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In the wax museums and anatomical display cabinets of speculative sideshow owners there are certain sections that are hung with curtains bearing the words ‘Admission for adults only’ or ‘customers with weak nerves are warned not to visit this room’ and that contain some monstrosity as the actual main attraction of the otherwise very harmless collections.<sup>1</sup>

With this image of a curtain hiding and at the same time heightening some terrible secret, Max Kalbeck began his review of the first Viennese performance of Richard Strauss’s *Salome*. Theodor W. Adorno picked up the image of the curtain in the context of Strauss’s fabled skill at composing non-musical events, when he identified the opening flourish of Strauss’s *Salome* as the swooshing sound of the rising curtain.<sup>2</sup> If this is so, the *succès de scandale* of the opera was achieved, in more than one sense, as soon as the curtain rose at Dresden’s Semperoper on 10 December 1905.

Critics of the premiere noted that the opera set ‘boundless wildness and degeneration to music’; it brought ‘high decadence’ onto the operatic stage; a ‘composition of hysteria’, reflecting the ‘disease of our time’, *Salome* is ‘hardly music any more’.<sup>3</sup> The outrage did not end there. A few months after the premiere the ageing Felix Draeseke published the polemic *Confusion in Music*, in which he analysed the phenomenon of *Salome* and the culture that allowed this to happen.<sup>4</sup> Embracing a Spenglerian cultural pessimism, Draeseke dwelt on the widespread fears that we had reached the end of music as we know it. Piquantly, Draeseke could hardly be counted as conservative; rather, as a member of the nineteenth-century *Fortschrittspartei* around Liszt and Wagner, he had garnered impeccable progressive credentials. Draeseke’s polemic in turn encouraged other critics to add their views on *Salome* and the state of contemporary music in general, and soon a sizeable – and surprisingly coherent – body of

This chapter is dedicated to Eric Zakim, with thanks for the countless discussions on musical degeneracy.

<sup>1</sup> Kalbeck 1990, 336–42.    <sup>2</sup> Adorno 1966, 115n.

<sup>3</sup> Brandes 1905, 1291; Gräner 1905, 437; Brandes 1905, 1293; Gräner 1905, 439, 438. Translations are my own, except where otherwise noted. See also Messmer 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Shigihara 1990 offers a useful anthology of early responses to *Salome*.

mostly conservative music criticism emerged that diagnosed the ills befalling the patient that was music.

This medical metaphor is no coincidence. A biological, or rather *vitalistic*, model of the musical work and music history informed most critics' observations and conclusions. One of the respondents, Hugo Riemann, spelled out what this debate was really about when he foregrounded the catchphrase of *degeneration* in the debate. This term had been loosely bandied about right from the very outset of the critical responses to the opera, but it was left to Riemann to thematise this term in his polemic 'Degeneration and Regeneration'.<sup>5</sup> Pseudo-scientific terminology was all the rage in turn-of-the-century music criticism, and a scintillating term such as *degeneration*, borrowed as it was from the unholy trinity of nineteenth-century criminal pathology, evolutionary biology and social Darwinism, thrived on overtones of scientific precision – so much so that it seemed unnecessary to define the term in any greater detail. The identification of degenerate elements of music, fantastical as the whole enterprise was, promised the possibility not only of objectively analysing a cultural situation but also appeared to suggest ways to cure music of its ills. We should therefore raise the curtain of *Salome* once again, a century later, to get a sense of how the critical discourse of musical degeneracy was elaborated around that most scandalous of Strauss's operas.

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But wait. It would not be in the spirit of the culture of degeneracy, characterised as it is by excess, licentiousness and luxuriousness, that we jump into a discussion *in medias res*. What follows is less an analysis of Strauss's score than a reconstruction of the broader discourse of musical degeneracy that will, somewhat self-indulgently, weave in and out of the critical and analytical commentary surrounding Strauss's scandal-ridden opera, behind which, needless to say, Wagner's long and dark shadow always looms large. The battle-cry of 'degeneracy' functions, in many ways, as a conduit metaphor, as a term whose very pronouncement unlocks a certain mode of thinking. The utterance of 'degeneracy' forcefully steers associations in one particular direction and opens up a force field leading irresistibly into the powerful realm of cultural pessimism.

What, then, is cultural degeneracy? The bare-bones history of degeneration can be told relatively swiftly: originally developed as a physiological concept in mid-nineteenth-century France, the medical term

<sup>5</sup> Riemann 1908; reprinted in Shigihara 1990, 245–9.

*dégénérescence* is primarily associated with Bénédict Morel, who was interested in the hereditary qualities of organic abnormalities. In the public imagination this concept soon extended to the larger social body of the nation, mixing it with racial theories, above all Arthur de Gobineau's essay on the inequality of races. Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso picked up Morel's concept and applied it to his study of hereditary criminality. In Lombroso's hands degeneration became synonymous with 'atavistic regression', the return to a previous evolutionary stage (which, in the context of the nineteenth-century ideology of progress, fed directly into major cultural fears). It was Max Nordau, finally, who transferred the concept entirely to the study of culture in his vastly popular study *Entartung* (1892), dedicated to Lombroso. Nordau's *Entartung*, an international bestseller, was a thundering diatribe, dressed up in scientific garb, against contemporary artistic movements and cultural heroes of the age, including Tolstoy, Ibsen, Nietzsche, Zola and above all Wagner.<sup>6</sup>

For our purposes, degeneracy is best understood as perennial negation, a brightly flashing 'Un-' slapped in front of whatever organic or moral authority one may want to invoke: unnatural, unhealthy, unwholesome, unviable, untenable, untrustworthy, impure, immoral, incorrect, dishonourable, corrupt, contagious, dangerous. It is this slippage that makes the concept so powerful. The epistemological idea on which cultural degeneracy thrives, and which makes this slippage possible, inverts Spinoza's principle of *omnis determinatio negatio est* ('every definition is negation'). No longer does a series of progressive negations lead to one positive definition, but here only the negation – degeneration – is given, encouraging the reader to infer the implied positives. This opens up enormous interpretative scope. In combination with the clear and present danger that is assumed to emanate from degenerate objects or processes, it is not difficult to see how withholding the positive answer while dangling the sensationally toxic negative in front of our eyes (or ears) will lead to the kinds of behaviour psychoanalysts describe as neurotic.

## Breathing Life into Music

Before musical scientists could apply their cultural stethoscopes on music's body and pronounce the chilling diagnosis of degeneration over it, indeed, before music could even stretch out on the doctor's examination table, the

<sup>6</sup> Pick 1989.

patient first had to have received the kiss of life. This was by no means self-evident, as the notion of music as an organism would have been quite unthinkable before the massive intellectual and social transformations of the 1800s.<sup>7</sup> It fell to the romantic generation to breathe life into music and to endow it with aesthetic autonomy and vital functions in one fell swoop.<sup>8</sup> Like other newly vivified fellow organisms – labour, language and love<sup>9</sup> – this warm and pulsating music became a force to be reckoned with.

The theologically inspired philosopher Karl Christian Friedrich Krause, for one, proclaimed in 1831 that ‘music itself is determinate life, and it represents the full life of emotions in its peculiar life, in the life of tones’.<sup>10</sup> Krause was too precise an analytical thinker to let himself get away with the conflation between the two conditions he assigned to music: music was both considered to be the metaphorical analogue of life, and to be a living organism in its own right. As this pesky difference between metaphor and essence, however, hampered the full flourishing of the grand metaphysical systems that the romantics were busy constructing around the idea of music, it quickly fell by the wayside.

Over the last 200 years it has become such an ingrained part of talking about music to think of the history of music as an evolution of musical styles or as a series of works that engender one another in a cogent, indeed necessary succession, that the notion of music not only ‘representing life’ but ‘being life’ has created a reality for itself.<sup>11</sup> Even nowadays, while most of us would deny that music has a ‘life’ in any biologically meaningful sense, far fewer object to historical accounts of music in terms of budding, flourishing, birth, maturity or death.

