

De Profundis

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In many ways, nineteenth century German art music was defined by the Brahms-Wagnerian dichotomy of “abstract” and “literal” art. Influenced by extremely progressive composers like Liszt, Schumann and Berlioz, Richard Wagner was interested in literal narrative or picturesque associations with his music. Brahms on the other hand, continued to write music abstractly, continuing the highly organized, contrapuntal and compositionally-derivative traditions of German and Austrian masters, like Beethoven, Mozart and Bach. Interestingly enough, Wagner’s harmonic and compositional techniques were extremely abstract and progressive, whereas Brahms’ techniques could be described as more literal, in their adherence to tonality and traditional forms.

However, in the works of Arnold Schoenberg, we see the culmination of these two complex and seemingly opposed concepts. He found a way to use the ‘literal’ structures of Brahms to organize extremely abstract harmonic and gestural ideas, influenced by the tidal wave of the newly established Wagnerian school. This not only forged a new direction for Western classical music, but also demonstrated the strongest falsification of this myth of dichotomies.

The birth of these ideas can be seen in the works of **Felix Mendelssohn**, an artist revered by both Wagner and Brahms. A great musicologist, as well as conductor, composer and pianist, Mendelssohn organized the first performance of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion since its last performance - nearly fifty years before.¹ Mendelssohn’s own oratorios, Paulus and Elijah demonstrate the transformation of contrapuntal textures into a romantic aesthetic, and this language finds a very personal avenue through his six organ sonatas. The **third sonata in A-major** owes its form and texture more to Bach than to Mendelssohn’s contemporaries. However, the innovative phrasing, gestures and effects bring this piece forward into a remarkably romantic, unique and influential style.

The first movement of the piece quotes a Lutheran chorale, *Aus tiefer Not Schrei ich zu dir*, based on the text of Psalm 130 – *De Profundis*.

¹ A classical piece being only fifty years old and still being performed doesn’t seem noteworthy today, but in Mendelssohn’s time - dominated by the performance of new music, this was much more significant.

Johannes Brahms' first outburst of organ compositions was in his early twenties. These works were either contrapuntal or improvisatory and virtuosic works. However, one year before his death, he returned to the organ to compose eleven chorale preludes – an archaic art form that reached its peak in the eighteenth century. Like the earlier works, the chorales are highly contrapuntal, but compositionally, these pieces are highly structured and demonstrate the technical mastery of the 'late Brahms,' albeit on a small scale. In *O welt, ich muss dich lassen* and *Herzlich tut mich verlangen* Brahms modulates as freely with pulse as he does with key. The shifting metric accents and harmonic language add to the colour of these older compositional forms. Both pieces also demonstrate complex compositional techniques within the counterpoint, such as inverted and retrograded melodic material. In *O wie selig seid ihr doch, ihr Frommen*, Brahms turns to a more normalized metric pulse and instead exploits voice crossing. He often creates melodic material by taking composite lines from different voices that cross each other at different times.

The **Variations on a Recitative for Organ, op. 40** is an especially interesting piece by **Arnold Schoenberg**. Composed in response to a commission from an American organist, William Strickland, this piece would be a new medium for Schoenberg, who had never written for organ before. In fact, he had even drafted an essay on why the organ was "obsolete" in its current form. For Schoenberg, the ideal organ would have much fewer colours, be playable by multiple people, and would primarily serve as a chamber instrument to play what he called the "idea-content" of larger orchestral works. What Schoenberg did not realize, is that organists who know the instrument only use a limited amount of colours. A large organ, with dozens of stops, really only has a few amount of colours - similar to an orchestra, which might have a hundred players, but only three or four different timbre groups, like strings, woodwinds, percussion et cetera. This makes the organ, in its current form, actually quite well suited, conceptually, to playing Schoenberg's music.

Compositionally, this piece marks an interesting turning point for atonal and twelve-tone writing. In the first few decades of Schoenberg's compositional style, he was interested in finding a way to write music without being restricted by tonality. This tonal flexibility had already begun in the works of Brahms, Liszt and other nineteenth century composers. It was out of this necessity for freedom that Schoenberg began to experiment with "composing with all twelve-tones." In an effort to wrestle with this new harmonic language, Schoenberg at first tried to write music that would have no tonal inflections whatsoever. By the 1940's however, Schoenberg had freed himself further, and began using tonal sounds in the Piano concerto, op. 42 and Ode to Napoleon, op. 41, both 'atonal' twelve-tone pieces. The Variations on a Recitative, op. 40 demonstrates an equally interesting innovation. This 'tonal' piece is based on an ornamented twelve tone row – although whether this was intentional by Schoenberg or not, is harder to say. All the motivic material in the piece is based on the original row, with subordinate themes based on hexachordal relationships in the row. Using such complex compositional tools in a 'tonal' piece makes this piece stand out as a true gem in the German romantic organ literature tradition.

Robert Schumann's fugues on B-A-C-H show a very different side of Germanic counterpoint. Although influenced by his good friend Felix Mendelssohn's explorations in counterpoint, Schumann uses fugal writing as simply as another texture for character pieces. The

fugues in this collection are filled with dreaminess, turbulence and sudden switches of character that are so typical of Schumann – they are by no means exercises in counterpoint! The **second fugue in B-flat major** is reminiscent of the second symphony, which was written around the same time. Most notably in its rigorous use of dotted rhythms, and constant modulation of the metric accent through various hemiolas and other rhythmic devices.

The Sketches for Pedal Piano offer organists the rare chance of playing Schumann's character pieces, which, through piano cycles like *Papillion*, *Kreisleriana* and *Carnaval* have established the composer, both during his lifetime and today. Many of these sketches are contrapuntal, and though the **fourth sketch in D-flat major** has some elements of polyphony, the piece seems more focused on portraying certain moods and characters, than on abstract concepts of composition. A growing symptom of new school of thought in Germany, and one that would reach its height with composers like Liszt and...

Richard Wagner, who is most well-known for his opera output, and his innovations in harmony and orchestration. *Tannhauser*, an opera written relatively early in Wagner's compositional output demonstrates his lineage with Schumann a little more than some of his later music would. However, already some of Wagner's most complex harmonic innovations and fiery orchestration are present in the **Tannhauser Overture**.

The transcription for organ of this work was completed by Edwin Lemare, a British composer and organist from the turn of the twentieth century. This arrangement brilliantly reduces the orchestral score into something playable at the organ, while still capturing the "idea-content" of the piece. Perhaps this is what Schoenberg had in mind when he conceived of the ideal possibilities for some futuristic organ – he just didn't know it was already being done!

Translations

De Profundis

From the depths, I have cried out to you, O Lord;
Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplication.
If you, Lord, were to mark iniquities,
who, O Lord, shall stand?
For with you is forgiveness;
and because of your law, I stood by you, Lord.
My soul has stood by his word.
My soul has hoped in the Lord.
From the morning watch, even until night,
let Israel hope in the Lord.
For with the Lord there is mercy,
and with him is plenteous redemption.
And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.

O welt, ich muss dich lassen
O World, I must leave you,
I travel from here along my way
to the everlasting fatherland.
I will give up my spirit
so that my body and life
lie in God's merciful hand.

Herzlich tut mich verlangen
I yearn from my heart
for a peaceful end,
since here I am surrounded
by sorrow and wretchedness.
I wish to depart
from this evil world,
I long for heavenly joys,
O Jesus, come quickly!

O wie selig seid ihr doch, ihr frommen
O, how blest are ye whose toils are ended!
Who, through death, have unto God ascended!
Ye have arisen
From the cares which keep us still in prison