Tradition without Convention:

The Impossible Nineteenth-Century Project

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I.

Some years ago, when I was practicing a difficult passage in the Concerto in B-flat Major, K. 450 by Mozart (Example 1), I found that I had absentmindedly strayed into a similar virtuoso phrase from another B-flat Concerto, the last one, K. 595 (Example 2).
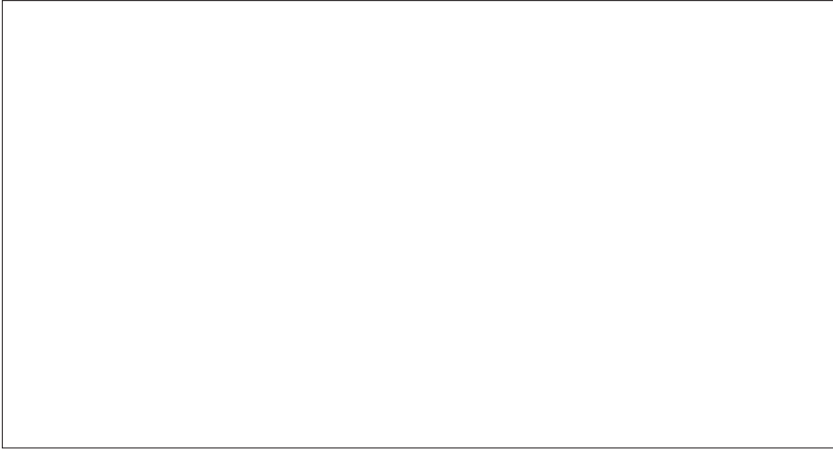
Example 1. K. 450, I bars 65–68

Example 2. K. 595, I bars 97–102

Both these phrases represent typical Mozartean virtuosity in B-flat major. We can find other examples in the finale of the Sonata in B-flat Major, K. 333 (this movement, indeed, is written like a concerto rondo arranged for solo piano and mimics the relation of orchestra to soloist throughout) (Example 3):

Example 3.

and in the Sonata for Piano and Violin K. 454, also in B-flat major (finale, bars 259ff.) (Example 4):

Example 4.
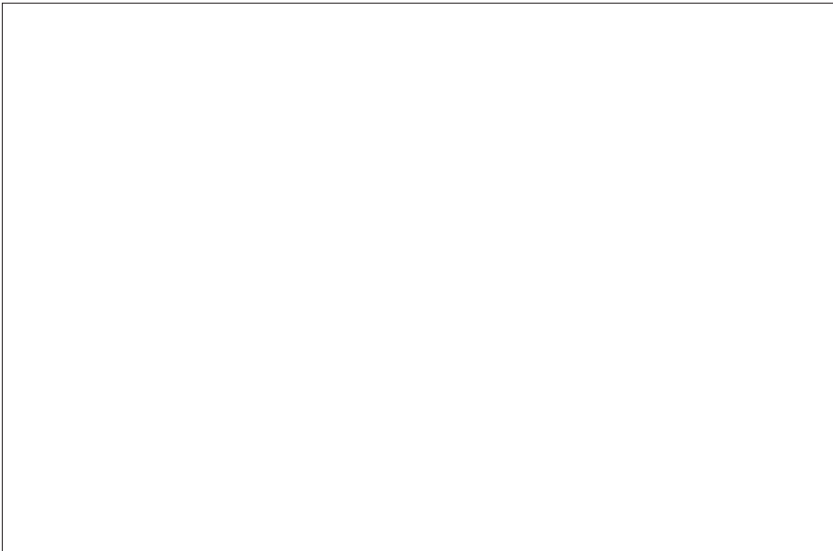
These passages are formed out of the basic elements of tonality: placing them well requires a certain mastery, but the invention of material here may be said to be almost at the zero degree. It is easy to see how any one of these passages may conveniently be replaced by a similar one from another work. The kind of mistake I made, however, is unlikely to happen with a later concerto. During the nineteenth century an important change took place in the history of musical style in the West—a progressive change, and we are still living with it.

Late eighteenth century music depended on a repertoire of conventional formulaic phrases that might be transferred at will from one work to another. Of course, almost all musical styles depend on some sort of conventional repertoire of motifs: in most periods the main body of this repertoire generally consists of cadence formulas, ways of ending or rounding off individual phrases or complete works. These cadence formulas, in fact, may often be said to define the style.

What is striking, however, about the second half of the eighteenth century is the grand dimension of these formulas, their imposing length—how long they last and what a large role they play temporally in the structure. They are not simply, as in other periods, motifs or short sequential sets of harmonies, but elaborate phrases lasting several bars, sometimes, indeed, a succession of several phrases. They act within large forms as a kind of stuffing. They fill out the work.

They also articulate the form, occurring most often at cadences. In concertos (and sometimes in sonatas), these formulas are virtuoso arabesques woven out of scales and arpeggios: for the most part they are derived from the coloratura passage-work developed at that time for the operatic stage, and the technique is transferred to the keyboard concerto and sonata or, less often, to the violin concerto. It is essential to the tradition that these conventional passages of virtuosity be executed with grace and ease. In symphonies and quartets, the conventional phrases tend to be elaborate and lengthy flourishes or fanfares. They mark the spaces between the end of one melody and the beginning of another, or between two playings of the same theme. We may take an example from one of the more symphonic of Mozart's piano sonatas, the A minor, K. 310. The rounding-off of the main theme is marked by a lengthy but conventional half cadence (Example 5).

Later, the end of the exposition is articulated by an equally conventional phrase. Here there is standard virtuoso figuration in the left hand and a military fanfare in the right (Example 6).

Example 5.
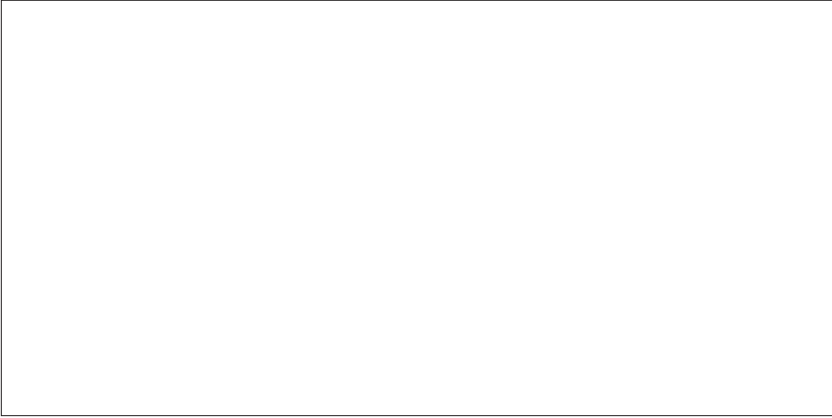
Example 6.

These banal phrases are a stumbling block today to critics of Mozart, who prefer to gloss over, or even forget, the conventional aspects of his work and concentrate on the more original inspirations, which are often very radical indeed. This modern prejudice, however, does a disservice to Mozart's accomplishment, as his handling of the most conventional material reveals an easy mastery denied to almost all his contemporaries, and we therefore fail to see how the more eccentric aspects of his style depend on a purely conventional context to make their effect. I have written elsewhere that when there is a convention of form, it is always found completely and elaborately fulfilled and even nakedly revealed in Mozart, while Haydn deals with the conventions as quickly as possible, even sometimes attempting to disguise or skate over them. This explains why the amount of "stuffing" is so much greater in Mozart's work than in Haydn's, where, nevertheless, it still plays an important role.

One might speculate that the expansive treatment of the traditional filling material has made Mozart an easier composer for today's audiences to listen to than Haydn with his more summary way of dealing with it, now that we have absorbed, and are no longer disconcerted by, the radical innovations in Mozart that made him such a difficult composer for his contemporaries. The conventional passages functioned as an aid to intelligibility, and still work as such today.

It is worth considering briefly one of the most radical passages in Mozart to see how it depends on the most conventional setting. The most routine procedure for rounding out a development section in the last quarter of the eighteenth century is a cadence on the relative minor—or a half cadence on its dominant (V of vi)—followed by a return to the tonic. The second solo, or development, of Mozart's Concerto in B-flat Major, K. 595 begins with his most astonishing modulation—from F major to B minor—and continues with a series of surprises (Example 7).

The progression, perhaps the most extreme in all of Mozart, goes from B minor to C major, C minor, E-flat minor, V of B major, V of A-flat major, V of F minor, and finally V of G minor, the relative minor. The last three moves are accomplished with conventional passagework, and, indeed, with the arrival at G minor, we reach another convention of the second solo of concerto form during Mozart's lifetime, the use of arpeggios.

