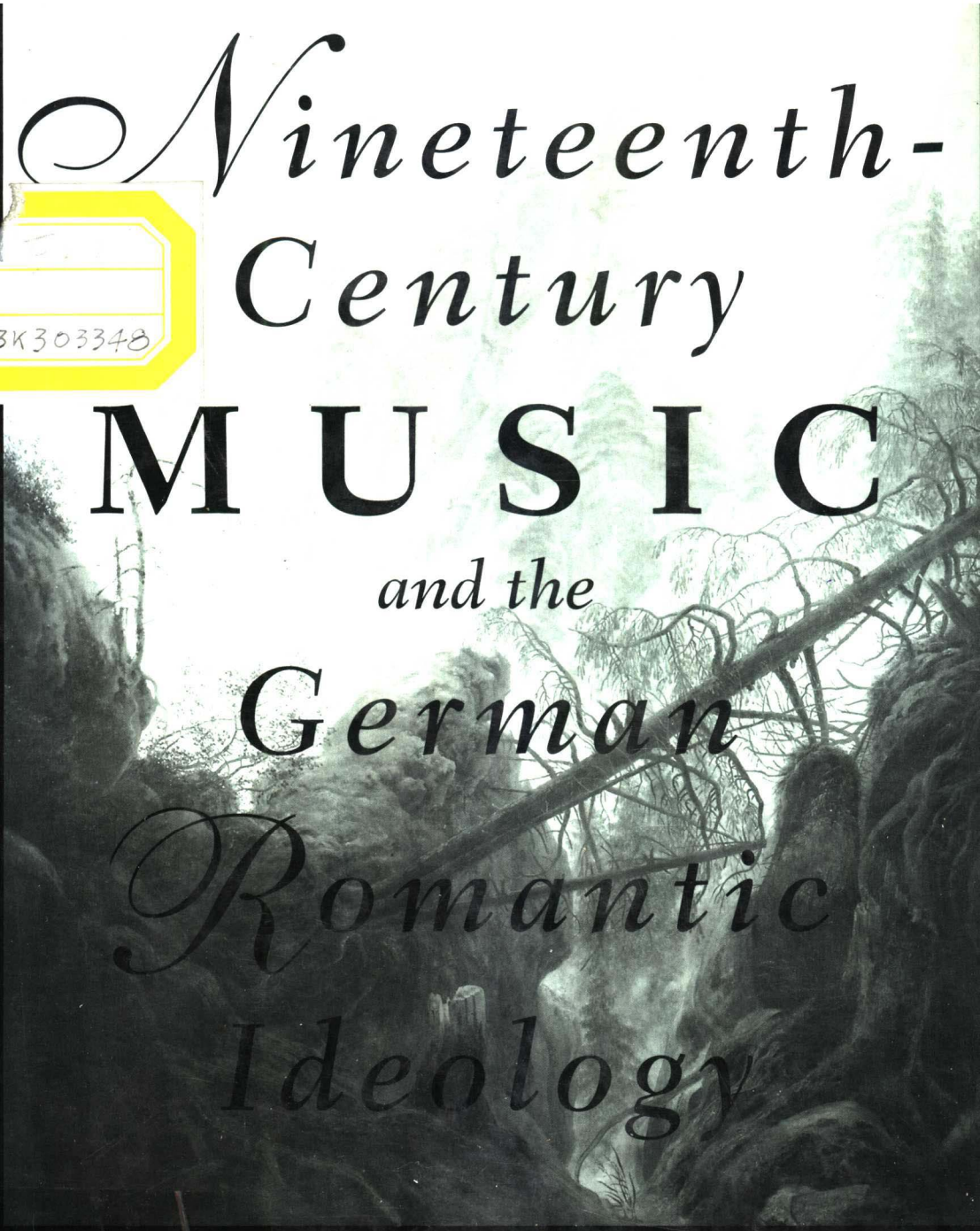
Nineteenth-Century MUSIC and the German Romantic Ideology



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Preface

This book has been a long time—perhaps too long a time—in the making. Its writing was motivated by four interrelated impulses: a firm belief in the power of history to teach us something about ourselves and our world, an abiding attachment to the music of the nineteenth century, a profound distrust of theories of musical meaning, and an equally profound conviction that music does have meaning.

