A Minstrel in a World without Minstrels: Adorno and the Case of Schreker

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The distinction to be made . . . is between the secondary talent and the artist who has something to express, even if it is only the crisis of art.¹

The collection of Theodor W. Adorno’s essays entitled Quasi una Fantasia: Musikalische Schriften II was first published in 1963. Among several substantial essays on major composers who loomed large in Adorno’s aesthetic-critical enterprise—Mahler, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg—appears a relatively short piece on a lesser-known composer, Franz Schreker (1878–1934). This essay originated as a radio talk that Adorno delivered in 1959.² Contemporary with Schoenberg, Schreker was well known in his own time, but had faded into almost complete oblivion before the end of the Second World War. Condemned by the Nazi regime for both his Jewish origins and the character of his art, he saw his music branded as degenerate and banned, and his professional position taken from him. By the time the war ended, Schreker was dead and his works were practically forgotten. Examining the features of Schreker’s music in terms of the context in which it was

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2. Stephen Hinton has recently noted that the published versions of Adorno’s radio talks often differ—sometimes considerably—from the versions he read for broadcast. Hinton makes this observation in connection with several broadcast recordings made by the Hessischer Rundfunk, which have been rereleased on a CD collection (Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit: Reden und Gespräche, selection and commentary by Rolf Tiedemann [Munich: Hör-Verlag, 1999], 5 CDs). The radio talk on Schreker was given for the Hessischer Rundfunk, but is not included in this collection. See Hinton’s review article in this Journal 56 (2003): 198–213.
produced, Adorno’s essay offers a corrective to the predominant historical view of the modernist tradition by drawing renewed attention to a composer whose works had hovered on the periphery of the modernist musical scene for decades.

During the height of his career, Franz Schreker was widely regarded by his contemporaries, critics, and audiences as a daringly modern and controversial composer. His operas were surrounded by an aura of scandal: their sexual subject matter was racy, and they gave an impression of monstrous difficulty—the huge, complex scores presented so many technical and interpretive problems for performers and conductors that they often required extra rehearsal time. As a composer, conductor, and teacher, Schreker exercised considerable influence in new-music circles. He did his part to promote the music of Schoenberg, campaigning to raise funds for concerts in which he conducted the premieres of *Friede auf Erden* (in 1911) and the large and complex *Gurre-Lieder* (in 1913). Schoenberg in turn showed an abiding personal and professional respect for Schreker, even citing a chord from the latter’s opera *Der ferne Klang* in the *Harmonielehre* as an example of one of the first unresolved harmonies of six tones or more.3

Despite the “advanced” sensibilities evidenced by his often highly chromaticized harmonic language and employment of dissonance, Schreker chose not to follow the Second Viennese School path into atonality. Rather, he continued to compose in a chromatic idiom that does not yet completely reject tonality but often suspends tonal function, producing a series of operas whose tremendous initial popularity gave no forewarning of the virtual oblivion to which the composer would later be consigned. The triumphant Frankfurt premiere of *Der ferne Klang* in 1912 led to performance runs in other major centers such as Munich, Leipzig, and Hamburg; its 1917 revival in Dresden paved the way for the enthusiastic reception of *Die Gezeichneten* and *Der Schatzgräber*, which propelled Schreker to the height of his fame, with his works enjoying demand on stages across German-speaking countries. Christopher Hailey’s “cultural biography” of Schreker clearly asserts that he was “the most frequently performed opera composer of his generation.”4

Given Adorno’s emphasis on the critical value of dissonance and atonality as embodied in the language of Schoenberg’s Second Viennese School, Adorno not surprisingly deals rather harshly with the once-popular opera composer, even while acknowledging Schoenberg’s high opinion of Schreker. As presented in his 1959 essay, there are several possible factors behind Adorno’s case against Schreker, one of which is his popularity itself, which appears damning in Adorno’s point of view. Authentic modern music, after all,


should express radical alienation as a critical resistance to the mass appeal of the commodity-driven popular-entertainment industry. The well-established generic distinction between opera and operetta, which were firmly separated in their own theaters, testified that the distinction between more challenging “art” music and “lighter” entertainment fare was not new:5 Commenting on the “rejection of populist opera” by the “idealistic German critical establishment,” Peter Franklin notes that “Schreker’s position as apostate modernist of the Weimar period was prepared in an exemplary way in Der ferne Klang (1912), which already occupied a deliberately ambivalent position between ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of musical theatre.”6 And in fact, Franklin’s discussion of the establishment’s privileging of the “dominant values of high culture” over the “audience-oriented forms of the mass-entertainment industry”—a “historically conditioned problem” related, Franklin asserts, to the reasons why Schreker was “partly forgotten”—starts from Adorno’s critique of Wagnerian opera.7 Adorno shared this suspicion of accessible popular music with his composition teacher Alban Berg, as illustrated by an anecdote recounted by Adorno about Berg’s opera Wozzeck:

After the Berlin première of Wozzeck and the dinner at Töpfer’s where [Berg] was fêted and, like an embarrassed adolescent, scarcely able to respond, I was with him until late into the night, literally consoling him over his success. That a work conceived like Wozzeck’s apparitions in the field, a work satisfying Berg’s own standards, could please a first-night audience, was incomprehensible to him and struck him as an argument against the opera.8

5. Adorno criticizes this high-low distinction within the “Schreker” essay: “The sharp dichotomy between highbrow and lowbrow music has been erected by the administrators of musical culture into a fetish which neither side may question. In consequence the guardians of highbrow music are shy of sounds that have found a home in lowbrow music and might discredit the lucrative sanctity of the highbrow variety, while the fanatical supporters of lowbrow music wax indignant at the mere suggestion that their music could have claims as art” (Adorno, “Schreker,” in Quasi una Fantasia, 137).


7. See ibid., 159–60.

8. Adorno, Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link, trans. and annotated by Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 10. A few years earlier Adorno had offered an explanation of the unexpected popularity of the opera: “That Wozzeck was so lucky on stage could be credited first of all to the choice of a text—a fact made much of by the envious. But the music demands so much of the listener, was felt at the world premiere in 1925 to be so excessive, that the text alone . . . would not have sufficed to overwhelm a restive audience. What people sensed was the constellation between lyrics and music, that peculiarly indicative moment in the music’s relation to the topic. Besides, the social effect and authority of any music is by no means directly equal to the understanding it has found. It is conceivable that in the case of Wozzeck . . . neither the details nor their structural connection were fully understood, but that the phenomenon fashioned by the compositorial force conveyed that force to an audience whose ears would have been unable to account for it in the particular” (Adorno, Introduction to the Sociology of Music, trans. E. B. Ashton [New York: Seabury Press, 1976], chap. 5, “Opera,” 74).
Berg’s uneasiness here demonstrates that, like Adorno, he saw popular acceptance of a work as a possible symptom of its inauthenticity, and hence an index of failure rather than success.

Popularity alone, though, is not the principal problem Adorno has with Schreker’s operas; his case against Schreker is not so simple. Nor does the critique amount to a mere accusation against Schreker’s continued proximity to tonality. The atonal idiom was validated for its sociohistorical implications, but also, significantly, for its capacity for authentic subjective expression. Yet, as Adorno’s own highly respectful and laudatory monograph of 1960 on Mahler testifies, authentic modern subjective expression does not depend exclusively on atonality, but could, in fact, be present also within a tonal framework. Adorno also praised Alexander Zemlinsky for a “stylistic asceticism and direct proclamation of feeling” that attested to his modernity, despite a use of largely traditional methods.

Not only did Zemlinsky’s compositional language remain essentially tonal throughout his career, but his textures are persistently homophonic, in contrast to the Schoenbergian preference for counterpoint. Schreker’s compositional idiom exhibits both these traits, but its use of often-recognizable tonal materials frequently avoids functional progression. In fact, the very plurality of Schreker’s harmonic language and style makes it difficult to describe or classify. In his 1972 monograph *Die Harmonik in der Oper “Der ferne Klang” von Franz Schreker*—the first detailed analytic study of Schreker’s music—Gösta Neuwirth states that there are indeed sections of *Der ferne Klang* that may be analyzed in terms of functional harmony. However, he also describes the differing harmonic characteristics of “sections that are not functionally definable.” These include “verticalities built up of seconds, fourths, and sevenths,” and “chords and chord combinations that arise from the overlapping layers of different functional levels.” In addition, Neuwirth distinguishes sections “whose individual sound events may still be found within a harmonically functional frame of reference,” but which do not function legitimately in sequence. Hailey affirms both the “multiplicity” of Schreker’s style and the daring quality of his harmonic language, which, “though often verging on atonality, remains referential and derives its tension


from the contrast of existing elements, refusing both synthesis and resolution into a higher abstraction.” But Hailey also points up the composer’s preoccupation with issues of orchestration, timbre, and acoustic space, and these are the aspects of Schreker’s style that become central in Adorno’s critique. Rather than emphasizing developing variation techniques, Schreker’s music gives priority to brilliant instrumental coloration, timbral subtlety, and carefully nuanced orchestration, creating in the process a dramatically motivated conception of the realm of sound itself. For this reason, Adorno condemns him as a purveyor of mere sensuous sonority, “complete with kitsch and a halo.”

Even within the context of the prevailingly critical tone of Adorno’s essay as a whole, such a comment is jarring. In some moments, criticism almost seems to give way to oblique personal attack; and indeed, there is a personal component to Adorno’s Schreker critique. Having attended a performance of Die Gezeichneten as a fourteen-year-old, “Adorno (b. 1903) belonged,” as Hailey notes, “to the generation that had cut its teeth on Schreker’s works.” Adorno professes his disillusionment with Die Gezeichneten, claiming that, despite the rumors which led to “visions of some huge, surging monstrosity, something altogether excessive and perhaps even alarming,” the music was far easier to understand than he had expected, and, in general, not all it was cracked up to be. To add to this sense of disappointment, it is conceivable that Adorno may have inherited a complex personal animosity against Schreker from Berg. It is an understatement to say that Berg exercised great influence over his pupil. Adorno’s respect and admiration—indeed, his love—for his teacher, wells up from virtually each page of his monograph on Berg, especially (but not exclusively) in the chapter of personal reminiscences, emitting a warmth of tone rare in Adorno’s writings. Berg’s own generally friendly feelings toward Schreker were tinged with a professional ambivalence that surfaced in occasional comments such as the following remark to Schoenberg in a letter of 1912: “Not long ago I heard Schreker give a reading of his third drama [probably Die Gezeichneten], parts of which I liked very much and which is incredibly effective, powerful, and skillfully done—granted, also a bit kitschy.” Hailey notes how tensions arose over the piano-vocal score of Der ferne Klang prepared by Berg for Universal Edition, which Schreker felt was too difficult to be playable. To add to this, Berg’s assistance with Schreker’s preparations for conducting the Viennese premiere of Schoenberg’s

16. See The Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence: Selected Letters, ed. Juliane Brand, Christopher Hailey, and Donald Harris (New York: Norton, 1987), letter of 8 May 1912. It is worth noting that Berg’s comments must be read carefully, as they could plausibly have been intended more to flatter Schoenberg than to disparage Schreker; a critical tone is nonetheless expressed.
"Gurre-Lieder" put a greater strain on the friendship. In the wake of extreme difficulties in rehearsals, partly due to numerous errors in the score and parts, Berg found himself in an awkward position, trying to fix matters without angering Schoenberg. As though trying to pass the blame, Berg wrote to Schoenberg of Schreker's "filthy ambition," declaring that the latter would rather incompetently conduct a poor performance of a work he did not know than give up "the opportunity to appear before an audience, to bow. . . ." Yet, though Berg's relationship with Schreker was conflicted, Adorno makes note of Schrekerian elements in Berg's music. In particular, he mentions that "one passage in "Wozzeck," where the Captain sings that he, too, has once experienced love, sounds like a Schreker parody; one usually parodies the things to which one is drawn, however ambivalently." The parody seems dramatically motivated by the allusion to passionate love and sensuality, expressed, ironically, by the Captain, whose character embodies all the most banally conventional notions of bourgeois morality. Actually, the Berg passage is contrapuntal, in contrast to Schreker's characteristic homophony. The most Schrekerian element here is the harp arpeggio, marked "rauschend," which is constructed of a series of triadic segments: E-flat major, C-sharp minor, C minor, B minor, B-flat minor, A minor. While the triadic juxtaposition in these bars might be considered characteristic of Schreker's language, the orchestral sonority, specifically the use of harp arpeggio and celesta, is also immediately reminiscent of a Schrekerian sound (see Ex. 1).

Adorno also singles out the orchestral introduction to the first of Berg's "Altenberg Lieder" for a more precise comparison with Schreker's music: "The similarity of the idea behind the sonoral [sic] design with that of the opening to the prelude of Schreker's "Gezeichneten" is striking, except that Berg's work, surely written earlier, goes much further in its use of dissonance than Schreker with his polytonally clouded triads; seldom, however, is a certain affinity between the two as palpable as it is here."  

17. See Hailey, *Franz Schreker*, 67–68. Adorno's view of Schreker was possibly colored not only by Berg's view, but also by that of Ernst Krenek, who was a former composition student of Schreker, and a longtime friend and correspondent of Adorno. Krenek, along with many of his classmates, turned strongly against Schreker when classroom tensions over the readiness of certain student works for public performance developed into open hostility during the difficult years (1920–32) when Schreker was director of the Berlin Musikhochschule. See ibid., chap. 7, "A Clash of Generations," esp. 155–66.  

