

## Chapter 9

### Decadence and Music

Emma Sutton

‘Very modern, isn’t it? Very Parisian. Very *decadent*’.

(Nietzsche, 1967: pp. 175–6)

Nietzsche’s famous account of decadent music, exemplified for him by Wagner’s music dramas, unequivocally associates decadent art with modernity. The conditions of the modern metropolis—urban crowds, technological innovations, commerce, consumerism, publicity, mass education, mechanical reproduction, new sexual identities and social mores, and ethnic diversity—that Nietzsche evokes by alluding to Paris are fundamental to his analysis of decadent music. Discourse about decadent music was profoundly entwined with the social, intellectual, political, and economic conditions of modernity—with commerce, mass education, publicity, the global movement of people and goods, and changing ideas of nationhood. Nietzsche’s writings demonstrate too that decadent art was shaped by and conceptualised in the terms of modernity’s new disciplines and modes of thought. If Wagner was a ‘sickness’, a ‘*névrose*’, a guide to the ‘labyrinth of the modern soul’ (Nietzsche, 1967: pp. 166, 156) whose music produced indigestion and sore throats (Nietzsche, 1982: p. 664), this was because his art seemed to Nietzsche and to many contemporaries to illustrate and be best understood through the new mental and physical sciences (some regarded as pseudo-sciences today) and theories: psychology, sexology, evolution, degeneration, racial theories, and eugenics.

Music was absolutely central to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses about decadence, decadent art, and modernity. Some of the most influential texts

that offered extended theories and classifications of cultural and artistic decadence—Nietzsche’s work, Nordau’s 1892 *Entartung* [Degeneration]—discussed music in more depth and at more length than any other art. For these authors, decadent music was a synecdoche of contemporary society: Nordau called it the ‘monument’ ‘by which posterity will be able to measure the whole breadth and depth of the degeneration and hysteria of the age’ (1993: p. 213) whilst Nietzsche observed ‘[t]hrough Wagner modernity speaks most intimately, concealing neither its good nor its evil’ (1967: p. 156). It was also frequently held up as the most illustrative or extreme example of decadent art in criticism and theory that focused primarily on other media, as in Tolstoy’s *What is art?* (1897). Recent analyses of decadence, however, have paid relatively little attention to music, a fact that is all the more surprising given music’s ‘driving position’ ‘in the decadent imagination’ whether realised in music, literature, aesthetic theory, visual art or other media (Downes, 2010: p. 57).

But, of course, decadent music wasn’t all new. Nietzsche’s reliance on the terms Apollonian and Dionysian in his binary model of ideal and decadent art reveals his debt to models from classical antiquity, a debt shared by many. Nineteenth-century European discourses about music were often shaped by examples from other cultures and historical periods. The Sirens, for example, had a busy afterlife in representations of decadent music, as did Sappho (a crucial figure for the aunt-niece co-authors, Michael Field [Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper], in the 1880s and 1890s) and other figures from ancient history. Suetonius’ account of Nero as an archetypally tyrannical and bombastic artist/composer, forcing women in labour to hear out his performances whilst other listeners leapt from the walls in attempts to escape (Suetonius, 2000: p. 206), was for some an evocative predecessor of the ‘despotic’ Wagner (Baudelaire, 1992: p. 332), imprisoning his audience for hours of opera or, as André Gill’s 1869 cartoon depicted, hammering a giant ear drum with his enormous orchestra. The idea of decadent music—for which read aesthetically inferior,

formally flawed, hyper-affective, morally ‘bad’, enervating or corrupting in some way—has a long history, and examples of proto-decadent music can be found across cultures and historical periods. Socrates opposed ‘purged’ music with a model of ideal ‘philosophical’ music, Plato the ‘virile’ Doric mode with the ‘relaxed’ Lydian, early Buddhism and Sunni Islam proscribed music altogether, and Biblical examples contrast the raucous music of idolatrous worship with the ameliorative music of figures such as David in 1 Samuel, whose harp-playing restores both the individual listener (King Saul) and wider society (since David is credited with the introduction of music into Jewish worship). Later, similar oppositions can be seen in the tussle between the ‘capricious’ rhythmic variation of *Ars nova* and ‘modest’ *Ars antiqua* in the middle ages, between English staged music and Italian opera (suspect because of its associations with Catholicism, castrati and commerce) in the eighteenth century, and between Joseph Goebbels’s promotion of Nazi-sanctioned ‘German music’ and its counterpart, ‘degenerate’ music, in the 1930s. Innumerable examples suggest that music has frequently been perceived to require aesthetic, religious or even state scrutiny and control. At times this control has been articulated via a binary model of music—‘decadent’ vs. ‘good’ music (whether the latter was perceived to exist or had only the status of an imagined ideal)—and at others via whole-scale proscriptions against music. Decadent music, we may be tempted to conclude, is an idea as old as music itself.

i.

