Music in the Western tradition is spread out in three dimensions: rhythm, melody and harmony. One or other dimension might be lacking, but the possibility of all three, and of music that develops simultaneously along each of the axes that they define, is both distinctive of Western art music and responsible for its many aesthetic triumphs. Other traditions use only one or two of the three dimensions. African drum music, for example, is purely rhythmical, and much of the world’s folk music is homophonic or heterophonic, eschewing many-voiced harmony as a distraction from the melodic line. The ancient Greeks, who first inquired into the rules of harmony, distinguished harmonious from cacophonous intervals, and explored the mathematical relations which seemed to them to explain the difference. But harmonia meant, for the Greeks, a pleasing melodic line, rather than two or more voices singing simultaneous but consonant melodies. In what follows it will not be possible to review all the many ways in which music has ignored one or more of the dimensions, and I shall focus on the Western tradition as the clearest example we have of music that both uses the three dimensions and consciously distinguishes them.

Rhythm

I begin with rhythm since it seems to be a species-wide phenomenon, and one that has an obvious social function in coordinating the movements of people, when they are working together, worshipping together, or relaxing together in a dance. As that sentence suggests, we are not going to understand rhythm if we ignore its ability to generate a sense of community. Through rhythm people find their activities governed by a shared force, and in both the dance hall and the concert hall they submit to that force collectively, in conscious awareness that they do so as a group.
We should not think of rhythm simply as a beat, such as might be produced by regularly striking a drum. Beat is neither necessary nor sufficient to generate rhythm. It is not necessary for the reason that there are rhythms contained in melodic lines which cannot be divided into the relevant sections – such as the extended melisma of Gregorian chant. It is not sufficient, since regular pulse can be heard in things which have no rhythm, such as the pulses of a machine. Of course we can hear such pulses as rhythmical, importing in imagination an organization that they do not contain in reality – as when Gershwin began to hear the rhythm of *Rhapsody in Blue* in the clicking wheels of the train in which he was traveling. But that only emphasizes the fact that rhythm is distinct from beat, and must be brought to the beat by the one who listens or moves to it.

The issue here is obscured by the Western habit of measuring in bar lines. Rhythm is not measure, though if you are familiar with Western music and understand the ways of measuring it out in bars, you will quickly latch on to the rhythm of any new piece. A bar contains a certain number of beats, which can themselves be divided by two, three, or more to produce smaller beats. Notes can be tied across the beat and also across bar lines, to produce effects of syncopation, as in Figure 3.1. These effects are felt and understood because the ties are forcing the listener to group the notes in a way that conflicts with the underlying movement. Some scholars (e.g. Schuller 1968) argue that the use of syncopation in jazz reflects the origins of jazz rhythms in African drum-music, which is polyrhythical, that is, it contains conflicting rhythms that serve to shift the accent relative to each other.

The emphasis on measure, and the division of the bar-line, leads to the illusion that rhythm and measure are the same thing. Two important observations count against that. First, there is the example of unmeasured rhythm, as in Gregorian chant. The work of Dom André Mocquereau of the Abbey of Solesmes, subsequently taken up by Olivier Messiaen, has familiarized us with the fact that Gregorian chant is profoundly rhythmical in its organization, even though it is not, and in many instances cannot be, measured out (Messiaen 1996–). In his striking polyphonic and serial tribute to the Benedictine tradition, the *Lamentatio Jeremiae prophetæ*, Ernst Křenek produces entirely unmeasured sequences which generate a strong rhythmic pulse through phrasing and grouping alone.

![Figure 3.1 Dave Brubeck, “Everybody’s Jumpin’”](image)
Second, there is rhythm formed by addition rather than division within the bar-line – a practice again taken up by Messiaen. A leading example is that of the Indian mātra, as set out in the system of deći-tālas by the thirteenth-century theorist Sharngadeva. Many composers – Boulez and Stockhausen among them – have followed Messiaen in constructing rhythms which resist division into beats, and which are derived by lengthening individual notes as one might lengthen a syllable for emphasis. (That is, indeed, how emphasis was effected in the Sanskrit language, and this feature of the language has carried over into its musical setting.)

