

CHAPTER I

Turtles All the Way Down (On the “Purely Musical”)

An old legend tells of an earnest youth who went to a holy man seeking the meaning of life. In response to the disciple's questions about the world and its foundations, the guru explained that the earth sits on the back of a huge tiger, which stands on the flanks of an enormous elephant, and so on. When the cosmological series reached a giant turtle, the sage paused. His enraptured pupil—believing he had arrived finally at ultimate truth—exclaimed, “So the universe rests on that turtle!” “Oh, no,” replied his mentor. “From there, it's turtles all the way down.”¹

I often find myself reflecting on this story as I experience the tensions between my work and the work of many others in my discipline. Over the course of the last fifteen years, I have engaged in what might appear to be a wide range of unrelated projects; yet in all of them, I have sought to explore the social premises of musical repertoires. This fundamental concern motivates not only my accounts of how gender-related issues have intersected with music at different historical moments but also my studies of narrative strategies in Mozart or Schubert and my attempts at making sense of today's popular culture.²

Of course, I am not alone in my quest for cultural interpretations of Western art music. Indeed, the numbers of those concerned with such

matters have increased to the point where we are now widely known (for better or worse) as “the New Musicology.” My colleagues in this endeavor include (most prominently) Rose Rosengard Subotnik, Lawrence Kramer, Richard Leppert, Philip Brett, Gary Tomlinson, Richard Taruskin, Robert Walser, and—the godfather of us all—Joseph Kerman, whose calls for music criticism and attacks on the “purely musical” date back several decades.

Yet despite the growing number of scholars committed to cultural interpretation and regardless of which project I happen to be pursuing, I continue to meet resistance from those who claim that most aspects of music—indeed, the ones that really matter—operate according to “purely musical” procedures. For while we all might agree that elements such as Baroque word-paintings or eighteenth-century *topoi* are referential, many musicologists and music theorists still like to assume that these elements simply perch on the surface of what underneath is autonomous bedrock. No gender, no narratives, no politics: just chords, forms, and pitch-class sets. And the discussion stops there.³

But those moments at which the investigation gets arrested have always intrigued me more than any others. Why does tonality emerge when and as it does in the seventeenth century? Because of “natural” evolutionary processes. Why does a sonata movement require that its second theme resolve into the key of the first? Because that’s the way musical form works; end of conversation. But WHY? Like an unsatisfied child, I have pressed on beyond those limits to know more. And like a jaded culture critic, I have found it impossible to accept any kind of bedrock certainty, anything natural or purely formal in the realm of human constructs. Whichever position I take—that of child or culture critic—I always return to the conviction that “it’s turtles all the way down.”

Musicologists do grudgingly acknowledge one cluster of turtles: we refer to them as conventions. By “convention” we usually mean a procedure that has ossified into a formula that needs no further explana-

tion. Why does a minuet repeat its opening section following the trio? Convention. Why do pop ballads end with fade-outs? Convention. Why did thousands of males undergo the knife in order to sing in the soprano range in Baroque opera? This last question—posed year after year by incredulous undergraduates in their music history surveys—is typically answered with the strangely threatening tone of voice parents reserve for inquiries about the Primal Scene: IT'S JUST A CONVENTION! Which translates—Don't ask.⁴

Since the nineteenth century, Western art has cultivated an aversion to conventions: we commonly exalt as “purely musical” the procedures that appear to have transcended signification, and we scorn conventions as devices that have hardened to the point where they no longer can mean anything at all. Thus, we have, on the one hand, patterns that operate beyond the petty concerns of cultural meaning and, on the other, clichés emptied of whatever communicative power they might once have possessed. We interpret reliance on convention as betraying a lack of imagination or a blind acceptance of social formula.⁵ In either case, the individualistically inclined artist or critic shuns them with disdain and seeks value in those moves that escape the coercion of convention—that aspire, rather, to the condition of the “purely musical.”⁶

Yet at the same time, we make concerted efforts to locate regularity within precisely those compositions that seem to have managed to escape the bounds of normative practice. The measuring sticks of Schenker graphs or the kabbalistic methods of set-based analysis strive to pull apparently unruly music back inside the horizons of the rational, the orderly, and (implicitly) the metaphysical.⁷ Why, I have always wondered, do we not label the procedures such theories trace likewise as conventions? And why do we neglect to talk about why these procedures matter so very much to us?

In this book, I want to claim that this split between conventions and the “purely musical” is itself socially and historically contingent, that the procedures we regard at different moments as “purely musical”

count rather as the most crucial set of conventional practices. I will scan through various stacks of turtles, sometimes teasing out the complex functions served by obvious conventions, sometimes addressing those clearly referential elements perched on the surface, sometimes prying into the shells of “purely musical” processes to examine their ideological premises. And while these turtles may occupy a range of positions within their respective stacks, I will not treat them as different in kind. No metaphysics—just cultural practice. Nothing but turtles. All the way down.

The periods in musical style that stand out for consistency in procedure—for example, the High Renaissance, the late eighteenth century—are those for which the hierarchy is at its most stable, though for a wide variety of historical and cultural reasons. If we remain exclusively within the domain of a particular style, we might well come to accept the premises characteristic of that repertory as Truth, just as our young disciple wanted to regard the giant tortoise as a *terminus ad quem*. We are less likely to do so, however, if we have witnessed the moments when the dominant turtles first slipped into those privileged positions and when they slipped back out again. During other times—for instance, the early 1600s or the late 1990s, the subject of Chapter 5—the scrambling is rather more apparent: an expressive device might become a standard procedure, a convention might be revived for use as a surface signifier, and so on. This is why I prefer in my work to take a rather wider view of history. For the jostling among expressive devices, conventions, and “purely musical” procedures becomes most apparent during those episodes of stylistic flux.

