves to emphasize, for instance, that the alternative to standard spatio-linear time is no static, quiescent permanent present; that this alternative temporality possesses a dynamism that yet may not be explained in terms of sequential development or teleology. It is the pertinence of this more generalized view of temporality to Adorno’s thought that the second half of my paper sets out to examine.

It would in any case be disingenuous to propose that all of Adorno’s references to dialectic in relation to musical form have this particular non-reconciliatory concept in mind. Adorno frequently dismantled the subject-object antinomy in his musical criticism, siding unambiguously with the subjective qualities of music as determined by his philosophical predecessors. This was undoubtedly as much due to his personal affiliations with composers of the “Second Viennese School,” as any conservative bias toward Austro-German idioms and tradition. These affiliations may well have constrained his musical criticism, and they frequently grated with the philosophical principles that are less guardedly presented in the non-musical writings.

Overview

A review of where we stand in relation to Adorno’s critique of musical temporality may be useful at this stage. I have attempted to show how the Hegelian, Marxian, and Freudian influences upon Adorno support a view of free subjective
temporality as essentially developmental, rather than repetitive or steady-state. However, Adorno emphasizes that any such view must be considered false without a concomitant assessment of the degree to which such a supposed attribute of the subject is itself objectively determined. No claim to truth can be made without recognition of the falsity that lies within it. “The Schema of Mass Culture” shows how music and literature may attempt to reflect the contradictory constitution of human temporality out of subjective and objective components. But Adorno’s musical criticism does not dwell on such contradictions. In opting to view dialectical form as the subject’s salvation, it risks exempting itself from the responsibility of locating the falsity in the nineteenth-century notion of the developmental subject. It is precisely the reinscribing of the nineteenth-century Austro-German dogma of developmental forms of which Adorno is accused by some commentators.

However, I have also suggested that it is possible to take antinomy as the model for a concept of dialectic which would allow Adorno’s critique to be read as supporting an alternative interpretation of musical temporality. In urging the necessity of dialectical musical form, Adorno could be seen to be arguing for a “non-spatial” rather than a developmental approach to temporality in music. But Adorno is sufficiently cautious about the idea for it to remain largely veiled in his writings. (At the end of this paper, however, I will show how a number of his comments support it.) It is here that we may turn to Paul de Man’s literary theory for valuable support. De Man’s writings suggest, in contradistinction to predominant concepts of time, that temporality is properly grasped only insofar as all attempts to spatially represent it are resisted. As I detail below, de Man defiantly asserts the possibility of a type of experience that resists encapsulation, representation, or any other form of symbolic determination. In one essay, he explicitly associates temporality with certain sorts of music, and I pursue these comments with reference to some examples of my own. However, the basic function of the following discussion—namely, as
a useful means of drawing out incipient motifs in Adorno's writings—is kept in mind, and motivates a concluding attempt to relate de Man's concept of temporality back to a broadly Adornian framework. This move demands the delimitation of de Man's approach, but in compensation harnesses some of the critical force of the older philosopher's thought.

**De Man and Temporality**

Paul de Man is best known to students of literature for his writing on interpretation. He is preoccupied specifically with the difficulty of interpretation and the impossibility of ultimate readings:

[De Man] is a critic who declares reading itself to be in some sense an "impossible" activity; who asserts the aberrant or error-prone nature of all understanding; and who argues (notoriously) that every form of knowledge—from primitive sense-certainty to pure reason, from ethics to history and politics—is somehow contingent on the radically figural character of language (Norris 1988, 105).

Picking up from Nietzsche's view of language as a set of tropes and metaphors whose figural nature has long since been conveniently forgotten, de Man charts the impossibility of all theory, in so far as it

aims—as most theories do—to achieve a sense of having thoroughly mastered the relevant problems and issues. To de Man, such illusions are precisely what criticism has to give up as it comes to recognize those deviant linguistic structures, or elements of rhetorical "undecidability," that work to undermine any form of self-assured hermeneutic understanding (Norris 1988, 42).

The paradox of saying such a theory—of constructing a theory that seeks to undermine the very process of theory construction—is not lost on de Man. In an essay on Nietzsche which may be seen as a self-defense, de Man argues that such a tauto-
logical position may be tenable if it is sufficiently earned by the overall deconstructive thrust of the analysis. This does not pre­vent the theory from suffering the contingency and equivoca­tion that, as it itself points out, are features of all texts.

De Man approaches this complex of problems specifically through the prism of temporality. In his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man pictures human temporality as a form of permanent "negation," a disturbing existential predicament from which the self continually wishes to hide. The human ob­session with preserving experience as a means of establishing identity is little more than a "defensive strategy" (de Man 1969, 191), akin to cowardice:

The temptation exists...for the self to borrow, so to speak, the tempo­ral stability that it lacks from nature, and to devise strategies...[to es­cape] "the unimaginable touch of time" (de Man 1969, 181).

De Man argues that this anxiety to root and preserve in the face of change finds its principal and most influential expression in nineteenth-century aesthetic ideology. This holds that art al­lows an act of unified perception—a "perfect, unimpeded com­muning" where "thought overcomes its enslavement to the laws of time, contingency and change" (Norris 1988, xviii, 28). De Man believes that this ideology has taken control of our un­derstanding of language, as demonstrated by the widespread privileging of symbolic over allegorical modes of expression. Symbolic language has come to be understood as allowing the coincidence of thing and representation; object and word are treated as "part and whole of the same set of categories":

Their relationship is one of simultaneity, which, in truth, is spatial in kind, and in which the intervention of time is merely a matter of con­tingency (de Man 1969, 190).