It need hardly be reiterated here that the practice of history as a discipline today finds itself in a troubled and troubling state. Symptomatic of the problem are the discussions clustered about the so-called New Historicism, which for me at least too often amounts to little more than the Old Historicism in modern garb, but without the grand sweep, the comprehensive vision that still makes the reading of a Burckhardt or a Huizinga such an exciting experience. Implicit in the "new historical" approach is a reduction of artworks to documents, signifiers of cultural processes; enduring products of the imagination are hollowed out of precisely that which makes them art. By privileging the location of the artwork within a nexus of sociocultural relations, we run the risk of skirting the primary issue faced by the art historian: the fact that artworks do not lend themselves to the plot configurations of narrative history. Yet this resistance is not a given to be ignored, but rather a problem to be met—a problem that has led me to adopt the premise that the history of art discloses itself only in the interpretation of individual art products.

Among "serious" music listeners, the music of the nineteenth century is practically everyone's favorite, though many would be loath to admit it. Like the god in Friedrich Hölderlin's great hymn *Patmos,* it is "near yet hard to grasp." Proximity and distance—these are the two poles between which the question of meaning is suspended. In this connection there is at least one fact that Eduard Hanslick's protoformalist aesthetic makes abundantly clear: it is far easier to prove a negative thesis than to forward a positive account of

how music, given its discontinuous relationship with objective reality, interacts with meaning. To do so requires a kind of leap over an abyss, a foray, nolens volens, into the murky territory of musical metaphysics. What I offer, then, is less a hard-and-fast thesis than a series of interrelated reflections on one of the ways that the music of the nineteenth century might be said to convey meaning. This book, that is to say, unfolds as a series of variations on a theme: music as critique.

The present study draws in varying degrees on some of my already published work: chapter 2 on "Schumann's 'Im Legendenton' and Friedrich Schlegel's *Arabeske*" (*19th Century Music* 1987); chapter 3 on "Reading Schumann by way of Jean Paul and his Contemporaries" (*College Music Symposium* 1990); chapter 5 on "Brahms's *Magelone Romanzen* and the Romantic Imperative" (*Journal of Musicology* 1989); and chapter 6 on "Brünnhilde's 'Immolation Scene' and Wagner's 'Conquest of the Reprise,'" (*Journal of Musicological Research* 1991). Still, I would hesitate to describe these chapters as "reworkings" of the earlier articles. I will admit to having intentionally avoided rereading my earlier studies in favor of taking a fresh look at the ever-burgeoning files that led to them in the first place.

At the risk of making omissions, I would like to acknowledge some of the many individuals who have supported this project. At Boston University, both Joel Sheveloff (my former teacher and now colleague) and Jeremy Yudkin have patiently endured my distraction during our departmental meetings of the last several years. Mark Evan Bonds (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) I thank for his astute comments on my Schumann work, and Patrick McCreless (University of Texas at Austin) for his close reading of the earlier Wagner study embedded in chapter 6. Karol Berger (Stanford University) and Anna-Maria Busse Berger (University of California at Davis) have lent me their warm support as friends and their critical insights as scholars. My thanks also to the following scholars, all of whom have provided valuable commentaries on my work: Hermann Danuser (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg), Anthony Newcomb (University of California at Berkeley), Reinhold Brinkmann (Harvard University), Lewis Lockwood (Harvard University), and John Crotty (West Virginia University). I owe a debt of gratitude both to the staff of Boston University's Mugar Memorial Library, Holly Mockovak and Richard Seymour, for responding with lightning speed to my seemingly endless requests for materials, and to the administration of Boston University, for granting me a sabbatical leave for the 1992–93 academic year. I should also like to mention Gerald Weale (my colleague at Boston University) and Herbert Sprouse, who put their lovely home in the New Hampshire woods at my disposal. Dr. Martin Bente (Henle Verlag) and Amy Guskin (European American Music) facilitated the reprinting of several musical examples for chapters 2 and 3. And lastly, I extend thanks to Maribeth Anderson Payne, who saw to it that what I had been only thinking about was actually committed to paper.

