The Creative Process vs. The Canon

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The contemporary composer faces many obstacles in the struggle towards artistic independence. Not the least of these is the solemn realization that one's work will inevitably be compared to the countless pieces of music that define the tradition of musical achievement as canonized in the “Literature.” Another lies in the mandate (exacerbated in this century by the academy’s influence) that, to qualify as innovative or original, a work must utilize some new form or brilliantly organized and tightly wrought system (harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, philosophical, political, or otherwise). There is a seemingly contradictory element in these two sentences in which lies the philosophical problem for contemporary composers today: How does one maintain a connection to the canon (whose syntax and grammar must be realized or alluded to in some manner, however obscure, if comprehensibility is of any concern) while at the same time breaking new ground in the search for one’s own aesthetic voice? While the answers to these questions are deeply personal (and as such will probably define one’s aesthetic value system as much as they initially challenge its development), we can see in the music of the contemporary masters an approach to innovation that is at the same time both old and new. Often, this is accomplished by recycling the forms, phrase structure, and harmonic and melodic formulae from ages past and presenting them within a new context. In this way, the much-sought-after innovation occurs organically, without slavish adherence to (or mimicry of) the old styles; and also without the ungratifying and quickly forgotten oddities that are often the result of a frenzied and unfortunate search for “originality” (as intrinsic value in and of itself). The greatest composers are situated in a variety of different ways as a testament to the need for today’s body of professionals to see in our own contemporary works really are a logical outgrowth of the defensive who is still capable of music) in the hopes that they might show themselves true expression of our own aesthetic voice? T

The need for one’s music to outgrow the confines of a century’s pedagogical writings (in both categories (as populated, of course) music gives the impression of the masters theoretical, pedagogical writings, of the famous baroque torrential flood.” He viewed this as a special age when compo-
poser faces many obstacles artistic indecision, these is the solemn will inevitably be pieces of music that deal achievement as "new". Another lies in the "Common Practice Period," while still maintaining an aura of consonance and dissonance. In short, an expansion of the harmonic language which could conceivably include the most harshly dissonant of sonorities, yet one that also recognized the authority of the harmonic series. In light of this disparity (quite reasonable and even expected, given his intent) between his theory and his works, what then is the connection between Hindemith's music and the canon? Or, more precisely, which elements of the past resurface in his music?

The answer to this question is one that speaks not only to the plight of composers; in its larger context it speaks to the challenge faced by artists in all areas of creative pursuit. The great composers, authors, visual artists, poets, and dancers of the past cast a long shadow into the present, one that is both inspirational and yet somehow daunting in the implied challenge that it presents to contemporary artists. In short, how does one
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utilize that which cannot be avoided (the past) while at the same time finding a new means of personal expression?

In order to answer this question, we will examine the work in which Hindemith's contrapuntal voice finds its greatest expression: his collection of interludes and fugues entitled *Ludus Tonalis*. Of the work, Hindemith said, "I am...calling it *Ludus Tonalis* because of its didactic (not to say sophisticated) quality. Our Latin experts here at Yale think the title is very apt. I cannot find anything better in German or English to describe clearly what it is...[while also] hinting at the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and the *Art of Fugue* (the form, that is, not the quality)." 4

It was written during Hindemith's tenure at Yale and was completed in the fall of 1943. During this period, Hindemith divided his energies between integrating his musical and compositional theories into a cohesive and comprehensive pedagogical system for the approximately 16 hours of classes he taught every week, and transcribing and orchestrating volumes upon volumes of medieval music for various choral and original-instrument chamber groups (in which he also often performed). Logically, then, it would be expected that these pursuits might in some way have influenced his primary vocation, the composition of his own music. Many of the techniques and materials used by Hindemith in *Ludus Tonalis* are fairly obvious (Hindemith's concern for clarity and comprehensibility seems always at the fore) and are indeed closely related to those found in Early Music, and by extension, the Common Practice Period.7 These include:

i) church modes—primarily Phrygian, Lycorian, Dorian and Aeolian;

ii) regular phrase lengths which are often periodic;

iii) regular rhythms and meters (compound meters, when used, are quite transparent);

iv) key/mode relationships within movements;

v) standard musical forms.