Additive measure does not, however, determine rhythmic organization. Some of the measures introduced by Sharngadeva are just too long to be grasped as single units, and the use of the tabla and other percussion devices introduces beats and divisions into classical ragas that are not unlike the beats and divisions heard in Western music. This point further emphasizes that measure and rhythm are two different things. In Eastern European folk music, especially Bulgarian and Hungarian, beats are often lengthened, without destroying their number in the bar, as in the Bulgarian Christmas carol in Figure 3.2. This has four beats in the bar, but no bar is the length of four eighth-notes, since in every bar beats occur which have been lengthened by a sixteenth-note. Despite the irregular measure, this is an intensely rhythmical piece, which exerts a strong grip on the listener.

Such examples remind us that measured bar lines may or may not succeed in capturing the real rhythm of a piece. The “Danse sacrale” from the Rite of Spring is measured out with irregular bar lines – but measured out differently in the orchestral and the four-hand-piano scores. The real rhythm of the opening bars is captured by neither measure, since it arises from an experience of grouping and stress which itself depends on the “slicing” of the silence by the razor-sharp chords.

Such examples point to the importance of grouping. We group notes – whether pitched or percussive – in blocks or sections, and hear a beginning and an end to each block. If these blocks are repeated, even if they are of unequal length, we may hear a kind of pulse, and can “move with” that pulse either bodily or in imagination. Grouping of this kind belongs with those imaginative powers that remain within the province of the will: it is a well-known fact that we can choose to group notes in contrasting ways, and so enjoy the experience of rhythmic ambiguity, stressing now one note, now another, in a regularly repeated sequence, as in the excerpt from Brahms in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.2 Bulgarian Christmas carol
The simplest way to explain rhythm is therefore phenomenologically: it is that temporal organization which we hear in the sequence of musical sounds and with which we move, when we move with the music. It is not reducible to beat or measure, does not require regularity, but is sensitive to grouping and stress. This suggests a deep distinction, in conclusion, between two kinds of rhythmic organization – the external and the internal. External rhythmic organization comes from draping the music over bar lines that are defined from outside the melodic line, as by the drum-kit in a pop group, or by an ostinato rhythm in a classical orchestral piece, such as we find in the last movement of Sibelius’s Violin Concerto or, more subtly, in the first movement of Walton’s First Symphony. Internal rhythmic organization, by contrast, is “precipitated out” from the melodic movement: it arises from stresses and groupings that take shape within the melodic line, and has no independent reality. A prime example is the rhythmic order that we sense in Gregorian chant, and which explains the otherwise surprising fact that Messiaen, in his lectures, constantly reverts to chant as the paradigm of rhythmic organization. While you can tap or beat along with an external rhythm without destroying it, you cannot do this so easily to an internal rhythm, and certainly you cannot do it to a Gregorian chant. Between the two extremes of the drum-kit in pop and the melisma of Gregorian chant there are many intermediate rhythmic experiences, in which internal rhythm is given a measure of external support; for instance, by the use of timpani in a Haydn symphony.

Melody

Melody is as hard to define as rhythm, and – as the last paragraph implies – is often inseparable from rhythm. The shapes, lengths and intervals of melodies vary wildly from culture to culture, and it is difficult to give a general account that distinguishes genuine melody from a mere sequence of pitches. As with rhythm, however, it is safe to assume that melody is something that we hear in a sequence of pitched sounds, and which is not a material property of the sound sequence itself. We can therefore hear melody in bird-song, even though this melody is something that birds, which lack imagination and the grouping experiences that derive from it, cannot hear (Scruton 1974: pt. 1).
In the Western classical tradition, it is helpful to distinguish melisma – the melodic organization that extends “horizontally” through a sequence of pitches – from melodies, which are bounded individuals, with a beginning, a middle and (usually) an end. The Gregorian chant is a continuous melisma, which only rarely can be broken down into individual melodies. The same is true of the guitar solos in heavy metal, and certain kinds of jazz improvisation (for example, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane). In the classical tradition, however, melodies play the role of musical individuals, to be transported whole around the pitch spectrum, and to be diminished, augmented, varied and inverted, while remaining in some deep (but purely phenomenological) sense the same. Renaissance polyphony and the ensuing “baroque” show yet another kind of melodic organization, with few clear boundaries, but only half-closures, as the melodic line pauses at places where it can renew its ongoing energy (Szabolcsi 1965). A clear example is the last movement of Bach’s Third Brandenburg Concerto.

