

Schoenberg, Adorno, and the Collapse of *Vermittlung*: Quantifying the Erosion of Tonal Mediation through Triadic Presence

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Abstract

This paper takes Theodor W. Adorno's concept of *Vermittlung*, mediation¹, as its starting point, understood as the way coherence in art depends on historically conditioned structures whose binding force may become exhausted. For Adorno, tonality once fulfilled this role, yet by the early twentieth century the triad had come to resemble money "denounced as counterfeit" (*Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Hullot-Kentor, 2006, 179; 9). Although this comparison was not intended as a direct economic correlation, it points to a structural parallel: both money and tonality lose their binding function when the systems that sustain them break down.

Schoenberg's piano works provide a focused case study of this transformation across three Austrian contexts: the relative stability of the late Austro-Hungarian Empire (*Drei Klavierstücke* Op. 11, 1909), the inflationary crisis of the First Republic (*Suite für Klavier* Op. 25, 1921–23), and the post-stabilisation period under the schilling² (*Klavierstücke* Op. 33a, 1928, and Op. 33b, 1931). The analysis quantifies the presence of triadic structures by measuring the proportion of triads in general³ and root-position triads relative to both onset events⁴ and notehead counts. These measures provide a comparative index of the extent to which Schoenberg's writing remains connected to, or departs from, tonal reference points.

Rather than establishing causality or evaluating aesthetic value, the study traces how shifts in historical conditions are reflected in compositional materials. While not capturing the full complexity of Schoenberg's harmonic language, the results suggest that the triad does not simply disappear, but is progressively reconfigured as its structural role weakens. Placed alongside Austrian economic data from the same periods, the analysis frames these works as part of a broader historical process in which mediation falters and is transformed.

¹ Throughout this paper, "mediation" is used as the standard English translation of Adorno's term *Vermittlung*. While *Vermittlung* has a specific philosophical genealogy in German Idealism, it is not fully captured by the English term "mediation," which often suggests instrumental or technical means. In this article, mediation is therefore understood in Adorno's sense as a historically conditioned process through which relations become intelligible, binding, and socially credible, rather than as a neutral medium or tool. The German term *Vermittlung* is retained where conceptual precision or direct engagement with Adorno's terminology is required.

² The Austrian schilling was introduced in 1925 to stabilise the currency after the postwar inflation, replacing the depreciated krone.

³ "Triads in general" refers to complete triads in any inversion. Root-position triads are treated separately, since only they preserve the full hierarchical articulation through which the triad historically functioned as a mediating harmonic form. Further details on the analytical parameters and definitions employed in this classification are provided in Chapter 3.

⁴ An onset event was defined computationally as the collection of all note attacks occurring at the same global temporal position in the score.