a journal of the Society for Music Theory

Volume 6, Number 5, November 2000

Music, Evolution and the Ladder of Progress

Jeffrey Perry

KEYWORDS: evolution, genealogy, progress, compositional theory, polemics, Darwin, Goethe, Messing, Gould, Neff, Bloom, Straus, Urpflanze, Wagner, Schoenberg, Webern, Debussy, Boulez, Busoni, Partch, Rochberg, Russolo

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the compositional genealogies presented by several composers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, notably Wagner, Schoenberg, Webern, and Boulez, and of writings by other composers related dialectically to the genealogical mode of composerly self-perception. It also examines resonances between composers' genealogical polemics and contemporary notions borrowed from literature and evolutionary theory (e.g., the organicism of Goethe and other Enlightenment thinkers, the "ladder of progress" misreading of Darwinian evolution), and explores issues of centralization, marginalization, and legitimation as they are framed by the genealogical/ladder-of-progress model and as they apply to a wide range of Western composers.

---

[1] Introduction

[1.1] The topic of this essay is the stories composers tell about their own work and its place in musical history. It is probable that composers have always pondered this topic, but only since the nineteenth century has finding or making one's place among the composers of the past (and future) been an urgent, essential undertaking. As Scott Messing asserts in his study of neoclassicism in music, a "homogeneous and uniform [musical] past" was the creation of the nineteenth century; "by the twentieth century . . . the sense of a uniform tradition had begun to disintegrate and vary widely. . . [O]nly the greatest artists were able to mediate between the lure of the past and their own personal styles."(1) As I will show, this act of mediation quite often involves the creation by a composer of a compositional family tree which situates the composer at the end of a comfortingly long lineage, making the musical language of the composer in question appear less a matter of individual choice and more a matter of historical necessity. Other composers have been ambivalent or even hostile to the notion of compositional genealogy, which by its very nature addresses pressing issues such as the validation of some music (and musical cultures) and the marginalization of others. The arguments between these two types of composers, genealogists and non-genealogists, form a dialectic that centers around the notions of ancestry, centrality, marginality, and legitimacy, with enduring ramifications for music criticism, theory, history, historiography, and pedagogy in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

[1.2] In examining the history of this dialectic, I will first present the genealogical narratives of three major composers of the German tradition, Wagner, Schoenberg, and Webern; I will then address the complementary narratives of two French composers, Debussy and Boulez, for whom the family tree narrative was a more problematic construct. I then explore the uses to which the compositional family tree (and the component parts thereof) have been put by several composers of more marginal, individualistic status. By way of conclusion, I examine the work of George Rochberg and of other composers active in the latter decades of the twentieth century whose music seems to suggest that, for some composers at least, the issue of

genealogical validation has entered a new phase.

[2] Family Trees and the Creation of a German Mainstream

[2.1] Richard Wagner's recapitulation of European musical history in his 1860 essay, "Music of the Future," is a prototypical compositional genealogy. After describing his own musical education, Wagner summarizes musical history starting with classical Greece: "Greek music (the term almost always included poetry) can be thought of as dancing articulated through tones and words."[(2)] The early Christians, Wagner states, appropriated the dance tunes from Greek music, shorn of the dance to which it formed an accompaniment. The loss of rhythmic vitality that resulted was finally remedied, Wagner claims, when "the Christian mind invented four-part harmony on the basis of the four-part chord, whose characteristic mutations would henceforth motivate the expression as formerly the rhythm had done."[(3)] This led to the flowering of Renaissance polyphony, which Wagner associates mainly with Palestrina. He goes on to note the degeneracy that seized hold of Italian music with the onset of operatic monody, a musical analogue perhaps to the great late Cretaceous die-back, but then notes that in Germany

> . . . the secularization of church music gave rise to an important new development. . .instead of dispensing with the rich harmony of ecclesiastical music, they sought to unite it with the rhythmically animated melody in order that rhythm and harmony should participate in the melody's expression[(4)]

[2.2] Wagner then extols the innovations of Bach and Mozart, which he contrasts with the "meager formal structure" of eighteenth-century Italian opera. "The heritage of these two masters," he continues, "then passed to Beethoven, in whose hands the symphonic art attained a gripping breadth of form and a melodic content of such unheard-of variety that the Beethoven symphony appears to us today as a milestone in the history of art."[(5)] Wagner makes it clear that his own place on the ladder of ascent is not only after, but above, Beethoven. Consequent to a lengthy exposition of his theories on language and poetry Wagner proposes that the next task confronting the progressive composer is the synthesis of poetry with music; he thereupon announces that he is in the process of composing the *Ring of the Niebelungs*, and is making available to the Parisian public a French translation of the libretti to the four operas.

