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Piano and Pen: Music as Kenneth Burke's Secular Conversion

Joel Overall

Drawing on Kenneth Burke's music reviews in The Nation, this article argues that the shifting music scene of the 1930s heavily influenced Burke's development of the key term "secular conversion" in Permanence and Change. While reviewing works by Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, Burke also witnessed audience reactions to (and often acceptance of) jarring atonal works by Schönberg, Debussy, and others, leading to music reviews that focused on musical as well as rhetorical matters. Burke's interest in music provides a "perspective by incongruity" that illuminates the often-overlooked key term "graded series" as a type of secular conversion that informs Burke's dialectic in A Grammar of Motives. A greater understanding of "perspective by incongruity," "piety," and "graded series" through music provides a window into the possibilities of linguistic transformation that bridges Burke's continuously merging, dividing, and transcending dialectic in A Grammar of Motives.

In a 1916 letter to his dear friend Malcolm Cowley, Kenneth Burke proclaimed, "I am going for certain to take up exclusively the study of music" (17 April 1916; Jay 24). Cowley, in a response to Burke's newfound fascination with music, protested against his "devoting [himself] to music for those years" (3 May 1916; Jay 25). Instead, Cowley encouraged Burke to explore music while insisting that it be "taken in connection with something else. The piano by all means, but the pen too" (Jay 26). It is with these instruments—piano and pen—that the almost 19-year-old Kenneth Burke began his foray into the study of music while simultaneously pursuing his interests in literature and writing.

Although music was a major part of Burke's life, scholars have mostly ignored this aspect of his work. The notable exceptions are Denise M. Bostdorff and Phillip K. Tompkins's 1985 essay "Musical Form and Rhetorical Form: Kenneth Burke's *Dial* Reviews as Counterpart to *Counter-Statement*" and more recently the first chapter in Debra Hawhee's book *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language*. Specifically, Bostdorff and Tompkins connect Burke's music reviews

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in *The Dial* with his theories of form in *Counter-Statement* by noting that Burke perceived music, like rhetoric, as “the use of language in such a way as to produce a desired impression upon the hearer or reader” (210). Burke’s reviews, they argue, forecast the development of *Counter-Statement*’s five aspects of rhetorical form: syllogistic progression, qualitative progression, repetitive form, conventional form, and minor or incidental form. Similarly, Hawhee uses Burke’s *Dial* music reviews, which are heavily steeped in examining audience reaction, as an early example of Burke’s fascination with the body as a transition from aesthetics to rhetoric. For Hawhee, the reviews demonstrate Burke’s “inclination toward bodies . . . that first sets [him] to investigate rhetoric, communication, meaning making, and language” (14). Although Bostdorff and Tompkins’s and Hawhee’s works are vital to examining Burke’s musical interests, neither study investigates Burke’s second stint as a music critic for *The Nation* in the early 1930s. These *Nation* reviews, I contest, are laden with adumbrations of Burke’s early ideas for types of change presented in *Permanence and Change*.

Although Burke is mostly recognized for dramatism, identification, and other rhetorical theories put forth in *A Grammar of Motives* and *A Rhetoric of Motives*, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in Burke’s earlier works such as *Permanence and Change*. In their book *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s*, Ann George and Jack Selzer claim, “the books Burke wrote during the 1930s ought to be regarded as contributions as important and compelling as his later volumes” (3). By examining letters, manuscripts, and the journals in which Burke’s essays appeared, George and Selzer effectively reconstruct a historical context for understanding Burke’s early work. Debra Hawhee and Jordynn Jack also use a historical approach when examining Burke’s time as a researcher of drugs and drug use at the Bureau of Social Hygiene. In “Burke on Drugs,” Hawhee claims that while helping Colonel Arthur Woods draft the book *Dangerous Drugs*, Burke’s experience with Woods and drug users “helped structure his critical method” (57). Similarly, Jack claims Burke’s interactions with these individuals was formational in his establishment of the key term “piety” in *Permanence and Change*.