A little over ten years ago, having completed a dissertation under Murray Lefkowitz on a seventeenth-century topic, and written an article or two on pre-Corellian instrumental music, I fully expected to devote the rest of my musicological career to the Italian trio sonata. Teaching assignments and the interests of graduate students with whom I have worked as dissertation advisor would lead me in another direction. Three students in particular stand out as having influenced my thinking on the music of the nineteenth century in ways great and small: James Davis (State University of New York at Fredonia), Teresa Neff, and Elizabeth Seitz. They have often spurred my imagination, sometimes tried my patience, but always garnered my respect. It is to them—as synecdochic representatives for my many students—that this book, whatever its shortcomings may be, is graciously dedicated.

Boston, Massachusetts

Contents

1

Romantic Ideas and Romantic Music

Our deficiencies themselves
are our greatest hopes.

– Friedrich Schlegel
"Über die Grenzen des Schönen" (1794)

I

This study presents a series of discrete but complementary answers to a single question: How did Romanticism manifest itself in music? As such, my work is intended as a contribution to that growing body of scholarship that seeks to chart out the relationships between music and a broader web of intellectual trends. To be sure, the question broached here has already been considered many times over. But the result, at least in many music histories, has often amounted to an affirmation of the congruence between Romanticism and its ideology—that is, a loosely knit body of preconceived ideas that just as frequently distort as promote our understanding.[1] Indeed, few cultural movements are at one with the reified idea complexes with which they eventually come to be associated; but in the case of Romanticism, the distinction between essence and ideology is more crucial still. One could say that the very act of making the distinction was central to the initial phases of the

movement. For preideological Romanticism—Romanticism in the strong sense of the word—was primarily self-critical and reflective, and only secondarily occupied with the diverse matters often subsumed under its banner: unremitting individuality of expression, the recovery of a chivalric past, the cultivation of the marvelous or fantastic in literature, a delight in insoluble contradictions, the mystical union of subject and object, yearning for the infinite—and on the list could go. The heady mixture of escapism and ecstasy that is still too often taken as a defining feature of the Romantic endeavor was in fact a surface phenomenon, an artful camouflage for a penetrating and carefully circumscribed societal critique that attempted to come to grips with the disquieting moments in an emerging modern world, thereby wresting from them a measure of value and hopefulness.[2] Hence the fascination with works of art as enigmatic bearers of higher meanings through their transfiguration of the "interesting," the unusual, and even the grotesque. It could be argued, therefore, that we might best locate Romanticism in music not only by turning to the most "advanced" works of the age, works that strike us because of their daring play with the various parameters of musical discourse, but also by showing how these very works engage in acts of self-criticism—a criticism, in other words, directed at their own technical presuppositions. This is my thesis *in nuce.*

The main body of this book, then, is devoted to addressing and demonstrating the mutually conditioning exchange between music and ideas: How were the crucial strands of the Romantic program realized in musical works? How can the processes that inform this music be illuminated by referring them, critically, to the ideas of Romanticism? And since Romanticism is our subject, we should properly begin with the terms *Romantic* and *Romanticism,* even if doing so requires us to tread over some familiar territory. Are these terms still useful as historico-critical designations, especially considering that already by the early nineteenth century their respective meanings had become diluted? According to a reviewer for the *Zeitung für die Elegante Welt,* writing on 20 April 1809, "The implications of the word 'romantic' grow ever more diffuse."[3] And by 1837, Robert Schumann (though clearly conscious that he was in some sense a "Romantic") must have recognized something of this conceptual hollowness in asserting that he was "sick to death of the word 'romanticist,' although I have not spoken it ten times in my life."[4]