But de Man believes that human temporality dictates that this view of language is wholly illusory. His principal theme is that while language thinks to transcend temporality, it is in fact
irrevocably temporal. He proposes that allegory, not symbol, is a better model for the operation of language as a whole. In allegory, "time is the originary constitutive category" (de Man 1969, 190). Only allegory acknowledges "the inevitable failure of all attempts to make meaning coincide with the realm of intuition" (Norris, cited in Street 1989, 102), a failure that human temporality makes inevitable:

Allegory holds out against the lure of transcendence or visionary pathos, insisting absolutely on the timebound nature of all understanding and the plain impossibility that language should achieve—as the Romantics desired—a state beyond the antinomies of subject and object, mind and nature, the temporal and the eternal (Norris 1988, 10).

The allegorical sign refers not to an object with which it coincides (a spatial relationship) but to another sign that precedes it (a temporal relationship). Allegory thus implies an "unreachable anteriority" (de Man 1969, 203), the possibility of "presence" being denied by our perpetually changing condition. As a result understanding is always "in arrears." It may be considered complete "only when it becomes aware of its own temporal predicament" (de Man 1983, 32). And because this predicament cannot be avoided, so allegory must no longer be seen as the suspension of truth, but rather constitutes the "purveyor of demanding truths" (de Man, cited in Norris 1988, 100).

Thus while symbol is exposed as "a veil thrown over a light one no longer wishes to perceive" (de Man 1969, 191), allegory implies no such deception. However, allegory is not the only literary form to give such insight. Irony also acknowledges our temporal predicament. The ironic mind is characterized by an endless "dialectic of self-destruction and self-invention" (de Man 1969, 202). Irony comprises a series of disruptive acts that shatters the illusion of an organic, linear time and repeatedly forces one back to a blind present. Allegory and irony thus place differing emphases on the notions of past and present. Both, however, share "the discovery of a truly temporal
predicament" (de Man 1969, 203)—be it through the un-graspability of the present on account of its continual reference to what was, or the relentless reforging of a present that is refused the solace of a rationalized past. These are “the two faces of the same fundamental experience of time” (de Man 1969, 207), and de Man believes that all language ultimately succumbs to one of these two modes of problematic signification. Accordingly, he is moved to speak of the “temporality of all language” (de Man 1969, 204).

While temporality is obviously afforded a central place in de Man’s criticism, precisely what constitutes that temporality is never summarily stated. There are good reasons for this, given de Man’s concern with the limitations of symbolic language. However, isolated comments in his writings give at least a sense of the ramifications of the idea—the way in which adherence to a despatialized notion of temporality necessitates the problematization of many related concepts. These are often of the greatest relevance to musical experience. For instance, de Man’s claim that irony divides temporal experience “into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the inauthentic” (de Man 1969, 203) is typical of a skeptical approach to the notions of past and future. De Man views linear time as a fiction that originates as a direct response to the equally illusory synchronicity of vision:

The misleading synchronism of the visual perception which creates a false illusion of presence has to be replaced by a succession of discontinuous moments that create the fiction of a repetitive temporality (de Man 1983, 131-32).

De Man points here to the way in which society’s prevailing belief that the visual domain is opposed to the temporal, rather than subject to it, dictates the attempt to construct the temporal in a contrasting manner. Yet behind both synchronicity and succession lies the same obsession with identity, manifested in the latter case as an orderly sequence of identical (and thus
basically "repetitive") moments. De Man thus concisely attacks both conventional formulations of "presence," and the sequential sprawl frequently treated as its opposite. Temporality, properly understood, makes room for neither.

This skeptical approach to linear time leads to memory and expectation being treated with equal suspicion. For instance, the convention of positing an anticipated future, extending "forward" in symmetrical relation to the remembered, "backward"-extending past, betrays only a profound anxiety about the vulnerability of the temporal condition—a need to be reassured about the orderly progression of human existence. It represents no necessary truth about human temporality. Memory, too, with its notorious fallibility and selectivity, is viewed skeptically. In his essay "Literary History and Literary Modernity," de Man's reading of Nietzsche makes it clear that he is sympathetic to Nietzsche's rejection of remembering: "Moments of genuine humanity...are moments at which all anteriority vanishes, annihilated by the power of an absolute forgetting" (de Man 1983, 147). De Man describes the idea that memory is able to link past to present as a "naive illusion":

The power of memory does not reside in its capacity to resurrect a situation or a feeling that actually existed, but it is a constitutive act of the mind bound to its own present and oriented toward the future of its own elaboration (de Man 1983, 92).

The act of remembering, in other words, provides evidence not so much of a mind's past, but of its desire for a verifiable future.

As can be seen, de Man is at pains to resist the translation of concepts from the spatial to the temporal domains. Heidegger's discussion of "dwelling" within Hölderlin's poetic language, Gadamer's concept of "horizon" denoting the generalized background against which specific perception takes place, and Jauss's talk of "concretization" and "defamiliarization" are all criticized on these grounds. Similarly, the discussion of temporality in terms of organic metaphors—of
generative processes such as the growth of a tree—is guilty of a dangerous inexactitude. Metaphors of this kind may appear, on the surface, to identify the aspect of consciousness that resists the stultification of social control. Yet they in fact serve to perpetuate that control of the subject by envisaging temporality in visual terms. De Man makes this point in poetic fashion:

In becoming trees, we have lost the precarious situation of being on the earth to become creatures of the earth...[with the result that we] integrate [ourselves] with the soil without opposing it (de Man, cited in Norris 1988, 169).