Along these same lines, this essay presents a musical scene in which Burke identifies an audience’s capacity to change when confronted with the discordant music performances in the 1930s. In this scene, audiences familiar with performances of classical compositions by Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were suddenly confronted with the jarring atonal compositions of Schönberg, Debussy, and others, and Burke was in the theatre, watching their reactions. While in the early stages of his career as the music critic for *The Nation*, Burke was highly involved in drafting what would ultimately become *Permanence and Change*. He wrote a total of four music reviews for *The Nation* before he finished drafting and submitted his manuscript for *Permanence and Change* in May 1934. Drawing on these four reviews as well as largely unexamined archival material including letters, drafts of music reviews, and notes, I argue that the changing musical scene of the 1930s provided an arena for Burke to understand how the perspectives of a large group of people

can be changed to embrace new ideas. In contrast to Hawhee's and Jack's studies, which focus on Burke's exploration of how the perspective of an individual changes, this study identifies Burke working with a group of individuals toward larger-scale change. This music scene, I contend, represents an instance of "secular conversion" that Burke encountered while forming such key terms as "perspective by incongruity," "piety," and the "graded series" later included in *Permanence and Change*. After discussing Burke's lifelong interest in music, I will offer a brief summary of key terms from *Permanence and Change* before returning to see how music and social change come together in *Permanence and Change*.

Burke and the Piano

Although it appears that Burke's early interest in music was purely recreational, various aspects of Burke's life suggest that he continued to make connections between music and rhetoric. His 1916 letter to Malcolm Cowley, described in the introduction of this essay, is the initial evidence of Burke's fondness for music, yet it appears that his musical aspirations were tempered by Cowley's protest. It is clear that Burke took Cowley's advice of taking up both the piano and the pen to heart since much of Burke's early poetry contains indications of his interest in music. For instance, "Adam's Song, and Mine," "Spring Song," and "Hymn of Hope," published in 1917, illustrate a tendency to incorporate musical themes into his literary works. Later in life, Burke would often write letters to his friend and colleague, American poet Howard Nemerov, to solicit feedback on the poems he was writing, some of which were set to musical notes.

Over ten years after Burke wrote his letter to Cowley, he would get his first professional opportunity in the field of music, not as a musician but instead as a critic for the literary magazine *The Dial*. Burke had previously published work in *The Dial*, including several of the short stories that were later assembled in *The Complete White Oxen* as well as the first six chapters of his 1932 novel *Towards a Better Life*. During his tenure as *The Dial*'s music editor, Burke wrote fifteen music reviews from December 1927 to June 1929. As Bostdorff and Tompkins note, Burke's music criticism "covered all musical styles and periods, from Bach to Bloch" (237), and most focused on musical form. Burke reviewed an array of orchestras (Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, and New York), directed by a diverse group of conductors (Beecham, Damrosch, Koussevitsky, Monteux, and Toscanini), who performed modern compositions by Prokofieff, Ravel, Bartok, Ives, Gershwin, and Hindemith. Bostdorff and Tompkins point out, however, that one work dominates the reviews—Stravinsky's "*Sacre du Printemps*"—which was "said to have caused a riot among the audience during its first performance in Paris" (237); Burke was keenly interested in what caused this audience reaction, discussing the *Sacre* even in reviews of other works. During his time with *The Dial*, the violent and eerie *Sacre* appears to be one of the only works Burke reviewed that defied the conventions of classical music.

Four years after he wrote his last review for *The Dial*, Burke became the music editor for *The Nation*, contributing bi-monthly music reviews for the weekly magazine. During his time with *The Nation* from 1933–1936, Burke wrote eleven reviews of performances by the New York Symphony Orchestra, the Westminster Chorus, and conductor Aaron Copeland, among others. While attending these live performances, Burke would jot down ideas on personally annotated concert programs, a few of which were discovered at the Kenneth Burke archive at Penn State University. Although the handwriting is not legible enough to decipher sentence length comments, it is clear that Burke was making some of his earliest connections between music and rhetoric in these notes. On the front cover of a November 1928 program for the Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York at Carnegie Hall, for example, Burke wrote scattered notes across the top and in the margins, noting the “strings for more ingenuity than expressions left only ingenious by deviation” (Notes on musical program). It’s unclear what his purpose was in this particular instance, as is the case with most of the scribbled notes in these programs since the handwriting is mostly unreadable. Burke would frequently use the inner pages of conductor’s notes to record more substantial responses to the concerts. On one particular page of notes, Burke’s writing occupies every empty space in the margins, as he turned the program vertically to write notes about the performances.

Throughout several of his critical works following *Permanence and Change*, Burke uses musical examples to elaborate various rhetorical terms and ideas. For instance in *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke discusses the “Ambiguities of Symbolization” by examining Shostakovich’s Russian opera *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk*. Later in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke includes a review of the musical *Run, Little Chillun’* in “The Negro’s Pattern of Life.” In addition, Burke attempts to elucidate variations on the term “cluster” by relating a double-entendre cluster to a musical chord. However, he claims that most clusters “are drawn out in narrative sequence . . . in arpeggio, as you proceed from one subject to another” (58). Burke elaborates on this particular method, borrowed from a musical example, in the introduction to the well-known poem “Dialectician’s Hymn.” Burke claims that the title of the poem “draw[s] out, in temporal arpeggio all that is struck simultaneously, as a chord, in the title itself” (448).¹ Incorporating music into his critical works was clearly important to Burke’s development of these early theories.²

After the publication of *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, most of Burke’s musical interests disappeared from his published works and, instead, appeared

¹Burke later revisits the temporal arpeggio as a nonmusical term in *A Grammar of Motives* called the temporizing of essence whereby “a person who is against some policy *absolutely* . . . can rephrase his objections accordingly, by stating them in terms of the new conditions” (440-1, emphasis Burke’s).

