Abstract

1. Rhythm, Variation, and Unity of Form

1.1. Wagner, Mallarmé, and the social circumstances of music making

Passages from Richard Wagner’s *Zukunftsmusik* (published in 1860 in French as the *Lettre à M. Villot sur la musique*) and Stéphane Mallarmé’s prose writings of the 1870s and 80s show a similar estimate of the character of music, but sharp disagreement as to what that character implies for the treatment of language. Both writers describe a concert at which the audience’s indifference to the character of music, but sharp disagreement as to what that character implies for the treatment of language. Both writers describe a concert at which the audience’s indifference to the music marks their sense of social superiority; but where Mallarmé enjoys the condition of individual detachment and the opportunity for reverie and critical reflection, Wagner is angered by them. In order to achieve the aim of deeply moving his audience, Wagner demands that the music be ‘really heard’; language assists in this intention by becoming more concrete and sensually dense, and by freeing itself from the dominion of reason. Mallarmé, on the other hand, would ‘purify the language of the tribe’, an undertaking that requires music and speaking voices to be quiet so as not to cloud the operations of the mind. In passages of striking resemblance and difference, Wagner uses words profusely to describe the awakening of many voices from silence; Mallarmé shows in few words how the evocative power of concrete sounds can be increased through selection and elimination.

1.2. Rhythm between passion and reason

Mallarmé sometimes recognizes that rhythm is a phenomenon of the body and that the rhythms of poetry are less powerful and engrossing than those of music. Rather than attempt to rival music on this ground by cheaply coining emphatic cadences, he recommends a suspension of rhythmic emphasis, an indefinite deferral of the little ending that each strong beat makes in the line. He typically presents the experience of rhythm without its durative and physical aspect, as an understanding of abstract relationships (meter). To immerse himself in the immediate experience of rhythm would be to sacrifice the emotional detachment and intellectual distance that allow him to apprehend formal quantities in their relationship to one another.

Wagner argues that the abstractions of ‘arithmetic’ militate against the listener’s involvement in the present moment. An emotional understanding of the melodic line, he says, will suggest the right rhythm for every place in the score. While Wagner helps himself to the advantages of rational organization, his constant aim of stirring the listener’s feelings makes him hostile to any treatment of rhythm which would lessen its physical impact. Mallarmé, in contrast, though strangely close to Wagner in associating rhythm with melody, knows that the rhythms of poetry are inevitably moderated by considerations of meaning that must be rationally addressed. He mistrusts Wagner’s implication that poetry, like music, should become a matter of forthright and emphatic declaration. Indeed, where Wagner explicitly demands ‘belief’ in the stories he tells, Mallarmé will not forget that art is a contrivance and poetry a ‘hypothesis’. The paradoxical nature of rhythm—both single and plural; an infinite presence in the body of sound—admits of opposite treatments that can both induce a sense of timelessness. Where Wagner builds the rhythm of his works from within, creating an impression that nothing has been left out of them (and thus enforcing belief), Mallarmé postpones the downbeat indefinitely, refusing to let the reader forget that poetry is a ‘glorious lie’. Mallarmé’s younger contemporary, the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin, shows a typically Symbolist reaction to the Wagnerian model in his final preference for understatement and rhythmic ambiguity over the pleasures of emphatic repetition.
1.3. Variation and unity of form

Heinrich Schenker’s theory of the Ursatz maintains that the contrasting subjects of a classical composition are really aspects of a single musical idea. Conflicts and resolutions that seem to mark the encounter of ideas originally unrelated are in fact the working out of a potential for growth in the Ursatz. Every musical event in Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde, for example, can be discerned in nuce in the opera’s first chord. Music which derives from a single pitch structure typically undergoes a process called ‘developing variation’, sometimes figured as an ‘unfurling’ or ‘unfolding’ of latent implications. Each variation is like a character, or face, derived from the Type of characters, or faces.

Mallarmé speaks of ‘unfolding’ the idea of a poem in verses which have the autonomy and completeness of musical variations. Since each verse is the peer of every other, there is no fixed order of precedence among them, hence no storylike sense of progression through time. The technique of variation suits the Symbolist aim of awakening an uncanny sense of familiarity in the reader or listener, who seems already to have encountered the germinating idea in other variations. The final works of Scriabin, for instance, all derive from a single ‘matrix sonority’, or Ursatz, to which the composer attributed mystical powers. One might see the principle of variation at work in other nineteenth-century attempts to supply the deficiencies of one art form by the strengths of another, such as the Gesamtkunstwerk of Wagner and the elaborate synesthesia of René Ghil’s Traité du verbe.