It is the first of these that I would like to expound. Modes are featured quite prominently and generally govern both the melodic and harmonic aspects of *Ludus Tonalis*. Phrygian mode appears most often, which is perhaps not surprising, since this mode features an upper leading tone and a lowered seventh (inverse to the major scale). Other church modes are also featured (as mentioned above), as are less familiar modes of the ascending melodic minor scale (*Praeludium* mm. 36-49). All are used quite freely. Although tones foreign to the mode are found regularly, they generally resolve in step-wise fashion (with occasional octave displacements and other variations) which tends to mitigate the higher levels of dissonance created by writing that is so linearly derived. Much of this occurs on the surface and is aurally very apparent. As such, the emotional range of the various pieces in the collection is large and varied; some are light and playful (in some cases downright "folksy" in a medieval/renaissance sort of way), some are heroic, some tragic, some lilting and mournful, while still others are quite dark and almost gothic in the severity of their temperament. Overall, a certain medieval flavor permeates the entire work, which is easily recognized by the listener.

Example 1: Typical Phrygian Cadence

\[
\begin{align*}
C: iv \rightarrow v \\
\end{align*}
\]

What may not be as apparent is the relationship between the modal patterns found consistently throughout *Ludus Tonalis*. Hindemith's primary focus was on the regular cadences (using primarily major, minor, and modal, with an occasional common-tone cadence) with the aim of achieving a very obvious balance which is largely to the cadential areas they establish. This is a means by which a sense of proportion and balance is achieved within each movement as well as between movements. Form is thus also largely to the cadential areas they establish. This is done by practices whereby unisons or octaves are often used, and especially when practicing where unisons or octaves are used. These characteristics are an important part of Hindemith's language and his considerable debt to them. This was an extremely active period for Hindemith.

Closely related to the *Praeludium* is the use of Phrygian cadence which bears its characteristic cadence. (See example.)

Example 2: Pre-dominant Phrygian Cadence

\[
\begin{align*}
iv \rightarrow v \\
\end{align*}
\]
Hindemith in Ludus Tonalis

(Hindemith's concern with possibility seems always closely related to the mode, and by extension, the tonality. These include:

- Phrygian, Llocrian, and other less familiar modes.
- Compound meters (compound meters are quite transparent).
- Dissonant basses within movements; and
- Polyphonic writing that is so linear it occurs on the surface of the printed page.

As such, the emotion of the pieces in the collection is light and playful "folksy" in a medieval/romantic fashion, with some heroism, some pathos, while still other movements are almost gothic in their severity. Overall, a certain delicacy occurs on the surface of the printed page. As such, the emotion of the pieces in the collection is light and playful "folksy" in a medieval/romantic fashion, with some heroism, some pathos, while still other movements are almost gothic in their severity. Overall, a certain delicacy occurs on the surface of the printed page.

Example 1: Typical Phrygian Cadence (in C minor)

C: IV6 V IV6 V VII9 VI V +6 V (quartal)

What may not be as apparent is the relationship between the modal idiom and the cadential patterns found consistently throughout Ludus Tonalis. Hindemith's predilection for hollow sonorities (using primarily open fifths and octaves with an occasional complete triad) at cadences is probably one of his most identifiable trademarks. This is a means by which Hindemith achieved a sense of proportion and balance in his music. With these extremely consonant sonorities functioning very obviously as cadential markers, a sense of balance is achieved with the often very dissonant sonorities that are found within phrases. Form is thus also easily recognized, owing largely to the cadential figures and the key-areas they establish. This can also be traced to Early Music practices where composers routinely cadenced on unisons or open fifths (and triads). These characteristics are an undeniably crucial part of Hindemith's language, one that owes a considerable debt to the Early Music of which he was an extremely active and vocal proponent.

Closely related to the Phrygian mode is the Phrygian cadence which bears its name, the Phrygian cadence. (See example 1). The operative voice-leading in the Phrygian cadence relies heavily on the inverted leading-tone/supertonic relationship that results from the expansion of the outer voices as they move in contrary motion into the root of the dominant. As such, it belongs to the group of similar pre-dominant chords shown in order of increasing chromaticism. (See example 2).

Examples 1a-c are found regularly in the music of the Common Practice Period; 1b is a typical Phrygian cadence as previously shown in example 2. 1d is also found in the music of earlier centuries, but occurs much more rarely than 1a-c. 1e is a quartal harmony (built on fourths rather than thirds), which is not found in the Common Practice Period. It is, however, easily found in Ludus Tonalis.