²I hope to further develop connections between music and these later works in a future article.

in private music journals or in letters to friends. The Kenneth Burke Papers contains a small file of undated sheet music written by Burke. The sheet music at Penn State exhibits Burke's musical talent: a few pieces are written for piano only while one elaborate piece is specifically written for a trio of piano, viola, and cello (Musical Score). Burke's sole published musical endeavor was "One Light in a Dark Valley," which was published with musical bars in *Collected Poems 1915–1967* and later recorded by Burke's grandson, Harry Chapin, on his 1977 album *Dance Band on the Titanic*. Once, at a conference, Burke complained "that he made more money off the recording than he did on his books" (Simons and Melia 154).

Aside from writing sheet music, Burke would sometimes discuss or write musical bars in his letters to friends and colleagues. In a letter to Malcolm Cowley in 1944, Burke writes "guess I'll go in and play the piano," discussing his attempt at "contriving some new sounds, with progressions from one to another, and so on to the next, etc." (262). In a letter to Ed Cone, music professor at Princeton, thanking him for his "handsome card-with-note," Burke uses the postscript to write two bars of music notation (1961). Later in a December 1967 letter to Howard Nemerov, or as Burke puts it "Hovvard," from "Us Charter Members of the Scrooge Society," Burke playfully inserts a musical notation of a bawdy Christmas medley of "White Christmas," "Silent Night," and "Jingle Bells" with the lyrics "I'm dreaming of a silent night, holy jangle balls, jangle balls Christmas" (Letter to Hovvard).

Perhaps the most significant evidence of Burke's connection between music and rhetoric is in his correspondence with Louie Calabro, a music professor, Italian-American composer, and colleague of Burke's at Bennington College. Their correspondence suggests that Calabro and Burke would send their original music compositions to each other for critical feedback. For example, in a 1977 letter to Burke, Calabro mentions that he is excited to see Burke's original composition titled "Andor!," and in return, Calabro says that he is sending Burke "a copy of Voyage which you may scrutinize" (2 March 1977). In a series of letters written to Burke in 1961, Calabro asks questions about the musical form of his own original work, particularly questioning whether or not "a piece of music [can] be organically conceived?" (26 January 1961). In response, Burke, endearingly referring to Calabro as "Looey, dot pig-headed Dope," describes music as an experience that is culturally defined: a musician from China would find western music "'formless' because he doesn't share the language . . . the system of expectations on which its conventions are built" (7 March 1961). Here, Burke acknowledges that music is based on a system or language, implying that musical form can be successfully altered if the composer begins with a familiar form of music such as the classical forms written by Bach and Beethoven. Accordingly, this acknowledgement that music is a language with its own forms and conventions further connects Burke's descriptions of music with rhetoric, providing a framework through which to view Burke's music criticism in *The Nation* as an adumbration of "secular conversion" in *Permanence and Change*.

Burke and the Pen: *Permanence and Change*

Permanence and Change—a book largely focused on identifying the process of change—was Burke’s second published book on critical theory and was written during the Great Depression in the wake of the stock market crash of 29 October 1929.³ Burke wrote the book “at a time when there was a general feeling that our traditional ways were headed for a tremendous change, maybe even a permanent collapse” (xlvii). Much of the book focuses on the change that Burke and many other leftists hoped might take place as a result of the financial crisis while the final part of the book suggests an “ideal new order” (lix) that should replace the current Capitalistic system. *Permanence and Change* is divided into three parts: Part 1 “On Interpretation,” part 2 “Perspective by Incongruity,” and part 3 “The Basis of Simplification.” For the purposes of this essay, a close examination of part 2 “Perspective by Incongruity” is warranted before exploring how music represents a “secular conversion.” In this section, Burke is concerned primarily with the “resources and embarrassments to do with the modifications of meanings, once they have taken form” (lix); essentially, Burke wanted to examine how unproductive, even harmful perspectives or orientations such as industrial capitalism can be changed. Burke is particularly interested in theorizing social change by looking at examples of religious conversions, “secular conversions” such as music, therapy, and psychotherapy.