The points of resemblance between any two variations make for an impression of formal coherence without, however, delimiting the form of the set, which can always be extended or internally reordered. Thus the unity of variations is not formal, but ideal: they work to create form from within, but cannot define the overall form of a composition. The principle of le Vers serves a similar function in Mallarmé’s poetry. Each verse can stand for all the others, inasmuch as each is a version of the same absolute and self-sufficient utterance; yet the rhyme that links one verse to the next generates the larger form of poetic variations, which can be indefinitely prolonged. Moreover, in circumstances of such notorious obscurity as those attending the poetry of Mallarmé, the local form conferred by rhyme gives the reader a welcome feeling that sense and progress are being made. Similarly, the tonal framework of Scriabin’s late compositions palliates the difficulty of his advanced harmonic style. In the compositions from about 1905 onwards, tonality is used to imply the imminence of a resolution that in fact never comes.

Both Mallarmé and Scriabin seem sometimes to have assumed that the principles of poetic and musical composition were the same, and that the techniques appropriate to composition in one sphere were appropriate in the other. A comparison of their attempts to find equivalents in poetic language of specific effects in music will begin by recognizing that those attempts may be most enlightening precisely where they fail.

2. The Integrity of the Symbol

2.1. The subject in music and poetry

In evoking the effects of music, Mallarmé often proceeds by attributing traits of character to an unspecified grammatical subject. The passages leave room to suppose that their subject is a human being, or music itself, or both. The language of Scriabin’s score markings is of the same kind: fragmentary phrases without a subject ride upon the staves, suggesting the qualities of an element or the moods of a god. But in the free verse epic which Scriabin wrote to accompany his symphonic Poem of Ecstasy, the subject (‘I’) is named; evidently the adventures of the score befall that Moi which Symbolist doctrine had substituted for Schopenhauer’s General Will as the presumptive subject of music. Scriabin’s enthusiastic
Schoenberg’s settings of Maeterlinck’s play. There is a difference in emphasis. By his use of unresolved harmonies, lack of forward momentum, omission of self-contained arias, and flexible assignment of musical motifs to the elements of the play, Debussy made what he called ‘musical tapestry’ in which the characters seem woven without distinctness of outline. His professed belief that music should ‘stand aside’ from the dramatic action seems inconsistent with his choice of a play in which very little happens. Arnold Schoenberg, in contrast, undertook to ‘mirror every detail’ of Pelléas et Mélisande. Characters and even physical objects are represented with such exactitude in his symphonic poem, op. 5, as to make it seem that musical relationships are governed by the conditions of real life.

3.4. Translating the audience

If a composer, or a writer intent on achieving the effects of music, could fully realize music’s potential to bring about a complete identification between the listener and the performer (or between the real world and the world of art), he might come to believe that his audience could be made to share in the death and transfiguration of the subject at the end of the work. Such an ending would involve, not a catastrophic return to the conditions of our present existence, but a turning upward (anastrophe) toward that ‘higher spiritual plane’ which so preoccupied the Symbolists. Since this achievement was to be real, rather than merely imaginary, the means of accomplishing it would have to satisfy real conditions. The performers would have to be empty vessels to permit the necessary identification, but also stars; the words spoken would have to be void of meaning as music is, but also potent as a spell; the creatures’ temporally limited points of view would have to coalesce in their creator’s timeless one, so that the audience might enjoy his ability to occupy all positions at once. In certain respects both Axël and Pelléas et Mélisande reflect this ambition, which is systematically carried out in the apocalyptic projects discussed in the following chapters. Villiers declared that the entire human race was his intended audience, and Axël offers his suicide as a model for the race to follow. The androgyny of Villiers’s and Maeterlinck’s characters can be seen as the obliteration of one kind of difference that impedes the approach to spiritual unity. Another, created by the sequential unfolding of events, was addressed by a practical expedient: Maeterlinck, Debussy, and Scriabin all worked on the various parts of their compositions simultaneously. In Axël and Pelléas, and in Scriabin’s sketches, certain elements (such as the veil and the temple) are treated both as symbols and as real presences: evidently the apocalyptic aim was not satisfied with a mere figure of the imagination but looked for efficient vehicles on which to leave the world behind. Yet the fundamental absurdity of this aim transpires from a comparison of Villiers’s and Scriabin’s plans, which resemble each other in everything but the evidence of a storyteller’s skill. Perhaps a suspicion that language alone, even language and music together, would fail to move us from this world to the next, accounts for the resort to another sign system: color is present in objects of sense, yet lends itself to abstract codification. Its link to two orders of experience seemed to offer a means of binding together in a vital whole the elements of a project so ambitious that it must otherwise remain a monument to the folly of its creator.