Classical examples are instructive because of the ways that decadent music is characterised and because of their influence on Nietzsche and, via him, much subsequent thought on decadent music. Two myths of Apollo evoke the richness and mutability of the term. In the first, narrated by Melanippedes of Melos in his comedy *Marsyas* and by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, the satyr Marsyas picks up the flute invented but discarded by the goddess Athena. She thrashes Marsyas for his presumption in taking up her instrument, but he is not

deterred and becomes so accomplished that he challenges Apollo to a musical contest. Losing the contest, Marsyas is flayed alive by Apollo (Morford and Lenardon, 2007: pp. 75, 255–6). The inferiority or proto-decadence of Marsyas' music resides in several qualities. Firstly, his music is characterised as 'inauthentic', even ventriloquised: Marsyas may be technically proficient as a player but he lacks the imagination to have created the instrument, so his aesthetic achievement is secondary, dependent on and shaped by Athena's invention. Additionally, he has defied the explicit instructions of a figure symbolically positioned as a potential teacher and as representative of aesthetic predecessors and tradition. What we might call the social function of his playing also characterises Marsyas' music as decadent: rather than existing for some individual or social good (the pleasure or edification of the listener or player, for instance), the purpose of Marsyas' playing is self-aggrandisement and competitive display. It contrasts sharply with the lack of self-interest apparent in Athena's casual discarding of the instrument. Moreover, his music defies cultural regulations governing the right to produce art: in presuming to play an instrument specific to the goddess, the male, half-bestial, mortal satyr transgresses gender, social, and even species hierarchies and taboos. Fundamental to the moral lesson of the myth is the idea that the music (the work of art) inevitably embodies the qualities of its creator: the unanimous verdict of the listeners reinstates social hierarchies, suggesting that Marsyas' music must fail if only because he is a lesser creature than a goddess. The extremity of the punishment carried out by Apollo furthers the implication that this is an important, if unstated, part of the lesson; the apparently simple but nebulous assumption that music expresses or contains something of its creator (whether composer or, as here, improvising performer) was to be one of the most contentious and problematic elements in nineteenth- and twentieth-century debates about musical decadence.

Apollo's second musical contest revealingly augments Ovid's representations of proto-decadent music. The contest is with Pan (Nietzsche's Dionysus), who 'dared to belittle the music of Apollo compared to his own'. Ovid tells us that, in the contest, Pan 'plays a dainty tune' on his 'rustic pipes' made of reeds and wax but is trumped by Apollo, whose lyre 'captivated by [its] sweetness'. Because King Midas of Phrygia is alone among the listeners in refusing to grant victory to Apollo, as punishment his ears are turned into those of a 'lumbering ass' (Morford and Lenardon, 2007: pp. 256–8). Here, the opposition is played out through the differing instrumentation and formal qualities of the music (pipes vs. lyre, 'daintiness' vs. irresistible 'sweetness') and—crucially—through the behaviour and qualities of the listeners: Midas' obtuseness compromises the status of the music he favours.

ii

Ovid's and Nietzsche's examples outline a model of decadent music that coexists and indeed competes (literally or symbolically) with 'healthy' or permissible music. Accounts that place music on a historical continuum likewise often involve oppositional definitions of decadent music, either as a type of music that represented a decline from some earlier ideal or as a term applied to music that was new, unfamiliar, 'modern'. Somewhat ironically, what Wagner had heralded in the 1850s as *Zukunftsmusik* [the music of the future] quickly became exemplary of decadence. In 1893, Valery Bryusov, editor of the Russian Symbolist journal *Vesy* [The Scales], articulated this interdependence of modernity and apparent decline rather differently: 'the future belongs' to decadence because it denotes 'the attempt to bring poetry close to the contemporary' (Grossman, 1985: pp. 104–5). Decadent music, that is, was at once archaic, derivative, and secondary, yet somehow modern, avant-garde, and generative. And the instability of its historical placement was partly the result of the attitude of decadent music towards its aesthetic past—its use of quotation, pastiche, and established forms.