At the risk of stating the obvious: despite music’s newly gained identity as a life-force in its own right, the problem with this ‘life’ of music is that a composition still had to be created by a composer before it could exist. (Scholars beholden to the Idealist tradition sometimes seem to play down this problem by acknowledging that music’s autonomy is only ‘relative’ and otherwise to ignore the vast consequences of this fact.)<sup>12</sup> Of course, referring to musical creations themselves in humanising terms was common practice. Even in the 1910s, Ferruccio Busoni and Hans Pfitzner still

<sup>7</sup> The famous chapter nineteen of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Language* – titled ‘How music has degenerated’ – is a rare exception. See Rousseau 2009.

<sup>8</sup> See, among many others, Chua 1999. <sup>9</sup> See Foucault 1971.

<sup>10</sup> Krause 1839, 19. The unfinished, posthumously published manuscript was written in 1831 but is based on lectures Krause gave between 1824 and 1829.

<sup>11</sup> For an impressive analysis of evolution and progress in music historical texts, see Allen 1953.

<sup>12</sup> See Dahlhaus 1989.

quibbled about what exactly it meant for music to be described as an 'infant', though no one doubted the veracity of this image.<sup>13</sup> It had become much more than a mere metaphor. But even if one believed, as did Pfitzner, that in his day music had grown up to become a strapping – German – lad, an important difference remained: composers could create musical compositions, which could then live on as autonomous works, but, put bluntly, no musical work has ever been reported giving birth to a composer.

In the context of Darwinism this was actually a serious scholarly discussion. In 1900, Oswald Koller made a sustained attempt to transfer the principles of sexual selection to music history. For him, the musical organism was always 'the product of two factors', effectively its two genetic parents: it carried the general traits of its age, 'style', which Koller gendered as paternal, and the particular traits of its creator, 'individuality', which carried maternal traits.<sup>14</sup> The reason for his gendered choice was that the composer is the 'receptacle' of traditions from generations past, whereas 'present circumstances' constitute the fertilising elements. Koller was aware that these dual influences, one personal and the other historical and interpersonal, were qualitatively different from biological parents. He nonetheless tried to push the simile as far as he possibly could: 'Every new work has a fertilising effect not only for contemporaries and descendants, but also on its creator himself.'<sup>15</sup> We need not buy into Koller's exuberant, and sometimes tortured, attempt to argue away the asymmetry between composer and work, to see how important this biologicistic strain of thinking was at the turn of the century.

It was precisely this asymmetry that Krause had originally articulated in his distinction between 'representing life' and 'being life'. The asymmetrical relation between composer-as-creator and work-as-autonomous-organism added an awkward level of complication in the genealogies of musical evolution. The two formed two strands in a lopsided double helix of an evolutionary music history that had a habit of tying themselves in knots which were difficult to disentangle.

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<sup>13</sup> See Busoni 1916. Music is described as a young child starting on p. 7. And see Pfitzner's *Futuristengefahr* (1917), reprinted in H. Pfitzner 1926, 185–223. The image of music as a growing boy is found on p. 193.

<sup>14</sup> Koller 1901, 40. This was hardly a singular occurrence: similar attempts are found in other European contexts, such as in the work of Jules Combarieu in France, and Edmund Gurney in England.

<sup>15</sup> Koller 1901, 41.

In a world where music was a life form, music history had to solve its own chicken-and-egg problem: composer and work became so inextricably joined that music history was running the risk of turning into biography. Few music historians were as clear-sighted as Franz Stoepel, who took the most radical, and admirably logical, step in solving this problem by strictly uncoupling the history of music from that of musicians, presenting both in separate sections of his *Grundzüge der Geschichte der modernen Musik* (1821).<sup>16</sup> More commonly, only one side was foregrounded. Or both were conflated, as Guido Adler prescribed in his foundational methodology for musicology: the purpose of music history is to understand ‘the developmental process of music in works and their creators’<sup>17</sup> where all differences between these two aspects are brushed aside.

The problem leading to Adler’s indifference can be traced back right to the earliest scholarly music histories written on the continent in the 1830s. The German music historian Raphael Georg Kiesewetter led the way along the road to the great-man history of music. He rejected any division of music history according to world-historical periods, or stylistic periods, in favour of epochs named after outstanding composers, as the ‘most natural order’, offering ‘the most reliable survey’. The composers that gave their name to their age were those who had ‘left the greatest imprint on the creation of art and the taste of their contemporaries and . . . evidently advanced art to a higher degree of perfection’.<sup>18</sup>

His equally influential Belgian colleague and vociferous opponent François-Joseph Fétis, meanwhile, moved away from the figure of the composer and concentrated on the gradual unfolding of the potential inherent in the scalar material. Fétis recounted his creed: ‘I believed . . . in one scale given by nature as the basis of all music.’<sup>19</sup> The grand system Fétis had created in his concepts of the progression of stages of tonality, from *unitonique* to *omnitonique*, predicting the completion and demise of tonality was the closest music theory should come to a morphology of music history.

At face value, Fétis and Kiesewetter seem poles apart, and the extensive polemics between them, first and foremost about the nature of tonality, only serve to confirm this impression. (It might be tempting to construe this polarity in terms of differences between Francophone and Germanic cultures, but the Idealist Fétis considered himself intellectually an out-and-out German.)<sup>20</sup> Below the polemical surface, however, the

<sup>16</sup> Stoepel 1821. <sup>17</sup> Adler 1919, 13. <sup>18</sup> Kiesewetter 1834, 10. <sup>19</sup> Fétis 1869, 1:i.

<sup>20</sup> See Schelhous 1991.

historiographical basis of each can accommodate the tenets of the other. Kiesewetter in fact also conceived of music as an abstract evolving force shaped by composers, whose principles can be captured by a system of rules. Thus, in Kiesewetter's view, the Greeks had fundamentally misunderstood this system, as they had not understood harmony and polyphony – as a consequence, their 'amiable' musical child was stillborn.<sup>21</sup> And Fétis, whose first major work was, not coincidentally, a *Universal Biography of Musicians* (1835–44), held fast to the belief that each new stage of tonality was ushered in by one great composer: Monteverdi, Mozart and – much to Fétis's annoyance – Berlioz.

The difference between Kiesewetter's biographical and Fétis's structural approaches, then, turns out to be one of degree, or rather of hierarchy: are composers determined (or constrained) by the 'state of the musical material', or do they, conversely, determine (or control) this state? Their answers determined how they viewed the problem of degeneration: as Fétis argued, 'the greatest composers, whose genius was determined by the nature of the harmonic elements that they had at their disposition, could not extract themselves from the rigid despotism of this tonal unity'.<sup>22</sup> Kiesewetter, who in 1834 did not believe that music's time was up yet, would hold against this attitude that 'wherever art decayed, it decayed at the hands of the artist'.<sup>23</sup>

More generally, the dichotomy between Kiesewetter and Fétis represented opposite responses to the problem of understanding the cause and nature of progress. This great blank in the historical understanding in the nineteenth century was usually filled with the figure of the creative genius. No matter what role was assigned to the genius – whether it consisted in being a godlike 'second maker' (Shaftesbury), in giving 'nature's rule to art' (Kant), or in representing the manifestation of the world spirit (Hegel) – the genius was designated the virtually ubiquitous placeholder in art and the history of art.<sup>24</sup> The role of the genius was to bring individual achievement into alignment with the notion of a pre-ordained plan of the whole. However conceived, the concept of the genius managed to fill the gaping hole between the startling phenomenon that some individuals were responsible for historical deeds or new artworks, often in a haphazard and apparently meaningless way, and the comforting thought that (music) history would unfold in a logical underlying progression, even if its course was not always immediately apparent. With this sleight-of-hand, the

<sup>21</sup> Kiesewetter 1834, 1.    <sup>22</sup> Fétis 1849, 151.    <sup>23</sup> Kiesewetter 1834, 100.