4. René Ghil and the Contradictions of Synesthesia

An elaborate attempt to codify the ways in which poetry, music, and the visual arts may ‘correspond’ in their effects on the feeling subject, René Ghil’s Traité du verbe attests both to its author’s fascination with the impersonal authority of science and to his persuasion of his own greatness. Ghil himself presents in heightened form that tension between self-consciousness and self-effacement which we found in the protagonists of Villiers’s and
belief that composition is a matter of naming mighty qualities and declaring how he feels, serves him ill in poetry but well in music: the principal theme of his symphony is not repellent as the first person pronoun of his epic is. There appears to be no difference between subject and object in music as there is in language. If poetry is to ‘take back its own from music’, it must find a way to overcome the hard division of subjects at the foundation of language.

The danger of eliminating common nouns altogether as a means to this end can be seen in Baudelaire’s ‘translation’ of the overture to Wagner’s Lohengrin. Working from Wagner’s and Liszt’s verbal paraphrases of the score, Baudelaire drops what is not common to them both; the result no longer purports to say what the music ‘says’, but instead describes how the listener feels. The listener, in Baudelaire’s version, has become the subject of Wagner’s music, in a way that recalls how the player of Scriabin’s sonatas (rather than the music itself) was the subject of his poetic score annotations. In achieving fidelity to the music by foreclosing every definite end of the imagination, however, Baudelaire leaves the reader with nothing to care about. Mallarmé would have poetry become, like music, an ‘instrument direct d’Idée’ [‘direct instrument of Idea’] without losing the vital interest which music holds for the listener.

2.2. Rapture and detachment

Both Mallarmé and Scriabin wrote texts intended to affect the reader as music affects the listener; but unlike Scriabin, Mallarmé understood that language operates in conditions of opposition and difference that bespeak a utilitarian connection with life. Where Scriabin jumps effortlessly from one entity to another in the poem he wrote for his Fourth Symphony, and boldly declares the feelings of each, Mallarmé leaves the subject of his musical evocations to be cautiously inferred. Scriabin’s facility in occupying different vantage points reflects a musician’s confidence in the transparency of his medium. Musical pitches do not have to be rid of worldly associations before they can be used in a symphony. In order to make words shine with the ‘tiers aspect, fusible et clair’ [‘third aspect, fusible and clear’] of poetry, however, Mallarmé was obliged to arrange them with a painstaking deliberation and awareness of their ingratitude far removed from the poetaster’s enthusiasm.

The recent debate among academic philosophers as to the nature of musical experience is marked by a lively awareness of real-world conditions quite foreign to the state of mind which Wagner and Scriabin sought to bring about in the listener. Contributors to the debate, on every side, have paid much attention to the kinds of difference that can be discerned in extra-musical experience, and that are implied in linguistic descriptions of such experience; and with their findings they have built procrustean beds for the listener to lie upon. Their descriptions of musical experience are, for the most part, descriptions of the social circumstances of listening: they offer a timid, liberal, and decorous model of how to behave in the concert hall which is evidently a reaction to the abhorrent political implications of Wagner’s model. The self-forgetfulness and attitude of exclusive devotion which were meant to bind together the audience of Wagner’s operas—those prototypes of Scriabin and Mallarmé’s final, apocalyptic projects—may wear a less repellent aspect when their resemblance to the feelings of a romantic lover is understood; for then the enthusiast’s delight in repeating a pleasure which he feels sure will never pall, his wish that the whole world should acknowledge the perfections of his beloved, and the scorn he feels for the attractions of every rival, will be seen to offer an alternative untainted by the imputation of moral ugliness to the fair-minded detachment that observes the motions of music from a distance, but shrinks from feeling them in their full force and intensity.
The ‘opera scene’ in *Rameau’s Nephew*, by Diderot, offers a striking anticipation of the two modes of listening. There the irruption of the nephew, a musical ‘energumen’, in a society whose members are more alive to the danger of losing face than to the appeal of his imaginary world, is conveyed in both its outward ridiculousness and inward sublimity. The guarded subjects who witness the nephew’s performance are put off by his frenzied manner, and cannot enter into a realm whose charms they nevertheless dimly feel; a realm where every subject is fit for occupation, and where the unifying presence of rhythm creates belief in the reality of every episode. One might trace a philosophical line of descent from the nephew to Scriabin by way of Schopenhauer’s claim that the experience of art enables us to ‘become completely one with our object’, and Wagner’s that our sense of time and space is ‘annulled’ by the ‘actuality of the drama’.