As one moves from left to right in example 1, the cadential pattern becomes less diatonic and further removed from the original key. Aurally, the result is a series of cadences that become increasingly more exotic and surprising, culminating in 1e which, as previously mentioned, is entirely out of the realm of Common Practice Period usage.
Now we will look at examples from *Ludus Tonalis* in order to see the similarities between Hindemith's work and the typical Phrygian cadence. Compare any of the excerpts in example 3 with example 1. Structurally, then, the Phrygian cadence is found at the heart of Hindemith's modern counterpart. The cadence appears fully intact in example 3a, and is varied, as shown in examples 3b-d, by means of octave displacement, inversion, and the interpolation of extraneous pitches between the structurally important voice-leading of the Phrygian cadence. The resultant hybrid breathes new life and vitality into an old formula. As variations on this cadence occur regularly in this work (and others), I refer to them generically as *stylized Phrygian cadences*.

**Example 3: Stylized Phrygian cadences in *Ludus Tonalis***

a) Phrygian cadence (identical to medieval cadence):

[Music notation image]

Int. No. 3; mm. 35-36

b) with octave displacement

[Music notation image]

P.v. in C; mm. 10-11

c) inverted:

[Music notation image]

Int. No. 3; mm. 21-22

d) two voices only:

[Music notation image]

Int. No. 3; mm. 7-8

The difference in usage of the stylized Phrygian cadence is generally inconsequential. It means that, in Common Practice authentic cadences would not be a satisfactory means of ending a piece orlarge work, whereas Hindemith's hybrid may be anything but conclusive. Of course variations are found as well. Some feature lower leading tone (residual sixth in example 2); others feature Common Practice authentic cadences that belong to their own category of musical material that surrounds them rather than being a certain Phrygian characteristic.

Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis* in the Early Music which is so conscious of the fact at will in the drive toward the new and "old." The recommendations are thus adequate for the music, a decidedly original, yet it is not necessary to the canon. None of this is new to those familiar with his philosophically oriented written *Craft of Musical Composition* (and others), and continually makes the point—arguing that, he wishes to communicate in a comprehensible manner, the sun's influence on the roots stretch back--are thus able to provide us with a material that surrounds the as yet unmined.

For the creative artist with the past inevitably imitative and conceptualized, it not for our exposure to the past, but is highly unlikely that we will come creative artists to the past. Our initial interest in a piece is often due to the influence of the past, whose work elicits a particular

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The difference in usage between Hindemith’s stylized Phrygian cadence and its Early Music ancestor is worth noting. While the Phrygian cadence is generally inconclusive in nature (which means that, in Common Practice Period terms, it would not be a satisfactory cadence with which to end a piece or large portion thereof), Hindemith’s hybrid may be either inconclusive or conclusive. Of course, other cadence types are found as well. Some feature both an upper and a lower leading tone (resembling the augmented sixth in example 2); others actually adhere to Common Practice authentic cadences; while others still belong to their own category. Still, the modal material that surrounds these cadences gives them a certain Phrygian character, even though they are not, by definition, Phrygian cadences.

Hindemith’s *Ludus Tonalis* is thus well-steeped in the Early Music which he loved so dearly. He freely recycles materials from the past, altering at will in the drive towards music that is at once new and “old.” The requirements of the earlier mandates are thus adequately met—the music is decidedly original, yet it is also inextricably tied to the canon. None of this will come as a surprise to those familiar with his music or his more philosophically oriented writing (particularly in *The Craft of Musical Composition*). In that treatise (and others), he continually reasserts his belief in tonality—arguing that, for the composer who wishes to communicate in an objective and comprehensible manner, there is indeed nothing new under the sun. In other words, the tonal system, whose roots stretch back into antiquity, may be able to provide us with a wealth of new material as yet unmined.

For the creative artist in any field, familiarity with the past inevitably leads to some form of imitation and conceptual recycling. In fact, were it not for our exposure to the work of the past, it is highly unlikely that we would choose to become creative artists ourselves in the first place! Our initial interest in a particular art form is often due to the influence of one or two figures whose work elicited a powerful response. Our own personal journey then begins, myopic as it may be in its initial phases, focusing on these figures alone. Our field of vision then expands as we come to the realization that these seminal figures in our personal pantheon were themselves influenced by earlier generations of creative artists. The voices of the past, at first mere whispers, now begin to assert themselves loudly and irrevocably as they to materialize in our own work.