<sup>24</sup> For a useful survey of the genius concept, see Schmidt 1985.

contention that music ‘represented life’ (was a creation) and simultaneously ‘was life’ (was a creature, an organism) in its own right, convinced generations of musical thinkers at all levels.

By means of the genius, then, the awkward problem of music’s compromised autogenetic prowess – its ‘relative autonomy’ – could be solved in an elegant way: the composer would become something that was both mother and midwife in a creative process that was at liberty to transgress certain rules with impunity. If lesser spirits were to commit them, these transgressions would have to be considered offences, but the genius was a seal of approval, vouchsafing compliance with the dictates of nature or history. Appealing to the genius implied no less than a leap of faith across this divide between ‘representing life’ and ‘being life’.

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The genius was designated to close this epistemological gap: he would create innovative works, it was asserted, of unprecedented exemplary quality.<sup>25</sup> As these works followed the exigencies of nature, their startling newness notwithstanding, the succession of these works would constitute a cogent historical narrative describing the gradual and inevitable evolution of music. Thus the unity of individual aesthetic value and general historical narrative could be preserved seamlessly. In this way, the genius and his works would simultaneously reaffirm a whole string of idealist beliefs: the equation between beauty and truth, progress and perfection, and ultimately the meaning of history as a succession of autonomous artworks.

The admiration the genius elicited from the masses or posterity was taken as the token of the unimpeachable moral quality of these works, and the educational value of a history constituted of such works. But what if the genius was not the shining beacon he was thought to be? The free rein the genius had been granted came under increasing scrutiny, as these idealist certainties fell apart in the nineteenth century. Scepticism was not unwarranted: if direct knowledge of the workings of nature or history was foreclosed to lesser individuals, that is, most of us, how could one know that the genius was not leading us astray? The story of degeneration in music can be understood as an expression of this suspicion.

Immanuel Kant wrote a note of caution into his influential reflections on genius: ‘But since [the genius] also can produce original nonsense, its products must be models, i.e. exemplary; and they consequently ought

<sup>25</sup> I consciously use masculine pronouns for the genius. See Battersby 1989.



not to spring from imitation, but must serve as a standard or rule of judgment for others.<sup>26</sup> Kant was blithely unconcerned about the wider ramifications of this point; for him the problem of nonsense was a closed system in its own right: nonsense would be recognised either by not being original or, retroactively, by its inability to have given ‘nature’s rule to art’ – that is, nonsense would not function as a model and would not produce artistic progeny. The proof, for Kant, was in the pudding, and the problem of nonsense would automatically take care of itself.

Later commentators, by contrast, were not convinced that original nonsense could never become a model. This thought would become one of the main fears within the discourse of degeneracy: What if art was following false idols, and unknowingly strayed from the path of *good* art? How would we even know we are on the right track? What is the difference between good, ‘healthy’ originality, and nonsensical innovation? As we will see, a number of critics of degeneration would invest a lot of energy trying to find ways to discriminate between true geniuses and false idols.

Insofar as the discourse of musical degeneration never questions the ‘life’ of music (and could not possibly do so) it partakes of the very idealist convictions that it claims to examine with scientific impartiality. It is here that we return to our dual approach to the phenomenon of degeneration as, on the one hand, the attempt to elevate cultural pessimism onto a scientific pedestal, and on the other, a fictionalisation of science in the service of upholding these cherished idealist values. No matter what biological model we discover underlying approaches to degeneration, and no matter what intellectual expressions we determine as requirements – physiognomy, Spencerianism, etc. – the constant factor between all of them is the conviction that some invisible underlying state of culture can be read out of artistic products. The signs of artistic decay are invariably read as symptoms of something much bigger. The relation between the composer and his creation is central to this concern, as we shall see, and it determines the way in which degeneration is imagined.

In the following, we will explore three of these main lines in which musical degeneration has been imagined, using Strauss’s *Salome* as a reference point. First, if the work of art is imagined as a fully autonomous entity that exists independently of its creator and creates its own historical trajectory then degeneration may set in with a fault in the ‘genetic code’ of the work of music. The consequences, the argument continues, will be felt

<sup>26</sup> See also Lewis 2005.

in subsequent generations if the evolution of such work strays away from a healthy development and leads in the wrong direction. (Underlying this construction is invariably a tacit conviction that a 'right' direction exists.) Second, if the individual work of art is considered as a vehicle of moral and sensuous pleasure, the main point of concern becomes the relationship between surface and deep structure. The sensuous, sounding surface – stimulating the nerves – was often seen as a danger to the spiritual content of the work of art. Not only was the composition believed to reflect the nervous disposition of the composer, but it could also gravely affect the nervous state of its listeners. And third, we will return to the figure of the genius as a surface onto which cultural fears and aspirations were projected.

All this invests a metaphor with great power. If we have to appeal to the laws of literature in order to understand the full power of the discourse of degeneration, then its force is driven by the search for closure, the quest for an ending – ideally one that is in consonance with the kind of life that music had been assigned in the first place. For all its scientific posturing, the discourse of degeneration is ultimately about the force of narrative. And the tales we hear are inescapably moralising.

## Evolutionary Models

The vehement critical reaction Strauss's *Salome* elicited is useful from our perspective, as it brings out the tacit critical assumptions and pedigreed critical dogmas more clearly than in any other musical work of the time. Both supporters and detractors of *Salome* were caught up in the nineteenth-century doctrine of organicism, in which nature metaphors abound. One enthusiastic critic of the premiere compared the opera with a 'flower of the rarest, erotic kind'. He emphasised that this 'erotic flower,' like the opera itself, was a 'product of nature'.<sup>27</sup> (Intriguingly, others misread the extravagant image as 'exotic flower'.) Most other critics disagreed. Granted that *Salome* was a product of nature, it was a musical organism gone wrong:

That which blossoms and grows in the artist through nature's touch, organises itself according to a peculiar law, emerging together with the embryo of the work of art, is a product of nature, almost without any human contribution. The science of harmony, of counterpoint, the entire theory of composition exhausts itself in the

<sup>27</sup> Hermann Boehringer, cited in Messmer 1989, 45.

focus of artistic creation and even in the slower work of elaborating, the artistic idea imperceptibly flows back together with nature. And nature never repeats itself.<sup>28</sup>

If there is such a ‘peculiar law’ in music, where is its embryonic seed located? Musical thinkers were divided between the three principal elements of music: melody, rhythm and harmony. A. B. Marx, Ernst Kurth and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, albeit coming from very different perspectives, would all appeal to the emotional force of melody. Krause, whom we encountered earlier, found himself in the diverse company of Margaret Glyn and Friedrich Schelling in choosing rhythm as music’s heartbeat.<sup>29</sup> Harmony, finally, with its traditional associations with physics, was harder to add to music’s biological functions, but it came to play a vital role nonetheless, particularly when it came to explaining evolutionary models of music.<sup>30</sup>

Before we return to *Salome*’s exotic-erotic flower, let us explore a little further how the element of harmony was construed to unfold historically. A favourite demonstration, something of a learned musical parlour game, was the evolution of the *Tristan* chord.<sup>31</sup> Donald Tovey, for instance, identified the origin of *Tristan*’s opening, shown in Figure 14.1, as a half-cadence with modal bent, as it might have been written during the sixteenth century, and showed how the music evolves following a route towards elaboration, cogently tracing the rules of voice-leading.

Tovey identified this development as an evolution from simple harmonic progressions to advanced chromatic passages. This evolution is an elaboration toward ever more intricate musical structures laid out over an imagined chronology. It is tempting to imagine this entirely hypothetical model as the musicological equivalent of Ernst Haeckel’s visually stunning, and scientifically dubious, parallel tables of human evolution (see Figure 14.2), where the developmental stages of embryos from different species are juxtaposed, suggesting that their early stages are virtually indistinguishable from one another, only gradually evolving into their characteristic shape.

All this is in support of Haeckel’s highly influential and irresistibly romantic thesis that ontogeny replicates phylogeny, that ‘the history of

<sup>28</sup> Karl Schmalz, ‘Annus Confusionis. Eine Trilogie’, in Shigihara 1990, 282. The quotation is a passage by the music critic Paul Marsop.