The explosion of the term in the late decades of the nineteenth century is particularly intriguing given that it followed shortly after the placement of music at or near the top of the hierarchy of the arts in a number of aesthetic and philosophical works and in the writings of the ‘musical idealists’. Hegel’s influential hierarchy relies on the elevation of mind over matter: music is a ‘subjective’ and ‘romantic’ art that may be seen to ‘celebrate [...] its triumph over the external world’ through attempts to surpass the constraints of form (Hegel, 1964: p. 436). In Hegel’s model, music relies on feeling and is inferior only to poetry (which need only be thought, rather than heard) among the arts. Schopenhauer’s writing on music was also influential, not least on Wagner who famously recast the plot and argument of the *Ring* following his conversion to Schopenhauer’s theories in 1854. In *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* [The World as Will and Representation] (1818; rev. 1844), Schopenhauer had afforded music a privileged position because of its ability to represent the ‘Will’: music ‘differs from all the other arts by the fact that it is not a copy of the phenomenon [...] but is directly a copy of the will itself, and therefore expresses the metaphysical to everything physical in the world’. In his account, music is ‘independent of the phenomenal world’; other arts ‘speak only of the shadow but music of the essence’ (1969: vol. ii, pp. 262, 257). Even aesthetic theory that in other ways was read as a manifesto for decadent art continued to elevate music: in ‘The School of Giorgione’ (1877; added to the third edition of *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* in 1888), Walter Pater reflects on the relationship between ‘form’ and ‘matter’, ‘subject’ and ‘expression’ in different arts, proposing that music is the ‘true type or measure of perfected art’ because ‘it most completely realises this artistic ideal, this perfect identification of matter and form’ (1986: p. 88). The ‘constant effort of art’ is ‘to obliterate’ the distinction between matter and form; thus, as the famous dictum proposed ‘*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*’ (1986: p. 86). Such writings suggest that music might be particularly resistant to being characterised as decadent.

The placement of music at the apex of the arts implied that it was aloof from and superior to its immediate context and to politics—decadent music was understood to be just the opposite. Decadent music problematically failed to ‘transcend’ (a key word) its immediate context, whether that context was understood biographically (in terms of a composer’s personal traits), aesthetically (as a product of inferior artistic traditions), or socially (as reflecting a debased social or political context). There was, then, a great deal at stake in characterising music as decadent by the late nineteenth century since it implicated an art perceived as the most elevated and ideal and as representative of Art more widely. Decadent music denoted not just musical but also wider aesthetic and cultural decline.

iii

Rather than offering a chronological survey of the term’s occurrence, the remainder of the essay traces *definitions* of decadent music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Following Nietzsche (and recalling Ovid) it outlines attempts to understand in which elements of musical composition, performance and reception decadence could be located—including, most problematically, the question of whether music (to put it baldly, notes) could be decadent in itself. It traces decadent music’s role in collective contexts (nation, performance venue, audience) before moving to questions of the individual (listener, performer, composer) and lastly to the artwork itself (formal matters of style, genre and so on). It aims, then, to suggest both the generic and specifically musical characteristics of musical decadence.

Given the political history of mid-nineteenth-century Western and Eastern Europe, it was inevitable that decadent music would be iterated in terms of national or ethnic identity—portrayed as inevitably the product of the composer’s national or ethnic identity; as shaped by the aesthetic heritage, performance traditions, and contemporary society of that nation; and as a matter that denotes the ‘taste’ and, by implication, the aesthetic and socio-cultural well-

being of that nation and its status in a global hierarchy. The intersection of the term ‘decadent music’ with contemporary geo-political conflicts—political, economic, aesthetic and military—is overt.

Wagner’s essays, particularly those on Jewish music but also his writings on French music and his own *Zukunftsmusik*, were and remain the most notorious examples. His definitions not only influenced discourse that followed but also set up terms that would later be turned against him—by Nietzsche, most famously, in his characterisation of Wagner’s works as stylistically French, his ‘heroines’ as ‘almost indistinguishable from Madame Bovary!’ (1967: p. 176). French grand opera in *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde* [A Communication to My Friends] (1851), had served as the antithesis of everything Wagner wished his own music dramas to be: showy and materialistic, its ‘sickly unsubstantiality’ cloaked in ‘a glittering show’ in a capital city described as the ‘modern Babylon’ (1993: pp. 302, 383). *Opéra comique* fared no better: characterised as a ‘coquette’ in *Oper und Drama* [Opera and Drama] (1851), its debased music is used to characterise his own duplicitous Guttrune (1995b: p. 112). Wagner’s opposition of his own German art to proto-decadent French music relied, as did much contemporary criticism and philosophy, on the term *Volk*; its connotations (‘people’, ‘folk’, ‘nation’ and, particularly in Herder’s writing, a collective with a *Seele* [soul or essence]) were complex and nuanced but in the lead-up to the unification of German-speaking states in 1871 it increasingly became synonymous with the term ‘nation’. At the conclusion of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* [The Mastersingers of Nuremberg] (1868), Hans Sachs invites the Nuremberg *Volk* to honour ‘[o]ur sacred German art’ and to defend it against ‘foreign rule and foreign ways’ (1983: p. 125). This self-referential moment defines ‘good’ and proto-decadent music in terms of national and arguably, via the anti-Semitic representation of Beckmesser, ethnic identity.