2.3. Point of view in music
Attempts to find the divided conditions of real life in compositions written for instrumental voices alone have been frustrated by the lack in them of identifiable motives and clearly oriented points of view. As soon as the description of a piece of music ventures beyond the most general emotional categories, it has gone further than a scrupulous use of language will allow. Yet, despite the tirelessness with which philosophers of music have demonstrated that music cannot truthfully be said to reproduce certain complicated human attitudes (since such attitudes imply the presence of extra-musical factors which the score does not specify), there has been a tendency for storytelling to creep into even the most rigorously ‘counter-intuitive’ demonstrations. In one such case, a piano etude by Scriabin is said to express ‘unrequited passion’; the contrasting themes that seem to justify this implication of actors and a story are in fact variations on a single ‘matrix sonority’. The listener thus has a sense of *sameness in difference* which accords with other signs of paradox: Scriabin’s themes function both as ‘players in an ensemble’ and as ‘parts of a whole’; his music moves forward in time, yet makes one feel that one is in possession of all of it at every moment. The lack of a linguistically definable point of view, which philosophers have used to argue that ‘point of view [is] absent in music’, also admits of the opposite implication: that music affords access to every point of view.

2.4. The expression of musical experience in words
We can discern in the literary response of the Symbolists to music a tension between the wish to preserve the advantages of a critical perspective and the wish to write language that is the music it describes. In the naive verse of his *Poem of Ecstasy* Scriabin spoke for every element and every mood in his symphonic poem of the same title; Wagner, too, acted out in both verse and music that ‘imitative all-pervasiveness’ which Thomas Mann observed in him. This point of resemblance can be linked to another: both men sought to derive all the specific and various contents of their final compositions from a single, integral, pre-composed *Ursatz*—a kind of musical Philosopher’s Stone. In the course of this attempt, the creator’s ‘will’ (to use the terms of Scriabin’s explanation), impelled by a need for ‘activity’, projected itself into the individual moments and creatures of the music’s episodes. Thus, while no stories can be told about the *Ursatz* itself (since only abstract language befits a musical idea in its pre-composed state), some story must be told in order to reproduce the sense of suspenseful uncertainty raised by the vicissitudes of the score. Yet this variation, insofar as it purports to be an aspect of the musical *Ursatz*, is bound to disappoint—unless it can somehow achieve that freedom from the burden of reference which has always seemed the singular privilege of music.

Arthur Symons’s short story, ‘Christian Trevalga’ (1905), suggests how the purely musical problem of unfolding the *Ursatz* can be seen as a metaphor for the Symbolists’ attempt
to ‘réaliser l’inexplicable’ [‘realize the inexplicable’] in poetry. Whatever circumstances attended the conception of a musical idea, Symons says, are ‘forgotten’ by the music itself. We cannot claim on the music’s authority that we have rediscovered those circumstances when we interpret the music in words. In much the same way, the ‘fleur’ which Mallarmé transmutes into poetry is ‘l’absente de tous bouquets’ [‘the one absent from all bouquets’]; it arises ‘musicalement’ [‘musically’] in the listener’s mind, ‘idée même et suave’ [‘sheer suave idea’]. In a Symbolist perspective, music has the great advantage over other subjects of poetry that the elements of which it is made have no a priori significance: it is thus closer than other symbols to the transcendent reality for which symbols, in general, stand. Yet richness of suggestion, ambiguity, a feeling that what has been rendered in words is less important than what has escaped: these characteristics account for only half of the attraction exerted by symbols on poets determined to achieve musical effects in language. Symbols give a welcome specificity and concreteness to poetry as well; they are entities about which stories that seem to matter can be told; and as such, they arouse that sense of vital interest which is lost when the meaning of music is reduced to an abstraction.