The image of a parental begetter, conceiving in a moment of unmediated presence, is similarly false, by dint of positing a moment of original meaning which temporality can never accommodate (de Man 1983, 164). Inevitably, Marxist criticism, with its adherence to a “linear temporal development,” is vulnerable to criticism from this perspective. De Man, in remarks reminiscent of Adorno’s critique in *Negative Dialectics*, claims that

a truly historical poetics would attempt to think...in truly temporal dimensions instead of imposing upon it cyclical or eternalist schemata of a spatial nature.... Such a poetics promises nothing except the fact that poetic thought will keep on becoming, will continue to ground itself in a space beyond its failure (de Man 1983, 242).

It is ironic (and perhaps so intended) that de Man capitulates to the imagery of space the moment he has damned it. Language is not readily stripped of its spatial imagery.

De Man’s comments correspondingly alert us to problems attending the very idea of temporal “form”—a basic assumption in so much writing about music. For instance, it follows from de Man’s reservations about conceiving the temporal in relation to the visual that, “in a purely temporal world, there can be no perfect repetition, as when two points coincide in space” (de Man 1983, 76). The very concept of repetition is
false, insofar as it suggests that criteria for determining identity on a spatial plane may be unproblematically translated to the temporal world. Similarly, de Man asserts that “form is never anything but a process on the way to its completion” (de Man 1983, 31). To attribute temporal organization with the sort of self-containedness and completion normally held to be characteristic of spatial objects is to indulge in a false and ideologically dubious comparison.

If temporal experience presents no “form” in any literal sense, how might it be positively characterized? The image, in the passage just quoted, of thought “grounding itself in a space beyond its failure” is suggestive in this respect. It evokes the Nietzschean idea of the “moment,” a concept intended as an alternative to conventional notions of the present. According to David Wood, the Nietzschean moment denotes a “self-exceeding that is not appropriated, but that, precisely, risks the self, and does not aim at a higher reconciliation” (Wood 1989, 29).

De Man and Nietzsche together suggest that, far from being predicated upon the notion of presence, temporality is properly conceived as an exploding of the present—not in a Heideggerian “thrownness” along axes of past and future, but in a denial of self-appropriation. The relevance of this suggestion to certain sorts of musical experience will be assessed shortly. However, de Man’s analysis is hardly marked by the euphoric connotations of Nietzsche’s formulation. On the contrary, his account is almost unrelievedly pessimistic in tone. For de Man the recognition of temporality can barely be conceived as a liberation. Rather it represents the brutally truthful admission of our enslavement to change.

So far, de Man’s understanding of temporality has been traced via his writings on language and literature. Yet de Man was himself a keen musician, and music is not totally neglected in his theorizing. It is a particularly prominent element of his essay “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau” (de Man 1983, 102-41). In it de Man elaborates upon Rousseau’s view of music as a “mere play of relation-
repercussions

Music does not collude with language’s pretense of transcendent signification. Its meaningfulness rests not on an assumption of the perfect coincidence of sign and meaning, but in a system of functional relationships that are intrinsically and overtly temporal. Music’s temporality is assured and ever-apparent, regardless of the subject’s interpretation of its content—it is implicit in its nature as significant. This is well captured by de Man’s description of music as a “persistently frustrated intent towards meaning” (de Man, 129). Music may therefore stand as a model for language’s actual operation: musical organization presents more overtly the temporality that exists in all acts of interpretation. It “could be said to [be]...the allegorical art par excellence” (Street 1989, 103).

De Man gives some intriguing details in his account which suggest how specific musical elements take their place in this view of music. He suggests that, “considered as a musical sign, the single sound is in fact the melody of its potential repetition” (de Man 1983, 129). The single tone signifies nothing—except in so far as it implies a further sound with which the “meaningful play of relationships” may be established. The implication is (presumably) that melody is permanently touched by this contingency of meaning. Successive pitches only further delay the arrival at a definitive “meaning.” I will review the plausibility of this suggestion in a moment.

Harmony is opposed to melody in de Man’s reading. Harmony misleads in presenting “the mistaken illusion of
consonance within the necessarily dissonant structure of the moment. Melody does not partake of this mystification" (130). This is consistent with Rousseau’s rejection of harmony and privileging of melody, for the former contravened his concept of music as a “play of relationships” in its suggestion of the possibility of immediate meaning. De Man suggests that even Rousseau’s own writings are fashioned after the ideal of melody: despite their narrative semblance, they
do not “represent” a successive event, but are the melodic, musical, successive projection of a single moment of radical contradiction—the present—upon the temporal axis of a diachronic narrative (de Man, 132).

De Man’s analysis is undoubtedly simplistic, as may be seen by taking a closer look at his understanding of melody. He interprets melody as a denial of the illusion of presence, for it refutes the symbolic ideals of closure, sufficiency, or immediacy of meaning, while it is just these ideals that (tonal) harmony appears to possess. But the distinction is difficult to sustain absolutely, at least in so far as melody has been treated for a good part of its history as the horizontal presentation of vertical sonorities. In tonal music, melody is precisely subordinate to harmony, its decorative “freedom” only giving pathos to its confinement. And this subjugation of melody to harmony is by no means unique to tonality; intervallic atonal idioms arguably perpetuate such an arrangement. In striving to separate melody from the symbolic realm, de Man also conveniently ignores the traditional conception of melody as a form of rhetoric, a conception that overtly recognizes the proximity of melody to language in certain respects. Despite these difficulties, it is not impossible to imagine a type of melody that conforms more closely to de Man’s stipulations, as I will presently suggest in relation to one of my musical examples.