These arpeggios begin the retransition, and the harmonic progression is a strikingly conventional ascent to the subdominant: g, c, f, B-flat, E-flat. Then Mozart reaffirms the conventional relative minor by its dominant (D major), and then, with a set of arpeggios, accomplishes the return to the opening theme and the tonic. The conventional detail is as exquisitely handled as the unprecedented and eccentric harmonic progressions. In this extraordinary work, the conventional elements of structure, the banal figuration, and the arpeggios help Mozart to solve the problem of an expansive form. They allow the composer to slow down the momentum as the development section reaches its end after the disconcertingly swift changes of the opening, and the endow the return to the opening theme with the necessary breadth. They announce the resolution while suspending the movement toward it.

The passages of conventional filler—arpeggios, virtuoso figuration, or fanfares—are essential to the late eighteenth century's project of

Example 7.
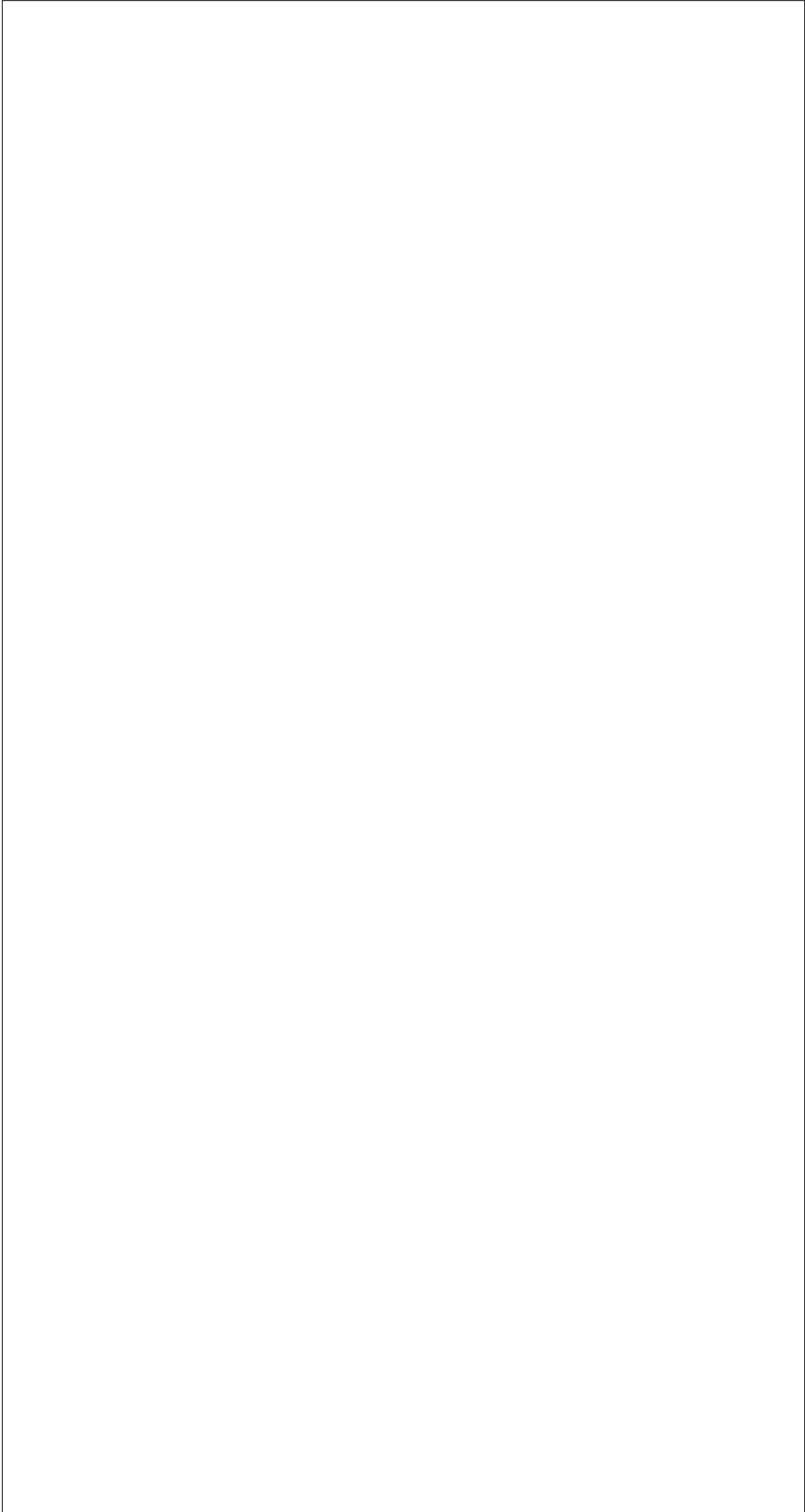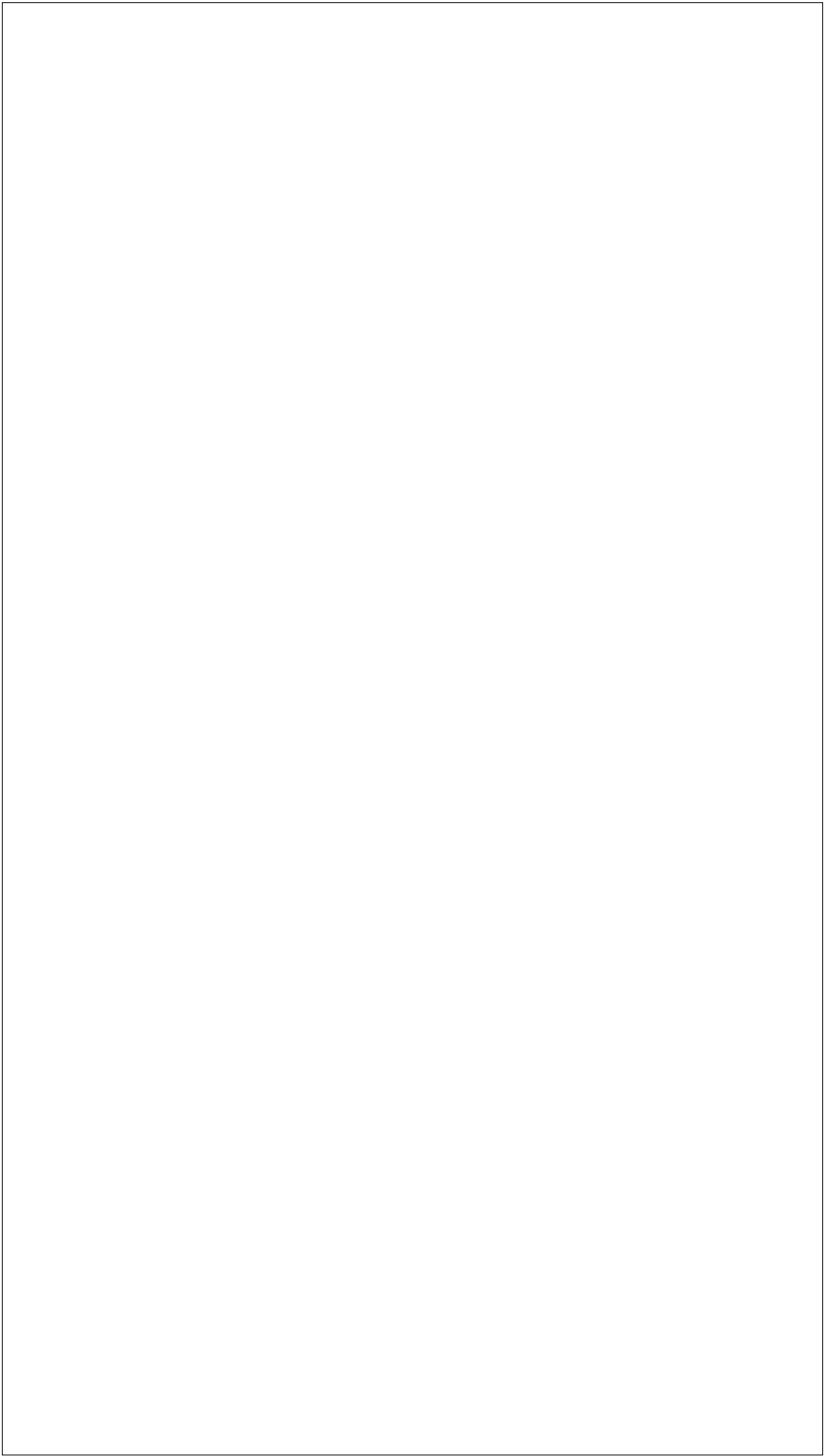
enlarging the shorter binary forms of the first half of the century into the more imposing sonata forms. The growth of public concerts at that time made the larger forms desirable, and what was wanted were forms more tightly organized than the relatively loose sectional forms of the *da capo* aria or the *concerto grosso,* in which the dramatic climax cannot be focused as successfully and as lucidly as in the later symphonic structures, where the moments of extreme dramatic tension are far more clearly articulated than they could have been with early eighteenth century style.