[2.3] Central to the notion of musical genealogy as practiced by Wagner and others of his century is the concept of evolution. Since the late eighteenth century, the term "evolution" has been understood in a number of different ways. A fallacious "ladder of ascent" misreading of Darwinian evolution persists in the popular imagination to this day. It is perhaps best evoked by two popular illustrations by the American artist Rudolph F. Zallinger, both of which depict biological evolution as a triumphant march from simpler, cruder prototypes towards latter-day perfection. The first is *The Age of Reptiles*, a well-known dinosaur mural in the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale University, for which Zallinger won the Pulitzer Prize in 1949; it depicts the progress from the relatively small, early reptiles and plant life of the Permian and Triassic eras to the Tyrannosaurus Rex and flowering foliage of the Cretaceous.[(6)] The second is one of the most widely copied and parodied illustrations of the twentieth century, namely Zallinger's depiction of the "March of Progress" from early simians to *Homo sapiens*, via intermediate forms such as Australopithecus, *Homo erectus*, Neanderthal man, etc.[(7)] It is easy to imagine as one reads the compositional genealogies of Wagner, Schoenberg, and others that they too were involved in the creation of a similar March of Progress, in which composers and music not part of the preordained journey from the ancient Greeks and plainchant to nineteenth-century Germany are simply omitted as unsuccessful outgrowths that were incapable of completing the journey.

[2.4] Less readily dismissed is the concept of organicism, promulgated by eighteenth-century thinkers such as Edward Young in England, and Johann Georg Sulzer, J. G. Herder, and J. W. von Goethe in Germany. Goethe's notion of the *Urpflanze* or archetypal plant, propounded in *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790) is perhaps the most essential formulation from the point of view of compositional genealogy.[(8)] The *Urpflanze*—part botanical doctrine, part mystical system—is the cornerstone of Goethe's theories about botanical growth. Long after his work as a natural historian was superseded, his philosophical musings on the subject of plants provided a rich fund of metaphorical justification for notions of aesthetic unity and balance.[(9)] When Darwin's doctrine of biological evolution was introduced, it resonated in crucial ways with the special sense in which evolution had been used by aesthetic and philosophical thinkers of the early nineteenth century. Subsequent misreading of Darwinism against a backdrop of Goethe, Young, Herder, et al., became the dominant intellectual paradigm of the Victorian age, giving rise to what Stephen Jay Gould, a critic of conventional evolutionary theory, has in our own day referred to as the Ladder of Progress model of evolution.[(10)]

[2.5] According to the Ladder of Progress model, evolution is teleological, i.e., not simply a matter of adaptation by organisms to environmental change (which is, according to Gould, the strict meaning of the term), but indeed a progression from cruder to more perfectly realized versions of a given underlying organism type. The Ladder of Progress makes of evolution a march of progress, graphic representations of which Gould notes are "viscerally understood by all. . . The straightjacket of linear advance goes beyond iconography to the definition of evolution."(11) It is easy to understand the appeal of such a model for nineteenth-century Europeans: if human society evolves (i.e., progresses) as nature evolves, the displacement of lesser civilizations and races (e.g., those of Africa and Asia) by more highly evolved and progressive white European technology and culture is as inevitable as the displacement of the Neanderthals by *Homo sapiens*; the atrocities committed in the name of colonialism and imperialism are thus at worst necessary evils. Note that in both halves of this analogy (Neanderthals and non-Europeans of color versus *Homo sapiens* and white Europeans), there is a conceptual confusion between ancestors and side-branches—although the Neanderthal is shown in illustrations like Zallinger's as chronologically prior to modern man, as "inferior" parts of the human lineage they must represent a degenerate side-branch rather than an ancestor. If this were not so, the lineage of the modern, perfected human species would be highly suspect. Human evolution as conventionally portrayed is thus a kind of succession of degenerate uncles and more vigorous nephews.

[2.6] The family tree narratives of nineteenth-century composers present musical history as a ladder of inevitable progress from some remote point in the past to the composer's own day, with their own music on the top rung of the ladder. In such a telling, earlier music is perforce cruder and less perfect than later music; the best earlier music has value primarily to the extent that it foreshadows the great works to come. Unexpected evidence that the ladder of progress remains embedded in the discourse of music theorists and historians of the present day is found on the cover of the *Indiana Theory Review*, a respected journal published by the Graduate Theory Association of the Indiana University School of Music, on which one may see a Ladder-of-Progress consisting of (from left to right) medieval neumes, fifteenth-century white mensural notation, Baroque figured bass, and so on, right up to graphic notation a la Berio or Crumb!