Criticism, or at least some of its dominant strands, has followed suit. Arthur Lovejoy, in an important essay written in 1924, concluded that the plethora of connotations clustered about the terms had nearly reduced them to meaninglessness;[5] and for many subsequent critics, *Romantic* and *Romanticism* have been retained as generally understood, albeit empty, style designators. René Wellek, on the contrary, locates the essence of Romanticism precisely in the interplay between the plenitude of its diverse elements—ranging from the picturesque, exotic, historicist, and archaic to the poetic, imaginative, mythological, symbolic, unique, and expressive—and their underlying unity.[6]

In either case, however, the efficacy of the term *Romantic* and its cognates as critical categories is called into question: Romanticism, in short, can imply far too little or far too much. Music historians have troubled over this problem as well. Carl Dahlhaus wisely cautions that Romanticism (viewed as a confluence of exoticism, historicism, and folklorism) was but one of many subcurrents that ran through the nineteenth century; moreover, he suspects that as a category borrowed from the history of ideas it may lack the sharpness of focus that historical writing requires.[7]

Given the nebulous position of Romanticism as a historiographical term, is it even worth posing (or posing again) the question of its involvement with music? If we accept Maurice Blanchot's eloquent and passionate appeal to the effect that "Romanticism, as the advent of poetic consciousness, is not simply a literary school, nor even an important moment in the history of art: it opens an epoch; furthermore, it is the epoch in which all epochs are revealed,"[8] then the answer is a resounding yes. True, our project will require a leap of faith. Yet it seems to me that leaps of faith are built into the whole enterprise of writing history from the start, provided that "history" is taken to mean an ordered account of the interrelationships between and among events, and not a mere chronicle in which striking but isolated events are simply juxtaposed. I do not think it possible to make truth claims about the ties between music and Romanticism. We can, however, make historical claims whose worth may be measured against the rigor with which we sketch out the dialectic interaction of music and ideas. The path to this goal is outlined in the methodological sketch that follows.

II

By way of approaching the Romanticism-and-music question anew, I propose that we reinvigorate the term *Romantic* itself by considering it in the delimited sense in which it appears in the early writings of Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), that frustratingly unsystematic yet brilliant thinker whose essays and enigmatic fragments, numbering in the thousands, at once embodied and motivated the whole Romantic program. Although Schlegel, like many of his contemporaries, linked the term *romantisch* with a broad spectrum of meanings, it also figured prominently in his theory of the novel or *Roman* (developed from about 1797 to 1800) in a specific sense that is particularly important for our purposes. By analogy with the terms *epic* (*episch*), *lyric* (*lyrisch*), and *dramatic* (*dramatisch*), the adjectival forms of the substantives designating the principal genres of classical antiquity, the term *Romantic* (*romantisch*) was used to describe the *Roman,* the genre that in Schlegel's historical scheme "colors the whole of modern poetry."[9] This is certainly the sense that can be inferred from such fragments as: "Alle Werke sollen Romane, alle Prosa romantisch sein" [All works should be novels; all prose

should be novelistic].[10] And although Schlegel was not the only writer of his time to employ the term in this way (examples can be found in the works of Schleiermacher, Tieck, Novalis, and even Goethe),[11] he was undoubtedly the first to apply it consistently as a genre designation. To be sure, Schlegel's notion of the *Roman,* conditioned as it was by his study of Dante's *Divina commedia,* Shakespeare's dramas, and Cervantes's *Don Quixote,* was aimed at something quite different from the extended prose narratives that we normally associate with the novel as a literary type. The kind of novel described in the *Brief über den Roman* (from his *Gespräch über die Poesie,* 1800) and elsewhere in his writings is better thought of as a poetic encyclopedia, or secular Bible, that seeks to combine, fuse, and ultimately transcend all of the traditional forms and genres.[12] In short, Schlegel's theory of Romanticism, the *Ur*-theory of the movement, was in its basic outlines a theory of the novel, or more properly, a theory of the fantastically formed and generically ambiguous artwork; and it is in this latter sense that Schlegel's theories can still be said to have implications for art criticism—and not just literary criticism—as a whole.