Early in part 2, Burke identifies the religious term “piety” as one key obstacle to change. Burke defines “piety” as “a system-builder, a desire to round things out, to fit experiences together into a unified whole. Piety is the sense of what properly goes with what” (74). In adapting the religious term for secular purposes, Burke understands “piety” as the unyielding state of mind before “secular conversion” takes place. For example, the classical music enthusiast would exhibit a type of musical “piety.” In order for a composer of classical music to ingratiate this audience member, s/he will employ the chord progressions, key signatures, and rhythms typical of classical music. If the composer deviates from these characteristics too drastically, s/he is in jeopardy of violating this audience member’s sense of “piety” because a classical music enthusiast expects, for instance, a 4/4, 3/4, or 6/8 time signature. For Burke, secular conversion can take place when a classical composer slightly distorts one aspect of the audience’s “piety” while keeping most of the other elements in place, such as inserting a few bars of a 5/4 time signature in a predominately 4/4 composition to surprise the audience. This slight shift in the audience’s perspective allows them to accept change while clinging to their own “piety.”

³Although Burke wrote *Auscultation, Creation, and Revision* in 1932 before *Permanence and Change*, it was rejected for publication at that time; it later appeared in James Chesebro’s 1993 collection *Extensions of the Burkeian System*.

Another method of conversion, which Burke arrives at as a result of studying examples from psychotherapy, is “perspective by incongruity.” Early in *Permanence and Change*, Burke discusses what he calls “trained incapacities” or limitations to a person’s understanding where “a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (49). In other words, while a “trained incapacity” can be fruitful for interpretation, it can also condition a person to misinterpret a sign because he remains loyal to his particular “piety.” As a result, people struggle to view reality from perspectives outside of their own “pieties.” For example, an audience that holds a piety toward rock music would demonstrate a “trained incapacity” when they are unable to recognize jazz as a valid form of music. In order to shift an audience’s perspective to see reality in another light, Burke develops the term “perspective by incongruity” to move people away from a “system [they] are largely familiar [with] . . . by depriving [them] of this familiarity” (121). To use the prior example, a “perspective by incongruity” in classical music would be achieved when an audience forgoes traditional aspects of the classical music piety, such as the familiar I-IV-V chord progression, in order to accept unconventional chord progressions as a valid contribution to music. The difficulty of achieving “perspective by incongruity,” particularly in the case of this music example, is the unlikelihood that an audience will accept such a drastic change. This leads Burke to develop what will become, I argue, one of the most important methods of secular conversion in *Permanence and Change*: the *lex continui*⁴ or “graded series.”⁵

In the “graded series,” Burke explains, “we move step by step from some kind of event, in which the presence of a certain factor is sanctioned in the language of common sense, to other events in which this factor had not previously been noted” (142). The “graded series” represents a spectrum of terms that many would classify as gradients between polar opposites, but Burke’s “graded series” essentially eliminates polarities by focusing on how the orientations encompassed within these graded terms convert into the next. Thus, the concept of wetness can be converted upwards in the graded series to become soaked, then drenched, until it is sopping. Similarly, wetness can be converted downward in the graded series to become moist, then damp, and eventually dry. Because the change in perspective is achieved by degrees, people might be more inclined to consider a position that had seemed unconnected to their orientation. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke uses the example of how the composer Arnold Schönberg “takes us step by step from

⁴The *lex continui* was a theory of continuity in physics that was originally developed by Gottfried Leibnitz.

⁵Rhetoricians have often talked about a climactic series that encourages persuasion. In “Series Reasoning in Scientific Argument,” Jeanne Fahnestock discusses the classical figures of *incrementum* and *gradatio*, which present “a continuum where there were once divisions” (18). Burke even discusses the figure of *gradatio* in *A Rhetoric of Motives* in connection with antithesis. While Fahnestock claims that “Burke’s definition of the formal appeal of figures like *gradatio* . . . does not go far enough” (16) in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, the graded series in *Permanence and Change* provides an extended definition of a Burkean rhetorical figure that bridges antithesis.

the methods of classical music to the methods which he employs—and if we follow his gradients we are imperceptibly eased from a region of sound where the logic of composition is generally apparent into a region of sound which might have seemed to the uninstructed hearer as chaotic” (142–143). This statement echoes Burke’s discussion of Socratic transcendence in *A Grammar of Motives* where he argues that a Platonic dialogue is a “process of transformation whereby the position at the end transcends the position at the start” (422). As Burke’s third example of dialectic in *A Grammar of Motives*, “transcendence” represents the progressive steps taken from one term to its apparent opposite. Through the “transcendence” from classical music to other dissonant styles of contemporary music of the 1930s, we see Burke thinking about “transcendence” as a way to bridge oppositions in a dialectic through the “graded series” well before writing *A Grammar of Motives*.