18. Adorno, *Alban Berg*, 19. As Brand and Hailey state in their translators' notes to this volume, Adorno had indicated, in an earlier essay on Berg, that the Schreker parody in this "Wozzeck" passage was pointed out to him by Berg himself (142).  

19. Ibid., 64. (When Adorno writes "polytonally clouded triads," he is referring to a distinctive feature of Schrekerian harmony in which larger dissonant chords are composed of superimposed triads. It is doubtful that he is claiming that Schreker's idiom is "polytonality," however such a term might be defined.) Nicholas Chadwick also notes Schrekerian features in the "Altenberg Lieder" in "Franz Schreker's Orchestral Style and Its Influence on Alban Berg," *Music Review* 35 (1974): 29–46.
More significant than the similarities, however, are the differences between Berg’s and Schreker’s sonorities, which Adorno goes on to describe. While both employ what he calls a “mixed sonority” (“Mischklang”), “Schreker’s sound virtually eradicates the individual colors in its shimmering totality,” whereas, “while [Berg’s] simultaneously juxtaposed colors likewise blend into a whole, they at the same time remain unhomogeneous, independently layered: mixed sound without mixture.”

While illustrating Berg’s ambivalence toward Schreker, these comparisons, which emphasize a distinction between contrapuntal independence and a pervasively undifferentiated homophony, also highlight the very aspect of Schreker’s style of which Adorno was most (though not irredeemably) critical: the concept of sound, which I will discuss at length below.

As we attempt to put Adorno’s essay into perspective, it is worthwhile to note that it does not touch upon Schreker’s admittedly less popular later works, which exhibit significant stylistic changes. The critique is thus necessarily limited in scope. It is indeed marked by Adorno’s view of the validity of the dissident modernist musical work, whose authenticity is evident not only in terms of its antipopulist stance and its dissonant and fragmentary aspect, but its temporal character as a reflection of its status as a sociohistorical product. These preferences are deeply rooted in his unique critical-philosophical endeavor; yet, as Franklin points out so clearly, Adorno’s critique of Schreker’s works also falls into line with German establishment views of the pleasurable and populist aspects of post-Wagnerian music drama: “The wider Germanic antipathy towards . . . decadent musical manners is reflected in Adorno’s unease about Schreker.”

Nonetheless, Adorno’s essay—which has unquestionably been extensively influential for postwar Schreker reception—is much more than a mere polemical (or personal) attack; and it is not, in the end, unrelentingly negative, as will

21. See Hailey, “Franz Schreker and the Pluralities of Modernism,” 5–6; the latter chapters of Hailey’s Franz Schreker provide, of course, a much more detailed discussion of Schreker’s later style. The last Schreker work Adorno mentions is Der Schatzgräber (1918), saying that, “in reality, the curve of Schreker’s production already began to turn downwards after Die Gezeichneten. His most successful work, Der Schatzgräber, is not able to sustain the high quality of the earlier opera” (Adorno, “Schreker,” 141).
Example 1  Berg, Wozzeck, act 2, scene 2 (2 mm. after R325), Berg’s “Schreker parody” (Vienna: Universal Edition A. G., copyright © 1926; used by permission)
be seen. It is a dense, and sometimes scathing, but ultimately careful critical look at key aspects of the oeuvre of a once-modern composer whose virtual disappearance from cultural memory exemplifies that traumatic loss of a sense of historical continuity that was felt across Europe after the Second World War. Yet, though Adorno’s essay is cited by most major commentators on Schreker and his opera, few make more than brief mention of its details, and none formulates a comprehensive critical response that queries in depth the central critical categories it employs. It is thus worthy of a closer examination than it has received in the exegetical literature so far.24

Adorno’s Critique: Phantasmagoria and Sublimation

In 1919 the leading German music critic Paul Bekker had proclaimed Schreker “doubtless the greatest music-dramatic talent we have known since Wagner,” insisting on a unity of dramatic and musical inspiration as the most significant aspect of Schreker’s works.25 This unity arose not only because he, like Wagner before him, was both a librettist and composer, but because, as Schreker himself claimed, his literary and musical inspiration were one and the same. “We see here drama growing out of a primary musical vision,” stated Bekker.26 According to the Wagnerian principle, and yet managing to maintain a stylistic independence from Wagner, Schreker conceived his dramatic ideas “out of the spirit of music.” This conception, in Bekker’s view, gave the operas greater dramatic integrity than could be achieved by merely setting literary texts to music, or providing musical accompaniment for theatrical spectacle.27 Adorno admits that Bekker had studied Schreker more closely than anyone else had, and does not dispute the Wagnerian connection, but he interprets it in a somewhat different light, which is perhaps not surprising given the generally critical tone of Adorno’s own study Versuch über Wagner, which appeared in 1952.28


27. For a detailed discussion of Bekker’s commentary on Schreker’s works, see Hailey, Franz Schreker, chap. 3, “A Critical Champion: Paul Bekker and the Schreker Question.”

“In general,” asserts Adorno, “like Wagner’s other successors, what Schreker borrowed from Wagner was the element of the phantasmagoria which he then made into the centerpiece of his own work.” This term phantasmagoria is at the crux of much of Adorno’s case against Schreker, and thus merits elucidation and deeper investigation. Phantasmagoria comes from a French term; it was first used in English at the beginning of the nineteenth century, referring to the apparitional quality of magic-lantern effects. Adorno’s usage has roots in Marx’s Das Kapital, drawing from Marx’s explanation of the commodity and its role in the social relation between individuals. Though the commodity may be made of “natural” material, its most important aspect for Marx is its mediated quality as a product of human labor. As Max Paddison so aptly explains, “the defining characteristic of the commodity form is that the labor that went into its production is concealed, and that, as a result of this, something that has been made . . . assumes the appearance of nature, as ‘natural object.’ ” Labor becomes an abstract entity in relation to the commodity it produces, and the commodity itself takes on a mysterious aspect. People relating to each other through the exchange of commodities, in which their own human labor is mysteriously hidden, are distanced by the apparition of a commerce among the commodities themselves. Therefore the social relation between individuals—producers and consumers involved in commodity exchange—assumes a fantastic aspect; in Marx’s terms, “the fantastic form of a relation between things.” The commodity itself, which presents a naturalized appearance, is viewed by Marx as a manifestation of “alienated labor.” So, in theorizing the form of the commodity as phantasmagoria, Marx uncovers a spectral nature of the social bond between humans. This spectral world of alienated relations resembles the shadowy deceptive images, the phantasmagoria, of magic-lantern effects. Both these aspects—concealed or alienated labor and magical effects produced by technological illusion—are reflected in the concept of the phantasmagoric as employed by Adorno in his criticism of the music of Wagner, Schreker, and others.

A related problematic aspect of phantasmagoria is its atemporal character, already suggested, perhaps, by its original definition in spatial rather than temporal terms, as a visual image. In appearing as a natural object rather than a social product, phantasmagoria denies history in favor of an illusion of timelessness. It conceals its own history, which is the productive process by which

it was made, and it attempts to transcend its historical context through a pretense of naturalness: in Adorno’s terms, “Time is the all-important element of production that phantasmagoria, the mirage of eternity, obscures.”33 The atemporality of phantasmagoria is a feature that takes on particular importance in Adorno’s Wagner and Schreker critiques.

What might this concept mean in musical terms? Wagner’s concealment of labor was in fact rather obvious: his ideal orchestra pit in Bayreuth literally hid the orchestra under a large, black screen. On a deeper level, his employment of mythical plots attempted to present his art as natural and timeless. And indeed, the opening of Das Rheingold has always been perceived as embodying the principle of mythological timelessness in musical form, with its slow, static unfolding; the “ur-” quality of its pure and primal triadic harmony, arising “naturally” out of the overtone series; and the way it gradually appears as if from the inarticulable mists of time itself, starting so softly it is almost impossible to tell the precise moment when it begins. It really is the quintessence of the Wagnerian illusion of art as eternal nature.34 Wagner’s compositional technique itself, its seamlessness and careful concealing of joints, points toward a conscious effort to conceal the labor that went into its production, making it appear more nature than art. The whole Gesamtkunstwerk concept is, according to Adorno, the prime exemplar of phantasmagoria in Wagner. “For in seeking aesthetic interchangeability,” effacing individual labor and production in the guise of the united totality, “his intention was to obliterate the frontiers separating the individual arts in the name of an all-pervasive infinity” which pretends to a state of nature.35

The phantasmagorical concept can also be seen in Wagner’s efforts to create the illusion of a magical onstage world through technology—the elaborate behind-the-scenes machinery, and especially the orchestral effects, engineered so that the physical means of producing individual instrumental sounds are obscured. In the fifth chapter of In Search of Wagner, entitled “Colour,” Adorno focuses in particular on this issue of orchestration, criticizing the lack of contrapuntal independence between instrumental voices, as in the above comparison between Schreker and Berg. He specifies that the typically massed sound of the Wagnerian orchestra, the pervasive use of doublings, especially at the unison, have a tendency to obscure timbral distinctiveness and aim instead for a seamless blending of sounds, in which the individual instruments become less perceptible, one concealing the other. Aided by subtle dynamic shadings between ends of phrases, antecedent-consequent structures in which one in-

33. Adorno, In Search of Wagner, 87.
35. Adorno, In Search of Wagner, 97.
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The art of the nuance in Wagner’s orchestration represents the victory of reification in instrumental practice. . . . The history of Wagner’s work, particularly in the dimension of colour, is that of the flight from the banal, by means of which the composer hopes to escape the market requirements of the commodity known as opera. But paradoxically, this flight only leads him more deeply into the commodity. The idea that governs his orchestration, that of sound from which the traces of its production have been removed, sound made absolute, is no more immune to the taint of the commodity than was the trivial sound his art had set out to circumvent.

Adorno made a similar criticism of Schreker. The concealment of labor can also be seen in Schreker’s style of the orchestral writing itself. “He really only acknowledged one possible instrument as an accompaniment for opera: The orchestra itself,” asserted Adorno. In other words, the orchestral instruments are not individuated, but rather merge into a massive blur of sound. Adorno was not the only one to remark upon the skillful smoothness of Schreker’s orchestral writing; the composer was known from the time of his earliest operas as a virtuoso orchestral colorist. The brilliance of his orchestration often caused him to be associated with French Impressionism, a connection which Adorno made as well. Again valuing counterpoint above other compositional procedures, Adorno deplores a lack of contrapuntal independence in Schreker’s textures: “In extreme contrast to Schoenberg,” he states, “the texture is homophonic throughout. . . . The orchestra is not at all used soloistically, but produces a comprehensive body of sound.”

It thus conceals the labor of its production beneath an iridescent sonorous veil. The opening

36. Ibid., 75.
37. Ibid., 89.
38. Ibid., 80.
39. Ibid., 82.
40. Adorno, “Schreker,” 135–36. Schreker himself did in fact make comments to this effect, such as the following from his essay entitled “Meine musikdramatische Idee” (1918): “I only oppose the all too clearly differentiated timbre and would like to recognize only one instrument in service of the opera: the orchestra itself.” Later he was dissatisfied with this formulation; see Hailey, Franz Schreker, 96–97.
41. See Adorno, “Schreker,” 131–32, 137, and 138; though he notes a difference between Schreker and Debussy, 141.
42. Ibid., 139.
measures of the Overture to Schreker’s *Die Gezeichneten*—which, according to Adorno, “represents the quintessence if his work in general”\(^43\)—provide an example of the orchestral technique referred to here (see Ex. 2).

It opens with a nebulous, shimmering “mixed sonority” somewhat like that described above in Berg’s Schrekerian parody, in terms of triadic structure and timbre. The second violins and celesta present rapidly oscillating D-major and B-flat-minor triads (“hexatonic poles” in Richard Cohn’s recent terminology),\(^44\) at times enharmonically respelled, while the upper strings, piano, and harp reconfigure the same pitch classes in arpeggiated triads and running figures. A melody emerges, and the listening ear strains through the blanket of massed strings to identify its origin. In the score, it is revealed on the top line as a bass clarinet—a unique instrumental timbre, generally immediately identifiable—but the eye travels down the page and discovers the discreet unison doublings in viola and cello that mask the distinctive woodwind quality and cast a veil over the melody’s timbral character.

But Adorno thinks that the notion of the phantasmagoric extends beyond orchestration, to Schreker’s very concept of musical sound and, by extension, his entire compositional style and technique. Once again, the criticism of Schreker echoes that of Wagner, in which, interestingly, Schreker’s name makes an appearance:

> The great phantasmagorias that recur again and again occupy a central position in [Wagner’s] work. . . . They are all defined in terms of the medium of sound: ‘Wondrously, from afar, the dulcet tones resound’, as it is put in the *Venusberg* scene in *Tannhäuser*, the phantasmagoria par excellence. Until its dissolution with Schreker, the Neo-German school remained loyal to the idea of ‘distant sound’, as the source of acoustic delusion; in it music pauses and is made spatial, the near and the far are deceptively merged, like the comforting Fata Morgana that brings the mirage of cities and caravans within reach and makes social models appear magically rooted in nature.\(^45\)

Adorno provides a technical analysis of the Venusberg’s phantasmagorical effect: “Its characteristic sound is created by the device of diminution.” The use of high instruments, soft dynamics, and absence of bass line (which would “mark the harmonic progression and hence the temporal character of music”), all give an illusion of remoteness in time and space.\(^46\)

In this passage, Adorno encapsulates many of the crucial aspects of the phantasmagorical category: evocation of magic and wonder; suggestion of

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43. Ibid., 140. The Prelude to *Die Gezeichneten* is a slightly reworked version of Schreker’s earlier orchestral work entitled *Vorspiel zu einem Drama*. The operatic prelude utilizes the opening and closing sections of the orchestral piece, whose middle section is used in the opera’s third act.


