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Kurt J. Ellenberger

Grand Valley State University

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The Creative Process vs. The Canon

Hindemith Recycles in *Ludus Tonalis*

The contemporary composer faces many obstacles in the struggle towards artistic independence. Not the least of these is the solemn realization that one's work will inevitably be compared to the countless pieces of music that define the tradition of musical achievement as canonized in the "Literature." Another lies in the mandate (exacerbated in this century by the academy's influence) that, to qualify as innovative or original, a work must utilize some new form or brilliantly organized and tightly wrought system (harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, philosophical, political, or otherwise). There is a seemingly contradictory element in these two sentences in which lies the philosophical problem for contemporary composers today: How does one maintain a connection to the canon (whose syntax and grammar must be realized or alluded to in some manner, however obscure, if comprehensibility is of any concern) while at the same time breaking new ground in the search for one's own aesthetic voice? While the answers to these questions are deeply personal (and as such will probably define one's aesthetic value system as much as they initially challenge its development), we can see in the music of the contemporary masters an approach to innovation that is at the same time both old and new. Often, this is accomplished by recycling the forms, phrase structure, and harmonic and melodic formulae from ages past and presenting them within a new context. In this way, the much-sought-after innovation occurs organically, without slavish adherence to (or mimicry of) the old styles; and also without the ungratifying and quickly forgotten oddities that are often the result of a

frenzied and unfortunately context-free search for “originality” (as if originality had some intrinsic value in and of itself). This century’s greatest composers accomplished this synthesis in a variety of different ways, all of which stand as a testament to the creative genius contained in our own contemporary canon. It is absolutely necessary for today’s composers to examine the ways in which this was accomplished within the confines of a centuries-old system (one that is apparently still capable of generating truly “new” music) in the hopes that resources as yet untapped might show themselves as viable tools for the expression of our own musical visions.

The need for one’s work to be recognized as a logical outgrowth of the tradition is apparently a powerful one—few have escaped its influence. While most composers show their roots rather overtly in their music, others also tell us about their lineage in their philosophical and pedagogical writings. Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1952) and Paul Hindemith (1895–1963) belong in both categories (the latter being much less populated, of course).¹ In Schoenberg’s case, the music gives the impression that he is a man on the defensive who is trying to convince a hostile body of professionals and amateurs alike that his works *really are* a logical outgrowth of the so-called “Common Practice Period.”² In Hindemith’s case, his voluminous output in matters theoretical, pedagogical, and philosophical stemmed from a genuine desire to impart his knowledge to the next generation of composers. He viewed this as a serious responsibility, especially in an age where the various “currents” of compositional practice ran not, in the words of the famous baroque theorist, J. J. Fux (1660–1741), “[like] a gushing stream that has overflowed its banks” but rather (as Hindemith saw it) “[like] a torrential flood.”³ Hindemith has been criticized because he apparently did not use his own “system” (as outlined in *The Craft of Musical Composition*) in his own works. This criticism misses the point entirely—he was not attempting to establish some

elaborate compositional system for subsequent generations to blindly follow (he repeatedly warns that such a system is an impossibility in the creation of art). Instead, he was attempting to establish an a-stylistic means by which a young contemporary composer could work within an environment of extreme dissonance, completely outside the realm of the Common Practice Period, while still maintaining an aurally recognizable hierarchy of consonance and dissonance. In short, an expansion of the harmonic language which could conceivably include the most harshly dissonant of sonorities, yet one that also recognized the authority of the harmonic series. In light of this disparity (quite reasonable and even expected, given his intent) between his theory and his works, what then is the connection between Hindemith’s music and the canon? Or, more precisely, which elements of the past resurface in his music?

The answer to this question is one that speaks not only to the plight of composers; in its larger context it speaks to the challenge faced by artists in all areas of creative pursuit. The great composers, authors, visual artists, poets, and dancers of the past cast a long shadow into the present, one that is both inspirational and yet somehow daunting in the implied challenge that it presents to contemporary artists. In short, how does one

utilize that which cannot be avoided (the past) while at the same time finding a new means of personal expression?

In order to answer this question, we will examine the work in which Hindemith's contrapuntal voice finds its greatest expression: his collection of interludes and fugues entitled *Ludus Tonalis*. Of the work, Hindemith said, "I am...calling it *Ludus Tonalis* because of its didactic (not to say sophisticated) quality. Our Latin experts here at Yale think the title is very apt. I cannot find anything better in German or English to describe clearly what it is...[while also] hinting at the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and the *Art of Fugue* (the form, that is, not the quality)."⁴ It was written during Hindemith's tenure at Yale and was completed in the fall of 1943. During this period, Hindemith divided his energies between integrating his musical and compositional theories into a cohesive and comprehensive pedagogical system for the approximately 16 hours of classes he taught every week, and transcribing and orchestrating volumes upon volumes of medieval music for various choral and original-instrument chamber groups (in which he also often performed). Logically, then, it would be expected that these pursuits might in some way have influenced his primary vocation, the composition of his own music. Many of the tech-

niques and materials used by Hindemith in *Ludus Tonalis*⁵ are fairly obvious (Hindemith's concern for clarity and comprehensibility seems always at the fore) and are indeed closely related to those found in Early Music⁶, and by extension, the Common Practice Period.⁷ These include:

- i) church modes—primarily Phrygian, Llocrian, Dorian and Aeolian;
- ii) regular phrase lengths which are often periodic;
- iii) regular rhythms and meters (compound meters, when used, are quite transparent);
- v) key/mode relationships within movements;
- vi) standard musical forms.