Piano and Pen: *The Nation* Music Reviews

Burke wrote and published four music reviews for *The Nation* before he finished drafting *Permanence and Change* in May 1934, and these reviews represent a music scene in which Burke’s key terms of “perspective by incongruity,” “piety,” and the “graded series” emerged. By examining the conditions for emergence of these terms, a description of this musical scene will, in M. Elizabeth Weiser words, “rhetorize” Burke’s theory. She suggests that “the construction of theory” in *Permanence and Change* from Burke’s musical interests “is as much a conversational product as are the situations that theory can define” (Weiser xii). Several of the live music performances took place a few weeks before the four pieces of music criticism appeared in *The Nation*: “Schönberg” on 29 November 1933; “Orpheus in New York” on 10 January 1934; “Two Brands of Piety” on 28 February 1934; and “The End and Origin of a Movement” on 11 April 1934. Although Burke primarily reviewed performances in New York, his criticism often focused on a diverse array of music, including opera, ballet, and American and Latin-American symphonies; most of his criticism, however, concerns works written during the early twentieth century. Frequently, Burke would review two performances in one criticism, juxtaposing them to show how each is effective or not. However, what is important about these reviews for rhetoricians is that, in each case, Burke shifts quickly away from the performance itself to comments on the composition, specifically to how differences in form affect the audience. Because this contemporary music was often highly unconventional, Burke became most interested in how the composers were able to shift the audience’s responses to accept new musical forms, a project with clear parallels to his theories of psychic and social change in *Permanence and Change*.

“Perspective by Incongruity”

Burke’s second review for *The Nation* forecasts his development of “perspective by incongruity” in *Permanence and Change*. In “Orpheus in New York” published in

January 1934, Burke reviewed two performances by the New York Symphony Orchestra, which included works by Strauss, Brahms, and Debussy. Burke is particularly interested in how Debussy's 1888 cantata "Blessed Damozel" emotionally affects the audience. He claims that it "reminded [him] of the 'Poesque' aesthetic" (52), the ability to leave the audience with the mood that the poet has imposed on them. Burke ponders, at length, how music such as Debussy's could have such a magical effect on an audience that they would "acquiesce in a melancholy" (53). In trying to understand the audience's somber yet favorable reaction to Debussy's composition, Burke takes a closer look at the forms of contemporary music in which "dissonance and irregularity of rhythm happen to take the place occupied by trills, arpeggios, cadenzas, and runs in an earlier age" (53). He claims that contemporary music continues to rely on the conventions of classical music forms and that Debussy deviates from classical form "only so far as the emotions unmistakably followed" (53). In other words, Burke claims that Debussy's compositions successfully move away from classical conventions by taking into account the audience's emotions. Ultimately, Burke concludes that Debussy's composition is a "religious enchantment" (53), acknowledging that sometimes "rare modalities of feeling . . . go with the rare modalities of tone" (53). By shifting the audience's perspective from traditional forms to an emotional response evoked by tones and harmonies, composers such as Debussy are able to implement less accepted musical forms effectively. However, the use of emotion as a method for conversion, Burke suggests, leads the audience to "suspend their resistance only for the duration of the work" (53). In this way, Burke was also discovering methods for change that were insufficient in shifting an audience's perspective permanently.

Burke's attention to Debussy's ability to suspend an audience's resistance to an unconventional musical composition shows Burke playing with the concept of perspective by incongruity in this music scene. Burke is fascinated by the willingness of an audience to accept Debussy's work and proposes that a musical audience achieves a perspective by incongruity only by "the suasive strategy of a magician" (53). By using emotional appeals to open up the audience, Debussy is able to "suspend [the audience's] resistance" to the unfamiliar forms of early twentieth-century contemporary music. For instance, rather than allow the audience to focus on the unconventional forms of music that he employs in his composition, Debussy shifts the audience's perspective to the emotional qualities within the music. As Burke claims, this particular Debussy piece employs the "Poesque" aesthetic, using musical tonalities that audiences typically associate with the feeling of melancholy. According to Burke, this technique allows the audience to suspend their criticism of anomalous musical forms because the emotional mood or perspective has already been established. The audience's emotional reaction to the musical tones helps them to achieve perspective by incongruity for the work, but Burke suggests that the audience's resistance to unfamiliar forms returns after the work plays out its last chord. Throughout this particular review, Burke focuses on art's ability to achieve a perspective by incongruity more quickly than

other social perspectives such as society's rejection of communism. While Burke understood perspective by incongruity as an effective model for conversion when interpreting art, he realized that as a method for social conversion, it succeeds only so far as the audience is willing to go. In other words, Burke believed that perspective by incongruity was an effective method for interpretation, but when a person's orientation or identity is at stake, piety to that identity often stands in the way of conversion.