Enough of turtles for now, however. Even if we do not commonly approach music from this point of view, my project resembles several lines of inquiry long central to cultural studies and literary theory, including the work of Hayden White, to whose *The Content of the Form* I pay homage in my title.⁸ I want to explore in music history the kinds

of processes Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling,” Fredric Jameson the “political unconscious,” Roland Barthes “mythologies,” Thomas Kuhn “paradigms,” Kaja Silverman “dominant fictions,” or Ross Chambers simply the “social contracts” that establish the conditions for the production and reception of artworks.⁹ Whatever we label these structures, they are intensely ideological formations: whether noticed or not, they are the assumptions that allow cultural activities to “make sense.” Indeed, they succeed best when least apparent, least deliberate, most automatic. Although musicologists and theorists often grant these kinds of formations the status of the “purely musical,” I will treat them as conventions—albeit conventions that so permeate human transactions that we usually fail to notice their influence. And I want to examine the values they represent, the interests they reinforce, the activities they enable, the possibilities they exclude, and their histories within the contested field that music inevitably is.

I have chosen my title, *Conventional Wisdom*, for two principal reasons. First, the phrase itself is a convention, a cliché that refers to commonly held but wrong-headed beliefs. We use it rhetorically to set up a surprising item of information: conventional wisdom has it that X; but in point of fact—Y! Just hearing the words “conventional wisdom” prepares us for that rude reversal, whereby something that seemed to have possessed truth-value gets relegated to the scrap heap of superseded misconceptions. Schoenberg’s refiguring of tonality in his *Theory of Harmony* and Monteverdi’s *seconda-prattica* manifesto both adopt something of this tactic, as they explain why the apparently universal laws of syntax they had inherited were “merely” conventions, why they felt free—even obligated—to push them aside.¹⁰ My title draws on that same ironic stance, for I will seek to redefine what conventional wisdom has elevated as the “purely musical” to the status of social contract.

Yet my title also means to acknowledge the fact that genuine social knowledge is articulated and transmitted by means of shared procedures and assumptions concerning music. I want to insist that a great

deal of wisdom resides in conventions: nothing less than the premises of an age, the cultural arrangements that enable communication, co-existence, and self-awareness. At the same time, none of them counts as anything more than artificial constructs human beings have invented and agreed to maintain—in particular contexts, for particular reasons, to satisfy particular needs and desires.

Consequently, conventions always operate as part of the signifying apparatus, even when they occupy the ground over which explicit references and encodings occur: in other words, it is not the deviations alone that signify but the norms as well. Indeed, the deviations of particular pieces could not signify if we did not invest a great deal in the conventions up against which they become meaningful.¹¹ Thus, while the traditional methods of hermeneutics often focus on explicating deliberate meanings, my project also factors in these seemingly automatic dimensions—which I take to be the most crucial because the most fundamental. In addition to paying attention to what individual compositions articulate on their surfaces, I will also examine the frames within which their strategies make sense as human endeavors.

The old question of form versus content has long been criticized as presenting a false dichotomy, especially perhaps in music. Theorists since the nineteenth-century critic Eduard Hanslick have generally solved the split by redefining everything as structure—thus the institutional prestige of our graphs, charts, and quasi-mathematical explanations of music. The more we have placed our trust in rigorous, self-contained analysis, the more we have had the impression that we might eventually explain it all on the basis of idealist abstractions.¹²

But too much is left out of such accounts, for the course of music history never did run smooth: the anxieties produced by collisions between incompatible practices or by the oedipal struggles between successive styles always involve far more than just notes. Plato warned that “the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions.”¹³ The power of music—both for dominant cultures and for those who would promote alterna-

tives—resides in its ability to shape the ways we experience our bodies, emotions, subjectivities, desires, and social relations. And to study such effects demands that we recognize the ideological basis of music's operations—its cultural constructedness. Even the urge to explain on the basis of idealist abstraction or to insist on an unbridgeable gap between music and the outside world stands in need of explanation, an explanation that would require a complex social history stretching back more than twenty-five centuries to Pythagoras.¹⁴

Thus, in contrast to Hanslick's resolution in the direction of form, I want to treat the entire complex as content—social, historically contingent content. As Adorno puts it, "Form can only be the form of a content."¹⁵ Moreover, I will claim that music (like other kinds of human artifacts) is assembled of heterogeneous elements that lead away from the autonomy of the work to intersect with endless chains of other pieces, multiple—even contradictory—cultural codes, various moments of reception, and so on. If music can be said to be meaningful, it cannot be reduced to a single, totalized, stable meaning. At the same time, its polysemousness does not justify our long-standing avoidance of interpretation. For if music frustrates our attempts at nailing down definitive meanings, it does so no more than poems, films, or paintings, all of which maintain a considerable degree of indeterminacy.

As even readers with little investment in what is called "postmodernism" have already no doubt discerned, my project shares many of the deconstructive assumptions animating much of the current work in literary criticism and film studies. Like similar investigations in those other disciplines, this book will strive to take apart into their constituent elements many of the procedures we have embraced as "natural." Yet my project differs tactically from that of most literary theorists.

Meaning has long seemed too immanent in verbal language. Accordingly, practices such as deconstruction strive to draw our attention to the opacity, constructedness, and undecidability of texts, literary and otherwise. But music studies have a different history—one that has

long denied signification in favor of appeals to the “purely musical,” that places music beyond the reach of “mere” social arrangements. And this history of denial, I would argue, has put us in what is no longer a tenable position for our understanding of musical cultures, either past or present. Thus before we can properly embark on programs that seek to destabilize musical signification, we have to recover some notion of how musical gestures, procedures, and forms do, in fact, produce their very powerful effects.¹⁶ Otherwise we simply hop from one brand of skepticism to another without ever having to consider how music actually operates as a cultural practice.

This book pursues what might appear at first a rather circuitous logic. Following this introduction, the second and third chapters deal respectively with the two conventional schemata that have contributed most to the formation of our musical world today: first the blues, which has provided the basis for so many genres of African American and popular musics throughout this century; and next that European convention most often regarded as “purely musical”—namely, tonality. Chapter 4 examines what happened in the nineteenth century when conventions became anathema, when artists took flight from the faintest whiff of preordained behavior.