This course of study is almost an apprenticeship of sorts. Through it, a high level of sheer craftsmanship and technical expertise is attained. It helps to build much-needed confidence, which gives the maturing artist a surefooted stance from which to proceed in the search for his or her unique voice. In this sense, its effect is very positive—in fact, it is difficult to imagine mature artistry without it. Yet, there is also another aspect to consider, one that by definition may be stifling to the creative process.

Obviously, the artist is forever influenced by the skills and knowledge gained in the study of the past. This influence, which likely begins as the means to an artist’s first successful attempts at meaningful expression, may, at some point in the future, become the *only* means of expression. In short, the foundation upon which our technique and craftsmanship rest can become a prison of sorts. While technique and craftsmanship can ground and nourish us, they can...
also bind and confine, relegating our work (in the worst case) to the unenviable position of being mere imitation and mimicry. This is one of the most difficult dichotomies that every artist must come to terms with and ultimately solve if the creative process is to be fully realized.

There is a saying that is well-known in jazz circles, purportedly made by the great jazz drummer Art Blakey when he was once asked how one becomes a jazz musician. His response was wise beyond measure while at the same time concise beyond belief. He said: “immitate, assimilate, innovate.” Technique and craftsmanship are attained through imitation and assimilation, but it is in the last step, innovation, that the promise of the creative process, as elusive as it may be, is finally fulfilled.

References

1. Arnold Schoenberg and Paul Hindemith were two of the most important (and diametrically opposed) composers of the 20th Century.

Schoenberg is the founder of the “2nd Viennese School” which consisted of himself and his two equally renowned students, Anton Webern (1883-1945) and Alban Berg (1885-1935). He is best known for the development of the system of composition known as “serialism.” Serialism is a decidedly atonal method of composition in which the twelve pitches in the chromatic scale are placed in a specific order (called a “row”) which is then manipulated in various ways and thus functions as the source material for all of the melody and harmony used in a given piece.

Hindemith, in strong opposition to Schoenberg, was an unabashed champion of tonality. He devised his own system based on the acoustical properties of the harmonic series. In his system, however, tonality is not abandoned; rather, it allows for very dissonant structures which are contrasted starkly by the purest of consonances. He is best known for his many instrumental sonatas and his orchestral works, including the very popular symphony Mathis der Maler.

2. The Common Practice Period is the period from approximately 1650-1900 in which European composers were all using essentially the same harmonic and melodic vocabulary in their works. Composers such as J.S. Bach, Mozart, and their many contemporaries...


Luther Noss, Paul Hindemith (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 117.

It goes without mentioning that the lexicon of fugal practice and the piece’s “didactic” character and academic subtext.

Early Music is a general term for music of the medieval and renaissance periods.

Hindemith’s use of the arpeggiation (and others) as well as his use of the piece’s “didactic” character and academic subtext.

Kurt J. Ellenberger Delegating our work (in enviable position of being) mimicry. This is one of the dandies that every artist and ultimately solve if be fully realized.

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Paul Hindemith were two (diametrically opposed) contemporaries.

Hindemith, the "2nd Viennese School" and his two equally renowned contemporaries, Webern (1883-1945) and Strawinsky (1885-1971), is best known for the development of composition known as 12-tone method. This method allows twelve pitches in the chromatic scale to be used in a specific order (called a tone row) and manipulated in various ways to form the source material for all of the music of the 12-tone period.

Hindemith, the "2nd Viennese School" is the period from which European composers, and ultimately the same harmonic substance of their works. Composers

such as J.S. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin and Brahms and their many contemporaries fall into this category.


5. It goes without mentioning that the collection is a virtual lexicon of fugal procedure—not surprising given the piece’s "didactic" (to quote Hindemith) character and academic subtext.

6. Early Music is a general term referring to music of the medieval and renaissance eras.

7. Hindemith’s use of the archaic Latin for this piece’s title (and others) as well as his chosen subject matter (in pieces such as The Four Temperaments, Der Schwanenderer, Mathis der Maler, and Nobilissima Visione) points clearly to his fascination with (and encyclopedic knowledge of) the music and philosophy of ages past.