46. Ibid.
Example 2 Schreker, *Die Gezeichneten*, opening of the Overture (Vienna: Universal Edition A. G., copyright © 1916; used by permission)
Example 2 continued
distance and otherworldliness; “acoustic delusion,” which attempts to present itself as natural rather than technologically generated; and finally, atemporality or foregrounding of the spatial (read, denial of music’s inherently temporal nature, and by extension of the dimension of history). The same factors apply, according to Adorno, to Schreker’s sound-concept—which he characterizes similarly as an “auditory Fata Morgana”—and to the compositional technique used to achieve it: “Schreker’s ideal of sound is music that puts down roots in mid-air. It denies both cause and effect, indeed every actual determinant of composition. The factors that usually define the musical structure—developing variation, the logic of composition in its broadest sense—are virtually excluded.”47 Such an attack on Schreker’s compositional technique also had considerable precedent in the critical literature of the composer’s own time. The sort of objections often raised to the musical aspect of Schreker’s works include lack of significant progression, poor grasp of harmonic movement, absence of melodic line and thematic clarity, and awkward shifting of chords from one pedal-point to another.48 For Adorno, this “loosen[ing] up and dematerializ[ation of] the viscous flow of the post-Wagnerian school” exemplified, as I will show, the phantasmagoric concept of alienated labor, in effect making Schreker’s works commodities of the modern culture industry rather than authentic resistances to it.49

It seems worthwhile to note the unusual effect of Adorno’s invocations of the “Fata Morgana” in the passages cited above. Fata Morgana is a natural phenomenon of temperature inversion that causes the appearance of a mirage, typically near a water surface. The phenomenon takes its name from the mythology of a fairy enchantress, skilled in the art of shape-shifting, who lived in a marvelous castle under the sea. Sometimes she would project the castle’s image above the waves, luring sailors to their death.50 In evoking the Fata Morgana as a metaphor for phantasmagoria, transposed from the visual to the auditory realm, Adorno inevitably, if unintentionally, recalls that the

47. Adorno, “Schreker,” 134. Note the play on the word “roots”—the sense of “putting down roots in mid-air,” suggesting an instability of (physical) location, is coupled with a reference to the nonfunctional nature of the harmony, the “roots” of chords remaining unconnected, as it were, “in mid-air.”


50. Fata Morgana is the Italian name for Morgan le Fay of Arthurian legend, who first appears in literary form in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Vita Merlini (ca. 1150). Her legend may have made its way to Sicily via Norman conquerors in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The mirage itself occurs frequently in the Strait of Messina, between Italy and Sicily. Fata Morgana appears as an allegorical character in Boiardo’s unfinished Orlando innamorato (1486) and in Ariosto’s Orlando furioso (1516). See Brian Edward Rise, “Morgan le Fay,” in Encyclopedia Mythica, http://www.pantheon.org/ (accessed 3 June 2005). See also pp. 671 and 679 of this article for further allusions to the Fata Morgana.
phenomenon is not a mere illusion but, rather, one generated by a truly natural process, rather than by a technological deception. Further he (perhaps unwittingly) invokes the trope of the feminine as deceptive and fatal seducer, like Venus herself, or, later, Wagner’s flower maidens in *Parsifal*\(^{51}\) (a trope that also recurs in Schreker, as will be seen). Most of all, the concept of the Fata Morgana embodies the realization that the mirage, however beautiful, is only illusion, is fleeting, and is dangerous; it means the undoing of those who fall prey to its temptations, and as such, it is not a “comforting” phenomenon, but a fearful one. The pleasurable image embodies within itself the idea of its negation. The idea of the Fata Morgana takes on an interesting interpretive resonance within a particular scene of Schreker’s opera *Der ferne Klang*, which I will discuss below.

According to Adorno’s aesthetics, the element of phantasmagoria has socio-philosophical as well as artistic consequences for the significance of Schreker’s (and Wagner’s) art. In its pretense of naturalness and immediacy, it conceals the rational-technical aspects of the labor that went into its production (composition and performance). The subject’s alienation from the product of its labor as commodity, and from other producers also distanced by the market mechanisms of commodity exchange, is reinforced. The musical phantasmagoria thereby denies the suffering of the individual subject oppressed by the rational-technical force of modern society. It declares itself natural and timeless; it pretends to transcend the dominating regime of modern culture. But if this social force of commodity capitalism is so negative, if it is an ideology under whose weight the individual is crushed, is not transcendence exactly what is needed? Should not authentic art attempt an escape?

Here arises a problem that frequently confronts the interpreter of Adorno’s theory: how to distinguish the concealment of suffering from a hopeful prefiguration of utopia. Despite the overwhelming pessimism of his theory, Adorno acknowledges the utopian character of art, which resides even in modern artworks in what he calls a “grain of affirmation.” It imagines a possibility for change, as though the world could be different from what it is. This moment of resistance to the immutable is a crucial difference between the authentic modern work, which both acknowledges and criticizes the dominant tendencies of its society, and the nihilist one, which expresses negativity, but accepts defeat. In authentic art, as he states in *Aesthetic Theory*, “Affirmation becomes the cipher of despair and the purest negativity of content contains . . . a grain of affirmation. . . . The constellation of the existing and nonexisting is the utopic figure of art. Although it is compelled toward absolute negativity, it is

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51. In the above quotation from *In Search of Wagner* (p. 652, cited in note 45), Adorno refers to *Tannhäuser*, but not to *Parsifal*; however, he does allude briefly to *Parsifal* in “Schreker,” 132, though the reference is to the Good Friday music, not to the enchanted garden and flower maidens of act 2.
Adorno and the Case of Schreker

precisely by virtue of this negativity that it is not absolutely negative.”

This utopian figure remains only a “grain.” In the case of Schreker, however, Adorno concludes that “the utopia conveyed in these operas is too unsublimated for it to survive.”

Sublimation refers to a second key concept which must be more closely examined in order to approach an understanding of Adorno’s criticism of Schreker. The term derives from Freudian psychoanalytical theory, aspects of which Adorno employed alongside Marxist theory in the development of his aesthetics. Freud’s ideas on art are based upon the primacy of the unconscious in aesthetic production. According to Freud, sublimation converts the sexual aim of the libido into a cultural one through the mediation of the ego, allowing for the production of cultural phenomena by the essentially radically asocial unconscious. It is a complex process of repression and transformation of unconscious drives into a form more acceptable to society. Through sublimation, the artist “can transform his phantasies into artistic creations instead of into symptoms.” Art is supposed to deal positively with the negative experiences of life. Freud thus characterizes art as an alternative to neurosis, a link between fantasy and reality through which the artist, typically a neurotic personality type, regains contact with reality. Significantly, art is thus also similar to the Freudian concept of dreamwork, as an objectification of unconscious desire and wish-fulfillment. Through this analogy Freud suggested the applicability of his theories of psychoanalytic dream interpretation to the interpretation of artworks.

It should be noted, however, that Freud’s own ideas about art are not very systematic. His tendency to employ psychoanalysis of artists’ personalities in interpreting their works in terms of wish-fulfillment has often been criticized as overly simplistic. Freud’s sublimation model has the effect of reducing art to a psychological framework for something else. Further, the analogy of artistic creation to dreaming does not account for the aesthetic value of art, much less for the conscious processes of elaboration that produce the aesthetic forms of artworks. While Adorno did find Freud’s idea of sublimation a useful tool, he echoed many other critics in dismissing traditional psychoanalytic interpretation of artworks as daydreams: it “confuses them with documents,” and “reduces artworks to crude thematic material.” Yet even if one accepts a simple

production process of unconscious projection into the artwork (which Adorno does not), the material aspects of the artistic product cannot be neglected by interpretation:

The psychoanalytic thesis, for instance, that music is a defense against the threat of paranoia, does indeed for the most part hold true clinically, yet it says nothing about the quality and content of a particular composition. . . . Psychoanalysis treats artworks as nothing but facts, yet it neglects their own objectivity, their level of form, their critical impulse, their relation to nonpsychical reality, and, finally, their idea of truth.57

By thus complicating the Freudian sublimation model through emphasis on the objective sphere of artistic production, Adorno makes room for the critical dimension so crucial to his aesthetic theory of the authentic (truthful) work of art.

In Adorno’s theory, then, musical sublimation is evidenced by the technical means through which given musical materials are rationalized within the logic of the form of a work. The composer’s creative impulse must be expressed, but it must also be brought under control by the laws of compositional technique, which impose a coherent form and syntax upon the raw musical materials. “In artistic production, unconscious forces are one sort of impulse, material among many others,” he explains. “They enter the work mediated by the law of form; if this were not the case, the actual subject portrayed by a work would be nothing but a copy [of the unconscious].”58 The mark of an authentic modern work of art is the continuing tension it exhibits between the rational calculation of formal construction and the spontaneity of expression—in other words, between the conscious and the unconscious, as mediated through the process of ego-sublimation.

Perhaps more importantly, however, Adorno objects to the traditional psychoanalytic emphasis on sublimation as an affirmative process through which the individual (artist) becomes better adapted to social reality. For, as emphasized above, negativity is the true and inescapable character of the relation between the isolated individual subject and the modern society to which he finds himself forced to adapt. Yet, in traditional psychoanalytic studies of art, “Artists whose work gave uncensored shape to the negativity of life are dismissed as neurotics. . . . The negative element is held to be nothing more than the mark of that process of repression that obviously goes into the artwork.”59 But expression of this negative moment in the artwork is, for Adorno, the only authentic outcome of sublimation of the unconscious drives through the transformative ego process. Denial of the negative is a sign of repression rather than sublimation. Adorno finds that Freud’s traditional concept does not make a clear distinction between positive and negative ego-functions in artistic production, between sublimation and repression. “Instead,” he asserts, “the

57. Ibid., 8–9.
58. Ibid., 9.
59. Ibid., 8.
concept of what is useful or socially productive is rather innocently dragged in. But in an irrational society, the ego cannot perform at all adequately the function allotted to it by that society.\textsuperscript{60} (This is why a tension between internal/unconscious and external/conscious, as described above, must be evident within the musical work: it is reflective of the real conflict between the individual subject and society.) So, while Freud characterizes sublimation as positive, Adorno insists on the importance of the negative in the form of the ego’s simultaneous adaptation and opposition to external reality. In other words, Adorno’s version of the theory of sublimation necessarily includes a critical dimension. The authentic artwork must contain a crucial negative element, which is the trace of the irreconcilable negativity of modern human experience.

Thus, for Adorno, the work of art as a product of sublimation must exhibit both the inspiration and its material mediation, and it must bear traces of both the affirmative and the negative. As in other contexts, Schoenberg’s atonal expressionist idiom provides an ideal example for Adorno of the sublimated musical discourse. Its atonal language and technique of formal, functional, and gestural fragmentation inscribe the confrontation of historically given or socially conventional musical material (tonality, traditional forms) with the modern demands of culture (tonal dissolution, breaking with tradition). Simultaneously, its dissonant and fragmentary nature critically resists the demand for adaptation, in that it reflects the negative aspect of the individual’s confrontation with social reality and an ultimate failure to adapt to it. Unsublimated music, then, denies both the demands for social and historical mediation and the negativity that inevitably arises therefrom.

The criticisms cited above against Schreker’s seemingly faulty compositional technique suggest that the composer’s musical inspiration remains unsublimated by compositional logic. To Adorno’s ears, this music is “the immediate, unconfined promise of sensual pleasure.”\textsuperscript{61} Unconscious desire and fantasy are immediately expressed through sensual sound, and given free rein. If art as sublimation replaces neurosis, unsublimated music remains untransformed unconscious fantasy: the music itself is the neurotic symptom. This is what Adorno refers to when he states that “[Schreker’s] music failed, as the psychologists would say, to construct an ego. It stands outside the demands of culture.”\textsuperscript{62} Adorno could not hear in Schreker’s music any dialectical


\textsuperscript{61} Adorno, “Schreker,” 138.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 143. Adorno makes a similar reference to Wagner in commenting on the function of the leitmotiv and comparing it to Berlioz’s idée fixe: “The idée appears to a man under the spell of an opium dream. It is the exteriorized projection of something secretly subjective and at the same time ego-alien, to which the ego abandons itself as to a mirage. The Wagnerian leitmotiv remains rooted in these origins. It determines the absence of genuinely constructed motifs [sic] in favour of a kind of associative procedure. What psychology a century later was to refer to as ego-weakness is something on which Wagner’s music is already predicated” (Adorno, In Search of Wagner, 31).
dimension that would indicate the composer’s consciousness of a struggle between the desire for immediate self-expression and the need to acknowledge sociohistorically imposed musical laws.\(^\text{63}\) This conflict, which he \textit{did} hear in the musical structure of Schoenberg’s works, was the true stamp of the authentic musical work which expressed the modernist crisis of the individual. Though Adorno hints that Schreker was, at bottom, conscious of the unattainability of his utopia,\(^\text{64}\) any note of negativity is drowned out by the wash of Schrekerian sound. “The essence of modern art is that utopia enters into the power of negation, into the prohibition on its own name,” Adorno claims. “All this only brushed [Schreker] fleetingly.”\(^\text{65}\) Schreker’s operas seemingly lack that internal tension between expression and form (in this context the notion of form refers not to any specific musical form such as ternary, sonata, etc., but to the “formed” character of the artistic product), through which authentic modern artworks mirror the crisis of subjectivity of the oppressed and suffering individual.

