

Radical Intersections: The Rise of Atonal Music and The Invisible Committee's *The Coming Insurrection*

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An insurrection is not like a plague or a forest fire—a linear process which spreads from place to place after an initial spark. It rather takes the shape of a music, whose focal points, though dispersed in time and space, succeed in imposing the rhythm of their own vibrations, always taking on more density. To the point that any return to normal is no longer desirable or even imaginable.¹

The Coming Insurrection, a notorious 2007 ultra-left polemical tract written by a collective of French anti-state communists writing under the group-moniker The Invisible Committee, posits a conception of insurrection as the creation of new collective ontologies through acts of radical social rupture. Eschewing the orthodox Marxist line that revolution is something temporally removed from the present, towards which pro-revolutionaries must organize and work, The Invisible Committee's use of insurrection claims it as an antagonistic challenge to late-capitalism firmly grounded in its own immediacy. Communism is therefore made immediate, and it is willed into being by insurrectionary acts of social rupture. While much has been written on the debt that The Invisible Committee owes to French strains of ultra-left anti-state communism, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, Situationism, and the Italian Autonomia movement of the 1970s, their implicit nod to the sociopolitical themes of music has been largely ignored. By subtly claiming that insurrection spreads by resonance and that such proliferation "takes the shape of a music,"² The Invisible Committee allows for the interpretation of its "coming insurrection" as an inherently musical act. Using a historical reading of the shift from tonality to atonality in Western art music, as exemplified by Arnold Schoenberg, this interpretation of *The Coming Insurrection* aims at imbuing its explicitly political premises with a more thorough exploration of its implicit musical qualities.

The Invisible Committee's use of the term "insurrection" in *The Coming Insurrection* functions on two distinct levels. The first function retains the conventional understanding of insurrection as material acts of militant resistance, uprising, and direct contestation with opposing forces of domination. The second, which this paper will focus on, understands insurrection as a new mode of collective becoming which is predicated upon the abject negation of the present social order and its affective relational ties. The Invisible Committee claim that through a collective refusal of the social relations under late-capitalism, which they call Empire (a term appropriated from the Italian autonomist-Marxist Antonio Negri), fundamentally new ways of relating to other individuals begin to manifest. Unlike more traditional Marxist thinking, *The Coming Insurrection* is hesitant to offer any prefigurative claims as what is to be done to create the preconditions for revolution, and instead claims that it is quite literally through the very act of negating Empire's affective ties that communism will be enacted. This current of negation, while expressing modernist sensibilities, can also be seen in the shift in Western art music from tonal structuring to experimental atonality.

Seen as one of the most radical departures from convention by modernist thinking, atonality is a calculated rejection of the tonal center (tonic) and the subsequent hierarchical pitch relationships based on a specific key, which dominated Western art music until the turn of the 20th century. A broad term, atonality refers to various attempts to destabilize the primacy of the tonal center—most notably, free atonality, strict atonality, and twelve-tone serialism. Perhaps most associated with what is called the "Second Viennese School," atonality's historical arrival was one which was signaled by a "crises of tonality." It is precisely this historical moment which my argument rests upon, as the existing musicology on atonality itself is secondary to the rhetoric generated by and around this form of early twentieth century music. I would argue that the atonality of Schoenberg attempted to create an entirely new ontology of music. It is an ontology informed by negation; one which refuses convention with the aims of existing outside or beyond the contemporary aesthetic context of fin-de-siècle society in Europe. This new ontology of negation is mirrored in much of the rhetoric within *The Coming Insurrection*, and thus Schoenberg's "crises of tonality" can be seen as analogous in many ways to The Invisible Committee's "crises of Empire."

In his account of Thomas Mann's novel, *Doctor Faustus*, music historian Alex Ross claims that the main character Adrian Leverkühn (who is widely viewed as a doppelgänger for Arnold Schoenberg) is:

an intellectual monster [...] His music absorbs all styles of the past and shatters them into fragments" while attempting to "remake the world in utopian forms."³

This nascent nihilism is also evoked in *The Coming Insurrection*, as it claims that "there's nothing more to be said, everything has to be destroyed."⁴ Both of

these positions have their basis in the acknowledgement that older systemic forms have failed as justification for existence itself, both musically and socio-politically, and as such they need to be completely destroyed in the hopes of creating new forms of being. For Schoenberg this failure is embodied by tonality, and for *The Invisible Committee* it is late-capitalist Empire. All attempts at the reformation of both these failed and antiquated systems are recontextualized as merely being assimilated back into mainstream musicological and sociopolitical discourse, respectively. Thus, discursive practices must be negated as a means to move beyond the threat of hegemonic assimilation.