On the lowest level, the long passages of stuffing in the late eighteenth century simply helped to pass the time, to extend the dimensions of the form, to make it more imposing. However, the emphasis they added at cadences had powerful consequences for the large-scale harmonic structure as well: they enabled the composer to transform with ease the standard half-cadence on V at the end of the first part of an early eighteenth century binary form into a full cadence that affirmed the dominant in what would later be called a modulation, raising the long-range power of the harmony to a higher level. The conventionality was, in fact, an asset; it made the form more easily intelligible in public performance. The audience did not have to strain to understand something original or eccentric.

In concerto and aria, the conventional virtuoso figuration may be said paradoxically to have combined physical excitement with intellectual relaxation. They made it possible for the audience to admire the performers without having to strain to admire the composition. The moments of purely conventional material that essentially resolved any previous harmonic and even melodic tension were basic to the style we call classical, which required, at a point about three-quarters of the way through the movement, an emphatic and lengthy resolution of any form of structural dissonance, a resolution that could not, as later in Chopin and Liszt, be postponed to the last page.

The conventionality is also derived from improvisation, which in general is dependent on a repertory of standard figures. For example, in the keyboard concertos of the third quarter of the eighteenth century by Wagenseil and others, the second solo (or what, in a sonata form, we would later call the development section) was sometimes notated only as a series of harmonies that were to be arpeggiated at will in any way the soloist pleased. Later in the century these arpeggios were written out and specified by the composer. The standard formulas did not disappear. A page of sketches by Beethoven once puzzled experts, as it consisted entirely of a series of these standard figures, all relatively banal. It was realized that this was a repertory of figures that Beethoven could use in improvisation—he was, in fact, famous for his extempore powers, and he had his collection of formulas just as the poets who improvised oral epic poetry had their repertory of standard phrases, images, metaphors, and epithets. Beethoven was, however, to effect a profound change in the use of conventional material.

2.

The aethestics of the late eighteenth century developed a fixed prejudice against the conventional as part of the widespread and even fashionable contemporary speculation on the nature of language, a prejudice extending into our own time. There is a double significance to the word "conventional," and the two meanings cannot be completely separated in eighteenth-century aesthetics. The conventional is both commonplace (that is, familiar and banal) and arbitrary (that is, imposed by an act of will). A convention is accepted by everyone precisely because it is arbitrary, because it is imposed. There can be no disagreement because there is no argument. For the eighteenth-century critic, the signs of painting are "natural": that is, the painted image of a tree signifies a tree because it looks like a tree. The arbitrary nature of language, however, has been acknowledged at least since Aquinas: a word signifies its meaning by convention, not because it sounds like, or imitates, its meaning—even when it does, as with onomatopoeia (words like "buzz" and "gargle"), the meaning is still fixed and imposed by arbitrary convention. That is why language is essentially social, not personal, and makes available only the meanings that society has agreed upon, not the inimitably individual significance that each of us might like in order to express something absolutely unique.

The most famous eighteenth-century discussion of the arbitrary character of linguistic signs is G. E. Lessing's *Laokoon,* written in 1766, in which it is maintained that the arbitrary signs of language can only describe in temporal succession those qualities in Nature that coexist simultaneously:

> Es ist wahr; da die Zeichen der Rede willkührlich sind, so ist es gar wohl möglich, daß man durch sie die Teile eines Körpers eben so wohl auf einander folgen lassen kann, als sie in der Natur neben einander befindlich sind. Allein dieses ist eine Eigneschaft der Rede und ihrer Zeichen überhaupt, nicht aber in so ferne sie der Absicht der Poesie am bequemsten sind. Der Poet will nicht bloß verständlich werden, seine Vorstellungen sollen nicht bloß klar und deutlich sein; hiermit begnügt sich der Prosaist. Sondern er will die Ideen, die er in uns erwecket, so lebhaft machen, daß wir in der Geschwindigkeit die wahre sinnlichen Eindrücke ihrer Gegenstände zu empfinden glauben, und in diesem Augenblicke der Täuschung, uns der Mittel, die er dazu anwendet, seiner Worte bewußt zu sein aufhören.

[It is true, the signs of speech are arbitrary, so it is indeed possible
that through them one can let the parts of a body follow each other
when they are to be found contiguous in Nature. But this is, above
all, a characteristic of speech and its signs, not, however, insofar as
they are most convenient for poetry. The poet does not want simply
to be understood, his representations should not be simply clear and
intelligible: that would content the writer of prose. But the poet
wants the ideas that he awakens in us to be made so lively that we
immediately believe that we feel the real sensuous impressions of his
objects, and, in this moment of illusion, gives us the means to cease
to be conscious of his words.]

In short, poetry transcends the arbitrary nature of language. Ideally, the
words in the poem do not merely signify the meanings established by
convention; they make the reader seem to experience the meaning sen-
suously and directly. The words are transformed from arbitrary signs
into natural ones: the words of a poem, if the poet is successful, appear to
convey their meaning by their sound and rhythm and by the way they
are ordered. The significance arises not only by the conventions of mean-
ing recorded in a dictionary but out of the poem itself, which gives the
illusion of newly inventing or recreating the meanings of the words.

In his essay, Lessing was influenced by Denis Diderot's *Lettre sur les
sourds et muets* of 1751, which asserted that in poetry, sound, rhythm, and
word order are all so many "hieroglyphics" (or symbols) that combine to
remove the arbitrary character of meaning. For Diderot, language in po-
etic discourse takes on a kind of organic life:

Il passe alors dans le discours du poëte un esprit qui en meut &
vivifie toutes les syllabes. Q'est-ce que cet esprit? j'en ai quelquefois
senti la présence; mais tout ce que j'en sais, c'est que c'est lui qui fait
que les choses sont dites & représentées tout à la fois; que dans le
même temps que l'entendement les saisit, l'ame en est émue, l'imag-
ination les voit, & l'oreille les entend; & que le discours n'est plus
seulement un enchaînement de termes energiques qui expose la pen-
sée avec force & noblesse, mais que c'est encore un tissu d'hiéro-
glyphes entassées les uns sur les autres qui la peignent. Je pourrais
dire en ce sens que toute poésie est emblématique.

[There takes place in the poet's discourse a spirit that activates and
enlivens all the syllables. What is this spirit? sometimes I have felt
its presence, but all I know is that it causes things to be both said and
represented at once, that at the same time that the understanding

grasps them, the soul is moved, the imagination sees them, and the ear hears them, and that the discourse is no longer only a series of energetic terms that display the thought with force and nobility, but also paint it by a web of hieroglyphics piled on top of each other. I might say that in this sense all poetry is emblematic.}

This astonishingly early proclamation of symbolist theory implies that poetry transforms the signs of language, the words, from arbitrary into natural symbols. The poetic technique breathes life into the words: they no longer signify by simple convention, but by stimulating and awakening the listener to their meaning. For Diderot, this poetic sophistication is a sign of an advanced state of civilization, and he also proposes to carry his analysis of the effects of poetry and its hieroglyphic character into the arts of painting and music. But not everyone, he claims, is capable of appreciating the subtleties of poetry: those who are sensitive to them form an elite (although not, it must be said hastily, an elite defined by class). As Diderot remarks, the symbolic nature of poetic discourse makes even the easiest poet hard to read if we wish to understand him fully, and impossible to translate.

<div style="text-align:center">3.</div>

The identification of the commonplace with the arbitrary is profound, but it obscures the dynamic process of stylistic development: a convention only becomes commonplace when it loses its logical reason for existing—when, in short, it becomes arbitrary, when its justification becomes dubious. A convention remains alive when it seems inevitable; but when we become aware that we can do without it, it begins to be tiresome, and even to seem vulgar. It is not frequency that makes repetition appear commonplace, but the lack of evident necessity. A slice of bread at every meal will not seem tiresome to those who find it unthinkable to go without it. When the classical conventions were still vigorous, they were felt to be as indispensable as bread or potatoes. When, for example, the convention of the final cadence in tonal music or the modulation to the dominant in an exposition went unchallenged, it did not then feel banal or commonplace.