Yet it must be noted that Adorno acknowledges a critical aspect in the music, which (seemingly accidentally) arises out of that same unsublimated character for which it is condemned:

> Because [Schreker’s music] springs from a compulsion which is more potent than shame and testifies to the truth of things that culture proscribes, it gives expression to doubts about the value of culture as such. Schreker consciously deserts to the realm which culture has distanced itself from and consigned to the vulgar. The fact that culture has to reject this reminds us of the limitations of its power and, ultimately, of its own failure: unable to effect a reconciliation between the drives and itself, it holds them down by force. . . . Schreker, a minstrel in a world without minstrels, refuses to join in the repression of the drives.\(^\text{66}\)

It would be going too far to say that Adorno allows here, after all, for an element of authentic social criticism in Schreker. The defiance of culture is seen more as a by-product of the composer’s adolescent sensibility—what Adorno calls “incorrigible immaturity”\(^\text{67}\)—than as a conscious statement regarding societal repression of the “proscribed” unconscious drives of the individual. Still, Adorno finds it worthwhile to dwell on this moment, to acknowledge that the “possibility of transcending culture” is “something from which great art is increasingly alienated.”\(^\text{68}\) And this possibility that “flashes” from Schreker is

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\(^{63}\) Adorno does make use of the term “dialectically” in criticizing Schreker’s compositional technique; see “Schreker,” 139.

\(^{64}\) See ibid., 138: “The consciousness of unattainability, . . . of the power of prohibitions, encumbers Schreker. . . .”

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 143.

\(^{66}\) Ibid.

\(^{67}\) Ibid., 142.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 144.
“something splendid.” Here a critical fissure opens and another possibility emerges: that of a critical reinterpretation of Schreker.

Sound That Comes from Nowhere

Adorno’s critical categories of the phantasmagorical and the unsublimated may be traced throughout Schreker’s oeuvre, and they afford possibilities for looking beyond Adorno’s interpretation, as will be demonstrated below with regard to the composer’s first major operatic success, *Der ferne Klang* (1912). It has perhaps already become obvious that, in the case of Schreker, the critical categories of the phantasmagorical and the unsublimated intersect in a fascinating way. They merge in their aspects of immediacy and fantasy, and in their rejection, whether through illusion or denial, of the demands of culture. And they do so in the realm of sound.

Yet, in contrast to Adorno, one can argue that Schreker’s operas, in a way different from Schoenberg’s works, may be read as case studies of subjectivity in crisis, in terms of both text and music. The following discussion undertakes a dialectical critique of the critique, as it were, reading both through Adorno and against him, to arrive at an interpretation that recognizes a critical dimension in the dramatic import of Schreker’s works. The plots of these operas center on the struggles for selfhood of marginalized subjects, pitting the desires of the individual against the banal and repressive norms of society. Musically, the emancipated tonal idiom of these works, characterized in large part by extremes of chromaticism and by untraditional or nebulous harmonic and tonal functioning, conveys a language in crisis, embodying the historical instant of the atonal rupture. Schreker’s operas might thus be heard as presenting images of a musical moment of crisis, reflective of the crisis of subjective identity manifest in their plots.

A discussion of *Der ferne Klang* demonstrates how some of these musical and narrative issues may be articulated. More so than in any of Schreker’s other operas, the realm of sound here becomes an explicit dramatic and narratological as well as an implicit compositional category, and therefore the concepts of the phantasmagorical and the unsublimated come to the fore on several levels. Fritz, the protagonist of the opera, is a young composer caught up in the pursuit of a haunting “distant sound,” which seems to represent to him a vision of his musical identity. In the search for the sound, he abandons his love, Grete, who subsequently falls into a life of moral decline. Desperate at finding that her father has offered her in marriage to the landlord in payment of a gambling debt, she runs away from home in search of Fritz, but fails to find him; lost in the forest, alone and afraid, she is lured by a procuress into a brothel, where her beauty makes her the star attraction. When Fritz, drawn by

69. Ibid.
the sudden return of his mysterious sound, finds her there, he is aghast at what she has become, and rejects her once again, continuing the search for his ideal. But the ultimate fruitlessness of Fritz’s quest for the distant sound becomes apparent years later when his opera, “Die Harfe,” fails at its premiere. Fritz’s belated rediscovery of the elusive sound comes only when he is reunited with Grete at the moment of his death. Though the plot seems to revel in the fin-de-siècle decadence for which Schreker was chastised by more than one critic, I read it as a rather stark reflection on a frightening modern crisis: a musical portrait by a composer of a composer who utterly fails to construct a musical identity. My interpretation resonates with that of Ulrike Kienzle, who comments on the “ambivalent and equivocal” nature of the dramatic message of the opera, which starts out as “a search for self-fulfillment. . . . The conclusion confronts the recipients with the collapse of the utopia of a reconciliation of art and life, before the backdrop of the inscrutability of the modern world.”

The failure of Fritz’s art is an index of the artist’s alienation from society. The distant Klang, a fantasy that the artist fails to transform into a form acceptable to society through his art, seems to typify the failure of sublimation. Yet, as in many of Schreker’s other operas, this plot, which he penned himself, betrays not so much an escape into fantasy as a painful self-consciousness of potently modern issues.

The Klang is not merely a dramatic concept, an idea; it is also an actual, physical sound that appears in the opera. Further, it is not a precise, stable entity, but reveals itself in its various appearances as changeable, though with a few recognizable elements. A closer look at the harmonic features of this sought-after Klang highlights the issues more sharply from a specifically musical point of view. The Klang-as-chord first appears in act 1, as Fritz describes to Grete the distant sound that calls him away from her (R9–13). Here the Klang is represented by a nebulous arpeggiated chord, shimmering in string harmonics, harp, and celesta (see Ex. 3). It is built of a minor third, a perfect fifth, a major seventh and a major ninth over an E bass (E–G–B–D♯–F♯), which could arguably be conceived as its root. The minor eleventh (A) is added a couple of beats later. This chord may be viewed as a single unitary entity, or as a compound one: an E-minor triad superimposed with its dominant (seventh). Its structure of two triads, one major and one minor, is similar to the sonority at the opening of the Overture to Die Gezeichneten, as described above, where the triads are separated by a major third rather than a perfect fifth, and where they are, to be precise, closely juxtaposed rather than directly


71. Fritz’s vocal line outlines the dominant harmony (F♯–B) above the chord in the orchestra, and in the next few measures his melody continues in a clear B-major profile.
Example 3  Schreker, *Der ferne Klang*, act 1 scene 1 (R11), Fritz’s *Klangvision* (Vienna: Universal Edition A. G., copyright © 1911; used by permission)
superimposed in a putative single chord—Klang. As such, the Klang may be analyzed as a chord with a single or a double root; certainly it has the sound of tonic and dominant functions simultaneously. Neuwirth describes the chord as a “bold dominant-tonic combination.”72 Another possible analytical interpretation views the harmony as a central augmented chord, with minor thirds added above and below.73 This analysis is more consistent with later reappearances of the Klang, particularly its recurrence in the opera’s final scene as an arpeggiated (B♭–D–F♯–A) chord in the celesta (see Ex. 4). Whatever the interpretation, the chord is problematic and its harmonic function is uncertain.

Hailey explains some of the complexities of the Schrekerian concept of Klang:

Klang is one of those words so rich in connotation that there is no single English equivalent. “Sound,” “noise,” “note,” “tone,” “colour,” “timbre,” “ring(ing),” and “peal(ing)” are each part of its meaning and there is seldom an instance where only one of these meanings is implied. In Schreker’s music the term usually refers to a combination of orchestration (subtle doublings and instrumental effects) and harmonic ambiguity (sonorities with two functional roots, added non-harmonic tones, indefinite bass).74 Fritz’s Klangvision (Ex. 3) corresponds to these details in several ways. Its unique orchestration is as characteristic a feature as is its ambiguous harmonic composition of two superimposed triads. It is likely just such a chord that Adorno refers to when discussing sensuous aspects of Schreker’s harmonic style (even though he is here describing all major triads, rather than major and minor): “Frequently groups of dominant-related major keys are stacked one above the other, intensified to a kind of ‘super-major.’ Their aim is to re-establish something of the glow that has long since faded from the simple major triad. . . . Schreker cultivated [this device] as far as it would go and indeed he intensified all the possibilities of Impressionist luminosity with heedless extravagance.”75

The Klang’s harmonic and timbral character pinpoint it as “the Schrekerian phantasmagoria par excellence,”76 a status Adorno ascribes to the opening chord of Die Gezeichneten, which it closely resembles. In its functional separation from the surrounding harmonies (which often shift by common tones between chromatically altered chords, sometimes linked by

72. See Neuwirth, Die Harmonik, chap. 4, “Nicht funktional bestimmbare Partien,” 110. Neuwirth also points out here the similarity of the Klang to a sonority employed by Schreker in his earlier opera Flammen (1902).
73. Forte class [01348] (see Allen Forte, Structure of Atonal Music [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973]). Thanks are due to Richard Kurth and John Roeder for making this suggestion during a reading of a previous version of this paper at the University of British Columbia School of Music.
74. Hailey, Franz Schreker, 49–50.
76. Ibid., 140.
Example 4  Schreker, *Der ferne Klang*, act 3, scene 11 (1 m. before R75), Fritz’s hallucination (Vienna: Universal Edition A. G., copyright © 1911; used by permission)

II. Szene. (Fritz allein an seinem Tisch, wie zu Anfang.)

![Sheet music image]
Example 4 continued

FRITZ

Harfe.

Cel.

Klav.
Example 4 continued

FRITZ

Harfe.

Cel.

Klav.

(lauschend.)

Mir ist so seltsam zu Mut!
chromatically-inflected thirds, but not functionally related to each other), it “stands outside the demands” of compositional laws, unsublimated, as Adorno says.\(^77\) Despite slight harmonic differences in the Klang when it recurs later in the opera, it is still immediately identifiable because of consistencies of interval class, articulation, and timbre, most noticeable in the prominent role of the harp and celesta arpeggios. “Sonority of this kind is the goal of [Schreker’s] music,” claims Adorno. “He remains indifferent to the disciplines of construction.”\(^78\) Since there is no convincing explanation of the sound in functional harmonic terms, Adorno’s suggestion (and, notably, that of other analysts approaching the score) that the purpose of a chord such as the Klang is purely sonorous and sensuous, falling altogether outside the arena of harmonic function, seems unexceptionable. Kienzle describes the Klang, “which is not motivically governed and for whose duration the process of harmonic development stands still,” as “a subversive moment: The logic of phrase construction, the advance of musical discourse within cadential units appears to be negated. The Klang stands isolated, it remains without consequences, it yields no further developments.”\(^79\) In terms of the operatic plot, this description is also perfectly plausible, considering the concept of the distant Klang that Fritz is seeking. His enraptured description of it—“as when the wind strokes over harps with a ghostly hand, far in the distance” (wie wenn der Wind mit Geisterhand über Harfen streicht, weit, weit)—suggests otherworldliness (in fact, it strongly recalls Adorno’s above-cited description of the Wagnerian Venusberg), as does the orchestration itself (see above, p. 652 and note 45).

However, Adorno’s condemnation of Schreker’s purely sonorous pleasure-seeking misses the conflict that arises through the dramatic context. While the sought-after sound is presented as otherworldly and, in its vague harmonic and functional definition, somehow ungraspable, Fritz declares his determination to find it. The sound is followed by a motive in which he continues to describe his quest (Ex. 5), a clear C\(^\#\)-minor motive with a dotted rhythmic profile whose naively Romantic, even Wunderhorn-like tone, evokes the Wanderer setting forth into the world. There is no suggestion, though, as to where he might go. Meanwhile, the text conveys a telling contradiction between dreams of otherworldly transcendence and worldly success: “when I hold that sound I shall be rich and free, an artist of God’s grace . . . then I will return, a famous man . . .” (“und halt’ ich den Klang, bin ich reich und frei, ein Künstler von Gottes Gnaden. . . . dann kehr’ ich zurück: Ein berühmter Mann”). Divine inspiration’s goal is reduced to one of bourgeois commercial

\(^{77}\) See above, p. 659 and note 62.


\(^{79}\) “Im Klang, der nicht motivisch gebunden ist und für dessen Dauer der Prozeß der harmonischen Entwicklung still steht, manifestiert sich . . . ein subversives Moment: Die Logik der Tonsatzkonstruktion, das Fortschreiten des musikalischen Diskurses innerhalb kadenzieller Einheiten erscheint negiert. Der Klang steht isoliert, er bleibt folgenlos, er zeitigt keine weiteren Entwicklungen” (Kienzle, Das Trauma hinter dem Traum, 130).
achievement. From the moment it sounds, the musical phantasmagoria rapidly dissolves into a gesture that is at once touching in its naïveté and striking in its banality—mocking, even—a contrast highlighting the gulf between the marvelous and the mundane, the transcendent and the everyday. As an unsublimated, unconscious projection, the Klangvision suggests its own negation; it conveys insecurity and fragility as much as the “incorrigible immaturity” of which Adorno accused the composer.