For the post-Marxist theorist Theodor Adorno, who wrote extensively on Schoenberg, “only the most recent phase of music—in which the isolated subject communicates as if from across an abyss of silence precisely through the complete alienation of its language—justifies a coldness that, as a self-contained mechanical functioning, is good only for producing disaster.”⁵ Disaster is central to both Schoenberg and *The Invisible Committee* as it forms the basis for their immediate threats of radical change—a clear position of antagonism to the established order. For Schoenberg it was important that his forays into atonality carried “the threat that *all* music will sound like this.”⁶ For *The Invisible Committee*, it is the antagonistically totalizing claim that, “we don’t want to occupy the territory, we want to *be* the territory.”⁷ Thus, for both parties the enmity to their contemporary hegemonic moment (be it musical or political) is predicated upon direct contestation with forces of opposition. It is not merely enough that a space exists for atonality or communism within their respective aesthetic and social structures; rather, atonality and communism necessarily present their coming-into-being as forces of complete subsumption—negating anything which stands in opposition to it.

Both *The Invisible Committee* and Schoenberg attempt to create forces which operate in relation to teleology. *The Coming Insurrection* claims that,

the West is a civilization that has survived all the prophecies of its collapse with a singular stratagem. [...] The operation can be summarized like this: an entity in its death throes sacrifices itself as a content in order to survive as a form.⁸

Thus, for *The Invisible Committee*, late-capitalist Empire is the teleological end (pure form) to the progression of a capitalist ideology which ostensibly at one point in its historical development possessed some semblance of content. As such, late-capitalist Empire contains within itself the elements which necessitate its own collapse. Thus, as proponents of this particular conception of insurrectionary communism *The Invisible Committee* advocate finding other “forms-of-life”⁹ to enact communism with in the immediacy of the present moment. These acts of “communization” precipitate both the collapse of Empire and the creation of new collective ontologies outside of the pervasiveness of late-capitalist schema.

For Schoenberg, teleology functioned as a means to validate the atonal turn as the logical overcoming of an existential crisis within Western art music. Schoenberg “set forth an elaborate teleology of musical history, a theory of irreversible progress, to justify his actions.”¹⁰ Teleology, for both Schoenberg and *The Invisible Committee*, is not as finite or fixed as one would believe. Instead, both Schoenberg and *The Invisible Committee* view the fixity within a teleological rendering of both music and political history as something that can be worked *through and beyond*. Alex Ross maintains that Schoenberg was noted for such cryptic pronouncements like: “I can see through walls.”¹¹ As odd as this claim seems, implicit within it is a conception of Schoenberg as being able to envisage ontologies of alterity beyond the confines of the historical present. It is a vision which at once acknowledges the totality in which the individual subject is located and the possibility that other modes of being can exist outside of that which delineates. For Schoenberg, this musical space of confinement and stagnation is tonality. Thus, the teleology of Western art music is necessarily of a political dimension.

Tonal music is set upon a binarized/dualistic tension, as evidenced by the fact that the return to the tonal center necessitates the subsumption of one element of the duality over the other. This dichotomy in tonal music functions on multiple levels, one of which is the resolution back into consonance after playing with its dissonant other. Here it is the return which is tantamount, as return signifies the safe and familiar. The return, or perhaps more polemically phrased, the retreat into that which is familiar can be conceived of as the grounding in a center which has a clearly articulated, delineated, and circumscribed identity or essence—or in Foucauldian terms: the subjectivized. The tonic key forms an identity which is, quite literally, that which makes sense of everything else in its field of being. Mediants, subdominants, dominants, and supertonics only make sense in relation to their tonic key. Thus, tonality is an inherently hierarchical system of prioritization. Because this tonal center at once *defines* and *is defined by* those elements of scale and harmony which use the tonal center as their organizing referent, it is the embodiment of a strict musical identity.

In terms of a musicological teleology, the “crisis of tonality” arises through the proliferation and exhaustion of all the tonal “identities” possible within the tonal system. Much like how *The Invisible Committee* claims that *Empire* contains within itself the contradictions which will inevitably bring about its own destruction, Schoenberg claimed that:

[the] end of the system is brought about with such inescapable cruelty by its own functions [...] Every living thing has within it that which changes, develops, and destroys it. Life and death are both equally present in the embryo.¹²

Schoenberg argues that tonality contains within itself the necessary preconditions which will cause its own collapse. Thus, just as tonality’s

“catastrophe was inevitable,”¹³ so too was the birth of atonality inevitable, as its role as a force of negation was already prefigured by the historical progress of tonal music. Seen in this perspective, communism as envisaged by The Invisible Committee is not what arises after the collapse of late-capitalist Empire, but that which can be enacted in the temporal present as a catalyst for Empire’s destruction. Against more orthodox Marxist claims, communism for The Invisible Committee is found in the very act of becoming, and is not *a posteriori* to any “revolutionary” or “transitional” moment. This position validates their proposition that it is not a question (as Lenin asked) of “What is to be done?” but rather, “How is it to be done?”¹⁴ The Invisible Committee claim:

So we have a corpse on our backs, but we won’t be able to shake it off just like that. Nothing is to be expected from the end of civilization, from its clinical death. [...] To decide for the death of civilization, then to work out *how* it will happen: only decision will rid us of the corpse.¹⁵

Thus, conceptualizing communism as a process of becoming is inherently an ontological project.