What does all of this have to do with music? In my view, just as Schlegel was able to assess critically the strikingly new aspects of the literature of his day and to pinpoint just those features in contemporary art that held out the greatest promise for future developments, so might we do much the same for the music of the nineteenth century. Schlegel's assertion, in the *Brief über den Roman,* that "a song can be just as romantic as a prose narrative"[13] can be read as an imperative to seek out novelizing *qualities* (not specific narratives), elements of form and genre that cut across the obvious distinctions between verbal and musical arts. As it turns out, the divinatory power of his critical prescriptions can be shown to have manifested itself in two areas: not only does his theory of Romantic poetry prefigure developments in literature that came to fruition only with the novels of Thomas Mann, Hermann Broch, and Robert Musil, but it also concords well with some of the musical phenomena that set in with full force in the 1820s and 1830s.[14]

If music critics and historians are concerned with evaluating the varying degrees of continuity or change displayed in a given series of events, then it should be made clear that the accent in this study will be placed on those musical elements of change that both mark off the 1820s and 1830s from the preceding years and stamp them with an emerging Romantic consciousness. The perspective on musical Romanticism developed here is therefore drawn somewhat differently from that suggested, for instance, in Friedrich Blume's influential *MGG* articles (published in translation as *Classic and Romantic Music*). For Blume, musical Classicism and Romanticism formed an indissoluble unity, a coherent epoch in music history extending from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth century, its artistic products sharing in common a canon of genres, forms, and stylistic elements.[15] Likewise, Carl Dahlhaus concurs that the early years of the nineteenth century witnessed relatively

few substantial changes in compositional technique.[16] For both writers, the only really "new" genres whose addition to the canon can be attributed to the Romantics—the character piece for piano and the *Lied*—were decidedly diminutive in scope.[17] But in Dahlhaus's view, the years in and around 1814 might still represent an important historical caesura if only because of the profound alteration in intellectual outlook, registered in the writings of Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Ludwig Tieck, and E. T. A. Hoffmann, that "influenced the way music was heard for a full century."[18] Similarly, Arno Forchert defines the Romantic impulse in early nineteenth-century musical life in terms of the new way in which music was perceived; decisive for this shift in outlook was the tendency to think of instrumental music not merely as an abstract play of tones, but as the representation of some kind of emotional content.[19]

It is fair to say that these commentators take their cue primarily from those of the *Frühromantiker* whose chief interest lay in formulating an aesthetic of musical reception. The pronouncements of Tieck and Wackenroder in particular give special emphasis to the reshaping of musical experience as a quasi-mystical event, where the listener gives in to the enigmatic, wondrous, and oracular accents of pure instrumental music, an art that says most by saying nothing at all. And for Wackenroder, the musical initiate will revel in sound precisely because of the unbridgeable gap between *Gefühl*—the exalted feeling that music can inspire—and *Wissenschaft*—the mathematical laws that silently govern its creation.[20] Schlegel's, on the other hand, was first and foremost an aesthetic of production. The "New Mythology" that he envisioned in the *Rede über die Mythologie* (from the *Gespräch über die Poesie*) would take the form of the "most artful of all artworks" (*künstlichste aller Kunstwerke*); our understanding of it, in other words, must proceed from a studied consideration of the processes that went into its making.[21] A historical account of nineteenth-century music that takes as its point of departure an aesthetic of production will necessarily lead to different conclusions from those articulated in studies whose critical approach calls attention to shifting modes of reception. Our conclusions may not be any "truer," though they may serve to complement the listener-response approach that colored many nineteenth-century writings about music and that, as we have seen, has continued to resonate in more recent accounts.