The apparent lack of significant harmonic progression in the Klangvision passage—typical of Schreker’s style, as Franklin notes—80—is an important aspect of Schreker’s concept of sound that Adorno criticized as phantasmagoric, denning “both cause and effect.”81 Yet Bekker, who made a closer study of the music than any other contemporary critic, claimed to find beneath the surface a linear foundation to Schreker’s harmonic language that was missed by critics listening for more conventional cadential periodicity. “Schreker is in the first instance a melodist,” he claimed. “His harmony is the result of the interweaving of melodic lines.”82 And Schreker’s melody itself “does not follow descriptive gestures, it does not derive from the text: it springs from the emotional situation and gives it such a compellingly satisfying lyric countenance that only an ear longing for conventional norms can miss hearing it.”83 As such, the melodic-harmonic complex is dramatically authentic at each moment. Thus, what sounds at first like causelessly shifting blocks of sound is in fact a deliberate flexibility of formulation, which Adorno recognized as having an unexpected potential critical component—by default. “To [this] extent Schreker may be seen, remarkably enough, to participate in the critique of the traditional

81. See above, p. 655 and note 47.
82. “Seine Harmonik ist erst das Ergebnis sich verflechtender melodischer Linien” (Bekker, Franz Schreker, 50).
83. “Sie läuft nicht der darstellerischen Gebäude nach, sie nährt sich nicht am Wort: sie entspringt der Gefühlsituation und gibt dieser in so anschmiegsamer, zwingend überzeugender Fassung lyrische Gestalt, daß nur ein nach konventionellen Normen verlangendes Ohr dann vorbeihören kann” (ibid., 45).
conception of melodic line,” he says. “If there is anything at all topical about Schreker, then it lies in such elements as this.”

So there is a possibility for an alternate view of the lack of clear melodic and harmonic definition typical of Schreker’s style, a possibility that Franklin seizes. He characterizes Schreker’s language as both interrupted and fragmentary. As Franklin realizes, “the fact that Schreker never finally or systematically renounced the full affective vocabulary of [tonality] is what gives his often highly expressionistic style so radically different a character from Schoenberg’s.”

Franklin notes that closer analysis reveals fragmentation of the material, unexpected interruption of progressions, gestures half-made and withdrawn, even the use of small ostinato figures, which, despite the vast difference in overall sound, seem to suggest that, in one respect at least, Schreker’s compositional technique is closer to Schoenberg’s than Adorno would care to admit. In fact, these aspects of Schreker’s style offer the resistance to interpretation that is a mark of authenticity in Adorno’s theory of the radical modern musical work.

This same difficulty in analyzing the nature of the Klangvision raises an interesting issue from another point of view: that of narrative voice. Of course, the sound literally emanates from the orchestra pit, but, within the context of the opera’s narrative, where precisely is it coming from? There is a hint that it may be audible to both Fritz and Grete on stage, a circumstance suggestive of Carolyn Abbate’s category of the noumenal, which intrudes from “beyond” into the phenomenal world, transgressing traditional narrative boundaries.

It is possible to suggest that at its first instance the sound merely accompanies Fritz’s verbal description of it and is not a phenomenal sound event in the stage world, but this idea is called into question by the return of the Klang near the close of the opera, when Fritz exclaims, “Do you hear the sound?” (“Hörst du den Ton?”; emphasis mine). The sound is thus an orchestral entity that rends the diegetic fabric of the narrative and intrudes upon the phenomenal world of the stage. Schreker does employ other intradiegetic music in the opera, most notably through various onstage ensembles in act 2, but the Klang is clearly separate from those musics as well. Although it is first heard at the moment of Fritz’s description of it, it is difficult to conceive of it as emanating from his consciousness, in that he describes it as something elusive he must search for, rather than something he knows. It is, above all, reminiscent of Schrecker’s description of his own inspiration: “the mysteriously inward struggles for musical expression.”

In citing this statement, Franklin suggests that “Schreker’s ‘mysteriously inward’ is in fact to be interpreted in a Freudian light.” Though couched within the context of Franklin’s defense of Schreker’s

authentically “expressionist” style, the “Freudian” assertion somehow ends up replicating Adorno’s accusation that the music is unsublimated. What else is the “mysteriously inward” but the radically interior unconscious? If, as Adorno elsewhere implies, the psychological dimension of Schoenberg’s fragmentary Expressionist style takes on a “case-study disposition” through its quality of objectivity, then perhaps Schreker’s own expressionistic style aims to represent the irrational flow of unconscious subjectivity, manifest in sound. The unconscious dimension self-replicates in the description of Schreker’s composition and Fritz’s fantasy-sound. Fritz is not Schreker—but the sound is a symptom for them both.

For Fritz, then, the *Klang*, ringing from an indeterminate location, is an element in his unconscious, which he vaguely senses and struggles to bring forward to consciousness. But moments before the end of the opera, during a scene in which he seems to be dreaming or hallucinating, hovering in a state of semiconsciousness, the sound source of the representative *Klang* is physically relocated from the orchestra to a celesta and piano (and later harp) behind the stage, further complicating the issue of the narrative locus of the sound (act 3, scene 11; see Ex. 4). It is characteristic of Schreker’s orchestration techniques, as described above, that the sound itself is composed of carefully blended instrumental timbres—the composer’s elaborate score directions specify that only a very good piano should be used—which add to the *Klang*’s phantasmagorical quality. The dimension of sound-as-symptom is nowhere clearer than here, where it is projected as a manifestation of delirium. Curiously within this hallucinatory context, the elusive sound suddenly seems more concrete through its isolation, in that it is specifically and uniquely located. It is more present, and it defines itself as separate from a mere accompanying role as part of the orchestral mass. Yet at the same time it remains a liminal moment, hovering just beyond the boundaries of the stage world. Paradoxically, as it attains a more concrete specificity by so clearly becoming a separate and unique sound, its status as a dramatic entity becomes less stable. It exists in some other region, apart from both the orchestral background and the onstage world.

Adorno’s answer to the problem of the location of the sound—and surely he had this particular *Klang* in mind during his general condemnation of Schreker’s concept of sound—places the entire construct within the category of the phantasmagoric:

What is conjured up is the idea of something which resounds but comes, as it were, from nowhere and returns to the same place. It is suddenly there, as if strings had been plucked. Like an auditory Fata Morgana it hangs in the air, colourful, transparent and denatured. It proves too elusive to grasp and then disappears. In the shape of a phantasmagoria it aims to snatch music from time and conjure it up in space.\textsuperscript{90}


\textsuperscript{90} Adorno, “Schreker,” 134.
But when we recall Paul Bekker’s assertion of the inextricability of musical sound and text in Schreker’s dramatic conception, we remember that this sound is so much more than mere sound. Both Schreker’s and Fritz’s sounds function as symbols, pointing beyond themselves. And, like Freudian dream-symbols, the Klang is characteristically overdetermined. As it sounds and re-sounds at different moments in the opera, it changes, and its possible meaning shifts with its context, frustrating attempts at any definitive interpretation of its significance. This shifting quality suggests another compelling interpretation of the concept of the Klang and its musical-dramatic significance. If we accept, in terms of the plot, that the Klang represents the composer’s sought-after musical identity, then from a psychological point of view, its instability—of harmony, function, and locus—suggests a problematic identity that offers the subject no security. Schreker’s own painful consciousness of the issue of identity—evident in the way he situates the musical fantasy-object within a dramatic context that negates it—imbues the Klang with all the unconscious weight of a modern crisis of subjectivity.

This is not the limit of the Klang’s significance as subjectivity or symptom. While it manifests itself as a symptom of the artist (Fritz, and ultimately Schreker), sound becomes the symptom of Grete’s trauma as well. As Fritz departs on his idealistic search for the fantasy-sound, she becomes the center of the drama, perhaps its more proper protagonist, left behind and thrust into the harsh world of reality. In addition to Fritz’s Klang, Grete in fact hears her own music. It first occurs in act 1 as the music of the “forest magic” that overcomes her the night she runs away from home in search of Fritz; it recurs when she describes it, in act 2, as a song that she can still hear. Both sounds, distant Klang and Waldzauber, resonate throughout her failed attempts to seek for Fritz, then to adapt to a world far from ideal. In contrast to Fritz, whose sound-fantasy remains elusive, Grete is haunted by her sound-phantasm (phantasmagoria), in sleep and in waking dreams. His is distant; hers is all too present. Grete’s role in the opera does not merely reinforce the centrality of sound to the drama. It also adds to the radical overdetermination of the Klang, by suggesting the additional possibility that she herself is inseparable from its source.

The Problem of Schreker’s Drama: Text, Narrative, Sound

As suggested above, Adorno’s essay on Schreker tends to focus on the musical aspects of the operas to the exclusion of the textual dramatic elements. Indeed, he advises that, for those who do not know Schreker’s music, the best starting points from which to develop an acquaintance with his oeuvre are the Chamber Symphony and the Overture to Die Gezeichneten. Even if it seems

91. See Bekker, Franz Schreker, 23.
strange that Adorno would refer to purely instrumental pieces as most characteristic of the style of a composer known almost exclusively for his operas, it does make the interpretive bias unusually clear. Sidestepping issues of textual interpretation (not to mention those of the singing voices), Adorno makes relatively little comment on the overall dramatic significance of the works. Other critics, including Franklin, Carl Dahlhaus, and, of course, Bekker, develop their views of the authenticity of Schreker’s modernism through examinations of both text and music, recognizing that, particularly where this composer is concerned, the two are inextricable. “It is a special merit in Schreker,” stated Bekker, “and the mark of his thoroughly music-dramatic gift—that one cannot speak of his scenes without meaning his music, nor speak of his music without thinking of the scene.”92 From this viewpoint, Bekker saw Schreker as a truly modernist opera composer, indeed, the only one of his generation. One wonders whether Schreker’s art might be viewed more positively, even through Adornian eyes, if the significance of the operas were judged according to both narrative and musical elements, functioning together to create the drama.

This is not to say that Adorno ignores Schreker’s texts completely. In commenting on how easy critics found it to “snipe at the tastelessness of [Schreker’s] texts,” he proceeds to do just that. He isolates the following stage direction from act 1, scene 7, of Der ferne Klang as an example of the kind of passage to which the music—presumably equally tasteless—was “only too well suited” (not least because of its invocation of a “magical” merging of nature and music):

She raises her arms, as if to leap into the lake. At this moment the moon rises and transfigures the landscape. The lake glitters in its light, glow-worms dance, a nightingale sings and deer go to the lake to drink. Sultry breezes envelop the girl. The magic of the forest [Waldzauber] by night. Nature breathes love and promise. Grete stands silently, lost in wonder at the view.93

The Waldzauber occurs as Grete, having run away in search of Fritz, finds herself lost in the forest at night. In despair, she contemplates suicide in a nearby lake. Her fear at the cold darkness of the water, accompanied by rippling arpeggiated figures in the harp, gives way to a suicidal fantasy in which she imagines being cradled to sleep by the waves, and awaking in paradise. However, when the moonrise transfigures the landscape, she finds her mood transformed as she contemplates the natural beauty around her (see Ex. 6).94

94. The dramatic scenario here brings to mind two other well-known operatic moments: the first is Agathe’s scene in act 2 of Der Freischütz, in which her anxiety over Max’s whereabouts gives way to a blissful reflection on the moonlit night outside her window; the second is Wozzeck’s gruesome drowning by moonlight. Thanks to Rose Subotnik for this observation.
Example 6  Schreker, *Der ferne Klang*, act 1, scene 7 (R78), *Waldauber* music (Vienna: Universal Edition A. G., copyright © 1911; used by permission)

Anmutige Bewegung.


I. Hälfte.

(sul D)

PPPP (sehr zart)

3 Pulte.

PPPP

3 Pulte.

PPPP

2 Pulte.

PPPP
Rocking motions of the syncopated tonic-dominant pedal in the cello suggest the watery cradle Grete imagines, and a modulatory shift upward from C sharp to E major accomplishes the transforming effect of the moonrise. The continually rippling harp arpeggios, as well as the barcarolle-like rhythm of the passage, evoke the motion of the water, while touches of the triangle and celesta provide the otherworldly atmosphere suggested both by Grete’s dream of paradise and by the “magical” transformation of the landscape by moonlight. As Grete, emotionally exhausted, lies down on the ground and falls asleep, “the forest”—according to the stage directions—“sings a lullaby” (“Der Wald singt ein Schlummerlied”). As in the phenomenon of phantasmagoria, nature and magic come together again in the realm of sound. However compelling the musical quality of these descriptive, gestural effects, they are so obviously mimetic that they do seem to bear out Adorno’s suggestion that Schreker’s music is “only too well suited” for the scenario described in the dubious stage directions.