At the basis of Schoenberg’s revolutionizing approach to the destruction of the tonal center is a move towards an altogether *different* ontology. Ross argues that the fin-de-siècle Europe which the young Schoenberg inhabited was a historical context in which “occult and mystical societies [...] promised rupture from the world of the present. In the political sphere, Communists, anarchists, and ultra-nationalists plotted from various angles to overthrow the quasi-liberal monarchies of Europe.”¹⁶ Thus, Schoenberg’s own attempts at musical subversion were not in isolation from larger sociopolitical currents at the time, for

the world was unstable and it seemed that one colossal Idea, or, failing that, one well-placed bomb, could bring it tumbling down. There was an almost titillating sense of imminent catastrophe.¹⁷

Schoenberg’s earlier attempts at a “free atonality” attempted to musically enact the effect of a “well-placed bomb,” while his later, more restrained attempts using “twelve tone technique” attempted to create the “one colossal Idea” which could bring it all down. While one approach proved be much more systematic than the other, both “free atonality” and “twelve tone technique” embodied the late-modernist sentiment that “in the face of the gigantic lie of the cult of beauty—

so the rhetoric went—art had to become negative, critical.”¹⁸ This critical negativity informs the basis of Schoenberg’s new ontology of music. By the effective dissolution or subversion of conventional tonal tropes within

Western art music, Schoenberg's atonality creates entirely new musical languages, new aesthetics, and in atonality's culmination in "twelve tone technique," new systems of being. These new musical ontologies are essentially the creation of new aesthetic truths out of the negation of the totality of tonality. Yet, this approach seems to be paradoxical as, critic Alexander L. Ringer argues:

[...] Schoenberg's dauntless quest for truth simply does not square with his oft-expressed, unshakable, and infallibly proven faith in the essential immutability of all fundamental precepts.¹⁹

Viewing the rise of atonality as historically deterministic, the search for truth becomes complicated. Thus, it is through this very contradiction, this atonal act of negation, which new musical modalities emerge.

The Invisible Committee claims that the ontology of the present is actually a mere Spectacle,²⁰ an ontology which is entirely codified by hegemonic apparatuses. The ontology of the present cannot be reformed because it is the ontology of Empire – that of domination, subservience, and exploitation. They claim that the West is at once the most egregious perpetrator of this empirical hegemony yet also completely enraptured by it; and that "we belong to a generation which lives *very well* in this fiction."²¹ Thus, like Schoenberg before them, The Invisible Committee views the only logical step to take against this totalizing fiction as one of negation. It is precisely through the act of insurrection that The Invisible Committee claims that new "authentic" forms of collective relations can be created. They claim that through insurrection, "we are forced to reestablish contact, albeit a potentially fatal one, with what's there, to rediscover the rhythms of reality."²² Here insurrectionary ontology is conflated with "reality," as a collectivized truth which emerges through a shared refusal. This argument is inherently anti-postmodern, as notions of authentic truths reemerge as tangible outcomes of collectivized insurrection. Through finding other "forms-of-life," and enacting insurrection together as the manifestation of *communism-in-the-present*, a non-Spectaclized reality once again becomes possible.

Unlike Schoenberg's work in "twelve tone technique," The Invisible Committee does not want to postulate their unique conception of insurrection as merely another system, even as one of negation and subversion, to be adopted and subsequently recuperated by Empire. In his later years, Schoenberg found it necessary to create a system to ensure that music did not rely on or regress back to tonal conventions. "Twelve tone technique" was a system which forced Schoenberg, and those who adopted its methods, to never return to tonality at all. This shift from "free atonality" to the systematized serialism of "twelve tone technique" signified Schoenberg coming to terms with limits of a negative freedom. The negation itself now

becomes systematized and totalized. Adorno claims that through Schoenberg's new negative system,

variation, the instrument of compositional dynamism, becomes total and is as a result annulled. The music no longer presents itself as being in a process of development. [...] Variation as such no longer appears at all. Everything and nothing is variation.²³

This is a concession to systemicity that The Invisible Committee refuses to make. They claim that “the goal of any insurrection is to become irreversible,”²⁴ and by extension, *non-recuperable*. They go on to state that insurrection

[...] becomes irreversible when you've defeated both authority and the need for authority, property and the taste for appropriation, hegemony and the desire for hegemony.²⁵