In his account of Jewish music in *Das Judentum in der Musik* [Jewishness in Music] (1850 anonymously; reissued 1869 under Wagner's name), the terminology and characteristics he attributes to Jewish music are unequivocally proto-decadent. Jewish music is characterised as emotionally superficial, commercialised, and imitative, qualities that Wagner attributes to Jews' cultural and linguistic marginalisation within Europe. He argues that Jewish music will inevitably remain derivative because the only cultural and aesthetic tradition available to Jewish composers is 'sullied', 'senseless and distorted' synagogue chant: 'The Jew has never had an Art of his own' (Wagner, 1995a: p. 90). One of the most revealing elements of Wagner's definition of proto-decadent music is his assertion that musical style is particularly open to imitation or mimicry (the 'easiest to learn' of the arts (p. 88)), making music vulnerable to Jewish appropriation. Telling too is his claim that Jewish music enjoys contemporary commercial success because of the weakness of 'German' culture: the 'success' of Jewish composers, he argues, denotes the '*ineptitude of the recent musical epoch*' (p. 98). In metaphors nearly as striking for their decadence as their virulent anti-Semitism, he terms the 'Judaic period' of modern music 'stability gone to ruin' (p. 98), its art 'a worm-befretted carcass' (p. 99).

The legacy and proliferation of these metaphors and ideas is apparent in much late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writing. Nietzsche's critiques not only portray Wagner's music dramas as 'French' but deploy larger geographical oppositions of southern and northern European cultures. His polarisation of Wagner and the French Georges Bizet mobilises clichés about perceived northern European pedantry, mysticism, and religiosity in contrast to the 'naturalness', grace, physicality, and ebullience of southern Europe. In musical terms, this opposition had often been articulated via the comparison of the 'playing north' and the 'singing south', the opposition of northern 'intellectual', polyphonic, keyboard and symphonic music with the 'emotional' vocal and lyrical music of the south, exemplified by

*bel canto* (Zuckerman, 1964: p. 78). In *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche observes: ‘With [*Carmen*] one takes leave of the *damp* north, of all the steam of the Wagnerian ideal’ (1967: p. 158). The tendency to define decadent music in terms of nations or national traditions is also striking in Russian and Polish critical debate where decadence was frequently explained as an ‘ailment’ or ‘[f]oreign mania’ (Bartlett, 1995: p. 82). Diaghilev’s ‘World of Art’ exhibitions prompted a nationalist diatribe against decadence in 1899 from Vladimir Stasov (Downes, 2010: p. 55); the logic was deployed for the opposite effect by the president of the Hamburg Musical Society who implored Tchaikovsky to leave Russia so that he might overcome the inevitable ‘shortcomings’ of his national context and education (Bullock, 2016: p. 146). Yet the most vitriolic discourse that defined a national music in opposition to its ‘degenerate’ foil is evident in Nazi propaganda and policy in the late 1930s. In 1936, the *Jüdischer Kulturbund* [Jewish Cultural League] (the theatrical, musical and cultural programme run exclusively by and for Jews) was forbidden to play repertoire claimed by the Nazis as exclusively, ethnically, ‘German’: Beethoven and, by 1938, Mozart (Potter, 2007: p. 98). In 1938, the first *Reichsmusiktage* [Reich Music Days] took place in Düsseldorf alongside the *Entartete Musik* [Degenerate Music] exhibition. In his keynote lecture, Goebbels opposed ‘German’ to ‘degenerate’ music—a category loosely defined through a melange of allusions to jazz, Jewish, ‘Bolshevist’ and commercialised music. Schoenberg and Webern were subject to anti-Semitic attacks and the exhibition catalogue included caricatures of Jewish musicians. The exhibition paid relatively little attention to formal matters, but atonality was targeted: the catalogue accused Schoenberg of attacking the triad, ‘the essence of German musical expression’ (Potter, 2007: pp. 92–3). The cover of the exhibition catalogue depicted a caricature of an African-American saxophonist wearing a Star of David, concisely evoking the convergence of racial, national and aesthetic terms in Nazi definitions of degenerate music.

