The purpose of this book is to explore the new possibilities that postmodernist modes of thinking offer to the understanding of Western "classical" music and, by implication, of music in general. Just what the elusive term postmodernism means will occupy a substantial part of the first chapter. Suffice it to say here that recent decades have witnessed something like a Nietzschean transvaluation of all values in the human sciences. This development has certainly not gone untested, and its outcome is far from clear, but its impact is undeniable. A complexly interdisciplinary body of theory, intertwining concerns with language, culture, and subjectivity, has been rethinking, and making it mandatory to rethink, the traditional foundations of thought. Conceptual paradigms have been proliferating which problematize the great ordering principles of rationality, unity, universality, and truth, recasting them as special cases of contingency, plurality, historicity, and ideology. Both knowledge and its objects are increasingly being recognized as decentered, heteronomous, and prismatic. As Donna Haraway puts it, they are being "constructed deconstructively."¹

A turn to postmodernism in this sense would be bound to have a dramatic, even traumatic, effect on the ways we think about music, which have long been unusually dependent on the concepts under stress. Music has figured familiarly in modern Western culture as the vehicle for everything that cannot be represented or denoted. It embodies the feeling or intuition or pure mode of apprehension to which we attain after all the resources of signification have been exhausted.
By one reckoning, music serves this function in Apollonian terms, re-
viving ancient figures of cosmic harmony in the modern form of aes-
thetic order—the tangible embodiment of rationality, unity, univer-
sality, and truth. In music, the forms of thought become manifest as
pleasure by withdrawing themselves from the contents of thought.
The Dionysian complement of this process, in which the withdrawal
appears as a rupture and music taps emotions and desires at depths
beyond the reach of any order, is equally pervasive as a cultural trope.
The opposites, as opposites do, interact and depend on each other.
Music in the modern era can transcend signification both Platonically
and daemonically. Either way, it stands apart from the suasions and
coercions of the real. It figures as a self-enclosed plenitude, an acous-
tic image of pure interiority.

By undercutting the foundations of this conceptual and represen-
tational order, postmodernism has made it necessary to rethink music
from every possible perspective. The force of this necessity stems
from the perception that the resistance to signification once embodied
by music now seems to be an inextricable part of signification itself.
Nothing can signify without resisting, and nothing can resist without
signifying. Nothing that signifies, therefore, can escape a constitutive
tension between an aesthetic and a political impetus, the one denying
or sublimating the force of the real, the other disclosing or exerting it.
When “classical” music is caught up in this dynamic, as it must inevi-
tably be, its whole mode of being comes into question. How can this
music be understood as part of a general signifying process, a network
of cultural practices, and still retain its charismatic quality, its exalted
capacity to wield power and give pleasure? How, to shift the venue of
the question, can we reflect on musical works or traditions—indeed
on any artistic works or traditions—without either overidealizing
(sanctifying, fetishizing) or demonizing them, without either mystify-
ing or crassly disenchanting them?

I hope to suggest some answers to these questions in what follows.
Admittedly, it may be hard to do without the comforting thought that
music, and not only untexted music, is something numinous and,
more important, accessibly, possessibly numinous. If holding that
thought requires us to speak of musical meaning only in the most re-
stricted of terms, be they self-consciously hesitant “emotive” descrip-
tions or the tokens of a formalized semiotics, some who love music will not mind. I once didn't mind, myself. But the thought can be hard to hold, as Wallace Stevens suggests in a remarkable but little-known poem, "Anglais Mort à Florence":

He used his reason, exercised his will,
Turning in time to Brahms as alternate
In speech. He was that music and himself.
They were particles of an order, a single majesty:
But he remembered the time when he stood alone.

He stood at last by God's help and the police;
But he remembered the time when he stood alone.
He yielded himself to that single majesty;
But he remembered the time when he stood alone,
When to be and delight seemed to be one,
Before the colors deepened and grew small.

Stevens's insight is that music acts as a substitute for a blissful sense of full presence felt to have been lost. But the substitution has its limits; a prop itself, music needs props of its own, eventually even the watchdogs of the law. The only thing this exemplary modernist text misses is the further insight that the lost presence, the time when one stood alone, is itself a musical fiction, even the exemplary musical fiction. That presence arises only as an echo thrown in retrospect by the music that supposedly recalls it.

Music so construed is more fantasized than heard. The truth (sic) is that we listen, and with feeling, only as we read and act, as speaking subjects in a world of contingencies. In a sense, the project of what is called postmodernism is simply an effort to show that this truth is rather a good thing than otherwise. And the thesis of this book is simply that it is a good thing for music.

The design of what follows is simple. The first two chapters theorize the interrelations of music, musicology, and postmodernist thought. (Musicology here should be understood broadly to cover history, theory, criticism, and aesthetics.) The next three chapters explore the consequences, many of them political, of taking up problems in musical aesthetics (representation, narrative, expressivity) from a postmodernist standpoint. Three more chapters explore the conse-
quences, many of them aesthetic, of taking up problems in the cultural politics of music (subject formation, social space, commodity) from the same standpoint. An epilogue brings together many of the leitmotifs of the volume and also brings the conceptual “polyphony” dear to postmodernism into the explicit procedures of the musicological text itself. This envoi forms a candid effort—justified, I trust, by what precedes it—to begin widening further the possibilities of acceptable discourse on music.

A related effort guides the approach taken throughout to questions of musical form and structure. *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* seeks to reach nonspecialist as well as specialist readers. Specialists are addressed as often by subtext as by text; except in a few scattered paragraphs, discussions of musical technique are framed in terms that ought to be widely accessible. Not that technical issues are scanted or begrudged. But they arise strictly in relationship to the cultural, social, and psychical issues that they subtend and are talked about with that relationship in mind. As I suggest below, the lack of a viable public discourse about “classical” music is one reason why the music, cherishable though it is, is losing cultural ground at an alarming rate. I am not sure how much musicology can do to remedy this situation. But I would like to see it try.

My concern on this point necessitates a few closing words on one other. Much of what has been dubbed “the new musicology” has evolved through postmodernist critiques of the formerly (and, if truth be told, still currently) dominant models of musicological knowledge, which for want of better names can be called formalism and positivism. Postmodernism itself has evolved through critiques of modernism. Recently, writers on music seeking either to resist or assimilate postmodernist approaches have decried what they take to be the polemical use of these “-ism” labels as mere pejoratives.\(^3\) Up to a point, this is a caution worth heeding. Without modernism, postmodernism is unthinkable, and not only because of the prefix; postmodernism does more than merely extend modernism’s critique of itself, but that is where it starts. And the musical “-isms”—need it be said?—do not represent demonic forces but reasonable ways of specifying a disciplinary commitment to the scrutiny of style and structure on the one hand and the amassing of verifiable knowledge about musical texts and con-
texts on the other. It makes no sense to wish away the substantial achievements of these approaches, or of the modernism that houses them. But it makes no sense to wish away their limitations, either, or to conflate a critique of those limitations with mere name calling. Without critique, knowledge stagnates; no questions, no advances.