[2.7] Wagner was followed by several generations of compositional genealogists. One of the principal such was Arnold Schoenberg, many of whose writings, particularly those written after his emigration to the United States, present complete or partial musical genealogies. Severine Neff has shown how Schoenberg developed his notions of *Monotonalitaet* and *Grundgestalt* by drawing heavily on Goethe's *Urpflanze*.(12) Schoenberg's discourse is also laden with Darwinian imagery, as when he discusses the *Grundton*, or tonic, itself the progenitor of the overtone series that governs every tonal field, and thus of the harmonic regions that are related to the *Grundton* as offspring to a parent. The fecundity of the *Grundton*—its ability to give birth to the tonal regions—seems to have been latent in antiquity and unrecognized by the "primitive ear." The *Grundton* is a dynamic entity whose articulation into harmonic regions engenders motivic and harmonic problems (the *Hauptmotiv* and subordinate motives) that "are concealed in it, . . . [and] clash with one another . . . [as] the *Grundton* lives and seeks to propagate itself." This suggests a view of the generation of tonal form that evokes both the conflicts and travails of the gods of ancient Greek mythology (the *Grundton* or *Hauptmotiv* as Zeus, the harmonic regions as the rival/offspring Olympian gods) and Darwin's doctrine of natural selection and survival of the fittest.(13)

[2.8] Depending on the essay, Schoenberg may reach back no farther than the mid-nineteenth century in his search for musical forebears. As he states in "Problems of Harmony," "everyone is familiar today with the road that led from Schubert through Wagner to Reger, Richard Strauss, Mahler, Debussy, and others. . ."(14) Alternatively, he may recapitulate European music history beginning with Renaissance polyphony, and then moving along a familiar path to Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, finally reaching his own top rung of the ladder. Often Schoenberg is interested in the internal lineage of his own music, seeking to prove that his recent serial compositions are the direct result of tendencies embodied by his earlier, somewhat more popular tonal works.

[2.9] In "Brahms the Progressive," the ladder of progress has certain rungs which, while at first evidently safe, turn out to be steps down or to one side rather than up. Specifically, Schoenberg decries music that relies excessively on overt repetition, sequence, and foursquare phrase structure, devices that he associates with the infancy of serious music, unworthy of a "grown up" musical art. For Schoenberg, ontogeny indeed recapitulates phylogeny: "An alert and well-trained mind," he says, "refuses to listen to baby-talk and requests strongly to be spoken to in brief and straight-forward language."(15) It soon becomes clear that Schoenberg means to indict his former idol Wagner as one of the principal "baby-talkers," and, as the title of the essay suggests, to advocate the music of Brahms as embodying the true step up the ladder. Schoenberg illustrates the subtlety of Brahmsian harmonic practice by introducing excerpts from Schubert and Beethoven as forerunners, and a little later introduces examples from Haydn and Mozart to illustrate their successes in freeing music from phraseological and metric squareness, successes which Brahms of course follows up in his own music. By contrast with this august lineage,

Schoenberg pairs Wagner by implication first with Keiser, Telemann, and Mattheson, and a bit later (still more dismissively) with Johann Strauss, Verdi, and "contemporary Italians."(16)

[2.10] A reliance on compositional genealogy is not the sole province of composers who paint on a large canvas, however. In the 1933 lectures published under the name *The Path to the New Music*, Anton Webern follows the lead of Schoenberg closely. As Joseph N. Straus points out, for Webern

> . . . the universal source of musical coherence [stems from] *Grundgestalt* composed-out via developing variation. . . Motivic unity and concentration are the standards by which earlier music is judged and the goal toward which composition must always strive.(17)

[2.11] The *Grundgestalt* and developing variation are direct musical counterparts of Goethe's *Urpflanze*, which Webern, himself an amateur naturalist, invokes by name. The question that concerns Webern as a musical genealogist is, "how much space can be assigned to the presentation of musical ideas."(18) He begins by assigning the origin of the seven-note modal scale to the ancient Greeks, and sees subsequent musical progress up to the time of Bach as "the conquest of the tonal field." While all the formal principles later to be elicited by Bach and his followers are already present in germ form in Gregorian chant, Webern notes, continual refinement of the motivic principle and expansion of the tonal field from five notes to seven, and then finally to all twelve leads upwards to Renaissance polyphony, Bach, Beethoven, and Schoenberg. Throughout this illustrious lineage, Webern finds the continual quest for "a new inter-penetration of music's material in the horizontal and the vertical . . . [a] constant effort to derive as much as possible from one principal idea. . ."(19) Just as Wagner in his essay presents the story of his own musical education as a teleological tale leading to the conception of the Ring cycle, thus synopsizing the history of Western music in his own history, Webern sees the evolution of Western music as a whole and the evolution of the germ motive within a given work as different manifestations of the musical *Urpflanze*. Further, Webern traces the intertwining of the polyphonic and homophonic principles in Western music in a manner congruent with Goethe's postulation of male and female, or vertical and horizontal, forces governing plant growth.