In contrast to analyses of decadent music informed primarily by national or racial theories, some definitions attributed decadence to the mass audiences of the late nineteenth century. Much discourse about decadent art registers discomfort with the newly enlarged scale of musical audiences, enabled by new forms of transport, larger theatres, and the technologies of advertising, publicity, and celebrity (whether of performers or composers, about whom documentary studies such as biographies and correspondence were burgeoning). Nietzsche proposed:

One leaves oneself at home when one goes to Bayreuth [...] solitude is lacking [...]. In the theater one becomes people, herd female, pharisee, voting cattle, patron, idiot—*Wagnerian*: even the most personal conscience is vanquished by the levelling magic of the great number.  
(1982: pp. 665–6)

Nietzsche's revulsion fuses anxiety about the apparent threat that mass experience presents to individual (aesthetic) autonomy with distaste for commercialised art and that available to a wider audience. Despite the social exclusivity of the Bayreuth audience, Nietzsche unequivocally attributes the decadence of Wagner's work to its commercial success and calculated popular appeal, a definition reflecting the rise of 'middle-brow' art and the bifurcation of high and popular art at the *fin de siècle*. Nietzsche's alignment of women with mass, 'middle-brow'—in this case, decadent—art and consumerism has parallels in contemporary crowd theory. Gustave Le Bon's *La Psychologie des foules* (1895; English translation in 1896 as *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*), for example, asserts that crowds are especially susceptible to 'theatrical representations' and are remarkable for their sentimentality and absence of critical discernment—traits found particularly in 'women,

savages, and children' (1960: pp. 68, 35–6). Accounts of decadent music that define it through the scale of its performance or reception thus register changes in the performance conditions of some contemporary music as well as modernity's conditions. Similar concerns were expressed about specific venues such as Berlin cabarets in the late 1930s (Steinweis, 1993: pp. 142–4), perceived as a synecdoche for the character and quality of the work performed there. Anticipating Theodor Adorno, decadent music signals the wider commodification of art.

## v

Musical decadence was defined not only in terms of nations, 'races', and mass audiences or markets but also through the attributes of individuals. Defiantly 'perverse', idiosyncratic individual listeners commanded scrutiny in attempts to define decadent music through its formal qualities and conditions of performance and reception. The trope of the enervated, 'pathological' listener, relishing his (and it was more often his) suffering as he listened to or recalled music became a familiar element of decadent fiction and critical debate. Baudelaire's declaration in 'Richard Wagner et *Tannhäuser* à Paris' (1861) that his 'rapture had been so strong, so awe-inspiring that [he] could not resist the desire to return to it again and again' (1992: p. 332) was formative, characterising his listening as an addiction, a compulsion, a psychological symptom. Ludwig II's widely reported private performances of Wagner's operas, at which he was the sole audience member, also fuelled attention to decadent musicians. Such accounts and appraisals of aesthetic experience in pathological, clinical terms were highly influential; in particular, they shaped contemporary perceptions of gender and sexuality that became entwined with definitions of decadence. By the 1890s, decadent fiction was populated with masochistic listeners: the composer Magnus in a short story by Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) is emblematic, overwhelmed by music that paralyses his creativity and which affects him through highly sexualised images of penetration (2006: pp. 179–80);

the protagonist in *Under the Hill* (1896), Aubrey Beardsley's erotic take on *Tannhäuser*, conducts a masturbatory reading of the score of *Das Rheingold* (1966: pp. 55–6); and Wilde's Dorian Gray listens in 'rapt pleasure' to *Tannhäuser* which he hears as a 'presentation of the tragedy of his own soul' (1994: p. 135). The assumption that musical tastes were a secure index of a subject's sensibility and even sexuality is evident from Magnus Hirschfeld's 1899 questionnaire intended to allow homosexuals to self-diagnose (it asked, 'Are you particularly fond of Wagner?' (Sutton, 2002: p. 54)) and in Havelock Ellis' observation in his seminal *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1900) that '[i]t has been extravagantly said that all musicians are invert[s]' (1921: vol. ii, p. 295). Interrogated in the terms of the new mental sciences, these figures contributed to the converging fin-de-siècle typology of 'the decadent' and 'the homosexual'. Individual aesthetes whose behaviour or tastes were perceived to be idiosyncratic or 'perverse' became barometers of the aesthetic value of the works they admired; consequently, works or artists might be characterised as decadent through the perceived qualities of their admirers.