The language with which we refer to melodies indicates some of the differences between them. Not all melodies are tunes: some are too open-ended and elaborate to deserve such a label. (Consider, for example, the long melody that occurs immediately after the opening declamation of Act II of Tristan und Isolde.) We distinguish songs and song-like melodies from thematic and theme-like melodies, the first being complete musical individuals that can stand alone, the second being, and sounding like, musical material, which will reveal its character only in the course of elaboration and development. Folk songs and hymns have melodies of the first kind, and a strophic form suitable to their use. The instrumental masterpieces of the Western classical tradition often deploy themes that are very unsong-like, however attractive – such as the “thesis” melodies of Bach’s keyboard works, or the famous four-note theme that opens Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Such themes call out for development, and acquire their character only in the course of it. The distinction here is not hard and fast, but depends on context and treatment. Schubert was able to present one and the same melody now as a song, now as a theme in a fully instrumental elaboration – consider “Der Tod und das Mädchen,” “Sei mir gegrüssst” and “Getrockene Blumen.”

Melodies are also distinguished by the impulses that drive them. Some are driven by word setting, and bear the marks of the words that they set – these we might call logogenic, and they include most hymns in the Anglican Hymnal, and most of the modal folk songs collected by Cecil Sharp in the pubs and marketplaces of Edwardian England. Other melodies are essentially dance tunes. These (the orchegenic) are often not very singable, however compelling in outline: consider the melodies of Dvořák’s scherzos, or that of Ravel’s Bolero, which is both orchegenic and melismatic. Finally there are the harmonegenic melodies, which are driven by harmonic relations among their successive notes and reflect underlying harmonic relations and key relations which may be only implicit, or else filled in by the accompanying voices. Familiar examples are the themes of sonata-form movements in the classical tradition. The first two melodic kinds
preserve the memory of social uses: love-song and hymn, dance and choir. Only in the course of time, and as a result of the listening culture that grew in church, in court and finally in concert hall, did melodies begin to take the thematic form which we find in the Western symphonic tradition.

Two features serve to characterize melody in all its forms. First, there is the internal constraint exerted by every note on every other. A melody is a sequence in which no note can be altered without changing the character of the whole. This feature was pointed out by Edmund Gurney: the “wrong note” phenomenon causes us to cry out in protest at every departure from the known musical line (Gurney 1880: 92–4). A non-melodic sequence of tones can be chopped and changed without eliciting protests. But all changes in a melody are noticed, and most condemned as wrong. If a composer is able to change a melody and take it in a new direction – for example, so as to end in another key – this is regarded as an achievement, such as that of Berg in incorporating the whole-tone melody of Bach’s *Es ist genug* into the last movement of the Violin Concerto.

The second feature that characterizes melody is that of the boundary. Melodies have a beginning and an end, and often half-endings along the way – though, as I noted above, the ending may be postponed until the close of a section or a movement, as in much Baroque music. Hearing a melody begin is one of the fundamental musical experiences, and it is very difficult to describe what exactly it is that you hear when this happens. Some melodies begin with an up-beat – a passage that leads into them, and which is understood as preparatory, as in Figure 3.4. Sometimes a phrase might sound like an up-beat but turn out to be an indispensable part of the melodic structure, such as the three-note phrase that begins the “Londonderry Air” (Figure 3.5), which is in fact the first of eight such three-note entrance figures, and a key to the character of the melody as a whole.