In the final chapter, I explore some aspects of the current musical scene, in which several long-dispelled conventions have returned home to roost. Indeed, to a great extent, the present moment and our difficulties as musicologists in making sense of it have shaped this entire book. It is the urgency of our predicament that led me to study the blues seriously, to reflect on European culture’s investment in tonality, and to explore alternative ways of understanding the course of music history.

If I want to reject the possibility of the “purely musical” and to reassign those elements so often exalted as “purely musical” to the realm of convention, I also expect to reinfuse all these levels—whether expressive devices, explicitly conventional formulas, or deeply buried assumptions—with meaning. Not, to be sure, the giant turtle of transcendental meaning or even consistency; but human meanings,

grounded in the historical contexts in which they performed—and, in many cases, *still* perform—crucial social functions. If in the final analysis we have nothing but turtles, our turtles ought to suffice.

I want to begin by examining two pieces of music, both of which reside slightly outside what we commonly regard as conventional practices—far enough outside, in any case, that we cannot simply lunge for accounts based on formula yet close enough that we may be able to detect *as such* some of our usual habits of listening as they are engaged or frustrated.

My first example comes from the oratorio *La Susanna* by Alessandro Stradella, the foremost Italian composer of dramatic music between Francesco Cavalli and Alessandro Scarlatti.¹⁷ According to the scriptural source—the Book of Susanna in the Apocrypha—Susanna is a virtuous young wife, entirely above reproach. Yet her beauty has enflamed two elders of the community. They hide in her garden, spy on her as she bathes, then accost her—threatening to testify that they caught her in the act of adultery unless she submits to their desires. When she refuses, they indict her, knowing full well that the penalty for adultery is execution. Just as the authorities prepare to stone her, the young prophet Daniel steps forward, interrogates the elders separately, establishes their mendacity, and thereby saves Susanna’s life and reputation.

The schematic good-versus-evil narrative presented in the Apocrypha never suggests that Susanna compromises her chastity. Yet during the Renaissance, her story became the justification for a whole genre of paintings that depicted her nude, often brazenly displaying herself. Those viewing these paintings could feast their eyes on her beauty, secure in the knowledge that the scriptures themselves legitimated the subject of their gaze. Stripped of the narrative that ultimately redeems Susanna, this excerpted moment panders to latter-day stand-ins for the elders. With Daniel removed from the picture, she is positioned as Diana without Acteon’s hounds to defend her honor. Moreover, artists often fuse her representations with the iconography

traditionally associated with *Vanitas*, making her seem to anticipate and, consequently, to condone the elders' lust as she gazes into a mirror in autoerotic rapture.¹⁸

Stradella's oratorio (libretto by Giovanni Battista Giardini; Modena, 1681) spends considerable time with the elders—both depicted as the stock aging lechers of *commedia dell'arte*—before he introduces Susanna herself. The elders exchange boastful metaphors, each claiming greater degrees of arousal, then hide together in the bushes to wait for her arrival at the bath. As if their locker room buildup were insufficient to eroticize Susanna's entry, the *testo* or narrator—a cross, in this case, between the evangelist in a Bach passion and a leering MC like Joel Grey in *Cabaret*—describes with Marinesque language dripping with double entendres her cruel progress to the pool (she crushes the grateful, masochistic grass under her feet), the lily whiteness of her breasts, the purple of her lips (envied by the roses as they look up at her from beneath), and the rapturous gushing of the fountain's deities when she lowers her naked body into their waters. Our attention—the gaze of the ear, which has to suffice in this unstaged genre—is drawn inescapably to the libidinal as Giardini's poetry eroticizes her every fiber before she even opens her mouth.¹⁹

Moreover, Stradella's music marks the recitative with sudden chromatic relocations of key that continually raise the erotic stakes. The *testo* seals off his discussion of the elders in D minor, just before this passage. But three times over the course of this short speech he shifts abruptly by a major third to a new key only distantly related to the one to which we had become accustomed (D to B \flat , E \flat to C, C to E). This device has the effect of canceling out the previous tonality and asserting another: a series of maneuvers that simulate a quick succession of phenomenological states. Winks and nudges? Progressive degrees of arousal? The effect depends on the performance, but it in no way counts as a neutral setting.

Following this buildup, the apocryphal heroine at last receives a full scene to herself—albeit a scene hedged around by interlopers both on the stage and in the audience. Her *scena* opens with an aria in which

Susanna—in her fateful bath—contemplates God, her devotion, and (significantly) her unworthiness. Because this is her first utterance in the oratorio, the aria sets the tone for her characterization (Ex. 1.1).

Quanto invidio vostro stato,
Care limpide sorgenti.
E'il mio cor contaminato,
E voi siete acque innocenti.
How I envy your condition,
Dear limpid springs.
My heart is contaminated,
And you are innocent waters.

The music of “Quanto invidio” operates on the basis of a quasi-ostinato, a brief cadential pattern that repeats in the bass throughout the aria. This ostinato serves several functions, one of which is figurative: it represents aspects of the fountain that inspires Susanna’s meditation. Obviously, music can represent water in many ways—this aria does not sound like Respighi, for instance, even if Stradella’s experience with fountains was also Roman. What Stradella captures in his metaphor are qualities identified in the verbal text—clarity and innocence or purity—as well as a particular image of waves, in which similar units flow together to create an ongoing stream. Moreover, he exploits the “timeless” effect of ostinato procedures to invoke nature—a common association in seventeenth-century repertoires.²⁰

Stradella might have repeated the pattern unchanging as an orthodox ostinato. Instead, he modifies it so that it creates tensions both locally (as in the introduction, in which a polarity between tonic and dominant areas helps shape the phrase) and structurally (the aria pursues a sequence of modulations). He thereby produces a piece that exploits the image of obsession typical of the ostinato yet traces a dramatic trajectory of departure and return.