In the final quarter of the eighteenth century, however, the demand for originality, perhaps imperceptibly at first, stimulated musicians to

question certain aspects of the tonal language. It has sometimes been claimed that composers like Haydn and Mozart thought of themselves as craftsmen writing only for their contemporaries rather than as original and even radically innovative artists with at least one eye on posterity. This will not hold water, however. Connoisseurs insisted on originality—and of course, as they do today, resisted it when it came along. One sign of this was the despairing sense that the conventions of tonality had now been exhausted. Charles Burney's conversation in 1770 with the Roman opera composer Rinaldo di Capua is instructive in this respect:[1] music was finished, the Italian composer asserted—all possible beautiful melodies had already been invented, all the beautiful modulations discovered. The best one could do was to create an ugly modulation to set the beautiful one in relief.

The modern dogma that the shock of the ugly is the inevitable and only road to original creation has begun to rear its head. Even more instructive is the comment of critic Johann Friederich Reichardt in 1782 on the rising reputation of Johann Sebastian Bach. Reichardt was not entirely comfortable with the new vogue: technically, he felt, Bach was one of the greatest masters, but he was deficient in his rendering of sentiment. If Bach and Handel had only understood the human heart, he claimed, "a great genius who would not be satisfied today only with equaling them would have to overthrow our entire tonal system in order to create a new field for himself" (*Musikalisches Kunstmagazin*). This astonishing foreboding of the arrival of atonality is a witness to the importance attached to radical originality.

Only a decade or so later, however, Novalis was to be even more incisive when he wrote:

> Alles Ausgezeichnete verdient den Ostrazism. Es ist gut, wenn es ihn sich selbst gibt.

> [All excellence merits ostracism. It is well when it ostracizes itself.]

This is one of the fundamental tenets of modernism. By 1828, the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi was to claim that any truly original melody was bound inevitably to displease a public that was content only with the familiar.

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[1] See my *The Frontiers of Meaning* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), Lecture 2.

4.

In the process of the destruction of conventional material, Beethoven is a pivotal but ambiguous figure. The conventional material does not disappear from his music—on the contrary, there is perhaps even more of it in his work than in Mozart's. But it loses some, or even most, of its conventional aspect. The traditional, conventional use of arpeggios in the second solo of the concerto will give us a good example: they are present in every one of Beethoven's concertos. Ostentatiously present, in fact, and that makes all the difference. The clearest example is the "Emperor" concerto, bars 273–301 (Example 8).

Following Haydn rather than Mozart, Beethoven arrives at the relative minor early in the development instead of waiting for the more traditional end of the section, and the soloist accompanies the melody in the orchestra for sixteen bars with varied arpeggios. With bar 289, the arpeggios are no longer an accompaniment but have taken over the texture aggressively. Fragments of the main theme in the orchestra now become the accompaniment to the relentless and energetic arpeggios of the soloist. The arpeggios have ceased to appear conventional: they have become thematic, the principal motif, the bearer of meaning on which we concentrate all our attention. In short, the "arbitrary" has been "naturalized"—that is, given an immediately perceptible meaning unforeseen by the tradition and independent of it. It now sounds as if Beethoven had created the idea of arpeggios specifically for his concerto: with that, the existence of a tradition has been made irrelevant. Beethoven does not simply employ the traditional stuffing with the mastery of Mozart: he reinvents it.

In the development of a Mozart concerto, the standard arpeggios may be played with an improvisatory quality—for example, the opening of the development in the first movement of the Concerto in G Major, K. 453. Mozart recalls the origin of this convention. In the "Emperor" concerto, however, all sense of improvisation must be left behind. These arpeggios are no longer improvised; they are composed. They must be played strictly as part of a symphonic texture.

It has often been remarked, furthermore, how much of Beethoven's thematic material is not merely derived from the conventional filling of the classical technique but reproduces it nakedly, generally in his most important works. The opening themes of the Ninth Symphony, the "Eroica," and the "Appassionata" all start as simple unadorned arpeg-
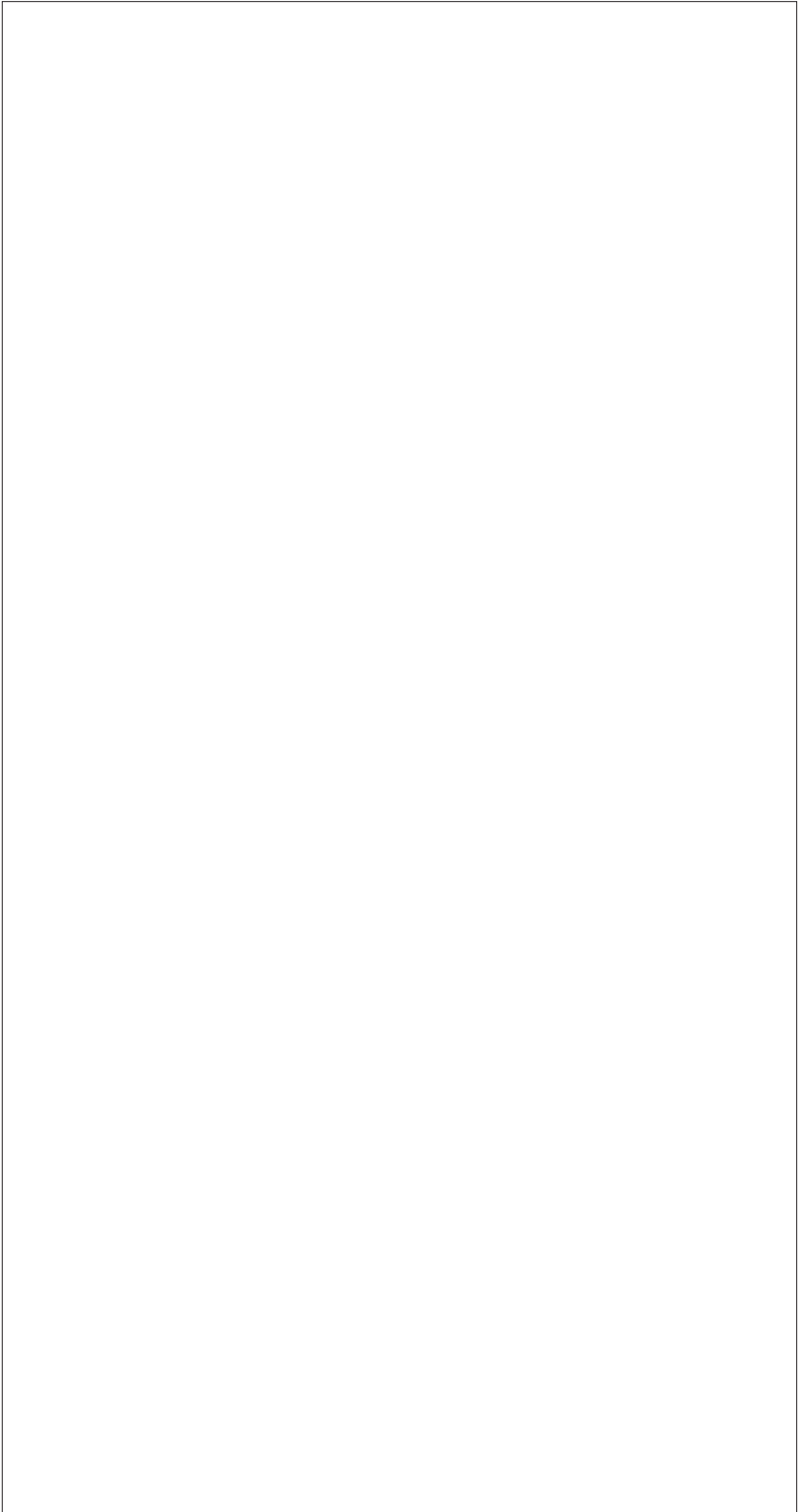
Example 8.

gios, as if the basic building blocks of tonality were enough of a stimu-
lus to create a form. The conventional cadence is similarly remodeled
under his hands. The opening of the Sonata in E-flat Major, op. 31 no. 3,
juxtaposes the radical and the banal in a new way (Example 9).