What of de Man’s interpretation of harmony? The claim that harmony connotes an immediate and unproblematic rela-
tion between sign and signified would certainly seem to be supported by the widespread practice of attributing individual harmonies with functions. In tonal music these functions are normally syntactic in kind; in post-tonal music the “function” ascribed to a harmony may take the form of a more generalized structural or motivic role. Neither kind of harmonic function has the degree of semantic autonomy associated with words. The “meaning” of individual harmonies is frequently entirely dependent upon the particular harmonic context in which they appear. On the other hand, that meaning is unambiguously ascribed to a particular harmony, despite its context-dependence. To this extent harmonic function is not treated as a partial or incomplete signification, contingent on further developments. This is the case even if those further developments (that is, the continuation of a harmonic sequence) show a prior ascription to have been mistaken. In such an instance the initial meaning ascribed was wrong, but not incomplete. So de Man’s description of harmony receives a measure of support from the prevailing practice of attributing harmonic function.

Whether such functions—such unambiguous meanings—are literally possessed by musical sounds is a matter for debate. It has been argued that the determinacy of meaning suggested by (among other things) harmonic functions is a property of descriptions of music rather than the music itself. Music lacks the subject and predicate necessary for such semantic determinacy (Nattiez 1990). So, if this argument is accepted, harmony does not “itself” deny temporality but is subject to social conventions of description that do. But then this is precisely the argument that de Man has against symbolic literature: language, literally viewed, may never escape its temporality, but certain uses of it perpetuate the illusion that it can. It is this perpetuation that de Man resists for all his worth. And along similar lines there emerge grounds here for a comparable

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2. I grapple with this argument in greater detail in my doctoral thesis (Adlington 1997).
critique of musical temporality. Some music colludes with the illusion of symbolic signification. It retains faith in the coincidence of its configurative elements with their meaning, and thereby seeks to deny temporality. Music that takes a more skeptical approach to this connection may be understood as acknowledging more openly our “temporal predicament.”

Some Examples

In this section I intend to point to passages in music that may be understood as recognizing temporality in a de Manian sense. I shall focus particularly upon the way in which certain musical strategies may be understood to undermine the credibility of presence, or, put another way, to insist upon the “self-exceeding,” the “denial of self-appropriation” referred to above. My purpose is not only to demonstrate how music may indeed “mean” the negation of all presence” (de Man 1983, 128), but, in reference to the earlier discussion of Adorno, to indicate the possibility of a temporality that more completely avoids compliance with social concepts of time. An undue dependence upon musical notation is to be avoided therefore, in so far as the notation gives credence to the idea that music is necessarily linear in form—a view that was disputed earlier in this paper. While the following analyses make heavy use of notated examples, it should be borne in mind that these examples are included to assist in the identification of interpretative problems, rather than as representations of actual musical experience.

De Man’s critique implies that tonal music conspires against temporality. It is therefore to post-tonal music that I turn for my examples, although I intend to suggest that one of the most effective ways in which post-tonal music “negates presence” is through the problematization of tonal syntactical functions. But two simpler examples are considered first. Example 1 shows a melody extracted from a passage in Birtwistle’s Earth Dances. Melodic writing of this sort closely reflects de
Man's injunctions. It is perhaps difficult to prove that Birtwistle's melody is not intended to delineate harmonic collections. But in resisting segmentation more readily than inviting it, it must be distinguished from tonal melody. There is never much sense of a determinate function being fully articulated or arrived at. Rather, the melody appears to leave itself permanently open to the redefinition that subsequent pitches may bring about. In this sense it is an apt reflection of the self-exceeding, non-appropriative temporality that de Man adumbrates in his literary criticism.


This interpretation is strengthened by the basis of much of Birtwistle's writing in varied ostinato. Birtwistle works to hide the humble origins of his material (Hall 1984)—certainly varied ostinato is not obviously apparent in example 1—but the result nevertheless bears traces of these origins. Example 2 shows more clearly how varied ostinato gives rise to a
permanent contingency of meaning. The repetitive aspect of this ostinato argues against construing it as a series of distinct, individually meaningful units. Yet the variation makes it difficult to identify any one unit as a source of meaning for the whole passage—for there is no basis on which to assume that
one form is the “original” and the others the derivation. And even the meaning of *differences* between forms is contingent upon future variations. The ostinato endlessly defers its signifying function in a potentially infinite extension of its own possibilities. In so far as the music has meaning, it resides not in some discursive linear content that may be traced in a score, but in that very denial of presence insisted upon by (de Manian) temporality.

The two Birtwistle examples suggest contrasting ways in which music may strike away from the syntactical functions of tonality without resubscribing to the dominance of the symbolic in the guise of “intervallic” harmony. However, novel forms of harmonic organization *can* sometimes possess this same critical potential—particularly when they involve engaging syntactical harmony in a questioning of its own premises. Some post-tonal music does not completely abandon tonal organization, but rather works to undermine the functional specificity normally associated with it. This is achieved by setting up musical situations wherein traits of functionality survive but individual chords and contexts are complicated so as to allow no one function to be unambiguously attributed to each harmony. Instead of forming a succession of discretely meaningful components, a harmonic progression becomes a chain of ambiguous, incomplete signs, openly acknowledging the illusory nature of the coincidence of sign and function.