"Piety"

A second key term from *Permanence and Change* that is illuminated through Burke's music scene from the 1930s is the concept of "piety." In fact, it's quite possible that Burke's third review for *The Nation* is the first time he used the term piety in print. In "Two Brands of Piety," published in *The Nation* on February 1934, Burke juxtaposes two operas—"Four Saints in Three Acts" with words by Gertrude Stein and music by Virgil Thomson and "Merry Mount" with libretto by Richard L. Stokes and music by Howard Hanson—that are superficially "antipodes" but actually contain a common element: they both effectively entertain their intended audience. Burke claims that "Four Saints" "at its worst is effete, and content with mere tonal wisecracking" (258) while "Merry Mount" is "manly and imposing" (258). He observes that "Four Saints" "would probably be found on analysis to have been built about the simplest and most fundamental chords" (258) while "Merry Mount" "was much more highly developed" (258). While "Four Saints" used a more simplistic and theatrical style and "Merry Mount" was more suited to the typically ornate operatic genre, both operas, Burke argues, effectively ingratiate the pieties of their intended audience.

As mentioned earlier, Burke defines "piety" in *Permanence and Change* as "a system-builder, a desire to round things out, to fit experiences together into a unified whole." (74). Throughout the review, Burke identifies two pieties that characterize the opera audience of the 1930s: a seasoned and traditional opera crowd and a crowd that privileges theatrically and spectacle. Throughout the review, Burke is highly interested in how "Four Saints" is able to win over the audience despite breaking the conventions of the traditional operatic genre. Ultimately, Burke asserts that "Four Saints" is effective because "all art in the end must ingratiate itself," and as a piece of ingratiation, "Four Saints prevails" (258). Burke claims that "Four Saints" defies some of the conventions of a typical opera, which could possibly lead to the audience's rejection of it. But, since it relies on the conventions of flamboyant theatricality that a general audience is familiar with, "Four Saints" succeeds in bringing a new style of music into the more ornate genre of opera. "Merry Mount" is more effective at anticipating what the audience wants, which hinges on the conventions of traditional operatic form. Yet, because each opera is its own brand of "piety," they are both able to gratify their respective audience: the seasoned opera crowd and the "spectacle-loving masses" (258). Each

opera functions within the piety or system of the audience's expectations, but Burke claims that "Four Saints" does this more effectively. Ultimately, however, Burke declares that both operas succeed in ingratiating themselves to their particular audience within their own brand of "piety": "Merry Mount" as the bold and frank opera and "Four Saints in Three Acts" as the light and entertaining opera. Burke's review of these two operas shed light on the conditions for emergence of the concept of "piety" in *Permanence and Change*.

"Graded Series"

In "Schönberg" Burke's first music review for *The Nation* on November 1933, Burke uses the "graded series" to explain an unpredictable contemporary music environment both in the music and within Arnold Schönberg's compositions. The review focused on the first United States concert of Schönberg's work performed by the League of Composers, a New York organization "devoted to American contemporary classical music" (*League of Composers*). The concert was an all-Schönberg program that featured works by the Austrian-American composer, spanning from his earliest "periods of development, up to and including the present period [1933]" (633). When reviewing the first performance of Arnold Schönberg's compositions in the United States—compositions that *New York Times* reviewer Olin Downes claimed were hissed at by audiences in Europe—Burke once again veers away from the League's performance to focus, instead, on Schönberg's compositions. Schönberg altered earlier forms of classical music by introducing more dissonant tones with fewer melodic notes in a traditional scale to produce a new musical form, using the twelve-tone technique, a method of using all twelve notes in a chromatic scale without emphasizing one over the other.⁶ Burke is particularly interested in how the progression of Schönberg's compositions "had rationalistically extended some underemphasized qualities in Bach and Mozart until they become the center of emphasis in his own music" (633).