We might be tempted today to hear this modulatory schema either as stock formula or as a slightly primitive version of what soon establishes

Example 1.1: Stradella, *La Susanna*, “Quanto invidia”

Susanna

Basso Continuo

5

Quan - to, quan - to in-

10

vi - dio il vo - stro sta - to, il vo - stro sta - to - ca - re

14

lim - pi - de - sor - gen - ti. E il mio

18

cor - con - ta - mi - na - to, e il mio cor - con - ta - mi - na - to, e voi

22

sie - te ac - que in - no - cen - ti, ac - que in - no - cen -

26



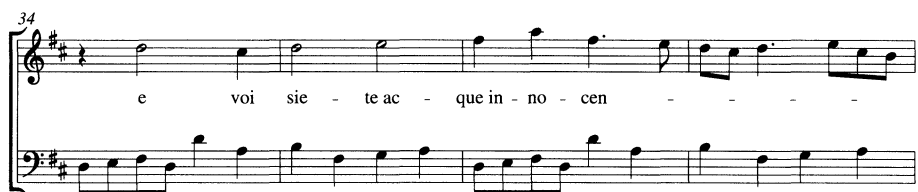
ti. E il mio cor con - ta - mi - na - to, e il mio cor con - ta - mi -

30



na - to. E voi sie - te,

34



e voi sie - te ac - que in - no - cen -

38



ti, ac - que in - no - cen -

42



- - - - -

46



- - - - - ti.

itself as “purely musical.” But given the structural flexibility of mid-seventeenth-century style, we can also hear it as a living procedure that kicks its way into existence for purposes of this piece in response to Stradella’s needs of the moment. If something like this schema later freezes into “the way music goes,” it is largely because of what the procedure is able to accomplish. But Stradella cobbles it together ad hoc from a number of the competing options available to him; his method more closely resembles bricolage than either formula or metaphysics.

We can sketch the assumptions of his practice relatively quickly. Stradella’s task is to set a text as effectively as possible, both enhancing it affectively and articulating it structurally. Like most Western musicians, he accepts responsibility for ending in the same pitch area with which he began; he thus reinscribes the sense of centeredness that has been with us at least since the Franks imposed writing on Roman liturgical chant. But like other seventeenth-century Italian musicians, he also engages with various ways of expanding the peculiar capacities of cadential mechanisms.

As it had developed in the context of Renaissance polyphonic practice, the V-I harmonic cadence—hackneyed convention though it was—served as a mechanism to produce desires and fulfill expectations, and it did so more effectively than any other configuration available (Ex. 1.2a). Yet during the 1500s, the desires of the leading-tone harmony were usually short-lived: closure followed fast upon the heels of arousal, and another image emerged to accommodate the next line of lyrics. This process worked especially well for setting texts that delighted in sustained ambiguity and paradox: cinquecento compositions thrived on the style’s relative looseness of syntax, which required clarification only at moments of musical punctuation. But for the late sixteenth-century composers who sought to appropriate some of the dramatic power generated by theatrical spectacle, the delicate ambiguity so carefully cultivated within the mannerist madrigal came to seem a liability.²¹

The technological breakthrough for theatrical realism came with *stile recitativo*, in which a composer throws a simple cadential formula

Example 1.2a: Dominant-tonic harmonic closure

Major version

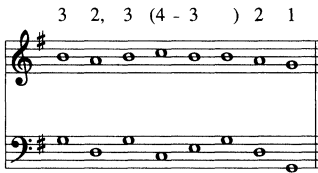


Minor version



Example 1.2b: Linear cadential formulas

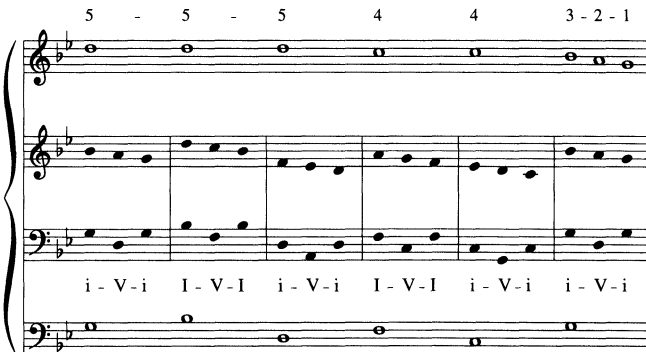
Major version



Minor version



Example 1.2c: Background progression with tonal expansion
(minor version only)



into the background and exploits its teleological force in shaping whole speeches (Ex. 1.2b). In order for the drive toward cadential closure to operate in an expanded state, the ear has to be led to hear as virtually causal the interconnections between successive moments of the formula. The innovations of the seventeenth century largely involve ways of harnessing the energy of that background syntax to produce longer

and longer spans. Those surface harmonies we recognize as “tonal” (which are themselves nothing more than little cadence patterns) serve to sustain each moment in the background progression while simultaneously pointing toward—and thus producing desire for—its closure (Ex. 1.2c).

The whole procedure is posited on an uneasy, breathtakingly dynamic paradox: how to prolong a function through a process that can only keep going by means of patterns that constantly announce their impending termination. By 1700, these innovations will have stabilized sufficiently to grant the illusion of reason and order. In “Quanto invidio,” however, the dependence of the measure-to-measure surface on the desire mechanism of the cadence remains palpable, for each unit of the *ostinato* figure performs a brief cadential pattern; each raises the expectation of imminent conclusion, and the impression of continuity that occurs results from the composer’s ingenuity. If we leave the surface and take an overview of the background, we find a modulatory schema holding the aria together (I-V-vi-IV-V-I), which derives its cohesive power in large part from its own cadential origin, even though each point along the way is greatly prolonged.