Stravinsky’s music provides compelling instances of this “temporalizing” of tonal syntax, although I shall argue below that it is by no means a feature of all his neo-tonal writing. The same must be said of Debussy’s music—the dismantling of the musical present tends to intermingle with material that only appears designed to celebrate it, as commentators have often noticed. For instance, Debussy’s favored device of chains of identical but registrally displaced sonorities succeeds in divesting the chord of any conventionalized syntactical function. But instead the sonority comes to “mean” simply its sensuous self, stripped of all dependence upon context.
Example 3. Debussy, *Jeux* (piano duet version), 2 mm. before figure 11.
These contrasting attitudes to the present may be traced in a passage from the piano duet version of *Jeux* (example 3). Between figure 11 and *Sans rigueur*, and for the first four bars of figure 11, single complex harmonies are toyed with, but a lack of harmonic movement or variety effectively neutralizes their syntactical potential (see my simplified harmonic account, example 4). This contrasts sharply with the first four bars of *Sans rigueur*, and its transposed repetition four bars before figure 14. Here, delayed voice leading and congealed appoggiaturas at once encourage and problematize the ascription of syntactic functions. Six complex harmonies may be identified in this passage (they are numbered in example 4) and they each affect the possible syntactic roles of the other. Harmony no. 1 may initially be construed as a dominant seventh on F♯ with added false relation, the initial D forming a lower appoggiatura to the E that immediately follows. Interpreted thus, the harmony marks a return to the F♯ dominant seventh predominating at figure 11 (example 5). The C♯ complicates this interpretation however, and the upward movement of the bass F♯ to G together with the continuing sixteenth-note activity on E, D, C, and B♭ recommends an alternative interpretation that sees the F♯ as a lower appoggiatura to an implied C dominant ninth (example 6). As my example suggests this interpretation also receives support from an earlier passage in example 3. But to treat harmony no. 3 as a C dominant ninth obviously ignores the A♭ in the upper voice, and pushing this pitch to the foreground again suggests alternative interpretations. For instance harmony no. 3, lasting only a sixteenth note, could function merely as an accented passing chord between two statements of the same whole-tone scale (harmonies 2 and 4, the move to octave A♭s in the outer voices representing a limited form of resolution—see

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3. The following discussions of harmony in Debussy and Stravinsky involve a simplification of the musical surface that is only tolerable because they are intended to make a general point about the potential of post-tonal practice, and not as an exhaustive analysis of the actual music concerned.
example 7). There again, having reached harmonies 5 and 6, harmony no. 4 is more likely to be understood retrospectively as a chromatically altered A\(^\#\) triad, forming a relation of I\(^{5/3}\)--V\(^7\) (example 8). Even this is dependent upon accepting the lower appoggiatura indicated in my example. Debussy's
functional intentions are admittedly somewhat less ambiguous by this stage, though one might nevertheless be encouraged initially to treat the upper C of harmony no. 5 as an essential note, by analogy with the preceding two-bar phrase.

Conflicting contexts and affinities thus confront a listener with a series of signs that endlessly redirect, failing at any one moment to present sufficiently firm ground for the ascription of a definite syntactical function. It should be noted that this is an aspect of the music’s content that cannot be straightforwardly gleaned from the sequence of events presented in a score: its essence lies rather in a problematization of the idea that temporal experience comprises merely the accumulative assimilation of sequentially presented information. Still, my notated examples and the linearity that they suggest rather work to obscure this fact: surely talk of “redirection,” “affinities,” and “contexts” merely implies a continued, even heightened dependence upon the past and future of linear time? Indeed, Debussy’s harmonies could be read as signaling a radicalization of the limited constitutive relation of the tonal present to past and future—a recognition that the present is in fact nothing more than an assembly of memories and anticipations.

But this is, I suggest, to be confined by the linear ideology that tonal syntax helps perpetuate. What makes us believe in the existence of past and future in tonal music, other than an uncritical confidence that it constitutes an objective fact about the form of experience? It is the fact, first, that the present is made partly dependent for its meaning upon what is not present, and, second, that that dependent relationship takes the form of a connection that is not only aurally recognizable but also readily encoded in memory, thus encouraging the music’s concretization as a fixed sequence, extending back into the past and (a listener presumes) forward into the future.4

4. The robustness of memory for tonal syntax remains a matter for debate however: see Adlington 1997 for a summary of existing views on the matter.
Without these aurally recognizable connections we “forget” the past and are “unable to predict” the future—which amounts to their ceasing to exist. This is the case for much non-tonal music.

Such an eradication of past and future might seem only to promise a glorification of the present, abstracted from its situatedness in historical time. But the post-tonal harmonic strategies under discussion here cleverly avoid this total abandonment to an ahistorical present. The residual syntactical connections that they contain are sufficient to ensure that the present continues to be treated as contingent—which is to say dependent upon something absent, as it was in tonal music. But the music’s simultaneous suggestion of conflicting tonal interpretations, and the brevity with which any one interpretation remains viable, make it resistant to any linear hardening. The contingency of the tonal present remains, but the possibility of salving that contingency in terms of a singular past and future is withdrawn. Inevitably, using a score to identify the nature of the problem tends to result in the foregrounding of a sequential purview. But the overlappings and re-readings involved in my descriptions are intended to counter this tendency, refusing the uncomplicated linearity that the notation so seductively presents.