Burke argues that, in some of the works, Schönberg's style does "not seem any longer 'usable.' It is the music of the future, to be sure, but the present would pass it by" (633). In other words, in most of these works, Burke claims, Schönberg distorted the classical form so drastically that the audience of the 1930s no longer had a point of reference with which to understand it. However, in Schönberg's Opus 10, Burke observes that the strings "contemplate the entire matter for some considerable time, until our removal into another realm does gently take place" (634). The Schönberg compositions that effectively earned the audience's acceptance, in

⁶Classical music features an eight-note scale with typical I-IV-V chord structures in a major key signature and VI-II-III chords within a minor key signature.

Burke's estimation, were the works that were able to gently shift the audience's perspective by relying on their previous conceptions of musical form.

The "Schönberg" review makes an important connection between the music of the 1930s and the "graded series," a key term that most Burke scholars have paid little attention to. Schönberg is famous for inventing twelve-tone music, a technique that refrains from emphasizing one note above the other eleven notes, resulting in a musical work that is written outside of a conventional key signature. Schönberg's twelve-tone technique is considered to by some twenty-first-century music critics such as *New York Times* critic Anthony Tommasini to be "arguably the most audacious and influential development in 20th-century music, . . . a radical departure from tonality, the familiar musical language of major and minor keys." For Burke, Schönberg's new musical form was a unique opportunity to observe the audience's reactions to this often dissonant and discordant style of music with vastly different conventions than earlier classical music.

Early in the criticism, Burke attempts to link Schönberg's compositions to the Leibnizian *lex continui*, which claims, "all basic constituents of the universe are continuous" (*Permanence and Change* 142). Schönberg's new technique embodied the *lex continui* in musical form by refusing to choose an essence of the chromatic scale and, instead, emphasizing each note equally. Burke discusses the ambiguity that may arise from refusing to choose an essence of a linguistic graded series because it does not "provide a clue as to which point we should select as the essence of an entire scale" (145). He claims that a person's orientation helps him or her choose the essence, or the representative word, for a linguistic scale, but the ambiguity from one conversion upward or downward aids in the change. Although, in the review, Burke claims that Schönberg's compositions are ineffective when he attempts to wholeheartedly embrace this new form of music without using the conventions of the previous classical form, he acknowledges that Schönberg's compositions are effective when they gently shift the audience into a new realm. In conceptualizing the graded series, it is clear that Burke was influenced by Schönberg's revolutionary twelve-tone technique. When introducing the "graded series" in *Permanence and Change*, Schönberg is one of the first examples used:

Thus, in harmonic theory, the composer Arnold Schönberg takes us step by step from the methods of classical music to the methods which he employs—and if we follow his gradients we are imperceptibly eased from a region of sound where the logic of composition is generally apparent into a region of sound which might have seemed to the uninstructed hearer as chaotic. (142–143)

Therefore, Burke's concept of the graded series is better understood from the musical perspective of Schönberg's twelve-tone technique.

Burke continues to expand upon the "graded series" in his fourth review for *The Nation*. In "The End and Origin of a Movement," written in April 1934, Burke focuses mostly on performances of contemporary music and suggests that "much

of the resistance to modern works has been the fault of performers rather than composers” (422). Yet, Burke examines four concerts put on by the Roth Quartet at the New School for Social Research, who are able to offer interpretations of contemporary works that are near to what the composer intended. These particular musicians, he says, “understand the art of gradation—and the versatility of their resourcefulness has made their concerts a succession of engrossing changes” (422). One of the main reasons that the Roth Quartet is able to offer interpretations that most resemble the composer’s intention is the shift from vocal compositions to purely instrumental compositions. Burke claims, “Any attempt to translate specifically musical effects into the abstract equivalents of speech must make the designs of the composer seem few” (422). He appears to acknowledge the need for more contemporary works in the 1930s to be performed solely with instruments, yet he also concedes that if the trend continues, we are headed for “an increasingly non-vocal conception of musical problems” (424). This shift, in which “the authority of instruments was coming to replace the authority of the voice as a major stimulus to musical imagination” (424), Burke claimed, was a miniature version of the “vast cultural transition” (423) that was taking place as a result of the Great Depression. Perhaps these transitions in contemporary music helped to illuminate his theoretical writing, but it was also this vast cultural transition during the 1930s that led Burke to develop his theories of change in *Permanence and Change*.