The opening six bars are among Beethoven's most eccentric inspira-
tions, harmonically, melodically, and rhythmically. Opening with a
question that expresses a powerful yearning by an intense chromatic rise
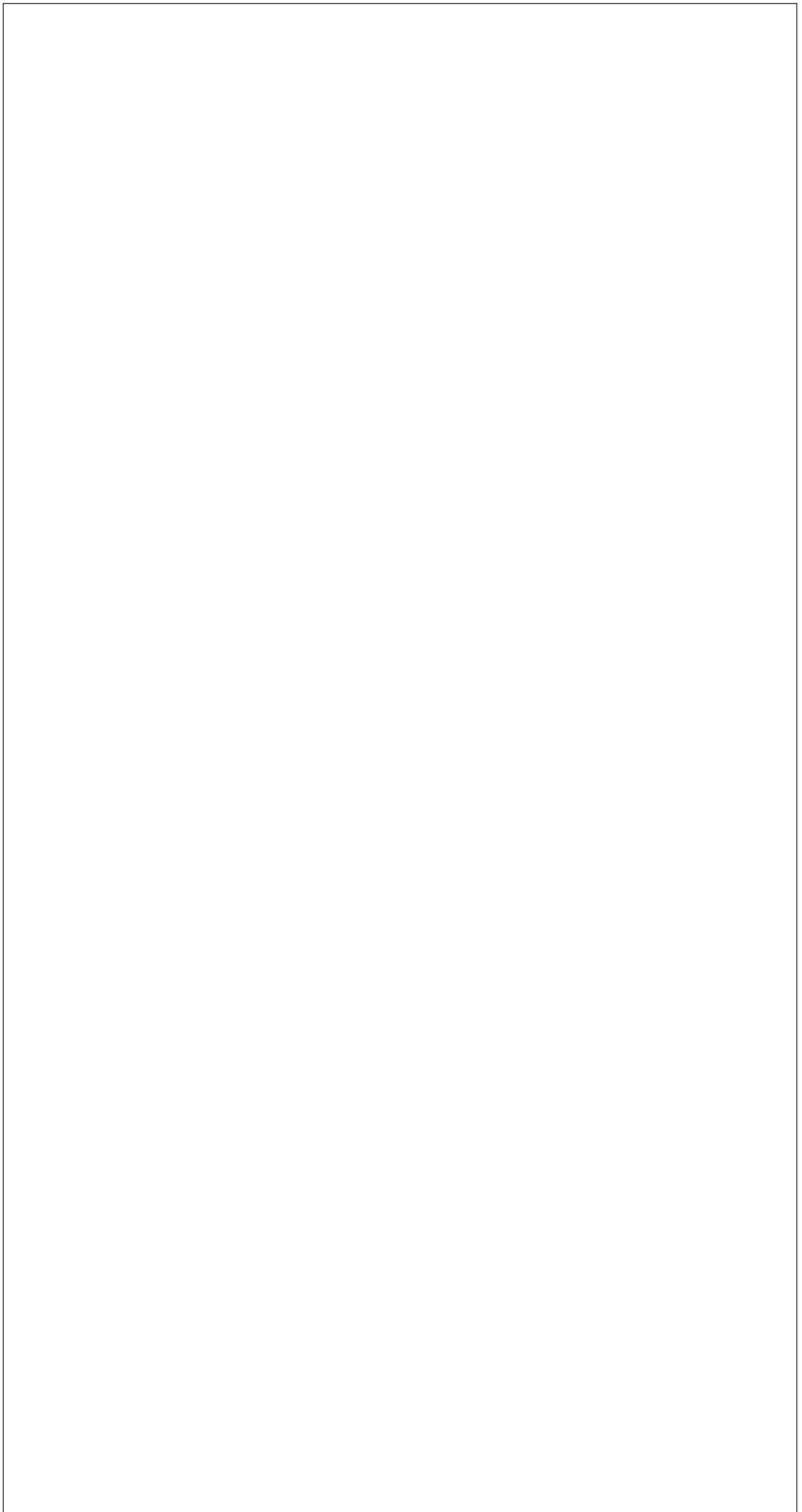
Example 9.

and a gradual and dramatic slowing down, these bars are answered by a cadence of the utmost conventionality. It is, in fact, the banal aspect of the cadence that gives it an ironic air and makes a witty and deflating contrast to the strange opening. Using the commonplace for ironic purposes was, I think, new in music at that time, unless we count the exaggeratedly simple minuet that accompanies Susanna's appearance from the closet in the second act finale of *The Marriage of Figaro,* when she obviously enjoys the discomfiture of the count and the countess. The irony is certainly new in pure instrumental music: Beethoven's cadence sounds exaggeratedly conventional, coming as it does after the extraordinary opening, and it enhances by contrast the intense lyricism of the opening. In any case, the conventional cadence is no longer conventional as it now speaks with an individual voice, and adds a note of comedy to the lyrical atmosphere. We might say that the conventional has become a special effect essential to the representation of sentiment in this work, and has consequently been naturalized.

I might add, parenthetically, that a theme of such contrasting character is inherited from the classical technique of Mozart, and was about to become impossible in the music of the 1830s and after. In Mozart's work, these contrasting themes are generally replayed at once with the contrast now resolved into a synthetic whole, as in the "Jupiter" Symphony, where the opening opposition is restated, now united by a flute solo (Example 10).

In Beethoven's Opus 31, no. 3, the synthesis or resolution of the contradictory character of the main theme is postponed to the end of the exposition, where a condensed and laconic version of both the opening motif and its witty conclusion closes the section (Example 11).

This postponement is an adaptation of the scheme learned from Mozart, but employed in a way that reinforces the effectiveness of the larger structure. The tension created by the opposition within the main theme is left unresolved by Beethoven until the final cadence of the
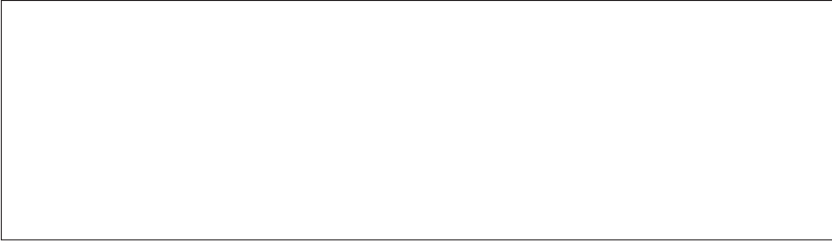
Example 10a.

Example 10b.
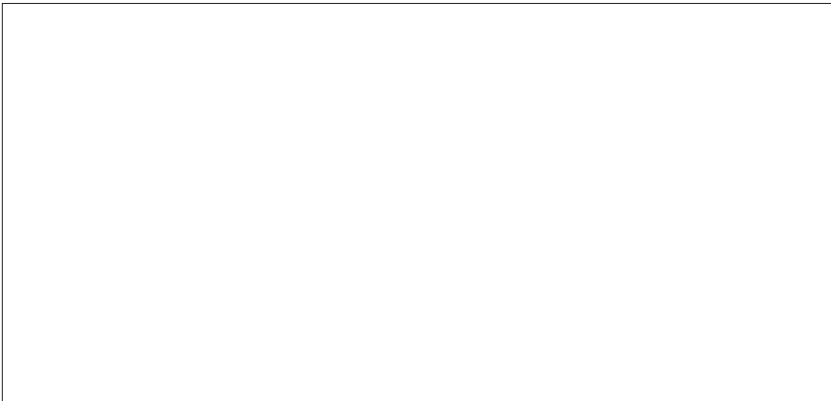
Example 11.

exposition. The need for resolution even on this small scale is extended to the entire exposition. It should be observed that in this sonata the conventionality of the simple cadence that always resolves the intense and eccentric opening of the principal theme is only partly ironic: it is also a sign of grace. A difficult and puzzling motif is succeeded by a gesture of sociability. The conventionality here is clearly a virtue and a pleasure, a form of relief from the more complex experience of the previous bars: we are expected to welcome and appreciate the cadence precisely for its conventionality.

It is easy to find examples of Beethoven's rethinking the major conventions in order to give the impression that they have been invented for the particular work; and, as I have implied, this is a sign that the conventions were beginning to lose their authority for the musical imagination. I mention only one further example here—briefly, as I have written about it elsewhere.[2] Perhaps the dreariest of academic conventions is the use in fugue of the devices of inversion, augmentation, and diminution. In the finale of Opus 110, Beethoven employs these devices as if each had been invented specifically for this one work. After the exhausted character of the second Adagio arioso (*ermattet*), the rising theme of the fugue is inverted, now descending and so losing its force; the return to life (*poi a poi di nuovo vivente*) is signified by the augmentation of the theme in a tempo twice as slow that gradually accelerates back into the original tempo, and by the diminution of the theme, now three times as fast, giving the sense of new vigor. These old-fashioned and banal devices are here given a meaning within a dramatic scenario for, as far as I know, the first time in the history of music. The conventions of the fugue are naturalized, and this would have been unnecessary if they had not been felt to be in need of justification, to have outlived their usefulness.