Stravinsky’s “neoclassical” harmony sometimes exhibits similar traits to those discerned above in the extract from Jeux. It is not consistent in this respect, however. Frequently, Stravinsky’s reckless deployment of the diatonic scale provides little more than a passing frisson while keeping a basic tonal orientation (and thus a keenly articulated “present”) firmly in place. Elsewhere it is difficult to draw a definite line between this technique and a genuine, de Manian problematizing of the present. Stravinsky’s reception of tonality comes in many different shades and evades categorization or easy formalization. Here I will merely point to some less ambiguous examples, leaving a thorough assessment of Stravinsky’s neo-tonality for another occasion.

The opening of *Orpheus* illustrates Stravinsky’s ability to work with a diatonic collection in such a way that syntactic function becomes wholly suspended in a web of temporal dependencies (example 9). The opening bar presents E as a tonic, but of the Phrygian mode rather than the more conventional major or minor key. Stravinsky’s willingness to move between modal and tonal implications considerably assists his light handling of the diatonic collection in this passage. So while the open fifth in bar 2 (harmony no. 3) appears to confirm establishment of the Phrygian mode on E, the addition of the low A (simultaneously with the A in the harp) suggests instead A minor, harmony no. 3 being reinterpreted as a dominant chord. But this does not settle the matter, for harmony no. 5 summarizes rather than resolves the ambiguity, sustaining the notes of harmony no. 4 while adding lower and upper notes that tend to side with the E tonic—implying a first inversion tonic chord. The harp’s repetition of its first bar further strengthens the claims of E. Still, the A remains firmly in place, and the sheer length of this chord is an important factor in its destabilizing function. Its reappearance (as harmony no. 7) is brief but

5. Approaching Stravinsky’s harmony in terms of its “reception of tonality” is itself arguably confining. My discussion does not endeavor to address the impact upon his music of jazz or Slavic idioms and the differing syntactical interpretations that they may imply.
no clearer in functional allegiance, for the intervening chord (harmony no. 6) strengthens the hand of the disruptive A, if viewed as a modal “dominant” (example 10). Interestingly, harmony no. 6 itself reappears twice, the first time (harmony no. 9) immediately challenging its previous interpretation as an E-minor seventh because harmony no. 8 so strongly implies a turn toward C major (example 11). Harmony no. 10 appears

![Example 10 and 11](image)

Example 10. Example 11.

to be as much the outcome of voice-leading decisions of as any harmonic strategy: it does little, at any rate, to clarify the re-approach to the contested C/E minor chord, whose third appearance comprises harmony no. 12. The failure to arrive at a point of harmonic definition with this chord is only emphasized by its downbeat placement and extended length. In this way, each harmony in the passage seeks a form of unambiguous linear clarification that is resolutely absent.

Chromatic examples, closer in some respects to Debussy’s calcified Wagnerisms, may also be found in Stravinsky’s music. Example 12 shows a particularly concentrated passage from the Credo of the Mass, while example 13 displays an analytical interpretation of its harmonic organization. I have pictured the passage as suggestive of superimposed, contradictory harmonic progressions. For every chord, two or more tonal interpretations are possible. Example 13 should be largely self-explanatory, and so rather than make further detailed observations I will limit myself to general comments. I view this music as possessing a dense functional suggestiveness. The superimposition of
Example 12. Stravinsky, Mass, Credo, figure 35.
Ivinsky's harmonies
competing tonal functions

Example 13. Harmonic analysis of example 12.

possible functions makes each harmony thoroughly dependent upon what is “not present” for semantic clarification, yet because every harmony shares the same condition, such clarification never emerges. It is difficult to think of a more compelling musical presentation of de Man's “thought grounding itself in a space beyond its failure.” The music is susceptible to description neither in terms of a perpetual present, nor the developmental teleology of spatial time. Rather it prompts us to recognize the possibility of a temporality wherein determined meaning is always deferred and spatio-temporal presence permanently denied.
Adorno and de Man

I have so far hinted only in general terms at the function of de Man's concept of temporality in relation to Adorno's. How readily can de Man's approach be reconciled with Adorno's critique, and what use would it serve if it could? The suggestion that these two figures have much in common is not new. In his book on de Man, Christopher Norris emphasizes the similarities between de Man's thought and Adorno's. Both believed that

it is only by acknowledging the limits placed upon thought by its material and temporal condition that philosophy can hope to preserve some sense of an alternative, better world.... Adorno, like de Man, rejects every form of philosophical or aesthetic ideology that claims in itself to transcend the bad antinomy of subject and object, individual experience versus the power of objective dialectical thought (Norris 1988, 150-51).

However, their handling of certain issues might more readily seem to suggest their mutual antipathy. Beyond the broad parallels noted by Norris there exist many differences of emphasis.