2.5. The performer and the listener

Rameau’s nephew identified with every creature of his musical imagination but could not induce his listeners to do the same. The darkened concert hall of Wagnerian and Symbolist dramaturgy was intended to foster such an identification; to banish the self-consciousness and fear of ridicule that held back the nephew’s audience and that are evident in the response of some modern philosophers to the challenge of ‘really listening’ (as Wagner put it). Elias Canetti has spelled out the ugly political implications of this intention in his analysis of the psychology of crowds; but when he applies his theory to the experience of listening to music, he draws a peculiarly loveless picture. One suspects that he cannot deplore, in the political sphere, the complete relinquishment of control by an ‘audience’ and its complete appropriation by a ‘performer’, without forgoing the joy which such an arrangement can afford in the concert hall. In any case, the proselytizing spirit, intolerance of rivals, and absorption of the individual’s identity in a wave of devotion—features which wear a sinister aspect when masses of people exhibit them—are also articles in the code of romantic love. In that context, the erotic vocabulary which Diderot used to portray the nephew’s frenzy makes sense, as does the combination of grandeur et misère which Canetti diagnosed in the conductor’s attitude, and which one finds again in the central role assigned to the poet and the composer, respectively, in the final projects of Mallarmé and Scriabin. The performer who sounds out the score with his fingers or voice is literally in touch with a transcendent reality through its unmediated symbol. No wonder that the listener’s feelings may ‘crystallize’ about a particular performance in a way that recalls Stendhal’s metaphor of falling in love. Perhaps great music is greater than it can be played, but the enthusiastic listener may nonetheless come to feel that this or that embodiment of a musical idea in sound is greater, or dearer, than any other possibly could be. Like the exponent of fin’amors described in the twelfth century by André le Chapelain, he is offended by the mere act of comparison, and demands that others acknowledge the rightness of his choice. He wants to condense and repeat the experience of being with his beloved, and prefers the flaws in her face to any hypothetical perfection.

A lied by Johannes Brahms (‘Am Sonntag Morgen’, op. 49, no.1) serves to show how the three types of identification described in this chapter—of subject and object, words and music, performer and listener—may coincide in musical practice.
3. Subject and Setting in Two Symbolist Plays

3.1. Wagner without music, music without Wagner
The biographical record suggests that Villiers de l’Isle-Adam in *Axél* and Maurice Maeterlinck in *Pelléas et Mélisande* sought to achieve musical effects by literary and dramatic means. They followed Wagner’s precedent in using the tone and material of myth but rid their treatments of what seemed to them too factual and literal in Wagner’s music dramas. This change looks like a way of compensating for the difficulty (which Wagner did not face) of having to make language do the job of music. It results in plays in which a single, transcendent point of view is shared by characters whose difference from one another is less important than their function as aspects of a symbolic unity lying beyond the accidents of time and space. In aspiring to this properly musical effect, Villiers weighs the advantages of declamation and repetition against the eloquence which silence implies. He hesitates between the dream of a materially splendid production, in which star actors would unforgetably impose their faces on the roles, and the higher satisfaction of ensuring that a nearly pure idea should transpire, in the theater of the mind, through the indeterminate identity of the characters. Maeterlinck similarly implies that dramatic speech and action are mere adumbrations of a subject which perpetually eludes definition: they hide the face of the idea, like a veil. His reluctance to authorize musical settings of *Pelléas et Mélisande* can be seen as a mistrust of melody’s power to give a face to the idea, to substitute a definite variation for the ineffable theme.