In certain contexts performers too were identified as exhibiting proto-decadent elements. The claim was not unprecedented: castrati in British discourse about eighteenth-century Italian opera, for instance, and characterisations of Liszt and Paganini portrayed their virtuosity as compromising the repertoire they perform through their proto-decadent simulation and stylistic exaggeration (Bernstein, 1998: pp. 12, 112–3). (Marsyas' mimicry is an even earlier example). But this concern became prominent in the fin de siècle: works such as Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (1881) or George du Maurier's best-seller *Trilby* (1894) use female automata and mesmerism to explore anxieties about the role of the performer in mediating, embodying and 'voicing' music. These performers signal the decadence of a particular performance and are themselves characterised as decadent artists, offering inferior, 'insincere' or ventriloquised forms of aesthetic expression. But perhaps the

most tenacious trope in writing on musical decadence was the assumption that something of the composer's 'character' and qualities were present in—and contaminated—their work.

The acute scrutiny of the composer was shaped by the mass media and publicity industry of the late nineteenth century but the perceptions underpinning such attacks suffused critical writing and aesthetic theory as well as biographies and popular discourse. Frequently, these discourses took the form of pathological images of the composer as an invalid displaying 'symptoms' of psychological or physical degeneration, or of depictions of the composer as the racial or sexual other. Nietzsche was one among many who pointed to Wagner's own personality to 'explain' the decadence of the music: from their titles onwards, *Der Fall Wagner* [The Case of Wagner] and *Nietzsche contra Wagner: Aktenstücke eines Psychologen* [Nietzsche contra Wagner: Out of the Files of a Psychologist] (1888) characterise Wagner in medicalised tropes. Nordau, too, portrays Wagner as the representative 'degenerate': 'The stigmata of this morbid condition are united in him in the most complete and most luxuriant development' (1993: p. 171). Wagner's consumption of silks and perfumes, his affairs, his homoerotic relationships with figures including his patron, Ludwig II, and his perceived 'mania' for attention and publicity were stock elements in caricatures and popular writing that contributed to constructions of his pathologized, decadent 'character'.

Several composers were retrospectively co-opted into the decadent canon via similar strategies. Beardsley's 1892 drawing *Frederic Chopin [sic]* depicts the composer seated with his hand hovering as if outstretched to an absent piano keyboard; his slumped posture, paleness, and tubercular frame represent him in the iconography of 'the decadent'. Similarly, in Thomas Mann's *Tristan* (1903) the fragile female inmate in a sanatorium plays his *Nocturnes*—the performance contributing to her collapse and death—and Albert Giraud's 'Chopin's Waltz' (1884) describes the music itself as the consumptive composer's own,

bloody spittle. Late nineteenth-century writing on the syphilitic Schubert, on Schumann, Wolf and even on Beethoven (whose A-minor Quartet, Op. 132, with its movement inspired by illness and recovery, was prominent) deployed similar tropes. One of the most strident examples was the reception of Rachmaninov's work—particularly the *First Symphony* (1895)—that relied heavily on accounts of the composer's apparent neuroses and their inevitable expression in the music. (The work was destroyed by the composer after its disastrous premiere and was a factor in the writer's block for which he sought hypnosis). César Cui influentially described it as containing 'sickly perverse harmonization' and 'a complete absence of simplicity and naturalness', whilst in 1927 the composer and his work were described as displaying 'volitional impotence' and a 'semi-conscious mood characteristic of a "hashish stupor"' (Downes, 2010: p. 98). These tropes shaped perceptions of Rachmaninov's work well into the twentieth century and were crucial to critical distinctions between romantic (exemplified by Rachmaninov) and modernist (exemplified by Scriabin) styles. Tchaikovsky, whose *Manfred Symphony* (Op. 58, 1885) and *Pathétique Symphony* (Op. 74, 1893) were frequently read as autobiographical, confessional narratives, particularly as 'covert narrative[s] of homosexual psychopathology', acknowledged the pressures of contemporary publicity and of romantic investment in the idea that a work authentically expressed the composer's personality or emotions: 'I hate it when people try to peer into my soul [...yet] in my music I claim extreme sincerity' (Bullock, 2016: pp. 142, 176). Such equations of artist and work have a long philosophical history, but these fraught fin-de-siècle accounts were inflected by new psychological ideas about character.