Even Schreker’s apologists agree that there are moments when his libretti are somewhat undisciplined, marred by a tendency “to go over the top.” Der ferne Klang certainly has its excessive, melodramatic moments, which are open to this criticism. Yet, despite such flaws, the overall implications of the drama point beyond the level of literary detail, a fact to which Dahlhaus draws attention in his discussion of the dramaturgy of Schreker’s opera:

If Adorno thought it was enough to expose a stage direction of Der ferne Klang taken out of context as a “literary monstrosity” for Schreker to be dismissed as a librettist, a victim of the deadly quotation technique, he failed to realize that in opera it is not the verbal detail that counts, however dreadful it may be, but only the scenario: the configuration of affects that impel the characters in the action and of the situations in which they become entangled.

When the scenario is examined, it becomes clear that Schreker’s drama is extremely complex. Dahlhaus’s essay discusses the opera’s mix of naturalism with symbolism, its joining of traditional, modern, and fairy-tale elements. Yet I wish also to highlight the way the opera employs layers of dramatic space juxtaposed with multiple narrative levels, attempting an explicit blending of art and modern life that openly addresses modern artistic questions. In particular, an emphasis on the act of narration itself and on the repeated narration of events that have already occurred gives a case-study aspect to many portions of the opera—especially to those scenes of a confessional nature, wherein a character retells details of his or her personal past, like a psychoanalytic patient on the couch. Many of these aspects of the text show how the musico-dramatic

95. Franklin, “Schreker’s Decline,” 147.
97. As the “trauma” and “dream” of the title suggest, Kienzle’s Das Trauma hinter dem Traum deals at length with the influences of contemporary psychoanalytic theory on Schreker’s work, and the many references to psychoanalytic ideas in the opera; my focus here differs, however, in that I am concerned with the workings of narrative and acts of narration.
narrative of Schreker’s opera displays his acute consciousness of the state of crisis that his art was reaching during his time.

Within the frame of the opera’s story, the act of narrating takes on an importance that may seem strange in a dramatic context, in which literal enactment of events, rather than telling of them, is the normal mode. This feature of the opera is another element that is reminiscent of the Wagnerian music drama, wherein narration often dominates the action for long stretches of time. Techniques of both narrative and spatial layering are present virtually from the beginning of act 1. After an overture, the act opens upon a farewell scene between Fritz and Grete. Boisterous sounds of drinking and gambling from the pub next door warn them that they are about to be interrupted, so Fritz quickly departs. Soon, the intoxicated crowd from the pub noisily enters the house in a state of high excitement over the results of a game of skittles, which had been heard in progress from offstage during the previous scene. The game moves from background to foreground, as an actor steps forward dramatically to tell the events: Grete’s father has staked her hand in marriage in the game, and lost to the landlord. Grete is horrified and refuses at first to believe the story, whereupon it is told again, this time by the character of Dr. Vigelius. He narrates the progress of the game step by step, switching from past to present tense to describe each stage of play, as though reporting the game as it occurs. His renarration of the events is like a recurrence of the game itself, punctuated by the cheers of the crowd of “onlookers,” who have already seen the game in the pub but are more than happy to participate in its dramatic retelling. The structure of his tale involves threefold repetition (as in fairy tales) of the description of each throw of the dice—“Die Kugel rollt—es fallen die Kegel”—which becomes a refrain. The scenario of the game and the act of storytelling are in fact a foreshadowing of events to follow in act 2.

Dahlhaus refers to the game of skittles as an element of operatic naturalism that yet takes on a symbolic aspect when “seen as the allegory of a hopeless fate,” as in the novels of Zola.

Though Adorno did not address this scene of Der ferne Klang in detail, Dahlhaus’s comment is reminiscent of Adorno’s discussion of the Card Trio in Bizet’s Carmen, in which the gypsy girls’ “unproblematic refrain” ironically becomes an expression of the irrevocable nature of fate and death: “the immanence of Fate . . . becomes an immanence of form.” An “absence of transcendence and meaning” in the Card Trio, and in Carmen as a whole, is compared with the tone of Flaubert’s novel Madame Bovary. With explicit reference to Nietzsche, Adorno thus reads Bizet’s opera—and the musical banality of the Card Trio in particular—as a critical

100. Adorno, “Fantasia sopra Carmen,” in Quasi una Fantasia, 61.
101. Ibid.
denial of the nineteenth-century (specifically Wagnerian) ideal of redemption and transcendence through music. Schreker’s drama participates in this critical denial in a similar way, symbolically in this scene, but more explicitly in others. (What is Fritz’s Klangvision but a dream of musical transcendence, a promise that he seeks but manifestly does not find?) This idea of transcendence and its denial recurs later in the opera.

It is the second act of Der ferne Klang that has received the most comment for its textual and musical complexity, as its various narrative levels and juxtaposed orchestral and onstage musics give rise to a counterpoint that some critics found an impressive demonstration of technical skill, and others dismissed as merely confusing and disorganized. Act 2 is dominated by one scene of narration after another, the different acts of storytelling embedded at different levels. It takes place ten years after the end of the previous act, in La Casa di Maschere, a dance establishment that is “a rendezvous for the gallant world of Venice on an island in the gulf.” Grete, now called “Greta,” is its main attraction, the favorite of all the male guests.

At once the center of attention when she enters, Greta is in low spirits. She tells her story to the crowd around her, beginning with the night when she fell asleep in the woods, musing that her life since then has been like “a wild dream” (“Seit vielen Jahren dünkt mich—ich träum’ einen wilden Traum”), as though she never truly awoke from her slumber. She recalls not only the night when she ran away from home in search of Fritz and became lost in the forest but also the enchanting music of that scene, the “trees rustling a wonderful song” (“die Bäume rauschten ein wundersam Lied”). Then she was asleep and dreaming; now she describes that music as a dream within a dream. As she recounts the trauma of past events, her Waldzauber music recurs like a sound-symptom, part of the unconscious realm of dreams (“Fernher doch manchmal, ein Traum im Traum, tönt es hertiber von Waldeswipfeln”). Even after so many years, she is haunted by it. Now she feels herself trapped within the round of her loose life, laughing and dancing with the others while holding back her true feelings. The social world of the Casa and the inner world of the dream remain in conflict, a conflict that materializes in the clashes between the music of Grete’s dream of forest enchantment and the noisy, banal dance music of the scene’s onstage gypsy band.

Attempting to lighten the atmosphere, Greta proposes a game, offering herself as a prize to the gallant who tells the best story. The Count, a character who is particularly enamoured of Greta, is the first contestant. After a formal exhortation to everyone to listen, he sings a ballad in the key of E-flat minor. Schreker entitled it “Die glühende Krone. Eine Ballade,” in the score, as though to make a point of isolating it as an embedded set piece derived from

some other tradition. The narrative resonates in several ways with that of the opera in which it is embedded. The subject of the tale is a king with a cursed crown that burns his forehead whenever he tries to love another. After years of suffering alone for the sake of his duty to his throne, the king feels a great love in his heart. He seizes the cruelly glowing crown and flings it into the sea. From the waves come the muffled strains of music (tellingly, polytriadic chords and arpeggios in harp and celesta); a pale woman “with a mad look” rises, reaches for him, and pulls him under with her. This woman, who appears on the ocean surface like the Fata Morgana invoked by Adorno, is both the visual and musical manifestation of phantasmagoria. The ballad, in traditional form, has a refrain structure featuring regularly repeating musical and textual refrains. Furthermore, its story has some notable parallels with the opera’s narrative: Fritz’s duty to his artistic ambition has drawn him away from love; his distant sound, like the music from the waves, brings him eventual ruin rather than success. According to Bekker, the ballad allegorically encapsulates the entire drama.103 Kienzle offers a lengthy and detailed analysis of the numerous connections between the song and the opera as a whole, explaining the parallels between the artist Fritz and the character of the king, and detailing the fateful workings of the catastrophic tale that presage the tragic outcome of Der ferne Klang.104 “Der glühende Krone” thus fits the paradigm of the nineteenth-century reflexive narrative ballad, which was a prominent feature of much nineteenth-century German opera. Its mirroring on a small scale the overall operatic plot is characteristic, as is its supernatural subject matter. Even the Count’s opening exhortation, “So hört,” fits the nineteenth-century convention of a reflexive narrative ballad embedded within an opera.105

But how does it fit into Schreker’s twentieth-century opera? It is so consciously employed in its archaic form within its modern setting that it seems to be a deliberate parody of the nineteenth-century tradition. Kienzle suggests that Schreker had in mind the tremendous popularity of the ballad in the nineteenth century, “the most beloved and most national poetic art of the German people,” and classifies this particular tale among “the type of the ‘nordic ballad’ with its predilection for ghost stories and thrillers with morbid, ominous scenarios.”106 Perhaps most obviously, the ballad has multiple Wagnerian resonances. The reflexively significant ballad featuring a doomed man and a

104. Kienzle makes connections not only between Fritz and the king, but between Greta and the “pale woman” of the “Der glühende Krone.” See Kienzle, *Das Trauma hinter dem Traum*, “Ballade und Couplet: Symbolische Spiegelungen der Bühnenhandlung,” 374–90.
connection with the sea are immediately reminiscent of the ballad central to Der fliegende Holländer. And the contest itself parallels the song contests central to both Wagner’s Tannhäuser and Die Meistersinger, except that Schreker’s contest takes place within the obscene realm of the Venusberg/Casa di Maschere, and the maiden who is the object of the contest is not quite a chaste Elizabeth nor a pure Eva (though perhaps she is more like a Venus). This short song embedded within Der ferne Klang suddenly appears remarkably problematic and laden with significance when read from a narrative point of view. While it is manifestly a nineteenth-century gesture, it is also clearly a uniquely modern one in the very self-conscious nature of its employment, in its montagelike relationship with the music that surrounds it, and in the complex, contradictory web of relations it sets up between itself and the rest of the opera.

A Chevalier steps up to challenge the Count’s story with another tale, one deliberately contrasted with the sad tone of the preceding ballad. “Das Blumenmädchen von Sorrent” is a racy story of a not-so-innocent flower maiden who gives her favors to men who buy her blooms. This music-hall song too has a refrain structure, the recurring chorus supplied by the high-spirited onstage audience members. It also has an element of reflexivity, in that the behavior of the flower maiden has parallels with that of the dancing girls in the Casa di Maschere, and particularly with Greta, who has offered herself as a prize to the winner of the contest of which the song is a part. Indeed, the name of “La Casa di Maschere” makes an appearance in the last line of the song. Further, the motive of the seductive flower maiden is another Wagnerian reminiscence, linking act 2 of Der ferne Klang this time with the magic garden realm in act 2 of Parsifal.

Kienzle details the way “Das Blumenmädchen von Sorrent” reflects Greta’s situation, as “Der glühende Krone” reflected that of Fritz; indeed, both contest pieces not only “mirror the individual fate of the protagonists in ironic refraction” but “cast back like a convex mirror the quintessence of the [whole] work in reduced dimensions.” On another level, the whole story-telling contest is a narrative echo of the skittles game of act 1. As described above, that game took place offstage, partially heard as fragmentary interruptions from another space. It came into focus only in the form of Doctor Vigélius’s narrative of it. Here, the act of narration itself becomes the game. Once again, Grete becomes a commodity, a prize to be played for and won; but this time she sets herself up as the object of exchange in a neurotic reenactment of the scene of her parental betrayal. The dramatic gesture as a whole is doubly reflexive: the narrated game becomes a game of narration; the prize who once resisted her fate in the name of love offers herself in a mockery of love.

107. “Beide Stücke spiegeln das individuelle Schicksal der Protagonisten in ironischer Brechung . . . auch sie werfen wie ein Konvexspiegel die Quintessenz der Werke in verkleinerten Dimensionen zurück” (ibid.).
Musical juxtapositions and narrative reflections and reversals continue to accumulate as the act progresses. Members of the crowd have been excitedly watching the approach of a ship to the island in the midst of a storm. When it finally lands, Fritz emerges. The onlookers exclaim over his pale appearance, and compare him to the pale king of the Count’s ballad, now emerging from the sea. Fritz himself enters the Casa, and after a moment spies Grete. It takes her a while to recognize him, but once she does, she eagerly demands that he tell her where he has been for so many years, and what has happened to him. Fritz proceeds to narrate to her the fruitlessness of his quest for the “distant sound,” and of his failure to find her upon his eventual return to their hometown. While searching for her, the sudden return of the Klangvision has drawn him into the dance establishment: “I hear it again, the blessed sound! I hear it again, the sound of the harps” (“ich höre ihn wieder, den seligen Klang! ich höre ihn wieder, den Klang der Harfen”). Overjoyed at having unexpectedly found her again, he does not make the connection between his rediscovery of her and the return of the Klang. Somehow Fritz is unaware of the nature of the situation he has entered, and does not realize that his Grete has become “Greta.” Nor does he know that his arrival has interrupted a storytelling contest to win Greta’s favors. Yet the act of telling the audience the tale of his futile search over the past several years ironically places him in the arena of competition for Greta through his act of narration. When he discovers the prize he has unwittingly won, and who she has become, he recoils from her in disgust. “Can he really be so naive?” questions one of the dancing girls in disbelief. Indeed, he can. Clinging to his idealism, he leaves the Casa di Maschere, abandoning Grete to her fate once more, as he did in act 1. Dahlhaus recognizes this instance as one that exemplifies a classic dialectical dimension at work in Schreker’s drama, for Fritz does not grasp the connection between Greta’s presence and that of the Klang that drew him to the Casa in the first place. “The conflict in which Fritz finds himself involved in the second act is . . . borrowed from the repertoire of traditional dramaturgy,” Dahlhaus explains. “Fritz turns his back on Grete because she has become what he has—unintentionally—made her.”108 As Fritz leaves, Greta commands the gypsy band to play, filling the “painful silence” of the stage directions with worldly dance music, the greatest possible contrast to distant Klang and Waldzauber. Her attempt to master the situation takes the form of sound. The full orchestra, accented with triangle, tambourine, castanets, and xylophone, erupts into a wild Csárdás, “alla Zingarese,” and a high-spirited dance begins. A brawl breaks out, but the music only plays on, ever louder. Amid cries from the chorus the scene closes clangorously.