<sup>29</sup> A. B. Marx 1884, 443; Krause 1839, 169; Glyn 1909.

<sup>30</sup> For some pathos-ridden rhetoric see Heller 1930, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Tovey [1911] 1944, 68. For another model see Schering [1935] 1941, 132.

Evolution of the opening of Wagner's Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*

**Ex. 19** — Three concords (tonic, first inversion of subdominant, and dominant of A minor, a possible 16th-century cadence in the Phrygian mode)



**Ex. 20** — The same chords varied by a suspension (\*)



**Ex. 21** — Ditto, with the further addition of a double suspension (\*) and two passing notes (††)



**Ex. 22** — Ditto, with a chromatic alteration of the second chord (\*) and an 'essential' discord (dominant 7th) at (†)



**Ex. 23** — Ditto, with chromatic passing notes (\*\*) and appoggiaturas (††)



**Ex. 24** — The last two chords of Ex. 23 attacked unexpectedly, the first appoggiatura (\*) prolonged till it seems to make a strange foreign chord before it resolves on the short note at †, while the second appoggiatura (†) is chromatic.



**Ex. 25** — The same enharmonically transformed so as to become a variation of the 'dominant ninth' of C minor. The G# at \* is really Ab, and † is no longer a note of resolution, but a chromatic passing note.



Figure 14.1 Tovey's evolutionary model of music, from a modal turn of phrase to the *Tristan* chord, from 'Harmony', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1911).



Figure 14.2 Parallel evolution of embryos from various species. From Ernst Haeckel, *Anthropogenie* (1874), table iv/v.

the individual is the abbreviated history of the species'. He declared that the embryonic stages of higher-evolved species correspond to the former fully developed stages of its ancestral species – in other words, that each individual has to undergo a fast-forwarded summary of the entire history of evolution.<sup>32</sup>

Tovey's model also carried the same evolutionary idea with it, where each apparently historical stage in the evolution towards the *Tristan* chord represents one stepping stone which carries all the previous stages in itself and is in turn superseded by a more complex manifestation. Putting his organicist cards on the table, Tovey explains his ambition to show that the laws of harmony 'are true to the nature of art and are no mere rules of a game'.<sup>33</sup> On one level, such evolutionary tables could be seen as exemplifications of the principle with which Adler began his programmatic exposition of a stylistic history of music:

<sup>32</sup> See Gould 1977, 1981. <sup>33</sup> Tovey 1944, 44.

The development of musical art is organic. In continuous succession one evolutionary moment links up with the next to bring the organism to completion. The individual phenomena can be viewed from different perspectives. For the purpose of historical depiction, that which shows the phenomena in their temporal succession offers the most readily intelligible perspective.<sup>34</sup>

The unilinearity from one historical level to the next suggested in these constructs makes an impressive plea – visually more so than aurally – for the organic evolution of the chromatic harmony of *Tristan*. The *Tristan* chord is shown to carry within it the whole history of Western harmony from humble beginnings to its most complex flowering. In this representation nothing appears illogical, wilfully contrived or artificial – it follows in a stringent progression.

The *Tristan* chord is, of course, not just any chord. This enigmatic harmonic–contrapuntal complex stood emblematically for the pinnacle of musical modernity – or the beginning of the end of harmonic tonality.<sup>35</sup> While not explicitly claimed by either author, it is almost impossible not to read such an evolutionary table as a powerful visual argument against the widespread assertions that Wagner’s music constituted the main degenerative force in late nineteenth-century culture.<sup>36</sup> As if to liberate Wagner’s music from the taint of *fin-de-siècle* decadence, Tovey added mischievously that Wagner’s sense of key was no different from Beethoven’s (whose vigour and ‘health’ was never in any doubt), except carried out on a broader temporal span.

As far as stylistic history is concerned, however, Tovey’s idea of evolution is distinctly dubious. The actual argument presented here lies in the continuity and cogency suggested in the presentation. The historical trajectory providing the explanatory logic for Wagner’s famous opening bars is clearly constructed backwards, beginning with the *Tristan* opening, not culminating in it. After all, only by means of this teleology can the historical narration protect the work against accusations of degeneration, real or imaginary. Like Haeckel’s example, the evolutionary progression from modal polyphony towards *Tristan* is nothing but a theoretical systematisation spread out over quasi-historical instantiations, amounting to an arbitrary succession of stylistic stages. Likewise, the assumed succession of musical styles, progressing towards ever-clearer distinction and individuality, and culminating and concentrating in a single work is a

<sup>34</sup> Adler 1880, col. 690.    <sup>35</sup> Kurth 1920.

<sup>36</sup> A wonderful example is Edmund Gurney’s vividly synaesthetic description of *Tristan* in ‘Wagner and Wagnerism’, in *Tertium Quid* (1899), 2:19. See also Kennaway 2012a.

questionable historiographical assumption, albeit one that perfectly replicates the basic idea of ontogeny-as-phylogeny. In this way, the organic work of art functions as both a representative of a distinct style and as an autonomous living organism in its own right.

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Unfortunately for Strauss, his critics felt that none of this applied to *Salome*. According to organicist dogma, it was nature that warranted the character of art, and in so doing nature set absolute limitations to art. The ways in which nature apparently indicated these limitations reflected the staples of nineteenth-century music theory: according to the critics, nature constituted itself variously in the harmonic series, in closed forms, in the rules of counterpoint, or indeed in the healthy sentiment of the nation.<sup>37</sup> And Strauss seemed to fall foul of all these authorities in some respect.

The problem was identified in his colourful orchestration, his overly refined handling of timbre, and ultimately his provenance from the dreaded genre of programme music:

The combination of instrumental colours went hand in hand with the dissolution of form. And colour without form?! Perhaps the germ of such sudden decay must be sought in this untenable state [i.e. the impossibility of colours to hold up without form]. In any case, the germ of decay was that one began alienating autonomous music from its very own primordial essence . . . Nothing good could come of this.<sup>38</sup>

If the very own *Ur*-essence of music resided in autonomous forms, then this musical essence was denied by Strauss's composition. However, another aspect is implied in this critic's assessment of the situation: when he uses the organicist metaphor of 'the germ of decay' he adds a historical dimension to the argument. The germ is not merely the musical idea but an expression of cultural pessimism. What is at stake is no less than the future of music. From this angle, programmatic elements that Strauss composed out in his score – such as the initial rustling of the rising curtain – become signs of the Decline of the West.

Draeseke went one step further: in *Salome* 'there are moments that cannot be explained in purely musical terms and that I therefore cannot assess as music'.<sup>39</sup> Strauss had committed the cardinal sin of overstepping the boundaries of what was considered music. A particular thorn in the critics' side was the double-bass solo during Jochanaan's off-stage

<sup>37</sup> Arno Kleffel, 'Ueber Konfusion in der Musik', in Shigihara 1990, 145; P. Pfitzner 1905, 903.

<sup>38</sup> Schmalz, in Shigihara 1990, 286.

<sup>39</sup> Felix Draeseke, 'Offene Antwort an Richard Strauß', in Shigihara 1990, 173.

execution. Strauss's performance instruction indicates: 'Instead of pressing down [the string], this tone is to be played by tightly holding the string between thumb and index finger; a short sharp attack with the bow so as to create a sound that resembles the suppressed sighing and moaning of a woman.'<sup>40</sup> Zooming in on this moment, one critic commented sarcastically:

So that's what all the fuss is about. If this entire development began by creating means and forms that were adequate to great contents, then it ended by characterising possible and impossible things: in particular, music became more and more characteristic, until it comprised the ugly and the sick . . . – and lost its character altogether.<sup>41</sup>

Here again, degeneration of a purported musical essence is telescoped into the historical dimension, heralding the end of music at large. The problem of degeneration is, on one level, one of musical progress-as-procreation. Here the metaphors of reproduction that abound in the debate – 'erotic flower', 'germ cell', 'embryo' – come to full effect: after all, it is sex that is at the core of the opera.