We turn last to attempts to define decadent music within the musical text itself. In the case of opera and programme music these attempts were relatively straightforward: operas that set texts by known decadent authors or that dealt with decadent topics, or programme music that

represented decadent subject matter, were readily identified as decadent works. Thus, for all his divergence from Wilde's text, Strauss' *Salome* was a prominent example—the final scene notoriously described as ‘the most disgusting ever to be shown on stage’ (Kristiansen, 2011: p. 114), earning Strauss the dubious honorific ‘the genius of bad taste’, in Romain Rolland's words (1913: p. 407). Strauss's revisions to Wilde's play drew out the work's affinity to contemporary theories of (female) hysteria, asexuality, and pubescent insanity (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2000: pp. 209–14). (Nietzsche had of course characterised Wagner's characters, particularly Amfortas and Parsifal, in similar terms). Alban Berg's 1907 *Lulu*, based on Frank Wedekind's plays, was also a much-discussed example: its subject matter, encompassing femme fatales, murder, prostitution, and popular spectacle such as the circus, placed the work securely in the canon of decadent opera, notwithstanding considerations of its formal qualities. Equally, the decadence of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) lay in both the subject matter of Maurice Maeterlinck's play and the musical fetishization of Mélisande's spectral, posthumous voice (Abbate, 2001: 176–9). Some of Bartok's early works, such as *Bluebeard's Castle* (composed 1911) and *The Miraculous Mandarin* (1926), qualified on similar grounds: their thematic focus on prostitution, criminality and violence was matched by a stylistic and expressive emphasis on the grotesque. In Eastern Europe, the pessimism of Mieczysław Karłowicz's symphonic poems —the *Rebirth Symphony*, Op. 7 (1902), *Returning Waves*, Op. 9 (1904), *Stanisław and Anna Oświęcimowie*, Op. 9 (1908) and *A Sad Story*, Op. 13 (1908)—were read as ‘debilitations’ of Dionysian energy, undermining narratives of heroism or redemption (Downes, 2010: pp. 84–96).

But the greatest critical challenge for *fin-de-siècle* writing on music was the question of whether music itself could be decadent. The assertion was certainly made insistently but, on the whole, with little formal rigour. These accounts locating decadence in formal questions of genre, tonality, melody, rhythm, and so on have been given renewed critical



purchase in the last twenty years by critical musicologists who have pursued these insights via detailed formal analyses, documenting the significance of decadent music to the syntax and structures of modern(ist) music. Structural ‘inferiority’—typically classified as miniaturism or as an excessive attention to ‘surface’ at the expense of structural coherence and ‘depth’—was a common charge. Works that were perceived to be particularly self-referential, hybrid, or piecemeal in their structure were vulnerable to the charge of decadence. Thus Nietzsche derogatively classes Wagner as a ‘*miniaturist*’ unable to master teleological form (1967: p. 171) whilst Karłowicz’s *Returning Waves* was reviewed at its premiere as a ‘whole [that] consists merely of pieces’ (Downes, 2010: p. 87). More recently, Lawrence Kramer has drawn attention to the miniaturism evident in *Salome*’s temporal suspension—her monologue flaunts music’s capacity to elongate time through ‘luxurious nonaction’ (2004: p. 141). Similarly, Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades* (1890) uses multiple pastiches (from Mozart to salon song) to create temporal ambiguity (Bullock, 2016: pp. 156–9). *Lulu*’s palindromic structure was widely critiqued as too artificial and reliant on a form of unity inferior to an organic, overarching structure (Berg’s allusions, via the character Alva, to the hostile reception of his own earlier work probably didn’t help) (Perle, 1985: pp. 68–84, 69). Boulez later memorably described the opera as exemplifying ‘an aesthetic of parody’, reliant on ‘a whole repertory of *objets trouvés*’ (1986: p. 387). But these examples should not imply that decadent music is synonymous with structural weakness or attention only to surface:

The relationship of decadence to formal organisation is a neglected field of enquiry. And in music this is especially vital: formal processes of intensification and dissolution [...], deformation, miniaturism and the preoccupation with ‘ending’ all possess powerfully decadent potential. (Downes, 2010: p. 17)