The word “closure” is often used to describe the ending of a melody, on the analogy with syntactical closure in language. By invoking this analogy we emphasize that, in the classical tradition, the musical movement unfolds along all three dimensions simultaneously, and that the “sense of an ending” in the melodic line may be reinforced at the rhythmical and harmonic level too. A simple example is the “syntactically correct” nursery rhyme, “Baa Baa, Black Sheep” (Figure 3.6), a four-square sixteen-bar tune which moves toward the tonic for a “half closure,” goes back to the dominant and then moves step-wise down to the tonic again. It seems illuminating to say that this harmonogenic melody moves toward rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic closure simultaneously, although it is necessary to guard against taking the analogy with linguistic syntax too literally.
The boundary experience and the “wrong note” experience are familiar at the phenomenological level, but they do not correspond to any fixed features of the sound sequence. A melody can pass through any note on the diatonic scale, tonic included, without generating the sense of an ending; and it can also end on any note, even a note that does not belong to the scale, as in Figure 3.7 from Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*. There are also recognizable melodies that are not tonal at all, such as that which opens the Schoenberg Violin Concerto, and melodies which appropriate tonality only to ignore its melodic constraints, such as the melody which opens the Violin Concerto of William Walton. The experience of hearing a melody begin and end is, in other words, *suigeneris*, and not reducible to the recognition of any definable pattern in a sound sequence. A melody is a purely *intentional* object of musical perception, something we hear in a sequence when we respond to its musical potential.
During the course of the nineteenth century, and under the influence of Wagner, melodic boundaries began to weaken: a new kind of melisma emerged, in which tune-like episodes emerge from a continuous musical line, as in the first act of Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. A good example of this is the slow movement of Elgar’s Violin Sonata, which is melodious without a melody. The melodies that are begun in this piece usually break off, or are overlaid by new beginnings. Many Romantic movements are similar, consisting only of melodic beginnings without endings, as in the tone poem *Don Juan* by Strauss. In describing such works, it is more appropriate to speak of *melodic thinking* than of melodies. Nevertheless, they exhibit the same horizontal order that we hear in a tune by Mozart.

**Harmony**

The study of harmony in ancient Greece began from the natural intervals – fourth, fifth, and octave – which correspond to elementary arithmetical relations witnessed in the lengths of the strings or pipes used to produce them. However, harmony as we now know it is an intentional object like melody. It is what we hear in two simultaneous pitches when we hear them as a single object. In this sense, harmony, in our tradition, takes two distinct forms: chordal harmony, in which separate pitches sound together as a single chord; and counterpoint, in which separate voices move interdependently, creating an interwoven texture. In both cases, harmony is to be distinguished from *simultaneity*. In certain works of atonal music, such as Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, we hear instruments sounding together at different pitches. But we do not (or do not as a rule) hear chords. What exactly is the difference here? One difference seems to be that when two or more pitches are heard as a chord, the phenomenal space between those pitches is occupied by the chord. The space between two pitches that form a “simultaneity” remains vacant.

In saying that, I am assuming that the metaphor of musical space is not just a *façon de parler*, but a description of something that we hear. We speak of tones as moving up and down the pitch spectrum, of melodies as occurring now at one place, now at another, and of the music itself as moving forward, and these are all metaphors, which correspond to no actual space in the world of pitches. Nevertheless, we hear music as spatially organized, and if we did not do so we would be unable to understand the art of music as we know it (Scruton 1997). Our experience of harmony belongs to this experience. A chord occupies music space. Chords can be heard as excluding melodies from the spaces they occupy, such as the chord that opens the second episode (the “Dance of the Adolescents”) in Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Chords can “leak into” each other (as Janáček puts it (1974: 164)) – as the open fifth on A at the beginning of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony leaks into and pollutes the fifth on D that replaces it; they can be transparent, such as the opening chords of *Lohengrin*, or opaque, such as the Stravinsky chord just mentioned.
Chords may be harmonically disconnected from their neighbours and still be chords, rather than simultaneities; for example, the whole-tone chords in the chordal melody that opens Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*. More often, however, we hear chords as belonging to sequences, in which each chord places constraints on its successor, compelling us to hear it either as part of the harmonic argument or as an intrusion. Hence there has arisen in the Western tradition an idea of “harmonic progression,” according to which sequences of chords are understood as progressing toward or away from a boundary, with the equivalent of the “wrong note” phenomenon in the form of the “wrong chord” (as in the crazy cadence that ends Strauss’s *Don Quixote* – and which sounds right in retrospect, when the tonic chord is finally reached).