3.2. ‘Abstracting the physiognomy’
Passages in which Villiers and Maeterlinck both portray the work of art as a character without a face recall the lack of a distinction, in music, between the story told and the means of telling it. Where the face should be, we encounter the work itself. Instead of contemplating a character who exists discretely within the world of the play, we become the contemplating subject, and are filled (as her face is filled) by the whole of that creation. The success of such passages in ‘abstracting the physiognomy’ (Mallarmé) from the characters depends on their being silently read. Yet neither Villiers nor Maeterlinck was content to dwell in the cerebral shadow of music’s vivid presence, its power to remain ideal and universal even when it is performed. They looked for theatrical ways of interesting us in the fate of the protagonists while still implying that the events enacted on stage stood for something beyond themselves. It must be possible (they seem to have believed) to achieve in a play without music the musical effect of distinguishing the elements of which it is composed while at the same time erasing that distinction. In the nighttime ‘tower scene’ in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, for instance, neither Pelléas nor the audience can see Mélisande’s face, yet her presence is betokened by the synecdoche of her hair; Pelléas loses himself in this, uttering his rapture in words that confuse the literally-connected symbol of his beloved with the starry setting of the scene. Maeterlinck was at pains to specify a narrow gradation of shades between costumes and decor: the characters stand out from the background only intermittently, so the audience seems sometimes to be looking at them, and sometimes at what they see. Villiers de l’Isle-Adam achieves much the same effect in *Axél* by substituting, in the temporal sequence, an objective synonym for a subjective antecedent: the audience is first invited to see a universe of stars in the eyes of a character who is later said to be merely ‘dazzled’; the heaven of her thoughts thus gives way to a sense of her isolation.

3.3. Musical responses to musical plays
Music’s ability to combine the transcendent satisfaction of an all-inclusive viewpoint with the excitement and uncertainty of an unfolding narrative can be seen in Debussy’s and
Maeterlinck’s plays and will find again in the central, officiating figures of Mallarmé’s and Scriabin’s final projects.

4.1. Testing the predictability of correspondences
According to Symbolist doctrine, the intuition which a few people enjoy of an affinity between certain sounds and colors is really a memory of their original ‘unity’ in a realm beyond sensation. Synesthetic intuitions, on this view, are not a matter of individual association but point to a real connection beyond the reach of experimental proof. The lack of consistency across experimental subjects does not trouble possessors of the gift themselves; but it has led scientists (whose approach has sometimes been compromised by a misunderstanding of basic musical relationships) to conclude that no generally valid description of links between particular colors and sounds can be made.

4.2. Timbre, pitch, and melody
Ghil associated color with the timbre (tonal quality) of a note, not with its pitch. His theory owes much to Hermann von Helmholtz’s work in acoustics, but he lessens the importance which Helmholtz attached to pitch as a distinguishing characteristic of sounds. Without pitch, there can be no melody, and without melody, Ghil’s system lacks the musical means of making statements—a serious shortcoming, given the tremendous message which his poetry was supposed to convey. To supply this want, Ghil transfers to rhythm and timbre the assertory function of melody. In successive revisions of his treatise, the natures of rhythm, harmony, and melody are redefined as aspects of instrumental timbre, with the result that every musical instrument comes to be associated with a particular color, regardless of the notes that are played upon it.

4.3. Absolute certainty and intolerance of deviation
Synesthetically minded composers have tended to see color as the concomitant of the pitch of a note, not of its timbre. For them, the connections between particular pitches and colors are definite and invariable. In this respect, the synesthetic faculty resembles the ability to recognize the pitch of a note without reference to any other note (absolute pitch), even though synesthetic intuitions, unlike absolute pitch ability, cannot be objectively verified. When the two faculties are combined in the same subject, any deviation in pitch or color causes physical distress; this intolerance is the price of the subject’s infallibility.

4.4. Compromise in practice
Ghil scorned the taste of his contemporaries for synesthesia as a kind of parlor game, insisting instead on its value as an investigative tool. His claim that he alone had discovered the true correspondences between colors and vowels served both to protect his system from the reproach of triviality and to imply his unique personal importance. The absolute tone of his theoretical pronouncements, however, is at variance with the flexible use of synesthesia in his poetry, where the colors assigned to vowels do not always coincide with the colors of what is signified. Since the number of French words whose ‘color’ happens to fit their meaning is insufficient to carry the burden of Ghil’s message, he is obliged to look for combinations of sound and sense that barely conform to the rules of his system.

4.5. Emotion, mode, and temperament
In the fourth edition of the *Traité du verbe* Ghil added moral and emotional traits to his tables of vowels and colors, following the baroque example of the ‘doctrine of the affections’. The certainty with which practitioners of the doctrine attributed such traits to particular musical modes is like Ghil’s certainty. It derived, in their case, from the basis of modal composition in the untempered tuning of the scale. Each mode was intimately associ-
ated with the timbre of a particular instrument, tuned so as to make the pitch of every note played on it harmonically ‘just’. This emphasis on timbre, and the curtailment of melodic invention that untempered tuning implies, made the ‘doctrine of the affections’ a welcome precedent for Ghil’s expanded theory, which at last seemed adequate to support his grandiose poetic ambition.