Non-reproductive sex, to be specific: Herod's lust for his step-daughter, Herodias' sublimated desire for power, Salome's necrophilia, Narraboth's masochistic longing for Salome, the little page's homosexual feelings for Narraboth. And behind all this, as the more reactionary critics eagerly reminded their readers, lay the sexual perversion of playwright Oscar Wilde.<sup>42</sup> No surprise, then, that sexual reproduction was seen as a danger – or as an opportunity – in the critical responses to *Salome*. Ferruccio Busoni made this genealogical thought more explicit than anyone else, albeit in unreservedly positive terms:

In art everything changes step by step. With this *Salome* such a step may have been taken on the top of other manifestations which will hurry on to the ascent of a new and higher step. Every son has the stuff of his ancestors in him – by his side flourish a hundred other species.<sup>43</sup>

What Busoni celebrated here encapsulated the worst fears of the detractors of *Salome*, for it might indeed herald no less than the end of music – at least a music that works on the basis of triads and counterpoint and complies with the 'healthy sentiment of the nation'. Added to these limitations set by nature are those from Idealist aesthetics:

<sup>40</sup> Strauss 2009, 294. <sup>41</sup> Schmalz, in Shigihara 1990, 285.

<sup>42</sup> See for instance, Adam Röder, quoted in Puffett 1989, 133. <sup>43</sup> Busoni in Puffett 1989, 140.



Topics of a more or less explicitly sexual nature are nothing unusual in modern art but rather tend to represent the norm. The limitations should not be set by moral but by artistic interests. Sex may well find its place in rustic anecdotes and cheap novels, in the variety show – as much as is allowed by the police, this has nothing to do with art. From the artist, however, we demand the highest sensitivity – not out of prudishness but for the sake of art itself. One loves to talk about modern liberated art, which does not close off anything human or natural. Nothing may be closed off but it closes itself off from anything that cannot be spiritualised, anything that remains animalistic. Schiller – who will surely be a philistine for the new composers of decadence – demarcates this boundary by calling on the artists: ‘The dignity of humankind is laid in your hands. It is yours to preserve!’<sup>44</sup>

This critic spelled out what others assumed tacitly: the categories on which *Salome* was assessed are ultimately derived from German Idealism. While in German philosophy the unity of goodness, truth and beauty had come under suspicion at least since Nietzsche, this dubious triumvirate still ruled strong in the field of music criticism (or was invoked when it seemed convenient). Even though this Idealism had acquired a distinct Darwinian tinge in the later nineteenth century, it was on the basis of this surviving Idealism that several critics made a direct connection between the ethical import of the work and its technical features.

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Let’s take a step back from Strauss’s *Salome* again, to consider the wider implications. For the conclusion that Strauss had somehow overstepped a mark and had turned ‘good’ progress into ‘bad’ degeneration is, of course, an arbitrary decision. Busoni’s glowing assessment has no greater or lesser validity than the abject dismissal of the conservative critics, and the moral dimension attached to their aesthetic judgment is, at bottom, just as metaphorical – just as meaningful or meaningless – as the evolutionary trajectory critics drew to bolster their respective positions.

For an object like music, whose commentators steadfastly refuse to decide whether it ‘represents’ life or ‘is’ life, the imagined processes of evolution, based on graphic chains of metamorphoses, need not in principle continue in one direction only. Even the nineteenth century itself, though overawed by the idea of evolution, knew that such graphic evidence could easily be manipulated. The French caricaturist J. J. Grandville latched

<sup>44</sup> Georg Göhler, ‘Richard Strauß’, in Shigihara 1990, 212.



Figure 14.3 J. J. Grandville, 'L'homme descend vers le brute', *Magasin pittoresque* 14 (1843), p. 108.

on to the reversibility of these images, showing (Figure 14.3), how the developmental chains could overshoot the goal and go the other way: from a child, via the adult stage, and gradually metamorphose into an ape-like brute in chains.<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to tell whether Grandville is making a commentary on social decline or physiological degeneration, but in nineteenth-century French discourse, as Daniel Pick has shown, the differences were negligible.<sup>46</sup> The graphic evidence documents this process of degeneration with equally compelling force as Tovey showed musical progress as a forward-propelled process.

Musical degeneration is always based on an interpretative act. The paradigmatic trajectory of organic process describes a succession of germination, flourishing and decay. Always interested in endings, degeneration does not accept the period of decay as an inevitable part of this trajectory but regards it as irreconcilable with the mantra of progress – 'up and up and up, and on and on and on'<sup>47</sup> – and treats it as the symptom of a disease that has befallen the organism.

This idea of identifying a turning point beyond which history cannot progress is at the heart of the discourse of musical degeneracy. No one has put this thought more concisely than the music historian August Wilhelm Ambros, who was the first to assign the composers of the 'New German School', Wagner and Liszt, a place in history in 1860:

<sup>45</sup> See Blindman 2002. <sup>46</sup> Pick 1989, 37–44. <sup>47</sup> Pick 1989, 13.

The direction of these artists memorably signifies the point toward which historical evolution has moved music at large. Of course, excessive rigour in follow-up efforts will lead to doom, and in any development there is a certain point, which is its actual, true ‘point of life’, beyond which any further development turns into *degeneration*, and will eventually fall into the abyss of aimlessness.<sup>48</sup>

The art of the music-historian-as-diagnostician was to identify this turning point in history, when progress turns into degeneration, and to establish criteria on the basis of which such pronouncements can be made authoritatively. There was little dispute about the existence of such a turning point, but it was much harder to gain consensus on the moment when this turning point was reached – and why.

The basis on which this music is judged as degenerate (or, conversely, as ‘healthy’) is much more difficult to determine. Most arguments hark back to a simpler age when, as in the eighteenth century, aesthetics could draw on a *sensus communis* and a unified, authoritative notion of taste, and before evolutionary thought introduced a stringent historical dimension into musical thinking. Eighteenth-century aestheticians availed themselves of a notion of ‘correct music’ that could become the normative basis of judgment.<sup>49</sup> In the nineteenth century, however, such consensus was much harder to achieve, and democratic tendencies were often blamed for the disintegration of taste. As a consequence, the rhetorical volume had to be cranked up to retain an authoritative sense of unity in matters of taste.

For example, the respected Italian physiologist Paolo Mantegazza turned his medical authority to a blistering cultural critique in which he argued that there can be no debate over matters of taste. For him, this was not a question of opinion, taste, aesthetics or even physiology, but of plain pathology:

Whoever loves the baroque and confuses it with the sublime, whoever seeks out the grotesque and considers it to be great, whoever cannot separate the ornate from the graceful, the common from the plain, the new from the beautiful – this person is a degenerate, a mentally sick man, his aesthetic sense is diseased.<sup>50</sup>

This abject condemnation was brought about by the abomination of a woman combining a green dress with a yellow scarf. With the benefit of hindsight, the stern health warnings of Mantegazza and other men of science can merely seem like a historical and hysterical curiosity, but we do well not to dismiss these questionable pronouncements too lightly. Learned men pronounced apparently eternal truths from the bully pulpit

<sup>48</sup> Ambros 1860, 174. <sup>49</sup> See Hentschel 2006. <sup>50</sup> Mantegazza 1891, 135.

of science in a world that appeared to be changing all too rapidly and to be leaving behind any sense of stable common ground. For some, at any rate, there was considerable comfort to be gained from hearing that there was an absolute and non-negotiable line between good and bad, sublime and baroque, ornate and graceful, or right and wrong – particularly if it was couched in the clearly marked terms of sickness and health.

The danger of cultural degeneracy always lay in its contagious effects. Its excess could hardly be contained and always threatened to spill over into other areas: from music into noise, from one work into a whole historical trajectory, and from sound into amorality. What was at stake was always the stability of the (implied) definition of the good, true and beautiful. By the late nineteenth century it was hardly possible to define these in positive terms, but they could still be captured negatively – or so it seemed – as degenerate deviations from these implied positives that would in this way define and circumscribe that which was asserted to be self-evidently and emphatically normal. But how would unassuming listeners protect themselves from the dangerous effects of such degenerate music?