[2.12] The construction of compositional genealogies is not an exclusively German-speaking composer's undertaking, although as the cases of Wagner, Schoenberg, and Webern illustrate, it does seem to have been an occupational hazard of nineteenth-century composers whose affiliation with the "German stem" was self-conscious. It ought to be remembered that if German-speaking composers had every reason by the nineteenth century to feel secure in their status at the center of Western musical culture, Germany in the nineteenth century was anything if secure from the point of view of geopolitical development. The first attempt at German unification had failed spectacularly in 1848–49, and unification of the non-Austrian part of German Europe came about at the tip of Bismarck's bayonet only in 1871, a decade after the process of Italian unification had been substantially completed, and centuries after the other major nations of Western Europe had emerged as unified entities. It is also easy to overlook the fact that while Germany was surrounded on two sides by political antagonists (France and Russia), culturally it was surrounded on three sides by musical "superpowers" (France, Russia, and Italy); this makes it all the more impressive an accomplishment that German cultural nationalism is so often taken for cultural cosmopolitanism, while French, Italian, Russian, or English cultural nationalism are seen as somewhat parochial. It was not without considerable effort that the mainstream of Western musical development was made to seem to flow through Germany; one of the tools that made this happen was the genealogical ladder of progress.

[3] Debussy, Boulez, and the Ladder of Progress

[3.1] An excessive interest in one's genealogy can be a mask for concerns about one's own legitimacy; it is not surprising, therefore, to find the ladder of progress invoked in the early polemics of Pierre Boulez. As a young rebel who had already made a name for himself as a disciple and collaborator of German-speaking composers in a Europe recently torn by the Second World War, and as a student of the ostracized visionary Olivier Messiaen, Boulez may have had more reason for anxiety about his legitimacy as a French composer than most of his contemporaries. In his notorious "Schoenberg est mort" (1952) Boulez simply moves the top rung of the ladder upwards to where he himself and his fellow post-Webernians are standing.(20)

[3.2] The Boulez case must be placed in the context of French musical nationalism. For French composers, reclaiming music history from the German-speaking composers and writers who had created the concept in its modern sense was no small task. Messing documents attempts by late nineteenth-century French composers such as d'Indy, Saint-Saëns and a host of lesser talents to reclaim or create for themselves an entirely French compositional lineage.(21) Unlike their German contemporaries, who with relative ease construct plausible lines of descent for themselves entirely in terms of German

composers (at least from the high Baroque onward), French composers inevitably found it necessary to address themselves to the trans-Rhenish Other in order to construct a cogent account of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The anti-German sentiment dominant in French life after the Franco-Prussian War lends a political dimension to this effort. For d'Indy, for instance, this necessitated the appropriation of Bach and Beethoven as "not German musicians but great universals, as fundamental to the evolutionary perfection of art as Rameau, Couperin, and . . . d'Indy himself."[(22)] Debussy confronts this identity crisis forthrightly in his "Open Letter to the Chevalier Gluck."[(23)] Writing as Monsieur Croche, Debussy indicts the latter's ghost as follows:

> Through knowing you French music enjoyed the somewhat unlooked-for blessing of falling into the arms of Wagner. I like to think that, but for you, not only would this not have happened, but that French music would not have asked its way so often of people who were only too ready to lead it astray.[(24)]

[3.3] Debussy then claims Rameau as a true ancestor, turning his back on the Germanic influence represented by Gluck, whom he nonetheless acknowledges as a major influence on the development of French musical life.[(25)] Despite his numerous utterances in the genealogical mode, there is a sense of ironic detachment in Debussy's approach to the issue of musical ancestorhood, by contrast to the rather strident contentions of Wagner concerning matters of lineage; his utterances on the subject of French and non-French music, as well as his own compositional engagement with the works of non-French artists and writers such as Hokusai, Rackham, Poe and Dickens alongside the poets of his own nationality, suggest a belief that the peculiar musical genius of each nation should be nurtured without either excessive chauvinism or excessive deference to external exemplars, be they German or French — a balance between nationalism and humanism that is all the more appealing in this latter time of European unification and the global village. His jocular remarks concerning Beethoven's alleged Flemish, rather than German, ancestry suggest an ironic appreciation on Debussy's part of the absurdity of musical nationalism when carried to extremes, and perhaps unconsciously raises at one and the same time issues of musical and of biological parentage; one assumes that he is parodying more extreme French musical nationalists of his own day.[(26)] For him, Beethoven was a "necessary" master; it was as absurd to deny his genius (as some of his French nationalist contemporaries apparently were wont to do) as it would be to exaggerate it in order to assert the superiority of German music.[(27)]