The notion of temporal "form" is one of these. Adorno's wholehearted use of spatial conceptions and metaphors in his discussion of music appears to overlook the possibility, encouraged by de Man, that to escape organicist-spatial metaphors itself represents a critical act. An expression of Adorno's faith in the spatial is the repeated tendency of his musical criticism toward a synoptic, even downright conservative, view of musical form. Reservations have been expressed by other writers about this aspect of Adorno's approach to musical works. Max Paddison, for instance, notes

the strange disparity between the sophistication and radicality of his aesthetics and sociology on the one hand, and on the other hand the lack of sophistication and the traditional character of his music-analytic method (Paddison 1993, 169).
Of course, given that Adorno is every bit as much concerned with the activity of the composer as the experience of listeners, the prioritization of score-based conceptions of musical organization—which, as I noted earlier, are not necessarily characteristic of a listener's experience—is not unexpected. It might even be argued that, in places, Adorno recognizes the diffuseness of music's various manifestations more fully than those commentators that accuse him of an old-fashioned, notation-based approach. However, such nice distinctions do not always characterize Adorno's polemic. In some of his vehement criticisms of contemporary listeners, the visual perspective is indiscriminately intermingled with the aural. For instance, an uncritical concept of musical form lies behind his criticism of commercial music's "culinary moments," which have a merely "diversionary character," or its "conglomeration of irruptions," which are antagonistic to "the organization of the whole" (Adorno 1991, 29, 36). At such moments the ideal of a holistic grasp of musical "structure" is brandished with little regard as to whether it is either appropriate or possible for a listener.

Spatial conceptions of musical organization are not, however, wholly unchallenged in Adorno's writings—as I have already sought to argue in this paper. As further indication of the flexibility that sometimes exists in Adorno's comments on this matter, I would like to return to an excerpt quoted earlier from Adorno's essay "The Schema of Mass Culture." Adorno states that "conflict concentrates past and future in the present," creating a "dialectical arrest of time" (Adorno 1991, 64). This was interpreted earlier as supporting Adorno's central concern for a progressive, dynamic, developmental temporality, one that suspends the ever-same calibrations of empty clock time. However, there is another way of reading this excerpt. Adorno may be seen to be attempting the formulation of a temporality that dissolves the linear arrangement of past and future. The first half of his statement is relatively easily understood. In conflict or tension, the past may be said to be present in the now (in the sense that the now is perceived in antagonistic relation to what
has gone before), and so may the future (in the sense of the necessity of some outcome—whether it is dominative or negotiated). But what does Adorno mean by the "dialectical arrest of time"? I suspect it is intended to connote something more than the mere suspension of empty clock time. Rather it indicates a transcendence of the entire spatio-linear framework by means of which the temporal is usually conceptualized. In conflict, Adorno suggests, past and future fuse, to form a dynamic present lifted out of its impossible confinement in linear time.

Of course this positive interpretation of "the present" is in sharp contrast to the deep suspicion of the concept normally thought characteristic of Adorno. Julian Johnson's belief that Adorno saw "the inability to proceed, to develop through time" as "the mark of unfreedom in both the individual and in society as a whole" (Johnson 1993, 209) leads him to criticize "static' music" as

[existing] only in the present; it has no memory and no history. It demands no real attention and no thought.... [It forms part of a culture that] caricatures the dream of the perpetual present (Johnson 1993, 223).

Here the present is invoked not as salvation from the rationalized structures of society (as in "The Schema of Mass Culture") but as a product of those very structures. Adorno's comments on memory provide further support for the argument that a present-dominated temporality is antithetical to his critical stance. In his article "Music and New Music" (Adorno 1992, 249-68), Adorno argues that, in the rationalized world, "the equal and quantitative" threatens "the unequal and qualitative," and bitterly concedes that this "integration and total elaboration of time...is not unfitting in an age whose subjects increasingly relinquish their control over their memory" (Adorno 1992, 259-60). The erosion of memory is also implicit in Adorno's scathing analysis of formulaic and atomistic listening in "On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening" (Adorno 1991, 26-52). Adorno pictures the
relinquishing of memory as symptomatic of the surrender of subjective consciousness to the objective forces prevalent in society. An individual abandons himself or herself to the present at the cost of the past, and thereby of history as well. So music that does not present a meaningful evolving relationship to its own past must be viewed as ideologically suspect. By failing to encourage or allow an accumulating grasp of its form, such music only furthers the sacrifice of the historical subject to the pleasure-craving present.

Two conflicting readings of Adorno’s understanding of the “present” are therefore possible. On the one hand, the present is viewed as the locus for the dissolution of the past and future of rationalized time, and thus holds out some measure of freedom for the subject. On the other, the present is viewed as signifying the abandonment of memory, and thus the subject’s collusion with the false hopes of present-day ideology. Under the first reading, the present signifies freedom from that very past-future axis which constitutes the principal social control upon individual temporality. Under the second, the hypostatization of the present suggests a false, ideologically complicitous abstraction from history. It could hardly be claimed that both readings have equal weight in Adorno’s interpretation of temporality. Certainly it is the second, rather than the first view of the present that would normally be thought of as characteristic of Adorno’s critique. But significant motifs in Adorno’s thought suggest that, once elaborated, the first interpretation could form the basis for a compatible (and dialectically necessary) adjunct to his more explicit reading of musical temporality.

