Most of the articles in this issue, directly or indirectly, deal with the question of how meaning in music can be construed and communicated. The approaches in these essays (as in the case perhaps of any effort to discuss the idea of meaning in music) assume a linguistic metaphor, if not a linguistic backdrop. The moment we use words and talk about music we engage the notion, however reluctantly or inadvertently, that communication through language is the benchmark against which our concepts of how music functions must be measured. Discussions of the intentions of the composer, the structure of a musical text, the character of its acoustic realization in performance, the reactions of the audience, present and future, all beg the question of the relationship between the making and hearing of music and life and how we respond to life with a linguistic mirror.

In the case of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, narration, memory, and the transmission of autobiographical experience and states of mind are presumed, by Owen Jander, to be successfully communicated through music; audible, comprehensible to listeners, past and present, in a manner describable in ordinary language. Pauline Oliveros is said, by Tim Taylor, to want, with her music, to "express inner values," to create "a new sense of self from within," and to chart a path different from what Susan McClary defined as the "private language games" of "much contemporary music." Again, the achievement of these goals is contingent on the idea that recognition of the intentions of the composer or the "meaning" of work by listeners can be realized. That recognition is, in terms of musical equivalents to ideas, recognizable only in language.

As Murray Dineen's piece on Schoenberg and Adorno and Michael Hicks's on Cowell's use of clusters point out, notions of comprehensibility, analogies to grammar, conceptions of sense and nonsense, and the appropriation of terms such as idea, logic, content, and style by the discourse on music were at the center of early twentieth-century arguments about music and its future. It is clear that these issues were, in turn, contingent on meanings derived from linguistic usages formulated within political and philosophical debates during the second half of the nineteenth century. The struggle over the applicability and meaning of these terms became pivotal for the development of twentieth-century musical modernism.
Albrecht Dümling's account of how the Berlin Music Academy was brought into line with Nazi aesthetic ideology makes plain that both Nazi ideologues and supporters of the avant-garde of the Weimar period, including Adorno, were reasonably certain that music expressed ideas and functioned in society by communicating translatable meaning. The audience took impressions, if not ideas and meanings, away from music and integrated them into ideological frameworks characterized in language. The manipulation of language by the Nazis ran parallel to their appropriation of music. Dümling's article (whose publication follows the publication of Christopher Hailey's fine parallel discussion of the same subject in his excellent new book, Franz Schreker, 1878–1934: A Cultural Biography [Cambridge University Press, 1993]) brings us to Adorno's 1968 essay.

Despite Adorno's careful effort to distinguish between language (which in his view "signifies") and music, he recognized the interdependence between language and our perception of music. Music can aspire to that which language fails to do. As Michael Steinberg notes, Adorno's discourse can be compared to Schoenberg's treatment of music and language in Moses und Aron. Adorno's essay is itself a neat mirror of how a powerful modernist aesthetic about "how music means" from the first two-thirds of the twentieth century becomes reactionary, in part owing to the changing character of language use outside of the realm of music in the mid-twentieth century. The first part of Adorno's argument derives directly from Schoenberg: the distinction between immanent musical content and surface style; a penchant for thinking about musical form as emanating from musical ideas; faith in the autonomy of music and its ethical essentiality. Adorno's own twist stems in part from his idealization of Alban Berg's accomplishment.

The latter part of Adorno's essay evokes the fear of the new avant-garde of the 1960s. The avant-garde is construed as deviant, heralding an antihuman, pseudo-objective "electronic sound" that renders the musical imagination "irrelevant." In place of music as logical and tied to ideas, new music is viewed as monotonous, "prehuman" sounding, the result of lawless "philistine tinkering" masquerading as a progressive aesthetic. The failure of new music is ascribed to its vacuous emancipation from any resemblance to or tension with language and therefore meaning.

In one brief essay Adorno shows how the specific philosophical assumptions that he believed vindicated the work of a progressive movement (in the historical sense—that of Schoenberg and Berg in
the 1920s and 1930s) could be used against the radical avant-garde of the 1960s. At stake in both historical moments for Adorno was a normative ideal of music and its potential ethical and political significance. Adorno's confident sense of the cultural context of perception vis-à-vis politics and philosophy—the link between so-called objective musical values and how they were perceived, subjectively, within the web of real musical life (concerts, recording, listening, and criticism)—seemed undermined by much of new music in the 1960s.

What all the essays in this issue of MQ point to is how much the normative and historical analysis of musical-meaning communication is still in its infancy. If Adorno's argument seems all too clearly located in a particular historical context, the way in which the other contributors to this issue attempt to formulate claims about the meaning of musical texts, techniques, and intentions can be taken apart and viewed as equally problematic. The nexus of musical meaning, significance, and comprehension—by whom, where, and when—can only be clarified in terms of methods of understanding and explanation that probe music within a cultural and historical dynamic. The essays here represent an essential starting point.

Among the vital issues in music history that must be illuminated by further research and writing about what music means (and how it is talked about, compared with, and translated into language) are the manner and character of acoustic re-creation and performance and the nature of past and present responses to it. Much has been written about performance practice as something that either can or cannot be reconstructed or approximated in valid historical terms. But even if we can determine the manner of past performance and approximate the sounds made, we may not be any closer to realizing the historical character of the musical communication in any given moment and place in the past. The replication of the dynamic of musical communication and the historically located assigning of significance to musical texts and their performance may have very little to do with reconstructing the sounds made in the past. Understanding how audiences in the past understood and responded to what they heard demands a new set of procedures: an intensive and complex historical reconstruction of response and of the modes of the assignment of meaning, through language, in history.