It is the first of these that I would like to expound. Modes are featured quite prominently and generally govern both the melodic and harmonic aspects of *Ludus Tonalis*. Phrygian mode appears most often, which is perhaps not surprising, since this mode features an upper leading tone and a lowered seventh (inverse to the major scale). Other church modes are also featured (as mentioned above), as are less familiar modes of the ascending melodic minor scale (*Praeludium* mm. 36-49). All are used quite freely. Although tones foreign to the mode are found regularly, they generally resolve in step-wise fashion (with occasional octave displacements and other variations) which tends to mitigate the higher levels of dissonance created by writing that is so linearly derived. Much of this occurs on the surface and is aurally very apparent. As such, the emotional range of the various pieces in the collection is large and varied; some are light and playful (in some cases downright "folksy" in a medieval/renaissance sort of way), some are heroic, some tragic, some lilting and mournful, while still others are quite dark and almost gothic in the severity of their temperament. Overall, a certain medieval flavor permeates the entire work, which is easily recognized by the listener.

Example 1: Typical Phrygian Cadence (in C minor)⁸

C: IV⁶ V iv⁶ V vii^{o6}/V V +6 V (quartal) V

What may not be as apparent is the relationship between the modal idiom and the cadential patterns found consistently throughout *Ludus Tonalis*. Hindemith's predilection for hollow sonorities (using primarily open fifths and octaves with an occasional complete triad) at cadences is probably one of his most identifiable trademarks. This is a means by which Hindemith achieved a sense of proportion and balance in his music. With these extremely consonant sonorities functioning very obviously as cadential markers, a sense of balance is achieved with the often very dissonant sonorities that are found within phrases. Form is thus also easily recognized, owing largely to the cadential figures and the key-areas they establish. This can also be traced to Early Music practices where composers routinely cadenced on unisons or open fifths (and triads). These characteristics are an undeniably crucial part of Hindemith's language, one that owes a considerable debt to the Early Music of which he was an extremely active and vocal proponent.

Closely related to the Phrygian mode is the cadence which bears its name, the Phrygian cadence. (See example 1). The operative voice-leading in the Phrygian cadence relies heavily on the inverted leading-tone/supertonic

Example 2: Pre-dominant Chords and the Phrygian Cadence

iv⁶ V
(with possible third)

relationship that results from the expansion of the outer voices as they move in contrary motion into the root of the dominant. As such, it belongs to the group of similar pre-dominant chords shown in order of increasing chromaticism. (See example 2).

Examples 1a-c are found regularly in the music of the Common Practice Period; 1b is a typical Phrygian cadence as previously shown in example 2. 1d is also found in the music of earlier centuries, but occurs much more rarely than 1a-c. 1e is a quartal harmony (built on fourths rather than thirds), which is not found in the Common Practice Period. It is, however, easily found in *Ludus Tonalis*.

As one moves from left to right in example 1, the cadential pattern becomes less diatonic and further removed from the original key. Aurally, the result is a series of cadences that become increasingly more exotic and surprising, culminating in 1e which, as previously mentioned, is entirely out of the realm of Common Practice Period usage.

Now we will look at examples from *Ludus Tonalis* in order to see the similarities between Hindemith's work and the typical Phrygian cadence. Compare any of the excerpts in example 3 with example 1. Structurally, then, the Phrygian cadence is found at the heart of Hindemith's modern counterpart. The cadence appears fully intact in example 3a, and is varied, as shown in examples 3b-d, by means of octave displacement, inversion, and the interpolation of extraneous pitches between the structurally important voice-leading of the Phrygian cadence. The resultant hybrid breathes new life and vitality into an old formula. As variations on this cadence occur regularly in this work (and others), I refer to them generically as *stylized Phrygian cadences*.

Example 3: Stylized Phrygian cadences in *Ludus Tonalis*

a) Phrygian cadence (identical to medieval cadence):

Interludium No. 3; mm. 35-36



b) with octave displacement

Fuga prima in C; mm. 10-11



c) inverted:

Interludium No. 3; mm. 21-22



d) two voices only:

Interludium No. 3; mm. 7-8



The difference in usage between Hindemith's stylized Phrygian cadence and its Early Music ancestor is worth noting. While the Phrygian cadence is generally inconclusive in nature (which means that, in Common Practice Period terms, it would not be a satisfactory cadence with which to end a piece or large portion thereof), Hindemith's hybrid may be either inconclusive or conclusive. Of course, other cadence types are found as well. Some feature both an upper and a lower leading tone (resembling the augmented sixth in example 2); others actually adhere to Common Practice authentic cadences; while others still belong to their own category. Still, the modal material that surrounds these cadences gives them a certain Phrygian character, even though they are not, by definition, Phrygian cadences.

Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis* is thus well-steeped in the Early Music which he loved so dearly. He freely recycles materials from the past, altering at will in the drive towards music that is at once new and "old." The requirements of the earlier mandates are thus adequately met—the music is decidedly original, yet it is also inextricably tied to the canon. None of this will come as a surprise to those familiar with his music or his more philosophically oriented writing (particularly in *The Craft of Musical Composition*). In that treatise (and others), he continually reasserts his belief in tonality—arguing that, for the composer who wishes to communicate in an objective and comprehensible manner, there is indeed nothing new under the sun. In other words, the tonal system, whose roots stretch back into antiquity, may be able to provide us with a wealth of new material as yet unmined.

For the creative artist in any field, familiarity with the past inevitably leads to some form of imitation and conceptual recycling. In fact, were it not for our exposure to the work of the past, it is highly unlikely that we would choose to become creative artists ourselves in the first place! Our initial interest in a particular art form is often due to the influence of one or two figures whose work elicited a powerful response. Our

own personal journey then begins, myopic as it may be in its initial phases, focusing on these figures alone. Our field of vision then expands as we come to the realization that these seminal figures in our personal pantheon were themselves influenced by earlier generations of creative artists. The voices of the past, at first mere whispers, now begin to assert themselves loudly and irrevocably as they to materialize in our own work.

This course of study is almost an apprenticeship of sorts. Through it, a high level of sheer craftsmanship and technical expertise is attained. It helps to build much-needed confidence, which gives the maturing artist a surefooted stance from which to proceed in the search for his or her unique voice. In this sense, its effect is very positive—in fact, it is difficult to imagine mature artistry without it. Yet, there is also another aspect to consider, one that by definition may be stifling to the creative process.

Obviously, the artist is forever influenced by the skills and knowledge gained in the study of the past. This influence, which likely begins as the means to an artist's first successful attempts at meaningful expression, may, at some point in the future, become the *only* means of expression. In short, the foundation upon which our technique and craftsmanship rest can become a prison of sorts. While technique and craftsmanship can ground and nourish us, they can

also bind and confine, relegating our work (in the worst case) to the unenviable position of being mere imitation and mimicry. This is one of the most difficult dichotomies that every artist must come to terms with and ultimately solve if the creative process is to be fully realized.

There is a saying that is well-known in jazz circles, purportedly made by the great jazz drummer Art Blakey when he was once asked how one becomes a jazz musician. His response was wise beyond measure while at the same time concise beyond belief. He said: "imitate, assimilate, innovate." Technique and craftsmanship are attained through imitation and assimilation, but it is in the last step, innovation, that the promise of the creative process, as elusive as it may be, is finally fulfilled.

References

1. Arnold Schoenberg and Paul Hindemith were two of the most important (and diametrically opposed) composers of the 20th Century.

Schoenberg is the founder of the "2nd Viennese School" which consisted of himself and his two equally renowned students, Anton Webern (1883-1945) and Alban Berg (1885-1935). He is best known for the development of the system of composition known as "serialism." Serialism is a decidedly atonal method of composition in which the twelve pitches in the chromatic scale are placed in a specific order (called a "row") which is then manipulated in various ways and thus functions as the source material for all of the melody and harmony used in a given piece.

Hindemith, in strong opposition to Schoenberg, was an unabashed champion of tonality. He devised his own system based on the acoustical properties of the harmonic series. In his system, however, tonality is not abandoned; rather, it allows for very dissonant structures which are contrasted starkly by the purest of consonances. He is best known for his many instrumental sonatas and his orchestral works, including the very popular symphony *Mathis der Maler*.

2. The Common Practice Period is the period from approximately 1650-1900 in which European composers were all using essentially the same harmonic and melodic vocabulary in their works. Composers

such as J.S. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin and Brahms and their many contemporaries fall into this category.

3. Paul Hindemith, *The Craft of Musical Composition, Book 1: Theory*, trans. by Arthur Mendel (Mainz: Schott and Company, 1970), 10.

4. Luther Noss, *Paul Hindemith in the United States*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 117.

5. It goes without mentioning that the collection is a virtual lexicon of fugal procedure—not surprising given the piece’s “didactic” (to quote Hindemith) character and academic subtext.

6. Early Music is a general term referring to music of the medieval and renaissance eras.

7. Hindemith’s use of the archaic Latin for this piece’s title (and others) as well as his chosen subject matter (in pieces such as *The Four Temperaments*, *Der Schwanenderer*, *Mathis der Maler*, and *Nobilissima Visione*) points clearly to his fascination with (and encyclopedic knowledge of) the music and philosophy of ages past.

8. Thomas Benjamin, Michael Horvit, and Robert Nelson, *Techniques and Materials of Tonal Music: with an Introduction to Twentieth Century Techniques*, 5th ed., (New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 62.