108. Dahlhaus, “Schreker and Modernism,” 197. This interpretation is one-sided; it may be accurate for Fritz, but it suggests a total lack of agency for Grete.
The noisy conclusion of act 2 is one of many moments in the opera that pit one type of sound against another. Different sounds and musics are layered throughout, and often interrupt and conflict with each other. Schreker’s musico-dramatic structure repeatedly embeds not only reflexive narrative layers, but also musical ones whose interaction takes on symbolic significance for the drama as a whole. Some of Schreker’s sounds are worldly—music, like that in the Casa di Maschere, or everyday noises; some of them are otherworldly phantasmagoria. In the act 1 Klangvision passage described earlier (see Ex. 3), Fritz’s description to Grete of the sound fantasy that calls him away from her is repeated verbatim a few moments later (R20), as Grete joins him in the evocation of the sound, a repetition that gives a sort of refrain structure to this portion of the scene. This moment presents an interpretive problem, giving rise again to speculation on the nature of the Klang. Is Grete merely repeating what she heard Fritz sing earlier, or is she joining him in describing a phenomenon that she too can hear?\footnote{As well, the act of the two characters singing in unison may be variously interpreted. At first it may seem to indicate total understanding and sympathetic communion between them, thus participating in a nineteenth-century convention for operatic duets. Perhaps Grete is momentarily swept away by her lover’s idealism. But in light of her previous resistance to Fritz’s quest, it may also be read more pessimistically (from a feminist viewpoint) as Grete’s capitulation to bourgeois convention, in accepting the superiority of male ambition to her own feminine needs and desires.}

It seems that they both have an ear for distant, otherworldly music. But Fritz and Grete’s joint reverie is interrupted by other sounds, noises from the neighboring tavern, where Grete’s father is drinking and gambling with their landlord. Fritz departs, drawn by the distant sound, driven away by the nearer one.

Another striking sound juxtaposition occurs in act 3, which takes place first outside a theater in a large city, and then in Fritz’s composition studio. Dr. Vigelius and the actor from act 1 are drinking in a sidewalk café before the theater. They recall the long-ago skittles game at the pub, and the sad fate of the poor gambler’s daughter, a rehearsal that suggests a sort of symmetry between acts 1 and 3. Shortly thereafter Grete herself enters, assisted by a policeman; she was attending the performance inside the theater and became unwell. Vigelius comes to her assistance and recognizes her.

Meanwhile, choristers and guests passing in and out between the café and the theater are discussing the progress of the performance inside. Its title is “Die Harfe”; it is actually Fritz’s opera, and bits of it can be heard from off-stage. Initially it goes well, and a great success is predicted as the second act ends—possibly tragically—with a loud E-flat-minor chord that penetrates the onstage noise. But during the third act the audience reaction turns sour. By its conclusion, the opera is denounced as a scandal and a failure. This is yet another explicitly reflexive element in Schreker’s opera, the most striking so far. In fact, in an earlier draft of the work, Schreker had considered titling his own opera “Die Harfe.”\footnote{See Franklin, “Schreker’s Decline,” 148.} Those strains from the embedded opera performance...
that drift through and mingle with the onstage music are familiar: clearly Fritz’s opera is actually Der ferne Klang itself. And yet, in its incarnation as an opera-within-an-opera, it fails badly during its third act—the same act of the larger opera in which it is embedded. The actor sneers at the very title of the work: “Is that a title? ‘The Harp!’ Ridiculous!” His words convey the sense of a sharp, ironic distance. The gesture as a whole is not subtle. Yet this makes it all the more striking that Schreker should not only boldly stage the general image of the failure of an opera-composer but could also imagine therein the failure of his own work, and set this fearful idea before his public. While it exhibits the critical negativity that characterizes the sublimated work of art, this gesture also emphasizes that the work is a commodity, and reveals it as a flawed product of labor by a fallible human subject, the artist alienated from the public.

Hearing from the café guests that “Die Harfe” has failed, and that its composer is gravely ill, Grete becomes agitated, insisting that she must go to him. She wishes to die at Fritz’s side. Vigelius, moved by remorse for his actions so many years ago, promises to take her to Fritz. As Grete is reminded of her repeated trauma of abandonment, the musical symptom recurs. After a few measures that recall Fritz’s Klang in celesta and harp arpeggios, we hear again Grete’s own distant sound—“Ach, die wilde Musik!” she exclaims—that has haunted her since that fateful night in the forest, and she sings again softly and dreamily (“ganz leise im Traum”) of the music of the Waldzauber. The meaning of distant sound is transformed, from that of desirable ideal to a motive of death, as Fritz’s musical dream of artistic fulfillment gives way to Grete’s musical dream of suicide. In its pessimism, its shift toward negativity, this moment has an almost Adornian echo of negation. Grete, distraught and ruined, now explicitly links distant sound with her own demise.

Meanwhile Fritz, considerably aged, pale, and suffering, reflects on his past folly: his search for what he was unable to find, which drove him to abandon Grete. A friend enters to discuss the previous day’s failure of “Die Harfe”; the producer wants a revision of the third act. Despite encouragement that the drama bears within itself the potential to be a great work, Fritz refuses to revise it, feeling his lack of strength. As Dahlhaus observes, Fritz knows it is too late to make changes, in his work or in his life:

His resigned “Doch nun ist’s freilich zu spät” (“But now it is all too late”) in the penultimate scene is unmistakably a motive from Ibsen: that the passing of time as such, and not what happens in the course of it, gives rise to a tragic situation which would not be totally explicable on the basis of the events alone is an idea that Schreker took over from the modernist, non-classical dramaturgy of the late nineteenth century.111

Fritz inquires about the woman he heard of, who became ill during the performance. Though told that she is merely a fallen woman, Fritz is sure she is Grete, and sends his friend to find her. He then falls into a strange reverie, a seemingly hallucinatory state (described above—see Ex. 4) in which he hears once more his Klangvision, ever more clearly. When Vigelius interrupts Fritz’s sound reverie, telling him the story of the woman who is waiting outside to see him, Fritz at first hardly listens, but continues to exclaim over the Klang still ringing in his ears. Finally, Grete herself enters.

The final scene, in which the lovers are reunited, is predictable in some sense. Though the two begin with declarations of devotion, Fritz’s attention soon turns back to the overwhelming presence of the Klang. Here the sound, the symptom of illness and delirium, is again linked with death. It is also linked, for the third time, with Fritz’s proximity to Grete. Desire is the intersection between his misconceived relationship to her and his unconscious fantasy of artistic inspiration. This time he does not turn away from either. Ecstatic, he declares his renewed intention to revise his opera, now that his inspiration has returned, but a moment later he dies. The dramatic reversal in the final moments of the opera is this: although it is Grete who longs for death—the ending is almost like a Liebestod—it is Fritz who dies, and just when he resolves to continue, having finally found the “distant sound.” Grete is the one left with the music of the Klang, her lover dead in her arms. A seemingly Wagnerian moment of transcendence in music and in death—recall the music that only Isolde can hear at the end of Tristan—is somehow thwarted by the exchange that cheats both characters of their sought-after goals. Music has the final word, so to speak, but not the music of the Klang. Schreker’s curtain falls to the same fortissimo E-flat-minor cadence that ended the second act of “Die Harfe” (act 3, scene 2), the E-flat minor of the ballad “Die glühende Krone” (act 2, scene 6) that foreshadowed Fritz’s tragic end. The solid tonic triad, for once an “unmixed” sonority, is, ironically, utterly inconclusive. There is no revision of Fritz’s failed third act and no closure to Schreker’s third and final act, which ends with a gesture of narrative embedding that throws it backward into the midst of the staging of its own failure. This ending has an almost Adornian pessimism about it: the sought-after utopia proves unattainable.

Rehearing Distant Sounds

This reading through the dramatic events of Der ferne Klang, highlighting discontinuous and juxtaposed narratives, musics, and symbols, is consistent with Dahlhaus’s interpretation of the dramaturgy of Schreker’s opera, wherein

112. On further resonances of the conclusion of Der ferne Klang with both Wagner’s Der fliegende Holländer and Tristan und Isolde, see ibid., 199–200.
the authentic mark of modernism resides in part in its divergent and at times contradictory “non-classical” dramatic tendencies. Beyond the general level of dramatic genre and structure, however, Schreker’s opera contains blatant gestures that point directly toward his struggle to grapple with the modernist crisis of his art. These moments exhibit a modernist self-awareness, but they are also the indices of a critical dialectic dimension arising from the conflicting interplay between text and musical structure. Most notably, Schreker went so far as to stage the failure of his own opera within the opera itself, and then to recapitulate musically that failure for his own work. It is hard to imagine how the significance of such a gesture could have been lost on a critic as perceptive as Adorno usually was. When I speculate on the reasons for this curious lapse, Adorno’s objections to the music again come to the fore. Perhaps in this case, despite his usual gift for penetrating observation, he was unable after all to see—or to hear—past the overwhelmingly sensual surface of Schreker’s music, the seemingly impressionistic features of which he was so harshly critical. As Hailey points out (in a commentary reminiscent of Franklin’s discussion, cited above, of the idealistic German critical establishment’s attitude toward pleasurable and popular musics): “Impressionism . . . was a movement little understood in Germany and it met with a good deal of critical resistance born partly of chauvinism, but more importantly, of aesthetic aversion. At the heart of this antipathy was a deep-seated distrust of the sensual, hedonistic roots of the style so at odds with Germany’s own more austere and cerebral musical traditions.”

Adorno claimed that his response to his first encounter with Schreker’s music at the age of fourteen was one of disappointment, but this claim is hedged by ambivalence. A note of self-contradiction echoes in his remark that Schreker’s sound “arouses nostalgia, like the nostalgia that attaches itself to the traces of smells which involuntarily recall happiness in childhood.” The key to this contradiction between a memory of happiness and the critical tone of the essay as a whole may lie in Adorno’s seemingly acerbic description of Schreker’s music as “music for puberty”:

In order to be properly in tune with Schreker’s music, it is probably necessary to have encountered it as an adolescent. . . . Schreker’s music . . . had its roots in an adolescent frame of mind and remained attuned to it with all the defiance of incorrigible immaturity. This is how a highly gifted fifteen year old spends hours improvising at the piano, pressing down chords with the right hand and arpeggios with the left.

Perhaps, as an adolescent, Adorno had also experienced (as did so many other audience members) a uniquely visceral response to the sensuality of the music. Certainly the negative tone that dominates throughout much of the essay is

113. Hailey, Franz Schreker, 41.
115. Ibid., 142.
modulated in the moment of nostalgic reflection when Adorno admits that “something survives” in Schreker’s music “of the radiance which only those years possess and which maturity irrevocably destroys.”116 That peculiarly physical dimension of sound, which Schreker’s effects depended upon, may have been in the end an element that Adorno could not get past, though he would not have been the only critic to be “move[d] . . . against [his] will” by the force of the Schrekerian sound.117

Yet Dahlhaus asserted that “the music of Der ferne Klang raises a protest, so to speak, against the dramaturgy of the bourgeois tragedy and its moral implications. It is the expression of an interior action which virtually contradicts the exterior one.”118 His statement suggests that a dialectic is indeed present in Schreker’s work, but shifted, as it were, from the locus of the music to the horizon where the music and drama connect and interact. My reading of the musico-dramatic structure proposes an alternative interpretation to Adorno’s, in an effort to critically reimagine and find new significance within the realm of the phantasmagorical and the unsublimated to which his criticism consigned it. More specifically, my rereading attempts to highlight certain narrative details of the text ignored by Adorno, perhaps because he found the text marred overall by the presence of dramatic clichés and maudlin gestures. Yet several of the critical textual features described above, through their dramatic interaction with the music, suggest a different understanding of the musical features Adorno criticized. Ultimately, a dialectical dimension is revealed within the musico-dramatic structure that Adorno found missing from the music itself. Circumventing the central Adornian critique by privileging—as Bekker’s analysis did—a different logic of composition that Adorno failed to understand, seems insufficient. The task is rather to confront the crux of Adorno’s criticism head-on: the focus on the Schrekerian sound. For, as Franklin makes clear, the entire reception history of Schreker’s work is conditioned by this problem of pleasurable sound which, together with its dramatic framework, pushes the opera toward that dubious realm that was censured for decadence by the “German critical establishment,” and further, censored for degeneracy by the Nazis. Yet, as this discussion has demonstrated, Schreker’s pleasurable sound-concept is dramatically motivated, and examining the dialectic between dramatic text and music reveals the sound’s critical dimension. In Der ferne Klang, sound itself becomes the locus of interaction between art in crisis and the modern world. It is foregrounded over and over again, in various forms, to point up that very disjunction between the artist’s individuality and the rational-technical world from which he is alienated, and which yet impinges on his autonomy and threatens his subjective identity.