As many commentators have remarked, the distinct and often self-consciously pseudo-archaic surface of modern reconstructions of past performance practices may obscure an adequate perception of significance and the translation of meaning—understood in historical terms—from music into the language of ideas and emotions, also
historically considered. One needs to ask, for example, how did such translation and the assignment of significance occur and take shape in music both for the early nineteenth century and for periods as late as the 1930s? Studying the official critical response is merely a primitive beginning.

The truth is that in music history we still want to believe that by seeing the same text and hearing comparable sounds, questions of meaning and logic—understood even in historical terms—might be resolved. However, as literary historians have long observed, a normative view of text and language—and therefore meaning—is hard to sustain. The kind of suprahistorical philosophical sense of music present in Adorno’s essay begs the question as well of who the audience is and was, and what they bring and brought to the act of listening (as well as what they take and took away) in contexts other than those near his own time that Adorno was confident he understood as historical certainties.

These sorts of questions come to mind particularly when one is faced with the ever-increasing number of CDs that contain recorded performances from the early twentieth century. Two examples will suffice. I recently listened to a performance of the Brahms C Major Trio, op. 87, no. 2, with Dame Myra Hess, Joseph Szigeti, and Pablo Casals (Sony CD MPK 52535). The entire affair, from matters of string technique and sound (the striking differences from contemporary usage in terms of vibrato, bowing, fingerings) to ones of tempo and phrasing, raises more than feelings of admiration and the question of how these great musicians interpreted a text and why. The question of “greater” authenticity is moot, since none of the individuals knew Brahms or played for him. Only if one indulges in the common, if not perhaps ridiculous, intergenerational equivalent among musicians to the child’s game of telephone (so and so studied with so and so or knew so and so and therefore carried with them the “real” style of interpretation) can such a performance carry historical weight vis-à-vis Brahms. The fascinating issues are how we hear the performance (and why) and what these players saw and heard and wished to communicate. And what was communicated to their contemporary audience? How did Brahms mean, in its various performance realizations, in the 1920s and 1930s; to whom and why?

The second example is more extreme. The financier and Mahler enthusiast Gilbert Kaplan has produced a CD (Pickwick GLRS 101) containing the four piano rolls made by Mahler on Welte Mignon equipment in 1905. He has added, in two cases, modern singers who use the roll performances as accompaniments. Without engaging the
technical debate about these rolls and their use as historical records (or their use as a bizarre variant on "Music Minus One"), the effect of hearing the music is striking. There is no antique surface derived from old recording techniques or period instruments (a modern Steinway was used), a fact heightened by the singers and the excellent recording technique. One is moved to ask what was being communicated and what was heard, circa 1905. In Mahler's playing at stake are not really issues of tempo, but fundamental ones about phrasing, weight, and meaning that suggest not that we often have got Mahler "wrong," but that we have yet to grasp the full range of meaning and significance of Mahler's music to audiences in his own time. What we have learned from the familiar but narrow confines of the sort of otherwise helpful criticism, analysis, and biography produced by Mahler devotees, specialists, and detractors is not enough.

Ironically, the difficulty of this kind of historical investigation for music and music-making argues for its abandonment. It is consoling to realize that if we give up the quest for adequate criteria for historical description and explanation, we are free to accept an appealing idea of music as a stable form of life, in some way impervious to historical change; universal and timeless, and susceptible to recurrent reawakening through an eclectic range of performance practices.

One of the few truly distinguished musicologists to advance the cause of historical analysis and reconstruction, to remain open to new ways of thinking, and to maintain a spontaneous regard for the value of an unexamined normative tradition of eclectic music-making through performance was Howard Mayer Brown, Ferdinand Schevill Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago. Howard's sudden and untimely death this past February at the age of 63 robbed musicology of one of its true humanist practitioners. Few men had so few enemies for good reasons in a field notorious for personal jealousies and petty conflicts. Howard was a great scholar. He was a generous teacher. He also loved the sound of music and refused to succumb to the pedantry of those scholars who despise practitioners or become intolerant of the variety of interpretive solutions to re-creative performance.

My recollections of Howard Brown date from my undergraduate years and are painfully tied to the embarrassing arrogance and philistinism I displayed. It is not surprising, therefore, that I recall how considerate and kind he was. I played in the University of Chicago's Collegium Musicum, which Howard directed. The Saturday rehearsals, the concerts, and the parties in the home he and the late Roger Weiss maintained are among my most treasured undergraduate memories.
Howard introduced me to the challenges and possibilities contained in the study of music as an aspect of culture, history, and society. Above all, he communicated the joy not only of scholarship but of making music and listening to it.

Howard encouraged new avenues and areas of research and strengthened the idealistic resolve among his students to expand and extend the issues, methods, and materials employed by music history. Howard Brown’s scholarly rigor, his curiosity, his respect for serious and innovative speculation, and his commitment to the performance of music as part of the vocation within the academy—shaped as it was by his warm and generous approach to colleagues and students—will be missed.

—Leon Botstein