I noted earlier that the extent of the non-spatial in Adorno’s thought may be disguised by commentators’ (and possibly also translators’) tendency to assume that the concepts of “conflict” or “dialectic” imply sequential development, whereas either may be understood without such spatio-linear implications. Other similarities may be found between de Man’s concept of temporality and Adorno’s comments. Adorno’s awareness of
the dangers of talking about the very possibility of a temporal "form" is apparent from his disapproving remark that form bears a certain affinity with the Bergsonian concept of duration (Adorno 1984, 254), which he condemns as succumbing to the "detemporalization of time." His crucial qualifying clause—"Duration is implied by the concept of form but is not essential to it"—indicates his interest in entertaining a concept of temporal organization that is not reducible to a static visual shape. The idea of "process" is central to this competing perspective. A short passage in Aesthetic Theory considers the various ways in which art works may be viewed as processual (Adorno 1984, 252-56). Adorno's use of the concept is complex, but it is clear from this passage that it is intended as an opposition to conventional, static notions of form:

Above all, the work of art is processual in so far as it is a relation between a whole and its parts. In other words, this relation itself is a process of becoming. The work of art is not a totality in the sense of a structure integrating the parts: once objectified, the work keeps on producing itself in response to the tendencies at work in it (Adorno 1984, 255).

For Adorno, therefore, process refers to more than the gradual unfolding of "temporal" art forms such as music, cinema, or theater. Even art forms normally considered "static" fail to distinguish the motion of processual forces, which "remains visible qua motion in this standstill" (Adorno 1984, 253). Adorno takes his most de Manian turn in the following passage with his consideration of the effect of process on meaning:

What becomes engulfed by this dialectical turbulence is the notion of meaning. Since a negative judgement must be passed on history, the unity of process and result is unattainable. Increasingly, the individual moments refuse to accommodate themselves within a preconceived totality, opening a cleavage that destroys meaning (Adorno 1984, 255).

Here, Adorno is emphatic that process places itself in opposition not just to totalized forms but also to self-present meaning. It thereby signals a moment of freedom within art.
Adorno’s concept of process, as described in this passage, has a striking affinity with de Man’s understanding of temporality. It provides further indication, alongside Adorno’s cautious articulations of a non-spatial “present,” that de Man’s thought is far from incompatible with a wider Adornian framework. This is not to claim that de Man’s position is representative of Adorno’s complex and contradictory overall stance on temporality. But its use as an “adjunct” (as I earlier described it) seems to me beyond question. And part of its value consists in revealing the potential for ideological resistance in music that Adorno consistently denounces. Debussy and Stravinsky do not fare well under Adorno’s critical gaze, yet I have suggested above how it is their music that (on occasion) most effectively resists compliance with a rationalized temporality. Present-day inheritors of Stravinsky’s harmonic strategies have also sometimes managed to retain this critical edge, yet would generally be viewed as unlikely beneficiaries from Adorno’s criticism. The repetitive and non-developmental aspects of the minimalism of Steve Reich remain in many ways totally antithetical to an Adornian aesthetic. Yet a piece like the Variations for Winds, Strings and Keyboards is nothing other than a sustained exercise in the problematization of diatonic functions; its density of allusion and continuous, anxious harmonic movement largely prevent the establishment of any unambiguous semantic reference point.6 And Stravinsky’s more complex, chromatic harmony finds more than a passing resonance in the music of Louis Andriessen. In his De Tijd (“Time”), it is not simply the superimposed pulse layers that are pertinent to the subject matter, but also the harmony which perpetually defers definition, urging the exceeding of the spatio-temporal framework that the pulse layers are simultaneously connoting. The grating dialectic of temporalities that results forms a striking parallel to the intermingling of antinomial contradictions that

6. In fact this piece is something of a one-off, its perpetual harmonic “slippage” contrasting with the more abrupt (and less frequent) harmonic shifts characteristic of much of Reich’s music.
Adorno cautiously articulates in “The Schema of Mass Culture.” It might be seen as the epitome of the wider musical critique of temporality for which I am arguing here.

Contrariwise, the shortcomings of compositional approaches favored by Adorno are also revealed by a de Manian perspective— a fact quite in keeping with Adorno’s own insistence upon the ingrained falsity attending all conceptual thought. It becomes preeminently clear that the tendency of music toward linguistic logic—a phenomenon discerned by Adorno in the “cognitive character” of Schoenberg’s music (Adorno 1973b, 124)—is damaging at the same time as it is (according to Adorno) laudable. Conceived thus, music risks sacrificing that very allegorical character that allows it to act as an exemplar for self-exceeding, non-spatial temporality.

If de Man serves to qualify some of Adorno’s summary judgements on particular musical idioms, the reverse is also true: Adorno’s framework demands the qualification of de Man’s discussion of temporality. Principally, Adorno would loudly refuse the idea that we may rest content with the effort to articulate the non-spatial—as if that did not involve the very engagement with the symbolic that recognition of the temporal presumed to dismantle. Adorno possibly sensed that the value of particular types of musical experience lies precisely in the resistance they exert against symbolic rendering—in other words, against linguistic description. This might account for Adorno’s own failure to articulate openly the sort of interpretation of temporality I have outlined here: its presence in his writings is hinted at rather than explicitly stated, alluded to rather than directly confronted. From Adorno’s standpoint, the necessity of philosophical engagement unquestionably remains: social critique demands an involvement with the symbolic concepts of that society, and it is in this light that the Hegelian picture of the developing subject remains a necessary verbal counterweight to more dominant tendencies that promote repetition and stultification. But the falsity attendant upon any conceptualization of temporality demands that the
possibility of an alternative be kept in mind—one that resists description or depiction and that is also perhaps better heard than visualized. De Man's single-mindedness in articulating this alternative temporality (albeit in rather disparate form) perhaps takes him too far in the direction of a false encapsulation. But it at least helps us to recognize its possibility, its relevance to Adorno's project, and its centrality to musical experience.

References