Conclusion

While the music scene was changing in the 1930s, of course, Burke also encountered other more substantial changes in the sociopolitical scene of the Great Depression and lead-up to World War II. Both of these scenes, I argue, compelled Burke to develop a rhetoric of “secular conversion” in *Permanence and Change*. In an abandoned introduction from the original manuscript of the music review “Two Brands of Piety,” Burke describes a moment shortly after hearing about anti-parliamentarist demonstrations in Paris:

It is with a strong sense of incongruity that I lay down the morning’s paper, with its reports of the recent Dollfuss horrors, and attempt to piece together my notes on the two premieres of American opera . . . only a few days before, when the papers were vibrant with the news of the uprisings in Paris, I became aware of a similar mocking combination: the radio had been inattentively left on, a jazz orchestra had ceased its fifteen minutes of dutiful ether-disturbance, and now one of our many available professors was explaining, in dulcet and soothing tones, the several ways still open to the wise investor. In the face of ultimate despair . . . all art seems to belong in the category of the dulcet and soothing voice of that available professor: an incongruous talk framed to entice the interests of the “wise investor.” (“Two Brands of Piety” draft)

Burke describes this moment to convey art’s capacity to change an audience, especially in times of uncertainty. In his conclusion to this abandoned introduction,

Burke proposes, “the example of good and significant forms [of art] in Print or upon the stage can supply the needed prototype of similar forms carried into the arrangements of society” (“Two Brands of Piety” draft). Similarly, Burke interprets “good and significant” forms of art in his music reviews to discover three key concepts toward a rhetoric of “secular conversion” in *Permanence and Change*: “perspective by incongruity,” “piety,” and the “graded series.”

Placing *Permanence and Change* in the context of the contemporary music scene of the 1930s creates two greater implications for Burkean and rhetorical studies moving forward. First, these music reviews can help us understand and properly emphasize an undervalued concept—graded series—which Burke revisits in various forms in *A Grammar of Motives*. While many in rhetorical studies have viewed *Permanence and Change* as a book on epistemology in social situations, closer attention to Burke’s list of secular conversions reveals a book that is fundamentally on rhetoric, offering methods for enacting social change. Furthermore, an examination of these secular conversions illuminates well-known terms in more familiar works such as Burke’s dialectic in *A Grammar of Motives*. In “Dialectic in General,” Burke speaks of a “gulf between other terms” (402) within a dialectic. He claims that “one expects to find terms possessing ambiguities that will bridge” (402) this gulf, a bridge, I argue, that was initially conceived as the “graded series.” Within any given dialectic of opposing terms exists a spectrum of linking terms in between. Each intermediate term appears to possess more of one term and less of the opposite until one encounters the neutral terms in the middle with the most ambiguity. As a method, the graded series illustrates Weiser’s emphasis on Burke’s philosophical habit of falling on the bias or “cutting across positions, envisioning an alternative that was parts of each as well as new” (1). When we understand Burke’s dialectic in the context of the “graded series,” the possibilities of linguistic transformation between this spectrum of terms illuminate Burke’s continuously merging, dividing, and transcending dialectic in *A Grammar of Motives*.

Second, we should analyze music as a language that is inherently rhetorical. Until recently, there has been much resistance to expanding the term “language” to include any symbol system outside of the discursive. In his afterword to the 3rd edition of *Permanence and Change* “In Retrospective Prospect,” Burke argues “for language to be understood to include the ability to behave with other such arbitrary, conventional symbol systems as dance, music, sculpture, painting, and architecture” (295). Similarly, other theorists,⁷ such as Joddy Murray, have argued for a widening of the scope of language to include “the symbol systems of music, film, sculpture, dance, et cetera” (1). By expanding the term language to include the non-discursive, these highly rhetorical but scantily theorized symbol systems

⁷Susanne K. Langer in both *Philosophy in a New Key* and *Feeling and Form*, Gunther Kress in *Multimodality*, and Cynthia Selfe in “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning” are further examples of theorists who have operated with this view of elevating the importance of non-discursive symbol systems.

will be paid the attention they deserve in rhetorical studies. In “How the Other Half Sounds,” Rodney Farnsworth reviews the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century German baroque musical practice of adopting rhetorical figures originally developed by Cicero and Quintilian for the purposes of composing and critiquing music. In this instance many years ago, verbal rhetoric was applied to musical composition and interpretation. As Burke reviewed music in the 1930s, the rhetorical features he identified within music became useful in the verbal realm. I argue that there is still much in Burke’s writing yet to be analyzed that offers this expanded view of language, and we should seek to identify and emphasize these moments.

Music was more than a hobby for Burke; it was a lifelong passion and an arena in which he explored many of the foundational concepts for his rhetorical theory. In fact, music helped Burke to see two ways at once as his music reviews demonstrate. Burke took Malcolm Cowley’s advice to heart at a young age by focusing on both the piano and the pen throughout his life, providing him with two perspectives, two ways of interacting with the world, two tools that were clearly interwoven in his life and work. He moved seamlessly from one to the other. Thus, ‘we will more fully understand what came out of Burke’s pen if we also consider the insight he gained through the piano.

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