Speechsong
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Cage was arguably one of Schoenberg’s most important students (“an inventor — of genius”¹ was Schoenberg’s assessment), not because he followed in Schoenberg’s twelve-tone footsteps (like Berg and Webern) but through the importance he placed on the environmental dimension of music in the era of the technological reproduction of sound. In “The Future of Music: Credo,” a talk given in Seattle in 1937, Cage stated that “NEW METHODS WILL BE DISCOVERED, BEARING A DEFINITE RELATION TO SCHOENBERG’S TWELVE-TONE SYSTEM. Schoenberg’s method assigns to each material, in a group of equal materials, its function with respect to the group.”² Like Gould, Cage understood the twelve-tone system to be a poetics, a mode of artistic production, rather than a mode of composition strictly tied to music. As Gould discovered in his interview, Cage maintained his allegiance to Schoenberg’s poetics throughout his career; late in life, Cage stated that as a young man he was “like a tiger in de-

Schoenberg. “3 Schoenberg had told Cage that “without a feeling for harmony [he] would always encounter an obstacle, a wall through which he wouldn’t be able to pass. My reply [said Cage] was that in that case I would devote my life to beating my head against that wall — and maybe that is what I’ve been doing ever since.”4 Once again, this suggests we must reassess Schoenberg’s influence such that it extends beyond musical composition. Schoenberg was a synaesthetic artist, producing not only musical compositions but visual art works (and technological inventions, such as his music typewriter). In moving musical composition from a temporal axis (the ultimate expression of which in Schoenberg’s musical context was Wagner’s Liebestod) to a spatial one, and affirming thus that artistic meaning was a product not only of temporal progression but spatial juxtaposition,5 Schoenberg inaugurated a modernism that was as powerful as Einstein’s theorization of spacetime relativity. If we understand the composer’s achievement in this larger context, then we are presented with a much broader legacy: Schoenberg as teacher — and what he taught us was to understand art beyond the closure of traditional modes of production, to understand being as beyond individuality, to understand politics as beyond traditional boundaries. In 1991, John Ashbery said of his own avowedly difficult poetry that one way of reading it “was to think of it as music”: “[w]hat you hear at a given moment is a refraction of what’s gone before or after.”6 While living in New York, Ashbery had encountered the work of John Cage, “whose atonal compositions had a lasting influence on him.”7 When one recalls that McLuhan and Cage often met at Cage’s New York

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3 Hines “Then Not Yet ‘Cage’,” 92.
4 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
apartment, and that McLuhan was the mentor of Gould, and that Ashbery, like Schoenberg, was attuned as much to music as to the visual arts, then the circle of Schoenberg’s influence and legacy expands exponentially.

Schoenberg’s influence is clearly present in contemporary “new music”; its performative aspects overlap, as well, with composed theatre, which claims Schoenberg as a forerunner. At the World New Music Days (convened by the International Society for New Music, Canadian Section) held in Vancouver, Canada, in November 2017, the overriding characteristics the compositions had in common were playful dissonance, performativity, the use of electronic media, post-instrumentality, and juxtapositional rather than linear forms. In one presentation, of circa thirty contemporary pieces for piano, the instrument was often used in conjunction with an iPod (to produce sinewaves), or as a sounding board. There was little use of the keyboard in piano compositions by an international group of composers, including Judith Weir, Chiyoko Szlavnics, Heera Kim, and David Brynjar Franzson. Other pieces magnified the sound of plastic cups being crumpled, or a sewing machine in operation. These are clearly Cagean resonances, but they are Cage via the Schoenberg who liberated Cage from the tonal imperative. As Charles Rosen has put it, “the later Schoenberg became a model followed so many times that we hear him most often without being aware of it.”

The argument that Schoenberg is very important but little-performed ultimately bears no weight in this context. James Joyce was as important to literary modernism as Schoenberg was to musical modernism, yet *Finnegans Wake* is little read or taught. The same could be said about Gertrude Stein and many

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9 Schoenberg was made Honorary President of the ISCM after WW2. See Bojan Bujic, *Arnold Schoenberg* (London: Phaidon, 2011), 204.
10 The series was produced by David Pay, Artistic Director of Vancouver’s Music on Main, http://www.musiconmain.ca.
other modernist authors. Their work, however, has not been superseded. As T.S. Eliot (another modernist author) stated in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), the work of a new artist changes the entire system of artistic expression; it does not represent an evolutionary singularity. Furthermore, media produce their effects differently, some in “low definition” (which is involving and process-oriented) and others in “high definition” (not inviting deep engagement) and therefore our encounters with them as listeners or viewers will be different. And the remediation of music, literature, and the visual arts by the Internet (such that it is possible to speak of “post-Internet art”) reconfigures these effects again. On YouTube, Schoenberg’s Suite (op. 29, Boulez conducting) has been listened to more than 17,000 times; Hilary Hahn’s performance of the Violin Concerto (op. 36) has been viewed over 100,000 times on various sites; and Maurizio Pollini’s performance of the Three Piano Pieces (op. 11) has been listened to 120,000 times (as of December 2017). Clearly, the concert hall performance is not the only yardstick or perhaps even the major one, now, for assessing the performance life of an artist’s work.