Yet Stradella designs some aspects of the aria—even its structural pillars—not merely to produce the illusion of coherence but also to enhance affectively the sequence of thoughts presented in the libretto, as the words move from calm to abjection to exaltation. Moreover, in 1681 (before stabilized spans of a single key area become the norm) much of the music’s delight involves the process of pushing further and further apart those pillars that constitute the background. Because the meaning of the words still informs much of the aria’s unfolding—both the particular points of modulation and the degree of expansion given to each—we can fruitfully explain many of its musical events in terms of the verbal text. In other words, Stradella occupies a moment when the technologies of tonal expansion allow for extensive elaboration, yet his work predates the agendas of formal standardization brought about by composers such as Alessandro Scarlatti and Arcan-

gelo Corelli: his pieces appear to make themselves up as they go, and although he wrote some pieces in ABA form, his arias typically arrange themselves as through-composed ABB' structures. The da capo convention, which comes to govern eighteenth-century opera as a formal fact of nature, shows up in Stradella's work as only one of many strategic alternatives.²²

As is frequently the case in seventeenth-century arias, Stradella sets the initial lines of the lyrics in a relatively perfunctory manner: they serve principally to announce verbally the reigning trope. Thus he presents each of the first two lines in "Quanto invidio" once only. In the first, Susanna strives to conform to the cadential character of the ostinato, and it is only through additive means—that is, repeating her cadence—that she sustains the opening tonic as long as she does. Stradella marks the second line by moving directly into the dominant, where a vocal melisma imitates the water's flow. What will turn out to be the *raison d'être* of the aria—Susanna's successful emulation of the spring through the binding together of ostinato units—occurs first in measure 15, as a suspended E hovers over what would otherwise be a clear caesura, defying the gravitational pull toward immediate cadence.

The remaining two-thirds of the aria involves only the last two lines. Susanna's initial confession of contamination (m. 17) coincides metrically with the ostinato, yet her confession seems to corrupt the stream itself, as the whole piece pivots abjectly into B minor. Suddenly, in measure 26, the ostinato shifts to G, then back to tonic, where the focus shifts once again to the innocence of the waters. Formally the aria could end with its arrival on D, for it has accomplished syntactically what it had to do: that is, return to the original key. Instead, the voice embarks on an extraordinary melismatic expansion that in measure 42 even wrenches the ostinato from its regular course into a series of resisted cadences, enhancing the climactic illusion of infinitely swelling waters. In terms of the lyrics, Susanna's abjection turns into elation as she contemplates ideal purity; her initial reticence melts into ongoing ecstasy. This is Stradella's showcase moment: the passage where he gets

to demonstrate his many ways of sustaining desire while delaying closure as long as possible.

In addition to demonstrating technical prowess and enhancing dramatic characterization, however, Stradella accomplishes other kinds of cultural work within the aria. As a soliloquy overheard, it grants the listener access to what is presented as Susanna's interiority. And while the lyrics themselves offer only a static comparison between her condition and the spring, the music sets them in such a way as to trace a succession of states, from calm, to alienation, to a confidence that simultaneously reestablishes security and launches a dynamic expansion of quite excessive length. We seem to witness her innermost doubts and her resolution of them within the music.

The fact that this shape (departing from tonal certainty and coming back) was becoming standardized at this time in no way diminishes our ability to hear it as Susanna's own personal drama: on the contrary, her emotional adventure makes sense to us precisely *because* it follows this shape. Indeed, it would be intelligible to us even without words—as it is in the sonatas of Corelli, one of the violinists in Stradella's pick-up orchestra. For this shape becomes not only “the way music goes” but also the way interior feelings—hers and ours—operate: it developed in the 1600s as one of the principal technologies for representing individualistic but “autonomous” subjectivities. If we now hear this convention as transcending culture, it is because the process has been replayed so often that it has been naturalized. Yet in “Quanto invidio,” it is never entirely clear where tonality is operating as part of the expressive apparatus and where it serves the structural background. The two are virtually indistinguishable.

Unlike the only slightly later da capo arias, which carefully seal up any energy that might have been unleashed by such processes, “Quanto invidio” constantly threatens to spill over past its borders. To be sure, it is designed to do so, since it is but the first of three arias in a scena. But even the third aria of the set concludes not with its opening ritornello but rather with the ecstatic strain generated in its final section. The

progressive dynamic of tonality as it emerged in the seventeenth century is very audible here; it will be the task of the eighteenth century to retain tonality's desire-producing capacity and yet contain far more securely this process that seeks by definition to overflow its boundaries. If some of the formal conventions of the 1700s seem quite uncompromising, it is in part because they were designed to cope with the overwhelming momentum generated through tonal trajectories. Yet regardless of how cleaned up tonality becomes, this unruly potential is always still sedimented in, always threatening to break out: seventeenth-century tonality is the skeleton in the closet, the capricious turtle beneath what we like to perceive as bedrock.²³

La Susanna also participates in several other areas of cultural representation, including one quite alien to us now: namely, the sacred erotic. To many of us today, religion and sexuality reside at opposite ends of the spectrum. But seventeenth-century artists often mapped these realms upon one another because of many factors—including the charismatic example of St. Teresa, the increasing emphasis on subjective spirituality following the Reformation, and the need of the Counter Reformation church to attract and retain followers. If human desire is at its most fervent at moments of sexual transport, then the church wanted access to that experience, albeit harnessed and redefined as love for God.²⁴

Like Claudio Monteverdi, Alessandro Grandi, Girolamo Frescobaldi, and Heinrich Schütz before him, Stradella here exploits this powerful cultural trope: Susanna's prolonged melisma constitutes a moment of transcendence, at once sacred and profoundly erotic. To quote St. Teresa, "The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul then content with anything but God. This is not a physical, but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it—even a considerable share. So gentle is the wooing which takes place between God and the soul that if anyone thinks I am lying, I pray God, in His goodness, to grant him some experience of it."²⁵

Stradella here tries to replicate in music the effect of St. Teresa's prose descriptions or the sense of ecstasy captured by Bernini in his celebrated sculpture. Knowledge of this world—now mostly vanished—is necessary if we are to understand why the composer created that particular image at the end of "Quanto invidia": the task required his skills in harmonic manipulation, but the images he produced contributed to a very particular cultural preoccupation. Stradella hones his expansion devices—the very basis of later tonality—precisely to create such effects. Tonality emerges, in other words, as a mode of cultural representation, an instrument for the articulation and production of social values.²⁶

Stradella's powerful depiction of Susanna is not without its ambivalences, however. If Renaissance paintings of Susanna often depicted her as an exhibitionist vainly contemplating herself in a mirror, Stradella's aria has Susanna display herself extravagantly: she flaunts the extremes of her vocal range, teases the listener's expectations, and finally delivers a prolonged, wordless climax. The elders soon accuse her of seducing them, and the *testo's* taunting commentary later in the oratorio likewise holds her responsible for her fate. Even Susanna admits her guilt eventually, as she confesses that her beauty itself caused her downfall and that of the elders. Of course, we do not actually *see* Stradella's Susanna in her bath; the medium of the oratorio demands that her irresistible sensuality be conveyed strictly by means of the ear. But the tonal devices that fuel her aria are too effective in their ability to arouse, too difficult to control once unleashed: she ought to have known better.