### Pathogenic Sonorities

The discourse of degeneracy is complicated by the fact that there is another dimension cutting across the (quasi-)temporal axis of the evolutionary models we just examined. The evolutionary chains are often not merely to be read diachronically, as developmental chains that unfold (and inescapably decline) over time, but also ‘in depth’. This second axis is based on the belief that appearance can provide important insights into underlying ethical qualities. We already saw this in the invocation of Schiller’s artistic ideals, forging connections between sounding surface and underlying morals. This idea of the unity of the beautiful and the good – often called *kalokagathia* – was revived in the eighteenth century, particularly by the Earl of Shaftesbury, and it was eagerly adopted by other scholars, most famously the physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater.

Physiognomy concerned itself with the interpretation of physical features in terms of its relation to the underlying moral character. Lavater was well known for another brand of developmental chains that bear some resemblance to the later evolutionary models of Haeckel and his colleagues, and no less visually stunning than those, though they actually signified something rather different. Take Lavater’s famous transformation from a frog to Apollo



**Figure 14.4a** Johann Kasper Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775–78), [Vom Frosch zum Apollo Belvedere], Tables LXXVIII/LXXIX. Image used courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

in Figure 14.4a, as an imagined spectrum from the very ugly to the epitome of perfect beauty. These kinds of chains were closer in outlook to the medieval *scala naturae*, the immutable hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being, than to any evolutionary process, and they served as an illustration of the various levels of moral standing that are attainable by various creatures.

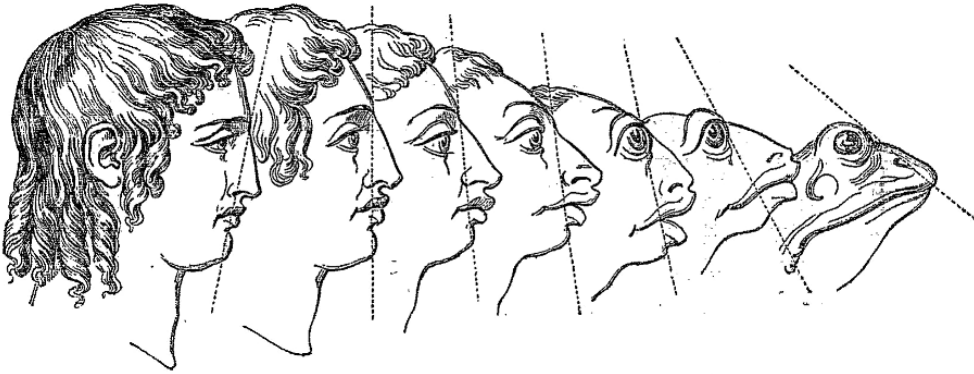
In the context of a culture, however, that became obsessed with evolutionary biology, or rather its popular reception, a parallel reading of these images with the diachronic evolutionary tables was almost invariably imposed. Grandville, for one, irreverently inverted the image (Figure 14.4b), in exactly the same way he had prognosticated



Figure 14.4a (cont.)

the degenerative evolution from human to ape, suggesting a parallelism between these two very different kinds of evolutions. By turning the succession back to front, his caricature exposes the merely visual appeal on which the supposed coherence hinges in such chains of images. And of course, the discourse of degeneration conflated precisely the temporal dimensions of evolution and the ‘depth’ dimension of an underlying morality that could apparently be read out of anatomical features.

The circle around Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, much-revered dedicatee of Max Nordau’s *Entartung*, gained fame and notoriety for their large-scale quantitative studies measuring facial features of criminals and comparing them with those of law-abiding – emphatically ‘normal’ – citizens in order to gauge whether physiological abnormalities could serve as



**Figure 14.4b** J. J. Grandville, [L'homme descend vers la grenouille], *Magasin pittoresque* 15 (1844), p. 272.

predictors for socially abnormal and criminal behaviour. It would be wrong to assume that the discourse of degeneration simply inverted the idea of *kalokagathia* and posited that the ugly was coterminous with the morally repugnant – things were never *that* straightforward. Rather, Lombroso sought to prove that there is one model of anatomical normalcy and that any deviations from this normal standard would signify underlying flaws of character.

A firm believer in the ontology-replicates-phylogeny parallelism, Lombroso argued that anomalous physiological features were not markers of disease or hereditary traits, but rather signs of ‘atavism,’ a regression to an earlier stage in our evolutionary past. With the word ‘stigmata’, which Lombroso used to refer to these physiological atavisms, he chose an etymologically correct but culturally loaded term.<sup>51</sup> These stigmata linked modern humans with their developmental ancestors – and here the idea of ontogeny-replicates-phylogeny allowed Lombroso to freely lump together apes, savages and children. As the stigmata gave visible proof that these individuals had reverted to earlier evolutionary – less civilised – stages, it seemed self-evident that they would have regressed in their social behaviour as well. Following this logic, the deviations from anatomical normalcy could thus help scientists to read an innate propensity toward crime and antisocial behaviour out of the physiological make-up of individuals afflicted with such stigmata. In the words of Stephen Jay Gould, Lombroso’s ‘born criminal pursues his destructive ways because he is, literally, a savage in our midst – and we can recognise him because he carries the morphological signs of an apish past’.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Lombroso 2006. <sup>52</sup> Gould 1977, 120.

In the field of music, especially non-representational music, the connections between moral comportment, anatomy and heredity were somewhat less straightforward – largely because the double notion of music ‘as life’ and ‘representing life’ made concepts of evolution and heredity more complicated. Only few musicians made attempts to transfer an explicit notion of ‘atavism’ to the realm of music history.<sup>53</sup> But this did not deter scholars from observing the musical surface very closely to get a clearer view of what lurked behind it.

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What had been conceptualised in the evolutionary models as a process of decline unfolding in the diachronic domain was being reconfigured in this discourse into the synchronic dimension of depth and surface. Criticism was expected to look behind the sounding surface and to penetrate the deep structure of the musical work. In Kurth’s immortal words: ‘The gaze into music is veiled by sounds.’<sup>54</sup> The ‘correctness’ of the music was judged according to that which did not simply meet the ear.

The idea that composers were fascinated by the surface of music, which would somehow constitute a danger, was widespread among *fin-de-siècle* music critics and aestheticians. The general consensus was that a focus on the surface, a process of externalisation, obscured the deep structure of the music and, more broadly, that the sensuous features of music might take over from the deep intellectual pursuit that characterised particularly the tradition of instrumental music.<sup>55</sup>

Even where there was no explicit concept of a Schenkerian *Ursatz*, musical and cultural critics saw certain dangers emanating from too much focus on the sounding surface. The sensuous dimension of orchestration, which had stubbornly resisted structural analysis throughout the nineteenth century, was a central concern in this respect. The idea that instrumental timbre might be used to paper over structural flaws was widely accepted. Kurth, the first music theorist to analyse Strauss’s *Salome*, argued that ‘considerable mollification of the harshnesses [of harmonic clashes] is always found in the instrumentation’.<sup>56</sup>

Some critics saw a genuine threat emanating from instrumental sounds:

<sup>53</sup> See for instance, Koller 1901, 42. <sup>54</sup> Kurth 1920, 3. <sup>55</sup> See Watkins 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Kurth 1920, 136.



The study of instrumental sounds belongs in the chapter of musical stimuli, that is, based on their effects on the nervous system. This can, under certain circumstances, attain a degree that the stimulus becomes pathological. In more recent times especially, pathological stimuli play a major part in music, and there is many an artist who works with instrumentation almost exclusively.<sup>57</sup>

Some critics prescribed sonically 'neutral' piano arrangements to spare overly sensitive nerves. In this line of thought, the purest music is silence, unencumbered by sounds.