The theater is now increasingly ranged beside the concert hall as a place where performances structured according to musical principles take place; relatedly, the art gallery is increasing-

12 “[W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.” See T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Egoist (September and November, 1919), http://ts Eliot.com/essays/tradition-and-the-individual-talent.

13 This is McLuhan’s theory of hot and cool media, as elaborated in Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 22–32.

ly home to sound installations. “Composed theater,” one such mode of theatrical performance, places Schoenberg among its forbearers. As David Roesner writes in Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes,

[s]ince the beginning of the twentieth century, it has been an ongoing interest of composers like Arnold Schoenberg, John Cage, Mauricio Kagel, George Aperghis, Dieter Schnebel, Hans-Joachim Hespos, Manos Tsangaris, Charlotte Seither and Heiner Goebbels — to name but a few — to approach the theatrical stage and its means of expression as musical material. They treat voice, gesture, movement, light, sound, image, design and other features of theatrical production according to musical principles and compositional techniques and apply musical thinking to performance as a whole. This idea is again flourishing among composers, directors and theatre collectives, as reflected in recent developments towards postdramatic forms that de-emphasize text, narrative and fictional characters, seeking alternative dramaturgies (visual, spatial, temporal, musical), and focusing on the sonic and visual materialities of the stage and the performativity of their material components.15

Roesner goes on to note that, concurrently, “musical composition has increasingly expanded its range of ‘instruments’ to include live video, lighting design, live sound electronics, costumes and spatial arrangements, and has paid closer attention to the theatricality of the musical performer.”16 Particularly influential on the poetics of composed theater have been Schoenberg’s comments about his 1913 composition Die glückliche Hand that he was “making music with the media of the stage [mit

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16 Ibid.
den Mitteln der Bühne musizieren],”¹⁷ such that lights, music, acting, and staging were all coordinated. These theatrical poetics¹⁸ reflect the dethroning of language that was a concomitant of theatrical modernism and the associated crisis in narrative: linearity was no longer deemed an adequate way of addressing the complexities of modern life, and, in the musical context, the Wagnerian model of narrative employed in his “music dramas” was rejected. As Schoenberg puts it, “[i]n Wagner’s music-drama, he placed the drama in the foreground, whereas he had a supporting role in mind for the music.”¹⁹ To the static model of the Gesamtkunstwerk, Schoenberg proposes a process model in which “[i]t is every single word, every gesture, every beam of light, every costume and every image that does it: nothing should symbolize something other than what sounds usually symbolize. Everything should mean nothing less than the sounding notes mean.”²⁰

Matthias Rebstock claims that


¹⁸ Richard Taruskin polemicizes against the “poietic fallacy” in that it diverts the focus of musical understanding from the listener to the composer. My use of the term “poetics” is somewhat different, in its suggestion that Schoenberg’s compositional method constituted a paradigm that has a larger application than to musical production alone. As such, my use of the term is also different from that employed by Carl Dahlhaus as summarized by John Covach in “Schoenberg’s ‘Poetics of Music,’ the Twelve-Tone Method, and the Musical Idea,” in Schoenberg and Words: The Modernist Years, eds. Charlotte M. Cross and Russell A. Berman (New York: Garland, 2000), 309–46. See Taruskin’s “The Poietic Fallacy,” Musical Times 145 (2004): 7–34. For a response, see Joseph Auner, “Composing on Stage: Schoenberg and the Creative Process as Public Performance,” 19th Century Music 29, no. 1 (2005): 64–93, especially the last section, “Poiesis R Us” (90–93).


²⁰ Quoted by Matthias Rebstock, “Composed Theatre: Mapping the Field,” in Roesner and Rebstock, Composed Theatre, 31.
there are some features within the compositional bias of serial music that have become highly relevant for Composed Theatre. [...] It was the clash of this highly organized structural music with the aesthetics of John Cage and the early happenings that unleashed enormous productivity in the field of music-theatre in the sixties, making this period the true starting point of Composed Theatre.”

As a method, seriality was independent of specific material, allowing it to be applied to any material that might form part of the theatrical performance. Thus, “following the internal logic of serial music, European composers finally arrived at a point quite similar to one that Cage had already made in the early fifties, even if on the basis of completely different aesthetic beliefs, when he sustained that virtually everything could turn into musical material.” Music at this point became truly environmental in its embrace of a post-literate acoustic space.

21 Ibid., 36.
22 Ibid.