My point is not to castigate Stradella for sexist imagery but rather to draw attention to the cultural tensions revealed in this dramatization of the Susanna story, which pits the desire to indulge in intense sensuality against the need to frame and distance that sensuality—in part by projecting it onto a woman in a context that verbally condemns her for it. Mid-seventeenth-century composers came to specialize in depictions of the *femme fatale* (Poppea, Salome, Semiramide).²⁷ Such depictions

not only acknowledge female sexuality but treat it with a blend of awe and fear—as do representations of St. Teresa or settings of the woman's verses from the Song of Songs.²⁸ For a variety of reasons, Baroque artists were obsessed with how to capture (in both senses of the word) the experience of feminine eroticism in their work, and this obsession left its marks both on the compositional techniques developed under its sway and on the bodies of male singers who sacrificed their all for the ability to simulate the sound of high-voiced ecstasy.

This set of representational practices stands in sharp contrast to those of later eras, several of which denied that women had sexual feelings at all. The Enlightenment sought to banish virtuosic women from the stage, thereby minimizing traces of female erotic transport (Mozart's Queen of the Night may be heard as a distant echo). And when the eighteenth century domesticated representations of women, it also—and not coincidentally—curbed the excesses of early tonality through increasing standardization (that melisma at the end of Susanna's aria would seem much safer if it were followed by a reassuring return to the beginning).²⁹ Thus although the narrative frame Stradella gives Susanna may be somewhat problematic, we can find in "Quanto invidio" a residue of the seventeenth-century belief that women experience both bodily and spiritual realms with unmatched intensity. If Susanna envies the fountain, Stradella envies her.

My second example also happens to belong to the category of the sacred erotic, though it comes from an unrelated practice that is vital and influential today: namely the gospel music of the African American church. The ensemble responsible for this tune, the Swan Silvertones, was formed in the early 1940s by Claude Jeter—coal miner, preacher, and incomparable falsettist—and they soon had a weekly radio show in Knoxville, sponsored by the Swan Bakery Company, from which they took their name.³⁰ In 1945 they began to record; by 1948 they were able to leave the coal mines behind and tour full time as professional musicians.³¹ Membership in the group shifted periodically through the

years (Jeter himself quit to concentrate on his ministry in 1963), but during their prime in the 1950s and early 1960s, they were among the most celebrated groups of their kind.

The Swan Silvertones recorded their performance of “Near the Cross” in 1959.³² Since it is based on a traditional fundamentalist hymn, the full impact of the performance depends on the listener’s having internalized the hymn itself, just as Bach expected his congregation to know by heart the chorales from which he constructed his preludes (Ex. 1.3). “Near the Cross” resembles many other such hymns: a verse of two phrases identical except for the cadences, respectively on dominant and tonic, and a chorus made up of a contrasting phrase and a return to the music of the second half of the verse. And although the hymn’s composer, W. H. Doane, has thrown in a few of what my hometown congregation used to call “fancy” harmonies (vi in m. 2; a secondary dominant in the chorus on “raptured”), the principal moves in the hymn are supported with the most fundamental chords (tonic, dominant, subdominant), thereby producing the desired aura of inevitability and utter security.

African Americans first encountered hymns like “Near the Cross” in the massive evangelical movements that swept through the South in the nineteenth century. Whatever the motivation of those movements, the fervor of the fundamentalist message and its songs soon took root and developed within the slave population into a vibrant hybrid that blended elements of European music with practices handed down from African culture. After Emancipation, and especially after the breakdown of civil rights movements in the 1870s, the black church became the center of activity, the place where the community could maintain its identity and fight for survival—spiritual, social, and physical.³³

Music holds a place of privilege in most African and African-based cultures, and it differs in many crucial respects from the European tradition. First, music is defined as an activity—something that exists only in as much as the community is involved in making it happen. It is far

Example 1.3: “Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross”

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Fanny J. Crosby

W. H. Doane

1. Je - sus, keep me near the cross: There a pre-cious foun-tain, Free to all, a
 2. Near the cross, a trem-bling soul, Love and mer-cy found me; There the Bright and
 3. Near the cross! O Lamb of God, Bring its scenes be-fore me; Help me walk from

CHORUS

healing stream, Flows from Calv'ry's mountain.
 Morn-ing Star Sheds its beams a-round me. In the cross, in the cross, Be my
 day to day With its shad-ow o'er me.

glo - ry ev - er, Till my rap-tured soul shall find Rest be-yond the riv - er.

more oriented toward performance than producing objects, and performances are understood as the means whereby the community enacts consolidation.³⁴ Second, while some individuals specialize in virtuosic performance, all members of the society participate in the making of music: it is a communal expression—as the hymn says, “free to all, a healing stream.” Accordingly, many African and African American genres are characterized by the convention of call and response, in which soloists are legitimated by the sonic embrace of the group.