116. Ibid., 143.
There are multiple instances in which a musical gesture that seems regressive or phantasmagorical on first hearing sounds much more authentically critical after the significance of its dramatic context is examined. One such example is the *Klang* itself, a seemingly beautiful, sensuous sound that, through its harmonic instability, as well as through the elusive—indeed ungraspable—quality of its very existence, betrays the insecurity of the dramatic concept of subjective identity that it is intended to convey. Yet, as the music I have discussed makes clear, there is more than one “distant sound” in the opera, and this is a crucial point. The many sounds that may be thus described seem to fall into two categories: the first, magical, otherworldly, and transcendent, is opposed to the second, the naturalistic, worldly, and intrusive. The latter type of sound frequently breaks through rudely and disrupts—or even shatters—the illusionary mood of the former. This effect is present from the opening scene of the opera, when we first hear the *Klang*. Recall the description of the scene from above: as Fritz and Grete sing together of the sound, and as it resonates in the orchestra and all around them, their enraptured moment is interrupted by “distant sounds” that filter in from the pub next door. Loud noises of drunken gambling provide a sharply contrasted worldly counterpoint to the mysterious, otherworldly *Klang*. Fritz departs hurriedly: he would rather chase the dream than face sordid reality; it is as though he senses that the former cannot exist in the presence of the latter. Years later, though he claims it is the sudden return of the “distant sound” that draws him into the Casa di Maschere, he is quickly driven out again by the worldly reality he finds in it, which fills him with disgust. The most prominent musical feature of act 2 is its juxtaposition and superimposition of different musics and musical realms, the boisterous worldly elements competing with each other and with the musics of Greta’s dream and Fritz’s fantasy; but at the act’s close the wild and noisy dance tune triumphs and dispels the dream. Again, in act 3, Fritz’s art is forced into competition with the tumult of the real world. Bits of sound from the ill-fated performance of his opera drift through the noise of the café crowd outside. It is the crowd’s unsympathetic critical murmur that wins the day, and the work of art that fails. In these scenes, Schreker is dramatizing an issue that had grown in importance throughout the nineteenth century and that preoccupied musical modernism well into the middle of the twentieth century and beyond: the question of musical/artistic autonomy. All the artist’s subjective insecurity comes to the fore as, in a pessimistic vein that resonates with Adorno’s own philosophy, the composer postulates the failure of art’s autonomy, its downfall in the face of the onslaught of the rational-technical world of modern administered society. Schreker’s *Klang* manifests the condition of Adorno’s letter in a bottle (*Flaschenpost*), the alienated gesture par excellence.119

Another, somewhat different gesture of worldly intrusion into the otherworldly moment occurs near the end of act 1, when Grete escapes from home.

through the forest, hoping to find Fritz (see Ex. 7). The passage is built on the “Wanderer” motive of Fritz’s quest (Ex. 5); its consequent phrase, repeated in solo horn, English horn, oboe, and clarinet, is gradually augmented rhythmically while the dynamic diminishes, as though it is moving further away, sounding across a longer distance. The motivic fragment’s repeatedly inconclusive ending on the third scale degree of D minor, rather than the tonic, has the effect of leaving the sound hanging, as it were, and suggests the dramatic uncertainty of the outcome of both Fritz’s and Grete’s searches. But the scene is also signaled by another sound, the “distant sound” of a train whistle heard over the orchestra. In his 1912 review of *Der ferne Klang*, the critic Richard Specht referred to the sound of the train as a “symbol of awakening,” situating the nighttime forest scene in the context of “reality, in the brutality and mercilessness of life.”\(^{120}\) But the train is at once both symbolic and real—in fact, it seems likely to be the train on which Fritz is leaving. As the motive of the quest fades into the night, to give way to the magical nocturnal music of the forest, the sudden train whistle marks an intrusion of modern technology into nature, and into the fantasy realm of the sought-after dream.

Adorno made no direct comment on this particular dramatic phenomenon but it may be interpreted in various ways. At first, it may seem like yet another instance of phantasmagoria, in the sense of the use of technological illusion for dramatic effect. Yet, sharply juxtaposed with the fantasy character of Fritz’s *Klang*-quest (and Grete’s hopeful attempt to follow him), the gesture of the train whistle takes on a contradictory, even a negating, effect. While compositional and orchestration techniques give the phantasmagorical effect of the fantasy fading into the night, becoming an ever-more-distant sound, the shrill train whistle snaps the scene back into a harsher, more realistic focus. It is a moment of musico-dramatic self-criticism on Schreker’s part. Recognizing the impossibility for nineteenth-century dreams of musical transcendence within a modern context, he brings in an intrusive musical sign that shatters the dream: a sonic embodiment of the dominating and alienating effect of modern technology. One phantasmagorical gesture cancels another.

Like the skittles game as described by Dahlhaus, the train sound that breaks the spell is a realistic element that takes on a symbolic aspect. What about the opera’s central distant sound, the *Klang* with which the present discussion of the opera began? It is obviously symbolic: is there ever a moment when it might be real as well? Is the sound ever actually heard as sound by any of the characters onstage, or does it remain an imaginary construct, which points beyond itself? The only certain moment when the *Klang* music is real occurs in the opening scene of act 3, during the performance of “Die Harfe.” Brief strains that occasionally drift out of the theater and into the street café are unmistakably distant echoes of the *Klangvision* passage from act 1. In its new

Example 7  Schreker, Der ferne Klang, act 1, scenes 6–7 (1 m. before R71), train whistle (Vienna: Universal Edition A. G., copyright © 1911; used by permission)
Example 7 continued

1. Solo

Der Vorhang geht langsam auf

(Man hört sehr entfernten Eisenbahnpfeifen und vernimmt das Rollen desselben.)

1. (ged.)

2. P

2. P

2. P

ppp

ppp

ppp
context it is fragmented and more distant than ever; and its futility is most clearly conveyed at the same moment when its existence, through its framing, seems most concrete. This irony is intensified by the critical realization that Fritz’s opera, produced after years of searching for inspiration, sounds exactly like his musical ideal at the beginning of his quest. Having traveled far, he has gone nowhere, and the intervening years are virtually eclipsed by his failure. The music’s “immediate, unconfined promise of sensual pleasure,” which Adorno condemned, is never fulfilled.

Rose Subotnik recently remarked that “North American musicologists should have found Adorno sooner.”\(^{121}\) If they had, they might also have found Schreker sooner. Adorno’s 1959 radio portrait represented an attempt to call the composer back from his long exile. That effort has gradually been rewarded, but Adorno, too, had died before the musical world began to take serious notice of a composer whom he had once been nearly the only one to remember.

Ultimately, Schreker was exiled from the modernist musical scene not only by political persecution and critical misunderstanding, but by history itself. In the wake of the Second World War, many of those figures who had been submerged beneath the waves of National Socialist oppression simply never resurfaced, and the face of Viennese musical modernism assumed the countenance, the defining features of which were the emancipation of dissonance and the establishment of serialism: that of Schoenberg and his pupils Berg and Webern. “It is a tidy narrative,” Hailey comments, “and one largely established in the years after the Second World War by a generation of students and disciples intent upon reasserting disrupted continuities. That such continuities never existed is beside the point. . . .”\(^{122}\) Adorno, as a student of Berg and champion of the modernist avant-garde—and particularly of the Schoenbergian doctrine of developing variation—was concerned with this continuity-oriented revisionism, as the opening sentence of his “Schreker” essay suggests: “Music has not been left unscathed by that loss of a sense of historical continuity after the Second World War which has been so widely remarked on in Germany.”\(^{123}\) Adorno played no small part in the perpetuation of the Schoenbergian legacy, though he mistrusted the implications of Schoenberg’s self-proclaimed doctrine of his brand of modernism and its assurance of superiority for the musical future—a future from which Schreker’s type of modernism was apparently to be excluded. In the wake of the postmodern dismantling of monolithic historical metanarratives in favor of philosophically self-aware narratives of aesthetic pluralism, the revisionist nature of this account


\(^{122}\) Hailey, “Franz Schreker and the Pluralities of Modernism,” 2.

\(^{123}\) Adorno, “Schreker,” 130.
has become increasingly evident (if, admittedly, musicology and music theory have come typically late to the recognition of it, only lagging behind largely biographical-account-driven attempts at its correction). In fact, Dahlhaus already placed his finger directly on this problem decades ago, when he noted that Schreker had to be “sacrificed” to make way for Schoenberg and the “new music.”

As Hailey notes, Schoenberg’s preeminence on the historical stage of twentieth-century modernism drastically obscured the roles of numerous composers who were his contemporaries, Schreker being one. But Dahlhaus realized that, “however remote Schreker may be from twentieth-century modern music (whose adherents branded him a ‘late romantic’), he is fully representative, along with Strauss and Schönberg, of musical modernism at the outset of the century.” Schoenberg recognized as much when he wrote ruefully to Schreker during the latter 1920s that the two of them, who had once been sarcastically branded “Neutöner,” were apparently already being consigned to the scrapheap of “Romanticism” by the younger generation. But it was Schoenberg who survived the stigma, physically and historically. As well, Schoenberg influenced his pupils in a manner that seemed to have assured their future discipleship and continued propagation of his ideas; but Schreker did not, like Schoenberg, construct in a sizeable body of writing any claim for his own position in the history or future of music. Perhaps ironically, the task of defense was left to Adorno.

That he took it up, even on the relatively small scale of a radio talk, says something of its significance for him. Adorno certainly did not waste words on topics he did not consider important, though he was by no means confident of the power of his words to retrieve the possibility of a future for Schreker’s music. Still, he opts for engagement rather than dismissal, even when his tone is most critical. The same cannot always be said of those who, in continuing the task of recovering the lost narrative of Schreker to an infinitely fuller extent, realized that they could not ignore the somewhat problematic contribution of Adorno, who had been before them. It is rather easier to mine his essay for pithy aphoristic selections that can then be denied—if they are negative—and used for launching a counterattack on the narrowness of Adorno’s view of modernism.

Yet such a judgment on Adorno’s modernist bias can only be formed from a selective reading that misses or ignores those crucial passages in which Adorno questions the validity of the ultimate outcome of the Schoenbergian enterprise, and seeks expressive modernist possibilities for other paths:

126. This is Karl Kraus’s term of abuse, which also puns on “Newtonians”; see Adorno, “Vienna,” in Quasi una Fantasia, 204. Schoenberg’s letter to Schreker is quoted in Schreker-Bures et al., Franz Schreker, 31.
[Elements in Schreker’s music] teach us that changes in material and consciousness do not necessarily move in a straight line along the same track as the new music. The pressure to dissolve all existing practices may perhaps have expressed itself before the First World War in a variety of categories, and not just in those of the great historical trend. But today, when that trend threatens to become universal and mechanical, we have to reevaluate many things which previously appeared to be of minor importance.

As Adorno saw it, the progression toward complete rationalization of all the components of musical composition, which carried on from Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique, had resulted in the dissolution of any residue of musical subjectivity in favor of the obsessive objectification of the system itself. This direction of “the great historical trend” was a condition Adorno was clearsighted enough both to pinpoint and to trace back to its origins, in which he could also envision that alternatives had existed. In fact, the postwar disappearance of Schreker from the history books and concert halls was a reflection of Adorno’s realization that “the survival of works of art of the past does not follow automatically from their once palpable modernity.” Modernity proved a questionable quality in the judgment of Schreker’s works even during his time, when they were alternately accused of lacking it or possessing it in undesirable degrees. Yet Adorno held out the possibility that the judgment of posterity might uncover other criteria through which Schreker’s music might attain a more lasting value. “Once works of art have lost the tension of their immediate here and now, . . . they reveal quite different dimensions from those visible in the material at the time,” he observed. “On occasion they often prove more durable in the retrograde art of a past era than in the erstwhile avant-garde.” The retrograde glance of Adorno’s “Schreker” essay does indeed discern such different dimensions. It offers an opportunity to revise “a historical judgment which proves that the power of chance and the injustice of the world also hold sway in the realm of art.”

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Franz Schreker (1878–1934) was widely regarded during the height of his career as a daringly modern and controversial composer. The tremendous initial popularity of his operas gave no forewarning of the virtual oblivion to which their composer would be consigned by history. Theodor W. Adorno’s 1959 essay on Schreker recalls the composer’s importance on the early modernist scene, but criticizes him for producing sensually alluring yet technically deficient works that sought to escape rather than authentically express the crisis of the modernist human condition. This article takes Adorno’s essay as a starting point for a reexamination of Schreker’s Der ferne Klang (1912) and defends the critical quality of Schreker’s artistic conception. Adorno focuses on Schreker’s idea of musical sound: Klang as a harmonic-timbral entity that draws attention to itself as sensuous sonority, evocative of pleasurable fantasy. However, the opera’s text, which Schreker wrote himself, demonstrates a critical awareness of the problems confronting the modern artist, whose expressive needs collide with society’s limitations. While the musical dimension evokes the ineffable qualities of the artist’s vision of expressive freedom, the realm of narrative embodies, in sometimes strikingly realistic terms, the all-too-present social realities he cannot escape. Rehearing Der ferne Klang after a close reading of the narrative reveals a dialectical dimension between music and text that problematizes Adorno’s critique.