Thus, the very techniques of repetition and ‘intensification’ that seemed to some contemporaries evidence of structural inadequacy regenerated (through apparent perversion or dissolution) ‘classical’ musical forms. Relatively few critics noted this at the time; Shaw’s *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898) was unusual in observing the structural tightness and formally conservative elements of Wagner’s *Ring*. More often decadent structures were described in metaphors of degeneration or cultural otherness. Thus Wagner’s *Unendliche Melodie* [infinite melody] not only lacks structure but also takes us back into the primordial soup: for Nietzsche it was ‘the polyp in music’ (1967: p. 157); for critic Edmund Gurney the music was like ‘invertebrates’, ‘jellyfish’ and ‘seaweed’ (1883: p. 441); to others it resembles an opium haze or Turkish mysticism. Wagner’s deferred resolutions and ambivalent cadences, for example, were more often heard as decadent than as generative innovations. Yet Brunnhilde’s two closing cadences in the last scene of *Götterdämmerung* [Twilight of the Gods]—musical symbols representative of polarised decadence and Dionysian revitalisation—themselves shaped the two C sharp cadences in the closing section of Salome’s monologue and the double ending of *Elektra* (1909), propelling the proto-modernist syntax and symbolism of these works (Downes, 2010: p. 55).

Tonality and melody were also interrogated as sites of decadence. *Salome*’s decadence was attributed not only to its subject matter but also to its chromaticism and harmonic experimentalism: as an early listener complained, ‘the pure triad is administered—like medication—only one teaspoonful every half hour’ (Kristiansen, 2011: p. 115). More recently, the tonal struggle between Jochanaan (C major) and Salome (C sharp major) has been widely read as expressing the polarisation of ‘normal’ and ‘perverse’, masculine and feminine, saint and sinner at tonal level; it is given an extra twist as Salome’s key enharmonically recalls the love duet of Camille Saint-Saëns’s *Samson et Dalilah* (Kramer, 2004: pp. 156–8). Certain motifs and harmonies—such as the flat/minor sixth—occur with

frequency in, for example, Scriabin's Third, Fourth and Fifth Piano Sonatas and in both Rachmaninov's; their unstable structural position contributes to the works' concerns with, respectively, Dionysian ecstasy and a sense of apocalyptic finality (Downes, 2010: p. 58). Such uses build on the popularity of the flat/minor sixth in romantic music but intensify it for pessimistic or decadent use: it is vital, for instance, to both the melodic descent and the harmonic character of Tristan and Isolde's longing at the start of the Prelude. The falling melodic minor seventh was another common decadent motif.

Even instrumentation and rhythm could be heard as expressions of decadence. The choice of a specific instrument might connote decadent concerns via intertextual allusion: Karłowicz's *A Sad Story* looks back to Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony* in which the tam-tam signals Manfred's death. In doing so, it also signals Karłowicz's affiliation with Tchaikovsky's critiques of heroism and, specifically, of Germanic musical models associated with the masculine sublime (Downes, 2010: pp. 77–81, 92). It is worth noting too how often instruments themselves are figured as objects of erotic fetishization or as malevolent, seductive agents in decadent writing. Following Huysmans' *À rebours* [Against Nature] (1884), Dorian Gray takes 'curious delight' in the 'hideous voices' and 'bestial shape' of Amerindian instruments, the 'monsters of Art' (Wilde, 1994: p.135), whilst in John Meade Falkner's *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895) instruments embody the uncanny, the haunted, and the taboo. Rhythm, perhaps because of its critical elasticity and lack of precision, was a particularly vivid term in definitions of musical decadence. In *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, Nietzsche characterised *Unendliche Melodie* as 'a rhythmic paradox and blasphemy', 'the complete degeneration of rhythmic feeling, chaos in place of rhythm' (1982: p. 681). Too little, and a work was vulnerable to accusations of an absence of 'vigour', regarded as enervated and effeminate. Too much, and it signalled primitivism: the English composer and educator Hubert Parry, for instance, rebukes Tchaikovsky for his 'barbaric rhythm and

unrestrained abandonment to physical excitement which is natural to the less developed races' (Parry, 1894: p. 119). Rhythm—especially 'decadent' rhythm—exemplifies the inextricability of apparently apolitical matters of musical form from *fin-de-siècle* anxieties about ethnicity and gender.

Whether in critical, philosophical, and aesthetic discourses or in popular metaphors and cultural tropes, music's centrality to decadence and to the gender, national, and racial discourses of the fin de siècle is irrefutable. Modernity was frequently conceptualised via the idea of decadent music—a rhetorical move that persists in analyses of our own twenty-first-century versions of modernity. Nietzsche's perception of the necessity of studying this 'metropolitan' (1967: p. 176) music is, we might conclude, no less pressing for critics across disciplines now.