[3.4] In light of compositional developments of the 1960s, '70s, and beyond, Debussy's critique of what Gould refers to as the Cone of Increasing Diversity (the convention of popular evolutionary theory whereby a few earlier, simpler prototypes give rise to greater and greater diversity, complexity and refinement) is especially apt:

> Let us purify our music! Let us try to relieve its congestion, to find a less cluttered kind of music. And let us be careful that we do not stifle all feeling beneath a mass of superimposed designs and motives: how can we hope to preserve our finesse, our spirit, if we insist on being preoccupied with so many details of composition? . . . As a general rule, every time someone tries to complicate an art form or a sentiment, it is simply because they are unsure of what they want to say.[(28)]

[3.5] The Ladder of Progress was, however, too efficient and versatile a polemical tool for French composers of the early twentieth century to abandon or ignore. The historical impossibility of creating a French musical genealogy without co-opting at least a few foreign masters presented a problem, however, as indicated by comments such as the following, taken from a 1954 essay by Boulez:

> Whereas Schoenberg and Berg allied themselves to the decadence of the great German romantic stream . . . Webern—by way of Debussy, one could say—reacted in the direction of rehabilitating the power of sound and against all inherited rhetoric.[(29)]

[3.6] Boulez's use of the notion of a (German) Romantic "stream" ("le grand courant romantique allemand"[(30)]) and his postulation of Debussy as a common ancestor to Webern and himself reveals his interest in family trees and structures isomorphic to them. In "Schoenberg est mort" Boulez presents an internal genealogy of Schoenberg's work, tracing what he calls an "evolutive progression [which] started from the post-Wagnerian tonal vocabulary and reached 'suspension' of the tonal language."[(31)] Boulez cites mutually contradictory tendencies in Schoenberg's earlier works which later, after the first group of twelve-tone works, caused his "exploration of the dodecaphonic realm . . . [to go off] in the wrong direction so persistently that it would be hard to find an equally mistaken perspective in the entire history of music." Boulez identifies certain specific procedures and stylistic traits that for him show that Schoenberg was "outridden by his own discovery." His

indictment continues: "In Schoenberg's serial works . . . the confusion between theme and series is explicit enough to show his impotence to foresee the sound-world that the series demands."(32) For Boulez the Ladder of Progress assumes the character of a family romance—Schoenberg as the musical father whose inadequacies compel the son to parricide and then force him onward to his own conquests.(33)

[3.7] In the recent republication and reorganization of Boulez's collected critical and analytical prose, the first group of essays is entitled "Cortège des ancétres" and includes well-known writings on Berg, Ravel, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Varèse, and J. S. Bach, with an allusion ("La corruption dans les encensoirs") to Baudelaire, thus providing a nearly complete catalogue of those whom he claims as musical forebears. It is difficult to imagine a composer of the twentieth century who more clearly embodies Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence. If we paraphrase Straus's formulation of Bloom's anxiety model of poetic influence so that it applies to the composition of music, a new composition must struggle to find a place for itself in an overcrowded musical world. To do so, it must push earlier compositions aside. More directly, for Boulez, a new composer must struggle to push earlier composers aside; his evocation of the funeral cortege from *Le Sacre du printemps* is thus a way of suggesting that a proper appreciation of one's ancestors is not enough—they must be exorcised, celebrated, and immolated before one is free to act as a living composer.(34)

[4] The Ladder of Progress and the Twentieth Century Maverick Tradition

[4.1] Two types of individual have something to gain from establishing their ancestry's bona fides by creating a family tree: first, those who wish to retain the high social standing they have, and second, those who wish to gain a level of social standing they lack. If we cast those composers who are undisputed members of the central European classical mainstream as group one we should be able to find group two in the margins of Western musical culture; and indeed, it is possible to find more than one genealogical essay in the writings of the experimental "mavericks" of twentieth century music. It is no surprise, therefore, to find Luigi Russolo relying on ladder-of-progress genealogizing to legitimize his own innovations as the leading composer of the Italian Futurist circle in his 1913 manifesto, *The Art of Noise*. We find, perhaps surprisingly, that Russolo and Webern both see musical evolution as a matter of the conquest of the tonal field, but that for Russolo this conquest leads outside of music as conventionally considered. Perhaps this mutual reliance on ladders of progress testifies to an underlying philosophical positivism at the center of both Second Viennese and Italian Futurist thought.(35)

[4.2] Ferruccio Busoni, with his an unusual combination of radical and reactionary impulses, calls the notion of musical progress into question in two ways: first, by speaking of music in terms of the growth and evolution of a single organism rather than of a species or succession of species (in this, like Schoenberg, echoing Goethe's writings about the *Urpflanze*), he is able to declare that the entire history of Western music up to the present day (1907) is simply a kind of prologue, in its infancy.