[2] See *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven,* revised and enlarged edition (New York: Norton, 1998), penultimate chapter.

5.

The generation that followed Beethoven—Chopin, Schumann, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Wagner[3]—was torn between the need to master the classical conventions and the desire to ignore them. Liszt's one attempt at the classical sonata is clearly a reformulation and deformation of the conventions for the purpose of constructing a new type of dramatic form. It is not program music like some of the sonatas by Clementi or Dussek or like Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony, all of which work by mimesis: the now conventional structure of sonata-form is reworked by Liszt from within, to create a progressive scenario of despair, consolation, Satanism, triumph, and death (for the layout of the work, he followed in the steps of Beethoven and Schubert, using the finale of the Choral Symphony and the "Wanderer" Fantasy as models). Neither Schumann nor Mendelssohn created his most successful works with full respect for, or obedience to, the classical sonata conventions: Schumann almost always displays a certain awkwardness with them, and Mendelssohn an inevitable blandness. Both achieved their most distinguished and popular achievements in large forms when these appear to be invented with relative freedom, as in their recasting of the concerto or the program overture. Chopin's two mature sonatas have always been brilliantly effective in public, but the principal movements are idiosyncratic and even eccentric. The large works of Chopin and Schumann that have had the greatest prestige evade classical sonata modules: the Ballades, Scherzos, and Polonaises, the F Minor Fantasy and the Barcarolle, the *Davidsbündlertänze,* the *Carneval,* the C Major Fantasy, *Dichterliebe, Frauenliebe und Leben,* etc.

More significant, however, is the disappearance from the music of both Chopin and Schumann of the conventional passagework still found in Beethoven and Hummel, an almost total disappearance in Schumann after opus 1, and a drastic reduction in Chopin after the Andante Spianato and Grande Polonaise. Any virtuoso "filling" that remains in mature Chopin is no longer simply cadential in nature (with rare exceptions, like the end of the E Major Scherzo), but is either thematic or reworked with astonishing originality, above all in the final sections of the Ballades.

The late 1840s betrayed a new musical conservatism, a desire to return to the past already evident in the work of Liszt and Schumann.

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[3] I do not have the space here to consider the important intermediate figures of Schubert and Weber.

Even Wagner and the so-called Music of the Future did not remain untouched by this change in musical ideology: we can see this not only in *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal,* but also in parts of *Der Ring des Nibelungen.* The leading figure in the reaction is, of course, Brahms: the reminiscence of Beethoven's Opus 106 in Brahms's Opus 1 and the allusion to Beethoven's Choral Symphony in Brahms's Symphony No. 1 were manifestos, and were understood as such at the time. Chrysander even shrewdly interpreted the reference to the Choral Symphony as a signal that Brahms intended to lead music back to a pure instrumental style.

We are beginning today, however, to understand how radically Brahms reinterpreted classical forms and technique, how he attempted to revive and preserve the style while getting rid of many of its most conventional aspects. The basis of classical triadic tonality is the relation between tonic and dominant. This was considerably weakened by the composers of the 1830s, who were more interested in mediants than in a classical tonic/dominant polarity. The diatonic purity of triadic tonality was attacked from the beginning by the minor mode, which always introduces chromatic elements. In the eighteenth century the minor mode is essentially an exception, an agent of trouble. It is therefore significant that all the sonatas for piano, or for violin and piano, or for cello and piano by Chopin and Schumann are in the minor mode, which uses the mediant as an immediate secondary key instead of the dominant (although the dominant minor can turn up later in the exposition in a succeeding tonicization). What is essential to triadic tonality, however, is the major dominant.[4]

In a number of works, Brahms goes farther than anyone to weaken the tonic/dominant polarity by substituting the dominant *minor* for the major.[5] The dominant minor lacks precisely the sharpened leading tone necessary to the strong tonal cadence. The exposition of the first movement of the third string quartet in B-flat major mixes the major and minor modes of F major very ambiguously, and this removes some of the power of the dominant. (The theme of the variations in the last movement uses D minor instead of the dominant F: the exotic harmonic

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[4] Beethoven's occasional substitution of a mediant for the dominant is always preceded by an elaborate preparation on the dominant of the mediant chosen. This is largely evaded by Chopin, who prefers a rapid change using a pivot note (e.g., shifting from A flat major to E major by holding the tonic note of A-flat and simply putting an E-natural under it). For an elaborate form like the first movement of the B minor sonata, he moves in the exposition from B minor to the relative major D major by first shifting astonishingly to D minor and then changing the mode.

[5] See my *Sonata Forms* (New York: Norton, 1980), final chapter.

structure is B-flat major/D minor :‖: D major/B-flat major.) The solo exposition of the D major violin concerto goes to A minor, and the solo exposition of the B-flat major piano concerto goes to F minor (this makes a problem for the opening ritornello, since returning directly to B flat major from F minor is not possible, but it is cleverly solved by Brahms's placing of the secondary material at first in D minor). Brahms also uses the mediant minor instead of the major in the Cello Sonata in F Major, where the exposition of the opening movement goes to A minor. In a study of the proportions of Brahms's sonata forms, James Webster found the coda to be anomalous for its length: there was, however, no way to avoid a long coda, as logic forced Brahms to end his recapitulation correctly in D minor, and it was necessary to find the way back to F major. In short, these are all, superficially, classical eighteenth-century forms, but the harmonic structures are profoundly subversive of the traditional stylistic language: the procedures weaken the foundations of the style by adding an anomalous chromatic emphasis at odds with the very tradition that Brahms was claiming to revive. Carl Dahlhaus has cogently remarked that in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* the frequent diatonic pages presuppose a basic chromatic background.[6] In spite of the opposition of Brahms and Wagner, we may say the same of Brahms.

And we should go further: with both composers, the purely diatonic in their music has come to sound exotic, the chromaticism normal. In one respect Brahms goes more radically in the direction of twentieth-century modernism than Wagner does: the dissonant contours of his melodic shapes are insistent and spiky, and the dissonances carry more weight than their release and resolution into consonance, which are always correct but for the most part deliberately underplayed. The interior cadences are generally weak (this is a characterization, not in the least a value judgment), rarely decisive: moreover, the cadences in the melodies are often out of phase with the cadences in the bass, which serves to increase their weakness.

By softening the force of the cadence, Brahms attacked the principal conventional element of the classical system while, at the same time, he reproduced with extraordinary cunning the proportions, the procedures, and many of the lineaments of the style. He studied the composers of the past and recreated their techniques with material or procedures that would have been previously rejected or would have been unthinkable. The transition to the opening of the recapitulation of the

[6] See his article "Wagner" in *Grove 2* (1981).

Example 12.

first movement of the B-flat concerto is an example of his sophistication (Example 12).

A V-I cadence that prepares the return of the tonic and the main theme depends traditionally for its effect on the sense of a strong down-beat on the tonic chord. Brahms reproduces here the standard dominant preparation, even at great length, but the arrival of the tonic is placed as if it was still part of the dominant harmony and the articulation is

blurred. The blurring continues with the replaying of the two phrases of
the opening theme, originally heard in the horn with echoes from the
soloist: here, theme and echoes are merged, the antiphonal clarity of the
opening of the movement becomes complex, the contours fluid. (In
what follows, Brahms seems to have taken to heart Donald Francis
Tovey's observation that in the concertos of Mozart the recapitulation is
a synthesis of the first ritornello and the first solo.) The reentry of the

main theme at the beginning of a recapitulation is the most important tonic cadence in the classical scheme next to the final cadence itself, and Brahms's treatment affects the structure of the movement as a whole. His attempt to evade the most conventional effect here can be compared to Wagner's treatment of the tonic cadences in the most diatonic of his works, *Die Meistersinger:* a very large number of these all-too-numerous cadences avoid the final tonic chord for a surprise resolution into V7 of V—or what would be a surprise if it did not occur so often in this work that it almost hardens into a new convention.