The idea that instrumental sounds are somehow 'pathological' resonated with music critics of the earlier nineteenth century, and was famously highlighted by Eduard Hanslick.<sup>58</sup> 'Pathological' listening wallows in sounds and excites the nerves. He set up his own strategy of formal appreciation of musical works in sharp opposition to the 'pathological listening' which reacted to the glittering acoustical surface of musical works, ignoring the underlying structural features. Hanslick's example shows as well that the criticism of 'pathological' music is not only focused on the relationship between the genius composer and musical evolution, but expands the circle of influence to the relationship between music and listener.

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The term 'pathological' is not randomly chosen: it allows, on the one hand, a connection to the scientific advances of musical perception, and on the other, it raises the frightful possibility of music no longer appealing to traditional 'ethos' (character), but instead attaching itself to 'pathos' (experience).<sup>59</sup> In other words, music would no longer be a spiritual force, as especially idealists had demanded, but rather a force that worked directly on the body.

In the final analysis, the squeamishness about the sensuous surface of music leads us back down the road to sensuousness and eroticism. The attitude of the Victorian period toward sexuality is famously complex. The Darwinian line that was promoted in certain circles about the function of music in sexual selection did not help those who felt uncomfortable with the sensuous dimension of music. Darwin himself had

<sup>57</sup> Schaeffer 1877, 8.

<sup>58</sup> For instance, in his *Vorlesungen über Musik* (1826), Hans Georg Nägeli suggests performing symphonies as piano duets to prevent sensual stimuli from impinging too much on the perception of music. See Sponheuer 1987, 173.

<sup>59</sup> See, for instance, Painter 1995, 238.

suggested, based on his speculations on birdsong, that music was an important part of rituals of sexual attraction. Koller, the most outspoken Darwinian among the musicologists, applied this idea more rigorously than anyone:

In the competition for females it is not only the strongest males that remain victorious but also those that stand out over and above all other competitors on account of exceptionally decorative colours, plumage, song, etc. The parallel in music, it seems, is the observation that here, too, the splendour of the exterior means of expression, in the form of virtuosity, catchy instrumentation, new surprising effects, etc. is continuously augmented and intensified.<sup>60</sup>

Koller argued that this principle of 'sexual selection' in the musical domain was responsible for a natural tendency toward progressively coarsening audience tastes. But here Koller followed Spencer rather than Darwin: according to the latter's musical rule of the 'survival of the fittest', compositions lacking in splendour and appeal would 'die out' by no longer gaining favour with audiences and eventually not being performed.

Koller came close to naturalising market capitalism in the concert hall. His cheerful Spencerianism is perhaps an indication of anti-elitist, democratic tendencies inherent in his thought. How valid these are in practice is another question, as Koller seems to imagine audiences as unsusceptible to manipulation. However, his optimism seems wilfully to repress a problem that loomed large in more pessimistic commentators' minds: the lowering of standards to please audiences, in the service of a musical kind of sexual selection. More sensual music leads down the road of immediate sensual effects without reflection.

In this respect, Strauss's orchestral technique was deemed particularly suspicious, as it threatened to supplant the intelligibility of the formal aspects of his music. For one critic, this has grave consequences:

The iridescent beauty of the orchestra is admirable but its incapability of creating a single fully shaped musical idea from this chaos of colours is deplorable . . . The only thing we do not get is redeeming melody, redeeming music. From the rotting vaults of the drama this shapeless windy music blows up dust and dirt that cause the listener to suffocate.<sup>61</sup>

As seen before, beauty – and any ensuing ethical qualities – are bound up with form. Strauss's orchestral counterpoint particularly arouses suspicion:

<sup>60</sup> Koller 1901, 48.    <sup>61</sup> Gräner 1905, 438.

The reckless brutalities of the contrapuntal voice-leading, in strange opposition to the refined, sophisticated instrumentation, the contorted progressions, the frequent use of melodically vacuous passages and trills, the merely external, sensual, splendid [but] screaming orchestral colours: all these feature in Strauss's compositions bear witness to a disturbed psychological state, which has lost a sense of the true beauty of clear, pure form and controlled power within bounds.<sup>62</sup>

Other critics harboured the same fears that counterpoint and orchestration might team up against musical form. Some responded by charging ahead and denying Strauss any artistic qualities:

This kind of contrapuntal work is child's play. The fact that Strauss immediately becomes banal whenever, for the sake of contrast, he works without it, confirms the suspicion that this bold technique is only needed, out of embarrassment, as a shroud to cover up his lack of invention.<sup>63</sup>

Even though Strauss's technique was supposedly mere child's play, it took another seven years before anyone seriously engaged analytically with the music. Kurth provided the theoretical framework in which harmony, counterpoint and orchestration were brought together in forever historically changing constellations.

Kurth's concept of 'disalteration' suggests that a pitch in a triad is chromatically altered in two different ways simultaneously. From this perspective, shown in Figure 14.5, the opening gesture, with the sweeping clarinet run over a non-standard exoticist scale, becomes a simple C $\flat$ -minor plagal cadence, with the F $\flat$ -minor subdominant disaltered to comprise D and C $\flat$ . It *sounds* like a non-functional dominant-seventh chord in second inversion but its actual function would be veiled by this disalteration. Likewise, bar 3 becomes a sustained C $\flat$ -minor chord with a doubly-altered fifth (A and G $\flat$ ). By this means, Kurth's analysis lifts 'the shroud that covers up' the opening passage.

Kurth recognised that disalteration bore within it the seed of the destruction of tonality. In the most extreme case, from Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre*, a dominant ninth chord can simply be 'disaltered' into a whole-note scale. Kurth explored how disaltered chords shift the focus away from harmonies towards voice-leading, from the vertical to the horizontal dimension. The voice-leading from disaltered chord to disaltered chord was often associated with harsh clashes but, as Kurth assured his readers, these contrapuntal harshnesses were mollified by means of orchestration. Put more ominously, Strauss's luscious, beguiling orchestration would function as the veil that

<sup>62</sup> Gräner 1905, 436–7. <sup>63</sup> Göhler, 'Richard Strauß', in Shigihara 1990, 216.

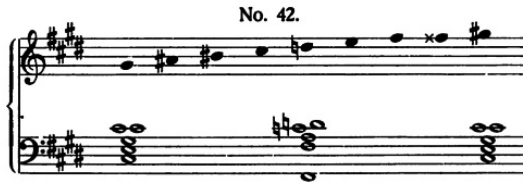
Denkt man sich in der einfachen Kadenz:



im fis-Akkord die Quinte Cis disalteriert, so resultiert:



Eine dieser Kadenz zugehörige Skala:



ergibt den melodisch höchst interessanten Klarinettenlauf des 1. Taktes. Im nächstfolgenden Takte wird unter dem in den Streichern tremolierten Cis-moll-Akkord der Ton Gis chromatisch umspielt, ohne selbst nochmals angeschlagen zu werden, die Harmonie, auf der das Motiv ruht, ist also Cismoll mit disalterierter Quinte. Analog ist der in Quintolen geschriebene Lauf des nächsten Taktes über der Akkordfolge:

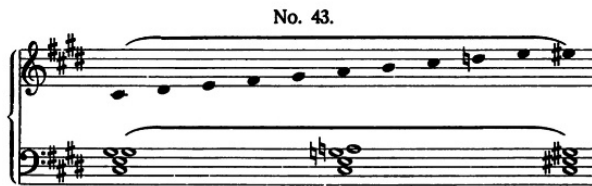


Figure 14.5 Ernst Kurth's analysis of the opening bars of *Salome*, from *Die Voraussetzungen der theoretischen Harmonik* (1913), p. 138.

rendered inaudible the degeneration that had found its way into the harmonic and contrapuntal structures of his music.