Understanding harmony in this way, we are led to the view that the distinction between consonance and dissonance is a distinction within harmony. The distinction is purely phenomenological and impossible to align with any material property of the sounds in which it is heard. Helmholtz (1954) believed that he could explain dissonance in terms of the beats caused by the clashing overtones of competing fundamentals. However, harmonies cluttered by beats may be heard as entirely consonant – close harmony in the bass, for example, as in late Beethoven sonatas – while uncluttered harmonies can sound highly dissonant, as when open fifths and fourths emerge in polytonal structures (e.g. in Ligeti’s Horn Trio). Such examples suggest that consonance and dissonance are heard relative to the stylistic context, so that a chord that is dissonant in Haydn will sound consonant in Berg. Furthermore both are a matter of degree, and are understood as such – such as the dissonances that interrupt the “Ode to Joy” in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Hence dissonance can gradually increase and decrease within the musical line.

In the classical tradition these phenomenological features are put to important use in two ways: resolution and suspension. Composers discovered ways of “resolving” the tensions heard in a dissonance through the consonance that follows it. So effective is this device that the syntax of tonal harmony has been almost entirely built upon it. And one way of building on it is through the practice of suspension, in which a note from a consonant harmony is held while the other notes change, so creating a dissonance, which then resolves to consonance as the “suspended” note is allowed to slide home to its proper place. Whole sequences of suspensions occur in the music of Gesualdo and Victoria, often put to exquisite use, and Romantic harmony frequently resolves a suspended note while at the same time changing the rest of the chord, so as to land on another dissonance – the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* being a vivid instance, in which harmonic closure is deliberately avoided throughout.

In one familiar form of suspension, the tonic is sounded over the chord of the dominant and then resolved on to the leading note (Figure 3.8). Jazz musicians got to like the sound of the first of those chords, with its accumulation of fourths, and, in deference to its classical function, called it the “sus” chord. However, sus
chords are used in jazz as complete and closed harmonies, and as a rule no listener feels the need to resolve them – a clear illustration of the context-dependence of dissonance in all its forms. The convention arose of turning the upper fourth of the stack into a triad, so that the sus chord on a given root is now understood to include the triad on the note one whole-tone below the root (Figure 3.9). (Herbie Hancock’s “Maiden Voyage” consists entirely of such chords.)

The Baroque harmonic idiom, which J. S. Bach shared with Couperin and Handel, deploys recognized “chord progressions,” in which each harmony arises naturally from the predecessor, while moving in a goal-directed way toward closure. The Classical style of J. C. Bach, Haydn and Mozart also deploys such chord progressions – though they are rather different. And Romantic composers delighted in exploring novel progressions, which might lead to closure, as in Schumann and Brahms, or might equally seem to “lose their way,” as in Wagner (see, for example, the Tarnhelm and Forgetting motifs in the Ring cycle). In jazz, however, there is a fertile abundance of progressions, some standard, some not so standard, even though there is as a rule no felt need for a “goal-directed” syntax. The consonance–dissonance distinction is much fainter in jazz than in the classical tradition, on account of the seventh and ninth being treated as natural additions to any triad, the seventh in addition being a melodic note, and not a passing note as it is in most classical music. Indeed, you might conclude from this and other examples that the “goal-directed” character of Western art music is very much a culture-bound phenomenon, and not something that has any special connection with any of the three dimensions of musical syntax.
Earlier I remarked that the distinction between a simultaneity and a chord could be understood in part through the fact that chords are heard as “filling” the space between their boundaries. Although this is true, it is not the whole truth, and there is a great difference between chords which are heard simply as musical units, and chords which are heard as composed from the several voices that flow into them. Suspension is in fact a special case of a general principle of Classical harmony, according to which chord sequences arise from the movement of individual voices. In the Classical style, and equally in its Romantic offshoots, voices are required to move naturally, as though singing from one position to the next: disobedience to this rule causes the musical surface to lose its organic integrity, and to acquire a jerky quality which makes it difficult or impossible to hear goal-directed progressions. Jazz too obeys the voicing principle, and insists that each chord be properly spaced, so that no inner parts are heard to leap across unmelodic intervals.