What is most remarkable about the return in this concerto of Brahms is the lack of forward drive and the sense of suspended rhythm. The end of the development appears to dissolve into the recapitulation. The tension of the lengthy dominant preparation of a return in the classical manner is not so much grounded as dispersed. Perhaps Brahms was influenced here by Mendelssohn's lyrical technique of ending a development with an air of exhaustion, but he has transferred that effect here to the return itself. The classical resolution on the tonic midway in the second part of the sonata is achieved on paper, but the dramatic scenario is completely subverted. Brahms seems to me far more radical in this instance than Beethoven in the "Appassionata," where the tension of the development is prolonged into the recapitulation by a dominant pedal. The recapitulation of Brahms's second piano concerto is very much like the recapitulation of his Symphony no. 4, where the opening theme returns in a stillness marked *dolce,* with the rhythm arrested and even suspended by the augmentation. This extraordinary passage is often performed with an unnecessary *ritenuto,* spoiling the subtle effect of the pianissimo arpeggios in the strings, which create two written-out four-bar fermatas.[7]

Brahms may seem to be preserving the classical conventions, but in fact he reformulates their function in ways that attack the foundations of the style. Perhaps Haydn was equally revolutionary for his period, but Beethoven's works never altered the premises of the musical lan-

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[7] The aesthetic implied by these striking moments lies behind the even more unclassical return of the opening movement of Symphony no. 3: not only is there no dominant preparation of the return of the tonic F major (except at the last possible and very brief moment), but any sense of a dominant is contradicted by a repeated emphasis on an E flat over an E flat pedal and then a brief tonic pedal. Perhaps this derived from a study of Beethoven's Symphony no. 4, where the return of the tonic had been prepared paradoxically by a long tonic pedal, but Brahms has subverted the essentially classical aspects of Beethoven's device. In any case, introducing the tonic through an emphasis on the flatted seventh must have been unprecedented when Brahms did it here.

guage to the extent that Brahms does in many of the large works. But then Brahms had the radical experience of the generation of Schumann as part of his equipment, to say nothing of the contemporary challenge of Wagner, for whom Brahms had a grand but suitably nuanced admiration.

The second piano concerto makes more use of conventional virtuoso figuration than, for example, Schumann did in his piano concerto, from which it was virtually eliminated. Nevertheless, Brahms's use is idiosyncratic and, we might say, fundamentally unconventional. He does, naturally, follow Beethoven in naturalizing the conventional by making it thematic. The arpeggios that begin the cadenza right after the opening of the concerto provide an example (Example 13):

Example 13.
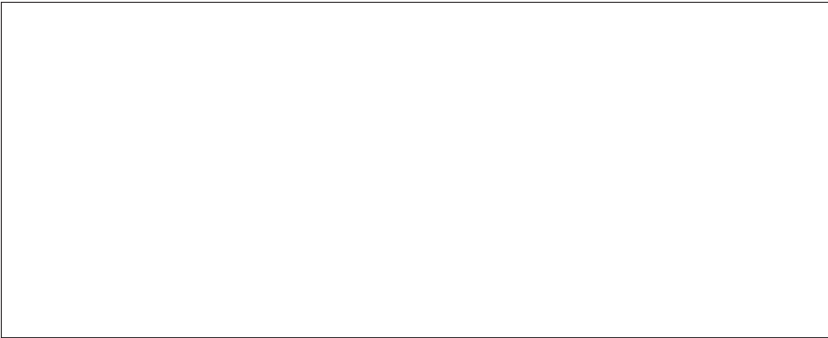
This makes the opening page of the "Emperor," on which it is clearly modeled, seem by contrast extremely conventional, and the free tempo of Beethoven's cadenza has yielded to a much stricter tempo.

Not all of the conventional elements, however, are given a similar thematic character. In this concerto, which is famous for its exacerbation of the virtuoso element, the conventional arpeggios, scales, and figuration of the concertos of Mozart are not absent. Nevertheless, one essential character of the conventional filling in a classical concerto is canceled by Brahms: the grace and ease with which it should be performed. Almost without exception, the conventional material is slightly altered by Brahms so that it sounds awkward as well as difficult; the pianist not only has trouble playing it, but—against the grain of the convention, contradicting its purpose—clearly appears to everyone to be having difficulty. The tradition demanded that the difficulties of display be solved with an apparent ease of execution: the virtuosity was an

impersonal or neutral element of the composition; the ease of the performer allowed the admiration of the spectators to be concentrated entirely on the execution of the purely mechanical. Our consciousness of the deliberate awkwardness of the passages of display in Brahms, by contrast, adds an impure element that partially blocks the audience's surrender to the interests of the performer; the awkward alterations divert attention to the composer, even in passages of almost completely mechanical content (Example 14):

Example 14. Bar 154, B flat Concerto, I
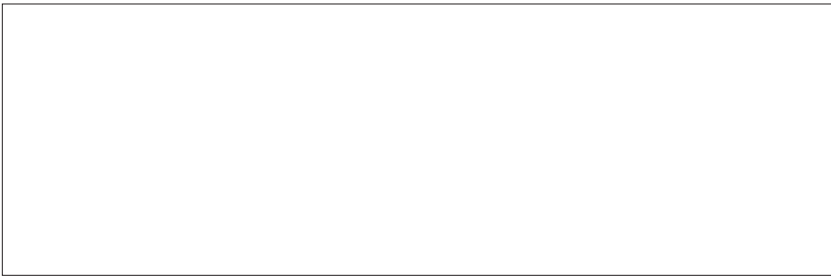
The extra note A-natural in this arpeggio of the dominant seventh of F minor makes this bar horrendously difficult to perform, and impossible to execute with any sense of ease. The most difficult passages in a concerto by Rachmaninov or Tchaikovsky allow the soloist an appearance of facility and grace refused by Brahms. This imposed awkwardness oddly transforms the mechanical into the expressive—or, in other words, the arbitrary sign into a natural signifier. Similarly with the famous parallel thirds in the final movement (Example 15):

Eample 15. Bars 32–36
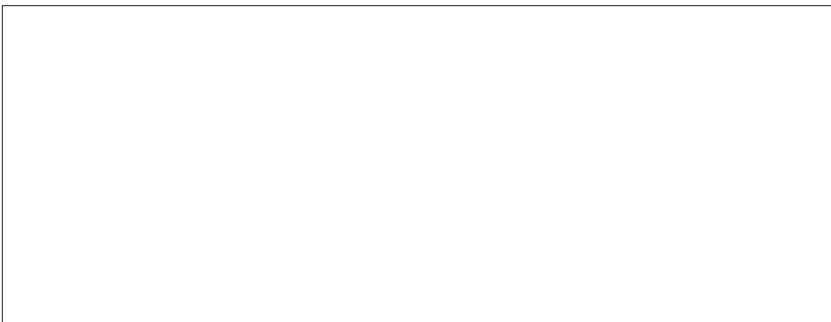
This reproduces part of the scheme of the opening strain of the finale of Beethoven's Concerto no. 3 in C Minor that Brahms followed almost slavishly as a model for the finale of both his piano concertos and is a substitute for Beethoven's brief cadenza, except that Beethoven's trill precedes the scale, and his scale is only a single line, not in parallel thirds. Brahms later reinforces the new complexity by demanding that the parallel thirds be played by one hand alone. Even if the soloist plays all the notes *leggiero* as marked, this never sounds like the more free-wheeling cadenza style of the Beethoven concerto. It is only when we compare this with the model, in fact, that we realize that these bars actually function as a cadenza written out in strict time and that Brahms, as he did with the first concerto, has adhered faithfully to the Beethoven scheme, with a motif repeated several times followed by a cadenza leading directly back to the opening phrase of the main theme (Example 16):

Example 16. Bars 20–28
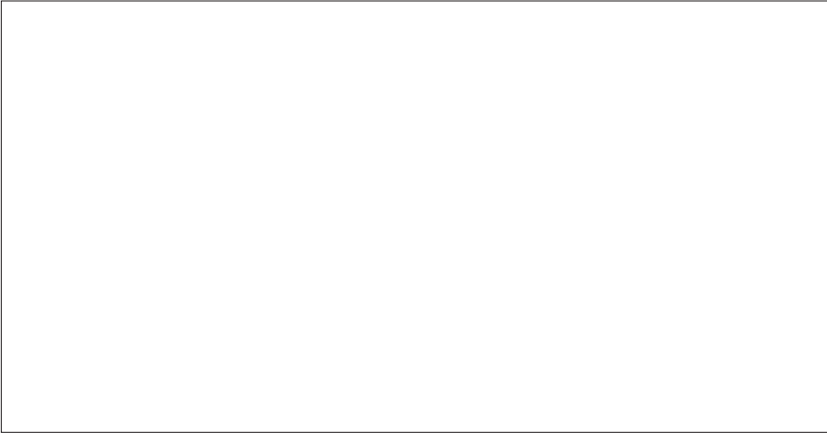
In short, Brahms has rewritten the classical cadenza so as to remove the basic convention and function of a cadenza, its sense of free improvisation.