Likewise, the notion of a shared Classic–Romantic canon tells only part of the story, for it can just as convincingly be shown that it is precisely in the areas of form and genre that we may locate the truly new, the quintessentially Romantic elements in the music, no less than in the literature, of the nineteenth century. More specifically, form, which in terms of the neoclassical aesthetics of the eighteenth century implies configurational wholeness, gave way to what Schlegel calls "tendency" (*Tendenz*), to intentionally fragmented or incomplete structures. At the same time, the hierarchy of discrete genres came to be displaced by a system that valued individualized *Mischgedichte*—

mixed-genre works—aimed at transcending generic boundaries altogether. And although opera, symphony, concerto and sonata, the principal genres of Viennese Classicism, continued to live on in the nineteenth century, they tended more and more to function as qualities, or "tones" (operat*ic,* symphon*ic,* and so forth) in compositions whose generic essence derived from their mixture.[22] There is hardly a monument of nineteenth-century musical art, from Schumann's *Papillons* to Mahler's *Wunderhorn* symphonies, that does not partake of these mutually dependent trends. This is not, however, to argue for the simple binary opposition of Classic and Romantic characteristics in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art, to set a formally and generically pure Classicism against an anomalous and contradiction-bound Romanticism. Musical Classicism, too, had its ruptures and bizarreries. It is simply to assert that the "fantastic" impulse that occupied the periphery in musical Classicism (though significant, for example, in so many of C. P. E. Bach's keyboard works) took center stage in musical Romanticism, and that the formal hybrids of Classicism (such as Mozart's and Haydn's blending of sonata and rondo, or rondo and variation) continued to obey, in Schlegel's words, a "determinate law of mixture."[23]

The valorization of the fragment at the expense of the perfectly shaped whole, and of the *Mischgedicht* as opposed to the generically pure artwork, both represent decidedly nineteenth-century points of view. Together with literal readings of Schlegel's utopian prescriptions for the *Roman,* or E. T. A. Hoffmann's views on absolute music, or Wagner's theoretical restitution of the lost unity of the arts through the *Gesamtkunstwerk,* they might easily congeal into ideology, into a body of received ideas that express the special interests and prejudices of a particular social or intellectual group. But as the literary critic Jerome McGann has cautioned, it is a mistake tacitly to accept Romanticism's appraisals or representations of itself. None of the frequently contradictory concepts that the Romantics promulgated about themselves, their works, or their world—the idealization of uniqueness and creativity, the possibility of synthesizing the most disparate entities, the omnipotence of the poetic imagination, the organic quality of life and art—can be accepted at face value; rather, they must be subjected to a thoroughgoing critique.[24]

This is just the component that is missing from Leonard Meyer's recent and provocative "sketch-history" of nineteenth-century music, which purports to show how the music of the period was basically consonant with the Romantic ideology by linking the doctrines of organicism and "becoming" with parallel musical phenomena such as motivically dense but formally open-ended structures.[25] Although his study is rich in insightful observations, Meyer's embrace of the Romantic ideology frequently leads him to repeat some well-worn clichés about the nature of musical Romanticism; his assertion that "Romantic composers were better at writing small forms than large ones,"[26] for example, is predetermined by an almost exclusive focus on minutiae: Isolde's *Verklärung* from *Tristan* is the only extended passage subjected to

close analysis. The lesson is obvious: pointing out the parallels between Romantic ideas and Romantic music will not suffice in itself; if criticism is to go beyond mere repetition, the dialectic between idea and artwork must be charted as well.