4.6. An absolute language?
Ghil’s struggle with the musical implications of synesthesia suggests a new way of understanding Mallarmé’s effort to ‘purify the language of the tribe’. Just as the impure pitches of the tempered scale were prerequisites for the fluent treatment of melody, so the imperfect coincidence of sound and sense in late nineteenth-century French marked a point of development at which users of the language could make complicated statements without troubling over the ‘true’ meaning of words. This compromise of ‘la parole’, its reduction to specie, permitted the exchange of information among unlike users of the language in a way that recalls how the adoption of a common pitch system, unconnected to the idiosyncratic timbre of any one instrument, made it possible for various instruments to play together. The portion of French that survived the test of Ghil’s synesthesia proved inadequate for his purposes. He attempted to enrich his later poetry by the addition of Javanese words, claiming that they represented a perfect union of sound and sense without (apparently) being aware that the musical tradition to which they were connected was a modal one.

5. Two Versions of the Symbolist Apocalypse
While most apocalyptic art has described or predicted the end of the world, a few works—conceived in a climate of apocalyptic expectation and fostered by their creators’ confidence in the transforming power of art—have aimed to produce it. As the subject of the first class of work, the apocalypse recedes into future time; as the object of the second, it awaits a comprehensive and efficient form.

5.1. Mallarmé’s Livre and Scriabin’s Mysterium
Two examples of the second class were longstanding projects of their creators. The practical steps that each took to realize an ‘impossible’ ambition belie the tendency among critics to suppose that it was, in either case, a mere Schnapsidee. Both Mallarmé and Scriabin repeatedly set out to compose the ultimate work but renamed it a draft or preparatory sketch when its deficiencies became apparent. Their apocalyptic aim did not rule out a tendency to work in miniature; for, given a sufficient power of symbolization, there was no reason why the absolute should not be rendered in parvo as fully as in magno. The large-scale versions of their projects were to involve a concourse of all the arts (Mallarmé spoke resignedly of the necessity for collaboration; Scriabin boldly wrote bad poetry).

5.2. L’arbitraire du chiffre
Apocalyptic works of both classes feature the symbolic use of numbers and colors. It is the attribution of importance to numbers and colors in general that matters, rather than the particular selection made; for numbers and colors can be endlessly combined, and one combination will rival another; but in any case they give an air of precision and inevitability to works that predict the general doom (particularly when they seem to have been chosen by God) and a sense of power and control to artists intent on producing it themselves. The actual numbers that Scriabin and Mallarmé singled out are not the same ones, and there is a tendency for their numbers to ‘float’. Nevertheless, in connection with what each conceived to be an act of discovery rather than of creation, numbers offered the attraction of a potential key. That both of them sought to make each of their works the ultimate work is consis-
tent with the Symbolist principle that the attainment of essence must coincide with the ‘aboli-
tion’ of material forms. Scriabin’s preoccupation with nirvana, and Mallarmé’s with ‘le
Néant’ [‘Nothingness’], show the trace of this conviction.

5.3. Practical measures for real change
Ancient authorities were divided on the question whether the apocalypse would occur
within history, as an event of this world, or be discontinuous with it, as befitted the end of
half-measures. The question reappears in the ambivalence of Scriabin and Mallarmé as to
where best to concentrate their energies. Should they devote themselves exclusively to the
cultivation of the ideal in music or poetry, leaving all practical applications to take care of
themselves? Or should they address such matters as the size of the hall, the number of per-
formances, and the qualifications for admission?

5.4. Irreverence and apotheosis
Since neither le Livre nor the Mysterium achieved its aim, it is easy to assume that they
were never really expected to achieve it. The two projects lose much of their aura of decad-
ent inconsequentiality, however, when they are viewed as episodes in the history of the
rite. Alchemy and the Mass, by offering practical procedures for embodying the numinous,
held an appeal quite different from that of the purely and merely aesthetic. In Scriabin’s and
Mallarmé’s hands the rite was not undertaken in a spirit of propitiation. Both artists as-
sumed the role of God. The surviving drafts of their apocalyptic plans lack the traditional
components of guilt and retribution. There is no dies irae, and the vindictive beasts of
Revelation are tame.