One idiosyncratic employment of convention should be mentioned: the use of a convention so old-fashioned, so archaic, that it had ceased to be conventional, but had become an original and almost exotic effect. In Brahms's Violin Sonata no. 2 in A Major, the development section begins by playing the main theme at the dominant and then replaying it at the tonic. Beginning a development with the main theme at the

dominant was a convention that was still alive; beginning with the main theme at the tonic was an experiment of Beethoven in Opus 31, nos. 1 and 3. But playing the main theme at the dominant and immediately after at the tonic is a form so archaic that, as far as I know, it had not been practiced by anyone since the 1760s, when it was commonplace and almost standard. Derived from the mid-century opera aria, it can be found frequently in works of Haydn from that early period (Oliver Strunk called it a "premature recapitulation" and thought it a banal device, which it was), but Haydn later abandoned the scheme, perhaps not only because it was banal but also because it inconveniently reduced the tension of the development. Brahms revives it, but with great originality (Example 17):

Example 17.
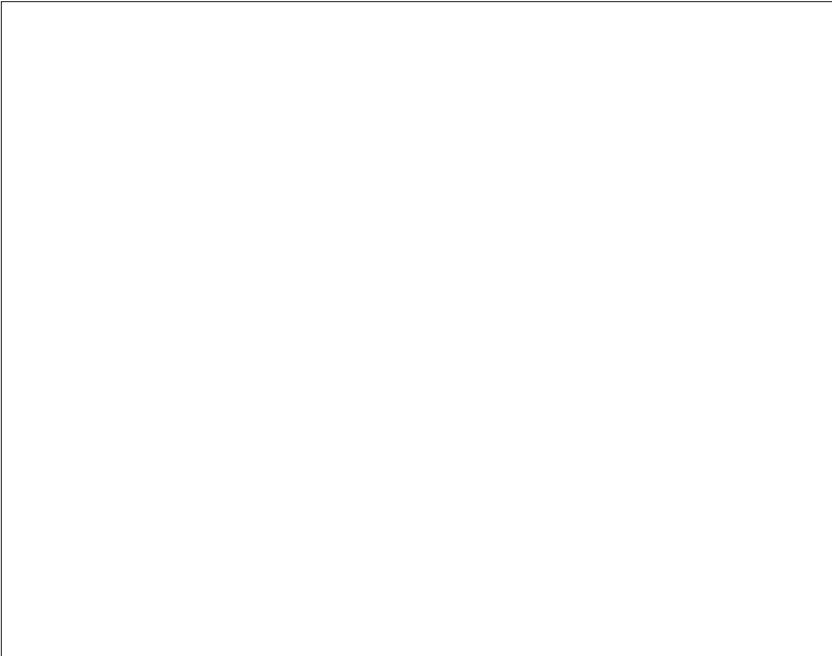
He exploits the inconvenience, as the relaxation of harmonic tension increases the lyricism. It is also the fruit of a musicological study—a convention so buried in the past that it has been forgotten and is no longer conventional. Brahms is not only continuing a classical tradition, but amusing himself here, I think, by resuscitating the dead.

6.

The project of purging art music of its conventions continues after Brahms into the twentieth century, and is still active today. Debussy almost always used only compound arpeggios, complicating the triadic nature of the device, and consented to write simple scales only ironically, as in the Etude for five fingers "in the style of Mr. Czerny." (As far as I can remember, Ravel wrote scales only *glissando* on either the white or black keys, which changes them from a witness to the harmonic language of tonality into examples of pure sonority.) The disappearance of scales and arpeggios is a great hardship for performers today, causing much misery above all perhaps for pianists, as the arrangement of the black and white keys of the keyboard was specifically designed to facilitate their execution and to make anything else more onerous. With instruments constructed for tonality, the loss of conventional material has made music harder to play, and, as we all know, harder to listen to. In the general development in the nineteenth century of all the arts—music, literature, and painting—the attempt to rid the arts of the standard conventions is the villain in the wicked creation of a difficult style and the consequent alienation of that large part of the public that resents any heavy demands made upon its attention.

The difference between art music and popular music is, in fact, largely a question of how much close attention is required or demanded for appreciation. Of course, when so-called classical music is familiar enough so that it no longer makes us uncomfortable, we can listen to it happily without paying much attention to it and think about more pressing and more practical considerations. The once controversial work of Wagner or Stravinsky can now be transformed into Muzak and performed in elevators without inspiring a public outcry.

Sustaining the classical tradition while weakening, or even dispensing with, so many of its conventions was a paradoxical activity. The classical language of music was largely dependent on these conventions: getting rid of them attacked the musical tradition and injured it almost beyond repair—at least, the music language was radically and systematically altered in the process in ways that were probably not completely understood, the consequences certainly not clearly foreseen. That the greatest and most durable masterpieces from 1750 to the present were composed through this project is not enough to make the fundamental

loss of eighteenth-century tonality less poignant. Musicians were vaguely and intermittently aware of the danger of this loss of the tradition long before the present day: how wonderful it would be, Brahms once observed, to be a composer at the time of Mozart when it was easy to write music. The demand for innovation, the prejudice against convention, has made music not only harder to play and harder to listen to but also harder to compose.

   In the twentieth century, a reaction against the sensuous delights of unlimited chromaticism and atonality brought an attempt to return to diatonic tonality in the work of composers as disparate as Virgil Thomson, Samuel Barber, and Philip Glass, to name only a few. But the tonal system they employ is by no means that of the eighteenth century: the symmetry of dominant and subdominant directions has disappeared, and there is no longer any of the rigor with which chromatic tonal relations were regulated in Haydn and his contemporaries. It is not that the eighteenth-century conventions are infringed or violated: on the contrary, they are ignorantly or innocently disregarded. In general, tonal relations are loosely conceived by neoconservatives and neoromantics today, and their laxity has not permitted a renaissance or revival of the structural richness of the classical tradition. Exceptionally, the most astonishingly effective use of a diatonic language in the last century has been that of Stravinsky after *Les Noces,* who exploited the conventions and formulas of tonality ironically. The main theme of his piano sonata shows his method (Example 18).

The harmonies are all tonic and dominant, but their function has been subverted: every melody note of the tonic triad after the first is harmonized by a dominant, every melody note from the dominant is harmonized by a tonic chord. Here there is a direct and consistent violation of the tonal significance, a systematic destruction of the conventions of tonality that undercuts any nostalgia or sentimentality that might arise from the composition of a sonata in C major. In *The Poetics of Music,* Stravinsky observed that in the 1920s he used the formulas of classical tonality the way he had previously employed the motifs of folk music. The technique in both cases was fundamentally one of alienation. The trill at the opening of the melody of the sonata reveals this as clearly as the harmony: a classical trill prepares the resolution of the cadence as the leading-tone goes into the tonic; transforming the trill into a *tremolo* on the interval of a ninth blocks resolution, as the dissonance of the ninth hangs over unresolved (above all because the composer has incorporated

Example 18.

the dissonance into a semblance of resolution). The technique of alien-
ation is basic to Romanticism (defined succinctly by Novalis as "making
the strange familiar and the familiar strange") and the neoconservative
Stravinsky, like the neoconservative Brahms, continued the revolution-
ary development initiated by the late eighteenth century. Both sub-
verted the conventions as they transformed them.

   How is a convention established? Clearly by repetition. Of course,
the conventions that have been most firmly set in place are those that are
consonant with the basic nature of the musical language and style—but
that, too, is established by familiarity achieved through repetition. Per-
haps the most profound aspect of serious music today is its disdain for
repetition. This is not a new phenomenon but the end of a long and
gradual development: the essential difference between an early eigh-
teenth century *da capo* and a late eighteenth century sonata form is that
the *da capo* is structurally a literal repeat sometimes with added orna-
mentation improvised on the spot or planned by the soloist, while the
return of the opening section in the sonata has to be completely rewrit-
ten with an altered harmonic structure. Simple repetition (even with
improvised decoration) no longer satisfied the new sensibility.

   The prejudice against unvaried repetition became firmly ingrained
during the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth, Strauss, Debussy,

and others have renounced the repetition of even short sections, unless they were completely rethought and reformulated. With the second half of the twentieth century, the avant-garde foreswore even the repetition of a theme. In the music of Luciano Berio, Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Elliott Carter, and others, we come upon the return of textures and even the return of certain kinds of harmonic configurations, but there is no return of a theme and even no simple recurrence of a motif. It would seem that the most interesting composers of our day have determined to block what might result in the creation of new conventions for future generations. We can be sure, however, that convention will find itself a way back by stealth, and it is probably already doing so.