Third, while individual improvisation is much treasured, it occurs within the context of frameworks passed on lovingly through the years. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has theorized this practice as “signifyin(g),” whereby the creative artist exhibits prowess and imagination and yet simultaneously reinscribes the cultural habits and structures that preserve both community and communication.³⁵ “Signifyin(g)” takes on many shapes, from the troping of familiar songs or stories to the use of a wide range of funky or “masked” sounds that incorporate elements of noise (deliberately exploiting complex vocal sounds, playing guitar with a bottleneck, and so on). But the polarization between self and society that led to the rejection of convention in European Romanticism would appear counterproductive within this diasporic community.³⁶

Finally, many African musical practices insist on the strong presence of the body, even when it engages with religious beliefs. In traditional West African religions, a sign of a ritual’s success is the entry of one or more participants into trance-state, where spirits inhabit temporarily the receptive believer’s body. Music helps to break down barriers between members, to align soul and body, to facilitate spiritual transcendence—or “getting over,” to use a familiar gospel expression.³⁷ And in virtually every African American genre from spirituals to rap, rhythmic pulsation serves to bring into being something of this sort of community.³⁸ This set of values made it possible for this group of forcibly displaced people to survive and maintain some sense of dignity despite the brutal conditions to which they were subjected. Music was and is still, for the most part, far too important for what Gregory Sadow once termed the “upward trivialization” of aesthetics.

One of the most striking aspects of the recording of Swan Silvertones performing “Near the Cross” is the model of social interaction to which it bears witness. Jeter, who sings lead vocals, performs his high-wire act safely supported not only by the steady regularity of the backup ensemble but also by an audience that responds enthusiastically to each of his virtuosic moves, encouraging him on to greater and greater heights. Jeter says concerning his artistic development: “So, I

began making little falsetto notes and I noticed how people would like it. I began to rehearse it and do a little more. Then it got stronger and stronger and stronger.”³⁹ In Stradella’s “Quanto invidio,” the illusion that we have direct access to Susanna’s interiority requires the apparent absence of spectators (even if we are ever mindful of the elders lurking nearby in the bushes). But Jeter’s virtuosity depends upon his audible, multileveled support system. He sings not just for himself but for his listeners, who perceive him as one who testifies for them all. The social context of performance is not only relevant here but indispensable. This recording permits us to hear the ritual enactment of that community as though firsthand.

As is typical, the backup singers provide the continuity for this performance. They sing in close harmony with velvety, well-rehearsed voices (characteristic also of contemporaneous doo-wop), enunciating text and inflecting pitches with great precision. The group credits their precision and sweetness of tone to their microphone skills, which they worked to perfect during their broadcast years. That is, the same amplification devices that made possible the intimate crooning of Bing Crosby also enabled the sounds cultivated by these new gospel ensembles. They even influenced Jeter’s style of singing. As he says, “I believe in the soft approach. The Bible tells us, ‘If you pray in secret, I’ll reward you openly.’ I tried to practice that during my career.”⁴⁰ That “soft approach”—the apparent intimacy of Jeter’s delivery—could not occur without the mediation of miking technologies.

When the backup singers enter, they lay down a slow groove that rocks the hymn physically. The groove registers even more powerfully in the chorus when clapping enters to mark the backbeats. As St. Teresa wrote of her ecstatic states, “the body has some part, even a considerable part, in it”; and even if we can’t see the group moving with the pulse they create, we can hear their physical investment in the performance. To appreciate their performance properly—that is, to become part of the community here offered—we would have to surrender ourselves likewise to the groove, with all its carefully placed cross-rhythms.

The Silvertones have restructured the original hymn somewhat, throwing into stark relief the principal harmonic event of each line by singing the words on the tonic, then repeating them on the contrasting harmony—on the dominant- or subdominant-seventh, as the case may be. Instead of inflecting Fanny Crosby's poetry, as in the hymn, the chord changes here resemble a blues-like ritual, where the gravitational alternations among these basic tonal harmonies serve to mark our location within the framework.

While those chords carry something of their standard implications, the Silvertones deploy them in such a way as to attenuate the teleological drive with which they are usually associated in European music. Whereas the hymn dutifully works through to a restful tonic twice (at the end of verse and the end of chorus), the Silvertones defer closure in both places, postponing certainty with a suave diminished chord. The significance of this alteration becomes clear when the last line becomes the basis for sustained improvisation. As the backup group sings "just beyond the river" fifteen times, Jeter enacts his yearning to push through to another state of consciousness: he may be denied repose here on earth (or so the diminished chord at the end of each cycle indicates), yet he strives to get over, and he attains rapture through his efforts.

In some important sense, his performance is no simulation but an act of faith, and it is received as such by those listeners who respond so urgently to him. Jeter explains: "This is a thing where you can only survive by being real. Out of all the people we can fool, we can't fool God. He knows our intentions. So I'd rather fool nobody in the gospel field. If I don't feel the spirit, I won't move."⁴¹ The recording concludes with a fade-out, but there is no reason why this cycling might not have lasted far longer—as long, in fact, as the energetic exchanges between the lead and congregation continued to inspire each other on to ever greater heights.

Jeter's reputation as a charismatic gospel singer rests on his ability to utilize effectively a wide range of rhetorical devices—that is, in his tal-

ent for “signifyin(g).” Nothing he does in this performance is exactly *new* (although his eerie falsetto moans are unmistakably his own),⁴² but he brings these parts of a shared repertory together in a particularly compelling fashion. Musicologists might call some of his tactics “troping”: that is, inserting connectives, editorial comments, and exclamations along the way, the way a preacher might in the heat of the sermon. What begins as a standard hymn becomes a personalized meditation, as Jeter throws in references to his family (“Mother told me that the fountain was free”), to his shortcomings (“Sometime I have to give up the right for the wrong down here”), and to his longing (“Come on Jesus, I need you and I can’t get along without you this evening”). He thereby not only signifies, but he confesses his faith, failings, and hopes to the congregation. That his testimonial resonates with the larger group is evident by their echoes, cries of pleasure, and shouts of recognition.