It is explicit here that mere destruction is not enough, for a whole new way of relating must necessarily arise out of insurrection. This is what is meant by the creation of a wholly negative ontology, as it is a mode of being which possesses none of the same coercive forms of domination which are proliferated by late-capitalist Empire—even at the abstract level of the *mere desire* to dominate. Thus, the insurrectionary project set forth by The Invisible Committee not only seeks the negation of private property (in the material sense), but it even seeks to negate the very *desire* to own property (in the psychological sense). They argue that

Destruction has never been enough to make things irreversible. What matters is how it's done. There are ways of destroying that unfailingly provoke the return of what has been crushed.²⁶

It is therefore a matter of the process itself; and framed as such, insurrection must always be an act which incorporates a tacit and critical self-cognizance of itself *precisely as a process*. In this sense, insurrection is inherently an act of ontological becoming, as it is simultaneously aware of itself as a material process and as a metaphysical site where new, authentic forms of collective-relations emerge

Atonality and insurrection both represent attempts to completely break with prevailing systems of dominance and hegemony. At the core of the rhetoric of these two disparate, yet connected forms of praxis is an inherently negative project. Imbued with a sense of antagonistic criticality, both Schoenberg and The Invisible Committee attempt to articulate that freedom must necessarily be born out of complete refusal. Yet upon a closer

examination of the juxtaposition between the theoretical trajectories of both Schoenberg and *The Invisible Committee* the differences start to become apparent. It becomes clear that both projects of negation are often accompanied with the regressive temptation to depend on older forms—relics from the very systems which they attempt to remove themselves from. For Schoenberg, this warranted the creation of the negative system of “twelve tone technique” because familiar tropes still managed to find their way into the earlier compositions of his “free atonality” period. Adorno claims that the twelve tone system

subjugates music by setting it free. The subject rules over the music by means of a rational system in order to succumb to this rational system itself.²⁷

Thus, paradoxically, Schoenberg depended on a system to facilitate a complete negation of the tonal system—a system negating a system.

In contrast, *The Invisible Committee* is pointedly vigilant about the ways in which resistance to Empire can either be recuperated into late-capitalist logic or reproduce the very systems of domination that they intend to destroy. Truths are born from the immediacy of the insurrectionary social rupture, and thus it is the act of negation itself which creates the heretofore unimaginable new spaces of being. Forms-of-life, collectivity, communization—all only make sense in the context of the social rupture itself. *The Invisible Committee* elaborates upon this conflation between action and actors by claiming:

In truth, there is no gap between what we are, what we do, and what we are becoming. [...] Here lies the truly revolutionary potentiality of the present.²⁸

Negation is inherently *atemporal* for *The Invisible Committee* because of its immediacy. It is precisely because of this that they are able to evade the recuperation back into a systematized conception of their own negative project. Thus, while *The Invisible Committee*’s coming insurrection and Schoenberg’s atonality are both characterized by ontological rupture aimed at the subversion of the hegemony within their own sociopolitical and musicological contexts, they diverge greatly in the *methodology* of their negations.

Notes

¹ *The Invisible Committee. The Coming Insurrection.* Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2009.

² *The Invisible Committee. The Coming Insurrection,* 12.

³ Ross, Alex. *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century.* (New York: Picador, 2007), 37.

⁴ *The Invisible Committee, The Coming Insurrection,* 86.

- ⁵ Adorno, Theodor W. *Philosophy of New Music*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 92.
- ⁶ Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 39.
- ⁷ The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 108.
- ⁸ The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 91.
- ⁹ A term borrowed from Giorgio Agamben by The Invisible Committee to indicate individuals which are no longer (bio)political subjects.
- ¹⁰ Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 38.
- ¹¹ Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 38.
- ¹² Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 65.
- ¹³ Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 65.
- ¹⁴ An essay in the French radical philosophical journal *Tiqqun*, which was published by a few individuals in The Invisible Committee, was titled "How is it to be done."
- ¹⁵ The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 94.
- ¹⁶ Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 40.
- ¹⁷ Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 40.
- ¹⁸ Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 40.
- ¹⁹ Ringer, Alexander L. "Assimilation and the Emancipation of Historical Dissonance." *Constructive Dissonance*. Eds. Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 23.
- ²⁰ The French Situationist Guy Debord's notion of the "Spectacle" is the confluence between mass media, individual alienation, and commodity fetishism which forms the totalizing psychological landscape for late-capitalist social relations.
- ²¹ The Invisible Committee *The Coming Insurrection*, 44.
- ²² The Invisible Committee *The Coming Insurrection*, 82.
- ²³ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 50.
- ²⁴ The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 130.
- ²⁵ The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 130-131.
- ²⁶ The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 131.
- ²⁷ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 54.
- ²⁸ The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 15.