The cadence

An interesting feature of both melodic and harmonic order in our tradition is the “cadence.” This word, from Latin cadere (“to fall”), indicates a specific kind of boundary – not necessarily a closure, but an effect of “settling,” however temporary, in which melodic or harmonic tension is released, and a particular note or harmony emerges as a place of rest. Melodic cadences are very important in Gregorian chant, and in melismatic compositions generally, since they represent pauses in the musical movement that facilitate grouping. Without them both listening and performing would lack an essential aid to the grasp of structure.

Harmonic cadences are similar, and have achieved standard forms in most Western idioms. The V–I cadence is familiar as a concluding moment in the Classical style, as are the II–V–I and the IV–V–I cadences, all known, in this use, as “perfect cadences.” The IV–I cadence, known as the “plagal” (oblique) cadence, or “amen” cadence because of its use in the Protestant “amen,” also has a concluding function, as in Scriabin’s Poème de l’extase. Cadences include imperfect cadences, half cadences, interrupted and deceptive cadences – all instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with the Classical style and its Romantic derivations. There is also a distinction between masculine and feminine cadences, the first moving to a metrically strong position, the second to a position which is metrically weak. Needless to say, feminists have objected to this use of language; but the distinction, however described, is very easily heard. (Listen to the beautiful sequence of feminine cadences with which Jenůfa reminds the selfish Števa of her plight, in Act 1 of Janáček’s opera, and you will see that the language records something real.)

Cadences that form conclusions in one idiom might have quite a different effect in another. Thus the II–V–I progression which provides the perfect cadence in much classical sonata-style music has another use altogether in jazz. If the chords
are voiced without the root and with added seventh and ninth, the progression loses its finality, and becomes an opening gambit, rather than a concluding move – as in “Tune Up” by Miles Davis, which presents a succession of such cadences in different tonal areas.

Whether there is the equivalent of the cadence in rhythmic organization is a moot point. Rhythmic order can certainly work toward and away from boundaries, and it is possible that it can induce the same effect of pause and recuperation that we know from melodic and harmonic cadences. Nevertheless, rhythm is seldom if ever described in this way. As the distinction between “masculine” and “feminine” cadences makes clear, however, melodic and harmonic cadences are affected by rhythmic organization, and heard differently according to the strength of the beat or the rhythmic accent.

**Tonality**

Central to the Western musical tradition have been the ideas of scale and key, and, arising from these, the notion of the chords of the key, and modulation between keys. Tonality is not a static system, but one that is constantly developing; scales can be modal as well as diatonic; they include chromatic and whole-tone scales, which have no key. Nevertheless, the idea of a tonal centre, with its privileged chords and intervals, has been fundamental to music in the Western classical tradition right up to the present day. It is thanks to tonality that we can hear melodic and harmonic closure as achieved together, and also that we can hear chord sequences as making sense in themselves, as well as being appropriate “accompaniments” to recognized melodies – such as the melodies that we know from the Great American Songbook.