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We cannot know whether Kurth's principle of 'disalteration' in fact offered the music-theoretical representation, the technical basis of degeneration, that the critics in the wake of Draeseke's polemic had imagined, or indeed whether his notion of 'disalteration' is really the altered gene that causes the musical embryo to go astray from form, beauty and morality. Kurth refrained from engaging in the kind of cultural criticism that had surrounded the opera just a few years previously. (Schoenberg's extended tonality, by contrast, was regarded as another harbinger of doom.) However, Kurth's explanations *do* provide a model that goes a long way

to tying together various threads (or threats) that were articulated somewhat sketchily in the responses to Strauss's *Salome*. Kurth's developmental history of musical parameters – which, significantly, was devoid of any of the pessimistic outlook that characterised the critical discourse around *Salome* – helps us understand why Strauss's rich orchestration and his programmatic proclivities were regarded with such horror in the critical context of organicism. Put polemically, if skilful orchestration could function as a shroud to cover up the underlying decaying structure, if the limitations set by nature could thus be surreptitiously expanded, then music might be in a worse state than meets the eye: the fear of degeneration reveals itself in the last instance as a formalist fear of sound.

This fear of sonic phenomena, of appearances, may be reflected on the various veils, shrouds and curtains that pervade both the opera and the critical language in which it is, well, clothed. Cultural historian Aleida Assmann reminds us that veils and curtains essentially fulfil the same function: both can conceal and reveal a secret.<sup>64</sup> In that sense, the opening few bars representing the rising curtain are no less revelatory than the sexual core of the opera, Salome's dance of the seven veils. Both harbour secrets that ought not to be revealed.

Or do they? Is it not the veil, the curtain, that only *makes* the secret? What matters is the concealment giving rise to our expectations of a revelation, more so than the object that is to be revealed. To return to the image with which we started, the advisories and warning signs serve to *alert* us to some monstrosity that is to follow, and that we might otherwise not even have noted. From this angle, the critics' real fear turns out to be the (no less monstrous) situation where the lifted veil reveals that nothing had been hidden in the first place.

In the critical discourse around Draeseke's polemic, however, the veil had been turned into the antiseptic linens of the hospital bed to which the patient modern music had been confined. With its belief in organicism and a normative notion of beauty, the concept of degeneracy mainly served to identify the musical object in negative terms: *Salome* emerges as the product of a misguided musical progress, the parameters of which are defined by its deviation from the purportedly natural limitations. The diagnosis of musical degeneration in *Salome* is a reconstruction of an elusive idea of what might constitute 'healthy music'. This diagnosis is premised on a self-evident understanding of healthy music. It is only an

<sup>64</sup> Assmann 1997.

apparent paradox that this interest in ‘healthy music’ emerged at precisely the time when *Salome* was pronounced irrecoverably sick.

Only outside of this heated polemical context was it possible to take a broader stance on the meaning of degeneration, the ‘dark side of progress’, as a *necessary* by-product of the nineteenth-century ideology of progress.<sup>65</sup> The *Edinburgh Review*, surveying the recent philosophical literature on the topic, observed sagely: ‘Degeneration is a necessary accompaniment of progress. We must look upon it with no teleological disfavour but as a normal manifestation of evolutionary change, set up in response to environmental conditions.’<sup>66</sup>

The contentious case of Strauss’s *Salome* clearly shows the stakes: in the relentless forward surge of progress and the transcendental homelessness that characterised the modern condition, it became more important than ever to assert stability and control over a world that had apparently lost any sense of stable values. By emphatically excluding artworks such as *Salome*, by branding them with the Cain’s mark of degeneracy, cultural critics asserted their authority in demarcating a space for ‘normality’ – though couched in the unassailable scientific metaphors of ‘health’ and ‘nature’ – to give them a sense of the cultural stability that they so sorely lacked.

## Hearing the End

In *Der Fall Wagner* Nietzsche interpolated a proclamation in French, ‘*Wagner est une névrose.*’ He could expect his educated contemporaries to hear the resonances: the French psychiatrist Moreau de Tours had made a similarly terse pronouncement: ‘*Le génie est une névrose.*’<sup>67</sup> For Moreau, madness and genius were congeneric, ‘*in radice convenient*’.<sup>68</sup> This judgment was eagerly picked up all over Europe: the psychological literature on the genius at the turn of the century was legion. But what exactly does it mean when genius and madman ‘come together at the root’? Obviously, the common ground between genius and the madman lay in the deviation from the norm: both had a penchant for thinking ‘outside the box’, and this could lead to culturally useful results in the case of the one or not, in the case of the other. Beyond that, there was no agreement on how to relate degeneracy and genius. For every Lombroso, arguing that madmen and

<sup>65</sup> Chamberlin and Gilman 1985. <sup>66</sup> [unsigned] 1911a, 138–64.

<sup>67</sup> Moreau 1859, 464. This statement was eagerly taken up and quoted by Lombroso.

<sup>68</sup> Moreau 1859, 493.

geniuses were closely related, there was a Nordau, who pronounced them irreconcilably opposed.

The two positions reflected their own underlying biases. Lombroso's examination always began with the physiology of the creator, showing large overlaps between the insane and the genius.<sup>69</sup> He saw non-causal parallels between 'healthy geniuses', 'insane geniuses' and the 'insane without any special gifts'. To Nordau, however, that there might be any form of overlap of these groups was anathema. Analysing cultural creations to infer the mental state of their creators would simply not allow for such a possibility.

It was common in psychologists' circles to analyse the creative artworks of their patients and to examine them for clues as to their psychic make-up. But in a world where the creations flowing from the geniuses' nibs develop a life of their own and affect the world around them, the stakes are particularly high. The logic of musical degeneracy posited a closed circle: 'A lack of chastity in artistic creation will always be avenged by diseases of the art, which have a dangerous effect back on the artist.'<sup>70</sup> What exactly these 'diseases of the art' are and how exactly they afflict their environment remained unclear; the boundary between metaphor and reality remained tantalisingly undefined.

In its ill-defined boundaries, however, degeneracy in music could hardly be contained: music affected health and sickness of individuals in mysterious ways, as it did society at large. There is no distinction between individual and collective (whether it be identified biologically as race or sociologically as community), though given the strong organicist overtones of the discourse of degeneracy, these conflations should come as no surprise. The burden was firmly on the composers. Musing on the agency of the individual composer, Adler underlined: 'Every being carries the germ of decay in him, and the greatest deed of a human is not seldom the cause of his fall.'<sup>71</sup> Pure organicist lore, this rule has little to do with biology or evolution – or with history, for that matter. It is nothing other than Aristotle's *harmartia*, the 'fatal flaw' of the tragic hero.

As we saw, the laws of degeneration are invariably the laws of literature; its fears are based on the poetic justice that its practitioners fear the real world has denied them. No wonder that listening to *Salome* on the radio motivates a character in Alfred Döblin's novel *Hamlet* to move to Paris and to degrade into prostitution. No wonder that George Du Maurier's wholly unmusical Trilby, whose singing enchants her fawning audiences as

<sup>69</sup> See Lombroso 1864 and especially 1894. <sup>70</sup> Raff 1854, 183. <sup>71</sup> Adler 1911, 28.

Svengali extends his dark powers over her, became the best-selling novel of the 1890s. No wonder that it is the self-absorbed twins of Thomas Mann's *Wälsungenblut*, like those of Elimir Bourges's *Crépuscules des Dieux*, who are inspired by Wagner's music to consummate incest as an act of higher purity.

Despite all the cultural fear-mongering, in real life music has never effected such moral decrepitude. The discourse of degeneration adopts the persona and the authority of the scientist, and puts him (there is little ambiguity about the gender) in power over the narrative. He decides when the story is over and how it ends – as long as he abides by the rules of poetic justice. As a man of science, who can get below the sounding surface, he is in a position to tell us what the rest of us cannot hear but which may be of baleful influence to the rest of us. And as a poetic figure, his stories will always follow the same moralising archetypes, asserting order over a world that has become complicated and unstable. He tells us, in categorical terms that allow no objections, how to separate right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, healthy from unhealthy. Audiences at the time would ignore these health warnings at their own peril. What the frightened – and titillated – public rarely realised was that those pronouncements were, in the most literal of senses, works of science fiction.