> Music as an art, our so-called occidental music, is hardly four hundred years old; its state is one of development, perhaps the very first stage of a development beyond present conception. . . We have formulated rules, stated principles, laid down laws;—we apply laws for maturity to a child that knows nothing of responsibility!(36)

[4.3] Second, by alluding to a perfect state of nature from which music had fallen, he was able to make paradoxical judgments that seek to playfully frustrate the tendencies towards musical progressivism shown by Wagner and others:

> Such a lust of liberation filled Beethoven . . . that he ascended one short step on the way leading music back to its loftier self. . . Indeed, all composers have drawn nearest the true nature of music in preparatory and intermediary passages . . . where they felt at liberty to disregard symmetrical proportions, and unconsciously drew free breath. . . But the moment they cross the threshold of the Principal Subject, their attitude becomes stiff and conventional, like that of a man entering some bureau of high officialdom.(37)

Given the relative conservatism of his own compositions by comparison to those of Schoenberg and others whose music he championed in the 1910s, Busoni's own ambivalence towards the notion of musical progress may mirror his own ambivalence towards the emerging "progressive" idioms of the early twentieth century.

[4.4] Harry Partch's use of the narrative structure of the ladder of progress to subvert musical Darwinism deserves mention. The first chapter of his manifesto/how-to manual *Genesis of a Music* (1948) is largely taken up by an explanation of why he

himself has come to reject the notion of progress in music, followed by a lengthy time-line in which he traces the various manifestations of two permanent musical principles, the Abstract and the Corporeal. Although he reviews the entirety of music history from ancient China and Greece up through European modernity, his survey negates the usual genealogical narrative first by filtering through the quite specific criteria that define Corporeal music for Partch:

> Throughout history the Monophonic concept has been consistently manifested through one medium: the individual's spoken words, which are more certainly the juice of a given identity than anything else in the tonal world. Of all the tonal ingredients a creative man can put into his music, his voice is at once the most dramatically potent and the most intimate. (38)

[4.5] Far from representing a march of progress, the history of music (in all times and places, including ancient China as well as ancient Greece, modern America as well as Europe) consist for Partch of a series of discoveries and cultivations of the Monophonic principle, followed by the inevitable side-tracking of music into excessive focus on technique and abstraction. For Partch history's heroes include the Emperor Chun, Plato, the Florentine school of the late 1500s, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Berlioz, Wagner (more for his theory than for his practice), Moussorgsky, Debussy, Satie, Ravel, and Douglas Moore. Anti-heroes include the antiphonal singing of the early Church, Gregorian chant, most Italian opera of the seventeenth century, Mahler, and Schoenberg (except for the "whimsical adventure" of *Pierrot Lunaire*, of which Partch approves).

[4.6] Partch's dualism reflects his interest in the issue of speech and music that preoccupied him to the virtual exclusion of all other issues. There is a cyclicality in his view of musical history that prevents him from seeing any given path of development in terms of progress; his interest in non-Western music and thought, combined with his skepticism with respect to material and scientific progress and its relevance to the arts, makes his critique of the development of Western music a unique document, cast partly in the genealogical mode but with a world view that casts history as an endless helix (in which music flourishes and declines repeatedly and eternally) rather than as a ladder of progress leading ever upwards towards perfection. (39)

[5] Conclusion: Getting off the Ladder

[5.1] George Rochberg is a contemporary composer whose preoccupation with the past has compelled him to seek an abandonment of musical progress as an end in itself. In particular, his String Quartet No. 3 documents his attempt to get off the ladder, to confront the musical past in a non-exclusionary manner. In this work Rochberg felt "freed of the conventional perceptions which ascribe some goal-directed, teleological function to that past, insisting that each definable historical development supersede the one that has just taken place either by incorporating or nullifying it." (40) Rochberg's renunciation of such progress is significant because of his prior devout adherence to a compositional worldview informed by it. Indeed, much of the impact of this string quartet comes from its conscious negation of the expectations generated by the composer's adoption of an "advanced" atonal idiom. The latter suggests an aesthetically and technically "progressive" stance; when this idiom is presented in antiphony and counterpoint with other musics which are more backward-looking, the resultant whole draws attention both to the commonalities between new and old, and to the illusory nature of musical progress in an age of mass media and mass reproduction technology.