Rhythmically, his tropes play off against the groove set out by the group. Sometimes he is relatively spare, adding brief statements only to bridge over the gaps between cycles; at other times, he throws in comments in such fevered succession that they threaten to overwhelm the groove: for instance, over line 3 he inserts “[Son, it don’t cost you nothin’, free to all a healin’ . . . , all you got to do is believe on him, she said it] FLOWS.” Both strategies demonstrate his rhythmic prowess: his ability to reinscribe the background by creating tensions against it, making it seem all the more inevitable when it enfolds him again.

Jeter’s melodic fragments have little to do with the original tune. Once again, he is troping—playing around the borders and in the gaps of a well-known, much-loved hymn. His additions typically center on pitches most open to microtonal inflections and therefore affective intensity: the yearning sixth degree with which he begins his opening melisma on “Jesus”; the blue third degree that is bent down, in part to accommodate the frequent harmonic moves to IV⁷, as on “Father, will you *keep* me”; or the raised fourth degree, used as an almost unbearable appoggiatura several times in the last section. Each of these is greeted

enthusiastically by the audience, often inspiring Jeter to repeat that tactic or go it one better.

And, of course, Jeter draws on a large range of vocal sounds that seem to move beyond mere singing and into the phenomenology of spirit possession. The first of these occurs in the second line, on the first syllable of “fountain,” and once more the audience voices its approval of this strange, disembodied sound. He marks the beginning of almost every line with a leap up to the high tonic pitch: if a kind of struggle is enacted in each cycle, that pure harmonic (which seems to pop out of nowhere) regularly restores our faith that we can, in fact, get over. Later, in the extended ostinato conclusion, he produces strangled sounds and growls that mark a kind of limit to human expression.⁴³ As another singer (probably Louis Johnson) joins him in this final section, Jeter inserts ever more extreme devices into the gaps of that infinitely repeating riff, pushing himself and his listeners on to ecstasy. For the duration of the performance, we inhabit a world in which everyone participates, in which tradition balances with individual invention, in which self conjoins harmoniously with community, in which body, mind, and spirit collaborate, in which the possibility of a sustained present replaces tonality’s tendency to strain for and against closure.

To be sure, African American music relies heavily on conventions—conventions that carry sedimented within them a worldview that has proved to be both durable and flexible. Indeed, it is in part the adaptability of African cultural attitudes—a willingness to fuse—that has ensured their survival. Not only do the Silvertones draw on the European-style hymn and African-based modes of performance in “Near the Cross,” but they also gladly make use of the capacities of devices borrowed from pop genres (blues and crooning), modern sound technology (microphones and amplifiers), and the commercial networks afforded by radio, commercial promoters, and the recording industry.⁴⁴ And while they express their awareness of potential exploitation, they see commercial distribution as a way of getting the word out to an even

larger community—and a way out of the crushing conditions of coal mining.

But no less does European music inscribe a world through its conventions and foundational assumptions. The society Stradella's music helped to shape was one that believed in unbridled progress and self-expression, that craved dramatic extravagance, that sought representations of interiority, that understood desire as the motivating element behind religion, sexuality, and musical procedures. It was a world that prized passion, eros, and spirituality. By sheer coincidence (that is, not because of mutual reliance on a shared convention), it shared more similarities with African American musical priorities than any European art repertory since: recall the quasi-improvisatory spontaneity, the drive for ecstasy, the emphasis on performativity rather than structural balance in Susanna's aria.

As we will see later, eighteenth-century musicians drew from the devices developed by composers such as Stradella what they found useful and thereby sustained a period of remarkable consensus in European music based on standardized tonal syntax and symmetrical forms. But before examining the practices that begin to prevail as "purely musical" during the Enlightenment, I will turn in the next chapter to the blues—a genre with tightly constrained formal parameters that has, nevertheless, given rise to much of the music that has shaped twentieth-century sensibilities.

The decentered approach to music history that will emerge over the course of this book differs considerably from the ones now generally circulating, which tend to take one repertory or another and create a narrative of origins and linear development. Without question, other historians would choose other elements—elements that would, of course, reflect their sense of the present as well as the kind of future they envision. But the existence of diverse historical narratives does not mean that such choices are either arbitrary or inconsequential. The recent canon wars revolve around which or whose turtles get to count in

official records of cultural representation and reproduction. And a great deal is at stake in these debates, whether one claims on the one hand that a single tradition is to be maintained in the face of pluralism or, on the other, that such an account is no longer credible.

I should identify myself at this point as one who grew up listening to and playing virtually nothing but classical music. If I can be said to have a vernacular, Western classical music would have to be it. Yet I can no longer tell the stories about music I was trained to tell, for those stories marginalize or even exclude many of the musics that have been most influential—in the West and elsewhere—for the past hundred years.

I sometimes think that we musicologists resemble those pedagogues at the end of the seventeenth century who continued to advocate the *prima-prattica* style of Palestrina, who failed to notice that their world had come to be dominated by opera and its musical languages. Like them, we too often take our “purely musical” procedures to be absolute and use them in evaluating musics that work on the basis of radically different premises. I prefer to take as my model the great medieval theorist Grocheo, who impatiently pushed the “purely musical” speculations of Boethius to the side in order to produce a socially grounded inventory of the many distinct music cultures flourishing in Paris around 1300—an inventory that included explanations of the preferences of the aristocratic and ecclesiastical élites, the laboring classes, and even hot-blooded youths.⁴⁵ What would our histories look like if we took note of the many kinds of music surrounding us—observing differences in social function and technique, to be sure, but acknowledging them all nonetheless as parts of a shared universe?

My history of Western music contains Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, but it also includes Stradella and the Swan Silvertones, Bessie Smith and Eric Clapton, k.d. lang, Philip Glass, and Public Enemy. And it treats all of them as artists who have negotiated with available conventions and in particular historical circumstances to produce musical artifacts of exceptional power and cultural resonance. If I can no longer

privilege any one tradition, I find myself perpetually in awe of the countless ways societies have devised for articulating their most basic beliefs through the medium of sound; I share with philosopher Lydia Goehr the “sense of wonder at how human practices come to be, succeed in being, and continue to be regulated by one set of ideals rather than another.”⁴⁶ Just turtles, perhaps. But what magnificent turtles!