The presence of a tonal centre is vital to a certain kind of long-range symphonic thinking. While a simple song may progress from tonic to dominant and back again in a few bars, large-scale movements in the classical tradition may prolong such transitions over many minutes. This does not mean that a symphonic movement will stay on one chord for all that time. The classical idiom enables the listener to hear, enduring beneath a short-term progression, a single tonal centre, to which the musical movement returns both melodically and harmonically, and from which it departs in ways that do not disrupt the sense of that tonal centre as “home.” Tonality creates “regions” of tonal space, in which a single chord prevails, so that other chords are heard as “prolongations.” These prolonging harmonies do not, in themselves, turn the music in a new direction, but simply move around the harmony that defines the region in which they occur. This striking phenomenon has been provided with an interesting analysis by Heinrich Schenker, who presents a kind of generative grammar of tonal music, with subsidiary harmonies emerging as “middle ground” structures from background tonal relations (Schenker 1979). However, Schenker’s theory has proved controversial and at best of only narrow application. Once again, we seem to be confronted with
a striking phenomenological feature of music which cannot be pinned down by a single theory.

Such discussions suggest that the three musical dimensions, although separable in principle, are not easily separated in fact. The emergence of tonal “regions” in musical space is profoundly influenced by rhythmic organization: rhythmic patterns govern the segmentation of what we hear, and can force alien harmonies to relate to each other. Melodies have harmonic as well as rhythmic implications, and can change character entirely when differently harmonized. The slow movement of Schubert’s last piano sonata contains a melody first harmonized in C-sharp minor, and then harmonized in E major. And what we hear is two melodies, even though hardly a note has been changed. That which is being played out “horizontally” in the melodic line is heard as expounding, in its own way, the “verticals” on which it rests, just as the ornaments in a classical frieze expound the same Order as the columns beneath them.

What happens to melody and harmony when tonality is abandoned? This is a question that troubled Schoenberg, who believed that he could derive new melodies from his serial technique, and who advocated what he called “the emancipation of the dissonance” (1975: 91), which would remove entirely the feeling of tension and release, the distinction between consonance and dissonance, and the need for dissonances to resolve. The result remains controversial to this day. In particular it remains controversial whether genuine closure can be heard in music that eschews all privileged pitches, and whether real harmonies, as opposed to simultaneities, can be heard in chord sequences that follow no pattern of tension and release.

This controversy lies beyond the scope of the present chapter, but it points to the real need, in the philosophy of music, for clarity concerning the nature of the musical dimensions. Can there be melody without boundaries? Can there be harmonic progression without the dissonance–consonance distinction? Can there be closure without rhythm? Those and many other questions all depend upon our view of the three musical dimensions, and how they connect. So too do questions concerning the place of music in a culture.

For example, we make a distinction between short-term and long-term musical attention. The Western classical tradition is a tradition of long-range musical thought, in which themes and ideas are explored in all their implications, and closures achieved only after extended ventures across musical space. The contrast here with the short-term listening encouraged by pop is both important and difficult to conceptualize. Adorno (1987) wrote in this connection of “the regression of listening,” meaning the kind of short-circuiting of musical attention, what we might call the “addictive” aspect of listening, that he discerned in the popular music of his day. Adorno connected his argument – which he took to be a profound objection to jazz and its off-shoots – with a theory of mass culture and its socio-economic origins. This theory is, to say the least, controversial. But many of Adorno’s readers have felt that he is getting at a profound truth about
music, concerning a real distinction between different kinds of listening, and between the different roles that music might play in the lives of its adherents. However, there is no likelihood that Adorno’s criticisms will ever be properly stated, let alone assessed, if they are not connected to a theory of what is going on when a listener follows a rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic argument.

See also Analysis (Chapter 48), Music and imagination (Chapter 11), Music and language (Chapter 10), Music, philosophy, and cognitive science (Chapter 54), Phenomenology and music (Chapter 53), Psychology of music (Chapter 55), Music theory and philosophy (Chapter 46), and Understanding music (Chapter 12).

References