As McGann has argued, the status of a poetic work is directly dependent on its ability to criticize the very ideas that it seems to embody, thereby unmasking its own illusions.[27] That may well be so for literature, but how can a piece of music embody or criticize an ideological position? We cannot be so confident of music's ideological content as was a figure like Theodor Adorno. Nonetheless, let us take the opening movement of Schumann's Opus 17 Fantasie as an example. Here Schumann yokes together a fully elaborated sonata-allegro design (an emblem of the "higher" forms toward which he felt every composer should aspire) and a quasi-independent character piece, designated *Im Legendenton* (a representative of the diminutive piano pieces that flowed more easily from his pen than sonata or symphonic movements), as if to suggest that the two were capable of effecting a synthesis. Yet their uneasy juxtaposition and the unusual placement of the character piece within the design as a whole imply that such a reconciliation is indeed impossible. In other words, through purely musical means Schumann was able to explode one of the Romantics' (both literary and musical) most cherished pipe dreams: the notion that incommensurable entities would allow for a harmonious union. Schumann's work bristles with what Adorno would call "negative moments" or "alienating symptoms"—textural and formal disruptions that are intentionally composed into the piece, and which, far from signifying any failing in compositional technique, actually project a critical message. If we concur with Adorno's assertion that "modern art is more likely to oppose the spirit of its respective age than to agree with it,"[28] then Schumann's conception is eminently "modern." Yet he was at the same time obeying a dictum that Friedrich Schlegel had set down some forty years earlier: "When ALL of the constituent parts of a romantic poem have been perfectly fused, then it simply ceases to be romantic."[29]

A close attention to questions of form can therefore help us to understand the drama of ideological contradictions that is played out in the strongest products of musical Romanticism. My orientation, then, runs counter to much of the received wisdom on nineteenth-century music, which has traditionally undermined the significance of form per se in the Romantic program. (The deemphasis of formal issues goes back at least to Hegel, master systematizer and chief promulgator of an internally consistent doctrine of Romanticism, who said of the Romantic artwork that "its outer form no longer has a meaning and significance, as in classical art, in and of itself; meaning resides in the feelings . . . that the outward appearance generates").[30] Meyer, for instance, suggests that Romantic composers came to devalue form as a primary compositional concern owing to a decline in audience sophistication; nineteenth-century listeners, he postulates, could no longer "respond sensitively to the

subtleties of syntactic process and formal design" that characterize classical works.[31] The implication here, that Romantic designs are as often as not lacking in subtlety, is thus tied to the no less questionable assumption that nineteenth-century listeners were less competent than those of the century before.

Without calling into question the musical awareness of nineteenth-century audiences, Dahlhaus has noted that Romantic forms tend either toward the "schematic," as exemplified in the apparently simple designs of many lyric pieces for piano, or the "disintegrated," where the form of a work is conditioned by its relationship to a specific content or program. Yet in both cases, form remains an element of secondary importance, since as Dahlhaus maintains, the value of a Romantic work rested mainly on its thematic eloquence and poetic character. For Beethoven, however, structural issues often supplied the raison d'être of a work, which, according to Dahlhaus, may then be seen as a unique solution to a particular formal problem.[32] But, as I will argue, the problematizing of form, manifested in part by its transfiguration into and displacement by "tendency" (and not content), was no less an issue for the Romantics, who at once shared and intensified Beethoven's self-conscious response to the Classical canon.

Walter Benjamin's succinct claim that "the romantic theory of the artwork is the theory of its form"[33] may seem extreme at first blush, but on reflection it becomes clear that issues of form were indeed central to the Romantic undertaking—witness such complementary ideological strands as Coleridge's thoughts on organicism and Schelling's theory of the symbol, both of them varying responses to the question of how parts relate to wholes. In addition, it is precisely through these formal issues that we can begin to gauge the nature of the links between music, the other arts (literary arts in particular), and the preoccupations of the age as a whole. But my recourse to the literature and literary theory of the nineteenth century should not be taken to imply that one art form directly influenced or merged with the other—notions that count among the most prominent of Romanticism's self-*mis*representations.

Accounts of music in Romantic poetry are first and foremost verbal, not musical constructs, just as the "literarization" of nineteenth-century music through figurative titles and poetic programs is probably little more than an external means of signaling the music's claims to artistic worth in an era that prized the written word over the transient and ineffable tone as a carrier of intellectual substance. The music and literature of the nineteenth century engaged in a mutually conditioning exchange, or *Wechselwirkung* as Dahlhaus calls it,[34] that led to a number of shared musico-literary processes of an abstract, structural sort: a penchant for digressive interpolations, fragmented utterances, open-ended or circular designs, and self-reflective patternings.