[5.2] With Rochberg we come to a kind of collapse of the entire genealogical impulse, and an ultimate questioning of its basis in evolutionary theory. The social and technological bases of this collapse require further study; when the music of all eras and cultures is equally available and more and more equally accessible, composing is less plausibly viewed as a matter of cultural imperatives: if all previous composers are possible parents, no composer need dwell on pedigree to the extent that was necessary for Schoenberg or even Rochberg.

[5.3] One remarkable development among serious composers in the United States and Europe in the late 1940s and '50s is that discussion of compositional technique largely replaced other topics as the principal mode of shop-talk among composers; rather than tracing one's compositional lineage back to Palestrina, one allowed one's choice of technical means and processes to make one's allegiance and ancestry apparent; examples abounded in periodicals such as *Perspectives of New Music* and *Musical Quarterly* during the 1940s, '50s, '60s and '70s. (41) This is attributable, perhaps, to the increasing importance of academic credentials, at least in the community of American composers. It may also indicate that (except for certain composers such as Boulez) one's family history is no longer quite as acceptable a topic for public discussion.

[5.4] Reaction to the exclusively technical tone of much composerly discourse at mid-century began in the late 1960s, as composers increasingly sought connections between their own endeavors and musical forebears more remote in time than

Babbitt and Boulez, or Stravinsky and Schoenberg. Writing in the program notes for *Horizons 1983: Since 1968, a New Romanticism?*, a program of the New York Philharmonic, whose music director was composer Jacob Druckman, Thomas Willis remarks that

> The process at work today is independent of compositional technique, historical labeling or a metaphoric swinging pendulum.
>
> The fundamental drive is simple. All of us wish to fell time- and space-bound to kindred spirits. In an age of technological revolution, social and economic unrest and the increasingly imminent danger of self-induced destruction, we need to be reassured of our common humanity. (42)

[5.5] Significantly, the need for the sort of time- and space-boundedness of which Willis speaks would seem to invite within it the inclusion of genealogical bonds of parentage and descent as well as of more affiliative formulations. Does Rochberg's musical dialogue with Beethoven in his Third String Quartet imply a yearning for reunion with a parent or for a dialogue with an equal?

[5.6] It seems fitting to end with a quote from Igor Stravinsky, a composer for whom the establishment of musical lineages was almost a tongue-in-cheek undertaking, who indeed manufactured not one but many synthetic personalities and alternate histories for himself as a substitute for the Central European ladder of progress from which he, a multiply-exiled Russian, was effectively excluded:

> It is in the nature of things—and it is this which determines the uninterrupted march of evolution in art as much as in other branches of human activity—that epochs which immediately precede us are temporarily farther away from us than others which are more remote in time. (43)

Jeffrey Perry
Louisiana State University
School of Music
245 Music and Dramatic Arts
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
jperry@lsu.edu

Footnotes

1. Scott Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music: From the Genesis of the Concept Through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 151–152.
Return to text

2. Richard Wagner, "Music of the Future," in *Three Wagner Essays*, trans. Robert L. Jacobs (London: Eulenburg Books, 1979), 24.
Return to text

3. Wagner, 25.
Return to text

4. Wagner, 25–26.
Return to text

5. Wagner, 27.
Return to text

6. See Vincent Scully, et al., *The Age of Reptiles: The Great Dinosaur Mural at Yale* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990).
Return to text

7. This illustration made its first appearance in F. Clark Howell, *Early Man* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1968), 41–45. As Howell shows, it is simply the late-twentieth-century scion of a venerable lineage of nineteenth-century march-of-progress illustrations (see especially the 1867 march-of-progress recapitulating all animal life, in Howell, 20).
Return to text

8. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 198–213. See also Bertha Mueller, trans., *Goethe's Botanical Writings* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1952), esp. 162. Mueller points out that Goethe's own use of the term "evolution" corresponds to the obsolete doctrine of preformation, as when he notes: "The new and the similar is at the beginning always part of the same thing, and in this sense proceeds from it, thus supporting the idea of evolution" (85–86).
Return to text

9. Karl J. Fink, in *Goethe's History of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), addresses the relevance of Goethe's scientific inquiries and writings to his literary oeuvre. According to Goethe, the various components of any given plant are all leaf, i.e., all an offshoot of the organic form-generating properties of the plant; their differentiation into leaf, blossom, and so on, is more apparent than real; every part expresses the whole, and the whole is implicit in each part. By corollary, every plant that breeds true is simply a leaf on a larger plant, and all of the botanical world is a single organism reaching backwards into the earliest past and forward endlessly into the future.
Return to text

10. Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989). Another component of the enlightened Victorian's world-view was Charles Lyell's doctrine of uniformitarianism, which contradicted the catastrophism implicit in the Biblical account of creation. Lyell, attempting ca. 1830 to explain geological evidence that seemed to contradict Genesis, expounded the belief that the natural forces observable in the present day had been in operation in ancient times as well. This tenet, correct as far as it goes, was an essential component of Darwin's thought and is the inertial principle against which Gould's own doctrine of punctuated equilibrium is seen to operate. See Gould, "Uniformity and Catastrophe," in *Ever Since Darwin* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 147–152.
Return to text

11. Gould, 31–32. Gould is referring specifically to Zallinger's human "March of Progress" illustration in Howell, 41–45. I am indebted to the FAQ page of Jim Foley's Talk.Origins website (at http://www.talkorigins.org/) for helping me pinpoint the source of this illustration.
Return to text

12. See Severine Neff, "Schoenberg and Goethe: Organicism and Analysis," in *Music Theory and the Exploration of the Past*, ed. Christopher Hatch and David W. Bernstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 409–433.
Return to text

13. Neff, 415.
Return to text

14. In Arnold Schoenberg, "Composition with Twelve Tones (I)" in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 277.
Return to text

15. Schoenberg, "Brahms the Progressive," in *Style and Idea*, 399–401.
Return to text

16. Schoenberg, "Brahms the Progressive," 402–415.
Return to text

17. Joseph N. Straus, *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 39.
Return to text

18. Anton Webern, *The Path to the New Music*, ed. Willi Reich, trans. Leo Black (Bryn Mawr: Theodore Presser, 1963), 20.
Return to text

19. Webern, 35.
Return to text

20. Pierre Boulez, "Schoenberg is Dead," in *Notes of an Apprenticeship*, trans. Herbert Weinstock (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).
Return to text

21. Messing, 1–59 passim.
Return to text

22. Messing, 30.
Return to text

23. Messing, 43.
Return to text

24. Claude Debussy, "Monsieur Croche the Dilettante Hater," in *Three Classics in the Aesthetics of Music*, B. N. Langdon Davies, trans. (New York: Dover, 1962), 69–70.
Return to text

25. Messing, 43.
Return to text

26. In François Lesure and Roger Nichols, eds., *Debussy Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 292–3, 324.
Return to text

27. In François Lesure and Richard Langham Smith, eds., *Debussy on Music* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 96, 229, 233, 245, 296–7.
Return to text

28. Lesure and Smith, 297.
Return to text

29. Pierre Boulez, "Incipit," in *Notes of an Apprenticeship*, 277.
Return to text

30. Pierre Boulez, "Incipit," in *Points de repère*, I (Paris: Christian Bourgeois Editeur, 1995), 153.
Return to text

31. Pierre Boulez, "Schoenberg is Dead," 269.
Return to text

32. Ibid., 271.
Return to text

33. Cf. Straus on Harold Bloom's anxiety model of creative influence and the Oedipal resonances therein. Straus, 14.
Return to text

34. Straus, 13.
Return to text

35. Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises (Futurist Manifesto 1913)*, trans. Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986), 23.
Return to text

36. Ferruccio Busoni, *A New Aesthetic of Music*, ed. Thomas Baker (New York: G. Schirmer, 1911), 3–4.
Return to text

37. Busoni, 8–9.
Return to text

38. Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music: An Account of a Creative Work, Its Roots and Its Fulfillments*, 2nd ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), 7.
Return to text

39. The following is a sample of his cyclical mindset: "It was the tendency ten centuries ago, also, to reject 'modern,' or individual, thinkers, but to the everlasting credit of the little 'interpreters' who lived in the dark ages let it be said that they did not engage press agents to label them as 'great artists'." Partch, 55.
Return to text

40. George Rochberg, "On the Third String Quartet," in *The Aesthetics of Survival: A Composer's View of Twentieth Century Music* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1984), 239.
Return to text

41. See, for example, collections of articles by composers such as Paul Henry Lang, ed., *Problems of Modern Music* (New York: G. Shirmer, 1960), all of which were originally published in *Musical Quarterly*; Benjamin Boretz and Edward T. Cone, eds., *Perspectives on Contemporary Music Theory* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), all of which were originally published in *Perspectives of New Music*.
Return to text

42. Thomas Willis, "A New Romanticism? or High Tech/High Touch?," in *Horizons '83: Since 1968, a New Romanticism?*, Linda Sanders, ed. (New York Philharmonic, 1983), 10.
Return to text

43. Igor Stravinsky, *Stravinsky: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), 142.
Return to text

Copyright Statement

Prepared by Brent Yorgason and Tahirih Motazedian, Editorial Assistants